The Author

Tappei Nagatsuki

The Illustrator

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Re:Zero

Starting Life in Another World

Fan Translation Omnibus

Foreword

This is a compilation of the entire translated web novel, as well as all translated side content, organized by volume!

As for the chapters themselves, I've tried to change as little as possible in each translation, only fixing obvious grammar mistakes and standardizing the formatting.

If you find any mistakes, please let me know in my discord.

That's it for now,

Eminent

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Credits

Arc 1:

Human Translation Credits:

Social Network User

Volume 1:

Emilia’s Capital Touring Chronicle: Social Network User

Felt’s Job: Hayate Butler

Ram’s Flirting Refusal: Graced Harperd (LQ) with editing by Shifty Fish and proofreading by Ringo

Rem Meets Subaru: Remonwater

The Awkward Duo: Ice

Behind the Scenes of Life in Another World from Zero: Eminent

Lone Wolf of the Slums, Felt’s Noisy Days: Eminent

Arc 2:

Human Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-19: Eminent

Machine Translation Credits:

Chapters 20-END: Shido Itsuka

Volume 2:

Emilia’s Starry Sky Classroom: Reddagh (LQ, TTL)

Felt’s Imprisonment Life: Reddagh (LQ, TTL)

Ram and the Night Study Group: Xrakix

Rem's Latte Art: Xrakix

Natsuki Subaru's Splendid Steward Life: Xrakix

Roswaal Manor Girls Party: Bathroom Edition: Xrakix

Roswaal Manor Girls Party: Dressing Room Edition: Xrakix

Volume 3:

Emilia's First Date: Social Network User

Felt Saw!: Hayate Butler

Ram's Older Sister Heart is Complicated: Xrakix

The Best Day of Rem's Life: Hayate Butler

Felt Rises to Center Stage: Reddagh (LQ, TTL)

One Day I:

Withdrawal Symptoms: Trupin

The First Mayonnaise Disturbance: Trupin

Arc 3:

Human Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-12: KaguroJP

Interlude I-III + Natsuki Rem: SummaryAnon

Withdrawal Symptoms (One Day I): Trupin

The First Mayonnaise Disturbance (One Day I): Trupin

Machine Translation Credits:

Chapters 13-84: Shido Itsuka

Volume 4:

Priscilla’s Cheers for Me: Entertainment Part: Xrakix

Anastasia’s Prosperity Record: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Xrakix

Felt Gathers Thugs: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

Volume 5:

Anastasia’s Moving Picture Scroll: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: The Chapter of Vows☆: Xrakix

Rem’s Maiden Heart is Super Complex: Usterm, Graced Harperd, Paper Kaminari, Ringo with proofreading by Graced Harperd, Ice, Matterfield, Nanashi, and Tournament

Comic Alive Collection 1:

A Heroic Tale Starting from Zero: Translation Pending

The Head Maid's Unrestful Vacation: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 1:

A Heroical Tale Starting from Zero: Remonwater (P1-14); Ice (P15-18)

The Head Maid’s Restless Day Off: Remonwater

The Day I Gave Up on Being a Following Star: Xrakix

Emilia in Wonderland: Eminent

Anastasia’s Rising in Life Memorial Day: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Ferris’s Sudden Emergence☆: Eminent

Volume 6:

Felt Forms a Hooligan Squad: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

Anastasia’s Kararagi Merchant Path: Lesiak (LQ, TTL)

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Blue’s Studies: Eminent

Ex 1:

Anastasia’s Most Important Travelogue: Lesiak (LQ, TTL)

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Extra: Days Without Her Follower: Eminent

Volume 7:

Librarian Beatrice’s Log: Restart: Xrakix

The Great Spirit Puck’s Nyan Nyan Sunny Day: Eminent

Ex 2:

Librarian Beatrice’s Log: Page 2: Xrakix

The Great Spirit Puck’s Nyan Nyan Nyan Sunny Day: Eminent

Volume 8:

Librarian Beatrice’s Log: Page 3: Xrakix

The Great Spirit Puck’s Nyan Nyan Tricks: Xrakix

Thinking of You on the Night Before the Decisive Battle (Edited Machine Translation): PerMike72

Comic Alive Collection 2:

A Love Song for EMT: Translation Pending

Ram is Order: Translation Pending

Operation Kokkuri: Translation Pending

Librarian Beatrice's Reluctant Promise: Translation Pending

Some Like it Cold: Translation Pending

Alcohol Panic: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 2:

A Love Song for EMT: Eminent

Ram is Order: Eminent

Operation Kokkuri: Remonwater (LQ)

Librarian Beatrice's Reluctant Promise: Paper Kaminari

Some Like it Cold: Remonwater

Alcohol Panic: Remonwater

Emilia and Ram's Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship: Social Network User

Beatrice and Rem's Cumbersome Cleaning: Xrakix

Volume 9:

Emilia and Ram's Very Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship: Wintry One

Beatrice and Rem's Cumbersome Service: Remonwater

Short Story Compendium 1:

Emilia's Capital Touring Chronicle: Social Network User

Emilia's Starry Sky Classroom: Reddagh (LQ, TTL)

Emilia's First Date: Social Network User

Rem Meets Subaru: Remonwater

Rem's Latte Art: Xrakix

The Best Day of Rem's Life: Hayate Butler

Rem's Maiden Heart is Super Complex: Usterm, Graced Harperd, Paper Kaminari, Ringo

Ram's Flirting Refusal: Graced Harperd (LQ)

Ram and the Night Study Group: Xrakix

Ram's Older Sister Heart is Complicated: Xrakix

Librarian Beatrice's Log: Restart: Xrakix

Librarian Beatrice's Log: Page 2: Xrakix

Librarian Beatrice's Log: Page 3: Xrakix

The Great Spirit Puck's Nyan Nyan Sunny Day: Eminent

The Great Spirit Puck's Nyan Nyan Nyan Sunny Day: Eminent

The Great Spirit Puck's Nyan Nyan Tricks: Xrakix

Emilia and Ram's Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship: Social Network User

Emilia and Ram's Very Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship: Translation Pending

Beatrice and Rem's Cumbersome Cleaning: Xrakix

Beatrice and Rem's Cumbersome Service: Translation Pending

Short Story Compendium 2:

Felt's Job: Hayate Butler

Felt's Imprisonment Life: Reddagh (LQ, TTL)

Felt Saw!: Hayate Butler

Felt Rises to Center Stage: Reddagh (LQ, TTL)

Felt Gathers Thugs: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

Felt Forms a Hooligan Squad: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

Priscilla's Cheers for Me: Entertainment Part: Xrakix

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Xrakix

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: The Chapter of Vows☆: Xrakix

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Ferris's Sudden Emergence☆: Eminent

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Blue's Studies: Eminent

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Extra: Days Without Her Follower: Eminent

Anastasia's Prosperity Record: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

Anastasia's Moving Picture Scroll: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

Anastasia's Rising in Life Memorial Day: Phantaminum (LQ, TTL)

Anastasia's Kararagi Merchant Path: Lesiak (LQ, TTL)

Anastasia's Most Important Travelogue: Lesiak (LQ, TTL)

The Awkward Duo: Ice

Emilia's Blog Practice: Translation Pending

Another World / Reincarnation SS Paper: Eminent

Arc 4:

Human Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-110:Translation Chicken

Chapters 111-One Day II: Summary Anon

Volume 10:

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days I: Wintry One

Garfiel and Ram’s Complicated Love Affair: Wintry One

Re:zeropedia:

Emily’s Maid Path: Eminent

Volume 11:

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days II: Wintry One

Garfiel and Ram’s Really Complicated Love Affair: Remonwater

Volume 12:

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters’ Dark Diary, Kill 1: Wintry One

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days 3: Eminent

Garfiel and Ram’s Extra Complicated and Twisted Love Affair: Eminent

Volume 13:

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters’ Dark Diary, Kill 2: Wintry One

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days 4: Eminent

Garfiel and Ram’s Extra Complicated and Twisted Love Affair Zero: Remonwater

Volume 14:

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters’ Dark Diary, Kill 3: Eminent

Elior Forest Team: Waiting for the Thaw: Nanashi (TTL)

Kremaldy Forest Team: Days Forever Lost: Nanashi (TTL)

Volume 15:

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 4: Eminent

The Witch's After Tea Party: Eminent

The Emilia Camp's Great Evaluation Meeting: Social Network User

One Day II:

Credits: Summary Anon

Short Story Compendium 3:

Frederica and Petra's Maid Days I: Translation Pending

Frederica and Petra's Maid Days II: Translation Pending

Frederica and Petra's Maid Days III: Eminent

Frederica and Petra's Maid Days IV: Eminent

Garfiel and Ram's Complicated Love Affair: Translation Pending

Garfiel and Ram's Really Complicated Love Affair: Translation Pending

Garfiel and Ram's Extra Complicated and Twisted Love Affair: Eminent

Garfiel and Ram's Extra Complicated and Twisted Love Affair Zero: Translation Pending

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 1: Translation Pending

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 2: Translation Pending

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 3: Eminent

Elsa and Meili: The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 4: Eminent

Elior Forest Team: Waiting for the Thaw: Translation Pending

Kremaldy Forest Team: Days Forever Lost: Translation Pending

The Emilia Camp's Great Evaluation Meeting: Translation Pending

The Witch's After Tea Party: Eminent

The Witch's After Tea Party: The Witches' Evaluation Meeting: Translation Pending

The Loving World Seen Through Petra's Eyes: Translation Pending

Sword Demon Love Story: The Bride's Father: Eminent

Sword Demon Love Story: Earth Dragon Capital, Flanders: Eminent

Sword Demon Love Story: The Other Side of the Honeymoon: Eminent

Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero: Translation Pending

Rezero EX ~ I Can Hear the Festival Music ~: Translation Pending

Memory Snow Prequel: Liar Days: Translation Pending

Bonds of Ice Prequel: Frozen Days: Translation Pending

An Ordinary Day: Eminent

Comic Alive Collection 3:

My Fair Bad Lady: Translation Pending

The World Petra Saw: Translation Pending

Rem's Very Ordinary Happy Day: Translation Pending

Kararagi Girl Meets Cats: Translation Pending

Sunlight on the Water: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 3:

My Fair Bad Lady: Remonwater

The World Petra Saw (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

The Loving World Petra Saw (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Rem's Very Ordinary Happy Day: Remonwater

Kararagi Girl Meets Cats: Negi

Sunlight on the Water: Negi

Arc 5:

Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-5: Summary Anon

Chapter 41: Translation Chicken

Chapter 42: Translation Chicken

Chapter 44: Translation Chicken

Chapter 46: Translation Chicken

Chapter 48: Translation Chicken

Chapters 6-40, 43, 45, 47, 49-81; Interludes: Witch Cult Translations

Volume 16:

Priscilla's Cheers for Me: Drunk Father Part: Ice

Petra's Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 1 (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Mimi Pearlbaton's Bite of Love and Passion: Eminent

Ex 3:

Sword Demon Love Story: Earth Dragon Capital, Flanders: Eminent

Sword Demon Love Story: The Bride’s Father: Eminent

Sword Demon Love Story: The Other Side of the Honeymoon: Eminent

Volume 17:

Otto Suwen’s Internal Affairs Struggle: Erifuru

Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 2 (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Joshua Juukulius’s Careful Encyclopedia: Eminent

Volume 18:

Otto Suwen’s Internal Affairs Struggle: Line 2: Erifuru

Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 3 (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Joshua Juukulius’s Second Careful Encyclopedia: Ringo, Frr, Nanashi

Comic Alive Collection 4:

Felt’s Royal Selection Life from Zero: Translation Pending

Royal Selection Life from Zero: The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Translation Pending

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Translation Pending

Otto’s Peddling Record of Joy and Sorrow: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 4:

Felt’s Royal Selection Life from Zero: Negi

Royal Selection Life from Zero: The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Eminent

Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies: Negi

Otto's Bittersweet Peddling Trade Log: Erifuru

A Foolish Teatime in April (Bonus): Xrakix

Volume 19:

Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle: Line 3: Erifuru

Petra's Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 4 (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Joshua Juukulius's Third Careful Encyclopedia: Eminent

Volume 20:

Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle: Line 4: Erifuru

Petra's Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 5 (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Joshua Juukulius's Fourth Careful Encyclopedia: Eminent

Comic Alive Collection 5:

Royal Selection Prequel: The Successor of Blue: Translation Pending

Kararagi Girl & Cat's Eye: Translation Pending

The Three Idiots Set Out! Earth Spider Episode: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 5:

Royal Selection Prequel: The Successor of Blue (Edited Machine Translation): PerMike72

Kararagi Girl & Cat's Eye (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

The Three Idiots Set Out! Earth Spider Episode (LQ AI Translation):

Jubak

Arc 6:

Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-32; 35 (3)-88: Witch Cult Translations

Chapter 33: Translation Chicken

Chapter 34: Translation Chicken

Chapter 35: Translation Chicken (1-2); Ice (3)

Chapters 80-90: Eminent

Volume 21:

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Beatrice’s Everyone is Troublesome, I Suppose: Paper Kaminari

Julius Juukulius’s Promise-Keeping Notebook (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Ex 4:

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella Reconstruction: Journal Number Two (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Beatrice’s Everyone is Troublesome, I Suppose!: Paper Kaminari

Julius Juukulius’s Promise-Keeping Notebook II (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Volume 22:

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella Reconstruction: Journal Number Three (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Beatrice’s Everyone is Troublesome, I Suppose! In Fact!: Paper

Kaminari

Julius Juukulius's Promise-Keeping Notebook III (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations

Volume 23:

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Four (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion's Ferocity, First Chronicle: Ice

Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me! Shadows of Conspiracy Part: Ice

Comic Alive Collection 6:

Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village Ex: Blessing Day: Remonwater (I and II)

The Three Idiots Set Out! Cursed Goddess Statue Episode: Translation Pending

The Witch's After Tea Party: Requirements to Be a Witch: Ice

Short Story Collection 6:

Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village Ex: Blessing Day: Translation Pending

The Three Idiots Set Out! Cursed Goddess Statue Episode (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

The Witch's After Tea Party: Requirements to Be a Witch: Translation Pending

The Witch's After Tea Party: Witches' Evaluation Meeting (Bonus): Ice

Volume 24:

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella Reconstruction Journal Number Five (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion's Ferocity, Second Chronicle: Eminent

Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me! Declaration of War Part: Ice

Volume 25:

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella Reconstruction Journal Number Six (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion's Ferocity, Third Chronicle: Eminent

Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me! Presentiments of Chaos Part: Ice

Arc 7:

Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-110: Witch Cult Translations

Volume 26:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy I: Ice

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Empty Words of an Oni: Paper Kaminari

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle I: Eminent

Volume 27:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy II: Paper Kaminari

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: An Oni's Ailment: Fried Hedgehog

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle II: Eminent

Ex 5:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero, Arakiya: Eminent

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero, Vincent: Erifuru

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero, Priscilla: Eminent

Volume 28:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy III: Ice

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: A Metal Bat for an Oni: Paper Kaminari

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle III: Erifuru

Volume 29:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy IV: Eminent

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: There are No Oni Around the World: Paper Kaminari

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle IV: Erifuru

Comic Alive Collection 7:

Lugunican Papers (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Sword Identity I-Ii: Taurace (I and II)

The Scarlet League: Eminent

Short Story Collection 7:

Lugunican Papers (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Lugunican Papers Extra: Eminent

Sword Identity: Garcar (2.5 and 3)

The Scarlet League: Eminent

Volume 30:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy V: Eminent

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Laundry While the Oni are Away: Paper Kaminari

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle V: Erifuru

Volume 31:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VI: Eminent

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Whether Oni or Snakes Live There: Paper Kaminari

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle VI (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Comic Alive Collection 8:

Stand by me Pleiades I-VI: Eminent (I, II, III, IV, V, VI)

Poltergeist Story: Eminent

Very Very Rough Justice: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 8:

Stand by me Pleiades (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Poltergeist Story: Eminent

Poltergeist Story Extra Eminent

Very Very Rough Justice (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Volume 32:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VII: Eminent

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Like Holding the Oni by the Neck: Paper Kaminari

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record:

Eminent

Volume 33:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VIII: Erifuru

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero, The Nine Divine Generals: Garcar

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record II: Eminent

Arc 8:

Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-Curtains Close: Witch Cult Translations

Volume 34:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy IX (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Even the Most Hardhearted Oni Can Be Moved to Tears: Paper Kaminari

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record III: Eminent

Volume 35:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy X (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Anastasia's Search for Her Companions: First Chronicle: Garcar

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record IV: Eminent

Comic Alive Collection 9:

Lugunican Hustle: Eminent

Golden Siblings (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Brotherhood of Pleiades: Garcar (I, II, III, IV)

Short Story Collection 9:

Lugunican Hustle: Eminent

Lugunican Hustle Extra: Eminent

Golden Siblings (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Golden Siblings Extra (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Brotherhood of Pleiades I-Ii: Translation Pending

Volume 36:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XI: Garcar

Anastasia's Search for Her Companions: Second Chronicle: Garcar

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record V: Eminent

Comic Alive Collection 10:

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, Riot in Flanders: Eminent

The Witch's After Tea Party, One Wild Night: Eminent

Short Story Collection 10:

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Introduction): Eminent

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Incident): Eminent

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Sequel): Eminent

The Witch's After Tea Party: One Wild Night: Eminent

The Witch’s After Tea Party: One Wild Night Extra: Eminent

Volume 37:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XII: Garcar

Anastasia’s Search for Her Companions: Third Chronicle: Garcar

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili’s Witchbeast Observation Record VI: Eminent

Volume 38:

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XIII: Garcar

Anastasia’s Search for Her Companions: Fourth Chronicle: Garcar

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili’s Witchbeast Observation Record VII: Eminent

Arc 9:

Translation Credits:

Chapters 1-Curtains Close: Witch Cult Translations

Volume 39:

The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters I: Garcar

Kararagi Shinigami Incident I: Garcar

No Stella No Life I: Garcar

Comic Alive Collection 11:

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica: Eminent

Elegant Lesson (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Short Story Collection 11:

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica: Eminent

Elegant Lesson (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Elegant Lesson After (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills

Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle: Translation Pending

Joshua Juukulius's Careful Encyclopedia: Garcar and Ringo with proofreading by Eliman7

Joshua Juukulius's Careful Encyclopedia Ex (Edited Machine Translation): LadybugBirdie42

Petra's Emilia Camp Struggle: Translation Pending

Mimi Pearlbaton's Bite of Love and Passion: Eminent

Priscilla's Cheers for Me, Drunk Father Part: Translation Pending

Ex 6 (Comic Alive):

Sword Demon Battle Ballad: Ice

Ex 6:

Sword Demon Battle Ballad: Finale of the Eight Arms: Ringo with proofreading by Shadow

Sword Demon Battle Ballad: The One Who Succeeds Astrea: Garcar with proofreading by Shadow

Sword Demon Battle Ballad: The Flower Field of That Day: Garcar with proofreading by Shadow

Volume 40:

The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters II: Garcar with proofreading by Eliman7

Kararagi Shinigami Incident II: Garcar with proofreading by Cirdan Lunae

No Stella No Life II: Garcar with proofreading by Eliman7

Comic Alive Collection 12:

First Mission (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Guardians of the Crimson Flame: Garcar with proofreading by Cirdan Lunae

Short Story Collection 12:

First Mission After: Garcar with proofreading by Shadow

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II After: Garcar with proofreading by Shadow

Volume 41:

The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters III: Garcar with proofreading by Eliman7

Kararagi Shinigami Incident III: Garcar with proofreading by Cirdan Lunae

No Stella No Life III: Garcar with proofreading by Eliman7

Volume 42:

The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters IV: Anonymous

Kararagi Shinigami Incident IV (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

No Stella No Life IV (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Comic Alive Collection 13:

Royal Selection: First Contact (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Once Upon a Time in Astrea: Anonymous

Volume 43:

The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters V (LQ MTL

Translation): Camelva

Kararagi Shinigami Incident V (LQ MTL Translation): Camelva

No Stella No Life V (LQ MTL Translation): Camelva

Arc 10:

Volume 44:

The Land of Nascent Wolves: The Magnificence of the Eminent Emperor of Vollachia (LQ MTL Translation): Camelva

Kararagi Shinigami Incident VI (LQ MTL Translation): Camelva

Yae Tenzen's Crimson Sakura State of Affairs: Bigthrow

Miscellaneous Comic Alives:

Visual Complete Vol .1: Emilia: Translation Pending

Visual Complete Vol .2 Ram (Edited Machine Translation): Goldkills with J-E checking by Rageasu and proofreading by Shadow

Visual Complete Vol .3: Rem: Translation Pending

Red Snowfall on the Orcos Domain (Edited Machine Translation): Heretic Translations (1 & 2)

The Witch's After Tea Party: Omega in Wonderland (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

The Three Idiots Set Out! The Great Manhunt for the Missing Child Battalion Episode (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

The Witch's After Tea Party: Witch Trials (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Short Story Collection 13:

Once Upon a Time in Astrea After (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Royal Selection: First Contact After (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Birthday Specials:

Emilia:

Emilia’s Very Happy Birthday (9/15/2017 Event): Wakaran

Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 2 (9/15/2017 Event): Erifuru

Memory Snow Prequel: Liar Days (9/14/2018 Event): Social Network User

Bonds of Ice Prequel: Frozen Days (9/20/2019 Event): Wakaran

Happy Diary (9/23/2021 Event): Eminent

Two Witches Tea Party (9/23/2022 Event): Eminent

The Two Witches’ Eventful Journey (9/23/2023 Event): Eminent

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star (9/21/2024 Event): Eminent

Two Witches’ What Ifs (9/20/2025 Event) (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Oni Sisters:

Blessing Day Ex: Rem’s Birthday Party (2/2/2017 Event): Remonwater

Blessing Day Ex: Remrin’s Day (2/2/2017 Event): Remonwater

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: Welcome to the Evening Party (1/18/2018 Event): Xrakix

Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 3 (1/18/2018 Event): Xrakix

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: A Happy Bad Dream (2/1/2019 Event): Xrakix

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: An Onis Role (1/31/2020 Event): Xrakix

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: Nocturnal Reverie Sisters

(2/2/2022 Event): Eminent

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: Before and After Pleiades (2/2/2023 Event): Eminent

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: One Thousand Origami Cranes of Prayer (2/2/2024 Event): Paper Kaminari

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: The Maid's Nocturne (1/31/2025 Event): Paper Kaminari

Event Specials:

Another World / Reincarnation SS Paper: Eminent

Emilia's Blog Practice: Hayate Butler

Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero: Xrakix

Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 1: Eminent

Re:Zero Ex: I Can Hear the Festival Music: Remonwater

Subaru's Strange Tea Party: Eminent

Isekai Quartet Special: Another World, Another Episode: Ice

Hansel And Gretel: Paper Kaminari

Re: Starting a Menu Life from Zero: Paper Kaminari

Malice Before the Theatre: Garcar and Ringo

Others:

Twitter Short Story: Eminent

Martyr's Death: Wintry One

Glossary: Xrakix

Give Blessings to the Beautiful Maid!: Remonwater

Give Blessings to This Wonderful EMT! (CN-EN Translation): Polvo Aranha

IF Stories (Web Novel):

The Butterfly Dream: Eminent

Lust IF: Eminent

Greed IF (WN): Ice

Pride IF: Summary Anon

Wrath IF: Fr (LQ)

Gluttony IF: Ice

Re:Zero Academy: Eminent (I), Paper Kaminari (II), Jubak (III, IV; LQ AI Translation)

Mimagau IF: Eminent (I), Jubak (II; LQ AI Translation)

Rem IF:

Natsuki Rem: Trupin

Oni and Happiness: Trupin

Fortune Roll Rhapsody: Trupin

Natsuki Rigel: Trupin

Fortune Fish-Head Tree: Remonwater

Setsubun Hollow: Remonwater

Blu-ray Specials:

Bonds of Ice: Social Network User

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: Remonwater

Camp Formation Stories: Jubak (LQ AI Translation; Chapters 1-2), LadybugBirdie42 (Edited Machine Translation; Chapter 3: A Graceful Prosperity Record), Eminent (Chapter 4: Felt's Camp Formation Story Starting from Zero)

Sloth IF: Remonwater

Bonds of Ice: Before Memories (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Apocalypse Girls: Garcar with proofreading by Eliman7

Loving the Days Gone By: Ringo

Greed IF (BD): Ringo & Ice (HTL); Kazatashi & GioGioCat (MTL)

Virtuousness Before the Theater (LQ AI Translation): Jubak

Movie Specials:

Another Memory Snow: Social Network User

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    2. Chapter 38: The Witch Cult’s Proposals
    3. Chapter 39: Knightliness and the Tardy Man
    4. Chapter 40: Corrosion of Wrath
    5. Chapter 41: Heroic Reveries
    6. Chapter 42: The Newest Hero and the Most Ancient Hero
    7. Chapter 43: Before the Rendezvous
    8. Chapter 44: Nothing Left Unsaid
    9. Chapter 45: An Inescapable Curse
    10. Chapter 46: A State of Mind
    11. Chapter 47: Recapturing the City Outpost
    12. Chapter 48: The Person You Will One Day Fall in Love With
    13. Bonus Short Stories

        1. Otto Suwen’s Internal Affairs Struggle Line 2
        2. Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 3 (Edited Machine Translation)

        3. Joshua Juukulius's Second Careful Encyclopedia

5. Comic Alive Collection 4: Translation Pending
6. Short Story Collection 4

    1. Felt's Royal Selection Life from Zero
    2. Royal Selection Life From Zero: The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint
    3. Pride and Prejudice and Zombies
    4. Otto's Bittersweet Peddling Trade Log
    5. Bonus Short Stories

        1. A Foolish Teatime in April

7. Volume 19

    1. Chapter 49: Thus Opens the Crusade Against Greed
    2. Chapter 50: The Shackles of Love
    3. Chapter 51: Malice in Trickery
    4. Chapter 52: The Stars and Sin Archbishops
    5. Chapter 53: A City of Strife
    6. Chapter 54: The Combat Power of Non-Combatants
    7. Chapter 55: The War God's Challenger
    8. Chapter 56: Signing of a Divorce
    9. Chapter 57: Where the Heart Lies
    10. Chapter 58: —Faith
    11. Chapter 59: Regulus Corneas
    12. Chapter 60: One Ending, One Battle
    13. Bonus Short Stories

        1. Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle: Line 3
        2. Petra's Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 4 (Edited Machine Translation)
        3. Joshua Juukulius's Third Careful Encyclopedia

8. Volume 20

    1. Chapter 61: Victim of the Territory
    2. Chapter 62: Commend of the Warrior
    3. Chapter 63: The Passion of Liliana Masquerade
    4. Chapter 64: The Despondence of Liliana Masquerade
    5. Chapter 65: The Regret of Liliana Masquerade
    6. Chapter 66: Liliana Masquerade's Stage
    7. Chapter 67: Liliana Masquerade
    8. Chapter 68: Name Eating Gourmet
    9. Chapter 69: A Repulsive Dinner Banquet
    10. Chapter 70: Eclipsing
    11. Chapter 71: Sword Demon VS Former Sword Saint
    12. Chapter 72: Sword Saint VS Previous Generation Sword Saint
    13. Chapter 73: Theresia van Astrea
    14. Chapter 74: Fruits of the Battle For Priestella 1
    15. Chapter 75: Fruits of the Battle For Priestella 2
    16. Chapter 76: Fruits of the Battle For Priestella 3
    17. Chapter 77: A Nameless Knight
    18. Chapter 78: The Remaining Ripples in the Watergate City
    19. Chapter 79: The Sage's Watchtower
    20. Chapter 80: Leaving Behind Ripples on the Water's Surface
    21. Chapter 81: One Who Fills the Vessel of Greed
    22. Interlude I: The Couple's Requirements
    23. Interlude II: Unfulfilled Talent
    24. Interlude III: Name of Warmth
    25. Bonus Short Stories
        1. Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle: Line 4
        2. Petra's Emilia Camp Struggle: Page 5 (Edited Machine Translation)
        3. Joshua Juukulius's Fourth Careful Encyclopedia

9. Comic Alive Collection 5: Translation Pending
10. Short Story Collection 5

        1. Royal Selection Prequel: The Successor of Blue (Edited Machine Translation)
        2. Kararagi Girl & Cat's Eye (LQ AI Translation)
        3. The Three Idiots Set Out! Earth Spider Episode (LQ AI Translation)

11. Arc 6: The Corridor of Memories

    1. Volume 21

        1. Chapter 1: The Dragon Carriage's Way Back
        2. Chapter 2: His Way of Providing a Warm Welcome
        3. Chapter 3: A Little Girl's Cell
        4. Chapter 4: The Reason to Bring You Out
        5. Chapter 5: Each of Their Unease
        6. Chapter 6: The Juukulius Inscription
        7. Chapter 7: Aim for the Desert
        8. Chapter 8: The Sand Dunes Initiation
        9. Chapter 9: Break Through Sand Time
        10. Chapter 10: As if a Flash
        11. Chapter 11: The Audible Tearful Voice
        12. Chapter 12: Baptism of the Watchtower
        13. Chapter 13: Ridicule of the Sands
        14. Chapter 14: Faith Built atop the Sand
        15. Chapter 15: Scattered to the Sand
        16. Chapter 16: Chewed Remains
        17. Chapter 17: The King of the Desert
        18. Chapter 18: The Keeper of the Sand Tower
        19. Bonus Short Stories

            1. Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number One (Edited Machine Translation)
            2. Beatrice's Everyone is Bothersome, I Suppose
            3. Julius Juukulius's Promise Keeping Notebook (Edited Machine Translation)

    2. Ex 4: The Great Journeys

    1. Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Two (Edited Machine Translation)
    2. Beatrice’s Everyone is Bothersome, I Suppose!
    3. Julius Juukulius’s Promise Keeping Notebook II (Edited Machine Translation)

3. Volume 22

    1. Chapter 19: Whereabouts of the Sage
    2. Chapter 20: Shaula ≠ Sage = Flugel
    3. Chapter 21: Monolith’s Trial
    4. Chapter 22: The Asterism of the White Starry Sky
    5. Chapter 23: The Third Floor Library, Taygeta
    6. Chapter 24: The Perverse Examiner
    7. Chapter 25: The Man Who Waits on the Second Floor, Electra
    8. Chapter 26: Stick Swinger
    9. Chapter 27: Electra’s Wall
    10. Chapter 28: Julius Juukulius
    11. Chapter 29: Loser
    12. Chapter 30: The Second Floor’s Capture Strategy Post-Mortem
    13. Chapter 31: An Encouragement of Cooperating in the Tower
    14. Chapter 32: Who
    15. Chapter 33: ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■
    16. Bonus Short Stories

        1. Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Three (Edited Machine Translation)
        2. Beatrice’s Everyone is Troublesome, I Suppose! In Fact!
        3. Julius Juukulius’s Promise Keeping Notebook III (Edited Machine Translation)

4. Volume 23

    1. Chapter 34: Coming Out of the Convenience Store, There Was a Wondrous World

    2. Chapter 35: Thin Ice Relations
    3. Chapter 36: A Place of Relief
    4. Chapter 37: A Papier-Mâché’s Dream
    5. Chapter 38: Who Are You
    6. Chapter 39: Ruins
    7. Chapter 40: Abandoned by the Stars
    8. Chapter 41: The Scent of Peace
    9. Chapter 42: The Tower of the Dead
    10. Chapter 43: The Tower of the Living
    11. Chapter 44: Medal of Blood
    12. Chapter 45: Embrace of the Guilty
    13. Chapter 46: Meili Portroute
    14. Chapter 47: I Won’t Forgive
    15. Chapter 48: Murder Becomes a Habit
    16. Chapter 49: To You, the Worthless Excuse
    17. Chapter 50: To You, the Absolutely Worthless Excuse
    18. Chapter 51: Tower of the Living II
    19. Chapter 52: God, Please Forgive Me
    20. Chapter 53: A Voice Chimed
    21. Chapter 54: Re: Starting Life in a Different World from Zero
    22. Bonus Short Stories
        1. Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Four (Edited Machine Translation)
        2. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion’s Ferocity: First Chronicle
        3. Lady Priscilla’s Cheers for Me! Shadows of Conspiracy Part
5. Comic Alive Collection 6
    1. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village Ex: Blessing Day (CA)
    2. The Three Idiots Set Out! Cursed Goddess Statue Episode (CA) (Translation Pending)
    3. The Witch’s After Tea Party: Requirements to Be a Witch (CA)

6. Short Story Collection 6
    1. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village Ex: Blessing Day (Translation Pending)
    2. The Three Idiots Set Out! Cursed Goddess Statue Episode (Edited Machine Translation)
    3. The Witch's After Tea Party: Requirements to Be a Witch (Translation Pending)
    4. Bonus Short Stories
        1. The Witch's After Tea Party: Witches' Evaluation Meeting
7. Volume 24
    1. Chapter 55: You Who Awaits The Snowmelt
    2. Chapter 56: Talking about What Awaits
    3. Chapter 57: Putting it Aside for Now
    4. Chapter 58: This is This, That is That
    5. Chapter 59: Smiles in the White World
    6. Chapter 60: A Single Spot in the Sunshine
    7. Chapter 61: —Stand Up
    8. Chapter 62: Tremors of Collapse
    9. Chapter 63: Five Obstacles
    10. Chapter 64: The Second Obstacle
    11. Chapter 65: The Second, The Fifth, And Then—
    12. Chapter 66: Second Chance to The End
    13. Chapter 67: Little King
    14. Chapter 68: The Woman of Scorpius
    15. Chapter 69: The Absurd Iron Hammer of the Sword
    16. Chapter 70: The Earnest Star
    17. Bonus Short Stories
        1. Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Five (Edited Machine Translation)
        2. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion's Ferocity: Second Chronicle
        3. Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me! Declaration of War Part

8. Volume 25
    1. Chapter 71: Count One
    2. Chapter 72: ■■ ■
    3. Chapter 73: ‘Natsuki Subaru’
    4. Chapter 74: Natsuki Subaru
    5. Chapter 75: Louis Arneb
    6. Chapter 76: The Hell Named Oneself
    7. Chapter 77: The Beacon of Counterattack
    8. Chapter 78: The Four Corners
    9. Chapter 79: Ready, Steady, Go!
    10. Chapter 80: Death of the Mind
    11. Chapter 81: —Pleased to Meet You
    12. Chapter 82: Shackle Accompanying Battle
    13. Chapter 83: Ram
    14. Chapter 84: Heave-Ho! Heave-Ho!
    15. Chapter 85: Good Loser
    16. Chapter 86: Conversing of What Yesterday Held
    17. Chapter 87: Distant Regard
    18. Chapter 88: —I Ask Thy Will
    19. Chapter 89: Shaula
    20. Chapter 90: Hero
    21. Bonus Short Stories
        1. Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Six (Edited Machine Translation)
        2. Lady Priscilla’s Cheers for Me! Presentiments of Chaos Part
        3. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion’s Ferocity: Third Chronicle

12. Arc 7: The Land of Wolves
    1. Volume 26
        1. Chapter 1: Initiation
        2. Chapter 2: Animal Tracking
        3. Chapter 3: VS Rem
        4. Chapter 4: A Brave Choice
        5. Chapter 5: Being a Man is Tough

    6. Chapter 6: The Land Faraway in the South
    7. Chapter 7: Being a Man was Tough
    8. Chapter 8: Name
    9. Chapter 9: The Way of the Empire
    10. Chapter 10: The People of Shudrak
    11. Chapter 11: The Lifeblood Ceremony
    12. Chapter 12: The Vollachia Empire
    13. Bonus Short Stories
        1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy I
        2. Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Empty Words of an Oni
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle I
2. Volume 27
    1. Chapter 13: As a Mortal
    2. Chapter 14: Unbridgeable Values
    3. Chapter 15: Those I Want to Protect
    4. Chapter 16: The Situation in the Empire
    5. Chapter 17: Looming Evil
    6. Chapter 18: Battle in the Fortress City of Guaral
    7. Chapter 19: A Vexing Reunion
    8. Chapter 20: Emperor / Merchant / Natsuki Subaru
    9. Chapter 21: Zikr Osman
    10. Chapter 22: The Bloodless Siege Plan
    11. Chapter 23: Musician Natsumi Schwartz
    12. Chapter 24: Arrogance
    13. Bonus Short Stories
        1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy II
        2. Provisional Rem's Paranoia: An Oni's Ailment
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle II
3. Ex 5: The Tale of the Scarlet Princess

    1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero: Arakiya
    2. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy ZERO: Vincent
    3. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero: Priscilla

4. Volume 28

    1. Chapter 25: A Reunion Akin to Scorching Blood
    2. Chapter 26: A Dancing Roundtable Conference
    3. Chapter 27: The Haves and the Have-Nots
    4. Chapter 28: Victory Conditions
    5. Chapter 29: To Each Their Stance
    6. Chapter 30: Self-Proclaimed Hero Natsuki Subaru
    7. Chapter 31: A Talk Between Compatriots
    8. Chapter 32: The Path Onwards
    9. Chapter 33: Now, Onto the Journey Towards the Demon City
    10. Chapter 34: A Quarrel in the Carriage
    11. Chapter 35: A Night For Talking
    12. Chapter 36: Chaotic Demon City
    13. Chapter 37: The Lord of the Crimson Lapis Castle
    14. Chapter 38: A Reward Eight Years in the Making
    15. Chapter 39: Vicious
    16. Bonus Short Stories

        1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy III
        2. Provisional Rem’s Paranoia: A Metal Bat for an Oni
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle III

5. Volume 29

    1. Chapter 40: Nachuki Shubaru
    2. Chapter 41: A Chat Over Tea
    3. Chapter 42: Beast Of Ambition
    4. Chapter 43: Hidden Behind Your Eyelids
    5. Chapter 44: Shrinking Vision

   6. Chapter 45: Konkon
   7. Chapter 46: Childish Recklessness
   8. Chapter 47: Unperishing ■■
   9. Chapter 48: Purposes Entangling in the Demon City
   10. Chapter 49: The Stars Aligned
   11. Chapter 50: A “Hole” With a Great View
   12. Chapter 51: The Demon City’s Mistress
   13. Chapter 52: Love Can’t Be Bequeathed
   14. Chapter 53: What Lies Beyond the Eleventh Second
   15. Chapter 54: The Utopia of Chaosflame
   16. Bonus Short Stories

       1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy IV
       2. Provisional Rem’s Paranoia: There are No Oni Around the World
       3. The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle IV

6. Comic Alive Collection 7:

   1. Lugunican Papers (CA) (Edited Machine Translation)
   2. Sword Identity I
   3. Sword Identity II
   4. Sword Identity III (Translation Pending)
   5. Sword Identity IV (Translation Pending)
   6. The Scarlet League (CA)

7. Short Story Collection 7

   1. Lugunican Papers (Edited Machine Translation)
   2. Lugunican Papers Extra
   3. Sword Identity (2.5 and 3)
   4. The Scarlet League

8. Volume 30

   1. Chapter 55: The Cacophony of the Demon City

    2. Chapter 56: The Great Disaster
    3. Chapter 57: I Can't Live Wiser
    4. Chapter 58: Those With No Place to Turn to
    5. Chapter 59: Taritta Shudrak
    6. Chapter 60: The Planting of a Tumultuous Seedling
    7. Chapter 54B: Covering the Blue Sky
    8. Chapter 55B: The Cacophony of the Fortress City
    9. Chapter 56B: The Flying Dragon Cataclysm
    10. Chapter 57B: I Don't Mind Being Called a Moron
    11. Chapter 58B: Those Who Have No Place to Turn To
    12. Chapter 59B: Flop O'Connell
    13. Interlude: The Frenzied Overture of the Empire
    14. Bonus Short Stories

        1. The Land of Wolves: Death Unto the Weak, No Mercy V
        2. Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Laundry While the Oni are Away
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle V

9. Volume 31

    1. Chapter 61: Welcome, to the Gladiator Island!
    2. Chapter 62: The Island's Order
    3. Chapter 63: Sparka
    4. Chapter 64: Magic Words
    5. Chapter 65: The School Food Fighter
    6. Chapter 66: Hiain Yatz
    7. Chapter 67: Hidden Behind the Molar
    8. Chapter 68: Guidance of the Sword Wolf
    9. Chapter 69: Arriving from the Imperial Capital
    10. Chapter 70: One Thing
    11. Chapter 71: Water
    12. Chapter 72: Ludicrous Rumors
    13. Chapter 73: Weitz Rogen
    14. Chapter 74: Idra Missanga
    15. Chapter 75: I know

    16. Bonus Short Stories
        1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VI
        2. Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Whether Oni or Snakes Live There
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle VI (LQ AI Translation)

10. Comic Alive Collection 8
    1. Stand By Me Pleiades I
    2. Stand By Me Pleiades II
    3. Stand By Me Pleiades III
    4. Stand By Me Pleiades IV (Translation Pending)
    5. Stand By Me Pleiades V (Translation Pending)
    6. Stand By Me Pleiades VI (Translation Pending)
    7. Poltergeist Story (CA)
    8. Very Very Rough Justice (CA) (Translation Pending)

11. Short Story Collection 8
    1. Stand By Me Pleiades (LQ AI Translation)
    2. Stand By Me Pleiades: Return of the Good-For-Nothing Son (LQ AI Translation)
    3. Stand By Me Pleiades: Petra's Manly Negotiations (LQ AI Translation)
    4. Stand By Me Pleiades: Frederica's Blood Bride (LQ AI Translation)
    5. Poltergeist Story
    6. Poltergeist Story Extra
    7. Very Very Rough Justice (LQ AI Translation)

12. Volume 32
    1. Chapter 76: Chance Meetings at the Imperial Capital
    2. Chapter 77: Twist of Fate
    3. Chapter 78: A Volatile Reunion
    4. Chapter 79: A Roar of Scarlet Laughter

    5. Chapter 80: Iris and the King of Thorns
    6. Chapter 81: The Fierce Lady and the Clown
    7. Chapter 82: The Rebels’ Intent
    8. Chapter 83: Warfare and Warzones
    9. Chapter 84: Tea Chamber
    10. Chapter 85: Fhrend
    11. Chapter 86: The Five Bastions
    12. Chapter 87: Decisive Battle at the Bastion
    13. Chapter 88: New Wind
    14. Chapter 89: Kafma Irulux
    15. Chapter 90: The Cradle of Hell
    16. Chapter 91: Racing Across the Battlefield
    17. Chapter 92: Rekindling Old Ties
    18. Chapter 93: The Stone Army
    19. Chapter 94: Determination for the Sake of Whom
    20. Chapter 95: Enemies on All Bastions
    21. Chapter 96: Painting with Deep Love
    22. Bonus Short Stories

        1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VII
        2. Provisional Rem’s Paranoia: Like Holding the Oni by the Neck
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Meili’s Witchbeast Observation Record

13. Volume 33

    1. Chapter 97: Arriving From Beyond the West
    2. Chapter 98: The Pleiades Battalion
    3. Chapter 99: Those Who Rule the Sky
    4. Chapter 100: A Myriad of Changes at the Bastions
    5. Chapter 101: Love is a Flame
    6. Chapter 102: Wall of Resolve
    7. Chapter 103: Countdown of the Stars
    8. Chapter 104: Bastions in Chaos (I)
    9. Chapter 105: Bastions in Chaos (II)
    10. Chapter 106: Bastions in Chaos (III)
    11. Chapter 107: Chisha Gold
    12. Chapter 108: The Forthcoming Great Disaster

        13. Chapter 109: Sword Wolf of the Empire
        14. Chapter 110: Congratulatory Words
        15. Bonus Short Stories
            1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VIII
            2. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero: The Nine Divine Generals
            3. The Dragon Kingdom: Meili’s Witchbeast Observation Record II
13. Arc 8: Vincent Vollachia
    1. Volume 34
        1. Chapter 1: Change of Victory Conditions
        2. Chapter 2: Grudges
        3. Chapter 3: Three Reasons
        4. Chapter 4: Warrior’s Instinct
        5. Chapter 5: Forgiveness
        6. Chapter 6: Won’t Beg for Forgiveness
        7. Chapter 7: Todd Fang
        8. Chapter 8: Future Prospects
        9. Chapter 9: Deciding to Love
        10. Chapter 10: No One Can Be Alone
        11. Chapter 11: Shut the Hell Up
        12. Chapter 12: Natsuki Subaru and Vincent Abellux
        13. Chapter 13: To Each Their Wounds
        14. Chapter 14: The Kingdom and the Empire
        15. Chapter 15: Admiration
        16. Bonus Short Stories
            1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy IX (LQ AI Translation)
            2. Provisional Rem’s Paranoia: Even Oni Shed Tears
            3. The Dragon Kingdom: Meili’s Witchbeast Observation Record III
    2. Volume 35

   1. Chapter 16: The Undead Cataclysm
   2. Chapter 17: A Magical Approach
   3. Chapter 18: Reunions Are but a Moment
   4. Chapter 19: Valga Cromwell’s Stratagem
   5. Chapter 20: The Two Lights
   6. Chapter 21: A Destiny Unavoidable
   7. Chapter 22: Want To Believe. Will Not Forgive.
   8. Chapter 23: Louis
   9. Chapter 24: To Walk in the Light
   10. Chapter 25: The Wishes of Those Who Near Death
   11. Chapter 26: The Poison Princess
   12. Chapter 27: Berstetz Fondalfon
   13. Chapter 28: Siblings of the Empire
   14. Bonus Short Stories
       1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy X (LQ AI Translation)
       2. Anastasia’s Search for Her Companions: First Chronicle
       3. The Dragon Kingdom: Meili’s Witchbeast Observation Record IV

3. Comic Alive Collection 9
   1. Lugunican Hustle (CA)
   2. Golden Siblings (CA) (Edited Machine Translation)
   3. Brotherhood of Pleiades (CA)

4. Short Story Collection 9
   1. Lugunican Hustle (Translation Pending)
   2. Lugunican Hustle Extra
   3. Golden Siblings (Edited Machine Translatio)
   4. Golden Siblings Extra (Edited Machine Translation)
   5. Brotherhood of Pleiades (I) (Translation Pending)
   6. Brotherhood of Pleiades (II) (Translation Pending)

5. Volume 36

    1. Chapter 29: Did Not Want to Love
    2. Chapter 30: Bad News
    3. Chapter 31: The Stone
    4. Chapter 32: Selection of Members
    5. Chapter 33: Verdict on Love
    6. Chapter 34: Won't Forgive You Until You Explain
    7. Chapter 35: Life-Threatening Work
    8. Chapter 36: Undead Capital Lupugana
    9. Chapter 37: Time for Foreshadowing
    10. Chapter 38: Rowan Segmunt
    11. Chapter 39: Laughter of the One Unbounded
    12. Chapter 40: An Inconsequential Threat
    13. Chapter 41: Where Hell Resides
    14. Chapter 42: The Grand Slave
    15. Chapter 43: To Each Their Long-Cherished Desires
    16. Interlude: Ubilik
    17. Bonus Short Stories

        1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XI
        2. Anastasia's Search for Her Companions: Second Chronicle
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record V

6. Comic Alive Collection 10

    1. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (CA)
    2. The Witch's After Tea Party: One Wild Night (CA)

7. Short Story Collection 10

    1. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Introduction) (Translation Pending)
    2. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Incident) (Translation Pending)
    3. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in

    Flanders (Sequel) (Edited Machine Translation)
    4. The Witch's After Tea Party: One Wild Night (Translation Pending)
    5. The Witch's After Tea Party: One Wild Night Extra

8. Volume 37

    1. Chapter 44: How to Respond to Faith
    2. Chapter 45: How to Fell the Stars
    3. Chapter 46: The Taste of the Wind
    4. Chapter 47: Tanza
    5. Chapter 48: The Curse of Thorns
    6. Chapter 49: The King of Thorns
    7. Chapter 50: Eugard Vollachia
    8. Chapter 51: Tennozan
    9. Chapter 52: Medium O'Connell
    10. Chapter 53: The Magical Sharpshooter
    11. Chapter 54: Soumatou
    12. Chapter 55: Madelyn Eschart
    13. Chapter 56: Arakiya
    14. Chapter 57: Cecilus Segmunt
    15. Chapter 58: Proof of Existence
    16. Chapter 59: Sphinx
    17. Chapter 60: Witch
    18. Bonus Short Stories

        1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XII
        2. Anastasia's Search for Her Companions: Third Chronicle
        3. The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record VI

9. Volume 38

    1. Chapter 61: Palladio Manesque
    2. Chapter 62: The Power of Love
    3. Chapter 63: Upon These Lips, I Savor This Miracle
    4. Chapter 64: Parent and Child of the Empire

        5. Chapter 65: Starfall Upon the Imperial Capital
        6. Chapter 66: The Magic Crystal Cannon
        7. Chapter 67: The Cards in One’s Hand
        8. Chapter 68: The Man I Fell For
        9. Chapter 69: I Forgive You
        10. Chapter 70: The Final Stratagem
        11. Chapter 71: Heroic Reveries
        12. Chapter 72: The Sun Princess
        13. Chapter 73: Fated Foes
        14. Chapter 74: Love
        15. Curtains Close: Priscilla Barielle
        16. Prologue: Aldebaran
        17. Bonus Short Stories
            1. The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XIII
            2. Anastasia’s Search for Her Companions: Fourth Chronicle
            3. The Dragon Kingdom: Meili’s Witchbeast Observation Record VII
14. Arc 9: Light of a Nameless Star
    1. Volume 39
        1. Prologue: A New Journey
        2. Chapter 1: O Prayers, Be as Clouds
        3. Chapter 2: Will Not Play the Villain
        4. Chapter 3: To Each Their Mourning of You
        5. Chapter 4: Dunderhead
        6. Chapter 5: Nine Hundred and Thirty-One Hits
        7. Chapter 6: Departure
        8. Interlude: Katya Aurélie
        9. Chapter 7: Reunion at Sand Wind
        10. Chapter 8: How to Regret
        11. Chapter 9: High-Efficiency Sorcerous Induction Door
        12. Chapter 10: Limit of Three Days
        13. Chapter 11: You Are No Longer Among Us
        14. Chapter 12: Starlight Beyond the Realm of a Billion

        15. Chapter 13: The One Most Loved and the One Most Unloved
        16. Bonus Short Stories

            1. The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters I
            2. Kararagi Reaper Incident I
            3. No Stella No Life I

    2. Comic Alive Collection 11

        1. Once Upon a Time in Lugunica (CA)
        2. Elegant Lesson (CA) (Edited Machine Translation)

    3. Short Story Collection 11

        1. Once Upon a Time in Lugunica (Translation Pending)
        2. Elegant Lesson (Edited Machine Translation)
        3. Elegant Lesson After (Edited Machine Translation)
        4. Otto Suwen’s Internal Affairs Struggle (Translation Pending)
        5. Joshua Juukulius’s Careful Encyclopedia
        6. Joshua Juukulius’s Careful Encyclopedia Ex (Edited Machine Translation)
        7. Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle (Translation Pending)
        8. Mimi Pearlbaton’s Bite of Love and Passion
        9. Priscilla’s Cheers for Me, Drunk Father Part (Translation Pending)

    4. Ex 6: Sword Demon Battle Ballad (Comic Alive)

        1. Prologue
        2. Act One
        3. Act Two
        4. Act Three
        5. Act Four
        6. Act Five
        7. Act Six

    8. Act Seven
    9. Act Eight
    10. Curtain's Close

5. Ex 6: Sword Demon Battle Ballad

    1. Sword Demon Battle Ballad: Finale of the Eight Arms
    2. Sword Demon Battle Ballad: The One Who Succeeds Astrea
    3. Sword Demon Battle Ballad: The Flower Field of That Day

6. Volume 40

    1. Prologue: The Days Spent Chasing that Star
    2. Chapter 14: The Strongest
    3. Chapter 15: The Defeated
    4. Chapter 16: The Complicit
    5. Chapter 17: Please, Don't Forgive Me
    6. Chapter 18: A Hundred Times More Troublesome
    7. Chapter 19: Scuffle in the Shadows
    8. Chapter 20: How to Use a Life
    9. Chapter 21: Valga Cromwell
    10. Chapter 22: How to End a Battle
    11. Chapter 23: The Gang's All Here
    12. Bonus Short Stories

        1. The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters II
        2. Kararagi Reaper Incident II
        3. No Stella No Life II

7. Comic Alive Collection 12

    1. First Mission (CA) (LQ AI Translation)
    2. Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II (CA) (Translation Pending)
    3. Guardians of the Crimson Flame (CA)

8. Short Story Collection 12

        1. First Mission (Translation Pending)
        2. First Mission After
        3. Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II (LQ AI Translation)
        4. Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II After
        5. Guardians of the Crimson Flame (Translation Pending)

9. Volume 41

    1. Prologue: Account of a Witch’s Dream
    2. Chapter 24: The Enemy of Mankind
    3. Chapter 25: Emilia was Enraged
    4. Chapter 26: Sword Demon VS Crimson Sakura
    5. Chapter 27: Words of a Child
    6. Chapter 28: A Stanza of Legend
    7. Chapter 29: Foot of the Table
    8. Chapter 30: Plan B
    9. Chapter 31: One-Hundred Percent Effort
    10. Chapter 32: The Man Named Clind
    11. Chapter 33: The Girl Named Petra Leyte
    12. Chapter 34: Attraction
    13. Chapter 35: The Awakening Star
    14. Chapter 36: Problem
    15. Bonus Short Stories

        1. The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters III
        2. Kararagi Reaper Incident III
        3. No Stella No Life III

10. Volume 42

    1. Prologue: A Witch’s Blessing
    2. Chapter 37: Mindset
    3. Chapter 38: Scorched by the Sun
    4. Chapter 39: The Final Line
    5. Chapter 40: Flash Remnade
    6. Chapter 41: Apprise the Usurper
    7. Chapter 42: What Effort Doth Shatter the Heart
    8. Chapter 43: True Name

        9. Chapter 44: Collusion Beneath the Water's Surface
        10. Chapter 45: Clash of the Suprarational
        11. Chapter 46: The Witch of Tristitia
        12. Chapter 47: "Voice"
        13. Chapter 48: The Ultimate Lifeform
        14. Chapter 49: Magician
        15. Bonus Short Stories

            1. The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters IV (LQ AI Translation)
            2. Kararagi Reaper Incident IV (LQ AI Translation)
            3. No Stella No Life IV

11. Comic Alive Collection 13

    1. Royal Selection: First Contact (CA) (LQ AI Translation)
    2. Once Upon a Time in Astrea (CA)

12. Short Story Collection 13

    1. Royal Selection: First Contact (Translation Pending)
    2. Royal Selection: First Contact After
    3. The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: The Lion's Ferocity (Translation Pending)
    4. Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me! The Crimson Flame's Homecoming Part (Translation Pending)
    5. Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Night Parade of One Hundred Oni (Translation Pending)
    6. Once Upon a Time in Astrea (Translation Pending)
    7. Once Upon a Time in Astrea After

13. Volume 43

    1. Prologue: End of the Dream
    2. Chapter 50: Decisive Battle on the Ice
    3. Chapter 51: Yae Tenzen

        4. Chapter 52: Aldebaran I
        5. Chapter 53: Aldebaran II
        6. Chapter 54: Warlock VS Witch
        7. Chapter 55: Aggressor of the Territory
        8. Chapter 56: Petra Leyte
        9. Chapter 57: Final Act of Servitude
        10. Chapter 58: The Sound of Chains
        11. Chapter 59: —No.
        12. Interlude: Cheer
        13. Curtains Close: Reweave
        14. Bonus Short Stories

            1. The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters V (LQ MTL Translation)
            2. Kararagi Reaper Incident V (LQ MTL Translation)
            3. No Stella No Life V (LQ MTL Translation)

15. Arc 10: The Land of the Lion Kings

    1. Volume 44

        1. Prologue: The Fateful Night
        2. Chapter 1: Friends
        3. Chapter 2: Sacrament of the Church
        4. Chapter 3: An Omen of Light
        5. Chapter 4: You’re Welcome
        6. Chapter 5: The Details of a Detour
        7. Chapter 6: Instantaneous Water Heater
        8. Chapter 7: My Friend
        9. Interlude: “—Why?”
        10. Chapter 8: The Consequences of a Choice
        11. Chapter 9: Crybaby
        12. Chapter 10: Faith Embedded
        13. Chapter 11: The Reason the Dragon Gem Shines
        14. Chapter 12: Groan
        15. Bonus Short Stories

            1. The Land of Nascent Wolves: The Magnificence of the Eminent Emperor of Vollachia (LQ MTL Translation)

        2. Kararagi Reaper Incident VI (LQ MTL Translation)
        3. Yae Tenzen’s Crimson Sakura State of Affairs

16. Unadapted Comic Alives

    1. Visual Complete Vol. 1: Emilia (Translation Pending)
    2. Visual Complete Vol. 2: Ram (Edited Machine Translation)
    3. Visual Complete Vol. 3: Rem (LQ AI Translation)
    4. Red Snowfall on the Orcos Domain (Edited Machine Translation)
    5. The Witch’s After Tea Party: Omega in Wonderland (LQ AI Translation)
    6. The Three Idiots Set Out! The Great Manhunt for the Missing Child Battalion Episode (LQ AI Translation)
    7. The Witch’s After Tea Party: Witch Trials (LQ AI Translation)

17. Birthday Specials

    1. Emilia’s Birthday Specials

        1. Emilia’s Very Happy Birthday
        2. Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 2
        3. Memory Snow Prequel: Liar Days
        4. Bond of Ice Prequel: Frozen Days
        5. Happy Diary
        6. Two Witches Tea Party
        7. The Two Witches’ Eventful Journey
        8. Twinkle Twinkle Little Star
        9. Two Witches’ What Ifs (LQ AI Translation)

    2. Oni Sister Birthday Specials

        1. Blessing Day Ex: Rem’s Birthday Party
        2. Blessing Day Ex: Rem-rin’s Day
        3. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: Welcome to the Evening Party
        4. Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 3

        5. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: A Happy Bad Dream
        6. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~An Oni's Role~
        7. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~Nocturnal Reverie Sisters~
        8. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~Before and After Pleiades~
        9. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~One Thousand Origami Cranes of Prayer~
        10. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~The Maid's Nocturne~

18. Event Specials

    1. Another World / Reincarnation SS Paper
    2. Emilia's Blog Practice Diary
    3. Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero
    4. Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 1
    5. Re:Zero Ex: I Can Hear the Festival Music
    6. Subaru's Strange Tea Party
    7. Isekai Quartet Special: Another World, Another Episode
    8. Hansel and Gretel
    9. Re: Starting a Menu Life from Zero
    10. Malice Before the Theater

19. Others

    1. Twitter Short Story
    2. Martyr's Death
    3. Glossary
    4. Give Blessings to the Beautiful Maid!
    5. Give Blessings to This Wonderful EMT!

20. IF Stories (Web Novel)

    1. The Butterfly Dream
    2. Lust IF: The Butterly Dream
    3. Greed IF: Accumulating Life in Another World From Zero (Web Novel)
    4. Pride IF: Life in Another World Erring From Zero

    5. Wrath IF: Drowning Life in Another World From Zero
    6. Gluttony IF: Patching Together a Life in Another World From Zero
    7. Rem IF

        1. Natsuki Rem
        2. Oni and Happiness
        3. Fortune Roll Rhapsody
        4. Natsuki Rigel
        5. Fortune Fish-Head Tree
        6. Fortune Setsubun Hollow

    8. Mimagau IF: Re: Mistaking Life in Another World from Zero

        1. Mimagau I
        2. Mimagau II (LQ AI Translation)

    9. Re:Zero Academy

        1. First Period
        2. Second Period
        3. Third Period (LQ AI Translation)
        4. Fourth Period (LQ AI Translation)

21. Blu-ray Specials

    1. Bonds of Ice

        1. Prologue: Four Greats and an Outsider
        2. Chapter 1: Called by You
        3. Chapter 2: I Am Here
        4. Chapter 3: If It’s for You
        5. Chapter 4: I Can Become Anything
        6. Epilogue: The Meaning of Happiness

    2. The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village

        1. Prologue: The Hornless Twins
        2. Chapter 1: A Fiery Night
        3. Chapter 2: The Prideful Oni Clan
        4. Chapter 3: A New Life and the Start of Revenge

    5. Chapter 4: A Festival Dyed in Blood
    6. Chapter 5: The Oni That Cried
    7. Epilogue: The Clown, The Accomplice, and The Substitute

3. Camp Formation Stories

    1. Chapter 1: The Valkyrie, Blue, The Sword Demon, and— (LQ AI Translation)
    2. Chapter 2: The Bloody Bride and her Amusing Servants (LQ AI Translation)
    3. Chapter 3: A Graceful Prosperity Record (Edited Machine Translation)
    4. Chapter 4: Felt's Camp Formation Story Starting from Zero

4. Sloth IF: Natsuki Rem's Life in Another World From Zero

    1. Prologue: The Beginning
    2. Chapter 1: 2 Months
    3. Chapter 2: 3 Months (1)
    4. Chapter 3: 3 Months (2)
    5. Chapter 4: 6 Months
    6. Chapter 5: 10 Months
    7. Interlude: Death Anniversary
    8. Chapter 6: The Last Month of Pregnancy
    9. Epilogue: Anniversary

5. Apocolypse Girls

    1. Prologue: Beloved Warmth
    2. Chapter 1: The Featherrun Sisters
    3. Chapter 2: Holosseo Featherrun
    4. Chapter 3: Dorothea Featherrun
    5. Chapter 4: Saria Featherrun & Hildea Featherrun
    6. Chapter 5: Ornea Featherrun
    7. Chapter 6: Sithonia Featherrun
    8. Epilogue: Elsa Granhiert
    9. Afterword

    6. Loving the Days Gone By

        1. Prologue: First Cry
        2. Chapter 1: Chased by the Spherical Moon
        3. Chapter 2: Night of Stars' Descent
        4. Epilogue: Crying Voice

    7. Greed IF: Accumulating Life in Another World From Zero (Bluray)

        1. Prologue I: The Shield of the Sanctuary
        2. Chapter I: Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch
        3. Prologue II: The Witchbeast Master
        4. Chapter II: Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch
        5. Prologue III: The Versatile Steward
        6. Chapter III: Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch
        7. Prologue IV: The Progeny of the Lion King
        8. Chapter IV: Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch
        9. Afterword
        10. Closing Dialogue

    8. Virtuousness Before the Theater (LQ AI Translation)

        1. Prologue: The Day of Preparations
        2. Chapter 1: The Day of Invitation
        3. Chapter 2: The Day of Arrival: Daytime
        4. Chapter 3: The Day of Arrival: Nighttime
        5. Chapter 4: The Day of Execution

22. Movie Specials

    1. Bonds of Ice: Before Memories (LQ AI Translation)

        1. Prologue: Bonds of Ice / Once upon a Time
        2. Chapter 1: Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago / Priscilla Camp
        3. Chapter 2: Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago /

        Anastasia Camp
        4. Chapter 3: Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago / Felt Camp
        5. Chapter 4: Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago / Crusch Camp
        6. Epilogue: Bonds of Ice / What Happened After

    2. Another Memory Snow

        1. Chapter 1: The Oni Sisters' Memory Snow
        2. Chapter 2: Crusch Camp
        3. Chapter 3: Anastasia Camp
        4. Chapter 4: Priscilla Camp
        5. Chapter 5: Felt Camp

23. Notes

Arc 1:
The Tumultuous First Day

Volume 1

Chapters 1-END

Prologue: Waste Heat of the Beginning

This is really bad.

He felt the hard floor against his cheek, and realized that he had collapsed onto his face.

His strength was completely gone, and he had already lost sensation in his fingers.

The heat from his core was so excruciating it made him want to tear his throat out.

Hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot.

The moment he opened his mouth to scream, what spilled forth was no shriek, it was a clump of blood.

He vomited up large quantities of his lifeblood as he coughed. Frothy blood started foaming up at the corners of his mouth as he gurgled. Within his dim field of view, the ground had been dyed red.

Aah, this is all, my blood?

There was enough to soak his fallen body. Blood comprises about 8% of the human body, and it is said that losing about a third of that would be life-threatening, but—It seemed to him that he'd already lost just about all of it.

He had stopped vomiting blood, but the 'heat' that felt as though it would incinerate him still persisted. He moved his hand toward his abdomen with great difficulty, and having felt an impossible sensation there, he understood.

My stomach's been torn open, huh.

It was no wonder he felt so hot. It seemed his brain had confused 'pain' for 'heat'.

He was almost torn in half, only a bit of skin at his back held him together.

In short, it seemed that this was ‘checkmate’ for him.

The moment he realized this, his consciousness started fading.

Even the heat, which was making him writhe in agony had disappeared, Even the unpleasant feeling of blood and the sensation in the hand he’d used to feel his organs, it was all fading away along with his consciousness.

All that was left was his body, which would not be able to accompany his soul.

This body used the last of its disappearing consciousness to move just a little. It turned its head upward.

Black shoes formed ripples in the pool of blood before his eyes. There was someone there. And that someone was most likely the one who killed him.

Strangely, he didn’t feel like looking at their face. This person was the one who took his life, and yet he still decided to simply remain a spectator to his own demise. He had no clue who they were, but right now he didn’t really care about that.

He only wished for the girl’s safety.

“—Baru?”

He felt like he heard a voice like the chime of a bell.

He was beyond the point where he could even differentiate his senses, so he probably just imagined it.

Despite that, even supposing it wasn’t real, he found it extremely comforting.

So—

“—!”

A short scream, and then the carpet of blood welcomed yet another person.

She had fallen right next to him, exactly where his arm was.

Her fair hand dropped powerlessly, and intertwined with his.

—Probably just a coincidence.

He felt her fingers move slightly, as if squeezing his hand.

“…ait”

He forced his disappearing consciousness to return for a moment. The pain and the heat, everything had faded away. It was a meaningless effort, nothing but a loser wasting time.

But even so…

“I will, definitely—”

Save you.

At that moment, Natsuki Subaru lost his life.

Chapter 1:
Unusable Ridged 10

1

—This is really bad.

Lost and penniless, those few words were all he could think of.

Well, penniless wasn't quite right. He did have his wallet in his pocket, and setting aside the fact that he had an abundance of small change and very few notes, it couldn't be denied that he had his assets on him.

More than enough to go to the nearest mall to do some shopping and eat some lunch. Even so, he could only be called penniless.

"Looks like the currency around here is completely different after all…"

Flipping the rare ridged 10 yen coin he was holding, the youth sighed deeply.

He was an unremarkable youth bearing short black hair and average stature. He had some muscularity which combined with his cheap jersey gave off the air of an athlete.

His sharp eyes were his only noteworthy feature, and now even they drooped helplessly.

The banality of his appearance was such that one could instantly lose him in a crowd, however the gazes directed at him were those of wonder and incomprehension, as though they were looking at something strange.

Obviously, there wasn't a single person sporting black hair or a jersey among those looking at him. Their hair varied extensively, blonde, white, brown, green, blue and so on. Furthermore their outfits were armor, dancers' clothes, monotone robes and more which possessed a certain vibe.

The youth could only cross his arms in comprehension as their brazen gazes washed over him.

“So basically, it’s like that, huh.”

Snapping his fingers, he pointed at those who were staring at him.

“Seems I’ve been summoned to another world.”

Before his eyes was a carriage drawn by a massive lizard-like being.

2

Natsuki Subaru was born in Heisei-era Japan’s pressure-free education system.

He had lived seventeen years, and to describe his life would take seventeen years in itself.

Setting that aside, his present situation could be simply described as “High school third year, shut-in.”

Or in more detailed terms, “A piece of trash who disregards everything, even his parents, to shut himself in his shell even with his entrance exams right around the corner.”

There was no particular reason for his solitude.

On typical weekdays, he would occasionally think “Getting up now would be a pain”, and that became an impetus to cut school.

With his absences steadily increasing, before he realized it he’d become an exemplary shut-in who brought tears to his parents.

He spent his days in sloth, plunging ever deeper into the net with minimal communication.

“The result being a summons to another world, huh… I don’t really get it myself.”

Reconfirming his surroundings yet again, he heaved his umpteenth sigh.

He had moved from the street he was on, and was presently sitting in a somewhat dim alley.

The ground was paved. A rough job compared to modern Japan, but it wasn't bad.

"Supposing this is a parallel world fantasy, I guess this must be the standard medieval civilization. I didn't see any machinery, and they build with stone and wood…"

He thought back to the sights he'd seen on his way to the alley and organized the information in his head. He would frequently let his imagination run wild, as a result he was more than prepared for his present situation.

First, calmly analyze that time period's culture and its differences with Japan. Ascertain any differences in the laws of physics, and possibility of contact with humanoid organisms. These were his priorities.

"Alright, let's do this. I'm not imagining you guys, and I'm fairly certain about the level of civilization. It seems like my money won't be of any use, but I took the opportunity to speak to a shopkeeper and we had no problem communicating."

Upon realizing he'd been summoned, the first thing Subaru did was attempt to negotiate with a "Grocer?" Having attempted to purchase the "Apples?" with his Japanese Yen, he was promptly denied. It seemed that this world used gold, silver and copper coins as its currency. The inherent value of currency in this world was easy to understand, certainly befitting a parallel world fantasy.

"Well, I suppose there would be mixed-metal fakes. Something like a 500-won coin would probably degrade, though."

'Probably heavy to carry around', he thought as another lizard-drawn carriage passed through the street. This produced a giant cloud of dust and yet the townsfolk paid it no mind, as though they were completely used to this.

“Even so, they don’t seem nearly as common as cars were… Come to think of it, I haven’t seen any dogs or cats around here.”

The lizards drawing the carriages appeared considerably larger than horses. Their body mass seemed constant relative to their proportions, but it was certainly worrying to see reptiles of that size.

“They’re commonplace, huh… Both lizards and humanoids.”

Then the final piece he had to confirm, the unique looks of this world’s humans.

They possessed very colorful hair, but one could easily obtain any hair color with dye. For a parallel world fantasy, that was nothing extraordinary. Instead, Subaru focused on their “animal ears.”

At a cursory glance he spotted dog ears, cat ears, perhaps even bunny ears and he may have even caught sight of a lizardman-like being. There were also those who looked no different from Subaru which led him to conclude-

“The genre is parallel world fantasy. The culture is that of your typical medieval civilization. Demi-humans are common, so battle and adventure might be common as well. The animals show some minor changes but they basically serve their functions. Is that how it is?”

Having deduced that, Subaru exhaled a long breath that wasn’t quite a sigh.

Having spoken of the circumstances he’d ended up in, he knit his brows at this seemingly convenient development. If things proceeded according to his fantasies, he’d freely use his modern knowledge to obtain incredible power, however this world was slightly different from what he’d planned for.

“I’d run perfect simulations of the Sengoku era… If I’d ended up there, I’d have seized the country from Nobunaga.”

When it came to parallel world fantasy, at best his knowledge amounted to gunpowder production. And even that was meaningless considering this world’s technological level Parallel world fantasy generally came with magic, if that were the case it would probably make gunpowder little more than fireworks.

“Well, there’s also cliches where magic isn’t the end all be all. If I ever get the opportunity to contribute to the advancement of science, I’ll do my best to… First, my current problem.”

He had no clue how or why he’d been summoned here.

He clearly remembered what he was doing prior to the summoning. He had just gone out for the first time in a long while to buy some cup ramen at the convenience store and was about to return home. He didn’t want to use his bicycle so he went on foot

Midway, he looked up at the night sky and thought “It’s almost a full moon tonight, huh.” And then as he looked down and blinked, it was noon.

Night to noon in an instant. He immediately realized something was off, but that was it. He’d calmed down now, but immediately after the summoning his panic was such that it could be told of for generations to come.

“Considering I being an only son have gone missing, those generations might not exist.”

As he muttered this, he once again checked his belongings. In a parallel world fantasy, starting gear was even more important than he’d imagined. He’d need everything he had, however little.

First, his cell phone (with a dying battery), his wallet (containing many video rental membership cards), the ramen he bought at the convenience store (Shoyu Tonkotsu), some snacks (corn potage flavored), his beloved gray jersey (unwashed), worn out sneakers (of two years) and more.

“That’s that, huh… Why didn’t I at least carry a pistol? What do I do now?”

It seemed only his snacks would prove useful, and only to fill his belly.

“The situation is hopeless. And of course I don’t know the source, I don’t even have any memories of passing through a mirror or hopping in a pond. Most importantly, where’s the beauty who summoned me?”

The heroine’s absence, by 2D standards, was an act of inconceivable negligence. To summon him and just leave him like that, it was as though he was simply thrown away.

In truth, Subaru could no longer escape reality now that he’d assessed his situation and he could only hang his head in despair.

“Oh, give me a break already. What on earth am I supposed to do here?”

Subaru was already at his limit as he muttered complaints. He earnestly wanted to go back, fantasy was best left in the realm of fantasy. It was fun to imagine arriving in another world to obtain incredible power, but to actually end up in such a situation, what could he really do?

“For now, what’s important is survival, but… Will my level 1 communication ability be enough?”

Aside from his family, he only really spoke to store clerks. He’d lived this lifestyle for almost a year now and had long forgotten how to navigate social interactions.

“Even though I can type at speaking speed in online chats…”

Subaru moved his fingers nervously as he contemplated his future in despair. However, his expression changed when he heard the sound of footsteps echoing through the alley. He looked up to see three men blocking the exit.

Chapter 2:
“Don’t get carried away,” Said God.

The men gazed at him with scorn and contempt as Subaru appraised them. They appeared to be in their mid-twenties. Their clothes were filthy and it was as though their inner evil had manifested on their faces. They weren’t subhuman, but they couldn’t be called decent humans either.

“Damn, a compulsory event.”

Facing the grinning men, Subaru wiped his face and stood up in a panic. They were clearly bandits, and considering the state of the world they might even take his life. Mission 1: “Repel the bandits” had begun. The clear condition was eliminating them, and the failure condition was probably his death.

Subaru smacked his cheeks and ignored the chill running up his spine. He had to get serious, hesitation could cost him his life. He at least had confidence in his decisiveness.

“Furthermore, this is another world. Considering the typical pattern I might be super strong here. Something like the gravity being a tenth of what it was or… Come to think of it, my body feels light! Maybe I can win!”

“He’s murmuring something.”

“Maybe he doesn’t get what’s going on. Should we teach him?”

Unlike Subaru, the men remained fairly calm. However, Subaru continued to face them without backing down. “Woah there, you guys won’t be so calm for long. Let me warn you, guys like me fantasize about this sort of thing all the time. I’ll beat the crap out of you and turn you into XP!”

“I have no clue what you’re saying, but you’re going to die for mocking us.”

“That’s…my line!”

With that declaration, Subaru launched his preemptive attack before they could react. He flew into one of them with a full bodied right straight. He landed a direct hit on the leader’s face with such force that his front tooth cut Subaru’s hand.

He’d hit someone for the first time! And it was much more painful than expected!

This was all he’d tried in his simulations, but it was his first time actually doing it, the man he hit fell to the ground and stopped moving. Driven by emotion, Subaru immediately lunged at another man who was still in shock.

“Eat this! A high kick forged by after-bath stretches!”

“Guh!”

His foot drew an arc right into the man’s temple and slammed him into the wall. Having knocked a second person out, Subaru started to believe he was invincible due to his unexpectedly competent performance.

“Looks like this world is set to raise my power after all! With all this adrenaline I can definitely win!”

Filled with courage, Subaru turned to the last man as he prepared to take him out. However, the glint of the knife in his hand caused Subaru to prostrate himself on the spot.

“I’m sorry, it was all my fault! Please forgive me, spare—!” He surrendered on his knees, the greatest and lowest representation of Japanese spirit.

His earlier excitement had completely disappeared. Subaru felt his blood run cold as he tried his very best to beg for mercy, with his head on the ground.

After all, he had no chance against a blade. If he were cut, he’d be finished. Skill didn’t matter when it came to a knife-wielding opponent.

He then realized the two who were supposed to be down were also getting back up. They nursed their bleeding noses and shook their heads dizzily, but otherwise seemed fine.

“Huh?! How come my peerless attacks failed?! Where’s the power I’m supposed to have?!”

“What sort of crap are you spouting?! How dare you do that to us?!”

They stomped his head into the ground, causing his forehead to bleed as it scraped against the road. Subaru desperately curled up as they continued to pile on blow after blow.

—This is bad, it hurts like hell. I might actually die, for real.

They showed no mercy whatsoever, and unlike his old world there was no guarantee they’d spare his life, there was a strong possibility that he’d be tortured to death like this.

Perhaps he should have fought, prepared to die an honorable death. But that was no longer a possibility considering his injuries. Even so, he couldn’t just die like that.

“Don’t move, fool!”

“Owowowow! Hurtshurtshurts!”

The moment he tried to get up, they crushed his hands underfoot and he could only scream in agony. The man turned red with rage and sent spit flying as he yelled, he then held the knife in an underhand grip.

“We’ll kill you and take everything you have. That’s what you get for messing with us.”

“If it’s valuables you’re after, it’s useless. You see, I’m completely broke!”

“Your strange clothes and shoes will do then, we’ll turn you into Giant Rat feed.”

—Ah, there's rats in this world too. Sounds like a bottom-tier monster.

His mind started drifting in an attempt to escape reality as he looked at the knife which could tear into him at any moment. He wasn't seeing any lights, nor did the world slow down. His life would simply end just like that.

"Hey, move move move! You're in my way!"

An exasperated voice rang out as someone ran into the alley. The startled men looked up at the intruder, and Subaru attempted to do so as well though he couldn't move.

A beautiful girl crossed his field of view.

Her frame was small, and she possessed shoulder-length blonde hair which fluttered in the wind. Her eyes suggested a strong will and her fang-like canine protruded mischievously. She looked rather cheeky, but it could be said that she was cute considering her age.

The shabbily dressed girl had just come across the scene of a genuine mugging.

The seemingly deliberate timing caused hope to well up within Subaru. This was it, the development he was waiting for. Following the typical pattern, this kind girl would gallantly save Subaru who was on the verge of death, and then-

"Man, this is crazy. But I'm busy, gotta get outta here! Live strong!"

"Eh? What?! Seriously?!"

However, that fleeting hope was crushed.

Their eyes met momentarily and she raised her hand apologetically as she continued to run past them into what seemed to be a dead end.

She then proceeded to leap off a leaning board and rapidly disappeared up the wall.

With the girl gone, the alley naturally went silent. She'd gone by like a typhoon leaving them dumbfounded, but Subaru's circumstances hadn't changed one bit.

"Now that the mood's been lightened, I don't suppose you might let me go?!"

"On the contrary, we're even angrier. You're not going to die a peaceful death, you know?"

The man with the knife looked serious. Subaru realized that he was finished for sure this time, his hands were still trapped under their heels, it was too late to attempt to get up. Ultimately, despair conquered his heart.

—It's… Over? Just like that, in a place like this? It's true I haven't lived very virtuously. Even so, a death like this is just too cruel. If I were to ask what I did, the reply would be that I did nothing at all, a completely idle demise.

Pain… Wasn't it. There was something else causing him to tear up. It wasn't something like the fear of the end. He just couldn't bear having lived such an empty, meaningless life.

"—That's enough, villains."

A clear voice rang through the alley overpowering the noise of violence, the men's vulgar jeers, and even Subaru's own ragged breaths.

Chapter 3:
First Encounter with Magic

‘Time itself stopped’, a phrase reserved for moments like this. At the entrance to the alley stood a single girl.

She was a beautiful girl.

She had tied up her long silver hair which reached her hips, her piercing gaze was brimming with intelligence, her soft features were both seductive and youthful and she exuded an air of nobility that was dangerously charming.

She stood about 160 centimeters tall, her royal blue-toned garments weren’t particularly flashy, and yet their simplicity emphasized her presence even further. The one conspicuous feature was the emblem on her coat, a bird resembling a hawk, and even its magnificence was nothing more than a supplement to her sublime beauty.

“I won’t let you run amok like that. Stop at once.”

She spoke once again, her voice so exciting it could send tremors through one’s body.

Her voice was like a silver bell, it was pleasant to the ears and her speech held such power it could shake one’s heart.

Subaru was overwhelmed, to the extent that he’d completely forgotten his predicament. He could only think of her.

The bandits were no different, faced with her animosity their earlier vigor vanished. Even the man holding the knife turned pale as they retreated into the alley.

“Waitwaitwait! Please wait! We don’t really get it, but we’ll let him go! So please forgive us…”

“It’s good to see you’re so gracious. It’s not too late, so return what you stole.”

“It was our bad… Eh? What we stole?”

“Please. It’s really important. I’d let go of anything else, but not that. —If you return it now, I’ll spare your lives.”

Though her words were only that of an entreaty, the last few were clearly filled with anger.

Her gaze was sharp, and the hand she’d extended as though reaching out was empty. However, there was something hard to put into words gathering in her palm, something everyone there could feel.

“W-Wait! … Um, perhaps there’s been some kind of mistake?”

“…What?”

They pointed to Subaru who was still under their boots.

“Uhh, you’re not here to save this guy, right?”

“…What strange clothes he’s wearing. Perhaps there’s been some internal strife among you? I can’t say I approve of you ganging up on him like that, but if you were to ask whether or not I have any sort of connection to him, I’d have to say I don’t.”

Perhaps thinking they were trying to distract her, her tone was one of irritation. Seeming flustered by this, the men started talking in a hurry.

“Woa-W-Wait! If you don’t want this guy, we have nothing to do with each other! About whatever was stolen from you, it was probably that girl from earlier!”

“A-Ah, right! The girl from earlier, she ran up the wall onto the roof!”

“Yeah, over there! She’s probably three streets away by now!”

As they gave their rapid-fire explanations, her eyes met Subaru’s.

Her eyes seemed to ask if they were telling the truth and Subaru nodded instinctively, unable to lie.

Having seen this, the girl reluctantly nodded in understanding.

“It looks like you weren’t lying. So she went that way…? I’ll have to hurry.”

She turned her back on them, prepared to leave.

The men were blatantly relieved, and Subaru cursed his own foolishness for getting wrapped up in the atmosphere and squandering his only chance. However…

“Be that as it may, I can’t overlook what’s going on here.”

She turned around with her palm facing them—and aimed the ‘rock’ in her palm at the stock-still men as she fired.

Its speed would fit right in at the major league, and its course was that of a bean ball.

The sound of a regulation ball striking flesh rang out thrice, and the men were blown away as they screamed in pain.

Having scored direct hits on the men, there was a high-pitched din as lumps of ice fell by Subaru. Lumps of ice the size of a fist—Their existence defied any sense of season and even physics itself, and they dispersed as if consumed by the atmosphere once they’d served their purpose.

“—Magic.”

The word most suited to explain this phenomenon immediately spilled out of his mouth. He didn’t hear her chant or anything, but that ice just now was definitely formed in and fired from her palm.

Having seen this actually occur before him, he realized something.

“This isn’t nearly as fantastic as I thought… It feels disappointingly real.”

He’d imagined light scattering around or energy flowing wildly, but in reality it was just some lumps of ice rapidly coming into existence and disappearing just as quickly. There wasn’t even the slightest hint of atmosphere to it.

“You’ve… Really gone and done it now.”

Setting aside Subaru’s impressions, the men who had been hit by that disappointingly real attack had sustained serious damage. Two of them could barely keep their footing steady as they stood back up and the third may have been hit in a bad spot, because he was out cold. Despite their bleeding, the two who were still standing appeared ready to fight. Even the man beside the guy with the knife was holding an object resembling a rusty nata as he prepared for battle.

“I don’t give a damn whether you’re a mage or whatever. The two of us together are going to kill you… You think you can win against both of us?”

The man with the knife raised his voice in anger as he pressed down on his broken nose with his other hand, but the girl showed no signs of faltering.

“I suppose two on one might be unfair.”

“Then two on two should be okay, right?”

Yet another voice filled the alley, androgynous and high-pitched, as though speaking for the girl.

Subaru started looking around in surprise and the men shared his reaction. They couldn’t find anyone who might have spoken those words, not at the entrance and of course not within the alley.

The three of them were confused and bewildered, and as if to show off, the girl held out her hand.

Her palm faced upward, and ‘it’ floated above her white fingertips.

“It’s kind of embarrassing to be looked at like that.”

It said as it bashfully groomed its face. ‘It’ being a cat small enough to fit in a palm, standing upright.

Its coat was gray and its ears were floppy, to Subaru it looked very much like an American Shorthair. Well, setting aside its pink nose and the length of its tail. The sight of this bizarre cat-like being caused the man with the knife to tremble as he screamed.

"—A spirit user!"

"Correct. If you withdraw right now, I won't pursue you. Think fast, I don't have time for this."

The men clicked their tongues at her words and started to carry their fallen friend out of the alley. As they passed by Subaru and approached the exit, they glanced back at the girl and—

"Just you wait, you damned brat. You'd best be careful the next time you decide to wander around here."

"If you lay a finger on her, you'll be tormented until the end of time. You'll be in the afterlife well before that, though."

They desperately tried to make threats, but the reply was dismissive in tone although its contents were rather severe.

The cat in her palm behaved rather frivolously, but their faces turned paler than ever before as they silently fled out of the alley.

Now that they were gone, only Subaru remained before her.

"—Don't move."

Forgetting the pain coursing through him, Subaru had tried to get up to thank her.

But she stopped him in his tracks, her ice cold voice devoid of any sentiment.

Her eyes were filled with caution. Even having understood Subaru wasn't with them, she clearly didn't think of him as a good person.

Despite this, he was enthralled by the beauty of her amethyst eyes.

He wasn’t used to dealing with beautiful women, so that alone caused him to turn red and avert his eyes. Seeing this, the girl smiled boldly as she maintained her cautious gaze.

“Your guilty conscience made you avert your eyes. Looks like my judgement was spot on.”

“I wonder. I didn’t sense malice whatsoever, that was probably just an instinctive male reaction.”

“You be quiet, Puck. —You, you probably know who stole my insignia, right?”

The girl silenced the cat as she tossed a question Subaru’s way. She seemed rather proud of herself, but,

“Sorry to disappoint, but I have no clue.”

“No way?!”

Her prideful front crumbled, allowing her usual expression to come through for a moment. Her imposing attitude had also vanished as she turned to the cat in her palm in a panic.

“Wh-What now? Did we really just waste our time…?”

“You’re wasting time as we speak, you really should hurry. The culprit definitely has the divine protection of wind considering how fast they ran.”

“Why are you treating it like someone else’s problem?”

“You were the one who told me to stay out of it, though. Besides, what are you going to do about this guy?”

Subaru smiled bitterly when he once again became the topic of conversation. The girl seemed as though she’d just now realized that he was still there. Subaru put on a brave face for her and stood up,

“You’ve done enough. You’re in a hurry, right? You’d better get going.”

—I’ll help you out if you so desire, how about it?

He’d planned to say this while his fingers combed through his hair and his teeth sparkled, however,

"Huh?"

"Ah, you'd better not try to sta—, too late."

His head felt heavy and his body was wobbly. He tried to support himself against a wall, but his hand only grasped air. In the end, he had a reunion with the ground he was just recently laying on. He fell completely undefended right onto his nose, the sharp pain making his consciousness drift.

"—Well, what now?"

"Well, it's not like we know him. He won't die, so let's leave him be."

As his consciousness faded away, he could make out bits of their conversation. This was parallel world fantasy alright, harsh even when it came to kindness.

He was going to be abandoned in some alley, a negative viewpoint.

Well, he was about to die so merely being alive was a blessing in itself, a positive viewpoint.

These half-hearted thoughts floated across his mind as his consciousness slowly—

"Really?"

"Really!"

On the verge of losing consciousness, he caught sight of the girl turning around, her face red.

"—I definitely, definitely won't stick around to help him."

—So cute even when she's angry, a true parallel world fantasy.

Those were his last thoughts before he blacked out.

Chapter 4:
Compensation For a Lap Pillow

To Subaru, the feeling of waking up was rather similar to the sensation of raising his head out of water. Rays of sunshine assailed his pupils the moment his eyelids parted, causing him to grimace as he rubbed his eyes. He was rather good at waking up, once his eyes opened his consciousness would soon follow.

"Ah, you're awake?"

A voice directly overhead. As Subaru turned to face it, his body still on the ground, he realized that his head was resting on something rather soft.

"Don't try to move just yet. Your head was hurt, so it's not safe."

The voice worrying about him was gentle, and the sensation under his head was one of supreme bliss. Subaru thought back to what had happened before he lost consciousness and concluded that he was currently experiencing one of the greatest boons a man could receive.

—Holy crap, that beauty's giving me a lap pillow?!

Taking advantage of this divine blessing, Subaru started to toss and turn, enjoying the feel of her thighs to his heart's content.

His circular motions brought delightful sensations to his cheeks, his face wrapped in a fluffy—

—Man, pretty girls are a lot hairier than I thought.

"Like hell—!"

"Glad to see you're up. (Falsetto)"

Subaru played the straight man as he looked up, now fully lucid, he could properly see what was before him. In his inverted line of sight was the face of an absurdly huge cat. Its expression was excessively ingratiating as it formed what seemed to be a smile.

“I decided to be considerate and offer you some comfort until you woke up. (Falsetto)”

“First of all, quit doing that terrible falsetto.”

Having ended up in the absurd situation of receiving a lap pillow from a human-sized cat, that was Subaru’s only request. He then went back to enjoying the furry sensation since it was so generously provided.

“Fluffy… So fluffy. Just what in the world have you gone and created, God?”

“Oh dear, it seems it was well worth it for me to change size if it brings you that much joy. Right?”

The giant cat shyly scratched its head and winked as if seeking agreement. In the direction of its gaze, at the entrance to the alley, a girl stood with her arms crossed in displeasure. She was the girl who had been burned into his eyes and memory before he lost consciousness.

“So basically, you’re that tiny kitty from before?”

“Fufufu, its freely changing size makes it great for transport. It also brightens your day with humorous chitchat. A cat for everyone, goes great with your lifestyle! For more details please contact the spirit association.”

It nimbly snapped its fingers and started a sales pitch. The contents weren’t really relevant, but Subaru understood that was probably how it acted.

“So you ended up staying here until I woke up…”

“Don’t get it twisted. I had some questions for you, so I had no choice but to stay. If that weren’t the case, I would have just left you here. Definitely. Just so we’re clear on that.”

When it was emphasized that much, even Subaru couldn’t really say much in response. She spoke in a fierce tone, as if pressing him. Considering his level 1 communication ability that was even worse when it came to the opposite sex, all Subaru could do was nod.

“And that goes for me healing you and letting you enjoy Puck’s lap too. All of it was for my own benefit, so I’ll have you repay me now.”

“You’re putting on quite the act, but it ultimately wraps around to being a regular request, doesn’t it?”

What goes around comes around, taken to the extreme. But in response to his answer, the girl shook her head with a stern expression.

“That’s not it, I’m making a demand here. —Now, you probably know who stole my insignia, right?”

Subaru nervously accepted her condition, and she for some reason lowered her voice and asked him this.

Subaru couldn’t help but tilt his head at this. He had a really strong feeling that he’d heard this exact question before he lost consciousness.

“Did I hit my head really hard while I was very briefly unconscious?”

“You were out for at least five minutes, but as far as I know nothing of the sort happened.”

“Then could it be deja vu? Maybe I’ve awakened some hidden power that lets me experience the immediate future?”

Perhaps he should call his ability “Come back yesterday.”

It could be rather useful to come up with the right answer to a question. Perhaps it’d even be possible to prepare for tough questions on tests. His dream started spiraling out of control.

“Ah, I was a shut-in!”

"Quit ignoring me and calm down already, would you? Now, answer me."

"Uhh… I have to say… I don't really know."

The so-called insignia was probably something like those badges people like lawyers, prosecutors, members of the defense force etc. had to prove their identity.

Unfortunately, Subaru had no memory whatsoever of seeing such a thing in the hour or so he was here.

Back home, he had a veritable mountain of toy badges he'd collected as a child. But he didn't know how to return there, and he'd probably get smashed by her ice if he tried offering her one.

Consequently, his answer couldn't possibly meet her expectations. But the girl simply nodded, not disappointed in the slightest.

"I see. That's that, then. But I did learn that you don't know anything, so that shall suffice as compensation for healing you."

Her logic regarding her total loss would have shocked the sleaziest swindler. Leaving a dumbfounded Subaru behind, she loudly clapped her hands together as if she'd completely gotten over it.

"I'll be going then. Sorry, but I'm in a hurry. Your injuries are almost gone, and those guys probably won't come after you again considering how scared they were, but wandering into deserted alleys alone at a time like this is basically suicide. Ah, I'm not worried or anything, I'm just warning you. I won't have a reason to save you if this happens again, so you'd better not expect anything."

Her mouth moved rapidly as she spoke at length, and perhaps interpreting Subaru's silence as agreement, she seemed satisfied as she turned away.

Her long, silver hair swayed with her movements and even in that gloomy alley it had a fairy tale-like luster to it.

Subaru's support suddenly disappeared and he hastily stopped his fall. When he turned around, the cat's giant body was nowhere to be found, having returned to the palm-sized form he'd originally seen. Floating through the air like a balloon, it turned toward the girl.

“Sorry about that. She just can't be upfront about such things, this daughter of mine. Don't think her strange for it.”

Saying this in a jovial tone, the cat gently landed on her shoulder. She patted its back as if to confirm this, after which it disappeared into her hair.

Subaru's eyes followed her dashing form as she walked away, and he thought intently about what the cat had said to him.

—The real motivation behind her words and actions.

It seemed she had been robbed of something really important to her, and she was pursuing the culprit. She then saw a stranger being assaulted, and stopped to help him despite this.

On top of that, she even wasted her time healing him and watched over him until he woke up, and then repeated her earlier question and deemed that sufficient compensation so he wouldn't feel indebted to her.

It was far beyond the level where you could say she wasn't upfront about things. It was the first time in his life he'd seen someone so absurdly considerate.

From her perspective, there was absolutely nothing to gain from interacting with him. On top of losing her target, she spent precious time healing him. Considering this, it could be said that she'd actually sustained a great loss here. She had every right to criticize him, and he would accept all of it.

But in the end, she didn't do that, nor did she ask for an apology. Why? According to her, it was because saving him was all part of her self-serving plan.

“Living like that, you're going to lose everything.”

He stood up with those words and patted his dirt-covered jersey.

The filth made his well-used jersey stand out, but it had sustained no real damage. And most importantly, all the pain from his beating was completely gone. He rotated his shoulders and stretched his legs as he confirmed his condition, once again realizing just how absurd magic was.

And also how abnormal the girl was, having done this much for him and demanding next to nothing in return.

“—Hey, wait up!”

As she looked around at the spot where the alley connected to the main street, a voice called out from behind her. Smoothing down her hair with her hand, she seemed annoyed as she turned around.

“What? We’ve already said everything we needed to say, so we no longer have anything to do with each other. We’re merely strangers whose paths intersected for a moment.”

“Don’t say such heart-rending things! And even if you intended to end things, I think it’s far from over.”

Her eyes were cold as he approached as if clinging to her. Some part of him thought this scene was very much like a boy pursuing a girl who’d given him the cold shoulder, but he pressed on, spreading his arms to block her path.

“That thing’s important to you, right? Let me help you find it.”

“But you don’t…”

“It’s true that I haven’t a clue as to the culprit’s name, background or fetishes, but I at least know what she looks like! A pretty girl with a snaggletooth and striking blonde hair! She was shorter than you and flatter too, and maybe two or three years younger, but I was like really—?!”

It was a bad habit of his to become tense and speak at extreme speed when he was at his wits’ end, a habit that was clearly on display at this very moment. Frankly, even he himself was repulsed by this.

—There was too much unnecessary crap like chests and fetishes. And using words like ‘pretty girl’ and ‘really’, just who am I supposed to be? I gave up on English in my first year of middle school.

In his first year of middle school, he’d gotten rid of his English textbook in the middle of summer break and he’d sworn off using loan words ever since, enacting a personal policy of national isolation.

So how on Earth could he just litter his speech with English—

It seemed as though Subaru was about to embark on a journey of self-reflection, full of strain and regret. His back was soaked with cold sweat. His arms were in a dreadful state due to the sweat from his palms and armpits. He was besieged by heart palpitations, breathlessness, dizziness, anemia, nasal congestion and migraines as he stood there.

He’d driven himself into a corner, and what saved him was,

“—You’re a strange guy.”

The girl’s voice, her finger on her lip as she slightly tilted her head, as though looking at some exotic animal. She stared at him as if appraising him and then,

“Let me just say this, I can’t offer you anything in return. I’m completely broke.”

“It was all stolen, you see.”

“Relax, I’m basically broke as well.”

“There’s nothing reassuring about that, though.”

Consciously ignoring the intermittent interjections, Subaru vigorously struck his chest.

“And I don’t need a reward or anything. I just want to thank you.”

“I haven’t done anything to deserve your thanks, you already repaid me for the healing.”

She remained stubborn to the very end.

Her obstinate attitude made Subaru smile bitterly as he continued, “If so,”

“I’m helping you for my own sake too. My objective is, yeah, that. I wanna do some good deeds!”

“Good deeds?”

“That’s right, if you do a whole lot of them, you get to go to heaven when you die. It’s basically my dream life, lazing about all you want, living as self-indulgently as you please, and it’s like it’s just waiting for me. That’s why you have to let me help you.”

He didn’t really understand what he was saying himself, but he said what he wanted to. He looked as though he’d just accomplished some great task, but the girl seemed rather pensive. However, the cat on her shoulder started poking her cheek with its paw.

“I’m not sensing any malice, wouldn’t it be best to take him up on his offer? You don’t have any leads, and you can hardly search the whole capital.”

“But… I”

“Your stubbornness is definitely cute, but it’d be foolish to lose sight of your objective because of it. I don’t want to think of my own daughter as a fool.”

The cat shrugged its shoulders as it provoked her, causing her to raise her eyebrow. The next several seconds were filled with strangely erotic ‘Ahh’s, ‘Uhn’s and ‘But’s, but in the end,

“—I really can’t give you anything, you know.”

Saying this, she took his outstretched hand.

Chapter 5:
Your Name

His first friendly interaction in this world.

About thirty minutes after he offered to help her in that heartwarming exchange,

"—What exactly is this?"

Their investigation had led nowhere.

The girl's eyes were cold as she asked this, her dissatisfied gaze directed at Subaru who had just discovered something. Namely—

"That cold gaze is actually kind of exciting… Wait. No, it can't be. I, I… Was an M all along…?"

"I don't know about this 'em' or whatever, but it's clear to me that you're talking compleeete nonsense."

Making no effort to hide her exasperation, she crossed her arms and sighed.

Her criticism was scathing, but it was probably appropriate considering what Subaru had managed to accomplish over these past thirty minutes.

Subaru himself had offered to help her search for her missing item, but there were a number of problems that made their search extremely difficult.

To begin with, he had no idea where he was.

As far that was concerned, it couldn't really be helped considering he was just summoned from another world, but it was a major hurdle considering the girl was also unfamiliar with the area.

They had both assumed the other person knew the way, and ended up wasting almost ten minutes wandering around the back alleys. A funny story to tell at this point, but they couldn't really laugh at it.

Secondly, he couldn't read their language.

He'd neglected this since conversation wasn't a problem, but upon examining his surroundings again he noticed what seemed to be hand-written hieroglyphics all over the place.

He didn't realize this at first, but considering they were even written on signs and the like, unless mystic runes had become all the rage around here, they were probably this world's alphabet. As a result he couldn't differentiate shops by their signs, and he couldn't rely on signposts to navigate either.

In summary, the typical cliche of "Why do they speak and write the same language?!" had only delivered on the former it seemed. But if one considered that he'd probably be dead in some ditch if he didn't at least have that, it could be said that his situation wasn't that bad.

"Even if that were the case, this explosion in difficulty is absurd…"

Far from the kind of story where the hero comes in with unbeatable cheats, it was more like he didn't even have the minimum level of preparation. And most importantly, the crucial problem that had earned the girl's ire—

"You've just been hiding behind me this entire time, you haven't been helpful in the slightest."

"I mean, it's kinda scary talking to people you've just met…"

"You're not some kid…"

Her well-shaped eyebrows scowled as though she was having a headache, and she spoke in a rather pitying voice.

Just as Subaru feared, the hurdle of obtaining information from strangers proved to be too much for him. His communication ability had dropped precipitously over the past year. He merely clung to her silently, like a shy boy following his mother.

He certainly wanted to say something in response to her disappointment, but his cowardliness ran deep and the words wouldn't come out. Thus, the cat on her shoulder who had been silent thus far started waving its tail and,

"Relax… At least he has no ill intent."

"That's even worse. It'd be easier to believe he's sabotaging me, honestly. To be so utterly useless with good intentions, it's honestly harder to deal with than enmity."

"Sure is enlightening, huh?"

The cat's uncaring attitude made the girl sigh. She then looked at the street yet again and continued, "But even so,"

"This really is tough."

A small complaint left her mouth. Having moved from the alley they were in earlier, and even from the street connecting to it, they were now far from the hustle and bustle of civilization as they entered the slums. Though discouraged, they continued their investigation and ultimately ended up here.

"They said that stolen goods were usually handled in the slums…"

"We know the location and the culprit's appearance, so why not leave the rest to the poli… I mean, the guards? We'd find it right away if we had a lot of people working on it."

A shopkeeper about two streets away had told them about a narrow alley connecting to the slums. It was true that the sun was going down, but despite being right next to the street, the place was gloomy for reasons other than the light source. The depressing atmosphere and foul smell caused Subaru's face to scrunch up reflexively.

"The atmosphere, mood, and probably even the inhabitants' personalities are all bad It'd be best to call someone."

"No way."

He wasn't merely nervous or afraid, he'd suggested this after carefully considering his ability and the girl's safety, but he was turned down on the spot. Subaru was bewildered by this declaration and the girl seemed somewhat apologetic.

“I'm sorry. But that's no good. I don't think the guards will come running over a little theft like this… And also, I can't rely on them due to personal circumstances.”

Sealing her lips, she looked at him as if to say, “I can't say why, though. Having understood she probably didn't want to be questioned, Subaru raised his hand in compliance. To begin with, he wasn't so boorish as to pry into others' affairs, and getting too involved with others was a pain anyway. If he were interested in interpersonal relationships, he wouldn't have become a shut-in.

“Alright, what do we do then?”

Even having heard nothing of her circumstances, Subaru asked about her next course of action.

Not seeking the reason and deciding whether or not to stop helping her were entirely different matters. He may not have known her circumstances, but he didn't want to be an ingrate.

Perhaps sure that Subaru would leave her, the girl's eyebrows rose in surprise at this. The cat started doing a little dance on her shoulder,

“I told you, didn't I? Not a hint of ill will.”

Fooling around as usual, it seemed terribly cheerful as it pointed at Subaru. However, its expression suddenly became serious.

“But you'd better decide carefully. —It's almost nightfall, so I won't be able to help you. A few hoodlums wouldn't be a problem, but… Be careful.”

“Yeah, you're right… Okay, I'll think about it. I'll think about it, but”

Her answer was indecisive. As she seemed to struggle with her response, Subaru suddenly became curious and asked the cat, “What were you just talking about? You can’t be around at night?”

“To put it more precisely, despite my cute looks I’m actually a spirit, you see. Manifestation alone consumes a great deal of mana, so at night I fully return to my Yorishiro and focus on building up mana. I’d say on average a nine to five schedule would be ideal.”

“Nine to five, you sound like a civil servant… Spirits’ terms of employment are unexpectedly severe.”

Unusual terms like spirit or Yorishiro were flying around as though it were natural, but a modern otaku corrupted by games and anime wouldn’t have a hard time understanding them.

Anyhow, the cat before him—Or rather, Puck’s contract did not include a night shift. He didn’t look reliable at all, but considering how terrified those thugs from the alley were, setting aside Puck himself the beings known as ‘Spirits’ did seem to possess power befitting them.

A being who inspired far more fear than the girl who could magically create ice. Contrary to his unusually idyllic atmosphere, his true nature might have been that of a maneater that craved blood.

“Thinking of it that way, you’re unexpectedly terrifying. Let me just say this, I’m really sinewy so I probably taste really bad!”

“I can kind of read your mind to some extent so… You really are a nut, huh?”

It felt like he intended to say that in a roundabout fashion, but completely failed to do so. Puck’s fluffy forehead then moved in a gesture similar to a frown,

“Come to think of it, I don’t even know your name. I don’t believe we ever introduced ourselves.”

“Ah, I guess so. Then let’s start with me.”

Subaru cleared his throat and then spun on the spot, striking a pose as he thrust his finger into the sky.

“My name is Natsuki Subaru! I’m utterly lost and completely broke! Nice to meet you!”

“Sounds like you’re in a real tough spot, huh. Alright then, I’m Puck. Nice to meet you.”

Subaru had extended his hand in a gesture of goodwill, and Puck flew right into it, a dynamic handshake with his whole body. From an outsider’s perspective, it looked like Subaru was crushing him.

Puck was just as fluffy as he was in his giant form, once he’d had his fill of the sensation Subaru turned to the girl next to him. Her gaze was sour as she watched this exchange between man and animal.

“Why can’t you ever set that overly familiar attitude aside for a moment? It’s unnecessary.”

“I was at my wits’ end and found a thread I could cling to! Damn it, I’m never letting this go, this encounter… My life itself depends on it…!”

“Your determination is compleeeetely pointless… Say, do you even remember under what pretense you joined us?”

“Of course. You’re now searching for a person rather than an object, and I’m the only the one who knows what they look like… You think I’ll let you get rid of me just like that, I’ll never leak my secrets…!”

“Although I do recall you murmuring “Blonde hair… And her teeth… Ah, never mind” and the like as you hid behind me while we questioned people, so you’ve leaked quite a bit.”

“Curse my own foolishness!!”

He grabbed his head and bent over on the spot. It was like he was playing poker while showing his opponent his hand. Attempting to negotiate like that was simply laughable. Even though she was his first friendly contact in this world, it seemed like she was about to slip away from him and that made him terribly anxious. Puck smiled wryly as he watched Subaru struggle.

“Well, you’ve both got your own problems to deal with. Let’s hear you out later and prioritize the issue at hand. Be that as it may, that’s an unusual name. Has a nice ring to it.”

“I guess so, it’s not a name you hear around here. Speaking of which, your hair and eye color, and even your clothes are all rather unique… Where are you from?”

“According to the template, a small nation to the east, probably.”

A well-worn pattern when it came to parallel world stories. An isolated land in the far east, akin to Zipangu.

A magical cliche where you could just say you were from some other country and most people would simply accept it, since in such worlds international relations were generally very lacking. However,

“Lugunica is the easternmost country on our continental map… There’s nothing to the east of here.”

“No way, seriously?! This is as far east as it goes?! Then what about the well-beloved Zipangu?!”

“You have no clue where you are, you’re penniless and you can’t talk to others because you’re scared… Your future doesn’t look very promising, in a number of ways.”

The girl seemed restless, her eyes somewhat worried as she looked at Subaru’s panicked state. Despite her attempts to hide it, her extremely helpful nature seemed to be overflowing. His completely helpless state was probably making her very uneasy. Puck watched over them with a smile as they agonized over this. He then started plucking at his whiskers,

“Well, just suck it up for now. Right now we should head… I have less than an hour left. Make a decision.”

“—I’ll go. I don’t intend to let her get away, it’ll be too late if she manages to take it somewhere we can’t reach.”

That was her reply to Puck, she then turned to Subaru.

“I’m going to head in now, but… The path ahead will be a lot more dangerous. When night falls, there will probably be some hoodlums up to no good, and to begin with this is a place where battle-hardened people live. If it’s scary, you can wait here, or follow behind me like you were doing before.”

“How much of a chicken would I have to be to decide to stay behind! I’m going! I’ll stick right behind you the whole time!”

“There isn’t the option of heading out front, huh… Well, that works for me too since I won’t have to worry as much.”

She’d sighed so many times now he’d lost count. Subaru reflected on how he only ever made her expression worsen. Thinking back, he hadn’t seen her smile even once. She looked like that when angry, so her smile was probably the cutest thing in the world.

“Can a match box? No, but a tin can!”

“…What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Strange. No effect, but why… Ah! Damn it! Does this world not have tin cans! Uh. um…Is your refrigerator running… No refrigerators either?!”

“This abnormality in his speech and mannerisms… It’s not a curse or something of the sort, is it?”

“No, that was completely voluntary. He put his heart and soul into it too. For an utterly meaningless pursuit.”

Perhaps having guessed the reason for Subaru’s incredible struggle, Puck explained things relatively favorably. On the other hand, it only resulted in the seed of doubt being planted in the girl to whom it looked like Subaru had suddenly started malfunctioning.

Regretting that his terrible puns only worked in his original world, Subaru desperately shook his head. Focusing too hard on what was in front of him and losing sight of the bigger picture, this too was one of his flaws.

“What’s the difference between snowmen and snowwomen?

Snowballs!”

He’d finally found one that didn’t rely on modern knowledge, but the girl’s reaction wasn’t favorable in the slightest. She coldly turned away.

Her eyes were on the alley, probably indicating that she wouldn’t play along any further.

His momentary desire to see her smile had completely backfired.

“—Are you satisfied, Subaru?”

The girl called to Subaru, whose self-hatred was currently maxed out due to his terrible attempt and the equally terrible outcome.

The fact that she’d said his name for the first time, and also the idea of a member of the opposite sex using his name so casually made him just a little nervous.

“Y, yeeah. T-Totally chill. Completely cool. I feel great, I can win!”

“Why are you trembling like that… I get that you’re scared, but we haven’t even entered yet. You really would be better off waiting out here if you’re that terrified.”

With this misdirected worry, she let out a small sigh and turned her attention away for real.

As he watched her walk into the alley, Subaru suddenly realized she did not intend to leave him even if she was successful.

By telling him to wait here, she was signaling that she would come back for him upon finding it. In the less than the hour they’d known each other, her strange inability to deceive for personal gain had become apparent.

“This sucks, I’m so uncool.”

Despite having offered to help, he was absolutely useless to her, and on top of that he was even making her worry about him. He was far beyond the point of being a deadbeat.

Striking his cheeks, he used the pain to force himself to focus and advanced forward. He still had a mountain of complaints. Anyone would be helpless if they were suddenly forced into such a harsh world. He didn't think badly of himself for this. However,

"Relying on her for absolutely everything would be pathetic. I should at least have her back."

Though dependent, he'd have to stand on his own two legs. —But despite having focused, he ended up zeroing in on the small stuff.

"Come to think of it, there's one more thing."

When he called out from behind her, he saw her glance at him through a gap in her silver hair. Even this sidelong glance was dauntingly attractive, but Subaru managed to get his question out.

"So I've heard your cat's name, but I never caught yours."

This somewhat playful question caused her to look ahead and fall silent for a bit. This caused Subaru to panic, wondering if he screwed up. Perhaps her earlier silence was to indicate that she didn't want to tell him her name. His communication disorder that rendered him unable to read others' hearts, much less a woman's, could it still—

"—Satella."

"Oh?"

As he agonized over this, her sudden whisper surprised him. She didn't even turn to look at him, and she repeated without any emotion,

"You can call me Satella."

As she gave her name, her attitude suggested that he definitely shouldn't call her that. Subaru had wanted to learn her surname if possible, he couldn't call her name just like that so he ended up falling silent. For now he would just refer to her in the second person, a rather pathetic compromise. Behind the scenes of this exchange, Puck muttered from within her hair,

“—That’s in terrible taste.”

These words did not reach either of them.

Chapter 6:
The End of the Beginning

Their investigation had them entering the slums, and as usual they were faced with signs of terrible—Or rather, contrary to expectations, an unexpected development resulted in Subaru proving useful.

“This place is super gentle for some reason. What is this… Could it be that my popular period has suddenly arrived?! For the first time since kindergarten!”

Subaru had very lovely features as a child, and his hair was long as well which caused him to be mistaken for a girl rather frequently. —On the other hand, he’d ended up like this over 10 years later, so it wasn’t really a laughing matter.

“Well, this is just a guess, but…”

“Let’s hear it! If there’s a scientific… Wait, since this is fantasy wouldn’t it be magical? If there’s a magical basis for this, I want to hear it.”

“This probably isn’t the answer you’re hoping for, but it’s probably because of your appearance. You’re kind of filthy and you’ve got traces of blood on you, the people here seem to be struggling too so they probably find you relatable.”

“I understand completely, damn it all!”

It now seemed obvious why they were all so friendly. Among them was an old lady who offered him a small dry fruit, saying “Eat this and live strong.” When he nervously tried putting it in his mouth, he felt a slight sweetness under its hard surface. And then a terrible odor violently flowed out. The feeling of his nose being destroyed from the inside caused him to pass out.

“Damn it all! I thought she was being considerate but she poisoned me! That was poison! It’s like my whole body is burning! I might seriously end up dying here! Or I might strip and end up dead from a social perspective!"

"Looks like you received a Bocco fruit. It stimulates the mana within you when you eat it, and accelerates healing and stuff. The effect varies by person, for most it's rather soothing…"

Satella put a finger to her lip and went "Umm," as she watched Subaru heat up and sweat as he breathed ragged breaths.

"It seems to me that your body circulates mana very well. If you overdosed, you might die."

"Tell me that before I eat it! What do I doooo?!"

"Yeah… Puck."

Responding to her call, Puck emerged from within her hair. His movements were dull and his earlier liveliness had vanished. To put it simply, he was extremely sleepy.

It seemed like he wasn't even listening to most of their conversation, he rubbed his large eyes as he said,

"Whaaat? I'm at my limit, you know…"

"You'd better fill up before going to bed then. There's a feast for you right here."

As he felt a bit of bite to her words, Subaru realized Puck was now looking at him, his sleepy eyes sparkling like he was looking at a delicacy.

"Can I really?"

"B-Be gentle."

Despite being a little worried that he was going to be chomped up, Subaru replied playfully. Puck gave a vague response and then stretched his tiny body on Satella's shoulder,

"Alright, let's eat."

Immediately after, Subaru felt whatever had been rampaging around inside him start to drain out in large quantities. It was hard to say from where exactly. If he had to say, it was like it was being drained out of every pore on his body, rather uncomfortable.

“That was quite the treat.”

Puck joined his hands in thanks. Subaru wanted to reply with something along the lines of, “You’re more than welcome,” but he suddenly felt a terrible chill throughout his body.

The heat had directly transitioned into cold. And no ordinary cold either, he could feel it from his very core.

He instinctively grabbed his shoulders, the sight of this causing Satella to glare at Puck in reproach.

“Puck.”

“Sorry, sorry, it’s been a while so I couldn’t quite control it. But his gate does feel strange. It doesn’t seem like it’s seen much use, but it pours mana right out, that’s why I ended up going a bit too far.”

Teehee, he laughed bashfully as he tapped his head, but to Subaru this was no laughing matter.

Yet again there were unfamiliar words being used, like ‘gate’ or mana.

“Probably something like MP, huh… And I’m in this state because it’s been drained.”

His gamer brain once again displayed its ability to immediately grasp such concepts.

The problem then was just how important MP was in this world. If MP Restores were extremely expensive, it could be said that this was a very troublesome act.

“I apologize. We’ll talk about this later.”

“I’m reflecting on my actions. I don’t regret it, though, that was delicious.”

Puck’s attitude resembled that of the protagonist of a certain manga, and Satella hadn’t scolded him very severely. Judging by this, it probably wasn’t a huge issue. If that were the case, it’d be uncool for him to get hung up on this.

“Relax, at least I don’t feel like I’m going to burn to death now. More importantly, let’s keep pursuing the culprit, whose location was determined thanks to my efforts. Thanks to my hard work we were able to-”

“I understand that you’re happy to have been useful, but saying it twice reeeally isn’t cool.”

He’d wanted to change the topic, but ended up sounding like a bragging kid. Satella looked like she regretted raising her opinion of him, and Subaru simply forced a smile. It was about time they decided to go further into the slums.

“Sorry, I’m out of time.”

Saying this, Puck who was still on Satella’s shoulder feebly leaned against her neck. His gray coat was tinged with bits of light, lightly wavering as though he could disappear at any moment.

“It kinda looks like he’s about to die, huh.”

“It’s because I really pushed myself. I use mana to manifest, so it disperses when I disappear. —My crystal, please.”

“Got it. Sorry to push you so hard, Puck. Take it easy.”

Satella retrieved a green palm-sized crystal from her bosom. It felt somewhat different from what one would call a gem, as far as Subaru knew he could only say it seemed crystalline.

Puck walked down Satella’s arm to reach the crystal, and then he turned to her as his small body embraced it.

“I’m sure you know this, but you mustn’t go too far. If the situation looks desperate, use your Od to force me out.”

“I understand. I’m not a kid, I can handle myself.”

“I wonder. I can’t say I trust my daughter very much in that regard. I’m counting on you, Subaru.”

Puck’s smile was full of compassion as he looked away from a displeased Satella and toward Subaru.

Subaru thought their interactions were very much like that of a parent and child as he watched them, he then struck his chest when he was called to,

“Aaalright, leave her to me. You can expect great things from my jitter sensor, if my danger alert goes off we’ll retreat immediately!”

“I don’t understand half of what you said, but I’m trusting you. — Alright then, good night, Puck. Take care.”

Puck looked at her one last time before he vanished from the world. Just as he said, his form started scattering into particles of light. This sight wouldn’t have been possible in Subaru’s old world, and it sent shivers through his whole body.

Once Puck was gone, Satella started stroking the crystal as if it were terribly precious to her, and then put it back in her chest.

Following the typical flow of things, Puck’s essence was probably stored in there in an ethereal form.

“We’re alone now, but… You’d better not try anything strange. I can use magic.”

Not knowing what he was thinking, perhaps she thought he was just staring at her breasts. In response to her words of caution, Subaru instinctively put his hands up and started shaking his head,

“No way! I haven’t been alone with a girl since elementary. I couldn’t possibly try anything, you’ve seen my people skills, haven’t you?”

“That’s soooo nonsensical and yet also reeeally convincing… Alright, let’s go. But we don’t have Puck looking out for us, so we’ll have to be more careful.”

Perhaps dumbfounded by Subaru puffing his chest out with pride, Satella tightened her robe and moved ahead of him. She then turned her head toward him without moving from her spot,

“I’ll be the vanguard and you’ll look out from behind. If something happens, call to me immediately. Don’t try to do anything on your own. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but… You’re weak.”

“Prefacing it like that, I really can’t dislike you…”

If she wanted to preserve her cold image, she should have omitted the part before “You’re weak” and said it more harshly.

It showed her kindness that she just couldn’t hide, she really was sweet to the core. Enchantingly so.

Satella looked like she wanted to complain as he urged her onward, their two member search had begun.

Having said that, their task hadn’t really changed. Find some inhabitants, describe the culprit’s features, and ask if they know anyone like that. Rinse and repeat.

Subaru was in charge of this, and he became more and more used to it the more he did it.

“Maybe it could be Felt. A tricky little blonde, right?”

This useful piece of information came from the fourteenth man they’d asked. He was another person Subaru had called to in an over-familiar fashion such as “Yo, brother. How goes it?”

He looked at Subaru’s dirtied appearance with sympathy and,

“If it’s Felt, your lost item’s probably in the loot house right now. Stolen goods are tagged and stored there, and the owner gathers them up to sell elsewhere.”

“What a strange system… What if this owner just ran off with the goods?”

"He's the owner because they trust that he won't do that. But well, even if you tell him you had something stolen from you, it's not like he'll return it just like that. You'll have to negotiate for it."

Because the theft was on the victim for being careless, such was the logic of the slums, and he forced it on them with a laugh despite his favorable attitude.

They'd managed to obtain the loot house's location from him, and it seemed like she would very soon be reunited with her stolen item.

However, a different problem had manifested. The problem being that they were both totally broke.

"He told us to buy it back, but what now? On top of our shortcomings in this regard, this seems like the kind of event where we get overcharged or something."

"I'm just retrieving what was stolen from me, why must I pay to do so I wonder…"

Once the problem had become one of funds, Satella's expression suddenly clouded over. Her spontaneous mutter was certainly correct, but it was also true that their opponent wasn't the sort to be swayed by that. To settle things peacefully, and moreover reliably, it would be best to take the man's advice.

Nonetheless,

"Does this stolen insignia look expensive? Even if they overcharge us, without knowing the market value, it would be…"

"…It has a small jewel in the middle. I don't know its monetary value either, but it definitely isn't cheap."

"A jewel, huh… That's troublesome."

Any buffoon could immediately recognize it was valuable at a glance, that was the sort of convenient effect jewels had. It didn't look like this world had the technology to create imitations, so it seemed certain that almost everything that appeared to be a jewel would be the real thing. If that were the case, their inherent value would be obvious.

He understood that they had nothing to be relieved about, but there was also something else about her statement that bothered him. She said she didn't know how much her insignia was worth.

It was certainly possible that it was given to her, but he still felt somewhat uneasy.

"Anyway, let's try going there first and then think about it. I might be able to negotiate a decent price depending on how I go about it…"

Worst case scenario, Subaru had a method that could prove disastrous for him.

His vague wording made Satella frown, but Subaru waved his hand in response to her doubt.

They had walked for about ten minutes, agonizing over their financial situation and coming up with no solutions.

—Having arrived at the so-called loot house, the two looked at each other.

"It's bigger than we thought, huh."

"Shows why they call it that… If everything in there is stolen as the name implies, there's really no helping it."

Of course, since they were periodically selling things off, it probably wasn't filled to the brim with loot.

Subaru thought this as he looked at the loot house, its appearance not quite fitting its coarse name as it beckoned to them.

By Subaru's estimate, it was probably around the size of a convenience store. Parking lot included.

It only had one floor, but it was large enough to fit twenty cars with ease. Their surroundings had changed too, the various ruins and hovels were nowhere to be seen, and behind the loot house was a giant wall. It was quite literally in the deepest part of the slums.

“That tall wall thing…”

“Probably the capital’s border wall. Looks like we came to the very edge without realizing it.”

Her statement caused Subaru to idly imagine what a map of the capital might look like.

It was probably square-shaped, guarded by these walls on all sides. Within those walls, perhaps in the center or the northernmost area there would be a castle, and far away from there one could find these slums.

He felt like it had been two or three hours since they started their search, so he had an idea as to the capital’s size. But then, if he compared it to Japan which didn’t have such clear divisions, its size wasn’t really comparable.

“Well then, if the rumors are true the owner of the place should be in there, but… Considering our position, how do we approach this?”

“I’ll be upfront about it. I had something stolen, so return it if it’s in here, that sort of thing.”

Subaru insisted that this wouldn’t work any number of times, but she refused to listen.

She was virtuous to her core. She couldn’t bring herself to consider using twisted means so easily.

But it was precisely because she was that kind of girl that she stopped to help Subaru even though it brought her no benefit.

“Ahh—, got it. Then, leave this to me.”

There was a high possibility that things would go south, so Subaru reluctantly offered to go himself.

His last resort—This was too hasty so it didn’t really feel like a trump card, but it would also be a problem to lose the timing entirely. Subaru wouldn't hesitate when it came to such matters.

Meanwhile, Satella seemed puzzled by this suggestion. His newfound confidence made her look at him with suspicion.

“Alright, I'm counting on you.”

“I get that you can't agree just like that. After all, I myself understand that I haven't done anything to win your trust. But I do have an idea, so try to believe in… Ehhh?!”

“Wh-Why are you so surprised?”

“I mean, this is completely different from the typical pattern, isn't it?! “Leave it to a good for nothing like you, who can barely even talk to others? Don't make me laugh, even a dog would be better,” I was prepared to hear something like that!”

“As if I'd say something so terrible.”

His paranoia had offended her. However, she cleared her throat and fixed her amethyst eyes on him,

“It's true that you haven't been particularly useful thus far, and you haven't done or said anything to inspire any sort of confidence, but…”

“What kind of appraisal is that? I can't refute it, though!”

“But I believe you think things through, and I don't think you're a liar.”

She stopped his self-deprecation in its tracks, and then took a breath and continued,

“I'll try believing in you… It'd be a great stroke of luck if you actually succeeded.”

“Instead of that last part, something like “Do your best for my sake” would really get me motivated, you know?”

"I can't be that demanding. But, do your best."

A girl who could not lie, in every sense of the phrase.

Subaru responded with a broad smile and turned toward the entrance.

This definitely wasn't easy on him, but he felt like her expectations and that little bit of trust were giving him the push he needed. If he came back without accomplishing anything, he really would be completely useless.

As he walked, Subaru looked at the plastic bag in his hand, which had never once become the topic of conversation thus far.

Within it were the items he'd brought with him from the other world. As far as Subaru was concerned, they were all that he had in this world. He might be able to barter with them.

He didn't know how much this insignia was worth, but surely it couldn't be more than his cell phone, which would be the only one of its kind in this world.

This would be a great loss for him, but negotiation should be possible if he used them to trade.

That was the last resort he'd kept secret from her. Of course, he also had a bunch of cards that would be useless in this world. If he had the chance to use them, he should do so.

"Umm, is anyone home?"

Standing before the wooden door, he tried knocking on it. The sound was deeper than he expected, but there was no response from within.

He hesitantly reached for the handle, and the door readily opened as if there were no lock on it.

The interior had no lighting, it was so dark that one could only fumble around. It was supposed to be a place where stolen goods were stored, and yet for some reason there was no one standing guard.

“Maybe they’re in the toilet or something… Uhh, anybody there?”

Subaru poked his head in to look around, but not even the moonlight reached the room, leaving it pitch black. As he was welcomed by stale air and an unpleasant odor, Subaru built up his resolve and took a step forward.

But first, he turned to Satella,

“If the two of us walk in just like that, we might look like burglars. How about you stay out here?”

“Are you sure? Perhaps I ought to be the one…”

“I’ve already called out a bunch, so I probably won’t be cut down just like that. It’d be dangerous if the owner were to misunderstand, so please leave it to me.”

Subaru bowed his head to her as she contemplated this. She then reached into her robe and pulled out a white crystal which she held out toward him.

“You should at least have some light. Whether or not someone’s there, call out to me.”

“I understand. Carefully, huh… How do I turn this thing on?”

“You don’t even know how to use lagmite? You really are ignorant, huh?”

She said in a tone that was both amused and surprised as she lightly struck the lagmite against the wall, causing it to produce a pale white glow. It was very dim, barely illuminating a few meters at most, but it would be enough to discern imminent danger.

“These days most people use mana-based lights instead, but this is a lot simpler and I quite like it. If it goes out, just do that again and it’ll light up.”

“I see… Seems pretty convenient. Alright, I’ll head in for a bit.”

Lagmite in hand, Subaru timidly walked in. “Don’t force yourself,” Satella said from behind him, and he responded by raising his hand.

When Subaru passed the entrance, a small counter entered his dim field of view. Perhaps this place was originally a tavern or something. On the other side were some broken boxes, one might guess that the owner or someone else had been sitting there.

The counter also seemed to play the role of a reception desk, and had various items on it. —Small boxes, jars, and all sorts of blades were carelessly strewn about.

He was in the dark in both the physical sense and the intellectual sense so he couldn’t hazard a guess as to their worth, but to the untrained eye they definitely didn’t look very valuable.

“I suppose it’s obvious, the valuables must be further inward.”

The stolen items also had wooden tags attached, it seemed like characters had been carved into these with something sharp. According to what the man from before had said, these were probably the names of the thieves who had stolen them. It seemed like they could catch all of these guys in one shot if they just gathered these up and handed them over to the guards.

“Well, there’s also the possibility that they’re using fake names. And in a situation like this, there’s plotlines where the country has a dark side that’s in cahoots with the criminals…”

There was also the question of just where these stolen goods were going.

He could just skim ahead if this were a novel or manga, such were his detestable thoughts as he walked further inward.

There were still no signs of life, but even with his dim light he could make out that the goods were increasing in size and value as he went deeper.

An insignia with a jewel embedded in it would surely be all the way in the back, then. As he thought this, his footsteps unintentionally quickened—And then,

"Hm?"

Subaru stopped when he suddenly felt something strange under his shoes.

It wasn't the discomfort of stepping on something hard. On the contrary, whatever he had stepped on had some give—It felt like he'd stepped on something sticky.

When he raised his leg and felt the sole of his sneaker, he noticed a thick liquid sticking to it. When his finger felt its strange stiffness, he felt a primal fear surge from within.

"What… is this"

He brought his finger to his nose to smell it, but the stale air prevented him from realizing exactly what it was. Even so, he simply didn't have the courage to bring it to his mouth for a taste.

He rubbed it off on the wall, and pointed his light forward as if prompted by his unease. At his destination was the source.

"…Ah?"

His voice leaked out when he finally saw 'it.'

Under the dim light, what he first saw was an arm sloppily lying on the ground. Its fingers were open as if reaching for something, and strangely, there was nothing above the elbow.

He raised his light as if to look for the rest of it, and there he found a leg. Perhaps it was fortunate that the leg was still attached to the torso, and the body had most of the parts it was supposed to have.

—With a torn up neck and a missing arm, what lay before him was the corpse of a large old man.

"Hie"

Once he realized this, his mouth produced a meaningless noise. What filled his mind right now was not fear, despair or shock. His mind was overwhelmingly blank, all thought had completely ceased.

Even the options to ‘run’ or ‘stay’ did not exist in his brain. The blankness simply had him stand stock still until his brain fully absorbed the sight before him. This would ultimately decide his fate.

“—Aah, you saw it. I have no choice then. Yes, no choice at all.”

A woman’s voice, he thought.

Low and cold, and somehow enjoying herself, he felt.

“Guah—!”

He didn’t even have time to turn around. The instant he decided to turn toward the voice, he was blown away by a colossal impact.

His back slammed against the wall, knocking the lagmite out of his hand which left him in complete darkness.

But that wasn’t what Subaru was focused on, his entire consciousness was devoted to,

“Gu…Ah, hot,”

—He felt a terrible ‘heat’ coursing through his entire body.

—This is really bad.

He felt the hard floor against his cheek, and realized that he had collapsed onto his face.

His strength was completely gone, and he had already lost sensation in his fingers.

The heat from his core was so excruciating it made him want to tear his throat out.

—Hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot.

The moment he opened his mouth to scream, what spilled forth was no shriek, it was a clump of blood.

He vomited up large quantities of his lifeblood as he coughed. Frothy blood started foaming up at the corners of his mouth as he gurgled. Within his dim field of view, the ground had been dyed red.

—Aah, this is all, my blood?

There was enough to soak his fallen body. Blood comprises about 8% of the human body, and it is said that losing about a third of that would be life-threatening, but—It seemed to him that he'd already lost just about all of it.

He had stopped vomiting blood, but the 'heat' that felt as though it would incinerate him still persisted. He moved his hand toward his abdomen with great difficulty, and having felt an impossible sensation there, he understood.

—My stomach's been torn open, huh.

It was no wonder he felt so hot. It seemed his brain had confused 'pain' for 'heat.

He was almost torn in half, only a bit of skin at his back held him together.

In short, it seemed that this was 'checkmate' for him.

The moment he realized this, his consciousness started fading.

Even the heat, which was making him writhe in agony had disappeared, Even the unpleasant feeling of blood and the sensation in the hand he'd used to feel his organs, it was all fading away along with his consciousness.

All that was left was his body, which would not be able to accompany his soul.

This body used the last of its disappearing consciousness to move just a little. It turned its head upward.

Black shoes formed ripples in the pool of blood before his eyes. There was someone there. And that someone was most likely the one who killed him.

Strangely, he didn’t feel like looking at their face. This person was the one who took his life, and yet he still decided to simply remain a spectator to his own demise. He had no clue who they were, but right now he didn’t really care about that.

He only wished for the girl’s safety.

“—Baru?”

He felt like he heard a voice like the chime of a bell.

He was beyond the point where he could even differentiate his senses, so he probably just imagined it.

Despite that, even supposing it wasn’t real, he found it extremely comforting.

So—

“—!”

A short scream, and then the carpet of blood welcomed yet another person.

She had fallen right next to him, exactly where his arm was.

Her fair hand dropped powerlessly, and intertwined with his.

—Probably just a coincidence.

He felt her fingers move slightly, as if squeezing his hand.

“…ait”

He forced his disappearing consciousness to return for a moment. The pain and the heat, everything had faded away. It was a meaningless effort, nothing but a loser wasting time.

But even so—

“I will, definitely—”

—Save you.

At that moment, Natsuki Subaru lost his life.

Chapter 7:
An Incomprehensible Reunion

1

“—What’s the matter? Why’d you suddenly space out?”

“Hah—?”

A middle-aged man with stern features called out to him, and he absentmindedly responded as such. This response caused the man’s already creased brow to wrinkle up even further as he scowled.

“I’m asking a question here! Are you going to buy the appa or not?”

“Hah—?”

“The appa! You wanna eat it, right? You came here saying that and then your eyes suddenly went blank which was quite the shock. Anyway, how about it?”

He was very muscular and had a scarred face, but in his palm was a lovely red fruit. He mentally compared the man’s face with the apple-like fruit he was holding out,

“Ah, you see, I’m completely broke.”

“…Seriously, you’re just browsing? Get outta here! I’m running a business here, I don’t have time for window shoppers.”

The man shooed him away and he obediently left.

He—Natsuki Subaru examined his surroundings and,

“Eh? Eh? —What’s going on here?”

In his confusion, all he could do was toss out that question directed at no one in particular.

2

The main street was crowded as usual, except for the occasional passage of a lizard-drawn carriage, the road was filled to the brim with pedestrians.

The sun was still high. The temperature wasn't quite what he'd call hot, but looking at the humanoid wolf walking by—Should he call it a werewolf? Looking at its fur, thoughts such as "Sure must be hot, huh?" floated across his mind. They did, but,

"This ain't the time to be acting like some sightseeing country bumpkin. Umm, what is this?!"

He grabbed his head and twisted his waist. As he performed this full-bodied pose displaying his distress, a number of curious gazes were directed at him.

These gazes felt extremely familiar to him. Just a few hours ago, there were several people staring at him in much the same way—Or rather, in the exact same way.

"Right, several hours ago… It should have been."

As he said this he looked around again, and then up at the sky after which he tilted his head.

The sun was still high. As far as Subaru remembered, the sun had just been setting.

This feeling wasn't unfamiliar to him either.

When he first came to this world, he saw night turn to day. So that much wasn't new, but there was one clear difference this time.

"My wound… Is gone."

He whispered as he rolled up his jersey and confirmed his abdomen's condition.

He had been torn up by what he assumed was a huge blade, spraying blood and viscera all over the place, and yet there were no signs of this having happened to him. Since he had no scars, there were obviously no traces of blood on his jersey either.

In fact, his well-used jersey didn't even have any dust or dirt stains. The convenience store bag in his hand was in good condition, and his pocket still had his phone and wallet. He was back at square one, in every sense.

—It felt like he was going crazy.

"Just being summoned here was already too much for me, what's going on now…"

As far as his missing wound was concerned, he'd already seen what Satella was capable of so he wasn't confused on that front.

However, he'd clearly sustained a fatal wound in the loot house. It was so bad he was sure he had died when he lost consciousness.

If even an injury like that could be healed, it seemed to him that this world's magic could even revive the dead.

"Guess the value of life drops quite a bit then… Wait, who was that back then?"

Realizing that he could see something in his hazy memories. Subaru fervently tried to remember what had happened right before he lost consciousness.

Right, he was dying with his gut split open. There was a woman's voice, he thought.

He'd come across a corpse in the loot house, and then he was attacked by the presumed killer. And as he was on the verge of death—

"That's right, Satella!"

The silver haired girl had ended up entering the loot house to check on him.

Having remembered what he'd done, Subaru was filled with regret. She had clearly warned him not to try anything on his own, that he should immediately call to her if anything happened.

Those words weren't merely out of worry for him. They surely also meant that he should inform her if the situation seemed dangerous.

And yet when it came down to it, Subaru failed to even raise his voice. As a result, not only did he fail to escape himself, even Satella got wrapped up in the tragedy.

As he drowned in his own blood in that darkness, he definitely saw the assailant cut her down.

She collapsed into that sea of blood the same as him, and stopped moving before he did—

"Damn it… Didn't he say he was leaving her to me?!"

He remembered the words Puck said to him right before he disappeared.

Those weren't words spoken lightly. Subaru himself didn't take them seriously enough, and as a result things went exactly the way Puck had feared.

Despite all the warnings, Subaru had completely failed to notice anything and missed his chance.

His present situation was the end result of this.

Tossed out onto the streets totally unaware of what was going on, he didn't even know if they were safe. He was now at a complete loss.

"Am I some kind of moron… No, I'm definitely a moron. I don't have time to hang around sulking. For now, I'd better look for them…"

The two might even be dead—Subaru shook his head to rid himself of this terrible thought.

He was completely useless, with not even a single redeeming feature. He'd even say he was nothing more than a waste that simply converted oxygen into carbon dioxide, and yet he'd survived.

That being the case, he couldn't imagine that that magic using super kind, super helpful, not quite upfront about her feelings and yet so virtuous beauty and that aloof and mysterious oddball of a spirit had died.

Or rather, he didn't want to imagine it.

"Anyway, for now I'll…"

—Head to the loot house, Subaru decided.

Since that was where he'd lost consciousness, he might be able to find some hints there.

Once he put his mind to something he'd immediately start doing it. Here too the speed of his decision-making shined. "I'm not going to school anymore" was usually the sort of decision he was making in his old world, but right now it would prove useful for him to move quickly and without doubt.

However, his determination was—

"Yo, kiddo. Let's have some fun."

Three men blocked his way out of the alley, clearly intending to give him a hard time.

3

"Hey, what's with that dumb look on your face?"

"He probably doesn't understand what's going on here. What say we go ahead and teach him?"

Witnessing his lack of reaction to their threats, the men's lips warped as if sneering at him. To Subaru, this was almost like watching a comedy.

There were three of them. One couldn't say they were well dressed even as flattery, and their poor upbringing and vulgar character were clearly evident on their faces, they were basically walking stereotypes.

Their scars seemed to show their combat experience, and their general disposition was evidently inclined to violence.

Subaru clearly remembered all of this. After all, these guys were,

“You lot… Perhaps you’ve gone and hit your heads somewhere?”

The reason he was able to meet Satella and Puck just a few hours ago.

These guys were basically your typical mobs, but since this was a 3D world he doubted it was reusing characters. So maybe they were different people with the same appearance,

“Could there really be three other guys with the same looks running around playing bandit?”

Maybe if it was just one, but there were three of them. It was absurd to think that they’d even party up the same way. In other words, they had to be the same guys he remembered.

“You’ve hit your heads or… Perhaps this is revenge for your instant defeat? Guess that sort of thing doesn’t change even in another world. You didn’t bring your pals, you want a fair rematch or something?”

In the real world, when you took someone down they’d bring their buddies to exact their revenge. In the end, you’d have to face wave after wave of enemies no matter how many you beat and would ultimately die to an absurdly strong foe, getting a game over. This sort of thing happened very frequently.

Considering the chain of suffering this pattern creates, perhaps these fellows ought to be commended for relying on their own strength instead of calling others.

Either way, he couldn’t help but think they were barking up the wrong tree if they were targeting him.

“Well, I understand you’d want to go for the weak one, so I can’t criticize you for it. But right now isn’t convenient for me, or should I say…”

“What’s this guy talking about? Maybe he’s lost it?”

The men mocked Subaru as he looked for a way to amicably resolve things through discussion.

Naturally, this irritated Subaru. The only reason he was trying to settle things peacefully was because he was in a hurry, in truth he was rather short-tempered under ordinary circumstances.

But even so, considering how serious the situation was, he was prepared to deal with a little scorn, but,

“Alright, kiddo. Hand over everything you’ve got and maybe we’ll let you go.”

“Yeah, sure sure. Everything I’ve got, right? I’m in a hurry, so let’s leave it at that.”

“Now act like a dog! Crawl around on all fours and beg for help.”

“Don’t get carried away, you bastards!”

They started getting too cocky, and Subaru’s patience ran out.

The men were shaken by his sudden burst of rage. As they stood there dumbfounded, Subaru targeted the one in the middle.

He was the man with the knife who had successfully stopped Subaru last time. Naturally, he would probably be just as quick to draw the knife as before. Therefore,

“I’ll start with you! I hate bastards who don’t value life! Die!!”

He put his entire body weight behind his palm as it crashed into the man’s jaw. He then immediately drove his left arm into the man’s undefended torso, slamming him against the wall and knocking him out instantly.

It was the work of an instant and the other men were slow to react, Subaru then knocked one of them down with a leg sweep. He then took advantage of this opening to target the final man, and dove into him.

Having tackled him, Subaru lifted him and threw him against the wall with all his strength. The man groaned at the impact as Subaru finished him off with a kick, but when turned around the man started getting back up.

“Tch… You bastard.”

“Come on, it’s one on one now. I’ve already taken down the guys with the knife and the nata, what are you going to do?”

The adrenaline pumping through Subaru’s veins gave him confidence, this seemed to overwhelm the man and his expression changed. In truth, he was the guy who had been knocked out by Satella in their previous confrontation. He was the only one whose weaponry Subaru wasn’t able to confirm, but judging by that reaction just now he didn’t have anything lethal on him.

“If it’s a fist fight you want, I’m not about to just kneel for you, you know.”

“Don’t screw around, you bastard. Aah! Don’t look down on me, brat!!”

Subaru provoked him by beckoning with his hand, and the man responded by rushing at him with spittle flying out of his mouth.

As the man attempted to grab him, Subaru welcomed his approach with his fist. His aim was true, and his fist sunk into the man’s chest, but the man wildly charged him and forced him against the wall. However,

“Behold!”

Subaru grabbed the man’s wrists and forced him to let go by exerting force even greater than his. Seeing the shock evident in the man’s expression, Subaru’s evil-eyed face warped into a fiendish smile.

“Don’t underestimate me just because I’m a shut-in. I swung a wooden sword every day for no reason and as a result my grip strength is over 70 kilos. I can bench 80 too.”

He had once ruined the atmosphere at a family gathering by crushing an apple with his bare hand, an incident from his dark past. His life as a shut-in consisted of daily training that he never neglected. His strength was such that if he were facing an opponent of similar size, he would only lose under exceptional circumstances.

The man howled as his wrists were crushed, and the moment his grip loosened Subaru's knee flew into him. The impact on his abdomen caused the man to crumple into a < shape. Subaru then quickly got behind him,

"Don't blame me if you die. I've always wanted to try this, an overhead throw onto hard ground!"

He wrapped his arms around the man's waist and violently threw him overhead as he leaned back. It was similar to a suplex in pro wrestling, but he'd maliciously let go midway. The man was helpless as his head collided with the wall, and he went completely still when his body collapsed to the ground.

Confirming the two men were down, Subaru went to the man he took down first, the man with the knife.

The man hadn't taken much damage and though he seemed to be fainting with agony, he suddenly tried to pull his knife on Subaru when he approached. Subaru mercilessly stomped on his face when he tried this, knocking him out instantly.

"Hmph, that was easy! In this world, evil never wins!"

Striking a triumphant pose, Natsuki Subaru celebrated his victory all by himself. He was relieved to know that all his aimless training wasn't a waste. Anyway,

"The situation hasn't changed at all. I got held up a bit, but I'd better hurry to the loot cellar."

Once he'd confirmed that the men weren't dead, Subaru left the alley.

A number of pedestrians seemed rather surprised to see him emerge unharmed, Subaru noticed them gasping as if they'd expected another outcome. Made him want to yell that if they saw what was going on, they should have reported it.

Of course, shy as he was, Subaru couldn’t do anything of the sort and he ended up jogging away from the area.

Chapter 8:
The Taste of Bitter Alcohol

1

Having finished up the revenge match in the alley, Subaru had reached the deepest part of the slums. —He was standing before the imposing loot house. The sun had already declined quite a bit and it was now evening.

“F-Finally found it… That took way too long, damn it.”

Now that he’d finally arrived, he sunk down to the ground as he used his sleeve to wipe the sweat off his forehead.

He had spent almost two hours running around until he finally found the place. He was at least able to confirm the passage of time with the phone in his pocket. Definitely two hours.

“I figured it wouldn’t be that hard since I came here just recently…”

Indeed, being unable to read any sort of signage had proven to be quite the obstacle for him.

The capital had very similar looking streets, and Subaru who was unfamiliar with the area could not even rely on the names of shops or places to guide him.

In the end, he had no choice but to brute force it while referring to his memories.

“I spoke with Satella and Puck in a number of places, so I’ve got a vague recollection of the path as well.”

This was especially true after he’d entered the slums.

Unlike a few hours ago, since someone had thoroughly cleaned his jersey, the reaction he’d received from the slum dwellers was cold and they were extremely uncooperative.

Subaru's social skill wasn't at the level where he could deal with this atmosphere of exclusion, so he ended up struggling alone here too.

As a result, he wanted to commend himself for managing to make it here. He decided to give himself a reward for his hard work.

"I'm finally opening you, corn potage flavor. To begin with, it was because I wanted to eat this that I went to the convenience store. It'd be no exaggeration to say this was the reason I was summoned to this world."

As he made various excuses, Subaru opened the bag.

His nostrils brought him bliss as it gently released a sweet smell. He tossed some onto his tongue with trembling fingers. —Supreme bliss overwhelmed his sense of taste.

"Delicious… Super delicious…! Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten anything. Amazingly delicious."

He shoveled down more and more as he thought back to all that he'd been through.

His stomach had been empty ever since he'd been denied that apple-like fruit. He had been bearing it for about six hours now.

Though he'd distracted his empty stomach, Subaru realized that he couldn't do the same to his mind.

His heart was throbbing violently, its pulse abnormally high. He could feel blood coursing throughout his entire body, this was at an entirely different level from that incident in the alley.

His limbs felt heavy and his mouth was dry for reasons unrelated to his snack. He was repeatedly tormented by a sharp pain as though he had been hit in the head, and this was accompanied by shrill ringing in his ears.

—The answer he had been seeking lay within the loot house.

He instinctively gulped as the scene he didn't want to remember floated across his mind.

A room turned into a sea of blood, an old man missing his arm. His stomach torn up as he lay there on the verge of death, and Satella's limp hand. It was his fault she'd ended up in that situation.

"Don't freak out, don't freak out, don't freak out, damn it. Am I an idiot? … No, I'm definitely an idiot. As if I'd come this far and then head back without looking."

Not like he even had anywhere to head back to.

He resolved himself and faced forward, when he attempted to advance he realized that his knees were shaking.

He couldn't control his trembling lower body. He forcibly stopped the shaking by striking his kneecaps, and then he took a deep breath as he advanced.

Bathed in orange sunlight, it was as if the door to the loot house was rejecting him.

Suppressing such delusions brought about by his nervousness, Subaru reached the door and raised his hand,

"Is anyone in there?"

He thought it was an extremely faint hope, but he still tried knocking lightly.

That unexpectedly dull sound should have reverberated both inside and outside. However, he received no response, only unbearable silence.

Subaru found this silence extremely terrifying, and started banging on the door even though he knew it was hopeless.

"Someone… Someone's in there, right?! Please, respond… Please."

He didn't want to think that they'd died in there.

Denying reality, Subaru pounded the door so hard it began to creak.

Unable to bear his fury, the door slowly started to give in as its old hinges deformed.

"—Shut up!! You don't even know the signal or password, you wanna bust the door down?!"

The door opened with great force, and Subaru who had been leaning on it was sent flying.

Subaru tumbled onto the ground in an unsightly fashion, almost five meters away. He then raised his head, bewildered.

His eyes were wide with surprise, and reflected in them was a red-faced old man glaring at him from the doorway.

He was bald and had a large build.

Perhaps his garments had once been white, but dust and many years of sweat and the like had turned it brown, a very unsanitary sight. Could be the source of the unpleasant smell wafting through the air.

Under his clothes was a very muscular body. Contrary to his aged appearance, he didn't seem frail in the slightest, he clearly had some toughness to him.

In summary, a huge bald old man in exceptional health was standing before him.

"Who're you?! That's not a face I remember, why are you here?! How'd you find out about this place, and how'd you get here?! Who told you?!"

The old man closed the distance between them with amazing speed and grabbed Subaru with his giant hand. As he felt his feet leave the ground, Subaru realized that he'd gotten carried away and returned to reality. What had happened earlier was an exception. He was just a mediocre, banal, commonplace guy at the end of the day.

Even if his strength was such that he would only lose under exceptional circumstances, almost all of his opponents would fall into this category.

As the almost two-meter tall giant hoisted him up, his will to resist was completely gone.

“—Please have this, a sign of my goodwill.”

He turned to the man’s rage-filled face—And tossed a corn potage flavored snack at him.

2

Shortly after that violent meeting that probably gave them both poor first impressions, Subaru was invited into the loot house.

There were some guest chairs by the counter right past the entrance. Sitting in one, Subaru adjusted the position of his behind which was rather uncomfortable.

The seat was splintered which caused Subaru to feel various stinging sensations all over his bottom. If his bowels were at their limit, he would no doubt be discharging right about now..

“Why’re you fidgeting around like that… Your balls chafing or something?”

“That’s hardly the case. Wait, give that back. I didn’t say you could have all of it!”

The old man was stood on the other side of the counter, where one would expect the owner to be.

Compared to his colossal body, the bag he was holding looked so small one might wonder if their sense of perspective had malfunctioned.

“How stingy. You’ll go to hell if you try to keep something this delicious to yourself.”

“And where do you think you’re going, eating others’ stuff like that? Boomers, I swear. Always criticizing others while ignoring their own faults.”

“There you go with those weird words again. This is why you young… Mm, tasty.”

“Stop eating already!”

Subaru leaned forward and extended his arm, somehow managing to snatch the bag out of the old man’s hands. However, most of the bag’s contents were already in his stomach.

Subaru’s shoulders dropped when he saw that there were only a few left.

“Aah… My precious corn potage. I might never be able to taste you again.”

“What, it was that rare? Well, it is true that I’ve never seen anything of the sort. Then how about using duplication magic on the rest?”

“Duplication magic?”

“Magic that turns one of something into two. It can only replicate the appearance of a living organism, but it should be possible to reproduce something like food.”

The man said this as he rubbed his round head, and Subaru realized anew how convenient magic was.

It really can do anything, huh, Subaru thought with admiration as he nonchalantly looked around the interior.

The loot house at dusk—There were no signs of the tragedy Subaru had experienced there.

There were still various items scattered all over the place, easily covering the place’s massive interior.

Perhaps having noticed Subaru’s eyes wandering, the old man’s eyes narrowed.

“What’s the matter, boy? Interested in my goods?”

With these words, he got to the heart of the matter.

The giant old man, who had introduced himself as Rom (he'd said Subaru could call him Old Man Rom). Negotiations with him had become unexpectedly smooth when in response to his rage, Subaru offered him a snack (Seriously, this was actually how it happened).

Once Subaru tossed it into his mouth, he became obsessed with the newfound flavor and immediately put Subaru down safely.

After that, Subaru convinced him that he had come here because there was something he had to do, and that he'd heard about the place from a middle-aged man in the slums, and in the end the two ended up at the counter like so.

On the other side of the counter, Rom used his huge arms to fill a somewhat dirty glass with alcohol, he had a slight smile on his face as he did this.

"Well, those who come here have one of two objectives. They're bringing me stolen goods, or they want said goods—One of those two."

"Certainly, that's part of why I'm here."

"Part, huh. Then you've got some other business too?"

Rom raised an eyebrow at Subaru's conditional agreement. Subaru nodded, and then he hesitantly asked his question, prepared to be mocked for it,

"This is pretty stupid, but… Old man, have you died recently?"

With your neck and right arm chopped up.

He decided not to include those words. As far as he could see, there were no signs of such a thing on his arm or his neck.

As he received Subaru's question and his gaze, Rom's gray-tinged eyes widened for a moment, and then his face suddenly broadened into a smile as if time had just started flowing again.

"Gahahaha, I was wondering what you were going to say. It's true that I'm an old man at death's door, but I'm sorry to say it hasn't happened yet. I don't imagine it's far off at this age, though."

Rom laughed as if he'd heard a terrific joke as he pushed a glass toward Subaru, "want a drink?"

Subaru turned him down with a wave of his hand, the smell of the alcohol irritating his nose, and briefly apologized for what he'd just said.

He'd apologized, but the unease within him continued to grow.

He was talking to Rom right now, but—Subaru had seen his corpse.

Right here, in the darkness, his arm and throat had been ripped apart by a blade, and he'd died an unspeakably gruesome death.

However, as if to deny the sight that had been scorched into his eyes, Rom's huge body was right before him, stuffed into that counter in a manner that seemed somewhat uncomfortable.

Rom's face was red as he emptied his glass, there was clearly blood flowing through him, he was nothing like the pale corpse that had lost a great deal of blood.

Old Man Rom was definitely alive. And the same went for Subaru as well.

Thinking back, Subaru too had sustained a grievous injury. But despite this, he was here with no traces of this having happened.

Subaru was no longer confident in his own perception as he started to wonder if he was merely daydreaming.

"Don't tell me all of that was a dream…? If so, how much was a dream and why am I in this world?"

His complaints briefly let him forget about his uneasiness, but now that he was in a place where he could sit and calm down, they once again plagued him.

The feeling of guilt, the scorching pain of that fatal wound, the warmth from the girl's ever so slight touch, if all of that was supposed to be a dream, then why was he here?

If that were the case, it'd make more sense if everything since his summoning was all a dream.

He found that much easier to accept than the idea that he'd suddenly started dreaming after arriving in another world.

"Old man, have you seen a silver-haired girl around?"

"Silver hair…? No, I can't say I have. I wouldn't forget something that conspicuous. No matter how old I might be getting."

Rom boldly laughed it off, but Subaru's expression clouded over.

Perhaps having perceived Subaru's sincerity from his attitude, Rom suddenly stopped laughing.

"Drink."

Without hesitation, he once again pushed the glass toward Subaru.

He tilted his bottle into the glass, and an amber liquid filled it to the brim. Subaru watched this silently, and Rom once again repeated, "Drink."

"Sorry, but I'm not in the mood. And I'm not so much of a brat that I'd drink to look tough."

"You stupid? Drinking and acting tough is what being a kid's all about. Gulp it down and feel the burn in your belly. Whatever's bothering you won't be able to bear the heat and you'll cough it right up."

"So drink," he said yet again, nudging the glass toward Subaru.

Subaru accepted the glass as if overwhelmed by Rom's stubbornness, and brought the amber liquid to this nose. The thick smell of alcohol assailed his nose and he almost ended up choking which caused his expression to go sour.

But despite this stance of refusal, part of him still wanted to follow through with Rom's advice.

Subaru thought that relying on alcohol was the mark of an uncool adult, but even so,

"Ah… .To hell with it!"

Tilting the glass, he downed it all in one gulp.

He didn't know how strong the stuff was, but immediately after he'd done this he felt as though his body had ignited.

The alcohol seemed to burn its way down his throat, causing him to scream and slam the glass onto the table.

"Pha! Gah! Terrible! Hot! Horrible! Nnaa, this sucks!"

"That's enough already! Guys who don't get the taste of alcohol are fools who miss out on half the fun in life, you know.

As Subaru coughed up the heat welling up inside him, Rom yelled at him and took another swig.

He splendidly overturned the whole bottle and drank right out of it.

Having downed an amount that was well over three times what Subaru drank, he belched crudely and smiled.

"Shtill, yuu hanjled jat well! Doncha feelike yer gunna throwep?"

"…Yeah! Just a little! Old man, let's move on to my other objective."

Turning his face away from the smiling old man, he started wiping the spilled alcohol with his sleeve as he pointed deeper into the interior. Unlike the crap strewn about here, the stuff in there should be valuable.

Rom's expression turned serious. Seeing this, Subaru directly announced his objective. "I'm searching for an insignia with a jewel embedded in it—I want you to give it to me."

His original goal—Aside from confirming Satella's safety, the reason he came here.

The jeweled insignia that had been stolen from Satella. She hadn't told him the reason, but she was willing to confront any danger to retrieve it, that's how important it was to her.

If it had been brought into the slums, it definitely had to be in here, or so he was told.

If the insignia at least existed, Subaru would know for sure he wasn't dreaming.

"An insignia with a jewel embedded in it… Sorry, but there's nothing like that around here."

"…Are you sure? Try to remember, maybe you're going senile?"

"I'm in peak condition when I've got booze in me. If I can't recall it now, I can only say I don't know about it."

As it seemed like Subaru's final hope had been ripped away, Rom smiled meaningfully. "I head there's supposed to be a large haul coming in today—it could very well be this insignia you speak of."

"The one bringing it in… Perhaps a girl named Felt?"

"What, you even know who stole it?"

Rom seemed to think this was anticlimactic, but Subaru couldn't help but strike a triumphant pose. The string of hope he thought for sure had snapped still held strong. He had just confirmed that Felt existed. If the girl who stole the insignia was real, then Satella, from whom it was stolen, should also be real.

"I was wondering if my love for silver-haired heroines was making me see things, it freaked me out…"

"Sorry to rain on your parade, but whether or not you'll be able to buy it once she brings it here is a different matter. A jeweled insignia would have a price befitting it, no?"

“Ha! It’s no use trying to size me up, I’m flat broke!”

“There’s nothing to talk about then!” Perhaps having wanted to start negotiations early, Rom seemed disappointed as he yelled.

However, Subaru waved his finger in response. “Tch, tch, tch. It’s true that I don’t have any money. How-ev-er! In society. money isn’t the only way to obtain goods. There’s also the barter system, right?”

Rom didn’t object. He silently prompted Subaru to continue to which he nodded and reached into his pocket. And what he pulled out was…

“—What’s this? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“This right here is a magical item that can freeze an object in time, I call it a ‘cell phone’!”

A compact white cell phone. Rom seemed confused since it was his first time seeing something of the sort, but Subaru was already nimbly using it—Immediately after, the dim interior was filled with a white light.

There was the sound of a camera shutter, and the light enveloped Rom who was so shocked he collapsed behind the counter. Subaru couldn’t help but smile at this extreme reaction,

“What was that just now?! You trying to kill me?! Pulling those weird moves, you’re taking me too lightly.”

“Wait, wait. Take a deep breath and calm down, and then look at this.”

Rom’s face was red for reasons besides his inebriation, and in response Subaru showed him the phone’s display.

Rom stepped back, his eyes full of suspicion as he strained to see the phone’s small screen—and then his eyes widened.

Displayed on the screen was Rom’s face, which Subaru had just photographed. He had used the phone’s camera function to do so.

Of course, this technology did not exist in this world.

Just as Subaru predicted, Rom stared at the screen intently and,

“That’s… My face, isn’t it? What’s going on?”

“I told you, didn’t I? That it could freeze things in time. What you see in here is the Rom from just a little while ago.”

As he said this, he turned the camera toward himself and snapped another photo.

He once again showed Rom who seemed to want to see the result, and this time the screen showed Subaru throwing up a peace sign.

“This is basically how it functions. Well, it’s usually used to commemorate important moments and store them, not to fool around like this.”

“I see… Certainly, this is… Hmm…”

With a hand on his jaw, Rom seemed to be pondering something as he looked at the phone.

The bait had been even more effective than Subaru expected, and he felt that he had already succeeded as far as negotiation was concerned.

As if to boost Subaru’s confidence even further, Rom took the phone and examined it closely as he said,

“It’s my first time seeing one, but… From what I’ve heard, this might be a ‘Meteor’.”

“Meteor?”

Subaru tilted his head at this unfamiliar term. Rom nodded. “They’re devices that allow people who don’t have open gates to use magic. They’re extremely rare, though, even I’ve never seen one before.”

Rom sighed in admiration once he was finished staring at the phone and placed it on the counter.

And then he once more turned to Subaru. “I can’t estimate its value very precisely. I’ve been in this business a long time, but… This is my first time handling a meteor. However… It’s definitely worth more than anything else I’ve ever sold.”

Seeing a meteor for the first time and the potential to use it for trade seemed to have aroused Rom’s interest. He continued with a slightly shaky voice, “Even so,”

“If you put this up for trade, you’d be sustaining a huge loss. I don’t know how much this insignia you’re looking for is worth, but it definitely can’t match this meteor. From a financial perspective, you’d be better off just selling this meteor on its own.”

A shady business in the slums that dealt with stolen goods. Rom’s advice to him was completely unlike what one would expect of the boss of such an establishment.

His proposal was definitely an attractive one.

Subaru was basically worthless in this world.

He couldn’t use magic, and he wasn’t especially powerful. He knew nothing and he couldn’t even read, and on top of all this he was totally broke.

If he were able to sell this phone, it would definitely help him break out of the corner he was backed into. At the very least, he wouldn’t have to worry about money for a while.

The future before him was one where he would have to struggle just to get some food, so it seemed completely obvious what choice he should make here. However,

“Nah, that’s fine. I’m going to trade this meteor for the insignia that Felt girl brings in.”

“Why go so far? Could it be more valuable than this meteor? Or are you saying its value isn’t monetary?”

Subaru’s obstinacy seemed to baffle Rom. As he asked about the insignia’s value, the latter half seemed to contain a hint of ridicule.

That was how it was for someone who lived here. The idea that something could be more important than money, though they could entertain the concept, probably wasn’t one they could easily accept in reality.

Accepting that people had such values, Subaru shook his head,

“To be honest, I haven’t even seen the thing. Even if I were to exchange it for money, I don’t really think it would go for more than this meteor, I’m definitely taking a massive loss here.”

“If you understand that, then why?”

“It’s obvious. —This isn’t really a loss for me.”

Subaru felt a thrill of excitement as he saw Rom’s eyes widen yet again.

Yes, that was the answer.

Even if he wasn’t sure he’d have anything to eat tomorrow, even if his future seemed completely hopeless, even if he was throwing away a boatload of money, there was meaning to his loss.

“I want to return a favor. I always repay my debts. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t. I’m pretty high-strung, being a child of the modern generation and all. —That’s why, no matter how much I’m losing here, I have to get that insignia.”

“Hm… In other words, the insignia didn’t belong to you to begin with?”

“It belongs to a silver-haired girl who saved me. I don’t know why, but it’s really important to her.”

“And where is she now? Not with you?”

“I’m currently looking for her! Or rather, the fact that I was saved by her and even her existence itself may merely be delusion on my part!”

Suddenly clenching his fist, he spoke his earlier worry out loud and laughed it off.

The conditions all connected properly. It was impossible that Satella didn’t actually exist.

He would definitely meet her again once he’d obtained the insignia.

As Subaru strengthened his resolve, Rom watched him with eyes as though he was looking at something extremely strange.

“—You really are an idiot, huh.”

With this, all other feelings were forgotten and all that was left was laughter.

Chapter 9:
Trump Card

1

Negotiations were established, Rom had assured him of that once he'd examined the phone. But…

"I'll only go as far as helping you secure a talk with Felt. From that point onward, it'll be up to you to make the trade."

"I'm basically getting robbed here, you know? You've guaranteed this thing's value too, so I'll definitely succeed."

Rom grimaced at Subaru's carefree attitude, it seemed like he wanted to say something.

It was probably some advice like don't let your guard down, or don't take this lightly.

But since Subaru's face was turning red from the alcohol he drank, perhaps he felt that lecturing him would be wasted effort,

"Well, you're probably right. If you were dealing with someone more malicious, they might look for even more than that meteor… But Felt's personality isn't that warped."

"Riight, buh—Riight, buh—By the way, do you not have anything better around here? This is horrible, like I'm eating scraps."

"You say this as you eat my food? You really are getting shameless."

Before Subaru was a crude plate with something like bean paste on it, he was steadily shoveling it into his mouth while spitting 'buh's,

His earlier distaste toward the alcohol had disappeared. He had Rom fill up his empty glass, steadily sipping alcohol as he ate his bean paste.

"Say, is this really enough for that huge body of yours? It's not like you’re living off air, don’t tell me you’re about to say that you can survive as long as you have booze?”

“Don’t you know how efficient giants are? Despite our awesome strength, we don’t need much sustenance. We were famed across the land during the warring period, you know.”

Rom’s face was stern as he answered Subaru’s tactless question.

He then brought the bottle he had been pouring out of to his mouth, and as he drank,

“Because of this, most of us were wiped out. Even in the capital, I haven’t seen any other giants.”

“Yer strong even without eatin’, sho kewl. … Gunna throw up.”

“I’m saying something sad here and you respond like that?”

He wasn’t about to let someone’s sob story kill his mood.

As Subaru blocked his ears and interrupted the story, Rom gave up on telling it and started eating his beans.

The two of them passed their time silently eating those terrible beans as a side to their alcohol.

Eventually there was a coded knock on the door, by which time the sun had already set for the most part.

Subaru who had been nodding off raised his head, and Rom nimbly approached the door in response to the sound.

The door looked rather small compared to Rom’s giant frame. Rom pressed his ear against it, and started asking questions with a mysterious expression,

“To the giant rats,”

“Poison.”

“To the skeletons,”

"A pitfall."

"To the noble dragon we are,"

"Shitbags."

His short questions received immediate answers.

This was probably the signal and password he'd heard about. Rom seemed satisfied and unlocked the door. As Subaru watched him, he internally remarked that that was a very tacky password. And then,

"—Sorry to keep you waiting, old man. She was more persistent than I expected. Took a while to shake her off."

The girl seemed happy, as if bragging about her achievement, as she passed by Rom to enter the loot house. She had shoulder-length blonde hair. She had red eyes like a rabbit, and she had a mischievous fang sticking out. Her small frame was covered by clothes that seemed easy to move in, and to put it frankly, were completely ragged.

He'd only seen her a moment, but she was definitely the girl he'd encountered in the alley.

Having seen someone familiar, Subaru reflexively stood up. The sound alerted the girl to his presence, and her smile disappeared as her expression changed to one of suspicion.

"Ah? Who's this? Hey, old man, I told you I was bringing in some good stuff, so you should have the place cleared out, didn't I?"

"I understand how you feel, but this kid is here because he has some business with you. And it's not unrelated to what you're doing."

The doubt on Felt's face increased even further at Rom's answer.

It seemed to Subaru that her hand was reaching toward her chest, that was probably where she'd kept it.

As Subaru silently looked at her, Felt turned to Rom with an uneasy expression.

“What’s with this guy? —Don’t tell me you’ve sold me out?”

“As if I’d be that dishonorable. And I think this talk is going to be one you’ll like.”

Closing one eye, Rom seemed to be seeking agreement.

Having experienced a great degree of disgust at the old man's wink, Subaru nodded.

He then carefully chose what he ought to say to Felt who was still being cautious,

"Let's calm down for now. I have no ill intent toward yooouggghhh…"

—And was then overwhelmed by his nausea, pouring it all out.

""Gyaaaah—!!""

The two shrieked when Subaru suddenly vomited.

Subaru himself fell to his knees, a pain that felt as though his stomach was being squeezed causing him to throw up all of its contents.

The amber liquid and the bean paste were mixed together, producing a truly terrible sight.

"What about this am I supposed to like?! This is the worst!"

"I'm the one who's suffering here! That's my food and booze! That stuff was expensive! You know much it cost?!"

"Shut up! Stop screaming! Feels like my head's going to explode! This isn't good, I feel terribuuuaaaaagghhhh…"

""Gyaaaaah—!!""

Subaru's weak will submitted to the second wave, and the pair's screams echoed for quite a while.

—Even after Subaru had finished emptying his stomach, even after the mess he made was cleaned up, even after the stagnant atmosphere he'd produced had been ventilated, until Rom informed him that he was banned from drinking, this uproar continued to echo throughout the slums the entire evening.

—It was approaching nighttime.

2

"—Alright, let's pull ourselves together and get to negotiating!"

Subaru clapped his hands together and said this in an attempt to fix the ruined atmosphere.

They had moved from the counter to a small table deeper into the loot house. The reason being that Felt had absolutely refused to negotiate there, since there were still traces of the earlier incident (The smell and some remnants) around there.

Felt sat on the other side of the table, and emptied the glass of milk Rom had poured for her.

The caution in her red eyes hadn't decreased at all, and there was now a great deal of mistrust and discomfort added on top of that. She was concerned about what had just happened.

"Come on, don't make that face, smile, smile. You're wasting those cute looks, you know?"

"Don't try to flatter me, bro. Besides, I'm only interested in whether or not whatever you have to say can bring me some profit. How about we cut the crap and get right into it?"

Subaru pressed his fingers against his cheeks and acted as friendly as he could, but her reaction was cold and curt.

Even in this world, his communication ability had completely missed the mark. Transcending worlds, dooming him to solitude, his 'Power of Absolute Isolation'

"I thought I'd left everything behind, but I guess that alone stuck with me. Fufufu, it's kinda like karma, don't you think?"

"Hey, Rom. Did you water this down or something? This milk is terrible."

"I offer you things out of the kindness of my heart and you both keep calling them terrible…”

Felt and Rom seemed to be getting along in their own way as they ignored Subaru who was off in his own world.

Subaru cleared his throat and once again garnered their attention. “Alright, let’s start negotiating. Uhh, Felt—you have the insignia, right?”

“…Yeah, I do.”

Subaru cut right to the chase, and Felt’s short answer was upfront as well.

She retrieved something from her bosom and gently placed it on the table.

—The insignia he’d been looking for all this time. It was a badge modeled after a dragon.

In terms of size, it was like those embroidered patches from his old world. He couldn’t quite tell what it was made of, but it looked to him like some precious metal. As far as Subaru knew, the design looked to be that of a winged dragon viewed from the front, and its core—The dragon’s mouth held a red jewel within it.

The red jewel within the insignia had a faint glow to it. This light caused Subaru to fall silent despite himself.

Rom silently appraised the jewel, hmming now and then like he was having a hard time.

“Come on—”

The one who broke the silence was Felt, who was holding the insignia.

Once she was sure her introduction had brought them back to their senses, she pushed the insignia toward Subaru.

“Show me what you’ve got. If you have something that can match this insignia’s craftsmanship and the effort I exerted to obtain it, we'll both be happy, yeah?"

"I see you're trying to size me up with that evil smile, but too bad, I only have one card to play. Because you see, I'm absolutely broke!"

The same old displeased reaction everyone had upon hearing he was broke, he thought.

Setting aside his feelings on the matter, he used his trump card just as he'd declared.

He placed his phone on the table as if slamming it down, and just as he predicted Felt seemed to be confused.

This reaction was the same as Rom's was back then which gave him confidence as he used the phone's camera.

"Natsuki Flash!!"

"Woah, bright!"

With the flash and the mechanical sound of the shutter, he had taken a photo.

Felt's face looked as though she wanted to complain about his lack of manners, but he thrust the phone's screen before her before she could open her mouth.

Her red eyes went wide when she saw herself on the screen.

"This is…"

"Yep, it's good ol' Felt! This is a meteor that freezes time and stores it as a picture. This is the only card I can play. I'd like to trade it for that insignia."

He played his trump card right away, and the momentum shifted in his favor.

What he'd just pulled was a standard tactic in negotiations. A powerful tactic that, depending on the situation, could seal the deal on its own.

Naturally, this was essentially the same as announcing that you had no stronger cards to play, and in truth Subaru and his big mouth had already fouled it up, but,

“I see, that’s incredible. So, Rom, how much would this meteor go for?”

Felt nodded as she looked at the screen, and her response was outrageously candid.

Her eyes didn’t sparkle, nor did she want to hold it. She was only interested in its value, not its functions.

“Only men can understand a man’s romance even in a parallel world?! Is that how it is?!”

“Quit making such a fuss, it’s shameful. You probably have the confidence to sit still for a bit. Alright then, how about it, Rom?”

Perhaps her attitude ought to be called vulgar, or maybe manly, but her composure seemed unshakeable.

She looked to be about two or three years younger than him, and yet he almost ended up thinking of her as the older sister type.

Setting aside Subaru who was anything but manly, Felt asked Rom who was standing next to her about the phone’s value.

She slid her finger down the phone’s side as if she were barely interested in it at all,

“As far as I’m considered, if this meteor thing is worth more than this insignia, that’s great. I’m sure you can tell me whether it is.”

“Well, I can’t really say how much it would sell for. This is my first time handling a meteor too. However, I don’t think even an insignia of this quality can match up to it—In short, I think you have a lot to gain by making this trade.”

“I see, I see. That’s pretty great then, isn’t it?”

Felt seemed rather pleased now that she’d received Rom’s seal of approval.

Her reaction was a little different from what he'd expected, but it looked like he'd achieved his goal regardless, so Subaru was delighted as well.

However, when Subaru reached out to take the insignia, Felt stopped him.

"We've shown each other our trump cards. But I'm not quite done overcharging just yet, you know?"

"…It's not exactly praiseworthy for you yourself to announce that. But it's pointless to try haggling any further. As I said, I'm completely broke."

"I'm not that cruel either. And even Rom said that this thing would be worth more than this insignia, so I recognize that much. —But it'd be a lie to say you're out of cards to play."

Felt stood up and looked down at Subaru who was still sat in his chair.

Her red eyes were overflowing with sadism, Subaru broke out in a cold sweat as her gaze seemed to see right through him.

As far as this negotiation was concerned, he'd already played what should have been his trump card, his cell phone.

However, Subaru still had a number of items on him that didn't exist in this world.

The coins and various membership cards in his wallet could probably be exchanged for some amount of money. If it came down to it, it wouldn't be unthinkable to even trade away his jersey and sneakers, technical assistance in a sense.

The phone was his most valuable asset, but he did have some other items he hadn't yet shown them.

But these could be used to help support his life later on, so he really didn't want to spend them here if possible.

—But if the cell phone wasn't enough, he would have to use them.

"Relax, I told you, didn't I? That I wouldn't try to rip you off any further. I'll be satisfied so long as I can make some money off this thing."

"I-I-I-I'm? Not Really? Worried or anything? Or rather, I don't really know what you're talking about. I-I-I-I've already done all I can? I don't see what I have to be nervous aboooouuugggh"

"Quit psyching yourself out like that! Don't throw up! I'll call things off!"

The pressure he himself was putting on himself caused him to vomit, but he managed to stop it in his mouth and sent it back into his belly.

Subaru struck a victorious pose as he gulped it down, causing Felt to look disgusted from the bottom of her heart as she drew back,

"It's fine since none of it came out, but—If you hadn't brought this meteor, I'd definitely kick you out for that."

"Although I'd have already finished him off before then."

Gahahaha, the two laughed in a very manly fashion.

As Subaru endured the burning in his throat from his gastric juices, he addressed them,

"So, what exactly do you mean when you say you're not done overcharging?"

"Hm? Ah, it's simple. You're not the only one I'm negotiating with."

Subaru looked doubtful, and as if to respond to that doubt, Felt raised her finger,

"To begin with, I only pilfered this insignia because I was asked to. They said they'd pay me ten holy gold coins for it."

"You had a prior contract?! I'm not sure how much ten gold coins are worth, but…”

He glanced at Rom, and Rom nodded as if he’d guessed what Subaru was thinking.

“I might be able to get four or five gold coins for it. It’s possible I’d have to drop to three.”

“So basically they’re paying at least twice its worth?”

“No, didn’t you hear her say holy gold coins? Unlike typical gold coins, they’re made of holy gold which is rarer, so I’d say they’re paying about 20 gold coins’ worth.”

“Four times, then?!”

“What are you so surprised about? That meteor you’ve got wouldn’t sell for any less than twenty holy gold coins. Depending on the situation, there might even be enthusiasts willing to pay a lot more. There’s no comparison.”

He didn’t really understand how things were valued in this world, but apparently there was something even higher than gold coins, and his phone was worth twenty of those which surprised him.

His phone with less than ten contacts in it was starting to look like some sacred treasure to him.

And since he didn’t use it very much, it looked good too. Thank goodness he didn’t have any friends.

“How about you quit consoling yourself for a moment, if this thing sells for more, then I’ll just turn down my client.”

“You’ve been talking about overcharging, though.”

Felt’s cheeky expression changed into an even more mischievous smile.

“You’ve put up an absurdly expensive item. If they want the insignia, they’ll have to at least match its value, no?”

“…So basically, you’re hoping they’ll bring out more than twenty holy gold coins?”

“And you’ll have to show me what else you’ve got if you want to compete.”

Felt’s expression was mischievous, or rather, pure evil as she cheerfully declared this.

Subaru now felt that the situation was starting to look rather ominous,

“So, when and where are you planning to meet this person? Could I join your discussion?”

“Of course. If you were to be put at a disadvantage, I might end up losing out on some profit after all. And you don’t have to worry about the location—Right here.”

She tapped the table with her finger, and then leaned back into her chair and looked up at Rom.

With her inverted gaze on him, Rom seemed terribly annoyed,

“Yet again you haven’t even bothered to get my permission before…”

“After all, if I have you, almost anyone would be too scared to try using violence. They’d lose their will just looking at you.”

As Felt looked to him for agreement, Subaru too took at a glance at Rom and agreed with her.

A bald old man who was nearly two meters tall and heavily muscled. And he’d easily picked Subaru up with one hand even though he weighed almost seventy kilos, so those muscles probably weren’t just for show.

Subaru concluded that if things got violent, it’d probably barely even be a fight.

On the other hand, Rom didn’t seem very bothered by their impressions of him.

“No helping it. Can’t you do anything without me? Seriously, it’s sad. Want another glass of milk? I’ve got a few sweets too if you want.”

It kind of felt like he was a senile old man doting on his granddaughter.

Rom seemed to be in a good mood as he filled Felt’s glass. As Subaru watched her, he sighed in exasperation, “However,”

“The fact that you’d already called them here must mean you were already planning to hassle them about the price even if I weren’t here, right?”

“That’s right. Do you have any idea how hard it was to get this? And if little ol’ me tried to face them alone, what if they tried to avoid paying? Wouldn’t it be sad?”

“Little ol’ you, huh…”

If one judged by her small and slender frame, she definitely wasn’t wrong.

But considering her indomitable spirit and brashness, he felt it wasn’t right to describe her that way.

Thinking back, there was even once a time when she’d left him in the jaws of death while in the process of stealing the insignia.

Just what part of her is frail, he thought as this memory started to anger him.

“Hold on, do you not remember me at all?”

“? Have we met somewhere? I’m a busy girl, so I don’t really remember people who haven’t left strong impressions. To begin with, you look super plain.”

“Only your hair color and clothes stand out” she cackled.

She didn't seem to be lying, and she'd even dissed his appearance which left Subaru stunned.

Perhaps the concept of empathy had completely died out in this world, considering she'd casually forgotten that she'd seen a murder in progress.

But on the other hand, there was Satella who had saved him when she had everything to lose, and Rom who let him stay even after he'd vomited all over the place, so he just didn't know.

It seemed that there were all sorts of people even in another world. It wouldn't do to only look at the negatives.

"Well, let's aside your poor memory for now. When is this person supposed to be coming?"

"That's a pretty irritating way to put it. I said I'd probably have it by sundown, so they said they'd come here after that… The sun's gone down, so it shouldn't be long."

This "They're coming, right?" sort of conversation may have set off a flag.

The sound of two sharp knocks on the door suddenly filled the loot house.

The three looked at each other, and then Rom asked Felt, "The password?"

"Ah, didn't tell 'em. Probably mine, I'll go see."

Felt stood up as if leaping and headed to the entrance.

As he watched Felt treat the place like it belonged to her, Subaru shrugged at Rom as if to ask, "Is this really okay?"

"Well, it's not like we don't know each other. We've known each other a long time… I don't mind playing bodyguard for her."

He seemed to be in high spirits, like a grandpa who was happy to be relied on, as he retrieved a club from deeper within.

It’s length was around what you’d see in kendo swords, and it looked like it was made of wood. However, it had several sharp bits sticking out of it, and it was obvious at a glance that a single hit could be lethal.

“It’s like a nailed bat or something, looks like sticks are standard equipment in this world too…”

It was standard in many RPGs to be given 50 gold and a wooden stick to start with.

Sure looks like you’d expect, huh, Subaru thought as he evaluated Rom’s equipment from the side, at which point Felt came back with a strangely cordial smile.

“It was for me after all. Over here, wanna sit down?”

She gestured to Subaru to get out of the way, her hospitality being directed at the one behind her.

Subaru was a little surprised as he covertly examined this person, he was somewhat tense as he wondered if they were the one he’d be negotiating with.

Because the person Felt had invited in was a beautiful woman.

She was rather tall, around the same height as Subaru, and she appeared to be in her early twenties.

Her eyes angled downward toward the edges and she had a calm atmosphere to her. Her unusually pale skin clearly stood out even in that gloomy interior.

She was wearing a black cloak, but she’d left the front open so one could easily see her tight black outfit underneath it. Slender as she was, she had curves in all the right places.

And just like Subaru, she had black hair which seemed to be unusual in this world. Her long hair that went down to her waist was tied up as if braided, and she was currently fiddling with the end of it.

She had a rather bewitching aura.

Since Subaru had very little experience with the opposite sex, he wasn’t at all used to dealing with someone like her and his heart started pounding.

Mentally overwhelmed, Subaru ended up ceding his seat to Felt.

Felt sat down in the now empty chair, with the club-wielding Rom to her left and Subaru who couldn’t hide his nervousness to her right.

This was quite the welcome she was receiving, but the woman didn’t seem particularly bothered, merely tilting her head slightly.

“It seems to me we have some outsiders here.”

“It’d be a problem if you tried to skip out on paying, call it the wisdom of the weak. Hey, Subaru, some drinks.”

Felt ordered him around with a wave of her hand, and Subaru couldn’t bring himself to object as he obeyed.

He picked some relatively clean glasses, filled them with milk, and then placed them before the two.

The woman whispered a thank you to Subaru as he did this, and then gazed at him as if appraising him.

“I understand why the old man’s here, but what of this young man?”

She’d probably realized from his behavior that he wasn’t used to being there.

The woman was genuinely doubtful, and Felt responded with a mischievous smile as if to get right down to business.

“This guy’s your rival, another person I’ve been negotiating with.”

And just as she declared, her price gouging had begun.

Chapter 10:
The Consequence for Loose Lips

“I see, I understand what’s going on here.”

Tilting her glass of milk, the woman licked the remnants off her lip.

She’d introduced herself as Elsa, and her every movement was sensual, even as Felt was explaining things she’d cast some flirtatious glances Subaru’s way which caused his heart to pound.

“You’ve got a fine personality, I don’t dislike it. —So, how much is the young man over there offering?”

Ten holy gold coins, that was how much she had offered.

If Subaru was to compete with her, it was only natural to assume he’d put up more.

Subaru decided that he shouldn’t just sit and watch, so he once again used his phone to take a photo. The flash filled the room and Elsa’s appearance was displayed on the screen.

His actions caused her to frown a bit, but beyond this Elsa had no reaction.

He showed her the screen,

“What I’m offering is this meteor. It’s likely so rare it’s the only one of its kind. According to the muscly old man over there, it definitely wouldn’t go for less than twenty holy gold coins.”

“Meteor…”

She looked at the version of herself shown on the screen, and nodded in understanding.

Subaru was going for an exchange of items, and he wasn’t bluffing was probably the impression she had.

She extracted a small leather pouch from her bosom—That was most likely where she kept the holy gold coins she was supposed to pay with.

She set it down on the table. The sound of the coins clanging around gave the impression that its contents were rather heavy.

Felt’s eyes pupils like a cat’s, and Rom rebuked her for this. As Subaru waited for her next move, she linked her fair fingers atop the table.

“The truth is I was given a little extra by my employer. So that if you were hesitant, I could consider raising my offer.”

“Employer… Meaning, just like Felt you were ordered to obtain the insignia too?”

“That’s how it is. The one who desires it is my employer… Could you perhaps be in the same business?”

Elsa seemed to hold some doubt toward Subaru, who intended to trade a meteor for the insignia.

Even though she asked him this, he didn’t really understand her profession in the first place.

Since she was ordered to get something for her employer, maybe she was something like a delivery girl? Regardless,

“Being in the same business as me would mean being unemployed.”

“Well, this jobless guy just outbid you by quite the margin. So, just how much did your master send you with?”

Felt addressed Elsa provocatively and in response she silently opened up her pouch.

As she overturned it, holy gold coins that glittered a dazzling silver poured out.

The overlapping sounds of metal falling caused Felt’s eyes to shine, and even Rom ended up making some noise.

By contrast, Subaru was instead focused on counting how many there were rather than their shininess.

If he wasn’t wrong—

“Twenty, exactly.”

“This is all my employer gave me. They were certain that this would be enough, but… Does it not quite suffice?”

Her question was directed behind Felt, toward Rom.

Rom counted the coins, and then looked down at Subaru's uneasy expression and smiled.

"You don't have to be such a baby about it. It's not very manly… Twenty certainly is quite the sum, but didn't I tell you yours was worth at least that?"

His large, rugged hands violently ruffled Subaru's hair.

Subaru was still somewhat drunk, so being shaken like this caused him to feel absolutely horrible, but,

"It looks to me like Subaru has the advantage here. Sorry about your master, but you'd better take your coins back."

That horrible feeling changed into absolute ecstasy when Rom said this as he pushed her coins back to her.

Felt threw her hands up without objection, and Elsa didn't seem particularly disappointed as she shrugged. Subaru suddenly shot up into a pose of triumph, a reaction that seemed out of place.

"What?! It's fine, isn't it?! I was happy! In a certain sense, I've finally achieved my original goal! A little celebration is warranted, right?!"

"It's not like anybody's even saying anything, you're getting too worked up. I'm happy so long as I make a bit of profit."

"And I don't imagine my employer will mind too much if I return without the insignia, so I haven't much reason to persist."

As Felt teased Subaru whose face had gone red, Elsa seemed rather unconcerned as she stood up.

It's not like he was hoping to hear her lament her loss or anything, but the fact that she didn't seem to care at all about failing did nag at him.

"Ah, sorry, Elsa. They might be mad at you, huh?"

“There’s no helping it. It’s not as if the fault was mine, they simply tried to get away with paying too little.”

“For twenty holy gold coins to be too little, that’s pretty tough.”

“Anyway, hasn’t my luck been crazy good?! Could it finally be my time?!”

Unlike the men who were sympathizing with Elsa, Felt’s attitude seemed as though she was completely unable to read the mood.

At any rate, it looked like he’d finally completed the trade that was giving him so much trouble.

Meaning that he was another step closer to his hope of repaying Satella, who had saved him when he first came to this world.

Technically speaking, he should probably tell Satella about Felt who had stolen her insignia, or Elsa who had ordered it, but in the end the only damages were Satella’s emotional state and Subaru’s phone.

He’d only spoken to them briefly, but Subaru didn’t have the heart to have them tossed in cells.

Surely this was the limit of opportunism.

“Well now, this didn’t exactly end well for me, but I’ll be taking my leave now.”

They all looked at her as she stood up.

Finishing up the last bit of milk, she once again erotically licked the rest off her lip, and then she turned to Subaru as if she’d just remembered something.

It felt as if her deep black gaze was wrapping around his heart, binding it.

“—Incidentally, what exactly do you intend to do with that insignia?”

Her tone seemed somewhat low and cold as she asked this.

The sweet sound of her voice on his eardrums was persuasive, as if forbidding him from lying.

“…Ah, I’m returning it to its owner.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Subaru realized his mistake.

He’d just announced that he’d be returning the stolen item to the person it was stolen from, and he’d done so in front of the girl who stole it and the woman who ordered it.

That was no different from declaring he was an enemy,

“—So you’re involved too.”

—And it was more than enough to make him the target of Elsa’s cold killing intent.

“U—?!”

He suddenly felt an impact to his side.

The force on his waist caused him to fall to the side, and he couldn’t do anything to brace himself as he hit the ground in an unsightly fashion.

Pain and a collision, his vision spun until he hit the ground, after which he raised his head to see Felt seemingly clinging to him.

“What the—”

“Are you a moron?! Run away, you wanna die?!”

—Hell are you doing, he tried to shout, but it was drowned out by Felt’s angry yelling.

Subaru’s surprise was evident on his face, from his low vantage point he could see Elsa who was still standing, looking his way.

“Ah, I missed.”

She said, tilting her head in curiosity.

In her hand was a weapon that didn’t quite fit her, one that had a dull gleam.

-A Kukri knife, as far as Subaru knew, that was what you called such a knife.

A knife about thirty centimeters long, with its body bent into a < shape, a member of a class of knives commonly known as Uchizori. He’d heard that the weight of the tip was such that it would tear a victim apart like an axe.

Even having brandished her knife, her smile hadn’t changed.

Judging by her stance, she had just swung that blade. If that was the case, Felt had saved him by jumping into him since he was in its path.

His fate was decided in an instant, moreover he hadn’t even realized what was happening, confronted by this fact, the fear set in far too late.

His warning bells were going off, and his heart was like an alarm as it pumped blood. The heartbeats he was hearing almost made it seem like his whole body was a heart, and he couldn’t stop the trembling in the arm that was supporting his body.

Despite his pathetic behavior, the situation continued.

“Uoooohhh—!!”

Rom charged Elsa with a roar.

He was wielding the club he hadn’t let go of even during the negotiations, and was now trying to smash Elsa’s skull with it.

The speed at which he swung it down was extraordinary.

It surely weighed at least ten kilos, and yet he was swinging it like it was a twig, a feat that was a testament to the giants’ strength.

The club slammed into the ground, and the impact felt as though the whole building was shaking.

The shattered floor's wood and the stolen goods scattered around were sent flying by this. As Subaru lay on the ground, a battle transcending common sense took place before him.

"This is my first deathmatch with a giant."

"Keep talking, girl. —I'll smash you to pieces and feed you to giant rats!"

The club he was swinging to the side certainly had the destructive power he was talking about.

Its speed and power were such that any ordinary defense would be ripped apart like paper.

There wasn't much room to move around, and if one were cornered by these blows they would be finished.

But on the other side, Elsa's skill was also at a transcendent level.

Still holding her kukri knife with one hand, Elsa's silhouette seemed to slip right past his maelstrom of attacks.

She advanced even as he unleashed attacks that would surely be lethal if they landed, dodging them by a hair. She was practically toying with him as she dodged around.

Subaru's instincts told him this was bad.

This is really bad, something within him desperately echoed like an alarm.

"Not good…"

"It's okay. Rom couldn't possibly lose! I've never in my life seen him lose, not even once!"

Subaru could only murmur with his lips shaking, and Felt responded with a shout showing her trust, as if trying to convince herself.

Her words showed trust that had built up over many years, trust that couldn’t be broken so easily.

Even as they joked around with each other the two clearly respected one another, a relationship borne of the long time they’d spent together.

But unlike Felt, Subaru wasn’t optimistic in the slightest.

This wasn’t one of the tussles she’d seen until now, this was a deathmatch.

“Eat this!”

Before his worries could take shape, there was a change in the battle before them.

Rom had kicked up a table as he roared. That was where they had been conducting their negotiations, its wood shattered into pieces, the fragments completely covering Elsa.

It was a curtain of splintered wood.

Aiming at her, Rom swung his club with all his strength.

He was swinging with such force that even a car would most likely end up smashed. However,

“—Old man!”

A sorrowful scream left Felt’s throat.

And then Subaru saw the result.

Rom’s right arm had been blown away, club still in hand, and was now spinning around.

His huge and burly arm had been ripped from his shoulder and flew through the air, spraying blood everywhere as it slammed into the wall.

The rain of blood that filled the room covered Felt and Subaru from head to toe. But they hadn’t the leeway to turn their attention to this fresh blood.

“I’ll at least take you down with—”

With his right arm gone, Rom’s shoulder was spraying blood like a hose.

He sprang forward with his huge body, making no attempt to reduce the bleeding as he aimed at Elsa with his other arm.

The wood fragments from the table had fallen to the ground, and there stood Elsa still holding the position of her swing.

Before she could turn her knife back around, Rom’s giant body would crush her.

But his fleeting last stand,

“I forgot to say this earlier—Thanks for the milk.”

Was stopped by the broken glass she’d brandished in her other hand.

Chapter 11:
A Struggle too Late

There were drops of blood running down the glass's sharp shards, and following them upward one would find Rom's throat.

He had lost his arm and his throat was ripped apart which caused a large amount of foamy blood to pour out of his mouth, after which the light left his gray eyes as he collapsed to the ground.

His twitching body had already lost its vitality, and there was no doubt that it no longer held life.

Elsa elegantly bowed to his fallen body as if to pay her respects.

She placed the glass she'd used to kill him down by his still twitching body,

"I'm returning this. I no longer have a need for it, you see."

She said cruelly as she twirled the kukri knife in her hand.

Cleaning the blood off the blade, she once again pointed it toward the other two.

Subaru, who was still on the ground, could not even say anything.

He was entirely focused on the brutal slaughter that had just occurred before him.

Someone he had been conversing with just a few minutes ago was now dead. And it wasn't due to an accident or illness, it was due to another person's malice.

"—Ah, so you're the braver one."

Subaru, who was still frozen, raised his head when he heard her voice filled with admiration.

His limbs would not obey him. As he lay there in that stupefied state, he saw Felt stand up before him, striking her trembling knees as if to encourage herself.

She straightened her legs and combed hair blood-soaked hair back.

“How dare you…”

Subaru couldn’t see her expression since he was behind her.

However, it was clear that her strained voice filled with hatred was not a tearful one.

“If you resist unnecessarily, you might end up getting hurt.”

“You’re going to kill me either way, you damned sadist!”

“I might not cut you properly if you move. I’m not very good with blades, you see.”

She skillfully turned the knife in her hand, and acted out a rehearsal of her cutting ability.

Felt was facing her with no weapons whatsoever, her chances of victory seemed non-existent.

He should raise his voice, his brain decided.

He should attract Elsa’s attention and buy Felt time to escape.

He at least had to give her time to call someone, or even just escape on her own.

Analyzing the difference in their ability with his minimal experience, this was the conclusion he had drawn.

Despite this, his throat produced no sound, as if it was frozen.

His will to fight did not reach his limbs, they merely continued to tremble with fear..

“…Sorry for getting you caught up in this.”

“…I, I’m”

She whispered a small apology to Subaru.

These words caused his face to jolt up toward her, and he completely forgot about his plan to shout and instead all that left his mouth were words that seemed to be begging for forgiveness.

And then, Felt left his sentiments behind forever as she dashed forward.

There was a loud sound as her body flew forward, seeming light as a feather.

The instant after she moved, it was as if a gale was blowing through the loot house.

It looked to Subaru like she had completely disappeared when she started running.

Having disappeared from his field of view, she then reappeared right next to Elsa, whose eyes were wide at this extreme speed as Felt's slender leg sunk into her side.

Having landed her attack, Felt stepped back as if leaping, and once again drew in wind as she moved at top speed.

In that limited space she was even treating the walls as solid ground, her movements were simply amazing and even Elsa couldn't help but be surprised.

"The divine protection of wind. Ah, how wonderful. It seems you're loved by the world,—I'm envious."

Elsa's ecstatic smile suddenly changed, her eyes filled with loathing as her arm whizzed through the air.

That was all it took,

"—Ah"

—For Felt to be cut right through from her shoulder while still in the air, she then helplessly fell and tumbled across the ground.

The wound extended from her left shoulder to the right of her chest, its depth was such that even her organs were cut right through her bones.

Her body had fallen facing upward and blood spurted out of her like a fountain in accordance with her pulse, it seemed like the pain and the shock of being sliced into had already caused her to lose consciousness. Her movements had completely stopped.

The blood pouring out of her lost its vigor within a few seconds, silently signaling that her life was at an end.

His body wouldn't move.

He wanted to go to Felt's side and stop her bleeding.

If one said it was already far too late for that, he at least wanted to close her eyes.

But his body refused to do even this, it had basically become a doll that could only circulate blood and pain.

"The old man and the girl have both fallen, and yet you still haven't moved. Maybe you've given up?"

Her voice was somewhat pitying, and she seemed bored as she looked at Subaru who was still stock still.

It would all be over if she just got a little closer and swung that knife. It was probably because she realized this that she was so casual, it even looked like she might have been stifling a yawn.

Her attitude caused an unbearable rage to surge within Subaru.

They were people he'd only just met, it had barely even been an hour.

But even so, he had conversed with them and they had opened up to each other. She had killed them like it was nothing and showed no remorse whatsoever, to Subaru this was unforgivable.

And most of all, he couldn't forgive himself for letting them die by this wretched woman's hand while he watched.

This belated rage was what finally caused his limbs to move.

He pressed his trembling limbs against the ground and somehow managed to get up in a rather animalistic fashion. Was his body shaking due to rage or fear? Maybe it was both?

"Ah, you've finally stood up. You're late, and rather dull, but not bad."

He faced Elsa who had her kukri knife at the ready and charged her with everything he had.

He would throw himself at her and beat her down with strength surpassing his limits.

But his charge,

"That's no good at all."

Was immediately stopped by Elsa's elbow which slammed right into his nose, seemingly crushing it.

She spun her body and struck him with her elbow with minimal movement, and as he recoiled she followed it up by drawing an arc right into his body with her long legs, easily sending him flying.

Subaru crashed into a shelf of ceramics and fell to the ground as the fragments scattered.

In that instantaneous exchange, his nose and front teeth had been ruined. And the side that took Elsa's kick was in extraordinary pain, he felt like he'd lost some ribs there.

Despite this, he slammed his fist into the ground and stood up immediately. The endorphins flowing throughout his body dulled the horrible pain which was at a level he'd never experienced before.

His breath wild in this excited state, he once more launched a suicidal attack without thinking—And he was countered yet again.

His wild swings did not reach her, she smoothly shattered his shoulder with the back of her blade.

And then, as if his shrieks were an annoyance to her, she landed a kick directly into his jaw, forcefully shutting him up and causing his broken front teeth to fall out. She looked down at his collapsed body.

"Simply pathetic. You're evidently a novice and your moments are unrefined. You possess neither divine protection nor skill, and you weren't even able to think up any sort of strategy. Why even bother trying?"

"Shut up… I've got my stubbornness too… After you've gone and done all this."

Subaru couldn't even properly yell at her because of his broken nose.

He had lost his arm to that counter just now, everything below his left shoulder had gone limp. He couldn't feel the pain, but the ringing in his ears was horrible. His nausea had returned, and it seemed to pour out of his mouth with his rage as he staggered around, barely standing up.

He was riddled with wounds. His chances of victory were zero, and it was exceptionally unlikely that he'd even be able to land a hit.

The sight of him standing up even though the situation was utterly hopeless caused Elsa to sigh,

"I'll admit you've got outstanding spirit. If you'd drawn it out earlier, perhaps things could have ended differently for these two."

Elsa used her knife to indicate the two she had cut down.

His eyes followed the movement of the knife's tip to land on the corpses, and a sudden discomfort caused Subaru to frown.

For some reason, this scene felt familiar to him.

The loot house that had been turned into a sea of blood. A giant who had lost an arm and had his throat torn apart. And within that dim room, the dull gleam of a brownish blade—

A thought suddenly shot through the back of his mind—

“Let’s end this. I’ll be sending you to the angels.”

Elsa licked her red lips and disappeared into the darkness with an alluring smile.

Subaru groaned as he lost sight of the threat, it seemed like she had simply vanished into the shadows.

“Wh-Where…?!”

Subaru restlessly looked around, his sensitivity to every little sound or sign greatly heightened.

His pathetic behavior truly seemed like that of a weakling waiting to be hunted by a predator. From Elsa’s perspective this was probably terribly boring, it was like he was just laid out on a cutting board.

Consequently, when she appeared from the shadows her slash was exceedingly straightforward.

“Wha—?!”

Having judged that she’d target his stomach, Subaru barely managed to dodge.

He stepped back a bit, drawing in his abdomen as he did, due to which the horizontal swing merely grazed him. The slight cut caused a sharp pain to run through him which he bore by clenching his teeth.

“Rrrruuuaaahhh!!”

He then spun his whole body, landing a spinning kick right into Elsa’s face.

A satisfying blow delivered by twisting his waist, the tremendous impact on his foot confirmed that he managed to land a hit, the feeling rushed through his heart. And then,

“Aah, I really felt that one.”

The second kukri knife Elsa had drawn had just torn about 70% of the way through Subaru’s torso, causing blood and guts to spill out,

“—Ah?”

One step, two steps, he staggered around until his shoulder hit the wall, causing him to collapse as if he’d slipped. Looking down, he could see copious amounts of blood pouring out of his abdomen, and unable to handle the pressure, his internal organs had also started falling out.

He tried to place them back in with his shaky arm, but the clotting blood prevented him from doing so.

“Are you surprised? I split your stomach when we passed by one another. This happens to be my specialty.”

Elsa said as she smiled, forming small splashes in the sea of blood as she walked toward him.

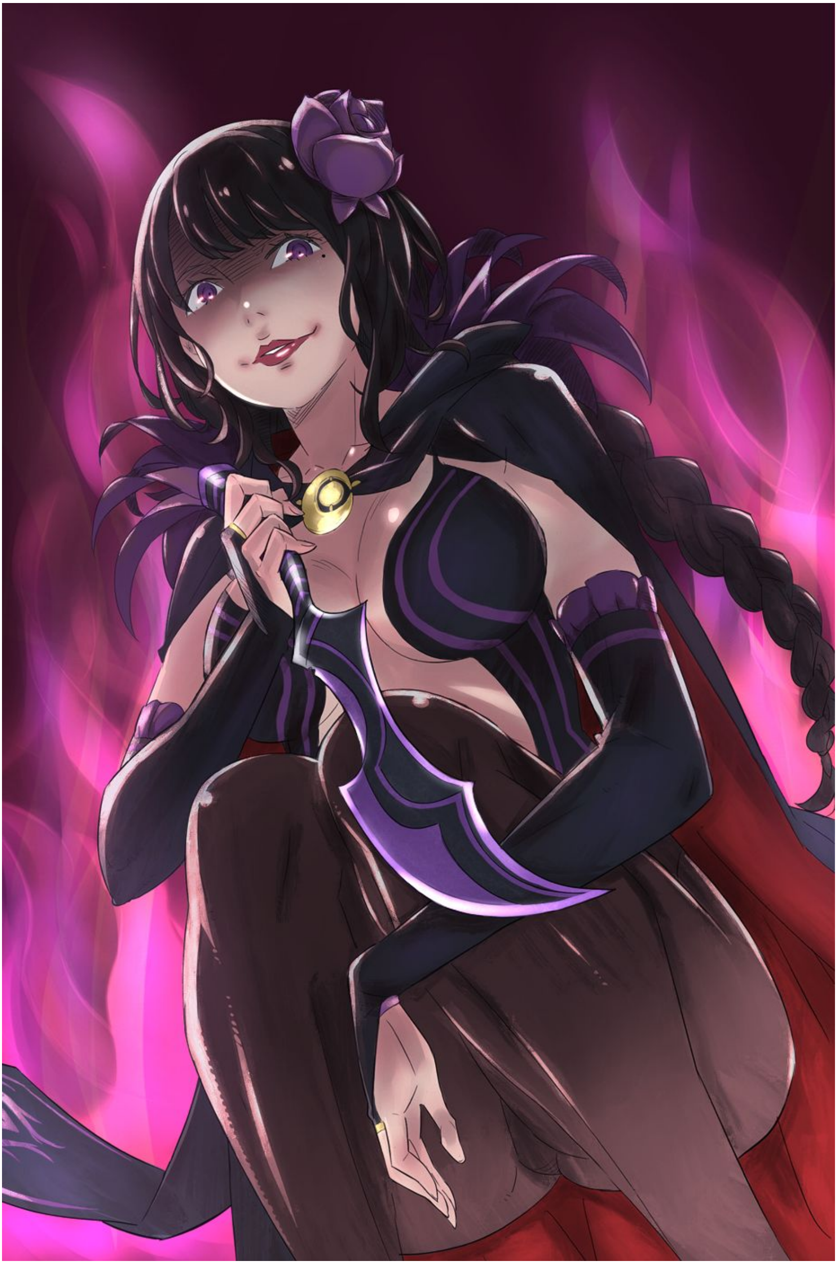

Once she reached Subaru's side, who was by this point incapable of even speaking as he shrieked, she lovingly looked upon his entrails within his darkened blood,

"Aah, your bowels truly do have such a lovely color, just as I thought."

This woman was abnormal. She was insane.

Even the endorphins flowing through him couldn't hide the terrible pain that was causing his vision to dim, and before he knew it seemed like he had ended up on his side.

Like this, he slowly extended his arm, frailly grasping Elsa's foot.

"Au… Uah"

"Does it hurt? Are you suffering? Is it hard? Are you sad? Wanna die?"

With his hand still on her ankle, Elsa crouched down by him, her line of sight intersecting with his.

Her eyes looked like she was in a trance, it was as though she didn't feel anything at all when she took a life. No, she was definitely feeling something.

The ultimate pleasure.

"But it'd be a shame to make it too easy."

Still crouching next to him, she smiled sweetly as she swung her blade.

And that was the last thing Subaru saw.

Her slash was vivid, and it cut right across Subaru's face. The result,

"—GGaaaaaahhh?!"

Both of his eyes had been torn apart, he had forever lost his sight.

Still collapsed on the ground, Subaru used his hands to feel his deeply cut eyes.

There was a mixture of blood and tears, and he once again vomited blood as he screamed, and he was assailed by the feeling that his insides were completely empty, as if all of his blood and organs had spilled out.

It was strange that he was even alive. It was like he had entered hell.

And he couldn't even look at himself, he simply lay there on the verge of death not knowing when death would finally come.

“Slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, writhe around.”

As he approached the end, he felt Elsa's voice gently strike his eardrums, it seemed tormenting, savoring, grieving, cherishing, and loving.

His pain, suffering, rage and despair were all overwhelmed by a jet black fear.

In that world he couldn't see, in that world where he didn't know when the candle of his life would burn out, what dominated his now empty heart was a single-minded fear, the extreme fear of death.

—When will I die? When will I die? Am I still alive? Am I not dead? What defines life? Can it really be said that I'm alive, in this state lesser than any insect? Can it really be said that I'm alive, now that I'm being toyed with in the palm of life and death?

—What are life and death? Why am I afraid of dying? Do I need to be alive? No?

I'mscaredI'mscaredI'mscaredI'mscaredI'mscaredI'mscaredI'mscaredI'mscare

His instincts rejected the inevitable death that was ceaselessly approaching.

It ended up filling Subaru's mind, he was already at the end and now his blank field of view was dyed white,

—Ah, I’m dead.

With this, Natsuki Subaru’s life reached its disappointing conclusion.

Chapter 12:
Reunion with the Witch

1

"—Quit spacing out, man. You want the appa or not?"

When Subaru's consciousness returned, there was a red, ripe fruit before him.

As he gazed at this very apple-like fruit, worthless thoughts such as 'they call it the fruit of wisdom, huh' passed his mind.

A forbidden fruit that resulted in expulsion from paradise if you ate it.

Maybe if he bit into it, he'd be able to escape this incomprehensible situation.

"Hey, you listening?"

The middle aged man knit his brows and once again called to Subaru who had no reaction.

Some distant corner of Subaru's consciousness perceived this which caused his face to jolt upward. He started looking around at his surroundings.

He was standing in front of a stall on a street bathed in early afternoon sunlight.

Within this shop there was a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. This certainly wasn't an unfamiliar sight to him, but there was a small difference.

Filling the crowded street, there were hair colors that were impossible in his old world, as well as races that were quite literally impossible walking around as if it were natural.

Watching all this hustle and bustle, Subaru scratched his head.

His left arm could now move, when it touched his abdomen he felt nothing unusual, and there was no sign whatsoever that his organs had poured out or that his eyes had been slashed.

“I have no idea what’s going on here…”

As he murmured this, his rising nausea and dizziness overwhelmed him, causing his knees to give out.

2

“It’s water. Can you drink?”

Accepting the cup offered to him, Subaru gingerly sipped at the water poured within it.

The water was ice cold and spread as if soaking into his parched mouth from the tip of his tongue, it even relieved his dreary mood to some extent.

“Aah, just what I needed. Thank you. —You really are a good guy, old man.”

“Quit it. It’d be no laughing matter if you suddenly collapsed in front of my store, it’d look like my products caused it. Rest in the shade until you’ve settled down,” the man replied without a hint of bashfulness and then went back into his stall.

Subaru was still sitting on the ground near the road as he watched the man leave. He then leaned against a shop’s wall as he sighed deeply.

The one who had helped him when he was overcome by dizziness and was about to collapse was the shopkeeper he was now well familiar with.

Despite his rough appearance, he immediately prepared a wet towel and some drinking water once he guessed that Subaru was suffering from heatstroke, and then brought him into this shade so he could rest.

You really couldn’t judge people by their looks. There were muscly bald old men who were like good natured grandpas, and sexy women who took pleasure in murder.

“I thought my stomach and eyes were destroyed…”

He whispered as he felt his eyelids, and once again confirmed that he could see properly.

Naturally there was no wound on his abdomen, and his left shoulder was in good health as well. It seemed his wounds had once again disappeared completely, and perhaps due to some obsession he was placed before the man’s stall yet again.

“But even so… That was… Really bad.”

He moved his hands from his eyelids and looked at them.

Even though his fingers weren’t touching anything, they trembled slightly. This traveled up his arms until it finally became a terrible chill throughout his entire body.

Merely thinking back to it caused his teeth to chatter as he curled up with his head between his knees, the pressing horror so intense it even drowned out the hustle and bustle around him as his body trembled.

It was repulsive, alien, overwhelming, absurd, and the very personification of despair.

He had never been exposed to such malice, he had never experienced such pain and violence, and he had never had his body destroyed to such an extent.

He and his acquaintances had lost their lives, the terror was so heartrending that all he could do was curl up.

He refused to even think of facing such an aberrant entity.

“Stop thinking about it, stop thinking about it, this is absurd. It’s hopeless, there’s nothing I can do. That was death. That couldn’t have been anything but death. That I’m even alive is unbelievable luck, isn’t it?”

Seeking agreement from no one in particular, Subaru desperately begged for forgiveness.

The scenes of Rom's grisly slaughter and Felt's final moments after she was cut down repeated in the back of his mind.

And after that came the horrifying memory of being sliced up, broken, opened up, and having his sight stolen.

He felt nausea and dark emotions surge up and he immediately splashed his remaining water on his head.

There wasn't a lot, but it was enough to cover his head in the cool sensation.

He wiped away the water dripping from his bangs and then repeatedly slapped his face to restore his emotional state.

"Alright, let's cheer up. It's simple. Just forget all about that place. There's a mountain of other things I have to do and think about. For instance, I'll have to think about how I should live in this world. I happened to get caught up in some trouble while I worried, and then…"

—I was saved, and wanted to return that favor, and then felt like I was going to die.

"Come on, I said not to think about that."

Even if he tried not to think about that, the silver-haired girl continued to shine within his memories.

To begin with, most of what had happened to him in this world was in some way related to her, so it was impossible for him to forget about her and focus on the world.

However, if he thought back to his time with her, he would ultimately end up at that painful and despair-inducing memory.

His thoughts were once again in a downward spiral.

His shaking wouldn't stop, and his negative thoughts kept going in circles as he completely lost sight of any hope.

What should he do and how should he do it to succeed, would it be fine if he just stood around and did nothing, right now he couldn't grasp even the slightest hint.

"Hey, how do you feel now? Any better?"

With his face peeking out of his stall, he asked this considerate question.

Despite his attempts to act tough, the concern he displayed showed that he was a good man at heart. It wouldn't do to just rely on his kindness like this, Subaru thought as he decided to leave the area for now.

"Ah, I think I've calmed down somewhat. Sorry to trouble you."

He tried not to look weak as he stood up, and then returned the empty cup. The shopkeeper seemed to want to say something as he took it, but he didn't press the matter further.

"I'll definitely pay you back someday."

"That's unnecessary. But if you ever make some money, come to buy some appas."

Subaru's face was meek as the shopkeeper lightly tapped his shoulder, after which he raised his hand and returned to his store.

Feeling good about the man's laid-back attitude, Subaru took a deep breath and stepped toward the road. The crowd continued to move just the same as when he was curling up, and the main street lined with stalls seemed as bright as ever.

"…The loot house."

He should probably go there, he thought vaguely.

He thought about it, but his legs did not move in its direction. Going there meant facing that terror.

If things went wrong and he encountered Elsa again, his life that he had somehow kept would essentially be wasted.

Having been summoned to another world, he would simply rot away without accomplishing anything.

“Ha. It’d be just the same if I run.”

He ridiculed himself as he smiled, and then put his hands in pockets and started walking.

In the opposite direction from the loot house. That was what he had decided.

He would throw it all away, give up completely, and turn a blind eye to the favor he had received.

After all, that was what he did before he came here. He never did anything he didn’t have to, no need to rock the boat. Stuff like give and take or whatever, human interaction in general was a pain to him, that was the sort of life he lived.

At this point, that couldn’t possibly—

“Eh…?”

When he raised his head and took his first step, an expression of bewilderment left his mouth.

Within his widened field of view, the crowd moving back and forth seemed to be avoiding him as he stood in the middle of the street.

There was a tall figure with reptilian skin, a beastman whose height only reached Subaru’s waist, a young pink-haired dancer, a knight with six swords,

—And a girl in a white robe, her silver hair fluttering as she walked.

The girl glanced at him and then as if to avoid touching him, she shifted to the side and passed by.

Her bundled up hair swayed, and a flower-like scent permeated the air and tickled his nostrils. Her strong-willed amethyst eyes had already disregarded him, they had a sharpness that only looked forward, toward the path she was supposed to walk.

Her dignified atmosphere hadn't changed and that shimmering beauty hadn't the slightest blemish, the girl he had been looking for was walking right before him.

"Wa—"

He couldn't immediately call out, the sound stopped in his throat as he ran after her.

The girl smoothly weaved her way through the crowd. His mental state was lost, confused and disordered as he chased her silver hair, and he called out in an almost tearful voice.

"Hey, wait… Wait up… Please wait…"

She looked at him for a moment, her eyes cold as though she was looking at a stranger.

They'd only interacted a few hours, to her he was just a passing acquaintance. Maybe he was even someone she despised, considering he couldn't even heed the simplest warning and put her in danger.

Even if she thought of him that way, Subaru continued to pursue her.

He didn't know how she felt about him. So at the very least, he wanted her to tell him that much.

If he was going to be hurt by whatever he imagined she thought of him, he'd much rather end up hurt by her real opinion.

"Please wait—Satella!"

Once he stopped her, what exactly did he want to say?

The instant the answer appeared within him, he shouted her name as if he just remembered it.

His shout tore through the noisy road and even reached the girl who was getting further and further away.

The silver-haired girl stopped immediately.

He pushed the crowd aside to reach her, and placed his hand on her slender shoulder.

“Please don’t ignore me. It was my bad for disappearing, really. But I don’t get what’s going on either. I even went back to the loot house to look for you, but I couldn’t find you…”

Satella seemed surprised as his hand lay on her shoulder.

When she turned around, all that left his mouth were excuses. He spoke rapidly, justifying himself as if afraid he’d be hurt.

Perhaps her gaze that seemed to see right through him was the cause.

However, even with this gaze on him, Subaru felt some relief in addition to his anxiety.

At a glance, there didn’t appear to be any serious wounds on her. Maybe she had also been healed by someone after the loot house incident. It was also possible that she’d healed herself, but what was important was,

“Sorry, I’ve just been blabbing about myself… But I’m glad you’re okay.”

The fact that they were able to meet again made him happier than anything.

Come to think of it, what worried him next was her partner—Puck’s safety. Subaru had far too many things he had to apologize to him for.

He couldn’t uphold a promise made man to man. That was a sin he ought to be condemned for.

"You…"

Once Subaru stopped talking, Satella started speaking as if to fill in the gap.

It had only been a few hours, and yet it felt like he hadn't heard that silver bell-like voice in forever.

He could see her standing before him, he could even reach out and touch her, he had finally caught her, such out-of-place emotions welled up within Subaru. However,

"What are you thinking—?"

As Subaru felt this sense of relief, Satella directed an angry look at him.

Her white cheeks flushed slightly, and she twisted her body a bit to shake his hand off. She took a step backward to put some space between them, and her eyes were filled with hostility as she looked at him.

Her unexpectedly harsh reaction caused Subaru to gulp and fall silent.

But thinking about it, it was obvious this would happen. To her, it must have been a wonder that he even dared to show his face.

He would accept any abuse she wished to rain upon him. This resolve of his—

"I don't know who you are, but to address someone by the name of the Witch of Envy, just what are you thinking?!"

Was smashed to pieces by this completely unexpected reaction.

3

Faced with these unexpected words, Subaru felt as if time itself had stopped.

The sound from the crowd had vanished. All that he heard were his heart's pounding, and the silver-haired girl's angry voice.

It was as if all other sounds were gone—no, they were gone.

"What…?"

He muttered as he awkwardly turned his head to look around and realized.

Every single person around them on this street filled with stalls and pedestrians was now focused on the two of them.

They were all shaken and had fallen silent, as though even the slightest movement was forbidden.

It was as if the conversation between the two of them had completely dominated the street.

"I'm asking you what you're thinking. Speak up."

However, Satella wouldn't allow any hesitation despite his bewilderment.

Her tone was harsh, but Subaru had no response since he didn't even know why she was angry.

They seemed to be on completely different wavelengths as to what the problem was.

"I'll ask this once more. —Why did you refer to me by the name of the Witch of Envy?"

"No, I mean, I was told…"

"I don't know who told you that, but that's in very poor taste. You're at fault too for going along with it. —The Witch of Envy, the symbol of all things taboo, merely mentioning her name is frowned upon, to think you'd actually call someone by that name."

Her anger clearly on display, Satella—The silver-haired girl plunged him into a sea of confusion.

The crowd gathered around them all nodded at her words. Which is to say they were proof that her words were correct, and this confused him even further.

He didn’t understand what she was saying.

He had just said her name.

And yet she took offense to this, and the people around them acknowledged that she was correct to do so.

He didn’t know what he was doing wrong, he was just being reprimanded for being wrong. He couldn’t reflect on his actions or change his behavior.

“—If that’s all, I’ll be on my way. I don’t have time for this.”

She said as Subaru hung his head, she then walked off gallantly, her silver hair fluttering. Subaru wanted to call out to her, but the name froze in his throat.

He'd be making the same mistake twice if he called her that again. But then, what should he call her?

This hesitation dulled Subaru's judgement.

Consequently, he simply watched what took place before him without doing anything.

"—!"

There was a small gasp atop the canopy of a nearby stall about a head taller than Subaru.

It leapt, its small body was gently pulled downward by gravity, and the instant it landed it rode the wind to accelerate.

That swift wind was wearing somewhat dirty clothes and had golden hair flowing behind it. She easily slipped through the crowd as if divinely inspired, and her quickly extended arm entered a white robe with a hawk embroidered on it.

It was only a moment of contact, but that was enough for the wind.

The wind made the robe flutter, and then took off as the girl turned.

"Don't tell me—!"

The silver-haired girl raised her voice in surprise and stuck her hand into her robe.

She didn't find what she was looking for, and her eyes widened as she looked toward the wind that was fading into the distance.

That wind held an insignia symbolizing a dragon in its hand, and watching it from behind Subaru instinctively yelled,

"Felt?!"

This caused the wind to waver as if perplexed. But its speed did not decline and it disappeared from the street into an alley in an instant.

That was some incredibly fast work. A chance meeting of an instant. He had only seen it momentarily, but that was most likely—

“It’s gone. Was this why you stopped me…? You’re in on it?!”

The girl groaned at Subaru who had just stood still, unable to react to the hectic situation.

She immediately pointed her palm his way, but as if rethinking this decision, she ran off toward the alley the wind had disappeared into.

“Hey, wait! It’s a misunderstanding! I’m not…”

Subaru ran into the alley as well, chasing after them so he could resolve this misunderstanding.

As he ran, his mind was filled with doubts toward many mysteries.

There was far too much information being unloaded onto him, and his flustered brain could not process it all. Even if this weren’t the case, he felt like he had died twice today and that really messed with him.

“Someone please be nice to me! Why the hell was I even summoned here?!”

The absurdity of the situation made him yell this as he stumbled through the dim alley.

He wasn’t sure his stamina would last, but he didn’t think he’d lose to those two over a short distance. He’d catch up to them right away, and clear up all these doubts.

That was what he was expecting as he ran, but,

“Damn… A wall?!”

Subaru spat as a dead end blocked his path.

The two he was chasing weren't there. If he recalled correctly, Felt was agile enough to easily scale walls. And Satella probably wouldn't have any trouble getting over a wall or two with her magic.

"I don't mind climbing, but… I don't think I could catch up that way."

Most importantly, if the gap between them widened Subaru couldn't just keep running.

Even though he had trained his physical strength inside his room, it would be impossible to do the same with aerobic exercise. His lack of stamina was his fatal flaw, and even here it caused him to give up the chase.

"If this is no good, how about the loot house? Satella and Felt are both alive, so… Rom must be too."

He decided that it would be ideal to go on ahead of them and link up with Rom as soon as possible.

For now he should get out of this dead end and head toward the slums. Thus, he turned around,

"…You're kidding."

Before him were some figures blocking his way out of the alley.

There were three of them, they were somewhat filthy, and they had a rough aura about them as if their violent nature had manifested on their faces.

By this point it was a pain to even bother describing the three standing in his way.

These bandits who made the back alleys their hunting grounds had encountered him for the third time that day.

Chapter 13: Ending and Beginning

1

“Just give up already! There’s a limit to incorrigibility!”

Subaru was tired of seeing these guys and kicked the ground in frustration.

This was their third encounter, and it was once again a three on one in an alley. Despite how fruitless their first and second attempts were, they still continued to hound him, he was truly surprised by this tenacity.

If the situation wasn’t as it was, he might have even applauded them.

“I don’t have time for you guys. I’ll face you when things settle down, so get out of my way.”

He was a little uneasy, but he had managed to beat them solo last time so he kept his composure.

If he intimidated them a bit, there would probably be an opening. That’s what he expected, but,

“Get out of his way, huh? What do you say we do?”

“I don’t like his attitude, not one bit. It doesn’t look like he understands who’s going to be giving the orders here.”

“You pathetically lost three on one, why the hell are you trying to act tough…? Even the sorest loser would show more shame.”

To be honest, Subaru couldn’t help but feel like a sore loser himself right now.

In other words, this place had turned into a gathering of beaten down losers.

“That’s way too negative! I thought I was a more optimistic character!”

“It’s no good, he’s completely messed up in the head. We decided to target him because of his weird getup, but maybe this is…”

The men started talking to one another, clearly annoyed by his loud monologue. The empty-handed one and the one with the nata seemed to be losing interest in Subaru, but the biggest threat, the one with the knife, still had a sharp gaze.

Those eyes seemed to have given up on his value as a wallet, but there was another dark desire cruelly wavering within them.

The man’s look caused Subaru to internally mutter, “This could be dangerous.”

Having faced them twice, Subaru concluded that the man with the knife was the most troublesome among them. In addition to his lethality, he was also the one with the quickest temper.

Forget fighting, it would be wise to avoid even getting close.

“Got it. I won’t resist. Just state your demands.”

Subaru said this as he raised his hands, emphasizing that he had no intention of fighting them.

He had completely dropped the confident attitude he had, and instead changed to one of compliance.

The reason being that he decided to prioritize getting out of here, and wanted to keep the man with the knife calm. He had decided that some losses couldn’t be helped, and it would be best to just get out of here for now.

—Well, there was also the unfortunate possibility that they were aiming for revenge and would beat him to a pulp.

If things looked to be moving in that direction, he’d run away with all he had before they had the chance to stab him. If he managed to make it to the main street, they probably wouldn’t be able to do anything conspicuous.

As Subaru vigilantly formed plans to ensure his safety within his mind, the men's attitudes toward him relaxed.

They spoke as if to ridicule his cowardliness for being willing to take their demands,

"C'mon, if you were that scared you should have just done that from the start."

"You bastard. You sure talk big for a scaredy cat."

"Isn't this great? You heard him say he wouldn't do anything, right? What a coward."

Their words annoyed him, but Subaru forced a smile and laughed them off. He found some satisfaction in naming them 'Ton, Chin, and Kan' in his mind.

[TN: Tonchinkan = Foolish, irrelevant]

"Well, just want demands do you intend to make of this idiot?"

"For now, set down everything you've got. Even those weird clothes and shoes. You can keep your underwear, we're not devils after all!"

They mercilessly mocked Subaru who had humbled himself before them.

So they have the concept of devils here too, huh, along with such irrelevant thoughts their words also instilled a strong sense of unease.

Everything he had, even his clothes and shoes, this demand was surely—

"You guys, you really have gone and hit your heads somewhere, haven't you?"

This was the exact same as what they had asked the first time he encountered them.

Perhaps they'd hit their heads, or maybe the poor bastards lacked the brainpower to even remember what they had said before, it could even be that they overused the same template so much they didn't even remember who they said it to.

They were irredeemable to the core, but their attitude toward Subaru who had once beaten them down was strange, considering this, there was one more possibility

"There was Felt too, looks like there's a lot of memory problems around here…"

"Quit flapping your gums. Don't wanna follow your orders? Or do you not have the brains to follow them?"

"You're the last guys who ought to be talking about brains…"

This last mutter stopped in his mouth, and Subaru showed that he was willing to do as they said.

As he wondered if he should at least try to keep his clothes, or maybe deal with them all in one go now that they'd gotten closer, he stuck his hand in his bag—

"Huh—?"

He frowned, this was his most unsettling experience yet in this world.

"Why…?"

He muttered as if groaning, as he slowly confirmed the contents of his plastic bag.

In it was his shoyu tonkotsu cup ramen, his wallet and phone that were too troublesome to keep in his pocket, and finally, a golden snack of a flavor he was extremely fond of.

Right, the gold-colored snack—The corn potage flavored snack.

It was the first thing he had eaten since he came to this world, and it also proved very useful to calm Rom's rage at the loot house, after which most of it was supposed to be used up.

—But right now, it was completely full and back in his bag.

“I thought we’d eaten this… There was definitely only a little bit left.”

They had consumed at least two thirds of its contents.

And yet it had returned to its original state. There was no sign the bag had even been opened. It was strange no matter how he thought about it.

The disappearance of his wounds could be explained. He had seen Satella’s magic. Therefore he could conclude that someone had healed them in the aftermath of both tragedies.

—But even if he supposed that such a high class healer existed, would it really be possible to restore something that no longer existed?

“Right, duplication magic…”

He remembered Rom mentioning something of the sort.

Duplication magic—Magic that made it possible to not only copy something’s appearance, but fully replicate it. If someone used that magic, even this…

“But then what about the bag’s opening. Don’t tell me healing magic can even restore glue or something…”

He didn’t think that was very realistic.

And considering this world seemed to have sacrificed technological development for magical development, it seemed doubtful that they would have the knowledge to reglue the bag.

His thoughts were completely blocked on all sides. But within those trapped thoughts, Subaru started to believe that this was not healing magic. But that was where it stopped, because the other possibility he had thought of was too absurd, his sense of reason rejected it, believing it to be impossible.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?”

“Ah?”

A sudden call from right next to him caused him to let out a dumbfounded noise.

One of the men—The barehanded third one, whom he called ‘Kan’ in his mind. Subaru frowned when he realized that the man had walked right up to him.

“Why are you approaching me like that? Let me tell you, I don’t need your help to get my clothes off.”

“As if anyone’s going to help you do that! You were the one who staggered over here!”

Only after he was yelled at did Subaru realize that he had gone from the inside of the alley all the way to the side of the road.

It seemed he had been moving unconsciously while engrossed in thought. But to the men, his thoughtless actions ended up looking like hostile conduct.

“If he won’t do as we say, what say we knock him around a little?”

“Or rather, this is a real pain in the ass already. Let’s just end it here.”

Subaru saw that the men were about to do something hasty, so he halted his deep thought for the moment.

What he needed right now was—

“Here, catch this!!”

“Wha?!”

He raised the plastic bag in his hand, and then tossed it deep into the alley.

It drew an arc as it flew into the darkness at high speed. Naturally, the men who were planning to loot it also followed it with their eyes.

Seeing an opening, Subaru energetically dashed past them.

Just as he'd concluded several times now, the most important thing was getting away from them safely. After that, he would have to go to the loot house and find the answers to the doubts that had welled up within him.

He himself felt that what he was thinking was foolish.

Some user of healing magic, who was incredibly proficient in both restoration magic and duplication magic, happened to come across the tragic scene at the loot house and out of the kindness of their heart, they healed everyone there completely free of charge, and then left Subaru alone at that one stall, after which they simply left without even introducing themselves.

Even this completely whimsical story was easier to accept.

"Well, that's pretty hard to accept too, though."

It was what made the most sense.

At least, compared to the baseless foolishness that had crossed the back of his mind.

With two contrary ideas conflicting within him, Subaru dashed out of the filthy alley.

If he made it out to the main street and ran around while making a lot of noise, even these guys most likely wouldn't pursue him. It was unfortunate to lose the contents of the bag, but he had snuck some things out right beforehand, so the only things left in it were the bag of snacks and some small change that was just dead weight —His losses weren't significant.

It was with this in mind that he ran, but suddenly his next step missed its mark by a wide margin, causing him to panic.

His body was unsteady and the leg he was supposed to have put out in front was stumbling. The strength then left his legs and he fell to his knees.

He put out his hands to stop his fall, and scolded himself for being such an idiot as to fall at a time like this. However,

“Huh, that’s weird…”

He tried to gather his strength to stand back up, but his arms were trembling. He was completely unable to raise his body. He had also dropped the things he was holding before this.

“That’s why we told you to just listen, fool.”

He heard a scornful voice from right behind him, and somehow turned his head toward it.

The man standing behind him was the second one, whom he had nicknamed ‘Chin’, an extremely humiliating name.

With that vulgar attitude, the man pointed at Subaru as the edges of his mouth curved up.

Following his pointing finger, Subaru realized why he had collapsed.

—There was a knife embedded in his lower back.

“Goah… Gga…”

The moment he realized this, a terribly sharp pain ran through him and blocked his throat.

This extremely pure and primal pain even robbed him of the ability to writhe in agony.

—I’ve been stabbed! Stabbedstabbedstabbedstabbedstabbedstabbedstabbed.

Unlike the other two, the knife-wielding Chin hadn’t been distracted by the bag. Meaning at that moment, he must have been more focused on hurting Subaru than stealing anything of value.

As expected, Chin was the most important one to deal with, more than Ton or Kan.

This was the result of neglecting to do so. In these few hours, he had already encountered many different types of horrible pain. But no matter how many times he experienced this, it would be absolutely impossible to get used to it.

“Hey, you seriously stabbed him?”

“I had no choice. What if he escaped into the street? It’d be a real pain for us.”

“Aaah, this is bad. You hit his guts so he’ll probably die… It’s even drenching his clothes.”

Is that all you think about when you stab someone, a complaint through the horrendous pain.

He couldn’t afford to think of anything else, he was in so much pain that it was hard to even stay conscious. And judging by what Ton said, his wound was such that he wouldn’t be getting back up.

He at least had to do something while he was still conscious.

Deciding this, he scraped together all the strength he had left, steadily gathering it as he prepared to shout.

Bringing it to his tongue, he tried to scream,

“Aalright, here’s a second one before you go and try anything!”

A second knife was mercilessly thrust right into middle of his back.

“—Ough”

The numbness that spread through him like an electric shock canceled out his shout.

He was already far beyond the point where he could bear the pain or attempt to do anything like scream. There was no longer anything he could do.

The damage to his back seemed to have reached his lungs.

Even as he repeated his hoarse, rough breaths, his lungs would not expand and breathing became more and more painful.

Oxygen deprivation was affecting him severely, he was becoming so weak it seemed he would soon lose the ability to even think.

He lost sensation in his limbs, and no longer knew whether he was facing down or upward.

Even though his eyes weren't slashed this time, he still couldn't see anything as his vision had gone black.

—What do you mean, 'this time'?

It was pitiful to cling to an idea he had already dismissed as absurd.

If he was going to cling to it, he might as well do so to the fullest.

—Don't think about your impending death. Before you die, analyze the world around you.

His eyes were dead. So were his limbs. All he had left were his nose and ears. That being the case, he would have to make full use of them. Any sort of lingering scent would be fine, he didn't mind hearing all sorts of abuse. The stink of the dirt in the alley. The rising metallic scent of blood. His nose just died. It was gone. His ears were at death's door as well, and were barely even functioning.

"—St take… Valuables…"

"—It! The guards… Co…!"

"…Un! This is bad! …If we get…!!"

He could only pick up these fragments of conversation. Picking them up was fine, but too much of his brain had died for him to understand what he had heard. Since it was dead he could only hear. He didn't know if he would remember what he heard. What exactly did he mean, remember? What did he want to do by remembering? What was want? What was what—

As if following the parts that died first, his other functions steadily disappeared, and at the very end, with the scraping sound of something being pulled from him, Natsuki Subaru lost his life for the third time.

2

When his consciousness returned, Subaru was in darkness.

Realizing it was a darkness of his own creation, he gently opened his eyes—And had them burned by the dazzling sunshine, causing him to groan as he used his hand to cover his eyes.

"So, how about the appa?"

A familiar voice asked a familiar question right before his eyes.

His ears were fine. The hustle and bustle of the street was as loud as usual, completely different from the dreadful silence he had experienced in that alley.

Despite the fact that if he considered the distance, he was only one turn away.

"I couldn't even make it past this street, pretty pathetic…"

The scarred stall owner overhead his words of self-derision, however he started to frown, seeming displeased that he wasn't getting a response.

Subaru knew from personal experience that though he looked intimidating, he was in truth a very kind man. Naturally, the shopkeeper probably had no memory of this.

As he thought such things, Subaru once again faced him,

"Say, how many times have you seen me?"

"How many times, you're a fresh face, man. I wouldn't forget such a conspicuous look."

"What's today's date?"

"It's the fourteenth day of the month of Tammuz."

"Thank you. —I see, the month of Tammuz, huh."

He had no idea what that was.

To begin with, he didn't even know how they recorded this world's calendar. —But it seemed they used days and months, and he could probably assume that they used a solar calendar.

It was likely common knowledge, but he hesitated to ask about it. Especially to someone like the owner of this stall, who was completely focused on selling his goods.

The shop owner was being very patient with him, but as expected he seemed to be thinking that he was wasting far too much time just to sell a single fruit.

Holding out that apple or whatever in his palm, he asked for the umpteenth time,

"So, the appa?"

He tried his best to hide his anger with a smile.

His white scar was twitching, and his forced smile looked more like an expression that would scare kids away.

In response, Subaru placed his hands on his hips and puffed his chest out,

"Sorry, but I'm totally, absolutely broke!"

"Get the hell out of here—!"

This angry shout caused him to recoil instinctively, after which he scurried away.

I can’t go back there for a while, he thought, two meanings in mind.

Chapter 14:
Fourth Time's the Charm

1

"There's my wallet. And my phone. The corn potage and ramen and stuff are good too. No damage to my jersey or sneakers either. And naturally…"

Pulling up his jersey, he turned his head with great effort to check the state of his back.

There was no scarring on his middle or lower back, nor were there two knives sticking out of him.

"Phew, thank goodness. A wound to the back is a warrior's greatest shame. As someone who once enrolled in the kendo club, even if I were to stray from the path of humanity, I would never stray from the path of the warrior."

He felt around his unharmed back as he grumbled. He spotted a long hair growing near his shoulder and after a great deal of struggle, finally managed to pull it out after which he exhaled.

"So basically, that's what this is. It's hard to believe, though…"

He blew the hair away with his breath and placed his now empty hand on his jaw as he surveyed the street.

He was still on the same street, by stall only a short distance away from the grocer.

The shady looking owner who had lined up various suspicious looking jars and plates looked at Subaru as though he were a nuisance, but this had no effect on Subaru who leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

The sun was high and the breeze was gentle. The street was crowded and a lizard drawn carriage would occasionally pass by.

Even Subaru was starting to get used to the dust they kicked up by this point, and his only reaction was to gently fan it away from his face.

All traces of injury had vanished from his body, and his already eaten corn potage snack was providing excellent value, since it could be eaten any number of times. And his jaw was completely smooth to the touch,

“Pretty pathetic for me of all people to forget about my special skill.”

He had the ability to estimate the passage of time fairly accurately based on the growth of his stubble.

Subaru had a level of self-confidence that bordered on admiration in his technique that made full use of a privilege only available to those with a consistent level of male hormones. He was certain,

—That his facial hair was no longer than it was after he shaved it before heading to the convenience store.

“So it’s like that.”

He pointed the hand that was touching his jaw forward, and with the gazes of many people including the shopkeeper on him, he snapped his fingers,

“—Looks like I return to my original state when I die.”

And came to the conclusion he had previously dismissed as absurd.

2

“Return by Death, huh… It’s like the ability itself is telling me to bite the dust.”

The original was more like a “Win and then repeat” type of ability, so considering Subaru’s pattern of losing and returning, he felt that his current situation fit the name better from a literary perspective.

“To put it more directly… Isn’t this something like time travel?”

It was limited, but this could be considered what one would call time travel. In short, Subaru had become a time traveler, something he could only dream of before.

To be honest, the possibility had been bouncing around his head until some ten-odd minutes ago, but he shied away from it due to the harsh activation condition.

He also felt that it was more likely that there was some wandering super healer who happened to encounter them.

And most of all, the main reason he thought it unlikely,

“Generally speaking, temporal magic is considered to be the highest class of magic so it’d be strange for me to have it right from the start. To begin with, even though one may dream of going back in time, it’d be impossible to actually do it. Or so common sense would suggest.”

Having said this, he cocked his head wondering what about a parallel world summoning adhered to any sort of common sense.

Thinking of it this way, his earlier feelings of obstinate rejection would also fade away.

“Moreover, if I actually am returning by death, all the strange stuff until now suddenly makes sense…”

His first death, to put it briefly, was when he went to the loot house with Satella.

He had his defenseless stomach torn open and unable to even shout out a warning, he ended up getting Satella wrapped up in this, an absolutely inexcusable development.

His second death was after Felt and Rom were murdered, Elsa had slaughtered him, his resistance completely futile. When he first returned by death, he assumed the discrepancy in time meant it was a different day, but in truth he had returned to the same point on the same day.

His third death had happened recently, he had experienced it some ten-odd minutes ago.

It truly was a pointless death, but he couldn't think of a more fitting one.

For him to actually end up getting killed by random small fry at the very start, it was like every single choice had a BAD END attached to it, and it kind of felt like a poorly designed adventure game.

"Wait, I've died three times in just half a day…?"

Considering human life was generally considered to be something you only got one of, dying three times in the span of half a day truly was nonsensical in every way.

Subaru had certainly lived a mediocre life these past seventeen years, but if one considered that he had avoided death 17 x 365 x 3 times thus far, it was rather moving.

"Or I'm just really bad at staying alive."

He was too used to the comfort of his old world, due to which he could not keep up with the rapid-fire instant death events this one kept throwing at him.

The fact that he kept getting lured into obviously dangerous situations was probably another reason.

"Thinking back to the causes of the first and second time… It was probably Elsa both times."

The first time, the one lurking around in the darkness of the loot house was probably Elsa.

The corpse of a giant old man, that had to be Rom. But it was hard to imagine that Rom would end up dying regardless of Subaru's verbal gaffe.

"Could Felt have been in there… I couldn't confirm that much, huh."

Naturally, Rom was most likely accompanying Felt for her negotiation.

That being the case, she was definitely linked to his death. If things were like the second time, it was very likely that Felt's greed caused negotiations to break down.

“She pointlessly provoked her and ended up getting killed for it, maybe.”

Considering her extremely competitive spirit, it was certainly possible.

And right as Elsa had silenced them, Subaru and Satella arrived with terrible timing. This was probably how the first time went.

“The second time was quite a bit simpler, wasn't it. I just happened to be one of the people being silenced.”

Thinking of it this way, perhaps Satella ended up arriving there after they got murdered.

He knew about her magical ability, but he doubted that that homicidal maniac would give her time to chant. Satella was probably at a disadvantage 8 or 9 times out of 10.

“Wait, I've been killed by the same person twice. Simply put, Elsa's basically a certain death encounter, final answer. Also…”

Is there even a need to take countermeasures, Subaru heard his now calm mind ask.

Right, why did he have to think about what would happen if he encountered Elsa?

Frankly speaking, the loot house was the only place he ran the risk of encountering her.

And the reason he wanted to go to the loot house was in order to obtain Satella's insignia, and the reason he wanted to do that was to repay her for saving him.

But since Return By Death had brought him back to right after he'd been summoned, this debt had quite literally disappeared with time.

Satella's cold reaction to him on his third time was proof of this.

She did not know him. Meaning he had no relation whatsoever to the Satella of that timeline, and his debt no longer existed.

Meaning he could forget all about this insignia business, and instead focus on avoiding those BAD END flags.

He didn't know why he was granted such an ability, but it was a very valuable skill that would allow him to learn of future developments. He would avoid any dangers he could avoid, that was the right thing to do.

He had obtained something that appeared to be time travel. It would be meaningless if he didn't use it this way.

"Fortunately, I now know that my cell phone is worth quite a bit. Even without relying on Rom, if I can find some shop I can trust and sell it off, I'll be able to create a war chest."

More than twenty holy gold coins, he didn't know how much that was, but he figured it would buy him decent lodgings for quite a while. And then he would sharpen his fangs there until the day he was ready to bite.

"Well, I still have no plan as to what exactly I'll be biting into."

He wasn't exceptionally knowledgeable on any particular subject, nor did he have anything he was passionate about. To maintain a broad, but shallow knowledge of many things, such was the stance of the modern generation, and Subaru was no different.

"Once I sell this cell phone, guess I'll have no choice but to get hired as an assistant at some shop or something while I've still got money…"

He was extremely uneasy about how he would earn a living since he had no job experience, but doing some black labor should at least be better than getting involved in bloodshed. At least he most likely wouldn't end up dying thrice in half a day.

"It's simple then. The sun will set if I don't get moving right away. Right, old man?"

"I thought you were muttering something for a while, but what's this all of a sudden. Even if you ask me, it's not like I'd know.."

The stall owner next to him responded with an annoyed expression as Subaru looked for agreement.

He had a turban on his head and was running a stall that sold jars and plates. Regardless of Subaru murmuring nearby, it didn't appear to be one that attracted customers.

"Wonder if I should sell my stuff like this… But I wonder if I'd actually make anything if I tried selling things like you, with those crappy jars and stuff. What do you think, old man?"

"Don't say that crap while looking at someone else's merchandise! What's with you?!"

"I'm a man who'll one day be famed for his wealth. You could even call me the cell phone nouveau… Say, doesn't that wrapping on your head itch? Why do you have it on? You balding or something?"

"I don't understand most of what you're saying, on top of which you're being extremely rude! Go away, I've got a business to run here!"

His attitude was cold as he spoke in a strangely feminine manner.

Guess people treat passing strangers the same in any world, huh, Subaru thought as he sighed on the inside.

"But then, there's also some people so kind they help others even when it puts them in a tough spot."

She had something precious stolen from her, and was in the middle of chasing the culprit.

She stopped to save some useless guy she didn't even know, wasted her time healing him, and then tried to leave without receiving anything in return.

And then this kind girl let the useless fellow accompany her for his own self-satisfaction, and ended up dying a horrible death for it.

"Thinking back to the third time, there's a whole lot I learned. Or rather, it'd be pathetic if I didn't learn, but I'm not that stupid."

"What are you saying now?"

"There's probably a pattern here. You could even call it fate. —No matter how many times it repeats, this will keep happening. For instance…"

Felt stole Satella's insignia all three times.

Rom had been killed in the loot house both the first and second time. Felt had probably died the first time too.

If so, what happened to Satella who most likely arrived at the loot house the second time as well?

She didn't have a burden holding her back, would she have been able to win against Elsa?

"I don't know. And I probably won't know. But there's things I do know."

If he just left things alone this fourth time, Felt and Rom would definitely be killed. And Satella would end up battling Elsa.

So what if those two died? One was a small-time villain who dealt in stolen goods, and the other was a brat who shamelessly tried to pawn off said stolen items at exorbitant prices.

They were both criminals, it would probably be a good thing if they died.

"Aah, I really am a child of the modern era. Even though I absolutely ridiculed these sorts of emotions from behind a computer.”

Mercy and compassion were just stupid, that was supposedly what he believed.

At least, he wasn’t just pretending as if he did. He thought of himself as a cold hearted person, and that all modern people were like that.

So no matter what situation he ended up in, he wouldn’t be particularly moved and wouldn’t react very strongly, or so he convinced himself. The death of a few people he knew was no exception to this.

“But still, I don’t want that. It feels horrible. Those two aren’t good people, far from it. —But when I know that familiar faces are about to die, I can’t just stand by and let it happen.”

But in the end, it seemed that was all just an act. A result of his experiences in the virtual world. When the weight of reality set in, his tenets easily crumbled away, that was how flimsy they were.

He wasn’t really that firm on these principles to begin with, though, so it was no loss to be rid of them.

“And of course, there’s Satella… Or rather, that girl. Can’t abandon her either.”

Calling that name, Subaru thought to himself that it was most likely an alias.

Thinking back to the first time, she was pretty reluctant to say that name. And then there was their exchange in the third world. It was painfully clear.

To sum up, it seemed she didn’t trust him enough. He hadn’t built up enough affection and failed the name acquisition event as a result.

“Alright then, I’ll do my best to actually learn her name this time.”

Subaru started warming up on the spot, and stretched his body to the limit.

“Cha—nCha—Chachachacha!”, As Subaru started his radio calisthenics routine, the shopkeeper was already beyond the point where he had anything to say.

Subaru performed routine two in front of the speechless man, and having worked up a good sweat, he turned around and suddenly raised his hands,

“There are times when a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. — Isn’t that right, old man?”

“Right, right, right, absolutely right, so get out of here.”

He’d planned to end it with a posed look, but the terrible reaction caused his face to twitch.

The shopkeeper drove him away with a perfunctory gesture, and Subaru ran off from the stall where he had spent such a long time deep in thought.

Pushing his way through the crowd for a while, he had probably run about 200 meters.

“Well then…”

Subaru stopped and brushed his bangs upward.

He looked here and there in a pointlessly exaggerated manner, and then smoothly placed his hand against a wall to lean on it, after which he closed his eyes and once again smoothed his hair. Then,

“Where should I go to find you, Not-Satella?”

He started his quest with words that didn’t bode well for his future prospects.

Chapter 15:
Because He is the Sword Saint

Thinking about it, his meetings with Not-Satella relied on a lot of random coincidence.

He did encounter her the first and third times, but the only connection was that both had occurred around this main street (He heard from the shopkeeper wearing the turban that it was commonly called the trading street).

It would have been great if he was at least obsessed with keeping time, but he hadn't done the stalkerish act of recording exactly when he met her.

In the end, it was quickest to think back to the third time's pattern, but,

"Back then, just how long did I spend sulking by that fruit shop?"

He sunk down to the ground overcome by dizziness and spent an unknown amount of time hugging his knees.

It felt like it was only a few minutes, but it also felt like it could have been an hour. Regardless of what the answer was, all Subaru could say was 'I don't know'.

"Should I just wander around this street looking for her…? And just hope my beauty radar works?"

Or maybe his silver-haired hottie sensor.

This ability was completely useless in his old world, but he'd be able to use it to great effect here.

He placed both hands in front of his face and straightened a finger on each, and went "MyonMyon" as a number of people looked at him strangely. He felt like he could sense something, and decided to follow whatever was beckoning to him for the moment.

His surroundings steadily changed into an atmosphere he was familiar with, filling him with thoughts such as “Woah, looks like my sensor’s working fine as ever?!”, and then he suddenly realized.

—Without realizing it, he ended up leaving the street and was now entering a narrow alley.

“Isn’t this where I first met her…?”

It looked very similar, but he was unsure.

It wasn’t that different from the path into the slums in terms of atmosphere, on top of which he had only been to the alley of their meeting in the first world, and had never revisited it since.

The second time was clearly in a different alley, and thinking back to the third time, that was yet another dead end. Even if Felt stealing Satella’s insignia was a fixed event, which alley she would run into after the fact seemed to vary depending on the situation.

Perhaps it was the same the first two times, but the third time things seemed to have changed slightly due to Subaru’s presence.

Having thought this far, Subaru suddenly realized just how shallow his thought process was.

Maybe he could find Felt or Satella now that he was in a familiar alley.

However, that also meant the possibility of a different reunion. In short,

“I’m so damn tired of seeing you, Ton, Chin, Kan!”

Subaru turned around fed up, and found the usual suspects blocking his path.

There was no difference in appearance, clothing, or countenance. Their goal and equipment were most likely the same as well, no progress whatsoever. It was only natural since he was back in the same spot.

"Even though I'm having such a hard time finding Not-Satella and Felt."

The reason he was unable to find them was probably because their actions depended on many factors independent of him.

By contrast, the reason he kept running into these guys was most likely because they were targeting him from the start.

That's why he kept encountering them despite taking a different path each time.

"Now that I've come up with a conjecture that doesn't make me happy in the slightest, what exactly do you guys want?"

"Just what the hell has this guy been muttering about?"

"He probably doesn't get what's going on here. How about we go ahead and teach him?"

Even this conversation between Ton and Chin followed the template exactly, which caused Subaru's mood to sink further. However, he also felt that he couldn't take them lightly just because he was tired of dealing with them.

The clear conditions for the Tonchinkan encounter weren't that demanding, but it wasn't like he had a 100% chance of breaking through. After all, they were the cause of his third death.

Maybe Not-Satella would save him like the first time, or maybe he could beat them on his own like the second time, but he had no guarantees.

Things went really well the second time, but this time wouldn't necessarily go down the same way. There was also a high chance that there was a big event waiting for him after this, and he didn't want to sustain any injuries.

"On the other hand, I wouldn't want to escape by handing over my stuff either, I could use those to negotiate."

The ideal would be to get out of here without sustaining any losses, like he did the second time.

And if he could avoid wasting time like the first time, that would be best of all.

Subaru crossed his arms and cocked his head, wondering if there was some way he could get away from them.

On the other side, perhaps thinking Subaru's attitude meant he was ignoring them despite their seemingly superior position, Tonchinkan's expressions were dyed in hostility

He at least had to make a decision before they drew their weapons.

As he lamented their lack of patience, Subaru figured he would have to go with a surprise attack after all—Suddenly, he remembered the moment of his third death.

As he lay there on the verge of death, all he could do was hear.

Back then, what was it that they were talking about? His dying brain could not comprehend it back then, but it should be possible now.

—Yeah, that's it.

"Guaaaaaards!!!"

Tonchinkan were caught off guard by his sudden call for help, causing them to jump.

The volume was such that it smashed the silence of the alley, and even tore through the hustle and bustle of the main street.

His absurd sensitivity was well known when he took kendo, and had long since stripped him of any shame when it came to screaming.

Something like screaming for help did not damage his pride even slightly.

"Someone—! I need a man—!!!"

"Bastard… Don't screw around! You're seriously yelling at a time like this?!"

"You're supposed to listen to us if you don't want to get hurt, that's how it's supposed to be! You can't just do this without even listening to our demands!"

"Shut up! Who gives a damn what normally happens?! Offbeat, off path, off course, wrong way, they're all on the right track! As if I wanna deal with you guys! I just wanna have some fun with gold and silver haired beauties!"

As Tonchinkan went into a frenzy and stomped their feet, Subaru angrily yelled at them.

Subaru was putting on a defiant act as he verbally attacked them, but although it wasn't showing, a sense of panic was rapidly building up within him. The plan to seek help was based on his very vague memories of his last moments in the third world.

The moment before his consciousness descended into darkness, someone among them had said something like "Guards" and "Run", his shoddy strategy relied on this tiny hint.

There was also the fact that when he beat these guys on his second time, it seemed the people on the street simply turned a blind eye even though they knew he was getting robbed.

"So it was a mistake after all…"

"Trying to scare us like that… I was just a little nervous."

"Just a little bit!"

"A really tiny bit!"

In unison, they denied how pathetic they were in a very pathetic fashion.

The men took a deep breath to calm down as if to regain control of the situation after Subaru's stunt, and then they each drew their weapons.

A knife, a rusty nata, and,

“Why are you the only one without a weapon? Didn’t have the money to buy one?”

“Shut up! I’m stronger without one! Underestimate me and I’ll beat you to death, you damned brat!”

“If only I had a recording of the second time, I’d love to show it to you.”

As he thought back to his flawless overhead throw, he started to bask in his own admiration. On the other hand, his situation was now so bad his mind continually warned of danger.

They had already drawn their weapons, greatly reducing his chances of success.

Forget escaping without any injuries or losses, he wasn’t even sure he could make it out of there in one piece.

“Let me go already… I’d rather avoid the pain.”

Having died three times, Subaru now understood that it wasn’t something you could get used to no matter how many times it happened.

Furthermore, all his deaths until now were horribly painful ones brought about by blades. That sharp pain was always fresh and electrifying, like his nerves were being scraped.

He’d really rather not go through that again, and most of all—

“I’ve been able to come back from death until now, but there’s no guarantee it’ll happen again…”

He couldn’t be sure that this ability didn’t have a limited number of uses.

There was no number engraved on his body or anything, but it was said that even Buddha would get annoyed if you touched his face three times. Assuming that that was the case here, he had already run out of continues. If he pathetically died a pointless death here, his life in another world would reach the BAD END.

"… In short, the best thing to do would be to run away, even if I get injured."

The most lethal of them was, naturally, the tried and true knife. That nata was terribly rusty, so it'd probably be no different from a normal hit if he blocked it with his plastic bag. The empty handed thug was no problem.

As he watched Tonchinkan approach, he immediately made up his mind.

Subaru was completely focused on Chin, and started counting down in his head as he looked for an opening.

—Three, two, ah, hold on just one moment, three, two…

"—That's enough."

That voice suddenly and clearly tore through the tension in the alley.

Its dignified tone hadn't the slightest hint of hesitation or mercy. All those who listened to it were struck by its overwhelming presence, and were naturally inclined to obey it.

Subaru raised his head, and Tonchinkan turned around—There was a young man standing there.

What first drew their eyes was his red hair that was like a blazing inferno.

Right below were shining blue eyes that could only be described as daring.

His extraordinary good looks only further amplified his awe-inspiring presence, and a single glance was all it took to tell that he was someone of great importance.

He was tall, slender, and well-proportioned, and he wore well tailored black clothing. At his waist knight's sword that despite its simple appearance, gave off an abnormally intimidating atmosphere.

"Regardless of the circumstances, I will not permit any further violence against him. You've gone far enough."

As he said this, he calmly walked past Tonchinkan and stood between them and Subaru,

Both Subaru and the men were left speechless by this excessively majestic act.

But it seemed they had different reasons for their silence.

Subaru had fallen silent from surprise, and because he was anxiously waiting to see how this never before seen development would progress, but Tonchinkan were different, their faces were going pale.

"N-No way…"

Chin pointed at the man, his lips turning purple as they trembled,

"Blazing red hair and eyes blue as the sky… And that sword's sheath with a dragon's craw engraved in it."

He pointed to each location as if to make sure, and then gulped,

"Reinhard… The Sword Saint Reinhard?!"

"Seems I won't need to introduce myself… That title is a bit much for me, though."

The young man called Reinhard muttered in a self-deprecating manner, but the glint in his eyes did not waver.

With his gaze piercing them, the men stepped back as though they were overwhelmed. They looked at each other as if to decide when to run, but,

"I'll leave it at that if you flee. You'd better head out onto the street.

But if you wish to use force, I shall be your opponent.”

He placed his hand on the handle of his sword, and jerked his chin toward Subaru who was stood behind him.

“It would be three on two in that case. In terms of numbers, you would have the advantage. I do not know to what extent my meager strength can aid him, but as a knight I shall face you.”

“Yo-You’re kidding! There’s no way!”

Reinhard’s declaration caused them to panic, they ran off into the street having forgotten to even conceal their weapons.

They were so panicked they couldn’t even make any parting threats like they did the first time. That in itself showed just how extraordinary the man before him was.

“I’m glad we’re both safe. Are you unhurt?”

After he watched the men leave, the young man turned around with a smile.

Suddenly, the air of intimidation covering the alley disappeared. Realizing that even that was something the young man had consciously manifested, Subaru couldn’t help but fall silent. Most of all.

“To be this cool after doing all that… This is beyond the level of Ikemen.”

His face, voice, demeanor and actions, they were all scoring extremely high on the Ikemen index. If he also had a personality and pedigree to match, he had to be doing something evil behind the scenes or the world’s balance would be thrown off.

Anyhow, setting aside his heart overflowing with envy, it was a fact that he had been saved. Subaru dropped to his knees and prostrated himself on the spot.

“I am ever so thankful to you for saving my life, please allow me to express my gratitude. I, Natsuki Subaru, admire your gallant spirit…”

“Relax, you don’t have to go that far. They felt that they had lost their advantage when it became three on two. It would have been different if I were alone.”

“No, judging by how terrified they were, forgot three on one, they’d back down even if it was ten on one… What’s with this guy. Is he truly an Ikemen to the core, both body and soul? You’re raising my route’s flags!”

It’d be a real tearjerker, so a handkerchief would be indispensable.

As he spoke random drivel, Subaru once again took a good look at Reinhard.

The more he looked at him, the more it seemed like his handsome features were sculpted by God himself, but his outfit didn’t really give the impression that he was a guard. Beyond the quality of the materials, his clothing didn’t seem very different from those of the general public milling about the street.

“Um, Reinhard-san… Can I call you that?”

“You don’t need to be so formal, Subaru.”

“You sure closed the distance smoothly… Uh, thank you once again, Reinhard. You were the only one who responded to my screams, how terribly lonely.”

Considering how many people there were, there was no way he was the only one who heard. Reinhard lowered his eyes slightly as Subaru lamented the lack of human kindness,

“I don’t really want to say this, but it can’t be helped. For most people, it would be very risky to antagonize such fellows. In that respect, your decision to call for the guards was the correct one.”

“From the way you’re talking, you’re a guard? You don’t really look like one.”

“I hear that often. Well, today’s my day off so I’m not in uniform, that's probably one of the reasons."

As Reinhard spread his arms with a strained smile, Subaru retorted internally.

The main reason he didn't seem like a guard was because he seemed like the furthest thing from the somewhat unrefined image the term suggested To add on…

"I believe they called you something like 'Sword Saint'…"

"My family is somewhat special, you see. Every day feels like the weight of their expectations could crush me."

He shrugged his shoulders in a lighthearted manner, it looked like he had a sense of humor as well.

There was already no doubt whatsoever that he was an Ikemen in both body and soul. Subaru couldn't hide his wonder toward this man whose very existence was Ikemen, but Reinhard stared at him intently,

"You've got unusual hair and clothing, and that goes for your name too… Where are you from? For what purpose have you come to the capital of Lugunica?"

"It's a bit hard to answer that first one. The typical setting of a small country to the east got some backlash so… H-How about further east, then—"

Subaru thought it seemed like a pretty safe answer. But Reinhard's reaction was stronger than expected.

"East of Lugunica… Surely you don't mean beyond the Grand Cascade, some kind of joke perhaps?"

"Grand Cascade?"

Subaru cocked his head at this unfamiliar term.

He figured it was something like a waterfall, but he was completely clueless when it came to the geography around here. To begin with, he didn’t even know how large the capital was. As far as Subaru knew, this Lugunica place only consisted of a trading street, some alleys, and the slum.

Essentially the same level as his old world, that only consisted of his home, his room, and the convenience store.

“Thinking of it that way, I’m basically being a shut-in even in another world, this has already become an inherent part of me… I really am something.”

“It doesn’t seem like you’re trying to trick me, so let’s leave it at that. Anyway, it does look like you’re not from around here. You must have had a reason for coming here, right? Lugunica is currently in a bit of a complex situation. I can aid you if you wish.”

“No, no, it’s your day off, right? You don’t have to throw it away just to help me out, you’ve already done more than enough… But while we’re at it, there is something I’d like to ask you.”

He shook his head at Reinhard’s proposal, and then raised his finger as if he just remembered something. Reinhard casually nodded, giving him the go ahead.

“I’m not well versed in the happenings of the world so I’m not sure if I’ll be able to answer, though.”

“Well, what I’m asking about relates to a person I’m searching for, so that’s fine. So, have you seen a silver-haired girl in a white robe around here?”

Having surveyed the main street several times, he could tell that Not-Satella’s clothes stood out. Her silver hair was rare much like Subaru’s black hair, and of course there was her robe with the hawk embroidered on it.

Thinking back, that white robe seemed expensive in its own way. Considering she had an insignia with a jewel embedded in it, he guessed her lineage must have been a prestigious one.

“A white robe and silver hair…”

“In addition, she’s super gorgeous. And there’s this cat… Well, it’s not like she goes around showing it off. That’s all I can tell you about her, ring any bells?”

There would be no doubt it was her if the cat spirit was a match as well, but since it was usually hidden in her hair most of the time that was probably too much to ask for.

Mentioning her beauty, he ended up thinking she and Reinhard who was very handsome himself would look perfect standing next to each other. This arbitrary thought caused a strange envy to well up within him.

“…What are you planning to do when you find her?”

“I’m going to find something she lost, or rather, would it be something she’s looking for? Anyway, I’ll find it and give it to her.”

Of course Subaru didn’t actually have it on him right now, and it was even possible that it hadn’t even been stolen yet.

Reinhard narrowed his eyes at Subaru’s response, and contemplated for a moment.

“No, sorry. I don’t really know. I could help you with your search if you wish, though.”

“I can’t impose on you like that. It’s alright, I’ll find it one way or another.”

Subaru raised his hands when Reinhard offered his aid, and then decided that he would wander around the main street for now. If things went well, he might catch sight of her on the street like he did the third time.

If possible, it’d be good to stop Felt on the stop and prevent the theft entirely.

Thinking about what could happen after, he felt that that would be the best way, and became all the more impatient.

“The problem is how to stop her with that agility of hers…

Repeated sideways jumps like this to block the road, a zone defense?”

“What unusual movements. For what purpose?”

“It’s a defensive action to pressure the opponent and snatch away the ball. Despite how it looks, it’s a well-established defense. Later, you end up participating in a position where you have no effect whatsoever on the ball, it’s that kind of ability.”

Subaru was someone who, when he participated in dodgeball, would simply stand right by the line in such a way that you didn’t know whether he was infield or outfield. It wasn’t uncommon for him to go entire games without once touching the ball.

“Anyway, I’d better head to the trading street first.”

“Are you leaving?”

“Yeah, I’m going. You really helped me out. I’ll definitely repay you someday… Can I meet you at the guard station or something?”

“I believe so, you just have to mention my name. Otherwise, on days off I’m usually wandering about the capital.”

“I wouldn’t really want to wander around town looking for a man… This isn’t an Otome game.”

He replied with a joke and suddenly raised his hand, to which Reinhard responded, “Be careful”, cool to the very end.

As if those words were giving him a push forward, Subaru successfully left the alley having sustained no injuries or losses.

—Never realizing that blue eyes were on him, appraising him.

Chapter 16:
Negotiation in the Slums

1

Having returned to the trading street, Subaru immediately started trying his hardest to locate Not-Satella.

Although, all he could really do was stare into the crowd with eyes as wide as dinner plates. In the third world, he wasn't very far from the fruit shop when he encountered her, so he decided to position himself around there for now. Subaru could see the shopkeeper's face in the corner of his vision and his expression seemed rather stern.

"Our meeting didn't go that well this time… But I know that you're actually a great guy deep down! I know it!"

Subaru directed a smile and a thumbs up at him, and the shopkeeper immediately averted his eyes with an expression that looked like he'd seen something unpleasant.

Subaru felt somewhat lonely as he withdrew his thumb, and once again directed his gaze toward the street.

The street was swarmed with all sorts of people as usual.

Diverse inhabitants of a fantasy world, and among them Subaru saw what one could perhaps call a beastman, a bipedal dog-like being that had incredibly fluffy fur which caused him to freak out. He wanted to feel it, really badly.

"What's with that loveliness… They've already won at birth, just like Reinhard or Not-Satella, it's sinful."

Their gait was tottering due to their short stature, giving them the charm of a small animal.

"Kh… Calm down, my right arm… This isn't the time to feel them up, have you forgotten why we're here?!"

He somehow gained control of his arm that was going to reach for that white fur, and after he regretfully watched them walk away, he returned his gaze to its original position.

However, it had already been almost ten minutes since he started watching the road, and he didn't find anyone that looked like her. Confirming the time on his phone, he found that it had almost been an hour since his reset.

"My sense of time feels off, but going off my memories it'd be weird if the theft hasn't happened by now…"

As he said this, an unpleasant premonition suddenly flashed through his mind.

Once he felt the chill of doubt, there was no escaping it. Subaru scratched his head and let out various 'Aahs' and 'Oohs', and having no other choice, he walked toward the stall before him.

"Hey, old man."

"What, broke kid."

Standing before him was the owner of the fruit shop, clearly annoyed that Subaru dared to show his face again as he responded.

True or not, that was a pretty harsh way of saying it Subaru thought as he forced a smile, and without being discouraged,

"It's true that I'm broke so I won't deny it, but… There's something I wanna ask you, old man. Has there been a pickpocketing incident around here?"

"You've got some nerve asking questions without even buying anything… Also, too bad, but that sort of thing is really nothing unusual."

"Seriously?!"

Subaru couldn't help but raise his voice in surprise at this mean-spirited response. But it wasn't as if he didn't understand. To begin with, the loot house was a place where stolen items from all over the capital were gathered. There was enough theft going on to fill that giant storehouse, which gave an idea as to the level of public order around here.

"Does this mean I'm out of luck…?"

"—But, I do remember the commotion just now since it was unusual. There were two or three blasts of magic, you see. Have a look."

He leaned out of his stall and pointed to the left, at a stall about four spaces away. Subaru's line of sight followed and,

"Woah, incredible."

"Those icicles pierced that wall like arrows and left that damage. They disappeared immediately, though."

Right next to the stall was the entrance to a narrow alley, and one of its walls had holes bored into it.

There were four of them, and each one was around the size of a 500-yen coin. Since they were able to piece a stone wall, the thought of their speed and power at the moment of impact sent a chill down his spine.

"This isn't like those ice rocks she fired before… I wonder if she's angrier this time."

If he approached her carelessly, he might end up getting blasted with them himself. The thought of this caused a cold sweat to form on his forehead.

"But this means I was too late this time too."

Setting aside his frightening imaginations, he wiped the sweat off his forehead as he muttered this.

Not-Satella was most likely the one who left these marks behind. If it was a theft involving her, it was probably alright to assume that

Felt had snatched the insignia from her.

That being the case, it meant that he had lost the means to link up with Not-Satella.

At least, there was no surefire way to meet her as far as Subaru knew.

In other words, what he ought to prioritize was,

“Meeting up with Felt who has the insignia, huh. I’d like to get to her before she reaches the loot house, and trade my phone for the insignia on the spot if possible.”

He truly did not want to approach the loot house, considering he had been slaughtered there twice.

Strictly speaking, what he actually wanted to avoid was getting involved with Elsa there.

“It’ll just be a repeat of the first time if I’m too late. Having said that, reaching Rom first and waiting for Felt would be no different from the second time.”

So the crucial point was Felt’s location.

At the moment, she was probably desperately running around in order to shake Not-Satella off. Of course it wasn’t like she could run forever so he figured it should be possible to catch her somewhere, but such a thing would prove extremely difficult for Subaru who was even less familiar with the capital than the average person.

“Should I rely on Return By Death and just use this attempt for investigation…?”

It certainly seemed like an effective strategy, but Subaru shook his head and rejected it right away.

First, having experienced death three times, he didn’t think he could make the decision to throw his life away in order to retry. All three deaths were quite literally so painful he could die. If he could settle things without tasting death, then he’d rather only ever experience it at the very end, on his deathbed.

In addition, he was also concerned about the fact that he didn’t know exactly how Return By Death worked. Throwing his life away only to find out he had zero left wouldn’t even be funny as a joke.

“In the end, I guess I’ll just have to struggle all I can while I’ve still got life. That much is obvious, though.”

He twisted his waist, grinding his joints, and started bending and stretching to warm up.

The shopkeeper seemed annoyed by the fact that he was doing radio calisthenics in front of his stall. Having warmed up, Subaru raised his hand toward him as he jogged away.

“Alright, thanks a lot, old man. I’ll be leaving now. I’ll definitely buy some appas next time.”

“Yeah, you’d be more than welcome as a customer. Work hard, broke kid.”

“For sure. —I really am praying I have some money the next time I show up here.”

The shopkeeper apathetically saw him off as he broke into a run.

He was headed toward the slums—But not in the direction of the loot house. He had already decided that he’d be raising BAD END flags if he went there. That being the case, it was time to try a new angle of attack.

2

“Where Felt lives, huh? Head two streets down that way, it’s ahead of there.”

“Thanks a lot, you’re a lifesaver, brother.”

“It’s no problem, brother. —What was it, live strong?”

The middle aged man said with a weak smile as he disappeared into the creaking door.

Thinking back to how the man's strained smile was filled with sympathy from beginning to end, Subaru pumped his fist at his strategy's success.

He was covered in mud and dirt, his appearance was such that even slum dwellers found it pitiful.

"It was a strategy I devised from my experiences in those first two times, but… That sure was effective, huh."

As he said this, Subaru wiped off his sleeves which had become crusty now that the mud on them had dried.

Having arrived here, he devised an ingenious plan to pinpoint Felt's destination, which was to play the part of an extremely downtrodden person.

When he was wandering around the slums with Not-Satella in the first world, he had just recently been beaten into the ground by Tonchinkan, and the inhabitants' reception was correspondingly sympathetic and cooperative.

Completely different from the second time, when their reaction was cold and curt since he had no real damage to speak of. Thinking back to that, he ended up going a little overboard with his appearance this time.

"Well, I did end up stepping in some unknown animal's dung and stuff."

Thank goodness he barely managed to avoid falling in it, he thought as he trembled.

Since it only got on his shoes, his honor was probably still intact.

Unfortunately, even as he thought this there wasn't the slightest hint of honor or anything of the sort left in his filthy appearance.

"I've got four reports right now… Three of them match."

Sympathizing with him, four people gave him information. Right now, three of the comments about Felt's location matched. Unless they were all conspiring to screw him over, it was probably okay to assume the information was accurate.

The one differing report came from an old woman who was hard of hearing, so she definitely wasn't trying to deceive him. Maybe.

"I think I've found out where she sleeps, but… Now the problem becomes whether or not she'll come here."

He did find out where she normally stayed, but since she was currently in the midst of escaping it was fifty-fifty whether or not she would run here. If she was worried her pursuer would destroy her place, perhaps she would think it better to avoid it. —If that happened, he could only say he had no luck.

"It's not like worrying about it will do anything. I'm not going to worry about things I can't answer, alright."

Even when he was at a loss, he wouldn't waste time on things that couldn't be helped. His decisiveness shined here too.

Subaru jogged deeper into the slums as he knocked the hardened dirt off his clothes. When he first came here, he couldn't even do anything besides hide behind Not-Satella let alone independently gather information, he had developed quite a bit. Made him want to reward himself.

"A reward for my hard work… Am I going to open my corn potage again?"

As he fished around in his bag, he approached a road. He then almost collided with someone who suddenly emerged from there.

He moved out of the way in a panic, but his back ended up colliding with that narrow road, knocking the wind out of him. Watching him, the person he was about to walk into spoke in a gentle manner,

"Oh, do excuse me. Are you alright?"

“I’m good, I’m good. Despite how I look I’m actuallyyyy!”

Subaru raised his face to play it off, but was unable to end his sentence when he saw who he was talking to. Hearing his high-pitched voice, the black-haired woman giggled slightly.

“You’re a fun kid, aren’t you. Are you really alright?”

She brushed up the hair covering her ear. Even this gesture was somehow sexy, and Subaru thought to himself that her each and every action was as erotic as usual.

A sexy beauty who behaved in an erotic manner—Someone he absolutely did not want to meet.

“—You don’t have to be so afraid, I’m not going to do anything to you.”

“Af-Afraid? It’s not like I’m afraid of anything? What proof do you have to claim that I’m nervous? I’m seriously freaking out, though—, but you can’t talk down to me like that—, I’m really nervous, though—”

“Your scent…”

Ignoring his attempt to act tough, her eyes narrowed into a sweet smile.

Subaru cocked his head at this, and in response she used her well-shaped nose to sniff.

“When someone is afraid, it shows in their scent. Right now, you’re scared… And you’re angry too. At me.”

She seemed to be having a good time exposing his inner feelings as she looked up to him.

Subaru went silent, only responding with a forced smile as he took deep breaths to calm his rapidly beating heart.

Her words were true.

Subaru was afraid of her. The woman before him was the most terrifying person he knew in this world.

She was also the one he hated most in this world.

He truly wanted to beat her down if it was possible for him to do so, and before that he had an unbearable urge to run away immediately.

He had died by her hand twice now. She inspired fear from the bottom of his heart, and who could laugh at him for it?

Elsa narrowed her eyes like a snake in response to his silence. But even as he felt her gaze pinning him down, he would not allow himself to show weakness by averting his eyes.

She licked her lips at his bravado,

"…I am somewhat interested, but it's fine. It wouldn't do to cause a fuss right now."

"Th-That's not a very nice thing to say. Act too scary and that beauty will go to waste, you know?"

"Ah, very nice. —Hide your hostility and it'd be even better."

She reached out and lightly tapped his forehead with her finger, and this simple gesture released the tension from his body.

Subaru exhaled, his shoulders heaving, and Elsa placed her finger against her lip,

"Well then, I'll be taking my leave. I get the feeling we'll see each other again."

"If it's a bright place with lots of people around, I'll be able to relax too."

It took everything he had to get those sarcastic words out.

Elsa flipped her cloak with a longing smile as she disappeared into the alley's darkness. After he watched her quite literally disappear, Subaru felt exhaustion rush through him as he leaned against the wall.

“That… That was an unexpected encounter, seriously. To think she was prowling around here before going to the loot house…”

This unexpected encounter almost tore his heart apart.

In terms of mental preparation, this was far more of a shock than Not-Satella. He wanted to pray that this would be his last encounter with her if possible.

“Felt’s place should be around here, I believe… But surely it’s not possible that Elsa already destroyed it…?”

She was a pervert who drowned in pleasure when she sliced people’s bellies open.

It wouldn’t be strange if she carved up a few people to kill time before the appointment. Furthermore, now that he was heading deeper into the slums, he couldn’t help but imagine all sorts of horrors.

“I-It’s okay, probably. There isn’t the stench of blood, nor do I see any, maybe.”

The garbage and the rotten smell made it impossible to discern the smell of blood, and it was too dark for him to confirm if there were any bloodstains around, but there definitely wasn’t any blood. That’s what he wanted to think.

He didn’t have the courage to run right now, so he slowly continued onward with stealthy steps.

Even the hum of an insect or the sight of a not yet empty bottle of alcohol would cause him to freak out as he searched.

About five minutes after his encounter with Elsa, he finally reached a rundown shack.

“This should be it according to my information… But does a human really live here?”

Subaru tilted his head as he stood in front of a wooden board that seemed to be the door.

The shack before him was around the size of two of those porta potties one would see around construction sites and the like. It felt like someone was actually putting the saying, ‘half a tatami mat to stand, one tatami mat to sleep’ into practice.

“This is definitely what you call a place to sleep, so I guess that’s about right.”

Even so, the idea of such a small girl living in a place like this caused him to feel some pity. He felt like he could forgive her, that her ambition and greed couldn’t be helped.

“She’s curling up her already small body and living in a place like this. Guess it couldn’t be helped that her personality would turn out so warped. Aah, it just couldn’t be helped, poor thing. Aah, how pitiful.”

“You’re going way too far, it’s disgusting. I can’t believe you’re looking around someone else’s bedroom like that.”

As he was entering his sympathetic mode, a voice from behind him caused him to turn around.

Before his eyes was a small blonde girl glaring at him with disgust —Felt.

She didn’t look particularly different from their previous meetings. That her slightly dirty clothes were now dirtier than usual was probably a sign that the chase was much more intense this time.

“What’s with that increasingly pitying expression? You looking down on me just ‘cause I’m a girl and a little bit filthy?”

“It’s a different sentiment, but… Most of all, I’m glad we could meet.”

She made no attempt to hide her displeasure, and Subaru instinctively dropped his shoulders in relief.

He was truly happy that he was able to find the girl he was looking for. He was worried about what might have happened after his near miss with Elsa, but looked like things were alright after all.

In response to his murmur, she snorted, “What, a customer?”

She stared at him, still cautious,

“Since you came all the way here, I assume you have some business with me? … Judging by your look, you’re not from around here.”

“Oh. To see that I’m not one of you, you’ve got good eyes.”

“Even the guys around here are a little more careful about their appearance. That level of filth is just unnatural. In truth, you’re even dirtier than us right now.”

As usual, she always had a comeback—Made him want to retract his earlier sympathy.

Felt ignored his inner feelings even as his veins popped, and stepped back, “Well?”

“What do you want? If you want something stolen, I’ll need payment in advance. Depending on the target, I might ask for more after the fact.”

“Commissioned thefts… This sure is a greedy business you’re running. Are you proud of your sticky fingers?”

“It’s how I stay alive. If it weren’t for this, I’d have to sell my body. So, what’ll it be? Or do you perhaps have some other business? Depending on what it is…”

Felt rapidly moved her fingers to show off her dexterity.

Suddenly, a small knife appeared in her hand as if by magic. Probably a warning that depending on why he was here, she would use it to defend herself.

Speaking practically, if he ended up fighting her now he would have no chance of winning. She would just disappear from his sight with that speed of hers, and before he knew it he would complete the ‘Stabbed to death in a back alley: BAD END 2’ route.

“What I want is just one thing. —I want to purchase the insignia you stole right here and right now.”

Chapter 17:
Negotiation in the Loot House

1

Having reached this point, Subaru decided that beating around the bush would only worsen her impression of him.

There was also the fact that Elsa was prowling around the area, so he wanted to finish this up as soon as possible. However, this caused Felt to become even more cautious.

She placed her hand on her chest, presumably where she was keeping the insignia.

“How do you know that I stole an insignia? I don’t imagine the one who requested it would have leaked it, and I only just stole it. It certainly isn’t the sort of thing you’d just happen to hear.”

“Now that you mention it, that was far too impatient. I’m so damned careless!”

“…You can’t possibly negotiate with anyone if you show your hand that easily. You crumbled way too easily to a bit of pressure.”

As Subaru stressed over his thoughtless blunder, the hostility left Felt’s face.

Subaru crouched down with his head in his knees and Felt knelt down to meet his gaze as she spoke, “Well?”

“So you want to purchase this insignia, what’s that about? You’re not with the woman who made the request, right? A business rival or something?”

“I guess you could call her a business rival, but there’s probably a mountain of things that doesn’t cover?”

“I don’t get it. Well, I don’t really care about that anyway.”

As Subaru agonized over how to talk himself out of this one, Felt seemed indifferent as she laughed it off. She then extracted the draconic insignia from her bosom.

In her hand was the insignia, the jewel within it glowing red. She dangled it before him as if to flaunt it,

“I’ll just sell it to whoever can offer me the highest price. That woman will probably be mad if I scrap her request, though.”

“It’s even possible she’ll go crazy, but—Never mind, I’m just talking to myself.”

Setting aside these words that would only complicate things, Subaru once again cleared his throat and donned a serious expression,

“So, you’re going to allow me to negotiate for it?”

“I’ll hear anyone out so long as they can bring me some profit. Ain’t it obvious?”

“Talk about a strong will… I’m going to be offering an item worth more than twenty holy gold coins. I would like to use it to purchase your insignia.”

“Hmm, I see. You’re offering quite a bit, huh. That’d certainly reward my efforts… But your rival’s offering that much too, you know?”

“Yeah, right. The deal was ten holy gold coins. Too much greed is going to kill you, you know? Seriously.”

Practically speaking, he did think that that was probably why the first massacre happened. Cause of death: Greed.

Since he even knew the exact number, she must have thought that her tricks wouldn’t work. After her eyes widened slightly, she scratched her head in resignation,

“What, you even know that much? … That’s right, it was ten holy gold coins. Even so, once she learns she’s got a rival, she’s bound to offer more, isn’t that right?”

“That much is true, you know?” The edges of the perhaps fourteen or fifteen year old girl’s lips curled upward.

She sure is sly, as Subaru felt a certain degree of admiration toward her boldness he was also excited at the prospect of negotiating from a superior position like this.

“I don’t suppose you’d listen if I asked to make the deal right here and now?”

“Obviously. I mean, the stuff you said earlier is pretty suspect too. I definitely didn’t mishear you, and what you said was not that you have twenty holy gold coins, but rather something worth that much. It’s unfair for only one side to know what cards are being played in a negotiation, right?”

“I think what really matters in a negotiation is how much you can prepare beforehand, but… I suppose it’s also true that you can’t make a decision without knowing what I’ve got.”

He didn’t want to waste time with her grumbling.

Making a decision, he pulled this negotiation’s key item, his cell phone, out of his breast pocket.

The sight of this small contraption caused Felt to raise her eyebrow slightly, but that was it. As usual, she didn’t really care unless there was a clear connection to money.

“That’s supposed to be worth twenty holy gold coins? Doesn’t look any different from a hand mirror or something to me.”

“This is one of those ‘Meteor’ things that are all the rage these days. It can freeze a moment in time. Alright, now check this out—NATSUKI FLASH times eight!!”

Subaru turned on continuous shooting mode, causing mechanical sounds and flashes of light to emanate in rapid succession.

White light filled the alley, and as the light covered her, Felt reacted to the sounds and flashes with a rather unfeminine shriek.

Subaru was happy to have gotten a better reaction than last time, and quickly thrust the screen before her when it looked like she wanted to complain. Her red eyes widened in surprise.

“This is the power of this meteor. It can produce exquisite pictures in this manner. And if you’ll let me add some PR speak, it’s the only one of its kind in this world. So, how about it?”

As Subaru looked down at her with pride, Felt hummed in response. She examined the phone in his hand closely, and once she’d looked it over, she nodded in understanding.

“…Doesn’t look like you’re lying. But is this supposed to be me? You said it produced a clear picture of the world, but I think I’m prettier than this.”

“I get the feeling that you’ve got a fine base, but when the presentation is this bad there’s really nothing to be said… If we cleaned you up and put you in some nice clothes, you’d be like a totally different person, for sure.”

“That condescending attitude and the way you ended that sentence piss me off… Kinda makes me want to never show you that.”

He had needlessly provoked her, but Felt’s attitude seemed favorable..

But then, that these slum dwellers didn’t easily go along with others’ plans was one of their strengths.

Felt smiled sadistically at his proud expression,

“I’ll admit you’ve got something unusual there, but it’s still unclear how much it’s worth, you know? Let me warn you, I’m not so much of an airhead as to just accept everything the other party says, I’m not going to believe this thing is an easy twenty holy gold coins just like that.”

“…Well, that’s obvious. I wouldn’t really mind if your brain were a sponge, but I suppose we do need a third party’s opinion.”

It would have been nice to keep things going and settle it right here, but he did expect that it might not work. The problem now was who to use as a third party,

“Deep in the slums, there’s a place called the loot house. The place is as the name would suggest, I think it would be quickest to ask the weird old man in there. He appraises things fairly, you know? He’s got some experience, so he should be able to judge a meteor as well.”

“It comes to this after all…”

He also expected that she would end up suggesting this.

From her perspective the loot house was the place she was supposed to meet Elsa, and also a place that had a bodyguard she could rely on in case things got violent.

When you also added the appraisal of the meteor, there was no other choice. Despite this, Subaru really did wish to settle this before they reached the loot house.

“I’m fine with having the old man take a look, but…”

“You’re suddenly calling him an old man even though you’ve never even met him, you might end up regretting that, you know? He’s actually pretty scary if you’re rude to him.”

“Although he does seem to dote on a certain foul-mouthed girl, giving her milk and stuff…”

This was clearly irrelevant, but Subaru did feel like it was as if he was doting on his granddaughter.

Regardless, the problem wasn’t the person, but the location.

“Can you not call him out here or something? You can use my phone if you want.”

“Even if you ask me, I’ve no clue what I’m supposed to do.”

“That’s true, isn’t it. —I’ve only got family and stuff in here, anyway.”

And to pad his lonely contacts list, he also had the police station, fire department, ambulance, time announcement service, weather report etc. It was like a prideful loneliness.

“I don’t know what your issue is, but if you’re in a hurry let’s head there right away. There was a little something I wanted to do, though.”

“Something you wanted to do?”

“Ah, the owner was a lot more persistent than expected, it was a real pain to get away so I wanted to sabotage her. Give ‘em a little money and the guys around here will happily do it.”

“Alright, let’s go, right now, immediately, in a flash!”

As Felt started walking, Subaru started pushing her shoulders from behind and hurried her toward the loot house.

“What the hell?” She pouted as Subaru hurried her, congratulating himself for minimizing unnecessary damage.

To try to hinder Not-Satella while she was chasing after her insignia, there was a limit to how far you could go for a little money. If it meant being blasted by ice and writhing in pain, it was probably better to just stay home clutching their empty stomachs.

“But we’ll have him look quickly and then seal the deal on the spot.”

“Man, why are you in such a hurry? You’re getting pretty sweaty, live strong.”

“Looks like everyone around here says that, is it a slogan or something?!”

Subaru thought it ought to be revised to ‘live stubborn’.

Leaving such impressions behind, he headed to the loot house for the third time, in this fourth world.

—He’d get out immediately. He’d dash out of there. He’d leave even if he had to leave them behind.

Having come to this decision internally, Subaru was fire up and pushed hard at the shoulders before him.

“That hurts.”

“That hurts!”

He was kicked.

2

“To the rats,”

“Where do they sell boric acid balls? Poison.”

“To the skeletons,”

“Digging is a lot harder than you’d expect, huh. Pitfall.”

“To the noble dragon we are,”

“It probably really exists since this is a fantasy world, but if I were to actually face it I definitely wouldn’t be able to do anything. But it certainly fascinates me, so I do want to meet it. I can’t deceive this wavering heart of mine, however I can’t say I dislike it. A real shitbag of a feeling.”

“Can’t you just say the password without adding all that crap?! You’re too damned annoying!”

The door opened from within with such force that it was like it had been kicked open, but Subaru had anticipated this and quickly leaped backward to avoid taking damage.

There was a giant standing there, too tall for the door and growling in frustration—It was the bald old man Rom whom Subaru was already familiar with. His face was red, it seemed like his blood pressure had spiked.

“You’ll have an aneurysm if too much blood flows into your head.

That’s pretty dangerous even with modern medicine.”

“If you know it’s bad for me, don’t anger me! What’s with you?! I have to keep the place cleared out today, so you can’t enter! You can’t! Serves you right!”

Rom stamped his feet in a very immature fashion. But, what wiped the smirk off his face was,

“Aah, sorry. This guy’s one of my guests too. Let him in, old man.”

Felt who was hiding behind Subaru.

She looked at Rom with sympathy as his shoulders dropped in disappointment. She then cast a sidelong glance at Subaru whose expression was apathetic as he whistled,

“You’ve got a pretty horrible personality, huh. You’re the worst, and that’s putting it lightly.”

“I just somehow end up wanting to tease people. The type that shines when they get to mess around, huh… I thought I’d discovered my M tendencies, but it turns out I was an S as well…? Isn’t this the perfect offense and defense?!”

“I don’t know and it looks like it’d be best not to know so I’m not listening. We’re coming in, Rom.”

Felt slipped by Rom who was hanging his head and entered the loot house as if it were completely natural.

Rom’s gaze seeking an explanation was ignored, so he turned his confused face toward Subaru instead. Subaru nodded at his wrinkled face,

“This is why self-centered people are troublesome. Average fellows like us just get left behind, huh?”

“I’d like to start over from when I was teaching her what words meant… Get in quickly.”

Rom seemed to have given up on everything as he carelessly shrank his giant frame and went back in. Following him, Subaru entered as well, welcomed by the dusty interior.

Still cautious, he snuck a glance inward, but fortunately it didn't look like Elsa or Not-Satella were lying in wait.

Felt casually sat at the counter, drinking some milk like she owned the place. She noticed his gaze,

"What? This is the only cold one, I'm not giving it to you."

"Your shamelessness doesn't bother you at all, huh. I'll take some booze, old man."

"You're just as shameless as she is! I'm not giving you any! None at all!"

The floor creaked under Rom's giant body as he ran to the other side of the counter to hide a box that seemed to contain his drinks. His turmoil almost inspired pity, and Subaru chuckled in response, "That was a joke."

"I see, so that's where the alcohol is. Now that I know where it is, it's practically mine already…"

"You're saying that out loud! To try to loot booze from the owner of the loot house, you wanna be lower than the lowest?!"

"Woah… You'll make me blush. And it's not like I'll do the stealing myself. I'll be hiring Felt."

"Sorry, old man. I can't turn down a job."

"Will no one take my side?! Isn't this my house?!"

By this point he was actually worried about Rom's blood pressure, so he decided to stop teasing him.

Felt seemed disappointed since she was just getting into it, but Subaru brushed her off with an ingratiating smile and turned to the counter

He didn't want to sit on these seats any longer than he had to, so he got the point right away.

"Alright, old man. We got sidetracked, but let's get to the point."

"Feels to me like that was mostly your fault, but… What do you want?"

"What I want to request is an appraisal, basically. I'd like you to put a price on this meteor I've brought and guarantee its value to Felt."

Rom's gray eyes became serious when the conversation turned to business.

He looked at Felt to confirm this, and returned his gaze to Subaru after she nodded.

His eyes suggested he wanted to see the item, and Subaru took it out of his pocket.

What first caught his eye was its metallic appearance. It looked like a toy in his oversized hands as he gently handled it.

"This is a meteor, huh. Even I've never seen one before."

"There's probably only one of this thing in the world. Also, it's pretty delicate so handle it carefully. If it breaks, I'll seriously have to die."

Meaning a retry.

As he felt around its exterior, he gently opened the flip phone. Its startup sound was what first surprised him, and the wallpaper was the next surprise.

"This picture is…"

"I thought it was perfect timing, you see. To show you how effective this thing is, I decided to use a scene from Felt's day as the wallpaper."

The phone's wallpaper had been set to one of the pictures of Felt he had just recently taken.

He picked the one he thought looked the cutest, and the image quality was decent as well so he thought it was pretty nice to look at.

Rom compared the picture with the real Felt who was sipping milk right next to him.

“What a surprise. I don’t think there’s anything out there that could produce such an excellent picture.”

“It’s a meteor that seals away a moment in time, you see. A human couldn’t draw anything even close to this, right? I could even photograph you if you’d like.”

“I’m interested, but it’s also somewhat frightening. It doesn’t shorten your life or anything, right?”

“Regardless of the age and regardless of the world, looking at a picture brings to mind that kind of superstition, huh…”

Rom’s reaction felt like it came from before the Taisho period. Next to him, Felt’s ears pricked up when they started talking about lifespan. Subaru reassured them by responding, “You’ll live to eighty just fine even if you get photographed”, and then used the camera function to photograph Rom.

Rom hummed as he looked at the picture.

Doing this before his very eyes was probably sufficient as a demonstration of the phone’s abilities. To begin with, he already knew from personal experience that Rom’s impression of the phone would be favorable.

“This is definitely something amazing. If I were selling this, I’d take at least fifteen… No, twenty holy gold coins. That’s how much it’s worth.”

Perhaps his smuggler spirit had been stimulated, his eyes were sparkling.

He dealt in stolen goods, Subaru wondered if such an occupation was really one to be proud of, but he was still relieved to receive Rom's seal of approval.

Subaru turned to Felt, his nostrils flaring as his face filled with pride.

"Well, that's what I'm offering you. Just as I said, an item worth more than twenty holy gold coins. I'd like to trade this for your insignia."

"Seems you make that face often, it's annoying."

Perhaps unhappy that things went as he expected, Felt's expression was one of displeasure. But still, that didn't change the fact that this meant she had a windfall coming her way.

Her gaze moved toward the cell phone in Rom's hand,

"Well, I'm definitely happy now that I have a guarantee that this thing can make me some money. It looks like I don't need to doubt your claim of twenty holy gold coins either. Alright, I accept the card you're playing."

"Right?! Okay, negotiations went off without a hitch. Selling it is up to you, do your best! Anyway, I'm in a hurry, so I'll be taking my leave now…"

He approached Felt in a hurry and extended his hand, seeking the insignia.

However, his palm was gently pushed away.

When Subaru raised his eyebrow, Felt brought her face close to his,

"Hold on a moment. Why are you in such a hurry?"

"It's not like I'm in a hurry or anything? A-Also, your face is too close."

"What, you're the sort that gets shy when a girl gets close to you?"

“Nah, you probably haven’t bathed in several days so there’s this terrible stench.”

She walloped his jaw from directly below.

The pain of biting his tongue brought tears to Subaru’s eyes as he recoiled.

“You sure don’t go easy on the girls, huh?!”

“And you, can’t you take a little joke?! I’m already shedding blood here!”

The cut in his mouth was fairly deep, and the metallic taste brought back some unpleasant feelings.

Felt’s face turned red, and she covered her face with her shoulder-length hair.

“Do I really smell that much…”

“I just said that to hide my embarrassment, is what I’d like to tell you but I can’t lie to myself.”

He turned his face away, still teary-eyed, and collapsed on the spot, his teary form looking rather effeminate. The triviality of this act sent Felt beyond the point of anger, and she simply took deep breaths with her fingers on her forehead.

“Alright. Hold on a moment. Let’s get back to what we were talking about. Calm down, cool off.”

“What we were talking about, huh. Yeah, that’s right. For now, I think it’d be best to start cleaning up around your bed. There’s quite a bit of garbage around there, so even when you sleep the stink…”

“How about we forget about my stench and get back to the other thing?!”

“…You… Sure kick, quickly…”

She kicked forward in embarrassment, and scored a clean hit on

Subaru's jaw due to the position he was crouching in. He didn't bite his tongue this time, but he hadn't even stopped bleeding yet, and the second impact caused even more blood to pour out.

"Drinking too much blood makes me feel absolutely horrible…"

"If you've learned your lesson, take our conversation more seriously. Well, getting back to our return to the topic at hand, I'll ask you again, why are you in such a hurry?"

She extinguished the anger from her expression, and looked as cold as she could as she asked this.

Rom read the mood and remained silent, so he couldn't look to him for help. Subaru shrugged his shoulders in resignation,

"Life doesn't last forever. Every second is precious, I don't want to waste any…"

"Aah, right, right. That's enough of that. Hey…"

Subaru attempted to cover things up, but Felt stopped him in his tracks.

Her red eyes narrowed, and with a detached attitude she finally pierced the heart of the matter.

"To begin with, why do you even want this insignia?"

Chapter 18:
Battle in the Loot House

1

They saw Subaru's breath catch, and he realized what a mistake he had made.

This was where he needed to brush things off with a casual joke like he had been doing, but instead his complete lack of communication ability had him displaying his weakness for all to see.

In a negotiation, there was nothing that could make you lose your advantage quite like having your weakness exposed.

As a result, the edges of Felt's mouth relaxed in response to Subaru's silence.

"The woman who hired me didn't want to say anything either, and it looks like it's the same for you, huh?"

"…Thievery is pretty immoral in itself, so naturally anyone involved in it would have some shady business going on."

"But you're the shadiest one here. Thinking about it clearly, what you're trying to do is to snatch away a stolen item requested by someone else."

With the cruelty of a cat toying with its prey, Felt incessantly attacked Subaru's incompetence.

She then coldly addressed him with a sadistic smile,

"What is this insignia anyway? The truth is it's worth way more than it looks. That's why you all want it, right? In other words, it's worth more than a meteor."

"Wait, Felt. That way of thinking is really dangerous. I can pretty much guess at what you're going to say next thanks to my gamer brain, but… You'd better leave it at that."

Subaru saw her miser gauge start to fill up, and tried to keep her in check even as he broke into a cold sweat. At this rate, she'd just keep on raising her price.

If that happened, the negotiation would drag on and they'd walk right into the BAD END waiting for them.

"It's more than twenty holy gold coins, just take the deal! Don't try for more than that! El… The one who hired you can't go over twenty either! You're not going to get more!"

"And why do you know that?"

"Ah…"

"You're slipping up. —So you know her."

How easy it would be if he could just declare that he knew because of Return By Death.

But even if he actually tried explaining it, there's no way she'd believe him.

The suspicion in her eyes was getting deeper, she probably wouldn't believe a word he said at this point.

If it was going to turn out like this, he'd be better off just snatching the insignia from her, but,

"This muscly old man's going to be a problem if I try that…"

"She got you good, kid. Pretty pathetic to be outwitted by a girl younger than you."

"It's probably because of how you raised her. Her stubbornness could make me cry."

If he resorted to violence, he'd just get flattened by Rom.

Even supposing he were able to snatch it away from her, he didn't think he could outrun her.

If it came to a long distance race, Subaru's ability was pretty low even among his classmates.

No matter how much he placed in the top three elsewhere, he could only ever manage consolation prizes in long distance runs which meant he would generally never get an A.

"Felt, please…"

"Begging won't do you any good. I acknowledge your right to negotiate, but it's hardly fair to end things without even hearing the other party out, right? But it'd be a different matter if you could tell me what this thing is really worth and produce adequate compensation."

Her pressing eyes didn't contain the slightest hint of mercy or compassion.

Her eyes were completely focused on him, hoping to deduce the truth from his behavior. However, it wouldn't be possible to ascertain the insignia's value no matter how much she started at him

But the reason he wanted the insignia was different from Elsa's, he just wanted to repay a favor.

Beyond that he only knew what it looked like, that it had a jewel embedded in it, he didn't know anything Felt didn't.

Thus, it would not be possible for him to give her the response she desired.

"The reason I want that insignia… Is so I can return it to its owner."

"—Hah?"

That's why, with all of his sincerity, he revealed the truth

"I want to return it to its owner. That's why I want it. That's all."

As her eyes widened, Subaru raised his head and repeated his declaration.

Her crimson eyes were filled with hostility as she glared at him, but even so Subaru could only remain silent.

He didn’t have the leeway to crack jokes, he sincerely got on his knees and lowered his head.

“…Felt. It doesn’t look like the kid’s lying.”

“Don’t be fooled, old man. He’s clearly screwing around. Return it to its owner? As if he’d pay such a large sum to get it back from the person who stole it, that’s absurd. It’d be over if he just brought a guard with him to apprehend me.”

He couldn’t do that.

Not-Satella didn’t want guards involved in this.

That’s why he even refused Reinhard’s offer to help.

If it was something inconvenient for her, then Subaru wouldn’t do it.

That was all he could do, his sincere response to her for saving his life.

“You need to come up with something better if you want to trick me. I won’t fall for it no matter how serious you act. Otherwise I… Right. I won’t fall for it.”

“Felt…”

Felt’s voice was hoarse, as if she was trying to get something off her mind.

Rom seemed concerned, perhaps his pained expression was because he understood what she was feeling.

Either way, all Subaru knew was that her obstinate attitude meant she wasn’t going to change her mind.

In other words, this negotiation had ended in failure.

"—Who's there?"

At that moment, Rom's expression changed as he glared at the entrance to the loot house.

Subaru, still on his knees with his head lowered, was currently in shock from the breakdown in negotiations.

Because of this, his mind's response was just a little too late.

There were several sharp knocks, and Rom silently turned around.

His gaze was directed at Felt, who nodded. She pointed to herself,

"It might be my client. —Seems kinda early, though."

She headed toward the door as she said this, she reached for the door with her anger still evident in her expression.

As Subaru watched her from behind, he suddenly felt a terrible sense of unease well up within him.

Loot house, knock, Felt's client—There was only one answer that fit.

"—Don't open it! We'll be killed!!"

This was earlier than expected. The bit of light pouring in from the window was still fairly bright, that orange shade was too brilliant for the sun to have set.

In both the first and second worlds, the despair came after the sun went down.

It wasn't as if he was taking things lightly because he thought he had time.

But even so, this was still too soon.

—He still hadn't managed to change anything about this world.

His scream filled with grim determination was futile, he was unable to stop Felt from opening the door.

With the door open, the loot house's dim interior was faintly illuminated by the evening glow.

And then,

"—Kill you? I wouldn't do something that drastic without warning."

A silver-haired girl entered the loot house with a sour look on her face.

2

"Thank goodness you're here… You're not getting away this time."

Felt wordlessly backed away at the sight of the silver-haired girl—Not-Satella.

She had a mortified expression as she retreated, and her lips warped in annoyance.

"You really are a stubborn woman."

"You're quite impertinent for a thief. I won't hurt you if you hand it over quietly."

While Felt seemed to be grinding her teeth, Not-Satella's voice was extremely cold.

Subaru felt the temperature of the room drop rapidly, and couldn't help but shiver at the changing atmosphere.

—Why is Not-Satella here?!

The sun was just now setting, from what he'd previously experienced, she shouldn't have even reached the entrance to the slums at this point in time.

And from there, gathering information would take almost two hours. And only then would she reach the loot house, that was how it went on his first attempt.

"So basically, she would have gotten here this quickly if I weren't with her?”

If she hadn’t healed him in that alley, she would have just made it here on her own. And this quickly.

Subaru couldn’t describe how he felt now that there was proof of his uselessness that transcended space and time.

Even as Subaru felt this emptiness, the situation continued to progress without him.

Felt had already crossed the center of the room and reached the back as she continued to retreat, and Not-Satella smoothly blocked the path to the door as she turned her palm toward them.

The magic being gathered in her palm caused the air to crackle faintly. It seemed like ice magic was her specialty, the room’s temperature dropped as she formed icicles.

“I have but one demand. —Return my insignia. It’s important to me.”

There were six icicles floating in the air. Their tips were rounded, so their power came from their weight rather than their sharpness. But if she scored a direct hit, the damage would definitely be on an entirely different level from those rocks.

Of course, Subaru himself was one of her targets and this caused him to break out in a cold sweat, all he could do was watch what happened silently so as to not provoke her.

“…Old man.”

“I can’t move. You picked up something troublesome and someone troublesome came with it, Felt.”

Felt quietly called to him, but Rom shook his head, his giant body filled with tension.

The familiar club had appeared in his hand at some point, but his arm didn’t look like he could swing it. As if lost, as if bewildered, he alternated between loosening and tightening his grip on it.

“The fight hasn’t even started and you’re giving up?”

“I wouldn’t withdraw if she were just some magic user, but… She’s trouble.”

Rom chided Felt for her provocation.

His gray eyes narrowed slightly as he stared at Not-Satella who had icicles at the ready.

His eyes were filled with strong caution and even stronger reverence as he looked down at her.

“Young lady… You’re an elf, aren’t you?”

Rom asked with trembling lips, causing Subaru to look up instinctively.

In this sort of fantasy world, elves were an indispensable race.

They had long ears, long lives, and were beautiful.

Rom’s question caused Not-Satella to close her eyes briefly, after which she sighed,

“That’s not quite right. —I’m actually only half elf.”

She spoke as if this confession was painful, and Subaru knit his brows at this.

But the other two had much bigger reactions.

Felt’s reaction was especially striking, she shuddered as she retreated even further,

“Half-elf… And silver hair?! Don’t tell me…”

“It’s an accidental resemblance! … I find it quite bothersome.’

Subaru didn’t understand their exchange, but he did to some extent get that it was one Not-Satella really didn’t want to deal with.

He didn’t know what exactly she was denying, but it didn’t seem to calm Felt down at all.

Rather, she turned her gaze toward Subaru who was just standing there in silence, and her red eyes were filled with intense animosity as she glared at him.

Subaru's face stiffened in confusion, and she laughed as if mocking herself.

"So you were playing me all along, huh?"

"What?"

"I thought it was weird when you started talking about returning it to the owner and stuff. Stopping me from hiring those guys in the alley to block her was part of the plan too, wasn't it? You were with her from the start."

Her questions were filled with resentment, and Subaru realized she had misunderstood the situation.

But he also realized something else, he was now closer to piecing together why Not-Satella had arrived so early.

Originally, she wouldn't have made it this soon after all. Right, normally the guys Felt hired would meddle with her and delay her arrival.

That didn't happen this time thanks to Subaru, and Not-Satella was able to appear earlier than usual.

From a causal perspective he was the main reason this happened, so Felt's anger wasn't exactly misplaced. In truth, the situation was starting to go the way he hoped.

Unless Felt and Rom had some trick up their sleeve, they would have no choice but to return the insignia to Not-Satella.

To be honest, Subaru wanted to obtain the insignia and return it to her himself, but he wouldn't complain as long as it ended up in her hands.

If things kept going like this, one could probably call it the second best plan. However,

"…? What do you mean? You're not comrades?"

Not-Satella reacted to the apparent break up between Felt and Subaru.

In response to Not-Satella's confusion, Felt laughed scornfully, "Hah"

"Just drop the act already. I've been cornered. How about you just take the insignia back and laugh at my stupidity?"

"You're caving too easily. All that just because you're at a slight disadvantage?"

"That's what you have to say after landing me in this situation? Aah, damn it. I've been had!"

Felt angrily scratched at her blonde hair and groaned in frustration.

The crease in Not-Satella's brow deepened further as she watched this completely unladylike behavior.

Seeing that they weren't quite on the same wavelength, Subaru clapped his hands and intervened,

"Well, things are just getting complicated so let's leave it at that. Give that insignia back, Felt. And Sate… You, leave this place quickly. Don't let anyone steal from you again."

"Why are you acting nice all of a sudden? I don't get it…"

"I don't understand either. What's with you?"

His plan to smoothly intervene had failed magnificently.

It had completely backfired, he had drawn their attention to him and become the focus of their ire.

It'd be too hard to explain, so he turned to Rom for help, but he crossed his thick arms,

“Our opponent uses the spirit arts, not ordinary magic. Can’t make any careless moves.”

He ended up misunderstanding Subaru’s intent and denied him his aid.

Subaru was interested in the new term Rom had casually used, but the sharp gazes from the two girls were unbearable.

He had to get out of this somehow—The moment he glanced at the door,

—A shadow stealthily approached the silver-haired girl from behind, as if gliding.

“—Puck! Block it!”

A sensual smile passed through the room’s shadows, and a silver glint that seemed to be squirming lunged at the girl’s white neck.

In an instant, the girl’s head was torn off as Subaru watched with wide eyes—That’s probably what would have happened originally.

—A crack.

What hit his eardrums was not the sound of steal severing bone, but that of steel smashing glass.

Not-Satella lowered her body slightly, and a magic circle that glowed a pale blue manifested behind her head.

The knife was stopped when it slammed into it head on, the magic circle had perfectly protected her neck from the blade.

“Puck…”

“That truly was by a hair’s breadth.”

Not-Satella leapt forward and turned around.

Following after her was her silver hair, and a small animal with gray fur peeked out of it from around her shoulder.

Puck hummed in pride and glanced at Subaru,

“Right in the nick of time, you saved us.”

“I’m the one who’s been saved. Thank you.”

Puck’s gesture was akin to a thumbs up, and in response Subaru offered a frail thumbs up as well.

Satella had appeared before sundown—Meaning her reliable backup was still on the clock.

Even though he had been called so suddenly, Puck was able to protect her with his unexpectedly splendid performance.

As for the assailant whose surprise attack was blocked,

“—A spirit, you’re a spirit, yes? Fufufu, wonderful. I’ve never killed a spirit before.”

The familiar murderer raised her kukri knife up to her face that was filled with ecstasy—It was Elsa.

Her sudden appearance put Not-Satella and Subaru on guard. However, the first one to take action in response wasn’t either of them.

“Hey, what’s this about?!”

Felt yelled as she stepped forward.

She pointed at Elsa and pulled the insignia out of her bosom.

“I thought your job was to purchase the insignia. Turning this place into a sea of blood wasn’t part of the deal!”

“Purchasing that insignia is indeed my job. But negotiating won’t be possible since you’ve also brought the owner along, so I’ve decided to change my plans.”

Felt’s face had turned red with rage, but faced with Elsa’s gaze full of killing intent she instinctively stepped back. Elsa looked down at her as if she found her fear adorable,

“I’ll massacre everyone in here, and then collect the insignia.”

Elsa’s smile was like that of a loving mother as she made this cruel declaration, she then tilted her head,

“—You couldn’t do your job properly. It’s only natural you’d be cast aside.”

“—!”

Felt’s face warped in agony, not from fear but from a different emotion.

Subaru didn’t know if Elsa’s words touched a sore spot. He didn’t know, but

“Quit screwing around, damn it—!!”

It angered him enough to make him forget about the difference in their ability and yell at her.

Elsa looked at Subaru in surprise. Felt, Rom, and Not-Satella were no different. But the one who was most surprised of all was Subaru himself.

He himself didn’t understand why he suddenly flew off the handle.

He didn’t understand, so he just let his emotions take over and spilled everything.

“Is it really that fun to pick on a little kid?! You damned bowel-loving sadist!! Also, your appearance was way too sudden, were you just waiting outside for the right timing or what?! You made me celebrate prematurely because it looked like things could go smoothly, you’re too damned scary, I really didn’t want to meet you! Just how many horribly painful, tear-inducing memories do you think I’ve got?! If I had some change for every time I got torn up by a blade, I’d be a damned millionaire! That was an exaggeration!”

“…What are you saying?”

“My tension and rage meters are maxed, so I’ve got no clue what I’m saying either! That’s how my day’s been, so how are you guys doing? And please don’t change the channel.”

In response to Subaru’s nonsensical screaming, Elsa let out a small sigh of exasperation which was rather unusual for her.

Subaru found her attitude strangely hurtful, and as he sent spittle flying.

“Stalling complete—Do it, Puck!!”

“That was magnificently awkward. —I’d better live up to your expectations.”

As Subaru stamped his foot, an aloof voice responded to him causing Elsa to look up.

Sharp icicles surrounded her in every direction—There were more than twenty of them.

“Seems I haven’t even introduced myself, young lady. My name is Puck. —Remember that name in the afterlife.”

In an instant, Elsa was bombarded by icicles from every direction.

Chapter 19:
A Spirit Art User's Battle

The icicles crisscrossed mercilessly, filling the room with a white mist and covering the black cloaked figure in freezing wind.

The speed of these icicles was far beyond what he'd seen in the alley, as far as Subaru knew this had transcended the major league and had reached a level of speed you only saw in video games.

Their sharp tips would easily pierce through the human body and come out red with fresh blood.

There were about twenty of them. If they landed, it'd mean certain death. But,

"Is she finished?!"

"Right, there's a bad flag—!!"

Even though he had remained silent for so long, the baldy just had to go and say something at the worst possible time.

And as if to answer Subaru's shout—

"—I was prepared, you see. I quite dislike its weight, but it was the right decision to wear it."

Cutting through the white smoke, Elsa dashed forward with her black hair dancing behind her.

As she brandished her kukri knife and nimbly advanced, there was no sign of injury on her body. She had cast aside her cloak and was now only wearing the form-fitting black clothes she wore underneath it, but there was no change besides this.

"Don't tell me it's the sort of thing where you take off weighted clothing and become faster?!"

"That would be pretty interesting, but the reality is simpler. —My cloak had a spell woven into it that could negate magic just once. Seems it allowed me to keep my life.”

Elsa politely answered Subaru’s query, and then swung her blade forward from a low stance.

Standing in her path was Not-Satella who had just unleashed that huge attack.

The blade’s path was true, intended to plunge the heavy tip into her chest. Subaru was about to scream, but before that could happen,

“You’d do well not to underestimate a user of the spirit arts. We’re rather frightening when you make enemies of us.”

A multilayered shield of ice easily stopped Elsa’s blade.

Not-Satella placed her hands together before her chest. She had probably formed that shield using her hands. With her attack blocked, Elsa immediately backflipped away.

A number of slightly smaller icicles were rapidly fired in pursuit and pierced the ground.

This was Puck’s attack, he floated by Not-Satella’s silver hair as he waved his arms like he was conducting an orchestra.

“They’re splitting the roles of offense and defense—It’s really two on one.”

“That’s what makes spirit users dangerous. One handles offense while the other handles defense. Depending on the situation you’ll have one stall with simple magic while the other prepares a powerful move… They can do that sort of thing. On the battlefield, it is commonly said that ‘If you encounter a spirit user, you should drop your weapon and wallet and run.’”

As Subaru looked on in admiration, Rom who was next to him muttered gravely as he tightened his grip on his club.

Subaru nodded at his words. Indeed, in a one-on-one battle their advantage was absolute. Overcoming it would be no easy feat.

"By the way, what are you planning to do, old man?"

"I'll look for an opening to help the elf girl. She seems more reasonable than the other one."

"Waitwaitwaitwaitwaitwaitwait! Don't try it! You'd only be a burden! You'll just have your right arm and throat ripped apart if you go, so stay right there!"

"Don't be that specific! It almost feels like that actually happened!"

He had actually seen this happen twice, as a result his statement felt genuine.

Rom seemed rather displeased as he clutched his arm and neck as if he felt himself getting cut down in another dimension.

Even as they had this exchange, the battle continued.

Although Subaru had warned Rom with his frivolous talk, in truth there were no openings to interfere in the battle.

—Countless lumps of ice formed one after another and were blasted all over the room.

Their sizes varied, the larger ones were about the size of a head, and the smaller ones were roughly fist-sized. They were all fired with the speed of a full power pitch, and it was clear just how dangerous they were.

However, even as she was surrounded by all of this ice, Elsa's movements now that she had lost her magic-negating cloak had transcended the realm of common sense.

She would twist her body, lower herself to the ground as if crawling, and occasionally even defy gravity by running the walls. If she judged that even this wouldn't suffice, she would strike the ice with her blade, shattering the white crystals. She matched quantity with overwhelming quality, her skill was exceptional.

"You handle yourself well for a girl."

Even Puck had to admire her combat sense that could only be described as godlike.

His mutter caused Elsa to smile broadly even in the midst of that chaotic battle.

“Oh my. It’s been quite a while since I was last regarded as a simple girl.”

“Most of my opponents might as well be babies from my perspective. But even so, you’re so strong it’s almost pitiful.”

“It’s quite the honor to receive praise from a spirit.”

Genuinely delighted this compliment, she swept away the ice surrounding her with her blade.

He must have fired close to a hundred by now, but besides that first bombardment not a single one connected.

Puck was pressuring her with the sheer quantity of his offense, but he was unable to land a decisive blow.

“At this rate, won’t they run out of MP and lose?”

As he pictured a reversal in offense and defense, Subaru pointed out that a lengthy battle would prove disadvantageous.

However, Rom shook his head.

“I don’t know what this Empi is, but there’s no need to worry about a spirit user running out of mana in battle.”

“No need to worry about them running out of mana…?”

“Unlike magic users, spirit users do not use the mana within them, but rather the mana around them. Unless the world itself runs dry, a spirit user will never run out of mana.”

“They’ve got unlimited gasoline so they can rev their engines as much as they please, huh. Quite a cheat.”

Rom cocked his head, Subaru's response was completely incomprehensible to him.

He then continued with his head still tilted, "But,"

"There's also the matter of how long the spirit can remain corporeal. Once the spirit is gone, the situation might change drastically."

"Crap, that's right… It's almost five, isn't it?!"

In the first world, Puck went to sleep not long after sunset.

It hadn't been that long since the fight started, but surely throwing around that much magic must have been a significant drain on his mana reserves or whatever.

Subaru's worries,

"Ah, this is bad. I'm getting a little drowsy. Actually, I was fighting in my sleep just now."

"Hey, Puck! Get it together!"

"…Hah! I'm up! I'm awake! I'm definitely not sleeping!"

"His voice is so low, isn't that conversation super concerning?!"

Seemed to be right on the mark.

Puck seemed to be nodding off already, and he could see that Not-Satella who had Puck on her shoulder was also starting to look anxious.

"Just when it was getting good. You're not even paying attention, how cold."

"That's the problem with being a popular guy. The girls just won't let you sleep. But staying up too late is terrible for your skin, you know?"

Bending her knees slightly, Elsa prepared to leap.

Anticipating this, Puck shrewdly winked at her and spoke.

“How about we go ahead and put an end to this? You must be tired of seeing the same old performance, right?”

“—My leg.”

The instant she tried to advance, she tipped forward and had to put out her hands to stop her fall.

Subaru stared in shock at this unbelievable screw up, the reason for which was at her feet.

Elsa’s right foot was stuck to the frozen floor.

The shattered ice had slowly piled up, and had now been used to trap her foot.

“It’s not like I was just firing randomly, you know?”

“…So you’ve got me, is that right?”

“Just think of it as the difference in experience, I believe this is worthy of some praise. Good night.”

As he threw his chest out, Puck’s small body started to waver.

He thrust his hands out in front him, a pose that suggested he was about to use a killer technique, and started gathering up the largest amount of magic thus far—Even Subaru could see it radiating from him.

That magical power did not turn into ice, it was fired as pure destructive energy.

The bluish white light froze everything in its path, and dyed the loot house white in one fell swoop.

The energy passed through Elsa and slammed into the entrance to the loot house, blowing away the poorly fitted door. The freezing waves left in the aftermath even reached outside.

Once that magnificent light passed through, all that was left was frost. The goods, the furniture, the counter, everything was completely frozen.

Naturally, anyone who took a direct hit would inevitably be turned into an ice sculpture.

However—

“You’re joking…”

“I’m afraid not. Aah, splendid. I thought I was going to die.”

If she had taken it head on, perhaps.

“…You’re a girl, so I can’t really praise that sort of thing.”

She had managed to avoid his last resort, but Puck wasn’t any angrier than his words suggested. He truly was displeased by the act itself.

—Subaru could see blood dripping, and traces of steam coming off the frozen floor.

The source of the blood was Elsa’s right foot. She was standing barefoot just barely out of the path of Puck’s attack, and a large amount of blood was pouring out of her right foot.

It was only natural. After all, she had sliced off the sole of her foot.

“I was in such a hurry I almost chopped the whole thing off, that was a close one.”

“But even that amount ought to be quite painful.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re correct. It is painful. Wonderful. I feel alive. Now…”

In response to Puck’s concerned words, Elsa nodded with an ecstatic look, and then raised her bleeding foot and pressed it against a nearby lump of ice with no hesitation.

It sounded like the air was cracking, Elsa moaned seductively after which she used her kukri knife to smooth the ice's surface.

With that, she managed to stop the bleeding. She had recklessly attached a part of the ice to her sole.

"It's a little hard to move, but it's enough."

Her ice shoe produced a stiff sound as she tested it against the ground, she then smiled even more cheerfully.

The fact that she was so addicted to battle that she didn't even mind mutilating herself left Subaru speechless, but it left an even bigger impression on Puck and Not-Satella who were facing her.

"Puck, can you continue?"

"Sorry, I'm really sleepy. I underestimated her a bit. I used up too much mana, gonna disappear."

When Puck responded to her murmur, his voice had for the first time lost its composure.

The cat on her shoulder, by her silver hair, started to emit a faint glow and looked as though he could disappear at any moment. He was out of time.

"I'll handle this somehow, so get some rest for now. Thank you."

"Should anything happen to you, I'll act in accordance with the contract. —If it comes down to it, wring your Od to draw me out."

As if urged on by Not-Satella's tender voice, Puck's body suddenly scattered and vanished.

Every single person in that room lamented his retreat, but the one who was most disappointed was,

"—Aah, he's gone. How terribly unfortunate."

Elsa, who had been fighting for her life.

She once again readied her blade, and moved toward Not-Satella with high-pitched footsteps.

In response, Not-Satella started forming icicles one after another, but she couldn't form nearly as many as Puck had.

But considering Elsa's mobility had dropped, their chances of winning were probably still fifty-fifty.

"We can't just stand around staring anymore."

Rom gripped his club and readied himself, perhaps he thought the situation looked bad.

When Subaru silently looked at him, he shrugged his shoulders,

"We don't know if she can win without assistance. So if we just sit around and watch, we're just missing our chance… You understand, right, Felt?"

"Yeah, I get it. Even if we choose to run, we've got to do it right now."

Felt hadn't spoken a word since Elsa first made her threat.

She stood next to Rom who seemed ready to fight, and then suddenly turned to Subaru.

"About earlier… You kinda saved me."

"—Ah?"

"Just a little, mind you. Also, don't call me a kid. Despite how I look, I'm actually fifteen. Probably around the same as you."

"…I'm eighteen this year. I can drive and get married."

"You don't look it! You look like a kid, you gotta live a life that shows on your face more!"

On top of being a shut-in, he also lived a life without major ups and downs..

But still, he felt that his current situation had way too many gigantic ups and downs.

As the two resolved themselves and observed the state of the battle, all Subaru could do was watch.

He was probably the weakest one there. And it wasn't merely fighting strength that he lacked…

"My legs are trembling, they won't move… I don't even have the resolve."

It was more than a problem of being unqualified, he couldn't even get involved.

Rom had his arms, Felt had her legs, and Satella had her magic, they could use these to fight. However, Elsa's abnormality transcended all of these.

Truly—

"She's getting overwhelmed."

Rom's candid impression said it all.

Not-Satella continued to fire an endless barrage of ice, but they were all smashed apart by Elsa's blade dance.

Elsa sprang toward her, slashing as if she was dancing, and in response Not-Satella halted her attack to block with her ice shield and then froze the ground underneath her to slide away, barely avoiding the subsequent attacks.

If she managed to gain some distance she would once again go on the offensive with her ice barrage, but Elsa didn't seem like the kind of opponent who'd fall for the same trick twice.

The next time she approached Not-Satella, Subaru would probably end up seeing a sight he never wanted to see again.

"Here goes—!"

Probably imagining the same thing, Rom roared as he joined the battle.

He raised his club and produced a powerful wind as he swung it, a bit of the hair on the back of Elsa's head got caught up in this as she ducked.

"Oh dear, it's rather boorish to cut in on a dance."

"If you wanna dance that bad, I'll make you dance the finest dance of all! Here, round and round!"

Rom thrust his spiked club at her, changing the scope of his attack from a line to a point.

This sudden unconventional attack was aimed at Elsa's throat, and the end the result froze Rom's throat.

"What the hell?!"

"Because you're so strong, I can even do this."

Elsa was on her tiptoes, standing on the tip of his club.

There was a divinely inspired sense of balance to this disparity in power, the first time such acrobatics were performed. Before this miraculous balance could collapse, Elsa swung her blade horizontally.

It was aimed at Rom's temple, the force was such that a direct hit would blow the top of his head off.

"As if I'd let you—!"

Clang, a small knife was thrown into her blade's path, hitting it.

The impact from directly below slightly disturbed the blade's movement, and the side of the blade slammed into his head, still retaining its speed. There was the dull sound of steel striking bone, and Rom's body collapsed to the side.

"Bad girl."

"—Ah."

Elsa landed casually, and turned her gaze toward Felt.

Felt's small knife had saved Rom from a fatal slash. She had probably been aiming at Elsa's arm, but it seemed her haste threw off her aim.

But it could also be said that this just barely saved Rom's life.

"You have neither the resolve nor the strength to fight. That being the case, you should have just cowered in the corner, making yourself small."

With high-pitched footsteps, Elsa's dark figure seemed to be gliding as she instantly appeared before Felt.

Rom was unconscious from the blow to his head, and since Not-Satella had put some distance between them, she would not make it in time. Felt herself was paralyzed, like a frog in a snake's sights.

"Haidaraaaa—!"

So the only one who could grab her small body and leap out of the way was the one who had been cowering in terror right next to her.

Chapter 20:
The Gang's All Here

He leaped into her waist, and embraced her small body as they fell toward the ground.

The instant before he hit the floor, he felt as though steel had singed the hair on the back of his head which made him shudder. But he forced himself to ignore it due to the weight in his arms, and tried to create some distance as they tumbled.

He got on his knees and turned around to find Elsa standing still with an expression of surprise. He felt as if he'd gotten one over on her, and donned a twitching smile at his triumph.

His smile almost made her retaliate, but she switched to defending against the rapid-fire icicles coming from behind her. Thankful for Not-Satella's aid, he looked down into his chest,

"Are you okay?! It was a desperate situation, so please overlook it if I touched anything I shouldn't have!"

"I'd have thanked you if you didn't say that. —Wait, why?"

"No clue! My body just moved on its own! It's seriously a miracle! Make miracle! If I had to say, it's because I'm repaying a favor, although you probably don't know what I'm talking about! You don't!"

He released Felt and clenched his fist, congratulating himself for somehow doing a good job.

In the second world, Felt had saved him from Elsa. He was able to repay her for that. But that was a meaningless memory in this world, and now both Felt and Subaru had fallen before her blade.

—But even so, the kindness he received wouldn't just disappear. And if he could move now, he obviously had to see things through.

“Alright, I can move. Did that brush with death suddenly strengthen my resolve? Bravado is still bravery, recklessness is still courage. I’ll do it, it’s time to do it, gotta do it, have to do it, aren’t I gonna do it?!”

“H-Hey, bro…”

“Listen up, listen me. Listen closely, Felt. I’m going to start buying time just like Rom did before he fell in battle. I’ll create an opening one way or another, use that to run away. Run straight out of the entrance with all you’ve got, don’t look back. It’s what you call an escape, got it?”

“—! Absolutely not! Are you really telling me to just turn tail and run?!”

Her red eyes looked up at him as if glaring, and he accepted the challenge and brought his face close.

He immediately noticed when for a moment, his strong will caused Felt’s expression to falter.

“That’s exactly right, turn around, tuck your tail in, and run. To be honest, that’s what I want to do. I don’t want to stay in this violent hellscape a moment longer than I have to.”

He patted her blonde hair with all his might and then took a breath, “But,”

“You’re fifteen, and I’m eighteen. So you’re probably the youngest one here. Therefore, we obviously have to choose whatever option gives you the best chance of survival. It’s obvious!”

“Wh-What are you… Don’t screw around, you were cowering in fear just moments ago.”

“That was then! This is now! I’m not cowering now, so it’s fine! Or rather, I’ll have to do this before the fear paralyzes me again. That’s how it is, so run!”

Subaru pushed on her forehead to silence any further objection, and then started warming up as he stood up. Rom’s club had also fallen out of his hand and tumbled nearby.

He picked it up with great effort, despite its extreme weight, he could still swing it.

“I can probably keep her in check with at least one good strike… Looks like I was right to swing that pointlessly large bamboo sword every day. To think it was all for this moment, not bad, me.”

He sang his own praises as he swung the club, and then held his breath as he waited for the right time.

Felt looked like she still had something to say as she held her breath behind him, but he didn’t have the time to deal with her indecision right now. Their chances of survival were probably dropping with every second.

There wasn’t any sign of sluggishness in Elsa’s movements as she danced through the ice. To begin with, Subaru couldn’t even begin to understand whether or not she was open considering his complete lack of actual combat experience.

Therefore, the instant Elsa’s view was blocked as she cut down a particularly large icicle, he forgot to even breathe as he brought the club down.

“—Fush!”

It seemed the desperate situation had increased his strength, he swung the club even faster than expected.

It was a blow that could split a human head like a watermelon if he scored a direct hit, but,

“Your aim was excellent. But unfortunately, you exuded too much killing intent, it made your attack obvious.”

“Killing intent?! I have no idea how I’m supposed to control that!”

Although he’d attacked from right behind her, Elsa slammed the back of her blade into the club, altering its trajectory to avoid it. As Subaru whined about the failure of his surprise attack, he bared his fangs,

“Now! Go, Felt—!!”

“—!!”

As if jolted by his shout, Felt’s small body dashed forward, riding wind itself.

She’d reached her top speed in a single step. She ran through the room so fast the human eye couldn’t track her, moving past the scattered icicles and frozen floor as her body headed toward the entrance.

“You think I’ll let her?”

To stop her, Elsa drew a knife and threw it from right beside her.

Perhaps as revenge for Felt’s interference earlier, the plain looking knife was going to plunge straight into her back as she ran. But,

“You’ll have to let her go!!”

Kicking up a nearby table, Subaru blocked the knife’s path.

His reflexive reaction produced results, the knife ended up piercing the table and thus could not reach its target. Subaru couldn’t help but internally applaud his miraculous feat,

“Awesome! But my toes hurt more than expected…Bubugaru?!”

A long leg kicked him in the side of his head, interrupting his praise midway and causing him to crash into a wall.

The impact was to his shoulder so his head was fine, but this unexpected force halted his thoughts. The pain finally set in, and he once again tasted blood in his mouth.

“How unusual, I feel just a little annoyed.”

“Well, that’s just great! Hahaa, That. Is. What. You. Get! I made you lose one! Now, let me enjoy your whining, you loser!”

Putting on a show of courage as he got back up, he relentlessly provoked Elsa to draw her attention.

He didn’t think it was a very reliable plan considering her personality, but as if reading his mind, her smile deepened and she completely disregarded Felt.

“Alright, I’ll play along. In exchange, don’t bore me with your dancing.”

“Let me warn you, you’d better be prepared if you wanna dance with me. I’m rather unrefined, so I’ll end up stomping all over your feet.”

He ended up taking some mental damage when he remembered how he couldn’t dance with the girl he liked at a certain folk dance.

He spat out the blood gathering in his mouth, and fixed his grip on the club he was holding.

He wouldn’t have very many chances to use it. So instead of thinking about using it like Rom or whatever, he focused completely on meeting Elsa head on as she approached.

“Don’t forget about me!”

As Elsa focused on the opponent in front of her, she was suddenly assailed by some ice from behind.

She swung her blade without even turning around and deflected the attack. Her senses transcended human understanding, even Subaru couldn’t crack jokes at this point.

“I’m tired of that game, though… Do you think you can still entertain me?”

She asked in a low voice, her smile the color of blood.

This smile sent a chill down Subaru’s spine, he then glanced at Not-Satella. When their eyes met, he gave her a slight nod,

“If you have some kind of hidden power or something, now would be a good time to use it.”

“…I do have a trump card, but if I use it I’ll be the only one left.”

“I’ve got this! I can still do it! It’s too early to use your trump card! Why give up so soon?! The fight is still even! Let’s do this, me!”

Subaru waved his limbs around to show he was in good health, trying desperately to stop her from giving up on everything. His frantic expression caused Not-Satella’s lips to relax even though they were in the midst of battle.

“I’m not going to use it. Not while you’re still trying so hard. Let’s struggle all we can—Running to daddy is my last resort.”

Her resigned expression as she said this caused something to light up within Subaru.

He thought it was rather unlike him to have this sort of sentiment well up from within.

It wasn’t like him, he wasn’t that kind of person at all.

He was always apathetic toward his surroundings, he was unaffected by whatever went on around him, no matter what sort of problem arose, he would never choose to face it earnestly, instead he would just casually wait around for it to fade away, like a cloud or something.

Pinning his hopes on others or having others place their hopes in him, he thought he didn’t care about any of that.

—Just now, he ended up hoping. And because of this hope, he was disappointed.

He had only ever seen her look tense or brooding as she looked for a certain something, so he wanted to see her smile.

But to think that this expression that looked like she was giving up, like she had resigned herself to whatever was going to happen, would be the first ‘smile’ he received from her, there was no way he would allow that.

“That doesn’t count…”

“—Eh?”

“Ignore what I just said! It’s all nonsense! I’m seriously fired up here!! I’m going to do this, damn it! I definitely won’t let you use that trump card!!”

He thrust his finger out, and announced this to both Not-Satella and Elsa.

He stomped his feet and sent spittle flying as he howled in excitement.

“Don’t make that sort of face, you’re wasting your beauty! And you, you damned sadist of the year, read the mood! Don’t make her look like that! You’re wasting your beauty too!”

“…Seems you have a little too much energy.”

“Because you haven’t managed to spill a single person’s blood! But this club, ‘Kotetsu’, has been lusting for your blood all evening! Fm! Fmm!”

He swung his club on the spot, like a bat.

Pulled by its weight, Subaru staggered around flustered as Elsa pointed her knife at him.

“That’s enough fooling around. It’s about time we started dancing, do try to keep up.”

“You too, don’t think this will be over too quickly. Don’t underestimate me, I’ll toss you with my right and slam you with my left!”

As Elsa leaned forward slightly, Subaru pointed his club at her as if he was announcing a homerun.

Because of this unnecessary gesture, he wasn’t able to respond in time when she leaped at him. He readied the club in a panic, and prepared to strike the slender figure flying toward him.

There was a strong wind as he swung from the side, this attack would blow Elsa's head off.

He put everything he had into this merciless swing, prepared for the horrific sight it would create. It wouldn't be strange if a direct hit turned part of her into mincemeat.

"As if I could beat her by showing mercy!"

The urgency of the situation meant Subaru couldn't even think about holding back.

In response to this lethal blow, Elsa lowered her stance even further with practiced movements and continued to approach if slithering on the ground as she avoided his attack.

"You damned spider woman—!"

"Well, you are trapped in my web."

Seeing the blade reaching up to him, Subaru immediately threw himself backward. However, he still couldn't escape the blade's range.

In an instant so short you'd miss it if you blinked, the memory of the first time he stood up on his own two legs flashed through his mind, his parents clapped and exclaimed 'This kid might be a genius'.

"Damn it, looking at my current situation after that flashback, there couldn't possibly be a more pathetic memory—!!"

The embarrassment this memory caused made his knees shoot up.

He hadn't been aiming for anything, but Elsa ended up taking a direct hit to her torso as she slipped toward him.

She let out an erotic moan of pain and her blade's path was thrown off slightly. There,

"An ice shield. —Nice cover!!"

“I’m not very good at forming it where I want to. —I almost ended up creating an ice sculpture there.”

“You mean her, not me, right?!”

A block of ice appeared near his face and stopped the blade, Subaru immediately spoke his thanks as he retreated, and Satella stated this as she wiped her forehead.

She then dodged his question and started firing another barrage of ice at Elsa to keep her in check.

“You insects are starting to become an annoyance…”

“Hey now, don’t go underestimating insects. You might be allergic to our bite!”

“You’re acting pretty cocky now that you’re in a safe spot.”

Elsa was focused on dodging the hail of ice, and Subaru was attempting to break her focus with his taunts.

He would have loved to slip behind her to attack, but if he carelessly stepped into that barrage he would probably be taken out by his own ally.

That was probably why Not-Satella had restrained her attack while he was fighting.

This was the level of teamwork you could expect from an impromptu team formed on the spot.

“However, the two worked together to overcome this trial and their bond deepened. Before they knew it, trust had turned into love and their burning passion could no longer be stopped…”

“I have no clue what you’re whispering over there, but it’s clearly something compleeeetely irrelevant.”

“To think of another girl while you’ve got a woman right in front of you, how very boorish.”

“They both hated it?!”

Elsa somehow kept her composure even in the midst of these rapid-fire attacks.

Subaru continued to watch as Elsa deflected the ice, he would occasionally cut in with an attack of his own and then immediately retreat, he kept repeating this cycle as he thought.

Their steadily worsening situation hadn’t changed, it was obvious that Elsa could easily take out Subaru just like she did to Rom if she felt like it.

It only seemed like he was able to put up a fight because she possessed an overwhelming advantage in ability and was making light of him. The fact that Subaru’s fear would not let him step any further into lethal range was another reason.

If Subaru had more courage than brains, she’d probably end this equilibrium in a single swing.

Nonetheless, it didn’t seem his cowardice could prove useful for much longer.

The severity of her slashes was gradually increasing, and Subaru was steadily accumulating cuts as he failed to evade in time.

There were cuts on his arms, his calf, under his armpit, and even a shallow one on his neck, his gray jersey was starting to turn red as his blood stained it.

“Getting cut hurts! It hurts real bad! Even wounds of this level could make me cry!”

“—No good after all, huh.”

“Ah, sorry! I lied! Please ignore that! Don’t give up, don’t use that trump card! I can still do this! I’m completely fine, I’ve got this!”

He waved his hands to show Not-Satella he was fine, and then immediately performed a spinning kick.

He had aimed to catch Elsa off guard with an attack completely different from the pattern he established with the club. But,

“Right, got you.”

“Geh.”

She easily avoided his kick, and then grabbed his leg before it could pass by. She raised her kukri knife aiming to chop off his entire leg. The force would easily tear through his leg in one stroke, its speed and sharpness were more than enough.

The shock from the blood loss and pain of having his thigh severed would kill him—He could see the words BAD END 4 appear before him.

“Nuooo! Whatever is within me, burn up—!!”

He immediately tried to raise the club to block, but the weight meant he couldn’t lift it in time while standing on one leg.

Not-Satella screamed in despair as the merciless slash reached his leg.

The premonition of horrible pain and fresh blood caused him to quite literally scream up blood—

“—That’s enough.”

Piercing the roof, a blazing inferno descended into the loot house.

The flame’s dreadful aura swept through the room and even halted Elsa’s brutal act.

Subaru stumbled backward when his leg was released and ended up falling on his butt.

And before him, within the swirling dust and smoke, he saw a crimson glow.

“It seems things were rather risky just now, but I’m glad I made it in time.”

“Y-You’re…”

The flame wavered as it stepped forward.

In its path was Elsa, who had retreated quite some distance. She adjusted her grip on the kukri knife as she faced the being before her, losing her composure for the first time.

Before this overwhelming sense of intimidation, she no longer had the leeway to enjoy herself.

Its dignified presence froze Subaru’s, Not-Satella’s, and even Elsa’s expressions.

Even with all their eyes on it, its handsome features did not waver.

The young man only had a single-minded sense of justice in his sky-blue eyes as his lips formed a slight smile.

“Now, it’s about time we finished this—!”

Brushing his crimson hair upward, the handsome youth loudly declared this.

Chapter 21:
The Power of the Sword Saint

1

[Side: F]

Her body rode the wind out of the battlefield, she felt as if she was freed from the despair the moment she passed the entrance.

In the end, in that world she didn’t even have the leeway to look back at, the battle raged on even now.

There was the dry sound of freezing air as well as the sound of steel shattering ice, and there was also the sound of a blunt weapon tearing through the air along with the occasional ‘Hyoeh’s and ‘Fuah’s as someone dodged while making strange noises.

The battle wasn’t over.

Even though Felt had run away, leaving it all behind.

“What the heck am I thinking? Isn’t it lucky that I was able to escape?”

If she had stayed there, she would be dead, that was obvious.

Felt didn’t have the slightest change against a woman who could bring Rom down with one blow. It was the same for the silver-haired elf, she probably wouldn’t be able to match Elsa now that she had lost her spirit’s support.

As for Subaru, it was completely obvious that he was worthless.

Once could tell at a glance that he was just an ordinary fellow, and he hadn’t the slightest hint of combat experience. His lovely fingers suggested that he had never held a weapon, and his unmarred hair and skin probably meant he had never been injured.

In other words, he had lived a sheltered life. His social status was such that he didn't need to think of combat.

He did bring that absurdly expensive meteor, so this way of thinking made sense.

She should just think of it as him getting his just deserts. Ignorant of the ways of the world and possessing just a little chivalrous spirit, he ended up trying to do more than he could. She should just laugh at his recklessness.

"Right, keep running. I can't stay in this town anymore. There's people that terrifying. Before they find me, before it's too late to run away, I need to, quickly…"

Even within the slums, she had to choose a route known only to those who stayed here. Narrow and tiny, it was like a path for animals, but it was an ideal escape route.

Considering her agility and small frame, she didn't think there was anyone who would be able to capture her here. If she was to prioritize her life, this was the ideal method.

After all, Subaru who was probably dead by now had tried to act cool by letting her escape, so if she ran away successfully, he could at least rest in peace. That much was obvious.

It was obvious, but,

"—Someone, isn't anyone there?!"

Even though her brain told her she should choose the narrow path, her legs took her to the slum's main road which connected to the main street. Her expression was one of panic and she was out of breath, even her line of sight was unsteady.

Sighting a rundown shack, she ran up the wall and stood atop it, she then sent spittle flying as she screamed.

It wasn't just anyone that she needed.

She needed someone who had the power to face that murderer—Elsa.

If anyone would do, she had already seen several figures as she ran here. But Felt was by no means someone well-liked around here.

Especially now that she was in trouble, Rom was probably the only one around here who would help her.

If she just left Rom like this, he would die.

Even Subaru who had helped Felt escape was probably fighting for his life right now.

It was a strange feeling. Without understanding why, she desperately rubbed her eyes that were on the verge of tears.

Setting Rom aside, what was so bad about some guy she just met dying? He seemed to have had a good upbringing, spoke a lot of nonsense, and to call him inconsiderate was putting it lightly.

But when Elsa's words almost made her cry, he got angry for her, and even now he was sacrificing himself so she could escape.

She didn't understand what she was feeling. However, because she was feeling it, Felt's heart urged her to run.

She had felt something in response to his actions. Because of this feeling that wouldn't stop heating up, Felt continued to run, desperately wanting to scream.

And then, once she had run through many, many streets—

"—Please, help."

"Understood. I shall help you."

She encountered a young man like a crimson inferno, and changed fate.

2

"…Reinhard?"

"That's right, Subaru. It's been very long, has it? Sorry to be late."

The tall figure turned its head toward Subaru who was still on the ground—Reinhard's faint smile seemed apologetic.

Even though he had ripped through the roof and dropped about five meters, this didn't seem to have had any effect on him as he casually walked forward. His movements were refined even as he cleared the dust, Subaru felt that he was now somewhat different from when they had faced Tonchinkan, he felt that he was getting a glimpse at Reinhard's true nature.

Reinhard looked forward with his guard up, at the beautiful woman in black clothes whose hostility was directed at him. His blue eyes suddenly narrowed as if remembering something,

"Black hair and black clothes. And a curved blade characteristic of the north. —With those characteristics, there's no mistaking it. You're the 'Bowel Hunter', yes?"

"What's with that super disturbing nickname…"

"It was given to her due to her distinctive method of killing. She's a rather infamous criminal who is known to be dangerous even in the capital. It is also said that she's just a simple mercenary, though."

Reinhard sincerely responded to Subaru's mutter, and set his clear blue eyes on Elsa. His gaze caused her to stir,

"Reinhard—Yes, the knight among knights. From the line of sword saints. Incredible, to think I'd encounter such interesting opponents, I suppose I'll have to thank my employer.

"There's a number of things I'd like to ask you. I recommend you surrender."

"You think a starving predator could resist a splendid steak dripping blood?"

She seductively licked her lips with her red tongue and looked at Reinhard with an ecstatic expression.

Receiving her gaze, he scratched his cheek as if troubled, "I suppose not."

"No choice. Subaru, step back a bit. Get the old man somewhere safe if you can. It'd be a great help if you could stay by that person's side after that."

"Understood… She's a monster of a woman, so don't let your guard down."

"Fortunately, hunting monsters happens to be my specialty."

With these promising words, Reinhard advanced, completely calm.

He did not even reach for the sword at his hip, he approached her barehanded.

His composure made Subaru gulp, but what happened once the battle started shocked him even more.

"—Sh"

Exhaling sharply, Elsa brandished the knife in her hand, aiming for his neck.

She was no longer holding back like she was against Subaru, the flash of silver killed the air itself as it rushed toward Reinhard's slender neck. Reinhard seemed completely defenseless against this. Forget drawing his sword to block, he did not even attempt to dodge.

As the blade swung toward him, Subaru saw a vision of Reinhard's head being torn off. There would be a spray of blood, and Reinhard's head would fall later like in a manga.

That was the scene he saw. But—

"I'd prefer not to be too violent against a female opponent, but…"

Reinhard said these gentlemanly words in a somewhat lower tone. Then,

"Excuse me."

With force that shattered the ground and created a shockwave, his kick sent Elsa flying.

The shockwave even reached Subaru, who was rendered speechless by the wind..

It looked like a normal front kick, and yet it held such power that the wind from the shockwave shook the entire building. Having received a direct hit, Elsa's body flew like a leaf until she sprang off the wall to reduce the impact and landed as if tumbling onto the ground. Ever her expression was one of astonishment.

"Woawoahwoah, seriously… What's with that?"

He had used the term 'off the charts' many times until now, but right now, for the time Subaru believed that he had been using it all wrong.

The term surely existed just to describe the man standing before him.

Compared to him, running like the wind, swinging a club like a twig, transcendent battle sense, and magical power boasting overwhelming quantity, all of these were completely overshadowed.

"You're as good as the rumors say… No, you're even better."

"I'm not sure I can live up to your expectations."

“Will you not use the sword at your hip? I would love to experience its legendary sharpness.”

Elsa recklessly pointed at Reinhard’s sword, she wanted to face him at his best.

But Reinhard shook his head in response,

“This sword can only be drawn when it is necessary. That it has not left its sheath means this is not one of those times.”

“It seems I’m being looked down upon.”

“I find this judgement rather troubling as well. Therefore—”

Reinhard suddenly averted his gaze and looked around the loot house. He then found a worn down two handed sword among some loot that had been placed against the wall, but were now strewn about the ground.

He flipped up the handle with his foot and easily caught it as it spun, he then lightly swung it as if testing it,

“I shall face you with this. Are you dissatisfied?”

“—Not at all. Aah, wonderful. Simply wonderful. Please, do entertain me!”

As Reinhard held the sword, Elsa took the initiative by spinning her body to the side.

Immediately after, she threw several knives as she spun. There were four of them, thrown near simultaneously. She had been holding back when she aimed for Felt.

These blades thrown at different heights weren’t as fast as Not-Satella’s ice, but the difference in their trajectories would make it difficult to dodge. In other words, he had to deflect them, but,

“Of course, I’ll take advantage of that opening.”

Elsa’s body leaped like a wind-up toy. She flipped as if using the ceiling as footing, and then sprang back down aiming for Reinhard.

A two stage attack, even if he managed to deflect the knives he would still have to deal with Elsa's attack.

There were four attacks and another one right behind them, in response Reinhard raised his sword before him,

"Sorry, but—Projectiles won't reach me."

Immediately after he whispered this, Subaru saw a sight that defied the laws of physics.

The knives that were going to plunge straight into Reinhard's body—Their trajectories suddenly changed, they missed his body and hit the wall harmlessly.

He hadn't used any special magic, nor had he swung his sword faster than the eye could follow. He had essentially faced her first attack completely defenseless, this was an unfathomable spectacle, an absurd sight.

"The divine protection of arrow avoidance—!"

"I was granted it at birth, you see… Please don't think of it as unfair."

The knives completely failed to impede him, so their next exchange turned into a direct confrontation.

Elsa's slash had all the speed from her leap, and Reinhard was prepared to take it by swinging his sword directly upward.

Even though it was an exchange of an instant, Subaru could see everything in slow motion.

Perhaps that was because Reinhard's movements were perfectly refined, his every action seemed to possess divine skill that was almost magical.

He was holding some crude sword he found in a warehouse in the slums, but in his hands it shone like a legendary sword spoken of for generations.

His swordplay truly seemed to push the sword to the limit of what it could do.

Reinhard's blade hit its mark, the base of Elsa's kukri knife—Even though it was a clash between steel, that absurd cutting power easily dispossessed Elsa of her blade.

Flipping by placing her hand on the ground, Elsa was left speechless by the fate of the weapon she held.

With the blade sliced off, all she had left was the handle, and as for the blade,

"Now that you've lost your weapons, I recommend you surrender."

Reinhard held it in its hand as he turned around, lowering his sword.

Reinhard threw it with a flick of his wrist, and it did not even look as it pierced the wall with a sharp sound. Even Subaru could hear Elsa gulp.

"This guy's seriously out of this world. Even I can't find the energy to crack jokes about this."

This impression leaked out of Subaru as if he was being squeezed, he then excitedly distanced himself from the battle.

He approached Rom's fallen body, and somehow managed to drag him near the wall.

"Old man, Rom. Hey, baldy, listen here, are you still alive?"

"Uu… Who's… Bald…"

"You, obviously. As if it'd be anyone else. My only goals in life are to never go bald or become fat. From my perspective, you're a great example of what not to do."

Though frail, at least he was able to respond, Subaru struck his forehead and heaved a sigh of relief.

Setting aside the severe damage to his head, the old man was probably alright. His memory might end up getting a little worse, but that would be a small price to pay to keep his life.

“Is that person alright?”

As Subaru relaxed, Not-Satella called out while running over to him.

With her long silver hair flowing behind her, she analyzed Rom’s injuries, she then whispered, ‘I’ll have to heal this’ as a faint blue glow emanated from her hands.

“Hey now, this old man’s one of the people responsible for your insignia’s theft, you know?”

“That’s the reason. Once I heal him up, he’ll have to repay that favor by answering my questions. He definitely won’t lie to someone who has saved his life. This too is for my sake.”

Perhaps she needed to make such long winded excuses to justify her actions.

Smiling wryly at her roundabout nature, Subaru redirected his gaze to the battle.

Elsa was on her knees, he couldn’t see her expression but it seemed that Reinhard had concluded that she had lost the will to fight. Lowering the hand holding his worn out blade, he approached Elsa with his guard down.

This was probably because he was confident in his superiority, but conceit always led to the worst outcomes. Alarm bells went off within Subaru, and the moment before Elsa moved as if leaping,

“She’s got another one, Reinhard!”

The knife she drew from her waist sliced off a bit of Reinhard’s bangs as he leaned backward.

Now that her surprise attack had failed, she turned to Subaru,

“That was rather sharp of you.”

“I’ve experienced it first hand, after all!”

He flipped her off with pride that barely even counted as pride, but Elsa seemed to think he was talking nonsense and simply ignored him.

“However, I have more than just two fangs… Shall we start over?”

“Will you be satisfied if I dispossess you of all your weapons?”

“If I lose my fangs, I shall use my claws. If I lose my claws, I shall use my teeth. If I lose my teeth, I shall use my bones. And if I lose my bones, I shall use my life—That is what it means to lust for battle.”

“Well then, I’ll have to shatter that declaration of yours.”

Pulling out a third knife from her waist, Elsa took a two blade stance as she once again rushed him.

Blade met blade, the clash of steel caused sparks to fly. With the force against one blade, Elsa swung the blade in her other arm.

The curved blade was aimed at Reinhard’s neck, but his long leg shot up into her arm, ensuring it wouldn’t reach him. Elsa used the momentum to withdraw and leap off the wall up to the ceiling. She then kicked off the ceiling to reach another wall.

In a manner befitting the ‘spider woman’ insult Subaru had lobbed at her, her movements around the room defied gravity and prevented Reinhard from going on the offensive.

She would freely attack from any direction and immediately withdraw, and Reinhard was completely focused on intercepting her attacks, not moving a single step from where he stood. However, it didn’t seem like there would ever be an end to this.

“Don’t tell me even Reinhard can’t finish her off…”

Elsa's inhuman skill was now at an entirely different level from when she was wielding a single blade.

It was like a boss character reaching their second phase. She had ascended to a higher realm.

And even Reinhard who was facing her possessed his powerful divine protection (Subaru didn't really understand much about this stuff, though) and his supreme combat ability, he too had transcended the realm of humanity.

It truly was a battle between Gods. But even so, it did seem to Subaru that Reinhard was superior in terms of ability, however,

"…He's being considerate of us."

Not-Satella whispered as she healed Rom, as if answering Subaru's doubts.

She sent a sidelong glance at Subaru when he went 'Eh?' and bit her lip restlessly,

"I'm using the spirit arts right now, so he can't fight seriously. At the very least, until I finish healing this person…"

"What's the connection there?"

"If he were truly intent on fighting, all the mana in the atmosphere would turn away from me. —I'm almost done here. When I give the signal, call out to him."

"Ye-Yeah."

Her explanation didn't quite hit the mark, but since she was relying on him, Subaru accepted despite his confusion.

The blue glow continued to heal the blow to Rom's head, and a cut that had been bleeding slightly. His wounds and the traces of blood on him gradually disappeared, and Satella sighed deeply as Subaru looked on in admiration.

After wiping off the scar tissue with some cloth, there was no longer any sign of the blow that had knocked him unconscious. As Subaru gasped at her magnificence, she tapped his shoulder.

“Please.”

“Leave it to me. —Reinhard! I don’t really get it, but do your thing!”

Subaru announced the completion of Rom’s treatment to Reinhard who was still on the defensive.

Reinhard glanced at him for a moment. When his eyes met Subaru’s, he gave a slight nod.

“—What are you going to show me?”

“The swordplay of the Astrea family—”

Elsa asked this mid-leap, and Reinhard’s answer was short and stern.

—Immediately after, Subaru felt the space within the loot house warp.

Chapter 22:
Starting Life in Another World from Zero

1

“Hah?”

The atmosphere before him seemed to be warping, and he got the feeling that the room was somehow getting darker.

Furthermore, the temperature that was already low from all that ice magic had now dropped even further, causing Subaru to clutch his shoulders as he shivered.

And then,

“Eh, huh, hey.”

“Excuse me… Lend me your shoulder for a bit.”

Subaru was in a panic as he supported the silver-haired girl who was now leaning on him.

Her delicate body felt terribly hot, and Subaru felt his heart race for a different reason than it had been until now. But those feelings vanished in an instant when he saw her expression.

Her breathing was rapid and shallow and she seemed to be suffering, as though she had a high fever.

“What’s wrong, did you suddenly feel unwell…”

“That’s not it. My mana… You understand, right?”

—I don’t understand at all.

He wanted to cross his arms and announce this, but this wasn’t the time.

The main factor sealing his lips was not the weight on his shoulder, but the change in the room's atmosphere—and who stood at the source of it.

In the center of the room, Reinhard held the two-handed sword in a low stance.

No, he had been holding it since the battle started. But even so, Subaru felt that it was appropriate to say that he was now holding it for the first time.

—Right, the Sword Saint, Reinhard, had just now readied his sword.

"The Bowel Hunter, Elsa Granhiert."

"—From the line of sword saints, Reinhard Van Astrea."

His sword's overwhelming aura enveloped the room, and their fighting spirit made the atmosphere tremble.

Elsa introduced herself with a lick of her lips, and Reinhard responded with a dignified nod.

In this place that had almost been turned into a ruin, the assassin dressed in black and the lightly dressed hero faced each other, the metal that would clash was on one side a knife drenched in blood, and on the other a rusty old two handed sword—Even so, Subaru gulped.

Having introduced themselves to one another, the two would now face each other one on one.

The brilliance of this scene was such that it truly appeared like a verse straight out of some epic.

"—!"

There was a breathless scream, was it Elsa, Reinhard, or Subaru himself as one would expect? It was unclear.

But the result was clear to all three of them.

A brilliant light tore through the loot house that had lost its roof, and split space itself in two.

It looked as if the world itself was misaligned, that extreme light dyed the room white in an instant, but the world suddenly changed when the light faded.

The misaligned space started to return to normal, and the aftershock of this power so great it even warped the atmosphere was now rampaging through the room as wind.

The surging wind enveloped the loot, the furniture, and the scrap wood and violently tossed them about, and Subaru desperately held on to Not-Satella and Rom to protect them from this disastrous collateral damage.

“Nuwaaah!! What the heeeelll?!”

He didn’t understand the blast wave, but he did know what caused it.

With all his might, he had swung his sword but a single time—That was all, and it led to this.

Raising his voice, he endured the wind and the pain. Finally, the storm faded, and the sounds of the loot and wood that were being flung about falling to the ground in addition to the dull sound of the building creaking announced that it was over.

Tossing aside a hanging scroll-like bit of wreckage that had fallen on his head, Subaru confirmed the safety of the two he had given his all to protect. It seemed Subaru’s cover wasn’t quite enough, it looked like Rom had some milk or something splashed on him, but he’d cut himself some slack for that much.

“What do you mean hunting monsters is your specialty, you’re quite the monster yourself!”

“Even I get hurt by words like those, Subaru.”

The source of this destruction, Reinhard, turned around and said this with a faint smile.

His seemingly blazing red hair had been ruffled by the storm, and even his nonchalant face had some sweat on it. As for the two handed sword he was holding—

“I pushed you too far. Rest easy.”

It crumbled in his hand, its poor craftsmanship could not withstand Reinhard’s attack.

An attack so powerful as to destroy a steel blade, and Elsa who took it head on,

“There isn’t even a piece of meat left…Maybe it’s actually a good thing that she completely disappeared like that.”

In the aftermath of the slash that seemed to split the world itself, there truly was nothing left.

The destruction had blown away the counter near the entrance along with the seats, and the shockwave even reached the clearing in front of the building. The violent winds caused much of the building to crumble, and even now it looked like the whole thing could collapse.

Naturally, the spot where Elsa had been standing was also within range of his slash. Her tall figure dressed in black was nowhere to be seen, and he couldn’t even begin to comment on Reinhard’s overwhelming power.

“But with this…”

Stretching his body that was stiff with tension, Subaru heaved a big sigh.

And as if to confirm the reality that he just couldn’t accept, he thought of the person next to him.

The silver-haired girl leaning on his shoulder—Though her breaths were still shallow, her amethyst eyes met Subaru’s gaze when she noticed he was looking at her.

“Is it over?”

"Yeah, just barely, in the true sense of the term."

Answering the question she weakly asked, Subaru supported her as she stood up. In doing so, Rom's head that was in her lap ended up falling to the ground, but that didn't really matter.

Having stood up, she fixed her hair and separated from Subaru, though her legs didn't seem very steady just yet.

Now that Not-Satella had left his side, Subaru stared closely at her.

"Why are you staring at me like that? I think that's reeeally rude."

"You've still got your head, and of course your limbs too."

"…Isn't that obvious? Could you not say such scary things?"

She probably didn't understand what he was feeling.

As she glowered at him with reproachful eyes, he raised his thumb and flashed his teeth,

"That's true isn't it, it's obvious. I've got my limbs too of course, and there's no knife sticking out of my back nor is there a massive hole in my stomach!"

"You speak as though you've actually experienced such things."

He did. Those were some seriously troublesome times.

Because of his uselessness, Not-Satella had lost her life, Rom had lost both his arm and his neck, and Felt had been sliced open, it was truly cruel.

"Speaking of which, Reinhard. I haven't thanked you yet. You seriously saved me. There was that time in the alley too, you must have heard my heart cry out, friend."

"I would be rather proud if I could do that, friend."

Reinhard shrugged his shoulders with a somewhat pained expression, and indicated a certain direction with his jaw.

Following his gesture, Subaru looked in that direction,

“Oh.”

The sight of the person standing there caused Subaru to feel his mouth unexpectedly change into a smile.

At the now destroyed entrance to the loot house, in the shadow of a barely standing pillar, was a girl with a snaggletooth and striking blonde hair looking their way timidly.

“She was running around the alleys desperately. She then asked for my help. It was thanks to her that I was able to come here. After that, I just did my duty as a knight.”

“A knight’s duty, huh. Does that include leveling old buildings?”

“Do you not think you’re being rather harsh, Subaru?”

Reinhard touched his chest as if that struck a nerve.

Now that he’d created such a disastrous scene, his unchanging friendliness seemed a little frightening. In other words, Ikemen Maji Ikemen.

“That girl is…”

Not-Satella, with her unsteady footing, also noticed Felt’s presence.

Subaru stepped between them as if to keep Felt out of her sight,

“Time out, time out. We’d most likely be dead if she hadn’t called Reinhard, you know? So out of consideration for my face, please spare her the ice sculpture punishment.”

“I wouldn’t be that violent. Also, out of consideration for your face…?”

Not-Satella rubbed her brow in exasperation.

Even that gesture of hers somehow brought Subaru joy.

They were both alive and on somewhat good terms, because of which they could mess around like this. It felt pretty misleading, but this was basically the development Subaru was hoping for.

“The rest depends on my negotiation, huh… That’s completely unreliable!”

“What’s the matter with you all of a sudden? You’re all flustered and it’s reeeeally disgraceful.”

Her words cut deep, Subaru placed his against his chest just like Reinhard had. But he only ended up looking funny and didn’t have the slightest bit of Reinhard’s coolness.

Watching their exchange, Reinhard smiled without a hint of malice. He then raised a hand toward Felt who was watching them silently, and started walking over to her.

Watching his gallant figure from behind didn’t even inspire envy, Subaru simply dropped his shoulders. So this was the difference between those who had it all and those who had nothing.

Though cautious, Felt seemed to be grateful for his help, she did not try to run away when Reinhard approached her.

Subaru found the sight somewhat charming as he watched them,

“—Subaru!”

When Reinhard suddenly turned to him and shouted, causing him to realize they weren’t out of the woods just yet.

“—!!”

Some wooden wreckage burst open and a black shadow emerged from underneath.

The shadow’s black hair danced behind it as it firmly pushed against the ground to accelerate, dripping blood all the while.

Tightly grasping a crushed kukri knife, Elsa wordlessly dashed toward them covered in blood.

"You—!"

The murderer had kept her life by somehow evading that incredible slash, and her eyes were now filled with absolute darkness.

The killing intent she was now releasing was the greatest thus far, and it was like ice down Subaru's back.

She would reach them in mere seconds, in that time Subaru's thoughts raced rapidly.

A crushed knife. An instantaneous exchange. She's probably betting it all on one shot. Reinhard won't make it in time. If I somehow survive just one attack, Reinhard can take it from there. Not-Satella doesn't even have time to turn around. Who's the target? This third time, I'll protect her.

Protectprotectprotectprotectprotectprotectprotectprotectprotectprotectprote

"She's aiming for the gut she's aiming for the gut she's aiming for the guuuuuut!!"

He pushed Not-Satella out of the way and immediately raised the club he was still holding to guard his abdomen—Impact.

The force behind the horizontal slash was such that it felt more like a heavy blunt force attack than cutting one.

The impact to his gut swept him off his feet and he felt the world turn upside down as he coughed up blood.

His field of view kept spinning. In truth it was his body that was spinning, having been blown away.

He had no clue how far he had been sent flying and ended up crashing into the wall completely defenseless.

"This kid again—"

Elsa clicked her tongue in frustration as she looked at Subaru whom she had sent flying.

She then turned to Not-Satella who was standing stock still, but,

“That’s enough, Elsa!”

Reinhard had returned, and she realized it would be meaningless to continue fighting.

She threw the kukri knife in her hand at Reinhard, though it was completely bent from her final attack against Subaru. It failed to reach him due to his divine protection of arrow avoidance, but,

“Someday, I shall slice open the bellies of everyone in this room. So until then, do take good care of your bowels.”

It bought Elsa enough time to leap away atop the wreckage.

It would take too much effort to pursue her now that she was nimbly leaping from rooftop to rooftop. Not wanting to fight anymore, Reinhard intentionally stayed behind, choosing not to chase after her.

After he saw her fade into the distance, he ran over to the silver-haired girl.

“Are you unhurt—”

“That doesn’t really matter, does it?! More importantly—”

Worry flashed across Reinhard’s handsome face, but she brushed him off and forced her unsteady legs to move toward the wall—Toward Subaru, who had collapsed upside down.

“Hey, are you alright?! That was far too reckless.”

“Y-Yeeeah… Th-That was nothing. That was exactly the time to act reckless, ya know? I was the only one who could move, and I knew right away where she would strike.”

Subaru raised his hand as Satella’s worried face drew closer, and then gently rubbed his abdomen where he had been hit. He was terribly bruised, when he rolled his jersey up he saw that everything underneath had turned purple.

‘Uegh’, he stuck his tongue out at this disgusting sight, he then rolled over and used the momentum to stand up.

“She’s really gone this time, right?”

“My apologies, Subaru. This happened because of my negligence. If you weren’t there, the outcome would have been much worse. If anything were to happen to her, I…”

“Stop stop stop stop! Don’t say another word! I’ve been acting pretty pompous thus far, if I leave even that part to someone else I won’t be rewarded.”

Subaru stopped Reinhard’s apology, and smiled at him when he fell silent. He then slowly turned to the silver-haired girl looking up at him, and met her gaze.

She stirred slightly, and then stood up. They were about two steps apart, he could touch her if he reached out. It was a long, hard road to get here, thinking back on it caused powerful emotions to well up within him.

When Subaru suddenly closed his eyes and fell silent, she looked like she wanted to say something.

But before she could open her mouth, Subaru thrust his finger into the sky.

With his left hand on his hip and his right hand reaching into the sky, he completely ignored the surprised gazes of those around him and loudly raised his voice.

“My name is Natsuki Subaru! I know there’s tons of things you want to say and tons of things you want to ask, but set that aside for now and hear me out!”

“Wh-What…?”

“Just now, I saved your life by protecting you from that evil blade! Are we okay on that?!”

“O—Kei?”

“Meaning is that clear. So, are we okay on that?!”

Subaru twisted his body into the shapes of O and K, and in response the silver-haired girl responded ‘O-Okay’ as she twitched.

Subaru nodded enthusiastically, and continued as if pressing her for an answer.

“The one who rescued you, the savior of your life, was me. And the heroine whom I saved was you. So naturally I ought to receive a fitting reward, right? Right?!”

“…I get it. Only if it’s something I can do, though.”

“Alright then, I have but one wish, just a single one.”

Subaru raised a single finger and thrust it before her, emphasizing his words further. He then wriggled his fingers which made her somewhat anxious, after which he cleared his throat and shot her a lecherous smile as she nodded with a grim expression.

“Right, my request—”

“Yeah.”

Flashing his teeth and snapping his fingers, he raised his thumb and donned a posed look,

“I want you to tell me your name.”

Her eyes widened, her expression was one of astonishment.

The room fell silent for a while, and Subaru started to tremble slightly as he maintained his posed look.

The feeling he’d disregarded earlier came back in the form of extreme embarrassment, but he couldn’t lose his nerve before even seeing their reactions, that was the worst cliche in this sort of situation.

So he remained silent, and waited for the girl’s response.

He was ready for anything, be it lumps of ice, icicles or even a freezing beam. Ah, he'd rather not deal with the freezing beam.

"Fufu."

As Subaru's thoughts rapidly turned to extreme situations, they were drowned out by the faint sound of someone giggling.

With her hand against her lips and her white cheeks flushed, the girl smiled as her silver hair swayed behind her.

It was not a smile of resignation nor was it a faint fleeting smile, and it certainly wasn't a grim smile prepared for the worst. She simply smiled because she was happy, that was all it was.

"—Emilia."

"Eh…"

In response to the word she said following her laugh, Subaru could only let out a small gasp.

Seeing this reaction, she straightened her posture and smiled impishly with a finger to her lip.

"My name is Emilia. Just Emilia. Thank you, Subaru."

"For saving me." She said as she offered her hand.

Subaru looked down at her fair hand and timidly touched it. Her fingers were slender, her palm was small, her hand was delicate and terribly warm, a woman's hand with blood flowing through it.

—Thank you for saving me.

She wasn't the only one who wanted to say these words, that went for Subaru as well. She was the one who had saved him first. All this meant was that he was finally able to repay her.

He had been slaughtered thrice before he finally reached this point.

After all that pain, all that sorrow, all those horrible memories, after he fought to the bitter end with his life on the line, his reward was her name and a smile.

Aah, seriously—

“Man, that’s not nearly enough.”

Saying this, Subaru smiled as well as he firmly returned the girl—Emilia’s grip.

2

—That would have been a good spot to end things, but…

“At any rate, I’m glad you’re alright, Subaru.”

He was probably waiting for Subaru to finish his conversation with Emilia.

Having been forcibly silenced, Reinhard now spoke a few words of surprise at Subaru’s safety.

Perhaps that meant that even to someone like him, Elsa’s final attack must have looked devastating.

Subaru lightly pressed his sore abdomen and then pointed to the club on the floor.

The spiked club served as an excellent shield, just as its thick and study appearance suggested.

That may not have been what it was intended for, but even so.

“It’s because I was able to use that to block right away. If it weren’t for that, my torso would be split in two right now.”

“Right, if it weren’t for this—”

He wouldn’t have been able to avoid BAD END 4, Subaru smiled casually and Reinhard smiled along with him as he innocently picked the club up,

“Huh?”

In his hand, part of the club slid off due to the smooth cut going through it, producing a dull sound as it hit the ground.

Now that it was split in two, its days of service were over.

Reinhard slowly looked in Subaru’s direction with pained eyes.

Following his gaze, Subaru felt an unpleasant premonition as he rolled his jersey up. His torso was completely purple from the bruising just like before, but there was a difference.

—There was a red line going across it.

“Ah, this is bad. Even I can tell what happens next.”

The sharp pain arrived first.

The next instant—Subaru’s abdomen split along the middle, causing copious amounts of blood to gush out.

“—Hey, Subaru?!”

Subaru could hear Emilia’s panicked voice from right beside him.

Aah, I finally heard her real name and now it looks like this could be the end.

—But even so, I’ll probably come back here again.

His field of view tilted. Perhaps his body had collapsed.

Reinhard looked panicked as well, and Emilia’s well-featured face drew closer as she looked at him with an expression of sorrow.

—Aah, so cute even when she’s panicking, a true parallel world fantasy.

With that final impression, similar to a certain other time, the sharp pain and shock swept his consciousness away like surging waves.

Interlude: The Moon is Watching

A faint blue light. —As he watched the water-like waves administer healing from a distance, Reinhard heaved a sigh so faint no one noticed it.

His handsome profile was rather despondent and his clothing was slightly battle-worn. His figure standing before the wreckage was such that an image of it would be a masterpiece in itself.

However, despite his objective brilliance, from his subjective viewpoint, his inadequacy brought him such chagrin that no amount of words could describe it.

Even now, Emilia was putting her all into healing Subaru. The wound he had received was due to the opening created by Reinhard's conceit.

He had let Subaru sustain an injury that shouldn't have reached him, and placed an unnecessary burden on Emilia.

Furthermore, due to his innate characteristics he would only hinder Emilia if he was by her side.

Watching from afar like this was the best he could do, realizing that some part of him was calmly acting on this judgement increased his guilt even further.

"—Alright, that should be enough."

As Reinhard condemned himself with his eyes closed, a voice like a silver bell reached his ears.

Emilia lightly brushed away his bangs as if wiping his forehead, and confirmed that his face was tinged red. She then stood up with a nod and turned around.

"I've finished his treatment. —Looks like we're past the worst of it."

“That’s splendid news. Now, Lady Emilia…”

Reinhard briskly walked over to Emilia who seemed satisfied, and dropped to his knee and lowered his head. Not a single one of his movements were lacking, his etiquette was flawless.

“Due to my inadequacy, I have caused you a great deal of anxiety. I shall accept any punishment for this failure.”

He placed his sword before his knee as he apologized for his failings.

To a knight, this was the highest form of apology. Reinhard was prepared to accept any order or punishment she may give him.

However, in response to his apology, Emilia said, “You know, I don’t really understand why you people are like that.”

“Huh?” he replied.

“You came to save us from danger, and somehow settled things without anyone dying. Despite this, you’re now trying to take responsibility for all the pain and suffering that occurred in the process.”

She waved her finger and pouted, a little displeased.

She then suddenly turned her finger toward Subaru, who was sound asleep. “That kid’s a lot more straightforward. He saved my life, and thus demanded a reward. Although he really didn’t ask for very much.”

Reinhard too had seen Subaru try to act cool as he asked for her name. As Emilia smiled thinking back on it, Reinhard’s lips ended up forming a smile as well.

“So,” Emilia suddenly narrowed her amethyst eyes at Reinhard. “thank you for helping us. —That’s all I have to say to you. As far as I’m concerned you haven’t done anything wrong, so there shall be no punishment. If you can’t accept that, then do your best from next time onward.”

"—Understood," Reinhard replied. "I am thankful for your kind words."

After lowering his head even further to show his respect, Reinhard stood up.

Now that the two were facing each other, Reinhard ended up looking down at her since he was much taller. Even so, what was that majesty he had just felt from her?

It was probably the difference in their caliber, Reinhard guessed, aware of his narrow-mindedness.

On the other hand, this only reaffirmed the fact that Emilia too was one of the 'Chosen'.

"By the way, you're dressed rather lightly today…"

Emilia murmured as if she just realized this as she watched his silent form.

Her eyes were on his clothes. —Since he was off-duty today, he wore dark clothes suited to a stroll around the capital. He understood that the fact that he didn't look very much like a knight must have been strange to her.

"Today is one of my rare days off, so I wasn't wearing my imperial uniform. My armor is presently in the castle, so for today my sword is the only knightly object I have on me."

He placed his sword back at his hip, its conspicuous claw marks catching Emilia's eye.

She then blinked, seeming somewhat surprised. "How come you got wrapped up in this on your day off?"

"That's a little complicated, but… It was thanks to Subaru over there."

It was his encounter with the boy who was presently unconscious that led him here.

If he were to explain things in order, he would have to start with the alley where he first met Subaru and spoke with him.

Back then, Subaru had revealed to Reinhard that he was looking for a silver-haired girl in a white robe. Reinhard knew of only one person who fit that description.

Subaru wished to meet her. While in the process of investigating him, Reinhard ended up coming to the slums. "I met her along the way, and then arrived here."

"Right, that girl."

Now that she had been brought up, Emilia's eyes turned to a corner of the clearing—to the girl who was tending to the still unconscious old man.

Feeling her gaze, the blonde girl turned around and then lowered her eyes awkwardly.

"Lady Emilia, she…"

"Reinhard. You've been a great help. I'm grateful that you saved us. But I have one more request: don't interfere any further."

In response to her firm words, Reinhard gave up on saying anything further.

Taking his silence as a yes, Emilia walked toward the blonde girl. The girl also turned to face her, as if prepared for the worst.

"Is that old man your family?"

Emilia leaned over to meet the crouching girl's gaze as she asked this.

The girl was dumbfounded by this question. That was probably because this was entirely different from the sort of words she was expecting to hear.

Even Reinhard, who did not know their circumstances, could tell that their relationship was not a friendly one.

The girl, who seemed to have the wind taken out of her sails, scratched her cheek as she tried to compose herself, and repeatedly tapped the unconscious old man's head as if to hide her embarrassment.

"S-Something like that. To me, Old Man Rom is my only… Yeah, something like a grandpa I guess."

"I see," said Emilia. "I've only got one family member too. He's always asleep when it matters. I could never say that sort of thing while he's awake, though."

"Yeah, I couldn't say this sort of thing if Rom was awake either."

It seemed like her blows to Rom's head were becoming more than just taps. This was probably unintentional. Her pace increased as well, and his round white head started turning red.

She then looked up at Emilia with a frail light in her red eyes. "I thought you'd be way harsher."

"I suppose you would. Perhaps I would have if things were the way they were before, but it seems I don't feel like it now. So I'll let it go out of consideration for that kid's face, just a little, though."

Emilia shrugged her shoulders with a wry smile like it just couldn't be helped.

When she did this and pointed Subaru out, the blonde girl lowered her face for a bit, and then quietly mouthed an apology. "I'm sorry," she began. "You saved my life. I can't act ungrateful. I'll return what I stole."

Saying this, she stood up and directed her gaze toward the alley.

She then addressed Emilia. "Listen," she said. "When I came back, I wasn't sure you guys were even alive… So I hid it elsewhere. Is it fine if I go to retrieve it?"

"I see you're rather cautious… I don't dislike it, though. I'll wait here."

"…Are you sure? I might be making stuff up to run away, you know?"

"Running is fine, but you'll have that coming after you, you know?"

Reinhard, or that, as Emilia referred to him, straightened his posture.

It was a mystery what the blonde girl felt when she saw him do this, 'Uee', she let out a sound showing deep displeasure and then dashed into the alley saying she'd be right back.

"Once she comes back and returns everything… We'll finally be able to go back, huh."

"I won't ask for details, but do be careful. —I shall have a squad join you, please allow them to accompany you on your way home."

"Going that far is… Even if I say that, I suppose it hardly makes a difference considering how much trouble I've already put you through. Very well."

Having received her consent, Reinhard responded with an "Understood." He then followed her gaze to Subaru, who was sleeping peacefully. "Well then," he said. "What is your relationship with him—with Subaru?"

"Passing acquaintances," Emilia replied.

Reinhard was taken aback by her immediate answer.

Perhaps finding his reaction amusing, Emilia's lips broadened into a smile. "That's all I can tell you, we really are just passing acquaintances. I don't remember ever meeting him prior. I believe just now should have been our first meeting…"

"However, he was looking for you," Reinhard informed her. "He said he wanted to give you something. He was here during all of this, and also…"

He put his life on the line to protect you. Reinhard hesitated to speak this next part out loud.

It felt like doing so would somehow sully the nobility of his actions. He surely did not do it to receive praise.

Furthermore, Emilia probably understood without having to be told.

She continued from the part Reinhard did not speak out loud. “That’s what’s strange about it… Although I do suspect that that pervert might have something to do with this.”

“Please refrain from speaking poorly of Lord Roswaal,” Reinhard retorted. “He is a magnificent person. It is true that he is somewhat eccentric, but…”

“You knew who I was talking about, so it’s rather obvious what you think of him.”

“…My apologies. Please keep this secret from Lord Roswaal.”

Reinhard winked as he apologized, and Emilia ambiguously replied, “Right, right.”

After this, Reinhard once again raised the topic of Subaru. “What shall we do with him? If you wish to leave him to me, my family can take him in as a guest.”

“…No, I’ll take him with me,” Emilia answered. “I’ll be able to find out exactly who he is, and even supposing he isn’t connected to that pervert, the fact remains that he saved me.”

“Thank you for your concern.” She finished, and Reinhard responded with a nod.

With that, their discussion had concluded for the most part. What was left was to assign some subordinates to Emilia and escort her home safely. In the meantime, Reinhard would also have to deal with the aftermath.

Taking a look at the collapsing building, Reinhard closed his eyes at the scale of the damage.

As usual, he cursed his lack of self-control. He had failed to restrain just a bit of his power and this was the result. His power would wipe away the entire region if used carelessly, he had to be cautious.

“What’s going to become of this place?”

“We’ll forbid entry into the area for a while and put up some wanted posters for the Bowel Hunter. Although there’s always plenty of shady rumors surrounding her, so there’s a good chance it would only be a waste of time.”

“And that girl and the old man?”

“…I’m unsure of the circumstances, but considering my duty as a knight, I do not believe I can overlook their actions. However,” He paused and took a breath, and then shrugged slightly. “It’s my day off, and furthermore, if the victim does not file a complaint, it would be difficult to pursue the matter due to a lack of evidence. Ha-ha. Seriously, I don’t know the situation, so.”

“Fufu, you’re a bad knight.”

“Sadly, this is the true nature of the man known by such titles as the knight among knights.”

As they spoke, Reinhard sensed someone approaching them from the alley. From her gait and breathing, he knew it was that girl without even needing to look.

The snaggle-toothed girl showed herself and looked at them with an embarrassed expression. “I brought it back like I said I would.”

“Great, I’m glad you came back. I’d feel reeeally guilty if I had to set this guy on you.”

“The knight among knights; it’d be insane to try to outrun someone like that. This is my first time seeing someone faster than me. That shocked me quite a bit.”

Responding to her gaze with a smile, Reinhard took a step back and watched the two.

The girl approached Emilia while fishing around her chest. “Alright, I’m returning this. —If it’s important to you, conceal it so it doesn’t get stolen next time.”

“I find it a bit strange to receive that warning from you of all people… If possible, I’d prefer you stopped doing this sort of thing entirely.”

“That’s impossible. Let me tell you, I only wanted to return this to you because you saved my life. I don’t think I’ve done anything wrong, and I have no intention of stopping.”

She bluntly refused Emilia’s request and donned a stubborn smile.

Her profile felt rather tragic when one considered her age. Even as he heard her position on the matter, Reinhard silently accepted it.

He knew that this definitely wasn’t something he should overlook considering his responsibilities. But how else could they survive? It wouldn’t be right to simply speak of justice without even offering an alternative.

Reinhard’s thoughts were the result of all he had seen in the capital.

Emilia seemed to feel it as well. She lowered her eyes for one fleeting moment, and then extended her hand without pressing the matter any further,

“I see… You’re pretty stubborn, huh.”

“I might stop if food just appeared before me without me having to do anything, though. Anyway, here you go.”

The object she took out was in the palm of her hand, she was returning what appeared to be the stolen item to Emilia.

For an instant, a red shine flashed by his eyes. That dazzling light felt familiar, and in an instant Reinhard narrowed his eyes and searched his ocean of memories.

He then found a memory that matched,

"—Eh"

"Reinhard…?"

He grabbed her hand which was holding the insignia from the side.

Surprise filled both the girls' eyes. The two of them looked up at Reinhard, and hesitated to say anything further when they saw his serious expression and gaze.

"Th-That hurts… Let go…"

Felt weakly shook her head as she resisted.

However, Reinhard's grip on her hand showed no signs of loosening. Reinhard's strength was such that he could even crush steel if he wished. Although he was holding back, it definitely wasn't the sort of grip a dainty girl could shake off.

"What is this…"

A quavering murmur. It had come from Reinhard's mouth.

It was Emilia who responded to his words. Her amethyst eyes seemed shaken,

"Reinhard, wait. I do understand that it won't be easy to let her off just like that. But she didn't know the insignia's true value. And I, the person she stole it from, don't intend to make an issue of it either. —I was also at fault for letting it get stolen, so. So."

"That's not it, Lady Emilia. That's not what I'm worried about."

The firm tone of his response caused Emilia to fall silent with a perplexed expression.

Even disregarding his rudeness toward her, Reinhard looked at the girl whose arm he was holding. Looking up at the young man whose hair was the same color as her crimson eyes, her eyes wavered with unease.

"…What is your name?"

“Fe-Felt…”

“Your surname? How old are you?”

“I-I’m an orphan, you know? I don’t have anything fancy like a surname. My age is…probably around fifteen, or so I’m told. I don’t know my birthday. Hey, let me go!”

The girl returned to her usual self as they spoke, and struggled as she yelled in a coarse tone. However, Reinhard kept her in check with his dexterous control over his strength as he fixed his eyes on Emilia.

“Lady Emilia, I can no longer uphold our agreement. —I shall take charge of her.”

“…May I ask about the reason? If it’s about punishment for stealing my insignia…”

“That is certainly no small sin… But compared to the sin of overlooking what’s happening in front of me, it is but a trifling matter.”

Emilia raised her eyebrow in confusion and incomprehension.

Reinhard deemed her confusion something that couldn’t be helped and simply accepted it. After all, this was a sight she was used to. It would probably be cruel to tell her to notice it.

“I would like to take you with me. My apologies, but you do not have the right to refuse.”

“Don’t screw…don’t get carried away just because you saved…?”

Her foul-mouthed response to his words was interrupted when her body went limp.

Her shoulders mysteriously lost their strength before she could finish, and she resentfully glared at Reinhard to the very end,

“Go to hell… Damn it.”

After she hurled this final abuse, her head slumped.

Supporting her unconscious body, Reinhard smoothly carried her under his arm. In response to his practiced movements, Emilia,

“That’s not very knightly of you either… If you’re too harsh, there will be lasting effects on her gate.”

“Fortunately, I’ve had to deal with this from birth so I understand how to control it. —Lady Emilia, it seems you may soon receive a summons. Please understand.”

He gently took the insignia from the unconscious girl’s hand and presented it to Emilia.

The draconic insignia truly appeared to symbolize ‘The Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica’ itself. The red jewel emitted a faint glow in Reinhard’s hand. When it was passed to Emilia, it shone brilliantly as if overjoyed to be reunited with its owner.

“I shall leave Subaru in your hands.”

Reinhard bowed to Emilia who wordlessly gazed at him once she accepted the insignia.

As he felt the weight of the light girl in his arms, he suddenly brushed the bangs covering her forehead aside. Her cherubic white features possessed a charm befitting her age now that she was unconscious and thus had no need to brace herself.

If he gave her a change of clothes and got the alleys’ grime off her, she would surely shine brightly.

A strong wind blew, causing Reinhard’s red bangs to dance.

He looked up at the sky through that gap, it was already dusk and the moon floated in the capital’s sky.

The full moon shone a faint bluish white, its beauty was filled with a certain bewitching charm.

“Today might be my final opportunity to calmly gaze upon the moon—”

Reinhard’s whisper did not reach anyone but the moon looking down at him.

Bonus Short Stories

Emilia's Capital Touring Chronicle

1

"—The capital really is suuuuper huge after all."

With her hands joined in front of her chest, the girl said this in a lively voice as her eyes sparkled at the scenery before her.

She was a beautiful girl. She possessed long, silky silver hair that reached her hips. Her braided silver hair was accentuated by a white flower accessory, quite literally giving her a flower-like loveliness.

Her skin was as fair as virgin snow, her slender, well-proportioned limbs were draped in a dress with a white theme, and her amethyst eyes that were admiring the townscape sparkled so beautifully it was if there were jewels embedded in them.

Her beauty was such that one would not hesitate in the slightest to call her the loveliest girl in the world. However, the way the girl was looking around her surroundings full of excitement was just a little too childish to fit that description.

Her eyes followed the sea of people passing to the left and to the right. Once glance at her eyes that were full of curiosity as if looking at something novel would be enough to tell that what she was feeling was somewhat akin to someone from the country visiting the big city for the first time.

"You're very cute when you're having fun like this, but perhaps it's about time you returned to reality—"

Raining on her parade was a voice whispering so it would only reach her slightly longer than normal ears. However, there was no one around her. But the voice was quite literally right by her ear, so —

"—M, Come on, I already know that the situation has gotten a bit troublesome. You're being so mean even though I only stopped for a moment."

"Well, it's not like I want to earn my daughter's ire by endlessly scolding her either. But this is going to be quite a bother to the others as well, and you don't want that either, right?"

"That's true, but…"

The voice continued its sound argument and the girl despondently lowered her head in response. As she did this, a small figure nimbly pushed its way through her hair out to her shoulder. This was—

"Anyway, try looking around for a place that looks familiar. There's no point in getting dejected."

Offering this forward-thinking proposal while stroking its whiskers was a cat small enough to fit in one's palm.

It was coated in gray fur, with big, round eyes and a pink nose. Setting aside its size, that was all there was to say about its appearance, but where it differed most from an ordinary cat was in the fact that it was standing on two legs.

Waving its tail that was about as long as the rest of its body, the cat purred atop the girl's shoulder.

"I suppose your final option would be to build up your courage and ask someone. Can you do that, Lia?"

"Don't make fun of me. Of course I can do something that simple. Puck, you blockhead, you're always treating me like a kid."

"How else would you treat a kid that ended up losing their attendant because they were having too much fun?"

In response to his words that were both carefree and flippant, all the girl could do was pout.

The cat known as Puck smiled as the girl started behaving like a kid immediately after complaining about being treated like a kid.

“Alright, this is going to be a real problem if the sun goes down. You’d better find your way while I can still help you, Emilia.”

“I’m not some lost kid. I just ended up getting a little confused about the area!”

Becoming stubborn in response to his call, the girl—Emilia started walking with a prim expression.

Toward the endless sea of people before her, in order to find the servant girl she had lost.

2

The capital city of Lugunica, possessing a population exceeding 300,000, was the world’s foremost metropolis in terms of populace and was the core of the Dragon Kingdom,

At its center was the royal castle, and the city—The royal capital was a melting pot of all sorts of races, always bustling with activity and overflowing energy, one could spend their entire day watching the people walking on the streets without getting bored.

In particular, the commercial district, also known as the ‘trading street’, which was home to countless stalls and hawkers, and had any number of high quality goods or curios imported from other countries lined up due to which it was always dizzyingly busy.

“…Humans really are amazing.”

Somehow making it out of the wave of people, Emilia escaped to the side of the street and paused to take a breath. Smoothing down her ruffled silver hair, she once again examined the street once she was done with her short break.

The trading street was filled to the brim with people passing back and forth, conversing and negotiating endlessly. One street, just a single shopping street had this many people on it. Just the mere thought of how difficult it would be to find a single person in all of this depressed her.

“That girl was wearing a rather conspicuous outfit herself, but…

Even that doesn’t really mean much in the capital, huh.”

Puck who was slipping back into her hair spoke her thoughts out loud. Poking the cat as if she were touching her hair, Emilia lowered the ends of her eyebrows looking troubled.

“Yeah, that’s going to be a problem… Also, you’d better be careful too, Puck. It’d cause a real panic if anyone were to see you, you could just go back into your crystal since you don’t have anything to do.”

“I do have something to do, though, I’m your conversation partner. It’d be a problem if you started crying because I left you alone. But anyway, what are you going to do? Wanna haphazardly wander around at random with no destination whatsoever?”

“The way you put it seems like I’d probably never ever find her. I’ll have to use my head on this one.”

Shaking her head at his proposal, Emilia tapped her head with her finger.

With this, Emilia fell deep in thought and Puck started grooming his fur as he patiently waited for her brilliant idea. But what emerged from her was not a brilliant idea—

“—Look, Puck. It looks like there’s a bit of a quarrel going on over there.”

“Liiiaaa.”

“A little! Just a little bit! I’m curious, so I’ll head over there for just one moment!”

On the other side of the street, she could see that some curious onlookers were gathering around a stall some distance away. In response to what Emilia said when she saw this, Puck sighed in a somewhat troubled manner.

“Hey, Lia, you’re in trouble yourself, you know?”

“Y-You’re wrong. It’s not like I want to help them or anything…

Right, I just feel like taking a look.”

Looking as evil as she could and yet still quite cute, Emilia ran over to the disturbance. Making her way through the crowd, she made it to the front of the onlookers. And then—

“C’mon, Mimi keeps telling you—. Mimi doesn’t do things like dining and dashing. Mimi just ended up losing Hetaro who had the wallet, so Mimi’s in a lot of trouble!”

“You too, young lady, how many times are you going to make me repeat myself. I don’t know about this missing person, but you’ve already eaten my product, so I must receive the appropriate compensation. Aah, if your companion isn’t with you, you could use your possessions instead....”

“Mimi’s got this staff and stuff, but if Mimi hands it over the lady’s going to be super mad at Mimi!”

The sight of the two who were quarrelling in the middle of all of these rubberneckers caused Emilia’s eyes to widen.

One of the two parties who were arguing was a tall, dark-skinned man, and judging by his appearance he was probably the owner of the stall in question. And facing him was the one who had been arguing with him all this time, a person with a small build who was much shorter than him.

They were a cat-like beastman bearing round ears and orange hair. They were probably of the catman race. In terms of height they barely even reached Emilia’s waist, and their large white robe covered their entire body. Possessing cute, round eyes and an adorable nose, she was a girl whose entire body seemed to exude loveliness.

Judging by the contents of their conversation it seemed as though she was unable to pay the bill she owed the stall, but,

“Mimi doesn’t want to be thought of as someone who dines and dashes either. You want this staff, old man?”

“I feel guilty after all! That’s quite a decent staff, isn’t it? How troublesome…”

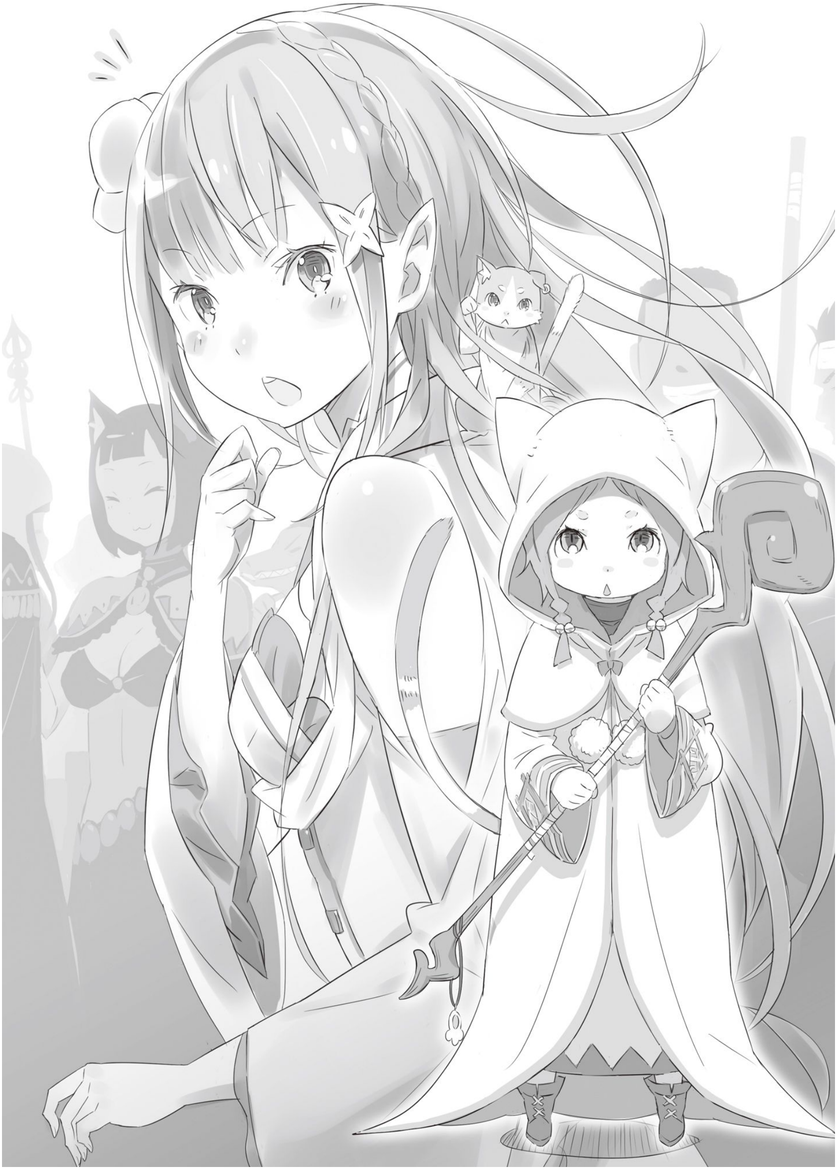

“Gosh, that Hetaro, getting lost so easily! Mimi’s mad at you as your older sister.”

“Excuse me…”

As the concerned parties started wearing themselves out, someone raised their hand and interfered. The girl and the shopkeeper were both surprised, the one standing between them was none other than Emilia.

Emilia had timidly stepped in, and with the two of them staring at her she continued, “Umm,”

“I happened to overhear, but… Basically, you just need compensation for what this girl ate, is that right?”

“Ah, yeah, that’s right, but… Young lady, are you this girl’s acquaintance?”

“Eh, this lady’s my acquaintance? First time I’m hearing of it! I don’t know her at all!”

“No, I don’t know her either. This is my first time seeing her.”

“Ehh—?!”

Emilia and the kitten, caught between the airheadedness of these two the shopkeeper screamed in despair. But Emilia disregarded this and quietly reached into her pocket.

“But I’ll pay for her. That should solve everything, right?”

“That would certainly be a great help, but… You don’t even know this girl, right?”

“True enough, I don’t know her, but… She does look reeeeally cute.”

This felt sloppy even for an excuse made up on the spot, but the shopkeeper seemed to conclude that Emilia was being considerate in her own way.

The shopkeeper nodded as if giving up, and Emilia smiled at him as she pulled out her purse.

“…Eh, eh?”

The hand digging around in her pocket was unable to grasp what it was supposed to. Emilia carefully checked every nook and cranny of her bosom, hips and sleeves and then nodded deeply.

“—Looks like I dropped my purse somewhere.”

The heartrending murmur of the girl who had lost her attendant in the middle of the capital and was now completely penniless dominated the area.

3

Having announced that she would shoulder the girl’s debt, Emilia was now in quite the predicament now that it turned out that her purse was missing.

Her attempt at philanthropy, or rather, philcathropy had ended up like this. Feeling Puck sigh in exasperation from within her hair, Emilia was unable to say anything in response as she fretted.

She had to find some way to break through this situation. But just how in the world could she—And then, in that place that had fallen silent, her brain arrived at one hope. That was,

“—I’m going to perform. If you find it entertaining, please toss me some money.”

“Eh?”

This impromptu announcement of a street performance caused all the bystanders to tilt their heads.

Among all these faces of astonishment, only Emilia who started preparing with a face that looked as though she was intending to do this from the very start, and the catman girl who was delighted, “Ooh! A performance! How fun!” Were different.

Needless to say, not even Puck was able to follow this completely unexpected idea of hers. The cat rustled around in her hair as he changed position, and quietly whispered into Emilia’s ear.

“Lia, Lia, I’m afraid to ask this, but what’s this all of a sudden?”

“I just remembered, Puck. If you show off some unique performances in a place with lots of people around, you can get money, isn’t that right? I think this is the perfect solution for me and this girl since we’re both broke!”

“You’re definitely cute when you’re trying hard, but there are times when I wonder if I went wrong somewhere while raising you. For instance, now would be one of those times.”

It was already too late to turn back, and Emilia had no intention of turning back either, Puck’s lamentations had no effect on her.

Neglecting to even prepare the bystanders for what was to come, Emilia took a step forward and started breathing deeply. Standing before the stall, right in front of all of these onlookers, the area naturally ended up getting monopolized by Emilia.

“I shall now have an extremely rare animal perform for all of you.”

“I’ve suddenly got a bad feeling that I’m about to get wrapped up in this.”

“Let’s go.”

Emilia thrust her right hand out in front of the onlookers and declared this.

The spectators seemed baffled as she showed them her empty palm. Unfazed by their reactions, Emilia signaled to Puck who was taking quite a while to emerge from her hair.

“C’mon, please. Hey, Puck. Come out.”

“It’s not that I mistimed my appearance, it’s that I don’t want to appear at all. But I'd rather not humiliate you in front of everyone, so I suppose I'll have to come out."

Shrugging his shoulders as he sighed, Puck was dejected as he reluctantly forced himself to creep out of her hair. His appearance instantly caused a commotion, and even as this happened he continued to walk across her upper her arm and elbow until he finally reached her palm where he raised both paws and proclaimed, "Victory"

The crowd grew excited in an instant. Emilia thought this response meant she was doing well—

"This is an extremely rare animal. I shall now have it…"

"S-Spirit! It's a spirit! She's a spirit user!"

"Crap, run! Drop your weapons and all the money you have and run!"

Perhaps she should have him dance, as Emilia thought up a program the crowd in front of her dispersed and ran off. They dropped everything they had on them, and the panic started spreading to people who weren't even involved. Like this, the commotion continued to spread and when the dust finally settled, the street was completely deserted.

Emilia was dumbfounded by this, and Puck who was still on her palm started grooming his face with his palm as he spoke,

"Just about everyone would run away if they saw a spirit. It was just like you said."

"That's true, but… They didn't need to be that surprised, did they?"

Accepting Puck's words, Emilia sulked a bit as she looked around her surroundings. She was surrounding by all the things the onlookers had discarded. Going by the rules of street performances, all of these things now belonged to Emilia. Of course, she wouldn't actually take them.

"…Your dancing is so cute, it would have been nice if they saw it before they went home.”

“To call that reaction going home, I quite like your elegance.”

The two had this frivolous exchange. And then—

“Ohh! This cat’s really talking! How? How can you talk? Are you the same as Mimi? Are you a catman? You’re tiny! Super tiny! Ufuhahaha—”

“This kid’s pretty bold, huh. If you consider appearance alone we’re certainly rivals in terms of prettiness, but we’re entirely different beings.”

“Is that so? How do ya know that?”

“I’m Lia’s father, and you’re that Hetaro kid’s elder sister, isn’t that right?”

“It’s true—!”

For some reason, Puck’s joke caused the aforementioned girl to explode with laughter. Anyway, she was genuinely happy that this girl stayed with them.

If even she had run away, even Emilia would surely be hurt.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Emilia’s eyes widened as she examined the fallen items. The reason for this was one of the items by her feet—A white purse placed on top of some somewhat dirty wrapping.

She crouched down and picked it up, and then nodded when she confirmed its feel.

“It really is the purse I lost… Why is it in a place like?”

“—Perhaps some kind hearted soul brought it here?”

Puck said this as if bored, and yawned as he slipped back into her silver hair.

He was basically declaring that he was done. This upset the catman girl, but she immediately returned to her usual self and started wagging her tail when Emilia stroked her head.

“Ufuhihihi, you’re super good at this, lady! You’re probably a match for the lady! You’re definitely far above the captain!”

“Yeah? Fufu, thank you.”

“Mimi can tell you’re a really good person, so Mimi’s gonna remember ya! If you ever have something troubling you or someone you wanna drop, just tell Mimi and it’ll all be fine!”

“Drop… I don’t really get it, but okay. I’ll be sure to remember you too.”

She didn’t really understand what this cute catman was saying, but Emilia magnanimously accepted her words.

Emilia then turned around as she continued to stroke the girl’s head. Behind her was the shopkeeper who even though the situation had completely left him behind, continued to man the stall because he could not abandon it.

Now that she had her purse back, Emilia approached the dumbfounded shopkeeper and opened it.

“Um, so, how much did she owe you?”

And she once again resumed her philanthropy under the guise of nosiness.

Continued in Volume 1

Felt’s Job

1

“…So I’d like for you to pick up the dragon-shaped insignia from that woman. The reward will be ten holy gold coins… would this be enough for you to take the job?”

It couldn’t be better. I shook hands with the black-clothed woman whom had made the request.

For all her feigned absent-mindedness, she’s got a tracking gaze that’s like a snake, I thought.

Still, this is the slums, so there ain’t any nice people who’d ask ta steal stuff around here.

I didn’t ask for the details of the circumstances, since we had a tacit agreement that I didn’t need to know.

That’s why we only spoke about the target’s appearance and location whereabouts, where to deliver the stolen goods, and parted without any other questions. …Ta be honest, I should be happy about that.

After all, it’s an important job worth ten holy gold coins. It’s a large bounty that’s ton more than ma savings from doing odd jobs up until this point, I can’t let this chance get away.

In this world, if you want to do anything, you need money. You need money to be happy.

I refuse ta spend ma last days in this den of losers. I’ll definitely get outta here someday, I’ve had enough with living in such a gloomy place.

“With this reward and my savings, I…”

I won’t have ta sneak around in the shadows of the capital. I can go out in the open without worries.

It won't just be me, definitely someday…

2

This city that I was born and raised in is apparently the biggest one in the kingdom, and is called "the capital." Honestly, even if I didn't know about the other cities, I still would've considered this city too big.

Still, even though I live in the capital, it's at the bottom rung slums—a stupid place where shadows gather. The world of the capital sure lacks glamour.

This is how I would best describe the capital. The aristocrat district is where rich people's homes are lined up, and a place where I could earn some small change by sneaking around; the commoner district beneath is a world's difference; and the shopping district is filled with greedy shops that would do anything to even earn a single copper coin. Lastly, below everyone are people like us from the slums, who desperately try and steal from those above us.

Weaklings become food, that's the ironclad rule of this world. This is even more so in the slums, where you can only rely on your own strength to survive. In my case, I used my agile hands to steal from other people's pockets.

At first, they were petty jobs like stealing a coin purse from someone I passed by on the streets. At some point, I broadened out and began working by stealing based on people's requests.

By the time I realized it, I had become a master thief. I was no longer doing it just to earn money, I was working for the sake of a greater goal. Step by step, I was getting closer to it, I was sure of it.

…Then this important job happened to land in my lap, and now I'm one step away from my goal.

Ten holy gold coins. Of course, the higher the reward, the more difficult it is ta steal. But I'm not carefree enough ta be scared of something like that. It's a great chance ta escape from the slums, and that's good enough.

Then…

“-is it really alright to go for that woman full of openings?”

Hearing that conversation held at the street, I turned my head to look for the woman described.

White clothes with golden birds woven on it, and long, dazzling silver hair. Even though her clothes and appearances are uncommon and eye-catching, ma attention seems to be elsewhere.

“She’s sorta jumpy… like she came from da countryside.”

The woman was looking around restlessly as she carefully walked along the edge of the street. Since I was also rotten and raised in the capital, I could tell at a glance who was unfamiliar with the capital, and was therefore easy prey.

My intuition from my many years of experience told me that she was obviously a country bumpkin. She gave off the feeling that she was not cautious of her surroundings, but rather, worried about being swallowed by the crowd. …Her defenselessness is enough ta make me want ta hold my head in anguish.

“Just as I thought, she gathered a bunch of us to go after Ms. Grey…”

Keeping my distance while tailing the woman, the faces I saw a moment ago started appearing on the streets.

They’re the same as me, thieves with their target set on this defenseless woman. It’s only natural for ruffians ta congregate in a flash towards someone who’s that unaccustomed ta the capital. It’s a painful lesson she’s going ta have to learn.

“For you guys, stealing that might mean today’s grub money, but if I get it, I’m swaggering away with ten holy gold coins!”

I was seriously troubled on how I could properly threaten them so that they would leave. Well, since so many of these guys are terrible at tailing, it would be easy ta just stick a knife in one of their backs.

But right before I got ready to act… "…?"

One of the men tailing the woman had a puzzled look on his face as he looked around. He then tilted his head, changed directions, and disappeared down the streets as if he had forgotten about the woman.

If that was the only case, it was simply a matter of the man realizing his inexperience and withdrawing, but when others also began leaving as well, that's another story.

"Wha…? Why did every single one of them disappear?"

When I realized it, all the people whom I thought were going to pursue the woman had vanished.

Only two people remained. The carefree woman, completely oblivious to having just been targeted by a group of people, and I, who had maintained a careful distance while following.

Confused about what had just happened, I studied the woman from behind. Staring, staring, staring… and suddenly, the woman's figure looked blurry. I shook my head.

"What was that just now…?"

What a strange feeling. I think it might be magic or something.

Old Man Rom told me stories about how this world has mirrors that can talk ta people from far away, flying clowns, and even walls that people can walk through. That woman can probably use those kinds of magic.

"So that's why she could walk around the capital while being so defenseless… Shit, this is bad."

In front of me was a woman casually strolling around the capital, but unlike before, looking at her back from afar now sent shivers up my spine.

As expected of ten holy gold coins, it won't let me have it that easily.

“Alright, if that’s how you’re gonna be, I won’t lose to you. I’ll definitely get that insignia…”

Fired up again, I was about to clench my hands and chase after the woman when I found myself taken aback. That was because…

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

She was shyly apologizing to some bastard who had bumped into her on the street. It seems like she’s embarrassed because she wasn’t paying attention in front of her, but that wasn’t the case. That other guy did it on purpose.

At that moment, that person had quickly stolen the woman’s coin purse. “What’s even happening?! Argh, shit! It can’t be helped then!” Scratching my head in frustration, I reluctantly ran forward.

The one I ran after was not the woman who was merrily touring the capital, but rather, the man who took the purse from the woman.

Seeing him pull ahead even though we had the same aim hurts ma reputation.

Plus, if the requested insignia is in that purse… This is the worst possible outcome.

Even if I were ta look away for a bit, it would be hard ta miss someone who stands out as much as her. So I should prioritize the thug who would not be easily found once he enters the slums…

“His movements aren’t bad, but the alleyways are like ma backyard ta me.”

His ability to slip into the crowd was amateurish compared to mine, so I had planned on cornering him somewhere unobtrusive by waiting at the end of the alley he escaped towards.

“…Looks like you meddled with someone quite out of your league.”

But it seemed like there was a scary old gramps holding an awfully magnificent sword at the throat of the thug.

From head to toe, the old gramps was in a nicely tailored black formal wear. And though he seemed calm relative to the contents of the words he spoke, that calm impression was offset by savageness of the upheld sword.

Above all else, his body emitted a distinct aura—something unique to extremely dangerous people.

Very occasionally will the capital get these people who give off this sort of vibe, and I hate it. They might be disguised as a patrol guard, or act as a shopping district store's security… this old gramps is also one of them.

"Take out what you stole. If you do that, I shall let you go."

He had a smile on his face, but his eyes showed no signs of joy as he spoke.

The bastard being glared at probably already looked inside, I thought, as the man hurriedly placed the coin purse onto the outstretched hand of the old gramps, and sprinted away as soon as the sword left his throat.

Conversely, I failed to escape, and was left with no choice but to stand there with a stunned "what should I do" look.

"It looks like you had the same idea, Miss." I gulped.

The old gramps standing in front of me gently looked down, but I couldn't see his smile as anything other than malicious. I genuinely thought I was going to be eaten.

"What a sharp child. It seems I still have much to learn… Now then, here."

After saying that, the old gramps handed the purse over to me. I quickly accepted it, and was surprised by how light it was compared to what I expected.

"Please return that to its owner. If I were to hand it back, things might get a little complicated."

“A-Are you sure? Don’tcha think I might take this and run away?”

“You did bother to chase all the way to here. Besides, you wouldn’t do something like that, would you?”

The old gramps’ gaze sharpened for just a moment, and it felt like my heart was being grasped. I was left with no choice but to nod. Seeing that, he gave a satisfied nod and headed towards the street, giving me a pat on the head with his coarse palm as he walked by.

“Aah! Jeez Grandpa Wil, where did nya go? Feli was worried, nya know?”

“I apologize, some boorish things came up.”

As soon as I returned to the main street, I noticed the old gramps was apologizing to someone. However, I didn’t turn to look because I was in a hurry to leave this place… or rather, escape it.

Occasionally, things like this would happen, so the capital is a scary place. Locations where there are lots of people mean those kinds of dangerous people are more likely to appear. It’s something you have to bear in mind.

“Th-This should be far enough, I should be fine for now…”

After I ascertained that I was far enough away, I breathed a deep sigh of relief. After that delay, now it’s time ta check the contents of the purse. It would be great if the insignia I’m after is in here, but I don’t have much expectation.

My expectations were low because it was related to how light and thin the purse was. “And what’s inside is… What is this, pocket money for a kid?!”

The amount was at the level where if you bought some candy from the shopping district to eat, it would run out relatively soon. Ta be honest, I had ma suspicions about whether or not that woman actually had the gem-embedded insignia like ma client claimed.

Her appearance fits, but the item is missing. Did she drop it or something?

"Crap, that's right! Even if the purse is safe, it's more important that I steal the insignia from that woman. If someone else took it, this would've been pointless!"

I might've been careless, but that woman was even more careless than me.

I hurried back to the street where I had stepped away from the woman, and began searching the crowd for the conspicuous woman. This is when I noticed that the street was rowdier than when I had left just a moment ago.

It was awfully clamorous, with many people throwing their belongings as they ran off. I looked around in confusion until I saw a silver-haired figure at the center of the commotion.

I was a bit relieved to find the woman, who had a reluctant look on her face, and drooped shoulders.

As to not be perceived by anyone, I feigned indifference and tossed her purse onto the pile of stuff thrown around her.

After having started a commotion in front of the shopkeeper's store to pay for something, she noticed the purse, gave the shopkeeper a look, and went to collect it from where it was dropped.

3

After that, I continued to tail the woman. While I was searching for a chance to steal from her, I very clearly understood something.

"…This woman is a really nice person."

I learned of this by eavesdropping a conversation from behind me. Supposedly, the reason for the commotion earlier was because a child cat-beast human next to her had tried to dine and dash.

Then this woman had nothing ta do with it, was what I thought initially.

Apparently she tried to shoulder the kid's meal fee, but realized her purse was gone. Undiscouraged, she seemed to have earned the money by putting up some kind of performance. Well, it turned out ta be some ruckus that I can't understand.

She would then walk with the cat human for a bit, part from the child, and wander about. Even though she used up everything in her purse, she doesn't look ta be ending her walk any time soon.

To be honest, I was getting tired of following her, but because I had observed her for so long, I was able to make an educated guess on where the insignia was. While walking, she constantly checks the side of her clothes near the waist.

There's something important there… It's not her purse. She's hiding something else.

"…"

Time ta steal it, I decided, and got out of the streets to avoid being in the woman's line of sight. Using the buildings' walls, I hopped onto the roof and observed her movements. Doesn't look like she noticed. I can jump over there, grab the insignia from her pocket, and escape by running into the alleyways. I was confident about it.

But I feel just a tiny bit sorry for stealing the insignia from her.

Those who request thievery are scoundrels; but those who get robbed are also evil in some way—those were my beliefs. However, I didn't know how this woman could be applied to it.

"There's no point in thinking about something I can't understand. …I just gotta do what I normally do."

Those were words that even I saw as a means to convince myself with. They were pointless excuses.

Having said those excuses, I took a deep breath. From the roof, I jumped straight towards the woman.

My forelock fluttered in the wind as I landed. The wind flapped at her hair as I landed. While witnessing her look of surprise, I reached towards her.

…In my hand was a dragon-shaped insignia, its jewel shining bright red.

Continued in Volume 1

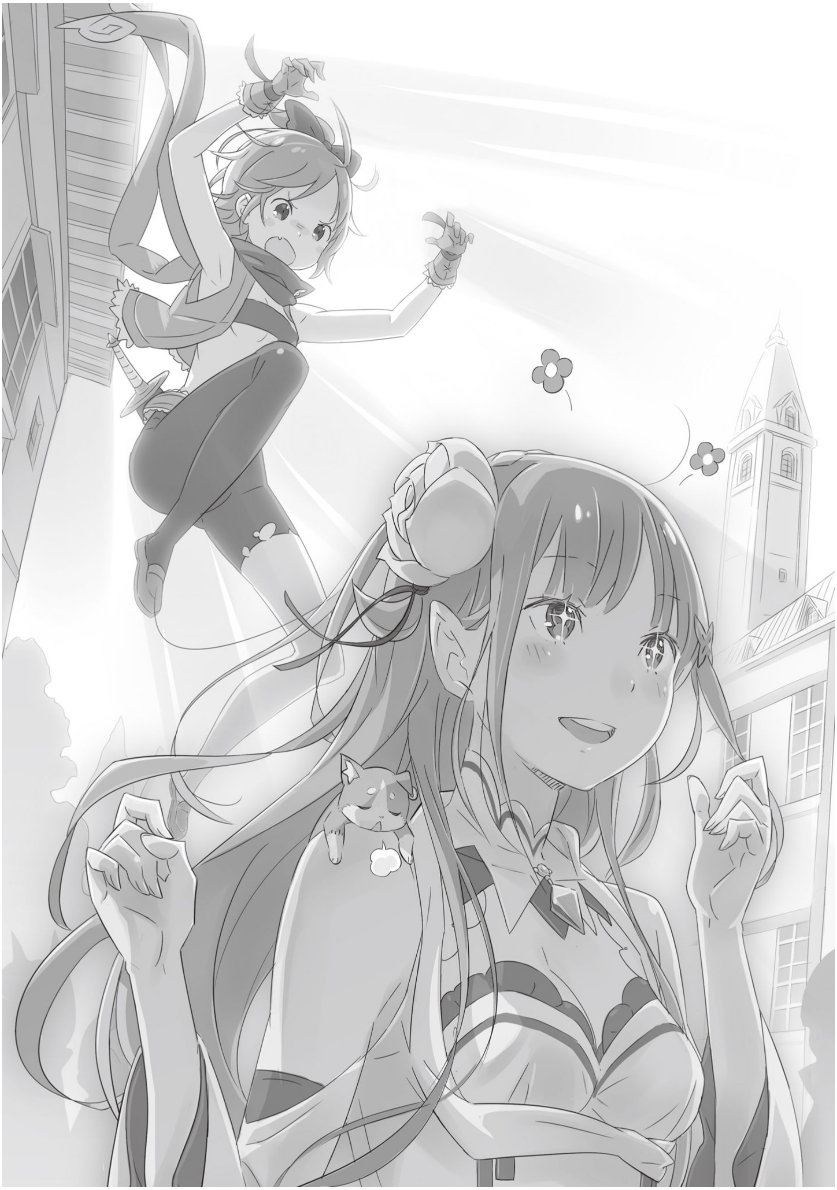

Ram’s Flirting Refusal

“Really, Emilia-sama is such a pain.”

Looking at the crowd of people walking passed her, the young girl places her hand to her forehead. Despite showing such a tired expression and grumbling, the girl normally had an adorable face. With her sharp facial features and her left eye concealed by short peach pink colored hair. The typical impression would be that of a beautiful girl, but it might be better to say she gave an impression of strength in spite of her cuteness.

Her expression remains relaxed and cool, her lone visible eye not betraying the slightest hint of emotion.

Amidst the noisy crowd, the young girl looked around and sighed seeing no signs of her target. However, her gaze remained determined. her pale skin and petite frame like that of a dancer. An Oni, looking like a cute little animal but so much more. She walked the streets of the Capital City Lugnica, wearing a maid’s uniform, which on its own was eye catching.

Although the uniform was decided upon to suit the interests of her master, the girl had no objection to such an outfit. The design attracted many curious stares from people on the street, but the young girl had grown accustomed to them.

“—She said to just wait a while here, how annoying.”

She was unable to find the “master” of her own master, and gave a dissatisfied shrug.

The pink haired girl’s name was Ram. No family name, it’s just Ram.

She works as the maid of a nobleman of the Dragon Kingdom, Roswaal L. Mathers, an on this day she’s come to the Capital.

As capital of the Kingdom of Lugnica, The city is more lively than others in the country. For Ram, who has had numerous visits to the Capital, and become familiar with the city as a result of following her master's orders. Ram wasn't particularly interested in the city, but—

"It's always Emilia. He already said from the beginning Ram would lose such a target."

After making a slight judgment on the character of the target, Ram, who is still pacing back and forth, continues to search.

If you haven't

If you haven't looked for someone like a stupid person in such a wide place since you have separated with the person for less than 15 minutes, it is more appropriate to judge whether the other person has searched far enough away from the initial position. However, if the she is going to the left at the very beginning, it will be totally luck. If you choose the wrong one, it will be very difficult to find her. If she doesn't, then there is no way of returning.

"Even something as simple as sending a letter, she gets lost. Ram must blame Emilia-sama's curiosity. This was underestimated, Ram isn't in the wrong."

Ram evaluates her current master, who was nowhere to be seen, and the result is the current situation.

In spite of this, no matter how absurd it was, Ram is certainly displeased with the current events.

"If only she had chosen a place to meet, it's no good. Even with my Clairvoyance, Ram cannot handle so many people…"

"Hey Hey! You there in the maid uniform!."

"…As a result, you can only personally inquire about it. It's really troublesome."

"Hey Hey Hey!Don't ignore me so casually ! Here ! Look at me !"

Hearing an annoying voice that had been calling out from the beginning, the person began scolding the ignorance of Ram as she walked away. When she turned to face the person speaking, Her facial expression dramatically changed.

“Hey, that look disgusts me from the bottom my heart. Missy, are you sad?”

“Anybody who is not only dressed in suspicious clothing, but even talks in a manner that makes people feel that they have no way to come to know it, will always receive this expression.”

Although Ram was harsh in her first meeting with the person, this time no one would criticize her attitude.

This is because the man who is standing in front of Ram is really beyond common sense.

With a dark, angular helmet, his head is completely covered. If this is the case, he can be recognized as an suspicious man.While his head is concealed in armor, from the neck down instead, he is dressed like a villager with cheap and simple materials. He wears shoes consisting of straw ropes on his feet. Can he even become more suspicious?

“The law and order of the Royal Capital has also begun to be corrupted. Now it’s time to call the guards over. Please wait a moment.”

“If you think of me as a perverted old man, you should be more conscious of your own safety, right?! What’s the point of waiting in the same place?!”

The tough-looking man, responding to Ram’s harsh approach, stopped in desperation. He stopped and loudly called out after Ram, who was staring straight at him with a pointed gaze.

“That’s not really a friendly look. Wait a minute please, I’m just looking for someone, so I’d like to find out where that someone may be.”

“What a coincidence, I’m also very busy trying to find someone here. Well, you’re free to keep searching.”

"That's too cold for someone wearing a maid outfit which symbolises service, isn't it?!"

Extending his hand to try to stop Ram from leaving, Ram who sidesteps to avoid the other person suddenly notices—the man had no left arm.

"Oh, did you stop out of sympathy? Anyways, that's right, since I lost my arm, my life has seen and suffered all sorts of awesome fates ! I'm relying on the warmth and sympathy of others to live and survive. Quite unfortunate, aren't I? "

"If you don't have enough hands, just ask a cat. If you've enough feet, please find it on your own. That's all ."

"Isn't that too harsh?!"

Toward the helmeted man before her, Ram's face began to lose it's angry glare. The man waved his right hand in panic.

"Wait Wait!I just want to find her!May I ask, have you seen a young lady with orange hair who looked almost the same age as you but had very large boobs?"

"I have never seen her. apart from what I have done so far in order to send you away, this time it's a message from my heart."

"This confession is persuasive!! No way…Well, could you tell me please who you're looking for?"

"I haven't answered, because I don't intend to answer."

"This is nothing but coldness. We're both simply searching for our people!"

"There is no "we". This is pointless."

Ram isn't entirely sure, but out of dissatisfaction with the man's heart, she refuses his assistance. She does not doubt there is dissatisfaction, but the reason for rejection is another problem altogether.

Seeing the silent Ram. the man gave a sad and dejected look as a result.

“Ah…yeah I understand, I’ll stop here. It’s not getting either of us anywhere.”

“I already knew that this was meaningless from the very beginning, but you still wasted the time of mine. What do you really intend to do about myself leaving… Oh yeah, nothing. I didn’t expect anything out this conversation anyway.”

“I’m sorry to hear I’ve troubled you!”

Giving a glance to the man yelling after her, Ram lets out a”sigh…” toward him and then leaves. She doesn’t remark further or offer a goodbye. It’s completely disgusting. Then she hears behind her—

“Well then, Bye, Ram”

Said innocently as she was leaving, and Ram stopped after hearing it. However, the shadow of the man with a helmet has already disappeared.

“—Did Ram ever mention her name?”

Ram mutters this to herself brushing her hand against her pink hair.

Ram’s search still hasn’t progressed well thanks to the helmed man wasting too much of her time.

“Hey! It’ll be best if you keep quiet! Cause us any trouble and this won’t end happily.”

“Isn’t it too inconspicuous? walking down busy streets in that eye catching outfit?”

“We’re not in a patient mood, wouldn’t you say? Maybe we should get a little rough?”

Ram stares at the three sh*t faces with disappointment.

The three thugs, one tall , one brawny, and one short came out of nowhere to begin threatening Ram.

“It would seem the security of the Capital truly is no better than the wilderness.”

“huh? Wilderness? Where are you from? Doesn’t seem like you’re from The Capital.”

“I mean you’re no different from wild animals spending your day scrounging for food and behaving in this barbaric way.”

Listening to their idiotic chatter Ram gave a look of disgust, in that moment the men looked to each other blankly, then laughed.

“Hey wait! Don’t mess with us !”

Unable to read the girl’s attitude, the tall thug pulls two knives and points them toward Ram.

“Don’t make me laugh ! You can’t possibly escape, unless you brought the Sword Saint, you’re in trouble!”

“Aah, I guess her lucks run out.”

“Haha, even if we actually have to fight, victory is ours.”

Intimidating, berating, the hateful words continue. Ram frowns hearing this, and then for the first time it seemed like she let out a helpless sigh.

“Hey, Just don’t move lady—”

“Ram is still trying to show patience, because this is an important task ordered by Lord Roswaal. …But now, I am at my limit with this.”

Ram whispers these words annoyed and reaches for a small wand within her dress. She points it to the sky and light starts to shine, magic power bursts in the atmosphere to create a strong wind surrounding her.

“Hey! Don’t go trying any funny business—Wuah!”

The man with the knives was blown away against a wall and buried in debris from the impact. Seeing the brawny man try to make a run for it while his remaining companion froze in place, Ram had already reacted before the fleeing man could even notice.

“Ah, Aayy?!”

the large man waved his arms trying to cast aside her wand, but immediately he was thrown into the sky. Slamming into the ground on his back accompanied by a scream before finally the man fainted on the ground.

And then—

“Is there something else you want to say to Ram?”

“Wait…Wait ….Sorry?”

“It’s right of you to apologize. —But Ram won’t forgive you.”

The short man gave a nervous smile before being launched into the sky by the merciless Ram.

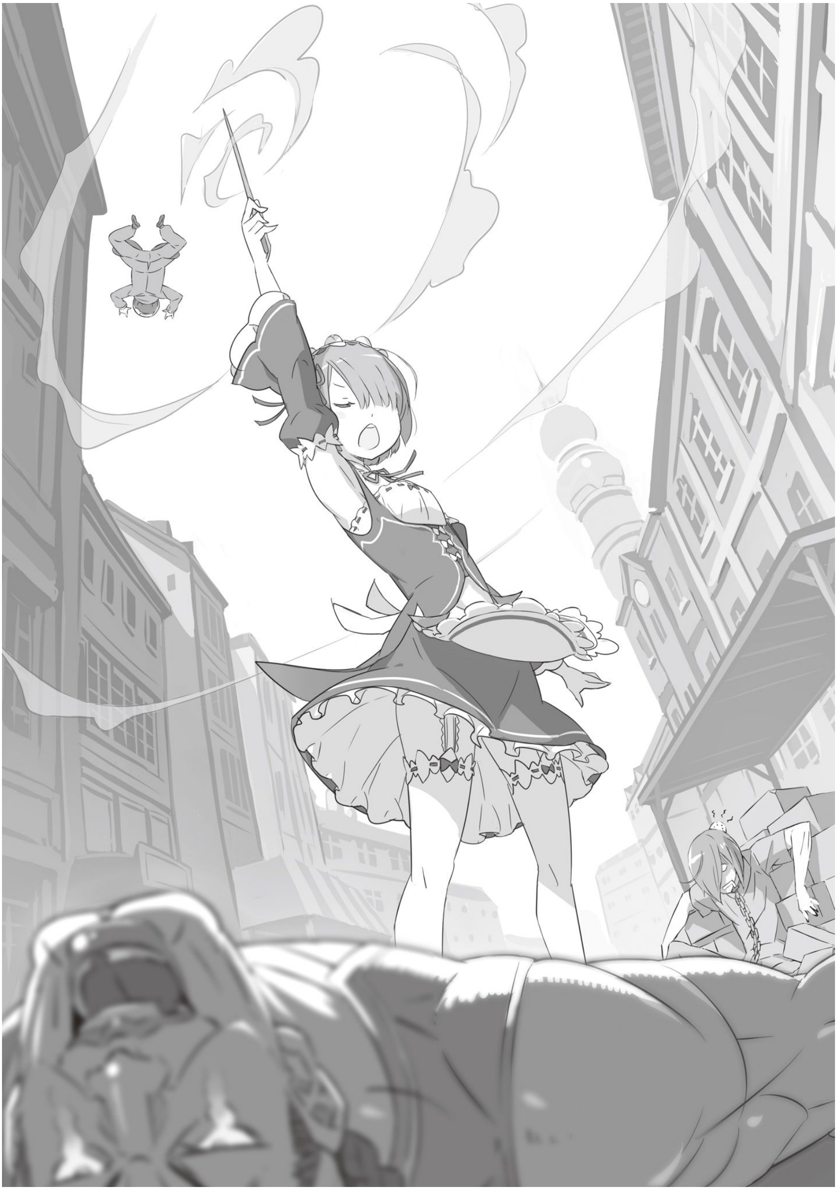

The three thugs were dumped into the alley like trash, and Ram patted her skirt looking up at the dimming sky.

“The sun has completely set… The target should have already gone back to the mansion.”

Ram’s conditions for finding her target have become more unfavorable. If she is not found quickly, the situation will become very bad. Looking up at the moonlight, Ram suddenly noticed.

“The light is—”

Ram looked up at the starry night sky of the Capital and notices Aurora Light waves in the sky.

The waves sweep around, and Ram emerges with a strong sense of intuition and rushes off toward the source of the Aurora Light without hesitation. The person she is searching for is this way, she doesn’t know why, but Ram is sure of it.

“Ram was just about to start thinking that Ram was finally done with being involved with trouble—Ram really is a troublesome person .”

Ram runs towards the lowest district of the capital—The Slums, and toward the deepest point of the slums.

She arrived, and in front of her, Ram finds her target holding a teenage boy’s hand. She realizes that the boy will come to the master’s mansion along with her target.

But that’s for another story…

Continued in Volume 1

Rem Meets Subaru

1

…Feeling her chest tingle, the girl looked outside the window.

The girl looked at the path in front of the gate that led to the main road, visible from the mansion window, then looked back.

Rem: “Master Roswaal, it seems my sister is coming back. It looks like she’s in a bit of a rush, though.”

Roswaal: “Hmmmm, she’s coming back earlier than plaaaned. Since she’s coming back soon, that must mean that she had left there at niiiiight.”

The man responded carefreely to the girl who gave a report based on her chest tingling, and he really sounded like he was feigning ignorance.

It was a person who was sitting in a leather chair and held a cup that gave out steam. He had long indigo blue hair. His different colored blue and yellow eyes were mesmerizing; you could say that at a glance he looked like a frail, handsome man.

However, the clown makeup applied on his face ruined these classy impressions.

Roswaal: “In a rush… I wonder if something happeneeeed. Do you know the details?”

Rem: “I’m sorry. I don’t know much about the situation. But, it seems Miss Beatrice has work to do.”

Roswaal: “Beatrice does? I see… But, that means a bone has been brooooken.”

When Roswaal looked up at the ceiling upon hearing her explanation, he pompously put down the cup onto the desk. After that, he fixed the posture of his long legs, and when he turned around to face the girl as he moved the chair, he said,

Roswaal: “At any rate, the things Ram does usually aren’t pointless… I think. Sorry, but can you go find Beatrice? I think she may be a little late, thoooough.”

Rem: “Yes, understood.”

After receiving her master’s orders, she lightly held onto the maid outfit she was wearing and answered with a perfect curtsy. On her lowered head, where she wore a white head dress, she had somewhat short blue hair.

After the servant bowed, Roswaal tugged on his chin approvingly and said,

Roswaal: “Well then, please take care of business. …Rem.”

The girl—Rem bowed formally again, and quietly left the office.

2

With her blue hair swaying, Rem walked briskly through the mansion’s spacious corridor.

It was Lugunica Margrave Roswaal L Mathers’ mansion. Rem was the head maid of this mansion. She was a maid that could do everything and did most of the mansion work.

Even though the Roswaal mansion was pretty big for a mansion, there were currently only two people who were permanent maids due to various reasons—there were only Rem and her twin sister Ram. So, Rem made up for lack of workers and took care of most of the mansion work by herself.

And then today, she had been contacted by her sister that had been away from the mansion for business, then the exchange from earlier happened.

Rem: “Judging from the range of synthesia, I suppose my sister will be back in about an hour.”

There did exist magic where they could communicate in real time that also cancelled far distances, but the sisters didn't need that.

The synesthesia the twins had—Rem and her sister Ram possessed a special ability that relayed strong emotions and small thoughts. She had felt her sister's return and her slight sense of impatience precisely as a result of synesthesia.

However, at this point in time it was uncertain whether she'd be able to do what her sister had asked of her.

Rem: "If only the great spirit was here, things would be much easier…Miss Beatrice?"

Rem boldly rose up to the difficult challenge, talking about how there was no use in asking for too much.

The challenge was very simple—open every single door that she sees. However, there was almost 100 doors in the mansion. This was, of course, no easy task.

Rem: "Miss Beatrice, which one are you in?"

She opens the door that had a "reference room" plate on it. She was met with a bunch of books and a pile of a countless number of books. It was normal, since it was a reference room.

Normally, there aren't any people who permanently stay in the reference room. Rem wasn't going to do that either.

Rem: "Miss Beatrice? Miss Beatrice?"

While calling out to her, Rem calmly opened doors one after another, though at an unusual pace. After doing that for five minutes…

Beatrice: "Augh! You're so annoying, loud, and noisy I can't stand it!"

A lone girl comes out of the next room with a loud but cute voice.

It was a little girl that had her hair put into drills, and she wore a magnificent dress. Seeing this girl that had dollish looks appear, Rem straightened herself and bowed deeply.

Beatrice: “You’ve been so loud, and you just don’t pipe down, I suppose! What in the world do you want from me at this time of night?!”

Rem: “I apologize, Miss Beatrice. But, thank goodness you’re still awake.”

Beatrice: “Hmph, even if I was sleeping, the noise would wake me up. You sure do have guts, little sister.”

The girl—Beatrice arrogantly snorted at Rem, who bowed, with a book held to her chest. She was acting all high and mighty, but Rem didn’t even care.

Beatrice was someone of a noble position. The way she interacts with Rem, a maid, is something to be expected.

Rem: “By the way, Miss Beatrice, Master Roswaal needs you for something. I’ve been told that he really needs your help for it.”

Beatrice: “For him to summon me through a maid, he’s become quite an arrogant one, I suppose. It seems he’s forgotten that there is no hierarchical relationship between me and him, I suppose.”

Rem: “…”

Beatrice, who seemed to not like this selfish way of going about things, was becoming grumpy since she had been summoned late at night.

Beatrice: “Haah. You should hurry up and show me the way before my mood changes, I suppose.”

Rem: “…! Yes, thank you. I’ll show you the way.”

Beatrice broke the momentary silence, then expressed tolerance in a way that showed that she had gave in. Saved by her thoughtfulness, Rem started walking through the corridor as she guided Beatrice.

Beatrice: “Mm…I heard Pucky’s instructions. He said to prepare a bath, a clean towel, and the guest room, I suppose.”

Rem: “The guest room, you say?”

Beatrice: “Yes. …It seems that foolish girl is bringing someone back, I suppose.”

Murmured Beatrice in somewhat of a displeased manner while showing no emotion in her eyes. Rem thought about Beatrice’s instructions in her mind without mentioning what she’d said.

The guest room is always ready. All she has to do is prepare some sheets and let in some fresh air. Then heat up the bath, prepare a clean towel—she immediately realized that they were bringing in a wounded person.

With that, she also understood why Beatrice was needed.

…Beatrice is a great healer that Rem could never compare to. She hears the earth dragon growl from afar, and had a feeling that the dragon carriage was very close.

3

…The black-haired boy laying down on the bed was breathing profoundly in his sleep as though he was dead.

Healing the boy in the boy that had been taken in took at dawn took a lot of time; outside the window, the sun was already setting westward in orange light. It wouldn’t be long before night approaches.

Emilia: “Now he should be relieved…yeah.”

Sitting on a chair next to the bed, breaking into a smile out of relief was a silver haired girl—it was Emilia.

Emilia was the one who took this boy back and asked for his injuries to be healed. Now that the commotion finally settled down for the time being, Rem threw a question at Emilia.

Rem: “Lady Emilia, now that things have settled down, I think it’s about time for you to tell me what’s the situation…”

Emilia: “Mm, you’re right. Umm, this boy’s name is Subaru. I had a lot of trouble at the capital…but that’s when he helped me out. I owe him my life, and a lot of other things.”

Rem: “Is that so?”

At her vague explanation, Rem shot a glance at the person next to her—she looked at her pink haired twin sister who looked identical to her.

Being looked at by her sister, the older sister—Ram kept her stone face, shook her head, and said,

Ram: “Even I don’t know the situation in detail. It’s something that happened while Lady Emilia and I were separated.”

Rem: “Separated…? I thought you were with Lady Emilia to escort her…”

Ram: “It was to encourage Lady Emilia to be independent and have a strong sense of responsibility.”

Rem: “As expected of my sister… I’m very impressed.”

She spoke in a bit of an insolent way, but Rem unconditionally accepts what Ram says. Seeing those sisters interact like that, Emilia burst out laughing.

Emilia: “You two really do get along reeeeaally well. But, don’t make me laugh too much. I want to let this boy get some good rest.”

Rem: “This boy must be someone you met while being separated from my sister.”

Emilia: “Nope, he’s not. Subaru is my…my, my what?”

Emilia put her finger to her chin and started to worry with a serious expression on her face. It didn’t seem like she was trying to put off

Rem. She saw that she really was at a loss for an answer.

If she wasn't trying to hide something, this must be someone whom she had too little information on in the first place since she was having trouble explaining.

…Then perhaps this was a kind of a person that mustn't get close to Emilia.

Ram: "…Rem. This person saved Lady Emilia's life. Master Roswaal acknowledged that fact, too. No matter how stupid he looks, he's our guest. You do understand what that means, right?"

Rem: "But, Sister—"

Ram: "Rem."

She calls her name once for a moment. Rem felt like her sister had looked deep into her heart, and after that she couldn't continue.

Emilia stared at the silent sisters in confusion, then slowly sat down.

Emilia: "I actually want to stay by his side until he wakes up…but apparently he won't wake up until morning."

Ram: "We were told that she used up most of his mana to heal, after all. I was surprised that Miss Beatrice helped heal someone she didn't even know."

Emilia: "Because of that, Puck will be Beatrice's for a day tomorrow. Also, Roswaal is…gone from the mansion for tonight, I think."

Rem: "He was called over suddenly, so he left the mansion before the afternoon. He plans on returning tomorrow night."

Emilia: "I see. Well, let's leave the room for now."

Emilia, who seemed to be satisfied with the sisters' replies as she had a quick stretch, prompted them to leave the room. Then, lastly Emilia ran her fingers through the bangs of the boy laying on the bed—through Subaru’s bangs.

Emilia: “I have so many things I want to talk about with Subaru when he wakes up.”

Rem felt like she was whispering, and it sounded like it had some sweet anticipation to it.

When they left the room, they separated in the corridor for each of their plans. Emilia’s duty to report the trouble in the capital to Roswaal was one in particular.

Emilia: “Hmm, he’s gonna get mad at me. How do I explain this…”

Emilia dropped her shoulder, and was trudging towards her private room in the mansion. Rem watched her go, said goodbye to Ram who had work left to do, and went to the kitchen to prepare dinner —

Rem: “…Before that”

Rem confirmed that they were gone and snuck into the room where the boy was sleeping in.

She silently closed the door with her back and walked up to the bed in the gloomy room that had the lights off.

Rem, who held breath, only heard the sleeping boy’s soft breathing. The boy’s innocent sleeping face reflected in Rem’s light blue eyes.

…She didn’t know who this suspicious boy was, or what he was after.

Emilia had explained that he was a lifesaver, but she just could not believe that he didn’t have an ulterior motive. Emilia was beautiful, but she was so vulnerable that just watching her would make you uneasy, and there was no end to people with bad intentions going after her.

…Before problems arise—before peace is disturbed, maybe I should do something.

Dangerous thoughts rise up in Rem's head, and she silently reached for the boy's neck. Then…

Subaru: "Ehehe, you're cute even when you're mad…parallel worlds, fantasies…"

With a very sloven look on his face, the boy talked in his sleep like a slob while drooling.

Just as Rem heard that, she didn't know what to do with her hand, and…

Subaru: "…Aagh"

Seeing the sleeping boy shriek after being flicked by her finger made her feel relieved.

Rem: "I don't think I'll ever get along well with this guest…Please leave as soon as possible."

Only Rem's superficially polite murmur was left in the guest room before she exited it.

Continued in Volume 1

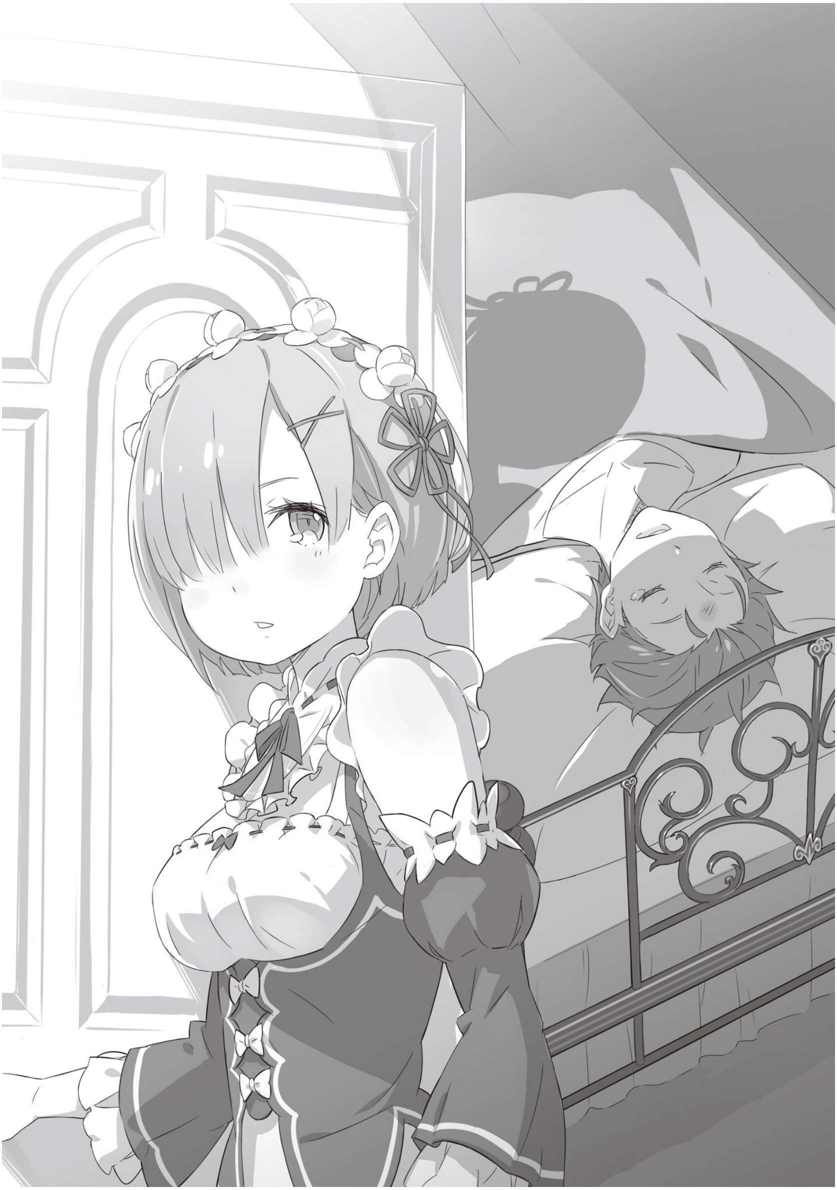

The Awkward Duo

1

Natsuki Subaru had practically no experience with walking around the neighborhood alongside someone of the opposite sex.

The last woman he'd walked around holding hands with had been his mother; he would need to go back to when he was a primary school student to find a time where he'd had rapport with the opposite sex, outside of relatives. Considering that he had to go all the way back to when there was no distinction between male and female to find any memories of that, that spoke volumes about his relationships.

Subaru: "E-Even so, this business of trying to find that girl among this crowd is like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

Subaru kept making talk with the girl walking right next to him, unable to stand the awkward silence. He wouldn't have known how to pass the time otherwise.

The Girl: "I guess you're right… But it's not like we can just give up. If we have to find a needle, then a needle we must find. Though I really only have myself to blame for letting my guard down."

The girl who'd given him that reply was so beautiful that he felt like his eyes were about to explode.

She had snowy-white skin and long silver hair that shimmered like moonlight. Her white garb greatly accentuated her innocence, and her amethyst eyes were full of determination as they gazed off ahead.

Her picturesque beauty stood out even from Subaru's shortish life. And to make matters worse, he could hardly get to grips with himself in the fact that she matched his tastes to a tee.

Regardless though, that wasn't the only reason why Subaru was walking with her.

Subaru: “Either way, I owe you for helping me out, so I’m gonna give it my all for you, my young lady.”

The Girl: “I already told you that you don’t need to do any of this… You sure are an odd boy.”

Though the girl stubbornly refused to admit it, the fact was: she’d saved his life. He really didn’t need any more reason than that to help her.

Subaru: “Well, even so…”

Walking up ahead of the girl, he strutted down the narrow alley at rapid pace. Then, he stopped in his tracks, turned around and struck his usual pose as she tilted her head in doubt.

Subaru: “By the way, it feels like we’re going somewhere with less people around, are you sure it’s this way?”

The Girl: “Wasn’t it you who knew the way?”

It felt like great troubles awaited them ahead, yet this strange duo’s trek was already going awry.

2

The girl had practically no experience with walking around the neighborhood alongside someone of the opposite sex. Or rather, she could hardly remember spending time with someone like this.

???: “…Are you a little nervous perhaps?”

A voice suddenly came whispering in her ear, causing a slight smile to creep onto her face.

The Girl: “Just a little. But now’s not the time to worry about such things.”

She purposely stiffened her lips as she replied back to the voice in something like a whisper. Though it wasn't like they were actually speaking, they were using something like "thought-waves" to communicate; a kind of magic that utilized the path between a contracted spirit and its contractor to share their thoughts.

The young man next to them heard nothing of their current conversation as he went around in circles in search for someone to call out to.

He was a strange young man. She hadn't taken notice of this when she'd first come across him cornered by those thugs, but he was dressed weirdly. That, and he had unusual black hair and dark eyes; plus, once in a while, he'd say stuff in a strange language that she'd never heard before. He was probably a foreigner, but even so, there was a lot of odd stuff about him.

He was strangely prudent for his confidence, and seemed to know a lot despite lacking in common sense. Even the girl could tell that something wasn't quite right—in spite of believing she couldn't speak for others.

???: "But it's definitely thanks to Subaru that we were able to get closer to our objective. You have to give him credit for that. Don't you think he'd be delighted if you gave him some praise?"

The Girl: "Quit with the silly talk. I doubt he'd be delighted even if I said something to him."

The tone of his voice sounded pleasant, in contrast to her's which showed signs of discouragement, probably because she understood where she stood. Nevertheless…

???: "But that boy gave off the impression that he didn't care about stuff like your identity, didn't he? I don't know what you think about that though, Satella-san."

There was a small hint of blame there in his words, which the girl accepted, along with the pang of conscience that came with it.

Her cheeks still flushed whenever she recalled how the black-haired boy, who'd called himself Natsuki Subaru, had effortlessly accepted her confessing to being a half-elf.

There'd probably never been a moment in the girl's life where shame had filled her heart as much as it did now. Subaru's reaction back then had been completely unexpected for her. It had made her aware of just how shallow and conceitful she was, bringing her almost to the verge of tears.

And what really couldn't serve as her saving grace was her own heart for being so happy about it.

Satella: "Maybe I'm just a reaaaally bad person…"

Subaru: "Hm? Did you say something?"

Satella: "…No, nothing. Let's just hurry and search the slums."

Flustered, the girl tried to pass off for the fact that she'd let that slip out loud, rather than as a thought-wave. She pushed the young man forward as he tilted his head in confusion.

They'd helped a lost child out, and thanks to that, they'd been able to get a strong lead from its mother, who'd told them about the slums, where stolen goods end up.

How could she even reward this young man after he'd led her this far?

Having completely forgotten that she'd saved his life when they'd first met, the girl continued to fret, not realizing that they were even with each other.

3

Seeing that the girl named Satella was getting more and more discouraged, Subaru began to question in dismay whether he'd screwed up by acting as her escort.

Her objective—which was searching for the insignia—seemed to be going well so far.

They still hadn't found the item in question, but he did feel like they were making good progress in tracking it down.

There was no question that looking for the lost child had given them valuable information and blown a wind in their sails.

Even so, ever since they'd started searching the slums, Satella had been acting strangely, sighing and such every time she glanced his way.

Subaru: "I mean, it sure is damaging when someone looks at your face and sighs at it. And if that isn't painful enough already, it becomes four times as effective when a beautiful girl does it."

Anyone snubbed by such a beautiful girl would have been hit just as hard; such was the fiercesomeness of this special attack.

The fact that this girl wasn't satisfied didn't match with all the life experience he'd accumulated so far; now if that isn't a bitter pill to swallow, he mused.

Subaru: "Though, well, I don't really have any life experience to match with this sort of thing."

That's why he was making great efforts, using his liveliness, to try and cover up for his lack of experience. Yet so far, all of the topics, quips and American jokes he'd brought up had fallen flat. Then, all that he had left was to reward her with actual results; thus he decided he would go back to his original plan, and show her the fruits of his hard work.

Subaru didn't realize that acting like that was only making the girl more and more discouraged.

Subaru: "I have to let her see my cool side by showing her some results. I need to take advantage of this windfall."

People's general attitudes towards Subaru asking them questions had improved a lot since they'd come to the slums. Strange as it was, most people in the main streets hadn't even bothered to give them a moment of their time; whereas, in the back streets, they'd gotten far more welcoming responses.

Even now, Subaru was still holding some kind of dried fruit an old woman had given him while saying: “Here, eat this and live strong.” He didn’t feel courageous enough to put it in his mouth, but all the same, her consideration was well-received.

Subaru: “Guess I’ll just feed it to Puck or something. Come here kitty-kitty, *chchchchchch*”

Satella: “Please don’t give him anything strange, it’d be a real pain if he were to get a taste for it.”

Puck: “If you think that I’m going to fall for these cheap tricks that only work when feeding strays, then you’re sorely mistaken.”

The grey kitten pushed its way out from Satella’s silver hair and emerged onto her shoulder. Apparently he was supposed to be a great being known as a “Spirit”, but Subaru saw him as no more than a cat, albeit a rather peculiar one.

Satella’s response had also felt more like something you’d say to a pet than a Spirit.

Subaru: “The way you’re saying it, you sound to me like a character flag where you’ve been completely hooked in…”

Puck: “Hmmph. You can only say these things to me now. Just you wait until I unleash my true strength, you shall regret all of your careless remarks… Meowmeowmeow!”

Yet half-way through his grand speech, he flicked the tip of the Spirit’s—Puck’s—nose with a few blades of grass he’d twisted together. As soon as he did, the Spirit began to swipe his paws at it, acting very much like a cat. Indeed he was all bark and no bite.

Subaru: “You sure are damn good at raising and triggering flags…”

Puck: “It pains me to admit it… But I really can’t resist playing with it…!”

(TL Note: The term flag Subaru likes to use is in reference to games or other such computer programs setting flags. Raising them refers to setting them, while triggering to reaping the rewards of the flag.

He's basically saying he's set the flag by offering the food to Puck, and then reaped its rewards after Puck went into cat-mode.)

Puck's face had turned positively cat-like as he played, now completely under Subaru's spell. As she watched them, Satella couldn't help but burst out into a few small chuckles.

Subaru saw her reaction, and with that, one of his missions had been cleared; one that he'd been pouring the same amount of enthusiasm into as their search for the insignia. He raised his thumb up, eliciting a discreet nod from Puck.

She looked far better with a smile on her face.

At least that was something which both Subaru and the Spirit were in agreement with.

4

Satella: "No… It's nothing. I'll give him a proper apology when I get my insignia back."

Puck: "I don't know what you're trying to apologize for, it'd be nicer to give him a thank-you rather than a sorry. And if that gets you smiling some more, then that'd be fantastic."

Satella: "You dummy."

Subaru had stepped into the loothouse, all the while putting on a show of bravado. The girl had sent him off, grateful from the bottom of her heart. She had so much to tell him when he came back after fulfilling their goal.

Satella: “Though… I’m way way more of a dummy than you…”

The girl was standing watch outside just like the young man had asked her to.

She quietly brought her hand over to the pendant she wore over her chest. It was inlaid with a bright green crystal, and within it, slumbered the Spirit that she relied on more than anyone else in this world.

She’d ended up keeping both him and Subaru around her for too long today.

Perhaps Puck wouldn’t be able to forgive her, no matter how much she apologized, especially for how dishonest she’d ended up being with Subaru. Though apologizing would be the thoughtful thing to do, her very idea of it was shallow.

At least for now, all she could do was pray that no harm would befall that goofy young man.

Satella: “…Huh?”

And yet, her prayer was interrupted by the sound of a sudden crash.

She snapped her head up and ran into the loothouse, her amethyst eyes vigilant.

The loothouse was a large, old, single-story building located deep inside the slums. Only a few minutes had passed since she’d sent Subaru out into the pitch-black awaiting him behind its enormous closed doors.

Satella: “…Subaru?”

The girl stepped inside without any hesitation, still keeping her guard up.

She kept herself focused, and made sure that the Minute Spirits drifting around her were ready to kick into action at a moment’s notice. Then, she squinted her eyes through the darkness, when suddenly, she spotted a white glow coming from something that had fallen in a corner of the room.

It was coming from the light source—the Lagmite Ore—that she'd given Subaru.

Satella: "…?!"

She hesitated for a moment, wondering whether she should walk over to it. However it was at that moment that the decision was made for her.

The girl felt something whistling towards her. She immediately turned around, giving her Minute Spirits a command—But before they could carry out her order, her body was ravaged by a sharp blade.

The blow pierced through her and she clattered down onto the hard floor, unable to do anything about it. She could feel a terrible cold gripping her, far more pronounced it was than the scorching heat. Yet, it was only for a moment that she could feel them.

Satella: "…Ah"

Countless thoughts, feelings, resolutions, memories and decisions flashed through her mind. It was as if they were a muddy stream, sweeping away all of her fears and regrets. In the hour of her death, the girl realized that she'd become completely empty.

She hadn't found out anything. She hadn't realized anything. Things were just ending without beginning. Yet it was in that moment…

???: "Just you wait…"

She could hear a voice. A voice that seemed to be almost fading, a voice full of anguish and regret.

A voice, that like hers, was on the brink of death. It was nearing its last, yet still unwilling to admit defeat.

But then, why is it that I…

???: “I will definitely…”

Why is it that I want to believe in the words that would follow?

The story, however, ends here for now. The girl’s thoughts unrewarded, the young man’s unheard; even so, the story winds back and starts anew.

Perhaps, only then, would the time they’d spent together be rewarded.

END

Lone Wolf of the Slums:
Felt's Noisy Days

1

The term 'Lone wolf' sounds good, but it's really just something you call yourself to hide the fact that you don't fit in with your surroundings and are isolated. The young girl was painfully aware of that from a young age.

"Damn it! They're being hella persistent. Stop messin' around with me!"

The one speaking in foul language was a girl who had clear eyes, despite her rough way of speaking. The combination of crimson eyes and blonde hair was rare, and it wasn't tainted by the stale air and dust of the slum. Her somewhat graceful face and features were also the cause of the rift between the girl and her surroundings.

However, the girl herself was unaffected by what others thought of her. And as we speak, her appearance was causing her problems.

"Damn it! That brat, where did she run off to?! Find her!" a man roared.

The one searching for her while holding his nose was a middle-aged man with a peculiar haircut. He had a bloody nose, and his face had a shoe mark on it that was a perfect match for the girl's. The man with the nosebleed was accompanied by ten or so companions. They were listening to the orders of the man with the bleeding nose as they boxed her in, making sure to block every escape route and keep her cornered.

"As expected of kidnappers, they are used to doing this. Aah, shit, I messed up!"

She pushed her little body inside an alley and glared at the men surrounding her, then clicked her tongue. She observed her surroundings carefully but none of the paths seemed to lead out of the intricate alleys.

"—She's there! Don't let her esc…gah!"

"Shut up, you slowpoke," the young girl retorted.

The young girl had jumped and delivered a kick to the man's face the moment she'd been found. The man, who seemed to be around twice the size of the girl, had gotten knocked out cold and crashed to the ground. The young girl ran off, leaving him there.

The men who had lost their companion chased after her frantically.

"You guys really are persistent! Aah, shit! I'll get scolded by Old Man Rom!" the girl, Felt, yelled in a way that sounded somewhat relaxed for the situation she was in—and ran like the wind through the dirty alleyways, jumping along swiftly.

2

As an orphan who had nobody to rely on, the royal capital Lugunica's slums had always been her home for as long as she could remember. However, she'd never felt like the slums were a place she could call home. Moreover, everyone living in the slums felt the same way as her. Only those living a life of comfort could afford to have such thoughts. The people living in the slums were all just trying to survive for the day. Of course, the same could be said of Felt. Like other orphans her age in the slums, Felt had been making a living by stealing with her cunningness and dexterous hands since she became independent (the age when she could no longer get charity from others.) She didn't get along with the orphans who chose to live together. She was often disliked by the people of her own gender, and, having gotten tired of socializing with others, chose to remain alone. The only exception was her only family. Despite his fierce appearance, he was very compassionate, and enjoyed acting as Felt's guardian. But what made Felt not want to rely too much on his kindness was her small amount of pride. The one she called family made a living by selling the stuff that had gotten stolen in back alleys. But even though he was in that line of work, he paid a fair price for the stolen goods people brought him. Felt knew that her pride was tainted, but it was an important ritual for her.

—Thus, Felt felt really miserable when she caused him trouble due to her insistence on doing things on her own. So…

“This time too, I’ll solve this on my own.”

Felt solidified her resolve, remaining silent all alone on the rooftop she had jumped to. She glanced down and saw that the men were still running around, searching for her.

The vindictiveness of guys like them is hardcore. Just running away from them isn’t gonna solve things.

The people chasing after Felt were a group of kidnappers that were at the bottom of the barrel in the royal capital’s underworld. It was rumored that they were newcomers there, but the way they did things without restraint was intolerable.

“I might’ve gotten soft. I should’ve just abandoned them.”

Recalling how she’d gotten into this mess, Felt pursed her lips and regretted her mistake. The alleyway she was currently hiding in wasn’t in her home turf. The place known as the Slums was scattered throughout the large royal capital’s lower district, and there were three of them. Felt lived in a place that was connected to the commercial district, but the area she was in now mainly contained warehouses, and thus wasn’t her turf. The reason she was being chased by the thugs was because of what she did when she witnessed them doing their ‘business’ while looking for the day’s source of income. Felt would have just ignored it and let it go by saying that it was too bad for whoever was getting kidnapped since it was just business as usual there, but this time, she was unable to take her eyes off the person being kidnapped. She saw a little girl being ripped from the hands of an old man who looked like a withered tree, which lit a fire in her that made her jump in and kick the face of the leader with everything she had. After that, she managed to help the old man and little girl escape from the encirclement, but the thugs had noticed her and started going after her in a frenzy.

And that's how things are.

"I'm not familiar with the area around here. And they are good at hunting people down here since it's their turf."

While annoyed by their organized criminality, Felt was also aware of how bad the situation was. She was confident that she was strong for her age—or rather, she was confident in her ability to kick her way out of bad situations—but she wasn't overconfident enough to think she could beat down a dozen men. Besides, the more time she spent on it, the more their numbers would increase, which would only worsen the situation.

As long as I can get back to my turf, I can do something—

"Woah, that was close?!" The moment she quietly peeked over the edge of the building, a sharp piece of wood whizzed by her face. She felt chills run down her spine at the sound of the dangerous object, and right after that she heard someone cussing from below.

"You idiot! Don't hit her in the face! We won't be able to sell her if it leaves a scar!" the Nosebleed Man scolded, his nosebleed stopped now that his face was covered with a white cloth.

I had no idea my facial features were something that would make them happy, but if he's shouting at them to go easy on me, then there's something I can do.

"Here goes!" Felt jumped, stomping on the face of the man who had set the ladder up and was climbing up to get her, making the rest of the men fall.

"Gaah!" the man grunted.

She didn't stop there but continued to step on the heads of the startled men, breaking through the enclosure with the skillfulness of an acrobat.

"Wha?!" the Nosebleed Man exclaimed. "Sh-She's too quick! Don't let her get away!"

"Your orders are to capture me, not beat me up. Even I can easily spot a mistake like that!”

She somersaulted while at the same time landing a kick on the last person, landing near the feet of the Nosebleed Man, who was shouting with spit flying out of his mouth. She dodged the arm that had come flying towards her and moved in on him, then kicked him with her leg, which was rather long for her height. The Nosebleed Man felt her toes plowing into his flesh—his nether regions—which did a lot of damage. He fell to his knees, letting out cries of anguish as Felt headbutted him without hesitation. The top of her head smashed into the tip of his nose, straight through the cloth, crushing it. He fell back as blood flowed from his nose and foamed at the mouth.

“Serves you right!” Felt yelled. “That’s what happens when you let your guard down because you think your opponent is ‘just some kid’!”

Seeing their leader get taken out so easily, the thugs hesitated to pursue her for a moment. Felt stuck her tongue out while they were hesitating and sped up once again, becoming one with the wind.

Once she had escaped their encirclement and the unfamiliar slum, she felt safe enough to take it easy. “I probably won’t need to deliver the finishing blow after doing all of that, right?”

They got their asses handed to them by a little girl, so I bet they’ll keep quiet for a while since their reputation is important to them. But if that’s the case, then the thing I saved for last will go to waste.

“Well, that’s fine by me. But that seriously tired me out, like for real.”

Crossing her hands behind her head, Felt blended into the crowd and sighed. While doing so, she slipped her hand into the pocket of a naïve passerby who didn’t have their guard up. Given the situation she was in, it was quite impressive how she was still trying to earn a few extra coins.

3

"I think I might have really gotten soft."

After earning a lot of coins, she went back to her turf with slumped shoulders. She was just thinking that she'd earned enough today to put her in the positive, but then trouble just had to come knocking on her door. The fact that she couldn't hide her disappointment and discouragement wasn't surprising.

"You put us through the wringer, but you done fucked up now, ya damn brat."

The man with a wicked smile on his face was the Nosebleed Man, who seemed proud of his victory while resting on the shoulders of his subordinates. His face was covered in even more cloth than before and his knees were shaking, which showed just how injured he was.

"I'll give ya some advice out of the goodness of my heart: if you are that banged up, then just go home and sleep," Felt told him.

"Don't make me laugh! Who the hell would run away with their tail between their legs after being humiliated so much? I won't be satisfied until I hear you beg for your life, you cocky brat!"

"Stop actin' like such a bitch just because your short nose and balls got crushed…"

"A little whore like you will never be able to understand how painful this is!" the man shouted with red eyes, his spit flying everywhere, after hearing Felt's unapologetic response. The thugs around him nodded in agreement with somewhat pale faces.

What a bunch of drama queens.

Felt, who didn't get what the big deal was about her act of violence, was surprised at how tenacious the thugs who'd chased her down and tried to cast a net around her in the part of the slums that belonged to them were.

So, where did they get information about me?

"You seem surprised," the Nosebleed Man said. "I'll give it to you straight… Your own people hate you, don’t they? They talked a lot.”

“…I feel like you guys are the same, talking a lot like that.”

Whenever people like them get the upper hand, they want to give the reason why they got the upper hand away. And it’s also true that the reason behind it is often simple and trivial.

The answer this time was simple too: she was sold out by people who hated her in exchange for a small amount of money.

This is why socializing is a drag and why I only really trust one person.

“Oh! Don’t get any weird ideas, k?” the Nosebleed Man warned. “I’ll tell you beforehand: my companions have this area surrounded. You should be crying tears of happiness since we set up a really extravagant welcome party for you, even if you’re just some brat!”

“Not gonna lie, it’s really making me start to tear up. Don’t you think it’s sad how you’re getting so worked up over a kid?”

“It’s a hundred times better than letting my reputation get dragged through the mud because I let you get away with that shit!”

With a lot of footsteps, the thugs gathered behind Felt to block her escape route. In front of her were the people she had used as steppingstones in the alleyway earlier. Similarly, she could see thugs placed firmly at the multiple alleyways in her sight. There was no escape. The amount of effort they had put into this was unbelievable, and it meant they were serious.

“We aren’t gonna hurt ya, but be prepared to pay us back in other ways, brat.”

“Are the rumors of you guys being new to the royal capital true? I’m just a bit curious.”

“Huh?” The Nosebleed Man frowned since he was expecting her to be scared, but on the contrary, her words showed no sign of fear.

“Alright, alright.” Felt took that as a yes and nodded. “Then I’ll give you some advice. You should learn a little more about the royal capital before doing anything else next time. Well—if there is a next time, that is.”

Before the Nosebleed Man could raise his voice, Felt took something out of her pocket and put it in her mouth. It was something she had stolen from an unsuspecting person in the crowd before she returned to her turf.

“A whistle to call the guards?”

She blew into it instead of answering with ‘correct’, and the high-pitched sound echoed through the back alley. The sound immediately made the thugs cover their ears, but what followed their surprise was a relaxed attitude.

“You…you scared us. What can a mere whistle do…” the Nosebleed Man said on behalf of the calm people around him.

However, his expression was soon tinged with uneasiness. They heard it too. The heavy sound of the ground shaking made by the military boots entering the alleyway one after another.

“Wha?! Why are they here so soon?!”

“You might not know this since you guys are new to town, but the guards regularly patrol the lower districts. Obviously, since I’m a local, I know when and where the patrols will happen, too.”

Today was the day when the guards patrolled the slum that Felt considered her turf. In consequence, Felt took her time after going out to look for easy pickings, and was also considering using the guards as her trump card if anything went awry.

Though I wasn’t 100% sure that the thugs would come after me, I borrowed this whistle from a guard who wasn’t paying attention just in case.

“Eeeek! Kidnappeeeers! Stop! I’m getting kidnaaaapped!” Felt screamed as much as she could in a wheedling voice, raising the morale of the guards. The Nosebleed Man quickly turned back, but

Felt had already slipped through a crack in their ranks.

The Nosebleed Man glared at Felt, who was jumping from roof to roof, and then let out an agitated scream. “You fucking brat…argh!”

“Don’t lose to a fucking brat in a competition of smarts then. You’ll never beat us when it comes to fighting dirty, dumbass.”

As the boss let out an unintelligible scream, the guards arrived in the alley and collided with the thugs. The guard up front was particularly powerful, and it felt satisfying to see the thugs get blown away like leaves one after another.

—And just like that, the newcomers to the royal capital’s underworld were destroyed before anyone could remember their name.

4

So, did my final earnings and the effort to get it put me in the positive or the negative? Felt thought as she brushed the dust from her body. Even though she had stolen some purses along with the whistle, there hadn’t been much in them. However, giving the kidnappers a painful experience had given her a sense of pleasure that was worthy of her effort.

Nonetheless, the realist Felt concluded that pleasure was only a temporary thing that didn’t fill one’s belly. Therefore, all I made today was the coins in the purses.

“This isn’t enough to reach my objective at all.”

Felt’s objective—though it was still a far-off goal since she didn’t make much from stealing—was to eventually save enough money to escape from the poverty of the slum. She would be even happier if the only one she considered family was there with her when it happened.

With a renewed determination, Felt started walking towards the building that had come into her view, then halted her steps before she arrived. A huge figure, so huge that it couldn’t be thought of as a human, stood in front of the large building and was waving at her.

“Gosh, stop embarrassing me… Old Man Rom, I’m back!”

And with that, Felt ran towards her family with the biggest smile she’d had all day.

END

Behind the Scenes of Life in Another World from Zero

1

The moment Emilia realized that her precious insignia had been pulled out of her pocket, she ordered her lesser spirits to chant and aimed an ice pellet at the back of the miscreant.

“It’s dangerous everyone, so don’t move!”

The silverbell-like voice called for caution, and the people on the street, who heard it, stopped moving. A petite girl with fluttering gold hair and a black ribbon moved through the gaps between them, running like the wind. Icicles created with mana were shot at the feet of the girl on the run. Making a sound similar to an arrow flying through air, the icicles approached the girl with the speed of a bullet. But the girl ran, ignoring the attacks as if she knew that the person attacking had no intention of hitting her. The icicles that missed their target gouged into the wall of the nearby shop and the ground, then began losing shape and disappearing.

After a moment of silence, the people who had stopped moving started making a fuss.

“What is it?! Is it a fight?!” a bystander shouted.

“What the hell are you doing in such a crowded place?!” another person yelled.

While listening to that, Emilia chased after the little figure that had escaped into an alleyway.

“Gosh! What’s up with today!” she exclaimed. I got separated from the girl accompanying me, the money in my purse got spent on food and drink, and I thought I was getting along with the nice cat girl, but now I am in a situation where something I hold dear got stolen.

“You seem busy, Lia,” muttered one with the appearance of a palm-sized cat while leisurely washing his face on Emilia’s shoulder.

The one muttering near her ear was the great spirit, Puck, who was the girl's contracted spirit.

"I'm in trouble, Puck! My important insignia got stolen! I'm going to be in a looot of trouble if I don't get it back, and Roswaal will get mad at me!"

"If you think he'd just get mad, you should give it some deeper thought… And the child who stole it seems to be quite skilled, too. Look."

"Huh?"

Emilia, who had been chatting with Puck after jumping into a back alley, stopped suddenly. A dead end appeared right in front of her at the end of the maze-like path.

I'm pretty sure I ran down the same path as the thief, and I'm sure the road didn't have any twists or turns near the end, either.

"We might have missed a side street, or she might have quickly climbed over the wall," Puck posited.

"I… I can climb walls too," Emilia hesitantly replied. "I need to catch up or else…"

"If she took a side path, then climbing it would just be a waste of time. You know that, right? We need to think more carefully here." As Puck said that with his short arms crossed, they heard a high-pitched guard's whistle coming from the front street. It was probably blown by a guard from the Royal Capital Guard who heard the commotion caused by Emilia's magic.

"We could get into trouble if the guards find us," Puck said. "What do you want to do?"

"If I explain the situation, I wonder if they'll help me find the insignia?" Emilia wondered.

"They would help you, but I don't think that's a good idea. You know the reason why without me having to explain it, right Lia?"

"…I know. It's because I'm a candidate. It would be troublesome if they found out about me losing my insignia."

"Good job." Puck clasped his soft paws together and complimented Emilia with a silent clap.

Emilia puffed up her cheeks and looked up at the wall in front of her, then snapped her fingers and created a staircase of ice.

By the time the guards came running towards the dead end, the silver-haired girl and the ice staircase were gone without a trace.

2

"We've gotten away from the commotion-filled street and alleyway, but…what should we do now?" Emilia asked.

"Isn't it better to meet up with the maid?" Puck replied. "I think it'll be easier to find that girl than the person who stole the insignia since she stands out so much."

Emilia and Puck were having a strategic meeting regarding what to do next in the street across from the merchant's street, the street where the insignia was stolen, after getting away from the guards.

"It would be great if Ram could give us a hand," Emilia said. "But would that be fine? I feel like I've been breaking Roswaal's orders really often."

"Don't stray away from your attendant. Don't waste money. Don't cause a commotion. Not losing your insignia wasn't something he thought of mentioning. Hmmm, there's no way you'll be able to escape from being scolded, don't you think?"

"I'm starting to feel like I should solve this on my own."

"Being afraid of your mistake from before being exposed and then making more mistakes because of that… I think you're clearly walking down a path of destruction with nothing stopping you."

Emilia pouted at Puck, who kept being a killjoy, but his arguments were sound. It would be far wiser to report the current situation with a mindset to be scolded rather than making the situation worse. However, that might result in the worst possible outcome for Emilia.

"But what would I do if Roswaal gives up on me because he thinks I'm useless?" Emilia asked.

"…"

"I can't let that happen. Roswaal is my ally now, but it's possible he might step down from that position before the royal selection happens. I don't want to owe him anything more until it starts."

Emilia envisioned the devious guy in her mind who was her guardian. He and I share the same interests, and I don't want the balance of power to be tilted towards either one of us.

"Ah well, my daughter is someone who chooses to walk down a thorny path," Puck said after shrugging his shoulders at Emilia's thoughts while wagging his long tail.

Emilia smiled and lowered her brows at the response of her family with whom she had been with for a long time. "I'm sorry to cause you trouble all the time," she said.

"That's something you shouldn't say… Well then, we must do our best to find that thief. I wonder what we should do. The sun will go down if we keep searching blindly around the vast royal capital. Do you have any plans?"

"Let's see… How about we keep our eyes wide open and search reaaally hard?"

"That's what it means to search blindly, Lia. I was able to get a quick glance at the thief, but they seemed like a child from their appearance. And the thief's clothes didn't seem that clean."

"Do you mean that she is someone who doesn't have money? You are right about that since she stole something." Emilia nodded at Puck's deduction, agreeing with him, then clapped her hands right after that when she understood what he wanted to say. “Oh, that’s right! Since she is someone who doesn’t have money, she must be from the slums I heard about when I was being guided around the royal capital! It’s a place where people without jobs or houses gather. You’re implying that the thief might be from there!”

“That’s just what I’d expect from you, Lia. Even I couldn’t predict that you’d be able to guess what I was thinking…”

“Alllright, let’s search the place called the slums. And after that…”

After deciding what to do, Emilia was about to start walking with high spirits, but she stopped the moment she took a step. Her gaze was directed across the street at a small figure. A small girl was crouching there helplessly with a tearful face.

“Lia.”

“I… I know, Puck. I’m veeery busy now. I don’t have time to worry about a girl in trouble at all. I need to hurry up.”

Emilia started making excuses, even if she hadn’t done anything, after being called by Puck, who was glaring at her. And even if she did say that she had no time to care about the girl, she showed no sign of moving, making Puck sigh.

“No matter how hard one tries, my daughter will always be a kind girl, so why don’t you go talk to her?”

“Is it alright?”

“If you ask whether the timing is good or bad, then it’s bad. But if you ask whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing, then it’s a good thing. So go ahead and perform your good deed that’s bad timing-wise.”

Emilia’s face brightened up, and then she went towards the young girl after getting the go-ahead from Puck. The young girl noticed Emilia looking down at her, and looked frightened at the sight of a stranger, but… “I know I might just be being a busybody, but aren’t your father and mother with you?” she inquired while smiling kindly at her, as if she had forgotten her own situation.

As a result, Emilia had to go through a lot of trouble to get the lost child to let her guard down. It seemed like her parents had disciplined her well, as she was reluctant to talk to strangers. To overcome that obstacle, they needed to take the first step, which was to tell each other their names. After overcoming that, Emilia made small ice flowers and ice sculptures of animals using her magic, which eased the tension, and finally won the little girl's trust by using her trump card: Puck dancing.

People mistook the ice flowers and ice animal sculptures as some sort of a street performance, so she received some change from people passing by who stopped to look. And after that, she got some skewers from a food stall using the change she'd earned and enjoyed them with the little girl.

"Lia, Lia. Have you forgotten your objective by any chance?"

"No…no, I haven't forgotten. Look, she is completely relaxed now, just like I planned."

"You know you don't look very convincing with sauce around your mouth, right?"

While holding the little girl's hand, they somehow managed to arrive at the fruit shop run by the girl's father. The girl leaped at the huge man with a white scar on his face, and the man—the girl's father—thanked Emilia profusely. The little girl's mother, who had been separated from her, was in the shop, too, and both parents bowed to Emilia, making her feel nervous.

"You are my daughter's savior, so I want to repay you. You can ask me anything," the girl's father said.

Emilia shook her head, saying she didn't want anything in return. But it was an unexpected stroke of luck when the father told her that she could ask him anything. After she told him a bit about her situation, she was given the location of the slum and the name of the loot house.

“It’s said that it’s a place where light-fingered people turn the goods they steal into money, but I wouldn’t recommend going there. I mean no ill will, but I think it would be wise to give up…”

“Ummm…”

Emilia wanted to say that it wasn’t something that she could give up on, but she hesitated since nothing was going to change even if she told the family about her situation. It would make them worry, too.

“I understand. Thank you for the warning. It’s such a shame, but I guess it can’t be helped.”

“Yeah, it’s better that way,” the father replied. “I am sorry that I couldn’t be of help… Hey?”

The father nodded in relief when Emilia pretended to give up. And then the little girl slipped past him and extended her hands towards Emilia. There was a red flower ornament in her hand. Emilia looked at the young girl’s smile, then at the flower ornament, and was at a loss as to what to do.

“Please, take it. It seems like my daughter wants to repay you in her own way,” the mother of the child said, urging Emilia on.

Emilia timidly took the flower ornament, and the little girl gave her a big smile.

“Thank you. I’m reaaally, happy.” Emilia held the flower ornament to her chest and gave the little girl a heartfelt smile that came from the bottom of her heart.

4

Waving goodbye to the little girl’s family, Emilia headed towards the slum after carefully putting the flower ornament away. The streets became less crowded, and you could visibly see the atmosphere beginning to deteriorate.

“Hmmm, as expected from the slums,” Puck said. “The people living here are both poor in pocket and character.”

“Don’t say rude things, Puck. It’s disrespectful to the people living here,” Emilia scolded, but she couldn’t say that the environment in this district was good, either.

The ugliness of the cityscape that had been left to rot after being built with minimum effort felt cramped, especially for Emilia, who had lived for a long time in the forest.

“The loot house, was it?” Puck asked. “It sounds bold from the name itself, but should we search for it?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t get any details about its location since I didn’t want to make her father worry,” Emilia replied. “But will the people here even listen to me?”

“Giving money in exchange for information is the norm, but we don’t have any.”

“The change I got was exactly equal to the cost of the two skewers. It being the exact amount is reaaally such a coincidence,” said Emilia proudly, but Puck had a hard time coming up with something to say.

At the moment, their search pace for the insignia was going steady. The search for the parents of the lost girl, which could be said to have been a mere detour, had paid off and they were able to get useful information through that.

It would have been nice if they could find the girl who had stolen the insignia at this steady pace, but…

“Who have you been mumbling to for quite some time, young lady?” a man said.

Emilia’s steady investigation was finally interrupted by someone with obvious malicious intent. A middle-aged man with a scruffy beard and dirty clothes had blocked the narrow alley in front of Emilia, who had stopped. On top of that, two more men appeared behind her, sandwiching her.

“It would be better to talk with us than with an imaginary friend. What do you say? We won’t hurt you… Huh? What’s a fine pearl like this doing here? Seems like we’ve found ourselves a good one, boys.”

“A fine pearl…? I don’t think I’m round anywhere… Am I fat?”

“A lot of money has been put into her appearance. We really hit the jackpot. She’s first-class inside and out.”

Not even hearing Emilia’s worry that had come out due to her misunderstanding, the middle-aged man moved towards her with lecherous breaths. Now feeling the presence of the two men behind her slowly inching closer, she put her back against the wall.

“Hee-Hee, looks like you’ve given up,” the goon said. “That’s fine. Even if you’re dumb, I’ll adore…”

“There’s not much time left before the evening, and I can’t push Puck too hard. So, it might hurt a bit, but…”

“Huh? The ones doing painful stuff will be us…”

“Haah!”

That was the end of the nonsense spewed by the middle-aged man. Emilia had shifted the position of her foes to her side rather than at her front and behind by leaning against the wall. She brought her long, slender leg up, then swung her heel down on the head of the enchanted man.

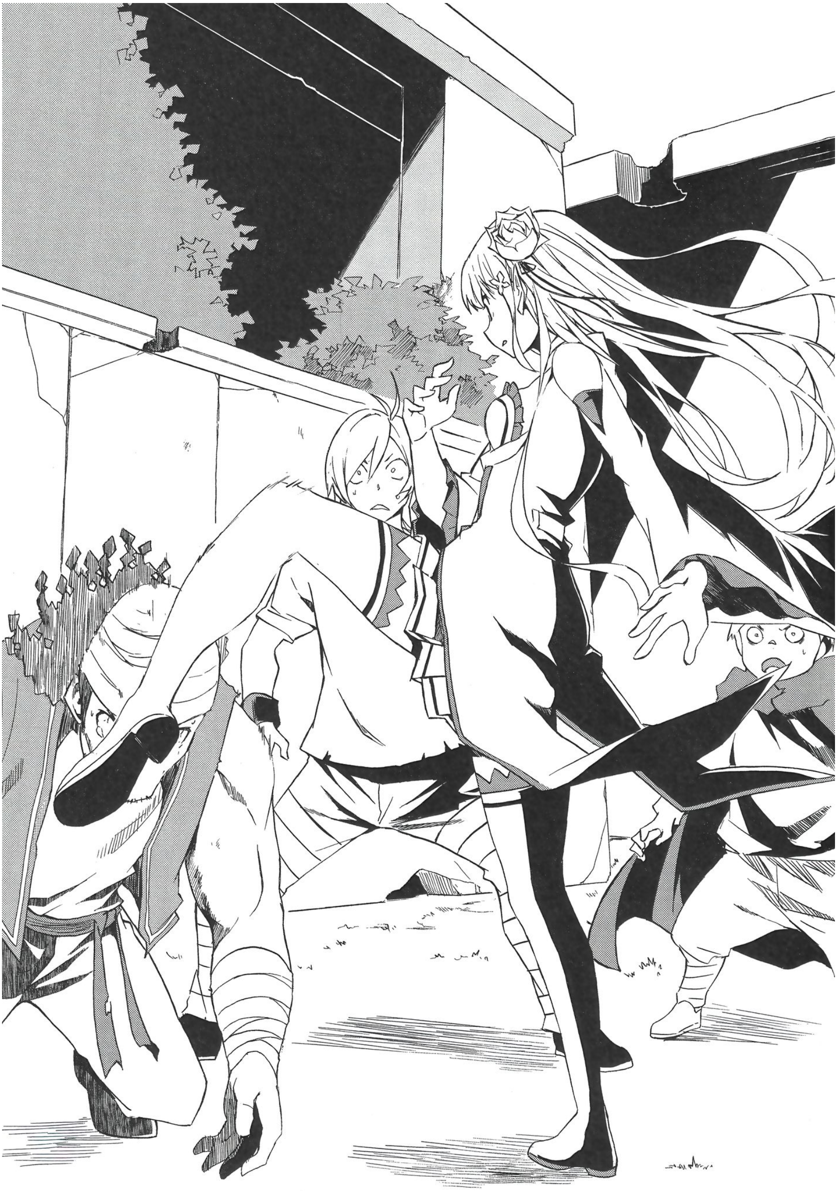

The sharp impact made the middle-aged man's eyes roll to the back of his head, then he collapsed to the ground, shocking his two companions. Using that to her advantage, Emilia quickly moved towards one of the men and gave his chest a hard push, flipping him over. The last one extended his arms towards her, but her flowing silver hair that danced in the wind slipped through his fingers.

“Take this!” Emilia shouted, running up the man’s body without stopping, landing a kick on the man’s jaw with the top of her foot as she backflipped off of him, which slammed him into the wall. After landing, Emilia, went towards the man she had pushed.

“Don’t move! If you move then…ummm, what should I do?”

“If you move then I’ll give you a terrible time in place of this kind child. Is that clear?” Puck threatened the man, his fur standing on end, from Emilia’s shoulder, as she hadn’t decided on what to say yet. Seeing how his companions had gotten beaten up and that a spirit showed up, the man lost the will to resist.

“Ask us whatever you want. We’ll tell you whatever you wanna know. He-He-he…”

The man smiled subserviently, and Emilia clapped her hands as if to say that the situation was lucky for her. “So, can you tell me where the loot house is? It would make me happy if you knew something about it.”

5

By using somewhat violent means to take care of the evildoers, Emilia succeeded in finding the loot house.

Emilia, her hand on her waist, tilted her head at the loot house in front of her. “I wonder if I am reaaally lucky today.”

“If you were lucky, then your insignia wouldn’t have gotten stolen to begin with. But it’s true that you were able to reach here without incident… Maybe you’re lucky in a bad way?”

“What does ‘being lucky in a bad way’ mean, for example?”

“It’s kind of like having to endure pain equal to the amount of success you get… Like you fell down and hurt your feet, but you were able to find a coin because of that.”

In Emilia’s case, it was due to bad luck that her insignia got stolen, but finding the person who’d stolen it so quickly was something only good luck could pull off. So, the only problem left was—

“What I do now will determine whether I can get it back or not.”

“Yeah, that’s what it is. We have a bit of time till sunset, so use me well.”

With Puck’s reassuring words, Emilia nodded and went towards the door of the loot house. It was quite a large building adjacent to the outer wall of the royal capital. According to the villains Emilia had beaten, the owner of the loot house was a huge man who was used to rough situations, and that fast girl might even be there, so they couldn’t afford to not be cautious.

“…” Emilia’s hands reflexively went towards her chest, since it was where she’d placed the red flower ornament the young girl gave her.

Even though nothing had been solved yet, Emilia recalled the various events that had occurred in the royal capital on her way here. She got separated from Ram, who was accompanying her, she played with the cat girl, she got her insignia stolen, helped a lost child, and then arrived here in the loot house. Good and bad things happened all in a single day.

Let’s act in order to end this day with a ‘It was a good day.’ I need to pull myself together since there will be no one on my side in here—

“Lia, the person inside has noticed us,” Puck whispered into her ear while she was standing in front of the door, confused about what to say when she went inside. Before she could reply to that, they felt someone running towards the door. And then the door opened—

“—Don’t open it! You’ll get killed!”

Right after that, she heard the desperate cry of a desperate-looking boy, making her lose her nerve. That’s really rude. Does he think some kind of short-tempered person is at the door?

Seeing Emilia standing in front of the door, the blonde girl getting hit by the evening glow backed away. Emilia followed the girl into the loot house and looked at the faces inside.

“—I would never do something scary like killing someone out of the blue,” Emilia said in a quiet voice with a pout.

6

What happened after that was not Emilia’s story but the story of another boy. However, as a result, Emilia would get to know that the dense day at the royal capital would end with ‘It was a good day’ as well as ‘It was a tough day’. And one more thing: that the determination she had before she stepped into the loot house that there was no one on her side inside would be proven wrong by the boy with a bright, cheerful smile who said, “—I’d like to know your name.”

END

Arc 2:
The Tumultuous Week

Volume 2

Chapters 1-28

Chapter 1:
The Unfamiliar Ceiling, The Endless Hallway

1

For Subaru, it was a far cry from waking up from a bad night's sleep.

When he opened his eyelids, what met his eyes was a dim white glow that was seemingly artificial. The ceiling was unfamiliar to him, and the crystals on it somehow managed to emit a faint glow that illuminated the interior of the room.

Subaru had a reputation of being good at waking up, so once he woke up, he would immediately become wide awake.

"…The pillow feels different."

As he rolled over, he noticed that the feeling under his head was different than usual.

Moreover, the softness of the bed couldn't have been possible on the futon he was used to sleeping on. In fact, the floor underneath his futon had become discolored because he never folded it and put it away after waking up.

"And it smells super nice, too. Ha-ha-ha…it smells like the sun! Well…it's really the smell of lice that were burnt to death in the sun, isn't it…?"

That was one of the top three pieces of knowledge he didn't want to know in his life.

I'm going to enjoy the stench of death to the fullest!, he thought, and then he opened his eyes. He then raised himself up halfway and looked around the room, which was instantly recognizable as a room for the upper class.

The bed was roomy enough for about five people, and the room around the bed was at least 350 square feet in size. Using a 350 square foot room as a bedroom would be a complete waste of space. However… "Given the size of the mansion…that's probably not the case, huh."

Fully awake, Subaru got off the bed and lightly turned himself around to check his current condition.

First of all, he checked his shoulders, then the various joints in his arms and legs, and then his cardiovascular and endurance strength by lifting his legs and doing squats, and lastly, while taking a breather due to being out of breath, he pulled up the clothes he was wearing to see if he had any wounds from before.

"Stomach wound…it's gone! No bruises, of course, and no scar from getting disemboweled, either. And zero stitches, so the doctors of this world are excellent! Great! No one would sweep me off my feet if I had any scars, after all."

Cooking, laundry, sewing, and other household chores were all things Natsuki Subaru would rather avoid, but he at least had potential in them.

Subaru was pretty tough due to all the exercises he'd done at home, and he was able to eat a lot of food as a result. I wonder if a rich official or minister would take me as a bride…

"I'm definitely not going to do that…Anyway…"

The room was as simple as he initially thought. —In addition to the bed, there was a houseplant by the window, some furniture, and paintings on the walls.

Subaru wasn't sure if it existed in this world, but he couldn't find a clock anywhere—or anything that looked like a clock—and he couldn't find anything that looked like a calendar, either.

"The question is…how long was I unconscious…? Well, maybe five hours?"

Subaru touched his chin and measured the approximate time elapsed by the feel of his stubble.

It was his secret technique that allowed him to check the time quite accurately without a clock. From the feel of his stubble clock, it had been roughly five or six hours since he'd last checked. In other words, it would be around the time the first day after being summoned to another world had come to an end.

Thinking that far, Subaru once again touched his belly. "Anyway… does that mean I avoided activating Return by Death this time?"

That was the question he had been trying to avoid thinking about ever since waking up, but then he ultimately decided to face the reality that he couldn't look away from.

2

Up to the point of losing consciousness, Subaru recalled the events leading up to each Death.

"First, I died in a haphazard manner; the second time I died bravely; the third time I died like a dog; and the fourth time I died from a stray projectile after getting thrown into a fight to the death—is what I would be saying if I actually died, but I'm glad I was able to stay alive. If I were to die like that again, I'd be on track to becoming a mob in no time."

All of the causes of Death were charming like that.

On the bed in the large and uncomfortable room—with the sheets and comforter thrown into a heap—Subaru sat cross-legged in silent contemplation.

There was no doubt that this was different from the site of the usual restart point since the activation of Return by Death had been avoided. There was a one-in-ten thousand percent chance that this was the home of the fruit stall owner where he always ended up before when he Returned by Death, but the only thing he could think of at the moment was, "It's either Reinhard's house or Emilia-tan's house."

They were the only two people who were friendly to Subaru and gave the impression that they would own a large mansion like this.

Hopefully it's the latter, Subaru thought with his own wishful thinking.

The treatment of my abdominal wound—this was probably due to Emilia's magic. If the treatment had not been carried out immediately on the spot, I'd probably have died, and above all, my male mind wants to believe that the beautiful girl was the one who healed me.

"It's not that I have an issue with that handsome knight healing me, but to have a gorgeous girl heal you is any man's dream, right…? This is a different world, after all!"

He then stroked the sheets with his fingers and made feminine gestures while daydreaming.

After that, Subaru bounced on the bed and used the springs to land on the floor. "For now, I'd like to figure out where I am," he began. "Then it's the beginning of a new adventure…no, no, no, no, don't dread these changes! Get back on track, me! —Are you really going to go back to those reclusive days when you were a pain in the ass who didn't want to do anything for himself?! Do you really want to go back to that kind of thing where you just eat and play games and watch anime and go to bed at the time you want to go to bed and check out what's on the internet and post comments occasionally…actually, yes, it would be nice to go back, wouldn't it?"

It wasn't that Subaru had any desire to be summoned to another world or anything.

It wasn't that he was dissatisfied with the shut-in life in the first place. It's just that he never thought that the days that passed by were boring or wasted, and to be able to sleep as long as he wanted to was all he needed as a shut-in.

"I do feel a little bad for my parents, who had to deal with me…but it's almost like they just let me do whatever I wanted without getting in the way."

He exercised, ate meals with his family at the table, went out occasionally, and even begged for an allowance. It was a relatively normal life for a teenager except for not going to school, so it would perhaps be better to call Subaru a drop-out rather than a shut-in.

“What a shocking fact, huh. If I didn’t have the opportunity to look back at myself in another world, maybe I wouldn’t have realized that I wasn’t a real shut-in for the rest of my life… No way, maybe that’s why I was summoned here…?”

Subaru firmly decided that he would be careful about self-identifying in the future. Wouldn’t wanna be easily identified as a shut-in and have to deal with the anger of the ‘World Shut-in Association’ or whatever it’s called.

“I suppose all the members of the association are also shut-ins…and if that’s the case, then how in the world do they all cooperate with each other…?”

His thoughts kept going in circles as he pondered that question over and over again. With a twist of his head, Subaru tossed out the entire investigation into that matter with “It doesn’t even matter” and crept toward the door.

Ideally, it would have been preferable for me to have an encounter with someone who had come to see me while I was killing time—someone who would also be able to give me an explanation of the current situation.

“Or I’d wake up and hear, ‘Are you awake?’ from a beautiful girl sitting by my bedside who had nursed me back to health. I mean, isn’t that’s normal? If you were summoned and the beautiful girl who summoned you isn’t by your side—that’s a pretty big disappointment for the one who was summoned and means something went terribly wrong…”

In any case, what he should appreciate was that, for now, as promised by the common clichés of otherworld-fantasy, the people he meets should all be beautiful.

At any rate, there are only five named characters I know of. The three hoodlums can’t be counted since they are essentially uninteresting mobs. And another one is an old man with a wrinkled face, but… “Felt looked like she could shine if she were cleaned up a bit, not to mention Emilia-tan and Reinhard. Elsa is… Oooh hell no, my fingertips are starting to shake just thinking about her!”

Subaru’s trauma gauge shot up, so he concluded that she should be excluded from the list.

I can admit that she is beautiful if only in appearance, but when her addiction to killing and disemboweling people is added to that… “That’s what we call ‘gap moe’!” —That isn’t something I can just ignore just because she’s pretty.

“OK! Now that I’ve figured out what I want to do, I’m going to stop procrastinating and start my journey… Starting something new is always super exciting!”

After he casually whispered that, Subaru carefully turned the doorknob and opened the door.

The chilly air from outside flowed into the room and crept over his bare feet, causing him to let out a “Wah!”

Outside the room was a long hallway painted in warm colors. There were long stretches of walls on either side, and he could see similar doors dotted along the way. All of the rooms had probably been constructed similarly to the room he’d slept in.

—With this many rooms in the 350 square foot class, this must have been a more luxurious mansion than he had previously imagined. He couldn’t help but think of the status of the owner of this mansion, and then he cleared his throat. “The only thing I can say is, wow. It’s super spacious. But with all this space, I wonder where all the people are?”

Walking barefoot down the hallway with floors made out of a smooth, polished material—similar to the floor of his school—Subaru couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at the quietness of the hallway.

“This is even more quiet than the room. Almost too quiet…to the point where I’m afraid of making a sound…”

Normally he'd be shouting, "Is anyone here?!" It was in his nature to do as much as he could in whatever circumstances he found himself in, but under the current circumstances, it didn't feel safe enough to do so.

At any rate, Subaru didn't have a shred of understanding of his current situation at this point in time.

He had been sure that he was in the home of a benefactor, but it wasn't unreasonable to assume that after losing consciousness, Elsa may have organized a large army consisting of 100,000 men to get revenge and captured him while he was asleep.

If that were the case, it was Elsa's side that had captured Subaru, and the mansion would quickly change from a good-natured millionaire's mansion to the hideout of a group of assassins.

"Maybe I should just wait for something to happen after all? I should just go back to my room right now and offer a prayer to God while trembling on my knees."

While looking at the furnishings that also adorned the hallway, Subaru hummed nervously as he began to plan his escape.

The paintings on display were more like the landscapes in the room, but many of the paintings in the hallway were quirky and abstract. As Subaru looked at the geometric patterns, he thought to himself, Hmmm, so the brushstrokes went this way and that way… as if he were a know-it-all.

"Well, I'm not going to let the flag slip away because of that weak-ass thinking. I already decided on a course of action. As if I swore an oath. I don't remember making an oath or who I made an oath to, but I'll keep that in the back of my mind and act on it." Erasing the option to go back, Subaru walked off with the goal of finding people for now.

Right or left—without much hesitation, he chose the right. This was because he remembered seeing a conversation in a manga that said, 'There are many traps on the left, hee-hee-hee,' which was reason enough.

The distinction between right and left changed depending on which room you left, but Subaru only realized that after walking for a while, so he just went along with it anyways.

“Oh well. Everything looks alike and I still can’t see any sign of anyone.”

He hadn’t even reached the end of the hallway yet or saw a place to turn into, and after another five doors, Subaru was baffled.

There would be a limit to how long it could be. A minute or two might not sound like a long time, but the distance he’d traveled in that time was easily 1,000 feet.

It wasn’t normal for there to be a hallway that went on for 1,000 feet without seeing the end of it.

“I’m not going to be able to get a good idea of what’s going on,” he said, scratching his head. The worst thing that could happen is that he would have to return to the room he came from.

“Huh?” With a bare voice, Subaru deepened the angle of his neck in further confusion.

Behind him, from where he had just come from—the problem is that he couldn’t see the end of that hallway either, assuming it was in the same condition.

“Didn’t I already see this painting when I first left the room…?”

He was pretty sure he remembered joking about the brushwork or something like that.

It was possible that they had the exact same artwork on display, but it would be in bad taste to display the same artwork outside of every room. In other words… “I mean, to put it more bluntly…I’m on an infinite loop.”

Perhaps it just felt like he’d moved down a hallway to some extent and was simply transitioning to the other side of the map? Or there was a moving floor contraption that subverted the clichés of otherworld-fantasy and operated so casually that Subaru didn’t notice it.

“With the whole moving-floor thing, it’s totally going to screw up the spirit of the time period. Since Return by Death is already part of the story, does that mean that it has an affinity for looping things, perhaps?”

After speaking cleverly to no one in particular, Subaru opened the door to the nearest room. It was a simple 350 square foot room with a bed and basic furniture inside. In other words, the very room where Subaru had come from.

“What the heck is this supposed to mean? That it’s useless to move around, and I’m supposed to just quietly stay put?”

—So this is how they limited Subaru’s movements after he woke up. He felt like this was a total waste of time and magic, but it may be that they had a plan to deprive him of the energy to resist by showing the difference in power.

“Well, now that I have a basic understanding of what this thing is, it’s really a clever way to sap my spirit, huh. There is no reason why I wouldn’t be shocked by the creation of such a mysterious space, if I think about it in a normal way…”

He stretched his arms, legs, and hips with an “Mmm.” Then he put his hands on the wall to firmly loosen his Achilles tendons, successfully warming up his muscles for his upcoming actions.

“My usual mode of action would be to jump into bed like, Hey! I’m just gonna chill until someone comes along…, but not this time! If they think this is enough to make me give up, then they are in for a big surprise!”

He crouched in the middle of the hallway and assumed a starting position.

Get set, ready—

“As expected, after sleeping for half a day, I’m full of energy!”

After a not-so-cool boast of his amazing amount of energy after getting a lot of sleep, Subaru started running as fast as he could.

He definitely wasn't as fast as Felt, and frankly, he felt like even Old Man Rom would give him a run for his money.

His stamina wasn't anything special, and his 100-meter dash was so disappointing that he got out of breath at the 70-meter mark, but in this moment at least, he felt like he could sprint like an Olympic sprinter.

Run, run, run. —He kept internally thinking this to push himself forward.

The end of the hallway was still out of sight, and he kept returning to the same starting point no matter how much he ran. It was like it was mocking his determination and telling him 'Resistance is futile'.

However, Subaru did not stop running.

As if to show with his attitude that the only thing an ordinary man could do was to keep on running straight over and over again.

Subaru didn't care if the hallway was just a forgotten, unused place in the mansion, or that it was a stranger's mansion, or that he had just been disemboweled half a day ago, or that he felt like he needed to take care of a little business sooner or later.

"No, that last one isn't good! That's not good! Oh man, I'm suddenly having a raging urge to pee! And number one and number two feel like they wanna come out at the same time!"

The boy parts of Subaru begin to squeal and the dashing form of an Olympic sprinter from earlier is nowhere to be found. The posture in which he ran through the air devolved into a woman's running posture in which his upper body swayed as he squeezed his inner thighs together.

However, such trivial differences in Subaru's running style did not stop the world from mocking his efforts.

The repetition of this maliciousness eventually slowed down Subaru's speed.

His shoulders shook loudly, and he breathed roughly. A lonely battle with even sweat on his forehead, and, unable to gain anything from it, Subaru squatted down on the spot. “I give up. Let’s just do it here.” He threw everything away and put his hands on the garment that protected his lower abdomen.

One could say that his dignity as a human being was about to be lost. Not being able to go to the bathroom in the proper place made him feel no better than a wild dog or cat.

But he refused to feel like his dignity was being lost. This wasn’t enough to make his heart falter.

“Moreover, it seems like I’ve discovered a new kink… This kind of abuse feels kinda good…” He said, with a fresh smile on his face for the first time since being summoned to another world. He squatted down in the hallway. At the very least, he’d stopped at the end of the hallway, which showed he at least had a little bit of reason left.

And… “Natsuki Subaru, ready to g—huh?”

Just as he was about to say, “Ready to go,” a change occurred in front of Subaru’s eyes.

The image of the hallway, which had remained the same no matter how much he ran, suddenly distorted in Subaru’s vision.

The transformation of the world occurring in front of his eyes was akin to crumpling a piece of paper and then stretching it back out.

Subaru blinked as if to confirm it was actually happening after the wrinkles had been fully stretched, and then stood up, holding back the urge to urinate that had involuntarily retracted.

“I don’t really understand it, but…is everything gonna be alright now?”

When he looked at his surroundings again, he could see that the world had changed. He could clearly see the end of the hallway in addition to other hallways he could turn into.

The abstract painting Subaru had seen many times was in front of him, and the room he had woken up in was right in front of the painting.

Subaru was sure he had been returned to his starting point, and he seemed to have broken out of the loop as well. He wasn't entirely sure what caused this to happen, but. "So it's essentially because I tried to go to the bathroom in the hallway. That's a complicated flag… It's the kind of thing you wouldn't notice normally. Whoever thought of it, I'm sure they're an evil genius."

"Well, now that I've escaped the loop, why don't I just go back to the room and go to sleep…"

Scratching the back of his head, Subaru looked back at the first door—however, a sudden chill swept through the hallway as he did so. It wasn't like it conveyed any words, but the feelings put into it were rather straightforward. —It was as if someone was facepalming somewhere.

"Whoever it is, I know someone's out there telling me to go back! —Yeah yeah, okay! I'll go!"

After throwing an angry yell at the cause of the endless loop, Subaru began walking once again. It would have been possible to just do his business there, but that wouldn't have advanced the event, and finding a bathroom was what mattered most right now.

"In other words, for the sake of protecting my dignity, I have no choice but to proceed. —I mean, whoever this is is too good, so I'm not going to back down!"

With a determined look on his face, he affirmed his intentions. Yes, Subaru would keep fighting on because of his urge to pee.

Although the looping mechanism had been deactivated, the hallway was still wrapped in a strange atmosphere as if saying it wasn't over yet. Subaru felt like that sensation was somewhat similar to the feeling he had when he saw Emilia use magic. This was his best guess as someone who couldn't use magic, but the hallway seemed to be completely filled with it.

Unlike when he was dealing with the endless loop, it wasn't even trying to be hidden this time. The magic user must have been quite confident in their abilities—to the extent that they could set up their evil schemes and confidently say, "Come on in, there's a trap in here."

"It's not safe to proceed in the dark, or so they say. But being too cautious is the same as being a coward. And above all, I have a time limit…"

The tide had receded quite a bit now, but it was no secret that it would eventually return as a massive wave.

Gulping and wiping the sweat from his forehead, Subaru took the first step with determination.

The door was in front of him, and with a twist of the doorknob, said, "The hallway is always full of traps after breaking the loop. In a typical dungeon event like this, surprisingly enough, the first door is always the best choice."

With that intuitive guess, he opened the door, and the response he received was, "…What a deeply bothersome guy, I suppose."

He received a resentful look from a curly-haired little girl staring at him in an unfamiliar library.

Chapter 2:
The Keeper of the Forbidden Library and the Twin Maids

1

It was a room that basically screamed “library” at you.

The room was twice as large as a 350 square foot room, and there were bookcases set up all over the place, going from one corner of the room to the other. Every bookcase was so tightly packed with books that it was hard to imagine how many books it truly held.

Books took up a lot of space and were heavy, so it was a problem to have so many. In Subaru’s case, his whole family loved to read manga, and there used to be a room on the second floor of his house that was filled to the brim with books, especially manga.

One day, without any warning, the floor fell through, and it was a complete renovation disaster. Fortunately, no one was injured, and Subaru had since put them all in a dedicated book storage room, so they should never experience that kind of catastrophe again.

Even from the perspective of Subaru, who has had such an experience involving books, the number of books in this room exceeded the number of books in his house even with the floors removed. Of course, the structure of the mansion itself was much sturdier than that of his house.

Finding even one book to read—that Subaru could understand—would be a tall order for him considering the enormous number of books in his view.

“With so many books here…there must be one that I can read, right?”

A quick glance around the library revealed that there were no spine covers written in Japanese. There were no alphabets here as far as he knew, and most of the letters were characters based on what he'd seen on the signboards while walking around the capital. These were the commonly used characters of this world, after all.

If Subaru wanted to live in this world, it was going to be essential to learn it. For him, who had even dropped his language classes in middle school, it already felt like such a drag.

Subaru sighed while envisioning his coming difficulties. Then—

"Gazing at other people's bookshelves, and even sighing as you do so… So you're trying to be offensive, I suppose? Shall I respond in kind, I wonder?"

Subaru didn't have the communication skills necessary to talk to someone he just met without any sort of preparation, so he had no choice but to say, "I'm really not good at talking to people I've never met before, so I'm gonna have to head out for a sec, sorry. I'll be right back for a Take-Two!"

After he raised his hand to the little girl who stared at him with her unmoving eyes, Subaru casually walked out of the room.

Then, after a few moments, he opened the door, re-entered the room, and looked at the little girl who hadn't moved an inch from where she had been standing.

"Oh, look who's here. Hi! Nice to meet you! Can I have a word with you?"

"Betty knew you were making fun of her, I suppose. Don't you think you deserve to be punished for entering Betty's library without an invitation, I suppose?"

The little girl laughed adorably and cruelly at Subaru as he tried to start their encounter over from a better starting point.

How many times have I seen this sight in this other world? —She was a beautiful, sweet girl.

She appeared to be younger than Felt, perhaps eleven or twelve years old. She was wearing an indigo-colored dress with lots of frills and had a lovely face that suited her ornate hairstyle and clothes.

Her hair was closest to the color of cream and was grown long and rolled into curls—it looked like drills.

Adorable came to mind, and the little girl's appearance seemed to be the embodiment of that word. The cuteness level was so high that one's heart couldn't help but melt if she were to smile.

Now she was standing in front of Subaru with a solemn face.

"You'll ruin your pretty face if you don't smile. You see, just smile! Smile! Smile!"

"Betty being pretty is simply Betty's nature. But a better question would be: what should Betty do with you? I suppose."

"Do what with me? I'm sorry I ignored your intentions. I'm the type of guy who unconsciously pulls out all the correct answers to a question like this, even though the GM would want me to step through all the events he's prepared for me."

A talent for pulling off the correct answer in a situation where there were four choices and only a total of four hints were available. People also called it 'not being able to read the mood'.

In the past, there had been many events that Subaru had subconsciously crushed in that way. The endless loop earlier could be added to the list of those events.

"Trying to do your business in the hallway of someone else's house, coming here without even crossing the hallway with lots of mana-sensing traps…there's only one word to describe you, the worst, in fact!"

"I'm the type of guy who doesn't stop for anything, even RPGs. That's why I'm so busy collecting sub-events the second week."

If it was a 'Visual Novel Game', he would often go straight for the main heroine, and though he enjoyed collecting special illustrations, he wouldn't necessarily collect all of them if there were too many side-quests to do.

Leaving those off-topic thoughts aside, Subaru said, "Well," and then looked at the little girl once again.

From what she said from earlier, it was safe to assume that she was the culprit behind the endless loop in the hallway. After that, it seemed that the hallway was also set up with various surprise events that prevented Subaru from finding a bathroom. However, he managed to skip all of those events in the end.

"I understand that you want to show off your power, but messing with someone's bodily needs for that purpose is not funny. It almost killed me socially. I shudder just thinking about it."

"Now that she thinks about it, Betty should have just let you run around in circles for a while longer, in fact. That would have saved Betty at least half the humiliation, I suppose.”

“Uh-huh, yeah, Betty. Well, now that I’ve stepped in here, that means I was just better than you. I’m not as much of a sore loser as you, either.”

Subaru felt a sense of urgency due to the toilet-talk, which caused him to start tapping his feet anxiously.

The little girl tiredly put her fingers to her own eyebrows. “Betty is growing tired of you, in fact. Roswaal lets that girl do whatever she wants without any consequences… Now Betty has to clean this mess up, I suppose.”

“You’re tired? But you’re so young! Children should play outside in the sun! Wrinkling your eyebrows together is so boring! C’mon, c’mon! Live strong!”

Thumbs up

The catchphrase was ‘Live strong’, which Subaru first heard in the slums of the capital. At first, he wasn’t sure about how he felt about it, but the more he said it, the more he grew to like it.

The little girl stared at Subaru with half-lidded eyes as she began to like the phrase soberly. Subaru responded to her gaze with a shy smile and then stuck out his tongue.

“Wait. That reaction is not what Betty expected, I suppose. You’re creeping Betty out, in fact.”

“Ow, you just said the whole phrase instead of using the abbreviated version! With that out of the way, can we get to the point? If I get sidetracked too much, my bladder will be in trouble.”

“I don’t know what the second half means, but I have a feeling we’d better get down to business for Betty’s sake, I suppose.”

“Okey-dokey. So…”

Subaru was about to ask the question, “So where’s the bathroom?”

but he was getting the impression that she would use that to her advantage in order to tease him, so he restrained himself and kept his mouth shut.

No matter how he looked at things, the little girl in front of him had to be a magic user of some sort. It was pretty obvious based on how well the looping hallway trick went, and there was a good chance he wouldn't be a match for her.

Moreover, Subaru was extremely hungry right now on top of recovering from life-threatening injuries, and his fighting power was declining. Especially after all the sprinting and running he did earlier, he felt a great deal of anxiety about his physical strength. He knew that his wounds were healing, but he was low on blood as well, which was a bit dangerous.

"I want to start with liver! A heaping serving of pork, liver, and garlic chives to replenish my blood! Tonight, it's not Koetsu, I'm the one who's bloodthirsty, Hiyaa."

"This boy… What are you even talking about now, I suppose…?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry, I'm gonna cut to the chase. Let's see, what's this place, anyway?"

After all, it was good to gather information while the other party was honestly willing to discuss it. While thanking the girl for her patience and understanding, Subaru decided to ask a few questions.

First of all, Subaru wanted to confirm where he currently was. He didn't think he had been captured by Elsa now, but he couldn't necessarily claim that as a fact yet.

He was hoping to get an answer from her concerning that issue. However, she responded with, "It's Betty's bedroom, I suppose."

"…Ah…giving a literal answer right away. I know that youngsters nowadays think that being literal is fun and all, but don't you know that's the exact problem with y'all?"

I teased her back a little bit and this is what happened!

That clearly upset the little girl—who called herself Betty—but he wondered if that was her real name. It seemed more like a nickname.

The girl puffed out her cheeks at Subaru, who was struggling with his emotions. She crossed her arms and shook her glittering dress as she approached him. “Betty has had enough, I suppose. Betty has a feeling she’s going to have to teach you a lesson, in fact.”

“Oh, come onnn, abusing prisoners is barbaric! Don’t do it! I’m just a normal guy who has to endure the urge to pee, and that makes me less dangerous than the average person!”

“That makes you more dangerous due to your desperation, in fact.”

“Damn, that’s clever. Crap, I can’t think of a single thing to do to prove that I’m not a bad guy! Listen, I-I’m not a bad guy!”

She shook her head in small increments, a determined appeal that made her eyes moisten as she shrank to the limit. But the girl’s steps, instead of slackening, increased in speed.

And then she said, “Don’t you dare move, in fact.”

A shiver ran down Subaru’s spine as he heard those words.

Suddenly, the smell of old paper that had dominated the library disappeared, and the pain he felt was as if ice had been thrust into his nose.

Subaru’s skin turned to the color of ash, and he could hear a distant high-pitched ringing in his ears. The reason why he couldn’t smell anything was so his other senses could be strengthened. In this case, sight and touch—his five senses had been cut down to those two senses only.

In front of Subaru’s eyes, the little girl was already close to the point where she could reach him. The difference in height was obvious. The little girl was only as tall as Subaru’s chest, and her shallow blue eyes were looking up at him closely.

The pale pink lips formed a smile, and the little girl’s innocence was the only thing that kept Subaru's alarm bells ringing.

"Do you have something to say, I wonder?" The little girl tilted her head back and asked Subaru, her eyes wide and her lips quivering.

As sweat trickled down his forehead and down his cheeks, and the sensation broke his rigidity for just a few moments, Subaru searched for the best word to say in the moment he was allowed.

That's right, the one word that should be uttered right here, the one word that would break the current situation. That was… "Is it gonna hurt?"

"Betty is impressed you can be so light-hearted in this situation, I suppose. —Betty guesses it's up to you whether it hurts or not, in fact." Saying that in a seriously impressed tone, the little girl's hand reached for Subaru's chest.

A palm met his chest and gently and modestly stroked the surface.

There was a tickly sensation running up his spine, like a chill. "Buhhhh..."

—In the next moment, Subaru felt as if his entire body was on fire.

Something terrible raged inside his body, burning everything from his fingertips to his hair. It was as if her fingertips were wrapped in flames and moving all across his body—it was an extremely painful sensation for him to endure.

Subaru's vision flickered, and the next thing he knew, he was on his knees with tears running down his face. His breathing was ragged, as if he had been running for miles, and his whole body was as sluggish and achy as the day after he had done a reckless muscle workout.

Most of all, he felt exhausted, with all the mental "stuff" dragged out of him.

"It looks like you didn't pass out, I suppose. Just like Betty was told, you're quite sturdy, in fact."

“What the hell did you do to me, drill loli…?”

“Betty simply took out some of the mana inside your body, I suppose. It seems to have a special shape, in fact…even though you’re just an ordinary guy. Your Gate also seems to be closed, in fact.” Muttering to herself, the little girl knelt in front of the crumpled Subaru.

Subaru struggled to support his upper body as she poked her fingers at him while he was trying to get up. “Well, it confirms that you aren’t hostile, I suppose. And for all the disrespect from you towards Betty and for all the hard work Betty has done, taking your mana should be a suitable payment, I suppose.” She poked him again, causing him to reach his limit, and his upper body fell to the floor, unable to support himself with his trembling arms.

This is the third time I’ve kissed the ground in a face-down position. Actually no, this isn’t even the first time… Since I Returned by Death, this is totally my first kiss.

Gathering up all the extra energy in his body between his silly thoughts, Subaru somehow managed to change the angle of his neck on the floor. Slowly, over time, he managed to look up at the little girl’s face.

“Hmm?” As the little girl watched Subaru’s efforts, she loosened the corners of her mouth in amusement.

Subaru peeled his teeth at such a smile and laughed. “You’re not human…are you? —And in this case, I’m not talking about your personality…”

“For all the times you’ve seen Bubby, you’re a little slow on the uptake, I suppose.”

Her words made her sound younger than she appeared, which in turn gave him the impression of a little girl cruelly playing with the wings of a feathered insect.

The fact that she was enjoying watching Subaru crawl along the floor drooling was another point that supported his current impression of her. “One correction…in terms of personality, you’re not even human, either…”

“Don’t measure a noble and sublime being by your standards, human.”

It was a statement said in a far too cruel tone for a little girl to utter.

Somehow, Subaru felt something smoldering in his chest. However, although he felt it, he no longer had enough energy left to act on it. No matter what he did, he was being dragged into the darkness.

—Come on! I just woke up and I’m being rendered unconscious again?!

“I will speak to the others, I suppose. It would be troublesome if you started leaking here, I suppose.”

What if I just let it all out now…no, I don’t have enough guts to say that…

Unable to speak with his unruly mouth, Subaru fell unconscious again.

2

“Oh, he is awake, Sister.”

“Ah, he is awake, Rem.”

It feels like my consciousness is rising to the surface from the ocean’s depths.

The time change and waking up again began with the voices of two girls with the same quality of voice.

Based on how well I slept, I guess I’m in the same soft, comfortable bed as before.

What burned Subaru’s eyelids as he woke up from his slumber was the slight amount of sunlight streaming in through the curtains. The amount of glare was so soft that one would think it was morning.

Don’t know what time it is when you’re on the road? Then when not try out my handy dandy ‘Stubble Clock’! He gave a sales pitch to no one in particular and checked the time while waking himself up.

When Subaru touched the stubble clock on his chin, it felt like it had been four or five hours since he’d woken up last. He could still feel some slight sluggishness in his body.

“It is Seven Brightsun now, sir.”

“It is almost Seven Brightsun, sir.”

Perhaps it was because Subaru stared at the window and showed the action to check the time, but the voice kindly answered the question.

Seven Solartime—Subaru didn’t even know what it meant, but he guessed it was seven o’clock in the morning, judging by the letters. In the first place, he didn’t even know if the time in this world ran on a 24-hour system.

It’s hard to tell if it’s really seven o’clock in the morning, but if I don’t count the first time I woke up… “So I pretty much slept through the whole day, huh? Well, that’s not much of a surprise to me as someone who has slept for 52 hours straight.”

“Sister, did you hear that? Truly the words of a lazy man.”

“Yes, I heard that, Rem. Truly the words of a good-for-nothing man.”

“So who are you two people who are always stereotyping me, ladies?” With a thud, Subaru bounced off the covers and got up.

The sudden action surprised the girls, who were standing next to the bed with Subaru between them. The girls jolted away from the bed, moved to the middle of the room, and then looked at him, hand in hand with each other.

Although they had expected this to some extent, the girls looking at Subaru with their fingers intertwined looked exactly the same—twins.

They were around five feet tall. They had large eyes and pink lips with shallow faces that made them seem childish and lovely.

The two girls, who looked exactly alike, had their hair cut short, but their hair was different colors—one was pink, and the other was light blue. Furthermore, they covered one eye with their hair, but the pink-haired girl covered her left eye, and the light blue-haired girl covered her right eye.

But such differences were only trivial. At this moment, based on those features, the thing that stirred Subaru's heart the most was… "No way…are there even maid outfits in this world?!"

A black apron dress with a white prim on top of their heads. The beautiful twin girls were dressed in the orthodox classic style of maid clothing.

—This is the embodiment of the ideal maid.

"Oh no. I'm currently being indecently humiliated in our guest's head, Sister."

"Oh no. I'm being violated right now in the head of our guest, Rem."

"Don't underestimate my mental capacity. You're both fodder for my fantasies, ladies." Subaru held his arms out and ruffled his fingers in the air. The meaningless movement brought a shiver to the faces of the two maids, and they untied their intertwined fingers and pointed at each other.

"Please forgive me, sir. Just let Rem go and go defile Sister."

"Please don't do it, sir. You can let Ram go and defile Rem instead."

"What kind of sisterhood is that?! Selling each other out and making me look like some kind of evil villain?!"

So scary! and the twins ran away, holding hands again.

Subaru jumped out of bed and chased after them.

The three of them ran around in circles in the large room, chasing each other. And—

“Couldn’t you have woken up more quietly?” A girl had knocked on the door softly, which opened with a thump, and then looked at the three of them from the doorway.

The beauty of her long silver hair could be seen in full and today it was untied and naturally flowing down her back. Her clothing was not the robed outfit she usually wore, but was designed with noticeably darker colors to suit her white, slender body. The skirt was slightly shorter than knee-length, revealing her slender legs, but that area was hidden by knee socks that reached up to the top of her thighs.

“Wow! Whoever picked this outfit out, I get what they were thinking!”

“Well, I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but it’s soooooo disappointing when I know it’s something meaningless.”

Before he knew what he was doing, Subaru pumped his fist and cheered unintentionally.

The girl—Emilia—looked at him with dumbfounded eyes in the doorway of the room.

Chapter 3:
I Can’t Be a Bride

Subaru felt his heart flutter involuntarily at Emilia’s sudden visit. The unexpectedly perfect outfit was a fresh and pleasant surprise, but what was even more pleasant was her presence here.

Simply due to being treated poorly after first being summoned to another world—especially the ones who put him through hell in the beginning—Subaru had special feelings for her, the one who was the first to treat him with unconditional kindness.

“I feel like I’ve imprinted onto you! I don’t want to leave you for a second, Mom!”

“Uhh… I was a biiiit worried because I heard that Beatrice played a prank on you while you were low on blood…but I guess it was useless to do so.”

“Hey, I’ve never had trouble waking up! And I’m kind of afraid to ask you this, but…”

At the puzzled Emilia, Subaru nervously tapped his index fingers together and looked up at her. “So uhh, do you remember me?”

“Your mannerisms are soooo weird, and that’s a weird question to ask. I don’t think anyone could forget someone who leaves such a strong impression like you, Subaru.”

Subaru’s shoulders descended in relief when he heard Emilia softly whisper his name. The fact that the girl called him by his first name without an honorific was completely unexpected and embarrassing for him, someone who never really interacted with the opposite sex in his original world. His ears ended up turning bright red in embarrassment.

Putting aside this somewhat immature behavior of Subaru, the twins, who had noticed Emilia’s presence, rushed to her side. They moved behind her, and with only their faces on either side of her, they stared at Subaru.

“Kindly listen, Lady Emilia. The guest has humiliated my sister.”

“Kindly listen, Lady Emilia. The guest has held me captive and violated Rem.”

“It’s reaaaally not good to tease him too much… I think it’s something Subaru would do, but there’s no way he could get away with it. Ram and Rem, don’t you think you’re playing too much with a sick patient?”

“Yes, Lady Emilia. My sister is sorry for what she’s done.”

“Yes, Lady Emilia. I’m sure Rem will reflect on this.”

Ram and Rem, the two who were called by name, declared their remorse without a shred of remorse in sight. Perhaps accustomed to their attitudes, Emilia looked at Subaru without seeming to be bothered by it. “So how are you feeling, Subaru? Does anything feel strange?”

“I thought I was going to die because I felt like my whole body was on fire before losing consciousness,” he said, “but I don’t feel like that at all now. Now I feel like I slept too much, actually.”

“Yeah. It’s been almost a day since I met you, and you’ve slept through half of it.”

“That’s not true…” Recalling the events that had occurred up until now, Subaru was at a complete loss for words as he tried to refute her statement.

The time it took for Subaru to get through the events of yesterday felt like more than 24 hours to him, but that wouldn’t be the case for Emilia.

From Emilia’s point of view, their chance encounter would only have taken less than an hour. The number of words she exchanged with him could not be said to be much, either.

For Subaru, having this conversation event with her took top priority, especially since he hadn't had a chance to do so this time around.

"Sleeping too much and being lazy are habits of mine…and it's super unusual for me to be up in the morning."

"What kind of life have you been living…?"

"You see, it's easier to play games at night because you don't have to deal with all the unnecessary noise. To be frank, for a shut-in, the high hours of the day are a perfect time to sleep."

"You know, I'm really getting more and more disappointed in you, Subaru." Emilia expressed her disappointment with a sigh in a way that was easy to understand, even though she probably didn't understand most of the meaning, but she understood the essence of what he was saying.

Detecting that the mood was turning sour, Subaru quickly attempted to change the subject by talking about her clothes. "By the way, you look soo different today. What were you doing?"

"Oh, don't mention the clothes too much. I don't like it either. If you're wondering what I've been doing, I was just about to go about my morning routine." Emilia held her forehead and slurred her words as if she were having difficulty saying them. Her lack of clarity also bothered Subaru, but he didn't the pursue the subject any further.

"What's your morning routine?"

"I'm going to borrow the garden of the mansion and talk to the spirits for a bit in the morning. Because that's part of the contract I made with various spirits."

"Wow, talking to spirits is super cool! I don't know what a contract is, but…

The first thing that came to mind when he heard the word 'spirit' was still a tiny gray-haired cat.

In this version of the world, he hadn't had much contact with him, but Subaru still found himself looking forward to seeing him again. Mainly to get his daily dose of cuteness and fluffiness.

Seemingly out of habit, Subaru wiggled his hands. Emilia was quickly learning to ignore the oddities of Subaru's mannerisms, however.

"Well, it's good that you're fine, but don't make too much noise because most people are still asleep at this time. Although, it's awful of me to tell someone who's been asleep for so long to be quiet."

"You're right. Oh, when you say garden, does that mean it's a bit bigger?"

"It's more of a park than a garden. Why do you ask?"

"Nah, provided you don't mind me doing something in the corner of the garden while you talk to the spirits, Emilia-tan…"

"As long as you're not making too much noise or anything… What? What did you just say?"

"Okay, I'm in. I'll go with you."

"Hey, what did you say? What's tan? Where did that come from?"

Though she was asking him questions in a frenzy, he dodged them. With a nasty attitude in return for their earlier mean-spiritedness, Subaru turned his body towards Ram and Rem. "Hey, maid sisters. Do you know where my clothes are? I don't know where they went, but these feel like hospital clothes, and I think they're probably keeping it here."

It hadn't been mentioned so far, but Subaru's current outfit was similar to a thin samue costume made of red-brown fabric. The material was too stiff to be called a hospital gown, but it was much cooler than it looked and quite easy to move in.

"But when it comes to moving around, it's not as comfortable as my tracksuit. So I'm wondering if I can find it somewhere. I don't know if the blood ruined it or not…"

"Do you know, Sister? Is it that dirty little gray rag by any chance?"

"I think so, Rem. Maybe it's that blood-stained rat-colored piece of filth."

"Quite fearless you two—yes, the dirty little rags. If it's still wearable, can you bring it here?" Subaru asked.

The twins looked at Emilia as if seeking approval. When Emilia indicated with her eyes that she had no choice, the twins nodded and tottered out of the room.

"Are you sure you're feeling okay? It wasn't a shallow injury, from what I can tell."

"For sure, I feel perfectly fine. And I don't want my body to be idle, either. If you miss one day of training, you'll have to train for three days in a row to catch up, or so they say."

Subaru straightened his posture as he remembered something, tidied his appearance up, and then turned to Emilia. She looked puzzled by his actions, but he bowed to her and said, "You were the one who healed my wounds, right? Thanks for the help. I'm still scared of dying, actually. I only wanna do it once."

"Normally I'd think you'd only do it once… But nope, it wasn't me." After saying that, Emilia gave a small shake of her head.

Then she looked straight at Subaru with seriousness in her amethyst eyes. Due to the brilliance of her gaze, the fascinated Subaru was stuck as if in a trance and just stood their silently, lost in her eyes. "I'm the one who should be thanking you, Subaru. Back then, you risked your life to save me, a person you barely knew, right? Treating your injuries was only the natural thing to do."

With such a sincere look on her face after conveying her gratitude to Subaru for saving her life, Subaru couldn't help but let out an involuntary "Ahh."

He resented himself for not being able to give even a single sincere response. It was unlikely that he would be able to confront her unless he was fooling around and deceiving her.

He thought about how much easier it would be if he could tell her that she had saved him by saying, That's not true. You were the one who saved me first, Emilia-tan. Though only Subaru remembered what happened in that world.

"—Well, since we helped each other out, how about we say we're even?"

"Even…?"

"It means we don't owe each other anything! So let's be friends, sista!"

If only they were still in the slums—they could have teamed up together, shoulder to shoulder, but all Subaru could do now was use his zeal to cover up his shame.

Emilia smiled slightly at Subaru's bravado. "I don't think I need a strange little brother like that."

"That's a rather harsh comment, right?!"

Subaru felt a little depressed when Emilia gave such a poor assessment of him, but he knows he hadn't shown an ounce of dependability yet, so he'd just have to resign himself to this harsh assessment without a single rebuttal.

"We found what you requested, sir."

"Here you go, sir."

While Subaru was in a depressed state of mind due to what had just occurred, the twin maids brought in his recently washed tracksuit. The pink-haired maid had his jacket, and the light blue-haired maid had his pants. Fortunately, they were able to get the tracksuit washed without leaving any traces of blood on it.

At first glance, Subaru was relieved to see the return of his good-as-new tracksuit. However, the two girls rushed over to him and tried to remove his clothes as quickly as possible.

"Hey, hey! No, I can do it on my own! Although I'm kind of flattered.”

“Oh my, he feels more pleasure than shame, Sister.”

“Oh dear, he feels more happy than humiliated. —He must be a pervert at heart, Rem.”

“Wow, the pink-haired one is the one with the foul mouth! I’ll get dressed, just hand—it—over!” Subaru quickly shook off the squirming twins’ hands and got his tracksuit back.

He was about to get changed as quickly as he could, but then suddenly realized something. “Speaking of which…were you the one who changed me into these clothes?”

“It was me. Ram and Rem were out, and since I was patching you up anyways, it only seemed natural to do it. Oh, and I gave you a quick but thorough wipe down too.” Emilia said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

Subaru gently peeked inside the underwear he was wearing and confirmed the fact that even his underwear had been replaced. He collapsed on the spot and covered his face with his palms. “I can’t be a bride anymore…”

“If the genders were reversed, that would make sense… Anyways, we don’t have much time, so if you’re going to go, let’s get going.” As if she were the man in the relationship, Emilia patted Subaru on the shoulder in a comforting manner. Since she probably didn’t understand what he was saying, Subaru decided to bury everything he just said and take it to the grave with him.

Subaru had been undressed, cleaned up, and then redressed by a beautiful girl who would have seen his naked body. He thought that was pretty nice in its own way and could even be seen as a reward. He decided to think positively—positive thinking.

Gently wiping the tears from his heart with these positive thoughts, Subaru got to his feet.

As he grabbed his clothes and looked around, the females in the room, sensing that he wanted to change his clothes, left the room in a hurry.

The twins left the room first, and the last thing he saw exit through the door was Emilia's beautiful silver hair. But just before her figure disappeared behind the door, her white profile suddenly turned around. "Don't worry about it. —It was impressive."

As she left, the door closed with a thud.

For the time being, Subaru had to get his clothes changed. He wasn't quite sure how the samue-style clothes were put together, but he figured it out eventually.

He then neatly folded the samue and placed it on the bed. After that he checked how the tracksuit felt after having not worn it for a few hours and stretched with an "mmmmm" and was ready go.

"Well…"

After swinging his hips around and popping a few joints, Subaru looked out the window of his room.

He gently pulled the curtains apart, and he could see the morning sun still blessing the early morning world as it began to rise. After basking in the warmth of the sunlight, he walked over to the bed and dived into it.

"I can't be a bride anymore…"

Pressing his face against the pillow, this time Subaru cried like a little boy.

The last thing that happened was the most heartbreaking for him. Subaru thought he was going to die back there. He even wished he could just die and start over.

—But this heartache wasn't bad enough for him to take such measures, and for a while, Subaru continued to cry his little-boy feelings out like a panzy.

Chapter 4:
Boot Camp in Another World

After wiping away his tears, Subaru left with Emilia, and this time, the hallway he walked through had a proper end. He was then led to a familiar-looking garden outside the manor.

The maid twins also had some work to do around the manor, so they slipped away while they were on the way to the garden.

“Wow, it’s huge…! The mansion is big too, but this is more of a field than a garden, huh.”

The garden of a well-off person’s mansion—a place that was often used as the setting for lunch or dinner parties in manga and anime. Subaru let out a sigh of admiration as he looked around the large garden and immediately began doing stretching exercises to get himself back into shape.

“Those are some odd movements. What are you doing?”

“HUH?! Is warming up not a thing here? If you don’t loosen up your muscles before moving your body, you’ll damage your ligaments before you know it! You could tear your Achilles tendon, or something like that!”

“Hmm, I don’t think I’ve seen something like that. But it’s true that you can easily get injured if you move suddenly without warming yourself up.”

“I didn’t know people in this world don’t do warm-up exercises. Oh well…then how about I teach you? The authentic warm-up exercises of my homeland, passed down through the generations!”

Impressed by the confidence of Subaru, Emilia hesitantly replied with a “O-Okay, then just for a little bit, then.”

Subaru asked her to stand next to him. After the two of them were lined up side-by-side, facing away from the manor, they took deep breaths with the sun pouring down on them. “Radio Calisthenics Exercise Twooo! Go! One-two one-two one one-two.”

“Uhh, what, no way?!”

“Hold your hands out in front of you and touch the sky! Follow my movements, follow me!” While encouraging the puzzled Emilia, Subaru performed his homelands famous Radio Calisthenics Routine. In the beginning, Emilia seemed perplexed and tried imitating his movements, but she gradually became more motivated and was absorbed in the exercises with a serious look on her face. Once the exercises were over, she took a deep breath, and… “And at the end, hold your hands up high and say, victory!”

“Bi…bictory!”

“Alright, that’s the spirit! Not bad for your first time. Emilia-tan is awarded the title of “Calisthenics Novice.” Keep up the good work! Fight!”

In another world, Subaru’s life as a radio calisthenics instructor began. Emilia, his memorable first apprentice, exhaled with a blank look on her face at the ever-so-enthusiastic Subaru.

“Despite what you just said, Subaru, it’s true that these exercises were effective, because I can feel my mana circulating in my body.”

“Then I hope you can spread the word! But only on the condition that the song and victory! are spread too.”

The song and victory! had to come in a package. That was non-negotiable for Subaru.

Feeling pressured by Subaru’s uncharacteristically serious attitude, Emilia nodded her head. “Let’s see…wan-to wan-too?”

“No! It’s one-two one-twooo!”

They spent some time saying “one-two one-two” to each other, but Subaru decided to write the lyrics down on paper in the end.

After he reached that decision, Subaru came to the realization that the people in this world might not understand the words he wrote down. At least for now, he couldn't read the letters of this world.

"Maybe I should check it out later, huh. I can only write in Japanese, a little English, and some gal characters, but…"

Subaru had mastered the Gal alphabet after spending a surprisingly enthusiastic amount of time learning it. Although, never actually being able to use it makes it feel like he just wasted his time.

"Even so, you are pretty fit, Subaru." Emilia suddenly muttered that to Subaru, who was turning his wrists and ankles and popping his joints.

For Subaru, despite already having been seen naked by her, even if it were for the purpose of being treated, he couldn't help but feel embarrassed when Emilia looked at him from top to bottom.

Recalling the extreme embarrassment he felt ten minutes ago, Subaru scratched his head. "Well, sort of. Since I'm a shut-in, I should at least exercise a bit."

"Well, I don't know what "shut-in" means, but I'm sure Subaru comes from a reaaally good family. Weren't you taught martial arts?"

"No, I'm seriously from a normal middle-class family, but where did that come from? Do I give off some noble-like elegance?!"

"You must be reaaally curious."

Subaru said, "Let's hear it." and raised his hands up in a playful manner.

Then Emilia quickly grabbed both of Subaru's raised hands. The girl fiddled with his hands vigorously, and he emitted an "ahh" as his throat froze up. "Like these fingers, it's because of the way your skin and hair look. These hands look sooo different from the hands of a commoner. And these muscles don't look like they came from working…" She continued to fiddle with his hands, causing him to blush constantly, but he felt satisfied regardless.

Aspects about his hair and skin, and other things he had never mentioned before, were pointed out to him, and he was greatly reminded of his own foolishness.

Subaru's mind was spinning at a dizzying pace as she talked about aspects of his appearance that were not usually seen among commoners here. Meanwhile, she continued, "Black hair and black eyes. It's a common trait among migrants from the south, and it can be seen in Lugunica too. I've never seen anyone with these traits, but maybe there were some servants before…? Even that outfit was made with a material I've never seen before… Am I right?"

At the silent Subaru, Emilia smiled as if she were proud of herself.

While being captivated by Emilia's beautiful appearance, Subaru nodded solemnly, and examined the content of her words. "If I were to say whether it's true or not, it isn't, but how can I explain it without hurting you?"

"Even if I'm wrong, you need to say it clearly, or I'm reaaally going to feel embarrassed."

"It's all good. I don't mind, I've been showing a lot of ignorance for some reason or another. How about we just be friends and be embarrassed together!"

"I don't remember our relationship being sooo close that we can casually embarrass each other without fear. I'm not making any progress by speculating, so I'm just going to ask you frankly. Where did you come from, Subaru?"

—A question that blew the shame and outrageousness of the situation away, and Subaru could only think, hmm.

Subaru felt like he could honestly say "I was summoned from another world" here, but saying he was summoned from another world would make him sound like a crazy person.

In a world full of opportunities, a crazy person would not be thrown out, but looking at the seriousness of Emilia in front of him, Subaru had a feeling he'd get turned into an ice statue if he gave a poor answer. “So… I guess it’s best to go with Deflection Plan B here.”

“It’s reaaaally disgusting to be muttering like that. You’re not going to answer my question?”

“I do have an answer for that! And it’s super! But unfortunately, I don’t have the answers to these questions… Uhhh, because I have amnesia and don’t know anything about myself!”

“You said your name was Natsuki Subaru.”

“Oh, shit! You’re not letting up! You keep pushing forward without wavering!”

“Soooo, you’re not going to give me a straight answer. —Well, I won’t try to pry if you don’t want to answer.”

Emilia surprisingly let Subaru off the hook without much trouble while he was engrossed in his thoughts about her behavior. She let out a single word, “Now…” and took out a green crystal that was attached to her blouse.

“Oh, that’s—”

“It’s a crystal for spirits to inhabit. You already know about Puck, right?”

“The gray cat that disappeared when we needed him most, right? And it doesn’t know what I did after that because it was taking a nap, huh?”

It was the crystal that housed the spirit that disappeared during their battle with Elsa. This was the first time Subaru had seen it in this world, but he caught a glimpse of it before in a previous loop.

The green crystal suddenly started glowing as if in response to Subaru’s mean criticisms. And then… “Unfortunately, I heard all about it from Lia after that mess was wrapped up. I don’t sleep all the time, Subaru.”

The light leaking out of the crystal came together and gradually formed a small outline. The head was formed, the torso emerged, and then the limbs appeared, fully equipped with fur. And a few seconds later, a small bipedal cat appeared in Emilia's palm.

"Hiya. Good morning, Subaru. Nice day today."

"It was a rather wild night and morning for me, though. I had to deal with looping hallways and the need to pee, and worst of all, my purity was stolen from me, so I can't marry Emilia-tan anymore…"

"Don't use such harsh words."

After being told that, Subaru replied with a vague "Sure!"

Emilia closed her eyes as if resigned to it, then looked at Puck, who was still in in her palm. "Good morning, Puck. I'm sorry I put you through all that last night."

"Good morning, Lia. But I feel bad about what happened yesterday. I almost lost you. I can't thank Subaru enough for that." Puck looked up at Subaru with his round eyes, tilting his little head back. "I should thank you. If there's something you want me to do for you, just let me know. I can do most things for you."

"Well, then let me touch that fur of yours whenever I want." Subaru also responded immediately to Puck.

The speed of the reply was the same, but perhaps the content of the reply was a surprise as well. It wasn't just Puck who rolled their eyes, but also Emilia, who was listening. She seemed a bit flustered. "Wait, can't you think about it a little more? I know he looks small and weak, but Puck's level of power is really quite something."

"It's a little awkward, but yes. I'm a pretty powerful spirit, despite my appearance, so I don't mind if you're a little greedy."

"For a top fur lover like me, the right to pet your fur whenever I want to is absolutely priceless. It's something that can lead a person's mind to a higher level and purify even the most desolate of souls."

As he said it, Subaru took advantage of his newfound rights and continued to play with Puck in Emilia's palm to his heart's content, starting with his belly, then his chin, and his ears too. "Wow, these ears are amazing! I can't get enough of this fluffiness!"

"Hmmm, the great thing about Subaru is that he's serious. I can read your mind vaguely, so I can tell," Puck said with amusement as he played freely with his fingers.

Emilia gave a distinct sigh of dismay at their playfulness. "It's soooo tiring trying to understand you, Subaru."

"You can't give up. Things in life, like interpersonal relationships, are built on a spirit of mutual understanding. But don't think it'll be easy to understand me, alright?"

"What's that? This is reaaaally frustrating," Emilia replied.

Subaru folded his arms and turned his face away while looking at Emilia with one eye open. Seeing her attitude, which showed her displeasure, Subaru made his mind up about the future.

And then she saved Puck from Subaru's barrage of petting attacks. With a light wave of her hand, she turned her feet toward the outskirts of the garden. "Well, I'll go talk to the spirits now then, and Subaru, ummm, can you go over there and weed quietly?"

"Alright! Weeding is so exciting, so I'll do my best! But I didn't come down to the garden to do that, right?!"

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding" he said, laughing as he watched her silver hair disappear into the distance. Then Subaru got on the ground before doing some exercises.

Subaru had already completed his morning exercises, so other than that, he can still do his daily muscle workout regime. After having skipped yesterday, it would make sense for him to do two days' worth of exercises to make up for it.

A hundred push-ups, a hundred sit-ups, and a hundred squats.

This was the type of workout regime Subaru did every day at home even though he was a shut-in living with his parents. Sometimes he would even swing a sword, or something similar, but he would mostly just do those three sets of exercises.

—In the meantime, Subaru did push-ups, sit-ups, and squats, all while sweating profusely.

After resting for a bit, Subaru did another round of exercises. Doing each set of exercises only took around ten minutes, but he was very serious about his training and would do them every day.

“I feel like I’m missing something. If only I had a wooden sword or something to train with…”

“Here, sir.”

“Please use it, sir.”

The maid sisters had appeared out of nowhere and offered Subaru a wooden sword to train with.

Subaru was stunned by their thoughtfulness, and, after receiving the sword with a respectful “thank you,” they disappeared without a trace. Regardless, he now had a wooden sword to train with, just like he had wished for.

The shape of the sword was in the style of the commonly used two-handed swords in this world, which was slightly different from what he was used to. However, a sword was a sword, and the fundamentals of using it were the same no matter what shape, material, or size it came in.

He swung it lightly to make sure, and decided that the weight was just right.

“Thank God that all-in-one maids exist. Anyways, I haven’t swung a sword in a long time, so let’s go!”

Ready, and swing! Ready, and swing!

Subaru had only been a member of the kendo club when he was in middle school, but he had stayed long enough to get to the first dan, or graded rank, so he was at least proficient in it and could make progress by practicing. After having those thoughts, he continued to swing over and over again, and as far the sharpness of his swings was concerned, it was still as good as it was when he was in the club.

“This is a fantasy world where magic is used along with swords, so I wonder if this will be useful.”

As Subaru continued his training, he could feel sweat running down his forehead like a waterfall and spilling onto the lawn.

Subaru recalled the battle that took place at the Stolen Goods Warehouse. —The sight of Reinhard and Elsa clashing blade against blade with sparks flying.

He then envisioned himself swooping in with his two-handed sword.

“Take this, Elsa! Your evil acts end here!”

He sprang into action and went in for a strike, but then got instantly defeated with a slash to his gut.

He gave it another go, but this time, he imagined being in the line of fire of Reinhard’s powerful sword slash… It didn’t end well either, as he saw himself being turned into ash as if he had been instantly cremated.

Subaru concluded that no matter how hard he tried, it would be impossible for him to beat a cheater—or overpowered character—as a normal person.

“Is it even worth the effort…? Well…”

Carrying the wooden sword on his shoulder, Subaru paused in order to look over at Emilia to check how she was doing.

He could see that she was sitting on the green grass with her feet sprawled out in front of her, and talking about something with Puck, who was on her arm.

Subaru thought that the person she was talking to was Puck, however, “If my eyes aren’t deceiving me, it looks like Emilia-tan is surrounded by dim lights.”

Within the reach of the seated silver-haired girl, Subaru could see that the space was enveloped in a hazy, faint glow. Around her, dim multi-colored lights were floating around and flickering like the light of a firefly.

It was a mysterious and fantastic sight to behold.

It wasn’t a scene that mortals should tread upon. —It was like a sanctuary for the divine where only heavenly beings were allowed entry.

“Wow, this is amazing. So are all these fluffy things spirits then?”

“Huh?”

Subaru casually spoke to Emilia while she was talking to the spirits as if it were the most natural thing to do.

Emilia couldn’t help but be surprised by Subaru’s sudden appearance, and her eyes moistened with tears as if they were responding to her astonishment.

—And her sudden change in feeling spread to the spirits around her.

“Uh oh, I’m in trouble now…”

Many dim lights could be seen fluttering from side to side, trying to move behind Emilia in an attempt to escape from Subaru’s view.

Subaru felt as if he had made a flock of pigeons flee from him in a park.

“You are amazing, Subaru. Normally it’d take a lot of courage to even try to touch a spirit,” Puck said.

“So you’re saying, ‘you’re lucky to have me around’, right? I know! I can’t imagine my life without you, tickle, tickle, tickle.”

Subaru ambushed Puck, who was still on Emilia's arm—which had stiffened in response to his actions—and began his tickle attack. While doing so, he tilted his head towards her, who was still speechless, and enjoyed the feeling of her silver hair with his fingers. "What's the matter? Your insignia will get stolen again if you aren't careful."

"Don't poke people where it hurts! That's not what I meant. I was just suuper surprised." Emilia blamed Subaru for her own shortcomings while wiping away her tears with her fingers. The spirits swayed up and down as if agreeing with her, and Emilia replied with a "Well, aren't you all in a good mood." while watching the reaction of the spirits.

"Weeelll, this is the first time seeing a spirit in my life, so it's a bit exciting for me. They didn't look dangerous to me, either."

"I was keeping them under control, so it was okay. If it were an inexperienced spirit arts user, they would cause the spirits to run away and…bam!"

Emilia tried to scare them with her voice, but she only managed get let out a 'bam' at the end of her sentence, as if her vocabulary wasn't broad enough to find a better word to use. Subaru listened intently and ended up shrugging, and then looked over at Puck. "Totally exaggerating, huh."

"What's so dangerous about a fluffy-looking light like that?"

"Mhm. For example, I could turn you into dust in a matter of seconds."

"I'm soo sorry if I offended you!" Subaru dived into a prostrating position and expressed his gratitude.

Puck laughed with a wave of his little hand, and Emilia pouted her lips due to the difference in treatment. "Why don't you treat me like that…Hey! Puck?"

"Is it the difference in age…?" He replied calmly, stroking his beard. Emilia sighed and gave up on pursuing the issue, perhaps due to how calm and gentle Puck was.

Chapter 5: Awareness of Emotions

1

Emilia sighed as she looked down at Subaru, who was still prostrating himself, and put a finger to her lips as if she had just remembered something. “That reminds me…”

The gestures she made sometimes looked strangely childish and cute in the eyes of Subaru. As he leapt up off the ground, Emilia removed her finger from her lips and pointed at her eyes. “You’ve never seen a spirit before, right? So do you know how to use mana then?”

“How do you use mana?”

“It’s as simple as focusing your eyes, right? What else is there…”

“Lia. It’s not that simple. You’ve only ever seen humans who are pretty good at using mana. Well, apart from that, Subaru’s situation is a little bit special.”

Emilia tilted her head and asked, “Special?”

Puck crossed his arms and nodded at Emilia. “From what I’ve seen after taking a quick glance, Subaru’s Gate is basically shut tight. Even if he has never seen a spirit or magic before, isn’t it too closed? It’s on that level.”

“That’s strange… Even if you only lived a normal life, that wouldn’t happen, right?”

“Yep, that’s why it’s strange. Subaru didn’t live a normal life.”

After they nodded to each other with their gazes linked, they looked at Subaru at the exact same time with bated breath. Subaru, who was being stared at by them, responded. “I can’t help but hesitate to interrupt you two when you’re in your own little world… I’m sooo jealous.”

“Well, well, I know it’s not normal.”

“Your definition of normal is totally wrong! I mean, isn’t it pretty rude to look at someone’s face and say they’re normal or not normal? How about your daughter then, huh?”

“I’m happy to say that she is growing up to be a kind and honest girl.”

“The stupid cat-parent has arrived!” Subaru covered his face with his palm at Puck’s attitude, which was nothing short of sweet to his daughter.

When Emilia saw that overreaction, she said, “I’m not sure why, but they seem really close.” Murmuring that, she looked at them back and forth.

After they heard her murmur, Subaru and Puck looked at each other, nodded, and then gave each other a high five. “Ohhh, definitely, we’re best buds! We’re on the same wavelength. Why don’t you come join me and then aim to be the world’s best comedy duo?!”

“You say that, but I’m sure you’re only after my body, right?” Puck replied.

“Whether it’s for love or your fluffiness, they are two different things, but I’m sure I’ll come back to you in the end. I’ll even tolerate a little bit of cheating if I’m feeling generous, tickle tickle tickle.”

They were interrupted by the touch of someone’s palms, and Subaru seemingly forgot about the conversation they were having since he was fully focused on playing with Puck with a grin on his face. Emilia then decided to leave Puck with Subaru for a while. “Puck, go play with Subaru over there. I’m going to go talk to the spirits now. I reaaally don’t want to be disturbed anymore, okay?”

“She’s thrown us away…”

"We've been thrown away…"

Emilia silently ignored the two of them who shrugged their shoulders in a joking manner. As soon as she gained some distance, she began to immerse herself in the spirits she brought along with her, which seemed to be the continuation of what she was doing before.

The scene of her talking to the spirits was just like the one he saw before—a fantastic sight to see. Subaru wanted to get a glimpse of it, which was why he had acted like that.

"Anyways, that wasn't my real intention, so please understand that."

"Don't worry about it. Well, I don't want to keep getting scolded, so I'll just tell you about it myself. She's in the middle of an important ceremony with the spirits, so I can't overlook it any longer."

"But you just can't seem to stop yourself from interrupting it, though… What's the big deal with it, anyways?"

"The ceremonial contract with a spirit—the forging of a covenant."

Subaru scowled in confusion in response to hearing a lot of unfamiliar words. Puck, as if trying to find the right way to explain it, started by saying, "Let me see…"

"First of all, a spirit arts user needs to form contracts with spirits before they can use spirit magic. And the content of the contract varies from spirit to spirit. Are you still with me?"

"So it's different from interest and collateral for a bank loan. OK."

"My name isn't OK, but I'll proceed. The content that the spirits ask for is different for each individual spirit, but when it comes to minor spirits, they only want simple things like direct access to the caster's mana. That's why it's rather easy to get them to cooperate with you."

"OK, got it. But based on what you said, true spirits are different, right? How about explaining that one, Mr. Spirit?"

"Smart kids talk fast and are helpful…but we won't get very far if you keep going off on tangents, though."

Subaru scratched his head in embarrassment. Then Puck looked at him warmly while stroking his whiskers. "As you said, spirits who have minds of their own are more demanding, like me for example. Although, I'd like to strike a good deal with the contract maker if I can. Even so, I'm still a powerful spirit in my own right, so the contract conditions with Lia are rather strict."

"I've been thinking about that for a while now, but Lia is a pretty cute nickname."

"Your Emilia-tan is even cuter. Maybe I'll call her that next time."

"—I'm begging you, please don't do that." Puck agreed with Subaru's choice of nickname, and then Emilia cut into their conversation with an angry look on her face.

While they were looking at her, the dim glow of the spirits that had been surrounding her disappeared as she glared at them.

—Looks like the Spirit Talk Show is over.

As Subaru stood up, he brushed the grass off his butt. "Is the party over? That felt like a piece of cake."

"I cut it short because you two were interrupting me and it was sooo distracting. You're able to get on people's nerves even when you're far away from them… It's quite the talent."

"Two people who shouldn't have met have now met… I have a feeling that something is about to happen. I can't stop thinking about it and my heart is pounding."

As Subaru pounded his chest to the rhythm of his own heartbeat, Emilia held out her hand to him, and Puck jumped up from where Subaru was and landed there. He looked up at Emilia with his round black eyes with a somewhat satisfied smile on his face.

"It's okay. From what I've seen so far, I don't sense any malice, hostility, or ill-intent in Subaru. His personality is a bit weird, but he's a good boy."

"Wha…?" Emilia was at a loss for words after hearing Puck's poor assessment.

She snapped at Puck in a hurried tone while she looked at Subaru to see how he reacted. "Why did you make that kind of comment in front of him… And even if it's true, wouldn't it be hurtful to be told that?"

"Oh, that's alright. I must be a complete stranger to you, so it makes sense. It's only natural to be suspicious of a nice guy like me whose name cannot even be verified… Though that part at the end really hurt, Emilia-tan!"

Emilia quickly covered her mouth with her hand, and Subaru chuckled bitterly at her honest reaction.

Subaru had expected this to happen, which was why he spent so much time with Puck in order to prepare for this exact moment. They were not so careless as to accept him, who hadn't given out a single piece of decent information so far, without caution. The sudden appearance of Ram and Rem earlier, too, was a trick that was probably due to the fact that they were keeping an eye on his movements from somewhere.

"Although, I'm really not sure how to explain it." The Subaru of this world existed in people's memories, but no preexisting records existed. It was difficult to explain, and there was a good chance he'd be treated like a lunatic. With that being the case, letting Puck give his own judgement was the best choice.

Subaru hoped that with the help of the exchange just now that Puck, being able to read minds to a certain extent, would be able to convey his situation more convincingly than he himself could.

It was a gamble of sorts, but Puck laughed after realizing what Subaru was trying to do. "It's alright, Lia. I mean, Subaru knows that too. You're a naughty boy for taking advantage of my mind reading skills like that, you know."

“It’s an honor. Let’s just get along perfectly, my friend.”

A look of shock appeared on Puck’s face after hearing Subaru address him like that. Then he burst into laughter and grinned. “It’s been a really long time since I’ve been treated like that. I like it.”

Subaru could understand why Puck was so happy, but before he could even mention it, Puck floated up in front of Emilia’s face. Then their foreheads met as she closed her eyes, which made for a strangely surreal sight.

“Eat this! Puck’s super mysterious technique called ‘Cat’s Forehead Impact’!!”

Subaru couldn’t help but feel lonely when the two of them remained silent, and in his own desolation, he tried to get their attention. But the two of them were in such a deep state of concentration that they didn’t react, so his loneliness increased exponentially.

“Damn it! I feel so helpless… I can’t think of any more ways to get your attention. I’m starting to tear up.”

“…Mhm, I get it. Wow, and I ‘ve been thinking a lot about you too… Why are you sitting on the ground crying like a girl?”

“Don’t—worry—about—it! So what was that, anyways?”

“It’s more like a shared consciousness. It’s easier to explain things to you if you just feel what I feel, rather than having to explain it with words, right?”

Having answered Subaru’s question in a straightforward manner, Puck sat next to the silver-haired girl. She put her hand on Puck’s shoulder and nodded with, “That’s how it is.”

“It was through Puck, but I got the message about you… I’m soooo sorry for doubting you. I know the truth now, and I feel reaaally bad about it.”

“The thought of being explored by a beautiful woman is rather exciting, isn’t it? Next time, by all means, you, not Puck, can enter my mind directly." Subaru gave a thumbs up and flashed his teeth, and Emilia looked so disappointed in him at this moment. Seeing her reaction, Subaru's inward regret began to run full speed ahead, and he thought, oh no…I've done it again.

Subaru had a bad habit of spitting out nonsense when he was in a good mood. "No, no, no, not in a perverted way, but yes…in our industry, that kind of pain is a reward."

It was also Subaru's bad habit to screw up his own follow-up.

With a tight smile, Subaru felt a cold sweat flowing down his face. Sweat, tears, rain, or slobber, a liquid that was sure to make him feel like a donkey in three quarters of a second, was now running down his chin.

Emilia tilted her head slightly at Subaru, who was a terrible actor. "—You are really strange, Subaru."

"Huh?"

"Playing with a real spirit as if it's normal, and…even setting your sights on a half-elf like me."

"It surprised me, even if it was just a joke," she chuckled quietly.

Would you be that surprised if it wasn't a joke? Subaru thought to himself, but he even forgot about that and just admired her charming smile in silence.

That smile was as clear and pure as the one he'd seen in that alleyway in the royal capital. It was neither fleeting nor sad, and he was very happy to see it.

—Subaru realized how much he loved her expression for the first time. "Oh no!"

"What?"

"No, I mean, I haven't felt like this in a long time… No, seriously."

Subaru's heartbeat quickened, his mouth became dry, and his breathing became labored.

Subaru's eyes began to lose focus and he had difficulty holding his head up. Then he lost control of his emotions and felt like he was burning up, which caused his neck and face to turn bright red.

"What's the matter? Are you okay?" Emilia, who asked Subaru that question, looked up at his face from below. That face, which wore a worried expression, looked absolutely adorable to him.
"Woooooohoooooo!"

After that loud shout, Subaru suddenly jumped backwards and tried to do a backflip to escape the situation. He landed on the ground in an upside-down position with his hand beneath him to break his fall, but his hand slipped due to the grass still being wet, and he fell on his head. He then slid across the grass on his head for a few feet before coming to a stop.

"Woah, what happened to you all of a sudden?!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow. Holy crap, I'm not bald now, am I…? Oh…they're white."

Emilia rushed to Subaru, who was rolling on the ground holding his head, and fumbled with her hands trying to figure out what to do. He had said those words when he looked up at her from the ground.

Emilia's face, which had originally looked puzzled, instantly turned bright red as she realized what it meant. It was because she had walked in front of him wearing a short skirt while he was rolling on the ground.

"Force majeure, force majeure! That wasn't what I was trying to do!"

"Are you telling the truth?"

"—Thank you for the eye feast." Sitting in a seiza position, Subaru clasped his hands together and bowed his head to the silver-haired goddess.

When he looked up, Emilia smiled at him. —Unlike the smile from earlier, it had a sadistic nature to it. “That kind of face is also lovely—oh shit.”

“—Reflect on what you’ve done.”

Even considering what he had done, Subaru felt like the balls of ice that rained down on him were rather large.

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“Ah, that hurt… I wonder if I’m really starting to go bald now. Is it gonna be okay?”

“It’s just a little bump on the head. —I think you should reaaaaally be thankful for my kindness.”

Subaru stroked his injured head while sitting on the ground. He was on the verge of tears, and Emilia, who had turned away from him, had responded in a cold manner.

They were separated by a distance of several yards now, and it was as if the gap created by his earlier actions was reflected in reality.

Subaru glanced at her white profile and then turned his face away.

Glance, *turn away*. *Glance*, *turn away*. *Glance glance*, *turn away turn away*.

“Don’t play around. I’m still mad at you.”

“C’mon, it was just an accident. It’s just a minor misunderstanding that got blown out of proportion.”

If he were to use manga terms, the bump was so big that you would want to put a band-aid on it.

Subaru felt like he really did see his life flash before his eyes at the moment of impact with the ground. It was so powerful that he thought he might get sent back the convenience store if he wasn’t careful.

Subaru felt fine now, but he had felt really dizzy after it happened.

It was possible that she thought she had overdone it, but Emilia was looking down at the collapsed Subaru, and he thought she looked like an adorable little animal.

When Emilia discovered that Subaru was looking at her out of the corners of his eyes, she became angry again. “Your personality is sooo hard to deal with. I wish you could make it easier for me.”

“I’m the type of guy who cuts corners in life to live comfortably. You’re too optimistic.”

Just ahead of Subaru’s envious gaze was Puck, who was relaxing in Emilia’s lap. He had been the size of a person’s palm just a moment ago, but was now the size of an infant, and she was petting him in her lap.

“Such disgusting feelings have nothing to do with me.”

“Shut up and don’t read people’s minds. It’s in the mind of a teenage boy, you know, and it’s a great thing. Emilia-tan is no exception.”

“If you have too many dirty thoughts about my daughter, I’ll erase you.”

“You would try to kill me just because I made you angry?!” Subaru was just joking, but he had a feeling that Puck was being serious.

Subaru looked at the two of them. “Even so…”

“Make sure you groom yourself every morning, okay? You know, it seems like the obligations of the spirt in this contract are too small.”

“Not really. Some spirits are more demanding than others. They may demand many times the amount of mana that a normal person has, or they may ask for one kill a day if it’s a really aggressive one.”

“That comparison is way too brutal…and you spoil your daughter too much.”

Compared with his example, the terms of the contract were way too good. Subaru wondered if it was the same in every world when it came to giving family members favorable terms in business contracts and such. Long live nepotism!

Subaru gazed at Emilia and Puck's playtime in a rare moment of silence as he thought about the concept of nepotism.

The reason why Subaru kept chattering on and on about whatever came to mind in the first place was because it was hard for him to be silent when he was around other people.

Subaru's silence in the presence of others gave him a "Since you've decided to stay quiet, then stay quiet" kind of feeling. It was strange how his usual personality was nowhere to be seen at this moment.

—It was just completely silent.

It was perhaps because of how heartwarming the scene in front of him was.

The movement of Emilia's fingers as she combed Puck's fur was very gentle. She seemed to be forgetting about her altercation with Subaru since her expression was starting to change, and the way she looked as she immersed herself in the grooming process was serious yet calm, and was absolutely mesmerizing.

Oh, I think I'm going blind, Subaru thought.

"*Grinning*"

Subaru really hated that mind-reading cat who was looking at him with a grin on his face. That cat, which could pick up on people's emotions without touching them, would know the true nature of Subaru's complex feelings that occupied his heart at this very moment. His weakness had been discovered unexpectedly, and he didn't think it was funny at all.

—Subaru felt as if he had chosen a very thorny path.

Her beautiful, flowing silver hair was as magical as dew in the moonlight. Her white skin was as pale as fresh snow, and her amethyst eyes seemed to capture his attention as if he were under a spell. He was also aware that her delicate body equipped with long, thin limbs was so fragile that it might break if he were to hold her in his arms, but he also knew she had a heart of gold wrapped around an unbreakable core. She was noble, beautiful, and an ideal woman.

No matter how Subaru looked at it, there was no way she would show interest in a smelly shut-in from another world. “Just doing this is a luxury, isn’t it?”

Subaru began experiencing strange emotions that left him in a stupor just thinking about them. Soon after, he stood up and started swinging his wooden sword again in an attempt to shake those feelings off.

The last time Subaru had felt an emotion like this was in elementary school. What’s more, even after 10 years, he had kept his feelings bottled up and never told anyone about them.

Every time he thought about those bottled-up feelings, the speed of his swings became quicker. “Disappear! Fuck you, stupid regrets! I don’t care if there are a 108 of them! I’m gonna destroy them all! Bring it on!” Subaru cut down his invisible regrets and made a bullish comment after each strike.

It wasn’t like Subaru to have regrets. It was in his nature to make choices without looking back. That was what the man named Natsuki Subaru was all about.

“Ohhh, this boy. Hee-hee-hee, I never get tired of watching him.”

“Yes, yes, it doesn’t seem to be working… But you can say that again.”

The two of them looked at Subaru, who continued to cut down his invisible enemies, and made such comments.

Emilia gently loosened her lips as she looked at his back. On that face of hers, the awkward anger from earlier was nowhere to be seen. The reason she seemed to have forgotten about it was because of Subaru being Subaru. “Huh. What’s going on with those two?”

At the sound of Emilia’s voice, who seemed to have noticed something, Subaru stopped his mock battle and looked in the direction of the manor. The twin maids with their prominent pink and light blue hair came towards them from the mansion. They both calmly gave formal bows.

““Master Roswaal, lord of the manor, has returned. Please come to the mansion.””

They spoke in perfect unison without making a single mistake.

Their perfect combination surprised Subaru, but what surprised him even more was their change in demeanor.

Unlike before, when they had joked around with each other, the two girls standing in front of him now looked like proper servants of a mansion. In short, they went from private-mode to work-mode.

“I see. Roswaal… Then we had best go see him then.

““Yes, and he said to bring the guest as well, if he is awake.””

Puck shrank and dived into Emilia’s silver hair. She patted down her hair and accepted it, and then got up with a slightly calmer expression on her face.

Subaru, who had been brought up in the conversation, wiped the sweat from his face due to being uncomfortable with his appearance. Shortly after, the blue-haired maid quickly moved closer to him, brought out a handkerchief from her bosom, and finished tidying up his appearance for him. “Sorry.”

“No, as a servant, it’s my duty, sir.”

“No, as a servant, it’s my job, sir.”

Even though it was the blue-haired maid that did it, the pink-haired maid butted in as well as if it were only natural. Subaru felt relieved that their demeanor had returned to what he had seen earlier, and then said, “So, who’s Roswaal?”

“The lord of this manor… Ah, I guess I never explained it.” Emilia put her palm to her mouth as if realizing her mistake. Then she frowned and wondered how she should respond. “Well, yes. Roswaal is… You’ll understand when you meet him.”

“You’re giving up too soon! What, he’s too plain to describe?!”

““““No, just the opposite.””””

After that four-person rebuttal, Subaru was so shaken that he dropped his wooden sword.

The blue-haired maid kicked the wooden sword up with her foot and caught it and then solemnly bowed before meeting up with her sister. Then the pink-haired maid standing next to her motioned towards the mansion. “There’s no point in trying to describe him with words. You will understand Master Roswaal’s personality once you meet him, sir. It will be okay.”

The pink-haired maid and light blue-haired maid looked at each other and nodded, and Emilia reluctantly agreed with them. While Subaru was still in a perplexed state, Emilia lightly tapped him on the shoulder as she headed towards the mansion. “—I’m sure you two will get along just fine, Subaru. He’s just a bit of a headache, though.”

Subaru could only murmur a “yes” with a depressing tone of voice in response.

Chapter 6:
The Return of the Lord

“Ohhh, you’re awake. That is good, quite gooood.” The tall man with long, dark blue hair running down his back let that out cheerfully as he looked at Subaru.

He was a tall man. His height surpassed Reinhard’s at around six feet tall. He had a slender body, as if he never did any sort of physical labor in his life, and it was not so much slender as it was delicate. He had different colored eyes, with yellow and blue on either side, and they matched his ghastly pale skin that made him look like a sick person.

His appearance was beautiful, as far as beauty standards were concerned. However, no matter how beautiful he was, if he got too close it would surely make anyone feel uncomfortable. “Your face is too close!”

“Sorry, soooooorry. You seeee, the first time I saw you was when you were deaaaathly pale, covered in blood, and on the verge of deaaath. I’m deeeeeply moooved to see you walking around like this.”

He patted Subaru’s shoulders in a friendly manner and bent down to look at him at close range once again—this was the owner of the mansion named Roswaal.

Subaru thought he looked to be in his mid-twenties and gave him the impression of a ‘prodigal son’ based on his appearance alone.

“No no, even like this, I’m sure you’re a pretty sharp guy…”

“Is that sooooo, that’s a nice assessment. Stare at me to your hearts conteeeeeeent. Do I look shaaarp? Weeeellll?”

Posing in front of Subaru, he spun around and stood as a model. The imposing manner in which he stood caused Subaru to be astonished when his own feet took a few steps back.

“N-No way…have I been outmatched here?! It’s not normal for someone to be more of a character than me… Isn’t that a hindrance in your daily life?!”

“Well, it reaaally doesn’t matter to me, either way.” A sigh arrived from behind them, and Emilia stepped forward as Subaru stepped back in shock. She turned to face Roswaal and said, “Welcome back. How have you been?”

“I’m fiiiiiine. I feel quite pleeaaaased. It’s been four days, 3 hours, and 19 minutes since we last spoooooke. I’ll have to write it down in my notebook.”

Roswaal was handed his notebook and a pen to write with by the pink and light blue-haired maids who had been standing to his right and left. They bowed reverently while doing so. With the notebook and pen he had just been handed, he began to write furiously, and —

“On the fifteenth day of the month of Tadmus. —Lady Emilia spoke to me herself. I am very happy. I feel like we are starting to get along, and…”

Roswaal closed the notebook with a look of satisfaction on his face, handed it to the maid, and then turned around. He was then greeted by Emilia who had a slight smile on her face, and—

“No, seriously…that was just…CRINGE.” After a quick side glance at Roswaal’s notebook that was in her hand—well, more like a planner—Subaru could see that it was well-used, and almost half of its pages had been filled with the same type of content he had just written down not too long ago. If it were filled with similar things, it would be the notebook of nightmares.

Roswaal slapped his knees at such an answer, which even overpowered Subaru’s response. “Cringe! It’s a nice wooord. This is my first time heaaaaring it, and I loooove it! Mmmm, the feeling of not being able to understand a different sensibility… oh, it’s woooonderful.”

“Wow, I hate that I can kinda sympathize a bit. Hey, did you really say I could get along with this?"

In front of the weirdo who was grabbing his shoulders in a strange way, Subaru waved the subject with frustration to Emilia with, "Am I regarded as the same thing as this?!"

She put a finger to her lips and let out a slightly annoyed "Hmmm."

"As expected, not even you are a match for this country's top pervert, Subaru…or are you?"

"Not even close! Is it really that fine a line?! With that?!"

"One man's fault is another man's lesson," or so they say, but being put on the same level as the weirdo in front of him was a real disappointment for Subaru. From now on, he was intent on being careful about what he said and did.

"Anyways, come back, come back. Now let me thank you. Thanks for causing me so much trouble, and thanks for letting me use your bed. Sincerely, Subaru."

"Oh, it's sooo messed up already…"

Subaru was too prideful to show real gratitude, but Roswaal didn't seem to care about that and simply whistled in response. Emilia, who was sandwiched in between the two of them, held her head in her hands. By the way, the twins chose to quietly refrain from getting involved, as if they had no intention of intruding in the first place, and Puck was still hiding in Emilia's hair without making a sound.

"A-n-y-w-a-y-s…"

Roswaal sullenly looked at Subaru from top to bottom after he had returned in an extremely awkward way. He frowned at him, who was uncomfortable. "You looooook like a normal person. And that's a bit disappointiiiiing."

"Hey, hold up, you think I'm just a normal guy? Normal is neither good nor bad… That evaluation is insulting to me! Take back what you said!"

"Why get angry about something like that, I suppose…" Beatrice commented.

He had responded to the question with defiance.

It was a line that could not be crossed for Subaru. Due to his courageous attitude, Roswaal waved his hand. "Aaaaahhh, sorry, sorry," he began. "I meaaaaaaan 'normal' in the 'racial' sense. You seeeee, I'm a perveeerted nobleman with 'Demi-human Tastes'."

"You must be pretty devilish to be able to say that about yourself, huh? Oh, man, I'm starting to like you a little bit, but I hate myself for that!"

Roswaal looked amusedly at Subaru, who had his head in his hands, and then hugged the shoulders of the twin maids standing on either side of him. "The same is true of these children, and is also the reason why we support Lady Emilia. Weeeelll, I feel like we are birds of a feaaather, which makes you suspicious, doooesn't it?"

Roswaal stroked the chins of the twins he had been embracing with his fingers, and at the same time created a strangely immoral-ish atmosphere. The twins did what they were told, and their faces turned bright red, as if they had already been bitten by his poisonous fangs. Subaru couldn't help but look at Emilia with a bad feeling in his gut.

Perhaps sensing the intent of Subaru's gaze, she hurriedly waved her hands. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not the type of person who is attracted to perverts."

"Normal is A-OK. When I graduate from high school, I will go to college, and once I graduate I will find a job and work to take care of my family like everyone else does."

Subaru reversed his previous opinion and thought about the typical normal life. However, he was reminded of the fact that fathers who lived a normal life in the world all had a hard time.

Then Subaru suddenly picked up on a disturbing part of Roswaal's statement. "I mean, what do you mean by supporting Emilia-tan?

That's why I don't understand the relationship between the two in the first place."

"Oooh, you don't know what's going on? Hmmmm, that's straaaaange." Roswaal released the twins and walked up to Subaru with his hands behind his back. He once again looked down at him from up close, but this time he didn't back down and just stared at him.

Their gazes clashed and sparks began to fly—it was uncomfortable to be peered at purely as if to explore his intentions. However, looking away was also irritating because it was akin to admitting defeat. In response to the gaze that seemed to be looking through him, Subaru, too, was prepared to fight back resolutely.

They stared intently at each other, and the distance between them gradually shrunk. Don't lose, don't you dare lose. With that kind of feeling, he put his eye strength into it, *glare*, *glare*—

Mwah

"Hoagyahhhhhh!" Subaru couldn't help but release a reflexive uppercut at the tall man who had accidentally kissed his forehead.

The tall man was blown away by his unrelenting blow, and the twin maids hurriedly attempted to catch him as he fell. Subaru, not seeing the result, rubbed his forehead as hard as he could. "Wh-What the hell, this…what is this really aboooooout?!"

"Aaaaaahh, it huuuurts, it huuuurts. —Weeeelll, I can't help but notice that you're looking at me with the innooooocent eyes of a treeeeembling maiden, and it makes me a bit arooooooused."

"I can't help but clench my butt! Stop looking at me with that eye! Seriously!"

His forehead felt as if it had been burned, and then he made a fist with the hand that had rubbed it and stood in front of Roswaal, but he was intercepted by the twins, who looked at him with animosity in their eyes.

As one would expect, they would never laugh at their employer if he were beaten up. Seeing their clear animosity, Subaru reflexively took a step back, but then Roswaal intercepted them with a "Stooooooooop, stop, Ram and Rem. It was my baaaaaaad joke. He's not at fault, I guess it's my fault for being toooooo girly."

"If you're treating me like a maiden because of the way I look at you, your eyesight is failing, nobleman. I was pretty as a flower until kindergarten, but from that point on the hair on the back of my head was cut off."

Subaru didn't want to be mistaken for a girl, and the answer his parents gave him was simply to have a shaved head. Nowadays he would only feel comfortable as long as the back of his head felt jarring to the touch, but back then it made him cry a lot.

—Subaru's parents had a strong influence on the development of his personality. His mother influenced him by never listening to others, and his father influenced him by being a complete go-getter.

Although disgruntled by the treatment of their lord, the twins took a step back. And then, while rubbing the jaw that had been struck, Roswaal stood up. "I apoloooogize for that just now, I was the one at fault. On top of that, to show my apology in a real way, how aboooout we have breakfast together? My treaaaat?

"Let me warn you, I'm not gonna work for it. If it's free, I'll make sure to eat to my heart's content."

"That's a gooooood thing. Eaaaaating well is connected to liiiiving well. Hmmm, that was a pretty good ooooone. I'll have to put it in my notebook." The twins gave the notebook and a pen to Roswaal, who was holding out his hand, once more.

Seeing how he had begun to write smoothly and expertly, it appeared that the contents of the notebook did not contain the weird writings of the 'Diary of Love with Emilia-tan'.

"If you were to write about your daily liiiife, wouldn't it be something like a collection of poems? I feel like I'll agoniiiiiize over it if I read it aaaall again in the future, buuuuut if I'm stiiiiill going on at that aaaaage, then there will be no hope of recovering from iiiiiiit."

The inhabitants of a flower garden would not think it sad that they were in a flower garden. Subaru convinced himself of this, and then gave an answer to the breakfast invitation he had previously received.

"Anyway, I accept the invitation to breakfast. I haven't eaten anything since before noon yesterday, let alone breakfast."

"That's splendid. Weeeeellll then, I'll have them show you aroooound. Ram, Rem, take care of it."

""You can count on us, Master Roswaal."" The twins responded in perfect sync whilst moving to both sides of Subaru. Then they each took charge of one arm, keeping him tightly restrained.

"Hey hey, what's with the atmosphere of being escorted away? Even if you don't do that, I won't run away, and neither will the dining table… Hey, hey, that hurts a little."

"So, let me show you around, sir."

"Well, let me show you around, sir."

"Hey, listen, that's as far as my elbows can go… So you guys still haven't forgiven me for that uppercut earlier at all?! But no matter how much I think about that thing from before, that guy was the one in the wron-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow. My elbows! My elbooows! You two, they don't go that way, hey!" Causing a racket with all of his "ow's," Subaru was dragged to the dining table with his arms held in a joint lock.

Emilia watched them go with pitying eyes, and when the three of them were out of her sight, Roswaal asked, "Weeelll, hoooow was it reaaaally, Lady Emilia?"

The question was spoken in his usual way of speaking, but gave off a different feeling. Emilia accepted the change without a hint of surprise. "It's the same as yours. Puck has the same opinion. Right?"

At her request for consent, the cat nodded, with only his face peeking out from behind her silver hair. Roswaal's eyes narrowed as if satisfied with the answer, and Emilia gently held her own chest in slight guilt.

With his face sticking out from under her silver hair, the cat nodded, seeing that she was looking for his agreement. Satisfied with that answer, Roswaal narrowed his eyes, and Emilia pressed her hands to her chest, feeling slightly guilty. "I'm reaaaally not sure if I should be suspicious of my benefactor. —I know it concerns me, but it's just awful."

She spilled that out as if ridiculing herself.

Chapter 7:
The Harmonious Get-Together at Roswaal Manor

"You know, watching that from above, I felt…that you are completely out of your mind, I suppose."

In the dining room where the twins had led them to, where breakfast was being held, the curly-haired girl who had sat down earlier said that in place of a greeting.

Subaru frowned grandly at her while turning his still-aching elbows. "What are you talking about on such a fine morning, loli?"

"What is that word, I wonder? I've never heard of it, yet it gives me such an uncomfortable feeling, I suppose."

"I mean, you're way too young for my tastes. I never go after girls who are younger than me."

"…To be so rude to Betty is also rather pitiful." With a pitying expression on her face, the little girl sighed as she rested her weight on the chair. As it was, she picked up the glass on the table and quickly let the amber liquid pass down her throat.

The shape of the glass was similar to a wine glass, and Subaru couldn't help but wonder if it contained alcohol inside. The girl smiled meaningfully under his suspicious gaze and pointed the glass toward him. "What, do you want to drink it, I wonder?"

"Yep, but that would be an indirect kiss. The event would be progressing way too quickly."

"I was trying to tease you out of spite, but what is this naive feeling, I wonder! It's more embarrassing for me!" The little girl got angry at Subaru, who tapped his fingers together in embarrassment.

At this point in time, there were only two people in the dining room, and they were free to do whatever they wanted. There was a large table covered with a white tablecloth placed in the center of the large dining room, and there were about 10 chairs arranged around it, starting from the seat of honor in the front with the rest of the chairs along the sides.

There were several seats that were already equipped with dishware, so Subaru could sit at any one of those seats. Simply put, one of the lower seats would be the one he'd go for.

"I'm gonna take one of the best seats."

"That is a great choice. But it's obvious that it is the wrong one, in fact."

"Heh-heh-he, this is where Emilia-tan usually sits, right? Right now, the thought of our butts touching indirectly is making me giddy with excitement…"

"Are you a high-level pervert, I wonder?! It's not just creepy, it's disgusting, in fact!"

Subaru had a lot that he wanted to say, but the little girl, whose attitude was essentially like a straight man, was really worth teasing. He couldn't help but want to see how she'd react to him suddenly acting in a perverted way. "So, I'm not actually doing THIS on purpose, gee-hee-hee."

"That last chuckle wasn't very convincing… I can't take anything you say seriously, in fact!" As the little girl pressed her forehead and shook her head, Subaru moved his butt around on the chair, heating it up in the process.

"I guess it's alright since nothing bad happened in the end, but it was damn tough!" Thinking back about their first meeting where he'd ended up fainting, Subaru rotated his hands and feet in order to let his dissatisfaction be known. "Oh man, I suddenly realized that the number of times I've lost consciousness has reached a scary level in these past two days. Rather, I haven't had many opportunities to get up, have I? …But that…isn't much different from the time when I was a shut-in, huh."

On the other hand, it would've been great if I could've lazed around more!

Whilst gazing at Subaru and craning her neck, the little girl had the expression of one who was holding back a yawn. “Your gate had been wide open and spilling out mana, and it would have been a waste to let it all escape, so I absorbed it, in fact. It would be best for you to be thankful.”

“It was YOUR fault that it was leaking out like that! Shouldn’t you be thankful that there was a hole in it instead? Don’t make me laugh! You’re just ridiculous! And aren’t you acting a little too sassy?!”

Ignoring the incessant complaints of Subaru, the little girl once more tilted her glass. Drinking without hesitation would make her lose the willpower to respond to him.

It was only natural for the little girl to drink at the sad and wretched state of the world.

“The young girl then became acquainted with nighttime amusements, spent way too much money, and then, at the end of it all, got knocked up as a teenager… As your Big Bro, I can’t help but weep!”

“Don’t just go and make Betty the heroine of a great tragedy like that!”

“In my mind, you’re just the shitty protagonist of a shitty cell phone novel!”

There had been a time where he had killed time by checking those things out, but finding a good one was a matter of luck, a hit or a miss. He had been learning the Gyaru alphabet at around the same time as well.

She probably didn’t even understand the meaning of what Subaru had just said, and, with a scowl on her face, the little girl lightly tapped her fingers on the table. “Well, so be it. Are you going to give Betty words of thanks, I wonder?”

“Thanks? Giving words of thanks to the drill loli that berated me?

That’s not any kind of reward in my industry!”

“Why are you getting mad, I wonder! The one who should be angry is Betty! The one who saved you when you were on the brink of death was…”

But as the little girl’s voice trailed off, Subaru let out a “Huuuh?” However, before she could complete her answer, the door to the dining room opened.

“Please pardon me, sir. Allow me to set the meal.”

“If you would excuse me, sir. I will set the table and serve the tea.”

Pushing trollies into the room were the twin maids. The blue-haired maid was pushing a trolley with food from an orthodox breakfast menu on it, such as salad and pastries. The pink-haired maid, on the other hand, was pushing a trolley with tableware and forks on it.

The two of them moved to either side of the table and began quickly and expertly setting it. In perfect sync, the table was decorated, the warm scents causing Subaru’s stomach to growl unintentionally.

“Woah, not too shabby. It really is a breakfast fit for the nobility… I was worried it was gonna be some bizarre different world stuff.”

He had considered the possibility that the makeup of a dining table in a different world could be totally different. If he had made any mistakes, he might have found himself eating bugs every day by now.

And if that were truly the case, Subaru would have had no choice but to sever his ties to the world, thus liberating himself from an earthly life and obtaining nirvana.

“For real, bugs would be way too much. Why do those things even exist? Godddd, just look at them and the way they live their lives. Isn’t their purpose in life simply to be killed and teach us the importance of life in our early years?”

“If you oppress the weak, when you yourself have become weak, you shall be oppressed by the strong. You should learn the significance of those words, in fact. Silence, I suppose, you weakling.” As if putting on an act in order to hold him back, the little girl gave a deliberate reply whilst elegantly tilting her glass.

His irritation was reaching a breaking point, his hunger was increasing, and he was pissed off because of that sense of elegance she’d just displayed. “H-u-r-r-y-u-p-a-l-r-e-a-d-y! I’ve can’t take it anymore!”

“You are quite lacking in refinedness. Can you not wait in a more refined and elegant manner, I suppose?”

“I don’t wanna be talked down to by a drunk little girl! C’mon, let’s eat! Let’s eat!”

Subaru rudely and furiously grabbed his knife and fork and placed them together, causing the little girl to take action. With her hand still on the glass, the space around it began to warp, and, with a finger, she attempted to direct a paranormal-like energy at him. However, before that sinister technique could reach him… “Ooooohhhh myyy. You seem to be doing weeeell. That is good, quiiiite good.”

What had just appeared was the smiling face of a perverted man. He seemed to have completely changed from the outdoor clothing he’d worn before to more formal clothing. The collars of his outfit were excessively large and colorful, the model change seemingly reflective of his poor tastes. He indeed had the appearance of a clown, his eccentric behaviors the same as usual.

—Oh yes, he is a total pervert.

While jovially watching Subaru chop up some beets with his silverware, Roswaal suddenly noticed the little girl quietly tilting her glass, causing him to raise his eyebrows. “Ohhh myyyyy, it is rare to see Beatrice here. Is it not woooonderful that you decided to have a meal with me after such a looong time?”

“That’s enough. There’s a guy right there who’s happy-go-lucky, in fact. Betty is only here to share a meal with Bubby, I suppose.”

Brushing off Roswaal's buddy-buddy statements, the little girl—Beatrice—shifted her line of sight to his rear. Entering the room behind him was the figure of Emilia, and the one nestled within her silver hair was, "Bubby!"

The little girl seemingly sprung up from her seat and zipped over to him, her long skirt fluttering in the wind. Her face was adorned with a smile, like a blooming flower, so charming that it made him forget about how he'd just evaluated her as being "cheeky."

The little girl had suddenly behaved in such a way, her little run having been a reaction to the grey cat nestled within the silver hair. His face came out, and with a relaxed expression, said, "Hiya, Betty. It's been like two days. Have you been well and acting like a lady should?"

"I have been waiting eagerly for your return, Bubby. Would you like to spend the day together, I wonder?"

"Yeah, sounds great! How about we just relax for the day, then?"

"Oh, how wonderful!"

Puck leapt out of her silver hair, landing in Beatrice's outstretched hands. Now in her grasp, she twirled around and around on the spot.

As Subaru was struck senseless by the happy and carefree scene occurring right in front of him, Emilia walked over to him with a wry smile on her face. "You must've been surprised, right? Beatrice and Puck are suuuper close."

"It's a surprise, or maybe I should ask what the hell is up with that loli's attitude. Isn't she quite cunning by putting on airs in front of a cat?"

"I'm sorry, but I have noooo idea what you're saying."

Cutting Subaru's words off, Emilia let out an "Mm?" with a look of wonderment on her face as she pointed at where he was sitting. "That seat is…"

“Oh, yeah! Uh, you know how a freezing cold chair can make you feel down in the dumps, right? I’m running a campaign to become your blanket to cure and enter your heart and bridge the gap between us. That’s why I thought I’d keep your seat warm for you! It’s not like I was trying to go for an indirect sit-down or anything!”

“Sorry, but I have nooo idea what you’re saying…but, you know that’s Roswaal’s seat, right?”

After his excuses were all dismissed with ease, Subaru fell into despair, his knees buckling. Realizing his blunder as he crashed down, he clenched his teeth.

If he thought about it, it would only be natural for the owner of the mansion to sit in the best seat, the seat of honor.

And the Greenhorn of the Year award goes to…

“But I’m a man who turns adversity into opportunity. Under these circumstances… Yes, under these circumstances, I’ll bet on another chance tomorrow!”

“And there’s no need for you to sit in my seat, okay? Because it’s a biiiit unpleasant for me.”

“God is dead—!”

Subaru then finally fell to the ground, crying a river.

No longer having hope in this world, no longer seeing a future for himself, he was wrapped in an aura of helplessness. But then, he felt the tender touch of someone’s hand on his shoulder. That hand, giving him warmth, put him into a state of bliss, as tranquil as could be, and, as he raised his face upwards, saw that the shining beacon of hope was actually—

“I will prooooperly savor your warmth as best I caaaaan.”

After Subaru heard what the tall man had uttered, he immediately spat on his seat without a shred of hesitation. “You can enjoy the warmth from where my ass was after it’s been dirtied like THIS!”

“Ohh myyyyyy, such a quick action was rather unexpected. How splendid. But, no matter.”

Roswaal chuckled, as if he were feeling intense pleasure, and speedily raised his finger, pointing at the seat. Checking that the spit was there, he then thrust his finger out, creating a sound.

—Immediately afterward, the spit vanished right in front of Subaru’s eyes.

“What the?!”

Without thinking, Subaru stretched his hand out towards the seat, unable to believe that the spit had just vanished. Not a single trace of liquid could be felt upon touching it, and the only thing that remained was a slightly warmed seat.

“Did it, evaporate?”

He guessed that there was a relationship between the heat of the seat and the disappearance of the spit.

Roswaal whistled in admiration at Subaru’s conclusion. “Ohhh myyyyyy, you’ve hit the bulls eye. I messed with the scale of flame, using an extreeeeeeemly small amount of mana so that only that part of the seat would be heated up for buuut a moment.”

“WHAT? The way you said that made it sound as if this feat-like thing were easy… Could it be that you aren’t actually a perverted idiot?”

“Actually, he’s the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Head Court Magician.” Answering in the proximity of Subaru was Emilia, who’d given him a bit of a surprise with her words. Unable to process what she’d just said, he looked at Roswaal, muttering the words ‘Head Court Magician’ to himself.

“…There’s a look of disbelief on your face.”

“N—o—w—a—y, I totally believe you! Yep! I totally believe you now! I believe you!”

"I'm not that convinced, but I'm not going to keep talking about it." Emilia quickly gave up trying to convince him. In the short time she'd known him, she'd learned to ignore him so as to calm his seemingly boundless energy.

Subaru, awakening a new kink by being ignored like that, saw that Emilia was now sitting in a different seat, rather than the seat of honor. This is probably where she usually sits, huh.

Seeing that no one else would be joining them in the dining room, other than the seat of honor, Emilia's seat, and Beatrice's seat, Subaru thought about where he was sitting in relation to the rest. He was quite a way away from the seat of honor, and a bit separated from Emilia's, making it feel incomplete.

If one were to try to use all the space at such a large table, it would probably end up being arranged in an unbalanced way.

"Anyway, this isn't fun like…" Muttering that, Subaru grabbed the food that'd been placed at his assigned seat, then began moving everything, clinking noises from china hitting china. The place he was moving to was naturally—

"Hey?"

"Don't mind me, don't mind me, believe in Terry."

"Who's that?" Emilia asked.

After Subaru moved himself next to her, Emilia looked at him in bewilderment. Even after listening to her response, he'd moved his salad and pastries over there. Having successfully wiggled his way next to her, he said, "Aw, come onnn. Instead of eating separately, why don't we eat next to each other and be friendly? Hey, if you don't like vegetables, you can just put them all on my plate. *pat pat* How about it?"

"Then, you can have my green beppers… No-No-No, that'd be…bad manners."

"Isn't not eating yummy food like getting your priorities backwards? Besides, eating next to a girl totally makes the food taste better, and I'm never gonna compromise on that. How about you, Rosy?"

Perhaps Emilia doesn't like green vegetables?

When Emilia drew near to his plate, he said that with a smile, then waved the topic over to Roswaal, who'd been observing him with great interest.

At that manner of address, he pointed at himself. "Are you perhaps refeeeering to me by any chance?"

"Who else would it be? Rosy. It's really the perfect name for you."

Affirming it with a nod of his head, Roswaal laughed cheerily, then turned his face towards Emilia, who had an astonished look on her face. "Don't beeeee upset, Lady Emilia. Decorum maaaay be important, but you won't be able to enjoy your meaaal if you are too fixated on that even when you are with those you know well. Ohhh, his words are correct."

Since it was the decision of the lord of the manor, that was that.

Emilia sighed, her feelings on display, then Ram and Rem, who'd been in waiting, began serving the dishes one after the other. Steaming dishes were lined up on the table, and, soon after, the breakfast space was ready to go.

"Well then, let us eat. —To the trees, the wind, the stars, and to the earth." Palms together, Roswaal closed his eyes and muttered that. Emilia and the twins quickly followed suit. Beatrice also returned to her seat and then closed her eyes. Realizing that it was a pre-meal prayer, Subaru hurriedly imitated them.

To be honest, he was pretty surprised that Christian-like prayer was common even across worlds.

Based on how they were so adamantly praying, it was shockingly clear that Roswaal and Emilia were deeply religious. And the twins seemed to have grown accustomed to it, paying close attention to their behavior. Beatrice, on the other hand, was simply roughly going through the motions.

“Weeeell then, Subaru. She may not look it, but Rem’s cooking is really quiiiiite something, is it noooot?”

At Roswaal’s encouragement, and with the prayer ending without him noticing, Subaru joined in on the meal with great haste. The menu seemed to consist of salad, as well as ingredients for bread, such as something like ham, which was comparable to toast. Though it was a little unclear, it seemed to have the appearance of a Western-style breakfast.

Subaru was relieved for now, seeing that nothing near him appeared to be unusual. He was grateful that none of the ingredients looked exotic or went beyond human knowledge, and, putting something that was like toast in his mouth, said, “Mm, this is way better than usual.”

After raising his face and giving that impression, the blue-haired maid standing next to the table made a fox with her fingers. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but it could be a V-sign-like thing in this world. Subaru replied by making two frog signs with his hands. “Was this food made by the blue-haired…um, or can I call you Rem? Did you make this?”

“Yes, it is just as you said, sir. Rem is the one who handles the cooking in this household. Sister is not really good at it.”

“Oh-ho, so it’s like you twins are good at different skills? So, the pink-haired one is good at cleaning but not cooking?”

“Yes, that is correct. Sister is especially good at cleaning, doing laundry, and other domestic chores.”

“Then, since you are good at cooking, does that mean you are bad at cleaning and doing laundry, Remrin?”

“No, Rem excels at all of the domestic chores, including cleaning and doing laundry. Even better than Sister.”

“Why’s the pink-haired one even here, then?!”

So, one of them exceled at all domestic chores, while the other was only good at cleaning—totally different twins was a novel thing.

Ram, who was next to Rem, did not seem to care much about what had been said. And it seemed to be true since she'd never even spoken up about it. So, that being the case, why was she not bothered by it at all?

"So perhaps they're in different fields, then? Ramchi is great at combat… No, is she responsible for 'nighttime services'?! Oh shit, I'm itchin' for a bunch of things tonight!"

"Sister, Sister. The guest seems to have doubts about you!"

"Rem, Rem. The guest seems to be undressing me in his mind!"

The twins clasped their hands together, acting as if something terrible were occurring, in response to the lewd thoughts of the indomitable Subaru. Viewing that exchange, Roswaal chuckled softly. "Veeeery goooood, you. Though because of their strong idiosyncrasies, Ram and Rem appear distant when meeting a guest for the first time, do they nooot?"

"You don't care about the flaws of your servants, because even the master is so full of flaws, huh? But, because it's fantasy, I'll tolerate anything. Now, I…"

"There is no doubt that he is competent. At least, that's what many people have said." Cutting into their conversation was Emilia. After bringing a little bit of soup to her mouth, she continued, a hint of displeasure in her voice. "Actually, those two are amazing, you know. They handle nearly all the maintenance around this huge mansion. For a race like theirs, it's sort of trivial."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that. Isn't that difficult?"

Having said that to Emilia, whose pupils lit up with righteous indignation-like emotions, Subaru gathered up his words and raised a question. "Just now, did Emilia-tan say that there were only two servants working in this mansion?"

"Ohhh yeess, thaaat is certainly the case as of this moment. Ram and Rem are the only ones left."

"Are you an idiot? How can two people handle such a huge mansion like this? No matter how great those two are, even they might die of overwork. —Or do you have something like a “I can’t hire more servants” kind of restriction holding you back?”

Hearing Subaru’s question, Roswaal remained silent for a time, crossing his hands on the table. On his face was a smile, yet there were clear emotions in his eyes as he looked in his direction, altering the atmosphere.

Subaru heard the rising sound of a flag, perceiving that something had gone wrong, then brought out his dessert, the ringa he’d been yearning for, and began munching on it.

He shuffled the delicious fruit into his mouth, satisfied by the tenderness that excited his tastebuds.

Chapter 8: The Situation of the Country and That Girl's Circumstances

1

"You truuuuly are mysterious. Having come to the residence of Roswaal L. Mathers in the Kingdom of Lugunica, yet not knowing the circumstances? And somehow making it through the kingdom's exaaamination process upon entering the country?"

"Aaaah weeeeell, I guess I'm something like an illegal immigrant in a sense, huh."

By the time he'd realized it, he had entered this country, but was there anything wrong with that? That was pretty much how he felt.

Subaru's casual response surprised Emilia, and then she glared at him with righteous indignation, as if scolding a young child. "You're unbelievable. Have you ever thought about what would happen if we reported this to the authorities after saying such a thing so easily? You could be carted off to jail without warning and turned into mincemeat there."

"Nobody uses mincemeat these days."

"This is no laughing matter. Hey, Subaru. Are you really ok? Is everyone where you come from like this? Or do you just stand out?"

Subaru, feeling sorry because Emilia was feeling truly worried about him, scratched his head and reflected on his own behavior. "Err, it's just that I have a bit of a bad memory. So, if you wouldn't mind, I would be most grateful if you could fill me in on this matter."

"It seems like you come from a good family based on how you're using words like that, but…"

Subaru's social life would have been completely screwed if he used proper language in a very halfhearted manner, such as this instance, when going out and interacting with others. And Emilia seemed like someone who was easy to fool, which made him worry about her. “Could it be…? Could it be that you don’t have an in-depth knowledge of these things as well, Emilia-tan? Right now, your sentences were a mess with humble language and respectful language jumbled up together.”

“Err… I can’t really deny it,” Emilia replied, shrinking into herself after hearing Subaru’s observation. Seeing her like that was rather surprising for him, since he thought she looked like she was knowledgeable on everything, but it was not the withering girl who followed up from that, but the silent Roswaal, who’d been sitting in the seat of honor.

“I doooo understand what you have pointed out, howeeeeever, Lady Emilia is currently studying such things.”

“Studying, huh,” said Subaru. “Wait a sec, is it connected to what we were talking about earlier?”

“Ahaaaa. How excellent. Quite thoughtful, aren’t you. And iiiit is because of that thoughtfulness that you can spill out such thoooooughtless-sounding statements.”

“It’s just common sense to think while you live. Even if your limbs feel heavy, and snot drips from your nose, and the contents of your stomach spill out, a person has a responsibility to think, right?”

“Such a distuuuurbing example. It’s almost as if you have experienced these things youuurself…”

Those words were, of course, based on things he had actually experienced himself.

Perhaps due to Subaru’s words leaving a deep impression on him, Roswaal held out his hand, which the maids placed his notebook and pen in.

After quickly putting down the things that had just occurred, Roswaal once more turned to face Subaru. “Veeery goooood. Iiit’s great how you're just brimming with ideas."

"How many times do you write in that notebook in a single day? How many volumes have you written in your life?"

"As far as that question is conceeeerned, it is a sacrament of the House of Mathers. Too baaad, but I'm not telling."

Subaru wearily averted his eyes at the sight of the refined older man who suddenly acted with a bit of an attitude.

Subaru was increasingly perplexed about what to do about someone who had a stronger character than himself. Coming in at just the right time was Emilia, who cleared her throat in an attempt to steer the conversation back onto the original topic.

"Now then, let's get back on track. Subaru, do you know what's currently going on in this country—in the Kingdom of Lugunica?"

"I totally have no idea what's going on here. Not even a little."

"It's refreshing to hear you saying that without any hesitation to that extent. The way you've been acting until now has done nothing but surprise me, Subaru. Stuff like that was reaaally making me worried about you." Getting over her astonishment, Emilia began to look at him as if he were a child.

He wasn't trying to execute a plan to arouse her mother-hen-like instincts or anything, but in consequence, it seemed like the growing distance between their hearts was like one between a Mother and Child.

Trying to somehow reconcile their widening difference in age, Subaru pestered her with a "So what! So what!".

"You're such a baby. Umm, martial law is currently being enacted in Lugunica. And it is especially strict when it comes to going in and out of the country."

"Martial law… That doesn't sound very good."

"—Aaahaaa, it doesn't sound very goooood, indeed. —In any case, the Kingdom of Lugunica currently lacks a king." Roswaal ended up answering for her. Scrutinizing what he had just said, Subaru gulped silently, having figured out the significance of those words.

He glanced at the expressions of Emilia and the twins, and then Beatrice and Puck. They didn't appear to be shaken up about it at all, which meant this fact was common knowledge here. On top of that, he felt cautious at the fact that he, someone equivalent to an outsider, was informed of such a thing, but…

"No need to worry! This grave truth is already well-known by the public, you see."

"Oh, that's good. Well, I figured you guys would go, 'We won't let you make it out alive', because I just learned a secret that would threaten your positions or something."

"That's just sad if it were to happen, since we were the ones who revealed it… Anyways, the whole nation is preeetty unstable right now," Emilia interjected.

"This is where the martial law thing comes iiiin. In such a situation where there is no ruler, it wouldn't be desirable to carry sources of conflict into other countries, nor would it be good to do the opposite."

I see, thought Subaru as he grasped what had just been said.

A kingdom without a king would be a lethal blow to its operations. Whether they died from an illness or otherwise, the country was shaken to its core by the sudden Death of a king.

"Mmmm, wait a second. Isn't it usually the case that everything gets solved when the children of the king take over? Or like, they'll have a regent with them if they're too young?"

"Oh-ho, it seems that you can keep up with this conversation. Anyhow, that iiis usually the case. Howeeever, something happened half a year ago. It has been said that at the same time His Majesty passed away, a disease ran rampant within the castle…"

As Roswaal told it, it was announced that the epidemic was one that only affected a particular bloodline. And so, the king and his descendants that had lived in the royal castle perished.

“Then it’s true that there’s no king, huh? And if that’s truly the case, then what’s gonna happen to the country, then? If there is no royal bloodline, then what are you gonna do, start a democracy and elect a prime minister?”

“I dooo not understand the second half of what you said, but currently, the country is managed by a Council of Elders who oversee its affairs. It was formed from distinguished families who have left their mark in the kingdom’s history. Iiiit won’t have much of an effect on the operation of the government itself.”

After pausing for a moment, he let out an “However—” and with a stiffened expression, said, “—A kingdom must have a king.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Even if the person at the top didn’t manage anything and was just a mere figurehead, no organization came into existence without someone heading it. Even more so for something like a country.

Even in Japan, where a lot of importance was placed on democracy, a prime minister existed at the top. That applied even if the position came with heavy responsibility and was frequently replaced by another person.

“Then, since the kingdom lacks a king, a new one needs to be selected. But the bloodline was pretty much destroyed. So a new king needs to be selected in a way that everyone finds acceptable.”

“—Really, you’re such a strange boy, Subaru. Even without knowing anything, you can come up with such things, can’t you? I feel like you’re something like a clever fool.”

“Don’t praise me like that! I’m not used to being praised, so if you praise me like that, I think I might just fall in love with you!” Subaru turned his gaze away from Emilia and said that over his shoulder so that he might hide his embarrassment.

He slapped his reddening face, so as to justify why it was like that, then turned towards Roswaal. After organizing his thoughts, he raised his finger up at him. “I see. I think I’ve got the gist of it now. In other words, the country has no king and is in a bit of a rut trying to select a new one. Your relations with other countries are diminishing in significance and you’re basically in a state of mini isolation. So a mysterious foreigner like me showing up is—totally suspicious!!”

“Fuuuurthermore, by coming into contact with Lady Emilia, you have become associated with the House of Mathers. If they were one with a hasty disposition, that’s all they would need to…” With his eyes closed, Roswaal mimicked a guillotine by ‘cutting’ his neck with his hand, as if it were a blade. Giving that gesture a sidelong glance, Subaru broke into a cold sweat due to having an ominous feeling.

“H-Hey! I think I can imagine what’s going on from the pervert’s words just now! Looking at the House of Mathers, I feel like it has such a fine lineage. Perhaps you’re connected to the Council of Elders, or maybe even a possibility of something more than that—?!” Based on the current flow of the conversation, that was the best guess Subaru could make.

The way he was telling the story, as if he was relishing each big reveal he made, the way he crafted the flow of the story just now… It hardly seemed like what someone looking upon the situation from the outside would say.

Therefore, it would only be natural for him to think that the lord of such a large manor, who most certainly came from a fine lineage, would be associated with such things. With such thoughts in mind… “As an apology for my i-insolence, I would like to ask for your forgiveness by offering my whittle finger… at least my whittle finger to you.”

“For you who has such a frightening imagination, there is good news. You can be at eaaase, alright? I am nooot associated with the Council of Elders, nor am I in a position to be involved with the kingdom’s throne at present, you seeee. —Riiight, Lady Emilia?”

With Subaru’s finger presented on the table, Roswaal chuckled as if he'd just heard a great joke. He then looked at Emilia for her approval, who responded with silence while she frowned.

Subaru was about to explode at Roswaal due to his suggestive behavior in that moment, but suddenly felt that something was off and put a stop to such thoughts.

He had been really curious about something since awhile back.

“Why is…the lord of this manor calling Emilia-tan lady?”

The person who held the highest position in the household was always paid the greatest amount of respect.

Subaru turned his gaze to Roswaal to make sure of it, and his budding anxiety quickly began to bloom into a flower of complete dread. And—

“Is it not naturaaaal to address someone of higher rank than I with reeespect?” With his hands folded on top of the table, Roswaal uttered that with a gleeful smile.

Dumbfounded, Subaru froze with his mouth agape. He looked at Emilia so robotically that one could hear the sound of gears turning. The girl then sighed with resignation. “I don't want you to think that I was trying to trick you or anything, alright?”

“—Err, that is to say, Emilia-tan, you're…?”

Subaru had yet to be discouraged from using the ‘tan’ nickname he'd given her.

As if striking the finishing blow on him, who wanted to deny such a reality, she continued, “Currently, my title is Royal Candidate, one of those seeking to become the 42nd ruler of the Kingdom of Lugunica. With the backing of Margrave Roswaal, that is.”

Her words alarmed Subaru so much that he felt like the hurdle had risen to the height of a space elevator.

—The person I grew attracted to ended up being a queen.

A sentence like that crossed his mind. Well, she was technically a queen candidate.

“A phrase like ‘queen candidate’ has such an erotic feeling to it.”

“I reaaaally don’t know what that’s all about, but I’m talking seriously.”

“Waaaah, such a cold gaze is making me tingle… As one would expect from a queen. Don’t look at me as if I’m a lowly pig!”

“I’m not looking at you in such a horrible way, okay? I wish you wouldn’t say things like that, Subaru!”

Subaru threw himself down onto the table, trembling a bit, the rebuke of the very close-by beauty causing him to writhe in agony. So that he could hide his facial expression, he laid face-down on the table, but his heart was actually pounding hard, expressing his true feelings.

In any case, he didn’t want Emilia to see the pathetic look he had on his face now.

The Queen Candidate… If he were to be frank, other than the stuff he was familiar with in games and manga, he had no idea how a despotic world where kings ruled at the top worked.

Nevertheless, when it came to the potential ruler of a nation, he knew that such a person was one that was far-removed from the masses.

Not to mention that Subaru didn’t even have a family register in this world. To put it in a nutshell, he was in a position to be discredited from even being placed into the same category as the masses.

Not to mention his audacious feelings of love being quickly shot down, but knowing Emilia’s status on top of her being beautiful really knocked him down a notch.

He had no doubt that it was like climbing to the top of a space elevator with his bare hands.

“Oh Jesus, say it ain’t so! My path of love is surprisingly full of roadblocks, if I do say so myself. Romeo, who loves Juliet, surely feels for me!”

“Hold on, are you okay, Subaru? You became silent all the sudden, so…”

When he raised his teary-eyed face, Emilia was reflected in his blurred field of vision. It seemed like she was looking down at him with concern with her amethyst eyes.

Her skin was as white as untainted snow, and the sound she emitted from her thin pink lips was as lovely as a silver bell.

It felt like she was an existence that seemed oh so distant, someone he couldn’t reach no matter how far he went.

“…Here goes.”

Unable to take it anymore, Subaru tightly embraced the girl, who was right beside him.

“…E?”

“Wooooow, so petite. And sooo soffft, too. Oh, this smell is just amazing.”

For a moment, it didn’t register in Emilia’s mind that she had been embraced.

Subaru then relished in the sensation of holding her closely and embracing her to his heart’s content.

Subaru didn’t have a lot of experience when it came to interpersonal relationships, and absolutely zero experience with hugging a girl. He thought it was too bad that he hadn’t had enough time to enjoy it when he was protecting Felt at the Stolen Goods Warehouse, not to mention she was too skinny for it to count.

Whatever the case may be, Emilia, who belatedly became aware of what was going on, turned beet red and started struggling. “Wai… What?! What’s wrong?!”

“Er, it’s just that the fact you appeared in front of me suddenly brought out my bestial instincts, making it hard to resist. When I calmed down and thought about it, I realized I’d never be able to accomplish my goal from the get-go, so I thought, ‘I’ll never be able to reach it, so why bother!’.”

“I reaalllly have noooo ideaaaa what you’re talking about!”

“Weeell, hold on a sec. Allow me to calm down and analyze myself. —I mean, I thought about whether or not to reach out to you when you looked at me before, so I had an idea of making sure that I could reach you or not, and then out of my spinal reflex, my boy characteristics were activated, which then caused my libido to start going into overdrive, thus leading to me embracing you, and then after that, I concluded that I wasn’t gonna die or anything, so I thought I’d just keep enjoying this as much as I could, oh, and it was a pretty happy thing for me and fit the bill, but an unhappy surprise for Emilia-tan, I guess… and that’s it.”

“Even when you explain it in detail, I still have nooo idea what you mean!”

Subaru rambled on and on and on to drag it out, then Emilia, who was struggling in his arms, finally thrusted him away.

Subaru felt so lonely now that she had broken away from his embrace. Emilia, on the other hand, was getting red in the face and then pointed at him with tearful eyes. “Don’t just go and hug a girl sooo suddenly! It wasn’t really a big deal because I was the one you were hugging, but a normal girl would take it seriously, okay?”

“I didn’t really do it on purpose, though? Yes, I must’ve moved according to someone else’s command. Wait, could it be that you charmed me with magic, Emilia-tan…? You’re such an evil woman!”

“There nooooo way I did that. You’re laying the blame on me! And stop raising your thumb!”

His emboldening thumbs-up having been turned down, Subaru dejectedly lowered his right hand.

But it was true that his body had been stirred on because of his spinal reflex. And the words he’d said after that weren’t a lie, either, but he would be so embarrassed that he’d want to die if he said that out loud.

—The truth is, your eyes have stolen my heart.

“Ah, it’s embarrassing! If I heard you say that, I couldn’t help but say, ‘That’s so amazing! Hold me tight!’.”

“Myyyy ohhhh myyy, you really aren’t afraid of aaanything at all, are you?” Whilst Subaru was holding his cheeks with his hands, saying, “oh stoooop it,” hips swaying, Roswaal, spectating their conversation from the side, said that while looking like he was trying to hold back his laughter.

Emilia, still red in the face, very sternly glared at him because of the way he was speaking. With tears in his eyes because of laughing so much, Roswaal wiped them away and feigned ignorance. “She is a candidate to be the future queen, is she nooot? Peeeeerhaps she will long-remember this great disrespect towards her, and when the time comes that she takes up the throne, she will enact her judgment upon you, and…”

“Are you telling me to regret the happy things that’re happening right now, because no one knows what the future holds? Don’t underestimate a victim of a pressure-free education that advocates for instant gratification!”

With his middle finger up, Subaru rudely declared that. And with his free hand pointed at Emilia, said, “Even if Emilia-tan is a candidate to be the future queen, she’s just a girl at the moment. And I’m just a man. You don’t have any right to complain about whether the casual relationship between a man and a woman breaks down or not! That’s why…!”

With one foot on the chair and his fist clenched tightly, Subaru proudly made a declaration. "…Even if I were put to death tomorrow, I would still hug Emilia-tan tightly, sniff her hair, and use that as nourishment to keep on living—!"

The inside of the dining room was filled to the brim with deep silence due to Subaru's declaration, which made him sound anguished.

Everyone was at a loss for words at Subaru's fierce attitude. Gulping, they all took in the words of his extremely wild and boastful declaration. And then—

"Sorry for interrupting your breakfast. Then, let us return to our meal. Let us gather and enjoy ourselves once more, and forget about the quarrel just now…"

"You're churning out quite an exaggerated mantra to accompany a mere perverted remark." As Subaru pushed his hair back, putting on airs, trying to clear up the air in the room with his momentum, his intention of doing so was abruptly put to an end. The one who had done so was Beatrice, sitting in a distant seat, looking his way as if she were totally bored. Exhibiting bad manners, she placed Puck on the dining table and brushed his grey fur. "In the end, you were only fooled by that little girl's beauty, simple as that, in fact. How could you ramble on and on about her for so long, I suppose…?"

"You… really are my natural enemy, huh…" Subaru's shoulders slumped at Beatrice's words of exasperation, muttering that in response.

Beginning with Beatrice snorting at that, the other participants began returning to their senses one after the other.

In other words, the vilification of Subaru for his sexual harassment earlier was about to begin.

Chapter 9:
The Fruits of Dying Thrice

“So, in the end, why is it that you did those things, Subaru?” Emilia asked.

“I already told you the complete and utter truth. If there were to be another reason… Wait, could it be that the evil loli over there… messed with my mind…? You evil little girl!”

“You made a fool out of yourself, and now you’re just shifting the blame to another, I suppose! You’re the worst! The absolute worst, in fact!”

“Shut it! Can the words of a loli who drinks during the day even justify anything?! Aren’t you seeing and hearing lots of things wrong by getting drunk? In the first place, at what age is it hunky-dory to drink alcohol in this country?!” While he was having a spit-flying shoutout with Beatrice, he directed that question at Rem out of reflex, who was standing nearby.

Not shaken up one bit by the sudden change in subject, Rem gave a polite curtsy and asked, “What do you mean by ‘honky-dory’, sir?”

Seeing her skillfully tilt her head as she remained in her curtsy, Subaru scratched his head. “Oh, hmm… You guys aren’t even sure of the meaning of that, huh? Wasn’t expecting that, so I guess I’ll have to explain! It means something like ‘alright’.”

Comprehending what had been said, Rem and Ram shared a look.

“After you turn 14 years old.”

“When you turn 14 years old.”

“Are y’all serial?”

“‘Serial’?”

“Serial?”

"It means 'Are you telling the truth?', 'Are you being completely serious?', or 'it's mega amazing, isn't it?'."

""I see.""

The two of them gave a synchronized bow, as if they were impressed. In other words, when put into practical use… "Serial, is it really honky-dory to drink alcohol when you turn 14?!"

""That means, 'Seriously, is it really okay to drink alcohol when you turn 14?'.""

They managed to do a perfect translation here, their intention of coming to a mutual understanding having come true.

The three of them spontaneously looked at each other out of joy, and with their hands raised, shouted out:

"""Yeahhh!"""

They high fived each other one after the other. And then they started moving around in a circle, their hands still touching.

"…Have you finished your little performance, I wonder?"

"What do you want? You're such a killjoy, you drill loli."

"Hush with that lili, in fact! What the heck is up with you, I wonder!!" Beatrice leaned back into her chair and crossed her arms, looking quite angry. Subaru figured she was already through arguing with him, seeing as she chose to remain silent. He then saw Puck on top of the dining table consoling her, so he decided to let the little cat deal with her.

And then he once again faced the silver-haired girl, not having settled a single thing so far.

Perhaps because of her mood, she looked at Subaru with her white eyes filled with a chillier intensity than before, and—

"The fact that you're cute, even when you look at me like that, should be considered a crime..."

"…Sigh. Now I'm starting to figure out how I got involved with you, Subaru. All I need to do is pay no attention to the jokes you look like you tell everyone, and then just get to the point, right?"

"I feel offended when you think I crack jokes to everyone! I'd only say such a thing to you, Emilia-TAN! I'm being serious! Totally serious! Suuuper duuper SERIOUS!"

"Yes yes, just forget it. Let's just get to the point, then." Clapping her hands to reset the conversation, Emilia then quietly returned to her seat.

With no choice but to follow in her stead, Subaru settled back down, but while he was doing so, Roswaal said, "Though we strayed away from the subject quite a bit, nevertheless, let's just get to the point, shall we? Is that alriiiight with you, Subaru?"

"Weeell, based on how my head hasn't already flown off my shoulders, I'm going to pray for it to be nothing bad."

Roswaal whistled at Subaru's words. Emilia looked just as caught off-guard as him, since she assumed that Subaru had been acting in such a disrespectful manner in order to feel out their intentions, but they were looking way too much into it.

Of course, he had just been spitting out mere eloquent nonsense.

Subaru had put himself out there first, before they could figure it out and expose him, making sure to overwhelm them with the way he acted. He figured that if he took the initiative during the conversation, he would be able to decrease the chances of it being led in a dreadful direction.

"Alright, I suppose I'll make my guess then. So you brought up the whole talk about Emilia-tan being a candidate to be queen, right? I guess there's some type of connection here?"

"Really, are you a pervert, Subaru? Or are you not?"

"Those two choices are pretty extreme, you know?!"

With wide-open eyes, Emilia gave a light-hearted apology by saying, “Sorry, sorry.” While Subaru was genuinely offended by that, Roswaal followed up after her apology. “Neverthelееess, your guess was right on taaarget. The tale about her being a candidate to be queen from before is quiiite related to what shall become of you. —Lady Emilia?”

“Mm, I understand.”

After giving a quiet response to that call, Emilia put her hand in her pocket.

Subaru suddenly noticed that the merriness had disappeared from the atmosphere in the dining room. Though the same people were sitting around the dining table, they were now clad in a completely dignified presence.

Subaru spontaneously straightened his posture without thinking. Continuing from where she left off, Emilia brought out the object from her pocket and placed it on the table. That’s… “I-Isn’t that the insignia from…?”

It was the insignia adorned with a dragon motif that had been put through the bitter experience of being stolen, courtesy of Felt, something that Subaru had finally returned to its rightful owner after coming back from three whole deaths.

The deep, serene twinkle of the crimson jewel in its owner’s hands filled Subaru with a sense of awe, its prettiness sparking his curiosity.

“You seeee, the dragon signifies the crest of Lugunica. It wouldn’t even be too muuuch to call it the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica. It is a symbol that is often found on castle walls, weapons, and armor, but that insignia is especiaaaally important. Anyhoooow…”

Roswaal paused for a second. Subaru gave him a look that urged him to go on, which he nodded to, and then he shifted his gaze to Emilia to suggest that she continue. She closed her eyes, and then said, “It is one’s qualification as a royal selection candidate. —A test to determine if the person is worthy of sitting on the throne of the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

Her declaration of the truth, said in a strained voice, made Subaru's eyes go wide, and then his eyes once again darted towards the crimson radiance on the table. The insignia with a dragon with outstretched wings—the glittering jewel in the center of it supported the proof of her claim, and when everything that had just been said was put together… "N-No way… You lost the insignia that qualifies your entry in the royal selection?!"

"Don't put it so disgracefully! A light-fingered girl stole it!"

"That's the same thing—!!" With that loud shout, Subaru slammed his hands against the dining table as he rose to his feet.

The impact to the table threatened to make the tableware fall to the ground, but Rem's perfect follow-up managed to prevent it from happening. Paying no attention to that, he looked down at Emilia. Her face was turning crimson, her eyes brimming with humiliation.

"Even if you make a face that stimulates my sadistic heart, it won't work! Waaaait, seriously, like how the hell does this whole thing work?! If you lost it, could you just get a new one issued by a public office?!"

"Public office… I am not quiiite sure what that means, but it wouuuld be difficult to simply nonchalantly go and ask for another one, you seeee." Gazing at the flustered Subaru, Roswaal calmly adjusted the gargantuan collar of his clothing, and continued, "A king carries the kingdom on their shoulders. It would be outrageous if they could not even protect a siiingle small insignia. Why should people think they could entrust the country to such a person?"

"That's right. It's like how Lord Komon always left his work to the careless Hachibe, yet he was just as careless as him."

"Careless?"

"Hachibe?"

While the twins said the name of the mysterious person to themselves, Subaru digested everything that had happened.

The stolen insignia, their encounter in the alleyway, the fight at the

Stolen Goods Warehouse, getting welcomed like this. The answers he could derive from this became united into a single one. “If the imperial guards got word that you’d lost the insignia, it’d seriously be bad. That’s why Emilia-tan was looking for it all by her lonesome, like a lonely wolf.”

“…Yes, that’s right.” Emilia replied.

“Felt was the one who stole it, but Elsa was the one who made her steal it. And she said someone had requested her to do it. So, to put it simply, someone is trying to stop Emilia-tan from becoming queen?”

“That’s probably the caaase here. If someone wanted to make you drop out of the royal selection, there is no simpler way that I can think of than to steal the insiiignia.”

After affirming what had been said, everything that had happened yesterday started to come together.

How Emilia was so stubborn; Felt and her client, Elsa. And how the value of the insignia was the direct cause of him getting into a mess and dying many times.

“Man, now that I think about it, I did a super good job! Whatever I did was seriously amazing, huh?! You were in danger of sayin’ sayonara to the royal selection, right, Emilia-tan?! And since you were about to lose the insignia, saying ‘I accidentally lost my insignia! Teehee! Sorry!’ won’t cut it, right?!”

“Wow, I couldn’t understand sixty percent of what you just said.”

“Waaaaaaaah, it doesn’t matter! What actually matters here is that, looking back, I did a super awesome job for you, didn’t I, Emilia-tan?!”

Subaru was in a state of ecstasy once he realized that he had unexpectedly accomplished a great deed by doing the things he did. Then he got up again, brought his face close to the still-seated Emilia, and took excited nasal breaths.

“Fu-fu-fu, how about it, hoooow aboouuut iiiiit, Emilia-TAN. This fool right here was nice and played a preeety active role in making you happy, huh? Maaan, I wonder if I can expect a nice reward or something, really! I wonder, I wonder, I wonder?!"

After speaking like someone from Higurashi at the end of that sentence, Subaru cast his gaze down at Emilia, placed his hand below her chin, and lifted it up.

Conducting himself with narrowed eyes full of lust, he appeared as a skilled, but wicked governor. With his feel-good mood already reaching greater and greater heights, he slowly waited for the time that someone might tell him to cut it out. He tightened his abs in anticipation for this very thing. But.

"…Yeah, you're right. You've been a great help to me, Subaru. So much that you saving my life isn't enough to describe it. So… you can ask me for anything."

"Huh…?"

"If it's something I'm capable of doing, then I'll do it. Err, no, I'll do whatever I can. Because what you gave to me means just that much to me."

The way she placed a hand on her chest, staring back at Subaru with a serious expression, rendered him speechless.

Thinking that the level of his excitement didn't fit the mood because the conversation became more serious than expected, he removed his hand from her chin.

—Oh shiiit, I'm seriously bad at reading the mood.

Since he had become a loner due to not being able to read the mood, Subaru was pretty good at reading the 'Mood when he couldn't read the mood'. Although ordinary people could read the 'Mood before it had gotten to the point where he couldn't read the mood', he couldn't. The result was him constantly being unable to read between the lines with his insensitive remarks.

Now being no different, since Subaru himself couldn't read the mood with his excitement that was out of place when it was compared to Emilia's serious gaze, he was at a loss as to what to do.

"Hey, a girl can't just say they'll do 'a-anything', you know? You might come across a bad guy like me who just wants to... Mwahaha!"

"…Even so, that's fine. If that's what you want to do, Subaru, I'll follow your lead. You can go 'mwahaha', 'fuhfuhfuh', or even if it's a umph-umph thing, or making whoopee, I… Hic."

"A girl shouldn't say such obscene things! Moreover, it looked like you were about to cry in the latter half of that!" Subaru was relieved when the nearly crying Emilia hugged her own shoulders.

If she had tragically resigned herself to such a fate, Subaru would've had a hard time dealing with it. Of course, he would ignore the fact that they thought he would try to pull something like that, which told him they had a somewhat low opinion of him.

Subaru placed his hand on top of Emilia's silver hair and began lightly caressing it.

Emilia was surprised by the sudden feeling of his palm, but when she saw him doing that in silence, she just remained quiet and went along with it.

Thinking her reaction was as charming as that of a little animal, Subaru turned his head to look at Roswaal.

Watching the two of them, looking as if he were having a ton of fun while doing so, Roswaal noticed Subaru's gaze, letting out an "Oh myyyy.", and with a raise of his eyebrows, said, "What iiis it? Am I perhaaaps interrupting something? Should we leave?"

"It's surprising because having my first experience at the dining table would be way too abnormal. What are you gonna make me use this silverware for? You filthy, perverted nobleman…!"

"Oh myyy, I didn't teeeell you to go that faaaar, though."

Subaru lifted his mouth at the sighing tall man who was smiling dryly, and then, with the hand that wasn't petting Emilia, he touched his chin.

His gesture was akin to something a young detective would do in a detective anime, with his thumb and index finger held around his chin, said, “Wait, wait, wait, hear me out, Rosy. It’s definitely true that you’re dangling favorable conditions right in front of my eyes, which is more than I deserve. It’s a situation where a carrot is held before a horse. But I’m not so empty-minded that I’d get led on so easily. I still have lots of stuff I wanna ask you before I accept any of your offers.”

“Oh-ho? Go ooon.”

“Alright then, here I go. Answer carefully and truthfully, okay? Emilia-tan is a candidate to be queen, right? So, what the HELL do YOU have to do with that?”

Subaru threw that question at Roswaal, thrusting the finger that he had previously been holding to his chin at him. The corners of the magician’s mouth distorted at that question, then changed into the form of a delighted smile.

Chapter 10:
A Two-Faced Negotiation

1

Facing the mismatching color of the blue and yellow pair of eyes, Subaru felt as if they were drawing him into their depths, preventing him from thinking. Swallowing a breath, he clenched his teeth so that the atmosphere wouldn't overwhelm him.

With his chin nestled on top of his clasped hands above the table, Roswaal said, "You appeaaaar to be raaather observant. You've done quiiite well by understanding what has been saiiid so far, for it iiiiis, quite frankly, uuuuncanny for an ordinary citizen to be able to do so."

"I am greatly honored to receive your praise, so answer my goddamn question, guy with long, indigo-colored hair. If you don't…"

"If I don't, then what?"

At Roswaal, who had responded provocatively, the frustrated Subaru retorted, his teeth making a sound, "Then I'm gonna caress Emilia-tan with my hands, and as gut-wrenching as it is… I'll devote myself to sexually harassing this girl! I'm gonna umph umph and make whoopie!"

"Eep!"

Said with such force that it seemed as if she were going to bite through her lips, Emilia flinched involuntarily, stimulating Subaru's sadistic heart.

In that moment, when his quick temper was about to erupt, and he might not even regret putting his words into action, he was interrupted by the clap of someone's hands.

What had brought Subaru's consciousness back to a state of balance when he was in danger of actually committing sexual harassment was the dry plosive sound of Roswaal, who had stood up.

“That was close, you saved me there, man.”

“Why are you expressing gratitude towards me…? Myyy ohhh myyyy, you are such a straaaange boy. I have never heaaaard of such an unuuuusual way of negotiating.”

“Ha, placing the best, highest-ranking girl here within my reach will be the cause of your downfall. No matter how much you scheme and plan, none of it will work. Even if it’s just a single moment, or a mere chance encounter, that alteration can infinitely extend that fleeting moment. —The genes that can do it, live within my people.”

“An eternal moment… Is that the highest level of Yin Magic…?!” Emilia asked.

He brushed Emilia’s head, who was at a loss for words because of how difficult his nonsense was to understand.

He had an undeniable feeling that he was being treated like someone with the ability to manipulate time, but it unexpectedly wasn’t really far off from the truth, so he decided to not explain.

Whether it be his ability to Return by Death, or the idiotic characteristics of the Japanese and their amazing quality of making insane modifications to their momentary delusions, neither were untrue.

Leaving the baffled Emilia be, Subaru hid such thoughts as he glared at Roswaal. Not forgetting to give him a fearless smile, he was quick to take on the role of a villain.

And yet, the countenance of the long-haired man remained unperturbed at him acting like a villain. He had a gentle smile on his face, free of all emotion, showing dignity aplenty, befitting one who was a great nobleman.

They exchanged gazes in silence, almost as if sparks were flying between them, assessing each other, and trying to get a read on one another. The victor of the stare-down was Subaru, who made Roswaal avert his gaze downwards.

Looking at Subaru, who had dry eyes because he had been reluctant to close them, Roswaal raised his hands slightly. “I concede, I concede.”

“I lost this one. Your gaze was rather impreeeesive. Right, if I don’t make my position clear, it wouldn’t be faiiiir to you, now would iiit?”

“Ow, Ow, my eyes hurt like hell. Rub them a bit more gently, Emilia-tan.”

“Are you fine with that being what you want as a reward?” Emilia asked.

“I’ll do it myself! That was super dangerous! This girl is unexpectedly pretty shrewd, huh?!”

In danger of losing his edge in the negotiations, Subaru jumped away and rubbed his eyes. He blinked, confirmed that the pain was receding, and then got ready to confront Roswaal once more.

“Weeeell, it’s not as if it was something that needs to be concealed, you seeee. I may have let a few things sliiiip, but I am in a position to support Lady Emilia’s candidacy to be queen. I am her backer… or perhaaaaps it would be better to say that I am her patron?”

“Patron, huh.”

So, the person right before his eyes, Roswaal, was the representative of Emilia’s supporters.

Subaru once more tried to confirm the unknowable nature of the tall man, and then nervously asked Emilia, “I’m not sure if I should be saying this, but…shouldn’t you be more careful with your choice in people, Emilia-tan?”

“It can’t be helped. There was no one in the royal capital I could turn to, and, in the first place, Roswaal was the only one with strange enough tastes to cooperate with someone like me, so…”

“I see. It was the process of elimination, huh.”

“You two must be unbelievaaably confident and without fear to be saying suuuuch things right in front of your patron, yes?”

Despite receiving such insulting comments, Roswaal didn’t seem to be unperturbed at all, the gentle expression on his face unchanging. Perhaps he was immeasurably tolerant of others, or… “He might be one of your typical M’s (masochists), huh.”

“‘Em’?” Emilia asked.

With both arms held in a circle, he made the shape of an M by having them meet on top of his head.

As Subaru was displaying a letter that couldn’t be understood by anyone in this world, Emilia tilted her head as he tried to come up with an explanation, “No, if I calm down and think about it, this is the second time I’ve made this joke. It’s going to lose its freshness, so saying it to the same person again would be a little…”

“Don’t just accept the situation in such a weird way. Can you tell me what you mean?”

“The you from yesterday knew it. That’s it! Live strong.”

Pat Pat Lightly patting her head as if to comfort her, Subaru chuckled emotionlessly.

Leaving the flabbergasted and confused Emilia to herself, Subaru felt his heart lighten up since he didn’t necessarily tell a lie.

Though, the Emilia of the world that knew it was no longer here. She was silently sleeping within his heart, along with a debt of gratitude he couldn’t repay.

He gave a thumbs up to the pouting Emilia, who seemed to be discontent, and then used the same hand, still held in the same position, to point at Roswaal. Afterwards, when he turned it upside down, Roswaal said, “Hmmm? All you did was turn it upside down, but it feels like a humiliating gesture. I wonder why?”

"Really? Where I come from, it's a sign of deep affection that means, 'I love you so much that I wanna make you lick my shoe'."

"Subaru, in your hometown, licking someone's shoe is an expression of deep affection…?" Emilia asked.

"It's the ultimate expression of love, meaning, 'Everything that represents you is precious'. I wouldn't even hesitate to eat your hair or something if I feel like it, Emilia-tan."

"I'm begging you. Definitely DON'T feel like it, alright?"

Seeing as she had found fault with what he'd said, Subaru shrugged. Roswaal unintentionally burst out into laughter after hearing their exchange, and Emilia was in a bad mood because of the way they reacted.

As the three of them each did their own thing, they didn't make any progress at all with the conversation from before.

"Hey, we're having a serious conversation, so can you stop sidetracking us?"

"You're the last person I wanted to hear that from!" Emilia replied.

Emilia's lamentation was dodged with an easygoing "Yeah, yeah," and then Subaru once more directed his gaze at Roswaal to start things over again, getting to the main point. "So, about the main subject. I get that you're Emilia-tan's patron, Rosy. And it's pretty cute how I could catch glimpses of her 'bumpkin-ness' from every aspect of her behavior, but her acting all on her own in the royal capital is a bit rare, right?"

"I doooo suppose this is the first time such a thing has happened, you seeee. Though Ram should have been with her…"

Roswaal made a strained smile as he fiddled with his collar and shifted the topic over to the pink-haired maid. When Subaru turned to look at the maid behind him with suspicion in his eyes, she remained nonchalant, having disguised herself as the blue-haired maid by flipping her bangs to the opposite side. Though he immediately noticed it because their hair color was different.

"Man, that face that says something like 'I got away with it, just like I'd hoped' really pisses me off."

"Sister, Sister, the guest said such a thing like that."

"Rem, Rem, the guest said such an empty-minded thing."

"Hey, I can still tell who's who based on Ram's crude way of speaking!"

After having an exchange where they seemed like they had zero intention of glossing over their words, Subaru yelled that out angrily and let his shoulders droop. However, the one who nervously responded to that angry voice was Emilia.

With an awkward look on her face, the girl raised her hand slightly. "It's not like it's Ram's fault. About that, I…guess I sort of gave in to my own curiosity. I wandered around aimlessly and then got separated from Ram."

"What's up with that Moe-character-like reason? What an unbeatable defense. That being the case, it's true that she couldn't fulfill her lord's orders, right? Is that really okaaay?"

As he asked that question with good pronunciation and his lower lip jutted out, Roswaal responded with the turning of his neck. Prefacing it with a "You dooo have a point," he continued, "Perhaps I maaaay share a responsibility in Ram's failure to supervise. Hoooowever, on another note, what are you trying to say to me, I wooonder?"

"It's simple, really. Emilia-tan forgot how to get back to where she was and then started wandering around aimlessly, and the fact that her attendant couldn't find her is the most regrettable. And then, as a result… I, the villainous character, had taken advantage of that. So the right bad thing to do would be to wring as much as I can wring out of you, right?"

Grasping what had just been said, the facial expressions of everyone in the room changed.

Emilia's face stiffened, the twins glared at Subaru with eyes that held both animosity and remorsefulness, Beatrice had an uninterested look on her face as she tilted her glass to drink, and Puck plunged head-first into the egg dish in front of him as if he had slipped, resulting in a total disaster.

And then Roswaal nodded over and over again while smiling, looking like he had understood.

“I seeee. On the topic of private funds, I, the patron, am more suited for you to ask for a reward from, rather than Lady Emilia, who is essentially penniless, is it nooot?”

“Right? And you shouldn’t be able to refuse me, either. A-f-t-e-r-a-l-l, I saved Emilia-tan’s life and contributed greatly to preventing her from dropping out of the royal selection! In short, I’m something like a savior for the Emilia-tan Camp in the royal selection!”

“I muuuust admit that it is the truth. Well then, allow me to ask you a question in addition to that.” Roswaal stood up, looking down at Subaru from his superior stature.

Not to be defeated by being below him, Subaru turned his gaze upwards. The way they looked now was similar to when Roswaal had surprised him with a kiss to the forehead at their first meeting, but the weight of the atmosphere they were now clad in was in a completely different league.

Anxious, Emilia clasped her hands together as she feared where the negotiations were headed. Feeling something like a prayer being directed at his back, Subaru nodded. “Say it. I’m all ears.”

“Whaaat do you desire from me? As it is, I cannot refuse your request. Even if you wish for any sort of treasure. Or perhaaaaps, even if you preferred something else… such as a luxurious banquet set up for yourself. If it is to conceal the truth of the lost insignia, then I am willing to do anything.”

“Hee-hee-hee, as one would expect from a great nobleman. You really speak my language.”

With a lewd smile on his face, Subaru tenderly poked his thin chest with his elbow.

It was painful to hear the sound of his popularity falling to pieces behind him, but this had all been for the sake of preparing for this. Bearing the image of a villain, he extended both hands out. “I will ask for any reward that my heart desires! And you cannot refuse me! This is a promise between me and you. If you break it, you’ll have to swallow 1,000 needles.”

“Seems like I’d be on the briiiink of deaaath by the 100th one. Well then, it is a promise.”

“A man doesn’t go back on his word, right?!”

“I must say, that iiis quite a saying. I see. A man mustn’t make excuses. I will not go back on my word.”

It was a negotiation with both of them presenting their strong-mindedness as a man.

Believing that it was worth placing his trust in a promise that was made on top of that, Subaru proudly crossed his arms. “Then, hire me to work in this mansion.”

Compared to how long he had built it up, Subaru’s declaration was said easily, without hesitation.

The girls behind him were dumbfounded by his request. The twins’ expression changed to that of slight bewilderment, whereas Beatrice was truly disgusted, her face adorned with a frown. Emilia, especially… “I-It isn’t really for me to say, but isn’t that a bit…”

Her beautiful face was restless, an astonished expression overtaking it, and she was opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish. The fervent discomposure was peeling away at her mystical disposition, making it fade away.

Looking back at the girl, Subaru shrugged in disappointment. “No, to be frank, I knew that you wouldn’t find the joke funny a second time, Emilia-tan. However, from my experience, there was no other way but to go with a method that already worked well, so…”

“That’s not what I’m saying…! No, it’s that you want so little!” As if feeling angry for him, Emilia slammed her hands against the table and advanced on Subaru. She then jutted her finger out at him and started poking his chest repeatedly. “Listen, It’s not just the thing with Puck, okay? I’m also talking about…something different. To begin with, it’s just like when you asked me for my name back in the royal capital.”

The girl listed off the times where Subaru could’ve claimed a reward to the best of her knowledge. Emilia was aware of everything he’d done to get those rewards; she shook her head as if she truly didn’t understand. “You don’t understand just how grateful I feel. Such a… such a thing isn’t enough to repay you at all for saving my life…”

As she ended her sentence weakly, the strength behind her pokes lessened, and then she left her palm on Subaru’s chest and hung her head.

Hearing her silent lamentation, Subaru cursed his own thoughtlessness.

She had always felt indebted to him, because of how disproportionate what he’d asked for in return for saving her was.

However, the same could be said of Subaru.

Subaru had always felt indebted to her. And it was a type of debt that he could never ask from her, ever again. And then there was Puck, too.

Near the two people who were presenting their inner thoughts to each other in silence, Roswaal sneakily moved over to where Beatrice was. Well, he was actually aiming for Puck, who was beside her, in order to strike up a conversation.

“Whaaat? Did you give that boy a reward, O’ Great Spirit?”

“Yeah. He just wanted to be able to pat my fluffy body as much as he wanted. He’s a first-class lover of fluffiness,” Puck replied.

“Bubby’s?! What an awful boy, I suppose… He should be driven out at once, in fact!”

Intentionally ignoring the “Operation: Drive Subaru Out” that was somehow making needless progress, Subaru placed his hand on the delicate shoulder in front of him. She looked up at him with her wet amethyst eyes, giving him an inquisitive look, her lips quivering.

—Oh no, she’s crazy cute.

He was in danger of unconsciously going with the flow and completely giving in to his urge to snatch away her lips, but he miraculously got himself under control by beating the urge to a pulp. And then he brought out his most sincere attitude to tell her how he truly felt.

“You don’t understand, Emilia-tan. At that time, at that very moment, that was what I truly wanted from the bottom of my heart, you see?”

“—Huh?”

“At the time, I wanted to know your name. So much that I could write down that it’s a ‘serious’ thing and read the word as ‘critically important’. I was super-duper hungry, I was anxious about this new world, my feet were unsteady beneath me, I was on the verge of losing it, and I think there were a lot of things I had to obtain. That’s only if I stopped to think about it, though. —But I’m a man who won’t lie to himself.”

He had died three times, just for that.

He had done so merely for the sake of seeing the smiling face of the silver-haired girl in front of his eyes and to know her name.

At that moment, there was no greater reward he could have wished for.

“My request to Roswaal is just like that as well. To be honest, I’m completely and utterly broke! I wouldn’t really be right in the head, and my financial status wouldn’t be faring much better if I were to just trade it for temporary pleasure. So as far as I’m concerned, this is the best option, right?”

"…You could have lived here as a guest instead of working, you know?" Emilia added.

"—Why didn't I think of that?! How about it, Roswaal?!"

Upon hearing the teary-voiced retort, Subaru turned around as if he had bounced to look at Roswaal, who became his ray of hope. However, he crossed his hands in front of his face, forming the shape of a big X. "Your first request has taken effect. A man doesn't go back on his word, now doooes he?"

"Waaaaaagh! Right, that's right! A man doesn't go back on his word, huh?!"

He tearfully found his request denied because someone just had to open their big mouth earlier. Backing down reluctantly, Subaru gave up and thought about his future work life. "I really wanna go back to that moment and say, 'Take care of me!' instead."

"You know, for a moment, I thought that you were actually serious…but I guess it was just my imagination."

"And then you just give me a lower rating like that, Emilia-tan! That's kicking me while I'm down!"

Subaru realized that he had missed his chance to set up the perfect environment for a shut-in in another world because of his slip of the tongue. He had nothing to pick back up if he also lost his popularity with the beautiful girl on top of all that.

Emotionally anguished as if tears of blood were running down his face, Subaru bit his lip as he glared at Roswaal pitifully. "Anyway… That's just how it is, so. Remrin and Ramchi must be having a hell of a time taking care of this mansion, so I'd like you to give me a suitable position under them, something like a manservant."

"It iiiis true that this is a pressing issue… Though I beliiiieve it is as Lady Emilia said. Isn't iiit asking for rather little?"

Placing his hands in the sleeves of his clownish clothing, Roswaal's gentle expression darkened, showing a strained smile for once.

In response, Subaru stood up and wagged his finger at him with a "Tsk, tsk, tsk."

"I'm a super greedy guy, you know. —You know that, right? I obtained a position where I could live under the same roof as the super adorable, super beautiful girl I like, through rational means. And by being in a servant's position, I might even get blessed with chances to get lucky. There are infinite possibilities, and my heart is swelling with sooo much excitement about what might happen in the near future that it might burst!"

"…I see. It iiiis indeed as you say. It iiiis rather difficult to get to work close to the girl one likes, is it nooot? Sounds like quiiite a sweet deal for you then."

"Well, and besides…"

He stopped wagging his finger and then used it to scratch haphazardly at his black hair. Averting his eyes away from everyone else, he looked up at the ceiling and continued, "And besides, with a guy you know nothing about, you should keep him close instead of leaving him alone without knowing anything about him. Furthermore, please make sure if I can be of use to Emilia-tan, or if I am a source of danger to her."

He was declaring his belief that nothing good would come of it if he were to just leave the manor without any way to defend himself.

If he were to be honest about this, it wasn't above his expectations, and he also felt slightly bad about testing Roswaal's humanity like this.

There was no mistaking that Subaru was picking a quarrel, the type that would make Roswaal be at a loss for words if he had no idea of what Subaru was saying. However, contrary to Subaru's awkward feelings about it, he said, "Then it shall be done. —I hope we can get along well together, alriiight?"

He couldn't really get a read on what emotion was being exhibited in his different-colored eyes after that immediate reply.

2

Incidentally, Subaru was super embarrassed on the inside after unintentionally professing his love so strongly, but when he nervously turned his head to get a peek at Emilia's expression, "You're reaaally hopeless, Subaru… Is something the matter?"

He was somewhat puzzled by her calm response.

As one would expect from a beautiful girl, she was probably used to being flirted with, including people cracking jokes at her and behaving like a philanderer, so he trembled in trepidation in front of one who had so much experience.

"I'm not sure if I, have it in me to keep hitting on you, Emilia-tan."

Subaru couldn't help but sigh at all of the many difficulties in store for him.

While Subaru was feeling uneasy about the uncertain future of his life in another world, worrying about it from a more peculiar angle than one would expect, Emilia let out a quiet murmur. "How impure, wanting to work in the same workplace as girls. But I wonder which one is more of your type, Rem, or Ram?"

Emilia, who'd put a finger to her lips and inflated her imagination, had completely taken it the wrong way.

Chapter 11:
The Harmonious Post-Meal Get-Together

—The prolonged breakfast had come to an end. I thought it was the norm for everyone to go about their business as soon as breakfast ends, Subaru thought. But…

“For the time beiiing, Lady Emilia, please follow your usual schedule. And Ram, show him—Subaru—around the manor. Rem, you can follow your usual routine… But before that.”

As the master of the manor, Roswaal gave orders crisply, his posture and gestures full of dignity, though the size of his collar tended to obscure his grandeur. He then grinned widely at Subaru as if he had read his mind. “Buuut before that, you neeed to introduce yourself first. Luckily, all of the residents of the manor have gathered here.”

“That’s lucky alright…” Subaru commented. “But seriously, the number of people here is super small! There are only five people and a cat living here, excluding me!”

“Counting Bubby as a cat is extremely disrespectful, in fact.” Beatrice interrupted Subaru’s surprise, clearly unhappy with him.

Subaru raised his hand in a cumbersome manner and responded to her words. “Alright, alright,” he replied. “Excluding me, there are four people living in this mansion along with a furball and a drill… Are you happy now?”

“...I’ve heard you say that several times, but what’s that “drill” you speak of, I wonder?”

“A drill is a man’s soul, a man’s dream.”[1]

“It was stupid of Betty to ask you that, I suppose. Roswaal, is it fine for Betty to return now? She wants to relax with Bubby.”

Beatrice rubbed her eyes and turned towards Roswaal, her gestures not matching her age. In front of her was Puck, still on the dining table. He placed his hand on his hip and threw his chest out. “I’m super fluffy, yes.”

Just looking at him is kinda pleasant.

“I knooow you two aren’t veeery compatible,” said Roswaal, “but you guys are going to be working together from now on, so be a bit friendlier, please.”

“Betty has made all the possible concessions, I suppose,” replied Beatrice. “Asking for more wouldn’t leave even the head of the Mather’s family unharmed.”

Suddenly, Beatrice threatened Roswaal in a quiet tone. The sudden change in atmosphere made Subaru feel like the air in the room had become heavy. The cause was, of course, Beatrice, but the change was unnatural.

He’d felt it when he met her for the first time, but there was more to this young girl with chestnut-colored hair than met the eye.

It wasn’t just that she spoke in a sarcastic tone or the fact that she drank, it was something on a completely different level. Something was fundamentally off about her. So, he asked, “Sorry for interrupting your fun time, but what are you? You seem like you belong here, but as far as what your role is, I don’t have a clue what it could be.”

“Betty is in a bad mood at the moment, I suppose. You’d better watch your mouth, human. Betty could turn you into stone and shatter you into pieces if she so desired, in fact,” she replied with lowered brows after Subaru failed to read the mood and questioned her.

Subaru gasped at the little girl’s intimidating aura that made him almost reflexively get in a defensive position.

“Betty is the caretaker of the Forbidden Library in Roswaal’s manor.”

“Bubby?!”

However, such an atmosphere was dissipated by the comment of the grey cat who had leisurely intervened. The kitten was biting on a corner of something close to a rusk made by frying the bread's crust with sugar-like seasoning sprinkled on it.

"Sweet! Delicious! Meooow!"

"Sorry to bother you when you've lost your sanity due to the sweetness, but can you tell me about that in detai…oh, you're just so soft and fluffy." Subaru had approached Puck to question him, but his hands reflexively went towards his ears and began petting them. Puck gobbled down the rusk speedily while he petted him to his heart's content.

"Roswaal is 'somewhat' of a magician," Puck explained. "The Mathers have a long history, so there are books they don't want others to see. So, Betty is guarding the Forbidden Library according to her contract with him so that such books stay away from the public eye. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right," confirmed Beatrice. "Everything Bubby says is always right, in fact."

"Communicating becomes easy when Puck enters the frame, fluffy," added Subaru. "All are equal in front of a fuzzball, after all, fluffy."

"Your sentences are ending in fluffy," Emilia informed him.

Subaru hastily let go of Puck's ears after Emilia coldly pointed out that his sentences were ending in a funny manner. He had just proved how addictive petting could be.

The tragedy of loving a fuzzball. How ironic.

"The addictiveness of a fuzzball has backfired on me… Hey, wait!"

As Subaru was acting like a tragic character, Beatrice ignored it and fearfully reached out her hand, touching Puck's ear. The sensation surprised her, and her cute face drooped as the feeling on her fingertips sent her into a state of bliss.

Subaru gasped at how adorable she looked, her expressions now befitting her age. Puck gobbled down the rusk, not paying any mind to her fingertips playing with his ears.

Subaru turned his head away and looked at them from the corner of his eyes. “Hm-Hmph. I’m not jealous that Puck is cheating on me.”

“Stop being so cold, Subaru,” said Puck. “It’s between you and I, isn’t it, meow? I’ll throw this girl away after she gives me all the money she has.”

“Bubby, you are being so mean, in fact…but you’re so soft.”

“Oh, sorry, my lovely Betty. Of course, it is a lie. It’s obvious you are the most important to me. You, and you alone, are special.”

Puck was just a palm-sized pet cat, but he was acting like a player playing with their feelings. They both felt all fuzzy inside looking at him do his bad-guy act, but Emilia, who had placed her hands on her hips, came in between them.

She pinched Puck’s head between her fingers and picked him up, making him scream like a cat in bliss. “Meowh!”

“Puck, don’t get carried away,” Emilia chided. “And stop eating that many sweets. I won’t let you stay on my shoulder if you get really fat because of it.”

“Hahaha, are you jealous? You want to be the most important person, don’t you, Lia? Worry not, for the place where my heart returns to is always you. Even if I waver like a floating cloud during a windy day, I’ll always return to…meow, meow, meow, meow!”

The force pinching Puck’s head increased as he said his cheesy pick-up line, making him give up. She looked at the limp Puck and sighed, then begrudgingly looked at Subaru. “My child got this bad influence from you, Subaru…” lamented Emilia.

“Is it, though? Isn’t this how he naturally is? And you tamed him by doing an iron claw. I feel like I just witnessed the dark side of a Journey to the West-like household.”[2]

It’s like watching Master Triptikia and Sun Wukong from up close, he thought. Although, I guess their parent-child role did a complete 180 here. —Well, that's just how Puck usually is if the situation isn't serious. It isn't much of an issue as long as he's serious when he needs to be, though.

"But then, you were useless yesterday when you were needed… Hey, you'll end up being a useless cat who's all talk and no bite at this rate."

"Bubby is fine like that, in fact!" retorted Beatrice. "He just needs to exist and that makes everything better! The rest of the things are just a part of Bubby's charm, I suppose!"

"Your worship of him is extreme, isn't it?!" exclaimed Subaru. "That being said, "Guardian of the Forbidden Library" stimulates my nerdy mind. More about that in detail."

He held both hands in the shape of a pistol and pointed his fingers at Beatrice. She played with her drills while looking disgusted by his gesture, then spoke up softly, though she looked reluctant. "What Bubby told you is everything about it. If Betty has to spell it out for you… It is that room you entered, I suppose."

"Oh, that place filled with books."

That reminds me of the room that made me worry the floor might give out due to the large number of books in it. On the other hand, if all of them were Librorum Prohibitorum that weren't supposed to be in circulation, it would be criminal, wouldn't it?

Librorum Prohibitorum—it was a wonderful word that grabbed a man's heart, shook it, and forever remained.

Come to think of it, when he was in middle school, when he was mentally unripe and was in the middle of his youth, he referred to books that stimulated and released his young desires as Librorum Prohibitorum.

For some reason, the kendo club that Subaru belonged to boasted an overwhelmingly large number of such books. There was even a special storage room under the floor of the kendo club room in the club activity complex.

The information regarding it got leaked due to a dispute with the baseball club—during the cultural festival when students from other schools visited—and the book depository got caught up in cancel culture before graduation.

The story goes that the kendo club room was closed down because of that. The obscene literature survived, but they had no place to store them and were thus scattered all over the place.

“Come to think of it, we did our juniors dirty,” Subaru reflected. “They were passed down from one generation to another and had a rich history. They were sorted out orderly by era and genre. It’s really nostalgic…”

“Betty answered your question, but Betty feels that you are thinking of the dumbest thing in the world, and that’s making her flare up with rage, in fact.”

“Don’t let the anger consume you. Eat some small fish. Consuming calcium will make you calmer, and who knows, you might grow a bit taller. I think the height difference between Emilia-tan and I is perfect for hugging and doing stuff from love-comedy’s…”

He pretended to give the indignant Beatrice a piece of advice, dropping hints of him liking Emilia, but Emilia ignored Subaru’s fantasies and pointed her finger at something else entirely.

“Wait a minute, Subaru,” Emilia began. “Did you just say you’ve entered the Forbidden Library?”

“Yeah, I did enter it. I was on my way back to my room so I could sulk in my bed and sleep. But that drill loli had turned my room into her workplace. On top of that, she took my energy from me… It’s the shitty yakuza way.”

Subaru’s sanpaku eyes turned even sharper while complaining, but Beatrice turned away and ignored him. Emilia now turned to her to ask something. “Beatrice…you didn’t invite Subaru into the Forbidden Library, did you?”

"Not in a million years, I suppose. Why would Betty want to invite a lowlife like him? …He got the right answer to the Door Crossing, in fact."

"The elegance is slipping from your tone, my lady," teased Subaru. "Ohohohoho."

Subaru placed his hand on his mouth and started laughing elegantly, making Beatrice silently furious with him. In the background of their heartwarming conversation, Roswaal, who had been silent until then, touched his nose and exclaimed in surprise.

"It takes me a whiiile to reach the Forbidden Library if I try opening up the doors randomly, but you were able to enter it without her permission. You two must be quiiite compatible with one another."

""Haaah?!"" they both exclaimed simultaneously and turned towards Roswaal while frowning. They looked at each other, mirroring each other's movements, and started glaring. They followed the same flow and curved their lips into a pout.

"Your faces are mirror images of each other, you two," commented Emilia.

"Adorable, adorable Betty and this thing?" huffed Beatrice. "That's a bad joke, in fact."

"Same here," seconded Subaru. "I'm not into lolis to begin with. I can't laugh at it either. I wouldn't be able to laugh…"

"Why do you have to act so serious? Betty has had enough of this, I suppose! I'll leave you guys on your own, in fact!"

Beatrice had finally lost her patience with Subaru and had completely erupted after witnessing his masterful acting skill of making himself look gloomy.

She stood up, walked to the door of the dining room, and violently pushed it open.

But Subaru noticed something there. "What? Where's the hallway?" he wondered.

It couldn't be helped that he asked such a question. That's because the door was supposed to be connected to the corridor that led to the center of the manor. Instead, he saw the library behind the door; the very same library he'd visited previously.

Beatrice, who had stepped into the forest of jam-packed bookshelves, looked triumphantly at Subaru. "This is Door Crossing. Burn this noble sight into your eyes and tremble. —I don't want to see your face for a while."

The door slammed shut, and the small girl disappeared behind it. Subaru was bewildered by it, and he was surprised further when Ram opened the door again after it had been shut.

The door that had gotten violently slammed shut opened slowly. Behind it was a vast corridor that Subaru had walked through to reach the dining room. It was hard to believe it had been connected to the library a moment ago.

"I see, so her magic can connect any door in this mansion to her room," Subaru observed. "Seems perfect for a shut-in."

"You are quiiick at understanding," replied Roswaal. "Though I'm not sure what "shut-in" means."

"They are parasites that don't come out of their room except when they need to eat and bathe."

"I seeee. Then yes, Beatrice is a shut-in."

"I can hear the both of you, in fact," said Beatrice, who had creaked the door that Ram had just closed open and was peeping her face out from behind it, looking at them.

This happened right after she said she didn't want to see his face for a while. Subaru placed his hands on his hips. He moved his arms, mimicking the flapping of a bird, and hopped here and there from time to time.

"Well, well, well. What happened? What happened? You just went away quite energetically, so why are you here again? Did something happen? Did you forget something? That's quite unfortunate. Hey, how do you feel? How are you feeling now?”

The HHN (Hey, how are you feeling, now) dance exploded right in front of Beatrice.[3]

The reply to it was simple yet powerful. In short, he got blown away by Beatrice’s magical power after she had extended her palm from behind the door.

“Buon giorno!” he yelled.

Subaru got hit by an invisible mass of air, and his body, which wasn’t light in the slightest, was easily blown away. He lost his sense of direction and collided with the wall after flying over the dining table. The two maids, who had rushed there immediately, did an excellent job of keeping the pictures and furnishings on the wall in place after they had begun to shake.

As they did so, they kicked Subaru, who was lying near their feet, without mercy.

Chapter 12:
The Compatible Yet Incompatible Duo

1

Beatrice sighed after blowing Subaru away and smiled gently in satisfaction. She then looked at the palm she'd used to violently blow him away before softly gazing in Puck's direction. "You deserved it… Bubby, here."

"Alright, alright. I'll see you later, Lia."

Puck, having gotten invited by the girl, floated towards her. Upon welcoming him into her palms, the door slammed shut for good this time. The opponent's turn now over, Subaru's came up, but he was badly wounded already and didn't have any energy left to do anything.

Subaru begrudgingly looked up at the twins, who were carefully adjusting the angle of the furnishings while trampling on him. "It's obvious that furniture is higher up on your list of priorities compared to little ol' me, who isn't worth a dime, but..."

"Oh my, did you hear what he just said, Sister. He is saying something absurd."

"Yes, I heard it, Rem. We can assume how dumb he is from his words."

"Verbal abuse!" shouted Subaru. "And if it's fine now, can you guys get off?! It seems like your panties are pink and blue, too. That's the only thing I'd rate…pankration!"

The two of them had stepped on his face, interrupting his words.

""Oooh, noooo,"" said the twins in unison in an indifferent tone while they moved away.

As they watched Subaru stand up with shoe marks on his face, they held hands and brought their faces together.

“But sir…no, Subaru. You are going to be our colleague, right?”

“But sir…no, Barusu. Aren’t you going to be a servant just like us?”

“Hey, one of you turned my name into a blinding spell.”

It’s a reference that kids make in elementary or middle school once in their life, and the pink-haired one pulled it out without knowing.

But they do have a point, and that is… “So my position is that? That of a manservant?”

“It wooould be best if you follow Rem and Ram’s instructions and help them out with the work around the manor,” said Roswaal. “Are you dissatisfied?”

“If there’s something I’m dissatisfied with, it’s with myself who mixes ‘take care of me!’ up with ‘hire me!’ …but it might not be so bad! Who knows, the girl I like might fall for me if she sees me working hard!”

I feel like a man can truly be a man by working and contributing to his community.

Subaru gave Emilia a quick glance, anticipating something, but she replied to it with a vague smile. “Well, I don’t know much about that, but, best of luck?”

“Sure,” replied Subaru. “You can be rest assured now that you are in the hands of a super professional! Though I have never worked before!”

He had never worked before and had never thought of working, either. He was an idler among idlers, thus he felt proud about his remarkable progress.

But those around him didn’t get why he was being so cheerful.

“Sister, Sister. Rem was stupid to think that the work would get slightly easier."

"Rem, Rem. Ram was a fool to expect that she could slack off a bit."

"Sister, you need to learn how to sugarcoat your true feelings, alright?!" complained Subaru.

The twins did not even attempt to hide their disappointment. Subaru tried his best to defend himself, but even Emilia next to him heaved a tired sigh. He felt like his heart was going to break. His face looked really miserable, too.

"But," Emilia hastily started speaking, "from the looks of Subaru's fingers, I guess we can't blame him. He is stubborn, so I wouldn't ask him about it, but he was probably in a position where he didn't need to work."

"That line makes me seem shady if you take it out of context, you know," said Subaru.

"I'm trying hard to defend you, so don't make fun of it."

She poked Subaru's forehead and as if she were saying, "Bad boy." Not one to let such an opportunity go to waste, he grabbed her extended hand.

"Ah," exclaimed Emilia in surprise. Subaru looked at Emilia's arm and was astonished by the slimness and beauty of her fingers. It didn't look like the fingers of a working lady at all.

"Comraaade," teased Subaru.

"I reaally hate the way you pronounce it," retorted Emilia. "And we are not the same. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I'm in the care of the manor now, but I used to do everything on my own." She freed her hand, slightly pushing her chest out. "Hmph."

She's probably feeling superior to me since she can do chores. Though such childish gestures were something that made her look cute, Emilia thought she looked elegant.

"But I don't want to be treated as a useless person!" exclaimed

Subaru. "It's not like I'm incapable of doing domestic chores, I am good at some things!"

"I see, that's a bit unexpected," replied Emilia. "What are you good at? Cooking? Laundry? ...Or cleaning?"

"Sewing!"

"That's a surprise!" Emilia pouted to show that she wasn't happy with not being able to guess the answer.

It wasn't a lie or a bluff, Subaru really was good with needles. He could patiently pass the thread through the needle hole and mend things using it. It was one of his hidden skills.

"I can put buttons on things that have lost them, and I can mend things that got torn! I'm also good at…doing embroidery on accessories or clothes."

"It's hard to think of occasions where your skill could be put to use," said Emilia. "You are overly dexterous…"

I think so too, he thought. Unlike the old-fashioned household skills like cooking, laundry, or cleaning, sewing isn't that mainstream. It isn't a necessity unlike those three, which see daily use.

"I wonder what Subaru's family was thinking when they taught him that…"

"They probably weren't thinking of anything; and I didn't learn from them, I learned it on my own."

"I see?"

Emilia looked curious but Subaru dodged it with a wave of his hand. "Well, leaving that aside."

After that, Subaru turned towards the twins, pointlessly puffed up his chest, and pompously said, "Well, then. I'll leave it up to you two to decide what you want me to do since you guys have been working here much longer that I have! I will exert myself to the ut…something."

“““Utmost,””” said the three of them in unison.

“Yeah, that.”

The three of them had pointed their fingers at him and confirmed the word Subaru temporarily had trouble recalling.

Roswaal looked at the fine team play of the servants, then touched his chin and nodded in satisfaction. “Good,” he said. “It’s beautiful that you all are on good terms. Seems like there isn’t any tension between any of you, which is a great thing for an employer, wouldn’t you saaaay?”

“I feel like I can get along with them,” replied Subaru. “It’s like we have the same vibe or something? I’m definitely more compatible with them than with that loli!”

“It seems like you really didn’t like being compatible with Beatrice…” murmured Emilia pitifully, ending the long and noisy breakfast exchange with those words.

Roswaal clapped gently and drew the attention of the remaining four in attendance, and then pointed at something that looked like a picture frame hanging on the wall. Subaru followed Roswaal’s finger and looked at it, then frowned to show his confusion.

—The frame didn’t have paintings like the ones he had seen here and there in the hallway of the manor, it had a small crystal, slightly larger than a fist held within it. The crystal was giving off a mysterious, dim dark blue glow and was being gazed at by all five of them. The tall man spoke while pointing at the crystal. “Loook, it’ll be almost halfway through Water Time soooon. Let’s hurrry up… Ram and Rem: do as I told you before. Lady Emilia: do visit my room for a moment. Alright everyone, off you go.”

The harmonious breakfast had come to an end after Roswaal gave everyone their assignments.

Rem quickly began clearing the dishes from the table, and Emilia sighed melancholically, thinking about her upcoming schedule.

Roswaal walked over to Subaru, who had been left behind by the others, and tapped him on the shoulder. “Weeell then, I’ll be expecting a lot from you. Of course, I’ll pay you since I’ve hired you. You dooon’t need to worry about that.”

“I’ll ask you the details regarding the conditions of my employment later…but for now, thank you for your hospitality. Should I call you sir or something?”

“Ahaaa, you can call me Rosy if the guests aren’t around. It is somewhat refreshing being called by a nickname.”

Roswaal closed his yellow eye and winked, then waved lightly and left the dining room. A moment before leaving the room, he gestured lightly at Ram with his eyes, and the pink-haired girl nodded again and again, her face turning red as if she had been given some sort of instructions.

The twins were indifferent when it came to expressing themselves via facial or verbal means, but their nonchalant attitude crumbled away while interacting with Roswaal. The word ‘loyal dog’ crossed Subaru’s mind.

“Alright, Barusu,” said Ram.

“Oh, so you are gonna go with that.”

“Yeah, well, Barusu. Master Roswaal has instructed me to give you a tour of the manor, so kindly follow me and don’t get left behind.”

“It’s not like I’m Emilia-tan, so I’m not gonna run off or anything.”

“Su-ba-ru!!”

Emilia puffed up her cheeks at Subaru’s playful words. It felt very fresh to him when she called out his name by pronouncing each syllable separately. He then pointed his finger at her while giving her a broad smile. “It’s a harmless party joke. You would not be able to turn into a wonderful queen if you cannot even take a joke like this, Fräulein.”

“What’s fraulein…?” asked Emilia.

"It's something you need to learn along with the rest of the stuff. Life is like climbing an endless mountain without any supplies. If you are lazy about collecting the items known as knowledge in between, you'll end up dropping out at the third station without reaching the top."

Emilia got quiet and widened her eyes. It seemed like she was impressed by what Subaru had said.

Seems like the statement from a dude that dropped out of school carries a different weight.

Subaru was hurt by his own self-deprecatory thought. "Well then," he said, then glanced at Ram. "I don't want to leave, but I guess we have to. Let's go, boss."

"Yeah, let's do that, Barusu. Lady Emilia, we'll be seeing you later."

Subaru started following the girl heading towards the door after she had curtsied, her pink hair swinging here and there. Emilia looked at them. "Subaru, I need to give it my best, but…you can give it your best, too."

"What's up with that? It makes me really happy. I feel extremely motivated now. Are you a goddess?"

Subaru lightly 'curtsied' with his tracksuit and bowed, following Ram's example. He left the dining room after putting a peculiar expression on Emilia's face.

Ram, who had stopped after she was out in the hallway, turned her indifferent expression into a frown. "There's a difference between what's expected of a maid and what's expected of a manservant."

"I know, I know. But, if I were to do housekeeping, I wanted to do it with elegance and glamor. Wait, do you have a uniform for me?"

After all, it would be tasteless to start working as a servant in a tracksuit.

Of course, there's no doubt about it being the best when it comes to ease of movement but… "It's natural to long for prestigious clothing when you are sent to work in a nobleman's mansion. It might come as a surprise, but I look good in formal wear."

"I agree that clothes are important," said Ram. "Just the right clothes for you… Yes, I'm sure there are some."

"I see, I see. Then let's start with that. I am the kind of person who focuses on the aesthetics first! I start my preparations for an exam by cleaning the room so I can focus on my studies."

And then he didn't actually study after that.

Subaru gave her a thumbs up accompanied by a gleaming wide-toothed smile. Ram was looking at his entire body while lifting her fingers and muttering. "Hmmm."

It seemed like Ram was able to measure the approximate clothes size needed for Subaru just by doing that. She nodded in satisfaction and pointed in the direction of the upper floor.

"There is an anteroom for the servants upstairs. You'll find your clothes there. Considering your size, you'll fit into Frederica's, who left two months ago."

"Oooh, you left just at the right time, Frederica… Isn't she a woman, though?"

"Her size is almost equal to yours, Barusu."

"But the gender is different, right?"

Ram stopped walking and turned back, giving Subaru an icy look. She then sighed as if she were tired and touched her forehead. "You said that you wanted to do it with elegance and glamor, so I was kindly going to make your wish come true. What are you complaining about?"

"If it were Emilia-tan, it would be understandable, but who would benefit from me wearing a maid's outfit?! What would I do if it benefits me after I develop a weird kink?! There's a possibility of me developing such a kink and I don't want that!"

After entering this other world, various new kinks have been blooming vividly. If this opens a door for cross-dressing, then there would be no trace of a man named Natsuki Subaru left!

Ram reacted to Subaru's shouting by covering her ears, then looked at him breathing heavily and spoke up with a bored expression. "I can't do this without Rem. Let's go."

"It's amazing that your ability to go at your own pace surpasses mine."

I guess you need to be this unshakable to survive here.

Subaru became melancholic after realizing how high the hurdles were before his first job experience ever.

2

—Elsewhere…

"On the second floor, yes, any of the rooms on the west side…of the servant's anteroom would do. You can have any room you like. I'll leave your uniform there."

"Alright, roger that. Well, let's see…"

After getting escorted upstairs, Subaru started looking at the rooms that were candidates for temporary accommodation and where his uniform would be given.

However, the rooms will be the same inside and only the placement of the rooms will be slightly different. If that's the case, then it would be more convenient to move around if the room is closer to the stairs. With this in mind, he twisted the doorknob of his chosen room.

"Alright, I'll be having this…"

"Bubby, you are wonderful. Your fluffiness is the best. You're just so fluffy and soft, in fact."

He discovered a loli petting a kitten in the library.

Noticing Subaru's presence, the girl with vertical rolls slowly turned her gaze towards him. Subaru looked at Ram, who was standing in the corridor, and saw her shaking her head.

After that, he spoke to Beatrice, who was right in front of him, while scratching his head. "Congratulations. I bless the birth of a new Fluffist."

"Just close the door already!" yelled Beatrice.

He was blown away by a magical force and collided with the wall of the corridor once again. The door was violently slammed shut, not paying any mind to Subaru, whose eyes had rolled to the back of his head.

"Damn…you…" he cursed.

Subaru shook his head. His vision was still flickering, and he even seemed furious now. He opened the door that had just been shut. He was going to complain to the flirt inside, but… "How dare you flirt with someone else's fuzzball! Pay me the compensation, the compen…sation?"

He stepped inside while shouting, his spit flying here and there, but what he saw was a simple room with a bed and a wardrobe. There was no sign of the library that had been there before. This must be the effect of her 'Door Crossing,' he thought.

"Once Lady Beatrice hides her presence, we won't be able to know where she is. We won't be able to find her unless we open all the doors of the manor since she won't come out on her own," said Ram adamantly, as if she were telling Subaru to admit his defeat.

She patted him on the back as if to comfort him. Feeling that sensation, he decided to admit his defeat—not. "I'm really mad now. That attitude of hers that makes me seem like a bad guy is to blame!"

He shook off Ram's hand and ran down the corridor as fast as he could after turning back. Ram watched him with her eyes opened wide while he ran to the door at the end of the corridor. "This one!"

he shouted.

“So sof—?!”

“That’s amazing, Subaru.”

He was welcomed by the girl’s scream and the gray cat’s praise.

He observed the shock on Beatrice’s face caused by her door crossing getting breached again, then immediately rolled inside the library to avoid being blown away. He did a handspring followed by a headspring, a cartwheel into a roundoff, then a back handspring, and finally topped it all off with a spectacular backflip—landing right in front of the girl.

“Alright! 10 points!” praised Puck.

“You made the place very dusty!” Beatrice complained.

“It’s because you don’t clean properly! You shouldn’t bring a cat into the library to begin with! They’ll sharpen their claws using thick covers!”

“My claws have been cut short by Lia, so it isn’t an issue,” murmured Puck calmly next to Subaru and Beatrice, who were yelling at each other, but his words didn’t reach them since they were too busy arguing.

The two were exchanging shouts so loudly that it seemed as if their voices would echo throughout the manor.

Ram reached the door leading to the forbidden library a moment later. As she watched them arguing, she murmured, “Leaving aside whether you two have a good relationship or not, it appears to be true that you two are compatible.”

““—That’s not true!!””

Their combined scream that morning shook Roswaal Manor to its foundations.

Chapter 13:
The Promised Morning is Far Away

1

“Soooo, how did Subaru do?”

It was at night—the sun had already set in the western sky, replaced by a waxing crescent moon—when a secret report was being made.

The room was large, and in the center of it was a couch and table for welcoming guests. At the back was an ebony desk and a leather chair for the master of the room.

The desk was strewn with papers and quills, a still-steaming cup beside them giving off a slight, soft aroma.

It was a room in the center of the upper floor of the manor that could be judged as being an office at first glance.

Sitting in a leather chair, the one who’d kicked things off was a soft-looking man with long indigo-colored hair and blue and yellow eyes—Roswaal.

Though he’d asked it with something akin to a whisper, there was no doubt that it had reached the other party. And why wouldn’t it have? The person he was having a secret conversation with was sitting close to him. She was sitting sideways on his lap, making her petite body even smaller as she did so.

“It has been five days since that spiel…no, four and a half days. Isn’t it about tiiime you saw something?” asked Roswaal.

“Let’s see. —He’s no good.”

The one whose ears were being whispered into and was submissively allowing her pink hair to be stroked was Ram. Only her and Roswaal were in the room. Her twin sister, who was like her other half, was not there.

That was simply because it wasn't Rem, but Ram, who was Subaru's instructor. Roswaal looked surprised by her unequivocal rebuke, then broke into a fit of giggles. He even coughed a little.

"Ahaaa, I see," Roswaal said. "So he's no good."

"Barusu can't really do anything," replied Ram. "He can't cook, makes a mockery of cleaning, and starts breathing heavily when I have him do the laundry. I can't trust him with any of them."

"That's quite teeerrible for a servant, especially the last one."

Guess it can't be helped since he is of that age, Roswaal thought, smiling wryly. Ram looked up at her master as she thought about what happened over the past four days. Whenever she recalled those short, yet rich, moments, even an outsider would be able to tell that her beautiful face became strained as the mask of indifference fell away.

"It's rare to see such an expression on you," Roswaal commented. "Is he that bad?"

"He is absolutely no good," Ram replied. "It isn't that he is bad at them, it's as if he doesn't know how to do those things. He must have been brought up very well, but he lacks etiquette if that's the case."

"Oh, and I heard a bit about it that you gooot questioned a lot."

"His questions were also puzzling. I don't know what to do with him."

Ram gave examples of some of the questions to Roswaal, who had raised an eyebrow. He paid close attention to each of them.

"Hmmm." He put his hand on his chin, looking like he was pondering. "Indeed, the things Lady Emilia likes are a mystery."

"Master Roswaal, Master Roswaal, that pose of yours resembles Barusu's."

"Mmmmm, thaaat's embarrassing. It's frustrating…to think that I have fallen behind in the arena of being a freak, pervert, and oddball."

Ram sighed, trying not to be noticed by her frowning master, and was seriously thinking about what he had just said. She then changed her position in his arms and nuzzled herself closer. She fell deeper into his arms, then closed her eyes to savor his warmth, a large palm gently stroking her pink hair.

"Well then, Ram, let us get serious now. —So, what do you think about the possibility of him being a spy?" Roswaal continued without changing his tone, a smile still on his face. His question didn't specify who, but Ram knew who he was talking about.

Ram kept her eyes shut and recalled the face of a man, though not of the one whose warmth she was feeling. "I can't deny the possibility, but the chances of that are slim."

"Hmmmm, why do you think so?"

"For good or for bad…more like for bad…he stands out a lot. The way he infiltrated this manor and the things he did after that…and in the first place, he himself stands out like a sore thumb." Her answers came out in a stammering, yet coherent manner.

Despite Ram's reply coming in the negative, Roswaal smiled gently, as if he was satisfied with it. It was the smile of a master that said: I understand. And though he hadn't directed that smile at her, Ram felt her cheeks getting hot.

"Well, that makes sense. And if that's the case, then he truly is a third party with good intentions."

The chair creaked as he shifted his position on it. He had been facing his desk till now but was now facing the opposite side—towards the large window, where he could see the moon shining brightly.

He squinted his bicolored eyes, and the sight below made him smile as he spoke. “Buuut, it seems like he dooesn’t know when to give up.”

The view from the window was of the manor’s garden. It was surrounded by a slightly taller fence and trees. The garden was not visible from the outside, but it could clearly be seen from the manor’s window.

In a corner of the garden lit up by the moonlight, a silver-haired girl and a boy with black hair could be seen talking.

The boy was talking to the girl one-sidedly, as usual. But the girl listening to him didn’t look displeased at all.

“The sight makes me smile,” said Roswaal. “It’s the kind of passion I don’t have anymore.”

“It makes women happy to be approached that much,” replied Ram, even though it might have just been Roswaal talking to himself.

Upon opening her eyes, Ram noticed that her master was looking down at her from up-close.

Her lips quivered gently, her moist eyes meeting Roswaal’s. But he continued talking anyway. “Do you think highly of Subaru by any chance?”

“…He is no good, but I don’t think he’s bad. He’s not bad when it comes to learning household chores, since he’s simply not familiar with them.”

Ram’s eyes showed dissatisfaction. Roswaal laughed vaguely at her slightly cold answer, then gently brushed her cheek with the hand that had been combing through her hair.

Roswaal had answered the expectations of the girl whose eyes were fluttering in euphoria. He then quietly closed his eyes and thought about her answer.

It’s unusual for Ram to compliment someone. She did say that Subaru will improve if he gets the chance to learn things, though. It seems like the black-haired boy must be very much to their liking.

And that was making Roswaal happy.

“Considering my position, I neeed to be an obstacle for him,” muttered Roswaal while looking down at the garden with his yellow eye.

“Both of them are kids,” Ram replied, “so nothing will happen even if they are left on their own.”

“You are right about that.”

Faint laughter resonated in the office as the curtains of the window that overlooked the meeting of the girl and boy were drawn back.

—Not even the moon could see what happened in the office after that.

2

It was at the time when the moon was proudly shining in the center of the sky and Subaru was in high spirits.

He smoothed out the wrinkles on the butler suit he was wearing and looked at the window to check his appearance again.

It’s been four days since I started wearing this—long enough for me to get used to it.

“Not too shabby, not too shabby at all, me. I’m fine, I can do this. They say people look fifty percent more handsome than usual in the mirror after taking a bath. I feel like I’m experiencing that phenomenon now.”

Whether I look 50% better objectively or not is a mystery, but telling that to yourself over and over is quite important.

With the aura of a good-looking guy, he took a deep breath and stepped forward.

Stepping on the low-cut grass of the garden, he walked towards a green corner of it—a place surrounded by tall trees, garnering most of the moonlight.

There sat a young girl, surrounded by a pale light, her silver hair shimmering in the moonlight.

A pale blue glow—a phenomenon similar to the light of fireflies—was surrounding the girl, and Subaru knew what they were: spirits.

Even taking that fact in consideration, the wondrous sight had a devilish charm that would not let go of the observer's heart.

Subaru stopped and gasped. The girl, who had been whispering with her eyes closed, abruptly opened her eyes as if noticing his presence. The two amethyst jewels caught sight of him walking towards her.

Subaru's heart slightly palpated after getting spotted before he was able to call out to her. He held his hand up, trying not to show how restless he felt.

"Su-Sup. What a coincidence! Who'da thunk that we'd meet up here like this?"

"You interrupt my routine every morning, so how can you say that? And how can this be a 'coincidence'… Don't we live under the same roof?"

The flow of the conversation went from Subaru not being able to hide his restlessness to Emilia replying with a sigh, which wasn't unusual.

Subaru took a sharp breath in the face of her attitude and said, "You can do this!" to himself to raise his spirits again. "Hearing 'we live under the same roof' really makes me horny."

"You say that sometimes, but what does 'horny' mean? It sounds really, really creepy."

Emilia hugged her shoulders and shivered as if she had felt a chill. Seeing her reaction, Subaru grinned and casually sat right next to her. The distance between them was three fists, and that iffy distance between them was a sign of him being a wuss.

It seemed like Emilia had gotten used to Subaru sitting next to her like that, so she didn't point it out. Given that he had been sitting next to her during her morning routine and at meals, it was no wonder she no longer had any energy to do so.

Subaru was pumping his fist inwardly at her unspoken acceptance. Therefore, his voice henceforth naturally oozed with uncontrollable joy. "So, so, what are you doing? What are you doing?"

"You are like a child… It's just an extension of my morning routine. I can meet most of the spirits in the morning, but there are a few that I can only meet during Darksun."

Understanding what she meant, Subaru responded with a nod. Darksun was an expression of time specific to this world, which went from approximately six in the evening to six in the morning for a total of 12 hours. On the contrary, the time from six in the morning to six in the evening was called Brightsun. They were used instead of the AM and PM used in Subaru's world.

On a side note, a day was 24 hours and almost as long as it was in his world. The time when people were active was the same, so Subaru was relieved that his internal clock hadn't gotten disturbed.

The time had further classifications, but Subaru hadn't learned much about it yet. This was because his senior, who had a harsh training policy, had given more priority to teaching him about job-related skills than stuff like that. It seems like she really wants to make things easy for herself.

His bottled-up feelings about his grueling four days of training spilled out internally. But as he was doing so, Emilia continued to talk with the friends she could only talk to during Darksun.

A friend that you can only meet during the night has a bit of a bewitching ring to it.

Subaru felt weirdly embarrassed and rubbed his nose. As he continued to watch the quiet conversation between Emilia and the spirits, he muttered, “They look like will-o’-wisps.”

The spirits, who had been calm until then, began moving swiftly, surrounding Subaru’s face—soon after, he suddenly felt a sharp pain. “Buwah! Ow, ow, ow! It feels like I’m being poked with toothpicks!”

“Don’t make them angry by saying something insensitive like that!” Emilia exclaimed. “They aren’t listening to me anymore.”

Bearing an indifferent attitude towards Subaru as he was being attacked by the spirits, it seemed like Emilia shared their feelings. However, she showed her virtue when she said, “It can’t be helped,” and cast healing magic on him, still in pain after the spirits had ceased their assault.

A pale glow alleviated Subaru’s pain, and once he finished rolling around on the ground, he looked up at Emilia. As he laid there, she continued her wondrous meeting with the spirits right in front of him.

Suddenly, Subaru noticed that he was gazing at the beautiful girl and spirits in awe. This is what had made him feel embarrassed before, leading to him making a snide remark, but when he cleared his mind, it didn’t look all that special.

His embarrassment faded away into nothingness.

I just need to empty my mind and look at it nonchalantly.

“It isn’t a fun thing to watch, is it?” muttered Emilia, perhaps because it was so unusual to see Subaru being so quiet.

Subaru sat up and gently waved his hand in denial at the slightly sorry tone of the girl surrounded by spirits. “No, there’s no way I could get bored when I’m with you, Emilia-tan.”

“Wha-.”

His straightforward answer made Emilia blush and choke on her words. Subaru looked at her and recalled what he had just said, making him redden up to the tips of his ears.

He had spoken from the heart, so it just sort of came out, but he hadn't been prepared for that.

A sudden silence fell between them. Subaru was embarrassed, so he deliberately made some noise. "Aah, aah," he began. "And you see, we haven't had a chance to sit down and have a laid-back chat in a few days, right?"

"Yes, that's right. You were busy learning how to do chores around the manor. Yes, you were giving it your all… Yeah, you worked really…hard…"

"Your supportive words make me so happy and miserable. It makes me want to cry."

He'd dug his own grave with the conversation he started to change the atmosphere, but now he was tweeting his sorrow.

Subaru started drawing circles on the ground after realizing how pitiful he was. Emilia's hand wandered about in the air, an awkward look on her face as she wondered how she could comfort him.

Subaru's reputation after starting his new life as a servant a few days ago was that of someone who was good for nothing. Even if there had been some sort of favoritism and they looked past his faults, or he had bribed his higher-ups with a lot of money, things wouldn't have changed.

Cooking, laundry, and cleaning. Subaru had none of these domestic skills, which were essential for a servant at a manor, and had to acquire them.

At present, the three skills mentioned above were all C-grade.

"I only got an S when I put a button on a loose apron."

"You really are dexterous when it comes to that one thing."

"I wanted to grow up to be different and quirky rather than simple and boring.”

It’s the result of being brought up in a household where ‘anything goes.’ I think it’s crazy that I managed to develop my sewing skills in all that.

“Oh, but I am confident about my bed-making skills. I dreamed of being a hotel worker when I was in the first year of high school. I used up half of my summer vacation to practice.”

“Is that the reason why my bedsheets have been reaally tight for the past three days…?”

“I made your bed with all of the love and energy I could muster.”

What happened was that he had been so moved when he saw it that he put in a great deal of effort into making her bed, to the point where Ram got taken aback by it.

“This is the room where Emilia-tan sleeps and this is the bed she sleeps in. And these are the sheets and blanket she gets wrapped into! Muhaaa!”

The amount of energy he’d put into it was so extraordinary that Ram had to give him a time limit when it came to making Emilia’s bed.

“Oh, I see. I’m glad there’s something you can be confident in.”

Emilia smiled happily at the fact that there was a chore that Subaru could do with confidence, oblivious of what had happened during that.

Subaru kept quiet, not saying a word. He was crying tears of blood while his consciousness was being stabbed again and again. “Besides...” said Emilia to Subaru before continuing. “It’s admirable that you have been able to keep up with your other work without giving up. Ram and Rem were praising you in secret. Did you know that?”

“Are you for real! My seniors get all soft when I’m not looking at them, huh. They really are doing ‘Tsunderation’. But they aren’t doing it right if they don’t do it in front of me!”

If tsundering is done wrong, then it can be mistaken as someone being spiteful. It’s not really something I can recommend if the person on the receiving end is a noob. It would be a double-edged sword in that case.

However, Subaru wasn’t an amateur and knew what a tsundere was from his vast romantic experiences (in dating sims,) so no one stood a chance if they tsundered in front of him.

But the only thing they seem to be interested in is that perverted noble.

“Well, the only one I am interested in is Emilia-tan, so we’re even.”

He shrugged his shoulders and tried to act like it didn’t bother him, but since he was too embarrassed to say it out loud, it had only come out as a whisper. Thus, it seemed like it hadn’t reached Emilia, either. She tilted her head with a bit of a confused look on her face and then changed the topic.

“But isn’t it hard working that hard every day?”

“It’s super hard and is seriously painful. I want to choose between your arm, chest, and lap and sleep on them.”

“I see, I see.”

Emilia casually dismissed Subaru’s remarks and then proceeded to extend her slender arm, making the pale blue spirits gather around it.

It looked as if her white arm was the thing that was glowing. After witnessing that sight, Subaru was awestruck, letting out a dumb sound.

She smiled wryly at that and spoke. “You seem fine since you can still joke like that.”

“Please sleep with me if I’m about to break.”

“I’ll think about it… Saying that kind of thing scares me, so I’ll say no.”

“I failed at making you say it!!”

Subaru held his head and fell on the lawn. He sighed while feeling the coolness of the grass as he looked up at the starry sky. A sudden gust of wind shifted his short bangs, making him reflexively look up at the moon.

“—Isn’t the moon pretty?” he asked.

“Yeah, because it’s out of your reach,” Emilia replied.

“Guhah!”

“What happened?!”

Her unintentional comment shot down the expression of love he’d taken from classic literature. Emilia hastily rushed towards Subaru, who was holding his chest and moaning in pain. And then…

“Ah…” Emilia was shocked after she approached him. He was on the ground looking up at her. She looked at his chest with her amethyst eyes—and saw the hand placed there to express his pain.

His mistakes had kept piling up, and as a result, his left hand was covered in bandages.

“Oh, wait. This is lame. Effort is something you need to hide.” Subaru hid his hand behind him, trying to conceal his embarrassment. He touched his head with his right hand and stuck out his tongue as a sign of reflection. “Tee-hee.”

But Emilia’s expression stayed serious.

Subaru was wondering what to do as he waited for Emilia’s response, but then she lowered her gaze slightly and spoke. “Everyone, is really, working hard.”

To Subaru, it sounded like she was admonishing herself. Upon hearing her say that, he let out an “Aah,” understanding what she’d meant.

It wasn't just Subaru who was learning things from scratch at Roswaal Manor. Emilia was also in the middle of learning various things that a candidate to be queen needed to know.

It was the difference between a mere servant and a Queen. The level and number of things that needed to be learned by a Queen were far greater. The pressure she was feeling from all that must have been so great that it would be rude to even compare the two.

It would get tiring sometimes to carry such a heavy burden. She may have problems she can't share with others.

Emilia suddenly extended her hand towards Subaru before he was able to react. Her hand took hold of the hand of the arm he had hidden behind him and brought it in front of her eyes. She looked at his hands covered in wounds, then narrowed her eyes painfully after looking at it and asked, "Should I cast, a healing spell?"

Her question was so gentle. The warmth I felt during one of her treatments is something that can't be described with words, Subaru thought, as his new, freshly born wounds were crying out for the first time. It feels like the wounds are complaining and giving off a faint, tingling heat when I focus on them, but…

"No, it's fine. You don't need to treat them."

"Why though?"

"Hmmm, it's hard to explain, but…it's like, they are proof that I made an effort," answered Subaru with a grin as he pulled his hand away.

He clenched his worn-out fist in front of the beauty whose eyes were wide open in surprise. "It sounds unusual, but I don't dislike making an effort. If I didn't like it, then I wouldn't have trained every day. The feeling of being able to do something that you couldn't do before is a pleasant sensation."

He moved his hips with the rhythm, spun around, then stood up. Emilia panicked since it forced her to suddenly look up at him.

Then Subaru pointed his finger at her. “It’s really hard and super painful, you know? But it’s kinda enjoyable. Ram and Rem are really strict teachers, that loli gets mad at me, and Rosy doesn’t say much, so his presence is pretty much non-existent.”

“Roswaal would fly into a rage if you said that to him.”

“Fly into a rage? Who says that in this day and age…”

In response to getting interrupted, Subaru bent backward and shot himself back into his original position like a spring-loaded toy with his hand held out in front of him, putting Emilia on hold. Then he spoke. “Well, solving problems one-by-one is the way to go. There’s no way I’d survive here otherwise... And if I have to do something, it’s better to have fun doing it, anyway.”

In my original world, it was fine if I could live an easy life, but a life of peace and calm isn’t something you can just wish for here.

If that were the case, then Subaru wished for it to be fun. It was him showing his stubbornness to the existence that had unreasonably thrown him into this world.

Upon hearing Subaru’s words of determination, Emilia froze in place, as if her time had stopped. She just kept opening and closing her eyes, and then her serious expression faded away. “Yeah, you are, right. I think so, too. Aah, Subaru, you idiot.”

“Hey, what? That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting! Isn’t this the part where you fall for me again?!”

“I haven’t fallen for you toooo begin with. You are such a dummy… I am, too.”

Subaru was using his body to form the Japanese kanji for ‘life’, and the last part of her sentence had not reached him.

Emilia was smiling as if some of the pressure she’d been feeling had been lifted. Subaru was enraptured as he gazed at her smile, unable to say a single word.

She’s turning into an existence that words like ‘cute’ and ‘pretty’ can't even begin to describe. Yes, she's an… "E.R.G (Emilia-tan's Really a Goddess.)"

"I was thanking you, but you are joking around as usual."

As if a little mad, Emilia gave Subaru's forehead a little poke, making him take a few steps back with his hand held to his forehead. His gesture was somewhat passionate, and it wasn't just her imagination. She burst into delightful laughter after seeing his reaction.

"Nevertheless… I know you are working hard, but what did you do to get your hand injured that badly?"

"Oh, this one is easy. This evening, I got bit by a small animal that was playing with the kids in the village when I was helping Ram out with the groceries."

"Wasn't it a result of your hard work?!"

"It's more like the bigger wound is more eye-catching than the others…though I'm not the type to be hated by animals that much."

In his world, he wasn't the type of person that small animals would direct killing intent towards. He wouldn't have called himself a pioneer of the Fluffists if that were the case.

However, his trait, which had manifested itself involuntarily back in his world and made kids either like him or treat him lightly, was still active here.

"Those brats… They kicked, punched, and wiped their runny noses on me. That was the worst, damn it. I'll make them pay tomorrow, mark my words…"

"You look like you are good at taking care of kids, Subaru."

"That's a misunderstanding, Emilia-tan. I'm planning on taming them now and 'plucking the fruit' once they've 'ripened'. This is my Hikaru Genjification Plan."

"You don't need to act mean; you can just be honest and accept it."

Not taking him seriously, Emilia said, “Well then,” then looked up at the sky and straightened her posture. “I’ll be returning to my room. What are your plans?”

“I need to sleep next to you, so I’ll head back, too.”

“That part of your job can wait until your skills as a servant have improved.”

“Woooaah, my desires are expanding!” howled Subaru while raising both arms up in the air. Emilia looked at him with a wry smile. He then twisted his waist and turned back. “Oh, wait. If it’s fine with you, would you like to go with me to get revenge on the kids…no wait, on a date…no, to see a cute little animal?”

“You corrected yourself several times, didn’t you…? But yeah, I…” muttered Emilia, having trouble continuing her sentence.

Subaru tilted his head at her reaction. That’s not the reaction of someone who doesn’t want to go out. If that’s the case, then… “Cou-Could it be that you’re embarrassed about your friends starting rumors about us going out…or something like that?”

“I’m not going to turn someone down by saying something so horrible!” Emilia exclaimed, putting a hand on her hip to show that she was angry. It was almost as if steam was coming out of her ears. After finishing her gesture, she looked down once again. “I don’t mind, and I’m curious about small animals, too…”

“Then let’s go!”

“But I might cause you trouble if I go with you…”

“Alright then, let’s go!”

“...Are you even listening?”

“I am listening! Do you really think I’d miss a single word that comes out of your mouth?!”

“I hate you so much, Subaru!”

“Aaaaa! Aaaaa! What just happened?! IIIII caaaan’t heaaar yoouuu!!” Subaru covered his ears and ran around to block out the sound.

Emilia laughed, as if taken aback by Subaru’s boldness in immediately contradicting himself.

“Guess it can’t be helped then,” she said. “But only after I am done with my current studies and after you are done with your chores around the manor. That’s the condition.”

Having made Emilia promise to go on a date with him, Subaru clenched his fist and raised it in victory.

Seeing how easily Subaru’s mood could change, Emilia shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. “Speaking of which, why are you still dressed like that after finishing your work?”

“Oh, I just figured I hadn’t heard what you thought about it. So how is it? Doesn’t this suit me?”

“Yeah, let’s see. You seem like you are really good at your job.”

“I feel like I’ll get crushed by the burden of your expectations!”

I’ll note down here that there was a conversation like that.

3

After picking a door at random, Subaru peered inside and casually spoke. “Yooo, loli, are you getting enough sleep? You’ll stunt your growth and forever be a pipsqueak if you stay up too late, you know.”

“…He has been breaking my Door Crossing like it’s nothing,” said Beatrice in a resentful tone.

He saw a girl sitting on a wooden step ladder in the back of the library, glaring at him. She was holding a thick, halfway-open book in her hands.

“You’ll end up wearing thick glasses that look like the bottom of a glass milk bottle if you read manga at night in the dark. And you'll end up failing the entrance exam again and again of the university you want to go to."

"This incomprehensible nonsense again… Shall I turn you into stone if you act stupid, I wonder?"

"Sure, sure. I got you, I got you. Well, then go to bed already, good night." He waved his hand roughly and proceeded to close the door.

"Wait." Hearing that before he closed the door, Subaru halted his hand and looked back. He saw Beatrice leaning over a bit.

"Were you here to ask for something, I suppose?" she asked.

"Nope, not really," replied Subaru. "I figured I'd come say hi since I was on my way to bed. I was going to give up after opening three doors, but I got it right on the first try."

"This boy… What kind of a hunch does he have?"

Beatrice seemed tired as she pulled on one of her vertical rolls. Once she let go of it, it sprang back like a spring. It made Subaru's mischievous heart tingle a bit.

"Can I do that too?" he asked.

"Only Bubby is allowed to touch Betty, in fact. Betty has had enough, so go away already, I suppose."

"What's up with that attitude? You were the one who stopped me. Ha, I don't mind it at all though! I'm in a good mood, so I'll forgive you!"

After showing off how good he felt, he left the room, putting a scowl on Beatrice's face. However, as the door was about to close, he felt like he heard a tinge of loneliness in her voice. "—That has nothing to do with Betty, I suppose."

And that concerned him a bit.

"Eh, guess I gotta open the door again to ask her what's the matter.”

The other side of the opened door was different; it had turned back into a simple guest room.

He felt slightly hesitant, but he didn’t feel like walking around searching for the right door. He needed to wake up early tomorrow and finish his chores as fast as he could.

“I need to go to the village and make up some excuses to get the kids out of the picture. Wait no, I need to do some research to find a place with a good view and figure out where the flower garden is… Preparation, that’s the most important thing when it comes to all kinds of war! They say your victory or defeat is decided before the fighting starts. I can do this,” said Subaru as he puffed his nostrils, his chest full of anticipation for the next day.

He skipped towards the room designated to him: a private room for servants. And then he took off and threw away the butler suit he was wearing and quickly changed into his tracksuit.

“This fits me the most when it comes to sleeping. The only thing that worries me is that it’s the only tracksuit I have… I wonder if Rosy will cast a duplication spell on it if I ask him to.”

Now it’s a rare, one-of-a-kind item in this world. It’s pretty important since it can be worn as casual clothing, but it needs to be treated with the utmost care.

If it starts falling apart, I can just get over it by saying that clothes can’t be worn forever. It’ll be sad to lose something that reminds me of my old world, but there’s no point in looking back at things.

“And that’s why I’ll live hoping for a better tomorrow, gee-hee-hee.”

Subaru grinned vulgarly and dove into the bed he had made. After being met with softness, he crawled under the covers, completely ready to hit the hay.

However, since he was too excited for the next day, he remained wide-awake, unable to fall asleep no matter what.

“Shit, you gotta be kidding me, body! Are you going to trample on my hopes for tomorrow?! Damn it, so my greatest foe was myself…”

Jesus. Subaru glared at the ceiling and sighed. But I have a trick for sleepless nights like this.

Subaru smiled provocatively at his restless body. “Take this, my secret trick—One fluffy Puck, two fluffy Pucks!”

A first-class Fluffist can imagine the furball he wants to pet and have a virtual petting session that feels like the real thing.

The gray, fluffy cat appeared inside Subaru’s head, and it increased in number with each passing second. Eventually, Subaru’s entire body was covered in furballs. His body was taken away to the far-off utopia, Avalon, a place of bliss and non-being.

“One hundred sixty…three…fluffy…Pucks…fluffy fluffy,” muttered Subaru as his consciousness drifted into the land of dreams.

While imagining Shangri-La, he petted within his consciousness until he could pet no further—and then the lights went out.

4

It feels like my consciousness is rising to the surface from the ocean’s depths. This is the second time I’m saying this.

As Subaru opened his eyelids, the sunlight burnt his eyes. He then woke his slightly sluggish body up.

My head feels a bit groggy. Maybe I’m still a little tired. I did just start a brand-new job, so something like this had a possibility of happening…

…But today isn’t the day to be saying such weak things.

Upon waking up, Subaru, who was someone who’d wake up in a good mood, immediately began going over the promise he’d made with Emilia the night before.

"Yeah, Natsuki Subaru—you will be a man today!"

He gave a thumbs-up to no one in particular, flashed his teeth, and struck his usual pose.

It was the day of promised victory. Rising up from bed was supposed to be the beginning of his wonderful day, but its beginning was thrown on its head by the twins looking at him in surprise.

Subaru covered his face and pressed it against the blanket, then swung his body in embarrassment. "Whaat iiis uuup wiiiith youuu guuuys! Sooo you were there all along! It's embarrassing! You guys should've at least let me know you were there! Woah, woah, woooah, it's really embarrassing!"

He floundered around, trying to banish his embarrassment.

As usual, the twins' expressions didn't change much in response to Subaru.

Being pointed at and laughed at don't feel all that good, but their reaction didn't feel good, either. It's like I failed at making a joke.

"No, wait a second. That reaction would hurt even a guy like me. You guys witnessed my delicate side, so can't you be a bit more… You know what I'm trying to say, right?!"

The twins looked at each other after hearing Subaru's desperate plea.

I was expecting to hear the usual cold, indifferent words from them… Well, that doesn't sound so good, either.

It was the moment Subaru thought that when they spoke up:

"Sister, Sister, he greeted us in a very friendly manner."

"Rem, Rem, he greeted us in quite a frank manner."

Something's off. Those were the words that crossed Subaru's mind.

Their indifferent manner of speaking was the same as usual—but something felt off about it.

“Hmmm, what? Isn’t something weird? Bosses, what happened to you guys? Even if y’all are pulling a prank on me, this isn’t the right time to do it.”

While saying that, he started realizing what was off.

—It’s their eyes.

The gaze directed towards Subaru—had lost the frankness it had till last night. It was as if they were looking at a stranger.

And the nail in the coffin was…

“Sister, Sister, it seems like the guest is a little confused.”

“Rem, Rem, it seems like the guest has gone crazy.”

—Subaru was rendered speechless after being called a ‘guest’.

Despite the graceful ring it had, the words were sharp and fierce, and it tore deep into Subaru’s heart. Feeling as if the pain were real, he grabbed his chest.

I don’t get it. Their reactions are as if…

“Both of you…your joke isn’t funny. Don…’t…say…something… like…”

He wanted to block their gaze that looked at him like he was a stranger, so he immediately lifted his left hand up and covered his eyes. However, at that moment, he witnessed something decisive.

—The first aid band had disappeared from his left hand.

The tips of his fingers that had turned coarse due to doing the laundry and dishes, the back of his hand that he had cut because he wasn’t used to using knives, the bite mark on his hand left by a small animal while he was playing with the kids—all of them were gone without a trace.

Subaru had to accept reality after seeing all that. Suddenly feeling something hot deep inside his eyes, he pressed the blanket for a different reason than before.

He didn't want anyone to see his current face no matter what. He didn't want anyone else to see it.

He didn't want to cry while being looked at like a stranger by the people he loved. People he could have loved. People that he would have definitely loved.

"Why…did I go back?!" he wailed. While pressing his face against the blanket and baring his fangs, he howled with rage at the incomprehensible unreasonableness.

—At that moment, the loop that had tormented Subaru greatly consumed him into its whirl once more.

For the second time, the first day began.

Chapter 14:
Declaration of Rebellion

1

—I can hear something that sounds like a bell ringing from far away. The sound of the bell rushes fiercely towards me, then recedes like a wave, over and over again.

Subaru, who was wailing continuously, didn't realize that the painful sound in his ears was a kind of tinnitus.

He felt a terrible ache in his temples and a burning sensation deep inside his nose. However, he bit his tongue and lip and used the taste of his blood to focus on that sharp pain.

He masked out all of it—the pain that made him feel like the contents of his chest were being scooped out, the sense of loss that didn't feel real, and the rage that made him howl at the unreasonableness—with the taste of the blood in his mouth.

"Sir, you seem like you are in pain. Are you okay?"

"Sir, you seem like you have a stomachache. Did you defecate?"

I can hear two people nearby calling out to me with voices of concern. It hasn't been long, but they were voices I'd gotten used to hearing. They are sometimes noisy, sometimes annoying, sometimes relieving, and sometimes it felt like I could trust them.

—But now they sounded completely different, ringing cruelly against Subaru's eardrums.

"—Yeah, I'm fine," he replied.

He gave a short answer while under their gaze, then raised his face while keeping his eyes shut.

The reason he'd pushed the blanket against his face was because the strong emotion that had been gushing out from within had somehow disappeared behind the curtains. If he opened his eyes, they might be slightly red, a remnant of his emotions.

But they won't figure it out if I keep my eyes shut.

Subaru breathed quietly, again and again. He tried to keep his mind calm.

He had survived the initial shock of being forgotten and gradually gotten over the despair that had been tormenting him, but his heart was still crying out in pain at the sense of loss.

But even so, I can at least take my fate into my own hands and find a way to move forward.

"I'm sorry, about well, making you guys worried. It's just that, I'm still half asleep."

Subaru had a glib tongue that could spit words out like there was no tomorrow. His dry lips had produced a frivolous lie that didn't reflect what was in his heart.

"Ha-ha." Subaru faked a laugh in a husky voice. —Still, he couldn't open his eyes.

I wish the world would go back to normal while I close my eyes and stare at the darkness. I'd be okay with it if this is all just a fleeting dream and none of this is happening, though.

Aah, how wonderful, annoying, and joyous is the thought that all of this is just Roswaal's plan to trick me.

Such excuses seemed like great ideas to Subaru, and he thought they had a possibility of being true. He felt the thing blocking his chest disappearing.

Now feeling relieved thanks to his excuses, Subaru let out a small, clear sigh.

"—Yeah, that's it."

He opened his trembling eyelids, and the world in front of him that had been temporarily blurred expanded, making him see things as they were.

The twins were standing at both sides of the bed with their hands rested on it, looking at him. Ram and Rem’s familiar faces were looking at him with indifference just like before. Subaru couldn’t see any sort of emotion in them. Everything he’d built up with them until now had all but disappeared.

““Sir—?”” they said simultaneously with a confused tone of voice.

Their gaze moved and followed Subaru as he jumped out of the bed. He put some distance between them, hastened by the fear he was feeling.

“Sir, you must not move so suddenly. You still need to rest.”

“Sir, it is dangerous to move suddenly. You still need to rest properly.”

Subaru twisted reflexively and dodged the fingers that were being extended towards him. The twins’ eyes narrowed in pain, but he wasn’t in the right state of mind to notice that change.

It was an unbearable sensation.

The feeling of being treated like a stranger by someone you knew. He had experienced the same feeling just the other day, in a crowded street, in a back alley, in an abandoned house. But it was most certainly different from those times. The situation was different, the time was different, the experience was different.

It isn’t like doing it all over again with people I barely knew. This is like a one-sided do-over with the people I’d definitely formed a bond with.

He felt nauseous and wanted to puke due to how odd it felt for someone he once knew to become somebody else entirely.

The twin maids had begun to notice something peculiar about Subaru, who was staring at them with a feeling similar to fear in his trembling eyes.

A slight silence fell in the room. Neither party could act, waiting to see what the other party would do. So… “I’m sorry—I can’t do this right now.”

Subaru’s action was only a split second faster than the twins, who tried to stop him as he got ahold of the doorknob and rushed out into the hallway. While feeling the cold floor of the hallway under his feet, Subaru exhaled loudly and ran furiously, blindly rushing forward.

He didn’t know what he was running from. He didn’t know why he had to run. But he kept running. His instincts told him that they would catch up to him if he stopped.

There’s just no way I can stay in that place. An alarm is ringing loudly in my head. My heart, my instincts, and my soul are screaming that I shouldn’t stay there. I don’t know why, but they just keep screaming.

He ran past a number of similar doors, haphazardly running through the hallway as if he was going to fall miserably at any moment.

While gasping, he placed his hand on a door as if he had been led to it and opened it.

—He slipped into the forbidden library, where a large number of books were lined up on shelves.

2

Once the door closes, the library will be completely cut off from the outside world. After which, people will have to open every door in the mansion to find the one that leads here.

Breathing heavily, he rested his back against the door and sank down to the floor. Even though he had sat down, his knees were trembling. He extended his fingers towards them to stop them from shaking miserably, but even his fingers were trembling uncontrollably as if they belonged to a drunk who’d run out of alcohol.

“I might be able to perform well if I play paper sumo, ha-ha.”

His self-mockery lacked sharpness, and the dry laughter only accentuated the emptiness he was feeling.

The air in the tranquil library was filled with the smell of old paper, and it flooded Subaru’s tense heart with relief. The only comfort he could get now was by clinging to it, even though he knew it was something that wouldn’t last. He took deep breaths repeatedly, again and again. And then…

“—You are truly rude to enter without knocking.”

A taunting voice reached Subaru, who was repeatedly catching his breath like a fish out of water, from far behind the shelves.

Sitting on a wooden chair in the back of the dimly lit room was a young girl with cream-colored hair. It was Beatrice, the guardian of the Forbidden Library at Roswaal Manor—she never changed, never budged, and maintained her distance from Subaru. She closed the book in her hand with a plop. Then, with the book that was too large for her tiny body still in her hand, she asked, “How did you break the Door Crossing, I wonder… Back then, and now.”

“I’m sorry but let me stay for a bit. Please.”

He pleaded by joining both his hands and started meditating without waiting for her reply.

—I need to face reality and myself in a quiet place where nobody can disturb me.

I need to calm down. Accept reality. I am Natsuki Subaru. This is another world. I’m in Roswaal’s mansion. The names of the twins are Ram and Rem and the girl in front of me is Beatrice. And this is the forbidden library of this mansion. I can enter it quite easily due to my intuition that I’ve named ‘Door Breaker’. I don’t have a wound on my left hand. I don’t have proof of my effort. The promised morning won’t come. The promise I made. That I have to go somewhere with someone—

“Oh yeah, Emilia…”

He recalled her silver hair shimmering in the moonlight and her shy smile. He recalled the promise he'd made with the girl under the moon, with the girl that shone equally as bright as the stars in the sky.

"Beatrice."

"...You aren't adding any honorifics, I suppose."

"What's today's month and date…? Do you know what the time is?"

Subaru, who had been quiet for a while, started asking questions one-sidedly without pausing. Beatrice seemed offended by it. She looked at his behavior with annoyance and then snorted. "Time, dates, and months are meaningless to Betty since she spends her time in a library with frozen time, I suppose."

"What's your point?" Subaru asked.

"It's none of Betty's business, I suppose."

"Damn it! You are useless! I was an idiot to have expected anything from you!"

"This boy, saying whatever he wants to…"

Beatrice crinkled up her nose after hearing Subaru's unfiltered words that lacked any sort of consideration for others.

"But," Subaru continued talking to the girl who had a frown on her pretty face, "at least you didn't treat me like a creep. And you mentioned how I broke the door back then. Shit, you are confusing!"

"What's up with your noisy monologues… Betty doesn't want you to be noisy in the library. It ruins the tranquil atmosphere, I suppose," Beatrice replied with a sigh, looking fed up with his attitude as he glared at her in silence. "It was just three or four hours ago that I teased you for being ill-mannered."

"What happened to the whole the library's time is frozen thing…?"

Subaru didn't forget to jump at her mistake even though he was completely spent. After acting upon his urge, he thought about what Beatrice had just said.

—Beatrice and Subaru's encounter three or four hours ago.

What it means is that this is when I first woke up in the mansion. I had just broken the infinite hallway illusion and found the right door on my first try.

Back then, Beatrice pulled out a huge chunk of something like mental power against my will, leaving me unconscious.

When I woke up the next time, I was on the bed and Ram and Rem were there—

"So, in short, this is the second time I've woken up in the mansion."

Things made sense after Subaru was able to remember the scenes in his vague memory. That was the only day when the twin maids came together to wake him up. On top of that, the first day was the only time he'd been in a position to use the guestroom bed.

So… "I went back four days from five days in the future. Is that what it means…?"

Subaru defined his current state after looking properly into the situation he was in. He had travelled back in time once again under the guidance of some mysterious power; in a way he didn't want, on a time axis he didn't wish to be in.

He could understand what had happened, but accepting it was a different story. Subaru held his head and started thinking of the reason why he had gone back like this. He had only been going back in time for a day, which happened to be the day he had been summoned to this word. Using the experience from his three deaths, he was able to save Emilia. He thought he had escaped the loop by doing so.

In fact, the phenomenon in which I travel back in time, which I named Return by Death, hasn't happened until now, and my five days in the mansion went by very peacefully.

And now I travelled back in time out of the blue—there wasn't any sort of a sign, either.

"The conditions are different from last time, huh? I just assumed I went back in time when I died, but does it actually occur after a week…? No, if that's the case, then…"

It wouldn't explain why it chose this day to return me to. I'm not sure what sort of theory is behind me going back in time, but if I think about the times I repeated things, then there must be some set of rules that it follows. And one of those deals with the place I return to.

If Subaru hadn't escaped that loop, then he'd have woken up in front of that scar-faced grocer again.

"But in reality, the view in front of me went from a middle-aged guy with a scar to two angelic maids. But I, on the receiving end, experienced hell instead of heaven."

While saying that, Subaru touched his body here and there, making sure everything was in order. If it was following the same rule till now, then the reason why he had travelled back in time was clear. Which is—Subaru had died.

But the problem with that is… "Suppose I did die, but then how did I die? Nothing was out of the ordinary before I fell asleep. Even after I fell asleep, I never felt like I was going to die or anything."

Even if I was guided into a deep sleep, is it even possible to get killed without you knowing?

There was a possibility that he had been killed by a poisonous gas while he was asleep. But in that case, it would mean that he had been assassinated, and it didn't make any sense if there was no reason for it.

I don't think I'm worth that much at the moment at all.

"If that's the case, then perhaps it's a forced loop due to failing to meet the clear conditions."

If we consider this a game, then it's the effect of not triggering the necessary flags. But I don't know who planted them, so I have no idea what the trigger is for this one. Beating a game with unclear triggers is hard. Without caring much, I'd always end up relying on strategy sites to beat games, which was a bad aspect of the internet.

"Talking with friends, exchanging information by word of mouth, sometimes getting false info, and then moving forward step-by-step… That's how it's supposed to be done."

"I thought I heard you mumbling a while ago. Now the atmosphere has been ruined, in fact," muttered Beatrice in an unamused tone as she watched Subaru sink into a sea of thoughts.

Subaru lifted his head up and saw the girl, her lips curled as if to say she was frustrated at him for ignoring her. "Life and Death—such dull, insignificant things are only measured in human terms. All that resulted from your incessant mumbling was a bunch of delusional ramblings. It is not even something worth discussing, in fact."

The girl shrugged her shoulders and brushed him off dismissively. Subaru stood up, somewhat relieved by her unchanging hostility towards him.

He brushed the dust off his bottom and reached for the doorknob, but then heard a voice from behind. "You are going, I suppose?"

"I have something to confirm," he replied. "I'll do the sulking after I'm done with that. Thanks for the help."

"I didn't do anything… Hurry up and leave. I need to shift the door again." Her tone had no sign of gentleness, but it felt quite pleasant for Subaru now.

Beatrice hadn't intended on doing so, but Subaru felt like her words had given him the push he needed to take a step forward. He turned the doorknob and took a step into the cold breeze blowing his way. The wind jostled his short bangs, and his eyes hurt a little, so he shielded them with an arm. After the wind died down, he felt the grass under his bare feet—and the thing that came into his view was…

“Ah, she really is beautiful.”

My heart has been beating out of my chest ever since the silver-haired girl panting in the garden came into my view.

How very thoughtful of her, Subaru commented sarcastically at the cocky girl internally. And then…

“Subaru!”

Upon noticing him, the girl widened her amethyst eyes and rushed towards him without a second to lose. The word that spilled from her lips made up of three syllables and rang like a silver bell made Subaru’s heart tingle no matter how many times he heard it.

Naturally, Subaru’s legs gravitated towards the girl rushing his way. They were now facing each other, and the girl lowered her eyes in relief after looking his whole body up and down. However, she quickly regained her composure and straightened her posture.

“Hey, you made me worry. Rem and Ram were in a panic searching for you all over the manor, saying you had disappeared not too long after you woke up.”

“Mm, sorry. I got caught by Beatrice for a bit.”

“Again? I heard she pulled a prank on you not too long ago…”

Subaru almost reached his hand out at Emilia involuntarily at the sight of her beauty. She was leaning towards him in a concerned manner, but he restrained his weak heart.

If I do this here, it would be far too thoughtless of me. It would mean that me disturbing the tranquility of Beatrice’s room was meaningless. My objective wasn’t just to frame her.

Subaru could only respond to Emilia’s sorrowful face with a vague smile. Despite his uncharacteristic attitude, she was somewhat distant and didn’t press him.

It was obvious since there was no way a girl who had only spent less than an hour with Subaru would know that it was uncharacteristic of the current Subaru to do so.

There is an unfillable gap of four days between her and I. There are obviously four days that only I know of.

“It seems as if my thoughts are being influenced by extraterrestrials,” Subaru commented.

“Extra, terrestrials…?” Emilia asked. “What, what does that mean?”

“It just means the poet in me got a little too carried away. Leaving that aside, well, I’m glad you’re safe.”

A skirt above the knees and black knee socks. It was a sporty style with black as the base color; it was the same as the one that had delighted him on the first day.

Naturally, the body beneath her outfit made it through the whole loot house fiasco without getting a scratch on it.

“‘Body beneath her outfit’... The thought of that really gets me going, if you know what I mean.”

“Thank you for saving me… That’s what I wanted to say, but I reaaally don’t like those eyes.”

Being glared at by Emilia, Subaru was able to put on a natural wry smile.

His condition was returning to normal, albeit gradually.

I need to rev up the gears, lick my lips, and get off my ass and move forward. Come to think of it, I am a lucky guy. I didn’t start over from the grocer this time. There’s no dying a dog’s death flag by the hands of Ton-Chin-Kan, and neither is there starting from the point where Emilia’s likability for me is at its lowest because I said something stupid to her. Elsa’s gutting festival end is also out of the equation. After overcoming the battle in the loot house and sharing a life and death situation together, we must have developed a passionate, fiery bond that no one can interfere with. Though only a tiny flame now, it won't take much for it to instantly burst into an enormous blaze.

"I am a positive thinker."

And so, looking back at things with a positive outlook made the current situation feel like an opportunity.

Unlike last time, in that loot house where I had to make it through an absolute life or death crisis, there is nothing at stake this time until I come across the direct cause of this loop.

In other words, all Subaru had to do was calmly follow the route that he had already experienced and modify it so that it became his ideal route. By taking the same steps as before, he'd be able to make the promise of that moonlit night.

—If that's the case, then how much more promising would the promise of the moonlit night be if I took a far better route?

"Ha, this time I am at the climax from the start," Subaru said.

"Seems like you are getting pumped up, but is your body fine?" Emilia asked.

"Hm? Oh yeah, I am in my super dooper best condition. I am a little short on blood, my life force has been taken away from me, my mental power and physical strength were greatly drained when I woke up, and I feel like my mind was beaten with a bat, but I'm fine!"

"Isn't that called being wounded all over?"

"A pinch is an opportunity, and a baseball game only really starts when there are two outs in the ninth inning and you're the last one up to bat."

Subaru snapped his fingers and gave a thumbs up. In the face of his attitude, Emilia relaxed her shoulders as if her worries had melted away.

"Anyway, it's fine if you are well. Well, do you want to go back inside? I've got a bit of business to attend to here, so I'm staying."

"Oh, talk time with the spirits, right? I won't disturb you, so can I stay? Wake up Puck, too. I want to pet him in that state."

"I don't mind, but you really shouldn't interrupt, alright? Since it isn't a game." Emilia tilted her head at Subaru as he wiggled his fingers, telling him not to interrupt her like she was speaking to a child.

Subaru found her elder sister-like gesture endearing—lighting the fire of determination up in his heart.

"Alright then, let's go, let's go. Time is limited and the world is vast. And mine and Emilia-tan's has just begun."

"That's right… What? What did you just say? Where did 'Emilia-tan' come from?"

Although Emilia objected, she said, "It's alright, it's alright." Subaru then pushed on her back and led her to the usual place. He knew she would lose her will to correct him after he called out to her like that. And even that was one of the bonds that had been formed during the four days that had been lost.

"—I'll take it back," Subaru murmured as he followed the back of the girl who was moving deeper into the garden with a disgruntled look. He stopped and looked at the silver-haired girl as she moved away, then gazed towards the sky.

—I can see the despicable sun rising, still low in the eastern sky.

I gotta do this all over again. And I don't mind one bit as long as I can make it to the time of the promise. It'd be great if I could see the sunrise with the girl I made a promise with, with the girl that looks good under the moon.

—I have time, and I know the answer.

"I don't know who's harassing me, but I'll take everything back and make you cry. Never underestimate a modern teenager's temper."

He clenched his fist against the sky and declared war on an unknown entity. It was a clear declaration of rebellion for the first time since he had come to this world, against the being that had thrown him into the loop and had summoned him here.

The second loop, and the battle to get past the week at Roswaal Manor and see where those days would take him, began. In order to fulfill the promise made that night—

“Bring it on, oh inevitable fate!”

Chapter 15:
The Second Misjudgement and a Betrayal of Expectations

1

The rising sun set things into motion and the second first day in Roswaal Manor began.

I just need to watch the sun rise and set for five days. And I obviously need to follow the flow of the previous loop as much as I can. That was the policy Subaru had taken.

True to his determination in the garden, Subaru intended on fulfilling the pre-loop promise he'd made with Emilia. In order to do so, he had to make it to that moonlit night again and make that promise with her.

There was one conclusion that could more or less be established as a general rule in loop-style stories: if you follow the same route, the story will end up in the same place. This was only natural since it would follow the same sequence of events as the previous one. The thoughts and actions of those involved would overlap, resulting in the same end result.

What Subaru cared about was changing the end result alone into a future he desired, as well as doing everything that happened in between again to create the same memories. In other words, his ultimate goal was to get the most out of the loop.

By making use of quick save and load, let's make the conclusion more to my liking. Such was the noble, yet somewhat evil, plan Subaru had, but… "—It seems like, things took a turn for the worse for some reason," he complained listlessly, blowing bubbles as he sank into the tub.

Everything had been going against Subaru's expectations from day one.

Subaru looked back on his day while floating in the tub with his arms and legs spread out.

The morning filled with determination and the great tragedy that followed with tremendous momentum.

Right after the morning routine with Emilia, Subaru had secretly made up his mind to follow the steps of the previous loop.

To be honest, I don't think I was able to trace the details of what I had said in the spur of the moment, but the general flow of the conversation must have been the same as last time. The right to pet Puck, Emilia's nickname, and the first interaction with Roswaal. And knowing the value of the insignia and Emilia's status.

I'm not sure if I was able to present my reactions to them naturally in between, but I want to praise myself for doing it well. I feel like giving myself a star and saying, "You did a great job."

"If I had to grade it, the result would be pretty pathetic though, so I'll pass on that."

Leaving aside the criticism of his acting, things were going according to Subaru's plans, at least a little.

After that, the topic naturally shifted to Subaru's reward, and just like last time, he changed his class from 'Shut-in from Another World' to 'Apprentice Servant of a Perverted Nobleman.'

What followed was Ram being appointed as his instructor, and then his first day of work began after he was shown around the manor. —Things took a strange turn from here.

"I don't know why, but it's different from last time. I felt like I was already prepared for everything, too… I was totally gonna go all 'I learned the answer to this question in my Shinken classes!'" muttered Subaru as he poked his head out of the bathtub, resting his chin on the edge of it.

While his entire body was getting warmed up, he could feel his joints aching as the memories came back to him. What made Subaru have second thoughts about his policy of following the actions he took in the previous loop as closely as possible was the nature of the work Ram had assigned him. He had to do things like kitchen work, basic room cleaning, and sometimes washing and folding clothes. The tasks were the same as the previous loop's, but…

"The work content had become much more difficult…"

I should simply say that the amount and quality of work I was entrusted with had both increased. If I had to put it in a bad way, then the amount of work I had been forced to do had increased.

"I was exhausted with the work last time, but it was also hard this time… Damn it, I thought it'd be a bit easier to do since it was the same stuff as before."

Subaru complained about the unexpectedly harsh situation while at the same time concluding inwardly that his situation wasn't all that great.

This was the result of trying to follow the previous loop to a T. If the content had changed so much from day one, then there was no way he could match the flow of the second day onwards with the previous loop's.

On one hand, he thought he didn't need to worry about the small differences, but on the other, he feared the possibility of such small changes accumulating and creating a huge change at the end.

"Especially in this case since I don't know why I went back…"

The situation this time was that I had gone to bed normally, but when I woke up, I realized I went back in time... Thinking of a countermeasure this time is a pain since, unlike the last time I died and went back, it's not as clear since I don't even know why I went back.

"I wonder if I can trust my memory if things are this different…?" Subaru couldn't help but whine, then sank into the warm water to regain his composure.

He then recalled the immensely rich day when he first met Emilia in the royal capital. Although Subaru had taken a different path each time when it came to the finer details, the main events that occurred each time were the same.

I won't be able to tell if I messed up until I miss a big event. One such event that had left a lasting impression on Subaru recently, besides his first day here, was his promise with Emilia.

As long as I can get to it, I'll be able to do the same things as last time. And after I do that, all I have to do is figure out what happened after that.

His thoughts, which he had been unable to formulate during his hectic workday, somehow managed to come together in the solitude of the bathroom, allowing him to create a firm course of action. Naturally, Subaru noticed how good he was feeling in the warm water, but due to running out of air, he emerged from its embrace. After emerging, he coughed out the water in his lungs and took a deep breath while feeling the cool air on his skin, but then regretted doing so since—

"—Hey, may I accompany you?"

Right in front of Subaru's eyes was a naked nobleman with a hand on his hip. A cool breeze blew between his legs, reaching him. Naturally, since they were in the bathroom, the tall man was naked. Whether it was just how noblemen were, or because it was only natural to do in a bathroom, he was buck naked and wasn't even trying to hide his Excalibur. He was standing there at an arm's length, looking down at Subaru with his Excalibur swaying in the wind. It feels like a penis is looking down at me, which feels pretty damn humiliating.

"It's all reserved. I refuse."

"It's a facility in my mansion, so is it not myyy property? I'll dooo as I wish."

“Then don’t ask. You can take a bath on your own.”

“Oh, that’s harsh. And youuu don’t seem to understand. This bath is indeeeed my property, but…” Roswaal knelt and got closer to Subaru, who was looking up at him with disgust from inside the tub, and then extended his arm and gently pulled the vulnerable Subaru’s chin up. “Would iiit not also be correct to say that you are my property too since you are my servant?”

Chomp

“You didn’t hesitate!”

Subaru took a big bite of the unpleasant fingertip holding his chin, making Roswaal yelp, then backstroked away from him.

The bathtub is half the size of a twenty-five-meter pool. The huge, pointless, and spacious bathtub is lame, and it shows off that nobleman’s taste for indulgence, but it’s a pretty cool place where you can feel like a king while soaking in the tub alone.

Thus, Subaru’s bath time after work had been a time of respite for him all throughout the previous loop, but… “An unexpected event again…” he muttered as he did a backward turn inside the tub. As his back drifted on the surface of the water, he curled himself into a small ball by pulling his knees in, executing a special technique he’d named the Warm Water Coconut Technique.

He let himself become one with the waves, as if he’d become an inorganic object, and started thinking as he stared into the hot water.

In the last four days, there hadn’t been a single occasion where I had to bathe with Roswaal. Above all, Roswaal was extremely busy during the last loop, and I almost never had a chance to interact with him while I was in the manor.

It seemed like Ram and Rem were meeting him on a regular basis, but as for Subaru, he could count the number of times he’d interacted with him after the first day on one hand, excluding meals.

I haven't changed my routine of taking long baths to relax after a long day of work, so I guess that means he's the one who's changed.

"...Is thaaat, fun?" Roswaal asked.

"I'm pretending to be like the Coconut Boss, a tropical fruit and a lethal weapon. It's also known as the drifting killer of the beach. Despite its idyllic appearance, it can fall straight down from above the heads of unwary tourists, right on the back of the head."

"You really are good when it comes to babbling… Oh excuse me, I'll be occupying the space next to you."

Roswaal sat next to the floating Subaru, sank into the bathtub, and let out a long sigh. It went without saying that taking a hot bath was a universal pleasure. Subaru started putting some distance between him and the large, overly thin man that had drawn close to him, then stretched his body without a care in the world.

"Well then, Master. Isn't it a bit late to be taking a bath?"

"I've been a little busy with work, you seeee. It got laaate while I was dealing with it. Buuut, I'm glad I got the chance to talk with you like this. How was your first day?"

"It was productive, if anything. The muscles all over my body wanna do pillow talk. Wanna listen? I'm sure they'll whisper their woes into your ears until morning."

"It's a tempting proposal, buuuut my bed has already been reserved for the night. Maybe another time."

He started talking about it like it was nothing. "Damn it," Subaru cursed in frustration at his inability to do anything.

Even Subaru could guess that the relationship between the nobleman in front of his eyes and the twin maids was beyond shady, and it was an undeniable fact that they had such a relationship. Although Subaru was only interested in Emilia, and actually took it seriously by not showing interest in other women, he didn't have some warped sense of pleasure at the sight of two pretty girls becoming someone else's like, "Hee-hee, this kinda feels like being cuckholded!”

But he couldn’t even be mature about it and say, “Please make them happy no matter what!” All Subaru could do was envy him.

“Oh yeah, are Ram and Rem doooing well? They’ve been working at the manor for a long time, so I’m sure they know how to treat their juniors.”

Roswaal mentioned the names of the girls Subaru was thinking about, whether he was aware of Subaru’s inner thoughts or not.

I feel like Roswaal is playing me like a fiddle, but… “Yeah,” Subaru said with a nod before continuing. “Not so well with Remrin, but I’m getting along with Ramchi. Rather, isn’t Ramchi too unaware of social boundaries? She’s been treating me the same way since I was a guest.”

“It’s fiiine, Rem will assist her in the things she lacks. Sisters should help each other. Both of them are doing really well in that regard.”

“From what I have heard, Rem is the one who helps out with everything, and that Ram is the inferior version.”

There’s a clear distinction between the sisters when it comes to who was better in every household chore. The elder sister lags a step or two behind the younger sister in all of the skills. If you think about it normally, it’d totally end up making her develop a crazy inferiority complex, but... “But I asked her about it, and she immediately answered that she was the better one since she was older. That kind of brazenness scared me.”

“If we were to talk about brazenness, then you are also quiiite something… But I see. So, she answered like that. That’s really…”

Roswaal shook his head sentimentally and leered at Subaru. Being stared at by his emotionless, heterochromatic eyes made him feel like his thoughts were being read by them, so he turned his body away slightly. And then…

“Being nosy aaand unreserved. Thaaat’s a good thing.”

"This isn't something I should be praised for, yet I'm being praised for it. It feels kinda strange! I take everything literally, so be careful if you're being sarcastic, alright? I'm the kinda guy that goes home when the teacher shouts at me to go home."

Natsuki Subaru was the kind of guy who would stir things up and then leave. He had a solitary nature and was born to be alone.

Roswaal let out a little chuckle at Subaru's words. "School, I seeee," he muttered, then closed one of his eyes. "I'm not being sarcastic or anything. I truly believe it to be a gooood thing. Siiince those two live in their own little world, something might change if someone stiiired things up a bit from the outside."

"Is that sooo."

"Thaaat's how it is."

There the two were, neck-deep in the bathtub, facing each other and exchanging sighs while feeling the warm, relaxing sensation, and sharing in their admiration for it. But then Subaru suddenly raised his eyebrows, as if he had just thought of something. "Hey, Rosy. I have a question. Can you reply with an answer?"

"I'm nooot used to nicknames, but it makes me happy to have one. And you have a question? Well, if it iiis something I can answer using my broad and deep knowledge, then I don't mind answering it after giving it some deep thought."

"It's my first time hearing a guy say, 'I know a lot' in such a roundabout way… Leaving that aside, how does this bath work?"

Subaru knocked on the bottom of the bathtub and asked the question that had been on his mind for a long time. The tub that Subaru and Roswaal were in was made of stone. It was polished and smooth to the touch, and while it looked a little rough, it wasn't. The bath was located in a part of the basement, and the bathing area was unisex.

However, the hot water gets exchanged each time someone uses the bath, so going in after Emilia and drinking the bathwater won't give me any sort of satisfaction.

“It… It’s not like I actually drank it. I noticed it before drinking it.”

“Your adventurous nature neeever ceases to amaze me. Is iiit because you are young…? But then, I wonder if that idea would have occurred to me when I was young?”

Roswaal looked distant as he thought of the past, and after pondering for a few moments, he returned to reality. “Anyway, the answer is simple. There is a layer of magic crystals of the fire element beneath the tub. When it’s time to take a bath, mana activates the crystals, which heat the water. The same mechanism is used in the kitchen toooo, no?”

“Yeah, so the kettle and the other things follow the same principle. No, like there weren’t any gas stoves or induction heaters, so I was wondering how things were done from time to time.”

While Ram and Rem were handling things quickly, Subaru was in the background, timidly peeling a carrot-like vegetable.

But then I have no idea how the whole mana activation thing that he just casually explained to me works, and as long as I don't know how it works, I won't be able to help with the cooking or warming up the bath.

"Hey, can you do any of that mana hocus pocus if you aren't a magic user?"

"Thaaat isn't the case. Every living thing has a gate. Even animals and plants are no exceeeption. If this wasn't the case, then our civilization that relies on magic crystals wouldn't haaave developed to thiiis extent."

Subaru silently showed his lack of understanding at the appearance of the new word. Roswaal laughed at his sulky childlike attitude and started explaining. "The way you interact with spirits and what you did at breakfast this morning make you a biiit mysteriously out of touch with what is considered normal. Ram was also complaining about it, you knooow?"

"Huuuh, whaaat, reaaally? She was talking behind my back? That's really sinister. Oh nooo."

"She waaas covering up for you as much as she was complaining, and that's pretty rare."

"I was thinking bad about her, but she was just being a tsundere! I'm sorry, Boss!"

It's her growing soft on me, just like Emilia told me in the previous loop. But she's like falling for me on the first day, so isn't she a bit too easy to get as a heroine? I'm strangely concerned for her even though I never viewed her as a love interest to begin with.

"Hm." Roswaal touched his jaw and sighed while looking at Subaru who was shouting. "Alright. I'll give you a lecture heeere. You are a little ignorant, so let me teach you what it means to be a magic user."

"Hold on there buddy, I can't unhear that now. Are you saying that while knowing that I'm the guy who lived next door to Kawasaki, who was unrivaled when it came to fighting, and was no doubt the manliest of men, and whose knowledge and looks were in a different dimension, and who'd receive barrages of fancy words praising his greatness?"

"Who is this Kawasaki?"

"An old classmate of mine who's four grades ahead of me. His fiancée left him recently, near their wedding date due to the pre-wedding blues, and now he's heartbroken. Such a wonderful thing."

Although Roswaal didn't understand what Subaru meant, he must have sensed that it was something worthless, so he casually ignored what he was saying about Kawasaki and continued his lecture.

"Weeell then, leeet us start from the basics. You certainly know about Gates, don't you?"

"No, even if you start off with something like that as if I'm supposed to know it, the natural response from a person who doesn't know what it is would be like, 'What's that…?'"

"Your tooone dropped suddenly. So, you don't even know about Gates… If I had to put it mildly, it would be like, 'Huh? No cap?'"

"Did I use it correctly?" Roswaal asked Subaru to grade his usage of 'No cap' and Subaru replied with a thumbs up to show that he had scored an A, then they went for a high-five.

They pointed a finger at each other, as if saying 'Eyyyy', confirming that it had been used properly.

They then continued with the lecture.

"So, so, what is a Gate exactly? What happens if you have that, and everything is like 'who are you now?!' Shit, I'm getting high!"

"To put it simply, a Gate is a doorway that allows mana to pass in and out of your body. You absorb mana through the gate, and you release the mana through the gate. Whether you are going to utilize mana or store mana, it is essential."

"Gotcha. So it's like some kind of MP faucet…"

Roswaal's simple explanation made sense to Subaru.

I've heard the word 'Gate' a couple of times before, and it was affirmed that it was approximately what I had imagined it to be, so that means—

"If everyone has a gate, it means I have one too, right?"

"Well, of cooourse you have one, as long as you are sure that you are a human being. Are you human?"

"I haven't seen a more human-like human than me! —Puny and weak… An ordinary human."

"Well isn't thaaat a cool line? Thooough it doesn't suit the situation."

At least, it wasn't something a man should say to another man in the bathroom while buck naked.

But Subaru didn't care since this was possibly the second happiest he'd felt since getting summoned to this world after obtaining that information. He felt like his heart was going to burst due to the immense excitement he was feeling.

"Of course, meeting Emilia-tan was the happiest thing, but this one is also pretty amazing! So, I can finally become the magician I'd always dreamt about… I thought I had to wait 13 more years!"

"It's true that you need time to get good, but…thirteen years is too much, dooon't you think?"

"It's just a figure of speech, and the magicians I know of turn into one automatically on their birthday. Though that title is within my reach!"

If I still felt the same as I did before getting summoned into this world, then that would have been my fate, but here I have a girl that I am interested in who I can approach with my passionate heart burning with love.

I can say this now: This is why I was summoned here.

“I’ll just go in and pew pew and graduate—that’s the ending!”

“I’m happy you can get that excited about the topic of magic users, but even if you have a Gate, talent still plays quite a big role, you seeee. Though I know I’m just boaaasting, not many people are blessed wiiith as much talent as I from birth, you know?”

Beep!

Subaru heard the sound of a flag being established.

Roswaal was speaking confidently, but little did he know that the buck-naked man floating in the tub in front of him was the ‘Invited One’ that got summoned from another world. Subaru was no good when it came to strength, no good when it came to knowledge, and his luck was zero, or rather, in the negative, but a new hope appeared for him now.

—And that’s, magic.

Subaru, feeling really sure about it for some reason, clenched his fists. And, unable to resist the urge, he swam towards Roswaal. “Hey, hey, Rosy. Magic, magic, let’s talk about magic. I can feel it in my bones. There’s no way I’m missing this big wave!”

“Is that sooo?” Let us continue then. Magic has four basic elements. Do youuu know what they are?”

“I dooon’t.”

“Ah-ha, pointless, purposeless, and innocent ignorance. How wonderful. I’m in a good mood, so I’ll explain. The four elements are: fire, water, wind, and earth. Did you get thaaat?”

“All clear! And now continue, pretty please.”

Though neither of them had drunk any alcohol, they were drunk on the mood and on a high. Roswaal, in a good mood due to being relied upon, nodded, then spoke. “The fire element is related to heat. The water element is related to life and healing. The wind element is related to the divine protections outside the bodies of living things. The divine protections within the body are related to the earth element. They are mostly divided into these four, aaaand on top of that, if a normal person has an affinity for one of them, it's considered good. Oh, and as a side nooote, I have an affinity for all four, you seeee."

"Woah, what a cocky bastard! But we won't be able to move forward if I get bothered by that, so I'll just pay you some lip service! Oh yeah baby, so amazing, fuck me, and that's all she wrote, folks! Now bring on the rest of the lecture! So, is there a way to find out your element?!"

Roswaal nodded magnanimously. "Ha-haa," he laughed and smiled gleefully at Subaru, who was splashing his hands in the water like he had some sort of plan in mind, then extended his palm. "Ooof course. When you are a magic user of my level, you can teeell with a mere touch. Well, in reality, I neeeed to enter the Gate itself to check."

"You serious?! No cap?! Woah, it's here! My expectations are through the roof! Come on, cop a feel and tell me all about it. Tell me about what, you say? About me!"

Subaru, forgetting that they were both naked, inched closer, wagging an invisible tail quickly enough to leave an afterimage. Roswaal looked at him as if he was looking at an untrained dog and smiled, then placed his palm on his forehead.

"Alright, now please give me a moooment. Oh, and do tell me if you feel an itch somewhere."

"My ass feels itchy! But I'll scratch it myself! I'll save you the effort, so just focus on finding out my element! Woaaah, my heart is shaking with excitement!"

I want to forget all my worries for the time being and think about the wonder that lies ahead. I have hope, I have a dream, and I have a sense of certainty.

—That magic is going to be my fangs in the world I'd gotten summoned into.

Subaru wore a twisted smile, his sanpaku eyes glowing and making him seem belligerent. He waited for the result as his eyes glowed brightly. And then…

"—Alllright, I gooot it."

"Finally, I was waiting. What could it be, what could it be. Is it fire, reflecting my fiery passion? Or is it water, reflecting how cool and levelheaded I am? Or is it wind, which blows through a grassland in a cool and fresh manner like my temperament? No, no. Maybe my nice-guy nature that likes to take care of younger people and is easygoing and reliable came out, so my element might be earth, I guess?"

"Yeah, it's Yin."

"All rejected?!" Subaru reflexively exclaimed, as if he'd been diagnosed with a bad disease, not believing what he was hearing. And he wasn't acting, either. He truly was disappointed.

Roswaal opened his mouth slowly and spoke. "I have no doubt that iiiit is indeed Yin. Your connection with the other four elements is raaather weak, though that is pretty raaare."

"What the heck is Yin, anyways? Aren't there only four classifications? This has gotta be a classification error or something!"

"I didn't tell you this, but aside from the four main elements, there are the elements of Yang and Yin as well. Howeeever, as there aren't many people who have affinities for them, I decided to omit them from my explanation."

It seems like I'm one of the rare few, huh.

After hearing about it, his slightly panicking mind started to calm down.

Yeah, it's a super rare element—which means… "I'm sure it's a somewhat amazing element, right? Like it's something that only appears once every 5000 years?! Like you can use magic that people with other magic affinities can't use?!"

"Let's seee, Yin Magic is famous for...blocking an opponent's sight, cutting off sound, and slowing others down—those are the kind of spells that can be used, I suppoose."

"It specializes in debuffs?!"

I was expecting to be able to use some super destructive magic, or to be able to drag my enemies into a realm of darkness and rip them to shreds, or something powerful like that.

Judging from the way Roswaal was talking, it seemed like he really was feeling bad for him since he was taking his time to explain interference and debuff skills to him.

I wasn't given strength, intelligence, or any cheat skills… "And my element specializes in debuffs…"

"Byyy the way, you don't seem to have any talent for magic at all. For instance, if I'm a 10, the highest you can reach is 4."

"That's the last thing I wanted to hear! There's no God or Buddha in this world anymore!"

Subaru splashed the warm water violently and made a desperate pose. Roswaal looked at Subaru, who was floating on the surface of the water with his arms stretch out, with pity. However, Subaru, who was seriously disappointed, didn't feel like coming up with a witty comeback.

Roswaal still tried to cheer Subaru up, nonetheless.

"There, there. Yin-type magic can be handy, too. You can turn off people's sense of sight when you don't want to be seen, and you can stop sound from getting out if you don't want something to be heard."

"I see, so it's meant for holding secret talks, or rather, secret meetings. This is good, ha-ha-ha!" Subaru replied as he got up and started patting Roswaal's shoulder. And… "...Is that…cool?"

"Leaving aside it being cool or lame, girls who want to hold a secret meeting would suuurely find it useful. It all depeeends on how you use it. Either way, you are cuuuurently unable to wield it."

"That's right. Magic, magic I see… Even if debuffs are its specialty, not using it would be a waste. Shit, what should I do?"

Although thinking about it was making Subaru feel troubled, Roswaal made it sound as if it was no problem at all. "If you want to use it, then you can leaaarn it from someone. Luckily for you, we have a specialist of Yin Magic here."

"Oh yeah! That was an option! I don't even care about the type of magic and such anymore! As long as I have an excuse to learn magic, I don't care if I'll be able to use it or not! In other words!"

He emerged from the water, splitting it as he pointed one hand towards the ceiling and placed the other on his hip. He then jumped out in the nude, splashing water everywhere, and while Roswaal was looking at him, he struck a pose.

"I'll learn magic from the girl I like, yo. She can hold my hands, yo, feel my legs, yo, and grab my waist during the lesson, yo. It'll be a lesson with many such amazing options after I get off work, yo. And then we can sail towards the future together and eventually get visited by a stork, yo! Yippee ki-yay, yo!"

He decided his future plans with an impromptu rap.

If this is the case, then it's already decided. It's time to immediately act upon it.

His original goal of doing the previous loop over again had already somehow disappeared into the recesses of his mind. However, a wrench was soon thrown into his plans.

"I think you've misunderstood me, so I'm going to correct you. The specialist in Yin Magic iiisn't Lady Emilia, alright?"

"What-the-hell-yo? Do you have a grudge against me, yo?! Do you like playing with people's hearts that much, yo?! Yo!" Subaru exclaimed, still in rap-mode, as he pointed his finger at Roswaal.

“So, who is then? Is it you?! The respected court magician?! Yeah, since you have an affinity for all the elements, right! I’m disappointed!”

“It’s Beatrice.”

“That’s more disappointing!!”

The loudest scream of the night exploded from his mouth with a massive splash of water.

3

“Ah shit. The hot water made me feverish. Curse that Rosy. He kept lifting me up and dropping me. It was like he was the Buddha’s palm,” Subaru blurted out in the changing room as he passed his arms through the sleeves of the clothing he’d been provided.

Subaru had just come out of the bath after taking a short break upon concluding their disappointing conversation, leaving Roswaal there.

Subaru was never a fan of taking long baths, but nowadays, he often took them due to being tired and needing a place to think. However, getting in and out quickly was how he originally did things. Thus, he was feeling lightheaded because of it. He felt that way today especially since he had yet to recover and was still low on blood.

There was a slight, peculiar difference between what his mind and body wanted. It felt like the gears were a little out of sync, which created a discord that made him feel uncomfortable.

“On top of that, I think my muscles might be sore tomorrow. Damn it, Ramchi. Just you wait. You’re only working me like a horse because I’m a little better at doing things compared to the last loop…”

“She shall kindly wait, just like you wished.”

“Woooooah!!”

While Subaru was heading out with the basket filled with his dirty clothes, someone responded to his complaint, startling him enough to make him jump in surprise. And just like that, his underwear flew from his hand and landed at the feet of Ram, who was standing in the hallway outside the changing room.

“Haa, you are no good.”

She bent down and picked up Subaru’s underwear, which was soaked with the sweat from his hard day of work, and tossed it into the trashcan right next to her.

“There’s a dude right in front of you holding a basket who intends on doing his laundry, ya know?!”

“Ram is sorry. The moment she lifted it up, she felt an instinctual disgust for it. Ram wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible, so it ended up that way.”

“Despite that, your movements looked refined!”

Subaru reluctantly retrieved his underwear from the trashcan and put it into the basket, then faced Ram again. The maid was leaning against the wall of the changing room, waiting quietly.

I wonder what she wants? Subaru tilted his head. And, as if reading his mind, Ram spoke. “It’s unfortunate for you, but Ram has already taken a bath, so she won’t start undressing even if you wait there.”

“You didn’t get me at all?! Isn’t that fatal for a maid?!”

“Ram is only kidding. She’s here to help Master Roswaal get dressed. It is Ram and Rem’s duty to wait on Master Roswaal when he takes a bath.”

“Aren’t you spoiling him too much? I think he can change on his own.”

But then there are people out there who have their socks put on by a maid and have never put them on themselves. Considering how vast the world is, Roswaal might be one of them, which really is an eye-opener for me.

"That just opened my Roswaal Trust Bottle, too, which didn't have much in it to begin with, but now there's even less in there."

"Kindly refrain from making any disrespectful remarks about Master Roswaal in front of Ram. Ram will use force after the second warning."

It sounds like a gentle suggestion, but she means it, so I'll keep that in mind. In fact, she teaches things in a polite and respectful manner the first time, but if I ask her the same question again, she looks at me like I'm just some pig in a pig farm.

Subaru thought that it would bring unnecessary trouble if he stayed there any longer, so he decided to leave immediately.

"Alright then, excuse me, Boss," said Subaru as he tried to leave, but…

"Barusu, do you have any plans after this?"

"Other than going to bed, nope. It should be obvious since I have to wake up early tomorrow, damn it. Boss, mornings are such a pain."

"I see." Ram gave a short response to Subaru's words, which made him sound like he was both complaining and expressing an attitude of defiance.

Subaru kept looking at her as she stood there without saying a word, then... "Alright," Ram said, as if she had decided on something. "Then Ram will come to your room later, so wait for her."

And that's all she had said.

"—Huh?"

Chapter 16:
The Confusion of the Second Loop

1

I'll keep declaring over and over again that I, Natsuki Subaru, am an advocate of only being into Emilia.

Ever since he came to this world, he has had the opportunity to encounter many beautiful women one after another, but she stood out from the rest.

It was partly because of her beauty, but the real reason was simple: it's because he fell in love with her. As long as he continued to feel that way, his attraction to her would only increase.

Therefore, no matter what kind of beauty was in front of him, there was no way that Subaru's heart would fall for anyone else.

It's just not possible.

"So, this perfect bedmaking doesn't mean anything more than me wanting to sleep soundly," he said, making an enthusiastic excuse to himself as he poked his finger into the bed with lightning speed.

After taking a bath, Subaru had gone back to his room and spent all his time making the bed, which he was currently looking at. He even left the basket of laundry unattended. He'd put a lot of effort into it, sweat dripping off his forehead like a waterfall, even though he had just taken a bath.

It's been a while since I've done such a satisfactory job.

"It doesn't have any deep meaning behind it. It isn't anything like that. I need to calm myself and empty my mind. One Emilia-tan, two Emilia-tans, three Emilia-tans… Is this Heaven!"

"You are making too much noise, Barusu. It's night already, so keep quiet."

“Faaar awaaay!” (Gackt: Faraway) he sung as he leapt back towards the wall. He could see Ram, who had opened the door without making a sound, standing at the room’s entrance.

After entering the room with a knock, she scolded him. “You do this right after Ram told you to keep quiet. You are no good.”

“What’s up with you making your own rules?! It makes me feel nervous since your rules make me question my common sense! What and how do you want me to do things?!”

In response to Subaru shouting, Ram abruptly sneered. “Hah.” Even Subaru could do nothing after being struck with the contempt that hadn’t even put into words.

Ram crossed in front of such a Subaru with crisp noises and headed towards the bed—no, she headed towards a small wooden desk in front of the bed. Each room had a space of its own for reading and writing, but for Subaru, it was useless since he could not read or write in this world. Of course, he could write in Japanese though.

“Maybe I should do that at least. Even though I can’t carry it to another loop, it might make it easy for me to remember things if I write things down…”

“What are you mumbling on about? Come here, Barusu,” Ram said in a tepid manner, as if she were disciplining her dog.

Blue veins appeared on Subaru’s forehead after hearing that. But it would only be a loss for him if he let her take control of things. Subaru could only show his true ability when he had the other person in the palm of his hand to begin with.

Anyway, I’ll train my unyielding heart so that it won’t be shaken by anything she says, no matter how surprising it may be.

He stood in front of Ram with a battle-ready mindset.

“Now what? What kind of recklessness have you brought this time?”

“What are you talking about? Ram is telling you to sit down so that

Ram can teach you how to read and write."

"That's my first time hearing of it?!"

His unyielding heart shook immediately.

He felt like his hardened heart instantly became soft and broken, and then, unable to hide his unrest, he looked at his desk and gasped when he saw a notebook with a white page, a quill, and a book with a reddish-brown cover. It seemed like she wasn't joking or playing a prank on him but was genuinely trying to teach him how to read and write.

"But then, why all of a sudden…"

"Barusu, you can't read or write, right? I know that from watching you work today. If you can't read or write, then you can't note down things that you have to buy or write down the things that you are told to do."

Ram gave a perfectly reasonable answer to the confused Subaru's query. Subaru's mouth reflexively kept opening and closing slovenly like a fish.

However, seeming indifferent to his reaction, Ram pointed her finger at the book with a red cover. "We'll start with an easy collection of children's fairytales. Ram and Rem will help you out every night, so study hard from now on."

It's a good offer, but frankly, I'm more confused by it than anything.

This situation was the same as the one in the bathroom, a situation that never happened in the previous loop. And according to Subaru's own estimation, the distance between him and the twins was still much greater compared to the fourth day of the previous loop.

In spite of that, why is there a bona fide study session happening?

"It's obvious. —It's because Ram wants to work less."

"You don't change, do you?"

"Of course. The more work Barusu is able to do, the less work Ram has to do. If Ram's workload is lessened, then Rem's work inevitably gets reduced, too. It's a win-win situation."

"Wouldn't I be overwhelmed with work instead, though?!"

"…?"

And now she's tilting her head as if she didn't understand what I am complaining about.

Subaru lost the energy to talk back since she responded in a way that made it seem like she didn't get his point. On one hand, he was baffled by it, but on the other, he was happy about it.

"Ok, alright, understood. Let's staaart studying then."

"Barusu, in your case, your conversational grammar is fine, so it shouldn't be too difficult. The language skills you were born with shouldn't be blamed."

"Aren't you insulting me by making it seem like you are praising me?" Subaru said as he sat in front of the desk and grabbed the quill, fully prepared to get started.

Subaru never had the chance to hold a quill before, but it was light, and when you slid it over the paper, it produced beautifully written words.

It was the memorable first stroke in this world. Subaru faced the cover of the book and started writing with a large stroke of his quill. "Natsuki Subaru has arrived… Alright."

"Sorry to interrupt you, but we don't have time to play around drawing things like that. You need to make up early tomorrow, so time is limited."

"No, this is my native language… I knew you wouldn't get it."

I was hoping that the things I write down would be translated too since I can have conversations normally, but I guess things aren't that convenient. To me, the script of this world looks like hieroglyphs, so to them, Japanese probably looks like fancy-looking scribbles.

And so, Subaru couldn't go on a rampage with his knowledge of idioms that he loved so much.

"But on the other hand, it means that nobody will notice it no matter what kind of obscene fantasies I put into writing. That kind of situation is useful…libido-wise!"

"First, we'll start with the basic letters, which are E letters. You can move on to Ro letters and Ha letters after you master E letters."

"There are three types? Just hearing about them makes me want to give up."

It's so painful that my heart feels like it's about to break before learning a new language. I can relate a bit with the feelings of the foreigners trying to learn Japanese. There are three types: Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji, so they would be bewildered once they realized how long it would take them to learn.

"We'll move on to the fairytales after you get the hang of E letters. We can study until 1 AM Darksun since we also have to do this tomorrow, and Ram is sleepy, too."

"Showing a glimpse of your true feelings at the end there… I don't dislike that, boss."

"Ram likes that about Ram," she replied without hesitation, thus making it harder to determine whether she was joking around or being serious. Subaru felt that the former had a higher probability, and his alphabet learning lesson began.

When learning a new language, the first thing you need to do is to figure out what kinds of letters it uses. In the case of hiragana, there are 46 characters, and just like that, there are basic characters in other languages, too, and the meanings are formed by combining those basic letters.

Therefore, learning a language begins with writing the letters, but…

"It's more painful than I imagined… It's like the time I was learning how to write in cursive."

Subaru wrote down the basic letters that Ram had written for him at the rate of around 400 letters per page. The accumulation of it was something that could cause Gestaltzerfall, but he accepted that working steadily was the necessary way to get the job done, so he devoted himself to that.

To be honest, my eyelids are heavy due to fatigue and drowsiness, but I can't fall asleep since Ram's been keeping me company. That she is being friendly from day one of the second loop is really important to begin with, too. I can't let the chance slip out of my hands.

"I know that you said that you were doing it to make things easy for you, but it still made me happy," Subaru admitted, conveying his honest feelings while holding back his embarrassment, to Ram, who was behind him.

When he wasn't writing the same letter over and over again, producing a soft sound as the quill ran over the pages, Subaru recalled the four days from his previous loop.

Come to think of it, I spent my days chasing Emilia's ass whenever I had time, but the person I spent the most time with was Ram when I wasn't doing that.

It must have taken a lot of effort to train Subaru, who was an amateur in all the work around the manor—such as cooking, doing laundry, and cleaning. It was tougher for her since that wasn't her only job, she did it while performing her regular work.

Obviously, the burden would have fallen upon Rem as well, but the time he spent with her in the four days of the previous loop wasn't much. Ram and the others said that Rem, who was excellent at everything, did the work that didn't get done, but Subaru felt bad for indirectly burdening her.

"To be honest, I wasn't liked much."

She was as busy as she was, and then a useless newbie came in. She had to teach him various things, utilizing her time after she was done with her work. Just thinking about it was painful for someone like Subaru, who had little experience in dealing with people. To be thought of that way was something he was used to, too.

Thus, Subaru was happy with the current situation where he wasn't being rejected.

"I know I'm going to keep causing trouble, but please take care of me," he told Ram, who was silently observing him, as his chair creaked when he gently turned back.

He had suddenly bared his heart and true feelings to her, but Ram silently responded with "Zzz."

She was sleeping soundly in the bed that had been neatly made. She had taken her shoes and apron off, her headdress was put on the side of the bed, and the covers were pulled up to her shoulders. It was a proper sleeping position.

The quill snapped with a crack.

2

Following the sudden urge, Subaru opened his mouth wide and yawned. He couldn't hold back his sleepiness. It appeared as tears formed at the corners of his eyes, so he violently rubbed them and straightened his posture. The evening sky was dyed orange with the parting gift of the sun, and the clouds were flowing slowly, welcoming the end of the day. Subaru looked up at all of that and moved the joints in his body to check its condition. He still felt the effects of overworking, but it wasn't as bad as before.

"But even so, the strength of my body remains the same even after I go back in time… I guess it means that I learned how to move my body, so it doesn't get as tired."

It wasn't that his body was getting used to it, but rather that he was getting used to the work, which improved his efficiency. He predicted that it would lead to a slight reduction in fatigue.

If there's a possibility that the loop will occur again, then I can't expect to strengthen my body through repeating things. The only thing I can do is revise the events that are going to occur and practice household chores.

I can't continue with this if I don't think like that. Since…

"Subaru, sorry for making you wait. —Are you fine?"

"Hm, yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine. Remrin, are you done with your shopping now?"

"Yes, it went without a hitch. You looked like you were having a lot of trouble, Subaru."

The blue-haired girl holding a handbag with goods inside in front of him—Rem—tilted her head and appreciated Subaru's effort.

She was in her usual maid outfit, her hair swaying in the wind as she looked at Subaru with a slightly relaxed expression. At Subaru, who had stained his butler's uniform with mud, dust, snot, and tears.

"You were quite popular," she said.

"I don't know why, but I've always been a kid magnet. Maybe it's because there's a maternal instinct inside me that can't be suppressed and is irresistible to kids, so it keeps attracting them to me."

"Children are like animals in that they assign ranks to humans. They know instinctively whether they should take a person lightly or not."

"You aren't complimenting me, are you?!" Subaru exclaimed, putting a hand on his chin to show his dissatisfaction, but Rem didn't respond.

Subaru nodded his head thinking that Ram and Rem were indeed sisters after getting such a harsh comment. With Ram, who was direct, and Rem, who said things in a reserved manner, one needed to be tough mentally to keep up with them. Of course, he needed to be physically tough too or else he wouldn't be able to keep up with the work in the first place.

With a wry smile, Subaru turned his hips and looked around while moving his neck. The high-pitched voices of the children could be heard from the square behind him. He had been in the group of children a few moments ago, struggling against their blows and drool. Everyone had been relentless, and it was a lonely battle without any allies.

Currently, Subaru and Rem were in the village closest to the manor. Roswaal, even if he was like that, had the status of Margrave, so naturally he was a nobleman that ruled over quite a bit of territory in his fiefdom.

This village near his house is no exception, and the people who live here know us as a matter of course. The two maids in particular since they probably go out to buy groceries often, and that's why the rate of people greeting them was high as they passed by.

On the other hand, it seemed like the villagers knew about Subaru's existence. Although it was actually his first time going there, he was welcomed amicably, and it made him feel uneasy yet happy at the time.

However… "What's up with those kids being over-familiar… Can't they recognize my hard-boiledick aura that can burn them if they touch me?" Subaru blurted out the title that he wanted to say in a deep voice while lighting a cig. (Totally imagining it)

Hard-boiledick, short for hard-boiled and adultic.

Rem, who was walking in front of him, gave him a sideways glance. "You said you had a maternal instinct, and now you are pretending to be an adult. You are a busy person, Subaru."

"If I was busy, then I wouldn't be in such a bad situation. Shit, I should've gone shopping with you, Remrin."

Even if Subaru had gone shopping with her, he would have been useless since he didn't know how to distinguish between ingredients or even know what they were called. So, he had stepped back from that to not bother her. But then the children from the village found him and kidnapped him, which was something he hadn't expected.

"I don't have any complaints in general, but… I can't accept that."

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind, it's something that has to do with me. I'm glad that I can have a conversation with you without being cautious. In Ramchi's case, I can't predict the angle from which she'd look down at me."

"Isn't my sister wonderful?"

The conversation was slightly out of sync.

Rem looked slightly proud as she bragged about her elder sister. Subaru assumed that they were honest words without a hint of deceit in them, but…

"To be frank, aren't there a lot of problems with Ramchi's personality? It seems like it would often cause conflicts."

"It isn't as bad as you, Subaru, who is still new to being a servant."

"That's, what, I, thought."

Learn wisdom from the follies of others.

It was obvious that Subaru's critique of Ram's ability and personality would be mocked since his current contribution was half that of Ram's. The person hearing it was the upgraded version of said Ram as well.

The destructiveness of her sarcasm was also a few steps higher than Ram's, making up for it not being direct.

Subaru scratched his head and pondered as he followed behind Rem as she walked ahead of him. —I'm sure I was accompanying Ram during the village shopping trip in the previous loop.

“Speaking of which, Subaru, how is your study progressing?”

“Steadily…is what I want to say, but things aren’t that easy. Everything must be nurtured slowly, over time. It’s the same as love!”

“I hope it doesn’t wither halfway.”

“Remrin, the love in your comment just now is withered!” Subaru screamed, changing Rem’s expression into a slight smile that made him smile too.

—Four days have passed already since Ram volunteered for the private lessons at night. She said that she would take turns with Rem while teaching me letters, but in all that time, Rem has never been the instructor. From the standpoint of the situation, it probably means that Rem couldn’t afford to leave her work, and it seems like she was feeling guilty about it.

Subaru continued smiling at Rem, who couldn’t even come up with a response like she usually did, and then…

“Youuu dooon’t neeed tooo worrrry about it. It isn’t like I’m being neglected, and I am not complaining about Ramchi being the instructor. No, wait, it definitely demotivates me when she falls asleep on the bed while teaching me, but still.”

“Sister is acting like that on purpose to raise your motivation.”

“That’s some positive thinking that far exceeds mine. The way you worship your sister is out of this world. You really are possessed by a demon.”

“Possessed, by a demon…?” Rem tilted her head at the word that was trending inside Subaru lately.

“It’s the demon version of being possessed by a god, being possessed by a demon. Doesn’t it sound nice?”

“Do you like demons?”

“I like them more than God. Since God usually does nothing, but

I’ve heard that a demon laughs with you when you tell them about your vision of the future.”

They get especially excited when they hear the things about the coming year.

Subaru thought of the scene where the Blue and Red Demon had their arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders and were laughing loudly, and then, suddenly, he saw a definite smile on Rem’s face.

“Oh…”

He had seen her smile faintly several times before, but it was the first time she had shown an expression that could be described as a proper smile.

Subaru didn't know if it had struck a chord with her, but he snapped his fingers and said, "That smile is as bright as Pikachu's million-volt thunderbolt."

"I'll tell Lady Emilia."

"It wasn't like I was hitting on you?!"

He straightened his posture, thrust out his hands and did the pose of meekly begging for forgiveness.

Suddenly, Rem raised her eyebrows slightly, looking at Subaru taking that pose. "What happened to that hand?"

"Hm? Oh, the dog that the kids were playing with took a big bite out of it."

The scar on my left hand has a prominent teeth mark on it. It bled a little, but it stopped already. I remember that this happened to me in the last loop, so it means that I have gotten to the weird part of the loop.

By the way, someone blew their nose on the back of his butler's uniform, so it had a great amount of snot on it, but the time he would notice it would be the same as the previous loop, which was after he returned to the manor.

"Shall I heal your wound?"

"Huh? What, Remrin, are you the type who can use healing magic?"

"I can do easy things, like simple treatments. Or do you want Lady Emilia to do it?"

"Mm, it's an attractive offer that can't be denied. Bu…but…I'll pass."

Subaru denied her offer while looking at the toothmark of the canine on the back of his hand. It was because he had decided that the scar was, in a sense, a good mark to know where he was in the loop. It was the disappearance of the scar that made him the most aware of the fact that a new loop had begun the moment he had started a new one.

Whether there is a scar or not is a good indicator. If I hadn't been bit coincidentally by the dog, then I would've ended up hurting myself with a quill or a random knife.

"Hah, I grew out of the phase of wanting a sword scar on my cheek when I was in middle school. Now that I think about it, I was covered in scars, so that makes me…"

I miss the days where I longed to have scars on my face, and I worked hard to leave scratch marks on it. One scar was not enough for me, so I made a lot of them, and it was bad luck that the scars got filled with pus since it landed me in a disastrous situation where I was called the bandage-man. I was the only mummy-man in the graduation album of middle school.

"Oh my, I am, cute…!"

"It's said that a scar is a man's badge of honor. Come to think of it, Master Roswaal also brags about a scar that he doesn't erase. —Around his chest."

"This seems like the topic is going to be graphic, so can I pass?"

The topic was going to stray towards the suspicious relationship between the maid and her master without Subaru noticing it, so he hurriedly put a stop to it.

Rem tilted her head curiously as if she didn't understand what he was talking about, and Subaru pushed her on the back. "Never mind, never mind," he said, then hurried on home.

Subaru wasn't confident that he could keep up with a graphic topic like that and was also a bit nervous.

—Since he was on the fourth day of his second loop in another world.

"I'll see if I can make it to tomorrow morning in one piece. But before that.”

Whether I’ll be able to make that promise with Emilia or not is just as important.

“…Anyway, I’m worried about Ramchi and Remrin’s sexual knowledge. I’m worried that they are being tricked by that master into doing things while being none the wiser.”

These questions have begun to creep into my mind as I have begun to know things in more detail than the previous week of the previous loop. I’ll make a little inquiry after I’m done with taking care of my situation.

Subaru secretly made up his mind to do so.

3

Natsuki Subaru’s second first week at Roswaal Manor was now facing its greatest problem. He wasn’t able to follow the steps of the previous loop that he had revised, so it wasn’t smooth sailing to begin with, but now it was facing its greatest crisis.

Which was…

“I can’t go meet Emilia-tan because I have to study.”

Whispering their love to one another in the moonlit garden and making a pinky promise; Subaru held such hopes for the second night, so this situation that interfered with his promise event was the worst thing that could happen to him.

It was only the fourth day of study, and before dinner, I casually asked the twins directly, “Wouldn’t it be ok if I took a break today?” But…

“Sister, Sister. A spineless guy called Subaru has given up already.”

“Rem, Rem. A pathetic dog that’s inferior to humans and animals is saying something in dog language.”

And thus, I was dismissed with an unprecedented blank stare.

He wanted to rush to Emilia's side even if he had to skip the lesson, but…

"If Emilia-tan finds out that I have skipped the lessons through Ram or Rem, then, knowing her personality, she will definitely cancel our promise!"

It would be useless even if I'm able to make the promise if it gets reneged upon later. The promised couple's rendezvous. And the two burn passionately in the flower garden and disappear into the nightlife district.

It would be a Happy End, according to Subaru, if it reached that point.

"But then, if I study properly, then Emilia-tan will fall asleep before I can meet her."

Therefore, there was only one best answer for Subaru.

Which is: Finish the assignments as quickly as possible and go down to the garden before the moon disappears behind the clouds.

This is it.

"Or I can lure Ram into falling asleep with my ultimate bedmaking skills and make the promise while she's sleeping and then come back and finish the assignment... I'd be able to kill two birds with one stone!"

In other words, you could say he was stuck between a rock and a hard place. It was a sad man's heart wavering between the assignment and the promise.

I've prepared plan B and have already adjusted my bed. The bedding is in great shape, having soaked up the sunlight, and the warmth you feel just by touching it is powerful enough to make you fall into dreamland in no time.

There, Subaru concentrated all of his hidden hotelier abilities into it, and the masterpiece of bedmaking was complete.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to make a better bed than this...”

It was literally a masterpiece in which he put in everything he had.

It’s really captivating workmanship even though I’m the one who did this. I usually hate Ram for lying on my bed without my permission, but now I can’t wait for her to come into my room.

“I feel as if I’m waiting for a cockroach to enter my newly purchased roach trap as fast as possible—I’m the worst!”

I’m not gonna rephrase it since that’s how it is.

However, the fact that he was waiting for his opponent with such dutifulness could be said to be a sign of his Japanese temperament, which was the reason why he couldn’t be ruthless.

He stood in front of the desk, tapping on his knee with his finger, and waited for her. But…

“Why does she have to be late today? If it begins late, then consequently, it will end late too. Unlike lessons in school, there’s no bell that rings when it’s over.”

In schools, if the teacher is late, then it would be a ‘I was waiting for this!’ situation, but in the current situation, it’s a pure waste of time that keeps me stuck here longer. It’s not like I don’t like the idea of putting extra time into revising stuff, but I have to say that keeping my mind calm and going for the letters in this state of mind is pretty harsh.

Subaru himself didn’t realize that it was a ridiculous resolve to try to finish his assignments early with such feelings.

As the time was ticking by, he became more and more impatient, so he rushed towards the door and violently opened it the moment he heard a knock. And then, he lashed out. “You’re late! Every second of this may have been nothing to you, but to me, it was equivalent to chipping away at whatever sanity I had left!”

“…I didn’t know that you were waiting that much, I’m sorry? I was late because I haven’t been on this floor much.”

He felt like his face had turned as white as a sheet when Emilia, who was waiting outside the door, said that.

Chapter 17:
The Sound of Chains

1

“So, since Ram or Rem can't come see you tonight… I took over the role of supervising your studies.”

“I see! Wow, I’m glad, a real surprise! Oh, please, sit. You want tea or something, right? Oh, I snuck out some special tea snacks.”

Subaru invited Emilia into the room, and started to prepare to welcome her in a rush. He rushed through the hall, went into what seemed like an employee-only hot water supply room, prepared tea and tea snacks, and then dashed back. This feat of agility was done in a matter of two minutes.

Perfectly displaying the skills he had learned while living in the mansion as an employee, Subaru showed a working attitude he had not even shown to Roswaal himself.

“Thanks for waiting! I’m back! Brought special tea leaves and tea snacks, we can feed each other!”

“I feel like you may have forgotten the main reason I’m here… Do you mind?”

Subaru, still holding the tray, tilted his head with question marks at Emilia, who had been standing there in the room like she was out of place.

She slowly pointed towards the bed and asked Subaru, “Is it just me, or is it way too neatly arranged?”

“Ah! Nah! It’s not like I had a plan or anything, just thought I’d let Ramchi sleep there! It’s not suspicious!”

“What were you going to do having Ram sleep in your bed?”

“I feel like the misunderstanding suddenly made a quick turn?!”

He put the tray down on the table, and dove onto his bed under Emilia's suspicious gaze. He took his time to mess up the bed all he could.

"Seee, now it's all wrecked. Right! A naughty girl like Ramchi deserves to sleep in a messy bed!"

"So you still intend for her to sleep here."

"I can't win this by myself! Puck, come ouuuuut!"

"It's already his bedtime so don't wake him up… I mean, it doesn't matter."

Emilia crossed her arms as she watched Subaru turn to the gray cat for help, and looked away. "It's fine that you're friendly with Ram and Rem, but you need to do it in moderation. Not to mention those two are still young…"

"I personally like that you have strong virtues. I mean, isn't there a more suitable person to receive that comment in this mansion? I'll give ya a hint, he's a pervert with long hair."

"Ah, whatever… I've given up on trying to fix that."

"So much so that you look super gloomy, Emilia-tan! It's kinda giving me goosebumps!"

With resignation in her eyes, her behavior was like an abandoned puppy, which activated Subaru's protective instincts. To cut a long story short, Emilia was cute to him, whatever expression she was making. In short…

"E. M. T. (Emilia-tan is seriously an angel!)"

"Your face tells me you're reaaally speaking nonsense. Maybe I've finally come to understand you, Subaru."

"Aw, that's a delight to hear. But don't think you can see through me so easily. Oh, here's some tea."

"Oh, thanks." Emilia took the tea from his hands and softly moistened her throat with it. Offering her the chair in front of the desk, Subaru sipped tea while sitting on his bed.

Sharing the treasured tea snacks, they enjoyed a calm and peaceful time together. Maybe this is what they call happiness.

“This is, how, I feel,” said Subaru.

“You’re saying something very ordinary but it kind of resonates with the heart,” Emilia admitted.

“It’s a word trick. The trick is to pronounce them like they’re katakana. It’s just saying normal things like they are normal.”

Emilia reacted naturally, probably because she had gotten used to Subaru talking nonsense.

She was also somehow glad that he was enjoying their peaceful time together.

“A-Actually, I didn’t come here to fool around,” Emilia declared, “so you shouldn’t be relaxing.”

“Who comes to a man’s room alone at night and doesn't expect some happenings! Don’t you know it’s dangerous?!”

“You know that I can use magic even without Puck, right?”

The air started to crack apart with a dry sound, and the temperature in the room decreased drastically.

Seeing the steam from the tea becoming more forceful and thick, Subaru came to the conclusion that further delaying this study session would be impossible. “Ok ok, got it. Let’s study, it’s study time. A heart-racing lesson in a private room at night with Emilia-tan… I got excited just saying that!”

“Fine, fine, I got it. Anyways, what do you usually do?” asked Emilia from the side with her hands on the back of the seat after Subaru had moved to the chair. Feeling her breath on him, Subaru nervously opened his notebook and textbook.

"I'm currently learning the basic E letters," he replied. "It seems like the fairytales are mostly a collection of stories written with E letters, so my goal at the moment is to be able to read them."

"Huh, a collection of fairytales."

Emilia took the book with the reddish-brown spine and flipped through the pages to check its contents. She suddenly stopped turning them, and Subaru looked up at her. "Huh? Was there a story that caught your attention?"

"Hmm not really, but kinda. Well, once you're able to read this, you'll come to understand."

Emilia closed the book with a sound, then walked to the bed and sat down. Looking at her sitting on the bed that he had messed up made Subaru slightly excited and restless.

However, she stretched her body as though not noticing Subaru's animalistic urges.

"I was actually supposed to meet with the ones I can only meet during Darksun but then I was requested by Ram and Rem. So I'll prioritize you for today. You should thank me."

"I'm super thankful! Truly is Buddha's guidance!"

"Th-That's a bit much, you're making me blush."

"Thank you! Ramchi! Remrin! I'll never let your considerations go to waste! I, Subaru Natsuki, will become a man!"

"Huh?! What about me?!"

He shouted out his thanks to the twins who had created this situation for him, then turned back to the dissatisfied Emilia and put out both hands. "Of course, I'm blown away by your kindness and deeply moved, Emilia-tan. When we finish studying and stuff, would you like a massage or something? With my cherished gratitude towards you, I'll relieve your daily fatigue real attentively. Ge-he-he."

"That sounds kind of dirty, so I'm good."

"Shit, why am I so honest! Though I don't hate that part of me!"

Emilia sighed at Subaru, who was leaning on the desk fake crying. She then clapped her hands to change the direction of the conversation. "Now, don't be playing around forever. We have work tomorrow too, so let's finish this before it gets too late. Okay, let's continue."

"Ok, got it. Oh, Emilia-tan, you can have the rest of the tea snacks, ok?"

"Whatever, thanks…hm, but it's a snack."

I guess it's even common in this world for girls to refrain from eating snacks between meals, huh.

Gaining such useless knowledge, Subaru began his daily practice of writing letters with Emilia behind him.

Once he threw himself into it, Subaru could focus on studying. While he was conscious of Emilia's existence, as long as he felt that he could still make that promise, it was something he could ignore. So there was no need to be anxious.

From that peace of mind, Subaru calmly copied the letters. After a while of silence, Emilia suddenly called out from the back. "I see. You don't get sidetracked as much as I imagined."

"Cuz I'm focusing. I'm the type of guy who hyper-focuses once he gets into it. That's why I'm so devoted to the girl I love!"

"I hope so. Though maybe not when you're making eyes at me."

Subaru was a little overwhelmed by Emilia's teasing. It seemed likely that his past attempts hadn't been taken seriously.

Perhaps she could believe him a little bit since he was saying it so straightforwardly.

"But like, with my skill, it's impossible to flirt without teasing. The shame would literally give me an unnatural death. Shortening my life as I fall in love with love, just like Heian nobles!”

“Whatever, no fooling around… You should be as serious as this on a regular basis. Ram and Rem are going to give up on you.”

Emilia, on the bed with her arms around her knees, mumbled to the troubled Subaru. Her skirt was short and suggestive, but she seemed to be subtly unaware of how unguarded she was.

Subaru focused on the edge of his vision as he tilted his body slightly. She would obviously notice if he turned his head, so he only secretly looked.

“This, indeed, is the Yin family of magic’s art of concealment!”

Subaru burned with an odd sense of mission. Not knowing his objective, Emilia had a cloudy expression on her face, as she lowered her gaze in her sensational position. Then she muttered, “Hey Subaru. I don’t really want to ask you this but…why aren’t you usually more serious like this?”

“It’s my policy to seriously be unserious and…guess that kind of answer is not what you want to hear right now, huh. Um?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. —Ram was also complaining a little bit. That you seem like, hmm, like you’re cutting corners here and there in your work.”

Maybe because it seemed like she was telling on him, Emilia spoke hesitantly. However, all Subaru could do was internally frown in pain that she was right on point.

I gotta admit that it’s a totally accurate evaluation to say that I’ve been cutting corners here and there while on the job.

In fact, Subaru was not seriously devoting himself to his work. Rather, you could say he was making adjustments to gain the same results as before.

Compared to when he hardly understood his work, Subaru now more or less had gotten used to it. You could say that if he had an employee skill of all Cs, he currently had all C+s.

In reality, he had just begun to climb the tall tall hill of an employee, but maybe that slight difference didn't manage to deceive the eyes of those senior to him.

Naturally, the sense of guilt slowed down Subaru's mouth.

Seeing Subaru who could not utter another word, Emilia murmured "I thought so," before continuing. "Well, it's not like you don't feel guilty. You're faithful at strange moments, Subaru. Like how you aren't slacking off while studying."

"Well, I guess I have my reasons, studying benefits me… I realized it when I said it, but I kinda act in my own self-interest, huh."

Thinking back, that was a terrible thing to say.

He had been causing trouble for the twins due to his own circumstances, working hard for the things that would only benefit himself, and cutting corners even outside of that. I messed up big time, huh.

"Ah, I will attend to it with a renewed attitude starting tomorrow, please forgive me, my queen."

"Hmm, that's alright… Wait a second." Emilia tilted her head, as though she'd felt something was off about her response.

While feeling at ease at her softened attitude, Subaru promised himself that he would make his words reality starting tomorrow.

At any rate, it was a good place to restart. After that, he wouldn't have to retrace his previous work, and he wouldn't have to intentionally cut corners at his work either.

He would be able to return the debt of gratitude to both Ram and Rem.

Of course, just because I stop cutting corners doesn't mean that my level of ability is gonna immediately rise either.

"Your mentality is important for these things. My dilligentness has a value that can't be bought. Indeed, it's priceless."

"You fool around at your convenience again… Did you finish studying?"

"Yeah, today's share! Oh ya, I have a favor to ask you, Emilia-tan, can you hear me out?" Fiddling with his fingers, he glanced up at Emilia using his secret technique: puppy-dog eyes. It was a gesture targeting her maternal instincts, but she looked slightly disturbed.

"No, I have a reaaally bad feeling about this one."

"Such a negative impression that you are disgusted?! It's nothing like that! I just wanted a reward for working hard starting tomorrow."

"A reward! Just to let you know, I don't have any spare money, alright?"

"I was also completely and utterly broke till I received my salary. Ju-Ju-Ju-Just hear me out. So since I'm gonna work seriously starting tomorrow… Let's go on a date!"

Putting his thumb up with shining teeth, he made his signature pose, content with the results.

Emilia blinked her eyes at Subaru's usual posing and said, "A da-te, what do we do?"

"Ha, simply, if a man and woman go out alone, that is a date. Only the goddess of romance knows what happens during that time."

"So, you went on a da-te with Rem today, Subaru."

"My date-virginity has been taken?! I lost my chastity!"

Emilia wryly laughed with an "Ok, ok" at Subaru, who had broken down into tears with his arms wrapped around himself. Waving her hand, she said, "I get that you want to go out together, but where do you want to go?"

“Eh, there’s actually a super lovely dog right near this mansion. There’s also a field of flowers and it’s really pretty. I wanna forever commemorate our co-starred scene amongst the blooming flowers with my magical item.”

His initial equipment had also been collected after the battle in the loot house and stored in the corner of the room.

The contents in the plastic bag were untouched, and not to mention the cell phone, the snacks and instant ramen were also in good condition.

“If I had a charger and an outlet, I would fill up the storage with pictures of Emilia-tan…and change my phone wallpaper everyday. Aargh, I really wanna do that. Why was I summoned to another world, Thomas!”

Calling the name of the great inventor, all he could do was lament the gap in the level of civilization of this world. His cell phone battery showed one less bar, and it was only a matter of time.

Eventually, I may have to bet on charging it with lightning magic or something.

“That’s like a solution in a children’s manga…”

“Hmm, so a village.”

Emilia looked deep in thought with a hand on her cheek, while Subaru talked to himself. That reminds me how she was troubled like that before, he recalled.

Based on his memory that it was not something negative like not wanting to go out with him, he tried to recreate his memory of how he had pushed through in that situation. Right…

“The dog is super cute, let’s go!”

“But I might cause you trouble, Subaru, and to the village people…”

“The kids are also innocent and like an army of real angels, let’s go!”

“...Uh, Ok. I got it. I’ll go with you.”

“The field of flowers is really colorful and wonderful, let’s go… Wait, r-really?”

He almost felt tricked, as there was less pushback than last time.

“If that’s going to make you motivated from tomorrow, I’ll hang out with you. You can’t fool around, alright?”

“I won’t, I won’t! I’m super speedy! If anything, I have the energy to abandon the dog and the kids and the field of flowers so that it can just be the two of us!”

“That defeats the whole purpose of the da-te!” Emilia skillfully countered Subaru’s comment.

After that, the two continued to exchange joking comments, then as she realized it was getting late, Emilia stood up and said, “Well then,”

“If you’re tired,” Subaru interjected, “you can just sleep in that bed?”

“You seem to be panting and the sheets are messy so no thanks.”

“Shit! Why is it so messy… It’s Ramchi, getting in the way even when she’s not even here.”

It seemed as though Ram’s face, who had been the number one person he was thankful for a moment ago, was floating in the night sky, looking down at him in disdain.

Next to Subaru, who was imagining a scene of him being a corpse under a sky full of stars, Emilia walked towards the window and also looked up at the sky. “Yes, the stars are pretty tonight… I’m sure the weather will be nice tomorrow.”

“—Yeah, and it will be an unforgettable day.”

“Can’t believe it…” Turning around with her back facing the windowsill, Emilia was about to reprimand Subaru for his jokes yet again. However, her lips stopped moving when she saw him.

It was probably because she saw that his expression was unusually serious.

Noticing Emilia who suddenly went quiet, Subaru blinked. “Huh, what happened? If you take your time too much, sleepy me will irrationally make you a body pillow, Emilia-tan.”

“After all, you are a weird boy, Subaru.”

“A sudden and outrageous assessment?! Did I do something?!”

Subaru was surprised by the unexpected comment. Leaving the window behind, Emilia crossed the room and passed by Subaru’s side with an adorable “Nothiiing,” before looking back at him with her hand on the doorknob. “Well then, Butler Subaru. Work hard tomorrow. Rewards are rewards because they are given to only those who worked hard.”

She raised her hand like she was saluting, and flipped her silver hair, leaving a wry smile behind. Her shadow disappeared outside the door before hearing his response.

Even if he reached out his hand, he couldn’t reach her anymore. The door shut with a light sound, leaving Subaru alone in the room.

However—

“Hey-hey-hey-hey, are you kidding. I’m so motivated now. Like really.”

The promise he wanted to make was again made.

And Subaru could face the night again.

Will I be able to get through the fourth night and pick her up on the morning of the fifth day?

The duration of the battle would be approximately six hours.

“Well, let’s get on with it, dear destiny—”

2

Subaru sat on the floor with his bed against his back, instead of sitting on the bed, waiting with hope that the night would gradually turn into morning.

The cool floor had become warm with Subaru’s body heat after sitting there for over two hours, which did not help with keeping him awake.

However, his drowsiness had yet to catch up to him. In fact, he was as alert as could be.

The reason is obvious.

“Who could sleep with their heart beating this fast?”

His heart was pounding quickly, loudly, and sharply, with the sound ringing in his ears. He could keenly feel the blood rushing through his body, and his fingertips felt slightly numb.

“I’m like this because I am impatiently waiting for my promised plan with Emilia-tan. Whoa, whoa, am I an elementary schooler who can’t sleep before his field trip? Don’t remember oversleeping on the day of my graduation trip.”

Surely the whole family overslept. They must’ve been so excited that they forgot to wake up. The sadness of being the only one who brought a convenience-store lunch box still haunts me at the back of my mind.

Reflecting on the painful memory in his mind, Subaru looked up at the sky as he distracted himself.

The stars shined like always, and only the placement of the moon moved gradually to the west.

Could it be around four hours before the sun rises from the east? thought Subaru. It’s a long time indeed.

Although not sleepy at all, he had to continue to be alert as he didn’t know what could happen. It was hard to kill time thinking of the possibility of an attack, so all Subaru could do in that moment was listen to his body's pounding sound while he kept on thinking.

He reflected on the past four days, or rather, the second round of four days.

Being out of shape at the beginning, and the difference with the first week. The impact that had on tonight must have been pretty big.

However, on the other hand, he thought that he was able to get past some of the memorable events. There were also subevents added to the second week.

If I assume that the reason for going back was due to failing to trigger a flag, is there a possibility that an event like this study session would count as that?

“I can't deny it as a possibility, but…”

Hypothetically, if there was an existence that was leading Subaru to a loop, it would be difficult to draw the conclusion that this study session was an important thing.

Having said that, there didn't seem to be a big change outside of that. His relationship with Emilia did not change, and he felt like his relationship with Ram and Rem was better than before.

“If I were to have a regret…”

It would be that I wasn't able to meet Beatrice this evening.

In the previous world, Subaru had trespassed Beatrice's room by “door breaking” right after making the promise with Emilia.

He didn't remember talking about anything significant, and he would have to say that the possibility of it being the flag was very low, but compared to last time, he had had an even worse relationship with her.

As a result of his crammed schedule, Subaru barely had any opportunities to encounter her in these past four days.

"Although we were just throwing insults back and forth last time we met."

Though he complained, there was something that Subaru couldn't get off his mind.

It was true that he didn't recall talking to Beatrice, but what had unmistakingly saved his heart in the last loop was her attitude.

It's because her hostile yet straightforward attitude towards me helped me get back on my feet.

"I should have thanked her at least."

It probably won't ring a bell for her in this world, and I can already guess what she'd say if I said it, too.

Although they would insult each other when they met, Subaru's face loosened up when he thought of Beatrice.

Even the same old exchanges were memories that made him laugh when he remembered them like this.

If he could see tomorrow, the next morning, he could do much more of what he wanted to do.

Not just to Beatrice, he also had much to say to Ram and Rem, and even Roswaal.

Of course, they'll have to forgive me since I'll have to shower Emilia with ten thousand words first. "Wait, maybe ten thousand words won't be enough to express my feelings for her. I'll express the rest with actions then…"

In his daydream, he hugged the shy Emilia in his arms, and his lips met hers as she looked up with rosy cheeks. He got worked up upon imagining that game-like scene.

He laughed out loud when looking back on last time and this time —a total of eight days.

As if being taken in by his inner peace, his eyelids started to become heavy, even though there were still more than three hours till morning.

“It seriously wouldn't be a joke if I fall asleep now. It’s not like I’m just playing an online game…”

He rubbed his eyelids as he said that, chasing away the sleepiness that was bubbling up. However, his sleepiness was accompanied with a slight chill, and he laughed at himself as it made him shiver.

He crossed his arms around his shoulders and tried to warm up his body. Yet, no matter how much he did that, the chills did not go away. Rather, there was no sign that they were going away.

—This is weird.

Subaru realized the change in his once optimistic situation.

—Cold is an understatement, it’s more like pain.

When he looked under his sleeves, he saw goosebumps rising on his arms, and it was apparent to him that he was shivering internally.

This was abnormal. This other world had warm weather, and he could usually maintain the perfect temperature by rolling up his sleeves.

Then why is it so cold that my teeth are chattering now?

“This is bad, no way, could it be…!”

He began shaking, though from terror rather than the chills, and fell to the floor. He tried to brace himself with his arms, but the chills could already be felt throughout his whole body, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t find the strength in his arms to get up.

After trying for nearly 30 seconds, he somehow managed to finally stand up. But both his knees were shaking, and he felt that he could fall to the ground any time if his attention wavered.

He could feel himself growing weak. He felt a sense of fatigue in his hands and feet. His once-loud heartbeat weakened, and he slowly felt his thinking becoming dull.

He could find no strength left in his entire body, and he could even forget to breathe if he didn't focus on it.

Lips shaking as he tried to gasp, Subaru crawled out into the hallway to call for help—dragging his feet behind him.

"...S-Someone." He tried to shout for help, but his voice trembled, as if something was blocking his throat.

His throat dried out, only allowing air to pass through, and his breathing slowed, as if his lungs had been overcome with fatigue.

This is bad. That single thought overtook Subaru's mind.

He could not think of a single solution, and he could not understand what was being done to him.

The only thing he knew was the fact that the current situation was threatening his life.

Groaning, he aimed for the stairs with uncertainty. Even though it was a path he was used to walking and the distance wasn't very far, his destination seemed so distant.

His breathing became hoarse, and walking from there to the upper floor was mortifying as each step wore down his soul.

"Aaah… Aaah…"

Subaru finally made it up to the top floor crawling one step at a time using his arms and legs. He headed further back into the hallway—to where the person who he longed for was.

He felt like the inside of his body was melting, and there was a discomfort as though everything was being mixed together. He dragged his feet onward as he failed to contain the nausea and tears that swelled up.

I have to go to Emilia, to where Emilia is.

A sense of mission, of obligation, of an emotion he could not spell out was driving Subaru.

There was nothing like the desire to be saved, which would only reaffirm the misery that was his life, but while ungraceful, there was simply a pressing sense of absoluteness that he had to go there.

Emilia’s room was at the end of the hall on the upper floor of Roswaal Manor’s west wing.

When he arrived at that floor, Subaru was only faintly breathing. If there was someone looking at him from the side, they may have looked away due to how pathetic he looked.

Leaning against the wall, dripping feces and urine, face dirty with tears and vomit, his figure failed to maintain its basic human form.

His whole body felt exhausted, and none of his muscles obeyed his commands. To Subaru, the place he was approaching seemed as far away as the clouds.

“□□□”

He was breathing heavily, and his ears were ringing with high-pitched and loud noises.

Therefore, it was simply a coincidence that he noticed that odd sound.

It seemed like the clinking of a chain.

The strange sound stopped Subaru’s step. At that moment, his body leaning on the wall began to slide down. He stood firmly. But, unable to resist, he fell to the floor and…

“—Huh?”

The next second, the impact struck Subaru.

He completely lost his balance and was blown away instead of just falling down.

Subaru only realized that he had taken a big blow after he had bounced off the ground several times and wiped the floor with his face.

But there was no pain.

There was just a lingering discomfort running from the tip of his hands and feet to his stomach. A sense of fatigue was controlling his body, similar to that of the numbing sensation when your blood flow got interrupted.

“What, ha…”

Happened, he murmured as tried to lift himself up while lying on his stomach. However, his shaking arms held no strength in them. No, that’s odd. I cannot balance myself. First of all, why doesn’t my left arm appear while my right arm is working so hard?

The hallway was already dim, but it felt like it was refusing to help by not even giving any light. In his blurred and distorted vision, Subaru looked at his right arm struggling in vain, then shifted his eyes to his left arm that had stopped listening to him and…

…realized that the left side of his body had been torn off.

“—Aaa?”

After pushing his lying body to the side and positioning the left half upward, Subaru was stunned with shock.

He needed both of his arms to get up, but the left half simply didn’t exist. His left arm had been blown away from the shoulder, and you could see his flesh and bone sticking out of the wound. The peach-colored inside was vibrant as ever in the night air, and vivid red blood was gushing out of it.

The wound was not limited to the left shoulder but continued around to the ribs on his left side, and some internal organs were peeking out where flesh had been ripped apart. How many times have I seen my own intestines now? He thought half fascinated, until it was promptly followed by pain coursing through his body once he realized the damage.

It could neither be described as painful nor hot, and it blocked Subaru's throat like a fish on land, taking away the opportunity to scream at the top of his lungs.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah—"

His vision started to flicker, and red and yellow lights flashed before his eyes.

It crossed out the familiar view of the mansion, and took Subaru's consciousness to a different place not of this world.

I wanna die.

I wanna die I wanna die.

I don't know the meaning of life.

I can't call this living.

I'm just not dead yet. I will only die soon. I will die soon.

I don't know anything. Everything is far away.

I can't remember what I was trying to do. I can't remember what I was. Nothing matters. I don't care, I just wanna die.

The wish Subaru made with the entirety of his being…

"The sound of… a chain…"

…came true as his skull was crushed, that whisper being the last thing he heard.

Chapter 18:
The Third Reunion

1

“...!” Waking to the sound of your own screaming is one of the worst things you can experience. Subaru sent the blanket flying as his hand immediately shot up. He gasped haggardly as he absorbed the shock. “My left arm…is still there…right?”

His left hand was raised in the air as if reaching out for something. His previously obliterated left side was again intact. Despite having lost a limb for only a short time, the feeling of loss hit Subaru like nothing else.

He raised himself up and rotated his left shoulder to make sure it still functioned as normal. No trace of damage remained on his left side, and there was no sign of the dog bite on his reattached left hand. If my scars were still there, I could’ve passed off this terrible feeling as a nightmare after passing out, but…

“I came back… No, I made it back.”

That’s what the missing scars mean. Fate got the better of me and I was forced back in time. In that case, it's better to say I lost but was given another go at it.

With all that squared away, Subaru realized he needed the day and time. According to his experience with Return by Death, he should have returned to his first day at Roswaal Manor. But it was possible he’d been sent back to a different point in time, so he first had to confirm this detail.

“Ah, sorry. Good morning.”

It was at that moment he noticed the presence of the twins holding each other’s hands off to the side of the room. An unconscious man had suddenly awoken screaming; of course they’d be scared. Even with his relaxed greeting, the twins didn’t respond. They remained huddled together like small animals protecting each other.

Scratching his head, Subaru wondered what he should do. The twins probably forgot all about me, huh? The thought pierced his heart, but he suppressed the pain and formed a smile. He'd have to first show goodwill in order to get along with them. Even if they had forgotten him, he remembered them clearly.

"Sorry for the trouble I've caused. Natsuki Subaru, ready to go!"

Subaru leaped up from the bed and raised his arms and leg into a flying crane pose. It intimidated the twins, but he remained like that as he asked, "By the way, could ya tell me the day and time?"

And so began his first day at Roswaal Manor for the third time.

2

Subaru thought back to what happened on the night of the fourth day. It was after I made my promise with Emilia, and it was most likely in the dead of night. Suddenly I got hit by chills and my strength totally drained away. The effect was potent enough to rapidly trigger asthenia. And that was while I was awake. Meaning...

"The first death was from asthenia while I was sleeping…"

Like a thread slowly curling around your neck, it was a slow but certain method of killing. If that's what had happened while asleep and defenseless, then his consciousness would be swallowed up and he'd never wake again.

But still…

"The sound of a chain…"

The possibility of asthenia is merely conjecture for now, but this new mystery is far more important. The peculiar sound of a long chain clanking about. He clearly remembered that dreadful sound reverberating in his ears. It was immediately after he heard this that he was attacked and lost half his torso.

Just remembering that scene caused his left side to throb. Though his present body hadn't experienced it, his soul fought against that painful memory.

Without knowing, he grabbed his left arm. "Meaning that there was an attacker. I don't know if they were the same person who weakened me, but they're probably working together at least."

Subaru reasoned that there was at least one person involved during an attack on the mansion on the fourth night, and he just happened to be another victim. There's no proof that the other inhabitants of the mansion were targets, but…

"If I was targeted, then everyone was probably a target. This is probably related to Emilia-tan's royal selection, like with the loot house."

I don't know if the surrounding nobles have developed a grudge against Roswaal, so I should ignore that for now. If I'm going to get involved, I'd rather be involved in a cute girl's business.

Subaru clutched his head as he gathered his thoughts. I've figured out there'll be an attack and that Emilia will be targeted. That should be a big step forward. But…

"Even knowing that, I have no proof to explain it with and no real way to prevent it either."

One problem with Return by Death was that it couldn't be explained to others. That was the same for this attack on the mansion. If I desperately plead with Roswaal and get him to prepare for the attack, will the attacker see the preparations and just call it off? Where would my proof be in this case?

In the worst case, he was prepared to be branded the boy who cried wolf if it meant protecting Emilia and the others.

And facing the attacker himself was definitely not an option. Firstly, Subaru knew that he didn't have that sort of power, and on top of that, he didn't know anything about his attacker.

It would probably end with him crying like a baby while being brutally killed. A poor way to go.

“And I didn’t even see their face or their weapon. A completely meaningless death.”

If he didn’t know anything about his attacker, then there was no way to even begin a counterplan.

He folded his arms, tilted his neck, rotated his hips, and began to moonwalk around in a circle.

At the center of the room, in the middle of Subaru’s moonwalking circle, a young girl spoke up in irritation. “You’re irritating Betty to death, so either leave or Betty will kill you.”

Subaru turned towards the volatile girl and said, “Sorry, sorry. When I get things moving around other than my head, for some reason makes my brain works better. So let it slide, okay? We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Betty doesn’t recall creating that relationship with you, I suppose. This is only the second time we’ve met.”

“Actions speak louder than words, and you did just let me in here.”

“You just broke through the Door Crossing on your own. What’s going on here, I suppose? Unbelievable.”

As always, Beatrice did nothing to hide her animosity towards Subaru. He initially came to the forbidden library because of this, in fact. He felt he would find some safety and solace in her reliably cold demeanor.

Part of the reason was to clear things up and organize his thoughts, but he also found it difficult to handle Ram and Rem keeping their distance from him like strangers. Unlike before, he properly excused himself before leaving the room this time and came to the only place he felt he could rely on.

“Well, I’m not here to cause any trouble. Just serve some tea and let me chill here.”

"Betty will do no such thing. You are truly irritating, in fact." Playing with one of the curls in her hair, Beatrice's lips curled up in annoyance.

A thought occurred to Subaru. "Come to think of it, you're a magic user, right? Even though you don't look it."

"What do you think magic users are? And being compared to those second-rate users is troubling, I suppose." Beatrice pouted with her nose pointed upwards.

She must have real confidence in herself. Based on that haughty attitude… "You don't have many friends, do you?"

"Where did that come from?!"

"Well, I don't have any friends either so I can tell, but that's not good for you. Being so high and mighty at that age is gonna cause all kinds of trouble going forward."

Beatrice just sighed at Subaru's constant teasing. Seeing that reaction out of her made him cut off that topic and switch to the main issue at hand. Right, what I wanted to ask a magic user to begin with…

"Is there magic that can weaken someone until they die?"

Subaru's sudden asthenia. He wanted to confirm whether it was by poison or disease, or perhaps by magic. My current theory is that the cause for my sudden chills and fatigue was magic. After all, there was no obvious source for a disease to spread that quickly, and the effects were too delayed for me to have ingested poison. Especially in the case of poison, I can't think of a time I could have ingested it. Dinner was served communally; for example, the soup was served in one bowl and split between all of us. The other possibility is that it was laced in the tea and snacks I had with Emilia.

"In that case, the perpetrator can't predict when I'll have the snacks or the tea. "

That method can be crossed out by running a probability check.

Taking the existence of the intruder during the second loop into account, they'd have to have known about my weakened state, so there'd be no reason for them to use poison.

Beatrice frowned at Subaru's question. She most likely wondered about the reason behind such a question. But seeing the rare seriousness in his expression, she sighed slightly and replied, "If it was a question of whether it exists, then it does."

"So it does."

"It is closer to a curse than magic, I suppose. There are more shamans that are familiar with it than magic users. It is a more nefarious method, I suppose."

Subaru became confused by the appearance of this new job by the name of shaman. In response, Beatrice raised a finger as if presenting a lecture. "Curse-users, or shamans, come from the northern country of Gusteko. It is a subvariant of magic and spirit arts. However, it is full of defective techniques and not something to take seriously, I suppose."

"But they can still curse someone to death, right?"

"That's the defective part. There are many paths, but all they can do is cause harm to others. Out of all the mana users, they are the most irritating, I suppose."

The hatred Beatrice showed towards the curse arts was so deeply ingrained that she showed no signs of willingness to compromise her point. Subaru held no appreciation for curses either. Right now he just needed more information.

"Anyway, so with that curse art thing, you can do what I said before?"

"You can, I believe. But rather than learning a curse, there's a much simpler method, I suppose."

Subaru furrowed his brows, at which Beatrice smiled amusingly. She then opened up her small palm and covered Subaru's eyes. The next moment…

"...Gah?!"

Subaru's upper body quivered and collapsed at the sudden feeling of loss. He fell down to one knee, dangerously close to losing consciousness. His eyes fluttered as he felt the fatigue coursing through his body.

"How was it? Feeling it with your own body?"

Beatrice looked down at Subaru, giggling condescendingly. The back of her hand was elegantly placed at her lips, but Subaru couldn't laugh it off and call her pose adorable with her actions still fresh in his mind.

"Dammit, what did you..."

"Simply put, Betty just drained the mana from your body. Simply drain some more and you would reach the same condition, I suppose. Rather than relying on some curse, this way is much easier."

Subaru could do nothing more than look up maliciously at the triumphant Beatrice. This triggered a sudden thought for him. In the current timeline, I received my first mana-drain from Beatrice right before I passed out. Meaning I was mana-drained right before sleeping, then mana-drained right after waking up.

"Are you trying to kill me?!"

"Betty held back. If you were to turn into a husk here, then Betty would have to deal with your husk every time she wants a book."

"Husk? What am I, a bug?"

When seeing her expression that seemed to confirm this, Subaru began to question why he thought this was a safe place. Confirming that he still had feeling in his arms and legs, he mustered his strength, stood up, and lightly tapped his foot against the floor. "Don't tell me that you're the one who killed me."

"If you died then we wouldn't be having this conversation, and it would be more peaceful. Unfortunately, Betty is busy and doesn't have time to kill you.” She folded her arms behind her and moved away from Subaru to a bookshelf. Her gothic lolita dress fluttered as she struggled to grasp a book just barely out of reach. And so…

“This one?”

“...The one next to it. Hurry and hand it over, in fact.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He grabbed the surprisingly thick book off the shelf and passed it to the sulking girl. Remaining displeased as she took it from him, she again moved away from him and towards a stepladder. Her small stature looked more suited to sitting on that stepladder than on a chair, and without fail, whenever Subaru wandered into the Forbidden Library she was sitting in that same spot with a book in hand.

“What book are you reading there?”

“A book that mentions how to get rid of bugs.”

“You have bugs in the library? That’s the worst. What kind?”

“It’s big and black, with a foul expression and mouth. And it thinks highly of itself, I suppose.”

“That’s a very peculiar bug there.”

Something you'd wanna check for and get rid of as quickly as possible. Most of the books here are probably way beyond me, but as a book lover, I can't forgive anything that damages books.

That’s what Subaru truly thought.

Upon seeing that, Beatrice sighed lightly. “Do you have any other business, I suppose? If not then please leave.”

“Ah, um…right. So that thing where you slurp out someone’s mana, can anyone do that?”

“That term feels inappropriate, I suppose… In this mansion, only

Betty and Bubby can use that. Roswaal doesn't have the talent for it, I suppose."

"Really? I heard he was all-powerful." Maybe he was just putting on a show? Subaru formed a rude thought about the manor's lord. He gave himself a pass, however, since he technically hadn't met him in this timeline, yet. "Anyway, about that. Could you not just take so much when you do that mana-drain? Both you and Puck."

"...I suppose Bubby has extracted mana from you as well?"

"Yeah, that bastard. He said I was full of mana, and he just kept asking and asking and forcefully… What's wrong?"

As Subaru continued his rant, a bit of crimson appeared beneath Beatrice's eyes. She placed both hands on her cheeks and muttered, "Ah, what a thing, I suppose. Betty and Bubby had an indirect mana-drain."

"What's with that bittersweet, indirect kiss-like reaction!" Stop that! I feel like a can that's been passed around!"

"With that in mind, it was quite a rich flavor… Can Betty do it again, I suppose?"

"I'll shrivel up like a prune! I don't have much blood right now!"

"Ah, right. Everything important was put back, but your blood wasn't returned, I suppose. Well, even Betty isn't that all-powerful."

Beatrice sighed in disappointment, but Subaru could only tilt his head in confusion. Her statement didn't match up with his memory.

"That makes it sound like it was you who patched me up. It's not good to try and steal credit from Emilia-tan."

"That half-blooded girl doesn't have the power to fix fatal wounds yet, in fact. She and Bubby closed the wound, and Betty healed it… What's wrong, I suppose?"

"I just don't know how to feel."

A hidden side of what happened back then had just unexpectedly come to light.

He assumed that Emilia had healed him, just like she did back in the alleyway. He glared at the girl in front of him suspiciously; she didn't falter and eyed him back just the same. Unless she's a big fat liar, her words can be taken as truth. That means that Beatrice is…

"You big fat liar. You have the worst personality!"

"Says the one who can't take kindness from another person!"

The verbal battle began and quickly escalated to the verge of a physical one. But before Subaru could grab her, he found himself flying through the air by Beatrice's magic. She played with one of her curls as he found himself hitting the now upside-down door.

"It's about time for you to leave, I suppose. The shaking in your hands has stopped, so your fear must've left you."

"…You noticed it?"

"You were trying to hide it, I suppose? It's vexing to be treated so conveniently."

Beatrice turned her nose up and waved her hand as if to shoo away a bug. Subaru accepted this gesture, righted himself, and stood up. He then brought his hand up to his face—the shaking had indeed stopped.

It may have been his fifth death, but it wasn't something that he could get used to. In fact, as the number rose and his experiences increased, he could feel his legs shaking at the thought of feeling that terror again.

On top of that was the way he died this last time. Who could blame him for feeling terror deep in his soul—so deep that no trace of courage remained in his body once he returned?

"I guess the time for excuses is over. Jeez, you're not kind at all." He smiled bitterly. With that last excuse over, Subaru raised his head. Placing his hand on the doorknob, he turned back to the girl one last time. “Sorry. But thanks. I’ll come again.”

“Your payment was the indirect mana-drain. Next time Betty will drain the rest of it, I suppose. So don’t come here again.”

Beatrice cut him off with that curt line as she dropped her eyes back to her book. Smiling so that she wouldn’t see it, Subaru turned the doorknob and passed through the Door Crossing.

“Wait, was that bug you were talking about me?!”

“Hurry up and leave! You wish to be blown away, I suppose!”

And thus he was blown past the Door Crossing.

3

“Umm, can I ask if you’re okay?”

“Damn, that kindness is my only solaaace. This is so great.”

Meeting the silver-haired girl in the garden, Subaru relaxed. He had been struck by Beatrice’s magic and launched out the door. From there, his body kept going past the second-floor terrace until finally landing in a flower bed below. Luckily the ground was soft enough to cushion his fall, but depending on how he fell he could have easily had to restart for the third time. The reason? His smart mouth.

“It keeps seeming more likely that she’s the one who killed me…”

“Can you stand? Is your tummy ok?”

“For now my stomach doesn’t appear to have reopened. It wouldn’t be very funny if the one who closed it up just opened it again. Man, sorry, but could you give me a hand getting up?”

“That’s the flower bed that Rem spread manure over yesterday, isn’t it…?”

“Aaaaaah! Abnormal Play!!”

He quickly withdrew the half of his body that had been dug into the flower bed and rolled out. Emilia, strangely far away, came closer as Subaru frantically wiped the mud and what might not be mud from his clothing.

“That doesn’t count! That doesn’t count, right?! It was yesterday, so it’s just dirt by now, right?!”

“Um, well, Subaru… Good soil grows good plants, so maybe you can take this as a sign of good luck…”

“Emilia-tan has already shifted into consideration mode?!”

Meaning it definitely counts.

Subaru wanted to cry at his pitiful state as he wrung out his sleeve. Meanwhile, Emilia watched that figure with a pained smile before reaching up to her chest. “Puck, wake up.”

In the palm of her hand lay a brightly shining green crystal. The light coming from the crystal formed a shape, and soon after the light solidified, a small gray cat appeared on top of her hand. The cat stretched, yawning widely. “Umm, morning, Lia. Ah, Subaru, you’re awake.”

“Morning, Puck. Sorry to ask this of you when you just woke up, but could you wash Subaru for me?” Emilia asked as she raised Puck in front of her face, one eye closed.

Subaru found himself enchanted by her demeanor. Puck nonchalantly turned around, noticed Subaru’s state, and nodded in understanding. “Alright, I’ll wash him. Here!”

“Wash me? What does that—ughr?!”

Puck turned both of his palms towards Subaru. From his palms appeared a magic circle, from which a continuous burst of water erupted. The water blasted Subaru’s right side with enough force that it seemed like Puck was trying to wipe all filth in the world from existence.

“Is this a flash flood!!” cried Subaru, as the force of the water caused his body to spin.

“Oh sorry, I should balance it,” Puck said, before changing the direction of the water. With the water now hitting his left side, Subaru began to spin in the opposite direction.

Puck fine-tuned the direction from there.

“There, now you’re all clean,” declared Puck.

“Right to left…my heart…goes round and round…” Falling to his knees and arms on the water-soaked ground, the overwhelming urge to vomit came over Subaru. But with an empty stomach, all that came out was spit.

Despite the torturous treatment, he did feel a little better. Wiping away the spit from his mouth, he slowly got up. “My first flash flood was dangerous… I thought my arm was going to come off. Hey, you aren’t actually the culprit here, are you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but do I look like someone who would do such an evil thing? That hurts,” Puck pouted in defiance, his hands on his hips, despite having just nearly drowned Subaru.

In response, Subaru just flicked him on the forehead and turned back to Emilia. It was the worst reunion yet, but his negotiating power going forward depended on how well he could recover from this. Despite everything, he had managed to make it work the first and second times, so he decided to push forward based on that. But as he was thinking about how to make the first step...

“Puh.”

“Heh?”

“Ahaha! Sorry, no, ahahaha! What are you two doing… Ahaha! Ah, I’m dying.”

In the face of such laughter, his resolve went flying away. Pointing towards Subaru’s soaked figure, Emilia burst into uncontrollable laughter. If they weren’t outside she’d be rolling on the floor.

Subaru could only stand there dumbfounded. Then he faced Puck, who had at some point started flying. “Anyway, first contact: success! Thanks for the assist, Father!”

“Who are you calling Father? I won’t hand over my daughter so easily,” Puck declared, puffing out his chest.

Upon hearing that, Emilia burst out into laughter once again.

Chapter 19:
The Results of Reading and Writing

1

“Ram and Rem said you’d be right over. I wondered what was keeping you,” said Emilia, her laughter subsiding. She stood at the edge of the garden, her eyes fixed on Subaru. As she spoke, traces of laughter lingered in her eyes, turning into teardrops that she gently brushed away with her fingertips.

Subaru, the cause of her hysterical outburst, toyed with Puck in his hands. “Let’s just say I wanted to give our reunion some impact and didn’t want to leave anything to chance!”

“Yeah, but isn’t leaping from the terrace straight into the flower bed a bit much?”

“Sorry, I just couldn’t help myself. I’m not usually that much of a brat,” Subaru said. He didn’t want her to see him as a pain in the ass who threw himself out of windows just for fun. Getting stuck in the flower bed, not to mention having Puck wash him off with a deluge of water, wasn’t exactly something he enjoyed.

“Anyway, you said you wondered what was keeping me,” Subaru continued. “Were you waiting for me all this time?”

“Huh? No, I wasn’t,” Emilia replied. “Certainly, I did want to thank you, so I didn’t want to step away and miss you, and I didn’t want to make an injured person go around looking for me, either. But it’s just by coincidence that I’m still here.”

“Right, a coincidence, Subaru,” Puck interjected. “She made up a bunch of reasons and took an extra long time grooming my fur, and bored the lesser spirits by talking about the same things over and over again… Sure, she was doing that, but that doesn’t mean she was waiting for you. Right?”

Puck hijacked the conversation in response to Emilia’s self-destructive reply. Emilia looked at Puck, unrelenting in his teasing, with a smile on her face. “Puck?”

“Just be honest!” Puck continued. “That’s what makes you so charming, dear daughter. I’m sure Subaru would agree, too. Right?”

“Of course I do!” Subaru beamed. “Emilia-tan is the absolute best! I’m already head-over-heels!”

“Subaru, don’t join in on Puck’s shenanigans…” Emilia chided. “By the way, what does ‘tan’ mean? Where does it come from, and why?”

The question of Subaru’s names for her became a topic of discussion each time he spoke one.

Previously, he was able to simply brush it off. But this time, Subaru would join forces with Puck to cover it up. They looked over at each other, eye to eye.

“Didn’t you know?” Subaru began. “That’s one of the highest forms of endearment one could use to show affection for another person. Especially when said slowly and deliberately, like this. Emilia-taaaan.”

“Oh, is that so…?” Emilia asked quizzically. “But I’ve never heard of it…”

“Well, it’s an old, long-forgotten expression of the past now,” Puck explained. “So it’s no surprise that you’ve never heard it before. Actually, I had forgotten about it for a while, myself.”

Looking off to the distance, Puck piled his own made-up story on top of Subaru’s tall tale. Subaru nodded solemnly at his words. “Yes, it’s an old and moldy term, long forgotten like a fairy tale that’s been lost to history. However, its meaning lives on in our hearts, ever so faintly.”

“Nowadays, though, there seem to be less and less people who remember it…” Puck started. “Hold up! Subaru, don’t tell me…you don’t happen to be…involved with that lost kingdom?!”

“Involved with…” Subaru paused. “Well, not exactly, but you could say I’m part of it. Didn’t you know? The royal family of that lost kingdom was said to have black hair and dark eyes…!”

“You’re both laughing way too much!” Emilia cut them off.

Subaru and Puck erupted with a surprised “Gaaahh!!”

Just as the conversation was heating up, blocks of ice hurtled from Emilia’s direction, forcefully shutting it down. Although each ice block was no bigger than a lump of sugar, it was a big enough quantity to block his field of view, making it the perfect prank. It struck true, sticking to Subaru’s face.

Removing the ice block plastered to his face by force was far too painful an endeavor, so all he could do was wait until it melted from his body heat. He’d have to endure the painful frostbite in the meantime.

“So annoying and painful! Critical hit! It’s super effective!” Subaru rolled on the ground, raising his body temperature in an attempt to speed up the thawing process.

Looking down at the figure rolling about on the lawn, Emilia let out an exasperated sigh. “Oh, come on. You always turn everything into a joke… You won’t even let me say a single word of thanks; that’s simply unfair.”

Emilia didn’t seem to grasp the severity of the situation. “You really look like you’re in pain… Oh, don’t pick it off like that, you’ll bleed!” Meanwhile, Puck was getting a kick out of Subaru’s humiliation.

Why hasn’t Puck received any damage? He was in on it too, huh.

“You see, I’m more than capable of deflecting Lia’s magic with a single hand,” Puck boasted.

“Hm, I see,” Subaru replied.

“So I simply diverted the attack that came my way to the person next to me.”

“Thereby resulting in me receiving the brunt of a critical hit! Your cuteness really belies your cunning, y’know!”

Subaru continued rubbing his face until the last of the ice melted away. Standing before the angry Subaru, Puck laughed sheepishly and put a hand to his head. Continuing with these antics would only tire him out. Knowing this, Subaru decisively turned toward the mansion.

“Oh, there’s Ram and Rem,” he announced.

Emilia thought aloud, “No kidding, is it breakfast time already?”

It was an unusual sight, both twins out and about in the garden in the middle of the day. Subaru was gazing at Emilia, head tilted in contemplation, when he realized what was going on. It was at this precise time on the first day that Roswaal would be making his return. The twins must have come to get us.

They approached the group and bowed politely, announcing in unison: “Master Roswaal has returned. Please return to the mansion.” Subaru would never tire of their synchronized stereo sound. It was a sound he loved.

Emilia, having no say in the matter, simply shrugged. Subaru stood up and stretched, assessing his own condition, before turning to the twins. Looking him up and down, they gave a comment.

“Sister, Sister. We look away for but a moment and our guest has become a wet, muddy rat.”

“Rem, Rem, it’s only been a minute, and our guest is now a filthy rag.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Subaru responded to their insulting observations. “Have you seen my jacket?” Looking up at the mansion, he prepared to change his clothes, clean himself up, and face Roswaal once again.

This time, I’ll try a different approach.

For what would be his third round of meeting Roswaal for the first time, Subaru headed to the main hall to greet him. And just the same, it would be his ‘first time’ joining them in the dining room for breakfast.

For Subaru, having already been welcomed to this mansion three times, it was a familiar flow of events. Subaru suspected that Roswaal’s strong will was causing these events to persistently unfold.

The first day Subaru was summoned to this other world, that is to say, the day he met Emilia, was also an event that repeated itself four times over the course of four repeated days. It could very well be that situations that involved such strong intent would never fail to occur.

For example, Felt stealing Emilia’s insignia, and Subaru getting mugged by the Ton Chin Kan trio in the alley. The fact that the story itself never deviated from that general flow, despite minor changes in between, such as people’s whims and Subaru’s actions, was perhaps also attributed to such strong intent.

Therefore, it was only inevitable that the conversation over breakfast would lead to talk of Emilia’s insignia, of her candidacy for Queenship, and ultimately, of Subaru’s reward. Though he couldn’t deny the fact that he had nudged the conversation in that direction.

“Aaas Lady Emilia’s patron,” Roswaal began, “I am willing to pay a reeeeasonable price to keep the information you obtained about the insignia robbery under wraps. Okaaay?”

“A price, huh…” Subaru repeated thoughtfully. Having successfully brought the conversation back to this point, he contemplated how to reach his ideal conclusion.

In his previous two loops, Subaru settled the matter with an appeal to work in the mansion as their butler. The last time, he only did so on the assumption that the day would unfold in the same manner as the first. But this time he had no intention whatsoever of traveling down the same path. In order to guarantee a different outcome, the reward from Roswaal would also have to be different.

“Okay, Rosy,” he said conclusively. “Let me crash at your mansion for a couple of days. And after that, I’ll get out of your hair. Just lend me a bit of pocket money for the road.”

Puzzled by this request, Roswaal replied curiously, “Hmmm, sooo, when you say a liiiiittle bit…you mean enough to buy a couple of hooouses?” He narrowed his eyes as he spoke, perhaps reading too deeply into Subaru’s request.

Subaru, however, waved his hand with a chuckle. “No, no, I wasn’t being roundabout,” he said dismissively. “I just wanna kick back and eat well for a few days. I can live on my own after that.”

“Lady Emilia was riiiight,” Roswaal pondered. “That is indeeeeed a rather… mooodest request, isn’t it?”

“No biggie, it’s not like I did much…” Subaru continued, before suddenly changing his tune. “Unless you didn’t want to separate from me, Emilia-tan! Now that’s a different story!”

Emilia chimed in. “That’s a very selfless offer, but I’m sure you have your reasons, and I’m sure it must be very important to you. So, Subaru… I don’t want to hold you back.”

Subaru gasped at her unexpected input. “I've been rejected because my words were interpreted positively?!” Well, I don’t know what kind of image of me Emilia has made up in her mind, but at least the negotiations have ended with a rather fine impression of me.

Roswaal adjusted the collar of his kabuki-looking outfit. He observed Subaru, who appeared to be wracking his brain. “Weeeellll, if you really insist, then so be it. I’ll oblige. I’ll have Ram and Rem prepare what you neeeed. Is three days enough? If you need anything else, just aaaask.”

“Right,” responded the relieved Subaru. “Well, then…lend me some paper, a quill, and a book of fairy tales!” Roswaal raised his eyebrows slightly at Subaru’s unusual request. Subaru scratched his head, glancing over at the twins.

“I promised to keep practicing reading and writing every night,” he said. “Don’t be fooled by my looks. I’m a man of my word!” He gestured at the twins with a wink. They could only look at each other blankly at his one-sided promise.

3

In effect, this would be Subaru’s third week at Roswaal Manor. And in this third iteration, Subaru set his focus on one goal above all else: learning the cause of his death and the identity of the assailant in question.

“My only leads are ‘magic’ and ‘chain’…” pondered Subaru. “But that still doesn’t tell me what I need to know!” All he knew was that on the night of the fourth day, someone would appear and make an attempt on his life.

If only I could tell Roswaal. Then we could put some countermeasures in place! But I can’t prove where I got the information, so that would be a huge gamble… If only I knew what the assailant looked like, or what they were after… That alone would make a world of difference!

“So this time around, I’ll focus on only one thing. It’s a one-point wager to gather information. If the conditions for Return by Death are still the same, then…” That would guarantee at least one more chance for me to restart. That was the only conclusion Subaru could devise at this stage.

Subaru had experienced a breakthrough before on his fourth iteration after three deaths. On that basis, he should be able to return at least once again. All he needed was to gather enough intel to make said breakthrough for his next fourth run.

“Though honestly, I’d prefer not to go with a plan that guarantees my death from the start…” he lamented. But as long as Subaru was so limited in the measures he could take, some sacrifice would be necessary. Besides, it’s not like I’m just gonna sit around and do nothing. He was prepared to restart once again, but despite that willingness, he’d like nothing more than a conclusion that avoided another agonizing death. It was only natural to be so hell-bent on breaking through this loop if the opportunity arose.

“I’ve already told Puck to look after Emilia-tan,” Subaru affirmed to himself. After their exchange in the garden, while Emilia’s attention was drawn elsewhere, Subaru pulled Puck aside. Without getting into details, he warned Puck to look after Emilia during the night.

At first, Puck was skeptical due to Subaru’s lack of specifics. But being a feline with the ability to read into people’s emotions, he ultimately determined that Subaru’s concern was not misplaced. “I don’t know what’s going on, but you do seem to genuinely care for Lia,” he’d said.

Puck readily accepted Subaru’s persistent request. So it was safe to assume that Emilia’s safety would be secured to some extent. Although I haven’t known him very long, I can tell Puck is a cat of his word. Subaru was even willing to go so far as to give up his right to pet him, something he normally wouldn’t have done so easily.

I’m just glad he didn’t ask too many questions. It sure takes a load off! But why Subaru was so relieved by this did not even cross his mind at the moment. “All that’s left is that loli and Roswaal…but how do I get them to take a hint? That’s a lofty goal for a guy with no social skills.” He gruffly scratched his head, tucked the quill under his nose, and straightened his posture. The sheer number of challenges ahead is making my head pound.

Regardless of his ability to start over if he failed, using the girls as sacrificial pawns in his plan was far from a painless decision for Subaru. If possible, I’d like both Ram and Rem to survive. Heck, even Roswaal and Beatrice deserve to be there, too. Even if the hurdle is so high that I can’t see the top, I can’t use this as an excuse not to jump. “Now, where to begin…?”

“Pardon me, sir.” A voice from outside interrupted his thoughts as he leaned his weight back into the creaky chair. Before he could reply, the door opened to reveal one of the maid sisters—the pink-haired Ram.

Holding a tray of tea in her hands, Ram furrowed her brows at the sight of Subaru, seated at his desk. “Well, well. So you really are studying, sir.”

“Hey, that’s super rude!” Subaru pouted. “I’m the honored guest here, y’know.”

“Ram is aware that you’re a freeloader in the name of a guest, sir.” Apparently unfazed, Ram barged into the room, placed the tray on the desk, and offered Subaru a cup of steaming hot tea with a courteous “Here you go.”

The tea in this world was similar to the ‘black tea’ of his own world, both in appearance and taste. But Subaru, who wasn’t particularly a fan of tea-based drinks, half-resigned himself to the fact that colas and soft drinks in this world were out of the question.

Subaru had spent a total of ten days at Roswaal Manor. Over that period, his roles changed from injured patient, to honored guest, to servant. But one thing that hadn’t changed over the course of events was the taste of tea. And Subaru had been there long enough to sense that Ram’s bluntness would not allow for cutting corners.

Which is why, once again, Subaru found himself hesitantly lifting the cup to his mouth. “Yup. Still tastes like shit.”

“What a loathsome impression for the finest tea leaves in our mansion,” Ram scolded. But Subaru held fast to his opinions.

“It’s bitter. It’s gross. It tastes like a mouthful of grass. I don’t even wanna try to look sophisticated by drinking it, especially not if it’s you I’m drinking with. It tastes like plant water.”

“You’re being incredibly curt, sir,” Ram said as she lifted the other cup on the tray as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She helped herself to a seat on the bed behind the desk. This maid has some nerve, coming here to slack off on her duties, Subaru thought as he stared at the unconcerned Ram.

“You got some balls, lazing around in front of your honorable guest,” Subaru scoffed.

Ram replied coolly, “Pay Ram no mind, sir. She’s not asking anything of you. She's simply using tea as an excuse to kill time."

Subaru continued his criticism. "You must be a maid of pretty high status to have a sister who does all the work while you slack off."

"Not as high as the honorable guest who gives my sister all that work." Ram raised her hands to cover her mouth on her expressionless face as if to suppress a giggle. While exchanging insults with Ram, Subaru couldn't help but feel that something wasn't adding up.

The progression had already unfolded into what would've been his second night from the third loop. Within that time, Subaru had remained confined to his own guest room, hyper-focused on his studies, with the exception of the time spent chasing Emilia's ass. Although on rare occasions, he also made time to pester Beatrice, too.

In other words, I haven't advanced beyond a mere 'guest' and 'servant' relationship with Rem and Ram in this loop. One would assume that would mean a more distant relationship between them, especially in comparison to the first and second loops.

Yet despite this, for some reason, Ram had been visiting Subaru's room. She would visit to see how he was doing, to serve him tea, even to interrupt his studies as if checking on his progress, followed by them bickering before she left the room. It had become a recurring theme.

If anything, I've gotten even closer with Ram compared to the previous loops. For Subaru, this was a relationship that brought both gratitude and remorse. Having already prepared to use this loop as a strategic sacrifice, it was a shame to have to let this world pass him by.

"I just don't get it…" Subaru muttered pensively. "Can it be that your heart's been so moved by the sight of me, a 'man of literature', scribbling away at his work?"

"A man of literature…" Ram reacted to Subaru's musings. She watched him from her corner on the bed, taking in the sight of this boy from head to toe, and let out a “Heh.”

“You do that sometimes, but that’s not really nice, y’know.” Subaru’s cheeks twitched as Ram snickered with a condescending look on her face.

She shrugged her shoulders, not once breaking her usual calm composure.

“A young boy with an athletic build, a face that screams pure evil rather than intelligence, and a mentality without a hint of sensibility. If that’s what you call a ‘man of literature’, sir, Ram must question if you may not, in fact, be delusional.” Ram continued the insults.

“Oof, that’s harsh!” Subaru flinched at her words. “Although it is true that I was famous in my neighborhood because people in my town frequently said things like, ‘Subaru from the Natsuki family is fit like an incredible athlete but is a shut-in!’”

Indeed, anytime someone brought it up, his mother would report back to him from outside his room, stifling a laugh. The humiliation of the past rushed back to him. He wanted to sink through the floor. Subaru fought back the urge as a blush flashed across his face.

Ram stood up and approached him, peering over at the notes on his desk. “What disgraceful handwriting. You dare call yourself a ‘man of literature’, sir?”

“You dare call yourself a maid just because you use the word ‘sir’?” Subaru retorted. “Even maid cafe maids are nicer than you.” Not that I’ve ever visited one myself. I’ve only heard about them through word-of-mouth, but their hospitality sounds amazing! Though I have no way to confirm that.

Subaru’s bitter remarks were casually brushed aside. Ram continued flipping through the pages, unimpressed. Staring at her motionless profile, Subaru suddenly held up the book of fairy tales. I almost completely forgot about this! “Well, this book’s written almost entirely in E-letters, so it’s about time I got around to reading it.”

The book's reddish-brown spine was marked with a simple title: A Collection of Fairy Tales. The book itself wasn't much different from those in Subaru's world, complete with a table of contents in the beginning, followed by stories written in chapters. A quick glance at the contents revealed about ten fairy tales in total. It wasn't very thick, and looked easy to finish. It shouldn't take me an hour.

Subaru grinned. "I mean, it's about time I taste the fruits of my labor."

"Reading these stories is nothing to brag about," Ram stated, shutting him down. "It would be more embarrassing if you didn't know them. As a 'man of literature', it's only natural that you should know them, sir."

"Oh, come on, don't give me that. Why're you so offended by me claiming to be a man of literature? You got a fetish or something for well-read guys?" Ignoring Subaru's sexual harassment disguised as a question, Ram took the cup that was still on the desk and tilted it to her lips. That was my drink.

"Hey, what kind of maid drinks her honorable guest's drink?" Subaru gasped.

Ram replied nonchalantly, "Well, it's not like you were enjoying it. This tea is more suited to a person with a decent palate, anyway."

"You call liquified grass a 'decent palate'?" Subaru groaned. "You know what, never mind. I'm gonna bury myself in my book now, so go home. Or, I dunno, kill some time. Or whatever it is you maids do."

Subaru waved his hand dismissively at Ram, leaning back his chair as he finally opened the book. It began with a preface by the author who had compiled the collection of fairy tales. But before he knew it, he stumbled onto written characters that were definitely not the 'E-characters' he was familiar with. I'm already lost.

"Let's see… this says… 'Circle-circle, square-square, blankety-blankety-blank'… Shit. I can't read this part at all. I mean, I guess I could skip over it, but it doesn't feel right." Subaru grimaced. What if I come across words I can't read at the best part of the story?

Closing one eye, Subaru flipped through the book, trying to see the letters while also trying to avoid spoilers. After quickly confirming the difficulty of the text, he returned to the story. "Now where was I… 'Once upon a time…'"

Subaru continued reading, slightly amused to know that even fairy tales from another world began with the same cliche. Fairy tales as they were, their beginnings and ending were quite clear and concise. They were no different from those back in Subaru's world in the sense that they left plenty of room for imagination.

"They're just like those children's stories with some kind of moral in them. There's even one nearly identical to The Red Oni Who Cried." If asked what his favorite fairy tale was, Subaru would have to say it was that one. If asked what his least favorite fairy tale was, he would also have to say it was that one.

The Red Oni Who Cried was a story that Subaru both loved and hated. He had fond memories of scribbling his own ending into every copy of the picture books when he was in kindergarten. "The Blue Oni deserves happiness too, Buckaroo. Why should he stay sad?"

Ram's voice interrupted his flashback. "Ram doesn't know what you're talking about or why you're crying all of a sudden. But it's not a good look. So please stop crying in front of her."

"How could you be so cruel to a boy's tears?!" Subaru wailed. Snapping back to reality, he rubbed his eyes and let the tears fade. He lightly tapped the cover of the book he had finished reading in front of Ram, who was still in the room.

"I did it," he bragged. "I read the whole thing. It was more interesting than I expected. I was able to enjoy the subtle difference in our values…kinda like a cross-cultural exchange, huh? Maybe I should study art here and share knowledge about the other side of the world. Do you think they'll come after me to a different world for copyright violation?"

"Ram didn't understand half of what you said, sir… That's your impression after reading the book? Wasn't there anything memorable about the stories?"

Plagiarism is bad, though. Subaru's beliefs as a creator wavered at his question. Looking up, he flipped through the collection of stories. "The story of the dragon in the middle of the book, and the witch story at the end. They're the only two that really caught my attention. I mean, anyone can tell these two are treated completely differently from the others."

Of all the tales in the collection, the two that made the strongest impression on Subaru were those two in particular. One was made to appear like it was truly exceptional, while the other was completely…

"The witch story seems like a throwaway. Like the editor just included it because he had to. It's just an outline without any real plot." Subaru critiqued the tales.

Ram added her thoughts. "The witch story is something else," she began. "The dragon story is revered because this is Lugunica, after all. It's only natural."

"Oh, right," Subaru recalled. "Lugunica is known as 'the Dragon Kingdom,' isn't it? Now I know where the name comes from." With a nod, Subaru placed the book of fairy tales back on the desk and put his hand on the cover.

Lugunica, the Dragon Kingdom. A fairly large country, and the country where Subaru lived for the moment. There was a good reason why this country, located in the easternmost part of this world according to their map, was known as the 'Dragon Kingdom'. Simply put, this kingdom's prosperity had long been dependent upon a covenant with a dragon, which allowed the country to flourish.

"Famine, pestilence, war… The dragon has protected Lugunica in all kinds of situations," Ram continued.

"And the name they gave it was 'Dragon Kingdom'. How profound," Subaru noted. “According to the story, it was a covenant between the royal family and a dragon. Sounds more like an origin story than a fairy tale.”

“Yes, it’s true,” Ram confirmed. “To this day, the noble dragon watches over our land from afar. From beyond the Great Waterfall. Until the promise made to the royal family is fulfilled.”

Subaru let out a thoughtful “Hmm” as Ram somberly spoke. An age-old pact with a dragon. The story never mentioned the nature of the pact, but it was a pact that had saved the kingdom from crisis on many occasions. It must’ve been some kind of contract between man and dragon.

After some thought, Subaru came to a realization. If it was indeed the royal family of Lugunica with whom the dragon had made a covenant, that would mean… “Wait a minute…by any chance, the family that made a pact with the dragon…didn’t they just die the other day?”

“Yes,” Ram confirmed his suspicions. “It was rather sudden.”

Subaru started to fret. “Isn’t that bad? I mean, I don’t know anything about the situation, but still…”

This is a dragon that promises and provides so much. So the compensation would be substantial. But if the royalty is eradicated before paying that compensation, wouldn’t the dragon get pissed?

“No, no, no, cut the negative thinking crap,” Subaru scolded himself. “A better theory is that the royal family had already paid up. The dragon’s happy, the country’s safe, everyone wins.”

Subaru pushed away his fears. Ram, however, dismissed his hope with a single shake of her head. “Nobody knows what the dragon wants, as the story goes. And what the dragon will do in the present situation, nobody knows this either…” Ram paused, then breathed out a “No. The only one who knows what the dragon wants, sir, is the dragon himself.”

Subaru gulped. Sweat trickled down his forehead. It’s not even hot in here. He chewed on Ram's words, swallowed them, and digested them. Finally, he spoke. "Then, isn't that an insane amount of pressure on Emilia-tan?"

"Indeed," Ram agreed. "An entire country's fate on your shoulders, and negotiations with a dragon who can choose to protect or destroy it on a whim. The thought alone makes it seem like a fairy tale."

It was the last night of his second loop that Subaru saw Emilia look at this book with uncertainty. It was only after his death that he realized why her hand had stopped turning the pages. The size and weight of the pressure she carried was beyond his imagination. Just thinking about the burden she bore on her slender shoulders and the toll it took on her mind made his heart want to scream in a fit of rage and sorrow.

"There's nothing we can do," Ram said.

"Huh?" Subaru questioned, but Ram continued speaking.

"Everyone is born with certain qualities and the responsibilities that come with them. Lady Emilia was born under such a star. And that is why she must endure these hardships. She must persevere uphill, no matter how steep that road may be."

"Isn't that too much to place on one girl's shoulders?" Subaru asked, his voice quivering due to an unidentifiable anger.

"I suppose it would be nice to have someone to help carry the baggage. But even when she reaches the summit, she must ultimately face that on her own," Ram replied, her voice cold and her response rational.

Subaru noticed her strenuous effort to stay rational, allowing him to regain his composure before he exploded in anger. There's no point taking my anger out on Ram. She's not the one responsible for this. She's only stating her readiness to accept the situation.

"Oh, right, Ram," Subaru said, changing the subject. He didn't feel that apologizing was the right thing to do at this time. "About the other story…” The story of the witch at the end of the book was only a handful of pages in length, and its treatment paled in comparison to the dragon story, which was placed smack-dab in the middle of the book. A story called, The Witch of Envy.

“So about that witch story—”

“Ram doesn’t want to talk about that story,” Ram cut him off abruptly. She hastily collected the cups and put them on the tray. “Ram has overstayed her welcome. She doesn’t want to leave Rem with too much to do, so she will go back. Ram will return when it’s time for dinner, sir.”

“Y-Yeah…” Subaru gaped at her.

“Good day, sir.” Turning away with an air of nonchalance, Ram’s petite body exited the room. Once the door closed silently behind her, Subaru flopped over onto the bed with an exhale. “Somebody’s moody…”

Subaru grumbled, lifting the book of fairy tales to his face and thumbing through the pages. The last one, The Witch of Envy, was a relatively concise tale, spanning no more than four pages.

“A frightening witch, a dreadful witch. The very mention of her name was enough to fill someone with dread. They called her the Witch of Envy, and…”

There was no beginning, middle, or end. The story only conveyed the horrors of this witch. It was written in simple language that even a child could understand, underscoring the bleak and simplistic eeriness of the tale. “I’ve worked my ass off to learn how to read this book, and yet…”

The sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, indeed even that freshness one feels after reading an entire book, had all gone to waste in a single moment. Subaru rolled over in bed and, for once, detached his thoughts from the story. He pondered the trials and errors of this loop, with only two days left in its run.

Subaru’s mind raced. The same thoughts swirled over and over again through his brain. Before he knew it, his consciousness had melted into a muck all over the soft bed and sheets, until it had all but faded away.

Chapter 20:
Struggling Alone in the Dusk

1

“Er, right. It was only a short while, but thanks for everything.”

Standing in the entrance hall, watched by everyone in the mansion (which amounted to just four people, excluding Beatrice), Subaru fought back the itch of embarrassment and bowed his head.

The three-day stay, the limit he had been promised, had come to an end. The day for Subaru to leave the mansion had arrived.

Subaru’s outfit was simple: the jersey and convenience store bag he had on when summoned to this other world, plus a tool pouch provided by Roswaal’s generosity.

The pouch was heavy, apparently containing a decent sum of money, though given the monetary sense of aristocrats, he was a little terrified to look inside. Especially for Subaru, who was currently woefully lacking in means of self-defense.

“Are you really sure you’re okay? You really should just ask Roswaal to call a carriage here for you.”

Among those seeing him off, Emilia stood in the center, the worry on her face showing no sign of fading. Happy that she was so concerned for him, Subaru waved his raised hand.

“Nah, nah, nah, I’m good. I’m gonna take it slow and easy. I can’t cause you guys any more trouble than I already have, honestly.”

“…I know you’re capable, Subaru, so I probably don’t need to worry, but…”

“Whoa, getting high marks like that is actually kinda pressuring. But, but, I’ll be fine. Someday, when I’ve become a stronger, smarter, richer man, I’ll come on a white horse to sweep you off your feet.”

“Got your handkerchief? Drinking water? And… right, lagmite for when it gets dark. And then, and then…”

“You’re in full-on mom mode?!”

Emilia’s worry knew no bounds; she had even gone so far as to ask, “Will you be able to sleep alone without getting lonely?” Just how desperate for companionship did she think he was?

Or perhaps, her intuition had sensed the uncontrollable anxiety Subaru held deep in his heart.

“Well theeeen, stay safe, Mr. Subaru. It was short, but it was fuuuun, wasn’t it?”

The tall man extended a hand. Subaru shook it and smiled back.

“Yeah, thanks to you too. You even gave me souvenirs and everything; you really rolled out the red carpet.”

“Glad to hear it. Oh, yes, try not to lose that souvenir. I added a liiiitle bonus to match the memories of your three days with us.”

Roswaal winked one eye as a signal. Sensing his intent, Subaru nodded firmly and shook the tool pouch on his back.

“Right, right, hush money. I got it, I won’t spill the beans. I’ll swear on the Dragon if you want.”

“Talking to you, I feel like I might lose sight of the true nature of my schemes. Besides, in this country, swearing on the Dragon is the highest form of oath. I don’t doubt you, but… see that you don’t forget that.”

Despite the reminder, Subaru raised his hand, then turned that hand toward the twins standing behind Roswaal. As the two stood silently still, Subaru patted them on the shoulders with his raised hand.

“You guys took super good care of me, too. Especially Rem-rin—

thanks for the tasty meals. And Ram, well, uh… you're pretty good at cleaning toilets, right?"

"Sister, Sister. Our guest is hopelessly crap at flattery."

"Rem, Rem. Our guest has a fatally poor sense of flattery."

"Oh, shut it. I seriously just couldn't think of anything else. But thanks."

Having said his goodbyes to everyone, he turned his back before the reluctance could set in.

The twins quickly opened the doors to the entrance hall, and the road leading straight to the nearby village spread out before Subaru's eyes.

Walk about twenty minutes to the village, then move on to another village from there. Take a carriage from there to the Royal Capital —that was the plan Subaru had explained to everyone.

"Well, thanks for everything. See you again someday, maybe."

"Yeah, be careful. Don't get hurt, okay?"

Leaving a smile for Emilia, who worried for him until the very end, Subaru stepped out onto the road just as he was sent off.

The silver-haired girl waved her hand in front of the entrance until the mansion was out of sight.

That distant gesture was infinitely endearing, causing the flame in Subaru's chest, which had been nearly extinguished by anxiety, to blaze up once more.

Alone on the road, he stopped walking after awhile.

Subaru surveyed his surroundings, confirmed there was no sign of anyone, and suddenly stepped off the path and into the forest. The forest flanking the road was deep and connected to the mountains; Ram had strictly warned him not to enter it due to the abundance of wild animals.

Ignoring that warning, Subaru pushed through the vegetation, heading deeper into the woods. He climbed several slopes, maintaining his pace even as protruding branches left scratches on him.

He must have proceeded through the mountains for about fifteen minutes.

“Alright, this is the spot.”

Suddenly the forest opened up, and the high sky filled his widened field of vision. After climbing several slopes, Subaru had arrived at a place like a small, elevated hill nestled in the mountains.

This was his destination. Miming the action of wiping sweat from his brow, Subaru then brought the cliff before him into view—and specifically, the building that existed directly below it.

It was a familiar mansion. None other than the majestic Roswaal estate.

By circling around the road and going through the forest and mountains, he had reached a perfect peeping point from which he could monitor the Roswaal manor from a high vantage. Specifically,

“I can see the west side, where Emilia-tan’s room is, really well. If anything strange happens, I’ll know right away.”

From this distance, Subaru’s eyesight could just faintly make out the window of her room. Even setting that aside, it was a position that allowed him to grasp the full view of the mansion, including the west wing. He judged that if anyone visited the mansion from the outside, he would definitely be able to see them.

It was already past the morning of the fourth day in his third loop. In Subaru’s experience, there were about sixteen hours remaining until the time of his previous death.

Which meant, presumably, that any anomaly at the mansion would occur around then as well.

“Now, I just wait for something to happen.”

If it was only sixteen hours, a stakeout was possible even with Subaru's mental fortitude.

Ideally, he had wanted to create this situation three days ago—right after the loop started—but he gave himself a three-day buffer, fearing his concentration wouldn't hold if he acted too hastily.

Thanks to that, his energy, stamina, and motivation were all topped up.

To detect any abnormality at the Roswaal manor in advance, or to create conditions where he could rush in no matter what happened —that was the prerequisite Subaru had prepared.

If he stayed at the mansion and was included in the attacker's targets from the start, his consciousness would be muddled by the same magic as before.

In the current situation where he wanted even a single fragment of information about the attacker, such a thing would be fatal.

Therefore, Subaru chose a strategy of using Emilia and the others as decoys to lure out the attacker.

Of course, unable to be completely heartless, Subaru had set up several safety lines and intended to dash into the mansion the moment anything happened, running around to warn of the enemy attack.

"It'd help if the enemy is the cautious type who gets spooked and runs when I scream."

Voicing his optimistic observation, Subaru lowered his tool bag and searched its contents. What he pulled out was a long rope he had "borrowed" from the mansion's warehouse. From his experience as a servant, he knew exactly where such supplies were kept.

He had sneaked it out when no one was looking, carrying it for just such an emergency.

Tying the rope to the trunk of a nearby thick tree, Subaru secured the other end of the rope to his own body. Of course, using it as a lifeline just like that would kill him from the g-force, so he tied several knots at various points to act as shock absorbers first.

“Now for the small knife to cut the rope… hopefully cutting the rope is all I’ll need it for.”

With a blade length comparable to a fruit knife, he was also considering its role for self-harm in a worst-case scenario.

As a means of resisting the magic from the last time, he could probably crush the initial weakening of his consciousness before it took hold. Though he didn’t think he could counter the debilitation that followed.

“Better than having no plan at all… After all, this time is for preparing countermeasures for the next time.”

Muttering as if to convince himself, Subaru shook his head to banish his timidity.

Suddenly, the faces of the people at the Roswaal manor he had just bid farewell to crossed his mind.

This time, Subaru was trying to use them as sacrificial pawns to prepare for the next loop. Even though, just like the times before, he was supposed to have formed a genuine bond with them.

If he closed his eyes, he could recall the days of these last four days.

He didn’t think he had built as close a relationship with the others this time, but he still had many opportunities to interact with Ram and Rem, and he had actively gone to see Emilia. All while predicting that right now, in this very moment, it would cause his heart to ache like this.

This is a punishment. This is just desserts. This is a penalty he deserves to take.

It is the kind of judgment that Subaru, who planned this strategy on the premise of loss—deciding that he had to use them as pawns at least once—must absolutely accept.

He interacted with them thinking it was painful.

He interacted with them thinking they were dear to him.

Subaru spent these three days enduring the agony of sticking his fingers into an open wound, tearing the flesh further and breaking the bone.

So that he would not forget any of it.

“I told myself this, Natsuki Subaru. When you repeat it, even if everyone else forgets… you will remember.”

That’s why he mustn’t think it’s okay to forget what happens this time.

Until the very, very, very last moment, he must continue to seek the happy ending he desires.

No one has the right to decide that their existence is just bubbles disappearing into the rift of time.

Keeping his body low, clenching his jaw, Subaru hid himself between the trees and grass, monitoring the Roswaal manor through gaps in the forest.

His breathing was shallow, and though his body should have been tense, his heartbeat was strangely slow; he could feel his entire being affirming the resolve Subaru had set.

A sensation of his body obeying him like never before.

While grasping that rare sensation, Subaru waited silently for the time.

2

He lay low, waiting for the time to come.

Tension stiffened his body, anxiety shook his heart unevenly, and impatience caused extraneous things to flicker in his vision.

Quietly avoiding such unconscious interference, Subaru continued to hold his breath.

Six hours had already passed, and the sunset was pouring a brilliant orange into a world that had been before noon.

Thinking back, this was the time when, in previous loops, he would have been heading to the village for shopping with either Ram or Rem.

However, this time he hadn't confirmed either of them leaving the mansion. Did that mean without Subaru, the shopping event didn't happen?

"Maybe since there's one less mouth to feed, purely practical, they pushed the shopping to tomorrow… or something. Weird that I can look at it objectively."

Because he had been silent for over six hours, the voice he suddenly murmured was hoarser than he expected. Giving a wry smile, Subaru took out the tool bag—and the tube of water inside it—moistening his throat with the cold water. It was simple, like a bamboo tube, but it was a mysterious tool that kept the water inside cold indefinitely. He figured this, too, must be a tool related to magic.

"Just six hours and I'm already this pathetic. It isn't the time to lose focus. Get it together, man!"

Slapping his cheeks as he spoke, the dry sound snapped his consciousness back into clarity.

There was still nearly half a day left until the predicted time. If he was breaking now, the road ahead looked grim.

He had to shore up his slackening spirit and return to his watch.

Fortunately or unfortunately, it was at the moment Subaru switched his mindset that it happened.

"—!"

The instant he felt a faint anomaly catch on his eardrum, Subaru's body leaped to the side without a shred of hesitation.

An evasive maneuver executed exactly as planned, with all senses fully engaged.

It certainly bore fruit, spectacularly saving Subaru's body from the threat of that surprise attack.

Immediately after, what he heard was the crushing sound of a heavy object snapping a tree in half. The toppling trees swept up everything around them; leaves, branches, and the sound of snapping wood danced wildly.

Subaru bolted through the chaos, instantly throwing himself toward the cliff.

"—Whaaa!"

Unable to be fully stifled by his clenched teeth, a scream leaked out as he tasted the floating sensation of his insides flipping from the high fall. However after falling only a few meters, his momentum came to an abrupt halt. The rope tied tightly around his waist dug in, and groaning in pain, he gasped,

"Emergency… escape…!"

Saying that, he cut the rope with his knife. His liberated body resumed its fall; where his shoe soles bit into the sloping cliff, and he practically slid down, landing violently on the ground.

Without a moment to catch his breath, Subaru chose to flee, abandoning all appearances. He threw away the tool bag to lighten his load and ran down the mountain with literally just the clothes on his back.

Running out of breath, he shouted,

"I saw it! Haa… Aah! I saw it!"

The object that had mown down the trees—it was a spiked iron ball as big as a person's embrace. You could call it a bowling ball equipped with killing functions; a romantic weapon connected to its user by a long, long chain—its name: the Morning Star.

The anomaly that had occurred in the mountains was the timbre of the chain connecting that iron ball. That sound, which he remembered hearing, was unmistakably the weapon that had taken Subaru's life that night.

Having witnessed its power and intimidation, Subaru's teeth were chattering with belated terror.

If that mass flew at him with sharpness, it wouldn't be strange for a body taking a direct hit to be blown to pieces. It made perfect sense that his left side had been ripped off.

"But… they came this way!"

Stepping on branches, jumping over ditches, spitting as he conquered the poor footing.

This was an outcome Subaru anticipated. The possibility of him being attacked after he left the mansion was about the same as an attack on the mansion itself.

If they intended to kill everyone involved, Subaru, who had stayed for three days, would hardly vanish from the list. And the fact that they chose Subaru as a target meant,

"Basically, it means they've been watching me in that mansion for days."

The attacker had been monitoring the mansion for several days.

Therefore, they didn't remove Subaru from the target list even after he left the mansion. Above all, finding Subaru where he lay hidden was the greatest proof.

How could they do that without following Subaru after he left the manor?

"—Wah!"

It was the moment he grew so lost in thought that he neglected his footing.

A tree root caught Subaru’s foot, sending his momentum-carrying body into a spectacular tumble. He rolled across the ground, sliding down the slope. Just then, the iron ball passed overhead as if it had been aimed perfectly.

If he hadn’t been rolling just now— a shiver raced through Subaru’s heart.

He rolled to the side, stood up, spat out the dirt that had gotten into his mouth, and resumed his escape. He had completely lost the path, but he couldn’t stop.

He was out of breath. His lungs hurt. To begin with, Subaru lacked endurance.

He was confident he was above average in all other athletic abilities, but his stamina was truly hopeless. A game of tag on a mountain path—just thinking about it meant he had no chance of winning. If he had no chance just thinking about it, he had even less chance actually doing it.

In other words,

“Being cornered… was inevitable, huh…”

Before him, a cliff towered up as if to imprison Subaru.

The stone wall, revealing hard, sharp fragments, was a natural fortress that refused to be climbed or used as a foothold. Naturally, the current Subaru had no means of overcoming it.

He turned around, took a deep breath in and out, steadied his breathing, before bracing himself.

In front of him, the darkness in the forest had deepened before he knew it, and this place, where the trees obscured the sunset, was filled with a sense of desolation as if cut off from the world.

“If you’re coming… then bring it on…”

Driving away his whining with bravado, Subaru unzipped the front of his jersey and took off the jacket. He spread it out with both hands, taking a stance, and quietly waiting for the attacker to arrive.

He is cornered. He is trapped. Subaru is now nothing more than powerless prey caught in a predator's trap.

But he won't just let himself be eaten.

He has sacrificed this much. At the very least, he's going to get compensation to match.

—In that instant, dragging the sound of chains from beyond the darkness, violence flew at high speed.

"Have you got… the guuuuuts?!"

Faced with a certain-kill blow, Subaru's body displayed reflexes that defied common sense.

Lifting the jersey jacket he held in both hands, he wrapped up the incoming iron ball from directly underneath, slightly deflecting its momentum and dodging a direct hit to his torso by a hair's breadth.

However, the jacket was ripped from his arms, and his body, unable to fully kill the impact, was slammed into the rock wall; he was not unharmed.

But the moment he looked up and saw the iron ball that had missed its mark embedded in the wall, Subaru smiled a smile of supreme satisfaction and firmly grabbed the fully extended chain.

Then, looking toward the opposite end of the stretching chain—the direction where the attacker holding it stood—

"Now show yourself, you piece of shit! I spent a whole week trying to see your face, dammit!"

He raised a roar of anger, emboldening himself by shouting foul curses.

No matter who came out, he strained his eyes and glared into the darkness so he would never miss them.

It was a desperate situation, but somehow he had picked up his life.

Perhaps, without making this loop a sacrificial pawn, it might even be possible to repel the attacker who revealed themselves.

His racing consciousness made Subaru picture thoughts that were indistinguishable from optimism.

In a situation he had once nearly given up on, he desperately reached out for the light he saw.

In that light were Emilia, the twins, the cheeky little girl, and Roswaal. A sensation where he almost forgot the situation and his cheeks nearly relaxed, and then,

“—I suppose it can’t be helped.”

The sound of chains rang out, and he felt the slack as the owner approached.

However leaving such trivial sensations behind, Subaru’s eyes were wide open.

His lips trembled, and a voiceless voice leaked from his throat as a groan.

Unconsciously, his fingers let go of the chain they grasped, and his head shook slightly, weakly from side to side as if rejecting it.

Treading on grass, stepping over branches, her figure slowly emerged from the darkness.

An apron dress based in black, a pure white headdress adorning her head. Gripping the handle of the chain connected to the iron ball—a weapon that completely mismatched her petite frame—

“It would have been best if you had simply met your end without realizing anything.”

Swaying her blue hair, tilting her head with that familiar expressionless look,

“You’re kidding… Rem.”

The girl he thought he wanted to protect was raising a flail before him.

Chapter 21:
Tag at Nightfall

In that instant, the only thing dominating Subaru's mind was a complete blank.

He couldn't even conjure a clinging plea to deny the spectacle before his eyes. Subaru's thoughts were simply, utterly buried in a landscape of white.

A stagnation, as if his throat had frozen, his breathing forgotten, his very heart stopped. What broke the spell was the sensation of a single drop of sweat caressing his skin as it trickled down his forehead.

With the feeling of the sweat dripping from his chin to the ground, Subaru's consciousness returned from the void.

However, facing reality meant there was no denying that the person standing before him was the one person he hadn't wanted to believe was there.

—This is bad. Badbadbadbadbadbad.

Following the blankness, what filled his thoughts was a chaotic litany born of impatience and confusion.

He couldn't think straight. Was the person standing before him really the Rem that Subaru knew? Or could it be an impostor? No, there was no possibility of an impostor. There was no point in doing such a thing.

"Maybe you're actually triplets…"

Subaru himself knew best that even if that were true, it would offer no comfort at all.

Watching Subaru, whose fighting spirit had evaporated, Rem gently stroked her short blue hair with her free hand.

“If you do not resist, Rem will make the end painless.”

“Do you really think there’s a human alive who’d hear that offer and say, ‘Yes, that’s right, please do, hihihi!’?”

“Rem apologizes. You are right; you were indeed that sort of person, esteemed guest.”

The way she bowed so politely was far too divorced from the atmosphere of the scene. Her demeanor was so unchanged from her usual self that one might mistake this for a casual scene inside the mansion.

That only made the alien presence of the rugged weapon gripped in her hand all the more tremendous.

“A girl wielding a savage weapon is definitely a romantic trope, but…”

An iron chain and a spiked iron ball—a lethal blunt weapon that would mince anyone it hit directly. The gentleman who chose this for her must have had terribly bad taste.

Subaru had already tasted its power once and had his life scattered by it. He knew from firsthand experience that she could manipulate it at will.

Involuntarily swallowing his breath, turning his panic into drops on his forehead, he formed words.

“Can I say a cliché line like… ‘Why are you doing this?’”

“It is not that difficult. Punish the suspicious. It is a maids duty.”

“Don’t you have the phrase ‘Love thy neighbor’?”

“Rem’s hands are already full.”

Perhaps she had no intention of playing along with his stalling; Rem’s gaze never once softened as she answered him.

He couldn’t read her next move. But there was one thing he did know.

That if he moved now, he would definitely die.

Subaru's instincts, having died five times in one way or another, were screaming that alert at him.

It was too one-sided a checkmate to call it a stalemate. Subaru spun his wheels frantically, struggling to squeeze out even a little bit of information.

He had to avoid stepping on a landmine, pique her interest, and drag out the conversation. telling himself this, Subaru tried to avert his eyes, if only temporarily, from the despairing fact closing in on him.

Because if he faced it head-on, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from collapsing to his knees.

"—Does Ram know about this?"

The name that slipped out of his mouth was that of the older sister who looked exactly like her.

Unfriendly, foul-mouthed, with a bad attitude, and maid skills that fell short of her sister's across the board—a hopeless stat sheet—but she was the one Subaru had spent the most total days with at the Roswaal Manor.

If even that girl, with whom he had enjoyed bickering, had turned into Subaru's enemy—just the thought made his body tremble. But,

"Rem intends to finish this before Sister sees."

The answer Rem gave was, unintentionally, the very answer Subaru had been seeking.

The situation remained bad, but he was saved from plunging into the absolute worst mood just in the nick of time.

He let out a long breath, surprised that it came from relief.

To find something to be optimistic about in such a cornered situation—just how lukewarm was his way of thinking?

Raising his head, Subaru looked straight back into Rem's eyes. And, watching Rem furrow her brows slightly at his glare,

"So, you're acting on your own? Not following Roswaal's orders?"

"Rem will eliminate with her own hands anything that could be an obstacle to the fulfillment of Master Roswaal's dearest wish. You are merely one of those things."

"Can't he even discipline his pet dog? Try thinking about how a passerby feels getting bitten, huh?"

"Rem will not allow insults toward Master Roswaal."

Subaru had lightly provoked her to probe her true feelings, and his cheek burst open.

His vision shook from the impact of the blow, and his hand involuntarily touched his cheek where the sharp pain was—it was wet with bright red blood.

She had used the chain—the connection to the iron ball still embedded in the wall—like a whip, striking the side of Subaru's face with iron. His cheek was torn in the distorted pattern of the chain, and blood flowing from his forehead entered his left eye, stinging with pain.

All this damage from one smart-assed remark. But it was worth it for what he gleaned.

At least her loyalty to Roswaal was genuine. And it was likely true that she believed disposing of Subaru was for Roswaal's sake.

It was judged that Subaru's departure from the Roswaal Manor would be detrimental to Roswaal, who was supporting Emilia in the Royal Selection.

In short, when you put it all together, the heart of the matter was—

"Ah, so that's it. —Did you really trust me that little?"

"Yes."

She nodded without hesitation, and Subaru felt a pain as if a sharp blade had been thrust deep into his chest. That answer stirred up unpleasant imaginings for Subaru, and affirming those imaginings changed the color of every scene from the days leading up to this.

Therefore, Subaru did not voice the suspicion that had sprouted in his heart.

He merely twisted the corner of his mouth in self-mockery at his own comical stupidity.

"Serves me right. Thinking I was getting along so well… what a misunderstanding."

"…Sister is…"

"I don't wanna hear it! —Eat this!"

Screaming, the moment Rem showed a slight hesitation, Subaru thrust the cell phone he had hidden behind his waist forward—immediately, a white light tore through the darkness-sunken forest, creating a stagnation in Rem's movement for just a split second.

"—Raaagh!"

"—!"

He dashed out, slamming a shoulder tackle into her small frame to blow her away.

Whatever the trick, Rem swung that violent device with impossible strength, but in a simple collision, Subaru had the advantage in physique and weight.

Hit by the full-force charge, her small body flew backward; she lost her balance and fell to the ground. He ran past her without a single glance, sprinting at full speed.

Gasping, forcing air into his lungs, he raced his thoughts and his legs.

If this was Rem's independent decision, he could still formulate a plan to save his life. If he could run back to the mansion and negotiate directly with her employer, there should be a possibility.

But if Roswaal's opinion aligned with Rem's, then this was nothing but a foolish act of escaping the lion's den only to run into the wolf's.

"Even so… if it's… Emilia."

If it was that silver-haired girl who shone more brilliantly than anyone in his memories, there was no room for doubt.

If it was her, if it was her, if it was her—

—She, who was a central figure in the Royal Selection, and who might find Subaru's existence the most troublesome of all?

"—?!"

The manifestation of anxiety suddenly surfacing in his heart. Realizing that it was his own voice, infinitely dark and cold, Subaru was struck by a shock like lightning.

Unmistakably, he himself, with his own voice, had doubted Emilia's heart.

Subaru himself, who knew how straightforward she was, how hard she tried, and how she never hesitated to suffer loss for the sake of others, had doubted her.

If positions change, thoughts change.

Just as Rem was now, how could he say for sure that the other people in that mansion weren't gunning for Subaru's life?

In the first place, it was a mistake not to suspect an inside job at the time of his second death. It happened inside the mansion. Naturally, the easiest people to pull it off were those on the inside.

Blinded by superficial relationships, this was the result of overlooking the obvious.

Running frantically through the mountains in this unsightly state, unable to come up with a single decent breakthrough.

—What happened to strictly gathering information this time?

When the threat actually appeared in a form different from his expectations, he had no choice but to cling to life while coughing up his life force like this.

He had been arrogant. He had been naive. He had been shallow.

Breathing roughly, conquering the slope as if tumbling down it, what filled Subaru's head was not a method to break the deadlock, but simply words of regret.

"What on earth… was I doing this for…!"

A whimper spilled out, and tears involuntarily blurred his vision.

His steps faltered, and as the forest suddenly broke, Subaru saw the night closing in on the open sky.

And then—

"—Huh?"

A blade of wind from a super-high altitude flashed—and blew away everything below Subaru's right knee.

Watching the tip of his right leg bounce away with momentum, Subaru's body completely lost its posture. His balance destroyed, the momentum of his run caused his body to tilt and crash into the ground. The impact caused the wound on his cheek to bleed again, and he slammed his shoulder hard against a tree; a dull sound echoed, and pain raced through him as if electrodes were jabbed directly into his brain. Above all,

"Aaaaaaagh! M-My leg, my leeeeeeeg!!"

There was no pain—that was the terrifying sensation.

His right leg was gone from the knee down, the blown-off fragment having flown beyond the bushes. The wound vividly displayed pink flesh, and fresh blood sprayed out with a delay, as if only just realizing the amputation had happened. Simultaneously, the pain invaded his nerves with a delay.

"—!!!!"

He clawed at the ground, screaming a grand agony that became voiceless.

Holding the wound, thrashing his body, his free right arm beat the ground, punched the tree, his fingernails peeling off magnificently, his consciousness boiling from the heat of it all.

He suffered, and suffered, and suffered, and suffered through it.

A sensation of himself being eroded, as if the pain were filing down his nerves and planing his brain directly. Blood was being lost at a tremendous rate with every second, which meant the direct disappearance of the source of Subaru's life.

And there,

"Ah, Rem finally caught up."

Swaying the skirt of her maid outfit, Rem appeared dragging her weapon.

She looked at Subaru rolling on the ground, took note of the missing right leg, and after a moment of silent contemplation, she nodded.

"It must hurt; it must be agonizing. Please wait a moment."

Crouching down, Rem turned her white palm toward Subaru's wound.

His throat was already parched from voiceless screaming, and the writhing pain had exhausted his stamina, leaving him no will to move.

Subaru moved his clouded vision, silently watching Rem's movements. Then,

“Oh Mana of water, grant healing to this one.”

She murmured, and suddenly a soft, pale light was released from Rem's palm.

The light gently covered the stump of Subaru's right leg, and with that pale glow, it began to compensate for the pain and sense of loss.

Feeling the sign of healing in a sensation akin to an itch, Subaru dragged back his consciousness that had started to drift away, and stared at Rem's face in astonishment.

The pain hadn't vanished completely, but a surprise greater than the pain dominated Subaru.

At this stage, he didn't understand the reason why Rem would heal him. Receiving Subaru's gaze, a hint of a faint smile floated onto Rem's features.

Finding a tiny, meager hope in that—

“If you were to die easily after surviving all that, Rem wouldn't be able to ask what she needs to ask.”

Her following words made him realize that it had been a fleeting, overly foolish optimism.

Rem's arm pulled back, the sound of chains rang out, and the iron ball flew.

It slammed into the ground right next to the upper body of the fallen Subaru. Seen up close, it was rugged, crude, and simply a violent device specialized solely for threatening life.

Rem had deliberately placed the iron ball where he could see it. Her true intent was conveyed clearly enough.

It was an easy-to-understand demonstration to let him know that she held his life in her hands.

Seeing Subaru's eyes harbor resignation, Rem prefaced with "Now then," and said,

"Rem will ask you. Are you part of a camp belonging to a candidate hostile to Lady Emilia?"

"…My heart is always on Emilia-tan's side."

The moment he said it, the slack chain struck Subaru's upper body violently.

His undershirt, torn by branches along the way, ripped all too easily, and the skin beneath was carved with identical lacerations; Subaru's scream echoed through the forest.

"Who hired you, and for how much?"

"For Emilia-tan's smile… Priceless."

With a flick of her wrist, the same treatment. While physically experiencing the skill to strike the exact same spot without a millimeter of error, he praised that proficiency with a scream of agony.

After that, similar questions and similar answers.

The sound of the chain rang out as many times as there were questions, followed by a grand chorus of groans and screams.

Every time his consciousness was about to be blown away, he was treated by Rem's own healing magic—Subaru was put through an infinite hell loop of healing and violence.

His spirit was worn down, and his consciousness cut out sporadically many times. Yet, his heart alone did not yield to Rem's treatment.

Perhaps tired of Subaru's obstinate attitude, Rem suddenly looked up at the sky and muttered, “Rem must return soon. Preparations for dinner will be delayed.”

“…Dinner, huh. I wonder… what’s on the menu… today…”

“Let’s see. How about a minced meat pie?”

As Rem pointedly rattled the chain to flaunt the iron ball’s presence, the best Subaru could do was respond, “Please spare me from being on the dinner table.”

At Subaru’s posture of cracking jokes to the very end, Rem finally expressed emotion with a sigh. She then fell silent, looking down at Subaru with eyes more devoid of emotion than ever before.

“—Are you affiliated with the Witch Cult?”

A word he had never heard before jumped out, and Subaru furrowed his brows in confusion.

What kind of situation here did that word correspond to? Not understanding Rem’s true intent, he withheld his answer. To such a Subaru, Rem said,

“Answer me. You are ‘one ensnared by the Witch,’ are you not?”

“…By the… Witch?”

“Don’t play dumb!”

Raising her voice as if enraged, Rem pierced Subaru with a gaze that felt somewhat sharp. Through all the scenes from their true first meeting to this taking of each other’s lives, that was the moment Rem bared her emotions for the first time.

On that white face that usually never lost its composure, a slight vermilion of anger appeared as Rem looked down on Subaru with evident murderous intent.

Targeted by a killing intent he had no recollection of earning, Subaru shook his head weakly.

“I don’t… know… To begin with, my family has been… non-religious for generations…"

"Still playing dumb. —Reeking of the Witch's scent like that, claiming you are unrelated is beyond transparent."

Rem swung her arm down in front of Subaru, twisting the corner of her lips into a look of rage. At that unprecedented expression of emotion, Subaru opened his eyes wide, feeling as if he had touched slightly upon her true nature.

"Even if Sister and everyone else doesn't notice, Rem notices! That stench, that lingering scent of a sinner—Rem harbors nothing but disgust and revulsion for it."

In front of the silent Subaru, Rem bit her lip so hard she looked like she might grind her teeth.

"Even when peeking at you conversing with Sister, Rem felt like she would go mad with anxiety and anger. The source of what happened to Sister, someone related to that… carefree and nonchalant, in a place important to Rem and Sister…"

Incoherent words were muttered like a grudge, and sighs of resentment were showered mercilessly upon Subaru.

"Because Master Roswaal said to treat you with hospitality, Rem watched and waited as well… But even just monitoring you is now too painful to bear. Even knowing Sister was only pretending to look after you, while she acted like you two were so close!"

As if spewing out all the hatred she had bottled up, Rem slammed her passion into Subaru to make up for her lack of emotion until now.

Having said her piece, shoulders heaving, she glared at Subaru with wrath in her eyes. Then, suddenly, those eyes widened in surprise.

That was because,

"—Why…?"

In front of Rem, who had voiced her hatred, Subaru was quietly shedding tears.

“I knew… it. …I kind of, guessed it.”

His throat hitched, and the hot things welling up passed through his eyelids one after another, falling to his cheeks. While shedding tears he couldn’t stop, Subaru spoke in a broken, tearful voice.

“I’m going through this, after all… I knew there was a catch to being treated so kindly. But… I didn’t want, to hear it.”

The two who had taught the basics of housework to Subaru, who couldn’t do anything.

Ram, who mocked Subaru for not knowing how to wear a butler’s uniform. Rem, who helped him get dressed while chiding her.

He was crap at handling knives and couldn’t even peel vegetables properly, but for some reason, Ram had patiently stayed with him and taught him. And Rem, too, would offer a share to Subaru, who struggled in the kitchen, every time a menu item was completed.

“I stopped cutting my hands when peeling veggies. I learned that you wash clothes differently depending on the material, and I’m still in the middle of learning how to clean…”

In just four days and another four days, he couldn’t hope for much more improvement than that.

But he had thought that if he overcame several four days, he could still learn more in the days beyond.

“Reading and writing… just the simple stuff, but I learned how. I read a fairy tale. Thanks to you two…”

“What… are you talking about?”

At Subaru’s voice, which sounded like delirium, Rem lowered her tone as if feeling creeped out. Subaru squeezed out a breath and looked up into her eyes.

“I’m talking about the things… you two gave me…”

“Rem has no memory of such things.”

“—Why don’t you remember!!”

At the sudden outburst of passion, Rem’s foot involuntarily took a step back.

Lifting his prone body, scratching the ground with his unbalanced upper body, Subaru howled, baring his teeth.

“Why do you all gang up and leave me behind…?! What did I do…?! What are you telling me to do…?!”

He couldn’t control his emotions. He knew it was an extreme misplacement of anger, but still, Subaru’s heart, his soul, couldn’t stop screaming.

Summoned to another world, driven into unreasonable corners, he had still gritted his teeth and gotten through it. But he was at his limit.

“What was wrong… what did I do wrong? …Why do you guys hate me so much…?”

“—Rem is.”

“I… lo… you guys—”

—An impact did not allow him to continue the words that followed.

His body tilted from the power of the surprise attack, and Subaru’s body slowly bumped into the tree behind him.

Hearing a rasping breath and the sound of overflowing water close by, Subaru’s gaze wandered. And he found the cause immediately.

His throat.

The right half of Subaru’s throat had been gouged out by something, and air and blood bubbles were gushing fiercely from the middle of his windpipe.

Before his eyes, he saw Rem’s face looking at the wound in dumbfounded wonder.

Seeing only that, Subaru’s eyes lost their light, rolling back into whiteness.

His voice did not continue. His consciousness, too, shut down as if the power was cut.

Fading away. There was no pain. Anger, sadness, even emotion vanished somewhere.

Only, at the very end,

“—Sister, you are too kind.”

He felt as if he heard just that, murmured in someone’s sorrowful voice.

Chapter 22: Beyond Words

1

"—!!"

He cannot perceive the moment his consciousness returned.

A ringing in his ears like torrential rain falling right beside him; his vision flickers alternately between red and white, and the world is tilted distortedly, unpleasantly.

Sensation does not transmit to his limbs, and his throat is straining with a scream thick beyond thought at the agony of his entrails being wrung out.

He twists his body which will not obey him, making it bounce, using every movable part of his whole body to convert the incomprehensible passion welling up within his chest into destruction.

He doesn't know what is what.

Where did the pain vanish to? Why is his consciousness not clear? Where are the wounds that were ravaging his whole body? Blood is draining away, life is draining away, he is dying.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die.

Pain and hardship and suffering and sadness and fear, he hates it all.

He wants to push it all away, yet those are the only things he can find within reach. So, surrendering to impulse, he tries to protect his own heart by striking, crushing, tearing, throwing away, and discarding those negative emotions at random.

"—!"

He can hear something. He can hear someone's voice.

Mixed into the beast-like roars, he can hear the voice of someone clinging to him desperately.

The meaning doesn't get through. He doesn't understand the meaning. He doesn't want to understand the meaning.

It's useless even if he listens. Listening will only hurt him. It's not as if listening will change anything. Nothing will change even if he listens.

Even so, gradually, gradually, the colors of the world become clear.

Blood circulates to the tips of his limbs, and the sensation of his thrashing body is transmitted correctly to his nerves.

His arms, having rampaged and rampaged, seem to have struck something hard repeatedly; his nails are broken, his knuckles split, and they seem to be bleeding terribly.

Sharp pain stabs his brain, and his wailing slows its momentum ever so slightly.

And then he notices. That something warm is clinging to his aching arm, around the right upper arm, as if wrapping it up.

There was a similar sensation on his legs. Something small is covering his legs, which he had raised to strike the floor over and over again, from directly above, sealing their movement.

Color returns to his vision. Spreading out before his eyes is a white ceiling he remembers seeing several times.

From the circulation of his blood and the weight on his back, he realizes he is lying face up. The soft sensation belongs to a bed; he had been sleeping with his limbs thrown out.

And, the ones who had physically restrained his thrashing limbs in that posture were, "Guest, Guest. Have you calmed down yet?"

"Guest, Guest. Are you done going completely mad?"

The moment those two familiar voices struck his eardrums, Subaru's brain stopped thinking and selected only one thing: a scream.

2

For Subaru, the morning of his first day at the Roswaal manor, totaling the fourth time, opened its curtains in the worst form yet.

Subaru has already lost his life six times in this world and returned.

None of the ways he died were ever easy, and each time, he has tasted the agony of having what he gained spill from his hands once more.

He never gets used to the pain or the suffering, and the sense of desolation and loss that arises every time he returns is not something anyone can share with him.

Even so, Subaru intends to have lived looking forward earnestly, simply clenching his teeth. He has resolved that he would not bend his knees, that he would not lose in spirit alone.

However, this instance cannot be compared to anything before.

The sense of loss, the sense of desolation, the pain, the suffering—all of it gouged deeply and sharply into Subaru's heart, proportional to the bonds of the days spent until now.

There is no way he can stand. The will to stand does not even well up. He cannot even think of a reason why he must stand. It is that kind of situation.

"—Okay, all done. The wound should be closed, but you mustn't be too rough. If it happens to bleed again, just call me."

Gently stroking the back of Subaru's right hand, the girl sitting in the chair next to the bed smiles at him.

Tying her silver hair into a single bundle, wearing faint blue light on her palm, is Emilia.

She had rushed over and was healing Subaru with healing magic after he suffered lacerations on his hands from thrashing about immediately after waking up.

The only ones in the room are Subaru and Emilia.

The other two who happened to be there the moment he woke up had bowed their heads and disappeared, never to return, upon seeing Subaru's unsightly behavior right after he noticed them.

"I heard from Ram and Rem, that… you said some terrible things to the two of them?"

At the mention of names he didn't want to hear, Subaru lifted his face as if flicked.

Emilia opened her eyes slightly at that excessive reaction, but upon recognizing the expression of agitation running across Subaru's face, she pursed her lips,

"They were unusually down, thinking they might have done something rude. So next time you see them, please say something to them."

"Something rude, huh. No, there was noth—ing. …Between me and those two, there was noth—ing at all."

His somewhat throwaway voice was hoarse, and Emilia's well-shaped brows furrowed softly at the aftereffect of the ill feeling contained within it.

Even seeing that, no apology or comfort comes from Subaru's mouth.

What slipped out instead was a question that couldn't quite be called sarcasm.

"Hey, Emilia-tan… don't you think I'm a nuisance?"

"Tan… you really…"

Emilia shows a rejection-like reaction to the address for a split second as usual, but Subaru's attitude in asking the question does not lose its seriousness for a moment.

She contemplated silently for a while, prefaced with "Not really," and held up a finger,

"There's no way I'd think you're a nuisance. Besides, Subaru is my lifesaver, right? If my lifesaver disappeared on his own without me repaying that debt, I'd sleep poorly. So, for the sake of my pride, I'd be troubled if you disappeared before I repay the debt."

Speaking fast, Emilia asserts this as if to gloss over some kind of emotion.

Listening to it intently, Subaru watched her every move. Was there any falsehood there? Did it contain any reactions or gestures hiding something?

"Oi oi, seriously…"

Realizing that he was gauging her reaction with eyes of suspicion, Subaru muttered the sound aloud, unable to hide his discouragement and disappointment in himself.

Unexpectedly, hadn't Emilia just said it? If he can no longer even think of his lifesaver as such, then that is truly the lowest behavior.

Emilia was supposed to be the only oasis where Subaru could entrust his heart in this other world where he had no one to rely on.

The possibilities that he should have been able to think of in the same way, even if not to her extent, have now disappeared from before Subaru in a merciless form.

If he loses even his absolute trust in her at this point, that would be nothing other than Subaru walking through pitch darkness by touch alone.

Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind.

If only he could confess the despair occupying this chest, and the situation he has tried to redo and challenge over and over again, to her and no one else.

Thinking back, Subaru has continued to struggle to manage all the mortal crises that have visited him time and time again with his own hands alone.

But the situation has reached extreme destitution, and it has already come to a point where neither advancing nor retreating allows Subaru any easy choices.

In that case, wouldn't confiding the matter to a third party—a trustworthy person—and begging for assistance be the brilliant move to play to reach the best outcome?

As if fog were clearing, the emotions of anxiety and bewilderment that had been hanging over Subaru's head were blown away.

Once he realized it, it was such a naturally acceptable method that he didn't know why he had removed that option from his candidates until now.

"—Emilia-tan, there is something I want you to hear."

Lowering the tone of his voice, Subaru turns to face Emilia.

She must have sensed the change in atmosphere. Emilia, too, floated tension on her sorrowful face, corrected her posture on the chair, and looked at him from directly in front.

Watching his reflection in her violet-blue eyes, Subaru slowly begins by choosing the first word.

What should he speak of? About "Return by Death"? Or should he speak nakedly from the point that Subaru is not an existence of this world in the first place?

It is a story likely to be laughed off, and the probability of it being taken as a joke is far higher. Even so, surely she alone would not treat Subaru's serious plea casually.

That expectation, that hope, was everything supporting Subaru right now.

—I will speak about "Return by Death." And, if possible, I want you to lend me your strength.

While feeling ashamed of his own wretchedness in seeking it again from someone he had received a debt from, Subaru swallows his breath and forms the first voice. From there, the situation will begin to move.

Extremely confused, forced to throw in the towel saying it's helpless. The light to the situation he had almost given up on opens from there.

—That, is what he thought.

"…"

The moment he thought to put it into words, to form his voice, it visited.

A sense of wrongness; receiving it, Subaru hesitates on the first word in bewilderment.

Thinking something is wrong, he immediately realized the reason. Sound. Sound had vanished. From the world, suddenly, sound had disappeared. The sound of his own heart beating fast, which he could hear just moments ago. The faint breathing of Emilia in front of him. The quiet coloring of the morning breeze sneaking in through the slightly open window and circulating in the room.

All of it had vanished completely from the world.

A world without sound—it is an isolated space where even the word "silence" is lukewarm. An absolute state of silence, no questions asked, where even the sound of ringing ears is erased, where even the sound of blood flowing through the body cannot be heard.

Just by having that done to him, chills run through his whole body, and an unbearable discomfort rampages as if stirring up his entrails.

And that was merely the beginning of the anomaly.

—What, is this?

From the world where sound had vanished, next, the movement of all existence vanished.

Time is stretched out, an instant becomes eternity, and one second later changes its arrival point greatly to the distant yonder of time.

Before his eyes, Emilia's expression does not move from her serious look. Her eyelids do not twitch, and her lips remain tightly sealed.

Remaining in her dignified appearance, Emilia is distanced from her next movement eternally. And that is the same for Subaru; the length of his thoughts that he was supposed to voice will likely never be delivered to anyone if things stay this way.

Sound vanishes, time stops, and Subaru's earnest wish is distanced.

A phenomenon beyond understanding that arrived suddenly. His body, through which nerves do not pass, cannot be moved a fragment, and Subaru simply continues to race his thoughts while holding onto his confusion.

Incomprehensible. Incomprehensible. Incomprehensible. Incomprehensible. Incomprehensible—

What is the reason for this? He doesn't even have the mental leeway to guess.

Simply, in the domain of non-understanding that comes in waves, Subaru can do nothing but continue to scream his lamentation inside his brain as if overwhelmed.

And, the end of that sensation revealed its form abruptly.

—What is this?

A voice of doubt floats in his mind, and Subaru tilts his head in image only.

Ahead of his gaze, within the fixed, unmoving field of vision, he could only think that it had arisen suddenly.

It is a black haze. For Subaru, who didn't even have the freedom to blink, its appearance could only be described as abrupt in the truest sense.

Cutting into his consciousness, It was drifting in that spot.

What was even more singular, however, was that only that black haze slowly changed its shape.

In a world where everything has stagnated, only the black haze changes shape at a gentle speed. A haze of a mass about enough to be held in both hands makes its outline clearer little by little, and finally reaches its target shape taking over ten seconds in perceived time.

—To Subaru, it looked like a black palm.

The haze that changed shape had taken the form of an arm.

A floating black arm possessing five fingers and only length up to the elbow.

And It trembled its fingertips as if checking, then closed in on Subaru with clear intent.

Watching it helplessly, Subaru swallowed his breath in sensation alone.

The black fingertips sneak into Subaru's chest smoothly, as if there were nothing to obstruct them. And, the sensation of those fingertips clearly caressing his internal organs was transmitted to Subaru.

Touching his entrails, stroking his ribs, the palm proceeds further in, and eventually delivers its fingertips to the most important organ in the human body.

—Oi, wait.

A voice that does not become a voice. A body that cannot resist. Without being able to make a single movement, not understanding the black palm's motive or anything else, fear races through Subaru's whole body.

—This is seriously, not fu—

Before he could finish saying it in his heart, a shock shook Subaru's existence from the foundation.

Is there a human alive who can explain why it hurts to have one's internal organs damaged? The answer to that is simple; it can be summed up in one phrase: there is no need to think about such a thing.

In that instant, the intense pain that assaulted Subaru did not have a fragment of necessity for reasoning.

Just simply, earnestly, the pain of having his heart crushed without mercy continued to batter Subaru.

He cannot raise his voice. He is forbidden even from trembling in pain.

With no means to gloss over the pain, who other than Subaru in this moment could understand the pain of feeling nothing but pain?

Only agony was there. And bringing along something that was not just agony, it left a warning for Subaru that was grateful enough to bring tears to his eyes.

The existence known as Subaru was torn apart by the pain, his consciousness distorted as if treated roughly, his thoughts shredded to ribbons so badly he couldn't remember their original shape—

"—Subaru?"

"—Huh?"

"Subaru, are you okay? You went silent suddenly, you're making me worry."

Placing a hand on his knee, a silver beauty was staring at Subaru with eyes harboring sorrow.

The moment he became conscious of that, Subaru leaked a long breath as if deflating. Then he confirmed that his fingers moved according to his will, and touching his own chest with a delay, he confirmed from the outside that his heart was carving out a quiet rhythm.

His body moves. His voice comes out. He feels no pain in his heart.

But, the fear was carved into him.

His fingertips tremble, his voice refuses to come out, and his body remains shrunken and frozen.

Proportional to the hope that had arisen, the fact brought about by It made Subaru despair.

Just thinking in a corner of his head that he would muster his courage and challenge It again, the illusion of a black haze crossing the edge of Subaru's vision floats up.

And, Subaru is finally forced to admit it.

To Subaru who covers his face with his palms as if yielding to the welling despair, shrinking atop the bed, Emilia floats bewilderment and opens her mouth,

“Wh-What’s wrong? You’ve been really strange for a while now, you know? If there is something…”

“—I have a request.”

Interrupting the voice concerned for him, Subaru turns his palm toward her.

He cannot lift his face. Surely, he is making a terrible face. If he looks at her in this mental state, he cannot trust himself regarding what he might blurt out.

Mobilizing all his self-control, Subaru creates just a single phrase.

Discarding the words he intended to say, the feelings he wanted her to hear, the passion he truly wished to confess from the bottom of his heart—everything.

“Emilia-tan.”

“Y-Yeah. Tell me anything.”

“Don’t concern yourself with me.”

Conveying only that feebly, he collapses onto the bed without looking at her reaction.

Unconsciously his palm touches his chest, and while feeling the beat beneath it through his thin skin, Subaru clearly realizes the reality that has been thrust upon him.

—Confessing is not forgiven.

—That Subaru has no choice but to continue struggling alone.

Chapter 23:
A Temporary Contract

Driving even Emilia out of his room, Subaru's fourth loop got off to a bleak start.

On the morning of the first day, after hurting Emilia with a heartless remark, a confrontation with the returned Roswaal awaited him.

His mocking attitude hadn't changed, but Subaru felt ill at ease, feeling as though he were being looked upon with appraising eyes. Whether that was limited to this time around, or if it had been the same in the previous loops, the Subaru of now had no way of knowing.

Their conversation was brief, and its contents barely remained in his memory.

He only vaguely felt he'd received words to the effect that he would be treated as a guest.

He also felt like Roswaal had said something convenient, like he should stay as long as he pleased.

That could be said to be a wish come true for Subaru, but it could also be said to be a matter that was already of no importance.

If he wandered out of the mansion now, he would surely be killed to silence him. Yet, even if he stayed and was judged as nothing but baggage for the Roswaal camp, it was obvious that a future where he was turned into mincemeat awaited him before long.

To leave is a BAD END; to stay is a BAD END.

It felt like he had saved in a position where the approaching BAD END could not be avoided. Even though it was an auto-save, what an absurd setup this was.

While spouting such curses, Subaru spent the day crouching in a corner of the room, idling the time away. Since coming to this parallel world, this was likely the first day he had done so little.

Come to think of it, the current Subaru was in the position of the “kept man” he had longed for. Meals were served without him working, and no one complained even if he holed up in his room.

Despite being in a parallel world, he was leading the same shut-in life as he had in his original world. That should have been what he looked forward to, yet he felt not a speck of deep emotion for the time he had so craved.

Unable to even choose the attractive option of indulging in lazy slumber, Subaru could not even sleep on the guest room bed, spending his idleness holding his head in his hands.

In his hand, he gripped a quill pen in a reverse hold; its tip was stained with blood that had been dipped into and dried countless times. Whenever he lost to drowsiness and his eyelids began to droop, he stabbed the back of his hand, forcibly bringing his consciousness to an awake state through pain.

Though he barely moved atop the bed, breathing through his mouth, Subaru’s breaths were rough and rapid. His heart continued to beat fast and short in unbroken tension, and his eyes darted about, captive to paranoia, constantly doubting if there were any abnormalities in the room.

He had already died three times, and his days at the Roswaal manor were entering their fourth iteration.

In Subaru’s experience, his death count as of the first day of summoning had been three. For Subaru, who had broken through that day on the fourth attempt, a fourth death was unknown territory.

—If he died here and now, he might not be able to come back next time.

He could find no method to avoid death. Even so, he did not want to die.

But living here was also so painful and agonizing that he could hardly bear it. All that Subaru, who felt like he was losing his mind, could do was choose a conclusion that made it seem like he had lost his mind.

Namely: to doubt everything, to resist everything, and to cling single-mindedly to life.

He had already entered the afternoon of the second day of the fourth loop; the time he had spent in idleness was too different from the previous repetitions, so his memories from before were no longer reliable.

He didn't know what would happen, and it wouldn't be strange for anything to happen. And even if something did happen, it would all surely be to Subaru's disadvantage.

Disappointed in reality, despairing at the situation, and resigned to the future, Subaru's heart had broken and shattered.

Now, only the remnants of it continued a disgraceful, futile struggle.

Unable to perceive day as day or night as night, even the passage of time became vague, and the boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness wavered like a heat haze.

Only the pain of stabbing the back of his hand was vivid; the fact that the sensation was so sharp made him just a little happy, and he gouged the wound again and again. Gouge. Gouge. Gouge.

"—You're wearing quite the spineless look on your face, I suppose."

Suddenly hearing that voice, he raised his head as if he'd been struck.

At the end of Subaru's beast-like, glaring gaze, gripping the doorknob and leaning toward him, was the girl he had not yet met even once in this loop.

Beatrice's visit—it was a first within the four repeated worlds. And Subaru instantly heightened his vigilance.

An abnormality that could only occur this time—it was bound to lead directly to a result that threatened Subaru's life.

"…So this time, it's you."

A low, hoarse voice came out, surprising even himself.

His throat, which had remained silent for over two days and had only passed rough breaths, was parched and raw. It contained more hostility than he had intended, and the girl who received that malice head-on said,

"How can one rot so much in just a day or two, I wonder? Humans are hopelessly foolish creatures, in fact."

"I've got no intention of listening to your lecture. —What did you come here for?"

Beatrice laughed scornfully at Subaru's shameful state. She furrowed her brows in displeasure at Subaru's way of speaking, which lacked any tact, and said,

"Bubby and that little girl told me to, so I came to see your face, in fact."

"Puck and… Emilia?"

"Since you've been acting strange since you woke up, they suspect Betty might have done something when you first woke up, in fact. It's a rude story, I suppose."

Emilia, who should have been hurt by Subaru's heartless words, was even now worrying about Subaru's heart. She had thought the cause of Subaru's change might be Beatrice, whom he had contacted just before, and had appealed directly to Beatrice.

Beatrice, who for some reason could not stand up to Puck, had been supported by Puck—who was overly soft on his daughter—and had thus reluctantly shown her face at Subaru's place.

Emilia's concern—it left a warmth, however slight, in Subaru's desolate heart. However, her worry was grossly misplaced.

The cause of Subaru's sudden change was unrelated to Beatrice, and this was not a problem that could be solved no matter what anyone did for him anymore.

"I get it. That's enough. I understand what you're saying, so just get lost. You came to apologize. That's enough."

"Why must Betty apologize, I wonder? Unless we start by correcting that, I can't go back even if I wanted to, in fact."

Beatrice pressed on as Subaru waved his hand, trying to drive her away roughly. Then she stepped further into the room, moving as she dragged the hem of her long skirt, and…

"—Ugh?"

Suddenly, she wrinkled her nose and stopped.

Her profile, which would be adorable if she kept silent, turned its neck like a dog tracking a scent, sniffing around the area.

Eventually, she glared at Subaru, her eyes harboring grand displeasure, and said,

"Not only has your face become gloomy, but it's become quite thick, in fact."

"—Huh?"

"I'm talking about the smell, I suppose. It stinks; it's the worst scent, in fact. It would be wise not to meet those twins for a while, I suppose."

Beatrice pinched her nose and waved her hand to emphasize the stench.

Not even noticing her gesture, Subaru's thoughts turned to a memory corresponding to the keyword "smell."

The smell, surely that was what someone said when the third loop ended—

“What do you say smells on me?”

Raising his head, Subaru asked the question, imbuing his voice with the color of emotion for the first time.

At the question, Beatrice raised one eyebrow, crossed her arms, and said,

“It’s the smell of the Witch, in fact. It’s enough to make my nose crooked, I suppose.”

Muttering the keyword “Witch,” a corner of his mind suddenly began to throb.

He remembered that word. He should have seen that word just recently. That was—

“The Witch of Envy.”

“In this current world, when one says Witch, What else could one mean, I wonder?”

At Beatrice’s mocking manner of speech, Subaru instinctively leaned forward. Reaching his hand out toward her, he asked,

“Why are you smelling that from me?”

“Who knows? Maybe the Witch took a fancy to you, or maybe she made you her enemy. Either way, you receiving special treatment from the Witch makes you a nuisance, in fact.”

“Being given special treatment by someone whose face and name I don’t know gives me the creeps.”

Beatrice shrugged, her attitude implicitly showing that even discussing it further was unpleasant. At her stubborn stance of refusal, Subaru shut his mouth and began to dive into the sea of thought while organizing the current fragments of information.

The Witch. The Witch of Envy was a globally famous figure remaining in fairy tales, hated and feared by the entire world, whose name everyone avoided even mentioning.

The only knowledge Subaru possessed regarding her existence was what was told in stories that lacked even a story.

Naturally, he had no memory of meeting her, nor did he recall having any contact with her whatsoever.

It was an absurd story that the lingering scent of the Witch would stain him when he hadn't even experienced such a thing.

—I feel like Rem said something like that to me, too.

If a part of her excessive murderous intent lay in that, then Subaru had once again bought resentment for a fact he had no recollection of. Since all his crimes were false accusations, Subaru's bad luck in being killed repeatedly was truly top-tier.

Realizing that helpless facts were simply helpless, Subaru let out a long sigh of fatigue. Seeing that, and perhaps judging there would be no further development in the conversation, Beatrice smoothed down her long hair with her hand and said,

"If there's nothing else, I will be going, in fact. I will properly tell Bubby that Betty came to see you, I suppose."

"Wait a sec."

He called out to her back as she reached for the doorknob to perform "Door Crossing," stopping her movement. To Beatrice, who looked back at him only with her neck,

"You feel bad for me, don't you?"

Subaru threw the question at her maliciously.

It was a move that might be somewhat of a gamble, but he followed his heart's plea that it was better than doing nothing.

To Beatrice, who wore a look of disgust, Subaru tapped the sheets lightly and asked again,

“You. Feel. Bad. For. Me. Answer Yes or No.”

“I don’t, in fact.”

“I’m telling Puck.”

“Gh… I might occasionally think so just a liiiiittle bit, I suppose.”

Turning her whole body back toward Subaru, Beatrice crossed her arms and looked away haughtily.

Looking at her small body from top to bottom, and then recalling the time he had spent with her until now—Subaru agonized over it, then made a decision.

“If you want me to forgive you, listen to just one request.”

That was—

“One night… no, until the morning after next is fine. Can you protect me?”

It was nothing other than a truly shameless choice, to beg a girl who looked younger than himself.

Beatrice fell silent for a moment at the request Subaru had broached, and said,

“That’s a vague way of putting it, in fact. Is there a reason you’re being targeted, I wonder?”

She returned a perfectly natural question.

Beatrice began to walk around the room while looking coldly at Subaru, and said,

“In the first place, I want no part of trouble being brought into this mansion. This mansion is an indispensable place for Betty, I suppose.”

“…I don’t intend to start anything myself. I just want to brush away the sparks falling on me.”

“For leaving even that to others, that’s quite the noble ambition, in fact.”

“Just this time, I’ve got no comeback.”

Beatrice sighed at the downcast Subaru.

For a while, a time of silence flowed through the room.

Head still down, Subaru thought he would hear the sound of the door closing before long. The sound of Beatrice casting aside his plea and fluttering back to her Forbidden Library.

When he heard that, it would be the moment even the single drop of hope Subaru had managed to connect with would be crushed.

To Subaru, filled with such resignation,

“Put out your hand, in fact.”

Beatrice had walked up to the side of the bed and was holding her small hand out toward him.

Subaru was taken aback. She impatiently took Subaru’s right hand, looked at the scar-covered back of it, grimaced, and said,

“Disgusting. To think you even have a habit of self-harm, you’re a hopeless pervert, I suppose.”

“That is Roswaal’s identity… I’m just a delusional teenager with a bit too much youth leaking out.”

“I don’t understand what you mean, but I know your hopelessness has only deepened, I suppose.”

Sighing, Beatrice turned Subaru’s right hand palm up to hide the wounds, and placed her own small palm over it.

Naturally, as if invited, they clasped hands, fingers intertwining with fingers, and…

"—I shall heed thy wish. In the name of Beatrice, the contract is hereby sealed."

Subaru was lost for words at the sight of Beatrice speaking so solemnly.

And then, an overwhelming heat transmitted from their intertwined palms. It traveled through his palm to spread throughout Subaru's entire body, suddenly shocking vitality into his drained frame.

Bewildered by his body's sudden heated reaction, he looked forward to see Beatrice glaring at him with eyes that seemed to say she was thoroughly reluctant, saying,

"Even if it is temporary, a contract is a contract. Formed in accordance with the ritual, it is absolute, in fact. I will listen to your incomprehensible request, I suppose."

"You should be grateful"—concluding with that, Beatrice stared boldly at Subaru with a superior gaze, despite looking from below.

Receiving that gaze, Subaru instantly looked away, trying to endure a wave of inexplicable emotion that suddenly visited him.

A welling passion, a sensation beyond words.

Not knowing how to handle that, extended from such an unexpected place, Subaru closed his eyes to the heat of the palm being held, and said,

"For real…? I almost got made to cry by a loli."

"Don't call me a loli, in fact. —Also, if you tattle to Bubby, I will absolutely not forgive you, I suppose."

"You're so desperate. That's seriously demonic."

Being on the receiving end of a gaze filled with genuine hostility, Subaru responded with a bitter smile.

It was the first smile, however small but certain, to appear in this fourth loop.

Chapter 24:
The Morning He Yearned For

1

Having formed a contract with Beatrice, Subaru obtained a very small measure of peace.

However, regarding the essential point that he was cornered, the situation hadn't improved one bit, nor was a solution even remotely in sight.

As usual, Subaru continued his shut-in life, unable to leave the guest room, and Beatrice wasn't sticking to Subaru twenty-four seven either.

In fact, because he had negotiated for her to allocate her guard duties to the critical time—from the night of the fourth day to the fifth day—Beatrice, who didn't want to be by Subaru's side if she could help it, hadn't come to his room even once since that incident.

Instead, the one visiting Subaru time and again was,

"I see, that's good. Beatrice properly came to apologize. I'm impressed, impressed."

Emilia, nodding with a smile on her face beside his bed.

Her frequent visits pricked Subaru's conscience, and at the same time, she seemed like a goddess without exaggeration, bringing a single ray of light to this world that was nothing but darkness.

Despite being pushed away with such harshness, Emilia still walked toward Subaru. Even when he voiced a succinct apology out of guilt,

"You were surely just on edge, right? Everyone has times like that, so it can't be helped. Though I'd be happy if you said that to Ram and Rem, too."

She gently let Subaru's rude remarks slide.

Regarding her modest request after that, Subaru couldn't return a clear answer.

Purely speaking, if they judged him as an untrustworthy element who knew the circumstances, Subaru's mouth would be silenced by them. On the other hand, it was also the honest truth that even after tasting their excessive loyalty, he couldn't bring himself to hate the two of them completely.

Although, perhaps that was a cardboard hope born from the optimistic thought that only one of them was definitely involved, and maybe the other knew nothing.

Day by day, Subaru wore down his spirit between hope and the disappointment that outweighed it.

Emilia stared intently at Subaru as he grew gaunt, then glanced at the meal placed beside the bed, and said,

"As I thought, you haven't eaten your food."

"…My bad."

Subaru was a guest who was nothing but trouble. Despite not allowing the mansion's servants to see his face, and on top of that, greeting their first meeting with abuse, they did not commit the injustice of cutting corners on his meals, as was proper.

Even though the meals served went almost untouched every time, and he knew he was clearly unwelcome, they fulfilled their duties without changing their expressions or voicing a single complaint.

He knew that one was blunt and the other was politely rude, but neither had a personality that would cut corners on work. Subaru knew that. And yet,

—Isn't there poison in it?

Every time he looked at the food, such anxiety crossed his mind.

He didn't think they were the type of opponents to use such methods. If they were going to do that, there should have been any number of chances in the loops so far.

But their actions had always visited Subaru directly. Therefore, he was half-convinced that when they came to kill him this time too, they would come gripping a weapon.

The reality that people he knew had many good points were definitely trying to kill him. Subaru's despair began from the point of acknowledging that.

Because he was in such a mental state, the reason he couldn't stomach food was purely that his internal organs couldn't fully suppress their trembling due to tension and anxiety.

He thought the food was surely delicious. It was a taste he had realized was good again and again. He might have even thought that eventually, he would be able to cook just as well.

"If you don't eat even a little, it's poison for your body, you know? It might be hard, but…"

"My stomach won't accept it… If Emilia-tan feeds me with an 'aahn', I might be able to eat."

Throwing a worthless quip at her sorrowful face, Subaru cursed his own unsalvageable nature.

At himself, a failure who could no longer even feign his usual frivolity toward someone who was likely genuinely worried about his well-being.

However,

"Okay then, here, aahn."

"—Huh?"

"Come on, aahn."

Placing the tray with the meal on her lap, Emilia was looking at Subaru with a spoon in her hand.

Soup was scooped into the spoon, and still barely retaining warmth, it aimed for Subaru’s mouth, slowly approaching him.

Not understanding Emilia's intention, Subaru frantically waved his hands,

"No, no no no, wait a sec, Emilia-tan. What are you doing?"

"What am I doing? Subaru, you said you'd eat if I did this, didn't you? So, eat. I'm doing 'aahn' for you."

"Uhh, regarding this sort of thing, there's a certain aesthetic beauty in the fact that somehow or other you can't actually do it in the end, or even if you do do it, there's something moving about the girl turning bright red and reaching her limit after one time, you know?"

"There's no way I'd be embarrassed just feeding a little bit of food to a boy saying such childish things. Come on, stop talking nonsense."

Against a flustered Subaru, Emilia forcibly enforced the 'aahn'. Eventually pushed by her vigor, Subaru felt his ears heating up with shame as,

"A-Aahn."

"Okay, gulp. I'm keeping them coming, okay? Here, here, here, here, here."

"Too fast?! It's my first aahn, yet there's no lingering sentiment or anything?!"

Mechanical and efficient movements, as if they were holding a speed-eating championship. Instinctively putting the spoons thrust out one after another into his mouth, Subaru, who had fallen into Emilia's trap, reached the point of finishing the meal by her hand.

Splendidly emptying the tray, a satisfied-looking Emilia deepened her smile with a "Yep," and,

"Come on, what do you say when you finish eating?"

"Thanks for the grub."

"Bad manners. Correctly, once more."

"Thank you for the meal."

"Okay, you're very welcome."

Emilia bowed politely to Subaru, who bowed his head deeply.

As for Subaru, a strange sense of fullness was pressuring his internal organs because he had suddenly stuffed food into an empty stomach that had endured for over two days.

To Subaru, who tilted his head wondering since he didn't recall eating a significant amount,

"Since you haven't eaten anything proper for a while, this is so your stomach won't be shocked. Ram suggested it, and Rem made it. Because they're good girls."

Emilia's words, sounding as if she were boasting of sisters, pierced sharply into Subaru's chest.

Consideration that should have surely made him happy enough to cry if it were true, now became nothing but a painful delusion to the current Subaru, enough to make him cry for a different reason.

Behind the kindness, behind the friendly behavior, there is a reverse side that is not as it seems.

Yes, once he had been made to realize that.

"Now then, I've fed Subaru, and if I stay too long I'll probably tire you out, so I'll head back."

"If you like, you can sleep next to me, you know?"

"I'm glad you seem to be getting your energy back. But I have a lot of things I need to do, too. Since I'm sneaking out, I can't really."

Emilia closed one eye, apologizing for her playfulness.

Suddenly recalling her schedule for this time of day up until now, Subaru realized how blessed he was.

At this time, she should have been constantly chased by studies in her own room.

To shoulder a country, to aim for the future, she should have been piling up diligent efforts.

To waste even a second paying attention to a loser of fate who had nothing but his body, couldn't advance to the future, and kept repeating the present—it must be precious time.

Suddenly, someone whispered in Subaru's heart, asking if he was fine with keeping on losing to fate.

Raising his head as if pushed in the back by that competitive spirit, which sounded exactly like his own voice,

"Hey, Puck."

"…I was keeping quiet because my loveliness doesn't fit the atmosphere, so what's uuuup?"

The silver hair holding the tray was about to leave the room. He called out to her back by another name, and watched as a small kitten appeared, parting the long silver hair.

Looking firmly into those black eyes, Subaru pointed at him and said,

"Nothing will probably happen to Emilia-tan, but… protect her properly and thoroughly. Even if you have to use that small body as a shield."

"Saying I can protect her with my size, that's quite a small crisis, isn't it?"

"Shut up. Just, I'm counting on you. This time, I'm full up just dealing with myself."

He didn't think a crisis would reach Emilia.

At least, Roswaal had no reason to harm her, and if Roswaal didn't, those twins wouldn't birth a reason either.

The only one in danger of their life in this mansion was, frankly, Subaru alone.

"Worrying only about your own life, huh? That's simple… No, wait. Thinking about it carefully, I feel like I didn't do anything that big last time either."

He had a premonition that the summary of the last loop was that while he was weathering the situation on momentum, a handsome guy swept everything away.

Last time and this time, wasn't Subaru just being jerked around?

"I'm sorry to interrupt while you're confused in a good way, but I'll properly accept your advice. —Yeah, since it doesn't seem to be a lie or malice."

Softly, slightly lowering the tone of his voice, Puck nodded.

Wondering what he was thinking behind those pitch-black pupils where no light entered, Subaru pulled in his chin as that emotionless look seemed both eerie and reliable.

At the exchange between the two, Emilia, who had been left behind despite being the subject, pursed her lips in dissatisfaction,

"Reaching an understanding just between the two of you, what is it? Are you thinking of something bad?"

"No way, no way. It's talk about how since you're a girl, let's be careful about various things. Watch out for cars, watch out for men!"

"Cars… do you mean carriages or dragon carriages? What does 'watch out for men' mean?"

"Since not all men are single-minded and sincere like me, it's talk saying listen well to your father's stories, and judge whether they're someone you can trust, Emilia-tan."

At Subaru's words, where his usual tone had emerged, Puck nodded deeply,

"That's right, Lia. From now on, don't think of my opinions as annoying nagging, and listen seriously. First, black-haired men with nasty looks in their eyes are a no-go. If you bring home someone like that, I won't let them in the house anymore, okay?"

"Brutus, you too agaaaain!"

A roar at Puck, who had slashed at the back Subaru had entrusted to him as if it were natural. One person and one animal tilted their heads at the unknown name. Subaru cleared his throat as if to pull himself together, and said,

"Anyway, that's all. Be especially careful at night. Since Emilia-tan is cuuute, I think you're always fighting the fear of unwanted night visits, though."

"I hear the floor my room is on is set up so that if someone trespasses, it's conveyed to a scary guardian."

"Close one. Good thing I'm too exhausted to do anything but sleep like a log after work. I can't even do a night visit in peace, geez."

"I'll leave the lock open, so if you have the courage, you can try it, you know?"

Raising her hand slightly, Emilia left the room leaving only that behind. As she left, the kitten on her shoulder greeted him with a wave of its paw as well.

At least, he was able to call out a warning to her and her guardian.

At this rate, the two of them would probably be fine.

"Ah, crap…"

Suddenly, the moment relief pierced into his heart, drowsiness trampled over Subaru's consciousness with a thud.

The sleep demon, which he had deflected with pain, dominated his consciousness seizing this opportunity, stripping away Subaru's will to resist from the roots.

The fact that his hunger had been inadvertently satisfied might have also been one of the indirect causes that left him without the energy to resist it.

Thinking he couldn't afford to sleep, as if biting his lip, Subaru's consciousness fell sinking into a slumber.

2

In the rift between dreams and reality, Subaru's consciousness drifted like a cloud.

He had heard somewhere before that the act of dreaming during sleep is a byproduct occurring as a result of the brain organizing information.

Then, the fact that scenes hindering Subaru's peaceful sleep continued even while he slept like this made sense as the organizing of vivid memories.

The sensation of half his body being torn off, the moment his skull was smashed, the pain of his leg being blown away, the sense of loss of his throat being bored through, the despair of his stomach being slit open; they tormented Subaru, standing on the edge of dreams, even as he escaped from reality.

Groaning, having nightmares, twisting his body while soaking his whole body in sweat, spilling tears from the corners of his eyes, Subaru continued to fight the emotions welling up from within him.

It's suffocating. It's painful. It's sad. It hurts. I don't want this anymore. I want to end it.

Whining, complaints, overflowed endlessly, and each time, his soul was whittled down. Whittled down, whittled down, and in the end, it would be completely worn away and surely nothing would remain.

His mind and body were completely exhausted, enough to make him think that way.

Suddenly, the stiffness in Subaru's body vanished.

As if the chill, the horror, that made his body tremble from the core had suddenly been swept away.

The reason was a hand.

Someone was holding Subaru's hand.

Someone was touching Subaru's existence, which drifted in the rift of unconsciousness within the bed, from the side of reality, trying to anchor him.

It was a warm sensation. It was a gentle sensation. It conveyed that he was being cherished.

He felt as if he had been saved. A gentle breeze blew into his desolate heart.

His pained sleeping face became peaceful, and his breathing forgot the hardships and returned to something quiet.

Who was it, he wondered. What was it, he wondered.

Was it reality, or was this also a convenient dream?

Feeling the faint warmth remaining on both his right palm and left palm—

3

"—How long you're going to sleep like a log, I wonder?"

"Bunder-sree-gah!"

Subaru's cry of anguish as he was violently kicked off the bed and forcibly awakened.

Roused by the hard sensation of the floor, Subaru grabbed the bed and lifted his body; before his eyes, Beatrice was standing on the opposite side across the bed.

Crossing her arms with an attitude that didn't hide her displeasure in the slightest, she snorted haughtily and said,

"It became the promised time, so I came even though I hated it, in fact."

"There's such a thing as hateful words without needing to hit someone, you know. It feels exactly like that right now."

Throwing his upper body onto the bed, Subaru told her so in a tired tone.

Suddenly, he realized that he had been sleeping and his blood ran a little cold. Even though he had brought his consciousness to wakefulness so much and hadn't lacked vigilance.

"Falling asleep on the crucial fourth day, am I seriously a reckless moron?"

"You're noisy with your grumbling, I suppose. Come on, we're going, in fact."

Ignoring Subaru lamenting with his face covered by his palms, Beatrice guided his attention with a beckoning gesture and headed for the door. At her back, Subaru panicked,

"Going… where are we going?"

"Are you telling me to spend a night in a room filled with your smell, I wonder? I refuse, in fact. The place for Betty is inside the Forbidden Library; that is non-negotiable, in fact."

Beatrice snapped her fingers lightly and touched the door.

No abnormality could be seen, but presumably, with just that, the preparations for "Door Crossing" were complete.

It was an unexpected offer from Beatrice, but Subaru was grateful for this stroke of luck. Beatrice's "Door Crossing" could be said to be a troublesome item for attackers as it prevented them from pinpointing the location for a surprise attack. Although for some reason it didn't work on Subaru, he had confirmed that Rem had no effective means of “Door Breaking.”

“You, you’re surprisingly thinking about various things for me, aren’t you?”

“If we don’t hurry the tea will get cold, so return quickly, in fact.”

To Subaru’s impressed voice, Beatrice gave a curt reply. It seemed that her being considerate was a misunderstanding.

Grimacing that he had wasted his breath, Subaru suddenly looked at both his hands.

There was nothing particularly different about them, but for some reason, he was terribly curious.

Come to think of it, while he was sleeping, someone, his hand…

“Beatrice. I don’t think it’s possible, but you weren’t holding the hand of the sleeping me or anything, were you?”

“That really is an impossible story, in fact. Even if Bubby asked me to, I would politely decline, I suppose.”

“You’d go that far, huh… But with a guy like me—If we die, we die together![4]”

“Absolutely NOT, in fact.”

Subaru gave a thumbs up, his teeth gleaming weakly.

It was his usual pose, but his condition hadn’t returned yet.

Leaving a sigh of amazement at such a Subaru, Beatrice went through the door. Hurriedly fixing his appearance here and there, Subaru also crossed the door to the Forbidden Library.

As always, Subaru thought it was a room where he couldn’t wipe away the impression of both serenity and clutter.

This room, where bookshelves packed to the brim with books stood endlessly, never changed its appearance no matter how many loops he visited it in.

Beatrice, who had entered the room first, went to the side of the stepladder that was her designated spot as usual. Opposite the door, she sat on the stepladder that was abandoning its role by being treated as a chair, and,

“You should kill time appropriately, in fact. If it’s here, no matter what happens… I don’t think anything will happen, but I will keep the contract, in fact.”

“Even if you tell me to kill time…”

Tension and the anxiety accompanying it. He had been trying to regain his composure since earlier, but still, as the critical time approached, he couldn’t remain calm.

Subaru looked around the room, comparing the many books lining the shelves, and,

“That’s right. Are there books written only in ‘I-glyphs’?”

“…There are some, in fact. Don’t tell me, you can’t read other writing, I wonder?”

“Embarrassingly, yeah. But even like this, I put in effort, you know.”

With all his might, while being watched over by the twins—

He gouged his own wounds grandly by himself, and took massive damage.

“To step foot into the Forbidden Library of the Mathers family, that is a waste of a treasure, in fact. Betty inviting someone in here happens maybe once every few years or not, I suppose.”

“Even if you say that, a book I can’t read is a bundle of paper, and even if you tell me the chance to enter the Forbidden Library is precious…”

Unfortunately for Subaru, this room was neither rare nor anything special.

Even if he told the current Beatrice that, it would only complicate things, and judging that it wasn't something to be particularly proud of, Subaru shut his mouth.

At Subaru cutting off his words halfway, Beatrice furrowed her brows suspiciously. To her, Subaru raised a finger trying to change the subject,

"Come to think of it, are you in this room all the time?"

"That is the contract, in fact."

"A contract again. Contract, contract from such a young age… it seems you were caught by quite the skilled sales lady. Insurance agents are more skilled the louder their voices are, right?"

"It is all a contract I desired myself, I suppose."

It was a tone that curtly refused any further mention.

Subaru nodded quietly at Beatrice's manner of speaking, which had erased her expression, and,

"Or so the person involved testified—"

"If you don't be quiet soon, I'll be on the verge of annulling the contract, in fact!"

Beatrice stood up, pulled books from the shelf, and threw them at Subaru one after another.

Given that it was Beatrice, who usually hurled magic power without hesitation, relying on such physical attacks was extremely rare.

He nimbly caught the throws of the weak girl and piled them on a nearby stand. Suddenly the attacks stopped, and Subaru, knitting his eyebrows, realized belatedly.

The seven or so books thrown at him—all of them were books written only in 'I-glyphs'.

Raising his face, Subaru turned his eyes toward Beatrice.

As if mocking Subaru for noticing her intention late, she waved her hand flutteringly, and,

“Is that okay for yoooou? It might be a little too haaaard, in faaaact?”

“Ri-ight. It might be too haaaard for meeee, so I might not understaaand.”

“It’s disgusting when both of us are using baby talk, in fact!”

“Good grief. I just matched you, you know. The level.”

If Subaru was going to set up a joke, he’d go back not to a baby, but to a fetus.

Communicating by pulling the umbilical cord or kicking the placenta.

At that attitude of Subaru’s, Beatrice shrugged both shoulders for real this time, and began to open a book as if she had completely given up on conversation.

Seeing her curt attitude, Subaru also sat on a nearby chair and picked up one of the books Beatrice had thrown and chosen for him.

He couldn’t possibly say words of gratitude out of embarrassment, but her thoughtfulness was genuinely making him happy.

4

Thus, the silence in the Forbidden Library passed slowly.

Without exchanging words with each other, only the sound of turning pages at slow intervals flowed alternately through the library.

The books Beatrice chose for him were, as expected, mostly works for children like fairy tales, similar to previous times. Since ‘I-glyphs' only meant content similar to being only in Hiragana, it was unavoidable that it would lean toward children.

Even that precious reading time ended up with Subaru's eyes merely repeating going back and forth over the same page.

At first, he had the composure to proceed with reading, but as time passed moment by moment, such mental leeway was stripped away little by little.

—From the closed Forbidden Library, the state of the outside could not be known.

Due to the nature of the room, the Forbidden Library, which didn't even possess windows, was a place where "time was frozen," as Beatrice had once said.

Not in the literal sense, but at least in the sense that it felt that way.

What time was it outside now?

At the point Subaru was invited into the Forbidden Library, sunset was already close.

Thinking simply, calculation suggested it would be fine if he spent just about half a day here until Subaru greeted the morning of the fifth day.

However, placing himself in this stagnant place, he couldn't measure the sensation of that mere half-day by himself at all.

He felt like only a short hour or so had passed since visiting this room, or perhaps he felt like he had been here for nearly ten hours.

The suffocating feeling coming from anxiety and tension also played a part in significantly lowering Subaru's current reality recognition ability, and he could no longer trust his own judgment.

Yet, he felt guilty asking Beatrice about it.

It wasn't feministic like he shouldn't disturb her reading, but he was afraid that by taking such action, a change would occur.

Spending stagnant time like this was also suffocating. But if the situation fluctuated greatly at the drop of a hat—that was also terrifying.

Unable to go forward or back, he just continued to cower before the overwhelming phenomenon called time.

His fingers trying to turn the book went numb, and the tip of his tongue complained of thirst. The pounding of his heart beat out a familiar high speed, the ringing in his ears was high-pitched, and the sound of blood circulating could be heard from his entire body.

How long was he forced to endure such tension?

If the beginning was absurd, the end also had no forewarning.

"—He's calling."

Suddenly, such a mutter resonated quietly within the library.

Before the eyes of Subaru, who raised his head as if struck, Beatrice was closing her book and putting it aside. She hopped down lightly from the stepladder, and,

"I am being called, I suppose."

As if forgetting the existence of the surprised Subaru, she muttered to herself and waved her finger.

Instantly, Subaru's whole body received a sense of wrongness like space distorting.

A sensation close to floating assaulted his body from all directions, and despite it being an instant, fatigue like having been swung around and nausea spread languidly through his whole body.

Stopping his body from sliding off the chair, Subaru glared reproachfully at the ringleader, Beatrice. And when she finally noticed that gaze,

"Ah, come to think of it, you were here, in fact. I forgot, I suppose."

“Forgetting even though I’m right in front of your eyes, that’s low grade even for a joke.”

“It’s a matter of priorities, I suppose. —Bubby is calling, in fact.”

Announcing just that, Beatrice passed by Subaru toward the door.

Reaching his hand toward her back as she tried to go outside as if it were natural, Subaru, unable to hide his irritation, said,

“H-Hey, wait! If you go outside now…”

“I don’t mind if you stay withdrew inside, in fact. If you stay here, you’ll be safe, I suppose.”

Blood rushing to his head at the phrasing that didn’t hide her contempt, Subaru stood up as if kicking the chair and chased her back. Putting his hand on the door handle, just a few seconds of hesitation.

But,

“Ah, dammit. What the hell, something like this!”

Inspiring himself with foul language, he threw the door open violently.

Immediately after—

“Ah—”

Unintentionally, a foolish voice spilled from Subaru’s mouth.

Shielding the dazzling light piercing his eyelids with his hand, he responded to the morning sun’s welcome with agitation.

Clawing the air with his hand as if to confirm, Subaru’s body tottered forward. The front of the hallway, the window overlooking the garden—in that high sky, was the sun that had just begun to rise.

It was the morning sun of the fifth day, which he had craved so much and hadn’t reached no matter how many times he tried.

“No, way… did I, cross it? The night of the fourth day…?!”

Unable to believe the result before his eyes, he slammed his hands against the window with force enough to break it and pushed it open. A cool breeze flowed in, and as his bangs were stroked by the wind, Subaru vividly sensed the smell of morning. The cold, newborn wind blew away the air of the mansion.

His legs gave way, and he went backward weakly just like that. His back hit the wall, and losing the will to stand, he slid down and collapsed.

Dumbfounded; there was no other way to express it.

It was a current situation he couldn’t have imagined, to the point where he couldn’t even distinguish between dream or reality.

He had completely given up. He had completely despaired. He was worn out.

And yet, Subaru had crossed the night of the fourth day and arrived at the fifth day.

“Ha, haha…”

Unknowingly, a dry laugh leaked from his mouth.

Once it spilled out, he couldn’t find a way to stop it anymore.

“Hihi, hahaha. Wha-at is it. Hey, what is it. Something like this, hey, haha…”

He couldn’t think of a way to put his current feelings into proper words.

Holding his knees, Subaru continued to spew out laughter as if he had lost his sanity while crouching in the hallway.

He couldn’t put it into words. It didn’t become words. Finally Subaru—

"—Subaru?"

What cut into that empty delight of Subaru's was a voice like a silver bell.

At the end of his gaze, which he raised sluggishly, a silver-haired girl was standing deep in the hallway.

It was Emilia. On the morning of the fifth day, he was able to find her having greeted it safely.

Together, the two of them had crossed the night of the fourth day. That fact again made inexplicable emotions well up in Subaru's heart.

However,

"Emilia…?"

In contrast to Subaru, whose heart was expanding with delight, Emilia stared at Subaru in astonishment. And then she suddenly broke into a run, rushed to the side of the sitting Subaru, and,

"Subaru… where, were you?"

"No, I was…"

"Because… no, that's fine. It's fine so… come with me."

Having his hand pulled, Subaru stood up while being surprised by her forcefulness.

Just like that, without hearing Subaru's reply, Emilia began to run down the corridor, dragging him forcibly.

While being taken aback by her sudden action, Subaru tried to mention it, but his throat stopped upon seeing Emilia's profile.

On her refined profile, unconcealable agitation and irritation were floating.

It was an expression reminiscent of the time of the battle at the loot house.

“Hey, what on earth—”

Happened, he could not ask.

Because faster than he could voice those words, another sound struck Subaru’s eardrums.

—That was, he thought, a scream. Or perhaps, it might have been a shriek.

High-pitched and trailing, it was filled with sadness, a cry of the soul that could not help but leave painful claw marks on the hearts of those who heard it.

The scream, as if half their body were being torn apart, continued endlessly, and conveyed its urgency painfully even to Subaru, who didn’t understand the situation.

Passing through the hallway, they headed to the upper floor. The second floor on the east side was the floor where the servants’ individual rooms were. Passing a room where Subaru had been staying until a few days ago, what Emilia aimed for while pulling his hand was further in—there,

“With Roswaal…”

Blue indigo long hair stood in the hallway, narrowing his eyes at Emilia and Subaru rushing over. Right beside him, Beatrice, who had disappeared, was leaning her back against the wall, and in her hands, he could see a cat with gray fur curling its body into a ball.

“Inside.”

To Subaru, who arrived at the three of them and tried to demand the circumstances, Roswaal responded shortly with just a single word.

What he indicated was right next to him, a single private room with its door opened.

When he turned to Emilia, she also nodded to Subaru. Those violet eyes were moist, forcing Subaru to make a decision whether he liked it or not.

Swallowing his breath, Subaru turned his feet toward the inside of the room.

Even while he was stepping in, the scream from earlier continued without interruption. And it was clear that it was now hearing from the room in front of him.

Entering inside, eyelids closed from tension—opening them softly, Subaru saw.

It was a beautifully tidy room. The occupant's methodical personality was reflected; the private room with few furnishings arranged tastefully showed that the limited space was used functionally without waste.

Though the layout itself was almost identical to the room Subaru had been using, he thought, he thought, does this much personality come out just by having a different occupant?

By thinking that, Subaru forgot the scene before his eyes for just an instant.

But such escape from reality was in vain; the world forced a conclusion onto Subaru.

In the center of the private room, there was a carefully made bed.

On top of that bed,

"AaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaahhh—!"

There was Ram, screaming as if to tear her throat apart in deep, deep sadness, shedding tears like rain—and.

—While being clung to by her, Rem lay there, having breathed her last.

Chapter 25:
The Voice of Deep Resentment Doesn’t Vanish

How many times has it been now that my consciousness has been dominated by this blankness?

Faced with a spectacle beyond comprehension before his eyes, Subaru stood frozen, at a loss for words, just as he had done again and again.

He had been beaten down. Countless times until now. He wanted to whine, just once, that surely it was about time he could be saved.

After all, he had witnessed nothing but tragedies, repeatedly, over and over like this.

Directly in front of the frozen Subaru, a blue-haired girl lay on the bed.

Her face, devoid of vitality, was pale, and her closed eyes would never open again. Her thin negligee—likely sleepwear—though strange to say at a time like this, suited her well, giving her a childlike air compared to her usual capable impression.

Suddenly, Subaru realized he had never seen her in anything other than her maid uniform. And the first time he saw her in other clothes, they were her final outfit.

"Why… is Rem…"

Muttering, Subaru thrust his hands into his hair, looked down, and muttered again.

Faced with a situation he couldn't understand, his head, spinning uselessly in circles, hurt terribly. Perhaps it was also the fatigue from lack of sleep. Thinking felt awfully troublesome.

In each repetition, four times in total. For Subaru, who had been killed in three of them, she was the person he had to be most wary of as a perpetrator.

Roswaal, who could order her to silence him, and Ram, who likely shared the same position, met the same conditions, but there was no doubt he had judged Rem to be the biggest obstacle this time based on the experience of actually having his life taken.

Therefore, this time he kept them at a distance, even talked the reluctant Beatrice into getting involved, and postponed the situation again and again to prolong his life.

As a result, being able to greet the morning of the fifth day was good news, but…

"Why have our positions changed so much…?"

It should have been Rem trying to kill Subaru. Absolutely not the reverse, and he couldn't think of a reason for Rem to be killed either.

Suddenly, Subaru stepped forward to confirm if she was truly dead. The girl laid on the bed had her hands clasped over her chest; her death face was peaceful, as if someone had cleaned it up.

He reached out, trying to touch that unmoving body. But,

"—Don't touch her!"

His hand was slapped away by an arm swung with vigor, and

Subaru groaned quietly and looked up.

Facing him across the bed was Ram, clinging to Rem and shedding tears. While continuing to shed tears that showed no sign of stopping, Ram said,

“Don’t touch Rem… don’t touch Ram’s little sister.”

It was a word of rejection leaving absolutely no room for argument.

Saying only that as if slamming it down, Ram clung to Rem’s body again, whispering to her while weeping quietly. It was a devoted and painful figure, like a mother telling a bedtime story to her sleeping child.

Even with her sister’s appearance inviting such pity, there was no sign of the younger sister waking up to rebuke her.

The pale profile, the lips with poor color. And the body that had stopped its beating.

Seeing those things up close, Subaru finally accepted reality.

—Rem had truly died.

“It is likely due to magic, I’d saay. Though it seems closer to a curse than magic.”

To Subaru, who had left the room with tottering steps, Roswaal, standing next to the door, voiced his deduction.

Raising a finger, the man with indigo long hair slightly tightened his usually completely lax expression, and said,

“The cause of death is debilitation. Her vitality was stolen while she slept, her heartbeat was slooowly distanced, and just like that, the flame of her life was blown out as though settling into stillness”

At the word “curse,” Subaru raised his face.

It was a deduction he remembered hearing. And regarding the cause of death Roswaal spoke of, Subaru also had an idea.

That was exactly the type of abnormality Subaru had experienced in the situation of his second death. Assuming that was likely the cause of his first death as well, then Rem's cause of death this time would be the same as Subaru's first time and indirect second time.

It would be, but,

"I was sure that debilitating magic was Rem's doing, though."

The second time, where he was debilitated by magic and had his skull crushed by an iron ball.

If one recalled that situation, Subaru couldn't be blamed for predicting it was the crime of the same offender. However, in reality, Rem had been given death by a curse, and Subaru had thus slipped through not only the influence of the curse but also the baptism of the iron ball.

In other words,

"The curse and Rem are separate…? What about a cooperative relationship?"

In the case of his second cause of death, it was an attack after being affected by debilitation due to the curse. It would be natural to assume they were working together, but what about this case?

Falling out, Subaru thought, then shook his head. In the first place, he didn't know the position of the curse user. Speaking from conditions, it would be strange if the curse user wasn't someone close to the mansion.

Otherwise, they couldn't have opportunities to contact Rem, and above all, they had to be a person whose motives and conditions overlapped with Rem's actions.

Considering the remarks in the third iteration, Rem trying to kill Subaru to silence him was because she thought it would be for Roswaal's sake. That act, which indirectly led to the elimination of an obstacle for Emilia, was the gift of loyalty, albeit excessive.

Therefore, the premise that he might not be able to avoid it, which had also mentally cornered Subaru, was greatly shaken because of the link with the curse user.

Unable to establish a logic that convinced him no matter what, Subaru, touching his chin and thinking, couldn’t hide his irritation. With the accumulation of fatigue, the blood circulation in his head right now was the worst.

Even knowing that no decent conclusion would come out, Subaru, who could do nothing but think, had to think. And so,

“Don’t tell me, a cooperative relationship is also X-ed out and they’re completely separate cases…?”

What if there was no relationship whatsoever between Rem and the curse user?

The first time, Subaru was targeted by the curse user and died just like that. The second time, Rem killed Subaru, who had fallen under the curse user’s spell, for some reason. The third time, Rem killed Subaru purely out of a rampage born of loyalty. The curse user was unrelated to this.

And this fourth time,

“Because I didn’t do anything, Rem became the curse user’s target…?”

The causal relationship was unknown. In the first place, even the reason why Subaru’s life was targeted by this curse user or whatever remained unclear. Or perhaps the curse user’s aim could be considered the people in the mansion in general, but then he couldn’t come up with a reason why those of low position like Subaru and Rem would be prioritized as targets, omitting important figures like Roswaal and Emilia.

In the end, it was going in circles unless the identity of the curse user was revealed. Feeling his thoughts blocked on all sides and stagnating, Subaru clicked his tongue in irritation and cut off his thinking. Then,

“You seem to be worrying quite seriously, don’t youuu?”

From a slightly higher position, Roswaal looked down at Subaru and muttered that. His blue and yellow odd eyes were narrowed as if appraising Subaru, and Subaru furrowed his brows at the unpleasantness of having his inner thoughts naturally seen through.

Perhaps realizing his own bad manners, Roswaal immediately corrected his posture, bowed to Subaru with his eyes, and said,

“Excuse me. It seems I am also a little on edge. As expected, when I think that a servant I favor has been made to meet with such a fate, well.”

Even while voicing an apology, Roswaal’s attitude never softened in the true sense. He crossed his arms, and while tapping his crossed arms lightly with a finger, said,

“Roast with fire, violate with water, carve with wind, sink into earth. —I feel like it wouldn’t be a return gift unless I did about that much. It’s awkward to ask this, buuuut… My Esteemed Guest, do you have any idea what happened here?”

There was not a fragment of a joking ring contained in those words muttered in a low voice.

Voicing a threat that was likely his raw true feelings, Roswaal stared at Subaru as if testing him. Suddenly, Subaru became aware of how bad the situation he was placed in was, and agonized over how to respond. But there was a voice that interrupted before Subaru could open his mouth.

“Last night or so, you said to be vigilant. You said that, right, Subaru?”

Looking up in the direction of the voice, what entered the vision of Subaru, whose eyes widened in astonishment, was a gray cat moving its short arms as if washing its face—Puck.

To Subaru, who was left speechless by his unexpected remark, Puck tilted his head and said,

“Emotionally and in terms of obligation, I would very much like to take your side, you know. But if I prioritize that and misjudge things, there's a child who won't be rewarded."

Turning his black eyes softly toward the room, Puck rubbed his pink nose with his hand.

While maintaining his usual comical attitude, he must still have had thoughts regarding Rem's death. Making small movements, he shifted and said,

"If lingering regrets or hesitation remain, the soul will fall to evil without being saved. For me, that is a sad thing, not only as a mere spirit, but as someone who had interacted with that child no little."

Shaking his small head side to side, Puck curled his body up again as if to say he had said what he wanted to say. Gently watching over him on her palm, Beatrice was also staring at Subaru silently.

What kind of emotion was contained there? Even though she was such an expressive girl, the current Subaru couldn't even verify that.

"…Subaru."

Emilia pulled on Subaru's sleeve anxiously, turning moist eyes toward him as if appealing for something.

If there is something you know—thoughts conveyed by just a single call.

While he wanted to throw his whole soul into answering her plea, the impulse to brush away her clinging to him was also Subaru's true feeling.

If there is something you know—everyone says it lightly.

But if that were true, that was something Subaru wanted to scream in a louder voice. Indeed, if there was someone who knew the truth of the situation, he wanted them to come forward right now. And he wanted to slam all the countless questions floating up like mountains against them, and have them pull him out of this dead end with no exit.

However, in reality, such a convenient mastermind would not show themselves, and the meaning of the four pairs of eyes directed at Subaru would not change either.

The advice to Puck, given with good intentions, had backfired like this this time. Toward Subaru, who didn't put it into words despite knowing something, even Puck must have harbored distrust. It was natural for Emilia, who had a deep connection with that Puck, to also harbor not a little suspicion toward Subaru.

He repeated loops, and struggled each time hoping for it to get better. However, the result was that every time he did one thing, it backfired and brought back a worse situation than imagined. Surrounded by enemies on all sides; how many times did Subaru have to repeat this to taste the same heartache Subaru felt last time?

"Subaru."

Clearly, Emilia called his name.

It was proof that she harbored suspicion she couldn't wipe away at Subaru's attitude of falling silent. Subaru felt a sense of sorrow at her natural reaction as he continued to think.

In a situation tantamount to knowing nothing, how could he speak to convince them? Or perhaps, he thought they would be disappointed in Subaru, who knew nothing.

Thoughts that had become a messy jumble.

The moment he thought he wanted to say it and just get it over with—

The stagnation of the world and the black mist—as if induced by Subaru's resignation, they eroded the world again, feeding on his resignation.

He lost his words. No, the lips that would utter words did not move a twitch.

Naturally, his hands, feet, eyes, and tongue didn't move, and even the air was completely cut off from the world. Sound and movement were lost; at the return of the absolute space of silence and suspension, Subaru was literally struck dumb.

It was the unreasonable phenomenon that had forcibly cut him off the other day when he decided to tell Emilia about “Return by Death.”

The black mist created a black arm faster and more elegantly than before. That hand, which had been from wrist to elbow before, appeared forming the outline of a slight upper arm.

Just like last time, the arm slipped into the chest of the frozen Subaru without showing any sign of hesitation. Then, softly stroking his internal organs and sternum, it reached his heart, and—

—Instantly, his thoughts were blown away, and pain that could cause instant mental death pierced through his entire body.

“Subaru?!”

Hearing a grievous voice of sorrow, Subaru realized he had danced back to reality.

And that he was clutching his chest, a massive amount of sweat floating on his forehead, kneeling and breathing roughly.

Raising a hand lightly to the worried Emilia, Subaru looked back on the current phenomenon.

When he tried to tell Emilia about “Return by Death,” that black mist gave Subaru a warning in the sense of interfering with it.

And if it showed itself with a similar meaning this time too—

“Is it because it’s impossible to explain without touching on the content of the loop…?”

At least with his mental state just now, he didn’t think he could possibly dodge persistent questioning. But if that was true, this situation was the worst.

Subaru, who wanted to spill his guts, and the members who wanted to unravel Subaru's guts. For the black mist, there could be no greater field of activity.

Endless questions meant endless torture. The moment he realized that, Subaru, in fear of the unbearable pain, trembled his lips and backed away.

That act,

"—If you know something, Ram won't let you escape."

To the girl who had collapsed crying in the room, looked like an unforgivable folly.

In a split second, a gust of wind shook the door of the room violently, slamming its aftermath against Subaru's bangs. Immediately after closing his eyes at the natural storm,

"Ouch…!"

Sharp pain pierced his cheek, and Subaru instinctively covered his face with his palm. What he felt damply on his touching palm was the sensation of bleeding dripping from a wound just opened.

Realizing that was an injury from the wind just now, Subaru turned his surprise to the back of the room.

Gently stroking her sister lying on the bed, and directing the hand opposite that one toward him, the pink-haired girl glared at Subaru with eyes harboring rage.

"If you know something, spill everything."

"Wait, Ram! That's…"

Only the folly of saying "I can't" was something he restrained himself from.

The moment he said that, it would become absolutely impossible to settle this situation. However, even if he stopped himself from saying it, not a single word to break the deadlock came out.

Subaru didn't know what would become the trigger to receive that warning again.

The fear of that pain made him lose the ability to make correct judgments regarding Ram.

As a result, Subaru's words petered out, failing to extinguish her momentum.

Toward Subaru, who shut his mouth, Ram sent out wind with the meaning of a second warning.

If a cliché expression was permitted, it was truly a phenomenon one would call a "wind blade."

It was likely magic related to wind. The magic creating a sickle-weasel flashed with sharpness like a slash,[5] tore through the walls and doors on the path to reach Subaru, and was about to slam in a blow like the one that tore his cheek—when it suddenly vanished.

Subaru and Ram, surprised and choking on their words. Between those two,

"—It is my policy to keep promises, in fact."

Muttering, the one who stood in front of Subaru was the girl with cream-colored hair.

Beatrice lightly waved her raised palm, and without boasting about erasing the sickle-weasel Ram unleashed as if it were nothing,

"While in the mansion, Betty will protect this human's safety, I suppose."

"Lady Beatrice…!"

At Beatrice declaring so as if bored, Ram bit her lip in indignation.

Glancing sideways at her attitude, Beatrice looked up at the tall figure standing beside her, and,

"Roswaal. Your servant is acting rudely toward your guest, in fact.

As the master of the mansion, how do you judge that, I wonder?"

Directed at him, Roswaal furrowed his brows for just a moment. But he immediately regained his usual composure, closed one eye and shrugged,

"Indeed, it is truly regrettable. If possible, I would also like to renew my welcome to him as a guest immediately. If he would spill what is in his chest and unburdened himself, then immediately."

"…This guy was in Betty's Forbidden Library last night, in fact. So he should be unrelated to this affair, I suppose."

"Whether one should place weight on the situation is no longer the issue. Beatrice, surely you are fully aware of at least thaaat much, are you nooot?"

Negotiations broke down, and Roswaal turned the palms of both hands upward just as he shrugged. In those palms, he suddenly saw multiple colorful radiances floating up.

Even Subaru, who had absolutely no knowledge of magic, was made to realize that it was a state where condensed magic power was visible.

Red and blue, yellow and green—four colors of pale light floating; even if he didn't understand just how outside the norm that was.

At Roswaal's performance, Beatrice gave a small snort with her cute nose,

"As always, a dexterous youngster, in fact. Having a little bit of talent, putting in just a tiny bit more effort than others, and being blessed by lineage and a teacher by only a slight margin… Do you think you were able to escape being a jack-of-all-trades with just that level, I wonder?"

"You're the one who is as harsh as always. Although, if I said I've never thought I wanted to try out just how different I, who continues to walk, am from you who spends time in a room where time has stopped—that would be a lie."

A rise in magic power occurred between the two, bringing Subaru an illusion as if the atmosphere were distorting.

Unknowingly, the two heightened their fighting spirit, leaving Subaru, the person involved, behind.

Subaru himself didn't know why it was turning out like this. However, the fact that he couldn't utter words to stop the two was also a fact Subaru himself could only grit his teeth at.

"Howeeever, to think you would go so far as to physically protect him. Did you take quite a liking to him?"

"Keep the jokes to your fetishes, Roswaal. Betty's ideal is Bubby himself, in fact. With that human, both adorableness and furriness are unsatisfactory, I suppose."

Against Roswaal heightening the visible four-colored magic, Beatrice took no particular action while maintaining a calm stance.

However, around the girl who should have just been standing there, an overwhelming phenomenon that distorted space was occurring, which Subaru, standing close by, could sense.

That was merely the aftermath of gathered power; just imagining how much efficacy that power would display if it had directionality made his spine freeze.

"Why go this far?"

"A contract is absolute, I suppose. If I break it, Betty will no longer be Betty, in fact. Being sincere to a contract takes priority over everything else, I suppose."

Responding to Roswaal's sigh like that, Beatrice continued with "However,"

"If he aimed for this situation and used the contract with Betty, he would be an outrageous imposter, I suppose."

"I…! I didn't intend for that…!"

Glancing at Subaru, Beatrice looked away with emotionless eyes.

What Subaru wished from her was strictly because he regarded the phenomena related to the causes of death so far as dangerous.

He absolutely did not wish for a situation like this.

“It doesn’t matter, all of that doesn’t matter!”

Stamping her foot, it was Ram who interrupted that exchange.

Receiving everyone’s gaze, she gripped the hem of her skirt tightly,

“Don’t get in the way, let Ram through. Rem’s enemy… if you know something, tell everything. Save… Ram… save Rem…”

A grievous appeal, but Subaru had no words to return to it.

What was given to his silence was an invisible blade harboring rage and disappointment. However, that was again intercepted without reaching Subaru,

“I’m sorry, Ram. Even so, I will try believing in Subaru.”

Lining up next to Beatrice, it was Emilia who checked Ram.

She turned her palm toward Ram, and while carrying Puck on that shoulder, walked up to Subaru. Then, looking down slightly as if searching for words,

“Subaru, please… If you can save Ram, save Rem, please tell us everything.”

At the emotion of affection contained there, Subaru felt his own pettiness and was ashamed.

Even when things had come to this, Emilia was trying to stand by Subaru’s side. For Subaru, who hadn’t shown a decent attitude in this loop, and even now kept his mouth shut about the crucial matter and wouldn’t speak.

And also at his own weakness, unable to return a single thing to such consideration of hers.

“Sorry—”

Leaving that behind, Subaru let himself back away, putting distance between them.

For an instant, Emilia’s hand reached out to stop him. Before it could reach Subaru, it had to be turned to intercept the wind blade that was unleashed, and as a result, no one on the spot could stop Subaru’s feet.

“Subaru—!”

Shaking off the voice calling him to stop, Subaru cut through the corridor regardless of appearance. Behind him, even while feeling a clash of magic power occur, he didn’t even summon the courage to look back.

Despite Emilia racking her brains for him so much, Subaru didn’t have the courage to face that fear.

He was weak. He was helplessly fragile. That was why he was scorning every kind of goodwill and good intentions, and running away selfishly.

He didn’t know what to do anymore.

Where he should go, how he should think, everything.

Only—

“—I will absolutely kill you!!”

Hearing from behind, the scream of a girl like she was vomiting blood.

Only the scream of vengeance of the girl who lost half her body, tearing at herself, chased after him.

As if fleeing, fleeing from that, covering his ears, shaking his head, raising a voiceless voice, Subaru threw everything away and ran.

He continued to run.

Chapter 26:
The Third Choice

Running frantically, he didn't know how much time had passed.

His breath ran out, his knees buckled, dripping sweat ran down his chin; with the inside of his heart a mess, he still continued to run without being able to stop.

If he didn't run, he would be caught up by the incomprehensible emotions chasing him from behind. And if he were caught by them, this time everything would surely end—that conviction alone was now driving Subaru.

Ram's scream, her roar of resentment, that cry that regarded Subaru as an object of hatred, still wouldn't leave his ears.

Ram, who never broke her rude, haughty attitude that seemed to mock people.

That same Ram had bared such emotion and screamed hatred at the top of her voice.

Just recalling it made his heart shrink, and indescribable sadness came and went.

He had run away. He had ended up running away.

Rushing through, bursting out of the mansion, throwing away all the noise heard from behind, he had run away leaving everything behind.

Subaru could no longer return to that place.

Ram and Roswaal wouldn't forgive the Subaru who ran, and Emilia and Puck likely wouldn't be able to fully trust the Subaru who stubbornly kept his mouth shut.

And Beatrice, who was bound by contract, also likely wouldn't become an active ally without being able to read the true intent of

Subaru’s actions.

If he could have spilled everything, that would have been fine too.

But to do that, the black mist stood in his way and interfered.

In a world where time had stopped, in a world where sound was isolated, pain like his heart being crushed and fear—before that, Subaru’s wavering resolve was easily blown away.

As a result, unable to endure either the pain or the sorrow, Subaru had no choice but to run.

“It can’t be helped, can it…! What could I… Even I!”

He didn’t understand anything.

Why it had turned out like this, what he had to do.

What he had to do for the world to forgive Subaru.

“Even though… it was… so fun…”

Suddenly invited into another world, having no choice but to live in a world where he knew nothing; a place that welcomed Subaru in a world where only that anxiety was rooted.

Those days, that time, that time where only about a single week had passed, was now so far away it was out of the current Subaru’s reach.

Redoing, returning, repeating; each time, the world bared its fangs at Subaru.

The world that had been so kind changed color, the brilliance that had been vivid faded, and everything looked dull.

—It’s no good anymore.

Suddenly, such a mutter grazed his mind.

—There’s no need to try hard anymore, is there?

At his own voice urging resignation, at that sweet temptation, Subaru almost stopped thinking.

If he did just as those words said, he thought he would surely be at ease.

Originally, Subaru had a nature of easily drifting toward the easier, easier direction of the situation.

It wasn't just Subaru. Any human would likely be the same.

If two choices were lined up in front of them, and they couldn't throw away either, they would be forced into a time of anguish.

In the midst of struggling with such suffering, what if a third option were suddenly presented?

If that option seemed attractive, as if it were a divine revelation, as if it were a godsend, who could blame the impulse to reach out for it?

If one could choose neither to resist nor to escape completely, wouldn't it be better to just throw it all away?

"Throw it away… you say."

Blood rapidly drained from his head, and even the pounding of his heart, which had been beating so fast, felt like something distant.

His limbs became heavily weighted, and his legs, which had been moving as if driven, slowed their pace, gradually changing to a dragging walk.

Suddenly, his field of vision, which had become invisible until then, expanded, and Subaru realized his figure was in a forest surrounded by trees.

While running recklessly, he seemed to have burst out of the mansion, gone off the highway, and wandered into a mountain path.

Surrounded by dense, overgrown greenery, in the gloom where even the sky was blocked, Subaru thought that this place resembled the place of his previous death.

The moment he thought that, a clear vision of the third option floated up.

“If I die…”

Would I be saved, from this situation?

“Ah, that’s right. If I end up dying, it changes.”

The nonsense born of weakness that slipped out of his mouth seemed too sweet, and a twitching smile floated onto Subaru’s lips.

Subaru had already lost his life three times.

A fourth death was inexperienced for Subaru. Therefore, he had been tormented by the baseless anxiety that if he met a fourth death, perhaps everything would end.

But,

“If it ends with that, what’s wrong with it…?”

Each time he repeated, the situation Subaru was placed in got worse.

Death by debilitation, beaten to death after being debilitated. Murdered by a person he should have trusted, and this time the death of that partner, and the loss of all trust from the other concerned parties.

This time, where he picked up only his life. This time, where he was made to hold nothing but his life.

Like this, losing everything, continuing to struggle under conditions worse than when he was first invited to the parallel world. What meaning would there be in such a thing?

No, even if there were some meaning, why was it said that Subaru had to walk it?

“If you want to do it, you should just do it on your own… What relationship does it have with me, with me?”

Biting his lip, he spat hatred at the existence that involved him in this situation.

Muddy dark emotions boiled in his guts, curses as far as he could think of filled his head, pouring black fuel into Subaru’s heart, which had already completely withered.

—The choice called “Death,” it seemed like the best idea to the current Subaru.

If it ends by dying, then that’s that.

But if, hypothetically, he could die and return to the “Second Day” again.

“The first… that’s right. Getting along with Emilia-tan, fluffing Puck, teasing Beatrice, exchanging banter with Roswaal, together with Ram and Rem…”

Tracing the first time just as it was, he might be able to do it happily.

Come to think of it, the first time could be said to be the ideal itself for Subaru. Even if the future of dying from debilitation at the end on the night of the fourth day couldn’t be changed, that death was accompanied by neither pain nor suffering, and above all, peace and tranquility were promised.

If he could return to those days again, if he could come in contact with their smiles, then dying was by no means a scary thing.

The current situation, which was beyond help, was far more terrifying for Subaru, and above all, he couldn’t endure the sadness.

Swallowing his breath, Subaru searched the pocket of his trousers.

Inside, the thin sensation he grasped in his hand was the quill pen he hadn’t let go of even once in these four days.

The sharp pen tip had pierced the back of Subaru's hand countless times, stained with fresh blood each time, and the now dark red, caked-on blood likely couldn't be wiped off even if he tried.

Gripping the quill pen in a reverse hold, Subaru pointed its tip at his own throat.

The pointed tip possessed sharpness sufficient to gouge the human body; that was something Subaru himself could already testify to with his own body.

If he gathered momentum and swung it down with all his might, the objective would likely be achieved.

"Haa… haa… haa… gh."

His vision flickered on and off, and his whole body was hot as if boiling from the too-rapid blood circulation.

And yet blood didn't circulate only to his head, and the spinning of his brain froze more and more as if it knew no limits.

His gaze staring at the pen tip was fixed, and the trembling tip approached inch by inch.

His rough breathing, surpassing even a full sprint, was accompanied by nausea, to the extent that if his concentration broke, he seemed likely to vomit stomach acid immediately.

His knees shook, his lower back gave way, and his arm didn't move as if nerves didn't pass beyond the elbow. Yet only his right hand gripping the pen was trembling ridiculously, comically.

"Damn… it."

Clicking his tongue, he shook his head as if to deceive the emotions before his eyes.

He grabbed and fixed his trembling right wrist with his left hand. But the moment he touched his right hand, the fear was transmitted to his left hand as well. Both hands gripping the pen trembled minutely, and that intent was never carried out.

"Stop… I said stop!"

He raised his voice in irritation, but even that voice couldn't fully hide the trembling.

Finally, he dropped the quill pen he was holding, and when he bent his back to pick it up, his knees, which should have been buckling, lost their strength and he collapsed on the spot.

Putting both hands on the soil, staring at the ground close up in astonishment, Subaru suddenly spilled hot things welling up from both eyes, and bit through his lip in frustration.

Sharp pain and the iron smell of blood filled his mouth, and tasting that, he sobbed.

"I can't even… even such a simple thing…"

—Is it that I lack courage and can't do it?

If he tumbled down there, he could be at ease.

Despite brooding like that, Subaru couldn't even determine the resolve to fall completely.

He couldn't lose to impulse and leave it to momentum, nor could he put an easy and weak decision into action. Even his determination and resolve were fragile; crouching and wailing was the most he could do.

Even if he exposed such a shameful state, the situation wouldn't improve one bit. It wouldn't even worsen. Change would not occur. The unchanging situation just simply conveyed that the current state Subaru was placed in was rock bottom.

Pain, suffering, sadness; everything pressing Subaru for a decision, absolutely everything, granted him no kindness.

Even the option he had craved so much, he didn't have the resolve to carry it out.

He thought that if he was going to choose the end anyway, maybe it would have been better to let Ram kill him.

Subaru was not directly related to Rem's cause of death. Therefore, even if Ram could have killed Subaru, it would have been nothing but a completely misplaced revenge play.

Ram, who wailed at the intense pain of having half her body torn away, and screamed hatred so much.

If it could soothe that body-scorching impulse even a little, wouldn't it be fine to offer up something like the life of Subaru, who had chosen only to rot away like this?

While seeming to care for others, its essence was escapism just to distract from the whereabouts of his own unsettled resolve.

However, Subaru, who avoided even facing his own shame, never realized that thought which insulted even Ram who was being used as a comparison.

That selfish emotion that even spirits would abandon—what dispatched that there was, perhaps, the dispensation of heaven unable to bear seeing such a shameful sight.

"—Ah?"

At the sensation of the air suddenly changing, Subaru, who was groveling, raised his face.

On the soil where he crouched, there was no change in his vision crumpled by tears. But in the gloom where sunlight didn't penetrate, blocked by leaves and branches, something caught on Subaru's nerves.

It was a warning called up from instinct.

Raising his body at the ringing alarm bells, Subaru looked around while kneeling on one knee. Rubbing his eyes, securing his vision, straining his ears, and killing his breath.

The sound of grass being stepped on rang out, and the dry echoes of swaying branches followed in succession.

Fast. And sharp. Something was closing in sharply and rapidly.

Unknowingly moistening his dry lips with his tongue, Subaru instantly picked up the quill pen that had fallen at his feet. Holding it in a reverse grip, he held it in front of him with anxiety whose reason he didn't understand.

—In an instant, it pushed aside the vegetation and revealed itself before Subaru.

"Y-You are…"

A pursuer from the mansion—it was not.

Or perhaps the weakness that somewhere hoped if it were was betrayed.

Before his eyes, which he cast down slightly at the selfish expectation, however, it stood leisurely.

Speaking from Subaru's knowledge, it was likely closest to a wolf.

Its whole body was covered in black fur, its four legs firmly biting the soil, keeping its body low. Saliva dripped from a large mouth lined with sharp fangs, and in the center of a face covered in jet black, red twin eyes, the only things asserting their presence, shone brilliantly.

Its body length was roughly about one meter, and its weight was probably about thirty or forty kilos.

In his original world, it would be the size of a large dog class, but from its overall sharp body shape, he didn't feel that much overwhelming strength.

However,

"Hey, hey…"

In front of that existence with glaring eyes before its prey, breathing roughly, could a human who knew only the lukewarm dogs blended into human society maintain composure?

Before that thing shaking its fangs with obvious hostility, cold sweat rapidly wet Subaru's forehead.

In front of Subaru, who couldn't make a single move, it lowered its head and snorted.

Likely, it had sniffed out Subaru's scent and come this far. Subaru's body, which had run recklessly, had many abrasions from grazing branches, and there were not a few places still oozing blood. On top of that, he had even been raising unsightly sobs. It wouldn't have lacked materials to pinpoint his location.

The black dog lowering its head and threatening him.

Suddenly, he saw a yellowish horn growing on the top of that dog's head, proving that its ecology was definitely different from what Subaru knew.

At the ferocious rage of the horned beast hungry for food, Subaru felt his courage shrink, but on the other hand, realized he was obtaining even a sense of relief from unknown origins.

Perhaps if it was the beast before his eyes, it would affirm Subaru's decision without hesitation. Because to the cornered Subaru, it seemed like such an existence.

"Thinking I'd let Ram kill me… and right after that, this. Even I think I'm too fickle."

Because he couldn't hold a firm resolve, he continued to be swept away by the situation before his eyes.

Just as it had been until now, even now he ended up entrusting himself to the easy situation before his eyes.

He didn't think making that choice was a mistake. Even if he thought so, it was useless, and even if he thought so, nothing would change.

Spreading both arms, Subaru expressed non-resistance to the horned existence.

For an instant, perhaps unable to understand the meaning of the prey's action, the horned beast keeping its body low trembled as if frightened, which was a little funny.

"Wh-at are you scared of, against a guy beaten down this much?"

A laugh that slipped out of his mouth.

He was amazed that he still had the energy left to laugh like that.

—He felt somewhat at ease, enough that laughter came out.

The black beast standing in his way—this guy, who clearly regarded Subaru as prey, was the messenger of heaven who would grant Subaru's wish.

It would likely guide Subaru, who couldn't even end his own life, to a gentle and sweet stagnation with those fangs, those claws, and that horn.

Whether it would end in death, or return and sink into lazy happiness.

He didn't know which would be thrust upon him, but he could escape from this helpless dead end pressing on Subaru.

For now, that was fine. Just that was fine. He wouldn't wish for any luxury beyond that.

So rather, put me out of my misery—

"Huh…?"

Even though he should have been thinking that with a clear feeling, cold water was thrown on Subaru's mood by the sound of hard things clattering close by.

Surroundings; while paying attention to the threat before his eyes, he searched for the cause of the sound, but it wasn't found anywhere visible.

And so he realized immediately. No wonder it wasn't found. It was natural.

The small, hard sound was the sound of the roots of Subaru's teeth trembling, unable to mesh.

"—Eh?"

The lips leaking a mutter trembled, blood flow concentrated in his fingers to the point of pain, and it was ringing at a speed that could make Subaru's heart explode.

The abnormality occurring in his own body; noticing it belatedly, Subaru was astonished.

Why did his body want to escape from this place so much?

Like this, it was as if—

"This is just like…"

—Like I don't want to die, isn't it?

His heart betrayed even by his body, Subaru was distressed by the situation where he could no longer trust even his own self. And, ignoring Subaru's disturbed emotions,

"Oah…?"

The beast suddenly vanished from his field of vision, and a stupid voice dropped into the forest.

Dumbfounded, he chased the whereabouts of the jet-black shadow that had been there just a moment ago. Not found.

Immediately after, the base of his right leg was bitten into by powerful jaws.

"Ggh…!"

Fangs pierced flesh, reached nerves, and the wound was widened by sharpness like a blade.

Blood spurted, the movement of the world became slow, and looking down in a daze at the source of the pain, Subaru's eyes crossed with the red twin eyes thrusting fangs into there.

—As if loudly asserting that he was alive, Subaru's scream echoed throughout the forest.

Chapter 27:
The Fangs to Stay Alive

His throat trembled. His soul screamed.

Tearing through flesh, invading nerves, a sharp, excruciating pain that threatened to drive him mad struck his brain.

“Gyaaaaaaahhh—!!”

His vision turned bright red, and he couldn’t grasp reality at all.

His right thigh area was being bitten by a black beast. Before the thought to tear it off could run through his mind, the reaction of raising a scream against the agony was faster.

—It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

His head was completely filled with that, leaving no room to even think of a counterattack.

Suddenly, his sense of balance collapsed. The biting beast shook its head with its fangs still thrust in, pulling Subaru, who easily outweighed it by nearly double, down to the ground.

“Ugh—”

Carried by the momentum, he half-rotated and was slammed face-down onto the ground. His face, failing to break the fall, crashed into the soil; the sensation of his nose being crushed and the taste of dirt in his mouth.

Pain continued to assert itself from both above and below, and while spitting out dirt, Subaru’s throat continued to raise a low groan. Then, realizing that the sensation of fangs had left his right leg, he hurriedly flipped his body over.

“This is bad…!”

Returning to his back, he raised his upper body.

Copious bleeding could be seen from his right leg, and the flesh of the skin under his torn clothes was turned up. Pain flared up again from the wound that looked like it had been gouged by a knife, but prioritizing standing up over that—he wouldn't make it in time.

Having sealed the prey's movement, the jet-black shadow moving to pursue was too fast to follow.

Against the wild beast approaching while bounding left and right on the ground, the only reaction Subaru could manage was to cover his upper body with both arms.

A flash of the swung sharp beast claws tore through Subaru's right arm from the back of the hand to the shoulder in one go. Blood spurted, pain nerves applauded the manifestation of the new wound, and Subaru's brain boiled with a heavy ensemble of intense agony.

Before biting off his throat, it intended to crush his limbs and rob him of the power to resist.

Experiencing the cruelty of a wild hunt firsthand, Subaru shuddered and screamed.

That sound, which didn't form meaningful words, had no effect on the horned beast's movements. As if performing a task it was used to, indifferently, the horned beast bit into the left wrist of the merely screaming Subaru, robbing him of the function of a third limb.

The sensation of fangs penetrating his left wrist.

A sensation that surpassed pain and was now nothing more than something inducing screams. Under conditions where his vision flickered and even thoughts didn't run properly, what still drove Subaru was only his reflexive survival instinct.

"Aaaaaah—!! Damn it all!!"

Screaming, with all his might, he slammed the beast into the ground along with his bitten left wrist. Its jaw strength wasn't so weak that the fangs would come out with just that. While soiling its black fur with blood and saliva, the horned beast pushed its fangs in deeply as if mocking Subaru's resistance.

Into the side of its face,

"Don't get, cocky—!!"

The quill pen he hadn't dropped yet pierced deeply into the wild beast's left eye.

At the sensation of its eyeball being crushed and the inside stirred, it was the horned beast's turn to roar.

At the unexpected retaliation from the opponent it had determined to be helpless prey, the wild beast thrashed its whole body in resistance. However, Subaru judged that if he let go here, there would be no next time.

Covering the beast with his whole body, keeping not only his right arm thrusting the quill pen but also his bitten left arm as it was, he absolutely would not let that body escape.

"It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts—"

His right leg, with its nerves damaged, couldn't hold firm; his left arm had the wrist dangling by a single piece of skin; and on his right arm, bone was visibly deep within the turned-up wound.

There was a sensation of a nosebleed flowing endlessly from his battered nose, and he felt like he might be missing two or three front teeth if he wasn't careful.

Even in such a state, he did his utmost to escape from the predicament before his eyes.

There was pain. There was suffering. There was fear. He was alive.

Both himself and this beast were still breathing.

"Agaah—"

The beast's blindly swung claws grazed his forehead, and at the sensation of his brain being shaken, his hold loosened. In that opening, the horned beast shoved Subaru away and distanced itself with the quill pen still stuck in its left eye.

With a single leap, it moved several meters away, and just like that, the jet-black shadow melted into the forest and vanished.

Subaru, collapsed on the soil, searched for that vanished figure, forgetting even the pain.

He couldn't think optimistically that it retreated due to injury.

It was a well-heard story that a wounded beast is terrifying. And for the beast, Subaru would also be a wounded opponent.

For both of them, the opponent was an existence whose life had to be ended here.

"—It hurts."

Kneeling on his right leg which couldn't hold firm, he raised his body relying only on his left leg. Both arms were wretched to look at; especially his left hand looked so bad he felt his heart would break just seeing it, so he couldn't direct his gaze at it.

An illusion as if the side of his head were being beaten repeatedly. Temporarily thrusting the continuously ringing alarm of pain into his subconscious, Subaru's gaze glared at the forest where the beast had disappeared.

It will definitely come.

That baseless conviction might have been the gift of the few experiences he had gained in this world, for Subaru who had faced murderous intent not a few times until now.

"—!!"

Was it Subaru or the opponent who raised a scream like holding their breath?

The only thing known was the fact that before the bracing Subaru's eyes, opening a mouth lined with sharp fangs, the horned beast flew in like a bullet.

Subaru tasted with his whole body the power of a creature weighing over thirty kilos charging at full speed without holding back. And that, with the constraint of the condition that he couldn't receive the blessing of support from both legs.

With a split-second judgment, his right arm went up, and the horned beast's bite ended in failure as its jaw was struck from directly below. However, he couldn't kill even a speck of the charge's destructive power, and Subaru's body rolled on the ground entangled with the horned beast, carried by the momentum of the crash.

"Ooooooaaaaaaaah—"

Blown backward, while hitting his whole body hard, Subaru swung his arms frantically. On the way, feeling the sensation of touching hard fur, he grabbed it with all his might, and clung to it determining never to let go, even if he didn't know what part it was.

Rolling on the ground while entangled, eventually Subaru and the beast's bodies entered a slope. Far from stopping, they gained momentum aiming for the bottom of the slope, and in the end,

"—You've gotta be kidding."

Suddenly, the sensation of the hard ground that had been battering his whole body vanished.

Gaining the floating sensation that attacked immediately after, Subaru realized he had thrown himself off a cliff.

"—!!"

Was the voiceless scream again screamed by either Subaru or the beast?

As a result, that scream didn't last very long.

The floating sensation was cut off in just about two seconds, and his bones creaked at the impact of hitting his whole body hard again. A dull sound rang out, and he thought somewhere probably actually broke. However, prioritizing the judgment that his body was in no state to worry about that.

Extending his left arm which had no sensation beyond the wrist, he tried to kill the rolling momentum as if clawing the ground. The fingernails of the five fingers spread on the rock surface were peeled off, and spots like sprayed paint were drawn on the rock wall by the spurting fresh blood.

Doing that much, the momentum finally slackened, and Subaru's body barely stopped at the edge of another cliff. Stopping in a state where half his body was protruding into the air, Subaru hurriedly rolled his body toward where there was ground, and,

"Buhaa… haa… ah, ah, ah, shit!"

Pinching his nose, he vigorously expelled the noseblood that hadn't finished flowing.

Unable to judge whether the liquid accumulated in his mouth was saliva, blood, or stomach acid, he spat it all out onto the ground along with curses.

Breathing roughly, grimacing all over his face at the pain of lacerations and bruises his whole body complained of, Subaru then realized that the figure of the beast that had fallen with him was not there.

"Hey, where…?!"

It wasn't the time to think avoiding death by falling was lucky.

If he received its attack again, the fate of Subaru, similarly at the edge of a cliff, would be decided this time for sure. Assuming the figure of the horned beast jumping back nimbly and threatening him, Subaru looked around while changing his posture.

And he immediately caught that black figure in his vision.

“…Is that so, you couldn’t make it, huh.”

The figure of the horned beast existed beneath Subaru’s eyes, at the bottom of that cliff.

Unlike Subaru, it hadn’t been able to avoid a second fall. Unable to endure the fall from a height more than double the first one, the beast, which seemed to have fallen headfirst, lay on its side atop copious bloodstains, not moving a twitch.

—Apparently, Subaru had picked up his life again.

“Dammit… this is, ridiculous…”

Relief pierced into the gaps of his heart, perhaps because he had witnessed the end of that life.

Subaru, who was also bleeding in a way that couldn’t be overlooked, lay on his side on the ground and closed his eyelids, unable to resist the attacking drowsiness.

Just like that, without being able to think anything, his consciousness fell and vanished.

Chapter 28:
Preparedness and Confession

"—Finally, you've noticed, in fact."

When Subaru opened his eyes, the sunlight was leaning heavily toward the west.

Midway up the cliff—that place Subaru had arrived at during his first fall was gaping open like a mouth where the forest broke off.

He hadn't had the composure to notice it during the chaotic battle with the beast, but placing himself here where he could see the sky, an inexplicable sense of relief wrapped around Subaru.

Perhaps the illusion of having escaped the suffocating feeling of being surrounded by trees made him think so. To the extent that a self-righteous hope floated up that maybe, even in this dead-end situation that should have remained unchanged, something might have changed.

"Why don't you say something, I wonder?"

"…Something."

"On top of being boring, you have a stale, gloomy look on your face; you are a hopeless guy, in fact."

Spitting that out harshly, Beatrice smoothed down her long, luxurious ringlets.

Atop the rocky surface of the sheer cliff, the incongruity of her usual dress attire was tremendous; there was a mismatch there as if only her part had been pasted onto a landscape painting later.

"…In that getup, I can't really picture you doing outdoorsy stuff."

"Betty didn't want to walk in the dirt-smelling mountains either, in fact. If you hadn't fled into a place like this, there would have been no need to come here, I suppose."

Brushing off her hem, Beatrice said this bitterly.

At her words, Subaru furrowed his brows suspiciously, and then, belatedly, he realized.

That the multitude of deep wounds he had sustained were mostly closed, leaving only traces like bloodstains and tears in his clothes.

The left wrist that had been nearly falling off, the laceration on his right arm where bone had been visible, the right leg he had hallucinated was no longer moving—all of it was back to normal.

“There were too many, so I couldn’t erase the scars, in fact. You should accept at least that much as the result of your own clumsiness, I suppose.”

If he looked closely, he could confirm the remnants of wounds received from fangs in various places. However, they had faded enough that one wouldn’t notice unless in a bright place, and above all, he didn’t care about his appearance enough to worry about scars.

Purely, the fact that he had his wounds healed like this was the greatest salvation. However,

“Why…”

“What is it, I wonder?”

“Why did you save me? I…”

—Even to Beatrice, who had formed a contract with him, he couldn’t reveal anything.

At Subaru’s attitude of choking on his words, Beatrice snorted with a familiar look of amazement. She shrugged her shoulders just like that,

“If the other party were to die in an unsightly pool of blood, it would affect Betty’s prestige, I suppose..”

“I thought the terms said… until this morning.”

"If you have the composure to nitpick, I could make a wound in the same place again for you, in fact? Fittingly, there is a target called a scar to aim for, I suppose."

"I'msorrythankyoupleaseforgiveme."

Prostrating himself flat and rubbing his head against the rock surface, he dealt with Beatrice's quiet rage.

In any case, although she teased him, she—

"Are you still… keeping the contract with me?"

"A contract is a contract. It remains valid until one of us falls, in fact… Thinking of it that way, not setting a proper time limit was a mistake, I suppose."

Perhaps intending to pretend the earlier nitpicking hadn't happened in earnest, Beatrice behaved as if she had forgotten the duration Subaru had mentioned.

A foul-mouthed girl with whom he didn't get along. —Subaru felt as if his chest had been suddenly struck by the merciful stance shown by Beatrice, who had given such a strong impression.

Subaru lost his words at the emotions welling up.

Beatrice, while gazing at Subaru who had fallen silent, pointed a finger at him without touching on the change in his expression,

"Come to think of it, there was something I had to ask, in fact."

"…What, is it?"

He instinctively braced himself because, depending on the content of that question, he was wary that an audience with the black mist would be unavoidable.

However, what came out of her mouth was content unrelated to Subaru's fears,

"About the wounds Betty healed… did you defeat the opponent that inflicted them, I wonder? Or did it escape, I wonder?”

“…? By wounds, do you mean that black wolf-like thing? If it’s that…”

Approaching slowly to the edge of the cliff, he pointed below as if to show Beatrice.

At the tip of his finger, there lay the carcass of the beast, rolling in the same position. Beatrice, standing next to him, confirmed it and nodded,

“Was that the only opponent, I wonder?”

“If there were two or more, I would’ve simply been bitten to death twice as fast.”

Being able to bury one like that was completely a result of coincidence.

If he had been attacked by a pack, a dust cloud would have risen in cartoonish expression, and after it cleared, a clean Subaru skull would likely be rolling there.

At Subaru’s reply, Beatrice touched her own chin and closed her eyes for a moment. Then, she shook her head slightly as if immediately convinced,

“I don’t sense any presence in the surroundings, so it was probably a stray, in fact. If you happened to encounter one that slipped through the barrier, your bad luck is quite something, I suppose.”

“I’m actually at the point of suspecting I’m a clump of bad luck myself.”

It felt like all the misfortunes that occur in a life were weighing on him at once.

Even if it were guaranteed that no misfortune would occur if he got through this, he would want to ask them to switch to releasing it in small doses if possible.

Since coming to the parallel world, what he recalled vividly were only memories accompanied by pain.

Even though there should have been just as many happy things.

Feeling something ache effeminately in the depths of his memory, Subaru cast down his eyes to deceive his expression. But Beatrice didn't pay attention to such sentimentality of Subaru's,

"If that's not the case… well, thinking about this is a waste of time, I suppose."

"Hey, what? When you figure something out all on your own like that, it makes me curious. I want to see, hear, and touch that fact you realized"

"It would just add one more thing that you can't do anything about, in fact. More importantly than that, you should rack your brain about how you'll conduct yourself from now on, I suppose."

Pushing away the approaching Subaru, Beatrice clearly blocked the retreat of Subaru, who had been searching for an escape route again.

As if to press the point to the silent Subaru, Beatrice crossed her arms,

"Let me tell you, this is as far as Betty can do for you, in fact. I cannot create an opportunity for you to return to the mansion and explain yourself to the older of those sisters, I suppose. Even if that chance existed, you are the one who threw it away, in fact."

"I…!"

If he could have said it, he wanted to scream that he would have.

If not for that restriction that felt like his heart was being crushed, Subaru would have spilled everything and begged for forgiveness.

That not a single thing would serve as a clue to heal Ram's heart. That Subaru was also a victim just being swept away by that helpless situation.

Because even that wasn't allowed, he had run away to a place like this, been attacked by a wild animal, and ended up groveling for his life.

"Am I an idiot…? No, I am definitely an idiot."

Again, making that situation an excuse, he tried to pretend he didn't see.

Repeating public stances, excuses, defenses, and self-preservation, Subaru had come to the edge of the cliff. It was proof that he had been driven to a place with no escape, both in a realistic sense and a mental sense.

Running, running, running, and continuing to run; which way were his feet facing now?

"Why do you… care about me when I can't go back?"

"It's a whim, in fact. If you don't at least die somewhere out of my sight, Betty will have bad dreams and be troubled, I suppose. — Seeing you hesitating even at this late stage, I feel like even that is a faint hope, in fact."

Erasing kindness, she slashed at him with words filled only with severity.

Beatrice's gaze, looking at him as if he were something boring, was completely dry, and unknowingly Subaru made his throat sound as if gasping.

"If I, choose to run away…"

"I will at least lend a hand so you aren't found by the people of the mansion, in fact. As for where you disappear to after that, you should do as you please, I suppose."

It was a blunt way of speaking, but that was likely her undeniable true feeling.

Beatrice never broke the content of what she voiced. That was clear from the fact that she came to search for Subaru in the mountains like this, and in the end, didn’t abandon him as he crouched effeminately.

Surely, if Subaru chose to run away, she would affirm it.

Not out of consideration, but out of indifference born from weighing the terms of the contract..

But if, hypothetically—

“If I said I wanted to talk to Ram, what would you do?”

“…It’s useless, in fact. The older of the sisters no longer has the composure to listen to your words, in fact. No matter what you say, she won’t listen, and she won’t believe, I suppose.”

To Subaru’s presentation of another choice, Beatrice responded while casting down her eyes, which was rare.

Was the image floating in her mind the figure of Ram raising a voice of resentment, whom Subaru had left behind at the mansion?

How she had been after Subaru ran away. Coming into contact with Beatrice’s current attitude, he knew that it was a situation where he dared not ask.

Seeing Beatrice shut her mouth, Subaru looked up at the sky and chewed on his own foolishness.

That moment, that place was the watershed.

Subaru shouldn’t have run away at that place. Even if he didn’t have the resolve to endure the pain, Subaru should have faced Ram.

He missed the opportunity, and the chance to connect their hearts was lost. And that which had slipped through his hands once could never return a second time.

The rift that had opened between the two was just that deep and large.

“The older of the sisters endured for the sake of the younger. And the younger of the sisters lived for the sake of such an older sister, I suppose. If either is missing, that pair is no longer whole, in fact."

As if interrupting the silence, the melancholy voice of the girl flowed.

In front of Subaru lowering his gaze, Beatrice toyed with her own luxurious hair,

"If either is missing, the function is lost. Since she has ended up like that, the older sister probably won't last long either, I suppose."

"What, does that mean? What do you know…?"

He felt like something outrageous was being muttered.

Closing in on Beatrice with momentum as if about to grab her, Subaru tried to question the true meaning of her statement just now. But,

"You are arrogant, your attitude is big, and your hands and eyes are nasty, human."

His hand was taken, and Beatrice's body rotated as if dancing. As if caught up in her rotating movement, his legs got tangled, and before he knew it, he landed on the ground on his back. Air was forcibly expelled from his lungs by the impact, and the groaning Subaru opened his eyes wide.

"It will never go back to how it was. When I think that, I have thoughts of my own, I suppose. Although, Betty may not have the qualification to voice them, in fact."

"Acting like you understood it all by yourself… Stop acting like a big shot. Are you blurring the content to act like a key person, you piece of shit."

Was she amusing herself with the state of the opponent alternating between joy and sorrow by releasing information in small doses? Subaru cursed at that bad taste. However, Beatrice shook her head,

"You're the one asking; what do you intend to know about an opponent you've only known for four days—and barely even faced properly at that, I wonder? Even if you knew, what could you do, I wonder? Don't force your self-righteousness on me. You can no longer be involved with that mansion, in fact."

"I don't…"

"Know anything", he started to say, but Subaru's mouth lost the counterargument.

The human named Natsuki Subaru, since waking up in the mansion, had been a suspicious person who stayed shut in his room and didn't even converse properly until this morning when Rem died.

At least, the Subaru in Beatrice's subjectivity was nothing more than such a human.

However, even if Subaru told her about the ten days he had experienced, what on earth would come of it?

Looking back on these ten days, could Subaru say he knew anything about them?

To Beatrice, who was now looking down on Subaru with a harsh gaze like this, did he gain anything from those two that would let him argue back?

"In the end, without knowing anything, in a place I didn't understand anything, was I just making a pathetic racket on my own selfishly…"

—You know nothing.

There was no mistake in Beatrice's words.

Subaru knew nothing. He didn't know. He wasted all his chances, and had drifted this far with just his body.

Lying on the ground spread-eagle, Subaru covered his face with his palms and looked at the darkness.

Inside the pitch-black vision, what was recalled were the few days of peace of mind spent at the mansion. Those days shattered into pieces, and Subaru's heart also shattered.

"So as not to touch the barrier, go through the forest tracing the boundary, in fact. If you get out to the highway beyond the mountain, it shouldn't be difficult to walk to a human village, I suppose."

Implicitly, Beatrice was announcing she intended to look after him only that far.

Her contract was, in the truest sense, nothing more than "Subaru's safety within the range of her reach." If there was no factor involving her own beliefs there, the fact that Subaru was a stone by the roadside to her did not change.

Beatrice began to walk around as if searching for a spot where he could descend the cliff safely, and he stood up to follow her back absentmindedly.

Leave the mansion, forget everything, and flee somewhere far away. He didn't know if he could survive, but it was a life he had picked up with so much trouble. Let's cherish it, cherish it.

"—Pretending I didn't hear any of that crying voice, huh."

At the words that slipped out of his mouth, Subaru grabbed his own chest and clenched his teeth.

He heard the voice filled with hatred. The roar of resentment chased after him. A scream covered in curses, saying she would kill him, was slammed into him.

But before that, wasn't that girl crying?

Something that should have shattered was screaming inside Subaru's heart.

"Hey, I'm thinking stupid things, aren't I…"

The back of his throat trembled. The sensation of his stomach being tightened. A shudder like his skin crawling transmitted to his whole body, and the breathing of the standing Subaru became sharp and rough.

He himself thinks that he is thinking stupid things.

It's a stupid story. It doesn't fit logic at all. It doesn't add up, and above all, if he considers the disparity between merits and demerits, it's a clear story.

"Even an idiot doesn't need to think to know. That's right, it's decided."

—Really, are you okay with that?

"It's decided that it's okay. Three cheers, it's because there is life. All's right with the world."

Shaking off the hesitation, he tries to step forward.

But his legs do not obey the brain's command. He stops on the spot, forcing a dialogue.

Someone's question. An inner, question of his own.

—Really, are you okay with that?

"Like I said, it's decided, that it's okay…"

—What part of that, makes it okay?

To his inner question, Subaru cannot find words. Meanwhile, the voice throws questions as if piling them up, demanding an answer.

—Are you okay with not being able to be involved with that place anymore?

—Are you okay with not being able to interact with those people anymore?

—Are you okay leaving the people you left behind in that place alone?

—Are you okay having shaken off the girl who was crying there?

—Can you give up on the future that should have been in that place?

"—Eat shit."

Against the risk, the possibility of getting a return is too low.

High-risk, high-return? That's bound to be the most impossible choice in Subaru's life.

In the first place, the moment he finds himself betting on something, it's safe to call it a loss, judging by Subaru's way of living.

Not getting deeply involved with anything, not choosing anything, just drifting.

Since he had lived that way, since it would have been fine if he could live that way, why not do so even after coming to this world?

"After all that trouble… right, after all that struggle, this is a life I worked so hard to pick up, isn't it?"

Pretending not to see the bonds he had gained, betraying the warmth that certainly should have been there, brushing away even the mercy of heaven that visited at the destination he fled to; if the conclusion he reaches at the end of that is this, isn't his current self too much of a clown?

"No, since it doesn't even make a funny story, a clown is far better."

A clown who behaves comically and can't make anyone, let alone himself, laugh. What value is there in such a thing?

Subaru doesn't know, and doesn't want to know.

"That's right. It's a life I picked up after all that trouble… So."

Taking a breath, he raised his face.

"—I decide how to use it."

The conflicting hearts matched, and Subaru's will was unified.

Suddenly, a cool breeze blowing through swayed his bangs, and Subaru narrowed his eyes at the ticklishness. In the distant sky, over there, the sunset was sinking while dyeing the world orange.

The sun of the fifth day he had wanted to see so much was vanishing toward the end.

While seeing it off, Subaru finally remembered.

For what purpose he had waited so eagerly for that sun.

"—Get back, I suppose."

Suddenly muttering in a low voice, Beatrice stepped around toward Subaru.

She restrained Subaru's movement with a raised hand, and carving a color of deep vigilance onto her lovely features, she ran her gaze around the surroundings.

"Bea…"

"Silence, in fact."

The question was cut off immediately, and Subaru also wandered his gaze as if searching for the cause of her vigilance.

He didn't know what Beatrice felt or what she was wary of.

Therefore, that Subaru found it first was simply a gift of coincidence.

"—Ram."

The pink-haired girl indicated by the mutter was finding Subaru and smiling beautifully.

Her figure was high in the sky, at the summit of a large tree stretching high. Ram, using a thick branch as a foothold and supporting her body with a hand on the trunk.

The moment her gaze and Subaru's gaze entangled and he unconsciously swallowed his breath, something shaved the earth and kicked up a cloud of dust around Subaru and the other.

"Gwoh!"

While being bathed in the raging earth and sand, Subaru reflexively covered his face. When he lowered his arms timidly after a few seconds, a rock face gouged in a semicircle was left before his eyes.

At the destructive power of that phenomenon, a chill ran down Subaru's spine. It wasn't a shudder from imagining himself receiving it.

—He shuddered because he remembered what he was like when he actually did.

"From that time…"

Last time, Subaru fleeing while being chased by Rem in the mountains. There was a blow that blew off his right leg and finally gouged his neck.

Invisible slashes, the identity of the opponent who released them. He had never let his thoughts run there, but,

"So it was the two of them…"

Thud; there was a sensation of a lump that had accumulated in his chest falling.

He knew it was foolish to think so, but what Subaru felt at that moment was the desolation of realizing that even she had abandoned him, along with a mysterious sense of relief.

Subaru tilted his head at himself for obtaining relief.

Thinking such out-of-place sentiments like, as expected, they are only themselves when they are two.

"Found, in fact. —That girl's Clairvoyance is troublesome, I suppose."

“Clairvoyance, huh…”

An ability with a grandiose name; it’s to Subaru’s liking.

As Beatrice’s grave tone indicated, her movements from there were rapid. Ram bent her body and descended from the trunk of the large tree as if sliding.

Landing with quite some momentum, but without killing that momentum, she rode it into a sprint, and with a single leap to the foothold of Subaru and the other midway up the cliff—arrival.

“Finally, Ram found you. Lady Beatrice still being with you is unexpected, though.”

As if facing a hated enemy, Ram said this with shining eyes.

Seeing those young features distorted by hatred, painfulness swept through Subaru’s heart.

Her clothes were the usual maid outfit, but that attire usually worn methodically was now distorted beyond recognition.

Holes were scattered on the skirt snagged here and there, the white brim she had worn on her head had vanished somewhere, and the pink hair that should have been arranged was disheveled and had lost its grace.

—Dressing, and hair care; the two of them used to do it for each other.

Subaru knew that too. He remembered them talking about it, sometime.

There are other things, many things he knows.

“Step back, in fact. By contract, Betty protects this human. Even if the opponent is you, I will show no mercy, I suppose.”

“Lady Beatrice, please move. Ram also cannot hold back when the opponent is Lady Beatrice.”

“An amusing joke, in fact. Did you use the words ‘hold back’ in regard to Betty, I wonder?”

“Lady Beatrice, surely you have forgotten that this is not inside the mansion. Far from the Forbidden Library, and in a forest—under these conditions, do you have confidence you can protect that gentleman from Ram?”

In front of the silent Subaru, the fierce check of the two girls continued.

From the reaction of Beatrice narrowing her eyes in frustration, it was conveyed that Ram’s hardline attitude was not a bluff.

Beatrice’s strength was limited, and it was likely a fact that Ram was advantageous under these conditions. Even so, Beatrice did not try to move from in front of Subaru.

Subaru, while standing behind her,

“Boi~ng.”

Grabbed two of her luxurious ringlets with both hands and stretched them with all his might.

He let go. The hair bounced largely with its volume. Bounce, bounce.

“Yup, quite pleasant.”

“Wh, wh, wh, wh…”

Opening her eyes wide, trembling her lips, Beatrice turned around trembling.

Subaru tilted his head at her with a “Hmm?”. Then,

“What are you doing, I suppose?! In this situation, do you want to die, I wonder?!”

“Don’t say stupid things, I don’t wanna die even a little bit. Dying is really, just once at the end of life is enough. Seriously, I think so.”

While saying that, he pulled Beatrice's shoulder and stepped in front of her as she stumbled.

In front, standing there was Ram staring at him with a dumbfounded face. She heightened her vigilance at Subaru stepping forward, and as if biting her lip,

"Well, you've got some nerve. Does that mean you've finally resigned yourself?"

"Resigned is a little different. If I had to say… I've made my resolve, I guess."

"—What."

Not understanding Subaru's intention, Ram frowned.

To her, Subaru put his hands together and bowed his head deeply.

"My bad. Because I chickened out, I made you incredibly sad."

"—! As Ram thought, about Rem, you know something."

"No, sorry but I really don't have a clue. Honestly, there's so much I don't understand. But."

Cutting his words, Subaru placed a pause of one breath,

"I decided I'll start trying to understand the things I don't understand."

"At this late hour?! What?!"

At Subaru's declaration of determination, Ram, who could only feel it as nonsense, barked. She stomped her foot down as if stamping in frustration,

"Rem has already, died! It's already, irrevocable! Even if you understand something now, what can you do?!"

"I can't say cool things like I can do something. The result of not being able to do anything is this mess, after all. I know best that my persuasiveness is zero."

It's not that he's becoming defiant. Even now, only regret pierces his chest.

He is disgusted by the degree of his own stupidity, and if he could die of shame, he might be dead.

Even so, acting unsightly, struggling to live unsightly, exposing a helpless shameful state, this is the place he arrived at.

And this conclusion is what he obtained.

"What do you know about Ram, or Rem?!"

"I don't understand anything, because I didn't try to know. I remain knowing nothing about the essential parts. But you know…"

For ten days, Subaru walked with them.

They don't know that, and even if they heard, they wouldn't understand.

But, Subaru certainly remembers those ten days.

Even if they forget, the things he saw with them, the things he laughed about with them, the things he spent with them; Subaru's soul remembers.

It's not that he knows nothing. Subaru knows them.

And, such them—

"You guys don't know either, do you."

"What…"

"That I! Love! —You guys!"

The older sister who is meddlesome despite being blunt.

The younger sister who is sarcastic despite seeming politely rude and courteous.

In the days spent with them, Subaru thought that time was precious.

Even if memories of being killed by their hands remained, both were memories hard to forget.

To the extent that he could think that if he could share that time once more, he wouldn’t mind choosing to do “so.”

At Subaru's scream, Ram just froze with her eyes wide open in astonishment.

Naturally. From her perspective, Subaru's statement is nothing but a delusion with unknown meaning. Nothing more than one of thousands of nonsenses uttered by a crazy madman.

Therefore, the judgment to cut him down was made in an instant.

Immediately after her thoughts stopped and her body's stiffness dissolved, Ram's hostility was put into action.

But, even an instant of stagnation is stagnation.

"—!!"

Subaru sprinting was just a split second faster than her immediate judgment being carried out.

Turning his back to Ram, passing by Beatrice's side, Subaru's body rode on full speed—heading toward the cliff.

"Wait—!"

Behind him, a voice like a girl's high-pitched scream echoed.

Which girl's voice that was, did not reach the running Subaru's consciousness.

His thoughts are a mess. He intended to have made his resolve.

But the beating of his heart sent pain throughout his body as if betraying his mind, and at the tips of his limbs, he felt weight as if lead were packed in.

Despite running with all his might, the world was endlessly slow motion, and he felt as if it were trying to urge a change of heart in Subaru by delaying it even by a second.

Ridiculous. Even now, he is hesitating like this.

If he thinks about it, he understands. He struggled that much, he should have been attached to life.

Even if he thought he wanted to die, in the end, he couldn't resist the survival instinct.

And yet now, he is doing this.

"I forgot to thank Beatrice, huh…"

Suddenly, voicing the concern that remained, with that, he left everything behind.

The cliff approaches. How many more steps; it's terrifying to even count. His heart feels like it will break. He feels like it's already broken. It's not normal. He's not sane. An impulse to burst out laughing wells up. Yet he can't laugh at all. There's no way he can laugh.

Even if he survived as is, he would just live as if he were dead.

If he gives up the future in that place, that is the same as being dead for Subaru.

If he is going to live a life he picked up as if he were dead, what's wrong with using it how he likes.

The cliff is right before his eyes. The height is sufficient. At the bottom of the cliff, a previous guest is waiting impatiently for Subaru. He kept it waiting quite a while… Sorry, but I can't go to the same place as you.

"Since a good person like me will end up going to heaven when I die."

His feet left the ground. Scratching the air. Touching nothing, reaching nothing.

His body wavered. His posture collapsed. Up or down, he cannot maintain balance.

Fast. The wind is strong. His eyes hurt. His head hurts. The ringing in his ears is distant. He feels like he left his heart behind. He can't hear the pounding; the bell of ill omen rings out.

If it ends by dying, that's that.

Living as if dead; then it changes nothing.

But if, if hypothetically, he can return.

—Because she screamed, "I will absolutely kill you."

In that case, I.

"—Will absolutely, save you."

Immediately after voicing his determination, he crashed headfirst into the hard ground.

The sound of shattering resonated grandly, and anymore, nothing, can be heard.

Even the voice of resentment could not catch up. Anymore, nothing —

Bonus Short Stories

Felt's Imprisonment Life

1

As soon as I woke up, the first thing I felt was a softness throughout my body that I had never felt.

"…Ngah?!"

Without understanding anything, I raised my body while scratching my head. My eyesight was still a little blurry, but I saw a pillow all soaked with drool. Well, I think it was a pillow, I had never seen one so soft, but it should be. Looking around, I soon realized that I was on top of a huge bed with my body covered by a smooth sheet.

"Where am I…?"

Being in a room and on a bed that had nothing to do with a brat who grew up in the slum, my first thought was whether this was not a dream. For me, mornings started on an old couch, a shabby blanket and an unpleasant smell in the air. It is true that I have the goal of one day leaving this life, but I did not want to see it come true in a dream.

"Is that what I really wish deep inside…? What a weird dream…"

"Looks like you woke up."

I was terrified when I heard someone else's voice, and when I turned around, he was standing by the door: he was the red-haired bastard. At the same time, I tried to get the knife from my waist, but it was this time that I realized that I was naked, with only the sheet covering my body.

"If you are concerned about your clothes, they are being washed and restored. The servants will already bring temporary clothes, wait just a little while longer."

"…Wait a minute."

“Yes?”

I wasn’t in the mood to listen to the bullshit of the tall blue-eyed redhead who was standing in the doorway. I didn’t like it that he obeyed me right away, but I let it go.

“Screw my clothes for now, because there are more urgent things to be dealt with. You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“I have some guesses, but I lack conviction. If you can tell me…”

Seeing me staring at him ugly, that damn redhead, one of the most famous guys in the capital… “Sword Saint” Reinhard just shrugged, I got angry at his reaction and screamed:

“Where am I?! And what do you intend to bring me here after leaving me unconscious?”

Because of the scream and my agitation, the sheet almost fell off my body and I had to hold it at the last minute. Only that made the bastard chuckle and I was even more irritated.

“I apologize for my insolence. Please allow me to explain the reason that led me to do what I did to you, in the minimum details.”

That’s what he said after making a serious face and kneeling, while punching me with his blue eyes.

2

Sitting with my legs spread on the bed and my body covered with only a sheet, I popped my tongue in anger. I don’t like the idea of having to play his game, but it’s no use complaining without knowing anything.

“Okay, you can tell me why a noble knight abducted me and kept me naked in captivity.”

“Yes, I will be as honest as possible to end the misunderstanding.”

With a smile on his face, he reached into his shorts pocket. Unlike the time I saw him in the slum, he now wore only a basic T-shirt, shorts and jacket. In fact, I had never seen anyone look so well dressed just like that, what anger.

“Firstly, this residence, located in the upper part of the capital, belongs to the Astrea family. We don’t use it very often and I apologize for forcing you to stay in such a tight room.”

“Was that ironic? about ten of my tents could fit in this room.”

Of course he didn’t mean it and he didn’t want to be insensitive, but I frowned anyway. Then he apologized and took something out of his pocket.

“I think you remember this here,” he said, showing me the object.

“…Isn’t it the badge I had stolen?”

“Technically, no. The badge that you know is currently back in the hands of Miss Emilia. This one is another, but of the same type.”

Now that he spoke, the color of the jewel in the dragon’s mouth was really different from what I remembered. What I tried to steal was red, this one was green.

“And what about it? I don’t need it at this point anymore.”

“Please take it in your hands and you will understand.”

“…”

I wanted to respond with a “I’ll understand what?”, but I kept quiet. Not only because Reinhard’s stare sort of intimidated me, but it was because I had already taken the badge from his hand without thinking. At that time, I saw that the green stone started to shine.

“Done, what’s up? He’s just shining and I still don’t understand anything.”

“The “just be shining” is the most important part. As you can see, the stone did not emanate any light while it was in my hand. And it had not emanated from anyone, with the exception of very few, including you.”

“Chosen …? For this stone?”

I laughed because I thought it was ridiculous that he was doing all that just because of a shiny stone, but the bastard just approached his face without changing his expression and replied:

“No, it wasn’t for the stone. —The lady was chosen by the Dragon… Or perhaps, by fate.”

“Fate… Há! It was just what I lacked!”

And here I thought he was going to say something that was serious.

“Listen, here, Reinhard. “Fate” is the magic word that people who give up on anything love to use. Life should be easy for those who believe in “fate”, since the culprit of everything will always be him, right…? but look here, I don’t need it…”

“…”

“To hell with “fate”, I’m not going to be following impositions that I don’t even see. I don’t know why you’re all happy there, but don’t get me into this.”

I’m tired of seeing people who like to run away using “fate” as an excuse to give up. The lack of strength, intelligence, money and dreams is all his fault. If “fate” only serves to cover up weaknesses, I don’t need it. I am the only one responsible for my life.

“…”

All Reinhard did was look at me with a serious face. Until, a while later, he opened his mouth again:

“Miss Felt, not everyone can go against fate. Only a selected handful of people, possessing qualification, determination and means, are able to oppose him.”

“Shut up, I’m not here to be debating with you. So what if that little stone shines? End of conversation. I’m going to go back to my tent, give me back my clothes.”

Nor do I have the courage to hang around naked, and that outfit was a gift from Grandpa Rom, I couldn't leave behind.

"Unfortunately, I cannot fulfill your request. The one who makes the Dragon Ball shine has the duty to introduce herself to the castle. As a citizen of the kingdom, you will have to obey."

"…Ah, get screwed! Citizen of the kingdom?! And when did the kingdom do anything for me?!"

"As miserable as your condition was, if you live in the capital, you receive the protections of the kingdom directly and indirectly. I will not allow you to deny them."

"It's not like I live here by choice, is it? I just don't leave the city for lack of money, but now I got enough. So, let me out of here!"

"I can't, please give up."

My patience had reached the limit with this conversation that was not going to get anywhere. Reinhard continued with his usual calm face, while I started to get out of control. So I pulled my hair hard, took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down.

"A-Alright… I'm going to think calmly about what you're talking about. In return, I have a request to make."

"May I help. however, you will have to stay in this house until we have an official response from the castle. Any other request, I am willing to answer."

"I just want my clothes back. Until when will you make me stay naked, huh, noble knight?"

I spoke with a tone full of irony and saw Reinhard's eyes widen a little. Then, he apologized and turned his back on me.

"I'll call the maid, I believe your clothes are rea-…"

"Bye, sucker!!"

I took advantage of Reinhard's hesitation and threw the pillow on the back of his neck. And looking at him, I jumped out of bed at the same time and ran. When I looked out of the corner of my eye, he had grabbed the pillow with his hand, but I didn't intend to stop.

"Hah!"

I pulled the sheet off the bed and threw it in a way that it would open, hiding both him from my view and me from him. Now, yes, it was the perfect opportunity to get past him and escape through the door. But… that would be an amateur thing.

"Until never more!"

What I did was jump back and open the window by force, holding myself tightly on the curtain. From what I checked while talking sitting, the room was at most one floor high, which would be a safe height for me to cushion the fall with the curtain and run out after landing. And that was when I was sure of the escape…

"…What?"

…The curtain that was supposed to hold my weight was cut by the part connected to the window. The worst thing is that the cut was so straight that even with a sword it would not be so easy to leave it that way, but Reinhard only had an open hand, implying that it was with her that he had cut it.

"…You monsteeeeeeeeeeeer!!"

"It's the second time I've been called that in the past two days."

As he spoke, he passed by me after jumping out of the window. But as he gained speed "running" through the wall, he reached the floor before me and caught me with a pillow.

"…Excuse me."

In this, the sheet that covered my body wrapped itself around me as if it were a dress, and now I was there like a little princess in the bastard's arms. I'm angry.

"My fault in not having presented the house, but we have stairs that connect the floors.”

“Learned to speak ironies, huh? Get me on the floor! Until when will you be holding me naked?!”

I even tried to get rid of him, but Reinhard just waved his arms and balanced me anyway, making it clear that he had no intention of letting go.

“If you are able to escape this house, I will give up. However, I warn you that the servants and I will try to prevent it at all costs.”

“Oops, word of knight, huh? No going back later. If I can get away, you won’t bother me anymore!”

I pointed a finger at his face and made him promise. After he agreed with his head looking into my eyes, he turned his face towards the house and said:

“Apparently, the servants noticed the mess. Let’s go back to the room.”

“Tch! See if you carry me carefully, noble knight!”

3

We were greeted by an elderly couple when we arrived at the room. According to Reinhard, they were the ones who took care of the house, that is, I would only need to run away from three people. It would be easy, just arriving at night and I was going to get out of this house.

“…Hey, listen.”

“May I help? it looks great on you Miss.”

For a change, I was irritated, and Reinhard continued with his damn little smile. Beside him was a grandmother with a harmless smile holding a bunch of dresses in all colors. And one of them, a yellow color, was the one that covered my body.

“Wh-Where’s my clothes…?”

“It is properly stored. While in this house, please wear the clothes we have here. Stay calm, we bought enough for more than a month.”

“You bastard! I swear I will run away, can you hear me?! I swear!!”

I only know that with my scream it certainly echoed throughout the mansion.

Continued in Felt Saw!

Ram and the Night Study Group

“…Barusu, you have good handwriting.”

At Ram’s commentary, the sounds of pen on paper that had continued up till that point suddenly stopped.

The boy right next to her sitting facing his desk, Subaru, looked up at her with surprise on his face.

“What?”

“Well, I mean, what’s up with that all of a sudden? I mean, it’s not like I want you to get upset with me, but having you praise me out of the blue is more unsettling than you might think.”

“It’s nothing. I was merely stating what I thought. As you’re still in the middle of learning, now and then it’s good to look away from everything you have left to do, and note that the way you write the letters is adequate. I’m only saying that you have good handwriting.”

“The moment you add in an ‘only’ there, it kinda kills my gratitude for what you’re saying!”

As Ram praised him in her own way, Subaru ended up looking up at the ceiling, dissatisfied. But, he quickly chuckled and smiled as though he’d regained his humor.

“Well, setting aside that you said ‘only’, heh, is that so. I’m honestly happy to hear that you think I have good handwriting. It means it was worth all the frustration when I was going to calligraphy class back when I was little.”

“Also… no, it’s nothing.”

“What was that?! When you almost say something and then stop, it usually turns out to have been important, so don’t swallow your words, spit ‘em out! If it’s words of praise, I’ll happily take all you’ve got!”

After giving a thumbs-up, Subaru indicated himself with the thumb while looking full of himself. Ram nodded deeply at him.

“Indeed, I’ll go ahead and say it, then. Good results must be properly praised. Poor behavior must be scolded, and one must take care with giving food as well. …I read that long ago in a book, and I’m putting it into practice.”

“That sounds a lot like how I’d raise a dog, y’know?!”

“It’s similar, in the sense that you still need to learn how to behave, isn’t it?”

“Ah, I walked right into that!”

As Subaru arched his spine backwards, the chair’s backrest let out a loud creak.

With a simple bed and an unpretentious desk, this was the private room of a servant, allocated to Natsuki Subaru for his own use. The extreme scarcity of personal possessions was due to it being only a few days since he had begun his employment.

In this room with nothing in it, evening after evening was filled, not with amorous moments, but the “Acquisition of Letters”.

“Barusu, you’ve gotten it wrong again. That should be more than enough of repeating the same mistakes.”

“Ow.”

With the tip of a wand held in her hand, she lightly smacked the hand that Subaru was holding his feather pen in. Losing his grip on the pen, he rubbed the reddening back of his hand while glaring accusingly at Ram.

“Hey, isn’t that a little too Spartan?! I’m the type that grows more from being praised than scolded!”

“If you want to be praised, then you must produce results. If you do, Ram will praise you in spite of herself.”

“Don’t praise me like you hate doing it! Actually, never mind that… can’t you go a little easier on me with the studying? I still can’t really tell the letters apart and all.”

“A lack of effort.”

Ram cut off Subaru’s self-excusing words without mercy.

Subaru simply sighed and shrugged as though he’d been expecting a response like that.

“Well, you can say that, nee-sama. It’s true that until you actually experience it, you can’t understand how rough it is to encounter a foreign culture. I’m not just studying writing, I’m trying to learn my job too, after all.”

“…Very well, go on.”

“In other words! If you’re going to say that I haven’t studied hard enough, then I’m certain you must be more than familiar with, and exceptionally skilled at, this sort of thing, is what I’m saying.”

While Subaru rushed his words out at high speed, Ram drew her eyebrows together, as if to ask what he was trying to say. Seeing that, Subaru smiled to himself as though he had achieved his aim, and retrieved something from one of the desk drawers. It was…

“Tada! Behold the hiragana alphabet!”

“…and this is?”

What Subaru had retrieved was a large paper that entirely covered the desk. From one side of it to the other, the paper was entirely filled with densely-packed symbols she had never seen before.

“These are letters we use back where I’m from, called ‘hiragana’. Here you’d call them ‘I-glyphs’.”

“You mean this is the official language of the Kingdom of Barusu?”

“Will you please cut it out with things like country names that should only exist in my head?! Elaborating too much on the details and going so far as to produce a written language would be a pathetic black mark on my record!”

“Among the children’s tales we’re using for your instruction book, there’s a story called ‘The Lonely King’. It really is an exact match for your current state, Barusu. You’ll get a laugh out of it, so look forward to it.”

“And now you’ve needlessly spoiled it for me!”

Perhaps because he could imagine the grimness of the contents from the title alone, Subaru began making a pained face. Paying no mind to him as he did, Ram looked over the letters that Subaru had called hiragana.

There didn’t seem to be any pattern to them. Each one had its own particular shape, and to Ram’s eyes, it looked like nothing more than pictures of a snake or the like that a child had drawn as a prank.

“What of it? After showing Ram the alphabet of the Kingdom of Barusu, what did you want her to do?”

“Well, I mean, I was thinking that while I’m practicing writing like this, you’ve got a lot of spare time, too, right? So I thought you might like to try meeting a foreign culture, too, just to kill time. Along with that, you can learn how rough it is to learn letters, and maybe you’ll learn to be a bit more understanding towards me.”

As Subaru placed quite a bit of emphasis on his true intentions in the later half of that, Ram’s shoulders drooped in exasperation.

He could come up with such, hmm, elaborate vexations.

“For her own part, Ram can’t think of a reason that she should accept your proposal.”

“Well, how does proving the legitimacy of your assertions sound, then? If you can master that right away, then I’ll admit you were right when you said ‘a lack of effort’ earlier. From now on, I won’t contest your education policies, and I’ll work like a horse at learning just the way you want. It’s just, if it doesn’t go like that, then…”

“If it doesn’t go like that, then what?”

“Then try to be a little kinder to me! Along with Rem! It’s a promise! This matters!”

As Subaru stated his claims while making the chair creak, Ram’s expression was that of someone looking at a troublesome farm animal. Subaru faltered a bit under the glint in her eyes, but although he withdrew some of his attitude, he didn’t withdraw his claims.

Growing tired of glaring, well, not really, but giving up on it for now, Ram sighed.

“Spending time with Barusu drives up the count of sighs day by day.”

“I hear that a lot.”

“Yes, it’s the correct assessment. …Let me see that.”

As Subaru regained his attitude and stuck out his chest, Ram took the paper with the ‘hiragana’ written on it. Looking it over briefly, it seemed to correspond somewhat to the ‘i-glyphs’ of the common tongue.

“The order of the letters is similar to the ‘i-glyphs’?”

“More or less, yeah. But I’ll give you a once-over explanation. I want to fight as fairly as I can.”

It seemed that before she knew it, it was being treated as a contest, but if it was a contest, Ram didn’t feel like losing. In contests, no matter who it was against, Ram’s creed was total victory.

Ram lent her ear to Subaru as he explained the ‘hiragana’ while pointing them out, and more or less worked their placement and ordering into her head, and memorized their shape and stroke order while guessing at how they were formed based on their structure.

It didn't take long for Subaru to finish his explanation of what he called the fifty sounds. Then grinning at her, he noted "Now neither of us has a handicap".

"The allowed time is until today's study ends. There will be a little quiz at the end, so we'll see if you can answer it, Ram."

"Fine, let's do it. Having you work like a horse will make things easier for Ram as well."

"Hehehe, you look sure you'll win, but I'm gonna change that overconfident look into a teary one!"

While giving a response entirely suited to an insignificant person, Subaru dove headfirst into concentration. Looking at that from the corner of her eye, Ram sat down on the bed and embarked on her acquisition of 'hiragana'.

…Suddenly, she couldn't help but think that it had been a long time since she had spent time studying like this.

"Barusu, where did you study the alphabet?"

"Well that's out of the blue, here when I've gotten focused. If you're trying to throw me off, it's not…"

Glancing back at Ram, Subaru cut himself off mid-sentence.

Perhaps the reason he didn't continue his banter was that Ram's expression, illuminated by the room's dim light, was tinged with something that made him nostalgic for home.

Holding his silence briefly at the look on her face, he suddenly, roughly scratched at his head.

"When you ask 'Where?', it's kinda hard to say. My parents taught me at home… is the most accurate answer, I think. I honestly don't remember having studied at kindergarten."

"'Kindergarten'?"

"It's a school for little children, just really little children. It's basically a place to play, eat, and sleep, but, well, maybe it's a place where the importance of group activities is taught while they're kids?"

The height that Subaru was showing with his hand was roughly the same as the desk, or less. It seems it would be a school where children around the age of four or five would attend; Ram had gone to something similar back in her home village.

"A school, I see. Were you able to attend, Barusu?"

"Kinda, I guess. I attended properly during mandatory education… when I was free to choose for myself, I sort of stopped going. And then, as I was sliding along like that, I ended up here."

Subaru's eyes were downcast, and his manner suggested this was a difficult topic for him to speak of. Given how he looked, Ram judged that it would be cruel to press the matter further.

Even with what had just been said, it led her to guess that Subaru's station in life had been fairly high, at the least.

It was only conjecture, but it seemed likely that Subaru's place of birth had been in the upper class of a small kingdom, separate from the four great kingdoms.

The world was divided into four parts by the four great kingdoms, however it was also dotted with small kingdoms that were not attached to the great kingdoms, and Ram had heard that many of them cultivated their own unique cultures.

Subaru's unusual appearance, and his explanations of a culture Ram had never heard of, were a little too solid to dismiss as a made-up tale. He was likely a runaway or something similar.

The 'hiragana' she held in her hand spurred on this reasoning as well.

"What about you, Ram, how long have you been working at Roswaal's place?"

"Ram's first meeting with Roswaal-sama was when she and Rem were around eight so… that would be nine years ago, then. By now, she's been serving nearly ten years."

"Heh, nine years… wait, nine years since you were eight, are you seventeen? The same age as me?"

"And what's the meaning of you being surprised by that, I wonder?"

"You look young, in an older-sister sort of way. But seriously. If you're seventeen, then Rem is too. That's unexpected…I thought maybe you were younger than me."

"Referring to someone younger than yourself like an older sister, you should keep your lusts in check, Barusu. And Ram was mistaken as well. From your lack of composure, Barusu, she wondered if you weren't more of a child."

This wasn't teasing, rather it was her actual thoughts.

Many things about him, including his facial features if you set aside the evil look of his eyes, feel like a little child. In particular, the frivolity of his words and actions didn't make one think of him as a seventeen year old, an age when one should have gained an appropriate amount of maturity.

Though if one were speaking of a mismatch between age and appearance, that would apply to many here at the mansion.

"But, eight years old? That's pretty young to be depending on someone outside your family. You must have gotten consent from your parents… or is it just normal over here to start an apprenticeship around that age?"

"It's not unusual to leave one's parents while still a child. Although in Ram and Rem's case, there was a different, special reason for it."

"'Special' meaning…?"

"It's simple. If she wasn't together with Rem, Ram hated it and threw tantrums."

"Ah, 'zat so."

They had only been around each other a short time, but Subaru nodded in understanding of the relationship between Ram and Rem.

Ram was well aware that her own ability with chores was placing a burden on Rem. And also that Rem made up for what her sister lacked, and just barely kept the mansion running day-to-day.

Hence, she had no intention of nit-picking at Subaru's understanding to correct it.

Aside from Roswaal, another co-worker who was now away from the mansion, and a few other close acquaintances, she didn't feel the need for anyone else to understand the relationship between herself and Rem.

That would be the case for as long as it remained unclear how Subaru would end up fitting in at the mansion.

"…The time for idle chatter is nearly past."

Above the room's doorway, the magic time crystal's color was changing to a deep yellow, showing that the time had reached the deepest part of the night. It was nearly time to bring the evening's studies to a close.

"Sure is. Well, thanks for all your help tonight. Let's do this again tomorrow…"

"You may be on the verge of regretting assuming that tomorrow will come, Barusu."

"My bad! Just joking around! Okay, it's time for the showdown. Here's the question; try reading it, and writing out your answer in 'hiragana'!"

As he said that, Subaru removed one sheet from the stack of paper he had for practicing on, with the word 'Question' written in it with i-glyphs, followed by a sentence in hiragana, and presented it to her. In exchange, he retrieved the hiragana chart she held.

"Now then, I've taken back the hiragana chart. You're as helpless as a babe in the woods. Hehehehe, go ahead and answer if you can!

And get it wrong, and from tomorrow on, both of you sisters can be kinder when you teach me i-glyphs!”

Working himself up with his crass reasoning, Subaru laughed mockingly as he imagined Ram looking distressed.

On the other hand, not deigning to pay any attention to Subaru’s small-time villian act, Ram looked over the ‘hiragana’ question. She observed the conglomeration of wriggling letters for a while, and then…

“Done.”

Taking a feather pen in hand, Ram smoothly wrote out her answer in the area labelled ‘Response’ in i-glyphs. When she finished writing, she took the answer sheet and smacked it into Subaru’s face.

“…”

“The question was ‘The names of the sisters that live in the mansion’, and the answer is ‘Ram and Rem’.”

“No way, you…?! You got it perfect?! Seriously, that quickly?!”

Checking Ram’s answer against the question, Subaru collapsed dumbfounded on the spot. His reaction confirmed to Ram that her guess had worked correctly.

Based on Subaru’s personality, she’d imagined that he would come up with a question about the mansion and matters related to it. After that, choosing Emilia, Beatrice, and the twins themselves as candidates, remembering a limited number of letters was simple.

“In other words, what matters is one’s grasp of the essentials. Barusu, you remember what you promised, yes?”

“W…wait. There must be some kind of trick to it. I’m too dumb to figure it out, but you must have done something sneaky… I think…!”

As Subaru stood there being a poor loser, Ram flicked him in the forehead with her finger, then headed for the doorway as she yawned. Then, turning back as she opened the door, she looked back at him rubbing his reddening forehead.

“Tomorrow should be fun. Have pleasant dreams, Barusu. Ram certainly will.”

“You demon…”

Subaru’s frustrated face disappeared behind the closing door. The timing of his last embittered remark was so good, Ram nearly laughed in spite of herself.

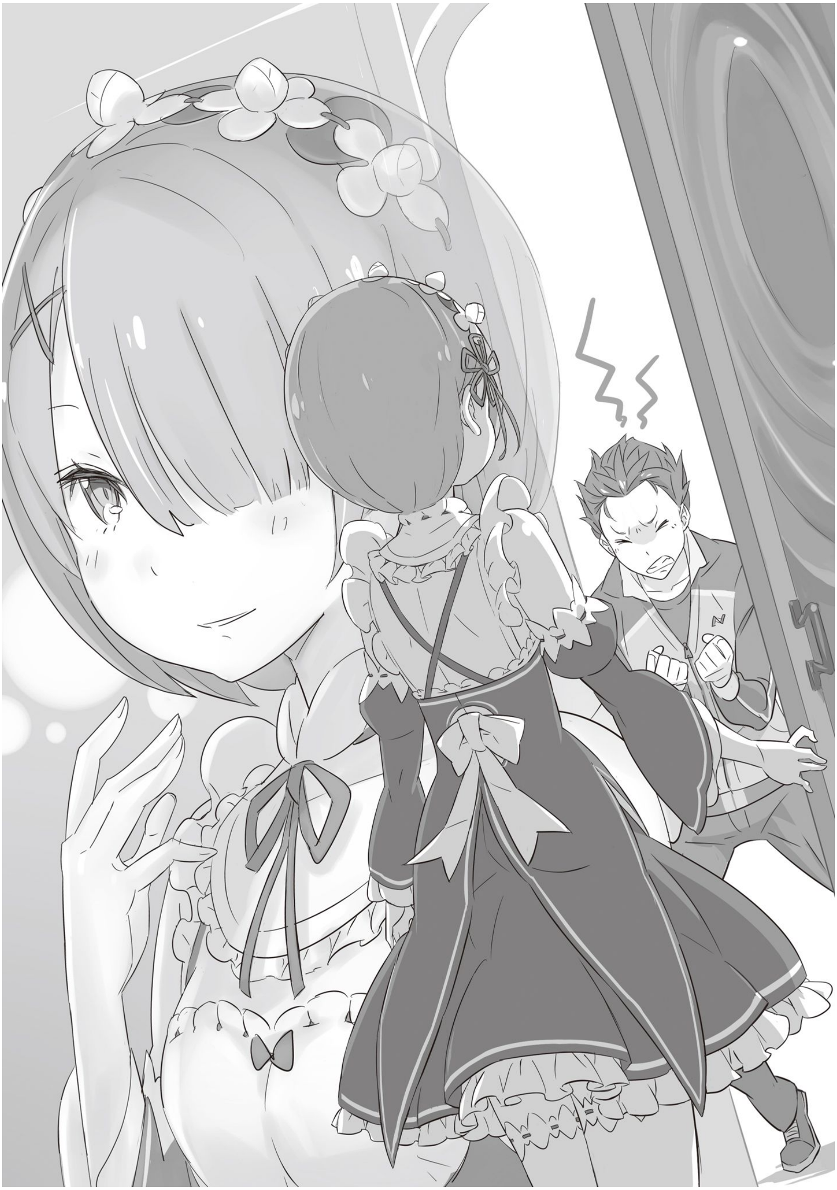

“With that, Barusu should learn to take things a little more seriously.”

Ram was very pleased with herself after having not only mercilessly toppled Subaru, but also provoked him to greater effort from tomorrow on.

Retreating away from the room before the whining became audible, she started looking forward to the look on Subaru’s face tomorrow.

“But still…”

A sudden thought occurred to her. It was about the ‘hiragana’ that Subaru had written.

“…It feels like I’ve seen it somewhere before.”

That whisper fell into the hallway, and faded away without reaching anyone; even from Ram’s own memory, it passed away as something largely unimportant.

END

Rem’s Latte Art

1

It was three days after a new servant had entered the Roswaal manor.

“…What are you doing, Subaru-kun?”

Holding open the door leading back to the dining hall from the kitchen, Rem tilted her head and asked that.

The current time was after lunch. Preparation of food was Rem’s job, but cleaning up afterwards was included in that as well. Having finished that, she’d just now come to check on how the newly-hired servant was handling cleaning up the dining hall.

“Oh, hey Rem. Don’t worry about the cleaning, it’s done. It’s break time now.”

Greeting Rem as she returned to the dining hall was a black-haired boy who was smiling casually at her.

He had black hair, a color that was rarely seen in the kingdom, and his features had a peculiar way of making him feel younger than the age he’d given. The eye color and the color of his skin were rare as well, and his point of origin was still unclear.

Regardless, there was no mistaking the way that his over-snug butler’s uniform didn’t suit him at all; this was the new servant that the Roswaal manor had welcomed, Natsuki Subaru.

For a moment, Rem was silent as her gaze judged him—Subaru didn’t show the least sign of being aware of it, and stood looking pleased with himself, without a care showing on his face. It looked like nothing more than the innocent face of a mischievous boy, and this only strengthened Rem’s suspicion about his age.

Could a boy with this sort of childlike face truly be the same seventeen years of age as herself and her sister?

“Well, that’s fine. So why are you in such a good mood? Because you piled up the plates nicely, or spread the tablecloth nicely?”

“No way?! Do you think of me as the kind of guy who would make a ‘Yeah, I did it!’ face from a little job like that?!”

“When I think back to how you worked on your first day, I don’t think such an opinion is that far off the mark.”

“Gaah, I can’t really deny that… but, just you wait. I’m a man with incredible potential for growth…The rebellious skyrocket that could one day threaten even your position is climbing now…!”

“What’s this now? What will happen one day? Please speak clearly.”

Leaving behind Subaru as he ground his teeth in frustration, Rem turned her eyes towards the dining hall’s table where Subaru had been playing up until now. It was a fairly wide table, and could be used for dining and discussions for ten people or more. Naturally, the recent lunch was taken here, so cleaning it up had been Subaru’s responsibility, but…

“…This is a cup you forgot to put away, is it not?”

Looking at the cup placed on the table, Rem raised an eyebrow a little. If there was nothing unusual about it, she might have taken it as something that hadn’t been cleaned up, or Subaru’s cup for his break. However, it was clearly different.

As Rem pointed it out, Subaru’s face broke out in a wide ‘You noticed?’ grin.

“Yeah, actually I’ve wanted to try that out ever since I noticed there’s something like coffee around here as well. It was really rough trying to get the milk close to what I remember, but sometimes ya just gotta try it.”

Subaru extended both his hands towards Rem, while dancing festively. Held in one hand was a cup poured full of a drink made from beans, originating from the Vollachian Empire, called coff. And, in the other hand was a container of milk.

And, as for what Subaru was doing with those two things…

“You’ve used the milk to draw a picture in the coff, then?”

In the black fluid in the cup, a white pattern had been used to draw a little picture of a cat.

Rem couldn’t help but let out a sigh of exasperation mixed with wonder at his playfulness.

2

“So you keep the coffee…er, the coff hot, and then the trick is to make the design a little at a time while keeping the milk at the bottom. There’s different ways to do it, but first, the basics are…”

Seemingly to have mistaken Rem’s first sigh for admiration, Subaru cheerfully began to explain, and poured another cup of piping hot coff so she could see.

The aroma of the steaming coff spread through the room, and Rem sniffed quietly. Struggling not to let her interest show on her face, for the moment she simply kept her attention on Subaru’s hands.

When the cup had been poured about half-full of coff, Subaru next switched to the container of milk and began to fill the cup the rest of the way. The foamy milk was something new to Rem, and she couldn’t help but open her eyes wide.

“What have you done to this milk?”

“This? This here is the end product of a lot of difficult work. Honestly, steaming it would be ideal, but I just don’t have that kind of equipment, so I used the magic crystals in the bathing room instead. There was a lot of trial and error involved, I’ll tell ya. I couldn’t get it quite right.”

The foamed milk wouldn’t turn out like that simply by heating it.

She was terribly interested in what sort of struggle Subaru, who she didn’t think could use magic, had gone through with the magic crystals. However, Rem quickly remembered her own duties, and that she was in charge, and put away her curiosity.

She should make him put away the cup and coff right away; even on break, one should be cautious of playing around. She should, and yet…

“To make sure the milk doesn’t spread too far, you keep it on the inside like this. Then, a layer of milk builds up a little at a time, so when you keep the unruly bit of it under control and redo it…”

“ah…”

“There you go, the first step of the first step! The completion of a heart design!”

Lifting up the container of milk, Subaru spun about and unveiled the finished product.

Making way for him, Rem blinked at yet another surprise as she viewed the result.

The white design drawn in the cup was a fanciful thing built up from countless layers of milk. Without thinking, she let a sigh of admiration escape her lips.

“Amazing…”

“Oh, oh oh? What’s that, what’s that, please speak up. Feel free to shower me with praise! Isn’t it amazing?!”

“It’s a skill you could never gain without being an amazingly idle person.”

“Don’t you think you should apologize to all the latte artists throughout the world?!”

As Subaru started getting full of himself, she abruptly gave him a back-handed compliment.

While it was simply out of the question to openly recognize his accomplishment, there was no escaping the fact that it was not only a rare ability, but a craft that required exceptional skill. Even this pattern that he had called the first step made that clear. The picture of a kitten that Subaru had first drawn in that cup—the great spirit that accompanied Emilia, how incredibly difficult would that be?

“This is called ‘latte art’?”

“Yep yep. Latte is sort of the name of this drink, and you make art with it. Back where I’m from, it’s an essential skill for a first-class waiter.”

“Latte art and sewing as well; you’re quite good with your hands at little skills, Subaru-kun.”

“When you call them little skills, it really makes them sound like something that isn’t an essential part of life! Besides that, I can do magic tricks and play the guitar and cat’s cradle and ball-and-cup toys and yo-yo and lots of things, you know!”

Presented with a list of skills she’d never heard of, Rem doubted their existence. However, there was the precedent of the latte art. Perhaps all of them were from a world of little skills that Rem knew nothing of.

“And thinking about it now that I’ve said all that, what am I trying to do with nothing but skills that have no practical use?”

“Boasting all that and then becoming depressed about it… You must have lived a life free of boredom, Subaru-kun.”

“That’s a surprising evaluation of me when my goal in life was to live in seclusion and play with cats on the porch.”

Subaru shivered. Seeing him looking like that, Rem felt even more certain.

Subaru was most likely a person who grew up in a very fortunate environment.

It was true of his work as a servant as well, but she felt that he mostly had no experience engaging in hard work before now. That’s why his fingers were pretty, and in some areas he was lacking knowledge and common sense needed for life. In exchange for that, being able to enjoy something like latte art was a sign of the frivolity of the upper class born from a life of ease.

That fact itself was neither a good thing nor a bad thing. Being unable to choose one's birth was the same for everyone, regardless of whether one was poor or rich. Subaru was making an effort to learn his job. Regardless of the results.

So, even if one were to overlook that he was playing like this during his break time…

"Well, there's a few things I'd like to say about your merciless poison tongue, Rem, but… fine, here."

"…huh?"

Taking the offered container of milk, Rem let out a surprised voice without meaning to. She looked back and forth from the milk in her hand and Subaru's face. Subaru scratched his head as she looked at him.

"Whadaya mean, 'huh?'. Looking all anxious to try it like that, don't give me that."

"Saying that she looks anxious to try; Rem wouldn't…"

"When your face looked like you were dying to try it like that? You don't need to be embarrassed about it. You're a cute girl too, Rem, so what's wrong with playing a little now and then?"

Turning his attention away from Rem as she backpedaled, Subaru poured another cup of coff. Then, placing the cup before her, he offered it with a look that said 'Go ahead'.

"Um, for you to have implied that Rem really wanted to try that. Well, it would be a lie if I said that I didn't want to even a little tiny bit, not in the least, just a little, perhaps slightly…"

"I get it, I get it. I'm forcing you to try it even though you don't want to. So, just once, please do."

"…Well, when you put it like that, it can't be helped. Honestly, Subaru-kun, you're so troublesome."

Pestered until she was left with no choice, Rem hid the glee she couldn't help but feel and turned towards the cup.

Recalling Subaru's process from earlier, the order of things seemed to be that one first poured milk into the slightly tilted cup, building a layer on the interior and drawing a pattern. Envisioning Subaru's movements that she'd been watching wide-eyed, she overlayed her own movement and imitated them…using the white pattern on the black liquid, she drew from her heart.

Rem looked back towards Subaru. And, he looked to her and nodded forcefully.

"Well, that's how it turns out on a novice's first try. Don't worry about it!"

"Rather than playing endlessly, Subaru-kun, please get back to work right away."

While holding the messy art in front of her, Rem stated that in the coldest voice she had used yet.

3

"…Rem, what are you doing?"

Surprised while she was concentrating by a voice from behind her, Rem's little shoulders jumped.

Looking behind her to the dining hall's entrance, standing in the entrance was a girl with sharp, pale red eyes—her older sister Ram.

Rem's eyes briefly lit up at the sight of her beloved sister, but she quickly remembered what she was doing, and her expression stiffened. Suddenly, she tried to hide what was on the table, but…

"…Isn't this what Barusu was playing at?"

It was impossible for her to deceive the sister who had always been better than her at everything, and Ram immediately saw through

Rem's clumsy attempt to cover it up. As Rem shrank, Ram looked over the countless cups Rem had been working on, and the failed latte art, and narrowed her eyes.

…It would soon be nearly an hour since Rem had chased Subaru out of the dining hall, saying that she would clean up.

The state Rem now found herself in was that, until Ram arrived (after becoming frustrated with the work when Rem did not return), she had forgotten the time and been trying her best at latte art.

Glancing quickly, she could see that the magic crystal that showed the time had changed color, and she finally realized that break time had long since passed. It was shameful. On top of that, her sister had found out.

"It's rare for you to lose track of time playing at this sort of thing, Rem."

"I…I'm sorry, nee-sama. I'll clean it up right away. I'll catch up right away on my work, too. Oh, I should never have been doing something like this…"

"Don't be silly, Rem. I'm not upset about it. I just thought it was unusual."

As Rem shrank back, Ram's expression softened in a way that only someone close to her would recognize.

Then she poured coff into an empty cup, took hold of the milk placed nearby, and began to gently pour it into the cup.

"Doing her work with all of her might is one of Rem's good points, but occasionally it's good to do something with all your might even if you can't expect any results from it. If there's no leeway in your heart, nothing will ever go right for you."

"…Are those Roswaal-sama's words?"

"Yes, as expected of Roswaal-sama. They're wonderful words. I feel the same way, too."

Thinking of her master with an enchanted look on her face, Ram's eyes were gentle as she stared into the cup. Having finished pouring milk into it, inside the cup in her hands was…

"This is… a pattern I've never seen before. A pattern… no, a letter…?"

"It seems that this is how you write 'older sister' in the letters of Barusu's homeland. He insisted I look at it while he was studying in the evening, so I learned it no matter how little I wanted to."

Although she'd never seen the letter before, there was no mistaking that it had been drawn by a combination of reliable skills. Rem marvelled at her sister's talent, and gazed shyly at her.

"Were you practicing latte art as well, nee-sama?"

"Not really. It's called latte art, is it? I simply imitated what Barusu was doing earlier."

As Ram spoke about it as though it were nothing, Rem couldn't help but catch her breath. Cutting off the momentary hesitation before her sister would think it strange, Rem smiled softly.

"Impressive as always, nee-sama. Subaru-kun will be jealous, too, no doubt."

"It might be entertaining to crush Barusu's areas of expertise one by one like that. Regardless, that's enough of this for now. I'll clean this up and catch up with you."

Saying that, Ram took the containers of coff and milk and headed off to the kitchen to clean up. Watching her go, Rem compared her own botched creations lined up on the table with the 'older sister' that Ram completed on her first try, without any practice, and sighed softly.

"…You truly are impressive, nee-sama."

Herself, unable to create a single thing she was satisfied with, and her sister, who was able to complete it so easily and skillfully.

It was something she should have already understood, but when she had a chance to compare them like this, she was once again made painfully aware of how far she had to go. To Rem, it was a harsh prompting towards self-reflection and self-discipline.

“Well, all of this needs to be cleaned up, then.”

Speaking to no one in particular, Rem collected all of the used cups onto the tray.

And, at the end, she gathered up Ram’s ‘older sister’ artwork,

“Mm…bitter.”

avoiding damaging the pattern in the milk, and moistening her tongue with the slightly cooled coff,

“First, I’ll have to teach Subaru-kun how to grind the beans.”

Deciding to teach him about her own area of expertise, she followed Ram’s path towards the kitchen.

END

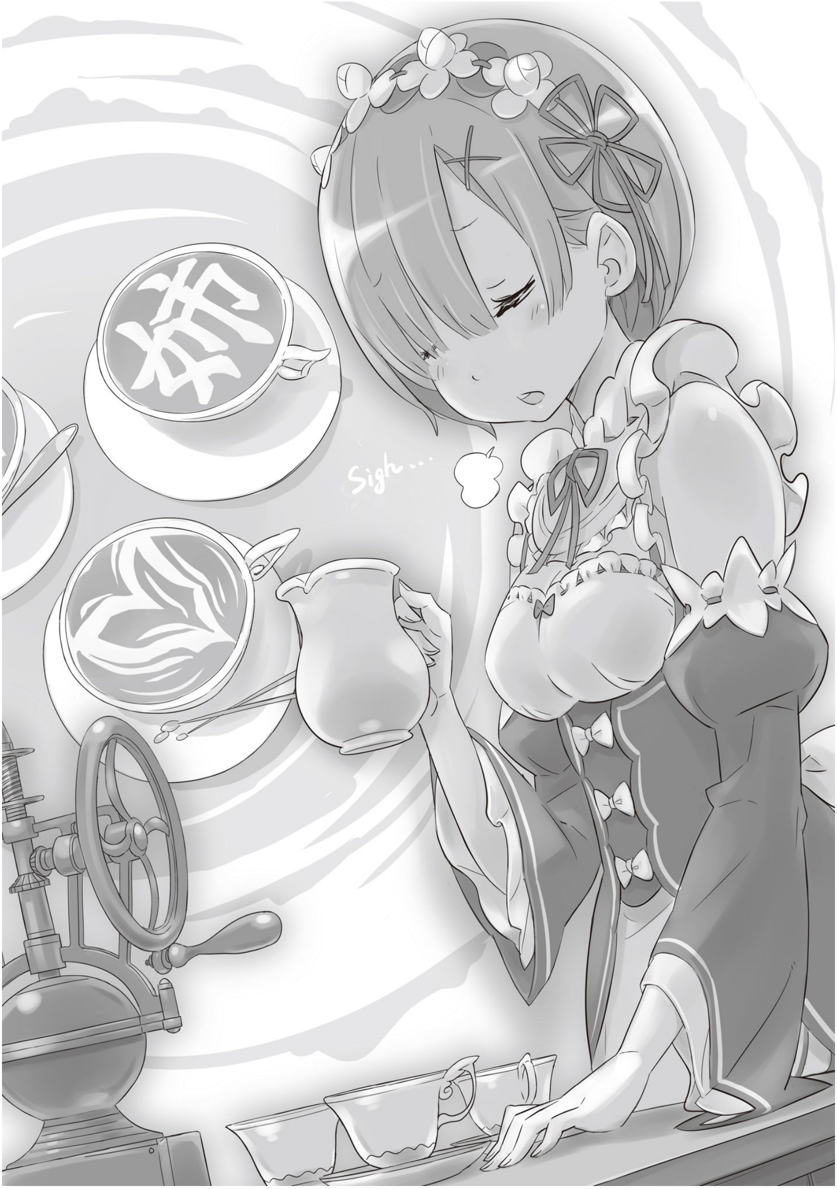
姉
Sigh...

Emilia's Starry Sky Classroom

1

Emilia, who was walking down the corridor, stopped her steps when she was called from behind.

"Are you leaving at this hour, miss?"

The long silver hair swayed as the girl turned. Then, her amethyst eyes reflected the silhouette of the person who had asked the question.

"I'm just going to go to the garden. I still haven't been able to talk to the spirits today because of the confusion this morning… And I can't break the pact," she replied with a gentle smile.

Hearing this, the other person, in this case Rem, closed her eyes slightly.

"Confusion… Do you say Subaru?"

"W-Well …Yes, but…"

Rem's tone of voice was a little harsh, which made Emilia smile uncomfortably. Seeing this reaction, the maid added:

"Any problem you have, please don't be shy to talk to us. Especially considering that Subaru became an employee of the mansion."

"It's not that I feel shy… It's true that it all started because of Subaru, but I have a part of the blame for being so entertained with his conversation," Emilia admitted with a small sigh.

As a spirit user, despite her main companion being the Pack, she had the help of several lower spirits. Therefore, keeping the promise made to them was an obligation that she could not neglect.

"I can't be privileging only Pack, otherwise the others will be upset. So I usually take the time to talk to them every morning, so they can help me when I need it most.”

“I didn’t know about these details of the technique of manipulating spirits. I know very little about it.”

“It is normal, not least because there are very few spirit users. Did you learn to use magic with Roswaal?”

“Yes. I learned the basics from my sister when we were children, and since we came here, I have been instructed by Master Roswaal.”

The Marquis de Mathers, despite all his eccentricity in terms of language, dress and other personality details, was also the magician in direct service to the royal family, known and recognized as the greatest magician in the kingdom. Thanks to that, both Rem and Ram, both under his instruction, had a high caliber in magic technique in their respective elements of preference, water and wind.

“I hope I don’t get involved too much in situations that you both need to use magic…” Commented Emilia.

“I understand your concern, but it will be inevitable. What happened in the capital was only the beginning, I am sure that similar incidents will be repeated throughout your candidacy.”

Instead of consoling, Rem chose to alert her master of the risks. And her strict stance was not only with others, but mainly with herself, which Emilia considered a great quality.

“I know. I can’t be naive forever, let alone look down after receiving so much help from Roswaal and the two of you.”

“My sister and I just obeyed the master’s orders. Of course, it will be a great satisfaction to be able to help you, Miss.”

Then, seeing the maid bow, Emilia also threatened to do the same, but gave up when she remembered the last time she was scolded for it. Even simple gestures like that, now, carried a greater meaning for the candidate to the throne and she needed to get used to it.

“So, I’m going to go to the garden. I promise not to stay long.”

“Yes ma’am. Ah, one last thing.”

Rem, before Emilia started walking again, asked: “What should I do if Subaru asks me where to find you?”

The maid’s concern was natural, since they had just talked about the boy having hindered Emilia in conversation with the spirits. Despite this, the silver-haired girl shook her head sideways and said:

“Don’t worry, you can tell him I’m in the garden.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I don’t want to treat Subaru as a hindrance, and I just need to take my obligations more seriously. In addition… I’m a little curious to know the continuation of the conversation I had with him in the morning.”

“Miss Emilia, or you take obligations seriously, or listen to Subaru stories.”

“I-I know! But I will really do everything right.”

“By the way, if I may ask the question, what was the conversation you were having with Subaru about?”

“Hum… Do you usually look at the night sky Rem?”

“The night sky…? I don’t think much… At most, I am guided by the stars when I have to go out at night.”

“I know, and I was like that too. But that is not it.”

So, Emilia went to the hall window and looked up at the sky. The world had already lost the sunlight, and what lit the landscape in its place was the moonlight and the scattered brightness of countless stars.

“…”

Rem also did the same and went to the window, to which Emilia added: “When you have an opportunity, ask Subaru about the stars. I’m sure that, like me, you will also have fun looking at the sky at night.”

2

“Beatrice, can I get Puck back…?”

“…You can’t, right? But do what…”

The girl Emilia talked to did not hide her dissatisfaction as she hugged the gray kitten tightly in her arms.

“What is it, Lia? Are you hypnotized by my cuteness?”

“Pack, Just yourself. In fact, I kept thinking that Beatrice always makes a face at me.”

“Natural, isn’t it? For Betty, you are a bad girl that keeps the brother from me. Ideally, I would never see your face or that idiot’s face again, okay?”

If it was anyone else, those words would have hurt Emilia, but she knew Beatrice didn’t really have bad feelings about her, so she just laughed.

“I have a pact with Lia, and you know the importance of that, Beatrice. But I promise I’ll play with you again.”

“Do you really promise? Do you promise to come back to Betty as soon as you can, brother?”

After the dramatic farewell, the kitten jumped on Emilia’s shoulder and settled in his usual place, between the silver strands of hair, and said:

“For a change, I didn’t see time go by in the library. It’s already night, isn’t it? Because of your clothes, I imagine you’re going to talk to the spirits in the garden, am I right?”

“Right. I didn’t have time to talk to them in the morning and I can also see the stars that Subaru spoke… Hey, I know! Beatrice, are you busy now?"

"If Betty is busy…?"

Once again, the girl frowned at the question. Everyone at the mansion knew that the librarian never acted sympathetic to anyone, but Emilia was under the impression that Beatrice was especially harsh with her and Subaru. Even so, she suggested:

"If you have no appointment now, how about going for a walk with me? I want to be more friends with you, Beatrice. And today I have a very interesting subject to tell you!"

"Too bad it was Subaru who told you first…"

"Do not disturb, pack! And then? what do you say?"

She stared into the girl's eyes, but without giving too much time, Beatrice turned her face and replied:

"A pity, but I'm very busy right now, understand? Not to mention that I have no interest in knowing about the stars."

"Not even if it's quick? Rem was so interested…"

"Don't think you'll be able to convince Betty with stories about that idiot, okay? I bet he stays giving random names to stars and is having fun like a fool."

"Wow, incredible. How did you know?"

Emilia was truly surprised by Beatrice's precise comment. According to Subaru, the dispositions of the stars were different in his homeland, and apparently he was suffering from knowing which was which.

"Subaru seemed to understand a lot about astronomy, only he said that the stars are not the same here, and there where he grew up. He spoke of Vega, Altair… B-Betelgeuse?"

"…Geuse…"

"Hi?"

"…It's nothing. Now go quickly, do you hear?"

After popped the tongue, the librarian expelled visitors from her library. Before the Door Crossing was activated, however, she just said goodbye to Pack by waving her hand, and then immediately disappeared.

"I really wanted to be friends with Beatrice…"

"Believe it or not, but in the beginning, she and I fought every day. But look how intimate we are today. All thanks to the long time we spent together… Just like you, Lia."

In other words, Pack was telling Emilia not to be in a hurry, which seemed to convince her. Then she headed back towards the garden and, when she left, she was greeted by a pleasant night breeze.

"…I think it's good here…"

Saying, the girl sat on the grass in one corner of the garden. Then she looked unconsciously at the sky and laughed. As Rem told herself, she never paid much attention to the night sky. Of course, there were times when she looked up and was amazed by the beauty of the starry sky, but it was never something that would make her repeat every night.

"Subaru is so excited when he talks about the stars…"

At first, the boy was confused by the different disposition of the constellations, but that soon changed to curiosity. For Emilia, Subaru's eyes that saw the starry sky shone more than any bright spot above.

"You are very happy today, Lia," Commented Puck.

"You know, I really am. The sky remains the same as always, but just because I changed the way I saw it a little bit, it became much more beautiful."

He also said that the name "Subaru" was taken from a group of stars, the “Pleiades” in the language of his homeland. And that is why he was always interested in astronomy and knew so many mythologies about it.

“That band full of stars is the Milky Way, if I’m not mistaken. In the legend, two lovers cross it once a year to meet, on a day called Tanabata.”

“Why do I get the impression that this story is more cruel than beautiful?” Wondered the kitten.

“How was the story? The lovers Hikoboshi and Orihime were separated as a form of punishment, but Hikoboshi is allowed by the star king to cross the Milky Way once a year and go to find his beloved.”

“Well, I guess it’s no use talking about it now…”

Emilia’s eyes sparkled as she told the supposedly romantic story, but Pack was still not convinced. Despite him, the girl was very fond of the myths about the stars, and looked forward to hearing stories from Subaru.

In any case, she could not lose focus on the initial objective:

“So, Puck, I’m going to call the guys.”

With that, the kitten moved away from her a little. The reason for this was so that the lower spirits would not be intimidated by the Pack, which was a great spirit.

“I’m sorry for not being able to talk to you this morning. But now we have all the time in the world.”

Following her whisper, warm flashes began to emerge around her. Each was an inferior spirit who had answered the girl’s call, and the clarity of the lights showed that they were happy, making Emilia smile.

And so, the conversation between them began, serenely, only in their world. Until…

“H-Hey! Wh-Wh-What a coincidence we meet here, huh?”

…A boy in a butler’s uniform came up raising a hand. Another astronomy class was about to begin, under the tutelage of the blinding moon.

END

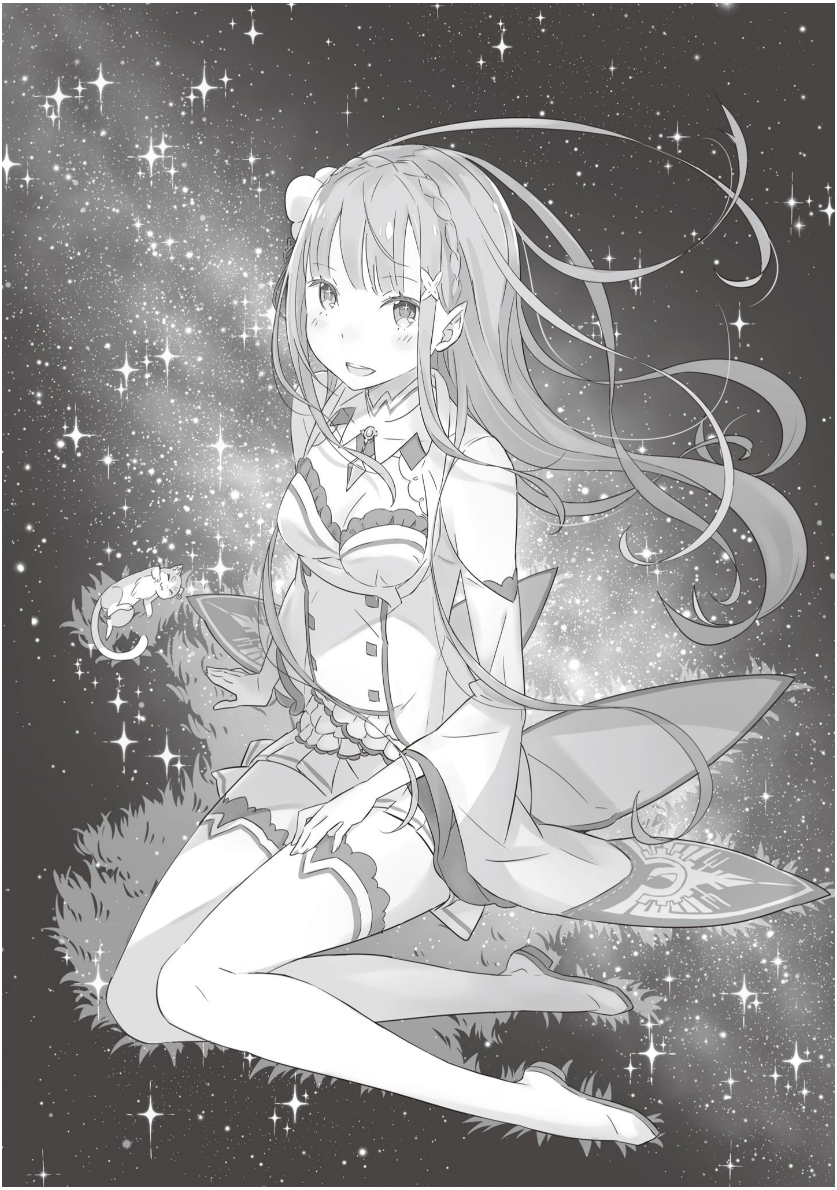

Natsuki Subaru’s Splendid Steward Life

1

“…Barusu, wake up. It’s morning”

He was awoken by a frozen voice, and the sound of curtains being opened, letting in a breeze.

Suddenly pulled down from the world of dreams to the real world, Natsuki Subaru growled and woke up. At times like this, he hated being so good at waking up.

“You’re not much help, but at least it doesn’t take much to wake you up.”

The voice that woke him threw that poison dart at Subaru as he was sitting up in the bed.

Standing in front of Subaru as he rubbed sleep from his eyes was a beautiful girl in a maid outfit.

Her red hair was short, and her light red eyes were clear. The girl with a cold expression fixed on her pretty face was named Ram. At the mansion where Subaru was helping out, she was one of only two maids.

“Come now, stop dozing off and get changed. If you keep causing me trouble, I’ll report it to Master Roswaal and your position will be taken away.”

“Can’t we at least say ‘Good Morning’ or something…? oof”

Stifling a yawn at her strict words, Subaru somehow managed to crawl out of bed. Having placed a change of clothing beside him on the bed, Ram turned to leave.

“Get changed, and meet up with us promptly. Don’t even think about something as foolish as going back to sleep.”

"What on earth are you saying to a hard-working man like me? I'll be right there, ma'am."

"…Be quick."

Ram said no more, and Subaru watched as she quickly left the room.

Frowning at Ram's cold attitude, Subaru took off the jersey he slept in, and, stripped down to his underwear, picked up the change of clothing.

Today was the fourth day since he was hired to work here, at the Roswaal Mansion. His body wasn't yet familiar with the job, or even with the concept of hard work. The fact that he was still sleepy was good proof of that.

Pulling on the sleeves, Subaru adjusted the oddly large number of ornaments on his clothing. Placing the last bit of the uniform firmly on his head, Subaru unsteadily made his way down the early-morning hallway. The meeting spot was the mansion's main entrance hall. Subaru made his way there while hunching his back in the chilly morning air.

"There you are, Baru…"

Ram greeted Subaru as he came out of the hallway and arrived at the main entrance hall. But, her expression stiffened as she looked at him, and her greeting halted in the middle. At her reaction, Subaru inclined his head slightly.

He'd changed into his uniform while sleepy, perhaps something was off with it?

"Oh, Subaru? Good morning. Let's work hard today…"

The girl who had been facing Ram, with her back to Subaru, turned around. It was Ram's twin, Rem. Indistinguishable from her sister aside from her blue hair and eye color, she too looked at Subaru and froze.

While her attitude was softer, Rem was even stricter about work than Ram. Subaru looked down at his outfit, checking again to see if anything didn't look quite right.

Starting with a white base, it was a stylish outfit in black. The skirt extended below his knees, and the sleeve cuffs billowed. The frilly apron was straight, and the ribbon in the back that completed the outfit's appearance was done up properly. Worrying that perhaps the hair ornament wasn't on right, Subaru put his hand to his head… at that, he finally realized what was wrong.

"Why am I dressed up in a maid outfit?!"

"Bwaha!"

At the same time as Subaru's morning yell, Ram and Rem both burst out laughing.

2

"Even if they were sleepy, someone would normally notice something like that while getting dressed."

"For you to dress up in the entire thing and come all the way to the meeting spot… I have to wonder if that's one of your hobbies."

After their bout of laughter, Ram and Rem continued to press home the point about Subaru's sleepy-headed behavior. Maid Subaru listened to their criticism with a vein standing out on his head.

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"Hmm, yes. It seems that Frederica's clothing fits you perfectly. It's just as Ram suspected."

"My sister is impressive as always. Rem can't help but admire her courtesy."

"That's not the problem here! And I'm not asking if it looks good on me or not! This is a social issue! The senior maids are making fun of the junior maid here!"

"You're thinking of yourself as a maid, then? Truly impressive,

Barusu.”

“It seems you really do enjoy seeing yourself that way…”

The twins exchanged whispered words. Seeing that he was getting nowhere, Subaru gave up in despair.

After giving up, he decided to head back to his room and change, and headed that direction.

“See here, Barusu. You’re already dressed; where do you think you’re going?”

“I thought that before showing such a horrible sight to everyone, I would return to my room and cry.”

“That won’t do at all. We’ve already wasted precious time this morning. We really can’t afford to lose any more.”

“The time we lost was all thanks to the two of you looking at me and laughing it up, wasn’t it?”

As Subaru pointed this out, the twins both wore innocent faces. Seeing their reaction, he let out a deep sigh.

“Anyways, I’m gonna get changed. If I go now, I’ll get by with only being embarrassed by you two. I can’t even imagine letting Emilia-tan see me like this. It would be way beyond embarrassing.”

“You’re saying that, but it’s your first time tasting the unfamiliar feeling of a skirt…”

“Yes, yes, I could really get used to the feeling of freedom…not!”

Unable to help throwing a sarcastic reply back at Ram, who showed no remorse despite being the root of the problem, Subaru started climbing the stairs, trying to get back to his room as soon as possible. The situation needed to be improved, right away.

“Alright, this will be our secret, just ours. I’m begging you, please never speak of it again.”

"Losing your nerve halfway through, that certainly your style, Barusu."

"I don't even have a reply for your poison tongue right now. So please, keep it a secret."

"Keep what a secret?"

"Keep up with the conversation here. I'm talking about the fact that I was half-asleep, dressed up as a maid and paraded around…"

In response to the question from above his head, Subaru angrily turned around and retorted…in the middle of that, he found himself looking into a pair of innocent amethyst eyes, and his voice froze. "Hieh" was all that came out.

On the second floor of the entrance hall, standing at the top of the main staircase and looking this way, was a silver-haired girl—recipient of the hospitality of the lord of the manor, and person of interest to Subaru—Emilia.

Brushing her long silver hair, Emilia looked at Subaru as he froze, and tilted her head.

"Umm… I'm sorry. I'm not sure what to say in this sort of situation."

"You might as well laugh with the rest of them."

"I'm sorry, it's not really amusing enough to laugh."

Subaru could only take so much of this. Was the whole world out to get him? What was up with this situation?

Having the girl he had his eye on see him in an unflattering maid outfit, and being unable to laugh about it… he wanted to die.

"Sister, Sister. Is this perhaps the sort of thing referred to as public execution?"

"Rem, Rem. A situation like this can lead to losing all human dignity and dying, I would say."

The maid sisters behind him took each other by the hand, and quietly discussed his misery. Subaru's escape attempt had failed so badly, he couldn't even disagree with them.

Most likely, nothing Subaru could say at this point would be convincing. To move was death, to speak was death.

All Subaru could do at this point was try and minimize the damage from this fatal wound. Of course, there's no way to avoid a fatal wound, so he might as well make things as painless as possible.

"Subaru, it's hard for me to know what to say…"

Stammering, Emilia shifted nervously while trying to choose her words carefully for Subaru's sake. In any other situation, Subaru would be overjoyed by her concern for him, but in this situation, he was hopeless.

Seeing Subaru's feelings and expression die second by second, Emilia made up her mind.

"I understand wanting to dress up in cute clothes, too, but I don't think it suits you, Subaru!"

"…huh?"

"Ah, I'm not upset or anything. But, I do feel just a little jealous. Something like what Ram and Rem wear is embarrassing for me, but the length that Frederica wore would be fine…"

"You're reaction to what I'm wearing is just giving it a low score? You're not going to yell at me for being a pervert?"

Emilia was trying to explain as quickly as she could, but she'd missed the point of the conversation. There was no need to bring that to her attention, but it was so far off from what he'd expected, Subaru asked her anyways.

"…? A pervert is a dangerous person, right? Are you dangerous, Subaru?"

"I'm not dangerous at all! A modern safety man, that's me! I see, I see! So I'm more your type the way I usually dress, than like this? Got it, I'll go change!"

Subaru rushed to cut the conversation short, before Emilia could react badly. He could feel the twins' displeased glares stabbing his back, but he simply ignored them.

"I can still get out of this thanks to Emilia's cute absent-mindedness, but I'm not out of the woods yet! I have to get back to my room before Roswaal, or even worse, Beatrice sees…!"

"Deeeear me, why is everyone gathered here so eaaaarly in the morning?"

"Are you holding a grudge against me or something?!"

As he tried to break away and return to his room, there was yet another arrival at the entrance hall.

In clown makeup and an eccentric outfit, there was no mistaking the master of the mansion, Roswaal. This in spite of the way he always kept to himself until it was time for breakfast.

"Today of all days, why! Not just Emilia-tan, but Ros-chi shows up too?!"

"If I had to say, it's because I just knew I haaaaad to. If I didn't get up early and come have a look I knew I'd regret it…and indeed, I've seen something quiiiiiite interesting."

As Roswaal approached, he looked at Subaru with the unpleasant smile of someone enjoying themselves a little too much. Under that indecent gaze, Subaru held down the hem of his skirt and backed away without thinking.

"It loooooooks like you've got everything in place. If I had to guess, I'd say this actually isn't your first time wearing women's clothing?"

"Well actually, there was something back at the high school entrance ceremony… hey, quit digging into my dark past! Crap! Now I'll never get to be a bride! Emilia-tan, please say we can be married!"

“Hm? But you’re a boy, Subaru, so you couldn’t have been a bride in the first place, right?”

As Subaru stood on the verge of tears, Emilia’s innocently demolished him, and he broke down crying.

It could only be called terrible. Having been unintentionally seen in women’s clothing, now he knew that fate was playing with him.

“If I’d known I was going to be seen, I’d at least like to have put a real effort into it, and faced it with the makeup and underwear done properly…!”

“Is that the problem? You really are a little strange, Subaru.”

As he half-seriously recovered, regretting being carried along by the situation, Emilia gave Subaru a wry grin.

Seeing her response, he boldly stood tall and folded his arms, getting control of himself.

“Here are four of the six people in the mansion! Having been seen by sixty-six percent of you, I’ve made the manly decision it would be best to finish the job! Certainly, once it’s up to one hundred percent, we’ll all have a good laugh!”

“That’s a manly decision, but you don’t look at all manly right now.”

“What a noisy bunch you are so early in the morning! One might wonder what you’re doing out here, I suppose.”

A small cat pulling aside silver hair, and a girl with horizontal-rolled hair opening the front entrance, made their appearance.

“It’s not like I actually called for either of you! Give me a break!”

“What?! What kind of comment is that?! It’s not like I would show up even if you did… if you… You! That outfit is ridiculous, I suppose! You pervert!”

“Be quiet, drill girl! You’re in no position to be pointing fingers about clothes! On top of that, if you think about it, your Bubby is pretty much running around stark naked all the time, isn't he?!"

"Hey, I'm properly dressed in fur. Pardon my smell, poot poot."

"Don't do it, Bubby! You'll catch pervert from him, I suppose! You must escape with Betty!"

Carrying on like that, the unexpected morning gathering of the mansion's inhabitants continued to chatter noisily.

It goes without saying that this day's breakfast was quite a bit later than usual.

3

"Ah, good grief. Today was a disaster. It's just not my lucky day."

At the end of the day's work, Subaru changed back into his jersey and sighed.

In the end, he had defiantly worked the entire day in the maid outfit. He was left with the feeling he'd lost something important as a person, but in exchange, he also had a feeling of accomplishment, as though he'd won a small victory against an unseen something.

It might be better to say he felt self-satisfaction—he was surprised at his own character, unchanging even across worlds.

"I guess I put a lot of effort into something silly. I really ought to learn better."

It wouldn't do to be disliked for being too foolish. Especially by that adorable silver-haired girl.

"Even with that, I'm surprised that Emilia-tan doesn't mind maid outfits. Or maybe that means she's not impressed with the butler outfit I normally wear…? That'd be a downer."

Turning his head, he thought back to seeing himself confidently wearing the butler outfit, reflected in the full-length mirror.

“Well then, tomorrow I’ll just have to blow away everyone’s memories of the maid outfit, by putting on a magnificent show as a butler. Yeah. On a more intimate note, isn’t it about time I asked Emilia for a date?”

After his work was finished, and Emilia’s studies were done, he could call it an invitation for a refreshing walk.

The flower field at the nearby village, and the little animal that the children had been excited about. There were lots of things to look forward to.

Dreaming about the fun times tomorrow, Subaru’s today came to a close.

The promise of a date, and the world once again turning on him, sat unseen in his future, two days away.

END

Roswaal Mansion Girls Party: Bathing Room Edition

Emilia: "…Mmm."

Slowly, from the tips of the toes, long, white legs slipped into the hot, faintly cloudy water. Her thighs trembling for a moment from the heat of the bath, she purred softly from the warmth, and let her limbs sink below the surface.

Emilia: "Ahhhh…"

With her long, silver hair simply gathered in her hands, she lowered her body into the hot water, and let out a long sigh.

She was beautiful. Her silvery hair was like a reflection of the night's moonlight, and her bluish-purple eyes seemed like they were inlaid with gemstones. Her white skin, as clear as fresh snow, was slightly flushed with color, and if anyone, man or woman, saw her, they would have to admire her splendor.

Her name was Emilia, and she was a lovely maiden whose fine looks were a gift from her elven lineage.

Emilia: "A bath in a tub big enough to soak your whole body always feels nice…"

Leaning against the edge of the bath, Emilia whispered blissfully while her cheeks reddened.

In a bathing room as large as this, the bath was able to easily accommodate Emilia's long, outstretched legs. As one would expect of the mansion of Margrave Roswaal, the bathing room was as large as a public bath. It was true that Emilia didn't exactly understand his position in society, but the fact that he was letting her stay at his mansion was an ongoing, painful reminder each day that he was a person of importance.

Her protector, her supporter—she had to meet Roswaal's expectations. Her awareness of this was one of the reasons she was spending each day living an unfamiliar lifestyle, striving to advance her studies.

Having said that, even the always cautious Emilia, with her clothing shed, bathing by herself, was simply a girl—nay, a beautiful girl.

Emilia: "Hm… I think I might have put on a little weight."

Her voice trembled as she lifted her arms from the bath, and pinched her white upper arm between her fingers. Perhaps it was due to eating regular meals as part of her recent life at the mansion; she might be overeating. Compared to her life before, life at the mansion didn't give her as many chances to move around, either. Given that, gaining weight was only natural.

Emilia: "Puck will start complaining again at this rate…"

In truth, Emilia didn't worry much about her own health. Puck, the cat spirit bound to Emilia by contract, was another matter. More than Emilia herself, he was concerned, and made sure to always remind her to take care of herself.

Puck, who had appointed himself her substitute parent and spent time with her as family, cared almost too much for her, and often instructed her on how to handle various parts of her life. She was grateful, of course, but sometimes the little lectures grew tiresome.

Emilia: "Do after-bath stretches, and do my hair, and do my nails, and, um…"

Counting on her fingers all the things she'd promised Puck to do after bathing, she started to feel a bit melancholy. Perhaps having her daily routine start to feel tiresome meant that she was getting worn down.

The incident at the capital—having her emblem stolen, and the big mess of a day that it took to get it back. It was only a few days ago; perhaps she was still physically and mentally exhausted.

Emilia: "I can't be like that. This isn't the time to be having second thoughts."

With only thoughts of the past springing up, Emilia tried to cut them off by smacking both hands to her cheeks.

The path she had chosen for herself wasn’t easy enough to let a little exhaustion slow her down. Even from the start, she’d been behind. To recover from that was going to require a real struggle.

And so, While Emilia was rebuilding her motivation…

Ram: “Oh my, Lady Emilia?”

The door to the changing room opened, and someone stepped into the bathing room. Emilia turned to see who had spoken, and saw a pink-haired girl approaching, with a towel concealing her naked body.

She was more petite, but her flawless skin and adorable face were a match for Emilia. The steam-dampened towel clung to her, and revealed her body was well-sculpted, despite it’s delicacy. Looking towards Emilia, she inclined her head slightly.

Ram: “It’s quite rare for you to be bathing at this hour. Would it be better if we come back later?”

Emilia: “No, it’s fine. I wouldn’t say something as mean as that.”

Ram: “I see. Thank you very much. Rem, do come in.”

As Emilia, still soaking in the bath, answered her, the girl—Ram, bowed her head slightly without changing her expression. She then turned towards the changing room and called out to another: her younger sister.

Rem: “Sister, it’s alright since it was Lady Emilia who was here before us, but what would you have done if it had been Subaru? That wouldn’t do.”

With that, Ram’s nearly-identical blue-haired sister appeared, following her into the bathing room.

Compared to Ram, her eyes seemed slightly gentler, but other than that, they were very similar. Her features and delicate form matched her sister—Rem's chest was, perhaps, larger.

Rem was also covering herself with a towel, and at her words, Ram turned her head and replied Ram: "When you put it that way, that's true." If the bath had been occupied not by Emilia, but by the boy who was staying as a guest…

Rem: "If Subaru was looking at my sister with his dirty eyes, Rem simply couldn't tolerate it."

Ram: "If that happened, I'd simply have to gouge out his eyes. His last sight would be a parting gift from me."

Emilia: "There's no need to say scary things like that. Subaru is a good boy."

Ram: "Perhaps your estimation of him is a little off."

Responding candidly to the comments from her younger sister and Emilia, Ram, now sweating, softly placed one leg in the bath. As she placed herself diagonally forward from Emilia, Ram's normally expressionless face relaxed slightly.

Noticing that, Emilia smiled faintly.

Ram: "…What's the matter, Lady Emilia? You seem amused."

Emilia: "Mhmm, just a little. Even Ram relaxes a little in the bath, it seems."

Ram: "I'm not a doll, after all. Though i won't deny that I'm as pretty as a doll."

Speaking in a hard voice, Ram quickly tightened her expression. Emilia regretted having caused her the embarrassment of being noticed, but now Rem entered the bath, across from Ram.

Rem: "My sister's way of always being resolute is wonderful, of course, but I also think that the way she lets down her guard in the bath is adorable as well."

Emilia: "Oh, you mean that this always happens?"

Rem: “Yes, it’s my sister’s little secret.”

Showing a little color in her cheeks, Rem spoke with a humor in her voice that was rare for her.

In some ways, even more than Ram, Rem tended to build walls between herself and others. Having had that impression of her, to be treated like this was an unexpected delight for Emilia.

Ram: “…Rem. Let’s not have too much of that.”

Rem: “Sorry, Sister. I just can’t help talking about how wonderful you are.”

Ram: “Well I suppose it can’t be helped. I’m a sister that anyone would boast about without thinking twice.”

Ram was always kind towards Rem, but today she seemed especially so. Couple with Rem’s own attitude, Emilia felt it was a lovely change.

Emilia: “Do you think that, when you’re naked in the bath, you can forget unimportant things and speak freely…?!”

Ram: “Lady Emilia, what’s the matter?”

Emilia: “Oh, oh my… I think maybe… I just figured out something amazing… something like the real truth about the world…”

Rem: “Sister, Sister, it’s terrible. It seems Lady Emilia is becoming dizzy.”

Ram: “Rem, Rem, it’s terrible. It seems Lady Emilia is half-asleep.”

Emilia: “Even though I’m in the bath?!”

Being treated as though she were dizzy and half-asleep, Emilia sank under the surface in surprise. She blew bubbles playfully, then came back above water with a gasp.

Emilia: “Mmm, the two of you are so mean…”

Rem: “Lady Emilia, it seems to me your imagination is being poisoned by Subaru.”

Emilia: “R… really? That couldn’t… hmm, I don’t think that could be…”

Having had that pointed out by Rem, Emilia looked troubled.

Since the uproar in the capital a few days ago, that boy had been welcomed at the mansion and working as a servant.

His expressions and actions often seemed incomprehensible to Emilia, and he seemed to surprise her every time they met.

Certainly, it was possible she was being influenced by the strange boy, but…

Emilia: “But, if you’re going to say that, the two of you spend a lot more time in contact with him, right? If being in the tub and naked doesn’t make a difference, then maybe you’re changing because of Subaru?”

Rem: “That would be”

Ram: “Utterly impossible.”

As Emilia tried to turn the tables on them, the twins replied in perfect unison. It seemed like a sharp retort, but it wasn’t made with a strong sense of rejection. Even from Emilia’s point of view, somehow or other the twins’ relationship with Subaru wasn’t bad. They’d almost certainly get used to each other soon.

Emilia: “Although I’m not really sure it would be good to let him stay here too long and get caught up in things…”

“…”

Hearing Emilia’s sad whisper, the twins only narrowed their eyes and said nothing.

The future awaiting Emilia was the battle for the fate of the country, to determine who would sit on the throne—the royal selection. The theft of her emblem in the capital was an attempt to interfere with Emilia's candidacy. Anyone near Emilia could certainly get caught in a deadly situation like that again. She hesitated to think it was alright to let a light hearted, good-natured boy like that get dragged in with her.

Ram: "Perhaps that's not something you need to worry about, Lady Emilia."

Emilia: "Ram?"

Ram: "Regardless of what Barusu thinks, if he doesn't prove useful as a servant, he'll be asked to leave in the near future. This decision has been left to us, so please don't trouble yourself about it."

Emilia: "…Thank you."

Emilia expressed her gratitude to Ram for interrupting her gloomy thoughts and saying that. Her deliberately harsh words were meant as a defensive line around Emilia's heart. If it became necessary, she would play the villain to spare Emilia.

Emilia: "It seems that Ram and Rem really are kind when you are naked."

Ram: "Please, stop adding 'when you are naked' to that."

Rem: "Indeed, Lady Emilia. My sister is always kind even when she isn't naked."

At Emilia and Rem's slightly off responses, Ram let out a deep sigh. Then, as the three of them were gathered together in the bath, the shadow of a truly rare fourth appeared.

Beatrice: "…oh, for heaven's sake. It's just one thing after another."

Opening the changing room door and showing up in the bathing room was a girl in an elegant dress. Her cream-colored hair was done up in horizontal curls, and her lovely appearance was almost doll-like. Her red, puffed-out cheeks looked like fruit, and she glared at the three in the bath with round, bulging eyes.

Ram: “What’s the matter, Miss Beatrice? Is it Barusu?”

Beatrice: “That’s exactly correct, and that makes me furious, I suppose. He really is a truly aggravating person! ‘Door Crossing’ doesn’t work on him, so this is the only place I can escape, I suppose.”

Ram: “Even Barusu wouldn’t dare launch an attack on the bathing room, after all.”

Beatrice: “That was my thought as well. I’ll just have to spend some time here, I suppose.”

With a haughtiness that didn’t seem to fit with her appearance, Beatrice folded her short arms and stood in a corner of the bathing room. However, Emilia rose from the bath, and walked towards Beatrice.

Looking up at the naked Emilia, Beatrice made an irritated face.

Beatrice: “…What do you want? Betty is only here to spend some time.”

Emilia: “Don’t say that. You’ve already come to the bathing room, Ram and Rem are here too, wouldn’t it be nice for Beatrice to have a bath too?”

Beatrice: “It wouldn’t be nice at all! I can’t imagine why you’d say that, I suppose. It’s certainly not funny.”

Beatrice tried to shoo away Emilia with a wave of her hand, like she was shooing an insect.

Faced with that stubborn attitude, normally Emilia would have kept her distance, but Emilia was a little different this evening. She glanced behind her, and saw two heads nod.

Beatrice: “…Wait a moment, I suppose. What’s the meaning of that signal just now?”

Emilia: “Oh, it’s nothing. …Ah! Beatrice, Puck is washing himself!”

Beatrice: “Oh?! Where, I suppose?!”

Falling for an old trick, Beatrice’s eyes followed the direction that Emilia pointed.

The next moment, Emilia picked up Beatrice’s small body in her arms, and tossed her towards the bath. Crying out “Nyaa!”, Beatrice flew towards the tub.

Beatrice: “What are you thinking… No matter, it will take more than this!”

The parabolic arc Beatrice was tracing stopped in mid-air. Using magic, she attached her thrown body to the air itself. She slowly began to move towards the side of the bathing room, but…

Ram: “Come now, Miss Beatrice, don’t be like that.”

Rem: “Stay with us a little while. I’ve always wanted to try washing Miss Beatrice’s hair.”

Beatrice: “You…you wouldn’t!”

Ram and Rem had each grabbed a sleeve of Beatrice’s dress as she tried to fly away.

There was a splash, and then Beatrice, now soaking wet, sprayed bathwater from her mouth, and glared at the other three.

Beatrice: “The three of you are completely under the influence of that strange fellow.”

Listening to Beatrice’s words, which were somewhere between a cry and a roar, Emilia smiled.

Smiled, thought that perhaps it was true, and continued to smile.

That day, at the Roswaal estate’s bathing room, the girlish voices echoed on for a while.

END

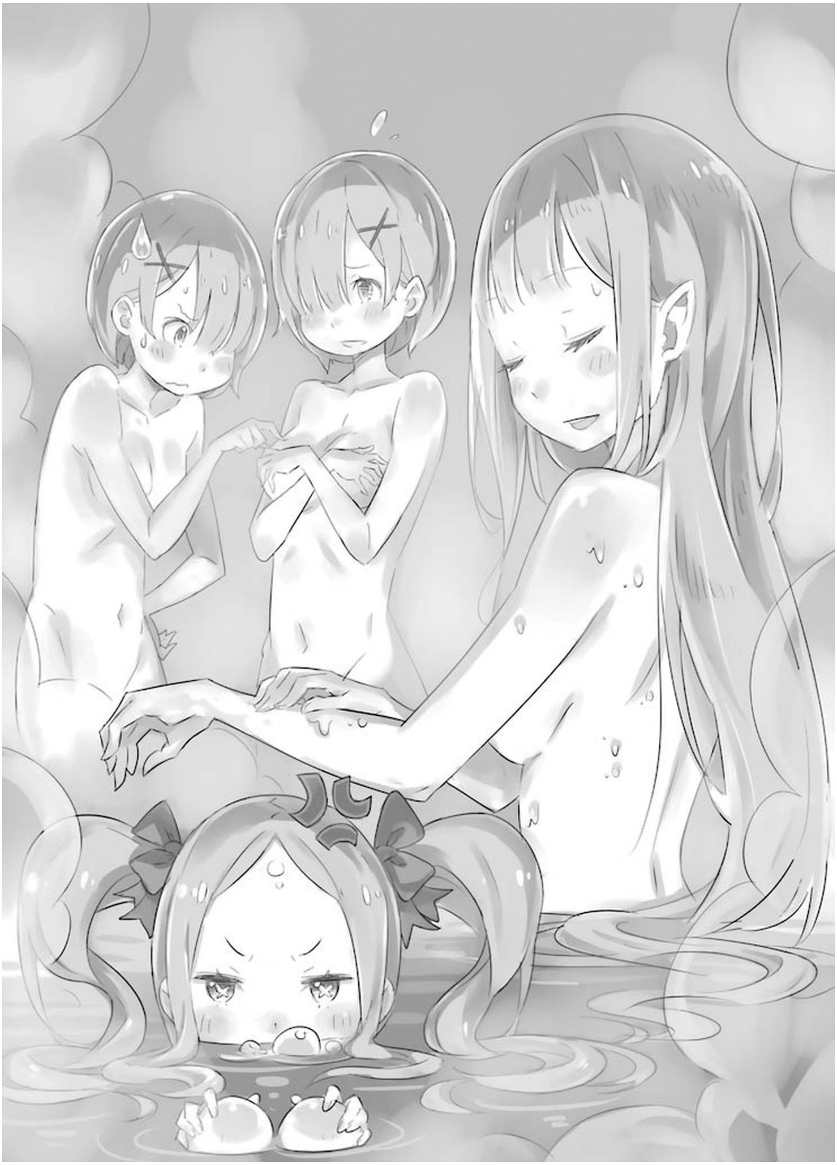

Roswaal Mansion Girls Party: Dressing Room Edition

1

Emilia: “Aaaaaah…”

Yawning from the morning’s drowsiness, the girl rubbed tears from the corner of her eyes with the back of her hands.

She had long, silver hair, and beautiful amethyst eyes. She had the lovely appearance of a fairy, but her slightly rumpled nightgown gave her a touch of indecent charm.

The nightgown slipped slightly, revealing her slender, fair-skinned shoulder…almost.

Rem: “That won’t do, Lady Emilia. If you rub at your eyes like that, they’ll turn red.”

Hands quickly extended from behind her, and stopped both the nightgown from slipping, and her hands from rubbing at her eyes. At the advice, the girl—Emilia—responded with a sleepy “mmm”, and then “Mm… yes, okay. …but I don’t think it would really be that bad.”

Rem: “It’s important to take care, even with the little things. Your hair, as well, needs to be combed, even if it takes a long time. I’m beginning to understand Puck-sama’s sorrows.”

Emilia: “Hmf, you’re so mean…”

Seated on a chair, Emilia puffed her cheeks out with a look of dissatisfaction. Standing behind Emilia, and politely running a comb through her silver hair, was a blue-haired girl—Rem.

It was early morning, and directly after waking up, Emilia was in the mansion’s dressing room, having Rem take care of her hair.

—To Emilia, having someone take care of her hair was the start of every morning.

Leaving her hair care to others… this was not due to Emilia being lazy, but that the people around her wouldn't leave it alone. Truthfully, it might be accurate to say that the people around her couldn't help but notice that Emilia was indifferent to her own appearance, and so it was a result of her laziness.

Rem: "if you don't want to take care of it yourself, please let Rem or Puck-sama handle it for you."

Emilia: "…Alright."

Rem chided her as she gently ran the brush through her hair, and Emilia reluctantly nodded.

Rem excelled at all things at the mansion, and had first rate skills not only for taking care of the estate's various tasks, but also caring for the personal grooming of the residents. Just having Rem touch her hair brought a curious sense of peace. Before she knew it, she was overwhelmed by the temptation to go back to sleep.

Ram: "Lady Emilia, now that you've managed to get up, it wouldn't do to fall asleep again. Even Ram is sleepy, after all."

Emilia: "Mmmf… Ah, sorry. Mhmm, you're right, but I got reeeeeeally sleepy."

Ram: "Ram can certainly understand that. Rem's hands have a heavenly touch."

The one saying that, her chest swollen with pride, was a girl whose appearance matched Rem's like two peas in a pod—pink hair and light red eyes were their only difference in color—Rem's older sister, Ram.

Unlike Rem, Ram was standing back and observing Emilia's hair being styled, but that didn't seem especially strange. The sisters, Ram and Rem, had always divided their responsibilities like this.

Rem: "Sister, if you keep praising me like that, I'm going to blush… Lady Emilia, I've finished."

Rem’s cheeks turned faintly red at Ram’s compliment, and she gave Emilia a light pat on her shoulder. As they’d been speaking, the silver hair Rem had gathered had been woven into a pretty braid.

Emilia: “Oh, thank you. …Mhmm, I’m sure Puck will be very pleased, too. That helps a lot.”

Rem: “Something like this is nothing more than the work expected of Rem. But, it’s rare for Great Spirit-sama to not be here while Lady Emilia is having her hair done.”

The great spirit that Rem was concerned about was Puck, the small cat-spirit that held a contract with Emilia. As Emilia’s self-appointed parent, the little cat offered guidance constantly, and often prodded her about taking care of her appearance. As a result, he was always present in the morning when her hair was being done, and when she was selecting clothing, but…

Emilia: “It seems he stayed awake too long yesterday. He was up late playing with Subaru, so he’s sleeping in today. I just can’t believe him sometimes.”

Ram: “With Barusu, you say? With all the work he has to do today, he’s got some nerve staying up late.”

Emilia was smiling slightly in spite of what she’d said, but Ram drew her eyebrows together in displeasure. Seeing Rem nod in agreement with her sister’s words, Emilia’s wry smile deepened.

Ram: “So Barusu’s late night is the reason that Puck-sama is still resting, then. …If he’s making problems not only for himself, but for everyone around him, then it casts even more doubts on his competence.”

Rem: “But, Sister. Thanks to Subaru, Sister and Rem can pick out this morning’s clothing for Lady Emilia.”

Ram: “That’s true. Barusu can take credit for that, at least.”

Emilia: “You’re giving Subaru credit for that? Why?”

As Emilia tilted her head at the sister’s conversation, Rem responded “You see,” to her confusion, and continued:

Rem: “Choosing Lady Emilia’s clothing has always been Puck’s job, after all. There was never any chance for Sister or Rem to give any advice on the matter. But, today will be different.”

Ram: “As far as choosing clothing is concerned, Lady Emilia has no opinion on the matter, correct? Everything is up to Ram and Rem, in other words. It’s a little bit exciting, honestly.”

Emilia: “I… I see. I don’t really understand…”

Emilia felt a little confused as the sisters became excited. The sisters’ expression didn’t normally change much, but as they talked seriously about Emilia’s clothing, she glimpsed a trace of enjoyment in their faces.

As Ram had pointed out, Emilia didn’t have any idea what she should wear. If the sisters could have some fun choosing her hairstyle and clothes, she thought that was fine, but…

Emilia: “It feels a little sad to be left out… oh, I know!”

Ram: “Lady Emilia?”

Unable to participate in the sisters’ discussion, Emilia broke her silence as her eyes suddenly lit up. Ram’s expression softened as she noticed Emilia’s sudden change, and Emilia beamed at Ram proudly.

Ram and Rem exchanged glances as Emilia’s attitude showed she’d had a flash of inspiration.

Emilia: “I just had a reeeealy good idea. Listen, listen.”

Ram: “…I’m not sure I want to hear it, but what have you thought up?”

Emilia: “Well, I’m really happy that you’re working so hard to pick an outfit for me, but aren’t the two of you always wearing the same maid outfit? That seems a little sad to me.”

Not noticing Ram's hesitant wording, Emilia confidently raised a finger and continued.

Emilia: "Since we're here already, I thought I'd like to see what you have to wear beside maid outfits."

2

Rem: "Subaru was one thing, but for Lady Emilia to be suggesting this as well…"

Emilia: "Oh, Subaru was telling you the same thing too? I think I understand a little better what he was thinking, now. It's so much fun seeing all your cute clothes, after all."

Ram: "Though in Barusu's case, his ulterior motive was obvious, so the idea was dismissed."

Neither of the sisters could turn down Emilia, after she'd suggested this with such an enthusiastic smile.

Looking at Ram and Rem standing side by side, Emilia clasped her hands in delight and looked deeply impressed. That was no surprise, since the two of them were in entirely different clothing than she had seen them wear before.

Emilia had known the sisters for three or four months now, but she had never seen them wear anything other than their maid outfits. She didn't know how to express her gratitude.

Emilia: "Thankya, thankya!"

Ram: "Lady Emilia, that response shows a lot of Barusu's bad influence on you."

Emilia: "Mhmm, I was trying to do a little impression of him there. But I'm really very happy!"

Sighing a little as Emilia looked on with her hands held together, Ram turned around once for her. The hem of her skirt lifted as she twirled, and she sparkled with a lovely girlishness.

Ram’s current clothing, compared to the maid outfit that left most of her shoulders and back exposed, was much less revealing. However, the feminine outfit, with a soft white as it’s basis, was an entirely different kind of charming, compared to her usual black serving clothes.

With her maid headdress removed, a large ribbon only added to the effect.

Ram: “Honestly, this is quite embarrassing. This look just isn’t me.” said Ram as she posed, running her hand through her hair, creating a perfectly adorable image. Emilia looked on, delighted; she was beginning to realize the fun of choosing outfits for others.

Rem: “As expected of Sister. No matter what she wears, her beauty only shines more brightly.”

Ram: “Thank you. But you look good too, Rem. Ram is very proud of how cute her little sister is.”

As Rem praised her sister’s appearance, Ram smiled faintly and touched her cheek.

In contrast to Ram’s outfit that had been made with an eye towards a soft splendor, Rem’s clothes were abundant with frills, producing a sweet ambiance not unlike something that would seem fitting for Beatrice, another of the mansion’s residents. With left and right ponytails adding to the effect, the combination of Rem’s gentle eyes and her attire shone brightly.

Emilia: “Mmmmhm, it’s just as I suspected. It’s a terrible waste for the two of you to be wearing only maid outfits all the time. We’ve discovered something here, don’t you think?”

Ram: “Our uniforms are in accordance with Roswaal-sama’s will, so Ram can only agree with him. However, it was thanks to Lady Emilia that we could see Rem look this adorable …I’d like to say that, at least.”

Emilia: “You’re reeeealy not telling us everything, Ram. Don’t you agree, Rem?”

Rem: “Rem is pleased to be able to see Sister in her uniform every day. Working, going out, shopping, fighting, serving… they are everything we need.”

Emilia: “But they’re all maid outfits…”

Rem had counted off the different types on her fingers, but they were all more or less the same maid outfit.

Hearing that response, Emilia started to worry that maybe Rem wasn’t really that interested, but Rem showed a rare smiled and continued “Just kidding, Lady Emilia. Rem really enjoyed seeing Sister’s cute clothing, too.”

Emilia: “…Really? That’s good to hear. But you look reeeeally cute too, Rem.”

Rem: “Thank you very much. However, we should probably get back to work soon.”

As Rem responded, she was looking above the door of the dressing room. The magic time crystal placed there had turned deep green, letting them know it was time to begin the morning.

Ram and Rem needed to start their work in the mansion, and Emilia needed to spend her daily time with the lesser spirits.

Emilia: “That’s too bad. But I suppose we can’t keep on playing forever.”

Ram: “Yes, that’s right. On top of that, if we don’t change quickly, it’s not impossible that Barusu might show up and misunderstand what’s going on. Ram really wouldn’t want Barusu to see her like this.”

Emilia: “Ahah, too bad for him. Oh, but wouldn’t you want to show Roswaal that outfit?”

Ram: “…Ram can imagine what Roswaal would say about it.”

She had hesitated for just a moment, but then shook her head as though clearing it of regret. Rem seemed to agree with her sister, and began to undo her tied-up hair.

It was lonely, and unfortunate. But, there was nothing that could be done. It was that kind of moment.

Puck: “Sorry, sorry, Lia. I slept in. Were you able to wake up alright?”

Emilia: “Ah, Puck.”

The green crystal hanging at Emilia’s chest lit up brilliantly; the next moment, the light introduced a small cat spirit into the world. The little cat rubbed at his eyes, and, looked around the dressing room.

Puck: “Oh, what’s this? Not only Lia, but the other two are dressed up cutely today as well.”

Blinking his round eyes in surprise, Puck whispered without malice. At those words, the sisters, who were still changing their clothes, looked at each other, and then they both fixed their eyes on Emilia.

Ram: “Somehow, being seen by Puck-sama isn’t pleasant either…”

Rem: “It’s rather strange. Rem feels the same way as Sister. What do you think we should do about it?”

Emilia: “Umm, I’m not really sure what to say… Ah, I know!”

As the sisters looked at her sourly and complained, Emilia thought hard, and then clapped her hands. Opening one hand, she landed the floating Puck on her palm.

Puck: “What’s the matter, Lia? You look a little… hmm, you look like a child getting into mischief.”

Emilia: “Well you see, Puck. I understand a little better how Puck feels. So, I thought that it’d be nice for Puck to understand a little better how I feel, too.”

“Puck It’s important to understand each other. But I’m getting a bad feeling about this… Hey, hold on, wait!”

Seeing Emilia's smile deepen, Puck's face showed a rare moment of disquiet. But Emilia didn't wait. Ram and Rem didn't wait, either.

3

—That day, the atmosphere at the Roswaal estate dinner table was a little different from normal.

Every morning, all the mansion's residents gathered together for breakfast. This included the lord of the manor, and Beatrice, and the servant boy was no exception either. However…

Beatrice: "Bubby, you look wonderful. Even if it's not your usual appearance, it's making Betty's heart melt…"

Puck: "Haha, thank you, Betty. But, if you'll please avoid drawing too much attention to how I look, it'll help to preserve the little pride I have left."

Out of those assembled, Beatrice was even more excited than usual as she held Puck to her cheek. Cradled in Beatrice's arms, Puck's appearance was completely different from normal.

With ribbons attached all over his body, and a lovely dress made from from a handkerchief and lace, the little cat who usually only wore gray fur was now decorated splendidly.

Subaru, who knew nothing about the situation, was looking at Puck wide-eyed. Leaning towards Emilia sitting next to him, he held his hand to his mouth as if trying to speak discreetly.

Subaru: "Hey, what's going on there? I'm pretty tolerant towards the idea of dressing up pets, but did you do that, Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "Hmm, well…"

With a wry smile at Subaru's question, Emilia glanced at the head of the table.There, watching with amusement as Beatrice and Puck cuddled, was Roswaal, with the two maids quietly lined up behind him. They both noticed Emilia's quick look, and each raised a hand.

Those hands were making the sign that Subaru had called 'The

Fox'…

Subaru: "Emilia-tan?"

As Subaru repeated his question in a confused voice, Emilia stuck out the tip of her tongue. The answer was a secret from the time spent this morning in the dressing room, between the sisters and herself, so…

Emilia: "Subaru, I can't tell you."

Emilia answered with a cute wink.

Volume 3

Chapters 29-END

Chapter 29:
Natsuki Subaru’s Restart

1

Only nothingness existed there.

Vaguely, that consciousness casually looked around. Perhaps “Looked around” isn’t the right expression in this case.

This consciousness had no eyes. Not only that, but it had no hands, no feet, no part of a body whatsoever. Just an uncertain, incorporeal consciousness floating there.

Understanding nothing, comprehending nothing, it still looked around.

It was a dark room, and utterly empty. The boundaries between the ceiling and walls were indistinguishable, a world enveloped in pitch black where the room’s size couldn’t even be estimated.

Suddenly, meaning was born in that world of eternal darkness.

In the position directly in front of the consciousness, a human silhouette abruptly appeared.

A slender, indistinct outline, also shrouded in black. Especially above the torso, a haze obscured it, strongly hindering the consciousness’s perception.

With the appearance of the silhouette, the consciousness experienced its first sensation.

And before that sensation faded, the shadow moved languidly, as if trying to convey something to the consciousness.

It couldn’t understand. Nothing was conveyed.

Even so, for some reason, it couldn’t avert its consciousness from that human silhouette—

“—we can’t meet, not yet.”

Leaving behind such a faint whisper, the world suddenly vanished.

2

The moment Subaru woke up, his strongest thought was, “Thank you, Mom and Dad, for giving me a strong body.”

He had thrown himself off a cliff, plummeting headfirst to the ground. There was no doubt his cervical vertebrae almost snapped from the impact, but instead of instantaneous eternal peace for Subaru in such a state—

“To think I couldn’t even die instantly and still have some consciousness… this isn’t just bad luck, it’s beyond that.”

Next to the horned corpse that had fallen to its death, he lay immobile, tormented by excruciating pain, counting down the seconds to death.

He probably didn’t last long before losing his life, yet the subjective experience felt like several hours.

He couldn’t bear to imagine Beatrice coming down to check on his well-being and then healing him while he was still alive.

“Nope, never again. I’m absolutely done with trying to kill myself. I wouldn’t do it even if I were dead.”

Even thinking back to the self-interrogation he went through leading up to that moment literally made him want to die.

After putting on such a brave front, his inner self was trembling like that. He absolutely couldn’t call it a “resolution.”

But—

“I’m back…”

Reaching out, clenching his fist, Subaru confirmed his location.

A soft bed. Neatly arranged sheets. The reddish-brown work clothes felt nostalgic, and then—

“Sister, Sister, it seems our guest is still half-asleep.”

“Rem, Rem, it seems our guest is quite senile for his age.”

The twin girls held hands, gazing at Subaru with two pairs of eyes from the foot of the bed.

Familiar voices, familiar gestures. A powerful greeting, repeated four times before, and now for the fifth time.

He had a mountain of things he wanted to say. So many feelings pressed against his chest, wanting to be expressed. Yet, all of them caught in his throat.

Seeing Rem alive and well, seeing Ram’s usual rude demeanor, feeling them treat him as if everything were normal—an uncontrollable surge of emotion welled up inside him.

“Guest, dear Guest, what’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell?”

“Guest, dear Guest, is something the matter? Did you have an attack of your chronic illness?”

After seeing their faces, Subaru fell silent, clutching his chest, confusing the twins. They separated, approached the bed, and reached out as if to comfort the crouching Subaru. As the two approached, Subaru—

“Gaba-cho!”

“Eh?”

“Ah?”

Making a sound effect with his mouth, he vigorously pulled the twins into a tight embrace.

Blue hair to his right, pink hair to his left; their small bodies were easily encircled by one arm each. He put his face between the twins, who had bumped heads, and while savoring the feel of their hair against his cheeks—

“Ah—I’m home, I’m home! Finally, I’m back in this place, with these feelings. I’m home!”

He then roughly rubbed his face against their heads, then patted their backs, releasing them.

The twins, unable to hide their shock at Subaru’s sudden embrace, quickly regained their composure and practically sprang off the bed.

“Sister, Sister, our guest has made a plaything of us.”

“Rem, Rem, our guest has made us the object of his beastly desires.”

“Hah! That’s not it. Sorry, but you two are, unfortunately, just a tad outside my strike zone. Remember that. I don’t really have a thing for younger girls! And girls should have long hair, long hair!”

Subaru’s personal theory was that girlish charm resided in the hair.

Therefore, a woman’s hair should be long. And a silver-haired heroine was Subaru’s justice. Plus, if she had a slightly older, doting type, that would be perfect. Hence—

“Emilia-tan is right in the center of my strike zone! Sorry, but you two are off-center. Still nice pitches though!”

“Sister, Sister. His statement is hard to understand, but I feel insulted.”

“Rem, Rem. His words are crazy, but I feel like I’m being put down.”

The twins’ response to Subaru’s rapid-fire talk was rather harsh.

Ignoring their attitude, Subaru sprang out of bed. Standing barefoot on the floor, he sharply spun around. Turning back in the center of the room, he pointed both index fingers at the two, who were still standing by the bed.

"Listen up, hey, listen, listen to me. After you give each other lap pillows and clean out your ear holes, lend me an ear!"

He offered his palms to the silent duo, making unnecessary open-and-close gestures with his hands.

"I understand that you two have, well, complicated and mysterious backgrounds due to various circumstances. I totally get it, but even so, I'm going to say this."

As if gauging him, the twins silently urged him to continue.

He probably figured that their assessment had already begun. He couldn't come up with a clever plan to try and win their trust while being aware of their gaze, struggling and experimenting.

For starters, he was terrible at socializing.

If he had the advanced communication skills to read others' expressions and respond appropriately on the spot, he wouldn't have become a shut-in, and he would have done better here too.

So, even knowing the meaning of their sharp gazes, there wasn't much Subaru could do. His informational advantage was limited.

Therefore, what Subaru was about to say to them at this point wasn't a declaration of war but purely a self-admonition.

In other words—

"I trust you two, so let's get along!"

Just like the first time, he would face them with all his might, single-mindedly.

He must have thought the same thing on the first day of his summoning to another world.

Even if he knew what future awaited him, he didn't have the strength to fully utilize it. In that case, to make the most of the given chance, he had no choice but to desperately live and struggle through the present situation.

At Subaru's proposition, the two's eyes widened. They exchanged glances with each other, communicating silently. There was no way to guess what was exchanged during that silent interaction, but Subaru was not quiet enough to solemnly await their verdict.

After all, he had decided to abandon that quietness this time.

"Being left behind is lonely, you bullies! The world is much vaster and more open. So stop immersing yourselves in a world just for the two of you and let's open up more and more! With whom? With me!"

"Sister, Sister. Our awakened guest is incredibly troublesome."

"Rem, Rem. Our guest, who finally woke up, is annoying as hell."

"But you two must be sincere even to this annoying and troublesome me! Wow, you are making this guest feel things once again after so long! It's good for a brief moment, yeah!"

It felt like his suppressed frustrations were exploding.

Relying on his mouth, which spun even faster than usual, Subaru's tongue reflected light words more than ever. Then—

"—Couldn't you have woken up a little more quietly?"

The voice came from the direction of the entrance.

Looking that way, standing near the door was a silver-haired girl. She gently knocked on the already open door, her beautiful eyebrows furrowed in exasperation.

"It's good that you're well, but you're recovering from an illness, so you shouldn't make so much noise."

"Don't worry, Emilia-tan, you're my guiding star!"

"What are you talking about?!"

Giving a thumbs-up, his teeth gleaming, he struck his best determined pose. Emilia put a hand to her forehead at Subaru's all-out action.

“Um…”

Her gaze wandered as if choosing her words, and then—

“Anyway, good morning. I’m glad you’re safe.”

Emilia smiled with relief.

Subaru nodded back at her smile, a grin spreading across his face.

“Yeah, good morning. —Alright then, let’s get started.”

The three women tilted their heads, not understanding the intent behind Subaru’s words.

Subaru gave them a wry smile, waving his hand, and declared, as if telling himself first and foremost—

“One week at Roswaal’s Mansion—mission start.”

—Now, let’s set the story in motion.

To look up at the morning Subaru desires, with the people Subaru desires.

The first day of the fifth time, morning at Roswaal’s Mansion begins.

Chapter 30:
Natsuki Subaru's Buffoonery

1

Subaru has two major hurdles to overcome to get through his week at the Roswaal mansion.

First, to earn the trust of the mansion's residents, which includes not only Ram and Rem, but also Roswaal, the master himself.

If he fails to gain their approval, there's a very high chance his life will be extinguished in the name of secrecy.

This was the conclusion he reached after thinking about it over and over again during his ample time in the previous loop.

Similarly, leaving the mansion without their permission would fall under the same category.

Suspicious behavior immediately leads to a DEAD END. This is the point that demands the utmost caution.

Second, is a hurdle he hasn't even found a clue about it yet.

That is, the true identity of the curse user attacking Roswaal's mansion.

The user of the curse that took Subaru's life the first time, ravaged his mind and body the second time, and killed Rem in the fourth iteration.

In this fifth world, the biggest objective is to locate and defeat this adversary whose true identity remains elusive.

In summary, if he can somehow gain the trust of Ram and Rem, and then defeat the wicked magic user, he might be able to break through the loop.

He had to die four times just to finally see the victory conditions.

What's more, the crucial part of achieving these conditions is still largely unknown, and he can't shake the feeling that he's returned with no plan whatsoever.

Subaru sighs again at the sheer difficulty of his path ahead, but he shakes his head, resisting the urge to cradle it, and looks forward.

No matter how high the wall before him, he can't back down.

He came back here, even resorting to suicide. He gambled on the unknown conditions of whether he could return, and he did.

He had died once, by his own hand.

So, he should face this challenge as if he were already dead.

—That's what Subaru had decided.

2

"Soo, Ram? From your perspective, what's your assessment of him?"

At the hour when the moon hung in the night sky, a private discussion was taking place in the office on the top floor of Roswaal's mansion.

There were two participants: Roswaal, the master of the mansion and the room, and facing him, the pink-haired maid—Ram.

Ram tilted her head slightly in thought, considering Roswaal's question, delivered with clasped hands on his desk and a slight smile.

Noticing her hesitation in reporting, Roswaal raised an eyebrow as if he'd seen something rare.

"Hmm~, it's rare to see Ram, who usually makes quick decisions about aanything, pondering so deeply, iisn't it? Couldn't you measure him in a single daay?"

"That's not exactly it, but—"

Her denial came quickly, but its content still lacked clarity. She touched a finger to her lips, a hint of confusion remaining.

“He—Barusu—is, well, completely useless in terms of ability. His performance as a servant is barely better than a novice. Before even considering whether he’s suited or not, he’s simply out of the scope of evaluation.”

“Hmm~, it’s quite mysterious for someone to ooffer to work themselves, only to be soo… unsuited.”

Recalling the breakfast table, Roswaal chuckled to himself.

He remembered inviting their newly awakened guest to the dining table and discussing his achievements and rewards.

Roswaal’s impression was that he was a “boy who had received a decent education, had a moderately quick wit, and was reasonably good at self-preservation.” It wasn’t a bad assessment, and in another sense, it meant he warranted caution.

Therefore, he had assigned Ram to him as a supervisor under the guise of an educator, and indeed, he had set aside time for this report.

He hadn’t expected results on the first day, but on the other hand, someone who could cause this kind of unease in Ram was a serious opponent.

“It’s strange, but…”

“Yes, I’ll listen. Go ahead and tell me everything.

“Though he’s completely lacking in ability, Barusu is… how should I put it… unsettlingly positive?”

Roswaal furrowed his brow at Ram’s statement, which sounded more like she was searching for words than choosing them.

Ram herself likely knew she wasn’t making sense. With a frustrated expression, as if precise words eluded her:

"He just keeps talking and talking, never losing his smile even when he fails, and going so far as to act terribly devoted towards us…"

"…What is it thaat you are think?"

"It's different from what Lady Emilia had told me about him."

Ram responded only with that to the low query.

Roswaal, having had less contact with him, couldn't grasp her specific questions. However, this was the opinion of sisters who had gained considerable experience in the mansion. Considering his trust in them, her advice was something that should be taken seriously.

"At any rate, it's understandable if his true nature isn't apparent on the first day. We owe him a debt of gratitude for saving Lady Emilia. —Let's continue to oobserve his progress slowly for a while longer, shaall we?"

"…In case of, if…"

Her reluctance to hear the rest was palpable.

Even though her expression hadn't changed, his ability to sense it was likely due to their long association. Roswaal looked at Ram's rare display of weakness with his golden eyes, and shook his head slightly.

"Then it shaall be. We'd prefer to handle things as amicably as possible. —Above all, be careful not to let Rem act rashly."

Sometimes, that blue-haired girl tended to act on her own initiative, even when she understood his intentions. While her judgment generally didn't deviate from Roswaal's directives, there were times when her immediate decisions, which nipped potential problems in the bud, caused him trouble.

This time, in particular, there was a chance that such an immediate decision could lead to a bad outcome.

For Roswaal, all three of them were essential pieces.

“By the way, Ram. Is your report finished?”

“…Yes. I apologize for not being able to convey anything substantial.”

“I would never blaame you for such a thing. Rather, shall we finish our duties for tonight? —It’s been two nights. I imagine you’ve been quite… aching?”

To Roswaal’s inviting gesture with his fingers, Ram followed with a somewhat entranced expression. She had been standing in front of the desk, but she approached him with a swaying gait, then hesitantly settled onto his lap as he sat.

“Tonight as well, if you’ll… excuse me.”

“It’s your rightful exercise, of course. It’s always like this, but there’s no neeed to be shy. It’s an important body. Aafter all, It’s not just yours alone.”

He traced her cheek with his hand, turning Ram’s face upwards as her eyes faintly closed.

Combing her pink hair with his other hand, Roswaal closed one eye, looking down at Ram with his blue one.

“Noow then, what kind of eexistence will you be for us. We truly want to proceed amicably, doon’t we?”

He murmured only to himself, then Roswaal immediately shifted his awareness.

Gazing only at Ram before him, his consciousness sank only into Ram.

The first night deepened.

—Concluding with the mysterious private conversation between the master of the mansion and his maid.

"Good morning! Another clear day, perfect for laundry! Good for me, good for you, good for everyone! Good smile!"

On the morning of the second day, welcoming the rising sun with three cheers, Subaru cheered loudly.

Standing in the middle of the garden, his eyelids burning from the sunlight, he shook off his grogginess by moving his entire body with full energy.

First thing in the morning, radio calisthenics—blood circulated properly through his limbs, sending the energy stored during sleep throughout his entire body.

Finally, he stretched both hands to the heavens and shouted "Victory!" marking the end of the beginning of the day.

Lightly sweating on his forehead, Subaru refreshed himself by wiping it away and turned around.

Then—

"You really are energetic in the morning…"

"Energetic, super energetic! My energy is everyone's courage, I love you, love, we love! Let's get to it!"

At the edge of the garden, in the shade of the trees surrounding the garden, Emilia, who had been performing her morning routine, gave a wry smile. A gray furball, or rather, Puck, floated beside her, rubbing his black eyes with his tiny hands.

"Seeing you wash your face, you really are like a cat. But anyway, do spirits also get sleepy? Do they oversleep?"

"You humans get sleepy when you're tired, right? When spirits' mana reserves, the source of their activity, decrease, well, it's similar. If I don't have enough mana, I might continue to feel sleepy like this… fufunyaa."

Prompted by Puck's yawn, Emilia also covered her lips with her palm and let out a small yawn.

Subaru shrugged and played dumb at their gestures.

"You two staying up late isn't good. It's probably that, right? You were talking about your crushes late into the night? That's fine, that's fine, let me in on it! My crush? Um, well, it's super embarrassing, but—"

Subaru clasped his hands, lowered his eyes, and stole glances at Emilia. Emilia waved her hand dismissively at Subaru's behavior, saying, "Yes, yes."

"I love Puck, and Puck loves me. End of story."

"Mutual love?! Is there no room for me?! No room?!"

"No way. Lia's head over heels for my charm. Subaru, you might not have been a bad guy, but compared to me, you're nothing. Just honestly give up on this girl… nyaunyuau!"

Puck looked down at Subaru, warding him off.

Emilia, grabbing a hand towel from who-knows-where, bit it and cried "Kii—" in exasperation.

Then, with no mercy, she pinched Subaru's ear and Puck's ear, who was straightening his whiskers with a pompous air.

"Both of you, don't get carried away! I'll get angry if you keep saying things like that!"

""Ow ow ow, you're angry, you're angry, I get it!""

One person and one familiar cringed in unison at Emilia's punishment.

As they both rubbed their released ears, Emilia let out a small sigh.

"It's good to get along, but don't play around using people as an excuse. Answer if you understand. Yes?"

""Yes~!""

Prompted by her outstretched hand, they impulsively nodded.

He couldn't shake the feeling of being completely manipulated, but it was strange how seeing her satisfied smile made such minor things seem irrelevant.

A relieved smile gently surfaced. As he felt his lips relax, Subaru inwardly panicked slightly and forced a smile.

"What's this pounding heart? An older woman type acting like a big sister to me, Emilia-tan's appeal rush is too intense, I'm troubled + screaming with joy."

"Screaming with joy, but feeling troubled… What's that like?"

"Like 'Kya-hii-n!' or something like that, right?"

He put both fists near his chin and took a small jump, bending one leg. It was a pose a cutesy character from an old manga might do, but he was surprisingly good at replicating it, to his own surprise.

"I wonder why. I feel so utterly deflated."

"More unpopular than expected! Why?! Are me and the world really that out of sync, why?!"

Subaru's full-throttle reaction to Emilia's disheartened gesture. The classic manga pose was called 'Sheh,' but she gave no reaction to it.

It fizzled out, and his strength drained, causing him to collapse on the spot.

"My physical gags really bomb a lot…! It's unavoidable that concepts like 'life' or 'flames' don't convey well, but for a bewitching pose that charmed children and adults alike to not be received, how strict is this world on comedy…!"

"I don't know what wall you crashed into, but that's just fine. Hey, Subaru. Come here, come and sit."

As Subaru, with hands on the ground, looked about to cry, Emilia, sitting sideways on the grass, lightly patted the spot beside her.

Subaru's reaction upon realizing she meant "come here" was swift. He practically leaped, sliding in beside her.

"Called, jumped out, slid in, and here I am. What, what? What kind of timing is 'just fine'? Natsuki Subaru, the man who reaches the itchy spots, will scratch that unreachable spot on Emilia-tan's back exactly as commanded! Nothing more!"

"I only invited you to sit beside me, but I got a bigger reaction than I expected. What should I do?"

"…"

Even Emilia couldn't help but give a wry smile at his intense momentum. In her palm, Puck remained silent, touching his own whiskers.

Perhaps assuming Puck was unreliable in this stance, Emilia prefaced her words with "Um, so," and turned back to Subaru.

"So, how was yesterday? Were you able to do your job properly?"

"Ah, eighty percent failure!"

"I see. You are so confident… wait? You failed? Eighty percent?!"

"No, sorry, eighty percent was an exaggeration. Probably… if I'm being generous, six… no, seven, seventy-five percent…"

"That's so close to the edge…"

Seeing Emilia's suddenly deflated look, Subaru inexplicably felt a pang of conscience and his shoulders slumped. Seeing Subaru influenced by his own demeanor, Emilia waved her hands frantically.

"Ah, but, look, you succeeded twenty percent on your first job, right? Then it's fine, I'm sure you can do well. Come on, be confident."

"You're right! Twenty percent on a first try, isn't that like being a strong batter? I'll ride this tailwind and get cocky, watch me!"

“Don’t get so conceited, and make sure to reflect.”

“Aren’t your demands too strict?! Oh, no, never mind, I’m sorry.”

Pressed by Emilia’s stern glare, his shoulders, which had started to rise, shrunk again, and he hung his head.

At any rate—

“Well, in reality, I’m somehow managing thanks to Ram and Rem’s support. If I’m giving my all and still only getting twenty percent, it’s pretty much unavoidable, right? As for the disappointment there, I’ll look forward to the future, so see you tomorrow!”

“If you yourself aren’t worried about it, there’s nothing for me to say…”

Emilia pouted her lips somewhat sulkily at Subaru’s positive remark. That childish gesture was abnormally endearing, and a feeling like his chest was tightening making Subaru’s body feel hot.

However, he mobilized all his self-control to suppress that impulse.

Subaru made an exaggerated movement, pointing at her with both hands.

“Well, well, well, that’s how it is, so I’ll be working hard at servant life today, too, while being bossed around, educated, and punished by the maid sisters. When I’m exhausted from that kind of life, I’ll come jumping into Emilia-tan’s lap, so make sure to keep it open for me!”

“A harsh assessment with a cute face! But, but, if you’ll listen to half, that means one knee is okay, right! Then, Emilia-tan’s one knee for tonight is reserved by me… don’t you dare use it, Puck!”

Changing the target of his pointing finger, Subaru declared war. Meanwhile, Puck, who was the target, maintained his composed attitude.”

“Heh heh, no matter what you say, you who appeared later, Lia has already dedicated her body and soul to me through our contract.

There's no interfering with this relationship now, nyannya-nyan!"

"Don't change the terms of the contract on your own behind my back!"

Emilia pinched both of Puck's incorrigible ears and lifted him into the air, swinging him.

Since his entire weight hung from his ears, if a human were subjected to it, it would be an unimaginable torment. But Puck, whose weight was like fluff, seemed to suffer no damage. He continued to swing, allowing himself to be swayed, with his usual serene expression.

"Alright then, now that I've replenished my morning vitality, I guess I'll get to work."

"Replenished your vitality? Were you doing something?"

"Of course, my love - love power accumulated from flirting with Emilia-tan. I've got two gauges filled, so I can land two super moves. This is a sure win…"

"You're always so full of yourself. If you keep teasing people like that, they won't believe you when you tell the truth. Haven't you read that in fairy tales?"

"I know similar stories! Honestly, I think that guy totally deserved it, so there's no room for me to defend him, you know?"

"You're saying that, Subaru…?"

Subaru stuck out his tongue and gave an embarrassed smile, standing up under Emilia's gaze, which seemed to say, "Look at others' faults and correct your own."

He brushed the grass from his rear, then stretched his back, rotating his hips.

"I really need to get going, or I'll get seriously scolded. This morning, I'm supposed to start with breakfast prep. Emilia-tan, you don't like bell peppers, right? I'll take them out for you."

“You have to eat them even if you don’t like them… wait, did I ever tell Subaru that?”

To Emilia, who tilted her head in question, Subaru gave a small smile and waved his hand.

He was just slightly pleased that he had surprised her.

He swayed unnecessarily from side to side, continuing to act silly within her sight until he disappeared.

Consciously, deliberately, making sure his smile didn’t fade.

4

Watching Subaru disappear from sight with an unsteady gait, Emilia let out a small sigh and looked down at her hand.

At the end of her gaze, the small gray cat was looking at Subaru’s receding back. Suddenly, noticing Emilia looking down at him, the cat raised its head.

“What’s wrong? You have a gloomy expression.”

“It’s just… I feel so hazy. I can’t quite put it into words.”

Emilia stammered, struggling to articulate her inner confusion. However, it didn’t come out right, eventually just becoming a silent sigh that vanished into the air.

Watching her struggle, Puck touched his pink nose and narrowed his eyes.

“Is Subaru on your mind? That’s unusual. It’s rare for Lia to care so much about another person.”

“Don’t just assume I’m bad at socializing. I’m not bad at interacting with others; I just haven’t had many opportunities.”

Puffing out her cheeks, she complained to the long-time gray cat.

It was a childish attitude she usually wouldn’t show if anyone else were around. It was her way of expressing her affection, something she could only do in front of Puck, who she'd known for years.

Meanwhile, Puck's expression remained serene.

He was like a parent delighted by his daughter's growth—which was exactly how he felt—and with that same expression, Puck nodded.

"Well, it's no wonder you're confused, Lia. Things are getting a little complicated."

"Complicated?"

Though nonchalant, Emilia's expression tightened, sensing that the content was something she couldn't ignore.

Puck's demeanor was generally consistent, regardless of the situation. Whether this was peculiar to spirits or simply a facet of Puck's personality was unknown, but the weight of his statements often fell to the receiver's judgment. In short, it meant Emilia had to make a decision.

Despite being met with a serious gaze, Puck's demeanor didn't falter.

He toyed with the tip of his short whiskers with his fingertip.

"I tried to vaguely sense it, but… Subaru's heart, it was quite a mess. His outer self and inner self are all tangled up. If he stays like that, he might wear out before long, nya?"

He said, in his ever-relaxed tone.

Chapter 31:
The Laments of Buffoonery

1

—Sick.

“Oh, Ram-chi! Did you see that just now?! My knife skills have gotten pretty refined in just one day, haven’t they?! Did my talent finally bloom?!”

—Sick, sick.

“Rem-rin, look, look! This skill that allows for such delicate craftsmanship—right now, a miracle truly resides in my fingertips! Appliqué!”

—Sick, sick, sick.

“Emilia-tan just scrambles my heart every time I see her! She’s so wickedly captivating, I’m practically guilty!”

—Sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick.

Wearing a smile, acting like a clown, his tongue, slick with oil, spun at full speed. He tackled every task assigned to him with all his might, bravely challenging himself without fear of failure, and whenever he had a free moment, he’d wander off in search of some event to join. He mobilized all his memories, digging through the four repeated four-day cycles as if to burn them into his mind, imprinting himself onto every tiny incident he could possibly create.

That’s how it had to be. That’s what he had to do. Not a second could be wasted. He had to scrutinize every possible outcome, simulate every success and failure of every necessary event.

He should think of it as a game. Thorough flag management. He should have been good at it. The more he met people, the higher the possibilities became. He should be able to smile better. He should be able to make others smile better.

Act as if your mind is empty, but never stop thinking. Perform meaningless, wasteful, exaggerated actions. Make them think you're a fool not worth their caution. Avoid being judged as too stupid to be useful. Conflicting thoughts and conclusions. If you have time to dwell on contradictions, act before you think. But before you act, ask yourself the meaning of your actions. Always be careful not to seem unnatural. Don't let your guard down for even a second, let alone a moment. Failure isn't an option; it simply can't be.

—I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail, I can't fail.

Again and again, an alarm bell rang in his head. It was an alert signaling danger. He'd come to this other world and hadn't made any progress, but he prided himself on this one sharpened sense.

Danger was approaching. A mistake was about to be corrected. He didn't know where it was coming from. Stay alert, step lightly, and move his body.

"Whoa there, Ram-chi, I'm not slacking off, okay? I'll definitely, precisely, and perfectly finish my work. You senior folks can just kick back in your rooms and take a siesta for all I care!"

He parried, he dodged, he avoided the situation with flippancy and a superficial smile. Was he doing it right? Was he properly being Natsuki Subaru? Had he avoided suspicion? Even if he managed it in front of Ram, if his true colors were exposed in front of Rem, everything would be ruined.

He had to genuinely and naturally pretend to be Natsuki Subaru. It was simple; it was about himself. He just needed to revert to the lazy pig he was before, completely oblivious to the inner thoughts of the mansion's residents, innocently, unreservedly, impudently, and shamelessly just enjoying whatever was given to him. He was supposed to be good at knowing nothing, understanding nothing, noticing nothing, and doing nothing. He should have been able to do only that. It should have been easy. He should have been able to do that much with a smile.

He walked with a silly grin, a fixed smile plastered on his face. He was inside the mansion. He didn't know who he might run into where. He knew there was no such thing as free time during free hours. All empty time had to be spent recalling the past and planning future actions.

"Oh, ugh…"

Suddenly, a wave of nausea welled up. Only a groan escaped his lips, but Subaru never let his smile falter. His feet continued to skip, and he glided, almost danced, into a nearby guest room.

Then, he headed to the washroom built into the room, and—

"…Obufwa! Ugh, oueh…!"

He emptied the already hollow contents of his stomach into the sink. Any food or drink he consumed was immediately thrown up. All that came out was yellowish gastric acid, and he was so wrung out from the constant retching that even his stomach acid had run dry. Still, to satisfy the unending nausea, he gulped down water from the sink to fill his stomach, only to promptly vomit it back up. He repeated this, again and again, as if trying to wash out the contents of his stomach.

"Haah… haah, haah…"

He roughly wiped his mouth with his sleeve, his face pale, and gasped for breath. The crushing pressure alone felt like it could kill him. If this relentless, stressful time continued, he felt like he could simply waste away and die. He scoffed at his absurd condition, yet not even a dry chuckle escaped him. All that surfaced was an endless well of anxiety and despair rising from his chest.

—Am I doing this right?

Looking back, the time when his relationship with the mansion's residents was best was probably during his first, ignorant loop. So, should he follow the first loop and try to replicate the same situation? No, doing that would be nothing more than tracing the second loop. The second loop copied the first loop's events, but with the added misery of his weakening magic and Rem's judgment. It would simply be going down the wrong path again. If the third and fourth loops were out of the question, then Subaru should indeed emulate the first loop. This time, instead of merely copying the first, he'd aim to do it better than the first.

In the first loop, his abilities at every job were low, but he believed he tackled every assigned task head-on. In the second loop, his attempt to replicate the first loop's results was seen through and judged as laziness. Therefore, this time, he would give his all, just like in the first loop, and produce even better results than before. If he did that, Ram and Rem wouldn't abandon him. If he could just avoid the path where they punished him, one of Subaru's worries would be lifted. But the problem was,

"I still have no idea where the curse user is."

Since Rem was killed, the culprit must be someone from outside. Someone targeting the mansion—if it was related to the Royal Selection, then Subaru, who wasn't familiar with those relationships, was effectively at a dead end. To expose the sorcerer's true identity, the cooperation of the mansion's residents was absolutely essential. At the very least, warning them wouldn't be useless. But then, how much influence did Subaru currently have in this mansion?

"Who's going to listen to my suggestions when I haven't even earned their trust…?"

On top of that, Subaru was constrained by not being able to reveal his source of information.

That's why he endured the frustrating and roundabout process, spending his time with a constant, stomach-churning tightness. Not enough time. The lack of time was maddening. He wasn't confident he could endure this painful time any longer. He wanted it to end quickly. But it couldn't end. His words wouldn't reach them. He needed time for them to reach. And he didn't have that time. He had to do something. He felt sick, it was agonizing.

His thoughts repeatedly wandered into the cul-de-sac they'd reached so many times before. Last night, too, he'd been swallowed by this endless spiral, unable to sleep a wink. The powerlessness of trying to shake off a clearly defined anxiety without finding a solution. If only he could have chosen the option of simply screaming "Danger!" even if they thought he was crazy, it wouldn't be a bad gamble if it saved everyone in the mansion. Measures would be taken beforehand, and everyone in the mansion would safely greet the fifth day. If the sorcerer chose to retreat due to the worsening situation, it would be a perfect ending.

—But he couldn't bear not being there himself.

Subaru wasn't enlightened or saintly enough to simply be content if they were just safe. His desire was for everyone in the mansion to survive and to overcome the fifth day harmoniously, with him by their side. He didn't possess a spirit of self-sacrifice to begin with. He was greedy, extravagant, stubborn, and utterly boorish by nature. That's why,

"Ah, damn it… I'm pathetic."

Despite resolving to take his own life, he couldn't stop himself from hesitating when the opportunity presented itself. Once a life is picked up, it becomes precious. If something you thought you'd discarded returns to your hands, you can't easily let it go again. Subaru was the same. The life he thought he'd thrown away, the life that should have ended. After winning the gamble and returning, what struck Subaru when he realized it was back in his hands was the terror of losing it again.

He couldn't fail; there were no more chances. This was the fifth time. And Subaru wasn't the type to optimistically believe he could "Return by Death" again afterward. He was able to come back this time. Next time, he might not. The constant mental erosion of being aware that this version of himself might be the last, that he was always on the edge of a cliff—the more sane one was, the more it pushed them to the brink. He wasn't so insane as to act recklessly, nor did he possess the courage to stake everything and fight back. Utterly ordinary, utterly mundane. He was painfully reminded of how insignificant he was, to the point of disliking himself.

"Do you have time to complain, you idiot…?"

If he had time to even utter a single complaint, it was more important to crack a light joke and make a good impression. Before he knew it, he shook off the fading nausea, slapped his stiff cheeks, and admonished himself. Then he headed out of the guest room. Currently, it was free time after finishing his assigned work, but even that time was precious now. In any case, he needed to find Ram or Rem, and then—

"I finally found you."

As he leaned out of the door, he heard a voice call out to him. He turned around to see Emilia, catching her breath. The moment her silver hair, swaying in the breeze, entered his vision, Subaru's consciousness sharply switched gears. He adapted to the situation, forgetting all stomach pain, chest tightness, and suffocating feelings. Now, he turned back to Emilia, his cheeks stretching into a lecherous grin.

"Well, well, well, Emilia-tan calling me specifically? How delightfully embarrassing and rare! Say anything, command anything! For you, I'd dive into fire, water, or even the darkness of a stolen goods warehouse!"

He pointed a finger to the sky, swayed his hips, and struck a pose in rhythm. He felt like he wanted to applaud himself for how quickly he could switch gears. However, Emilia's reaction to him was not what he expected. He had braced himself for a look of exasperation or a sigh, but—

"Subaru…"

"Hey, hey, hey, Emilia-tan, that's not cool. Ignoring my best joke, one I thought up all night. A joke, once used, can't be used again due to freshness! Do you understand how it feels to have the child you painstakingly birthed be killed by Emilia-tan?!"

He bit his sleeve and pretended to cry in vexation. But even to this, Emilia's reaction was meager. Emilia defied all of Subaru's expected reactions, merely looking at him with eyes that mingled sorrow and pity.

—This is bad, his instincts screamed a warning.

"Emilia-tan, why so quiet? If a beauty like you stays silent, I might mistake you for a work of art, take you home, decorate you in a corner of my room, and give you good morning and good night kisses every day!"

Something's wrong, his own voice screamed inside his head, again and again.

Her reaction was unlike any he predicted. A reaction that was neither exasperation nor anger was unexpected. If she were angry, he could still consider how to respond. But for her to look at him with such pained eyes… Did it mean she saw through his clumsy clown mask?

The moment that anxiety pierced him, Subaru remembered the gray cat that was always by her side. Recalling the characteristics of the spirit that claimed to be a cat, he clearly understood the futility of everything he had done so far. How foolish it was to try and put on a superficial act in front of someone who could read minds.

The instant he realized this, Subaru's bluff collapsed. The pasted-on smile vanished without a trace, replaced by the vulnerable expression of a child waiting to be scolded. The awkwardness of continuing to dance, pretending not to be noticed, in front of someone who saw right through him. And more than anything, his tiny pride was deeply wounded by the fact that he didn't want her to know.

A silence fell between them. Subaru no longer had any room to make lighthearted remarks, and Emilia, for her part, was searching for words, her eyes wavering at Subaru's expression.

—He didn't want Emilia to be disillusioned with him. That was the one thing he didn't want. But he didn't even know what to say to make an excuse. There was no way to break through the situation here, either. He tried to open his mouth many times, but the crucial words wouldn't come, leaving him unable to move forward. As Emilia watched Subaru, who was consumed by this frustration, she suddenly murmured, "Alright," and then softly,

"Subaru, come here."

"…Huh?"

"Just come."

She firmly grabbed Subaru's arm, heading into the very guest room Subaru had just emerged from. He was pulled back into the room, only half out the door, and question marks filled his mind, unable to grasp her intention. But Emilia paid no mind to Subaru's confusion, placed her hands on her hips, and looked around the room, then—

"Alright, sit down, Subaru."

She pointed to the floor, her voice unchanged, like silver bells, and said so. Following her finger, he looked down at the floor. The floor was carpeted, and while no one used the room, it was impeccably clean. Of course, the floor was so well-maintained that he could even lie down on it if he wanted.

"Wouldn't a bed or a chair be better to sit on? Why the floor…?"

"Just sit!"

"Yes, as you command!"

She spoke with an uncharacteristically strong tone, and he instinctively obeyed, sitting ramrod straight. Seeing him sit, Emilia nodded contentedly and then came right beside him. Naturally, he had to look up at her from his low position, but he couldn't even entertain any impure thoughts at the moment. He was simply desperate to decipher Emilia's true intentions.

"…Mhm," Emilia whispered softly. She took a breath as if confirming something, or perhaps steeling herself, and then sat in seiza next to Subaru. His heart fluttered at her beauty, so close he could almost touch her, and he stared intently at her pale profile, trying to read her emotions. Suddenly, her pale profile flushed, and he noticed her ears were faintly red.

“This is special, okay?”

“—Huh?”

A question mark appeared at her suggestive words, but before he could voice it, something pushed the back of Subaru’s head. Naturally, his seiza posture couldn’t resist the force, and he was swept forward, stumbling into a soft embrace.

“The position’s a bit off. And it’s prickly.”

Something shifted beneath his head, and Emilia’s shy voice was close beside him. Surprised, he looked up, his eyes widening further at the sight before him. Right above him, so close their faces could almost touch, was Emilia’s face. It appeared upside down, and a vague, distant realization surfaced: “Ah, I’m upside down.”

At this distance, upside down, with a soft sensation beneath his head. These keywords converged, forming a single meaning within Subaru. In other words, this was—

“A lap pillow?”

“It’s kind of embarrassing, so don’t say it out loud. Also, don’t look over here. Close your eyes.”

He was lightly tapped on the forehead, and her palm covered his eyelids, blocking his vision. But Subaru gently removed her hand, protesting,

“Emilia-tan looking shy is also the best, but… what exactly is going on here? When did I earn a reward worthy of this?”

“That kind of strange bravado isn’t good, you know.”

He was tapped on the forehead again. This time, however, she kept her hand on his forehead, and Emilia used her fingers to brush back

Subaru's upside-down bangs.

"I told you, Subaru. When you're completely exhausted, I'd give you a lap pillow. So I'm doing it now. I can't do it all the time, but today is special."

"Special or not, it's only the second day! If I look this exhausted and worn out, then I must have the weakest constitution in all of history…"

"I can tell you're beaten down just by looking at you. You probably won't tell me the full story, will you? I don't think this will make things easier… but it's all I can do."

Emilia interrupted Subaru's words, speaking with a gaze full of affection. Her fingers, which had been combing his bangs, now parted his hair and began to gently stroke his head as if comforting a child. He gave a small laugh, attempting to shrug off Emilia's actions. He wanted to insist she was mistaken, that he wasn't acting pathetic, and he intended to maintain the pretense he'd decided to uphold in front of her.

"Haha… Emilia-tan, like… I, can't…"

His voice cracked, his throat tightened, and the next words wouldn't come out. For some reason, he couldn't disconnect his awareness from the soft touch of her fingers stroking his head.

"Are you tired?"

"N-No, I can still do it. I'm totally fine…"

"Are you troubled?"

"If you're so kind, well, I'll fall for you, you know? Like that, again… that's… haha."

In response to her brief questions, Subaru's words rang hollow. He knew himself that his words were empty of feeling. And then, Emilia gently leaned closer to Subaru and said,

"—That must have been hard."

“—!”

She said it with tenderness. She said it with care. She said it with affection. With just those words, with just that one phrase, the tattered dam inside Subaru burst. It broke, it shattered, and everything he had held back poured out all at once. It was a well of intense emotions he thought he had contained, but had never been able to extinguish.

“It… was hard. It was really, really tough. It was so scary. So incredibly sad. It hurt so much, I thought I was going to die…!”

“Mhm.”

“I did my best, you know. I was trying my best. I was desperate. I was desperately trying to make everything good…! It’s true. Truly, honestly, I’ve never tried this hard before!”

“Mhm, I know.”

“I love this place, you know… I think this place is really important, you know…! That’s why I was desperate to get it back. I was scared. I was so scared. The thought of being looked at with those eyes again… I hated, hated, hated myself for thinking that…!”

His emotions were out of control. Once they exploded, they gushed out like a dam breaking, profusely staining the coward’s face, hidden behind a smiling mask, with tears. The tears wouldn’t stop. Snot ran down his face. His mouth filled with some inexplicable liquid, making Subaru’s choked sobs even more unbearable to listen to. He was pathetic. So shameful. A grown man, sobbing uncontrollably on a girl’s lap while she stroked his head. So shameful he wanted to die. Yet, his heart was filled with such warmth, it felt as if he might just die from it.

Emilia’s reassurances as she listened to Subaru’s complaints were gentle. Even though she said “I know,” it was obvious that she couldn’t possibly grasp even a fragment of Subaru’s experiences. Yet, Emilia’s voice carried a weight that he couldn’t simply laugh off. He didn’t know why. Perhaps he just wanted to believe that. But it was true that Subaru felt as though he had been saved by that inexplicable warmth.

Tears streamed down his face as Subaru continued to cry on Emilia’s lap. He cried and cried, bawling until his pathetic sobs faded into the distant beyond, leaving only the quiet sound of peaceful breathing in the guest room.

2

Rem visited the guest room when Emilia was gently stroking Subaru’s black hair as he slept.

Opening the door silently, Rem spotted Emilia in the room and was about to speak, but Emilia put a finger to her lips, signaling “Shhh,” and Rem closed her mouth. Shaking her short blue hair, Rem calmly surveyed the room. Then, she approached Emilia, who was sitting directly on the guest room floor with Subaru’s head in her lap.

“Is Subaru just sleeping?”

“Yes. Fufu, look, he’s like a child, isn’t he? When I stroke his head, he makes a relieved face.”

Amused, Emilia stroked Subaru and sought Rem’s agreement. Rem responded to her request with a quiet shake of her head.

“It seems Subaru won’t be able to do any more work today.”

“That’s right, he’s off today. To take a break just two days after starting work, he’s a very naughty boy. When he gets better, please punish him for me.”

Emilia chuckled softly, then returned to gently toying with Subaru’s face. She apparently had no intention of moving the sleeping Subaru and freeing her legs. Rem interpreted Emilia’s attitude this way and quietly looked down at Subaru. As he slept innocently, all tension and flippancy had vanished from his expression. For some reason, when he interacted with Rem and her sister, he always displayed a subtle tension before he even smiled. Sensing something significant in that attitude, Rem had even considered strengthening her surveillance.

"Seeing him sleep like this, I lose the desire to do so."

Following Emilia's example, Rem lightly parted his bangs with her finger and murmured. He looked as vulnerable as an infant. His appearance, as if ignorant of the world, was almost pitiful, and Rem's lips curved into the barest hint of a smile.

"I will inform my sister that Subaru is useless today. We'll have to reallocate the work."

Rem bowed, politely stated her intention, and turned her back. She headed towards her sister's location. If she closed her eyes, she would immediately sense her sister's whereabouts. She intended to go straight there and deliver her message as she had just said. From behind her,

"Rem."

She stopped walking at the call and slowly turned her whole body around. There was a significant difference in eye level between her and Emilia, who was sitting on the floor. Yet, Rem felt an inexplicable sense of pressure, as if Emilia was looking down on her. Unaware of Rem's slight surprise, Emilia softly said,

"—Subaru is a good boy, you know?"

Rem responded to the declaration with a deep bow. Then, without another glance, she headed for the door and left the guest room, leaving the two behind. She walked down the hallway, pondering Emilia's words. A faint tremor ran across Rem's expressionless face, unnoticed even by herself.

—Only a faint scent of evil lingered, leaving a slight knot in Rem's heart.

Chapter 32:
I Cried and Screamed and Will Cry No More

1

“Falling into a peaceful sleep on a girl’s lap, with my head being stroked… Looked at on its own, that was a truly exquisite event, I guess.”

Subaru scratched his head, mumbling with an abashed expression. He lowered his eyes, repeatedly stifling sighs, and as he ran his hand through his hair faster, his ears turning red, he continued,

“Crying and whining like a baby, blubbering all my complaints, getting my face completely messed up with tears and snot, and then falling asleep on the lap of the girl I’m crushing on. On top of that, hogging her lap for hours in that state… what kind of humiliation play is this, seriously?”

He recalled the feeling of Emilia’s lap and the terrible state of her lap after several hours of Subaru’s deep sleep. It was a dreadful mess of tears, drool, snot, and other fluids, a condition that was inexcusable both hygienically and purely from the perspective of Subaru’s “boy factor.”

Yet, she hadn’t spontaneously tried to wake him until he awoke, and despite her clothes being soiled like that, she didn’t blame Subaru when he woke up and profusely apologized.

“If you were able to rest even a little, that’s enough. Besides, Subaru, you don’t understand.”

“Huh?”

“Instead of saying ‘I’m sorry’ over and over, when it’s like this, saying ‘thank you’ just once is enough to satisfy the other person. I didn’t do it because I wanted an apology; I did it because I wanted to do it for you.”

Who wouldn't be swayed if a finger was placed on their lips to stop their apology, and then they were told that with one eye closed? No one, that's who. In fact, Subaru was instantly and completely won over. He was already head over heels for her anyway, so this was just the final, overwhelming push.

He parted ways with Emilia, who said she was going to change, and wandered around the mansion for a while in a daze, then came back to his senses in this sorry state. Looking back at his actions today, he wanted to cry at how pathetic he was. But after crying so much, he couldn't shed any more tears now.

"No, I'm really not good. What was that about not wanting Emilia-tan to see my weak side? I just showed her the most embarrassing part of me! How am I ever going to face her again?"

"…Entering someone's room late at night, and that's what you have to say, I suppose? I thought it was peaceful since I hadn't seen you all day, but this is an unwanted disaster, in fact."

Beatrice, perched on the middle rung of a stepladder, grumbled, glancing sideways at Subaru writhing near the entrance.

After wandering around the mansion and concluding that he couldn't possibly face anyone while sober, Subaru had headed to this forbidden small room, unreachable by anyone else. Although, for the young lady who was its master, it was likely quite displeasing. However, that wasn't the only reason he came here.

"Don't say that, Beako. We're buddies, aren't we?"

"What kind of relationship is there between Betty and you… wait, in fact. Before that, what did you just call Betty, I suppose?"

Beatrice asked, raising an eyebrow and her cheek twitching. Subaru clapped his hands at her reaction.

"Ah, 'Beako.' Nicknames are for people you feel a certain level of intimacy with. I think it's necessary. Up until now, you were the only one in the mansion I didn't feel that way about, but…"

He recalled the previous loop, the time when he was steeped in despair. Even if it wasn't a situation where she was swayed by his smooth talk, a contract had certainly been made between them. Beatrice had faithfully kept her word, and she even helped Subaru by deliberately vagueing the terms of the contract. Even if she had forgotten it, he couldn't possibly forget how he felt saved back then. That's why,

"No matter what you think of me, I'll call you Beako. That's the most I can do to show my affection for you—!"

"Betty's not happy at all, in fact! What is this pushy goodwill?! It's not just gross, it makes Betty feel sick, in fact!"

"What's with your tone?! I'm seriously trying to express my heartfelt gratitude, this isn't a time to make fun of me!"

"If you can say you weren't joking after reflecting on what you just said, then what's happening between you and Betty isn't a conversation anymore, it's something else that feels like a conversation, in fact!"

Subaru, who thought he was trying to have a back-and-forth conversation, was told he was playing Kabaddi instead and stammered. It was his way of showing affection, but unfortunately, it didn't seem to resonate with her. He was genuinely disappointed and couldn't help but slump.

"Well, even so, I'm still going to keep calling you Beako."

"That's unnecessary persistence, in fact. Then Betty will absolutely not respond to such a name, I suppose. With that, our opinions align, in fact."

"Don't be so cold, Beako."

"…………"

Despite Subaru's call, Beatrice remained silent, her gaze fixed on her book. It seemed she intended to put her earlier statement into practice. Approaching her stubborn figure, Subaru circled around the stepladder.

"Beako, Beako, Beako, Beako, Beako, Beako, Beako, Beako, Beako…"

"—You're uniquely annoying, in fact! What is it, I suppose?!"

He chanted her name like playing Kabaddi. Beatrice's emotions, constantly whispered into her ear, reached their boiling point, and Subaru pumped his fist, having achieved his goal. Then he turned back to her, and with a twisted grin at the still fuming girl, he said,

"I'm cornered and out of options. Frankly, I need your help."

—He pathetically cried and fell into a disgraceful disarray, and in the end, he conveyed the conclusion he'd reached to the vertically-coiled-haired girl.

2

After pouring out his inner turmoil on Emilia's lap, and letting all the pent-up, ugly feelings and uncontrollable tears flow out, what remained within Subaru was his own pure greed.

He loved Emilia. He loved life in the mansion with her. He loved the environment where he could learn so many things. He loved Ram, who, despite her bluntness, took care of him in many ways.

He absolutely loved Emilia. He loved Rem, who subtly insulted him with polite language while guiding him. Emilia-tan was truly an angel. He owed a debt of gratitude to Roswaal for providing this paradise-like situation. He now also owed Beatrice a debt he could never repay. He held an unshakable fondness for the people living in this mansion. He couldn't discard the happiness of being there himself.

Feelings welled up so much they choked him. The indelible memories of happiness were the source of his vitality. But as he thought of that—

He loved Emilia. He felt useless for not having the power to protect her. Life in the mansion was relentlessly stressful. He didn't know when he might be abandoned. Ram, who had severed his leg with a blade of wind and pierced his neck, was terrifying. Rem, who repeatedly tortured him even while healing his wounds, and crushed his skull with an iron flail, was horrifying. The unfathomable madness of Roswaal, who employed these two and likely could give the order to ruthlessly exterminate Subaru, was sickening. The constant need to check if he was still alive upon waking, and to confirm that despair wasn't creeping in, was excruciatingly painful and sad.

That, too, was the undeniable truth within Subaru. Conflicting emotions couldn't tolerate each other's existence, and Subaru spent his time struggling to live, holding them within him, on the surface and deep inside. It was as if he had to walk barefoot on thin ice, constantly smiling without showing even a hint of his soles being peeled away.

Emilia had seen and scooped up Subaru's agony, his miserable torment of resisting despair.

Perhaps Puck had noticed it. A spirit who could read minds would have easily seen through Subaru's clumsy mask. But even so, it was Emilia who comforted Subaru's heart, a heart that was on the verge of breaking.

He didn't care if this was dependence. There was not an ounce of doubt that the driving force behind Subaru's heart now was his feelings for her. Yes, in other words—

"Emilia-tan is truly an archangel!"

"Did you just utter something intensely idiotic, I suppose?"

"Of course not. I just reconfirmed the most important thing to me."

He could answer that with confident pride, puffing out his chest. And having his statement completely affirmed, Beatrice sighed, as if too weary to even bother showing exasperation.

"Let's get back to the point, in fact… Well then, about you asking for Betty's help, I suppose."

"Yeah, it's seriously like a prayer to God. I can't think of anyone else to cling to."

Currently, the only person in this mansion Subaru could fully trust was, of course, Emilia. But her existence was also the most crucial factor for Subaru. In short, he didn't want her to be in danger.

For Subaru, who prioritized his own life above all else, her existence was the only thing truly comparable to his life. Therefore, in this loop, with the confrontation with the sorcerer in mind, he wanted to avoid using her help until the very last moment. That naturally made it difficult to borrow the power of Puck, who was always by her side, leaving him with only one remaining option—

"Somehow, you're actually quite sweet, you easy-to-sway Beako."

"Even if Betty doesn't understand the content, she can sense the insulting atmosphere, in fact?"

"I have absolutely no intention of that… Honestly, you're the only one I can rely on in this mansion right now."

He couldn't confide in Ram or Rem, nor of course in Roswaal. If Subaru could rely on anyone in this mansion besides Emilia, it was her.

"Please. —I'm begging you."

So, Subaru knelt on the floor before her and bowed his head, making his plea. For her cooperation. To become a guiding light for Subaru's path, to bring an end to the repeating chain of despair.

"I need your power. All of it, everything. I want to protect the place where I can be happy."

"…"

As he remained bowed, a silence fell between them. While waiting for a reply, Subaru's heart hammered anxiously against his chest. But as the prolonged silence stretched on, the sound gradually faded, and Subaru, feeling suspicious, lifted his gaze slightly. And then,

"…Beatrice?"

He unintentionally called her by her name, forgetting their previous exchange. Her expression, as she stared at Subaru, was filled with such sorrow that it made him do so. Her brows slightly furrowed, her lip bitten, Beatrice glared at Subaru. But to Subaru, it looked like a face that was about to burst into tears.

He held his breath, silently waiting for her next reaction. Beatrice then took a moment to compose the waves of emotion within herself, and quietly, with her eyes closed, she replied,

"…Betty has no reason to grant your request, in fact."

She said it weakly.

"Beako… I…"

"Silence, I suppose, human. Betty won't always be kind, in fact. If you're getting ahead of yourself, Betty won't forgive it, I suppose."

Beatrice interrupted Subaru, rattling off her words quickly. Subaru was silenced by her overly sensitive reaction, surprised and bewildered as to what he had said earlier had struck a nerve.

That, in turn, must have strengthened her already uncooperative stubbornness, leading to this deterioration of the situation. He had intended to express his sincerity, but it had backfired. It was a result he regretted endlessly, but Subaru no longer possessed the delicate mental fortitude to dwell on it. Something backfiring was already a common occurrence in this situation. How many times could he remember the dice landing favorably in these five repeated worlds? Thinking that, he could crush any lingering, weak heart. In the first place, that weak part of himself that might have made him stop, he'd already flushed it all out with snot and drool on Emilia's lap. He decided he hadn't shed any tears. A man who cries on a girl's lap, let alone in front of her, is the worst kind of man. He had his pride; he was a man, after all.

"Listen, Beatrice. I understand why you want to push me away. From your perspective, I'm just some rude, inexplicable guy who was brought in yesterday."

"If you understand that much, then you should understand Betty's answer too, in fact."

"I'm grateful you healed my stomach wound. You might not know it, but I have so much to thank you for, and on top of that, I still can't manage without relying on you. It's pathetic. It's utterly miserable. But you're the only one."

He rattled off every thought that surfaced, one after another. He was aware that his persistent demands were selfish and showed no consideration for her feelings, yet Subaru continued to bow his head. Looking down at Subaru's incoherent words and his bowed head, Beatrice gave a small snort, as usual.

"Lamenting your lack of power, pathetically groveling on the ground, begging and clinging. Do you have no pride, I suppose?"

"I've clearly seen what's important. If smashing my head on the ground ten or a hundred times is enough, I'll do it as many times as it takes."

He didn't possess a petty pride that clung to his own insignificance. Keeping his head bowed, Subaru maintained his posture of earnest supplication. He knew it was a cowardly tactic. In the five repeated worlds, Subaru had met Beatrice countless times, and they had argued each time. That relationship, forged through constant bickering, allowed him to understand. Even if Beatrice outwardly adopted a cold demeanor—

"Raise your head, in fact."

A somewhat resigned, gentle voice reached his ears, and Subaru believed his humble plea had been heard. He again realized his own insignificance and felt a blush of shame at his insincere attempt to feign sincerity. However, it was also a necessary step. He had to be pragmatic. More than anything, he had to resolve to use every means at his disposal to achieve the future he desired—

"Bea—"

"Take this, I suppose!"

"Blagh!"

Just as he solidified that tragic resolve, something hard suddenly and forcefully struck his face. His head, still in a dogeza bow, snapped backward, and an indescribable sound echoed through the Forbidden Library, followed by an inarticulate scream. Subaru writhed, bent backward like a shrimp. Unable to comprehend the damage to his cervical spine, he thrashed, his gaze wandering until it locked with Beatrice, who stood with her arms crossed and one foot raised. Understanding dawned. The young girl had delivered a merciless "yakuza kick" squarely to Subaru's face, still bowed in a dogeza.

"You—this—!"

"Betty cannot comprehend the shallow notion that a hundred of your heads rolling around would be worth Betty's effort, in fact. No matter how many copper coins you collect, they will never reach a single Holy Gold Coin. Do you know that, I suppose?"

"No, even if you collect thousands of copper coins, they'd reach a Holy Gold Coin. If you're comparing them by value, that's how it is, right? Are you okay with math?"

"Stop looking at Betty with those pitying eyes, I suppose! Those aren't the eyes of someone who was just begging Betty for help, in fact?!"

Shrieking loudly, Beatrice and Subaru's war of words began. A back-and-forth that never started for the same reason in their many repeated worlds. As their familiar quarrel continued, the tragic resolve Subaru had held somehow began to seem absurd. After such an exchange, the war of words ultimately concluded with—

"Alright, I'll play my trump card. If you cooperate with me, I'll endure your mana drain a few times."

"Your mana isn't as valuable as you think, in fact? Though it's true that compared to normal mana… it was somehow compatible or had a better taste, I suppose."

“My mana has a track record of being absorbed by Puck too. In other words, it’s indirect mana drain. …You understand what I mean, right?”

Beatrice’s expression changed, and the negotiation ended with her biting her lip in vexation as she nodded to Subaru, who was basking in the superiority of leading the negotiation. Looking back, Subaru thought it had been a rather anticlimactic resolution. Of course, by bringing the conversation to that point, he had reluctantly secured Beatrice’s cooperation.

—He knew that the little magician had arranged things that way, though.

Chapter 33:
The Rays of Hope that he Saw and the Shadow of Unrest

Negotiations with Beatrice, which felt somewhat predetermined, concluded, and Subaru successfully secured her cooperation. It was a result heavily reliant on her goodwill, but he decided to put aside any self-reproach for his lack of ability until later. The objective was achieved; self-reflection could come afterward. There'd be no end to it if he started dwelling on "what ifs" in the middle of everything.

Subaru idly touched his chin, suddenly conscious of the time. The Forbidden Library was completely cut off from the outside world, offering no means to track the passage of time. Not even a crystal clock was present, making him think, as he watched the young librarian, that she lived a remarkably free life in that regard.

Based on the stubble on his chin, he estimated it had been about seventeen hours since he last shaved. It was likely around ten at night. Considering he'd crashed on Emilia's lap sometime after noon, he'd overslept by an outrageous margin. He'd been so adamant about not wasting a second, yet the more he thought about it, the more hopeless it seemed.

Realizing that self-loathing was a bottomless pit, Subaru decided to get straight to the point with Beatrice, who appeared to have reached her limit of displeasure. He wondered how much he could explain without revealing too much. Remaining wary of the black mist, he intended to resolve each of his questions one by one.

"…You want to know more about Curse arts?"

"Yeah. I know there are users of that system, unlike Magicians or spirit arts users, but I don't know anything beyond that."

"You always ask the strangest things, in fact. Knowing about those kinds of people won't benefit you in the slightest, I suppose."

Just as before, when he'd only touched upon the subject, Beatrice's expression wasn't bright as she spoke of Curse arts Users. She'd previously stated that she disliked their approach to mana, but this time, he needed to delve deeper.

"Basically, isn't it a system that can only be used to cause trouble for others? I heard it was popular in the northern countries or something like that."

"If you know that much, you don't really need to ask, I suppose. Curse arts users are a nasty bunch, bringing illness to their targets with curses, or imposing restrictions that forbid certain actions, or simply reaping their lives, in fact…"

"Well, it's true that things depend on how you use them, but if it's that biased, you really can't find any use for it other than messing with people."

That's all curse arts was: curses. Supernatural powers that harm others are perhaps a vice that can arise in any culture or society. Though, he thought, the fact that they actually have the power to affect others was probably unique to this world.

Even "Ushi no Toki Mairi" (Ox-Hour Shrine Visit), in a way, fell into the realm of curse arts. Thinking such thoughts, Subaru leaned forward, trying to get the tight-lipped Beatrice to speak.

"Alright, so I want to ask… how do you protect yourself from a curse?"

Intercepting a curse arts user was difficult unless you knew their true identity. However, Subaru's advantage in this situation was knowing that an attack would occur. Even if he didn't know the Witch's identity, he knew they would use Witchcraft, so devising a way to defend against it was a logical and reasonable approach. A brilliant idea, if he did say so himself.

However,

"You can't, in fact."

"—Huh?"

"There's no way to prevent a curse arts once it's been activated, in fact. It will never disappear until it exerts its full power and fulfills its curse on the target, I suppose."

"Is that even allowed? Instant death resistance nullification…?"

Beatrice's flat declaration almost broke Subaru's spirit. A surprise attack with an instant death resistance nullification spell—just thinking about it brought a mountain of criticism as a combat condition.

"A chant simultaneously with the start of combat. I have no means to resist, so this is a checkmate. It's checkmate, I tell you! This is a terrible game!"

He tore at his hair, re-realizing the grimness of his situation. The faint glimmer of hope he'd had moments ago shattered into a million pieces, and Subaru's mind boiled, desperately searching for another solution. His face was like Baron Ashura, one half blue with despair, the other red with defiance. To such a Subaru, Beatrice said,

"However, that only applies to activated curse arts, in fact."

She said, loosening her lips as if revealing a trick. Subaru let out a breathless "Huh?" and looked up, seeing Beatrice's smug expression. Though the girl's face suggested she'd perfectly duped him, Subaru's heart was completely frozen. The immense temperature difference that had just occurred made Beatrice's eyes flutter slightly.

"…I don't think you need to be so angry, in fact."

"Me. Serious. Next. None."

He managed to reply in broken words, killing his emotions. Inside, he was raging with insults and abuse for Beatrice, but he wanted to avoid a confrontation with her right now. After all, a glimmer of hope was finally appearing.

Beatrice held up a finger as if giving a lecture, and said, "As I said, there's no way to prevent an activated curse arts, I suppose. However, you can interfere with the curse before it's activated, in fact. Before activation, it's merely a ritual, not curse arts, so any entity with a certain level of skill can easily dispel it, I suppose."

"For example?"

"In this mansion, first there's Betty. Of course, Big Bro. Then Roswaal and… the three little girls might not be able to, I suppose. Oh, you can't either."

"I know that firsthand…"

He was greatly indebted to her the first and second times. Putting that aside, Subaru pressed Beatrice further.

"How do you distinguish a ritual before it's activated? Or rather, does curse arts require preparation before it's cast?"

"Of course, in fact. The stronger the ritual you handle, the heavier the burden on you. It's the same with everything, I suppose. Curse arts especially has a strong aspect of that, in fact. Considering its effect on people, it's a natural price, I suppose."

"Can you… guess the price of that curse arts?"

With a desperate hope, Beatrice closed one eye, pondered for a moment, then licked her lips.

"The content changes depending on what kind of curse arts effect it has, in fact. But there's one rule that can never be broken, I suppose."

"A rule that can't be broken…"

Subaru held his breath, urging Beatrice to continue after she paused. In response to Subaru's pleading gaze, Beatrice lightly tucked her chin.

"—Contact with the target of the curse arts. That's an essential condition, in fact."

She declared.

The moment that information registered, Subaru's mind raced. To perform curse arts, contact between the caster and the target was necessary. This meant that in both the first and second loops, Subaru himself had faced the curse arts user. He tried to search his memory and recall that person.

"Excluding the mansion residents…"

Excluding the residents who could be targets of curse arts, Subaru recalled the first eight days. During that time, he lived as a servant in the mansion and should have had almost no contact with anyone outside the mansion. The external presence Subaru could have possibly contacted during that time was—

"—The village at the foot of the mountain."

In both the first and second loops, Subaru had visited that village. And come to think of it, both times he went to the village were during the crucial daytime hours of the fourth day. The pattern of him being cursed by a Witch in the village, returning to the mansion, and the curse arts activating—leading to his death—flashed through his mind.

If a curse arts user was staying in the village, it would explain why Rem became the target of curse arts in the fourth loop. In that loop, she went to the village and was chosen as the curse arts user's target. In some cases, it might have been Ram, and if Subaru had carelessly gone to the village, it probably would have been him.

It connects. It connects. Everything connected.

"Beako. Do you know how many residents live in the closest village to this mansion?"

Beatrice frowned, taken aback by the sudden change of topic. But perhaps because Subaru's expression was so serious, she didn't point it out. Instead, she shook her head.

"I don't know, in fact. I'm sorry, but Betty doesn't have much knowledge even about the mansion, let alone anything outside the

Forbidden Library, I suppose."

"I see. No, it's fine. That's asking too much. Besides, I can just ask Roswaal about that much… And then…"

Was the curse arts user among the residents, or were they a temporary visitor? If it was the latter, finding them wouldn't be too difficult. He could simply ask the villagers and expose the caster. Conversely, if it was the former, identifying them would be incredibly difficult. If they had prepared that meticulously, he'd be at a loss, but—

"That possibility is actually slim."

If he assumed this incident was related to the Royal Selection, the royal family's demise due to the epidemic was only about half a year ago. Including the time it took for Emilia to be named a royal candidate and for the Royal Selection framework to be established, the current situation should be a fresh, chaotic mess that had only unfolded in the past three or four months. He didn't think anyone would have the foresight to hide a curse arts user among the villagers beforehand. If there were, they would either be a prophet or would have "known about the Royal Selection beforehand."

Considering that,

"The curse arts user is an outsider. Finding them wouldn't that difficult…!"

As he spoke, Subaru began to search for holes in his own reasoning. While there were a few points to refine, the general theory wasn't bad. Besides, from the curse arts user's perspective, this was before any action had been taken. Only a god or a devil could know that their presence had already been exposed at this point.

He looked up, searching for a clock, but there was none. He clicked his tongue, but then recalled his stubble timer from earlier and savored the fact that it was still "the night of the second day." Compared to the fourth day, when the situation began to turn for the worse, he still had a full day's leeway. That also meant he could launch a surprise attack on the Witch from his side.

"I've got a lead, you bastard…! I haven't been killed once and almost killed once for nothing, you damn jerk!"

A ray of light appeared. The situation was changing. Despair was parting, and hope seemed to be streaming in from the other side. Subaru instinctively clenched his fist, his voice trembling with joy.

As Subaru rejoiced in the turn of events, Beatrice, who had been left behind, looked displeased. Her adorable cheeks flushed red, and she pouted her lips, expressing her displeasure.

"Asking for my cooperation and then acting like that is truly outrageous, I suppose. If what I said was helpful, don't you have something to tell Betty, in fact?"

"Oh, right! You saved me! Thanks to you, I've found a light! I super love you, Beako!"

"Wha—?!"

Subaru leaped, scooped his hands under her armpits, and lifted her light body above his head, spinning her around. Despite wearing a luxurious dress, the girl's body was as light as a feather. Subaru's mood was also soaring, and that synergy doubled the spinning speed, and then some.

"Let… let me down, I suppose!"

"Hahaha, I feel like I could fly right now! No, let's fly together, Beako?! I can fly! You can fly!"

"Don't get carried away, in fact—!"

"Jump Pro?!"

Magical power erupted from directly above him at close range, hitting him squarely and slamming him to the ground in an incomprehensible posture. The impact entered his head, traveled through his body, and exited straight from his backside. He landed on his rear, his head spinning from the turbulent rush of mana within him. Meanwhile, Beatrice, freed from Subaru's grip, drew a beautiful arc with her small body and flew.

However, just as it seemed the girl would crash wherever she was headed, she abruptly stopped mid-air. She gracefully turned her body, her skirt fluttering, and landed lightly on the library floor with an elegant stillness. She looked down at Subaru, who was still shaking his head miserably on the ground, and with her usual demeanor, snorted.

"That's what you get for acting so familiar and getting carried away, I suppose."

"I saw more than just that though. —It was white."

"—?! Take this, I suppose!"

"D'OH?!"

A second shot blasted Subaru's chin, sending him flying deeper into the library. He tumbled, crashed into a step ladder, and was buried under falling wooden planks. Sharp corners hit him everywhere, and with tears in his eyes from the unbearable pain, he cried out,

"My affection gauge was maxed out and you hit me with a super move for this?! What was your problem, tell me!"

"Everything, I suppose! You hugged me, lifted me like a child, swung me around, peeked at my underwear, and spouted superficial words of love, in fact! At this point, your very existence annoys me, I suppose!"

"Don't deny my entire existence, that's sad! It reminds me of my shut-in days, even though it wasn't that long ago."

His shut-in days felt like a distant past. Indeed, it felt like he had come so far, a distance that could no longer be calculated. He wondered if everyone was doing well. Anyway,

"Now that I've come full circle and calmed down, the situation has improved quite a bit. …Tonight's tough, but tomorrow, I'll head to the village and…"

He decided to investigate the curse arts user's identity. He probably couldn't go alone, so he'd have to go with either Ram or Rem. And if a confrontation with the curse arts user was possible there, having the two strong fighters accompany him seemed essential. If all went well, he'd defeat the curse arts user, and if, by some chance, it turned out that Subaru had no prior connection to the Witch, then everything would end happily. This would be the completion of Mission 2: "Conquer the Roswaal Mansion."

"Mission 2 was seriously so much harder than Mission 1."

He remembered Mission 1 was "Defeat the Thugs," so he really had come a long way when he thought about it.

Recalling the battle with the thugs, which now felt like a long time ago, he then reflected on his days in the mansion. He knew it was too early, but a dead end where he couldn't do anything was finally about to open up. He hoped he could be forgiven for feeling this excited.

He didn't neglect to check his surroundings, wondering if there was anything else he needed to resolve. Precisely because the situation was turning for the better, he suspected there might be a pitfall. It was the caution of a timid person, but then a word suddenly caught in that web of vigilance. It was, “The Witch’s… lingering scent…”

“What is it, I suppose?”

“That’s right. The Witch. Rem too…”

Just a single word, and countless scenes flooded his memory. The word “Witch” had appeared frequently in those scenes, but Subaru still lacked knowledge of its true meaning. The Witch Subaru knew in this world was merely a very short episode in a fairy tale called “The Witch of Envy.”

However, if he recalled, that name had appeared several times, both during the loop on the first day of his summoning and during the repetitions in the mansion this time.

Subaru looked up at Beatrice, who frowned in bewilderment. He felt a slight anxiety about whether she would answer. After all, the last time he’d mentioned it, Ram had flatly cut him off, and Rem had even used it as a motive to attack him. Even Emilia seemed to have a strong resistance to it. Therefore, carrying that anxiety,

“Beako. —Do you know about Witches?”

“…”

There was no immediate answer to his question. Beatrice closed her eyes at the word that had vibrated her eardrums, and fell silent as if confirming the word. Subaru, too, waited, his heart churning from her reaction.

He wondered if, by some chance, that one word had again touched a raw nerve.

“The one who swallowed the world. The queen of the Shadow Castle. —The Witch of Envy.”

Subaru gasped and his eyes widened at the suddenly whispered words. Without noticing Subaru’s reaction, Beatrice let out a melancholic sigh.

“In this world, the word ‘Witch’ refers to only one being, in fact. I’s a being whose name is forbidden to even speak, I suppose."

"Everyone fears her, everyone reveres her, and no one can defy her."

"Yes, that's right, in fact. Rather, the question 'Do you know?' is the more puzzling one, in fact. You couldn't possibly not know, I suppose. In this world, after your parents' names and your family's name, you're taught the name of that Witch, in fact."

"That's… an exaggeration…"

He tried to laugh it off, but seeing no hint of a joke in Beatrice's expression, he swallowed his words. If what she said wasn't a joke, then she was truly a symbol of abomination to the world—.

"The Witch of Envy, 'Satella.' —The worst calamity that once existed, who devoured all six Witches bearing the names of deadly sins and destroyed half the world, in fact."

Beatrice stated in a voice devoid of emotion, then closed her eyes. Subaru let out a short "Huh" at the familiar name, rendered motionless by the weight of the name that had been thrust upon him.

"It's said she ruled the night. It's said she couldn't understand human words. It's said she envied everything in this world. It's said no one who saw her face survived. It's said her body will never decay, never weaken, never end. It's said that even with the power of the Dragon, the Hero, and the Sage, she was sealed but could not be destroyed."

Beatrice rattled off these details, not allowing Subaru to interject. And to conclude the list of information, she added a final "It's said."

"—Her body was that of a silver-haired half-elf."

Chapter 34:
The Witch, the Spirit, and the Mage

The Witch of Envy, Satella.

A supernatural being, once purging the Witches that made the world scream, she wielded their stolen power to obliterate half the world, striking fear into the hearts of all. Her body, sealed within a crystal by a hero's hand, remains imprisoned to this day, impossible to destroy.

Subaru, with his modern sensibilities, found it all absurd. It was an impossible tale by the standards of his original world. While stories of her evil deeds being passed down for centuries might be one thing, the idea that such a being still slumbered somewhere in the world was another.

"Well, it's an age where people know the most popular idol group member even if they don't know the president's name, so I guess I can't really rely on that."

Subaru himself was a prime example of someone who lived a typically bland and unenthusiastic life, uninterested in either.

As he mused, Subaru replayed the details Beatrice had shared, then leaned his cheek on his hand and looked next to him. In the sunlit garden, faint lights floated around Emilia, who sat on the green grass.

It was one of the most beautiful sights in this world, its fantastical impression undiminished no matter how many times he saw it—Emilia's morning routine.

To avoid disturbing her, Subaru scratched his head a little distance away, stifling a rising yawn and letting out a sigh in his butler's uniform.

A night had passed since his meeting with Beatrice in the Forbidden Library, and now it was the morning of the third day. For Subaru, who had spent most of yesterday sleeping, his physical condition was still excellent. He had a mountain of questions he wanted to ask Beatrice from midnight to dawn, but,

“It’s bad for your skin, so go to bed now, in fact. Besides, you made me stay up so late tonight because of you, I suppose.”

The girl, veins throbbing in anger, had chased him out of the library. Thinking back, she was always in that room, but where did she sleep? Aside from the bookshelves, there was Beatrice’s usual stepladder and the desk Subaru occasionally sat at. There was nothing else notable in the room. It was impossible for her to sleep directly on the floor, given her personality.

“Does she have a room or something? I’ve never seen her come out of one though. Not that I’m expecting any pervy coincidences with a little girl like her.”

It would be annoying if she was keeping secrets. He decided that if he got the chance, he would secretly follow Beatrice for a day. That is, once he got out of this loop and life in the mansion became peaceful.

—With another reason to strive forward, Subaru’s lips curved into a smile. Just then,

“You’ve gotten quite a good look on your face, don’t you.”

A voice spoke, and a gray furball appeared before his eyes as he looked up. Or rather, a small cat with a pink nose floated there. It was Puck. He washed his face with his small paws, just like a normal cat would.

“Honestly, I couldn’t bear to watch you yesterday. I’m a little relieved now.”

“Oh, sorry for making you worry. But my sensitive heart still hasn’t recovered at all. I want you to comfort it. Specifically, fluff fluff fluff fluff.”

“Well, that much bravado is fine, I suppose. I’m glad. It means Lia lending you her lap was worth it.”

“By any chance, were you watching that lap pillow too?”

“Well, it went on for so long. I figured it would be tough to sit seiza for hours, so I offered to switch a few times… but you can rest assured. Lia didn’t give up her duty until the end.”

Subaru’s cheeks flushed with shame at Puck’s endorsement. Seeing his reaction, Puck said,

“Hah!”

“Ow—?! Why did you scratch me just now?!”

“As a mother, I found it heartwarming, but as a father, I felt an indescribable discomfort towards you.”

“Are you swaying between a woman’s heart and a man’s heart? You’re complicated too!”

“It’s tough when you have a cute daughter. Oh, so please, move a little further away from Lia, see?”

“He’s resorting to obvious obstruction tactics! This distance is my absolute line! Doesn’t the feeling of being just out of reach have a subtle charm? Please, I beg you!”

Subaru bowed deeply, somehow gaining permission to maintain the status quo. Then, he looked towards Emilia again. She seemed engrossed in conversation with the spirits and apparently hadn’t noticed the exchange between one person and one cat that was shattering the morning’s tranquility. As he watched her serene profile, occasionally breathtakingly beautiful when she smiled, Subaru suddenly murmured under his breath.

“—A silver-haired half-elf, huh?”

That was one of the Witch of Envy’s characteristics, as Beatrice had described. The Witch who shook the world and struck fear into everyone’s hearts, her origins. Subaru, unfamiliar with such a burden in his own life, couldn’t imagine how difficult it must be to share that commonality. But he could infer that it surely wasn’t an easy path.

Yet, despite all that, she had grown up with such an honest and straightforward personality. The way she lived, like a delicate flower, was probably because,

“She was either incredibly blessed by her surroundings. Or perhaps…”

“Because her adoptive parent was good, I suppose. Hehehe.”

Puck put his paws on his hips, leaned back, and chuckled while touching his whiskers. He was an emotional cat. Combining this with Subaru’s mumbled thoughts, Puck must have clearly understood what Subaru was thinking.

As Subaru closed his mouth, having been preempted, Puck began spinning vertically in mid-air.

“Well, her innate nature is a big part of it, I suppose. I don’t intend to tell you everything, but she’s suffered ten thousand times more than you imagine. —Even so, she’s like that, which makes her precious.”

Not a single rebuttal came to mind. It was true that Subaru didn’t know anything about Emilia’s past, and Puck had shared those unknown days with her. And Subaru’s imagination, limited by that of a person who had always lived in comfort, was easily surpassed by reality. People became so helpless when toyed with by fate. Subaru had keenly felt that many times since coming to this world, and Emilia must have experienced it countless times as well.

“Hey, Puck, do you know about the Witch of Envy?”

“I suppose there isn’t much I don’t know.”

“Then, I want to ask… When would someone pretend to be the Witch of Envy? No, ‘pretend’ sounds bad. Should I say, ‘borrow the name of the Witch of Envy’?”

What came to mind was the event from the very first loop, on the day he was summoned. He thought back to that very first incident. At that time, Emilia had falsely introduced herself as “Satella” to the ignorant Subaru. He had a vague idea of her true intention there, but Subaru wanted someone else to confirm it. Even better if it was her closest confidant.

Puck, who had been silent for a while, not understanding the intent of Subaru's question, slowly opened his mouth.

"Either way, I think it's a reckless thing to do. There's no end to people who still hold grudges against the Witch, and the fear and despair etched into their hearts will never disappear. To pretend to be the Witch in such a situation can only be described as crazy."

"Got it."

"?"

Puck raised a questioning eyebrow as Subaru pointed a finger at him. Leaving Puck behind, Subaru clenched his fist mentally, having received an opinion from Puck that affirmed his own theory. Yes, at that point, pretending to be the Witch was something that would naturally be seen as insane. It only didn't happen that way because Subaru was extraordinarily ignorant of common sense, but normally, that's what would happen. So why did Emilia give that name, knowing what would happen?

"If she acted crazy and made me uncomfortable, she wouldn't have to involve me in dangerous things like finding the insignia."

He thought she must have wanted to push him away. Emilia's intention, as she had acted, was now lost to another dimension, and only Subaru knew about that exchange. And Subaru would never have the chance to ask her true intentions. However, that was the only way he could think about it. And if he thought that way, Subaru had received enough from her to believe it was the conclusion. In short,

"Emilia-tan is truly like Maitreya Bodhisattva!"

"Don't compare people to things you don't understand well."

As Subaru, convinced of Emilia's maternal kindness across dimensions, the person herself approached with a wry smile. Having finished her conversation with the spirits, the faint lights that had floated around her were gone. Instead, Puck, who had been swimming beside Subaru until now, hopped onto her shoulder.

“Back to my usual spot. This is the most comfortable place after all.”

“Yes, yes, welcome back. I’m always sorry. But when Puck’s around, the other spirits get intimidated.”

“Intimidating spirits is beyond awesome, it’s amazing. It makes it seem like I’m important, which is a misunderstanding.”

“Hehehe, I am important, even if I don’t look it. I demand more reverence! Specifically, how about dried sardines as an offering?”

“You’re totally a cat…”

Puck started shaking his head in a peek-a-boo style. Emilia stroked his gray head with her finger, then turned to face Subaru again. When he became aware of her beauty directly in front of him, Subaru found himself almost involuntarily averting his gaze.

He felt awkward, of course. After all, he’d had a lap pillow, cried his eyes out, had his head stroked for several hours, and then they’d parted. Only one night had passed since then. He truly felt like he wanted to roll around on his bed with a pillow, wondering what kind of face he should make when meeting her again. The fact that he still came to see her showed how serious Subaru’s condition was. He was in a severe state of Emilia addiction. He could no longer live without her.

“Um, it feels a little embarrassing, doesn’t it? …Are you feeling alright?”

“I was having withdrawal symptoms, but I just got rid of them, so I’m perfectly fine. Emilia-tan, yourself… uh, thanks for everything, I’m sorr—”

He started to apologize, then stammered, swallowed his words, and rephrased.

“Thank you for everything. My head and heart were a murky labyrinth, but I think I'm feeling a little better now."

"It doesn't seem like you've completely shaken it off, but it's progress that you're even thinking about shaking it off. Yes, if I could help even a little, that's fine. If you feel like you're wearing thin again, just tell me. Your big sister will be kind to you."

Emilia put her hand on her chest and chuckled, teasing him. That, too, was probably her thoughtfulness to lighten his guilt. Seeing her face, which looked genuinely happy about acting older, made him wonder if she actually meant it, and his thoughts wavered slightly. Anyway,

"Being well is the most important thing. You have to work hard today, right? You slept at a strange time, but aren't you sleepy?"

"Don't worry about that. Shut-ins like me generally sleep during the day and are awake at night. I've been a bit too healthy lately."

"You say 'shut-in' sometimes, but what is that?"

"It's about a brave person who burns charcoal briquettes in their room and gambles on whether a pink-haired magician will jump in to save them."

Honestly, that was the act of people on a whole other spiritual level. Emilia nodded slightly, taken aback by the strangeness of Subaru's words. Watching her reaction, Subaru suddenly realized,

"Speaking of magicians, Emilia-tan, you're one too, aren't you? What kind of magic can Emilia-tan use?"

Asking about what kind of magic someone could use was something that could only happen in another world. Subaru almost chuckled, having uttered such an unexpectedly fantastical question. But Emilia shook her head at his question.

"Strictly speaking, I'm not a magician. In my case, it's not just my contract with Puck, but I'm a spirit arts user. I use spirit arts, not magic. The principles are almost the same though."

"Magicians and spirit arts users are different?"

"What kind of difference is that, sensei?"

He raised his hand and posed a question to Puck, the lecturer. The cat straightened his posture and, clearly pleased, relaxed his cheeks.

"It comes down to whether or not you use a gate, so the difference is quite significant. For a magician, the size and number of gates directly relate to their aptitude as a magician. But for a spirit arts user, that doesn't matter much. They use outside mana regardless of a gate."

"So, magicians draw in mana from outside through a gate, and use the mana stored inside to cast spells. And spirit arts users don't have that, right?"

As he chewed on Puck's explanation, Subaru tilted his head at a question that suddenly arose partway through.

"No, no, then spirit arts users would be overwhelmingly advantageous. In other words, magicians store fuel internally, but spirit users can import as much fuel as they want from outside… unlimited MP means it wouldn't be a fair fight."

"You understand quickly, but it's not that convenient. The mana filling the atmosphere isn't infinite, and…"

Puck cut himself off and looked up at Emilia. Receiving his gaze, she took over the explanation.

"The strength of the arts a spirit arts user can handle depends on the power of the spirit they serve. Besides, contracting with a spirit itself seems to be quite rare, so I don't think one is superior to the other compared to a magician."

"Hmm… But if you contracted with a powerful spirit, that would be pretty good, right? Emilia-tan, isn't Puck actually pretty amazing?"

"Well, I won't deny that I'm one of the ones you'd count from the top."

"You're usually so gentle, but when you speak your mind… you really stick to your guns, huh?"

Subaru had a lot to say about strong egos, but even he was surprised by Puck's unwavering nature. It must be the difference in experience. A greenhorn and a Great Spirit were simply years apart in accumulated wisdom.

Despite that, perhaps unaccustomed to praise, the Great Spirit chuckled bashfully, looking quite pleased. Subaru pointed at him.

"By the way, what kind of spirit are you, Puck? You were spitting out ice like crazy in the loot warehouse… but if I remember correctly, I thought there wasn't even an ice attribute."

During a lecture from Roswaal in the bathhouse some time ago, Subaru had heard about the four standard types: fire, water, earth, and wind. In addition to those, there were only the dreaded yin and yang systems. Responding to Subaru's question was Emilia, who was stroking Puck's head. She turned her right palm upwards.

"It's ice, but this is actually fire mana. Fire mana is mainly related to heat, so both hot and cold are broadly categorized as fire."

The air crackled, and an icicle appeared slightly above her palm. The icicle, about the size of a traffic cone, pointed its sharp tip towards him and began to rotate like a drill.

"You might not mean anything by it, but that's scary?! If I had a phobia of sharp things, I'd pee my pants right now!"

"Ah, sorry. I was just trying to explain it clearly and got carried away… I summoned it, but I don't know what to do with it."

"Thinking of using it as a meaningless threat is dangerous! I prefer the graceful and lovely Emilia-tan!"

"Yes, yes."

Emilia gave a perfunctory affirmation, then clapped her hands, and the icicle dispersed. It didn't melt or shatter; it literally dissipated into a fine powder. It was a strange principle, but its fantastical nature never failed to attract Subaru's curiosity. Perhaps his fidgety excitement showed on his face. Puck, who had been watching the silent Subaru, suddenly asked, “Hmm, perhaps you want to use magic?”

“Can I?! If I can, then! An ultimate annihilation spell…!”

“No, you can’t. You shouldn’t make light of the basics of either magic or spirit arts, I suppose. Magic isn’t built in a day.”

Puck folded his arms, directly striking down Subaru’s surging curiosity. His spirit broken, Subaru slumped his shoulders. Perhaps feeling sorry for him, Puck fiddled with his whiskers and said, “But,”

“I suppose I could let you have a simple experience?”

“Meaning?”

“In short, since you want to use magic, either Betty or Lia can assist you. We’d use the mana inside your body and cast magic through you. For us, it’s just a matter of whether the mana comes from the atmosphere or from you, and the magic itself will come out of your gate. How about it?”

“Hold on, Puck, don’t make promises so easily. It might be dangerous, you know.”

Emilia, his partner, admonished Puck’s tempting offer. She seemed genuinely concerned about the safety of the act, but,

“Sorry, Emilia-tan. I appreciate your concern. I’m super happy about it… but I’m gonna do it!”

Subaru gave Emilia a confident smile, flashing his teeth with a thumbs-up. Emilia blinked several times, unable to hide her surprise at Subaru’s attitude, which completely dismissed any negative thoughts or concerns.

“Wh-Why are you so…?”

“Even when I know it’s dangerous, even when I know the risks, there are times when a man just has to do what he has to do. …If I miss a chance like this, where I might be able to use magic, then there’s no point in being summoned to another world!”

A roar from his soul, clenching his fists. Right now, Subaru was more excited than he'd ever been since coming to this other world. For Subaru, who had only ever received aesthetic benefits from this otherworldly boon, mostly from seeing beautiful people, he couldn't talk about this other world if he missed this chance.

Perhaps realizing that it was useless to oppose Subaru's enthusiasm, Emilia gave in, emphasizing, "I'll stop you immediately if it seems dangerous." Subaru accepted her advice with a good smile and turned back to Puck.

"What should I do first? Do I have to draw a magic circle or sacrifice Beako or something?"

"I'm glad you're getting along with Betty. Right, let's start by checking your attribute, I suppose. We can't start until we know what kind of magic you can use."

Hearing Puck's suggestion, Subaru's cheerful expression instantly clouded over. Puck blinked his black eyes at his obvious reaction, but Subaru waved his hand dismissively.

"My… attribute… is… definitely… 'Fire'… I think?"

"Why are you suddenly speaking in broken sentences?"

Subaru slowly shook his head with a creaking sound, as if it was about to snap, in response to Emilia's question. He didn't want to remember anything beyond that. But Puck, disregarding Subaru's thoughts, flew from Emilia's shoulder and hovered in front of Subaru's face.

"Alright, excuse me."

"Whoa, what is this new sensation?"

He extended his tail, which was as long as his small body, and placed its tip on Subaru's forehead. He was probably checking the mana inside Subaru's body. He thought that before, when he had communicated telepathically with Emilia, they had pressed their foreheads together, but the difference in treatment made him feel envious of the good fortune of having his forehead touched by

Emilia.

“Trying to gloss over it doesn’t change reality… No, wait, let me try to think positively, like myself. Come to think of it, wasn’t Roswaal’s attitude at that time unnatural? Yes, he was jealous of my rare talent as a magician slumbering within me. Oh, shit! Yes, he was jealous of me. That’s why he spouted all sorts of nonsense to try and close off my brilliant path as a magician…”

“That’s rare. You were straight ‘Yin’ attribute.”

“SECOND OPINION—!!”

Subaru despaired at the endorsement from a different person across dimensions. Unless Puck and Roswaal were secretly conspiring on this matter, he had no choice but to believe this result. How likely was it that this laid-back cat, who lived by the motto “My way is my way, others’ ways are others’ ways!”—a phrase his own mother often used—would lie out of jealousy of Subaru’s talent?

“A debuff specialist, huh… I wanted to unleash lightning bolts and blow away armies of ten thousand…”

“Oh, and you have absolutely no talent either. Your gate is small, and only the number of them is slightly better, I suppose? Many of them aren’t fully open, so the ventilation seems poor, too.”

“I know! Shut up! Don’t talk about me like a room with uncleaned window screens! By the way, if you quantify my talent, what would it be like?”

“If you devoted yourself solely to magic training for twenty years, you might become almost first-rate, I suppose.”

“Betting half my life to be less than first-rate… I’m giving up on this path…!”

Emilia looked exasperated at Subaru’s declaration of giving up on his dream, holding back tears. But it couldn’t be helped. The concepts of “effort” and “hard work” were so unwelcome in Subaru’s dictionary that they had claw marks on them. Still, putting that sentiment aside, “I still want to try a magic experience, so please do it. What should I do?”

“It’s the ‘Yin’ attribute, huh—a bit surprising. For simple ‘Yin’ magic, what was there, Lia?”

“For Yin attribute, I thought ‘Shamak’ for blinding people was one… but I’m sorry, I’m not very confident.”

Emilia lamented her lack of ability. In front of her, Puck clapped his paws and said, “Oh, right.”

“Shamak, huh, that’s something rarely used, I suppose. Well, let’s aim to use that for now.”

“Hold on, hold on, hold on. I can’t just go along with it as if it’s obvious. First of all, what kind of spell is Shamak? What if I use it without knowing its effect and some weird power turns me into a frog? In that case, Emilia-tan, please turn me into a prince with a kiss.”

“Am I the only one who feels like the beginning and end of that sentence don’t connect?”

Subaru winced at her scrutinizing gaze. Meanwhile, Puck nodded, agreeing there was some truth to Subaru’s point.

“You’re right. It might be a little scary to use an unknown spell. Well, let me show you. This is Shamak.”

With a flick of his short arm, Puck completed the brief incantation. Suddenly, Subaru’s vision was plunged into darkness. Even after blinking and opening his eyes, his sight remained as dark as if his eyelids were still closed. He let out a small cry of surprise, but even his own voice didn’t reach his ears. The darkness that had appeared completely severed Subaru from his vision and the outside world, sending a sensation akin to dread down his spine.

“Alright, that’s the end.”

“Mom—… wait, huh? Did I come back?”

"You came back. By the way, Subaru. You just called me 'Mom' because you were so anxious, didn't you?"

"I wouldn't do something so unmanly?! That was, you know, like calling your teacher 'Mom' in school, that kind of thing!"

His vision returned, and he breathed a sigh of relief seeing Emilia's beauty and the small cat side by side in front of him. He touched his eyelids, confirming there was no change.

"So that was the blinding spell, Shamak, huh? It's plain, but it seems like it could be quite effective, doesn't it?"

"Not really. Unless the opponent is weaker or of equal strength, it'll just be repelled by pure difference in power and won't last long. If I were to cast it on you, Subaru, I could make you spend your whole life in darkness, though."

"That thought is scary?! I'm confident I'd be groggy if that state lasted just one day, let alone longer!"

Subaru chuckled wryly, subtly clenching his trembling fist behind his back. The memory of the moment everything felt distant, being assailed by a sense of desolation as if left alone in the world, was still fresh. That feeling—the time when he felt utterly alone, with no one on his side—he suddenly recalled it, and his hands trembled.

Biting his tongue in shame, Subaru smiled.

"Anyway, whether it works or not, I can use that spell now, right? I want to try it right away!"

"Alrighty. Well, I'll provide the assistance. Lia, please stay away, as in the unlikely event mana goes wild and Subaru explodes, your clothes would get dirty."

"That's a truly unlikely scenario, isn't it?! That's almost an impossible failure case, right?!"

Puck smiled silently and amiably, while Emilia, with a slightly crestfallen face, said, "Don't push yourself too hard," and actually put some distance between them. In an extremely unsettling atmosphere, the situation began to unfold, leaving Subaru's slightly hesitant mood behind.

Puck settled on the top of Subaru's short black hair, adjusting his position.

"Your head's prickly and uncomfortable to sit on."

"I never thought the day would come when someone would sit on it. I can't even offer you a cushion as hospitality, but make yourself at home."

"Nah, I'm already missing Lia's hair, so I'll finish quickly and go back. So, are you ready?"

Subaru hesitated for just a moment at the question. But then, he slowly nodded, twisting his cheeks into a smile. He was still riddled with anxieties, but he couldn't resist his curiosity.

Receiving Subaru's affirmative answer, Puck also gave a big nod. Suddenly, Subaru felt a sensation of heat throughout his body. It was a feeling distinct from blood circulating—this invisible, raging torrent within his body must be mana. He could feel the energy inside him moving with purpose, transmitted by something from Puck, who was on his head.

"Subaru, try to imagine it. Right now, I'm grasping the flow of mana inside your body and moving it. You need to expel a part of it from your gate, out of your body. It will take shape outside—like the black cloud from earlier."

"Imagine, huh? Leave it to me, I'm good at fantasies."

Subaru slightly misinterpreted Puck's advice, seeking an outlet for the writhing energy within him in his imagination. He envisioned the gate—a portal—in the center of his body. The gate's heavy doors opened, allowing energy to overflow from inside to out. That energy would exit, sublimate into a phenomenon according to Subaru's will—

"Oh, this is troubling. The gate suddenly…"

Just as he reached the final stage, Puck suddenly murmured that. Subaru wasn't given time to ask "What?"

Immediately after—

"Both of you?!"

Emilia screamed, and a few seconds later, an explosively ejected black mist covered a corner of the Roswaal Mansion's garden.

—Although it didn't explode, it was a complete failure.

Chapter 35:
A Pledge of Purchased Goods

1

Subaru was left alone in the darkness.

Darkness covered his entire field of vision. He couldn't hear a sound, nor could he see anyone. Even if he reached out to touch, he couldn't discern if it was the ground or a wall—a forced incomprehension permeated everything.

Unconsciously, he felt his throat tremble as he let out a scream.

He just kept raising his voice, hoping it would reach the distant, distant end of nothingness.

"—ru."

Suddenly, a voice echoed from beyond the darkness.

He clung to this change, born within the 'nothingness,' as if pouncing on it.

He clawed with his hands, moved his legs, and headed toward the voice.

"Subaru—"

Forward, always forward—!!

2

"To get straight to the point, Subaru, your gate isn't the kind you can control, so it's probably best not to push yourself."

"Is that seriously the first thing you say after seeing me like this, you jerk?"

"Tee hee."

"That's not cute at all?!"

Subaru cursed at Puck, who was floating with his arms crossed, delivering his overall assessment, while he himself was experiencing the hard, cold sensation of the grass with his entire body.

Lying face down on the grass, Subaru was gasping for air, his whole body abnormally sluggish. A fatigue akin to a high fever permeated him, and he couldn't feel any fighting spirit in his limbs.

It was a familiar sensation.

It was similar to when Puck drained his mana on his first day after being summoned, or when Beatrice routinely siphoned mana from him.

In short, Subaru was completely out of gas.

"For better or worse, your gate, Subaru, is coarse-grained. That's why it ignored your intentions, and everything just gushed out."

"So… don't… talk about people… like a screen door…"

He was out of breath. How much energy was he wasting just to utter such a weak retort?

He tried to stand up somehow, but he couldn't muster any strength anywhere in his body. In the end, all he could do was lie there and groan.

Emilia knelt down to meet Subaru's gaze in his weakened state,

"Don't move. You've used up all the mana in your body, so you need to stay still. —You might not be able to work today, either."

"—That's a problem!"

Subaru instinctively blurted out sharply, responding to Emilia's attitude, which was like a mother scolding her mischievous son.

As Emilia blinked in surprise, Subaru genuinely and deeply regretted his carelessness.

If he were to truly waste this entire day, it would mean throwing away the one-day reprieve he had gained regarding the loop.

That would be incredibly stupid, and fatal.

To stumble due to his own self-inflicted wounds like this was unacceptable.

"Nngh…!"

He struggled to stand up, channeling his self-reproach into strength.

If he could at least sit up, it would be a bit better. From there, he could gradually regain control and recover.

"Hey, I said you shouldn't push yourself."

"Now is the time to push myself. If I don't do it now, I'll seriously regret it forever…"

It wasn't uncommon for him to bring trouble upon himself through his own actions, but the timing and situation were currently the worst.

Emilia subtly shrugged her shoulders at Subaru's desperate efforts, sweat beading on his forehead.

"There's really no helping it now, is there?"

Emilia spoke again, bending down.

Unsure of her intentions, Subaru looked up at her with just his eyes.

"—? Emilia-tan, what are you—mph!"

Her hand, which had met his gaze, suddenly pressed against Subaru's upturned face. Then, he felt something being pushed into his mouth.

Something round, with a soft texture.

Confused, Subaru looked at her, and Emilia nodded, still covering his mouth with her palm.

"Chew it."

"—?"

"Chew it, and swallow. One, two, three."

Overwhelmed by her unyielding attitude, Subaru bit down hard on the sensation in his mouth.

A sweet and sour taste slowly spread across his palate. He guessed it must have been some kind of fruit based on the texture, and then—it happened.

"Whoaaaaaa—?!"

A heat like fire ignited throughout his entire body, and Subaru sprang to his feet.

His blood seemed to boil, raging inside him, and his limbs, from fingertips to even under his nails, felt like they would burst with energy. His breathing became ragged as if he wanted to expel the excess heat, and unable to suppress the impulse, his legs started doing random high-knees.

After all that, Subaru finally realized he had regained the strength to stand up.

He looked at his hands in disbelief, opening and closing his fists to confirm the sensation.

The heat in various parts of his body hadn't completely subsided, and he could feel a dull fatigue lingering in his joints. However, it wasn't so bad that he couldn't move.

"Wh-What was that just now…?"

"It's a fruit called a 'Bocco.' Eating it activates the mana inside your body, and it's just a temporary measure, but your gate regains some strength."

The identity of the familiar fruit matched the one Subaru had received from the old woman in the slum on his very first loop.

He remembered experiencing similar side effects after eating it that time too—but that was rectified by Pack's mana drain afterward. This time, it seemed the order of events was reversed.

In any case,

"Ah, I'm relieved. If I had ended up on a BAD route like that, I really wouldn't have been able to forgive myself. Thank you, Emilia-tan."

"I didn't want to use it because there aren't many, and it's not good for your body… That wasn't just bluster earlier, was it?"

It seemed Subaru's urgency earlier was genuine enough to make her resort to using such a valuable item.

Subaru looked up at her questioning tone.

"Of course."

He stated emphatically.

Then, wiping his forehead, he added,

"Still, I was an idiot… If it had ended there, I would've died of self-reproach, even more so than last time."

He prided himself on having experienced many things others couldn't, in terms of experiencing various ways to die. But,

"Dying from humiliation, frankly, no thanks."

In the first place, if possible, he wanted his last death to be the previous suicide by jumping. That, too, was incredibly painful because he didn't die instantly.

One death was enough. And if possible, he wanted to meet it in his own bed after living a full life. Or, perhaps, to be watched over in Emilia's arms after achieving some spectacularly cool flag—

"Nah, that's not how I can think, and that's why I'm such a small-minded guy."

Even in jest, he couldn’t casually utter the word ‘death’ anymore.

Only someone who had truly experienced what Subaru had could laugh at him for becoming cowardly.

He turned his body, re-checking his condition.

He was far from perfect, and if anything, there were lingering worries about his state.

However, Subaru didn’t have the luxury of postponing his plans because of it.

“Are you okay? Do you think you can really work?”

“I’ll do my work, and I’ll finish everything else too. Just think of yourself as riding on the remodeled unsinkable Subaru, and relax.”

“An unsinkable ship that’s already been remodeled once, huh…”

If she noticed that, the sense of security would disappear.

To be honest, he had sunk not just once, but about seven times, but there was no need to point that out and spoil the morning air. Subaru learned his lesson.

Ignoring Emilia’s remark, Subaru performed some squats on the spot to regain his composure.

“Alright then, shall we face our senpai’s with renewed resolve!”

“Yes. I don’t think you’ve talked to either of them since yesterday, Subaru…”

“—Ah.”

He was told this mid-stretch, and his lower back gave a dull pop.

3

“Sister, Sister. A heartless person named Subaru has arrived.”

“Rem, Rem. A wage thief called Barusu has appeared.”

"I am truly sorry for yesterday! Please, please forgive me!"

He bowed his head, begging for forgiveness with profuse apologies.

He felt like he'd been bowing his head all morning. Excluding Roswaal, he'd apologized to everyone in the mansion, completing the full set of women.

"So, I've finished the 'being looked down upon by girls' route—my karma is deep."

"Sister, Sister. Subaru is quite the pervert."

"Rem, Rem. Barusu is such a contemptible masochist."

"That's going too far, especially you, big sis!"

Shouting while still in his full Japanese DOGEZA, Subaru transitioned from that position into a handstand using his arms as a pivot, then smoothly spun up to his feet.

"Anyway, I'm sorry for being such a pathetic mess yesterday and an annoying pest the day before yesterday… Well, a lot happened and I was feeling down, but I'm making a fresh start, so from today on, I'm the new Subaru."

"The lap pillow, right?"

"The lap pillow, right?"

"Do you mean everyone knows? How embarrassing?!"

He covered his face in an action of shame. As Subaru slumped, the twin maids exchanged glances.

"Shall we start our morning duties soon, Sister?"

"We should begin our morning duties soon, Rem."

"No comment is just as disheartening!"

The two maids cut off Subaru's comment with a hand gesture.

While Subaru stuck out his tongue and reacted with an “Ouch,” the two hurried off to begin their work. Then,

“Hold on, hold on. I have a small favor to ask before you start your morning duties.”

Stopping at Subaru’s call, the two turned back and tilted their heads in unison.

“A favor?”

“Trouble?”

“Even though I’m interacting with them so calmly after a long time, what is this bubbling feeling in my chest…? Humans are strange.”

While he was happy to exchange such banter, a wry smile also tugged at him, given the older sister’s more obvious scowl compared to her sibling.

He sighed, lightly letting go of the absurdity that had surfaced.

“Actually, I’d like to visit the village. It’s nearby, isn’t it? Do you have any plans for shopping or anything?”

To confirm his suspicions from the Forbidden Library last night, he wanted to visit the village today if possible. At Subaru’s thought, Rem placed a hand on her chin.

“I believe we’re running low on spices, so I was planning to go to the village tomorrow…”

“Then, how about moving that plan to today? If we’re running out, it’s better to get it sooner rather than later, and it’s not like we’re in an environment where we can easily borrow miso from a neighbor if we run out of spices, right?”

Even if he wanted to be neighborly, there were no other mansions nearby to begin with.

Rem seemed to ponder Subaru’s suggestion for a moment.

But,

“Sounds fine to me.”

“Sister?”

It was Ram, lightly touching her pink hair and winking one eye, who answered casually in place of her pondering sister.

She turned her gaze to her sister’s questioning voice.

“We have to go shopping anyway, and there’s no urgent business. We also have Barusu to carry things, so we might as well work him to the bone while we have the chance.”

“Please consider that I actually just had my stomach cut open and am recovering from a three-day illness!”

Subaru interjected with that retort to Ram’s rather blunt opinion, yet internally, he couldn’t help but tilt his head at her unexpected assistance.

It seemed the twin maids’ opinions were not aligned on this matter.

Considering the previous loop and the loop before that, both twin maids were supposed to be in a position to eliminate Subaru if the conditions were met.

The fact that their opinions differed was an anomaly that Subaru, having actually been killed by them, couldn’t overlook.

At any rate, he was genuinely grateful for the unexpected support.

He had genuinely intended to rack his brain over how to persuade them.

“…If Sister says so.”

After a moment of contemplation, Rem also offered an affirmative opinion.

Rem often took the lead in their actions, but he knew from their past interactions that she generally prioritized her sister's opinion.

One could say the outcome of this negotiation was decided the moment Ram, albeit by chance, was convinced.

As Subaru secretly gave a fist pump, Rem, with a serene expression that replaced her thoughtful one, said,

"However, we will go to the village after lunch regardless. After two in the afternoon—before then, let's at least finish our usual duties."

"It'll be fine. Barusu, who brought it up, will work his fingers to the bone. Right?"

"It'd be nice if even my sister, who agreed, would help out… Well, I'll work myself to the bone and do my best."

"Crushing your body."

"Right, that."

His incomplete sentences were corrected in stereo, and Subaru scratched his head in response. And just like that, the negotiation had splendidly borne fruit.

The shopping trip was settled, and now it was finally time for servant duties. Rem began walking briskly, perhaps reorganizing the day's schedule to include the shopping, sorting things out in her head.

Seeing the blue-haired girl off, Subaru looked at the pink-haired girl beside him. She had been appointed as Subaru's overseer again today, and he would accompany her to learn the ropes of his unfamiliar servant life.

Yesterday—or rather, the day before yesterday—it was probably best to avoid interacting with her at that strange level of tension. In fact, having come full circle and gained the mental space to reflect on himself, it was too painful and impossible to imitate.

"It's terrifying to realize my own dark history in such a short time. I'm in a pseudo-sage mode right now. …No point in dwelling on it, shall we get to work, Senpai?”

“Before that.”

As he was about to start walking, Ram stopped him this time, returning the favor from earlier. He stepped his foot out to the side, turned to her with a wide stance, and looked at her.

Ram crossed her arms and looked up at Subaru from below.

“About the magic in the garden earlier…”

“Ah, that was pathetic, my bad. It’s completely useless. I’ll seal that away for a while. Apparently, it’ll take twenty years to master.”

“Being pathetic aside, try not to provoke Rem too much.”

“—?”

Subaru didn’t understand the meaning of Ram’s words and a question mark floated above his head.

At his bewildered face, Ram let out a “Hmph” through her nose, as she sometimes did.

“In that corner of the garden, you used Shamak to disrupt the surroundings, including Emilia-sama—you should be dancing in thanks to Ram for stopping Rem.”

“Ah… ah-ah, ah, right, right, you’re right.”

He was so shocked by his magic failure that he hadn’t realized it, but from an outsider’s perspective, that situation could easily have been ‘one of those situations.’

For that, he was truly grateful to Ram for not acting rashly. Conversely, Rem’s tendency to act immediately in such situations chilled him to the bone.

“Honestly, I can’t afford to be careless… Four times and this is where I’m at. I’m dreading what’s to come, me.”

"What are you muttering about…? If you don't work quickly, you'll miss both breakfast and lunch."

"Alright, alright. No, well, I was just thinking about the afternoon shopping trip. I wonder which one of you will be accompanying me."

Considering his current mental exhaustion, Rem's company felt a bit heavy.

However, considering his objective in the village, Rem was actually the more suitable companion.

He didn't know the conditions for which of Ram or Rem would accompany him to the village, so this question was also meant to probe that—

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

"Huh?"

As Subaru tilted his head, Ram, uncharacteristically, smiled.

A very cruel, chilling smile.

"Both Ram and Rem will go. It's what you call 'a flower in each hand,' Barusu."

—I just hope those flowers aren't poisonous.

Subaru, who hadn't considered the possibility of negotiations going too well, covered his face with his palm, looked up at the ceiling, and merely muttered that in his heart.

Chapter 36:
Fast Forward in the Village

1

This was Subaru's third time visiting this particular village.

He had first come with Ram, and then again with Rem. For a village so close to the lord's mansion, it was rather small, with a population of perhaps three hundred at most. Far fewer people than his local elementary school back in his original world.

Even knowing how tiny it was, the village felt like an enormous challenge to Subaru now—too big for him to handle. It was easy to say "around three hundred people," but it was impossible to investigate every single one of them. What's more, he optimistically only had today and tomorrow.

"It seems we finished our work quite early today."

"Barusu was disturbingly sharp. I wonder what happened."

"Heh heh, I guess the dormant potential within me has bloomed. Ram-chi, you can praise me directly without being shy. Just don't fall in love, alright!"

Subaru was quite elated, having received high praise for his morning's work.

It was the result of putting all his effort into completing the essential tasks to ensure the afternoon's shopping trip. Until now, such enthusiastic efforts often backfired, but strangely, this time he managed to approach it naturally, perhaps because he was more relaxed.

Naturally, the memory of Emilia's lap warmed his ears.

—She must have helped me relax, I guess.

Even contact with the twins, who had forced him to maintain such a false front, didn't feel as mentally taxing now.

Some tension remained, but in a good way, it reinforced Subaru's resolve and kept him focused.

Thus, as he explored the village, literally "a flower in each hand" as he'd boasted, Subaru's state of mind was calm enough that he didn't start trembling.

This was partly due to his feelings towards the two maids, but also due to the tension of acting in the village.

—He had to avoid alerting the problematic individual with any strange behavior.

The condition for a witch doctor to cast a curse, as learned from his Q with Beatrice last night, was physical contact with the target.

As a prerequisite for cursing someone, the witch doctor first had to make some form of physical contact with them. If one considered the witch doctor purely as an assassin, this was a rather risky condition.

Considering his knowledge from his original world, for an act that could be accomplished simply by sniping from a distance, one had to expose oneself to risk.

It could also be said that because they paid that price, the absolute success of the curse after activation was guaranteed.

In any case,

"The culprit's conditions haven't changed—it's limited to the villagers I encountered during my two previous visits to the village."

If that person was a recent outsider within the last few days, it was almost certain. Narrowing it down would be easy.

As he observed the compact village scenery, Subaru racked his brain, dredging up memories from the past. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't recall every person he'd met in the village.

His focus had suddenly shifted from inside the mansion to outside. Since he had largely excluded this possibility, it was hard to search through old memories.

“For now, what I remember are… the ‘Aging Granny’, the Youth Group, ‘Ram-Rem’s Fan Club’, the ‘Village Headman’, and the kids.”

These were the most memorable faces in the village.

The ‘Aging Granny’ was an incredibly lecherous old woman, who he distinctly remembered groping his backside with a lascivious grin. Apparently, she would grope young men, muttering “I’m getting younger, I’m getting younger.”

The Youth Group was exactly that—a group of young men from the village. Their leader was a loud, short-haired, athletic-looking guy who would slap his shoulder hard, which was particularly tough on the indoor-type Subaru.

The ‘Ram-Rem Fan Club’ was just a provisional name he gave them; they didn’t actually call themselves that. They seemed to be composed of members similar to the Youth Group, also led by the short-haired leader. They apparently disliked men who got close to Ram and Rem, and Subaru had grimaced when they would aggressively pat his shoulder as a form of harassment.

“Remembering them like this, it’s… everyone seems too suspicious. They’ve all subtly made contact with me. This four-choice… no, effectively three-choice situation.”

The second and third options would be combined, naturally reducing it to three choices. However, that was as far as the clues went. To delve deeper, he would have to—

“This time, too, I’ll have to step into the same place, won’t I?”

There was no other conclusion.

Subaru sighed at himself for always finding only direct, head-on approaches. And then, at his weary sigh,

“What’s wrong, Subaru?” “Does your tummy hurt?” “Are you hungry?”

Voices, responding one after another, came from above Subaru.

He turned his head to see small figures clinging to his back.

It was a boy with short, neatly cut brown hair, less than ten years old, probably in early elementary school. The boy grinned at Subaru’s gaze. And besides him, other small shadows clung to Subaru’s legs and waist.

They were all small children, none taller than Subaru’s waist. There were four clinging to him alone, and if he looked around, there were probably about ten in total.

Readjusting the surprisingly light weight on his back, Subaru began, “Alright,” then,

“You guys follow me even across time and space, huh…”

“What are you saying?” “Did you hit your head?” “Do you have a tummy ache?”

“Stop obsessing over tummy aches. What, do you want me to have diarrhea that badly?”

When Subaru said that, the children burst into laughter. It was likely they were reacting to the word ‘diarrhea’ rather than finding it genuinely funny.

It seemed that talking about bodily functions was universally capable of inducing laughter in this age group, even across worlds.

“My nature of being inexplicably bothered by kids hasn’t changed either.”

As a child on his back pulled his cheek, Subaru could only slump his shoulders at the cruelty of his own disposition.

This was the true power of the ‘Absolute Loner Ability (except for kids),’ a contradictory power that countered the absolute loner force created by his communication disorder.

"For some reason, I've always been somewhat popular with kids and old people. Honestly, I only need to be popular with one person in this world."

He shifted his body, dandling the child on his back.

Amidst the joyful squeals and cries of "Me next, me next!", Subaru walked through the village with the children in tow.

Currently, Subaru was on his own, free to move.

In reality, he wasn't alone, and being clung to everywhere made him anything but free, but he was 'free' in the sense that he wasn't accompanied by Ram or Rem.

The maid sisters, who had come to the village with him, had said things like,

"Sister, Sister. Let's split up and collect only the light items."

"Rem, Rem. Let's leave the heavy, hard-to-carry stuff to Barusu."

Then hurried off to scatter for shopping, leaving behind disheartening comments for later.

Supposed it was a kindness to Subaru, who wanted to see the village, but he honestly wished at least one of them had stayed. Then, he wouldn't be swarmed by children, and—

"I wouldn't have had to greet suspects while super nervous."

Subaru, breaking out in a cold sweat, reiterated his plan to gauge its difficulty.

His chosen method for finding the curse arts user was very simple.

—To use himself as bait to lure out the user.

Not in a "Please kill me!" kind of way, but rather to intentionally step into the preliminary stage—the stage where the curse's ritual was inscribed.

He was aware this was a highly risky decision. It meant that if the curse arts user chose to activate the curse the moment it was inscribed, a countdown to death by weakening would begin for Subaru."

His current goal was to become a carp that willingly jumped onto the cutting board, waiting for the chef's knife to descend.

He had to get on the cutting board to see the face of the invisible chef.

"At least, Beako said she can dispel the ritual itself."

Beatrice, and also Puck, claimed they could dispel the curse's ritual. He wanted to avoid the latter case as it would inevitably involve Emilia, but if Beatrice remained uncooperative, that option might be unavoidable.

"Subaru, bad face—" "Scary face—" "Weird face—"

"What are you saying, pointing at someone's face, kids? Plus, I've been hearing you, number three, quite often."

Subaru retorted as he dragged the children along, exploring the village.

He couldn't shake them off, and they were surprisingly useful as navigators for finding suspects.

Most importantly, an assassin who couldn't cause a stir in the village wouldn't be able to harm Subaru while he was surrounded by so many children. It was a calculated move, using them as human shields.

"I'm quite the scoundrel myself. I'm disgusted by my own thoughts."

"Subaru, what's wrong?" "What happened?" "Are you spaced out?"

"Nah, nothing."

Subaru stroked the heads of the children clinging to his legs, laughing self-deprecatingly.

“Well, it’s for my happiness. Just cooperate a little, okay?”

Come to think of it, he never used to like children.

Loud, overly familiar, and selfish.

—Perhaps he felt that way because they seemed just like him.

2

“Coming to check on you now that your free time is almost over, and just look at this…”

Ram sighed in exasperation, running a hand through her pink hair.

Subaru met her gaze, swinging his arms in wide circles.

“I’m not doing anything weird, am I? Whoops, almost done. —Alright, arm circles and leg stretches!”

He moved dynamically, stretching out the stiff muscles of his body. The children mimicked Subaru’s movements, and surrounding them, a group of elders and the youth group followed a beat behind.

Finally, they took a deep breath, and everyone synchronized their breathing.

Then, as a grand finale, they stretched both hands to the sky, and everyone shouted in unison,

“—Victory!!”

A cheer erupted as they finished, and he instinctively high-fived the people around him. Wiping his slightly sweaty forehead, he left the circle of chatter and headed towards Ram. In contrast to Subaru’s refreshed appearance, Ram gave him a completely cold look.

“What kind of entertainment is this?”

“Entertainment? It’s nothing that grand. I was just trying to keep the brats occupied, and the adults watching decided to join in on the fun.”

The “Radio Calisthenics No. 2” was his method for dealing with the noisy children who constantly demanded attention. He recalled that he’d only performed as a ‘radio exercise enthusiast’ on his very first loop, and he decided to make it public this time.

“Well, I was surprised it was more popular than I thought. Maybe this wide appeal, enjoyable for both children and elders, is the secret to its long-standing support!”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“She cut me off cold!”

As Subaru dramatically recoiled from Ram’s curt reply, the children watching mimicked his reaction, recoiling as well.

“Ram-chi, you’re cold.” “Ram-chi, you’re mean.” “Ram-chi, you’re scary.”

“…Did you teach these children to call me that?”

“No, well, I didn’t intentionally teach them, but approach-ability is important, right? If you’re too far apart, you can’t see each other’s faces clearly. …I thought that was lonely, you know… I thought that…”

“What a fast talker. Ram doesn’t mind that much, but Rem might dislike it.”

“Rem-rin?” “Rem-rin.” “Rem-rin-rin.”

Seeing the children tilt their heads while repeating the name, Ram shrugged as if in resignation.

Then, she turned back to Subaru.

“So, did you enjoy the village as you wished?”

“—Ah, regarding that, it went smoothly.”

Answering Ram's question, Subaru twisted his cheek into a smile.

His "village stroll," which was merely a pretext for contacting the suspects—that itself was achieved far more easily than Subaru had expected.

It was partly because they were already noticeable individuals, but also likely because they themselves had wanted to make contact with Subaru. They showed up without him even having to search for them, so regardless of the flow of events, physical contact happened as much as, or even more than, last time.

He had, however, been meticulous about avoiding conscious physical contact and ensuring that only the main named characters would be suspects.

"I wanted to show off my flexibility, trying every trick in the book to avoid contact… However, when you're surrounded by this many brats, there's nothing you can do."

He sighed at the children still clinging to him. Unlike the adults, who generally gave up after being avoided once, he couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the children's vitality.

However, with Ram coming to pick him up, his youthful escapade was over.

With a lingering sense of reluctance in his eyes, Subaru said,

"Alright, I've got work, so scram, you guys. Oh, what a shame. If I had more time, I would've played with you more. Haha, too bad."

"So cheerfully—" "While laughing—" "Are you really that happy—"

"Shut up! If you want me to genuinely care, you guys need to think about how you interact with your elders! For kids to use casual speech with me on our first meeting, it makes me realize how low my objective human value is, and it's depressing!"

He yelled at the children, acutely feeling his own lack of human value. It was a negative spiral.

Waving goodbye to the grumbling children, Subaru followed Ram, who was signaling him with her gaze to hurry and meet up with Rem. But just before he started walking, his sleeve was tugged.

He turned his head to see a girl with brown pigtails shyly holding him back.

"Oh?"

A surprised sound escaped Subaru's lips.

Unlike the active bunch from earlier, this girl had been observing Subaru from a step back, peeking at him intermittently.

He knelt down, meeting the gaze of the downcast child.

"What's up? If there's something you want to say, I'll listen."

"Um… over there."

Tugging his sleeve, the girl pointed in the opposite direction of their meeting point with Rem.

He felt reluctant to brush off her weak tug, so Subaru looked at Ram for permission. She sighed faintly.

"Why don't you do what you want for a little longer?"

"Alright, I owe you one, Senpai. So, what could it be?"

He followed the girl as she pulled his hand.

With her leading, the same group of children from earlier trailed behind. They seemed to know their destination, uniformly wearing mischievous smiles and whispering to each other in low voices.

"They're definitely going to be surprised." "They're definitely going to be happy." "They're definitely going to pee their pants with joy."

"Surprised, happy, and peeing their pants—am I an ill-behaved puppy? With expectations this high, I'm the kind of contrarian who actually doesn't want to be surprised…"

Pushed along by the children's giggles, he squeezed between houses and entered a sunless corner.

Then, he found what the children had wanted to show him.

"Ah-ha, I remember this event now."

A sound of understanding escaped him, and Subaru clapped his hands, nodding repeatedly.

The girl let go of his hand and ran off. The usually quiet girl came back before Subaru, breathless, holding it in her arms.

It was a 'puppy'-like creature with brown fur.

It seemed to have been born recently, its body not even thirty centimeters long when fully stretched.

With its innocent eyes and seemingly soft fur, it possessed more than enough charm to stir Subaru's instincts as a 'fluff-lover.'

His arm instinctively reached out, ignoring his will, but he managed to restrain it, exhaling a long breath.

Surrounded by children and doted upon, it was truly a pampered pet, feeling like royalty. But based on his past experiences—

"Fwoosh!"

"Of course, it'd be like this…"

The moment Subaru approached, its fur bristled, and it snarled in warning.

Seeing its tiny body on full alert, the children also looked surprised.

"It's usually so quiet!" "It's only angry at Subaru!" "What did you do, Subaru—"

"I'm the one who should be asking that! Is this just a matter of incompatibility between me and this guy, since it's happened three times now?"

Responding to the children's boos, Subaru observed the small animal that showed no sign of becoming friendly.

If there was no particular reason, this would be his third encounter with this small animal. To have the exact same individual react in the exact same way like this made the loops worthwhile. For some reason, Subaru's loops rarely allowed him to tread the exact same path as the previous one.

"If it's going to react the same way, I'd have preferred a friendly reaction, personally."

Being disliked three times in a row was genuinely disheartening.

Subaru offered a fawning smile, trying to curry favor. Then, the puppy suddenly relaxed, as if its guard had dropped. Seeing it curl up in the pigtail girl's arms, Subaru, seeing an opportunity, eagerly approached.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me."

He fully extended his 'fluffing' arm, raised by Pack, towards the curled-up small animal.

First, as a test, he checked the feel of its head and back, then its belly, and then moved onto more connoisseur-level areas like the tips of its paws to its joints. His recent obsession, its ears and tail, would be saved for later.

"Whoa, as expected of the fluff-ball of my dreams. That's some serious fluff-ification. But still, a stray naturally has some issues with its fur. Daily brushing and love are key there."

"I don't know what Subaru's talking about." "Fluff-ball? Fluff-ify?" "An adult being so mushy with a puppy, it's a bit gross—"

"The third one has been relentlessly savage this whole time?!"

The chestnut-haired pretty boy, the 'number three' in question, smiled innocently at Subaru's retort. If you cropped the image, he'd look like an angel, which must have emboldened him.

“He’s going to make so many girls cry in the future… That aside, fluffing is great—it’s the pinnacle of human culture.”

His frayed heart soothed by the soft touch, Subaru was captivated by the inexplicable charm of fluffing.

It made sense that cat cafes were popular. Originally, from a hygiene perspective, who would even think of combining cats and a cafe? The originator must have been an exceptionally talented ‘fluff-lover.’

“Fluff-balls and fluff-lovers are destined to attract each other, aren’t they? I’m poetic, and super amazing. Still, I’m a little worried about that. Oh, what’s this? A ten-yen… no, a one-yen coin-sized bald spot on its head. It’s whitish, but where did you bump—ouch!”

Perhaps pointing out its complex was the trigger, but the puppy, which had been docile until then, suddenly bared its fangs.

It bit down on his left hand with its small canine teeth, and when he hastily pulled it away, a thin line of blood ran down the back of his hand.

Subaru looked at the wound, saying “Aiyaya.”

“What incredible event completion rate. Even the position of the wound is almost the same. Could it be that you’re time-leaping too?”

To his question, asked while lightly wiping the bleeding wound, the small animal, its guard completely back up, only responded with an intimidating growl.

Seeing the renewed rift in the interaction between Subaru and the creature, the children who had been observing chimed in.

“He got carried away again!” “Well, he did touch it without permission!” “Besides, this one’s a girl!”

“I feel like the points of contention are subtly shifting… And no one’s worrying about me. It’s about time a tsundere came out and showed some affection!”

He complained to the children about their attitude, but not a single one listened. On the contrary, it was probably because Subaru had raised his voice.

The puppy, trembling, wriggled out of the girl's arms, leaped out, and darted into the bushes.

"Oh no!" "Oh no!" "Oh no!"

"Did you all just synchronize your 'oh no's'?! I'm sorry! I didn't mean any harm! It's always like this!"

He stomped his foot, apologized profusely, and then waved goodbye to the children who were going to look for the puppy.

Leaving them behind, after they had left their marks all over Subaru's body until the very end, he hurried back to Ram, who had been waiting.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The tall maid, arms crossed, leaned against the fence. She opened one eye and looked at Subaru as he addressed her.

"Regarding the kouhai I sent off, expecting him to be back quickly, returning with messy hair, rumpled clothes, and blood flowing from his left hand."

"That's exactly what I'm sorry about! A lot happened, you can tell just by looking!"

"Yes. I was watching, so I mostly know."

A hint of worry crossed Ram's delicate features, and she let out a small sigh.

Subaru furrowed his brow at her uncharacteristic demeanor, but then Ram snorted, "Hmph," looking at Subaru.

"That wound and your appearance are pathetic. Let's go meet Rem quickly. Rem should be able to heal both."

"Oh? Ram-chi, are you the type who can't use healing magic?"

"I can perform drastic remedies like cutting off the affected area."

"Dangerous folk remedies?!"

Subaru couldn't hide his shiver. Then, Ram suddenly walked up to Subaru, pulled his sleeve, and started leading the way.

Subaru blinked, surprised that she was initiating physical contact like this, and Ram looked back over her shoulder.

"Barusu, aren't you coming?"

"I'm coming! With you!"

As he responded, he saw Ram's lips soften for just a fleeting moment.

He continued walking, being led by her sleeve.

On one hand, he thought how cute she would be if she were always so straightforward, but on the other hand, perhaps it was precisely because she was always true to herself that such remarks kept spilling out.

Frankness, too, had its time and place.

Thinking such thoughts, he walked with Ram towards the spot where Rem was waiting.

He felt as if the leading back was walking slowly, more leisurely than usual, for some reason.

Chapter 37:
The Curse Arts User's Identity

1

"Sister and Subaru are quite close, aren't they?"

That's what Rem said first when they met at their rendezvous point, seeing the two of them. Her gaze was fixed on the space between them, specifically where Ram was pulling Subaru's sleeve.

Subaru, the one involved, thought that if you only saw that particular moment, it might have looked like quite a suggestive scene.

Laughing off Rem's hasty conclusion, Subaru pointed to the spot in question.

"There's no ulterior motive, really! It's purely because I was slow, and Ram-chi got impatient. Sorry for making you wait."

He lightly waved his sleeve and dropped his finger, apologizing to Rem for the wait. Even so, Rem's gaze remained a little colder than usual, but when Ram smoothly moved to stand beside her, Rem's expression softened.

Aha, looking at it now that I've calmed down, Rem's mental state, despite appearing unfazed, has quite a few flaws. Especially when Ram is involved, her dangerously sister-complex tendencies really come to light.

"Sister…"

"Even Barusu says so, Rem. There's no ulterior motive, right?"

Ram coolly dismissed her sister's pleading voice. Rem, who had been staring intently at her sister's identical face, suddenly narrowed her eyes as if realizing something.

"Sister, did you… perhaps see something?"

"Yes."

"…Even though I told you not to."

"If it's necessary, I'll do it. Anything more is useless, Rem."

"When you two talk in your own little world, it makes me, the one left out, want to cry! Let's mix it up and chat together, okay!"

Serious Rem, deflecting Ram, and Subaru, who cut in with a joke. The two of them, especially Rem, shot Subaru a sharp glare.

The reason was vague, but it seemed he had significantly triggered Rem's caution. Conversely, he felt like he was gaining favor with Ram, which reaffirmed to him how difficult these twins were to handle.

At this rate, they were headed straight for a BAD ending.

He wanted to somehow raise Rem's affection level, but he had no idea how.

For now, he decided to say,

"Alright, alright, alright, it's like this. Let's not be so intense; How about we have some fun instead. I'll carry anything you need, whatever the original purpose was."

He rotated his shoulders and his hips, appealing his readiness to work.

Some of the smaller purchases were probably already in the parcels Rem and Ram were carrying. Subaru's role, if Ram's words were correct, was supposed to be handling the large, heavy items that required a man's strength.

With that in mind, Subaru's gaze drifted behind the twins, and he instantly regretted it.

There, sitting proudly, was a barrel-like object that looked like it would take a whole person to carry.

"…Is there no limit?"

"Seven times."

"Huh?"

As Subaru lowered his voice, imagining a diagonal line across his face, Rem's lips suddenly whispered a mysterious number. To Subaru's puzzled tilt of the head, Rem then looked at him with a testing gaze.

"We plan to take breaks according to Subaru's schedule. Seven times is Rem's prediction."

With a rare, politely insolent bow, Subaru considered the distance to the mansion. It was about a twenty-minute walk. In a straight line, it was less than three kilometers, but Subaru was acutely aware of his lack of stamina.

He silently approached the barrel and carefully tested its weight. Perhaps it was a paper tiger, just a deceptive appearance. That pathetic hope was easily crushed by the solid weight that settled heavily in his lower back.

To carry this, for three kilometers, with seven breaks—

He twisted his waist, did some knee bends on the spot, and stretched his back out wide.

"I'll try my best not to go over ten."

He rather liked this part of himself—instead of the expected defiance at being provoked with "seven breaks," he set a higher number to create a safeguard.

"By the way, Ram predicts you'll rest thirteen times."

"Atleast you two are fair, not letting personal feelings get in the way of harsh or lenient evaluations."

Even with the slight difference in affection levels, he still felt that Rem's evaluation was more favorable.

In its own way, it was a situation that made him scratch his head.

2

It was well past dusk, the sun already dipping low, when Subaru and the others finally made it back to the mansion.

Subaru had suggested taking a break roughly twelve times, collapsing under the weight of the luggage. His biceps were screaming from lactic acid, and his knees wouldn't stop shaking from what felt like spasms. He'd been utterly defeated by Rem's prediction, and it was only a sliver of pride, the desire not to give in to Ram's malicious teasing, that had kept him going this far.

"We made it, we made it! I did it, me! Good job! Seriously, good job!"

"Sister, Sister, Subaru's practically groveling on the ground, he's so happy."

"Rem, Rem, Barusu is lying on the ground like a dog, utterly moved."

"Hey, don't be so mean! Praise me for finishing this first. I'm sensitive and delicate, you know. If you keep whipping me, I'll break easily. I'm a product of the lenient education system; I haven't experienced many setbacks!"

Especially since coming to this world, he felt like he'd been whipped too much. Of course, he knew he'd been given plenty of sweet rewards too, but even considering that, weren't the whips a bit too strong?

Anyway,

"Yes, yes, well done."

"Yes, yes, good effort."

With a dismissive nod to Subaru's struggles, Rem effortlessly lifted the sake barrel from the ground. Subaru, who could bench press eighty kilograms, would have struggled to lift it above his shoulders even with all his strength. Yet Rem carried that heavy object, holding small items in her other hand.

The sheer absurdity of the impressive sight made Subaru crack a smile.

“Was I even needed?”

“No? Ram and Rem always handled this by ourselves if Barusu wasn’t around, as you can see.”

Ram had no intention of comforting the boy inside Subaru.

Watching Rem’s retreating back, with a heavy-sounding thump-thump to her steps, Subaru truly felt the uselessness of his physical labor.

“Then why did you make me do it? Are you seriously just messing with me? Come on, seniors shouldn’t bully their kouhais!”

“Don’t you understand, Barusu? It was consideration, of course.”

“I don’t get it. What do you mean, ‘consideration’?”

Ram snorted in response to Subaru’s question, then shrugged her shoulders in an exasperated pose.

“So Barusu wouldn’t mind if, after Rem carried that enormous sake barrel back, Lady Emilia saw you happily returning with nothing but a small bag of spices in your hand?”

“My words fail me at your kindness, Senpai!”

Subaru knelt and bowed in thanks to Ram’s esteemed presence.

Making a girl smaller than himself carry a huge load, while he returned with just a shopping bag, looking smug—what kind of hellish scene was that?

Even before Emilia saw him, just looking in a mirror would have filled him with despair. His already flimsy “manliness index” would have been utterly shredded; compared to that, it was nothing.

Just then,

“Sister, Lord Roswaal is—”

Rem, who had gone ahead with the luggage, returned to the two exchanging words at the entrance. Ram reacted instantly to her sister mentioning the mansion’s master. The name “Roswaal” invigorated Ram so much that she shed her usual languid aura, moving briskly to stand beside her sister, tidying her appearance as she walked. Then,

“What are you doing, Barusu? Are you going to keep Lord Roswaal waiting?”

“You two can communicate with just sympathy, but that doesn’t mean I can understand! Huh, what, is this like a servant assembly?”

Subaru, met with a look usually reserved for slow-witted children, scratched his head and hastily followed them. On the way, he tried to tidy himself up, mimicking Ram, and when he opened the mansion’s entrance,

“Ahaha, you two were together, how convenient. It saves me the troooouble.”

Roswaal, the master of the mansion, was waiting for the three of them with his arms spread wide.

He had long indigo hair and heterochromatic blue and yellow eyes. A gentle-looking man with a lazily relaxed smile—but now, his aura was different than usual.

“Formal attire?”

“Correct. Weeeeell, I don’t particularly caaaaare for it. But when I wear my usual clothes, there are always some jeaaaaalous people, so I have nooooo choice, simply no choice, but to wear these formal rooooobes.”

He usually favored overly playful clothes with absurdly large collars, geometric patterns, and colors that blended into the background. But now, he was clad in proper attire, similar to what he wore when they first met. Roswaal's outfit made Subaru consider two possibilities.

And,

"Do we have guests?"

"Are you going out?"

The twins voiced the same possibilities Subaru had just thought of. Roswaal gave a wry smile at his servants' questions.

"Ram is correct; I'm going ooout. I've received a rather troooooublesome message, you see. I'll be going to Garfiel to confirm it. I don't think I'll be late, thoooooough."

That was a new name, and Subaru didn't know if it was a person or a place. However, seeing the twins nod as if they understood everything, Subaru followed suit, nodding to Roswaal's words without objection. Roswaal gave a magnanimous nod to their attitude.

"So, that's why I'll be leaving the mansion for a while. In any case, I don't think I'll be back tonight—Ram, Rem. I'm leaving it to you twooo."

"Yes, as you command."

"Yes, even if it costs my life."

He nodded to the two who affirmed instantly, then his heterochromatic eyes fixed on Subaru.

Feeling slightly overwhelmed by their intensity, Subaru shifted.

"Sorry, but I haven't sworn that kind of loyalty that would cost my life yet, you know?"

"That's peeeeerfectly fine. If you suddenly swore something like that, it would feel heavy and unseeettling, you see. Well, I'm leaving it to you too, Subaru.""

Patting Subaru's shoulder, Roswaal winked, reflecting Subaru in only his yellow eye.

"I sense something ominous. Don't worry about me… Just take gooood care of Lady Emilia, aaaaalright?"

"—Ah, that's definitely something I'll take on."

He didn't need to be told. Subaru didn't know how much Roswaal suspected, but he responded with clear resolve.

—An unprecedented turn of events. This certainly meant that Subaru's actions had brought about a change in this world.

Receiving Subaru's nod, Roswaal nodded contentedly. Then, after saying a few more words to his loyal twin retainers,

"Weeell then, I'll be off. I pray nothing happens."

He muttered in a somewhat low voice, and Roswaal's back disappeared beyond the entrance.

Suddenly, after seeing him off with a bow, Subaru wondered,

"Wait, I just realized, you two aren't going with him. And there's no sign of a carriage or anything outside… Is he walking?"

In response to Subaru's question, the twins looked at him with matching expressions of exasperation.

"There's no point in going. We'd only be in the way."

"Loyalty can't make you fly, you know. And besides, it would show my skirt."

"Whoa, you just said a bunch of things I can't unhear…"

From Subaru's perspective, they were a hopelessly strong force, comparable to Elsa, yet the two of them clearly recognized their own inadequacy. Furthermore, if he believed Ram's statement,

"Whoa, it's true!"

Subaru pushed open the entrance where Roswaal had disappeared and confirmed that their master was no longer outside. Then he looked up at the sky for a moment and saw a tiny speck of a shadow in the far distance, towards the sunset, barely discernible by its fluttering mantle. It had to be Roswaal, flying solo.

“He can fly?! Can you do that with ‘Yin’ magic?”

“You can, if you can properly handle wind, fire, and earth.”

At Ram’s words, Subaru covered his face, thinking of how far off the day he could achieve that was. Subaru’s lack of magical talent had already been thoroughly confirmed by both the court mage and the spirit. When the day would come that he could fly freely, he had no idea.

Putting such sentiment aside,

“Even without Lord Roswaal, our duties remain the same. In fact, precisely because Lord Roswaal isn’t here, we must perform them diligently.”

“That’s a very diligent opinion. Alright, let’s get to it.”

Subaru nodded to Rem, who began taking charge, his mind racing.

The situation had changed again. It was a change that clearly foreshadowed an attack. The twins would no doubt be roused to reinforce the mansion’s defenses, but knowing an attack was definitely coming, Subaru’s thoughts were elsewhere.

He needed to quickly ascertain the identity of the curse arts user. The acceleration of their actions was undoubtedly triggered by his visit to the village today. This meant Subaru’s suspicion was correct: an assassin was likely hidden among them.

3

“So, it’s finally time for Beatrice!”

I pushed open the door and stepped into the Forbidden Library. Beatrice, who had been sitting on a step stool reading a book, dramatically slumped her shoulders at my overly confident intrusion.

“You’re the only one who can so easily break Betty’s ‘Door Crossing,’ in fact. How do you even do it, I suppose?”

“It’s a hunch, a gut feeling. My sixth sense whispers to me.”

I closed the door behind me and walked toward Beatrice. She watched my approach with an expression of utter disdain, but perhaps seeing the seriousness in my face, she narrowed her eyes.

“Your expression is different than it was half a day ago, I suppose. You’re a busy one, in fact.”

“I wish I could take it easy sometimes too, you know? It seems the world just won’t let me.”

For an ordinary person, it’s hard enough just keeping up with the constant barrage of changing situations. Fumbling through one problem after another often leads to a dead end. In that regard, the current situation feels like I’m backed into a corner. But at the same time, I feel confident that I’m also cornering my opponent.

“There’s something I need you to check for me. I finished cleaning the bath super fast just for this.”

“If the bath was a higher priority, then it can’t be that important, in fact.”

“It’s not that the bath was the priority, but rather managing Rem’s affection level… No, never mind that.”

Cleaning the huge bathhouse was a grueling task. Even now that I’ve gotten somewhat used to it, it’s still heavy labor that leaves my whole body aching. That’s precisely why Rem’s reaction if I skip it is so terrifying. Especially since, in this loop, her affection for me isn’t very high due to my closeness with her sister.

Even if I found the curse arts user, if Rem’s affection was low and I ended up on a BAD route, it would all be for nothing. I felt like a man juggling two women, having to deal with two different threats at once. Although, I don't think there are many two-timing situations where a single flag management mistake leads directly to death.

"And it's not even a juicy story."

"You're getting off topic again… So, what do you need Betty for, in fact?"

"Ah, about that…"

For now, I pondered for a moment in front of Beatrice, who seemed willing to listen. I hesitated on how to broach the subject, then nodded once.

"I think I might be cursed. Could you check it for me?"

"…What are you talking about, I suppose?"

"I think I might be cursed. Could you check it for me?"

"Who told you to say the same thing twice, I suppose! It's only been half a day since we talked about the curse arts in detail, in fact! There's a limit to how easily influenced you can be…"

Perhaps thinking I was being paranoid, Beatrice slammed her book shut roughly and approached, yelling. But halfway, her momentum deflated, replaced by a look of suspicion, then certainty, on her adorable face. She stopped and looked up at me with questioning eyes.

"There's a trace of a spell… You really are cursed, in fact."

"Seriously? Even though I kinda knew it, it's still pretty shocking to hear it confirmed."

Even though I was prepared to be afflicted by a curse, having someone else confirm it was still a lot to take in. It affirmed my suspicions, and confirmed that the assassin in question was indeed hiding among those kind villagers.

"Can you tell what kind of curse it is?"

"Just by looking at the spell, Betty can't tell, in fact. Betty isn't deeply knowledgeable about curses, and it's not something Betty wishes to know, I suppose. However, nine times out of ten, it's the kind that will take your life, in fact."

Beatrice stated the fact dispassionately, without any hint of a threat. I quietly nodded at her words. I had already experienced firsthand the kind of power a curse could unleash. Perhaps surprised by my composed expression, Beatrice blinked her large eyes rapidly.

"You have a lot of nerve, in fact. Aren't you afraid to die, I suppose?"

"Huh? Are you stupid? I'm super scared to die! There's almost nothing scarier than dying in this world. 'It's better to die'—I wish people who say that would try dying first."

That alone was an absolute truth I had learned in this other world, one I would never compromise on. "Death" is absolute. Treating it lightly is unforgivable. And casually speaking of "death" as something to compare to other things is nothing but a thoughtless folly only those who don't truly understand it can make.

I knew that, because I had experienced "death" countless times, I had returned, restarting the world, so as not to experience a sensation worse than "death" itself.

"So this time, I'm gonna break through, fate!"

I pointed my finger to the sky, declaring war on the unknown, supernatural entity that could be watching from anywhere. Then, I turned back to Beatrice.

"Alright, hurry up and remove this curse. We don't have much time."

At the very least, I needed to identify the culprit and make my move before they did. I was eager, having finally gotten a chance to make the first move. Beatrice tilted her head at me.

"Why should Betty save your life, I suppose?"

"I figured you'd say something uncute like that, so I prepared a way to persuade you. Puck would be sad if I died."

"…Brother would probably not be greatly disturbed if one or two humans like you died, I suppose."

"No, no, if I die, Emilia-tan would be devastated. If Emilia-tan is devastated, Puck would take damage too. What would he think about your position, having not prevented something you could have?!"

"You're threatening me while begging for your life?! Have you completely lost your mind, in fact!"

Beatrice stamped her foot in frustration, but apparently couldn't come up with an effective retort. She exhaled a long, frustrated sigh to calm herself, then beckoned me closer.

"Betty will humor you, I suppose. However, Betty will not be involved in any further dealings from now on, in fact."

"Honestly, I can't really promise that. When I'm in trouble, I'll definitely come looking for your help. I'll gnaw on your shin until it's powder and drink it as soup."

"Do you even realize you're the one being helped, I suppose?"

"I have a reputation for getting my way. I didn't become a shut-in for nothing!"

Beatrice shook her head in resignation at my thumbs-up and flashing teeth. Then, she held a white light in her palm and touched my body.

"Now, Betty will destroy the curse mark that was engraved, in fact. It's the spot the curse arts user touched directly, so it should be a good reference, I suppose."

"Oh yeah, I've already laid the groundwork, don't you worry."

Watching the glowing palm approach, I rechecked my body. I had made sure to have each of the suspects touch a different spot. Only the old hag who got younger had ignored my intentions and touched my butt, but if Beatrice's hand went for my butt, then so be it. I'd accept the fact that the old hag was the culprit, and then condemn Beatrice for sexual harassment too.

But my expectations were—

"—Huh?"

Completely off, surprised by where Beatrice's palm landed.

A warm light seeped into my skin, and I felt a gradual heat. Suddenly, a faint itch arose. It welled up from within and then, finally,

"A black mist…?"

It was directly grasped as a black mist in Beatrice's glowing hand. The itching disappeared, confirming that the extracted mist had been the cause of the sensation. And then, that mist in Beatrice's palm,

"Utterly detestable, I suppose."

Was crushed and vanished, as if in a crushing image. Beatrice shook her hand, dispelling both the mist and the light from her palm. Noticing my gaze, she looked at me.

"It's done, in fact. You should be fine now, I suppose."

At her words, I involuntarily let out a deep breath. I realized, belatedly, my own cowardice for unknowingly holding my breath in tension, but there was something I needed to ask before I could mock myself.

"Hey, Beako."

"That way of calling me…"

"The spot your palm touched just now, that's where the curse arts user touched, right?"

Interrupting and pressing the question, Beatrice nodded. With that nod, I knew the identity of the user responsible for the curses.

According to my original plan, I was supposed to wait until tomorrow to act after identifying the culprit. I would coordinate with Ram, Rem, and Roswaal, the master of the mansion, then flush out the village's curse arts user and resolve the situation. That was the vision I had—

"I have to go to the village—!"

I rushed out the door, forgetting even to thank Beatrice. All my initial goals and everything else were tossed aside. My mind was filled with nothing but curses aimed at merciless fate.

"No matter where, no matter how far… Are you kidding me?!"

Shouting every angry curse I could think of, I ran. I ran.

Chapter 38:
The Meaning of Courage

1

He burst out of the room, dashed down the hallway, and leaped down the stairs.

He landed on the landing, skipping three steps at a time, then spun around and immediately jumped, hitting the ground floor. He looked up, and—

"—Ram! Rem! I need to talk to you!"

Subaru's feet carried him to the entrance hall, his voice echoing through the mansion. He was about to rush out the door when Ram, who had already reached the entrance, stopped him. It wasn't so much that she'd anticipated him as that she was simply closer to the spot than Rem, who was busy preparing food in the kitchen. In other words, Ram had more time on her hands.

Ram's composed expression showed a hint of surprise, perhaps at the sight of Subaru's agitated face.

"What's wrong, Barusu? Why are you in such a hurry…?"

"Sorry, but I'm going to the village. It's pointless to try and stop me, and I'd go even if you did, but I figured not telling you would just cause more confusion."

"To the village…? For what purpose…? No, before that, did you not listen to Lord Roswaal's instructions? Tonight, Ram and Rem are entrusted with the mansion. Do you not understand what that means?"

Ram's gaze sharpened as she countered Subaru. Her stance was to prioritize Roswaal's wishes above all else. Subaru's dismissive attitude toward their master's orders must have struck a nerve. However, Subaru was not in a state of mind to back down.

“I don’t have time for a back-and-forth, so I’ll be direct. There’s a curse arts user in that village. I figured out who they are, so I have to go.”

“…You expect us to accept that childish excuse?”

“What else am I supposed to say? That’s the truth. You can ask Betty if you don’t believe me; she’ll vouch for it. And…”

“Sister—”

Before Subaru could argue further with Ram, who was growing increasingly suspicious, Rem appeared, opening the large door behind them. Seeing the two arguing at the entrance, she glided to her sister’s side.

“Sister, what is this…?”

“He says he wants to go outside to defeat a curse arts user in the village. —What should we do, Rem?”

Ram succinctly summarized the situation for her sister, who blinked in confusion. After a moment, as if finally comprehending, Rem turned her suspicious gaze to Subaru.

“Sister, Sister. Subaru tells such boring jokes.”

“Rem, Rem. Barusu says things that show he’s a first-class clown.”

“Ram, Rem. I may joke around a lot, but sometimes I’m serious.”

The two fell silent as Subaru’s words overlapped their unison. He stepped forward, pressing his advantage with their reaction.

“I admit it’s hard to believe, and I know it’s difficult to trust me when I suddenly start acting like this. So, I won’t say you should unconditionally let me go.”

This was a crucial crossroads for Subaru. He moistened his lips with his tongue and offered a proposal to the two silent girls, pointing a finger.

"I'm going to the village now. If you're suspicious, you can come with me. You can keep an eye on me. However, we can't leave Emilia-tan alone. If you join me, only one of you can come."

"Your arbitrary decisions… Besides, if we are to follow Lord Roswaal's orders, there's no reason for Rem or Sister to accompany Subaru…"

"Ah, there isn't, if you're only following Roswaal's orders from this evening. Is that the only order Roswaal gave me though?"

"…"

Rem lost her words, as if a sensitive spot had been hit. It seemed his bluff had hit its mark. He had suspected from fragmented information from previous loops that they had been ordered by Roswaal to keep an eye on him.

Rem still scanned her surroundings, searching for a rebuttal, but it was Ram who broke the silence with a sigh. She raised a hand slightly.

"Alright, Barusu. I'll allow your independent action."

"Sister—?!"

Rem was stunned by her sister's swift surrender. But Ram turned her raised palm to her sister and continued, "However."

"As Barusu knows, I cannot let him go alone. Allowing Barusu to act alone here would be defying Lord Roswaal's orders."

"Right. So, what's the compromise?"

"—It's annoying to admit, but we have no choice but to accept Barusu's offer. Ram will stay at the mansion. Rem will go with Barusu. If he does anything suspicious… that's the condition."

"Couldn't ask for more."

Subaru thrust his fist into the air, signaling his agreement to Ram's terms. Ram let out a small sigh and turned to her sister, who was still a little lost.

“Rem, that’s how it is, so please. Ram will handle confirming with Miss Beatrice and protecting Lady Emilia. —I’ll be watching over that too.”

“Sister, that look…”

“This isn’t the time to be talking about it. I’ll use it if necessary. You do the same, Rem.”

Rem couldn’t interject any further words at her sister’s calm tone. After an exchange that only the two of them understood, Rem swallowed several words and then turned a less-than-friendly gaze towards Subaru.

“Subaru, I’d like to hear the details.”

“On the way. Things might be getting pretty bad.”

If Subaru’s worst fears were true, the damage could be significant, not just for him personally but from a much broader perspective.

He lightly tapped Ram’s shoulder, showing his gratitude for letting him pass. Then, with Rem, who still looked unconvinced, Subaru headed for the entrance. Just then,

“—Subaru, are you going somewhere?”

From the top of the grand staircase in the entrance hall, the sound of a silver bell descended. He instinctively looked up. Emilia stood there, her silver hair swaying. She must have heard Subaru’s loud voice from earlier. Breathing slightly heavily, she looked at the three frozen figures in the entrance.

“I heard a loud voice, so I came down… Did something happen?”

“Something might happen, Emilia-tan. Well, you don’t have to worry. Oh, but I’d be happy if you worried just a little.”

Subaru deliberately acted this way to spare Emilia unnecessary anxiety. Despite Subaru’s usual frivolous demeanor, Emilia seemed to see something in it.

“You’re making a face like you’re about to do something dangerous again.”

Emilia saw through him immediately and made a meaningful face. Subaru scratched his head, wondering what to do about her keen insight.

“We just barely finished arguing about that…”

“It’s useless to stop you, isn’t it?”

“Well, I guess so. In fact, if I were stopped, it would hinder various situations…”

“Alright, alright, I get it. I won’t stop you.”

Emilia descended the stairs and stood before Subaru and the others, placing her hands on her hips. Her deep purple eyes looked directly at him, and he found himself unable to look away, drawn in by their sparkle. She reached out to the motionless Subaru, lightly touching his chest.

“Even if I tell you not to overdo it or push yourself, that seems useless too, doesn’t it?”

“Depending on the situation… yeah. No, I don’t want to do any of that, either.”

Words like “effort,” “hard work,” and “desperate” were all things he wanted to avoid. Yet, if he was the only one who could change the situation, Subaru had no choice but to act. He chuckled wryly, thinking how he’d developed such a troublesome nature—it was likely largely due to the girl in front of him.

“—May the blessing of the spirits be upon you.”

“What was that?”

Subaru tilted his head at her murmur, still touching his chest. Emilia gave him a knowing smile.

"It's a send-off. It means 'come back safely'."

"Ah, like sending someone off with a flint. Then I should respond too. Emilia-tan, glory to victory to you—"

"Alright, alright."

Emilia brushed off Subaru's salute and turned her gaze to Rem. Rem, who had been silently watching their exchange, straightened her back under Emilia's gaze.

"Rem, be careful too. And keep an eye on Subaru so he doesn't do anything reckless."

"Yes, Lady Emilia. Understood."

"You don't trust me, do you?"

"What are you saying? It's because I trust your character, Subaru, that we're even having this conversation."

"What kind of trust is that? It's devilishly ambiguous, in both good and bad ways."

Emilia, hands on her hips, was in lecturing mode. She probably had many more things to say, but she brought the conversation to a close there. Understanding Subaru's urgency, she pushed his back gently.

"Have a safe trip."

"Yep, I'm off!"

Pushed forward, he responded with a raised fist, leaving Emilia and Ram behind and rushing out of the mansion. Rem followed, bowing as she left the estate, and he could tell she was effortlessly pacing beside him as he ran.

"So, I'd like to hear the details…"

"There's a curse arts user in the village. Betty dispelled the curse on me, but others might have been cursed too. —If we're not careful, the village might be wiped out."

"—Are you serious?"

Rem gasped, her eyes wide, as she ran beside him. Subaru nodded silently in response, focusing intently on reaching the village. If the sorcerer were a rational human, such drastic measures wouldn't need to be considered. However, if Subaru's suspicions were correct, the worst could happen. That's why Subaru ran. Rem, running alongside him, also understood the gravity of the situation and ran in silence.

The two figures sliced through the night, heading for the distant village beyond the trees.

2

"Subaru, over there!"

Subaru heard Rem's voice, filled with a certain tension. Rem, who had cried out, was quite a distance ahead of Subaru's gaze. The clear outline of the village was in the direction she was pointing, and her expression indicated the same thought.

"The village is quite bright, isn't it…?"

Subaru also sensed something amiss, coming to the same conclusion. His steps were heavy, too slow for running, yet too fast for walking—his dash had slowed to that pace. Rem, unable to suppress her impatience, looked at Subaru in frustration, but he couldn't even manage a loud word, his side aching from the effort.

"Go on ahead…!"

He gestured for her to go first, but Rem shook her head. After all, the very reason she was accompanying Subaru was to monitor him;

separating now would be self-defeating. Perhaps annoyed by Subaru's sluggishness, she said,

"Oh, it can't be helped. Just try not to bite your tongue."

"Huh, wait, Rem-rin, what are you—?!"

Rem rushed back to Subaru's side, extended her arm, grabbed the scruff of his neck, and effortlessly lifted his wobbly body. It was the same overwhelming difference in physical strength she had displayed when carrying the wine barrel.

Carried on Rem's shoulder, Subaru's body was inverted, soaring through the wind. Experiencing the speed of Rem's full sprint, Subaru was speechless at her incredible physical prowess. At the same time, he was convinced that his decision to bring her along was correct.

What could a powerless and incompetent Subaru possibly accomplish by diving into the heart of the crisis alone? Securing Rem as a fighting force, including their bluffing exchange at the entrance, had been the right move.

"We've arrived. Subaru, are you alright?"

"That was fast, as expected… Now, the village's situation… Ugh, bleh, bleh."

Subaru leaned against a fence, tormented by nausea caused by the jostling and exhaustion. Ignoring Subaru's pathetic state, Rem scanned her surroundings. A villager passing by noticed their conspicuous appearance.

"Aren't you two from the mansion? At this hour…"

"Just in time. Has something happened?"

Rem seized the approaching young man and questioned him from above. He widened his eyes slightly, startled by her firm tone, and stammered, "Uh, yes."

"Actually, several of the village children are missing. We know they were playing until it got dark, but after that…”

Rem opened her mouth to press further questions at the young man’s vague words. But Subaru moved first. Still breathing heavily, Subaru put a hand on the young man’s shoulder, turning him around.

“The missing ones are Luca, Petra, and Mild?”

“Th-That’s right… Do you have any idea where they went?”

Receiving confirmation of his fears, Subaru clicked his tongue and kicked the ground, muttering, “Damn it!” Then he gazed towards the edge of the village—the fence leading to the forest.

“Who’s looking for the kids besides you?”

“The entire youth group, and the village chief.”

“The kids are in the forest. You won’t find them searching inside the village.”

The young man’s expression changed at Subaru’s assertion. He still seemed to have questions for Subaru, but Subaru patted his shoulder and started running.

“I’m going into the forest first. You tell everyone, that the kids are in the forest!”

The young man called out in question from behind, but Subaru ignored him and started running again. Rem hurried to follow. She couldn’t understand Subaru’s certainty.

“How do you know that…?”

“I know. I’ve heard it twice now—about finding them crying alone deep in the forest—”

Tall wooden fences surrounded the village. They climbed over the fence adjacent to the forest, landing on the earth, and entered the woods. They wove through the gaps between the trees, mindful of branches and muddy ground, heading deeper.

"Even within the forest, the area is too vast. Subaru, do you have any idea where they might be…?"

"If the kids' words were accurate, it should be this way…"

He proceeded relying on his memory, but his steps, tracing only what he'd heard, were heavy.

Moreover, the visibility was pitch black, and there was no way to confirm if they were going the right way. But then,

"—The barrier is broken."

At Rem's surprised cry, Subaru clenched his fist, confirming his judgment was correct. Before them, Rem pointed to a crystal embedded in a large tree. It looked as if it had lost its light ages ago, a mysterious object they had encountered several times in the forest. Subaru remembered several instances where the forest and the barrier were mentioned. When was it that Ram had directly told him not to go deep into the mountains?

"What happens if the barrier is broken?"

"Witchbeasts will cross the boundary. That's why maintaining the barrier is the villagers' duty…!"

"No point in talking about it; it's a fact in front of us. More importantly, what are witchbeasts?"

Despite her continued agitation at Subaru's question, Rem replied,

"Witchbeasts are external enemies of humanity that possess magic… It's said they were created by the Witch to harm humanity."

"The Witch again…"

Subaru frowned at the frequent appearance of that unignorable word, but he became convinced by the first part of Rem's words. He understood the sorcerer's true identity and the impending disaster threatening the village.

“—! Subaru, what are you doing?!”

Rem cried out in surprise, trying to stop him. Before her, Subaru was crossing the tree, which was part of the barrier, and heading deeper into the forest. Turning to her, surprised, Subaru offered his left hand.

“The kids are deeper in. We have to go save them.”

“Do you have proof? To cross the barrier, Lord Roswaal’s permission is…”

“The scar on the back of my hand is proof.”

He pointed to the back of his left hand—where there was a wound he had sustained when he visited the village earlier that day. It was the mark of the fangs that had surrounded the children and also “baptized” Subaru.

—Pointing to this wound, Beatrice had said:

The entity that created this scar was the one who cursed Subaru.

The being involved in all instances where Subaru was afflicted by a curse. The same entity that had the potential to attack Rem in the fourth iteration.

Only that entity could encompass all these possibilities.

“It’s the dog the kids were so fond of. What if that dog-like thing wasn’t a dog, and cursed everyone it bit?”

It was not something man-made, but like a natural disaster.

Just as there were epidemics spread by rats, if it spread explosively through animals, it was easy to imagine what would happen to a village like this.

The safety of the children who had chased that dog into the forest was also similarly at risk.

"The more time we waste, the worse it gets. I don't know if the kids are cursed, but we need to get all of them back to the mansion for an exorcism, no matter what."

"Wait. You can't make such a decision on your own—besides, the situation is too suspicious."

"Huh?"

Rem persisted, clinging to Subaru as he tried to enter the forest in his agitated state. She pointed towards the village, and by extension, the mansion.

"At a time when Lord Roswaal is absent, does such a problem arise by design? What if this isn't targeting the mansion…"

"Then what do you propose? Abandon the kids, who are undeniably in immediate danger, and return to the mansion to strengthen our defenses? If you're okay with all the villagers dying tomorrow, then that's an option."

Subaru said it, knowing himself that it was a terribly unfair thing to say. Rem was merely trying to avoid risk. That was a natural emotion, and she was by no means to blame.

Whether they remained silent or crouched down, the time for a decision would inevitably come. No matter how limited the options, they had to choose one of the cards presented before them. Of course, they could choose not to choose. However, the deepest regret when he had done that was still etched deeply in Subaru's heart.

"Rem, let's go. We have no choice but to do something about it ourselves."

"Why are you so… Subaru, how much does this village concern you…?"

Perhaps still uncertain in her judgment, Subaru heard Rem murmur so effeminately for the first time. Rem, who had always maintained a composed demeanor no matter the situation. But when faced with a decision without her trusted lord and sister, she regained the fragile, age-appropriate face of a young girl. Subaru felt a painful empathy for that human weakness. However, neither of them had the luxury of wallowing in their wounds now.

There was no time to spare, and no room for mental distress. As he urged Rem to act, Subaru's legs trembled for reasons other than fatigue, and he couldn't hide it. Of course. He knew that the entity that had caused his death twice and Rem's death once was waiting ahead. Moreover, his strongest accompanying force was not actively enthusiastic about going deeper. Considering the worst-case scenario where he might have to go alone, how could he suppress the cowardice that he had tried to hide, but which was now peeking through?

However, Subaru slapped his cheek, making himself forget his weakness. Rem looked up at the sharp sound. Receiving her gaze, Subaru took a deep breath and said in a low voice,

"—Petra, when she grows up, she wants to make clothes in the capital."

"…Huh?"

"Luca says he's going to take over from his dad, the best lumberjack in the village, and Mild wants to make a flower crown from the flowers she gathered in the field to give to her mom."

"…………"

Counting each face that came to mind behind his eyelids, Subaru continued.

"Meina was happy because her little brother or sister is going to be born soon, and the brothers Dain and Cain are competing over who gets to marry Petra."

A small laugh escaped him unintentionally. Then, he shook his head at the silent Rem.

"How can you say it doesn't concern me? I know their faces, their names, and what they want to do tomorrow."

Subaru disliked children. They were noisy, overly familiar, spoke casually, and most of all, they had no manners. They were rude, impertinent, reckless, and presumptuous, like looking into a mirror.

Subaru was far from being a good person at heart. Even when he saw reports of gruesome incidents on TV, no matter how large the numbers on paper, if it wasn't close to him, he would forget it soon after a night's sleep; he was that heartless.

That's why he disliked them, and he didn't care what happened to children who weren't close to him. Indeed, as Rem said, prioritizing Emilia and the others and staying cooped up in the mansion felt much more like something Subaru would do. But,

"We promised to do radio calisthenics again tomorrow."

During the loop on his first day of summoning, Subaru must have thought the same thing. It would be easier to abandon them. He ran because he couldn't do that.

He looked at Rem. She was wavering in her judgment. She was confused. She looked weak. She looked like she was lamenting her lack of strength. It was Subaru's own reflection.

He hated himself for steeling his resolve while looking at her, who was weaker than him right now.

He was terrified and scared out of his wits, yet he despised himself for still trying to preserve himself by using someone else. If he could even use his own cowardice, then he would.

"I keep my promises, and I make others keep them. —I will definitely do radio calisthenics with those kids again. So, we're going deeper."

—He hadn't known courage could be so terrifying.

Subaru was desperately trying to steady his trembling hands, finishing his sentence without noticing his voice was shaking.

Watching Subaru's back, Rem silently closed her eyes. If she chose not to follow, he supposed that would be unavoidable. Going back now to call the villagers would waste too much time. At the very least, he wished to tell Rem that much before leaving—

“It can’t be helped, then.”

“Rem?”

Rem looked up at Subaru, a faint smile on her lips. She looked at the surprised Subaru with an expression that showed clear emotion, perhaps for the first time.

“Rem’s assigned task is to monitor Subaru. If I let Subaru go alone here, I wouldn’t be fulfilling that, would I?”

Subaru was stunned for a moment by her teasing words, then shook his head.

“Ah, you’re right. Keep a close eye on me so I don’t do anything suspicious.”

“Yes, I will. —So, shall we go?”

Rem glided to his side, and Subaru felt as if he was truly standing beside her for the first time, and he straightened his back. He felt a ticklish sensation and was about to thank her when he noticed something.

—In Rem’s hand, as she walked beside him, a flail had somehow appeared. The iron ball, connected by a chain to an iron handle, made a light metallic sound in her hand, unbefitting its weight.

“Um, Rem-san, is that…?”

“For self-defense.”

“No, but that’s…”

“For self-defense.”

With Rem, and such a conversation, he stepped into the untrodden forest. Somehow, desperately, he managed to rekindle the courage he had just managed to squeeze out, which was beginning to wane

again.

Chapter 39:
An All-Nighter Pledge

The search through the night forest continued, Rem at the ready, wielding her self-defense iron ball.

The moonlight was blocked by the trees, and the forest's darkness, where pitch black fell, was deep. As they avoided the trees in their path and pushed through the branches, abrasions that bled slightly appeared all over Subaru's body.

As the master of the manor, Roswaal gave orders crisply, his posture and gestures full of dignity, though the size of his collar tended to obscure his grandeur. He then grinned widely at Subaru as if he had read his mind. "Buuut before that, you neeed to introduce yourself first. Luckily, all of the residents of the manor have gathered here."

The stinging pain of small wounds, and the frustration of fumbling through the dark, blindly searching.

Including the lack of time, the mental pressure these things put on Subaru was immense.

"Honestly, this much darkness was way more than I expected. Rem, how are you okay with it?"

"If we're in the forest, or the mountains, my divine protection… More importantly, please don't speak so loudly. Control your breathing, and your heartbeat is too noisy."

"Stop… you… can't…"

He retorted, breaking his words into individual hushed syllables, slowly following Rem, who was ahead.

If it weren't for her, he'd probably be lost and stuck, unable to even tell where he was. Rem's footsteps were light and unwavering as she moved forward, as if she had night vision.

She was traversing the dark forest, which Subaru couldn't even vaguely see, clearing a path to make it easier for him to follow.

In the depths of the darkness, where even moonlight was distant, the only thing he could rely on was Rem's back ahead of him. Her small body in front looked large, and he instinctively reached out and pinched the hem of her maid outfit.

"…What are you doing?"

"Just hugging onto something in the loneliness of the dark—that's the scene."

"If you're grabbing on so you don't get lost, you should properly grab my shoulder or something."

"I don't want to hinder your steady progress, but I can't stand the loneliness. That's just my bittersweet, delicate maiden heart coming out…"

"What kind of talk is that… You were a little cool just now."

Rem looked speechless, as if dumbfounded. She stopped, letting Subaru hold onto her hem, then looked around and let out a small sniff.

Subaru pointed at her police-dog-like gesture and asked,

"You've been doing that off and on, but can you really track by scent?"

"It's the one thing that can't be disguised. Appearance and voice can be faked, but the scent that emanates from one's very existence cannot."

Rem's words were brimming with confidence as she declared this. All Subaru could do was pray her sense of smell would lead them to their goal.

Suddenly, watching her, he felt like they'd had a conversation based on scent before. Back then, yes, it was definitely the 'Witch's scent' that was the problem. Rem had said he smelled of something abominable.

Thinking back, Beatrice also seemed to have said something similar about him. The situation didn't allow for it now, but if he remembered after things were settled—.

"—! Close, it's the scent of a living creature!"

Beside Subaru, who was lost in thought, Rem turned her face to the right and narrowed her eyes. Subaru followed suit, looking in the same direction, but all that greeted them was the unchanging darkness.

Feeling frustrated, he turned back to Rem and asked,

"Is it the kids' scent?!"

"I don't know, but it's not a beastly smell."

"That's good enough! Let's go!"

"This way."

Rem crouched low and ran, and Subaru followed, still holding onto her hem.

He felt a hint of excitement in Rem's voice. Their steps unconsciously quickened towards the literal light they saw in the darkness.

However, hope and anxiety are two sides of the same coin.

Rem's unconsciousness, in not definitively stating that the scent was the children's, was likely because she, too, subconsciously acknowledged that anxiety.

That's why they both needed to find an answer as quickly as possible.

Rem, leading the way, violently swung the iron ball in her hand, tearing out trees that blocked the path and creating a wide opening. Her rough method clearly showed her impatience, and Subaru, following behind, naturally pressed harder with each step.

His breath grew ragged, his legs heavy, but his mind was as sharp as ever. Gradually, his eyes began to adjust to the pitch black, and faint images of the forest began to appear in his vision.

Suddenly, the view in front of Subaru opened up. There was an open space in the forest where the trees parted. It was a small hill with an open sky, and the moonlight streaming down created an almost fantastical atmosphere.

On that small, green hill, bathed in the dazzling blessing of the moonlight—,

“It’s the kids!”

There they were, children lying sprawled on the green ground, their limbs flung out listlessly. He rushed over, and he and Rem quickly checked on their safety.

There were six of them in total. No external injuries were visible on their exposed skin, and while all of them were unconscious, they were still breathing.

“They’re alive. —They’re alive!”

Subaru clenched his fist and cheered, thinking they had made it in time.

Rem however, who had been observing the condition of a sleeping girl beside him, prefaced her next words with “No,” and said,

“They’re still breathing now, but their exhaustion is too severe. At this rate…”

“Exhaustion… A curse!”

Looking at them, the children’s faces were pale, and their ragged breaths gasped like fish out of water. Cold sweat beaded on their foreheads, and their sleeping faces looked pained, as if tormented by a nightmare.

Subaru bit his lip, objectively observing the curse—something that had attacked him many times—and asked,

“Can’t we do something, anything? Can you lift the curse, Rem?”

“Rem’s abilities are far too inadequate… If only Sister were here to see this situation.”

Like Subaru, who was spurred by impatience, Rem regretfully admitted her own powerlessness.

However, she quickly shook her head as if to shake off that weakness and said,

“In any case, I’ll cast healing magic, even if it’s just a temporary measure. We need to restore their strength, even a little.”

“Alright, please. What should I do?”

“Be vigilant of your surroundings, and gather the children in one place.”

Following Rem’s instructions, Subaru lined the children up in front of her. Looking at the children struggling to breathe with pained eyes, Rem used the iron handle to draw a circle on the ground.

A circle that completely enveloped the children. She squatted down at its edge, touched her hand to it, and began to chant,

“Water’s healing, bestow your blessing—”

Following the incantation, a faint blue light appeared within the crudely drawn circle, softly enveloping the sleeping children’s bodies, and slowly seeping into them.

Even to Subaru, who lacked knowledge of magic, the gentle, soft shimmer felt like a healing wave.

As time passed, the light permeated the children’s bodies, and gradually, their strained breathing began to calm, if only slightly.

“Amazing, Rem. With this…”

"I told you, it's a temporary measure. While I can speak to the mana in their bodies like this, it might be alright, but once it's depleted, it won't even be first aid. We need to eliminate the root cause as quickly as possible."

"Lift the curse, huh. We'll have to go back to the mansion and rely on Beako and Puck. Alright, let's go back. I'll carry the children…"

"—Subaru?"

Just as he steeled himself for an immediate retreat, Subaru was startled by his name being called.

He shifted his gaze to the sound and saw a brown-haired boy with his eyes slightly open.

The boy, who seemed to have regained consciousness, looked at Subaru with his eyes, and gasped painfully,

"Subaru, Suba…"

"You woke up, Luca. Good boy, strong boy. But don't push yourself. We'll take you back right away and get rid of whatever's making you suffer. You can leave it to me, just rest quietly for now…"

"One, deeper… still… deeper."

"…Hey, what did you say?"

Luca tried to convey something in broken words.

Subaru felt something in that fragmentary information that he couldn't ignore, so he asked again.

However his voice didn't reach Luca, who had closed his eyelids again and lost consciousness.

Subaru muttered a small "Damn it," then looked deeper into the forest,

"If the group from daytime, the missing kids… Ah, dammit, it's true. That girl with the braids isn't here."

The six sleeping here were all children whose names he knew, but the one missing was the girl who had led Subaru to the puppy during the day. She was a shy child who struggled to join Subaru's group.

Her figure was nowhere to be seen. Luca, with his brief return to consciousness, didn't say "help me" or "it hurts," but instead conveyed that "that child was taken deeper."

A child who was not even ten years old, still in a life-threatening condition, worried not about himself, but about his friend's safety.

"Damn it all."

Swearing once more, Subaru stood up.

Luca's exchange seemed to have been mostly unheard by Rem, who had a question mark floating over her head. Subaru turned to her, pointed a finger, and asked,

"Question, Rem. If we keep casting healing magic on the children, can we extend the time limit?"

"…For now, yes, but it really is just buying time. Rem would also be tied down here."

Rem's words were disjointed as she responded, unable to grasp Subaru's intention.

As he listened, Subaru's mind raced. What should he do? How should he, useless in this situation, move most effectively?

There was only one possible course of action. It would be a huge gamble, but—

"Rem. One of the children was still taken deeper. I think that's probably where the beast is."

"Deeper… but if they were taken one by one, then that means—"

Subaru stopped Rem from voicing her worst fear by holding out his palm. To her, silenced, Subaru said with a frown, "I know the situation's bad, but we somehow managed to save the lives of the kids we thought were pretty much gone. So, shouldn't we try to save the rest too?"

"You might get greedy and drop even the ones you could have brought back."

"That's why you're here, Rem, so that doesn't happen, right?"

Rem flinched, rebuffed. Subaru spread his arms in front of her.

"With your strength, Rem, carrying six kids and escaping shouldn't be impossible, right? On the other hand, I thought I was pretty strong, but I can't carry six kids. Two at most, maybe three if I push it. I can't use healing magic, and there's almost nothing I can do here. So, we should make good use of the pawn that's free."

"…………"

"I'll go check deeper. Rem, take the children and go back to the village for now. —Don't worry, I won't do anything reckless, impossible, or thoughtless. Just drop the kids off at the village, and then Rem, you can fly back."

Rem listened silently to Subaru's absurd logic.

Though her gaze didn't soften, Subaru's lips kept rambling, talking up a storm.

"The child deeper in… In the worst-case scenario, I'll turn back, but if there's still hope, I can at least buy some time."

Unable to accept Subaru's decision, Rem grabbed his sleeve and pleaded.

Was she worried about him, or simply unable to stomach his reckless plan?

Hoping it was the former, Subaru gave a wry smile and gently removed her fingers from his sleeve. Then, he took her detached fingers and said, "Don't worry, we won't lose each other."

"On what basis…"

"I have a basis."

Smiling, Subaru touched his nose with his finger, then pointed at her face and said,

"You're confident in your nose, right? I've actually been told a few times by R-rin and B-ko that I emit a pretty obnoxious smell."

Rem fell silent, her eyes wide.

He jabbed both fingers at her in her astonishment, as if taking revenge on the Rem of the past, the one this Rem didn't know.

"Even if no one else notices, you alone will notice my smell. My foul stench, the lingering scent of a sinner—right?"

"Subaru… how much do you know…?"

"Well, I don't know much at all. There's so much I don't understand, and no matter how many times I repeat yesterday, today, and tomorrow, I can't seem to reach the answer I want."

Rem made a bewildered face at the sudden change in topic. While he thought her reaction was understandable, he was also somewhat surprised at his own state of mind, being able to laugh about this.

He wanted to praise himself for having developed such thick skin.

"Just like you have a lot of things you want to ask me, I have a lot of things I want to ask you. So, after everything's settled, let's talk. All night in each other's rooms, in our pajamas, like a late-night girls' talk. Promise, okay?"

With that, he forcibly intertwined his finger with hers, which he was still holding.

Their pinky fingers linked, Rem looked at Subaru with bewildered eyes. In front of her, Subaru vigorously shook their intertwined fingers up and down.

“Pinky promise!”

“Wh-What was that just now…?”

“It’s a promise ritual from my hometown. If you break it, you have to swallow a thousand needles. It’s like one damage hit a thousand times, an instant kill move if you’re playing an RPG with only triple-digit HP.”

Subaru’s words came thick and fast, now beyond Rem’s comprehension. To Rem, who was speechless from confusion piled upon confusion, Subaru prefaced his next words with “In short,” and said,

“I trust you, Rem. So, I want to act in a way that makes you trust me too. Let’s make that promise now.”

“…”

“I told you, didn’t I? I keep my promises, and I make others keep theirs. So don’t worry, I’m completely fine.”

“Fine, you say…”

Finally unable to hold it in, Rem let out a sigh of exasperation and gave a weak laugh.

Unable to suppress the urge to laugh, Rem continued to chuckle softly, and Subaru, pulled along, also chuckled silently.

After laughing for a while, Rem lifted her head and said,

“You’ve made a promise. —I’ll really be asking you a lot of things, you know.”

“I’ll tell you anything, even the name of my first crush. Except for the name of the girl I’m currently in love with, that’s off limits.”

“I already know who.”

"But it won't reach the person herself, will it!"

Somehow, it was like a conversation they had left behind.

By recreating it, Subaru found his own satisfaction. Rem, too, with a serious expression, said,

"I'll be back soon. Please, don't do anything reckless. Lady Emilia would be angry."

"I don't want Emilia-tan to be angry either, so I'll be careful. — Well, it'll be fine. Today, I'm pretty much a demon."

"A demon…?"

"The demon version of 'godlike'! My new favorite phrase!"

He crossed his arms, spread his legs, and struck a new pose, grabbing at the empty air.

What did Rem think of Subaru's flimsy bravado?

She didn't comment on his attitude.

"See you later,"

She said, then scooped up all the children. The sight of the small girl carrying six people, albeit young ones, on her tiny shoulders looked like a street performance. Even in this situation, Subaru found himself laughing as he watched her receding back.

Alone on the small hill in the forest, in a world where silence fell, Subaru exhaled deeply, then slowly turned towards the direction he had been told to go.

"Alright then, let's do this, Subaru."

He said, as if steeling his trembling self, then bit hard on the pinky finger with which he had made the promise, and began to run.

—What awaited him ahead: despair, hope, or something else?

The fourth morning, which he had reached countless times, now felt ever distant.

Chapter 40:
The Witchbeast's Fangs

My heart raced, but I tread carefully.

Deep in the forest, Subaru continued to traverse the dark night, following Luca's words, which he'd squeezed out of a hazy consciousness.

His mouth was dry, and his throat burned with tension. He held his breath, silenced his footsteps, and pushed deeper into the perpetually dark forest. Though there was a faint hint of hesitation, there was no sign of weakness, no fear of moving forward.

Despite his big talk to Rem, Subaru didn't believe his actions were without a chance of success. He didn't think so highly of himself that he'd jump into a situation with zero chance of winning.

Just as he'd fallen from grace in his original world without reason, his self-assessment in this world was the lowest possible—likely only below someone completely clueless.

It was precisely because he made such judgments that he wouldn't commit the folly of stepping into a no-win situation. Even when there was absolutely no turning back, he'd still search for excuses, showing his small-mindedness and cowardice.

He was aware of this, and because of that, he could follow the thinnest of threads, those easily overlooked, and struggle to cling to an answer.

"Think back on the situation. If the 'Witchbeast' is really that dog…"

One tended to focus only on the terrifying implications and the curses that actually took lives, but looking at it from a broader perspective, a chance of victory emerged.

No matter how lethal the trap, the one who set it was still that fragile puppy. If the target was that thing, which fit perfectly into a child's hand and whose cuteness seemed to equate to its combat ability, then—

"I can't possibly lose… right?"

It was a pathetic way to seek victory, hoping for it based on the opponent's small size.

However, he didn't think it was a misguided idea. Subaru had already had the curse removed by Beatrice. So, if that being tried to get him again—he should be able to strike first.

The potential advantage in a fight, that thin thread, was the driving force behind Subaru's current footsteps. Of course, he was aware that this was based on the most Subaru-centric conditions aligning.

Naturally, he could imagine the worst-case scenario contradicting this, but—

"No, no, stop it. If you envision the worst pattern, the way this world's god's work is to happily cross that line and bring about an even worse situation."

Considering past results, he set up a protective barrier before suffering a terrible backlash. Even knowing that this world's way of showing affection was to mercilessly tear away that barrier and gouge out the hidden wounds beneath.

"—!"

He suddenly held his breath and stopped, sensing something amiss.

The change in the air was palpable on his skin, and he felt the temperature of the sweat on his forehead, which had been damp from exhaustion, rapidly drop.

A dense presence, unconsciously radiating intimidation, pricked his skin like needles. Just its presence alone instilled such instinctive fear.

The warmth of the air changed, and as the airflow became disturbed, it carried a foul odor. The forest, which had only smelled of dense grass and earth moments before, now reeked of a stench that made him involuntarily wrinkle his nose.

Unlike Rem's extraordinary sense of smell, even Subaru's ordinary nose could clearly detect it. It was the distinct odor of a living creature—or more plainly, a beastly smell.

Unable to stop the rising sense of dread, Subaru held his breath and moved forward.

He cautiously peeked through the gaps in the trees, looking towards the source of the smell, and realized that the thin thread he had clung to had been abruptly severed.

—It was covered in jet-black fur, blending into the deep darkness of the forest.

Its physique was comparable to a large dog. Its long limbs firmly pressed into the ground, supporting a body as heavy as Subaru's, if not more so.

Its developed claws and fangs, too large to be contained within its mouth, were a culmination of violence, evolved specifically for piercing and tearing flesh.

In the darkness, where light was blocked by branches and leaves, its two glowing red eyes were impossible to miss. They ceaselessly scanned their surroundings, looking as if they were eagerly awaiting the moment to sink their fangs into prey.

Seeing its form emerge in the darkness, it became clear.

—That peculiar appearance, from which only pure threat was extracted, that was a witchbeast.

"And that thing…"

Subaru examined its form in detail, touching his chin as he searched his memory.

The witchbeast before his eyes—he remembered it.

It closely resembled the horned creature he had fought to the death at the end of the previous loop. At first glance, he couldn't confirm the presence of a horn on its forehead. But if it was the same one—

"Did I inadvertently get my revenge last time…?"

It was no consolation, but thinking that he had managed to get a blow in made him feel a slight sense of relief.

However, just as all the events of the previous loop remained only within Subaru, that fact could not bring about any change to the current situation.

If there was any gain, it was—

"Only knowing that those claws and fangs aren't just for show…"

He wasn't expecting a scenario where the claws were fake and the fangs were just for decoration; he was just disheartened to know that the threat was genuine.

With the confirmation of the large witchbeast's presence, Subaru's resolve quickly began to wane. His already thin chance of victory had completely vanished.

According to his self-diagnosis from earlier, not being reckless was Subaru's course of action.

"Anyway, slowly…"

It was just as he was about to decide to leave the area and wait for Rem to rejoin him.

"…"

He couldn't take his eyes off the witchbeast and backed away, glaring at its strange form. Then, in the corner of his slightly widened vision, was something that caught Subaru's attention.

In the deep abyss of the forest where the witchbeast stood, there was a place where fallen trees lay piled up. Perhaps the witchbeast's dwelling was in the gaps between those fallen trees.

—Beside those fallen trees, a young girl had been discarded.

Her clothes were tattered. Her brown braids were disheveled. Blood oozed from various spots on her fair skin, and from a distance, it was impossible to tell the extent of her injuries as she lay face down.

Still, the girl—

"—Ugh."

A small, faint sound.

It traveled through the air, through the forest, and sharply struck Subaru's eardrums.

It was a distance too far to have reached him. Or perhaps it was an auditory hallucination, a mere trick of his mind.

If he looked closely, the fallen girl wasn't moving an inch, and for only her faint groan to reach him like that, it was too pathetic a wish for a miracle to grant.

Only Subaru was here. Only Natsuki Subaru.

If a miracle were to occur, if Heaven wished to save the girl, then a more reliable, strong, and valiant hero should be here.

For example, Roswaal. For example, Beatrice. For example, Reinhard.

They would have easily overcome such a situation. They wouldn't have cowered like Subaru, trembling at the knees and giving up.

They would have easily repelled the witchbeast's threat, rescued the girl from despair, and led the story to a perfect, happy ending. Amazing, cool, elegant.

However the one here was Natsuki Subaru.

He had no strength. No magic. No wisdom, nor cleverness to be resourceful. If he could cling to a miracle, he would shove aside the crowds and be the first to seize that right. He was that kind of hopeless man.

Subaru was the one who desired miracles. He couldn't possibly be a miracle.

Subaru gritted his teeth, forcing himself to endure the chattering of his jaw.

He took a deep breath, placing a hand on his chest as if to confirm his heartbeat. It was beating. It was certainly beating, but he couldn't tell if it was fast or slow.

The passage of time had become terribly ambiguous. His vision felt as if it was warping, and he wiped the sweat from his forehead, rubbed his eyelids, and tried to stick to his original intention—to remain a bystander.

Yet,

"Hey, stop it…"

A weak mumble. In his line of sight, the witchbeast turned its head slowly, looking at the fallen girl. It then scraped the ground with its sharp claws and moved towards her with deliberate steps.

One step at a time, one step at a time, as if chipping away at Subaru's heart.

He couldn't read the witchbeast's intentions. It must have been the one to drag her here. It could have killed her anytime. Yet, it had kept her alive. Now that the girl, whom it had kept alive, had moved, it was trying to stop her. It didn't make sense. It was unreasonable. It would reach her in just a few more steps. Wait, this was wrong, it didn't make sense. What should he do? He saw no chance, no hope of victory. There was nothing left to cling to, just nothing, simply—

—Emilia, surely, wouldn't hesitate.

"…Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, I'm thinking about some pretty stupid things right now."

He took a deep breath, steadied his breathing, dug his nails into his trembling knees, and bit his lip. He bit down hard enough to draw blood, awakening his consciousness with the pain.

Natsuki Subaru couldn't perform miracles. All he could do was struggle dirty, writhe, and annoy the approaching despair by throwing a tantrum and saying he hated it. That was the extent of his abilities.

Subaru didn't overestimate himself. Therefore, he knew the limits of what he could do.

At most, he could inflict a tiny scratch on fate. And if he saw that limit, that maximum extent of his abilities, then he should fulfill it.

He took off his jacket and wrapped his tattered butler uniform around his left arm. He tightened it securely to prevent it from slipping, wiped away the blood, and faced forward,

"ORA-AAAAAAH!!"

He bellowed, kicked up grass and dirt, and leaped into the area where the witchbeast was poised.

Startled by the sudden loud noise, the witchbeast flinched dramatically and sprang back, lowering its body and glaring at Subaru.

Subaru, also, encouraged himself with his shout, stomping his feet and intimidating it.

"Aaaah! Over here! Come on, look! What's wrong, are you scared!!"

He spat and yelled. His heart felt like it was about to burst, sending waves of pain throughout his body.

Right in front of him, the witchbeast, now face to face, felt much larger than he had imagined.

This was partly because he had seen it from a distance, but also largely due to being overwhelmed by its immense hostility.

What he had learned from his previous fight with a witchbeast was that even a being grandly called a “Witchbeast” still fought within the familiar confines of a regular animal.

Of course, Subaru had never had the chance to cross swords with a four-legged beast in his original world, but he had seen countless instances of humans fighting beasts in manga and anime.

Among those, the most effective strategy against an opponent whose main attack was biting would be to cover one’s arm with thick cloth, as Subaru was doing now.

Given his poor equipment, this was the only countermeasure Subaru could prepare.

Shouting, yelling, and threatening, he thrust his left arm forward to keep it at bay.

Ideally, the witchbeast would be timid and flee, pressured by Subaru’s spirit. However, as before, these creatures never let go of prey they had targeted.

In contrast to Subaru’s roar, which shattered the forest’s silence, the witchbeast, crouched low, didn’t let out a single growl. It simply coiled its limbs silently, as if calculating the timing to explode, and merely glared at Subaru.

Its demeanor clearly indicated which of them was the prey, raising Subaru’s adrenaline further, and he took another step forward, gaining momentum,

“What are you so complacent about! Come on!! Come! Co—”

It vanished.

Just like that, the witchbeast that had been in front of him melted into the darkness and disappeared.

His throat froze in astonishment, and the trembling of his eyelids made Subaru realize his mistake: he had been robbed of a moment of blinking. The witchbeast had been waiting for that brief instant when Subaru lost sight of it.

Subaru was terrified that a wild animal had engaged in such a sophisticated psychological battle, waiting for a moment of distraction from its opponent. He immediately cast his gaze in the direction where the witchbeast had vanished, and—

—The moment that scene flashed through his mind, Subaru instinctively pulled his right leg back.

"—!"

"Take that, you idiot!"

Where his right foot had been, the witchbeast's fangs snapped shut with a high-pitched crunch. He had narrowly avoided a blow that would have gouged out his nerves if he had been a moment slower. Subaru then kicked the witchbeast's unguarded torso with all his might from directly above.

It was a front kick from a compromised stance, far from his full power. But it damaged the witchbeast, which let out a whimper like a puppy and tumbled away.

Perhaps feeling humiliated by that pathetic cry, the witchbeast righted itself, glared at Subaru, and finally bared its fangs, letting out a ferocious roar.

Its red eyes were stained with fury, and its fangs clattered repeatedly in its drooling maw.

—That last strike was a fluke. He had believed that it would target his leg again, just like in the previous loop, and he had simply gotten lucky.

"Come on, come on! You're pretty pissed off, aren't you? Well, I'm even more pissed off than you are, you bastard!"

—It's coming!

An unfounded certainty, but at the same time, the witchbeast's form vanished.

When it reappeared, it was already before him, having circled to

Subaru's left. Its long fangs plunged into the arm he had extended forward.

He felt the sharp fangs pierce through the thick fabric and sink deep into the flesh beneath.

"You—!"

An intense, agonizing pain that almost made him cry out, a sharp agony that directly assaulted his brain.

But,

"—Don't want to!"

He tensed the muscles in his left arm. Naturally, the embedded fangs became harder to dislodge, and combined with the effect of the wrapped jacket, the witchbeast's movements were completely halted.

Subaru's gaze locked with the witchbeast's red eyes, and as he was almost swallowed by its overwhelming hostility,

"You bit me, you idiotic moron—!"

Subaru embraced the witchbeast's body with his left arm and spun around with all his might.

The witchbeast's body lifted due to centrifugal force, and with the momentum of the swing, he slammed it back-first into a large tree behind them.

He thought he heard a yelp of pain, but Subaru's movements didn't stop. To avoid missing the chance while he had the fangs—that lethal weapon—restrained, he swung and spun, wildly slamming the creature in his arms against trees and the ground, repeatedly.

Finally,

"This is the end!"

He brought it down from directly above onto a fallen log, aiming to crush the witchbeast's face.

A tremendous impact reverberated through his arm, and then the witchbeast, which had been struggling to free itself, suddenly went limp.

Gasping for breath at its surprisingly easy defeat, Subaru collapsed to his knees.

Looking at it, the witchbeast, still biting his left arm, had no life in its eyes. A large amount of blood spilled from its mangled head, and a tree branch that had pierced it during one of the slams protruded from its back.

Slowly, he widened its jaw and pulled out its fangs. Its tongue lolled out. Realizing that its life had completely ceased, Subaru took a deep, shaky breath.

"Did… I win?"

Dazed, he muttered only that, then removed the jacket, stained with blood and saliva, from his left arm. The skin underneath was in a terrible state; the embedded fangs had gouged out flesh, and the white bone beneath was faintly visible.

The pain he had forgotten in his excitement surged back as he looked directly at the wound.

Wincing greatly at the burning sensation,

"Anyway, ah, it hurts. Damn, the girl…"

He crawled, at a frustratingly slow pace, somehow reaching the girl beside the fallen tree deeper in the forest.

Despite it being a life-or-death battle, there was not a shred of satisfaction or sense of accomplishment from his victory. All that remained was a heavy feeling of fatigue that weighed down his body and a strong aversion, a desire to quickly erase the memory of the mutual killing intent that had just taken place.

He didn't need exhilaration or the afterglow of victory now. He just wanted to confirm, with a sense of urgency, if what he had sought at the end of this struggle had been recovered. That impatience was far stronger.

“—It’s good that it wasn’t for nothing.”

With his left arm clutched to his side, Subaru leaned his back against the fallen tree and let out a deep sigh of relief.

The girl right beside him—her body faintly soiled with dirt and blood—he could indeed confirm that the breath of life remained within her. In fact, her complexion was better than that of the children he had seen earlier, and aside from minor external injuries, the damage was extremely light. Subaru, with his exposed bone in his left arm, was in a far more severe condition.

“You made me worry… Well, it’s fine. If a girl’s body gets scarred, I’d have to take responsibility and marry her, wouldn’t I? Emilia-tan seems strict about harems.”

As relief washed over him, what returned was mental stability brought on by lighthearted remarks.

He had told Rem he would buy time, but as it turned out, he had completely eliminated the threat itself. He probably wouldn’t be punished for being a little proud.

“Buying time is good, but I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to defeat that thing, would it?”

Quite brilliant, he had achieved a long-cherished desire that hadn’t been fulfilled in the original story.

To distract himself from the pain of his injury, his rambling thoughts continued. He wanted to somehow take the girl back to the village, but he didn’t have the strength left to do so.

It would be best to calmly wait for Rem to rejoin him. This time, there was no time limit. In the worst case, he could probably just fall asleep here and it would work out.

“Though, I can’t exactly just openly doze off…”

He re-tied his loosened jacket, making it serve as a tourniquet, and sighed.

Then, Subaru suddenly heard the distant rustling of bushes.

He looked up. Just as he thought he might have mistaken the sound of the wind, the same sound came again, directly from the front—from the direction Subaru had come from.

The direction Subaru had emerged from was also the direction he had parted ways with Rem. So, the one rustling the bushes would be that charming girl with blue hair.

“I’ve been waiting forever… Unfortunately, your opponent isn’t around anymore.”

He prepared a line he’d always wanted to say, waiting for the girl he was meeting to burst out.

The grass and trees rustled, and he sensed a presence stopping just beyond the bushes. He felt eyes observing him, and Subaru gave a wry smile.

There was no longer an enemy to be wary of, he thought, and raised his right hand to signal, —And then, his whole body registered it: the suffocating, beastly stench returned.

The bushes rustled, and from beyond, a low, four-legged shadow stepped out.

Then,

“Oh… you’ve got to be kidding me…”

Numerous points of light—glowing red eyes that cut through the night forest—peeked out from beyond the cluster of trees directly in front of him.

There were so many he hated to count them, likely more than he had fingers and toes combined.

Holding his left arm, he stood up, surveyed the points of light floating in the darkness, and let out a deep breath.

Subaru suddenly touched his cheek with his right hand and realized it was contorted. The corner of his mouth twitched, forming a smile.

Ah, he understood. Indeed, this, involuntarily, made him laugh.

“—I’m dead, aren’t I?”

Overwhelming killing intent exploded with those words, and the silent forest was swallowed by madness.

All Subaru could do was shield the still unconscious girl behind him, spread his arms, and stand his ground, showing his resolve.

—A scream, trailing high, high into the forest sky.

Chapter 41:
Oni

A guttural cry escaped Subaru's throat, echoing through the deep, dark forest.

It was an inarticulate burst of sound, neither "ah" nor "oh," utterly devoid of meaning. Even as it tore from his own throat, Subaru couldn't find a reason or purpose for the act.

A multitude of crimson lights darted towards him. As they drew closer, their outlines sharpened, revealing raven-black beasts with bared fangs, lunging for the attack.

There was no time to register the trembling in his legs, the terror in his heart, or the screams of his soul. In that moment, Subaru's mind wasn't consumed by the overwhelming embodiment of "death" closing in, but solely by the safety of the girl lying just behind him.

He spread his stance, extended both arms, and used his body as a shield, preventing the beasts' claws and fangs from reaching her. It wasn't a conscious decision; his body simply moved on its own. If only his opponent had been the kind to back down easily in the face of such resolve, he might have been saved. But the reality pressing in was merciless. Before the raw, untamed hunger of the beasts, such sentiment held no meaning.

—It's over. After coming all this way, just when I finally saw the whole picture.

He still wasn't strong enough. He still couldn't reach. No matter how much his heart struggled not to yield, a sheer lack of power stripped Subaru of his options. Was this situation also fated to be the same?

"—!!"

He roared, refusing to accept defeat. That much, at least, he wouldn't yield to any of the crimson lights before him. He held onto his fighting spirit, a literal bluff, a hollow threat —fangs clamped down on his windpipe,

—Then, before his eyes, he saw a witchbeast's head explode like an overripe fruit.

The close-range pulverization sent blood spattering, drenching Subaru head-to-toe in fresh crimson. Immediately after, the headless body, still propelled by its momentum, slammed into Subaru. He was thrown backward, tumbling, and as he shook his head to clear the pain and the nauseating feeling of blood, he staggered to his feet.

What in the—

"Sorry for the delay—but Rem is glad she made it in time."

With an elegant swish of her skirt, a white apron dress daintily held in one hand and a menacing iron flail in the other, a blue-haired girl descended into the abyss. She spun, taking a graceful step, the clinking of her chain echoing.

"I thought the plan was for you to focus on stalling?"

"I did my best! I stalled for an insane amount of time! I went all out, like it wouldn't matter if I defeated them! And this is the result, thank you very much!"

Subaru literally prostrated himself in gratitude to Rem, who was making the morning star's chain clang in a high-pitched rhythm. Rem, observing his reaction, slowly turned her gaze to what was in front of her—a horde of witchbeasts, licking their chops and eyeing them, anticipating the arrival of new prey.

The creatures that had been so aggressive towards Subaru alone had now turned cautious with the addition of a single, small girl. They weren't underestimating the fact that one of their pack had been instantly slaughtered. As he'd realized from their previous encounter with that one beast, despite their brutish appearance, these creatures were remarkably cunning and sly.

"Rem…"

He called out to her towering back, urging her to stay alert. Rem didn't turn at Subaru's slightly lowered tone, merely exhaling.

"After tracking Subaru's terrible body odor and rushing here because of your incredibly loud, shameless shrieking, this is what Rem finds. You're in a dreadful state, aren't you?"

"My 'terrible body odor' is a bit of a low blow. Also, I'm not aware of it myself, but I'd like to know in detail what I was screaming just now."

"If Rem feels like it, and if they allow it, I don't mind telling you in full detail."

Pointing forward with the iron handle, Rem's eyes gleamed with a dangerous light, as if challenging them. While Subaru's blood ran cold, the witchbeasts, on the receiving end of that hostility, didn't seem to be taking it calmly. Clear signs of battle readiness and an eager anticipation of domination emerged in the eyes of those who had been silently glaring at them.

"It seems that won't be possible."

"—Rem!"

Unable to hold back, Subaru involuntarily called out Rem's name, his voice high, almost a shriek.

Before her, two witchbeasts suddenly unleashed a ferocious attack, splitting left and right. Had it been Subaru facing them, he would have been unable to keep up, unable to decide which way to focus, and easily torn apart by their poisonous fangs.

But,

"—Hup!"

Her right arm, gripping the iron handle, swung as if casually swatting a fly. The chain attached to the handle followed its rotation, and the flail linked to the chain dutifully followed. The destructive weapon, which should have been cumbersome, spun with incredible speed. Following the swing of her arm, it swept away everything in its path, directly striking a witchbeast's torso and blowing it clean in half. Bones and organs splattered, quickly transforming into forest fertilizer, unnoticed by anyone.

Meanwhile, the surviving partner, whose comrade had been instantly killed, channeled all its rage into its fangs, delivering a sharp blow to Rem's exposed left side—just before her left fist crashed down on the witchbeast's snout from directly above. The force of the punch caved in its skull, killing it instantly with a blow that buried its head in the ground.

It was a brilliantly executed maneuver. But its brutality was far from what one would call brilliant.

Praise was far from his mind. Subaru's eyes were wide, and he could do nothing but stare in stunned disbelief at the massacre unfolding before him.

He thought he knew Rem's destructive power firsthand. It became unequivocally clear that his understanding was merely a "thought."

"S-So stronggggggg!!"

"Rem wonders if that's an appropriate thing to say to a lady, Subaru."

"My vocabulary's too poor for me to think of any other words to describe this situation. Seriously, you're amazing!"

Overwhelmed by Rem's unexpected reliability, Subaru scrambled to his feet and returned to his original position. The crawling Subaru checked on the unconscious girl. Despite the moment of absolute peril, and the ongoing threat to her life, the sleeping girl remained profoundly unconscious, unaware of it all.

"My, how carefree and optimistic. She'll surely grow up to be a cheerful and tenacious child!"

Praising her profound sleep, he used his aching arm to carefully lift her small body. He readjusted his grip, holding her light weight securely.

"Rem, can you actually wipe them all out by yourself?!"

"We are outnumbered. It would be a losing battle."

"Right, I figured. In that case…"

He moved to Rem's side, still holding the girl. The witchbeasts, having lost two more from their pack, were slow to react. They crouched low, trying to gauge their next move, their eyes gleaming with intimidation, but lacked the impetus to act. If they had attempted an infiltration strategy, relying on their numbers, Subaru and his group, inferior in strength, would have been wiped out instantly. However, they mistook caution for cowardice and chose the least optimal path.

Therefore, Subaru and Rem, almost simultaneously, fixed their eyes on the same spot.

"There!"

Rem's strike answered Subaru's shout. The flail's roar tore through the air, celebrating slaughter. It found its mark, exploding the ground just in front of the densely packed mabeast horde—sending clumps of earth and dust flying, and a torrent of debris obscured the retreating witchbeasts' vision for several seconds.

"Now—!"

At Rem's next shout, Subaru's body bolted forward as if kicked. His destination: a single point of breakthrough in the dense area, where the previous blow had forced an opening in their encirclement.

As Subaru plunged into the gap, a witchbeast that had yielded the way roared. The beast roared and leaped again, attempting to block Subaru's path, but—

"—Whoa, trauma sound!!"

A light clinking of chains gently caressed his ear as it passed by. A shiver ran down Subaru's spine at the familiar sound. Right beside him, the flail's welcome exploded, and a burst of blood blossomed like a solitary flower in the night forest.

Leaving the fresh blood behind, he stepped on uncertain ground, plunged into the forest amidst immense hostility. He leaped over tree roots, his cheek brushing against branches.

“Rem, I don’t know where I’m going!”

“Straight ahead, forward. Once we pass through the barrier, the fight will be decided. Until then, do not lose your sense of direction!”

“Straight ahead,” she said, but “ahead” was elusive. He hadn’t realized that the darkness, where he could only see a mere few feet ahead, would so thoroughly disorient him. Even if he tried to feel his way forward, both his hands were occupied by the weight of the girl. Naturally, Subaru was forced to curl his body, minimizing harm to the girl, while keeping an eye on obstacles ahead as he ran.

He was out of breath. Had he lost his way? Would they catch up? Would they get ahead, surround them? His anxieties were endless, and the rising fear steadily eroded Subaru’s spirit.

His left arm felt numb, and the unceasing bleeding dripped from the fabric of his jacket. The drops of blood falling to the ground almost made him feel as if he was leaving a trail for his pursuers.

Running, dashing, constantly fleeing. The scenery remained the same, making him feel as though he hadn’t moved an inch. Though he knew that wasn’t true, desperation spurred on that illusion.

Whenever weakness swelled in his chest, whenever his knees threatened to buckle,

—From behind, the surging sound of chains spurred Subaru on.

Each time he heard that sound, Subaru grit his teeth and looked forward. He was able to run like this now thanks to Rem. Because she eliminated external threats and protected his back, he was able to continue living this shameful existence. Since he’d already exposed himself this much, he might as well throw caution to the wind and desperately cling to life.

“Ah, damn it! My side aches—!”

He cried out in frustration, pushing himself forward with each step. Forward, ever forward—!

Then, suddenly, the darkness opened before Subaru's eyes. His vision expanded, and he instinctively squinted at the sudden light. In the distance, he saw artificial light.

"Rem! Light! People… we're reaching the barrier!"

At the literal appearance of light, Subaru turned his head back to convey his joy. However, he instantly stared in shock.

Behind him, Rem, who had been fighting to protect Subaru's back, was a horrifying sight. Her impeccably tailored maid uniform was shredded in countless places by claws or fangs. Numerous shallow wounds marred her exposed white skin, and her once vibrant blue hair was so disheveled and caked with so much splattered blood that its original color was almost indistinguishable.

"Rem—!"

"Run! …While Rem can still be Rem!"

Subaru's voice, full of concern, was cut off by her strong words from behind. He couldn't accept it. But her shout banished his hesitation, and he ran towards the barrier. All sentimentality was put aside. If only he could just pass through the barrier, just get through there—

"What…?"

His resolve was immediately shattered by an unexpected sight. Subaru's dumbfounded gaze was directed towards the glow of the crystal that powered the barrier, right next to the great tree where it was embedded. His gaze was low, almost parallel to the ground. There, a small, tiny shadow crouched.

As he drew closer, and its outline became clearer, Subaru's eyes widened. It was a small creature.

Its body was small enough to be completely enveloped by both his arms, and its fur was as soft as cotton. He knew it was incomparable to the larger ones.

—It was the witchbeast puppy that had guided Subaru to the village.

"I haven't seen you around, but… I can kick your ass, even you!"

If it was trying to block his way, it was clearly out of its depth. If it intended to stand as the final obstacle in this escape, he had to say its thinking was shallow. But Subaru's thoughts—

"No way…"

—were swept away by the torrent of mud and earth that unfolded before his eyes, completely filling his vision. It was a sight that made him realize that the shallow thinker was, in fact, himself.

The world slowly, gradually slowed down. Subaru understood from experience that this was a grace period granted by being on the verge of death. In this world where everything moved sluggishly, he belatedly realized something. Before entering the forest, Rem had told Subaru this:

—Witchbeasts are external enemies of humanity, possessing magic.

She didn't say they could use curses. She said they possessed magic. Didn't that also mean they could use this kind of magic?

"Oooohhh—!!"

He thrust his feet sideways, abruptly braking his sprint. But it was useless. His stumbling body lost its balance, and the mudslide was already upon him. There was no way to evade. And if he was swallowed by the current, the frenzied dance of sand and stones would tear his body apart in an instant.

All was lost. The moment that thought crossed his mind, Subaru braced himself to at least throw the girl in his arms sideways—when a shock from his direct side sent him flying, tearing through trees.

"Gahhh?!"

He screamed as he was blasted away, struck on his right flank with enough force to feel like his organs were spilling out. In the gravity-defying sensation of up, down, left, and right blurring together, he instinctively curled his body to protect the girl, then slammed his back into a thick tree trunk, the impact stealing his breath, and he fell to the ground.

“Gah, ugh, ah… It hurts…!”

He groaned in pain, rubbing his battered abdomen as he looked up. And then, he stared directly at Rem, who had been launched high into the trees by the direct impact of the mudslide.

Rem’s small body spun lightly like a leaf, receiving the rough welcome of dirt and stones. Her splattering blood marked a clear distinction from her earlier appearance, already caked with return blood, making it clear even to an untrained eye that she had sustained seriously bad damage.

Rem fell spectacularly to the ground, unable to even break her fall. The only saving grace was that the ground, tilled by the mudslide, didn’t shatter the fallen girl’s head.

At this point, even the slow-witted Subaru understood the situation. Rem had sacrificed her own time to evade, pushing Subaru away from the mudslide. And she, herself, had borne the full brunt of the impact. Of course, it was a force that Subaru himself couldn’t have withstood. But if Rem became a sacrifice for it, it was meaningless.

“Rem, you idiot! You, like this… I, if this happens…!”

The moment he almost shouted “What for?”, a chill ran down Subaru’s spine. Perhaps they had experienced the same sensation. The witchbeast that had unleashed the mudslide, and the pursuing horde that had caught up, all halted their movements simultaneously.

There was a premonition. A certainty. Only a dense aura of “death” permeated the air.

—Slowly, Rem’s fallen body began to rise.

Despite taking such a flamboyant attack, there was no sign of injury in her movements as she stood up. On the contrary, the wounds she had sustained visibly closed before his eyes. Her terrifying regenerative power radiated intense heat, causing her blood to evaporate and even create a reddish mist.

Then, Subaru saw it.

Rem, her eyes devoid of reason, surveying her surroundings. Her blood-soaked face distorted into an ecstatic grin, and most importantly—from her head, where her hair ornament had come loose, a white horn had sprouted.

“Ah ha, ha ha ha—”

Laughter. It was like a child’s, a laugh overflowing with raw cruelty.

Spinning around, Rem’s body, carried by the wind, charged into the horde. Before the leading witchbeast, which had halted, could react, its nape was crushed under Rem’s heel. The witchbeast, killed by a throat crush from above, was kicked hard, keeping the other witchbeasts in the rear at bay. One by one, as they stopped moving, she repeatedly brought down the morning star in her hand—its chain retracted into the iron handle, transforming it into a mace—producing blood blossoms and corpses one after another.

“Witchbeasts, witchbeasts, witchbeasts —Witch!!”

What was most terrifying was that Rem, with her reason-lost eyes, hadn’t lost her sanity. Even as she surrendered to her surging bestiality, she wasn’t losing track of the situation. With overwhelming power, she was unleashing some kind of unresolved karma simmering within her.

Blood burst, skulls shattered, intestines and brains splattered into the forest with incredible force. Kneeling, forgetting his pain, Subaru stared at the scene.

He didn’t have the courage to speak now. If he did, if he entered the consciousness of the raging Rem, he had an inexplicable feeling that he would be killed, even though it shouldn't be possible.

Perhaps it wasn't a misconception. Rem seemed that far beyond normal right now. Her appearance, her grotesque form with blood splattered all over and her crazed laughter echoing through the forest, was truly—

"—An oni."

No matter how much blood she was drenched in, her white horn remained pristine. On the top of her head, it gleamed with a sharp point, as if loudly proclaiming its existence.

Subaru was overwhelmed by the situation. But unlike Subaru, who was paralyzed, the witchbeasts wouldn't just sit there and wait to be slaughtered. Individuals who broke free from the paralysis began to surround Rem one after another. Even as the number of corpses piled up with each blow, they slowly reached her body with their claws and fangs.

They were outnumbered to begin with. The number of witchbeasts, which had already increased from the initial pack size during their movement through the forest, was immeasurable. Though a number equivalent to the initial pack had probably already been annihilated, crimson lights continued to spring up incessantly in the dark night.

"No matter how strong she is in 'strongest mode,' she can't last forever against infinite spawns…"

The situation was changing rapidly, but at its core, Subaru and the others remained at a disadvantage. Realizing this objectively, Subaru cut himself off as he sensed another surge of magical power.

The mana was concentrating again, at the puppy. The mana in the air was being completely drawn there, and his vision twisted as if warped. Rem must have felt the magical vortex. She turned, her hand-blade, which had just ripped out a witchbeast's internal organs, poised to deal with the threat, ready to strike towards the puppy—but,

—Not missing the opportunity as she was about to rush forward, the horde of witchbeasts simultaneously pounced on her back.

"—!"

A sense of disarray. Even Rem, in her berserk state, seemed utterly bewildered by the situation beyond her comprehension. Emotion returned to her previously reasonless eyes, her blood-soaked savage grin faltered, and beneath it emerged the face of a grief-stricken girl.

—Ah, so she can make that kind of face too, he thought idly, as—

"—GaaahhHHHHHHH!!!"

A searing pain in his crushed left arm ripped a throat-shredding scream from Subaru.

Immediately after, the simultaneous sensation of fangs digging into his right leg, left flank, and back. His vision turned crimson. The pain was no longer recognizable as pain. His ankle was crushed. A chunk of flesh was cleanly taken from his side. Blood, contents, spilled out. Dripped. What a waste. His flesh and blood.

"Subaru—!!"

He heard a screaming voice. Even trying to lift his head towards the sound, his body was no longer free. He lost his balance. His other ankle, the one not crushed, was also half-torn, making the severity of his wounds just right. He collapsed onto the ground. Right before his eyes, a gaping maw lined with fangs loomed. Fangs aimed at his windpipe. They were crushed between an iron ball and the ground right in front of him. Blood splattered. His own blood, or theirs?

His consciousness flickered. He didn't know what would happen when it disappeared. His life was draining away. He thought to himself what a foolish thing he had done. It would negate the meaning of starting over, and being too fixated on that was putting the cart before the horse.

It hurt, it was painful, it was distant, he couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, his life was wearing away. From the hole in his side, his life was spilling out like sand from an hourglass.

Disappearing, ending, everything—I am.

“Don’t die, don’t die, don’t die—!”

A tearful voice. Crying.

I am—

Chapter 42:
Steamed Potatoes

1

My consciousness drifts far away, bobbing on the waves.

Amidst the flickering ripples, in a hazy slumber, it floats and sinks between dream and reality.

“—Is there any other way to save him?”

“—That’s all, I suppose. The rest is up to you, in fact.”

Voices talking, far, or perhaps near, at the boundary between beyond and here.

Pleas, rejections, tearful voices, voices devoid of emotion. Voices.

Suddenly, a soft sensation envelops my palm.

It’s the touch of someone’s hand, I recall from memories of having felt it many times before. I must have felt this warmth like this before.

Then, the sensation of that palm suddenly moves away.

Leaving my hand, far, far away, so high I can’t reach… and,

“—I will definitely save you.”

Only that strong resolve remains, leaving me behind.

Everything vanishes, leaves, goes away. Far, far away.

And then—

2

This must be, what, the tenth time I’ve been forcibly knocked unconscious and woken up like this?

Subaru vaguely thought, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling patterns. There's an old pillow talk cliché about counting the stains to pass the time, but if I were to count the stains at this world's cultural level, it'd take forever, he thought with a wry smile —a sudden spasm in his side made him groan.

"O-Ow, that hurts…"

He reached for his aching side, and a strange sensation exploded in his left arm. Following the feeling, he brought his left hand to his face and understood completely at the sight of its grotesque state.

From his fingertips to his wrist, his left arm was covered in white, raised scars. Furthermore, these scars were connected by distorted, clumsy threads, so much so that if someone said a child who was bad at sewing had stitched him up haphazardly, he would have believed them.

The odd sensation wasn't limited to just his arm. When he lifted his shirt, he saw similar stitching on his spasming right side. And then both his ankles, around his right bicep, his right shoulder, and even his backside—the list was endless. All of them bore scars and stitches, making him feel like some kind of cyborg.

As he gently touched various parts of his altered body, a faint pain brought his memories slowly trickling back. That's right, he'd gone into the depths of the forest to look for the children, and then he encountered a witchbeast—

"I really thought I was dead…"

He'd shielded Rem, taking the full force of the witchbeast's fangs. The beast's jaws should have easily crushed Subaru's flesh, tearing and ripping him apart like rags. He'd felt his life draining away and had been half-convinced it was over.

"Mummy… no, that's not right. Seeing how much I've been sewn up with needle and thread, a jiangshi-like image is probably more accurate."

Or perhaps, if he had a screw driven into his head, he'd be Frankenstein's monster. He mused this far, then suddenly realized how carefree he was being.

"—Right. This is no time for jokes. What about Rem and the children?"

Subaru sprang up from the simple cot and looked around to assess his surroundings. The unfamiliar ceiling, the crude bed. A cramped room with shabby furniture—this was definitely not the Roswaal Mansion.

Then, right by the entrance—he noticed a silver-haired girl sitting on a wooden chair, her face bowed in sleep.

"Emilia-tan."

She didn't respond to his call. Her slumber seemed deep, her breathing quite profound. Her beautiful silver hair, usually so neat, was slightly disheveled, as if she hadn't had time to fix it. More importantly, her clothes were badly stained with blood and mud.

His own injuries. Waking up in this bed. Emilia, sleeping on a chair right beside him. And her clothes, soiled with blood. Considering these points, even Subaru, as slow-witted as he was, could grasp the situation. In short,

"Looks like I owe Emilia-tan another one…"

"I wonder about that. While I do think you should be grateful to Lia to some extent, I think there's someone else you should be more grateful to this time."

A gray cat, emerging from behind Emilia's silver hair, responded to Subaru's self-reproachful murmur. He gently nudged Emilia's cheek with his paw, then floated up to Subaru's face.

"Oh, good morning. How do you feel, now that you're awake?"

"It's hard to say 'great.' I must be a cyborg without even realizing it. I almost want to escape before they mess with my brain and become a masked hero seeking revenge on the organization."

“Cyborg… Oh, you mean the threads. It was an unavoidable procedure. Simply to heal you, your internal mana wasn’t enough. We had to rely on tools just to piece you back together. Without them, you’d probably be in pieces right now, you know?”

“That’s a chilling thought! Even so, couldn’t someone better at sewing have done it?”

Even if he didn’t mind the stitches themselves, he wanted to complain about the shoddy workmanship. Especially as someone who held the title of “Sewing Level S,” he felt like he wanted to teach them the basics. To Subaru’s words, Puck waved his paw, saying, “No, no.”

“It’s been a long time since I put a needle through a human body. My hands were shaking all over the place, it was quite a struggle.”

“You, of all people?! How did you even manage to sew with that tiny body of yours?!”

“It was easy because you weren’t moving. Your bleeding was severe, so I froze a lot of the wounds while working on them, but you’ll have to bear with that.”

“So that’s why the scars are strangely white… I’m a man, so I won’t fuss about the marks remaining or anything, but still.”

Subaru looked over the various scars, then turned back to Puck. Puck looked surprised at Subaru’s posture, but Subaru bowed deeply to the black-eyed cat.

“You saved me, thank you. I’ve gotten my life back again.”

“Mm-hmm, being honest is a good thing. This time, you did something deserving of it. It would be too unfair for you to collapse after all that. So, it’s fine, really.”

Puck responded to Subaru’s words of gratitude without a hint of shyness. Feeling a weight lift from his chest at Puck’s words, Subaru began, “Well then.”

“It’s flattering that you say I ‘did something deserving,’ but… what actually happened after that? Honestly, I don't remember anything after being chomped on by those dogs in the forest."

"'Chomped on' is a cute way to put it. Judging by your condition when you were brought in, I'd have thought it was more like 'CRUNCH-SQUISH-RIP-RIP-MUNCH-GUSH!'"

"Hey, with those sound effects, I'm definitely dead! That's a 'missing five or six arms' scenario, and I alone wouldn't be enough!"

"Right, so, the blue-haired maid girl was in quite a bad state too."

Puck's casual remark made Subaru's throat involuntarily constrict. Puck then added, "However," to Subaru's reaction.

"In her case, the effects of her onification make her wounds heal incredibly fast. By the time she carried Subaru back to the village, there were no visible injuries. She didn't even need healing magic."

"Don't scare me unnecessarily! …Anyway, Rem made it back to the village then. And the other person, the one who was carried back with me?"

"They were there, so rest assured. Six children plus one, makes seven. It's a good thing you and the blue-haired girl were strong. Your judgment was spot on in the end."

Puck clapped his paws together, making no sound with his mouth. The softness of his paw pads prevented any clapping noise. Subaru's lips almost curved into a smile at the comforting sight, but he shook his head to banish it.

"Puck, I have a few questions. Is that alright?"

"Only if you speak softly, so Lia doesn't wake up. I manifest using the mana I gather overnight, but when I was out last night, I was using Lia's Od."

"Od?"

"Mana is what you absorb from the outside world. Od, on the other hand, is literally the power of the soul, inherent to a living being's body. Unlike mana, using Od drains one's life force, so I prefer not to use it much."

As he spoke, Puck glanced at Emilia as if looking at a troubled daughter. Subaru, drawn into gazing at her sleeping face, easily accepted Puck's words. He could imagine Emilia, if she needed to sacrifice herself to help someone, wouldn't hesitate. If Puck needed to appear last night, and if it meant drawing on her own life force, she wouldn't have hesitated for a moment.

"So, that means Emilia-tan helped me even at the cost of her own life force?"

That too. My main role yesterday was for the children—the ones Subaru brought back from the forest. My purpose was to remove their curses."

"Remove curses… That's right! That happened too. Are the children okay? What about the curses?"

"They're also fine."

"The healing magic helped suppress the weakening quite a bit, and the curse removal went well, so there are no problems. I definitely removed the children's curses."

Puck thumped his own chest as if to give his seal of approval. Subaru let out a deep breath at the sight, relieved that his actions hadn't been meaningless. And, as is human nature when relieved,

"Oh."

Immediately after the feeling of relief filled his chest, Subaru's stomach let out a loud growl. He touched his belly, feeling something akin to pain in its emptiness, and remembered that he had missed dinner last night.

"By the way, I don't get hungry as long as I absorb mana."

"I didn't ask, but okay. Still, since mana is everywhere, you're like a plant, full just by breathing air."

"I don't need water or sunlight either. All I need is love. It's an important thing you should never forget when dealing with spirits."

"Alright, alright. Can I go outside?"

He pointed to the door and asked. Puck, with his arms crossed, nodded several times.

"I think that's a good idea. You should move around a bit and check yourself, now that you're in one piece. Oh, and the threads will be absorbed into your body and disappear on their own once your body gets used to them."

"Oh, good. It'd be hard to look stylish with these worm-like stitches. It's like I was born two hundred light-years too early or something."

Puck tilted his head with a smile at Subaru's full-blown joke. It seemed he didn't get it. It was supposed to be a golden setup, starting with "Light-year is a unit of distance," and leading to a joke about "different planet's sense of style."

With Puck's permission, Subaru headed out of the room. On his way, he gave a small bow to Emilia, who was sleeping right next to the door. As he bowed, her peaceful sleeping face caught his eye, and he was filled with the urge to ruffle her hair, but the watchful eyes of her guardian nearby made him give up. He exited the room. And then,

"Ah, well, I guess that's to be expected."

Stepping out of the room and poking his head outside the building from the front entrance, Subaru muttered this at the commotion in the village.

It was still early morning, just after sunrise, but many figures had already gathered in the village square. It was a small settlement. The number of people there suggested that almost the entire village population was present. Elderly people, women, and children huddled together anxiously, while a group led by strong young men surrounded them protectively.

The group surrounding the villagers protectively was the youth corps, who had also worked tirelessly searching for the children last night. Subaru twisted his neck, unable to find the faces he was looking for within their circle, and then headed towards another building that seemed to have a lot of people going in and out. But before that,

"—Barusu, you're awake."

A voice called from behind, and Subaru stopped and turned around. He recognized the way he was addressed immediately, but seeing her face still brought an overwhelming sense of relief.

Standing behind him was the pink-haired maid—Ram. She had the sleeves of her familiar maid uniform rolled up, carrying a large amount of steamed potatoes in a basket-like container.

A faint, almost salty aroma wafted from the slightly steaming potatoes, making Subaru's hungry stomach cheer with anticipation and excitement. Ram snorted "Hmph" at Subaru, whose stomach growled with a sound similar to the onomatopoeia Puck had used earlier.

"To worry us so much with such severe injuries, then to immediately ask for food upon waking, how unsightly. Did getting bitten by a dog make you catch 'dog-ness'?"

"I could go on about what 'catching dog-ness' even means, but… so, you actually were worried about me, huh?"

He straightened his back, bent down, and swayed his body from side to side as he approached Ram with a smug look. Ram narrowed her eyes at Subaru's teasing attitude.

"Eat this."

"Urfgh!"

A steamed potato was forcefully shoved into his mouth, literally crushing his throat. On top of that, scorching heat ravaged his mouth, and Subaru gasped wildly like an animal, looking upwards, "Haff! Haff!" Then,

“I thought I was gonna die! But yes, it was delicious!”

“It was delicious, wasn’t it? Freshly made… no, freshly steamed.”

“What’s with that smug look, it’s irritating! I can’t deny how delicious it was though!”

“Yes, yes, here’s another one, now quietly devour it.”

He was handed a potato and took it playfully, like a child. Ram looked at Subaru with a scornful gaze for a moment, then said,

“Well, regarding last night’s incident, I’ll honestly thank you. Good work.”

“Good work? You’re always so condescending. No, it’s fine, but… is this something you’d even thank me for?”

“If any harm comes to the villagers, the lord’s responsibility is questioned. Thinking about what would have happened if the children had been threatened by that pack of Ulgarms… your actions were correct, Barusu.”

“Ulgarms, huh…”

That must be the name of those black witchbeasts. What a grand name. Just hearing it made it clear that they were the kind of beings that threatened your life upon encounter. Subaru nodded, and Ram looked towards the forest.

“The barrier that seemed to have frayed last night has been re-weaved. After that, I spent the whole night checking if there were any problems with the barrier, so no witchbeasts should be able to get through here.”

“Unless we leave from here, right? It’d be pointless if the kids crossed the barrier, went to the other side, and came back with a baby.”

“That stings a bit. Since the barrier was put up, there haven’t even been skirmishes with witchbeasts, so we let our guard down. —I'll make sure to tell them."

Her tone was a bit less gentle, likely because she, too, was irritated. For Subaru, it was the unpleasantness of being caught up in it, but for her, it was probably directed at the villagers who didn't properly follow Roswaal's instructions. Considering her excessive loyalty, he couldn't help but pity the villagers who would be lectured.

"Don't overdo it. Honestly, you had injuries that would have surely killed you if it weren't for the Great Spirit and Lady Beatrice."

"Beako's name came up, so I owe her one too… Damn it!"

"Even if it was at the Great Spirit's request, it's rare for Lady Beatrice to leave the Forbidden Library, let alone the mansion. Though she can't act at her full power outside the mansion."

Subaru regained his balance with Ram's support and lightly shook his head. He felt as if he was low on blood. There was a similar languor to his first morning at the Roswaal Mansion, and the heaviness in his limbs was probably due to a severe mana deficiency. Puck had said he had been sewn back together from serious injuries. Given Subaru's naturally low mana reserves, it wasn't surprising that they were depleted.

"I'll watch the village's progress a little longer before returning to the mansion. I'm also concerned about the children whose curses were removed… and the measures against the Ulgarms."

"Measures, you say? Isn't just putting up a barrier enough?"

"It might have been enough for the skirmishes we had until now."

Ram replied to Subaru's slight question with her usual expressionless face. But as her supposedly emotionless eyes met his, Subaru's spine tingled as if pierced by ice, and he couldn't stop the goosebumps. She spoke to Subaru, enunciating each word as if chewing on them:

"To allow the village to be harmed, and especially Barusu, who is connected to Lord Roswaal's mansion, to suffer this much, and then to simply resolve it with non-interference, is unthinkable."

"Wh-What do you intend to do…?"

Subaru, who had involuntarily switched to formal speech, saw Ram suddenly shed her intimidating aura. She lightly ran her fingers through her pink hair.

"We will eradicate them. —However, that will happen after Roswaal-sama returns. Once Roswaal-sama is back, it won't take much time."

Subaru had no room to object to her words of complete trust. While he didn't know the extent of Roswaal's power, he understood the immense trust Ram placed in him.

Afterward, Subaru "stole" two more steamed potatoes from Ram before they parted ways. After they separated, she headed towards the group of villagers who were still huddled together, looking anxious. This was likely her way of showing concern. The fact that her expression of concern was steamed potatoes was very much in line with Ram's detached personality.

"These steamed potatoes are delicious. The saltiness is truly exquisite."

Chewing on the steamed potato he had received, Subaru continued to wander around the village.

While checking his physical condition, he also simultaneously confirmed the safety of the children who had been retrieved from the forest. The children themselves were still asleep due to the fatigue from last night and mana depletion from the curse removal, but their parents showered him with excessive gratitude. Honestly, Subaru, who hadn't done it for thanks, panicked terribly, was more flustered than ever, and ended up choosing to escape out of embarrassment without even managing a decent joke.

Sweating nervously from the unexpected welcome, Subaru decided he had accomplished his main objectives. He returned to the room where he had initially slept, intending to wait for Emilia to wake up, and then realized he hadn't yet seen the blue-haired girl.

—Suddenly, the image of an Oni, bathed in blood and roaring with laughter, flashed through his mind.

At that instant, it wasn't fear that made Subaru tremble, he thought. It was a more overwhelming, inexpressible emotion, like being in the presence of a being far superior, one that he had to look up to as a living creature. Perhaps, people would call it awe.

With a white horn growing from her forehead, her figure, using inhuman strength to slaughter witchbeasts, was precisely the image of an Oni from ancient legends. He wondered if he could act normally in front of her after seeing that.

"No, no, if I was fine with Ram, who's her twin, what am I worried about? If Rem's an Oni, Ram's an Oni too, right… Wait, haven't I had an incredibly rare experience?!"

Subaru shook his head, refreshing his memory, trying to make himself forget his cowardice with a lighthearted remark. It was thinking only of the most shocking scene from last night that made him feel that way. He needed a fresher, more exhilarating sight that would make him forget such a harsh scene—

The scene of an iron ball crushing a witchbeast's head, blowing apart its torso, and tearing through the pack, came to mind. It was certainly demon-essce, but it was a perfect description for an Oni

"Wait, even if I cut out the Oni part, all I can think of is gore. And now, ugh, thinking about it makes me sick…"

The feast of blood and guts suddenly came to mind, and Subaru covered his mouth, feeling nauseous. He staggered to the edge of the building and squatted in the grass, breathing heavily.

He somehow managed to hold it in, breathing a sigh of relief. After all, it was steamed potatoes he had finally put into his hungry stomach. And it was a precious dish, filled with Ram's unique kindness. It would be a disgrace to a man to waste it.

Having somehow managed to suppress his vomiting, Subaru nodded vigorously, praising himself. Then, he looked up, ready to face Rem again.

"—You're just in time, in fact."

From beyond the grass, a girl with cream-colored hair in vertical curls appeared. Recognizing Subaru, she beckoned him over.

"I have something to discuss with you, I suppose. Would you mind accompanying me—"

"Guh-hurk-hurk-hurk!"

Subaru's long-suppressed vomit erupted, cutting off Beatrice's affected words.

"Kyaaaaaaah!"

3

After the commotion died down, Subaru was led by Beatrice to the back of a building right beside the Witchbeast Forest.

Previously, this area should have been lined with small, independent shops, but naturally, the morning after a witchbeast disturbance, there wasn't a single villager aimlessly wandering around.

This deserted place, with its rows of empty houses, would indeed be the perfect spot for a hushed conversation away from the village.

"So, what's so important that you had to call me out to a place like this?"

"That's not the attitude of someone who was just throwing up, in fact. Have you reflected at all, I suppose?"

"Oh, thanks for rubbing my back. I feel a bit better now. Oh, and you helped put my body back together too, right?"

"When you give Betty the same kind of thanks for both the former and the latter, it makes Betty a little unsure how to interact with you, in fact.”

Regardless, he was genuinely grateful, so he hoped she’d just accept it.

Putting Subaru’s thoughts aside, Beatrice, uncharacteristically for her, kept her gaze wandering and fidgeted with the hem of her skirt, as if troubled.

Her demeanor suggested there was something difficult to say.

It was quite unlike her, who was usually so direct and outspoken with Subaru. Perhaps her expression, looking her age, like a child afraid of being scolded by their parents, also played a part.

Seeing such a face, Subaru couldn’t bring himself to rush her. Crossing his arms and leaning against the building, Subaru waited for her to speak.

However, that waiting posture wasn’t needed for very long.

Subaru not pressing her seemed to have, conversely, spurred her decision.

Beatrice closed her eyes, then opened them wide as if she’d steeled herself.

Then,

“Bubby has Bubby’s own ideas, in fact. However, keeping it silent wouldn’t be fair to you, I suppose.”

“Bubby,” the affectionate name she used, could only refer to Puck.

Imagining the small, gray cat he’d just spoken with, Subaru tilted his head at her words, expressing his question.

To Subaru, Beatrice said,

“Bubby favors that mixed-blood girl, so he prioritizes her. That’s the correct thing to do as a spirit, in fact. However, Betty has complaints, I suppose.”

“You, what are you…”

Subaru’s words, “trying to say,” were cut short.

Before he could finish, Beatrice spoke, cutting him off.

She declared,

“—In less than half a day, you will die, in fact.”

Chapter 43:
The Conditions to Stay Alive

I swallowed the words I was told, breaking them down, chewing them over.

It took only a few seconds for them to pass down my throat, settle in my stomach, and become blood and flesh circulating to my brain. Slowly, I closed my eyes, savoring their meaning.

“You’re calmer than I expected, I suppose. I thought you’d be crying and screaming, in fact.”

Perhaps surprised by Subaru’s unexpectedly quiet reaction, Beatrice mumbled this in a tone of surprise.

In response to her words, Subaru gave a small nod and then said,

As he spoke, he held up three fingers, showing them to Beatrice, who stood before him.

As if flaunting them to the silently observing Beatrice, he folded down one of the raised fingers.

“First, a black joke, a bad prank. Honestly, it’s not funny… but if a ‘Prank Successful!’ sign pops up, I’ll laugh. If it’s coming, now’s the time, you know?”

He winked as he made his demand, but Beatrice’s expression remained unchanged.

Subaru accepted that the most peaceful possibility had been crushed, and with a sigh, he folded down a second finger.

“Second, the injury was too severe. I actually saw my insides spill out, after all. Even if they say life-saving treatment is just barely working, it doesn’t quite click… but I can accept it.”

“There’s no way Betty and Bubby’s healing would be incomplete, in fact. Scars will remain, and even if it’s not completely healed yet, it'll return to normal with time, I suppose. Betty wouldn't let someone she managed to save just die pointlessly, in fact."

"Right. You proved you could save me even with my guts out… wait, that was only three or four days ago, wasn't it?"

It was hard to tell due to the repeating days, but in the correct timeline, Subaru's stab wound from Elsa should have happened four days ago.

—Four days later, and he's back to having his stomach ripped open. Someone losing their intestines so frequently in such a short period might just be a rare specimen.

"It's not something to be happy about at all, but… anyway, if that's the case,"

Waving the remaining third finger from side to side, Subaru brought up the last possibility that came to mind.

"There's only one cause of death I can think of."

Among the many possibilities that had led to Subaru's death during the repeating days at Roswaal's mansion, the one that matched the current situation was…

"A curse's revenge?"

"You got a whole bunch of them planted on you when you were attacked by the pack of Ulgarms, in fact."

As if to back up Subaru's conjecture, Beatrice replied, crossing her arms.

Subaru glanced at the white scars remaining in various places on his body—the marks of teeth and claws from multiple Ulgarms—and then, scowling, he asked,

She had a dangerous tendency to say something like, "You didn't ask, so I didn't do it, in fact,"

if he played his cards wrong, so he poked at that concern.

However, she shook her head at Subaru's question, mixed with hopeful speculation.

"If it were something that could be dispelled, I would have put you in debt to me in a way you could never repay, I suppose."

"Hey, give me a break. I'm already so indebted it's tough to pay back, you know."

Always receiving, never able to give anything back. This time, and the time before that, and the time before that too.

Beatrice looked questioning at Subaru's lament, but Subaru waved his hand to dismiss it and asked,

"Can I ask why this curse can't be dispelled?"

"…You might as well know how you're going to die, in fact. It's a simple story, I suppose. —Too many curses have been layered on top of each other, making it too complex, in fact."

"Curses are… layered?"

To Subaru, who tilted his head, unable to visualize it, Beatrice spread both her hands.

Then, to the blinking Subaru, she said,

"Suppose a curse is a thread, I suppose."

As she spoke, a red thread suddenly appeared between her palms. She showed him the taut thread with her eyes, and Beatrice tied a knot in the thread.

"Suppose this knot is the curse's spell, in fact. To dispel it, simply put, would be to untie this knot, I suppose. But…"

Beatrice's fingers moved skillfully, and the number of threads passing through her palm increased. Blue, yellow, green, pink, black, white—threads appeared one after another. She made knots in each of them as well, and moreover, she intricately intertwined each thread.

“If it were just one curse, you could unravel it by tracing it. But when multiple threads get tangled like this…”

Reaching out, Beatrice gestured for him to take the tangled threads. With the threads placed in his outstretched hand, Subaru looked at the complex, bizarre pattern and said,

“You can’t untangle it no matter how you pull or trace it, huh… Ah, damn it, that’s definitely a high degree of difficulty.”

Even if he were to untangle them one by one, he wouldn’t know where to start.

Of course, he thought it wouldn’t be impossible to untangle this given enough ti

“You mentioned a half-day limit. What kind of prediction was that?”

“That’s simply because the Ulgarms will get hungry after about half a day, in fact.”

Beatrice held up a finger, then pointed it at Subaru and continued.

“The Ulgarm’s curse excels at ‘draining mana from a distant target,’ I suppose. The witchbeasts primarily feed on mana… so the reason for the curse should be obvious, in fact.”

“They attack people because they’re hungry, huh. I see, typical wild animals, simple. I guess I should be grateful they haven’t gotten peckish until now.

He wanted to vent his frustration somewhere, but unfortunately, his hands were filled with threads. Subaru directed his indescribable emotions at the hard knots in the thread, struggling to untangle them with much effort, while Beatrice looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Aren’t you scared, I suppose?”

“Huh?”

"Betty has given you a death sentence, in fact. Betty and Big Bro have a way to save you, but they're not doing it because there's no time."

Subaru had approximately half a day left—depending on the beast's hunger, it could activate at any moment.

In such a time-limited situation, the curse plaguing Subaru's body wasn't simple enough for an attempt to yield results.

That's why Beatrice wasn't taking the gamble, and Puck was the same.

While he understood the rationality of their judgment, he couldn't grasp her intention in deliberately stating it like this.

Beatrice looked directly at Subaru. Fiddling with the thread in his hands, Subaru suddenly felt like he understood what she was looking for. It was…

"What is it, you… Do you want me to blame you?"

"…"

Beatrice fell silent. Normally, she'd retort quickly, but her choice of silence now made her thoughts unfathomable.

She didn't deny it, nor did she affirm it. Subaru gave a wry smile at her attitude.

"Puck and your judgment, well, from a human emotional standpoint, it seems heartless, but from a logical standpoint, it's a natural conclusion. Pouring all your effort into someone who's clearly going to die—it might be beautiful in a story, but it's just superficial."

Pouring all effort into a life that's known to be beyond reach.

Perhaps that's a beautiful way to face life. However, from a practical standpoint, the fact that it's futile cannot be denied. Of course, it's precisely because emotions are involved that people sometimes throw themselves into such actions.

“I don’t think you two are heartless. You two are right. —I’ve got another question I want to ask, can I?”

“…What is it, I suppose?”

“Does Emilia-tan also know about the curse on me?”

The girl still sleeping in Subaru’s room, exhausted from nursing him.

He couldn’t help but wonder how she would have faced a situation that Puck and Beatrice had already given up on.

To Subaru’s question, Beatrice shook her head.

“That half-breed girl doesn’t know, in fact. The reason Bubby isn’t touching your curse is to keep the curse’s existence from her, in fact.”

“…Ah, I see. Puck can’t leave Emilia-tan’s side while dispelling a curse, so if he did, she’d inevitably figure out that I’m cursed and that the means to break it are far off, right?”

If they kept silent until the curse activated, the mental wound inflicted on her would be a one-time affair. It was a understandable way of thinking if Puck prioritized Emilia above all else and judged that the tragedy couldn’t be avoided.

Subaru read Puck’s formidable intentions, despite his appearance, and then said,

“So,”

As if to mark a break in the conversation, Subaru pointed his finger at Beatrice. Watching her eyebrows furrow slightly at his gesture, he continued,

“I don’t see you as so cruel that you’d go out of your way just to deliver a death sentence, you know?”

“…What do you know about Betty, I suppose?”

"At least four times longer than you think, that's how long I feel like we've known each other."

Looking at the girl whose frown and doubts deepened, Subaru thought of the long and short two weeks he had rushed through.

His relationship with Ram and Rem was good, as it had been since the first time. His relationship with Emilia was also good, apart from how much crying on her lap affected her evaluation. He'd grasped the identity of the sorcerer who had tormented him, and he'd saved the lives of the village children.

Looking back at these repeated loops, this attempt scored close to a perfect score.

If only Subaru's own life were factored into that score.

"When those dogs bit me all over, I honestly thought I was dead. How pathetic."

The feeling of his life slipping away, experienced countless times—Subaru had succumbed to it. He'd grown too accustomed to dying. He'd developed a habit of giving up. After all this, after so much.

Most importantly,

"You, Rem, and Emilia-tan were the ones who treated my wounds, right? If you were going to abandon me because of some curse, you wouldn't have treated me so thoroughly."

It was an insult to them, who had desperately clung to his life even after he selfishly gave up on it.

Including the small cat who had used her short limbs to mend Subaru's body with thread.

"You're all… terrible liars."

"…It's true that the possibility of survival is much lower, in fact. Bubby is trying to keep that girl from getting involved in that method, too."

"Trying to play the villain and take my anger? That's too much consideration for a little girl. —Tell me, then, about that infinitesimal possibility."

He made a small circle with his thumb and forefinger, showing it to Beatrice to prompt her answer.

After a moment of hesitation, she exhaled as if resigned.

"Since it was a Ulgarm that cursed you, its contents must be something that thoroughly drains mana, in fact."

He understood that. Subaru had already felt its power a numerous times.

Therefore, the moment the Ulgarm that cast the curse began to 'feed,' Subaru's fate would be sealed. After all, there was no way to prevent an activated curse—

"Wait. Then what about the kids' curses?"

The children found deep in the forest were weakened. Their condition must have been almost identical to Subaru's curse. He hadn't thought that far at the time, but…

"If the curse had activated and the children were having their mana drained, the pattern should be for them to be drained until they're empty, but those kids are safe—you're not going to tell me that was a lie to make me feel better, are you?"

If that were the case, Subaru probably couldn't tolerate it.

Beatrice stopped Subaru's hasty conclusion by holding out her palm.

"You're rushing too fast, you must listen to the end of the story, in fact. You're close to the core, I suppose. —The village children's curses could be dispelled. That method also aligns with the faint possibility of connecting your life, in fact."

"The difference between the kids and me…?"

Subaru's mind raced at Beatrice's explanation.

The difference between Subaru's curse and the children's. Their curses were singular; Subaru's were multiple. Activated curses. Unactivated curses. Curses that steal mana. Weakening from mana being stolen. Stolen mana. Stolen mana is food for magical beasts. —If that's the case…

A possibility suddenly flashed in his mind, and Subaru looked up, turning to Beatrice.

"If the caster itself dies, what happens to the stolen mana?"

Beatrice's expression didn't change at the question; she simply nodded once.

"If it loses its destination, the curse loses its original efficacy. That's also a condition because this spell's purpose is to steal mana, not to kill the target, in fact."

With Beatrice's affirmation, Subaru felt a sense of conviction inwardly.

The children's curses—their progression stopped because the magical beast that cast them died.

If the caster dies, what remains in the children's bodies is simply a spell, which Puck and Beatrice could easily dispel.

The number of magical beasts that perished in that forest last night must have been considerable.

Starting with the one Subaru dealt with during their first encounter, a significant number were also subjugated by Rem's hand during their escape.

If the magical beasts that cursed the children were among them, there's no element currently to refute this current hypothesis.

However, that conviction simultaneously—

"Ah, I see. That's how it is."

Having confirmed that his hypothesis was solid, Subaru realized.

The meaning behind Beatrice still standing before him with such a seemingly sorrowful demeanor.

Since it was impossible to dispel the curse by normal means, the only way to remove the curse on Subaru was to kill the caster.

But,

“The ones who cursed my body are too numerous to pinpoint.”

Subaru looked back at the forest where the magical beasts resided.

A barrier was spread around it, separating the village and the forest by something not physical.

Deep within that forest, the scattered pack of magical beasts.

Finding them and eradicating them within half a day was impossible.

“Ah, damn it…”

Almost laughing, Subaru pressed a hand to his forehead and looked down.

He had come to terms with it. He had faced the reality he couldn’t turn away from.

Unless all the Ulgarms were killed, Subaru’s life couldn’t be saved.

The difficulty of doing that within half a day. More than anything, the danger of stepping into that forest and facing the pack of witchbeasts—these were the reasons that made Puck hesitate and refuse to inform Emilia of the truth.

“Bubby…”

“I know without you saying it. If Emilia-tan knew, she’d push herself too hard, being the girl she is. That would make me incredibly happy… but it would also terrify me.”

Emilia was the type of person who would selflessly put herself at a disadvantage for others, even though Subaru saw the possibility of her doing so, he couldn’t ask it of her.

If, by some remote chance, he were to lose her before his eyes, Subaru would surely suffer a torment that tearing his own body into a hundred pieces wouldn’t suffice.

“The difficulty is truly monstrous. There’s no way, absolutely impossible. I’ll give up—”

Is that why you’re giving up?

As Subaru was about to speak, that voice echoed in his mind.

Lost in the noise, it was distant, a faint voice that seemed to resonate from the depths of his subconscious.

He gasped, looking around.

No one else was in the area except Subaru and Beatrice. Yet, that voice just now—

Is there any other way to save him?

A pleading, desperate voice. But that voice also held a tragic resolve somewhere.

“Did your head start hurting, I suppose? That’s not surprising, in fact.”

That’s all, I suppose. The rest is up to you, in fact.

Chapter 44:
The Usage of Despair

"—You were spouting off some pretty cool rhetoric earlier, but…"

Fifteen minutes after declaring war on the Witchbeast Forest, Ram prefaced her statement while glancing at Subaru beside her:

"If you calm down and think about it, there's no condition saying you have to fight on the front lines, Barusu."

"Hey, hold on. That's technically true, but look at all this overflowing motivation! This single-handed sword, handed down from the village's youth group, has a proper lineage! I'm practically living a fantasy right now!"

"Even that sword, you wouldn't have gotten it if Lady Beatrice hadn't stopped you from going in empty-handed. If you went in bare-fisted, you'd be nothing but dead weight."

"I can't honestly deny that."

Subaru sighed, his shoulders slumping, as he readjusted his grip on the unfamiliar hilt.

It was a single-handed sword with a black sheath and a copper-colored hilt, its blade roughly the length of Subaru's arm. He couldn't hide his surprise at how light it felt. He'd acquired this weapon by following Beatrice's advice, who had frantically stopped him from challenging the Magical Beast Forest unarmed.

The gravity of the situation deepened with each passing moment. It was this sense of urgency that almost made him choose to rush in immediately, but looking back calmly, he honestly realized it would have been suicide.

Beneath her seemingly unapproachable demeanor, that girl with the vertical drills somehow always managed to do good work—that was the frustrating thing about her.

"By the way, can you use a sword, Barusu?"

"I don't know, it's subtle. I do have a second dan in junior high kendo, but I don't think actual swordsmanship and school kendo are the same."

Subaru replied, shaking the sword at his hip, feeling its weight.

Three years in middle school, and after that, idle swings whenever he had time, for no particular reason. He figured he was somewhat more capable than a complete amateur who had never touched one, but he didn't think he'd gone much further than "just dabbled."

The ill-fitting single-handed sword was a blade inherited from a young man in the village's youth group.

He couldn't exactly honestly say, "I'm about to enter the Magical Beast Forest," so he had to make some pretty awkward excuses to get it, but how useful it would prove to be was currently unknown.

That wasn't the only thing entrusted to him in the village.

"In my pocket… candy, a pretty stone, and whoa! A bug got in!"

Subaru shrieked at an unpleasant sensation as he rummaged through his stuffed pockets. The winged insect, trapped in the cramped space, flew away from Subaru's hand and vanished into the depths of the forest. Watching it go, Subaru wiped his forehead and said,

"Those kids are unbelievable, taking advantage of the commotion like that. I'll give them a lecture later."

"It's proof they adore you, isn't it? …I wonder what's so good about a man like this."

"In the pure eyes of children, the true essence of a man like me shines brightly."

To Ram, who looked as if she was about to snort with a deadpan expression, Subaru poked a finger at her, wagging his head from side to side, saying, "And… besides…"

"This time, it's not just for me, but also a thank you for Rem. In fact, I'm more of a delivery boy for her. You get it, just watch."

"…I see."

Subaru nodded repeatedly with a satisfied look at Ram's hesitant agreement.

The exchange before leaving the village had resonated with Subaru to some extent. He hoped it had done the same for Ram, who had also witnessed it.

—Leaving the village and entering the Witchbeast Forest.

The children, still affected by the drained mana, were the ones who detected Subaru and the others trying to sneak into the forest, hidden from the villagers.

They had intended to thank Subaru and Rem directly, and upon noticing them, they crammed various things into Subaru's pockets as a token of their gratitude.

The sweets, the pretty stones, even that winged insect—to them, they were all expressions of their gratitude. There was no way he could treat them carelessly. Though the winged insect did escape.

As Subaru stood there, flustered by the somewhat unnecessary expressions of thanks pressed upon him, the children smiled and said:

"We want to thank Rem-rin too, so bring her back later, okay…?"

How dangerous the place she was in now was, and why she was risking her life to fight—The children didn't know, and they didn't need to know.

Because—

"Don't you worry, you brats. I'll lecture any bad kids who wander into a dark forest at night without telling anyone, along with their reckless big sister."

He might as well add the foolish boy who recklessly entered the forest and got bitten all over by dogs, causing immense trouble for everyone around.

Wouldn't it be quite satisfying for them to sit on their knees all night, listening to the village chief's sermon?

Naturally, a smile played on his lips as he envisioned this future.

As Subaru subtly grinned to himself, Ram said,

"Even so, you're slow, Barusu."

Ram looked back at Subaru from far ahead, her expression one of exasperation.

Ram effortlessly traversed the forest, which should have had difficult footing, with heavy strides.

Despite her attire being her usual maid uniform, her footsteps were no different from crossing the mansion's garden.

Subaru, on the other hand,

"C-Can't you cut me some slack? I'm lacking blood, and guts. Speaking of which, I forgot to have Emilia-tan say 'have a good day' to me!"

"You haven't said 'I'm home' yet, so last night's 'have a good day' is still valid.""

"I-Is that how it works…?"

Struggling with his swaying body and dizzy head, he tottered along, using his single-handed sword like a cane.

Their march could hardly be called fast, and their current situation only served to make Ram, who was ahead, feel more anxious.

Unlike last night, they were searching the forest during daylight hours. Visibility was far clearer than after sunset, but the dense, overgrown branches and leaves still made it difficult to see far.

He thought he was walking in the same place as last night, but the possibility that he was heading in a completely wrong direction couldn't be denied. Did the depth of the forest even distort a person's sense of direction? He genuinely thought that if he were alone, he might have gotten lost without even knowing the way out.

"Barusu, wait a moment. —Clairvoyance, open."

Ram held up a hand to stop him, and her right eye turned crimson as she murmured.

Since entering the forest, Ram had been regularly using her clairvoyance, searching for Rem's presence, who should be in the forest. Unfortunately, there had been no results yet.

Either Rem wasn't within Ram's visual range, or—

"Stop imagining bad things. Fate will be overjoyed and make them come true…"

He poked his own head, banishing the worst-case scenario that had surfaced.

Three or four hours had already passed since Rem deceived her sister and the villagers and entered the forest. Compared to them, who were chasing after her, it was impossible to imagine how deep she had gone into the forest. However, considering the enormity of her objective, even running from one end of the forest to the other wouldn't be enough.

Subaru once again felt the overwhelming nature of Rem's goal and the high difficulty of his own survival.

Even understanding that, he couldn't help but be thoroughly exasperated with his own self-preservation, which still made it hard to make up his mind.

"Ah, how pathetic. Concentrate, concentrate, me. Just focus on guarding the defenseless Ram while she's using Clairvoyance, don't think about anything else."

He drew the single-handed sword from its sheath, lightly testing its feel by slicing the air.

The sound of it cutting through the air was quiet, and its weight was slightly lighter than a wooden sword. Given the length of the blade, this one was easier to handle; all that remained was purely the readiness to wield a real sword.

“They say in real combat, just keeping the blade straight with a real sword is tough, you know.”

A blade wielded by an amateur would wobble, making it impossible to cut anything straight in the first place.

He raised the blade towards a thin tree branch directly in front of him, and with a single upward slash from directly below—a branch about the thickness of Subaru’s wrist was effortlessly severed, spinning and falling to the ground.

He involuntarily exclaimed “Oh!” and praised his own skill. He let out a gasp of admiration at the unexpectedly “lack of resistance” and continued his sword dance.

With each swing, whether one or two, branches and leaves scattered, and the intensity of his slashes increased.

Reconfirming the fact that his three years in middle school and subsequent swinging practice had unexpectedly paid off, he got carried away and swung the blade wide horizontally.

“Ah.”

With a loud clunk, the blade buried itself halfway into the thick trunk of a tree.

Entry was easy, but extraction was difficult. The embedded blade wouldn’t budge easily, and Subaru, sweating profusely internally, looked back at Ram. After confirming that she was still sharing her vision through Clairvoyance, he put his foot on the trunk and struggled to pull the sword out.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no, this is so uncool! Losing my sword like this would be so lame! Get out, come out, I don’t care if it breaks in half, just come out…”

“—Barusu, something’s looking at us.”

Behind Subaru, who was struggling to pull out the stuck sword, Ram, who had lost her immediate vision due to Clairvoyance, shouted.

—Subaru shuddered at her warning that something was looking at them. If she, who could share others’ vision, said so, it meant that the entity was…

“Within eyesight of us…!”

Subaru released the hilt, which wouldn’t budge, and frantically looked around. To his left—a shadow leaped from branch to branch, approaching them at an incredible speed.

Seeing that it was the familiar four-legged beast, Subaru immediately abandoned trying to pull out the sword. He crouched down and picked up a few suitable stones.

“No time to pull out the holy sword, so take this!”

He threw a fist-sized stone with all his might at the leaping shadow. If it hit, the spinning projectile had enough force to immediately incapacitate, but alas, it was an amateur’s throw. Moreover, with a moving target, whether it hit or not was a matter of miracle.

His continuous throws were in vain; every stone he threw vanished into the depths of the forest.

As if mocking Subaru’s clumsy resistance, the witchbeast bent a branch and executed an especially sharp glide—landing on the ground, it lowered its body just a few steps away from Subaru. But then,

“Alright, welcome!”

As if he had anticipated its move, an uppercut-like full swing was unleashed.

The target was the witchbeast's face as it landed, and the chosen weapon was the empty iron-sheathed scabbard. This was the precise timing he'd predicted, assuming his stone diversion would miss. He intended to smash the beast's nose with the thick hilt end of the scabbard—or so he planned.

"Huh?!"

A tremendous whoosh of air echoed, and Subaru's feet slipped badly on the fallen leaves.

At the moment of impact, the witchbeast's charge, which had lowered its body further, slightly altered their point of intersection, and the scabbard only managed to snag a tiny bit of fur on the beast's back. Conversely, Subaru's wide-open back, exposed by his massive swing, was left completely open for the twisting beast's fangs to tear into.

Directly behind him, the presence of the magical beast digging at the ground and turning to bare its fangs. Feeling a chill on his neck, he tilted his head. Just before its sharp canines tore into Subaru's calf—

"What are you playing at when it matters most?"

A gust of wind caught the leaping witchbeast, heavily disturbing its mid-air movement and making it miss its target.

The witchbeast lost its balance due to the unexpected intervention. It rolled on the ground and tried to get up immediately, but its limbs trembled violently, and it remained sprawled on the spot, unable to move.

Subaru, still clutching the scabbard, watched the unmoving magical beast with a shaken expression. He raised the scabbard, ready to strike at any moment, and moved sideways to Ram's side.

Ram, who had her palm facing the crouching witchbeast, snorted with a "Hmph" as soon as she saw Subaru beside her.

"Your armaments have become quite meager in just a short while."

"I admit I screwed up and my attack power dropped significantly. So, what state is that in?"

He pointed at the unmoving witchbeast, questioning Ram, who he assumed was responsible for its condition. The witchbeast had already closed its eyes and wasn't twitching at all, as if it had fallen asleep.

Seeing this, Ram gently lowered her palm that had been extended towards the witchbeast.

"It's over."

"Huh?"

"I said, I stopped its breath."

Surprised by Ram's casual announcement, Subaru went to the witchbeast's side, half in disbelief. He poked its seemingly sleeping body with the tip of his scabbard, and when there was no reaction, he boldly flipped it over. Its limbs sprawled loosely, and its tongue hung out of its mouth; there was no sign of life. Indeed, it was dead.

"What did you do to make it like this?"

"Didn't I tell you I can use a little wind magic? I just cut the tendons in its limbs with a wind blade and choked it to death. —I had no intention of making it suffer for long."

Ram spoke as if it were nothing. Looking closely, indeed, a faint trail of blood dripped from the tips of the witchbeast's limbs, and its expression showed signs of agony, as if it had gasped for breath without air.

Confirming these things, Subaru couldn't help but have various questions about Ram. What part of this was "a little magic"? This magic felt unsatisfyingly uncool, and it was no different from being an assassin.

However, it seemed Subaru wasn't the only one who wanted to retort to his partner.

Before Subaru could sort through the several options that came to mind, Ram looked at the single-handed sword still stuck halfway in the tree trunk and said,

"Useless."

"Ugh."

That succinct, no-nonsense expression stung the most.

As Subaru clutched his chest and knelt, Ram shrugged slightly and walked towards the trunk where the sword was embedded. Then, she placed her palm on the tree, and with another wind blade, gouged out the surface of the trunk, effortlessly freeing the sword. Subaru was dismayed, but he hastily went to catch the single-handed sword Ram threw to him.

"Thanks, but can we stop throwing bare swords with a vertical spin?!"

He gave up on catching it and retrieved the sword from the ground. He wiped off the dirt and sheathed it, thinking to himself that it was back where it belonged, when Ram tilted her head.

"Even so, the Ulgarm just now went for Barusu instead of the defenseless Ram. It was the same last night, too; you seem to be quite popular with them."

"Ah, yeah. I guess I'm pretty pheromone-y."

Subaru lightly pressed his hand to the magical beast's corpse, then scratched his head, vaguely agreeing with Ram's observation.

This feeling of being the witchbeasts' priority target had indeed continued since last night. As these results accumulated, Subaru's suspicion drew closer to certainty.

Anyway,

"So, did you find Rem with your Clairvoyance just now?"

"No, unfortunately. She might be deeper in the forest. We should hurry… Though the chances of you being attacked will also increase exponentially.”

Ram touched her white cheek, seemingly lost in thought as she glanced at Subaru.

Her gaze flickered between Subaru and the witchbeast, and then, as if she had somehow reached a conclusion, she nodded.

“You look weak, after all.”

“That’s the conclusion you came to after agonizing over it? How rude!”

“Then, you look easy to take advantage of.”

“The fundamental part hasn’t changed, my dear sister!”

“Talking won’t improve anything. Let’s find Rem.”

…Y-Yes, you’re right.”

With a partner who stubbornly maintained her own pace, Subaru found things somewhat difficult.

She, oblivious to his inner thoughts, headed deeper into the forest.

Chasing after her, Subaru suddenly brought up something that had been bothering him.

“Can I ask what a ‘hornless’ is?”

It was a word Ram herself had uttered before entering the forest.

It was a word he could somewhat imagine, but Ram didn’t stop, nor did she look back, as she replied,

“Just as it sounds: a derogatory term given to a fool who, despite being an oni, has lost their horn.”

The appearance of the word “Oni” brought back the scene from last night to Subaru’s mind.

In the forest, Rem, covered in blood, letting out a roaring laugh. The sharp, white horn extending from her forehead was unforgettable. It was exactly like the oni he knew from fairy tales.

However, there was no sign of such a horn on Ram's forehead, despite them being twins. Of course, it might be hidden beneath the white prim essential to her maid outfit, but that possibility had just been denied by her own words.

Perhaps sensing Subaru's unspoken dissatisfaction, Ram ran a hand through her pink hair.

"Due to a minor incident, I lost the only horn I had. Since then, I've decided to rely on Rem for everything."

"…Ah, did I ask something bad, by any chance?"

"Why?"

Ram, walking ahead, looked back and genuinely tilted her head in wonder. Subaru replied by scratching his cheek.

"Well, I don't know how big a deal horns are to the Oni race, but I'm guessing it's a pretty big problem. I thought I might have been pretty rude touching on it."

"If that's the case, it's too late to worry about it now that you've dug it up. —Well, rest assured."

After lowering her voice slightly to threaten Subaru, Ram's expression softened slightly.

"While it was difficult at the time, I'm calm now. Losing my horn has brought me things and saved lives. Those things are part of fate."

What a broad-minded person, Subaru thought to himself.

After saying that, Ram prefaced with "However," and a shadow fell across her face.

"Rem probably doesn't think so. —That's why we need to find her quickly.”

Ram faced forward again and signaled to Subaru to stop with a hand gesture.

It was time for Clairvoyance. This time, he would be vigilant of her surroundings without fail.

Her right eye turned crimson, and her vision shifted from here to afar. Her leaping vision jumped to another viewpoint, searching for the target.

Subaru didn’t know, nor did he ask, what it was like to perceive the world by borrowing the vision of a compatible individual, or how much of a burden it placed on the caster.

Every time she used Clairvoyance, tears of blood streamed down Ram’s white cheeks, both her legs trembled as if she had walked all day, and her body, stubbornly pushing forward, swayed as if she were constantly dizzy. Still, Ram did not stop advancing through the forest.

Subaru believed he shouldn’t leave it to Ram, who never complained about pain or suffering.

At their core, she and Rem were ultimately alike. If it meant pushing themselves too hard, they were the type to do it without hesitation.

Including Emilia, the women in that mansion were a little too focused on putting others first.

“You should be flailing around, just looking at your feet, like me. —It makes me sick how uncool I am.”

He kicked at the grass underfoot. Then, the scattering grass got in his mouth, and the flying dirt got in his eyes—a huge miscalculation. He frantically “peck-pecked” and felt terribly awkward about his own lack of composure.

Somehow, Subaru had the illusion that his somewhat stiff emotions had eased a little, realizing that such clumsiness suited him well.

So,

“Ram, are you worried about Rem?”

A question asked despite knowing it was not good to disturb her consciousness while using Clairvoyance.

“Ram, whose eyes were bloodshot and whose gaze was not focused on him, replied a beat later,

“Of course I am. It’s true that she’s stronger than me, but that’s no reason not to worry.”

“…Yeah.”

“Even if she’s far better at everything, Ram is her older sister. That position will never waver.”

Under a firm resolve, her position as an older sister was exercised.

Subaru now admitted that until he truly understood this, he had greatly underestimated her, believing she only used her position to act important.

Having admitted that, Subaru, too, had no choice but to brace himself.

“Ideally, I had wanted to meet up with Rem first, though.”

He scratched his head and started doing knee bends.

Perhaps sensing something unsettling about Subaru’s demeanor, Ram, who had not achieved results, ended her Clairvoyance and regained her normal vision.

Wiping her bloodshot right eye with a cloth from her pocket, she frowned quizzically.

“Barusu, what are you planning to do?”

“Right now, I’m just here to drag you down, aren’t I? I told you before we entered the forest, didn’t I? That I’d be useful in helping

Rem.”

While it was a fifty-fifty possibility, the odds had now shifted to about seven to three in his favor.

Of course, there was still the anxiety of hitting that remaining three, but…”

“Seven to three? It’s rare to be on the winning side of those odds. I can’t throw it away. —Ram, are you willing to take a bit of a dangerous gamble?”

“Hungry beasts and a young man in the forest—as a maiden, there aren’t many situations more dangerous than this, I suppose.”

“You got a point, Sister of mine.”

Subaru laughed, then took a deep breath and opened his eyes wide.

If Subaru’s idea was correct, the situation should change now. Even knowing it was necessary, he couldn’t stop his heart from faltering.

—It’s too late to be scared now. I’m a petty coward, that’s obvious. But if I can still act, even while scared and holding back, then there’s no complaint.

If Subaru was right, it should come.

“Ram, I’ve actually—”

—He was about to say, ‘I’ve actually been returning from death.’

Subaru acted as if to reveal what he was forbidden to tell, to break the taboo. Ram, who had been bracing herself, froze.

No—time had stopped.

The world lost its color, sounds vanished, and the concept of time itself was utterly blown away.

In this world where everything was equally subject to stagnation, the only entity escaping that restriction suddenly appeared before

Subaru's eyes.

"—It's here."

The murmur didn't actually make a sound.

He poured all his wishes and venom into it, hoping it would reach the entity before him. If a little of his feelings got through, he'd feel much better.

—In a world where time had stopped, the only thing unaffected was a black mist.

It appeared from nowhere and began to form the outline of an arm in front of Subaru, who was putting on a brave face. Fingers formed, a wrist appeared, an elbow emerged, and an upper arm branched off—this was the same mist transformation he had witnessed before. But this third time, there was further change.

"Up to the shoulder…"

Beyond the upper arm, a shape resembling a shoulder was forming.

Having created from the fingertips to what appeared to be a shoulder, it was now truly worthy of being called "a single arm."

From the first encounter, it had gradually begun to form a clearer image. While terrified of the mist's erosion intensifying with each repetition, Subaru wasn't given time to examine it in detail.

The fingers slid unhesitatingly into Subaru's chest, which felt eerie about the black mist's growth.

They passed through the thin flesh of his chest, grazed his ribs, and went straight for his heart, protected within his sternum.

Even knowing it was coming, pain, once it crossed a certain threshold, was unbearable.

The pain of his heart being directly gripped was in a realm that could not be described without screaming and writhing madly.

A long, painful, unbearable period of agony continued.

His heart rhythm went wild, blood was pushed out chaotically, and his entire body screamed. Tears of blood erupted from the pain, and his clenched molars involuntarily cracked and shattered.

Enduring pain that could cause such things, the frozen Subaru could not release it through external reactions and had to continue to endure it.

Eventually, the time of suffering faded, and his vision was dyed pure white—

“—Barusu?”

Having been called, Subaru realized he had been kneeling.

Saliva was dripping from his downturned mouth, and he hastily wiped it with his sleeve as he stood up.

“Close call, that was too close a call. It was just a daydream.”

“You’re just as sick as I am, Barusu. Don’t push yourself; leave it to Ram. So, how can we help Rem…”

Ram stopped mid-sentence, her expression changing abruptly as she looked around.

In the silent forest, only the faint rustling of tree branches swaying in the wind and leaves rubbing together echoed. Ram, listening intently to these sounds, looked at Subaru.

“What did you do, Barusu?”

“…I took a bit of a painful gamble.”

Despite all that agony, not a trace of it remained anywhere on his body now.

While he found the method, which thoroughly left wounds only on his mind, repulsive, he felt a flicker of gratitude that it left him with enough physical strength to move.

Because—

“The wind is acting erratically… and the scent of the beasts are drawing closer. A lot of them, too.”

Amidst the deep green, which was beginning to lose its tranquility with rustling sounds, Ram’s face suddenly fixed on the right. Following her gaze, he saw multiple red specks of light approaching from a distance.

Five at first. Ram turned to face them, knowing they would encounter them in ten seconds or so. Beside her, Subaru drew his single-handed sword from its sheath, preparing for the unavoidable battle.

“We still haven’t found Rem…!”

“Well, don’t worry. We’ll probably meet up soon enough.”

“How can you be so sure?”

He shrugged at Ram, who glared at him with a sharp gaze.

“Rem’s goal is to hunt down all the witchbeasts in the forest. —As long as I’m here, they’ll come flocking to me as their prey. So eventually, Rem will have no choice but to come here too.”

He had been thinking about it for a long time. He had been wondering for a long time.

The reason why the witchbeasts chose Subaru as their target.

In this iteration, Subaru was always cursed every time he encountered a witchbeast. It wasn’t so much an unavoidable fate as it was a kind of compulsion, ensuring that Subaru would always be chosen as the target when he encountered a witchbeast.

The magical beasts reacted excessively to Subaru’s presence. The answer to that reason was derived from the words of a person who had reacted excessively in a similar way. Simply put,

“The Witch’s Scent.”

Witchbeasts were said to be external enemies of humanity, created by the Witch.

They had always shown an excessive reaction to Subaru, who carried the scent of the Witch.

It was probably for the same reason that Subaru had been consistently attacked after entering the forest.

If the faint scent enticed the witchbeasts to appear, then he might as well reek of it boldly.

So boldly that all the witchbeasts in the forest, all the witchbeasts that had cursed Subaru, would gather, and even Rem, who was pursuing them, would be forced to join them.

That was Subaru's best plan to reunite with Rem and save himself.

—He called it, "Operation: Natsuki Subaru Decoy."

It was still a fighting style that didn't put him on the front lines, but the plan worked out well.

It helped that a fleeting comment Beatrice had made when the mist appeared the first time he tried to tell Emilia about his "Return by Death" ability had bothered him.

With the appearance of the mist, the lingering scent of the Witch surrounding Subaru became stronger.

—Perhaps that mist had some connection to the Witch.

That's why every time that mist appeared, the Witch's presence emanating from Subaru became stronger, and as a result, he became an effective live bait for luring witchbeasts.

The unbearable agony that could not be conveyed to anyone, and the excruciating pain that could not be complained about to anyone.

With a sense of exhilaration from turning the tables on the fate that had brought these upon him, Subaru's lips twisted into a grin, leaving even the approaching threat behind.

—Ah, I finally struck a blow against the fate that engineered this loop!

Cheering inwardly, he tightened his grip on the single-handed sword and braced himself against the approaching witchbeasts.

Then he declared loudly to Ram beside him:

“So, when it comes to fighting, I’m totally counting on you, alright!”

“You should objectively reflect on what you just said later.”

Following Ram’s sighing voice, a blade of wind struck the approaching horde head-on.

—The battle against the witchbeasts is about to begin again, with a new cast.

Chapter 45:
The Effectiveness of his Lingering Scent

I kick the ground and leap forward.

Thick roots snake underfoot, getting in the way, but I stomp them down with all my might, crushing them as I forge ahead.

When traversing forests, mountains, or unpaved paths, being overly cautious about uncertain footing is actually a mistake. When running on natural animal trails, it's the decisive resolve to push through, no matter what's underfoot, that truly carves the path forward.

Trusting the sturdy soles of my shoes, I trample over accumulated branches, leaves, and moss, leaping once more.

My breath comes in ragged gasps. Sweat trickles down my forehead, threatening to sting my eyes, and I blink painfully, trying to clear a path for the sweat.

There's no time or reason to look back. Besides, the possibility of having escaped is practically nil. The pursuer's footsteps still parallel mine, relentlessly dogging me as if mocking my frantic flight.

I lean my body forward, minimizing wind resistance, and sprint at full speed.

My lungs ache, and I feel my entire body creak, gasping for oxygen like a fish out of water.

Subaru, who is opening and closing his mouth clumsily like a beached fish, hears:

"What a vulgar expression… it really shows your upbringing."

"—You bastard, you'll regret that later!"

Regretting the wasted oxygen, Subaru shifts the arm wrapped around the young girl in his embrace—Ram—and carefully readjusts his grip on her small frame.

It's probably been about ten minutes since the start of the 'Operation: Natsuki Subaru Decoy,' which utilized the black mist likely connected to the Witch.

Just as Subaru had planned, the battle against the gathering witchbeasts became incredibly fierce, and finally—the two of them had no choice but to choose flight, tearing through the forest in retreat.

"I trusted you when you said you could fight, and this is what I get!"

"I was fighting, actually. It's just that Ram's stamina didn't last as long as expected."

"Didn't you say something cool about crossing dangerous bridges?!"

"It was more dangerous than Ram imagined. I was about to fall before I even crossed."

Ram's responses to Subaru's shouts are consistently brazen.

It's hard to believe such an attitude from someone who, after repeated battles, can't maintain her mana and can barely move her limbs.

Lured by the 'Witch's Scent' that Subaru emits, the witchbeasts are being successfully drawn out.

Their numbers far exceed Subaru's wildest imagination, and frankly, the rate of their appearance is so overwhelming that he can think of nothing but regret.

Utilizing wind magic, Ram had dealt with seventeen witchbeasts.

After clearing them all so smoothly, Ram suddenly lost her strength and collapsed. Subaru, who was right beside her, was startled out of his wits and hastily scooped her up, beginning their escape—

"Now we're here—it's nothing but improvisation."

"You're being carried, so shut up! Don't make me talk so much! I'm about to bite my tongue… Besides, my stamina isn't… holding… out…"

Despite being a shut-in student with extraordinary athletic abilities in every other respect, his indoor lifestyle has left him severely lacking in stamina. A long-distance run would easily place him among the last in his class.

Even with such poor stamina, when his life is on the line, he manages to squeeze out every last drop. However, it's only a matter of time before his well of stamina runs dry.

The pursuing witchbeasts seem to sense that the fleeing Subaru is about to collapse.

As if savoring the process of their prey weakening, they nip at his heels whenever his pace slows, keeping him on edge and reigniting his fading instinct to flee.

"Barusu, they're right on your left. —Just swing your sword; you'll hit them."

Ram, still in his arms, turns her head and advises him on a suitable distance as the scenery rushes by. He glances over, and sure enough, he sees the snout of a witchbeast running alongside him, completely underestimating his threat.

He swiftly draws the single-edged sword from his hip and slashes towards it. The strike, aimed perfectly, bisects the arrogant witchbeast's face horizontally, adding another piece to the forest's compost—or so it should have.

Ram's eyes, looking up at him from his chest, fill with anger, as if exasperated by Subaru's refusal to draw his sword. But Subaru glares back with equal emotion.

"Why aren't you drawing your sword?"

"How am I supposed to swing a sword while carrying a person with both hands and running?! Even if I could swing it, I wouldn't hit anything, you'd fall, I'd trip, and it'd be a triple out, you idiot!"

Subaru hurls his ragged breath at the dumbfounded Ram, straining and sweating as he desperately moves his legs.

Even though Ram is small, the weight in his arms must be no less than forty kilograms. To be running so desperately while carrying that much weight is quite impressive. To also draw a sword and fight on top of that is something only seen in manga, and Subaru simply can't do it.

An untrained ordinary student has limited options when carrying a girl. Naturally, Subaru's only choice is to carry her and run.

"It's about time my hidden power awakened—Ow!"

The voice, eagerly anticipating the moment of awakening, abruptly switches to a scream of sudden, sharp pain in his shoulder. He twists his body to look, and there, embedded deep in his right shoulder, is the fang of a leaping witchbeast. A single strike from a beast that had grown tired of toying with them; a chunk of his shoulder flesh is gouged out, and his throat trembles from the pain of his collarbone touching the tip of the fang.

But,

"Carelessness is a great enemy—"

Ram, still in his arms, reaches for Subaru's waist, pulls out his single-edged sword, and delivers a sharp, diagonal thrust.

The tip of the blade deftly penetrates the witchbeast's nose, destroys its brain, and emerges from the back of its head. The strength in its impaling fangs completely drains away, and it's thrown off by Subaru's momentum, plummeting to the ground—leaving behind the tumbling corpse, Subaru looks at the blade that had passed right by his face.

"Don't do such a dangerous thing!"

"I prevented another curse from taking hold, so be grateful. —

Barusu, if a Ulgarm bites you, you absolutely must kill it. If you let it escape, your life will be that much shorter."

Skillfully, Ram shakes the blood from the blade in his arms, then warns him with a glare. Subaru, pretending to focus on running, refused to answer her words.

He's aware of the faint trembling at the roots of his teeth inside his closed mouth.

He can't tell if it's from fighting spirit or fear. No, that's a lie. He accepts with a sense of resignation that it's probably the latter.

Witchbeasts are terrifying. Their fangs and claws are utterly frightening.

The sensation of the fangs that had just pierced his shoulder, though shallow, was sharp enough to stimulate Subaru's fundamental fear.

He had been bitten and torn apart countless times, all over his body.

How could he ever forget that pain, that sense of loss, that despair?

Even with a sword in hand, Subaru hasn't once driven its blade into a witchbeast during their joint struggle with Ram. He's only brandished it as a deterrent, keeping them at bay.

As a result, he's forced a heavy burden on Ram, and now he's compelled to flee while carrying her, exhausted. Including the fact that he couldn't have imagined so many witchbeasts gathering, everything is solely Subaru's fault.

His shoulder wound aches. Blood steadily trickles from the tear in his clothes, soaking his right sleeve up to the elbow. He feels the strength draining from his right arm, and he readjusts his grip on Ram's body several times, desperately pushing forward. In any case, he needs to change locations, even if only slightly.

"Ram!"

“I’m on it.”

Ram responds curtly to his call, her eyes turning bloodshot.

She periodically activates her clairvoyance, searching the surrounding area for any sign of Rem.

During this time, it’s Subaru’s role to protect the completely defenseless Ram.

He scans the surroundings, intensely wary of any witchbeasts preparing to pounce.

Fortunately, perhaps deterred by the demise of the previous beast, no individuals are overtly provocative. They merely pursue him, maintaining a constant distance, as if patiently waiting for his stamina to run out, like tigers eyeing their prey.

In the unsettling silence, Subaru gulps, unable to shake off a bad premonition.

Occasionally, he swerves right and left as if to provoke them, changing course to avoid any ambushes. Each time he does, he loses track of the original direction they were heading.

It’s been a long time since they lost sight of the village and the path deeper into the forest. Since Ram, who uses clairvoyance, hasn’t mentioned it, he trusts that they are at least avoiding running in the wrong direction and simply keeps running.

Abandoning that thought and simply running mindlessly, the result was—

“Damn it—!”

Suddenly, the forest opened up, and the ground beneath his feet vanished, bringing immediate retribution.

His feet flailed in the air, and a floating sensation, as if his internal organs were being pulled upwards, assailed him. Immediately after, his heels scraped against a slope, and he transitioned into a slide, losing his balance.

It was a heart-stopping moment, but he wasn't facing a cliff.

More simply, they had encountered a hollow in the forest. He slid down the slope, holding the girl, clumsily reaching the bottom while almost falling. Grateful for the luck of not tumbling, he looked around and realized his gratitude had been too hasty.

They had fallen into a ravine in the forest, a V-shaped hollow with two exits, left and right.

However, the sounds of multiple witchbeasts reached them from both paths. At the same time, he sensed more witchbeasts sliding down the slope from which Subaru had fallen.

"We've been trapped…!"

He shouldn't have underestimated the witchbeasts as mere animals.

Despite repeated encounters making Subaru realize they possessed some semblance of intelligence, he chose not to dwell on it, given the situation and their appearance.

This allowed them to cleverly manipulate his path, leading him into this inescapable trap.

In his arms, Ram, unaware of the dire situation, still had her gaze fixed on the distance.

It was impossible to leave the resolution of this predicament entirely to her, given her lack of awareness. Therefore, overcoming this crisis was a testament to the trust she placed in Subaru.

"I've got no choice but to do this…!"

Decisiveness was one of Subaru's few virtues.

He somehow managed to hold Ram with just his left arm and snatched the single-edged sword from her right hand. The wound on his right shoulder throbbed, but it wasn't so severe as to impair his grip.

Taking a deep breath as he felt presences from the left, right, and behind, Subaru raised the single-edged sword.

“Here we go, you bastards!”

He plunged it into the slope in front of him, mobilizing his lower body and right arm muscles—he was about to tackle the uphill climb.

His chosen method was, once again, escape—heroic actions like breaking through one of the three paths and carving a way out weren’t worth considering. Since he didn’t possess any supernatural combat abilities, it was even unknown whether his blade would reach the first beast.

He plunged the blade in, dug his shoe soles into the moss-covered slope, and used his whole body to climb the hill. If he rolled down, it would be the end, but it was self-evident that the end would come no matter where he waited. So, if he was going to struggle, it might as well be in a direction that offered some hope.

He twisted his body, pressing his right arm from elbow to shoulder against the slope to gain as much friction as possible as he ascended. Below, in the hollow, the witchbeasts that had been trying to ambush Subaru and Ram butted their noses together, looking up at their fleeing figures and roaring.

It was too late now that they had realized his intentions.

After a dozen or so thrusts, Subaru and Ram finally reached the top of the slope. He swung his body over the edge, hooking his upper body, and somehow managed to climb out.

“Alright! I did it! I actually managed! Nice one, me! I’m awesome! This venerable one-handed sword, it’s all chipped and broken, but… ugh!”

Amidst his self-congratulatory remarks, his body, which had just topped the slope, was immediately pulled back down. Instantly, a tremendous gust of wind, carrying dirt and debris, swept over his head—the back of his neck, too slow to dodge, was gouged by the aftershock, bringing with it both burning pain and intense agony.

"—You bastard!"

Grimacing in pain, he peered over the slope again, and far in his line of sight stood a small shadow—the witchbeast pup he had encountered for the fifth time was there.

It was stretched out on all fours, belly to the ground, in a crouch.

Its glowing red eyes were fixed on them, its unwavering animosity towards its escaped prey swelling within it.

In short, it was preparing for a second shot.

"No way, I'm not taking that!"

As a torrent of mana began to affect nature, Subaru, in a panicked rush, launched himself over the slope. He put off sheathing his sword and readjusting his grip on Ram, fleeing from the witchbeast's sight—and as he ran, the forest behind him was ravaged by a horizontal torrent of earth and debris.

Trees were toppled, and the ground was ripped open, the sheer force of it felt right behind him. There was no time to look back; his lagging calves were torn by the aftershock, and blood spurted out.

"Damn it!"

He yelled and leaped.

He jumped and landed to the right, onto a different slope than before. Deciding not to be caught by the mudslide, and bracing for the cliff's greeting, Subaru plunged the sword, which he had held in a reverse grip, into the ground again.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

He scraped the ground with his right side, twisting and digging in the impaled sword to control his fall. Half-crying from the pain of the new scrapes, Subaru looked up at the cliff from which he had fallen.

"Whoa!"

Unable to stop himself, he instinctively shoved away the witchbeast's body tumbling down the slope.

With a yelp like house dogs, several witchbeasts fell straight down. Unlike the hollow from before, the bottom of this slope was a stark, rocky valley. The falling witchbeasts were mercilessly embraced by the hard ground, silencing them with the sound of bones shattering.

"I almost ended up having a funeral myself, but—"

"Barusu—! Rem was there!"

In his arms, Ram let out a cry of joy, her bloodshot eyes returning to reality.

Then, after a joyful expression, she frowned at the fact that their view was tilted sideways.

"I haven't seen you in a while, what's going on here?"

"We're in a cliffhanger situation due to unavoidable circumstances! More importantly, I want to hear about your results, partly to distract myself from reality."

Feeling his arm muscles tremble, Subaru shifted his focus to the good news for a distraction.

Without commenting on Subaru's increased injuries, Ram nodded slightly.

"Another sight caught Rem's shadow not far from here. The timing was bad, so I couldn't get Rem's own view, but she should have been heading this way."

"How do you know?"

"The view Ram seized was from a Ulgarm, and it encountered Rem while moving somewhere with several others from its pack. It was smashed, and the connection broke."

"Is that so…"

Subaru didn't know what kind of shock Ram experienced when the entity whose sight she was sharing died. But he imagined it was anything but a pleasant sight.

At any rate, confirming Rem's safety was a stroke of luck. Just as he expected, she seemed to be doing well as a hunter in the forest, which was great.

"The problem is that we have way more issues over here… I ran over thinking Rem was in danger, but this is beyond the level of the rescuer needing rescuing."

"If we fall down the cliff, both of us will be in danger, Barusu. Can you climb up?"

"I'll manage with sheer willpower. The bigger problem is the witchbeasts chasing us from above…"

As he discussed what to do, he tightened his grip on his right arm, which supported both of them.

He leaned his weight against the diagonally impaled sword, trying to ease his posture.

"—Ah."

"—Ah."

Their voices overlapped, and simultaneously, a high-pitched clang of shattering steel echoed.

The blade of the single-edged sword, plunged into the cliff, snapped, leaving about a third of its tip embedded in the slope. He frantically tried to stab the bent blade into the ground, but with its tip flattened, its penetration was weak. Simply put—

"—Is there a chance the witchbeasts below will break our fall?"

"It's more likely that we'll be cushions for the witchbeasts that fall after us."

To Subaru's words, uttered as if praying to divine providence, Ram replied with resignation. At that instant, the weakly embedded blade dislodged from the slope, and their fall resumed.

Subaru pressed his entire right side against the slope, bracing himself to be scraped raw, but the friction wasn't enough to support their combined weight, and their bodies were helplessly flung down the cliff.

"Aaaah, damn it—!!"

"—This is going to cost you, Barusu!!"

The sensation of falling headfirst brought back memories of a past suicide attempt, and Subaru's entire body bristled with cold sweat. Yet, instinctively clutching Ram in his arms to protect her from the impact of the fall, he hadn't stopped being a man, it seemed.

Receiving the sensation of that forceful embrace, Ram stirred and extended her arm towards the ground.

"—El Fula!!"

Along with her shout, mana surged, and the ground at their projected landing spot erupted in a blast of wind.

The upward pressure from directly below caught Subaru's body mid-fall, causing it to reverse its headfirst descent and considerably slowing their impact velocity.

This will work, he thought, his vision half-spinning in the swirling world, and he poured all his strength into both legs, enduring the coming impact by clenching his teeth hard enough to crack them.

"Nguooooohhh, aaahhhh—I made itttttt!!"

—He endured.

He bounced on the spot, massaging his protesting legs, and then looked up at the cliff they had fallen from, stunned by its height.

Over ten meters high, roughly equivalent to the fourth floor of a school building. To be thrown from that height onto solid ground and somehow survive was truly a miracle.

“Seriously, Ram-sama, you’re like a Buddha. If it weren’t for that wind magic, right now…”

As he was about to express his gratitude for surviving, Subaru noticed that Ram in his arms wasn’t stirring at all. A thin trail of blood ran from her nose, and her closed eyes were shallowly breathing, only letting out pained groans.

“Huh, hey, Ram? Crap, this is, hey.”

He gently shook her and called out, but there was no response from Ram.

She was already exhausted from the battle with the witchbeasts. The magic used to soften their fall had pushed her past her limit, probably wearing down her spirit.

“Ah, damn it, my timing is the worst.”

Cursing his own carelessness, Subaru held Ram in his arms even more carefully. The half-broken sword was awkwardly sheathed, and he looked up.

Above the cliff, the pursuing witchbeasts seemed to have detoured, now searching for another route to track down Subaru and Ram, who had taken a shortcut.

He wanted to put as much distance between them and the beasts as possible right now, but—

“We don’t have time to waste—?!”

Running would lead to a loss of time, and that loss directly impacted their lives. Still, Subaru suppressed the urge to click his tongue at the fact that fleeing was their only option. However, that sentiment was immediately overridden by a violent noise echoing from above the cliff.

“Whoa, no way.”

Looking up, a massive mudslide was cascading down the very slope Subaru had just slid from—carrying with it the witchbeast pup and over a dozen other witchbeasts.

He instinctively jumped back, at least avoiding being caught in the mudslide.

However, when the witchbeasts, along with the earth and debris, landed on the same level ground, the advantage Subaru and Ram had risked their lives to create instantly vanished.

As an added bonus, Ram's consciousness had sunk to the bottom from creating that opportunity, and Subaru's unreliable armament had become even more unreliable.

"Damn it, Witch… your perfume is waay too strong."

When things went according to plan, he was grateful, but realizing it led to his current failure, he immediately flipped his opinion.

"Dirty, as expected of Subaru, dirty," he critiqued his own small-mindedness, yet prepared for another escape, knowing it would only delay the inevitable.

He planned to get out of here, hoping the witchbeasts still underestimated them and wouldn't immediately attack—

"Wait, what?"

Just as he was about to run, Subaru sensed the oddity and tilted his head.

The witchbeasts that had fallen were acting strangely. He had assumed they would crouch on the mudslide, then leap at them as soon as they landed, but—

"Hey, wait, I'm over here, you know?"

As Subaru's dumbfounded voice indicated, the moment they landed, the witchbeasts scattered in every direction, running down the cliff.

Their frantic scattering, like spiderlings, was so undignified it reminded him of his own desperate flight earlier.

“What’s wrong with you guys—”

The tension of being attacked briefly eased, and such questions filled his chest.

Immediately after, the answer exploded above the cliff and rained down on Subaru.

“Huh?”

Again, looking up, Subaru’s eyes widened in confusion at the change on the cliff—and then he understood as he witnessed reddish-black chunks of flesh scattering before his eyes.

—High above on the cliff, a single human figure appeared.

A young girl in a maid’s uniform, wildly swinging a blood-soaked iron ball, glaring down at the cliff bottom with deranged eyes.

The moment their murderous gazes met, Subaru felt his back drench in cold sweat, overcome by the worst possible premonition.

Immediately after, with a powerful leap from the high cliff, the ‘Oni’ descended effortlessly to their level.

Surrounded by witchbeasts in the deep forest, confronting the ‘Oni,’ holding the girl he had to protect, with a broken sword in hand, Subaru took a breath, realizing he had reached the final stage.

“Don’t you think I’m a bit too pathetic for that?”

His appeal reached no one, silenced by the wind sweeping through the forest.

Now, this is what you call the moment of truth—

Reflected in the blade of his drawn single-edged sword, his distorted profile looked terribly weak to Subaru.

Chapter 46:
Oni-like Flash

1

Though they only faced each other for a few seconds, to Subaru, those silent moments felt like hours.

Rem's eyes, which had seemed devoid of reason, regained their emotion after a sudden blink.

"—Sister, and Subaru?"

Subaru breathed a sigh of relief at her surprised voice. Ram, who had been stirring in his arms, fluttered her eyes open.

"Oh, Rem, I was so worried about you. Running off like that, isn't good you know."

"I'm sorry, Sister. Rem was desperate to try and fix things…"

"You don't have to push yourself so hard, Rem. We found a way to make it work. If we use Barusu here as bait, it'll be perfect!"

"Ah! I see! That's brilliant! Rem is so moved!"

The twins rushed to each other, clasping hands. Their synchronization was unprecedented as they communicated, and Subaru, met with their expectant gazes, thumped his chest.

"Well, leave it to me. I'll show you the greatest bait performance of this century!"

""Kyaa, amazing! So manly, truly fitting for Lady Emilia!""

Cheered on by the two, Subaru proudly responded.

With this, the long, arduous loop of suffering was over. Natsuki Subaru would seize the light he saw and walk the path to glory.

2

“…That’s what I wished would happen.”

Subaru muttered this in a pathetic voice, cutting off his fantastical delusion as he slowly backed away.

Rem’s eyes, fixed on him, showed no hint of the emotions that had returned in his fantasy. There was only pure, jet-black killing intent. She certainly didn’t seem to be in a state of mind where a conversation was possible.

Each drop of sweat felt as heavy as lead. The weight of the sweat on his eyelids threatened to obstruct his vision, and Subaru tried to blink one eye at a time to cope. He’d learned his lesson about blinking both eyes simultaneously and creating an opening from his fight with the witchbeast.

“Hey, Rem-rin! It’s your friend, Suba-ru!”

To snap himself out of his growing wariness and to break the tense silence, Subaru deliberately tried to sound cheerful as he called out. Rem’s reaction to his friendly greeting was:

“Don’t give me such a heated stare, I’ll get burned.”

With a sharp, almost audible movement, she swiveled her head and locked onto him. Until then, she had been surveying her surroundings, but now her focus was entirely on him. He might have made a mistake.

The demonic aura emanating from Rem was terrifying. Her familiar maid uniform was drenched in blood—a gruesome two-tone of dark red and fresh, vivid red, smeared over already dried blood.

Perhaps due to her oni transformation, green-blue veins writhed beneath the skin exposed by torn sleeves, and her fingernails had grown as sharp as any witchbeast’s claws. The “self-defense” flail she carried on her right arm was still there, untouched, and seemed to have seen as much action as she had. Caked with blood and various other substances, it looked even more menacing.

He could say with certainty: though he maintained some semblance of composure because he had somewhat braced himself for Rem's appearance, if he were to encounter her like this unexpectedly on a dark path, he would without a doubt wet himself.

Despite being enveloped in such madness, the single white horn extending from her forehead remained pristine, as if oblivious to the carnage. It was the most symbolic part of her transformation into a malevolent "oni," yet that horn alone created a stark, incongruous impression on Subaru.

However, the situation wasn't about to accommodate Subaru's feelings. He noticed the scattered witchbeasts that had fallen into the ravine were maintaining a distance, observing them from behind rocks and deep within the forest. They were likely assessing the movements of Subaru, and especially Rem. If they judged her to be vulnerable, it was easy to imagine them rejoining the fight.

For Subaru, who was at the very bottom of the power balance, their intervention would be nothing short of absolute desperation. Rem's next move, then, was literally a matter of life and death.

He held his breath, closed his eyes once, and then met Rem's gaze head-on. He focused all his being into his stare, trying not to miss even the slightest flicker of emotion in her glaring eyes.

And then,

"Sister…"

It was a faint, exhausted voice. But it was a definite sound that vibrated in Subaru's eardrums.

Rem's lips trembled, and her eyes, bewildered, stared intently at Ram's profile. There, unmistakably, was a positive emotion, and Subaru was impressed by it. Even in the throes of madness, completely surrendered to her fighting instinct, her consciousness still clearly perceived her other half, her beloved sister.

"You're truly the epitome of a siscon. I'm glad we could reunite. From now on…"

His words were cut off as the flail, gathering a fierce wind, flew towards him.

It was almost a miracle he managed to tilt his body to the right in time. The laceration on his right calf, which had slightly destabilized his stance as he tried to step forward, turned out to be a stroke of luck. The thorns of the passing flail grazed his left shoulder, and the intense pain of torn flesh made his brain boil. His throat rattled with the pain, but he had no time to lose focus. He stepped diagonally forward.

“Ow, that hurt!”

Turning away from his gouged and bleeding shoulder, Subaru sidestepped under the chain of the overshooting flail. Immediately after, the sweeping chain violently struck the spot where Subaru had been, deeply imprinting the pattern of an iron snake into the earth. It wasn’t hard to imagine that if he had been even a moment slower in his evasion, the flesh on Subaru’s back would have exploded in the same fashion.

A shiver ran down Subaru’s spine at the thought of the skin-tearing pain, and he looked at Rem, almost pleadingly. But her posture, as she looked at him, hadn’t changed. Her eyes, still wet with hostility, remained vacant, confirming her complete loss of sanity.

“So she transformed into an oni, but can’t control it, huh…”

Subaru made a rough guess about her current state based on her behavior. The problem then was to figure out the difference from last night. Rem had also transformed into an oni last night, but she seemed to have regained her sanity immediately then. Was it the elapsed time, or was it the shocking sight that caused this? If Subaru being seriously injured protecting her had affected her mind that much—

“Should I try taking a hit from the flail? I’d be minced meat instantly, though…”

If the conditions from last night were all it took, he thought she would surely come back to her senses. But in return, Subaru would be ground meat.

“The next best option is… getting super mauled by the dogs.”

If he prostrated himself, throwing himself to them, the ones hiding behind the rocks would surely welcome him with open jaws, thinking, “What kind of beast in the wild doesn’t eat a ready-made meal?!” He felt like it might work, but there was no guarantee Rem would let him go if he threw himself out there, and it would likely lead to a catastrophic re-application of the curse. At worst, Rem might abandon him completely, leading to a “dog’s death” scenario.

Following this pessimistic line of thought, he was truly out of options. Ram’s consciousness, which might understand the situation, was still far away. He’d been shaking her, trying to bring her back, but it seemed it would take time. And neither Rem in front of him nor the surrounding Ulgarms seemed willing to wait.

Subaru licked the sweat trickling down his cheek, moistening his lips, and let his words slip out. If he couldn’t think of any moves, he’d try to cover all the common patterns of interacting with someone who’d lost their sanity. After all, a full-on trial and error was his only breakthrough. That was the Subaru way—

“Hey, Rem. You don’t quite remember who I am, do you? Listen to me, you heartless person. I will reminisce a sweet, embarrassing, and treasured time so you can remember who I am. It was three days ago, if you recall. I was washing clothes in a strange mood, and in front of the laundry basket I was told to use, I couldn’t help but get excited… Whoa!”

He tried to turn the tide with an emotional appeal to their bond and her memories, but it was immediately cut short by Rem’s impatience. He barely avoided the spinning flail, which smashed and shattered the trees in its path, sending wood splinters flying. He then masterfully dodged the subsequent chain attacks with a hop, step, and jump, all while struggling not to drop Ram. Turning around,

“It’s bad manners to try and bludgeon someone to death in the middle of their story! I’d like to see your family’s face… Oh, here it is!”

“Give back Sister…!”

Subaru shouted, looking down at Ram in his arms, as Rem leaned forward and muttered. But then, with a sudden swing of her arm, she reeled in the thrown flail, and with the momentum of that swing, she sharply spun around,

“—!”

Rem’s spinning back kick connected directly with the torso of a witchbeast leaping from behind—a thunderous explosion erupted, and even from a distance, it was clear that the Ulgarm’s insides had been utterly pulverized.

This was what happened when you tried to take advantage of the situation. The witchbeasts, who had been planning a wave attack in conjunction with the vanguard’s approach, stopped dead in their tracks at the sight of such a gruesome death.

It was akin to a foolish act of exposing one’s belly while lying on their back before a hunter.

A horizontal blow shattered the bellies and heads of two beasts lined up together. Without even a glance at the scattered flesh, Rem took a step forward, propelled by the force of that strike. She crushed the front paw of a cowering witchbeast with her stomp, then kicked its stopped snout with her other foot—a light sound rang out, and the witchbeast’s cervical vertebrae snapped and twisted at an impossible angle. Rem then leapt directly in front of the last beast in the wave attack, grabbed its scruff, and with no further action, simply hurled it straight up into the sky.

Tracing an arc, the faint howl of the witchbeast, now a fastball, echoed, trailing off into the distance. It faded, then grew closer, closer, and finally, it abruptly ceased with a sound like a fruit being smashed against hard ground.

Slaughter after slaughter. Massacre for the sake of massacre. Carnage within carnage. No other thoughts came to mind for the actions unfolding before him.

It was an overwhelming difference in power, like a child's game. Their very existence was on different levels. When it came to dread, "Oni" and "Witchbeast" could compete, but in terms of absolute power, they could never contend.

Yet, Subaru utterly failed to comprehend the witchbeasts who still challenged an "Oni" they couldn't defeat. They trembled in terror, let out desperate howls in the face of death, and even felt grief over the discarded corpses of their comrades—yet they absolutely refused to flee the conflict.

Perhaps that was the very core that made them "Witchbeasts"—creatures born of the Witch's hand, referred to as external threats harmful to humanity.

Witnessing this reckless charge—in a sense, an active suicide—Subaru furrowed his brow, a sudden doubt surfacing.

Rem, crushing the witchbeast horde with overwhelming brutality. The doubt was that her incredible combat power, witnessed from the sidelines, hadn't been fully unleashed in the two previous attacks aimed at him.

It was nothing to boast about, but Subaru had a certain level of confidence in his physical abilities. In gymnastics, there were almost no techniques he couldn't perform, like backflips and aerials, and he also had records of significantly exceeding the national average in agility.

However, when comparing Subaru's physical capabilities to those of witchbeasts living in the wild, he couldn't possibly believe he was superior in agility, explosiveness, or stamina. At best, he might win a test of strength, but even that couldn't be definitively confirmed, recalling his past experience of being temporarily pulled down by brute force.

For Subaru, who harbored such a somewhat disappointing self-assessment, Rem's rampage unfolding before his eyes was utterly beyond the realm of evasion. An attack that could turn a witchbeast into mincemeat would naturally strike Subaru as well. Yet, the contradiction was that he had already survived twice—delving deeper, Subaru found yet another thread, too thin to cling to.

“Even if she’s lost her sanity, she’s still aware of Ram’s presence.”

He looked down at the girl exhaling tormented breaths in his arms, gently brushing the bangs from her forehead with his finger. All the incoming flails targeted his head and neck—an instant death blow. From another perspective, it indicated an intent not to eliminate anyone but Subaru.

Subaru was holding Ram, so Rem’s attacks were softened. Therefore, the mercilessness shown towards the witchbeasts and the attacks directed at Subaru were disproportionate in their intensity.

Subaru gasped, formulating this hypothesis. If his conjecture was correct, he might be able to get through this. This seemingly desperate situation, though by a precarious method like crossing a flimsy bridge about to collapse, he might be able to traverse it.

“For that, I need to—”

He looked around. The current layout of the ravine had Subaru in the center. Rem stood to the north, with her back to the cliff, and the Ulgarm’s have formed a large encirclement to the east and west. From the witchbeasts’ perspective, both Subaru and Rem should be equally prey, but currently, they seemed to be prioritizing Rem due to the danger she posed. Rem, while paying some attention to Subaru, was preoccupied with dealing with the attacking witchbeasts and wasn’t going on the offensive against him. However, if the number of witchbeasts interfering with her actions decreased, it was easy to imagine Rem turning her attention to Subaru to reclaim her sister.

Considering all this, Subaru had only one course of action. He braced himself, spread his legs, took a breath, and stared at Rem.

—Go for it, me. Men need guts, women need charm.

“So don’t make that scary face, smile, Rem! —I’m about to ‘Return by…'"

Today's second cessation of the world, followed by a banquet of screams caused by black mist. Even anticipating the intense pain, it was unbearable. Especially when it wasn't just one hand, but the appearance of his left hand as well.

Perhaps having savored the completion of his right arm, the sensation of something passing through his sternum and caressing his internal organs, as Subaru opened his unmoving eyelids, had now transformed into two palms. One held his heart, and the other gently touched Subaru's cheek, as if with affection. —A shiver ran through him, and immediately afterward, pain consumed his nerves.

Intense pain, intense pain, intense pain—! The world turned upside down, and at the same time, a tremendous discomfort as if everything inside his stomach was being churned. He was no longer himself. A strange feeling as if every part of him, from head to toe, was being replaced. A numbness that made his nerves unable to recognize themselves as nerves boiled his brain, and his consciousness gradually blurred. Yet, only the gentle touch of the palm on his cheek was warm, and centered there was a feeling of relief as if his mind and body were melting away, but Subaru knew a sensation that surpassed it without relying on it—

"I'm… back."

His vision blurred. His soul was worn thin. The pain and suffering, in reality, nothing had been brought back. Time had not passed. Before his eyes, the witchbeasts and Rem were still locked in a desperate standoff, a chaotic battle—but the moment Subaru returned, a significant change occurred in that confrontation.

As if something massive and unignorable had appeared in the area, the attention of both Rem and the Ulgarm pack turned towards him. This was likely due to the witch's presence enveloping Subaru intensifying even further, just as he intended.

—Rem roared. To reclaim her beloved sister from the hostile entity emitting the tremendous lingering scent of the Witch.

—The Ulgarm horde began to howl in unison. To gather every member of their pack in the forest, their instincts drawn by the familiar scent.

—Subaru also roared. Barely dodging the claws of the leaping witchbeasts and the flails being hurled, as if demanding to ignite his own life and soul.

3

A chaotic battle begins.

Amidst the frenzy, a mismatched struggle between an Oni, witchbeasts, and ordinary people, Subaru continues to dance with utmost caution in the center of the fray.

He maintains a safe distance from the intensifying battle, putting all his effort into dodging any direct attacks—nothing more.

In front of him, a witchbeast is struck by an iron ball and quickly splatters against the rock wall.

Yet, unfazed by their comrade’s demise, three beasts coordinate an attack, aiming to gravely wound Rem. Their shallow cunning proves futile; a dismissive sweep of her hand intercepts their leap, and one by one, the beasts, halted in their tracks, fall victim to her merciless weapon.

Watching this unfold, Subaru readjusts his grip on Ram, who is about to slip, and leaps backward. He narrowly evades a pouncing magical beast and lunges into Rem’s attack range.

Just then, Rem, sharply aware of his approach, retaliates. He abruptly stops, dodging a thrusting iron handle, then ducks under a trailing chain. The iron ball, passing over his head, blossoms into a crimson flower on the skull of a magical beast that had been closing in from behind.

Having confirmed that, he discards all shame and propriety, scuttling away like a cockroach crawling on the ground. Magical beasts block Rem, allowing him to successfully escape.

Maintaining a set distance, he exhales a sigh of relief, praising his own judgment for saving his life.

"—Hah! Turns out, I can do this, can't I?"

He desperately bounced to avoid being bitten by a dog, then shoved the chasing dog onto the maid girl, and when the angry girl threw a tantrum, he scurried away like a cockroach.

Simply put, that's all there is to it, which makes him want to die a little, but he rationalizes that he's doing this to survive, and in his mind, he even beautifies his own disgraceful actions.

Currently, Subaru's plan is working well. It's a decent development, both in terms of buying time and reducing the total number of Ulgarms.

Glimpsing up, he senses hordes of magical beasts gathering towards them from several directions leading into the valley.

Subaru's scent, which has spread over a considerable area of the forest, continues to instinctively draw the Ulgarms. It was a sinful situation.

Thus, he began to see a chance to live.

Even though the situation hadn't actually changed, he found himself experiencing premature joy.

"—Huh?"

Suddenly, it happened.

A new horde of Ulgarms entered the valley, throwing themselves into a deadly struggle with Rem. As he witnessed this, he slightly shifted his body, preparing to dodge, when a dizzying sensation drastically unbalanced Subaru.

His knees buckled, and he nearly toppled forward. Instinctively, he twisted to shield Ram, whom he was holding, and fell to the ground on his injured left shoulder. A pained groan, as if his throat were constricted by sharp pain, escaped him, but even more dominant in

Subaru's consciousness was,

"This chill—"

It was a familiar, extraordinary chill that froze him to the bone.

After all the intense movement, using his life as a shield, and burning his soul in the midst of a fierce battle, this sudden coldness felt like a bucket of icy water thrown onto his burning passion.

In response, Subaru once again regretted his miscalculation.

The more he gathered them, the more dangerous it became. The entity before him was so powerful that if he judged he needed even a little more strength, resuming the suspended curse would seem like the very first course of action to consider.

He scanned his surroundings.

One of the Ulgarms participating in this battle had activated the curse on Subaru and was siphoning his mana. However, even after looking around, he couldn't see any such witchbeast.

Furthermore, he had no idea what state a witchbeast would be in when activating a curse.

With his body now too sluggish to even lift a finger, even if he could pinpoint the source of the curse, he wouldn't be able to stop it, even by sacrificing himself.

"…Is this the end?"

After coming this far, would everything be in vain?

Subaru's consciousness began to fade as the chill intensified. He tried desperately to cling to it, reaching out, but no matter how much he reached, it was only a futile grasp at air—

Suddenly, the chill vanished, and blood rushed back into his palm.

—A roar, Subaru's recovery, and the sound reverberated simultaneously.

Pushing through his blurring vision, Subaru's gaze darted around, searching for the source of the sound. Then, deep in the forest, he saw Rem, stomping heavily on the ground and slamming her iron ball against a rock face. Beneath the iron ball, a witchbeast lay, its carcass burst open.

Understanding the causal link between his remarkable recovery and the situation, Subaru stood up.

The witchbeast Rem had just crushed was the one that had been cursing Subaru. Its demise must have interrupted the curse's activation.

What a terrifying coincidence, he thought, admiring his own extraordinary bad luck.

"No, that's not it."

Rem was now a considerable distance from where she had been standing moments before.

There was only one reason she would ignore the scattered witchbeasts on the way and target only that one.

Casting everything aside, Rem had sprinted, sustaining claw wounds along the way, to pinpoint and strike down the one activating the curse.

Subaru wasn't so obtuse as to not understand what that meant.

Even if she had lost her sanity, even if she was in a mental state where she didn't recognize Subaru.

Rem wouldn't mistake her beloved sister, nor had she forgotten her initial purpose for leaping into the forest.

Then, he thought.

Subaru rubbed his eyelids, consciously focusing on what he had to do.

He decided that instead of exploiting her in such a deceitful way, he should stick to his original objective. In short,

“My initial ideal. A thrilling joint curse-exorcism operation with the maid sisters, Ram and Rem.”

Only by achieving that, Subaru believed, could he hope to survive this cursed situation. Therefore, he had to bring Rem back to her senses. Subaru needed her—the impudent, rash, quick-to-judge, troublesome girl—not the ‘Oni’.”

“—Horn.”

Suddenly, that voice vibrated Subaru’s eardrum from right beside him.

Looking down, he saw Ram, still cradled in his arms, her eyes barely open, her lips moving even in her hazy consciousness.

“You’re awake?”

“I thought this was the most opportune moment, you see…”

“Ah, you’ve got good instincts, big sis. —You said ‘horn’?”

Subaru returned Ram’s faint smile with a half-bluffing, half-resigned grin and asked. She pulled her chin back, seemingly tired.

“What makes Rem an oni is that horn… if you land one strong hit… she’ll come back…”

“Are you sure?”

“Should be. Probably. I hope so.”

“You’re pretty vague about that, aren’t you?! Either way, I’m gonna trust you.”

He declared, then looked at Rem.

The white horn extending from her forehead was about ten centimeters long. If you imagined a small packet sticking out of her forehead, that would be roughly the size.

—A single blow, right there.

“Doesn’t that sound impossible?”

“Gather every last bit of your wisdom and courage and just make it happen.”

Ram raised an eyebrow, surprised by Subaru’s reply.

Subaru gave her a wry smile, twisting his lips as if it were difficult to say,

“You’ll probably get angry.”

“If it brings my sister back to her senses, Ram won’t be angry.”

“Really?”

“Really, really.”

“Swear on Roswaal?”

“…You’re brave to pick that name. Yes, I swear on Lord Roswaal.”

Ram’s utterly manly declaration convinced Subaru to respect her opinion.

In front, Rem slowly turned to face them.

Her core awareness was still directed toward them, and her expanded alert network encompassed the surrounding Ulgarms.

Against Rem in her full-perimeter alert stance, Subaru initiated his move to strike the horn.

It was—

“Ooooh, ace!”

“—Huh?”

He twisted his body, adopting a low stance, and with the recoil, swung his arms while rotating his entire body—he threw Ram, whom he had been holding in both arms, forcefully towards Rem.

She probably hadn't expected to be thrown.

Ram's stunned face, soaring through the air, receded and was drawn towards Rem. Even the oni-like Rem seemed momentarily dumbfounded by this, but as soon as she realized it was her defenseless sister flying towards her, she immediately let go of her iron ball and stretched out her arms to catch her.

"…Is this the end?"

Skillfully moving her clawed fingers, Rem cradled her sister in her bloodstained arms. In that instant, a gentle expression swiftly appeared on her face, which had been drenched only in killing intent.

—Subaru's body was launched, ensuring he wouldn't be late to witness that moment.

Simultaneously with throwing Ram, Subaru's body surged forward in the same direction. While Rem's gaze was fixed on Ram above, he crouched, darting through her blind spot and closing the distance.

He stepped in, drew his sword from his waist with his right hand, and with that momentum, aimed for the horn on her head. Cutting through the wind, the timing was perfectly unexpected.

Even Rem, formidable as she was, couldn't react to this audacious tactic—but,

"—Ahf"

The tip of the swung blade was chipped, his powerful step was a single flinch of hesitation, and under the absolute most critical circumstances, he just barely failed to strike the horn.

Subaru was stunned as a once-in-a-lifetime chance slipped through his fingers.

"I chickened out! I was just one step short of courage!"

He swung and missed, his body spinning from the momentum.

Just before he turned his back, he saw Rem's left hand poised in a piercing strike at the edge of his vision. A direct thrust from that would neatly pierce his torso.

Again, by Rem's hand—he bit his lip, determined to avoid that, just as,

"Ooohh—?!"

His body struck by a barrage of stones, skin tearing and bleeding, Subaru, still airborne, saw the cause of his current plight below.

The ground had erupted south of Subaru's position, the cause being a puppy-sized witchbeast lying low there. The creature, which he had thought was gone since falling into the valley, must have been waiting for the moment when Subaru and Rem aligned in its line of fire.

The instant it believed it could eliminate both of them at once, it unleashed its magic in a surprise attack, creating a spectacular diversion with a torrent of earth and debris.

However, its plan was—

"—!!"

Rem roared, stomping once on the exploding ground.

The nascent earth current was canceled out by her power, merely causing her blue bangs to ripple a bit more intensely.

Neutralizing magic with brute force—it probably wasn't that simple, but it was a method of magic suppression close to it.

Rem carefully held her sister, whom she had caught, and stepped sideways to escape the magical aftershock. —She had completely forgotten about Subaru, who was falling from above.

The world spinning in a vertical tumble could not be grasped normally.

However, his right hand still firmly gripped the one-handed sword, and fortunately, his landing spot was not the rock face but solid earth.

Directly below him was Rem, oblivious to his presence, her head exposed.

There would be no better chance, no later chance, no further hope.

He drew back, gripping the one-handed sword with both hands, and prepared for a full-power strike.

By sheer happenstance, layered upon happenstance, upon happenstance, this might just barely reach.

Hooray for plot convenience. Miracles are the best. Even God's whims work sometimes.

—If only it had worked during that earlier flash, it would have been so much cooler.

He grimaced. There was no time. Just ahead, in a world that had become slow and sluggish, there was Rem.

He saw the horn. He flipped the sword over, reversed the blade, and released his accumulated power.

"Smile, Rem. —Today, I'm more fanatic than even an oni could be!"

The blade was unleashed, a straight sword flash streaking towards the white horn—

A high-pitched clang of steel sharply echoed through the witchbeast forest.

Immediately followed by Subaru's ungraceful cry, due to a failed landing.

Chapter 47:
Rem

1

The vividly emotions felt at that time are still fresh.

Swords swung, fresh blood splattered.

Familiar landscapes were scorched by flames, and Familiar people transformed into silent corpses.

A world ending. A world that had been closed off. A world unrewarded.

A world that was simply harsh, simply unreasonable, simply hurtful.

Rem reaching out, her fingers twitched, her lips trembled, yet she still pleaded.

Even in such a hopeless world, it was the only one she knew.

A world Rem had only ever peeked at from behind the back that always shielded her view.

Then, that wall was suddenly torn down, and Rem squinted at the dazzling expanse of the world. The burning heat and color of the flames scorching her skin, the scent and color of searing flesh, the beautiful color of the “horns” dancing in the air—Rem imprinted everything into my eyes, into a vision that had never been fully open—

What was Rem thinking in a world that might already be ending?

Rem still remembers the emotions she gained at that time.

From then on, her every day was solely an atonement for those feelings.

For a young girl named Rem, being compared to her sister was a harsh daily reality.

Among the demi-human races, the Oni possess exceptionally high physical strength and mana.

Their unparalleled combat prowess and the racial trait of being “Kings of the Forest” further amplify their dominance in nature, demonstrating power sufficient to be acknowledged as one of the strongest among demi-humans.

No other race is as reliable in combat, given their physical resilience and the quality of mana they can wield. The only weakness the Oni possess, if any, is their critically low population.

A race specialized in producing powerful individuals, the Oni haven’t managed to foster a large population. Contrary to their immense power, they were forced to live in small settlements deep in the mountains. However, unlike their toughness, their temperament was often gentle, and few harbored dissatisfaction with this way of life.

Precisely because they were a race living in secluded lands, several strict rules existed. Breaking a rule would result in punishment, and in the worst cases, even exile. For them, clinging together due to their small numbers, exile meant lifelong solitude. Therefore, the rules had to be upheld no matter what.

For the Oni, twins were considered “abominations.” This was one of the strict rules established among the few Oni remaining.

Originally, Oni are born with two horns on their heads. Normally, these horns are hidden within the skull, but if circumstances change and stir their Oni instincts, the horns emerge from their heads, devouring surrounding mana. They subjugate and command the mana in the atmosphere, significantly boosting their combat power. Horns are organs for this purpose, and for the Oni, they are the very pride of their race.

Yet, twins are born sharing those two horns.

Among the Oni, those who lose a horn are called “hornless” and forfeit their standing within the race. Even the loss of a single horn doesn’t spare them from scorn. Despite this, twins are born lacking these vital horns from the start. What else could this be but an abomination?

Hence, twins were deemed abominations, and it was customary for them to be disposed of immediately after birth. Their fate, too, should have ended then.

If not for the immense magical power emitted by one of the twins at the moment the patriarch, having made a painful decision, was about to carry out the execution—if that natural talent hadn’t been discovered.

The twins were named Ram for the elder sister and Rem for the younger, thus securing their place, however humble, among the Oni.

Their lives, however, were far from smooth sailing. Although their lives were spared, the fact that they were twins could not be erased. Labeled “hornless” from the start, they were raised with cold indifference from everyone in the clan, including their own parents. Their parents maintained an aloof attitude despite being blood relatives, and other clan members openly displayed disgust and contempt for the “abominable” twins. For them, still unable to walk or understand words and malice, it was arguably the worst possible environment for their upbringing.

However, how long did this harsh environment last? It continued until they became aware of themselves—more precisely, until the elder twin sister established her own consciousness.

The simplest way to describe Ram in her infancy would be “prodigy.” Her talent was unmatched among all past Oni. Even as a child, her mana reserves were extraordinarily high, and above all, the beauty of her horn captivated all Oni.

Without succumbing to her own talent or power, she presented herself as straightforward as the single pure white horn on her forehead, causing everyone in the clan to naturally bow their heads before her. For a girl not yet ten, this was truly exceptional treatment.

Her aloof parents, the clan members who couldn't hide their scorn, and even the patriarch who had intended to kill them immediately after birth, were speechless before her aura. She was a being born to stand at the pinnacle of the Oni, a chosen race among the powerful demi-humans.

They revered powerful individuals, they never failed to show respect to those who possessed great strength. Being such a race, their devotion to Ram was utterly devoid of ulterior motives.

Rem's daily life was simply following her sister's glorious path with unsteady steps.

She possessed no outstanding talents. Her mana reserves were ordinary. Her power as an Oni was average for someone with a single horn. Unlike her sister, she lacked a shred of confidence, shrinking behind her sister's back, acting like a shadow to avoid being noticed or talked about. That was her coping mechanism as a child, a defense mechanism to protect her undeveloped heart.

It wasn't that she was jealous of her sister. It wasn't that she hated her parents. It wasn't that she disliked her clan members.

Her sister, always walking ahead, was always kind, often looking back and offering a hand to her slower younger sister. As their parents learned of her sister's natural gifts, they began to show the same affection to Rem. Many villagers, too, looked at her, diligently following her exceptionally talented sister, with eyes full of expectation and envy.

Her sister, kinder than anyone. Her parents, who had expectations for her. All the clan members who cheered her on to become as splendid as her sister—all of it was an ordeal for Rem, like being cut to pieces.

Perhaps the fact that she looked so much like her sister also had no small impact. Her height, facial features—her entire appearance was similar, yet the quality of the “Oni” she harbored within her differed greatly.

Of course, Rem also tried to change this situation. Though it was merely the shallow and clumsy trial and error of a young child, Rem tried every means to get even one step closer to her sister, to surpass her in even one thing.

However, her sister was superior in everything. Rem realized, even in her infancy, that there was an unreachable realm, and that this realm belonged to the closest, most beloved person to her.

She could not stand alongside her sister. Her sister always stood in front, bathed first in the light that illuminated the world. Her own place was to timidly peek out from behind her sister’s back, shrinking her body in the dazzling glow. If she gave up in such a way, she could accept all the daily hardships, like plants gracefully yielding to the wind.

How long did such days of accepting resignation continue?

3

One night, Rem awoke, restless from the heat.

She lay on the wooden bed, pulling the sweat-soaked covers off her body. Looking around, she suddenly noticed that her sister, who should have been sleeping in the adjacent bed, wasn’t there.

Immediately, she felt she had to go find her sister. If her sister was awake, Rem had to follow majestically behind her. Even if it was just a momentary awakening for a small errand, a compulsion to never neglect this duty dominated Rem at that time.

As she thought about stepping out of the room, she belatedly, finally, realized.

The source of the heat was their familiar home, engulfed in flames. Pulling her hand away from the scorching doorknob, Rem grasped the truth. Her dormant sense of smell awoke, detecting the acrid scent of burning, and an itching sensation ran across her forehead as her horn emerged.

Immediately, she used her enhanced body to break through the door and sprint through the house, which was covered in raging fire. She didn't know why, but she followed her instincts: out, out.

With a single kick, she shattered the brittle wall and burst out of the house. Even at that moment, her mind was dominated by a kind of fanatical thought: "I must get out of the house and ask for Sister's instructions." That thought was instantly overwritten by the scene she witnessed outside the house.

In the center of the settlement, a towering pile of charred corpses. Burning houses, trees burned to ashes—her familiar world had transformed into a red hell overnight.

Seeing familiar faces among the twisted bodies, singed by the flames, Rem immediately gave up thinking and collapsed on the spot. Slowly, shadowy figures in black robes surrounded her. Their faces, deeply hidden by hoods, were not visible until they were close, and even then, she didn't recognize them. However, she felt no friendly light from them, and a smile unfitting for Rem surfaced on her cheeks.

It was a face too world-weary for a young girl, a face that had bitten back resignation many times over.

The shadows paid no mind to her sorrowful expression. They raised their hands, and a gleaming silver blade in their palm swung down towards the girl—immediately after, the shadows' necks were simultaneously severed.

Fresh blood; four lives were taken at once, and the severed heads were handled with such swiftness that they didn't even realize their own demise; no screams were uttered. She felt a familiar surge of mana, sensing it directly on her skin, and Rem was certain it was her sister's doing.

The moment she perceived this, Rem stood up. If her sister was somewhere, she had to follow behind her.

She didn’t need to look far; she found her sister immediately. Her sister, whose face was identical to her own, was now distorted with sorrow. She rushed to her sister and embraced her. Checking that Rem’s body in her arms was unharmed, her sister’s body relaxed in relief. Embracing her sister back, Rem savored an overwhelming mix of happiness and sorrow.

—She didn’t remember much after that.

She thought she had left everything to her sister. That was for the best, and above all, it was right. Her sister’s actions were always the most revered among all possibilities.

Yet, when she realized it, she was surrounded. The number of figures was enough to obscure her vision, and vaguely watching them, Rem still completely believed her sister would somehow manage.

The back in front of her was desperately shouting something. Crying, shrinking, desperately pleading for something.

If her sister were to fall to the ground, Rem would be troubled. Looking down on her sister was something that should never happen in Rem’s way of life. Behind her sister, smaller than her sister—that was her reason for being.

Her sister screamed. Standing up, spreading both hands in front of her. Mana surged. Her sister’s insane power unfolded, and invisible blades, dissecting everything around them, ravaged the world.

Before they could strike, her sister turned back, embraced Rem—and then, an impact.

Rem saw it. She saw that white brilliance, her sister’s horn, dancing in the red sky, struck sideways by steel.

Round and round it spun, the broken horn. A horn broken at its base, gushing fresh blood, and someone’s shrill scream.

She still vividly remembered what she thought when she saw it.

While listening to her beloved sister’s scream, who had been brutalized and had her horn broken while protecting her, and while watching the beautiful white horn she had always envied dance in the air,

—“Ah, it finally broke,” she thought.

4

When Rem regained consciousness, her feet weren’t touching the ground.

A sturdy arm was wrapped around her stomach; someone was carrying her. The rough, clumsy handling suggested no regard for touching a woman. It was true: the arm’s owner was desperately focused on running, with not an ounce of room left to pay attention to anything else.

“—Barusu, to the right of the broken tree ahead! You’re too slow!”

“Don’t be unreasonable…! Haah, I’m already at full, sprint… dammit!”

A familiar voice and a voice that had grown familiar were shouting at each other nearby. Violently jolted up and down, Rem shook her head, trying to clear her hazy mind. Then, her lips trembling, she said,

“…Subaru. What are you…?”

“—! Rem, you’re awake!”

Subaru’s face looked down at her, a cry of joy escaping him as he ran. With vacant eyes, Rem looked up at him, her throat constricting at how terrible his condition was.

His forehead seemed to have split open, blood dripping down, vertically streaking his face with crimson. All over his body, white scars from last night remained, and numerous new wounds bled on top of them. This was the result of pushing himself recklessly, already in a state of exhaustion.

“…Goodness, Rem. You truly are a troublesome child.”

Ram, her pink hair swaying, smiled faintly as she ran alongside them. She curved her lips just slightly, enough for only those who knew her well to recognize it as a smile, and gently stroked Rem’s blue hair with an outstretched hand. Immediately after,

“Fula!”

A wind blade spell was cast, and the swirling wind blades sliced through the forest—sectioning the body of a magical beast that stood in their path, turning its lunging form into fertilizer.

Suddenly, as if struck by dizziness, Ram stumbled, lightly colliding with Subaru.

“—Ow, ow, ow! Ram, you—hey… you know my right shoulder is dislocated, right…!”

“…Quiet. If Ram didn’t push herself, the curse would’ve simply layered on. Enjoy being a wall to lean on for a little while.”

“At least the other shoulder… Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!!”

Subaru screamed, half-crying in agony. Ram, her body leaning against his, bled from the “trace of her lost horn.”

Watching them, Rem suddenly grasped the current situation. Why she was in such a place, and why she was being carried by the two of them. It was—

“Why…?”

“Huh?”

“Why didn’t you just leave Rem alone?”

The question tumbled from her lips as she was jostled. Subaru looked down at her with a dubious expression, and Rem’s lips trembled continuously.

“It’s meaningless if Sister and Subaru came. Rem… Rem has to do it alone… It’s enough for only Rem to get hurt…”

“Well, it’s too late for that, me and Ram are already ragged! We might be in worse shape than you!”

Subaru roared, stating it as a fact, not an exaggeration. Ram, perhaps lost in thought, did not participate in the conversation. Rem felt as though her sister's attitude had pushed her away, and she desperately clung to her, uttering broken words.

"It's Rem's… it's Rem's fault. Rem hesitated last night… so Rem has to take responsibility… Otherwise, Rem will be like this to Sister, to Subaru…"

"I'm really struggling right now, can you try to sum things up nicely?! Being distracted, I'm seriously getting chomped all over again like last night's replay…"

"Subaru wouldn't have been bitten—"

Even to Subaru, who wasn't in a state to listen, her voice seemed to have reached him clearly. His face stiffened, and as he looked at her, Rem confessed her sin.

During the back-and-forth battle in the forest last night, Rem had unleashed the "Oni" within her and confronted the witchbeasts. Her consciousness at that time was a coexistence of the part that surrendered to her "Oni" instincts and the half that maintained her own awareness. Her injuries were severe, but if she completely entrusted herself to instinct, withdrawal would become difficult. It was a limited use of "Demonfication" based on that judgment. However, it exposed her immature combat skills and, moreover, forced Subaru, whom she was supposed to protect, to throw himself into harm's way.

However, what Rem truly needed to apologize for was not creating that situation.

At the moment Subaru shielded Rem and his entire body was devoured by the witchbeast's fangs—Rem, in truth, could have protected Subaru.

Even though he was pushed away, the physical strength of "Demonfied" Rem and Subaru's own were not even comparable. The impact of merely stumbling forward slightly had not even shifted him from a position within arm's reach if she had turned around and extended her arm. Yet, Rem hesitated to reach out, inflicting a near-fatal injury on Subaru. It was all because of the strong scent emanating from his body, the scent of the day everything was burned to ashes.

"It's because Rem hesitated to reach out to Subaru, Subaru almost died, and he took on too many curses. That's why—"

"So, you were planning to take care of it all by yourself as atonement?"

At Rem's confession, Subaru nodded in understanding, albeit with ragged breaths. Affirming his understanding, Rem also lowered her chin, gazing at her own sin.

She was prepared to be cursed and despised. Words that should have been hurled at her by him before she even entered the forest. Was she postponing it because she felt she had to save him as quickly as possible, or was it because she wasn't prepared to face her own weakness? Rem thought, self-deprecatingly, that it was surely the latter.

"Rem."

"Yes."

Called by name, she looked up, bracing herself. No matter how harsh the words thrown at her, she had to accept them meekly. This was the sin she had committed, and the punishment she deserved.

To her, he said,

"Stupid."

"—?!"

There was a dull thud, the sound of bone hitting bone, and sparks flew in Rem's vision. A sharp pain made her vision flicker for a moment, and Rem, bewildered, pressed her forehead. Her current body, not "Demonfied," was not much different in strength from a human's. The forehead she had hit was slightly swollen and would likely be red on the outside. Looking down at Rem, who was blinking in confusion at this incomprehensible situation, he said,

“First of all, are you an idiot? No, you are an idiot.”

“Barusu. Your split forehead is bleeding again.”

“I’m an idiot too, I know that! But your sister is an even bigger idiot!”

Saying that to Ram, who interjected, Subaru shook his bleeding head. Seeing this, Rem realized that Subaru had headbutted her. She didn’t understand.

“You’re an idiot in many ways, but there are three particularly idiotic things about you. Do you know what they are?”

“What are you saying…?”

“First, you idiot! You’re saying you couldn’t save me!”

Spitting as he interrupted Rem, Subaru lifted the still-held Rem, brought his face close to hers, and, his black eyes wide at breathing distance, said,

“Open your eyes wide and look carefully. Can you see how vigorously manly I am? I’ve got a few white scars here and there, but scars are a man’s badges of honor, so no problem. Therefore, your sense of guilt is wrong to begin with, you idiot!”

“But… that’s why, if Rem hadn’t hesitated, if she had just reached out immediately, you wouldn’t have gotten those injuries…”

“Alright, don’t talk in ‘if only’s! And the second idiotic thing! You tried to shoulder everything and do it all by yourself!”

Forcibly silenced, she had no choice but to meekly accept Subaru’s rant. She looked at her sister for help, but Ram showed no movement, seemingly intending to observe the situation. Subaru moved his face in the direction of Rem’s face and, sticking out his tongue, said,

“Listen, in my hometown, there’s a saying, ‘Three women together make a noisy crowd.' That's irrelevant, but there's also 'Three heads are better than one'."

As he said this, Subaru muttered softly, "What's Monju…?" and tilted his head before dismissively saying, "Ah, never mind!"

"Anyway, it's like a story about how arrows are harder to break when there are three of them rather than one person thinking alone."

"I imagine that's not its original meaning, though…"

"ANYWAY! Don't think alone; rely on those around you! You're not mute, are you? It's not like someone's got your heart in their—"

He stopped mid-sentence, his expression suddenly turning bitter. Naturally bending forward, Subaru struggled to catch his breath, saying,

"To say no to that… isn't that a harsh judgment?"

"What are you talking about…? No, Subaru. Suddenly, the witch's… scent is strong…"

Pinching her nose, Rem squirmed at the dreadful sensation her sense of smell detected. Right nearby, right next to them, the disgusting stench—the lingering scent that had caused her to hesitate reaching out—was heavily concentrated. Why had it suddenly appeared—

"Well, about that, just change your mindset. I will too."

However, Rem's question was dismissed by Subaru's nonchalant remark. Astounded, Rem looked at Subaru with her mouth agape. No emotion beyond his words was visible on his profile, conveying that he was truly postponing the issue.

"And now for the third idiotic thing… Dammit, no time!"

Subaru looked ahead as he ran, his gaze narrowed in intense tension. At the same time, Ram, running beside him, also began to unleash mana, pressing a hand to her aching head.

"Ram, the direction of the village… no, at this point, the barrier is fine. Which way should we run to get through?"

"If we just get past the group in front, then it's a full sprint to the left, but what are you planning?"

Subaru let out a long groan in response to Ram's question.

"How about a scenario where I push Rem to you, and I heartlessly flee alone beyond the barrier—?"

"So you'll be a decoy, attracting the Ulgarms with the witch's scent, while Rem and I escape. Understood."

"Don't expose my tsundere so easily, please?!"

Subaru and Ram exchanged these words without slowing their pace. Hearing their conversation, Rem uttered in despair, "That's…"

"There's no way we'll be saved. …Stop, please stop. If you do that, then what was Rem for…?"

"One more idiot point, Rem-rin. This is the best plan for everyone to survive, you know? If we can somehow meet up after getting through the barrier, I've got a brilliant idea to hunt down all the Ulgarms using a method Rem-rin doesn't know about. With that approach, it's a grand finale, an easy win, right?"

Rem didn't know what kind of brilliant idea Subaru had in mind. Honestly, she even suspected it might just be a temporary improvisation, its existence doubtful. Because even before that, Subaru escaping the encirclement alone seemed like an impossible feat to Rem.

"You don't have to do that… Rem can just scatter those witchbeasts…"

Determined not to let such recklessness happen, Rem tensed her entire body. But her limp limbs obeyed none of her will. Her fighting spirit didn't transmit, and she couldn't find any part of her body that would listen to her.

Her fingertips trembled. Her facial muscles were barely able to move. Her familiar weapon was nowhere to be found in her hands, and she asked,

“Rem’s… weapon…?”

“I dropped that heavy thing! You can’t expect a student with a dislocated arm to carry you and that, really!”

With the explicit declaration that she had no weapon, Rem finally knew despair. Rem was then helplessly passed to her sister, slowly,

“Don’t drop her.”

“I intend to have more strength than Barusu with one arm.”

“Then why was I carrying Rem?!”

“Because Barusu insisted on carrying her himself, wouldn’t he?”

“Seriously, a genuine comeback!”

Subaru covered his face with his palm, trying to retract his statement. Rem looked up at Subaru, gazing at him as if seeing something unbelievable. Even though she had just admitted to despising him so much, why would he go so far?

“Subaru, why would you…?”

“—Right.”

Subaru closed his eyes for a moment in response to her question, then held up a finger and smiled,

“You’re the partner for my first ever date. I can’t be so heartless as to abandon you.”

Saying that, he gently stroked Rem’s hair with the hand that had held up his finger.

“Well then, I’m off to give it a shot. —I’m counting on you with Rem, Big sis.”

“Barusu, I pray you can rejoin us safely.”

Leaving such a brief exchange behind, Subaru and Ram’s running directions rapidly diverged.

Four days and another four days weren’t enough to hope for much more improvement.

Ram to the right, Subaru to the left. The group in front hesitated for a fleeting moment, uncertain which scattered prey to pursue—and immediately, they chased Subaru to the left.

“—Sister!”

“This is time Barusu bought with his life. Let’s make good use of it.”

For her sister, who had lost her demon power, the physical strength to support Rem’s body could only be her body’s natural strength. Therefore, her running speed was never fast.

Feeling this, Rem bit her lip, ashamed of her own helplessness.

If only she could “Demonfy,” she could easily protect Subaru, or carry her sister instead and run. She could do everything. Yet, at the crucial moment, the “Demon” within her wouldn’t even show its face.

Ram’s priority in this situation was definitively “Rem > Subaru.” So when Subaru proposed sacrificing himself as a decoy, if she judged that it would even slightly increase their survival rate, she could decide without hesitation.

While respecting her sister’s decisiveness, Rem couldn’t help but plead through her tears. Why wouldn’t she challenge them more boldly? Why wouldn’t she show her something more incredible?

With such unreasonableness, as if entrusting her complete trust from her childhood, Rem sobbed,

“Subaru… Subaru…!”

“Don’t look back, Rem. It will leave a scar.”

Words from her respected sister. Words from her sister, who was always right. If she followed them, her heart would surely be protected. Because her sister was always right.

—If so, then what was the value of being right?

"—Sister!!"

"—!!"

A shock ran through Ram's expression at the scream that came from her heart. Ram's feet stopped, her lips pressed together, her eyes wide open. Twisting her body instinctively, Rem escaped from her sister's arms, fell to the ground, rolled, and looked back.

Far away, a sprint too slow to be called a sprint. Black hair, tattered clothes, a limp, powerless right arm swinging, and Subaru's face, a contortion of various emotions swallowed whole.

In front of him stood a Ulgarm, forming a wall with its massive body. That body, conspicuously larger than others of its kind, might perhaps be the alpha of the pack.

With such a being in front, and surrounded by countless witchbeasts behind and to his sides, Subaru continued to run fiercely. His hand couldn't reach his back. Even if she extended her fingers, even if her heart trembled, she couldn't reach him.

Yet, Rem simply screamed, as if to make it reach him. Wishing and praying that the fingertips that couldn't reach that night, the feelings that couldn't reach that night, would reach him this time.

"—Subaru!!"

She didn't know if her voice reached him.

Only, as if responding to that voice—she barely saw Subaru, running, draw a dull gleaming sword with his left hand.

The roar of the witchbeasts shook the forest. And, as if to drown it out, Subaru's throat also let out a mighty roar.

Chapter 48:
All In

1

The moment they exchanged harsh words and went their separate ways, Subaru's bravado crumbled.

He couldn't understand himself.

He'd spent countless hours on self-analysis during his free time, meticulously examining his own character. If he looked back at the results of those diagnoses, he should have known what kind of insignificant person he was, and what choices he'd make in a situation like this.

Yet, he couldn't comprehend why he was running now.

When did he become such an idiot, such a stubborn man?

To endure agonizing pain and force a smile just to avoid making those sisters feel indebted to him—that was completely unlike him.

The sound of their footsteps told him they had turned their backs and put distance between them. At that instant, Subaru's composure shattered.

Both sharp and dull, extreme pains assailed him relentlessly. He contorted his face, baring his teeth and sticking out his tongue, crying,

"It hurts, it hurts so much! It hurts, Mom, Dad, Emilia-tan…!"

He called out the names of the three most important people in his life, then glanced sideways at his dangling right arm.

The pain had been intermittently throbbing for a while now. He couldn't put any strength into it, yet every time it swayed, a jolt like an electrode to the brain shot through him. He wanted to believe it was just a dislocated shoulder.

It was an injury sustained after striking Rem's horn, a consequence of a botched landing. He was lucky the landing spot was soft earth, and even luckier he instinctively fell onto his right side. He should consider himself fortunate that it was just this.

If he had landed poorly, he could have fallen on his head and had it cracked open.

He was spinning vertically, yet he always seemed to land headfirst. He was incredibly curious what his luck stat looked like.

"This phenomenon of always landing on my head when falling from a height—I'll call it 'True Murphy's Law,' out of respect for Murphy's Law."

So, it was the unseen Mr. Murphy's fault that Subaru always landed on his head.

Thinking such foolish thoughts like, "Damn you, Murphy," seemed to distract him from the pain. It would be perfect if it also made the fear of the obstacle in front of him disappear.

Before him, blocking Subaru's path as he ran, was the dog-like witchbeast—he'd lost count of how many times they'd met; it was too bothersome to tally.

Its persistence went beyond being unrepentant; it was so tenacious it made him wonder if it held a grudge against Subaru.

"I wish this would be the last time we meet…"

As he ran, Subaru braced himself for the mudslide the witchbeast would likely unleash.

He shook his head to clear away the unpleasant thoughts, simulating his footing on the animal trail and the movements to dodge sideways. The moment the mudslide started, he would sprint sideways without hesitation.

"Bring it on," he muttered, half-recklessly, turning back towards the Ulgarm.

"Huh?"

A foolish, airy sound escaped him involuntarily.

For good reason, a sight that made Subaru doubt his own eyes unfolded before him.

The puppy witchbeast growled softly, its small body contracting even further. It was as if it was coiling all its power. Subaru narrowed his eyes, wondering what it would do next, when,

"—!"

The furball rapidly swelled with explosive force.

The house pet, originally small enough to fit in his hands, transformed in the blink of an eye into a size that could only be described as "ultra-super-sized" dog head. His mouth hung open.

"This is a common trope in manga, but where does all that extra mass come from?"

The answer to his question was a roar that shook the forest.

It pushed off the ground with explosive force, supporting its body as it levitated on two hind legs. Then, the Ulgarm clacked its two free front claws together, displaying talons that looked like they could strip bone with a single swipe.

It seemed that its repeated evasion of his magic's fatal blows had gotten on its nerves, and the beast's chosen final confrontation with Subaru was to tear out his throat directly.

But,

"I have no reason to go along with that!"

If his memory served him right, that puppy—the former puppy's—fangs shouldn't have been able to reach Subaru's body. In other words, there was no reason for the beast to risk getting cursed.

With that, he immediately changed his path, shifting to avoid contact with it. But then,

"—Ugh."

Subaru tried to break away from the front line by veering sideways. Blocking his escape route, a shadowy witchbeast with bared fangs pursued him, running alongside.

He instinctively looked in the opposite direction, but there were multiple identical shadows there as well. And from behind, he could hear the relentless, innumerable footsteps treading on grass.

"Are you all head over heels for my pheromones, you damn bastards—damn it!"

His role as a decoy was perfect. For the first time since being summoned to this other world, Subaru had found a true calling, one only he could fulfill. It was an honorable position he'd spit on and immediately give up, though.

Once he realized it, an aura so overwhelming it almost made his legs falter surrounded him. It seemed all the Ulgarm in the forest had gathered here at once.

The thought that the sole objective of all these witchbeasts was to rip out Subaru's throat made his heart tremble.

Oh, truly, honestly.

"You're after me instead of the beautiful sisters? Your taste is demonic, you guys."

"Why must Betty apologize, I suppose? First, if I don't correct that, I can't leave, in fact."

He was too terrified and trembling to even piss himself.

His escape routes blocked, the surrounding horde of witchbeasts silently forced Subaru to run straight ahead. That meant a one-on-one battle with that massive witchbeast.

In front of him, the Ulgarm's ferocious expression twisted into a malevolent grin.

Subaru resignedly concluded that a one-on-one fight, with the implicit understanding of being ganged up on later, was unavoidable.

—The moment he reached that conclusion, Subaru decided to play his trump card.

He reached into his pocket, fumbling around. The feel of a stone. The texture of crushed sweets.

The unpleasant stickiness of some fabric. And then,

“All that’s left is to trust Puck…!”

He pulled out what he had, tossed it into his mouth, and offered a desperate prayer to the small gray cat.

He held the round object in his mouth with his molars, then opened his eyes wide and looked ahead.

The distance between Subaru and the witchbeast was almost gone.

In less than ten seconds, they would be within striking distance of each other.

That’s when it happened.

“—Subaru!!”

He heard it.

A voice call his name just now.

The voice was terribly sorrowful, filled with an unavoidable sense of despair, as weak as if witnessing the end of the world, and he knew how much she cared about his life and death—he couldn’t help but feel a misguided sense of happiness.

He was truly awful. A pervert. A turncoat.

He wasn’t incapable of imagining how the girl who screamed his name felt right now, yet he could still laugh, which meant he was completely insane.

He acknowledged his abnormal thoughts and laughed, and then, his smile vanished.

With his left hand, he gripped the sword at his hip—a broken one-handed sword—and held it in a low guard.

The witchbeast's roar came from directly ahead.

As if to chase it away, Subaru roared back, refusing to be outdone.

His voice cracked, and an unpleasant scream rose. One filled with fighting spirit. They glared at each other, clashing soul to soul.

Just moments before contact, Subaru took a deep breath.

He imagined the very center of his body.

Between his chest and waist, in a region like the “tanden,” he focused on a “gate” connecting the inside and outside, and shouted.

“—Shamak!!”

Immediately after, a black cloud erupted as if exploding around Subaru.

With Subaru at its center, it swallowed all the witchbeasts surrounding him, plunging the decisive battle in the forest into darkness.

2

The black mist veiled a world of incomprehension.

Within it, the shape, color, and even scent of the world were utterly indiscernible.

Only the soles of his feet—where they met the ground—conveyed a firm, undeniable sensation.

Without it, he surely would have lost all sense of up and down in that darkness.

Seeing nothing. Hearing nothing. Understanding nothing.

It was as if the world had ended.

Subaru’s mind, aware that the only tangible thing was the sensation from the soles of his shoes, was desperately engaged in one task:

Remembering.

He needed to somehow reclaim the contents of his mind, which had been completely snatched away by the black mist, and execute whatever it was he had to do.

His foot lifted from the ground to step forward, and for an instant, he lost everything.

Then, understanding returned as his other foot pressed against the ground. Truth existed only in the soles of his shoes. However, he no longer knew if he was truly moving forward.

Amidst the incomprehension, clinging to the only tangible sensation, Subaru's brain fought against the desire for comfort, demanding that he struggle.

He had to retrieve something that was lost. If he didn't, something irreversible would surely happen.

Again, his foot lifted, and incomprehension descended. His other foot bit the ground, and understanding returned. But this time, it felt somehow unreliable, loose.

Something, something, something, something was missing.

Remember, remember the world of understanding before this world of incomprehension.

What happened and how? Who did what to cause this?

For what purpose, for whom, and how could he break free? Hadn't he prepared the conditions for that?

Remember, remember, remember—

As his brain commanded, sparks of thought began to fly.

They refused to connect. He just couldn't grasp it. Just one more step, something was missing.

One step, but the next foot wouldn't come. His feet had stopped. The reason they stopped? He could feel only a terribly weak, feeble power in his legs.

Why, how, had he not anticipated this?

If so, he must have prepared a means. Remember it, execute it.

If the outside of his body wouldn't work, then question what was within. Even if the outside, enveloped in incomprehension, was impossible, he had to call upon all his internal organs, which constantly worked with his unconscious mind.

Fulfill your role, move, all movable parts, fulfill it, and finally—

"—!!"

Suddenly, a burning sensation surged within his body.

A frantic passion raged through him, and an inarticulate, beast-like roar escaped Subaru's throat.

Or rather, he thought it did. He wasn't even sure.

He didn't know. He didn't know, but his feet had begun to move.

His feet had regained the strength to move again. He moved forward. He stepped in the direction he thought was forward.

Understanding, incomprehension, understanding, incomprehension, understanding, incomprehension—this cycle came and went, vanishing and returning, vanishing and returning—and then.

3

The moment he burst through the black mist and sprang out, Subaru felt an incredible impact.

The sword he gripped in his hand was nearly ripped from his grasp.

He quickly scanned his surroundings, and seeing the result of that impact, Subaru stifled a gasp of astonishment.

Deep within the black mist, the massive witchbeast, still with its head plunged inside, had Subaru's one-handed sword deeply impaled in its torso.

This unexpected strike sent a sensation through Subaru's hand unlike anything he had ever felt.

It was the feeling of a dull blade sinking into the living flesh of an animal. This brought a mental shock to Subaru that was far greater than he had imagined.

Until now, Subaru had faced many witchbeasts and, as a result, taken lives twice. Once by accident, and a second time intentionally. However, this was the first time he had used a method that left such a distinct sensation in his hand.

It filled Subaru with an unsettling discomfort, completely out of place in this moment. The feeling of killing a warm, living creature.

The witchbeast, still in its world of incomprehension, couldn't perceive the death that was coming for it.

He saw that the black cloud Subaru had rushed through spanned an enormous area, and not a single witchbeast shadow emerged from it.

Unlike Subaru, they had no mental preparation whatsoever for this.

Once submerged in the world of incomprehension, how could anyone laugh at the cowardice of stopping due to its unreliability?

Stumbling, Subaru slowly began to run, aiming to put some distance between them while he still could.

His head felt heavy, and his whole body was sluggish. This was the result of the debt incurred by Subaru's incomplete gate activation and excessive mana discharge during his magic use, as Puck had pointed out.

The execution of a magic spell that should have normally caused him to expel all the mana in his body and collapse, unable to stand—Subaru had broken through that by using his trump card.

"…I'll give you kids some credit."

He spat out the small bit of fruit peel remaining in his mouth, muttering softly.

The fruit he'd spat out—it was the third time Subaru had tasted this particular kind of fruit.

A Bokko Fruit. A doping item that vitalizes mana within the body and briefly restores strength to an exhausted physique.

It was among the useless items the children had given Subaru when he went to rescue Rem, somehow gathered from who knew where.

From the moment he confirmed its existence, this plan had been vaguely in his mind.

He thought that if he bit into the fruit the instant he cast the spell, he might be able to keep moving.

It was a gamble with his life as the stake, but which way the scales had tipped was proven by the fact that Subaru was still alive in this situation.

He headed in the direction where Ram had explicitly stated there was a barrier.

He didn't know how long Subaru's Shamak, incomplete and lacking mana, would last.

He couldn't buy any more time. He just needed to get to the barrier, even a little bit.

"—Huh?"

However Subaru's plan was—

"You…!"

—immediately thwarted by a claw strike that suddenly grazed his right side.

A sharp pain signaled bleeding, and Subaru groaned in agony, his knees buckling. The enemy that had done this wouldn't allow Subaru to kneel.

It extended a thick arm, deftly moving its arm with blade-like claws, and effortlessly lifted Subaru's body.

"Goddammit!"

A gaping maw suddenly opened before him, and blood-soaked fangs along with foul breath assailed his face.

Subaru, with a desperate, half-hearted laugh, marvelled at the colossal witchbeast's delusion.

"You're the one who's gonna die—!"

He forcefully pulled out the sword impaled in its torso and slammed it with all his might into its open mouth.

"—!!"

With the fatal blow delivered inside its mouth, the witchbeast flung Subaru's body away.

At that moment, Subaru, who hadn't let go of the sword, further ravaged the inside of its mouth with the blade. After tearing it to shreds, he was thrown to the ground, rolling, and then crouched forward, ready.

"Haha! What's wrong, huh?! Come on, you piece of trash!!"

"—!! —!"

The witchbeast shook its head wildly, turning a frenzied, enraged face towards him.

Facing it, Subaru also shook his blood-soaked body, raising his broken-bladed sword forward again and shouting vulgar taunts.

Blood rushed to their heads; they saw only each other.

Their plans had been crushed repeatedly, and Subaru had long lost his composure. At this point, he couldn't move forward without taking care of this pest.

It was the same for the beast. It too couldn't process the hideous emotions festering inside it without killing Subaru.

Both entered battle readiness, and with a single trigger, the hostilities would begin.

This confrontation between one person and one—no, two—beasts, on the verge of exploding, was—

"—El Goa."

—interrupted forever by a direct hit from a fireball raining down from the sky.

"Uwoah?!"

Subaru's body was blown backward, his face covered, engulfed by the impact.

Suddenly, the ground in front of him exploded. The impact was accompanied by intense heat, adding burn damage to his already wounded, pain-ridden body.

Cuts, bite marks, abrasions, bruises, burns, and emotional wounds—he was completely battered.

"What in the world…"

Shaking his head on the ground where he'd rolled, Subaru groaned in pain and looked up.

Seeing the sight before him, he was astonished again—he didn't know how many times it was today.

In front of Subaru, the massive witchbeast's body was ablaze.

Its black fur completely engulfed in flames, the Ulgarm writhed in agony, shaking its entire body.

The more it struggled, the more it screamed, the more the flames intensified, and eventually, the colossal body fell to the earth with a heavy thud.

It still writhed and groaned in pain for a while, but that too gradually subsided, until finally, only a blackened lump of flesh remained.

The unexpected end of the witchbeast wasn't the only thing that surprised Subaru.

The fireballs that incinerated the Ulgarm—they weren't a one-time occurrence. They continued to rain down from the sky, one after another, striking into the black mist.

The spreading darkness; it was impossible to see from the outside what power the flames unleashed upon impact within it.

But he could imagine the outcome.

Within that persistent darkness, the horde of witchbeasts, still submerged in incomprehension, was trapped.

They would die without even perceiving the falling flames, without realizing their bodies were burning, without even knowing their lives had been lost.

Whether it was an act of mercy or mercilessness, Subaru no longer knew.

However, he did know—

"No, no, but reeeeally, what a brilliant ideaaaa. To deliberately use Shamak, which is normally meant for blinding, as a beacon."

The person who brought about this situation, which was neither a comedy nor a tragedy, certainly appeared, chuckling idly.

His long indigo hair swayed in the wind, and his odd eyes were mismatched blue and yellow. His lanky, tall frame was encased in his familiar, eccentric attire, and he gracefully descended into the witchbeast forest.

The master of the mansion. The Margrave. The useless one who was never there when he was needed—Roswaal had arrived.

He brushed off the hem of his robe where his feet landed, then let his long hair fall behind him, and looked down at Subaru.

"Ahaha. You're quuuite the meeeess."

"You're unbelievably late, Roz-chi. How many times do you think I prepared to die?"

Probably more than he could count on one hand.

Subaru felt a slight dip in his mood as he recalled, but then, overcome with relief, he unconsciously sank to the ground.

"Still, how did you know that was me?"

"Lady Emilia had lectured me thoroooughly back in the villaaaage. 'Even if it's reckless or foolhardy, if he's pushed to the brink, he'll surely use magic, so don't miss him if you see him flying in the sky,' sheee said."

"Beatrice… she just spilled the beans to Emilia-tan so easily."

It seemed she wasn't quite up to the task of cleverly deceiving Emilia.

Considering Roswaal's miraculous intervention, perhaps it was all for the best in the end.

As Subaru was reflecting on the situation,

"Lord Roswaal—!"

Ram appeared, shaking the bushes as she circumvented the black mist. When she noticed Roswaal, the cool composure she had maintained instantly melted away. She was helping Rem stand, supporting her shoulder.

"I apologize for the trouble I've caused you."

"Oh, no, not at aaall. This happened on my territory, after aaall. It's my duty to resolve it. In fact, you've done quite well."

Ram blushed at the words of praise, pressing a hand to her chest as she solemnly nodded.

Subaru sighed deeply, watching their exchange from the corner of his eye.

"—Subaru!"

Suddenly, he let out a squeak as Rem lunged and hugged him.

Right in front of him, blue hair swayed next to his face. He judged it to be a hug from extremely close quarters—normally a welcome benefit, but—

"Rem, right now, my body, all over… ah, my consciousness…"

Perhaps she couldn't control her emotions, but her embrace was filled with all her strength.

His injured body screamed in pain, and Subaru desperately slapped Rem's back with his free left hand to signal his agony.

But,

"You're alive. You're alive for me. Subaru, Subaru."

Overwhelmed with emotion, Rem didn't notice Subaru's reaction.

She pressed her face into his chest, and he felt warm drops slowly dampen his shirt. A mix of ticklishness and various emotions surged, overwhelming Subaru's brain's processing capacity.

In short,

"This pattern, again…"

As he spoke, Subaru couldn't support his own neck and his head lolled forward.

His consciousness drifted away. Voices faded. Finally,

"You should sleep now. When you wake up, I shall express my gratitude for what you have dooone. At the very least, I promise to eliminate anything that threatens you."

Such a serious voice, stripped of its usual clownishness, vibrated in his eardrums.

Feeling a definite sense of relief from that, Subaru slowly let go of his consciousness.

Until the very last moment before falling asleep, he felt the warm sensation of being embraced, savoring the relief he had finally managed to grasp.

Subaru’s consciousness sank into the wellspring of unconsciousness.

Chapter 49:
Story of the Future

1

Subaru's consciousness was once again drawn into a world shrouded in black mist.

It was a world dominated by nothing but absolute, jet-black "nothingness."

Only his consciousness drifted through the void, and Subaru vaguely recognized his own existence.

No one was there. Nothing was there. Nothing happened.

A world without beginning or end, where only idleness existed.

Subaru's consciousness surrendered to a vast, boundless sensation, as if cast into a night sea, abandoning even thought as it sank into the waves of inertia.

Then, suddenly, a change occurred in that world of darkness.

Someone stood directly in front of Subaru, who was nothing but consciousness.

A shadow stretched vertically from what seemed to be the ground, taking on a humanoid form and revealing its presence.

Its face was unseen. Its form was indistinct. Yet, he vaguely thought it was the shadow of a woman.

The shadow wavered, slowly extending a hand towards him.

It was a distance where he could surely touch it if he reached out a finger. At that moment, Subaru, whose existence had until then been purely consciousness, realized he now had fingers to respond to the outstretched ones.

In a world that should have been empty, a world where only consciousness drifted, a physical body mirroring that consciousness had appeared. Though, on his side, only a right arm and a half-formed left hand had materialized.

His consciousness hesitated, looking at the fingers reaching out before him.

The fingers approached with a gentle gesture, as if cherishing him, and for some reason, he felt an uncontrollable urge to cry.

It was a mysterious sentiment, as if he had been waiting for this very touch for a long time.

The shadow stirred further, and he instinctively tried to overlap his fingers with its hand—but stopped. No, he was stopped.

A white hand, reaching from behind, enveloped Subaru's hand as he tried to extend it.

It was a soft, almost hot sensation.

He wanted to turn around and see the owner of that palm. However, unlike his arm, his vision did not obey his will, and he simply couldn't turn around.

His movements were restrained as if forbidden, and gradually the grip of the touching palm tightened, pulling Subaru's consciousness backward.

This meant separation from the shadow before him.

The outstretched fingers moved enticingly, as if pleading, as if clinging, inviting Subaru.

In contrast to his gripped right hand, he tried to touch those fingers with his free left hand, but his left hand, only half-existent, fruitlessly clawed at the darkness, unable to reach.

His heart trembled. His emotions screamed. —But there was no mouth to give them sound.

Fading, fading, disappearing, the shadow.

It extended a final finger towards a tearful Subaru,

“—love you.”

The last unheard words, even they became indistinct, and the world vanished.

2

The first thing Subaru saw when he woke up was that familiar, lavish ceiling.

In a mansion where aristocratic tastes ran rampant, even the servants’ private rooms bordered on excessive ornamentation. When it came to a guest room, intended to entertain visitors, it was almost a given that the design would be overly elaborate, serving to showcase the master’s authority and more.

Regardless of such facts, Subaru, a commoner, clearly felt out of place.

Utilizing the shorter-than-average time it took him to fully awaken, Subaru vaguely pondered such thoughts.

Then,

“—Have you woken up?”

Exactly five seconds after he opened his eyes, as Subaru’s consciousness fully awakened, a voice addressed him.

The voice came from right beside the bed, very close. Subaru tilted his head on the abnormally soft pillow and looked over,

“…Guten Morgen, Rem.”

“Guh…? Is that a greeting from Subaru’s homeland?”

“Nah, by this world’s standards, it’s more like a regional dialect, and I only know ‘Danke’ besides that. ‘Buono’ wasn’t it, right?”

Suddenly, he worried if there were different languages based on country differences in this world.

Currently, the form of Subaru's linguistic communication hadn't been sufficiently verified, so this issue would need to be handled with extreme caution.

Anyway,

"Having a maid right beside you the moment you wake up, in a way, that's every man's dream, isn't it?"

"…Given Rem's recent blunder, Rem can't atone for it with something like this."

"Ah, you're about to get negative, so let's not go there. More im—por—tant—ly!"

Sitting up and shaking his head with each syllable, Subaru slowly lifted his right hand from under the covers. His hand was firmly intertwined with the blue-haired girl's,

"Did I do this? Like, I grabbed on and wouldn't let go…? If so, that's pretty embarrassing. Like when I was a kid and wouldn't let go of my favorite towel."

"No, well, this is… um…"

In response to Subaru's question, Rem nervously moved her hand, still clasped in his, then she blushed ever so slightly and looked down,

"It was from Rem's side."

"What's wrong? Just so you know, even though I look like this, I sweat a lot in my sleep, okay? Especially my hands and around my hips. Heat rash in the summer is a serious problem."

"Subaru was…"

"Hm?"

Looking intermittently at their clasped hands, Rem mumbled incoherently. Subaru, feeling calm, waited for her answer without rushing her.

With Subaru in such a posture, Rem took a few breaths, then looked up at him,

“You seemed to be suffering… in your sleep, so I… held your hand.”

“You held my hand?”

“Rem is ignorant, untalented, and full of flaws. So, Rem don’t know what to do in times like these. Rem didn’t know, Rem wanted to do the thing that made Rem happiest.”

Perhaps it connected to an embarrassing memory, her broken words were clumsy.

Yet, seeing Rem, who had revealed her feelings, Subaru looked down at their clasped hands and a faint smile touched his lips.

Subaru, who had been trembling like a child, as if from a bad dream. Faced with such a Subaru, she chose this gentle method.

Perhaps she, too, had once had her hand held like this by someone on a night when she felt like crying. The fact that she did that for Subaru somehow made him feel ticklish and happy.

“That aside, you sure do put yourself down a lot, Rem-rin. That’s not good. It’s a negative spiral; easy to fall into, but hard to get out of.”

“Perhaps so. In Rem’s case, she has already lost sight of the exit.”

A weak smile. He subtly disliked it.

Though Subaru felt a simmering emotion within him,

“…Anyway, not an epilogue, but I’d like to hear the full story of what happened.”

“Yes. How much do you remember, Subaru?”

“Up to where Roz-chi descended, spewing fire rain and completely hyped up, and then I passed out from Rem-rin’s excited bear hug, I guess.”

“…Then, it’s what happened after that.”

Haltingly, Rem recounted the subsequent events in a businesslike manner.

After Subaru lost consciousness, Roswaal undertook the extermination of the Ulgarms in the forest. Subaru, who emitted the lingering scent of the Witch even when unconscious, apparently served as live bait, effectively removing the option for the beasts lurking in the forest to remain hidden.

The packs hidden in Shamak’s darkness were wiped out by flames, and the remnants scattered throughout the forest were incinerated along with them.

“So, about my curse then?”

“There’s no worry of it activating due to the caster’s death. Lord Roswaal, Lady Beatrice, and the Great Spirit have all confirmed that the curse’s effect has already been lost.”

“Well, if you get a third opinion, I guess it’s safe…”

He couldn’t recall the specific part where the curse had been placed, so Subaru just rubbed his chest and let out a sigh of relief.

At least, the time bomb directly implanted in his body had been disarmed. It was suffocating just remembering how many times he had almost died because of it.

“Lord Roswaal also personally calmed the village’s confusion. The children are recovering well, and the village has mostly returned to normal now.”

“I see, I see. I bet, since their beloved big brother Subaru came back all bloody and beaten up, the kids must have been pretty sad, right?

Some of them probably even cried? Oh man, nothing for it, I guess."

"—Yes, that's right."

As she spoke, Rem slowly, meaningfully pulled back Subaru's blanket. Subaru instinctively tried to curl up, saying "Oh no," but his movement was immediately interrupted.

The cause was Subaru's clothes, which had been hidden under the blanket. It was the same kind of work clothes he'd been given on his first day at Roswaal Mansion when he was brought in injured. However, there was something odd about the lower part of the work clothes. It was…

"Completely covered in graffiti… like a cast for a broken bone!"

"By Lord Roswaal's kindness, the children who were invited to the mansion left their writings."

"Good grief, those kids…"

Subaru suppressed the urge to click his tongue and looked at the numerous scribbles. From his perspective, they were upside down, and the handwriting was messy, making them very difficult to read.

Fortunately, they were all letters Subaru could read, so he took his time and read everything.

"Good grief, those kids."

The same words as before. However, the emotion contained within them was subtly different.

With the bed pillow as his backrest, Subaru gazed toward the window, wishing the time would come when he could go to the village as soon as possible.

'Thank you for bringing Rem-rin back,' 'Thank you very much,' 'You're uncool, but cool,' 'You promised to do radio calisthenics again,' 'I love you.'

"Hmph, you fools. Of course, I love you guys more."

Subaru thought, ‘They say “love” so easily, their words are so light.’

He didn’t realize that those words would boomerang back to him.

Subaru grumbled, basking in what would surely be a warm gaze. Then, Rem suddenly composed herself, her lips trembling,

“Regarding your recovery, this time, Rem has something to tell about Subaru’s body.”

“Hm, ah, right. Curse aside, my body was pretty much in an emergency state otherwise.”

As he spoke, he belatedly noticed that the shoulder of his right arm, which Rem was holding, felt fine.”

Even when he put a little force into it, there was no discomfort or pain. It must mean he had been treated, and indeed, the healing magic in this world was truly versatile.

Subaru was thinking along those lines, but then,

“I’m sorry, Subaru.”

Before Subaru, who was making an optimistic assessment, Rem bent at the waist and bowed her head.

Subaru couldn’t think of a reason for her apology, so he waved his hand at her, saying, “Whoa, whoa,”

“Lift your head, Rem-rin. My body’s not bad at all, see? My dislocated shoulder is back in place, and no other parts of my body hurt either. I’m perfectly fine, perfectly fine.”

“That’s not true. It’s true that the visible injuries have been treated, and thankfully there’s no worry of lasting after-effects that would hinder daily life. But—”

She cut her words short, and a shadow of sorrow fell across Rem’s face,

“Scars will remain. On your body, of course, and in your heart too.

De to repeated treatments, the mana in Subaru's body is almost depleted."

"Ah, that's why. I did feel a little tired, though… It's not a big deal. A man's scars are badges of honor, except for those on his back, and as for emotional scars, I'm pretty tough, you know?"

Pointing to himself with his thumb, Subaru smiled, trying to alleviate her guilt.

It was no lie. If Subaru's heart were weak and overly sensitive, he wouldn't have been able to greet the morning holding her hand like this.

If they were talking about emotional scars, Subaru had experienced enough that it wouldn't be strange for him to be unable to look Rem directly in the face.

Thinking that far, Subaru stared at Rem intently.

Short blue hair. Her well-defined features were more cute than beautiful. Her expressions, which he initially thought were unchanging, now shifted fluidly. He wasn't scared. Not at all. There was the her who had made Subaru loop countless times, and there was also the her who genuinely rejoiced at Subaru's return. He felt that everything depended on fate.

It was also true that there was a Rem who would go berserk thinking of Roswaal, a Rem who would jump to conclusions thinking of Subaru, and a Rem who would enter berserker mode, losing all rationality once she determined there was no risk of friendly fire—

"You seem calm, but Rem-rin, you're actually not calm and composed at all, are you?"

Her usual demeanor in the mansion, and her work as a senior maid guiding Subaru. Judging by those, Rem seemed like a very capable and calm person.

However, when situations deviated from her domain, she seemed to possess a tendency to suddenly rush off in a completely wrong direction.

Subaru himself couldn’t criticize her tendency for immediate decisions, but in her case, it was problematic because it was accompanied by actual force and the ability to wield it.

At Subaru’s remark, Rem paused for a moment, then looked down weakly.

With her face still lowered, she said,

“I know.”

She mumbled, and then continued to spill her thoughts, little by little, as if confessing.

“Rem is powerless, untalented, and a failure among the Oni. That’s why, no matter how fast Rem run, there are many times Rem can’t reach. So, for Rem to catch up to Sister, Rem can’t think of any other way than to run faster.”

Covering her face with her hand, Rem continued her confession, as if squeezing out the words.

“Sister would have done it better. Sister wouldn’t have stumbled here. Sister would surely never hesitate. Sister would definitely do it easily. Sister would absolutely never make a mistake. Sister, Sister, Sister—”

Cutting her words short, Rem looked at Subaru, her eyes holding a faint light.

What floated in her eyes were not tears. It was merely a void, a despair filled with resignation.

“Rem is… a substitute for Sister. A much, much inferior one, a failure who can never catch up to the real sister.”

—Suddenly, faint drops welled up in her eyes.

“Why did Rem keep her horn? Why didn’t Sister keep hers? Why did Sister only have one horn from birth? Why—why were Sister and Rem twins?”

As if seeking the meaning of her own existence, Rem’s lips trembled.

The drops accumulating in her eyes traced paths down her cheeks, leaving painful glimmers on her white skin.

Subaru fell silent. Rem, unable to bear the silence, hastily wiped away her tears and, her expression crumbling, forced a clumsy smile,

“Rem is sorry. She said something strange. Please forget it. This is the first time Rem ever talked about something like this to anyone, and it’s strange…”

“Hey, Rem.”

Rem spoke quickly, trying to dismiss her earlier words.

Interrupting her, Subaru called her name. Breaking the silence, what words would Subaru form?

Rem looked up, afraid of the answer, yet she raised her face.

To her, Subaru said,

“What’s the punchline?”

“—Huh?”

“I said, the punchline, the punchline. The crucial part that makes the whole room erupt in laughter. There must be something, you talked that much.”

Unsure of what Subaru was saying, Rem blinked in confusion,

“What in the world…”

“I’m saying it was such a laugh-free story. —Rem, let’s continue the conversation we paused. Remember?”

Rem’s eyes clouded at his question. Seeing her reaction, Subaru chuckled, “Can’t be helped, can it?” and raised his left hand, holding up one finger in front of Rem’s eyes.

“Alright, let’s recap. First, you’re an idiot for saying you couldn’t save me. Can you see me, perfectly fine right in front of you? I’ve got my feet firmly on the ground too.”

He wiggled his feet as an action. Rem seemed to have grasped the topic Subaru brought up, but she still shook her head weakly,

“That’s just hindsight…”

“People used to say, ‘All’s well that ends well.’ Honestly, if we scored along the way, I’d be in a worse state than you. That aside, the second idiot thing is trying to shoulder everything and do it all by yourself.”

Winking, Subaru held up a second finger,

“Well, I’m glad you went wild for my sake, but that depends on the time and situation, doesn’t it? More importantly, good solutions tend to appear if you talk things over, right?”

Regarding the beast hunt, it was self-evident that Subaru’s words had a point. Rem’s lips trembled as if she was ashamed of her impulsiveness, and she swallowed her objections.

However, this was a hindsight bias that could only be said after seeing the outcome—Rem, who was at her wit’s end, didn’t notice this, and Subaru secretly stuck out his tongue, apologizing for his teasing.

Then, Subaru leaned his face in under her bowed face.

He chuckled at her startled expression and held up the third finger on his left hand,

“Then, the third idiot thing you couldn’t say. No, the third one subtly came out back then, so it’s actually the fourth idiot thing. You’re full of idiocy.”

“Rem has done things that make it unavoidable to be called that.”

"Yes, that's it. That's the fourth idiot thing."

Subaru pointed a finger at Rem, who couldn't break free from her self-deprecating spiral. Then, fluttering the four fingers he held up,

"It's dwelling on the past and always looking backward—"

"…"

"Rem, you keep elevating Ram to death, saying 'If only I were like Sister, if only I were like Sister,' and putting yourself down… but I don't think Ram-chi in Rem-rin's position would have made the situation better, you know? She has less stamina than Rem-rin, she's bad at cooking, she slacks off work, she has a sharp tongue… maybe just a little more thoughtful?"

Recalling Ram's specs, Subaru thought of the disparity between them and the ideal image Rem described. A sister inferior to her younger sister in every ability. As they themselves were aware, Ram was inferior to Rem in every stat. So much so that Rem had absolutely no need to disparage herself.

Despite Subaru's thoughts, Rem shook her head as if in denial,

"No, that's not true. Sister, the real Sister, is different. If she had her horn, if Sister had her horn, then this wouldn't have…"

"But Ram doesn't have that 'if only' horn. So, I don't know any high-spec Ram with that horn."

Interrupting Rem, who tried to deny herself with a predetermined answer, Subaru touched his chin with his left hand,

"The Ram I know is just as I said. She's not as good as Rem at cooking, sewing, cleaning, manners, or even her mouth. —Well, I guess that's her charm point though."

Her way of speaking was so arrogant, it wasn't bad to clash with her sometimes.

That kind of distance in his relationship with her felt comfortable to Subaru. If he turned the problem to the presence or absence of a horn,

“You’re probably the only one who cares about that, Rem, you know?”

He recalled his short conversation with Ram in the forest.

Ram didn’t seem to hold much attachment to being an Oni. In fact, it seemed Ram even wanted to do something about Rem’s attachment to it.

Subaru didn’t presume to think he could do anything about it.

After all, he was just a young man with too little life experience, a recluse whose life density was even thinner than his peers.

How could the empty preachings of such a person resonate with anyone?

He didn’t get worked up. He didn’t even try to make it resonate.

What one had to come to terms with internally, in the end, wasn’t something to cling to others for; one had to deal with it oneself.

So, what Subaru told Rem was simply a blunt imposition of his own feelings.

“If you weren’t here, I’d probably be dog food by now. I was saved because you were here. I’m still alive like this. It’s not just thanks to Sister, it’s thanks to you too.”

“…The real Sister, if she were here, would have done better…”

“Maybe so. —But it was you who was here.”

Overlaying her weak objection, Subaru placed his left hand over his right hand, which was still clasped with hers.

To Rem, who looked up with a gasp, Subaru offered a wry smile,

“I’m glad you were here, Rem. Thank you.”

“—!”

At Subaru's words, Rem let out a choked sound, like a groan.

Then she turned her face away, not showing him her expression,

"Rem… Rem has always been a substitute for Sister…"

"Stop that lonely self-definition. First of all, the categories are completely different, Ram and Rem. After all, big sister type and little sister type—it could even start a war."

A difference in preferences that would never align. While Subaru inwardly thought that each had their own good points, Rem squeezed her eyes shut.

"Well, it's like this. From now on, try to make better use of the advantages of being twins. If Ram, who's quick-witted, can't keep up with her body, then Rem should take care of the parts she can't keep up with. Complement each other's weaknesses with beautiful sisterly love, and you'll be the strongest."

"So Rem's impulsiveness is still a flaw, isn't it…"

"Don't pick up on that when we've got a good flow going. Oh, right. I just thought of something."

Clapping his hands, Subaru's face lit up as if he had a brilliant idea.

Then he leaned closer to Rem, who was still facing away,

"Earlier, Rem-rin, you asked why Ram doesn't have a horn but you do, right?"

"…Yes."

"Well, I haven't asked deeply about why she lost her horn, and I won't, so I don't know. Since I don't know, I'll speak as if I do."

Subaru tapped his forehead with his left hand—right where Rem's horn would have been,

"You just need to be the substitute for Ram's missing horn. You two can get along and do the 'Oni' thing together. It feels heartwarming."

"—Ah."

"And besides, you say 'substitute,' but there's no substitute for Rem to Ram, you know? Can you imagine what state Ram would be in if Rem disappeared?"

Rem, who was speechless, didn't know, but Subaru knew that future.

Her screaming at her sister's death, her heartbreaking lament that sounded like the end of the world, her frenzied form trying to avenge her with all her might.

"…But."

Even so, Rem still wouldn't readily agree with Subaru's words.

It was difficult to convince people, after all. In her case, she had probably been struggling with those feelings for many years, so the knot in her heart was deeply ingrained.

To such a stubborn her, Subaru scratched his head and said, "Ah, fine, then,"

"Okay, then let's do this. Rem, you compare yourself to this ideal Ram in your head, and no matter how much you struggle, you're stuck. So, just get rid of that ideal Ram idol you keep comparing yourself to."

"Rem can't do something like that so easily. Rem has always been with Sister and…"

"So if you want an evaluation, ask me. I'll give you a more realistic evaluation than the Ram in Rem's head. Just so you know, I can't read the room, so I'll be blunt. No flattery, no mercy whatsoever. You asked for it."

Smiling, Subaru gently stroked Rem's blue hair with his left hand.

To her, who narrowed her eyes as if tickled, Subaru let out a small sigh,

“In my hometown, we say, ‘If you talk about next year, the Oni will laugh.’ So,”

To Rem, who remained silent and let him do as he pleased, Subaru tilted his head and continued,

Rem spoke quickly, trying to dismiss her earlier words.

“Laugh, Rem. Don’t look so glum, laugh. While laughing, let’s think about the future. Let’s talk about the future, making up for all the wasted time you spent looking backward. For starters, even just about tomorrow.”

“…About tomorrow?”

“Yes, about tomorrow. Anything is fine. For example, whether tomorrow’s breakfast menu will be Japanese or Western, or something silly like whether you put on your right sock or your left sock first. No matter how trivial the conversation, it’s a conversation about tomorrow because there is a tomorrow.”

Spreading his hands, Subaru concluded the conversation, then shrugged and asked Rem for her answer.

She hesitated for a moment, then lowered her eyebrows, looking troubled,

“Rem is very weak. So Rem is sure she will lean on you a lot.”

“That’s fine, isn’t it? I’m also weak, stupid, have bad eyesight, can’t read the room, and even I get depressed saying that about myself, but I live by relying on others to pick up the slack. We can just lean on each other and move forward.”

She tried to shoulder everything herself, her focus was only on the burden, and she couldn’t see the path ahead.

It was easy if one walked with both hands free, like Subaru intended to. Even then, burdens accumulated before one knew it—but if you couldn’t see ahead carrying it alone, you should share it with someone and move forward. How about that?

“Let’s laugh, link arms, and talk about the future that is tomorrow. It was my dream to talk about next year while laughing with an Oni, you know.”

“…That’s quite Oni-like.”

“Right?”

He winked and twisted the corner of his mouth, and Rem, as if drawn in, let out a small laugh. She started laughing, and from the corners of her laughing eyes, tears suddenly spilled. They flowed endlessly, torrentially, yet Rem continued to laugh.

Crying and laughing, crying and laughing, Rem pressed her face into the futon as if to suppress her sobs and laughter, yet her crying-laughing sounds quietly filled the room.

Crying and laughing, crying and laughing, Rem pressed her face into the futon as if to suppress her sobs and laughter, yet her crying-laughing sounds quietly filled the room.

Subaru continued to gently stroke her hair the entire time.

His right hand remained firmly clasped in hers until the very end.

He kept stroking, gently, gently, forever.

3

I reflect on my days at the Roswaal Mansion.

The first loop began, and I died on the fourth night—cause of death: debilitation.

The second loop started, and I died on the fourth night—cause of death: bludgeoned by Rem.

Despair set in during the third loop, and I died on the third evening—cause of death: brutally murdered by Ram.

Inspired in the fourth loop, I died on the fifth evening—cause of death: fall from suicide attempt.

Then, the fifth loop. I was bitten all over by dogs, scratched raw by claws, losing both blood and spiritual strength, leaving behind horrifying scars all over my body—but I believe I managed to salvage everything.

My relationships with Rem and Ram, my position in the mansion. The village children were saved, and the witchbeasts in the forest were eradicated, eliminating any danger. Twenty-odd days of adventure—it should have been a complete success.

Yes, it should have been a complete success.

"—I'm not angry, you know. No, truly, I'm not angry. Just because the person I was diligently nursing wasn't there when I woke up, and then when I tried to look for them, I found myself tied tightly to a chair and completely left behind, it doesn't mean I'm narrow-minded enough to get angry about something like that."

If it weren't for the girl sitting on the chair beside the bed, fiddling with her silver hair, and cornering Subaru with her ill temper.

Subaru silently listened to her resentful litany, sweating profusely.

Ten minutes had passed since she entered the room, and most of that time had been filled with complaints disguised as lectures.

However, upon first entering the room, she had genuinely worried about Subaru's condition, sighed in relief after confirming he was unharmed, and then, pulling herself together, sat in the chair and changed her mood to begin—her earnestness was evident.

Anyway,

"I'm not, angry, okay?"

"Yes, Emilia-tan, your anger is completely justified. Yes, I'm sorry."

"I said I'm not angry, honestly. If you think you're at fault, then fine. I'll accept your apology. —Just, really, don't make me worry again."

Subaru apologized, swept away by Emilia's momentum. Emilia smiled, pleased, then added that last line with a touch of affection in her smile.

That was incredibly unfair. How could he possibly refuse when she said such a thing with that expression?

After Rem, who had cried to her heart's content, left the room (she strongly emphasized that her crying was to be kept a secret, so he was currently considering how to spread the word without her finding out), Emilia visited Subaru, who was dozing off.

Her actions upon arrival were as described above. However, once all that was done, her eyes held nothing but a loving light, caring for Subaru, and it made him feel strangely ticklish.

“Even so, Subaru, you’re always getting hurt, aren’t you? You came to this mansion because of injuries, and it’s only been four days since then.”

“I don’t go around getting hurt on purpose, you know? It’s just that the world is purely a bit harsh on me, or something… So at least, Emilia-tan, you can spoil me rotten to balance it out!”

“You ran away when I tried to be sweet to you, though. I’m done with you.”

“Ngh! I blew my own chance! Damn it, Beako, you should’ve done a better job! What do you mean ‘tied up’?”

Subaru yelled the name of the vertical-rolled-haired girl whose face he hadn’t seen since waking up, venting his frustration at the absurdity of the situation.

Emilia’s eyes glazed over at the word “tied up” that Subaru had used.

“I fell asleep sitting in the chair, and when I woke up, I was stuck to the backrest. I was completely flabbergasted.”

“Flabbergasted? You don’t hear that word much these days.”

“Don’t make fun of me… Puck also tried to keep me from chasing after you guys, and what would have happened if Roswaal hadn’t come back? Do you understand?”

Emilia pouted, looking a little angry.

Subaru could only respond with utmost humility to her words.

Puck, according to his own intentions, acted to prevent Emilia from being exposed to danger, and Beatrice apparently quickly gave up on persuasion and shifted to forcibly restricting her actions.

Her state of mind, blocked by two people and unable to move forward, must have been quite miserable.

If he had been the one left behind, he couldn't help but think that.

However, he was confident that even if the same thing happened again, Subaru still wouldn't take her with him.

"You ended up helping me again, didn't you?"

"Huh?"

"I said, you ended up helping me again. I invited you to the mansion to thank you for saving my life, and here we are again. Thank you, really."

Clasping her hands together, Emilia smiled, a helpless expression on her face, and told him.

Receiving that, Subaru finally replied, "Ah,"

"Nah, it's fine, it's fine. It's just something I wanted to do, and it wasn't like it had nothing to do with me. That's right. I did it."

As he spoke, he finally felt a sense of accomplishment.

It felt as if something that had been solidifying in his chest had simply fallen into place.

The repetitive twenty-odd days he looked back on—Subaru had seen their end point.

What he had sought, even after having his heart so thoroughly scraped, broken, and crushed, had finally come within reach.

He finally felt that he had accomplished it himself.

"I thought you'd say that, Subaru, but that won't satisfy me. Roswaal, and Ram and Rem too, will surely want to thank you."

"Is that so… then, I'll gladly accept. I'll have Ros-chi revise my employment terms to be even better, and Ram and Rem will be my exclusive maids for a while, mufufu. Then!”

Cupping his hand over his mouth and laughing lustfully, Subaru swayed his body back and forth, closing in on Emilia, and poked a finger at her as she slightly recoiled,

“Emilia-tan’s also the type to give rewards?”

“…You’re so materialistic. Just so you know, only what I can do. …You asked for my name last time when I said that, didn’t you?”

“Hehe, don’t underestimate greedy me. The me now is completely unrelated to such naivete. Greed, avarice, swirling libido drive me!”

Subaru struck a wild pose, raising both hands diagonally, even though he couldn’t get out of bed.

Seeing Subaru in such high spirits, Emilia probably didn’t expect such an anticlimactic request.

She straightened her posture and turned to face Subaru.

Subaru nodded at Emilia’s attitude, which seemed to say, “Tell me your demand,” and then quickly searched his mind for his desired ‘Emilia Reward List’.

With options ranging from a small adventure to dramatically skipping up stairs, Subaru carefully considered and chose one.

Then,

“Then, let’s go on a date, Emilia-tan.”

He decided to make the promise they had exchanged twenty days ago, with her once again.

“Da-te?”

“It means we go out together, just the two of us, see the same things, eat the same things, do the same things, and share the same memories.”

“…Is that all right?”

“That’s all I want.”

The first step began there.

How much hardship Subaru had endured to have that longed-for date with her.

Along the way, various feelings accumulated, and the hurdles Subaru sought to overcome by looping kept rising, but the hurdle he ultimately wished to leap over was always there.

Therefore, that promise was a fitting conclusion to these repetitive days.

“I want to brag about Emilia-tan to the kids in the village, and there’s an amazing flower field there. Just vaguely walking around with you would be special for me.”

“Maybe your meaning of ‘greedy’ is different from the usual, Subaru?”

“Just you wait. Eventually, even that smile of yours will freeze from my brazenness. YES!”

He crossed his arms in a mysterious pose.

Watching Subaru, who couldn’t hide his excitement, Emilia let out a relaxed smile,

“Alright, I understand. I’ll go on a date with you, Subaru.”

“Yessss! That’s it! E-M-T!”

The promise was made, and Subaru triumphantly declared it with a fist pump.

Emilia let out a small sigh, and hearing it, Subaru looked out the window, his spirits high, eagerly awaiting his body’s recovery.

The direction of the village, the promised date destination.

As he thought of it, Subaru suddenly thought of the witchbeast forest.

The curse on Subaru's body, they said, had completely lost its effect.

That meant the eradication of the Ulgarms in that forest. This whole ordeal had started with one of them slipping through a crack in the broken barrier.

In the end, everything had been resolved by the complete annihilation of one side.

There was an inexplicable bad taste left in his mouth.

He simply couldn't wholeheartedly rejoice that the harmful beasts were gone.

Suddenly, he remembered.

The sensation of plunging his sword into the witchbeast's body, in the forest, completely engrossed.

The feeling of steel striking flesh was unique, and the sensation lingering in his palm was still fresh in his memory.

The sensation of taking a life.

He supposed that sensation would eventually fade.

With the passage of time, he thought, the inexplicable things now swirling in his chest would surely disappear.

A sensation he hadn't known until he came to this other world.

What could he do until the day came when he forgot it—?

"Subaru."

"Hm?"

He turned around at the call.

How did she interpret the meaning of Subaru’s distant, vague gaze?

Emilia swept back her silver hair, walked over to the window, and opened the curtains.

The blocked sunlight flooded into the room, engulfing her silver hair in a dance of light, gently drawing Subaru’s eyes to the scene.

Then, to a silent Subaru, Emilia smiled softly,

“On our date, let’s bring flowers.”

“—Yeah.”

Receiving that smile, Subaru covered his face with his hand, thinking, ‘She’s too much’.

It might be hypocrisy, and an overly sentimental imposition, but he didn’t think it was wrong.

Emilia’s smile made him feel like it was right.

Time passed, with Emilia and him laughing together.

—The morning sun of the fifth day, finally arrived, continued to gently illuminate the two of them.

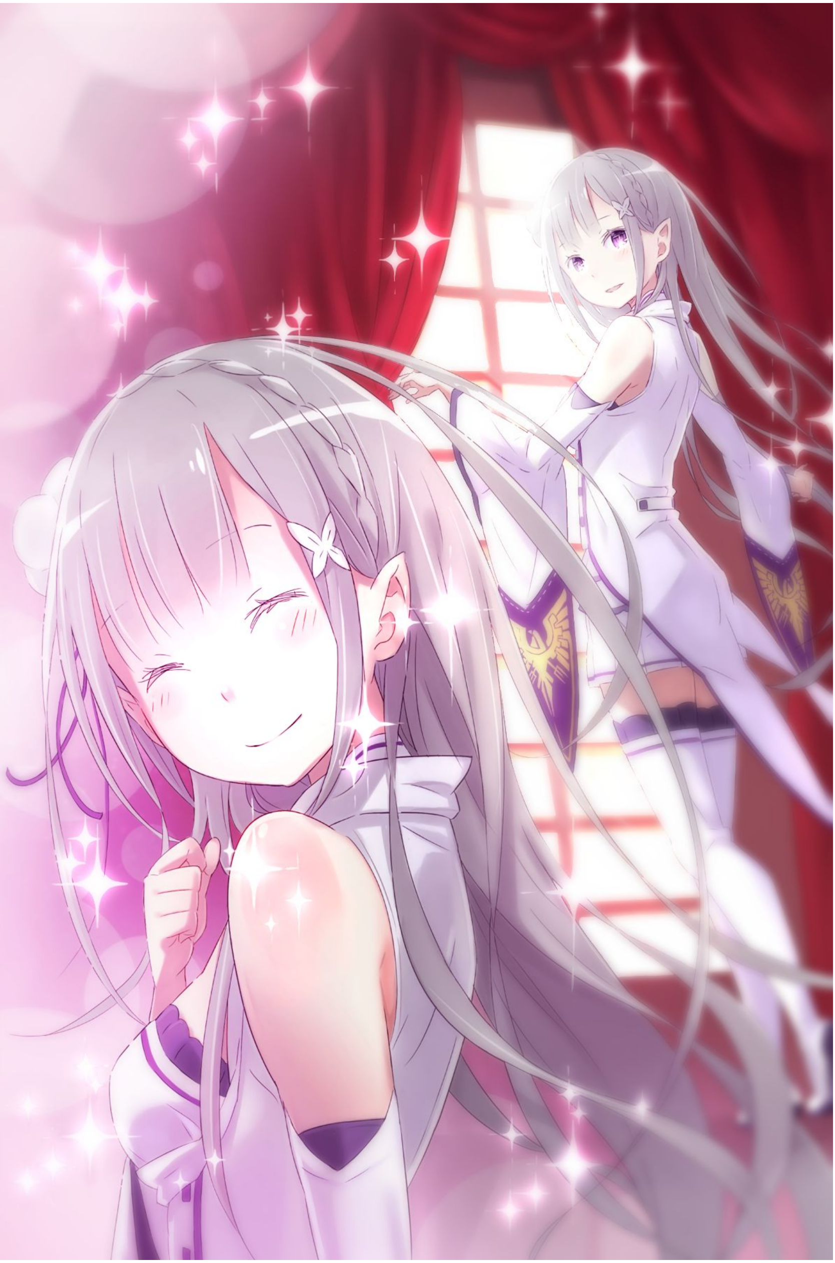

Interlude:
A Secret Talk under the Moonlight

The morning after Subaru and Emilia made their promise—about half a day had passed.

The setting was the Lord's central room on the top floor of Roswaal Manor.

When a secret meeting was held there at night, the participants were always the same two.

"First, let's acknowledge your efforts during my absence, shall we? You've done well in bringing the situation under control. Thanks to you, the damage was kept to a minimum."

The soft voice carried a unique masculine charm, yet his tone was utterly nonchalant, the kind that brought confusion to those who heard it.

Roswaal, the master of the room, spoke these words. However, the maid facing him, perhaps accustomed to it, didn't seem to mind and bowed low,

"You are too kind. Besides, in the end, I caused you trouble, Lord Roswaal…"

"Oho, thaaat's fine, don't worry about such things. Disposing of forest pests by incineration is haaardly any trouble or effort at all."

Waving his hand, Roswaal spoke as if it were nothing.

The girl—Ram—knew that his words were neither an exaggeration, a show of bravado, nor a sign of humility, but simply an undeniable fact. Thus, she said nothing.

"Pursuing responsibility will only lead to gloom. Let's talk about something more coooonstructive. —For example, how's Subaru doing?"

Roswaal posed the question to the silent Ram.

Ram shook her head slightly in response.

“His body has almost completely healed. Even Lady Beatrice, despite complaining, dedicated all her efforts to his treatment.”

“My, I wonder what’s gotten into her. That’s unusual. I’ve known her for a long time, but I’ve never seen her show such favoritism toward anyone. Was it love at first sight?”

“From Ram’s perspective, it didn’t seem like that kind of emotion…”

Ram replied, recalling Beatrice’s treatment, then pulled herself together and said, “However,” holding her hand out.

“Thanks to Lady Beatrice’s treatment, he was saved. If she hadn’t been there, I wonder if Barusu would still be alive.”

“Well, let’s just chalk that up to Subaru’s increeedible luck. In truth, there aren’t many healing maaagic users as skilled as Beatrice. Both I and Ram are quite clueless in that area. —We’re only good at causing harm, it’s quite vexing.”

Shaking his head, Roswaal’s expression subtly dimmed.

Anyone would think the content of his words bordered on self-loathing, and his downcast face would likely reflect that.

In reality, however, his expression wasn’t contorted into one of sorrow or self-loathing; he merely wore a transparent smile.

Then, Roswaal prefaced with “However,” and looked up at Ram.

“Starting with a shake of the head implies that simply being alive isn’t something to be happy about, iiis it?”

“Yes. There are a few issues.”

Nodding in response to the question, Ram paused for a beat before continuing. After organizing the information she needed to convey, she began again.

“Barusu forcibly activated his gate twice in a short period, from a depleted state. On top of that, life-threatening injuries were healed with magic… Due to overusing and straining his gate, we don’t know how long it will take for it to function properly.”

“Is that the Great Spirit and Beatrice’s assessment?”

“Yes.”

Roswaal clasped his hands and closed his eyes, mulling over the information.

Gate damage—in this world, where life cannot be separated from mana, it’s equivalent to suffering an extremely troublesome disability.

As a Margrave, and someone who dealt with mana more intimately than others, Roswaal keenly understood the inconvenience of Subaru’s current situation.

He hoped for recovery as soon as possible, but—

“Even with individual differences in gate repair, it could take years. It seems we’ve forced a cruel choice upon him.”

Ram nodded in agreement with Roswaal’s grave words and continued.

“There’s also the problem of the curse.”

“—The danger of it activating should have passed, right?”

“The casters—in this case, the Ulgarms—have been purged, so the casters are absent. Therefore, the curse will not activate… but the spell remains within Barusu’s body.”

“As for its removal, I’d like to heeear an expert’s opinion, though.”

In this case, an expert referred to Beatrice, who was proficient in curses. When asked for her opinion, Ram shook her head.

"Lady Beatrice said it would be difficult to untangle such a complex web of threads."

The cursed magical grip that gnawed at Subaru's body was deeply rooted, far more than imagined.

The spell bound his body so tightly that even Beatrice hesitated to attempt its dismantling.

However, the spell itself, having lost its caster, posed no significant threat.

Normally, a cast spell cannot activate without the caster's conscious recognition, and this particular curse was the type that transferred mana from the target to the caster. Since the recipient no longer existed, the conditions for the curse's activation were not met.

Therefore, the spell remaining in Subaru's body was not an issue if left alone.

However,

"If that's the problem, then it means we've confirmed what I asked you to check."

To Roswaal's subject-less question, Ram nodded without hesitation. As he awaited her reply, Ram touched her forehead.

"Limited to the corpses that were confirmed, all discovered Ulgarms had their 'horns broken off'," Ram reported calmly to Roswaal, ignoring a faint ache in an old wound beneath her headdress.

Roswaal sighed at her demeanor, then his chair creaked.

"That's what I saaaw too. It's likely the entire pack was like that."

"Is that even possible? Breaking the horns of so many witchbeasts…"

"Nooonsense. Either break them when they're young, or break ten or so first, and then order those ten to attack and break the horns of a smaller number. If you repeat the same thing, the rest of the pack will naturally lose their horns. Isn't that hooow it goes?"

Ram nodded in understanding to Roswaal's explanation. Watching her, Roswaal closed one eye and looked at her. His heterochromatic yellow eye closed, and his clear blue eye fixed on Ram.

"Hooowever, if that's the case, then circumstances change. Especially since Subaru is our benefactor twice over."

"Witchbeasts with broken horns obey those who broke them. — That means someone foolishly and intentionally ravaged the mansion, or Lord Roswaal's territory."

"Will this tuuurn into another Royal Selection issuuue, I wonder? First, luring Garfiel away, and now this… It seems we are quite the nuisance."

"Garfiel… what about him?"

Raising an eyebrow at the familiar name, Ram asked hesitantly. Roswaal smiled wryly and shrugged.

"Of course, he flatly denied ever calling for me. We'll have to change our codes and methods of contact. Weeell, whether we could reeely on their help was always a rather delicate maaatter anyway."

Roswaal mused, touching his chin.

He spoke of it airily, but Ram knew full well it wasn't something to be dismissed lightly. From the start, this was a battle with clearly slim chances of victory. To improve those odds, it was certainly better to have as many cards as possible.

Ram, aware that she herself was one of those cards, was frustrated by her inability to do anything but watch Roswaal's distress.

However, her thoughts were interrupted by Roswaal waving his hand, saying, "No, no."

"Let's get back to the topic. What about the 'parent' of those witchbeasts? Any leads?"

"Tentatively. However, their tracks have completely disappeared."

"Did they escape… or were they eliminated?"

"I cannot say either way. All we know is that the child that Barusu and Rem supposedly brought back from the forest disappeared the very next day."

Regarding the "braided girl" that Rem and Subaru had brought back from the forest, the villagers unanimously stated that they had never seen her before. The children who had accompanied her also testified that she had simply joined their group.

The adults had deemed her a stranger, like Subaru, and the children had not thought to question her background in the first place. Due to these two psychological blind spots, they were late to notice her existence and were left playing catch-up.

Thus, the primary suspect was the girl who had vanished.

In this case, her youthful appearance was no counter-evidence whatsoever. There were countless beings who could only have grown up in such a world.

After listening to Ram's report, Roswaal ruffled his hair and said, "This is troublesome."

"In the capital, it's the Bowel Hunter, and in the territory, it's a Witchbeast Master. It seems like I've gotten tangled up in a strange repertoire."

"No matter how many oddities gather, Lord Roswaal is not one to be disheartened by them, are you?"

"Oh my~, you're becoming quuite impudent. That makes me happy."

Roswaal smiled and beckoned Ram. Following his gesture, Ram moved from the center of the room to the back—past the ebony desk, directly to Roswaal's side.

Then, Roswaal extended an arm, pulled her small body close, and sat her on his lap.

Then,

“I couldn’t give you my attention last night due to my own circumstances, you see. I muuust have put you through quite a bit, didn’t I?”

“I understand that Lord Roswaal is busy. You can put Ram last, it’s quite alright…”

“Ram, haven’t I aaalways told you?”

Tracing a finger along Ram’s chin, Roswaal tilted her face up slightly and smiled.

“You and Rem are among the most important beings to me, you know? So much so that if something were to happen to you both in this incident, I’m not sure I could control myself.”

Extending his free hand to the ceiling, Roswaal spoke with a theatrical gesture. Ram looked at him with an enraptured expression, as if in a fever.

“Ram and Rem are important to Lord Roswaal—”

“That’s right, you and Rem are important to me, precious, and above all, crucial.”

He layered his words, building up the sentiment, and after a beat, Roswaal smiled radiantly.

“—Indispensable pawns, that is.”

Roswaal spoke these words to Ram with complete composure.

There was no hint of guilt or any other negative emotion; only the pure echo of a simple statement of fact within himself.

So, Ram, having been explicitly told that her existence was merely that of a pawn, accepted it.

"—Yes," she replied, her cheeks flushed, nodding ecstatically.

Roswaal nodded contentedly at her submissive, almost adoring, demeanor.

He pulled Ram, who was on his lap, even closer, enveloping her small body completely in his arms.

"Noow then, shaaall we begin? You must have pushed yourself quite a bit, Ram, didn't you? I told you to hold back, but you've let out quite a lot of mana, haven't you?"

"I apologize… Please."

Receiving Roswaal's words, Ram removed the white headdress adorning her pink hair.

Beneath the ornament, as Roswaal's fingers parted her pink hair, a faint white scar was visible just above her forehead.

—It was a remnant of the era when she was an Oni, a prodigy.

The scar showed damage from the exertion of mana, with faint traces of blood still seeping.

Roswaal traced the wound tenderly with his finger.

"—May the stars grant their blessing."

Four colors of light traveled up Roswaal's arm, transforming into a pure white light as they converged at his fingertip—then, the light flowed from his fingertip, pouring into Ram's scar where he touched.

—Directly transferring mana to another person is an art that requires extremely advanced handling.

Unless the mana of each attribute is perfectly balanced, the mana will be converted into force and damage the target's body. This "healing act" is only possible for Roswaal, who is compatible with all four colors of mana and can wield them at a high level.

For an Oni, the horn on their forehead represents the line through which mana flows in and out.

While similar in function to a gate, its physical nature allows it to perform this function more intensely, and the body is similarly adapted.

However, Ram lost her horn due to an external factor, and neither the amount of mana she can absorb nor the amount she can release is sufficient to satisfy her body.

If left unchecked, her body would simply waste away—to maintain it, these nightly secret meetings with Roswaal were a daily routine.

As mana was poured into the scar on her horn, Ram's shoulders trembled slightly.

"Ah, mmh."

"No matter how many times I hear it, it's a sight and sound that poooisons both the eyes and ears."

Ram, breathing heavily and her cheeks flushed with allure, received a wry smile from Roswaal.

Ram cast him a sidelong glance.

"If you find it so poisonous, you may as well dispose of me."

"My own daughter, in all but name? Oh, that would certainly live up to the reputation of a peeerverted, corrupt noble, wouldn't it? Hooow exciting!"

Roswaal smoothly deflected Ram's temptation and continued to pour mana.

As vitality filled her body and her gate swelled with warmth, Ram, entrusting herself to the sweet sensation, suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, I have something to report to Lord Roswaal…"

"What is it?"

"It's about Rem."

"There's no particular reprimand, you know? Ooof course, there will be a little scolding, but I have no intention of punishing her otherwise."

Roswaal interrupted, anticipating her words. But Ram subtly denied him, "No," then hesitated with her lips, seemingly wondering how to convey it.

"Rem has become attached to Barusu."

"Hmm?"

"Something about Barusu seems to have touched Rem's vulnerable side."

It was about her twin sister.

Ram, as the elder sister, understood Rem's psychological state all too well. And she knew that her thoughtless younger sister could never do the opposite.

Initially, Roswaal looked puzzled, but as Ram explained, he gradually showed an expression of understanding, and muttered thoughtfully, "Hmm."

"Rem, you say? Weeell, I suppose it's not surprising. Unlike Ram, she doesn't serve me out of loooyalty, after all."

To her master's rather blunt assessment of her sister, Ram responded with silence, offering no rebuttal whatsoever. This was, in essence, unspoken affirmation.

Unlike Ram, who devoted herself to Roswaal with selfless loyalty, Rem's devotion was largely driven by a sense of self-preservation.

For Rem, Roswaal largely represented "the one who protects her older sister, Ram." This way of thinking stemmed from Rem's deep-seated dependency, where her sister's existence was intertwined with her own sense of purpose. As a result, Rem's actions to protect her community tended to be rash and premature. If left unchecked, she might even take it upon herself to dispose of anyone she deemed harmful.

In that sense, Ram's honest assessment was that Subaru had been lucky to earn her trust before being attacked.

Of course, even with such an assessment, Rem was still the cutest sister in the world to Ram, and her priority was still higher than Ram's own.

—However, if asked if she was the absolute highest priority, Ram couldn't honestly nod at the moment.

"Regardless of Rem's feelings, Ram will continue to remain in my hands. Theeerefore, she will inevitably have no choice but to do the same. Seeeee, it's the same as always, nothing has changed."

"I'll set some expectations in advance. This is an important task for tomorrow, you know."

As he said this jokingly, the light in Roswaal's palm faded.

The treatment was over. Feeling the vitality within her, Ram reluctantly slid from Roswaal's lap to the floor.

She turned and faced him as Roswaal rose from his chair, his tall figure towering over her.

"In aaany case, things are going to get busy again. It will be a hardship, but I'm counting on boooth Ram and Rem."

"As you command. This body has been yours since that night of fire."

She pinched the hem of her skirt and curtsied low.

Receiving her loyalty, Roswaal clasped his hands behind his back and walked to the window. With Ram accompanying him, he opened the curtains.

Looking up at the sky—where a plump, full moon floated—Roswaal narrowed his heterochromatic eyes slightly.

“This Royal Selection, we absolutely must win. For my purpose.”

He murmured, and his outstretched arm pulled Ram closer by the shoulder.

Feeling the warmth of his tall body near her once more, Ram quietly closed her eyes and looked down.

Listening to the voice of the man beside her, her master, the one to whom she entrusted her soul,

“—For the day we kill the Dragon.”

—The night quietly deepened.

Sweeping away the tumultuous days, cleansing everything, as if welcoming a new world.

Bonus Short Stories

Emilia's First Date

1

The day of their promised date began with a morning blessed with a clear, cloudless sky.

"I feel like a braid definitely looks best on you these days, but it's regrettable that I have to show it to Subaru. As for your clothes, I suppose it would be best to stick with the white theme. We'll add a highlight with your hair accessories, and then, after that…"

Floating around in a hurry before the silver-haired girl sitting on the bed—Before Emilia was the cat spirit she had formed a contract with, Puck.

As she watched the gray furball stress himself out, Emilia placed a finger on her cheek.

"I don't think you have to worry about it that much, it'd probably be fine if we just went with the usual…"

"No way! Forget about your partner, this is your first date. You absolutely have to be the cutest in the world!"

"Gosh, you're making such a big deal of it."

Puck's fighting spirit seemed to be blazing for some reason, Emilia stealthily sighed so he wouldn't see it.

Acting as her foster parent, the cat spirit who was essentially her family had been in this state since last night. At this rate, the preparations alone would exhaust her before she even took a step outside. —Even though she was supposed to go on a 'date' with Subaru today.

"Listen closely, Lia. On today's outing, Subaru might try to approach you to hold your hand or something of the sort, but you definitely must not allow that. Don't get caught up in the flow of things, no matter what. The most important traits in a woman are modesty, shyness, and just a little bit of submissiveness. I'm always telling you this, so I'm sure you understand."

"Okay, I get it already, jeez. If you're that worried, you might as well come along."

"I want to respect his courage as a man. There's no way I could do something so tactless."

"But then your words and actions are completely contradicting each other…"

"My feelings as a male wanting to support him and my feelings as a parent wanting to forbid this are battling it out within me… Hngh, Lia, you'd better go while I can still hold myself back…!"

"Right, right."

Puck's theatrics as he made his jokes were probably due to Subaru's bad influence.

She certainly felt like he was already this way to begin with, but she also thought he had gotten even worse about it now.

Quickly finishing up her personal grooming, Emilia beckoned Puck over to her with her hand. Puck readily responded to her call and perched on her shoulder, after which he started massaging her cheek with his paws in a fancy manner.

"Alright then, Lia. I'll be sleeping in my Yorishiro, but if Subaru tries to do anything that strays from the path of decency, be sure to call me out."

"Come on, you don't have to worry about that sort of thing. Alright, nighty night. Take it easy."

As Puck saw a giggling Emilia off, his body dissolved into particles of light. The faint light was then absorbed into the crystal on her chest, and the noisy cat watching over her fell silent.

Therefore, Emilia flicked the crystal with her finger after which she jauntily walked out of the room.

Even Emilia understood that her heart somehow felt stimulated as if it was expecting something.

2

“Did I keep you waiting?”

“No, I’ve only just gotten here myself.”

Standing before the tree they had decided to meet at, Subaru responded like so to Emilia who had just linked up with him.

Emilia nodded at his response, and then turned back to the mansion as she continued,

“You said you wanted to meet outside the mansion, and say that stuff we just said… Can I ask if there was any particular meaning to that?”

“They both seem rather fitting for a date, don’t you think! Leaving the mansion together wouldn’t feel very much like a date, and when you meet outside the sort of conversation we just had is an absolute necessity.”

It seemed like he had arrived much earlier than her, and used a twig or something to draw several pictures of Puck in order to kill time under this tree.

Seeing this, it seemed to her that at the very least his statement that he had only just gotten here himself was a complete lie.

“Hmm, so that’s how it is. I really don’t know anything about this sort of thing.”

“By the way, I would still reply ‘I’ve only just gotten here myself’ even if you were super late, it’s a sign of my noble manly heart.”

“But wouldn’t that mean you were reeeeally late too…”

“There’s certain things you shouldn’t point out even if you notice, aren’t there?!”

This seemed to be an obligatory exchange. Subaru lectured her about its importance as she accompanied him, and when he was done he placed his hand on his jaw and started staring at her intently.

“Eh, what’s wrong? Do I look weird somehow?”

“The characters for weird and romance look quite similar, huh, but setting that aside, there’s only a tiny bit that’s weird about you, and that tiny bit is also charming in itself so it’s all good. More importantly, you’re looking extraordinarily cute today as well! … Have you dressed up a little more than usual today?”

Subaru, alert as he was, noticed the subtle changes in her hair, accessories, and so on. He accurately guessed where Puck had spent his efforts, surprising Emilia.

“You noticed? Puck was a lot more enthusiastic than usual today.”

“Ooh, great job! Not bad, Puck. And here I thought for sure that his feelings as a father would make him put up some resistance when it came to his daughter’s first date.”

“Yeah, he was reeeeally conflicted about it, but he’s sleeping in my crystal right now so you can relax.”

Emilia showed him the crystal on her chest with a faint smile, causing Subaru to don an expression of relief, “I see.” He then cleared his throat, and humbly bowed before her.

“Well then, I suppose this is the beginning of our first date. I consider it a great honor that you would allow me to escort you.”

His butler outfit was completely flawless from head to toe. Subaru didn’t really have much choice since he did not possess any other formal clothing, but to Emilia it truly seemed to fit this gesture.

Consequently, she obediently stood next to Subaru who was holding his elbow out to her, intending to link arms with her.

“Umm, is this okay?”

Her fingers grasped his cuff ever so slightly as she looked to him with upturned eyes and asked this. Puck had told her not to take his hand, so she was rather anxious wondering if this was okay. But in response, Subaru,

“This isn’t what I was hoping for, but that’s a performance beyond my expectations! Your loveliness truly is demonically inspired…”

Subaru covered his face with his palms and writhed around, it didn’t look like he was angry. Relieved by this, Emilia pulled on his cuff as she started walking.

“So, what exactly do you do on a ‘date’?”

“First of all, we’ll head to the village. After that, we’ll pay our respects to the dead… And then, how about going to see some flowers. Slowly, calmly, there’s no rush.”

Bathed in the warmth of his gaze, Emilia looked at his profile as he said this with a smile, after which she responded “That sounds nice” with a smile so lovely it was enchanting.

3

“Thank goodness the children seem alright. You seemed reeeeeally popular too, Subaru.”

“I wonder if that’s something to be so happy about, it’s actually pretty problematic in its own way, Emilia-tan.”

Subaru who muttered this with a grave expression was currently dusting off his butler outfit which was covered in dust and dirt.

When they first arrived in the village, the two set went to receive some flowers for their visit to the grave. Subaru had already asked the children to prepare a bouquet in advance.

There were no problems thus far, their troubles started after they had obtained the flowers.

Even the fact that he was on an important date had no meaning to these innocent children. Regrettably, Subaru ended up getting surrounded just like he usually did and was ultimately reduced to this wretched state that he always ended up in.

“Even with this, they were probably holding back because you were there. If it weren’t for that, I’d be going through something even more horrible right about now.”

“Come on, you’re exaggerating. Those kids just like you, isn’t that right.”

“If this were any other day, I would have snot spread all over my back right now. Fortunately, I was able to avoid that fate today.”

“That’s what usually happens?!”

Emilia suddenly started to gaze upon him with pity.

Forming a complicated expression in response to her sympathetic gaze, Subaru turned around somewhat exhausted and, “Ah.”

This caused Emilia to turn around as well, and there she found the children from the village who had been following them.

“Come on, you guys can’t tag along this time. I told you that Emilia and I were going to be having a thrilling, lascivious tryst, didn’t I? Get outta here, scram!”

“Ehh, what a tyrant.”

“Ehh, what a rude guy.”

“Ehh, what an unruly kid.”

“I’m no unruly brat. Also, we’re getting close to the barrier which if you remember you were forbidden from approaching. Unless you want to hear Muraosa’s long, boring, droning lectures, you’d better head back right now. Head back, and have fun playing that frozen demon game I taught you or something.”

[T/N: Frozen Demon = Freeze Tag]

Subaru waved his hand as if shooing away insects, causing the children to mutter complaints as they retreated.

Emilia watched this exchange as if she found it charming, but she suddenly realized that among the children, there was a cute girl staring directly at her.

She was a lovely girl with reddish brown hair and red cheeks like an appa. When her eyes met Emilia's, she stuck her tongue out with a noise before she ran off.

"That Petra, what's with that attitude of hers. I'll be sure to give her a good talking to tomorrow. Are you alright, Emilia-tan? If the shock has rendered you unable to walk, I'm more than willing to princess carry you in my arms."

"No, I'm used to it, so it's fine. Something of that level isn't anything worth making a fuss over."

"Making a fuss, not something you hear very often these days… And I'm the one hurt by the statement that you're used to this…"

"It's fine. Come on, our 'date' isn't over just yet. Let's go."

Emilia said this to Subaru whose face looked like he wasn't telling her something, after which she immediately started walking. Subaru seemed a little troubled, but he ultimately ended up walking over to Emilia's side without saying anything.

Emilia felt somewhat disgusted at herself for relying on his consideration like this

"—Alright, we're here, we're here.".

After they walked a bit further, Subaru stopped and pointed at the trees.

At first glance they appeared to be a perfectly normal cluster of trees, but there were blue crystals embedded high up in their trunks, and the evenly spaced trees formed a barrier that responded to evil mana in the atmosphere—Miasma.

The witchbeasts known as Ulgarm which had been inhabiting the forest were all wiped out, but it was very likely that a different type of witchbeast would soon take over the now empty territory. The barrier had not yet outlived its usefulness, and thus it was once again restored.

"We can't enter, so sorry, but this is as far as we go."

Standing right before the barrier, Subaru found a spot people weren't likely to frequent and placed the bouquet there. Having done this, Subaru joined his hands and closed his eyes while still on his knees, and then lowered his head as if in prayer.

It was an unusual method of praying, it was her first time seeing such a thing. Perhaps it was a custom from his home town which he would not speak to her in detail about. Seeing this from the side, Emilia too placed her hand on her chest and prayed for them to rest in peace

She had heard that all living things, even witchbeasts, would have their souls cleansed when they returned to the Od upon death. She hoped they could get along when they once again incarnated into this world in a new form.

That was a life lesson Emilia had picked up—Someone had probably taught it to her.

"Sorry to make you play along with my self-satisfaction. It's alright now, everything's OK."

Dusting off his knees, Subaru stood up and smiled at Emilia. Coming to her senses, Emilia confirmed that Subaru wasn't forcing himself to smile after which she nodded, "Yeah."

"So, what we're doing next is… Visiting a field of flowers, is that right?"

Drawing up their 'date's' itinerary in her mind, Emilia asked about their next destination. To confirm this, Subaru snapped his fingers in satisfaction,

"That's right, a flower field. This is a pretty big deal in itself, you know?"

Saying this, he smiled with a playful expression that fanned the flames of her expectations even further.

4

Having left the forest, with her bangs dancing in the wind, Emilia could not suppress her voice of admiration.

“W-W… Wow!”

She advanced through the forest with Subaru leading her, and the greenery that had been blocking her view thus far cleared away in an instant. The vivid scenery filled her vision with endless, beautiful colors.

“How about it?! I was rather surprised myself when I first saw this, but… It really is pretty grand after all, isn’t it?”

She couldn’t even respond to Subaru who was boasting right beside her, her gaze was fixed on the scenery before her.

Red and yellow, white and blue, flowers were blooming all over the place, and none of them overwhelmed the others, the field of flowers was in complete harmony. The fact that a flower garden like this was formed naturally could only be called a miracle.

“This seems to be some sort of secret garden to those brats, I really had to work hard to get them to talk about it.”

“A wonderful place like this… How did you get them to tell you about it?”

“Hehe, it was all for my date with you. I suppose you could say it was a bit of compensation for letting them violate my rights as a human being for days on end.”

The conditions of this exchange probably resulted in Subaru getting covered in unfathomable amounts of dirt and snot.

While she certainly found this pitiable, she definitely could not forget about how deeply the scene before her eyes moved her.

Perhaps she was once again being spoiled by him. To have her chest filled with such pleasant emotions.

"—Also, this too is a present from me to you, Emilia-tan."

And thus, Subaru said this to Emilia whose hand was against her chest as he extended his hands toward her. "Eh?", Emilia was late to react as Subaru touched her silver hair,

"This is… An ornament, made of flowers?"

"It's a crown of flowers, so to speak. Perhaps it's not much compared to the real thing, but you could think of it as a rehearsal for when you one day ascend the throne? I definitely want to give you one adorned with the finest jewels by my own hand some day, but… For now, this is the best I can do."

Subaru said this in a rather pompous tone as he winked at Emilia.

His actions caused Emilia to feel a slight throb in her chest. For some reason, her heart suddenly turned lively for a moment. She wondered what exactly that sensation was, strangely enough it did not occur again.

But she did know that it made her feel terribly warm, and it naturally brought a smile to her face.

"Thank you, Subaru."

On that day, Emilia gave him her finest smile, and Subaru was so entranced he could not even speak.

Emilia felt immense gratitude toward Subaru and continued.

"If possible, I'd like to go on another 'date' with you sometime."

This killer line of hers pierced his heart magnificently.

END

Felt Saw!

1

…I'll get it this time, I thought, as I leaped over the redhead with clenched fists.

I kicked off the wall and jumped towards the ceiling where I grabbed onto the hanging lights and swung forward like a pendulum; and as I had intended, the moment my feet hit the carpet, I was able to accelerate.

"Yes! Gotcha this time. Serves ya- gyah?!"

During my escape's parting shot, I was caught by the neck and my legs were left kicking the air.

"Ugeh," I cried, as my nape was squeezed and I dangled like a cat.

"Felt-sama, it is not proper for a girl to say 'ugeh.'"

"That so? Ugeh, ugeh, ugeeehh."

Hearing that, I repeated it as harassment towards the guy I should have been able to leave behind.

Continuing to hold me like a cat by its scruff, he stared at the ceiling.

"Still, in just a few days you were able to leave my side once… that's quite an accomplishment."

"Don't pretend ta praise me ta brag about it! And I'm not a stray cat, lemme go!"

"Well then, may we consider today as my win again?"

While I was thrashing my legs about, Reinhard directed a smile at me.

“Fuck!” I spat, as I threw all my feelings of anger, worthlessness, and other various emotions towards his smile.

2

Ten days had passed since I was confined by that bastard, Reinhard.

“Feel free to try if you think you can escape from me,” he had proposed, as if to mock me after trapping me. Regrettably, for the past ten days, all of my dozen or so escape plans have failed. I was still unable to get out of this abduction situation.

It was as if he had eyes across the entire mansion, immediately appearing wherever I tried to flee. With that said, I should use this time while he’s not here to escape…

“Here, Felt-sama. It’s such a waste for you to ruin your cute face by being miffed all the time.”

A plate of sweets was offered towards the dissatisfied me, and my stomach rumbled as I smelled its fragrance. Seeing my instinct to touch my abdomen, the old lady that provided the sweets smiled.

She was called “nanny” by Reinhard, and is the wife of the couple that works at the mansion. Her work seems to involve stuff like cooking and cleaning.

She looked to be over 60, and was someone had trouble dealing with, albeit in a different sense from that of Reinhard.

It might be because she was always smiling, which made me feel uncomfortable, as if I was being cursed at.

“Today’s snacks are baked confectionaries. Felt-sama, would these fit your taste?”

As I looked back and forth between the confectionary and the old lady, her already wrinkled face creased further as she encouraged me to try it.

I guess I gotta do it.

I picked up a piping hot confectionary and stuffed it in my mouth. Its sweetness quickly enveloped my mouth.

“Mmm!”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling.

Even though I was unwillingly captured into this mansion, and I hated their pretty clothes and soft beds, their food was just something else. You couldn’t compare it to that of the slums.

“Is it no good after all? Ta bring Granny along when I escape.”

“Fufu, it makes me happy to be invited, but… if I were to leave, Gramps would starve to death. Though, Young Master can handle everything on his own.”

“Aww, guess it was no good.” I pouted after being rejected by Granny.

By the way, Gramps—Granny’s husband—is an extremely reticent worker. That’s how I saw it when he took care of the garden, went shopping, and such. After all, I found it difficult to even talk when I went shopping with him before.

“Besides, even if I snuck out ta escape, I’ll be found no matter where I go and then ma tired body would be dragged back to the mansion by ma legs…”

“It’s not good to trouble your two elders. Sigh. My, oh my, how troubling.”

“Well, Granny, you also don’t hold back punishments each time I run away…”

Even without Reinhard here, I still couldn’t leave because Granny and Gramps were in the way. Their movements made it clear they were no ordinary elders. Perhaps it was because they were acquainted with Reinhard, or perhaps everyone with connections to nobles were like this.

“In that case, it’s money, huh… By the way, I haven’t seen Reinhard around, he ain't here?"

"Indeed, Young Master is at the Royal Castle because of some matters he must take care of. However, he should be returning shortly. I understand Felt-sama is feeling lonely, but please bear with it as Granny shall accompany you."

"I ain't feeling lonely. I'm done eating, so I'm leaving."

I licked the cream stuck on my hands as I got up from my seat.

To be honest, I wanted to lick the plate as well, but the last time I did that, Granny got so furious it felt like the world was about to end.

"I have to tidy up and clean the residence, hence I cannot attend to you… so please be careful not to do something dangerous. I don't know what Young Master would do after all."

"I'm not a kid, ya don't hafta worry. Thanks for the food."

Swinging my arms, I left the dining room to leisurely walk about the mansion. With that said, because I was here for ten days, I had explored most of the mansion.

Basically, the doors to the outside were locked, and since I had jumped out of the windows on the first day, the windows were modified to no longer open. At worst, I could break the windows to escape, but the moment I tried that, three people rushed over and caught me.

"Even so, I'll definitely get outta here…"

It's true that it wouldn't be bad to wallow in such comfort, but there was a reason I had to go back no matter what.

"Rom-jii… wonder if he's doing alright…"

That was the name of my only family member, whom I had left behind in the slums.

Ten days ago, because of a blunder I made, he got involved and ended up getting hurt. I was captured by Reinhard soon after, so I wasn't able to confirm Rom-jii's safety.

It's not a wound he would die from, but if asked about, it wasn't something even he could avoid answering easily.

"That's why I hafta go back no matter what, but what can I do to escape…?"

As I finished my thought, I halted—at the end of the hallway I was walking down was a door that led to a room.

"This room… was usually closed ta prevent anyone from entering, right?"

The door had a large, rugged bell on it, and I clearly remember being warned about not entering it.

Right now, there was no key on it, but twisting the doorknob easily opened it.

I checked my surroundings to confirm there was no one nearby before slipping into the room.

The air was chilly, and my initial thoughts were that it was a dimly lit room.

Even though it was daytime, the windows were blocked by thick curtains, preventing any sunlight from coming in. The interior was quite dreary, with nothing that stood out aside from the bed at the center.

A candlestick lay beside the bed, with its faint light providing the only illumination in this room.

"What, how boring. I honestly thought they would be hiding some treasure or somethi-?!"

Initially finding the room to be a letdown, I noticed something that left me speechless. It was so shocking, I thought my heart was going to explode.

…On the bed laid a sleeping woman.

It wasn't the fact that a woman was sleeping there that startled me, but rather the fact that she didn't breathe like someone who was asleep. I didn't get that impression from her.

Even after confirming it with my eyes, it didn't seem like that was the case.

"What… is this? She's…"

I couldn't feel the presence of a living person from her even as I moved closer.

You would think that would mean she was a corpse or a doll, but that was not the case. Her cheeks and lips indicated that her blood was still flowing, and if you looked closely, her chest did rise and fall from breathing.

Although she was alive, there were no signs of her life.

"I can't understand. In fact, who is she? …Don't tell me that bastard Reinhard imprisoned other women as well?"

"…That is a terrible misunderstanding. I cannot help but say your assessment was very unexpected."

"Gyaaah!"

Hearing a voice from behind made me lose my wits. I screamed and leaped across the other side of the bed with my hands.

I glanced at the entrance, and there stood Reinhard.

He was leaning against the door, and had a rare, troubled look on his face as he pushed aside his forelock.

“It seems I had slackened just a bit… I have made an oversight, it seems.”

“This isn’t like ya. By the way, mind letting loose who she is? If ya keep quiet, I’ll see ya as criminal who abducts a bunch of women. “

“She is my mother.” Reinhard readily replied towards my question.

His answer only made me respond with “What?” as I looked at the woman on the bed.

She had long golden hair, and was beautiful enough to make your eyes pop. At most, she seemed to be twenty years old. I would have believed it if Reinhard said it was his older sister instead. He sure sucks at lying.

“In ma mind, yer a criminal who abducts people and lies about it…”

“I don’t blame you for finding this hard to believe, but my mother—Luanna Astrea—suffers from the Sleeping Beauty sickness, and her appearance remains unchanged as she remains asleep. It’s already been seventeen years.”

“Sevent—?!”

Hearing him say “seventeen years” made my jaws drop. If that was true, then she has been sleeping before I, who was fourteen, was even born. No, wait…

“Reinhard, how old are ya?”

“I will be nineteen this year… I only have memories of my mother up until I was two years old.” He shrugged with a wry smile as he talked about his mother.

For some reason, his matter-of-fact reaction rubbed me the wrong way, and I pursed my lips.

“So ya locked yer sick mom in the corner of the mansion and left her there to sleep, did ya?”

“…Those words are quite hurtful. Sadly, the cause of this sickness is unknown. At the very least, should a treatment be discovered, we will act to ensure she will recuperate at a separate residence in the capital. “

“…Don’t say something like this so matter-of-factly.”

His response was something he must have said enough times to forget what it even means. It was like a prepared answer, and it irritated me even more.

“This is family yer talking about! Even though yer not doing anything, you dare talk big about it ta me. You piss me off!”

“But facts remain facts. Felt-sama’s words are justified, but I believe we should leave it at that for now.”

“Huh, that so!”

If I talked with this bigot any more, I felt I would go crazy from anger.

Reinhard’s mother really didn’t wake up, even after those loud voices. Her face was into my memories through the corner of my eyes, and I got off the bed to leave the room.

“Felt-sama.”

However, Reinhard grabbed my arm and stopped me.

I looked back at him with a face that said I would bite him, but he didn’t seem to mind as he said “I would appreciate it if you do not disclose to anyone else about my mother’s situation. I also want you to never enter this room again.”

“You…!”

“Also, I am grateful for your concerns earlier.”

For a moment, my mind went blank at his words. Once I understood what he meant, blood rushed to my head in anger as I realized just how utterly disgusting this bastard is.

He knew just why I was angry, and the reason behind what made me angry.

“Reinhard! Yer a seriously disgusting guy!”

Pulling back the arm that was gripped, I dashed out the room.

Behind me, Reinhard closed and locked the door before walking next to me. I was annoyed enough that I didn’t have to look to know he had an unpleasant smile on his face.

“By the way, Felt-sama, I went to the imperial capital’s guardhouse this morning.”

“…What.”

“It’s about the old man that was with you. Apparently, after the uproar the other day, he ran away from the guardhouse during his treatment. I do not know where he went after that.”

Hearing that, I inadvertently stopped.

Reinhard was saying something along the lines of “I am very sorry,” but I wasn’t listening to him.

If Rom-jii escaped from the guardhouse, that means…

“Fer now, it’s safe ta say he’s fine…”

“I would have preferred to secure the person in question before reporting his safety to you, but…”

“Sigh, ya don’t need ta. Ma family is not something ya need ta concern yerself too much about. Besides, fer someone like ya, ya can’t understand the dirtiness of living in the slums.”

I poked at Reinhard’s chest, and then continued walking happily with a grin. He also showed a bit of relief on his face as he walked alongside me.

Suddenly, something came up in my mind about his face.

“It looks like ya really do look like that mother of yers, Reinhard.”

“…Really?”

Immediately after I said that, Reinhard suddenly looked happy. His reaction surprised me a little, and I replied with “Y-Yeah” while nodding.

“The shape of yer eyes and nose are exactly the same. Putting aside her being yer mother, I believe that she’s yer family.”

“Do you still view me as a criminal who abducts and confines young girls?”

“Multiple kidnappings aside, the fact that yer keeping me trapped here is the truth!”

… But before long, I’ll be sure ta escape ta Rom-jii’s place.

Thinking that, I decided against spitting on the annoying Reinhard.

Walking down the corridor, I was drawing up my next plan of action for escaping.

Continued in Felt Rises to Center Stage

Felt Rises to Center Stage

1

Feeling the vehicle sway on my ass, I scowled at the damn redhead who sat in front of me.

“Do not keep looking that discouraged forever,” Reinhard said.

As always, he had the usual unpleasant smile, from someone who doesn’t believe that malice existed in the world, which came to seem like he was provoking me, playing in my face that I am a loser.

“You recognized my victory, remember?”

“Tch, are you happy to have beaten me on a bet?”

I practically threw myself on the seat and with my arms crossed because I knew that Reinhard didn’t like it when I didn’t behave like a “lady”. Only the bastard continued to look sleepy without caring, as if I were just like a tantrum child.

“Sucker.”

“Oops.”

That was me trying to put the sole of my shoe in Reinhard’s white pants, but the guy wasn’t even caught off guard and managed to move his leg off to avoid my foot. So, I tried a second time, then he kicked his foot on mine to get him out of the way. If I looked uncomfortable, he went on with a teasing smile.

“Take it, take it, take it, take it, take it.”

“Oh, ops, hm, no, ah.”

“Each “take it” was a kick, but they were all defended. So, I thought there was no point in just trying to face it and that I would need a more elaborate plan, so…”

“…Gentleman, please.”

But before I put my plan into practice, the grandma who saw us from the front seat told us to stop. She looked at me and Reinhard and said:

“Don’t make a mess in here, behave yourself, both behave.”

Her voice was not that of someone who was angry, it was more of someone who made a dear request. So, I lowered my foot and Reinhard also shrugged. It seems that he hinted that it was my fault and I got more angry.

“TAKE IT!”

“Oh.”

Too bad that not even that last kick hit, so I had to settle for stamping my feet on the floor.

2

The vehicle we used to call, “Dragon Carriage”, is nothing more than a carriage that has earth dragons in place of horses. I don’t even need to say that it is something that has nothing to do with me, and that was the first time I traveled on it inside the passenger wagon without being hidden among merchants’ goods. In fact, unlike the merchants’ drakes, this one was all chic.

“And so? After all, where are we going? isn’t it time for you to tell me?” I threw the question to Reinhard without being able to stand the silence.

The guy then opened his blue eyes, looked me in the face and said.

“Well… what if I say it’s a surprise?”

“Do you want to be hit? No matter how good you are at dodging, if I decide I’m going to hit you, I’ll hit you. Better not even think about sleeping until then.”

“There is no need to threaten me, as we are already arriving. As grandpa and his earth dragon are calm, we ended up taking a little longer trip."

Reinhard's answer was about the grandpa who drove the vehicle, but I didn't ask him why we were late and he didn't even explain what I wanted to know. To start with, all of this was just happening because I was muggle to fall for the bastard's trick. But in my defense, I was starting to get a little anxious about not being able to get away from that house and that made me nervous.

The bid went something like this:

"Miss Felt, what about making a bet with me? We will throw a coin and, if you hit the side that falls, you will be free to leave."

"Are you serious?! I'm in! But I'm going to throw the coin!"

And I lost. Worse than I was the one who threw the coin and I was the one who chose which side was going to fall, so Reinhard couldn't have cheated. That, without even checking what he would want from me first if he won. You know, I never really thought about it until that moment, but things that happened to me made me think that maybe I was a little dumb. This gambling story was another example.

"…Miss Felt, our destiny is in sight," informed Grandma.

Since I was kidnapped by Reinhard, I found myself reflecting on my actions more often, but being interrupted by Grandma's voice, I looked out the window. It was a landscape of the capital that seems familiar, except that I had never seen it myself. After all, it was the Noble District, the area of the city that has less to do with me. I showed my tongue to the tasteless mansions lined up with them and the only thing that mattered was showing who had the most money. Then, I looked in the direction we were going and… I regretted it. I really hoped that that way ahead, at the end of that straight street and that there was no way out, was not our destination.

"This is where we are going, the center of the kingdom, the Castle of Lugunica."

Unfortunately, this is what Reinhard told me, as if he had read my thoughts. Facing his profile, I realized that my shoulders were shaking a little.

“There is no use turning the face that I know you’re laughing, you bastards!”

3

It didn’t matter how much I cried or kicked, those people didn’t have a drop of mercy. Apparently, they wanted to squeeze me like a floor cloth.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch! It hurts! I already said it hurts!”

“Please hold on just a little bit longer, this is necessary for any lady.”

“I don’t remember becoming a lady and I don’t even plan to be!”, But I wanted to shout it, but I saw that it wasn’t going to happen.

Around me, there were six girls trying to tighten my body with a thing they called a corset. It looked like they were companions of the castle, and in the corner of the room was Grandma with a smile watching over me.

If not, even grandma I could win, I had no chance being in enemy territory. So, I just let it be brought up to that room and I was since being treated like a toy by the six girls, who put on and took off a lot of dresses on me.

The instant I entered the castle, I lost any chance of escaping the dragon carriage and I was locked in this room. Reinhard left saying that he had something to do, but at least I didn’t need to change in front of him. In the end, the chosen outfit was a yellow dress similar to the one I had to wear at Reinhard’s house, but I could feel it by the fabric texture that was of a better quality.

“This is suffocating me and the fabric bothers me… What does that bastard want from me, huh…?”

“If you intend to complain to the young master, let it be only after being properly presentable. Rest assured, that dress looked great on you," said Grandma.

"Damn it if it was good! What anger to have to do everything the way that bastard wants…"

Anyway, for the peace of mind of the chaperones, I stopped struggling and let them squeeze me. Even after the corset, there was still a lot of place in the dress that I needed to adjust and my suffering continued. I swore I would fly kick Reinhard later.

And it was at such an hour that the door was suddenly opened and a hoarse voice invaded the room.

"…cense. Is Sword Saint here?"

As the girls had not finished dressing yet, they were petrified without knowing what to do. I just looked at the guy who came in and did a quick analysis. He was a not-very-old uncle with a slightly flushed face and a badly shaved beard. He staggered a little bit as if he were the drunks in the slum, and it would be perfect if he had a belly out with a bottle of drink in his hand, but that was not the case. Surprisingly, he wore the crumpled Royal Knights' uniform and carried a sword at his waist. Incredible as it seemed, he was a knight.

Then the uncle searched the room with his eyes and let out a breath bad smell of alcohol.

"Whaaat? They told me that the Astreas would be here, hey…"

"…How dare you enter the room where a lady is dressing?!"

Whoever shouted at the man scratching his head was Grandma. I could see on her face that she was angrier than when I licked her plate, only her exaggeration seemed a little strange.

The answer came with the man's reaction to her:

"Ah, is it you, grandma? I thought it was an old vase that scared me."

“Frankly, unbelievable that you prefer to offend me before apologizing for entering without knocking. If I no longer have the minimum dignity as a knight, how about leaving the sword on your waist hanging on the wall?”

“Sharp as always… But I’ll tell you, Grandma. I think you are the one who should be careful how you address me, huh?”

“…Master Heinkel…”

I could hear Grandma say the guy’s name very quietly, which made him smile a little disgusting. And my patience was almost at the limit.

“Hey, uncle, you’re too loose for those who were invading the place where a girl is changing. Which is? Didn’t you realize it’s already time for you to apologize to me?”

“Hã?”

With that, the man looked at me for the first time, and when his blue eyes reflected me, he put a hand on his forehead and said:

“Ah, right, it was bad there, young lady. I didn’t think I was going to disturb a child by changing, nor did I care about you.”

“Do you want me to leave an unforgettable impression on your face?”

Seeing that uncle tease me, I already lift the skirt of my dress and get ready to give him a nice kick. Only, before the shock happened…

“Vice-captain Heinkel, you must know the reason for the meeting… From that, can’t you really deduce who this lady might be?”

…Grandma entered our midst. I didn’t understand anything about what she said and apparently neither the guy.

“It was bad, but I don’t know anything, no… For a change, I’ll have to be locked up quietly in my room, Marcos didn’t tell me anything.”

“…The royal selection.”

“…!”

When uncle heard Grandma’s whisper, his expression changed instantly. If before he seemed to be making fun of the whole world, now he was looking at me with a serious face, from head to tiptoe. So…

“Há… Há, há, há… há, há, há, há, há!” He laughed. “Understand. Now I understand! Then that’s it?! You mean that kid chose a child of that size as a sacrifice this time?! What a joke, huh?! It can only be a joke! How not to laugh at that.”

“…!”

He had kicked one of the bookshelves and spread a lot of stuff on the floor as he burst out laughing. While the girls were intimidated by this, I took a step forward and got closer to him. I didn’t understand anything about their conversation, but I’m sure the guy was making a fool of me. And of all things, what I hate the most is that they make a fool of me.

“He’s laughing now looking up, and since he’s drunk, it’s just me giving a good kick that he will fall to the floor. Easy.”

“…Hold the emotion there, young lady. I’m drunk, but you won’t be able to touch a finger on me.”

The problem was that even before I gave the kick, the guy came out of nowhere in front of me releasing the breath of alcohol, making me take a few steps back.

“In a little while, you will also understand that you and I, we are in the same situation. At that time, if you want, I can comfort you.”

Saying that, the uncle just laughed and left the room without fixing anything. When the door closed, Grandma came to my side and wiped my face with a tissue.

“Is everything okay, Miss Felt? I’m sorry, if I had managed to react in time, you wouldn’t have had to go through this discomfort…”

“Relax, I was just annoyed, but he didn’t do anything. Do you know that uncle, grandma?”

“…Yes. He has an intrinsic relationship not only with me, but with my husband and the young master… So I apologize sincerely.”

Grandma showed a pained face that made me feel sorry for her. In the same way, the other girls were also all upset and the atmosphere in the room was very heavy in a very unpleasant way.

“Well, I almost didn’t understand what that guy came to do, but it’s over. Forget it.”

“But, miss…”

“We better pack up the things on the shelf he kicked and finish dressing me, right? I don’t think you’re going to like me walking like that.”

I held out my arms to the ladies waiting to show that there were still things to do, like closing a bunch of buttons and covering the corset. I didn’t need to be an expert to know that I wasn’t ready yet. At first, the girls were a little confused, but soon four of them came to dress me and the other two started to arrange things sprawled on the floor.

“Aaagh… What a paaaaaaaaaaain… Grandma? Why are you making that face?”

As I suffered from the tightness of the dress, I noticed that she was looking at me with her eyes wide open, as if she was frightened by something.

“Nothing, miss. I was just thinking that, like always, the young master got it right again.”

“Tsc, how about we don’t talk about him? I don’t want to remember that annoying face.”

Against my will, I ended up remembering the face of that bastard and, at the same time, I realized something: the drunk uncle who came to make a mess in the room also had bright red hair, the same tone as Reinhard.

“Yeah, at least now I know people with red hair suck,” as I came to the conclusion of the day, next to me, Grandma, looked at me with a satisfied face and someone who knew everything. She stayed like that until a knight appeared in the room and took me outside.

Continued in Volume 4

Ram’s Older Sister Heart is Complicated

1

“Nee-sama, nee-sama. Please listen to this. Today, Subaru-kun was able to get out of bed.”

“Hmm, yes.”

“Nee-sama, nee-sama. I’ve promised to cut Subaru-kun’s hair. What kind of haircut do you think would look good on him? He looks wonderful no matter what, but…”

“Ah, hmm, yes.”

“Nee-sama, nee-sama. Just now, Subaru-kun was able to go to the bathroom by himself. Please compliment him!”

“Hmm…?”

2

“It’s simply incomprehensible.”

Sitting and holding her head in her hands, Ram let out a sigh with a weary expression on her face.

Day by day, her usual routine was one taking care of trifling odd jobs while following her younger sister around as she handled the heavy work. However, her drive had now withered to the point where even those odd jobs were bothersome.

“That, too, is entirely Barusu’s fault.”

“What kind of baseless rumors are you making up about me on my first day back on the job? More importantly, how bold do you have to be to let me do all the work when I’m just recovering my health?!”

Where Ram’s gaze lingered woefully, Subaru wiped a shelf with a rag held in one hand, and howled.

Currently, Subaru and Ram were together in one of the guest rooms in the Roswaal manor’s east wing. Visitors to the mansion were rare, but cleaning the guest rooms and maintaining the furnishings was nonetheless a required daily labor.

On this day, the two of them were seeing to the airing out of one of those guest rooms. As a work assignment, It was almost too light, but it was necessary to let Subaru get used to it gradually after returning from medical treatment.

There was no way for Subaru to know that Rem had spent her entire saved-up salary on the brand-new butler uniform he was wearing on his return to work.

His lack of awareness of that fact became yet another seed of dissatisfaction to Ram.

“It’s likely pointless to expect that sort of thing from Barusu, though. Honestly, what does Rem see in a man like this? It hurts to think about it.”

“Won’t you please quit muttering to yourself and lend a hand, senpai? I’m doin’ the best I can here!”

“You likely returned to work early to put a stop to Rem’s worries. If you really have that sort of resolve, then you shouldn’t be whining no matter what kind of difficulties you encounter. …It’s not manly at all.”

“Neither my resolve nor my manliness are excuses for you to be slacking off on the job!”

Subaru was going on about something or other, but Ram covered her ears and pretended not to hear. Having said that, it was obvious to see that while Subaru was making a fuss, he was moving stiffly and being cautious about spots here and there on his body.

Roughly a week since the witchbeast commotion—thanks to Rem’s devoted nursing, and the healing spells that Beatrice regularly cast on him due to some whim, he was in more or less perfect condition.

It’s just that, that was speaking of nothing more than surface appearances. Ram, who had heard Roswaal and Beatrice’s assessments, knew how serious the remaining injuries on the inside were.

And despite that, how infuriating was the sight of him refusing to let the pain show on his face. Did he think that Rem would feel responsible if he kept on staying in bed?

In truth, that was correct if one considered Rem’s feelings. Ram’s cute little sister was clumsy with her own heart, and pushed herself to the breaking point shouldering this burden and that. She was a worrier down to her very core.

“So, although it’s true that Ram had hoped that someone would bring that under control…”

“What’s that?”

“Your face is dull. You get ahead of yourself easily. You have no learning or strength worth mentioning, and not only are you penniless, you’re reckless… Finding someone who brings together so many unfortunate attributes is actually fairly difficult, indeed.”

“Just so you know, even I can tell that you’re making fun of me, y’know?”

For him not to express anger at that point made her think that he lacked spirit as a man. Truthfully, it was exactly because she was aware of this that she was willing to speak so impolitely.

Having thought that far, Ram was suddenly stunned.

…The way that thought just now made it seem as if she was depending on Subaru’s good nature was quite disagreeable, wasn’t it?

“…”

Standing up without allowing her irritation to show on her face, Ram casually ran a finger along the edge of the room’s window frame. Seeing that there was white dust on her fingertip, Ram turned back to Subaru.

“Barusu, what’s this?”

“You’re supposed to be taking care of that part, you know?!”

She’d intended to point out poor results in his cleaning, but Ram was miffed to have her own deficiency pointed out instead. Her already-scarce drive to work diminished further, and Ram wanted to go lie down in her room soon.

“But really, you’re even more listless than usual. I’m just guessing, but are you actually not feeling well?”

Resting his weight lightly on the table, Subaru said that while gazing in her direction.

At his glance and question, Ram drew her eyebrows together in displeasure.

His worry was off the mark. It was true that in the last few days, she’d exceeded her limits in utilizing mana due to the witchbeast commotion, and her gate’s condition wasn’t good. As part of settling matters afterwards, she’d travelled between the mansion and the village time after time, and she’d been tasked with a daily survey of the boundary in the forest to ensure there were no failings in it. As well, her nights were spent assisting Roswaal, who was as busy as ever, by handling paperwork in his place, and this morning, too, she’d slept little more than an hour.

Her body felt heavy, it was difficult to think, and just keeping her eyes open was tiring. Her limbs moved sluggishly as though filled with lead, and, perhaps due to her poor circulation, her entire body seemed to be creaking.

“But, that’s entirely normal.”

“I’m not sure what that ‘but’ is talking about; just don’t push yourself, alright?”

As she rubbed between her eyes after realizing how heavy they were, Subaru walked right next to her and, with a ‘Let me see’, placed his palm against Ram's forehead. Ram stiffened as she realized her carelessness.

"Fever…doesn't seem quite right, maybe just a mild fever? If you've gotten worn down, it wouldn't hurt to take a break just for today… owowow!"

"Who gave… you permission to… go ahead and touch Ram? One really can't let down their guard around you. Filthy."

Pinching the back of the hand that had touched her forehead, Ram sniffed dismissively as she made Subaru cry out. Rubbing his hand as he jumped back, Subaru glared at Ram as he went teary-eyed.

"You little… I'm trying to show some concern here, you could be nicer about it."

"Ram doesn't need your sympathy. More to the point, how can you be concerned about Ram's problems on top of everything else? If you've got time to worry about her, worry more about Rem…"

While saying that, Ram moved away from the side of the resentful-looking Subaru. Continuing like that, as she went to move on to cleaning the next guest room…

"…ah"

Whether the hoarse, quiet voice belonged to Subaru or Ram, she couldn't tell.

Only that, immediately after the soles of her feet lost sight of the feeling of carpet, her vision went dark like a curtain coming down with a whoosh, and her body could no longer support the heaviness of her head.

3

…When she awoke from a sleep so deep that she saw no dreams, she was met by the sensation of a cold cloth on her forehead.

"…This is… Ram's… room?"

She slowly pushed her eyes open, and when her fuzzy vision cleared she was greeted by a view of a familiar private room.

It was a simple, undecorated and dreary bedroom. Only the pink curtains, along with the sheets and thick blanket on the bed, brought flowery colors to the room, to match it to Rem’s tastes.

Aside from that, leaving one with utterly no sense of her self was what made it the room of the girl known as Ram.

“Oh, you’re finally awake, are ya? Honestly, you really had me freaking out there, c’mon.”

When she raised her upper body on the bed, and turned her head to the side, Subaru appeared holding a pottery bowl filled with water. Looking over her memories of just before losing consciousness, and her current condition, Ram understood.

“Barusu, you pervert…”

“That’s the first thing you say after suddenly collapsing?!”

“Ram’s clothing has been changed. The sweat has been cleaned from her back as well; how meticulously you must have licked all over her body. Filthy.”

“You think up some really scary stuff, y’know?! It was Emilia-tan that changed your clothes and wiped the sweat off! There’s no way I could do that, and licking? What do you think I am, some kind of boogeyman?!”

From Subaru’s explanation as he claimed false accusations, it seemed that immediately after she’d gone unconscious in the guest room, Subaru had made sure it was nothing serious, and called for help right away. As Rem was away from the mansion for shopping, he’d called Emilia, and asked her to take care of Ram.

“Is that so. It’s not that you caused trouble for Emilia-sama without any thought at all, then.”

“No matter how much I’ll jump at any chance to have contact with Emilia-tan, when it’s time to do what matters, I’ll do it. So, how are you feeling, actually?”

“The first face Ram saw after waking up was so evil-looking, it really soured her mood.”

“Tell me about your health! I don’t care about your mood!”

“Don’t shout at a sick person. You really are a boy incapable of consideration for others, aren’t you.”

“Ghgizagigi”

As Subaru ground his teeth in chagrin, Ram let slip several weighty sighs.

…The truth behind that was that she was berating herself for what she honestly felt were her own blunders.

That she showed weakness to Subaru, and, through her own carelessness, mistreated a part of Rem's feelings that she should have taken consideration of. That she felt just a little serenity, too.

"Well, if you can run your mouth the same as always, then you're probably fine. Here, have some water. Emilia-tan said it was probably overwork, too, so you'll get better if you just take it easy for a while."

Not noticing Ram's internal conflict, Subaru offered her a pitcher of water. Taking it, Ram sipped at it to moisten her throat. At her side, Subaru retrieved the damp towel that had fallen from her forehead, and wet it again in the room's washbasin.

Given that it was Subaru, taking that kind of care was quite out of character.

"Mm, *hk*"

She had been thirstier than she'd thought, and after draining the pitcher, Ram slowly lay down on the bed. Right away, Subaru placed the damp towel on her forehead; it felt nice.

"That's unusually thoughtful of you, Barusu."

"Heheh, I'm so glad to meet your approval, nee-sama."

Speaking flippantly, Subaru dragged a chair to the side of the bed and plopped down on it. Facing the opposite of the usual direction, he sat with the backrest hugged into his stomach.

Ram frowned as his attitude suggested that instead of returning to work, he was thinking of staying to tend to her.

"If it's just a matter of sleeping, even Barusu could do it. Anything Barusu can do, Ram can do as well."

"Your repertoire of abuse never runs dry. ...Don't worry about it. By now, there's no way I'd get today's jobs done anyway, so I'll just watch until you go to sleep. Want me to hold your hand?"

"Please don't say such creepy things. The thought of you watching me sleep gives me chills."

"Hmf, is that so."

Subaru frowned, and looked like he was pouting. Wondering if he was that upset simply because he'd been unable to hold her hand, Ram's gaze towards him became increasingly stern.

It was just that, a situation where she was lying in bed like this, and someone was watching over her at her side was…

"This reminds me a little of long ago."

"When you say long ago, Ram, you mean that you've experienced being tended like this? From how steady you normally are, it's tough to imagine you being frail."

"…Shortly after Ram lost her horn, it was common for her to fall ill like this. It was also partly due to being unable to control mana properly, and it ended up placing a burden on Rem."

Perhaps because he'd intended to tease her, Subaru's face fell when he realized the topic was her horn. Mildly pleased that she'd put Subaru to silence, Ram smiled faintly.

…Nine years ago, just after Ram (having lost her horn) had been taken in by Roswaal, the total amount of mana she was able to manipulate inside her body was vastly reduced, and her body, unable to withstand the alteration, fell ill many times. Each time, Rem cared for her at her bedside.

She'd overdone it for the first time in a long while. The bill for that was falling into the same sort of condition that she had back then. Perhaps the reason she couldn't laugh at it at all was because the one caring for her was no longer her little sister.

Back then, while caring for Ram when she'd fallen ill, Rem would often hold her hand.

On nights when it seemed like Rem would be crushed by needless guilt, of course Ram held her hand as well.

Perhaps it was because, thanks to Subaru's banter, she was able to remember that sort of thing.

"…Barusu."

"Hmm?"

Assaulted by a sudden sleepiness, Ram was on the edge of losing her hold on consciousness, unable to endure the weight of her eyelids.

Just before that, she spoke unexpectedly, her voice calling out to the boy beside her…

"…"

What she had said at the end, she wasn't sure.

Still unsure, Ram once again submerged into a deep, deep sleep.

4

"…Nee-sama is sleeping soundly, then?"

"Mhmm, like a log. I guess it's impressive that she kept up the verbal abuse right until she went to sleep."

As he looked down at Ram's sleeping face, Subaru responded to Rem (who had returned from shopping) with a wry smile. Insistently proving that the body and heart are separate things, Ram remained herself, even if weakened.

Removing her gaze from Subaru's pained smile, Rem's eyes went wide with a 'Hmm?'.

"Subaru-kun, are you holding nee-sama's hand for her?"

"Right at the very end, she went and called out to me with a really forlorn look on her face. Maybe not forlorn, it was more of a… dunno, it's hard to put into words."

Subaru thought to himself about what was meant by the emotion

Ram showed at the end, and her thin, soft voice. But, Rem shook her head at Subaru's troubled thoughts.

"Rem is sure it could only mean that nee-sama has finally accepted Subaru-kun. There's a part of nee-sama that's just a tiny bit more suited to being aloof than most people, after all."

"You could take that different ways, but basically you're saying she's a bit difficult to handle, then."

"No, that's not true at all. The part of her that's just a little bit stubborn is precious, that's all."

"When I hear you say that, it really does feel like you two are sisters…"

Holding a strong belief in her heart, and being unwilling to let others sway her from it. When Subaru responded with that nuance, Rem tilted her head with a "Is that so?", seemingly unaware of his meaning.

Subaru's wry smile deepened at her reaction, then he looked down at his own hands. His right hand was, even now, still grasped in Ram's palm as she lay on the bed.

Seeing her face as she slumbered, Subaru let out a little sigh.

"You'd be cute, too, nee-sama, if only you could always look as gentle as this."

That was his appraisal of Ram with a peaceful look on her sleeping face.

END

The Best Day of Rem's Life

1

Her body was hot, her face was red, her chest swelled with her excited breaths that wouldn't calm down.

Cooking, cleaning, laundering. Even though she found herself busy with all kinds of daily chores, she was long distracted from work. Her thoughts were already occupied by other things.

Hurrying through the corridor, half of her was wondering how to quickly finish the rest of her work, while the other half did nothing but think about the source of why her heart was pounding.

"…Ah."

Suddenly, because she saw something, the girl voiced a shy word.

Even she could hear how full of joy her inadvertent voice held. She felt her cheeks burning. Then the girl—Rem, increased her pace.

"Oh! You're almost done with your chores, Rem?"

Noticing Rem's presence as she neared him, the boy ahead turned around with a grin.

Short and black hair, sharp sanpaku eyes, a mischievous child's smile. Rather than being very manly, he's more on the cute side. No matter which trait, they all caused "The Horn" inside her to tremble excitedly. Bowing her head in front of the boy, Rem unconsciously smiled as she stopped.

"Yes… Would you like to have some tea together, Subaru-kun?"

She had the look of a girl in love that called out her beloved's name.

2

Rem, at this point, was aware of the incurable sickness that caused her flustered state.

She could not get the boy out of her mind. Rather, it would be easier to calculate how much time she spent a day without thinking about him. This was to be taken literally. Whether she was asleep or awake, she would be thinking about him.

“Rem, I didn’t know you were such a carefree person…”

Isn’t that far too much? Even she questioned how abnormal her love was.

The only other person Rem knows that is afflicted with this sickness is Ram nee-sama. Rem understood that, Ram’s admiration towards Roswaal was the same as Rem’s own feelings towards Subaru. But Rem can’t imagine being like nee-sama, where she won’t reveal those expressions uncontrollably.

…Nee-sama sure is amazing.

This was Rem’s unwavering love towards her sister. After losing her horn, many aspects of her abilities had become worse than Rem’s, but none of it has harmed Rem’s respect towards nee-sama.

Because of this, Rem wondered if her sickness was more severe than her sister’s.

“—Rem?”

A male’s voice entered her ears. It could be said to be a little childish, but it was also one that had gradually left boyhood. That was the impression the voice gave.

Her blue hair swayed as Rem tilted her head and looked at the person whose voice it came from.

“Yes, is something wrong, Subaru-kun?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong, but… aren’t you a little too close? Wouldn’t it be inconvenient when drinking tea?”

"Really? Rem doesn't find it at all inconvenient."

Close enough that they could feel each other's breath, Rem replied to Subaru's troubled smile with an endearing voice.

The two were in the living room of Roswaal's mansion, where they enjoyed their afternoon tea on the same couch.

Subaru's left arm was tightly stuck next to Rem's right arm.

Though the two had maintained some distance in the beginning, without him noticing, Rem had nestled closer bit by bit.

"Subaru-kun, would you like some more snacks?"

"Eh? There's more? This is really good, these things that Rem made are delicious!"

"Yes. That's because I was praised like this before by Subaru-kun… There's around a hundred of them, is this enough?"

"Are you planning on feeding me until I'm a pig?! Two or three is enough!"

After she received Subaru's praise on the baked cream pastry a few days ago, it was served countless times during their tea time.

Rem excitedly stood up.

"Then, I shall go prepare. If Subaru-kun disappears while I am preparing, then I'll be sad."

"I wouldn't do something that mean. How about we promise on it, a promise."

"…Okay."

Long-awaited by her, Rem stretched her pinky out, while Subaru extended his own with an "it can't be helped" smile. Their pinkies entwined each other, and shook up and down to seal the promise.

"—Hair… cut"

…Was it because of Rem's sickness that Rem was not thinking clearly? She felt as if they had made such an agreement before as she thought about what she blurted.

It was around a week ago, after the Witchbeast turmoil subsided. The morning the wounded Subaru opened his eyes, Rem apologized and requested to atone for the trouble. Instead, she received a gentle "punishment [curse]." That morning, Rem's heart was captured. Rem was captivated by the future he described in their promise.

But recently, she had become less satisfied. She wanted more precious promises about the future. Even though Subaru would give a wry smile while he agreed to the promises Rem made, he never refused her selfish desires. So, her love could only grow bigger and bigger.

"That's right, we did promise something like this."

With his warmth still left on her pinky, Rem was about to step out the room when she stopped. Subaru pointed at his hair when she turned around, and revealed his usual, mischievous smile.

"We made a promise about trimming my hair before. I think it's about time I need your help, right?"

The boy must not have known how much those words made Rem's heart beat like crazy.

3

…With Rem's skill, taking care of Subaru's hair would be straightforward.

Although it was a fairly simple promise, for Rem, it was more important than anything else. The reason why would be…

"Because this was the first promise with Subaru-kun."

"Just like you have questions about me, I have a lot to ask about you. That’s why, let’s take care of everything and then talk. We can talk until our throats are sore. Let’s make a promise.”

He firmly tugged Rem’s hand, and hooked their pinkies together.

While Rem was confused by their intertwined pinkies, Subaru already shook on it.

“We made a pinky promise.”

“Th-That was…?”

“It’s the ceremony my hometown does when making a promise. If you break it, you’re forced to swallow a thousand needles. It’s a punishment of hell.”

Subaru’s monologue had already surpassed Rem’s understanding.

Rem was confused and utterly speechless. To which Subaru snapped his finger, flashed a toothy grin, and said, “I trust Rem, so I want to do something to earn Rem’s trust. That’s why I made that kind of promise.”

“…”

“I said it before, didn’t I? I’m the kind of person that would keep his promise after making one. Plus, I have Emilia’s blessing, so I’m not concerned at all when I say ‘dun worry ‘bout it.’ “

“Hehe…”

Dumbfounded, Rem was unable to hold it in as she laughed. Seeing Rem smile, Subaru followed suit with a chuckle of his own.

“Then it’s a promise. Rem really will ask a lot of things.”

“Yeah. I also have things I must ask of you, like my hair.”

“Hair…?”

“That’s the reason why you keep staring at me all the time.”

Hearing Subaru’s words, Rem was speechless as her eyes widened.

With her blue eyes filled with guilt, she let slip, “Subaru-kun, Rem was–”

“It’s fine. You were concerned about the clumsy me, who had a pitiful haircut, so you kept looking at me… am I right?”

In his first loop, Subaru had made a promise with Rem. It was Ram’s words that started it, to help Subaru fix his shabby haircut.

Subaru finally understood Ram’s words at the time. The real meaning behind it.

It was evident in Rem’s stares that, at the time, she held a sense of distrust towards Subaru, so Ram immediately said his hair was messy to fool him.

Now he knew, the opportunity of that promise was borne from a lie.

That’s why… smiling inside, Subaru wanted to make the promise of a lie into something truthful.

“Once we safely return, I’ll leave it up to you for the style. Make it so that Emilia can’t help but snuggle up to me.”

“…But Rem can’t help when it comes to the character.”

“Please be more gentle about saying those things!”

It was a conversation of which the two did not know where it was going.

Noticing Subaru’s intentions, Rem followed with a joke, which made Subaru extremely happy.

“Once I leave the children to the villagers, I’ll regroup with you immediately. Don’t force yourself too hard.”

During the witchbeast turmoil, in order to save the children outside of the village, Subaru and Rem set foot into the forest and made this promise. And at the time, Rem’s love for Subaru had not yet blossomed.

Therefore, fulfilling this kind of promise to Rem had an extreme significance.

“It’s not that I forgot. It’s because I’ve been running around lately that I haven’t had the chance. Even if I mentioned it, once I remember there’s a guy who can’t read the mood, I could only postpone it.”

“It’s not like Subaru-kun to have worries at all. It would be better if you were more like your usual self, where you don’t think before you speak, cause a mess, then run around trying to fix it.”

“Eh?! Why do I feel nostalgic about this feeling of pain in my heart from Rem’s harsh words?!”

Pushing her chest on the back of the chair, Rem leaned forward slightly to look at Subaru, and laughed harder.

Although this kind of Rem is unbelievably cute, I definitely cannot say that out loud, Subaru secretly decided.

In order to fulfill the haircut promise, the two arrived at the mansion’s atrium. A chair was placed in the middle of the groomed lawn, and with a towel tied around Subaru’s neck, everything was ready.

“After changing hair styles, it’ll give the impression of a different person. It’s quite common in anime and manga, huh.”

“If it’s done indoors, it’ll be difficult to clean up. Whether it be preparations beforehand, or cleaning up afterwards. If it’s outside, then we just need to sweep the ground and wash your head. About how short should I cut it to?”

In Rem’s point of view, Subaru’s hair was still fairly short. There’s only a small portion that was messy, and gave a bad impression. Once that bit is trimmed, it’ll be perfect.

“Yeah… I’m not that good at specifying my hair length. Rem can just cut it to the length where it looks the coolest!”

"Subaru-kun is always at his coolest"

"The purpose of my haircut was denied?! It was over before it began?!"

The chair swayed as Subaru shook. Holding Subaru's shoulder with her hands to prevent him from struggling, Rem stared at Subaru's head carefully.

Though her answer was not a lie, she thought his hair certainly didn't look the best.

"This responsibility is quite heavy."

"Um… Rem-san? It's fine even if you don't think about it too much? Don't worry too much, just do as you said before and fix the hair ends, slightly groom it…"

While Subaru gingerly proposed a solution, that voice didn't reach Rem.

Moisturizing Subaru's hair slightly, Rem brought out a pair of silver-shining scissors and put on a determined pose.

"…"

Facing her immediate challenge, her hand stopped. Rather, it couldn't stop. Her right hand was trembling violently.

Clickity, Clackity. Rem was stunned by her own hand's trembling. Though she had kept calm, all her nervousness was redirected to her right hand.

"Subaru-kun, this is bad. My hand won't stop trembling."

"Hm? A little bit of trembling is fine… Oi, isn't this trembling too excessive?! Is this even ok?! This level of shaking would crack a skull! Don't tell me you're actually not accustomed to giving other people haircuts?!"

“Rem is responsible for nee-sama and Roswaal-sama’s haircuts… but Subaru’s is the first time…”

“There’s no way a barber would be able to make a living if he said such a thing!”

A barber that refused to serve first-time customers would no doubt go bankrupt. But that matter wasn’t important right now. Rem’s hand was still trembling fiercely because she had to give Subaru a haircut.

“Well… even though I told you ‘it’s fine if you mess up, don’t worry about it!’ I guess it’s hard to change your feelings so quickly. But to be this nervous… Even if the cut is slightly bad, after a week it’ll recover.”

“But, because of Rem, Subaru might have a endure a week of a bald state…”

“If I’m going to become hairless, then it’s probably better to stop, right?!”

She extended her hand again to stop the chair that Subaru sat on from shaking. Rem proceeded to rack her brain to stop her trembling hands. All of a sudden, she inadvertently blurted out what she was thinking. It was…

“Does Subaru-kun have any uneasiness by entrusting Rem, this kind of person, with this?”

Those were the words she had unintentionally said. But after they were spoken, they left behind a depressing and heavy pressure on Rem’s shoulders.

Yes, that must be it.

No matter how you look at it, the fact that Rem had tried to kill Subaru-kun does not change.

Rem almost executed Subaru twice at the witchbeast forest. And if one were to count Subaru’s final act of becoming bait to die, then it was thrice.

“Twice inside the forest, Subaru-kun saw Rem’s nature. Rem’s Oni personality… even before that, Rem also…”

Subaru-kun’s presence at the mansion was an unsettling factor, and Rem had questioned whether to eliminate him.

That suspicion will surely wrap itself around the fragile heart that upholds Rem, and will someday explode.

If Rem doesn’t resolve this here and now, then Rem will surely cause Subaru-kun to die.

Up to this point, this sense of guilt has plagued Rem, the perpetrator. Then, as the victim, Subaru-kun must naturally be in even more pain. Then why? Why can he show Rem this kind of smile?

Why is he able to sit in front of Rem so carelessly?

“Rem.”

A calm voice. Subaru was calling out her name. She was suddenly at a loss, and could not form a response.

Towards that self-deprecating confession, what would he say?

Scared.

Don’t want to hear it.

Don’t want to destroy this illusion of intimacy. Her heart beat furiously from fear.

“In my hometown, there’s a fairy tale called ‘The King with Donkey Ears.’”

“Yes… Eh…?”

“Once upon a time, there was a king with very long donkey ears. When the king needed a haircut, he would call a barber into the palace. But, no matter who, they would laugh out loud when they saw the king’s donkey ears. And as a result, would be beheaded by the king. Among them, there was a barber that finally managed to hold back and not laugh. But to withhold the king’s secret, the barber eventually could not take it. He ran up a mountain, dug a hole, and shouted in it.”

Subaru cupped his hands and shouted, “the king has donkey ears for ears!!! He shouted again and again. At last, even the trees around him recorded it. He then made a flute out of those trees, and blowing into it would make the sound ‘the king has donkey ears for ears.’ In the end, because all the citizens of that country used the flute, the secret now had become known to everyone.”

“Eh…?”

Although it was an interesting story, Rem was unable to understand the underlying lesson and looked at Subaru, puzzled.

At Rem’s expression, Subaru smiled.

“Rem’s forehead has an Oni’s horn!!!”

“!!!”

Subaru shouted once again, causing Rem to jump. Towards her reaction, Subaru patted his knees.

“The king was ashamed of his donkey ears, so he beheaded everyone who spilled his secret. Rem, are you ashamed of being an Oni?”

“N-No such thing. Rem being ashamed of her birth… something like that isn’t too big of a concern.”

“Would you find me telling your secret unforgivable?”

“No. Rem believes that Rem coming from the Oni tribe is something that doesn’t need to be kept hidden.”

Returning Subaru's gaze, she gave him a firm answer. Subaru sat back down.

"Then there's no problem! Since there's no possibility that Rem would harm me because of her origins, then I have no reason to be worried. Ahh… I'm relieved."

"B-But, the things Rem did to Subaru-kun—"

"If you anger a girl, you'll get an extremely scary stare. It's something that boys learn about from their fathers early on. Since it's my fault for forgetting such a thing, let's just call it even, ok?"

Such an outrageous sophistry left Rem speechless.

Subaru looked back to see Rem keeping silence, and continued, "Well… how's your trembling hand doing?"

"Ah…"

Her gaze fell on her hands after hearing those words. It was then Rem noticed her trembling had stopped. Even with the scissor's tip pointing at Subaru's head, her fingers did not have a trace of hesitation.

The kind of changes Subaru's words brought to Rem's heart were unknowable. After all, everything he'd said has had a major impact to Rem's feelings. Those unstoppable ripples stirred her heart.

But Rem knew without a doubt that her own timidness had been swallowed whole by the sickness of her heart and disappearing without a trace.

Knowing that Rem's trembling had stopped, Subaru relaxed and leaned his back on the chair, entrusting himself to Rem. He pointed at his head.

"Well, please give me a cool hairstyle. One that'll be handsome enough that Emilia-tan can't help but fawn over me."

The naive boy did not notice his words deeply stabbed into the girl's heart behind him. But even his innocence was something that she loved. Rem smiled.

“…Subaru-kun, no matter when, is always fascinating.”

END

One Day I

Withdrawal Symptoms

1

—Three days have passed since the Witchbeast Forest incident and Subaru's promise with Emilia. On this fateful morning,

"—No more. I'm at my limits here. I can't stand this. Send me back home!"

With a cry of pure anguish, Subaru pounds the dining table and rises from his seat. His sudden outbursts shatter the peaceful breakfast atmosphere, causing everyone to turn toward him.

With their curious gazes on him, Subaru wearily spreads his arms,

"Ahh, this is, the end."

With a frail whisper, he drops his head into his hands and crumples backwards. As he plunges, Rem, who sat to his left, skillfully catches him. With perfect timing, she pulls back his chair and stops his descent,

"Please be careful, Subaru-kun. Rem will worry if Subaru-kun pushes himself too hard while recovering."

Gently patting his slumped shoulders, Rem voices her devotion and concern. From behind, she affectionately traces a finger across his jawline. While Rem's skinship seems rather excessive, for the last few days, this has been the norm. After declaring that she would "see to Subaru-kun around the clock while he recovers," this level of intimacy was an everyday occurrence.

Despite the amorous touch of this beautiful maid, Subaru coldly unravels her finger from his chin. "No, no, no," he mutters, shaking his head weakly,

"That's not it… this is way more serious."

Subaru gravely replies as his body collapses onto the table. Of course, he shoves away any stray dishes first. A calm Emilia, used to Subaru sitting next to her and causing such scenes, looks on with little urgency.

“Are you okay? Please tell me what’s wrong. I’ll do anything I can to help—isn’t that your line, Emilia-tan?”

“I’d tire myself out if I kept going along with Subaru like that. You know, if you do this too much, people will stop hearing you out.”

“Sniff, so strict. But that cold side-face is cute too… damnnit.”

With his head still resting on the table, Subaru appeals with fluttering, upturned eyes. But Emilia ruthlessly cuts him down, casually bringing some salad-like food to her mouth mid-conversation.

Seeing Subaru openly sulk, his face wrinkled with discontent, Rem energetically raises her hand,

“Yes, yes! Rem will listen to what Subaru-kun has to say. Rem will do it. Please order her. And when she succeeds, Rem doesn’t mind having her head petted, yes?”

“Praise me, praise me,” Rem seems to say, like a puppy excitedly wagging its tail. Smothered by the maid’s excessive appeals, Subaru further collapses onto the table, devolving into a shaky, mangled mess.

“But you know, you really do look like you’re struggling this time.”

Subaru’s face grows sickly and pale, sweat dripping readily from his forehead. Seeing this, even Emilia—or rather, especially the softhearted Emilia, can’t help but show concern.

With his fingers shaking so violently atop the dining table, Subaru’s condition was clearly abnormal.

“Could it be, after-effects from the curse…”

Fearing the worst, Emilia and Rem look toward each other. Eyes clouded with concern, Emilia reaches into her silver hair, plucking out a small, grey-furred cat.

With two dainty fingers, she rests the sleepy spirit onto the table in front of Subaru. After briefly rubbing his eyes, Puck sniffs about with his small, pink nose,

“Hmm, it doesn’t seem like anything Lia needs to worry about? Subaru’s mana is exhausted, so his vitality is pretty low, but other than that it’s the same as always.”

Lightly slapping at Subaru’s face with his paws, Puck calmly reports back. Suddenly, Subaru’s shaky fingers extend toward him. With Puck trapped between the palms of Subaru’s hands, a FLUFFING session begins.

“Auauaa—” Puck cries, but Emilia ignores him. With Subaru’s Fluffist rampage and Puck’s report, she breathes a deep sigh of relief.

But now they have no way to explain Subaru’s condition—

“Trembling fingertips, shallow breathing. My, it’s aaalmost as if he’s suffering from withdrawal. Possibly from some hiiighly addictive narcotic.”

As Emilia frowns in puzzlement, Roswaal, sitting at the head of table with a hand on his chin, takes a guess.

With a quick glance at Subaru’s condition, he pulls back his chin,

“Once a user stops taaaking such highly addictive substances, these sort of symptoms tend to occur. Of course, even in the royal capital, their use is increeedibly prohibited.”

“With no background, he was already suspicious. But to use illegal narcotics, Ram misjudged you, Barusu. Rem, move aside, your sister can’t kill him.”

“So you’re immediately doubting me, huh. Then again, I guess that’s the Ram-like thing to do here.”

Taking advantage of Roswaal's deduction, Ram maliciously overreacts. Subaru smiles wryly, impressed that something drug-like exists even here. Though their treatment as taboo seems to be the same as well.

It goes without saying that, even in his own world, Subaru never lived such an underground lifestyle. At worst, he lived the underdog life of a lonely NEET.

Thus, such narcotics are unrelated to the state of Subaru's body. Unrelated—but the "withdrawal symptoms" Roswaal spoke of were an exceedingly good lead.

Truthfully, he does indeed suffer something like withdrawal.

Subaru's body, his very soul yearns eternally for-

"…aise, I need it."

Subaru mutters faintly, his right hand still skillfully fluffing Puck. Everyone's eyes fall on the collapsed heap that is Subaru's body.

The only one to barely hear him is the nearby Emilia. On his opposite side, Rem fails to hear because her head was tilted away. Dissatisfied, her lips curl into a small pout.

Oblivious to Rem's pouting, Emilia moves to catch Subaru's fleeting words. Bringing her ear towards his face, she strives to catch even the feeblest of breaths.

But, as if betraying her efforts, Subaru's eyes suddenly shine, and he flings himself up like a spring.

Shocked, a medley of different-colored eyes rise to meet him. Amongst them, Subaru screams to the heavens,

"—MAYONNAISE, I NEED IT!!"

With the appearance of this unknown word, the onlookers could only tilt their heads in confusion.

2

—Natsuki Subaru is a genuine Mayo Lover.

[Mayo Lover], a venerable title granted only to those who love mayonnaise above all else. An army of culinary heretics, topping every food imaginable with mayonnaise is their justice.

Adding mayonnaise—commonly referred to as “mayo-ing,” came to the world alongside the title of “Mayo Lover,”—is probably how it happened. By those lines, Natsuki Subaru is undoubtedly a true Mayo Lover.

His history with mayonnaise dates back as far as the lactation period. Alongside him, the entire Natsuki household is utterly enthralled by mayonnaise. To have a meal without bottles of it set aside is simply unimaginable.

Cramming the refrigerator with reserve mayonnaise was a given. Each member also marked their name on their own personal bottles. Slurping mayonnaise straight from the bottle after a bath, the so-called [Mayo-chuchu], was a daily occurrence as well.

Fried chicken with mayo. Salad with, of course, mayo. Gyoza and fries and dessert all with mayo. When you’re troubled, add mayo. If you’re bored, add mayo.

—As a proud, natural-born Mayo Lover, Natsuki Subaru lived by this code of conduct.

Subaru came to this parallel world roughly one week ago,—though in his perspective, it has been almost a month. One whole month without this essential nutrient, his veritable soulmate.

Spirit wearing away, fingers trembling, tongue begging for oil and calories, eyesight blurry and failing—these are the withdrawal symptoms of a Mayo Lover. They ruthlessly eat away at Subaru’s body, forcefully dragging him deep into a sea of agony.

“And that is the White Lover—Mayonnaise.”

So ends Subaru’s tale of his long, long relationship with his [Lover].

To everyone who listened, he gives each a curt bow, then promptly collapses back into his chair. Overpowered by his incredible passion, they struggle to digest what had just occurred. The first to snap back to reality, Emilia crosses her arms,

“So… basically, you’re quibbling over a condiment you liked?”

“Emilia-tan, you just don’t understand!!”

At her words, Subaru flies into a rage, slamming the table. Still firmly grasped in his hand, Puck lets out a shrill “munyaa—.” But with his emotions at a boil, Subaru fails to notice,

“To a Mayo Lover, even a day without mayonnaise is a glimpse of hell itself. And I’ve suffered twenty-… no, a whole week of it. A normal person would’ve gone mad by now. It’s only because of my inhuman mental fortitude that I’ve survived up until now, but… I’m at my limits.”

“Ar-, aren’t you just exaggerating? About going mad, and…”

“If I was acting, would my hands and feet be trembling like this…? Please believe me, Emilia-tan. Without mayonnaise, my body can’t survive.”

It’s commonly said that the oils in mayonnaise are akin to pure endorphins—consuming this substance channels the purest of pleasures directly to the brain, giving birth to the Mayo Lover.

Thus, Roswaal’s guess was very close to the mark. To Subaru, quitting mayonnaise causes a strain not unlike withdrawal symptoms.

Pushed back by this unfamiliar seriousness, Emilia is at a loss for words. In front of her, Subaru had always maintained a frivolous attitude. That same Subaru now faces her as if his life is on the line. His intense passion, that unrivaled obsession, for laughing and trivializing them, Emilia feels greatly ashamed. She’s fallen completely into the palm of his hand.

“Well, even without mayonnaise, food is still delicious, very delicious even. This thing that tastes like bread, and this soup-like liquid, that bowl of pseudo-salad, coupled with a dubiously water-ish beverage, it all tastes delicious, incredibly delicious—but, it isn't mayonnaise."

Pointing toward each item in their luxurious menu, an anguished Subaru cradles his head. His short hairs pierce at Puck, still trapped in his right hand. "It's all prickly—" he complains, but Subaru, lost deep in his sorrow, cannot hear him.

The greed of man knows no limits.

Since coming to this world, Subaru's only desire was for these peaceful days to continue. To stand at Emilia's side, to be surrounded by happy, smiling faces, to live each day peacefully and uneventfully. Having desperately clawed beyond times of pain and despair, Subaru's inner NEET dreamed only of peace.

But after overcoming crisis after crisis and reaching these precious days, an insatiable hunger overwhelms Subaru, screaming "it's not enough!"

Disgusting. This ruinous human greed, is utterly disgusting.

Wasn't he supposed to be satisfied with these peaceful days? Those which he so desired, and then finally grasped. Satisfied with this gift, can't he just sink back into sloth and complacency?

—no, absolutely not.

As Subaru descends into a sea of laziness, a booming voice calls out to him. He wonders whose it is, only to realize that it is his own. Within his heart, passionately, powerfully, violently, the voice echos. "Now," it cries, pushing onward the stalled Subaru,

Advance, advance, advance—toward an insatiable greed.

Onward, onward, onward—past the coveted days you strived to claim, go forth beyond and aim for more.

Thus, Natsuki Subaru's pursuit continues.

After escaping the endless loop of deaths, saving the twins and Roswaal from disaster, and reaching the promised date with Emilia.

Now is the time to dream a new dream.

“I was aimless, goalless, lacking a purpose in life. But now, this is my new dream… That is, to bring mayonnaise to this world. What’s, wrong, with, that.”

To bring the white fairy to the dinner table, that is Subaru’s new purpose. Carefully listening to his quietly burning passion, the one to rise up and meet him is,

“Understood. Subaru-kun’s request, please leave it to Rem.”

Blue hair waving about, eyes sparkling like jewels, Rem comes to his call. Lately, she carries out absolutely any request Subaru asks of her. Out of gratitude, and probably for a slew of other reasons, she simply will not abandon Subaru in his time of need.

“In the first place, the task of managing the manor’s kitchen falls to Rem. If Rem’s cooking can’t satisfy Subaru-kun, it’s Rem’s duty to take appropriate measures. —isn’t that right?”

“You… will you do this with me, Rem!”

Subaru’s wet eyes look up toward Rem. Assuring him, she spreads her arms,

“Let us do it, Subaru-kun. Now, about the recipe…”

“—eh?”

“—eh?”

Facing each other, Rem and Subaru freeze solid.

Their jaws slacked open, they stare back at each other like fools.

Between Subaru’s hand and the dining table, the squashed mass that is Puck protests,

“It’s too heavy—”

In the cold silence of the dining hall, his grumbling is the only sound to be heard.

3

"'Oh, my body can't survive without it,' he says. Such big talk without even knowing the recipe. How appalling."

"I won't deny that. But as I was saying, do you perfectly understand your favorite dish's recipe? Don't change the topic on me."

"Ram's favorites are everything Rem makes. And since Rem knows the recipes, Ram doesn't need to. It's different from Barusu and that mayo-whatever that nobody's heard of."

Shortly after breakfast, in the now empty dining hall.

While clearing the dining table, Subaru and Ram engage back and forth in something that doesn't quite amount to an argument.

Subaru retrieves the tableware, passing it to Ram who stands behind him with a cart. In contrast to his abnormally slow pace, she transfers the tableware to the cart with a trained hand. Yet, despite their difference in speed, Ram waits on him without complaint.

Objectively, their routine was terribly inefficient, but this was part of Subaru's rehabilitation. In fact, Ram herself volunteered to assist Subaru's work.

After recovering, Subaru would eventually be reinstated as a servant of the Roswaal Manor. By taking on simple chores everyday, he'd grow accustomed to the work and acclimate back to health. This was his duty for the past few days.

Originally, Rem grandly declared herself as Subaru's aide. However, since work would be delayed all throughout the manor, she was instantly rejected.

In comparison to Ram, setting Rem aside as Subaru's aide would be devastating. Considering she manages roughly 90% of the work, the loss of her fighting potential would be like running the manor at 10%. To no one's surprise, her request was immediately shot down.

“If only she was more self-aware about that. It’d definitely help her self-esteem.”

Wiping down the dining table, Subaru laments with a light sigh.

The manor depends on Rem for the majority of its chores. Though Ram doesn’t slack off either, there exists an undeniable difference in ability.

And yet, Rem’s self-deprecating nature refuses to change. In a sense, her self-worth comes not from within, but from others—with Subaru as the main provider, as of late. Though her praise-seeking behavior could be seen as a sort of progress.

“Then again, the 24/7 barrage of [How is it?], [Did Rem do well?], [It isn’t strange, is it?], [Is it tasty, Subaru-kun?], [Rem doesn’t mind being praised, yes?], [Praise me, praise me, praise me] is really wearing me out.”

Though Subaru himself allowed it, the weight with which Rem leans on him is immense and crushing.

After keeping to herself for so long, Rem was like an explosion. Subaru just hopes that, like an explosion, her extreme forwardness will be a brief phase. If this goes on for much longer, with his body still recovering, he’d stand no chance.

Be that as it may, Subaru can’t just bluntly shake Rem off, especially since his feelings for her have started to bloom.

“…That child’s stubborn inferiority complex is dyed straight into the wool. It must be from our childhood, when Ram was a bit too much of a prodigy.”

“Isn’t it a bit much to call yourself a prodigy, especially in the past tense? How big-headed does someone need to be to make a claim like that?”

“If Ram was still in her prime, everything above Barusu’s neck would be gone by now… Honestly, why does Ram have to hang her hopes on a man like Barusu.”

Ram sighs wearily. Tilting his head at her words, Subaru seeks an explanation. With a particularly disgusted look, she side-glances back,

“Up until now, all that existed in Rem’s world was Ram, Roswaal-sama, and the manor. While Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama were in her scope as well, she probably didn’t attach much importance to them. As for anyone else, all the more.”

“Hmm, yeah, Rem does seem to have that kind of narrow-mindedness.”

This narrow-mindedness also explains why she rashly jumps to conclusions.

Secluded from the world, Rem resolves her problems internally, deciding everything by herself. As a victim of that dangerous thought process, this analysis is deeply etched in Subaru’s mind.

Looking back, he laments his poor conduct from that time.

“What are you staring at Ram for?”

“Why don’t you figure it out for yourself, Nee-sama.”

“Stop looking at Ram with those perverted eyes. We’re the same in terms of looks, so just do what you want with Rem instead.”

“That beautiful, sisterly love of yours isn’t beautiful at all, is it!”

“Well, putting that aside for now.”

Skillfully ignoring Subaru’s shouts, Ram swipes the cloth out from his hand. With a swift motion, she usurps his role and begins cleaning.

Subaru’s arm had given out from exhaustion some time ago. He tried to keep talking as an excuse for a break, but Ram saw through him. Feeling somewhat guilty, Subaru turns away from her as she works,

“So, what was that thing you were talking about?”

“Asking for an answer that you already know, Ram thinks that’s quite malicious.”

“Wouldn’t it be bad if we misunderstand each other? After all, it’s an established fact that I’m an oblivious guy who couldn’t read emotions to save his life. I’m Round Table class.

Though she doesn’t quite understand, Ram responds with a long sigh. Murmuring, she continues,

“—Rem’s small, narrow world, like a contamination, Barusu forced his way into it. If that contamination rampages enough, the walls of that child’s small world might push out just a bit. So dreams a beautiful girl named Ram.”

“Careful, that act of yours is starting to resemble me a bit too much. —Also, those dreams or whatever, don’t dump them onto me like that. I only do what I can, and sometimes I don’t even do that.”

Subaru’s motto is “To do or not to do? If you can’t decide, then don’t do anything.”

With this as his personal creed, he allowed countless potential events to slip past him. Subaru boasts his uselessness with a triumphant smirk. But with a curt “hmph,” Ram cooly scorns back,

“Unable to abandon the village children, much less leave Rem behind. And in the end, becoming a decoy to let Ram and Rem escape. Trying to act tough after all that, my, it gives Ram goosebumps.”

“Stop spelling out my deeds! Looking back, I’m so embarrassed, I could explode! Ugh, seriously, what’s wrong with me. I must’ve let the tension get to my head. That’s not me, goddamnit…”

Thinking back on his actions, a bashful Subaru crouches and furiously shakes his head. Though he managed to break out from the endless loops of death for the second time, Subaru was baffled by his various doings. Who is this crazy, hot-blooded youth, he asks, goosebumps forming all over.

“For the cool and gallant Natsuki Subaru, it’s just unbecoming. If I’d heroically taken care of everything myself, it’d be another story. But didn’t I just blow black smoke everywhere and let Ros-chi handle the rest?!”

“Well, logically speaking, that is how it was.”

“I knew it! I tried so hard too, damnit!”

After countless loops, this was the end result.

In reaching that result though, Subaru undoubtedly struggled. Yet, with no one aware of his suffering, everyone probably thinks “Oh, he just got involved by chance or something.”

Moreover, without landing a decisive blow of any sort, Subaru’s role amounts to “that guy who was just sort of there by chance.”

Most of all—

“Barusu was there. Sometimes that alone can save someone. You should know that.”

Soft, gentle words spill from Ram’s lips. Without her usual cynicism, nor any callous hatred, her words carried a genuine warmth and kindness. However-,

“Now that I think about it, that time with Reinhard, wasn’t I useless back then too?! Shielding Emilia-tan at the very end, was that all I did? Plus, that’s just being a meat tank. Even Rom-jii could’ve done that! I’m in despair—!”

Unfortunately, Ram’s words fail to reach Subaru as he grieves over his paltry achievements. Hanging his head, he sighs as if the world itself was ending. With an unpleasant scowl, Ram lets loose an explosive low kick, buckling his legs and sending him to the floor. Looking down at Subaru, Ram seems annoyed enough to spit on him,

“As expected, hanging any hope on a failure like Barusu is a lost cause.”

“So harsh! Well, I guess you’re not wrong though? But I wouldn’t mind if you had at least a little hope in me.”

Met with her hard stare, he snaps his fingers, then shapes them like pistols and playfully shoots at Ram. Blowing out the imaginary smoke wafting from his fingers,

“Expanding worlds or whatever, instead of relying on some stranger, you should do that yourself. Besides, being secluded in this cramped mansion, aren’t you the same as Rem? Boasting about your [Clairvoyance] when you don’t even know the names of the local village brats, what a joke.”

“…what are you-”

“You and Rem, your scopes are both too narrow. All you two ever do is look to each other for anything and everything. If you’ve gotta be together, instead of staring at each other, try walking alongside each other. That’s definitely more constructive and worthwhile.”

As Ram sinks into silence, Subaru snaps his fingers and flashes a bright smile. Adjusting the angle, he strikes his best pose,

“How’s that. Did my speech manage to convince you?”

“Enough that it’s unimaginable for Barusu and the person who cried over a condiment to be one and the same.”

So harsh, Subaru thinks, laughing bitterly. He takes a look around the hall,

“Well, let’s take our time with this. I’m sure Rem will eventually come around. After thinking and worrying for a while… one day, when she stops to look carefully, she’ll realize that compared to herself, Nee-sama’s totally inferior.”

“…yes. Ram hopes that day comes soon.”

With his teasing unexpectedly met with agreement, Subaru involuntarily falters. There wasn’t a hint of bluffing or falseness in her words. Ram spoke from her heart.

“What are you going to do if that day actually comes?”

“Even then, as the elder sister, Ram is to be respected. —That alone will never change.”

Hearing her refreshing declaration, Subaru decides not to press any further. Though he feels he’s been sticking his neck where it doesn’t belong since quite a while ago, he shoves the thought away.

Subaru sees that she’s finished working. He’s forced to recognize that, in the end, Ram took on the brunt of the work. Subaru’s recovery still has a ways to go. As for hiding his weakness, even more so.

“I can’t let Emilia-tan and Rem see me like this after all.”

He doesn’t want the former to see his weakness. He doesn’t want the latter to feel guilt and indebtedness. Both feelings stem from his stubbornness as a man. “To do or not to do? Stop worrying and just do it,” he decides.

“Although, as her older sister, Ram isn’t happy with Barusu’s mayo-whatever adding to Rem’s workload.”

“Right now, Rem’s goals are all fuzzy and vague, so she’s trying too hard in every direction. She’ll overwork herself and collapse at this rate. But if we give her just one clear goal, she’ll be able to focus her efforts on it. Rem’s got tunnel vision after all.”

While seemingly calm and collected, once she sets her heart on something, Rem single-mindedly pursues it.

Right now, her mind is undoubtedly stuck on completing Subaru’s fabled condiment. With a lowered focus on her other tasks, hopefully Rem will unconsciously ease up on herself.

Ram looks genuinely impressed with his answer, her eyebrows raised high,

“How surprising for Barusu to think so far. And even spout all that nonsense.”

“If you’re going to praise me, could you at least put some feeling into it?! Besides, right now, my soul yearns for the [White Lover].

—For both Rem and I, isn't this plan a Win-Win?"

"Uin-Uin?"

As Subaru twists his body about, chanting "Win-Win," a rare look of bewilderment emerges on Ram's face.

Without having to worry about indebtedness or weakness or any special care, for Subaru, talking with Ram is refreshingly easy. Enjoying their conversation amidst a comfortable weariness, Subaru pushes his weight off from the dining table,

"Okay, on to the next task. Let's see—"

With the dining hall cleaned up, for now they could go help Rem.

—At that moment, the doors to the dining hall fling open.

"Subaru-kun! Nee-sama!"

Beyond the doors, Rem's face shines with a brilliant smile.

Short of breath, her shoulders swaying, Rem looks around the clean dining hall and nods excitedly,

"It appears the dining hall is all tidied up. —In that case, we've finished our work for the morning."

Usually, their morning work would take almost two more hours. Yet Rem declares that they're already done.

Imagining her lightning-fast pace, Subaru and Ram can't help but look on in shock. In front of them, Rem smiles, arms widely stretched out,

"Well then, let us immediately start on Subaru-kun's [mayanaize]! Rem worked hard, so we can try many times before lunch!"

In high spirits, the blue-haired girl claps with delight.

Poking out above her radiant smile, beside her white headdress, lies a brilliantly pure white horn.

“To make her use her Oni transformation… weren’t you trying to stop her from overworking.”

“Hey, the way you brought her up isn’t blameless either.”

Staring each other down, Subaru and Ram maliciously point out the other’s mistakes. Watching over them, a curious Rem tilts her head.

Atop her tilted head, Rem’s white horn glistens brilliantly with the sun’s morning rays.

The First Mayonnaise Disturbance

1

“If we’re going to make the very best mayonnaise, the best there ever was, there are some ingredients we absolutely need! The first is a burning love and passion!”

“Yes, please leave it to Rem.”

“Just get to the recipe already.”

As Subaru clenches his fist dramatically, the twins sandwich him with polar opposite reactions. At the moment, Subaru stands in the kitchen, a plain apron draped over his butler’s suit. Joining him in his valiant quest for mayonnaise, Rem gazes back at Subaru with an ardent fire in her eyes (though thankfully, her horn stays hidden.) On the other hand, Ram doesn’t even bother hiding her bored, listless face (currently washing dishes.)

“My knowledge is honestly kind of shaky, but I have a feeling it only took a few ingredients to make.”

“All we need to do is mix the ingredients together, so the difficulty level should be fairly low. If the recipe had called for curing or fermenting, this whole exercise would have been hopeless though.”

“It really wasn’t that tricky of a process. Damn, if only I’d paid more attention when Mom made it at home.”

It was far too late to worry about at this point.

“It’s, mayo makin’ time!”, his enthusiastic mother suddenly spouted one day. Back then, Subaru didn’t notice her gathering any particularly special ingredients. Then again, her homemade mayonnaise was a complete failure, and his mother, sick and tired of trying, eventually settled for a store-bought brand.

“If anything, only Dad was persistent enough to have a shot. In the end, he single-handedly finished the homemade mayonnaise, but he thought it was still inferior to the store-bought kind. It never even made it to the dinner table."

Subaru's father took responsibility for the botched home cooking and personally disposed of it.

Thinking back, as a self-proclaimed Mayo Fanatic, Subaru regrets not tasting it to discover just what was so different from the store bought kind. But again, it was far too late to worry about.

To think though, that after all this time, Subaru himself would go head to head with homemade mayonnaise. —The blood of Mayo Fanatics truly runs deep.

"Alright, that's enough reminiscing. Let's go over what we'll need besides love and passion. Let's see, first and foremost we've just gotta have eggs."

When you think mayonnaise, you think eggs. To Subaru who is just as fanatical about egg dishes, the egg is a sacred ingredient, one he can't possibly live without. Amen.

"From Subaru-kun's description, it seemed like fowl eggs were most suitable, so Rem prepared them for today. They are the same ones Rem uses in her everyday cooking."

"That's probably for the best. Striking out a weird, novel path is the first step to an upset stomach. Besides, the ingredients are just a bit different here. That alone worries me."

With this world's unique ecosystem, it'd be unreasonable to prude over using the exact same ingredients. While they have similar uses, one must remember that they're not one and the same. Subaru had a feeling that even a small side trip could devolve into an epically Bizarre Adventure.

"Cooking is a science afterall. I'd rather handle this carefully like a science experiment, not a free-spirited adventure into the culinary world."

"If Subaru-kun had wished it, Rem would have brought higher quality ingredients."

"If we put any real money into a hit-or-miss operation like this, you know we'll just go bankrupt right? Also, what the heck would a 'higher quality' egg even come from? Some sort of brand name chicken?"

"Winged dragon eggs and other top class items, Rem knows a market that sometimes sell them."

"Using dragon eggs to make mayonnaise?! What the hell is that, it sounds terrifying! Besides, doesn't this country worship dragons?!"

How could a country that reveres The Dragon be gobbling up his kin, Subaru wonders. Ram sighs wearily at his ignorance,

"Does Barusu really think dragons and The Dragon are one and the same? Listen, there exists an insurmountable wall between The Dragon and some common dragon you'd find anywhere. Understand?"

"Listening to this is just making me even more confused… so basically, normal dragons and The Dragon are treated differently?"

Isn't that obvious?, Ram seems to say as she listlessly shrugs back. As Subaru glares back with a sour face, Rem pulls on his sleeve, raising her gaze up toward him.

"As Nee-san says, there is no reason to worry. If Subaru-kun wants, Rem will go procure winged dragon eggs right this second…"

"Hearing you say 'procure,' I can't tell if you'll be hunting for them in a market or a bonafide nest! For now, we should start with chicken eggs. If they turn out to be no good, then I'll ask you for the dragon eggs."

With his commoner's tongue and taste for cheaper foods, Subaru doubts they would tread such an absurdly extravagant path. But the sight of a heartbroken Rem, shrinking ever smaller in disappointment, keeps him from rejecting it outright. Hearing her proposal merely put on hold, Rem lifts her head, her face lighting right back up.

"Anyways, presenting the second sacred ingredient, cooking oil!"

"The manor keeps a sizeable stock for everyday use. It should be alright even when Barusu wastes it by the vaseful."

"Actually, now that I think about it, is it really alright to be using the manor's stock like this?"

Subaru had neglected mentioning his mission to Roswaal, but he figured it was selfless enough that the lord wouldn't mind.

At the same time, going overboard and sowing the seeds of discontent—Subaru wanted to avoid this at all costs.

"Please be at ease. Any ingredients used today, Rem will pay for them. Subaru-kun won't need to worry about anything."

"I almost went along with your kindness, but now that I think things through, doesn't this make me the epitome of human scum?!"

Hearing Rem so unhesitant to dip into her personal savings, Subaru desperately begs her to take back half the expenses once he gets his paycheck. Rem, who had planned to take the whole brunt of the costs herself, wouldn't yield any further than this.

In the face of Rem's overly selfless dedication, Subaru feels pangs of concern for her. Beyond his vision, Ram watches their conversation with suspicious eyes, her mood rapidly boiling from absolute zero to extreme danger level. With the overly-attached Rem by his side, Subaru holds back a sigh, continuing on with the mayonnaise briefing.

"Well, that should be it for the major ingredients. All that's left is, umm, well first there's salt."

"Solte, is it?"

"And then some pepper?"

"The peppa is right here."

“Sugar… I don’t remember needing any, but might as well have it out.”

“Sugar is prepared as well.”

“I wonder why sugar’s the only one that stays the same…”

With a medley of spices lined up before him, Subaru puts a hand to his chin with an enthusiastic “Alright!”

Eggs and oil, as well as a number of seasonings—Subaru feels that this was just about everything. The main problem, how should he go about mixing them, and in what amounts?

“Well, Rome wasn’t built in a day. Let’s take any mistakes in stride as we do this.”

“Yes, understood. So, if a mistake, if Rem makes one, don’t… please don’t throw Rem away…”

“Whooa! Why do you look like you’re going to cry?!”

Grasping Subaru’s sleeve with her small hands, Rem’s delicate frame silently trembles in horror. For a girl who judges herself so harshly, an exercise that guarantees failure might be too much for her.

In a sense, this trial-and-error approach is Rem’s natural enemy. Trying to comfort the rapidly shaking Rem, Subaru says with a nod,

“You know what? Accepting failure right from the start, that’s a loser’s attitude. Let’s take this on like it’ll work out in one fell swoop! Besides, I’m the type that can’t read the atmosphere and somehow succeeds the first time around. This’ll be cake.”

Subaru puts on a bold face, but his mind is drenched in a cold sweat as he turns toward the ingredients.

With a concerned Rem watching over him, he could no longer just haphazardly mix things together.

The anxiety from the last few days—all of it rushes back to Subaru, his heart pumping at an astonishing rate.

“This kitchen’s like a battlefield… Alright, let’s do this. Rem, gimme an egg.”

“Yes. Will two hundred be enough for you, Subaru-kun?”

“Do I look like I want to swim in mayonnaise?! One’s enough!”

Rem carries a basket with a bonafide mountain of eggs, conveying her brimming enthusiasm. Blinded by her brilliance, Subaru flinches back as he sheepishly retrieves a single egg. For now, he cracks its contents into a nearby bowl and begins cooking.

Subaru tosses what seems like a reasonable amount of salt and pepper into the bowl. He can’t show any hesitation. Next to him, Rem watches his performance with hopeful, expectant eyes. Wavering here and filling those eyes with tears, that would be inexcusable.

With a strange pressure on his back, Subaru has no choice but to believe in himself and his parents’ guidance. In a flurry, he starts mixing the egg and seasonings, introducing oil after they feel reasonably mixed. It’s all coming back now. Yes, when it comes down to it, you just have to keep mixing, mixing, mixing—is what his parents probably said at one point.

Adding oil, adding more oil. With a passion that could burn the contents of the bowl, Subaru single-mindedly pours oil. And, as if avenging the efforts of his fallen parents, he furiously mixes.

His breath shortens, sweat drips from forehead to jaw, his field of vision goes white. Even then, clawing desperately toward a frontier unknown, unreachable to man, Subaru pours his very soul into mixing and mixing and mixing.

Sound grows distant, color fades from the world. But in return, his senses sharpen. Subaru’s skin tingles from the slightest perturbations in the air as he stares single-mindedly at the bowl of mayonnaise. And then,

“It separated.”

Love and passion weren’t enough after all.

2

—The quest for mayonnaise feverishly continues.

Yet no matter how you’d mince it, Subaru’s efforts were met with complete and utter defeat.

How many eggs have been sacrificed toward the venerable mountain of failures emerging in this kitchen? No, rather than a mountain, it was more like a yellowish, whitish sea of blasphemy, appalling any who lay eyes on it.

Having already lost dozens of eggs to this detestable sea, Subaru could no longer bear such callous wastefulness of life.

“Damnnit! It’s not even close! How could this be! The method should be about right… What am I lacking?! Damn. In my efforts to bring mayonnaise to another world, who would have thought that the world itself would rebel against me—?!”

After being summoned to another world, using one’s knowledge to bring about a culture shock, Subaru coveted such an event.

In spite of himself, the uncultured, inexperienced Subaru did not anticipate so many pitfalls along the way.

“Damn, I underestimated the unreasonable nature of this cruel, fickle world. If just making mayonnaise strains my soul this far, anything more ambitious is just impossible.”

The encroaching despair threatens to snap his heart in half.

And yet, even after facing such crushing disappointment time and time again, Subaru’s heart has stayed strong. Even when reaching and reaching for a place his hands could not seem to grasp.

But to think that he would revisit this feeling just from making mayonnaise—

“Wow, when I think about it, I despair a lot, don’t I.”

A torrent of heart-wrenching, despair-inducing experiences come up in recent memory.

Unfortunately, no matter how many of these experiences Subaru accumulates, he won’t gain any sort of resistance to them, nor will he somehow level up. It was truly a pointless parameter to be raising so thoroughly.

Such thoughts invade Subaru’s mind as he suffers failure by the bowlful. Fearing his attitude only invites beratement from Ram and disappointment in Rem, he quickly glances towards the twins.

“The consistency and texture appear to be improving, but the taste is unacceptable. What does Nee-sama think?”

“Drizzle the cooking oil gradually over time, seasoning with solte and peppa to taste. Mixing looks to require quite a bit of patience, so Ram isn’t suitable for it.”

Rem and Ram whisk away while chatting casually. To top it off, when Subaru sneaks a peek at their bowls,

“Wait wait wait what? I’m the one with actual experience with the stuff, so why do yours actually look like mayonnaise?!”

In their bowls, a highly viscous substance emerges. Though Ram’s creation seems slightly closer to the real deal.

“Wh-, why?”

“This is the difference between those who cook and those who don’t. A trifling lack of knowledge poses no problem at all to a seasoned veteran. Know your place.”

“You say that, but have I ever seen you make anything besides steamed yams?!”

Subaru talks back like a sore loser, but Ram, with a bored expression, appears largely unfazed.

On the other hand, Subaru, seeing how far behind he is, falls ever further into despair. Rem puts on a smile and tries to cheer him up, “It’s okay. Subaru-kun should use the methods Subaru-kun believes in. Even if Rem views Subaru-kun’s technique as irrational, and it seems illogical next to basic cooking theory, and honestly Rem does think Subaru-kun’s cooking is inexcusable to the eggs. That’s just how Subaru-kun lives his life.”

“So it’s finally come, the unintended criticisms that stab like knives to the heart! And you even take a stab at my way of life?! I don’t wanna be judged like this just for trying to make goddamn mayonnaise!”

Subaru yells back at Rem who tries, and fails spectacularly, to support him. He goes back to inspecting the twins’ bowls of proto-mayo.

Eyes like saucers, Subaru watches as they mix while slowly pouring oil a little at a time.

“Ooohh, now I get it. You can’t just dump it all in at once.”

“If too much is poured at once, the mixture separates too quickly. Also, the recipe seems to call for consistent mixing. Requiring both patience and perseverance—quite a compelling dish.”

“Wow! Amazing! Rem, you’re amazing! You did a good job! You did a great job! Good girl, good girl, WONDERFUL!”

Subaru’s lighthearted compliments quickly raise Rem’s spirits. Hearing his words, her face lights up. “I-, is that so~” she asks back with an embarrassed smile.

While quite a handful, Rem’s personality is becoming noticeably easy to handle.

“Of course, the whole point of the mayonnaise was to make me look good.”

Due to his poor self-esteem, Subaru constantly looks for ways to get praise from others. And with some self-confidence, he could finally escape from ‘helpless little doggie’ status—is what Subaru saw a lot of in manga and games.

But with Rem single-handedly running the manor like clockwork, Subaru hardly ever has a chance to prove himself. And even then she probably thinks to herself, “Not yet, there’s no doubt that Rem can go further.”

For that reason, Subaru challenged mayonnaise.

But conceding guaranteed failure without Rem, Subaru enlisted her, hoping that she would gain at least a little confidence as well.

Those were Subaru’s motivations for this operation. It definitely wasn’t just for selfish, personal gain.

“But if you do even better than me, then what’s the point? Damn, you’re really messing with the wind beneath my wings.”

“If we’re talking about messing with wind, that would be Ram’s specialty. Barusu, take a look at Ram’s bowl.”

With a scornful tone, Ram arrogantly shows off its contents. Within her bowl, a small cyclone of wind spins rapidly. The torrent manipulates the whisk’s end, stirring at a truly inhuman pace.

Seeing the proto-mayo slowly transform from the fierce wind, a smiling Subaru nods,

“These skills of yours are way too enviable.”

“Physical aptitude aside, isn’t Ram’s sharp mind a given? Barusu on the other hand…”

After snidely side glancing toward Subaru, Ram turns her attention to Rem. Oblivious to her gaze, Rem continues whisking away as if her very life was on the line.

Seeing her little sister’s determined face, Ram’s lips form a slight smile.

“When depended on, one wants to show an impressive side of themselves. Ram’s tiny pride as an older sister—does Barusu have anything that even comes close to matching it?”

While inferior to Rem in terms of ability, Ram still carries herself as her older sister.

In her own way, Ram still takes the lead and guides Rem. Of course, her only superior quality is her excessive rudeness.

“In the end, if you finish this off, it won’t do any good for Rem’s self-esteem. Like this, it’ll just be an endless loop of ‘As expected, Onee-sama is amazing. In comparison, Rem is just…’ And I doubt you want her clinging to me either.”

Subaru can’t afford to let Rem’s attachment get any more extreme. If her praise-seeking escalates any further, one day he’ll be going to the toilet, and Rem will follow after him, offering to wipe his butt. Nightmare fuel.

As Subaru desperately pushes away his fears, Ram mutters “How would that ever happen” with a sigh.

“Ram can’t spare any more mana. Anyway, if a path is shown to Rem, she can walk it on her own. Having discovered that path, Ram’s pride is preserved as well. Will that be enough of a compromise, Barusu?”

“Definitely not a cute way to put it, nee-sama. —Wait, have you actually been pushing yourself?”

Back in the forest, Ram used wind magic to the point where she couldn’t even move.

If this operation put a burden on her again, then it would partly be Subaru’s fault. However, Ram shakes her head at Subaru’s concern.

“Ram honestly sees no benefit in going further. Even if Ram finishes the mayonnaise, it would only make Barusu happy. Ughhh, the very thought is sickening. Ram will stop this very second.”

Ram carelessly tosses her bowl into the sink, yielding with a rather refreshing sportsmanship. Yet, no matter what her true intentions are, she still manages to enrage Subaru.

“Nee-sama?”

“Rem. Your sister is tired and will be dropping out. Ram will be drinking tea in the dining hall. Just keep Barusu company until lunchtime.”

Ram leaves the rest to her hard working sister as she leaves the galley. Shocked by her audacity, a sighing Subaru retrieves her bowl.

“What a waste. She didn’t have to throw it out. How many baby chicks does she think I’ve sacrificed without even getting this far?”

Subaru’s failure streak is beginning to look pitiful. Upset, he sticks a finger into the bowl and brings some yellowish proto-mayo to his mouth.

“The texture’s just about there, but… bleh, something’s just not right with it.”

Rich in oiliness, similar in appearance, the contents seem very close to true mayonnaise. And yet, with this taste, it might as well be a different food altogether.

It lacks something, but not additional salt and pepper.

They required more than just seasoning—something fundamental is missing.

“It needs something. What is it, I don’t have a clue… sweetness, spiciness, saltiness, it doesn’t feel like any of those.”

Subaru tastes the mix over and over but can only cock his head in puzzlement. The proto-mayo’s incomplete flavor, the more he tries it, the more disgusting its oiliness seems to become.

At his side, Rem joins his taste-testing. Eyes closed, she scrutinizes the flavor spreading in her mouth. Deep in thought, she mutters a simple “hmmm.”

Appearance-wise, it’s really close. The problem is this very last step, deciphering the final ingredient. Subaru’s thoughts are interrupted when Rem, eyes popped open, utters a single word.

"—sourness."

"Hwa?"

"Judging by this taste, adding a little sourness should greatly enhance the flavor."

Blinking at Rem's proposal, Subaru suffers another mouthful of proto-mayo to check.

Alongside its rich oiliness, a purely disgusting feeling spreads in his mouth. But what if a tongue-numbing sourness was introduced? From this holy marriage, a pair of angel's wings emerge, and the proto-mayo takes flight toward a bright blue sky. He can finally see the answer.

"Sourness! Of course, sourness! We need sourness! What, what should we add?! Sour things, sour things… like oranges?!"

"Lemomu fruits or vinegie, Rem thinks these would work best."

"Lemon juice or vinegar! I think so too! If this works, it'll be like a dream!"

Trusting Rem's judgement, Subaru pulls out a number of seasonings. And after crushing and juicing several lemon-like fruits, a relentlessly insipid smell surges through the galley.

With both sources of sourness prepared, he nods to Rem. Subaru takes the lemomu juice and the bowl Ram threw out. Meanwhile, Rem adds the vinegie to her own bowl.

"All that's left is to stir like maniacs! Until our very souls wear down to nothing…!"

In contrast to his feverish excitement, Subaru introduces the lemon juice slowly and delicately.

Adding to the proto-mayo little by little, Subaru desperately holds back his fiery passion. The dish is taking shape.

As he pours in his time, pours in his veritable love, before Subaru's eyes, the proto-mayo assumes its final form.

He nervously takes a breath, a sharp pain ringing in his dry throat.

And yet, Subaru seeks not water, but the viscous substance before him.

He turns back. Rem is with him. She gives him a nod, her trust and support in him unwavering.

Nodding back, Subaru turns toward the bowl. This strong oily smell, this sour aroma that lightly tickles his nose—there's no mistake. This is it! Subaru's inner Mayo Fanatic screams.

At this moment, Subaru cuts open an entirely new path—.

With a single finger, he scoops a sample.

Subaru stares lovingly at the thick, viscous substance that paints his finger a rich white, slowly bringing it to his mouth. Captivated, he sucks at his finger almost erotically. Thoroughly lapping up every drop, his lips smack spectacularly as they part from his finger.

An intoxicated look appears on his face. Finally, Subaru turns back toward Rem,

"—GROOOSSS!! It's a failure! This wasn't it at all! BLEH!!"

"Su-, Subaru-kun, are you okay?! Did you add too much lemomu juice?"

"Nononono, this was just fundamentally wrong! It's like how wasabi and mustard and habanero peppers all have different types of spiciness! This was the wrong sourness, a total Category Error!"

The sourness of lemomu juice yielded a catastrophic failure.

Desperately wiping the remaining proto-mayo from his tongue, Subaru lays his tear-filled eyes on Rem.

This final bowl contains the last of their hopes and dreams. But behind it, a crushing anxiety threatens eternal despair.

If Rem too fails, that would truly be the end. But after all they've been through, there was no turning back.

In Subaru's gaze, a glimmering, fleeting hope and a fearful defeatism swirl about in endless combat. Rem handles her bowl, fully aware of the sheer weight it carries.

Yet within her, a resolution to face the truth head on is born.

Taking a breath, the girl's face no longer shows hesitation. Her weak, dependent persona strips away. All that remains is a seeker of truth, a figure singlemindedly pursuing her objective.

"—Rem."

At Subaru's beckon, Rem slightly nods.

Between the two, words are no longer necessary.

Subaru's trust pushing her on, Rem slowly dips a finger into her bowl.

For a few seconds, she stares at the white fluid adhering to her fingertip, the world at a standstill. What ran through this girl's head in those few seconds—nobody knows.

Time moves forth and, without further hesitation, Rem consumes the proto-mayo. Her red tongue traverses her white finger seductively. A pink sigh shrouds her fingertip. Rem closes her eyes to experience the flavor.

A brief span of time, a fleeting encounter—yet an eternity seems to pass between them. And then, the girl opens her eyes. With an expressionless face, Subaru asks her.

And her answer—

"This new flavor born here today—we name thee Mayonnaise."

Scholars tell of this moment as the first step in the spread of Mayo Fanatics throughout the world.

3

By the time Subaru and Rem complete the mayonnaise, it is well past the point when they start preparing for lunch.

After briefly celebrating, their neglected obligations put a damper on their spirits. At that moment, a certain figure comes to their aide.

“Ram thought this would happen. Don’t worry, preparations have been made.”

Ram proudly stands before them with a plate of her specialty, steamed yams.

While her steamed yams honestly taste delicious, the thought of offering it as lunchtime cuisine, to an esteemed noble no less, seems somewhat questionable.

However! Mayonnaise, the root of this predicament, could very well be the solution.

“And so, this is the ultimate flavor, handed down by my people, called mayonnaise. Put it on the steamed yams, and you’ll experience its taste to the fullest. Give it a try!”

See, there’s a legitimate reason for this shabby-looking meal, Subaru’s conduct seems to say.

Atop the luxurious table, cradled by gorgeous tableware, lies a plain display of steamed yams topped with mayonnaise.

“Once agaaaain, this is quite a dish you’ve cooked up.”

“I wanted you all to understand the greatness of mayonnaise. To accentuate its flavor, I even forced Rem and Ram to serve only the bare essentials. If you’ve got any complaints, I’ll take full responsibility. And then-”

“And then?”

“My efforts from the majuu incident and today’s lunch, they’ll cancel out, and we'll call it even…!"

"It was the same when you saved Emilia-sama, but Subaru-kun sure is aaaawful at spending his rewards wisely."

Roswaal accepts Subaru's arrangement with a wry smile.

He easily saw through Subaru's half-decent explanation. Especially since behind Subaru, an apologetic-looking Rem squirms restlessly.

Beside her, Ram, who has absolutely no qualms with serving steamed yams, sticks her chest out in pride. Such courage.

As the conversation unfolds, Roswaal is not the only one to express reluctance. Subaru looks toward the person whose reaction most matters to him, only to find Emilia eyeing her plate cautiously.

"How is it Emilia-tan? Feel like eating?"

"It's my first time seeing something like this, so it's honestly a bit scary. But Rem guarantees its taste, and Subaru's so passionate about it, so I want to believe it's good."

Admittedly, it didn't have the kind of appearance that invites first-timers to try it without hesitation.

If it's come to this, let's just force someone who won't hold it against me too much, Subaru decides as he looks around the table.

"Hm? Where's Beako?"

"Beatrice-sama came in a while ago, but she turned around and left after seeing today's menu."

"That damn loli, I'll remember this…"

Leftovers are unacceptable, Subaru thinks, silently deciding to bring some mayo-yam to the library later.

In the end, without a vanguard to bravely lead the way, Subaru sighs, “Alright, there’s just no choice. Puck, you’re up.”

“What, me?”

Shaking his head bitterly, Subaru bestows the honor of vanguard to the small cat-like spirit.

Rem plates a smallish yam next to Emilia, Puck sitting cozily in front of it. He looks like he wants to rub his face with his paws and groom himself with his tail as usual, but resists while indoors.

Subaru’s intense gaze fixed on him, a troubled Puck looks to Emilia for help. However, Emilia can only look back with an apologetic face,

“Puck, please.”

“…I’m really weak to Lia’s requests. Guess I’ve got no choice.”

Puck reluctantly gives his head a light slap and turns to his yam.

He takes one last look with his beady, black eyes, his pink nose twitching as he casually mentions,

“By the way, if I were to die, then everything but Lia will be frozen in a violent maelstrom, as sworn in our contract… don’t forget okay?”

“Don’t reveal something that scary so casually. You won’t die, so stop worrying!”

Subaru yells back after what sounds like Puck’s final farewell. Puck leans his body toward the steamed yam and clings to it. Then, with his small mouth, he bites off a chunk,

“Nom nom, pretty tasty.”

“Hey, don’t just go for the yam, taste the mayonnaise too.”

“Saw through me eh? Well, here goes. Aah—n.”

His plan to eat just the yam portion revealed, Puck laughs nervously as he laps up the mayonnaise. As he chews at the mayo-yam, all eyes are on Puck.

While Subaru had a chance to approve the finished product, he had no idea how others would react to it. An overwhelming feeling of tension fills the air as everyone awaits Puck's reaction. And then, the grey, cat-like spirit slowly raises his face,

"—Hey, this actually tastes good."

Puck remarks as he lightly paws at his steamed yam, his print like a personal stamp of approval.

With that, lunchtime truly begins.

Emilia, who previously glared ever vigilantly at the steamed yam, gives in and stuffs a piece into her mouth. As she chews, the mayonnaise's rich, creamy texture envelopes her tongue,

"Oh, it's delicious. Wait, oh no, I can't stop myself."

As if enraptured by its taste, a troubled Emilia involuntarily shovels away at her yam.

With Roswaal also remarking "My, hoooow delicious," his royal tastes also seem satisfied. As a mayonnaise evangelist, Subaru could not hope for a better result.

"Alright, success! Rem, you did really great."

Overjoyed with the unexpectedly high rating, Subaru pats Rem's back. Still feeling troubled, Rem shakes her head at his praise,

"No no, Rem didn't do much of anything. These results are the fruits of Subaru-kun's efforts. Rem was even careless enough to forget about preparing lunch… without Nee-sama and Subaru-kun, Roswaal-sama would have surely scolded Rem."

"You don't need to always think so negatively. Ram and I can be at fault too, so why don't you look at yourself in a more positive light?"

Subaru can only shrug at Rem's poor evaluation of herself. In reality, Ram and Subaru's actions are the ones really worth reprimanding.

If anything, for convincing Rem to help with the mayonnaise and causing her such distress, Subaru feels that he should be the one apologizing.

"You know, it's all thanks to Rem that we finished the mayonnaise. With this, it's like a flower bloomed in a place called the dinner table. I'm honestly really grateful."

Subaru says, fully aware that this may devolve into a perpetual battle of praising and rebuking. Subaru decides to forcefully push an onslaught of compliments until she has no choice but to accept.

"—it's all, it's all thanks to Rem?"

Miraculously falling for his praise, Rem's face lights right back up.

In his mind, Subaru smiles wryly at her simple personality, but he accepts it as one of her cuter points.

"Yeah, that's right. Without Rem, it would've been flat out impossible. Take pride in yourself."

"Was Rem useful to Subaru-kun?"

"Oh, absolutely. As a true blue mayo-addict, you saved my life. I was seriously at critical danger level, you know?"

"Critical danger level…"

"It was at the point where I'd have died if I didn't practically swim in the stuff. But thanks to you, my life goes on. Thank you God, Buddha, Rem-sama, Emilia-tan."

The ridiculousness of Subaru's praise seems to know no bounds.

But Rem gazes at him with a serious face and nods energetically,

"Understood. Please leave it to Rem."

"—Hm? Alright. I'll leave it all to you!"

Subaru doesn't quite know what she means, but he's onboard for anything that helps her self-esteem.

He gives her a thumbs up as he heads toward the spot next to Emilia, coveting more praise for the meal.

Unbeknownst to Subaru, Rem quietly concocts her plan as she makes a guts pose behind him.

4

—Early next morning

The daily life of a servant starts exceptionally early. Subaru fights back a yawn as he gets out of bed and makes his way down the hall.

While yesterday was tough, bringing mayonnaise into this world was a small miracle.

From now on, Subaru's meals will be replete with the viscous, oily nectar. It's all thanks to Rem.

"Oh hey, speak of the devil. Mornin' Rem-rin."

"—ah, Subaru-kun. Good morning to you."

Apparently having woken up before Subaru, Rem excitedly hops towards him from the other end of the hall.

Face brimming with light, she looks expectantly at Subaru as if waiting for his response.

"Oh yeah, thanks a lot for yesterday. It's thanks to you that I got to re-experience a flavor from my hometown."

"No, it wasn't much. If Rem was able to be of use to Subaru-kun, then that makes Rem happy beyond words. —It's okay to praise Rem though?"

An imaginary tail wags happily behind her. Softly plopping a hand on Rem's blue hair, Subaru gently strokes her head. Eyes closed and cooing softly, Rem looks to be in pure bliss.

Subaru suddenly feels like he's doing something incredibly lewd.

What in the world am I doing so early in the morning… he asks himself.

"Oh yes, Subaru-kun. Did Subaru-kun sweat a little while sleeping last night?"

"Huh, no way, do I smell? Yesterday was pretty hot, now that I think about it."

Subaru did indeed have some trouble sleeping last night. Shocked by Rem's discovery, he quickly raises an arm to his face.

Yet no matter how much he sniffs, he can't seem to notice any particularly strong stench. Subaru tilts his head in confusion.

But for Rem to point it out, it must be quite something.

"It'd be pretty embarrassing if Emilia-tan noticed too. I'll go wash up a bit."

"In that case, please make use of the bathhouse. If it's one of the smaller baths, using it in the morning should be no problem. —Rem will even wash Subaru-kun's back."

"Nah, that's alright. Girls should be more reserved about this sort of thing, okay?"

"How disappointing."

Passing it off as a joke, Rem withdraws. However, Subaru decides that accepting might actually be for the best. After all, if Rem goes so far as to suggest a bath, then perhaps the Smell radiating from his body is more akin to an unfathomable stench.

Because of Rem's fondness for him, this encounter wasn't so much an issue. If it had been Ram or Beatrice though… the very thought threatens to snap Subaru's delicate spirit in two.

“You know what, I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“Yes. —Please enjoy.”

A hidden intention lies in Rem’s reply. But Subaru, desperate to rid himself of his stench, doesn’t notice.

Parting with Rem, he quickly makes his way to the baths.

Taking a bath first thing in the morning, in a world where showers didn’t exist, it was quite the refreshing experience.

The life of a shut-in entails the very reversal of night and day. As a result, Subaru would always arrive at the bathhouse at unusual times, only able to take a quick shower.

In this world, taking a shower isn’t even possible. Moreover, with girls nearby, he couldn’t afford to look shabby and unkempt.

As a result, Subaru puts a little more effort into his grooming.

“But man, having the bathhouse all to myself, it’s oddly satisfying.”

Laying his eyes on the wide bathhouse, a nude Subaru pointlessly sticks his chest out in pride.

An enormous bath rivaling that of a public bathhouse’s fills the center of the room. Formed from a marble-like stone, it currently lies empty, awaiting its daily scrubbing. Subaru’s aim isn’t this massive tub but rather, a smaller one sitting in the corner of the bathhouse.

An economical bath, used in Roswaal’s absence. More than large enough for a single person, it also comes equipped with magic crystals to adjust the water temperature with ease.

Laying his eyes on the tub,

“A comfortably rising steam… Looks like Rem set it up just right for me.”

Subaru arrived at the baths after quickly heading to his room for a change of clothes. He supposes that during that time, Rem had quietly adjusted the water for him.

It would've been a light task considering her usual workload.

Alone in the baths and completely nude—with no one's eyes on him, an overwhelming excitement builds in Subaru's heart.

The result,

"First into the baths, it's Natsuki Subaru—This bath is all mine!"

Exhilarated, Subaru dashes through the bathhouse with a Hop, Step, Jump! Unafraid of slipping on the wet floor, his First Rate Specimen dangles and whips as he leaps gallantly—his body twirling in midair, Subaru dives straight into the bath.

And then,

"—BLUH?!"

Pluuooo, a viscous, almost alien sound is made as his body sinks into the bath.

Shocked by the unexpected feeling and warmth, Subaru's body writhes against the slimy liquid. He tries desperately to bring his face to the surface—His eyes refuse to open.

"What, what the hell?! What is this sensation, what is this situation?! Everything's all slimy! Oh my god! It's even getting in my wounds! This is bad, BUT WHY! Am I going to die here!"

Throwing himself out of the bath, Subaru rolls around violently and shrieks in terror.

With a sticky, viscous substance covering his body, every attempt at standing just causes him to slip and slip. When his hands press against the floor, they too just slip and slip and slip.

An indecipherable motive. A truly unexpected situation.

His eyes still closed shut, a world of utter darkness assaults Subaru as alarms blare in his mind. This encroaching fear for one's life, to taste it again after just a few days. Subaru berates himself.

How could he have been so stupid. How could he have been so careless. He had forgotten how cruelly and mercilessly this world's God plays with his destiny.

Oh, you thought you were safe? Sorry, BAD END!

Subaru curses himself for not seeing this coming.

Struggling to breathe, Subaru gasps as his eyes bulge at the bathhouse ceiling.

Sprawled out on the floor, his body coated in the viscous goop, Subaru desperately pushes his failing five senses to their utmost limit. His brain buzzes with a torrential whir.

His voice still rings. Maybe he could call for help. But what if this was a trap? If he calls for help, he'd just be leading his savior to their grave. But if he doesn't, then the perpetrator will most certainly come to finish him off. Unable to yell out—for a moment, he thinks of blindly dashing out like a wild animal.

Thoughts flying rapidly, Subaru breaks his train of thought,

"If I die, hide my body for three days…! In that time, make preparations for… hm?"

In a panic, Subaru gives his last rites. As his face writhes and folds, a peculiar sensation takes hold of his tongue.

Viscous, oily, and above all else, a hint of sourness—this is!

"—Rem! Rem! Get in here!"

"Yes! Did you call for Rem, Subaru-kun!"

As if she was standing right outside all along, Rem's voice immediately answers back.

She comes rushing toward Subaru, wiping his face of the viscous substance with a towel.

“How is it, the feeling of swimming in mayonnaise? Rem did her best to satisfy Subaru-kun’s request. —Rem doesn’t mind being praised?”

Praise me, praise me, her smiling face seems to say.

Standing up, Subaru uses the towel to wipe off the rest of his mayonnaise-laden body. And, returning Rem’s innocent smiling face with his own smile,

“ARE YOU AN IDIOT?!”

In the early hours of the morning, Subaru’s yells boom throughout the bathhouse.

Seeing his soulmate, mayonnaise, wasted so callously, Subaru feels a rage like no other. Eventually, an oversleeping Ram awakens as well. At her elder sister’s hands, an apologetically kneeling Rem suffers a lecture of unspeakable length, unspeakable severity, and unspeakable violence.

“It’s tasty, so it’d be nice if we always had some,” Emilia says in the aftermath. So it was decided that a sizeable stock of mayonnaise would always be maintained at the Roswaal manor.

In the end, the plan to use mayonnaise to boost Rem’s self-confidence backfired spectacularly. After this incident, Rem still bears a trauma toward mayonnaise. Despite her genuine skill in making it, it ultimately fell to Ram to produce mayonnaise for the manor.

Arc 3:
Return to the Royal Capital

Volume 4

Chapters 1-Interlude

Chapter 1:
A Peaceful Early Morning

1

“Here, over here! If you don’t hurry they’ll catch us.”

“I know, I’m saying I know already, wait—timeou…!”

Pulled by the arm, the two ran through the alley with poor footing.

It’s a small back alley. Even though it’s past noon the sunlight has yet to reach this area, the dimly lit dark alleys formed a complex maze as if to reject to two.

For Subaru who had no familiarity with this area this wasn’t a very amiable situation. If only the one leading knew the way, was all he wished for.

“We sure came down a dark path, do you know where you’re going?”

“No clue!”

After a refreshing amount of back-and-forth chatter, Subaru let out a defeated sigh as he brought a hand to his brow.

It was a response to be expected, after all the person pulling Subaru by the hand was dressed in a showy manner that one couldn’t help but think unfamiliar with the hidden back alleys.

A fluttering red dress made with expensive looking materials. A glittering necklace catching the light. The skin that peaked out was an elegant white, it was impossible to think her upbringing would have been any different.

Most of all, the coloring of her vivid orange-colored hair. The nobility of it claimed her presence as being laughably far-removed from this place in the slums.

Looking at this appearance once more, Subaru was once again convinced he had picked up a troublemaker.

Hearing the the multiple footsteps following behind them, this wasn't exactly the time to stop and catch his breath.

How did things come to this… this question filled Subaru's mind. Running out of breath, he grimaced as aching filled his lungs.

Subaru's current trouble all started around two days ago.

2

For Natsuki Subaru, morning was a time for sleeping, at the very least not a time for vigorous activity.

Even if it's too much of a stretch to say that he'd melt from showering in the morning's bright light, for the DNA making up Natsuki Subaru's body it certainly felt like dying. For this Subaru to be bathing in the early morning sunlight doing radio calisthenics before a crowd, a mere month ago such a thing would have been unthinkable.

—Speaking of which, getting summoned to another world is pretty unthinkable in itself.

It's such a big transformation one would think they've hit their head or something. In fact, he did have memories of a rather strong impact to his head, such that it wouldn't be surprising if his way of thinking had changed a little. However, even taking that into account it wasn't like this was a situation he was all that opposed to.

"Ai, and for the last part stretch your arms to sky, Finishhh-! Victory-!!"

""Victory—!!""

A chorus of voices followed Subaru's instructions, stretching their arms to sky; radio-calisthenics complete. Hearing shouts of joy rise up from the crowd, Subaru lightly wiped the drops of sweat from his brow. In front, as if to surround him, was a crowd of inhabitants from the village bordering the Roswaal mansion. From the looks of it, I'd say roughly half of the villagers were gathered.

The radio-calisthenics he had started light-heartedly seemed to have unexpectedly caught the heart-strings of this world's inhabitants. In this village he had given rise to a great movement, one that had driven the non-committal Subaru into a situation where he couldn't quit even if he tried.

"Subaru—, we finished the exercises!" "Give us a stamp, give us a stamp!" "Sweet potato, sweet potato!"

"Daaaa! Stop it, stop crowding around me so early in the morning, and settle down! You guys are seriously too energetic, it must be nice to be young! You don't have to be so rushed, the stamps aren't going to run away. Line up, line up."

After coming in contact with the overly-familiar gang of children Subaru's expression carved into a bitter smile. Showing no hints of defiance, the children followed his instructions and formed a straight line in front of him. Seeing this Subaru gave a satisfied nod and turned his head.

"Well then, Emilia-tan, if you'll do the honors."

"Yes—here you go."

Emilia stood directly behind him, gripping a small sack before handing it over, her lips wavering between a bitter and happy smile. Opening the received bundle, inside were long thinly shaven raw sweet potatoes. Seeing the sweet potatoes appear the children raised excited voices, as if responding to the shrill voices Subaru took up a sweet potato.

"Alright I'm going to press it down now, take out your paper."

Taking out the container of ink from the same bag Subaru dipped the end of the sweet potato in, pressing down the inked-potato onto the paper presented by the first child. Emilia watches the children's faces turn to joy as a picture emerges onto the surface.

"Carving the flat side of a potato to make a potato-stamp. Subaru, you always come up with weird things."

"If you cut off the inked part then you can use it as emergency rations, and this picture has more sense than you'd think. By the way, I name today's masterpiece 'Monday's Puck'."

What appeared on the paper was a distorted print of a cat, bringing out a feeling of languor. It captured the key characteristics fairly well, anyone looking at it could guess the model at a glance. Well, the title itself is a dead giveaway.

"I'm really surprised, it looks just like Puck. Subaru, you're really good at art."

"Well, I've had ample time that I've wasted away practicing to draw like this. I only know the basics though, since I gave up half-way."

If you're a true Otaku then you'll have traveled down the path of drawing at least once. From there it's about establishing your own drawing style, whether you make a name for yourself is mostly up to luck. By the way, for Subaru this ended up being impossible.

"This is all I can do, carving images of cats onto potatoes in a world that doesn't even have potato-stamps; it's only good for spoiling innocent little kids."

"That's a pretty unpleasant way to phrase it… and doesn't this picture of puck somehow look like it lacks energy?"

"I told you it's called 'Monday's Puck', I wanted to try and capture that hidden negative feeling where you know that there's an entire week ahead of you. Those poorly drawn ears were on purpose."

Hearing Emilia's impression, Subaru tried to emphasize his artistic intent. All-the-while being pestered by children holding out papers to be stamped, on which the number of radio-calisthenics participation stamps was steadily accumulating.

It's like I'm re-creating one of those summer vacation stamp-rallies, Subaru thought with a bit of playfulness. Every day before sleeping Subaru carved out a new stamp, there were always a lot of kids looking forward to what kind of stamp they'd get. Entertaining children, Subaru demonstrated the nimbleness of his fingers in a rather odd way.

Subaru enjoyed chatting with the children for a while as they clamored around him, finally exchanging promises for tomorrow's radio-calisthenics exercise and bidding farewell with a wave of his hand. Subaru talked with each of the group of adult participants before accompanying Emilia back to the mansion.

Lately this had become Subaru's daily routine, leaving in the early hours to spend time in the village. This setting came about because his body hadn't quite recovered so he wasn't able to participate in the mansion's morning work, the pitifulness of this state was added onto by the fact he was also using up Emilia's relaxation time, something that bothered Subaru quite a lot.

"Aahhh, I'm worn out. Emilia-tan, I feel bad taking up your time like this every morning."

"It's fine, it's not like your conditions back to normal yet, and Ram and Rem both have their work at the mansion. And it's not like I dislike this anyway…"

"When you say you don't dislike it… could that possibly be spending time with me?!"

"Wrong—. I meant getting to know the villagers who I hadn't been involved with in the past. You know how it's been… because it was like I thought I had drawn up a line around myself."

She coldly shot down Subaru's words who was now wildly inhaling through his nose; Emilia gave a shy laugh. From under her hood, her face's white profile was interrupted by a glimpse of lovely-red lips, Subaru felt the blood rise unintentionally to his cheeks from the charmingness of it.

Emilia's current appearance is closest to what she wore when they first met in the capital. A lightweight short skirt, over the top of which was a white robe with falcon shaped embroidery, her beautiful silver hair entirely concealed under her hood. Subaru stood next to her in clear contrast, wearing a slightly dirty cheap-looking grey jersey. After coming to this world it had taken quite the beating, it was only due to Rem's handiwork that it was able to recover to this extent. The areas most frayed were the parts Subaru had attempted to mend by himself.

Comparing my clothes, appearance, and various other specs to Emilia's, in my heart I couldn't help but let out a sigh. I'm desperate over here trying to even things out. From the start our positions aren't even in the same arena.

"Anyways…"

The one to break the silence was Emilia, as Subaru was still brooding in deep thought. She was bent over in front of Subaru, looking down at him from an angle with both arms crossed.

"You've become quite familiar with the villagers haven't you, could it be that you're more of a celebrity now than Ram and Rem?"

"Well, in a certain way I'm like a hero that saves children! Kind of like a hero that goes around saving people, so maybe that's being talked about somewhat?"

Even though he dressed it up as a joke, in reality Subaru had done enough that it didn't sound entirely ridiculous, it ended up not being much of a joke.

Towards Subaru's playful words Emilia kept silent with a finger on her lips, tilting her head at Subaru.

"It's probably something a little different from a hero"

"Ah, yeah I guess they wouldn't be talking about it… but if it wasn't the forest incident then I wonder what else it'd be."

Being praised for his role in the rescue-business wasn't something that was needed or expected by Subaru. However, outside his expectations, Emilia's words continued on in this direction. Smiling with her peach-colored lips as she let out a small laugh.

"It's true that the current impression of you by the village children is a bit like a hero, but more than that the rumors are leaning more towards you being a musical ‘Scholar’ you know?”

“Musical Scholar…? I can’t lead an orchestra you know. My musical sense is zero.”

I was a proud living legend back in elementary school band class, getting the opportunity to play the big taiko drums once. Someone with zero musical sense on a big taiko drum is quite the scene. Why they had to change people midway through is still a mystery to me.

At the previous joke Emilia shakes her head sideways, “that’s not it.”

“Scholar as in an intellectual. A foolish sage himself, is what the old men in the village are saying.”

“That really doesn’t sound like praise… like someone who can study but is still an idiot. In the first place, what have I ever done that’s intellectual-like…”

“Mayonnaise”

Stabbing her finger out, Emilia blurts out a straight-forward single word. From her words Subaru could only agree. Ever since the incident a few days ago, the adoption rate for this new technology was progressing smoothly. Because it was deemed too much of a waste (mostly by Emilia) to keep such a treat to themselves, they had been spreading the production method out to the nearby villages. It’s only been a few days but it seems like it’s caused quite a stir.

As a mayonnaise lover, bringing mayonnaise to another world was truly a step to be celebrated. May mayonnaise be eternal.

However,

“It’s great that those who recognize the magnificence of mayonnaise are spreading, but for my death-defying heroics to be deemed less than a brand of mayonnaise…”

It seems rather than a hero, I’m becoming famous as a mayonnaise evangelist, in the end this is my so called value to society. With quite an overwhelmed feeling Subaru drooped his shoulders.

Seeing this reaction Emilia acted in a panic, massaging his shoulders,

“Ah, um, you know, I’m sure the children are thankful for you saving them? But the one who brought them back from the forest was Rem after all, and the rumors going around are saying that the one who finished off the witchbeast in the forest was Roswaal…”

It hurt to receive such sympathy, but he couldn’t deny anything she had said. Looking back at it again, Subaru was shocked.

When it came to rescuing the children, all Subaru managed to accomplish was to get bitten all over his body and become terribly injured. And with defeating the witchbeast, other than restoring Rem’s sanity he had left everything else to Roswaal, ran out of energy and lied down to rest. He was surprised with himself.

“I didn’t actually contribute anything, did I?!”

I was just flailing around the whole time. Subaru feeling like all his hard work was just denied from him, he felt increasingly like shrinking.

Seeing Subaru like this Emilia found it more and more difficult to find the words to call out to him, stumbling and ending with phrases like, “um,” and “you know,” “it’s not like that…”

“Geez, stop being like that, getting all caught up on small things”

“B-But, Emilia-tan…”

“The people that understand that you worked hard already know it. Roswaal, and Ram, and especially Rem are all like that.”

Emilia said with a playful tone, as she poked Subaru’s face with her finger. Feeling the pointy sensation Subaru shifted his eyes to her with a pitiful look, she let out a grumble as she trotted out in front of him. Turning around, she removed her hood with vigor, her long silver hair glistening in the morning sun as it ran down her back. Seeing such a magical figure Subaru stopped in his tracks. Standing in front of Subaru she placed her hands on her hips, with an attitude almost like scolding a younger brother,

“I know it too, you know.”

“Eeeeh?”

“That you tried hard, that’s something that I really understand. That’s why you can’t get depressed like this. Understand?”

Emilia tilted her head, “Your reply?” she asked. Hearing those words the dazed Subaru woke up in scramble, vigorously shaking his head up and down. Seeing this reaction Emilia burst into a smile.

“Geez, what is it this time? You’re moving like a broken toy. You’re always like this.”

“No, this time it wasn’t like I was doing it on purpose… and anyway Emilia-tan who does these things without trying is 100x more unfair! No matter how I struggle I fall in love again.”

“Yes, yes. And stop trying to play it up like that, I think that’s a bad —habit.”

We’re having a heart-to-heart talk here, but the smiling Emilia won’t lend her ear. As she catches her flowing hair with one hand and combs it to the back, Subaru thought once more that she was completely out of his league.

Even though walking together like this was something that they had done so countless times before, each time, every time, he felt like it was a brand new experience.

None of the Emilia’s were the same. If he let today’s get away, the chance to meet today’s Emilia would never come around again. Treating this time as precious and looking forward to tomorrow, it was unexpected that he’d be spending his daily life like this.

“Working energetically, deepening my relationship with my sweetheart—what a wholesome lifestyle. Noone can call me a shut-in anymore!”

"Even if it can't be helped that you act tough like this because you're a boy, you need to properly take care of your body you know. There's no good reason to push yourself right now you know. Just be obedient and let Rem and Ram… well mostly just Rem, take care of you."

From Subaru's energetic yell and eccentric pose, Emilia seems to have garnered quite a few misunderstandings and offered up some candid advice.

It seems in her mind Subaru had taken up a position as a well-mannered upstanding young man. One that would work themselves to death through labor and hard work. Of course, in reality Subaru was far from hardworking, his personality was one where he'd like to live his whole life eating and sleeping if he didn't have to work.

Of course he also wasn't honest enough to go out of his way to correct such a favorable misunderstanding like this though.

Meanwhile, during their extended talk you could begin to see the top of the Roswaal mansion peak out over the horizon. Like this they continued on, spending the few minutes in a pleasant morning conversation, the time of which one could see would soon end.

"We started talking and the time just flew b… hey, what's with you going so slow all of sudden?"

"This is my reluctance to part ways, behold my snail's pace tactics. Don't you just want to enjoy this refreshing morning air some more? With who? With me!"

"If we go too slow people would get upset you know… I did say that you shouldn't push yourself, but keeping promises is important. I have my contracts with the spirits I have to keep too."

"I'm weak to that kind of reasoning. …Puck's about to wake up now too, it seems like I missed my timing to have some nuisance-free love talk with Emilia."

The contract of a spirit user, he was weak to that being brought up. He hid his innermost thoughts behind his facial expression while holding back tears of blood in his heart,

“I know… let’s go back. …shit, I could have done some even better things…!”

“I don’t know what’s gotten you so vexed, but if I have some extra time I’ll hear you out so stop pouting, geez.”

Emilia who had gradually come to act more intimate towards Subaru gave a troubled smile while putting a finger to her lips. Subaru watched as she muttered softly under her breath “what’s this?”

“There’s a carriage… stopped in front of the mansion.”

“Hmm?”

Piqued by her murmurs he aligned his vision to where she was looking, narrowing his eyes he confirmed its existence.

In front of the Roswaal mansion’s main gate there was a single ‘horse’-drawn carriage approaching. At a glance Subaru could tell this ‘horse’-drawn carriage was different from the horse-drawn carriages he was familiar with.

After all, the animal pulling the frame wasn’t a horse but a horse-sized lizard. In that case it couldn’t truly be called a horse-drawn carriage, so he had no choice other than to refer to it as a ‘horse’-drawn carriage.

“I sort of remember these things darting around everywhere in the capital”

On the first day he was summoned, he remembered looking out from the marketplace onto the road the figure of these things running past kicking up a great amount of dust, it would be difficult to forget such a scene. From the fact that the word ‘horse-drawn’ was understood he could ascertain that there were indeed horses in this world, but from the fact that I’m observing a lizard pulling the carriage here I guess that this animal is the standard in this world’s society.

"If I'm not mistaken they were calling that a dragon-carriage?"

"…? Yeah. Because the one pulling the frame is an ground dragon calling it a dragon-carriage is only natural right? Ee, it's a lie, could it be my common sense is wrong? Does it have a proper name?"

Responding to the zero-knowledge Subaru's question was Emilia, whose own breadth of knowledge was now increasingly suspect. For the girl reading way too much into his words, Subaru shook his hands in denial,

"It's just that I'm lacking in knowledge. Emilia-tan is right about this, probably, so have some confidence."

"Really? You're not teasing me? Don't start any embarrassing rumors about me ok. If you lie I'll whack you, you know."

"Whack, that's not a word you hear nowadays…"

Like this, they came up to the carriage while talking. Looking the lizard up close it was shocking how big it really was. On the carriage it was pulling there was a stand built to seat a coachman, sitting on which was a person who fit the bill, spotting the two approaching he began to climb down to the ground.

"Welcome back. I beg your pardon for parking our vehicle in front of your gate."

With conduct fitting for an old-gentleman he greeted us while offering a bow. If the one escorting this carriage was like this then the passenger was surely a distinguished person in their own respect. Peeking inside from the coach's window there wasn't even a trace of a shadow inside carriage's room. In other words,

"Our envoy is already inside the mansion holding an audience with the count."

"My, how polite. How should I put it, I'm embarrassed to be stealing looks like this. Anway, I'm not used to things like this so I'd hope if you could overlook it."

Subaru blew it by responding in an overly honest manner, trying to cover with polite sounding language was too much to ask for. Standing next to him Emilia made a look like “you know how to speak properly” right? Subaru felt the difference in social standing between him and her keenly.

Covering for the now silent Subaru, Emilia stepped in front to face the coachman.

“You said envoy… by chance could it be?”

Facing the subjectless question the coachman gave a quick bow and demonstrated he was well informed,

“It’s exactly has Emilia-sama has guessed, this matter is related to the selection of the next Queen.”

Hearing the words ‘Royal Selection’ Subaru raised his face. Even just hearing it now, this was a far-off phrase for him.

Emilia’s face spontaneously stiffened, and Subaru frowned at this turn of events. Seeing their reactions the old gentleman held his bow and continued.

“I imagine you’ll hear this officially from the envoy. Please, if you would return to the mansion.”

“I wonder if it’s a summons?”

“For anything further I would request that you hear out the envoys message”

Facing the coachman who clearly knew his role, bowing her head Emilia replied “very well” with hardened face.

“—Let’s go”

Giving a short declaration, without turning to face Subaru she began walking. Heading towards the entrance to the mansion.

Flustered, Subaru ran off chasing her back. Turning his head once more for another look.

The coachman stood facing them with his head still lowered, seeing them off in silence.

Chapter 2:
A Servant’s Tea-time Conversation

1

Sent off by the Coachman, the two were greeted as they entered the mansions entrance lobby,

“Welcome back Miss Emilia”

Said Rem with a composed face lacking in expression, the temperature in the room dropping from her voice alone as she gave a bow.

Raising her head, that emotionless face was something he hadn’t seen in a quite a while. Recently inside the mansion, or at least wholly in front of Subaru, he often saw her going around smiling, he wondered if she was acting like this on purpose. Taking into account that the two had returned together but she had only called out to Emilia, this seemed likely.

“I’m back. I’m sorry for being out—it seems like a visitor came?”

“An envoy came from the capital to see you. Right now Lord Roswaal is receiving them, would you care to join them?”

“Of course. It’s originally something that’s my problem so I can’t very well be left out of it.”

Exchanging nods with Rem, Emilia began walking up the stairs, looking back at the bewildered Subaru.”

“Aa… Um, Subaru what are you going to do? Can you return to your room on your own?”

“What am I, a child? In the first place, it’s not like you can’t bring me with y…”

Feeling her nervousness fade a little, Emilia tilted her head towards Subaru’s proposition. But the one who interrupted those words wasn't Emilia with the troubled expression,

"Sister is already present. There is no need for another servant. You understand, yes? Subaru."

"mmu…"

Refusing to say yes or no to Rem's words, his reply got garbled in throat. Responding to Subaru who was still struggling to find an objection Emilia motioned lightly with her hands,

"Since it's like that, sorry. Rem, could you guide me there?"

"Yes. Suburu, please return to your room."

Throwing out those words of apology, Emilia had already turned away from Suburu. For the Subaru who had nothing else to do Rem came in to deliver the finishing blow, Rem leading the way Emilia's silver hair swayed as she climbed the stairs and disappeared.

"Aaa, damn, this isn't fun at all."

Seeing the figures of those two disappear, abusive words mixed with a sigh escaped out of his mouth.

I'm getting left behind. —Physically and mentally.

"Well, I guess it's true that even if I was there I wouldn't be of much use with my shabby understanding of this world"

Even though it's been two weeks since he first came to the mansion (1 ½ months from his mental perspective), when you talk about what he's learned it's limited to various basic house-chores and the reading of letters. So to speak, he's on the same level as one of the village children helping out around their homes. With that level of ability getting involved with not just some meeting of aristocrats, but the decisions of a country's very top, this was beyond ambitious. Know your place.

With that, he accepted being left behind. Not that he wasn't still unhappy about it.

“And so, I guess I’ll head back to my room and begrudgingly go to sleep—or not, I’m not that obedient.”

If he was to follow Emilia’s and Rem’s viewpoint, they probably wanted him to go back to his room, sleep, and do tonight’s practice of writing down characters. Or, going with plan B, opening up one of the doors and go complaining to the mansion’s resident hikikomori-girl, not a bad option.

Not a bad option, but… he should be able to do better.

“If this is my plan, first I’ll need to go to kitchen-kitchen.”

2

“Don’t you get tired waiting out here the whole time? How about taking a short rest?”

Hearing this the old man sitting on the driver’s platform opened his eyes in surprise, looking at Subaru and then again at the tray in Subaru’s hands.

The location is once again outside the mansion, up next to the dragon-carriage parked in front of main gate. As usual he wasn’t used to the lizard’s large size, shivering a few times, he poured tea for the old man who was looking at him with a surprised and half-smiling face.

“Thank you for the trouble. This is quite unexpected, pardon me for being situated up high here.”

No sooner than he recovered from the initial shock, the old man nimbly dropped down from the coachman’s stand. With his movements there was almost no sound as he landed, Subaru faintly held his breath. The coachman’s stand was high up enough that using the phrase “jumped off” would have been appropriate. It was even higher than Subaru’s eye-level, it didn’t seem possible to jump without support unless you we’re prepared for a little numbness in your legs.

However, flipping Subaru’s assumptions on their head the old man calmly walked on, coming up to the presented tray he gave a short bow.

“I’ll avail myself to your kind offer. My throat was indeed getting a bit dry, you see.”

“Ah, no problem. I didn’t know your preference so I just brought out the most expensive tea.”

Presented with the tray, a gentle smile carved its way onto the old man’s face. Subaru watched with particular interest as the wrinkles around his mouth rose and seemingly met halfway.

His stature was taller than Subaru, his head was dyed pure white with abundant hair that showed no sign of thinning. His attire was that of a coachman, that is a formal, extremely expensive looking, black uniform. His back was straight, the muscles under his clothes showed no sign of age and one could tell at a glance they were finely toned. In summary, the person standing in front of him was one who could make others nervous whether they intended to or not.

“My ranking of this other-world’s old people has been completely repainted. Farewell, Old Man Rom. But seriously, there hasn’t been a scene where you were ever of much help.”

For the Giant tribe with seemingly excellent settings there was relatively little to show for it. Subaru wasn’t able to confirm what had happened afterwards, Old Man Rom didn’t hit his head or something and forget everything right? That was something he was a little bit afraid of.

“I’m just an old bag of bones. There’s no reason to be on edge”

For Subaru who was absentmindedly thinking that, he was abruptly called out to by a gentle voice. Taking up the cup, the old man brought it to up to his mouth before offering some words. Noticing the indiscrete stares he was receiving, the old man smiled at the hard to punish Subaru.

“This is a good flavor. This is perhaps too good a thing…”

“It’s not an over-exaggeration, this is really our most expensive tea.

If a certain pink-haired maid found out I was drinking this she'd get seriously angry."

Looking at it broadly, Ram had an unexpectedly delicate tongue and was well versed in things like tea. If she knew he had taken out one of the "absolutely forbidden" highest grade tea leaves to use on his own, that in itself would was setting himself up for quite the sermon. But then in a very Subaru-like manner,

"Without the tea leaves ever leaving the kitchen, I properly prepared the tea there and brought it out… that's one of my 'ikkyusan' reasonings, I wonder if she'll buy that"

"Hmm, quite the schemer I see"

"It's unfortunate, but I'll have to leave it completely to fate whether she'll buy this kind of sophistic reasoning"

Moreover, the betting odds were set at 7 to 1 against. Challenging that was stupid in the first place. The fact that it had so much risk was what made it worth it though, this chat over tea. The old man tilted the cup back once more and let out a sigh filled with emotions,

"So, now that you've sprinkled out this tea as bait, what did you want from these old bones?"

With one eye closed, the old man began asking with a measuring look. Shrugging his shoulders towards this sharp attitude Subaru replied,

"Well. From all the people I've ever met, you're the toughest to try this on after Roswaal"

"To be treated the same as the Margrave, it's an honor"

"That's being put in the same rank as that pervert you know? That remark is one that I'm quite willing to yell out."

His refreshing expression quickly drained from him, Subaru once more felt on the defensive. A veteran, is what he should be rightfully called, that person's life experience was much deeper and thicker than the thin Subaru, this wasn't an opponent he could cross with. This wasn't a certain giant balding old man from somewhere. Thus, all Subaru could do was to raise the white flag,

"I give up. My name is Natsuki Subaru. I'm currently apprenticing as a servant at Roswaal's mansion. At least could I request your name?"

An inexperienced person should accept they are inexperienced, and try their best to cling to the benevolence of their elders. Towards the Subaru obediently lowering his head, the old man's expression softened,

"My how polite. I am called 'Wilhelm'. I am currently serving under the Crusch house, devoting myself to the job."

In front of the old man calling himself Wilhelm, Subaru tried rolling the name once off his tongue,

"Thank you very much for telling me your name. In addition to this thanks, could you tell me the reason for today's visit… err, is it acceptable for me to tread into such matters?"

"In regards to your question, the envoy is currently inside discussing just that"

"Yes that is correct, but to be honest I've been told not to participate in that you see. And having an event proceed without me being involved at all isn't very interesting, that's to say my approach is to…"

Getting this opponent to crack his lips was no easy task, from his first impression to the conversation up till now he could understand this. But, getting quickly into the hearts of others was Subaru's specialty. His ample experience being friendless due to ignoring other people's emotions wasn't just for show.

Towards Subaru's greedy attitude Wilhelm was temporarily lost for words,

"Having you expectations go awry, don't become angry, and don't celebrate before you've succeeded, that's how it goes, in't it? After being seen through, far from becoming timid you've gotten bolder. If your opponent this time was actually an opponent though your personality would be inviting loss."

At a glance they were sharp words. However, Wilhelm's expression as he spoke them was soft. From the contents of those words, he didn't appear to care much for Subaru's attitude, but it also eluded to the tolerance he had as his elder.

If that's the case, Subaru raised his head,

"Is it still no good if you only give me an outline?"

"For me who has no idea what kind of status you hold in this mansion, I can't afford to carelessly let my words slip. Please understand."

Even towards the comparatively rude, no-boundaries Subaru, Wilhelm responded with courteousness. As for a negotiation-trick to bend such an obstinate person, Subaru had no such thing on hand.

At this pace, all he's done is take out an expensive tea and fulfilled all the conditions to make Ram angry, Subaru's outlook was getting darker.

"However, I have seen earlier that you have quite a close relationship with the queen-candidate Lady Emilia."

"Oh, oh, oh, did you see? Me and Emilia-tan having our intimate, pleasant, embarrassing, red-faced talk, did you really see?"

"'tan'……?"

Frowning at this strange way of address, Wilhelm smiled bitterly at this Subaru's self-interest attitude.

"You're walking down a severe path. She might very well be the next Queen of Lugnica you realize?"

"The current state is just an extremely lovely girl, and an unskilled servant. Because the future is limitless, if we only talk about probability then you end up not being able to move when the time counts you know? Sir Wilhelm when you got married, didn't you think of your wife as the most beautiful person in the world?"

"My wife—"

Wilhelm faltered for a moment at Subaru's extreme argument. But, quickly returned to watching Subaru intently, his pupils flashing with an emotion that could probably be called admiration.

"I see, it is exactly as you say. I too thought my wife was the most beautiful in the world. I had the feeling like everyone was looking at her. Such that I felt miserable that I maybe wasn't worthy of her."

"Right? If it's something that everyone has to deal with, then even if they think I'm unfit to be her partner I'll make her mine. I'll somehow or another work to get a social position, then I'll steadily progress towards becoming suited for her, it's a win-win, or at least that's my dream."

Lately with those kinds of feelings, Subaru had been imagining the future possibilities of his love. Even now he couldn't get his true feelings across to her, he knew this wasn't something he could accomplish through hard-work alone. So I'll do it through any means possible, is what he was thinking.

"That's why when it comes to Emilia-tan's circumstances, I want to avoid ending up in a situation where I'm not involved. Even though she's walked a long ways ahead, and before you know it a jog turns into a run—in order to catch up to her of course I have to go full sprint, and if there's a shortcut or anything else my personality's one where I'll want to use."

"You have quite an amusing way of thinking there. Truly interesting. However, even if you come to me with more requests it's a little bit troubling."

As if to turn him down Wilhelm put out his palm towards Subaru, shaking his head. To the end he hadn't crumbled against that sincere attitude, but as if humoring Subaru, "In the end I am but a mere coachman, when it comes to these affairs I am not well versed. It doesn't seem like I can be of much help to you."

"Is that right. You at least already realized who the hood-wearing Emilia-tan was, don't you think using the excuse that you're a 'simple coachman' is a little bit too extreme?"

"……"

Wilhelm looked blankly and said nothing towards Subaru's objection of disbelief. While giving a sidelong look, Subaru raised one finger,

"Well, for someone heading towards the mansion you might be able to roughly guess who they were, but to say with 100% conviction? Sir Wilhelm, you knew who Emilia-tan was instantly"

"I could very well have met Lady Emilia in the past you know?"

"If that was true Emilia-tan would have greeted you at least. It's hard to imagine that the 'eager-to-teach' Emilia-tan wouldn't introduce an acquaintance to the person standing next to her—in the first place, starting from the point you recognized the hood covered Emilia as Emilia your setting as a simple coachman has been a bit forced."

Eyes searching for an explanation, he looked at Subaru silently. "Nonono" Subaru waved his hands,

"It seems there were some very complicated spell formulas sown onto the robe Emilia was wearing, supposedly ones that had an effect of blocking recognition you know? You've either received Emilia's approval, or you are a person capable of breaking through the effects, otherwise you wouldn't have been able to perceive her as Emilia"

From the time he first met her till now she had always worn that robe. This was to avoid inviting unnecessary trouble related to her blood-line, or more accurately from being a half-elf, this was something that Subaru had grasped more-or-less. For her having the appearance of a silver haired half-elf, on the surface he could tell just how much of a harsh thing that was to bear in this world.

Unexpectedly, Wilhelm shrugged his shoulders as if he was familiar with Subaru's explanation,

"Measuring me from the first time we met… you've got a bad personality"

"I'm not calculating to that extent. When I was in the mansion making tea, I just started thinking "huh, isn't this strange?" It was purely accidently."

Nonetheless, it was still thanks to Subaru's mental fortitude that he was able to capitalize on it. All to make sure no danger ever befell Emilia. Adding in the witchbeast incident, Subaru knew painfully well just how much danger this world held. In order to keep those fangs as far away from her as possible, Subaru was trying with all his might, even if it was like trying to cool a hot stone with little drops of water. That's why he'll take everything he can get, and learn everything he can find out.

Laughing frivolously and superficially, Subaru had no intention of letting Wilhelm get away. Starting from the point he accepted his invitation for tea, this gentlemanly old man had already been dragged into Subaru's dimension.

In addition to ignoring his opponent's position and circumstances, this dimension existed only to push outcomes favorable to Subaru.

"A simple coachman, I suppose that excuse isn't going to work… It's exactly as you've guessed, I am indeed someone related to the royal selection— No, I suppose it is more accurate to say someone related to someone related."

"Someone related to someone related…"

It appeared Wilhelm had lost the debate. As the loser he was fulfilling his duty, choosing his words he slowly began to speak.

Chewing the contents, Subaru digested the meaning of the words in his head, “In short, you’re basically in the same position as me?”

“I don’t see your reasoning there, the difference between you and me, huh”

“Since you’ve got your most beautiful wife in the world then you would never think of cheating right. Well, Emilia-tan is a bit cuter in my opinion though.”

“No, my wife is surely the cutest.”

He meant it as a joke but received a firm reply, Subaru unintentionally winced. He gave a sharp look as the fake smile he had been making was slapped down by Wilhelm’s declaration,

“Unexpectedly, you get stuck on some weird things, Sir Wilhelm… You’re more playful than I thought.”

“I’d be happy if you thought of me as a young spirit in an old body.”

It was an utterance that sounded unusually seriously, but if he wanted to stick his nose any further he’d have to have patience. Subaru made his head spin trying to delve into deeper topics. In some way or another he could use this, if he could play off of his human emotions he had a feeling he could make this work somehow—

—“It seems we’re out of time”

“Huh?”

Subaru let out a stupid sounding voice. Responding to him, Wilhelm pursed his lips silently, motioning towards the direction of the mansion with his hand. Subaru turned his head looking in the direction indicated, off in the distance the entrance door of the mansion began to open,

“The person who came out is Rem… and who?”

Beyond the opened doors he could see two figures, the ever familiar blue-haired maid and an unknown person accompanying her. From the attitude of Wilhelm took this person was probably the so-called envoy that had been the topic-piece for their conversation.

“How to say it, this really is a fantasy setting”

Without thinking he blurted out his impression, probably because that person’s appearance exuded an aura that was anything but appropriate for the term ‘envoy’. The envoy, noticing Subaru had been staring at them, a mischievous smile floated to their face as they rapidly approached the dragon-carriage.

“Hey! Even if I’m a beauty staring that much at me is still rude you know.”

No sooner than the moment they stood before Subaru, a white fingertip pointed straight at him. One eye closed as they made their declaration.

I’m afraid this person is likely the envoy. A cute girl with a charming face and flaxen hair evenly cut to shoulder length. Her height was rather tall for a girl, almost the same as Subaru’s. However her figure was naturally much more delicate, one-by-one her features revealed her gorgeous femininity or would it be more accurate to say girlishness. Her flaxen hair was decorated with a white ribbon, her big eyes shone with curiosity and had an almost cat-like charm to them, and currently on her head…

“It’s finally here, a non-minor character with nekomimi”

“Nya nya?”

The same color as her hair, a pair of animal ears claiming the top of her head trembled as if responding to his murmurs.

In this world sub-species were completely natural, aside from seeing them in the capital there hadn’t been any other opportunities to interact with them, seeing the real thing up close like this was a real treat.

After all,

“I’m an appreciator of all things fluffy, there’s no way that I can’t pursue this existence in front of my eyes… dammit, quite down, my right arm…!”

Looking at it as a spectator he could imagine the sensation of the fluffy fur covered ears, just by standing in front of him her mere existence was a deadly poison for Subaru. With a desperate look he suppressed his trembling right arm, somehow managing to pull away from the girl and create some distance. She stared blankly at Subaru’s suspicious behavior.

“Huuh, am I hated? Ferris has, failed”

‘Tehehe’, showing off her tongue, she bonked her head with a fist. Subaru’s throat froze over in fright, this was a completely different kind of horror than before.

—Not only a head bonk, but sticking out her tongue + winking?!

This was a classic rarely seen even in his own former world, the overly done legendary ‘cutesy-girl’ routine. He wanted to beat up anyone who dared attempt this overly cheeky routine in person, however—

“Now that I’m in front of the real thing the destructive energy of it… it’s too much, I can’t do a thing…!”

Faced with this overwhelming cheekiness all of his willpower was taken from him, is what that meant. Also, since the one doing it was wrapped up in it they were too cute to lay a hand against, is the second meaning that layered on top of the first. The result was that Subaru had choice other than to let this pass.

Towards the location Subaru stood shivering in a very wrong way, she gave a curtesy and turned to face Wilhelm.

“I’m back Old Man Wil, sorry for making you wait outside. Were you bored?”

“No, no. This young man over here was kind enough to keep my old bones company, it was an unexpectedly fun way to pass the time.”

“Fumyuu?”

Hearing the dressed up description Wilhelm had given of our back-and-forth argument, the girl had a perked up expression. Eyes like a cat, her pupils narrowed, and her mouth warped giving off a feeling somehow like a ω shape.

“Aaaaaaa, now I get it—. I see I see, you’re the boy Emilia was talking about. I understand I understand.”

From top to bottom she looked at Subaru as if tasting him, finally clapping her hands together as if giving approval. Feeling the gaze Subaru subconsciously moved to cover himself with his hands, twisting his body as if trying to escape.

“No, stop it~. Just because I’m a boy, if you stare at me like that I’ll get embarrassed you know”

“Don’t say that, honey. You’ve got a pretty good body there, no needless meat. So much so if you weren’t already somebody’s property I’d have a taste myself.”

Going along with Subaru’s over-the-top reaction, she hit back with an equally absurd response. Normally girls would respond with a ‘kyaa’ or a giggle, having someone play along like this was a first for Subaru.

“Somehow I’ve got a strange amount of energy. I wonder if this feeling is a physiological reaction?”

Rather than feeling disgusted, Subaru’s instincts were screaming out louder now. In front of his eyes stood a teasing-eyed girl, clearly the natural enemy of the person named Natsuki Subaru. A snake against a slug. A slug against a frog. A frog against a snake. Subaru’s compatibility with this girl, he was on the weak side and she was on the strong side—this was something he could tell instinctively.

Subaru’s usual inappropriate behavior wasn’t coming out. Facing the Subaru had by now completely lost his nerve, the girl hit the accelerator to max and stepped it up even further.

Throwing her arms out She wrapped around Subaru’s neck and snuggled up next to him.

“uh, eh, eeeh?!”

“Don’t move. I’m checking something out right now.”

Since they were about the same height, her face was now right next to Subaru’s. Her voice whispering directly into Subaru’s ear, his whole body felt like it was being tickled. His face turned red from the sensation. He looked to his surroundings for help, finding Rem loitering near the mansion’s entrance he instantly turned pale.

She had on a blank face, one could see from afar she was unconcerned with what was happening. Towards the now gasping Subaru, Rem gestured her hands in a small mincing motion. It wasn’t like this gesture had any meaning in particular, but the intent was clearly conveyed to Subaru.

“I’m going to tell Lady Emilia.”

“Nooooooo”

Making a snap judgement he moved his body, somehow managing to peel away from the clinging girl. It wasn’t like he violently flung her away, more like pushing her shoulders away. Unsteady on his feet, Subaru ended up falling on his butt. In the ten or so seconds that this all happened, various emotions processed through Subaru’s head. Sitting with his feet collapsed under him and his shirt disheveled, he cried sorrowfully

“I didn’t want to, why did you… even though I only love Emilia-tan”

While feigning big crocodile tears secretly he was disappointed. With a kind touch a hand firmly grasped his shoulder. Looking up reflexively, the one behind him was Wilhelm.

“Please take this.”

Held softly in his hand was a white handkerchief. Taking it from his hands, Subaru thanked him as he struggled to his feet. This was the compassion of an adult, experiencing it in person he fought the urge to bury himself in Wilhelm’s arms.

“Because, this person already has a wife they love more than anyone else—Subaru did a dramatic reenactment of his feelings. So, can I ask you something about what just happened?”

Returning the handkerchief unused to Wilhelm, Subaru looked to the girl for an explanation for her previous behavior. Hearing these words, she bent her lips in thought.

“It was just as I had heard, inside your body it’s like the flow of water is completely stagnant. I’d do something about it, but there’s no time right now.”

Leaving behind these words, the girl ended the conversation. Not knowing the meaning of these words, Subaru threw his arms to the sky.

“Now then, let’s hurry back to our lovely Lady Crusch, Old Man Wil. If we’re away for too long there’s no knowing what she’ll do.”

“It is as you say.”

Agreeing with her proposal, Wilhelm abided with few words. Offering Subaru one last bow, he picked up a now empty cup on the ground and returned it to the tray.

“Thank you for the treat. Subaru-dono, may you be in good health.”

Climbing up to the coachman’s stand in a flash, Wilhelm held the lizard’s reigns in his hand. Towards Subaru, who was staring speechlessly at this feat, the girl held her hands together as if praying.

“So then, we haven’t really time for introductions but we’re busy so sorry.

”

Leaving behind a wink, she turned her body towards the dragon-carriage. Reaching his hand out towards her back, he put a voice to the numerous unresolved questions racing through his head.

“Please wait. I have so many questions to ask you…”

“I think it’s fine if you go ask Emilia honestly. Well then, may our fates meet again. Byyye.”

Cutting down his question in a single chop, she disappeared into the carriage with a smile. Understanding he’d been completely swept up by their pace, Subaru’s hand dropped in frustration. Wilhelm said his goodbyes and the carriage set off along with the lizard’s neigh.

The frame creaked as the wheels began to turn. Every time the lizard stepped forward powerful marks remained in the ground, gaining speed quickly.

With the wheels moving forward, the frame began to move. The carriage picked up speed quickly as it traveled over the road, kicking up a cloud of dust it faded into the distance.

In the end all that was left was the completely defeated Subaru, and the lingering scent of the high-class tea.

3

Off in the distance, in the carriage heading out from the Roswaal mansion.

“Were you able to fulfill your duty as an envoy?”

“Of course. It was something that Lady Crusch asked Ferris to do, it’s impossible that I’d fail. Old Man Wil you’re such a worry-wart.”

The two exchanged conversation between the carriage and coachman’s stand. Sitting on the stand, Wilhelm handled the Lizard easily. Behind him, the flaxen-haired girl hung her head out from the private room’s window. Although they were going very fast, having the divine protection of wind there was not even a hint of wind and they could continue their conversation like this without interruption. In a certain sense there was no better situation than this to hold a private conversation.

Wilhelm smiled bitterly at her reply,

“an unnecessary concern is it?”

“Leaving that aside”, she added.

“I’m was sure surprised to see you talking with that boy when I came out, you hate talking with others right?”

“That’s a horrible misunderstanding.”

Having her words denied immediately, “aaa, that’s not what I meant” she waived her hands.

“That’s right, sorry sorry. It wasn’t that you didn’t like talking, it was that you liked killing more.”

“…That’s another horrible misunderstanding.”

Towards the girls banter, Wilhelm used the same words. Seeing such a flat response to her provocations, the girl’s mouth tapered into a displeased expression.

“Soo boring. Is talking with Ferris so much more boring than with that boy? Did he catch your eye?”

Her voice was like a child pouting when their parent won’t give them attention. Trying to draw out something more than muddled reaction from Wilhelm, she climbed further out the window towards him.

“I didn’t feel anything special about him, did something about him resonate with Old Man Wil? Like maybe unlike his looks he’s actually incredibly strong, or maybe he’s got some incredible talent?”

“No. My evaluation of him is not so different from yours. He’s an amateur, an amateur who hasn’t even starting to grow hair yet. He has no special talents either. It’s undeniable that he is an average existence.”

“Then why? Trash like that, wasn’t that what you hated the most in this world?”

The girl dressed Subaru up as an unredeemable person. Without even making a frown, Wilhelm quietly lifted his hand and pointed to his eye.

“His eyes”

“—eyes?”

Hearing her voice he sat in a pondering looking, pulling on his chin.

“That boy’s eyes, they caught my interest is all. They were the eyes of someone who’s faced near-death many times. There are many who have returned from the brink of death. However…”

Cutting off his words, Wilhelm closed his eyes.

“Coming back from the brink of death, not just once, but multiple times. I don’t know of any existence like that. It’s for that reason, that he’s caught my attention.”

“Hmmmph, I don’t get it”

Wilhelm’s words mixed with admiration were easily cut in half. Wilhelm was frowning for real this time as she continued on.

“Aside from what you just said Old Man Wil, that boy won’t be walking an easy road.”

Her eyes narrowed as if she had thought of something again, staring at the broad back sitting on the coachman’s stand.

“Catching the interest of the ‘Sword-Devil’ Wilhelm van Astrea, that’s as misfortunate as being obsessed over by the witch.”

Chapter 3:
Planning a Trip to the Capital

1

“You’re going to the capital right? Let me! I want to go too!!”

After the guests left, those in the parlor room all let out a collective sigh, the room slowly settling into a relaxed mood—with a single statement it was brilliantly smashed to pieces by Subaru.

Bursting through the door without notice, carrying a tray with tea on it over to the table. As they stared at him, mouths open, he handed the two main actors each a cup. “Hoi, Hoi”

“Everyone remember to bring some food, snacks are limited to 300 yen, and don’t stay up late even if you’re excited to leave.”

Assuming his fellow travelers were that excited, that is. Receiving a cup, Emilia and Roswaal met each other’s gaze.

“See?”

“…It appears so.”

Roswaal raising one eyebrow in a self-satisfied manner, his remark piled onto the already worn-out looking Emilia’s expression. Not pleased with only those two being in on something,

“what are you two talking about?”

Subaru twisted each syllable expressing his displeasure.

“Stop seeing eye to eye with each other, Jealousy! Please mix me in, we can sing a lullaby together”

“In the first place, about going to the capital who even told yo… it was me wasn’t it…”

As if she was embarrassed by her own words, Emilia hid her face with her palms shaking her head back and forth. Facing Subaru again, she started off lecturing with a “listen you know”,

“We’re not going there for fun. We were called out on very important business… really, very important”

“I already know that. Royal selection right? I already know that it’s a big event that’ll shake the country. Howeeever, even so please. Please take me.”

Subaru wrung his hands, on the carpet begging on his knees. Emilia had no idea how to respond to this kind of plea, her eyes scanned the room looking for help.

“What’s wrong? Ah~, please take no miiind of meee, it is fine if you chooooose as your heart wills.”

Declaring his status as a spectator Roswaal looked on with a smiling face,

“This tea’s fragrance… could it be Ram’s treasured… No, even for him that’s too… but, for Barusu that’s something he might just…”

It couldn’t be helped, this was the state they were in after realizing what type of tea had just been carried in by a certain someone. Especially so for the last person,

“It’s fine isn’t it, he’s so reared up to go that he made it and brought it up here. One of Subaru’s acquaintances is in the capital too it seems, in the first place we only carried him here because of his injuries. We should bring him along to give him some peace of mind.”

This, if it’s this… it was the most ordinary response you could expect, but from Subaru’s perspective it was the perfect follow-up.

“Yessss, Nice assist. Rem, Rem, Remmm, come here Rem.”

“Yes!”

Responding to Subaru’s beckoning with a smile she slid over next to where Subaru was sitting on the carpet, acting as if it was completely natural she presented her head, careful not mess up her blue hair he pet her head while showering her in praise.

Seeing Rem's elated reaction and demeanor Emilia's interest was piqued, "Aa, that might be kind of nice…" lifting her head a little bit in curiosity,

"Wait, in the first place Subaru if you come with us what are you even going to do? It's true that this has to do with the royal selection, this isn't really something that you have any connection with…"

"If going to cry from loneliness over here if you say something like it doesn't involve me. Emilia-tan becoming a king… queen. I'm fine if it's only a minor role, this is a critical moment that I want to be involved in. That's why I'll do anything in my capabilities to help."

"It's precisely because of that that I'm telling you, you can't come."

Scrunching her eyebrows together Emilia responded to Subaru, whose eyes were now filled to the brim with motivation. She was happy that he felt this way, but he had already done so much to help her. On top of saving her life, he had just nearly died a few days ago trying to saving a many number of people. Subaru had no idea how much gratitude she felt towards him. To ask anything further from him would be beyond spoiled.

"If I bring you along I already know you're going to do something unreasonable again. I don't want that, understand?"

"Emilia-tan's the one that doesn't understand. I hate doing unreasonable, impossible, and reckless things more than anything else, that's why I'll never do anything more than what I can handle."

Sitting on his knees, Subaru crossed his arms and puffed out his chest, suddenly taking on a much bolder attitude. "But,"

"If it's something within reach, that's a different story. Especially so when it comes to things related to Emilia. So, please understand."

"That's… I don't know."

Emilia didn't know why he was being so stubborn. Emilia wanted to let Subaru rest since he'd been through so many painful and difficult episodes recently. Why is he still pushing his body when he's not even recovered yet, doing something so unreasonable like this isn't funny. He always joking around he couldn't actually be serious about this could he?

Her thoughts sank into a sea of confusion as he looked at her with puppy-dog eyes. The parlor room falling into silence,

"Ooooookay, let's stop heeeeeere"

Clapping his hands together Roswaal shattered the mood in the room. Looking at the two's back-and-forth with some emotion,

"Siiiince you can't seem to an agreement, how about you leave settling this matter to meeeeee. Subaru you're coming with us to the capital. This is an order as your employer."

"Roswaal?!"

"Yesss! You sure know how to talk, Roz-chi!"

Roswaal ignored the reluctant Emilia's objections. While Emilia wore her surprise on her face, Subaru energetically responded with a thumbs up.

However, Roswaal seeing their reactions he continued, "Tsk Tsk Tsk" he waved his finger,

"Oooooon the contrary, Subaru coming with us to the capital is oooonly for his medical treatment. And so forth, the royal selection is a completely different matter. Are we at an agreement?"

"Medical treatment…?"

Hearing Roswaal's words he tilted his head in skepticism. Not getting his meaning, with his head still crooked he tried to stand—sitting on his legs too long they'd become numb, causing him to fall forward in a magnificent manner. Acting swiftly the nearby Rem stopped his fall, yanking him by his shirt's collar like a cat by the neck.

“Gueee! …Nice assist, Rem. But do it a little bit softer next time.”

“Umu, does this mean we’re done with the petting…”

Disheartened, Rem returned to her spot behind Subaru while he rubbed his aching throat. Turning once more towards Roswaal he questioned his last statement.

“What do you mean by ‘medical treatment’ purposes? I’m just gonna say this, but other than some leftover scars I’m completely fine you know? I’ll admit there are probably a few areas I could use some rehabilitation on though.”

Swinging his arms ‘round in a circle Subaru emphasized his body’s good health. However Emilia and everyone from the mansion knew apart from what claimed, his body was far from healed. On top of witnessing him struggle with just daily life there were a number of other points that popped up, his job, and the morning radio-calisthenics for instance. The fact that they knew the person in question was trying to hide it dug in like a spur, making them pity him even more.

Like this everyone had an unspoken agreement on the subject regarding the poor condition of Subaru’s body. Towards the totally oblivious Subaru, Roswaal shook his head. “No, no”,

“Hiding it is nooo good. Everyone is already aware that you still have after-effects. You were beat up to such an extent. Getting bitten by Juggernaut’s fangs, having a curse carved into your body —this has all caused the circulation of mana in your body to become abnormally bad. It’s completely muddled.”

“Even if you say my condition’s bad because of some invisible thing…”

“Subaru. The mana that fills your body is your very life itself. For it to stagnate means the circulation of your life energy is being impeded. I’m begging you, listen to this properly.”

Becoming obstinate after having his poor health seen through, Emilia scolded him for not taking this seriously. Her feeling conveyed, Subaru gave a small apology.

“I know my body’s in a pinch right now. But, how is going to the capital connected with getting treatment?”

“Treatment for your body requires an expert on liquid mana. Subaru, did you perhaps meet with the envoy earlier?”

“The tall cat-eared girl? To be honest I’m not good with those types.”

“That person is regarded in the capital as quite an excellent user of liquid mana.”

Subaru’s face plainly formed into a scowl at Roswaal’s words. Silently, Emilia was also in agreement that she was a tough person to deal with. How that person could see through him and had a personality like she was speaking in riddles was something he couldn’t handle well at all.

Using the pretext of passing along the invitation to the capital, he was forced into a lot of other things that he’d rather not talk about. Most of all,

“Emilia went out of her way to put her in our debt, all for the purpose of creating an opportunity for you to be healed. You should accept Emilia’s goodwill, don’t you think so?”

“Wha…?”

“Hey, Roswaal! That’s…”

Clearly displeased at Roswaal’s careless, or more-likely premeditated slip-of-the tongue, Emilia drew closer. Brushing off her angry voice Roswaal continued on with a calm face,

“Those two don’t alooong the best. Hooowever, there was still the issue with Subaru’s body. Gallantly she plead, and soooomehow or another was able to draw out an agreement for your treatment. Such a loveable person right?”

“RO—S—WA—AL!”

Having these hidden circumstances exposed, she emphasized every syllable through gritted teeth. Her silver hair swaying with anger, the blood rising to her face in anger and embarrassment. Losing herself in rage, mana gathered furiously around her, thinking she'd smash it right into his blue-haired head.

"Emilia-tan, is that really true?"

Disrupting the mood. Subaru interjected, trying to ascertain whether this was true or not. Emilia looked at him with a sorry expression.

"Because… it's my fault your body can't recover. And the reason you came to this mansion in the first place was because you tried to protect me, and with the witchbeast forest incident too, if I had acted then none of this would have happened to you. That is… this is a bit of repayment for all that you've done, it's proper compensation for what happened to you."

"Emilia-tan, your way of talking is too stiff. It feels like you're trying to run a business or something."

Subaru threw in a retort at Emilia's quick-talking self-excuse. "Anyways!" Emilia said strongly.

"You try really hard, that's why you deserve something back for it. Otherwise, how would I be able to meet you on equal ground? Every morning, whenever I look at you I feel this weird sense of guilt, if you think about it that way then this is for my sake too."

"It's been a while since I've seen this pattern, you were thinking about me every morning?!"

"I wasn't! I'm still thankful though!"

This was already getting out of hand. No matter what she did, she was bad at expressing her personal thoughts to others. Subaru was probably surprised too. Nervously, she looked at his face. Sure enough a bitter smile was floating to his face.

However, crossing his arms.

“Haha, so you were in favor of me going to the capital all along. Why didn’t you just say so in the first place?”

“Because when you think you’ve gotten everything you wanted like this, you get so full of yourself. I know you’re like a naughty brat.”

“Naughty brat… that’s not a phrase you hear much nowadays”

Subaru murmured softly, Emilia sticking her tongue out in kind. Subaru was entranced by it, even if it was done as a form of retaliation. With that exchange, any enmity there might have been was now in the past.

“Well then, let’s wrap up this conversation shaaaaaall we? Subaru will accompany us to the capital. Tomorrow we attend to the various preparations needed, depart the morning after. Is thiiis fine?”

“I understand”

“No objections.”

““Affirmative, Lord Roswaal””

Everyone in the room consented to Roswaal’s closing words. And like this, the plans for the trip to the capital were settled.

2

Planning for Subaru to accompany them to the capital, departure was decided as the day after tomorrow. Even though they had such a hurried schedule, the servants still had to go about performing the daily chores around the manor. Of course that included Subaru too, who as a servant-apprentice still in rehabilitation was assigned to simple jobs like tidying up the parlor room.

“When it comes down to it, is Ram going to be the one left to take care of the mansion?”

While straightening out his shirt Subaru addressed Ram behind him. Ram gave a nod as if it were annoying. Under the pretext of supervising Subaru’s work she was currently doing nothing.

“Yes. We can’t leave the mansion completely vacant. Normally Rem would stay behind, but this time she said she wanted to go, so I allowed it.”

Faced with her younger sister’s request she wavered slightly. I’m starting to get a grasp of Ram as someone who’s sweet to her sister. Even though she’s going to be away from her dear Roswaal, she didn’t seem too phased.

“Somehow, you look kind of happy about it.”

“Happy… that may be so. She always tries her best to fulfill requests given to her by others, I’m just happy that she has something that she wants for herself.”

The one thinking regretfully of Rem’s personality wasn’t just Subaru, her twin sister Ram who was with her since birth was the same. ‘I want to do something about it her personality’ was something Subaru had thought many times about. In that way, Ram and Subaru were of the same mind regarding Rem.

With those thoughts in mind Ram faced Subaru with a sharp look,

“That the catalyst had to be this man of all people… is the only part that bothers me.”

“I’m tired of hearing that, the fact that I’m the one that moved Rem’s heart won’t disappear! Hahaha, be vexed by it!”

“fula”

“uwaou?!”

With a single incantation a sudden gust encompassed him, pressed by wind Subaru’s body was flung to the bed. Like that the shirt he had just finished straightening out was disheveled with the landing, covered in white cloth he enjoyed the soft sensation of the bed as if he was floating.

“You! Magic is off-limits! You lose with words so you retaliate with magic, your personality is really bad.”

“That wasn’t retaliation. I was only venting the negative emotions that were building up in my stomach at Barusu.”

“That’s called retaliating against someone! An outburst of anger!”

Saying this to the shifty eyed Ram, Subaru quickly got off the bed and started tidying the sheets back up.

Even though my body’s not back to its regular condition, the nimbleness of my fingers was without change. The tidy white sheets were beautiful enough to captivate even me.

“In any case, Rem’s really multi-talented… in addition to being the coachman, handling the belongings, guard-duty, guide…… I don’t even have words to describe it.”

“You’re missing ‘Subaru’ duty, Rem named it that herself recently.”

“I don’t recognize that one by the way.”

Well, I sort have been getting taken care of a lot so I won’t deny that one too strongly. In any case, now is the all-important time for departure for four inhabitants of the Roswaal mansion. There was the main-involved party Emilia and her patron Roswaal. There was Subaru who plucked his ticket by throwing a tantrum. And the one in charge of taking care of these three was the final person, Rem.

Then there were the leftovers, Ram and Beatrice.

“Thinking about this again… those two were an extremely worrying group to be left alone house-sitting. Is this really going to be all right?”

“Relax. Oni won’t die even without food and water for three days.”

“You’re not even planning to cook for yourself?!”

Subaru was floored by the shamelessly pronounced abandonment of all cooking duties.

“Well you aside, what are you planning to do about Beako? I can already imagine her coming out of her room and making a fuss like ‘what is the meaning of this-ukiiii!’ when she sees that dinners not made.”

“I can already imagine her reaction, without a doubt she’d send me flying. If only Lady Beatrice went along with you guys…”

“You’re the caretaker, don’t suddenly expose that doing your job is a pain! At least make her a steamed potato or something! If you switch it up between salt and mayonnaise you’d be able to hold for three days at least. Probably. In the worst case scenario you could just resort to eating the mayonnaise directly.”

Looking as if he actually thought this was a better proposal, Subaru’s abnormal love for mayonnaise was clearly felt. Ram raising no particular objections, made a face like she was actually going to go through with this idea.

Unbeknownst to Beatrice, a tragic meal plan had been decided for her.

Subaru waived his hand, ‘nonono’

“If we’re having these many issues with just food, what are we going to do about the other stuff? Can you really clean the mansion properly?”

“What a foolish question Barusu. Rather than cooking, cleaning is my specialty.”

“Even with your specialty you’re worse than Rem! You really are only an older sister!”

“Oh well. Then, that’s all.”

Even though nothing in particular had been decided, Ram looked at Subaru with a face full of accomplishment. Seeing this troubling attitude, Subaru scratched his face

“So, in the end what are you going to do about work?”

“In exchange for indulging Rem’s wish to go to the capital, I laid out some conditions.”

“Let’s hear ‘em”

“They’re quite simple. Once she returns I’ll have her work for a single day for as much time as she can spare.”

Hearing Ram’s words Subaru was completely at a loss, looking at Ram with suspicious eyes. Ram responded with a shameless expression,

“They’ll all learn, this is what it means to leave the mansion in my care.”

Far beyond his expectations, such a bold abandonment of job duties was new even to Subaru.

This good-for-nothing’s refreshing declaration had forced even the hikikomori-disposed Subaru to resolve himself to help Rem out with this one.

Chapter 4:
A Trip's Departure, Many Difficulties Lay Ahead

The morning after his worrying heart-to-heart with Ram, all the members gathered in front of the Mansion's front gate, among them Subaru burst out in a loud voice irrespective of the mood.

"Hwaaa, it's this guy!"

Subaru cried out in joy. Before the energized Subaru's eyes was a majestic steed carrying an air of composure. Green hard skin, a body big enough that one had to strain their neck, a pair of sharp yellow eyes, he'd witnessed them many times but hadn't been blessed with many opportunities to come so close to them like this. Giant lizards, that is.

Magnificently enshrined in front of the Roswaal mansion gates was their guide inviting Subaru and the others down the road to the capital, a dragon-carriage pulled by an ground dragon.

"Big body! Tough skin! Scary face!"

A huge creature, or could it even limited to a creature? In front of this gigantic being he could feel his spirits rising, this is a feeling all boys would understand. Naturally Subaru as well, simply because of it being 'gigantic' he was already madly in love and his mood was set full throttle despite it being so early in the morning. Jumping all around the lizard, his excitement was plain for all to see.

"He's such a kid, fooling around like that."

Watching this scene bewildered, Emilia let out a long sigh. Shrugging her shoulders as if she was seeking some form of consent from the nearby Rem.

"Subaru… is so cute. Don't you think so as well Emilia-sama?" Rem said, trying to hold herself back.

"It's cute, yeah it's cute, I think so too… it seems like Subaru's been quite a bad influence on you Rem.”

Watching Subaru mess run around so energetically, Emilia and Rem let out a long sigh.

Ignorant of the impressions exchanged behind him, Subaru reached out and patted the ground dragon without restraint, letting out a strange voice

“Oh my god, I’m so moved! Super-fantasy! If only I had a digital camera, I so want to take a picture! How about titling it, ‘Dragon crawling around on the ground, and me’…”

Starting to lose himself in high spirits, his way of patting the lizard had quickly moved from touching to attacking, the Lizard was the one to lose its patience first.

Specifically…

“Dostoyevsky?!”

““Aaaaaaaa””

The lizard turned around roaring coiling its tail like a whip and slamming it full strength onto Subaru’s shoulder. His body was swept away in a blur, Subaru was sent flying fast enough it seemed like it would create after-images. Like a ragdoll Subaru flew off to the side of the gate, landing head first into the soft branches of a thicket. After a brief moment of silence he began working his way out somehow,

“Wh-What’s the meaning of this?”

“Subaru. Ground dragons are very smart creatures, even if they can’t understand words they can understand your intent. That’s why you have to be sure to treat them with respect.”

“Say that sooner! I saw what was on the other side and there was a mayonnaise bath waiting for me.”

After coming to this new world, the number of times I’m brought to the brink of death never ends. Just when I thought I could spend the day quietly, this had to happen.

While rotating the shoulder that got hit, Subaru struggled to pull his last foot from the thicket and return back to the gate. Glancing at the lizard nervously, its yellow eyes narrowed as if to say “this is what you get for touching me so carelessly”, exhaling strongly through its nose.

Even if he was used to the humans here treating him like this, having some animal in a backwater region show this kind of attitude was something in itself.

“From now on I’ll pay a little bit more attention to my way of speaking, and my attitude, and my actions, and my usual habits…”

“That’s a lot of things to reflect on isn’t it? But, I guess that’s something very like you Subaru.”

“Is this something, something you like Emilia-tan?”

“I think you should learn to choose the person, place, and timing better.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” obediently raising his hand and obliging.

“Good.”

Emilia put her hands on her hips and laughed. Like this, the door to the mansion opened abruptly. Those who came out were Roswaal and Ram, who were both running a bit late from the designated meeting time. Subaru tapped his finger lightly on his wrist-watchless wrist,

“Oi oi oi, what are you doing running late? Roswaal, weren’t you the one who set a meeting time in the first place? A guy who’s loose with time is loose with a whole lot more, right, Rem?”

“That’s right, yes! Even though Subaru was oversleeping and wouldn’t have made it in time if not for Rem. I don’t mind if you praise me.”

“Alright alright alright, be quite for a bit Rem.”

Subaru brushed Rem's hair to keep her from letting out any more unnecessary words slip. Emilia's white eyes piercing through him, Subaru rushed to explain himself in a panic.

"It's not like that! I have reasons! Reasons bluer than the seas, and greener than the mountains!"

"I bet you've got some pretty green excuses too huh… let's hear it."

"I was so excited I couldn't sleep!"

"You're such a kid."

Looking like she's given up, Emilia dropped her shoulders. From her forfeiting this round, Subaru managed to get away unscathed. Hoping to avoid any further line of questioning Subaru once again pointed the conversation back at Roswaal like a spear."

"So, what do you say? Why were you two late? Weren't we all gathered like usual at breakfast? And Rem essentially dealt with all the luggage."

"Sorry, sorry, iiiisn't it fine? After all, Ram's staying to take care of the mansion so we won't be able to see her for a while right? Thaaat's why we were having a bit of a thorough farewell."

Waving his finger, Roswaal straightened his collar while trying to explain himself. Next to him, Ram was hurriedly trying to fix her hair. Just from looking at this a fresh new meaning could be understood.

"OK, I take that back! Let's pretend I didn't ask, and we'll look the other way. 1st, me. 2nd, Emilia-tan. 3rd, Rem. …And also Roz-chi."

"How am I an 'also'? The dragon-carriage is my perrrrsonal property you know."

Laughing softly, Roswaal reached out his hand and touched the chin of the hard-to-please lizard. Subaru shrugged his shoulders instinctively, imagining Roswaal get sent flying he found was extremely funny, but his faint hopes were soon dashed. Far from flinging Roswaal, it snuggled its snout up next to him. Almost like a horse and owner, it showed an expression of deep affection.

“Somehow, I can’t really accept this.”

“That’s because it’s a dragon Lord Roswaal raised, being held by him is only natural right? You were wrong for thoughtlessly and recklessly provoking it.”

“Keeping a dragon, that’s an amazing impression… wait, where were you even watching from to see my embarrassing display?”

“Ah, did it actually happen?”

Ram confessed she was just speaking randomly, Subaru felt embarrassed. Pointing a finger at his face, she let out a disagreeable snort from her nose.

“You have leaves stuck to you all over your head and body. What’s worse, you have dirt marks too… I don’t want you getting the inside of the carriage dirty.”

“Even though you aren’t the one that cleans it…”

“You’ll be riding together with Lord Roswaal. Preventing nuisances is a servant’s job isn’t it? Speaking of nuisances, where Barusu is concerned it’s only… natural, it’s Barusu after all.”

“Don’t use my name like I’m some bad word, I’m seriously gonna cry.”

In an embarrassing display Subaru flailed his arms and legs about, rolling around on the ground like a spoiled kid. Of course, when it comes to Ram this had the chance of backfiring and incurring even more scorn and ridicule.

In the time they had spoken, Rem had rapidly piled up the luggage onto the dragon-carriage. Reaching the end of their friendly chat, the mood shifted towards setting up for departure. Among the various voices calling out to the left-behind Ram, a single thought popped into Subaru’s mind.

“Speaking of it, I guess Beako won’t come to see us off.”

‘A heartless loli-character’, was what Subaru thought of the cream-haired girl. Of course he had expected that something like this would happen, they had made fun of her so much yesterday. It was just a little bit lonely for her to not be there at the scene of their departure. Now would be a good time to make an appearance, Subaru’s expression soured as he glared at the mansion.

“Oooooooo”

The door was opened just barely, just a smidge, in the shadow a dress wearing character peeked out glancing stealthily over in this direction, their gazes meeting briefly.

Realizing she had been spotted she faltered for a moment before resolving herself boldly. Nevertheless, still hiding in the shadow of the door, she resumed her sneaking mission. Towards this obstinate girl Subaru smiled bitterly, putting his hand in the air,

“If I return safely, I have something I definitely want to tell you”

Or so, that was the kind of thought he put into the gesture. Facing this the girl wore an apathetic expression, sluggishly waving her hand in a shooing motion as if to drive him away. With that, she closed the door as if she had completed her task of seeing them off.

“Subaru? What’s wrong?”

Turning around, Emilia was leaning out from the dragon-carriage’s guest room. Without him noticing it seems they had already started to board, Subaru was the only one left still standing on the ground. Panicked, he reached out for the guest room door.

“Here.”

Before he could touch the handle, white fingertips reached out towards his. He hesitated for only a moment, taking the hand. With a strength not matching with the slenderness of the wrist, Subaru was pulled up to guest room.

Confirming that Subaru had boarded, Rem gave a single nod to the left-behind Ram. Words weren’t necessary between twins, with just that action their thoughts had been conveyed. Rem pulled the reigns and the earth dragon complied, pulling its feet forward.

As the frame creaked and Subaru could feel it move he turned to the window. Sticking only his head out, he turned to Ram who was facing them.

“W-Well, see you later! Take care you two!”

“Barusu too, if anything happens try to become a meat shield at least. You have talent as a decoy, ehe, that’s the only recognition I’ll give you.”

“Surely I have some better parts?!”

Before she completely disappeared into the distance Ram pinched the edge of her skirt, giving a small curtsy. Entirely silent, she lowered her head. Just like an exemplary maid she saw Subaru and the others off.

“If only she was as proficient at doing her job she’d be perfect.”

As they reached the slightly beveled main road Ram’s figure completely disappeared. Confirming this, Subaru lowered himself into one of the guest room’s seats with a great sigh. And, somehow or another the feeling of his first carriage ride stirred in him. The feel of the seats in the guest room had some good and bad parts, but as for the overall feeling of traveling in a carriage it was a rather pleasant.

As for his true thoughts, this highway couldn’t have been particularly well maintained. His former world hadn’t developed the type of wheels used on the dragon-carriage, the tremors that he had expected to be present in the carriage were far weaker than he expected. So much so that honestly, the feel of riding in a vehicles from his former world wasn’t any better.

“You seem quite currrrious about the dragon-carriage.”

“Should I call it unusual, or should I say fresh astonishment, everything’s a first so it’s like this. I’ll be a little noisy but cut me some slack.”

He responded to Roswaal's question while his seat jarred, he could feel the vibrations from the bottom of the frame travel up his legs. He couldn't tell if the carriage was going at a leisure pace, but looking out from the window the speed at which scenery passed by was anything but relaxed. Measuring it by eye the carriage had to be going close to 100 km/hr, that it could match up cars to this extent was shocking.

If it's like this… Rem being outside alone on the coachman's stand worried him.

"Hey, we're going so fast yet the coachman's stand is completely exposed to the wind, is this really OK? Like getting thrown off or something, well, it's Rem so I don't think we have to worry about that in particular… but won't her hair and clothes be a mess by the time we get to the capital?"

"You don't need worry, the dragon-carriage has a Divine Protection."

Responding to Subaru's overly dull question, Emilia responded with an inquisitive look.

"Divine protection?", Subaru tilted his head at her reply.

"Somehow that's a word that's been buzzing around lately. It hasn't come up as often as stuff like mana so I never got the chance to ask. So, what's this divine protection thing anyway?"

"Divine protection is divine protection. It's something you're blessed with when you're born, wait… do you really not know this?"

Pointing both hands towards Emilia, Subaru rocked his body back and forth. "Nope," Subaru declared his ignorance with a bright smile.

Emilia massaged her brow lightly with her fingers,

"Divine protection is like I said, a blessing brought about by this world. There are a lot of different divine protections so I can't say this definitively, but there are species that have specific divine protections given to them. The Ground dragon's 'protection from wind' is one of those."

"When you say 'protection from wind'…"

"When ground dragons run across the ground they don't get affected by the wind. On top of that, the blessings' effect is also passed on to the carriage they are pulling. That's why this guest room isn't getting affected at all by the wind."

"Then it's the same for Rem outside too, huh"

Subaru nodded in consent, digesting the information Emilia had just told him. Towards Emilia who was smiling as if to say, "very good!" he sent a wink as thanks. Mulling over everything he had just learned about divine protections.

Felt was abnormally quick on her feet so she must have the divine protection from wind. And Reinhard who demonstrated his offensive and defensive powers at the loot house had divine protection from arrows. I see, so there are a whole bunch of ones.

Which means…

"What about me, what about me? Heey, Emilia-tan. Do I have something like divine protection?"

Divine protection bestowed upon them by birth, this was it, this was the moment Subaru had been waiting for since he had been summoned to this world. It couldn't be a cheat ability could it? The activation conditions for Reinheard's and the ground-dragons' divine protection was rather limited. If so, there was a possibility that his own blessing had its own conditions and just hadn't been activated yet. His expectations boiled up, as he looked at her with expecting eyes.

"It's hard to tell, the number of people born without divine blessings is way higher than those with it though. And for people who do have them, it doesn't matter who it is, they should all be aware if they have it…"

Her words fading out… she looked at him apologetically.

Unexpectedly though, Subaru understood what she meant from that, the tower of hope he had just built came crashing down. It was a dim hope, his face bent in self-derision.

“Yeah, it’s fine. It was too much of a luxury to ask for. After all, I’ve gotten something even more valuable from this place. The miracle of meeting you Emilia-tan, that’s more of a blessing than any sort of divine protection.”

“Yes yes. We’ll get to the capital in another four hours, so just behave yourself till then.”

“Emilia-tan, so cold! But, I’m slightly mortified that even this type of response makes me happy…”

From spending time with Emilia-tan like this, Subaru was in the process of acquiring some pretty strange preferences. Sitting to the side, Roswaal and Emilia were now discussing their plans once they arrived in the capital, Subaru sat quietly and observed, behaving himself like he had been told.

In contrast to its showy appearance, the inside of the carriage was rather small. It was like what you’d see in a movie, something like what a rich person would ride in, a snug compartment that seated four people. The seats were made of quite the high class materials gathered from exotic lands, so his butt getting sore from sitting a few hours wasn’t a worry. On the other hand, the inside was quite cramped, the composure that Subaru had just established was starting to wear.

“Emilia-tan, Emilia-tan, can I sit near the window?”

“What’s wrong? Ah, did you get sick from the vibrations? It happens a lot to people who aren’t used to riding in carriages. I’ve got, I’ll lend you Puck.”

“The thought makes me happy, but it’s a little different. And wait a minute, how is giving me Puck even related with me getting sick? Would I use him as a vomit bag?”

“If you did that to him even Puck would get angry…”

The time was still early morning, raising this type of topic before the cat-type spirit had even woken up, Subaru felt shivers down his spine imagining such a laid-back character like Puck get angry.

After that Emilia sighed, looking at Subaru again.

“If it’s not that then what is it?”

“Because~, Emilia-tan and Roz-chi are so busy talking with each other. I’m lonely from not being talked to, and going back to sleep a second time is annoying, so I wanted to pass the time looking at the scenery or something.”

“Aa, sorry. I didn’t notice. Then, here.”

Emilia started moving to his request, in the small carriage the two changed seats. Since she was sitting next to him in the first place, when she started to change seats he felt contact all over his body, with a smug face he enjoyed this side-benefit. With this they successfully changed seats.

“Alright then, properly behave yourself this time. Understand?”

“Mm. I’ll be enjoying this indirect warmth from where you were sitting.”

“I don’t really know what you mean but it sounds reeeally disgusting, so keep it in moderation.”

Saying this, she looked several times worriedly at Subaru wiggling his butt in the seat, finally resuming her discussion with Roswaal. Seeing her smiles and gestures, Subaru turned his gaze out the window he had secured for himself. From the small window affixed above the exit/entrance door he could see they were still going extremely fast, the scenery streaming by. From the angle he was looking out from a large portion of the view was blue-sky, he couldn’t see any tall trees anymore so it seems they’ve already left the forest around the Roswaal mansion, he thought to himself.

“Now that you mention it, I don’t really know how far it is between the mansion and the capital…”

Emilia had said it'd be around four hours, considering it for a bit, without knowing exactly how fast this dragon-carriage was traveling there were too many unknowns, he could only make guesses. Lifting his waist from the seat, he pressed his face to the window. Seeing the scenery zoom by they could be going faster than he had initially thought. Irrespective of them flying down a poorly maintained highway, no tremors were transmitted up inside the carriage, it was a puzzle among puzzles.

"Attributing this to 'divine protection is amazing' he was able to accept it absentmindedly… a speed worthy of a lizard. From the feel of it, it's probably around 100 km/hr?"

The speed of the passing scenery, it certainly didn't seem inferior to what he remembered passing by from inside a car on the freeway. If it could keep up this speed continuously, it's no wonder the dragon-carriages were in such wide use. Each lizard probably differed a bit based on its care and food, a metal car was mostly the same in that regard. Whichever one was more convenient would be up to personal taste.

"As for me, I'm not much of a fan of machines, I'm a pitiful boy who gets revved up when I see giant animals."

He wanted to declare the dragon-carriage the winner based on personal preference. After weighing the merits of the dragon-carriage and automobile Subaru glanced around, "well then." Even if I stay here the carriage won't get any faster so it's a waste of time. Putting his hand out onto the door, he knocked. The two stopped their conversation and looked at him.

"I want to go where Rem is, I get the feeling that it's OK to open this door?"

"You sure say some interesssssting things, Subaru. Because of the blessing, everything connected to the carriage won't be affected by the wind. It's notttt a difficult thing to climb up the frame of the wagon to get to where Rem is, but if you fall you'll die you know?"

"Oi oi, Roz-chi, don't underestimate my athleticism. If you put together all the high-schoolers from the go-home-club and tested them I'm pretty confident I'd be in the top ranks. Other than long-distance running, that is."

"Attttt least do it after we call out to Rem."

His teeth shining Roswaal gave Subaru a thumbs up. Looking like he'd bought the idea, he knocked on the window connected to the coachman's stand. It was a window large enough that you'd be able to pass small luggage through. Separated by the small window, only Rem's voice came through.

"Yes, is something the matter?"

"Aa, Subaru says he's bored and wants to be near Rem. How wonderful a thing, you sure a loooved."

"Subaru is it? What should we do, do you want me to stop the carriage? If we take it to a stop, it will take a bit of time to get the ground dragon to start running again."

"Nn?"

Subaru tilted his head at Rem's words, looking to Roswaal who was now holding his chin with this hand.

"The thing called divine protection isn't all powerful. In the case of ground dragons, once they activate their protection from wind once, they need a littttle bit of time before they can use it again. We could take an early lunch though if you wanted?"

Listening to his explanation Subaru nodded, but shook his head no at the proposal.

"Nah, it's fine it's fine. I'll be up there in a flash, so just be good and wait for me Rem. Ah, be careful not to cause the lizard to drift or something, or else I'd get sent flying from inertia."

I'd hope she'd refrain from pulling off any moves like drifting or triple-acceleration. Since he didn't know to what extent the protection from wind would apply, wanting to avoid any tricky moves was his sincere thoughts.

“Rem understand and is waiting. The spot next to Rem is open. Hurry, hurry.”

From the other side of the window Rem called out impatiently, trying to feign indifference. Smiling bitterly, Subaru gestured with his hand to Roswaal.

“Nn-well, I’ll get going then.”

“Oh myyy, you sure seem to have won over Rem. You’ll get burned you know.”

“Roz-chi, getting burned by you is… if it was Emilia-tan I’d welcome it though!”

Giving Roswaal a light-hearted reply, he turned to Emilia with vigor. But it seems she wasn’t paying attention to what he’d said, mumbling to herself near the interior wall like she was looking for something. And, “here” she said, taking out something and putting it in Subaru’s hand.

“This isn’t something that’s all that dangerous so I won’t stop you, but make sure to keep hold of this.”

“A cord extending out from the interior wall… something like a seatbelt?”

“There are times when the carriage will sometimes flip over, that’s why they have these belts. I gave you the long end, so use it as a lifeline. After you get to the coachman’s stand you can let it go and it will retract.”

Gladly taking Emilia’s consideration, he took the belt he’d been handed and wrapped it around his wrist. While finishing the business of creating his lifeline, he started to realize that he probably should have sat up on the coachman’s stand in the first place. If that’s the case he probably should have just behaved himself and stayed put in his seat, but clearly not pleased with this option he displayed his selfishness in a big way.

Seen off by Emilia who had an extremely worried look in her eyes, Subaru opened the guest room door and climbed out onto the carriage. The dragon-carriage was moving fast as ever. Occasionally the speed slackened a little, probably a result of Rem's concern. Despite confirming with his eyes that they were moving at such a fast speed it was strange he couldn't feel any wind resistance at all. It was almost like some illusion where they were encased in a transparent box as they traveled along. Swallowing his saliva and still grasping the cord tightly, Subaru put his hand on the frame and proceeded cautiously out around to the coachman's stand.

Because there wasn't even a hint of wind, the short trip went exceedingly smooth. Subaru felt like he was proceeding down a road with bad footing, it was only an inconvenience to that level.

"This really is a weird feeling. With the divine blessing it was only a little difficult."

Experiencing this world's strange phenomenon with his own body, Subaru thought as he looked at the scenery streaming by.

'80 km/h'. While he was standing isolated, this was the thought that seized his brain. In his former world he remembered hearing this one particular urban legend. That is,

"Wind resistance when going 80 km/h feels exactly like touching breasts…!"

It was a regrettable thing, due to the divine protection's effects he wasn't able to confirm this. If the myth was indeed true, and he was in a world without divine protection, then he would have been able to experience the sensation of having his whole body enveloped in a woman's breasts.

"To add to it, if I look to the side a little there's Emilia-tan inside the carriage. Could this be, looking at Emilia-tan while fantasizing about air-boobs, a win through imagination?!"

With this strange revelation Subaru's mouth warped into an even more disgusting smile. Not giving up on his lingering regrets, he reached his hand out to the sky, fruitlessly trying to scratch the blue sky with his fingertips.

“By the way, Subaru. Rem forgot to mention this but, don’t stick your body too far out from the carriage. You’ll be cut-off from the divine protection.”

It was the moment she said that.

“No way…”

Immediately following his fingertips grasping the empty air, his fingers were assaulted by a blast of wind almost as if trying to carry them away. With a force far above what he was expecting his hand on the frame of the carriage was dislodged, losing his only support his body was sent flying horizontally, expelled off the side of the carriage.

What was happening was exactly what Rem had warned him about. ‘This flag was triggered way too fast’, is what he wanted to say but he had no time for such leisure.

Enveloped by wind, he couldn’t tell up from down with his body thrown about in a windstorm.

“Abababababaaaa?! This is bad, really bad, could this be… Descartes?!”

Like that, in the instant he thought he’d impact the ground he was pulled by his right arm towards the carriage. Pain shot through his right arm like it was tearing off, looking he saw the lifeline that Emilia had fastened for him, true to its name it served its purpose. Just as the light that was his life was about to be extinguished, it narrowly protected him.

However, during this time Subaru’s right arm screamed, from his wrist up it was beginning to turn purplish-blue.

“Pull! Can you pull me up?! The vibrations are getting a bit too much for me… ga! My tongu… I bit my tongue.”

Through his own thoughts of greed Subaru had caused a major disaster. His right wrist was signaling it had gone beyond its limits, he felt like his insides would leap out as a dark feeling started to take over his chest. Then, as Subaru gave in to resignation a high-pitched sound repeatedly entered his eardrum.

Lifting his head. Directly in front of him, he saw a wiggling silver snake. The end of the snake’s body was large and round, with lots of spikes growing from it.

“—My trauma’s coming back”

Emitting a shrill sound, the wriggling snake wrapped around and entangled Subaru’s body. Letting out a pained gasp as the snake constricted him harder than he imagine, but in exchange it held onto him tightly. His body floating in the air was dragged up all at once, flying over the carriage and releasing him just above the lizard. His body falling through the air once more, he caught glimpse of Rem with his vision spinning. Gripping the reigns like iron with one hand, she stuck the other out to towards where he was landing to support the falling Subaru.

It seems somehow or another my life was spared, he confirmed

“I’m going to live more obediently from now on…”

He was told those words by many people, now for the first time he took it to heart. One step before he could even confirm he had landed he had already ‘gone back to sleep’.

Chapter 5:
Time to Fulfill a Promise

1

Natsuki Subaru's heart was now beating like it had never done before.

The speed of it, the pain it caused was only an illusion. The sound of its beat growing louder without end. If one didn't listen closely there was only a bustle of noise, but among that bustle a certain sound stood out, resonating louder.

Lining up under the open air, the main street was giving off a feeling of being as busy as ever. A tide of people ebbing in and out with a great vigor not inferior to the last time he saw it. A great variety of races were mixed in, the hair styles were all eccentric, appearances overflowing with brilliant colors.

In my previous world I looked pretty average and could blend into a crowd, here it seems like black hair is rather unusual, looking out over the crowd I couldn't find anyone else with it at all. The most common hair color seems to be blonde, with white and blue as runner ups, the number with green hair was a lot lower, and there were only one or two with pink hair.

As I suspected, among all these people I couldn't spot a single one with shining silver hair.

In summary, on this bustling street Subaru stood out like a sore thumb. An usual pair, one with with black and the other with silver. On top of this those two were…

"S-Say, Emilia-tan… I know there are a lot of reasons but, could we stop doing this?"

Subaru proposed nervously, a cold sweat running down his brow while the other smiled in a pleasant mood. What he was reFerrisng to, was their hands firmly grasped together as they walked along.

The pair walked through the crowd of people, hand in hand. Looking at them as a strange they'd seem like an intimate couple. Normally this is something Subaru himself would flair his nostrils at, but

"Absolutely not! Since it's Subaru, if I leave my eyes off you you're definitely going to go off and do something ridiculous again. While we're in the capital I absolutely won't let you act on your own. Understand?"

"I'm sorry for being stupid on the carriage! I'm super-reflecting on it! Harsher than the seas, more dynamic than the mountains! But, but, but! If we keep this up my anxiety is going to go Mach 1!"

There was zero trust reflected in her eyes as he swung her hand up and down while pleading. Thus even now they were holding hands, his heart was on the verge of exploding. His joints throbbed in pain from his nervousness, he couldn't help but worry that his palm was covered in perspiration and sweat.

Following Subaru's attempt to disembark the carriage midway, the unconscious Subaru woke up to the tender sensation of being protected in someone's lap.

Directly above, was the owner of said lap, Roswaal. Subaru spit out when he realized who he was receiving affection from. What had retrieved the falling Subaru from the air was Rem's morning star (It's amazing she could do this while in the midst of traveling at such high speeds. For this girl secretly coveting praise he commended her for saving his life.) After retrieving Subaru, the one to look after him was Roswaal, it was during this time that Emilia's mood took a nose-dive. When Subaru woke up, "over there, sit" Emilia commanded and launched into a very very long lecture.

And above all,

"It was a complete 180° after getting disconnected from the divine protection; from then on he wasn't protected at all, it was quite troubling. Dealing with that speed and vibrations for an hour and a half… I've spilled out all my stomach's contents."

As a result of his secret midnight visit to the kitchen the night before, all that came out was mayonnaise. And after that Emilia's lecture filled his head to the point nothing more could fit in, from that he was truly and sincerely made aware of his actions. Subaru had fallen into a mostly groggy state. Because of this, no matter what you asked him his response would always be "yes, fall in love", causing the party members to decide on a resolution, which leads us to Subaru's current predicament.

"I can accept being accompanied by a guardian since I've acted rash on a number of occasions… but, at least could we stop with this hand-to-hand please?"

"Hmph, so that's what you have to say. Even though back in the village you were so desperate about that date thing and getting me to hold hands with you."

Amused by Subaru's groveling Emilia looked like she was enjoying his reaction as she teased him. Presented with the aforementioned scene a few days ago Subaru groaned out 'uguu',

"That's different! That was like, back then my manly power was overflowing. But now my gauge is completely empty, I'm weak, I'm useless."

Covering his face with his other hand, Subaru ground his teeth cursing his own inability to eat the meal set before him. That aside, the fact that he was being forced to reflect on his actions weighed heavily on his mind. As a result his inner thoughts were jumbled, his pitiful figure hard to look at.

"Well moving on from that…"

Subaru easily abandoning his inner turmoil as Emilia looked around at the bustling crowd. Taking her free hand Emilia adjusted her hood to further hide her face, not forgetting to distance herself from her surroundings and prevent any recognition.

It was a little bit of a nervous act but there really isn't something as being too careful. After all, there was the one case where she'd had her insignia targeted in the past. Since the location was the same it wasn’t all that unreasonable for her to be wary and stay on guard.

“Subaru, can you remember where the store you were talking about is now?”

“Yeah somehow or another, since we’ve come this far. I think we’re supposed to take a right here, probably.”

Shifting his attention away having his hand held, he tried to ignore the crisis going on with his sweaty hand. Like that he nodded at what Emilia’s words, gazing at the crowd of people he tried to shake his memory awake. Honestly, just from passing by familiar looking scenery he more or less had a grasp, although he couldn’t say with conviction. Even so, this was now the fourth time they’ve come down the same street. Pulling her hand along as they walked, his hesitation faded as they passed countless streets, each giving off a vague sense of familiarity.

Following his memory as they approached near the store, the unclear memories Subaru was fumbling with became clearer. The store’s entrance was plain and weathered by the years, with no distinguishing features to draw the eye it was buried in the throng of people. However there was one part that stuck out among the bustle, painted with striking colors the signboard appeared to have been redone with an extremely fresh layer of paint.

Last time Subaru saw the signboard he couldn’t see the words as anything but a child’s scribblings, now that he’d learned how to read this world’s letters he could tell that ‘Kadomon’ was written on it. Was is someone’s name or something? Subaru wondered about the store’s name. In any case,

“Safe and sound, we’ve arrived”

“Here?”

“Yeah. What, this is way more emotional for me than I thought oi.”

Barely managing to reach the store after so much difficulty, Subaru nodded and responded to Emilia’s quite comment.

Sticking their faces through the entrance, the two noticed the shopkeeper working busily inside. Turning his head, the man looked over at us. Seeing his face Emilia squeezed Subaru's hand a little bit harder.

Subaru smiled wryly at Emilia's easy to understand reaction. Certainly this person's appearance leaves quite a bit of an impact. That she'd be on edge was something that was unavoidable. After all, running down the left-side of this middle-aged man's face was a long scar that reached all the way to his chin, along with his bulky and muscular build it was hard to picture him as being involved in any sort of respectable line of business.

"Man, even though he tries to sound pretty rough, he's actually a scar-faced tsundere character who'll end up looking after strangers unintentionally"

Each time he looped, four times in this case, this person's face was what greeted him each time he returned. Even though this person had sometimes treated him quite coldly, Subaru knew from personal experience that despite his looks he was a really a good person.

Thinking back on it, you could really say that this man was really his starting point in this world. Thinking about how this person was technically the first person he met after coming to this world, it caused his heart to be filled up with emotion.

"Welcome!"

Deeming the pair as customers, the shopkeeper raised a shout and turned his delinquent looking face to them with a smile. Their eyes met. Suddenly all sound cut off from the outside world, he could feel the passage of his time slowly on his skin. As if space itself had been cut off, Subaru felt isolated like only the shopkeeper and himself were left in the world.

Then,

"Do you remember me?"

The question fired off from his trembling lips contained both anxiety and expectation.

The shopkeeper was surprised by Subaru's words; eyes narrowing as he stared at him, searching his memories. Peered at by deep dark brown pupils, Subaru felt almost like he was being drawn in while he waited silently for his reply. Tightening up, Subaru's tension was passed on to Emilia through his hand; swallowing her saliva she looked on at what these two would do next.

Slowly opening his lips, the shopkeeper put voice to his words.

"Nope, don't know. Who are you?"

So easily, Subaru was thrown away and forgotten.

2

One of the reasons Emilia accompanied Subaru as they walked along in the capital was so that he would earnestly work to fulfill the promise they made. They were able to stop him the first time he tried to follow along with them, but faced with Subaru's unyielding nature this was the compromise they came to.

With that sequence of events Subaru managed to receive permission; he was in high enough spirits that he might very well start flying soon, but was shackled by the promise he made in carriage (of which his memory was rather fuzzy from all his vomiting) independent action was forbidden, causing him misery.

As a result, he was now bringing along Emilia, or rather, being brought along by Emilia. Tormented by stress, his heart felt like it would explode with embarrassment; this was what the so called 'fulfilling his promises' came down to.

Even though his anxiety had been piling up, faced with this reunion event flag that was unexpectedly broken Subaru crossed his arms in outrage.

"I'm over here trying to hold up my side of the bargain and this is how you treat me! I firmly request a better treatment!"

"Even if you tell me that, bro."

Weary towards Subaru's face swelling with indignation the shopkeeper flashed a bitter smile. While looking at Subaru like some annoyance,

"Two weeks ago, and we only spoke briefly you say? Now that you mention it, I do vaguely remember something like that…"

The shopkeeper shut his eyes, tracing his scar with his finger while he searched through memories. Apparent that he was trying with great effort to remember, from how sincere he was you could tell that this shopkeeper was a good person; Subaru still in a state of shock didn't recognize this person's virtues. Seeing Subaru was still absorbed in his own thoughts Emilia called out to the shopkeeper in his stead, "please don't push yourself."

Seeing the shopkeeper open his eyes she corrected her posture, her voice dropping as she knit her handsome eyebrows together

"Sorry, he's always saying such unreasonable things. I didn't think it was such a one-sided promise he made…"

"Hey hey, Emilia-tan, that's obviously an excuse he's using. It was a vow exchanged between men. No matter what conditions it was exchanged under, if men didn't do everything they could to uphold it then they'd go out of fashion… really, this is the Stalingrad of a man's spirit."

Subaru kept deprecating the shopkeeper incessantly. Seeing Subaru like this Emilia glared at him to shut him up, puckering her lips like she was angry.

"Subaru stop having such strange expectations. You met with this merchant person once for how long? This is the capital, not some village shop near the mansion."

"Oi oi, don't act so pretentious old man. With a face as scary as yours there's no way you'd have a thriving business… ouch ouch, I'm sorry!"

Finally, Emilia punished him for his rude outbursts. Having his ear pinched Subaru immediately raised the white flag; the shopkeeper looked at her in admiration, letting out a sigh.

“Bro, just how much of a rude brat are you… ah I remember!”

As if he’d come to some conclusion he swung his hand abruptly, pointing over at us.

“You’re the kid that was flat broke. You left without even buying anything, you ungrateful little…”

“I promised to buy an appa next time didn’t I? Right? Right?”

Subaru was happily jumping around from being remembered, taking Emilia’s hand that was pulling his ear he held both her hands as he started to dance. Emilia was thrown off by these unfamiliar steps Subaru took the lead drawing her closer; the shopkeeper showed off his teeth in a wide grin,

“That’s right, that’s right.”

“I see, you’ve got quite the sense of obligation. So you came all the way out here to buy some things. Alright, I’m in a good mood so I’ll throw in a special! How’s 1 appa for 2 copper coins, and 20 appa for 38 copper coins sound to you?”

“Oh wow, what a deal! Then if we bought 200 it’d be 380 copper? This is amazing Emilia-tan!”

“That’s only if we buy 200… And don’t make me dance in public, it’s embarrassing!”

Subaru was overdoing his sales-pitch. Shooting it down, Emilia pried her hand from Subaru and interrupted his dance. But, immediately after, as if rethinking it she grabbed his hand again; truly an earnest personality.

“Man, let’s leave it at that. I’m gonna have you buy some appa though. I’m already looking forward to it… well I’ve already eaten a few already.”

Each time he’d looped he came face to face with it and would always end up having one for breakfast. There was no avoiding it.

By the way, an appa is an apple, he'd tried it once and there was no difference. The only change was the minor difference in naming.

While Subaru was off in his own world dreaming like this the shopkeeper brought out a crate filled with appa, taking out a sack to signal that everything was ready. Leaving the other's impression aside, the trader had the view that as long as he could do business earnestly everything was fine.

"So in the end, how many will you be buying?"

"We'll go with 10 big ones. I'm paying our promise well in excess."

Smiling at Subaru's generosity, the shopkeeper started stuffing the red fruit away in a sack. Subaru thinking it was about time to pay started making his preparations. Regretfully he had to let go of Emilia's hand (he'd grown quite fond of it by now), turning to her he noticed she was unexpectedly fidgeting around in with her breast pocket.

"What are you doing trying to take out your wallet, Emilia-tan?"

Taking out a leather bag from her clothes, Emilia inspected its contents; hearing his words she cocked her head in a confused look.

"What do you mean… If I don't take out money how are we going to pay for it?"

"That's wrong, wouldn't it be weird for Emilia-tan to pay? It's my shopping, so it's only natural that I'd… hey Scarface, what're you doing giving me that look!"

At his insistence that he pay in Emilia's stead, for some reason the shopkeeper's eyes glazed over.

Brushing off Subaru's accusation he shook his head,

"I'm pretty certain I said to come by when you made some money… bringing along this girl with money to pay for you, can't say I approve."

"Didn't you see our lover's quarrel just now! I just said I'd pay!

Really, I did!”

“Even if you say so, I haven’t seen you practice takin’ out your wallet much. I bet you’re one of those types, pretend like you’ll pay when you’re in front of a girl to keep up appearances.”

“I was only slow, what’s with that evil explanation! I’m not so ill-natured that I’d let myself be spoiled to that extent!”

Complaining about the shopkeepers prejudiced opinion, Subaru rushed to take out his wallet. He really wasn’t supposed to get paid for another few days but while they were still traveling to the capital Roswaal gave him an advance so he could have some extra spending money. It was quite a sizeable amount, as expected of a noble. Subaru shuddered at how high his wages were.

Then again, it could be that this times’ wages were factoring in Subaru’s contribution to resolving the forest witchbeast incident, he wouldn’t put it past Roswaal to do such a thing. This world didn’t have something like direct deposit banking so he couldn’t confirm it, but in reality Subaru was stealthily amassing a small sum of money. Although the person in question doesn’t know about it.

“If 1 appa is 2 copper coins… then would 10 appa be 2 silver coins?”

“Oi oi, don’t tell me you don’t know the exchange rate between currency? Right now 1 silver coin goes for 9 copper ones.”

“Let’s see here… so that’d make it 2 silver coins and 2 copper coins. Here.”

The coins jingles as he took them out of a leather pouch and handed them to the shopkeeper. As the shopkeeper stared in amazement, Subaru tilted his head in puzzlement at the shopkeeper’s behavior.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m going to say this myself. Bro, you better not trust strangers so easily. The fluctuation in currency exchange rate is listed at the market’s entrance, written on the billboard there. You came here without even reading that… you’d be prey to a less scrupulous merchant."

The shopkeepers warning, rather than honest, it was more like worried. Hearing this Subaru nodded his head in understand,

"Aah."

It's true that he'd believed him just like that and was about to pay up. In his previous world things had a definite price that you could have confidence in when buying and selling, it seems like he'd been far too trusting. Back in the stores around the village, the people were all quite insular so the idea of conning didn't really exist, but like it or not this is how it was in the capital. The biggest city in the entire country. Of course that means there are also people with evil motives, nothing strange about it.

"Pops, you're a really good guy after all."

Smiling ear to ear, Subaru showed he thought highly of this scar-faced character.

He waved his hand violently, "cut it out".

"It's not something I did on purpose. It's just that when a customer goes out of their way like this to hold up a promise it'd hurt my sleep if I knew they were keeled over dead-broke in an alley somewhere. Get it?"

"I've got it, you're a male-tsundere."

"Hurry up and take this and get outta here, scram! This is the exact change, thanks for the business!"

The first half was a rude statement, the second half was treating the customers as gods. Seeing the shopkeeper like that Subaru laughed from the bottom of his heart as he took the bag of appa. Leading Emilia by the hand they departed from the shop. We've stayed a bit too long I think, any more and we'd be obstructing his business.

"Thanks, old man. Let's meet again if our fates allow it"

"If you buy something again you're welcome anytime. Live carefully.”

He waved his hand lethargically at us, as if to drive us off. As we drew further away the crowd gradual began to obstruct our view until the figure of the well-natured shopkeeper completely disappeared.

Subaru checked the sack again, and turned to face Emilia who had been silent up till now.

“Huh, what’s wrong Emilia-tan?”

“…”

“Are you really that angry that you didn’t get to pay? You know letting you treat me there would have looked bad. I’d be some guy who mooches off women… wait a minute. Would that be amazing if we both spent money on each other and bought gifts? Damn! I should have let Emilia-tan buy the appa and then I could have bought something stylish for her.”

Like a ring, or a bouquet of flowers, or… the only things that filled his head were overly excessive things that’d pop up in bishoujo-games. While Subaru was off fantasizing Emilia-tan shook her head no.

“Subaru… you’re really quick with calculations.”

“Eh?”

“When you were talking with that scary-faced… Ah, sorry. When you were talking with that merchant about money, you did your calculations instantly. I knew the answer to it too, but that was still incredible.”

“So your true thoughts come out, I can understand just how deeply you were impressed. Hmm… so I’m unexpectedly good with arithmetic.”

This was quite beyond expectations. Subaru didn’t think of himself as all that smart, but it seems that’s not the case.

This is the difference between the educational standard here versus modern day Japan. He'd heard something like this in his former world too, that Japan was comparatively pretty good with mental arithmetic… Subaru accepted this reasoning with a nod.

"Hehehe, just thinking of my devilishly good intellect Emilia-tan's heart must be exploding. I guess it's true in every era, a man's gotta' have both guts and smarts. My oh my, is my cheat ability finally here?!"

Now that I've understood the circumstances, I keep my cool and don't become self-conceited. That's me. Natsuki Subaru.

He reminisced over his achievements proudly, although these weren't entirely achieved through his efforts. His lovely pleasant lifestyle in this world was about to begin.

"I'll fight with an abacus, raise the curtains on this mathematical fantasy world adventure. Catching the slight fluctuations in the market I'll… this is super lame! My spirit is broken!"

He was finished with that. Over. He didn't have the knowledge necessary to do something like make an abacus in a world without abacuses. And even if he did he didn't have the influence to cause the invention to spread. In the first place, Subaru's only good subject was fine arts.

"My climb upward hasn't even started yet… this tall tall mountain of abacuses!"

"Subaru you really… I can't tell if you're amazing or not amazing."

After raising the curtains on his grand adventure the curtains were lowered immediately, seeing Subaru like this Emilia sighed tiredly as she put her hand to her forehead. Taking a short pause, she shook her head and regained her energy, "alright then" she began.

"So we fulfilled the promise, next is…"

"Ah, the loot house right?"

The slums. Remembering the incident that happened on the first day he was summoned, Subaru gripped her hand harder; feeling the warmth from her hand.

“Even so, is it OK if I accompany you over there? If I’m being completely honest, the public order over there is pretty bad and they’ve got hoodlums walking around all over. It’s a little bit worry for a royal selection candidate to be going alone…”

“Even if you say that, no matter where I go it’s not going to be any different.”

Emilia frowned at him asking something like this so late in the game, taking her fingers she lightly pinched the hood covering her silver hair.

“I’ve got this blocking people from recognizing me, most people won’t be able to tell my identity. It’s not something handmade by the Margrave just for show you know. It’s really amazing, this thing.”

“Handmade by Roz-chi… somehow hearing that made its value fade a little in my mind.”

“Hey! You shouldn’t say things like that; is what I want to say.”

Struggling to hide that she felt the same way, Emilia stuck out her tongue shyly. Taking damage from her extreme cute surprise attack, Subaru clutched his chest as if his heart exploded.

“E.M.T!”

“Yes yes, there you go saying things I don’t understand again. I do realize that rather than me there’s another person you’d rather be with.”

Fending off his praise as a joke, Emilia laughed like it couldn’t be helped. Seeing her smiling weakly, Subaru shook his head “Oi oi”.

“Are you stillllll saying that? I’ve told you countless times that Emilia-tan is the one that I want to date. How can I get through to you?”

“I don’t think you should go around saying your important feelings so casually like that. With the proper partner, and a proper attitude, you need to choose the proper words. Promise me?”

Thinking his words were just a hollow decoration she closed down the subject quickly. With her creating a wall between them like this, Subaru couldn’t step any further through. In any case, the only way he could think of showing his affection any more than this would be to pour his heart out completely.

“Doing such a high hurdle, with my prospects of succeeding low and not having made any preparations, this doesn’t seem to be something I can overcome through sheer guts…”

In the first place, Natsuki Subaru’s motto was to never fight a battle he couldn’t win. Subaru made an excuse like that as he fled from having to face Emilia against here. When faced with this wall, rather than going around, or breaking through, it was full retreat! Like that, in the distance between Emilia and Subaru was laid out as a wall.

“Nn-then, *cough* shall we head off to the loot house?”

Clearing his throat, he pulled himself together. Deciding on the next destination Subaru’s lips bent upward. Emilia looked at his reaction questioningly.

“It’s nothing, just that when I checked the number of appa in the sack, there were 11.”

Plump, big, and ripened to a bright red. The number of these fruit totaled 11. The one who put the fruit in the sack was the shopkeeper himself, Subaru couldn’t possibly imagine him messing up like that, which meant…

“That old mans a super good guy after all”

Suburu said while closing up the sack, he laughed when reminded of the tough-mugged Scarface.

The budding, hazy feeling he had before became clear.

Yep, making good on this promise was the right choice.

Chapter 6:
A Dangerous Pair

Relying on memory to reach the loothouse, it was an aging dilapidated house in the farthest corner of the capital's slums.

I wonder if the people building the capital made a mistake or something, it was maddeningly how large a building it was; almost as if they were trying to hide all the unused space with it. For the sticky-fingered inhabitants of the slums, regardless of the legality or illegality of an item it would end up here through a various means, the one managing this place sold these goods out on a massive scale.

Like its name implied, this place was a hotbed of roguery.

"It's completely and totally gone. There's nothing left here at all."

Standing in an empty lot Subaru stared at the demolished remains of the former loothouse.

The loothouse building had disappeared without even a trace, the scrap wood and dangerous materials that would normally remain after a building collapsed had all been cleaned away, not one piece remained. There were traces of a building left on the ground along the edges of the foundation, but if you ignored that, it wouldn't be all that odd to doubt whether the place had ever really existed in the first place.

Thinking back, it's hard to think that a single sword strike could do all this.

"Yep, I don't think we can count Reinhard as human anymore…"

Reminded of a certain red-headed good looking man, Subaru's praise for him wasn't limited to the restraints of humanity. Then again, rather than positive this 'praise' had more of a negative tint to it; whether the person in question would be happy to hear this praise was another subject in itself.

"I suppose it doesn't need to be said, but it looks like nobody's living here anymore. Subaru, what will you do?"

This terrible scene was laid plainly before his eyes. Or maybe it was more accurate to say he couldn't help feeling like the place had been tidied up, faced with this spectacle Subaru was overwhelmed. Rather than Subaru, the more goal oriented Emilia was the first to speak.

"Also, I think getting in touch with Reinhard would be the best option…"

"Yeah, that's probably the right. I thought we could get in touch with Felt or Old Man Rom by coming here and then we'd know what to do next, but I guess things never go that easy."

The criminal always returns to the scene of the crime, well not exactly, but his common sense was such that he'd sort of been expecting that the stage for the end of the first event would somehow become the place for a sequel. However, reality doesn't go like fiction; our two criminals got taken away building and all. Quite literally, the only thing remaining were remains, and even those seemed like they were meager enough to be carried away in the wind.

"In other words we've no more use for this place. Goodbye loothouse. You served your role well as an event trigger."

Subaru picked up the bag of appa at his feet, giving a thumbs-up in remembrance as they departed; pulling Emilia by the hand. He lived his life never looking back. Goodbye yesterday, hello tomorrow. Please come in, Mr. Wedding-day.

"Anyways, since the slums are dangerous let's hurry and get out of here. Next is… searching for Reinhard I'd think. Felt got taken away by Reinhard, right?"

"Yeah, that's correct. He said he didn't mean them any harm, but… he changed his expression so quickly."

Thinking back on what Emilia said, Reinhard settled the incident by saying he'd overlook those two. It may have been just a verbal promise, but he was a young man who seemed like he'd risk his life to uphold his convictions; not the type to break promises so easily. Incidentally Reinhard had also taken charge over treating Old Man Rom's injuries too.

"It would have been nice if we could have spoken a bit more at least, we had our own issues though and had to return to the mansion quickly."

"What do you mean?"

"…Come on, we had a certain someone who had their stomach torn open you know? We couldn't think of anyone other than Beatrice who could heal it properly, so we were in a rush."

"Thank you very much for that assistance!"

He was wondering what she was talking about but it ended up being about himself. After throwing out a loud-voiced apology. "Now then" he said, trying to change to mood

"In any case, it looks like the conversations looped backed to searching for that pretty boy. I get the feeling there was something he said earlier, something about going to the royal guard station if we ever needed him…"

Digging through his memories of the conversation they had when they first met, Subaru was able to pull something out that seemed like it might be a lead. Well then, there you have it. Although he didn't have too much confidence in it. At any rate, if he is at the guardhouse I guess that'd mean Reinhard had somewhat of a policeman type position in the city.

"Like hell someone like that's just a policeman! I'm at least 90% sure that bastard's an actual knight and just wanders around town for fun."

He had an expensive looking sword, and even had some ridiculous nickname like 'sword saint'. On top of that he had some insane power. If that was the strength of an average soldier then he'd never be able to walk in the capital again out of fear. Looking like she agreed with his assessment, Emilia gave a small nod.

“I think so too, the probability that Reinhard is at the guard station is rather low. But, even if the person himself isn’t there, there might be someone there that knows him.”

“Well, either way he’s probably some kind of soldier, and maybe in the guard station they’d have the castle’s phone number written down somewhere… they don’t have phones here do they?”

“Phone?”

Emilia put a finger on her cheek while tilting her head. “Cute!”, Subaru thought to himself while wracking his brain on how best to explain.

“If I put it simply… it’s a way to talk with people who are far away. Ah, and it’s not some primitive method like shouting in a loud voice.”

“If you’re talking about a communication mirror, I think they’d have one…”

This time it was Subaru’s turn to tilt his head at the word she spoke with confidence. She could see he didn’t know from his reaction, “hmm…” she groaned softly.

“It’s a magical item used for long-distance conversations. When you stand in front of it on one end and another person stands in front of it on the other end, their image and voice will be projected over and you can have a conversation. It’s one of the more popular magical devices, you can see them around in a lot of places.”

“Hahaa, so they had this kind of method after all. Mirror, a mirror… this really is a magical world huh, fantastic!”

When you stand in front of it, it works something like instead of reflecting your own image it reflects the image of the person you are trying to talk to. When it came to magical items, the only thing that came to mind was his ‘magical’-phone that he tricked Old Man Rom with and passed off as a fake. Hearing that they actually had something similar to a phone got him excited, kindling his boyish spirit.

“Even if I don’t have magical aptitude, maybe it turns out that I can fight using magical devices. This time for sure, my happy fantasy-world adventure is about to begin.”

He was aware he lacked ability, but his nature was one that wanted to avoid situations where he’d have to use it in the first place. He had drawn up quite the fantasies about having grand adventures after being summoned to this new world, even though after facing reality he knew just how unrealistic this was. Facing this extreme situation, what had he done aside from forgetting his dignity and clawing to stay alive desperately?

Gloomily, his thoughts sank back into a negative direction. Shaking his head he dispelled his despondence. As for why he’d fallen into this line of thinking in the first place, that’d be due to the long silence that had settled between the two.

“Emilia-tan?”

“…Huh? What’s wrong?”

Her reaction was a few seconds delayed. Looking at Subaru her purple-blue eyes twinkled with light. Seeing her indifferent response Subaru’s face soured.

“That’s what I want to know. You got quiet all of a sudden. Is there something on your mind?”

“…No, it’s nothing. So, off to the guard station?”

From her attitude it didn’t really seem like it was nothing, but her response indicated he shouldn’t press any further on this issue. Acting like he’d accepted this explanation, Subaru tried his best to give out a vague reply.

“Since the guard station is over in the nobles’ district, from here it’s a bit of a walk. Let’s hurry a bit shall we, if we take too long Rem’s going to sulk.”

Originally Rem was the one who was supposed to accompany Subaru around the capital, but since she had a lot of work related matters to tend to, crying and crying, she had to hand over Subaru's charge to Emilia. Right now she should still be furiously tending to miscellaneous matters at the place they were staying for tonight.

Pulled by hand while they walked down a street heading out of the slum district, Subaru gazed silently at Emilia's back. Facing her white hood and robe embroidered with the emblem of a hawk, Subaru couldn't get a word in.

Whenever he was beside Emilia, he never failed to feel invigorated and excited. That's why there wasn't anything worse for him than getting the cold shoulder like this. 'What', 'when', Subaru fell into a panic as he raced to find what he'd done to put her in a bad mood.

If he got rejected by Emilia then he'd be all alone in this world. In this world Emilia had become his sole meaning of existence.

As the wheels in Subaru's head started grinding, the way he defined himself worked itself in a bad direction. His vision dimmed as nerves in his head screamed. A dark emotion crept up in his heart. He subconsciously understood this was the same as the dark hand he'd seen before. His lips trembled as the negative emotions started to run wild.

"That's enough of that, Subaru."

A voice resounded in his head unexpectedly, snapping him out of his stupor. Subaru opened his eyes in surprise. The words uttered felt like they were whispered directly into his mind. In front of him, Puck rested on top of Emilia's hood, rubbing his own belly while gazing out towards Subaru.

"This looks like a pretty bad sign to me, so I'm here to put a stop to it. I'd hope you wouldn't do anything improper with my daughter. I don't want to come to hate you."

Twirling a mustache, Puck came out with his reasonable as always tone. Subaru was a startled by the words as his face stiffened, looking at Emilia's back fearfully. However, Emilia didn't notice his panic and kept walking.

“You don’t have to worry about Lia hearing, I’m speaking directly to your mind.”

“…Can you hear what I’m thinking?”

“Telepaths can only do this when there’s a large difference in power. Well, you can just think of this as the difference between you and me.”

He could see Puck laughing dryly, but no sound was emitted. Although he could no longer be surprised at this emotion-reading-cat, the discomfort of speaking directly through his mind was something he didn’t think he’d easily get used to.

Anyways,

“Ah, I’ll just say my thanks. Just now, I was a bit weird for a second there.”

It was like he was the only one left in the world, he hated it so much; desperately struggling to get away. Hysterically, he reached out his hand to cling onto Emilia’s back in front of him. —Shaking his head, even Subaru didn’t know what had come over him just now. It was like he wasn’t himself, a strange thought had run wild.

I’m going to be blunt about this, the reason Lia’s in a bad mood isn’t because of you. She’s angry at herself after remembering some things.”

For Subaru who had doubted himself, Puck’s words brought him back to his senses. He tilted his head at Puck’s words.

“At herself?”

“There was something that reminded her of a bad experience. She’s only pouting over that. If you overlook it a bit, it’s pretty cute.”

Puck’s expression was one full of a father’s love for their child. Seeing this attitude Subaru felt alienated like he was being left out, he’d come to a sharp realization.

—I don't know anything at all about her past.

The Emilia that Subaru knew was an impressionable beautiful girl with silver hair and purple-blue eyes. She was a half-elf, and a potential candidate for the queen of this Lugnica kingdom. Living at her Patron Roswaal's mansion, she brought along a spirit named Puck who was close enough to call family. She was honest, always acted tough, soft-hearted, she'd take care of someone even if it meant losing something herself, she was like a big-sister, and on top of it all extremely easy to trick.

It's been two weeks since he met Emilia and this was everything he'd observed of her. It was completely surface level information. Only now did Subaru realize that he hadn't managed to step any closer to her.

Thinking of it, he didn't even know about the royal selection until recently. And him coming to the Roswaal mansion was only due to what happened the day he met her.

He was in a daze, he'd only taken the things given to him, and never sought to know more than that. This mess of a situation was his reward. Unlike Puck who knew her circumstances, Subaru who knew nothing and could do nothing but hold his peace.

"Bottling up your feelings like that, it seems you're quite the difficult child."

Even though he had kept his mouth shout on the outside, his couldn't keep the feeling on his inside quiet. Against Puck who could skim the top of Subaru's mind there was really nothing he could do. Subaru shrugged his shoulders.

"Bottling up my feelings? I think you've missed the mark on this one; my candidness loses to no-one. It seems the Great Spirit still has much to learn."

Poking fun of Puck in an exaggerated manner, Subaru acted to cut off any further discussion on this subject.

However,

“Hey, Subaru”

Regardless of what Subaru wished for, Puck wasn’t done with the conversation.

He didn’t even have the option to block it out. The words were whispered directly into his mind, rather than through his eardrum. Even though he was silent his feelings leaked out through his thoughts. And from his attitude it was clear these actions were not welcome. Irrespective of the other party’s interest, Puck broke through one-sidedly and informed him.

“I’d like if you didn’t expect too much. From me, and Lia too.”

“…Hah?”

“Hope is a gentle poison. Even if you know it, it will eventually eat away at your body. If you delude yourself into thinking something is within your reach there’s no way you won’t reach for it. Without a doubt, you are poison.”

Narrowing his black eyes, Puck erased his expression as he glared at Subaru. Faced with those expressionless eyes, his body froze up instinctively. Being stared at like he was being judged, he fought the urge to grind his teeth.

“You, what do you mean by that…”

However, before the incomprehensible Puck could give his reply—

“We’re here”

Emilia who was still pulling him by the hand stopped her feet.

“Oops”

Falling forward, he just barely managed to catch himself before almost bumping into her from behind.

He had been focusing too much on the conversation with Puck, disconnected from reality, finally the streets of the city came back into his view. Compared to the buildings that were jumbled together in a disorderly fashion, the buildings here were lined up neatly row-by-row.

The nobles' district. If it was like the name implied, this was probably the place where people from society's upper echelons lived. The scenery here was naturally more polished than from the districts where the masses lived, speaking directly, the way they spent money was different. The buildings were a given, along the roads were walls, and greenery was planted to maintain a beautiful view.

The other side of the street in front of him was like a completely different world. And, as if blocking the entrance to this new world a giant building had been erected. Even among the complete change in scenery this conspicuously tall building stood out. Like in his former world most of the buildings here were two or three stories tall, but this establishment in front of him looked to be about as tall as a six story building. The rear portion of the building joined into the outer wall behind it, the top portion had a terrace that could probably look out over everything. But rather than being intended to enjoy the view, he thought the terrace was probably built in order to look down over the people below. Even though he'd never done anything wrong, he was always timid in front of police; Subaru made a bitter face, remembering his own disposition as a member of lower-middle class society.

"This is the station for the guards that patrol the capital. People that want to go in and out of the nobles' district need to have their social status confirmed here."

"So that's why they built something like this… I guess no matter what era you're in, the police organizations have a kind of strange power that's hard to go against."

The pressure he felt was the same. From the feeling this place gave off, what he could tell was this definitely wasn't the type of place you'd go lightheartedly to about something like a lost child or forgotten item. He'd take the police boxes over this any day.

"Anyways, let's go talk with Reinhard inside… why are you doing all curled up?"

“It’s a conditioned reflex. There are some policeman out there that like to target people like me for questioning.”

“I don’t really know what you’re saying… but doesn’t that just mean you can’t do anything bad?”

“Impressive, now you’re starting to get it.”

Seeing through the spirit of Subaru’s statement, Emilia let out a sigh. Looking in front, she walked forward to knock on the door of the guard station. Chasing her hood-wearing back with his eyes, Subaru realized instantly that a certain little cat’s figure was missing. Disappearing off unnoticed, he was probably hiding in her silver hair right now.

Puck said what he wanted and left in a flash. Subaru scowled at his words, what exacted was he trying to say?

Whatever. Even if he worried about it it’s not like he’d get an answer. Folding his arms, he quickly ditched thinking about it as he moved his feet to line up behind Emilia. Almost immediately after she knocked on the door.

“—What’s this, what a coincidence to meet you here.”

The doors of the guard station opened outwards, a young man appearing from inside. The young man bowed respectfully to Emilia,

“It’s been a long time, Lady Emilia. Has anything come up in the meantime?”

He called her Emilia while she still had her hood on. Just from that Subaru’s heart filled with cautiousness. Emilia fidgeted a little after seeing him bow, but was overall calm.

“…Yeah, thank you. Nothing’s changed in particular. Um, Julius.”

“I’m honored that you remembered. I’m glad that your beauty is also unchanged, Lady Emilia.”

The man named Julius flashed his teeth with a glitter when he smiled. He said such a cheesy line without even flinching.

He was quite tall. It looked like he was at least 10 centimeters taller than Subaru, so around 180 centimeters in all. His hair was moderately long, purple with a tinge of blue; it made him seem both arrogant and polite at the same time. His body was slim, but rather than being frail it was more accurate call him supple and limber.

He had a big mouth fitting for a lady-killer. Amber colored eyes that women love and men couldn't help but be jealous of.

From his appearance and the fact he'd just emerged from the guard station, Subaru came to an understanding.

"Isn't it rare for a royal-guardsmen like you to be at a station like this?"

There were ornate decorations burnishing his uniform. A dragon symbol was woven into the sleeves, and a rapier hung from his waist like the wind. Most of all was Julius himself, it was clear from his appearance what his occupation was.

"Holding a ceremony for the guards, and inspecting the city… I suppose you could say. I came on the request of a friend, it's fine to prioritize friendship once in a while"

He replied to Emilia while brandishing his hands, as if to sing a song. His talkative mouth spun words like he was getting drunk just from listening to himself speak. Apparently trying to cut him off, Emilia in front of him followed up his words, "anyways…"

"Stretching my legs like this for a stroll through the city, no sooner than a single step was I able to come across such a beautiful flower. What more happiness could I wish for than this."

Saying this, Julius took Emilia's hand in a practiced manner and knelt on the spot. Before she could even let out a single breath he placed a kiss on her white hand.

Dumbfounded, Subaru was at his wit's end at having witnessed such a chain of events. One second later his emotions were seething, on top of this guy being arrogant he had to go out and do something like this that'd undoubtedly rub Subaru the wrong way.

However,

"Thank you, Julius. I'm sorry to spring this on you suddenly but…"

Seeing Julius' nostrils flair wildly, Subaru was about the let out a warcry but was instead interrupted by Emilia holding out her palm to stop him. Not understanding her intentions Subaru couldn't move. In front of him the situation slowly progressed.

"I have some business to take care of, could I have you act as an intermediary between the castle…?"

"Ah, I see. So you need the station's communication mirror. I understand, allow me to guide you."

Standing up and opening the door, Julius glanced inside the facility.

"Originally I'd feel a little awkward bringing Lady Emilia inside such a squalid place as this…"

"You don't have to mind things like that. Please."

"Well then, please come in…"

Emilia nodded at his words as Julius returned inside the station like he was going to guide her. Seeing this Emilia followed after. Scrambling, Subaru hurried to chase after them but,

"Subaru, wait here."

"Huh?"

Before the door closed, Emilia glanced back and turned him down cleanly. Words wouldn't come out. He tried to show his objection through gestures, but Emilia only shook her head.

"It'd be nice if I could bring you with me, but I don't think Julius would be too happy if you tagged along. Wait here."

“What the hell. Is that guy’s good mood more important that mine?”

Subaru’s mouth soured, from the way it came across it sounded like she was prioritizing Julius. Emilia protested with a troubled expression.

“That’s not it. It’s not because it’d put Julius’ in a bad mood, it’s because it’d definitely be an unpleasant experience for you. That’s why I want you to stay. Please, understand.”

“It’s already quite the unpleasant experience for me.”

The kiss on her hand. Even if it was an action that expressed reverence and respect, for Subaru it was something that was hard to forgive. He’d already gone on a date with her and held hands with her in the capital, yet she completely didn’t see him as a member of the opposite sex. That’s why kissing was something that he’d been struggling especially hard to do. Seeing another man cross that threshold so easily it was only natural he saw him as an enemy.

If possible, he didn’t want that man to touch Emilia anymore. Far from that, he was actually seeing her go off to that guy’s place without out him. That was Subaru’s male instinct.

“It’s not going to be that long before I get back so be a good kid and wait here. And don’t wander away from the guard station.”

It was worded kindly, but the color of rejection was still thick. Emilia was thoroughly keeping him away from her matters, fearing to step in any further Subaru couldn’t say anything.

The door closed between them, interrupting the two. Subaru laid his hand heavily on the door and hung his head, spilling out a long, long sigh.

“I’m so lame… what am I even doing? I’m not even doing anything.”

What came out was only self-derision. He bared his jealousy openly, sinking in it. A jealousy that would never run out or be used up. However, he was already aware of his own incompetence, if he left it alone he'd just get depressed.

“Knowing my luck, if I stay outside the station too long sulking like this I'll get picked up for questioning.”

Looking at it from an outsider's perspective he was definitely suspicious, thinking this Subaru hurried away from the station.

Nonetheless, since he had instructions from Emilia he only moved across the street, still in view of the station. After taking an appropriate distance, he put his back to the wall and let out a second sigh.

“That smug guy… an imperial guard was it?”

If that was right, then he'd be a knight. Among all the knights groups, the imperial guard were special. Originally they were directly under the command of the royalty, but now that the country has no king I wonder what's going to happen.

“That smug guy had a pretty obvious elite feeling to him. Licking and drooling all over Emilia-tan's cute hand so casually…”

His memories had already been revised. In his mind Julius was slowly changing into a heinous sexual deviant.

All he could do for now was wait and brood on negative emotions like this. Praying that Emilia would hurry to complete her task and make it back safely without being attacked by that sexual deviant Julius.

“And, after being defiled by that man's hand. Enter stage left. “Subaru, I'm no good anymore…” “That's not true, Emilia-tan… no, Emilia! No matter what happens to you, the Emilia that's reflected in my eyes is more beautiful than anyone else! Your eyes are more precious than any gemstone…” or something like that.”

His delusions exploding into a full-blown story, tears came to Emilia's eyes as she closed them, leaning her lips in towards his. It was then that a figure crossing the street caught his eye.

“I-Impossible.”

His lips trembling as the theater he had built up in his head collapsed. The lovely image of Emilia blushing vanished into his dreams, but a very real spectacle lavished his eyes, unable to avert his gaze.

In front of the shocked Subaru, an adorable therianthrope crossed the street.

It was only about about as tall as Subaru's waist, its short body swaying side to side as it walked. Tottering with each step, its body was covered with an unbelievably fluffy looking white fur. It couldn't even be compared to the beast-eared Demi-humans, this was the perfect figure for a therianthrope.

It was likely a dog, I think it's a dog anyway. It had long fur that was pure white like freshly fallen snow, which it wore with a loveable roundness.

In just one moment he was completely captivated. The heartbreak he'd just experienced from Emilia's attitude paled in comparison to this ultimate fluffball crossing the street in front of him. That is, he'd lost the will to fight even before the battle.

His soul as a fluff-a-holic, the resentment he'd built up since coming to this world, the self-loathing he'd wrapped himself up in just a few minutes ago, the torrent of emotions he could never seem to express to Emilia, through the combination of all these factors Subaru no longer possessed full control over his decisions.

I want to bury my hands in it. I want to rub my fingertips in the fluffy white fur. Hug it to my heart's content, press my face in it, pick it up and spin it around, sing my love for it to the world. Fluffing is love, fluffy is the cornerstone of world peace, fluff shall save the world. Even without fluffing, you can still fluff. However, because you fluff you want to fluff. To fluff is precisely the deepest desire of a fluffist. To not fluff despite being able to fluff is equivalent to choosing death to a fluffist. In summary, to fluff = a fluffist's life, without fluff the radiance that is a fluffist's life would…

"I got so caught up doing that, where the hell am I…"

When he came to his senses the therianthrope was gone, at his wits end Subaru stood looking around in shock.

Spread around him, his surroundings were a series of small alleyways he had no recollection of. The road in front of the station that was there a second ago was now gone. At the very least his surroundings were completely different from the showy nobles' district. He was too preoccupied with fluffing, this what he got for disregarding everything.

“I can't even sit still and wait, am I worse than a dog?! I guess after the point I got excited by the dog-like fluffball that much was already decided though.”

Having his sanity stolen away by the appearance of the fluffball, he followed it in a daze and now he's here. He didn't know how much time had passed, if he didn't hurry he'd be in for another one of Emilia's scoldings. Right now she must be waiting uneasily at the guard station, praying to be reunited with him even a minute sooner. That'd be nice if she thought that. Once she completed her objective and returned, she'd see the absence of our lost child Subaru who couldn't even sit still and wait obediently.

Subaru shuddered at the cold-treatment in store for him.

“I'll definitely get abandoned. This isn't the time to laugh and make a cute pose!”

Scratching his head, he recognized he was now in the emergency situation of emergency situations. First I've got to get out to the main street, he thought to himself; dashing down an alleyway. But on top of being unfamiliar with this area, the alleyways all looked the same to him so he couldn't tell up from down.

“Shit, why'd this have to happen now of all times… I've got it! I remember hearing that when you're in a labyrinth, if you stick to one side of the wall you'll eventually get to an exit. Piece of cake! Alright I'll go on this side of the wall… hogyaaa!!”

Reaching out triumphantly to the wall, when his hand came in contact with the filth covered wall he felt a smearing sensation and his ‘unpleasant feeling coefficient’ immediately shot up to max.

“What the hell is this, it’s all sticky and slimy! This seriously better not be vomit?! Why the hell is this sprayed all over the walls, even with the power of alcohol you couldn’t do something like this!!”

Wiping this vomit, excrement, or whatever other unknown substance, off onto another wall; not being able to ask some grandma for directions he was completely at a loss. It just had to be at a time like this, he couldn’t feel the presence of anyone in the nearby streets. For Subaru who couldn’t live without relying on other people, he couldn’t find anyone at all to rely on.

“Like this, trapped in the labyrinth without possibility of escape, Subaru gave up on thinking… BAD END #8: Death by isolation… Ok seriously this isn’t funny!”

Not having the composure to mess around anymore, Subaru upped his movement to the max. At least let this be towards a place with people… the moment he thought that,

“You bitch! Stop messing with us!”

While he wondered whether he should get closer or not, his eardrums had certainly picked up traces of people.

Chapter 7:
The Orange Girl

1

He wavered for a few seconds, deciding on whether he should go in the direction of the voices or not.

Even Subaru himself wasn't sure what his deciding factor was. It could have been that after being lost for such a long time he longed for human contact, maybe he was just drawn to the scene out of morbid curiosity. Or perhaps, it was because a certain silver haired girl did the same for him during his first loop.

Getting a bad feeling about this Subaru grimaced and pushed forward, rounding the corner.

"Don't mess with us, woman! Should we ruin that pretty face of yours?!"

"Stop making such a racket, you louts. Such an uncultured group, even your method of coercing lacks class."

Facing these disheveled men whose spit was flying in anger, her crystal-clear voice sounded cold and carried a hint of poison.

Quietly, he peeked his head out from around the corner, timidly checking to see what was happening.

In the narrow alleyway stood a single girl, three men surrounded her trying to cut off all means of escape. He couldn't help but sigh at the start of such a stereotypical 'petty-criminal' event, but what drew his attention more was the girl's appearance that didn't seem to fit in with this place's atmosphere.

Vivid orange-colored haired that sparkled like it was catching light from the sun, tied together with a barrette into a single bunch as it streamed down her back. A florid vermilion dress, one that's beauty would best be used for a ball or tea with the aristocracy, certainly inappropriate for this cluttered and dirty alleyway. The many ornaments adorning her neck, ears, and fingers, even an amateur could tell these were inlaid with first-class gems. From top-to-bottom, the coordination of her outfit just screamed ‘I have money’ to Subaru.

The girl herself despite being clad in dozens of dazzling jewels, her noble appearance still stuck out, not inferior to her possessions in the slightest. Her red almond-shaped eyes glinted defiance. Thin peach-colored lips, and skin shining white as fresh snow. Such perfection would make any painter snap their brush in frustration, seeing this in person Subaru once again confirmed how irregular this world was.

Surrounding this girl, the men savagely revealed their violent nature, shouting at her openly. The girl calmly looked back at them. This attitude didn’t appear to just be her acting strong, but no matter how he looked at it her delicate body didn’t appear to contain the power to extract herself from this situation. Or even if she did have the ability to take care of this herself, he had no way to confirm it. Crossing her arms, she puffed up her abundant chest with an air of composure. From his outsider’s perspective, he could tell the men had interpreted this as her looking down on them and gotten even more riled up.

“—H-Hey! Sorry to keep you waiting, honey!”

Promptly waving his hands, Subaru nimbly made his way into the middle of the altercation. Four people, the three hoodlums and the girl all stared at him; for the time being, he lifted a hand out to the three-hoodlums as if trying to apologize.

“It looks like there’s been some sort of misgivings between you all, but could you overlook this one for me. You can probably tell from looking, but she’s not all there in the head. You get me?”

The public order in this city’s underbelly definitely couldn’t be called good. Walking around celebrity-style was just begging to have all your possessions stolen. Wasn’t this exactly what you’d refer to as someone with mental issues? Shelving his own indiscretions at having temporarily lost his sanity chasing a fluffball therianthrope and wandering off, Subaru faced the group of awkwardly staring men.

“Well, that’s how it is. Bye!”

Subaru said energetically. Grabbing the girl’s hand behind him.

“Wh-”

“Look, let’s get going and not bother these nice young men any more. Remember we have that promise today… the one where we’ll be eating sweets together, feeding each other with a spoon “aaaan”, that promise you know…”

Making a cast substitution in the dream schedule he’d planned out for Emilia, Subaru took the girl by the arm and started quickly moving to depart.

However,

“Insolence.”

“Ha…?”

Grabbing the hand he touched her with, the angle of Subaru’s body was forcibly changed with a great twisting motion. Made to lean forward, his waist turned as his body made a full revolution.

“Don’t touch me so casually”

Releasing the wrist he’d grabbed, he felt his other hand brace the back of his head before a strong impact run out as he struck against the side of a wall like a rag doll.

“Gh-Ghh?!”

“Oh my, I go outside and immediately this happens. Men see my body and are drawn in like flies. Truly, I can’t let my guard down at all.”

Almost like looking at some garbage on the side of the road, the girl ignored Subaru rolling around in pain on the ground clutching his injured face. Subaru looked up from below, still half-crying from the pain of having his nose scrape against the stone wall. He stood up, anger welling.

“You! Go with the flow! That was definitely pattern A: Save the thankful woman from hoodlums. If you don’t go along with it how are we supposed to go by the template!”

“I don’t know what you’re saying. I do whatever I want.”

“Smashing someone you just met against a wall, that’s way beyond the level of being free-spirited!”

He tried to help her out, but far from having his intentions understood, he actually got treated like some pervert. To make things worse she actually took expensing justice into her own hands.

If he wasn’t so resistant to nosebleeds, or if his teeth protruded out more than an ordinary person this would have ended in tragedy.

Subaru’s face bent with pain and disgrace. It took him a while to realize the men silently standing around were looking at him. Subaru had put on such a spectacularly pitiful display. He collected the appa that had spilled out everywhere, setting them against the wall.

“Go ahead and laugh. I tried to act cool and help someone, and ended up eating a wall to the face for it. I’m lame so just go ahead and laugh. Do it!”

“Err, that’s… laughing would be a bit too much…”

The men’s words were colored with sympathy. Subaru dropped his shoulders, he would have been much more comfortable with being laughed at. Letting out a long sigh he settled his feelings. Taking control again,

“Take two! Come, you scoundrels! Now that I’m here, things won’t be so easy! If you want to pass here, you’ll have to go through me first. Hehe, once this battle’s over I’m going to go open a bakery in my hometown. I promised my childhood sweetheart I’d marry her too!”

Declaring his words assertively in good spirit, Subaru spoke sharply to the men. Protecting the girl behind him, he observed how the men would move. It’s 3-on-1, so if I take the initiative I might have a chance of winning—as he thought that,

“Uh, you guys kind of seem familiar”

Wracking his brain, he looked at the men in front of him, comparing their faces to his memory. With a sudden realization, he clapped his hands.

“Ah, the stooges. No way, this can’t be. Are there really no other goons in the capital besides you three?”

It was only natural he remembered these three, this was the idiotic 3-man gang he dubbed the ‘three-stooges’ after they harassed him on his first day in the capital. A slight feeling of tension seized Subaru, they did take his life once after all,

“Any more of this and I’m going to start losing my energy… what the hell are you guys, do you do this every single day? Every day? One day? Summer vacation?”

“He came in, bumped his head, now he’s spouting this gibberish”

“Oi, I don’t really want to deal with him right now, you go.”

“I don’t want to either! If we harass him a little do you think he’ll leave?”

He didn’t know if they were being cautious, or if their tension had dropped; facing the idiotic Subaru they couldn’t get their fighting spirit up and were now consulting each other in a low voice, deciding who should have to deal with him. With the three losing their will to fight and the mood on the verge of settling, the girl who had been observing silently spoke up,

“I grow bored. Talking amongst yourselves so indecisively, nothing’s ever going to happen. What are you, women? If that’s it, then I think you should dress like it. With all that muscle and hair, you'd look quite funny."

Putting a finger to her mouth, the girl threw out abuses; laying on ridicule and contempt. In that instant the other four (3 stooges + Subaru) had no idea what she'd just said. It took them a while to process what had just happened, but once it got through they all exploded at the same time.

"Don't mess with me, you shitty woman!"

"Who you calling a girl? messin' with me!"

"Who do you think you are, talking down to us like that! Huh?!"

"You, you're so full of yourself! Whether we're women or not, should we teach your sexy body the difference?!"

The 4-man gang of hoodlums spouted out vulgar objections. Among all of them the last one was especially inappropriate for public discourse. The one who shouted such a comment was Subaru, his shoulders swaying as he breathed heavily.

"Damn. What the hell am I doing joining up with the stooges…"

Even I'm surprised by my own impulsiveness sometimes. Honestly, the hoodlums were justified to be angry at her attitude. Then again, just because she was foul mouthed didn't mean it was OK for her to be threatened by these guys.

"I sympathize with you guys, but I won't yield from my original intentions. You may have reasons of your own, but if you want someone to blame, blame yourselves for making an enemy of me on first day we met."

"That stuck-up woman is one thing, but what the hell's your problem? You damn brat."

Scratching his head, one of the stooges spat out angrily at Subaru, seemingly troubled. It appears they had absolutely no recollection of him. Getting beaten black and blue by Emilia, getting beaten up by Subaru even when they were 3 on 1, stabbing him when he was passing by, they went through a lot together. How heartless to forget him.

“Well, I guess all those events didn’t happen on this particular world-line. In reality, the one these guys should remember… is a certain pretty-boy’s valiant entrance.”

It was settled in the most peaceable manner, but you could also say it was the one that left the shallowest connection between Subaru and them. Because he didn’t deal with them directly, there was no helping that Subaru didn’t leave much of an impression on them. Subaru felt a few pangs of loneliness,

“Hey, I remember now. A few days back in the business district’s back alley…”

“— ! He’s that crazy brat! He hasn’t changed a bit!”

“It’s really him. I didn’t notice because his clothes were different.”

A lightbulb lit up in one of the stooge’s minds; he yelled out, snapping his fingers. Like a chain reaction the stooges searched their memory, one after the other. Subaru’s sensitive ears picked up an inexcusable word mixed in, but that was water under the bridge. He clapped his hands in delight that they remembered him.

“Yep, since that’s the case, we’re not really strangers anymore right? So could you do me a favor this time and let us go?”

“Are you an idiot? Instead of strangers, we’re more like enemies now. The only thing that’s changed is instead of 3-vs-1 it’s 3-vs-2.”

“With just one more person it’d be evenly matched. Neither of us wants to make any painful memories, right?”

“I have a revision. It’s not 3 vs 2, it’s 3 vs 1 vs 1.”

“You! Could you not talk for a while?!”

Even though he was trying to throw out a random bluff to somehow resolve this peacefully, the self-absorbed woman was completely ignoring his intentions. If only he could time-leap 5 minutes back, he wanted to tap himself on the shoulder and call out, “seriously, it's not worth it." It was way too late for that now though.

In the first place, he knew first-hand that these guys didn't have much patience. Increasingly, what he felt from these guys wasn't anger, but a certain cold and sharp emotion mixed in. This was something he'd gotten very familiar with since coming to this world, this thing called killing intent. Putting their hands in their breast pockets, it was only a matter of time before they took out some item to exact their bloodthirst with.

"… I guess there's no helping it. I really didn't want to do this."

Having judged that there was now no avoiding a confrontation, Subaru shook his head at his own lack of ability. Unable to overcome this through conversation, he had to resort to his trump card as usual. He hoped he'd be able to take it easy one day.

"Stop right there, you three. Any more and this won't end well for you."

Turning a palm out towards the three, Subaru blocked the men who were now on the verge of violence. Listening to Subaru's words, a vein popped up on one of the easier to anger stooge's forehead.

"Ha? Aren't you misunderstanding something here? We're on top here, not you. Don't be giving out orders."

Not hiding his killing-intent, the stooge reached for the knife in chest pocket. Subaru was a moment quicker, stepping towards the stooge, declaring clearly in the most intimidating voice he could muster.

"Those words, don't regret it."

"Haa?"

"Just between me and you, I know Reinhard you know. We're best buds. If I give him a call, he'll come here flying."

"—Wha?!"

Hearing what Subaru said, the stooge shrunk back in fright. Begin operation ‘fox hiding behind a tiger’: they’re already shaking in their boots!

Having invoked Reinhard’s name, tremors ran between Subaru and the stooge. They probably wanted to call it a bluff, unfortunately, the stooges had actually witnessed Reinhard himself backing Subaru up before.

That ridiculous swordsman with a few screws loose up there, there was no way they didn’t know about him.

“What’ll it be, with just one shout I can take you guys out. I’ll do it.”

No sooner than he said that, the effects were apparent. Subaru cupped his hands around his mouth like he was going to yell, putting his acting skills to max in an attempt to threaten them. Honestly, if Reinhard wasn’t the type of character that’d conveniently appear out of nowhere like a hero to help citizens in need, Subaru would be getting the shit beat out of him right now. That’s why this was a rather desperate charade.

Not seeing through Subaru sweating bullets on the inside, the men grit their teeth in frustration.

“We’ll let you off this time.”

“But, it’s not like we lost, remember this.”

“And it’s not like we’re scared of Reinhard either!”

Here comes the loser’s excuses as expected, their unnecessary explanations made them look even more like kids. Leaving behind some foul words, the men shuffled down an alleyway.

Watching until their backs completely disappeared behind the street corner, he finally let out all the tension he had been keeping in with a sigh. Placing his hands on his knees he crouched down.

“Aaah, totally worn out. I’m seriously sweating. In a small child vs small child fight, it seems my small-child battle tactics were superior… it’s a small world!”

Telling a small joke he managed to get back some of his composure, turning to face the girl behind him. Trying to rationalize it all in his head: he had been bluffing towards those guys, so maybe she was doing something similar and that haughty attitude of hers was actually all an act for self-protection—

“What, looking at me with those eyes like a beggar. I have nothing to give to the likes of ye!”

“Nope, this is authentic. Can you at least say some words of gratitude towards the person who saved you?”

“Saved?”

She turned her head inquisitively. Closing her eyes in thought for a brief moment, letting out an ‘ah’, as if she’d come to some sort of understanding.

“What ye were chirping about earlier was all in order to save me. Hmm, I didn’t notice.”

“After all that, saying something like ‘I didn’t notice’, isn’t that exactly the same as no reward?!”

He twisted his legs, befuddled. The shock he received was so great he had to express it with his body. Even so, the girl looked at him with bored eyes, not commenting on it at all.

“Good grief, what a waste of time. Stealing my unlimited time, what a sinful story.”

“So you’re not going to say thanks after all…”

Gratitude and some words of thanks were all he sought, unintentionally Rem’s image came to mind. That blue-haired girl was probably on a shopping tour right around now, they’d only been apart for a few hours but how much he missed her. I want to be healed by Rem!

From Subaru’s voice she realized she may have been a little patronizing, with a ‘hmph’ she turned only her head back towards him.

“Don’t misunderstand me. Even if you weren’t there I would have been perfectly fine. It wasn’t even a problem in the first place, and you were the one who went out of their way to get involved. For you to boast of it as an achievement, it’s nothing but comical.”

“I don’t really get it, what do you mean? Is your ladyship so incredibly strong that you’d actually be fine on your own?! …Or something like that?”

“No, it’s even simpler than that. —This world is made for my convenience. Therefore, I’ll never be in a disadvantageous position. Being saved by you was only thanks to me. Snatching my achievement and acting like it’s your own, have you no shame?!”

Like it was completely natural, like she was completely right, like it was just common sense, this young lady puffed up her abundant chest and proclaimed it as universal law.

Such a lively and refreshing declaration. All possible situations are her ally, and everything that happens is only because of her actions.

On top of that, Subaru’s act of coming in to help was struck down as ‘trying to take away her glory’. Simply refreshing.

As she was sparkling like the sun in front of him, Subaru came to a definite realization.

—Getting involved with this… I’ve made a huge mistake.

“Uh… is th-that right? I’m sorry for doing something unnecessary.”

To avoid provoking this fellow too much, he needed to just go along with everything she said. Nodding his head exaggeratedly in agreement, he quickly picked up the sack of Appa he had left leaning against the wall. They spilled everywhere when he face-crashed into the wall, luckily, there didn’t appear to be any signs of bruising or damage. He felt a bit of relief knowing that the grocer uncle’s goodwill wasn’t damaged.

“Well then, that’s that. May we walk again in a place with more sunlight!”

Waving his hand, he made an about-face and turned his back to the girl. Right now I need to put some distance between us without making her angry, once I turn the corner let's all-out sprint to get away.

Like this he'd decided on a course of action, counting the steps until he reached the corner…

"—Halt."

A low voice called out to him from behind, he stopped walking unintentionally, cursing himself.

He should have just pretended he didn't hear anything and kept walking, now that he's stopped walking that excuse wouldn't work anymore. With a little hesitation, without turning around Subaru spoke up.

"Wh-Whatever could it be?"

Delicately trying to avoid angering her and deprecating himself, unknowingly a superior-inferior relationship had already established itself in his mind. The mentally weak Subaru tried with all his might to not turn around, against such a mentally strong girl his petty resistance was futile.

"What's in the bag? Show me."

He turned around slowly, the girl was indicating with her finger to put down the sack he was holding to his chest. He didn't have any particular obligation to obey meekly, but wanting to avoid dragging out the conversation by defying her, he reluctantly opened the sack for her, showing her the contents. Seeing the mountain of bright red fruit, her red eyes sparkled many times.

"Even after seeing it I don't know. This fruit… what is it?"

"Even if you ask me that… It's an appa. Have you really never seen one?"

Since they had always had them on the table for breakfast at the Roswaal mansion he had assumed they were a popular fruit. In a certain way, the standard of meals at the Roswaal mansion was fairly high, there was the possibility that appa's themselves were quite an expensive food item. That is to say, each one cost him 2 copper coins. Which means… a genuine question mark floated up.

In front of Subaru frowning with skepticism, the one with an even more remarkable reaction was the girl. She peeked once more into the sack, then back at Subaru like he was making a fool of her.

"You liar. Don't make me laugh. Understand me? Appa are a white fruit. Definitely not a fruit with a red appearance like this."

"Well, if you peel them the insides are white."

Not knowing what he should say, he blurted out something obvious, replying dejectedly. However, the one whose color drained from their face was the girl's. Uncomfortable from her reaction, he asked timidly,

"Um, it couldn't be, have you never seen an appa that wasn't peeled?"

"Hmm, now that you mention it I've only seen what's lined up on the dinner table. —Alright. Give it here."

Giving a single nod in assent, the girl thrust one hand out towards Subaru, requesting he hand over an appa. From the sheer audacity of her attitude Subaru wanted to try objecting, but, looking at her other hand he could tell that was a bad idea.

Opposite the left hand she presented out towards him, her right hand was tucked between her breasts, pulling out from her extravagant dress her palm gripped onto a short dagger the size of a kitchen knife.

The workmanship of the handle was inlaid with precious gems that he could tell were expensive just from one look. From the way the blade glinted, shining even in a back-alley like this with poor lighting, he definitely didn't want to have the pleasure of tasting its cutting edge himself.

He tried helping out a girl who looked like she was getting extorted, now he had the extraordinary experience of getting extorted by that same girl. Subaru felt his head getting dizzy.

Towards Subaru whose brain had overworked and shut down, the girl once again demanded “give it” with short instruction.

“I’m going to cut it in two and look at the inside. That’s how I’ll check whether or not thy mouth is only capable of spouting out lies like an spout.”

“It’s quite unpleasant to have a knife pointed at you in a back-alley…”

“Hurry it up.”

His resistance in vain, the appa was snatched away as she split the appa in two in her hand. She handled the dagger in a manner that was unexpectedly skilled, gripping it in reverse. Confirming that the insides of the split appa were indeed white, she licked the little bit of juice that spilled onto her hand.

“It’s sour and sweet… this is definitely the same taste as an appa.”

“Are you satisfied with this?”

Towards the girl who finally looked like she approved, Subaru put on his business smile like he was serving a customer. If you’d like I’ll give you one, so please let me go, were his true feelings. How much time had passed since he split up with Emilia, even though he didn’t have a wristwatch so he couldn’t check, he was still afraid of knowing.

However the girl’s heartlessness knew no bounds, with no sign of consideration or empathy to Subaru’s plea,

“Interesting. Hand over all of the rest. I’ll split them all to make sure.”

“HELL NO!!”

She was well past audacious, from her words one could only call tyrannical, even Subaru would erupt. His body clattering with temper, he approached the girl

“If you didn’t get it from cutting just one appa, why do I have to give you all of them. Absolutely NO! These appa, these appa… they’re a symbol of my bond with a certain man. They’re not ordinary appa, they’re the fruit of my friendship!!”

“Enough nonsense, how about this then.”

Brushing off his fervent speech disinterestedly, she continued the conversation one-sidedly. Pointing at the bag of appa he was carrying, her lips peeled apart, revealing a sweet smile

“How about we make a bet?”

“—a bet?”

“Yes, a simple bet. That’s right, something simple like betting on what side a coin lands on is fine. Each time we’ll wager an appa. How about it?”

She proposed a cointoss, Subaru laughed scornfully at her proclamation. She acted like this was a compromise, but the premise itself was strange.

“Your idea is absurd. In the first place, I have no merit taking this bet. If I don’t want to have the appa taken, wouldn’t me just dashing out of here have the same effect?”

“Naturally, I’ll prepare collateral for you. That’s right…”

She touched her lips in thought. Finally she sent Subaru a charming, flirtatious glance. Lifting up and displaying her abundant chest with her arms crossed under.

“If you win, I’ll let you touch my chest. How about it?”

She bet her body as a chip like it was natural; Subaru let out a long sigh, shaking his head. Presenting herself so easily in a bet, she clearly didn’t understand the implications of what she was saying, that line of thinking was destructive. People who ruined themselves through gambling always had that personality.

With such a good looking girl in front of them, what man wouldn't fall for her charms. What a wretched tale, such a sad way of thinking.

Wondering why his reply was so slow, she looked at Subaru with suspicion. Completely overlooking her stares, he scolded her clearly.

"You need to treasure yourself more. Talking stupid like this… as if I'd fall for your charms!"

2

—A short while later.

“This makes 7 consecutive wins for me, you only have 3 appas left you know.”

“Impossible! You took everything!”

In this backalley was Subaru’s figure after consecutive losses, ruined through gambling.

Chapter 8:
The Result of Gambling

1

—The coin flew up, spinning round and round through the air.

On the back of the copper coin there was the image of a dragon indicating it was of Lugnican make, on the face of the coin the year of production was engraved onto it, the appearance of it wasn't too far from the coins in his world.

Reaching the peak of its ascent, for a brief instant the spinning coin froze like it was sown into the air. Subaru held his breath, while watching the trajectory of the falling coin he moved both his hands with a tremendous speed.

Punching towards empty space with a consecutive barrage, trying to alter the falling coin's path with the resulting burst of wind.

Letting the coin drop right in front of him, he lowered his knees and leaned in, as the time it was still airborne dwindled. Right before the coin met the ground, he snatched it up in a crossing motion with both hands.

"Come now! Is it the left hand? Right hand? Or maybe even in my mouth?!"

"I've had enough of your bluffs. It's in your right."

"Oh My Goddess!!"

Opening his trembling right hand, he presented the coin on his palm to the triumphantly gloating girl. Seeing her smile grow bigger, he couldn't help tremble in embarrassment and hang his head in shame. TransFerrisng the appa from the bag to her hand, catching glimpse of the contents, a mere two appas stared back.

"Now, only two left. Not only making me guess which side of the coin, you even have me guess which hand it's in. What kind of tricks do you have for me next?"

Does she have no doubt whatsoever? She genuinely seemed to have no interest in what type of gamble he'd bring out. Her attitude was one where no matter what the game entailed, she had unwavering conviction that she'd win.

On the other side was Subaru in a completely defeated state, after losing in his specialty game of coin-catching his 10 betting chips were now reduced to 2. Mentally he was already feeling pressured.

"Impossible… for this coin-flipping skill that I've honed solely through reading manga to be completely ineffective. They even used to call me 'dazzling Subaru'…"

"I'll say it again, petty tricks are meaningless before me. I don't understand the point of your coin-spinning in the first place, there's no need for me to see the coin."

Sitting on a broken down crate on the side of a wall, he clutched his knees listlessly as the girl looked at him strangely. A smile appeared on her face as always, but a sadistic expression of her enjoying tormenting the weak was starting to mix in. Seeing such a haughty opponent his manly spirit flared up, he wanted to break that stuck-up nose by any means. But, he didn't have even a shred of the ability required to do so.

"I only challenged her to a coin flip because I thought I could win and then this happens… she's even treating it like it's completely meaningless! Since it's come to this all I can do is leave it to fate—"

"Have you decided your method? I wouldn't mind if you just handed me the two appa."

"Oi oi, in my country deserting under enemy fire means you'll be made to commit sepukku. Don't underestimate the harshness of an angry military officer. And don't think that I'll let this off with me being a sore loser."

The girl's attitude was like the incarnation of the word pride.

However with how pitiful of state he'd found himself in, he almost felt like prostrating himself before her intimidating aura. Struggling to go against it he shook his head, raising his voice he jabbed out his finger.

“The game will be… Rock Paper Scissors! This is the traditional means for a final-battle used in my homeland.”

`

“Rock Paper Scissors?”

“What's this, could it be you don't know what Rock Paper Scissors is? You don't do you?! Oi oi oi, how much of a sheltered baby do you have to be to say those words?!”

“A boring provocation, not enough class. While I won't deny thy charges of being ignorant of the world, I won't rise to such a low challenge.”

Making fun of and teasing her at the same he was planning to somehow throw off her usual calm-self, but against this girl who saw through him in a single breath it was useless. Even though he provoked her that much she still didn't pay him any mind. On top of being firmly self-centered, she seemed to think of Subaru as no different from another pebble on the side of the road. A pebble's provocation couldn't rise to the level of causing waves in her mind.

“I-I-t's not like I was scheming anything?! Just because I lost consecutively like that doesn't mean I'll do something underhanded to win, don't look down on me!”

“You waste my time. Hey, hurry up and explain this ‘rock paper scissors’ thing. That'll be the end of you then.”

Waving her hands out to the side carefree, the girl sneered at him. Getting his provocations flipped on him Subaru couldn't hide his agitation. Biting his lip in dismay, he brought his hands out front.

“Rock paper scissors is a type of duel where you throw out certain hand gestures while yelling at the same time, depending on the superior-inferior relation of the hand gestures victory and loss is decided. There are 3 different hand gestures, ‘rock’, ‘paper’, and ‘scissors’. Rock is strong against scissors, scissors is strong against paper, and paper is strong against rock. Got it?”

“Hmm”, she stroked her chin while Subaru bent his hands into various shapes during his explanation,

“Indeed, I understand. That’s quite an interesting idea there. What do we yell?”

“At the ‘scissors’ part of ‘rock paper scissors’ you throw out the hand you plan on using. And by the way, in the case that the same hand comes out it’s a tie and you have to do it again.”

“Is that all? Good, I understand. In that case I choose paper.”

“Mind games right off that bat?!”

In rock paper scissors there is the high level technique of declaring your hand, Subaru shuddered at the level of her reasoning and application. Immediately after explaining the rules, she understood everything completely, and right away chose the method that gives her a mental advantage. It didn’t come out earlier because they were contests of pure luck, the absolute best method for winning—Her ability to choose that is being displayed here.

“My strategy of explaining the rules quickly and jumping into a game of rock-paper-scissors while the opponent was still confused… was crushed?!”

“Let’s start then. Here, Rock-Paper…”

“W-Wait, timeout, hey, I haven’t decided on what I want to use.”

Having his makeshift strategy completely seen through, it backfired and now he was the one flustered. However now that she started she continued without heeding him, watching her raise her hand up Subaru had no choice but to match up.”

””-scissors!””

Throwing out her hand at the same time as her yell, it was paper just like she had declared earlier. As for Subaru…

“Making a flower like me wait, even though you protested so much… it seems like you wanted to give me your appa after all.”

“No! Ontop of being statistically the most common choice, when a person is forced into a game of rock-paper-scissors unexpectedly their hand tightens up, it’s out of my control!”

In front of the girl with her hand laid out flat, Subaru’s hand was tightly balled into a fist while he made up excuses like a sore loser. A schemer drowned to death in his own schemes, Subaru played the part of a drowned corpse perfectly.

“Now then”

Letting out a long sigh, he watched as the girl’s white fingertips reached past him to steal away an appa out from his bag. With this he only had one chip left to bet.

“By taking even that, I’ll teach thee who knows not thy own place a lesson. I’m at the top of the pyramid, you’re at the bottom. It suits you to crawl.”

“Oi oi, isn’t it a little extreme to treat a person who loses a bet like they’re the bottom rung of pyramid? Even though I don’t have a chance of winning and it seems like I’ll have all my belongings stripped from me and be ruined, my pride won’t let me not bet this last one… aa, am I actually the bottom rung?!”

“Don’t worry. Everything below me is the bottom rung. In this world there’s nothing but things below me.”

“A two story pyramid huh, even if there’s nowhere for me to stay it’s pretty refreshing?!”

Even though the portion touching the ground can be very wide, the place at the top only has one spot. With an extremely tall summit it ends being a pretty crazy pyramid. The pyramid in his imagination was in dire need of some lodging. “Now then,” the girl clapped her hands, bringing Subaru back to reality.

“Let’s bet the last one and have a match.”

“…This is the part where you’re supposed to pity me, like leave me the last piece at least.”

“I’ll make every last one of your appas mine. I’ve already gave me decision. All that’s left is for you to come up with the means, you can come up with whatever method you wish to hand over your appa with. I’m of the nature that I don’t get bored easily, but even so… this is becoming a little tedious.”

Even though her statement was no different from the ones earlier, it could said that she had absolutely no inclination to let him go; to Subaru this was a death sentence. For this girl who had no doubt in her own path, that she would win the remaining appa was already a decided matter—since it’s like this, Subaru had no way out.

“Let’s do another rock-paper-scissors for the last match.”

“Hmm, challenging me right away when you’re at a disadvantage. There might be some logic to that, but whatever you do is useless.”

“No more talk, from both of us. And no more of that lead in like last time either, just a straight match.”

Putting his hand out, Subaru’s first objective was to seal the girl’s mind games. Seeing Subaru’s unexpected attitude she raised her eyebrows, concluding that it wasn’t anything that could influence the odds of winning she shook her head.

“Very well. Let’s start this quickly and end this quickly then, shall we?”

Seeing that she agreed, Subaru pulled his hand back, winding it up. Covering his clenched right hand with his left, he shrunk down while twisting his body, like he was preparing to draw a sword from his hip quickly and strike, pulling his body to the limit, heightening his fighting spirit to the point it could cut.

“Aaaaaaaa!!”

Putting his spirit into it, an overly excessive warcry flooded out from his mouth. Movement without meaning, actions without meaning, preparation without meaning, fighting spirit without meaning. No matter how much force he put into his body, victory or defeat wouldn’t be influenced by such a thing. Even knowing this, no… despite knowing this! Subaru put his heart in soul into his right fist!

The atmosphere in the back alley began to change, from the spirit Subaru put into this match even the girl’s expression began to stiffen. The moment his fighting spirit reached its peak, the two of them moved.

““Rock-paper-scissors!!””

They shouted. With it their two fists shot out like they would collide, for just a split second all sound disappeared. The air in front of their fists broke apart, in the vacuum left behind speckles of light could be seen exploding—looking at the fist in front of her, unrest began spreading throughout her red pair of eyes. Subaru noticed this!

The girl’s clenched hand was ‘rock’. As for her opponent Subaru…

“Th-This is…”

“Listen and be astonished, look and be amazed. This is the ultimate rock-paper-scissors lethal weapon, passed down from centuries-old.”

Muttering to himself. Subaru’s right hand, it was a shape that defied the girl’s understanding. —His thumb, index finger, and middle finger were extended in an irregular shape. This was the ultimate forbidden move, tremble and be in terror!!”

“Yes, this is the ultimate form ‘rock + scissors + paper’!”

“What the heck is that?! I didn’t hear that you could use a shape like that!”

“Quite your complaining, loser! I may not have said it, but it’s your fault for not asking! This part here is rock, and this part here is scissors, and this over here is paper. In other words, my hand beats your rock.”

“If that logic works, then shouldn’t a portion of it lose to my rock…?”

“Aaa-aaa-aaa! I can’t hear you!!”

He raised his voice while plugging his ears, with a tap in his step he collected the remaining apple. The last remaining one that didn’t get taken away, he held it as if it were extremely precious.

“I win! I win! I won’t let you complain! Unlike a simple coin toss, rules have a shady side to them. It’s your fault for not putting in the effort to notice! My tenacity triumphs over your good luck! No objections! I’m more positive!”

From her unwillingness to lose to such an improvised idiotic reasoning, and the ugliness of Subaru’s cowardly victory parade, “grrrr” she growled bitterly. Within this short time, for the girl who had always had an air of daringness, her expression was stained with defeat for the first time.

“—In that case, let’s do one last bet.”

“Haa? What nonsense are you speaking, little Ms. Bunny-rabbit? The bet for the last appa ended with my win. What reason do I have to bet any further: NONE!”

“You bet the one appa you have left, and I’ll bet all the ones I’ve won.”

Towards Subaru who was thinking of running away after winning, the girl glared with fire sparkling in her eyes as she made the proposal.

Hearing this, Subaru stopped; staring back at her while frozen in place. The girl’s expression reflected in his black pupils showed her daringness was already coming back, this time with an even fiercer tenacity.

“The match will be rock-paper-scissors again. However, you can only use that ‘rock + scissors + paper’ move one time.”

“Are you serious? I’m just going to say it, but you already have 10 appa…”

“I believe I said I wanted all of them. If it’s not all of them, it’s the same as none.”

An even more refreshing self-righteous reasoning. She tilted her head, ‘what is thy answer?’ she questioned Subaru’s resolve. Hearing this, Subaru thought to himself ‘she’s quite stupid’. Losing herself in the heat of things, and not knowing to quit when you’re ahead is indeed quite foolish. Obsessed with victory

After all, he could never understand the absolute avarice to steal another’s belongings that shaped her very soul. Therefore, upon securing a single appa, and feeling that he had managed to get a good hit on her, Subaru had no reason to accept such a contest.

Even so—

“That old man’s face covered with scars is pushing me forward. Take back the fruit of our friendship. And land a good solid punch on that haughty girl’s face. No! What stupid things are you making me do?!”

“I’ll take that as an affirmative.” The girl confirmed in a deep voice.

Subaru stroked his chin, showing his agreement. Lifting their fists up in air, the final duel entered its starting sequence.

As their fists came down, for a few seconds the world became a slideshow, their thoughts accelerating.

One of the prerequisites for this duel was that the ‘rock-scissors-paper’ move was limited to one use. As this was a sure-kill ultimate move, it would naturally be the first one to be used. This way it’d be a tie, and afterwards it’d turn into a pure game of rock-paper-scissors.

Her tremendous luck was a menace.

Being able to guess heads or tails for 7 consecutive coin tosses, and even being able to recognize which hand he hid it in after he caught it. It was to such a level that if she told him she could predict the future, he'd believe it. But, there's no way that she could actually do that. Knowing future events, and being able to act to change that outcome is beyond a cheat ability. Such a ridiculous ability would be—

"Ah, isn't that describing me!"

"Here I go! Rock-paper-ss…"

Aiming for the moment his concentration was interrupted, her hand swung down. Seeing this, Subaru promptly followed with his own hand.

And—

"Naturally you used 'rock-scissors-paper' move. However, you were too naïve!"

Seeing the 'rock-scissors-paper' shaped hand in front of him, Subaru's face warped into a broad grin.

Faced with Subaru's composed attitude, the girl once again blinked her eyes in bewilderment.

"That hand, what is that?"

Subaru with his thumb sticking up; she called out with a completely chilled voice. Not paying attention to the tone of her voice, he let out a 'harrumph' through his nose.

"This is an even more forbidden move, hidden arts 'bomb'. Even something like the 'rock + scissors + paper' move gets blown away by it, the strongest ultimate technique. Blam, boom, the opponent gets their just deserts."

"What the heck?! Is this just anything goes?!"

"This is the genuine last hidden kind of move. You confirmed the ways you could use the 'rock + scissors + paper' move, but since you didn't ask about different ones I didn't tell you. With this bomb I deal you direct damage! Pulverization! Honorable defeat! Thunderous Ovation!"

Furiously clapping his hands, Subaru drew in the area's ambiance; trumpeting his victory loudly. The girl furiously bit her lip, pointing a trembling finger at Subaru.

"A-Are you saying it doesn't matter as long as you win?! Have you no pride as a man!"

"It's all good as long as you win, as long as you win! Don't misunderstand me! I don't like fighting! I like winning!"

Petty villain full-speed ahead. Forcing out a magnificent speech, Subaru set his foot down. Turning his attention back, he put his hand over the girl's finger pointed out at him.

"In the match just now, since you used the 'rock + scissors + paper' move you indirectly acknowledged my win as legitimate! In other words you have no choice but to admit to my victory! Hahaha, rock-paper-scissors truly is hell!"

"Grrrr…"

Subaru gloating in victory and the girl growling bitterly. But, the girl soon shrugged her shoulders, "I suppose there's no helping it.

Putting her hands on her hips, she puffed out her chest.

"It's as you say, now that it's over and done it's too late to back out now. As such, I'll say that this bet was your win. Now, do as you wish."

The girl took a big step forwards as if to say, 'here'. Taking a stance that emphasized her abundant chest, it was apparent that nothing was supporting her breasts as they shook lightly under her dress. Getting another good look at them once again, they went beyond what he had imagined. This was the first time in his life he'd met such a great person with such giant breasts. Among his ranking of the Roswaal mansion, Emilia's were the most well-formed. Below her were the twins, but even if you were trying to flatter them you couldn't call their's big. As for Beatrice, she didn't even meet the evaluation standards in the first place.

Therefore, with such a girl pushing her body out as an official prize, Subaru swallowed his saliva.

“O-Oi oi oi oi, you’re way too open to this. Can’t you be a little bit more like, “Nooo you dummy, there’s no way I can do something embarrassing like that, so embarassing!”, it wouldn’t hurt you know? If you did that, as a man named Natsuki Subaru, I wouldn’t hesitate to show you some mercy…”

“In the contest my loss was decided, making excuses on top of that is not something that can be allowed. That’d just make me a poor loser. It’s as you say, I got full of myself from my divine blessing and lost track of what was required to win. It was my mistake. Most of all, for me who has never lost this badly before in my life it could be said to be a valuable experience. As such, there’s nothing to feel bad about. Come hold them.”

Saying that, she stepped even further forward. Overpowered by her forcefulness, for as much she stepped forward Subaru retreated back. Scowling at his attitude,

“You, it couldn’t be… now that it’s actually progressed to the stage of touching my breasts, you lost your nerve?”

“Haa?! Ww-what, I don’t know what you’re saying! Who’s ch-ch-ch-ch-chickening out?! Who spread that nonsense?! When did they do it, how many hours ago, how many seconds, how many times did the earth spin around on its axis?!”

“…It seems you’ve fallen helplessly for me. Getting cold feet like this, what a pure love.”

Bringing her palm to her forehead in a shocked manner, she gazed at Subaru with charming eyes. Chills ran up his spine, reflexively he hugged his own body in a feminine manner.

“I don’t care anymore, just please let me go. I want to just take my appa and leave. I have a total cutie that I just got separated from for a bit… I’m probably already going to get a full timeout by now.”

Right around now Emilia was without a doubt earnestly searching for the missing Subaru. His strategy of returning before she got out of the guard station and insisting that he had been patiently waiting the whole time didn't seem like it'd work anymore. Subaru who was led astray by the loveliness in front of his own eyes and wasted all this time had no qualifications to make excuses.

"On top of it all, now that I earned the right to do this I'm hesitating like a no-good bastard. No, the pure-heartedness inside of me is speaking. It's saying that if my first boob-touch isn't with the girl I set my sights on then it's no good!"

"What moldy values… If it's like this I'm not pleased."

To touch or not to touch, the respective positions between the two were starting to reverse. Subaru displaying his apparent virginity and chickening out, on the other hand the girl's pride wouldn't let her happily withdraw after she herself was the one to offer her body. It had truly fallen into a bizarre state of affairs, with one side retreating and one side pushing forward.

"Hmm, this seems like it's going to become rather troublesome."

Abruptly releasing her gaze on Subaru, she turned towards the entrance to the street. Lured in, Subaru turned his attention over there as well.

"Huh, it seems like a bunch of delinquent looking people are coming over here."

"The ones leading the pack are some very familiar looking pieces of trash. Oh dear, it seems these fools don't have a shred of fun in them."

The girl shook her head with an expression that didn't conceal her surprise and disdain. Standing next to her was Subaru in a panic, casting eyes on the alley in the opposite the direction of the oncoming group. He didn't feel any presence of a group coming from that direction, but he had no proof it wasn't a dead-end either.

"Either way, getting caught here definitely feels like a BAD END. Even after hearing Reinhard's name they came back, what the hell are these guys thinking?!"

“They must have found out about your bluff about being acquainted with the Knight among Knights. They’ve got their honor too. Putting together their numbers, they came to pay back their debts. It’s that same tenacity to win you were talking about earlier.”

“What sore losers! Even if I forgive myself for not having any pride, I’m the type that won’t forgive others for their prideless behavior!

The sheer egotism espoused by Subaru and this girl.

Leading as the vanguard of the group, the stooges noticed the pair’s existence. Yelling something, they signaled to the group’s rear and some scary looking men broke into a run.

Subaru seeing this,

“Dammit, today is seriously unlucky!”

It started with his attempted fall from the dragon-carriage, and even more so after he got separated from Emilia. If he messed up at all it likely wouldn’t end pretty. He really hasn’t had any decent luck at all. Forcefully taking the hand of the girl standing up next to him and the bag packed with appa, he put on a hurried retreat —with no idea where he was going he advanced towards the dark.

“Oi, what are you doing, don’t touch me so casually.”

“This isn’t the time for that! If you don’t want to get caught run! Just look at the lewd look on their faces! If you get caught they’d only be able to put that in an adult magazine!”

While forcibly pulling the girl who had little intention of running, “and anyways!” Subaru enunciated out each syllable while rushing forward forcefully.

“You leased out your breasts to me just now! Like I’d let those guys touch them, outrageous! If you get it then dash! B-dash!”

Pulling her arm, he ran down the poorly maintained road; leading her as he headed deeper into the alleys. Behind them, the shouts and footsteps of the men linked together while following in pursuit. He felt his heart beat faster and harder, and felt pain in his lungs—

while aware of that all, Subaru ignored it as he ran deeper and deeper down the extremely narrow alleyway.

2

Emilia got out of the guard station, returning to the main street it was 20 minutes since she left Subaru alone.

Her main objective was getting in touch with Reinhard—Regardless of the time it took, you could say the result ended in failure. Bringing up the subject to her guide Julius,

“Reinhard? For a while now, he’s been busy with something and hasn’t had the time to come here… well, since it’s Lady Emilia I could convey your words to him personally.”

Getting this offer from Julius she somehow or another turned him down, seeing that her objective was crushed she planned to return quickly.

But,

“Julius took up more of my time than I thought.”

“He doesn’t mean any harm, and since I can discern these types of things it wasn’t too uncomfortable for me. Not to mention his colorful and abundant mana, I definitely don’t dislike that.”

Finally getting out of the guard station and onto the street, out from under her silver hair Puck replied to her words. Responding, Emilia nodded her head “yeah,”

“It’s not like I think he’s a bad person. And I think the things he told us were quite useful, I’m not unhappy with any of that, but…”

“Well, he does talk about himself a bit too much… If Subaru were there, what would he call it, ‘someone who can’t read the mood’ or something?”

Seeing Puck laugh dryly, she responded with a long sigh; looking out over the road. Even though it was only 20 minutes, it was plenty enough to get tired of waiting. She felt bad making him wait idle for that long. But, more than that she had been feeling a sense of unease in her heart.

“How to say it, it’s just as expected huh.”

“… I thought he wasn’t the type of kid to wait patiently for 20 minutes.”

The unpleasant sense of apprehension hit the mark. Running her hands through her silver hair, Emilia hung her head in shame. On the street spanning out in front of the nobles district, there was no sign of Subaru who had been told to wait there. They wondered whether or not if Subaru had sought shelter in some building while he waited for them, but, standing outside the guard station for a few minutes there was no sign of him appearing.

“It seems he isn’t here anymore… Puck, can you track him?”

“I can try. Right now Subaru’s mana feels pretty weak as a whole, so if I fail I don’t want you to get mad.”

“That way of talking, you’re becoming more like Subaru. — Anyways, please do it.”

‘Okayyy’, Puck replied softly; pushing his way out through her silver hair he came up to surface. Popping out from under her hood, he settled down on her shoulder. Wiggling his pink nose, he sniffed the air searching for Subaru’s scent—more exactly, he was smelling for any remnants of mana from Subaru’s body.

To a certain degree, if it was the mana of someone he knew then Puck’s nose was quite dependable. The problem was, how long had passed since Subaru had left. And, the problem of the current state of Subaru’s body which lacked mana. Both of those brought him a tinge of worry.

While Puck was using his nose like this, Emilia was scanning the surroundings for clues about Subaru’s whereabouts. There were very few people along the road next to the nobles district’s entrance and especially few near the guardhouse. The restrictions on coming in and out of the nobles district were pretty strict, if you didn’t have business in the nobles district then this probably wasn't the type of place you'd want to hang out at. As such, minus Emilia, the number of people visible on the street was probably few enough to count on one hand.

"… That person, I wonder what they're doing?"

Spotting a person across the street, she was extremely interested in that person's strange actions.

They were standing at a location a few dozen meters away from the guard station, on the opposite side of the entrance to the nobles district, near a path that headed into the commoners district. On the side of the road, was a place with a wooden box that had been established for the purpose of garbage collection. Leaning up against the wooden box, they person was sticking their head and arms in searching for something.

"I wonder if they're looking for a lost item?"

This is what Emilia thought, putting a finger to her lips. Glancing over at her shoulder, Puck was closing his eyes and sniffing through his nose with all his might, still trying to pick up on any remnants. He hadn't signaled for her to start moving yet. Confirming that, 'OK!' she whispered to herself and started walking, heading towards the suspicious person.

If Subaru had been here, or if anyone else had been here for that matter, she would have probably controlled herself. One would normally avoid going up to a person so interested in fishing around in the garbage. But, with Emilia on her own there was nobody around to stop her. And the only one around who could warn her, Puck, was completely oblivious to what she was doing. As such, with no hindrances she had already come up to the person's back.

"Huh, it's not here either, princess. I'm stumped, really. I wonder what happened."

Coming up behind them, the person's grumbles reached her ears. She could already tell from looking at him from behind, but it was a man's voice. A man who's upper body was thrust into the wooden box searching around, he was dressed in slightly dirty lightweight equipment. However, from the fact that the portion around his waist was furnished with a sword as wide as chest one could tell they were exceedingly strong. From the looks of his lower body he was built quite sturdily, there was no doubt at least a portion of that was reflected in his fighting ability.

From the roughness of his voice too, this was someone you'd normally want to avoid touching. But, the person here was someone far outside the norm, a soft-hearted half-elf.

"Um."

"—Mm?"

Being called out to so unreservedly, the man raised a seemingly surprised voice and pulled his head out,

"Gaa!"

Pulling his upper body out of the wooden box, he hit the back of his head strongly against the crate. Leaning over, this time he crashed his chin forcefully against the outside of the crate. Receiving consecutive hits to the head, the man crouched over.

"Ow-owww, it hurts…! What the heck, me, I'm getting too old old for this……"

"A-Are you ok?"

Letting out an oddly pained voice the man consoled himself, as the one who called out to him Emilia felt a bit guilty.

Touching his shoulder,

"Kyaa!"

The man stood up forcefully, Emilia who touched his shoulder was surprised. The man wrapped himself in his arms, turning around to face Emilia behind him.

The man was tall, he had to look down at her. The moment that man’s face met hers, her bluish-purple pupils widened in fright.

Towards this Emilia whose throat was filled with fright, the man pointed a finger and said.

“Oi, don’t touch me so casually little lady. Those that touch me get burned.”

Chapter 9:
Divine Protections, Reunion and Promise

1

Around five minutes after breaking into a run on the rutted road—while being pulled along by the hand, Subaru continued staggering forwards, breathing feebly.

“If you don’t hurry, we’ll be caught. Is this the time to be playing around?”

“Say-saying something like that… Time out, seriously, just a sec…”

When they had first started running, Subaru was in front, but because of a matter of physical constitution, their positions were now switched.

The girl running ahead of him looked unruffled, not even short of breath. And on the other hand, Subaru, unable to handle full-force sprinting for an extended period of time, was soon exhausted.

It must be explained in order to protect Subaru’s pride that his fatigue was partially because he had not yet recovered from his injuries. Considering that Subaru’s strength mid-rehabilitation was lower than usual, his current state was well below even that—it seemed.

“Pathetic. Don’t you think it’s embarrassing, falling behind a delicate maiden such as I?”

“I’ll try justifying it by saying that I’m having trouble because I’m still recovering. …But to be honest, I’m pretty screwed.”

The threat of the hoodlums chasing behind Subaru and the girl was still present. Fortunately, the duo’s head start created quite a large distance between them and the mob. But because there was basically only one path in the alleyway, it was clear that if the two slowed down, they’d be caught. Ideally, they would leave the main alleyway before that happened, but…

“We’re heading towards a dark area with no people…do you have an idea or what?”

He asked the orange hair that was unhesitatingly, rapidly moving forwards. But her answer to the ask was, “Ha, ha, ha, I dunno!” followed by a refreshing,

“Everything I attempt has favorable results. I’ve never needed to think about anything deeply in the past, and I will never have to in the future. Trust in whatever I attempt.”

“I take my hat off to you… Really though, whatever you do, no matter what…?

At this time, there was no doubt that it was thanks to the girl that they had not run into any dead ends. If you consider the possibility that if they exited onto the main street they might be caught like mice running into a trap, it was still too early to assume that something bad would happen if they continued deeper inwards. Nonetheless…

“Our future doesn’t look bright… My body isn’t feewing so good either.”

“—Hmm, we’re in a difficult situation.”

Subaru fumbled through his last words, breathing roughly. In front of his eyes, the girl suddenly stopped. Subaru, who was being pulled along by his hand, also stopped,

“Oi, oi. There’s no time to stop, they’ll close the distance and chase us down,”

Subaru said while making jogging motions to try to get the girl to start moving. But the girl mused over Subaru’s words, then faced him with a bored expression, saying,

“—I’ve lost interest”

“Lost int-…WHAT?!”

"I said, I'm tired of it. In the first place, why should I have to run? I'll decide my own actions. I'm certainly not affected by the actions or words of those ruffians back there."

"I mean, you can say that, but that's not how reality works…?!"

Subaru became impatient, seeing this princessy temper tantrum. Honestly, time was too precious to have this kind of argument. If he wanted to save his own skin, the best option was to leave the girl behind and make a mad dash for safety. But if he did that, he wouldn't be able to achieve his initial goal.

Stuck between a rock and two hard places, Subaru internally struggles with his ideals, reality, and the possibility of escape. Watching the conflicted Subaru, the girl opens her mouth obstinately,

"Hmph. I've decided. —be honored that thou have been allowed to carry me"

"Non, merci!"

He crossed his arms to express his refusal of this seemingly worthless proposal. Seeing Subaru's instant decision, the girl gave an insulted frown, saying,

"It's not as if I let just anyone have the honor of carrying me. Men who do so without permission don't know the meaning of fear."

"Do I look like a macho man who can carry someone while running? Even if I was at peak performance, it'd take all of my strength to carry a girl even skinnier than you! Not to mention that my strength is so far gone my legs are like those of newborn deer! Just look!"

Pointing to his continuously trembling legs, he complained with vigor.

Looking down on Subaru's disgraceful behavior, the girl said, "you good-for-nothing," sighing disgustedly,

"—acura"

She muttered under her breath.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, the moment her whispers reached his eardrums, a faint light appeared, surrounding Subaru. The gold-colored glamour wrapped around the surprised Subaru’s entire body like a veil.

Bathed in comfortable golden light, Subaru raised his two hands in front of his face.

“Wh-What the heck?! I can see an aura materializing… What’s going on?!”

Said Subaru, extremely confused at the changes going on on his body. The girl, who had been hidden in the shadows behind him, walked calmly around him, saying,

“If thou does not wish to carry me, then we shall do this”

“Whoa…oof!”

Subaru is interrupted as the girl easily throws herself onto Subaru’s back.

With her arms wrapped around his neck, Subaru planted his feet firmly into the ground. Although the girl was petite, he would nevertheless had to have bear her whole body weight—but this preparation turned out to be unnecessary.

“What the heck? You’re as light as a feather… Wait, no, it’s me that’s unusually strong?”

It didn’t even matter that she was on his back; it was like he didn’t feel her body weight at all. Moreover, the appa bag in his hand also became weightless, and his legs that had been jogging suddenly felt as nimble as if they had been replaced with brand new ones.

“Anyone who receives my blessing can work like carthorses. Including thou.”

“Whoa, well I don’t entirely understand, but this works! Natsuki

Subaru, takeoff—!”

He starts running, with a hand on the girl’s hip to make sure she didn’t fall off.

Light, light, so light were his feet. The lightness was as if he had shedded the shell that was his physical body, and his speed was such that a single step rivaled five of his steps previously.

The distance that had once shortened because of their pause once again widened, and this time, there was no sign of it decreasing.

His senses were sharpened—to the point where he could even keenly detect the presence and movements of the men in the distance. Subaru was very satisfied with how every part of him had been boosted to the utmost.

“This is amazing! My body’s so light! I’m not scared of anything anymore!”

Bending over to reduce air resistance, Subaru moved with such vigor that he became the wind. He narrowed his field of vision, and sped down the alleyway towards a small street, all the while turning just his neck to face the girl, saying,

“Now that we’ve gained a lil’ distance and we’ve got time to spare, I’ll ask this… What got you tangled up with them in the first place?”

To people wary of authority like that group, you’d think that someone as eye-catching as this girl would conversely be harder to lay a hand on. No matter how you looked at it, she didn’t look like the other townspeople.

Or maybe, it was possible that her absurdity was so extreme you couldn’t even consider that.

After hearing that question, the girl softly snorted with her shapely nose, saying, “nothing, really,” continuing with,

“I got separated from my companion while sightseeing to kill time. I simply happened across those guys when I stopped to check out that unusual dirty alleyway while looking for my companion.”

“You can’t have gotten in a fight with them just because of that…”

“It turned out that way because I jeered at their strange style of dress.”

“IT’S YOUR FAULT?!”

“I won’t be friendly with such easy to anger people.”

“Learn to watch that slippery tongue!”

The typhoon-like girl’s sense of compassion had been completely dwarfed by the absurdity of their misfortune. Even though in this situation, the person that thoroughly got the short end of the stick was Subaru.

In the middle of this rousing quarrel, Subaru came across a street that turned perpendicularly to his right ahead of him. Killing his momentum by kicking the wall, he used the recoil to turn right—then suddenly was struck with an idea.

“If we continue along the roads, we’ll never lose them. So instead of running along the path, I’ll make a path—!”

“Was the effect of my spell so strong that it affected thine head?”

“Don’t be mean! Observe, and regret doubting me!”

He declared, changing gear to go even faster than before.

The girl riding on his back shared the same field of view. Because of that, she knew that would be no outcome other than Subaru crashing into the wall directly in front of him.

She tightened her grip around his neck, saying,

“Hey you. What art thou thinking? We’ll crash if we keep going…”

“Stop nitpicking and just watch! Fire! This is it, the wall-riding ability learned from that awful sticky-fingered slum girl Felt!!”

Saying this, he vigorously planted his feet on the ashy brown wall, taking two steps that ignored gravity. With a sound, Subaru ascended. performing a wall-walk that would make Newton half-cry —.

“Red King Crab!”

Except no such thing happened.

On the fourth step, his foot slipped, he rotated downwards, falling with his face towards the ground. Subaru faceplanted without adjusting to reduce damage, and rolled on the ground in agony, screaming,

“IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTSSSS!”

“What art thou doing?”

The girl who had jumped off Subaru who was now covered in wounds, and eyed him as if she was looking at a strange exhibit. In her hand was the appa bag, which had avoided the misfortune of falling.

Relieved at seeing her safety, Subaru started to move to get up, saying

“Shit, that was a huge failure… Stupid Felt, showing me something that would give me false hope…”

It wasn’t very good to be cursing people who aren’t present, but if you’re going to be falsely blaming people, the golden haired girl was a good scapegoat. In the first place, it was true that she had done the wall-climb, although she has no recollection of teaching Subaru that skill. Of course, it’s not as if Subaru remembers being taught, either. Having displayed that ostentatious failure, Subaru scratched his head and tries to stand up and pull himself together.

“Huh, what? My legs… Ouch! Shit, hey, they really freaking hurt?! I only twisted it but it feels like I broke it!”

“It’s because thou exceeded thine body’s maximum limits. It’s obvious thine limbs will be more sensitive to pain than usual.”

“Obvious in what world?!”

She spoke of the side effects of Subaru’s buff matter-of-factly. Not only did she show no sympathy for Subaru who was moaning in pain, but curtly ordered him, “Now stand up.” But Subaru refused, with a childish, “Wahh, it hurts so bad I’ll cry.”

The distance and time they had gone to great lengths to earn once again decreased, and they could once again sense the presence of the approaching ruffians.

At that time:

“Just as I was thinking it’s been a while since I’ve seen you, what are you’re doing?”

Slowly, the owner of that voice peeked his large body out of the road on the right they were supposed to turn into.

They raised their line of sight. Where a normal person’s head was supposed to be just barely reached this man’s chest. When they looked further up, they could see a moustachioed bald head.

“You-you’re…”

A familiar brawny old man was looking down at them.

“Old Man Rom is here! We’re saved—!!”

“As usual it’s still early and you’re already irritating me. I’ll leave you behind, brat.”

“Save us HELP PLS! It’s not just virtue that’s in danger but innards too!”

The former danger being the girl’s, and the latter being Subaru’s.

That that the bad guys definitely peddled illegal organs was only Subaru’s prejudice at work, but hearing that, the old man—Rom—looked at the girl’s appearance and Subaru, saying,

“What, have you stuck your neck into dangerous situations again?

Your knack for causing a ruckus with female companions isn’t to be underestimated.”

“I don’t need that kind of pervy old-man comments from you! Help us!”

He gritted his teeth against the pain and stood up, pleading with Old Rom while jumping on one leg. The man nodded his hairless head as if troubled, appraising the silent girl all the while. The refined girl clearly expressed her discomfort at the treatment, saying,

“How darest thou look at me with thine ill-bred eyes, thou dirty old man.”

“I shouldn’t be talking, but you sure love to bad-mouth! What are you saying to the old man who’s about to snatch us from the jaws of hell? Please don’t think bad of us, Old Man Rom. Both of us are just a little too blunt!”

“You’re as good at decreasing motivation as usual, runt. Hide, quick!”

Covering the girl’s ever-ready-to-spout-poison mouth, Old Man Rom looks around, then takes off towards a hiding place. There were bundles of lumber leaning against the wall, and it looked as if two people could just fit and hide in there.

He pushed the girl in first, then Subaru by his behind, as if to stopper up the hole. The girl wanted to complain about the grime, but Subaru covered her mouth so decisively that she suppressed her dissatisfaction.

“Old Man Rom, everything’s OK”

“What in the world is ‘oakkeh’… Anyways, I’ll hide you with my body, so don’t move, you hear? If you get spotted it’s trouble for me too.”

Even as he lectured them gruffly, Old Man Rom moved to cover them from sight with his huge body. The two held their breaths behind Old Man Rom, who leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

Merely tens of seconds after they had hidden themselves, the sound of several footsteps rushing down the nearby alleyway could be heard—,

“The fu-! Thought it was a brat, but it turned out to be an old geezer!”

Swooping in from the direction of the noise, the man running at the front of the pack jeered at the gargantuan Old Man Rom. All Old Man Rom had to do was silently fix a level glance at him for the man’s spirit to break, as he took a step back, uttering, “uh, uhh.”

“What’s this noise for? I won’t be impressed by you trying to frighten the elderly, you know.”

It wasn’t as if he had said anything particularly threatening, but when a behemoth like Old Man Rom says something ill-humored in his low voice, it was already intimidating in itself.

Displaying just the reaction Old Man Rom was going for, the man prepared to turn tail and run back to his pursuer companions, but,

“I was wondering who he was, but isn’t that Old Man Cromwell?”

Shouted a man in the mob, pointing at Old Man Rom.

Subaru raised his head at hearing that unfamiliar name, but the one who had an even bigger reaction to being called was Old Man Rom himself.

His already wrinkled face furrowed more with bitterness as he said,

“I don’t like being called that name.”

“Are ya in the position to be making complaints? I’m askin’ ya, wouldn’t you think I’d become a big-shot in the slums if I smashed down your stolen goods warehouse?”

“It’s gathered a lot of dirt over the years. It’s not spick and span any longer… I’ll allow you to do whatever you like,” Old Man Rom's expressionless response to the lily-livered men, who then thought to themselves that they really didn't want to incite a bigger reaction than that. The man shrugged his shoulders, saying,

"Well, do as you like. If you're fixing to bow your head to Russel, come pay your respects sometime soon. The longer you wait, the worse your position looks."

The man only managed to say that much, and walked towards the men behind him to continue down the alleyway, turning around at the last minute to ask,

"Th-That's right. Old Man Cromwell… Have two brats come around these parts?"

"Haven't seen 'em. Ah, you lot as well. Have you seen my acquaintance, that blonde lass?"

"Dunno. What, is that brat you took in so important? An old fool and a young one, you two are."

With a careless wave, the men leave, this time for sure.

Old Man Rom stared unwavering at their receding backs, chewing his lip as if to quell his anger.

Gazing at his profile from the gaps between the scrap wood, Subaru couldn't do anything that would be of comfort. It was a happy thing to have bumped into Old Man Rom again after such a long time. But today he seemed slightly different to the Old Man Rom Subaru knew.

"Even his skin…"

"Hm?"

His line of thought broken by a murmur, Subaru looked around. Right beside him, breathtakingly close, was the pretty face of the girl who was leaning over, and his hand was still over her lips in his previous effort to shut her up.

She mumbled through her covered mouth,

"Ftopkwabwaengfwawafwasumouth!"

Then came the sharp pain of her chomping down mercilessly with her canines.

"—AYIIIII!!"

Subaru's shrill, puppy-like howl rang through the silent alley.

2

"Thanks for hiding us, Old Man Rom. I thought maybe you got knocked silly over the head, but it looks like everything turned out well."

"You… Those fellas are still on the prowl, so it'd be better if you weren't so optimistic."

"You're huge, so don't say something so small-minded! I can handle such lowly people myself just fine! YEAH!"

Seeing Subaru's bright, toothy smile and thumbs-up, Old Man Rom heaved a tired sight.

They switched locations from the alleyway that was even narrower than the one from before to a slightly more open road. This was the place that Old Man Rom had led Subaru and company to, after saying he would take them somewhere less eye-catching.

The threat of the chasing men had disappeared, and Subaru and the girl could finally breathe easy.

From that breath of freedom were these initial words:

"Hey, thou. Who is that old man that speaks to thou so familiarly? Explain,"

said the girl who had maintained silence until now, pulling on Subaru's sleeve agitatedly.

She pointed haughtily at Old Man Rom with her chin, and Subaru answered, nodding, "This old man is from the slums in the capital. Old Man Rom is a giant and the stingy boss of a group of thieves and ruffians. His special skills are his bad eyesight, spoiling children, and acting tough."

"I get that you're happy to see this old man you've been missing for so long, but aren't you getting ahead of yourself, kid?"

Catching the finger Subaru was pointing at him, Old Man Rom chided Subaru. Subaru answered, "my bad, my bad," with little remorse, and continued,

"To be fair, even if I'm joking around, it's not as if I'm spreading lies."

"So it's partially true. In short, he's an old, stingy, short-sighted thief with bark but no bite from the slums. How pitiful, for someone who has lived for so long."

"Your companion is as irritating as you are, brat!"

Subaru and the girl exchanged shrugs in front of the stomping Old Man Rom.

Then Subaru faced the disheartened Old Man Rom, saying,

"Either way, it's true that I'm glad we met again, Old Man Rom. To be frank, we were doomed back there, so I didn't have a way to 'confirm our circumstances'.

"I'm not sure if you're quick at changing your tune or you're a little unstable, kid. And you, young-in, would look more spirited if you opened your mind."

Old Man Rom smiles wryly, and gives Subaru a once-over. Seeing the wounds all over Subaru's exposed skin, he says,

"It's funny coming from me, but it looks like you got messed up pretty bad by that knife-user."

"Nah, the wounds I got from her are almost all on my stomach, so everything else is from after that event."

"It's been barely a week since then? What happened?"

"It's a long, tiresome story, so never mind. I'm alive, and that's all that matters. I'm satisfied with that. Anyways, speaking of,"

Hiding his scars from the surprised Old Man Rom's view, Subaru points towards the slums (or at least where he thinks they are), and once again brings up talk of the event.

"What happened after the uproar at the Stolen Goods Warehouse? Since you lost your workplace, have you been eating properly? If you're only eating side dishes you'll starve."

"I don't understand the second half of whatever you said, but I'm getting by, more or less. It's not as if the Stolen Goods Warehouse was my only livelihood. If you've lived as long as I have in the slums, you'd have lots of connections."

Old Man Rom replied laughingly to Subaru, who looked as worried as a mom whose child had gone to the big city. After all, there was no way that he could have been trusted with the role of taking care of stolen goods if he wasn't a person who was trusted in the slum community. He probably wasn't bluffing about having "connections."

Either way, if it hadn't been for the scars from that particular event and the worries of life after that, Subaru would have been relieved. Of course, he was substantially less heartbroken about him when compared to how he felt about Emilia and the girls of the Roswaal mansion.

"That's why I wasn't really worried about you, Old Man Rom."

"Sorry for saying something distasteful suddenly, but I too have something to ask of you."

Old Man Rom abruptly informs the meaninglessly tsundere-ing Subaru in a lower voice. Seeing the earnesty in his face, Subaru adjusted the attitude he had adopted until now. At that time, his sleeve was suddenly pulled behind him.

He turned around. The girl was standing closer to him than was necessary, and he was startled by the beautiful face in such close proximity to his. Then she said,

“I’m bored.”

“Now’s not the time to be bratty.”

“It’s not me being selfish, the world just has it in for me.”

“You’re so fussy. Then, I’ll give you a quiz. In this world, are there more uphills or downhills? LET’S THINKING!”

Slap-dashedly abandoning the girl to her thoughts, Subaru once again faced Old Man Rom. Then waved his hand as if to say, “go on,” to Old Man Rom, who was irritated at being cut off.

He sighed at Subaru’s attitude, then shook his neck as if to adjust his spirits, and said,

“Kid. Do you know where Felt went?”

“…Haven’t you heard? Apparently she was taken by that bastard Reinhard.”

“Reinhard… The Sword Saint? What would the Knight Among Knights want with Felt?”

Old Man Rom tilted his head as if he really didn’t know. Subaru, commiserating with the old man’s unhappiness, thought “It’s definitely because he got knocked over the head,” then suddenly realized the inconsistency between Old Man Rom’s knowledge and the events at the Stolen Goods Warehouse.

He recalled that during that event Old Man Rom had lost consciousness before Reinhard and his men. After that and before Subaru too lost consciousness, there had been no instance where Old Man Rom had been awake while Reinhard was there. In short,

“The abandoned Old Man Rom had awoken at his destroyed warehouse with no one around to explain what happened, and was left to stare dumbfounded at the ruins of what was once his home.”

“I didn’t fall into such a sorry state. When I regained consciousness, there were palace guards stationed. It was helpful they treated my wounds, but they left me alone soon after.”

“Ah, that’s true. That’s a little awkward then.”

After all, people who have done bad deeds don’t have the sensation of having lived if they wake up in a police hospital. It’s not strange for them to want to get out before anyone starts asking any questions.

Old Man Rom had left the guard station before being able to ask more about the situation, he had no contact with Reinhard, who was holding Felt in custody, and it seems he has been left dangling ever since.

“So that’s why our stories don’t add up. OK, then, I’ll just fill you in on the bits after you lost conscious, and before I lost conscious.”

With that as the preface, gesticulating, Subaru told the story of the grand decisive Battle of the Stolen Goods Warehouse, ‘Sword Saint vs Bowel Hunter’, a sort of one-man VTR.

Old Man Rom watched Subaru in wonder as he displayed his surprising yet useless performance skill, and even the girl who had looked bored watched him in fascination, eyes glittering.

“Then I said this to the surprised girl: —I want you to tell me your name.”

“What—! I said that, I did!”

“Ho-ho, isn’t that an elegant way of saying it. I don’t dislike it.”

With that slight derailment, the battle saga ended.

All three were a little fired up from that explanation, but the first to come to his senses was Old Man Rom, who said,

“This isn’t the time nor place to be doing things like that. Ah—, in other words, you, kid, don’t know anything beyond what happened when you and Felt were taken by Reinhard?”

"Well, yeah…"

"Isn't it obvious that the number of uphills and downhills is the same?!"

"Baumkuchen!"

Eating a body-blow from the girl who had suddenly arrived at an epiphany, Subaru squatted down in agony. Swinging the fist that struck Subaru, the girl seemed satisfied, declaring "From henceforth, do as you will."

After recovering from his shocked daze, Old Man Rom looked down pityingly at the groaning Subaru.

"What I'm saying may be indirect, but I think you should pick your companions more carefully."

"It's not like I'm especially picking them! I just wait for them to pick me! I'm in the middle of a powerful DAZE that won't disappear from eyesight!"

Jumping to his feet, Subaru poses, pointing out Old Man Rom's incorrect assumption. Then, clearing his throat, Subaru once again returns to the previous topic.

"Those longtime connections of yours, can one of them personally make an inquiry at Reinhard's house?"

"If I had such powerful allies, would I be holed up in a shack drinking booze? If that's the only way, I'm in trouble. —I can't think of anyone except the Astrea household."

That last half was a murmur that barely left Old Man Rom's lips, and didn't reach Subaru's ears. Looking at the serious-expressioned Old Man Rom, Subaru shrugged as if giving up, and said,

"Then, I might be able to speak with Reinhard on my end, so if I learn something I'll let you know. I've always thought that I should see how Felt is."

"Those are comforting words… You too, have some unusual connections. Any relation to that little lass over there?”

Remembering Subaru’s temperament at their previous chance meeting, Old Man Rom pointed Subaru’s source of confidence at not Subaru himself but at the people around him.

Although that judgement itself is not wrong, associating it with that girl is incorrect thinking.

“No, not at all. In the first place, I don’t even know that girl’s name or anything.”

“Youngin, why are you getting into feuds with allies you don’t even know the names of?!”

“Looking back, I didn’t know Emilia-tan’s name either, so this kind of thing isn’t that strange for me.”

Resigned, Old Man Rom put his finger on the nonchalant Subaru’s forehead, closed his eyes, and mused, “even considering it is useless.”

Then, Old Man Rom looked straight at Subaru and said,

“Then, without going through that young lass, you think it’s possible to create an opportunity to speak to the Sword Saint?”

“At least more than you who have nothing, Old Man Rom, I think. Put your faith in me, as you would when you cross an old fishing bridge!”

“The saying is to ‘tap a bridge as you cross it’, so how did it become this…”

Old Man Rom nodded at Subaru, who was beating his chest triumphantly, as if he was already prepared for the worst.

“Very well. I’ll leave it to you, youngin. Once you learn about Felt’s whereabouts, let me know. I’ll repay your kindness.”

“Don’t be so earnest. Don’t tell me you really are soft for children?”

“—Maybe so. That girl is my granddaughter of sorts. So please”

“-Then, it’s been asked.”

There wasn’t even a rebuttal to Subaru’s bold assertion. Subaru’s mouth slackened slightly at Old Man Rom’s direct affirmation.

As for the golden haired girl: what would she think if she knew she was loved this much? It’s her so, she’d probably turn beet red, all the while putting on a tough front.

“If I find news, how should I contact you?”

“Good point… There’s a shop called “Kadomon” on the merchant’s street. If you act intimidating and say my name, you’ll be able to contact me. Much obliged.”

“Aight, aight, Kadomn… Kadomon?”

Subaru tilted his head. It seems as if that word had been etched into his memory recently.

Anyways, as long as he knew where the merchant street was, there was no problem. If he combed that street carefully, he would find that store.

With a nod to indicate understanding, Subaru and Old Man Rom entered a steadfast agreement.

Subaru owed Old Man Rom for having made it this far, and he didn’t have a reason to refuse either. Doing what he had originally set out to do, and being able to help ease the life of an old man whose days were numbered was profit in and of itself.

“That’s right. I should probably explain to Emilia-tan. About this being for my own sake as well or something.”

“Did you say something before?”

“No, not really. Speaking of, it’s a bit soon, but I know a way you can be of use.”

Subaru pointed again at Old Man Rom, rocking his hips to get Old Man Rom's attention.

Old Man Rom frankly didn't look too pleased at being asked for a favor so soon, but then again that was the deal they made moments ago. With a sour face, he said, "go on."

To that, Subaru said, "It's no big deal, but:"

"To be honest, both that girl and I are completely lost, you see. My adventure ends thus, without having been fulfilled my promise! Or something like that, so please guide us out to a main street."

"…I see. I got it, leave it to me. Which street?"

"Outside the station would be great."

"Hey brat, didn't you just hear I ran away from the station?!"

Old Man Rom's shout echoed through the alleyway.

About an hour had passed since Subaru had strayed from Emilia.

Chapter 10:
Confluence and Farewell

1

“At first I thought this dirty place had a certain jumbled charm in its own right, now that I’m familiar with it there’s nothing interesting here at all. It’s no use at all in staving off my boredom.”

The end of her arm raised, while the hem of her dress fluttered; the orange-haired girl muttered without breaking her bored look.

“It’s only been a few minutes and you say you’ve seen everything there is to see in the back-alleys. The capital’s architect would be rolling in his grave if he knew his city was being evaluated as boring.”

“It’s because this world was made for me, that’s why everything in this world exists to entertain me. Why should I care about the opinion of someone who designed such a boring city? When you talk about the royalty, it seems they lacked a discerning eye. There’s a reason they died off recently.”

“Y-You… what are you doing saying something so disrespectful in the king’s own back-yard!”

Just hearing her words made his heart sink, even knowing there wasn’t anyone around in the vicinity Subaru couldn’t help but shrink down and cast glances around himself. Seeing Subaru’s caution, or rather cowardice, the girl flared her nostrils.

“What a boring reaction, and an idiotic irrational fear. Being this afraid, thou’s caliber is no different from the many thousands of innumerable commoners after all.”

“I already know I’m a mediocre, common, average, ordinary person from the lower class so I don’t care. I already got wrapped up in one fight today thanks to you, I don’t want to get dragged in any more cause of your irresponsible words.”

“What foolishness. You should be proud to follow the brilliant path I walk, even if it’s a minor role. Showing discontent goes against all reason.”

“I don’t want to take any more time like this and trouble my companions! I’m already out time wise, but the more time that passes puts me in an even worse position! OUT OF CONSIDERATION!!”

Thinking of being stared at by Emilia’s cold gaze, shivers shot up his spine from fear. He also felt a strange sense of chill. Even though he didn’t know what this mysterious feeling was, he knew it was the kind of feeling that he didn’t want to have the misfortune of learning about it in more detail. As such, he wanted to avoid sticking it out with this egotistical girl for any longer.

Like so, Subaru was reminded of this impending danger. But, the girl ridiculed these very fears of Subaru as ridiculous.

“What stupidity. How rude to think of another’s existence while in my presence. In actuality I also have a companion, but I think nothing of them getting lost.”

“No, that’s something you should think a little about! Don’t you feel sorry for them?”

The girl he was escorting was like the incarnation of arrogance. Even without meeting this other person he knew from this short period of time how much hardship they had to endure, the flames of sympathy flared up in his heart. No doubt they were thrown about by this unreasonable young lady, they must be a beautiful woman with an unfortunate fate and a neat and tidy personality; tossed around on the whims of the lady they serve. For Subaru who had a weakness for elegant characters, this was definitely a person he wanted to see for himself.

“On the other hand, coming in contact with them means I’d have to deal with this one as well though.”

“Calling me ‘this person’, I see you’re getting quite full of yourself. If you upset me too much, your life is yours to lose.”

“I’m sick and tired of that kind of talk! Just how much do I have to watch out to not trigger any death flags, damn it. Good girl, good girl, please don’t be angry!”

Walking side-by-side, he cut in front of her, waving his hands with a flutter and calling out in a playful voice. The girl frowned like she had some thoughts about his attitude; abruptly laughing.

“Well, it’s fine. A fool is only fit to be called a fool because they act like one. For the likes of a jester who doesn’t even have the self-reflection to be ashamed of themselves, there’s no reason for me to dirty my hand.”

“You said it in a smart sounding way, but you’re basically calling me an idiot right?”

“If I called thee an idiot that’d be just as expected. Being aware of it or not aware of it is the difference.”

Saying it with a look of enlightenment, the girl shifted the focus of her ridicule to Subaru. Receiving such an unpleasant gaze, Subaru was aware of just how bad a compatibility he had with this girl.

“Well, I guess it’s fine.”

We’re originally just strangers who happened to meet. We don’t even know each other’s names, once we get out onto the main street I can turn my back and probably never meet her again in my life. Even though he could go out of his way to put up with unpleasant feelings, he didn’t have such an amiable personality to be able to get along with just anybody. The thing that Subaru hated the most was trying to spend time turning something he disliked into something he liked. While making this decision, he still wasn’t going to leave her until they were safely out onto the main street. That’s just the kind of person Subaru was.

The two continued on with their dangerous but friendly chat in this manner. Old Man Rom, the only person who could have intervened, was nowhere to be seen. He disliked going out onto the main street, and declined to accompany Subaru and the girl on their way. Although he hadn’t met the old man in a long time, from his aloof attitude he could infer the position Rom was in wasn't all too great.

For Subaru whose understanding of the slums and the capital was too shallow, he didn't realize just how valuable the loothouse was for the people of the slums there. However, judging from the conversation of the thugs earlier it seems Old Man Rom's situation was well known. Losing the loothouse, his situation certainly couldn't have gone in a rosier direction.

"It's a rather heartless story, not something I can do anything about though."

Even guessing what his situation was, there was nothing he could do for him. In a certain sense you could say that Subaru was the one responsible for destroying the loothouse in the first place. From Old Man Rom's perspective Subaru is the abominable villain that destroyed his livelihood. Even though Old Man Rom could have blamed him for it, he didn't hear anything about it from him. Old Man Rom's definitely a reasonable guy after-all. Thinking of how likeable Rom was, he only wished he could do something for him.

If I want to repay him, I have to at least find out where Felt went off to.

Even though it was a bit of a detour, following the route Old Man Rom told them they'd be able to get out safely to the main street. For the sake of his own well-being he naturally wanted to avoid meeting the thugs for a second time; other than the unpleasant chatter coming from the girl along the way he really didn't have any reason to complain.

"Thinking along those lines, it looks like we finally found the exit."

Breaking out from the winding alleyways, out from the darkness there was finally a ray of bright sunlight piercing through onto the street. Seeing an uninterrupted stream of people crossing, with all the liveliness it seems the place they wound up at was close to the business district. Thinking that his agony was over, Subaru turned to the girl.

"Now that we're back in the open, from now on you and I are no more than strangers. I've got to go look for my cute-cutey-companion and I'd like to avoid further trouble from sticking around with you. Your companion is probably looking for you desperately as well, just don't move around too much and they'll find you."

Cold-blooded, cold-hearted, and steeling himself for abuse, Subaru put his foot down between him and the girl firmly. Until now he had gotten wrapped up in the pace of things so there was a tinge of him getting back at her here, but he also judged that if he didn't say it plainly the girl in front of him probably wouldn't pick up on his intentions.

Possibly because he said it so clearly, the girl didn't appear to be taking it as 'working out in her favor.' Regardless, she didn't forget to laugh intrepidly.

"Something as obvious as thou and I being unrelated, there's no need to go out of one's way to say it. Thou are nothing more than one of countless pebbles placed for my stepping. There's no need for someone like me, who has personally received the favor of the world, to be related to likes of a stone on the road…

—it's not like it's bothering me."

Crossing her arms and puffing out her abundant chest, the girl glanced apprehensively at Subaru, averting her eyes when they met his. Her speech and actions were completely opposites. She was so obvious even the notoriously dim-witted Subaru could figure it out.

"You act arrogant yet you still care about what people think about you?! You're such a pain!"

"It's the world's natural order for me to be loved by all. Going against that truth, you're the one who's strange. Rather I'm the one who's shocked at your lack of common sense."

"While I'm rather confident in my lack of common sense, you're the last person I want to hear that from!"

As if the previously tense atmosphere was never there, Subaru raised his voice boldly and dove in. Even though, if he left now he'd only elicit some bitter feelings and be soon forgotten just like he preferred, but there was just something about her attitude. She was undoubtedly beautiful, and he didn't exactly hate this new side of her.

She was incredibly egotistical and spoke like she didn't care about other's feelings, yet she was afraid of being disliked.

Looking at her like this he couldn't settle down.

“Aah! Alright alright, I get it. I don't hate you, OK?”

Like he had somehow rid himself of his malicious tone, Subaru smiled bitterly while answering the girl. Seemingly dissatisfied with this, she scrunched her face in discontent, “So what?” she started out,

“Being loved is only natural. Thou say some obvious things.”

“Aww, that's right~ you have the mind of a baby and everyone loves the baby!~”

Making silly faces was a staple for when you go to a social gathering with the neighbor's baby. It's always been a hit with the mothers. Although at the time he hadn't necessarily been trying to make a silly face, that was just how he looked normally, so he had some bitter feelings remaining from that.

Using those sad memories from that unpleasant experience as a basis for his approach, he was sure it'd receive a standing ovation, but what was important was how the girl responded to it.

“Hmph, thou are a wretched fool.”

Far from laughing she let out a sigh, putting a finger to her forehead she closed her eyes and shook her head. Ignoring Subaru's face, still frozen in a funny look.

“I don't know if you're aware of it or not, but it appears your behavior is ingrained into your being. Hardly a charming feature. It's simply a brittle husk to hide your own weakness. I can't bear to watch your dumb face any further.”

“The first half you were saying some pretty serious things, but for the last part did you really have to comment my how my face looks?!”

“If you’re going to stubbornly continue with that, then it’s none of my concern.”

Wrapping up the conversation like that, she made no allusion to Subaru’s previous behavior. Losing his opportunity to put the strange look on his face back to normal, the girl said her part and tilted her head at him innocently while he was stuck with a warped expression on his face.

Subaru had no idea what she wanted to say. According to her actions or attitude or speech pattern she had no regard for other people. Even if he investigated this further he probably wouldn’t get a clear answer. Thinking along those lines, Subaru gave up on trying to decipher her previous statements.

In a sense, he deemed her an existence that was impossible to come to an understanding with, but on this occasion perhaps he was avoiding coming to terms with that. But, while he was still stuck on how he should respond, he didn’t get his opportunity to form a reply.

That’s because—

“Found you!”

The moment they came onto the street, the two were greeted by a voice. Unlike the darkness of the inner-alleys, out on the main street the sunlight beat down harshly from above. They poked their heads out from under darkness to a sunny spot; Subaru narrowed his eyes as they were scorched by the intense light.

A girl wearing a white robe almost enveloped in light was looking at Subaru. With a seemingly troubled, tired look, she scrunched her noble eyebrows; from under her hood, silver hair swayed in radiance. Among her well-kept looks, the relief on her face was shown plain alongside a warm smile, and a difficult to describe emotion flickered in her bluish-purple eyes.

With just one look at her beautiful face wearing such a worried look, he could tell just how much his going missing had weighed on her heart. While on one hand he was sorry about making her worry, having her worry so much about him made him somewhat happy as a man. The love relations between a man and a woman were a rather complex thing.

"Ah, Emili…"

Coming across the street just now, the person he wanted to meet the most came to see him. Being able to meet up earlier than expected, his face was beaming as he called out her name. But, that was all torn about abruptly with a sudden strong sense of foreboding.

Next to Emilia letting out her soft sigh of relief, there was the shadow of another person. He could tell it was a muscly man with a well-built body. The words that popped into Subaru's mind were "Mr. Netorare."

"Hey, what do you think you're doing! Who are you to Emilia-tan?!"

Stepping forward rapidly, he immediately wedged himself between Emilia and the other man. Hiding her behind his back, he pointed his finger and glared—the moment he thought "I'd love to see this bastard's face!" his face hardened.

"Oi oi, little lady. Your pal over here has a few screws loose. Is this going to be alright?"

Shrugging his shoulders like that, he called out to Emilia in a booming but friendly voice. His voice had a few hard to distinguish grumbles mixed in.

It was only natural considering his head was entirely covered with a jet-black color full face helmet. A helmet that concealed his entire face, if it was only that then it probably wouldn't have stood out so much. This was the capital after all, a great number and variety of people travel back and forth along these roads. The likes of which naturally included those dressed as knights and sorcerers, you could say that type of outfit was rather popular. If he was going around with full body armor Subaru probably wouldn't be this surprised.

Even so, Subaru was dumbfounded by this man's appearance. That was because this man was not wearing a full armor suit, but was dressed in a strange manner not like what was usually seen in the capital.

"Immediately getting treated like a home-wrecker by a girly-man like you, this is new even for me. Gets me excited."

"Right back at you, your fashion sense is terrible."

"Hey kid, you don't know how to talk to your elders. I'm a cool dude, so I'll let you off this time but if you get on my bad side your head's gonna' fly."

Faced with the maniacally screaming and pointing Subaru, the man happily tapped on his own neck demonstratively.

His irregularity didn't stop at his head—no, I suppose it was irregular precisely because it did stop at his head.

A jet-black full-face helmet. From the neck below, normally there would be a set of matching armor. But, in reality there was no armor below the neck, instead he had on some light linen attire made from cheap looking materials. It didn't look like it was made from special material or anything like that, it was just some simple light garb. It wasn't just his shirt, his pants were the same way, and on top of it all he was even wearing Japanese-style wooden sandals.

That combination already didn't make any sense. In terms of style, Subaru's jersey was already considered pretty weird but it was nothing compared to this guy's outfit. He couldn't rule out that this was maybe the standard outfit in this world, but…

"It isn't like that, right Emilia-tan?!"

"Don't worry, I was surprised by his appearance too."

“Yep, she was really surprised, it was cute. When she asked to join me after learning I was looking for a lost kid, it was my turn to be surprised!”

With a giggling laugh, the man readily recounted his encounter with Emilia. Hearing this, Subaru stared vacantly at Emilia,

“Emilia-tan, even though being super-nice is one of your good points, you should choose more wisely. Do you know why a poisonous mushroom looks poisonous? It’s because it wants you to think “Huh, that’s poisonous. I probably shouldn’t eat that because I’d die.” It’s telling you that to prevent any damage before it occurs you know?”

“Oi oi, hearing that it’s almost like you’re saying I’m somebody dangerous, that’s a bit harsh you know?”

“For someone as blatantly suspicious looking as you, from where I’m from if you even got in the vicinity of a child you’d get reported immediately. They’d hold a community assembly at the nearby elementary schools warning about you.”

It was to the level that they’d be circulating flyers about a suspicious man just because you walked down the street. This was maybe going a bit too far, but it was probably Subaru’s prejudice against him than an actual concern for the children.

While continuing those baseless delusions et cetera, Subaru turned to Emilia.

“Anyways. Emilia-tan, aren’t I always telling you to watch out for cars and men? Especially the men, if you so much as give them a smile they’re all wolves that will… wait, are you angry?”

“Since you seem to have some things you want to say, I’m just wondering if you remember what I had asked you to do. I don’t mean it in a bad way.”

He poked a hornet’s nest; regretting his poor choice of words he felt like burying his face. Fortunately for him what seemed to soon be a lecture was unexpectedly interrupted. The one taking that action wasn't one of the 3 participants in the current conversation,

"Hmph, to be waiting here at my intended destination, thou sure pay a lot of attention to details. Thou hast a more commendable spirit than I first thought, Al."

"…Honestly, it's more of an accidental fluke of a coincidence, but if I said that it'd put princess in a bad mood. Too annoying, so I'll just play along with it. Aah, it's just as you say!"

As the girl stepped forward, haughtily addressing him—the man called Al laughed heartily. Taking his giant arm he tousled the girl's orange-colored hair messily with his hand."

"Nothing bad about coincidences, but the fellow you're looking for and the person I'm looking seem to be fellow travelers. This must be something like fate or something."

"It was just the red string pulling Emilia and I together, I refuse to believe there's anything like fate between us and you two!"

"You're never at a loss for words, huh."

Raising a grumbling laugh at Subaru's response, Al waved the hand that had been rubbing the girl's head. From some time ago, he had been only using his right hand. That was perfectly natural of course. After all, for the man in front of him, in the spot that one would normally have a left-arm there was nothing there.

One arm and a black helm. Not to mention his light clothes unsuited for his overbearing body. Going from the sound of his voice and his looks aside from his face, this was probably someone more experienced and older than him. Despite this, he didn't seem to inspire an air of superiority, probably because his attitude was as frivolous as his clothes.

Putting it in a good way, 'friendly'. Putting it in a bad way, 'this guy has ADHD."

"Speaking of it, you're this girl's companion aren't you! What happened to her retainer being a 'neat-and-tidy beautiful girl who gets run around and is always troubled by her master' type person that I was promised?!”

“Things never work out that well, you’ll have to make due with a middle-aged man like me. —Hmm, what’s wrong little lady?”

Facing Subaru who couldn’t hide his dissatisfaction at having his expectations betrayed, the big-hearted man brought up Emilia in a dubious manner.

From the man’s attitude Subaru belatedly realized something was wrong with Emilia.

Something was strange with Emilia, she had went silent a little while ago and wasn’t participating in their conversation. She had nonchalantly hidden her face behind the corners of her hood, and seemed to be hiding behind Subaru’s back to obstruct other’s view of her. As for who she could be hiding from, there was only one person it could be. You could immediately tell who it was, even without doing something like calculating the angle from where she was standing.

“What, why are thou staring at me? Now that you know we’re parting are you starting to miss my beautiful face? While it’s true I have sinfully good looks it’s still rude to stare like that.”

“Sorry, but if it’s beautiful ladies then I’m in no shortage. We’ve both found the people we were looking for, so it’s probably about time we head our separate ways.”

He responded coldly to the girl’s words, the person Emilia seemed to be hiding from, but the person he was really speaking to was Al rather than the girl.

He didn’t know why, but Emilia didn’t seem to want to make her existence known here. In that case he’d take her feelings into account and oblige her. In order to do that, rather than negotiating with the person who wouldn’t get it at all, he should try the person who would probably understand his intentions.

It wasn’t certain or not on whether he grasped the inner workings of Subaru’s mind, but Al didn’t appear to particularly deny anything that was said.

“Well, that’s fine I guess. You know I’m dead-tired from having to deal with Princess here.”

“…The amount of sympathy I have for you is no small amount. No, seriously.”

“If you hang out with broad minded adults, it’s not that tiring. Looking for that in a kid the same age as you would be unfair, so I don’t.”

Shrugging his shoulders at Subaru’s relatively serious words, Al lowered his eyes from the girl. You couldn’t tell from under his helmet, but his expression was somewhat close to that of a father’s affection for their daughter. It was no doubt a difficult relationship, or so he felt vaguely.

“Alright, we’re going to be going in this direction… what about you?”

“We’re heading that way too.”

“… Alright, then we’re going in the other direction.”

“Then we’ll go in that direction too…”

“You’re such a pain, did you fall in love with me or something?! This easily? Are you a girl in a gal-game?”

“It’s just a small joke, thou are so fussy. A boring man leads a boring life to a boring death.”

Right up until the end she was calling him boring. Together with her escort in tow, she walked off into the distance majestically. Her back showed no hesitation, even though it was something he wanted in the first place, getting thrown away so resolutely wasn’t fun at all.

As such, Subaru put together a final revenge for the departing girl.

“Hey, pompous girl, catch this”

“It seems you look down on me quite a bit. Al, I order you to take this fools head…”

Saying some dangerous words, the girl turned her head; her red eyes opened lightly. Her eyes traced a parabola, following the path of Subaru’s poorly thrown appa. Aiming for the two appa’s slow trajectory, the girl received them snuggly in her arms. Making sure she had caught it, Subaru smiled.

“You can have it, my appa of friendship. Next time be careful to not get reeled in by any bad adults using appa as bait.”

“I wasn’t in the back alleys for such a moronic reason.”

“The image I have of you is already set. Anyways, just take it.”

Using some rough logic he forced the appas on her, taking Emilia’s arm he turned his back on the pair. Just a little before turning around, he was starting to regret not putting his arm around Emilia, if it was earlier she probably wouldn’t have refused him. He had to convince himself to be satisfied with holding hands.

From across the street, facing towards the quickly departing Subaru and Emilia for the last time.

“Little lady, thanks for helping me find who I was looking for!”

With a muffled voice; nevertheless the feelings put into it were conveyed.

2

Bidding farewell to the haughty girl and her mismatched guardian, after walking down the street for a short-while Subaru slowed down to a stop.

“Hey, Emilia-tan. They’re gone now, so do you mind telling me what that was about?”

Looking at the surroundings, Subaru called out to Emilia who had similarly stopped walking. The girl had been silent up until now. Because she had been hiding under her hood the whole time, even

Subaru wasn’t able to see what facial expressions she was making.

During the conversation back there, he was worried he had done something to displease her. Thinking that,

“Um, sorry Subaru. I was spacing out a little.”

Emilia muttered, blinking her eyes and abruptly coming back to her senses. At the very least, hearing her say that made him relieved, hiding that sense of relief in his chest he played around.

“Are you sure you should space out around me? I could take that chance to do some things that can’t be said out loud”

“Things that can’t be said out loud…?”

At Subaru’s words, who was now wagging his finger side to side, a wave was set off in her bluish-purple eyes. Seeing that ripple in her big eyes, Subaru tilted his head

“Yeah, things that are beyond description. Emilia-tan, before you even know it you’ll be mesmerized by my golden-finger, before long I’ll make it so your body can’t live a day without me… Huh, is it just my imagination or did it suddenly get a lot colder in here?!”

“I don’t think it’s just your imagination.”

Subaru felt the physical sensation of a faint cold wave of air on the back of his neck. At the same time he felt a ringing in his head, the exact same type of sensation that he felt an hour earlier with the forced telepathy.

Experiencing the unbridled wrath of Emilia’s guardian, a grey kitty whose figure was nowhere to be seen, Subaru gestured frantically with a cold sweat.

“What I mean is, you know, that. I’m an upstanding son of Japan, one-track manly person with good morals, that’s why I’d never do something horrible like that without consent. The first time is us enjoying the night sky together at a suite, it’s no good unless we properly tell each other our feelings right… right?”

With his previous statement, he picked up a sigh from somewhere unseen. Seeing he had somehow or another managed to escape punishment, he felt like another weight was lifted from his shoulders. Seeing Subaru like this, Emilia frowned lightly.

“Subaru. —That girl earlier”

“Hmm, what is it, Emilia-tan are you jealous? Do you feel like baking some yakimochi? Seriously, I pushed on through these grueling two weeks—finally, the day my effort is rewarded has come!”

“—Subaru.”

Putting voice to his desires so naturally, he interrupted Emilia’s words. In return she interrupted his words in an even stronger tone, calling his name. From the seriousness of her expression, the look in her bluish-purple eyes filled with vigor, even someone like Subaru felt alarmed and quit his jokes.

“H-Huh? Emilia-tan, why are you making such a serious face…”

“I’m begging you Subaru, please don’t treat this like a joke. Why were you together with that girl?”

It was like Emilia was investigating something about Subaru. Uneasy about her request, he raced to think of an explanation she’d accept. With that, Subaru had an unusually earnest mindset.

“Finally found you! Making us go through all that trouble.”

As if dubbing over the two’s conversation, a rough and vulgar anger-filled voice interrupted them.

Surprised, Subaru looked around the surroundings in astonishment. In a street that just a little while ago should have been crowded with people, looking at it now they were surrounded by rough and dangerous looking men. Leading the bunch was the big and strong looking one of the three stooges. Although the other two were nowhere to be seen, the big stooge stood grinning at Subaru’s group who stood frozen in place.

“You sure made a fool of us back there. I’ve been looking for you and the girl for awhile now, gotta’ repay the favor.”

“…For a little tiny dispute you’re going to call your friends and get revenge? I’m a bit disappointed in you. No matter how much you were made fun of, no matter how frustrated, you’d never let others wipe your own ass for you. You made an oath to settle all debts yourself. Even though I’ve always… always! Always believed you were that kind of man!”

“Cut it with that sentimental crap, you don’t know me!”

Listening to the abuse and spittle hurtling at him, Subaru quietly observed his surroundings. The men who were blocking both sides of the road were roughly 15 or 16 in number. They all had weapons that were intended to not stand out too much—holding short poles or knives in their hands, they were probably pretty effective at chasing away potential onlookers. It certainly didn’t seem like there were any civilians around to get caught up in the mix. If they reported it, he wondered if the guards would notice the incident and come running eventually. Whether they’d make it in time like Reinhard with his hero-like perfect timing was a bit of a gamble though.

On top of escape being difficult, waiting for someone to save them was unrealistic in this situation. As such, the most effective method of making it out alive from this situation…

“Although it’s a bit pathetic, my best bet is to rely on Puck and Emilia.”

Picking up his ears, Puck admired Subaru’s refreshing extent of reliance on others. Subaru nodded exaggeratedly at his own words, said without even a hint of sarcasm. He stood out in front of Emilia, as if he were dancing.

“So, for that reason I’m going to give you guys an advanced warning. This is just a word of advice, if you attack us you’re going to be the ones to regret it.”

“You blind? Look at our numbers! You punk, I can understand showing off in front of your girl, but the one that's gonna' be screamin and cryin in pain is you."

"Don't jump to conclusions. The one that'll beat the hell out of you isn't me, it's this cutey behind me."

"The hell, at least try to show off a little in front of your girl?!"

Subaru comfortably ignored the stooge's angry shouts

"Now then," he turned to Emilia while gesturing his arm towards the men surrounding them.

"Now that I've decided to rely on your help, I leave the rest up to you. If you'll do the honors Emilia-tan. Cleaning 'em up with just a light beating will do. If you want you can make them into snow sculptures and we'll have a snow festival here in Lugnica."

"I took a quick peak into your mind for a bit, you sure are saying some scary things… However, it doesn't seem like there's really a need to go that far."

Lining up the street with newly minted ice sculptures, he was thinking about naming it the Eternal Force Blizzard street until his thoughts got leaked to Puck. "Hmm?" Subaru wondered, after hearing his words.

"—I came here following your scent, but what's with this ruckus?"

Saying an ominous line from the sky, a certain blue-haired maid came falling from above.

Holding the hem of her skirt while flipping through the air, a sound effect not unlike an explosion sounded out accompanying Rem's landing— Blowing away the cloud of dust with a wave of her hand, everyone's eyes were focused on her.

"So, Subaru. Don't you have something to say to say to Rem?"

"Rem, you're a supermaid with seriously good timing! I've fallen in love with you again!"

“If you praise me so much I’ll get bothered”

While the stooge’s stooges were on their toes from Rem’s sudden entrance, Rem and Subaru fell into their normal daily routine. Rem fidgeting from side to side, her face red from Subaru’s praise. The first to act was the big stooge, a vein bulging from listening to the two’s conversation.

Rem’s figure was perfectly positioned between Subaru and the stooge. With a scary face the stooge grabbed Rem’s shoulder angrily,

“Hey, you out-of-place maid. I was having a talk with that friend of yours o—”

The threatening words he had expertly seasoned with his veteran experience as a thug were cut short before he could even get the full sentence out, ephemeral like a fleeting dream.

Pulled by his shirt collar up into the air by Rem, the stooge was thrown onto the ground head first. As he got closer to the ground his body tumbled slowly, the whites of his eyes showing, unable to move out of shock.

I don’t think he’s dead. Definitely… Probably… Maybe…

“These are the people who threatened Subaru and Lady Emilia, correct?”

Rem said in a deep voice, no emotion showing on her face as she entered into work mode. Considering that she subtly listed Subaru’s name first it seems like her priorities still weren’t fully in order. While thinking that strange thought, he had a bit of sympathy for the obviously shocked group of thugs. Saying a prayer for them in his heart out of compassion, it was the least he could do.

“Rem”

“Yes.”

“Don’t kill them, ok?”

“Yes, Rem will only kill them 3/4ths.”

Deciding she would only 75% kill them, Rem leisurely got to work. There were some who threw things at her in desperation. There were some who turned tail and tried to flee. And then there were some who couldn’t quite grasp what was going on and just clutched their knees in fear.

—Facing all that, she rained down punishment on them, distributing it evenly.”

“Wow! Amazing.”

Watching the figures of several people easily thrown through the air, Subaru muttered dumbfounded. He was completely taken in by the brawl that was coming to a close, so much so that he didn’t notice the pair of bluish-purple eyes staring at him quietly, isolated from the chaos.

“—Subaru”

Towards her pleading mumbles, he was completely oblivious.

3

In the other direction, after separating from Subaru and the others Al and the girl were magnificently causing their own commotion.

Walking briefly after separating from Subaru’s group, in a section of the road where there were strangely few people they were surrounded by a group of men using the same modus operandi. These were led by the two remaining stooges, with the addition of those two this group was slightly larger.

Compared to Subaru, the girl’s physical looks probably attracted their attention more. Or, it could be that she had simply made them more angry than Subaru had.

“Since it’s like that, we’re going to put you through a little bit of pain. A little, just a little bit.”

Laughing vulgarly, the short stooge looked at the girl’s body with lewd eyes. The other men surrounding them similarly had a greedy light reflected in them, as for what they'd do after they caught her, it was obviously something you can't say out loud.

And, speaking of the girl being stared at like this with lewd eyes,

"…Hmph, what a bitter pleasure. The insides are unmistakably that of an Appa. With this it appears that fool earlier was right, he didn't just paint the fruit red as a jest. What a shock, who knew that appa were actually red?"

"Uh-umm, Princess, do you realize what's happening?"

Cutting the appa in her hand with a short knife, the girl put the piece in her mouth seemingly unconcerned with the surrounding men. Seeing this, the extent of the hoodlum's rage intensified; acting as a proxy for the men's feelings Al put voice to their concerns. That's right tell 'em! The men's spirits were united; the girl looked questioning at Al who called out to her.

"Get to the point. I hate circuity more than anything."

"Then I'll just say it straight. —You have two appa there, so isn't one of those mine?"

"Haa? What foolishness. Listen, that fool threw these two appa and I caught them both. In which case, these are both mine."

Letting out a tired sigh, Al shrugged his shoulders; seeking sympathy from the surrounding men. But, the men whose trust had been betrayed by what question he chose to ask, had a different response than he expected.

"Oh oh, they're really out for blood. They can't take even one playful joke, how mean."

"I'm not joking. I won't give any of the appas. They're both mine."

Even behind the helmet it was obvious Al was smiling bitterly at the obstinate girl. From their back and forth, it was the straw that broke the camel's back for the hoodlums.

Displaying obvious hostility, they closed in on their prey, shrinking the enclosure as they slowly approached. They too had noticed the irregularity of Al's appearance, but after considering his shabby clothing and missing arm they had judged if they grouped up on him he probably wasn't a threat. Towards this group that seemed accustomed to ganging up on a single person, Al let out a sigh of admiration mixed with cynicism before turning back to the girl.

"So, Princess. What course of action does the world will?"

"Whatever I choose it to. You should already know that, Al"

"More or less."

Nodding in satisfaction at his words, the girl took another bite from the appa. Puckering her face from its sour sweet flavor, an angelic smile formed on her charming face.

"I'm in a good mood right now. It's fine if you don't kill them."

Like she was plucking the wings off an insect, a smile as innocent as an angel's formed naturally on her lips. Hearing those words Al turned to face the men. Swinging his arm to his waist, he grasped the handle of the thick sword hanging on his hip. The sword grated slowly as he pulled it out of its sheath. He made that his background music.

"—Aye, Ma'am."

With violent vividity, a bloody smile was born under his jet-black helmet.

Chapter 11:
Three heads are Better than One, for Sinister Schemes

1

—As they continued glaring at each other for an excruciating amount of time, Subaru became uncomfortably aware of the droplets of sweat running down his brow.

What a big room. There were two beds on the far side, and near the door was a space that could easily fit Subaru's room from his home world. In that space was packages brought in and neatly organized, but the space could easily accommodate those things without becoming crowded.

If Subaru stood in the center of the room and enacted a fight, he'd encounter no obstacles at all.

"You don't plan to let me pass no matter what, do you?"

Subaru asked, painfully aware of his dry lips and throat that had gone rough out of nervousness.

It was a deep voice, to hide his trembling. Then as a response, the obstruction in front of him, the one blocking Subaru's path, opened his arms, firmly blocking the door from Subaru's view.

Recognizing the futility of trying to get past that posture, Subaru latched onto a glimmer of hope, putting out an entreating look. For a second, Subaru could see a slight wavering in her eyes, but her professionalism quickly recovered and any hesitation vanished.

"Even if your request was to do so, Subaru cannot leave here."

The one blocking the way—Rem—looked straight at Subaru, and said bluntly. Subaru sighed at her obstinance, and jokingly shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, just calm down and think about it. I've already been left behind, and moreover it's not as if I have any big power or influence. Therefore, even if I left this room, there's not much I could do. You get it, right?"

Repeating himself, Subaru presses Rem urgently in an effort to ease Rem's anxiety.

Hearing Subaru's words, she said, "yes," smiling cutely.

"Certainly if you think about normally, Subaru's wish wouldn't come true if he were to just leave this room. It's not as if it's an easy place to find, and hypothetically, if Subaru were to make it there, Rem still can't think of anything you could do."

"Right?"

"That is merely the conclusion Rem can draw from common sense."

Shutting him down flatly, Rem looks at Subaru unsmilingly. Having been scrutinized from head to toe, Subaru adjusted his posture. Then the girl continued.

"However, in Subaru's case, it is impossible to tell what kind of strange methods will be uses to achieve his goal. It could be a solution that is beyond Rem's imagination."

"You sound like you've been taken over by a demon; I can't tell if you trust me or you don't trust me. It's not like I've done anything above your expectations?!"

"If Subaru thinks so, then that must be. From his perspective, that is."

Subaru tried to gently correct Rem's thoughts, but Rem, who had already solidly constructed an image of Subaru, was unswayed.

Either way, it was quite the difficult situation, having to persuade her to let him pass using his words. Maybe it was better to create a path a different way.

"That's quite a high level topic. It's the same as what you said in the beginning."

Scratching his head while sighing, Subaru narrowed his eyes as if thinking while looking at Rem. No, his line of sight was actually beyond him—to beyond the door to the room where Emilia and Roswaal had left Subaru behind.

2

"—What? Housesitting?!"

Breakfast had just ended, and everyone was about to return to their rooms when Subaru, who was just told his task for the day, shouted in surprise.

In front of the shocked Subaru was Emilia and Rem.

The one who had caused Subaru to yell in the first place, Emilia, put her hand on her hip, saying, "isn't it obvious?"

"You haven't forgotten why you've come all the way to the capital, have you? You've come to check on the welfare your acquaintance, and to recuperate. That was a promise."

"Yeah well that second half is up to interpretation…"

"DEFINITELY not! It's not fun and games, so we can't allow any outsiders. We can't even bring Rem."

To the Emilia who had adopted an unusually threatening tone, it was bad for Subaru, who had made a mistake yesterday, to protest with a slip of the tongue. As if to look for help, he looked to Rem, who was standing in the corner of the room, but the blue-haired maid only shook her head to his supplication.

"All the same, Rem cannot be Subaru's ally in this situation. Lord Roswaal has made his intentions known, and Lady Emilia's opinion is correct. Please listen to them."

"Shit, I'm alone in this, huh. But if I think of yesterday's mishap, I can't even say anything. This sucks!"

Even Rem, who generally took Subaru's side, had her priorities in order.

With yesterday's failure— In short, because of the stray child incident when he disobeyed command, Subaru had his movements severely limited within the capital.

Regarding this, Subaru had little to say by way of excuse because he too recognized his own failures, and hoping for another meeting with Old Man Rom and the fruit stand man was not a big problem. Though it was a bit of a shock to himself that the people he most wanted to see were a bunch of dirty old men.

"Nah, I was just thinking I wanted to see Felt again, so that shouldn't be a problem. People connected to the throne are 3/4ths men… Though 6/7 of them are absurd!

There was no way to increase the proportion of girls in the group of people he wanted to see again without including Elsa. It's an alternate-universe fantasy, after all, so why the heck were there only flags for male character story routes?

"It's fine, at least I have the main heroine flag…"

"If you keep grumbling to yourself like that, I'll start to get reaaally suspicious."

The one who was the main heroine, Emilia, said this with reproachful eyes, and all Subaru could do was stay silent without a peep. Seeing that Subaru had run out of refusals or hair-splitting arguments, Emilia gave a satisfied nod, saying,

"It won't take that long… At least I'd like to say that, but I have no idea how long it will take today. So have your meals with Rem. If you wait for us, we'll definitely keep you for a while."

"Humph. Well if Emilia-tan says so so sternly, I have ideas of my own. Right, Rem? Let's dine like kings today!"

"Negative. Today's menu is roast appas followed by appa salad. Appa pie made with plenty of appa jam. After the meal will be juice extracted from appas that I've also prepared."

"What is this endless appa?! Damn you, Scarface!!"

Blind to the fact that he was the one that had carried nine or so appas home himself, Subaru visualized the scary face of the fruit stand man floating in the air. Returning the thumbs up of the vision who was smiling brightly at him, Subaru smilied with his teeth showing, as it had come to this.

“That’s fine. Appas are my favorite fruit, after all! Seriously, it’s Appa Night Fever! The two of us will eat them all up!”

“Definitely not. Rem is a maid with sense, so she will not hinder Subaru, who likes appas so much. All of the food will be served to Subaru.”

“Why is it you’re so merciless when it comes to me?!”

Subaru yelled at Rem, who always bore in mind her position, or rather, bore in mind how to use her position to her advantage. While watching their comedy sketch-like exchange, Emilia looked thoughtful, then turned her head to the side as if trying to shake off an idea.

“Anyways, I’m leaving everything to Rem. Though I think she was also told the same thing by Roswaal, but I’ve left strict instructions. —I’m serious, okay?”

“For you to have thought this through so much, you must really care about me, Emilia-tan!”

For emphasis, Subaru made a thumbs-up at Emilia.

Emilia, who was already used to his gestures, used her palm to push down his outstretched hand. Subaru caught his breath at the sudden contact. And with that, any opposition he had to the previous conversation they were having became extraordinarily weak.

As if she hadn’t noticed the change in Subaru’s attitude, Emilia said,

“Subaru. I’m not asking for much.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Please, just let me trust you.”

She said closing her eyes, as if supplicating him. For that moment, Subaru lost the ability to think.

Her words reverberated in his head, as he mulled them over, replayed them, until he understood exactly what she meant and felt by those words, then said,

“Ah, aah! All of it, I’ll do it all! I’ll succeed your expectations! As if I only live for them!”

He responding with resounding positives, as if he hadn’t understood what she was talking about. As long as he agreed to it now then fulfilled it later.

Emilia fixed her purple-blue eyes at Subaru, whose assurances were undeniably flippant, and looked at him unhappily, quietly grumbling,

“Alright. —I trust you.”

3

Now, our story comes back to the beginning.

Emilia and Roswaal had made their way to the capital, and Subaru, who had been left behind at their lodgings under Rem’s surveillance, spent some time copying writing.

At this time, Subaru had basically mastered all of the “I writing system,” and was now working on the “Ro writing system.” If the “I writing system” was the equivalent of the Japanese hiragana system, then the “Ro writing system” would be similar to katakana, the shape of the characters was different but the underlying logic behind it was mostly the same, with this new mastery he predicted it wouldn’t take nearly as much time to learn as the first.

Around an hour and a half after Subaru had begun copying the Ro characters, Subaru, who usually enjoyed studying, had gotten tired. Not so much of the studying, but more of having to stay in one place.

To Subaru, studying how to write was letting this alternate world into himself, and wasn't a bad feeling at all. This is why he looked forward to studying every day without a single complaint.

However, if the thing on the other end of the scales was Emilia, it wasn't even a question as to which one was more important.

Subaru stood up, preparing to walk slowly towards the outside of the room until he was masterfully intercepted by Rem.

When Subaru had said, "I'm going to pick some flowers," the maid who was simultaneously in charge of cleaning the room, taking care of the luggage, and managing/tutoring Subaru in his studies, immediately realized true meaning behind Subaru's words.

That is, his scheme to escape the inn and head for the capital.

He felt no small amount of guilt, since he was essentially breaking his promise with Emilia.

Rem had seen Emilia's well-founded uneasiness, and was watching Subaru's movements carefully as ordered.

And, while Subaru understood that all, he still couldn't bear to stay holed up waiting in his room.

"She only has bad memories of the capital, so she's probably scared stiff…"

Last time Emilia went to the capital, she suffered just as much hardship as he worried she would.

Probably, in spite of having arriving at the capital secretly, enemies who want the insignia would probably take it, and maybe her life along with it.

Subaru knew that if hadn't been there, she would have met that fate.

—If he recalled the day they met, Subaru couldn't place himself if he wasn't aware.

Having suddenly been summoned to an alternate world, Subaru hadn't been given a single thing that could be called a mission. On the surface, his insolence was disguised through positivity, but on the inside, you could only call him rash and reckless.

In short, he was basically the same inside and out, so it was undeniable that the developments up til now that let to him being in his current situation were not in his control.

However,

"People who just go with the flow should swim to and choose which currents to follow."

Without denying that he had simply followed along up to this point, he could also have chosen options that did not lead to this point. And the reason he was here now, was because he had chosen so.

Subaru, who was dropped into an alternate world without so much as a goal.

It's because he had that perspective that he was now thinking about turning his powerless situation around.

If he wasn't given a mission, he simply had to decide on one himself.

"Let's go save Emilia."

It wasn't just because he had been saved by her.

It was because the feeling of wanting to become Emilia's strength brimmed over from the bottom of his heart.

"That's the power of love!"

"What did Subaru say just now?"

"Sorry, it was kind of serious, so having to say it again is embarrassing,"

That was Subaru's one-sentence answer to Rem, who had asked him with her head tilted. Then, Subaru collected himself by clearing his throat, and set his mind in full operation in order to break through the obstacle in front of him.

Even if he managed to escape this place, he couldn't think of a single way to get to the capital. But none of that mattered if he didn't manage to escape this place first.

Regarding that, it was more Subaru's style to force things rather than go with the flow.

"Although the situation's badness doesn't really change."

Getting past Rem, who was standing imposingly with arms outstretched, was like clearing an insanely difficult last boss.

The difference between their physical abilities were evident, not to mention Subaru wasn't even in his best condition. An attack from behind would probably be rendered ineffective by that huge difference in strength, and Subaru had nothing up his sleeve to change the power imbalance either.

He also considered casting Shamak and running away under the cover of the black smoke, but he would definitely faint after breathing in the smoke because he didn't have any Bokko fruit with him. After all, the use of Bocco fruit was strictly banned in every corner of the residence.

Because of this, Subaru was boxed in. Subaru, who wasn't using any cheat codes to make his brain faster and sharper, was all out of ideas.

That is—,

"Woa…no way, it's!"

"Subaru?"

Subaru's face suddenly lost all color, as he clutched his forehead, trembling furiously.

Seeing Subaru in this unusual state, knees trembling and breath rough, Rem panickingly outstretched her arms and gently supported him by the shoulder.

“What has happened, Subaru? Don’t tell Rem you’re despairing at the recklessness of your ideas…?!”

“How low would my score be if you gave my worth to you a number? I can’t, I can’t… Ugh, so painful…”

Even while being supported, Subaru clutched his chest as he went to his knees, gasping at the pain. Seeing this, Rem too kneeled and nestled closer to him, saying,

“Subaru’s head was hurting, but now it’s his chest? Is Subaru alright?”

“Huh, was it my head? No, my chest hurts… It must be that…”

“The shallow atmosphere is showing a little, but do you know the cause?”

Seeing Subaru’s shallow anguish, Rem’s worries were sky high. Hearing this, Subaru gripped Rem’s collar as if holding on for dear life, brought their faces close, and opened his mouth tremblingly,

“—Ma”

“Ma?”

“—Mayonnaise deficiency.”

He asked himself if this was really the only idea he had, and one he had already used once already.

However, once he had said it, he had to see it to the fullest. This was Natsuki Subaru’s unwavering policy. The unwavering spirit of an uninteresting male.

“This deficiency happens to mayonnaise lovers who don’t get enough mayonnaise… Thanks to you, Rem, it was alleviated til now, but now that the house has been empty for a day… the symptoms advanced.”

“No way… What should Rem do…?”

Make me some mayonnaise… If I just could just suck on some mayonnaise, you could save my life… Oof, it hurts…”

Subaru, who couldn’t even raise his body to a standing position, fell over sideways even as he was clinging to Rem. Putting Subaru’s head on her knee, while stroking the suffering Subaru’s forehead, she murmurered softly,

“Mayonaise… I’d have to prepare the eggs, oil, and other ingredients, but…”

“It hurts… I’ll die. Please, Rem. Only you… I can only depend on you…”

“—Subaru can only depend on Rem?”

She couldn’t look at the suffering Subaru. So she wouldn’t know if anything changed during the time she had averted her eyes.

Hung out to dry between her own feelings and the orders she received, Rem was wavering, but but it seemed as if Subaru’s final words were the decisive blow.

“Only Rem!”

She balled her hands into hard fists, muttering with force,

“I understand! Please, leave it up to Rem!”

“Ouch! And oof!”

Rem stood up suddenly. Because of that, Subaru’s head fell from her knees, and he hit the back of his head, and moreover, his rib was crushed by the overeager Rem’s heel. It didn’t seem that Rem, whose enthusiasm had reached maximum levels, had noticed her own act of violence. Just like that, she put herself in order speedily, saying,

“Well then, Rem will quickly go get the ingredients and make mayonaise! Subaru, don’t sleep there on the floor, please rest properly in bed.”

“The fainting… is connected… to mayonaise…”

“Huh? Yes, I know. Rem will do her best for Subaru. The dawn… fufu, Rem lookS forward to it.”

She interpreted Subaru’s words as he was fainting in agony, and leaving behind an unusually cute smile, Rem fled the room.

Clutching his chest in pain, Subaru watched her disappear around the corner, confirming his success. He confirmed it indeed, but due to the accident earlier, he was unable to move for a while.

By and large the pain started to disappear, and while patting the back of his head which had begun to swell, Subaru stood up, then dusted his clothes that had been in contact with the floor before looking around,

“I can’t believe such a bad plan actually worked. I’m a little worried about Rem’s future, but I’ve been saved by her simpleness today.”

His rib and the back of his head were necessary sacrifices.

Having gained a pathway simply by exchanging a bit of pain was surely a good deal.

“All that’s left to do now is to leave a note to Rem, then run away quickly. It’d be bad if I left through the door and bumped into her…”

He left a scribbled note on the table, then opened a window and looked down. The room was on the second floor, so it wasn’t extremely dangerous to climb down by tying a sash to something. Under the window was a fairly empty alley, so there was probably little chance he would be mistaken for an underwear thief as he climbed down.

“Well, better get going. It’s not like climbing into my old house through the balcony to surprise my parents when I was young was just for show, anyways.”

He was an expert at climbing up and down the pipes and such that went around his house. His window was barred with iron, so he also developed the skill of squeezing his body through the spaces. He dubbed this skill “rubbermen”, which for some reason when naming it he made it plural.

Digging up these old memories, Subaru grabbed the sides of the window, and jumped down tumbling towards the capital’s road with little hesitation.

4

—Shortly after Subaru secretly slipped out of his room.

“…Even so, for Subaru to actually believe Rem was fooled by a trick like that is a bit of a shock.”

In the middle of the otherwise unpopulated room, Rem, who had just returned, muttered to herself while touching the table.

She retrieved the note left on the table she was touching. There, in hastily scribbled, barely legible I characters were written, “I’ll be back soon.”

Although she didn’t understand it, she could tell from Subaru’s personality that it was meant to be some obscure reference or joke.

“He didn’t really have to jump through the window… Rem wouldn’t have tried to stop him from leaving the room.”

This was the result of her pretending to have left through the door and hiding herself in the depths of a corridor. Once she had sensed that there was no human presence in the room and returned, she discovered the wide-open window and the note—and realized he had left through a rather dangerous method.

“…Geez, Subaru really can’t be helped…”

Contrary to the words she muttered, the expression on her face held a hint of happiness.

She was the one Subaru left the message for. The contents aside, it was unmistakably a letter addressed to her. Folding it neatly, she tucked it into the inner pocket of her maid uniform, treating it preciously.

"—Still, Rem wonders what Lord Roswaal is thinking."

Hands on her cheeks, Rem tilted her head, wondering about the meaning behind her master's order. It was an order she was given this morning by her just-awoken master.

Specifically, "Do not interfere with Natsuki Subaru's movements. Even if you were to be ordered to by Emilia."

When Rem tried to ask the reason, she was simply met with a silent refusal. Thus, as a servant, she had no choice but to comply quietly. She felt some amount of guilt for going against Emilia's orders, but her hierarchy in terms of masters unmistakably placed Roswaal above Emilia. Although as an exception, Subaru was somewhere in that hierarchy.

Regardless,

"—please, come back safely, Subaru."

She didn't think he was the type to have dashed off without a plan, but even so he was the type of boy to come running to the aid of others without regards for his own well-being. The only thing she could do was to pray for his wish to be fulfilled, and that he didn't encounter too much harm in the process of fulfilling it.

—Rem was wishing too much for the former, and much too optimistic about the latter.

Rem, who generally held Subaru in higher regard than he was worth, closed the window he left from, turning around to face the room. Shaking her head as if forget her troubles, Rem immersed herself in the work befitting her role as a maidservant.

Like this, Natsuki Subaru was let loose into the capital for a second time. As to whether he was playing into the palm of someone else's hand, that much was unclear.

5

“And so, for that reason Natsuki Subaru has been running around aimlessly,”

The rubberman Subaru who had jumped down into the capital without a scratch thought to himself—his mind refreshingly empty of thought.

He didn’t have a way to make it into the castle by himself, even his chances of getting past the guard station and into nobles district had a low probability. He considered breaking into the guard office using his reliably trusty Shamak, but that idea was rejected because he could just imagine himself fainting by the roadside from smoke inhalation. Relying too much on Shamak as an all-purpose tool was a bit of a problem.

“Shamak is pretty versatile, but I just don’t have enough power. If I could at least improve my mana pool for when I use magic…”

Since the uproar with the witchbeasts he had been getting some lessons on using magic from Roswaal. If the Margrave was right, for Subaru to learn some magic, and learn how to use his mana for that magic, would take two years. If he trained limited by his own natural talent, it would take Subaru twenty years to become a second-rate mage. And, in the first place, it would take over half a year for his overused body to return to the condition it previously was in.

“Trying to break through with using magic was unreasonable from the start, I’m still disappointed though.”

The next time he overuses his gate, there was no telling what would happen to his body.

So currently he had no choice but to remove the use of Shamak as an option. While it’s not like Shamak was ever a viable choice to begin with, it still stung.

“Having to say goodbye to the romance that is magic, vexing indeed.”

Were more or less Subaru's strong feelings on the matter. Compared to the how it would be for the sisters Rem and Ram, or Roswaal considering his job, Subaru wasn't as bothered by his current state. Subaru was never really able to use stuff like magic or mana, so losing something he never had in the first place didn't really feel like that great of a loss. Or at least, even if were to go down that path, now was definitely not the time for it.

"So that's how it is, the question now is how do I get into the castle without relying on anything magical. My knowledge and connections, if you're listening, now's the time to do something!"

"…And just what exactly am I supposed to do after hearing that? Jeez"

"More importantly, don't talk about dangerous stuff in front of someone else's store. This is supposed to be a respectable business that won't draw the eye of the crown. What am I supposed to do if some strange rumors surface thanks to you?"

"It's too late for this store to be respectable when the shopkeeper's face is the least thing from honest. Having connections with the old man from the back-alleys, it's no wonder there's rumors about you."

"You've got quite the bad mouth there, kid…"

The one who making a grim face at Subaru's extremely rude comment was Scarface, a long white scar running from his forehead to his chin. And nearby, was an old bald man whose immense muscular body was squeezed into the narrow store.

Including himself, he felt the surroundings smelled even more like sweat now. He let out a long sigh, "Anyways."

"The store that Old Man Rom had connections with turned out to be this uncle's shop. It's a small world—or rather, it's a small capital… Or is it that birds of a feather flock together?"

""Don't group us up like that.""

"Don't talk in unison like that! Unlike the pair of pretty young maid siblings I know, if a baldy and a scar face like you guys do that, nobody wins!”

The two looked at each other, exchanging disagreeable looks. By the way, currently the merchant’s store was definitely still open, but unrelated to Subaru and Old Man Rom’s presence, the number of customers was low.

It was a merchant street, yet because of the location of the store, as well as the shopkeeper’s face, he was playing on hard mode. Subaru, who always encouraged self-inflicted handicaps, felt a great affinity for the shopkeeper on this point.

“Hey, what the hell. What’s with that hand on my shoulder.”

“Both of us want to just to live it out on easy mode, I can sympathize with someone the like me. The gods just aren’t fair, ya know.”

“Don’t rope me into your pessimistic delusions. Unlike you, I have a wife and a daughter. I’m on the winning team here.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire!”

Shocked at having been betrayed by someone of his own ilk, Subaru’s speech became wild.

Subaru took a step back, and turned his face towards Old Man Rom in order to ask Old Man Rom about what was just said. The bald old man looked straight into Subaru’s wavering black eyes, saying,

“Face the truth. Plus my wife’s a beauty and my daughter’s cute too.”

“You damned…! This is the first time I’ve been treated this badly since I came to this world, you!!”, unleashing the fury he had accumulated after being summoned to this world.

Giving way to all the dark feelings he had pushed deep down into his stomach, Subaru flew at the shopkeeper, and was instantly met with a counterattack by way of a strong arm to his forehead.

“I’m… I’m powerless…”

"You've got to handle things situation by situation, but is there anything you want to say aside from lines that make you sound like a sore loser?"

Looking at Subaru sulking after having his angry outburst put to a stop, Old Man Rom stroked his chin in thought.

He was in a good mood after being called out here since he was sure it had something to do with Felt. When he learned it was just Subaru trying to rope him in on some shady scheme, instead of getting upset the old man showed the goodness in his heart and helped consult Subaru on his troubles.

Softened by that show of kindness, he felt guilty a bit about taking advantage of the old man, but prioritizing his personal gain above his own feelings and moving forward regardless was one of Subaru's good points.

Therefore,

"I'll ask your opinion again. How can I sneak into the castle without being caught?"

"What if you commit a felony and get shut up in the dungeons under the castle? That'd also achieve your goal, though your head would have to say goodbye to your torso."

"Give me some more constructive ideas. After all, it's not like you or your shop are busy right now."

"Don't say it like that, kid. It's because Kadomon's shop isn't popular that we can talk secretly like this. If you think about it that way, it's not a bad thing. Right, Kadomon?"

"Do you two have a grudge against my shop?"

Subaru and Old Man Rom met the eyes of the shopkeeper—Kadomon, who had been glaring at them, then shook their heads, with an "of course not."

As if to chastise the two for their infuriating behavior, Kadomon rubbed the scar on his face, saying, “Stop it with those dangerous ideas, like sneaking into the palace. There’s no emperor right now, so the security’s not all that high, but it’s not as if you won’t be punished if you’re caught.”

“Well then, the risk is just as high as we imagined, isn’t it. If you’re spotted, brat, you’ll die,”

Said Old Man Rom, agreeing with Kadomon.

The two had concluded Subaru should give up on his plans. But of course, to those two, there was no reason to try so hard in the first place.

“Well, when you put it like that, I don’t really have a clear reason to risk my life like this…”

Unlike up til now, this time Subaru didn’t have much of a reason to put his life on the line.

He always had another option—stroll back to the inn, stay in bed, drink the mayonnaise that Rem had made, and wait for Emilia’s return.

It was definitely the case that Emilia and company would be much happier if he did that. It was definitely the case… but,

“Why am I so desperate about this?”

Subaru had always half-thought being at Emilia’s side was his mission. He didn’t know how much help he could be to her. Even though he didn’t know, he still thought that as long as he stayed by her side, the opportunity to help her may arise. If he wasn’t near her, these chances wouldn’t appear.

That being the case,

“Even if it’s conceited, I want to be with her, that’s what I think.”

Although he was only a little ways separated, he felt a terror so deep it felt like it was burning him up.

Weighed against the other option of his own life, it was his reason for moving forwards now.

“Well, it’s the truth that I will break the jinx that surrounds the capital.”

In a place where dark premonitions regarding the candidates to the crown didn’t die, Subaru’s unease was bottomless.

If it was a place where he could only decrease the possibility that Emilia might get hurt when he wasn’t around by a little, he wouldn’t have had a reason to be so impatient all this time.

“It’s fine if I can’t be by her side, but I at least want to be where I can see her face. Somehow.”

“It’s not as easy as that. If it’s a guard post, you could get past with a bribe, but all the way inside the castle?”

Although it’s not impossible Subaru’s attitude wasn’t impacted deeply, it could only be seen that he did not look like he was going to give up. After being left alone to run wild, he would only be arrested and given the death penalty—and that left a bad taste in Old Man Rom’s mouth, so he too began to seriously formulate a plan to get into the castle. Compared to Old Man Rom, who was not self-conscious about his own position as an accomplice, Kadomon’s relationship with Subaru was not so deep.

He eyed the pair of conspirators amazedly, and quipped,

“Whatever you do, make sure it doesn’t cause me trouble.”

He couldn’t say that that was impossible because it chipped away at his earnestness, but Subaru pursed his lips at the uncooperative man, saying,

“Don’t say that. You do your best operating this store even if you have no customers even though you’re on a merchant street. We might get some sort of idea seeing your willpower in action.”

“First of all, even though I’m not feeling that well today my store is still popular, ok? …Instead of using hard to understand tricks, why don’t you go to the guard station and ask about it. Your companion is in the castle, right? …hmm, what did she look like?”

Having stated his honest opinion, Kadomon scowled as if to search his memory. It seemed that no matter what, that silver-haired beauty’s appearance would not surface from within his memories. It was the result of her hood, who’s purpose was to obstruct facial recognition.

Anyways, unfortunately, his decent proposal was not even considered as an option.

“If we do that, we’ll definitely be caught by Emilia-tan! It’s ideal to watch and protect her quietly from the shadows, even better if is undetectable. I’ll name this strategy ‘The Super-Strong Me Under the Floorboards’.”

“What an extraordinarily self-praising name for hiding.”

“You’re such a pain. Well, what if you hid yourself inside packages that are send into the castle? Coincidentally, today’s market day so they will send food in, and if you’re lucky…”

Kadomon said smiling, as if he was just chit-chatting, but his scarred face soon hardened.

It was because the instant Subaru heard that information, his two eyes shone.

He shut his own mouth as if ashamed of his slip of the tongue, then held out his palms, and started to say, “forget what I said just now!” but was interrupted by

“That idea— It’s a YES!”

It was way too early for Subaru to smile brightly with a thumbs up and wink.

Old Man Rom lamented at the sky at this recklessness.

The sun’s rays shone down on that bald head, making it glow a pale white.

Chapter 12:
Secret Castle Infiltration and its Result

1

“When things go smoothly like this, it makes me worry even more.”

Scratching his head, Subaru looked around at his surroundings while sighing. It was a sturdy passageway made of stone, a little less than two meters in width. It was narrow enough that four men side by side were enough to block it up, but if you only consider the movements of servants it was plenty big enough for their use. In comparison, the Roswaal mansion’s hallways were needlessly large which made cleaning a pain.

Anyways,

“I was imagining a whole lot more obstacles— Is it possible we cleared it on the first try?”

An unpopulated passageway— lurking in the corner of one of the passageways of the Royal castle’s basement, Subaru let out one of many innumerable sighs, unknown to anyone else.

2

—‘Kadomon pictures presents, Exciting Secret Infiltration Plan’, or so he was currently carrying out this scheme they had crafted not even an hour ago.

“Listen here, don’t ever say my name. You can use this trick to enter into the nobles district… The upper ward, but you’ll need to find some other way into the castle. Now that it’s come to this I’ll ask a person I know here by the name of Henehehe. They’ll be able to guide us back safely.”

Off to Subaru’s side reminding him to not get into any unnecessary trouble was Kadomon, he even went so far as having secured information about the all-important escape route. No matter how much he'd already done, his helpful nature compelled him to do even more, this scary faced shopkeeper. Considering he was accompanying Subaru in his recklessness, you could say his goodness as a person was almost disastrous.

Going by Kadoman's plan (he'd never take the credit for it though), they decided they were going to sneak into the upper ward by mixing in with the carts carrying goods from the business district. The lower classes: commoners living in amongst the general population, including those in the commerce ward or along the business street, when adding in the slums as well, which occupied the outer circumference of the capital, this seemed to be the entire range referred to as the lower class and their corresponding areas were referred to as the lower wards. The transportation of goods between the lower wards and upper wards appeared to occur at regular intervals, and the control issued by the guard station was said to be relatively lax.

"Do they just trust the merchants that much?"

"Rather than them trusting the merchants, it's more like they never imagined there'd be idiots stupid enough to do something that would upset the nobles like this…"

The one who answered Subaru's question was the muscular giant with his arms crossed. Rubbing his bald head once, Old Man Rom's outfit was completely different from usual. In place of the old worn rags he had on just a little while ago was a set of relatively clean clothes. Being questioned by him, Old Man Rom finally noticed Subaru's stares.

"If we made it into the upper district you could say I'd be quite suspicious looking, but if I dress neatly like this it probably wouldn't go farther than drawing attention. In your case, that's just another unnecessary concern."

"Well, in my case I'm actually a servant at a fairly respectable house. Since this is my debut in the capital, there's been quite a bit of money put forward on stuff like my clothes."

Facing those scrutinizing eyes Subaru gestured his hands toward his clothes, giving himself a quick look over before laughing. Related to his servant lifestyle at the Roswaal mansion, he received some formal men's clothing prepared by Rem. She said it was ok to get them dirty, but from the appearance and feel he knew it was something of the highest quality. For someone who was basically from the lower-middle class, taking abnormal care of his things was basically a given.

While in the lower ward the formal clothes were a source of attention, but here in the upper ward he thought the quality wouldn't stand that much so they were a rather mild choice. While making them understand that point, Subaru redirected the conversation to Old Man Rom's tidy appearance,

"Anyways, " he said while looking him over.

"Um, it's that, you know… If Old Man Rom is seriously coming along with us, I'm a bit worried here."

Since it was his single greatest source of anxiety right now, he touched on the subject apprehensively. Related to their human trafficking into the upper ward, the person who decided to accompany Subaru was Old Man Rom himself. Honestly, Subaru was against him coming along since he wanted to reduce the chance they were discovered as much as possible, but…

"What? When it comes to getting into the upper class area I have plenty of experience! Where do you think all the stolen goods from the loot house gets sold?"

"Annoying! You're like a father trying to hype up how much of a bad boy he was in the past. Or rather, you do this regularly?! It's dangerous to rely on this that much, old man."

Looking at Kadomon for some sense of agreement, the scarface's attention was absent from the two's conversation and was instead focused on his own conversation with the driver leading the carts. Subaru watched him not comment on Old Man Rom's coming with them, apparently the old man had used this trick far more than just once or twice.

The fact that the driver didn't have much of a reaction when Kadomon asked him to smuggle them into the upper ward, lent extra credence to that theory as well.

"I don't know if I should sigh at how lax the guards are here, or give a thumbs up to the sheer tenacity of these merchants trying to make a buck off it…"

"If a problem occurs, then it'll bring trouble to Kadomon and the others as well. If there wasn't this kind of mutual trust we'd never be able to do stuff as unreasonable as this. That's why it's only because I'm here that you're allowed to ride along with us, so where's my thanks?"

"You're definitely a bad adult, happily dragging a troubled youth like me down the wrong path. I swear I'll never be like this old man here, I'll give you some superficial praise at least though. As expected, Old Man Rom! Your head today is shining!"

"Wa-ha-ha, you really don't know how to watch your mouth you damned brat. Should I kick you off in front of the guard station?"

Reaching such an impasse they let out a sigh at the same time, trading smiles. While shrugging his shoulders, Subaru brought the conversation back to their original topic.

"Nn-so, in the end why did you tag along? It's not like I mind, since it's only thanks to Old Man Rom that we get a free pass on the cart, but do you really have a reason to be taking such a huge risk like this?"

Kadomon as well, he'd said he was merely an acquaintance of Old Man Rom's but given the current situation that was a little hard to believe. Simply from Old Man Rom asking for his cooperation he'd agreed to lend his support, there wasn't really a clear reason for Kadomon to go along with Subaru's recklessness so it didn't make much sense.

At Subaru's line of questioning Old Man Rom made a difficult face, wrinkling his brow.

“It’s about the kid, you said Felt was taken by that ‘sword saint’ fellow right? Since that’s the case, I was thinkin’ there might be an opportunity here to get some information about it.”

Old Man Rom had a bitter expression when he said the words ‘sword saint.’ Hearing that phrase, an image of the red-haired youth floated up in Subaru’s mind. If he remembered correctly his residence was also located in the upper ward. He was unmistakably someone from a fairly respectable family, I guess that was to be expected from somebody named ‘sword saint’. Although, actually finding the house might prove to be fairly difficult, it’s not like they have big nameplates scrawled out on the front gate.

“Not even mentioning the fact that I don’t know which house is Reinhard’s, even if we did find it I can’t really imagine we’d be able to just walk up to the door and ask to meet Reinhard, you know? Knowing that good-looking bastard though, I kind of get the feeling that even if we charged in unannounced he’d probably welcome us in warmly… “

“Brat, you’re the only one that’d do such a stupid thing. At most, I’ll just be doing some preliminary investigation and making some preparations for what comes later.”

“…What comes later?”

Tilting his head, he looked at Old Man Rom who was lightly stroking his chin in thought.

“Preparations ‘fer takin’ Felt back. As long as I know where the mansion is, with the right amount of money and connections, learning about about it in more detail should be possible.”

“Uhh… did I just set off a really big event? I’m not one to speak, but Old Man Rom you’re giving me the feeling like I just lit the fuse of something I really shouldn’t have.”

While the one criticizing Old Man Rom for saying such a radical idea was Subaru, looking at it objectively what they were doing probably wouldn’t be viewed much differently than terrorism. One of them was intending to sneak into the royal castle, while the other was in the midst of drafting up plans to break into a noble's mansion— the very nature of the offense made it quite likely they'd be cut down on the spot if they were discovered.

"At least when it comes to Felt, I don't think you need to worry about Reinhard doing anything bad to her. Speaking frankly, the chance she's living better now than before is pretty high you know? She could be working as a servant like me, with a fully satisfying lifestyle."

You might not have been able to tell since she was living in the slums with a filthy appearance, but if you fixed up her clothes and cleaned her up a bit her looks would be pretty decent. If it's Reinhard, then it wasn't impossible to think he noticed her aesthetic virtue and decided to take pity on a poor girl struggling in poverty. Shaking his head though, he didn't think think Reinhard was the kind of guy that would show the kind of compassion typical of an elite looking down on others from his position. Like that, Subaru tried to fit the context into the image he had of Reinhard in his mind and ended up rejecting the notion himself.

In any case, it was hard to believe she was being treated badly. However, towards Subaru's carefree attitude Old Man Rom pursed his lips with difficulty.

"No, I can't let it be. It doesn't matter who the other person is, that's not the problem. That girl has always belonged in the upper classes. —Sooner or later though, it'll cause problems."

Subaru looked suspiciously at Old Man Rom, whose attitude was more earnest than obstinate. While his suspicion somewhat included the parts about Rom being concerned for her wellbeing, it was moreso because he had an even stronger suspicion that Rom's words were tainted with self interest. But before Subaru could question him about his real intentions,

"Oi, we're finished on our end. If you're serious about this then hurry up and get on. We're on the third wagon. Old man, you usually handle the arrangements, so bring that kid up to speed on things."

Kadomon had finished his conversation with the driver and came back to tell them the preparations were done. Old Man Rom responded to that by waving his hand, staring with quiet eyes at Subaru who seemed like he had something he wanted to say.

“In any case, we need to get past the guard station first. Since it’s you I’m giving you an extra warning, don’t do anything unnecessary. Even if their guard is down, they’re still guards. If we’re caught it’ll end up making our purse hurt quite a bit.”

“I was sort of expecting we’d get beaten to death if caught, but for you to actually be able to settle things with money… this place sure is a hive of villainy. Be careful.”

Still finding it rather hard to accept, Subaru nodded; following Old Man Rom’s back, who had already started to move. There were four carts headed to the upper ward, they took up about half the space of the business district’s wide street by themselves so these carts were pretty big. And as for the ground dragons pulling the carts, unlike the thin lizard looking type he had seen before, these ones had short, thick legs, and reminded him more of slow lumbering turtles

.

For the four carts, there were four ground dragons in total. The one he and Old Man Rom were getting on was the third cart in the middle, whose main good appeared to be—

“Wow I was thinking it smelled pretty fishy, could it be that all of this is fish?”

“It smells pretty bad, so the guards are less likely to pay special attention to it. It hides our scent too so it’s perfect. Here, don’t forget to put on this deodorant powder.”

Old Man Rom handed a small green colored pouch over to Subaru, who was grimacing at the fishy scent having entered his nostrils. It was a small pouch whose size fit perfectly in the palm of his hand, sniffing the bag from the outside… he almost fainted in disgust. The foul odor was painful to his nose, It was even worse than the fishy smell. The smell attacked his face to the extent he thought he would get a nosebleed. Dropping the bag unintentionally, Old Man Rom stooped down to pick it up.

“This is our lifeline, don’t handle it so roughly you damned ingrate.”

“This feels like I’m getting an advanced loan on some divine retribution, what the hell is this stuff?! This isn’t at the level where you can just pinch your nose anymore! It feels more like my nose is gonna get torn off! In a non-metaphorical sense!”

“This Kalnago powder smells bad at first, but a few minutes after you apply it on your body the smell’ll disappear, along with any other odors. Don’t tell me you want to walk around in the upper ward with yer specially made nice clothes stinkin’ like fish; you’ll stick out like a sore thumb. Just think of it as a necessary sacrifice.”

Pushing the pouch back at Subaru, Old Man Rom had a wicked smile on his face. Reluctantly accepting it, he put the pouch in the pocket of his trousers while keeping his nose as far away as possible. Looking at the back-and-forth between these two, Kadomon waved his hand indicating them to hurry it up. Seeing that he wasn’t allowed to waste any more time, Subaru resolved himself and boarded the wagon.

As he feared— no, worse than he feared, the fishy smell assaulted his nose. They hadn’t even left yet and his spirit already felt like breaking. It seems they also had some method of chilling the raw fish, as the middle of the cart was unusually cold. While seeing the whiteness of his breath, he scanned for a spot to hide himself.

“Stop it with yer lookin’ around like that. The hidin’ spot is a little bit from the entrance… let’s see, behind that wooden box there. I’m hiding too so try to squeeze in.”

“This is just too sad, I’m stuck with this muscley old man for twenty-four hours a day… The floor better not be covered in fish juice, these clothes are brand new.”

“It’s far better than the alternative, having your clothes bloodied from living a life in poverty. B’sides the fish in the crate are salted so they don’t stink as much.”

Old Man Rom pushed Subaru’s back from behind to hurry him up. Coinciding with the moment he was pushed, the dragon-carriage started forward with a light jolt. Before hiding further in the back, Subaru poked his head out of the entrance of carriage to peek. Seeing them off with a wave, Kadomon gave them a final goodbye. He responded to that wave with a wave of his own, but Kadomon turned his back signaling not to look anymore, walking away from the carriage back to the business district. Confirming this, Subaru too retreated back into the wagon—settling in the corner next to the wooden crate he had been designated. He focused on calming his rapidly beating heart, excited from the thought of his first castle infiltration.

3

Grimacing at the pain from his heart, this carriage ride was one of slight regret for him, lamenting the fact that reckless deeds came so naturally to him. Though, the proof that Subaru’s worries were largely unfounded came when the driver seated on the coachman stand stealthily informed them that they had safely slipped past the guard station.

Roughly twenty minutes had passed since they departed from the business district. Having broken through so very easily, to the extent that he was even depressed from such an anti-climactic turn of events, Subaru looked with at Old Man Rom with a shocked face like he had just been told a joke or something.

“Is slipping past the guard station really this simple? They aren’t going to inspect the goods or anything?”

At worst, he had been imagining they’d do a really violent inspection like he’d seen in a few manga, like sticking spears into the wagon one by one. For Subaru who had been lying on the floor under this assumption, it was like his mental state was just thrown sumo-style.

Looking down, Old Man Rom laughed at Subaru’s baseless fears.

"Like I've been saying, there's an unspoken agreement here. Normally there are only supposed to be three carriages when bringing food items in from the business district to the upper ward. In the fourth wagon behind us, there were quite a few goods piled up to catch the guard's fancy."

From Old Man Rom's attitude, telling him with such an unpleasant face, it seems that Rom already knew the details behind the station's loose surveillance from the start. Hearing that with a sour face, Subaru openly displayed his displeasure with Rom's teasing-nature.

"So basically it's a rigged game from the start, and it's my fault for getting scared… Anyways, with the way you said it, can I assume the stuff piled up in the wagon were bribes?"

"If I said it without coating with any sweet words, then yes that's what it is. The cart was filled with a lot of inconvenient things that'd be bad if you got stopped with. Not just a small quantity."

He muttered like that, with his arms crossed. But after that Old Man Rom sent a serious look at Subaru.

"However, displeasing those bunch is the law. Getting caught and inviting unwanted attention isn't something they want either. They won't give you any chance to explain yerself, they'll cut'ya down to keep their secret safe— what a wretched way to die, got that?"

With unsaid words, Old Man Rom warned him against any hasty or rash actions. Faced with such a serious atmosphere, the usually talkative Subaru solemnly nodded his head, indicating his agreement silently. The shaking in the wagon decreased suddenly; it seemed they'd entered the upper ward— the sound of the wheels biting into the ground changed into that of pavement, informing them of their entrance into the nobles district.

"We'll get off after goin' a little bit further. Next, I'm headed to the place I told you about earlier, going to gather up some information in nobles district… Hey brat, you should do the same."

"Um… If I do that I can't achieve my objective?"

"It's only cause you pushed me so much to help that you were able to get into the upper ward. Trying to sneak in with how things are now should be impossible. You'll just be throwin' yer life down the drain. I know you have some reasons, but your preparation is lacking."

Having logic thrown at him, Subaru kept silent. Seeing him like that, Old Man Rom put a firm hand on Subaru's head, tousling his hair roughly.

"B'sides…", he prefaced

"Challenging these things with no preparation, from a certain perspective you can call that 'preparing to lose'. Even if you rush it, it's not going to get you the result you want. That's why… You understand right, kid?"

"…When you preach and act like an adult like that it's hard to argue"

Removing the hand resting on his head, Subaru sat up in the cart; turning to face away from the old man. Towards Subaru's pouting behavior, Old Man Rom smiled wrly. Peeking out from the gaps of the cart's canopy, he judged that this was around where their planned departure area was.

"Hey, we're gettin' off here. If we fully stopped the wagon it'd look suspicious. The carriage is going slow though, so I don't think you need to worry about getting injured; try to match your speed to the speed of the wagon and run along with it when you land."

Putting his arms though the gap in the canopy, Rom lifted it up enough for his body to fit through. The sun's rays flooded into the cart that was closed off from the light, to Subaru the strong light was painful to his eyes as he peered outside.

It was a paved road just like he had been imagining from the sensation in the wagon, and compared to the lower wards the way the city blocks looked in the nobles district's upper ward was fundamentally different.

Unlike the plain looking and crammed-together buildings in the trade district or slums, the amount of land dedicated to each building was vast. From Subaru's perspective using so much space between each building was a waste of land, it was like each building was enshrined by its own plot of a land. Each building felt pretty close being an extravagant mansion that you'd only see in fairy tales. He didn't see any buildings that were quite as large as the Roswaal mansion, but that was already a nonsensically large waste of space and was only really that large for the entertainment of Roswaal. Without the Rem and Ram sisters being excellent at their jobs, it'd probably end up where the mansion was impossible to maintain.

Finally at an understanding, Subaru took in the sights as he came to experience the difference between the upper-class and lower-class on a fundamental level. I guess this is the disparity between these fairy tale-like nobles and commoners, but it's also probably proof of how powerful the Lugnican empire had grown to be.

Including the wagon full of bribes behind him, he didn't exactly have a good impression, but it was also true that he had rode in on the back of those very misdeeds. Easily dismissing that inner-turmoil, Subaru's attention turned to getting off of the dragon-carriage.

"How's it, think you can do it?"

"I've got some experience when it comes to jumping, or rather, falling off a dragon carriage… I'm a little bit scared to be honest, if you would demonstrate it for me, I'll send you a nice gift or something."

"At least you don't try to act tough, that's one of yer good points you know. Here, watch close."

Nodding at Subaru, who had just confessed his own incompetence with honesty, Old Man Rom was the first the climb off. Pushing off from the edge of the wagon with one hand, his old body worked with practiced movement as he propelled his body off the wagon. Grabbing the edge of the wagon with both arms, he waited for the perfect timing before setting his feet on the ground.

He had imagined him being dragged along like that, or even worse getting caught in the wheel and turned to mince-meat in a huge accident, but—

“Without any of that happening… Could this be?”

“It’s because the divine protection’s still working. As long as you don’t let go with your hands you won’t get thrown off. Like this.”

Just like the dragon-carriage they had ridden to the capital, this dragon-pulled wagon also appeared to have divine protection against wind. So as to not have his body affected by the wind when putting it outside the carriage, he was running alongside the carriage while matching speed.

The speed of the cart was roughly what a bicycle pedaling at a relaxed pace could achieve. A little faster than a jog, but considerably slower than an all-out sprint. For Old Man Rom, whose stride was considerably bigger than the average person, keeping pace wasn’t difficult at all.

Letting his hand go, Old Man Rom was completely separated from the divine protection of the carriage. His body was now subjected to the natural law of inertia, but for Old Man Rom who had predicted its influence, this was a small matter. Without even flinching, he ran alongside the dragon-carriage.

Witnessing his magnificent skill, Subaru couldn’t help but sigh in admiration. As for Old Man Rom, seeing Subaru’s face exuding awe, he clapped his hands once while running alongside the carriage normally.

“Here, jump down just like I showed you. I can even catch you if you’d like, nice and gently.”

The words might have been intended to stoke Subaru’s competitive spirit. But, having that thrown at him, Subaru simply peered out from the canopy looking over Rom’s smiling face. What he learned from watching the running Rom, that is, to put his hand on the wagon’s edge and propel his body off— his practical application of that never materialized.

His innermost thoughts were seized with fear at the realization that he had to perform such an unexpected display of acrobatics. After chasing the dragon-carriage on foot for roughly 300 meters Old Man Rom seemed to have picked up on Subaru's thoughts as concern wove its way into the furrows on his brow. Veins popping on his wrinkled brow, his face reddened and spit flew while he shouted,

"W-Wait, kid! Weren't you going to get off here and sneak into the castle?!"

Seeing through Subaru's inner thoughts, the running Rom shouted with a face full of unease. While ignoring that, Subaru neither affirmed nor denied his words. With an attitude like he was going to close the canopy, his actions were demonstrating he heard it.

—This dragon-carriage was bringing supplies to the castle.

Although he had repeatedly corrected that statement saying he'd just misspoken, Subaru's ears hadn't forgotten the words Kadomon let slip at the start. This dragon-carriage's destination was the royal castle, it was probably safe to assume the food provisions they were carrying would be brought to the castle's cellar. Otherwise, then the plan of getting off here with Old Man Rom and finding a way into the castle together should have had a far better chance of succeeding.

Rom chased after him, having guessed Subaru's intention, but this place was the nobles district and once they got into the more populated areas he'd have no choice but to stop his pursuit. Just like Subaru had things he had to accomplish, Old Man Rom had his own priorities. If he caused a commotion on his own, that benefited neither of them. He understood that point, with a vexed expression on his face he dodged off the road, his giant body slipping into an alleyway. Seeing Rom's back disappear behind a corner, Subaru felt a pang of guilt.

In the end, it was like he was throwing away Kadomon's kindness and Old Man Rom's sympathy. They had given him the most assistance they could possibly give, it wouldn't be wrong if they thought he was paying that back with betrayal. Even so, Subaru had exploited their goodwill but he had no intentions of making excuses for himself.

—I'm going to be by Emilia's side.

For the current Subaru, this was truly his only priority. For that purpose, any problems that stood between him were nothing more than words on a page to be ignored.

The capital was a distorted land, where danger spread like a disease. Leaving Emilia exposed and defenseless in a place like this was something that Subaru couldn't allow on an emotional level.

If he were at least by her side there might be something he could do. In other words, "Even if it's no good, there's still a chance I might be able to do something, somehow or another." Or so Subaru was thinking subconsciously.

—Not noticing that this kind of thinking excessively prideful, or even inhuman.

Among the supply carriage's cargo there was only the slightest of differences, an unfamiliar face enjoying the smoothness of the paved road as they headed towards the royal castle. Happy with the realization he'd made it this far without something like a bribe, unbeknownst to him the situation was like an unexploded powder keg, growing ever and ever larger.

4

After the tearful farewell with his benefactors, Subaru had no choice but to challenge this ordeal himself. Blocking his way were countless thousands of crises and hardships, along with the love and friendship born amongst such tribulations. And, his collapsing life, ambition, dreams— stepping over that and shedding blood while pressing on.

"Something like that would be ideal… In reality aren't I in a pinch?"

Easily slipping into the castle's food cellar and currently walking around in the castle's interior, Subaru couldn't help but sigh in wonder at the state of the castle’s defenses— or rather lack of.

From the point of their journey where Subaru abandoned Old Man Rom about thirty minutes had passed, with Subaru riding along with the dragon-carriage he had easily entered the premises of the royal castle. Part way through, before they reached the castle the fourth wagon had strayed off the path, but that probably meant the bribes in it were destined for a different location. If that was the case it should be that the leading three wagons weren’t headed for a location other than the castle, and that Subaru’s life was probably safe for now.

“I guess this is what I get for cohabitating with salted fish. I didn’t expect the salt to stick to my body, but I guess the deodorant powder did its work.”

Noticing that some white powder was still clinging to a few spots on his body, Subaru dusted himself off with neurotic scrutiny while praising his own quick-wittedness. As expected after entering the castle, in order to unload the wagon of course they had to check inside. Faced with the likelihood of being caught, Subaru decided to climb into the crate of salted fish to escape the current crisis.

In actuality, they checked the contents of all the wooden crates next to him, but thanks to a stroke of god-like good luck they never checked the one Subaru had climbed into.

After that, the movement of the cargo itself was done with something like wind magic, Carrying the food provisions to the interior with something other than by human labor. Thanks to that the unnatural weight in the wooden box went undiscovered, and with his primitive hybrid-combination of absurd, reckless, and unreasonable, he somehow managed to succeed with his unlikely plan.

For Subaru the current situation was very lucky, but with the lax surveillance his thoughts immediately drifted towards worrying about Emilia’s safety, so he couldn’t celebrate without restraint. Taking into account all the information he had he slipped out of the food cellar, and thus choosing an area with few people he began moving about the basement.

“Well, it’s nice I managed to get in, but… I seriously have no plan here.”

Honestly, it was nice he got to this place, but he was drawing a complete blank on what to do now. Watching over Emilia from the shadows, if that was possible that was the best option, but as one would expect it didn’t quite seem possible to make it to where she was in the centre of the royal castle without being noticed. At worst, even if he was discovered mid-way through it wouldn’t be impossible to handle it by gradually pressing to meet up with Emilia to have her bail him out, or so Subaru calculated shamelessly.

Now that he had snuck in this far, even though Emilia would probably be angry he didn’t think she would send him away. It’d be enough to just apologize with his whole heart, and rely on her kindness. Thinking with extreme optimism, Subaru ran through the basement passageway. Without even a shred of self reflection, if other people were to see him now how would they judge him? Fortunately or unfortunately there was nobody around to do that.

And,

“Crap, somebody’s coming…”

Feeling somebody’s presence coming from the front, Subaru’s eyes searched his surroundings in a panic. As the location was a passageway in the basement, this was most likely a place only used by servants. Sliding his body into a nearby room, Subaru stood behind the crudely made door.

Luckily for him, there was nobody in the room he snuck into.

This small room was probably something like a dressing room used by the servants. There were several closets lined up next to each other, from the sweet scent he could tell this was room was intended for female servants as some feelings of guilt came to mind. But, he didn’t have the leisure to savor the sensation of the room’s sweet scent. In a hurry Subaru opened the interior closet, confirming that nothing was inside he quietly hid himself in it.

Concealing his breath, it would be fine if he just waited for the presence in the hallway to pass. If he was caught he could probably do something about it, or so he was going about thinking optimistically, but his body's actions revealed that this wasn't a situation where he'd get off easily if discovered. Although he hadn't steeled himself for the situation and his courage was wavering, to him now this was a trifling matter.

First thing was to get through this current situation, he could even try announcing himself and playing it off from there. But, Subaru's composure in considering his future course of actions…

"—This room stinks."

…was broken so easily; a girl's voice called out as the door swung open violently. He was so nervous it felt like his heart was going to jump out of his throat. He felt the sound of his blood moving with each pulse while he ground his teeth in despair. This closet was unlike that of changing room locker in that there were no convenient holes for him to peer out from. In other words, Subaru was in the dark and could only imagine what was happening outside based on the actions of the other person.

While feeling his throat closing up from stress, Subaru once again regretted his actions. He underestimated it, made fun of it, and got full of himself. He was too conceited. And now looking at the predicament he was in he understood just how stupid his actions were. Why did he ever just calmly carry out with such a reckless idea, he couldn't understand the reasoning behind his actions and decisions up till now.

While confused and trying to reason things out, Subaru still decided not to go ahead with the option of announcing himself to the other person. He was still hoping that maybe, just maybe, the other person hadn't noticed he was here. Or so he clung to that thread of hope thinner than a spider's silk, unable to throw those feelings away.

Subaru held his breath, his whole body tormented with the urge to run.

"—I'm only going to wait five seconds. My princess hates waiting even more than I do, you see."

He heard a muffled voice proclaim from beyond the wooden door of the closet. It was somehow a voice without much energy, but the intention behind it appeared not to be a lie, from the midst of silence the sound of a sword sliding out of its scabbard was proof enough.

Like this the proclamation he thought was just a bluff turned serious, he was still hoping to pretend like nobody was there and wait for this all to blow over— but he didn't have the guts to go through with that choice.

"5, 4, alright I'm done counting—"

"Time-out, stop, let's talk this over! I'm coming out, I'm coming out right now, just wait"

Hurried by the voice seemingly eager to use their sword, Subaru was pressured through fear to open to door. The closet slowly grated as it opened, the scent that had settled and drifted about in the room flowed in as a refreshing breeze, for just a moment it softly caressed his feeling of despair.

Then again, what followed was going to be a harsh scolding where excuses were useless. Thinking of the current situation he had brought about, it wasn't something that could be settled with just a light punishment. It's not like he hadn't thought about it at all, but it was true to a certain degree he had been overly optimistic in thinking everything would work out in the end.

Since there wouldn't be much point in arguing about it, before he was completely defeated he would play every card he could play— and Subaru having come to that determination, looked at who stood before him,

"See, look Al. Isn't it just like I said?"

It was a certain haughty voice he'd heard before, reflexively raising his head, an orange-haired girl smiled arrogantly while pointing the small fan-like prop in her hand at him.

“For us to meet this buffoon again so soon, even I’m surprised at how much early than expected this was.”

“Aah, I guess so. As expected of Princess, you have quite the eye. And you, you sure have bad luck.”

It was the middle-aged man standing next to her— sporting a jet-black helmet and bizarre light clothes, same as last time. The first half of Al’s statement was agreeing with the girl, the latter half he uttered with a tone seemingly full of sympathy for Subaru.

Wasn’t this the very situation he wanted to avoid? Getting thrown about without any say. Still, a feeling of relief attacked his whole body, before he knew it he was crouched down, letting out a dry laughter; he couldn’t help but breath out a long sigh.

Chapter 13:
Same Homeland

1

Subaru sank into the floor realizing just how bad his luck was.

Although it would have been the best development if they hadn't been found, it was a godsend that the people he did find were familiar faces. What's more, the people involved turned out to be a duo he had only just met yesterday; you never know what life will bring.

It would not be an exaggeration to say the purpose of the event last night with the girl and her companion had been to help Subaru get through this situation.

???: "So, out of respect for the will of fate in that area, let's keep things civil—"

Assuming a seiza posture, he bent deeply at the waist, placing both hands on the ground in the shape of a figure eight, and gently slammed the crown of his head into the floor. This was the Dogeza battle tactic, handed down from the ancient times of the Empire of Japan, which advocated for the triple star of defenselessness, impotence, and helplessness, thus making the opponent bear absolute pity towards him.

Subaru returned to his senses, caught up with the fact that he had not escaped the situation, and chose to make the most obvious apology.

His other options included pushing through forcefully or pretending to be crazy as he danced around the issue, although he foresaw both options ending in catastrophic defeat and hence quickly rejected them. He arrived at the option that seemed to give the highest chance of survival: clinging to the other party's kindness.

???: "…"

As speechless moments continued, Subaru prostrated himself, feeling pressure culminate on his shoulders. Unable to bear the heavy weight, he glanced upward.

He peeked at the situation with the full breadth of his field of vision, the small soles of shoes spread out.

???: “You really are a worthless guy.”

Subaru: “Cough, cough”

With a single phrase of boredom uttered, a front kick struck the surface of Subaru’s face.

With such force that it seemed as though there had been no mercy, let alone anything of the sort, Subaru was thrown back by the neck from where he was sitting. The back of his head nailed into the closet door, while the soles of shoes continued to trample down on him as his eyes cried in pain.

The young girl, who was the owner of such soles, kicked the shocked and immobile Subaru.

Young Girl: “To sneak into the Royal Capital, I wonder how determined you must be… how worthless. I refuse to use listening ears for anything like an apology. Besides, if you were going to apologize, you should not have done the thing in the first place.”

Throwing out a mixture of scorn and mockery, the girl continued to knead Subaru’s cheek with her pointed heel. He grunted from the sharp pain before quickly attempting to brush her foot away,

???: “Don’t move, dumbass. Princess is doing this directly out of kindness. Bastard, would you prefer my interrogation? You’re a useless underling, so naturally you’re a pain.”

As he tried moving, the tip of a silently-drawn large sword was held against his throat.

Before Subaru’s breathless eyes, the one-armed man who had done it muttered listlessly in a hard-to-hear voice.

Based on Subaru's knowledge, the broad blade was similar to a sword called the dao. The man easily wielded the large, thick sword with one hand.

There seemed to be no way that an unarmed, amateur fighter like Subaru could compete.

While Subaru was left speechless and unmoving by the way they expertly got the drop on him, the girl, still with her foot on Subaru, looked up at the attendant beside her.

Orange-Haired Princess: "Hey, Al! You dare to bring something so dangerous so very close to my feet? If my flawless, jewel-like skin were to get even a scratch, it would be a loss to the entire world!"

Al: "Relax, Princess. I've got a policy of never doing anything I can't handle. Besides, you're someone I owe. So just feel like you're riding in an ultra-powered boat of mud."

Remaining tense as he watched the exchange between master and servant unfold before him, Subaru decided that making a move in the current situation would be unwise. That said, simply sitting back and letting things play out wouldn't lead to anything good either. At some point, he'd have to seize the right moment to act, but—

Subaru: "A mud boat's just gonna sink… Put me on a real ship…"

Forcing the words out, Subaru risked his life to point out the oddity he'd heard.

At those words, the orange-haired girl slowly turned her head. She closed one eye, displeased that Subaru—who had just been kicked—had spoken without her permission.

Orange-Haired Princess: "To speak without mine permission while you are still awaiting mine judgment… You have some nerve. Very well, if your life means so little to you—"

Al: "Hold up a sec, princess. Just now, what did you say, kid?"

Stopping his master just as she was about to deliver a cruel decree, Al leaned in and questioned Subaru. His disrespect clearly irritated the girl, but Al, focused entirely on Subaru, didn't seem to notice.

From within his jet-black helmet—his eyes hidden from the outside—Al stared intently at Subaru.

Al: "Since yesterday, when I caught a glimpse of you, I've had a feeling, but… Hey, kid."

With his cheek still gouged by the girl's foot, Subaru looked up at Al with the one eye he had free reign over. From Al's demeanor, Subaru determined his suspicion hadn't been too far off the mark.

Together, their gazes intersected, while Subaru held his breath as he waited for Al to speak. Then,

Al: "When the wind blows—"

Subaru: "…? Oh, the barrel makers profit?"

Al: "If you talk about next year, then,"

Subaru: "The demons will laugh…!"

Al: "A laughing household…"

Subaru: "—Brings good fortune!"

Declaring with firm conviction, Subaru continued looking up at Al's face.

From within the pitch black helmet, any change in his expression was unreadable. Such being the case, he shook his head, shrugging the shoulder of his one arm.

Al: "I see. So it really is like I expected. You got me there."

Orange-Haired Princess: "What is this? You went and made sense of it all by yourself. Explain it to mineself as well. What is the meaning behind that incomprehensible exchange just now?"

Seeming dissatisfied with his understanding was the left-out young girl.

She glanced back and forth between Al's attitude and Subaru's expression, which interchangeably seemed to display the acquiring of a common sense.

Orange-Haired Princess: "The disrespect piling on top of disrespect is not something I am so tolerant of as to just forgive it or laugh it off. Therefore, answer carefully. That exchange just now, what was the meaning of it?"

Al: "—If I had to say, it was like a confirmation of each other's homelands."

Subaru: "That's about it…"

To the low voice, Subaru answered with the same inflection. At that answer, the young girl scowled at the lack of meaning getting through. Suddenly, she squinted as if she had realized something.

Orange-Haired Princess: "—The same hometown, hm? Al?"

Al: "Probably, yeah."

Once more, Al shrugged his shoulder as an affirmative gesture towards his master's inquiry.

Thereafter, he sheathed the dao. After that, Subaru once again looked down,

Al: "A few more questions I'd like to ask have sprung up. So, how about it?"

Subaru: "…If it's gonna be an interrogation, I'd personally be pleased to have some pork cutlet along with it."

Al: "I'm a fan of eel bowls. Although, this way and that, they're nowhere to be seen."

Yes, simply from Al's tone of voice, it could be judged that he was laughing as he presented his free hand.

Subaru reached up to firmly grasp that hand,

Subaru: “Life; you never know what’s going to happen, really.”

With the relief of escaping a narrow run-in with death and the unexpected surprise twist that came with it, those words were let slip.

2

Subaru: “Amnesia?”

Standing up from the floor of the changing room, after just having secured his right to life, Subaru muttered in a remarkably wild voice.

Repeatedly listening to these murmurings, the black helmet— Al nodded.

With one arm, he roughly scratched at the nape of his neck, at the point where his helmet met his light armor,

Al: “It’s what you’d call episodic memory loss. I haven’t forgotten general knowledge, or the names of things, or anything like that. Just the parts related to myself have cleanly disappeared. Pretty orthodox, right?”

Subaru: “Hearing somebody else rapid-fire all those katakana terms is really off-putting… Guess I’ve gotten pretty submerged in this otherworldly fantasy.”

Responding to Al’s seeking of agreement with a wry smile, Subaru realized anew the truth he had just confirmed. Yes, meaning—

Subaru: “No mistake about it, you and I really were both summoned from the same world.”

Al: “Well, that’s how it looks to me when I ascertain it with the common sense I’ve got.”

Saying so, he shrugged his shoulders— most likely, Subaru figured it was his way of laughing.

Compared to his earlier demeanor, Al had considerably softened. It gave off a sense of friendship equal to, no, greater than their encounter yesterday.

In a way, it was only natural, because Subaru too couldn't help but feel genuine empathy towards him, as if Al's situation were no longer just someone else's problem.

Subaru: "I hadn't given it much thought, but if there's someone else like me, then it isn't so strange for there to be others who were summoned. Al-san, do you know of anyone else like that?"

Al: "Attaching –san like that is a bother so quit it, brother. Just referring to me as Al is fine. And about others from our hometown,"

The troubling words caused him to correct his helmet's positioning; Al turned his neck slightly downward.

Al: "It's a no, I know nobody else like that. Meeting you was the first time I had come across someone from my hometown. Honestly, I even suspected that I could be a lunatic."

Subaru widened his eyes in surprise. Seeing that reaction, Al gave a self-deprecating chuckle and said, "After all, can you blame me?"

Al: "I have memories of a world that's not here, but I have no memories of myself, the one who holds those memories. Do you think it's possible not to doubt the possibility that this sudden self of mine is just some mysterious collection born from the depths of delusion? Memories of another world, to be blunt, felt to me like nothing but solitary insanity. Although—"

His manner of speaking was gloomy, but by the end of the latter half, that gloom was swept away. Riding that momentum, he clapped Subaru firmly on the shoulder.

Al: "Turns out I had a bro out there. Thanks to that, I was saved. My memories were real. I wasn't some insane madman. Just that alone—yeah, that saved me."

The manner of the weeping note of relief led Subaru to understand and ponder on the weight of that man's unbearable daily solitude.

There was no one out there who could share in his memories. Subaru had been in the same situation, but unlike him, Subaru held thoughts related to the self that served as an anchor for those memories. Only with both of those together could the solid sense of self known as Natsuki Subaru truly exist in this other world.

On the other hand, for Al there didn't exist that ideal anchor. In a different world where no one knew of his existence, he carried memories of another world that even he himself didn't know in any real sense. In that sea of memories, so vast and harboring misunderstandings from others, he had endlessly continued to nearly drown.

Shuddering at that terrible weight, Subaru's lips subconsciously trembled as he began to ask a question.

It was something he hadn't contemplated on up to now, but once it entered his awareness, he couldn't help but question it. That was,

Subaru: "Al, how much time has passed since you've been in this world?"

The time Subaru had spent in this world, in real time, amounted to no more than twenty days. His memories of his original world still being clear, he was in a state of amateurism in which the existence of everything in this other world felt fresh.

To Subaru's question, Al became speechless for a short time.

Al: "As to when I arrived in this world, I'm not certain—It must have been about eighteen years ago."

Subaru: "Wha–…?!"

Upon being replied to with an unexpected number of years, Subaru's repeated questioning choked up.

Al affirmed Subaru's surprise with a nod of the head.

Al: "When it comes to memories of my true age, I'm at a loss… Most likely, I'm just about to be around forty, I think. When I was summoned, I might have been around the same age as you?"

Touching his chin and steadily gazing at Subaru, Al expressed those words.

Once again grasping the weight behind his words just now, Subaru was unable to put forth any frivolous words of acknowledgment regarding that painful everyday.

There were still various things he wanted to say and many things he wanted to ask. However, thinking that digging into them might tie into more pain for Al, he couldn't bring himself to do it so simply.

Orange-Haired Princess: "So?"

Interrupting Subaru's sentimentality was the voice of the third person, who up until now had remained silent.

He turned his head around. With her back against the wall of the changing room, the girl stood with her arms crossed and eyes closed. She tapped her fingers against her folded arms in irritation,

Orange-Haired Princess: "To go so far as to interrupt mine judgment. There better have been fruit to it, Al."

Al: "As far as my standpoint goes, I couldn't have asked for any more. I don't know how you see things, Princess, though… At the very least, I've come to know my delusions don't end as mere delusions."

Orange-Haired Princess: "Continuing to speak with such a refreshed face; I'm not even angry. —And now, upon that, comes thy disposition…"

Pushing aside Al with her hand, the young girl stepped forward to stand before Subaru.

The pressure emanating from the small-framed girl—that sheer mass left Subaru instinctually overwhelmed. The meeting of the previous day was void of such a feeling of oppression. That is, without planning it, Subaru felt the greatly deep divide sprawled out in the space between himself and the girl,

Orange-Haired Princess: "You, like Al, prattle on about coming from beyond the Great Waterfall?”

Subaru: “Great Waterfall?”

Orange-Haired Princess: “At the ends of the ends of the world. A place of abhorrent demise. All swept away by the torrent— That is the Great Waterfall. It is said that none have seen what lies beyond it.”

She gathered her fingers on the unmoving Subaru’s jaw, lifting his face up as she continued.

Orange-Haired Princess: “Every once in a great while, there comes a party loudly proclaiming they are from beyond the Great Waterfall. Those fools generally try to attract attention with grandiose lies… Al is a bit different.”

Subaru: “That deducing, I’d like to know the grounds for it…”

Orange-Haired Princess: “Just intuition.”

At the very least, Subaru’s counterattack was cleanly cut through by the young girl’s single statement.

Declaring so to the speechless Subaru, thereafter she turned to face Al behind her.

Orange-Haired Princess: “I only need one clown to divert me from mine boredom. That is my decision. Any objections, Al?”

Al: “There are, massively so. Because, Princess, there honestly probably aren’t any of my countrymen left anymore. So if you could maaaaybe show a teensy bit of mercy or something, I’d be gladly humiliated with a rapidly beating heart.”

Orange-Haired Princess: “Are you giving mineself orders?”

Al: “Come now, come now, I’m begging for mercy. My ultra beautiful, ultra promising, ultra clever, ultra wonderful, and ultra kind Princess would surely never make a choice that led to my misery.”

Al’s smooth tone was met by silence and void of expression by the young girl. As it was, with a cooled voice, she turned her now-bored eyes to Subaru, who still awaited his verdict.

Her fingertips remained upholding Subaru’s jaw, as the fear of what her next words might be was unbearable.

Emotionally speaking, Al was taking Subaru’s side, although the essential aspect of moodiness was something Subaru came to understand in their short time together yesterday. Whether she herself possessed the power to inflict harm was unclear, but at the very least, she certainly could use both daggers and magic.

—If push came to shove, he could unleash one of his Shamak in retaliation.

Subaru sensed within himself a feeling of desperation.

Orange-Haired Princess: “Well, very well.”

Thus spoke the unchanged, disinterested tone from the young girl, the single phrase unmasking those as baseless fears.

The young girl withdrew the fingers touching Subaru’s chin, pulled a fan out of a bag, and began fanning herself while walking across the changing room.

Orange-Haired Princess: “It wasn’t anything that piqued my interest to begin with. To lop off your head by the neck and fall into disfavor with a retainer would be idiotically foolish. Needless labor; an unnecessary exertion.”

Subaru: “Umm, that meaning… I’m not getting punished?”

Al: “Now that seems awfully convenient, doesn’t it, bro?”

As the tides seemed to be unfolding in his favor, Subaru let out a sigh of relief, slumping his shoulders, to which Al cautioned him with a pained smile. Then, calling out to the back of his master who was just about to leave,

Al: “Heeey, Princess. Not that I’m displeased you heard me out, but seriously, what's to be done now? I don't expect you to just overlook everything, that'd be unreasonable."

Subaru: "Right?"

Even though he had literally just escaped the threat of death, saving his one life, it was also true that the situation Subaru brought about had stepped past the line of being able to be overlooked.

Regarding that, as expected, it seemed Al had no intention of drawing that line leniently. In response to his words, the young girl halted her steps and, with a look of bother from the bottom of the heart, turned her neck back.

Orange-Haired Princess: "Do you not heed my will? What a dullard. —No matter, bring him along. If he tries to run away, lop off his head by the neck."

Al: "Well sure, but… No, is that really okay? After all, given where you're headed, Princess—"

Orange-Haired Princess: "Shut it."

Upon readily accepting the inhumane decree, Al voiced a point of uncertainty. Cutting over his words, the young girl,

Orange-Haired Princess: "To interject into my conduct is preposterous. It would do you well to know your place, Al. In this world, only that which is convenient for me shall come to pass. Therefore, there is not a sole error in my judgment. Bringing that clown along shall serve my benefit. I will be the victor of this world's decision."

Al: "Listening to your self-assurance is almost refreshing, Princess. I understand."

To her self-regard bordering on haughty arrogance, Al declared his compliance in a pleased tone. From there, he turned to the left behind Subaru, tapping him on the shoulder.

Al: "That means that from now on, bro, you're in captivity. Oh, and don't try to run. I'd rather not, but if it comes to that I'll cut you down.”

Subaru: “No comradery between countrymen?”

Al: “When you weigh duty and sentiment on the scales, duty always prevails in this world.”

The announcement of those words invoked a deep feeling involving the fickle nature of this fleeting world. Al pushed Subaru along by the back.

Completely swept up by the situation as is, Subaru proceeded between the small-framed back and, from behind, the pressure of the one-armed man from his homeland.

Subaru: “Well, I’m aware I messed up, there’s no helping that, but… is this situation improving or getting worse…?”

Orange-Haired Princess: “Had it not been mineself that found you, your head would already be forfeit. Come now, offer your limitless gratitude unto me.”

Subaru: “It’s true that I got saved and all, but… isn’t it strange you aren’t asking why I was even here to begin with? Even I gotta admit I seem super suspicious and ill-natured right now.”

While he did want to explain himself, it was hard to say he acted based on something that could easily be explained to others. It was that unfounded anxiety that made it difficult to stay put.

And so, Subaru’s inquiries were born from the anxiety of not being asked what should have been asked; a shell of weakness serving as a makeshift defense. Although the girl, as if seeing through Subaru’s shallow contents, snorted through her nose.

Orange-Haired Princess: “I more or less have a rough idea of that reasoning. Therefore, mineself shall not ask. That my tolerance was what it was… ah, let us see, yes, I suppose.”

Halting as she stood, the young girl turned around.

Orange hair swaying before his eyes, at once Subaru came to a dazed stop. Before those same eyes, a finger was stuck out; the young girl graciously raised the ends of her lips,

Orange-Haired Princess: “Appa.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Orange-Haired Princess: “Yesterday’s Appas weren’t bad. It would do well to consider that the reason I did not immediately lop off your head.”

She defined her change of heart with that reasoning, and with that, began walking out without so much as a look behind her.

Dazedly seeing her back off, Subaru mulled over the words spoken to him in his head. With effort, he used his feet to step forward, murmuring a bit. That murmuring was,

Subaru: “Meaning my life was saved by that unc from the fruit stall…”

Even the achievement of having infiltrated the castle was thanks to Kadomon; he felt his participation rate in events related to the Royal Capital had reached abnormal levels.

With such a trivial impression, Subaru, regarding his narrow escape from death, attained one small sense of comprehension.

3

Subaru: “Heey, is this really okay? There’s no problem? Aren’t I pretty out-of-place?”

Al: “Out of place, you say? More like trespassing. I won’t go running my mouth, since Princess is okay with it, but… Don’t do anything strange. I won’t go out of my way to defend you.”

To Subaru, who repeatedly glanced around anxiously, Al curtly threw out a comment from beside him. But even Al, who seemed to be acting composed, appeared uncomfortable at a closer glance as he corrected his posture, shooting a gaze to his master walking ahead.

The girl walked ahead— striding down the corridor of the central tower located on the upper floors of the royal castle. She basked in the countless stares of others, those looks in a manner befitting her luxurious attire and elegant beauty.

Those gazes following the young girl's gait were being directed by the fully-armed guards lined along either side of the corridor. Down that corridor lined with guards brandishing swords, the young girl continued. Subaru restlessly walks forward, his inner thoughts in anything but their ordinary state.

After all, to begin with, Subaru had only planned to stealthily peek at the castle's interior. So why was he now in a place completely crowded to the brim? What's more, beside him, Al carelessly made a slip of the tongue; just that alone would put him under circumstances in which heads would fly.

He just wanted the corridor to quickly reach its end. The collection of soldiers shooting him a whirlpool of gazes, that wordless pressure exerted upon him quickened his step, causing him to inadvertently reach the young girl's back.

No, you could say he reached the end of the corridor where an exchange is to take place.

Subaru: "In the back of this passage filled with soldiers, that really is a massive door…"

The double doors were large to the extent that one had to look up at them, which naturally prompted Subaru to imagine the majesty of the place that lay beyond them.

The location was the top floor of the central tower in the royal castle of the Royal Capital— beyond a corridor flanked left-to-right by lined-up soldiers. Since earlier, an unpleasant premonition had taken hold of Subaru's head, swinging it around without letting go.

Before Subaru, who was in such a gloomy state of mind, the young girl was exchanging words with the giant blocking the door.

The well-armed giant removed his headpiece, then with an intellectual gaze measured up the young girl.

He appeared to be around thirty, not so much sharp-featured as one with a rugged countenance. On his craggy, deeply chiseled face, he carried an air of sternness mixed with a battle-hardened aura.

Stern Soldier: “Your arrival has been anticipated, Priscilla-sama.”

The man with that solemn face met her gaze with a serious voice, lowering his head politely.

Despite bearing in mind the respectful conduct, the young girl haughtily nodded her head, before indicating to the two behind her,

Priscilla: “They are my companions. One is my knight, and the other… is in charge of appas, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Hold o–…!”

Subaru was about to interject that she should have given him a more favorable position, but then he remembered the graveness of the situation and covered his mouth. Taking but a glance at the Subaru making many comical expressions, the knight glanced at the young girl with a boulder-like expression void of even the slightest movement.

Stern Soldier: “—In charge of appas, you say?”

Priscilla: “That’s right, commander of the appas. A pitiful fool whose purpose is to bring mineself red, sweet-and-sour appas. He is harmless, pay him no mind.”

Stern Soldier: “Unless I first inquire Miklotov-sama’s opinion, your passage…”

Priscilla: “My actions are, in a turn of phrase, the will of the world itself. This is outrageous disrespect. We will proceed now, Marcos.”

Apparently accustomed to such commonplace declarations, the knight raised no protest towards the young girl’s insolent remarks.

With gentle blue eyes he appraised Subaru, and then Al’s demeanors— Immediately after, his clear blue eyes shone dazzlingly, not metaphorically, but literally.

He lightly pressed a finger to his own eyes.

Marcos: “The presence of no dangerous mana signatures or armaments has been confirmed. As for Sir Knight, the only thing being brought in is that greatsword, correct?”

Al: “… Oh, by knight you meant me? Yeah, yeah, yes, yes. If the black-haired person shows suspicious signs, by chance, I’ll cut him clean in two with my own hands.”

Marcos: “If by some one-in-a-thousand chance something occurs, then please protect your liege, Priscilla-sama. As for all other matters, leave them to us, the royal guards.”

Having his flippant remark returned with such grandiosity, Al vaguely replied with an evasive “Sure, sure”.

Marcos: “Everyone inside is waiting. Please make haste.”

Priscilla: “To make the common masses wait is but a result of my superiority. The reverse, however, is absolutely impermissible.”

Putting on airs with a small-minded remark, the young girl stepped through the door as she was seen off. Without the slightest hesitation, Al followed behind. Seeing that, Subaru mustered his resolve and headed inside.

—What spread out before his eyes was a red carpet spread out over a vast space.

Dazzling ornaments adorned the walls and extravagant lighting from the broad daylight cast from the ceiling. Compared to this size of the room befitting a gymnasium, the sparsity of contents was like a bargain of wastefulness. However, that made sense if one considered the room’s objective and use.

At the very rear of the room’s center stood a modest level change where there lay a slightly raised platform, upon which a built-in chair had been furnished.

From behind there was a wall adorned with a dragon motif; the one seated in the chair could be seen as bearing that dragon on their back, or as being protected by it.

That was unmistakably the throne room of the Royal Capital. That chair was without a doubt the throne of Lugunica.

After first having his gaze stolen by the eye-catching throne, Subaru fearfully scanned his surroundings.

As for the interior of the room, unlike the outside, not a single figure of a sword-wielding guard could be seen. While all the royal guards were on standby outside, the few figures in the room could be accounted for on one's hands and feet.

And then, among them—

???: "—Subaru?"

As Subaru passed through the door into the throne room, a silver-haired young girl was watching him with astonishment on her face.

She blinked as if unable to believe the fact that Subaru was there, those deep violet eyes harboring confusion among other emotions, all blending together in ripples.

Basking in the full brunt of her astonishment, Subaru's heart cried out in a high degree of pain.

That mysterious feeling of oppression exceeded all previous pressures since sneaking into the royal castle.

Suppressing it by some means, before her next action, Subaru made his move.

Hitting his head with his hand, with one eye shut, he stuck out his tongue.

Subaru: "Sorry, I ended up coming."

A tremendous, wordless pressure came to sprawl over the throne room for a short while.

Chapter 14:
The Beginning of the Royal Selection

Subaru's earnest mischievous grin fell spectacularly flat, completely unaffected by historical context, cultural gaps in a different world, or any other issues.

Silence descended, so awkward that the world seemed to lose its sound, and even the passage of time became hazy. Yet, reality insisted that time hadn't stopped; Subaru's heart, shamelessly, continued to pump blood, and Emilia's complexion before him worsened with each passing moment. He wished he could just die of embarrassment and get it over with, but for Subaru, who had survived his days in this other world out of self-preservation, dying of shame or frustration was a distant concept.

He could only remain silent through the excruciating awkwardness, waiting for a reaction from the other party while maintaining his grin. This was a battle, yes, a battle. Like the few high-stakes moments he'd encountered in his time in this other world—the incident in the loot house, the one in the witchbeast forest—and now, this grand flop in the throne room, right in front of Emilia.

Subaru couldn't move. He had resolved not to budge an inch without a reaction from Emilia, a truly splendid sentiment. In contrast, Emilia's lips trembled as if searching for words, and her eyes darted around as she tried to compose her thoughts. Then, her lips set, and her violet eyes, as if having reached some conclusion, gazed directly into Subaru's black ones. Feeling as though he might be drawn into their depths, Subaru braced himself to accept whatever her first words might be—

"Mixed-blood, why are you staring at my servant?"

"Oof!"

"Huh?"

As Subaru awaited Emilia's words, an impact came from behind him. An incredibly soft sensation pressed against his back, and then arms wrapped around his chest and neck in a suggestive lock. A ginger-haired girl, standing on her tiptoes behind him, rested her chin on Subaru's shoulder, facing Emilia side-by-side with him.

Subaru's ears turned red as her posture naturally led him to realize what was pressing against his back. But he immediately dismissed that thought, shaking himself free.

"What do you mean, 'servant'? Emilia-tan will misunderstand…"

"Hmph, so you're not my servant. Then what, pray tell, is your status, that which allows you to brazenly wander the castle?"

"Ugh…!"

His immediate retort was cut off by a malicious grin. His overwhelming disadvantage in the current situation was undeniable. It was an undeniable fact that his position was secured only through her good graces, and his reliance on them. Considering the capricious nature of the girl, if Subaru chose to act against her wishes here, he'd be immediately reported and end up imprisoned. At worst, he might even be executed on the spot.

However, being overly familiar with any girl other than Emilia in front of Emilia was out of the question. It wasn't about what Emilia would think, but a matter of Subaru's own male pride. Thus, Subaru was in a desperate bind. Unless Subaru was a complete idiot, the logical course of action would be to obey the girl's wishes and get through this. However, just like his circumstances of infiltration, Natsuki Subaru was, indeed, a complete idiot.

"I can't bow my head to anyone in front of Emilia-tan!"

"…Oh, interesting. Then what do you claim yourself to be?"

The girl's teasing expression changed completely, and she questioned him in a chilling tone. His answer here would directly determine the value of his head. He couldn't see Emilia's expression behind him, but Al, standing behind the girl, shook his helmet-clad head, desperately trying to convey, "She's not in the mood for jokes right now!" Feeling bad about trampling on his goodwill, Subaru quietly took a breath and clearly stated his position.

"I am in this castle…"

"Oh my~, Lady Priscilla. My sincerest apologies for the trouble caused by one of our household staff. It is truly regrettable that he lost his way within the castle. Please excuse his impertinence."

Interrupting Subaru's rather pointless display of male pride was a familiar, gentle male voice. Standing beside Subaru, who was overly pumped up, was the long, indigo hair of Roswaal. Dressed in proper Marquis attire, he wore his usual carefree smile. He gestured to Subaru with an almost theatrical, mock-reverent bow.

"I shall repay this debt in due time. Again, please forgive the rudeness of our household member."

"So, the head charlatan has shown his face. Well, it matters not. Thanks to this clown and the mixed-blood, I was adequately entertained. —And it is my attendant's request, after all."

To Roswaal's impudent behavior, the girl nodded grandly, showing her generosity. Behind her, Al expressed his relief with a visible shudder. He seemed to have been terribly flustered by the fact that his compatriot, found after eighteen years, had almost faced a life-or-death situation so soon.

"Give me a break, Princess. My life candle melted like summer ice…"

"Your metaphors are usually incomprehensible. In any case, you both should be grateful for my magnanimity. Worship me, worship me."

"Yeah, yeah, amazing, amazing, great, great."

He casually ruffled the girl's head with his single arm, making her head wobble back and forth in an unsettling display of affection. It was a kind of interaction one might instinctively try to stop, yet despite the rough treatment, the girl's mood hadn't soured. It genuinely seemed to be her category of affectionate expression.

In any case,

“Seriously, that was a close call. You saved me, Ros-chi.”

“Well, I suppooose I bear some responsibility as weeell. Still…”

Roswaal looked down at Subaru, who was sighing in relief, with only his yellow eyes, full of deep emotion. Feeling uncomfortable under his gaze, Subaru asked, “What is it?”

“I honestly didn’t think you’d truuuly infiltrate the castle. How far will you deviate from my expectations…? No, perhaps this is futile.”

He muttered, and Roswaal nodded, as if only he understood. Subaru attempted to press him further about his enigmatic behavior, but then he noticed an individual in the corner of his eye to whom he had to apologize first.

“Ah, sorry for abandoning you. There’s a lot I want to say, but…”

“Why…?”

“Hmm?”

As Subaru mentally organized the order in which to deliver his various excuses, Emilia made a whisper so soft it almost disappeared into her mouth. When Subaru asked her to repeat herself, she shook her head once, and then looked back at Subaru.

“Not ‘how’… but ‘why.’ Why are you here, Subaru?”

“If I were to explain that, there’s a reason that’s somehow both deep and shallow, heavy and fluffy, and sometimes it exists and sometimes it doesn’t.”

“Don’t joke around. Subaru, I told you, didn’t I? Don’t you remember?”

Subaru’s throat made a small, constricted sound at her repeated, questioning tone. Emilia was, of course, reFerrisng to the promise they had made at the inn. Given that he had broken his word only minutes after promising to wait, Subaru's lack of intent to keep promises was utterly baffling.

His guilt over breaking that promise was inescapable. But on the other hand, the fact that he had rushed here out of concern for Emilia was also true. How could he blend these points well, in a way that leaned heavily in Subaru's favor? Subaru's mind raced as he thought. Just then—

"—Everyone has arrived. The Wise Men will now enter."

As if to interrupt Subaru and Emilia's conversation, the throne room doors opened. Subaru turned at the sound. From the front, the first person to enter through the grand doors was the knight who had been speaking with the arrogant girl earlier—he must have been called Marcos.

He advanced with a dignified stride, his face hidden beneath a re-donned helmet that conveyed robustness. His figure was precisely that of a knight from a fairy tale, exuding an aura so imposing that even Subaru instinctively straightened his posture.

Following behind him were several elderly individuals. All were dressed appropriately for the place and their status, and their demeanor suggested they were figures of considerable rank. Deep wrinkles, etched by long and heavy experience, marked every face, and an air of solemnity emanated from them.

Among this group, a white-haired elder walking in the center particularly stood out. He didn't appear to be stooped, but he was about a head shorter than Subaru. His long, snow-white hair, completely drained of color, flowed freely, and his beard, just as long and well-maintained, seemed to compete with his hair for length. His short stature made it seem precariously close to dragging, but that impression was sharply cut short by his gaze, which resembled the keen edge of a blade.

"That person is the representative of the Council of Wise Men — meaning, in the current Lugunica, where there is no king, he is the individual with the mooost influence. That's Lord Miklotov."

To a Subaru who had involuntarily lost his voice, Roswaal, standing beside him, quietly added this explanation. Subaru nodded in understanding. The person who was clearly no ordinary individual at first glance was, indeed, not ordinary in reality. He also recalled hearing the name of the Council of Wise Men and the representative of Lugunica in the absence of a king.

"If I remember correctly, it's the organization that runs the country in place of the king, right?"

"Noooominally, they're just assistants, but these days, the actual governance relies on the Council of Wise Men… Though, honestly, not much has chaaanged since the royal family was still alive."

Roswaal shrugged in response to his mutterings. In short, it seemed the Council of Wise Men had a track record of essentially managing the country since the time of the previous king, who lacked the ability to govern. While this might be true, for Roswaal to casually reveal it to Subaru, a near-outsider, let alone do so in the throne room, was nothing short of audacious. He had a rough idea, but it seemed his employer had a rather lax sense of loyalty to the nation. This seemed like a serious trait for someone involved in the nation's core, but then again—

"If we start talking about that, then what even is my position? Seriously, I can only play defensive midfielder, you know?"

"If you could play defensive midfielder, you wouldn't have ended up in that situation, I think. Besides, we're over there, brother."

Al, who had overheard Subaru's mumble, retorted, and Subaru looked in the direction he pointed. Knights were beginning to line up along the walls of the throne room, and three individuals with a distinct aura, different from the uniformly armored knights, also appeared there.

"Oh, those people over there are…"

Naturally, his eyes were drawn to the three distinctive figures, and to his surprise, they were all people Subaru had seen before. Al patted Subaru's shoulder, urging him to go toward them. Subaru looked at Roswaal next to him, as if seeking permission.

“Is it really okay if I go over there?”

“The cooorrect course of action would actually be to quietly send you outside… However, this is quuuite amusing, so follow the guy in the helmet.”

“Hold on, Roswaal!”

Roswaal’s attitude was unchanged from his demeanor at the mansion, and Emilia, similarly, was still angry with him. She pressed him, protesting his casual words.

“Unfortunately, Lady Emilia, there is no time to follow your reasonable arguments right now. To put it correctly, Subaru would be leaving here… for a long, looong time.”

“If you let Subaru stay in a place like this…”

“Debating our opinions will also have to wait. Lady Emilia, the other candidates have gathered. Please go over there.”

Roswaal’s arm pointed towards the back of the throne room, where the “distinctive” group was gathering.

Leaving the throne empty, the elderly members of the Council of Wise Men filled the surrounding chairs. Their figures, descending beneath the large dragon wings painted on the wall, were like loyal retainers attending a king with a dragon at his back. And arrayed neatly before these elders of the Council of Wise Men were individuals who, unlike the seasoned intimidation of old age, radiated a brilliance inherent from birth that resonated with others.

At the forefront stood a ginger-haired girl, leading three young women who stood proudly in line.

In the center stood a girl in a sun-colored dress, hands on her hips, proudly puffing out her chest. She had been called ‘Priscilla’ before entering. Even under the multiple gazes of the kingdom’s highest authorities, her core of arrogance showed no sign of wavering.

Standing to her right was a woman with long, deep green hair. Her hair was so dark it was almost black, but on closer inspection, one could see its lustrous green sheen. She was tall for a woman, her gaze slightly lower than Subaru's, yet her crotch height was significantly different. Her hair, tied back, reached her waist, and her voluptuous, feminine figure was encased in a dark blue uniform. —Her attire was similar to the guards he'd seen in the capital, but the quality of the material and the design were different. She wore trousers, a beautiful woman with a dignified face, well-suited to the term 'cross-dressing beauty'.

To Priscilla's left, in stark contrast to the woman with the sword-like aura, stood a woman with purple hair, exuding a cheerful impression. Her hair also reached her waist, but its texture was naturally wavy, and being fine-haired, it felt soft like cotton candy. This woman was slightly smaller than the other two beside her, her less voluptuous figure clad in a white dress. But what caught Subaru's eye most about her attire was the fluffy white animal fur stole wrapped around her neck. It was a masterpiece that immediately appealed to Subaru's inner fluffy-lover, and the sheer fluffiness of it was enough to make him drool.

Contrary to Subaru's rather tangential thoughts, Emilia bit her lip in frustration.

"We are definitely going to talk properly about this later," she emphasized to Subaru, then hurried over to the three girls. As Emilia, with her silver hair bouncing, joined them, Subaru, biased as he was, thought that while her attire might be a step behind, her inherent cuteness made her stand out head and shoulders above the rest.

Going forward,

"So, those are the participants of the Royal Selection—the candidates for the future queen, huh?"

Considering Emilia joining them and their previous interactions, Subaru concluded that this must be the case. Honestly, it was surprising that all the queen candidates were women, but he also felt that if there had been a male candidate, things might have been decided more smoothly. In a way, he should have anticipated this when Emilia was chosen as a candidate.

Subaru, sighing inwardly with emotion, noticed the people around him also beginning to move and hastily joined them. Roswaal joined a group of several elegant men who looked like civil officials, opposite the standing knights. Subaru strode confidently, following behind Al, who moved without hesitation, and positioned himself slightly closer to the throne than the armored knights. There, he saw—

"—As I thought, you came, Subaru."

A red-haired handsome man raised a hand, greeting Subaru's arrival with a smile. It had been two weeks, but his refreshing aura showed no sign of fading—it was Reinhard. His fiery red hair swayed, and today, unlike the light attire Subaru had seen him in in the lower district, he was in a knight's uniform. What remained unchanged was his divinely sculpted appearance and the sword at his hip, bearing the claw marks of a dragon.

"When I heard Lady Emilia would be attending, I immediately thought you might come."

"Long time no see, and what's with your ridiculously high evaluation of me? Last time you saw me, I was calling for help in a high-pitched voice and pathetically trying to commit seppuku, so you shouldn't have a good impression."

"You not only protected Lady Emilia from deadly blades but also consistently chose the best course of action in other situations. I suppose excessive modesty is a virtue, though."

When Reinhard said that with a completely earnest expression, Subaru was left speechless. True handsome men like him were a problem. They were so favored by their looks that they rarely faced hardships that would twist their personalities, resulting in a high percentage of genuinely good people. It was the "no pointless villains among handsome men" theory. Any handsome man with a twisted personality would be an extremely rare exception within the overall population of attractive men. Among them, Reinhard's seemingly good upbringing was exceptional, making him the epitome of a handsome man—an elite handsome man, one might say.

“If I pray, can I get some of that good fortune? Namu-Amida-Butsu, Namu-Amida-Butsu.”

“I’ve never heard that chant before, but it won’t have any effect, you know? It’s just how I am, by birth.”

“No, no, that’s purely within the realm of prayer, so don’t worry about it. Oh, right, right. Before that, there was something I needed to say.”

Reinhard looked at Subaru with wide blue eyes as he straightened his posture. Subaru then slowly lowered his head to him.

“Seriously, you saved me last time. And, I’m sorry I didn’t have time to thank you or a way to contact you sooner. I wish I could’ve talked to you earlier.”

“I understand your circumstances, Subaru. It couldn’t be helped. You had honorable injuries, and I’ve been a bit busy lately as well.”

Reinhard shrugged slightly, but his lips curved into a happy smile as he accepted Subaru’s words of gratitude. Even such a small gesture looked somehow picturesque, making it impossible to feel any jealousy toward a truly handsome man. And as the two rekindled their acquaintance,

“Reinhard and Subaru-kyun are acquainted? That’s surprising!”

A person with natural cat ears said, interjecting with a feather-light voice. Today, she wore a black uniform, matching Reinhard’s—a uniform with dragon motifs—and her flaxen hair was adorned with the same white ribbon he’d seen before. She was the one who had visited Roswaal’s mansion a few days ago, delivering the message that led to this trip to the capital. She brought a hand to her forehead, like a karate chop, and winked in a salute.

“It’s only been two days, has it? Have you been well? Everyone’s Ferris has been doing just fine, nya!”

“I didn’t ask, but thank you for before. It’s an honor to meet you again.”

“Oh, oh, was that last part a little stiff? You should relax a bit more, you know!”

The girl casually touched Subaru’s shoulder, urging him to relax. Reinhard watched their interaction with a slight look of surprise.

“Subaru, are you acquainted with Ferris?”

“She came to Roswaal’s place, where I’m staying, to confirm attendance today. I thought she was just a low-ranking attendant, but…”

Given that she was now standing next to Reinhard in the same attire, she must also hold a position worthy of standing alongside the ‘Sword Saint’. In fact, Subaru had already heard at the mansion that she was ‘the most skilled water magic user in the royal capital’. Considering everything, he had a strong premonition that she was a person of considerable rank.

“I see, so Ferris went to Lady Emilia’s place. If I had been free, I definitely would have liked to go myself.”

“There’s no way Captain Marcos would allow the Sword Saint to leave the capital, nya. It’d be a shame to add more worries to the Captain’s plate. He’s barely thirty, but he already looks so old… Soon it won’t just be his face, but his mind too, possibly.”

Reinhard let out a faint wry smile at Ferris’s jest. The content was such that he couldn’t openly laugh. Subaru also recalled Marcos’s stony face and inwardly commented that he was too imposing for someone not even thirty. And then, further—

“It’s about time you introduced them to me, wouldn’t you?”

The last individual with an aura different from the knights spoke up. Subaru recognized this person too. However, to be honest, he didn’t have a very good impression of him. Because,

“He’s the guy who kissed Emilia-tan’s hand in the guardroom.”

The flashy guy who had kissed the back of Emilia's hand, cutting in front of him. Subaru mentally called him a show-off, but outwardly, he forced a smile.

"My apologies for the belated introduction. I'm Natsuki Subaru, a humble man. Please, feel free to tuck that information away in some dusty corner of your mind, heheh."

"You're suddenly being quite self-deprecating, Subaru."

Reinhard admonished Subaru, then turned back to the flashy man.

"Please don't take offense, Julius. Subaru has a tendency to behave in a way that makes others underestimate him, to test them."

"Whoa, whoa, can you stop giving me such a cunning backstory? I don't have any such intention, this is just how I act when I'm trying to read the room, in my own way."

Reinhard's overestimation of Subaru was on a completely different level. For him, Subaru's actions on the first day must have been incredibly commendable. Being praised so much made Subaru uncomfortable, or rather, he wasn't used to it and suspected there was some ulterior motive. However,

"So, that's how it is. Julius, elegantly."

Reinhard's demeanor showed no hint of hidden intentions. Subaru realized it was pointless to say anything more, given the sheer goodwill radiating from his profile.

"That is my strongest suit, Reinhard. Julius Juukulius, of the Royal Guard. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. You as well, Sir Knight."

Accepting the red-haired youth's advice, the flashy man—Julius—introduced himself to Subaru with a slight smile. Then, he turned his attention to Al, standing beside Subaru. The one addressed as 'Sir Knight' cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Ah, I'm not that distinguished, so please don't call me 'Sir Knight.' I'm just a ronin, you know. Not like you gentlemen, with your upright stances.”

He responded in a muffled, low-pitched voice. Unlike his attitude toward Subaru, there was a clear intention to keep people at a distance. For Subaru, who had the impression that Al was quite friendly, his demeanor was utterly unexpected. However, unfortunately, there was no time to delve into that. It was almost simultaneous with the exchange of names and the moment the knight commander, Marcos, raised his voice.

“—Honorable Wise Men. Esteemed candidates. Everyone is present. With utmost humility, I, the commander of the Royal Guard, shall officiate this assembly.”

“Hmm… Very well.”

Miklotov, the representative of the Council of Wise Men, sat with his hands clasped, nodding with a slight tilt of his chin. Marcos bowed respectfully to the elder’s reply, then furrowed his brow, his expression stony.

“This convocation is to deliver a grave announcement regarding the selection of the next queen—the Royal Selection. It is for this reason that we have requested your presence at the Royal Castle, and for the Council of Wise Men to gather.”

His resounding voice, though not particularly loud, reached the ears of everyone in the throne room equally. Subaru, sensing the inherent quality in his voice to command attention, even refrained from making light remarks and listened intently.

“The origins of this matter trace back approximately half a year ago—when the previous king and other members of the royal family successively passed away. The absence of a king is the greatest crisis for a kingdom, and for the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, in particular, it deeply concerns the ‘Covenant’.”

The Covenant—that must be some kind of agreement the kingdom had made with the dragon. It was a detail he heard constantly in the early days at the mansion, so he was thoroughly tired of it. However, the information Subaru knew was only superficial, and the same went for the details of the Royal Selection. This lecture was, in a way, welcome.

“Indeed, the maintenance of the Covenant is vital to the kingdom’s survival. It was a regrettable matter that the entire royal family was afflicted by illness simultaneously. It became imperative to swiftly find a new ‘maiden’ capable of communicating with the dragon.”

“To that end, we, the Royal Guard, under the command of the Council of Wise Men, have undertaken the duty to seek out maidens chosen by the Dragon’s peculiar radiance.”

Marcos reached into his breastplate, revealing a small emblem in his palm that Subaru had seen many times—the gemstone-embedded qualification for Royal Selection participants. Marcos walked toward the arrayed candidates, bowed to them, and said,

“Ladies, please present your Dragon’s Radiance.”

In response to his call, the girls each held out their emblems before them. Each gemstone shone brightly in their hands, scattering light of different colors throughout the throne room. Gasps of admiration spread among the knights, and the elderly members of the Council of Wise Men also showed expressions of relief and joy on their deeply wrinkled faces.

“Thus, all candidates possess the qualification of a Dragon Maiden. Having witnessed this, we shall proceed according to the Dragon History Stone—.”

“Huh?”

Marcos was solemnly proceeding with the agenda. He was about to continue speaking in his grave tone, when he was suddenly interrupted by a calm voice. Marcos turned to see the girl who had spoken, the one whose Dragon Radiance shimmered with blue light—the purple-haired figure in the white dress. Still holding up her Dragon Radiance, she tilted her head gracefully.

“I know the Captain wants to push ahead with things, but I’m busy, too, you know? In Kararagi, they say ‘time is money,’ don’t they?”

Despite her gentle tone and calm demeanor, the girl made a straightforward demand. She put away her Dragon Radiance, then clapped her hands together.

“To be honest, instead of repeating what’s already clear, I’d rather hear the core of why we’ve all been gathered here.”

She spoke with a unique intonation, ending her request with a smile. Marcos looked somewhat taken aback by her attitude, but Subaru was even more shocked. In this tense atmosphere, even Subaru himself was trying his best to keep his mouth shut to avoid saying anything ill-timed.

“Hey, hey, Kansai dialect? You’re kidding me.”

"Oh, you're surprised too, bro? Apparently, that's how they speak in the western country of Kararagi. I haven't seen it myself, but… Maybe the other world's translation system just chose that language option."

Subaru muttered softly, and Al, standing beside him, echoed a similar sentiment in a low voice. As expected, Al, a veteran who had been summoned eighteen years ago, seemed to have long since overcome the initial shock of such linguistic encounters, showing less agitation than Subaru.

Meanwhile, a different kind of surprise spread through the throne room, for reasons unrelated to Subaru. A faint murmur began to fill the hall, but it was quelled by another dignified female voice.

"That makes sense."

"—Lady Crusch."

The green-haired woman, arms crossed and chin slightly lowered, assented. Marcos called her name in response to her reaction, furrowing his brow with a hint of perplexity.

"To think, the head of the Karsten family would say such a thing…"

"While I understand the importance of formality, neglecting the main topic would be putting the cart before the horse. We should quickly address the reason for our gathering. Although…"

The woman closed one eye, looking past Marcos to the assembled Wise Men.

"I have a rough idea."

"Oh, I see. As expected of the head of the Karsten family. You already understood the meaning of this convocation."

Nodding at Miklotov's impressed words, the woman lifted her dignified face and touched upon the true purpose of this gathering in front of the throne. It was—

“Yes. —A banquet, wouldn’t you say? Though we are destined to compete, there is still much we do not know about each other. If we gather around a table, clink glasses, and speak from the heart, we will naturally come to know each other’s character…”

“No, that is incorrect.”

An old man couldn’t help but interject to the woman who was solemnly planning a drinking party. She looked surprised by his attitude, then slowly turned to Subaru and the others.

“Ferris. The story is different from what I heard.”

“Oh, come on, you know. Ferris just said, ‘There’s lots of food and drinks being brought into the castle, so maybe they’re throwing a banquet, nya!’ That’s all!”

“I see, my mistake then. I forgive you.”

Her demeanor was magnanimous, but the content of the conversation was clearly bizarre. Turning back to the front, and based on their previous exchange, the woman let out a slight sigh.

“In that case, please disregard everything I just said. It’s embarrassing.”

“Oh, Lady Crusch, you’re so manly!”

Ferris writhed, holding her hands to her cheeks. Her face was red, and she swayed her hips, seemingly unconcerned about having provided incorrect information. In fact, seeing her now, it seemed almost intentional. It was hard to gauge the precise line between playful teasing and going too far. Subaru, even as he was swept up in the atmosphere of the venue, tried to maintain his normal thoughts. His thoughts were interrupted again by a clapping sound.

“Even if Crusch steps back, my opinion hasn’t changed. Everyone already knows the superficial stuff about the Royal Selection. Right?”

Tilting her head, the girl asked the three standing beside her for their agreement. Crusch nodded to her question, Priscilla let out a small, bored snort, and Emilia's lips trembled with tension.

"W-Well, I think we should listen properly…"

"Sorry, but I'm not listening to your opinion."

However, her attitude toward Emilia, who was the only one to respond, was abrupt and dismissive. Emilia's expression clouded with resignation at the blunt dismissal. Seeing her profile, her head bowed in submission to having her opinion brushed aside, sparks flew in Subaru's mind.

"You… what's with that attitude…? "Woohoo! I don't know anything about the Royal Selection or whatever, so I want to hear what's next!"

A strong arm reached out to block Subaru as he stepped forward, on the verge of shouting. The curse words that were about to spill from his mouth were instead overwritten by a voice that echoed throughout the hall.

It was Al who had stopped Subaru's rashness. Bathed in the gazes of everyone in the hall, he fiddled with the clasp of his jet-black helmet with his single arm, making rhythmic metallic sounds.

"Don't stare so much, it's embarrassing. I know I'm out of place, so if you treat me like too much of an outsider, I'll cry and wail and make a huge fuss, an adult of my age."

Al, as if scoffing at Subaru's attempt to gauge the limits of acceptable mischief, tap-danced through the minefield with an air of nonchalance. His behavior, more heedless than audacious, genuinely startled those around him, including Reinhard. However,

"Lady Priscilla. I understand he is your knight… an explanation?"

"You long-winded fools will do it yourselves without my needing to. I merely saved myself the trouble. Repeated words are no different from sleep talk. And you shouldn't even sleep talk while sleeping."

As only Marcos managed to respond calmly, Priscilla provoked him with her haughty tone. They were all, without exception, dysfunctional personalities—Emilia's good character stood out to an unfortunate degree. It was clear from their previous exchange that she wasn't being treated properly.

Anyway,

"—You owe me one. Or is it two now?"

Al held up two fingers, turning his head towards Subaru, who was inwardly grateful. He didn't think he could have handled the situation as well as Al did, had he gotten enraged and raised his voice there. Al had stepped forward and taken all the blame for him.

Perhaps the reason Al could act so confidently, despite being in a similar position to Subaru, was that he had solidly built his foundation over eighteen years. He was clearly different from Subaru, who had yet to find anything certain in this other world, even in terms of his mindset.

"Oh dear, the princess's tantrums have begun again. Please, enough already."

"It is Heaven's will that I bend the common folk to my will. Rejoice and dance in my palm. Continue, Marcos. Tell my knight how I shall become queen."

"If you can throw it to someone else with that much conviction, that's impressive. I'm not saying anything more."

The girl shrugged, giving up on Priscilla's attitude. Seeing that their two wills were unified, Marcos cleared his throat slightly and asked, "Is that acceptable?" to Emilia and Crusch. After seeing them nod, he continued.

"Then, though we have slightly diverged, let us return to the main topic. —You, the ladies qualified as Dragon Maidens, have been gathered here due to a new prophecy etched into the Dragon History Stone."

Another new word, Subaru inwardly wondered. From the context, he assumed it was some kind of prophecy tablet, but he couldn't be sure about the details.

“The prophecy inscribed on the stone tablet reads thus: ‘When the Covenant of Lugunica is broken, a new bearer of the Dragon shall maintain the Covenant and guide the nation.’”

“Indeed. The tablet’s revelation is truly the will of Heaven. The Dragon History Stone, which has accumulated as much history as the kingdom itself since its birth, inscribes texts in response to events that determine the kingdom’s destiny. Considering that its contents have shaped subsequent history, it is our duty to obey.”

Miklotov’s reflection was met with solemn nods from the other elders on the Council of Wise Men. In short, it could be interpreted as a rather audacious deferral of future policy to a prophecy tablet, but in a world with magic, prophecies seemed to have so much power that he couldn’t interject. In any case, it seemed Emilia and the others were gathered as king candidates—or rather, as maidens who could communicate with the dragon—in accordance with that prophecy.

Just then, a question popped into Subaru’s mind. It amounted to this:

“If it’s about talking to the dragon and the Covenant and all that, do they really need to be involved in the royal selection? Couldn’t they just have a family whose role is to be the Dragon Maiden?”

He muttered his question quietly, not to Al, but to Reinhard on his other side. Reinhard glanced down at Subaru, a wry smile playing on his lips.

“What you say, Subaru, is very sensible. But it cannot be so.”

“Why not? Could you tell me why?”

“The answer is that the Covenant for the prosperity of the kingdom was made between the Dragon and the King. The Dragon did not merely make a covenant with someone who could communicate with it. It was because that person was the King who bore the kingdom that the Covenant was made.”

A passage from a picture book, “The Dragon’s Tale”, resurfaced in Subaru’s memory. As Reinhard’s explanation indicated, it was a story of a king and a dragon. The weight of that history, passed down through generations. The Council of Wise Men, and the Royal Guard who had gathered Emilia and the others, probably aimed to uphold that history as much as possible. But then,

“In that case, wouldn’t a hastily appointed maiden and queen just infuriate the dragon? It’s not like it’s a riddle contest from Ikkyu-san; you can’t just say, ‘Oh, the royal family’s gone, so we’ve made a maiden into a king instead,’ can you?”

“I hear opinions on that point clashed quite a bit. However the prophecy tablet, the Dragon History Stone, which is transmitted within the kingdom, indicated that this precarious method was the correct one, the will of Heaven. The Council acknowledged that and gave us our orders. I don’t want to think it will turn out badly.”

Subaru responded with a nod of understanding to Reinhard’s explanation, which was too refreshing to be called a prayer.

There was no certainty, but there was also no other way. Therefore, doing their best was the current state of affairs in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica. What judgment the crucial dragon would pass on the decisions of the kingdom’s people—that was something no one knew now. Perhaps only the owner of the heavenly will, who so grandly inscribed words on that prophecy tablet, knew.

“Alright, I get the gist. So, the plan is to choose a queen from these four. Is it out of the question to just make all of them queens and rank them or something?”

“The reason that’s not possible is also inscribed on the Dragon History Stone… The Captain will read it now.”

Subaru’s brilliant idea was dismissed with a single shake of the head. As Reinhard’s blue eyes turned back to the center of the hall, he said that the true meaning would now be revealed. The stony knight, who commanded the attention of the hall, turned to the four candidates standing in line.

“The prophecy continues thus: ‘From the five who can become new guides for the nation, choose one maiden and approach the Dragon’s Covenant.’”

Marcos’s booming pronouncement, once deciphered, left Subaru no choice but to grunt in understanding. If the prophecy tablet stated to choose one, then there was no other way. But as he considered that, a part of it suddenly bothered him.

“Five…?”

“Yes, five.”

Reinhard nodded in response to Subaru’s question. He coolly glanced at Subaru, whose face was etched with doubt.

“In other words, with only four candidates currently present—the Royal Selection hasn’t even begun yet. We can only be blamed for the Royal Guard’s inadequacy in failing to find the fifth candidate.”

“Fifty million people, you said? It seems tough to find five from that, and if they did it in about half a year, wouldn’t that be too fast? That’s my opinion.”

Indeed, unless there was a well-established communication system and a nationwide census could be conducted all at once, as in a country like Japan, it would be a very difficult condition. Even in Japan, one could expect countless individuals who might bypass such conditions and become exceptions. He didn’t know how many people were in the Royal Guard or how excellent they were, but simply selecting four candidates in a short period was already quite an achievement.

“Well, if it turns out there are tons of potential maidens who can make the Dragon’s Radiance glow, then I’ll blame you without hesitation. You blind idiot…!”

“I can’t definitively say we searched all fifty million citizens, but we found four after searching over eighty percent. I think the Royal Knights deserve some praise.”

He must have been proud of what they had accomplished.

Reinhard's demeanor showed no shame whatsoever. Because of this, Subaru, who had gotten carried away, felt even more awkward. However, the situation continued to unfold, ignoring Subaru's feelings.

"The fifth person couldn't be found, because of this we were unable to do anything, despite knowing our competitors. It's frustrating."

"Exactly. I've been called out repeatedly, interrupting my business dealings, and the connection with the Juukulius family alone isn't going to be worth it in the long run."

"Lady Anastasia. Your honesty is a charming virtue, but in this setting, it might be better to exercise a little restraint…"

The purple-haired girl agreed with Crusch's words. Julius then offered a refined, albeit critical, remark. The girl—Anastasia, as she was called—looked at Julius.

"What? That it's better if I restrain myself?"

"No. It would simply be more graceful."

"I really don't understand Julius's standards on that one, nya."

Despite the advice being unconvincing, Anastasia sighed with a disarmed expression. Then, she turned back to Marcos.

"Anyway, everyone knows what's been said so far. Are you satisfied now, Princess?"

"What do you think? Did you get it, Al?"

"Yep, got it. Thanks a bunch, young lady with the Kararagi accent."

As Al waved his single arm, Priscilla responded to Anastasia, "She says so." Anastasia closed her eyes at the arbitrary nature of the master and servant. Then, she looked up at the Council of Wise Men again.

"If you have something to say, make it quick, okay? I'm busy, too, and I have lots of other things I want to do after this. You grandpas holding the national purse understand that, right?"

Her admonishing tone, however, in the current situation where she knew they were her superiors, sounded only like teasing. Subaru instinctively tensed, fearing the atmosphere might turn ugly, but Anastasia seemed to be a person who had already faced many such situations and knew how to tread the line. There was no hint of disapproval from any of the Council of Wise Men members, who had received her disrespectful remarks. On the contrary, Miklotov even looked amused.

"I apologize to the busy Lady Anastasia, but I would be grateful if you would bear with an old man's rambling a little longer. After all… Today will be a day etched in the history of the kingdom."

At the end of a seemingly casual conversation, Miklotov's voice suddenly deepened. Hearing it, an atmosphere so profound that everyone in the hall, which had been losing some of its initial tension, felt compelled to straighten their backs, swept through the room. Everyone tried to discern the true meaning of Miklotov's words, fearing to utter the first sound. In the midst of this, the girl who stood fearlessly, chest puffed out, broke the silence.

"You said history would move. Meaning, that's how it is, isn't it?"

To Priscilla's quiet question, Miklotov nodded slightly on the dais. Then, he directed his sharp gaze at Marcos, signaling with his eyes. Marcos, receiving the signal, bowed with a hand over his chest.

"—Knight Reinhard van Astrea! Present yourself!"

"Yes, sir!"

Suddenly, Marcos's voice echoed through the hall. Subaru flinched in surprise, but next to him, Reinhard responded as if he had been waiting for the call. He then moved with a fluid grace to the center, bowed to the four candidates, and then stood before Captain Marcos.

"Reinhard, your report, if you please."

"Yes, sir."

Stepping aside, Marcos cleared the center of the dais. Reinhard advanced, commanding the gaze of all spectators, and faced the Council of Wise Men with not a hint of tension.

“Honorable members of the Council of Wise Men, I, Reinhard van Astrea of the Royal Guard, humbly present my report on the completion of my mission.”

“Hmm, then let everyone hear it.”

At Miklotov’s instruction, Reinhard bowed, then turned to face the entire hall, standing tall and proud.

“The Dragon Maiden, the queen’s candidate—the fifth and final one has been found.”

A murmur of astonishment spread among the standing knights, and the expressions of the candidates shifted, reflecting various strong emotions: joy, boredom, bewilderment. Subaru, too, muttered “Just as I thought” to himself at Reinhard’s words. Given the flow of the conversation so far, this outcome was inevitable. However, what he didn’t understand was Reinhard’s position. Why was he chosen to deliver the report? Or, thinking along those lines, Subaru realized a common thread among the people present. It was—

“Everyone here is connected to a queen candidate… so that means…”

Al was with Priscilla. Ferris was with Crusch. Julius was with Anastasia. And if Subaru included himself in that category as being connected to Emilia, then Reinhard’s position in this group was also clear.

“Bring her in.”

Though his voice was quiet, it effortlessly carried over the murmuring in the hall, reaching the guards at the grand doors. The guards, receiving his command, saluted, and then the doors slowly opened.

Through the opened doors, accompanied by several women dressed as maids, one person was ushered into the throne room. Seeing her, Subaru raised his eyebrows in suspicion.

A dress of pale yellow fabric. White gloves reaching her elbows, and high-heeled shoes that made it difficult to walk, rustling her skirt as she stepped on the carpet. Her small, delicate frame looked so fragile it seemed it would break if hugged, and her fine golden hair perfectly matched her ethereal appearance. However, Subaru knew that this strong-willed girl, with her swaying semi-long golden hair and mischievous gap in her teeth, was far from frail.

Surprised by her transformed appearance, Subaru involuntarily gaped, stunned. While everyone else's eyes were fixed on the newly entered girl, Reinhard's clear voice echoed through the hall.

"The one I shall revere as queen—her name is Lady Felt."

Reinhard's voice reverberated repeatedly in Subaru's ears, frozen in surprise.

—The Royal Selection, which would decide the future of the Kingdom of Lugunica, was about to begin.

Chapter 15:
People on Bad Terms with Each Other

A girl clad in tattered, grimy clothes, with dull blonde hair and wild eyes. Though forced to walk with her head down by her circumstances, she was a resilient girl who survived with only fierce determination burning in her red eyes.

That was Subaru's entire impression of the girl named Felt.

Summoned by Reinhard's declaration, Felt, accompanied by her maid, walked quietly through the Throne Room. She trod on the red carpet, consciously avoiding dragging the hem of her pale yellow dress on the floor, her small back held straight as she advanced—the very picture of a noble lady.

Subaru had once thought she might shine if polished, but the raw gem named Felt, apparently refined by the power of Reinhard's house, unfortunately diverged from Subaru's previous assessment.

It wasn't just "might shine if polished." The truth was, she would "shine brilliantly if polished."

Though still immature, her refined appearance was beautiful.

As Subaru stared, dumbfounded, his mouth agape, she moved gracefully to Reinhard's side. Seeing Felt within reach, Reinhard smiled and nodded, his handsome face composed.

"Lady Felt, thank you for coming."

"—Reinhard."

Reinhard bowed respectfully. Felt, looking up at him due to their height difference, lifted her chin and called out.

Called by her clear voice, Reinhard responded with an equally clear "Yes." Felt smiled faintly at his demeanor.

Then,

"—You bastard, you hid my clothes again, didn't you?!"

Lifting the hem of her dress, her slender, surprisingly long leg arced. It struck Reinhard's temple precisely—but his kicking foot was neatly caught in Reinhard's lightly raised palm.

Reinhard, still holding Felt's foot as she stood on one leg, sighed.

"You startled me. What are you doing, all of a sudden?"

"Don't act all innocent after stopping me so smoothly! My clothes! You hid them again, didn't you? Thanks to you, I'm stuck wearing these annoying frilly things!"

Balancing on one leg, Felt pouted unhappily, shaking the hem of the dress that was likely tailored for her. Roughly handled, the formerly wrinkle-free fabric began to show unsightly creases. Watching this, Reinhard gently lowered Felt's foot to the ground.

"They suit you very well; there's no need to be embarrassed."

"I'm not embarrassed, I said I hate them! It's not just about the clothes, it's you too! Don't you think it's embarrassing for a knight to kidnap and imprison someone?!"

"If it is for the prosperity of the kingdom."

Felt put a hand to her forehead as if she had a headache, in response to Reinhard's unwavering declaration. Then, as if just realizing that all eyes in the hall were fixed on her,

"What are you looking at? I'm not a show. If you think I'm a show, you should throw some money, you rich folks."

With hostility towards the obviously upper-class people, Felt grumbled in a very unrefined manner, despite wearing a dress that was clearly of high quality, even in this setting.

Her disappointing thuggishness, betraying her refined appearance, allowed Subaru to finally shake off his dazed state and let out a sigh of relief.

"I thought she'd completely changed, but it's just her looks. Good, people really don't change their core, do they? Including me!"

Subaru was pleased, having justified himself while defending Felt.

Following his reaction, everyone else who had been watching Felt and Reinhard's exchange also began to react accordingly.

"To make Reinhard use his hands, she seems more capable than expected," said Crusch, impressed from an odd perspective.

"Oh dear, another tomboy, aren't we? Give me a break, please," said Anastasia, shaking her head with a look of exasperation.

"It's unthinkable for anyone to stand out more than me. What is there that I can use to stand out… Perhaps a public execution of an intruder?" said Priscilla, drifting into an unignorable thought.

"That child… from back then…?! So that's why Reinhard was so surprised…" And Emilia, who had apparently reached some conclusion, widened her eyes in surprise.

Emilia, in particular, was no stranger to Felt, so her surprise must have been profound. Despite their relationship of vying for the insignia, it had turned into Felt also being chosen by the insignia, and now they were rivals for the throne.

Once the initial impact had subsided, Felt reacted to these responses by looking uncomfortable—or rather, rudely clicked her tongue and turned her face away.

Though their acquaintance two weeks ago was brief, Subaru hadn't thought she was such a twisted girl. A lot must have happened to her during those two weeks. Subaru felt his own experiences were intense, but he could imagine the intensity of her journey from a mere street urchin to a royal candidate was considerable.

As Subaru nodded, thinking these thoughts, Felt's gaze, which had been scanning the hall as if appraising it, met his.

She suddenly furrowed her brow, then closed her eyes as if searching her memory. After only a few seconds, her face brightened as if she had found the memory.

“Oh! What are you doing here, bro!”

Pushing Reinhard’s chest with a light shove, she stomped towards Subaru with the same momentum. The expensive-looking dress was handled so roughly that it was heartbreaking, and the maids who had carefully coordinated it covered their faces and looked away.

Ignoring such sentiments, Subaru faced Felt, who was approaching with a beaming smile. Honestly, he would have preferred to avoid facing her given the atmosphere, but thinking that she must feel just as helpless with a lack of allies, he couldn’t just brush her off.

“Yo, long time no see. You’re doing well, aren’t you—”

The moment he casually raised his hand and offered a cheerful greeting, a front kick landed squarely in his gut. His body bent into a V-shape from the impact, and Subaru knelt on the spot, coughing.

Subaru groaned, not understanding the sudden violent act. Felt, still with one leg raised, looked down at his pathetic state.

“Judging by that, your stomach wound seems fine. It looks like you’ve got a lot more injuries elsewhere.”

“If you know that, show some sympathy, you… Why did you put your full strength into a check? What if it tore open when it was temporarily stitched? …There was actually a time when it was close to that.”

Though perfectly healed now, a distinct straight white scar remained on Subaru’s bare abdomen. Moreover, scars from witchbeast fangs were scattered across his body, making his state of being battered and bruised over two weeks quite remarkable. There were countless lacerations and scrapes, so it was no longer a matter of saying a back wound is a swordsman’s shame.

“Well, I guess you’ve had it rough too, bro. However, if you say you’ve had it rough, I haven’t been slacking either, you know?”

“…I guess so. I never thought I’d run into you in a situation like this. The insignia commotion has come full circle and now Bon Jovi —”

“You can’t just blurt out ‘insignia commotion,’ can you? Look at the situation!”

“…Couldn’t you have found a cuter way to shut me up? Your kicks are still fast.”

And because it was to shut his mouth while he was crouching, her chin was kicked up from directly below. Fortunately, the force was tempered, and he was getting used to being kicked, so he avoided biting his tongue. Anyway, he felt it would be bad for Reinhard if he touched upon her past misdeeds.

However, thanks to Felt’s own actions, the fact that her social debut had become such a mess was, he thought, irreversible.

“Lady Felt. It is good to renew old acquaintances, but please come this way.”

It was Marcos, who remained unswayed by the atmosphere and calmly proceeded with the agenda, who interrupted the exchange between the two, which might have seemed amicable to an outsider.

Felt seemed to want to argue with his stern expression, but as Reinhard, standing right beside him, bowed apologetically, she reluctantly moved forward again.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“First, I would like to say, ‘behave like a lady,’ but before that, please take this.”

Felt made a disgusted face at Reinhard’s light jab. Into her palm, Reinhard placed the Dragon Insignia he took from his pocket.

For a moment, Felt’s brow furrowed at the shape of the insignia, but as soon as she saw the gem begin to glow brilliantly in her palm, her stiff expression softened.

"I thought it was a weird stone when I stole it. Why does it glow?"

"Stole it?"

"It is because Lady Felt has been recognized by the Dragon as worthy."

Felt inadvertently let slip a remark, despite having just chastised Subaru. Marcos seemed to notice her carelessness, but Reinhard immediately cut her off, somehow averting the situation.

Marcos seemed momentarily perplexed that his statement had been brushed aside, but he apparently prioritized the immediate facts over his question.

Turning around, he looked up at the elders of the Council of Wise Men who had been silently observing the qualification ceremony.

"As you can see, the Dragon Stone has indeed recognized Lady Felt as a priestess. With her participation approved, the true meaning of this Royal Selection can now begin."

Marcos placed his palm on the iron plate and bowed respectfully. Reinhard followed his captain's lead, and then all the Knights of the Royal Guard who had been involved in the search followed suit.

The knights reported the completion of their mission; thanks to their efforts, the five Dragon Maidens—that is, the future queen candidates of Lugunica—had gathered here.

"I see, so this is the day history moves," Subaru muttered, finding himself unexpectedly in the midst of this momentous occasion. To sneak into the royal castle on such a grand day, looking back, was quite reckless and foolish. He should have been dead nine times out of ten.

He once again realized the strength of his own good fortune.

Subaru, harboring such irrelevant thoughts, belatedly noticed the murmuring that had begun to spread through the Throne Room.

The source of the murmuring was from the group of civil officials, including Roswaal, arrayed opposite the saluting knights across the center of the hall. The details of the murmuring were unclear, but it contained confusion, bewilderment, and clear dissatisfaction.

“Excuse me, if I may?”

Finally, a middle-aged man stepped forward from the group of civil officials.

He was a man in his forties, with flowing brown hair. He nervously stroked his magnificent goatee as he spoke.

“Regarding this Royal Selection ceremony, the efforts of the Royal Guard are beyond words. Without your strength, it would have been impossible to create a situation in line with the Dragon Stone’s prophecy in such a short period.”

“Your words are too kind.”

To the man who praised the knights with an elaborate turn of phrase, Marcos humbly replied in a solemn tone. The man, in turn, looked away as if finding it difficult, then prefaced with “However,” and continued,

“I hate to say this, but although it aligns with the situation indicated by the Dragon Stone, isn’t there a slight problem with the selection of individuals?”

“Meaning?”

“I am saying, have you not been too captivated by their qualification as Dragon Maidens, neglecting the crucial qualification to wear the crown of the kingdom?”

The middle-aged man snapped back, as if scolding someone slow to understand. He immediately clamped his mouth shut, seemingly embarrassed by the harshness of his tone, but several voices of agreement, like “That’s right, that’s right,” leaked from the group of civil officials.

Perhaps gaining some confidence from the presence of supporters, he cleared his throat and continued, "The covenant with the Dragon is of utmost importance. As long as Lugunica has existed as a pro-Dragon kingdom, the nation cannot stand without their friendship. However, if we emphasize the Dragon too much and neglect the people, isn't that putting the cart before the horse?"

"So, you mean this: We, the Royal Guard, in our zeal to find the Dragon Maidens, have misjudged the individuals worthy of being the king to whom we should pledge our loyalty?"

"There's a slight discrepancy in wording, but that's essentially it."

Perhaps chilled by Marcos's blunt summary, the middle-aged man indirectly warned him to choose his words carefully. But the follow-up was a little too late.

Despite their desperate efforts and results, the knights' feelings were far from calm after receiving such an ungenerous evaluation of their achievements.

This was particularly easy for Subaru, who stood on the knights' side, to perceive.

"It's not just fishy, it's getting ominous…"

"Well, from the knights' perspective, they're being nitpicked. I don't really care about that, but what about you two?"

Hearing Subaru's murmur, Al let out a muffled laugh and turned the conversation to the other two. Julius and Ferris, who were addressed, only shifted their gaze.

"Ferris doesn't care at all, nya? Because, no matter what that old man says, Ferris's loyalty is already pledged to just one person."

"I wouldn't say I completely agree with Ferris, but I feel the same way. My sword has already been offered. They, too, will eventually entrust their loyalty. I am not so narrow-minded as to condemn the wavering of their hearts before that happens."

"Hah, well said. Well, I'm the same with my princess."

As Al spoke as if in competition, the two could be seen smiling faintly.

Subaru felt somewhat left out and displeased. The three of them, who placed their complete trust in their masters as knights or mercenaries. Comparing his own position to theirs, Subaru felt a strange sense of being a step behind.

He shook his head to dispel the weakness, telling himself that couldn't be true. He wanted to help Emilia achieve her goal. He shouldn't be inferior to the three of them in that feeling.

While Subaru was driven by a strange impatience, the exchange in the hall began to escalate.

Starting with the middle-aged man who voiced his opinion, the civil officials began to express their dissatisfaction one after another.

"They are Maidens, but also queens. Or rather, they lack the self-awareness of becoming queen."

"Even if their appearance is adorned, their true nature shows in their demeanor."

"They lack dignity. Their education is insufficient. How can we call them queens?"

"Isn't it fine, reeeally? I think it might make for a cooolorful and enjoooyable Royal Selection, you knooow?"

"You, be silent!"

A familiar voice seemed to cut through the civil official group, but Subaru ignored those issues and looked at Emilia and the others caught in the storm.

The civil officials were particularly singling out Felt, whose bad attitude had been conspicuous earlier, but it couldn't be said that the criticism wasn't spilling over to the other candidates. In fact, Emilia's profile was as if she was enduring pain, and it was clear that standing there was a burden for her.

If only someone would shout at them to shut up, she might feel a little better, but considering the disadvantages of doing so, he hesitated to make an immediate decision.

Therefore, what settled the situation was not Subaru's shortsightedness, nor the anger of the knights whose completed mission had been sullied, nor the wisdom of the civil officials who regretted their excessive words.

The sole reason was a single word, "Silence," whispered by the old man seated on the dais.

Stroking his long beard, Miklotov narrowed his already half-closed eyes further, looking at Felt, who stared up at the old man with a defiant expression.

A moment of silence passed, then Miklotov suddenly let out a small sigh.

"Knight Reinhard."

"Yes!"

Called by name, Reinhard was beckoned and swiftly ascended the dais.

He knelt before Miklotov, removed his sword from his waist, and placed it on the floor, showing the deepest respect. Miklotov watched him with satisfaction, then stroked his white beard as if recalling memories.

"Hmm. Would you tell me the circumstances of how you discovered her?"

Asked about their encounter, Subaru, though not directly involved, felt a cold sweat on his forehead. If Reinhard told the truth, he would naturally have to mention Felt's theft.

However, disregarding Subaru's concerns, Reinhard nodded deeply.

"Thirteen days ago, I found her in a corner of the capital's lower district—commonly known as the 'slums'. At that time, for certain reasons, she had the opportunity to touch the Dragon Stone, and it was revealed that she possessed the qualification as a maiden, and so I brought her here."

Reinhard reported, smoothly glossing over the problematic parts.

To Subaru, who knew the circumstances, it was easy to find flaws, but it was not Subaru who commented on Reinhard's statement. The part that person pointed out was also different from what had bothered Subaru.

"A gutter rat from the slums… Are you sane, Knight Reinhard?!"

It was the voice of the middle-aged man, who had been gaining some momentum with the backing of the civil official group.

He gestured dramatically towards Felt, wildly waving his hands.

"To invite a gutter rat, of all people, to this ceremony to select the king who will bear the future of Lugunica is outrageous. What do you take the throne for?!"

"…"

"If it's inconvenient, you stay silent. Is this the successor to the current Sword Saint? I must conclude that the honor of the Astrea family has fallen to ruin."

Reinhard remained in a respectful salute on the dais, accepting the words as they were spoken. No negative emotion was visible on his cool profile, and the middle-aged man, who had been pressing his accusations, eventually fell silent as if speaking to the wind, clicking his tongue in irritation. Then,

"Lord Miklotov, please reconsider your thoughts. To grant someone the right to the throne merely because they were chosen by the Dragon Stone is excessive. The crown of the queen should be given to the worthy. It's not a matter of just having the insignia glow at random…"

"Lord Rickert, aaaren't you getting a little tooooo heated, perhaps?"

The middle-aged man—Rickert—challenged the current head of the nation and its policy. His fiery rhetoric was doused by a familiar, drawn-out, feigned-innocent voice.

Rickert turned a gaze filled with clear hostility towards Roswaal, who stood a few people away. Roswaal raised both hands at the piercing stare.

“Oh~, scary, scary. When looked at like that, my timid heart aches.”

“Nonsense… Roswaal. I am not convinced by your attitude either. Not just me, but many in the court. Until now, we have overlooked it as unavoidable due to the emergency, but if exceptions keep appearing like this, it’s unacceptable. The Astrea family, who tries to hoist a gutter rat onto the throne, and your foolish act of recommending a half-demon as king…”

“—Lord Rickert, you should retract those words.”

A chilling voice quietly echoed through the hall, and Rickert’s face, which had been red with excitement, turned pale. The cause was the pressure that accompanied the voice—Roswaal, who still wore an unchanging smile, merely tilted his head in concern.

“Calling a half-elf a half-demon is a bad custom. Moreover, Lady Emilia is still a royal candidate—do you understand which of us is out of line?”

“E-Even so, I don’t think my argument is wrong. The qualification as a Dragon Maiden and being a suitable person for a queen are not synonymous. Lord Miklotov!”

Rickert, pressured by Roswaal’s quiet intimidation, called Miklotov’s name, his face glistening with sweat.

“Please reconsider. At this point, it is premature to arbitrarily select royal candidates. What meaning is there in merely following the Dragon Stone’s form…”

“—Knight Reinhard.”

In response to Rickert's plea for a change of heart, the Wise Man, however, did not comply, but called the red-haired knight's name. The knight responded without hesitation, turning his resolute face towards the dais as if awaiting the words that would follow.

Miklotov touched his long beard, playing with it with his fingertips as if searching his memory.

"Surely, you believe she is that person?"

"I have no certainty. The means to confirm it have already been lost. —However, I hesitate to call this many coincidences."

"Then what?"

"—Destiny."

At Reinhard's clear answer, Miklotov closed his eyelids as if deeply moved.

Subaru, listening nearby, had no idea what the two were talking about. He glanced around to see if others understood, but Al, whose face was always hidden, and even Ferris and Julius seemed equally clueless.

Only Reinhard and Miklotov understood each other.

As if losing patience with this situation, Rickert's lips trembled and he stepped forward.

"Meaningless wordplay! Knight Reinhard, have you lost even the path of a true knight? Such clouded eyes, bringing a gutter rat, suit you well…"

"If you are caught up in superficialities and overlook what is important, then your eyes are but holes. Or perhaps your loyalty to the royal family is merely a facade, one might suspect."

The one who struck Rickert, who had been trying to denounce Reinhard with renewed vigor, was a quiet but unmistakably firm condemnation that brooked no softness.

Rickert stood dumbfounded for a moment, unable to comprehend the meaning of the words spun from Miklotov's mouth. The civil official group who supported Rickert was also in the same state, and even Subaru, who secretly felt schadenfreude at their humiliation, shared the same incomprehension.

Naturally, a slight silence fell upon the hall, but Rickert managed to gather himself and look up. Surprisingly tough, he said, his face pale,

"Th-This is strange. Lord Miklotov, you are being unkind. What is wrong with my loyalty, or my eyes?"

"Hmm. Then, looking at Lady Felt, do you not notice anything?"

At Miklotov's testing words, Rickert looked at Felt with a puzzled expression.

Felt, who had been the subject of the conversation but largely excluded from it, made a visibly disgusted face at the attention. The other candidates, who had been quietly observing the situation, felt the same way, with only Emilia, who had a subtly longer acquaintance with Felt, showing a faint hint of inner impatience on her face, stimulating Subaru's worrying nature.

While Subaru harbored such misplaced anxieties, Rickert meticulously examined Felt's appearance from head to toe.

"What is there to notice… She is still so young. There is too much she needs to learn rather than ascend the throne…!"

Rickert, following the words, looked at Felt and was about to point out what needed correcting. His expression suddenly stiffened as if he noticed something, and his eyes widened in astonishment.

Then he turned his wide eyes towards Miklotov.

"G-Golden hair and crimson eyes—?!"

"Hmm. Indeed, a rare combination of eye and hair color. —In Lugunica, especially, it holds a very significant meaning."

As Rickert voiced the cause of his agitation, the same shock spread among the civil officials who understood his meaning. Only Subaru, lacking common sense in this world, remained oblivious.

He glanced beside him; Ferris and Julius also had expressions of understanding. Al, as usual, was unreadable, but showed no particular surprise.

So Subaru, for now, adopted a stance of understanding what he didn't understand, just to avoid feeling left behind.

However, the explanation for that unknown part was soon provided by Rickert.

Perhaps wanting to share his current astonishment with those around him, he pointed a trembling finger at Felt.

"Golden hair and crimson eyes—those are the physical characteristics that appear in the bloodline of the Lugunica royal family. But! How can such a strange story be true! The royal family, all its members, passed away in an incident half a year ago! There's no room for anyone to intrude—"

"—Are you aware of the incident that occurred in the palace fourteen years ago, Lord Rickert?"

Reinhard quietly interrupted Rickert, who was about to utter a strong denial.

At the content of Reinhard's words, Rickert's expression stiffened further, and his voice cracked as he said, "No way."

"You don't mean, Knight Reinhard, that you're suggesting…"

"Fourteen years ago, an intruder broke into the castle, and the daughter of the former King's younger brother—Lord Fold—was abducted. The intruder was allowed to escape, and the whereabouts of the young lady remained unknown."

"Hmm. That was the incident that led to the disbandment and reformation of the former Royal Guard. I believe your relatives were not unrelated to it either…"

"Knowing information that should normally be unknown. I hope that is enough for you to surmise."

To Reinhard's concise reply, Miklotov merely nodded in response.

However, Rickert's confusion showed no sign of abating. He waved his hands wildly.

"An extreme, no, a wild theory. The young lady who went missing fourteen years ago, living in the slums of the royal capital, and you just happened to find her? And what's more, her body was even worthy of the Dragon Maiden qualification?"

Rickert listed the barrage of information, then laughed.

"Ridiculous! It's too convenient a story. It would be far more plausible to say that you, who found a girl with the maidens qualification, dyed her hair and changed her eye color with magic. —Though you wouldn't do something so reckless, would you?"

"Upon my sword."

To Rickert, who had regained some composure, Reinhard stood the sword he had placed on the floor, drew the blade slightly from its sheath, and then sheathed it with a click, making his vow.

Rickert roughly scratched his thinning scalp at Reinhard's composed demeanor.

"…The royal bloodline has all died of illness, and there is no means to confirm kinship. Do not think that everyone will bow their heads based on mere speculation about her lineage."

"That is natural. However, I am convinced that Lady Felt is the one most suited to inherit the throne. Even without considering her bloodline."

"For the current Sword Saint to be so infatuated."

To Reinhard's direct reply, Rickert sighed in resignation. Then he looked again at Felt, who had been the subject of the conversation but not involved in it.

"Aside from your qualification as a Dragon Maiden, you are from the slums. —And, perhaps, the possibility of a lost royal bloodline. The weight of the hardships you will face is unimaginable. Do you have the resolve for that?"

His words were a test, not merely a light provocation.

Considering the flow of the conversation so far, it was likely a ritual for Rickert to come to terms with his dissatisfaction through her own answer.

Sometimes, people, even while acknowledging someone, have to choose such troublesome means. Subaru, watching from the side, breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that this fruitless discussion would finally end.

"Huh? What are you talking about, old man? I never said I wanted to be queen, don't just decide for me!"

Completely ignoring the previous flow of conversation, Felt pouted hatefully and clearly expressed her refusal.

Naturally, a ripple of agitation ran through everyone in the hall, including Rickert. Felt, who had caused such an emotional wave, pointed a finger at Reinhard.

"I was dragged here from the slums against my will. They won't let me go back, and they keep hiding my clothes and making me wear these frilly things. It's beyond annoying; I'm not satisfied at all!"

Panting, Felt raised her chin defiantly, looking up at Reinhard's tall frame. The red-haired young man smiled wryly, looking troubled.

"Lady Felt is still saying such things."

"From my perspective, your stubbornness is what makes no sense. Listen? I said I don't want to!"

"—How long are you going to keep bickering about such utterly trivial matters?"

Felt shouted at Reinhard, who wouldn't back down, her face impatient.

One girl interrupted their exchange—Priscilla, who had been silently observing from among the royal candidates, her arms crossed, her eyes narrowed in boredom.

She swayed her ample chest above her crossed arms.

“The five necessary figures for the opening are gathered, at least in form. Once it begins, the unsuitable ones will naturally be weeded out. In the end, only I shall remain. The queenly qualities of the other superfluous individuals, whether they exist or not, are irrelevant.”

“Huh?”

Felt, still heated, reacted to Priscilla’s outrageous and violent remarks. She shrunk her small body further, adopting a thuggish stance to look up at Priscilla from directly below.

“I thought you were some happy-go-lucky woman in a fancy dress, but are you trying to pick a fight in those impractical clothes? I’m famous for kicking people right away, you know.”

“Insolence. Do you know who I am?”

“Hah, how would I know…!”

To Felt’s rather low-level threat, Priscilla imperiously retorted. Felt scoffed, then her expression suddenly clouded with bewilderment and surprise.

Felt ran a hand through her golden hair, muttering “Huh?” softly, and swayed as if dizzy.

“—Princess, that’s…”

The moment Felt nearly collapsed, Al, next to Subaru, gasped and shouted.

He understood that Felt’s sudden change was his master’s doing. And, triggered by his shout, simultaneous movements erupted throughout the hall.

Reinhard moved with truly wind-like speed, gently supporting Felt's collapsing body. Al, the one-armed man, stepped in to interpose himself between the moving Reinhard and the haughty Priscilla.

Felt's faction and Priscilla's faction confronted each other in close quarters. Outside this dynamic, several others were also moving.

Crusch crouched slightly, placing a hand on her empty waist, as if drawing an invisible sword. Marcos, the captain of the knights, who stood relatively close to the candidates, extended a hand to restrain Crusch's movement.

Anastasia, alone among the candidates, was holding her head and distancing herself, muttering, "Give me a break," which suggested she had no combat ability.

After meticulously observing each of their movements, Subaru focused on Emilia, his main concern.

She, who had also moved almost simultaneously with Al's shout, extended her hand into the void, a faint glow emanating from her palm.

"Over-interference of Yang magic—what were you thinking, using it like that?!"

The faint glow enveloped the swaying Felt, transmitting a healing wave to her body.

Emilia, openly angry, directed her fury at Priscilla, who showed no remorse for her actions. Priscilla waved her hand dismissively.

"I merely shared a little of the divine protection I was born with. If that elicits such a reaction, it merely reveals the capacity of the recipient."

"When you do something bad, you should apologize, shouldn't you? Do you not understand unless you're scolded?"

To Priscilla's unrepentant answer, Emilia retorted, her usual tone returning. For a moment, Priscilla looked bewildered, then burst into uncontrollable laughter. With a face full of mirth, she said,

“Ah, this is amusing. That was the most fun I’ve had in a long time; I might even praise you.”

“You’re always so unpleasant. What are you…”

“To apologize for doing something bad, you say. Then perhaps, in your case, you should apologize with ‘I’m sorry I was born,’ you silver-haired half-elf?”

Subaru could tell that shock had pierced Emilia’s entire body.

As if struck by a physical blow, Emilia’s shoulders trembled violently. Her resolute expression from moments ago was erased, and she pushed open her eyes, filled with anguish.

“I, I… have no connection to the Witch.”

“What meaning does such an excuse hold for anyone? You are a reflection of the world’s taboo, and people are terrified just by seeing your form. That is precisely why you rely entirely on such superficial rags to cover yourself.”

To Priscilla’s scathing words, Emilia, her face pale, could only shake her head weakly. Subaru could generally guess the content of their conversation, but he didn’t know the deeper circumstances. Therefore, he couldn’t possibly fathom the depth of the shock Emilia was experiencing.

He knew she was being unfairly hurt. That alone was enough for Natsuki Subaru to act. But,

“Princess, could you stop there? It’s really troublesome if you keep making more enemies, seriously.”

What stopped Priscilla’s tyrannical behavior was the faint plea from Al, who stood before her. Inside his helmet, where his expression should have been invisible, his voice was so weak that everyone could tell he had a troubled look.

“Especially confronting the Sword Saint, that’s a huge source of trouble. Let’s just apologize honestly, okay?”

“Do not utter such pathetic words, for you are my retainer. What of the Sword Saint? He is merely the strongest in this country; do something about it.”

“Wouldn’t last a minute.”

Calmly assessing the difference in their combat strength, Al quickly raised a white flag and declared his non-resistance.

Priscilla looked exasperated by his attitude. Reinhard and Emilia, facing Al, had expressions that couldn’t hide their surprise and confusion.

At least, the situation was prevented from immediately escalating into an explosive confrontation.

It was a moment that needed a trigger to reset, but it was unlikely to spiral out of control immediately.

As everyone racked their brains on how to resolve this stalemate—that sharp sound, despite its small volume, clearly struck the eardrums of everyone in the hall.

“—Is everyone satisfied?”

Dropping a flicked coin into a ceramic dish, the white-haired old man—Miklotov—drew everyone’s attention.

He did so without rising from his chair, surveying everyone, then turning his gaze to Felt, who was shaking her head after receiving Emilia’s treatment.

“Lady Felt, are you unharmed?”

“…Somehow. Damn it, if my knife hadn’t been taken away, it would’ve been nasty.”

Responding to Miklotov’s concern, Felt, still ill-mannered, hurled an insult at Priscilla. Even her losing remark sounded thuggish, but it wasn’t the atmosphere to point that out.

Reinhard gave Emilia a thankful nod, and Emilia accepted it with a nod, still looking somewhat dispirited. Crusch relaxed her combat stance, and Marcos let out a sigh of relief, finally, Al also rotated his one-armed shoulder, showing relief.

Only Priscilla, the instigator, remained with bored eyes, showing no sign of remorse, which was perplexing, but for now, the skirmish had ended.

Witnessing this, Miklotov declared anew.

“Then, regarding the original agenda—the Royal Selection—I hereby propose the convening of the Council of Wise Men, with the candidates present.”

Chapter 16:
Declaration of Ideologies

Miklotov’s dignified declaration filled the hall with tension. While their previous exchanges hadn’t been lax, it was true that the discussion had proceeded with little regard for the Council of Wise Men, the highest authority in the land. Now, as Miklotov’s presence suddenly intensified, all eyes in the Throne Room naturally gravitated towards him.

Receiving their gazes, Miklotov calmly stroked his beard and said, “Regarding the proposal to convene the Council of Wise Men, I would first like to secure the agreement of my fellow colleagues.”

Miklotov surveyed the elderly figures around him from the center of the nine seats arranged on the platform. At his words, the previously silent and almost invisible elders nodded in agreement.

“I, too, concur with Lord Miklotov’s proposal, exercising the authority of the Council of Wise Men.”

“Likewise.”

“I agree as well.”

Miklotov lowered his chin at the elders’ consent, then looked down at the candidates below. The five who had maintained a somewhat confrontational stance hastily gathered before Miklotov’s silent presence. Anastasia, who had been particularly far off, sprinted back. As the candidates returned, the two who had been with them naturally left their side and rejoined the knightly ranks where Subaru and the others remained. —Al and Reinhard flanked Subaru, making him extremely uncomfortable.

“Do I really have to be here?”

“For my part, I’d prefer you stay there as a sort of buffer. Honestly, getting into a fight with the Sword Saint is unthinkable, seriously.”

Al made a motion of wiping his forehead, as if in trepidation. Given that he was wearing a helmet and his voice hadn't changed, it was likely a jest, but for Subaru, who had witnessed Reinhard's combat prowess firsthand, it wasn't something to be dismissed as a joke. Al had even gone so far as to call himself a mercenary and served as Priscilla's one-armed bodyguard. He probably had confidence in his own abilities, but considering he was from the same hometown, it was hard to believe he had stepped into the realm of the superhuman. As he himself had explicitly stated, in a fight, he wouldn't last a minute.

"Come to think of it, maybe Elsa was genuinely amazing after all…"

He recalled the woman who had managed to put up a fight worthy of being called swordplay against Reinhard. At the same time, the pain of his torn abdomen resurfaced, and Subaru grimaced before quickly stopping himself.

"Her skill was genuine. We haven't even picked up her trail since. It seems we won't be able to make her atone for the severe injuries she inflicted upon you just yet."

"I just stopped that flashback, so don't bring it up again. Oh, it feels like my eyes are stinging, like they were cut horizontally…"

Thinking back, the second time he died felt like the most tragic. The mentally toughest experiences came later, though. Reinhard cast a concerned glance at Subaru, who was rubbing his eyes so vigorously they were practically bloodshot.

"Are you alright? If not, I know an excellent water magic user. They are nearby…"

"Mmm, we're about to get into some important talk, so keep quiet, 'kay? I'll heal you later."

"It's strange for me to say this, but aren't you two a bit too easygoing?"

Ferris remarked on Reinhard's words, and Julius gently chided them. Subaru was confident in his own easygoing nature, but he considered the four people around him to be quite similar, with an air of complete detachment.

While the tense candidates and their associates engaged in surprisingly relaxed banter, the convening of the Council of Wise Men was formally announced—Miklotov nodded.

“I thank my colleagues for their agreement. Now, let us begin the discussion. The topic, of course, is ‘who shall become Queen’.”

He paused, stroking his beard, then the old man winked one eye.

“Hmm. The problem is how to decide that. The Dragon Stone mentioned gathering five candidates, but it said nothing about the method of selection afterward. To put it extremely, it would be possible to have all factions compete in martial prowess here and make the last one standing queen, but…”

“I have a feeling that method would result in one faaaction completely dominating, dooon’t you think?”

To Miklotov’s jesting remark, Roswaal’s lighthearted comment from the civil servant group responded. The faction implied by his jest was none other than Felt’s, who had Reinhard. Knowing this, Miklotov slyly chuckled.

“Is there someone even the Marquis doesn’t wish to face?”

“There’s a ceeertain individual whom my only advantage doesn’t work against. So, unfortunately, the moment I’m forced to confront them, it’s goooodbye, farewell.”

Roswaal shrugged and shook his head. Even Reinhard, usually unflappable, looked down somewhat abashed at his words, but the fact that he didn’t deny it suggested he had confidence. Knowing the certainty of Roswaal’s magical abilities, Subaru questioned whether there was such an overwhelming difference between him and Reinhard. However, if the individuals themselves were convinced of it, then it must be an unshakeable fact. Reinhard’s inhumanity stood out even more to Subaru. Just then,

“Well then, since the Marquis also opposed it, let us refrain from choosing such a crude solution. Hmm, then what do you all think would be best?”

Putting aside his introductory pleasantries, Miklotov guided the Council of Wise Men into discussion. The members of the Council of Wise Men exchanged glances, and in voices somewhat less clear than Miklotov’s, softly but surprisingly audibly to everyone, they spoke.

“First, we should hear from each of the candidates.”

“It’s the first time all of them have gathered and met face to face like this.”

“Previously, even we, the Council of Wise Men, couldn’t all attend.”

“Therefore, a discussion. Their respective positions, their resolve to become queen, and what they intend to do once they are—that kind of discussion would be appropriate, wouldn’t it?”

“Hmm, I wholeheartedly agree. Then, Knight Marcos, if you please?”

As a result of the Council of Wise Men’s deliberation, the conduct of the proceedings was once again entrusted to the Knight Captain. The sole armored figure, standing apart from the candidates, bowed, then turned back to face the candidates, his stony expression firm.

“If I may be so bold, I will once again take charge of the proceedings. Each of the candidates must have their own assertions and positions. The members of the Council of Wise Men, as well as the knights and civil servants in the hall, all wish to know them. Please, bear with us.”

Representing the sentiments of everyone in the hall, Marcos respectfully bowed his head to the five candidates. Then, lifting his head, his stern expression opened wide.

“First, Lady Crusch, if you would begin. —Knight Felix Argyle! Present yourself!”

“Indeed.”

“Yes!”

Crusch nodded serenely at Marcos’s voice, and Ferris lightly raised a hand. Ferris scurried forward to stand beside Crusch, who stepped forward, heading towards the center of the hall. On the way, she stared intently at Marcos’s face.

“Captain. I always tell you, call me Ferris, not Felix! You’re hurting Ferris’s feelings!”

“I have no intention of giving special treatment to any of my subordinates. Naturally, that includes you. Step forward.”

Marcos curtly dismissed Ferris, who was pleading with a finger on her cheek, then gestured with his chin towards Crusch’s side, urging her to hurry. Ferris, looking displeased, stuck out her tongue at Marcos in protest, then stood beside Crusch, who was standing with her arms crossed.

“I am Crusch Karsten, head of the Karsten family and a Royal Candidate. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Ferris, the Karsten family’s head knight.”

“I am Knight Felix Argyle, members of the Council of Wise Men.”

Crusch introduced herself with a dignified, fearless demeanor, followed by Ferris, who remained lighthearted. Ferris’s self-introduction was corrected by Marcos in a chiding tone, drawing a piercing gaze from Ferris, but Marcos ignored it with a stoic, unyielding expression. Subaru, observing this exchange, murmured, “Hmm,” to himself.

“So that Ferris kid’s real name is Felix. It sounds like a really masculine name.”

In Japan, too, in old samurai families, the name of the eldest child was sometimes inherited, and there were cases where it was given regardless of gender. In gal games, historical gender-swap stories often featured female warriors with male names. Japan’s truly a cesspool. As Subaru came to this realization, Al subtly tilted his head beside him. Perhaps in his normal understanding, this was something not so easily accepted. Given the difference in their summoning eras, Subaru wanted to deepen their mutual understanding a bit more.

"Subaru, weren't you listening?"

Reinhard suddenly asked, looking surprised, as Subaru contemplated Al out of the corner of his eye. Unsure of the question's intent, Subaru foolishly asked, "What about?"

"It doesn't just sound like a man's name; Ferris is a perfectly fine man."

"—Wait."

"What is it?"

"What did you just say?"

Subaru's brain momentarily overloaded, unable to process what Reinhard had said. He slowly, deliberately, formed his words, demanding Reinhard repeat himself. Reinhard nodded nonchalantly.

"It doesn't just sound like a man's name; Ferris is a perfectly fine man."

He repeated the important thing twice, word for word.

""Whaaaaaaaa—?!""

As comprehension dawned, Subaru's and Al's simultaneous screams echoed through the hall. Everyone's attention in the hall turned to them in their surprise, but the two flailing and gesticulating in confusion didn't notice. Subaru, moving wildly, pointed emphatically at Ferris, who stood in the center of the room.

"Wait a minute, THAT's a guy?! Even the Knight of Knights isn't good at jokes, is he?! That's not funny?!"

He gazed at Ferris, who was looking at them. It was true she was tall for a woman, but apart from her facial features, slender build, and height, she looked entirely female. Although, it was undeniable that she lacked some feminine curves, there were many adult women in the world with flat chests. It wasn't conclusive proof.

"His voice is high, and he's slender. His skin is transparent, and I can't believe that's a man… No, I don't want to believe it!"

"You get it, brother!"

"Yeah, I get it, brother!"

Al, with his single arm, firmly clasped Subaru's shoulder, and the two aligned their understanding. How reassuring it was to have two rather than one. Just as they were confident that enough had been said to make Reinhard regret his unfunny joke,

"Ah, those two must be new. My knight, Ferris, is a man. I, of all people, can definitively state that."

Crusch, who had been silent until then, spoke to the two men with clasped shoulders. At the unbelievable content delivered in her dignified voice, Subaru's and Al's heads snapped around with an audible crack. Still with shoulders clasped, they almost spun in opposite directions, briefly dislocating each other's shoulder joints with a chain of pathetic cries of "Ow!" Regaining their composure, Subaru then stamped his foot.

"Y-You can say anything you want! You won't trick us like that! Proof! Yes, we need proof!"

"Ferris and I have a long history. We've even bathed together, and there's definitely a male appendage between his legs…"

"STOOOOPPPPPP!! I'm sorryyyy!! I'll completely admit, accept, and embrace everything, just please don't let a girl's mouth say anything about a penis—!"

"She didn't say penis, brother?!"

Subaru tried to correct the direct expression, but Al, at the peak of his confusion, only added to the chaos. Subaru, flustered by the multiple layers of confusing information, pointed forcefully at Ferris, the source of this entire situation.

“You, you damn it! You, with that appearance, who benefits from you having ‘that’? And you have cat ears, but you’re actually a guy, who benefits from that too?! I don’t have a thing for ‘otokonoko’! I’m a completely normal guy who likes silver-haired heroines!”

“It’s not Ferris’s fault if you misunderstood, ‘kay? Ferris never said she was a girl~”

“Don’t screw with me, you bitch— correction, you bastard!”

Ferris stuck out her tongue playfully and winked, and Subaru stamped his foot, expressing his indignation, but he couldn’t seem to elicit any apology from her. Dad, Mom, the existence of ‘otokonoko’ thrives even in another world.

“Unbelievable… This is the first time I’ve ever experienced such treatment. Even I, famous for being so gentle that the word ‘gentle’ would walk by me naked and I’d just watch, can’t help but feel anger…!”

“That’s just one naked person—!”

As Subaru, in his excitement, began to babble incomprehensibly, Al dutifully interjected. They exchanged grateful banter, the natural flow of a straight man responding to a funny man. Waiting for their surprise to subside,

“—Have you calmed down?”

A raspy voice addressed the two, seeking confirmation. It was Miklotov, hands clasped on his lap on the dais. Being cared for by the nation’s highest authority, even Subaru was brought back to his senses and genuinely apologized, “S-Sorry.” He meekly returned to his original line, truly reflecting on his actions for once.

“Everyone always expresses surprise when they learn Ferris’s gender. This is a pleasure I can never get enough of, no matter how many times I experience it. —Though few are as surprised as those two just now.”

“Hmm. It’s quite mischievous of you, Lady Crusch, to continue it even though you know.”

Miklotov subtly chided Crusch, who was smiling contentedly, but Crusch tightened her expression and shook her head.

"Lord Miklotov seems to be under a misunderstanding, but Ferris's attire is not something I ordered him to wear. It is entirely of his own free will."

"I believe it is the master's duty to ensure their attendant dresses appropriately."

The one who retorted to Crusch's decisive statement was Rickert, who had also returned to his line, like Subaru and the others. Perhaps he had gained the right to speak within the civil servant group from the previous exchange, as several attendees nodded in agreement with his words. Crusch gazed at these disparate individuals, then pierced Rickert with her sharp eyes. Rickert's face contorted, but he still faced her directly.

"D-Do you have any rebuttal…?"

"You're not like the countless others who avert their gaze. Though your timing is a bit off, your beliefs aren't the same, and you're somewhat easily swayed. Even so, I still value you, Lord Rickert."

—Wasn't he just thoroughly trashed? Subaru thought to himself, but perhaps Crusch considered that praise. Rickert also looked somewhat unconvinced. However, before he could pursue that, Crusch continued, "But,"

"You said it's the master's duty to ensure their attendant dresses appropriately. Then I would still wish for Ferris to wear his current attire. Do you know why?"

"Why, indeed?"

The question was directed at Rickert, but Rickert, perhaps intimidated by her gaze, couldn't continue. Miklotov asked in his stead, and Crusch nodded.

"It's a simple matter. —Because each person should be given the appearance that makes their soul shine brightest. His current attire suits Ferris far better than knight's armor. Just as I prefer this attire to wearing a dress."

Declaring this, Crusch puffed out her chest as if staking her very soul. Ferris stood beside her in a dignified stance, and she—no, he also followed suit, smiling beside his mistress's imposing figure.

Looking down at their presence, Miklotov narrowed his eyes as if seeing something dazzling. Then he subtly lowered his chin.

"Hmm, very well. We will conclude this discussion here. Lord Rickert, is that acceptable?"

"I-I have no objections."

"I have no objections either. Knight Captain Marcos, please proceed."

Rickert, though hesitant, put away his spear, while Crusch never lost her regal composure. Though they had exchanged opinions, it was clear which side had prevailed without even comparing their reactions. At any rate,

"This is the first declaration of intent among the candidates, but she is the strongest contender. If I may say so, the sense of security she exudes is simply on another level."

Such words, slightly too loud to be a murmur, could be heard. Hearing it, Subaru's ears twitched as he asked Reinhard beside him, "What does that mean?" Reinhard subtly lowered his eyes at Subaru's straightforward question.

"The Karsten family, which Lady Crusch leads, is a ducal house that has long supported the history of the Kingdom of Lugunica. Their history of loyalty to the country, their established lineage, and Lady Crusch's own talent in leading a ducal house at such a young age—she is the undeniable frontrunner in the Royal Selection."

"Is that… actually the case?"

Subaru could only groan at Reinhard's fluent explanation. Even with his limited knowledge of noble ranks, Subaru understood that the Duke was a vital national position, one of the highest in the land. Considering the current state of affairs—the royal family's demise—it would naturally be most desirable for the next monarch to be someone closely related to the original royal house. In that sense, Subaru couldn't help but think of Emilia's disadvantaged position.

"It's practically decided."

"The head of the Karsten family, and above all, Lady Crusch's brilliance as a talent is widely known."

"She makes somewhat bold decisions, but if one considers that a sign of great capacity, she is impeccable."

The attendees around them seemed to reaffirm what Subaru had just heard. The whispered conversations spoke only of Crusch's advantageous position, and it was implicitly understood that she was already a cut above the rest in the newly begun Royal Selection. Subaru couldn't help but feel impatient as the atmosphere in the hall increasingly tilted against Emilia, even before her appeal time began. However, Subaru's tormenting impatience was momentarily halted by Crusch's words as she raised a finger and interrupted the murmuring.

"It seems many here have misunderstood."

Crusch waited for all mouths to close and for attention to focus on her. Sensing her intent, silence fell over the hall, and she then gave a slight nod as a signal.

"I believe I understand what each of you expects of me should I ascend the throne. The Karsten family is a long-standing noble house deeply connected to the royal family, and we have been responsible for a considerable portion of state affairs throughout history. Therefore, if I were to take the throne, there would be no disruption to governance or national operations. A seamless succession to the throne would be assured."

As Crusch spoke fluently, many in the hall nodded, listening intently. Her words clearly articulated why she was considered the closest to the throne, making any rebuttal seem incredibly difficult. But then,

"—I regret to say to those who hold such expectations, I cannot make that promise.”

Her statement, which seemed to abandon her overwhelming advantage, brought a momentary silence to the Throne Room—followed by a seismic shock a few seconds later. “What does she mean?” voices questioned in unison. Crusch surveyed them all, then stepped confidently into the still heated atmosphere.

“Should I become king, the nature of this nation will inevitably change from that of previous generations. I ask you to understand this.”

“—Might I ask what you mean by that?”

“Naturally.”

The murmuring quieted, converging on Miklotov’s questioning voice, and in the hall where the initial shock began to subside, Crusch looked up at the dais. Her long, deep green hair swayed, and with a dignified expression, she looked past the Council of Wise Men members towards the dragon motif painted on the wall of the Throne Room.

“The Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica—this nation has built its prosperity, protected by the covenant once made with the dragon. Wars, plagues, even famines, every crisis has been averted by the dragon, and the character ‘Dragon’ has never vanished from the long history of the kingdom.”

The “Covenant with the Dragon”—Subaru had also read about it in picture books. It was the general outline of the history of the Kingdom of Lugunica, which had prospered and thrived, protected by its covenant with the dragon. Everyone listened intently to Crusch’s words, internalizing their meaning.

The covenant with the dragon had always supported the kingdom’s history from the shadows. It was the very premise of the Royal Selection, because with the royal family’s demise, its continuation was now in doubt. Hence, the stipulation that the next monarch must be someone with the qualifications of a ‘Dragon Maiden’.

"Therefore, we must entrust the throne to a maiden who can converse with the dragon. Otherwise, the prosperity promised to the kingdom will…"

"—I dislike that line of thinking."

As Miklotov spoke of the covenant, Crusch's words pierced through unexpectedly. The old man opened his eyes in faint surprise as Crusch crossed her arms and sighed.

"The prosperity accumulated through the covenant with the dragon, very well. In times of war, it incinerates enemy nations with its breath, if there is plague, it heals people through the activation of mana, and if famine occurs, the land soaked in dragon's blood yields bountiful blessings. All hardships are saved by our venerable Lord Dragon. Glory to the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica—"

Although the content of her words overflowed with radiance, Crusch herself spoke them flatly, her expression unbrightened. She cast her gaze over everyone, who remained silent, then murmured softly.

"I ask you. —Do you not feel ashamed?"

Subaru could tell that a tension greater than before filled the now silent hall. However, if there was one being in this hall, now brimming with various intense emotions, who felt the most anger, it was undoubtedly Crusch, standing before the throne.

"Regardless of the trials and tribulations, it is promised that they will be overcome through the covenant with the dragon. Indulging in this covenant, becoming decadent, and then panicking and clinging to alternatives when its continuation is threatened. How can one not be appalled by this?"

"—You go too far, Lady Crusch!"

One of the Council of Wise Men members stood up, openly enraged by Crusch's harsh words. He was as old as Miklotov, if not older. The old man slammed his raspy voice against the armrest of his seat.

"To belittle the covenant is unforgivable! How many lives and how much sacrifice did the kingdom avoid thanks to the dragon's blessings in the past? Do you deny this accumulation of history?"

"Regarding past prosperity, I said 'very well'. I myself would never claim to have not received its benefits. The Karsten family also came into being with the kingdom. If the kingdom is in crisis, the same applies to my house. If the country was saved by the dragon, the same applies to my house."

But, she continued, taking a breath.

"The future is different. Do you not feel anything about your current disgrace? Are you not stopping your thought processes by clinging to the covenant with the dragon? When war, plague, or famine strikes the kingdom again, will we have no choice but to fawn over the dragon?"

"—That is…"

"If this kingdom is to perish from being too accustomed to living under the dragon's protection, then let it perish. Excessive blessings breed stagnation, stagnation leads to decadence, and decadence brings about an end. That is what I believe."

"You… you say you will destroy the nation!"

The old man raged, his veins practically bursting. Crusch's eyes blazed with spirit at his cry, and she shook her head, "No."

"If we perish without the dragon, then we should become the dragon. The king, the retainers, the people—all should bear the burden of everything the kingdom has relied on the dragon for until now."

Therefore, Crusch paused,

"When I become king, I will ask the dragon to forget the previous covenant. Even if it results in us parting ways, it cannot be helped. For the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica is not the dragon's country, but the country of us, its people."

"…"

"Hardships await. Perhaps even greater calamities than those we overcame with the dragon's power in the past. But I wish to live a life that does not shame my soul."

Lowering her voice, Crusch shook her head and looked down.

"I have long questioned the state of this nation. I believe this current turn of events is an opportunity given to me by heaven to rectify it."

Given her loyalty to the previous king, such a statement could easily have been dismissed as disrespectful. Indeed, the elders of the Council of Wise Men exchanged glances at her words, their expressions deeply shadowed. Yet, on the other hand,

"It's certainly idealistic, but…"

Subaru found himself listening intently to Crusch's words, realizing they carried an undeniable weight. It seemed those around him felt the same, as no voices dared to openly refute her in the hall any longer. She directly confronted the accumulated history of the kingdom and possessed a presence that even the seasoned elders, who had built that history, could not gainsay.

It was undeniably the presence of a queen.

"—Lady Crusch, your thoughts are well understood. Having received them, should you attain the throne, you may do as you see fit. That is indeed the choice of a queen who bears the nation's burdens."

"Of course."

With just three words in response to Miklotov, Crusch turned on her heel as if she had said all there was to say. A murmur nearly broke out again at her dignified composure, but Miklotov preempted it. The old man then shifted his focus to Ferris.

"Then, Knight Felix Argyle. Do you have anything to add?"

It seemed he expected not only the master, but also the attendant, to speak of the master's merits. However, Ferris calmly shook his head at Miklotov's words.

"With all due respect, I have nothing to add. Lady Crusch's thoughts are precisely as she stated them. The righteousness of Lady Crusch's actions will be proven by history and by those of us who follow her. —I have no doubt whatsoever that my mistress will become queen."

Solemnly, Ferris bowed his slender waist and proclaimed this grandly. Miklotov responded with a nod of acceptance, and Ferris, after a single salute, went to Crusch's side. He glanced at her, and when she lowered her chin, he happily softened his cheeks.

"As expected, Lady Crusch is always wonderful. Ferris is head over heels."

"Sometimes, Ferris's words make no sense. —But I'll allow it. You wouldn't do anything that would disadvantage me."

Their exchange revealed an absolute trust and devotion between the two. Ferris, who was so infatuated that his persona broke, and Crusch, who accepted it nonchalantly—yes, it seemed to be a good relationship.

"Well, we've finally heard from one person… Hmm, it seems we're off to quite a tumultuous start."

Crusch's declaration of intent concluded, and Miklotov briefly summarized the exchange. For the Council of Wise Men and the civil servants, who mostly wished for a smooth resolution, the leading candidate's policies must have come as a complete surprise.

She had likely lost many votes she could have gained through this exchange. However, conversely, for those who supported her after hearing this, she would have gained an unshakeable trust that nothing could shatter. At this stage, it was impossible to measure the long-term pros and cons of her actions on the Royal Selection.

"I'm still not quite sure how the Royal Selection is decided…"

That's precisely what this declaration of intent session was for—to decide that. To use a mixer analogy, it was the initial self-introduction period to decide who to target. You'd throw out a jab to see if they were a red flag, and then it'd be a crucial turning point for how you'd deliver a straight punch to take them home. That was, by far, the worst analogy I've ever come up with. Anyway,

"Then, I will continue. In order, starting from next to Lady Crusch."

"Hmph, finally. It's time for this humble one's hyper time."

As the Knight Captain regained his composure to proceed with the meeting, a girl with orange hair stepped forward, making a remark that seemed to shatter that regained composure once more.

"Did she just say 'hyper humble one time'?"

Subaru was dumbfounded by the broken grammar, mixing Japanese and katakana. Al, as if boasting, pointed a thumb at himself, likely with a smug look under his helmet. Then, with heavy, thudding footsteps, he too stood beside Priscilla, who had stepped forward.

Unlike Crusch from before, Priscilla wore a vibrant dress and had hair that seemed to capture the sun. Her colorful ornaments jingled, further embellishing her already boisterous appearance with noise. Standing beside such a girl was a one-armed man, dressed seemingly as a commoner, his face hidden by a jet-black helmet. Naturally, this drew curious gazes from those around them.

"Hmph, it seems the humble one's magnificent presence is already attracting the vulgar gazes of the rabble."

"You're making good use of it, Princess. You're pretty hyped up, and it's a good look."

Despite being stared at not so much with curiosity, but more as an oddity, Priscilla proudly puffed out her chest. Al, her attendant, gave her an off-kilter compliment. Marcos cleared his throat in front of the slightly unhinged pair.

"Then, Lady Priscilla Barielle. We await your words."

"It's irksome, but I'll humor you. I suppose I'm to make these old bones understand my majesty, and then let them choose to obey me. A simple matter."

With that, she plucked a fan from her cleavage, snapped it open, and chuckled, hiding her mouth. It was a vicious, sadistic smile, ill-fitting her lovely appearance.

After Crusch's bombshell declaration, an unmistakably ominous atmosphere began to mix with the already unsettled mood in the hall. Even Subaru, known for his inability to read the room, felt a clear tension, and within that taut hall, someone murmured.

"—That Bloody Bride, damn her."

Subaru gasped at that deeply hateful voice, simmering with animosity. He had a clear premonition that this unexpectedly resonant voice, whoever it belonged to, would not lead to anything good.

With the second candidate now at the forefront, the Royal Selection's prologue had only just begun.

Chapter 17:
An Arrogant Speech

A statement like a bomb was dropped into the tense hall. Everyone held their breath, watching the situation unfold as if playing with fire in a powder keg. It no longer mattered who uttered the slip of the tongue. The problem was what kind of situation it would cause.

Holding their breath, everyone's attention focused increasingly on Priscilla in the center. Bathed in their gazes, tinged with awe, Priscilla glanced towards the direction of the voice.

"Such crude, uninspired, and talentless insults. Such vulgar envy, born of jealousy towards me, is far too familiar; it doesn't even serve as a lullaby."

Priscilla unhesitatingly cut through the suffocating silence that had begun to dominate the hall, her voice brimming with utter boredom. There wasn't a hint of concern for the surrounding unease or any attempt to be considerate in her tone. It was crystal clear to everyone that her arrogant words truly reflected her deepest thoughts.

Subaru was deeply impressed by her refreshingly arrogant and insolent demeanor, feeling that she, like Crusch but in a different way, stood on a plane far removed from ordinary people. Given the reactions of those around them, that single word earlier must have been akin to an insult or contempt. "Bloody Bride" was not a gentle moniker, but before anyone could question its meaning, as it hadn't been denied,

"Then, may I ask for your name again, including your attendant?"

Miklotov's seasoned experience was evident in his quick transition to the main topic before the atmosphere could sour further. The way he showed unfeigned respect to someone far younger than himself also spoke volumes. Despite holding a top position in the country, he seemed to be the type who prioritized considering those around him rather than forcefully leading, which was somewhat pitiable.

Priscilla seemed to understand the meaning behind Miklotov's gentle demeanor. She nodded readily, as if she had forgotten the rude remark she'd made earlier.

"Very well. It would be cruel to shorten the already limited time of a short-lived old man. You should be grateful for my magnanimous heart."

Adding an unnecessary remark, she further puffed out her ample chest with an imperious air.

"Engrave the name I am about to speak into your minds until the end of your days. My name is Priscilla—Priscilla. Oh, Priscilla… Hmm, what was it now?"

She started off with a flourish, only to get stuck like an old senile person. Subaru almost lunged forward to interject but barely managed to restrain himself, respecting the serious atmosphere around him. Nevertheless, Priscilla's comment undeniably made the mood in the room awkwardly warm.

She tilted her head a few times, then looked up at Al, who was standing beside her, and poked him in the side.

"Hey, Al. I'm troubled. Hurry up and help me."

"No, I'm surprised too, since I never expected you to stumble at the starting line. What about my pounding heart, waiting nervously for my turn to introduce myself?"

"I care nothing for your pounding heart. My will takes precedence, now hurry."

"You're utterly self-centered! That aside, you're not implying you can't remember your family name, Barielle, are you?"

"—Oh, that's it."

His outstretched hand was firmly gripped, and Al looked up at the sky, placing his palm on his forehead in despair at his mistress's lack of sense. Ignoring his attendant, who made no effort to hide his lament, Priscilla turned forward again, smiling fearlessly at the Council of Wise Men on the dais.

“I am Priscilla Barielle. The next queen. Bow down.”

Subaru felt it was a concise and unparalleled self-introduction. At the very least, it wasn’t the kind of speech someone genuinely wanting to be queen would deliver. Moreover, unlike Crusch, she seemed to have nothing more to add, looking utterly satisfied as if that one line had said it all.

Subaru, growing anxious in a different way than before, wondered if the conversation was truly over with just that, when,

“Barielle… as in, Lord Leip Barielle’s?”

It was Miklotov who interjected with a question. The old man twirled his white beard with his fingers, narrowing his eyes as if searching his memory.

“Hmm. Now that you mention it, I don’t see Lord Leip. Is he…?”

“If you’re speaking of that lecherous old man, he suffered severe injuries in an unexpected accident six months ago, never regained consciousness, and just recently passed away.”

“What? Lord Leip? Hmm. In that case, what was your relationship with Lord Leip, Lady Priscilla?”

Miklotov’s face showed pain at the news of the named person’s death. Priscilla snorted at the old man’s question.

“He would be my deceased husband, I suppose. Since I never even touched his fingertips, it was truly a marriage in name only.”

A hush fell over the hall once more. Feeling a distant, high-pitched ringing in his ears, Subaru replayed Priscilla’s words. In short, she had just dismissed her husband’s death with boredom.

“Princess, isn’t that a bit too heartless, no matter how you put it?”

Perhaps taking offense, or perhaps intending to cover for the poor reaction from those around them, Al whispered to Priscilla. However, she simply brushed aside Al's consideration.

"Where is the need to embellish when speaking the truth as it is? That old man married me, harbored inappropriate ambitions, then got caught up in an unrelated accident in an unrelated place, and burned himself out before his sparks could ignite a great fire. If that's not a laughing matter, then what is? Though, for all the life he staked, it's not a funny story at all, truly a worthless old geezer to the very end."

Rather than a quick, clean cut, Priscilla repeatedly slashed at the deceased with her words. Subaru even found himself pitying the man he didn't even know, and Miklotov, who seemed to know him, looked utterly dejected. Whether she noticed Miklotov's change in expression or not, Priscilla remained unchanged, raking her orange hair back.

"The only meaning that old man held, if any, was that he transferred everything he had accumulated directly to me. Since the old man and I were husband and wife, and there was no heir… What was it again? Oh, right, the Barielle family is mine."

Priscilla reached a crude conclusion and looked around, as if daring anyone to object. Receiving her gaze, Subaru felt a surge of dissatisfaction, but no one dared to express it concretely. Expectations were high for Rickert, who had argued so vehemently with Crusch, but even he kept his mouth shut, despite his displeased expression. Whether there was a reason or if it was clear from the outset that she wouldn't be taken seriously, her outrageous behavior seemed to be allowed to pass unchallenged.

Then,

"Hmm, I understand. As a long-time acquaintance, Lord Leip's passing was somewhat surprising, but… Lady Priscilla's story makes sense. It is indeed true that you are the head of the Barielle family."

"Naturally."

“I would like to hear more details, but what about your knight?”

To Priscilla’s serene nod, Miklotov then turned his attention to the attendant standing beside her. Al, suddenly made the center of attention, replied with a voice that clearly indicated he had been trying to suppress a yawn.

“Huh… Oh, me?”

He proved that both he and his master were the embodiment of doing things at their own pace. Competing with each other, master and subordinate subtly warmed the room. Compared to the other candidates, knowing even a little about them made this development, in a way, more detrimental to Subaru’s heart than it was to the actual participants.

“Yes, you. You’re dressed unusually, and you’re not a face… or rather, a helmet… seen in the Royal Guard.”

“Oh, you noticed? This helmet’s from the Vollachian Empire in the south, and it was a real pain to get out. It’s tough, lasts long, and looks cool, so I use it a lot.”

“From the Vollachian Empire… So, you’re not affiliated with the Royal Guard?”

“Being called a fancy ‘knight’ makes me squirm, honestly. I’m more like, well, a wandering mercenary, a drifter, you know?”

Indicating himself with his single arm, Al brazenly revealed his identity in his muffled voice. As he laughed heartily, his helmet clinked metallically, which seemed to provoke those around him unnecessarily. Indeed, his behavior drew angry shouts from the Royal Knight contingent.

“What insolent behavior! Do you not know where you are?!”

“While it may be cruel to demand knightly conduct from a boorish savage, we cannot condone such behavior!”

“What is the meaning of concealing your face before the Council of Wise Men? And with an Imperial helmet, no less… This is beyond disrespectful!”

“Whoa, whoa, don’t get so angry. My naive heart will be torn to shreds by the pressure, you know?”

Al maintained his cool demeanor in response to the knights’ angry shouts. However, tracing the surface of his helmet with a finger, he said,

“Well, I don’t think your opinions are off the mark. It’s true that hiding my face in front of important people might make me seem suspicious.”

“If you didn’t look like a suspicious character, you wouldn’t have caught my eye, Al.”

“That’s a chilling thought. Nevertheless, I hope you’ll forgive the rudeness of hiding my face. Because…”

Looking up at the Council of Wise Men, Al inserted a finger into a gap in his helmet, lifting it just enough to expose a portion of his concealed face. His head tilted back, exposing his chin and the area below his nose to the open air—

“Uh—”

Someone let out a small gasp at the sight of his gruesome facial scars. Al then turned around like a model, demonstrating the same condition to the entire hall. Naturally, the knights’ momentum died down.

That was only to be expected. Even the visible parts of Al’s face were etched with the marks of countless battles: burns, lacerations, and various other scars. Subaru also had noticeable scars on his skin, but Al’s were ten times more numerous, without exaggeration.

Perhaps the reactions of those around him were as he expected, for Al, replacing his finger and adjusting his helmet, laughed.

“Well, as you can see, I have an unsightly face, so I hope you’ll forgive the discourtesy of facing you all with my face hidden.”

"On the contrary, my subordinate was out of line."

Marcos bowed his head in apology to Al's evasive statement. Then, his face hardening like stone, he added,

"Forgive me for pressing the matter, but you're from the Empire with those scars… could you perhaps be a former sword-slave?"

"Oh, impressive, Captain of the Knights. You're well-versed in the dark underbelly of that secretive Empire. Indeed, I am a former sword-slave. A veteran of over a decade."

A stir once again spread through the hall, and several knights murmured the word 'sword-slave'. Subaru didn't know the term, but judging from the characters, it likely meant 'slave who uses a sword'. From that, he could infer their position was probably,

"Someone who fought for entertainment, you mean?"

"That's right, brother. Well, that's why I'd like you to be satisfied with my skill and my scars. Oh, I didn't introduce myself, did I?"

Al pointed at Subaru, confirming his murmur, then tapped his own helmet with that same finger.

"My ties with Vollachia are cut now. I'm a wandering drifter—just call me Al. I was lucky enough to be hired by the Princess, and I'm just plodding along."

Al continued to smile at Marcos with his usual playful attitude. Like his mistress, he didn't seem to care a bit about the glares from those around him. On the contrary, the knight contingent, who had been accusing him just moments before, were now utterly speechless at the intensity of the scars etched onto his body. This was likely because it became clear to everyone, including his missing arm, that his journey had been far from smooth. And,

"Seriously…?"

This was a fact that also impacted Subaru significantly as he witnessed it.

Until now, Subaru had avoided directly commenting on Al's appearance. This was partly to avoid the insensitivity of bringing up limb loss to someone with a single arm, and partly an unconscious rejection of it as a potential reality for himself in the future. If Al came from the same world as Subaru, then what happened to him was not just someone else's problem. Losing an arm and bearing such terrible, unshowable scars on his face—for Subaru, who already had numerous lacerations etched into his body, Al was quite literally a possible future.

A chilling sensation ran down Subaru's spine. Despite Subaru's sentiments, the royal selection proceedings continued.

"Hmm. If you're from the Vollachian Empire, what's your connection to Lady Priscilla? That country is a peculiar, separate world that keeps not only information but also people and goods from leaving."

"There are always detours, back alleys, and roundabouts. I managed to escape the Empire when the time was right. As for why I'm with the Princess…"

"It's nothing. Just a result of my amusement."

Priscilla, who had been silent until now, perhaps annoyed that it wasn't her turn, interjected. Interrupting Miklotov's question to answer, she fiddled with the colorful ornaments adorning her fingers.

"My becoming queen is akin to divine will. Therefore, any attendant would be the same. So, I chose the one I favored as my attendant. And that turned out to be that man there."

"I see, indeed. How did you choose him?"

It was better to accept than to foolishly argue, so Miklotov didn't touch on Priscilla's arrogance, instead promoting the conversation while satisfying her pride. At this arrangement, she looked pleased, blowing on her fingernails.

"Oh, it's a known fact. —I gathered strong contenders in my territory and had them compete, on the condition that I would take one who caught my eye as my attendant. It was quite an entertaining diversion."

Priscilla responded to Miklotov, then meaningfully glanced sideways at Al. If her words were to be believed, it meant that Al had, in fact, caught her eye. It made imagining the extent of his single-armed strength even more difficult. Miklotov and the members of the Council of Wise Men nodded in understanding at Priscilla's answer.

"So, he was the winner of that competition…"

"No, I didn't win."

However, to their understanding, came an unexpected interjection. Al looked at the surprised faces of the elders with amusement, shaking his shoulders.

"Life ain't that easy for a one-armed guy to beat out a bunch of strongmen. Just making it to the top four in a knockout format means I had some serious luck."

"Then why did Lady Priscilla choose him as her attendant…?"

"I already told you. I chose the one I favored."

Priscilla puffed out her chest in response to the question and forcefully slapped Al's back. A dry popping sound echoed, and Al yelped "Ahin" as she continued.

"Besides, no one else gathered by such a dim-witted proposition of 'strong contenders' was confident enough to still wear such an oddity even when subjected to curious gazes. Above all, no one else had been staying in the Vollachian Empire and then dared to boast that they came from beyond the 'Great Waterfall'."

Priscilla's smile deepened, and her red eyes began to glow with brilliant pleasure. Her speech quickened, and she stomped her foot loudly to draw attention, proclaiming,

"Therefore, I chose Al as my attendant. Both my choice of Al and my path to becoming queen are all divine will meant to make me shine."

Priscilla brazenly declared that the world itself blessed her. There was not a trace of hesitation or doubt, only a terrifying abundance of confidence. Setting aside the eccentricity of her statements, her stance, poised to reach the apex, was truly the charisma possessed only by a superior being who commands others. However, such a wonderful quality was meaningless since the content was unappealing.

"Hmm, I understand your relationship. However, that raises the question of how Lady Priscilla came to be known as a Dragon Maiden. If a knight didn't find her…"

Unlike the speechless individuals among the council, Miklotov possessed the composure to accept Priscilla's assertion. He took her words in stride and moved on to the next question—and indeed, the old man's question was perfectly valid.

From what Subaru had observed of the other factions so far, it seemed that the candidates were all found by Royal Knights who were given emblems to seek them out, and those knights then served as their attendants. This was the case with Ferris for Crusch, and Reinhard for Felt. It was likely the same for Anastasia and Julius as well. This naturally brought up the question of Priscilla's group, and,

"What about Emilia-tan's case…?"

Was Roswaal the one who nominated her? Roswaal supported Emilia as her patron. And Subaru had not yet met the knight who supposedly found her. Not only was he not in Roswaal's territory, but since he wasn't present in the capital, it seemed such a person didn't exist. Despite Emilia being in a situation where she might be isolated by the atmosphere, Subaru felt a certain sense of relief that such a knight had not appeared.

At that point, Subaru suddenly realized he didn't even know why Emilia was participating in the Royal Selection. What was her purpose for being here? And for what reason did she aspire to be queen? Subaru belatedly realized he hadn't even touched upon a fraction of this information.

"Esteemed members of the Council of Wise Men, the answer to that question has already been confirmed by the Knight Order."

Then, in response to Miklotov's question, Marcos stepped forward, saying, "If I may." His brows furrowed slightly within his stony expression.

"In truth, the late Lord Leip was the first to notice the clauses of the Dragon Tablet when the former king and his relatives passed away, and he hastened to secure a candidate. Originally, the management of the Dragon Tablet was Lord Leip's responsibility, and… There were reports of a several-day delay before the contents of the clauses were reported."

Marcos spoke of the deceased's suspicious actions with a hint of difficulty. Miklotov, as if something came to mind from Marcos's words, touched his long eyebrows that almost obscured his eyes.

"I see, he was an ambitious man. It's only natural he'd put effort into finding a Dragon Maiden."

The guardian of the next queen—in this case, since Priscilla was his wife, he must have been a person with an even greater thirst for power. Thinking about it that way, there really was an incredible old man.

"However, it's quite ironic that he found the crucial maiden, only to meet with misfortune himself."

"He was a rather uninspiring old man, never one to spark excitement. This is the extent of the humor he squeezed out at his very end. Truly, a fittingly risible end."

Priscilla delivered her assessment without a hint of a smile, stamping a failing grade on her deceased husband's life. Miklotov could only offer a wry smile at the severe judgment of his acquaintance. At any rate,

"There's no need to speak of a dead old nuisance. I stand alone. All other reasons are trivialities that need not even be touched upon. Without reservation, you should revere me as your queen."

With utter confidence, Priscilla announced the conclusion she had reached multiple times in this short period. While everyone in the hall was speechless at her demeanor, only the jet-black helmet standing beside her looked firmly at her.

"Princess, what's the reward for doing that? What do we get?"

"It's a simple matter. —To come with me is to gain the right to be a victor."

Priscilla laughed, took a breath, and continued,

"As the Royal Selection is a competition, the ultimate goal must be victory. Therefore, choosing me is the answer itself. Hence, following me is your righteous path."

"That Heaven has chosen you…"

"Naturally. After all, in this world, only things convenient for me occur."

That's why,

"I am the one most suited to be queen. No, no one else can fulfill that role. There is nothing more to say. You need only gaze with shining eyes upon my majesty before you."

Raking her orange hair back, Priscilla boldly tossed it into the air and turned around serenely. Her posture indicated that she had finished speaking, and she proceeded to walk towards the center, her back still to the Council of Wise Men on the dais. As he followed her retreating back, the dark helmet finally looked up at the dais.

"The way she puts it might be a bit much, but everything our Princess says is the absolute truth. If you come with the Princess, you'll definitely be rewarded, as long as it doesn't go against her will—Heaven itself has chosen the Princess, Priscilla."

Al finished speaking, then surveyed the entire hall. Everyone who met Al's gaze held their breath, and after seeing this, the one-armed man gave a slight wave with his single arm.

"Well, you can choose when to side with the Princess whenever you like. Though I think it's best to jump on the winning horse early."

Master and attendant, both so utterly self-assured, as if they had left humility in their mother's wombs. As they returned to the line of candidates, the tense atmosphere naturally relaxed slightly, and a sense of relief finally began to spread.

Subaru, too, relaxed the unnecessary tension that had built up during a time when even breathing felt like a chore. At least, the speech of his acquaintance was over—though it was hard to call it proper, he was glad that it had ended without escalating into a full-blown uproar.

"Why do I have to be so nervous…?"

Subaru glared at their backs as they returned to the line, a misplaced anger brewing within him. Then, Priscilla unexpectedly turned around, and their eyes met. Their gazes locked, and she smiled meaningfully, winking at him as if to charm him. The gesture was excessively alluring, and Subaru, who had no resistance, was easily flustered.

Just as expected, she was almost the same age yet already a married woman—or rather, a widow. Describing a young, wealthy noble widow with a voluptuous body would have been enough to fill a story in itself.

"A cross-dressing boy, a cross-dressing beauty. Now a rich widow, too—the genres are too diverse."

The only pity was that despite being a widow, she showed absolutely no signs of it. It was harsh to expect more from someone who had merely lost her husband on paper.

"—Ah."

While he was preoccupied with such trivial thoughts, his gaze happened to meet Emilia's, who seemed to have been following Priscilla's glance. She seemed slightly surprised that Subaru was at the end of Priscilla's gaze, then lowered her eyes, and from Subaru's perspective, looked away sadly as if betrayed. Subaru reeled as if punched, and a misplaced excuse formed in his mind: "N-that wasn't mental infidelity!"

Amidst all this, the Royal Selection showed signs of progressing calmly.

"Next, Lady Anastasia! And Sir Julius Juukulius! Step forward!"

"Yes."

"It's our turn."

The purple-haired girl replied gracefully, and Julius serenely raised one hand to the sky, bringing it down with a flourish that made his uniform sleeve crackle loudly. A dry, crisp sound filled the air, undeniably refreshing the mood. Anastasia smiled and stepped forward with a "thank you," and Julius stood beside her, showing no sign of trepidation.

—Thus, the two who were furthest ahead in terms of master-and-attendant relationship in this Royal Selection were now assembled.

Facing the next candidates, Subaru also straightened himself and looked forward once more.

Chapter 18:
The Greedy Merchant

Anastasia's pale purple, wavy hair flowed down her back.

Beside her stood Julius, a dapper-looking knight with meticulously combed dark purple hair.

They were a striking pair, epitomizing the upper class in their pure master-and-servant dynamic. However, after a string of such eccentric personalities, there was an uneasy feeling that another oddball might appear. Subaru's apprehension seemed to be shared by those around him; the glances directed at the two as they stepped forward were already laden with anxiety and tension, palpable in the air. In this stifling atmosphere, Anastasia, drawing all eyes, began by saying:

"If you're expecting someone with as strong a personality as the previous two, I'm afraid that's a bit too much for me. Too much self-assertion isn't really welcome, so my selling point is a lack of individuality."

She clapped her hands loudly twice, grabbing everyone's attention, then offered a gentle smile for all to see. At Anastasia's smile, the strange tension that had filled the hall subtly eased. Several coughs could be heard, and a sense of embarrassment at clinging to the previous atmosphere was evident among many in the viewing gallery.

She observed these reactions with satisfaction, then nodded once.

"Well then, I —Anastasia Hoshin— will do the talking. Please forgive me if I'm a bit presumptuous, being an outsider."

She pressed her clapped hands together and tilted her head slightly, radiating charm. That opening remark, coupled with this gesture, was the manipulative act of a wicked woman who could play with others' reactions in a single movement. And then:

"Julius Juukulius, First Knight to Lady Anastasia. Please leave the support for your esteemed self to me. I shall uphold you with elegance."

Lightly brushing his bangs, Julius highlighted his presence with an unnecessarily refined movement. Indeed, it immediately became clear that his "lack of individuality" claim was false advertising.

Putting aside Julius's grand and polished demeanor, what continued to bother Subaru was Anastasia's accent, which felt jarring in this other world. While not particularly familiar to Subaru, a native of the Kanto region, it was an accent he'd hear at least once a day if he watched TV. The intonation, combined with an unclear understanding of the otherworld translation's capabilities, still spoke to a remarkable job done.

Subaru nodded in silent praise for this unseen function. Meanwhile, the proceedings continued smoothly. To Anastasia, who had finished her introduction, Miklotov on the platform stroked his long beard and asked:

"Is that distinctive way of speaking from Kararagi?"

"Exactly. My origin is the lowest stratum of the Free Trade Cities in Kararagi."

"Hmm, the lowest stratum… Then what brings you to Lugunica?"

As Anastasia spoke of her origins, Miklotov's eyes narrowed slightly.

If the term "lower stratum" held the same meaning as in Lugunica, then Anastasia's status would be that of a commoner. Or perhaps, as "lowest stratum" implies, even lower. In that case, was her current extravagant attire bought for her by Julius? Yet, she wore it with such familiarity, and her unyielding composure before the kingdom's dignitaries, including the Council of Wise Men, didn't quite make sense.

As Subaru pondered these questions internally, Anastasia simply shrugged her shoulders slightly, maintaining a cool demeanor despite the sharp gaze directed at her.

“Though I’m from the lowest stratum, I now have a proper mansion in the capital. I also have several shops in other cities. My visit to Lugunica is also related to that.”

“The Hoshin Trading Company, which she chairs, is a rapidly expanding mercantile enterprise. With its growth in Kararagi, discussions of opening branches in Lugunica also arose. That was, in fact, the initial point of contact between Lady Anastasia and myself.”

Julius supplemented Anastasia’s words. Hearing this, Miklotov nodded in understanding, saying, “I see.”

“So, a young merchant who made a name for herself through her business acumen, despite being born in the lower strata?”

“It’s a good thing about Kararagi that even a young girl like me is given opportunities. It’s funny, but it seems I have a knack for sniffing out money.”

Anastasia proudly touched her well-shaped nose. Subaru observed a ripple of unease spread through those around them, especially the civil officials, at the content of her statement. Subaru had vaguely understood it as the result of some ‘straw millionaire’ alchemy, but for them, it seemed it wasn’t so simple. He wasn’t very familiar with the height of the wall between commoners and nobles, but the wall Anastasia had casually leaped over with a laugh must have been an extraordinary feat.

In the murmuring throne room, Anastasia modestly recounted her achievements. To further elevate her, Julius stepped forward and pressed the point to the still-rippling civil officials.

“In Lugunica as well, Lady Anastasia’s Hoshin Trading Company will expand its scale with the cooperation of the Juukulius family. What’s truly astonishing is that the rapid growth of this trading company, spanning two nations, was built by Lady Anastasia in just a few short years.”

If Anastasia’s age was consistent with her appearance, she likely wasn’t much older than Subaru, perhaps in her late teens. While it was unclear when she discovered her business talent, considering that fact, it was easy to see that she was a monster in the economic world.

“Lady Anastasia is a genius of commerce… No, a prodigy, even. Her business acumen is a natural gift, unaffected by her beauty… My apologies, by her age. Her foresight, her ability to move people—All are utterly beyond my humble talents and worthy of profound admiration.”

“Indeed, when the Finest Knight boasts to such an extent, it must truly be something remarkable.”

Miklotov nodded wisely at Julius’s excessively humble words. However, Subaru, listening from the side, couldn’t quite agree with his words. Subaru tilted his head at what Miklotov had just said.

“If I didn’t mishear, wasn’t he called the Finest Knight just now?”

With each knight currently attending their respective candidate, only Reinhard, still standing in the same line, could answer Subaru’s question. He merely shifted his gaze toward Subaru in response.

“He was. In the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica, after Captain Marcos, Julius holds the highest rank. There is a Vice-Captain, but that’s an honorary position in name only, so you can consider it practically vacant.”

Reinhard glanced at Marcos in the center, then watched Julius, who was gracefully acting under the spotlight.

“His sword skills and mana control, his lineage and achievements—Julius’s qualifications as a knight are impeccable. Without a doubt, he is worthy of being called the Finest Knight.”

“In the capital’s downtown, wasn’t it you they called ‘the Knight of Knights’? Even the simpletons knew it, and you never denied it, did you?”

“There’s quite a difference between that moniker and actual qualifications. However, if we’re speaking strictly of sword skill, I am indeed superior to Julius. I’ve never met anyone stronger than myself.”

Subaru blanched at the casual declaration of being the strongest, but Reinhard, who had just dropped a bombshell, continued without a hint of pride, his face serene.

“The world isn’t so simple that everything revolves around sword skill. When it comes to overall ability, I am greatly inferior to Julius… In that regard, I likely don’t even measure up to Ferris.”

“I can’t tell if that’s high self-esteem or low self-esteem…”

“I intend to neither over- nor underestimate myself. It’s simply that my aptitude limits what I can do, and those who can reach beyond my grasp are worthy of respect—that’s all it is. Of course, that applies to you too.”

“Putting aside your self-evaluation, you definitely overrate other people.”

At the very least, Subaru didn’t believe he had shown enough achievement to warrant Reinhard’s fervent endorsement. Subaru was aware that he was a mediocre talent at best, and he judged his past actions to be the mundane results of a commoner doing his common best. Therefore, conversing with Reinhard, who looked him straight in the eye and seemed to be thinking, ‘You’re seriously amazing,’ was incredibly ticklish. It felt like an itch in an unseen, unreachable part of his body.

“You say that so boldly to my face, you handsome bastard. You’re practically pushing me into a ‘my route,’ so be careful.”

“There are many words I don’t understand, but if it’s with you, then it’s fine.”

“I have no interest in pleasing the fujoshi demographic.”

Subaru, speaking in a difficult-to-understand slang, curtly ended his conversation with Reinhard. In the meantime, the dialogue between the Finest Knight and the head of the Council of Wise Men continued.

“I understand the good relationship between the Juukulius family and Lady Anastasia. Hmm, then I would like to ask Lady Anastasia something.”

“Finally, it’s my turn. Julius hogs the spotlight so much, it’s hard for me to get noticed. Ask me anything, I’ll answer.”

As Anastasia, who had left the stage to the eloquent Julius, smiled and spoke, Miklotov returned a grandfatherly smile and nodded. Suddenly, Miklotov’s eyes sharpened slightly.

“Then I ask you—as a citizen of Kararagi, what is your purpose in aiming for the throne in this Kingdom of Lugunica?”

“Ah, you’re curious about my origins, aren’t you?”

Anastasia nervously fiddled with the ends of her purple hair. Slowly, Subaru understood the intention behind Miklotov’s question. In short, he was raising the point that there would likely be various problems with accepting Anastasia, whose primary allegiance lay elsewhere, as their own monarch.

It was obvious, if you thought about it; as long as countries existed, there were divisions between nations and peoples in this world too. The height of that barrier was unknown, but even in an emergency, it was unthinkable to easily cede the highest position in one’s own country to a visitor from another. Even if she claimed to be qualified, realistically, an American becoming president of Japan would be impossible—regardless of qualifications, the citizens who made up the nation would not accept it.

Her qualifications had been confirmed, as had her background. The next question, then, was why she sought the throne—just as Crusch and Priscilla had articulated, Anastasia was now expected to do the same. The entire hall held its breath, awaiting her words. To the rising tension around her, Anastasia offered a faint smile.

“When you expect so much from me, it makes me nervous.

Unfortunately, I don't possess grand ideals like Crusch, nor do I have magnificent confidence like Priscilla, believing I was chosen to become queen."

"Then you wouldn't say that you're pursuing this simply because the Dragon Stone reacted to you, by any chance?"

"Ahaha, if that were the case, I wouldn't be able to show my face here. Of course, I have my own objectives."

Anastasia gave a wry smile at Miklotov's words, then took a breath.

"—I'm actually a bit greedier than others."

With a casualness like sticking out her tongue, Anastasia uttered those words. The statement, so different in atmosphere from what was expected, made most of the people in the room look as if they couldn't believe their ears. Anastasia nodded, delighted by their reactions.

"Given my humble origins, I believe I've been uncommonly materialistic since I was little. The reason I've managed to become a merchant of some standing, I think, is more due to my strong attachment than just my nose for money."

Anastasia had said she was from the lowest stratum. If her words were to be believed, her childhood, like Felt's, must have been a daily struggle for survival. What kind of personality would be forged in such a place? Comparing it to Subaru's common sense, and recalling the cunning and resilient figure of Felt, it was easy to imagine.

Felt, standing somewhat listlessly and unhappily in the line of candidates, sensed Subaru's lukewarm gaze and turned his way, causing Subaru to shift slightly behind Reinhard. Felt, whose eyes met Reinhard's as she followed Subaru, made a visibly displeased face, while Reinhard returned an intensely refreshing smile to Felt.

"Desire is a scary thing; once you start looking up, there's no end to it. First, it's money for today's meal, then tomorrow's, then a week's worth. I want to sleep in a safe place with a roof, I want a bed, I want a softer bed."

Counting her wishes on her fingers, Anastasia gradually raised her demands.

"At first, I was a small trading company's errand girl, and when I offered a bit of advice on how the shop people did things, it was a huge hit. After doing that a few times, I was entrusted with bigger deals, and life became so easy I forgot I used to live in the lowest stratum. But even though it got easier, I didn't become free. No, I became even less free."

"…Hmm. Why is that?"

"That's the terrifying nature of desire. Simply put, the more things you can see and reach, the more things you want to grasp. I want this, I want that, that's not enough, none of it is enough—and then, before I knew it, here I am."

Smiling brightly, Anastasia pointed at her feet. It was clear she wasn't just checking her footing, but reFerrisng to the royal castle. She then gestured to the other candidates.

"I'm greedy, so I want everything. I've never been satisfied yet. I don't know true contentment. That's why I want my own country."

"You speak of a kingdom as if weighing it on the scales of materialism?"

"If my scales break from it, then I want them to break. If it can't fit into my vessel, that means I'm satisfied."

Anastasia responded with a knowing smile to Miklotov's words, which held a hint of admonishment. She boldly declared her 'desire' as the reason she sought the throne, and furthermore, she stated:

"If, even after acquiring the kingdom, I'm still not satisfied… then I'll have to aim even higher, kingdom and all, won't I?"

"What if what you acquire proves worthless to you?"

What would happen to something placed on the scales, yet still unable to satisfy her passion? Even the kingdom, Miklotov pressed. She waved her hand dismissively, saying, "Oh, no problem at all."

"Didn't I tell you? I'm greedy. Therefore, once I've acquired something, it's mine, no matter what happens. What becomes mine will serve to satisfy my even greater greed. That's why my life in Kararagi, the Hoshin Trading Company, and the employees who work for the company are all part of my passion to fulfill me. I'd never throw them away."

So, she paused, and looking at everyone in the hall, she concluded:

"—Rest assured, you're all welcome to become mine."

She smiled gently, as warm as the first impression she had given in this hall. Beneath that tranquility, an almost insane yearning smoldered.

Though her concept was vulgar, her argument was simple for it. She desired the throne purely out of her own greed, and in exchange, she promised to dedicate all her effort to the kingdom's prosperity once it was hers. She had just conveyed through her speech that she wouldn't abandon what she acquired, and once it was hers, she couldn't help but strive to elevate it. And then:

"Alright, I understand. Lady Anastasia's argument is sufficient. Now, does Knight Julius have anything to add?"

Once the master's speech was over, it was the usual time for the retainer's appeal. The previous two had purely argued for the firmness of their master's spirit, but Julius, fiddling with his bangs, stepped forward and said, "Yes, well."

"Lady Anastasia has used the vulgar word 'desire,' but in essence, it is an expression of ambition and deep devotion. At the same time, from a business perspective, she can choose not to be swayed by emotion. As a ruler, this quality is indispensable."

"Hmm, indeed, I see."

"Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, Lady Anastasia's business acumen—this prodigious talent—is something the current kingdom desperately needs. Due to the war expenses and wasteful spending of the previous and former kings, the Kingdom of Lugunica's financial difficulties are severe."

The hall buzzed as Julius's words suddenly touched upon a sensitive national issue. One of the old men from the Council of Wise Men made a bitter face, looking down at the young knight.

"I believe that is not appropriate to speak of so carelessly in public, Knight Julius."

"It is common knowledge that financial reconstruction has been a major national concern for decades. I see no need to hide it from those gathered here. Don't you think the current stagnation of even national projects is the result of looking away and ignoring this issue?"

"A mere knight meddling in state affairs beyond his purview…"

"Precisely."

Julius cut off the elder, who was about to retort with a vein throbbing on his forehead, and waved a raised finger.

"My house, the Juukulius family, has not been significantly affected. Had we continued to avert our eyes and deceive ourselves, it might have been a problem I wouldn't have had to face in my lifetime. However, even if my house remains safe, I cannot overlook the fact that the royal family we serve is in distress."

"Therefore," Julius continued, turning his attention to Anastasia, who stood beside him, "I sought to connect with the Hoshin Trading Company, which was at the height of its prosperity in Kararagi, and bring a new wind to Lugunica. That I saw the qualities of a queen in Lady Anastasia in the process—what else could it be but fate?"

As he became more impassioned, Julius's tone grew louder, and his speech became more sonorous and rapid. With gestures, he became almost theatrical.

"If Heaven's will chose, it could be no other than Lady Anastasia. I swear by my loyalty to my royal family, and my fidelity to the kingdom, that Lady Anastasia is indeed worthy of being queen. —Thank you for your kind attention.”

Seeing that the audience had been captivated by his speech, he concluded with those words, signaling the end, and bowed. Air began to flow through the hall, which had seemed to be frozen in time, and everyone returned to their senses, re-evaluating the third master-and-servant pair’s argument. Even amidst this, only Knight Captain Marcos remained unfazed.

“Knight Julius, I think that’s enough.”

He calmly accepted and brushed off the fervent speech. Julius, accustomed to such curt responses from his superior, replied gracefully, “Yes, thank you,” and returned to Anastasia’s side.

“That was splendid, Lady Anastasia. Truly, a flower like you blossoms most beautifully in such a setting.”

“I still feel like Julius took over my turn, in the end. But he praised me so much, I can’t even get angry.”

Laughing together, the master and servant returned to the line of candidates. With the third candidate’s assertion concluded, the next in line was—

“Then, the next candidate—Lady Emilia.”

After a brief silence, the name of the silver-haired girl, who had maintained her composure until now, was called. The only candidate in the line without a knight. When her name was called, she raised her face, her beautiful white profile colored with both anxiety and strong determination.

“Yes.”

Emilia stepped forward. Her Royal Selection was now beginning.

—At that moment, Natsuki Subaru…

Chapter 19:
The Silver-Haired Witch’s Request

1

Emilia responded, her expression tight with nervousness, as her name was called.

The moment Subaru saw her right hand and right foot step forward at the same time as she began to walk towards the center, he thought, “I have to do something about this.”

From behind, even after just a few steps, her body was visibly stiff with tension. Normally, this would be a moment to praise her cuteness, thinking “Emilia-tan is such a puppy!” But now, there was no way it would work in her favor.

Just before she reached the center, Emilia managed to notice her awkward gait. Her limbs settled into a normal walking pattern, and she stepped forward—into the center of the hall, under the gaze of the Council of Wise Men.

—Emilia-tan, are you alright?

“There’s no need to worry, Subaru.”

“Don’t read my mind! Am I just a puppet on your strings?”

Reinhard cast a sidelong glance at Subaru, who was restlessly trying and failing to hide his inner anxiety. In a hushed voice, he addressed Subaru’s worries, then gestured with his chin towards Emilia, who was now at the front.

“It seems you don’t know what kind of reputation Lady Emilia has at the royal castle, Subaru. —At the very least, she isn’t being scorned in the way you’re worried about.”

“Even so…”

Her right hand and right foot had moved forward at the same time.

It was a classic tell-tale sign of extreme nervousness. If she were to trip over her words, then her tongue, then blush and squat down—if that chain reaction continued, it would be unbearable to watch.

If that happened, Subaru was prepared to endure the scorn and contempt of everyone present at this gathering of the nation's most important figures. He was ready to make a complete fool of himself.

—It was typical of Natsuki Subaru not to consider a path where he might cleverly salvage Emilia's reputation.

However, Subaru's utterly off-the-mark resolve became a groundless fear due to a diagonally opposite interpretation.

"Did you see that walking style, with both hands and feet moving at once…?"

"Isn't that a prelude to some special spell or incantation passed down among the elves?"

"It's a witch's charm. For some reason, I can't look away…"

Voices filled with awe reached Subaru from the accompanying Knight Guards, and the content disheartened him. It was less paranoia and more extreme grandiosity.

If they knew the real Emilia, it wouldn't even occur to them that her awkwardness was simply due to nervousness.

As for the third person, their comment was no different from Subaru's own thoughts, broadly speaking.

In any case, even such a stiff movement was being interpreted in that way—if what was being proclaimed wasn't meant to mock her but was utterly serious, then he could tell she wasn't being welcomed warmly.

As Emilia reached the center, the murmurs naturally quieted.

The only sounds remaining were Emilia's presence and the loud footsteps of a tall figure—Roswaal—approaching to stand beside her. Once his tall, indigo-haired figure stood next to Emilia, the preparations for the proceedings were complete.

Marcos, the moderator, looked at the two standing figures, his face grim, and lowered his chin. Then he glared at Subaru and the others—especially at those who had just spouted foolish rumors—making them straighten their backs before saying,

“Now, Lady Emilia. Along with Lord Roswaal L. Mathers. Please begin.”

“Weeell then. Oh my~, after having all these knights as attendants, I really do feel terribly out of plaaace, don’t you think?”

Roswaal responded in a lighthearted tone, turning to Emilia beside him with a “Hmm?” Emilia gave no reaction whatsoever.

Considering her stiffness from moments ago, expecting a normal reaction was out of the question. Roswaal’s inability to read the room was irritating even to Subaru, but that negative feeling was immediately forgotten.

Because—

“It is a pleasure to meet you all, members of the Council of Wise Men. My name is Emilia. I have no family name. Please simply call me Emilia.”

A clear, bell-like voice resonated through the hall, inscribing her name into everyone’s hearts. Her voice held no tremor, and her gaze forward was unwavering.

Where had her earlier nervousness gone? Emilia, standing before the Council of Wise Men and speaking her name, was in no way inferior to previous candidates.

No, Emilia, as she gave her address, possessed a detached, almost witchly charm that no other candidate could ever hope to have. It was unclear if this stemmed from her not being a pure human.

At the very least, Subaru was utterly captivated by that charm. His earlier inner resolve, and the many insults directed at her from the surroundings—all of it completely vanished from his mind as he was mesmerized by her standing figure from behind.

“Though I am unworthy, I, Roswaal L. Mathers, the current Marquis, serve as Lady Emilia’s recommender. I am grateful to all the members of the Council of Wise Men for your time.”

“Hmm. So, not a Knight Guard, but you, Marquis, will be her recommender. Could you perhaps explain the circumstances surrounding this?”

Miklotov stroked his beard, gently guiding the conversation, then his eyes narrowed with the sharpness of a sword. He quietly pierced Emilia with his gaze.

“Candidate Emilia. Please include your background as well.”

“Understood.”

Roswaal bowed at the waist, gestured to Emilia with an outstretched hand, and upon receiving her nod, began to narrate their encounter in a resonant voice.

It was a story even Subaru hadn’t heard, and he involuntarily tensed, straining his ears to catch every word.

“First, as I believe you are all aware, let us begin by explaining Lady Emilia’s ooorigins. Her beautiful silver hair, transparent white skin, deep violet eyes that captivate the heart of anyone who sees them, and a bell-like voice that once heard, you will never forget, even in your dreams. These many ‘Witch’ qualities, as you know, are proof that Lady Emilia carries elven blood.”

Subaru could feel many in the hall gasp at Roswaal’s words.

Elf— It was a fact that must have been widely known given Emilia’s treatment, and in a Royal Selection, it was a difference from others that was impossible to hide.

In the previous example of Anastasia, Subaru had used the analogy of a Japanese person not being able to become the American President. He wondered how deep the chasm between the elves and humans truly was compared to that.

"A girl with elven blood…"

"Superhuman witch allure, and an otherworldly aura, there's no mistaking it."

"An elf on the throne is utterly out of the question. That's not even comparable to the Anastasia example. It's not just that she's an elf."

The old men of the Council of Wise Men exchanged glances, speaking in hushed, yet critical tones. Especially the bald old man with a large scar on his forehead—his stance was particularly firm.

"Half human blood—meaning, a half-elf, isn't that right?"

He spat out the words, a vein even throbbing on his forehead, and waved his hand dismissively. It was a crude gesture to push Emilia away, and in fact, he continued,

"Just looking at her makes me sick. A silver-haired demi-human? How can you not realize it's blasphemy to even let such a being into the throne room?"

"Lord Bordeaux, you go too far."

"Do you understand, Lord Miklotov? The silver-haired demi-human is the very spitting image of the 'Witch of Envy' passed down through legends!"

Raising his voice even at the admonishing Miklotov, the old man, called Bordeaux, stood up. He then descended the stairs and strode purposefully to the center, in front of Emilia.

"The ruin that once swallowed half the world and plunged all living beings into desperate chaos. Don't tell me you are unaware of it!"

"…"

"How many do you think will tremble just at your appearance and lineage? You would dare place such a being on the throne? Unthinkable. Other nations and our own people will surely call us insane. Especially since this is the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica—The land where the Witch slumbers!"

Spreading his arms and stomping his foot, Bordeaux ranted in a rough tone and manner. Emilia remained unresponsive to his outburst. But instead, Subaru was nearing his limit.

However, even that…

“Damn it, Reinhard! What is that if not a baseless accusation?! If she herself had done something directly in the past, maybe, but to be treated like this just because she looks similar? Does that mean all bald old men are like that? The bald old men I know are a bit better than him!”

“Subaru, you’re starting to stray from the main topic.”

Reinhard, with quick judgment, restrained Subaru, who was about to shout out in a burst of passion. But Subaru’s anger would not be quelled.

Snorting, he glared at Bordeaux’s profile as if he could kill him with his gaze alone. The old man noticed the hostile stare and looked at the two quarreling, saying,

“I thought the attendants’ row was noisy. If Knight Reinhard is the attendant of another candidate, then that black-haired boy is…”

“Lord Bordeaux, haave you finished?”

Just as Bordeaux’s eyes gleamed dangerously, about to do something to them, Roswaal poured cold water on his judgment.

He stepped forward, maintaining his usual feigned aloofness, and met Bordeaux’s gaze head-on. Despite his age, the old man had a robust physique, almost matching the tall Roswaal in height. As they exchanged glances at close proximity, the old man stared into Roswaal’s odd-colored eyes.

“If you mean have I exhausted my words, then I have still much more to say. Your actions are truly so outrageous, do you understand, Marquis?”

“Oh~, I understand peeerfectly. The meaning of my outrageous actions, Lord Bordeaux’s consideration in representing the opinions of the Council of Wise Men, and even the emotional issues of the citizens who will see Lady Emilia."

Calmly accepting Bordeaux's domineering tone, Roswaal then raised a finger.

"Hooowever, have you forgotten, Lord Bordeaux? The part that Lord Bordeaux is concerned about holds no meaning concerning the Royal Selection."

"…What do you mean?"

"Ironically, Lady Priscilla said it heeerself earlier, didn't she? That once five candidates are gathered, even if it's just for show, the Royal Selection will begin. Once the Royal Selection begins, all that remains is to proceed dutifully according to the Dragon History. Isn't thaaat right?"

Roswaal leaned forward, escaping Bordeaux's gaze, and turned the subject to the Council of Wise Men on the dais. In response, Miklotov closed his narrowed eye.

"Hmm, so you are saying that the crucial point is that Lady Emilia is the one chosen by the Dragon, and whether she actually has the qualifications to ascend to the throne is not the issue?"

"Preeecisely. I want to start and finish the Royal Selection as soon as possible and return the country to its normal state. Otherwise, I won't even have time to enjoy my hobbies, you see."

Roswaal casually dismissed Emilia's chances of ascending the throne. His statement held a greater shock than his earlier outburst, and Subaru could only stare in stunned disbelief rather than anger.

He knew how hard Emilia was working to become queen, and yet her backer was saying such a thing.

Leaving Subaru, who was too dumbfounded to form words, behind, Roswaal playfully waved his raised finger and continued.

"It may be rude to call her a 'decoy,' but peeerhaps you could consider it in that way. Lady Emilia's appearance is, indeed, very distinctive. Theeere are few people who wouldn't associate her with the 'Witch of Envy.' Thaaat, to us, means she can be an incredibly easy-to-use piece on the board."

"Are you suggesting turning the Royal Selection of five candidates into a practical contest between four?"

"Don't you think having fewer options reduces the possibility of division? Especially with the nation's politics unstable due to the absence of a king, and the potential for interference from other countries. In thaaaat case, shouldn't we devise a strategy to reduce the risks?"

Bordeaux looked thoughtful at Roswaal's proposal. The other old men of the Council of Wise Men also expressed "In that case," seeming somewhat inclined to accept the suggestion.

The intention was to select Emilia as a decoy for the other candidates and essentially make the Royal Selection a rigged race to bring it to a swift conclusion.

Comparing the advantages and disadvantages, and judging which way the scales would tip, Bordeaux, who had been the most steadfast in his opposition, nodded, a look of understanding appearing on his stern face.

"Understood, very well. I withdraw my previous opposition. Let's proceed as you recommend—"

"Don't you dare joke around—!!"

An angry shout echoed through the hall. As its reverberations died down, the room fell silent.

The only sound left in the hushed chamber was the ragged breathing of the boy who had shouted.

Under everyone's watchful gaze, the boy—Subaru—his face red with anger, glared at Roswaal and Bordeaux, who had been about to agree to their scheme.

Receiving his gaze, Roswaal closed one eye, looking at Subaru with only his yellow one.

“Oh my~, are you not aware of your surroundings? This is not a situation where someone of your staaanding should be interjecting. Apologize and withdraw.”

“I’ve stated my opinion, you bastard. What comes next is this: you’re the ones who should be apologizing!”

“How increasingly astonishing. —To say you don’t need your life.”

Closing his yellow eye, Roswaal pierced Subaru with only his blue one.

His usual nonchalant demeanor vanished, replaced by an overwhelming intensity that sent shivers down the spine. The air around Roswaal seemed to distort, likely due to the immense amount of mana he possessed.

Facing that overwhelming presence, a great fire flashed through Subaru’s mind as he ground his teeth.

He remembered the scene in the Witchbeast Forest when Roswaal had swung his arm, instantly incinerating the Juggernaut that had given Subaru so much trouble. He’d heard that even entire hordes were annihilated by him with the ease of twisting a baby’s arm.

Considering the precision of his previous mana usage, evaporating Subaru alone from this spot would be even easier.

There should have been a certain level of trust between Subaru and him—but in this situation, he couldn’t and wouldn’t expect any mercy.

It was Roswaal himself who had first betrayed that trust.

“This rudeness, just as things were settling. I’ll give you one more chance if you grovel and beg for forgiveness. What do you saay, Natsuki Subaru?”

Under the surging torrent of hostile intent, Subaru’s knees buckled. A tremor spread to his fingertips, and if he didn’t grit his teeth to hold it in, his teeth would surely clatter.

He felt a shiver run to his very core, wanting to flee this place immediately.

—However,

"I-I said it! It's not me who should apologize, it's you!"

His voice was trembling, and it was high-pitched.

Still, Subaru did not lower his head.

Emilia was here.

Now, her wish was about to be trampled. Facing that, there was no way he could back down.

Who else could stand by her, now that she had been betrayed at this crucial moment? Who could be a bulwark against these people who spoke ill of her just because of her race and appearance?

He had no strength. His will was weak. Still, he had stubbornness.

Some unknown, inexplicable force drove Subaru, preventing his two feet from bending at the knees.

In the face of Subaru's powerless, utterly self-serving stubbornness, Roswaal's odd eyes narrowed slightly.

"Very well. If you have no power, you can accomplish nothing. You would do well to learn that meaning firsthand. I hope you can put it to use in your next life."

The moment the ultimatum was delivered, the overflowing torrent of power materialized into form.

What appeared was a fireball, radiating an aurora that illuminated the entire hall. The fiery mass, born in Roswaal's raised palm, was the size of a human head, but its intense heat, like a miniature sun, lightly scorched even Subaru's skin from a distance.

Before the clear manifestation of malice, Roswaal, now in a battle stance, caused Bordeaux and the relatively close candidates to brace themselves. Bordeaux's stern face contorted in anger, and the candidates moved behind their respective knights.

Emilia, the only one without a knight attending her,

"Wait, Roswaal. That's not how it…"

Her deep violet eyes flickered with confusion and urgency as she looked between Roswaal and Subaru. There was confusion in her gaze towards Roswaal, and in her eyes as she stared at Subaru—

"Emi…"

"I'll show you the highest level of fire mana output. —Al Goa!"

Roswaal uttered coldly, and his palm was directed towards Subaru.

This meant he was about to hurl the fireball in his hand. The fireball slowly but surely bore down on Subaru, threatening to incinerate him.

Seeing it before him, Subaru instantly thought of throwing his body sideways to evade. His body simply wouldn't obey his thoughts. Was it because his legs were trembling, or because fear had paralyzed him?

No, neither.

It wasn't that the intention wasn't reaching his lower body. It was that his will was accelerating too fast for his body to keep up with the transmission speed.

His vision became abnormally slow, and Subaru felt 'death' opening its maw and closing in.

It was a sensation he hadn't felt in a long time, and the possibility of experiencing it at Roswaal's hand was something he had wished to avoid until the very end, even during the second loop at the mansion.

His consciousness left reality behind, unable even to move his eyeballs.

Therefore, the only thing left in Subaru's vision, apart from the fireball rapidly approaching, was Emilia reaching out her hand towards him from the corner of his eye.

Seeing the undeniable urgency in her expression, Subaru felt an out-of-place sense of relief.

His own life was threatened, and the girl he cared for was watching, worried for him. —How abnormal it was to find comfort in that fact was something Subaru had no time to consider.

Consequently,

"If you have no power, you can accomplish nothing. Indeed, those are good words. I completely agree with them myself."

The voice that resonated was familiar, yet it struck Subaru's eardrums gently, having lost its usual comfortable familiarity.

The moment the fireball struck, Subaru forgot to even blink before the incandescent death rushing towards him.

Therefore, Subaru's eyes witnessed everything that happened before him without missing a single detail.

At the moment of impact, the fireball extended its limbs as if to engulf Subaru's body and incinerate him. In an instant, a pale blue light enveloped Subaru's entire body first. It directly competed against the heat capable of instantly evaporating a human body—and as a result, it offset the attack, leaving only white steam in its wake.

That unbelievable, inhuman skill, performed with such ease, hovered directly in front of Subaru, at eye level.

"For mere humans to speak so freely in front of my daughter…"

With arms crossed and a small sniff of his pink nose—the small cat with gray fur, its dark eyes frozen with an unprecedentedly cold emotion, declared.

2

The sudden appearance of that thing struck everyone in the hall speechless.

Floating in mid-air, looking down on its surroundings, was Puck, a palm-sized, kitten-shaped spirit. Anyone familiar with his usual doddering manner, his laid-back way of speaking, and his utterly self-paced personality couldn't hide their surprise at his current appearance.

As Subaru stood there in shock, it was clear that agitation was spreading among those who were seeing Puck for the first time. The problem they saw was entirely different from Subaru's surprise. It was—

"He just negated Marquis Roswaal's magic head-on…?"

"In such a short time, practically without incantation?"

"Before that, what was that condensed mana? Anything visible shouldn't be looked at directly! It'll swallow you whole!"

One of the Royal Knights called out a warning, supporting the shoulder of a dazed colleague. Looking around, similar reactions could be seen among several civil officials, all of them staring at the floating Puck with terror in their eyes.

"—Huh? Wh-What?"

Subaru couldn't understand their reactions. The being in front of him was Puck. A small, gray cat. While the atmosphere around him was certainly different than usual, there was nothing that would cause the knights to ignite with maximum caution. Staring intently, Subaru couldn't find a single element that would cause the physical discomfort they were describing.

Subaru couldn't hide his bewilderment. Ignoring Subaru's confusion, Puck, with an unbelievably arrogant "Hmph" for those who knew him, declared, "It seems you don't understand, Roswaal L. Mathers. My previous concessions to you were solely because my daughter wished for them. Otherwise, I wouldn't have hesitated to sink this entire country into the permafrost."

As he spoke, a sudden wind began to swirl around Puck. It was a wind accompanied by a cold so intense it caused pain to the skin. What had initially surrounded only Puck gradually spread throughout the hall, thoroughly engulfing everyone present in its chill. Naturally, as confusion began to fill the venue,

"—Would you please calm yourself, Great Spirit?"

From the platform, a raspy voice was directed at Puck, the cause of the commotion. The speaker was Miklotov. While no small amount of agitation had spread among the members of the Council of Wise Men, he alone, poised in the central seat without changing his posture, lit his eyes with an intelligent gleam,

"Such power, and the dense mana you possess. I take you for a Great Spirit of considerable renown."

"What? There's a young one here with some manners, after all."

"Hmm. To be called a 'young one' at my age, I must say, this is quite a rare experience."

Miklotov responded with a small laugh to Puck's gesture of raising an eyebrow. Perhaps pleased by the old man's demeanor, Puck nodded, maintaining his arrogant posture.

"As for what kind of being I am, unfortunately, I believe you know more about it than I do. I am merely a spirit who has existed for a long time. It's up to you what you choose to call me."

"Indeed, that makes sense."

Miklotov stroked his beard and nodded at Puck's answer. Then, the old man shifted his gaze toward Roswaal, who had remained silent. Receiving his gaze, Roswaal, who had been quiet since his magic was nullified, shrugged.

“This stems from my first meeting with Lady Emilia. I encountered her far to the east of the Royal Capital of Lugunica— In Elior Forest. Commonly known as the ‘Forest of Ice’.”

“Elior Forest…!”

Roswaal’s mention of the place name was met with a chorus of exclamations. Roswaal nodded, as if their surprise was exactly what he had expected.

“Thaaat’s right, Elior Forest. About a hundred years ago, it was suddenly covered in ice, a freezing barrier said to reject all who entered or tried to leave and, the encroaching permafrost.”

“Indeed, wasn’t it a cursed land where the freezing winds gradually froze its surroundings over time, expanding its frozen territory year by year?”

“Frozen land, plants, atmosphere, living beings— That means, it’s a white end. Everything is invited to eternity, and will neveer return from that eternal sleep.”

Clapping his hands, Roswaal indicated Emilia and Puck with an open palm.

“It was in the depths of that icy forest where those two were quietly living.”

“So the permafrost of Elior Forest is…”

“My doing, you mean. Though, I was merely making it more comfortable to live in.”

Puck replied nonchalantly to Miklotov, who couldn’t hide his astonishment. To Subaru, who had little connection to the aforementioned land, it was a hard story to imagine, but judging by the reactions of those around him, it was undoubtedly a significant matter. Subaru’s earlier outburst was already long forgotten.

At Puck’s answer, Miklotov gave a small, troubled groan.

“Hmm. Such power, enough to put Elior Forest in that state— Its might is comparable to any spirit mentioned in fairy tales.”

“It’s just that terrifying, isn’t it?”

Though Miklotov had offered words akin to praise, Puck seemed to have anticipated his true feelings, putting them into words. Miklotov closed his eyes. Then, with a look of understanding in his narrowed eyes, he looked down at Roswaal.

“Hmm, I see. I’ve more or less understood. What was the reason for your contact with these two, who were living deep within Elior Forest?”

“It was part of an investigation, you seeee. Elior Forest was quite close to my territory, so it risked being affected by the permafrost within a few years. I wanted to conduct a preliminary investigation before that happened.”

Roswaal held up two fingers, a wry smile on his face, indicating that he had failed twice. Then, his expression tightened.

“On my third attempt, I managed to get through the forest, and that’s where I met them. At first, I was attacked without question… Ah~, I was so flustered, so flustered.”

“It had been a long time since anyone had made it through the forest. Perhaps my welcome was a bit too enthusiastic.”

They recalled the time with an easygoing air, but no one else in the hall found it amusing. This could only mean that a battle of similar intensity to the magical confrontation they had just witnessed, one that could be laughed off as child’s play, had taken place between the two of them back then.

“I was hooorrified by the welcome that almost changed the terrain, but what horrified me even more was what happened afterward. The transcendent spirit, who had attacked me mercilessly, laid down its arms just by listening to a single girl’s words.”

Casually dropping the bombshell about the terrain nearly changing, Roswaal, with a solemn expression, pointed towards Emilia. She remained silent, her face slightly downcast, her amethyst eyes unfocused and elusive, making it unclear whether she was listening to Roswaal's words or not.

Subaru felt a faint sense of unease at her demeanor, but there was no time to pursue it. As if taking over from Roswaal's words, Puck turned his body around.

"It's the plea of my adorable contractor daughter. I'd grant it over anything else. Conversely, I obey only Lia, other than my own will."

Puck finished, then added, "That's why," as he surveyed the hall. Among the people shrinking as if transfixed by his black gaze, Puck's eyes finally settled on Bordeaux. Puck formed a grin that suited such an onomatopoeia.

"You disagreeable lot should be grateful to Lia that you aren't currently frozen solid. If this child hadn't stopped me just now, this place would be a hall of ice sculptures."

His calm words were accompanied by a chilling cold, sending shivers down the spines of everyone in the hall. The fact that his words were not empty threats had already been proven by his exchange with Roswaal. The truth that everyone present was at the mercy of a single spirit—the sound of someone swallowing echoed loudly.

It was precisely in that atmosphere that—

"—Hohoho."

Miklotov's small laugh seemed utterly out of place. Puck cast a calm gaze upon the laughing man, focusing his chilling stare on the old body. However, Miklotov met his gaze head-on.

"Indeed, it sends shivers down my spine. —I must say, for Roswaal, that was an interesting conceit."

Despite receiving a gaze of absolute zero, Miklotov's composed demeanor remained unshaken. On top of that, his statement made no sense, but upon hearing it, Roswaal's expression suddenly changed. From his earlier serious face, he reverted to his usual doddering look.

"Oh my~, I've been fooound out?"

"I'd say it was a reasonably well-crafted script. The Great Spirit's acting was beyond words, but perhaps, milord, you got a bit carried away."

Leaving the confused onlookers behind, Roswaal slapped his forehead at Miklotov's assessment. Watching their exchange, the floating Puck fiddled with his long, raised tail.

"See, Roswaal? I told you going overboard isn't good. Never mind me, but in your case, everyone knows your usual persona, so you need to act better."

"That really hits home. It huurts! I was so cooonfident, but now I'm in so much pain, gosh."

Roswaal puffed out his cheeks, expressing dissatisfaction. Puck dispersed it with a sigh, and Miklotov, looking tired, closed his eyes in silent acknowledgment. The understanding posture of these three was interrupted by the bald old man who had received Puck's chilling gaze last—Bordeaux. He etched clear confusion into his stern face with wrinkles.

"W-Wait, Lord Miklotov. What exactly are you talking about?"

"Hmm, to put it simply— This is the form of the Lady Emilia faction's speech. Though it differs greatly from the previous candidates'."

Miklotov winked, seeking Roswaal's agreement, and Roswaal raised both hands in surrender, dragging out a drawn-out "Yeees" to confirm. Bordeaux seemed unable to grasp the answer immediately, but Subaru, listening nearby, finally understood. At the same time, a genuine fury churned in his stomach at the maliciousness of the long-haired, indigo-clad figure standing before him.

In other words, with this exchange, Roswaal was—

"Marquis Roswaal, the kingdom's foremost magician. As well as a Great Spirit with power equal to or surpassing his. By showing everyone present that Lady Emilia commands such a spirit, he has demonstrated that she possesses considerable strength. —If I'm to summarize the plot, this is more or less correct, isn't it?"

As Miklotov explained everything patiently and thoroughly, a sense of understanding finally spread throughout the hall. Once everyone understood that the previous exchange was a kind of act, what followed was not admiration for Roswaal's scheme, but rather a strong sense of anger at his manipulation of people's hearts. Indeed, a similar emotion burned hotly within Subaru.

"That was an act… an act?! This whole scene was a fabricated farce! Roswaal, what do you think this place is?!"

Bordeaux, who had been most publicly shamed in the hall, turned particularly red with rage. The old man's forehead pulsed with veins, and his face was crimson as he lunged at Roswaal, looking as if he might spit. However, his momentum was halted by Puck, who appeared directly in front of Bordeaux's face. Bordeaux immediately shut his mouth when he saw the furball before him and realized it was the source of the earlier chill, opening and closing his mouth silently as if struggling to find words.

Puck looked down at Bordeaux's reaction and chuckled pleasantly.

"Yes, yes, it's only natural to be angry. I apologize, I truly do. Forgive me, I'm sorry, it was my fault. —However, everything I said earlier was true."

Though he spoke words of apology, Puck's added remark made Bordeaux's heart pound. The kitten floated higher, spinning sideways.

"That great forest is my garden, and it's true that Roswaal is too much for me to handle. The reason I'm doing nothing and simply existing is because of Lia's request, and the reason I'm not doing anything to you who speak ill of Lia is thanks to her kindness."

He carefully chose his words, as if explaining something important, and then, finally, Puck smiled sweetly. He prefaced his next words with "I want you to understand," and then,

"—The only reason you're not frozen solid right now is Emilia's compassion. Don't forget that."

With that, Puck's form suddenly lost its outline and vanished into particles of light. The green, shimmering particles drifted through the air, slowly moving towards Emilia. They headed directly for her embrace and disappeared from sight in an instant. Presumably, Puck had returned to his vessel, the green crystal stone, which was nestled within Emilia's embrace.

The moment Puck returned, Emilia's head subtly swayed, and then light returned to her eyes. The reason for her earlier unfocused gaze seemed to have been the influence of Puck's manifestation. She blinked several times, her gaze sweeping around as if to confirm her surroundings.

"Roswaal, what's the situation?"

"Generally, it's favorable. To be honest, it would have been ideal to stretch out the Great Spirit's presence until the very end, but… it seeeems it was difficult to deceive Lord Miklotov completely after all."

In response to Roswaal's answer, Emilia simply replied with a small "I see." Her gaze swept across the hall, catching Subaru, who was standing directly behind her. The amethyst light in her eyes looked at Subaru, stirring some fleeting emotion within her. Subaru instinctively began to form words, but captivated by her gaze and unsure what to say, he ultimately missed the opportunity to speak.

Subaru was left behind. Emilia then stepped forward, turning to face the Council of Wise Men.

"First, I apologize for the discourtesy of deceiving you all, members of the Council of Wise Men."

"No, no, it was our oversight for not seeing through it. This old man merely acted with reckless bravery and benefited from the Great Spirit's compassion. Besides, this concerns the Royal Selection… One must use all available means to make one's case."

Miklotov nodded, showing his magnanimity in response to Emilia's bowing apology. Emilia's lips relaxed slightly, showing a degree of relief at his answer, but another old man, who had been experiencing nothing but unpleasantness so far, interrupted.

"Available means…? If the culmination of that is this current threat, then there's no other way to describe it than as characteristic of a half-devil."

"Threat? That's quite a harsh accuuusation. I was merely demonstrating the extent of my capabilities, was I not?"

"What else could it be but a show of force? Did you not hear the spirit's words earlier? The spirit said, 'If you do not comply, I will freeze you solid.' What is the difference between that statement, made in a place where the nation's key figures are gathered, and a usurper's threat to seize the country?"

Roswaal's retort, intended to admonish, was met with Bordeaux's snorting, speculative words. However, in the end, there was some truth to Bordeaux's statement that could not be entirely denied. They had achieved their goal of demonstrating power. But, conversely, it had also revealed to others that military force could be used as a card.

This was information that could become a disadvantageous starting point for Emilia, who was attempting to enter the Royal Selection, far more so than being judged as powerless or harmless.

In this disadvantageous situation, Emilia looked up at Bordeaux, who had returned to the platform, and opened her mouth.

"—Yes, I am threatening you all."

She clearly, directly, and even reversed the negative insinuation aimed at her. Bordeaux gasped, unable to utter another word. Still looking up at the old man, Emilia's gaze did not waver in the slightest.

"Allow me to reintroduce myself to the esteemed members of the Council of Wise Men. My name is Emilia. A silver-haired half-elf who has spent a long time in the permafrost world of Elior Forest, and who commands Puck, the Great Spirit of fire mana. The people of the villages near the forest call me this when they see me.”

Emilia’s voice, clear and resonant, flowed like a song. Standing alone on the stage before her captivated audience, she paused, then closed her eyes for a few seconds as if cutting something off.

“The ‘Witch of Glaciation’ who lives in the frozen forest.”

The moment the word ‘witch’ was uttered, the atmosphere in the hall instantly shifted. Everyone had been aware of her appearance in connection with it, yet they had deliberately avoided pursuing it —the very characteristics of the world’s greatest disaster.

No one could answer her. Not Bordeaux, who had only been spouting bravado, nor the other esteemed members of the Council of Wise Men. Only Miklotov, whose very make-up of courage was clearly different, was an exception.

“To display power and state demands. Truly the way of a witch. —So, what does this Witch of Glaciation intend to threaten us with?”

“My demand is but one. —Simply, to be treated fairly.”

“…Fairly.”

Miklotov repeated the demand under his breath to Emilia, who responded quietly. Emilia nodded, indicating understanding of his murmur with a “Yes.”

“That I am a half-elf, that my appearance shares traits with the abominable witch, all of it cannot be changed. The same goes for being prejudiced against by everyone simply because of that. However I firmly refuse to have all possibilities for me stifled because of it.”

“So, Lady Emilia. You wish to be treated as an equal candidate in this Royal Selection?”

“Being treated fairly is something incredibly precious in my life. To demand more than that in this place would be an insult to the fairness I hold so dear.”

How many memories of malice must she have endured throughout her life? Being unfairly cursed like Bordeaux, being persecuted simply for being a half-elf—it must have happened countless times. That is why, in this moment, she yearned for nothing but to be treated with fairness.

She turned. Her silver hair flowed with the movement, and a shimmer like a pale moon swept through the hall. As everyone was captivated by her radiance, Emilia raised her voice.

“Therefore, the only thing I ask of you is to treat me fairly. I will absolutely not commit an act lacking fairness, such as using my contracted spirit as a shield to seize the throne.”

Emilia could choose that option, if she wanted to. But she had dismissed such an option from the outset, deliberately choosing a situation that might be disadvantageous to her intended goal. Because—

“Compared to the other candidates, I am still an immature being, lacking in many areas. There’s so much I don’t know, and a mountain of things I need to learn. Even so, because I know the peak I must aim for, I have no intention of neglecting my efforts.”

Subaru had seen her diligently studying at the mansion, earnestly tackling everything. That’s why, in this place, Subaru alone knew the truth of her words better than anyone.

He couldn’t hide his trembling. Subaru was aware of the strange situation where he was thirsty but his eyes were watering, and he desperately tried to suppress his pathetic whimpers.

“I don’t know if my efforts will be enough for the throne. However my desire to keep striving to be worthy is genuine. That feeling, I won’t lose to any other candidate.”

“That’s why,” she continued, looking directly up at Bordeaux on the platform,

“Please, look at me with fair eyes. Just Emilia, without a family name. Not the ‘Witch of Glaciation’, nor the silver-haired half-elf. Just look at me.”

Her final murmur carried a hint of entreaty. However, the strength of will and feeling contained within it was unwavering.

Emilia was asking for what was naturally given to other candidates. To stand at the same starting line, to be given the opportunity to run from there.

For a while, silence enveloped the hall. It wasn’t that they couldn’t find words. Everyone was stiffly waiting for an answer to Emilia’s plea. Finally, Bordeaux, who had been the focus of everyone’s attention, let out a long, long sigh.

“My opinion will not change. There is no doubt that your appearance, reminiscent of the ‘Witch of Envy’ will have a negative impact on the populace. Your disadvantageous position regarding the Royal Selection remains the same.”

In a low voice, he directly contradicted Emilia’s previous assertions. At his answer, Emilia’s amethyst eyes clouded slightly.

“But—”

Then,

“Interfering with people’s hearts is a domain no one is permitted to enter. Therefore, I cannot do anything about how you are perceived. Nevertheless, I apologize for my earlier discourtesy. —No, I sincerely apologize, Lady Emilia.”

Bordeaux rose from his seat, knelt on the spot, and performed the deepest bow as a sign of respect. Surprise rippled through the hall at his actions. Amidst it, he raised his head.

“You had the power to freeze me solid if I didn’t comply. Yet, you chose not to, and instead asked for fairness. —That is a noble act.”

His calm expression as he spoke was intelligent, and only now did Subaru truly grasp that this old man was indeed a respected elder of the Council of Wise Men. The shadow lifted from Emilia’s face, and the joy of being acknowledged naturally brightened her expression. Her lips curved into an arc, creating a smile like a blooming flower.

Subaru, who could only witness this from an angle, saw Bordeaux, who was facing the smile head-on, gasp, and inwardly he raised his middle finger, muttering, “Goddamn stubborn old man!” Though his silent curse probably didn’t reach Bordeaux, the old man cleared his throat, as if to cover his momentary stiffness.

“I-In any case, achieving true fairness will be difficult. It’s clear that a path of hardship lies ahead. Do you still desire the throne?”

“I’ve known since the beginning that it wouldn’t be an easy road. Even so, I will definitely sit on the throne. That is because there’s a reason I have to.”

Emilia responded to Bordeaux’s question about her resolve with a voice that no longer held any hesitation. Hearing her answer, Bordeaux nodded with satisfaction, returned to his seat, and extended his palm towards Miklotov, as if entrusting everything to him. Receiving this, Miklotov combed his long beard, nodding repeatedly.

“It turned out to be a bit eventful, but I believe that’s enough. Lady Emilia and Marquis Roswaal, you have nothing more to add, do you?”

“No.”

“Weeell, I actually have much more to say, but in this case…”

“Then, thank you very much.”

Emilia replied concisely. Meanwhile, Marcos, with impeccable timing, interrupted Roswaal, who was still rambling, and brought it to a forceful end. Emilia lightly patted the tall man’s back, who was pouting in dissatisfaction, and they both began to return to the candidates’ line. However, the matter was not yet settled.

“Pray tell, what of that gentleman there?”

Just as Emilia and the others were about to step back into line, the question was posed by Miklotov. The old man raised one eyebrow, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, directing his gaze towards that gentleman—in other words, towards Subaru, who had stepped forward and was now looking lost.

“Ugghh.”

One could hardly blame him for letting out such a groan. After all, Subaru had been nothing more than a spectator, driven by emotion to rush forward, only to then bumble on stage, unable to keep up with the subsequent exchange. He had secretly interjected with “Oh!” and “Ah!” and “EMT!” at various points, but in terms of affecting the overall situation, he was as good as air.

His hope had been to simply drift away with the atmosphere and disappear from sight, yet he had been caught by the old man’s curiosity and once again found himself in the spotlight. And apparently,

“It would be a shame to let things proceed exactly as Marquis Roswaal intended.”

He must have intended to mutter that, but for some reason, Subaru clearly heard Miklotov’s soft remark. In other words, the payback for the earlier charade had, in a roundabout way, come to Subaru. It was a complete misfortune, but thinking of it as a consequence of his own shortsightedness, he felt incredibly guilty.

“Ah, well, this child is, um, my…”

Turning around, Emilia stepped in front of him, trying to hide Subaru from the Wise Men’s view with gestures. Flustered, her dignified demeanor from moments ago had vanished, replaced by the familiar girl Subaru knew from everyday life—Emilia.

A strange, indescribable sense of relief washed over Subaru at this, and his cheeks relaxed at an ill-timed moment. And, precisely at such a time, Emilia happened to glance at Subaru’s face.

“No, that’s not it. Uh, this person is… hey, why are you grinning? This isn’t the time, conduct yourself.”

"Conduct myself? No one says that anymore…"

As Subaru caught the end of Emilia's reprimand, she cast a displeased look his way. Even that accusing gaze was captivating, and Subaru let out a small smile, touching her shoulder.

"It's okay, Emilia-tan. —I won't make excuses either."

"Excuses? This isn't the time for that… Subaru, what are you doing? Hey, wait!"

Ignoring her calls from behind him, Subaru strode purposefully forward. He confidently stepped onto the spot where the candidates had stood, receiving the full attention of the Council of Wise Men on the platform. He clenched his teeth, gathered his resolve, and raised his head.

"Greetings, esteemed members of the Council of Wise Men, how do you do? I deeply apologize for causing such a great inconvenience this time!"

He bowed deeply, right hand behind his back, left palm facing forward, performing a traditional formal bow. It was an otherworldly adaptation of the ancient Japanese etiquette known as "Ohikae nasutte." After a moment of silence to confirm that no one was interjecting, Subaru became confident that first contact had been made. He then moved his limbs in a fluid motion.

He widened his stance, tilted his waist, placed his left hand on his tilted hip, and raised his right hand high, pointing to the ceiling, striking a magnificent pose. And then,

"My name is Natsuki Subaru! A lowly servant of the Roswaal Mansion, and the First Knight to the Royal Candidate standing here — Lady Emilia!"

He shouted, then lowered his raised right hand, snapped his fingers, and winked with a flashy grin.

"Please, allow me to make your acquaintance, and treat me favorably."

To make his position clear, Subaru's unexpected participation began. He felt the air rapidly grow colder than it had been during Puck's earlier appearance.

Chapter 20:
Natsuki Subaru, the Self-Declared Knight

1

It was supposed to be my ultimate cool pose, but ever since I came to this world, I can’t really remember it ever achieving its purpose as a ‘cool pose.’

As far as I can recall, there was that one time I got Emilia’s name, and another time with Rem when I said something so good it makes me blush just thinking about it.

Well, I guess it’s good that it works when it truly matters.

I silently conceded that point, but then I reflected that my expression probably wasn’t appropriate for the time, place, and occasion.

Frozen in a stiff smile, Subaru, in the silent hall, nevertheless pressed on with his outrageous behavior.

Once I started something, there was no backing down. Waiting for the other person’s reaction and then planning a follow-up was the least I could do as an entertainer. Even though I’m not an entertainer.

Subaru’s utterly pointless decision, which benefited no one, was—

“Barcelona?!”

A sharp, hard impact struck the back of my head, cutting me off with a cry of pain.

Stars exploded before my eyes, a forceful blow that instantly buckled my knees. A heavy, solid thud sounded right beside me, and my brain immediately concluded I’d been hit.

Then, forgetting the pain in my anger, Subaru spun around, tears in his eyes, practically flying.

"You, who the hell are you?! Do you know who you're messing with? I'm Emilia-tan's number one knight, under Roswaal's care, and tight with Reinhard!"

"Completely reliant on others—?!"

Subaru spat furiously. Someone interjected, pointing out how utterly dependent his words were, but even that didn't reach his ears right now.

Much of his outburst was also an attempt to disguise how he'd stumbled, seizing on the sudden change in the unyielding situation. But he wasn't without anger at having his declaration of resolve so rudely interrupted.

It was Subaru's own attempt to muster courage.

His method of summoning it might have been a bit outlandish, and the subsequent reactions from those around him were far from what he'd expected, leaving him feeling somewhat disheartened. Still, there was no doubt it was an outpouring of resolve, making him want to praise himself.

The person who poured cold water on Subaru's spirited declaration was—

"Then I'm supposed to do a Dempsey Roll-like combination after a Shamak, like Emilia-tan?!"

Subaru stomped his foot quite emphatically, interjecting as he spotted the silver-haired girl facing him with an outstretched palm.

Looking down, what had fallen right beside Subaru was a chunk of ice, about the size of a hug. It was a miracle his head hadn't split open from its size; after serving its purpose, it dissipated into the air.

Witnessing that, Subaru couldn't hide his shock at the unexpected betrayal. However, the agitation in Emilia's eyes, as she looked at Subaru, was far more intense than his own.

Waving her hands frantically at Subaru, she stammered, "N-No, it's not that! I just… I thought I had to quiet you down, and I just… instinctively…"

"The idea of hitting me hard on the back of the head is dangerous! You're like a heroine from an old manga! Though Emilia-tan is my eternal heroine!"

"H-Heroin…? Oh, honestly, there's no time to be saying things like that! Apologize immediately! I'll apologize with you!"

"You're acting like my mom!"

Subaru thought that apologizing with a parent, despite having done something wrong, showed cowardice, not sincerity. He truly felt that tickling maternal instincts and being treated entirely from a guardian's perspective were similar yet vastly different. With that realization, Subaru firmly refused such a shameful act.

In a hall filled with national dignitaries, the two continued their usual banter.

Most of the audience, watching them, couldn't hide their dumbfounded, open-mouthed astonishment. On the other hand,

"He screwed up—!!"

"Ah-hah-hah-hah! Behold, Al! A fool, there's a fool at his finest!"

The most arrogant and insolent master and subordinate pointed at Subaru; one buried his face in his hands, the other clutched his stomach, bursting into roaring laughter.

"Based on the actual magic cast, the incantation to activation was quite fast. She truly is highly capable as well."

"Oh, my, Lady Crusch, you have such an amazing eye, so manly…!"

Another master and subordinate, whose personalities were inverted in terms of gender, also reacted. One praised Emilia's aptitude as a magic-user, while the other was too consumed by their master's thoughts to care about that.

"Ah, looks like that that guy really is insane, though I already knew that."

"So it seems. Subaru, you are Lady Emilia's…"

Even the two who had yet to form a proper master-subordinate relationship reacted. One succinctly described Subaru's actions with a rather rude remark, while the other, for some reason, bore an understanding look in their eyes, appearing convinced.

Then,

"Well, I thought there was just some strangely dressed kid mixed in, but he's with that witch girl, isn't he? …Huh, Julius, what's wrong?"

"No, it's just a little… yes, something has caught my attention."

In response to the distinctively speaking master, the finest knight quietly closed his eyes, an enigmatic expression on his face. He remained silent, choosing only silence as he waited for the right moment.

Seeing how each of the candidates absorbed the unsettling atmosphere without faltering, it was clear they all possessed nerves quite unlike ordinary people.

Subaru and Emilia's argument ultimately highlighted the difference in mental fortitude between the candidates and everyone else.

Of course, the individuals themselves weren't aware of this, and oblivious to the reactions around them, they continued their usual bickering:

"See, Subaru, you always try to smooth things over with words I don't understand. Just because I'm a little naive doesn't mean I'll always fall for your tricks!"

"Tricks?! That sounds super rude! My heart is always true, heading straight for your route and always together with you!"

"Ah, Lady Emilia, and Subaru-kuuuun."

Emilia crossed her arms and looked away, while Subaru stomped his feet, trying to get through to her. Seeing their verbal sparring momentarily halt, Roswaal's drawn-out call interrupted them.

As they both responded to his voice with just a glance, he silently gestured, as if surveying the entire hall.

"Ah."

"Ugh."

Only then did they finally realize the hall's atmosphere had devolved into utter chaos.

For Subaru, who was sensitive to the atmosphere when he failed to read the room, the current situation was a familiar predicament, akin to a "oops, I did it again, tee-hee" moment. However, Emilia, pale with fright, was far more upset.

Even paler than usual, she immediately looked up at the dais, and as she turned, she grabbed Subaru's ear, making him face the same direction, and bowed deeply.

"We sincerely apologize for causing such a commotion."

"Ow, ow, ow! It hurts! My ear's gonna fall off! Fall off, when, if it falls, when it can fall, it will fall, fall fall fall fall—!!"

Emilia kept her head bowed with Subaru's ear still in her grasp, pulling him down into a bowing position as well.

Subaru, reduced to near tears twice in a short period, struggled free from her grip. He then frantically rubbed his throbbing ear, complaining,

"Careful! Ears are one of those vital spots that can't be trained, so you have to treat them more gently! It'll be too late after they fall off, you know!"

"Being in this situation means you weren't listening to what was being said, right? If you're going to be useless, it'd be much better if it just fell off!"

“You’re harsh when you’re flustered! Just so you know, I’m confident I’d get a double-A rating for my eyes, ears, nose, throat, and all my other sensory functions!”

It was just that his brain and personality didn’t quite work towards utilizing them to their full potential.

Emilia, perhaps judging Subaru’s statement, based on his former world’s health check-up, as his usual nonsense, didn’t press the issue further and continued to apologize to the Council of Wise Men.

She closed her eyes once, then composed herself with a serious expression and looked up at the elders.

“Anyway, please forget what he just said. This boy… he’s an acquaintance of mine, and an attendant of Marquis Roswaal, but what he just said…”

“Wait, wait, wait! I said I’m not okay with you trying to pretend it never happened!”

However, just as Emilia tried to sum things up, Subaru interrupted her again.

She glared at Subaru with eyes that were truly losing their composure—though “pleading” would be a more accurate description of her gaze, as the emotion of entreaty was too strong to be a mere glare.

“Please, just be quiet. I know you’re embarrassed and can’t back down, so please, at least for now, just be still…”

“I’m not saying something I don’t mean out of desperation, and besides, I don’t have the guts to spout nonsense I don’t believe in a situation like this!”

Subaru loudly insisted to Emilia, who refused to believe any of his earlier declarations. Even Emilia, usually so steadfast, couldn’t maintain her rigid posture in the face of Subaru’s attitude.

Perhaps seeing a pause in the conversation due to Emilia’s silence, Miklotov, who had maintained his silence on the dais until then, cleared his throat lightly.

“It seems that gentleman’s will is quite firm. Hmm, what is Marquis Roswaal’s opinion on this matter?”

While stroking his beard in response to their exchange, he directed his attention toward Roswaal. Roswaal, in turn, smiled suspiciously and drawled, “Weeell, now…”

“Each of the Royal Candidates has a trusted knight by their side. Within that context, it had concerned me that Lady Emilia alooone lacked such a figure. After all, it would be a tad awkward for me to hold that position, wouldn’t it?”

“Right, right, you got it, you got it!”

“Roswaal!”

Subaru clenched his fist and cheered “MOTTO MOTTO!” at Roswaal’s ponderous words, while Emilia, in contrast, shot him a reprimanding glare.

Hearing this, Roswaal prefaced with a drawn-out “Howeverrr…”

“That isn’t to say just anyone will do. If one is to call themselves a knight, especially the First Knight of someone who may one day become Queen, they must demonstrate something fitting.”

“Exactly, exactly.”

“Roswaal!”

This time, Emilia agreed with Roswaal’s opinion, while Subaru grumbled his displeasure, calling out his name.

Watching their diametrically opposed reactions with a pleased smile, Roswaal turned to the esteemed members of the Council of Wise Men.

“The qualifications of a First Knight—loyalty to their liege, or the strength to protect their lord’s person. Something that clears the path for their lord, who strives to become Queen. Withooout such qualities…”

“—That alone is not enough, Marquis Roswaal.”

A voice interrupted Roswaal, who had been speaking in a resonant tone about what he intended to have Subaru do. Roswaal closed one eye, turning with only his golden gaze. Standing where his golden gaze landed was a purple-haired young man—Julius.

During Subaru and Emilia’s earlier exchange, he was the only one who had lowered his gaze thoughtfully. Now, he stepped forward, bowed gracefully, and said,

“Forgive my interruption. However, there is something I absolutely must ask of him.”

“Him,” Julius indicated with an open palm, was, of course, none other than Subaru.

Subaru, being the one singled out, scowled at the interruption and prepared to meet the elegant young man’s demeanor. From the start, Subaru had not held a good impression of him. Even in the Royal Selection, that impression hadn’t improved; to put it bluntly, he disliked him.

Julius, who Subaru couldn’t shake the impression of being a snobbish, typically annoying nobleman, received the negative change in Subaru’s expression as if it were a gentle breeze.

“There’s no need to be so wary. There’s only one thing I wish to ask, and once that’s done, you may do what you must.”

His words seemed to consider Subaru’s feelings, but the expression on his face as he spoke was intensely serious, and naturally, Subaru’s own expression tightened, not to be outdone.

“What’s wrong? You’re making a really strange face. It’s rude to make that kind of face when someone else is being serious.”

“I’ve just been severely wounded—!”

Subaru nearly collapsed on the spot, inadvertently hurt by the innocent remark. Without commenting on Subaru's reaction, Julius continued,

"Clownish theatrics are out of place here. That is, if you truly claim to be Lady Emilia's knight."

"…What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means exactly what it says."

Closing one eye, Julius surveyed Subaru's body from head to toe. Subaru moved his hands to cover his private parts from that gaze, but most people wouldn't understand the meaning. Only Al, who shook his head as if he couldn't bear to watch the crouching figure, would get it.

While he wanted to say something about his countryman's behavior, more than that, he was concerned about the man in front of him.

"Sorry, I'm not good at reading between the lines. Back home, I got an 'E' on the 'Reading the Room' exam. So, please, tell me clearly, break it down for me."

Subaru responded rudely to Julius, picking at his ear. Julius didn't comment on Subaru's impoliteness, simply touching his bangs with that irritatingly elegant gesture of his.

"Do you understand, sir? You have just now declared yourself a knight. —Here, of all places, where the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica are all assembled."

Spreading his hands, Julius spoke, representing the assembled knights behind him.

At Julius's words, the aligned knights simultaneously straightened their postures, stomping their feet in perfect unison, raising their swords, and saluting.

Overwhelmed by their presence, Subaru instinctively leaned back, muttering defensively, “Tch… I wouldn’t have thought they were the same guys who were scared of Emilia-tan’s walking earlier.”

“You speak too freely, sir. A knight’s attention to minor details comes from understanding the dignity and meaning of what they must protect. Do you have the resolve to do that?”

Subaru had nearly offended the knights’ dignity with his defensive remark, but Julius, with exquisite tact, skillfully reframed it into a noble sentiment.

It was frustrating to be put on the spot like this, but more than that, his question was profound.

Subaru, who had declared himself a knight in front of other knights.

With the dignity of the Royal Guard behind him, Julius was now, with that backing, questioning the true meaning and resolve behind Subaru’s claim to that title.

In short, Subaru was now being tested.

—Yes, the depth of his feelings for Emilia!

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Oh, just reaffirming my feelings, and getting a burst of resolve so my knees don’t shake.”

Emilia, who wrinkled her brows as if she didn’t understand, still couldn’t hide her worried demeanor as she watched Subaru confront Julius.

To reassure her, Subaru thumped his chest, then coughed lightly before turning back to Julius, who had posed the question.

“Cough, cough, so you’re saying… hack. My resol—cough, my resolve…”

“Take your time. Unfortunately, we don’t have any water here.”

Julius, instead of being exasperated, gave Subaru a reprieve, who was unexpectedly suffering from bronchial distress. Subaru gratefully accepted the offer, rubbing his throat and buying time to simulate his response in his mind.

Given that Subaru was now publicly known as Emilia's acquaintance, everything from this point on, whether it raised or lowered her standing, depended entirely on his actions.

He already had a sense that his earlier outburst of emotion had slightly reduced her evaluation, so he had to be even more careful in turning things around now.

Emilia, of all people, had gone so far as to put on a performance by asserting herself and expressing her opinion, which was quite unlike her.

Subaru, of all people, couldn't possibly hinder her efforts.

Only Subaru, who simply wished to remain the best for her.

"Right," Subaru cleared his throat, hardening his resolve and ending his stalling. He slapped both cheeks to pump himself up, then, still a bit dizzy from the force, turned back to Julius.

Julius, awaiting his move, stood composed. Despite no wind in the room, he adjusted his impeccably neat hair.

In contrast to that elegant demeanor, Subaru took a small hop, widened his stance, snapped his fingers, and aimed finger-pistols at his opponent.

"Alright, I'll give you a crisp, precise, and accurate answer. Oh, and I apologize for the wait, my apologies."

Julius momentarily furrowed his brow at Subaru, who started with a burst of energy only to immediately lose steam. Perhaps fearing he'd be drawn into Subaru's pace, he closed his eyes and shook his head.

"No, it's fine. Then, let us resume our question and answer. I will ask, and you will answer. —Are you fit to be a knight? Do you have the right to claim that title before us?"

The question was a rehash of the previous one—no, the knights behind him, too, were now more eager for an answer, having waited.

Feeling an illusion of a tempestuous storm from the increased pressure, Subaru moistened his drying lips with his tongue.

“I’m well aware of my lack of ability. I can barely swing a sword, and my magic is less than beginner level. I’m not some financial wizard, and I have no hidden, mysterious powers. If you apply Roswaal’s conditions from earlier, I’m nowhere near good enough, am I?”

Lack of skill, lack of many things—he was fully aware of it all.

Throwing a tantrum wouldn’t change reality. Natsuki Subaru was, tragically, a perfectly ordinary human, with no distinguishing features other than being from another world.

He knew full well that all the abilities he had cultivated throughout his life would be of no use whatsoever in lighting Emilia’s path.

Receiving that answer, Julius showed a hint of bewilderment in his refined expression.

Naturally. For the person who had boldly stepped forward and made such a declaration to then loudly proclaim their own incompetence and offer what seemed like an easy surrender to a clear challenge—it was understandable.

Disappointment, or perhaps simple disillusionment, welled up in his eyes.

But,

“You mentioned loyalty and fealty, didn’t you? Yes, my abilities are completely lacking, it’s laughable. But even so…”

He turned, looking at Emilia standing behind him.

How did she feel, watching him with such concern? She just pressed her lips together, her expression looking angry, or perhaps on the verge of tears, silently waiting for Subaru's next words.

Drawing courage from her presence, Subaru turned back to Julius. And then,

"I'm not sure if 'loyalty' is the right word, but I want Emilia-tan… Lady Emilia to become Queen. No, I will make her Queen. No one else, just with my own hands."

"…Don't you think that's a rather arrogant answer?"

At Subaru's words, Julius sighed as if he'd heard a fairy tale.

"You lament your lack of skill and acknowledge your inadequacy in all respects. In this very hall, you were not even given the right to speak in the first place. Yet, you, of all people, presume to touch the very core of a national affair? —Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?"

"Do you understand?" Julius raised a finger, continuing as if to impress upon the silent Subaru.

"People are born with their station. You could also call it a vessel. One cannot gain anything by exceeding their own vessel. Nor should one even seek to. The honor of 'knight,' which you so carelessly uttered, is also just that."

Julius unfastened the knight's sword from his hip and struck the tip of the scabbard against the floor, making a sound. A hard, sharp clang echoed through the hall, and a split second later, the knightly order behind him also struck the same sound. The overlapping thuds reinforced Julius's actions, and with the cooperation of the knights, he continued,

"What is required of a knight is loyalty to their liege and kingdom. As well as the strength to protect what they hold dear. These are indispensable. Neither can ever be lacking for one to call themselves a knight. However I believe there is something else vital."

"…"

In response to Julius's questioning words, Subaru remained silent.

He probably wasn't seeking an answer either. He likely just wanted to express what was on his mind. In fact, he shook his head faster than Subaru could respond, and spoke his next point.

"What I believe is indispensable for a knight— That is history."

"History…?"

Emilia tilted her head, mouthing the word that had been spoken so clearly. Julius responded deferentially to Emilia's question with a "Yes."

"I bear the name of the House of Juukulius, a count family that has served the Kingdom of Lugunica for generations. We, who hold titles, pride ourselves on supporting and protecting this nation."

He swung his arm, the sleeve snapping with the motion, indicating behind him.

At his gesture, the knights lined up behind him proudly raised their faces, stomping their feet in agreement.

"The Royal Guard does not recommend those whose origins are uncertain. This is not due to an exclusive obsession with lineage, but because the certainty of one's origin speaks to the weight of history served for the Kingdom. It is the accumulated history that upholds our pride as knights."

Therefore, he continued,

"In Lugunica, I do not recognize you, whose origins are uncertain, nor the person who called himself Al, as knights. Even less so as a First Knight serving the King."

"That's not something the person themselves can do anything about, is it…!"

"Indeed. That is why I told you: people are born with their station. That applies even to one's own birth family. People are not born equal."

Julius responded to Subaru's squeezed-out voice with a definitive aristocratic retort.

A chasm of unchangeable values lay between them, and the other's rejection was too distant to bridge the gap with words.

Even so.

Even so, he persisted.

"I will make Emilia Queen."

"—Are you still saying that? That position is far too high for you. You lack the weight of blood, and you don't possess strength like him, standing beside Lady Priscilla."

As if scoffing at Subaru's muttered words, Julius indicated the obsidian helmet with a tilt of his head. Al, in response, maintained an indifferent attitude, saying, "Don't drag me into this."

Ignoring his countryman's callous attitude, Subaru's answer remained unchanged.

"Even so, I will make Emilia Queen."

"You are—"

"If you're saying I don't have the qualifications of a knight, then you're probably right. As I said before, I'm a person with many shortcomings. Even before whether I'm worthy of the honor of 'knight', I'm self-aware that there are many aspects where I question if I'm even a decent human being."

Even with his own shortcomings, he wanted his feelings for someone else to be genuine.

He might be lacking as a knight, weak and unable to reach his goal, yet his wish alone was real.

"Still, I want to be Emilia's strength. I want to be her greatest strength. I know that standing here as a 'attendant' isn't enough. If I want to stand here, head held high, and be her strength, I need to be a ‘knight.’ So if that’s the case…”

He looked up, meeting Julius’s gaze directly.

His well-defined features, the valiant Royal Guard uniform, the splendidly crafted knight’s sword, and his dignified bearing.

Truly, he was the very image of a knight depicted in stories.

In contrast, Subaru was clad in a attendant’s uniform that seemed perpetually grimy from crawling around, his face far from refined or sharp, with ill-tempered eyes. If he let his guard down, his back would hunch, and he had no splendid sword, not even a bamboo practice sword—he was in a state of unarmed, self-taught combat.

The desired destination was simply too far. But,

“If I can’t even have a conversation without being one, then I’ll be a ‘knight’.”

He didn’t know how, and with so many shortcomings, he wasn’t even sure what exactly he was missing. Still, his desire was clear.

“If I can’t stand by her side without being a knight, then I’ll become a knight. That’s my answer, end of story.”

“Why do you wish to stand there so desperately?”

Perhaps he had given up on trying to persuade him with words.

Julius closed his eyes, shaking his head slightly, and questioned the very origin of Subaru’s actions. What did he desire so much that he would go to such lengths?

Subaru inhaled sharply, feeling the intense gaze behind him.

Emilia, the silver-haired girl standing behind him, she was watching.

He couldn’t turn around. He didn’t have the courage.

At least he could feel her presence at his back, so Subaru, though hesitant, answered,

"—Because she's special."

Upon hearing that answer, Julius murmured the same words softly to himself. Then, as if reaching some conclusion, he slightly drew back his chin and asked,

"Incidentally, may I ask what you mean by that?"

Subaru had only one answer to that.

"—Not here, I don't want to say."

He wondered what he was doing, standing in plain sight of everyone.

It was the ultimate humiliation. He could feel his face burning hot, even his ears were red.

As for Julius, the cause of his embarrassment, he shrugged, seemingly satisfied or perhaps resigned to Subaru's vague yet ultimately clear answer.

"Regardless of your qualifications, you've convinced me of your reason for standing there. In that case, there's nothing more for me to say. —However."

Turning his back, Julius started to return to the line of candidates. But along the way, he paused, turned his head back, and said,

"Still, I don't believe I can acknowledge you as a 'knight'."

"What—"

"I understand that you have determined whom you wish to protect and cherish. However, your way of thinking… no, it's not beautiful to use too many words."

Shaking his head, Julius looked at Subaru, who was still trying to argue, with a pitying gaze. Then, “One who makes the person they wish to stand beside wear such a face is no ‘knight’.”

The words, though softly spoken, carried a harsher meaning than anything said before.

Subaru felt a shiver run down his spine and tentatively glanced behind him. Emilia was standing there, and he couldn’t tell what expression she wore as she listened to the conversation. But he was terrified to turn around. Her silent demeanor only fueled his worst imaginings of how she was feeling about his words.

“H-He talks about knights, the ‘finest knight’ (lol) says things like that.”

Thus, the next words from Subaru’s mouth were nothing more than a trembling retort.

It was probably because he knew it was pointless. Julius’s steps, moving away from him, did not falter. Subaru’s words at that moment held no value significant enough to stop his stride.

Feeling as though he was being judged, Subaru continued to babble on.

“You’re being praised as the finest knight in this hall, but the title ‘Knight of Knights’ belongs to someone else in the streets. …Do you think I’d be intimidated by the words of someone like that?”

“Natsuki Subaru, was it? You should know that carelessly belittling others’ words not only damages your own value but also the value of those around you.”

Julius responded calmly to Subaru’s facile provocation, without any hint of anger.

His figure was already back in the line of candidates, standing beside his liege, Anastasia. Neither he nor his master felt any discomfort in that position.

Looking directly at their synchronized stance, and then at the two other pairs of candidates doing the same, Subaru felt the blood drain from his head, accompanied by a painful sensation.

“Natsuki Subaru. —That is not beautiful.”

Summing up all of Subaru’s previous words and actions, Julius stated this.

With that single phrase, Subaru realized the fact that he himself had degraded his own actions to the lowest possible point.

He saw that the candidates’ eyes, too, were now looking at him with a chilled indifference.

From the ranks of the Royal Guard behind them, many directed feelings close to hostility at him, presumably because their representative, Julius, had been disrespected.

From the circle of civil officials opposite, no favorable sentiment for Subaru, who could only voice emotional arguments, could be discerned, and he currently lacked the courage to turn to face the Council of Wise Men behind him.

To side with Emilia, even if it meant turning the entire world against him.

That resolve, that strength, he certainly had it for at least a brief moment until just now.

Yet, now Subaru’s body was rigid, unable to move from the spot.

Far from turning the whole world against him, he found his resolve wavering so easily just by making enemies of the mere hundred-odd people in the hall.

It was so pathetic, so shameful, his eyes felt hot.

Even in such a state, even in a situation where everyone around him seemed to be his enemy, he wished that at least she would remain on his side.

—But,

"That's enough, Subaru."

A clear, bell-like voice circled around him, before Subaru could even decide to turn around.

Touched on the shoulder, Subaru was surprised by the fact that he himself trembled so much he wanted to avert his eyes. However, Emilia, reaching out to him, made no mention of his pathetic disgrace.

"I apologize for taking up your unnecessary time. I will have him step down immediately."

Pulling Subaru's sleeve, Emilia bowed to the Council of Wise Men.

Being dismissed as "unnecessary time" cut into Subaru's heart like a sharp blade. However, there was no argument to be made.

He had, after all, trampled on his own resolve and determination.

Pulled by the arm, Subaru was led off the stage, unable to resist. He still couldn't bring himself to look at Emilia's face as she walked ahead, pulling his arm.

However, the fact that he couldn't even sense furious emotions from her stubbornly averted gaze, as if it proved the futility of his actions, was painful.

To that back,

"There were parts that could be judged as meaningful time, Lady Emilia."

From the dais, Miklotov's reedy, yet strangely resonant, voice reached them.

Miklotov continued speaking to the two who hadn't stopped walking.

"He at least showed that you are not the half-elf feared by the world. —You have a fine attendant."

"—Subaru is,"

They stopped. Emilia turned around.

Her gaze was directed at the Council of Wise Men on the dais; Subaru, standing beside her, wasn't even in her peripheral vision. Yet, Subaru clearly saw her face as she turned.

Her face held cold, frozen eyes, and in a bell-like voice, as if sharply cutting something away, she stated clearly,

"He is not my attendant."

She clearly rejected Subaru's words from moments before.

2

Wandering aimlessly through the corridor outside the hall, Subaru was at a loss.

He didn't remember how he looked after making such a fool of himself in front of everyone, standing next to Emilia. All he recalled was the Captain of the Royal Guard suggesting he leave, and Emilia entrusting the decision to Subaru without affirming or denying it.

Entrusting the choice to Subaru was her last act of kindness toward him.

Subaru had made such a spectacle of himself after widely declaring himself an acquaintance of hers. She must have known, painfully so, that his presence was nothing but a detriment to her.

Yet, she didn't blame Subaru with words, and if Subaru had chosen to stay, she likely would have respected that decision.

That's why Subaru couldn't remain in that place.

It wasn't that he couldn't bear the unbearable feeling of his own foolish actions. It was because he wanted to avoid causing Emilia any more trouble.

"No, that's just an excuse."

Saying he didn't want to drag her down was nothing but a convenient excuse. The root of the matter was simpler and more hopeless.

Simply put, he just couldn't bear to be looked at with such cold eyes by Emilia any longer.

"What did a fool like me even come here for, crossing such a dangerous bridge just to end up like this?"

After causing trouble for everyone, and even being saved by some miraculously lucky encounters, all he had accomplished in the royal castle was to become a grand obstruction in Emilia's path.

He came here to protect her from those who might do just that. His intentions were noble, but the outcome was a disaster— It would have been better if he hadn't done anything at all.

He hated himself for it. Though he had known this all along.

"Is something the matter?"

Suddenly, a knight walking beside him noticed Subaru's self-deprecating murmur and asked, his voice tinged with curiosity.

It was the knight who was accompanying Subaru from the hall to the waiting room. Unlike those inside, this person had been outside the room and hadn't witnessed Subaru's foolishness. Therefore, a certain respect for those involved in the Royal Selection could be felt in his demeanor.

Even being treated with such courtesy felt ridiculous to Subaru at that moment, causing the corners of his mouth to twist involuntarily.

"Nah, it's nothing. I guess… Sorry about this. I'm making you do extra work when you're in the middle of important duties."

"It's quite alright. Everyone knows that what is happening in the Throne Room now is a grave matter that will determine the fate of this nation. Although only a handful of the knights were allowed inside, guarding the exterior and guiding dignitaries are indispensable parts of our duty.”

The knight’s clear and concise declaration, conversely, left Subaru feeling flustered.

Honestly, in his current state, he truly wanted to reject even this praise. But for the knight, who hadn’t witnessed the events, Subaru’s strong rejection here would simply appear as a tantrum. It wouldn’t even count as lashing out.

The knight was proud that his actions were part of the Royal Selection.

What about Subaru, though? Could he be proud of his own actions?

Rejected by the very person he wanted validation from most, even if no one else recognized him.

“—Huh, what’s that?”

Suddenly, a commotion stopped Subaru’s steps as he was sinking into a sea of self-pity.

Looking ahead, he saw several loud voices exchanging words beyond the corner of the corridor. The knight stepped forward, shielding Subaru, who had furrowed his brows in suspicion.

“Please step back, just in case. I don’t anticipate any trouble, but…”

“Oh, uh, yes.”

Following the words of concern for his safety, Subaru pressed himself against the wall and held his breath. Then, turning the corner, the source of the commotion approached.

It was a group of about six people. A young man in knight’s armor led the way, guiding the group behind him. The group in the rear seemed to be restraining a central figure, and among the uniformly dressed knights, only the central individual’s attire stood out.

“What happened?”

Seeing that it wasn’t an urgent situation, the knight accompanying Subaru called out to the leading knight. In response, the knight who noticed them replied with a slightly stiff face,

“What happened, you ask? An intruder trying to sneak into the castle. A troublesome one at that.”

“An intruder…? Why are they being led through the castle? Wouldn’t it be better to take them quietly to the barracks?”

“I said they were troublesome. Anyway, I need to consult the Captain.”

Ending the conversation abruptly, the knight bowed to Subaru before returning to his duty of leading the group. Their destination seemed to be the very hall where the Royal Selection was taking place— A place that should be in the midst of the nation’s most crucial affairs. What kind of situation warranted interrupting that?

Subaru glanced at the group, replaying the conversation he’d overheard. Surrounded by knights, the person who had supposedly infiltrated the castle was now passing directly in front of Subaru.

Thinking that if he had made one wrong move, he could have been in the same position as that person, he felt a terrible sense of dread at the rashness of his own actions.

However, that sentiment quickly vanished. Because,

“—Huh?”

Right before Subaru’s dumbfounded eyes, being led away, restrained by four knights, was a familiar bald old man—Old Man Rom, whom he was supposed to have parted ways with in the noble district.

Chapter 21:
The Price of Impudence and the Old Man’s Intention

1

The shock that pierced Subaru upon seeing that person led away was perhaps the greatest of all the shocks he’d endured in the throne room.

He had stepped forward into the center, intent on helping Emilia, only to disgrace himself. Far from assisting her, he’d been a monumental hindrance, ultimately witnessing Emilia’s gaze filled with disappointment.

All of it brought Subaru unbearable pain. However, he didn’t fully admit that he was entirely at fault for everything. There was no lie in his words truly coming from the heart, and completely agreeing with Julius’s statements, which were rigid with the honor of a knight, was out of the question. Though his arguments lacked cohesion due to being driven by emotion, he didn’t believe everything he said was wrong. To put it bluntly, a significant amount of dissatisfaction lingered within Subaru that he hadn’t been understood, despite his best efforts to explain.

He had still withdrawn because he knew there was no point in revealing any more of his feelings in that moment. Subaru had no right to speak in that situation; it was clear that anything he said would fall on deaf ears. Natsuki Subaru should have been the kind of person to push his way through even in such a state, but the reality was that even the will to do so had been broken.

However,

“Hey, hey…”

On the other hand, the sight of Old Man Rom being restrained before his eyes held meaning enough to condemn all of Subaru’s own rash actions. The knight had pointed to the large old man and called him a suspicious individual trying to infiltrate the royal castle. Old Man Rom, who had been searching for Reinhard's mansion in the noble district and intended to take Felt, would have no reason to sneak into the royal castle. That is, if he had come to the noble district alone.

"Could it be, me…?"

He couldn't voice the decisive phrase, "Were you following me?"

Yet, the question that arose in his heart was almost a certainty, even without an answer. Fundamentally, his thinking had been far too shallow. Subaru should have known how good-natured the old man was, and how his personality was unsuited for the cutthroat environment of the back alleys. That's precisely why he'd used persuasion and trickery to get him to help with the infiltration into the noble district, and later, for his own solo mission, he'd exploited the old man's kindness to separate them.

As for the subsequent risks, they were all the consequence of his own actions. Even if he found himself in any predicament, Subaru had figured he could at least manage himself. At worst, he could invoke Roswaal's name, and even if it caused him an unreasonable amount of trouble, he had the bare minimum assurance that he would save his life.

Old Man Rom, who Subaru had parted ways with without any explanation, could not have known about Subaru's own base self-preservation. He could have abandoned him. He must have had his own important people, his own vital objectives. That's why, even after they parted, Subaru thought that Old Man Rom would somehow prioritize his own goals and discard Subaru due to a matter of priority.

The result of his neglect to consider others' feelings was the scene unfolding before him now. It wasn't hard to imagine that Old Man Rom, regretting letting Subaru head into such a reckless infiltration, had worried about him and thus infiltrated the royal castle. In fact, considering the old man's personality, it was an easily foreseeable outcome.

"Rom…"

"…"

Subaru's lips instinctively moved to call his name. But what stopped him was none other than Old Man Rom himself, who, while being led away, noticed Subaru by the edge of the corridor, protected by a knight. Upon realizing Subaru's presence, a flicker of surprise appeared in his gray eyes, followed by a clear look of relief that was only discernible to Subaru. Then, as if only for Subaru to see, he placed his index finger to his lips, signaling him to "be quiet."

The meaning of that instruction was clear. Old Man Rom, caught in the act of illegal entry into the castle. If Subaru acknowledged his acquaintance with such a suspicious individual, it would worsen Subaru's own standing. This realization was made in an instant, after seeing Subaru's current position.

"It's my own foolishness that got me caught. It's nothing for you to worry about."

Though not spoken aloud, Old Man Rom's inner voice, conveyed through the gesture of a finger to his lips and a quiet shake of his head, seemed to reach Subaru directly. Confused by this sensation, Subaru missed the timing to speak to the passing group. Surrounded tightly by knights, Old Man Rom's figure disappeared down the corridor. Would he be dragged into the hall and impeached? If that happened, who, unaware of the circumstances, would defend him?

And most of all,

"Why didn't I say anything just now…?"

He hadn't actually been verbally restrained, and the words that had flashed through his mind afterward were nothing more than the products of Subaru's imagination. Perhaps Old Man Rom had been seeking help, and even if he wasn't, Subaru had a reason to act to help him. After all, it was Subaru who had led him to such a state of mind and involved him in this infiltration.

"—Wait!"

It took some time to steel himself, but somehow, Subaru's throat managed to scream that out. The footsteps of the group, which had almost disappeared down the corridor, halted, and he sensed their questioning gazes. He had managed to stop them. It was the worst possible situation, but he had avoided falling below rock bottom. The remaining problem was what to do from here.

“Is something the matter?”

“I just have something for that old man…”

Responding to the accompanying knight’s concerned voice, Subaru walked towards the group—towards the restrained Old Man Rom. The group seemed unsure how to treat Subaru as he approached, but when the knight accompanying Subaru announced, “He’s connected to a candidate”, they all immediately straightened their posture and showed him deference.

Feeling the burden of it, but grateful for it in this moment, he gave a nod of acknowledgment and stepped forward. He reached Old Man Rom’s side,

“—!”

As he got close enough to reach out and touch him, Subaru lost his words, unsure what to say. Acting on impulse was his usual habit, but this time, things weren’t simple. Any words to Old Man Rom, who had been caught for illegal entry into the royal castle, could easily be mistaken for Subaru confessing his own illegal entry. Therefore, he needed to be cautious—but again, he had no plan.

Facing the familiar old man and realizing his own helplessness, Subaru understood that he was far more of a live-in-the-moment person than he had thought. He had always vaguely considered himself a calm and composed type who thought things through, but considering the process and outcome of his various actions today, it was laughable to think he could say that with a straight face. Even now, not a single idea of what to say came to him.

“—Sir Subaru?”

A voice of suspicion, directed at Subaru, who trembled his lips, unable to utter a single word. Naturally, the surrounding knights' gazes at Subaru began to harden. Feeling the rising caution prickle his skin, Subaru tried to think of something to say, when,

"Hmph, these aristocrats sure have terrible taste, don't they! To laugh at the foolish face of a clumsy old man who got caught, I can't believe we're even the same flesh and blood!"

Subaru's anxiety was drowned out by a loud voice that echoed from one end of the corridor to the other. Spitting and speaking in a vulgar tone with a grimace, it was none other than Old Man Rom. Twisting his restrained body, he looked up at Subaru's face from below, in an ill-mannered way, saying,

"If you want to see a face like this, look all you want! The face of an old man covered in the grime of the slums, something fortunate young punks like you know nothing about!"

Astonished, dumbfounded, utterly shocked, his thoughts completely ceased. Old Man Rom hurled unbearable insults, directing them at Subaru. The surrounding knights also froze for a moment, but a few seconds later, they snapped back to reality and,

"—Watch your mouth!"

"Guh!"

A punitive fist was brought down upon the criminal who had spoken disrespectfully to the important person, Subaru. Shackled and unable to move, the old man had no way to defend himself. Powerless, he was struck by the fist, paying the price for his unseemly remarks. Unable to hide his surprise at the excessive punishment unfolding before him, but knowing he had to stop it, Subaru reached out a hand,

"Wait, there's no need to go that far…"

"How kind of you, young punk. Well now, what's wrong, knights? That's your beloved master's command, why don't you wag your tails and obey… Guh!"

"Still talking, you vagrant!"

Subaru's words of protest were again cut off by Old Man Rom's curses. As Old Man Rom's insults intensified, the punishment grew even harsher and more relentless.

"Why?" The question flooded his mind, threatening to spill from his lips. But just before he could speak, Subaru's words were held back as he grasped the intent in Old Man Rom's rational eyes, which, despite the assault, never left his.

—Old Man Rom, even in this situation, was still trying to protect Subaru.

Defending Old Man Rom, who was caught red-handed for illegal entry, could create a reason for Subaru's own vulnerable position to be scrutinized. Subaru was aware that his position would be inconvenient if he were pressed, and Old Man Rom also knew this well. That's why Old Man Rom was acting overly hostile to feign animosity and eliminate any connection between himself and Subaru.

A feeling of deep regret overwhelmed his chest. If it was Subaru's rash actions that had driven Old Man Rom into this predicament, then the current situation, which forced Old Man Rom to make a difficult decision, was also a consequence of Subaru's lack of foresight. Old Man Rom was now forced to clean up after Subaru's actions.

"Sir Subaru, we should go now."

"Ah… no…"

A knight touched Subaru's shoulder, speaking in a concerned voice. He likely mistook Subaru's silence for shock, believing he was reeling from Old Man Rom's unwarranted insults. Subaru gave an ambiguous reply to the voice, then met Old Man Rom's gaze.

—Somehow, I need to get out of here.

That was the thought he conveyed. He had no concrete plan, but a sense of obligation surged through him, compelling him to act because he had to. However, Old Man Rom's answer to Subaru's intention was a silent shake of his head—a rejection.

"—None of your damn business, young punk."

The small, hoarse murmur sounded like a continuation of the earlier insults, not raising any suspicion of its context among the knights. But to Subaru alone, it was clear that those were the only honest words Old Man Rom had spoken in that moment, devoid of any deceit.

Old Man Rom then averted his gaze, and Subaru swallowed the words he was about to say, understanding that the conversation was over. His outstretched hand had been rejected, and Subaru again felt as if he had been denied. It was the same as in the hall. Only a sense of urgency pushed Subaru forward to do something—yet, the person who mattered most didn't need it.

Before the silent Subaru, Old Man Rom swayed his body and urged the halted knights to continue, saying, "That's enough now." The knights glanced at Subaru, but seeing him look down, unable to say anything, they said, "Excuse us," and resumed their march.

Just like that, Old Man Rom was led away. His large demi-human body hunched, his injured, bloodied face turned away, Old Man Rom was pulled away from Subaru, and Subaru let the final opportunity slip by.

"Subaru-dono, let's go. The captain will make the decision about what happens next."

A quiet voice, yet unable to hide its indignation, came from the knight. He probably believed Subaru's silence was due to Old Man Rom's unwarranted abuse. While that was partly true, in essence, it was completely different. Explaining it would diminish Old Man Rom's spirit.

—That's just an excuse.

Consider Old Man Rom's thoughtfulness? If he left him as he was, Old Man Rom would face condemnation and impeachment by the knight order in the hall—and there was no telling what punishment would be handed down. At the very least, if Subaru had mentioned Old Man Rom's transgression in that moment, he could have leveraged his position as someone involved in the Royal Selection to some extent.

"Just got caught up in it, huh…"

If he hadn't played along with Old Man Rom's intention, there was no doubt that Subaru, in his flustered state, would have also fallen under suspicion. If he had been eloquent enough in his subsequent defense to secure Old Man Rom's release, to an extreme, he wouldn't have even had to leave the hall. However even that was just an excuse.

"I…"

Once again, he wasn't needed. Rejected by Emilia, rejected by Old Man Rom, his outstretched hand lost its way, and,

"Why am I even here…?"

What would happen to Old Man Rom where he was taken? Shaking his head, Subaru tried to dispel the unpleasant thoughts. He imagined the faces of those in the hall, and in an attempt to comfort himself, he piled up excuses, telling himself that at least the situation would be better than if Subaru had caused a scene there.

Among those in the hall, three people knew Old Man Rom's face. All of them were candidates, the main players of the Royal Selection. Subaru knew how important Old Man Rom was to one of them. So, it would surely not turn out badly.

Surely not. It wouldn't, so.

"What am I here for…? I…"

2

A ripple of commotion spread through the throne room as a single elder emerged from beyond the wide-flung doors. Leading the man, whose hands were bound in shackles, was Marcos, the knight captain who had briefly left the room.

Just minutes earlier, a knight had entered during the Royal Selection proceedings to summon Captain Marcos. Though Marcos initially frowned, citing the presence of the Wise Men, his subordinate's urgency prompted him to excuse himself and leave. Five minutes later, as the proceedings were held in suspense, the current situation unfolded.

"Hmm, and who might this gentleman be?" Miklotov, on the dais, questioned the elder Marcos had brought, voicing the thoughts of everyone present. No one could fathom Marcos's intentions in bringing the man here.

Bathing in their confused gazes, Marcos bowed respectfully. "My apologies for the disturbance. This man appears to be a rogue who attempted to infiltrate the royal castle."

"Then why bring such a person here? He's irrelevant… no, out of place." Bordeaux, a stern-faced elder, made no secret of his displeasure at Marcos's explanation. The others in the room largely seemed to agree, their expressions clouding over as they tried to understand Marcos's true motives.

Amidst the confusion, three individuals, despite not understanding Marcos's intentions, wore expressions different from those around them—expressions of surprise.

One was an arrogant young woman. She recognized the elder's face but kept the fact of their acquaintance to herself, not even informing her attendant. Instead, she watched the situation unfold, a cruel twist to her lips. If Subaru had been present, her actions might have differed. However with the only person who knew of her connection to the elder having left, there was still no reason strong enough to sway her.

Another was a diligent young woman. After taking a moment to recall, she quickly recognized the elder's identity and shifted her gaze to another direction—towards one of the candidates. As far as she knew, there was an inseparable connection between that individual and the candidate. Upon hearing about the attempted intrusion, she immediately realized that the candidate was likely involved in the elder's plans. Then, she trembled her lips, hesitating on how to act. She heightened her awareness, ready to move instantly if anything were to happen.

The young woman who had received the most unexpected assessment in this place was…

"—Old Man Rom?" Her eyes wide, golden hair swaying, the young woman stared at the elder, her eyes shaking with surprise. A mix of unexpected joy, incomprehensible shock, and various other inexpressible emotions swirled within her. Her call of the elder's name was a mere whisper, yet more than a few people distinctly heard it.

"—Lady Felt, are you acquainted with this elder?" Marcos, who had spoken with a tone hinting at certainty, was one of those who heard her. Felt closed her mouth for a moment in response to his question, then stepped forward boldly.

"Don't play dumb. You brought him here because you knew, didn't you?"

"…I didn't take it at face value, but this elder did mention your name. I apologize if my words sounded like a test."

"That's just pointless. You've pulled quite the stunt."

Felt spat out her irritation, not bothering to hide it, as Marcos bowed without changing his expression. She then looked at the restrained Old Man Rom.

"We sure ended up meeting in a strange place, Old Man Rom."

Though her manner of speaking remained coarse, the affection imbued in her words was palpable to everyone present. It was the first time the young woman, who had only ever hurled insults in this hall, had spoken with such familiarity.

In response, the restrained elder lifted his head. For the two of them, it had been over ten days since their last reunion. This reunion should have been filled with profound emotion. But,

"Hey, Old Man Rom, what happened to your face?"

Seeing the elder's bruised and blood-stained face as he looked up, the young woman's expression instantly changed. Her defiant, cat-like eyes sharpened with anger as she glared at Marcos, who held the chain connected to Old Man Rom's shackles.

Receiving her furious gaze, Marcos, however, remained expressionless.

"It's likely the result of a struggle with the soldiers who stopped him when he tried to infiltrate the castle. My subordinates were merely performing their duty; there's no reason to criticize them."

"Ha! You say such fine things, Captain of the Knights. The fact that you're making excuses before I even say anything just proves you know it's messed up, doesn't it?"

"My subordinates risked unnecessary criticism, so laugh at my cowardice if you must. If you're going to slander anyone, please direct it only at me."

Marcos remained unyielding to Felt's provocation, a testament to his experience and composure. Sensing that further argument would be futile, Felt stifled her indignation with a sigh.

"Fine, I get it. Just release Old Man Rom. He didn't steal anything or kill anyone, did he?"

Felt waved her hand as if to say, "The rest can come after," and ordered Marcos. Her intention was to speak with Old Man Rom first and try to resolve the situation. However, Marcos's answer was,

"—Unfortunately, I cannot comply." His voice was low and firm, a clear refusal of her command.

"—Huh?"

Felt's expression twitched, a vein throbbing in her forehead. Her red eyes, filled with surprise and then immediate fury, looked ready to erupt into flames from her trembling lips at any moment. Marcos remained unperturbed by the young woman's enraged gaze. Before Felt could unleash her fury, a red-haired young man, who had been waiting in the knight's ranks, stepped forward.

"Captain, that might be a bit… lacking in explanation."

"Reinhard, be silent. I know you have something to say to me, who acts against the will of the master you vowed your sword to. However, that only holds true if the one you consider your master is willing to accept your sword."

"…"

Reinhard's conciliatory advice was, however, shot down by Marcos's words. Captain Marcos's argument was sound, and Reinhard could not offer a reckless rebuttal. He could only silently observe Felt's reaction.

Felt, however, did not seem disappointed by Reinhard's capitulation, nor was she observing the exchange. Her anger was solely and intensely directed at Marcos. It wasn't just about their current interaction, but a concentrated, potent rage, a distillation of various frustrations accumulated during the twists and turns that led to her being brought here.

"I'll say it again: release Old Man Rom. We can talk after that."

Holding back the rage threatening to burst forth, Felt calmly articulated her words. But Marcos, responding succinctly, paid no heed to her spirit. An ominous atmosphere began to spread throughout the hall, and Felt's patience was nearing its limit.

"—Knight Marcos, your disrespect is getting out of hand."

The one who intervened in this tense situation was, as expected, the person with the most authority to resolve matters here, an elder who let out yet another sigh for the unknown count today. Miklotov chastised Marcos for his unyielding attitude towards Felt, a royal candidate, an attitude that even warranted considering a rude dismissal.

"Releasing a person who attempted to infiltrate the castle—that command is somewhat problematic. However, even if you refuse, your manner of speaking is impolite. At the very least, you have an obligation to explain your rude behavior."

"As you wish."

Marcos's stubborn attitude abruptly changed; he readily obeyed Miklotov's instruction. The swiftness of his change further exacerbated Felt's temper, but her surge of emotion lost momentum as Marcos met her gaze directly. If Felt's red eyes burned with the flames of fury, Marcos's eyes were as still and clear as a tranquil lake.

Feeling as though she had been doused with cold water, Felt heard Marcos preface his words with "If you'll excuse me," before continuing.

"During the course of these Royal Selection proceedings, Lady Felt has publicly declared her unwillingness to participate in the Royal Selection. Forfeiting that qualification means also forfeiting the right to command us, the Knight Order, in this place."

In a clear, resonant voice, Marcos explained his reason for not obeying her command. One might call it an outrageous argument, but Felt's previous attitude, which had not impressed the civil officials, knights, or the members of the Council of Wise Men gathered here, now came back to haunt her. Naturally, many nodded in agreement with Marcos's statement, showing their support.

"Captain, that's an extreme conclusion. Firstly, regardless of qualification, Lady Felt potentially has royal blood in this country…"

"Potential is just potential. Stop speaking of ideals that are unlike you. An unclear qualification holds no meaning here, and forfeiting the clearer reason is her own will." Marcos paid no heed to Reinhard's words, instead looking at Felt as if to gauge her understanding, asking, "Do you understand?"

In response, Felt, who had remained silent until now, lowered her face and roughly raked her hands through her golden hair. She then groaned, irritatedly or perhaps to vent her frustration, uttering "Ah" and "Ugh."

“So, to simplify this complicated talk, you’re saying… You won’t listen to anything I say because I’m not interested in the Royal Selection, right?”

“—That’s correct, in essence.”

“Oh, oh, we finally understand each other. Ah, I see, I see. Ah, yes, yes. I see, I see… You’re annoying, you know that?”

Felt’s cat-like eyes, with their narrowed pupils, glared at Marcos, who had affirmed her question. The hostile gaze, close to murderous intent, however, had no more effect on Marcos’s rock-like expression than a gentle breeze.

An experienced veteran facing off against a mere delinquent girl who grew up in the slums. It was a woefully mismatched confrontation, but Felt’s personality wasn’t one to be intimidated by it.

She understood the reason. She understood the conditions. Her irritation was escalating rapidly, raging within her, seeking an outlet. It wouldn’t be so bad to just trade insults and put this man in his place.

Just as this rash thought exploded, and Felt was about to give in to her impulse—

“Who cares about all that! —Please help me, quickly!” The elder, who had remained silent until now, let out a desperate, high-pitched cry that echoed through the hall.

Neither Felt, who was on the verge of erupting in anger, nor Marcos, who stood beside the source of the shriek, nor anyone else in the hall could immediately react to that cry. The person himself seemed oblivious to the reactions around him.

“Felt, it’s me! Cromwell, the one you worked with in the slums! I don’t know what’s going on, but you look like you can do something now, can’t you? Help me!” Kneeling on the carpeted floor, the elder pleaded with a fawning smile plastered on his face. If he hadn’t been restrained, he would have likely groveled at the young woman’s feet.

Felt herself was speechless at his near-pathetic display, staring aghast at her acquaintance’s transformation. Naturally, the disgust for the miserable elder could be seen bubbling up in the eyes of those around them.

“We’ve done so many things together, haven’t we, you and I?! Who taught you, a naive young girl, how to survive when you knew nothing? It was me, wasn’t it? Your benefactor is in this plight, can’t you do something?!”

He spat, throwing his own crimes aside, and demanded to be helped quickly. Only an exceptionally compassionate being could feel sympathy or pity for him. To ordinary people, his self-serving remarks only evoked disgust. In a brief moment, it was fair to say the elder had alienated most of the people in the room.

Everyone was at a loss for words at such selfish behavior. Among them, only one person formulated words, completely unconcerned by these sentiments.

“—This could turn bad.”

Only the red-haired young man, hearing the pathetic cry, made a small sound in his throat, a sense of urgency rising within his chest.

Chapter 22: The Last Master and Servant

1

“Help me! I don’t want to die here! Felt! Hurry, help me! Tell these blockheads off for me!”

The old man’s desperate pleas continued, his voice hoarse, spitting, and shoulders shaking. The only sound echoing in the silent hall was his pathetic cries, which rapidly cast a heavy, stagnant pall over the assembly.

Many knights and civil officials eyed the old man with undeniable disgust, and even the members of the Council of Wise Men, likely close in age, looked as if they’d seen something unpleasant. It was undeniable that only a minority in the assembly saw any meaning beyond mere begging for life in the old man’s cries.

“What’s wrong? Who do you think you owe your life to all this time?! Have you forgotten all the favors after getting a taste of a slightly better life? Well, what is it?!”

The old man pressed on, insistently vocalizing the baseness of human nature. As everyone else avoided commenting on his behavior, Reinhard focused on the profile of the girl he considered his master. For her, it was a transformation in the old man so drastic it could be called a complete change. While their acquaintance was too brief to fully grasp her feelings, it wasn’t hard to imagine she was significantly rattled.

Reinhard, subtly sensing the true intention behind the old man’s words, decided he needed to act to break the deadlock and started to step forward when—

“—Don’t move, Reinhard. Don’t you dare try anything strange.”

He faltered, his attempt to move cut short by the girl’s voice. A blunder, Reinhard thought, looking up. The girl who had just spoken to the red-haired young man was smiling, her posture the epitome of arrogance. Priscilla held a fan, drawn from her cleavage, to her mouth, her eyes glinting with sadistic amusement as she pierced Reinhard with her gaze. She tilted her head, both charmingly and provocatively.

“That won’t do, Reinhard. For a knight of your caliber to be flustered. Such an attitude makes it seem as if you’re trying to silence that old fool before he says something inconvenient.”

With an exaggerated shrug and a feigned “Oh dear, how scary,” Priscilla’s words made Reinhard inwardly curse his mistake. He bit his tongue, regretting his failure. He couldn’t know what impact the words of the old man, who called himself Cromwell, would have on Felt. However, he had been preempted in his attempt to salvage a situation that was difficult to interpret favorably.

Priscilla’s single remark had now altered how the people in the hall perceived and understood the old man’s words. Even if Reinhard were to try and deny their content, it would no longer be judged without the preconception that he was “trying to conceal an inconvenient truth.”

With a single sentence, Priscilla had completely reshaped the situation to her advantage. Despite not fully knowing the background of the people confronting her, she had accurately discerned their relationships from just the brief exchange moments before and steered the situation as she wished.

Reinhard was left unable to move recklessly. In front of him, Priscilla nodded contentedly, then snapped her fan shut and pointed its tip back at the old man.

“Go on, continue your pathetic begging. Dance wildly, grotesquely, miserably, comically, until you collapse, and amuse me. I permit it; I won’t let you stop. Do your worst, old fool. Depending on your efforts, I might just consider granting your unbearable pleas.”

“You insolent little girl, speaking so grandly… Felt, you’re different, aren’t you? You’ve always been a kind child. You wouldn’t abandon me, would you? We’ve always gotten along so well.”

Spitting at Priscilla’s haughty tone, the old man still clung to the girl, an old acquaintance, with a fawning smile, begging for her mercy. Those around them shivered at the old man’s recklessness, ignorant of the consequences of offending Priscilla. Yet, Priscilla herself, despite being treated so disrespectfully, merely softened her lips with amusement, observing the continuation of what she called his pathetic plea.

Witnessing the end of this exchange, those around seemed to regain their senses, whispering their current thoughts—their impressions of the old man’s miserable begging.

“Did you see how pathetic he was?”

“Even more so, his fawning face. It makes you lose all sympathy. That’s what they call a brazen thief.”

“Even if Lady Felt were to protect him, a pardon would be out of the question.”

The knights loudly condemned the old man’s despicable behavior, as he was a criminal who dared to beg for leniency.

“Is it true that the slum is full of people like him… and Lady Felt grew up there?”

“Even if the story of her being a surviving royal relative is true, can someone who spent their life in such a place truly fulfill the duties of a queen?”

“Perhaps we should reconsider. Or perhaps, following the Dragon Tablet, she should be treated merely as a token candidate to make up the numbers.”

The civil officials began to question Felt’s qualifications, given her apparently close ties with such an old man. The whispers gradually grew louder, spreading as a murmur throughout the hall.

Observing the reactions around him, Reinhard bit his lip, his inner fears confirmed. He had anticipated this outcome. Yet, he had foolishly let the old man’s cries go unchecked and fallen completely for Priscilla’s deterrence. As a result, he couldn’t stop it, and both parties, whose interests aligned, had manipulated the situation to their advantage.

Cursing his own inadequacy, Reinhard looked at the silent Felt. What was the girl, still bowed and silent, thinking?

"—!"

"—!!"

"—!"

While the involved parties remained silent, the voices from the sidelines continued to escalate, unchecked. Unable to bear the crude deterioration of the situation, Marcos finally took a deep breath, ready to unleash a shout. And then—

"—You're all so damn loud!"

It wasn't Marcos's famously spine-chilling roar that made his subordinates tremble. It was a high-pitched, undeniably vulgar shout of anger from a young girl.

A gasp of surprise preceded a sudden silence that fell over the hall. In response, the girl exhaled sharply, stepped forward into the center, and surveyed everyone's faces.

"You've been chirping away while I stayed silent. A bunch of grown men gathered together, acting so effeminate, you spineless bastards!"

"Lady Felt, that language is quite inappropriate…"

"Shut up, half-assed knight. You got beaten by that naive woman, so don't talk down to me. Actually, just don't talk to me, period. I hate you."

Reinhard tried to caution her against such unladylike remarks, but Felt's response was merciless and utterly devoid of grace. Nevertheless, a command was a command, so Reinhard bowed deeply and withdrew. Watching him, Felt swished the hem of her yellow dress, roughly cracking her neck as she continued, "You brainiacs whispering, that's what I don't like. You paid money to study, paid money to buy your positions, and that's why you're standing there, right? Then act like it! You've got faces so pale it looks like you haven't eaten a proper meal!"

Felt swept her gaze across the civil officials, bluntly dismissing them. Then her head turned the other way, causing a stir among the Royal Knights she now stared at.

"Then you, all dressed up, what are you so scared of a little girl like me for? Don't give me that excuse about just bracing yourselves instead of being scared. Isn't that attitude just pathetic?"

Snorting and mocking the Royal Knights, Felt walked to her destination. It was directly in front of the old man who had been exposing his pathetic ugliness. The massive old man and the small girl, with the old man kneeling, were finally at an average height difference. The girl put her hands on her hips and once again surveyed the people she had just belittled.

"Look at this old man's horrible face. He's got a bloody nose from being hit, and tons of failed shaving attempts. Mirrors are precious, and there aren't many decent sharp blades. He's smiling so obsequiously with all that—in a word, it's disgusting."

"Now, that's going too far…"

The old man's voice dropped, and a somewhat deflated mutter escaped him at her scathing assessment. He quickly shook his head as if to regain composure, resuming his fawning smile. Witnessing this, Felt sighed deeply, raising her head.

"On top of that, that begging for your life earlier. Honestly, it made me lose all my strength, just listening to it. So miserable and obsequious, I couldn't bear to watch… Hey, Old Man Rom."

The old man looked up at the address. The girl's red eyes facing him held a tinge of sadness.

"People from the slums like us, well, we're hopelessly miserable. It's natural to be looked down on and live a lowly life, and it was full of rotten-hearted people, including me. It really is a terrible place."

Felt gave a harsh assessment that included herself, then paused and continued, "But…"

"It's true it was a cesspool of hopeless bottom-feeders. Still, didn't we manage to hold onto our human pride? No matter how lowly we were viewed, we never stooped to groveling on the ground."

"Felt…"

"I wish I had a mirror to show you your face right now, Old Man Rom. So obsequious and pathetic, wanting to live so badly you'll fawn and wag your tail—that's not really living."

The old man called the girl's name with a sigh, and the girl responded, shaking her head. Hearing her answer, Crusch, who had been quietly waiting in the line of candidates, nodded heavily. Felt's current statement resonated with her own ideals.

"If you're going to beg me for your life, you're doing it wrong. I won't abandon my right to leave a place I don't want to be just to help someone like you."

Felt stated this flatly, hands on her hips. It meant abandoning someone she knew, someone she had spent time with since childhood if the old man's words were true. And—

"…Lady Felt."

In front of the Knight of Knights—the red-haired young man—it meant withdrawing from the Royal Selection.

Reinhard couldn't suppress the bitter feeling that ran through him at her declaration. He had expected this. Seeing the old man's behavior, he had predicted how the proud girl would react. He had been completely outmaneuvered by Priscilla and the old man—no, by that old man alone.

The old man, abandoned, slumped his shoulders, his head bowed as if drained of all strength. Reinhard didn't miss the faint, powerless curve of the old man's lips. It wasn't the kind of exhaustion that came from regret or despair; it was the sense of accomplishment of someone who had successfully completed an act.

Gambling his life, the old man had made a daring move. And he had brilliantly succeeded, achieving his desired objective. It was a commendable act. Even now, it was necessary to expose the old man's scheme and correct Felt's actions. However, Reinhard couldn't do that. His very nature, what made him who he was, constrained his actions.

Seeing the slumped old man and Felt's stance, Marcos seemed to understand the conversation was over. He pulled on the old man's handcuffs, and the chains clanked as he bowed to the hall.

"I apologize for the disturbance. I will immediately remove this man…"

"—That's how I was waiting for someone to jump to conclusions."

Felt's words suddenly cut off Marcos, who was apologizing and about to leave. Marcos fell silent, looking uncharacteristically flustered. With a pleased smile, Felt glanced at his rock-like face, which showed a hint of agitation, and then, in the stunned hall, the small girl turned around.

"So, Captain, let go of his hand. Those handcuffs don't fit Old Man Rom's thick arms, and it looks painful."

"I've told you repeatedly, I refuse. I have no reason to follow your orders…"

"You mean unless I have no intention of joining this Royal Selection, right? Then it's simple."

Cutting off Marcos again, Felt lightly tapped her own chest. Then she twisted the corner of her lips into a wide, predatory grin, revealing sharp fangs.

"I'll do it, the Royal Selection. I just have to aim to be queen, right?"

"—!!"

Her smiling declaration sent a shockwave through the entire hall. This bombshell statement first stunned those who heard it, but after the initial impact, various emotions remained in each person's heart.

Some accepted it stoically, some smiled lewdly, some touched their foreheads as if enduring a headache, and some tensed their cheeks to maintain their composure. And in the hearts of many, there was resentment towards a girl who so lightly made such a grave decision—or perhaps anger at the casual treatment of a matter of such national importance. Leaving aside these various reactions, the biggest reaction, of course, came from the old man who had received her declaration head-on.

"Wh-What are you saying, Felt? I-I've accepted it. Your words earlier were right. One cannot live if they lose their pride. My previous behavior was the lowest of actions. It's only natural for you to abandon me…"

"That's just a bad act, you old geezer. You've lived so long, yet you don't even know you have no talent as a stage actor? Give up on that career change and just stick to being a petty criminal."

"Don't be foolish…! Besides, you're someone who avoids doing things you don't like. It's natural for you to abandon someone who made a spectacle of themselves like me. You wouldn't force yourself to endure something you hate just to…"

"Yeah, yeah, you know me well, Old Man Rom. That's right, I make it a rule not to do things I hate. But actually, I know you too."

Pointing at the old man, who was now desperately trying to argue the opposite, completely unlike his earlier begging for his life, Felt then pointed to her own face.

"I know this from our long years of acquaintance… Old Man Rom, when you're about to lie, the veins on the tip of your nose pop out."

"Wh-What?! That's a lie—?!"

The old man was startled by Felt's remark, and in a panic, he raised his still-handcuffed arm and rubbed his nose. Felt watched his gesture, snorting.

“Ah, so it’s a lie. Now the idiot’s been found out, so what are you going to do?”

“—Ah.”

Old Man Rom was dumbfounded, having been completely caught in the leading question. Felt shrugged both shoulders, though it was unclear what she thought of an old man falling for such a low-level trick, and shook her head as if to say, “Give me a break.”

“So, go ahead and take off Old Man Rom’s handcuffs. Everything that just happened was just the ramblings of a senile old man.”

“We cannot allow such an excuse…”

“—That old man is my family. So, let him go right now.”

To Marcos, who still refused, Felt spoke, all emotion drained from her voice. Hearing her words, Marcos frowned for a moment, but quickly erased any trace of agitation from his expression.

“Understood.”

He bowed with the deference one shows to a superior, and released his grip on Old Man Rom’s handcuffs. Then he turned back, asking the knight waiting near the entrance for “the key to the handcuffs.” However, Felt stopped him with an upraised hand.

“Can’t wait. —Reinhard!”

“Here.”

Reinhard’s tall figure immediately responded to the girl’s sharp voice, stepping onto the platform. She didn’t even glance at the red-haired young man standing beside her, simply crossing her arms, jutting out her chin, and ordering,

“Do it.”

"Yes, my master—"

To that shortest command in the world, the knight replied with profound emotion. The arm raised before his master formed a hand chop in the air, splitting the atmosphere as it descended.

Cleave—the metal shackles binding the old man's hands were effortlessly sliced through, like paper, by Reinhard's hand chop. The shackles, as if melting away, fell to the floor, producing a sharp clang that resonated throughout the hall. Against that sound, the girl looked up at the tall figure with eyes that seemed to say she found him annoying.

"Is this all part of your plan, too?"

"Not at all. It is a guidance of fate, even more so."

To Felt's unamused words, Reinhard replied, hand on his chest. Hearing this, the girl exhaled with a dismissive "Hmph!"

"Fate again? Are you a slave to fate?"

"No. —I am a servant of justice."

The young man answered her sarcasm seriously and directly. Felt closed one eye at his earnestness and turned up the corner of her mouth.

"However that job's retired now. From now on, you're my servant."

"Yes. As my master wills."

"I'm gonna work you ragged, so be prepared."

"Yes. All as my master desires."

"You're boring…"

Felt muttered this, seemingly exasperated by the complete affirmation. In front of the two, still openly dumbfounded, was Old Man Rom. He shook his now unhandcuffed arms, his bloodied cheek contorted in a pained expression.

"Why, Felt? …I, I was trying to…"

"I kind of get why you were saying all those pathetic things, Old Man Rom. You couldn't stand to see me standing here, could you? You were trying to push me away."

Felt raised a hand in apology to the old man, who was hanging his head limply. Old Man Rom looked up at her, his lips trembling.

"If you understood that much, then why…?"

"I told you myself. I make it a rule not to do things I hate."

To the old man's questioning look, Felt gave an embarrassed smile.

"Are you telling me to abandon my family and shamelessly go back to the slums? There's no way I could do something so despicable."

"…"

Hearing that, Old Man Rom's expression shifted from pained to something else entirely. He turned his back to the girl, hiding his face by rubbing his arm against it.

"M-My defeat was…"

"It was clearer than clear, old man."

Reinhard must have sensed his emotional turmoil. The old man looked up at the ceiling and, with a hoarse voice, muttered regretfully, yet unable to conceal a tremor of deep emotion.

"I raised her too well—!"

2

Amidst shouts that made it impossible to tell if they were laments or cheers for his training policy, Miklotov, the representative of the Council of Wise Men on the dais, narrowed his eyes while stroking his beard.

"Is this situation unfolding as you anticipated, Knight Captain?"

“I would never presume such a thing. I am merely a knight. My role is to uphold the path, not to create it.”

Miklotov nodded at Marcos, who responded with humility, then turned to the three standing in the center—no, rather, the two master and servant figures who had stepped forward.

“Then, Lady Felt and Sir Reinhard. Am I correct in assuming you two also intend to participate in the Royal Selection?”

“

Yeah, sure.”

“Yes. As my master wills.”

Felt maintained her insolent demeanor, and Reinhard followed her lead. The magnanimous elder did not comment on their uneven dynamic, simply nodding quietly and saying, “Understood.”

“Well, despite a bit of commotion, it seems everyone is accounted for. Lastly, Lady Felt, if you have anything to say…”

They intended to offer Felt an opportunity to speak, just like the other candidates.

Felt furrowed her brows slightly, appearing to ponder Miklotov’s suggestion, but then she raised a single finger and said, “Just one thing, then.” She stepped forward, positioning herself in the sightline of everyone present. And then,

“—I hate nobles.”

With a refreshing smile, she spread her hands as if indicating the Council of Wise Men and declared.

“—I hate knights.”

Maintaining that smile, she now pointed at the Royal Guard with her other hand.

“—I hate this kingdom.”

With both hands still spread wide, she wove her words, a hidden venom in her full smile.

"—I hate everyone in this room, the ground I'm standing on, everything. That's why I'm going to smash it all to pieces."

Felt tilted her head as if to say, "How's that?", and smiled gleefully.

At her attitude, the emotions of those who had completely forgotten to think exploded in an instant.

"Wh-What is she saying—?!"

"Destroy the country in a Royal Selection meant to choose a queen?!"

"What about all our time?!"

"Why do you all have to whine and act like 'we' can't even talk without some kind of title? All that talk about pride and history is just ridiculous."

Before the clamoring, angry audience, Felt dismissed their words in a single breath. Then, she plucked at the hem of the yellow dress she was wearing

"Dressed up in these frilly, expensive clothes, dripping with expensive jewels, your eyes are clouded by talk of blood and history. That's why none of you can see how rotten and crumbling the ground beneath your feet is."

"That's why," she continued, taking a breath, and then looked up at Miklotov on the dais.

"If I become queen, I'll smash it all. I'll knock down all those fools who can't see the crumbling ground beneath their feet and let some fresh air in."

The assembly could do nothing but turn pale at her clear declaration.

In response to her unprecedented outrageous remarks, Miklotov, still maintaining his composure, nodded magnanimously, then turned his attention to the knight standing beside her.

“Your master is a fierce one. Hearing those words, what do you think?”

“—Indeed. Lady Felt’s words are, regrettably, still merely a pipe dream.”

With that, Reinhard subtly undermined the very foundation of the girl he considered his master’s statement. Felt gave him a suspicious look, but Reinhard calmly brushed it off.

“However, the day will come when Lady Felt’s words reach everyone. —It is my duty to support her in all things so that this may come to pass.”

“However, it seems you yourself are included in what Lady Felt has declared she will destroy.”

“This person will also desire regeneration after destruction. In that event, there would be no greater fulfillment than to be by her side.”

Bowing deeply, Reinhard spoke with unwavering conviction before Miklotov. Felt, glancing at the knight’s demeanor, roughly raked her golden hair

“So, are you my ally or my enemy, after all?”

“An ally. —Only yours.”

“…Then, fine. I’ll work you to the bone.”

And so, the last master and servant pair for the Royal Selection was formed.

Then—,

“Now, it seems we have heard from all the candidates. So, once again, I ask my comrades on the Council of Wise Men.”

Solemnly, Miklotov spoke in a low voice.

Naturally, a sense of tension and silence descended upon the hall, and as everyone held their breath, awaiting his next words, Miklotov slightly widened his narrow eyes.

“For this Royal Selection, I declare its commencement with the five individuals present as candidates. I seek the approval of my comrades.”

“—By the authority of the Council of Wise Men, I approve.”

“Likewise.”

“I, too, approve.”

The members of the Council of Wise Men nodded in response to Miklotov’s proposal. After confirming their assent, Miklotov rose from his seat.

He then stepped forward, positioning himself beside the empty throne.

“—Now, I shall propose the conditions for the Royal Selection!”

Crusch Karsten, head of the Karsten Duchy.

Crusch’s First knight, Felix Argyle of ‘the Blue’.

“The candidates shall be Crusch Karsten, Priscilla Barielle, Anastasia Hoshin, Emilia, and Felt. All are individuals qualified as Dragon Maidens!”

Priscilla Barielle, ‘the Bloody Bride’.

The one-armed man from another world, Al the mercenary.

“The deadline shall be three years from now, today, one month before the Divine Dragon Ceremony— The ritual where the pact with the dragon is confirmed!”

Anastasia Hoshin, the young merchant from a foreign land.

Anastasia’s First knight, Julius Juukulius, ‘the Finest Knight’.

“The selection shall be decided by the Dragon’s Glow, before the Divine Dragon Volcanica!”

Felt, the lost royal bloodline (?).

Felt’s First knight, Reinhard van Astrea, ‘the Sword Saint’.

“Each individual shall strive to maintain the kingdom, and make their respective Royal Paths known to the common people and the subjects!”

Emilia, the silver-haired half-elf.

Natsuki Subaru, the self-proclaimed knight absent from this place.

“With these as the minimum stipulations, I hereby declare the commencement of the Royal Selection—!”

Miklotov shouted at the top of his lungs, and the hall was enveloped in tremendous fervor.

There were no voices. But everyone was unable to suppress the cries of their hearts.

With the aftershocks of that fervor at his back, Miklotov straightened his bent waist and opened his mouth wide.

“From this moment—the Royal Selection begins!!”

Chapter 23:
The Self-Declared Knight and the Knight Proper

1

—How many times had he been knocked down like this?

As the hard ground met his face, Subaru vaguely pondered this. His mouth was a mess of blood and gravel, and his body, already beaten more times than he cared to count, was burning as if on fire. His head felt hazy, thoughts refusing to cohere, and his swollen left eye was completely shut, making it impossible to see properly.

He was in tatters, like a discarded rag. Yet, due to his opponent's exceptional skill, there were no injuries serious enough to fatally impede his movement, at least not yet. His limbs still worked, and if he ignored the pain, no part of him refused to obey. To say his opponent was accustomed to inflicting pain sounded malicious, but the evidence etched across his body left no doubt.

"—I think any more is just pointless, don't you?"

A voice, distant and condescending, drifted down to him. Still lying spreadeagled on his stomach, Subaru laboriously moved his head to look in the direction of the voice. Through his skewed vision, he saw a purple-haired young man toying with the tip of the wooden sword in his hand. His white ceremonial attire was spotless, and naturally, his visible skin showed not a scratch, not a drop of sweat. Only the wooden sword in his hand, stained with his opponent's blood, stood out, a stark impression amidst his otherwise elegant demeanor.

"If you retract your earlier statement and bow your head, we can stop here. How about it?"

This was the same question he'd been asked countless times already. His body had been brutally beaten, relentlessly struck, and mercilessly knocked down. After each repeated assault, this surrender offer inevitably followed. His answer, of course, was already decided.

“…No, I won’t bow my head.”

His arms trembled. When he tried to stand, using the ground for support, his upper body wouldn’t obey. He rolled, used his shoulder as a pivot to prop himself up, then forcefully dragged his lower body to lift his torso. Next, he thrust the wooden sword, which clung to his palm, into the ground and clung to it as he got to his feet. During this time, his opponent didn’t press his attack on the completely vulnerable Subaru, merely shrugging his shoulders slightly, as if tired.

The difference in skill was obvious. The outcome was clear. His chances of winning were one in ten thousand, and without a miracle, he couldn’t even strike back.

He didn’t care, he thought. Everything else could be thrown aside for now. That he couldn’t win was self-evident. That he wouldn’t reach him was a given. From the start, he hadn’t been arrogant enough to expect a satisfactory outcome, being inferior to others. If that was the case, then at the very least, at the very least…

“…You’re the one who needs to retract your statement—!”

His torn mouth aching, Subaru bit off the end of his defiant cry as he charged at an agonizingly slow speed. He put everything into a desperate strike—the result was:

“There are differences that even everything you stake cannot bridge. That, too, is simply what you were born with, boy.”

The tip of the deflected, flipping wooden sword struck Subaru’s forehead hard. Red sparks filled his vision, his forehead split and bled, and the vision in his barely open right eye was stained crimson.

“How many times has this been?”

He gritted his teeth in pain, wiping the blood-soaked vision with the back of his hand. Slipping through that gap, a blow struck Subaru’s solar plexus, sending him flying backward.

Unable to break his fall, Subaru tumbled across the ground, once again sprawled out on his back. The impact to his chest made his lungs spasm, and the agony of breathlessness seized him. Though driven to the brink by the synergistic effect of pain and oxygen deprivation, Subaru's consciousness, far from fading, continued to rage as if seeking more fire.

The azure sky he looked up at was high and distant, with nothing visible beyond it. Facing the hateful blue, Subaru mustered all his strength and stood up again.

—He'd do it again, and again, no matter how many times.

Fueled only by his endless rage, he endured the agonizing pain that made him want to spit blood and looked forward. As if to avert his gaze from the truth of whether that rage was right or wrong.

2

Subaru realized that the story had started moving without him when Reinhard and Ferris, their faces showing completely opposite emotions, came to him in the waiting room after the assembly in the great hall had concluded, where he was slumped over.

"So, the Royal Selection has officially begun! Subaru-kyun, you're Lady Emilia's knight, right? Let's both do our best!"

Ferris spoke as if completely oblivious to Subaru's actions and their consequences in the hall, despite having witnessed the entire situation.

Next to him, Reinhard looked at Subaru with a compassionate gaze. Without pointing out Ferris's attitude, he smiled at Subaru, who was slumped in his seat, looking utterly defeated.

"I don't think it's as simple as Ferris says, but I agree that we should strive to improve together. Subaru, let's compete fairly and honorably."

"…Ah, alright."

When told so directly, with such a proud expression, Subaru could only give a vague affirmative. The meaning of their words was clear, and normally, Subaru would be scrambling to figure out his path forward.

However, at that moment, Subaru had something he needed to confirm, even more pressing than such important matters.

"…"

He knew it himself, yet the crucial words wouldn't come out.

He felt his cowardly, deceitful, and self-deprecating self holding him back, trying to disregard everything that needed to be set right.

It was humiliating to feel that way, but he could only bite his lip, and Subaru's eyes darted around, unable to meet the gaze of either Reinhard or Ferris.

"—Subaru, the old man is safe. His safety was guaranteed through Lady Felt's intervention."

"—!"

As if seeing through Subaru's cowardly heart, the red-haired youth provided the answer to the question he couldn't bring himself to ask.

Subaru's cheeks tightened in shock, and he stared with wide eyes. Reinhard nodded once.

"Given the passageway to the hall, it would be difficult for you to have passed by without seeing the old man. As someone who knows you and the old man are acquainted, it's easy for me to guess what's bothering you now."

Anticipating Subaru's unspoken thoughts even further, Reinhard raised a finger and explained. However, even he probably didn't understand the full extent of Subaru's guilt.

The baseness of giving up on saving Old Man Rom with his own strength at that moment, and despite there being a fallback plan, overlooking a situation where an acquaintance might be harmed.

No, to be honest, even that was just a pretense.

The truth of Subaru's heart, its very depths, was far, far more irredeemable.

"That's good, isn't it?"

Ferris smiled, leaning in to look at Subaru's face as he hung his head and averted his eyes. He looked up at Subaru from below with that charming smile, his hands clasped behind his back.

"You should be grateful to Reinhard and Lady Felt. —Now, Subaru-kyun doesn't have to make any excuses, right?"

"—!"

Subaru gasped, trying to look away, but found himself facing Ferris. Ferris's cat-like eyes widened, his chestnut cat ears twitched, and his sadistic grin stretched even wider across his face.

He truly looked like a cat toying with a mouse caught in its claws.

Subaru shivered. Ferris's sarcastic remark, clearly seeing through his thoughts, made Subaru instinctively try to form an excuse, but realizing it was exactly what Ferris wanted, he shut his mouth.

Ultimately, all Subaru could do was:

"Oh, right… Good, good. No, seriously, it's exactly as I predicted! I thought it'd go better if I left it to Emilia-tan, who's good at charming people, rather than messing things up myself. Well, in reality, it seems like my calculations were off, or rather, if I think about it calmly, Felt reacted super quickly, as expected."

Subaru spread his hands, shrugged his shoulders, relaxed his cheeks, tilted his head, and tapped his foot lightly. Ferris stared wide-eyed at the change, and Reinhard's expression tightened slightly. Subaru observed their reactions, keeping time with his foot, and then said:

"I'm guessing that's why Felt got so determined, right? What's the situation there, Knight Reinhard?"

"Hmm? Ah, that's right. The old man's appearance helped solidify Lady Felt's resolve in a good way. It's a little concerning that it seems to have gone against his original intentions, though."

The handsome man touched his chin, his brow furrowed slightly in thought. Reinhard's words, spoken with the perfect composure of a painting, didn't quite make sense to Subaru, who hadn't witnessed the exchange in the hall.

He merely imagined the events in the hall from the context Reinhard provided, and then accurately tried to trace how Natsuki Subaru should react after gaining that information.

"I see. So, I accidentally set the stage for a powerful rival to appear, huh? Emilia-tan might give me an earful later."

"I don't think that will happen. Lady Emilia, and of course, the other candidates, will surely want to compete fairly. To complain about a worthy opponent would show a lack of character."

"Nah, if I'm gonna do it, I'm the type who loves easy wins and being overpowered, so I don't quite get that feeling. I'm the kind who over-levels early in RPGs. Basically, by the time I leave the first forest map, the first monster is already in its second form."

Choosing a fire-type starter often leads to abnormal struggles in the first and second challenges if you're under-leveled early on. A grass-type is easiest, but that's cheating and a self-imposed restriction.

Anyway, putting aside Subaru's principles, judging by Reinhard's confident demeanor, their faction seems to be fully prepared and everything is going smoothly.

On the other hand, Ferris's faction, silently watching Subaru's frivolous attitude, has the longest-standing master-servant relationship, pre-dating the Royal Selection. Including Ferris's seemingly complete devotion to his master, Crusch, there appear to be no factors for concern.

Considering these relationships, it's undeniable that Subaru and Emilia's faction is falling behind. After all, the current Subaru is even hesitant to discuss the Royal Selection with Emilia now that she's returned.

—His fear of interacting with her was probably only as intense as during the period he was trapped in the loop at the Roswaal Mansion.

What was clearly different from that time was the state of Subaru's own heart, which feared contact with her.

Back then, he was afraid of the feeling that Emilia had become someone he didn't know.

Now, what terrified him was not knowing how the Emilia he had come to know more deeply felt about him.

"Anyway, if the discussion's over, where are the others? Just the two of you coming to pick me up, isn't that a bit too VIP treatment?"

"I think you know the answer, but the candidates need to discuss a few more details, so they're staying in the hall. For now, knights are free to do as they please…"

"I said I wanted to check on Subaru, and Ferris accompanied me. I apologize for not being able to properly support you in the hall earlier."

Subaru scratched his head with an embarrassed look, saying "Ah", as Reinhard took over Ferris's words and apologized.

"No, it's not your fault at all. In fact, when I look back, I just want to forget it because it's already becoming a dark stain on my past and my chest tightens. So just forget about it, okay?"

"I appreciate your generosity. I will never forget this kindness."

"Were you even listening to me?!"

Interpreting Subaru's guilt in the most positive light, Reinhard came to a conclusion completely opposite to what Subaru wanted.

His shouts ignored, Subaru, still looking troubled, turned back to Ferris.

“So, Reinhard aside, you… no, you… damn it, it doesn’t feel right!” “If you’re so conflicted about what to call me, you can call me “Ferris☆” with love, okay?” “Shut up. Why are you here, cat-ears? To be honest, shouldn’t you be by Crusch’s side?”

He remembered their brief exchange at the main gate of the Roswaal Mansion—their first meeting. At that time, Ferris had said something about not wanting to be apart from Crusch for a moment.

Considering that, he couldn’t help but wonder about the reason for Ferris’s presence here.

“There’s no problem regarding safety. Because Lady Crusch is much, much stronger than Ferris, you see?”

“Don’t say that so lightly… Is that really okay, Royal Guard?”

“Ferris’s selling point is elsewhere, so it’s fine. That selling point isn’t unrelated to Subaru-kyun either!”

Despite the irritation at the drawn-out words, Subaru patiently folded his arms and asked, “Oh really?”.

Ferris puffed out his cheeks at Subaru’s nonchalant attitude, wiggling his body and looking at Subaru from the corner of his eye with a cute gesture.

“Oh, come on, you know already. You’re just teasing me!”

“My heart, don’t waver. My heart, don’t flutter. What’s in front of me is the same kind of creature attached to my crotch…! Get to the point. What’s your selling point?”

“When it comes to Ferris’s selling point, there’s only this!”

Saying that, Ferris held up both hands in front of Subaru, raising two fingers. Then, the tips of his raised index fingers suddenly glowed faintly.

“Ugh… For some reason, I feel like the fatigue in my elbows, shoulders, and lower back is draining away…?”

“You’ve got an old man’s body that aches everywhere, haven’t you, Subaru-kyun?”

Subaru shivered, feeling the fatigue drain from his limbs as heat, and truly felt his body healing.

In short, it must have been due to the faint glow emanating from Ferris’s fingertips.

At that point, Subaru remembered what the ‘selling point’ was that the beautiful-girl-like youth standing before him had mentioned.

“Oh, right. So Ferris is some kind of amazing water magic user, huh?”

“That description, “some kind of amazing,” isn’t enough, Subaru.”

Reinhard corrected Subaru, who had recalled a forgotten detail and casually spoken it. He nodded at Subaru, who looked at him suspiciously, and then, raising his hand, pointed at Ferris.

“Ferris’s talent as a water magic user is unparalleled. Not just in Lugunica, but across the entire continent, there’s no one who can rival him. He possesses power befitting of the “Blue”, one of the Six Colors representing the pinnacle of each magic attribute in Lugunica, bestowed upon him at such a young age.”

“Another new detail… My head’s about to explode.”

Subaru didn’t bother to hide his exasperation at Reinhard’s fluent explanation. In front of him, Ferris, whose talent had been praised without reservation, put his hands on his hips proudly, puffing out his flat, unremarkable chest.

“Reinhard’s explanation skipped a lot, but that’s basically it. Because of all that, Ferris’s schedule, with this grand title, is constantly filled with requests from people seeking the healing power of water magic!”

Ferris pumped his clenched fist into the air, making a broad smile and saying, “Go, Ferris!”.

From that explanation, Subaru gathered that Ferris was essentially treated as a “super skilled renowned doctor” in this world. While it seemed unlikely he could tend to all fifty million citizens of the kingdom, the sheer number of people in a position to benefit from his touch made it easy to imagine how busy his days were.

He was in high demand, constantly sought after.

Needed by countless, innumerable people.

The moment Subaru interpreted Ferris in that way, he couldn’t help but compare himself to Ferris’s existence. He was someone who wasn’t needed by the person he cherished most and wanted to be needed by. It made him feel incredibly miserable.

That’s why,

“Honestly, I don’t really feel like relying on you since I don’t have any obvious symptoms of discomfort in my body. What do you think about that?”

Unable to endure his inferiority complex towards someone who was treating him kindly, Subaru deliberately trampled on it with a frivolous tone.

He knew that the more he spoke, the more miserable he would feel, knowing his own true feelings. He knew that even if he said it, it wouldn’t bring him any satisfaction.

“My body not being in top condition is partly due to lingering effects from injuries, and I think it’ll be fine once it heals. I don’t really feel anything about the gate issue either.”

“I don’t think the gate issue is so trivial that you can make light of it. It’s not okay if you just think of it as merely being unable to use magic, you know?”

“It’s not?”

Subaru frowned and asked back at Ferris's somewhat provocative tone.

Indeed, even when told about a gate malfunction, Subaru didn't feel anything specific. After being forbidden from using 'Shamak', he did feel a dull, persistent sense of fatigue deep within his body, like a murky residue.

However, he attributed that to the exhaustion of having his life force drained, and believed he would recover after nutritious meals and sufficient rest. It was hard to believe that an organ he had never been conscious of in his original world could become fatally impaired.

"You don't understand anything. Listen, the general idea is that a gate connects the outside and inside to let mana flow when using magic. In actuality, a gate doesn't just do that when using magic; it also circulates mana between the inside and outside to sustain life even during normal daily activities."

"So, it's like breathing?"

"You can think of it that way. Subaru-kyun, are you the type of human who can live without breathing?"

"Among the humans I know, fifteen minutes seems to be the world record."

Apparently, if you learn some yoga secrets and lower your heart rate to the limit, such a monstrous state of breath-holding is possible. However, that's probably not what he meant.

So, was Subaru's current state equivalent to living without being able to perform skin respiration? Surely it wasn't that severe.

"So, if I leave it like this, I'll end up like that sooner or later?"

"Subaru-kyun's gate, it's all messed up from all the strain you've put on it. At this point, ordinary water magic users can't even treat it. The most they can do is continuously cast magic and leave the crucial parts to natural healing."

Ferris emphasized that his own abilities were far beyond those of ordinary magic users, while also stating the urgent truth of Subaru's situation. Though, it might just be Subaru's envy making it sound that way.

"So, to quickly escape this critical situation…"

"Ferris's power is absolutely essential. Got it?"

Subaru furrowed his brow, showing his reluctance to Ferris's question as he swayed from side to side. However, Reinhard, observing their exchange, raised a finger.

"Forgive my interruption, but such an opportunity doesn't come often, Subaru. Ferris's skill is known throughout the country, and there's no end to the people who want to benefit from his power. You shouldn't expect to be given priority again in the future."

"Right, right. There are tons of customers waiting for Ferris. But, just this once, I promised to prioritize Subaru-kyun. So, just calmly give your body and soul to Ferris and relax, okay?"

Capitalizing on Reinhard's support, Ferris wiggled his fingers, extending both palms towards Subaru. Subaru looked at his gesture with a disgusted expression.

"When you say it like that, I, the contrarian, want to say no. I don't remember our bond deepening enough for you to give me such preferential treatment."

Counting their initial meeting, where they barely exchanged names, this was only the second time Subaru had met Ferris. Even if he considered the hall and waiting room encounters separately, it was only three times, and he didn't think anything had happened in that short period to stir Ferris's considerable kindness.

To Subaru's question, Ferris smiled mischievously, saying, "That's right, of course."

"Ferris has a super strict cat-like personality towards anyone outside his inner circle, so honestly, I absolutely wouldn't prioritize Subaru-kyun normally."

"You say that so frankly, which helps."

For Subaru, who had low communication skills, it was far easier to understand than superfluous flattery or superficial conversation. Ferris wiggled his body as if to emphasize, 'That's not it,' to Subaru, who didn't seem offended.

"Remember that day Ferris went to the Marquis's mansion to deliver the summons for this meeting? That was Ferris and Subaru-kyun's fated encounter!"

"Ah, the day I should've stayed in bed with a stomach ache."

"There you go again! You were secretly happy, weren't you?"

"Your gentlemanly companion drank expensive tea for free, my senior maid was furious at me afterward. I was forbidden from having mayo-squirts in the morning and evening."

He had, of course, ignored that prohibition and secretly resumed his mayo-squirts the very next morning.

Ignoring the incomprehensible words that spilled from Subaru's mouth, Ferris pouted, looking bored.

"Well, whatever. What's important isn't meeting Subaru-kyun, but that Ferris was asked by Lady Emilia at the mansion."

"…It was Emilia-tan after all."

"It was Lady Emilia, after all."

Subaru's tone was bitter and heavy, as the answer was expected.

Recalling his first encounter with Ferris at that mansion, the content of their conversation, and Roswaal's original reason for having Subaru accompany him to the capital, it quickly became clear.

Precisely because he understood the background, Subaru couldn't stop the heavy feeling from settling deep in his chest.

Subaru's body was being ravaged by mana depletion, a status ailment that could only be cured by Ferris, one of the capital's top magic users. Ferris was a retainer of Crusch, an opposing candidate in the Royal Selection. Asking him to treat someone in his own faction would mean incurring a debt to Crusch's camp before the Royal Selection even began.

In other words, Subaru was once again proving to be a hindrance to Emilia.

Knowing that,

"Hey, do I absolutely have to get treated?"

He spoke, knowing he would be met with incomprehension from the other party.

As expected, Reinhard frowned, looking as if he couldn't understand. Ferris, on the other hand, smiled wryly, as if he had anticipated Subaru's response.

"The compensation has already been paid. If Subaru-kyun isn't treated now, it might end up making Lady Emilia's efforts pointless, you know?"

"What kind of compensation? If it's something physical, you can just return it…"

"It's not something physical, and it's the kind of compensation that can't be returned once you know about it. So, unfortunately, Subaru-kyun's offer can't be accepted."

His plea was unceremoniously rejected, and Subaru could only put his hand to his forehead and look down.

Ferris had correctly read Subaru's feelings and was systematically blocking every escape route he presented.

That might have been his calculated move to put his master, Crusch, at an advantage, and at the same time, it might have been an act of human kindness and obligation to fulfill Emilia's wish, who had gone so far as to offer compensation to ensure Subaru's well-being.

All of these judgments obstructed Subaru's shallow and inadequate thinking.

"Why am I always so…"

He didn't want to be a burden to Emilia.

Knowing she wished to be queen and was working hard for it.

Understanding how much she was striving for that height, looking up to the distant throne.

He wanted to help her, found no other meaning, and that alone supported his very existence now, so he would give up everything.

So why was he so powerless, so ignorant, so incompetent, and such a hindrance?

"—If you lament your powerlessness so much, I think there are other choices you should make."

A serene voice echoed in the waiting room, and Subaru, who had been looking down, raised his head.

The voice came not from Reinhard or Ferris, but from the waiting room door. Looking in that direction, a slender, tall figure leaned against the open door, looking at them.

Receiving their gaze, the youth, stroking his purple hair, smiled with a somewhat affected air.

"You shouldn't make such a displeased face. I didn't expect a welcome, but to show such an attitude…"

"If I do, what then?"

"It would cast doubt on the character of those accompanying you. Be sure to be careful."

"Ugh…!"

If it were just a mere argument, he could have retorted that it was an unfair accusation, but if the matter couldn't be confined to just personal issues, that was different.

Subaru twisted his lips, swallowing his words of protest, and glared at Julius, who was striding leisurely into the room, with a hostile gaze.

"Julius, have the candidates finished their discussion?"

As if to block Subaru's hostile gaze, Reinhard stepped between their lines of sight and asked Julius.

In response, Julius shook his head slightly, closing one eye. "No."

"The discussion seems to be dragging on a bit. Lady Anastasia is concerned that if the Royal Selection begins under the current conditions, it might turn into an assassination free-for-all."

Julius explained that they were still ironing out those conditions.

Subaru, though turning his face away, took in the information and understood.

With five Royal Selection participants, and an unknown method of vying for the throne,

The most straightforward way to secure the throne in such a situation would logically be to eliminate all other candidates.

The candidates he had seen in the hall all seemed to have strong character, but regardless of their own natures, the opinions of those around them might not be the same.

Moreover, Emilia's faction, with Subaru in it, had clearly been subjected to sabotage in the past.

—Emilia's insignia theft on the very day Subaru was summoned to this world was an example of this.

Subaru must have realized the fact he was thinking of at the same time. His eyes met Reinhard's, who had slightly turned his face towards him.

To Subaru, who was at a loss for what to think, Reinhard simply lowered his chin, letting deep emotions swim silently in his blue eyes.

Then, he turned back to Julius.

“Assassination, that’s not a pleasant topic.”

“Of course, resorting to such means would be nothing short of an insult to the throne. However, we should be cautious, perhaps even overly cautious. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, that’s right. After that big incident half a year ago, it took so much effort to rebuild everything. We definitely don’t want to go through that again.”

Julius calmly countered Reinhard’s words, and Ferris concluded by agreeing. Watching the two tall men nod at Ferris’s words, Subaru felt a sense of exclusion, as if he were being left out again.

“So, why did you come here then?”

That’s why Subaru deliberately adopted an unfriendly attitude towards Julius.

In addition to being the source of his sense of exclusion, Julius had played no small part in the events that led to Subaru leaving the hall. While he blamed his own lack of foresight for the humiliation, even with that in mind, he couldn’t agree with Julius.

Bathing in Subaru’s now undisguised hostility, Julius calmly walked towards him. Reinhard subtly tried to block his path, but could not stop Julius’s determined steps towards Subaru.

Subaru and Julius faced each other, close enough to feel each other’s breath.

Compared to Subaru, who was roughly average height for a Japanese person, the tall and slender Julius was about half a head taller. Naturally, Subaru, looking up from such close proximity, said:

"Shouldn't the 'Finest knight' be by the princess's side at such a crucial moment? This castle's security might be so lax that invaders could easily sneak in, you know?"

"—Currently, with the Royal Selection participants gathered, the royal castle is one of the most important locations in the country. Naturally, the guards are approaching their duties with appropriate diligence. You have no reason to worry."

"…No, I really think that perception is dangerous. At the very least, I think you definitely have more reason to worry than anyone else."

Subaru said that to the confident-looking Julius, and could only lament the laxness of the royal castle's security network once again.

Subaru, who possessed no particular skills and hadn't undergone any special training, had managed to sneak in. It would be all the more likely if a professional came.

"You guys are so oblivious you wouldn't even notice a legendary mercenary with a cardboard box until he strapped a bomb to your back. To say you're perfectly safe is just… honestly, it makes my blood boil."

"I don't understand the meaning, but I can tell it's an insult. —This is the second time."

Julius turned away, walked past Subaru, and headed to the back of the room. Subaru followed him with his eyes and saw Julius stop by the window at the back of the waiting room—precisely where he could look down at the back of the castle.

"Now, you asked me why I came here."

With his gaze still fixed on the castle grounds below the window, Julius asked in a voice devoid of emotion. With his back still turned, Subaru lowered his chin in silent affirmation.

Did Julius sense his gesture? He prefaced with, "Then I shall answer", and turned around.

"The reason I came here, of course, was to see you. There's somewhere I'd like you to accompany me."

"What do you say?" Julius asked, spreading his hands, inviting Subaru's decision.

His stance implied that the choice was Subaru's. However, with such prickly emotions exchanged between them, it didn't feel like a friendly suggestion.

"What do I say? I can't accept or refuse if I don't know the place and purpose. Well, I can say it, but…"

"The place is the training ground, and the purpose is… let's see."

Julius responded straightforwardly to Subaru's remark, which was too sarcastic to be lighthearted, and thought for a moment, pressing a finger to his chin.

"The purpose is—to teach you reality, how about that?"

3

Subaru twisted his head, his feet planted on the well-trodden, sandy ground.

The location had shifted from the royal castle's waiting room to the independent Knight's Quarters next to the castle.

Here, the ground was packed with reddish-brown earth, and sturdy defensive walls, showing signs of long years, surrounded a training facility—commonly known as the drill ground—where guards honed their bodies daily and strove to improve their skills.

The grounds were perhaps half the size of a typical schoolyard.

It was ample space, whether for running around or engaging in swordplay.

Standing in the center of this area, Subaru performed slow, deliberate knee bends, stretching his muscles and warming up his still-cool body.

While Subaru calmly went through his warm-up, Julius stood about fifteen meters directly opposite him, surrounded by anything but silence.

This was because,

“Julius, you should stop this. It’s not like you.”

Reinhard was relentlessly appealing to Julius, who was also quietly preparing himself.

There was no anxiety or anger in Reinhard’s expression or tone as he pressed his point. Only a pure, almost sorrowful, concern.

With that emotion brimming in his blue eyes, Reinhard continued,

“I admit there might have been a slight excess on my part, but that’s merely something that can be corrected with a talking-to. Normally, wouldn’t you judge it the same way?”

“Normally, yes. Oddly enough, you are quite right, my friend Reinhard.”

Carefully removing the excessive decorations from his ceremonial white formal attire, Julius handed them one by one to a knight standing nearby.

He continued this task, turning an emotionless gaze towards Reinhard.

“If the day had been different, or if we had met elsewhere, I might have overlooked him. However, that was not the case.”

Cutting off the conversation, Julius averted his gaze from Reinhard.

His calm eyes now only reflected Subaru, who was performing knee bends directly in front of him.

Then, he unfastened the knight’s sword from his waist, and with its scabbard still attached, pointed its tip towards the sky.

“In front of those connected to the King, he insulted us, the knights, and spoke lightly of our chivalry. Without apologizing for that, he continued to heap insults upon me."

A hush fell over the drill ground, which had until then been filled with a faint murmur.

Only Julius's clear, captivating voice resonated.

Gathering the attention and ears of the onlookers, Julius surveyed the crowd.

"—From this moment, I shall pass judgment upon this insolent wretch who has defiled a knight's pride! Does anyone object?!"

"—!!"

A voiceless gale suddenly struck the air of the drill ground with intense force.

The source of this ear-splitting wind was the heat and voices emanating from the surging crowd.

It was the fervor of the gathered Royal Knights and guards, eager to witness the confrontation between Julius, their representative, and Subaru, who had collectively insulted them.

"Odds are a hundred to zero; no one's betting on me. Well, I really outdid myself this time."

"I'm truly hated". Subaru muttered, shrugging his shoulders slightly as hostile glares rained down on him.

It was the first time in his life he had experienced such a degree of enmity from so many people. Frankly, his heart felt cold, and he was overwhelmed by a sense that his legs might give way, crushed by the malice pressing down on him.

Despite this, his pulse didn't quicken, and while his limbs felt heavy, they weren't immobile.

Subaru found himself in a strange mental state, not quite what one would call resolved.

“Now, before we begin, let me ask again: do you intend to apologize for your earlier insolence and beg for forgiveness? If you do so now, with an apology fitting your repeated disrespect, I shall forgive you.”

“I can’t recall any ‘repeated disrespect’… For example, how should I apologize?”

“By rubbing your forehead on the ground while weeping. Or perhaps by lying on the ground like an obedient dog, exposing your belly to curry favor. How about that?”

“Both lack elegance, so I’ll respectfully decline.”

He was excellent at playing the clown, but that only mattered if there was an audience he wanted to make laugh. He absolutely could not tolerate being laughed at by these insufferable people in front of him.

Julius, who likely hadn’t expected a different answer, simply responded with a short “I see,” immediately dismissing Subaru’s retort. He handed the knight’s sword he had been pointing skyward to the knight beside him.

In its place, he received two wooden swords from the knight.

“Normally, it would be no surprise if your insolence warranted being cut down. However, you are, unwillingly, Lady Emilia’s attendant. Therefore, our confrontation shall be with wooden swords.”

Julius questioned him with his eyes if he had any objection, and Subaru succinctly replied “No problem” in sign language. Judging the answer from Subaru’s expression rather than his hand movements, Julius nodded and said,

“I’m glad you’re agreeable. I, too, shall face you purely with the sword this time. I swear I will not use any magic.”

“Oh, so you’re the type of knight who can also use magic, huh?”

“That’s included in being the ‘Finest’. —Now then, Ferris, you’ll be the referee."

"Yep, yep!"

Julius glanced sideways, where Ferris was waving a raised hand.

Having been appointed referee and readily accepting, his true feelings were utterly unreadable. Unlike Reinhard, who had tried to stop this to the very end, what was Ferris thinking, so gleefully present for this upcoming clash of violence?

"Alright, both of you do your absolute best. No matter how bad your injuries are, as long as you don't die, I'll take care of everything, so give it your all, Subaru-kyun!"

"Why are you only saying that to me? You should worry about him too."

"Whoa, feisty! Did you hear that, everyone? On the count of three, ready, set, go!"

Turning to the audience, Ferris waved both hands grandly like a conductor, prompting a burst of laughter from the crowd—mockery aimed at Subaru's recklessness.

Witnessing this wave of emotion, Ferris twitched his cat ears on his head.

"So, the betting odds are like this, but what are you going to do, Subaru-kyun?"

Subaru reached into his pocket, felt the coin with his fingertip, and flicked it towards Ferris.

He watched the coin sparkle as it arced through the air and landed in Ferris's hand.

"Bet on it anyway. If I win, I'll take everything, and I'll strip you all bare."

"No way, you pervert! You're going to do something naughty to Ferris, aren't you? Like in those naughty books! Like in those naughty books!”

Ignoring the wriggling “man-child,” Subaru turned back to Julius.

He sighed at Julius, who seemed fully energized, and slowly closed the distance. The fight would begin once he took one of the two wooden swords.

He had practiced sword swings at Roswaal’s mansion to train his body, but how well would he fare here?

“Anyway, I feel like I just got swept along into this situation, but I don’t actually remember agreeing to this little make-believe duel.”

“You came here. The look in your eyes also tells me you aren’t avoiding a clash. Isn’t that enough?”

“Hey now, Natsuki Subaru, renowned as the modern-day Mother Teresa with his principles of non-violence, non-submission, and non-nuclear, isn’t going to get all hyped up for such a violent approach!”

While prevaricating with random words, Subaru stood directly in front of Julius.

Despite his words, Subaru’s body was warmed up thanks to his warm-up exercises. He’d be able to move instantly once the signal started.

Julius narrowed his eyes, seemingly satisfied with Subaru’s state.

“I’m glad you’re motivated. Shall we begin then?”

Offering one of the wooden swords to Subaru, Julius declared the start of the mock duel.

Subaru felt the audience’s excitement naturally rise. He lightly swung the wooden sword he received, getting a feel for it in his hand, and then moved away from Julius—

“Ah, hold on. This one just feels… subtly off.”

Subaru spun the wooden sword in his hand and turned back to complain.

Hearing this, Julius, looking slightly taken aback, asked, “Is that so?”

“I don’t think it will make much difference, but would you like to try this one?”

“Ah, my bad. You know, I’m a bit of a pampered son, so it’s not good for me to hold items that don’t feel right in my hand—”

As he spoke, he took the wooden sword Julius offered with one hand. Then, he offered the wooden sword he had been given earlier back to Julius—

“Whoa!”

“…”

Before Julius’s fingers could even catch it, the wooden sword slipped from Subaru’s hand. Pulled by gravity, the wooden sword began its natural descent, and Julius, instinctively leaning forward, reached out to follow it.

Julius’s straight posture tilted, and the height difference between them vanished.

“—Hah!”

Stepping forward, Subaru slightly pulled back the wooden sword in his hand and, with a flick of his wrist, aimed an upward strike at the tip of Julius’s chin.

At the same time, he thrust his empty left hand forward, scattering the sand he had secretly gripped during his knee bends into Julius’s eyes—a two-pronged attack of blinding and surprise.

“Gotcha,” Subaru’s lips twisted into a wicked grin at his masterful little trick.

Immediately after,

"It seems you truly have no pride. How common and easy your life must be. —How truly pathetic."

A voice sounded in his ear. At the same instant, an impact arrived, a hard, sharp sensation that jolted his diaphragm.

The oxygen he'd held in his lungs exploded, and a short cry of pain, "Hah" escaped his open mouth. His body, struck by the hard impact, lifted forward, pivoting on his chest. His feet left the ground, the world turned upside down, and his internal organs were tossed about in a moment of weightlessness before his face slammed into the ground.

His face scraped against the sand, he vomited from the pain in his diaphragm, and as his brain took a powerful beating from the pain and heat—the drill ground erupted with fervor.

The recompense for reckless folly, exceeding one's limits, was now mercilessly about to befall Subaru.

In the high sky above the drill ground, a delayed scream of pain lingered, echoing.

High, high, far, far away.

Chapter 24:
The Duel's Details

1

"—Captain Marcos, I have a report!"

A guard, rushing in and saluting, announced this just as the intricate details of the treaty establishing the Royal Selection were being finalized, and the day's meeting was drawing to a close.

The young soldier, his shoulders heaving with haste, turned pale as he noticed the faces gathered in the room he'd intruded upon, his heart seizing with dread at his own impudence.

As the guard's blood seemed to drain with an audible rush, Marcos moved to shield him from the gazes of those in the room, saying,

"My subordinate has been rude. It is due to my insufficient guidance."

"The timing of the interruption was good, and the individual's remorse is clear on his face. If a superior lord says so, then there is nothing for us to reproach."

It was Crusch who, representing the assembly, showed magnanimity in response to Marcos's apology. She smoothed her long, green hair with a hand, then took a breath and continued, "More importantly"

"He must have forgotten the circumstances of this place to burst in like that. It must be something quite serious, wouldn't you say?"

To Crusch's tilted-head question, the guard nodded without hesitation. Then he opened his mouth, his expression betraying fear of what he was about to say,

"Captain, there is something I wish to tell you in private."

"…That is hardly a commendable attitude in front of everyone."

“Nevertheless, sir.”

Marcos, pressed by the subtle reprimand, instinctively judged that a ‘bad’ situation was unfolding based on his subordinate’s demeanor. Sensing only that, Marcos decided to excuse himself from the room and hear the report outside, but,

“You shall not leave this room, Marcos. I forbid it.”

Before he could even form the words, Priscilla, seated in a lavish chair, blocked his path. Unaware of Marcos’s intentions, she wore a sadistic expression, as if to say she found it amusing,

“I shall forgive the rudeness of disrupting the gathering. However, my indignation will not subside unless I hear the reason for it. Therefore, let the report be heard. In a voice loud enough for everyone here to hear.”

“With all due respect, Lady Priscilla. There are many matters that need not reach everyone’s ears. This matter is of that kind…”

“A mere old man, who merely snuck into the castle, gave spirit to a little girl who was previously nothing but spineless. —Then perhaps, that cannot be called insignificant, can it?”

Covering her mouth with a fan, Priscilla cast a fleeting glance towards Felt, who was positioned across the room. Felt, having been made fun of, twisted her lips into a downturned V-shape,

“Stop with your weird accusations, you airhead. Old Man Rom was supposed to be brought along anyway, but he got separated in the castle. Then a soldier who went out of his way to find him brought him to the hall. Isn’t that right?”

Felt crossed her arms, turning her face away from Priscilla, and looked up at the bald, giant man standing beside her—Old Man Rom—seeking his agreement.

The old man, eyes closed and maintaining an expression of enduring pain, responded to her request with a weak voice, “…Indeed.” Felt, though a hint of sorrow lingered in her red eyes, refused to elaborate further, cutting off Priscilla’s sarcastic pursuit.

"Princess, Princess. It's still early days, so how about you try not to make too many enemies? I'm already short one arm, so I'm a troubled man who has to work twice as hard just to break even."

"Hmph, very well."

Priscilla, still intent on tormenting Felt, reluctantly yielded to Al, her attendant's, suggestion. She then turned back to Marcos,

"However, my questioning of you is not over. You shall state your report loudly, so that we may also hear it. I permit it. Nay, I shall permit nothing less."

"…Captain."

"It cannot be helped. Obey the order."

To Priscilla's arrogant command, the guard sought Marcos's judgment, but Marcos's answer was an acceptance of the demand, tinged with reluctance.

An order from his superior, and furthermore, from a potential future leader of the nation—the guard lacked the courage to refuse the two directives.

He stiffened his expression, his eyes flickering with bewilderment and impatience, and straightened his posture,

"Reporting. After the meeting in the main hall concluded, Knight Julius requested the use of the training grounds. Having been granted permission, Knight Julius and…"

A fleeting glance, mid-report, from the guard's eyes towards the corner of the room—towards Emilia, who stood there looking somewhat out of place.

Receiving that gaze, Emilia blinked, as if suddenly addressed, with a sense of abruptness.

Before her surprise could turn into a question, before it could form into clear words, the correct information was delivered by the guard.

"—Natsuki Subaru, Lady Emilia's attendant, engaged in a mock battle with wooden swords."

"…Oh?"

Straightening his back, the guard blurted out what he had just witnessed.

Hearing this, Al, with a hand on his chin, let out a sigh of admiration. The others, to varying degrees, also showed emotions other than confusion in their eyes or on their faces.

Among them, Emilia was the only one who could clearly express nothing but bewilderment.

"…Eh?"

Unable to grasp the meaning of the words, Emilia let out a breathy sound and blinked her large, violet eyes, her thoughts coming to a halt.

Calmly, she tried to organize the reported information in sequence.

In other words, this is what it meant: In the training grounds, using wooden swords, for some reason Julius and Subaru were engaged in a duel—even after organizing it, the meaning remained elusive.

"Wh-Why would that happen…?!"

Unable to grasp the situation, Emilia voiced the rising doubt.

Stepping forward, approaching the guard standing across the desk,

"The training grounds, that's inside the Knight's building next to the castle, right? Subaru and Julius are… fighting?"

"Begging your pardon, but it is a mock battle. To think it began due to a personal grudge, as if it were a mere brawl, would affect Knight Julius's honor."

To Emilia, who spoke with a trembling voice, the guard firmly corrected her, unwilling to concede on that point.

Listening to his words, Emilia couldn’t dwell on such minor details. The clash between Subaru and Julius had shocked her to that extent.

Emilia regretted that she had been too preoccupied with her own matters to properly observe what had become of Subaru after he was made to leave the hall.

Subaru, who had been publicly shamed in front of everyone due to his outburst. She couldn’t deny that she had felt a slight sense of relief when he, hanging his head, was led out of the hall.

Could the consequences of such selfish thoughts be coming back to her now?

In the first place, Subaru was surely not fond of Julius.

It was Julius, the knight, who had rudely brought Subaru back to reality during his monologue in the hall, and even during the incident at the guardhouse in the capital yesterday, Subaru seemed to harbor resentment towards his aristocratic demeanor.

Although Subaru had yet to clearly reveal his background, Emilia vaguely suspected that his way of interacting with Julius suggested he had reasons to feel animosity towards the so-called upper class.

The lack of such an effect on Roswaal was likely due to Roswaal himself being a highly eccentric individual among nobles.

It was undeniable that issues that had not surfaced until now, and thus had been put off, had become the spark for the current situation.

Once thoughts began to spiral in a negative direction, they would only tumble to the bottom.

Emilia, following this tendency, her imagination spiraled for the worse, and a clear look of worry appeared on her refined face,

“Anyway, I have to stop them immediately. Please lead me to the training grounds…”

"Ah, I don't think that's a good idea, if you ask me."

Quickly, to the scene, to mediate between the two.

Emilia's words, as she thought this, were interrupted by a girl with a distinctive way of speaking.

Ignoring Emilia, who frowned at being cut off, Anastasia, shaking her long blue hair, pointed a finger at the still-straight-backed guard and prefaced, "I just want to confirm something"

"About that 'mock battle,' do you know who initiated it?"

"I heard it was Knight Julius. As a result of Natsuki Subaru accepting it, the current situation at the training grounds is…"

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine, no need to make excuses. If Julius was the one who initiated it, that's enough."

No matter how he tried to gloss it over, it was a private duel—a situation that could be judged as such. The guard tried his best to prevent Julius from being disadvantaged, but Anastasia waved her hand, dismissing his efforts. However, she wasn't ignoring the guard's intention,

"—If the mock battle was Julius's proposal, then I'm against stopping it."

And so, Anastasia showed her stance of affirming her attendant's judgment, directly confronting Emilia, who was about to move to stop them.

Emilia gasped, then quietly asked Anastasia, who shrugged slightly, "Why?"

"Subaru and Julius… your knight and my acquaintance are clashing, you know? Aren't you worried?"

"Worried? About what? That Julius might go too far, and we'll have to pay for your boy's medical treatment?"

At Anastasia's puzzled reply, Emilia was speechless.

However, as if to mock her astonishment, Priscilla, who indeed had a mocking smile on her lips, said,

“Indeed. From what I saw, he is a fool who does not know when to back down. By now, he might have been so stubborn that his already unsightly face has become unbearable to look at.”

“That’s right. The courage he showed in the hall was admirable, but he seemed like a child so light he might just fly away.”

Anastasia followed Priscilla’s sarcasm, and the two exchanged malicious smiles.

At their stance, Emilia put a hand to her forehead, her violet eyes filled with agitation,

“You, you two… don’t you have something else, something more to say?”

“To discuss… Oh, how about a wager? That Natsuki Subaru, was it? Let’s bet on how long that boy can hold his own against Julius.”

“I believe one usually bets on victory or defeat.”

“Then it wouldn’t be a gamble. If you’re fine with me, the house, taking everything, then that’s fine too.”

As Anastasia made a ring with her finger and smiled slyly, Priscilla, with a bored expression, dismissed her previous statement, saying, “Nonsense.”

Emilia was speechless at their consistently ‘observant’ attitude. From her perspective, their way of thinking was utterly unacceptable.

To her, gasping and at a loss for words, came another blow,

“If we are to question the propriety of a mock battle, then I, too, do not approve of stopping it midway.”

Crusch, who had been silently observing until then, crossed her arms and held back Emilia, who was about to intervene, with a contradictory opinion.

“Why?” Emilia’s eyes clouded over, having expected Crusch, who seemed to make judgments more in line with common sense than the previous two, to say something different. To her unspoken question, Crusch closed her eyes,

“If it were Lady Emilia’s attendant who had challenged to a duel, then it would be right for Lady Emilia to offer mediation. However, if it was Knight Julius who proposed it, and your attendant who accepted, then it is out of line for you to intervene.”

“Why? Because Subaru is my…”

“If you cannot understand that, then no amount of explanation will suffice. —Though it is hasty, it is necessary.”

Spoken with a strong tone, Emilia could not press Crusch further. Crusch, too, tightly sealed her lips, as if there was nothing more to say to Emilia.

Though not exactly talked into it, with the other three united in their decision to ‘observe,’ Emilia had no choice but to consider the reasons behind their judgment. If she spoke without thinking, it would only prove that she wasn’t on the same level as them.

Emilia’s lips trembled, her face somewhat drained of color as she sank into thought. Felt, observing this exchange, including Emilia, quietly asked Old Man Rom standing beside her,

“I don’t get it at all, Old Man Rom, do you know what it means?”

“I don’t know what that boy did before I came to the hall. So, I can only guess based on what I just heard.”

“What do you think that guy did… what do you think he did?”

To Felt’s question, Old Man Rom put a hand to his chin and pondered for a moment, “Well, now,”

“He probably acted like a reckless fool in front of everyone, making a scene and challenging people, earning the displeasure of many with his words, and in the end, unable to retort, he was ordered to leave dejectedly—that's the kind of atmosphere I sensed."

"Wow, Old Man Rom. You weren't watching, were you?"

Felt praised Old Man Rom's almost perfectly accurate guess. In response, Old Man Rom touched his bald head and furrowed his brows, saying, "I just made the worst possible guess, and it turned out to be even worse…" Then the old man nodded, as if he understood,

"If my guess is right, then indeed… that knight you spoke of, he must be a terribly unpleasant person, steeped in aristocratic principles. Or perhaps…"

Old Man Rom was about to present the other possibility. However, betraying Felt's anticipation, something made a sound that changed the atmosphere of the room.

A hard, sharp thud echoed on the conference room floor, a dry burst that shook the hearts of those in the serene room.

Surprise, or perhaps a slight discomfort, filled the gazes directed at the culprit of the sound—Al, who shrugged at the attention, and tapped the rim of his metal helmet with his single arm, making it ring.

"My bad, my bad. See, I'm missing an arm, so I can't clap to get attention. So I gotta stomp instead."

"My apologies, my apologies," Al said, unapologetically, with a hand chop gesture. Then he spun around and stepped forward, pointing directly ahead,

"Come on, come on, the conversation's straying a bit from the main point, haven't you noticed? It's not unusual for two men who don't like each other to get into a brawl. It's complicated with their positions and all, but before they're knights or self-proclaimed knights, they're men."

"I don't think it's that simple…"

"You're making a simple matter too complicated, young lady. The problem isn't that they're brawling, but why this secret was brought here."

Wagging his finger, Al responded to Emilia, then pointed again at the person he had indicated—that is, the young guard who had brought the report to the room,

"If they're just fighting, a report after the fact would be fine. So why are you so flustered that you had to call the captain?"

At Al's question, the guard's face visibly paled. He looked around hesitantly, wondering how to answer, and his eyes met Priscilla's, who was smiling sweetly beside Al.

Her lips stretched into a wide grin, an expression of ecstatic cruelty mixed with an angelic smile.

The guard finally looked to Marcos for salvation, but Marcos's answer to that plea was merely a merciless shake of his head.

"The reason I called the captain was… that…"

"Clearly, loudly, and articulate, please."

"Knight Julius and Natsuki Subaru's mock battle… it is just too one-sided, so I came to ask for instructions!"

At Al's malicious demand, the guard said, almost in despair, straightening his back. Hearing the content, Marcos, unusually, changed his expression to one of bewilderment,

"…One-sided, you say?"

"I believe Knight Julius is holding back, but… it's just… too much to watch."

The guard looked at Emilia with difficulty, inadvertently making everyone in the room recall the gruesome scene he had just witnessed.

At his bitter demeanor, Emilia belatedly realized that the situation had worsened beyond her imagination, and she cast aside all her previous hesitation.

“I have to stop them…!”

Emilia let out a murmur tinged with impatience, then darted past the guard standing by the door, and ran out of the room into the corridor leading to the Knight’s quarters—to the training grounds in question.

“Wait, Lady Emilia! Hey, follow Lady Emilia!”

“—Y-Yes, sir!”

The guard sent his subordinates after the fleeing Emilia, then followed her out into the corridor.

As a result, Marcos turned back to the people left in the room,

“I apologize for the disturbance. I will now endeavor to resolve the situation…”

“No, it’s fine. Rather, let’s follow the young lady and go watch the mock battle, shall we?”

Al stopped Marcos, who was about to bow his head, and said cheerfully, then shrugged his shoulders at Priscilla nearby, as if seeking her agreement, “Right?”

“You like it too, Princess, don’t you? Watching a show where a weak creature is tormented by a beast.”

“Do not misjudge me with your baseless assumptions, Al… Well, I do love it.”

Conditionally affirming her attendant’s words, Priscilla rose from the chair she had been leaning on, lightly arched her back, and her ample bosom swayed,

“Very well. I was getting a little cramped from the tedious conversation dragging on. It wouldn’t be so bad to look down on the pathetic sight of some common fool and mock them.”

Closing her fan with a snap, Priscilla pointed its tip towards Marcos, who stood by the door.

Maintaining her unchanging arrogance,

“Lead the way to that training ground. —It is my command.”

2

Blood streamed from the shallow gash on his forehead into Subaru’s uninjured eye, staining his vision red. He roughly wiped it away, letting out a frustrated grunt.

He’d long since lost count of how many times he’d been knocked to the ground and rolled. His left eye was completely swollen shut, and he couldn’t tell if his lip or the inside of his mouth was cut; the taste of blood was too overpowering to distinguish.

He didn’t feel much pain. Sometimes, when injuries are too severe, the human brain rejects the pain, preventing it from reaching the body. Subaru had certainly experienced many life-threatening injuries since being summoned to this world. As someone who had faced death multiple times, he could attest that there truly was a kind of pain so extreme it made you feel nothing at all.

One could launch into a long, modern explanation about an overabundance of adrenaline secreted in the brain, but if he were to describe the current situation in more primal terms, what made Subaru forget his pain was simply pure rage.

“You piece of absolute, piss-soaked, shit-stained fuck!”

Subaru spat out the vulgar words, overwhelmed by the oppressive emotions swirling within him. It was rage at Julius, who stood calmly before him. It was rage at his own helplessness, unable to even land a single blow against such an opponent. And it was the rage of a child’s tantrum over an uncontrollable situation.

It was rage. Nothing but rage. Rage was all that consumed Subaru at that moment.

Again, a wooden sword slammed into his gut, sending vomit spewing. Subaru, who had been sitting on the ground, painfully got back to his feet. His knees trembled, his breathing was ragged, and his vision was a blurry red from the blood he couldn't wipe away. Yet, driven by an inexhaustible rage, Subaru refused to stop facing his unwinnable opponent.

"Perhaps it's time you acknowledged your limits."

Julius responded to Subaru's abnormal tenacity not with praise, but with exasperation. He still stood there, immaculate, without a speck of dust or a drop of sweat on his face. He merely twirled the tip of the wooden sword that had relentlessly struck Subaru.

"You should have keenly felt the unbridgeable gap between us. You must now understand what a 'Knight', whom you insulted, truly is."

His words weren't meant to appeal to Subaru's heart, but to break it. Naturally so. A climax where opponents acknowledge each other after a duel can only happen if there's mutual respect, even if slight.

Julius merely continued to strike Subaru to demonstrate the essence of a knight, and Subaru, in turn, showed his futile resistance to the reality Julius presented by continuously getting back up. There was no room for anything to be born between them. Even after this long exchange, nothing had changed.

"Any more of this, and I fear it might become life-threatening."

"Huh?"

Perhaps trying to change his approach to breaking Subaru's spirit, Julius's provocation shifted. But Subaru responded, his voice dripping with clear anger.

"Like hell I'd die from something like this! Don't act like you know everything!"

"You speak as if you're experienced."

"In this world, I'm the man who knows that better than anyone."

Subaru said it without bluff or jest. Seven times in total—that was how many times his life had been trampled since coming to this world. If he scoured his previous world, this world, or even the three thousand worlds beyond, there was no one who had confronted their own death as much as Subaru had.

That feeling told him:

It hurts like hell, it's agonizing like hell, it's frustrating like hell, and it's hell, hell, hell, but a human doesn't die from something like this.

"I don't understand."

Julius shook his head, letting out a sigh as Subaru spat out blood and defiance. He glanced at the swaying Subaru.

"Why are you so stubborn? You must surely realize by now that you're no match for me. No, I know you already understand that you can't defeat me."

"…What are you…"

"We don't need pointless exchanges. Your objective is no longer victory. No, I should say that you and I have different definitions of victory."

With Subaru still in his sight, Julius gestured with his arm as if giving a speech. He lifted his chin slightly, speaking loud enough for those around them, not just Subaru, to hear.

"Your victory condition isn't to defeat me, but to 'land a single blow' on me, isn't it? Whether that means hitting me once with your wooden sword or making me stumble, I don't know the specifics."

"—!"

Subaru bit his lip, desperately suppressing the scream that threatened to erupt from his throat.

He'd been hit where it hurt. There was only the bitter taste of being exposed.

Humiliation and shame washed over Subaru, and he desperately clung to his pride, preventing his trembling lips from forming an excuse.

“Hmm, I thought some unbearable pretense might come out… but it seems you have enough sense to restrain that. However,”

Looking at Subaru, who was draining his last vestiges of pride, Julius continued:

“To misjudge your opponent’s skill, then lower your own goal mid-battle, debasing your own worth to that extent… I can only say that such pride is undeserved.”

“—You fucking bastard!!”

Julius’s exasperated gesture, a sight Subaru had grown accustomed to throughout the match, now filled Subaru’s thoughts with pure rage. The bitterness of having his inner feelings exposed only fueled his explosion.

Ignoring the pain from the countless blows to his body and his blurry red vision, Subaru lunged with all his might, raising his wooden sword towards Julius’s composed face—

“Not elegant.”

Just before he could swing down, a thrust was delivered, piercing Subaru’s right wrist, which held the sword. The sharpness of the blow sent the wooden sword flying from his grip. As he instinctively followed its trajectory with his eyes, a second strike landed squarely in his solar plexus, easily knocking Subaru to the ground.

His breath caught, and he tumbled across the dirt, unable to even brace himself. After experiencing his world turn upside down about five times, he lay sprawled on his back on the ground. Subaru literally vomited blood, and right beside his face, the flung wooden sword spun as it fell, sticking into the ground and seemingly mocking its owner’s pathetic charge.

“Just admit it already.”

Subaru coughed painfully, struggling to expel blood and gravel. Looking down at him, Julius repeated the surrender recommendation he had given countless times before.

"You cannot reach me. No matter how many times you re-evaluate the conditions for victory against me within yourself, it will be the same. —I will never allow you to achieve it."

"…"

"I will utterly crush and break your spirit, and make you regret your actions. I will make you reflect on your presumptuous words and deeds. Then, I will make you decide."

"…"

"To withdraw yourself from Lady Emilia's side—!"

"—?!"

Subaru, who had been gasping and taking shallow breaths, suddenly jolted upright at Julius's words. The pain from the blows to his chest screamed through his entire body, but he couldn't care less. He twisted his body, baring his teeth.

"Don't you dare… What right do you have to say something like that…?!"

"Naturally, I have no authority over your disposition. Therefore, I cannot dictate your future actions. All I can do is state this."

Julius looked directly at Subaru, pausing for a breath.

"—That you should, of your own accord, leave Lady Emilia's side."

To a stunned Subaru, Julius added, as if instructing him, "Listen."

"Your actions, your words, serve only to lead Lady Emilia into hardship. I am convinced of this after witnessing your exchange in the plaza and your conduct here."

"What in the world are you…?"

"You are selfish and self-centered, and above all, your thinking is superficial, naive, and far too lenient."

Counting on his fingers, Julius systematically demolished Subaru's thoughtless ideas.

"You are nothing but a troublesome burden to Lady Emilia, forcing difficulties upon her. You can do nothing for her, nor will you ever be able to. Until now, you may have clung to her kindness and been permitted to remain by her side."

Subaru had experienced powerlessness many times. Since coming to this world, he had repeatedly choked down his frustration at unchangeable realities, struggling against his own inadequacy.

"However, she can no longer allow someone who merely depends on her kindness to remain by her side. From this point on, she walks the path to the throne. The obstacles that stand in her way are numerous and formidable, and it is easy to imagine that every conceivable hardship will befall her."

Yet, Subaru had overcome countless misfortunes until now. In situations where his own strength was insufficient, he had borrowed the power of those around him, or utilized his unique advantage of future knowledge to alter circumstances.

"Those who walk that path with her must possess the resolve and strength to overcome those hardships together. They must be able to powerfully push her forward as she strives for even greater heights."

It had all begun with his feelings for a single girl. No matter how painful, how difficult, how sad, how frustrating, how inadequate, how unreachable, how agonizing, Subaru had persevered until now because of his feelings for that one girl. And now—

"You must absolutely not be someone who clings to her kindness, pulling her down."

This man…

"You should not be by her side— By Lady Emilia's side."

Was this man trying to even take away his reason for living?

“RRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAH—!!”

His emotions exploded. He sprang to his feet, pulling out the wooden sword that had been stuck in the ground. With the momentum of his spin, he aimed the wooden sword at Julius’s upper body.

The tip sliced through the air, and with the centrifugal force, a direct hit would easily shatter bone. This was literally a do-or-die blow, infused with all the pent-up frustration and passion accumulated throughout their exchange—intended to smash Julius’s face.

—The sound of his wrist bone shattering echoed in Subaru’s ears as if it happened in a silent world, loud and clear.

At the edge of his vision, he saw his right arm, still gripping the spinning wooden sword, intercepted by the waiting tip of Julius’s wooden sword, completely crushed and broken. His wrist was twisted entirely backward, and a protruding bone had pierced through the flesh of his wrist, revealing a white tip. In a few seconds, agonizing bleeding would begin.

Calmly verifying this, Subaru’s consciousness slowly followed the moving Julius.

Slowly, only Julius could move in this silent world—a strange phenomenon. Trapped by the sensation of the world slowing down in a desperate, near-death situation, Subaru was utterly amazed by his own foolishness, connecting to such an out-of-place thought.

Julius’s movements as he prepared to deliver a follow-up strike to the pathetic Subaru before him—every fluid motion brought a surprisingly vivid emotion to Subaru.

“—I will merely pity you.”

The unleashed strikes of the wooden sword delivered countless impacts across Subaru’s entire body in an instant.

His arm was broken. Several ribs were fractured, and it was questionable if any part of him remained uncracked. The gash on his forehead, which had only been a cut, was now completely split open, and the tip of the wooden sword had ravaged his mouth, knocking out several permanent teeth. A blow to his throat left an undeniable mark, and the finishing strike, not a thrust but a swing, landed directly in his stomach with a dull, watery sound, as if his internal organs had ruptured.

He was sent spinning so violently he couldn't tell up from down, spitting out an immense amount of blood. The reddish-brown dirt of the training ground deepened to crimson with Subaru's bleeding.

The brutality of the outcome silenced everyone, not just Julius. The training ground remained crowded with knights and guards who had gathered to witness Subaru's public lynching at the hands of Julius. Yet, every single spectator remained silent, watching Subaru tumble like a discarded rag.

The initial enthusiasm had lasted only for the first few exchanges. An impudent man who had mocked the status of knights and insulted the Royal Selection itself, which determined the future of the kingdom. They expected him to be tortured by Julius, the head of the Royal Guard, to feel the pain of his actions, and to apologize —that was the scene they had gathered to witness.

Indeed, for the first ten minutes, they had cheered and mocked, looking down on Subaru's pathetic state and showering Julius, their colleague, with unstinting praise. However, the atmosphere had begun to change when everyone realized that this mock battle was, in the literal sense, nothing more than a genuine public lynching.

An overwhelming disparity in skill lay between Subaru and Julius. Compared to Julius, who was among the top swordsmen in the knight order, Subaru's sword skills were, to put it mildly, still at an amateur level. Since Subaru possessed no special abilities, his fighting style was nothing more than a childish threat, merely having some familiarity with long weapons.

Subaru's attacks were parried, his clumsy defenses exploited, and he was repeatedly knocked to the ground. For the first few times, laughter dominated. Beyond ten times, sighs of exasperation began to overlap. And by the time they hated even counting, voices muttered:

“He’s overdoing it.”

“Why doesn’t he just give up?”

“It’s a pathetic and boring stubbornness. Damn, what an unpleasant sight.”

They cursed him vehemently, yet as Subaru continued to get up, they covered their faces with their palms. This was truly unbearable to watch. He was too weak, too pathetic, and his disgrace deeply stimulated their sense of ‘shame.’ He should just stop. The outcome was already clear to everyone, and everyone had been able to reaffirm the superiority of the ‘Knights’. Any more of this was a meaningless fight.

However, Julius never relented in striking Subaru with his wooden sword. Ferris, who had the right to stop the fight as an observer, showed no sign of intervention, no matter how injured Subaru became. Subaru himself, brushing off the knights’ pleas, continued to stand.

What was the meaning of such a battle, such a struggle? Without a word, merely looking down at Subaru being beaten so pitifully, every spectator sought meaning in the scene below.

Everyone understood. There was no meaning, no significance, to this struggle. There was only utterly pathetic, unsightly, and worthless stubbornness.

Then, at the very least, they had to witness the conclusion of that stubbornness. The knights and guards gathered there, facing a scene that made them want to avert their eyes, yet not leaving the spot, felt a sense of responsibility for having been involved in this situation as spectators.

Blood from his shattered wrist and massive amounts of vomit stained the training ground red. Subaru’s small, trembling body lay face down, his previously insane fighting spirit having withered, completely unfit for battle.

Everyone thought it was over this time. Seeing Subaru utterly defeated, everyone sensed the end of this one-sided brutality. However, Julius's stance, holding the blood-stained wooden sword, did not relax. He looked at Subaru, whose consciousness was likely unclear, and maintained his fighting stance without a hint of wavering in his fighting spirit.

At his unwavering posture, the spectators surrounding them also understood his knightly resolve and held their breath. It wasn't over yet. For this battle to end, there was a reason why it couldn't simply conclude with one side being defeated. That was—

"—That's enough."

It was a voice that had not been heard once throughout the tragedy in the training ground. As the crowd cheered and then increasingly sighed. As Julius calmly, or with cool passion, demonstrated the essence of a knight. As Ferris, the observer presiding over the scene, occasionally let out sighs that could be interpreted as either admiration or despair.

A single young man, who had remained silent throughout, stepped into the center of the training ground—between the fallen Subaru and the poised Julius.

The red-haired young man's handsome face was devoid of expression as his blue eyes, driven purely by righteous indignation, pierced Julius.

"If you intend to continue, then I will be your opponent."

He had merely uttered a single sentence, doing nothing special. Yet, upon hearing that one sentence, a chill ran down the spines of the knights, who weren't even direct participants. They were surprised by their own body's reaction, a shiver, and then their hearts, delayed, began to ache as if frozen by the aftershock.

Reinhard, the 'Sword Saint' —The strongest being in the Dragon

Kingdom of Lugunica, no, an unparalleled power across the entire continent—his oppressive aura enveloped the entire training ground and refused to dissipate.

Even mere aftershocks were like this. Considering what it would be like to directly face this oppressive aura, one would worry about Julius's state of mind, facing his blue gaze head-on. Just as the crowd's estimation of Reinhard was too low, so too was their estimation of Julius.

Receiving Reinhard's fighting spirit, which made even knights prepared to lay down their lives tremble, Julius remained perfectly composed. Ferris, standing beside him, was similarly unfazed, proving unequivocally that they were both on a different level.

Ignoring the spectators' thoughts, Reinhard, who had merely directed his gaze, slightly narrowed his eyes at the unmoving Julius.

"I repeat, Julius. Any further action is nothing short of an act of violence. As a Royal Guard knight… no, even before that, as a human being, I cannot overlook it."

"…"

Julius's eyebrows, which had shown no movement until then, twitched at those words. Reinhard raised an eyebrow in puzzlement at Julius's reaction, but Julius, still maintaining his stance, lightly waved his free hand at Reinhard.

"Reinhard, I consider you a very good friend."

He then uttered words that further perplexed Reinhard. Julius shook his head slightly at Reinhard, who deepened the furrow in his brow in bewilderment, and continued.

"Your knightly integrity is exceptional even among the Royal Guard. There is no doubt about your loyalty to the kingdom, and your skill and effort to fulfill it are impeccable. If asked what kind of being a hero is, I would answer without hesitation that it is my friend, Reinhard van Astrea."

"…That's an overestimation."

Even though he didn't understand what Julius was trying to say, Reinhard declined the praise with a look that was more genuinely humble than merely polite.

"I, too, consider you a good friend before a colleague. That's why I cannot allow a person like you to debase yourself further with your actions…"

"No matter who denies it, even if you yourself don't believe it, you are a hero, Reinhard."

Julius interrupted Reinhard, who tried to continue his persuasion. However, while his words were indeed praising, his tone contained no pleasant emotion.

"You are a hero, too much of a hero. The divine protections you were born with, the Astrea family that has embodied your very existence in the most fitting way. And a soul so noble and pure that there is no room to doubt it, no reason to question it —That is why you are a hero."

"What are you trying to say, Julius?"

"You are a hero. —You can only be a hero."

Julius shook his head faintly, telling the bewildered Reinhard that. Then he raised the tip of his swaying wooden sword and gestured behind Reinhard.

"As someone who can only live as a hero, you likely won't see the meaning of this battle. Nor will you understand why I won't pull back my sword, and…"

Feeling a stirring presence behind him, Reinhard turned, a hint of surprise in his eyes. There,

"Why he still stands."

With ghost-like, slow movements, yet dragging his battered body, Subaru's figure was there, standing up.

3

In front of him, Subaru saw Julius and Reinhard exchanging words.

Having thoroughly purged his body of impurities, he actually felt lighter. The pain was still intermittent, his limbs remained as heavy as lead, and worst of all, his right hand, which he'd tried to place on the ground, was hideously mangled. Even so, the overwhelming fatigue that threatened to steal his will to stand had vanished, and his body, though sluggishly, was starting to obey his commands.

Since his right hand was unusable, he dragged himself by his elbow and shoulder, using his left arm, which, though not unscathed, was still functional, to push his body up. He poured defiance into his trembling lower body, turning it into energy, and after a considerable amount of time, somehow managed to stand. Finally, as he was leaving the ground, his left hand brushed against a fallen wooden sword nearby. He picked it up, used it like a cane to steady his upper body, and barely stood. He was standing.

"—Subaru."

He looked, and at a distance close enough to feel his breath, a red-haired, stern face was looking at him. Clear concern filled his eyes, and he could also see a smoldering spark of righteous indignation there.

Reinhard was standing in front of him, concerned for Subaru, confronting Julius.

His normally slow mind quickly deduced the answer. The moment he reached that conclusion, a slow, crescent smile spread across Subaru's lips. His mouth was badly cut, and several teeth were missing, so smiling brought pain. How could he not smile?

"You don't need to push yourself. I will avenge you. This treatment is far too unjust. It absolutely cannot be forgiven."

While still aware of Subaru, Reinhard's gaze was fixed on Julius, who stood opposite him. Julius merely looked back at Reinhard with a sad, quiet gaze. Subaru didn't know what kind of exchange had occurred between the two. He didn't know, but he knew this much:

"Subaru, just leave this to me…"

"Reinhard."

Subaru called the name of the young man standing before him, clearly looking into his sky-blue eyes with his one good eye. This was the third time he had been protected by him, with him standing in front.

The first time he shamelessly cried for help, the second time his life was narrowly saved, and now this time. By the third time, an optimism had bloomed, a belief that if he just left it to Reinhard, everything would somehow work out. The repeated trust between the protector and the protected—that certainty within Subaru once again presented him with the best way to navigate this situation. He should just take the outstretched hand and entrust everything to that strong back.

If he did that, all the pain Subaru had endured, all the mental suffering, would be sublimated in the best possible way by the young man before him. It would be a resounding success. A perfect, happy ending. Everyone would be happy, a truly "mammoth happy" scenario. So,

"—Get out of the way."

"…Huh?"

"…I know you're an absolutely amazing guy, that there's no malice or ill intent in your actions… That everything you do comes from a pure, unadulterated place of good will… I know that."

But,

"…That, and that alone, is wrong. This one moment, I cannot… concede."

Subaru had started this. This was a battle Subaru had accepted. There was a stubbornness only Subaru could see through, and an outcome that only Subaru should reach. It was Subaru's duty to see this end. He couldn't abandon that duty, pass the buck to someone else, and sink into defeat.

More simply, in just one word, if he had to explain it:

"A man's got his pride—"

With bloodshot eyes, blood-dripping lips, and a face stained red with gore, Subaru, as if spitting blood, clung to his utterly hopeless stubbornness. Reinhard was speechless at this unexpected answer, blinking repeatedly, unable to hide his inner shock.

"Pride, you say? For something like that…?"

"—El Dona."

His trembling, utter denial was outpaced by the mana in the air reacting to the incantation.

4

The mana filling the atmosphere reacted to the incantation that transformed itself, and its effects activated according to the caster's will.

"—!"

Suddenly, the ground beneath Reinhard's feet exploded, and clods of earth with sharp points rose from the cracks. They shot up from his feet, aiming for Reinhard's torso, pressing in to deliver a powerful blow—

"—Hah!"

Against the seismic upheaval rivaling a giant beast's charge, Reinhard's stomp detonated—the impact rippled, shaking the air, and giving Subaru, standing nearby, the sensation of being hit by a gust of wind. In front of Subaru, whose eyes were wide with astonishment, the earth was crushed underfoot before it could fully rise, its purpose utterly thwarted as it returned to its normal state.

Having countered the magical technique with sheer force, Reinhard lightly leaped backward to soften the impact of the collision. Upon landing, he brushed off his clothes, returning to his usual composed state as if nothing had happened. Then, he turned his gaze, now more serious, diagonally upward—towards a presence leaping and flying in from above, a stern expression on his face.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“What do I think I’m doing, huh?”

As he spoke, the man in the jet-black helmet—Al—landed, kicking up dust. With his single arm resting on the hilt of the greatsword at his hip, he let out a languid groan, “Ughh,” as his neck bones cracked loudly.

“Just like you, pretty boy, I’m cutting in.”

He drew his greatsword with a clang, pointing its dull, gleaming tip at Reinhard. The well-worn, powerful guandao was probably a perfect weapon for Al, despite having only one muscular, thick arm. Even so, it didn’t seem like it would pose a threat to Reinhard. In fact, Al himself must have realized this.

“You can’t defeat me. I don’t think you’re so immature that you can’t see the difference in our abilities.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t challenge someone I can’t beat. My motto is, if you’re torn between doing it or not, then don’t… However, seeing the situation right now, I can’t just stand by.”

Al dangled the tip of his guandao and indicated the parties involved in the scene.

“Read the room, pretty boy. Can’t you see how awkward the atmosphere is?”

“Awkward…?”

At that, Reinhard looked around with a puzzled expression. Then, belatedly, he finally noticed. In the eyes of the knights and guards watching them—a crowd of several dozens—he saw a mix of fervor, the rational emotion that came from that fervor cooling, and another faint wave of emotion floating within.

“It seems you really don’t get it. I see, knights are quite the…”

Al stopped himself mid-sentence. He looked around, taking in Julius, Ferris, and the other knights observing the situation, then shook his head.

“No, ‘knights’ isn’t the right category. Ah, ‘heroes’ are a real pain.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’ve got nothing to say. Is there anything worthwhile to be gained from a conversation between you and me? After all, our values are different.”

Shrugging, Al announced a unilateral severance to Reinhard’s question. Al’s contradictory stance showed him maintaining a combat-ready posture while simultaneously dismissing any intent to fight. Ignoring the perplexed Reinhard, he looked towards Julius and Subaru, who were once again facing each other after the young man’s movement.

“Alright, keep going. I’ll keep this superhuman who can’t read the room in check.”

“I thought you and he were acquainted?”

Julius raised an eyebrow slightly at Al, whose intentions were unclear, and indicated Subaru with a nod of his head. Seeing Subaru, who was battered and hadn’t reacted properly since Al’s appearance, Al deftly scratched the back of his neck with the tip of his guandao.

“In a way, we’re more than friends, but eternally less than lovers.”

“Then wouldn’t there be an option to resolve this situation for the sake of your friendship?”

“I don’t think there’s a more friendship-oriented decision than what I’m doing right now. After all, hearts and bodies can heal no matter how much they're hurt, but I'm helping to save something that can't be healed from being wounded."

"I see."

At Al's muffled reply, Julius nodded, as if convinced.

"Thank you."

"Don't need it. Turn your gratitude into cash."

Al answered Julius curtly, all while keeping Reinhard in check. Receiving this, Julius's attention was already no longer on them, the outsiders.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"If I had been paying attention, I could've killed you ten times over during that lapse…"

To the short apology, the battered Subaru replied with a defiant retort. As Julius re-gripped his wooden sword, Subaru abandoned his broken right hand and switched the wooden sword to his left, clenching its hilt tightly.

Seeing that, Julius quietly became certain.

—The next exchange would be the final blow in this pointless conflict.

5

Subaru inwardly concluded: the next strike would be the last.

He could feel his body reaching its limit. He was already severely wounded, it was a miracle he was still standing. Only sheer, stubborn grit kept him from collapsing, but how long could that last?

If he was hit, the dam of his willpower would crumble effortlessly, sweeping away his consciousness, his pride, everything. Even if he managed to land a blow, there would be nothing left inside him to follow through. The torrent of pain and exhaustion would surely still drown him.

So why keep fighting? If the outcome awaiting him was the same no matter what, then why did he still press on?

He couldn’t see the answer. Even now, the only thing driving Subaru was a feeling of anger, akin to taking out his frustrations. He couldn’t stand the man standing before him, watching him with that smug look. He’d tried countless times to smash that guy’s self-important face, but the result was that countless other parts of his own face were smashed and broken instead.

So he decided. He decided right now. The reason he fought was because he wanted to smash that guy’s self-important face. He would land one hit. He would definitely land one hit. If only that could be achieved, he didn’t care what happened to him afterward.

Just breathing hurt his lungs. Exhaling made the inside of his mouth ache terribly. Clearing his mind through the pain, Subaru gathered every last bit of strength left in his body and waited for his chance. He waited for the moment Julius’s attention wavered, for that fleeting possibility, that sliver of a moment, a divine opportunity to smash his face in. He couldn’t miss it.

It hurts it hurts, just die.

Julius’s gaze flickered for an instant. The moment he saw it, Subaru’s body lunged forward.

He couldn’t hear any sound. Everything was left behind. Without even the luxury of a battle cry, Subaru charged at Julius, swinging his clutched wooden sword. The knight, who had briefly averted his gaze from Subaru, still hadn't reacted.

He poured every brain cell that would have considered what had distracted him into this single strike.

"—!!"

He thought he heard a voice. In a world where no sound could be heard, where everything, even the scenery, should have been left behind, in a world where nothing should exist but himself and his target.

He heard a voice. Someone's voice. Someone's voice reached Subaru's ears.

"—ru!"

It became a sound. A clear sound. His consciousness felt like it was being dragged away. Let everything be painted over by rage and forgotten. Right now, Subaru's sole reason for being was to advance towards the being in front of him.

"—baru!"

It was starting to become clear. It was starting to make sense. If he heard it clearly, there would be no turning back. So Subaru, as if shaking everything off, to escape the overwhelming terror that was closing in on him, squeezed out every ounce of his being—and shouted.

"—SUBARU!!"

"—SHAMAK!!"

Betraying the clear, bell-like voice he'd heard, he loudly chanted his own spell. Black clouds covered the reddish-brown parade ground—

A world of incomprehension unfolded. Rushing through it, Subaru simply acted as his brain commanded within that unknowable world.

His vision was gone. His purpose was no longer recognized by his brain. His heart could no longer see anything.

—He just swung his left hand, his raised left arm, down in front of him.

It was an incomprehensible action, but his left arm had begun its motion before being swallowed by the black clouds. Therefore, regardless of his consciousness, the action was completed.

Subaru, having lost everything, didn't know what results his judgment and actions would lead to. He shouldn't have known. However—

"So this is your trump card—"

In a world where he shouldn't have heard anything, that voice clearly vibrated his eardrums, and—

The next moment, receiving the blade that pressed in from beyond the cleared black clouds, Subaru's body was violently and mercilessly slammed onto the ground.

There was surprise, not pain. The vast black clouds that had erupted completely dispersed, and stretching across the sky was the same infuriatingly clear blue sky as before. Subaru finally realized he was lying on his back, spread-eagled.

"I didn't expect you to use 'Yin' magic. I admit, I was caught off guard."

A voice was thrown down from above. Subaru, whose vision was still filled with the sky, listened dazedly, struggling to grasp the reality unfolding.

"However your mastery is too low. Above all, low-level 'Yin' magic is useless unless against an opponent weaker than yourself, or an unintelligent beast. It certainly wouldn't have worked on me, nor would this tactic have succeeded against any of the Royal Knights."

Words of denial rained down. He couldn't move. He didn't move. His mind was clear, but his body no longer obeyed.

"Even after playing your trump card, this is it. You understand now, don't you?"

A pitying voice was cast down. Words that hammered at Subaru's heart, telling him to give up everything, poured down.

He thought he could change the situation. He clung to what he could, expressed what he could, and believed he could do it. Yet—

"You are powerless and beyond salvation. —You are not worthy to stand by her side."

He wanted to deny only those words, and Subaru moved his creaking neck, shifting his gaze from the sky. Somehow, he managed to glare at the man standing at the end of his vision, and —

"…"

—His eyes met the dark violet eyes of a silver-haired girl.

She was leaning over a narrow passageway connecting the barracks-adjacent building to the royal castle. Behind her stood other familiar female figures, each looking down at the scene on the training ground, their eyes holding various emotions.

None of that mattered anymore. What anyone else thought of him didn't matter to Subaru at all.

Unless… unless the one person, the only person in this world he least wanted to see him in this state, wasn't standing there.

Subaru heard the sound of something snapping inside him.

After that, his consciousness rapidly began to drift away. His previously clear mind detached, the world rapidly blurred, and this time, truly leaving everything behind, Subaru's consciousness plummeted into the abyss, and—

"—Subaru."

He felt as though he was called by a whisper that shouldn't have been heard, and everything vanished.

Chapter 25: Alone

1

What exactly does it mean to be happy?

Subaru believes that remaining unchanged is one definition of happiness.

He thinks that a tomorrow no different from today, a today no different from yesterday—the continuation of unchanging days—is what happiness truly is.

Of course, it's impossible to live without anything ever changing.

The passage of time brings about change, and through wear and tear, one eventually arrives at either evolution or degeneration.

—So then, have I, who arrived in this other world, moved forward? Or have I regressed?

If we're talking about change, there's no greater change than being thrust from the mundane into the extraordinary as I have been.

Natsuki Subaru feared, detested, and shunned environmental changes, shifts in circumstances, alterations in status, and transformations in his way of life more than anything.

That's why, even in a world where everything had changed irrevocably, he desperately searched, frantically, for something that remained constant.

He didn't want to let go of what he had once gained; he clung to it, held on tight, and yet…

Yet—I am…

2

When Subaru awoke, he furrowed his brow at the unfamiliar ceiling above him.

It wasn't the excessively lavish ceiling of Roswaal's mansion, which he'd grown accustomed to, nor the simple yet well-kept ceiling of an inn. Certainly not his own room, which he'd affectionately called grimy.

As he felt this sentiment regarding the needlessly high ceiling, Subaru drifted in a haze for a few seconds, his consciousness vague. For someone who usually woke up so clearly, the lingering, dazed feeling of just waking up was foreign. He savored this slight deviation from his norm and groped for his memories.

What had happened before he fell asleep? Where was he, anyway?

A throbbing pain near his temples made his half-opened eyes well up slightly. It was unclear if it was from the pain or the sensation of waking up. He gently wiped away the tear with his sleeve, and then Subaru noticed something odd about his right wrist.

Peeking out from his cuff was his right wrist, where he saw a gaudy, unfamiliar scar. It was etched on both the inside and outside of his wrist, accompanied by a faint numbness—

"…I remember."

He remembered how disgracefully he'd been treated to end up with such scars. The fact that these scars remained meant that…

"I… didn't die?"

Subaru didn't realize how arrogant and presumptuous he sounded when he uttered those words. Furthermore, he didn't realize what he unconsciously desired.

Then,

"Subaru, are you awake?"

The bell-like voice, which usually tickled his ears, now sounded terribly uncomfortable.

Tilting his head, Subaru turned his gaze toward the source of the voice. Next to the bed where he lay, Emilia was walking toward him.

Her appearance was the same as when he'd seen her in the Royal Selection hall earlier. Her white-based attire wasn't ostentatiously aristocratic, but it suited her pure demeanor well. The white robe, which had become so familiar when she went out, was neatly folded and now held in her arms.

Comparing her appearance with the orange sunlight streaming through the window, Subaru concluded that very little time had passed. Probably a few hours. Considering the Royal Selection started before noon, he must have been unconscious for at most four hours.

"How are your injuries? It was Ferris's healing, so I don't think there's anything strange…"

Emilia leaned in, worry in her eyes. Her amethyst eyes looked at Subaru's wrist, and she winced painfully at the severity of the remaining scars. Despite her gaze showing concern for his well-being, Subaru felt as though he was being seen in a way he didn't want, and he quietly hid his right hand behind his back,

"Ah, ah, well, at a glance, I don't see anything wrong with how it looks. No, seriously, it's amazing that I can even feel my teeth, which should have been broken."

He wiggled his tongue in his mouth, shuddering at the sensation of his front teeth, which should have been gone. He regretted not being conscious during the healing. Had his broken teeth regenerated or been reconstructed? He noticed that injuries all over his body, including the terrible state of his mouth, had been treated, and Subaru once again marveled at the versatility of this world's healing magic.

If broken bones, lacerations, and retired permanent teeth could all be fully recovered in four hours, hospitals in his original world would be out of business.

"No, wait. I don't think it can act on diseases. Thinking about it that way, hospitals still have an advantage…"

"Water magic can work on internal things like diseases, so I don't think you need to worry, Subaru."

"Magic is truly omnipotent. Farewell, White Big Tower. Say hi to BJ for me."

He made a flippant remark, trying to make his tongue feel normal again. However, Emilia seemed to sense his inner turmoil, as the sorrow mixed in her gaze remained unchanged. Yet, being "pitied" was the hardest thing for him to bear right now.

"Um, by the way, did the Royal Selection discussion end smoothly?"

Subaru offered a topic to avoid her gaze and the silent awkwardness. In response, Emilia nodded slightly and replied, "Yes."

"For the most part. Everyone had already said what they wanted to in the hall, so after that, it was just really minor details of the Royal Selection. It pretty much ended with Roswaal just nodding along."

When it came to detailed matters, it seemed to be a heavy burden for Emilia, who was still in the process of learning about statesmanship. Hearing the sound of self-lament in her voice, Subaru found a sense of relief within himself. At the Royal Selection, Emilia too had felt a sense of powerlessness and grief—a miserable empathy.

To hide the dark emotions that had sprung up inside him, Subaru looked up, quickly averting his gaze, and said,

"So, where's Lord Roswaal? He felt pretty much like background noise in the hall, though."

"Once his duties as my patron were over, he moved on to his work as a Marquis. He may seem like that, but he's relied on here. …It's not for me to say, who can't do anything without Roswaal."

In stark contrast to her confident assertion of her beliefs in the hall, Emilia's current way of thinking was somewhat negative and weak. If she was comparing herself to other candidates and feeling down about it, Subaru thought she was underestimating herself too much.

Indeed, if education received and one's birth were criteria for evaluation, Emilia's position was quite bad simply due to her half-elf lineage. However, her argument, where she emphasized not those aspects but rather how she would conduct herself in the future, was logical, and it was also true that her demeanor at the time was brimming with something that made even the rigid old man groan in admiration.

The things she lamented as lacking could be acquired later. The most essential thing she needed to claim the throne—Subaru believed she possessed it from the very beginning.

That's why Subaru considered her grief misguided and believed that what she lacked for the Royal Selection wasn't such a thing. And as if fearing she would realize this herself,

"Alright, once Roswaal's discussion there is over, we'll head straight back to the inn. Pick up Rem and figure out our future plans. Is there anything else we need to do at the castle?"

"Subaru."

"If not, that's good. We don't know where eyes and ears are placed here, so ideally, we'd go back to the mansion. We can talk more in detail there… No, since we've come all the way to the capital, maybe we should first try to win over some influential people…"

"Subaru…"

"No, no, actually, it might be better to negotiate some terms with the other royal candidates here. It's tough to figure out when and where to make a move…"

"—Subaru!"

Emilia sharply called out to Subaru, who was rapidly spouting a barrage of impromptu words. At her voice, he involuntarily stopped his verbal barrage and met her gaze. Her deep amethyst eyes stared intently, directly, at Subaru.

"—Let's talk."

Quietly, yet unshakably, it resounded heavily within Subaru.

3

Subaru sat up, using the bed as a chair, facing Emilia. She stood with her back to the wall near the entrance, tightly clutching the robe she held in both hands. Her unconsciously tense fingertips showed that the conversation they were about to have would be anything but lighthearted.

"There were so many things I wanted to ask… but I couldn't earlier because of where we were… Really, so many things."

"…Yeah, well, I guess so."

Emilia's lips trembled as she fumbled, unsure of where to start. Subaru could almost feel her hesitation and wavering. After all, he was the one who had caused all this. Everything he'd done must have been beyond her imagination, and she probably had countless questions.

So, if he had to put it into words, Emilia shouldn't just question all of Subaru's actions today, but rather their true intentions. To that, Subaru could shamelessly give only one answer. But,

"Um, well then… why did you… end up fighting Julius?"

The topic she chose wasn't what Subaru had hoped for. And, more than anything, it was the kind of question that made him frown. Naturally, a cynical smile appeared on his face, even as she carefully chose the word 'fight'.

"…What's with that really disgusted look?"

"Nothing, really. It's just, I don't think what happened was splendid enough to be described with a cool word like 'fight', that's all."

Given how utterly one-sided it had been, it should have been called a massacre rather than a fight. As Julius himself called it, a ‘chastisement’.

Regardless of Subaru’s bitter feelings, Emilia looked pained by his reply. It was understandable that she’d be surprised, as Subaru usually responded with witty remarks, but this time, he’d spoken with overt self-deprecation. Her faint eyes clouded with sorrow as she said,

“There must have been a reason, right? Knowing you, Subaru, it must have been something important…”

“A reason, huh…”

Julius had appeared before Subaru, who was dejected in the waiting room. As he was led by Julius to the training grounds, Subaru immediately knew this was payback for his insolence in the hall. He also had a fair grasp of the power difference between Julius and himself. His usual personality would have been to feign a stomachache and quickly thwart his opponent’s intentions, and he even thought that’s what he should have done.

Yet, in reality, Subaru had taken up a sword —Even if it was a wooden one— and challenged an opponent he had no hope of defeating. The result was being utterly discarded like a rag. Why had he done such a thing? The answer was,

“I wanted to strike back.”

“…Huh?”

“In the hall, and in the waiting room, he… that jerk, he said I… wasn’t worthy. I know that. I’m well aware. I know better than anyone how powerless I am; I don’t need anyone to tell me that. It’s just!”

He looked up. He gazed at the beautiful silver-haired figure standing before him, at her bewildered eyes, and continued,

“I wanted to show them. That I wasn’t completely useless. No, that’s not it. I just wanted to stand beside you. If I could show him even a sliver of that, I… I thought I’d become… better…”

His words faltered, and Subaru lowered his head, his face contorted by the tumultuous emotions swirling in his mind. He clenched his fists on his knees and bit his lip. He hated himself for not being able to express himself better. If only he could unleash all the emotions simmering in his chest, all his heartfelt thoughts, he wouldn't feel this frustrated.

"Subaru..."

"It was stubbornness, really. He said I was pathetic, useless, an obstacle, and I hated him for trying to cut me off from you... I challenged him because I wanted to make him take it back."

In the end, that's what it came down to, he supposed. Julius, who had condemned Subaru more harshly than anyone else in that hall, saying he was unfit for Emilia. But Subaru knew that better than anyone, without needing to be told. To prevent others from realizing it, Subaru had desperately put on a brave face. He couldn't forgive the man who had so easily exposed what lay beneath that desperately maintained facade. He'd tried desperately to somehow cover up what had been brought to light. And that, he supposed, had led to the pathetic result of him sinking into a pool of blood.

Emilia gasped softly at Subaru's weak, dejected answer. It probably wasn't the substantial answer she had sought. He didn't know what kind of ideal answer she was looking for. But Subaru's stubborn reality betrayed the ideal she had wanted to believe in. That disappointment escaped her lips in a faint sigh,

"For such a thing?"

"Such a thing was important... to me!"

Such a trivial thing was something Subaru couldn't concede. If only those around him acknowledged such a trivial thing, Subaru could walk with his head held high. Just thinking about such a trivial thing, Subaru was tormented by shame and became unable to move. He couldn't catch up to her back, walking so gracefully ahead.

His desperate feelings weren't understood by Emilia. She covered her mouth with her hand at Subaru's choked answer, and through the gaps in her fingers, she pushed out trembling words,

"Was that… that, was that why you fought like that, Subaru?"

"…Yeah."

"You went through so much pain and suffering, just for that?"

"That's right."

"

—You even used magic, which I told you not to?"

Subaru, who had been looking down and away, acting like a sulking child, stiffened. His trump card, his ace in the hole, his last resort—no matter how he put it, Julius had judged it a childish tactic.

It was a tangible power Subaru had gained, however awkwardly, since coming to this world. It was the power he had relied on more than anything during the second loop—the incident at the mansion. The ease with which it had been shattered had shocked Subaru considerably. It was a feeling of powerlessness, as if all his days since coming to this world had been cut short.

"Hey, Subaru, answer me."

"…"

"Did you really use magic… for that reason?"

"…Emilia-tan, you…"

Trembling words forced a confession from Subaru, who was tormented by powerlessness. She, who posed the question, couldn't know how cruel and merciless her act was. So Subaru, with a weak voice and unable to look at her,

"—You wouldn't understand, Emilia."

"…"

That's what he had blurted out.

Immediately after saying it, Subaru realized it was an unreasonable outburst, a low blow. It was the worst possible thing to say, rejecting the other person's attempt to understand and severing their connection.

Silence fell. Subaru knew his statement was a refusal to be pressed further, and Emilia must have clearly understood that too.

He wanted to avoid delving any deeper into the reason for that fight. No matter how much he dug, no matter how much he looked back, Subaru couldn't give Emilia the answer she sought. Continuing to unearth this topic would only deepen their wounds.

"—I see."

A breathy voice reached Subaru, who still couldn't bring himself to look up. The tone, almost a sigh, indicated that she had heard him out and had no intention of pursuing the topic further from her side. Feeling a sense of relief at her reaction, Subaru relaxed his shoulders and exhaled. Then, at the very least, he thought he had to be useful to her going forward, to make up for not being able to give her the answer she wanted—

"Subaru, let's talk about what happens next."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I was thinking about that too. First, I can't make a decision until I've calmed down and heard more about the situation, but we should meet up with Ros-chi first and…"

"Roswaal and I will be returning to the mansion tomorrow. Subaru, I want you to stay in the capital."

Unable to comprehend the meaning of her words, Subaru let out a bewildered "Huh?" As Subaru tilted his head in confusion, Emilia said in a voice with as little emotion as possible,

"That was the original promise, wasn't it? You came to the capital to get your depleted gate treated. Ferris has agreed to it, so just receive his treatment and focus on recovering your gate."

"No, wait a minute."

"While you're in the capital, Ferris —or rather, Lady Crusch Karsten's household— will take care of you, and I'll leave Rem with you, so don't worry. After your treatment is successfully finished, we can talk then."

"I said, wait!"

Emilia rattled off their future plans. Realizing that his own wishes were not reflected at all, Subaru raised his voice and called out to her. He looked up, trying to meet her eyes directly, which he had been avoiding. However,

"Emilia…"

"It was already decided. Focus on your treatment."

Turning her back to him, Emilia headed for the doorway as if the conversation was over. Subaru felt a chilling premonition from her unreadable expression and uncommunicative demeanor. Instinctively, he reached out a hand to her retreating hem. His vision blurred as his blood-deprived body tried to impede his action, but his fingertips barely reached her back as she moved away.

"Why so suddenly? I…"

"…Because you push yourself like this when I'm around, don't you, Subaru?"

Emilia replied without turning her head, to Subaru's pathetic, clinging voice. As Subaru gasped at her words, Emilia lifted her head and looked upward,

"It was like that when we first met. It was like that during everything that happened at the mansion. And even today… It's all because you're with me, isn't it?"

"You don't have to put it like that…"

Calling it 'sulky' would be too cute and unfitting. It was, quite literally, a tone brimming with clear displeasure. To Emilia's uncharacteristic, negative, sarcastic remark, Subaru replied, his voice trailing off weakly.

The way Emilia put it, Subaru would gain nothing from it. The content might be the same as what Subaru said, but the path to it was different.

He just wanted her to understand that, at least.

"That's not what I'm trying to say… I just…"

"Just?"

"I just… wanted to do something for you, Emilia-tan, that's all."

"For me?"

Subaru nodded in affirmation to her repeated question. It was a gesture she couldn't see with her back turned, but she must have sensed his movement. Emilia, still looking slightly upward, paused for a few seconds, wondering what to make of his words, and then,

"—It's for yourself, isn't it?"

At the sound of her next words, Subaru could only gasp in silence.

"…"

Beyond the silence, a void swept through Subaru's mind. Pushing aside confusion, incomprehension surged, and before words could form or emotions well up, his heart was first seized by an empty pain.

He didn't know what she had said. He didn't know what she meant. Was he sad, pained, frustrated, sorrowful, angry, or wanting to cry?

"I… I just… for you…"

He wanted to do things that would make her happy. He wanted to help her achieve what she desired. He wanted to protect her from all factors that would make her sad.

Subaru had always believed that the fundamental reason for his actions was precisely that. And he had been convinced that those actions would surely convey themselves to her, even without words.

Such a self-centered assumption, oblivious to the feelings of others —

"—Whoa!"

A soft fabric struck him in the face, and Subaru, who had been in a daze, cried out in surprise. He instinctively brushed it off his face, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw it fall onto the bed —A pure white robe with an eagle embroidery. He realized it had been in Emilia's hands, and he quickly understood that it had been thrown at him.

Her rough action and Emilia's image simply didn't connect. Even if his reason accepted that Emilia had thrown it, his emotions refused to acknowledge it.

In front of Subaru, Emilia had always been kind, overflowing with motherly compassion, and though she was stubborn and didn't want to admit it herself, she was still a kind-hearted girl who couldn't stop helping others.

So Subaru couldn't accept the reality before him. His consciousness froze at such a fragile act of violence from the girl he had believed would never do such a thing.

"Em… Emilia-tan…?"

Unable to grasp reality, Subaru called her name and lifted his gaze.

Right in front of him, within arm's reach, Emilia was still standing. She had turned back to him, her long, beautiful silver hair swaying as if to reflect her emotions, and her deep amethyst eyes looked directly down at him.

He saw, for the first time, those deep amethyst eyes swaying with waves of emotion. He saw, for the first time, that strained face, biting her lip as if to suppress a tremor of strong feeling.

Why was it? Such an expression and gaze didn't suit her at all. Yet there was no doubt that both were directed at him.

Knowing it was an out-of-place sentiment, Subaru nevertheless found her… Her emotionally revealed form beautiful.

"Stop lying, saying everything is for me—!"

The waves of emotion became tears, filling her deep amethyst eyes. Shaking her head slightly, Emilia seemed to unleash everything she had held back,

"Coming to the castle, fighting Julius, even using magic… You're saying it was all for me? I never asked you to do any of that, not once!"

"—!"

"I asked you for everything I truly wanted you to do, didn't I?"

"…"

"Hey, do you remember? What I asked you to do."

"I, I…"

His thoughts froze, explicitly denied by her words. He couldn't search his hazy memories for her question.

Emilia didn't seem to expect an answer from the silent Subaru. She exhaled softly, then tightly closed her eyes,

"I asked you to wait at the inn with Rem."

"…"

"I asked you not to use magic, because I didn't know what would happen to your body if you overused your gate."

He remembered hearing both 'requests'. Both were words she had spoken, concerned for Subaru's well-being, wishing for him to be sensible. Subaru had heard them, but acted anyway. And it was all driven by a somewhat abnormal obsession, pushing him to take actions that would save her, even at the cost of his own health.

He could always make excuses for disregarding those requests, even for trampling on them, if he brought back results that justified it. Though he hadn't explicitly thought that, such a rash idea was always present in the depths of Subaru's mind. But as a result, Subaru not only disregarded Emilia's requests, but also failed to achieve any worthwhile results, only exposing his pathetic state by dragging her down.

Still, the source of his actions, their beginning, was certainly—

"I was wrong for not listening. Really. I truly regret it. It's just! It's different. It's not like that. I didn't do it for myself, I did it for…"

He just wanted her to understand that the underlying feeling was real. However, Subaru's tongue twitched as if numb, refusing to form any more words.

Subaru covered his mouth with his hand, unable to hide his frustration at his body's rebellion against his will. Emilia watched his disgraceful display with a sad expression.

In her eyes, in that uncomfortable self-imprisonment, Subaru shrunk, feebly asking,

"Emilia, you… don't believe me…?"

It was such a selfish, self-centered, self-indulgent thing to say. It was a word that should not have been spoken. It was not a word to be uttered by someone who had just refused understanding to the other person.

"I want to believe you… I want to believe Subaru."

Her voice sounded like she was about to cry. In fact, she might have been crying.

Subaru didn't have the courage to confirm it. He couldn't find the courage to look up and face the girl he should have cherished.

Even though she might be crying, even though he might have made her cry. Even though he had run all this way to prevent that face, at the most crucial moment, Natsuki Subaru—

“You said you want to believe me… but it’s you who won’t let me believe you!”

Her emotions exploded. She was usually calm and rational, and it wasn’t that she had never gotten angry before, but she had never lost control like this, letting her emotions run wild. Her restraints broke, and Emilia, speaking her overflowing feelings,

“You haven’t kept a single promise! You made a promise… but you just break them all so easily and come to a place like this, don’t you?!”

He had trampled on them. The promises they had made, which meant trust. All under the pretext of a noble cause that only benefited himself: that it was all for her.

“You won’t keep your promises to me, and yet you want me to believe you… I can’t. I can’t…!”

He wanted to scream, No! However, in reality, Subaru’s throat trembled, failing to produce words, and his head remained bowed, unable to move as if solidified by lead.

Trembling, crying, swept away by emotion, he was forced to choose to turn his back and continue betraying the girl who was surely seeking his honest answer.

So, Subaru, with childish emotion, brushed away the hand Emilia still offered. At his stubborn attitude, Emilia took several shallow breaths, and then,

“…Hey, Subaru. Why do you try so hard to help me?”

It was likely the question Emilia had often hesitated to ask. The question reached Subaru without hesitation, as if Emilia had repeatedly replayed it in her mind during her short breaths.

She had seen Subaru repeatedly run himself ragged, smiling cheerfully or stoically enduring pain, throwing himself into deadly situations. She must have harbored that question, yet kept silent.

So, it was inevitable that it finally surfaced here, in this moment. If she couldn't express it now, Emilia would have no choice but to continue keeping that question in her heart, endlessly hurting without understanding why Subaru continued to dedicate himself to her so tirelessly.

Subaru realized that Emilia had clearly shown him a path to salvation. He had believed that all his words would be hollow, that nothing he said would reach her now that he had trampled on their promises. But still, it was a question that could be conveyed sincerely.

—Why did Subaru go so far to help Emilia?

—Why had he become so obsessed with her since coming to this world?

It was because—

"From the first time we met, Subaru, you've helped me. I'll never forget what happened in that loot house. At the mansion, too. It's always been like that. Hey, why? Why do you do so much for me, Subaru?"

Emilia found it inexplicable that Subaru kept giving to her. From her perspective, Subaru had appeared out of nowhere, suddenly saved her life, then selflessly devoted himself to her without explanation, only to betray her and act foolishly once she trusted him. He was an incomprehensible presence.

Subaru had a clear reason. She seemed to believe she hadn't done anything for Subaru, but that was absolutely not true. Subaru was constantly being given to by her. And he was merely striving to return even a little of what he had received. The beginning wasn't with Subaru. The beginning was when she gave to him.

So, Subaru's answer was—

"The reason I want to do something for you is because you helped me first…”

“I… helped Subaru?”

“That’s right.”

In a world where he was suddenly summoned, disoriented and lost, exposed to unavoidable violence, a world that might have ended right then and there.

“You wouldn’t understand how much what you did for me saved me. But I… I was saved beyond words by that.”

What Emilia had done for him at that moment wasn’t just saving Subaru’s life.

What Emilia had saved at that moment wasn’t his life, but Subaru himself. He wanted to somehow put it into words, but it was the kind of thing that couldn’t be expressed. So Subaru could only vaguely, shapelessly, try to convey it with his feelings for Emilia.

“I don’t understand, Subaru…”

Feebly, Emilia’s voice trailed off as if about to disappear, and her lips trembled. Subaru, seeing her like she might vanish, stretched out his fingertips as if to cling,

“It’s okay that you don’t understand. But it’s true. You saved me. So what I’m doing is returning that favor… But now,”

The words he wanted to add, “It’s not just that,” were—

“—I said I don’t understand!”

Shaking her head, her silver hair flying wildly, she exploded with emotion. Emilia looked at Subaru with tear-filled eyes, her shoulders shaking, her breath ragged with intense feeling,

“I helped Subaru? …There’s no way. The first time you and I met was at the loot house, and we couldn’t have had any contact before that!”

"No, wait, let me…"

"If we had contact before then, if that were true, then I… I would have…"

Covering her face with her palms, Emilia, who hid Subaru from her sight, wouldn't listen. She was completely shutting herself in, and Subaru's voice had no power to stop her.

He didn't know what sensitive spot he had touched. Even without knowing, he had to form words. So Subaru, driven by emotion,

"You might not understand, but please listen. It's true! I— when I first came to this world, you were the first one to—"

The next moment—the world stopped, and Subaru realized he had touched forbidden words.

Time froze, and the world where everything's movement stalled. Even the sound of his own violent heartbeat, and Emilia's voice he had heard just moments ago, faded away. A silent world descended, where even the lingering trace of a high-pitched ringing in his ears vanished.

Subaru couldn't contain his anger at his own carelessness and the shadow of the executioner who couldn't read the situation.

A shadow appeared. Regardless of Subaru's internal indignation, the merciless executioner revealed itself. The right arm, more distinctly formed than before, instantly took shape from fingertip to shoulder and pressed close to Subaru. The similarly formed left hand was unbalanced, only reaching the elbow.

The left hand gently, lovingly stroked Subaru's rigid cheek. The right arm crept into Subaru's stiff chest, tenderly touching his life-giving heart.

His clenched teeth remained still as intense pain pierced through Subaru's entire body. The pain of being torn apart, the sense of loss so profound it felt like he would vanish, the agony that wouldn't allow him to scream or thrash—these poured down on Subaru unilaterally as punishment for breaking the shadow's forbidden rule.

He didn’t know how long the painful time lasted. Was it a few seconds, a few minutes, or even a few hours? The folly of counting time in a world where time was stopped could never be a means to distract from the pain; it was merely a thought game, a mere fluctuation.

The shadow dissipated, and the world immediately began to move again. Emilia in front of him was still in confusion, and Subaru, who had been desperately resolved to stop it, could only respond with ragged breaths and a sudden gush of cold sweat.

Pain, agony, the shadow of a curse—they interfered, trying to obstruct Subaru’s feelings. The words he had tried to speak rolled back down his throat, and the sincere feelings he should have conveyed lost their way, becoming a heavy weight on Subaru’s shoulders.

“…You’re not saying anything again, are you?”

A voice, tinged with resignation and disappointment, cold with Emilia’s emotions, struck his eardrums. The tears of intense emotion, the heart-wrenching turmoil, all of it surged like waves, churning and sweeping away Emilia’s inner feelings.

Subaru, the only one who had the means to stem it, chose silence instead of offering her a helping hand. Even if the truth was different, that’s all she could perceive. And if he tried to deny it, the black shadow would once again constrict Subaru’s entrails.

An out-of-place anger welled up within him. A boundless sadness swelled in his chest, threatening to tear him apart.

What was he supposed to do? If he tried to convey his sincere feelings, Emilia wouldn’t listen. If he tried to explain everything that had happened, the shadow of the curse would interfere and obstruct him.

“The reason I want to do that for you, for you, is because you, you first, you…”

"…That's not me, Subaru."

Weakly, haltingly, his words spun out in fear of the black demonic hand. Emilia denied them, clearly tinged with sorrow,

"You're just seeing someone else in me, not me."

"No, that's… not true…"

Subaru looked down, covering his face with his palms, weakly uttering words of denial that wouldn't reach her.

The girl who had first picked him up after he fell into this world, Emilia. That memory didn't exist within her. That history, that world, existed only within Subaru. Even so, it had certainly been Emilia.

If the same situation were prepared, she would undoubtedly act the same way. The moment she saved him, when Subaru was about to die a miserable death in that alley, when he was about to perish uselessly without doing anything, that moment would always come.

Even if it hadn't happened in this world, it had certainly happened. Even if there was a history in this world where it hadn't, Subaru was continuously being saved by her.

There was only gratitude that no amount of words could express. Yet, there were no words anywhere in this world to convey it.

Still, he had believed she understood. He wanted to believe. He wanted to convince himself that was why he was allowed to be by her side.

"Why don't you understand…?"

"…Subaru."

"I thought, Emilia-tan… you would understand…"

"The 'me' inside you is amazing, isn't she?"

Such a painful disconnect, a chasm in their hearts, was contained in that one phrase.

Before a stunned Subaru, who had lifted his head, Emilia looked away, turning her face to the side. A lonely smile played on her lips; it seemed self-deprecating, and also pitying of Subaru, who was acting like a child stubbornly refusing to understand.

"She can understand everything without being told. She can feel Subaru's suffering, sadness, and anger as if they were her own."

"…Ah."

"—You have to tell me, Subaru, or I won't understand."

He was denied. Crushed. His illusion shattered into pieces. His shoulders grew heavy, an invisible something covered his entire body, and intense nausea assaulted Subaru. His vision spun, and murky, stagnant emotions swirled in his chest—

He had thought Emilia would understand everything without him saying a word. He had believed Emilia would feel his pain and sadness as if they were her own. He had hoped Emilia would grasp and accept all his feelings and thoughts.

—It was utterly fleeting, arrogant, and a self-centered imposition.

"My…"

He was denied. He was denied it. All that he had believed in, relied on, since falling into this world.

He had fought for his life, clenched his teeth against pain, endured sadness while wiping away tears, all to protect the idol he had envisioned.

Then he saw that non-existent, selfish utopia crumble with a crash,

"Everything so far…"

His lips trembled. His eyes burned. His tongue convulsed, and his heart pounded deafeningly. He looked up. His eyes met Emilia's. Her deep amethyst eyes held only sorrow as she watched him. His own face reflected in her eyes was so miserable, so beyond salvation.

"—It's all thanks to me, isn't it?!"

He shrieked, his enraged voice shaking the waiting room.

"At the loot house when the insignia was stolen! I saved you from that damn dangerous murderer! I put my body on the line! It was all because you were important to me!!"

His fingers clutched the sheets, and blood began to seep into his palms where his nails dug in. His screaming voice cracked in places, echoing even more gratingly.

"It was the same at the mansion! I was gnawed at, desperate! My head was split open, my neck blown off, and yet I still saved everyone in the village, didn't I?! Rem, Ram, they must have ended up in the best possible state! It's because of me, because I was there, right?!"

He listed his accomplishments. He enumerated all his achievements he could think of, chasing after her fading shadow.

"If I hadn't been there, it would have been worse! No one would have been saved! No one, no one, no one! Everything, everything, everything! It was all me! It was all because I was there!"

At the loot house, Emilia should have died. Felt and Old Man Rom too. Even if they overcame that, at the mansion, Rem died, the villagers perished, and perhaps the curse might have even turned its focus towards Roswaal, Beatrice, and Ram who remained in the mansion. Naturally, there was a possibility of Emilia's life being threatened there too.

It was his achievement that he had eliminated all of those threats. It was the result of Natsuki Subaru's actions, something to be proud of, something that deserved reward.

Since he had done all this, since he had dedicated himself to this extent, “You should owe me a debt more than you can ever repay—!!”

He screamed, betraying even the very thought that had been the root of his actions.

His unrewarded feelings, his vainglory seeking praise, his craving for fulfillment, his selfishness longing to be loved, all led Subaru, in the depths of his confusion, to this point.

That was, for both of them, the decisive word.

“That’s right.”

A trembling voice, a quiet murmur, was directed at Subaru, who was sweating profusely and breathing heavily. The sound was one of acceptance, resignation, and resolve; in short, it was the end.

“I owe Subaru a lot, a tremendous amount.”

“Yeah, that’s right. So I…”

“So let’s pay it all back and end it here.”

At her clearly stated words, Subaru’s head snapped up. Seeing only emptiness spread in Emilia’s eyes, staring back at him, he reflected on his own words and realized he had said something irreparable.

Carried away by momentum, swept along by a torrent of emotion, he had said what shouldn’t be said. He had trampled on his purest feelings, the very root of his emotions, and ruined everything with a childish tantrum.

If he defined his relationship with her as one of ‘debts and favors’, then that meant—

“No… No, no, no, that’s not what I meant…”

If the scales of ‘debts and favors’ balanced, then the relationship would be over. If he brought calculation into actions that were supposed to be prompted by selfless desire, by wanting to do something for her, then that’s what it had to become.

"It's okay now. —Natsuki Subaru."

She had always called him by his first name, affectionately, since their first meeting. When she called him by his full name, Subaru understood, too late, that there was no turning back.

Emilia didn't offer a hand to the dejected Subaru. She turned her back to him, shaking her silver hair as if to shake him off,

"Rem will come later, so follow her. I'll leave everything about your stay in the capital to her, okay?"

He couldn't reply nor was he asked to. Emilia walked away, getting further. He couldn't even bring himself to watch her back, let alone reach out to it.

The physical distance grew. Even more so, the emotional distance.

"You know, I…"

Suddenly, Emilia stopped with her hand on the door, and such a murmur fell into the room. Rather than speaking to Subaru, she spoke in a quiet voice, as if to herself,

"I had hopes. That maybe Subaru… That only Subaru wouldn't treat me differently. That you'd see me like any other normal person, like any other normal girl, without making distinctions…"

She was the one who sought fair treatment in the Royal Selection hall. The fact that she was a half-elf must have forced her to endure painful times, making even such a small thing a wish. But,

"That's impossible."

Subaru, too, responded with a small, quiet murmur. Emilia's soliloquy wasn't a question seeking an answer from Subaru. So Subaru's murmur wasn't an answer to her words, but something he said to himself.

Repeating her words, Subaru weakly, helplessly, shook his head,

"Even if you brought out every single person in the world, they couldn’t. I could never see Emilia… You, like any other person.”

That, at least, was an undeniable, honest truth.

The sound of the door closing echoed, and the air suddenly fell silent. Subaru was left alone in the room, curled up on the bed, his gaze wandering.

Suddenly, his eyes caught the robe, snagged on the edge of the bed and about to fall to the floor. He reached out, pulled it closer, and clutched it. He felt as if the warmth of the person who had held it still lingered, and he embraced it tightly against his chest, as if to hold onto that fading warmth.

—On that day, Natsuki Subaru was truly alone in this other world for the first time.

Interlude:
The Knights' Thoughts

1

"So, do you have anything to say for yourself, Knight Julius?"

His low voice echoed heavily through the dim, sunless room.

The setting was the knight's barracks adjacent to the royal castle. Far from the main facilities like the training grounds and guardhouses, this particular room, the Captain's office, stood out for the stronger scent of ink than iron, located at the very back of the building.

Reflecting the owner's temperament, the room's furnishings were minimal, and contrary to his martial appearance, books occupied a surprisingly large portion of the shelves.

"No, nothing at all. Everything is as I reported."

Responding to the question posed by the man scribbling with a quill on documents at the large desk in the center of the spacious room was a young man standing ramrod straight before the desk.

The handsome man, with his neatly combed, faintly bluish-purple hair, pulled down the sleeves of his white uniform, showing no trace of his time at the training grounds. He lightly tapped the hilt of the knight's sword at his hip.

"I will not protest if you deem my conduct unbecoming of a Royal Guard Knight. Please, hand down whatever judgment you see fit, Captain."

Removing the sword, scabbard and all, from his waist, Julius offered it forward as if in supplication. Witnessing this gesture of handing over his knight's sword, the middle-aged man seated in the chair —Marcos, whose expression remained as unyielding as rock— closed one eye at the orderly display.

“Detaining an involved party during a discussion to determine the kingdom’s royal successor, then dragging him to the training grounds, beating him to a pulp, and sending him to the infirmary? Taken purely at face value, this isn’t something that can be resolved with a mere slap on the wrist.”

Marcos shrugged, as if to say “Good grief” as he recounted the misdeed committed by his subordinate, a knight who bore the coveted title of ‘The Finest’.

—Knight Julius and Emilia’s attendant, Natsuki Subaru’s mock battle.

Whether the actual content adhered to that description was another matter, but Marcos was aware of the general outline. Simply put, it was precisely as he’d just stated, and Marcos’s ‘knight’s blood’ wasn’t so thin that he couldn’t grasp other underlying factors.

“There are mitigating circumstances. I’ve received numerous petitions from the other knights at the training grounds, advocating for your actions.”

“That is undeserved praise.”

“It means they see what needs to be seen. I see no reason to deny that aspect. However, you went a bit too far.”

Marcos tossed the stack of petitions onto the desk and tapped its cover, glaring steadily at Julius with his gray eyes.

“A crushed right wrist, ruptured internal organs, multiple fractured ribs, a crushed throat, a cracked forehead, and several missing front teeth —A gruesome sight that would be beyond help without a skilled healing magic user. It was hardly appropriate conduct toward the attendant of a revered individual.”

Marcos had arrived at the training grounds at the same time as the female candidates, only witnessing the final blow.

Yet, even discounting that, the boy was covered in wounds. It was Marcos himself who ordered the unconscious boy to be transported to the infirmary and commanded Ferris to exert his utmost effort.

Seeing the extent of the boy's injuries up close, it was easy to discern whether it was merely a 'mock battle' or something that far exceeded it.

"Was it so unforgivable for someone to insult a knight's pride?"

"No matter how I try to justify it, it would only be personal vendetta. Everything is a result of my own shortcomings. Please, Captain, say no more."

Julius blocked his own escape route, maintaining his stance of accepting punishment. Marcos's gaze wandered for a moment, contemplating what words to choose for such an unyielding attitude. Just then.

"Alright, thanks for waiting! Ferris is back~!"

With a lighthearted attitude that either improved or worsened the atmosphere, a chestnut-haired, maiden-like figure entered the room. It was Ferris, a beautiful young person with semi-long hair, a vivid white ribbon, and even more vividly colored cat ears.

He entered the room casually, and upon seeing Julius and Marcos staring at each other, he placed a hand over his mouth and gave an alluring smile.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh, was Ferris perhaps interrupting? To stumble in while you're having such an intense matchmaking session, was I not reading the mood?"

"…Stop with the pointless chatter and just report. You brat."

"Oh my, Captain. You're showing your true colors, aren't you?"

Marcos muttered, hand on his forehead, grimacing at Ferris's remark. Ferris's unusually casual demeanor had disarmed him, and his true self had slipped out. Seeing the tough, rock-like face contort with bitterness, Ferris happily relaxed his cheeks.

"You're charming even when you're a little rough, Captain. You're always so polite in public, so why not let your true self out when you can take off your public mask?"

"Normally, I should be a public figure in front of my subordinates… Oh, once it's broken, it's ridiculous, isn't it? Fine, just report."

Marcos waved his hand dismissively, and Ferris finally complied with a "Yes, sir." He stood beside the upright Julius, but unlike Julius, he relaxed his shoulders naturally.

"As per the Captain's orders, I've poured all my energy into healing Subaru-kyun. I've mended his bones, closed his wounds, and restored any missing parts, so I diagnose him as fine. Oh, I'll gradually replenish his blood through alternative means, though."

"Good work. No deficiencies?"

"If Ferris misses something, no one in the royal capital will find it, nya~. His physical injuries are fine. —Though I'm not sure about his heart."

Shaking his cat ears, Ferris glanced sideways at Julius's face as he spoke. Seeing no emotional reaction there, he nodded contentedly.

"Even so, Julius, you're truly kind. How many girls' hearts have you captivated with that consideration and thoughtfulness? Even Ferris is getting flustered."

"I don't understand the intent of your statement, Ferris. As for the latter part of what you just said, I respectfully decline."

Ferris chuckled, pouting his lips with a "How mean~," while Julius, with his eyes closed, maintained his initial stance. Marcos, surprisingly, felt a sense of goodwill towards this posture, yet he couldn't help but feel it was also a precarious way of standing. As if speaking Marcos's thoughts aloud, Ferris said,

"You don't have to be so rigid. The perceptive ones already know, and for those who don't, it was extremely effective, so it's fine, isn't it? Or—"

Ferris toyed with a pure white ribbon with his fingertips, then seductively licked his lips with a red tongue.

"Do you think Ferris and the Captain are so empty-headed that we wouldn’t realize the true meaning of your actions, Julius?”

“…Your thoughtfulness leaves me speechless. You make even the diligent among us feel foolish.”

At Ferris’s mischievous question, Julius’s expression finally thawed. There was a helpless smile, like a child whose mischief had been discovered, but it quickly vanished.

“However, I’d like you to be careful with your words. The way you just put it could needlessly wound the honor of my friend.”

“Ferris thinks that’s being overly protective. Don’t children need to experience a little pain to grow?”

“His straightforward way of being is not wrong. A day will surely come when that back will serve as a guide and his sword will fulfill its role. Thinking of that day, we shouldn’t introduce unnecessary changes.”

“Ferris is saying that’s being overly protective.”

With a “Well, I guess it can’t be helped~,” Ferris smiled at Julius, who remained steadfast in his opinion, and then gracefully threw himself onto the reception couch. Julius frowned at his sloppy posture, but Ferris used even that subtle reaction as a playful spice.

“You’re the type to go to such exaggerated lengths to meddle with a boy you just met today, aren’t you? So, it’s no wonder you’re soft on your own people.”

“I didn’t intend to be kind. Rather, I intended to be stricter than usual.”

“Yeah, yeah, everyone was pretty intimidated. Since Julius beat him up so badly… There’s no need to worry about him being attacked by unbridled guys anymore, is there, nya~?”

Julius gave a wry smile at Ferris, who closed one eye and formed a sly, mischievous grin. Marcos, who had been silently listening to their conversation, lowered his chin.

"The younger knights must have been quite agitated by that brat's disrespectful remarks about the knight's status in the hall. All the Royal Guards are guaranteed to have top-notch swordsmanship and pride, after all."

Indeed, it was precisely because the situation was the Royal Selection, a matter that could shake the very foundations of the nation, that the dissatisfaction simmering within the knights' hearts was prevented from exploding. However, this also meant that once they left that place, there was always the risk of it erupting at any moment.

"Even if a hot-blooded knight had demanded an apology, I doubt that young punk would have meekly accepted it. At worst, there was a possibility he could have been cut down for his insolence."

"That's why Subaru-kyun needed to be beaten down by a knight, and fast."

Taking over Marcos's words, Ferris stated the conclusion and pointed at Julius. Then, he held the hand he used for pointing vertically, as if showing gratitude.

"Honestly, if Julius hadn't done it, Ferris was thinking I'd have to, nya~."

"It's a matter of assigning the right person to the right job. You couldn't very well appoint yourself as an attendant, could you? Besides, I had a reason that made it seem natural for me to do it."

He was likely reFerrisng to the minor altercation at the Royal Selection. Given the animosity, no one would question Julius bringing the boy to the training grounds under the guise of personal vendetta.

"If I may say so, I was confident I could handle it best."

"Ah, Ferris agrees with that. In my case, even if I couldn't possibly lose, I couldn't have pulled it off so smoothly."

When it came to sword skill, Ferris stuck out his tongue and laughed, as if to hide his embarrassment. Ferris, who possessed unparalleled skill in water magic and held the title of ‘Blue’ was an exceptionally powerful magic user in the knight order. However, in terms of actual combat ability, he was among the lowest-ranked, or possibly even the weakest, among the Royal Guard.

Julius, who held the title of ‘Finest’ was at the very top of the knight order in terms of pure swordsmanship. There were concerns among those around him that his martial prowess might not be receiving its due recognition, as it seemed almost foolish to compare him to some superhumans in terms of combat power.

“When it comes to dealing with inferiors, entrusting it to Julius was the right call. That’s why I keep telling you to practice your sword more often.”

“No way~! If I swing a sword, sweat, and toil, what if my white, translucent hands get calluses? Can you take responsibility for that?”

“A knight whose livelihood is cutting and slashing shouldn’t be concerned about such things.”

Marcos sighed, shrugging his shoulders in exasperation at Ferris, who casually brushed off his captain’s orders. Then, he wrinkled his usually stoic face and looked at Julius.

“I understand your intentions. I’m not so dense as to think that wasn’t a necessary consideration. However, what’s done is done.”

Despite his sympathy, Marcos stated this briskly. Julius shifted respectfully at his unwavering stance, not mixing personal feelings with official duties, and tightened his slender face as if to reprimand his own slight relaxation.

“Knight Julius Juukulius, I hereby hand down your punishment.”

“Yes, I respectfully await it.”

“You are placed under five days of confinement, prohibited from entering the barracks and the royal castle. During this time, I will hold your sword. Once your confinement is lifted, go to the Vice-Captain to retrieve it.”

"—Understood."

Julius closed his eyes as if to ponder the announced details, then with a graceful movement, he reverently offered the knight's sword he had removed, handing it to Marcos, who reached out. Receiving the knight's sword, the very embodiment of a knight's pride, Marcos slid his fingers over the black scabbard as if testing its weight.

"I apologize. I'm making you bear a responsibility that isn't truly yours."

His expression remained unchanged. However, there was a definite hint of concern in his murmur. In response, Julius shook his head slightly.

"Captain is doing his utmost. The fact that the Royal Guard, once disbanded, remains strong and valiant today is all thanks to the Captain's presence."

"I'm a shallow man who can't even get his subordinates to fall in line properly."

"That's not true, Captain!"

Ferris, who had been silently watching the proceedings until then, refuted Marcos's uncharacteristic self-deprecation. He shifted on the couch, sitting up, and his cat eyes and ears playfully twitched.

"There's no way everyone can be perfectly harmonious, and the Captain has a firm grip on the reins. Then, with the reins the Captain holds, Ferris and Julius strive, and then with the reins that Ferris and others hold, someone else strives."

"Isn't that how it is?" Ferris tilted his head, looking up at Marcos's face. Marcos closed one eye at the words of appreciation and encouragement from his subordinates, then bared his teeth, forming a rough, unruly smile.

"When I say I can't even properly discipline my subordinates, I'm including you, who never dresses appropriately, you know?"

"Ferris's attire being like this is hardly a new development, nya~."

Marcos snorted at Ferris, who stuck out his tongue playfully, then carefully placed Julius's knight's sword on the desk and resettled himself in his chair.

"That's all the business for now. I also have many miscellaneous tasks to handle for the Royal Selection. —I order you to leave."

The return of his first-person pronoun to 'I' was a signal that Marcos's time for being unguarded was over. Sensing this, Julius respectfully and Ferris briefly, but both with equal deference, saluted their superior.

Marcos nodded, silently observing them. As the two turned their backs and exited the Captain's office, the door closed, leaving Marcos alone in the silent space. His lips muttered faintly,

"It's not easy, is it?"

That sentiment did not reach the two who had left the room.

2

Leaving the captain's office, the young man and the beautiful girl-like figure walked side-by-side down the corridor of the barracks.

The sight of the two beauties standing together was like a painting, and the fact that one of them looked like a girl dressed as a man added a suggestive element that sparked the observer's imagination.

Anyway,

"The Captain is so inflexible. If he sees through all the hidden circumstances, then isn't being acquitted good enough, don't you think?"

"For both the Captain and me, it's not that simple. I was expecting a much harsher punishment, so I actually feel the Captain's compassion."

Julius mused about the punishment he received while calming the discontented Ferris. However, a slightly bitter expression subtly mixed with his refined features.

"Though, having to meet the Vice-Captain weighs on me a bit."

"Ah, that's just mean, isn't it? Even I went 'ugh' the moment I heard it. I thought it was amazing that you didn't show it, Julius."

The two spoke about their superior, the Vice-Captain, without lowering their voices. Normally, Julius would be the one to admonish Ferris's behavior, but now he merely offered a wry smile and vague words, making no attempt to correct him.

That alone would reveal that this was the shared understanding of the Vice-Captain for the two of them—no, for the entire Knights' Order.

"So, what will you do now, Julius?"

"Naturally, I'll spend my time at the mansion as per the Captain's orders. I'll explain the situation to Lady Anastasia… Though it's concerning that she's not one to remain quiet."

"I totally get that feeling! At my place too, I'm always on edge wondering what Lady Crusch will do. Still, that unpredictability is kind of Lady Crusch's dangerous charm, wouldn't you say?"

Ferris, sympathizing with a melancholic Julius, then blushed as he gushed in the latter half of his statement. With a dreamy expression, he poked Julius's chest with his finger, twirling it in circles.

After dutifully listening to Ferris's lovesick rambling and letting him have his way, Julius suddenly remarked,

"By the way, Ferris, about him earlier…"

"Lady Emilia is with him now. After that, it'll only be for a short while, but…I think he'll be spending time at the Karsten family mansion."

Before Julius could finish his question, Ferris's voice offered a flat, emotionless reply.

Ferris looked up at the silent Julius from close by, then chuckled, "Nfufu," and said, “You really are kind, Julius. Should I say you’re very knight-like?”

“To be called that is the highest honor. …What do you mean, ‘taken into the Karsten household’?”

“Ferris thinks it’s not good to blab about a patient’s personal information, you know?”

Ferris deflected the question with an endearing gesture. However, Julius picked up on something within his curt reply that led him to understanding, and he muttered, “As I thought.”

“I suspected there were too many suspicious points, but it seems his gate is quite exhausted.”

“…Ferris didn’t say anything, okay?”

Julius gave a small nod, acknowledging Ferris’s feigned innocence.

After all, combining Ferris’s word ‘patient’ with the discomfort Julius himself felt about Subaru made it easy to imagine the background.

The conclusion that those elements led to in the intelligent Julius’s mind was,

“Lady Emilia is truly the type of person who loses out.”

Julius believed there had to be an easier way to live.

There must be clearer ways to repay kindness and to show it. However, she didn’t know them, nor had her life allowed her to learn them.

He thought that this path, for both the giver and receiver, was a precarious and fleeting way of life that could easily lead to misunderstandings and discord.

“Don’t you think she should just live more wisely…?”

Ferris directed a testing question at Julius’s monologue.

Julius pondered for a moment in response, then shook his head, "No."

"It is precisely because she acts that way that she can live nobly and beautifully as herself. I don't wish for her to change. That's why…"

Julius started to speak further but then closed his mouth, deeming it boorish.

Some things were better left unsaid. And Ferris must have understood that too. He also seemed to grasp Julius's hesitation and touched his own cat ears.

"What do you think will happen, Julius?"

"I don't know the future. All we can do is hope. Hope that everyone can live truly and without shame, as themselves."

Julius lifted his head, looked forward, and resumed walking.

Following him a half-step behind, Ferris clasped his hands behind his back and leaned forward.

"Does that include him too?"

"Everyone, Ferris. That's why we carry swords."

Julius wondered if he would break.

If he were to break, he thought it would be a blessing to break here.

However, if he didn't break,

"It wouldn't be so bad to cross swords again with a fool who champions ideals."

Receiving Julius's words, Ferris gave a small, knowing chuckle.

Julius raised an eyebrow at the reaction and made a puzzled expression. Ferris then burst out laughing as if he'd seen something even more amusing on Julius's face.

"Even if you think that way, I bet Subaru-kyun thinks he never wants to go through that again. Not after being so publicly beaten like that.”

A smile he couldn’t completely hide even with his hand over his mouth.

“You had all sorts of motives, but did you get a little irritated after all?”

A testing tone with an upward glance. Julius reflexively started to retort, “That’s unfair,” then suddenly looked inward.

The ill-mannered behavior in the hall, the numerous insults on the training ground. As well as the outcome it produced, and the face of the woman who was burdened because of it, came to mind.

“That’s unfair, Ferris. I am a knight. I impose that upon myself, however imperfectly.”

He gracefully shook his head, as if he had nothing to be ashamed of in his actions, and placing his palm on his chest, Julius looked directly into Ferris’s eyes.

“I was only a little bit annoyed.”

“Ferris was quite a bit, though.”

As if exchanging the greatest joke, they both shared smiles.

Then, approaching the entrance of the barracks, they faced each other again, extended their hands, and shook firmly.

“Well then, until next time. I sincerely wish you and your master good health.”

“You too, Julius, you’ll have to put up with Lady Anastasia’s nagging, but good luck. As for the rest of what you did… Well, I’ll take care of it over here.”

Releasing the handshake, Ferris waved his hand casually and walked out of the barracks.

Watching his back, Julius looked at his retreating friend—and then at his enemy.

“It is Lady Anastasia who will ascend to the throne.”

“Nuh-uh, the throne truly suits Lady Crusch.”

Exchanging such declarations of war, the knights returned to their respective masters.

The red sunlight pouring from the evening sky cast an equal hue upon the two parting figures, and upon all who lived in the royal capital.

The respective Royal Selections were now about to begin.

Bonus Short Stories

Priscilla's Cheers for Me!
Entertainment Part

1

"Well now, this is quite a collection of fools who think too highly of themselves."

Looking down on the scene below her, the woman concealing her mouth with a fan spoke without concealing her contempt.

Cruel beauty, and loveliness like a poison flower. A bewitching girl, who unleashed her beauty like an attack.

Orange hair like the sun, gathered up with jeweled hair pins scattered through it, with her body wrapped in a blood-red dress that boldly exposed her shoulders and upper chest. Her bountiful breasts asserted their existence nearly to the point of spilling out, and complemented the girl with a bewitching allure that would scorch men's ability to reason.

Her blazing crimson eyes were looking down at a castle-like courtyard made of stone—the event being held there, and the feverish madness of the participants.

It was a wide yard, but lacked the artwork and flower beds that are usually found in nobles' mansions. Instead, stone paving was laid on the ground, and a circular stone stage was placed in the center of the site.

The event's participants surrounded the stage, and while raising a roar of hoarse voices and the clanging of metal on metal, their attention was stolen away by the clash of arms occurring on the stage.

"…An exhibition match, competing with martial arts. Well, what an impressive collection of people with too much time on their hands."

Looking down at the madness where jeers flew, the stage was stained with blood and sweat, and sparks flew from weapons, the girl spoke with an expression that said she couldn’t be more bored. As she did, someone down in the courtyard noticed her looking down at them, and all at once, all eyes were drawn to her.

It was a stare imbued with the intensity of a rude crowd of men wearing helmets and armor, and wielding rough weapons. While all of that focused on herself, there was no change in her cool expression.

“See that you all do your utmost. If you do that, perhaps these days that wear down your flesh and blood will be suitable for me to look upon.”

Opening her fan with snap, she haughtily cast those words down at them. Though her voice wasn’t that loud, it rang equally in the ears of everyone in the yard, and their madness erupted again.

…Even while watching that, her red eyes remained entirely cold.

2

“Priscilla! How many times have I told you?! Showing your face in front of them is too strong a shock! Just wait quietly in your room for the results!”

“This is an event that I opened for myself. If I were to not observe it, how would the zeal of the commoners be rewarded? It would be the epitome of inelegance. Indeed, you should stop repeating yourself, you bucket of bones.”

“Bucket of bones…why you… Wha… what is it you think I am to you?”

“A husband who bought a concubine for gold, are you not? Quit making such a fuss over such little things, bucket of bones. It will put me in a bad mood, and you will be the one troubled by that the most. It makes no difference to me, either way.”

“Gh…”

The old man stood, choking on his words, grinding his teeth while a vein stood out on his forehead. He seemed to be nearing the age of seventy, but he stood straight for someone of his age, and his movements were youthful. If one thought of his excessive ambition as the driving force behind this, then the human desire for gain truly is nothing to scoff at.

While narrowing her gaze on the man who was exposing his anger, the girl—Priscilla—thought along those lines.

The relationship between the old man and Priscilla was that of a couple with a tremendous age difference. However, there wasn't a trace of bonds or affection between them; it was a relationship entirely run on necessity.

To the old man, it was his ambitions. To Priscilla, it was… a result of the environment that she'd become used to by now.

"From the very beginning, I was opposed to this. You don't understand the importance of choosing a knight! Pedigree! Status! The dignity of a knight is directly connected to the evaluation of his master's person! To choose that sort of critical follower in this sort of nonsense, of all things…"

"I will do exactly as I please. Do not forget that I have only joined in your plot because it does not go against my whims. Know that the flowering of your long-held ambition depends on each and every one of your words and actions catering to my mood. See that you do your utmost, commoner."

While dealing insensitively with her husband as he spoke hoarsely, Priscilla swung the sleeves of her dress and returned to the window. Despite having been told repeatedly not to show her face, she walked onto the terrace without hesitation.

Caressed by the wind, holding a hand to her hair as it streamed behind her, she looked down at the valiant warriors.

All of them had come seeking the prize of this fighting tournament—in other words, they were men who, seeking the position of Priscilla's knight, had decided to wield their weapons and shed their blood.

Priscilla’s husband, Leip Barielle, was a man who worked in a key position in the Kingdom of Lugunica. If one were to become the knight of his wife, Priscilla, there was no question that they would be given exceptional benefits.

Normally, this was an honor that would not be bestowed on anyone who was not an ‘actual knight’, someone who was part of the royal knights. This time, it had been announced that they would gather together martial artists without official positions, and choose a knight from among them.

Penniless mercenaries, and those without the social status to hope to become a knight, leapt at the chance, and it’s resounding success had led to the fever pitch of the current events in the yard.

Every bit of this, large and small, was done at Priscilla’s initiative, over Leip’s objections.

“It is quite an assembly of commoners, indeed. But even with this many gathered…”

Even while looking down at the realization of her proposal, with so many glory-seeking warriors gathered together, Priscilla’s expression did not brighten.

Disappointment at unmet expectations dwelt in her eyes, and her heart continued to grow colder towards the mens’ fervor and conflict. It was not the face of one who was enjoying themselves. It was the look of one observing a barnyard territorial dispute.

“There is no one who would make my heart dance, then. At this rate, perhaps no one will become my knight.”

She murmured something so selfish that if Leip, still inside the room, had heard it, he might have actually burst a vein.

Neither would it have been odd if the martial artists, upon learning that nothing would come of so many of them gathering, had then and there rushed to attack Priscilla and those with her. The reason that Leip was looking pale despite his anger was that he knew he didn’t have sufficient troops stationed at the mansion to keep control of the martial artists.

All of these unfortunate futures would be decided on by a single whim of the girl known as Priscilla.

“…Hm?”

Just as she was about to give in to boredom and turn and walk away, Priscilla stopped.

Turning at the waist to check on something that had caught the corner of her eye, she walked over to the railing of the terrace. Placing her hands together on the waist-height railing and looking down at the garden, she saw it.

“…Hey now, if you cringe like that, someone could really have their feelings hurt. Who? Me.”

Saying that, a man stood atop the stone stage, glaring down at the men around him. Why did this man draw Priscilla’s attention? The answer is simple.

It’s because at the moment he appeared, the roar of the crowd ceased as though it had been doused with water. And the reason for that would be clearly understood the moment you saw him.

He was a man in an unusual outfit. His head was protected by a pitch black full helmet that covered his entire face. Despite that, below the neck he was wrapped in a cheap-looking cape, and finished off with light linen clothing on his upper and lower body. His feet, too, wore sandals woven from plants, and affixed with cloth, so he was sacrificing everything aside from ease of movement.

And more than anything else, what drew the attention of the people surrounding him, was that the left arm that should have been there, wasn’t.

It would be one thing to see that while walking around the town, but quite another at a fighting tournament where they were supposed to be competing with martial arts. Anyone would understand without even having to think about it, how much of a handicap it was to be one-armed.

“In that case, does it mean he has great confidence in that one arm?”

It’s likely that everyone there came to the same conclusion as Priscilla. With a wide-bladed sword over his shoulder, the fully-armored warrior facing the one-armed man began shortening the distance between them without letting down his guard.

In response to that, the man cracked the bones in his neck, and lazily spoke.

“Oh, oh, now you’ve gotten all serious. …Just so you know, I’ll cry if I lose.”

Drawing the sword that was sheathed horizontally behind his waist, he began casually closing the distance while tossing jokes.

3

“Interesting. Interesting, interesting, interesting, interesting. Mhmm, interesting!”

Accompanied by the sound of her fan opening and closing, Priscilla repeated that with a terribly pleased look on her face.

Walking restlessly about the room, a faint excitement colored Priscilla’s cheeks. Her appearance gave off an air of passion that was out of the ordinary, and not intended by the woman herself.

Leip, seated nearby, groaned softly at her bewitching elegance. An old man whose lust should have long since dried up, he shook his head to try and deny the thirst-like emotion pouring into his heart.

“What do you mean, interesting?! Honestly, what are you thinking?! You sent away everyone you had gathered, even the victor, and the only one left is that?! Are you insane?!”

“I have no intention of getting absorbed into a meaningless debate about whether I am sane or mad. Who, indeed, has declared you to be sane? The correctness of my actions will be proven by providence, through their results. You should not waste my time with tedious words. Instead, hurry up and bring him to me.”

“You little…”

As Leip sat unable to speak past his exasperation, Priscilla showed no hint whatsoever of giving ground to him. At the point the air in the room was stagnating to its worst, a knock was heard from outside the room.

“Leip-sama. Priscilla-sama. I’ve brought him.”

“Mhmm. I’ll permit it. Enter.”

As Priscilla responded before her husband, there was a brief hesitation outside the door. Then, a youth in his early teens came into the room, along with…

“When I’m suddenly called for by the higher-ups like this, an easily-spooked guy like me gets a little nervous.”

With the joints of his helmet rattling, the one-armed man entered. He looked around the room unconcernedly, and shook his shoulders when he realized that Priscilla was staring at him.

“It is my great honor to have been invited. …Should I kneel, perhaps?”

“I care not. There is no value in the empty posturings of the common rabble. Show me where your worth lies. If not for that, then there was no point in having called for you.”

“What a scary lady. …I hope I didn’t come to the wrong place.”

“You lout! How dare you speak to my wife like that!”

Watching Priscilla and the man exchange disrespectful words, Leip’s patience ran out. He marched over next to him, frothing at the mouth at his ongoing rudeness.

“This barbaric attitude and behavior! And what do you mean by keeping your face concealed, after having come to this place. For unseemly behavior like yours, I will strike you down here and now…”

“Bucket of bones.”

“What?! I’m in the middle of something…”

“Do be quiet.”

Priscilla’s attack was launched along with her words. Her closed fan struck the back of Leip’s head, and the red-faced old man fell without a sound. After having knocked her husband flat, Priscilla paused a moment, and then turned her eyes to the boy butler who was standing by.

“Take him away.”

At the short command, the boy butler obeyed without any sign of hesitation. Lifting the large-framed old man with his shoulder, even while his feet were dragging on the floor, the boy took him out of the room as though quite familiar with doing so.

As the door closed with a click, the only ones left in the room were Priscilla and the man.

“Well then, at last that nuisance is out of the way.”

“I’m not really in a position to point fingers, but isn’t this a little too eccentric? Also, suddenly being alone in a room with a guy who’s this suspicious-looking; it seems like you’re a little too lacking a sense of self-preservation.”

“You think you could do something to me? Don’t think so highly of yourself, commoner. The only thing that can do anything to me is my own will. Nothing aside from that can have any effect on me at all.”

Seeing Priscilla speak proudly in complete self-confidence, the man shook his head and let out a deep, deep sigh.

“I surrender. This is way harder than I imagined. What can I show you that would make you approve of me, princess?”

"Hmm, yes. …Show me you can survive."

The moment after she finished speaking, Priscilla's body spun at high speed.

She spread the folding fan she was holding and tossed it in the air to block the man's sight. He immediately swept it away with his right hand. However, by that time Priscilla had already slid to his side, and extended her hand to his waist—she grasped the hilt of the man's weapon, the broad-bladed sword, and drew it.

"Hah."

A short breath out. One flash of the drawn blade. Carried by centrifugal force, the blade mowed horizontally through the man's neck. …I definitely got him. That conviction passed through the back of Priscilla's mind.

"This is really what they mean by getting away by the skin of your teeth."

But, at the end of her swing, the tip of the sword had cut nothing more than a shallow scratch in the man's neck; he had leaned back out of the way. A head sent flying, and a fountain of blood erupting. It was a solid enough strike that one could vividly imagine that occurring. That result had been avoided by a literal hair's breadth.

"Please spare me, princess. You're not gonna try that again, are ya?"

"…Be at ease. I have seen all I needed to with that one swing. Hmm…interesting, indeed."

As the man asked that fearfully, Priscilla smiled faintly and tossed his sword back to him. Seeing the unsheathed blade spinning in the air, he rushed in a panic to where it was going to land.

"But there's no way I can catch that!"

With a sharp noise, the tip of the sword tore through the room's carpet, and buried itself in the floor.

“Look here, commoner. What sort of disrespect is that? What do you think you are doing to my carpet?”

“Hey, it’s not my fault. No matter how you think about it, it’s you that went off like that, princess. Actually, how am I supposed to look at this? Can I pat myself on the back for meeting with your approval?”

“As long as the interest you provide me continues to be more valuable than this carpet. Whether it’s this moment just now, or your performance as a sideshow… your actions have value to the extent that they entertain me.”

“…”

At Priscilla’s words, the man gulped a little. Imagining the face on the other side of the helmet, Priscilla pulled a fan from her cleavage (different from the fan that had fallen to the floor), concealed her mouth, and continued.

“And so, what do you mean by not removing your helmet even in my presence?”

“…I messed up a little, and now it’s not a face I can show to people. I wouldn’t want to put you in a bad mood, so please put up with it. What’s more, I haven’t introduced myself yet.”

“Very well, I’ll allow it. Asking the name of a jester, and placing him by my side, is part of my generosity. Tell me your name.”

Without any sort of formal exchange, and with an imperious attitude, Priscilla allowed him to offer his name.

“…Aldebaran. My name is Aldebaran. Princess. I’d like you to just go with Al, basically, but I wanted to give you my name properly. …You’re my master, after all.”

“It has a nice ring to it. You have a good name, Aldebaran. And, I am generous. I will not ignore the first request from my attendant. I shall call you ‘Al’.”

As Al lowered his head in gratitude, Priscilla sniffed softly. Then, as she watched Al pull his sword from the floor,

“After this, I will be throwing myself into a contest that will determine the course of the country. It is a contest whose outcome is already apparent, but the way will most likely be rough. Al, I command you to clear the way for me. I trust you have no objections?”

“Ah, of course. …That’s the reason I’ve rushed to your side like this.”

Aldebaran’s murmur carried a deep meaning, but Priscilla overlooked it as unimportant.

It was obvious that he was a man with secrets. She knew well that they hadn’t yet shown each other enough of themselves for him to swear fealty from his heart. Despite that, Priscilla was able to be at ease because of the conviction she held.

It was her philosophy on life itself…

“…This world is designed to operate in the way that works best for me.”

That was the reason for the absolute self-confidence and self-esteem that the girl called Priscilla Barielle continued to carry.

Continued in The Day I gave up on being a Following Star

Anastasia's Prosperity Record

1

Noticing that the arranged time approached, Julius Juukulius looked skyward.

Julius: "It's nearly time… I lose track of time every time I start working on documents."

Removing his glasses, he gently pressed his tired eyes, after a long period of looking at tiny letters. He always wore these glasses when he had to fulfill his duties as a noble, but when assuming his role as a knight, he took these off. That detail was part of Julius's philosophy, who believe he should keep his noble and knights roles separated.

???: "Nii-sama, the time to get ready has come."

Some seconds after that, there was a knock on the office door, and a moderate voice was heard from the other side.

Julius: "I am finalizing everything here. Thank you for your reminder, Joshua."

Joshua: "Put yourself in my shoes. You told me it was an important meeting for our House and consequently, for the whole Kingdom of Lugunica. It's natural for me to be worried."

In response, a man of delicate features entered the room. His hair was styled in a ponytail, and showed a gentle smile. His name was Joshua Juukulius, Julius's brother, who was 4 years younger than him, and one of his unconditional supporters. Even though he was physically weak, and wasn't blessed with sword talent, he was a class apart when it came to smarts and had an easier time with studying compared to his older brother.

Joshua: "Nii-sama? Is something the problem?"

Julius: "…No, nothing, I was just spacing out. I'm alright.

Joshua: “Good, then leave the job of cleaning this up to me, and go change so you can meet your visitor.

Julius: “I could do that myself, but… You’re better than me at that, Joshua.”

Joshua: “Haha. That’s right. Most importantly of all, you should not keep a lady waiting.”

After that suggestion, Joshua winked at his brother, who was quite surprised with that gesture, despite the fact he was quite the upright gentleman, even if he ignored his familial bias.

Julius: “I was not expecting you to make that sort of joke, Joshua. Who did you learn it from?”

Joshua: “Who else could it be but yourself, brother?”

His immediate answer was another surprise to Julius who, despite that, agreed with Joshua’s assessment, and started reflecting on his usual behavior around his brother.

2

???: “Glad to meet ya. I am Anastasia Hoshin, the president of the Hoshin Trading Company.”

The one graciously laughing in the parlor was a girl who was apparently young, and was not very tall. She had wavy purple hair, and she covered her body with a white cloth, made out of animal fur. Her soft lips were always pursed in a smile, and her light blue seemed to calm down anyone who talked with her. Julius was not an exception to this, and was swallowed by her charm, and needed a moment to compose himself.

Julius: “The pleasure is mine. My name is Julius Juukulius, heir of the Juukulius House. Thank you for agreeing to meet me, Anastasia-sama.”

With his hand on his chest, Julius performed a knights’ curtsy to Anastasia. Looking at that act of formality, the girl raised her eyebrows slightly.

Anastasia: “It’s alright, let’s not make this too formal. You sought me out, after all. I accepted the invasion because I felt both of us could get a lot outta this conversation.”

Julius: “I am glad to hear it. Was there any issue during the trip? I attempted to take precautions for every possible problem, but if there was anything that caused you discomfort, please do not hesitate in telling me.”

Anastasia: “Nah, it was so peaceful that I have nothin’ to complain about. Quite the opposite, my only worry right now is that I may be hasslin’ ya too much.”

She said, with a shy smile on her face.

Anastasia had a very noticeable accent, characteristic of the powerful country to the West, Kararagi, a federal city-state composed of many cities. The origin of that accent was deeply related to the country’s own origin as well.

The worry shown in the girl’s face, however, was easily identified if one followed the direction of her gaze, towards what was happening behind Julius’s back.

???: “Woooooow! You got a lotta expensive things, mister! It’s all shiny! How cool!”

???: “Onee-chan, calm down… Don’t touch other people’s things! If that thing falls…”

???: “Lookie here, Hetaro! It’s gold! I’m all golden!”

Hetaro: “S-S-S-Sisteeeeer…!”

Two little children had run into the room and were playing around in a corner. Neither of them was tall enough to reach Julius’s waistline, and were aptly described as feline demi-humans with orange fur, wearing a white overcoat. The way they spoke clued people into their relationship as brother and sister, but the girl kept touching and picking up every object in sight, leaving her brother exasperated at her behavior.

Anastasia: “I’m sorry for this mess, but she means no harm. I’d be happy if ya were understandin’.”

Julius: “I’m not as strict to the point of chastising children for being children. But may I inquire who are they?”

Anastasia: “In theory, they’re my bodyguards. They may not look like it, but they’re pretty strong, ya know? They’re second fiddle only to my army’s captain, who stayed behind with the merchants.”

Obviously, Anastasia’s explanation surprised Julius, who looked again at the demi-human siblings. If they were indeed strong warriors belonging to a fighting force, despite their cute appearance, that would mean that they belonged to no other but Anastasia’s renowned personal army.

Julius: “So, they both belong to the Iron Fang?”

Anastasia: “Yes, and they’re both vice-captains on top of that. In truth, they’re triplets who work together, but the last remainin’ one, who’s a lot better at handlin’ money, stayed behind as punishment.”

It was common knowledge that the Iron Fang mercenary army was the strongest of its kind in Kararagi, and it was at the exclusive service of the Hoshin Trading Company, and would step in to solve only the most extreme of conflicts.

Anastasia: “Anyways, today is only meant to be a first meetin’, so don’t worry too much ‘bout them. I promise ya I have no intention to start a fight, I actually want to keep a good relationship between us.”

Julius: “I must still apologize for my lack of temperament. Even though I am a Royal Knight, I ended up having quite the exaggerated reaction at becoming aware they belong to such an elite army.”

Anastasia: “Ya know, your reaction is actually rather refreshin’, as many people don’t believe it at all when they learn.”

Looking at Anastasia’s calculating gaze, Julius was forcefully reminded of the girl he was facing. Despite her tender age, she already had quite the list of accomplishments, having already distinguished herself in the highly competitive commercial atmosphere of Kararagi. And now, she had the wish to expand her business into Lugunica.

Anastasia: “Alright, let’s start this from zero. Currently, the Kingdom of Lugunica is facin’ an economic recession, and the public coffers have never been this dried-out before, which is makin’ it difficult for the ones in charge to manage the Kingdom. Am I right?”

Julius had to put in quite some effort to maintain a composed and inexpressive face, as Anastasia did not hold back in picking her first topic. The subject of Lugunica’s precarious financial situation, was a critical matter. As such, it was information to which the majority of nobles were not privy to; even those working for Lugunica’s government were mostly unaware of this fact. Obviously, outsiders should not know that either.

Anastasia: “Before ya start lookin’ for a culprit, I’ll assure ya no one revealed anythin’ they shouldn’t. ‘Twas a conclusion I got from sightseein’ in the city myself.”

Julius: “Sightseeing…?”

Anastasia: “Negociatin’ starts before getting’ to the table, by researchin’ the subject I want to discuss. I assume you’ve also done your research on me, no? In my case, I like walkin’ ‘round with my own two feet, and takin’ a good look with my own eyes.”

Appreciating the vague aroma of her tea, Anastasia divulged her philosophy as if it was a natural thing to do.

Originally, this meeting with Anastasia had been proposed by Julius, who had set his eyes upon the Hoshin Trading Company, which was expanding very rapidly in Kararagi and had remarkable potential for expansion. He had thought that it would have been possible to bring it to Lugunica, so that it would help with its economic comeback. Now, it was purely Julius’s responsibility to reign in the girl in front of him in a proper fashion, so that his wager would not come back to bite him. However, right now, it was

Anastasia who was in total control of this meeting.

Anastasia: “To be honest, I’m not very interested in Lugunica as it is now. Even if my Company expands to this country, we’ll only be able to profit at the start of operations, and it won’t last long. That is because, in only a short time, this Kingdom’s administration’ll be in ruins, and I don’t wanna be investin’ money and manpower knowin’ that.”

She had no reserves in appraising Lugunica’s current state harshly. However, as the hair of the Juukulius Family, Julius was perfectly aware of how her words rang true, and did not know how to reply, choosing to remain silent about her statement. However, Anastasia added,

Anastasia: “That bein’ said… I see some potential in the Juukulius House. Not only you, but from what I grasped, your brother is also quite capable, ya know? Even if this Kingdom’s fated to fall, as far as I’m concerned, I don’t think it’s a poor choice to keep a good relationship with your House in the long term.”

Julius: “…”

That was a very clear provocation. Even if he knew that, if Julius remained quiet, it was because Anastasia’s words had the power to enchant his own heart.

At that very moment, his voice, his gestures, his gaze, all these things were weapons that Anastasia could use in this negotiation.

At that very moment, Julius was nothing but her opponent, an opponent she must defeat. For that reason…

Julius: “…Unfortunately, that will not be possible. The House of Juukulius swore absolute loyalty to the Kingdom of Lugunica, and it shall fall alongside the Kingdom. That being said, I have no doubt whatsoever that its greatest goal is to work tirelessly so that the worst may not come to pass.”

Anastasia: “…”

With that confident statement, which left no room for doubt, it was

Anastasia's turn to end up completely stunned. She knew she was going to be rejected, but not with such conviction. Her light-blue eyes were open wide in a genuine expression of shock, which curiously made Julius think her more attractive compared to the times she acted in calculated fashion.

Mimi: "Heeey, miss! Look at dis, miss! Isn't this cool?! This is so cool!"

Once the two sides had disclosed the first cards they held in their hands, everything pointed that the meeting would end up fruitless. Right at that time, the little demi-human girl came bursting into the conversation giggling like a madwoman. She then turned to Julius, smiling ear-to-ear, and asked,

Mimi: "Mister, is dis here yours? Why does it look like a lizard?"

Julius: "This is not a lizard, but a dragon. It is the symbol of our Kingdom."

Anastasia: "Mimi! Stop hasslin' Julius so much. C'me here, gimme that."

What the girl named Mimi held in her hand was an insignia, with an embedded jewel in its center. That was an item of ultimate importance to the Kingdom of Lugunica, and it should have been well-kept, however…

Julius: "Anastasia-sama. I don't mean to be rude, but that insignia is an artifact of great value and…"

Anastasia: "Yes, I apologize. I'll give it back, of course. But hey, this is quite the beautiful glow, ain't it?"

The girl smiled faintly when she noticed that the jewel encrusted in the insignia glowed slightly, and looked at it as if she were hypnotized.

Yet, more than anyone else present at that place, the one that was most stricken by shock was, obviously, Julius himself.

After all, that glow could only meant one thing. He could only kneel as a reaction.

Julius: “Anastasia-sama. It seems that we need to have an even more important conversation.”

Anastasia closed her eyes after witnessing that sudden change in Julius’s behavior who, in turn, began thinking on the possible results of the events that had just occurred.

The President of the Hoshin Trading Company, a foreigner, had reached the conclusion that Lugunica had no value whatsoever, to her.

But what if she had the chance to analyze the Kingdom’s workings from within? Would she keep the same opinion in not wanting to get involved with it?

More than that, what would she do if she had the power to directly influence the Kingdom’s course?

Julius: “…”

And if, by chance, she accepted to be a part of what the glow of the insignia implied…

What would Julius himself choose?

END

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins☆

1

When Felix Argyle was young, the world was a colorless, transparent place.

Without color, without sound, without flavor, without warmth.

Nothing was given to him, and nothing was taken away. From the start, he possessed nothing.

In a room so dark he couldn't see even his own hands, atop a bed he'd laid on for so very long that his own scent had worked its way into it, passing the time by thinking about nothing was all that he had.

Occasionally, food was pushed in through the gap under the door. Depending solely on the faint light, he crawled on the floor and rushed eagerly to the food like a dog would. Grabbing the cold food in his hands, occasionally pushing his nose into the bowl like an animal, sloppily getting his face dirty while biting and chewing his food.

When he finished eating, he would push the tray and dishes against the door, return unsteadily to his bed, and pass the time silently. If the dishes happened to be removed at some point, he paid it no mind.

Even if he'd lost sight of what it meant to be alive, he had no reason to die so he didn't die. Putting the food that was offered into his mouth, too, had no more meaning than that.

"…"

He opened his mouth and tried to speak. Whether his voice emerged or not, he wasn't really sure. Perhaps his ears were dead; perhaps his throat was dead. Or perhaps in truth it was he himself that was dead?

Idly giving himself to pondering such endless thoughts, Felix passed the time. Thinking back and forth about life and death, too, was something he had repeated more times than he cared to count.

"…"

Once more, it felt like the air was shaken. His mouth was closed. He hadn't tried to speak. What was it that he thought he'd heard? Perhaps an insect had made its way into the room. His unsanitary self, and the food he'd scattered as he ate. It was the sort of environment where insects might breed and fly around.

Even though he felt nothing, the thought of passing the time in a room together with an insect was somehow unpleasant. For someone who was even less than an insect to think that; would the insect mock him for it?

"…"

He heard something again. Had he laughed, perhaps? Trying to touch his own face, his fingers sliced through thin air. He'd lost track of even the location of his face. He let out a sigh at his completely broken mind.

…It was the next moment.

"I will take a lack of response as agreement…!"

Right after he thought he'd heard a gallant voice, the door was kicked open from the outside with a violent crash.

The hinges were sent flying by the impact, and the dishes that had been heaped in front of the door were scattered. At the sudden intrusion and sound of breaking pottery, Felix's body shook and, from atop the bed, he looked towards the door.

Brilliant light poured through the doorway that had lost it's door, and even the agitated dust could be seen floating in the air like something from a fantasy. A small silhouette advanced calmly through that light.

"Is Felix Argyle, the firstborn of the Argyle family, here?"

Felix felt that the voice was terribly strained with emotion.

After all, if you listened closely, it was the voice of a young child. A high-pitched voice suited to that age was intentionally ornamented with gallantry and firmness, turning it into a voice that would pass through the eardrums and pierce the heart.

But, it wasn’t something that seemed overdone. There was nothing forced in the attitude of the voice’s owner. It was simply that the development of the speaker’s body couldn’t keep up with the speed of her heart.

“…”

Still lying prone on his bed, Felix stared wordlessly at the intruder. Her eyes were narrowed in the dim light, and when they adjusted to the darkness, she finally noticed Felix.

And, changing her expression to a little smile,

“I see you there. …Come now, the time has come for you to be freed from this injustice.”

Saying that, she clasped Felix’s filth-covered hands without any hesitation.

2

As warm water was being poured on his head, Felix was at last able to feel that this was really happening.

The water traversed his long-grown hair, and washed off the grime all over his body. The clear water that had been poured on his head had been colored pitch black by the time it reached the floor of the bathing room.

“This is quite refreshing, isn’t it.”

Watching as the filth was washed off of Felix, the one bathing along with him spoke cheerfully. It was a young girl, wearing nothing on her pale body. Her green hair was long, and a strong conviction dwelt in her eyes. Her beautiful, dignified features made her seem more fearless than one would expect from her age.

Even though she was no older than him, Felix couldn’t help but turned his gaze downward due to the great difference he felt between them.

“Don’t cast your gaze downwards. Your eyes will become clouded. If your spirit grows dim, you may lose sight of your reason to live, as well.”

She smoothly cut off Felix’s fears. Taking the arms that Felix was still unable to move properly, the girl’s skin touched his as she cleaned his body with a washcloth.

While having the filth washed away from his body, Felix finally wondered who she was. Why had she taken him out of that room, and why was she close to him now?

“The Argyle household is under my household’s jurisdiction. Seeing a problem, and taking action, are only natural.”

“Juris…diction…”

“That’s right. It seems there had been rumors for quite a while. The eldest son of the Argyle family was an illegitimate child, he was seen as detestable, and his existence was hidden deep inside the mansion, they said.”

“…”

At the words “illegitimate child”, Felix’s body trembled slightly.

They were words he’d heard many times before he was thrown into that darkness. Even though he didn’t understand their meaning, he knew that they meant something unacceptable. That was why he was put in that place…

“You were seen as an illegitimate child because of those ears atop your head, you see.”

“These…”

“The Argyle household is a family of humans. Naturally, both of your parents are human as well. For you to have demi-human ears in spite of that, it was only natural for infidelity to be suspected. However, it’s already been proven that that was an error.”

“…huh?”

On the verge of looking downwards again, Felix raised his head at the girl’s declaration. Her face was right in front of his eyes, close enough to feel her breath, and his cheeks began to redden involuntarily.

“Because of a blessing I’ve had since birth, I can see through the lies of others. Your mother was not unfaithful. I confirmed it myself. After that, I climbed up the Argyle family tree and found the cause. Your ears are a throwback, a recessive trait from a distant relative four generations back.”

Felix was holding his breath. She smiled at him, and continued.

“It was all begun by a misunderstanding. …It is no sin for you to be alive.”

“…”

“Raise your head, look forward, and live with unclouded eyes. It might be difficult to do it right away, but I will help you as well. So for now, please believe in me.”

At that time, the smile she ended with looked like the carefree girl’s true face.

3

When the bath was over, the new clothing he put on was his first in longer than he could remember. Having the fabric not stick to his skin, and being able to slide his fingers along the cloth, were quite nostalgic as well.

The wind blew across his freshly-cleaned skin, and the flaxen hair that had grown long was waving in the breeze. Following a servant of the mansion going before him, he pressed forward bit by bit, with a faltering motion, as though remembering how to walk.

"…Felix-sama, we have arrived."

Saying that, the elderly butler opened a door, and with a burst of wind, a large room came into view.

In the Argyle manor's great hall, food was placed out buffet-style, and he could see that preparations had been made to welcome back the eldest son who had been freed from the darkness.

All eyes were focused on him, and Felix became aware that his heart was beating rapidly. His pulse became more strained, and he started feeling short of breath. He started feeling that he wouldn't be able to stand without leaning on something, and looking around for something to support himself with, Felix placed a hand on a nearby table.

"Felix…"

Out of the quiet murmuring, that voice found its way into Felix's ears.

Without thinking, Felix looked towards it and noticed. It was the voice of a woman looking intently towards him with trembling eyes, a woman with long flaxen hair.

Mother. Mother's expression was stiff, and she was covering her mouth with a hand. Next to her was a bearded man, and he finally realized that the person holding his mother's shoulder was his father. His parents were standing right there.

"Felix, I'm sorry. I…we…"

The parents who had thrown him in a place like that, were right there.

"…"

His mother took a step forward, and tried to speak with a sobbing voice, but Felix wasn't listening. His hand wandered about the table that had been supporting it, and the moment it felt something hard and cold, it gripped firmly. A knife. Holding it in a reversed grip, he looked up at his mother as she walked unsteadily towards him.

"…!"

If he stepped forward, it would reach. The moment he was sure of that, Felix's body sprang towards his mother.

But after being shut away for so long, his legs faltered, and the strike he'd aimed at his mother's chest cut through the air without even grazing her. She let out a shrill scream, and his father and the others nearby realized the cause of her cry. But there was no longer any way for him to stop.

Hate. Hate. He hated everything. He hated everything so very much, and he could not stop.

"…Aah!"

He jumped once more towards his mother, who had fallen backwards and was now scrambling away. He wouldn't let her get away this time. He raised the silvery sparkle over his head, and it's point shone as it aimed for his mother's chest…

"You fool…!"

The feeling of the blade burying itself in flesh filled his hand, and Felix was struck by a fierce impact, falling to his side on the floor. The knife clattered on the floor after being ripped from his hand, and the great hall's carpet was spotted with red.

He'd definitely stabbed her. He'd done it. With these hands, the object of his vengeance had…

"…"

The stagnation that had pooled in his chest vanished as though it was draining away through a newly-opened hole. A dark smile appeared on Felix's face at that sensation, and he raised his head.

…The green-haired girl was bleeding, and lay collapsed on the great hall's floor.

"…huh?"

At this scene he had not imagined, Felix's thoughts came to a halt.

Sound faded from the world, color faded, and it seemed as though even motion had faded. A world opened up, the same as the one he'd been in in that dark room, and the only difference was that the girl's bleeding would not stop.

While no one else was unable to move, Felix made himself crawl over to the girl, and arrived at her side. Taking her listless form in his arms and raising her, he spoke.

"Wh…why… why did you…?"

"…fool."

The girl's eyes were closed, and she gave a brief answer to Felix as he trembled. She feebly forced open her long-lashed eyes, and looked at his wretched face.

"Open your…eyes. Raise your head, and look forward. To live with unclouded eyes… does not mean to fulfill the darkness you have inside."

"But, but I… then what should I have done? It's cruel, isn't it? It's unfair, isn't it? After being treated like that… how can I forgive everyone…?"

"There's no need… to forgive…don't misunderstand. Your feelings are legitimate. It's only natural. It's simply that you tried to go about it the wrong way…"

"Wrong way… What's… the right way?"

"A way of living, that brings no shame to your soul."

Her weak voice became clear for just a moment as she passed on that conviction. Strength returned to her eyes, she raised her head, and she looked straight at Felix as she spoke.

"Never forget, Felix. …Live in a way that brings no shame to your soul.”

“Ah, aah, aaah!”

Having said what must be said, the strength left the girl’s body. When he could tell that the body in his arms was becoming heavier, even as the life in it became lighter, Felix was assaulted by a horrible sense of dread.

Back in that place, during the time when he couldn’t even tell if he were dead or alive, he’d been conscious of his own death many times. A fear that he never felt during any of those times, ruled him now.

“N…no. No. No, no, no, no… You…can’t. You can’t…!”

A life being lost. The one he owed a debt to. The girl’s honest eyes, that looked forward. His own soul.

Countless words flew around in his confused head, and Felix looked up at the ceiling and screamed aloud. With his throat shaking, and crying out until it seemed he would cough up blood, he denied the deepening shade of death enveloping the girl.

Instantly, blue-white light poured from all over Felix, and it then spread to the girl’s body.

“…”

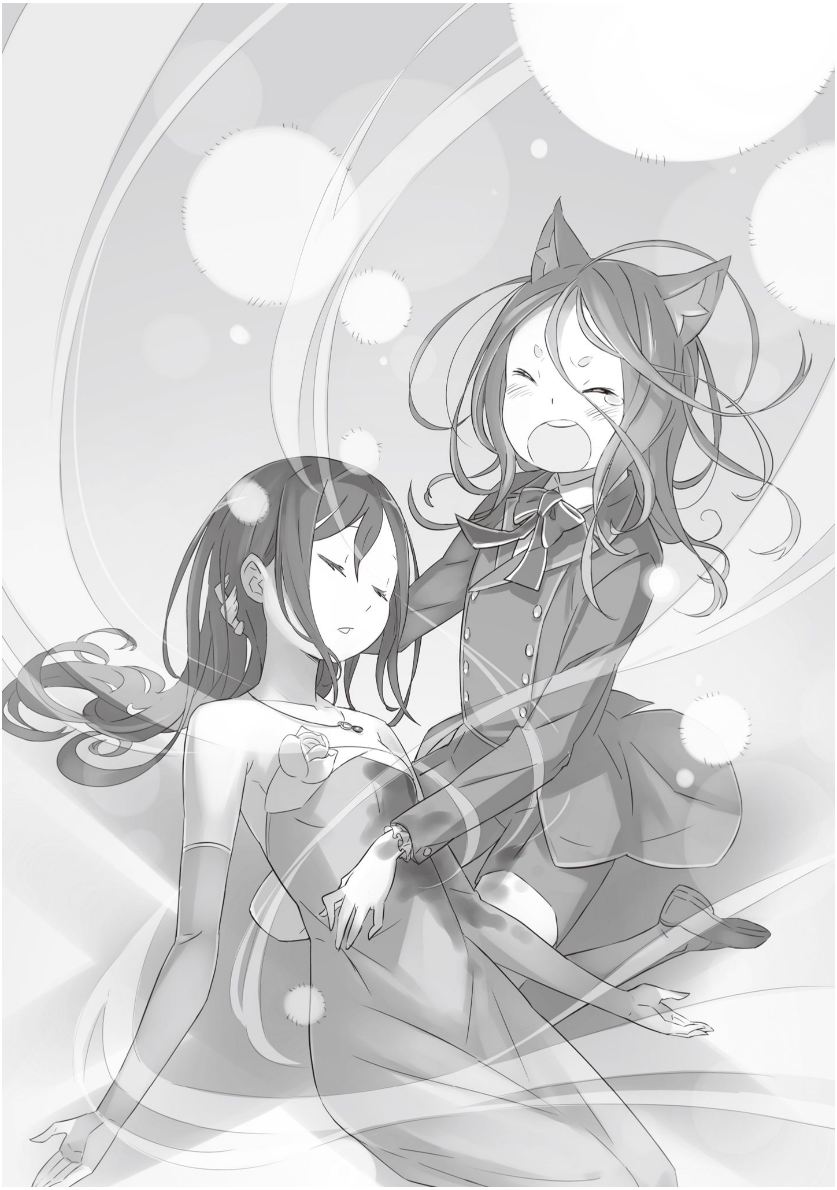

Felix blinked. It was a talent for magic that even he himself was not aware of, that had never had a chance to blossom—Felix Argyle the “Blue”, who would become able to utilize healing power sufficient to have his name recorded in the history of the kingdom. It was the light of his first healing.

The healing power bestowed vitality on the girl’s body, closed her wound, and compensated for her life’s mana that had flowed away. Color returned to her pale cheeks, and her halted breathing began again.

“…It appears I… escaped death. It would seem… you are telling me to live on.”

“…Mhmm. Um…yeah. I mean, yes.”

As the girl opened her eyes, Felix nodded at her, and spoke politely.

Beyond any doubt, there was only respect in his voice. The girl had used her body as a shield to protect him from his mistake. When he’d been as good as dead, she made him raise his head, and taught him how to live.

If she wished for him to live in a way that brought no shame to his soul, then…

“Please let me stay beside you. I want to use up my life by your side. I know it will be the best place for me to make my soul shine.”

He could tell that her eyes narrowed once as she listened to the words of one who had stabbed her. The girl sighed at him as he waited fearfully for her answer, unknowingly holding her tighter in his arms.

“Crusch Karsten.”

“…huh?”

“My name is Crusch Karsten. You should learn the name of your master, at least.”

Though her body still would not move on it’s own, she smiled proudly.

When he realized that he would be allowed to stay with her, Felix looked upwards, and cried.

“…ah”

With a loud voice, with tears dripping and dripping, like a child that had forgotten to cry, like a child that had recalled how to cry, like a newborn babe raises its voice.

With Crusch stroking his head with her palm, he continued crying for a long, long time.

Continued in The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins, The Book of Vows☆

Felt Gathers Thugs

1

Sitting in the dragon carriage with my legs on top of the bench, I sighed, and decided to finally break the ice.

???: “So, in the end, everythin’ went exactly as you planned.”

Look, in all my life, I think I have never been so upset before. They put me in a disgusting and uncomfortable dress and threw me into a meeting that had nothing to do with me all of a sudden, without bothering to explain anything at all.

Still, the redhead in front of me had a few words of choice.

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, even if you are not in public, you should strive to keep up a dignified front. A real lady should act with poise, even among close friends or alone.”

Felt: “Well, I wish those ladies would just explode! And did you really have the nerve to call yourself an close friend of mine to my face? Stop kiddin’ around, get outta here!”

I’ve lost track of the sheer amount of times Reinhard has nagged me with etiquette and finesse and all those pretty things, but I will not refrain from showing my displeasure and my pouting face to him. Worst of all, I’ve now been involved in this deal called a Royal Election or whatever, and I will be forced to spend too much time around this bastard, since he’s appointed himself as my Knight in this whole ordeal.

Felt: “I kinda let myself go with the flow there, I should have thought about it better… I’m already regrettin’ having to deal with your shit for such a long time.”

Reinhard: “I believe it would have been difficult to pick any knight other than myself, Felt-sama. As far as the Royal Election is concerned, your unknown pedigree and having been raised in the slums are very delicate matters. At the very least, I cannot think of anyone else that would be courageous enough to support you during the meeting…"

Felt: "Hey, I know all that! It's exactly because of that that I call you a damn bastard! I'm plenty sure that a lot of those knights and fancy nobles think you're wrong in the head!"

???: "Calm down, Felt-chan. I know it's a waste of time telling you to calm down but throwing a tantrum will not do you any good."

The only reason that I wasn't in an even fouler mood was the owner of the hoarse voice that interrupted the conversation, Rom-jii, who was sitting next to me, making the dragon carriage look smaller because of his presence.

Felt: "Yeah, ok, fine, but I have a number of things on my mind that need to be spo-… Okay, fine, whatever, nevermind, in the end they're nothin' but excuses."

Rom: "You don't need to put up a tough front in front of me, Felt-chan."

Felt: "I'll do that once things get really bad. I can't complain about everything when the so-called Royal Election has just started."

I am happy that Rom-jii is always worried about me, but I cannot depend on him forever… I know, today I'll sleep perched on his big arms just a tiny bit. Then, Rom-jii patted my head and turned to Reinhard.

Rom: "Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea… I think this is the first time we are able to talk calmly face-to-face."

Reinhard: "That's right, when I found you at the loot house the other day, you were already unconscious. By the way, how is your condition? When word arrived that you had escaped the guard post, I got worried."

Rom: "Yeah, I can see that you're worried… Luckily, I'm alive. But I'm not the one who matters most right now, it's Felt-chan. You… You really want to make her the King?"

With a serious, lower tone, Rom-jii asked that of Reinhard as if threatening him. I actually felt him putting more strength into his arm, and it really got the impression Rom was really going to jump Reinhard depending on his answer. The thought of warning him that his chances of succeeding were none passed my mind, but…

Reinhard: “Yes, I do. Felt-sama was chosen by the insignia, officially becoming a Royal Candidate. I am her knight, and will gladly give my life so that her ambition may be realized.”

Rom: “It is, to put it lightly, strange that someone such as the Sword Saint is that obsessed with a girl as little as Felt… I’ll have you know she’s small even when compared to girls her age.”

Felt: “Hey, Rom-jii!”

I started kicking up a fuss, but Rom-jii held my head in his large hands and continued, turning to Reinhard,

Rom: “I did not want to mock you, I am serious. Now that you are a part of that Royal Election business, everything that may happen is not just child’s play. I cannot let you go on this journey without trusting your companions. Because of that, we need to have an honest conversation with the Sword Saint. Do you understand?”

Reinhard: “Absolutely. May I call you Rom-dono?”

Rom: “You can call me jiji if you want to, but I can imagine it’s not really your taste. So what, are you gonna tell me your true intentions or not?”

Rom-jii crossed his arms, changing his posture on the bench, and I did the same looking straight at Reinhard’s annoying face. A few seconds later, however, he removed his sword from its place at his waist, and extended it to me while kneeling.

Felt: “…And what am I supposed to do with that?”

Reinhard: “Before anything else, I want to demonstrate my absolute loyalty towards Felt-sama. This is the proof that Felt-sama is my master, and that my sword belongs to her, and her alone. We can continue this talk after it is accepted.”

Rom: “Come on, Felt, take it. I feel it’s the right thing.”

With Rom-jii’s approval, I took up the sword. It was heavier than expected, with a large slash mark halfway along the white scabbard, as if a gigantic animal had stuck its claws in.

Rom: “According to the legends, the Holy Dragon Volcanica itself engraved its claws upon that scabbard.”

Felt: “Volcanica? That dragon from the legends? You’re pulling my leg, aren’tcha?”

If that was true, it would mean that the sword was hundreds of years old. If it had been inherited over several generations until today, it meant it was quite the treasure. But my hands were shaking while I held it, and it was not because of how valuable it was, and how much money it was worth. Then,

Rom: “So, there is no higher proof of loyalty than handing a sword like this to Felt-chan, is that it?”

Reinhard: “Precisely. This is the Dragon Sword Reid, and only the Sword Saint is able to draw it from its scabbard in times of great need. As there is only one Sword Saint in any given generation, I’m sure you understand the magnitude of my gesture, handing it to Felt-sama.”

Felt: “I guess I understand. Let’s see… Ehhh.”

If it was truly such an amazing sword, I thought of taking a quick peek at its blade and attest its sharpness. But when I tried to remove it from its scabbard, it did not budge even a tiny bit. Almost as if the blade had fused with its scabbard.

Felt: “Oy, it’s not going out! This sword is broken or something!”

Reinhard: “As I said Felt-sama, it can only be withdrawn from its scabbard in times of need. Right now, not even I am able to draw it.”

I wasn’t sure if that was exactly the truth, but if Rom-jii had not said anything, it was no regular sword at the very least. I gave up trying to look at it and simply put it on my lap, looking at Reinhard.

Felt: “Okay, good, the sword’s here with me. So you can start talking.”

Reinhard: “About my motivations and my real intent in supporting you to become the next King of Lugunica, correct?”

Felt: “Yes, yes, exactly. That’s the first step, without that, we cannot-”

Reinhard: “I know the true reason why the old Order of Royal Knights was disbanded.”

Rom: “…!”

I really could not understand what Reinhard was trying to say, but Rom-jii’s reaction made it obvious as to its significance. He was looking shocked, eyes wide open, and a trembling voice.

Rom: “H-How… How do you-?”

Reinhard: “I believe you know the answer to that, Cromwell-dono.”

Rom: “I do… So you know about me as well… You must also be aware that you will be ignoring that person’s wish?”

Reinhard: “If that is what destiny has chosen, then so be it.”

With Reinhard’s reply, Rom-jii forced the yellow smile of someone who did not want to accept defeat. I had no idea as to why, even if the subject of the conversation was me.

Rom: “…Felt-chan, this young man will not betray you. Rather, he cannot betray you. I guarantee it.”

Felt: “What do you mean? Just like that? Damnit, you need to explain what’s goi-”

When I tried to raise my voice and object, Rom-jii just put his hand over my mouth and pet my head once again. He knew I was unable to get mad at him whenever he did that.

Rom: “…You are my grandchild, my only family. Trust me, Felt-chan.”

Felt: “…You’re playin’ dirty.”

He didn’t tell me anything, but he didn’t let me ask anything either. So the only thing I could do was to look back at his face while holding back the tears. Through my misty sight, the only thing I could see was Rom-jii with the happiest sight of the day.

???: “…Enviable.”

I got the idea that someone said something along those lines, but I was not sure if it was just my imagination. After all, at the same time, I blew my nose pretty loudly.

Felt: “Hmph!”

2

Felt: “Wow, everything was blown away, huh, Rom-jii?”

Rom: “Yes, nothing was left standing, but it is better like this. Otherwise, we would probably want to fix everything or build it back up.”

Reinhard: “As the one responsible for this, it makes me glad to hear that.”

Felt: “We’re not trying to rid you of your guilt, so quit actin’ so pleased with yourself.”

I was talking to Rom-jii and Reinhard, in front of a small mountain-sized pile of rubble. It had been the place where the loot house once stood; I had ordered the dragon carriage to come to this location while returning from the Royal Castle.

Felt: “Will you guys let this stay like it is, or will you build somethin’ in its place?”

Reinhard: “…Right now, all public construction in the capital has been halted. Some say it’s due to the economic crisis affecting the Kingdom right now, but I personally believe it’s not the only reason.

Felt: “If you let a pile of trash just sit around, then naturally the trash will flock to this place, yeah? You people who look down from up high really make me sick… Damnit.”

I kicked a pebble on the ground due to my rage. It was plain to see it was an uncomfortable matter for Reinhard as well, so he just stared blankly. But, suddenly, he stepped forward and said loudly,

Reinhard: “…Who’s there?”

In the direction he shouted to, I saw three shadows not-so-very-hidden in the middle of the street. Looking better, it looked to be three punks who had been beaten up, a little dude, an average one, and a tall fella. They looked bruised and blood-stained, almost as if they had just gotten escaped from a fight. Seeing that, Reinhard gave up being on alert, and actually showed some worry.

Reinhard: “They’re beaten up? Something must have happened…”

???: “Shut the fuck up! Gimme all your valuables, now, if you want to live!”

The one yelling that was the guy in the middle, the one with normal height, stepping forward with a knife in his hand, menacingly.

???: “Calm down, Rachins! Now is not the time…”

Rachins: “You fucking idiot, now is the only time! We fucked up using Russell’s name, they’re gonna kill us three! We need money to escape from here!”

That guy looked desperate, and really wasn’t looking like he was open to debate with his companions either. He again turned to us, pointing his knife and getting closer and closer. Honestly, I think I could have done something about it, but…

Reinhard: “…That’s enough.”

…Reinhard was faster than I was and socked the punk. As he had cut through cloth using nothing but his hand in the past, I actually thought he was about to behead the guy right there, but luckily, he only fainted.

???: "…What?"

Seeing that their friend had been knocked out in a blink of the eyes, they were stunned. The knife the average height guy held went spinning into the air, being grabbed by Reinhard as if it was nothing. And only then did the punks realize just who they were dealing with.

???: "Red hair, and sky-blue eyes… Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea??!!"

???: "Are you kidding me?! Why must a guy like this show up right at this time…?!"

Reinhard: "If you know who I am, then this becomes easier for all of us. Your friend is just unconscious, his life is not threatened in any fashion. I promise not to do anything more if you leave this place right now. What do you say?"

Those poor sods were shaking in their boots in fear. The way Reinhard spoke, it seemed like he was giving them the option to tuck their tails between their legs and run, but in reality, it was nothing but a veiled threat. The real problem is that the sucker honestly thought he was being the good guy, and that annoyed me to no end. Wanna know why? That's exactly what the rich like to do to the poor, what the Kingdom does to the common rabble.

Felt: "Wait a second there, Reinhard."

Before even thinking about it, I stuck my nose in between them. Reinhard was a little surprised, but I stepped over the guy laying on the ground unconscious, and turned to the other two.

Felt: "That fella there on the ground, he said you guys need to run away. What the hell did you do?"

???: "Ugh…"

When faced with that question, they looked defeated, as if they had reached rock bottom. That is the reality of those who live in the bottom rung… That's what the Kingdom does to these people.

Felt: "Take a good look, Reinhard. You see what the slums are really like? You tried to be the good guy and let them leave unharmed, but that's not going to do any good. Here, our lives are worth less than a grain of rice. I'm betting on them becoming' dogfood by tomorrow."

Reinhard: "I feel the same, Felt-sama. What do you propose we should do, then?"

Felt: "It's what I said in the Castle. I hate this Kingdom. I want to burn it all down. And when I say 'all', I mean both the ones on top,"

I said, pointing at the oppressing Castle in the distance,

Felt: "…And the ones here below."

I said, pointing at the rubble of the loot house.

Finally, I pointed at the three idiots next to me, and said,

Felt: "Come with me, you three. Let's turn that shit you call your life upside down."

Reinhard: "Felt-sama?!"

"Oh man, Reinhard even squeaked a lil' bit there, how delightful", I couldn't help but think.

But he was not the only one surprised; obviously, the punks were also shocked. Well, if they did not understand it, I have no choice but to make it clear to them.

Felt: "I will destroy this Kingdom. I will build a new, improved one, in its place. And how will I do that, if I am not able to change the lives of 3 scoundrels livin' in the slums?"

No one was saying anything. But I did not regret what I did, calling over those 3 to join me, and I was not gonna change my mind. After all, I could trust in the backing of my only family member.

Rom: “Young man, I suggest you just accept it. Once an idea pops up in her head, that girl will not change her mind. Besides, isn’t it fun?”

Rom-jii walked up to Reinhard and threw those words at him, before picking up the guy fainted on the floor.

Reinhard: “Fun…?”

Rom: “She’s a slum dog, the incarnation of the Kingdom’s greatest shame! The first companions she picks are a trio of half-baked thieves! If that’s not fun to you, I don’t know what is, Sword Saint.”

Felt: “Not that it’s a lie or anything, Rom-jii… But there are nicer ways to say that, you know!”

With my hands crossed behind my head, I laughed at his words. Then he turned to the punks, and continued.

Rom: “Come with us, you three. Even if you just want to hide from Russell, if he’s truly after you. Meanwhile, get to know Felt-chan, and decide by yourselves what you wanna do with your life.”

After he was done talking, Rom-jii walked away from the slums, where the dragon carriage had been left.

???: “Oy, wait! I don’t understand anything you’re talking about…!”

???: “Me neither, but we can’t just leave Rachins alone! I’m going with them!”

The big one was doubting the whole thing, but when the little one ran after Rom-jii, he made up his mind and followed. For some reason, seeing those two really made my heart jump a little bit. Then, I turned to Reinhard.

Felt: “What about you? Are you gonna just stand there or what?”

Then, he just closed his eyes and turned towards me, standing there until I decided to go towards the dragon carriage as well, thinking how to explain the presence of these rascals to the grandpa and grandma waiting for us.

Reinhard: “…Felt-sama… I’m not mistaken, you truly should become… So, I…”

Unfortunately, I was already a bit too far away to hear Reinhard’s whisper, so I was not able to pick up on what he said.

END

Volume 5

Chapters 26-40

Chapter 26:
Rotting Spirit

1

A clear, blue sky stretched out above Subaru as he lay on his back.

It had been about a month and two weeks since he was summoned to this other world.

How many times had he found himself looking up at the blue sky like this since then? Large cumulonimbus clouds blocked out the sun, yet the bright, near-noon light still pierced through their thickness and poured down on him.

The sensation of his eyelids burning from the dazzling sunlight. He instinctively narrowed his eyes, feeling tears well up from deep within them, and then, without rhyme or reason, Subaru thought,

“Come to think of it… I haven’t encountered a single rainy day in this world yet.”

He still hadn’t come across a day where it rained deeply and continuously from morning till night.

There had been a few times when a light drizzle fell late at night, leaving the trees and grass damp in the morning, but he hadn’t experienced a proper rainfall here.

The temperature felt a bit too warm for long sleeves—he figured it was probably similar to June or early October in his original world. Considering the lack of rain, perhaps this was the dry season in this world.

“Shall we conclude for today?”

Subaru, engrossed in his idle thoughts, was suddenly addressed by a voice.

He slightly lifted his head, still lying on his back, to see who was speaking—a single old man stood a few meters away from where Subaru lay on the ground.

He was slightly taller than Subaru, with a neatly combed head of abundant white hair for his age. Dressed in a solid black butler's uniform, he exuded a disciplined aura befitting his starched attire.

Though his posture was ramrod straight and elegant, the man himself appeared quite relaxed, with gentle wrinkles etched on his mild expression.

However, in the old gentleman's hand was an unusually long wooden sword.

"Nah, not yet. I was just doing a bit of philosophizing."

"Oh, how interesting. What were you pondering?"

"Up above, a great fire; down below, a flood… What am I?"

He swung his legs up and then down, using the momentum to stand.

There was a heaviness remaining in his core, but the impact of the blows, which left no lasting damage, was negligible. Taking advantage of the moment he stood, he checked various parts of his body, then spun the wooden sword he was still holding and pointed it forward—at Wilhelm.

"Alright, one more round, please instruct me."

"By the way, what was the answer to your philosophical riddle?"

"Oh—wetting the bed and then getting angry about it."

Saying that, he stepped forward, striking with his wooden sword in a low, arcing sweep from below.

The tip sliced through the air, gathering enough wind to crush bone, with no holds barred. But,

"Ugh!"

"You're tensing up too much. Your hands, feet, neck, waist, and face."

Wilhelm's wooden sword was inserted into the trajectory of the blow, and the circular motion smoothly twisted away, missing its mark. As the intended head shot sailed over the taller opponent's head in a feint, a fierce counter-strike from the old man's revolving body swept across him.

Jaw, throat, solar plexus, groin—all vital points along the body's center line. Wilhelm's wooden sword carefully caressed these weak spots, and with just a touch, the impact sent Subaru flying.

The force of the blow, merely returning his own momentum, was slight. Yet, the impact on his vital points still stole his breath, and the sting of pain was enough to dye his vision red.

Subaru tumbled backward, flung back the same distance he had advanced. Once again, he lay spread-eagled on the ground just as before, and as his reddened vision cleared, the blue sky above seemed to mock him.

"Shall we conclude for today?"

Wilhelm's call, devoid of any intonation, not a hint of sarcasm or contempt.

How many times had he heard that voice, asking for his will—?

"It's the twenty-third 'no'."

"Oh, you're diligently keeping track, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I'm the kind of guy who forgets the memories of things I did that people hated, but never forgets the memories of things people did to me that I hated… that's me."

Boasting about something that wasn't really a boast, Subaru's body slowly and deliberately began to rise. The damage was minimal; the moderation of the blows was, as always, exquisite.

He stood, leaning on the re-gripped wooden sword, and after cleaning the dirt-covered tip with a practice swing, he pointed it at Wilhelm once more.

“One more bout, please.”

“As many as you wish. Perhaps, this time, we shall change our approach a little.”

As soon as he heard the affirmative reply, Subaru charged without waiting to hear more.

From a low stance, almost clinging to his waist, this time his attack was not a line but a point—that is, a thrust, minimizing the striking area, aiming for revenge.

A master’s technique, like the old man’s, striking four vital points in an instant, was impossible no matter how he struggled. Therefore, Subaru’s thrust was a single blow, but imbued with all his might.

The target was the large torso, aiming to hit anywhere near its center—the tip of the wooden sword, imbued with that intention, slowly drew into the center of the old man’s black clothes.

“It hit—?!”

It was a blow intended to hit, but the shock came from the unexpected success. However, the lack of resistance from the wooden sword, which should have directly hit, stole the celebratory end of his cheer, and,

“F-Fumble—?!”

A sensation of his feet being swept out from under him made him lose his balance, and the world spun upside down.

His brain couldn’t keep up with the sudden release from gravity, and the ground loomed large in his inverted vision. He instinctively closed his eyes, anticipating the intense pain of his full weight hitting his face, when,

“Majolica!”

Just before his face hit the ground, a hard pole pressed against his abdomen. It felt like he had vigorously run into a horizontal bar, and his inverted body righted itself again—his two feet landing correctly on the ground, defying gravity.

His arms, which he had instinctively lifted in reaction, extended straight, and Subaru froze in a pose like a gymnast who had just finished a floor exercise.

He didn't know what had happened.

A mysterious voice in his head said, 'A spin?' and then Subaru suddenly realized that the wooden sword, which he had been holding so tightly, had vanished from his palm.

"Ah."

As he frantically turned his head to look for it, his eyes met those of the old man smiling beside him. In his hand, Subaru saw two wooden swords, and,

"No, I don't want it to hurt."

Countless gentle, light blows struck his entire body, and Subaru was once again sent flying helplessly, rolling across the ground and ending up covered in grass.

The taste of dirt spread in his mouth, and spitting it out, he waited for reports of damage to various parts of his body. Arms, moving. Legs, numb but fine. Stomach, getting hungry now. Face, bad eyes are genetic. All in all, still exquisitely moderated blows.

"You're certainly putting in the effort."

His twenty-fourth rendezvous with the grassland.

The crisp voice came from a higher vantage point to Subaru, who was face down, strongly burying his forehead in the earth.

He rolled onto his side to get a view, and Subaru looked towards the sound of the voice. There, looking down at Subaru sprawled out in the garden, was a woman leaning against the terrace railing.

"I only heard your voice, but it sounds like you're quite enthusiastic."

"Is this hindering your duties, Lady Crusch?"

To the appearance of the green-haired woman —Crusch— who was propping her chin on her hand while leaning on the railing, Wilhelm, who was looking up at her from the same ground as Subaru, expressed his humble apologies. However, there was no trace of the emotion implied by his words in his tone, and Crusch, the recipient, waved her hand.

"No, I was just about to take a break."

She replied to Wilhelm, and then continued, "Besides,"

"I do not think it arrogant to consider someone's earnest efforts, whether their own or another's, a hindrance. It wouldn't do to let a hired hand just sit idly by. Work me hard, old man Wilhelm."

"Understood. However,"

Wilhelm deeply bowed at Crusch's magnanimous words, then subtly glanced at Subaru,

"Shall we conclude for today?"

"I don't think I'm so oblivious to the mood that I could say 'let's stop' with how things are going now."

Brushing off the grass from his body, Subaru stood up, checked his body for the third—no, twenty-fourth—time, spit out the dirt from his mouth, and then,

"Being utterly thrashed while a beauty watches… I kinda feel like it takes a toll on a guy's masculinity. My manliness meter is getting severely chipped away."

As Subaru made his quip and rotated his wrist, Wilhelm silently tossed him the wooden sword he had taken. Subaru caught the spinning sword safely, and a wry smile appeared on his face as he felt its sensation in his palm.

"There's no need to worry. This isn't the first time I've seen you get beaten up."

"Ugh."

"I've only heard the circumstances, but I can't deny that Lady Crusch's words just now were a bit too direct."

Crusch raised an eyebrow and wore an innocent expression at Wilhelm's sympathetic words to Subaru, who was clutching his chest and groaning.

"It is only natural that one cannot reach an opponent whose abilities surpass their own. Yet, if one still demonstrates an unwavering will, I believe there is no shame in it, only regret."

Subaru felt an uncomfortable prickle as Crusch touched her chin and spoke those words. To some extent, her words evaluating his disgraceful state were unexpected, and it didn't change the fact that the outcome was irrefutable regardless of what she said.

That's why she was in front of Subaru—

"Furthermore, if being instructed under the gaze of a woman is painful for you, then surely it must have been an endless repetition already, no?"

Crusch said, allowing a gentle smile to grace her lips, as Subaru was on the verge of sinking into a sea of thought. Leaning halfway over the railing, she cast a meaningful glance across the terrace—her gaze passed over Subaru and Wilhelm, who were facing each other directly below, and then towards the edge of the garden.

There,

"…It's a different feeling than embarrassing myself in front of my own people."

"I suppose it's also a problem to constantly expose one's hand to an opponent who will eventually become an enemy… If I'm letting such an opponent into my mansion, then I'm just as bad. It's surprisingly difficult to understand one's own heart."

Subaru tried to consciously avoid acknowledging where Crusch's gaze was directed, as he listened to her self-reflection overhead.

After a period of contemplation, she said,

"Wilhelm."

"Yes."

"I feel like moving my body a bit. I'll finish up my remaining tasks and come down there shortly. It's earlier than planned, but I ask you to instruct me today."

"Understood. Please, take your time."

"Considering my current state of mind, that's a rather difficult request."

With a faint smile, Crusch moved away from the railing and turned towards her office with a dignified bearing. Her agile movements caused her long green hair to swirl gracefully, glinting deeply in the sunlight as she disappeared from Subaru's sight.

Watching her go, Subaru let out a faint sigh of tension, releasing it.

Subaru gave a wry smile at his body's undisguised relaxation.

No matter how much Crusch was a type of person he struggled with, expressing it so openly would only leave the worst impression.

Anyway,

"Shall we conclude for today?"

"Since it's not a question, I suppose that means it's over."

Subaru heard the question mark disappear from the end of Wilhelm's words as he slowly readied his wooden sword—and understood that this intense yet peaceful time was coming to an end.

The old man closed one eye at Subaru's clearly disappointed expression.

"Since Lady Crusch will be coming down, I must fulfill my role as instructor. That is why I am employed by the Karsten household, after all."

"I won't be selfish any more than this. Even though it's your free time, you've already given up so much of it; it would be super bad karma to ask for more."

There was a sense of loneliness that the training was ending, but stopping him would only inconvenience him. He was already in a weak position, making bold requests. He wanted to avoid incurring displeasure. Though it might be quite late for that now.

"—Here I go."

"Anytime."

Following his declaration, Subaru's body kicked off the dirt and leaped forward.

No feints, nothing. For his twenty-fifth, and final, challenge, Subaru chose a straightforward, no-frills attack.

He raised his wooden sword high above his head, gripped it firmly with both hands, and swung it down with all his might.

The full-force downward strike cut through the air, its tip losing its destination and plunging into the ground. Subaru, unable to fully stop his momentum, stumbled forward.

And then,

"—!"

Subaru felt as if countless slashes had flashed simultaneously as he was struck down.

2

Two days had passed since Subaru arrived at Crusch Karsten's mansion.

Mansion—though in this case, it didn't mean the main residence of Crusch's ducal Karsten family. Her primary estate as a duchess, overseeing her territory, wasn't in the capital. The mansion where Subaru was currently staying was a separate residence used only during stays in the royal capital.

This mansion stood in the upper district of the royal capital, a particularly high-ranking part of the aristocratic quarter where clusters of estates, rather than mere houses, lined the streets.

Its scale certainly didn't match Roswaal's estate, which had been haphazardly developed on vast rural land, but the interior and decorations were, to an amateur's eye, on par or even superior.

Considering that a ducal family would need to entertain guests in the royal capital, paying attention to such details would likely be necessary.

That it wasn't simply nouveau riche taste was evident from Crusch's pragmatic personality. Though, it also felt far too expensive to be considered merely part of necessary expenses.

In that regard, the garden's simplicity, which didn't require such embellishments, somehow felt comfortable, as if reflecting the temperament of the mansion's owner.

The trees surrounding the mansion were meticulously maintained by gardeners, and the garden itself was nothing more than a wide expanse of low-lying grassland, completely devoid of anything unnecessary. In any case, the garden's simplicity likely suited its intended purpose.

Its main use was as a place for combat training, just as Subaru had been doing. The lack of a flower garden to delight the eye seemed to indicate Crusch's preference for iron over flowers.

"Can you stand, Subaru-dono?"

Wilhelm's voice reached Subaru from a distance, pulling him from his aimless thoughts.

He raised a hand in silent acknowledgment, and as he heard the old man's sigh of relief from the edge of his eardrum,

"Thank you again today."

"Oh, it was merely you humoring an old man's boredom. Rather, I am ashamed that I am not good at teaching others."

"Isn't it bad for someone hired as a sword instructor to say that?"

"To Lady Crusch, it's less about instruction and more about accompanying her in developing her mindset for actual combat… that's the gist of it. I don't often teach her with words."

Wilhelm responded to Subaru's words with a wry smile, then, with a cool, un-sweaty face, he tidied himself up.

"You're probably exhausted and can't move right now. There's still some time before Lady Crusch comes down. It would be best if you remained as you are until you can move again."

"I'll take you up on that. The feeling under my head is super comfortable! I might be losing on all fronts, but at this moment, I'm the winner!"

Wilhelm nodded slightly at Subaru, who was triumphantly lying down in an undignified manner, then straightened his back and looked down at Subaru and beyond him.

"I will take a stroll around the mansion. After your rest, it would be best for you to do as you please, same as yesterday. —Please take care of Subaru-dono."

"—Yes, thank you for your concern."

Someone who had been standing silently right beside the reclining Subaru, without uttering a word until now, replied.

She knelt on the ground, still in her familiar black apron dress, and softly cradled Subaru's head on her lap.

Under her short blue hair, a maid adorned with a white headdress—it was Rem.

She had silently watched every moment of Subaru and Wilhelm's mock battle—a misnomer for what was essentially a relentless training session—from the corner of the garden.

Now, she had rushed to Subaru's side after he had pushed himself to exhaustion, tending to his fatigue with a lap pillow.

Her devoted demeanor was a model for a servant, and in her gaze, as she doted on Subaru resting on her lap, a sentiment clearly beyond that of a mere attendant flickered. However, Wilhelm, having noticed it, did not comment.

That gaze was precisely the same radiance he had witnessed countless times in this mansion.

Thus, the old man did not touch the blue-haired girl's heart at all. With a refined gesture, he bowed at the waist.

"Then, if you'll excuse me. Ferris should be back in the afternoon. It would be helpful if both Madam Rem and Subaru-dono were in your rooms by then."

"We apologize for the trouble. We will do so."

Rem quietly accepted Wilhelm's words. The old man drew his chin in, seemingly satisfied with her graceful response, then narrowed his eyes slightly and looked at Subaru.

Then, without another word, he turned his back and disappeared from the garden for good this time.

As the old man's peculiar presence vanished, the tension that had filled the garden suddenly dissipated, replaced by a sense of openness.

It was as if even the plants and trees had been holding their breath; with the overwhelming pressure gone, the garden transformed into an open grassland with nothing to obstruct the wind or the chirping of birds.

In the midst of it all, Subaru simply closed his eyes, vaguely, surrendering his entire body's sensations and his mind to the soft feeling beneath his head.

Rem said nothing as she cradled him.

She simply accepted Subaru's weight with tenderness, and occasionally, as if to remind him that time hadn't stopped, she would run her fingers through Subaru's black hair with gentle strokes.

"…I am-"

Suddenly, Subaru broke the silence of the nearly motionless time.

Hearing his voice, a whispered rasp from trembling lips, Rem's fingers stopped moving. Indulging in her kindness, which patiently waited for his words, Subaru took a long time before continuing.

"Weak."

He muttered, stating an undeniable fact.

The wind blew, and the bangs Rem had been caressing were relinquished to the air. He felt Rem's knees shift slightly at the sensation, making her stir.

"That's right."

After a brief silence, Rem said softly.

It was such a natural affirmation that he was slow to realize it was an answer to his earlier statement. Once he did, he accepted the content of her words. Lying on her lap, Subaru looked up at an inverted Rem, as if glaring.

"Hey, isn't this normally the part where you'd cheer me up by saying, 'That's not true at all, Subaru! You're super wonderful, cool, incredibly strong, and extremely happy! You make my heart pound!'?"

"If Subaru wishes for that."

Subaru, making his request in a slightly high-pitched feminine voice, was met with Rem's unchanging expression. Taking a breath, Subaru prefaced his next words with a "Alright,"

"Okay, take two. —I am… weak."

"Yes, that's right."

"Did you hear what I just said?!"

"Subaru, did you hear Rem's answer?"

Subaru protested by stiffening both his legs at the unexpected comeback, but Rem merely tilted her head with an expression of unwavering affection at his reaction.

Subaru choked on his words, then slowly replayed what Rem had said in his mind. And then,

"Rem, you're amazing."

"Yes, but Sister is more amazing."

"I don't understand that Ram-supremacy mindset, but you are amazing."

Loosening the tension in his legs, Subaru let his entire body go slack as if all his bones had vanished, surrendering himself completely to Rem's lap.

Rem once again ran her fingers through Subaru's bangs as he closed his eyes, fiddling with them.

"Rem is here to do what Subaru wishes for."

"…You mean, affirming my self-deprecation about being weak is what you want me to do?"

"Isn't it?"

Tilting her head to the opposite side, Rem asked with a genuinely pure gaze.

Subaru didn’t reply with words, only exhaled a deep, long, low breath through his nose, choosing silence as his answer.

Quiet, undisturbed, lazy time continued to flow.

Before sinking into a sea of thought, Subaru found himself on the verge of being swallowed by the drowsiness that crept up, drifting between reality and dreams, losing his sense of place.

“Shall we go back soon? We shouldn’t bother Lady Crusch and Sir Wilhelm.”

However, the passage of time continued equally for all.

Subaru pondered Rem’s words as she shifted her knees, then twisted his neck, shifting his position so that his cheek rested on her leg.

“Just a little longer. Your thighs feel nice.”

“Yes. —If Subaru wishes for it.”

Rem, who had been about to tense her knees, relaxed them, and Subaru’s suggestion was accepted.

Indulging in her boundless kindness, Subaru sank deeper and deeper into the muddy comfort of not thinking about what he didn’t want to think about.

Three days had passed since the day the Royal Selection was declared, and the day Subaru and Emilia parted ways.

Natsuki Subaru was steadily, thoroughly, corroding.

Chapter 27:
The Voice of the Town

1

If Subaru had time to think, he'd be thinking, "What went wrong?"

Even though he hated it, his thoughts kept returning to that evening, to the countless times he replayed the scene of the silver-haired girl turning her back to him and walking away.

"What went wrong?" Subaru wondered every time the thought surfaced.

Subaru himself admitted that his words had been too harsh. He'd been cornered by her relentless accusations, and the physical beating he'd taken earlier probably played a role too. What came out was completely different from what he'd truly wanted to say, and it ended up driving a wedge between them.

Were they just impulsive words, something he blurted out in the moment?

Or, precisely because they were impulsive, were they thoughts that had always lingered in his heart?

He no longer knew where his true feelings lay in that moment. For Subaru, who had been dazed and lost immediately after that parting, his next memory skipped ahead to being led out of the royal castle's waiting room by Rem and riding in the dragon carriage toward Crusch's mansion.

While Subaru was still out of it, he could tell Crusch and Ferris were talking with Rem. He couldn't grasp the content of their conversation, but the only saving grace was that Rem held his hand the whole time they were talking. Feeling that warmth was the only thing that made him realize the last thread hadn't snapped.

"—Hey, bro."

His consciousness, which was shifting from recollection to reminiscence, was pulled back to reality by a sudden call. He heard a gruff voice from in front of him, and Subaru blinked, bringing his mind back to the present. When he looked ahead,

“Come on. Don’t go making scary eyes like that in front of someone’s shop.”

He saw the shop owner, a stern-faced man with an impressive scar running down his face, furrowing his brow. Looking directly at that impactful face so soon after returning, Subaru slowly rubbed his eyelids with his fingers, letting out a deep sigh.

“Hey, pops. I don’t think it’s right to intimidate your customers like that.”

“I’m not! I’m worried about you, dammit! I wanted to tell you how much I panicked when I couldn’t get in touch with you!”

The shop owner yelled, slamming his thick arm onto the counter, causing the fruits on the display stand to bounce violently and fly out of their basket. They arced through the air towards the bustling crowd, about to fall to the ground and get bruised or become shoe-soles’ stains, but—

“One mustn’t treat food carelessly.”

With a fluid motion, her skirt hem fluttered as Rem gracefully landed in the space in front of the shop. Lightly pinching and lifting, the fallen fruits were softly caught and collected inside her apron. Kadomon let out a sigh of relief and admiration for her nimble feat. He held up a hand to Rem, who offered him the picked-up fruits.

“Oh, thanks, little lady. So, listen to me, I’m telling you for your own good. Stop hanging around with this weird-eyed guy. He’ll just bring you bad luck.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what are you saying? I can’t believe you’re saying that? My companion just saved your merchandise from getting ruined, you know? Come on, let’s hear some words of gratitude!”

“You were the one who almost ruined it in the first place, weren’t you? Besides, I don’t think I’m saying anything wrong.”

Rearranging the goods on the display shelf, the shop owner, with arms crossed, snorted and compared Subaru to Rem, who stood beside him.

“This is a different girl from the one you brought last time, isn’t it? The previous one… ah, for some reason, I don’t really remember her, but if I don’t remember her, it means this girl’s cuter, right? You’re unprincipled, you should go to hell.”

“What’s wrong, pops? Are you the type who thinks friendship can’t exist between men and women? Don’t link everything to romance. Besides…”

Subaru almost asked why he’d forgotten Emilia, but he realized it brought a terrible pang to his chest and bit his tongue. And then, with that pain, he remembered the reason for the shop owner’s forgetfulness and understood. Kadomon gave Subaru a quizzical look as he fell silent, then secretly lowered his voice to Rem.

“See? This shameless attitude. If you fall for someone like this, you’ll have a hard time.”

“Thank you for your concern. …But Rem does this because she likes to.”

Blushing, Rem glanced sideways at Subaru. Feeling the warmth of her gaze, Kadomon shrugged his shoulders regretfully, sensing that further words would be boorish. But then he immediately widened his eyes and, prefacing with “That said,” continued,

“Romance aside, my opinion that he’s a dangerous guy hasn’t changed, you know? …I can’t believe he snuck into the castle by hiding in a delivery. He must have a death wish.”

Amidst the clamor of the crowd, his words wouldn’t have been heard by those around, even at a normal volume. Kadomon, considering the gravity of the content, carefully lowered his tone as he muttered that. Subaru felt a bitter taste rise in his mouth at those words and, scratching his head awkwardly, began to make excuses.

“Ah, about that, I thought… or rather, I might have thought… or maybe I didn’t think at all, it’s like a mountain.”

“So, did you think it or not, which is it?”

“My bad. For not reporting it immediately afterward.”

“Exactly!”

Looking down at the back of Subaru’s lowered head, Kadomon exhaled his anger with a sigh. He remained furious.

“Even Old Man Rom stopped contacting me. I thought this was seriously bad, so much so that even Henehehe was preparing to skip town. I was agonizing over how to fool and persuade my wife and daughter.”

“You should just be honest since you did something bad and let them despise you, smuggler.”

“Shut up, mastermind!”

The shop owner clicked his tongue at Subaru, who casually dismissed his previous respectful attitude. Then he said, “Well,” tracing the scar on his face with his finger,

“A really big thing happened at the castle that day. We were lucky your petty crime didn’t become public amidst all that commotion.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks to that, we found a hole in that castle’s sloppy security. Next time, let’s aim for the treasury and pull off a big job, boss.”

“I’m never helping you again! Next time, get caught and get your head chopped off!”

Subaru shook his head, feigning fear, as the owner made a chopping motion at his neck with his hand and stuck out his tongue. Then he focused on the “big thing” the owner mentioned and let out a breathy “Oh, right.”

“So, the details of the Royal Selection are already known throughout the capital?”

“Of course! For the citizens, it’s not something they can just laugh and watch as if it’s someone else’s problem. We’re choosing a queen, after all! It’s not just about the next few years; it’s a turning point that will carry on the kingdom’s 400-year history. Everyone’s talking about it.”

Kadomon, who had overheard Subaru’s murmur, spoke with a somewhat feverish look. Then he said, “Look,” and turned his head, guiding Subaru’s gaze. In the direction he indicated, there was a tall, prominent signboard, like a standing billboard, set up in the market street.

“Well, I can’t read anything unless it’s in the ‘I’ script.”

“What? You’re uneducated? Then can you read my shop’s sign?”

“I feel like it has hieroglyphs similar to ‘I’ script, but the handwriting’s too messy to read.”

“Nonsense! Writing it in a cool, stylized way like this is what’s popular now!”

“It’s a bit hard for someone learning to read. Once I thoroughly learn the ‘A-B-Cs’ of this world’s writing, I’ll popularize a gyaru-moji derivative.”

Subaru’s ambition to revolutionize the history of writing. What’s needed is the ability to perceive letters not as letters, but as images, or a recognition that blurs the line between reality and unreality. He’s quite confident in the latter. Anyway,

“So, what does the sign say, in the end?”

“I’ve told you the headline many times already, haven’t I? It says ‘Royal Selection Begins’.”

Subaru frowned at the unhelpful reply, and Kadomon waved his hand, saying, “Alright, alright.”

“Then I’ll read a bit for you. —Little lady, can you mind the shop for a moment?”

“Understood.”

As Kadomon casually stepped out from the side of the shop, Rem, without any protest, slipped into the shop to take his place. Feeling nothing but strangeness from her seamless action, Subaru shook his head in disagreement.

“Don’t just let an amateur in so easily! And Rem, don’t just accept it so casually!”

“It’s just taking the price written on the tag and the payment, and giving change. Besides, no customers are coming anyway.”

“He finally admitted it himself!”

Led by Kadomon, who looked almost refreshed in his frankness, Subaru stepped towards the bustling crowd, leaving Rem behind in the shop. They crossed the street, where various races mingled, large and small, and stopped beneath the tall signboard, which was two heads taller than even the tall Kadomon. Joining the fence of people who had stopped for the same purpose, their eyes scanning the words on the sign, Subaru craned his neck and, though unable to read, followed the characters.

“It says the start of the Royal Selection and its outline. It’s about deciding the queen before the Divine Dragon Ceremony in three years and then performing the subsequent rituals. It also briefly mentions the candidates.”

Subaru’s interest, already waning in familiar content, was piqued by the word ‘candidates’. His eyebrows twitched in surprise, and Kadomon, noticing Subaru’s expression, nodded, his eyes reflecting understanding.

“Seems you’re curious about the candidates. There are five candidates for the Royal Selection in total. Among them, the most well-known are Duchess Crusch Karsten and Anastasia, the daughter of Hoshin Trading Company."

"Are they famous?"

"She's a Duchess, you know? There's hardly anyone living in the capital who doesn't know her name. As for the Hoshin Trading Company, there's no way a merchant wouldn't know it, at least. The rumor about its representative being a young woman, whether true or not, was also famous."

As Kadomon said this, touching his scar, Subaru naturally pictured the two women in his mind. Crusch, with her sharp, sword-like presence and impressive dignified demeanor. And Anastasia, with her light purple hair and overly distinctive Kansai accent. Subaru, having seen the latter directly, would likely confirm that she matched the rumors. Though, considering the precedent of Ferris, there's nothing absolutely certain in this world.

"Well, if there were a bunch of 'male daughter' types, they wouldn't be rare, and their characters probably wouldn't overlap."

"I don't know what you're agreeing with, but… anyway, for now, these two are the strong contenders. Personally, I think Lady Crusch of the Karsten family, a kingdom stalwart, is more likely than Anastasia, who's from another country."

"She was called the strongest contender, indeed."

However, that likely shifted considerably after her own policy statement. Nevertheless, it was a fact that her position and family lineage were powerful backing. For the common people who hadn't heard her speech, it would undoubtedly seem that her smooth ascent to the throne was the most uneventful outcome.

"Crusch is the favorite. Anastasia is the dark horse… So, who's the long shot?"

"How do you know such an old-fashioned expression? A long shot… it's hard to say, but excluding those two, the remaining three are virtually unknown."

Kadomon read out the names Priscilla, Felt, and Emilia one by one, then snorted and pointed at the signboard.

"They're candidates whose names even I don't know. Priscilla, at least, seems to be a noble from her family name, but the remaining two don't even have family names apparent. The fact that the head of the Hoshin Trading Company is a candidate honestly makes me question how the candidates were chosen."

On that point, Subaru would completely agree if he didn't know the circumstances. There was the head of a ducal house, then a young, shrewd merchant leader, then a minor noble whose name wasn't widely known, and the rest were enigmatic figures with ambiguous family names.

This information alone was unhelpful to the citizens watching the Royal Selection. Just as Subaru thought this, "However… The fact that there's a half-elf among the candidates is just crazy, I tell you."

Kadomon narrowed his eyes, twisted his lips in disgust, and spat out the words harshly. For a moment, Subaru's thoughts froze at his blatant display of discomfort. But as his words quickly sank in,

"Half-elf… you mean?"

"The candidates' backgrounds are written to some extent, and it seems there's a half-elf named Emilia among them. It's no joke."

"Is there a problem with being a half-elf?"

"Oh, come on, save the jokes for your reckless lifestyle."

Shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head, Kadomon reacted exaggeratedly to Subaru's question.

"This isn't just talk, half-elves are despised everywhere you go. You see demi-humans in the capital sometimes, but unlike lizardmen or hobbits, elves are rarely seen roaming around. And a half-elf at that? They're naturally resented by both sides of their mixed blood."

Kadomon naturally corrected Subaru's ignorance. The shop owner, seemingly oblivious to Subaru's silence, glared hatefully at the words on the signboard.

"For all the bigwigs who decided this, it's a foolish idea. Of all things, a half-elf… no, how can a half-demon be entrusted with the country?"

"Half-demon…"

"That's what they call half-elves. It's a fitting name for the Witch's kin, isn't it?"

Subaru couldn't respond to the shop owner, who looked down at him as if seeking agreement. So much had that last phrase shocked Subaru.

Subaru had, to no small extent, felt favorably towards this scarred shop owner. It was because he was almost the first person Subaru had spoken to on his first day of being summoned, and also because of his character in their subsequent interactions. He was someone fun to talk to, and Subaru considered him a good man who was not difficult to deal with.

It was surprising that such demeaning words towards others came so easily from his mouth. What's more, they were slanders against a person Subaru absolutely couldn't overlook.

"Not everyone is involved with the Witch, you know."

"Huh?"

"Don't just lump half-elves together and dismiss them. That Emilia girl, she might be… like, really thinking of the country, you know? She might be a really good person, you know?"

Kadomon furrowed his brows suspiciously at Subaru's hurried, fragmented defense and held up a hand, saying, "Hold on."

"I don't know why you're so desperate, but stop defending half-demons. You never know who might be listening."

"That's exactly the kind of unnecessary worry. Walls have ears, Mary has windows, there's a chance the person you're talking about is right behind you and will stab you from behind, so correct yourself!"

Kadomon sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead, looking helpless at Subaru's confused mix of "Mary" and "Merry."

"I told you to stop. I apologize for my words getting out of hand. See, like this."

"…Tch."

Though it was an insincere apology, Subaru took it as a truce and lowered his guard. Just as Subaru lowered his spirits, Kadomon took a breath and said, "But you know," "However you feel about it, a half-elf becoming queen is impossible."

"Not that again…! Why? Is it because of the Witch of Envy? That Witch was a half-elf, which makes all other half-elves are dangerous?!"

"—That's right."

To Subaru, who was spitting out his irritation at the restart of the argument, that voice sounded unexpectedly cold. A single word affirming Subaru's shout— Kadomon, who uttered it, extinguished his momentum, and Subaru's voice choked in his throat as he looked up at the stern face. Kadomon's eyes, meeting Subaru's head-on, clearly showed fear.

"The Witch is terrifying— That's obvious, a common understanding that no one needs to be told. I don't know how ignorant you are, but for most people, that reason alone is more than enough to shun them."

Listen, Kadomon said, as if lecturing a silent Subaru,

"The Witch —the Witch of Envy— was a monster of unimaginable proportions, they say. Four hundred years ago, half the continent was swallowed by the Witch's shadow, and countless renowned heroes and even winged dragons fell before her. If it weren't for the Divine Dragon's power and the Sword Saint of that era, the world would have been destroyed."

Subaru recognized a few keywords he couldn't afford to miss, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the trembling pupils of the speaking shop owner. He trembled with parched lips.

"Yet, the true identity of the Witch who did such monstrous things remains a complete mystery. All that's known is that the Witch was a silver-haired half-elf. She couldn't speak, communication was impossible. She simply rampaged, destroyed, killed, and consumed everything relentlessly, as if she hated everything but herself."

Subaru also knew that much from the summary in the picture book.

Kadomon's narrative, infused with negative emotions, was colored with raw feelings that a monotonous text could never fully express. The Witch's tale, passed down not only through picture books but also through oral traditions from relatives, would have changed its course in countless ways through each teller, yet the endpoint always remained the same.

That is,

"The unknown Witch is terribly frightening. So, how could anyone not keep their distance, even with the little information we have?"

"So, that's why you discriminate against half-elves?"

"At least, it's true that many half-demons have twisted personalities. —Though, whether that's from birth or due to their environment, I don't know."

Kadomon's grimace, as if he'd bitten into something bitter, hinted at his own struggle in response to Subaru's strained words. Despite their short acquaintance, Subaru believed Kadomon was fundamentally a good person. He himself understood that what he'd said wasn't logically correct. It was just that the emotions that surfaced when he thought of "the Witch" wouldn't allow him to argue with that logic.

"Most people would agree with me. No one would willingly side with a half-demon and shift votes from other candidates. That's just common sense."

"…"

At the way he tried to abruptly conclude the conversation, Subaru acutely felt that Emilia's plea at the Royal Selection was indeed true. Being a half-elf. It was an inseparable destiny for her, an iron chain that would never allow her to stand at the same starting line as others.

As long as the Witch existed, Emilia would continue to be shackled by her own lineage. That was an unreasonable obstacle that she herself could do nothing about.

"So, as long as she's seen that way, she has no chance from the start. Who on earth would willingly back her… It's outrageous."

Kadomon crossed his arms, showing his displeasure. His anger now seemed to be directed from Emilia, the candidate, towards the person who had put her on a hopeless pedestal. This stance certainly showed his good nature, but as long as the negative impression of half-elves was ingrained, it offered no comfort.

Kadomon had called Subaru ignorant. Ignorant of the history of how half-elves had been oppressed, and of the Witch's atrocities that caused it.

But, Subaru thought.

"Don't screw with me," Subaru thought.

Indeed, Subaru was utterly ignorant of this world's history. As for the Witch's evil deeds, he probably couldn't imagine anything beyond the literal words. There was no way he could empathize with how much people feared half-elves, or how half-elves in that environment might, in turn, feel about humans.

It's just,

"—That's enough, you villains."

That clear, silvery voice had severely shaken Subaru's eardrums back then.

Crawling on the alley ground, about to collapse in pain and humiliation, the hand she offered to save Subaru showed no doubt whatsoever about her actions.

Subaru didn't know this world's history.

Subaru didn't know the history of half-elves.

Subaru didn't know how terrifying the Witch of Envy truly was.

But he knew Emilia.

Subaru knew that silver-haired, stubborn, utterly good-natured girl who acted without considering her own gain or loss, had absolutely no reason to be equated with the ‘Witch of Envy’. Subaru knew that this girl, who must have lived in a harsh environment, still possessed a heart capable of showing kindness to others.

No matter how cruel this world was to her, Subaru alone would always—

“Is that really true?”

Suddenly, that doubt crept into his thoughts.

The unsettling tone of the voice that crossed his mind made Subaru hold his breath and blink. The voice questioned a conclusion he was about to reach: “Is that really correct?” He looked back, pondered, and yelled at the invisible voice, “What’s wrong?” But,

“Do you really know her?”

To the voice of pure doubt, Subaru tried to respond with a defiant “Of course,” but couldn’t. A strange sensation, as if his inner voice was blocked. It was a simple yet difficult act, a kind of contradiction involved in deceiving his own heart. The moment he couldn’t clearly respond to the voice of suspicion, Subaru realized the voice was his own inner voice. The voice repeated in Subaru’s tone.

“Do you really know her?”

He tried to answer loudly, “I know,” but his throat, unable to completely deceive his own heart, refused to tremble.

Subaru didn’t know what kind of life she had lived.

Subaru didn’t know why she sought the throne.

Subaru didn’t know what she thought of the people who equated her with the Witch.

Subaru didn’t want to know what she thought of him.

"—Hey, you alright, bro?"

"Huh?"

Before he knew it, the surprised-looking scar-faced man was peering at him. Subaru instinctively recoiled, lightly stepping back to create some distance.

"Wh-What is it…? Don't suddenly get so close, you'll suck out my lifespan, please spare me."

"What a terrible thing to say! I was worried when you suddenly got that blank look in your eyes. What, do you have some kind of chronic illness?"

"Everyone has a miniature garden of delusions within their hearts. People eventually forget the importance of that place, but every now and then, there are adults who never forget that garden. I'm one of them, you see."

"I get it, you have a bad disease. That's enough, let's go back to the shop."

With a light jest to conceal his discomfited inner self, the shop owner, unwilling to humor him further, began walking through the crowd back towards the shop. As he followed the broad back leading the way, Subaru became aware that his own back was damp with cold sweat.

What emotion within him had caused that sweat? Trying to figure that out felt particularly unsettling, and Subaru's steps were heavy. Then,

"Also, it might be unnecessary, but,"

Kadomon muttered as he walked, without looking back at Subaru. His voice was so faint that Subaru could barely hear it.

"Don't publicly utter the word 'Witch' on the street. Including me… you never know who might be listening."

It probably wasn't a rehash of their earlier conversation. Given the serious tone of his voice, Subaru remained silent, taking it as a sign of acceptance.

Seemingly understanding his intention, Kadomon didn't add any more words. He just said,

"No telling who, or where."

That lingering, broken phrase was quite striking.

2

Subaru and Kadomon walked back, a heavy atmosphere hanging between them.

Honestly, Subaru was struggling to sort out the emotions swirling inside him, and Kadomon, for his part, seemed to be ashamed of getting so heated during their argument. So, the two of them pushed through the crowd and returned to Kadomon's shop in silence.

"—Welcome back. The last customer just left."

Rem, who had handed over the goods and change, bowed politely, and seen off the customer, said this. Kadomon stared at her, mouth agape in bewilderment. Before his dumbfounded gaze, the display shelves lay empty, cleared out of most of their merchandise.

It wasn't that Rem, left in charge of the shop, had gone wild and yelled, "Take it, thieves!" while tossing free fruit to passersby—that much was obvious from the basket overflowing with coins. This meant,

"M-My shop's daily average sales, in such a short time…"

Kadomon covered his face with his hands, trembling, confronted with a fact he didn't want to accept. Returning the shopkeeping duties to him, Rem smoothly slipped outside and practically flew to Subaru's side. She leaned in, looking up at him.

"How was that, Subaru? Rem's versatility. Rem heard you said he was your benefactor, so I tried my best to be of help. …You can praise Rem, you know?”

Rem swayed the hem of her skirt, peeking at Subaru out of the corner of her eye. Her actions, so clearly betraying her words, and the sight of Kadomon struggling to accept reality in front of them, made Subaru’s chest feel a little lighter.

He wasn’t sure if it was because he was relieved to see Rem acting normally, or if it was because he felt some satisfaction seeing Kadomon, who had just made him feel bad, so shocked.

“Either way, it’s definitely thanks to Rem.”

Reaching out to her blue hair, Subaru gently stroked her head, his fingers enjoying the familiar texture of her hair. Rem closed her eyes contentedly, savoring the feeling of Subaru’s palm stroking her, her cheeks flushed with an ecstatic expression as she made a strangely alluring “Mmm” sound in her throat.

Behind the two of them, Kadomon kept tracing the scar on his face, over and over again.

“Was it my looks after all…?”

He was now, far too late, verbalizing the reason for his business struggles.

Chapter 28:
Backwards Ambition

1

“I see, so that’s why we have this mountain of appa’s as a souvenir, huh?”

Felix speared a fork into a pile of sliced red fruit, bringing the dripping, juicy piece to his mouth, smiling with a playfully alluring gesture.

“Well, I handed most of it over to the kitchen, but I made sure to save some for tasting. Anyway, stop with the suggestive glances and lip-licking. It’s making my back cold.”

Subaru frowned at Felix’s behavior, waving his hand, and sighed as he sat down on the bed in the guest room assigned to him.

It was snack time before evening, and the sliced appa had been brought in for that purpose. Rem, who had returned with Subaru from sightseeing in the royal capital, had prepared it. She was currently changing in her own room and was supposed to meet Subaru in his room afterward.

The plan was to discuss the day’s results and future plans while eating the appa, but—

“Then a ‘femboy’ got here first and occupied the room, huh? It’s true I didn’t lock the door, but isn’t that a bit rude for a knight?”

“Oh, come on, don’t you think it’s proof that Ferris trusts you? I could never show myself looking this sloppy to Lady Crusch, you know?”

As he spoke, Felix practically threw himself onto the bed right next to Subaru. The soft mattress bounced, transferring the impact to Subaru’s backside, and the similarly bouncing Felix rolled over into a lying position. From there, he looked up at Subaru from a ninety-degree angle.

“Did your heart skip a beat just now?”

“It seized up. No offense, but I don’t have that kind of taste at all. My sexual preferences are completely normal—girls only.”

No matter how cute someone looked, it couldn’t possibly transcend the barrier of gender.

Subaru sighed at Felix, who was striking a pose as if he’d been shocked, and then continued, “Besides,”

“I can’t think of any reason for you to trust me. I don’t recall us ever getting particularly close. Am I, like, exuding that kind of dangerous pheromone?”

“Oh, that’s a simple story. —Subaru-kyun is definitely weaker than Ferris. You’re so weak, so I feel at ease.”

Hearing Felix say this so casually, looking up at him while resting his cheek on his hand on the bed, Subaru was momentarily at a loss for words, but then said,

“You have a terrible personality, you know that?”

“Oh? That’s surprising. I thought you’d get angrier.”

“Facts are facts. I’m not going to get defensive.”

Being reminded of his own weakness was something he had experienced countless times.

Ever since coming to this alternate world, Subaru had been repeatedly beaten down by his own powerlessness. If facing that detestable knight in the training grounds was the peak, then being defeated by Wilhelm at the Karsten estate was the most frequent.

It was foolish to vehemently argue about his own weakness. Before coming to this world, he might have fantasized, “I’ve been working out, so I might actually do pretty well!” But once you experience the wider world, you realize how much of a big fish in a small pond you were.

So, what Subaru wondered about was the opposite:

“What about you, always calling me weak? I mean, since you’re a knight, I assume you’ve trained quite a bit, right?”

“Hmm, Ferris? My swordsmanship is completely hopeless, you know? The sword hanging at my hip is only there because my parents nagged me to carry it, and if I swing it, I just get thrown around by its weight.”

Subaru was taken aback as Felix recounted this, kicking his legs playfully.

While sensing a certain frankness in how readily he admitted his weakness, Subaru couldn’t help but feel a hint of suspicion at the way he made it seem not like a weakness at all.

His inner thoughts must have shown in his gaze. Felix looked up at Subaru with a sidelong glance, drawing out the end of his sentence, “Bu-ut,”

“Ferris’s strengths lie elsewhere, you see. So, I don’t mind at all being a clumsy knight.”

“Is that so? If you’re happy with that, then that’s fine. —That’s fine.”

It was probably because he had a solid foundation for his confidence. Felix’s statements were brimming with it, making Subaru feel uncomfortable and avert his gaze.

Then, Felix suddenly twisted around on the bed, positioning himself behind Subaru and extending both hands to his shoulders—as if to give him a shoulder rub.

The sensation of fingers touching the hair at the back of his neck was ticklish, and Subaru shrugged his shoulders, but then he felt warmth begin to flow from where Felix’s palms touched, and he stopped moving.

A torrent of water mana, emitted from Felix's palms, began to circulate throughout Subaru's body, starting from his shoulders. Subaru felt the flow of energy, much more palpable than the circulation of blood, and closed his eyes, surrendering to the sensation.

"Slowly, moistly, softly. Oh, a split end. Subaru-kyun, you seem to be experiencing quite a bit of hardship, don't you?"

"Could you stop talking while you work? Honestly, this feeling of mana surging through my body is actually pretty gross. It's hard to keep my head straight, and I feel like I'm going to get dizzy."

Subaru thought of the current discomfort, akin to how he felt when he once tried on a magnetic necklace his father used, which was supposed to improve circulation.

Healing with water mana—on the surface, it sounded quite refreshing and gentle, but experiencing it firsthand, it was clearly not such a mild procedure.

Given the state of Subaru's physical wear and tear, it was a natural consequence.

Subaru's physical ailment was due to damage to his gate, the entryway for mana, caused by forcing the dregs of mana, generated through doping, through his depleted gate.

Felix's treatment involved repairing the damaged gate with water magic while expelling the solidified mana dregs from his body.

"So, basically, it's like plugging holes in a leaky hose while pushing out the mold and trash accumulated inside the pipe, right…?"

"I don't know. What you're saying makes no sense, but I feel like you're using a really unflattering analogy, nya~?"

"It's self-deprecating humor, don't worry about it. Ugh, I feel sick."

Subaru turned his head, complaining to Felix behind him about his worsening nausea, and endured.

Three days had passed since he started staying at Crusch's mansion—meaning it was his third day of receiving Felix's treatment. He felt he was starting to get used to it a little.

On the first day, the surging urge to vomit had been unbearable, and he had given up immediately.

"Well, the first day couldn't be helped, could it? Part of it was directly injecting it into the most clouded area, and also being in such a battered state with no stamina had an impact."

"You really hit all my sore spots, don't you?"

Felix, who couldn't possibly see his expression, read his intentions just from his fidgeting, which was irritating. And how he unhesitatingly dug into his emotional wounds.

Subaru forced an awkward laugh to brush it off, trying to avoid touching that emotional scab. But Felix, as if to mock Subaru's thoughts, said,

"So, Subaru-kyun, are you thinking about revenge after all? Your training with Old Man Wilhelm isn't entirely unrelated to that, is it?"

"…Could you stop poking at such delicate parts of a guy? You know how it feels… or do you, in this case?!"

"I might know a little, meow? Ferris also had a period where I thought, 'I want to be strong, no, I must be strong!' But well, now I don't think such reckless things at all."

Casually avoiding any mention of his own "femboy" aspect, Felix spoke without a trace of sympathetic sentiment for Subaru.

He consistently touted his lack of martial talent. On the other hand, he also boasted of the talent he possessed that more than made up for it.

Subaru could empathize with much of the first part. However, when it came to the latter part, he couldn't empathize to the point of self-deprecation. Unlike Felix, he found nothing in himself.

He had always believed that his stubbornness, his guts, and above all, his feelings for her were second to none.

“Isn’t it better not to think about dark things like revenge? I don’t want to say this, but… if it happens again, you might die, you know?”

“…I know that.”

Subaru averted his gaze sullenly, responding with a mumbled whisper.

In his previous fight with Julius, Subaru had been utterly defeated beyond words. Despite being so thoroughly beaten, he understood that Julius had shown him mercy.

Otherwise, there would be no explanation for why he had been struck, pierced, and wounded so many times, yet had sustained not a single fatal injury.

There was a desperate gap between him and Subaru.

Understanding that, Subaru was studying under Wilhelm. He wasn’t dreaming of becoming incomparably strong after just a few days of training. He just…

“It’s fine, just wallow in laziness. Subaru-kyun, you’ve been through a lot, your body’s in terrible shape, far from its best, and now you have a valid reason to just relax under the guise of treatment. No one can blame you for it, there’s no reason to. It’s a win-win, isn’t it?”

Felix spoke rapidly, giving Subaru no time to make excuses.

His slightly irritating phrasing lacked consideration for Subaru, but the content seemed exceedingly sweet to Subaru’s current state of mind.

But then—

“—Sir Felix. Please don’t mislead Subaru so much.”

A quiet voice echoed in the room, and Subaru, feeling a slight surge of anxiety, turned around.

Behind Subaru, who was sitting on the bed—Rem stood with her hand on the door to the room, her blue hair swaying just past her shoulders. She should have returned to the guest room assigned for changing, but her attire looked the same as when they went down to the lower district of the royal capital.

Noticing Subaru's questioning gaze, Rem lightly pinched the hem of her skirt.

"Rem has changed from her going-out maid uniform to her visiting maid uniform."

"Oh, right, of course. Rem, you always understand what I'm thinking."

"Yes. Rem always want to be a fresh Rem in front of Subaru."

"I'm happy, but saying it like that makes you sound like raw fish!"

Subaru responded to Rem, who was emphasizing her "freshness." Rem didn't respond to that, instead turning her gaze to Felix sitting behind Subaru.

"Thank you for Subaru's daily treatments. However, please stop using it to manipulate Subaru."

"Manipulating? That's a terrible thing to say! Ferris is just saying what she thinks is best for Subaru-kyun, meow!"

Felix grinned mischievously, then leaned further forward, his arms around Subaru's shoulders, practically hugging him.

At the soft gesture, and the distinctly firm, masculine sensation against his back, Subaru cried out, "Hey!" in protest, but Felix overrode his complaint by running his palms over Subaru's jaw and chest.

"A kindness that slowly spreads throughout your body… If you think of it as Ferris's heartfelt concern, then perhaps it's not so bad to fall for it, nya~?"

The whispered voice in his ear, accompanied by a breath, gently caressed Subaru's earlobe.

Despite knowing that Felix was Felix—the same sex—Subaru inexplicably couldn't actively respond to his actions. His thoughts subtly dulled, and he remained held, unable to move, accepting the embrace. But then,

"Sir Felix—"

"Ugh."

"Please refrain from your playful antics. With all due respect… some jokes can go too far."

A shocking impact, as if pulling his dulled thoughts back, hit his neck.

A white fabric covered Subaru's vision as he gasped and came back to his senses. Squinting, he realized it was cloth pressed against his face, and immediately connected it to a familiar apron.

He realized he was being hugged by Rem, who was holding his head.

"Whoa, whoa, Rem. This is a little too aggressive in public…!"

"Subaru, please be quiet for a moment. —Sir Felix?"

Rem hugged Subaru even tighter, trying to cover up his embarrassment with a lighthearted remark, and called Felix's name for the third time, her voice icy, as if for an official occasion.

In response, Felix let out a small, long sigh and muttered, "Oh, I see."

"Rem can use some water magic too, can't she? In that case, it might not be a surprise that she saw through Ferris's tricks, nya~."

He spoke in a tone that sounded resigned, or rather, like a child whose scheme had been exposed. Felix then rested his chin on Subaru's shoulder, wrapping his arms around him to hug him tighter.

"Hey, Felix. It's too late now, but getting squeezed by a femboy isn't cute at all, it's more like a letdown, or… wait, Rem, Rem-san? It's nice that my head is enveloped in a blissful sensation, but your grip is a bit strong… no, not strong, it's too strong…! Gyaaaah—!!"

"Ah, Subaru, I'm sorry. Sir Felix wouldn't let go… I thought I'd rather break you than have you taken by someone else…"

"Is this a sudden yandere moment?!"

Subaru scrambled out of the grasp of both Rem and Felix, holding his creaking skull. He glared at them from the corner of the room with extreme caution. Seeing his gaze, Rem shook her head slightly.

“Poor Subaru… you must have had a truly frightening experience.”

“Your last comment hit me the hardest! Don’t your eyes look even darker now, for some reason?!”

Subaru’s protest was ignored, and Rem and Felix exchanged glances, leaving him behind. Rem narrowed her eyes slightly, and Felix awkwardly ran his fingers through his chestnut hair.

“Rem’s anger is perfectly understandable, but Ferris isn’t doing this entirely out of malice, you know? It’s just a tiny bit for Subaru-kyun’s sake.”

“The part that isn’t just a tiny bit?”

“The rest is out of consideration for Ferris’s friends… and everything else is for Lady Crusch, isn’t it?”

Felix said this with an unrepentant expression, then tilted his head and asked Rem,

“Isn’t that obvious for a attendant? Or is Rem different?”

“No, I am not. Therefore, Sir Felix should know Rem’s answer.”

Rem shook her head at the challenging words, and looked directly at Felix again. Seeing whatever was in her intense gaze, Felix held up both palms as if surrendering.

“Alright. I get it. I’ll stop trying to brainwash him under the guise of treatment.”

“From now on, Rem will always accompany you during treatments.”

“Oh my, so distrustful. It’s fine, though.”

Rem moved sideways, standing to shield Subaru from Felix's gaze. Felix laughed at her blatant caution, then stretched to see over her and looked at Subaru, who was silently pursing his lips, unable to follow the conversation.

"Rem scolded me, so that's enough for today. Next time, let's meet somewhere where we won't get caught, okay?"

"I didn't realize it's a tryst, and besides, you just said 'brainwash,' didn't you?! The thought of being alone with someone who says such dangerous things creeps me out!"

"Yes, yes, you're just inviting it."

"Don't say things you pretend to understand but don't!"

Felix stood up from the bed with a gesture of understanding. He stretched, then headed for the door. Just before stepping out, he turned back.

"Rem."

"Yes."

"I don't expect you to believe this, but… what I was doing for Subaru-kyun wasn't a complete lie, you know?"

The words were directed at Rem, who stood in front of Subaru, not at Subaru himself.

Subaru, who could only see Rem's back, couldn't tell what expression she made in response to those words. He only noticed,

"—I understand."

That Rem's brief reply contained a very slight hesitation.

"Oh. Well, that's good then. Bye-bye."

This time, Felix spoke his farewell and elegantly exited the room.

However, since they would likely be sharing the dinner table when evening came, the idea of "farewell" didn't quite fit.

As Subaru inwardly made such pointless remarks, Rem turned back, calling his name, "Subaru."

"Oh, hey. I don't really get it, but… was I perhaps rescued?"

"I wonder. Sir Felix doesn't particularly bear ill will towards Subaru, and as for his recent actions… I'm not sure of his true intentions."

Subaru, who couldn't quite grasp what had been done to him, and Rem, who avoided explicit mention of it. That subtle discrepancy felt unsettling, and Subaru frowned.

"Um, so, what exactly was going on just now?"

"Just now, Subaru was receiving Sir Felix's treatment, and your entire body was under the influence of water mana, wasn't it?"

"I don't really get it, but probably something like that? It's true I felt like I was soaking in lukewarm water, like 'Viva Nonnon.' Feeling sick from too much of it, if you think of it as 'bath sickness', then it's not entirely unrelated to the risks of bathing, I guess."

"To have another's mana intervene with the mana circulating within your body means to some extent, you accept that person into yourself. You were in a state where you were much, much more susceptible to Sir Felix's will than usual."

"That sounds pretty dangerous depending on how you hear it?!"

Subaru spun on the floor on his backside, getting up with a breakdance-like maneuver. Then he flailed his limbs about, pointing and checking each part of his body for any abnormalities.

"Am I okay? Am I not weird or anything? Like, do I feel a little feminine somewhere, or is my speech ending with a cute, cat-like suffix?!"

"You're fine, please rest assured. You're the usual Subaru."

"Really? Seriously? Reeeeally?"

"Of course. Please trust Rem, who is always watching Subaru."

Subaru felt as though he'd heard something he shouldn't just gloss over, but he let it pass and breathed a sigh of relief. Then he shook his head slightly, prefacing with a "Good grief,"

"When you think about it, this place is, in a way, one of the enemy's strongholds, isn't it? I've been pretty relaxed and my guard was completely down."

"Please rest assured. Rem will stay vigilant so that Subaru, who is so lax and carefree and helpless, doesn't have to worry about anything."

"I'm sorry for being so lax, carefree, and utterly oblivious?!"

A shocking truth was now revealed. Tears welled up as Subaru thought about how much Rem had fought alone while he had been slacking off, but setting aside that unbearable sentiment, Subaru tilted his head.

"I'll try to be a bit more careful from now on. The people here are… all 'enemies', after all."

"…Enemies, you say?"

Subaru tightened his resolve, which had been lax, or rather, focused too narrowly. Rem mumbled something quietly at Subaru's posture, but Subaru, rotating his shoulders to switch his mindset, didn't notice.

After thoroughly checking his physical condition, Subaru looked at Rem.

"Alright, then, let's get to our daily routine until dinner is called. Rem-sensei, please."

As he spoke, Subaru sat opposite the desk set up in a corner of the room. On it was a notebook for writing practice, brought from the mansion, and several black-spined books stacked up. These were textbooks and practice notebooks. In other words,

“No matter how many times Rem hears it, Rem never gets used to being called that.”

“Well, you’re teaching me, so that’s definitely your position, isn’t it? If you don’t like it, I’ll stop, but what do you say, Teacher?”

“No! Please, keep calling rem that! It’s Rem’s, Rem’s only way of being called! You mustn’t say it to anyone else!”

“When you’re so pushy, I don’t know what to do with this unexpected performance! Ngh, damn it, I won’t lose…!”

Subaru let out a strange cry of defiance, fiercely confronting the desk.

Standing behind him, Rem gazed quietly at Subaru with a loving emotion, and an opposing, wavering emotion in her eyes.

Her eyes held a sorrowful tint as she watched Subaru diligently apply himself to his studies.

“—Sensei, I don’t quite understand this part.”

“Oh, Subaru, you’re such a helpless person. You can’t do anything without Rem. You can show your gratitude for that with actions sometimes, you know?”

That tint, however, vanished the moment Subaru spoke.

2

—Thus, Natsuki Subaru’s days at the Karsten household passed.

In the mornings, Wilhelm thoroughly thrashed him; in the early afternoons, he’d tour the capital with Rem, calling it sightseeing, as they wandered through the city. In the evenings, he’d receive treatment from Ferris, who had returned after finishing his errands, and after dinner, under Rem’s supervision, he’d diligently study to learn how to read and write.

His days were remarkably wholesome and genuinely fulfilling.

Occasionally, he'd have brief exchanges with Crusch when she had some free time, but he hadn't had the chance for a proper, sit-down conversation. Indeed, the mansion saw a continuous stream of visitors daily, and Crusch was often called upon to attend to them, leaving her with little free time.

Even so, it was impressive that she still managed to set aside time for her daily training with Wilhelm. Or perhaps, considering she carved out that time by sacrificing other commitments, one might call her a sword-crazed woman, despite her gender.

In any case, from outward appearances, Subaru's time was passing productively.

He was treated impeccably as a guest, and Subaru himself, within the environment provided, sought something he could do, diligently learning and training.

There was a sense of pride, a kind of boyish resilience, evident in him—even after being defeated, he neither bent, broke, nor succumbed.

At least, from outward appearances—.

3

The tip of the wooden sword struck his forehead, and the next moment, he was sent flying by a centrifugal blow.

As he was thrown backward, using his head as a pivot, Subaru experienced the usual sensation of the world turning upside down. He rotated his arms, braced himself against the ground, and executed a perfect roll.

His gray tracksuit, his outdoor wear, got dirty with mud, but there was virtually no damage from the fall itself. He licked his lips at the success, only to taste the mud stuck to them, and hastily spat it out in disgust.

"Ugh, blech, blech, blech. Tastes like mud and grass, ugh."

"Shall we conclude for today?"

"You jest. Did I look like I was broken by that? I'm still spry as ever, hey!"

Subaru thrust his wooden sword forward like a home run prediction, twisting his waist to show his high fighting spirit. In response, Wilhelm, standing opposite him, let out a small chuckle.

Day after day, morning after morning, Subaru and Wilhelm's sparring continued like this.

Subaru's attacks still couldn't reach Wilhelm, but there was a dramatic change in Subaru's reactions to Wilhelm's attacks. That is,

"If I may say so… your falling technique has improved remarkably."

"It's a bit pathetic to say it's the result of perfecting how to fall without pain, but hey. I'm not treading water in the same spot forever!"

Subaru gave a thumbs-up in response to Wilhelm's words, declaring his triumph.

Wilhelm's words were true; over the past few days, Subaru's skill at taking falls had improved to a degree that even a professional would be astounded by.

After all, he had at least thirty practical opportunities a day. Don't underestimate a mere fall; it is still a fall.

Falling defenselessly naturally carries a high risk of injury. Even if Wilhelm's strikes were exquisitely restrained, he couldn't control Subaru's injury rate once he was sent flying and rolling on the ground. Therefore, Subaru had to protect himself.

"My talent for taking falls is blossoming now— I feel like my spirit's about to break, seeing as how I'm only improving my 'getting hit' skills day by day!"

"In truth, that technique is useless in a real sword fight, not with wooden swords."

“Can you not state facts?! My one steadfast pine tree of a heart just cracked!”

Considering a real sword fight would end abruptly, the polished skill was indeed a training-mode-exclusive technique, predicated on sparring with wooden swords. Moreover, it wasn’t for offense but a defensive, “loser” stance, assuming he would be hit. Nevertheless,

“One more time, please guide me.”

“Anytime, from anywhere.”

Given permission, Subaru braced himself, lowering his stance, and charged again. Wilhelm, holding his wooden sword in an easy posture, was slower to initiate. Although he was large, his opponent was an old man; it was unthinkable that he could keep up with Subaru’s sweeping motions. But,

“Too much wasted motion.”

“Ugh.”

Even when he consciously made minimal movements, unnecessary tension and wasted kinetic energy emerged. Wilhelm’s sword moved through these gaps, avoiding Subaru’s attacks with minimal movement and effort. Then, the flashing blade approached Subaru’s torso,

“Franken!”

The moment he thought the flat of the sword hit his side, Subaru’s body was effortlessly sent flying through the air by Wilhelm’s sword strike, which didn’t seem to have much force behind it.

The airborne trajectory, fueled by his charge, soared over the white-haired old man, and he flew through the air, inverted. If he fell headfirst like this, a disaster would be unavoidable. But,

“This is nothing!”

Just before he began to fall, he shook his head, curled his body, and cradled his head in a defensive posture. What he executed mid-air was the “Coconut” stance he’d once shown Roswaal. It was a beginner’s amateur defensive technique to increase defense by compacting the body tightly.

Whether his spinning body would land headfirst was largely a matter of luck, but it was a shallow stance that could prevent some damage if he at least didn’t land on the back of his head—however,

“Did you say this was the end?”

Subaru’s plan was thwarted before he could fall, by the tip of the wooden sword inserted into the gaps of his clasped limbs.

For Subaru, whose consciousness had completely shifted to the fall, this follow-up attack was entirely unexpected. The inserted tip moved in a circle, and his firmly bound limbs were easily pried apart, naturally causing Subaru’s body to spread out mid-air,

“Gyah!”

He was slammed onto the ground spread-eagled, taking massive damage without a shred of a controlled fall.

His face smashed into the ground, a kiss with the earth for the umpteenth time. Feeling the warmth of pain slowly spread throughout his body, Subaru rolled onto his side and shot a protesting glare at Wilhelm, who was looking down at him.

“Wasn’t that a bit too cruel, even for you?!”

“Until you can take a fall even in situations beyond your expectations, it cannot truly be called progress in the proper sense. More than anything,”

Wilhelm brushed aside Subaru’s protest with a slightly stern voice, then paused, looking down at Subaru with calm eyes.

Subaru felt uneasy at the tranquility of those eyes and the unfathomable depth of emotion within their brilliance, and he fell silent. To Subaru, Wilhelm declared,

“I would not be able to accept teaching a fighting style that involves attacking from the start with the intention of losing.”

“Ugh…”

It was a direct hit.

He understood that there was a power difference that made victory impossible. For Subaru, Wilhelm was that high of a wall. However, understanding the power difference was entirely different from challenging someone while having already given up.

To Subaru, who was speechless, his weak mindset seen through, Wilhelm held up a single finger and asked, “Is that clear?” then continued,

“Before I teach you how to swing a sword or the technique of taking falls, let us discuss something more fundamental.”

“Fundamental…”

“—If you decide to fight, fight with all your heart and soul. Do not let your guard down for an instant, for a second. Use any means, any dirty trick, to greedily cling to victory. If you can still stand, if your fingers can still move, if your fangs aren’t broken yet, stand. Stand. Stand, stand, and cut. As long as you live, fight. Fight, fight, fight!”

“…”

“That is what it means to fight.”

In that instant, Subaru was taught that the tension dominating the garden had dissipated by the fact that his own heart was beating so loudly.

At the same time, he also realized the obvious truth that his heart was indeed beating the pulse of life.

—He hadn’t felt truly alive until now.

The moment he began to speak about the mindset of fighting, Wilhelm's aura transformed. Until then, he had an atmosphere that highlighted his gentle, gentlemanly demeanor, making him seem like someone untouched by strong emotions like anger.

Subaru clearly sensed from the current exchange that this was merely a superficial part of Wilhelm's true self. Or perhaps, the expression he showed just now was the real Wilhelm.

The warrior invited as the sword instructor by Crusch Karsten, the main favorite in the Royal Selection, who fully wielded his power—Wilhelm van Astrea.

Feeling something that made his heart tremble, Subaru hid it and stood up.

His limbs and fingertips were faintly numb, whether from pain, fear, or perhaps some other emotion, it was uncertain. But,

"Indeed… I've been quite rude. I have."

It was true that he had been deeply moved.

Shaking his head, not even brushing off the dirt on his body, Subaru gripped his wooden sword again, turned to face Wilhelm, and said,

"Even knowing I'll lose, I'll challenge to win. It sounds contradictory, but I understand that I truly must do that… not with my head, but with my emotions."

"That is most fortunate."

"If I can do that, will I become a little stronger?"

To Subaru's question, Wilhelm closed one eye and said, "Well,"

"That's a different matter. Wanting to be strong and actually becoming strong are entirely separate stories."

"Don't you think the story would be more beautiful if you just honestly affirmed it?!”

“I do not permit myself to tell cruel lies.”

“Sometimes, I think that itself becomes a cruel truth!”

The conversation, which was almost neatly concluded, started to fall apart, and Subaru slumped his shoulders in a huff, dropping his gaze to the ground. Then, he mumbled,

“Do I have any talent for swordsmanship?”

“In my humble opinion, unfortunately, no. Subaru-dono’s talent for the sword stops at mediocrity—much like mine.”

Denying the question, Wilhelm let a self-deprecating smile touch the corner of his lips. Subaru raised an eyebrow in surprise, so unexpected were his words,

“You’re being oddly humble. Saying Wilhelm-san has no talent for the sword.”

“It’s the truth. I have no talent for the sword. If I did, I surely would not have continued to wield a sword for so long. Therefore, Subaru-dono can reach the same place as I, if you so desire.”

“…By the way, how much effort would that take?”

“It’s nothing much. You just have to dedicate half your life to swinging a sword.”

“Just…”

Naturally, it wasn’t as simple as “just.”

It’s often said that the ability to continue making effort is true talent. In reality, even if Subaru was told he could reach the same level as Wilhelm, he had neither the resolve nor could he think of a reason to dedicate the same amount of time to the sword as Wilhelm.

Besides, the very reason Subaru was studying under Wilhelm like this was—,

“Hmph.”

He sighed, shifted as if giving up— The tip of Subaru’s wooden sword gouged the earth, kicking up a spray of dirt towards Wilhelm’s face.

The moment he saw the clods of earth obscure the old man’s vision, Subaru’s attack aimed for Wilhelm’s feet. It was an action he had just been advised to take by the man himself.

—If you’ve decided to fight, use any dirty trick.

The complete miss of his full-force blow was conveyed by the lack of any sensation from hitting his target. But Subaru didn’t stop there; using the recoil from his rotation, he unleashed a roundhouse kick, and a second, even more forceful sword strike followed shortly after.

In response to these coordinated attacks, Wilhelm, who had deftly dodged the blinding surprise attack, showed his teeth in a genuinely amused smile for the first time,

“That’s more like it.”

The wooden sword cut into his crotch as he kicked, and Wilhelm, having closed in, turned his back and plunged into Subaru’s space. The free hand grabbed the collar of Subaru’s tracksuit, which now overlapped him, facing the same direction, and the moment Subaru realized it, his feet were off the ground.

His vision spun around, and he was slammed onto his back with such speed that he had no time to comprehend being thrown. His breath hitched from the impact, his thoughts stopped, and before the pain could pierce his entire body, he became aware of the tip of the wooden sword pressed against his face.

“Shall we conclude for today?”

Upon being told this, Subaru completely relaxed his body and closed his eyes.

The coldness of the ground beneath him spread from his back, and naturally, a painful numbness began to permeate his entire body. Then,

“Looks like I can’t do anything with all these distractions.”

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Isn’t it true that to improve your swordsmanship, you need to be completely focused on the sword? Like, you only grasp something as a swordsman once you devote yourself to it wholeheartedly?”

“You won’t suddenly grasp something and become strong, and regardless of whether you’re focused or full of distractions, the fact that the one who ultimately cuts down their opponent wins remains unchanged.”

As Wilhelm gave his dry opinion, he continued, “Besides,”

“If I may say so, I have rarely swung my sword wholeheartedly. Especially when I first started swinging a sword, I wasn’t thinking much about the sword at all.”

“Then what were you thinking about when you swung it?”

“Only my wife.”

“Wilhelm-san, sometimes you hit hard with your wife stories!”

Subaru remembered the doting husband remarks from their first meeting, but even so, Wilhelm’s partiality for his wife was excessive.

Subaru sat up, looking up at Wilhelm with narrowed eyes,

“Putting aside the heartwarming anecdotes about your wife… I’m surprised you’d say something like you don’t need to dedicate yourself solely to the sword.”

“Decide to become strong, and then continue to swing your sword with ingenuity to achieve that. Ultimately, there’s no other way to become strong than by spending that time. Unless you’re born with a divine protection, neither I nor Subaru-dono are.”

“Haha, that’s harsh,”

Subaru said, unable to hide the wry smile etching itself on his cheek.

Being told he had no talent for the sword was somewhat painful. He had, after all, dabbled in kendo in his original world. The pride he had cultivated, what little he had achieved, was utterly shattered.

Despite that, Wilhelm looked at Subaru, who managed a bitter smile, and, running his fingers through his abundant white hair to straighten it, said,

“In any case, that’s the mindset for becoming strong. Well, perhaps it wasn’t very helpful advice for Subaru-dono.”

“What do you mean?”

Not understanding the true meaning of the words, Subaru rested his hand on his chin and tilted his head. Seeing his gesture, Wilhelm continued, “No,”

“I thought it would be meaningless to preach the mindset for becoming strong to someone who has no intention of becoming strong.”

“…”

For a moment, Subaru’s expression froze, not understanding what he had been told.

However that stagnation lasted only an instant. Subaru immediately thawed his frozen expression and shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated manner,

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Wilhelm-san, what’s with the sudden surprise? Don’t say shocking things like that. Me, what?”

“If you are self-aware, then to elaborate further would be tactless.”

Subaru fell silent, unable to continue speaking, as Wilhelm shook his head, resignation in his eyes.

Anxiety mounted within him, wondering what Wilhelm was trying to say. Understanding that feeling, Subaru questioned his own inner impatience.

—Why do I need to feel anxious?

"—Subaru-dono, it seems our morning session is concluded."

"Huh?"

Wilhelm told Subaru, who was breaking out in a cold sweat from an inexplicable sensation. When he looked up in surprise, the old man's gaze was directed not at Subaru, but at the mansion.

Following his gaze, he saw a figure running from the mansion towards the two in the garden. —It was Rem.

Her face, which she consciously kept devoid of overt emotion, nonetheless carried a quiet tension as she ran.

Something had happened.

For Subaru, at that moment, it was also a relief.

For Subaru, who felt an inexplicable pain from facing Wilhelm, Rem's expression of anxiety and unease was even a salvation.

"Subaru. —Rem needs to speak with you."

With that, a period was put to the daily routine that had been flowing uneventfully.

The mundane ended, and the extraordinary Subaru had longed for began— There, Subaru would once again face despair.

Chapter 29:
A Situation in Motion

1

When Subaru, led by Rem, burst into the reception room, he found three people there: Crusch, Ferris, and Wilhelm, who had arrived at the mansion just before Subaru.

Crusch narrowed her eyes within her stern gaze as she watched Subaru rush into the room, out of breath and his shoulders heaving.

“It seems you’ve already heard the news, judging by your state.”

As if to say the troublesome preamble was unnecessary, Crusch stated this with a glimmer of shrewdness on her face, showing no emotion. Feeling that he had been preempted, Subaru shook his head slightly.

“Not the detailed story yet. Rem doesn’t seem to know much beyond the vague parts either.”

Turning his head, Subaru looked at Rem, who stood close beside him. Receiving his gaze, Rem lowered her chin, her expression blank but with a hint of tension.

“What Rem felt was purely through Sister’s senses. —Unlike directly from my sister, I didn’t see anything specific. It would be different if I could use clairvoyance.”

Rem frowned regretfully, biting her lip, lamenting her own inadequacy. However, watching her, Crusch let out an impressed “Oh,” as if she understood.

“I had heard tales of the twin maids under Marquis Roswaal’s care. I see, so a certain amount of information exchange is possible even when separated by the distance between the capital and the domain.”

“As Rem mentioned, it was vague. As an untalented individual, that was the best Rem could do.”

Rem bowed, humbly acknowledging Crusch’s praise. Subaru, watching their exchange from the side, stepped forward, waving his hands and saying, “Wait, wait!”

“Now’s not the time for that kind of talk. I want to hear the crucial part. From the way it sounded earlier, you know a bit more, don’t you?”

“Our information’s a little unreliable in terms of accuracy, too, nya~. It’s information that’s slipped through the cracks of quite a few people, after all, nya~?”

Ferris directed his usual mischievous gaze at Subaru, who couldn’t hide his impatience. Subaru glared back at him, and Ferris, putting a finger to his lips, tilted his head adorably.

“What if that vague feeling, combined with Rem’s sixth sense from earlier, starts to pull things together nicely, nya~?”

“Stop stalling, just get to the point!”

Ferris still maintained his teasing attitude, so Subaru put his hands on the reception desk and threatened him by leaning his face in close. However, it wasn’t Ferris who clapped his hands to get attention in response to Subaru’s demand.

“I understand your impatience, Natsuki Subaru.”

It was Crusch, calling Subaru by his full name and shaking her green hair as she looked at him. Hit by the sharpness of her gaze, Subaru suddenly felt as if he had been doused with water, and he involuntarily gasped and recoiled. The height difference between the tall Crusch and Subaru was at most five centimeters, with Subaru still being taller. Nevertheless, Subaru felt an oppressive sensation, as if he was being looked down upon by her, despite them standing at the same level.

Perhaps the difference in their inherent capacities created this difference in their perceptions. As Subaru was unnecessarily reminded of the difference in their biological standing, Crusch spoke with an air of knowing nothing of his inner turmoil.

“What if I simply refused, stating that there’s no reason for us to disclose information to you in the first place?”

“Wha—?”

“It’s the reply you should have expected, isn’t it? You are currently a guest under our care. Your position doesn’t guarantee anything more. There’s no reason for us to involve a mere guest in the affairs of the Royal Selection, including our own household’s progress.”

Crushed head-on by such irrefutable logic, Subaru twisted his lips, unable to utter a sound. At the same time, he felt anger at his own thoughtless and naive weakness. Hadn’t he just realized it the other day? This was, after all, the “enemy’s” territory, a place where they would undoubtedly bare their fangs at him if anything went wrong. Naturally, Crusch and Ferris would surely adopt a similar stance towards him. It was ridiculous to think that showing up nonchalantly and asking for information would work.

“Lady Crusch, Sir Ferris—that’s enough of your jesting.”

Subaru, with the flame of animosity burning in his heart, was racking his brain on how to extract information. Halting his thoughts was Wilhelm, who had remained silent until now. He looked at his mistress and her attendant with a reproving gaze.

“While such leeway might be acceptable in peacetime, we both know this is an urgent matter. Unnecessary arguments will only leave behind bitter roots for the future.”

“If there is a future, that is, nya~.”

“Ferris.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll be quiet, nya~. Humph, you’re scary, nya~!”

Pouting, Ferris bounced onto the sofa and then covered his ears and eyes, falling silent. Wilhelm sighed at his childish behavior, and Crusch chuckled. Subaru blinked, unable to follow their attitudes.

"I apologize for my rudeness, Natsuki Subaru."

"Huh?"

"That was merely a small test for you. It holds no significant meaning. However, I want you to keep in mind that this is a place you cannot help but be conscious of."

Crusch apologized to Subaru, who responded with a blank voice, but her warning was not absent. At her words, Subaru once again realized his standing, experiencing a sharp awakening of his consciousness. In short, whether he wished it or not, Subaru was now in a position where he could not afford to simply settle for the given circumstances.

Though his mind wasn't quite calm enough to say he was pulling himself together, seeing Subaru switch his mindset, Crusch nodded, as if her intentions had been conveyed.

"There's been some troublesome activity near Marquis Roswaal's domain. I've heard that the territory has entered a state of alert under the Marquis's orders, but…"

"Troublesome activity? State of alert?"

Alarming words had been spoken, and Subaru frowned, questioning them. Receiving his question, Crusch nodded and folded her arms.

"Originally, these developments were anticipated. From the moment the Marquis declared his support for Emilia as a royal candidate— In short, his support for a half-elf."

"What, so the sto— The common folk are going to explode with dissatisfaction or something?"

"Naturally, that will happen too. As the Witch of Envy's ill reputation spreads, being a half-elf inevitably means battling such prejudices."

Subaru voiced his immediate concern, and it was readily affirmed. Again, he couldn't tolerate Emilia's lineage being a hindrance to her. Though it was not her fault, how much would the world hold her back? He couldn't help but despise the faceless "common folk" who spoke ill of her based solely on prejudice, without even knowing her character.

"She herself chose this path, prepared for it. Your indignation is misplaced."

"Like hell it is! This isn't about her being ready for insults or being used to them. I'm saying there's no reason for her to be insulted in the first place!"

Subaru retorted with a grim face to Crusch's words, then pulled the conversation back to its original direction, saying, "Anyway,"

"So, because of that idiotic reason, there's trouble brewing in Roswaal's territory? Is it going to be more than just a minor incident, like a huge fire?"

"An interesting analogy, but it hits the mark. The details aside, the general gist is correct. Doesn't that also explain your attendant's senses?"

A question was posed, and the gazes in the room converged on Rem. With a poker face that revealed no emotion, Rem met the closest gaze—Subaru's—and nodded, as if responding to the intent of his eyes.

"The sensation that came from Sister was a mixture of impatience and a lot of anger… Rem believes it wasn't something she intended to convey, but rather something that leaked out because she couldn't suppress it."

"Is that synchronicity something you two feel for each other that often?"

"No. We control it to a certain extent. Even so, with very strong emotions, they can sometimes overcome that control and be transmitted between us."

As she continued, Rem's words lost their power. If her words were to be organized, this wave of emotion transmitted from Ram to Rem was irregular. If Ram had used synchronicity to ask for Rem's help, it would have arrived in a clearer and more continuous form. Despite this, the synchronicity this time was a single leakage and did not continue afterward. This meant, in other words,

“She’s trying to keep me from getting involved…?”

Subaru muttered to himself, feeling a burning sensation from his own imagination. If Ram’s intention was as he imagined, it wasn’t hard to guess who had ordered Ram to do so, or whose machinations were at play.

Subaru was currently receiving treatment at the Karsten estate. Rem was accompanying him. For it to be transmitted to Rem was synonymous with it being transmitted to Subaru.

—Did she truly want to keep Subaru from getting involved in her path that much?

“She’s in trouble, isn’t she…?”

The situation had reached Crusch, who resided in the capital. And the situation was so dire that Ram, who should have far greater self-control than Rem, couldn’t suppress her emotions and let them leak out. She still had few reliable allies, and unreasonably many enemies. In such a situation, how many truly honest allies could there be?

Yes, that’s right.

That’s why—

“I have to go help her, don’t I?”

Subaru looked up and muttered, and this time, all eyes turned to him. Crusch closed one eye, Ferris narrowed his mischievous gaze slightly, Wilhelm’s deeply wrinkled face remained unreadable, and Rem—

“N-No, Subaru…!”

Rem tugged at his sleeve, her small lips trembling and her large eyes wide. In her eyes were impatience, confusion, and a desperate plea.

“We must obey Lady Emilia’s and Lord Roswaal’s orders. Subaru is to focus on his treatment at Lady Crusch’s mansion. Rem, Rem agrees. Healing your injured body is your top priority right now…”

“What if something irreversible happens while we’re doing that? Then we wouldn’t know what hit us. It’s about choosing which is more important.”

Pushing past Rem’s clinging demeanor, Subaru stepped forward and looked at Crusch’s face. He met her quiet amber eyes, then straightened himself.

“You heard him, Crusch-san. Rem and I are returning to Roswaal’s mansion… to Lady Emilia. Treatment will be put on hold until this matter is resolved…”

“—If you leave here, you will be my enemy.”

Interrupting Subaru as he began to speak of future plans, Crusch stated this with absolute coolness. The sheer sharpness of her words made Subaru feel as if he had literally been cut. And as the meaning spread like pain from a wound,

“Wh-What do you mean…?”

“Let me correct your understanding. The only reason I treat you as a guest and allow Ferris to treat you is due to a contract.”

“A contract…?”

Subaru questioned, and Crusch nodded, saying, “Yes.” She raised a single finger from her folded arms.

“The contract made was between Emilia and me… through Ferris, but the content is your treatment and its compensation. With mutual consent, it was established, and I have welcomed you as a guest. But there’s a reason I’m upholding this contract.”

“…”

"I am upholding my contract with Emilia because it was made before the Royal Selection. Our relationship, Emilia's and mine, after the Royal Selection, is one of political adversaries. Therefore, there is no inherent leniency to be shown to someone from Emilia's faction. A contract is a contract."

Repeatedly, Crusch emphasized the matter using the word "contract." As he listened, Subaru heard that word as "promise," and he felt an uncomfortable connection to the last conversation he had with Emilia.

Crusch, prioritizing the fulfillment of a "contract," and Subaru, who had not kept his "promise." She sharpened her gaze even more on Subaru, who tried not to let his inner guilt show on his face.

"If you leave my household, this contract will be considered abandoned midway. With no lingering resentment between us, Emilia and I will be complete enemies. You, acting as part of Emilia's faction, will naturally become my enemy."

"So if I leave, my treatment's off, is that it…? That's a pretty low move, isn't it? You just don't want us to help Emilia because she's in a bind, right?"

"I want you to understand, nya~."

It was at that moment, as Subaru tried to hide his inner feelings with a provocative jest, that Ferris, who had been silently observing the situation, cut in with a slightly stern gaze and his chestnut-colored cat ears perked up.

"What Lady Crusch is doing for Subaru-kyun right now isn't being mean, it's kindness, nya~. It wouldn't harm us at all if Subaru-kyun went back to help Lady Emilia, nya~? The only reason she's holding you back is…"

"Ferris, stop."

"No, I'm going to say it. His misunderstanding is just too severe, so I have to correct him on that point, nya~!"

Shaking his head at his mistress's brief attempt to stop him, Ferris looked at Subaru again. Then he slowly, deliberately, said:

“Subaru-kyun going wouldn’t change the situation. It would be a waste to go. The promise of treatment that Lady Emilia paid for would also be wasted. Instead of doing something like that, it would be better for you to quietly observe the situation and heal your body, nya~.”

—A sound.

Subaru heard something pop in his head. When he realized it was the mouth of the bag that had been holding back his temper, Subaru nearly bit through his lip in unimaginable humiliation.

“I’ve decided.”

Without letting any of those emotions show on his face, Subaru quietly uttered those words. The tempestuous emotions still raged in his chest, but that heat chose not to erupt outwards, instead scorching Subaru’s insides and leading him to one conclusion.

“I’m going back to the mansion… to Emilia. It was a short time, but thank you for your care.”

“Subaru!”

Rem cried out, her voice clinging to him as Subaru clearly stated his departure. Subaru held up a hand to silence her, then looked down at the Crusch faction in front of him. Hearing Subaru’s words, Crusch’s inner thoughts remained unknown as she closed her eyes. However, Ferris, sighing deeply beside her, clearly had a difficult expression. He shook his head, looking at Subaru without trying to hide his exasperation.

“I think accepting advice gracefully is also a measure of a person’s character, nya~?”

“Your advice helped me make my decision. Thanks.”

Ferris shrugged at Subaru’s distinct sarcasm, seemingly giving up on forming any further words. Instead, the conversation was taken over by:

"Natsuki Subaru."

Calling his name, Crusch looked up at Subaru with wide eyes. Stared down by her stern gaze, Subaru tightened his resolve not to succumb to her piercing stare. No matter what she said, he had no intention of retracting his words. Even if he was criticized as powerless and foolish, what did it matter?

But—

"I regret to inform you that all our long-distance carriages are currently out. We only have slow transport carriages to lend, and those intended for mid-distance travel that require changing ground dragons along the way."

Ignoring Subaru, who was inwardly fuming, Crusch spoke of a completely different topic—no, words that in a sense affirmed Subaru's decision.

For a moment, Subaru blinked, not understanding what she had said. Crusch looked at him with a slight hint of bewilderment, then turned to Ferris beside her.

"Ferris, did I say something strange?"

"Ferris always gets dizzy from Lady Crusch's amazing ability to switch gears, nya~… You see, Subaru-kyun probably didn't expect you to offer to lend him a carriage, nya~?"

At Ferris's answer, as he held his hand to his cheek and squirmed, Crusch made a gesture of understanding, saying, "Ah." Then she looked at Subaru again.

"I respect your decision. Whatever the judgment, carrying through with what you've decided yourself comes with significant responsibility. If you're going to bear that responsibility anyway, you should do what you truly wish to do. So that your own soul doesn't feel ashamed. —Isn't that right?"

"…Yeah, that's right. You're absolutely correct. My soul is screaming that it doesn't want to be shameless. When she's in a bind, I shouldn't be leisurely recuperating."

Responding to Crusch, who affirmed his intentions, Subaru embraced the change within himself. With unexpected support, Subaru's decision would no longer waver. Rem must have sensed this as well. She closed her eyes for a moment, as if blaming herself, choosing silence, and when she opened them again, her usual impassive expression had returned.

"On behalf of my master, Rem express our gratitude for your kindness until today."

"It's fine. It benefited us as well. I'd like to discuss arrangements for transport to your domain."

"If you would be so kind as to assist us, we would be most grateful. Now, more than anything, Rem wishes to return to the domain as quickly as possible and be of help to my master."

Bowing, Rem accepted the generosity Crusch offered. Realizing from the previous conversation that this was likely about a carriage for travel, Subaru raised his hand and spoke up without thinking.

"Just to ask, how far is Roswaal's mansion from the capital?"

If Subaru's memory served him correctly, the journey from the mansion to the capital had taken approximately seven to eight hours. He had departed in the early morning and arrived late in the afternoon, so that must be right. If so, the travel time should be at most half a day, but—

"Considering transferring carriages… it should take two, or perhaps three days."

"Three days?! It didn't even take half a day to get here!"

There had been talk of no long-distance carriages available, but even for that reason, the difference in travel time was too great. It was hard to imagine such a difference even if they drove continuously day and night. However, Subaru's natural question was denied by Rem's shake of the head. With her refined features, she frowned slightly, looking troubled.

"The Lifaus Highway, which we used to get here, is currently unusable. Unfortunately, it's entered the season where 'fog' occurs… so we have to go around the main road."

"What's so bad about fog? Just drive right through it…"

"The fog is created by the White Whale, nya~? If you encounter it, you won't survive. That's common sense, nya~, you shouldn't even have to be told."

Ferris interjected, dismissing it as a matter of course. Subaru frowned at the unfamiliar term "White Whale" again, but the discussion continued smoothly, leaving Subaru behind in his lack of understanding.

As a result, Crusch and Rem's negotiation settled on "borrowing a carriage from the Karsten household and changing carriages at villages along the way for the return journey."

Subaru felt frustrated, thinking about running without rest, but since the vehicle was pulled by living creatures, there was no escaping the reality of their fatigue. It wasn't like an automobile that could keep going with more fuel. In this regard, he keenly felt the difference in convenience between his original world and this one.

In any case, the situation had begun to move. There was no longer any room to hesitate and waste time.

2

Once that plan was decided, things moved quickly.

Subaru and Rem hadn't brought much luggage to the Karsten household to begin with. When they left the mansion, having practically stumbled in with just the clothes on their backs, the sum of their belongings was something Subaru could easily carry in both hands.

As the two quickly gathered their things and headed out of the mansion, a dragon carriage was already waiting by the gate, the only thing separating the inside from the outside within the iron fence. Wilhelm, who was seated on the driver's platform, noticed their approach. Still holding the reins, he agilely leaped down from the platform, landing at their level. He tidied himself with a quick comb through his hair.

“This is the fastest ground dragon among the carriages remaining in our household. Even so, its caliber is significantly inferior to the ground dragons used by the Marquis, I ask for your forgiveness.”

“Just being lent one is more than enough. I’ll definitely return it… though I guess that’s probably not going to be easy anymore, is it?”

Lowering his voice, Subaru took the offered reins and looked at Wilhelm. Only the old man stood before the gate to see them off—Crusch and Ferris had bid them farewell at the mansion’s entrance hall, and there was a clear sense of finality in that parting. At the very least, it was clear that smoothly returning the borrowed ground dragon after the matter was resolved would be awkward.

Wilhelm lowered his deeply wrinkled face at Subaru’s words, which betrayed his anxiety, and prefaced his reply with “Indeed.”

“Given my position, I have no choice but to follow Lady Crusch’s judgment. After you leave the mansion, the relationship between my master and Subaru-dono’s master will be as stated earlier. — Consider this carriage a parting gift, including the unfinished treatment and sword lessons.”

“I don’t recall them saying anything like that when we left the mansion…”

The words that master and attendant had spoken to the two as they left the mansion were, in their own way, overly characteristic farewells.

“I wish you good fortune. May you always make choices that bring no shame to your pride and soul.”

“Since you’re pushing away Lady Crusch’s kindness like this, you’d better make up with Lady Emilia quickly, nya~, or you’ll be in trouble, really. Hurry up and go.”

Perhaps those last individual remarks were the most memorable.

There was no hint of the consideration Wilhelm spoke of.

“I, too, serve Lady Crusch. I understand my master’s thoughts to some extent.”

“By the way, how long have you been working here?”

“About half a year, I suppose…”

“Your work history is shorter than I thought, huh?! Are you two communicating properly as master and subordinate?!”

It would be no laughing matter if he were to take Wilhelm’s words at face value, borrow the carriage, and then inadvertently deepen the conflict between Crusch and Emilia. That would be the beginning of the ‘Borrowed-But-Never-Returned War’. It would be truly regrettable for his name to be etched into history textbooks for that.

While Subaru and Wilhelm talked, Rem, who had rushed to the carriage, was diligently checking the vehicle and the ground dragon itself. She snatched the reins from Subaru, hopped onto the driver’s platform, then quickly dismounted again, bustling around to check the condition of the ground dragon pulling the carriage.

From a quick glance, the ground dragon pulling the borrowed carriage seemed about a size smaller than the one they had departed with from Roswaal’s mansion. The carriage itself was also smaller, so horsepower probably wouldn’t be an issue, but the difference in speed was still a concern.

“—Understood, then listen. Yes, good boy, good boy.”

“Rem, how is it?”

The ground dragon lowered its head, following Rem’s instructions. She reached out to the lizard’s snout, gently stroking its hard reptilian skin, then looked back at Subaru.

“It was a bit temperamental, but Rem has now shown it who’s boss, so there’s no problem. Rem believes it will follow Rem’s instructions.”

"Oh, I see… you really established the pecking order, huh? You're surprisingly athletic, aren't you?"

While Subaru was talking with Wilhelm, Rem apparently had a "discussion" with the ground dragon. The details were unknown, as he didn't have the courage to delve into the content, but he couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for the ground dragon that was about to be worked hard. However, there was no room for mercy that would slow their pace.

"If we bypass the fog and go around the plains, we should pass through two villages before reaching the Marquis's territory. Within those, at a village called Hanumas, closer to the territory, we should be able to arrange for a replacement carriage."

"By the way, how far is it to Hanumas village?"

"Approximately fourteen or fifteen hours, I'd say. If we push the replacement carriage to its limit, we might be able to reach the territory in about half a day from there."

In any case, it would undoubtedly be a frustrating journey of over a day and a half. Subaru scratched his head, gnashing his teeth in vexation, but still bowed to Wilhelm.

"Thank you for everything, I'm sorry. Speaking of which, our training was cut short…"

"I believe I've conveyed the most important lesson. If you wish to further improve your swordsmanship, there is nothing left but to relentlessly swing your blade. I wish you well."

Subaru and Wilhelm firmly shook hands, gripping each other's outstretched hands. Then, following Rem, who had already climbed onto the driver's platform, Subaru also swung himself onto the carriage's bed. Looking back at the mansion from the carriage bed, he could vaguely see two figures standing on the terrace overlooking the gate across the garden. From their silhouettes, he assumed it was Crusch and Ferris. Though he knew they wouldn't see him, Subaru waved to them, and then called out to Wilhelm one last time.

"Alright, we're off. If fate brings us together again, let's get along."

"If you enjoyed a welcome that involved being thrashed with a wooden sword, then by all means."

Wilhelm smiled gentlemanly, then politely bowed as he saw them off. The ground dragon whinnied, and with a slow initial burst of speed, the carriage gripped the ground and began to move. The mansion and its inhabitants slowly receded into the distance. Subaru resolved in his heart that he would definitely get a hit in on the distant white-haired figure, who continued to dutifully bow until he was out of sight.

Descending the slope, passing through the entrance to the noble district, crossing the guardhouse, going straight down the main street of the lower district, and exiting through the main gate that connected the capital to the outside world, they would reach their destination road. Feeling a barely perceptible tremor beneath him, perhaps due to the ground dragon's blessing, Subaru couldn't contain his impatience and let his gaze wander to the scenery outside the small window.

Having been unconscious upon his arrival in the capital, this was his first time seeing the area around it. However, even around the capital, once they were on the main road, there wasn't much change from the scenery they had just left near Roswaal's mansion. At most, the well-maintained road was wider, and in the far distance, he could see the imposing cityscape of the capital. Even that disappeared completely after only about ten minutes of travel.

As his vision became dominated solely by the vast green plains and the blue sky, Subaru suddenly had nothing to do but lean against the inner wall of the carriage, lost in thought. On the way there, he had company in the carriage, so boredom was minimal, but this time, his only companion was Rem, who was on the driver's platform. He couldn't distract her as she focused on controlling the ground dragon, so all Subaru could do was sink into contemplation.

For a carriage used by a ducal family, the seat on the cargo bed where Subaru sat wasn't particularly comfortable. Its small size probably meant it wasn't for someone of Crusch's high status, but rather for those who served as her hands and feet. Considering the constant comings and goings at her mansion, there was a reasonable explanation for why the long-distance carriages were all out.

Participating in the Royal Selection created that many connections with others. A ducal family would have a considerable number of acquaintances, and aiming for the throne would require an even wider and greater network of relationships. Emilia would have to delve into such political issues from now on. And awaiting her, before those hardships, was an unnecessary trial.

“That’s why I have to go, quickly.”

Of course, Subaru didn’t overestimate himself enough to think he could handle political issues or securing powerful supporters. In his original world, he had never had the slightest interest in politics or economics. Even when Japan’s prime minister changed, Subaru was the type who thought, “If heads keep rolling like this, it’ll be the same no matter who does it…” and had no further interest.

Therefore, Subaru had no concrete vision for rushing to Emilia’s side. Only a subtle sense of urgency, unknown even to Subaru himself, was diverting his attention from the problems he should have been considering.

“She needs me… then she’ll understand.”

An unfounded conviction—no, only a wish—existed there. Emilia was in a predicament. If only he could rush to her side, everything would somehow work out, he hoped, a fragile hope that felt like it could be extinguished at any moment.

He wanted to prove his worth; he had to. If Emilia was facing difficulties, Subaru could do it. No, it had to be so. For Subaru to find and make known his worth, she had to be in a bind—

“Right… she needs me. Absolutely.”

Muttering, Subaru sank into thought alone. In his mind’s eye floated the silver-haired girl he should love. Her smile was covered by an unknown darkness, buried by malice that sought to crush her noble heart.

Subaru envisioned that scene, biting his lip and closing his eyes. Alone in the carriage, Subaru quietly waited for the time to pass. Alone in a place where he felt no presence other than himself, except for Rem on the driver's platform.

Subaru looked down, closing his eyes. He never even noticed that his mouth was slightly distorted.

Chapter 30: Rem's Intentions

1

It was about six hours of subjective time after leaving the capital that Subaru noticed the dragon carriage beginning to slow down.

As the scenery outside the small window gradually softened, Subaru furrowed his brows in puzzlement and reached for his chin. The stubble he felt confirmed that his sense of time was quite accurate.

Rubbing his sore backside from sitting for so long, he stood up and moved towards the front window of the carriage, which led to the driver's seat. He hadn't used it during their full-speed journey, not wanting to disturb Rem, but now he had no choice but to use it to ask her true intentions.

"Rem, why are we slowing down? We don't have time to dilly-dally…"

"It will be nightfall soon. Traveling at night increases the chances of encountering bandits and witchbeasts. Rem thinks we should find an inn in a nearby village tonight."

Without turning around, Rem edged slightly closer to the driver's seat and began to speak.

Hearing her suggestion, Subaru rested his hand on his chin, furrowed his brows in thought, and asked,

"A nearby village… Is that one of the two villages Wilhelm-san mentioned? I think the one where we could exchange lizards was called Hanumas, is it that village?"

Subaru asked, hoping it was, even though he suspected it wasn't. Rem shook her head, saying "No."

"It will take another six hours to reach Hanumas. The village you'll see soon is called Fleur, not Hanumas. Rem is sorry."

"No, it's not your fault… We can't keep going for another six hours? Then we'd be halfway there, right?"

Subaru responded to Rem, whose voice had dropped, suggesting they continue their journey. However, Rem still shook her head at his proposal.

"Rem is afraid not. If we go to Hanumas from here, we might arrive around midnight. Then we might not be able to find an inn, and in any case, arranging for a dragon carriage in the middle of the night would be difficult."

"Ugh… you're right. It's not just about getting to Hanumas."

Rem must have had as much time to think as Subaru had been deep in thought. Naturally, her current suggestion was based on considering the options Subaru was now mentioning.

Subaru closed his eyes, pondering Rem's proposed plan. But he quickly reached a conclusion.

"Let's get an inn in Fleur and leave first thing tomorrow morning. That way, the ground dragon can rest, and maybe we won't even need to find a replacement dragon in Hanumas."

"Yes. If we leave early in the morning and can make good use of Hanumas as a stopover, we might even be able to return to the mansion tomorrow night."

Perhaps surprised that Subaru accepted so readily, a strong sense of relief was evident in Rem's voice as she held the reins.

Sensing her demeanor from behind, Subaru suddenly realized he was constantly burdening Rem as well.

Her devotion to her master— Knowing that some kind of crisis was approaching the mansion, Rem's mental burden must have been immeasurable, feeling it more keenly than Subaru.

With her already shouldering such pressure, if Subaru were to add to her burden by being unreasonable and difficult, it would only increase. Since he had already brushed aside her insistence on staying at Crusch's mansion, further distressing Rem was not Subaru's intention.

Fortunately, they quickly managed to find an inn upon arriving in Fleur.

Subaru and the others, after tethering the ground dragon in the stable adjacent to the inn (or should it be called a "dragon stable" in this case?), had begun preparing for an early night.

Subaru, having forced down a meal that was too meager to be called dinner and taken a quick wash to clean off the grime, burrowed under his futon, trying to rest his body immediately.

However,

"I can't sleep…"

His concern for Emilia's well-being and the impatience to rush to her side mingled, and his heightened emotions simply kept sleep at bay.

Still, he lay on the bed, unable to stop wishing for the sun to rise quickly.

He had had plenty of time to think.

And he would have plenty more throughout tomorrow.

Moreover, not just during their journey, but he had been given an immense amount of time at Crusch's mansion. It was after repeatedly envisioning and pondering during that time that he arrived at his current actions.

Therefore, what Subaru needed wasn't time to worry and fret, but simply action to bring his will to fruition.

Then,

"…Subaru, may Rem?"

A knock came at the door, followed by the creaking sound of it opening hesitantly.

Subaru rolled over to look, and it was Rem, changed into her sleepwear, peeking in. She had shed her usual maid uniform and was in the thin nightgown he'd seen sometime before.

He tried to recall when he had seen her in it, but before he could remember, Rem noticed Subaru was awake and walked over.

Subaru sat up and responded to Rem, "What is it?"

"If you're lonely and can't sleep by yourself, that's a bit of a bad situation. If I were a bit calmer, I'd hit you with my best joke, but right now…"

"That sounds like a very exciting offer… but that's not the main topic. Before you sleep, shall we continue your treatment?"

"Treatment?"

Still sitting up on the bed, Subaru crossed his arms and tilted his head at Rem's words.

If the word 'treatment' was ringing any bells for Subaru recently, it could only be the 'gate restoration' performed by Ferris.

However that was supposed to be a treatment based on the premise that no one else but Ferris could do it.

"I can't think of any other ailments… Rem, what are you talking about?"

"As Subaru imagined, it's about the gate treatment. Rem observed Mister Felix's treatment method, so I somehow know how to do it. The effect will probably be much weaker than Mister Felix's, though."

She said, then looked up at him with an upward glance, "It should still make you much more comfortable than not doing it at all."
Other than Rem, among those skilled in water-attribute magic at Roswaal's mansion, the only other person he had actually seen use

it was Beatrice.

Suddenly, he was reminded of the curly-haired girl he hadn't seen in a while, and he felt a pang of nostalgia for the days when they used to bicker without any hard feelings.

"Subaru?"

"Oh, ah, sorry."

Rem called out to Subaru, who had become pensive from the budding nostalgia, and he quickly cleared his throat to mask his emotions, then nodded.

"Alright, please do. I couldn't sleep anyway, and if it has even a little effect, it'll ease some of my debt to Ferris."

"Is that so? That's good."

Rem smiled, letting out a sigh of relief that Subaru had accepted her offer.

As Subaru sat with his back to her on the bed, Rem placed both hands on his shoulders from behind.

Her small, delicate fingertips, much smaller than Ferris's, tickled his nape, and while feeling a ticklish sensation, Subaru surrendered himself to the sensation of warmth slowly spreading.

It was the same surge of mana he had felt countless times from Ferris's palms over the past week.

Compared to Ferris's treatment, it felt a little lacking, but perhaps due to the difference in the amount of mana controlled, there was no sign of the unpleasant discomfort he sometimes felt.

Instead, he began to feel enveloped in a soft sensation, like being gently rocked in a cradle, or floating face-up in lukewarm water.

"Whoa, awesome. Honestly, this feels way better than when Ferris does it."

“Is that so…? Rem thought she wouldn’t be able to satisfy Subaru much with her inexperience, since it requires concentration.”

“That’s not true. It feels good, and somehow… it makes me sleepy…”

Indeed, if he let his guard down, he felt a drowsy sensation tickling his eyelids.

His nerves, which had been unable to sleep just moments ago, seemed completely different, but considering that sleep was essential, agreeing to Rem’s suggestion was clearly the right choice.

“It’s perfectly fine if you fall asleep. Rem’ll make sure you’re properly tucked in, cover you with the blanket, and enjoy your sleeping face before Rem leaves.”

“I’m not worried about catching a cold by sleeping with my stomach exposed, and there’s a lot I want to retort about ‘enjoying my sleeping face’, but Rem’s doing her best, so how could I fall asleep mid-treatment?”

He wanted to believe he didn’t possess the insensitivity to be that selfish.

Rem seemed to let out a small laugh at Subaru’s reply. She moved her hands slightly from Subaru’s shoulders, then wrapped them around his neck from behind, as if embracing him.

Subaru felt his eyelids grow even heavier, sensing an increased warmth from her palms. He rubbed his eyelids to resist it, trying to stay conscious by speaking.

“Still, I’ll probably get yelled at at first, huh…”

“…Perhaps. Rem might also be scolded by Sister, saying, ‘Why did you come back?’”

“I’ll explain to Ram. That I forced Rem to come with me. Emilia-tan…”

What should he say? His mind was slow, and the words wouldn’t come.

As Subaru's eyelids grew too heavy to keep his vision clear, Rem extended the hand she had on his neck further, embracing him from behind.

"—If you take your time, truly face her, and express your feelings properly with words, she'll surely understand someday. Subaru's sincere feelings."

"Is… that so. You're right… I feel so… strongly, after all…"

Sounds began to fade. No, Subaru's consciousness was beginning to detach from reality.

The drowsiness had already surpassed comfort and was closer to a curse; his eyelids had become an unyielding cage, impossible to open.

Unable to maintain consciousness, the strength left his neck, and his head dropped forward.

Just before his thoughts completely separated from reality—

"So, please keep a small corner of your heart for Rem, too."

As she spoke, he thought he felt Rem's lips brush against the back of his head, tickling him.

With that overly convenient illusion as the last sensation, Subaru's consciousness plunged into darkness.

2

When consciousness began to return, Subaru felt the heat of the sun burning his eyelids.

Still lying on the bed, he vaguely raised a hand to shield his eyes. The strong sunlight streaming in through the large window filled the room with heat, making the blanket pulled up to his shoulders feel uncomfortably warm.

As he indulged in these sensations and registered his surroundings, he noticed something amiss.

“Sunlight strong enough to burn…?!”

Startled, he kicked off the blanket, jumped out of bed, and rushed to the window. A cool breeze poured into the room as he impatiently pushed the window open. Looking up at the sky, his bangs gently caressed by the wind, he saw it—the sun, high, high in the sky.

“No way, seriously. Oversleeping at a time like this…?”

Looking at the sun, already too high in the sky, it was undeniable that this was hardly “morning.” It was lunchtime, or worse, even later.

“What’s wrong with me… Am I an idiot?!”

Slamming the window shut, Subaru frantically darted out of the room and into the adjacent one.

Rem should have been sleeping in there, and the fact that she hadn’t woken him meant her consciousness was still surely in the dark.

“Rem, Rem, wake up! We totally overslept!”

He pounded on the door, calling out, cursing his own carelessness for having slept for over half a day. Rem, who had never overslept before, could be excused, perhaps due to the fatigue from driving the dragon carriage and other stresses, but for Subaru himself, it was simply a pure oversight.

His frustration at his own incompetence and impatience became unbearable, and he naturally hit the door with more force.

Still, there was no response from inside. Was Rem’s sleep that deep, or was there some other reason?

“Ah, damn it, fine. Rem! I knocked, remember!”

Saying this, Subaru gently opened the door and peered inside.

He had been considerate, thinking she might be changing or sleeping in an immodest position, but all his concerns proved to be unfounded.

Because—

“…Rem?”

The room was empty.

Pushing the door wide open, Subaru stepped inside and looked around.

The unrumpled bed showed no signs of anyone having slept in it; in fact, the undisturbed sheets showed no trace of anyone even lying down.

Feeling a terrible premonition run down his spine, Subaru nevertheless desperately continued to search the room for any trace of Rem.

However, no matter how much he searched, there was no sign that anyone had been there, save for a ceramic vessel on the table that seemed to have held a partially drunk beverage.

His few pieces of luggage, which he should have brought— The fact that even those were nowhere to be found made Subaru feel dizzy, and with his heart pounding and blood draining from his face, he hurried downstairs.

At the inn’s reception, the same proprietor who had welcomed them last night was seated. Seeing Subaru rush down, looking frantic, he said,

“Well, good morning to you. It seems you had a good rest last night.”

He rubbed his hands together, offering a practiced, businesslike smile.

However Subaru paid no attention to the proprietor’s demeanor; he slammed his hand on the counter, leaning forward.

“What happened to the blue-haired girl who was staying with me?!”

“O-Oh, sir… please don’t get so agitated. You’ll startle the other guests…”

“Answer me! Rem, where did my companion go?!”

The proprietor flinched at Subaru’s belligerent tone, who was clearly not listening, then stammered haltingly, choosing his words carefully.

“Your, your companion… well, late last night. Uh, she used the dragon carriage you arrived in, yes…”

“I can’t hear you! What?!”

“I said! She left during the night! She took the dragon carriage you arrived in, and left your companion’s… your lodging fee and luggage!”

Uttering the answer as if screaming it, the proprietor produced a bag from beneath the counter. He placed it on the counter and pushed it towards Subaru.

“This is your luggage. The lodging fee was prepaid, and quite generously, so there’s no problem whatsoever…”

“No problem… whatsoever?”

The proprietor seemed to be trying not to provoke Subaru, who was overcome with emotion, but his chosen words still infuriated Subaru again.

“No problem…?! How can there be NO problem!!”

He roared, slamming his arm down on the luggage on the desk, and then clutched his head.

Rising questions, doubts, anger, sadness, and the struggle against injustice swirled within his skull. Subaru tore at his black hair and looked up at the ceiling.

“What… What are you thinking, Rem…!!”

Even his trusted confidant had forced incomprehension upon him, and Subaru’s desperate cry echoed emptily into the sky.

3

“To Subaru,”

“When Subaru reads this letter, Rem is sure Subaru will be very angry with Rem.”

“Rem won’t ask you to forgive her for leaving Subaru behind and heading to the mansion. However please, understand.”

“Taking Subaru back to the mansion now is very dangerous. Both considering the situation at the mansion, and Subaru’s own body.”

“So, please wait for Rem’s return in this village, in Fleur. After everything is sorted out, Rem will definitely come to pick you up.”

“Rem is leaving all the money for you. I’ve given the innkeeper enough money and spoken with them so you can stay for as many days as you need.”

“Please, take care of yourself. Until Rem returns, Rem begs you, please wait. —Please.”

4

Subaru buried his head in his hands, letting out a long, deep sigh as he finished reading the letter tucked away in his luggage.

He was in the inn’s first-floor common room, sitting alone on a sofa.

There were few guests to begin with, and the innkeeper seemed wary after Subaru’s outburst earlier, not showing his face since guiding Subaru to the common room.

Amidst battling an uncontrollable wave of emotions, he'd found the letter in his luggage and slowly, painstakingly, read it— That was his current situation.

"Rem, you idiot…"

Neatly penned, the entire letter was written in "I-script."

The fact that Subaru was still learning and could only read and write in "I-script" was well known to everyone at the mansion, especially the twin sisters, who often acted as his instructors.

The deep sense of care etched into the stationery made it impossible to jump to the overly paranoid conclusion that this was a conspiracy by someone who had abducted Rem.

This meant the letter was undeniably from Rem, and its contents were unmistakably her will.

She had decided, on her own, to leave Subaru in the village and return to the mansion alone.

The letter expressed concern for Subaru, who was still far from fully recovered, and assured him of his future. But Subaru's heart was too full to accept such kindness right now.

For him, the only sentiment he could glean from Rem's letter was this:

"Rem… are you saying I'm useless and powerless too…?"

It was a succinct expression of his own pathetic self-assessment, purely based on the fact that he'd been left behind.

He reread the letter again and again, desperately searching for any hidden meaning. Or perhaps something written that only Subaru would understand.

However no matter how many times he read it, the words offered him no different interpretation than the first time.

"Is that so… Fine, then. I get it. If you're going to leave me behind… I won’t rely on you either.”

He gnashed his teeth, muttered, and stood up.

On the table, in the open bag he looked down at, were significant amounts of gold and silver coins, just as the letter had stated.

Rem had been managing their travel funds, likely entrusted to her by Roswaal when they left the capital. Even Subaru, whose financial sense hadn’t quite adapted to this new world, knew it was enough money to live comfortably for over a year.

In other words, if used wisely, it was a kind of power that would easily allow him to achieve his goal.

“I just need to hire a dragon carriage and a driver with this money and go to Roswaal’s mansion. I don’t know the market rate… I’ll have to make it work.”

At worst, as long as he reached it, he didn’t care if he arrived completely broke.

Once he decided how to use the money, all that was left was to act.

Grabbing his bag, Subaru exited the common room, his footsteps echoing loudly as he headed to the reception. The innkeeper was sitting there, making himself small, and seeing Subaru approach, he flinched as if afraid.

“Wh-What can I do for you, sir…?”

“I just have a quick question. How much would it cost to hire a dragon carriage to go from here to Marquis Roswaal’s… ah, Mathers territory?”

“A dragon carriage, you say…?”

Initially, the innkeeper’s demeanor was somewhat cautious, but once he judged that Subaru had regained some composure, he immediately considered the question.

He glanced at the bag in Subaru’s hand and the prepaid lodging fee

Rem had given him—factoring in all that information, he replied,

“If you’re purely looking to rent a dragon carriage, four gold coins should be enough. If you want a higher-quality ground dragon or cart, the price will vary. It also depends on whether it’s a round trip or how long you’re renting it for.”

“Is that all…? That’s totally within my budget. By the way, what about with a driver?”

“With a driver, the period is more clearly treated as short-term. On the other hand, if you don’t use the dragon carriage for the return trip, that changes the cost… hmm, if it’s just a one-way trip, you could probably rent the entire dragon carriage for five gold coins.”

“I’m not an expert, so I can’t be certain,” the innkeeper added, and Subaru expressed his gratitude, understanding that at least he had a general idea of the market rate.

Considering the amount of money in the bag Rem had left, such an expenditure would still leave him with plenty of change. “She pulled a fast one on me,” Subaru thought, letting his lips curl slightly, realizing he had underestimated Rem’s tenacity in carrying out her will. But that thought was immediately shattered by the innkeeper’s next words.

Subaru had assumed he had a way to follow her, but the innkeeper said, “However,” and then lowered his gaze hesitantly.

“Regarding the dragon carriage you requested, sir, there are hardly any shops in Fleur that rent them out. You’d have to wait for a shared dragon carriage and go to the capital or Hanumas first…”

“What…? Seriously? There’s not a single place that rents dragon carriages?”

“We apologize for the inconvenience. It’s even harder to say, but the next shared dragon carriage won’t arrive for over two days… the ‘Fog’ is particularly strong this time of year.”

Subaru was told this shocking fact by the apologetic innkeeper, and he immediately retracted his previous thought—he found himself gasping at Rem's ironclad thoroughness.

Her scheme likely began yesterday, when she suggested taking an inn in Fleur. Leaving Subaru in a village where it was difficult to arrange a dragon carriage, and making it hard for him to find legitimate transport.

Subaru, who had no means of operating a dragon carriage, couldn't even resort to criminal acts like stealing a ground dragon and riding it as a last resort.

It was all a plan to keep Subaru in this village and prevent him from getting involved in the situation.

"Sir, are you alright?"

Seeing Subaru resting his forehead on the reception desk, the innkeeper, concerned, furrowed his brows and asked.

Subaru managed to reply, "I'm fine," and then set his mind racing to find the next course of action.

If he couldn't arrange a dragon carriage, the worst-case scenario was to try and go on foot. Subaru alone couldn't deal with the bandits or witchbeasts Rem had been worried about, and above all, he had no way of accurately navigating the roads.

What he regretted now, far too late, was the fact that Subaru had never bothered to look at a map of this world with his own eyes until now.

He had no idea where the capital was on this world's map, how far Roswaal's territory was from the capital, or how large it was.

It was all the price of ignorance. The cost of being unlearned. The excuse that this world was an "another world" for Subaru no longer held true. Despite having had opportunities to learn and know, Subaru had let all those opportunities slip away— This was the karma that had befallen him.

"Walking is out. No shops to rent a dragon carriage. …Isn't there any way? Think…"

He mobilized everything he had seen, learned, and experienced in this world so far. Or even from the seventeen years he'd spent idly in his original world.

Subaru desperately racked his brain, searching for any usable idea.

The option of giving up and simply wasting time here, following Rem's instructions, was never an option from the start. If he were to choose that, he wouldn't have left Crusch's mansion in the first place.

Subaru was determined to rush to Emilia's side, even if it meant trampling on her kindness towards him. So, any more disgrace was out of the question.

At that moment, Subaru's brain began to spin at a scorching pace.

All the pent-up frustration and hardships accumulated until this very moment, this instant—those memories and humiliation intertwined, and facing an end where he might not be able to make any comeback, his brain roared like a fire.

Then, within the memories of his past days, Subaru found a hint that might break through this situation. It was:

"I want to ask the innkeeper something."

"Y-Yes, what is it?"

The innkeeper, who had been withdrawn from Subaru's silence and bloodshot eyes, was startled. But Subaru paid no mind to his reaction, looking at him with his still bloodshot eyes.

"This village has merchants with their own dragon carriages, right? I want to negotiate with them. Can you mediate?"

Chapter 31:
Negotiation, Business Talks, and Interruption

1

Subaru had ridden in a dragon carriage only four times— A number he could count on one hand.

First, there were the two round trips between the capital and the mansion. Then, there was the unconscious ride after Elsa’s blade struck him down on the day he was summoned, bringing the total to three.

The fourth time was—

“That cargo dragon carriage I used when I snuck into the castle, going along with Kadomon’s devious plan… that was the fourth time.”

He recalled the details of his clandestine entry into the castle, crammed into a fish-smelling cargo bed. While all his memories of the castle were unpleasant, it was precisely because of that experience that he’d come up with his current idea.

Namely, if there were no shops that officially rented out dragon carriages, then:

“I just need to borrow one from someone who already uses a dragon carriage for travel.”

Even Kadomon, the fruit seller who wasn’t popular in the royal capital, handled a dragon carriage. He recalled that it was a shared dragon carriage among the shopkeepers in that area, but it wasn’t unlikely for itinerant merchants without their own shops to pull their own dragon carriages.

“In fact, I’ve passed dragon carriages many times on streets filled with street vendors. In light novels I read a long time ago, merchants who hadn’t set up a shop yet were usually working as apprentices or traveling merchants with horse-drawn carriages.”

This idea was affirmed by the innkeeper, who nodded in agreement.

According to him, there were indeed several people in the village who owned dragon carriages for personal use.

Their existence barely kept Subaru’s fading hope alive. However,

“Ground dragons are essential for their livelihood, and for itinerant merchants, they’re truly a lifeline. I think negotiations will be quite difficult.”

The innkeeper conveyed this, implicitly warning him that it would be a challenging proposal.

However, Subaru had no other option available to him now. Therefore, Subaru shook his head, declining the innkeeper’s concern, and said,

“No, I’ll try anyway. Please tell me which houses have dragon carriages.”

With that request, he chose the path of negotiation.

2

As the innkeeper had feared, the negotiations proved to be quite difficult.

First, the households in the village that owned shops and used dragon carriages for stocking supplies or trading with other villages absolutely hated the idea of unscheduled dragon carriage use.

For them, a dragon carriage was a tool of their trade, not something they could easily lend out. Moreover, with their daily business to attend to, not a single eccentric person raised their hand to accompany Subaru on his journey.

After being rejected by all these shop-owning candidates, things got even tougher with the itinerant merchants who operated their own dragon carriages.

Subaru had assumed that these merchants, whose selling point was their light footwork and not staying in one place, would be perfect for this kind of request.

"It's the Mathers territory, isn't it? Sorry, but going there right now is impossible."

The tall, slender man tossed the words aside, cutting off negotiations with Subaru.

He was a person with a covered wagon and two slender ground dragons, just like himself. He looked at Subaru, who was still searching for words to persist, with reptilian eyes and said,

"If I may say so, I don't think I'm the only one refusing, you know? In my case, it's purely due to my cargo."

"Cargo?"

"My cargo is iron products for weapons and armor. I hear the market price in the capital is quite high right now. Tomorrow, I'll have to rush my dragon carriage over there and join in on that profitable venture."

Tapping his wagon lightly, the man spoke, gazing distantly towards the direction where the sun was setting—likely the capital.

Noticing Subaru's silence, he scratched his head and continued, "Besides,"

"The reason this village, Fleur, is relatively prosperous for its size is because it's a hub for folks like me who travel back and forth to the capital. So, I think there are quite a few people you could negotiate with… but they're all refusing you, aren't they?"

"…Yeah, you're the sixth person to refuse me."

Subaru bit his lip in vexation, announcing the results with a grimace.

Indeed, he saw a few people who met the preconditions for negotiation. As the man said, it was probably because this village was on the main road to the capital.

Subaru had eagerly approached them with the negotiations that shop-owning merchants had rejected, seeing it as a happy miscalculation, but,

“Now’s the time when folks who’ve been elsewhere are heading back to the capital non-stop. Can’t be helped, you know. There’s an uproar about the Royal Selection. All I smell is money.”

“So that’s how it is…”

Listening to the man, Subaru once again realized his own naivety.

It was a natural conclusion if he considered why itinerant merchants engaged in their trade. They weren’t just merchants who moved around. Their light footwork was essential vitality for jumping on profitable opportunities, and they went through the trouble of transporting goods precisely because those goods would lead to profit at their destination.

Currently, with the entire nation abuzz with the Royal Selection, there was no way an itinerant merchant would miss out on business opportunities in the capital.

His enthusiasm was crushed by his lack of foresight. Perhaps feeling sorry for Subaru, who was frustrated by the receding glimmer of hope, the man touched his aquiline nose thoughtfully and said, “Let’s see…”

“Besides, there are some fishy rumors flying around the Mathers territory right now. Even if the profitable deals in the capital fall through, hardly anyone would want to go there.”

“Fishy rumors… are those also related to the Royal Selection, by any chance?”

“I think it’s just a rumor. Something about a half-elf being a candidate and someone supporting her… The Royal Selection is still in the stage where rumors are flying around. Do you know anything about it?”

“…No, I don’t really know either.”

Subaru instantly lied, evading the man’s question. Perhaps not expecting much, the man simply accepted it with a “Is that so?” without appearing particularly disappointed.

Glancing at his reaction, Subaru realized that the environment surrounding Emilia was caught in a more vicious cycle than he had imagined.

Just as he was starting to grow weary of the formidable obstacles standing in his way and Emilia’s path, the man suddenly clapped his hands and said, “That’s right!”

“Hey, rejoice! I might have just thought of someone who might take you up on your offer!”

“—! Seriously?! I was almost giving up just now, with rape eyes!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but it’s true. I’ll call him over for you.”

As he spoke, the man casually patted Subaru’s shoulder and jogged across the road. Subaru followed the man, who darted into a barely visible shop, and looked up at the shop’s sign.

“…Probably something like a tavern?”

He wasn’t entirely sure, but some of the characters carved there used the ‘Ro’ script he had just begun to learn, and he could barely decipher them. Furthermore, a faint, alcohol-laden scent wafted from beyond the double doors, making one question the character of anyone lingering there, even though it was still broad daylight.

Since the man had eagerly rushed in, the person he was looking for must be inside.

“What if he brings out some super dependent alcoholic… Is it okay to drive a dragon carriage while drinking in this world?”

Would there be jail time or license revocation for drunk driving? Or perhaps the concept of a dragon carriage license didn’t even exist.

Subaru quietly decided that if a stern-looking, alcohol-soaked self-employed type appeared, he would casually scatter some gold coins and make a run for it.

Just as Subaru was steeling himself with this grim resolve, the door opened, and,

“What, I told you to wait, but you came over here?”

The lean man laughed, looking somewhat taken aback. As he laughed, he reached an arm inside the shop, apparently pulling someone out by their clothes.

Subaru peered into the shop and shifted his gaze in that direction.

“I’m specifically asking for a favor, so it would be incredibly rude to make you walk over here. …So, this is the person?”

“Oh, right, right. This is him. Here, Otto, say hello!”

Pulled roughly by the arm, a young man with gray hair stepped forward before Subaru.

He was slightly shorter than Subaru and had a slender build. He seemed a little older than Subaru, probably around twenty years old. If he straightened his posture and composed his expression, he had a refined face that could pass for handsome, but,

“I’m Natsuki Subaru. Sorry for dragging you out. I heard you might be able to take on my request and… ugh! You reek of alcohol! Ugh, I’m getting drunk just from the smell!”

He tried to start the negotiation amicably but was immediately knocked out by the wafting stench. A potent alcoholic odor that made his stomach churn emanated from the gloomy-faced young man in front of him.

As expected—no, even more than expected, he seemed to be thoroughly drunk. Indeed, the young man stumbled a mere few steps with a staggering gait and somehow managed to stand before Subaru.

"I'm hooome… I've been introtuh-duced… as Otto… ugh… I mean. Ugh. Hic. Ugh."

He retched three times during his short greeting.

Otto, as the young man introduced himself, surveyed Subaru and the other man alternately with a drunken, flushed face that didn't suit his refined features.

"Sooo, what was it again? A business deal? Was it a business deal? Ugh, a business deal for me, ugh, ahaha, ugh. Isn't that a funny stoory, ugh."

Finally, Otto squatted down, laughing for reasons unknown to Subaru.

Feeling completely disheartened by his behavior, Subaru shot a resentful glance at the man who had introduced him. The man, flustered, raised his hands.

"Wait, wait, wait, I didn't trick you!"

"If you're serious about this introduction, it makes me question your judgment. This isn't just drunk driving; at this point, he'd be stopped by the police even if he was just walking!"

He had been introduced to a man who was not just tipsy but utterly plastered.

Perhaps understanding Subaru's skepticism, the man who was being glared at roughly shook Otto's shoulder, who was still squatting.

"Otto! Hey, wake up! You're the one who said to introduce you if there was a chance for a big reversal of fortunes! Are you gonna ruin it with alcohol, huh?!"

"A big reversal of fortunes…?!"

Otto's dead eyes suddenly flickered. He shook off the man's hand that was gripping his shoulder, and with a movement that belied his drunken state from moments ago, he stood up.

“My sincerest apologies. My name is Otto Suwen. I am a humble merchant who makes a living through trade.”

Otto’s determined expression was so sharp it almost seemed to make a sound.

Subaru was speechless at his sudden transformation. Otto observed Subaru thoroughly from head to toe, let out a sigh of “Hmm,” and then said,

“I see, so you are guaranteed a certain status. This could indeed be a valuable customer. Ketty, thank you very much.”

“Alright, alright. See, now the conversation can proceed, right? Well then, if you’ll excuse me. Young man, give me your business if we ever meet again. Otto, you owe me one next time.”

Once Otto displayed an attitude sufficient to dispel any doubts, the man dramatically exhaled in relief, patted his chest, and then raised a hand to them before leaving the spot.

After throwing words of thanks at his retreating back and seeing him off, Subaru turned back to the young man. Standing before him, evaluating him, Otto showed no trace of the lingering drunken stupor from moments ago.

“Now, let us begin negotiations. —What is it you seek, customer?”

Clapping his hands and raising a finger, Otto put on a beaming smile and proposed.

3

“I don’t mind taking it on, truly.”

That was Otto’s reply after Subaru finished explaining his situation, briefly and somewhat vaguely.

Subaru, who had only held a slight hope of not being outright refused due to the introduction from the merchant named Ketty, was, in a way, astonished by this ready acceptance.

However, he quickly grasped the meaning of the response, and immediately, Subaru gripped Otto's hands tightly.

"Ah, thank you! Really, you'll do it? That helps! It really helps!"

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow! Hold on, you're so strong! Wait, please! I'm glad you're happy, but I have conditions too!"

As his arms were swung wildly up and down, Otto raised his voice and shook free. Opening and closing his now empty hands, Subaru tilted his head, asking, "Conditions?"

Otto lightly shook his freed hands, grimacing slightly, and said, "Yes."

"This is my tool of trade, or rather, my lifeline, so I can't just accept easily. Of course, not for the price of a regular rented dragon carriage. Especially since there are many uncertainties heading to the Mathers territory right now."

"That's understandable, of course. I can't really say 'name your price,' though."

Glancing down at the bag he held, Subaru hesitated, unable to imagine the sum Otto might propose. At the very least, if he demanded more than the money Subaru had left, it would be an immediate no-go. Even then, he couldn't easily agree if some kind of exchange condition was brought up.

As Subaru revealed his caution, Otto winked an eye.

"Well then. How about… all the money you have?"

He shrugged his shoulders with both hands raised, speaking in a jesting manner.

For him, it was the first step in negotiations. In other words, he was laying a groundwork. The clear gleam in his eyes showed his intention to gain control of the pace from there and lead the conversation forward.

It was the start of a negotiation battle, a comparison of words and arguments—

“Is that all right? Okay. Then, I’ll entrust this bag to you. Can we depart right away?”

That’s not what happened.

Subaru, casually offering the bag he was holding, left Otto dumbfounded, making him instinctively accept it. Feeling its significant weight in both arms, he swallowed hard, then turned his trembling eyes to Subaru.

“Wha—no, that’s not right?! Normally, this is where a debate begins, where we slowly move closer to each other’s demands! To accept so easily…”

“It’s a waste of time, and I’d lose the debate anyway. So I’m not going to fight a battle that’s useless, and if what’s in that bag is enough, then it’s a dream come true for me.”

At worst, he could have lost everything in the bag and still failed to achieve his objective. Thinking of that, if he could get a one-way ticket by spending all his money, it was a cheap price to pay.

Otto, seeing Subaru’s decision, put a hand to his forehead with an exasperated look.

“This… could it be that I’ve been introduced to a truly troublesome person?”

“Don’t worry. Personally, I don’t intend to bother anyone. In my heart, at least.”

Neither Subaru himself nor Otto, whose acquaintance was far too brief, could possibly know that his statement had not a shred of persuasiveness.

“Alright. I put forth my conditions for taking on the job, and you accepted them immediately. I have my pride as a merchant. No matter how paltry the sum, I’ll see it through… Ugh?! Wh-What is this huge amount of money?! To just hand over something like this… ugh-bleh.”

Ignoring Otto, who retched in renewed nausea after checking the bag's contents, Subaru clenched his fist before the opportunity he had finally grasped.

Various obstacles stood in Subaru's way, but he could somehow overcome all of them. He still didn't know what stood in Emilia's path, but he was sure he would understand once he stood by her side. He was certain he could do something about it.

"Wait for me, almost there… almost there."

Clearly, the corner of Subaru's mouth twisted into a smile.

He didn't even realize he was smiling, unable to tell if it was because he could finally achieve his goal or because he had a vision of the beloved girl.

4

"Then, let's confirm the contract's terms. Our destination is the Mathers territory, under Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers. The condition is to reach it as quickly as possible, even driving through the night… I'm accepting this because of the payment, but it's an unreasonable condition, you know."

"Don't complain, you're the one whose eyes lit up at the sight of the gold coins! Please, thr future depends on this."

"I think the future depends on various things simultaneously, you know."

As he spoke, Otto skillfully managed the reins, and the ground dragon neighed, kicking the ground and setting off at a run.

Otto's dragon carriage was a large, covered wagon, and the ground dragon pulling it was a powerfully built, enormous creature to match. Subaru was concerned about its speed given its rather heavy-duty appearance, but,

"On the other hand, its stamina is exceptional. It's a breed particularly known for its endurance among long-distance types, so it won't break down even if it runs for three days straight."

"If you make it run for three days, the person riding it would probably break down first."

"About two years ago, I also pushed it hard so I wouldn't miss a business opportunity. When a person is desperate, they can do surprisingly much. I collapsed right after the business deal was done, and then hovered between life and death for about a week."

"Desperate, huh?"

He glanced at Otto's face, and noticing his gaze, Otto looked at him as if to ask, "Something wrong?" Subaru waved his hand in response to the unspoken question and tried to change the subject, looking down at the running ground dragon.

"Anyway, so there's no need to replace this one along the way, then. In that case, we can just pass through Hanumas village, right?"

"That's right. Hanumas is a better transit point than Fleur, but if you have your own dragon carriage fully loaded with water and food, there's no value in stopping. And since the request is for an express trip, we'll pass straight through."

Despite his plan being a complete spur-of-the-moment decision, Otto's orderly explanations contained not a hint of anxiety.

For him, it was just one of many roads he had traveled countless times. They were likely not far apart in age, yet he exuded a dignity that seemed unfitting for his refined appearance.

Even as such a person, he had agreed to Subaru's reckless request. While it was true that the payment was a factor, Subaru still had his doubts.

"Hey, why did you agree to my request? The fact that you were so drunk is also a bit of a mystery."

"Y-You're very blunt with your difficult questions, Mr. Natsuki."

Otto made a face that was more a grimace than a bitter smile at Subaru's question.

Subaru straightened his posture before the person who, for the first time since he came to this world, called him by his family name. Realizing, for the first time in a while, his own low social skills for asking such a direct, difficult question, he said,

“Well, what’s done is done. You might as well just confess.”

“You say that so easily… Well, to put it just as simply, I messed up due to a slight miscommunication of information.”

Sighing at Subaru’s almost brazen attitude, Otto began to narrate the cause of his earlier drunken spectacle at the tavern.

When the word “messed up” came up, Subaru furrowed his brows, and Otto turned his head towards the loaded cargo bed.

“Over there, in the cargo bed, is all of my current cargo… What do you think it is?”

“…At first glance, it looks like a bunch of jars or something. Were you planning to sell pottery?”

“Wrong answer. The merchandise isn’t about appearance; it’s what’s inside. The jars are full of oil. Originally, I planned to take it north to Gusteko, but…”

Shrugging, Otto chuckled self-deprecatingly at his miscalculation.

“It must be related to the Royal Selection. Passage to Gusteko, a northern country, has been temporarily closed. I desperately resisted when I realized my goods wouldn’t sell… I was turned away without success.”

What was supposed to bring a fortune in the cold Gusteko had been rejected, and he now had to somehow dispose of it within Lugunica. To add insult to injury, Otto had traded for the oil using various iron products that had been virtually worthless until recently.

As a result, he missed the chance to make a killing on iron products, lost the market to sell the oil he now had, and apparently, in despair, he got drunk.

"Even in the capital, it's impossible to sell this much oil easily… If I were to sell it for next to nothing, I'd be ruined as a merchant. I had half given up on life, thinking I was finished as a merchant, when your offer came along, Mr. Natsuki."

"Can that money somehow cover your losses?"

"Even if you bought all this oil at its market price, you'd still get change back. This somehow saved my neck. I'm truly grateful."

To Otto, who was bowing his head as if worshipping him, Subaru waved his hand, saying, "Stop it." Subaru was just as grateful to him. In fact, he was almost certain his gratitude was no less than Otto's.

For a while, they continued their charade, saying things like, "It's thanks to you," "No, no, it's thanks to you," "I exist because you were there," and "Yes, we were destined to meet this way," deepening their sympathy for each other as time passed.

When a lull fell in their conversation and silence suddenly settled between them, Subaru looked away from the road they were traveling and squinted at the endless plain.

"Hey, Otto. Can't we just cut across this plain?" he muttered.

Hearing Subaru's whisper, Otto burst into laughter as if he had heard the most exquisite joke, slapping his knee and saying, "Oh, come on!"

"That's not even remotely funny. When the 'Fog' covers the plain, the White Whale appears. It's one of the most famous witchbeasts… If you encounter it, you won't survive."

"Is it that dangerous? Hasn't it ever been subjugated?"

"As long as you avoid the 'Fog'. the damage is minimal. Apparently, there were expeditions organized to subjugate it in the past, but you can guess the results from the fact that the White Whale is still alive and well."

In other words, the subjugation failed, and the resulting damage made subsequent expeditions hesitant.

Listening to this, Subaru felt a complex emotion at the mention of the word "Witchbeast." For Subaru, witchbeasts brought to mind the hordes of Juggernauts that inhabited the vicinity of Roswaal's mansion.

He had thought there were some sympathetic aspects to the fate of those beasts, whose nests were all eventually burned down and eradicated. Of course, even for Subaru, who had been killed by them, the fact that they were creatures with an ecology too difficult to coexist with was undeniable.

"The White Whale, huh. Is it shaped like a white whale?"

"According to the few people who witnessed it and survived, it's apparently so massive they still can't quite tell what it was. They just desperately threw everything away and saved only their lives while everything around them was crushed."

"It's a terrifying story," Otto said with a long sigh, seemingly unwilling to talk about the White Whale any further.

For him, an itinerant merchant who traveled across various regions, the White Whale, which occupied the plains for days and forced detours, must have been an object of detestable hatred.

"It would be great if it were subjugated, but I don't want to get involved with it." Such an intention could be sensed from his attitude, and Subaru also ceased further inquiry at that point.

In any case, Subaru couldn't reach the territory without Otto's cooperation. He had to avoid displeasing him with strange talk and becoming unfriendly.

Otto, focused on handling the ground dragon, didn't notice Subaru quietly looking at him with suddenly emotionless eyes.

Subaru himself also couldn't tell what kind of gleam was in his own eyes at that moment.

The situation was slowly, yet surely, progressing with distortions.

—As a result of the forced march, continuing even through the night without rest.

"We can see it now. Once we cross that hill, we'll enter the Mathers territory."

About half a day and three hours had passed since their journey began.

Subaru and the others arrived at their destination, the Mathers territory, in the early morning when the sun that had set after their departure began to rise again, brightly illuminating the world.

"We've been running non-stop… Maybe we even overtook Rem."

"No, no, it's tough to catch up to someone who left more than half a day ahead. More importantly, are we heading to the Mathers territory's…?"

"Yeah, the mansion of the lord, Margrave Roswaal. Do you know the location?"

"Roughly. Well, leave it to me."

Otto responded to Subaru in a dependable voice, deftly moving his hands on the reins.

Unlike Subaru, who had managed to get a few shallow sleeps during the journey, Otto had no time to rest while driving and was practically running on fumes, but his reply had a strong, fatigue-free resonance.

“Hahahahaha! Go! Go! I can see a shining path before me now!”

In fact, seeing him utter such slightly over-the-top, excited lines made him seem like he was running purely on adrenaline from staying up all night, which was rather endearing.

Anyway, setting aside his fellow traveler’s condition, Subaru thought of the mansion, now very close, and brought to mind the reunion scene he had tried to avoid contemplating until now.

He probably wouldn’t be easily accepted. Subaru, who was supposed to be in the capital for treatment, was returning mid-treatment. He had to be prepared even for harsh words.

Still,

“I came back to do what I have to do. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. That’s right, nothing at all.”

As if to justify his actions, or to make excuses to someone not present, Subaru repeatedly whispered the magic words that had continued to sustain his morale.

When he uttered them, he could temporarily banish the anxieties that threatened to crush his chest. That’s why Subaru repeated those words.

Disregarding several other words he should have remembered, Subaru continued to support his fragile, crumbling self with such phrases.

Subaru’s resolve, bolstered by such temporary confidence, was then, “Mr. Natsuki… Could you forgive me if I stop here?”

Dashed by Otto, who suddenly stopped the dragon carriage after they had approached the mansion and driven through a forested area for a while.

5

“What do you mean? You’re not going to say the contract’s over just because we’ve entered the Mathers territory, are you? That’s not fraud, but it’s close enough!”

Subaru grabbed Otto, who had suddenly refused to proceed further, from the driver’s seat of the stopped dragon carriage. He pulled Otto by the collar, about to hurl more insults, but swallowed the words as he saw Otto’s pale face.

Released from the collar, Otto silently straightened his disheveled clothes on the driver’s seat. Then, he bowed deeply to Subaru.

“I apologize. I intended to stay with you until the very end. However I can’t find the courage to go any further.”

“What are you talking about? Courage has nothing to do with this, does it? We’re almost at the mansion. The road isn’t even bad. Come on, Otto.”

“I can’t, even if you ask. I can’t accept all the payment either. I’ll return half of it. So please, let me turn back here.”

To Subaru, who was trying to brush it off lightly, Otto put his hands on the driver’s seat and bowed his head, earnestly pleading for forgiveness.

Subaru gasped, taken aback by his utterly desperate demeanor.

“What’s wrong, all of a sudden? What could make you act like that…?

”

“The ground dragon… It’s afraid. This has never happened before!

This is why itinerant merchants use dragons for travel; they can tell when something should be avoided!"

Otto, his face pale, looked down at the ground dragon, his hands gripping the reins trembling slightly. Looking at it, the ground dragon, standing on its feet and awaiting its master's command, was quietly taking ragged breaths. But it repeatedly snorted towards their direction of travel —their destination— and shifted its body as if signaling danger, urging strong caution.

From the ground dragon's behavior and Otto's reaction, trusting it, Subaru understood.

An unimaginable threat awaited them ahead.

He couldn't force Otto and the others to face it with him. There was no choice but for Subaru to challenge it alone.

"Thanks for everything. Sorry to put you through something scary, Otto."

"Eh?"

Hearing a surprised voice behind him, Subaru leaped from the driver's seat to the ground. Landing beside the ground dragon, he lightly patted his tingling legs and looked up at Otto.

"I'll walk to the mansion from here. It's not that far, really. It's enough that you brought me this far. Take all the money."

"I can't possibly… No, more importantly, Mr. Natsuki! Don't go! Let's turn back together. There's a mist here right now!"

"Are you saying the White Whale will appear?"

"I mean it as an ill omen for merchants! When mist covers your destination, it's a matter of life and death for us… Never mind that, just reconsider, please…"

"I'm sorry, but…"

Seeing Otto desperately raising his voice, concerned for Subaru,

Subaru forced a bitter smile. Perhaps a merchant with such good nature, where deceit and trickery were common, wasn't suited for this profession.

Questioning the benevolent Otto's suitability for his job, Subaru raised a hand, then turned his back on the dragon carriage and Otto.

"Just as you weigh your life and money on a precious scale, I too am weighing something as important as my life. That precious thing is ahead of me."

"Mr. Natsuki!"

"I won't think badly of you for turning back. In fact, it's the right choice to turn back when you know it's dangerous. Just knowing that beforehand is enough for me."

Ahead on this road, at Subaru's destination, lay a danger that even dragons feared.

He had to hurry. He had to rush there. The answer Subaru sought must be waiting there.

"—Mr. Natsuki!"

Leaving Otto behind, who called his name, concerned for him until the very end, Subaru pushed off strongly from the ground of the deep forest and ran.

He ran, and ran, and kept running, leaving behind the person who had genuinely worried about him, and continued towards his destination.

The exact distance to Roswaal's mansion was unknown.

However, the familiar clusters of trees were undoubtedly those of the mountains surrounding the mansion. A clear path suitable for a dragon carriage remained, and there was no doubt he could reach the mansion by following it.

Before that, the nearest village— Very close to the mansion, a village Subaru had visited many times—should greet him, but he felt no need to focus on it now.

He just wanted to reach the mansion as quickly as possible.

If he did, the dangling emotions tormenting Subaru now might find some resolution. Whether in the form he desired or not, he wished for a change now.

He thought of Emilia. He thought of Rem. He thought of Emilia. He thought of Ram. He thought of Emilia. He thought of Beatrice. He thought of Emilia. He thought of Roswaal. He thought of Emilia. He thought of Puck. He thought of Emilia. He thought of the villagers. He thought of Emilia. Emilia, Emilia, Emilia, Emilia, Emilia—

Subaru continued his dash, too many thoughts for it to be mindless.

His feet stopped, not because he had arrived at his destination—

What stopped Subaru's running feet was a sudden sense of unease that flickered through his mind.

Even Subaru, who had been focused on running and ignoring any anomalies around him, clearly perceived an abnormality—namely,

"It's too quiet, isn't it?"

Other than the sound of the wind passing by, all other sounds had vanished from the world.

Looking around, all he saw were standing trees; there was nothing actively producing sound. But Subaru, who had spent nearly a month in this land, knew.

The abnormality of this forest's overwhelming stillness, where not even the chirping of insects could be heard.

—Then, it suddenly appeared, slipping into the gap of Subaru's consciousness.

"Wh-What?!"

Crying out in surprise, Subaru instinctively recoiled.

His face pale, unable to accept the reality before him—there, quietly standing, was an unknown figure cloaked entirely in black.

However, his astonishment didn't end there.

"This… no, these people…!"

Subaru turned his head, forming words with trembling lips. As if following his gaze, black shadows sprouted up, one after another, in various parts of the forest path.

Their number quickly exceeded ten, surrounding the wary Subaru.

Even more abnormal was the fact that despite their inexplicable appearance, the same profound silence continued as before.

The black-clad figures watched Subaru silently, without even a hint of a breath.

Feeling instinctively that they were not friendly, Subaru could say nothing, merely waiting for their next action.

How long did this standoff last?

The tension was so extreme that Subaru felt the flow of time become terribly ambiguous.

His heart should have been pounding painfully, yet the silence was so violent that he couldn't even hear his own heartbeat—and that equilibrium shattered as abruptly as it began.

Then—

"…"

All at once, the black-clad figures bowed respectfully towards Subaru.

—Completely, Subaru's brain gave up trying to comprehend the scene.

The inexplicable figures appeared, showed inexplicable reverence, and then, leaving the inexplicably bewildered Subaru behind, vanished as inexplicably as they came.

Unable to utter a single word, with nothing to do but stare in astonishment at the scene before him, the black-clad figures who had raised their faces began to move, gliding smoothly.

They passed by the frozen Subaru without doing anything, then disappeared from the edge of his vision with the same silent gait as when they appeared.

They likely appeared the same way when they first emerged, slipping through a gap in his awareness. Even having realized that, everything else about their existence remained incomprehensible.

Therefore, after freezing for several minutes, Subaru understood that he had been completely left behind. He gave up on trying to understand them further and started running again.

Their presence had unpleasantly gnawed at Subaru's current anxiety.

To shake off the shivers and unease that ran up his spine, Subaru ran through the forest path again, single-mindedly, as if to forget everything.

Subaru gave up trying to understand the incomprehensible black-clad figures.

Because of that, he couldn't notice.

The fact that the direction the gliding black-clad figures vanished towards was the same direction where Otto should have been left behind.

Subaru never once reflected on that fact.

Chapter 32:
The Illness Called Despair

1

Anxiety— A gnawing anxiety that made him want to claw at his own throat—dominated his entire being.

His feet were moving forward, his heart toward the future, his will toward his goal, yet he felt an unknown terror creeping up on him from behind, inch by agonizing inch. The nausea was overwhelming. A constant ringing hammered in his ears. His heart pounded so violently it felt like it would burst from his chest, and the feet kicking the ground felt so fragile and unreliable that if he wasn't conscious of them, they'd seem to vanish from the tips of his toes.

How had it come to this?

Everything was supposed to go well. Everything was supposed to be headed in the right direction. It was just bad luck. Just bad timing. He could do it if he tried. If his objective was clear, he should be able to proceed without hesitation.

He knew what he had to do: save Emilia. If she was in dire straits, it was Subaru's role to rescue her. He'd always done so. He'd do it this time too. Then everything would be fine. She'd surely look at him in a new light. She'd think, "I really can't do without Subaru," and keep him by her side.

He didn't want to be abandoned. Didn't want to be deserted. Didn't want to be underestimated. Didn't want to be given up on.

With desperate thoughts, fervent will, and a resolve to die, Subaru repeated these words to himself.

He was out of breath. His lungs ached, his overworked body groaned, and he could feel various parts of his still-healing body screaming in protest. Yet, he couldn't stop.

He had to run, even a second faster, even a tiny bit faster. Otherwise, he'd be caught. Whatever was closing in from behind would devour him.

He hated that. That alone he hated. Right now, only that was terrifying.

He wanted to see Emilia, wanted her to smile at him. Why had Rem left him? Where had the warmth he'd touched last night vanished? Beatrice's sharp tongue and Ram's impertinence now felt incredibly nostalgic and precious. How much peace would Roswaal's eccentricity or Puck's tranquility bring to his heart?

He should have just stayed in that place forever. His time should have been buried in the days at that mansion, forever and ever.

Going to the capital was a mistake. All the time he spent in the capital was the cause of his current predicament.

Reinhard, Felt, Old Man Rom, Crusch, Ferris, Julius, Anastasia, Al, Priscilla, the faces of the Council of Wise Men, the Knights—one after another, they flashed through his mind, and all of them could only be objects of hatred for Subaru now.

Be cursed, suffer, taste the limits of pain and die.

If only they weren't there, Subaru wouldn't have lost himself. If he could return to the mansion, reconcile with Emilia, and go back to those exhilarating days, he'd gladly throw everything away.

There was nothing left, nothing remained. Everything had slipped through his grasp. So, now he'd go and pick it all up.

For that, for that, for that, he kept running. Through the pain that scorched his lungs, the regret that shattered his heart, the ringing in his ears that threatened to drown his consciousness—Subaru endured it all and ran.

Like a ceaseless repetition, feelings of resentment and regret passed through his mind. How long had he been running forward with such a negative mindset?

Suddenly, the dense trees around him began to thin, and signs of human activity cutting into nature emerged. The ground he kicked gradually felt more packed, and Subaru, looking up with a start, noticed the gently rising slope and involuntarily forced a smile.

He had vaguely come out onto a familiar path. There were no obvious landmarks, and to an observer, it might have seemed like the same forest path continued on. But to Subaru, who had desperately sought change, who had traveled this road many times, he knew it was the end of this endless green labyrinth.

He hadn’t arrived at the mansion. Just before it, before Subaru’s eyes, beyond the slope, was the village closest to the mansion.

Suddenly, faces of people he’d interacted with frequently and befriended during those days, not just the mansion residents, flooded his mind. The overly familiar children, the strangely unguarded villagers. The eccentric folk who didn’t laugh at his otherworldly knowledge as absurd but accepted it as it was.

It was so nostalgic, tears almost welled up. He didn’t even know why he’d forgotten. Besides the mansion, there were still places that would warmly welcome Subaru.

There, too, his worth as Subaru remained. He had saved that village. It might have disappeared without him. It was his achievement. As a result of his actions, there was nothing better than this. Remembering his refuge so close at hand, Subaru’s steps quickened even more.

Beyond the slope, rising above the screen of trees in the early morning sky, was the white smoke, a symbol of daily life. Cooking, perhaps, or boiling water. Maybe from a blacksmith or metalworking shop. In any case, it was proof that someone was there.

For now, that was enough. He just wanted someone who knew him, someone who would accept him, to call his name. To prove, with familiarity and friendship, that he belonged there.

He ran. He climbed. The end of the slope neared, and the source of the white smoke became visible. He reached the top. Sweat trickled down his forehead, suddenly getting into his eyes. Subaru impatiently wiped it away with a rough hand, and then, with a refreshed feeling, looked at the village.

—And then, Subaru was finally overtaken by the nightmare closing in from behind.

2

When Subaru rushed into the village entrance, the first thing he did was scan his surroundings for any sign of a villager— Then he noticed something off and furrowed his brow.

The moment he stopped, the accumulated strain immediately hit his cardiorespiratory system. He gasped for air, spitting out saliva and phlegm, hands on his knees, bent over, trying to recover. All the while, his gaze remained fixed upwards.

At first glance, nothing seemed amiss in the village. But he distinctly felt that something was wrong. The cool morning air in the early village was crisp, and the waking light poured into his groggy mind. Yet, he couldn't sense anyone's presence anywhere.

Subaru crossed his arms, pondered for a moment, then realized, "Ah." He'd been running all night, so he wasn't fully aware, but it was still early morning, when few villagers would have begun their daily activities. That's why he probably wasn't seeing any figures outside their homes, starting their chores.

Convinced by this explanation for the lack of people, he then headed towards the rising white smoke to ascertain its source. They say there's no smoke without fire, and where there's smoke, there must be human intervention. He figured he'd encounter someone there.

That plan also failed, and Subaru met no one. When he reached the edge of the village where the white smoke was rising, there was already no one there. Only the faint embers causing the smoke were weakly burning, and looking around, there was no sign of whoever had started it.

This time, a clear, not vague, anxiety enveloped Subaru.

His breathing quickened for reasons other than fatigue, and his heart began to pound faster again. Driven by these reactions, Subaru couldn't stand it any longer and roughly knocked on the door of a nearby house. No response. Driven by a dreadful premonition, he violently pushed open the unlocked door and burst inside. However it was empty too. No one.

"Are they all out doing field work?" he muttered a pointless joke, forcing a dry laugh as he stepped back outside. Without stopping, he went to the next house. This time, he skipped even knocking and just stormed inside. No screams, no scolding from residents about his trespassing—nothing. This place was also deserted.

He was beginning to lose his grasp on the situation. The unknown chill he felt eerily resembled what he'd experienced with the black-clad figures in the forest, and Subaru desperately searched for people, oblivious to everything else.

No matter how much he ran around, how much he called out until his throat was hoarse, how many places a mischievous child might hide he scoured, he couldn't find a single soul.

Silence had fallen here too, and Subaru was left behind by the world.

He slumped heavily to the ground, his body devoid of strength, and let out a long, deep sigh. No matter how many times he encountered it, he never got used to situations that made no sense. Of course, illogical developments that he did understand were equally bad. His current predicament, constantly assailed by both, couldn't even be described with words like "surrounded by enemies" or "facing numerous difficulties."

Suddenly, a sharp pain seemed to reverberate in his skull, and Subaru instinctively put a hand to his forehead. But the moment he touched it, an unpleasant sensation spread across his skin. He saw that his right hand, which he'd placed on the ground when he sat down, was completely covered in mud from the wet earth, and he must have unwittingly smeared a large amount of it onto his face.

The sensation of reddish-brown mud trickling down the bridge of his nose was the epitome of discomfort. Subaru used his clean left arm to wipe it away, then cast a resentful gaze at the ground that had soiled his right hand.

He'd been concerned about it while running around, but this morning, the ground was terribly muddy and difficult to run on. It was especially bad at the village entrance and around where the smoke rose; he'd almost lost his footing countless times while searching for villagers. He'd tried to choose less muddy ground to sit on, but judging by his right hand, his backside might be significantly worse off. As he became aware of it, he felt a gradual dampness in his lower abdomen, and another massive sigh escaped him.

"I must be going crazy", he thought. That was only natural. He'd been traveling under harsh conditions for over a day and night with almost no sleep. He'd only eaten some bland emergency rations Otto had shared, so it was hard to say he'd eaten enough. Plus, his brain had been working frantically, constantly worrying about Emilia's safety, whenever he was conscious. If he wasn't tired after all that, Subaru wouldn't be human; he'd be a super-high-performance AI.

A pointless joke came to mind, and Subaru again let out a dry laugh. He brushed off his backside, then reluctantly rubbed the dirt from his right hand onto a wall before turning his body to search the village again. This was his last desperate effort. He'd called out so earnestly, run around so much, and yet no one had shown their face. He probably truly was alone in the village. He couldn't grasp where everyone had gone or why, but if he accepted that much, he had no choice but to move on.

He circled through the village once more, finally returning to the edge where the white smoke still wafted. It was the only place where time seemed to flow, gently swaying in the wind, as if to soothe the loneliness of being left behind by time itself.

When he reached his destination, the smoldering white smoke was about to die down, its heat fading. The weak smoke was beaten by the breeze, wavering unreliably from side to side before dissipating.

Feeling a sense of melancholy at the sight of the disappearing smoke, Subaru scanned his surroundings with unexpecting eyes. Still, no one was in sight. His search had apparently been in vain.

He sighed for what felt like the hundredth time, then kicked the ground in frustration. His toes dug into the muddy earth, and the splashing mud delivered the final blow to the nearly vanished white smoke. A tiny, faint death rattle as the fire died tickled his eardrums, and the smoke, its source extinguished, vanished into the sky. When the last wisps of white smoke were carried away by the wind and completely gone, nothing remained.

Watching the disappearing smoke, Subaru slowly lowered his gaze. With the smoke gone, that spot was now like any other, a place where time stood still, cut off from the world. There was nothing left there to draw Subaru's attention.

Only the village elder, who had been generating the white smoke, was lying there.

Scratching his head, Subaru then shifted his awareness outward and looked around. Near the wall, a young man with a close-cropped haircut lay as if discarded. A weapon was plunged into his chest, where he lay on his back, and copious amounts of blood stained the earth red. In the first house he'd entered, he now noticed a middle-aged man and woman collapsed, piled on top of each other in the corner of the first room. The next house, and the one after that—the people Subaru had desperately searched for were nowhere to be found. All that remained were their remnants, stripped of dignity, their lives violated like discarded rags. The sheer number of these accumulating remains was enormous, and as Subaru witnessed them, he continued to search for a living soul. He just desperately wanted someone to call his name.

However, no matter how many times he circled the village, Subaru's wish was not granted.

There was nothing Subaru sought here. Understanding only that, and casting aside all other understanding, Subaru abandoned his actions in the village and headed towards the path leading to the mansion. He had taken an unnecessary detour. This was the result of not seeing his initial resolve through. He had wasted valuable time and still hadn't reached the peace he should have already found. It was useless. All of it was useless. There was only futility here. Including Subaru himself, there was nothing but futility.

Muttering this like a curse, Subaru stumbled forward. Then, on the path out of the village, he suddenly tripped over something and fell. The moment he realized his footing had slipped, it was already too late. There was nothing around to prevent his fall, and with all his momentum, he hit the ground hard, shoulder-first. Pain pierced his brain, and Subaru let out a groaning sound that erupted from deep in his throat. Tears welled up reflexively in the corners of his eyes as he glared at the cause of his fall.

—He met the empty, unseeing eyes of Petra.

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH—!!!"

3

—He couldn't escape.

Subaru continued to heave sobs from a throat raw from screaming, tears streaming down his face as he cradled Petra's lifeless body, which had been tossed aside on the ground.

Petra's body had long since grown cold, her limbs beginning to stiffen. An unconscious body should be much heavier than a conscious one, yet Petra's felt too light, even considering her small size. Surely, too much blood had flowed from the wound that pierced her chest.

Petra lay dead, her eyes wide, a look of surprise on her face. The absence of any trace of pain in her expression was the only mercy, signifying her instant death from a shattered heart. This child had no reason to endure pain, not with a death that left a hole in her chest.

Her once lovely features had lost all color, and her brownish curls were now stained with blood and mud, unrecognizable. He at least wanted to close her wide-open eyes, but her stiffening eyelids denied her even that mercy.

Subaru laid Petra's body on the ground, covering her wide eyes with his jacket as a small atonement, praying for a peaceful sleep to find her.

Then, fearful of looking at what he had been avoiding, he slowly raised his gaze— Finally accepting the reality that his familiar village had turned into a hell.

The smoldering white smoke had been the burning body of the village elder. The young man from the youth group must have fought with a sword. The familiar sword now pierced his chest, forming a pool of blood that submerged its owner. The man and woman lying on top of each other were a couple. The husband had embraced his wife as if to shield her, and they had both been run through by a weapon, dying together.

There were brutally murdered bodies. Bodies burned to death. Bodies torn apart. Bodies crushed. Bodies beaten to a pulp. Only bodies.

Death lay scattered everywhere in the village. A suffocating silence hung over the village littered with corpses, everything having ended long before Subaru arrived. Now, only Subaru bore witness to the conclusion of the tragedy that had unfolded here, reaching out his hands far too late, gasping for air, with no one to grasp them.

What had happened? Something had happened. Something immense had occurred.

That "something" had ravaged this village with merciless brutality, violated the dignity of every life, and massacred the innocent villagers. No one was breathing. Not a single survivor remained. Every hiding place had been meticulously overturned, as if in a relentless search, and he even found bodies that seemed to have been burned to death while hiding.

His mind wasn't working. Liquids flowed ceaselessly from every orifice of his face. Tears, snot, drool— They continued to defile a face that had lost the will to resist.

He understood the facts of what had happened. However he couldn't comprehend it. He didn't understand anything about what had happened. Yet, there was one thing he did understand.

That this tragedy couldn't possibly be confined to this place alone.

When this belated realization struck, an unprecedented chill swept through Subaru's entire body. It was the greatest terror he had experienced since falling into this world, even after repeatedly overcoming —or succumbing to— life-threatening situations.

His teeth chattered. His eyes, stinging from too many tears, flickered, and his unsteady vision looked up at the sky. A hateful blue sky, and beneath it, the mansion awaited him. The place he had so desperately wanted to return to, the place he had constantly sought, now seemed terrifyingly close.

He didn't know what had happened. Something had undoubtedly occurred. That "something" surely wouldn't have overlooked that place.

He was scared. Terrified. He didn't even want to consider the possibility. If he allowed that possibility to enter his mind, let alone speak it aloud, it felt like it would become reality, and that was terrifying.

So Subaru shook his head, trying to cast off that thought. However, once it had crossed his mind, it slipped past his attempts to shake it off, refusing to be forgotten, as if whispering in his ear. Therefore, Subaru gave up trying to shake it off and clung to another method.

If speaking that possibility meant endangering her… if it meant his own heart would break… then he should find another sacrifice.

"Rem… is she…? What happened to Rem…?"

The girl who should have arrived here before him. By uttering words of concern for her safety, Subaru tried to deceive his own heart with the lowest means possible.

“If Rem had made it back, she wouldn’t have overlooked the village being like this…”

It was an excuse. In a place where only he existed, he was making excuses that couldn’t even fool himself.

“Did something… happen…? No, surely no trouble on the way…?”

It was the lowest. The worst. He didn’t want to understand, but he did. He had deceived his heart, telling it that if the possibility of losing the girl he loved would break him, then he should prepare another sacrifice. He had betrayed their trust.

“That’s right… Rem… Rem… Rem is…”

Subaru swayed as he stood up, beginning to move with weak, listless steps. Leaving Petra’s body behind, he dragged himself slowly towards the village exit —towards the mansion— moving at a snail’s pace.

He didn’t know what awaited him ahead. He didn’t want to know, yet he knew he had to know, but he couldn’t muster the courage to run.

Dragging his feet, clinging to her name, the name of the girl who was his anchor, Subaru slowly, slowly ascended the slope, continuing his trek towards the mansion.

4

—Rem was dead in the garden.

Chapter 33:
White

The garden, which had witnessed countless identical dawns, had transformed into a hell it had never seen before.

The small yet vibrant flowers of the flowerbeds were blown away and incinerated, and the trees that had lined the perimeter of the mansion were snapped in half, lying as fallen timber.

Here and there, the gouged ground was the result of an immense mass exploding, and its raging force had scattered not only dirt but also numerous pieces of flesh.

Black-clad corpses lay sprawled, their bodies staining the green lawn with dark, murky blood, sinking into eternal darkness. Most of these scattered remains were unrecognizable, with heads blown off, torsos crushed, and bodies torn apart, presenting a horror that surpassed anything seen in the village.

This was surely proof of the immense rage with which the executor had transformed those pitiable victims into mere husks.

The blood-stained iron ball, the culprit responsible for this gruesome scene, was connected by a chain to a handle. It had crushed and annihilated many adversaries— Yet, it had been abandoned by its owner halfway through and now lay discarded in a corner of the garden.

The “Oni” who was thought to have fought valiantly with it in hand…

“—Rem.”

Subaru was greeted by Rem’s corpse, riddled with countless blades and with her left arm severed.

The sheer number of corpses in this garden, excluding hers, made it clear.

She had fought. Fought against the malice that had massacred the villagers and turned its fangs towards the mansion. She had fought bravely, striking down many, becoming covered in wounds, pierced by numerous blades, losing her weapon and the arm that wielded it, yet still resisting—and dying.

Her black-based apron dress was torn in many places, riddled with holes, and stained dark red by blood gushing from everywhere.

The brutal weapons impaled in her body were so numerous that one would instinctively avert their eyes from counting them. Shaped like crosses, they were a grotesque design with bladed tips, and more than enough to fill the fingers of both hands were driven into her small frame.

Adding to the repulsion, despite the number of weapons impaled in her, the scars remaining on Rem's fallen body were far, far more numerous.

Again, and again, and again.

They had plunged blades into her fallen body, pulled them out, tormented her while she still breathed, toyed with her life, desecrated her dignity, insulted her way of living, and then plunged them in, leaving indelible wounds.

What sin could she have possibly committed to deserve such a fate?

What were they thinking, those who killed her? What did they know about Rem? She was diligent, a hard worker, caring, sometimes a bit quick to jump to conclusions, she spoiled Subaru gently but could also be sharp, she was there for Subaru in his struggles, but she also left him behind, she adored her sister, disliked herself, but had just started to like herself a little—

She had just begun to walk her own path in life, after constantly telling herself her life was a substitute for someone else's.

Rem was motionless. Even when he shook her, her cold body was already stiff, and her soft blue hair, which he had stroked so many times, was matted with blood. She lay face down, and Subaru didn't have the courage to look at her face.

Whether she wore a face of sorrow, or a desperate expression of final resistance, or even a peaceful look of death, he lacked the courage to accept it.

Rem had died because of Subaru.

Subaru, who had knelt and was shaking the unmoving Rem, vaguely lifted his head. He suddenly noticed the unnaturalness of the spot where Rem had collapsed.

Her body, having fought against despair in the garden-turned-battlefield, was discarded away from the mansion, at the edge of the garden—far from the flowerbeds, in a space where people rarely ventured.

It wasn't particularly strange, he thought. She might have been outflanked by enemies during the fight, or driven into this corner while evading, and thus met her end here.

Subaru found the situation odd.

As he struggled to think with his unresponsive mind, he realized the true nature of that oddity.

Rem's posture, falling forward, arms outstretched— Since her left arm was missing from the shoulder, it seemed as if she had been fighting with her right arm extended, against something at her back, and had collapsed there because she died in the midst of it.

Looking up, behind the fallen Rem, was a wooden shed where gardening tools, flower seeds, and other items were stored.

This place, also temporarily used to store disused furnishings, was a small hut, despite being called a shed.

Standing up, Subaru crawled towards the entrance of the shed, and as he approached, he noticed it.

A sensation he had experienced many times before. A damp, sticky caress on his skin, a dryness that parched his mouth, and a gloomy, dense presence that dulled his thoughts— The scent of death.

Reaching the front of the entrance, keenly smelling the odor of death, Subaru lowered his gaze. On the ground, beneath the closed shed door, a large amount of blood flowed out, staining the young grass.

He gasped, swallowed his saliva, forced down the rising nausea, and reached for the door. His hand trembled not from caution, but from terror.

There was no sign of anyone inside. There was no need to worry about such a thing, and anyway, Subaru had no mental capacity to spare for such thoughts.

His fingertips brushed against the doorknob, repeatedly fumbling as if refusing to grasp it. Frustrated, tears welled up at the pathetic state of his own uncooperative body. Yet, as he repeated the action, his little finger finally caught the knob, and the door creaked open.

The moment it did, an immense stench of blood, so pervasive it seemed to fill his nostrils and still be insufficient, spread throughout the shed.

Instinctively, he covered his nose and mouth with his hand, suppressing the rising urge to vomit as Subaru peered inside. He abandoned any attempt to imagine what scene awaited him, choosing instead to simply imprint the reality onto his eyes.

—Inside the shed were the village children.

The moment he realized it, Subaru's mouth filled with rising stomach acid, and he stumbled out of the shed, nearly falling.

He collapsed face-first onto the lawn and vomited violently, uncontrollably. His stomach was empty, and only yellowish gastric fluid came out. Yet, he continued to retch. To retch without end. Even as his internal organs screamed in pain, his throat burned with stomach acid, and sourness ravaged his mouth, Subaru kept vomiting.

He was not allowed to vomit in there, in that shed.

No one, no one at all, had the right to defile those children any further.

“Rem… she…”

She had fought to protect the children, and had died for it.

The only child’s corpse Subaru had found in the village was that of a girl named Petra. He hadn’t searched through all the villagers’ bodies, so the possibility of survivors had been completely dismissed from his consideration.

The adults had fought in the village, sending only the children to flee to the lord’s mansion. Even there, despair had struck, resulting in the same unchanged outcome.

Mercilessly, cruelly, lives had been extinguished.

“Hah.”

Suddenly, a strangled cry escaped Subaru’s throat.

Nothing had happened. He had simply become terrified.

Subaru had returned to the village, to the mansion, seeking someone he knew. Yet not a single living soul remained, and only the silent dead reproached his return.

He felt as though they were speaking. Their empty, unseeing eyes.

He felt as though he was being blamed. Their gaping, blood-dripping lips.

He felt as though he was being hated. By the memories of the days he had spent with them, laughing together.

“No… no, no, no, no, no…”

—Why were you the one who survived?

—Why did we have to die?

“No… I’m not… I didn’t wish for… something like this…”

He had an ideal. A hopeful delusion.

When he heard Emilia was in danger, Subaru thought he had received a divine revelation. He believed he had been given an opportunity to make her, who had abandoned him, reconsider him.

As always before, Subaru believed he would save Emilia, be thanked by her, bridge the small gap of their misunderstanding, and walk hand in hand with her.

He had taken for granted that the predicaments, dangers, and tragedies that arose were merely stepping stones for that. He had underestimated that no matter what happened, he could recover.

If this vast number of dead was the price for that.

“It’s not my fault… I, I…”

Shaking his head, he stood up, turning his back on the shed and Rem’s corpse, and ran towards the mansion.

“Someone… someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone…!!”

He cut across the lawn, circled to the front of the mansion, and tried to force open the front door. The door remained stubbornly shut, as if deeming Subaru an outsider; no matter how many times he slammed his body against it or kicked it violently, it showed no sign of opening.

Frustrated, he gave the door a final kick and turned back towards the garden. He trampled and leaped over the fallen black-clad corpses, heading for his objective.

He picked it up, dragging the incredibly heavy object that made his arm ache, and made his way to the mansion’s garden-side terrace.

Then, taking a deep breath and tensing every muscle in his body,

"—Ah!"

The iron ball spun with the centrifugal force of the grasped chain, and the shattered glass burst into countless fragments, scattering widely inside the room.

He hastily squeezed through the forcibly created entry point, and Subaru slipped into the mansion. Fragments of the broken window barely cut his skin, leaving numerous lacerations on his limbs, but Subaru felt no sharp pain at the moment.

"Someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone, someone…"

Pleadingly, obsessively, Subaru's lips continued to seek the presence of others.

It was similar to when he had rushed into the village, but now what he sought had shifted to something different.

Namely,

"It's not my fault… It's not my fault… It's not my fault…"

He wanted someone living to affirm that.

Rather, the mere fact that someone survived would be that affirmation.

Subaru desperately sought out the living. He craved them. He had to find them.

Otherwise, Subaru couldn't affirm himself.

If he were to convince himself that this catastrophe was caused by his own thoughtless actions, his mind would never be able to maintain equilibrium.

To prevent his mind from shattering, and to avoid bearing the responsibility for the deaths of this vast number of people, he had to protect himself with plausible excuses.

Stumbling, his upper body swaying, Subaru ran through the mansion.

Unlike the garden, the interior showed no signs of disturbance or damage. The familiar sight of the mansion unfolded before him, and despite the abundance of death outside, this place, which had not lost its normalcy, seemed strangely terrifying.

He reached for the door of a nearby room, violently opened it to check inside, then clicked his tongue and slammed it shut with force. Compared to the enormous number of rooms, too few people actually used this mansion.

There were four mansion staff members whose presence Subaru had yet to confirm— Subaru continued to randomly open and close doors until he found one of them.

“Damn it… damn it! Why… why is no one… usually…”

He muttered in a choked, half-sobbing voice, violently raking his fingers through his hair.

Normally, Subaru could reach Beatrice’s library so easily he didn’t even need to aim. Yet now, when it mattered most, he couldn’t find it.

He yearned for that hateful, sarcastic tongue more than anything right now.

He could endure being treated like vermin, endure her exhaling her undisguised displeasure. If only she was alive, and could affirm him with her very existence.

“Come out… come out… please, please… save me… save me…!!”

No longer able to hold back his tears, Subaru ran through the mansion, his cheeks drenched. Only sobs and effeminate pleas for someone to pull him out of this despair escaped his lips.

He ran past the guest room where he had first awakened in the mansion, trampled the carpet that Beatrice's magic had turned into an endless loop, crawled through the dining room he had frequented, turned his back on the kitchen where he had struggled to make mayonnaise, left the large public bath, the most strenuous of his assigned cleaning duties, ascended to the floor where the servants' rooms were clustered, and began to overturn every nearby room, peering inside—

In the seventh room, he found Ram's corpse.

Subaru, having seen so much death in such a short time, instantly knew that Ram, lying on the bed, wasn't merely sleeping.

Her translucent white skin was pale, drained of blood, while her lips, in contrast, were more vividly crimson than usual. Unlike her sister, whose appearance was so similar, Ram's body, even with what seemed like death makeup, possessed a strangely delicate deathly beauty.

He used to joke that if she kept quiet, she could easily pass for a cute maid.

Lying on the bed, she surely hadn't simply breathed her last in her sleep. Someone had carried her to the bed and arranged her deathly appearance like this.

Most likely, it was Rem. What had she thought, facing her sister's death? How many tears had she shed while applying the death makeup? What feelings had she carried, leaving her sister behind alone?

Now that Rem herself had been so brutally murdered, the state of her heart would remain forever unknown.

He touched Ram's cold lips with his finger, and a faint trace of crimson makeup adhered to his fingertip. Rubbing his fingers together, he toyed with the color on his fingertip, and Subaru realized he had unconsciously slumped to the corner of the room.

Vaguely, he lifted his head. The sight of the deceased, so peaceful that if told she was merely sleeping, he might have believed it, lay before him.

Her silent presence, greeting Subaru's return, now condemned him as the living.

Just like the many hollow eyes that had looked up at Subaru in the village.

Lips that would never tremble again continued to pour out a silent curse upon Subaru.

"Hah!"

Subaru crawled, scrambling out of Ram's bed. He forced his trembling arms and uncooperative knees to stand up, then stumbled, leaning on the wall, trying to get away from that room as quickly as possible.

"Stop it… no… it's not me… I, I, I didn't do anything…!"

He covered his ears, shook his head, and spun words of self-defense with a hoarse throat, trying to distance himself from the whispers of resentment. But the voices, the despair, followed him relentlessly, mocking his escape.

He dragged his feet, running down the corridor. He reached the landing with the stairs. He placed his hands on the ground and climbed the stairs on all fours. Along the way, he stumbled and fell countless times, blood dripping from his bruised lips, yet he continued to challenge the upper floor corridor he had finally reached.

Only the dead greeted Subaru. Ram was dead, leaving three survivors. His feet naturally avoided Emilia's room, which was on the same floor. Ram had died in her own private room, assigned to servants, on the second floor. The image of Ram, dead in her own room, flickered in his mind, and tears that should have run dry welled up again. He thought he had expelled all the moisture from his body, that his sobs and gastric fluid should be empty, yet an endless sorrow, aching deep in his chest, urged Subaru to run.

If it weren't for that, he would have just sat down, buried his head in his hands, seen nothing, heard nothing, known nothing, sought nothing, given nothing, lost nothing, loved nothing, been loved by nothing, started nothing, ended nothing, changed nothing, and remained stagnant.

With whimpers and tears streaming down his crumpled face, a stumbling Subaru reached the top floor—before Roswaal's office. The heavy double doors remained silent, and their sturdy appearance suggested they could repel even the malice that had assailed the mansion.

Such hope vanished fleetingly.

In this place where everything had ended, there could be no safe place, no permissible place, nor should there be.

He pushed them open, and a chilling wind flowed into the corridor.

The coldness pricked his arms, and Subaru suddenly remembered that he was lightly dressed and vulnerable to it. He wondered where his jacket was, then remembered giving it to Petra in the village, and became exasperated at the useless thoughts he was having to protect himself.

He stepped into the room. It was undeniable that he felt a sense of resignation, half-expecting to find Roswaal leaning against the office desk, a corpse.

With Rem dead, and Ram's life extinguished, it was difficult to maintain hope for others. He no longer knew if he was running around the mansion searching for the living, or if he was dragging despair with him to trample on memories in order to lose hope.

However, the world, which had betrayed Subaru's hope three times—in the village, in the garden, and in the private room—did not offer a fourth betrayal this time.

No one was in the office.

He scanned the deserted room, crawling under the desk, beneath shelves where furnishings were placed, and behind the reception table, yet he couldn't find any trace.

A sense of relief, however slight, pervaded Subaru.

It was relief at not having to confirm Roswaal's fate—and self-pity for not having to add more reasons to be tormented by the dead.

"—?"

Suddenly, the sound of a window rattling in the wind made Subaru turn around.

He saw that the moment he opened the door connecting to the corridor, a peculiarly bone-ch-chilling wind flowed into the room, hitting the window and rustling the leaves of a potted plant in the corner.

A current of air was being generated.

Having found a passage through the door, it carried cold air, circulated around the room, and blew out. Experiencing this fact on his skin, Subaru searched for the source of the wind, relying on the sensation of the breeze and his intuition—

"Such a contraption…"

The moment he fiddled with a mechanism hidden beneath the ebony desk, the sound of gears meshing echoed. Then, with a low grinding sound like a millstone, the bookshelf installed in the back wall of the office slid nearly a meter sideways.

Before a stunned Subaru, bewildered by the unexpected mechanism, a gaping black hole appeared beyond the shifted bookshelf.

He cautiously approached, and gently peered inside, seeing a stone-built passage that continued for a few steps, beyond which a spiral staircase descended.

"A secret passage, huh?"

It was likely for emergencies, no doubt.

For Roswaal, with his status as a margrave and his role as a lord, securing an escape route as a means of self-defense was naturally something he should have prepared. Whether there would be an actual opportunity to use it was another matter, but it was easy to see that a person like him would have gleefully prepared it.

He never imagined that such an opportunity to use the passage would actually arise.

The cold wind flowing through the room seemed to be coming from that opening. In other words, the wind was blowing through the passage beyond that opening, originating from somewhere even deeper and colder.

Subaru gasped, took several deep breaths, and waited until his rapidly beating heart had calmed down even slightly before he plunged himself into the opening.

The wall, cool to the touch, glowed with a faint, pale blue light, revealing his surroundings for a few meters ahead. He relied on this light, feeling his way along the wall with his hand, and carefully descended the spiral stone staircase, taking care not to miss a step.

The anxiety of stepping into an utterly unknown place—where it led, how far it went—tightened his insides. Even stronger than those negative emotions, burning his back, was anger at the existence of this hidden passage.

The fact that wind was blowing meant there was an exit.

In other words, someone had used this secret passage to escape to the outside. There were three survivors he hadn't seen in the mansion—considering whose office this passage led from, it was clear who had abandoned the mansion's devastation and fled.

Had they abandoned all that, abandoned such devastation, abandoned the girl who adored him so much, and fled? Had they shamefully fled for their lives?

Subaru didn't notice his teeth chattering with anger and, strangely, with joy.

Anger towards the person who had abandoned justice, run to a despicable, contemptible vice.

Joy at finding someone onto whom he could project all the resentment, curses, contempt, insults, and blame of the silent dead.

With a crazed smile, emotions swirling, endless tears streaming, and blood dripping from his bitten lip, the madman descended.

How many steps had he descended? In terms of distance, it was considerable, and in terms of height, it was far beyond merely from the third floor to the ground. The secret passage seemed to lead to the mansion's basement, and at the end of the stairs, another straight passage appeared to continue. The wall material was still the same blue-glowing mineral, and Subaru, pressing his palm against it as it drew heat from his fingertips, advanced with a strained smile.

He was chasing the lingering traces of the living. That single point made Subaru happy now.

He was happy at the fact that whoever was ahead would be a being who had made an equally, if not more, terrible choice and deserved to be cursed.

He was truly happy to find someone living in a world of only the dead, to confirm whether he was truly alive right now, or if he had already died.

"Ugh, oh…"

Suddenly, his palm, which had been pressed against the wall, lost contact with it and swept through empty space. His body, instinctively swaying, moved forward, and what opened up was a small room, slightly larger in all four directions than the passage before it.

In the dimly lit space, several pillars stood scattered. He felt an irregularity in the unevenly spaced pillars, but if this escape route itself was something hastily constructed, then he couldn't help but nod at its shoddy design.

Accepting this, Subaru passed by the obstructing pillars. At this point, his limbs felt terribly heavy and sluggish. A weariness, as if his fingertips were filled with lead, weighed him down, and even his already vague thoughts began to slow.

He struggled even to take a single step forward, yet he pressed on. His mouth was parched and even painful, and the blood that had been flowing from his lips had stopped at some point.

His eyelids were heavy, his movements restricted as if a heavy weight pressed down on both shoulders, yet only his stubbornness, his resentment, his madness, relentlessly pushed Subaru forward.

Avoiding the scattered pillars in the wide room, Subaru passed through the small room and found an iron door at his destination, visible in the blue light. Passage, stairs, passage, small room, then a door—would what he sought be beyond this?

—What was he looking for, anyway?

His bloodless fingertips reached out faster than his sluggish thoughts could find an answer. Standing before the door, Subaru opened and closed his mouth, gasping for breath, abandoning his blank thoughts and grabbing the doorknob out of a sheer sense of mission.

—The moment he touched the doorknob, a searing pain shot through his right hand.

"—Agh!"

His throat screamed in agony, and Subaru flung his right hand away as if ripping it off. The burning pain spread across his entire palm that had touched the knob, and groaning in pain, Subaru looked down at the gruesome state of his injured right hand.

—His right index finger was gone.

"—Huh?"

Dazed, stunned, Subaru held up his right hand and spread it open, looking at it.

His discolored white hand, with the skin of his palm ripped to shreds—among the five outstretched fingers, only the index finger was missing from its base.

Slowly, his gaze shifted to the door in front of him. Stuck to the doorknob he had supposedly grasped was what used to be Subaru's right index finger.

—Must attach it quickly.

With only that fleeting thought, Subaru reached his right hand towards the doorknob to retrieve the detached finger. But moving his body was even harder than before; his will wouldn't transmit from his shoulder to his elbow, or from his elbow to his hand. His uncooperative arm frustrated him, and Subaru stepped forward to close the distance to the door—his right ankle shattered at the base, and he collapsed sideways.

"—Aaaargh!"

An inarticulate cry escaped his throat.

He didn't know if it was a scream of pain, or merely a meaningless torrent of life. But amidst his confusion, one thing he did understand.

The moment he opened his mouth to release the cry and inhaled, his insides were filled with something white, and became immobile.

His lungs spasmed, and his breathing became shallow and difficult. He took short, shallow breaths, desperately trying to send oxygen to his uninflated lungs, as Subaru's eyes darted frantically in the abnormal situation.

He didn't know what was happening. His entire body felt terribly vague.

His right ankle had shattered, a pain and sense of loss he had never experienced before. And the moment he collapsed, his right side, which bore the weight of his fallen body, also began to crumble and disintegrate in parts, just like his right ankle.

From his now trembling lips, he barely exhaled the breath that connected him to life. Subaru belatedly noticed that the expelled breath was visibly white.

His face, pressed against the ground, stuck to the floor; he knew if he moved his neck, his cheek would peel off. He felt no pain anymore. He moved violently, and a large chunk of his cheek and the outside of his right eye fell off. It didn't matter. Finally, in his supine vision, he saw the small room he had passed, now upside down.

Looking up from below, Subaru finally understood why the pillars scattered in the small room had been unevenly arranged: it wasn't due to shoddy, incomplete construction.

All of those standing in the small room were human icicles, people who had died frozen in ice.

They were victims who, like Subaru, had wandered into this white demise and become ice statues. That was the end that would soon befall Subaru as well.

His breathing had already stopped.

Limited oxygen circulated in his brain, but his brain was so sluggish that it was a wonder he maintained consciousness, his existence on the verge of fading in this arctic world.

He understood nothing.

He saw nothing.

From his toes, his body gradually turned into ice fragments, ceasing to be Natsuki Subaru.

If it came to that, perhaps it was no longer Natsuki Subaru who was here, but merely a madman wearing his skin.

The sensation in his lower body vanished. His arms were nowhere to be seen. Now, his right eye fell out. It was strange that his remaining left eye could still see. Where did life reside—in the brain, or in the heart?

The answer would not be found in this frozen world—

"—You are too late."

A lifeless murmur echoed in the world dominated by white,

—Natsuki Subaru shattered into countless fragments, disappearing from the world.

Chapter 34:
On the Verge of Madness

1

The awakening began with the darkness being torn apart, and the painful searing of my eyelids by sunlight.

"—Hey?"

The sensation of a body that should have vanished, warm blood flowing to my fingertips and toes, and the feeling of my lower half, which should have been shattered, firmly treading the ground. The phenomenon of all lost functions returning in the blink of an eye mercilessly slammed every bit of information into my freshly-activated brain, literally making my head spin.

Before I knew it, the world, once dominated by ringing in my ears, was now filled with the chaotic sounds of human activity. People bustled along the dusty thoroughfare, smoothly dodging my standing body as if I were in their way, casting annoyed glances that oddly resonated with my frayed nerves.

"Hey, I said, HEY! Are you listening?"

A rough voice, tinged with a click of the tongue, sounded close by, and I swayed my eyes in that direction. In front of me stood a stern-faced man with a vertical scar on his face, frowning. Taller than me by a head, he lightly traced the white scar with his finger and said,

"Give me a break, bro. Don't just stand there spacing out."

"Eh, ah?"

"What kind of dumb answer is that? Well, whatever. More importantly, what are you gonna do?"

The man sighed at my faint reply, then pressed for a conclusion. In his hand, nestled in his large palm, was a small red fruit— A terribly mismatched combination with the man's appearance, which somehow undermined the sense of reality. I stared at it blankly, remaining silent. There was a significant defect in my ability to comprehend the situation. However, the stern-faced man showed no inclination to consider this,

"Are you gonna stop messing around? I'm just asking you one thing: are you buying this appa or not? Answer me carefully."

He leaned forward, and the man's arm, extended across the counter, grabbed me by the collar. I was roughly pulled forward, and my body stumbled into a shelf. The shelf, laden with goods, swayed from the impact, and items threatened to fall. The man panicked,

"Wh-What are you doing! Stand up straight. You're letting your legs go limp…"

"Legs… legs?"

"You've got two perfectly good ones from your waist down, don't you? Did you hallucinate that your legs were gone?"

The man tapped his finger on his head, spinning it around, then pointed his finger towards my lower abdomen. Following his finger, I looked down to see my own legs, trembling slightly. They wobbled so unreliably that they couldn't support my body; I was only standing by leaning my upper body against the counter.

"Please, stop fooling around. I'm already getting thrown off by all these unbelievable things happening, things that usually don't."

The man shook his head with an exasperated look at my weak, limp posture leaning against the counter. Such an exchange on the thoroughfare would have a negative effect on the people watching from a distance. Despite his words, prompted by his concern for this, my body didn't react in the slightest.

I couldn't perceive reality as reality. A somewhat hazy sensation, an inexplicable feeling of alienation like a thin film, caused all information to pass through my brain and spill out.

What was I doing?

What had happened?

I felt like something had happened, but what was it?

What, what, what—?

My rambling thoughts lost their exit, endlessly circling the narrow labyrinth of my skull, constantly wearing down my mind. Perhaps if I had been completely worn down, or simply exhausted and vanished, I might have found peace. However, that sense of lonely disappearance was—

"—Subaru?"

Suddenly, a girl's voice vibrated my eardrums, pushing it aside in an instant.

"…"

Without a sound, slowly as if not startled but with wide, fixed eyes, I raised my face. Across the counter, behind the towering figure of the man, stood someone rearranging the items on the shelf that had been displaced by the collision.

She wore a black-based apron dress with a white apron and a white brim. Her small, delicate body moved busily, and noticing my gaze, she turned, a blank expression on her lovely face. Her blue hair, shoulder-length, swayed with her movement, further emphasizing her cool impression.

Tears welled up.

"—Hey?"

"Subaru?"

A sob escaped, and my vision blurred. Frightened that the girl who should have been clearly reflected there was becoming indistinct, I desperately, roughly rubbed my eyes. Yet, the girl moved further away, and the murmuring grew louder.

Before I knew it, my body had lost the support of the counter and I had fallen onto the street. No strength or will reached my feet, and I lay prone on the thoroughfare, shedding tears and gasping for breath. No, it wasn't breathing.

"Fufufu… Hihhi, hahaha. Hehi, hihahaha…"

It was laughter.

The murmuring expanded, and I could feel the accelerating increase in the number of conscious gazes directed at me. Someone was looking at me. Recognizing me. I wasn't alone. I wasn't isolated. Just knowing that affirmed my current state, sprawled out like a rag.

"What's wrong, Subaru? Are you alright? Pull yourself together…"

Impatient to walk around, the girl climbed over the counter and knelt beside me. I felt her embrace my fallen body and pull me up,

"Eh?"

I instinctively pulled her vulnerable approaching body into a tight hug. The girl, astonished, accepted the embrace. Her momentary breath was close, its warmth feeling incredibly comforting, and I buried my nose into her shoulder, hugging her even tighter.

"Wh-… eh, Subaru? Um…"

She was saying something. Every single word, every syllable, every single character, the fact that they were indeed being spun from her lips, brought good tidings every second. Firmly, I didn't release my embracing arms. The girl, who faintly stirred, quietly accepted the embrace and didn't try to break free.

Feeling her warm body, the pulse of life, the presence of another being closer than ever before,

"Hih… uh-hih, hihihihi."

Natsuki Subaru —the madman— simply continued to laugh quietly.

“Honestly, there’s nothing more I can do,” Ferris declared, sitting in a leather chair, a finger pressed to his cheek.

The beautiful person, his cat ears twitching and chestnut hair swaying, looked at Subaru lying on the bed, then turned a pitying gaze to the girl standing beside it.

“The only wounds Ferris can heal are physical ones, inside or out. The heart… that’s beyond my power.”

“…No, thank you for your efforts,” Rem said, bowing her head and thanking Ferris, who was apologizing for his lack of ability. However, her voice, lacking intonation, was devoid of emotion. Unlike her usual conscious control, this was due to the immense turmoil within her.

Ferris averted his eyes from Rem as if pained by what he saw. Rem, still with her head bowed, didn’t notice his reaction and gently tilted her head, focusing on the person on the bed.

Lying on the bed, being cared for by the two, was a black-haired boy—Subaru.

Despite being the center of attention, his body showed no reaction to those focusing on him.

He wasn’t asleep. His eyes were wide open, intently staring at the ceiling directly above. Occasionally, he would force a pained smile as if remembering something, then suddenly burst into tears. He had been in an unstable state.

Rem didn’t know the cause.

Until this morning, no, even after noon when they were strolling through the lower district of the royal capital, he had been himself. Although there was some strain in his demeanor, he had tried his best to act normal, and Rem, by treating him normally in return, had built up their routine.

Yet, his heart shattered so suddenly.

There seemed to be no trigger.

The moment Subaru's condition drastically changed, Rem, regrettably, wasn't right next to him. Still, while helping at the shop, she must have overheard his conversation with the owner.

He had been discussing buying appa's to take back to Crusch's mansion. The owner, not imagining it was for a grand noble's estate, had been readily agreeing to the deal. It was during that negotiation that Subaru's heart suddenly broke.

Subaru collapsed in the bustling merchant street, tears streaming down his face—joyful and sorrowful at once—and letting out distorted, convulsive laughter that sounded like his lungs were seizing.

They left the scene, and, knowing they were imposing, carried him to Crusch's mansion, where Ferris was reluctantly asked to examine him for possible magical interference.

The results were not good. If the problem was beyond Ferris's reach, it meant it was a difficult matter that no great magician in the entire royal capital could heal.

Magic had nothing to do with his current state. His mind had simply lost its balance without warning.

"I hate to say this, but what are you going to do?"

"Until we know the cause, there's nothing we can do… Rem apologizes for troubling you, Sir Felix."

"No, that's fine. In fact, now that he's not causing a fuss, it's actually a convenient state for my treatment, wouldn't you say?"

Looking down at Subaru, who was mostly unresponsive and bedridden, Ferris continued, "Still…"

"I'm wondering if I should continue the treatment."

"…What do you mean?"

Rem finally looked at Ferris, lifting her head and averting her gaze from Subaru's expressionless face. Receiving her gaze, Ferris prefaced, “Please don’t get angry, but…”

“Treating Subaru-kyun’s gate is meant to ensure he can lead a normal life in the future, right?”

“Yes.”

“However he can’t lead a normal life anymore, so isn’t it pointless to only heal his body?”

“—! Subaru is!”

“Are you saying it’s not over? Looking at this state? Seriously? It’s true a lot has happened, but I don’t think someone whose heart breaks this easily from something like that will ever truly recover.”

Ferris maintained his skeptical attitude toward the agitated Rem. His gaze, looking down at Subaru, clearly held a discernible contempt.

For someone given the title of ‘Blue’ and known as Lugunica’s foremost water magic user, this attitude seemed incredibly cruel.

To Rem, who was silenced by Ferris’s demeanor, Ferris gave a wry smile and shook his head, saying, “Please don’t misunderstand…”

“It’s not that Ferris hates Subaru-kyun or particularly dislikes him, that’s why I’m saying this.”

“But…”

“It’s not about Subaru-kyun personally, okay? Ferris just purely dislikes people who lack the ‘will to live’.”

Ferris interrupted Rem, who was about to retort with pouted lips, and pointed at Subaru.

“All Ferris can do with magic is heal wounds. Even so, Ferris is quite busy using these hands for various people. Everyone is desperate to live, and it’s fine to help them, isn’t it? I don’t dislike being thanked, and I can owe important people favors to help Lady Crusch, too, right?”

"…"

"I hate using my power to heal the bodies of people who don't want to live. Even if their bodies are healed, such people will just waste their lives away afterward, right? Then just let it end. No, it is already over."

With a sharp declaration, Ferris turned his face away.

Behind his stubborn demeanor, Rem truly felt the sincerity toward the countless lives Ferris must have seen. Though his words were cloaked in frivolousness, it was his established view on life and death, learned from the life and death he had witnessed until then.

Against someone with such firm convictions, it was meaningless for an outsider like herself to argue based solely on emotion.

Rem merely looked at Subaru, frustrated, as if crushed by Ferris's words.

Subaru, unaware that he was the center of conversation, was now faintly emitting fragmented laughter that left scratches on the listener's heart.

Seeing him with his heart shattered, Rem felt an unbearable emotion reverberate within her chest. She somehow managed to suppress it without showing it.

To do so would dishonor Subaru, or tarnish Roswaal's authority, and most importantly, it would betray the feelings Rem herself harbored.

"—Ferris's opinion is a bit too harsh."

The voice suddenly resonated clearly in the awkwardly silent room.

Rem, whose consciousness had been deep in thought and hadn't noticed the person's arrival, snapped her head up. In contrast, Ferris, who had noticed the visitor after their knock, maintained a cool demeanor. No, the eyes he turned towards the visitor were those of a quietly fervent devotee.

"Lady Crusch."

"I would not go so far as to say that weakness is a sin. However, I do agree that it is a sin to embrace weakness and to remain complacent without correcting it."

Crusch entered, holding out a palm to the hastily standing Rem, and with her long green hair swaying, moved to the side of the bed. Then, looking down at Subaru's face, which was still twisted in a ghastly smile, she said,

"Indeed. This is certainly a grave situation. Do you know the cause?"

To Crusch's question, Ferris shrugged and raised his hands in surrender, saying, "No."

"Rem said he suddenly collapsed, and I've examined every inch of his body, but there's no sign of strange magical interference."

"Is there a possibility of influence from Northern… A curse arts user? It's unlikely, but there's a chance of interference from Gusteko towards those involved in the Royal Selection. Perhaps it's a demonstration from another faction."

"Both are unlikely. It's too bad a time to make a move, and what gain would there be in targeting Subaru-kyun anyway? His disgrace is well-known among those involved, and besides, there's no magical interference, including curse arts, to be found."

Breaking his words, Ferris tilted his head, and gently leaned next to Crusch, who had her arms crossed, saying,

"Or, Lady Crusch, do you doubt Ferris's abilities?"

"Nonsense. I could never doubt your abilities, your character, or your loyalty. Even if you were to stab me with a dagger from the front, that thought would never change."

"Oh, Lady Crusch, what an unbelievably fatal charm… I'm completely weak at the knees."

Putting aside the writhing Ferris, Crusch looked at Rem again. Rem, who had silently watched the exchange between master and servant, straightened her posture and met Crusch's sharp gaze.

"Ferris says this. If Ferris cannot help, then there is no one in this household who can treat Natsuki Subaru. My apologies for our inadequacy."

"—No, Rem is rather speechless at your generous treatment."

Rem bowed politely in response to her master's apology.

In truth, she had received kindness that no amount of words or gratitude could ever repay.

She didn't believe Ferris had held back, nor that Crusch had made an arbitrary judgment regarding Emilia's associate, who was a political rival.

Rem herself had some involvement with water magic. She understood Ferris's high skill and also that it was meaningless in the face of the anomaly that had befallen Subaru.

As for Crusch's character, though their encounter had been only a few days, there was no doubt about her sincere and upright nature. She possessed the ability and sense of responsibility to inherit a ducal house at such a young age, and as a woman, as well as the qualities of a great noble. This was evident from the many opportunities they had to speak and converse.

In short, there was no fault in them whatsoever.

This current situation was an unavoidable one that had simply come to be.

"—Witch."

Rem alone clearly understood that the increasingly strong stench surrounding Subaru was the cause.

The witch's presence surrounding Subaru —the Miasma— had grown even thicker.

Whether it was the direct cause of Subaru's collapse was unknown, but it was a fact that the presence had swelled just before he fell.

Only Rem could detect that stench; no one else could.

Therefore, she couldn't blame them for concluding there was nothing to be done. It wasn't in her nature to blame others, especially when she herself couldn't find a fundamental solution.

Being able to sense the witch's miasma was one of the very few ways Rem surpassed her older sister.

She believed she'd had a relatively keen sense of smell even before Ram lost her horn. She was confident in discerning the mana in the air, and her ability to track prey scents in the mountains rivaled her sister's.

However, the ability to sniff out the witch's presence was a new acquisition, gained after the night her entire family was slaughtered.

The cause was unknown. Rem herself thought it might be a result of her body mutating in an extreme state, a way for her to never forget that night.

Rem had never told anyone about this peculiar sense of smell. She just became more cautious than usual around anyone who carried that stench.

Physiological revulsion, a prejudice, would kick in.

However, such biased thoughts were eventually dispelled by the boy who, until then, had exuded the witch's miasma most strongly.

Even so.

Even so.

She —an Oni— was well aware that this Miasma brought nothing good.

4

“Thank you for everything. On behalf of my master, Rem expresses our gratitude for your kindness up to this day.”

Rem bowed deeply, bending at the waist.

Standing before her were Crusch and Ferris. The three of them met in the entrance hall of Crusch’s mansion— A farewell.

“I am sorry I could not be of more help. It would be presumptuous to accept payment for this.”

“No, it is our decision to terminate the arrangement midway. Lady Crusch has shown us the utmost consideration. Payment is certainly due.”

Rem replied firmly, looking up at Crusch, who had lowered her gaze slightly.

In response, Crusch apologized once more, saying “I’m sorry,” but said nothing further. She likely understood that any more conversation would be purely formal.

“It feels a little incomplete, but I guess it can’t be helped. Take care, Rem. As for Subaru-kyun… should I say ‘take care of himself’?”

So, Ferris spoke next on behalf of his master.

He closed one eye, pointing a finger, looking towards Subaru, who was behind Rem—leaning against the door in a loose, somewhat slovenly posture.

Subaru was still slow to react, and it was questionable if he was even aware of them, but he would follow if led by the hand, and he could now stand without collapsing. However, his sudden bursts of laughter and tears remained unmanageable.

“Regarding the rudeness of our companion, no amount of apologies from us would suffice. Rem sincerely thank you for your generous treatment."

"He is someone with whom I had a contract and exchanged no small number of words. There was no way I could treat him dismissively. I imagine things will be difficult for you from now on, though."

"That is… what Rem have prepared herself for."

With Subaru still swaying and faintly smiling beside her, Rem gripped the hem of her apron tightly, expressing her resolve.

Rem hadn't forgotten the words he'd once said to her. She replayed that scene over and over, hundreds of times, in her mind.

Therefore, she had to return to him the same as he had given her.

"It is regrettable that I cannot accede to your request," Crusch said, her eyes closed, to Rem, who was deep in thought. Though the words lacked a subject, Rem understood they referred to the private conversation between herself and Crusch. Rem lowered her chin, then shook her head at Crusch, who had cast her eyes down.

"It is entirely due to Rem's own inadequacy. —Though the result is regrettable, Rem wishes Lady Crusch all the best in your future endeavors."

"Tell Emilia as well. Let us both fight a battle we can be proud of in our souls."

That exchange alone made Rem realize her role in this place was over. Subaru's treatment was halted halfway, as were Roswaal's instructions.

Neither could continue with Subaru in this state. She couldn't keep an unprotected Subaru in this potentially hostile territory indefinitely.

"It's fine to go back to the mansion, but do you have a plan?"

"At the very least, if Rem can meet Lady Emilia…" Rem replied to Ferris's question, suppressing her regret.

No matter how many times she spoke to him, no matter how many times she touched him, no matter how diligently she cared for him, Subaru never gave Rem the reactions typical of him.

Yet, even in such a state, Subaru occasionally uttered meaningful words.

Those were:

“Name…”

“Hm?”

“Sometimes, he says names. Rem’s name, Sister’s. And…”

While she was happy her name was among them, it was also sad that he never responded to her efforts.

However, the most frequent name among those whispered was—

“If I can meet Lady Emilia, perhaps something will change.”

“Didn’t you have a harsh parting? It’s only been about three days, so maybe some time apart… No, that’s impossible for you, isn’t it?”

“Rem know it’s not a commendable approach. This is no longer a situation Rem can handle with my own judgment. Rem needs to return to seek instructions.”

Rem disguised her true feelings by making statements that showed concern for her master.

Using that as a justification, she understood what her heart truly desired.

It frustrated her that her own presence wasn’t enough for that.

“—Wilhelm has arrived.”

Suddenly, Crusch looked up, narrowing her eyes.

Following her gaze, Rem turned to look behind her—beyond the mansion’s outer edge, past the iron gate, a dragon carriage had arrived, and she saw a familiar old gentleman sitting on the driver's seat.

"That's the last long-distance dragon carriage we have. We almost sent it out for another purpose."

"You were lucky. If you push straight through on the Lifaus Highway, you'll probably reach the mansion by the time the day changes."

Looking at the arrived dragon carriage, Rem squinted her eyes at the increasing brightness of the rising sun.

It was nearly noon, and if they drove the carriage at full speed now, they would indeed reach the mansion in about half a day. With arrival so close, she might even be able to convey her intentions to her sister through empathy.

"I wish you well."

"Good luck~"

Seeing them off, Rem bowed deeply one last time, then took Subaru's hand and left the Karsten mansion.

At the gate, she took the reins from Wilhelm, exchanged a few words, and then climbed onto the driver's seat.

"Subaru, over here."

"…Huh?"

She pulled his arm, seating Subaru next to her on the driver's seat. It felt quite cramped with both of them, but she held him close, wrapping one arm around his waist and firmly gripping the reins with the other.

They would have to keep driving like this for a long, long time.

She worried about the burden on Subaru, and she would have to protect him even after they reached the mansion. Roswaal and the others surely wouldn't welcome Subaru.

She alone had to be an ally to Subaru, who might lose all his friends.

If not, he—if not, he—

Rem, her resolve firmly set, pulled the reins, and the ground dragon kicked off, starting to run.

Slowly, the carriage wheels began to turn faster.

It was as if this motion, through the reins, conveyed to her the state of her own heart at that moment.

Chapter 35:
The Way Back

1

Swaying, swaying, swaying, swaying, swaying.

Shaking, shaking. My legs are shaking.

The madman laughed to himself, a soft chuckle, as he vaguely and leisurely sank into the creaking seat, surrendering to the sensation of the dragon-drawn carriage.

There's nothing particularly funny, but oddly enough, laughing brings a sense of peace.

If I don't, a terribly painful feeling bubbles up in my chest, and if too much of it accumulates, my mind feels like it will explode into chaos.

To prevent that, I chuckle even when there's nothing amusing. I search for something funny, chuckling, chuckling.

Then, if the laughter suddenly stops, a sharp pang of loneliness unexpectedly takes hold.

When that happens, I can't hold it back anymore, and tears stream down my face. Even if I try to stop them, they won't, and trying only makes it hard to breathe. So, to avoid that suffocating feeling, I let the tears flow freely, soaking my face and clothes.

So, to keep my chest from hurting and my heart from aching, I repeat this cycle of laughing and crying. Always, from somewhere, Blue appears, stroking my head or wiping my wet cheeks with a cloth.

That's why I liked Blue. When Blue was by my side, my heart felt warm. When Blue left, I instantly felt uneasy, as if my surroundings had grown dark. My chest would ache, just like when I felt like crying, and even if I tried to laugh, I couldn't; only tears would stream down, stream down.

I guess the sad things happened when I wasn't with Blue. When Blue leaves, I remember that sadness, and that's why I cry. So, I always wanted Blue to be by my side. Blue, as if understanding this, stays with me as much as possible.

That's why I liked Blue.

Green isn't so bad either.

Green didn't gently stroke my head like Blue, nor did Green come to see me repeatedly like Blue, but Green was both hard and soft. Hard and soft, and I didn't dislike it.

It was Blue that Green came to see, and I think Green came because Blue was there. Green and Blue talked about various things, but I was busy chuckling and weeping.

When they finished talking and were leaving, Green stared intently at me. Those eyes were very hard yet soft, and I didn't dislike them.

Brown and White are scary. I don't like them. Scary. They make me tear up.

Brown came to see me after Blue, but when Brown touches me, I feel sick, and tears stream down, so I don't like Brown. Those angry-looking eyes are scary. Even with a soft face, it's scary. Blue strokes me so I won't cry, but I still tear up.

White is even scarier. White doesn't touch me. I've only seen White once. Yet, it's scary. Those eyes that stared intently, as if seeing nothing at all, are scary. I don't like White. I don't like White.

Dreams, I dream.

Swaying, swaying, swaying, swaying.

Swaying and shaking my legs, leaning on a shoulder, feeling the wind, vaguely and leisurely, the madman dreams.

In the dream, a silver color appears, swaying, swaying.

I don’t understand the silver color.

My chest feels warm and cozy. My chest aches and tingles. My chest feels tight and constricted. My heart pounds and throbs.

I don’t know if I’m happy, sad, joyful, or in pain.

I feel like I might like it, like Blue, or it might be bitter, like Brown, or soft, like Green, or scary, like White.

I don’t understand the silver color. But thinking about the silver color, I don’t dislike it.

Swaying, swaying, drifting, drifting.

Wavering, drifting. Gently swaying.

2

Rem looked sidelong at Subaru, who was dozing off, his head resting on her shoulder as he drifted to sleep, and a faint smile touched her lips.

She was happy with the fact that he was so unguarded, so defenseless, completely entrusting himself to her like this.

Rem knew that this wasn’t the usual Subaru, that his current state wasn’t what he truly intended, but even so, to be trusted so completely was the greatest joy.

“Subaru, come closer.”

“…Mmm, ugh.”

Though his sleeping breath was already close, Rem pulled Subaru even closer, pressing their bodies together. The driver’s seat was meant for one person, so sitting together was quite a squeeze. Normally, the smaller Rem should be leaning on Subaru, but doing so now would put them both in a precarious position.

After getting into the dragon carriage, Rem settled Subaru half-lying on her lap. She embraced his waist with the hand not holding the reins, then readjusted her posture and pulled on the reins again.

She tried to maintain a position that would put the least strain on Subaru. As a result, Rem's posture, giving up most of the driver's seat space, was quite uncomfortable. She would spend nearly half a day in that position, so for an ordinary person, it wouldn't be surprising if their strength gave out halfway through.

In that regard, Rem was far superior to an ordinary person in terms of physical strength. Her mental endurance, too, was top-notch when it came to quietly enduring. More than anything, the situation where her efforts would benefit Subaru was the greatest source of motivation for Rem.

Rem hadn't been told the details of what transpired between Subaru and Emilia, or what kind of rift had formed between them.

That day, when the Royal Selection was announced at the capital, Rem, who had, on Roswaal's orders, allowed Subaru to enter the castle, was greatly shocked by Emilia's haggard appearance upon her return.

She seemed utterly exhausted. She roughly explained what had happened at the castle to Rem, and then told her to go fetch Subaru, who had been left at the castle, and proceed to Crusch's mansion.

There was no reprimand for letting Subaru go.

Rem didn't think Emilia would have simply forgotten that part, so she assumed there was some reason for it and didn't bring up the topic herself.

She simply and quietly obeyed Emilia's command, took Subaru, and entered the Karsten estate. She had spoken briefly with Roswaal before that, but that conversation was a secret from both Emilia and Subaru. And at this point, it was a conversation that no longer held any meaning.

At any rate, once they were at the Karsten estate, Subaru's treatment began in earnest.

Rem was welcomed as a guest at the mansion and, unlike Subaru, wasn't in need of treatment, so she was given a great deal of freedom in her actions. Most of that free time, Rem spent by Subaru's side.

Partly, it was because she wanted to unconditionally affirm his admirable effort to maintain his usual demeanor despite being utterly exhausted, but frankly, it was for more personal reasons.

At Roswaal's mansion, Rem didn't get to spend much time with Subaru.

He was primarily assisting Ram with household chores, while she handled most of the mansion's upkeep. Their respective duties and responsibilities were different. Consequently, the time she spent with him was inevitably less compared to her sister, and this, to no small extent, planted dissatisfaction and anxiety within her.

Aware of this, she felt terribly unseemly and couldn't bring herself to voice it.

"Subaru, it's alright."

Subaru squirmed, as if uncomfortable in his sleep. Rem gently readjusted her hold on him and spoke softly, still gripping the reins.

Subaru, eyes closed and deeply asleep, didn't respond to her voice. Yet, she felt that the lines around his eyes had relaxed just a bit. Rem refocused her attention and looked ahead.

She had intended to reach the mansion by morning, but it might be better to camp out once somewhere. It was just past noon when they left Crusch's mansion, and now, about halfway to their destination, the moon had begun to cloud over.

Their pace was considerably slower than planned. This was a result of Rem's efforts to avoid burdening Subaru, causing the ground dragon to run much slower than its usual speed.

In another two or three hours, they would have covered half a day's travel as planned, but at this pace, would they only reach the mansion by morning?

"If that happens, it'll be difficult to communicate with Sister too."

Empathy requires a certain distance and for both parties to be awake.

Especially when Rem initiates contact with Ram, the conditions for both mental energy and distance are quite strict. At least from their current distance, it would be impossible to report the situation to Ram, and by the time they were close enough, it would be deep into the night.

Looks like we'll have to camp out after all.

Having made that decision, Rem manipulated the reins, signaling the ground dragon to stop.

The ground dragon, which had been at speed, obeyed, slowing its pace to a gentle halt. It let out a rough snort and looked up at her.

Rem carefully placed Subaru in the driver's seat, then agilely leaped down, landing on the road and surveying her surroundings.

The sun had already set, and the Lifaus Highway was lit only by the moonlight and the light from the lagmite ore lamps affixed to the dragon carriage Rem had been driving.

Fortunately, tonight's sky had few clouds, so the moonlight provided ample visibility. Assuming that the likelihood of bandit attacks was low under such conditions, Rem quickly climbed into the carriage's compartment, stacked blankets neatly, and created a makeshift sleeping area. Then,

"Subaru, excuse Rem."

She scooped up the sleeping Subaru in a princess carry and tucked him into the makeshift bed.

After laying down Subaru, who was surely tired from sitting and running all day, Rem lightly stretched to check her own condition. Then, she stepped out of the carriage to stand guard for the night.

She wasn't overly concerned about bandits, but it wasn't uncommon for witchbeasts or wild dogs to attack on the road at night, taking advantage of the sparse dragon carriage traffic.

Rem, who had encountered such cases several times in the past, understood that these opponents were far more dangerous than humans. Nevertheless,

"Since you're with Rem tonight, Rem doesn't think we have much to worry about."

Extending a hand, Rem stroked the ground dragon's face as it lowered its snout towards her.

They had been connected for half a day, albeit through the reins. She had grown quite fond of it, and it had listened well to Rem, despite it being their first meeting. The proper training it had received spoke volumes; it was truly commendable for a ducal house's ground dragon.

However, the ground dragon's understanding wasn't entirely unrelated to the fact that Rem was an 'Oni,' a biologically superior being.

Among dragon species, ground dragons are remarkably friendly with humans. A considerable number are integrated into daily life, and their docile nature makes them highly valued.

With flying dragons and water dragons, special training or raising them from infancy is essential, so their numbers are limited compared to ground dragons.

Nevertheless, while ground dragons are the most human-friendly of the dragon species, their quality as a race naturally sets them apart from other beasts. There are almost no foolish wild animals that would purely attack a ground dragon, and ground dragons themselves have a keen sense for danger.

Unless it's a large pack of witchbeasts or a group of bandits, they won't attack a ground dragon, and such groups are almost always detected by the ground dragon beforehand.

Therefore, there isn't much to worry about when camping with a ground dragon.

"Please rest well."

The ground dragon and herself were more than enough personnel for night watch.

Rem glanced up at the sleeping quarters, murmured those words, then patted the ground dragon, which nudged its nose against her, and made it sit down. Leaning against the ground dragon's hard skin, she pulled out a blanket to cover herself and sharpened her senses for the watch.

If they set off at dawn, when the sun began to rise, they should be able to reach the mansion by tomorrow morning.

She would have to meekly accept the reprimand for bringing Subaru back and for not achieving their objective. More than anything, she was the only one who could protect Subaru in his current state.

“If there’s someone who can bring Subaru back to normal…”

It could only be Emilia. That fact frustrated Rem.

For Rem, Emilia was a very difficult person to interact with.

Roswaal had welcomed her as a guest, and now she was treated as someone superior to Rem, a royal candidate. In fact, Rem and Ram had been instructed to treat her as such.

Rem had no particular objection to treating Emilia more highly than her master, Roswaal. Ram, who was devoted to Roswaal, seemed displeased, but Rem’s emotional attachment in that regard wasn’t as strong as her sister’s. Of course, her sister wasn’t foolish enough to show it in her face or words, so Ram’s feelings were merely something Rem sensed.

It was such a strong dissatisfaction that it resonated deeply with her empathy, something she usually didn’t consciously acknowledge.

The reason Rem’s feelings towards Emilia were complex was due to Emilia’s origins, unrelated to Roswaal.

—The fact that Emilia was a half-elf. In other words, a half-demon.

Intellectually, Rem understood that Emilia herself was blameless. However, it was also true that there was a part of her emotions that couldn’t fully accept it.

It wasn’t Emilia’s fault. The existence of half-demons had had too great an impact on Rem’s life to be trivialized.

It was difficult to choose between treating her with kindness or with malice.

As a result, Rem had firmly decided that her approach to Emilia would simply be to never deviate from the roles of ‘guest and servant’.

Suppressing her emotions, Rem responded to Emilia’s instructions like a machine. Perhaps Emilia also sensed Rem's attitude, as she never made any unnecessary fuss.

Days passed with such a relationship, and Rem had thought it would remain unchanged regardless of the Royal Selection's outcome. Due to her duties, she had little chance of being present at the end of the Royal Selection. Considering the position she had imposed on herself, she had also admonished herself that strong feelings, whether good or bad, towards Emilia were superfluous.

Yet now, Rem's feelings towards Emilia had completely changed from before.

That fact greatly frayed Rem's heart.

For Rem, who wasn't so childish as to deny her own feelings, Emilia's stubbornness was incomprehensible in every sense. And knowing that Emilia had an understandable past that led her to be that way, Rem felt disgusted with herself for thinking such thoughts.

These emotions swirled, harboring a single boy at their center, threatening to explode.

Sighing, Rem felt weary of her own ugliness.

In this soundless world, enveloped in an environment where even light sources were uncertain, her thoughts naturally drifted aimlessly.

The passage of time felt vague and slow; no matter how many times she looked up, the moon seemed to have not shifted from its previous position.

The night is long. A solitary night is endlessly deep, cold, and long.

Suddenly, Rem was overcome with the urge to slip into the carriage compartment behind her, where she was protecting him.

How wonderful it would be if she could slip in beside the boy who lay wrapped in a blanket, peacefully asleep without dreaming, and share his warmth.

A temptation arose, wondering if she could just give up everything and do just that.

Even if they returned now, what awaited him was a harsh reality far from ideal.

Right now, no matter where she drove the dragon carriage, there would be nothing to blame her but her own conscience. If she continued to care for Subaru over time, he might eventually recover his humanity from his childlike state, and while different from before, they might be able to share time together again.

The travel funds Roswaal had given them were a considerable sum. She could disappear with it and live in seclusion with Subaru.

“Heh, a pipe dream…”

Shaking her head and pressing it into her clasped knees, Rem gave a bitter laugh at her own delusion.

There was no way she could make such a choice, one that would disregard everything. It was a cruel thought that, by rights, she should have avoided even thinking.

There was no way she could leave her sister, Ram, and abandon the mansion. Her sister was truly half of her, and above all, if she left her in that mansion, how much burden would fall upon her? Her kind sister, who was so sweet to Rem, would surely forgive her anyway. Precisely for that reason, she could never betray her sister.

Roswaal, who entrusted such a large sum of money and a crucial role to Rem, despite her even contemplating such betrayal. Betraying that trust was also an unthinkable act for Rem, with her scrupulous character.

Above all,

“There’s no way I can just leave Subaru like this, is there?”

While diligently caring for Subaru, Rem was filled with a sense of immense happiness.

Rem was inherently aware that she had a possessive personality. If possible, she wanted to keep all her cherished people close to her. By dedicating herself to others, she could feel the value of her own existence—one could even say she was born with the disposition of a maid.

Therefore, caring for Subaru in his current state was not a hardship for Rem. On the contrary, she felt fulfilled by the realization that Subaru couldn't do without her.

However that was not the real Subaru.

For Rem, the person Natsuki Subaru had always been—

3

With the morning mist dampening her bangs, Rem slowly raised her head.

She recognized that it was time to depart, intoxicated by the sensation of her consciousness drifting in a state she could only call semi-wakefulness, a space between sleep and reality.

Throughout the night, nothing notable happened; neither witchbeasts nor bandits showed any sign of their presence. Nevertheless, Rem wasn't without fatigue. Unable to endure the unchanging hours, and with her consciousness nearly succumbing to sleep, she had transitioned into the aforementioned semi-wakeful state, allowing herself some rest.

She stood up and stretched in the cool morning air.

It was a sloppy, unladylike gesture. She would never do it if others were around, but now, even if she was being watched, it was only by Subaru, who lay beside her, breathing softly—

"Su-Subaru?!"

Startled, Rem recoiled, realizing the boy wrapped in a blanket was right beside her.

The boy, who had been leaning against her, lost his support and slowly rolled onto the grass, wincing and stirring.

In a panic, Rem looked between Subaru and the dragon carriage behind her. He must have gotten down and rolled beside her during the night, while her consciousness drifted from full wakefulness.

She shivered at the fact that she hadn't noticed, yet, at the same time, her face flushed as she realized how much she had let her guard down with Subaru.

While having such a maidenly reaction, Rem inwardly wondered if Subaru's current action was a good sign.

Subaru, who, when awake, mostly reacted with either a blank expression, laughter, or tears. He had now climbed down from the dragon carriage by himself and taken this deliberate action.

Rem harbored hope that his fragmented mind was gradually coming together, reconstructing his personality.

"—Alright, let's go home, Subaru."

If a change had occurred, surely things would turn for the better from now on.

It was an uncharacteristic thought for her, but it was likely a result of being influenced by the boy before her. And that internal change, to Rem, felt somehow endearing.

Rem gently picked up the still-sleeping Subaru again. After getting into the driver's seat, she roused the ground dragon. She spoke to the awakened dragon, gave it some water, and then they set off again.

The wheels gripped the road, slowly picking up speed as they began to move.

They had roughly half the journey left, which would probably take about seven or eight hours.

She felt more energized than yesterday when she'd set off with only a sense of despair regarding her mental and physical state. Gazing at Subaru’s deeply sleeping profile, Rem transferred her surging emotions to the reins, increasing their speed.

Surely, everything would turn out for the best.

—Rem believed so.

4

—The air feels wrong.

Rem, driving the dragon carriage, realized this as she rested Subaru’s restless head on her lap, her arm slipped into his black hair, stroking it gently.

Perhaps it was due to having ample time to think last night.

Rem, having come to terms with the complex emotions within her, had felt a certain lightness in her heart when Subaru had nestled close to her in the deep of the night.

If that was the reason she was so late to notice such an obvious anomaly, then she was foolish beyond salvation.

“It’s too quiet…”

Driving along the Lifaus Highway, she hadn’t passed a single other dragon carriage.

Though she was following the road, Rem was also taking a slightly less-traveled route, aiming for the shortest path to the mansion. She could feel the sensation of the wheels crushing grass beneath her, yet she should have been concerned by the complete absence of any other presence in their unobstructed surroundings.

Even last night, when she was on alert for witchbeasts or bandit attacks, there had been several strange points.

Before even the complete absence of hostile presences, there was the anomaly of not hearing even a single insect’s chirp.

A bad feeling rushed through her mind.

This kind of silence, and a situation where living creatures hold their breath—such things are always a prelude to abnormalities beyond human comprehension.

The increasing sense of unease as they drew closer to the Mathers territory, to the mansion.

Rem poured her inner anxiety into the hands gripping the reins, urging the already frantically running ground dragon to go even faster.

She knew she was pushing it, but now she had to ascertain the truth of this anxiety as quickly as possible. If it was just a false alarm, then so be it. She would apologize to Subaru and the ground dragon for putting them through a strenuous journey and then face the problem anew.

If the anxiety smoldering in her chest was real—

"—Sister?"

Suddenly, what arrived in Rem's heart was a storm of emotions that weren't her own.

—It was an unbearable anxiety, and the fact that it immediately vanished made Rem panic.

Her sister, who usually appeared composed, was indeed brave at heart. It was rare for her to be truly disturbed by anything unrelated to her master or, presumptuously, to Rem, her younger sister.

For her to feel such 'anxiety' that it reached Rem through empathy, and for it to vanish so quickly, meant she had controlled herself to prevent it from reaching Rem.

That anxiety, which likely wouldn't have been transmitted if they were further apart, had reached Rem, who was returning from the royal capital.

Upon receiving it, Rem,

“Rem has to get back, fast—!”

She hurried, gripping the reins even tighter until her knuckles turned white.

As things stood, if everything at the mansion was proceeding as planned, only her sister and Emilia should be there. If, in such a state, some problem arose that was beyond their capabilities. And if that problem was not unrelated to this anxiety—

Rem was driven by a sense of urgency. Outwardly expressionless, and inwardly trying to remain calm, she actually had the flaw of becoming oblivious to her surroundings when she exerted herself.

That flaw, this time too, bared its fangs at her.

—In a world where time stood still, Rem watched as the ground dragon’s head exploded before her eyes.

Chapter 36:
A Howl of Blood

1

The ground dragon, pulling the carriage, had its neck severed at the base. Its masterless, colossal body collapsed, sending the carriage careening off the path, bouncing violently, and overturning.

The overturned carriage gouged into the ground with a spectacular roar, kicking up a plume of dust. Wood splintered, and the fallen dragon's body became entangled in the wheels, creating the sickening sound of flesh being torn apart and a spray of blood mist. In an instant, the scene transformed into a gruesome spectacle.

This occurred in the mountains, just after exiting the Lifaus Highway and entering a forest path, at the very entrance to the Mathers territory. They would have reached their destination after crossing several forested areas and hills, roughly two hours of travel. However, the dragon carriage lay brutally destroyed midway, and only the empty whirring sound of the spinning wheels echoed forlornly at the accident site.

The land dragon lay as a mangled heap of flesh, the carriage reduced to wreckage. The dust cloud, mixed with dirt and blood, wafted an unusual stench.

Into this scene,

"…Ugh, aaoooh…"

A boy, thrown clear and covered in abrasions, groaned.

He lay slightly separated from the ruined carriage, having landed in a patch of grassland off the forest path. The thickly growing green, crisscrossed with vines, must have cushioned his fall somewhat. Despite being at the center of such a horrific scene, the boy's injuries were miraculously minor.

Even so, the pain from being thrown defenselessly was not insignificant. Abrasions and several bruises. Fortunately, there were no broken bones or major bleeding, but the agony was more than enough to make the small, defenseless child curl up.

"Ah-fuh, ugh-fuh… Ahh…"

The black-haired boy, rolling out of the grassland, groaned in pain and shed tears. His face was streaked with blood from a scrape on his forehead, further accentuated by tears and drool. His rough attempts to wipe it away only spread the reddish-brown across his face, and his mud-stained sleeves were also tinged red. It was a pathetic sight for a grown adult, and coupled with the horrific wreckage of the carriage, it evoked only a sense of tragedy in anyone who saw it.

At this moment—

"…"

Figures in black cloaks emerged one after another, a dozen or so of them encircling the boy and the carriage. The figures examined the fallen, headless ground dragon, confirming its death, then quietly turned their gaze to Subaru, who lay weeping.

The black-cloaked figures had their hoods pulled deep over their heads, making their faces and even their genders indistinguishable. These shadowy figures, whose breathing was uncertain, moved with a wavering, gliding motion as they surrounded Subaru. Looking down at him, reacting only to his pain,

"—Ra."

One of the figures whispered a single word. As one spoke, another uttered the same word. The chain of words then flowed rapidly, and all those encircling him began to whisper in a continuous murmur.

In a world devoid of insect chirps or any sign of life, only the sound of wind rustling branches and the whispers of the black figures echoed—a distorted scene, as if the world itself were self-contained.

Then,

"—Agh. Ahh! Ahhh, ah-bwahhh!"

Gradually, as the whispers intensified, a change came over Subaru, who had been groaning in pain. He writhed, arching his back while lying face up, emitting cries of anguish. He was still enduring pain, but its nature was clearly different from before. It was an agony on another level from the abrasions and bruises, a movement as if he were trying to suppress something erupting from within, as if the seeds of rampant pain within him were about to sprout and torment him.

Anyone observing would have realized that this was a scene in response to the whispers of the surrounding black figures. Looking down at the suffering Subaru, the figures did not cease their curses. However, as if reaching some conclusion from Subaru's desperate state, they continued to whisper as they reached out to his body—

"—Bo!"

An iron ball, hurtling with a roar, exploded the head of the man who was about to touch Subaru. Blood and fragments of skull splattered around, raining down mercilessly on the suffering Subaru. The collapsing figure's movements were accompanied by the light clinking of an iron chain, which writhed like a snake around the dead figure—lashing out at the other black cloaks.

"…"

The black cloaks were quick to react. Immediately disengaging their minds from their comrade's sudden demise, they silently scattered to avoid the chain's pursuit. As they did so, the black cloaks drew cross-shaped blades from their robes. These dully gleaming weapons had a gruesome design, with blades at their tips. Wielding one in each hand, the black cloaks cautiously scanned their surroundings.

There were eleven of them. All positioned themselves to cover each other's backs, forming a commendable formation that eliminated blind spots and prepared for a surprise attack. However, this only applied if their opponent could be confronted in a two-dimensional space.

"—Shhh!"

From above, an apron dress fluttered as a girl kicked off the trees. Her body, launched diagonally downwards with incredible speed, was slightly faster than the shadows' consciousness, which had reacted to the sound.

The hilt of the descending weapon pierced the black cloak's head from directly above. With a sharp sound, a hole was opened in the top of the head, and the shadow, spilling blood and brain matter, swayed and fell. Kicking off its body, the girl leaped back, obstructing the vision of a nearby black cloak. However, the shadow whose comrade's corpse had been kicked showed no hesitation. It charged, impaling its approaching comrade's body from the front with its cross-shaped blade, and lunged at the girl, intending to pierce her along with the corpse.

That shadow's body, along with the impaled corpse, was torn to pieces by a tempest of spiked iron balls. The girl, who had thrown the iron ball straight. As the chain stretched to its full length, she tilted forward as if overcome by the weight of the iron ball—the thrown cross-shaped blade passed through the space where her head had just been. A hard thud of the blade piercing a tree trunk echoed, and the tilted girl, maintaining her posture, gained initial velocity, leaping horizontally and causing the ground to erupt.

"Rwaaaah!"

Screaming, the girl bared her fangs and roared. On her blood-soaked blue hair, a pure white, sharp horn protruded and gleamed.

A black cloak, mid-leap, was caught in the girl's high-speed movement. The arm wrapped around its waist shattered the shadow's lower body, and the unfortunate, paralyzed figure was slammed with force into a tree behind it, expelling most of its internal organs from its mouth and rear, its life extinguished.

With a single swing of her arm, the demon flung away the dead black cloak's body and retrieved the iron ball. Its adorable face was stained with blood, and its eyes glowed brightly as it glared at the black cloaks. Then, spotting the boy lying at the feet of the still-silent black shadows,

“Rem won’t let you touch Subaru.”

The girl —Rem— declared in a voice full of vigor, dragging her blood-soaked left leg and swirling the iron ball above her head. This injury was sustained when she couldn’t completely avoid the splintering wood during the carriage’s overturn. If Rem had been alone, she might have escaped unharmed, but that was impossible.

The moment the ground dragon’s neck was severed, Rem immediately knew the carriage would overturn violently. Realizing the gravity of the situation, her immediate thought was how to safely protect Subaru, who was sleeping on her lap, from the overturning carriage. Her mind raced at dizzying speed, her eyes scanning. The moment she caught sight of a tangle of grass and vines in her peripheral vision, she threw Subaru there. The precious split-second she had for escape was used up, and Rem was left to share the fate of the now-wrecked carriage.

The result was a laceration on her forehead and a deep wooden splinter embedded in her left thigh. She had forcibly re-set her dislocated left shoulder, and the intense pain that coursed through her as she moved it sent shivers across her pale cheek.

Rem stepped forward, showing no signs of her injuries affecting her stride.

“Witch Cultists…!”

She glared at the group of black cloaks, spitting out the words in a voice filled with hatred. In response to Rem’s call, the black cloaks still showed no reaction. They continued to maintain their ambiguous, seemingly unaware posture, remaining motionless with their cross-shaped blades pointed at the enraged girl.

The balance shattered in an instant.

Rem, who had been swirling the iron ball above her head, cut to the chase, realizing that this stalemate would lead nowhere. The iron ball, propelled by centrifugal force and her added strength, was a steel-forged end that would crush all obstacles in its path. A single blow would not only break bones but also take a life, utterly destroying anything it hit.

The blow, with the chain fully extended, snapped trees, scattering splinters and chunks of dirt as it bore down on the black cloaks. However, the black cloaks dodged it by leaping or running low to the ground. After Rem unleashed her attack, leaving her vulnerable, they instantly lunged at her. Rem, having created a large opening with her powerful swing, twisted her body, pulling back the iron ball she had just released. But the lethal blades would reach her faster than the iron ball could return.

“—Raa!”

The lead black cloak’s jaw was completely gouged out by Rem’s upward-swinging toe. It wasn’t a gentle kick; his lower jaw was literally scraped off from directly below by her toes. The shadow, now jawless, its pink tongue dangling loosely. Yet, it lunged at Rem, unconcerned by its fatal injury, and raised its cross-shaped blade, intent on plunging it into her chest.

—Faster than that movement could be completed, Rem’s retrieved iron ball blew away the shadow’s remaining upper jaw along with its skull.

Amidst the splattering brain matter, the iron ball shot out. Rem caught it with her raised palm as it approached her face—the spikes pierced her left hand, and bright red blood stained her pale cheek. But she clenched her hand tightly, and instantly spun around, slamming the iron ball, along with her fist, into the face of a black cloak about to swing its cross-shaped blade sideways, crushing it.

That made six. Having halved the assassins from the initial twelve, Rem gasped for breath, her eyes, wet with murderous intent, fixed on the remaining enemies. An obsidian spear, sharpened to a needle point, flew towards her face. She tilted her head, dodging it by a hair’s breadth. Her hair and the side of her head grazed the rock, rasping against it, and pain and shock made her dizzy.

Her vision turned crimson, and the impact to her head robbed Rem of her judgment. Suddenly, her footing felt muddled. Her instincts reacted to the chilling sensation of sinking, and she gained momentum by slightly bending her knees, leaping diagonally with only her right leg. She then jumped onto a branch of a large tree ahead, intending to assume a surprise attack posture as she had done initially, but—

“Damn—!”

She cursed her own shortsightedness for easily jumping when facing an enemy with long-range attacks.

The branch she intended to land on was scorched by scorching flames, and a fist-sized fireball, which had burned through the large tree, emerged from beyond it—the sensation of intense heat searing her skin spread across her front. Rem instinctively held out her blood-stained left hand.

“Huma!”

A thin membrane of water expanded in front of Rem. The moment it collided with the fireball, white steam erupted, and the dying shriek of burning water echoed through the forest. However, though the fireball’s intensity was somewhat diminished, it was not so weak as to be extinguished by a hasty incantation.

“—!!”

Her clenched left hand now had a hole in its palm, and it was uncertain whether it would be usable in future combat. Therefore, she raised her clenched fist and, without hesitation, slammed it into the fiery projectile, exploding her own fist along with the flame.

“—Uaah!”

Caught in the mid-air explosion, Rem’s body was sent spinning and slammed into a tree trunk. She then tumbled down onto a mass of writhing roots, groaning in agony from the dull ache in her left arm as she looked up.

Her left arm was charred from the wrist down, her pinky and ring finger carbonized. The skin up to her elbow was horribly red and festering, and she had no sensation of pain beyond her shoulder. Unless she was treated by a mage as skilled as Ferris, her left arm would never move again.

Pushing through such severe injuries, Rem stood up, bringing her consciousness back to reality and forgetting the pain. She bit back her groans, instead roaring furiously, invigorating herself and letting her enemies know that her fighting spirit had not waned, hoping to divert their attention from Subaru, even slightly.

However—

"…"

A bare-handed black cloak, approaching silently, slammed its palm into Rem's torso with an impact that drove her back against the large tree behind her. Her internal organs twisted, and her sternum groaned under the force, causing Rem to cough up a large amount of blood.

Her throat burned with the hot sensation of vomiting blood, and her body sank with the agony of being squeezed dry. The withdrawn palm thrust out again, and she barely dodged it as it tried to crush her skull. The trunk behind her was punched through by the palm strike, and the unbelievably light large tree flew through the air. The black cloak, which cracked the ground with a single step, was clearly different from the opponents she had faced so far. Rem, dodging the follow-up attack with a sidestep, rolled and spat out the blood remaining in her mouth, her gaze wandering as she searched for the iron ball she had dropped.

"—!!"

An obsidian spear grazed her face, and her unsteady body was struck from behind by an earth hammer. Her spine groaned violently, and her small body bounced off the ground, sent flying. Where she bounced, the bare-handed figure who had overwhelmed Rem earlier waited. The shadow held the iron ball Rem had dropped in its hand and raised the iron mass, aiming it at her bouncing form—

"—El Huma!"

The blood she had spit out during the incantation froze, and a blade of pure blood cut halfway through the arm of the man holding the iron ball. The pain caused the weapon to fall from the black cloak's hand. And then,

"Gaurururuu!"

Slamming the ground to stabilize herself, Rem reached out her right hand and grabbed the hilt of the iron ball the black cloak had dropped. At the same time, she kicked the iron ball on the ground, sending it behind the shadow. Wrapping the chain around the shadow's thick neck, she pulled it tight with immense force.

The wet sound of the chain tightening around flesh, and the black cloak's neck, along with its shinbones, twisted and broke. Its face, now turned 180 degrees backward, looked at Rem, and its eyes lost their light. Rem relaxed slightly, believing she had defeated a formidable foe—at that moment,

"—!!!"

The black cloak's body, which should have been lifeless, moved, and a kick of tremendous force swept through Rem's torso.

The kick, directly impacting her left side, completely shattered Rem's left ribs and broke her left thigh, slamming her to the ground. And with that final blow, the black cloak finally perished. Its body lay face down, looking up at the sky—a gruesome corpse.

"Ugh, aah…"

Groaning and spitting blood, Rem urged her unresponsive left side, including her arm, to move as she struggled to stand. She had disposed of what was likely the most skilled opponent in the enemy group. However, the price she paid was not cheap.

Five remaining. Since no bare-handed individuals had mixed in, there should be no one skilled in close combat. If that were the case, she could finish them off by approaching and twisting each of their necks.

Could she do it with her trembling, injured body, with only her right side functioning?

She shook her head, biting back her weakness, and chastised herself for wavering. It wasn't a question of whether she could do it. She had to. What did it matter if her left side was dead? Her right side still moved. If her right arm failed, she could crush them with her feet. If her right foot failed, she would bite them to death.

If she killed every last one of them and Subaru survived, Rem would win.

This was already a large-scale battle, and they were already within the Mathers territory. Though she wasn't consciously aware of it, there was no way her sister wouldn't sense her own bloodlust. Soon, her sister would pinpoint this location. Her own life or death didn't matter then. If she could only protect Subaru's life, what hesitation would there be in expending herself here?

A hint of lingering regret distorted Rem's heart. To kill off that last hesitation, Rem glanced at where Subaru should have been lying. If only she could see him one last time, then it wouldn't matter what happened to her.

But—

"—Subaru?!"

He wasn't there. Subaru, who should have been groaning in pain, suffering, and fear, was nowhere to be found.

Panicked, Rem frantically scanned her surroundings. Could he have been caught in the aftermath of the earlier fight and thrown somewhere? But she searched and searched, and his figure was nowhere to be seen. Then, with a start, Rem realized.

"One, missing…"

There were five black cloaks remaining in the group. But now, no matter where she looked, there were only four. The black cloaks, with their cross-shaped blades lowered in both hands, stood blocking the beast path in front of them, subtly moving to obscure their fleeing comrade from Rem's sight. —To keep her away from the comrade who had carried Subaru away.

"You… bastards…"

A trembling voice escaped her trembling lips. Her lips, pale from massive blood loss, were stained with the rouge of blood overflowing from her mouth. Amidst this gruesome war paint, Rem's adorable face transformed into that of a true demon,

"Not content with stealing Rem's reason to live…"

She tensed her right arm, gripping the iron ball, and bent one leg, gathering explosive power. Ahead, tension ran through the black cloaks, and at the moment they were about to lunge at her,

"Are you even going to steal Rem's reason to die here and now—!!"

Rem's roar exploded, and her body launched forward with a kick that seemed to blow the ground away. In front of her, facing the charging Rem, were not only the black cloaks holding their cross-shaped blades as a diversion, but also a myriad of fist-sized fireballs being chanted from behind them—so numerous they covered her entire vision.

"—!!!"

A scream erupted, and immediately after, a chain of crimson light ignited in the morning forest. Intense heat raged, burning away trees, and the world shrieked in agony as the immense heat turned everything into scorched earth.

—In the scorched wasteland, a scorched fragment of a white apron dress fluttered down, then vanished in an instant.

2

Swaying, aching, swaying and aching.

Subaru drooled, helplessly swaying on the shoulder of the black-clad figure carrying him.

He barely felt the pain from the fall out of the dragon carriage anymore. It wasn't that he felt nothing, but his consciousness was so dominated by an even greater pain that he lacked the will to move, sinking deeper into it.

At the scene of the overturned dragon carriage, the black-clad figures had surrounded Subaru and begun their whispered incantations. As he listened to those whispers, Subaru's body felt like it was being torn apart from within by an unknown sensation, and his head was overwhelmed by a disturbance far beyond what could be described as ringing in his ears.

Something black raged inside his chest, his belly, his skull, at the very core of his being, as if trying to utterly destroy his existence.

He shuddered to think what would have happened if that had continued. That kind of pain could crush a person's spirit. It could twist a person's mind. It could change a person entirely. It was the kind of thing that stripped one of their humanity. If it had continued, Natsuki Subaru would have been—

"Hee-hee-hee, hee-hee-hah, heh-foo-hee…"

Suddenly, as if remembering something, a mad cackle spilled from the corner of his lips, along with drool.

As his self began to return to his consciousness, which had been dominated by pain, his mind naturally revealed its shattered state, but in a different way than the pain itself.

Parts of his body ached. His head felt particularly like it was splitting open. Blue wasn't there. Blue wasn't by his side. He was being carried by a black figure. What was this black figure? Where had Blue gone? Where was he being taken?

The black-clad figure ran through the forest, almost flying along the animal path. Despite their slender build, not appearing particularly trained, their ability to carry a limp human and move like the wind was utterly surreal. Like shadows moving in sync with the sunlight, the black-clad figure carrying Subaru glided through the mountains, traversing unmarked animal paths as if they owned them.

After about ten minutes of running, the black-clad figure suddenly stopped in the deep, sunless gloom of the forest. Directly ahead loomed a cliff face, prominently displaying moss-covered rock. It was so tall that it was clearly insurmountable without special equipment.

Facing this cliff, the black-clad figure scanned their surroundings and headed towards a particularly noticeable boulder. Placing a palm on the boulder,

"…"

Subaru's body tensed as he heard the shadow whisper a word. This was a reaction born of fear, dreading the repetition of the incantation that had echoed in his mind earlier. However, the single whispered word seemed different from the previous incantation, and its effect did not cause his skull to creak.

"…"

Before the black-clad figure who had whispered the incantation, the massive boulder suddenly vanished. As if it were a dream or an illusion, it dissolved into the air. Accepting this as normal, the black-clad figure readjusted Subaru on their shoulder and stepped into the cave that had appeared where the boulder once stood.

In the chilling air of the cold cave, only the regular sound of the shadow's footsteps echoed rhythmically. After proceeding about ten meters into the cave, the light from behind suddenly vanished. Presumably, the cave entrance had been sealed again by the boulder.

In the cold, biting cave, the black-clad figure showed no signs of panic, nor did their footsteps falter. Then, the dim light ahead of the unhesitating shadow was suddenly dispelled by a faint, white glow. The glow of lagmite ore.

Minerals were embedded at regular intervals along what appeared to be a passageway, and lights illuminated one after another, guiding the shadow's path.

Deeper and deeper into the cave, into the darkness. Was the goosebumps on his bleeding skin due to the cold, or something else?

Still carried, Subaru shivered slightly, hot tears spilling from the corner of his eyes, as he continued to laugh aimlessly.

Then, the end of the dark, cold, rock-walled passage came into view. The glow of the lagmite ore was slightly stronger here, illuminating a natural chamber significantly larger than the rest of the cave, clearly set up with proper lighting.

It was there that Subaru would come face to face with an embodiment of malice.

3

He was a gaunt man.

The man, surrounded by other black-clad figures, was himself shrouded in a black priestly robe. He was slightly taller than Subaru, with dark green bangs trimmed to fall just above his eyes. His cheeks were hollow, and he possessed a body so devoid of vitality that it felt accurate to describe it as just skin and minimal flesh stretched over bone, barely maintaining a human form.

That is, if you ignored his eyes, which gleamed with a maniacal, unsettling brilliance.

The man leaned in, intently observing Subaru, who was bound and slumped against the wall. He bent at the waist, then tilted his neck a full ninety degrees, staring at Subaru with bulging eyes and an unnerving lack of inhibition. His posture alone revealed a bizarre, abnormal quality, and indeed, the man’s actions were far removed from those of an ordinary person.

“I seee… Thiiis is, indeed, quiiite interesting, yes?”

After a prolonged gaze, as if licking Subaru with his eyes from head to toe, the man nodded in agreement to the surrounding figures. The black-clad shadows acknowledged his affirmation with a slight dip of their chins, silently awaiting his next words.

The man paid no mind to their respectful silence. Instead, lost in thought, he clasped his right hand over his left—then jammed his thumb into a wound on his wrist, unconcerned by the dripping blood, gouging into his own flesh.

“Youu… You aren’t ‘Pride’, are you, by any chance?”

Still bent at the waist, the man twisted his head back up to look at Subaru. He put his blood-stained thumb, fresh from the wound, into his mouth, savoring the metallic taste on his tongue with an ecstatic tremor in his dull, glinting eyes as he posed the question.

Subaru gave no reply to the query. He simply stared blankly up at the man, maintaining a vacant, out-of-place smile.

Watching this, the man noisily withdrew his finger from his lips, then said,

“Ah, is that so? My apologies, my apologies. How thoughtless of me, I haven’t even introduced myself yet, have I?”

Responding to Subaru’s smile, the man slowly split his pale lips into a horrifying grin, then bent deeply at the waist with slow, deliberate movements.

“I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witches Cult—”

Maintaining his bowed posture, he deftly raised his neck to look directly at Subaru.

“—Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti, in charge of ‘Sloth’!”

After proclaiming his name, the man —Petelgeuse— pointed at Subaru with the fingers of both hands and let out a cackling laugh.

Cackle, cackle, cackle.

Chapter 37:
Sloth

1

Peals of laughter echoed against the dim, cold walls of the cave.

With cackling, hysterical laughter, Petelgeuse bared his blood-stained, mottled teeth, continuing to chortle as if something was endlessly amusing him.

Petelgeuse seemed like he'd go on forever if no one stopped him. Facing this bizarre spectacle, Subaru, the object of his ridicule, remained hunched over, glaring at the ground.

Subaru had been dragged deeper into the hall by the robed figures, roughly thrown down, and bound to the wall. The iron shackles gripped his limbs so tightly they were discolored, and a tingling numbness, as if his blood vessels were being squeezed, gradually began to spread.

"Fufufu, hihihe…"

As his limbs went numb, Subaru offered a strained smile, as if he knew no other expression. Seeing this, Petelgeuse clapped his hands with even greater glee.

"Ah, how comical this is! It truly is quite, quite, quite, quite, quite the exciting sight, I daresay. My brain, it trembles… truly, truly, truly, truly!"

He let blood drip from the wound on his left hand, then wiped it with his right fingers and smeared it across his own forehead.

Drawing a mottled pattern on his forehead, Petelgeuse, with a maniacal grin, was utterly deranged.

Subaru giggled, seeing something other than reality, while Petelgeuse was utterly immersed in a world of pure madness. As the mad laughter of these two, slightly detached from reality, converged in the space, a shadow suddenly emerged.

It was a different figure from the one who had carried Subaru into the cave. The tall shadow moved fluidly, making no sound, and settled beside the laughing Petelgeuse.

"…"

It muttered something in a low voice, just loud enough for Petelgeuse to hear.

Upon hearing it, Petelgeuse abruptly dropped the maniacal grin that had twisted his cheeks and ceased his clownish antics.

"Is that so! Ahh, that is, ahh… my brain trembles, yes!"

With the same nuance that had kicked off his previous maniacal laughter, but now with a sinister, spine-chilling expression, Petelgeuse bit down on the nail of his left pinky finger.

He bit, bit it off, and as the nail peeled back and blood flowed, he paid it no mind, gnawing even on the flesh.

"…Ah, it hurts. It hurts, hurts, hurts, hurts, hurts. My brain, it trembles. Go on, it says! Keep going! No time to stand still! It screams! It calls! My brain truly trembles!"

He swung his arm, and blood from his gnawed left hand dripped onto the cold cave floor.

The black shadow watched dispassionately, tilting its head slightly—and with a gesture of respect, whispered to Petelgeuse, who continued his mad display.

"My left ring finger is ruined?! Ah, what a sweet ordeal this is! Despite my diligence in facing it… The world is still not kind to me today!"

"…"

"Ah, that's fine. The remaining count for my left ring finger will merge with the adjacent fingers. Oh, no, I still have nine, nine, nine, nine, nine, nine fingers! There's nothing to worry about!"

"…"

"Yes… that's right! A ordeal! A ordeal! This is a ordeal! Everything is a ordeal for us to follow the divine will! Shine, gleam… ah, my brain trembles!"

Petelgeuse laughed, spitting saliva in ecstasy, clutching his head, and spinning around on the spot.

The black-robed figure's voice was muffled, making it impossible to hear even in the confined space of the cave. Consequently, the conversation between Petelgeuse and the black shadow seemed almost comically like a monologue by Petelgeuse, further accentuating his bizarre behavior and unsettling aura.

"Ah, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!"

"…"

"Yes… Ah, him, you mean? You're concerned about him? No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, I understand completely… yes!"

Bending at the waist, crouching low, and twisting his body even further, Petelgeuse crept closer to Subaru. He thrust his face near, exhaling a somewhat foul breath, and Subaru, still giggling vacantly, looked up at his deranged display with emotionless eyes.

Facing Subaru's black eyes, Petelgeuse rolled his own grayish eyes with such intensity they seemed ready to pop out.

"Indeed, indeed, indeed, indeed, indeed, indeed, indeed, indeed, it's strange, unsettling, inexplicable… at this juncture, with the ordeal before us, why is a being like you here?"

"…"

"The dragon carriage! Ah, the dragon carriage is good! Ground dragons are delightful and very pleasing! Unlike humans, they harbor no unnecessary emotions. Above all, their diligent obedience to human commands, their diligent work, and their diligent attitude are splendid!”

“…”

“Killed! Ah, that’s also good! It was unavoidable to bring him down! Ah, you are also diligent, aren’t you! Excellent, that is good! By my side, as the fingers of my two hands, diligence is the most important thing! Good! Good! So, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so good!”

Petelgeuse arched his body, showing such flexibility that his head almost touched the ground. With an enraptured expression, he then sprang upright with the recoil of a drawn bow.

“The diligence of my fingers! It brought down an earth dragon, a creature that is a very embodiment of diligence! Ah, my brain trembles. It trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles!”

His face flushed with excitement from a madness incomprehensible to ordinary people, and suddenly a single stream of blood trickled from Petelgeuse’s nostrils.

He licked it before it reached his mouth, staining his face crimson. Petelgeuse then smiled languidly, enraptured, his cheeks softening.

“Ah… a dead ground dragon is truly ‘slothful’. isn’t it.”

He muttered this with fervent eyes, and Petelgeuse trembled in ecstasy.

Then, he roughly wiped the nosebleed with the sleeve of his robe, and with a chilling demeanor, as if he had discarded his previous intense emotions somewhere, he said,

“Immediately clean up the site where the dragon carriage was destroyed. Before the coming day of the ordeal, we must prevent our existence from being revealed. There should have been no witnesses since the area was cleared, but… what about the passenger? Did you kill them properly?”

“…”

“A report on that? Ah, I shall hear it. With generosity, with grandeur, with immense love. For I shall treat my fingers with mercy.”

Spreading his arms wide, the hem of his robe swaying, Petelgeuse nodded solemnly.

Seeing this behavior, befitting his self-proclaimed title of Archbishop, the black shadow lowered its chin and continued to stubbornly keep its voice hushed.

“…”

“One passenger… a blue-haired girl. The tip of the left ring finger grazed her, destroying the dragon carriage. A battle ensued when attempting to secure him… the destruction of the ring finger was caused by that girl… status unknown.”

Receiving the black shadow’s report, Petelgeuse shook his head from side to side, cracking his neck bones.

He then continued to turn his head from side to side, twist it, contort it, spin it, sway it, like a clock pendulum, and finally snapped it forward.

“Sta-tus-un-known… Is that it?”

He finished, then slowly, slowly raised his trembling head, turning his vacant gray gaze towards the black-robed figure.

“You are truly ‘slothful’, aren’t you?”

As he spoke, Petelgeuse brought his raised left hand, specifically his ring finger, to his mouth.

Then, without any hesitation, he furiously bit down on the tip of that ring finger.

A nauseating sound of flesh being ground between molars and violently pulled apart echoed. Petelgeuse bit his nail, chewed his flesh, letting the resulting blood pool in his mouth. He then spat it all out together and grabbed the black shadow’s face with his blood-stained left hand.

“A situation where things might be exposed, right before the ordeal! Is that! Is that! Is that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that how you sincerely repay the Gospel?! Ah, how slothful! Sloth! Sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth!”

From what source of strength in his bony frame, Petelgeuse swung the opponent, who had been capable of carrying Subaru, from side to side by the face. It was likely aided by the black-robed figure’s lack of resistance, but Petelgeuse, violently shaking his opponent, looked up at the ceiling and cried out,

“And! The sloth of my finger is my sloth! Ah, forgive the sloth of this body of mine, which cannot repay such favor! May I be forgiven for living, for existing, with utmost diligence in my entire being, to follow the Gospel!”

Releasing the black shadow, Petelgeuse knelt, tears streaming down his face. He clasped his blood-stained hands, pleading and clinging as if he saw something there.

The roughly handled black-robed figure also followed Petelgeuse’s prayer, looking up at the ceiling behind him, silently confessing his own unworthiness and sin.

—It was an abnormal sight.

Petelgeuse’s emotions, joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, switched indiscriminately, without warning, rolling from one to another. This wasn’t merely emotional instability; it was emotional disappearance.

The black-robed figure, who accepted this as normal and showed no reaction even to the assault on himself, was also bizarre. Seeing him obey Petelgeuse, who called himself an Archbishop, perhaps he should be called a follower. More accurately, a fanatic.

“Love! I must repay this love! To be slothful is unforgivable! I must obey the Gospel! I must repay the given love with love!”

“…”

“Find the girl whose status is unknown! If she’s alive, stop her breath! If she’s dead, sever her head and bring it here! I must personally clean up and apologize for being slothful!”

The black shadow responded to the piercing command, melting away into the cave’s darkness.

After its presence faded, Petelgeuse remained kneeling for a while, breathing heavily, seemingly dazed.

“Now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now…”

Still kneeling, Petelgeuse shuffled on his knees towards Subaru.

The movement of dragging his knees across the hard, sharp rocky ground was self-mutilation, needlessly tearing the skin beneath his robe.

Disregarding the pain and wounds, he peered at Subaru.

“Just what, exactly, are you?”

“Ugh… augh…”

“You don’t seem to have been guided by the Gospel, yet such dense favor emanates from your body. Truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly interesting!”

He brought his face close, his tongue flicking out so near he seemed about to lick, and Petelgeuse gazed at Subaru. But Subaru was in no condition to answer his questions.

To Subaru, still staring blankly into some other place, Petelgeuse murmured “Ah, my brain trembles” in ecstasy.

“I should know faces other than ‘Pride’, yet I can’t believe someone so favored has no connection to the Gospel.”

He murmured, then reached into his robe—and pulled out a book.

It was a black-bound book, about the size and thickness of a dictionary. At first glance, it just looked like a cherished book, but,

“Ah… I feel the Gospel. My brain, it trembles…”

The way he caressed the black spine with his fingers and exhaled with fervent sighs left no doubt that it was something far more.

Holding the untitled book, Petelgeuse savored its feel for a while, then slowly and solemnly began to turn its pages.

“You are not written in the Gospel. Of course, not a single thing about the problems that arose before this great ordeal! That! That means!”

He snapped the book shut, lifted it, and spat as he cried out,

“Your existence is insignificant! Your existence, unwritten in the Gospel, is entrusted to me! Despite receiving such deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep favor… how contradictory you are! Ah, my brain, my brain, my brain!!!”

He pressed his finger to his temple, moving his nail with such force it seemed about to gouge. The skin tore, and blood began to ooze.

Even seeing this, Subaru still gave no reaction. He merely giggled vacantly, literally overlooking Petelgeuse’s self-mutilation.

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah… Ah, being ignored, it’s lonely! Even though, even though! I am treating you with such goodwill, good-will, good-will, good-will, good-will, good-will!”

Petelgeuse’s extended hand seized Subaru’s face, fixing his gaze, which seemed to be looking nowhere, and forcing it to meet his own eyes.

Even in his dazed state, Subaru, at such rough treatment, finally frowned and tried to resist, but,

“—Look into my eyes.”

Quietly, with the least emotional fluctuation in any of his previous statements, yet with an undeniable, powerful force in his voice and eyes, he commanded.

Subaru’s body trembled with a jolt, and though dazed, he obeyed, looking into Petelgeuse’s gray eyes, which glowed with a deranged light.

Then,

“Answer me. Respond to me. To my questions, to my demands. Why are you here, and why are you so favored? Do you not possess a Gospel? Then have you directly heard the Gospel?”

“Ah, eu… hihehe”

“This is getting nowhere… perhaps I should change the order.”

His rapid-fire questions deflected, Petelgeuse tilted his head ninety degrees to the right.

With his face turned sideways, Petelgeuse leaned in even closer.

And then,

“I must ask you something.”

“—Auuuu!”

Petelgeuse, having drawn his face close, extended his tongue and licked Subaru’s left eyeball.

Subaru reacted with revulsion to this unnatural touch, the licking of his eye by another, and trembled, the chains of his shackles rattling.

That was only until he heard the next words.

“—Why are you feigning madness?”

2

I’m scared of gray.

The eyes staring at me, fixed on me, are terrifying. I try to tremble, turn my face away, and escape those eyes, but the hands gripping my face are so firm, and the chains binding my body are so cold, that I can’t escape.

Everywhere on my body aches terribly. Thrown from the overturned carriage, the abrasions covering my body haven’t been treated at all. Beneath my torn clothes, the raw, red wounds accelerate the pain just by looking at them, and the oozing blood felt as if it were directly connected to some terribly unpleasant memory.

Where has Blue gone? Blue, who was always by my side. Blue, who gently touched me. Blue, who fed me, and held my hand when I was anxious. If Blue were here, if Blue were with me, I wouldn’t have to be this scared.

Green, Brown, and White aren’t here either. All that’s here is the pitch black that sees nothing, and the gray in front of me.

The silent, unanswering Black was scary too. But Gray is far, far more terrifying than that.

“Have you, perchance, directly heard the Gospel?”

I don’t understand what he’s saying. My mind isn’t working to comprehend it. A strong desire to reject this unpleasantness overwhelms me, and I turn my body, my face, my heart away in refusal. But he doesn’t allow it, and Gray brings his face even closer.

“This is getting nowhere… perhaps I should change the order.”

Saying this, Gray brought his face closer. The tongue stretching from his mouth, an unnaturally long tongue, a red tongue freshly licking blood, mercilessly pressed towards me.

“I must ask you something”

—His tongue tormented the surface of my left eye, right above the pupil.

A surge of revulsion, an overwhelming dread, made the chains clank, revealing my rejection. However Gray didn’t stop. He even more gleefully moved his extended tongue to the back of my eye, toying with my eyeball as if rolling it on his tongue.

Disgusting, no, please stop, help me, I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared. I’m scared, I’m scared.

“—Why are you feigning madness?”

I’m scared, I’m scared—?

I didn’t understand what he said.

The discomfort of my eye being licked, the unpleasantness of being stared at, the rejection born from fearing the visible madness—my trembling body came to a sudden halt. Stunned, dumbfounded, with my mouth agape, my wide-open eyes still being licked,

“Why are you feigning madness?”

I heard Gray’s repeated question.

“Ahhh! Aaaah! Aah!”

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no, it’s a genuine question, you see. Why, for what reason, are you pretending to be consumed by madness?”

I shouldn’t listen. I shouldn’t let it enter my ears. I’m not allowed to know. I shook my head, rattling my hand and leg shackles loudly, cutting off my consciousness. I pushed the man’s words away from my ears. I must not hear, must not notice, must not know.

“I won’t offer convenient escape routes like ‘unconsciously’. You are aware, you understand yourself, and on top of that, you are pretending to be mad.”

“Aah! Ugh! Ugh, aah!”

“Your insanity is too rational. There is no way one can go mad so cleverly, so quietly, so as to gain sympathy, so as to be loved.”

I screamed, my throat feeling like it would burst, trying to drown out the man’s voice. But the man, rather, mocked my actions, slipping his words into the gaps of my consciousness as if to taunt me.

“That’s the act of a failed madman. If you were truly mad, if you were truly immersed in the world of madness, you wouldn’t be conscious of others’ eyes. The world must be self-contained; to be mad is to deviate!”

“—Baaah! Baaaah! Babababah!”

“Ah, how comical! How utterly comical! Why are you pretending to be mad?! To those truly deviated, such a superficial act is quickly exposed, seen, and utterly hilarious!”

Unwanted words, things I didn’t want to know, hammered at my eardrums and flowed in. It’s painful. It feels disgusting. Something is swelling in my chest. Something murky and dark is screaming to get out. I can’t let it out. If it were to get out, if that were to happen,

“Pity, I pity you! You, who are miserable, ugly, base, small, and sinful, ah, I shall pity you! While being so loved, what is there to reject?! Do you wish to neither drown in the given love, nor reciprocate the favoritism, nor refuse it, but rather to wither away in stagnation?”

The gray man shook his head and threw my face away. My head slammed against the wall behind me, sparks flew, and a sharp cry of pain escaped me. But the man paid me no mind, instead twisting another finger into the wound of the finger he had just bitten off, still inducing bleeding,

“Ah, ah, ah, you are… ‘Slothful’!”

Snap, something in my head felt like it had shattered. I didn’t hear anything. Nothing registered. It was all a madman’s babble. Not a single word hit the mark, not a single truth was reached. I understand nothing, comprehend nothing. That’s how it should be. That’s how it must have been. That’s how it has to be.

If not, then I—

“Ah, that’s enough.”

Just as the murky darkness swelled in my chest, on the verge of exploding, the man suddenly lost his intensity and muttered softly. Instantly, the skin-prickling sense of danger that had been present, the light of madness that had been bearing down on me, receded, and the tension unknowingly drained from my entire body.

“It wouldn’t do to corner you too much, you see. Perhaps it’s good to take your time and think it over carefully? If you sincerely face the favoritism, the answer should naturally emerge.”

“Ah…ugh…”

What in the world is this man talking about? From beginning to end, not a single word from his mouth reaches my comprehension. Despite not reaching me, the man behaves as if he holds all control over me, as if he understands me in this unseen darkness, like a gentle adult leading a child, or a demon luring a lost traveler across a suspension bridge.

I mustn’t understand. I mustn’t try to understand. Especially, I cannot think like that now. I mustn’t. Because if I were to understand it, there would be no turning back.

“Ah, I wish… that you are diligent, not slothful.”

Chapter 38:
Return to Reality

1

Hours had passed since Subaru was tied to the wall, his one-sided conversation with Petelgeuse cut off, and then abandoned.

Lying on the cold floor, Subaru's body was losing warmth, and he couldn't move as he wished. His consciousness was hazy because he was feverish, having lost both strength and body heat. Subaru repeatedly exhaled ragged, painful breaths, drooling from the corner of his mouth. Yet, there was no one there to care for him in such a state, no one even acknowledging his presence.

"Move all remaining fingers on the left hand. Clear the road with only the right hand. If it becomes unmanageable, we must consider moving up the schedule and blocking the path."

In stark contrast to Subaru, who lay weakened at the edge of the cave's chamber, Petelgeuse, standing in the center and clapping his hands, was full of boundless energy, issuing instructions in a high-pitched voice. Despite his appearance, which could only be described as a skeleton covered in human skin, his voice, eyes, and movements all brimmed with vitality.

He repeatedly uttered the word "diligence" himself, behaving in a manner truly befitting it, clearly doing so consciously. It was comical that such a person referred to himself as "Sloth", but there was no one there to laugh at it.

One after another, shadowy figures in black robes appeared before Petelgeuse, who sat in the center of the cave. Each of them brought silent whispers to Petelgeuse, and after receiving his instructions, they melted back into the darkness like shadows. Only Petelgeuse remained still; though he couldn't distinguish between the constantly arriving figures, if they were all different people, there were easily more than twenty of them.

The group of black-robed figures, appearing as if growing out of shadows—their image stimulated Subaru's mind, connecting to some memory.

"—Ah, that's right, you were here. How is it, have you decided to speak?!"

Once all the black shadows were gone and they were alone again, Petelgeuse moved. He strode

Impertinently towards Subaru, looking down at his fever-reddened face.

"Is it painful? Is it difficult? Are you sad? Are you angry? If you were a comrade, I wouldn't hesitate to be sympathetic, do you wish for that?"

"…"

"Ah, how aloof!"

Subaru responded to the madman who leaned in close by silently turning his face away. Seeing this, Petelgeuse clapped his knee delightedly, leaning back and tilting his head.

"But, you've started showing reactions that are quite like it, yes. Just one more push, just a little more wavering, and I think I'll understand you."

"…"

"What would it take? What should I bring? To make your heart tremble and to reward your love, what should I do!"

Petelgeuse got carried away, leaving Subaru behind as he screamed with an enraptured expression. Just as he was about to delve into his own world again, wallowing in ecstasy and spouting delusions as before, he was suddenly interrupted.

"Oh my?"

In front of Petelgeuse, who had turned around, black shadows rose one after another from the ground. These black-robed figures, looking as if they sprouted from the shadows, numbered over ten. They knelt there, looking up at Petelgeuse in silence. Petelgeuse, with his hips, neck, and eyes still tilted, asked,

“ What is it?”

“…”

“What, the left-hand encirclement? Alone? Isn’t that splendid! Despite being outnumbered, despite being wounded, still desperately clinging on… On the contrary, how incompetent and slothful my own fingers are! Could it be that they escaped?”

“…”

“Not escaping? Not seeking help outside, but burrowing inward? Wounded all over! Towards us, whose numbers are uncertain! Ah, that is, that is, that is, that is, that is, that is, that is—what deep love and diligence!!”

Clapping his hands, his face and eyes shining, Petelgeuse turned back to Subaru with a bouncing gesture. He then crouched down to meet Subaru’s gaze, smiling like a child.

“You should be pleased! That you are so strongly desired! The diligent one is risking their life! Ah, my brain, my brain, my brain is trembling!”

Spitting excitedly and splattering Subaru’s face, Petelgeuse stood up and paced frantically among the kneeling shadows.

“Is the girl coming? Ah, so that’s why you returned. That’s good! Very good! By all means, by all means, by all means, by all means, I must greet her. I must personally go out to meet her!”

“…”

“Yes! So it shall be! Mobilize all fingers of the left hand and escort her to the entrance! If she collapses along the way, that’s fine too; if she reaches without collapsing, I shall greet her. Ah, ah, ahhhhhhh, isn’t that splendid!!”

Petelgeuse's joy burst forth. His words, their meaning, didn't register. Yet, Subaru writhed, and with a feverish expression, opened his mouth. Only groans escaped his lips, guided by an inexplicable sensation welling up from within. But,

"—!"

His mouth, as if sealed by something invisible, made no sound. It was different from the sensation of his throat being choked by fear or other emotions. It was a clearer, physical interference, as if his mouth were being forcefully held shut. Subaru's eyes widened at the suffocating feeling, like an invisible hand pressed over his mouth. Petelgeuse, looking up at Subaru, cackled,

"Well, no need to rush… There's plenty of time."

Petelgeuse's dry cackle echoed through the cave. At that sound, that unpleasant ringing in his ears, Subaru's mouth remained silent even after the suffocating sensation faded. He could only repeat ragged breaths, neither smiling idly nor shedding tears, waiting patiently for time to pass.

The change came in less than an hour.

The black-robed figures remained kneeling in silence. Petelgeuse silently weaved among them, his footsteps and Subaru's ragged breaths the only sounds disturbing the air in the chamber.

First, the black shadow kneeling closest to the passage leading into the chamber raised its head.

Following that person's movement, one fanatic after another raised their heads. Their gazes were uniformly directed towards the cave entrance, and Petelgeuse, noticing their movements, also looked that way—a joyous smile, as if his mouth would tear, spread across his face.

"It seems she's here."

His joyous murmur was drowned out by a resounding boom.

The sound of immense mass being pulverized with bomb-like force violently shook the cold air of the cave. The cascading sound traveled through the hard ground, reaching even Subaru as he lay fallen. Everyone in the chamber felt that the entrance had been violently knocked open.

A shadow swayed and rose, gripping a crucifix it had pulled from its robe. The cave felt cramped for more than a dozen people to move around in. While this chamber was somewhat spacious, it was still only about the size of two school classrooms. It wasn't large enough for flying, running, or doing much else. And that, surprisingly, was an advantageous condition for the outnumbered intruder.

After all, her prey was—

"—Found you."

A roaring iron flail swept aside the attacking black shadows in a single blow, smashing them against the wall and turning them into red stains, visible even from a distance. That flail, which easily claimed three lives with its first strike, was a deadly weapon that would utterly obliterate anything it directly hit—there was no option but to evade, but even that was difficult in the narrow cave.

The iron flail, after falling to the ground, shattered the rock surface. Its blood and flesh-smeared spikes dragged with a heavy sound. The girl stepping forward had her blue hair dyed a murky black, yet her eyes, still shining, gazed into the chamber and found the collapsed boy. Her lips trembled with tenderness as she took a small, gasping breath.

"Thank goodness, Subaru—"

Calling Subaru's name, the girl, Rem, relaxed her shoulders in relief.

Her appearance was gruesome, clearly showing that she had just survived something horrific. There wasn't a single spot on her body untouched by blood. Her blue hair was dyed a murky black, and her burnt apron dress had not a single white patch left. Her torn, ripped skirt revealed numerous lacerations on both legs, and most notably, her left arm was missing from the elbow down. Blood dripped from her fractured forehead, obscuring her left eye. A faint smile on her lips, Rem was covered in the scent of blood and death, having pushed her utterly battered body to this point.

“Ah—how splendid!”

Faced with her gruesome state, Petelgeuse applauded. He had forgotten that his comrades were being slaughtered before his eyes; instead, he used it as further fuel for his excitement, stepping joyfully and pleasurably in place.

“A girl! A single girl! So wounded, yet still she advances! For what, for this boy! You, who do so much to rescue the boy cherished by the Witch, are also blessed with love and live for love!”

“Your platitudes are enough, Witch Cultist…”

Standing between Subaru and Rem, Petelgeuse exulted, frothing at the mouth. Rem stared coldly at his deranged antics.

“You are nothing but fools who commit atrocities in the Mathers territory without the permission of Lord Roswaal, the lord of this domain. In the absence of my master, Rem will deliver judgment.”

“In such a tattered, tattered, tattered, tattered, tattered state? Stop talking as if you can do what you clearly cannot. Anyway, you only came to take this boy back. Stop with the pretty, empty words.”

Crouching, Petelgeuse grabbed Subaru’s head, forcing him to look up. To Petelgeuse, who gleefully gripped Subaru’s hair and bobbed his head up and down despite his struggles,

“…Don’t.”

“What is it?”

“Rem said, don’t touch him!”

Rem’s body coiled with rage, leaping into the air, pushing her injured self to the limit. Chasing after her, the black shadows on the ground also surged skyward. Two shadows lunged at Rem. Black-robed figures, wielding crucifix blades that seemed to melt into darkness, pursued Rem's body as she leaped in a straight line.

"—!"

The raised blade aimed to pierce Rem's torso from below. But against the attack from below, she swung her left arm—the arm missing from the elbow down—and twisted her body, narrowly avoiding the blade as it grazed her in mid-air.

"Raaaa!"

She swung her right arm, and the iron flail connected to it pulverized the face of one of the black-robed figures. At the same time, her clenched fist struck the head of the other, caving in its skull and knocking it down. With the fall of the two corpses, Rem's body landed in the center of the chamber. This was the heart of the gathered fanatics, and everyone thought she had made a misjudgment.

Indeed, the fanatics readied their blades and rushed towards the girl, who was kneeling from her landing. The number of blades thrusting towards her was more than her fingers could count, and she could not avoid fatal impact if hit. But,

"—El Huma!!"

Responding to Rem's bloodcurdling scream, the corpse that had fallen beside her bounced. No, the copious blood that had gushed from the corpse had changed its form due to mana interference.

Spears of fresh blood, thrusting upwards from the ground, impaled the carelessly approaching black shadows. The frozen blood spears were brittle, breaking off at the base and losing their shape as soon as they pierced, but—

"—Ah!"

They bought Rem enough time to blow away the heads of the fanatics who had stopped. Blood, brain matter, and fragments of skull scattered, and steam rose into the cold air of the cave. Each time Rem swung her arm, corpses were created, building a pile.

There were about fifteen black-robed figures in the chamber. Most of them had already lost their lives to Rem's attacks, and the remaining few seemed unable to stop her raging assault. Rem's superiority was undeniable. Injured, missing an arm, and yet, her strength overwhelmed that of the black-robed figures.

And yet, why?

"Ah, ah, ah…"

Petelgeuse, pressing his face, exhaled heated breaths as he watched his believers fall to the rampage. The growing unease stemmed from the fact that his expression conveyed not sorrow, fear, or anxiety, but pure, unadulterated excitement.

Beside Petelgeuse, Subaru watched Rem's rampage. The meaning, the reason for the scene, her fighting form, was seeping into his brain.

He didn't understand. He didn't want to understand. He wasn't trying to understand. Something was getting through to him. Watching her, bleeding, wounded, yet still fighting, a surge of emotion welled up inside him.

If he were to voice that unease, perhaps he would have to. If he did, he might lose himself. He would have to agonize over what was right and what was wrong, and why things had to be this way.

Fearing that, prioritizing his own well-being, Subaru—

"My brain, it trembles."

As he spoke, Petelgeuse stood up. Swaying the hem of his black robe, Petelgeuse calmly stepped forward. He held nothing in his hands, unlike his believers. In fact, he leisurely swung his open hands, approaching with a relaxed demeanor, utterly devoid of any fighting spirit.

His body, made of only bone and skin, seemed utterly unrelated to strength. Rem noticed his approach, and after striking down another black shadow, she leaped. She hung upside down from the ceiling, glaring at Petelgeuse walking below.

Her bent knees stored explosive power, and in the next instant, her launched body, her arm, would surely smash Petelgeuse's slender frame to pieces.

Even so, why? Why was such an ominous feeling unsettling his heart?

"—Mu."

A hoarse voice barely crawled out from the back of his throat. It was a fragmented word, carrying not an ounce of the feelings he wanted to convey. But, gasping, raising his face, pushing his emotionless eyes wide open,

"…Rem."

In a weak, whispering voice, he uttered her name for the first time in what felt like ages.

"—Ah."

Did that voice, that almost-vanished voice, reach only her?

Suspended upside down in mid-air, a faint, soft emotion settled on the girl's blood-smeared face. Her lips softened ever so slightly, her eyes fixed on Subaru, trembling with joy,

—Countless crucifixes impaled her, pinning her to the ground.

2

Upon seeing blood spread from Rem's fallen body, Subaru was speechless.

Screams of agony and groans of pain echoed, interspersed with the incessant sound of sharp objects piercing flesh.

It was the sound of the cross-shaped blades repeatedly stabbing Rem's collapsing body.

Blades, detaching on their own, floated in the air, searching for unblemished skin to stab once more. There were eight such ownerless blades, repeatedly stabbing, withdrawing, and then piercing Rem's body in different places.

"The Authority of Sloth —Unseen Hand."

Petelgeuse muttered, gazing down at the profusely bleeding Rem.

He swung both hands, raised before his face, thrusting them out as if to display their emptiness.

"Reaching where one cannot reach. Accomplishing something with an unmoving body. Striving diligently in a slothful body—Ah, my brain trembles, I tell you, at my own slothfulness!"

The cross-shaped blades, simultaneously drawn, plunged into her body all at once again.

Rem's body, no longer even groaning, lay prostrate on the ground, not twitching.

Subaru stared blankly at Rem's final moments, utterly speechless.

His eyes wide, he forgot even to breathe. His consciousness began to fade before the unbearable reality of the blue-haired girl's demise, swallowed by the darkness.

Then,

"Fleeing is not permitted."

His escape was cut short by Petelgeuse, who grabbed his bangs and roughly forced his head up.

Petelgeuse leaned close to Subaru, who winced in pain and shock, his wide, bulging gray eyes darting frantically.

"Look, you must look. The girl is dead. She died for love. She fought through her wounds, resisted fear and stepped forward, and ended without accomplishing anything."

"Ugh, ah…"

"Look. Burn it into your mind. The result of your actions."

"—Huh?"

Petelgeuse forcibly pulled Subaru's face forward, preventing him from looking away from Rem, who was submerged in a pool of blood. He pressed Subaru to the ground, fixing his face with both hands, exhaling a foul breath.

"It is the result of your actions. You did nothing, you were 'slothful'. That is why the girl

died

! You killed her!"

"…My front…"

"With my arm! With my fingers! With my body! You, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you… killed her!!"

There was a tearing sound, as if something had been ripped apart.

Before Subaru's eyes, Rem's body bounced violently.

Her left arm had been torn from her shoulder. The severed arm was discarded like trash, rolling across the cold cave floor as if exposed.

"Snip, rip, tear."

"…Stop."

Petelgeuse made crude sound effects with his mouth, and each time, Rem's body was further destroyed. An ear was torn off, her right ankle twisted off, and the impaled blades vibrated, widening the wounds.

Rem was being violated.

Her dignity, before his very eyes, was being easily and joyfully desecrated.

That sight, that scene, a sight so horrifying he couldn't even think of looking away—

"—Petelgeuse!!"

It was enough to snap Subaru, who had been afraid to face reality, back to his senses.

He strained his neck, intending to bite through the throat right beside him, but the shackles prevented him from reaching. He lunged forward, the momentum causing his face to hit the ground. Petelgeuse looked down at Subaru and laughed delightedly.

"Ah, you finally called my name. I am so pleased!"

"I'll kill you, I'll kill you… I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll definitely kill you. I'll kill you. I'll kill you! Kill him, kill him… Die, let me kill you, die, die, dieee!"

"To hate someone in order to live! Ah, how twisted and wonderful. It seems my fingers and I have been diligent after all."

"I'll kill you, you bastard, I'll kill you. Rem, you killed her. I'll kill you, kill you, kill youuuu. Ah! I'll kill you! I'll kill you! Die, you bastard! You, ah, die!"

Subaru spat, spewing curses and roaring with resentment.

His shackled arms creaked, and the shackles biting into his legs absorbed the rising blood, gleaming dully.

He didn't care if his arms were torn off, or his legs.

If he could just break free from these shackles and kill the man before him, it would be enough. He hated him, hated him, hated him beyond measure. This man deserved to die. He shouldn't be allowed to live.

This man absolutely, at this very moment, had to die.

"This place has become quite soiled, so perhaps it's time to bid farewell."

Petelgeuse clapped his knees, abruptly ceasing his maniacal laughter and sighing.

Ignoring Subaru, who was shaking violently with rage, he beckoned his surviving followers to gather.

“We will abandon this place. It’s faster than cleaning up. The trial is scheduled for the day after tomorrow, but the location will be where the right index finger is currently hiding. Those of you remaining are to carry out your roles as the left hand. However, the five fingers must gather and divide the numbers equally, understood?”

“Die! Just die! Die, die, die!”

Issuing quick instructions, Petelgeuse clapped his hands. At this signal, the followers transformed into shadows, returning to the dim darkness of the cave.

Petelgeuse then slowly walked through the cave, which had been significantly reduced in the number of survivors.

Loud footsteps echoed in the cave, and Subaru hurled a blood-curdling scream at the fading sound.

“Wait, you bastard! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! Die right there! Die now! Die quickly! Die! Die! Dieee!”

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

Petelgeuse stopped, turning back with a casual air.

He nodded once at Subaru, who looked up at his face with hatred from below.

“Your position, I truly do not understand it. So, I think I shall judge it based on whether the Gospel is delivered or not.”

Petelgeuse raised a finger, tilted his head ninety degrees, and grinned grotesquely.

“With your hands and feet bound, only death awaits you if you are left here. However, if by chance the Gospel is delivered to you here, you will be saved."

"…"

"If you are saved, you are a comrade. If not, you are merely a passerby. How does that sound?"

Petelgeuse laughed brightly, as if to say it was a brilliant idea, and this time, truly turned his back on Subaru. Subaru continued to hurl curses at his retreating back, pouring out all his hatred in words and will, intent on killing Petelgeuse.

Petelgeuse showed no hint of these impacts in his stride as he headed for the exit.

Then, he stopped beside Rem's tragically destroyed corpse.

"Ah, yes, that is right. You, you tried very hard."

He murmured, straightened his back before Rem's corpse, and made a gesture like crossing himself.

"You died for love, and you resisted with all your might. Yet, you failed and broke, your love lost its destination, and your wish floats aimlessly in the void."

His tone, which had seemed to praise her, suddenly shifted. His words spoke of the futility of her actions, and as Petelgeuse crouched, a sneer appeared on his lips.

"Ah, you… are truly Slothful."

In the most insulting way possible, he desecrated the very existence of the girl named Rem.

"—!!"

A roar, a scream, echoed through the cave.

Rage that choked his throat, emotions too intense for words, regret deep enough to bring forth tears of blood—all these made Natsuki

Subaru let out an inhuman cry.

Hearing it, Petelgeuse laughed as if he had received the highest praise.

Heheheh, heheheh.

His steps did not falter.

It was impossible to stop his retreating back, let alone extinguish his life.

Heheheh, heheheh, the laughter continued to echo, on and on.

Heheheh, heheheh.

Heheheh, heheheh.

—Heheheh, heheheh, heheheheheheheh.

Chapter 39: Miracle

1

—Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.

Only a simmering hatred, only murderous intent, swelled in the hazy darkness.

—Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.

No matter how many times he whispered it, how many times he spat it out, how many times he wrung it dry, the endless spiral of hatred never ceased.

He had never hated anyone, anyone else, another human being, to this extent. Since coming to this world, he'd often experienced hating the intangible concept of fate. This merciless world had repeatedly cast Subaru into the depths of despair, confronted him with cruel realities no matter how many times he tried to climb out, and forced him to pay with his life every time he made the wrong choice— He'd hated that countless times.

However he had never, in his entire life, hated an individual to this degree.

"Petelgeuse… Romanee-Conti…!"

Every time he uttered that name, recalled that figure behind his eyelids, heard that shriek reverberate in his eardrums, and his brain registered that presence, a raging anger flared up within him.

What was that man, that madman, anyway?

His background was completely unknown. All Subaru knew was that he was a deranged lunatic, a flawed human incapable of communicating, a despicable scoundrel who thought nothing of oppressing others according to his own values, and a demon who mercilessly hurt Rem, who had sacrificed herself to save Subaru, and utterly violated her life and soul. All of it screamed that this man could not be allowed to live.

Therefore, he had to kill him. He had to kill him with his own hands; he couldn't entrust it to anyone else. Petelgeuse had to be killed by Subaru's hands.

Otherwise, how could he ever avenge Rem's death?

"Kill, kill, I will… I'll kill him…!"

Affirming his murderous intent aloud, Subaru writhed, making his handcuffs clatter. He violently swung his arms and legs, repeatedly trying to escape the restraints. The cuffs were already tightened so much they dug into his flesh. With his repeated rough movements, Subaru's body couldn't endure it, and the skin on his arms tore, the flesh underneath gouging out and bleeding.

A searing pain shot from the wound, making his brain boil. But each time the pain assaulted his nerves, he gritted his teeth, thinking of the suffering Rem endured. If his hands were to be ripped off, so be it. As long as he could escape the restraints, even if only a finger or a tooth could move, he would stop Petelgeuse's breath.

Frantically writhing, dripping blood and pain from the corner of his mouth with each movement, Subaru continued to rage, seeking an outlet for his hatred, a target for his murderous intent.

—Over four hours had already passed since Petelgeuse abandoned Subaru and left the cave.

The light sources placed throughout the cave walls —the Lagmite ore— had lost their brilliance. Now, they merely emitted a faint, weak glow, barely revealing their presence. Having lost their purpose of emitting light when struck, the cave was filled with an endless expanse of pale blue twilight. Subaru, struggling desperately to remove his hand and leg shackles, was also in darkness so deep he couldn't even clearly see his own hands. In a way, it was precisely because he was in the darkness where he couldn't clearly see the extent of the damage to his arms that he was able to engage in such self-harming actions.

“Petel… geuse…!”

Gritting his teeth, he spat out the name of the hated man, maintaining his strong resolve. In the invisible darkness, a world devoid of any presence other than his own. Heavy breathing, the pounding of his heart, the clinking of chains from his shackles, the sound of dripping blood—in such a place, where there were no external changes, loneliness rapidly weakened the human heart.

He briefly imagined what it would be like if all sound were suddenly removed.

“—Argh! Kill, kill, I’ll kill youuu!”

He quickly couldn’t bear the thought, and Subaru foamed at the mouth, letting out a furious scream of resentment.

In a world isolated from all external stimuli, being alone in that world could easily destroy, corrupt, and end the human mind. In a world where nothing would begin unless he acted, Subaru screamed to shake off the fear of being left behind, to turn away from that reality.

As long as he screamed his hatred, he could remain sane.

By clinging to murderous intent like a madman, he could avoid going mad.

To stay sane, Subaru needed hatred.

2

—After that, Subaru lost track of how many more hours passed.

“Hmph, hmph… coh, hmph… s-s-s…”

His consciousness drifted emptily between wakefulness and unconsciousness.

Fatigue, debilitation, and weariness gradually squeezed Subaru's mind and body dry. His throat, which had screamed every ounce of hatred, had long since become hoarse, and the unending resentment now produced only raspy breaths, no longer forming human words.

His body, which had continuously challenged the restraints, was now overworked beyond its limits and no longer responded to his brain's commands. His wrists were torn, the flesh ripped down to the bone. His ankles were exposed with raw, dark red flesh around the malleoli, and a convulsive pain assaulted him every time they scraped against the ground.

—Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.

Even so, deep within the wellspring of his heart, only murderous intent continued to gush forth.

With his body and mind no longer obeying, only his heart sustained Subaru. Roughly a full day had passed since he was abandoned and exiled to this solitary world. His body and mind had reached their limit, but Subaru hadn't allowed himself to lose consciousness. If his consciousness were to snap now, he wouldn't wake up again. And if he forgot this hatred, he wouldn't be able to continue perceiving reality.

Only hatred, only murderous intent, proved Subaru's sanity. If he forgot this, Subaru would once again withdraw into his own broken world, reduced to the slothful state of madly crying or laughing.

Sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth, sloth.

The three characters echoed repeatedly in his head. Petelgeuse's grating laugh, his insane gestures, his utterly mad actions—they all linked to those three characters.

If he succumbed to weakness and sank into sloth, he would be exposing the very ugliness that man had described. He absolutely couldn't accept that.

'Sloth' Petelgeuse. Witch Cult. Sin Archbishop. Fingers. Right hand. Left hand. Invisible hand. Index finger. Ring finger. Pinky.

Diligence. Sloth. Sloth. Sloth.

The words that were listed were characteristic terms from Petelgeuse's loudly proclaimed delusions. Subaru pondered what meaning they held in his dying mind, digging up memories related to Petelgeuse to connect his fading consciousness, even if only a little. He had to recall that man's face more vividly, more clearly, more distinctly, like illuminating it with a bright light. He had to dig up his voice, his appearance, his shadow, his walk, his way of speaking, his way of thinking, his touch—specifically, like recalling a beloved person—and burn them into his soul with hatred, continuing to fuel his awakening.

His strength to remove the restraints was gone, his throat to call for help was torn, and all his remaining willpower was poured into merely postponing the inevitable loss of consciousness, which would bring no benefit. From an outsider's perspective, Subaru's mind had already reached a dimension of madness. Only he himself failed to realize that there was no meaning in maintaining consciousness, in boiling with hatred. In a world where only he existed, his inability to realize this was like an eternally unanswerable question being posed.

Would his mind wear down and his heart vanish first? Or would his body weaken, unable to keep pace with his conscious awakening?

It was simply a choice between two predetermined endpoints. In essence, that was the only meaning left in clinging to consciousness.

What gave meaning to his futile and pointless struggle was not Subaru's stubborn refusal to give up, but—

"—?"

Suddenly, in the pitch-black darkness, Subaru felt the presence of someone else and held his breath.

He strained his neck, which was cumbersome to move even slightly, and looked towards the presence he felt. But the depth of the darkness filling the cave wasn't something that could be overcome by merely staring. With no Lagmite ore nearby, and no way to dispel the darkness, Subaru could only hold his breath and make himself small at the sudden appearance of the presence.

He couldn't determine if the presence was friendly or hostile. If a benevolent third party had appeared to help Subaru, they would have called out to him, so if someone had appeared without doing so, it was too suspicious.

He stopped breathing, consciously quieted even his heartbeat, and suppressed his own presence. Yet, the presence that had emerged slowly, truly slowly, little by little, at a crawling speed, but surely crept closer to Subaru.

In complete darkness, the presence approached Subaru as if it knew exactly where he was, despite him supposedly having suppressed his own presence.

He felt a sense of crisis, impatience, and dread from that being. But immediately after, a different sensation, completely opposite to those feelings, flashed through Subaru's mind.

—Wait, where did this presence even come from?

Subaru had no training in sensing someone's presence. Therefore, the reason Subaru could now feel someone's presence in the darkness was due to the biological sounds of another being that hadn't been there before. These sounds were quite close, certainly not coming from a distant area like the entrance. More importantly, they didn't originate from there. These sounds had suddenly appeared from near the center of the cave.

Thinking that far, Subaru's lips trembled with disbelief,

"Re-Rem…?"

He called out the name of the girl who was the most likely possibility for the sound and presence.

His rationality told Subaru that it couldn't be true. The last time Subaru had seen Rem, when there were still light sources in the cave, her appearance was too gruesome to behold.

Her limbs had been torn off, her ears removed, and her body pierced countless times with blades. In that state, she couldn't receive treatment, and furthermore, she had been left for tens of hours on the cold ground, which mercilessly stole her body heat.

She couldn't possibly be alive. It was only natural that she was dead. But if so, what other possibility was there? What was the true identity of this presence approaching Subaru at a crawling speed from where Rem had fallen?

"Rem, Rem…?"

"…"

To his desperate calls, however, only silence returned. Nevertheless, perhaps the presence had gained certainty of its goal from Subaru's voice, as its crawling speed seemed to change, if only slightly. It was a very subtle change.

Slowly, slowly, there was the sound of something dragging on the cold ground. She couldn't possibly be standing and walking. If it was her, she must be desperately moving the two of her remaining limbs, crawling like a caterpillar towards him.

Subaru tried to move himself, rising to his knees, pulling at his hand and leg shackles, making the chains clatter. But the cave's restraints were sturdy, and they wouldn't suddenly loosen after being challenged for over ten hours. With frustration and helplessness filling his chest, Subaru waited, almost in tears, for the crawling presence to reach him.

And then—

"Re—"

Finally, the crawling presence reached Subaru's body. Subaru's throat, which had been about to shout with joy as he received it, froze.

The sensation was too light, too cold, and didn't feel like that of a living person.

"Re-Rem…?"

Rem's body lay face down at Subaru's feet as he knelt. Her trembling body had already lost the warmth of blood, and was as cold as ice. Dragging that body, which should have been utterly finished, Rem still clung to Subaru's form. He couldn't feel her left hand. Only her right hand climbed his leg, his waist, his chest, covering him as if embracing him from the front.

Subaru, silently accepting that embrace of a corpse, didn't understand what was happening. He thought there was no doubt that it was Rem embracing him in front of his eyes. But her body, when he touched it like this, was clearly dead, only possessing an unreality, as if moving solely on the smoldering embers of a dying life.

For a while, the embrace must have continued.

Suddenly, that chilling reunion was ended by Rem herself. The strength left her body, which had been embracing Subaru with only one arm, and she collapsed onto his knees. Subaru hurriedly reached out to support her, but his hands didn't support Rem's body. Because—

"—Ugh?!"

His outstretched hands were grabbed by Rem's body and pressed against the ground. Subaru, who was pulled down forward, was stunned by Rem's sudden movement and unexpected strength, and even more astonished by her next action.

A large amount of liquid poured down from directly above onto Subaru's arms, which were on the ground. It was viscous, cold water with the smell of rust—Subaru realized it was Rem's vomited blood only after some of it splashed into his mouth and he tasted it.

The aversion to being drenched in someone else's blood sent shivers down Subaru's spine, but the rapid succession of events instantly erased that negative feeling.

"—Ma"

The whisper barely vibrated the air, interfering with mana and taking effect.

"—Gah!"

Pain, an intense pain like a sharp blade gouging into his wrist, assaulted Subaru. The pain, strong enough to make him arch his neck, spread from his wrist to his upper arm and shoulder.

He didn't know what had happened. He'd been vomited on, sudden pain shot through him, and at this rate, both his arms would become useless—just after that chilling thought,

—With a snap, the handcuffs, unable to withstand the internal pressure, burst open.

The light sound of metal shattering and fragments falling echoed on the cave floor. Subaru exhaled roughly at the sudden easing of the pain, recognizing the sensation of liberation spreading through his entire arm, and a burn-like pain covering his skin. He understood.

"Rem, you…"

Rem had used magic to freeze the blood she vomited, and that pressure had destroyed the handcuffs. Of course, Subaru's arms, which had been directly affected by the magic, were not unscathed. Yet, his wrists could rotate, and his fingers moved according to Subaru's will. If he disregarded the pain, he could probably move them as usual with sheer willpower. In other words, Rem's plan had succeeded.

As he tried to praise her, Subaru received a light body bumping into his now upright form. Light, far too light. Blood had been lost from her body, and now the very last vestiges of her consciousness were about to vanish.

"Rem… wait, Rem. Wait… me…"

Did he want to say, "Don't leave me behind"?

Did he want to ask, "Don't you hate me?"

Whichever was his true intention, Subaru despaired at his own selfishness. At his pathetic self, still trying to protect his weak self even now.

Even though Rem had literally defied death to save Subaru.

Yet, after this, the light of her life was truly about to extinguish itself.

“—Ngh.”

“Rem?”

Rem’s lips, the cold lips of a dead person, were trying to form words for the first time. The girl who had sparingly uttered even a single word, crawled on the ground with her unmoving body, and painstakingly refined magic with her hazy consciousness to achieve her goal, was trying to leave something behind at the very end. It was—

“L-Live.”

“—!”

“Lo-ve… you…”

She died.

That moment, Rem died.

In Subaru's arms, her light body became heavy. The body, still light even when heavy, a body completely devoid of soul, its weight pressed down on Subaru's entire being. In the end, brokenly, she had told Subaru, "Live".

—A wail of sorrow echoed, trailing through the dark cave.

3

It was several hours later that Subaru finally managed to escape the restraint of his leg shackles.

With his hands now free, Subaru reached out within the confines of his leg shackles and succeeded in grabbing one of the cross-shaped weapons that had fallen from the hands of the black-robed figures who died fighting Rem. Its broken blade was useless as a weapon, but perhaps that was for the best. If the blade had been intact, Subaru might have resorted to something as reckless as severing his own ankle.

"…It's light, isn't it?"

He rotated his ankle, where much of the flesh was scraped away and bone was visible, checking its function through the pain. Ignoring the searing pain that whitened his vision with every step, it seemed he could walk without hindrance.

Clutched in Subaru's arms as he stood was Rem's lifeless body. In his now-free arms, her body, missing two limbs, was incredibly small and light. He could completely envelop her tiny form by cradling her against his chest, and her smallness made him feel incredibly pathetic, yet deeply sorry, for having his life saved by such a frail figure.

The imperfectly bladed cross. He carefully, painstakingly, repeatedly struck its broken hilt against the joint of the leg shackle's metal clasp. It was a battle of endurance between the cross's disintegration and the shackle's destruction, and the cross barely won out. He flung the freed leg shackle against the wall, and the Lagmite ore glowed with a faint blue light from the impact, illuminating the cave.

The cold light brought the dim cave into focus. Even such a weak light was dazzling to Subaru's eyes, stinging his eyelids after tens of hours in darkness. He felt tears welling up from the back of his eyes from the pain and was oddly impressed that he still had tears left in his body. He thought he had already cried and screamed so much that his throat was hoarse and his tears had all run dry.

"Let's go, Rem."

While the impacted Lagmite ore was still glowing, Subaru began to walk towards the exit. With each step, pain shot up his legs. The ascending pain traveled to his shoulders, and the arms cradling Rem also suffered immense anguish.

There was no part of his body that didn't hurt. No part that wasn't bleeding. But the part that felt the most intense pain no longer felt anything at all.

Slowly, at a snail's pace, Subaru and Rem advanced across the cave's cold ground. The coldness of the earth directly reached the soles of his shoeless feet, but Rem's body in his arms was much, much colder. The coldness outside was nothing compared to that.

After passing through the long, narrow passage of the cave, they reached the entrance blocked by a rock. Suddenly, upon reaching it, Subaru was at a loss. The rock blocking the opening was about his height vertically and three times his width horizontally. In terms of weight, it would likely take more than ten Subarus to move it.

It was impossible to move. He wondered how he had even entered in the first place, but his memories from when he was withdrawn from reality were vague and hazy, and he couldn't find any instructions on how to move the rock in his brain.

"It was a straight path, wasn't it…"

Even if he thought there might be another exit, he didn't remember any signs of one along the way. Perhaps there was a cleverly disguised hidden passage like this rock, but if so, how much time and luck would it take to find it? Both flashes of insight and good fortune were utterly unfamiliar to Subaru.

"After all this, you've got to be kidding me… Please, tell me you're kidding…"

His strength drained, Subaru complained in a powerless voice at the mercilessness before him. As his body leaned in, he touched the rock in front of him— At that instant.

The rock, which should have had enough mass to support Subaru's body, suddenly vanished. Subaru, who was supposed to lean against the rock, stumbled, barely managed to steady himself by stepping forward, and the world was scorched crimson by the descending twilight.

"—!"

The orange sunlight provided such a vivid glow that a cry of pain involuntarily escaped him. The sunset, sinking beyond the forest and over the hills, filled the horizon, painting the world the color of flames as its final farewell after fulfilling its day's role.

Subaru, who had been in darkness for so long, crouched for a while, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the light. After some time, he stood up, blinked several times, and then looked around, confirming that the light no longer affected him.

As expected, the landscape, consisting only of clusters of trees as far as the eye could see, was completely unfamiliar. Even looking far in all four directions, there was no sign of human activity like a forest path or a road. Considering the nature of the people who had been holed up in the cave, it was only natural; it seemed to be a place of confinement completely isolated from human settlements.

"I'll walk…"

He didn't know his destination, and there was no way to determine one. Nevertheless, as if pushed forward by the light weight in his arms, Subaru began to walk through the forest. Stepping on leaves, climbing over roots, and crossing dirt, Subaru pressed on through the gradually darkening night.

He was certain he was near the Mathers territory— Near Roswaal's mansion. When his consciousness was in a hazy abyss, Rem must have been trying to reach the mansion with Subaru. He recalled being swayed in the dragon carriage, finding peace on her lap, and that's what she had been doing. There was an incident where the dragon carriage overturned, it was the work of those 'Witch Cultists', they abducted Subaru, Rem burned out her life to save Subaru, and now Subaru was like this.

What started as an attempt to organize the situation turned into a gathering of hatred from the fragments of memory, and Subaru's insides were scorched by a bottomless flame.

Thinking of Rem, his heart ached as if being squeezed by gratitude and regret. Remembering Petelgeuse, his body creaked as if about to burst with hatred and resentment.

Anger, sorrow, hatred, and affection supported and propelled Subaru forward.

His path was undefined, and there was nothing to guide him. Still, Subaru's feet didn't stop, and his consciousness continued to resist being lost.

—Perhaps, it was a miracle that befell him.

With no signposts, nothing to rely on, only refusing to stop and continuing to walk, he found what he sought, the place he wanted to reach. A miracle is when a mysterious phenomenon beyond human power occurs. If so, then Subaru's arrival at his destination, having traversed the shortest distance without anyone's help, was undoubtedly a miracle.

Since coming to this world, for the first time, the world had granted Subaru a miracle. If there was a god who governed fate, they had smiled upon Subaru for the first time.

That smile, that miracle—

"—Ha."

—Only graced him that one time.

4

The exact same hell he'd witnessed once before had once again ravaged the village.

Burnt-down homes, blood-stained villagers. Corpses, robbed of life after futile resistance, were haphazardly piled in the center of the village, forming a mountain of the dead.

Slit by blades, pierced through, incinerated and crushed by magic—there was no hope of survivors. The only difference from before was the even more severe disfigurement of the villagers' bodies, and…

"Petra. Mild. Luca. Meina. Cain, Dane…"

…The gruesome bodies of children were also incorporated into that vile effigy.

Clutching Rem, Subaru's knees gave out. He collapsed, clutching the cold body in his arms ever so tightly, and choked back a sob.

What had he been doing? Why, knowing this would happen, had he overlooked it?

Until he emerged from the forest path and saw black smoke rising from the direction of the village, Subaru had completely forgotten this scene, this heart-shattering vision of hell. No, he had averted his eyes. He'd pretended to be heartbroken by Rem's death, using his endless hatred for Petelgeuse as an excuse. Subaru had once again chosen self-preservation, trying to escape what had happened.

The result was the scene before him. The children were dead here because Rem, who should have protected them last time, couldn't reach the village. Instead of Subaru surviving, the children had been subjected to death at the end of their suffering.

This despicable reality gnawed at Subaru's heart. Now he understood. He understood everything.

It was Petelgeuse.

He had killed the villagers, killed the children, and killed Rem. Not once, but twice, he had committed unforgivable acts.

His course of action was decided. He knew what he had to do. Petelgeuse had to be killed. Killed, killed, utterly annihilated, every last cell burned away, his very existence erased. Unless he did that, he couldn't atone for their deaths.

His thoughts were dyed a single color: hatred. His vision turned crimson, and he felt most of the blood he lacked rush to his head, overflowing from his nose and trickling down. Roughly wiping away the blood dripping from his nostrils, he readjusted his hold on Rem, careful not to defile her, and stood up. His knees trembled, his ankles rattled; it was a miracle he could even stand, let alone walk.

"Kill him, kill him, kill him, kill him, I'll kill him…"

If he could walk, if he could move forward, he'd tear out Petelgeuse's throat.

Dragging his consciousness, solidified by murderous intent, Subaru headed towards the mansion. He had witnessed the hell of the village. Next, the mansion. What awaited him there? Just before he died, just before he would restart, his memories were frayed and unclear. He thought his heart had shattered upon reaching the mansion and seeing something definitive. He desperately tried to recall what it was, burning through his neural pathways to remember.

He had found Rem dead.

That experience, this time, he had already endured. Rem was dead, and the shock her death and devotion brought Subaru was immeasurable.

"Kuh."

Naturally, a laugh escaped him. Truly, truly, nothing had changed, had it?

Only the order was wrong. Nothing that had happened had changed at all. Had he ever spent a restart so pointlessly? In every previous scenario, Subaru should have gained something through death. But what value did he, now mentally broken, unable to salvage anything, and reunited with hell, possess?

The murderous intent began to lose its target. Only the name Petelgeuse supported Subaru. That should be enough. He was the one he wanted to kill. If he killed him, then he'd kill him, just kill him. After killing him— He wished he would die too.

Noise started to mix into his thoughts, and Subaru's consciousness flickered repeatedly. Standing once again on the border between sanity and madness, Subaru looked ahead with bloodshot eyes. No matter what, heading to the mansion was paramount now, choosing, as always, to postpone the immediate situation.

Then—

"—!!"

The moment he reached the top of the hill, Subaru saw Roswaal's mansion collapse.

5

The roof caved in, and the terrace crumbled. Windowpanes shattered simultaneously, scattering glittering fragments, and the cracked white walls were torn apart as if ripped asunder.

Subaru, who had just reached the front gate, gazed up in a daze at the overwhelming destruction.

As if a demolition crew had used bombs, the mansion lost its outline in an instant. The familiar building lost its shape, scattering its remains across the meticulously maintained garden, losing all traces of ever having been a mansion.

He searched his memories, seeking out any experience of encountering such a sight. However there were no corresponding memories. Or perhaps the shock was too great, and he didn't remember the moment of his death.

"Wh-What…?"

Confusion formed on his lips, and in his mind, he saw the gaunt man's sneer. If the village massacre was that man's doing, then he must have turned the spearhead of his heinous acts towards the mansion as well. This might have been the means that led to the mansion's collapse. Even so,

"What on earth could do this…?"

Subaru cradled his head, bewildered by the incomprehensible sight, and his eyes wavered as he exhaled a white breath. When he sought the sensation in his arms more strongly out of helplessness, an even greater coldness ran through his palms, pouring sadness into his chest. And then, belatedly, Subaru noticed.

—His own ragged breaths were visible, clouding white.

Before he knew it, a piercing pain encompassed his entire body. His exhaled breath turned white, transforming into ice droplets the moment it dispersed into the air. The inhaled oxygen was frigid, freezing his lungs and tormenting Subaru from within.

He didn't know what was happening.

His entire body's warmth was stolen, making it difficult even to stand, and he collapsed. He squatted down, then fell forward onto the ground, lying on his side while holding Rem's body, and remained motionless.

This wasn't a matter of lacking blood or being out of stamina.

Subaru knew this sensation: his will not reaching his fingertips, his consciousness almost separating from his body. It was a feeling of desolate emptiness and powerlessness he had experienced many times before, yet never grew accustomed to.

As the end drew near, Subaru tried to resist it even slightly. Within his unmoving body, he sent commands from his neural pathways throughout, seeking a place that would obey his will. But only the pupils in his eye sockets, which barely moved, listened, merely looking up at the ruined mansion.

"—Ah."

Then, in his now utterly fixed gaze, Subaru saw it.

—It was a beast, standing atop the ruins of the collapsed mansion.

A beast with gray fur flowing over its entire body and glittering golden eyes. With its four limbs planted and its long, long tail swaying, it was majestic and overly mystical. Above all, the beast possessed a colossal body, so massive it could be mistaken for the mansion itself.

Seeing its form from a distance, Subaru realized the cause of the mansion's collapse. That beast had suddenly appeared from inside the mansion. If such a gigantic body emerged from within, the mansion naturally couldn't withstand the pressure.

Shaking its body and surveying its surroundings was a giant, cat-like beast with gray fur. It exhaled sharp fangs from its mouth and a breath like a white blizzard, transforming the world into a pure white hell that froze all living things.

What was that, he thought, as his eyes finally clouded white, and Subaru realized his throat had somehow closed up. The coldness he had felt so intensely vanished, and he even felt warmth. A temptation to surrender everything to that warmth flickered, and Subaru forgot everything: the hatred that burned his body, the sorrow that tore at his soul, everything.

Forgetting, forgetting, his consciousness drifted beyond oblivion, beyond the freezing warmth.

《Sleep— Along with my daughter.》

Just before falling asleep, he thought he heard someone's voice. Natsuki Subaru melted and sank into the pleasure of everything, everything becoming inconsequential.

Melting, melting, melting— He vanished.

Chapter 40:
The Other Side of Murderous Intent

1

—By the time I realized, my consciousness was in a deep, deep darkness.

In the vast, spreading gloom, my consciousness sought change, its gaze wandering.

The endless jet-black seemed to stretch to the world's end, or perhaps the world offered the suffocating sensation of a miniature garden, extending only as far as I could reach.

Where was this place? Why was I here?

Such questions surfaced, but even that felt strange.

I didn't even know who I was, the one thinking these things.

Only my consciousness drifted emptily, while the vessel of flesh that supported it received no will.

I was standing. My feet were on the ground. Yet, what I perceived as my feet blended with the darkness that consumed my vision, making my very footing literally uncertain.

—Suddenly, a change occurred in the world dominated by darkness.

Shadows began to warp and distort, and the space before me started to crack.

After a mere instant of anomaly, a single human figure emerged from that spot.

I thought it was the shadow of a woman. The moment I recognized her, how could I name the inexpressible emotion that swelled within my chest?

Driven by emotions that explosively expanded, I wanted to rush to that shadow. But my legs still wouldn't obey my will, and there was nothing I could do for the distant figure.

Even if I wanted to call out, I didn't know what to say, nor how to form words.

Even if I wanted to shed tears of frustration, I didn't know how to express emotions.

I don't understand, I don't understand, I don't understand anything.

However as if understanding my thoughts, the shadow slowly extended both arms, closing the unshrinking distance from its side.

Those two hands slowly, surely, approached until they were within embracing distance—

"—I love you."

A sense of euphoria transmitted from the touching fingertips, and joy enveloped my entire body—

2

When his consciousness traveled back in time and settled into his body, Subaru stumbled spectacularly.

"Whoa?! What, what's wrong, bro?!"

Kadomon, from behind the counter, looked down at Subaru, who had suddenly face-planted on the street, raising and lowering his hands in a flustered manner.

Choking from the impact of the fall, Subaru, who'd gotten some meaningless scrapes, grimaced in pain.

"Nah… just, slipped a little."

"Slipped? More like your leg went missing for a second, didn't it? Are you sure you're okay standing and walking? If you lose anything else besides your common sense, I'm not dealing with you anymore.”

“You worry too much… What do you mean, ‘anything else besides common sense’? You make it sound like I’m some kind of uncivilized ruffian.”

“Exactly. Oh, considering you’re freeloading off some aristocrat, I guess you’re even more difficult to handle.”

Subaru clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction at Kadomon’s harsh words.

Then, he suddenly felt a tug on his sleeve, followed by a warm sensation spreading through his body. He turned his head towards the warmth, and there was Rem.

“—Are you alright, Subaru?”

She said, placing her palm on Subaru’s scraped skin where he had fallen.

The water mana transmitted from her touch interfered with Subaru’s scrapes, enhancing their healing power and providing hemostasis and recovery.

As he felt the pain recede, what simultaneously flooded Subaru’s chest was:

“Rem…”

“…? Yes, it’s Rem.”

Subaru called her name in a weak, hoarse voice. Rem tilted her head in confusion before saying,

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost. You don’t have to worry, Rem is right here. Your Rem, Subaru.”

Unusually for her, she smiled with a hint of a joke in her tone.

Subaru’s current haggard appearance must have seemed that painful to her. And her words, “like you’ve seen a ghost,” were utterly unfunny.

Truly, completely, not funny at all.

“Rem, I…”

“It’s difficult, isn’t it? Rem thinks you look much more like yourself when you’re smiling than when you’re frowning. So Rem thought Rem would try to make you smile.”

Rem furrowed her brow slightly, looking troubled. And while she did so, Subaru’s scrapes completely healed. Seeing this, Rem nodded once, saying, “It’s done,” and started to withdraw her fingers.

“…”

“Subaru?”

Subaru grabbed her fingers from above, refusing to let the warmth escape.

Rem looked up at him with a surprised expression at his forceful action. But when she saw the intense emotion clearly etched on Subaru’s face,

“What’s truly wrong? Rem is happy when you… well, when you do this, but it surprises Rem when it’s so sudden.”

“Thin. Small… Warm, aren’t you?”

“Rem is a little self-conscious about being small, so Rem would prefer not to hear that. But it’s okay if you say it, Subaru. Of course I’m warm. —Because Rem is alive.”

At that one phrase, Subaru’s head snapped up, and he looked at Rem.

Their gazes locked directly, and Rem’s eyes held compassion as she said,

“Were you anxious? Rem is right here. You saved Rem with your life, Subaru. So, it's alright."

—No. That wasn't it.

Subaru had let Rem die. Killed her. Twice, mercilessly and cruelly.

The first time, perhaps fundamentally, might have been unrelated to Subaru. However the second time was different. The second time, without any room for excuse, Rem died for Subaru.

To protect Subaru, to save Subaru, for Subaru, she used up her life, and then, from that depleted life, she squeezed out every last bit and died for Subaru.

The Rem before him didn't know that.

She didn't know how much pain and humiliation she had endured, and how brutally she had died in the end.

Only Subaru knew.

He knew that if the same situation arose again, Rem would not hesitate to protect Subaru in exactly the same way, and would suffer the same humiliation and lose her life.

"…"

Before he knew it, Subaru was gripping Rem's small hand, as if trying to hide something overflowing from within, and had bowed his head so she couldn't see his face.

At Subaru's reaction, Rem's fingertips trembled with worry, wondering if she had said something to trouble him. However, it was only for an instant. Perhaps she thought such an attitude would scare Subaru even more, and so she said,

"It's alright. It's alright. It's alright."

Gently, as if soothing a child, she patted Subaru's back with her free hand.

Caressing him, cherishing him, until Subaru could lift his head.

Always gently, always lovingly.

3

“I hate to bother you when you’re busy, but you can’t be canoodling here, it’s bad for business.”

That’s what Kadomon said as he watched the scene unfold outside his shop, shooing them away.

Normally, Subaru would have retorted, “It doesn’t matter if we’re here or not, your business isn’t exactly thriving anyway!” and probably angered him, but at this moment, Subaru lacked the mental composure for that.

He simply followed Rem, who was pulling his hand, and hastily left the spot.

The shopkeeper’s decency was evident in how he didn’t immediately send them away, and at least didn’t cause a scene until Subaru calmed down. Unfortunately, Subaru didn’t have the luxury of noticing that either.

Only one emotion now dominated Subaru’s heart.

—Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.

It was nothing but overwhelming hatred, a hatred that wouldn’t vanish even after dying and rewinding time.

Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.

That was the name of Subaru’s fated enemy now. The worst murderer, who had committed an unforgivable sin and massacred Rem and the villagers.

Killing that man was Subaru’s mission now.

"I'll definitely snuff out his life… with my own hands."

He'd twist that hideous face with his own hands. A dark joy bloomed in Subaru's chest as he thought this, and a distorted, unfamiliar smile appeared on his lips.

He'd stab him, tear him, crush him, twist him apart, make him beg for his life, and then kill him.

Just imagining it made an uncontrollable urge to laugh well up from deep in his throat.

"…Subaru, can Rem talk to you for a moment?"

Just then, Rem, walking half a step behind, called out to Subaru, who was steeped in this gloomy pleasure.

Subaru stopped, turning to Rem and asking, "What's up?" She gazed intently at Subaru's face, making a small sniff with her well-formed nose.

"No… it might just be Rem's imagination. Rem just felt a… an unpleasant scent, from you, Subaru, getting stronger."

"An unpleasant scent, huh?"

At her observation, he rubbed his nose against his arm and sniffed, but couldn't distinguish anything.

Given Rem's words, the strong scent emanating from Subaru must be the "Witch's" scent. Thinking back, several of Petelgeuse's remarks seemed to hint at something similar. It was a thought he'd forgotten after a brief consideration before, but,

"Could Return by Death really be connected to the Witch…?"

Every time he tried to confess his Return by Death, the Witch's presence around Subaru grew stronger.

In the Witchbeast Forest, he had even used it to his advantage, but due to subsequent events, he had neglected to pursue it further.

Perhaps an unconscious aversion to reaching that conclusion was also part of the strong power the word “Witch” held.

Before diving into thoughts he’d never dared to entertain, Subaru smiled at Rem, who was watching him anxiously as he remained silent. Then, he said,

“Don’t make that face, Rem. It’ll ruin your cute expression, and things will look bleak.”

“Sorry. Rem worries a lot, so Rem can’t help but…”

“Relax. No matter what, I’m not going to change, and I won’t be defeated by that scent or whatever it is. In fact, I’ll use it to my advantage, whatever it takes.”

Subaru didn’t have many cards in his hand.

In this world, Subaru didn’t possess the kind of cards even ordinary people had. So, any unique trait that could serve as a different kind of card, no matter what it was, had to be considered a positive and added to his hand.

What was so bad about the Witch’s scent? In the Witchbeast Forest, he had successfully outwitted its malice and used it conveniently, hadn’t he? He’d just have to keep doing that with various tricks in the future.

Rem remained silent for a moment at Subaru’s smile, her gaze wandering as if deliberating what attitude to adopt. To encourage her indecisiveness, Subaru scratched his head, then extended his hand.

“Come on, let’s go. If you’re worried I might disappear, just hold onto me.”

“Eh?”

“I definitely can’t win in a test of strength, so that feels safer, right?”

At his words, which implicitly contained a hint of shyness, Rem looked between Subaru's face and hand.

"Right."

Smiling, she took his hand and stood not half a step behind, beside Subaru.

So, the two walked side by side. Rem, looking down slightly and gazing intently at their clasped hands, kept her mouth tightly shut, matching Subaru's pace without a word.

Leading such a devoted girl, as they moved from the lower district of the royal capital towards the aristocratic quarter, Subaru savored the warmth of her palm— All while his murderous intent continued to seethe.

Their hands were joined, but their hearts faced opposite directions.

Natsuki Subaru's heart was, endlessly, dark, stagnant, and drawn deeper and deeper into the abyss.

4

This particular loop was Subaru’s third.

The first loop was on the day he was summoned, regarding the stolen insignia.

The second started with the witchbeast commotion at Roswaal’s mansion.

Now, this was the third, a loop involving the Witch Cult, whose full scope remained unclear.

In this third loop, Subaru should have already died twice.

In previous loops, upon returning from death, he would typically organize the situation and use it as fuel to somehow devise a strategy.

“It’s pathetic, but…”

This time, there was a flaw: the memories of both the first and second loops were unclear.

He vaguely remembered the first iteration.

He and Rem rode in a dragon carriage towards the mansion. Subaru was left behind halfway and headed for the mansion with Otto. Then he parted ways with Otto and reached the village— After that, his memory was clouded by a significant haze. The fragmented information he could recall was Rem’s death, Ram’s death. And on top of that, only the point that he died somewhere inside the mansion.

The second world was even worse.

He had no memory whatsoever of returning, and his memories only began to clear up around the time of his confrontation with Petelgeuse, specifically before and after Rem’s murder.

Given Subaru's broken mental state leading up to that point, it might be unavoidable, but only fragmentary pieces, even finer than mere fragments, remained of his memory until then. The only thing he could piece together from those memory fragments was—

"Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti…!"

The name of the hateful madman, and the sole source of Subaru's motivation now.

Understanding the pathetic situation he was in, Subaru had to delve deeper into his thoughts.

Namely, he had to select crucial information from the scattered memories of the first and second loops and break through the loop this third time— He had to kill Petelgeuse. To do so, he had no choice but to work his brain until it burned out.

First, he had to consider the official time limit.

The attack on Roswaal's mansion and the nearby village by Witch Cultists would likely occur around half a day after Subaru arrived in the village.

There shouldn't have been any significant change in the date between the first and second iterations. Considering that Subaru left Crusch's mansion in the first iteration three days after the incident at Kadomon's shop, and then spent about two days returning to the Mathers territory,

"The time limit is five days, no, four and a half days…?"

He could only grind his teeth at how little time there was.

Despite the vastly different scale of travel, the time allotted was almost the same as in the previous mansion incident. Within that limited time, he had to annihilate the Witch Cultists— or at least, definitely take down Petelgeuse.

Once the time limit was confirmed, the next step was to confirm the necessary conditions for breaking the loop.

Avoiding the attack on the mansion and village, annihilating the Witch Cult, and ensuring Petelgeuse's death. These were the problems Subaru had to solve this time.

If purely pursued, any of these would ultimately lead to the last one —Petelgeuse's murder— which would naturally fulfill the other conditions.

In other words, the condition fate had presented to Subaru this time was,

"To brutally kill Petelgeuse."

Killing him, the root of all evil, that wicked murderer, would save everything.

It was a terribly simple and clear rule this time. All that remained was to find the answer necessary to achieve that simple condition.

The Witch Cultists led by Petelgeuse— Their fighting strength was at least not something he could contend with alone. Even Rem, in her Oni form, was eventually killed despite her overwhelming individual power. It was unclear how much Petelgeuse's "Unseen Hand" ability was involved in that, but in the first place, he couldn't possibly push such a burden onto her alone.

To counter a group, the strength of another group was definitely needed.

The Mathers territory's power against such numerical violence was quite low. In fact, he had never seen Roswaal, the lord, leading private soldiers. Normally, a lord would have some fighting force at their disposal, but in Roswaal's case, perhaps because his own area-of-effect destructive power was too high, his reserves of such forces were unknown.

At least, there was no sign of this unknown group resisting the past two attacks. This option could be dismissed entirely.

No, on second thought,

"Where was Roswaal, anyway, during those attacks…?"

Subaru hadn't seen him in either the first or second loop.

In the second loop, he was present at the scene of the mansion's collapse, and the fate of the three people and one beast, excluding Rem and the villagers, was unknown. But at the very least, Roswaal had overlooked the attack on his own village and showed no signs of having annihilated the Witch Cultists.

The possibilities were:

"Either Roswaal was immediately assassinated, or ambushed and incapacitated. Or, he was absent during a crucial moment when he absolutely needed to be there…?"

If it was the former, he could only sigh at the Witch Cultists' thoroughness; if the latter, at the terrible timing. Indeed, Roswaal had been absent from the mansion during the previous incident and had a track record of not being present at critical moments. The possibility couldn't be ruled out.

As he recalled these things, Subaru also remembered the end of the previous loop. It was,

"That incomprehensible giant creature that destroyed the mansion."

It was a quadrupedal beast with an unbelievably massive body, large enough to be mistaken for the mansion itself.

Its sight, freezing the world with the cold air it spewed, was breathtaking, and though he couldn't say for sure, Subaru likely died from freezing in that cold.

If that was one of the Witch Cult's trump cards or something, then,

"Even more so, the fighting power is too insufficient."

Even just engaging the Witch Cult in battle, Rem alone was noticeably lacking as a force. If a final boss was lurking behind them, it was out of the question.

Therefore, Subaru's urgent task, above all else, was fighting power. And specifically, fighting power capable of contending with the

Witch Cult and a super-large boss character.

Subaru had an idea about where to find that fighting power.

It was—

5

By the time Subaru and Rem made it back to Crusch's mansion, it was already evening, the sun starting to dip, painting the sky in deeper shades of crimson.

"Welcome back."

It was Wilhelm who greeted them at the gate.

After a slight bow from a distance, he narrowed his eyes, observing the two walking closely together.

"Hmm. Subaru-dono, a wandering eye is perhaps unavoidable for a young man, but personally, I don't much care for it."

"What are you talking about, Wilhelm-san? Rem's just holding my hand so I don't get lost. Right?"

"Yes, of course. Rem worries greatly if she doesn't keep her eyes and hands on you so you don't get lost. Rem doesn't think we can let our guard down even inside the mansion."

"Well, I think I'll be fine with that…"

As Subaru responded to Wilhelm's teasing tone, Rem tightened her grip on his hand with a strange stubbornness. With a wry smile, Subaru turned his attention back to Wilhelm.

"Is someone else here to see Crusch-san again?"

His question was prompted by the sight of a dragon carriage parked beside Wilhelm.

The vehicle, noticeably adorned with lavish decorations, was pulled by a noble black ground dragon with a sleek, almost lustrous, hide

—not just fine fur.

It was unclear if ground dragons had bloodlines like horses, but this one certainly possessed a distinction that set it apart from any he'd seen before.

The coachman, impeccably dressed in formal attire, offered a silent bow and showed no inclination to utter a single unnecessary word.

Gauging the meaning of Subaru's question and gaze, Wilhelm nodded.

"Yes, that's right. Since the declaration of the Royal Selection, there's been a constant stream of people requesting an audience with Lady Crusch. Though, there are also those whom Lady Crusch herself invites."

"So, they're the kind of people who want to butter up someone who might be the future queen, huh? Well, I guess they've got their own struggles with all that."

When Subaru succinctly and bluntly stated the fact, Wilhelm offered a wry smile. Then, he suddenly looked into Subaru's eyes, his expression hardening.

Subaru tilted his head, wondering what was wrong with him.

"Subaru-dono. Has there been some change in your state of mind while you were out?"

"Huh? What's with the sudden question? Do I look different?"

With a sharp intake of breath, he shrugged his shoulders playfully and spun around. Rem, still holding his hand, was spun along with him, but Wilhelm closed his eyes at the sight.

"Darkness nests within your eyes. The real thing, not a counterfeit."

Subaru stopped dead in his tracks, the foolish smile vanishing from his face.

Beneath that ambiguous smile, a "real" smile emerged.

“Don’t be silly, Wilhelm-san. It’s like you’re saying something weird happened to me.”

“I wouldn’t call it a small change. To harbor such a dim light requires a reason that is anything but ordinary. —I know this firsthand.”

Wilhelm responded in a low voice, a faint smile gracing his lips as well.

Subaru sensed that there was no bright promise in it, only a pure, sharpened emotion directed at “something,” and a sense of understanding settled in his chest.

Wilhelm, too, was someone seething with murderous intent towards something unforgivable. That’s why, just as Subaru understood him, he likely understood Subaru.

“Are you going to keep your distance from me?”

From Wilhelm’s perspective, Subaru’s current precariousness might make him hesitate to allow him close to his lady. But Subaru was half-convinced that wouldn’t be the case.

Indeed,

“No. It would be best for Subaru-dono to do as he wishes. Compared to you just a moment ago, who seemed unwilling to truly see anything, I find you much more preferable now.”

Wilhelm shook his head, answering Subaru’s question.

Naturally, the same kind of smile as Wilhelm’s appeared on Subaru’s lips. The two, though not understanding the deepest parts of each other’s hearts, were acquainted on the surface.

So, the two exchanged somewhat dark smiles, but then,

“Subaru. You’re making a bad face.”

“Hehehe… Ow ow ow ow! Rem, hey, you’re gonna rip it off!”

Suddenly, his ear was pulled, interrupting their illicit conversation. Rem narrowed her eyes at the protesting Subaru.

“Please, don’t make Rem anxious.”

“Whoa, whoa, for Rem to make a demand, that’s super rare, but it’s pretty vague. Don’t worry, Rem. I’ll make everything work out, somehow.”

Now that he knew what he had to do, Subaru had no cause for anxiety.

The simplicity of having a necessary task and knowing how to accomplish it felt comfortable right now.

How liberating it was to simply have to kill the person he needed to kill.

Subaru smiled and spoke kind words.

Yet, in response, Rem’s expression became even more emotionless, and the grip on his hand tightened, as if she were afraid of something.

Then, she seemed about to say something, hesitating, but,

“It seems our guest is departing.”

Wilhelm murmured, looking towards the mansion. Through the gate —from the entrance to Crusch’s residence— a figure could be seen walking towards them.

It was a tall person with long, dull blonde hair. Dressed in a well-tailored formal suit and adorned with ornaments, at first glance, he put the image of a nouveau riche in Subaru’s mind. He was probably around thirty years old. The initial impression was that of a profligate noble with a penchant for spending.

“Mr. Nouveau Riche,” as Subaru mentally dubbed him, unaware of the impression he was making, approached the gate and noticed the three gathered there.

"Hmph. What an unusual gathering."

He touched his chin beard, which he seemed to be cultivating for style, and commented on them in that manner. Subaru frowned at the incomprehensibility of being seemingly known, but the man politely bowed.

"My apologies. My name is Russell Fellow. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. —Mr. Natsuki Subaru."

"…Right. Thanks. By the way, can I ask how you know my name? I know it's a strange thing to say, but I'm just a small-time civilian whose defining characteristic is being unremarkable, so it's embarrassing for my name to be known."

"A little connection, you see. During the Royal Selection conference, the person who claimed to be Lady Emilia's knight became quite famous. Though, not many would know that the same person is currently recuperating at Lady Crusch's mansion."

To Subaru's growing caution, Russell responded with a light tone and a smile free of malice. However, the content of his words already invited further wariness, clearly conveying the unpleasant character of someone who seemed to be doing this on purpose.

"Russell-dono. Did your discussion with Lady Crusch go well?"

However, Wilhelm interjected from the side, snatching away Subaru's attempt at a wary challenge. Russell shifted his gaze from Subaru to the old man, shrugging his shoulders, and replied, "No," shaking his head.

"Lady Crusch is a formidable person. Indeed, the gaze she directs towards us is sharp, and her will is unyielding. Considering everything that has happened, it will not be easy."

"Is that so? That's unfortunate. If you do not yield, it will be exceedingly difficult to get the others to agree."

"With your ducal status and Sir Wilhelm by your side, the starting conditions for the Royal Selection would be too favorable. …You are calling yourself Wilhelm Trias now, I presume?"

Calling him by name, the two continued a conversation that was incomprehensible to Subaru.

Wilhelm nodded at Russell's words, lowering his deeply wrinkled face.

"It would be too presumptuous for me to use my wife's family name now."

"You are also a formidable person. To us who cannot live that way, it is dazzling. Nevertheless, we will support you all."

Uttering superficial words to the old man, whose eyes were downcast, Russell stepped into the dragon carriage—it must have been his. Giving instructions to the silent coachman, he said,

"If Lady Crusch's aim this time succeeds, it will be a joyful matter for us as well. It will also be a long-cherished wish for Sir Wilhelm. I look forward to it."

The carriage door closed, and as the coachman tightened the reins, the vehicle began to move. Like the coachman, the ground dragon, which honored silence, began to run without a single whinny. Watching the carriage depart from the gate, Subaru approached Wilhelm's side.

"Wilhelm-san. That person just now was…"

"Russell Fellow. The head accountant who manages the Royal Capital's Merchant Guild. His title is merely the head of a single merchant family, but he is a shrewd individual involved in the overt and covert movements of wealth in the capital. Subaru-dono, it would be best for you to assume he knows more about you than just your name."

"Ugh. My heart doesn't exactly flutter knowing some old guy like that knows me, instead of a girl."

"Hmm, I concur."

Wilhelm responded solemnly to the jest, then straightened his posture and turned to Subaru. "Now then," he began.

“Today’s visitors will likely end with Russell-dono. We should go inside, but… Subaru-dono, is there something on your mind?”

At Wilhelm’s question, Subaru scratched his head and grimaced.

It was a bit irritating how understanding he was, as if he could read his thoughts. Still, if it meant things moved faster, there was nothing bad about it.

Thinking this, Subaru straightened his back before Wilhelm, then re-composed his face into a serious expression.

“Sorry, but I’m your last visitor today. I want to talk to Crusch-san. The topic is something along the lines of asking for her help.”

Bonus Short Stories

Anastasia’s Moving Picture Scroll

On that day, in a small, reserved corner of the Royal Capital, a small celebration was taking place.

???: “Come on, you guys! Instead of actin’ up, if ya don’t finish cleanin’ up quickly, I won’t be able to make that daisukiyaki pancake!”

The one clapping and commanding the group was a short girl. She wore a long white coat, made out of animal fur, and had wavy purple hair. Her neck was adorned with a white fox scarf and, combined with her own lovely appearance, the girl gave an impression of purity to all who saw her.

The woman’s name was Anastasia Hoshin. A young and beautiful merchant, running a large commercial company called the Hoshin Trading Company, hailing from the Kararagi City-State.

And in front of her stood an unoccupied building, totally empty on the inside—her new base of operations, established in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

???: “Come on! We gotta hurry so that the boss can make her special pancake! Let’s go!”

???: “W-Wait, onee-chan! That box has fragile objects in it, if onee-chan carries it this roug… Oh! Oh!!”

Little silhouettes ran back and forth near Anastasia, who witnessed their work with her hands on her hips. At that moment, one of the children tripped and fell, but managed to throw the box she was holding into the air.

???: “Oy! You’re hopeless, Mimi! You hafta realize how small ya are, how short yer arms are, how careless ya are, and how cute yer face is! Oh! Nevermind the face! Just be aware of the rest!”

Mimi: “Ah, captain! You’re the bestest! You’re carryin’ mine too even tho you're already carryin' a lot!"

The beast of a man was able to catch the girl and the box she held before they fell. The girl was carried up as well, laughing hysterically, pulling at the demi-human's dark brown hair styled like a mane.

The girl laughs innocently, and the beastman forgives her with a toothy smile. Anastasia couldn't help but loosen her cheeks at the sight of the girl's younger brother in a panic in front of the two.

???: "I see this is being quite the lively relocation."

The one who made that comment was a very spiffy-looking young man with a tense expression on his face, who had walked up next to the girl. He appeared to be approximately in his mid-teens. and had his lilac hair dressed in a ponytail. His face could be said to be androgynous and he had a slender build; if it weren't for his transitioning voice, he may have been easily confused for a girl.

Anastasia: "Right? Not only those two, but everyone here is cheerful just as ya see. I think the only exceptions are the other two vice-captains, and the old Oji-chan workin' in the administration. Please try to endure it."

???: "Yes, that lines up with what I was told. But is it possible to keep a normal life among this ruckus?"

Anastasia: "Well, in Kararagi, you can't get by speakin' in hushed tones. That's why everyone speaks loudly, gestures wildly, tells their stories melodramatically, and lies shamelessly. Joshua-kun, remember that."

Joshua: "So you're telling me that lying is done as naturally as breathing… I'll keep that in mind."

Without changing his facial expression, Joshua Juukulius accepted that advice, a gesture that Anastasia appreciated.

It felt good to meet people who knew how to actively incorporate external elements to better themselves, whatever the influence. His ambition was also suitable for his young age, and family background.

Now all that was left was for him to taste frustration and hardship, and be greedy enough to stand back up again, and succeed in life.

???: “Joshua-san. May I help you with that?”

Joshua: “Thank you. Let me see, you’re Vice-Captain Tivey, right? Well then, I request you bring that there.”

Correction. Her appraisal of that young man was even higher now. She appreciated the fact that he was able to correctly guess which one of the three triplets had come to him, which was important to her, who could match their names with their appearance instantly.

Anastasia: “It is rare to find someone who is able to tell apart the triplets in so lil’ time…”

Anastasia tilted her head, wondering if it was truly that difficult to differentiate them. It was true that they were similar, but each of them had their unique charm. It was a mystery.

Tivey wears a monocle and was the smartest among the three, Hetaro always had a worried face, revealing his sensitive side, and Mimi was simple-minded and the very embodiment of cute innocence. Those were the triplet Vice-Captains of the Iron Fang, the mercenary army of the Hoshin Trading Company. And the one who was in charge of all troops, the Captain of all those soldiers, was the beastman from before.

???: “What is it, boss-lady?! What’s that creepy smile, huh?! Are ya hungover or somethin’?! We can’t deal wit’ ya right now, we’re busy!”

Anastasia: “That’s a terrible accusation, Ricardo. Hurry up and get your work done. Otherwise, Ricardo’s food will end up in Mimi’s stomach.”

Mimi: “Ooooooh! Mimi’s gonna have a full belly!”

Ricardo: “Why not?! I’m working harder than everyone else, too!”

Ricardo opened his enormous mouth, talked loudly, made exaggerated gestures and laments himself loudly. His mouth was so big and full of fangs, he could eat Anastasia in two bites. His muscular body was covered with brown body hair, and his furry tail was swinging in excitement from one side to another.

Such features, as well as his canine-looking face, were irrefutable proof that he was a dog demi-human.

Mimi, who was riding on Ricardo's shoulders, is also a kitten demi-human, with orange body hair, and wiggling cat ears. Anastasia's Iron Fang was a mercenary group, composed solely of beastmen.

In fact, almost everyone helping with the relocation were beastmen, as the only humans present were Anastasia, Joshua, and another man.

???: "…It's being quite the cheerful relocation, isn't it, Anastasia-sama?"

The beautiful voice, that seems as if it were blessed by the wind, belongs to the young man standing right next to Anastasia.

Purple hair that is slightly darker in color than Anastasia's own, which had a light color. The young man's eyes, who adjusted his bangs are yellow, and his face so enchanting many women would be put in a daze if he smiled.

As opposed to Joshua's thin body, his was well-toned, and far from looking frail. The best way to describe it would be beautiful and strong.

Anastasia liked excellence, above all. Besides excellence, she also enjoyed pretty things. For that reason, that man who was a perfect fusion of excellency and beauty, was extremely desirable for her.

If she weren't resolute in her ambition, and didn't possess greed that far surpassed her carnal desires, she might have had her heart snatched away by that man. The Kingdom of Lugunica's Impeccable Knight, Julius Juukulius, stood a class apart just like that.

Anastasia laughed at Julius, who had changed to comfortable clothes after coming back from work.

Anastasia: “You brothers said exactly the same thing.”

Julius: “That’s extremely embarrassing. To follow my own younger brother’s footsteps…”

Anastasia: “Nah, I don’t think so. You brothers get on pretty well. I actually got a lil’ jealous.”

Taking a step back, she narrowed her eyes with both Julius and Joshua in her field of view. Joshua, realizing he was being looked at by Anastasia, turned his head and asked,

Joshua: “Does Anastasia-sama not have any siblings?”

Anastasia: “Hmm? Well, I’m not sure.”

In response, she tilted her head and closed one eye. Reacting, Julius reckoned his brother “Joshua”,

Julius: “I do not like such inquisitiveness. That is not a very nice thing to do, especially to ladies. Pay heed to that.”

Anastasia: “Ah, nonono, if you scold ‘im like that, I’ll lose my temper. It’s just that I didn’t understand and answered in a weird way.”

Waving, Anastasia smiled at Joshua, who had retracted himself, and touched the fox scarf wrapped around her neck, deep in thought for some time.

Anastasia: “Tivey?”

Tivey: “Yes, ma’am. Joshua-san, you can leave the organization of these materials to me, so you three can have an important talk together.”

Anastasia: “You understood it all from one word, I’m mesmerized by how cute and competent you are.”

It was not by chance that Tivey was known as the most astute and gentlemanly of the Iron Fang. Without him, such a large group, composed of people who lacked in perfectionism, would not work together as well.

Even with Anastasia's compliment, the little kitten demi-human kept the same facial expression and started to take care of Joshua's lot of tasks. The young man had a troubled face initially, but his brother put his hand on Joshua's shoulder.

Julius: "Do you wish to go somewhere else, Anastasia-sama? It'll be hard to offer guarantees that other people will not eavesdrop…"

Anastasia: "It's alright, it's no secret. Besides, if I don't keep an eye on this bunch, they'll start slackin' off. Let's stay at this place."

Turning to Joshua, she continued.

Anastasia: "In fairness, about your question from before, it's not like I was tryin' to dodge the question, ya know. I've no memories of my family, so I honestly can't answer ya."

Joshua: "…Are you saying you cannot remember your past?"

Anastasia: "No. As long as I've been self-aware, I was already alone, livin' in the most miserable place in Kararagi. 'Twas a miracle I didn't become a slave. And not only do I not know my own parents, but I even had to give myself a name."

Joshua must have had a good upbringing. He couldn't have imagined that. As she had said, both her name and her family name were self-given. When she was living in a hole in the ground, she dreamed to one day crawl out of it, and so her name was a pun on the word "hole"

It was comical to think that her ambition and pride had been so strong, even as a dreamer with nothing to her name.

Joshua: "So your surname, Hoshin, was also something you decided to give yourself?"

Anastasia: "Well, I don't think there's anyone else with that surname. Especially in Kararagi, no one'd be as bold as to do that.

After all, the most famous legend among us merchants is Hoshin of the Wastes. It's quite the ridiculous claim."

In fact, Anastasia's sanity was questioned many times at the time the Hoshin Trading Company was founded. She couldn't stifle a short laugh, thinking of the conversation she had at the time with Ricardo.

Anastasia: "If you're askin' if I'm sane or not, I'm pretty sure I lost it quite some time ago to be honest…"

The current Captain of the Iron Fang had once upon a time spent a lot of time worrying about it, but he was actually the first person to support this crazy gamble to move to Lugunica. Apparently, greed was contagious.

Joshua: "I understand… Now, the apparent reason why Anastasia-sama trusts demi-humans, and has an army such as the Iron Fang under her command, has become clear to me."

Anastasia: "That so. You are able to tell all that just from what I spoke?"

Joshua: "Yes. It is understandable from the story of your origin and name, allied to what little I was able to see from your personality. It's exactly because of you having such peculiar ideas, that you have no hesitation in appointing Demi-Humans in high positions, of all things."

Anastasia widened her eyes with Joshua's direct statement, who was looking at her as if analyzing her. Julius however, was clearly surprised at his younger brother's rant.

That shock turned to anger, and Anastasia acted before Joshua was reprimanded.

Anastasia: "I see… Joshua-kun, ya really are protective of your older brother, aren'tcha?"

Julius: "Anastasia-sama?"

Anastasia: "Joshua-kun's troubled. Me, a foreigner, is stickin' her nose into such an important topic for the Kingdom of Lugunica, with the backing of the Juukulius House… Which, in turn, is represented by yourself, Julius. Your brother is playin' the villain so he can know if I'm truly worthy of your trust."

Joshua said nothing in reply, getting paler. Anastasia could even see his eyes trembling slightly. That was enough for Anastasia.

Anastasia: "I'm sorry, but you're wrong. All I believe in, is that race has nothin' to do with people's abilities. My staff, other than bein' real helpful, they are all so very adorable. Why would I not give them the treatment they deserve?"

Joshua: "…In Lugunica, discrimination towards demi-humans has yet to be totally eradicated."

Anastasia: "I know, and I think that's the kinda stuff that normally happens in a country with such a long history. I can imagine people still have a lotta grudges from the time of the demi-human War… But lemme tell ya, I think that's just damn silly."

Anastasia shrugged at Joshua's defense.

Anastasia: "Race or blood, neither say absolutely nothin' about a person's worth. The only things that matter, are one's essence and willpower. When I sit upon that throne, I will follow that philosophy to a T, alright?"

Joshua: "…So Anastasia-sama is truly vying for the throne?"

Anastasia: "Oh, so that's what ya were worried 'bout?"

How seriously are you making a claim for the throne of another country? From Joshua's point of view, he was right to question the dedication of a person in that position. That was natural. Her way of thinking was very out of the ordinary in the Kingdom of Lugunica, so she would be at a clear disadvantage.

However, Anastasia was willing to bet her own soul.

Anastasia: "Alright then, how about a promise? I'll compete for the throne with all I have, and I swear I won't cut corners when it comes to the Royal Selection at any moment. I don't need to say that I'm not a strange actor from Kararagi that wishes to benefit Kararagi in anyway, right? I've never been this serious in my life, ya know."

Joshua: "If you make such careless promises, you might come to regret it, one day."

Anastasia: "No, I won't."

If Joshua was not yet convinced, Anastasia made it a point to drive it home, penetrating him with her gaze.

Anastasia: "I'll keep my promises, no matter what they are. «Posthumously too Hoshin keeps his promises, is Kararagi's national belief, and that too is my sort of determination. From the moment I decided to use his name as my own, I also decided I'd never trample on his legacy."

Joshua: "…"

Anastasia: "That's why we keep our promises. No matter what."

That is the true meaning of having borrowed the name of Hoshin, the founding hero of Kararagi. Joshua gulped, and beside him, Julius kneeled, emotion visible on his face. Seeing him, after a few seconds, the younger brother followed his lead.

Julius: "Anastasia-sama, please, forgive my naïve brother's rudeness. However, I must confess I truly admire your words. Now, I was able to ascertain that your arrival to Lugunica was a blessing."

Anastasia: "I'm happy wit' your compliment, but all I did was state the obvious, ya know? Well, if it was enough for you to know how serious I can be at times, that's alright… Ah, now I'm startin' to feel embarrassed 'bout it, I'm going all red."

The girl was shyly smiling as she turned one way and the other with her face held in her hands. Then both brothers stood up, and Joshua looked at Anastasia in silence.

Joshua: "…"

The boy had no idea of what he should say. Maybe, the world Anastasia had lived in could not be understood by applying the common sense of the Kingdom of Lugunica. But if that's how things were, then…

Anastasia: "Joshua, work yourself to the bone, and get a lil' bit hungry until the evening."

Joshua: "Eh…?"

Anastasia: "And then, when that's all over, I'll thank ya with my wonderful and special daisukiyaki. Mimi and Ricardo love it, and I'm sure you're gonna like it so much you'll fall off your chair."

With Anastasia's words, punctuated by her beautiful smile, Joshua's first reaction was to stay and ponder on those words for a few seconds, until he ran to Tivey to help him with organizing files, his determination visibly flaring up.

Julius: "I am very sorry, Anastasia-sama. My brother still has a narrow-minded view of the world, and that led him to confront you."

Visibly proud of herself, Anastasia pushed out her chest with her hands on her hips.

Anastasia: "Then, today'll be the day in which he'll start crackin' out of his stubborn shell. Your race or hierarchy doesn't matter when eatin' delicious food. Once he understands that, he'll learn to treat these children as equals."

With a bitter smile at Julius's noticeable emotion, Anastasia stroked the fox scarf wrapped around her neck as if out of habit. The fox scarf swung quietly, as if it had been tickled by her fingers.

END

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: The Chapter of Vows

"…!"

The tip of the wooden sword split the air as it was swung, and the boy grit his teeth.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his fingertips felt slightly numb. His body was heavy with fatigue, and while breathing heavily with his shoulders bobbing up and down, he stuck the wooden sword into the ground and looked up to the sky.

The panting, flaxen-haired boy was the owner of a slender-framed body with pale skin.

Yellow eyes, and hair that reached his back. His slender figure and soft features were so delicately groomed that other people were often mistaken about his gender.

Despite being in his early teens, one could already glimpse how fair the boy would become in the future. Perhaps he was even terribly ashamed of his appearance, that would have so much envy directed towards it.

The figure of a man that he promised to become, and himself as he was now—how great a mismatch there was between them.

"Gh…"

Right after he was assaulted by self-loathing, the boy took his wooden sword again as though trying to wipe away the unpleasant thoughts. He tried to force himself to return to swinging it, but the strength of his grip hadn't yet fully returned.

The wooden sword slid away from his fingers, and spun through the air with the force of the swing. As it headed through the air spinning end over end, and he stood and watched its course while deriding himself…

“You’re here again, are you? Your effort is commendable, Felix.”

Having come down to the back yard, she spoke in a familiar voice while catching the spinning sword.

After being momentarily taken with amazement at her unerring movement, the boy—Felix—hurriedly knelt where he was. Then, raising his head, he spoke with a trembling voice to the one approaching him.

“Cr…Crusch-sama! My humble apologies for this terrible rudeness. For my carelessness to have…”

“It’s no great matter. Don’t shrink so. As well, you were here first, and I came in afterwards. For me to have come within reach of your sword without having first spoken to you was a failing on my part.”

The generous response was delivered in the still-high voice of a young girl.

That was because the one standing in front of the kneeling Felix was a girl who was the same age as he was.

Duchess Crusch Karsten—a girl with beautiful, long, green hair that was nearly black, a gallant gaze and a countenance filled with aspiration. She was also both Felix’s master, and his benefactor.

Crusch’s narrowed line of sight was directed down towards the top of Felix’s head. Atop his flaxen hair was his terribly unmistakable characteristic—he had animal ears.

This, indeed, was the very cause of the situation that Crusch had saved Felix from, and the greatest turning point that had led to him serving the one he would follow till the end.

Ears that he had once thought of as loathsome were now, in front of his lady, something he was faintly proud of. From the way that he couldn’t quite control the swaying of his long tail, prouder than he himself could realize.

Though Crusch was consciously keeping her expression firm, at the sight of Felix’s flushed cheeks and swaying tail, her stern expression suddenly softened into a kind one.

“Felix, I, too, feel like exercising a little. Do you mind if I continue to borrow your sword?”

“Y-Yes, of course! Would it be alright if I watched by your side… no, from off to the side?”

“There’s no need to choose such a humble position. If you’d like to watch, watch from wherever you like. I don’t think that I’m such an intolerant master that I would be bothered by my retainer watching me.”

As Felix’s face brightened in delight, Crusch finally broke into an unmistakable smile. Then, as Felix made way for her, she stood perfectly straight.

“…sh.”

The course of the wooden sword strike unleashed by her beautiful standing figure was entirely the same Felix’s earlier swing. Despite that, its speed, sharpness, weight, brilliance and skill were clearly different. It was such a vivid slash that one might think the air itself hadn’t realized that it had been cut through.

Obviously, this was an illusion largely caused by Felix looking at it in the best possible light, but it was a fact that there was a vast difference between her sword skills and his. An isolating chasm dividing their sword talents that there was no way to bridge.

“…Your expression changes so easily, Felix. Just when I thought you looked pleased a moment ago, now you look quite crestfallen.”

“Ah…”

Having finished the first movement of the exercise, Crusch glanced to the side at Felix as he watched her, and spoke her thoughts to him that way. On hearing his master’s words, Felix lowered his eyes, ashamed of himself.

“It will soon be half a year since you came to our household, won’t it. …Is that it? That’s right.”

Looking at Felix as he held his tongue, Crusch seemed to have properly read what was going on in his heart.

Felix was very aware, and ashamed, that he hadn't made any progress at all, in the days since he'd been welcomed as Crusch's retainer.

Every day, without fail, he'd swing his wooden sword, exerting himself to become worthy to be Crusch's knight.

However, his body couldn't keep up with his will to become stronger. Due to his long confinement at his original home, his body had passed through the most important growth phase without knowing any development.

He had long since realized that the increasing stress on his body was as meaningless as piling sand on a sandcastle that was being destroyed by the wind.

"Once more, you are looking downwards."

"Once they become aware that the road to knighthood has been cut off, anyone would feel glum."

"Yes, that's true. That was thoughtless of me. Even I would be unsettled if I was unable to trust in my own sword skill. I should have been more careful of that."

Crusch's words of consideration dug painfully into Felix's heart.

The guilt of receiving an apology from the master he respected. Further, that his heart wasn't calmed in the least by her words. He felt that he was a terribly wretched being, and wished that he could disappear.

Despite having been saved, he was unable to return anything of value to the one who saved him. With that, it would only be natural for even his oath to be thought of as words of convenience, quickly forgotten once the moment was past.

Not wanting to be thought of that way, he'd continued to throw himself into the sword despite knowing it wouldn't lead to anything.

“Felix.”

Raising his head at the call, he suddenly realized that Crusch had moved to the side of the courtyard. A small flower garden was there, and under a gardener’s care, flowers of many colors blossomed.

Crusch crouched down in front of one of them, and casually grasped it by the stem—a flower that produced a beautiful bloom, but also guarded it with sharp thorns.

“Crusch-sama?!”

As Crusch winced at the slight pain, Felix ran to her side and took her hand. If one looked closely, a bead of blood had formed at the tip of a white finger, and was running down her finger toward the palm of her hand.

Hastily focusing his awareness, Felix awoke the mana within himself. Placing that faint sensation on his own fingertip, faint blue-white light flowed out to envelop Crusch’s injury.

In only a few seconds the wound had closed, and there wasn’t a trace of it left after the blood was wiped away. Once he had verified that, Felix let out a sigh of relief.

“Felix. Even after this, will you still continue to cloud your eyes with the belief that you have no value?”

“Crusch-sama…you don’t mean…?”

Opening and closing the hand that the injury had disappeared from, Crusch nodded to the bewildered Felix.

“Someone who protects others with the strength of a sword—who decided this is what it means to be a knight? Power is not what a knight holds dear. What a knight values is will. He cherishes the will to protect others. If a knight’s power can be used to protect the injured, then there is nothing strange about a knight’s power being used to heal the injured.”

"Crusch-sama… is that… what you want me to be?"

"I'm simply speaking of what I think is the way a knight should be. To speak plainly, I don't even think it's necessary for you, my retainer, to be a knight at all. If, despite that, you still feel concerned about knighthood… You can simply be a knight that does not rely on the sword. As well,"

As Felix stood speechless, Crusch closed her eyes and continued.

"When I was on the verge of death, it was none other than you who saved me, Felix. Back then, even if the Master Swordsman had been there, I could not have been saved. At that time, the only one who could save me there was you. Well then, in my view, you have more than earned the right to call yourself a knight."

One couldn't help but note that her opinion was excessively favorable towards Felix.

It's true that Felix had saved Crusch when she was at the brink of death, but it was also he who had placed her in that state in the first place. Crusch's words were putting a good face on a deed whose good was balanced out by its bad.

"If you can't help but be fascinated by the sword, I will not stop you. There's nothing so inelegant as dampening the enthusiasm of a young boy, after all."

No matter what path Felix chose, Crusch would surely approve of it.

It was that overwhelming trust from his master that melted Felix's stubborn heart. No matter how long he spent at it, he would never begin to approach Crusch's skill with the sword.

It was enough for him to at last accept the need to give up, that he'd long since been aware of.

"I won't give up on becoming a knight. But, I'm sure I'll turn out a bit different from the usual sort of knight. Will you forgive me for taking you at your word?"

"If it casts no shadow on your soul, then I'm happy with it."

With those brief, Crusch-style words of encouragement, Felix was at last able to give a relaxed smile.

Seeing Felix's smile, Crusch smiled faintly as well.

"You really do have a nice smile. Perhaps it would injure your pride to say it, but you have a smile that gently eases the hearts of those around you."

"I love your smile, Crusch-sama. It makes me feel from the bottom of my heart that I want to follow you."

"My father often calls it 'A face that's not cute at all', though."

She tried to pass the words off as a joke, but a flicker of pain was visible in her amber eyes. Noticing that, Felix was, for a moment, at a loss for words. But only for a moment.

"Is there something about the duke's words that bothers you, Crusch-sama?"

"…Did it show so clearly on my face that you could tell right away?"

"No. I think I was only able to tell because I'm always looking at you."

"Honest as always."

Speaking with a smile in her tone of voice, Crusch let out a small sigh.

"If I was going to be born without any girlish charm, it would have been better to be born a boy. No doubt my father thinks of me that way."

"That can't be…!"

"No, it's fine. It doesn't wound my heart. I think it's exactly right as well. Surely you are not unaware of how the gossips speak of me?"

Duke Carsten's daughter was a sword-crazed wild woman, was their opinion of her that he had heard. Those who knew nothing of her disposition touched on the topic however they pleased, without knowing the truth.

“It’s mysterious. While on one hand I am rebuked for being a woman who wields a sword, on the other I am strictly told to master things as a man would, in order to succeed the duke. The people around me; do they want me to be a man or a woman?”

There was nothing resembling sarcasm in Crusch’s voice. What she held was purely that doubt, exactly as she’d spoken it.

And no matter what the people around her might say, Crusch herself had already decided on an answer.

“I was speaking grandly to you about how a knight should be, but there is only one path that I am able to choose to be. Succeeding the duke, and becoming the next duke. That path has no use for sword skill or being a woman.”

“…Then eventually, you will have to lay down the sword?”

“It’s unlikely that I would be given the chance to bloom. I do have one faint wish. Even though I may not be able to reach the level of a great fencer or Master Swordsman, or that Sword Demon, I would at least like to reach my own limits… would be that wish.”

As Crusch described her lofty ideal with an ephemeral smile, Felix’s breath caught in his throat.

A feeling of remorse rose up and filled him. Crusch Karsten wasn’t the sort of person who should have to give up on anything. All the more wrong for her to have to take actions that would push aside her dearest wish.

“Even… even if you succeed the duke, there must be a way for you to continue to wield the sword.”

“Felix?”

“If it’s you, Crusch-sama, I’m sure it’s possible for you to find a way to move forward while keeping everything in balance. Taking over for the duke, and taking your sword skill to it’s ultimate limit; there’s no need to give up anything.”

As Crusch stood wide-eyed, Felix pled desperately.

He didn’t want to see what she looked like when she was giving up on something. Crusch had everything that he had wanted so much he could taste it. There was no way he could endure watching her throw it away.

“If you are lacking in something, then I’ll make up for it. I know I’m weak, and I there’s only so much I can do. But still! I will!”

“I’m very glad you would say that. However, even though you speak of helping… Perhaps you could be a butler to the duke, but I’m not sure how you could be involved with the other two…”

“Well then…!”

Crusch’s eyes must never become clouded. She was someone who should always be looking upward and forward as she walked.

He was the only one who needed to stand still in the darkness, waiting for a tomorrow that never came.

“Well then, I’ll take over being a girl for you, Crusch-sama!”

“…”

“As you’ve seen, I can’t help with the sword. But, if it’s being like a girl, I can help!”

As Crusch stared at him in amazement, Felix grasped the significance of what he’d just said without thinking.

Thinking that there’s no turning back now, Felix looked straight at Crusch as he ran with it.

“…Do you understand what you’re saying?”

“I do! …No, I don’t really know what I’ll need to do, but I understand! I’ll be a girl for Crusch-sama!”

Breathlessly, Felix cried out without giving Crusch a chance to raise an objection.

"I… I'll take care of being a girl, so I'll give my boyhood to you! Please; I know it might not be much, but please accept it!"

"You… ah, haha."

Seeing Felix wide-eyed with excitement, Crusch was suddenly unable to keep her face stern, and she began to laugh.

Felix was momentarily worried about his master's reaction, but Crusch immediately shook her head.

"It certainly wouldn't do to not accept something offered by my retainer. As a result…"

While saying that, Crusch undid the ribbon holding her hair, and gently pulled it free.

Escaping the constraints of the white ribbon, her beautiful green hair spread rapidly in the breeze. Unconcerned with that, Crusch took the undone ribbon and placed it in Felix's flaxen hair as he stood stiffly.

Like a large flower in bloom, the ribbon adorned the boy named Felix.

"Mhmm. It looks good on you… or perhaps that's not a compliment?"

"…It is. Crusch-sama's concern is better than any sort of recognition."

With a deliriously happy look on his face, Felix honestly revealed his true feelings.

It was a strange feeling. The hands that were too weak to hold a sword, the legs that couldn't support him the way he wanted, the delicate frame that quickly ran out of energy; until just a moment ago, he'd thought of them as a loathsome curse.

Now that, thanks to them, he was able to respond to his master's small request, he could think of them as a better gift than any other.

"If it becomes unpleasant for you, return it to me at any time. I will return what you gave me as well, without fail."

"That will never happen. So please, let me always serve at your side."

"I see."

Felix responded without hesitation to Crusch's considerate words.

Seeing Crusch smiling and looking satisfied as she turned away, Felix felt for a brief moment that he had been able to do something helpful for the sake of this precious girl.

Then, while looking at her beautiful hair fluttering in the wind, he said

"With that, please allow me to give you a replacement ribbon."

while touching the ribbon decorating his own hair.

END

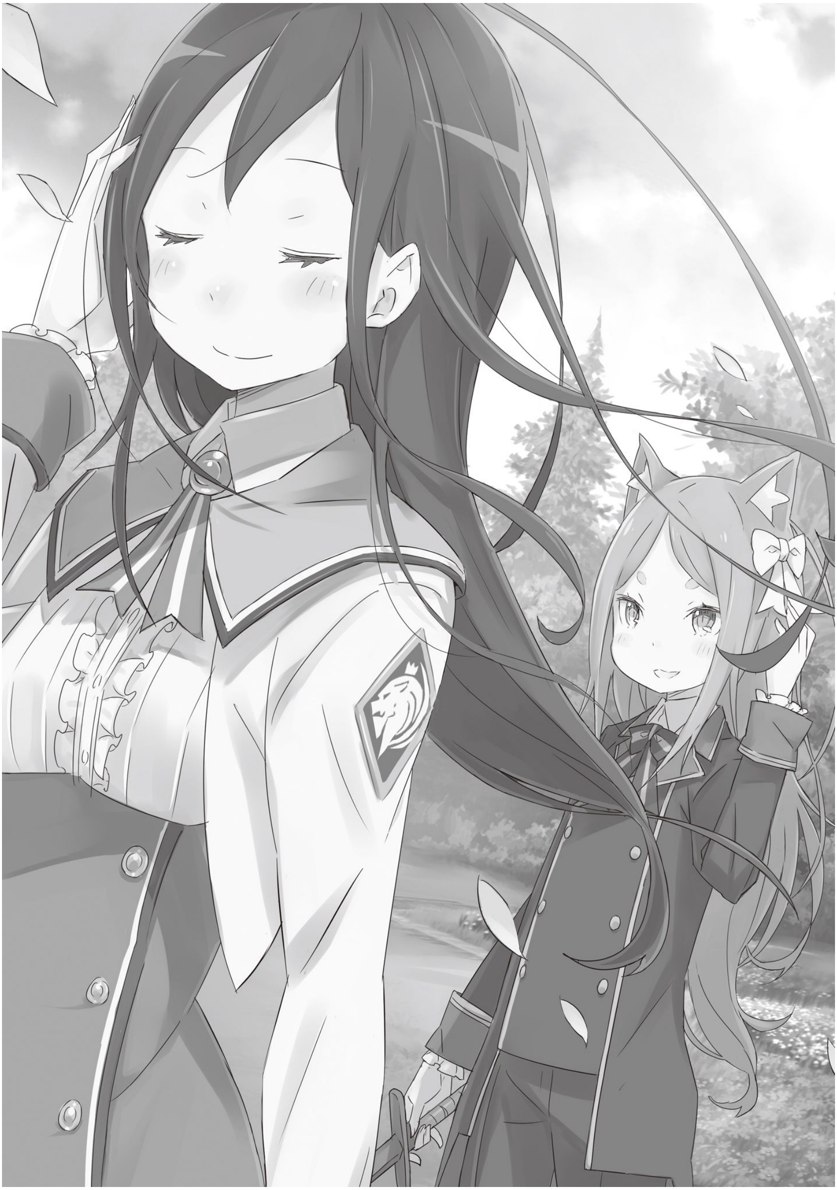

Rem’s Maiden Heart is Super Complex

—Sometimes, Rem seriously doubted that his mind was trying.

For example, when Rem saw him sleeping on the floor during a break.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, if you sleep in such a place, you’ll catch a cold.”

In the terrace dyed in warm sunlight, so as to not wake up the dozing Subaru, Rem whispered to him in a Really thin voice.

That she didn’t wake him up, though it appeared as if she were about to, was because Rem possessed a great sense of morality.

Rem: “Geez, Subaru-kun really is no good.”

Saying so in a happy tone, Rem decided to stay right beside Subaru as he basked in the sun. When it came down to it, preparation was key. From there, Rem’s bustling was barely perceptible to the eye, so fast and diligent was her work.

She set the nearby chair right next to Subaru, and placed a lap blanket on the napping Subaru so he wouldn’t catch a cold. Then, she layed out snacks and tea on the table in case he would crave some upon waking up. To make sure that her older sister Ram wouldn’t encroach, she appointed her to a job in the basement.

To Emilia, she made sure to instruct her to take a break in her own room, by offering snacks and tea. She then collected and submitted all the documents to Roswaal in order to make sure that he would be shutting himself in his office. As a precaution for Beatrice making an appearance, she closed every door around. And, last but not least, Rem seated herself next to Natsuki Subaru.

Even at that time, Rem hadn’t let her self-restricting rule of “To Never Leave Subaru-Kun’s Shadow” slip from her mind. Even if it were the scent of Subaru’s vomit, she would stand in it as much as she could.

But still, Rem, without holding back any of her passion, had requested to stay by Subaru's side until he had reached his limit. More specifically, Rem has been continually looking at Subaru, so much so that she could pierce a hole through him with her mere gaze.

Rem: "Ha~ah…Subaru-kun is cute…"

Rem who, in public, never showed a mushy expression, enjoyed Subaru's sleeping face.

Usually, his sharp eyes were unnecessarily intimidating, his mouth moved to the point of giving the impression that he may die if he didn't stop yapping, and his shoulders were bent unless he was conscious of putting up the correct posture for his spine—but as soon as he displayed his fragile sleeping form, those worries disappear from Rem's mind.

Subaru: "…R…em?"

When she took notice, Rem's face was extremely close to Subaru's face, to the point that her breaths could be felt on Subaru's eyes. Her heart about to explode, Rem masked those feelings behind a smile.

Rem: "Subaru-kun, if you sleep in such a place, you'll catch a cold."

Subaru: "Hm, Ah…ah, did I fall asleep? My bad my bad, I'll be careful…Yaaawn"

Watching Subaru's yawn, so large that he couldn't hide it with his hand, Rem reaffirmed the warm feeling on her chest,

Rem: "Geez, Subaru-kun truly is a helpless person."

END

Comic Alive Collection 1: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 1

A Heroic Tale Starting From Zero

1

Subaru: “A bard is coming to the village?”

He’s told an astounding word, and Natsuki Subaru repeats it again with an astonished look.

Subaru turns around with a dust cloth in his hand, and just like always, he had his butler outfit style that wasn’t very suiting of him. His cleaning of the window was awkward because of his injures still remaining from the other day.

The incident where the witchbeasts surrounded Margrave Roswaal’s mansion and the Earlham Village, the closest place near it—they abated the uproar before it was possible for victims to be had, and he received a literal injury of honor.

The confusion of the incident cleared up. The mansion and the village were already back to their usual appearance. Most of Subaru’s healing ended, and at the moment, he was working with all his might on chores in the mansion while rehabilitating.

Emilia: “Yes, a bard! I heard Ram talking about it, who came back from the village. Have you come across a bard?”

What responded to Subaru’s question was a voice that sounded like a refreshing, silver-bell melody.

The long, silver hair of the owner of that voice sways. She had such a beautiful face that even artists wouldn’t be able to bring themselves to draw it.

However, her deep blue eyes were filled with so much curiosity that she looked entranced, and if you looked at her cheeks that reddened from her uncontrollable excitement, those strong emotions would overwrite the prettiness of her appearance.

Subaru would also still show childish fascination every now and then.

Subaru: “E.M.T (Emilia-tan is seriously an angel.)”

Emilia: “Eh? What did you say just now?”

The name of this girl who tilted her head in slight doubt at that nonsense was Emilia.

She was a benefactor, and a person that was also beloved to Subaru. Subaru laughs at her innocent behavior and says

Subaru: “Well, I’ve never personally seen one myself…but Emilia-tan, seems like you’re looking forward to it.”

Emilia: “I don’t just seem like it, I am looking forward to it. Bards are people who tell stories through things like singing and dancing, right? Surely you should know various things about them…hey, Subaru can you…”

Emilia has hope in her eyes, and she looks at Subaru as she put her hands together.

She calls his name with a sweet voice, and looked up with a spoiled gesture. As if there would be a man out there who wouldn’t give in to a girl as beautiful as Emilia making a request like that. Or at least, Subaru immediately gave in.

Subaru: “Yes mam. After you clean up and ask for Sensei’s permission, that is.”

Emilia: “Yeah. Sorry for having you accompany me because of my selfish request.”

Subaru: “It’s okay. He’s not expecting much with my chores while I’m in rehabilitation, so the date has priority.”

Emilia: “Oh, I see. We’ll be going out with the two of us, so it’ll be a date again, huh.”

Subaru looks at Emilia's smile, who didn't seem to notice the sinfulness of it, and held the dust cloth with the returned bucket and headed towards the mansion. In the window, he saw a view of the faraway village of Earlham.

Subaru: "Bard, eh…"

When he said the word again, he felt like it gave off a more feelings of a fantasy than he had imagined.

He looked calm in front of Emilia, but there's no way his heart wasn't excited.

A singing voice would roll up the people and the world cheerfully and melodiously, and it would start to spin a tale.

Just from imagining it, it also excited Subaru's heart without him knowing it, as he walked alone in the corridor with a cheerful mood.

2

???: "Well then, I will now sing. Please listen. —The dolphin betrayed by the sunset."

It was a melody that was depressing with its melancholy and it seemed sad, but it flowed through the village's plaza like the rain of a day during rain season.

What stood on the rough stage made up of only lumber in the middle of the plaza was a form of what seemed to be an instrument between the guitar and the ukulele. It was a person playing a wooden stringed instrument.

The musical instrument with a geometrical pattern seemed to be bouncing temperament, but perhaps exhibiting gloominess to this sort of extent was something that depended on the singer's technique. That was how impressive this gloomy atmosphere that wrapped up the village was to the villagers.

They are moved by the very depressing melody and the lyrics of the piece, and the villagers that acted as the audience had emotionless, dead eyes. Considering the appearance of these old ladies that were breaking down and crying from what felt like the end of the world, perhaps there was a possibility that they've never seen something this cruel, even with the unease with the witchbeast incident.

???: "If it's this sad, then I'd rather die. I won't die. They won't let me die…"

The dolphin betrayed by her friend and fiancé was being protected by the setting sun in the midst of the song on top of the bridge where an important promise was exchanged before. This seemed to be the climax of the story, and it was choosing whether or not to drown itself.

The singer played her musical instrument. It didn't even matter if she was singing enough for it to be called a song; she supported it with her gestures. The story was full of realism, and a world was developed. Tears that couldn't be handled appeared within the eyes of the audience that saw a trickle of tears go along those cheeks, and they too started to sob.

???: "It spits bubbles, and sinks into the silent sea. Oh, Dolphin. Oh, oh, Dolphin…"

It seemed that the dolphin boldly sunk into the riverbed. The breeze and the flowers that could do nothing but watch her sorrow simply grieve over her miserable death, and the act came to an end—.

Subaru: "As if this could be a tune chosen for performance recitals, my god!!"

Emilia: "Oohyai!"

Subaru finally couldn't take it anymore, and gave a retort when there were still lingering sounds.

The poet who sung the bad ending jumps up and down, surprising the audience, and the story world that had wrapped up the plaza crumbles. The villagers who were captured in the song's world come to their senses, and they look at each other.

???: “Ah, eh…” ???: “Wow, look at that. I cried a lot.” ???: “ Aw man, the tears come quickly when you get old…” ???: “Dolphin, you are another version of myself!” ???: “The poet girl is cuuuute.”

Then, they all exchange their impressions unanimously while having tears in their eyes. And when they told their first impressions for a while, one of them looked back at Subaru, who snuck to the row furthest to the back in attempts to run away, and said

???: “—You are ruining the mood, Subaru-sama!!”

And he got shouted at, which startled him so much that it made him jump.

3

Liliana: “Allow me to introduce myself. I am the bard of the flow. I’m called Liliana.”

The person who said that was this cute girl who bowed quickly and still had traces of childishness in her.

She had eyes full of cheerfulness and curiosity, and yellow hair that seemed to reflect an aggressive personality. She had pigtails, and under her light cloak, she had dancer-like clothing that was decorated with ornaments that used nuts and animal bones. She was short, but her hands and legs were long, and her exposed skin had a healthy brown color. She was a girl that really did give off a feeling of a vagrant traveler.

Subaru: “Well then, thank youuu for your politeness. My name is Natsuki Subaru. I am a tumultuous, luxurious and gorgeous legman. At the mansion you see at the other side of the road, I am an all-round star as a servant.”

Emilia: “Tumultuwhat…? Ah, never mind. Hello. Nice to meet you.”

Subaru was being unkind with how he was greeting himself at his own pace, even when it was their first time meeting each other.

Liliana pushes her doubtful look under a forced smile, being frantic as she tried to avoid hurting Subaru and Emilia’s moods, who explained that they were people related to feudal lord.

However, Liliana’s precautions were smashed up at once by Emilia’s next actions.

Emilia: “That song was reeeaally good. I might burst into tears any minute, so…”

Being overcome with emotions, Emilia takes Liliana’s hand at once and expresses herself. Liliana becomes surprised for a moment by Emilia, as she was agitated. She quickly becomes aware of how she had been praised and then smiles.

Liliana: “Nooo! I am glad that you offered your kind attention too! I am still inexperienced, but just from you saying that…huh?!”

Liliana responded to Emilia with a smile, as Emilia acted amiably, but as soon as Liliana looked at her, she immediately became dumbfounded. Liliana had her mouth open in astonishment, and she stiffened up.

Subaru and Emilia widened their eyes at that reaction, but Liliana still had a surprised look on her face. While having that look, she says

Liliana: “A□are you a goddess…?”

Emilia: “—Eh?”

Liliana: “I-I mean, I’ve never seen such a lovely person before! Woww, woww! This is what happens when you take care of yer hair and skin?! We really the same type of humans?!”

Liliana jumped up and down at that spot, being moved by Emilia’s beauty.

Emilia became speechless from her exaggerating reaction, but Subaru was in complete agreement with Liliana’s opinion. Emilia was a little too indifferent to her uncommon appearance. That was cute.

Then, when Liliana suddenly stopped jumping, she raised her instrument and bowed.

Liliana: "I just came up with a good idea. Please listen. —Ohh, Goddess."

Liliana draws in a small amount of breath, and she picks up the rhythm while being at a halt. She starts to play a melodious tune while smoothly plucking the strings of her instrument.

Liliana: "So profound to the point of being entrancing, light like a gem, eyes with bluish purple glintstone in them. The flowy, silver hair of the moon's tears. Delicate looks that cause divine protection to swoop down onto the fingertips of doll makers. Unbeknowing of how her skin, similar to white snow that falls and piles up, tramples on others. Slightly long ears that…ears that…ears thatttt?"

""…"

Liliana suddenly pauses her beautiful voice, who had been fluently expressing her feelings into a poem. Subaru saw the three changes of emotions in her golden eyes: "from doubt, to realization, and then surprise.

She looks towards Emilia's ears, and adds on words to the song she sang herself.

Liliana: "The ear length of her silver hair…no way, the witch of envy!"

Subaru: "Alright, stop! It was a nice song, but I have suspicions that it has been caught by copyright! The verdict will be brought up later after a strict inspection, and so we must humbly cut off relations with you and…"

Emilia: "—Subaru"

Subaru stops Liliana from speaking at once, and covers up to prevent careless words from coming out. However, the person who criticized Subaru's actions was none other than Emilia herself.

Emilia gets joint locked by Liliana, and Emilia pouts at Subaru, who held Liliana's shoulders.

Emilia: "I'm happy about Subaru worrying for me, but it's not okay to be rude to girls. Tsk tsk"

Subaru: "Haven't heard "tsk tsk" nowadays…or rather, even disregarding that, Emilia-tan…"

Emilia: "It's fine. Even if you try to cover it up after she's noticed, it won't solve anything."

Emilia gave an explanation without blame, and she did act dignified, but Subaru couldn't act like that. Her not saying anything and exposing herself to blame made him feel sick.

—Emilia was born between a human and a elf. In other words, she was a half-elf.

There were various kinds of demi-humans mixed in this world, but discrimination against demi-human clans—it seemed there was an ingrained opinion of half elves, and Emilia experienced days of hardship alone.

That being said, there was no just cause for Subaru to continue restraining Liliana, seeing how Emilia had forgiven her. He reluctantly let go of the girl's body who was held by her wrists, elbows, shoulders, and arms.

Liliana: "*Pant* My chest! My chestt! Don't attack things necessary for my work! What're ya doing to a young girl's body, Maid-san?!"

Subaru: "I want to be a man that uses up the power he has and protects the things important to him. Also, I'm sorry to say this, but even with my experience, it's hasty to count you as the bottom for girls with soft fair skin, young lady."

It was a different world with a very high percentage of beautiful girls, but Lilliana had the worst ladiness (according to Subaru's inspection). Starting from the bottom, perhaps the first would be Beatrice, second would be Felt, and Liliana would be the winner for third place.

Liliana: “Alright! On top of holding a girl by her joints, you’ve also hurt a girl’s feelings! But but!”

Liliana stood out in front of Emilia with her mouse-like agileness while feeling indignant towards Subaru’s assessment of her. The short girl Liliana looks at Emilia, and her expression stiffens slightly. However,

Liliana: “Not only are you noble in your beauty, but you’re noble at heart. That moved me.”

Emilia: “Eh? Ah, yeah. Really?”

Liliana: “Yess! I am sorry for my careless behavior earlier with my bad manners. If the maid hadn’t restrained me, then I would have been eradicated by family and followers for my impoliteness!”

Subaru: “You’re the type to ruin yourself energetically, aren’t you!”

Subaru was surprised by her energetic, all out confession, but Liliana started to strum her instrument cheerfully.

Liliana: “I may look explosively abundant with sensitivity, but when there’s something in front of me that causes me to have an idea, I stop being patient! Thus, I will anxiously combine Emilia-sama’s beauty, graciousness, and her various reasons for not being able to publicly talk about her race!”

Subaru: “You sure are fresh, considering how I’ve never come across someone like you before.”

Liliana showed her necessary liveliness. Her noisiness wasn’t strange, nor was it pleasant.

This was because of her honest personality and her voice. Her beautiful voice that smoothly crept into people was natural. You could certainly say that being a bard was her calling.

Subaru: “Or maybe her calling is forcing old people to buy things like filled futons and water purifiers.”

Liliana: “What is this? I feel like those words just now gave off a cruel sort of feeling.”

Liliana overreacted to Subaru, who showed his admiration, although she did clearly ignore that.

To the side of Subaru, him being dumbfounded along with his wariness having faded away, Emilia also smiled at the wild girl.

Emilia: “However, although I am happy that you praised me, I don’t really think I am a beauty.”

Liliana: “Ah! Ahhh! As a woman, I just had unforgiving feelings pop up inside of me! I’ve got it. Please listen. —Oh Goddess…”

Subaru: “Shut up! But, I do think that recognition of Emilia-tan needs to be corrected!”

Subaru and Liliana both give their denial, and Emilia tilted her head slightly with a look that made it seem as if she had said something unbelievable, appearing to be troubled.

4

—Now that he thought about it, he did feel tormented by anxiety and tension in the morning when he was first called out to the dining hall.

That’s what Subaru thought of at the Roswaal residence’s parlor as he tilted a cup of black tea.

Emilia: “What’s wrong Subaru? You’re making a reeeally weird look.”

Then, once he thought about it, Emilia called out to Subaru, her sitting to his side, as he had a bitter look because of the exceptionally dark flavor.

Subaru: “I thought a little bit about the past. I was just thinking about how I curled up too during my initial times at the mansion.”

Emilia: “That’s how it was? Didn’t you grin boldly back then just like you do now?”

Subaru: “When you put it like that, my suspiciousness increases, and that hurts!”

Subaru becomes astonished from the evaluation that had quite the difference between its subjectivity and objectivity.

Emilia looks at Subaru, him kneading his cheeks into a dissatisfied look, and she put her finger on her lips.

Emilia: “Yeah, I was kidding. I tried teasing you a little since it looked like you were in deep thought.”

Subaru: “Seriously? Well then you are E.M.A(Emilia-tan seriously is a wicked woman)!”

Emilia: “Yeah yeah. Also, you don’t have to be that tense too you know, Liliana.”

Emilia ignored Subaru’s nonsense, and she called out to Liliana, who cowered at the front. Liliana curled up with a pale face as she looked up saying “Oki”, as if the liveliness she had at the village was gone.

Subaru: “What is this what is this? You’re being awfully nervous. What happened to your cheerfulness from earlier?”

Liliana: “Even if ya’ll say that, I’m nervous. A□an ol country girl like me suddenly being invited to the feudal lord’s mansion…also, for it to be the Margrave’s mansion…I□if I do something careless…”

Subaru: “Your family and your followers will burn not just your roots, but even the fields around it. Like dogs, that is.”

Subaru gives a gesture of chopping his neck at Liliana, who became nervous and started speaking with an accent.

Liliana sees that gesture, her face becomes ghastly pale, and Emilia got angry as she hit his knee.

Emilia: “Godd, Subaru!”

Subaru: “I’m sorry I’m sorry. I did not think it would have an instant effect on her.”

Subaru apologizes with a wry smile at Emilia, who pouted with her cheeks. That being said, Subaru did feel gratified with Liliana’s behavior of acting quiet and meek, as he was manipulated at the village.

Subaru and the others returned to Roswaal’s mansion from the Earlham Village, and were currently having a friendly chat at the parlor—which meant that they were spending time together with a bit of a heavy atmosphere.

They had spare time from the mansion’s master to meet Lilliana, who was a visitor. In other words, this is why these three were on the couch facing each other.

Subaru: “Even so, did you see Ram’s displeased face as she acted as an intermediary? It seemed as if her eyes were scorning us as burdens that brought in unnecessary trouble.”

Liliana: “Eek! I’m not invited after all. The…n, I need to run now…”

Emilia: “No come on it’s fine. Subaru wasn’t threatening you either. Don’t you feel sorry for Liliana?”

Subaru: “I wasn’t trying to scare her, I just told her the objective reality. It is true that I don’t like the idea of Ram increasing Roschi’s work, after all.”

Ram was a maid of the mansion, and she adored Roswaal. She was a girl who had an improperly prideful attitude towards being a waiter, so she let out a blunt sigh when she was requested to convey a message to Roswaal for the Liliana issue.

She was now talking with the master, while certainly feeling annoyed.

Subaru: “As of now, I don’t know what type of infamy Roswaal is hearing about. She might even be telling him that a giant bard over two meters high with a hoarse voice is asking for an audience.”

Even Roswaal, someone who was well known for strange things to some extent, wouldn't see a suspicious person that might not be worth meeting. Thus, Liliana was pitiful with how she lost hope, but—

Rem: "You don't have to worry that much. Nee-sama will be fair. Nee-sama won't include arbitrary feelings when confirming Roswaal's intentions, after all."

The person who negated Subaru's worries was this blue haired girl carrying a tray that gave off steam.

It was a beautiful girl wearing the very charming remodeled maid outfit that revealed her shoulders and back—it was Rem.

The girl who entered the room adds tea cakes with a graceful gesture, and she goes around pouring second servings of tea into the empty cups. Subaru sees Rem holding the teapot, and he held out his cup.

Subaru: "Putting the sweets aside, I thought that serving tea was only Ram's job."

Rem: "Nee-sama is always busy, after all. …Also, I always want to prepare Subaru-kun's tea. I put in a lot of things into the tea, such as my feelings, and other things as well."

Subaru: "Can't you just include the tea leaves and hot water? Please, I am begging you!"

When Subaru's cheeks twitched as he said extreme words, Rem said "Too bad", pouting with her lips.

Rem's has always been like this towards Subaru ever since the resolvement of the witchbeast incident. He was honestly happy with that expression of her deep affection, but Subaru was also a bit confused, as a part of male instincts.

The people around him and he himself did not know that this was a young man's sad nature of not knowing about how this was a romantic period.

Subaru: "Anyways, I've used tea and sweets as excuses to invite you to join in. The contract has expired.”

Rem: “My…to use the delicious tea, sweets, and the cute maid as excuses…I’m blushing.”

Subaru: “It’s the truth, but you smoothly added on one more thing, didn’t you?”

Subaru gives a quiet retort at Rem, who put her hands on her blushed cheeks. She accepts that, and Rem says this softly with a whisper while having an embarrassed smile

Rem: “Even so…I heard that it was just a bard, but why the mansion?”

Subaru: “Ahhh, Emilia-tan was extremely interested…there’s that, but the matter is a little more complicated. Somehow that girl broke through Emilia-tan’s recognition inhibition.”

Rem squints slightly in response to Subaru’s details that he said in a whisper. The recognition inhibition was a technical effect weaved into Emilia’s robe that she wore so that people wouldn’t notice her lineage, as she was a half elf. As long as the person didn’t have the power to break through that effect, or if they didn’t have Emilia’s approval, then the person could not recognize Emilia as Emilia.

Rem: “Breaking through that effect…it’s Roswaal-sama’s knitted technique, so it’s hard to imagine that being broken.”

Subaru: “Right? Which is why I couldn’t leave it as is and brought her along.”

And then he used Ram’s tea and Rem’s tea cakes as pretext to bring her to the mansion. Liliana also quickly fell over with that pretext, even though she had been hesitant at first. He was really worried about her future.

Anyways, Subaru thought about how he couldn’t leave it as is, and brought her back to the mansion.

Rem: “I understand. In other words, force her to shut up before she reveals anything, right?”

Subaru: “You don’t understand, and when you say that, it sounds like something serious!”

Rem: “Aw, come on, Subaru-kun. Of course I don’t go that far.”

Rem stuck out her tongue with a cute smile saying “Just kidding”, but it wasn’t convincing because of various reasons.

Though, those various reasons were only left at the back of his mind.

Subaru: “Even then, the effect of Rem’s tea cakes was outstanding.”

Now that he looked at it, even Liliana, someone who had been nervous earlier, went into a trance upon tasting the fragrant baked sweets. Rem’s ready wit for making pastry stood out, although she was already versatile with housework.

Subaru: “Let’s see, I’ll have one more…yeah, it’s super delicious after all. Rem’s pastries are superb.”

Rem: “Thank you! I put in my body and soul for Subaru’s sake…I put in everything I had to the point of me being fine with never making sweets again…those are the kind of feelings I made them with.”

Subaru: “You put in such determination as if it was like you were burning your soul, just for a casual moment like this?!”

While confirming the flavor of Rem putting in everything she had, Subaru pulls back slightly upon thinking about how pastries were risking their lives too.

And on the other hand, it seemed like Liliana also was able to relax. She leaned on the couch as she stroked her stomach.

Liliana: “Zzz…zzz…”

Subaru: “I still don’t happen to have a heart big enough to overlook you dozing!”

Liliana: “Huh! I’m not sleeping! I am not sleeping! It was me planning to arrest assassins where I'd pretend to look like I was sleeping, and they'd get lured out after observing me."

Emilia: "…! That's not good, someone is trying to get you…?"

Liliana: "See look! My naive angel has been fooled!"

Emilia, someone who didn't know how to doubt people, had been successfully tricked by Liliana, who talked fast.

Perhaps Liliana was a girl that could only have extremely strong reactions or extremely weak reactions, as she wiped the drool that hung around her mouth.

Rem: "By the way Ma'am I have heard that you are a bard."

Surprisingly enough, Rem was the one who said that and broadened the topic.

The instrument that leaned against the sofa—in response to Rem, who gazed at the lyulyre, Liliana hastefully carried the instrument and raised her trembling voice nervously.

Liliana Yes, yes! I am sorry for being a reckless dream chaser that challenges the world with my lyulyre!"

Subaru: "You really are someone that just goes with the flow!"

Liliana was acting so abasing of herself that it was more refreshing to see, but Rem clapped her hands without caring about it. She had the same type of radiance in her blue eyes that Emilia had when she first heard her sing.

Rem: "Well then, Ma'am, do you know a lot of famous stories?"

Liliana: "—! Yeah, yes! Leave it up to me!"

Liliana's eyes shine at Rem's question, and she plays the lyulyre.

Liliana: "I'm also a girl who lived independently for no less than 10 years like this by making a career out of playing the lyulyre. I have confidence in my songs that bring tears to people's eyes, exciting a bunch of people, swallowing them up into a swirl of madness.”

Subaru: “Hey wait! Living independently for 10 years? Just how old are you again?!”

Liliana: “I’ll be turning 20 this year, but is there something wrong with that?”

Subaru: “You’re 20 with that appearance and that calmness?!”

She had childish looks, and an immature chest, butt, and hips. He felt sorry for the exposing of her thin body, but he felt even more sorry now that he knew about her real age.

Subaru: “This isn’t a time for a legal loli to be saying this and that… I saw something even more horrible…”

Liliana: “Yeah, be quiet. A person you like has a request. Also…”

Liliana pushes aside Subaru, him being busy with being moved while feeling pity, and stares back at Rem’s look of expectation. She picks up her lyulyre, and took a pose of having one leg on the sofa.

Liliana: “Alright, I will take any request. What shall I do? One of the masterpieces…for example, speaking of immortal, famous poems, the “Sword Demon Love Poem” sounds good!”

Subaru: “Hey, that sounds like a disturbing title.”

Liliana: “What are you saying?! The “Sword Demon Love Poem” is a famous poem that is passed down through singing not just in Lugunica, but other various countries too! It’s a story that makes a lot of girls fret as they want to feel the same romance as the awkward but honest military man, and then they cave in.”

Subaru: “I□is that so…”

Liliana: “Yes, absolutely! The very last part in particular is one that I cannot sing without tears. The people that see the scene become fascinated by everything where the sword demon crosses swords with his lover and the weapons unfold!”

Subaru: “Isn’t that lovers crossing swords with each other?!”

It was a summary, but he could only think of it to be brutal.

There was literature back in his original world where people would “kill each other from love”, but that was out of his scope to follow up.

As for Subaru, it was a title that simply gave only that sort of impression, but

Rem: “What are you saying, Subaru-kun? The “Sword Demon Love Poem” is a famous poem that represents Lugunica. I’ve also heard of it over and over.”

Subaru: “Seriously?! Is that true?! Emilia-tan, do you cave in to it too?”

Emilia: “Eh? Sorry, I don’t really know much about it. I might not be able to meet your expectations.”

Subaru: “No, your response is fine! Emilia-tan’s response is just what I expected!”

Or rather, the unexpected trend of Rem’s tastes was becoming so clear that he was surprised.

Liliana puts the three’s noisiness aside, and while seeming to be looking up a song book in her head, she says

Liliana: “As for other ones, there’s “The Blue Lightning of Vollachia” and “The Figure of the Sword Hill’s Hero”. Also also, can’t forget the classic example of success, one that represents the founding of Kararagi’s might, “Hoshin of the Wilderness”.”

Subaru: “There’s a lot of them. Nevertheless, don’t a lot of the songs involve lineage of great men? Or did you gather only those type of songs according to your tastes?”

Liliana: “I do have my own tastes, but as you’d expect, the general public likes the ones about heroic tales and lives of great men. They are brilliant stories that cause people to have aspirations. I take it a step further from there, as I want to pass them down through songs."

Liliana's cheeks blush as if in embarrassment, and she reveals one end of the purpose of her journey to Subaru and the others.

Subaru shook his head, indicating that he had no intentions to make fun of her attitude.

Subaru: "That's awesome. Deciding on what you want to do at that age…or wait, you said you were 20, eh."

Liliana: "You're talking in a prickly way, but do you have a problem or something with me being 20? If you get too persistent, then you can go to court, and I'll go too."

Subaru: "Where would a court be in this world…"

Was it a place that held things similar to trials? Subaru didn't know, being someone who was poorly informed on this world.

Rem: "So Ma'am, is spreading those songs the goal of your journey?"

Liliana: "Nooo, that's not the only goal. Of course, I do think spreading the songs is a mission of mine as well, but I have a more rooted goal myself. That is…"

Liliana answered Rem's question with a face that indicated the renewal of her mood. However, she was interrupted before she could take the opportunity to answer. That was because—

Ram: "—Sorry for interrupting in the middle of your chat."

They hear the sound of a knock, and a lone maid that pushed the door open on the other side bowed her head politely.

Her appearance made Rem and her look like two peas in a pod, and the girl who squinted with the light red eyes under her pink hair—Ram lifted her face, and said

Ram: "Thanks for your patience. Master Roswaal-sama will be seeing the guest."

That's how she expressed her message with a manner of welcoming the "honored guest."

5

Roswaal: "I am the owner of this mansion, the Lugunica kingdom Margrave, Roswaal L Mathers."

Liliana: "…"

He sits down at the chair up front. Liliana stiffened up without saying anything in front of the person who introduced himself.

He sympathizes with her behavior, viewing it to be understandable with his side glance.

He's been introduced to people like the Margrave, along with nobles of high positions, without having mentally prepared for it. Out of all people it could've been, to make matters worse, this was a person who was so intimidating with the sense of lifelessness he had and—

Subaru: "I didn't think we'd meet a pervert painted in white clown make-up."

Ram: "Barusu. I will not forgive disrespecting Roswaal-sama. I'll twist and cut your thing off."

Subaru: "You've also made the same offensive of noticing Ros-chi's current look, and what exactly are you going to cut off?"

Ram: "Hm, I wonder what…"

The person staring at Subaru to her side was this girl who completely lost her previous politeness, Ram.

Roswaal holds back Ram from her side, and he calmly crosses his legs on the leather couch.

His blessed appearance and title were mixed with those strange habits and costume into very small pieces, throwing them down the drain.

People thought highly of him as a feudal lord even in an appearance like this, so they'd suffer in the gap between the reputation he had in the territory and the real thing they'd witness.

Roswaal: "Juuuust as expected, seeing this new person's surprised face is the greeeatest joy. I like Subaru-kun's kind of reaction too, but this sort of reaction really is the best. Riiiight, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru: "Can you not imply that I'm an accomplice in toying with people's hearts while enjoying it? I only have a little bit of those types of poor characteristics."

If he had to say something about it, he did feel an indescribable pleasant feeling whenever he got on other people's nerves.

From an outsider's point of view, Roswaal was much the same as Subaru. Considering how each of them thought they were better than one another, they both really were making themselves hopeless. Anyhow

Liliana: "I am extremely humbled and delighted that you've granted me an audience. I□I am the bard, Liliana. I am honored to meet you, Margrave-sama."

Roswaal: "Hmmm, splendid, splendid. If you're going to speak in this situation while shaking that much, then there's reason in meeeting with you. I am famous for being tolerant, soooo relax."

He was blowing his own horn, but Roswaal's words were not lies. If Roswaal was someone that held the temper of a villainous noble of a work, then people like Subaru would be dismissed the first day.

Emilia: "I heard that a bard was coming, and then I met Liliana. This girl says that she's looking for tons of rare stories, so I was thinking that maybe Roswaal would be able to help."

Roswaal: "I seeee. If Emilia-sama has that much expectation in me, then I have no choice but to show what I have up my sleeeeve."

Roswaal gives a faint smile, creaks the back of the chair, and crosses his arms. Closing his eyes to go into deep thought, after a few seconds, he looks at Liliana with one eye—with his yellow eye.

Liliana gets put in the spotlight with that questionable look as she sits next to Emilia, and she starts to shake.

Roswaal: "You don't have to be frightened like thaaaat. I am on your side. Seeing that Emilia-sama has decided to be on your side, I'm also putting in efforts to do the same."

Liliana: "Y□yes. Th□thth…thank you."

Roswaal: "However, Bard. Bard, right. Geeeez, this is wonderful timing."

Roswaal deepens his smile at Liliana as she cowered in fear.

For some reason or another, Subaru had a bad feeling while seeing his scarlet lips turn into a smile. This was because he could see nothing but Roswaal planning something from that smile of his.

Roswaal: "You said your name was Liliana, riiight? This is Emilia-sama's request. I care about satisfying your wish. This is when I'd like to hear a little mooore details."

Liliana: "W□when you say details, what should I talk about…"

Roswaal: "Let's see. —How about the goal of your journey? Frankly tell us about the goal itself."

In response to Roswaal's tone lowering slightly, Liliana's facial expression changed, who had been stiffening up until now. And then Liliana connected that change with an expression she'd never shown before.

Liliana closes her eyes just once, and when she opened them once more, she looked straight at Roswaal.

Liliana: "—I am on a journey to seek newer "legends" in this world."

In front of the leading domestic powerful person's look, he saw Liliana's unwavering determination in her eyes.

The words that she said—the sound of those words "newer legends" made Subaru's heart tremble.

Subaru was a man. There's no way the power those words held wouldn't cause his chest to fire up.

Emilia: "Newer legends…"

Liliana: "Yes, that's right. I am looking for those, and I'm on a journey to sing them."

Liliana had devilishness in her voice.

It was devilishness that sent feelings directly into the hearts that listened to it. Then the person who had whispered quietly, Emilia, nodded her head as if it touched her inside. She picks up the instrument that was to her side and makes a sound with it.

Liliana: "We…bards are beings who live and turn stories into songs. The songs permeate into the audience's hearts, and they etch into the soul that hears about the certain past…about the history. The song that passes down for a long time, so long, has power. This means that the poet who made the song still has his/her remnants remaining in the world, even after death."

Liliana continues to speak in a bright voice. Nobody could interrupt her.

Liliana: “We can’t leave something tangible behind. Our instincts won’t even let us settle down while not making things, not knowing letters. We wander the world with these feet, sing songs at the places we arrive at, and if we’re able to pass the song into someone’s heart, we search for another place and begin walking again. And if at some point we arrive at empty wilderness, our instrument decays as a pillow—that’s the type of people we are.”

There was power in her voice, words, eyes, and gestures. It was just like when she sung.

Liliana: “Since we are beings that can only leave things in people’s hearts, not being able to leave something of form, we want to create something that will continue to remain in everyone’s hearts. We want proof that we certainly lived, a proof that has our souls carved into history. That is the only honor we wish for, if we were to want something out of this.”

There wasn’t music, but the words of the girl who told her will were comparable to it, and they etched within Subaru.

Liliana had such an established view of life that it was touching. Hearing that speech, Subaru could not let out a word, and it was the same with everyone else in the room.

They probably judged that she was being obstinate and excessively self-righteous too. However, doing that would mean denying the way of life bards had, which was the same as hers.

Subaru still lacked a certain “something” in order to do that.

Therefore, Subaru was not qualified to evaluate Liliana’s determination.

Roswaal: “I seeee. …So that’s why you want new legeeends.”

The voice that responded to Liliana’s determination in this period of silence was Roswaal’s.

The man who had the most experience with coming across determination out of all these people nods at her readiness.

Liliana also straightened her back to show admiration for Roswaal’s nod.

Liliana: “Vivid legends—history that continues to remain in everyone’s hearts strongly for a long time. Passing down existing songs already is a prideful way of life as a bard. However…if I could, I would like to be the first singer that sings a song that remains in everyone’s hearts. I want to sing and pass down the newest, freshest history in this world with my throat…with my tongue. —That is my wish.”

Roswaal: “…Ah”

“That is why I want the newest “legends”“, Liliana said.

The first page of history that nobody sings about and knows about yet, but is still etched into the world.

That’s why this girl wished to accomplish singing, despite knowing that what awaited her would be her last moment of decaying in the wilderness, as she continued along the journey.

Roswaal: “That enthusiasm is spleeendid. However, what kind of legends are you looking for? Chasing things without form is the same as grabbing onto the clouds, after aaall. You might even miss the things you desire, unless you have a definite form inside yourself.”

Liliana: “…If possible, I want a heroic tale.”

Roswaal: “A heroic tale…”

Roswaal asked a question. Liliana answered. Emilia admired it.

The meaning of those three’s reaction and the power of the sound of the words “heroic tale” also fascinated Subaru.

Heroic tale—those definitely were words that excited people and had the power to cause anyone to have wild enthusiasm.

Even in his original world, many of the names left in history were heroes that rendered famous, distinguished services in war. Heroic tales were things that had the power to captivate anyone's heart in any world during any time period.

Emilia: "Then Liliana wants to know new stories of heroes?"

Liliana: "…Well it's not that simple coming up with new heroes in this current age. There may have been a place for development of a hero several hundred years earlier when witches were rampant and the world was full of threats…a new hero in this world with peace, even if it's only apparent peace, would be very…"

There was no room for a hero to be born precisely because it was a peaceful age.

An age without a hero was also an age when a hero wouldn't be necessary. It seemed that Liliana also understood that, but she stifled her emotions in response to that helpless matter. However

Liliana: "—interesting."

It was a slight murmur, but it reached everyone's eardrums.

But, Subaru had confusion on his expression since he could not understand the meaning of that murmur. Being looked at everyone, Roswaal opens his differently colored eyes widely and laughed.

Roswaal: "A bard has come here like this, seeking a not yet known heroic tale. How should I describe this flow events that is like fate, other than saying it's amusing? Wait wait I caaan't, this is amusing!"

Emilia: "Wait, Roswaal. What are you saying? Everyone…is bothered, including Liliana…along with myself. Don't just have understanding by yourself, give a proper explanation."

When Emilia drew closer to Roswaal, him looking like he was enjoying himself, he looked at that beautiful face and says

Roswaal: “Easy to do, Emilia-sama. I will fulfill Miss Liliana’s wiiiish.”

Emilia: “Eh?! Then does Roswaal have an idea of a new heroic tale?”

Roswaal: “Of course I do. —Also, it’s related to Emilia-sama toooo.”

Emilia: “I’m related to it…?”

Roswaal gives a profound smile at Emilia, who had a look of being completely clueless. Subaru suddenly understood Roswaal’s intent, as he looked at that expression, being across from Emilia.

—If his prediction was correct, then that sure was a new “legend”.

Liliana: “You know a new hero? If so, then please let me hear about it…!”

Roswaal: “Ah, I wiiiiiilll noooot.”

Liliana: “Moohin!”

Roswaal mercilessly knocks down Liliana, who was in high spirits after hearing that the goal of her journey would come true. Emilia takes place of Liliana, her letting out a shriek like a squashed frog, and she glares at Roswaal.

Emilia: “Roswaalll”

Roswaal: “Don’t make such a frightening look. It ruins your beautiful face. Aaalso, nothing about this is me being maliciooous. Do I seem like that kind of a bad guy to you?”

Emilia: “I’m doubting if it’d actually be weird for you and Subaru to do things like that.”

Subaru: “That’s an impassioned harmful rumor!”

In response to Subaru, him getting hit by a stray bullet, Emilia says “Ah, is it not like that?” as a follow up in a panic. In front of that follow up, Liliana looks up at Roswaal once again, still being crushed, and says

Liliana: “Th-then…what can I do…to have you tell me about it?”

Roswaal: “This new “legend”…it’s not something we can rashly talk about eitheeer. Thuuus, we must make sure that you are a person we can truuust.”

Liliana: “Wh-what do I have to do? Y-you can’t have my hands, but if it’s just my toes, then I can offer them as an oath!”

Subaru: “Calm down. Also, take more care of your own body, young woman.”

Subaru calms down Liliana, who started to talk about which muscles would be acceptable and unacceptable to give, and he sighed.

It sure was difficult to make a differentiation between the title flow bard and someone who had no fixed address and no occupation. It was comparable to the suspiciousness of Subaru’s lineage, as he was someone who was summoned into a different world and didn’t have a family register.

Anyhow, Roswaal had a sound argument. If Roswaal’s plan was exactly what Subaru was thinking of, then they couldn’t rashly get Liliana involved.

Liliana drops her shoulders. It was too ironic how being a flow bard was forbidding the reason to act as a flow bard.

Roswaal: “So, thaaaat is why we first need time for ascertainment. Let’s see what we could do. How about we allow you to stay at the mansion for a few daaays. If we’re able to see you as a trustable person during that time, then I’ll reveal what I know about heroic tales.”

Liliana: “—!”

Perhaps this was her reaching the light at the end of the tunnel.

Surely that would be how you’d describe Liliana’s current mental state. That is what Subaru thought while looking at Liliana, who had hope within her eyes despite being pushed into the tunnel by Roswaal.

Liliana: “O□okay! I’m also a woman! If you’ll compromise that much, what kind of bard would I be if I wasn’t on board with it! Come at me with what you got! Come at me!”

Seeing this girl being this easily manipulated in the palm of his hand by a carrot and stick made him vaguely think about if she had talent as a dancer.

6

Liliana: “…Oops. Did I perhaps just get manipulated? Is it just my imagination?”

Subaru: “It’s more something you brought upon yourself, rather than your imagination.”

Subaru points out Liliana’s simple mindedness while they walked the distance to get to the Earlham Village together. When he did, she makes a look indicative of being very hurt and says

Liliana: “H□how cruel of you to say that. This isn’t the behavior you should have towards a dejected girl that has just noticed that she got fooled and manipulated…don’t you think? Don’t you think so?!”

Rem: “Wrong, ma’am. Subaru-kun is always lovely.”

Liliana: “I have no way to express my anger towards that blind reply.”

The person who turned down Liliana, her half crying, was Rem, who was accompanying the two of them. While looking at Liliana as she shook and fought alone, Subaru let out a sigh, as if thinking that it would be boring for a while.

Liliana successfully got caught in Roswaal’s tricks, and it was decided that she’d be observed in the mansion.

They were now on their way towards the Earlham Village to get the luggage she left behind. Subaru and Rem appeared to be her helpers, but they actually had the role of supervising Liliana to make sure she wouldn't escape.

In actuality, Subaru was warned by Roswaal to not let Liliana out of his sight, and Rem was this unreliable person's backup. Neither Subaru nor Liliana was trusted.

That being said, in truth, it was actually just Subaru reading too much into it, and Rem respecting her intentions.

Subaru: "But, Ros-chi is boorish…we don't know what he's aiming for either, after all."

Liliana: "But can Mr. Maid imagine what the Master's idea is?"

Subaru: "Roughly. However, I won't speak about it for the same reasons Ros-chi has. He and I have the same opinion, although it irritates me."

Liliana: "Mugyuuffu"

Even though Subaru spoke out, it was a failure, and Liliana let out scream that sounded similar to one of a peculiar animal. There were points where he should've felt sympathy for this girl's circumstances, who had her journey's goal in front of her and still couldn't see the full picture very well.

Subaru: "In reality, etching your name into history isn't a simple task. If we look into history from now for things like heroes and all that, we can't learn about them intuitively."

Liliana: "I agree. It's very difficult. I couldn't be any happier if I found a hero whose name hasn't even shown up in the world yet and put their traces into a song…although it would be a different matter if we had a method to look into the future."

Subaru: "A…a□a□a…as if a method like that exists, stupid!"

Liliana: "Why are you overreacting that much?"

In some sense, it would be correct to call "Return by Death" something that was similar to being able to foresee the future.

The conversation becomes blurry because of his own peculiarity, and Liliana turned towards Subaru with a doubtful look, him being disturbed. However, Rem interrupts Subaru and Liliana’s moment. Rem claps her hands with a smile and says

Rem: “Ma’am, I have good news for you. The truth is that I know a new legend.”

Liliana: “Ehh?! R□really…?!”

Liliana comes across unexpected good news, and her look becomes weird as she had both surprise and joy. Considering how Rem had been friendly until now, there was credibility in her line of saying that she had an idea.

However, on the other hand, the person who stayed silent and didn’t overlook it was Subaru. If Rem’s idea was Roswaal’s secret details, then it was still too early to tell Liliana about it.

Subaru’s worries were put aside, and Rem pointed to the side with a face full of confidence.

Rem: “It’s Subaru-kun.”

Liliana/Subaru: “—Ehh?”

Rem: “It’s the newest legend. And it’s a hero whose name will rise up, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru and Liliana’s dumbfounded voices overlap, and Rem supports Subaru to pile onto that.

Subaru forgets to ask “Eh, a joke?” as a response to the excessively confident recommendation.

Rem: “It’s Subaru-kun.”

It was hard to say if Rem was being serious or if she was trying to deceive them, as she presses for an answer. But at the very least, it seemed like a conclusion appeared inside of Liliana. She compares Subaru and Rem's face and says

Liliana: "I've got it. Please listen. —A new legend: "Skillful Playboy"

Subaru: "Shut up!"

Subaru scolds Liliana, her not even acting like she believed in him, and he lets out a deep sigh.

The feudal lord's attendant male servant that sensed the disaster that would happen in the village before anything happened, the person who risked his life to stop the witchbeasts from causing damage, the person that protected the citizens' safety and trust—who would believe in that guy? Such blasphemy.

Rem: "I was serious…too bad you won't believe me."

Rem feels discouraged, hanging her head, and she really did look disappointed, so Subaru started to feel sorry.

Subaru was confident that he wasn't great enough as a man to be rewarded with that much pure trust.

The "Return by Death" ability was Subaru's unique last bit of hope in this different world—however even when he had that power, there were many times when Subaru couldn't save the swirl of tragedies at the village and the mansion.

If it was someone else, that person would do a better job. That type of evaluation of himself was rooted within him.

Subaru: "No matter how I die, the pain is the same. …Even if I could save & reload more easily, Heaven wouldn't punish me."

It was an ability with many restrictions that had "death" as an absolute trigger for activation.

He couldn't welcome it with both hands either because it wasn't something he wished for.

He actually wanted to complain about the existence of this paranormal power he had been given, more than he wanted to show his thanks for it.

That was when the mood suddenly changed.

Rem: "—Subaru-kun"

Rem calls out to Subaru with a low, cautious voice, and after she reached out, the course of the situation was interrupted.

The sound of the seriousness in Rem's voice caused Subaru to immediately come back to reality after he had been in deep thought. And then, he clearly saw why Rem stopped him.

Subaru: "…Who are these people."

Before Subaru's eyes, who whispered, there were figures of four people that blocked the road to the village.

They were clearly suspicious people—they were completely covered in white clothing. Their faces, the length of their hands and legs, and their builds were concealed, completely burying their lineage in white.

They had white hoods, white masks, and white costumes. They were entirely white, from head to toe.

Subaru: "To think I'd see the day when I'd come across perverts other than Roswaal like this…"

Subaru tells a joke and scans his surroundings.

The eccentric clothing catches his eyes. He couldn't commence an independent surprise attack for now. If that was the case, then it was unlikely that the mere itinerant entertainer would do so either, considering how she stayed silent and stood in his way.

Subaru: "If you don't know the road, trace your footsteps. The globally common term for ground with no maintained grass is "road". By the way, the feudal lord's mansion is behind me, and a small village is at the front, but…"

"…"

Subaru: "Ah, I guess you guys aren't lost children that want to hear about the road after all."

Subaru acts provocative. The edge of their knives flicker at the end of the white clothed people's sleeves.

They put their specialized weapons for specific times into their hands and the white clothed people sliding towards him cause Subaru to gulp.

The four people swing up their knives towards Subaru and the others without even a warning and—

Rem: "I don't know who you people are, but I judge that you all have hostile intentions."

The faces of the white clothed people that were at the front receive a violent punch from Rem's fist, pushing them upward.

Her rough fist hitting their bodies makes a sound, and the men sent flying into the opposite direction land on the ground with their heads, tumbling down. Their limbs are made limp, and they saw that the masks on their upwards facing heads were becoming red.

Subaru sees that ridiculously gruesome state and says "Wow, that looks painful", honestly letting out his impression that he had.

???: "—Eh."

After he took a look, the white clothed people that were silent until now let out their voices in dumbfoundment. They look at their comrades that were sent flying, and they quickly started to feel the human kindness in the figure that stood upright.

Although, that would have no effect at all on the event that would happen from this point on.

Rem: "I lost my weapon the other day at the forest, so until I get a replacement, I'll fight you empty-handed. Got a problem with that?"

"Lost property in the forest" was a cute way of saying it, but the thing she lost was her morning star, which was a brutal thing that had thorns on it. Rem's white slender hands that liked to use those as her specialized weapon were also beautiful but dangerous weapons that sent those men flying just a moment ago.

Rem put up her hands, and the white clothed people immediately conspire with each other in response to the girl who showed those dangerous weapons.

???: "Retreat!"

The men slip away to retreat just like when they were nearing them, and they carried their unconscious comrades, quickly withdrawing from the area. Rem kept an eye on the men that came into the side forest and tried to run, but once she saw that not a trace of them was left, she lost the strength in her shoulders.

Rem: "I was a little anxious. I'm not sure if I'll be able to protect Subaru-kun empty-handedly when we come across people like that, after all."

Subaru: "You say that you were anxious, but that was a serious, good straight right."

Rem: "Subaru-kun, you're making me blush with how you're praising me that much."

Subaru nods at Rem, who put her hands on her blushed cheeks, and he looks at the forest that the white clothed people ran from, although they didn't look like mere thieves.

Subaru: "What do you think that was about? Maybe it was disturbance related to Emilia or something."

Rem: "That's a possibility, but Roswaal-sama is also someone that doesn't have many enemies. If he restrains himself that much, then I don't think he'd get frequent enemies, but it's a possibility."

Subaru: "Seriously? I'm a little worried about my workplace's safety. —Also"

While getting cold feet from Rem's response, Subaru finally glares at the side. He saw a girl that kept her silence until now, and she had just stealthily turned her back.

Subaru grabs her shoulder from the back, and while putting on the friendliest smile he was capable of he says

Subaru: "Whaaatcha doin, trying to run off? Hmm, Liliana-chaaan?"

Liliana: "Eek! Sorry. I apologize. I'm sorry, so please don't make that angry look."

Subaru: "I don't look angry! It's a smile of a smile that's trying to loosen its tension. Take a good look!"

Liliana: "Eek!!"

Liliana continued to be frighted by Subaru's full throttle smile. That reaction astonishes Subaru, but Rem takes over Liliana for him as she patted her back like she was comforting a puppy.

Rem: "Don't worry, Subaru-kun isn't scary. It's just that his eyes are a little more lovely than others'."

Liliana: "Th□that's a personal opinion, but I'm fine. I've calmed down, yes."

Subaru: "I have some subtle feelings about that…but whatever. Anyways, why did you try to run? I think this would be unlikely, but are you perhaps…"

"An accomplice of those white clothed people, and a comrade that's trying to disturb Emilia's royal selection"—was she someone that got close to Subaru and the others with that goal? The moment he tried to ask that, Liliana prostrated herself.

Liliana: "I'm sowwy! But but, I am not a bad person! It's just that those people have always been trying to get me. I tried and tried not to think "Man, I want to do something about this. Oh yeah, how about I get the mansion people to help me"."

Subaru listens to Liliana explain herself, as she prostrated herself, and it made him goggle in astonishment, and seeing that franticness made him erase the possibility of her being a threatful spy.

Subaru: “You’re telling me that when you said assassins were trying to get you while you were dozing off at the mansion, that actually was true?!”

Subaru could do nothing but be troubled and groan in response to feeling another problem popping up.

7

Subaru: “And so yeah, Liliana got chased by some unfamiliar people.”

Subaru finishes his report, and he sinks deep into the couch.

They returned, and were at the Roswaal residence office. Four people, including Subaru, were in the room. Subaru points at Rem, who was sitting next to him, and he said

Subaru: “Frankly, Rem being there saved us. I hate to admit it, but if it was just me and Liliana, then we would’ve gotten killed.”

Rem: “Yes. Thankfully I was there, too. Though, I would’ve been more useful if I had my iron flail.”

Subaru: “If you did, then they would’ve become forest fertilizer. … Yeah, I thought it was graceful and cute.”

Subaru’s heart calmed down, having evaded a massacre. The men that got knocked out by Rem, who was smiling, surely didn’t expect to almost get beaten to death by a cute maid. Anyone would understand those feelings.

Ram: “So, is the bard you were talking about in the guest room?”

Subaru: “Yeah, with Emilia-tan, that is. She is there under the pretext of guaranteeing her safety, but it’d be problematic if we pressured her awkwardly and made her run away. That’s why Emilia-tan’s suited for the job, since she knows nothing.”

Ram: “I see. It seems you understand why Roswaal-sama wants to keep that poet here.”

Ram gives an acknowledging gesture with her chin, and she pierced Subaru with a cold look. Subaru responds to that look by shrugging his shoulders.

Subaru: “He wants to make Liliana have a position of something like a news spreader for Emilia-tan’s royal election, right? Liliana wants to create a new heroic song with her own hands. She seems perfect for a success story of a country’s new king.”

Ram: “That was some quick understanding for someone like Barusu. My suspicion of you having a hollow pumpkin from the neck up has been cleared.”

Subaru: “Have you been trying to talk about a jack-o’lantern or something?”

Setting Ram’s usual assessments aside, Roswaal’s intentions were probably something like that.

This was a world where things like TV and newspapers to communicate information to the general public were non-existent. The influence of a bard going to various places conveying things such as history and events through song was something definitely far beyond the capabilities of Subaru’s imagination.

—In regards to the royal selection too, Liliana would be a big help to Emilia with her songs.

Roswaal: “Subaru’s also quick on the uptaaaake. My plan is exactly what you saaaaid. Although, I plan to keep an accurate balance between the merits and demeriiiiits.”

Subaru: “Merits and demerits, eh.”

Subaru felt suspicious with Roswaal giving a pleased answer while chuckling.

Seeing Subaru’s reaction, Rem takes Roswaal’s spot, and while facing down she says

Rem: “I hate to point this out, but Emilia-sama is a half-elf, after all. You cannot deny the possibility of a normal poet using that as a reason to decline the proposal. For that point, Liliana-sama seems to be friendly with Emilia-sama, so I figure she might accept the proposal, depending on the conditions.”

Subaru: “So a plan in which we force the responsibility for trouble that can’t be resolved alone onto someone else and make it feel like an undeniable proposal, too. …Did I just make a really evil look?”

Ram: “It was your usual evil person face.”

Rem: “It was as lovely as usual.”

Subaru curls his lips at the evilness of Roswaal’s personality while receiving the sisters contrasting assessments.

On top of his crafty speaking that got Liliana to stay at the mansion, he really was a smooth talker with his cunningness.

When he glared at him to criticize him slightly, he waved his hand with a full smile, and Subaru sighed.

Subaru: “Anyhow, I guess our current aim is to solve the problem while paying attention to Liliana’s surroundings. It really sucks how we let our attackers get away. If we caught even one of them…”

Ram: “If only you broke 5-60 of their bones, made them throw up as much as possible, and killed them.”

Subaru: “They wouldn’t even be able to spit out blood anymore if they got harmed that much. Take it easy on them.”

The fact that he couldn’t affirm it as a joke showed just how terrifying Ram’s loyalty was.

Subaru: “I am careful myself, but if I do get attacked, I’d only be able to cry for help in a super high-pitched voice. Though, I wouldn’t expect people to try it in a mansion with a feudal lord on the watch.”

Rem: “If I hear Subaru-kun’s voice, I’ll come running over right away. Even if I’m cleaning, even if I’m cooking, even if I’m taking a bath, please always call me.”

Ram: “Filthy.”

Subaru: “Quit looking at me with scornful eyes before I’m able to say anything!”

Rem shaked her invisible tail as a puppy maid, while Ram looked at Subaru with completely scornful eyes as a kitty cat maid. After the usual interaction, they sought to conclude the conversation.

Roswaal: “Anywaaays, as for me, I just want to keep the status quuoo. How about we find a solution after asking Liliana a little more about the situatioooon?”

Subaru: “Okay, then let’s talk to her with that in mind. Honestly, right now she probably feels more dead than alive, after all.”

Ram: “She caused a problem that’s bothering Roswaal-sama. She should suffer a little.”

Subaru: “Even if it’s towards the guest, that is too rude, Nee-sama.”

Subaru smiles wryly at Ram’s abusive language, and he puts his hand on the door to leave the room. Then

Roswaal: “As long as you’re with us, your safety is guaranteed. Maaake sure you communicate that point propeeeerly.”

Subaru was shocked by the deep statement that came from Roswaal’s voice that hit his back.

8

Liliana: “…S□so, I don’t gotta worry about y’all slaying me with a sword for now?”

Subaru: “Uh, where do you come from?”

Liliana listens to the conclusion of the discussion, and she collapses in the chair dead tired, having stiffened up with her whole body from her nervousness. He decided to honestly excuse her slovenly appearance for now.

Because she must’ve went through suffocation while waiting, after all.

Subaru: “If you’ve learned from this experience, then don’t think of trying something like involving a feudal lord with your own motives. This is actually something that could get you slain with a sword, you know.”

Liliana: “Agh! I□I’ll reflect upon my actions. I’ll be finer than wind, clearer than water!”

Subaru: “That’s a duplicate of my acting style. So from now on, you’re not allowed to use it.”

Liliana currently did not have the composure to respond to Subaru’s cold retort with a witty joke.

Liliana basically got people related to the feudal lord involved in her situation and exposed them to danger. Her idea was surely foolish, and she was certainly naive, too.

As you’d expect, seeing Liliana down was a good way for Subaru to relieve his grudge. However, the one who saw Subaru and Liliana and puffed her cheeks angrily was Emilia.

Emilia: “Subaru. Liliana seems to reaaaally be reflecting on herself, so don’t go any further.”

Subaru: “You can’t be like that, Emilia-tan. If we don’t warn her firmly this way, she’ll never start to have self-awareness. She has to be taught just how much trouble you can cause to everyone around by staying silent and keeping a secret…Emilia-tan, what’s up with that look?”

Emilia: “No, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about how terrible it is to not have self-awareness.”

Subaru gets stared at by Emilia, and for some reason it makes him feel uncomfortable.

Subaru understands the turn of events, and he changes the target of the conversation back from Emilia to Liliana.

Subaru: “So, I’m gonna ask you to speak in detail…but uh, when in the world did the white clothed people start going after you?”

Liliana: “I don’t really know. I became clearly aware of them going after me in these past few days…nothing special happened until that point.”

Subaru: “Nothing like an accident that would give a hint?”

Liliana: “No. At best, there were things like my own feather pen going missing, my clothes going missing after I took a bath, used tableware disappearing from the inn…”

Subaru: “That sounds like damage from stalkers!”

When Subaru raised his voice because of the devious tricks, Emilia and Liliana both tilted their heads.

It seemed like these girls couldn’t grasp the concept of a “Stalker”.

Emilia was perfect. Liliana was a beautiful girl if she didn’t open her mouth, so he wanted them to be careful, taking that into consideration.

That said, when Subaru remembered the attackers’ situation, he shook his head.

Subaru: “Your belongings going missing probably isn’t related to those pursuers. You just have passionate, curious fans. Have they ever chased you around with a knife?”

Liliana: “Hmmm. The way you speak is a slightly confusin’…but anyways, today was the first time someone flicked a shiny object at me. If it wasn’t, I woulda had a little more of a serious look on my face.”

Subaru: “Doesn’t really look like you have a serious look today either…but I guess this means their approaches have suddenly changed.”

Subaru goes into deep thought with Liliana's evidence, and he searches for the cause of the white clothed people's change in their actions. However, there was one thing that came to mind when he thought of changes that happened most recently to Liliana.

Subaru: "Did they panic…because you met with this mansion's feudal lord?"

If Liliana's contact with Roswaal was what motivated the people who chased her, then it would fit the puzzle. But on the other hand, it meant that there was a reason to be worried with Liliana getting involved with people of power.

Subaru: "You really don't have any idea, huh. You seriously feel like a pretty dangerous troublemaker. If there's something you know and you don't barf out all of it around here, we won't be able to protect you."

Liliana: "Such ridiculous remarks you're making by saying stuff like barf in front of a girl! I swear on the souls of my ancestors and this lyulyre that I'm not hiding anything! Actually I can't swear it on my lyulyre yet. Please wait."

Subaru: "Don't just lose confidence right off the bat!"

Subaru sighs at Liliana after yelling as she held onto her business tool tightly.

But, Liliana was also seriously looking for a clue, so while groaning she said

Liliana: "I'm not even remotely trying to hide anything, but I got nothin. Although, this discomfort kinda feels like small bones getting stuck on all my teeth."

Subaru: "Take out the bones properly before you eat fish."

Subaru responds coldly at Liliana, her lacking seriousness even though she had a serious face, and he turned to Emilia, wanting to have a serious conversation.

Subaru: "So, Emilia-tan, did you have any realizations while we were talking about being dirtied with small bones? We made you listen to an unproductive conversation, right?”

Emilia: “Not at all. Based off of what Liliana said, things felt off about two weeks ago…it seems to have started before she came to the Irlam village when she left town Warwar. So if we assume there’s a reason for that…”

Subaru: “That’s where it is, eh. I’m almost certain something that happened there was the cause. Some sort of impressive matter, or whether she did something there or not, oi.”

Liliana: “Why are you assuming that I did something, even after I let you guys treat me disgracefully?”

Subaru ignored Liliana while she had a whiny look on her face. Liliana grabs onto her pigtails while pouting, and she shook her head back and forth.

Liliana: “Even if you say that, it was the same as always. That town is a little cold to outsiders, so feeling unwelcome would be…aah! Aah! The song! Don’t sigh after the song ended…! Don’t look at me like that…!”

Subaru: “I do feel bad for your heart breaking because of bad memories, but come on, say things that can give us hints.”

Emilia: “Besides, why’d you even stay at a rude place, even if it was just for a little? I do have experience myself, but I don’t think it felt good for either of us.”

Subaru: “I caught a glimpse of Emilia-tan’s painful past.”

Emilia’s innocent experience telling pierced Liliana while she held onto her head shaking.

However, it was natural to point it out. Being a bard meant that you’d go where the wind blew, that you’d do things on a whim. There shouldn’t have been any reason for a rootless girl to stay in a place that made her feel uncomfortable.

Liliana: “Ah, you see, those people certainly were cold, and they did completely irritate me, but fortunately, the richest grandpa liked me!”

Subaru: “Oh, a rich grandpa, eh.”

Liliana: “Nooo! Jeez, I meant that he adored me like a granddaughter. He even bought me a new lyulyre! That’s why it’s new,”

She holds out the lyulyre to show it off, and Subaru accepts it without thought. Liliana was euphoric, but to Subaru it only sounded like her fooling a lonely old man and making him support her.

Liliana: “I ate delicious food, slept in a comfy bed, and he even bought new things like a lyulyre and clothes…it was like a dream hehehe.”

Subaru: “You should do something about that vulgarity you have whenever you aren’t singing.”

Liliana had an intoxicated look with drool that looked like it was going to drop. However, after she ignored Subaru’s point, she suddenly made a gloomy expression.

Liliana: “But, unfortunately that time didn’t last for long, either. One day the grandpa kicked me out of the mansion, not knowing what I did wrong. And that was the end of my riotous pleasures.”

Subaru: “Did you make careless mistakes while sleeping like breaking vases and snatching food?”

Liliana: “H-How rude! The last time I made a careless mistake was five years ago!”

She said 5 years ago, but that was when she was 16. Although, it would be tiresome to dig into that, too.

Liliana made a baffled look, appearing to really have no idea why she was kicked out.

Just from hearing “Rich Grandpa”, there was a word he was suspicious of, but he was far from the core of the reason as to why she got kicked out. He also thought about the possibility of Liliana’s pursuers having misunderstandings about there being something going on between her and the old man.

Subaru: “Either way, I guess the hints are the Warwar town and that grandpa. I’ll tell this to Roswaal just in case…but can this even be investigated?”

Liliana: “But but, the grandpa helped with the things around me, and he also taught me the “Song That Must Not be Sung No Matter What”, so I really have no idea.”

Subaru: “Is that so…then I guess he can’t be a clue. I’m stumped.”

Emilia: “No, hold on a second.”

Subaru was just about to let go of something that seriously could not be ignored, and he stops the conversation in panic. However, the two girls were tilting their heads. It seemed like they weren’t even kidding.

That’s why airheads are scary. Emilia-tan is seriously an angel.

Emilia: “Um, what is the “Song That Must Not be Sung No Matter What”?”

Liliana: “…? It’s a song the grandpa taught me, and it’s about the secret that made a fortune in a lifetime. Honestly, it’s not for me, whether it be because of the music or the lyrics.”

Emilia: “Jeez. You can’t talk like that about a song someone taught you. Can you play it once?”

Liliana: “Yes, with great pleasure! If you don’t mind, I’d like to show everything in my repertoire!”

Liliana takes her lyulyre from Subaru, and she was in a good mood strumming it.

It also made Emilia’s eyes light up. Her heart was pounding like a drum because of the request.

Subaru closed his eyes with the two of them in front of him. After that, he took a deep breath and said

Subaru: “—That song is completely at fault!!”

Then, he put an end to the two airheads’ conversation with no retort in sight to come from them.

9

Subaru: “But you know…”

Liliana: “Fai? Fwht’s up?”

Subaru: “Don’t talk with your mouth full. Ladies are vulgar. “

Liliana: “Haha. It seems like Mr. Maid finally noticed my sexiness as a woman.”

Liliana appeared to be prideful for some reason, and the way she interpreted Subaru’s remark was unknown. At the very least, her appearance of having her cheeks inflated with candy like a squirrel did not have a bit of an adult woman’s sexiness.

Liliana stuffed a ridiculous amount of Rem’s homemade sweets in her mouth, and it was now afternoon snack time. Subaru let out a sigh while enjoying the tea and sweets during the beautiful afternoon.

Subaru: “It’s already been 3 days since you came here…”

Liliana: “It has. That was quite quick. What about it?”

Subaru: “It’s hasn’t been at the level of continuous attacks, but seriously what have you done?!”

Subaru yells, looking back on the three days, and Liliana made her wide eyes even wider in surprise.

The three days Liliana stayed at the mansion—the gang's attacks on her were done frequently, be it in the morning, at noon, or at night, and she was attacked more than 30 times already. How good was the guess of them most likely hesitating if she was sheltered in the mansion?

Subaru: "At the moment, Rem shoots all of them down, but them escaping is the only thing unusual. Not a single one of them has been caught. Just who are we dealing with?"

Liliana: "Oh come on now. If I knew that, then I wouldn't be having trouble. Please don't make me say that at this point."

Subaru: "Just how carefree have you become in merely three days?!"

It was as if Liliana got very carried away in these past 3 days, laughing like it was none of her business.

She only cowered in fear for a few hours in the first day. Now she was walking so confidently as if the mansion was her own place. Or maybe Subaru was the one taking them lightly.

Subaru: "Though there is luck in leisure…at this rate, I don't think Ram wants to wait, either."

Liliana: "I apologize for the inconvenience…if you aren't gonna eat those sweets, can I have them?"

Subaru: "Your gratitude really is just for show and lip service!"

Liliana stuffed herself with Subaru's share of sweets, appearing to have taken Subaru's angry voice as permission, and she was delighted. That behavior made Subaru feel bad for Ram, who was acting for Liliana's sake.

As of now, Ram was doing an investigation all the way up to the Warwar village Liliana stayed at before. She did this because it seemed that the town's rich man was related to Liliana getting chased.

Although it was Roswaal's order, he could not forget the truly displeased look Ram had on her face before she left the mansion. You could say that the future of Ram letting out her anger on Subaru after she came back was guaranteed.

Liliana: “But you’re very popular with everyone besides Ram.”

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Liliana: “Songs are simply stubborn things that soak deep into hearts, indiscriminate of countries, words, and races. Well, bards succeed in life because of their true abilities. Sincere feelings move people. Hehe.”

Subaru: “I’m not convinced…”

Subaru felt some sort of sense of defeat in the beautiful girl (21 year old) that had a vulgar smile. It was splendid how her secrets to success were things such as her looks and true ability, but she was far from convincing.

For a girl to be charming, Subaru felt like she had to have beauty in the heart.

Subaru: “For that, Emilia-tan truly is fitting for my first star.”

Emilia: “Did you call me just now?”

Subaru: “Eek!”

Right after murmuring his feelings out loud, Emilia showed up in the room, and his heart jumped.

Seeing Subaru reflexively straighten himself, Emilia pointed above the room’s door. There was this world’s ma-time-crystal sparkling, which you could tell the time with based off the change in color.

Emilia: “See, it’s about that time of the day again, you know? I came here because I couldn’t wait.”

Subaru: “That’s a line I’d like to hear in my room when everyone’s asleep at night. …Rem said that she was going to clean up the tableware and stuff, too.”

Emilia: “Haha. Rem’s also looking forward to it, after all. I’m interested in the continuation from yesterday, myself.”

Emilia had her cheeks sweetly blush a little because of her expectations. He felt jealous because that captivating face and her eyes weren't looking at him. Subaru unconsciously glared at Liliana.

Liliana: "I've got it. Please listen. —Another person's love, the taste of honey."

Subaru: "Shut up!"

Liliana takes a lick of the pastry cream on her finger, carrying the lyulyre on her shoulder, and Subaru roared at her. He was simply a poor loser, so Liliana's triumphant look made him feel complete frustration.

Rem: "Ah, was it just about to start?"

Emilia: "No it's okay. Subaru was just teasing Liliana like always,"

Subaru: "Inside your head, I was the one doing the teasing, Emilia-tan?!"

Emilia speaks to Rem, who came in late, and she was making space for her on the sofa. When Rem sat next to Emilia with a "Excuse me", there was one seat left. Then

Beatrice: "—I'm coming in, I suppose."

The door to the room opened had opened three times. However, this scene had a different effect than all the others.

On the other side of the door, a scenery was now drawing a faint library in their vision, something that should've usually been connected to the mansion's corridor. A spacious room and cramped, rows of bookshelves. There was a childish girl walking towards them from there.

It was a girl that had cream-like colored hair put into magnificent drills. She made her doll like pretty face into a sour look, and she entered the room while the edges of her flashy dress shook.

She looks around the room, and she gave a little snort while having a composed expression.

Beatrice: "Well, you waited quite long for me. That's the only thing

I'll admire you for, I suppose."

Liliana: "Oh please. There's no way I'd start without Beatrice-sama. Neglecting my obligations would be disgraceful of me as a woman."

Beatrice: "Yeah. Nice prudence. It seems like there are others who should follow your example, I suppose."

In response to Liliana's welcome, the girl—Beatrice looked down on Subaru.

She did, but Subaru's eye level wasn't like that, and as long as he was used to her impudent behavior, she was nothing but lovely.

Subaru: "Even so, I still can't believe Beako even leaves the forbidden library to listen to Liliana's songs."

Beatrice: "Occasionally experiencing a world that isn't reading books isn't that bad, I suppose. That girl's singing voice has its own value. A singing voice alone has more value than you, I suppose."

Subaru: "I seriously might get worried about my own worth, so can you quit it with those type of expressions?"

Beatrice ignores Subaru, him worrying about his own rating, and she sat down on the remaining seat.

With this, the Roswaal residence's Liliana fans were all gathered together. With Emilia and Rem, and even Beatrice, the ones who liked Liliana's songs were the whole mansion, and it surprised her.

Liliana: "Wow, well then, thanks for gathering like this today again. The singer that will color everyone's time through songs and stories is I, Liliana."

Liliana gives a speech in the middle of the room while being looked at by her audience of four.

The way she said the standard phrases had dignity. It seemed that her behavior as a bard was the only thing she took seriously. He didn't criticize her for having bits of sweets stuck on her mouth.

Liliana: “Well then, from here, what I will sing is a famous modern day poem, “The Sword Demon Love Song”, act II. Starting from when the sword demon who knew nothing but the sword meets a beautiful girl in the flowers.”

The girls’ applaud moderately at Liliana, her bowing, while Subaru applauded at her loudly.

Subaru was aware of the fact that he was here, secretly looking forward to hearing the continuation of the song from yesterday. All in all, Subaru, and again Emilia and the others, all felt the same way.

Sadly, Subaru was also wowed by this little singer’s singing voice.

Liliana: “I will sing. Please listen. —The Sword Demon Love Song.”

Liliana plucks the strings of her lyulyre, and her thin voice gets into the song, and she began to sing the prologue.

That moment, the room’s atmosphere melted into the the song’s space made by the girl, and the feeling of the world changed completely.

Liliana: “…”

The world changes form with Liliana’s gestures, and even for the scenery, the way the song surrounded it was just amazing.

Subaru tried his absolute best to hold back his oohing and aahing while he continued to have goosebumps.

He couldn’t do something like destroy this beautiful world because of his own lack of insensitivity.

The story starts from when the swordsman, who devoted himself so much to the sword that he was called the sword demon, won his first fight after becoming strong at the royal capital and finally met a lone woman. The love song changes color from there. The sword demon ran through the battlefield as he swung cold steel while keeping his unconscious love to himself. Act 2 ends when the sword demon exchanged words with the girl, feeling something equivalent of swinging the sword.

Liliana: “—Thank you for kind attention.”

The tune of the lyulyre that shook the atmosphere ends. Liliana bends her back, leaving something that would stay in their minds.

Seeing that, Subaru naturally straightens his back, and he clapped. As for those next to him, Emilia and Rem were also applauding the same way. Beatrice was the only one not clapping, but her mouth that formed a faint smile was proof of her satisfaction with Liliana’s song.

Emilia: “As lovely as I thought…the story will definitely begin from here.”

Rem: “The sword demon love song is a song I know from beginning to end, and yet it felt like it was my first time listening to it. I can only admire Liliana’s song. It was wonderful.”

Beatrice: “It was okay, I suppose. I might as well come again to listen to the continuation.”

Subaru: “What a dishonest loli…”

Beatrice was viewing from above for some reason while Emilia and Rem were expressing their true thoughts. While putting in a retort for Beatrice, Subaru also intentionally avoided the opportunity to say his thoughts out loud.

Liliana: “So, what did you think of it, Mr. Maid?”

However, the bard that made her nostrils flare while having an evil smile would not permit Subaru’s weak self-esteem. Subaru bites his lips, and he sighed, immediately giving up.

Subaru: “…Yeah, damn it. It hurts to say it, but it was amazing. I’m honestly concerned with you as a person and as a girl whenever you aren’t singing, but when you do sing, it’s the one time you are perfect. I was thinking of suggesting that you always sing, for the world’s sake, the people’s sake, and your own sake.”

Liliana: “What is this?! That should’ve been praise, and yet I don’t feel satisfied! How strange!”

He felt annoyed honestly praising her, so it turned into a complement with unintentional tints of abusive language. That made Beatrice snicker, and it caused Emilia to have a warm look.

Rem: “The sword demon love song is a total of five acts. I of course love the ending 5th act, but I can’t miss out on listening to tomorrow’s 3rd act, too. I’ll finish my work and run over, no matter what.

Subaru: “Rem, you really love this. As of now, I’m not so absorbed in Liliana’s song that it overwhelms me, but if I listen to it until the end, then my thoughts might change.”

Rem: “Yes, they sure will. The sword demon’s way of life is the ideal way for many men and women, even today. Subaru-kun, please come and see me someday just like in the sword demon love song.”

Subaru: “If the spoilers I heard were true, then wouldn’t that mean Rem and I would kill each other in the end?”

While replying, Subaru loosens his lips upon seeing Rem having her cheeks blush slightly because of her excitement.

It was rare for Rem to show her emotions this much. It was the same case with Beatrice going to listen, but Liliana’s singing voice really did have power. He was honestly a little jealous of that.

Subaru even tried so hard to become friendly with Rem as much as anyone else was that he literally died.

Subaru: “She simply did that. That was not fun.”

Liliana: “What is up with you, Mr. Maid? Even if you make such a whiny look, it’s neither cute nor pleasant at all. You need to look at yourself objectively more.”

Subaru: “You’re not very convincing with how you usually act. Or are you trying to make the difference big to make the amazingness you have when singing stand out? I guess you're a schemer aiming for a gap in moe."

Liliana: "I don't understand what you're saying, but that's exactly right *munch munch*"

Subaru: "Don't eat in the middle of speaking!"

The unexpected guessing ended in an unexpected way.

The song ended, and Liliana reached for baked sweets once again, having put her lyulyre against the wall. The majestic and splendid angel became a fallen angel the instant she was polluted by the world called sweetness.

Mixing in Liliana like that and transitioning into the tea party while chatting was the daily life for the past 3 days.

—However, today she didn't seem to behave herself.

Rem: "Excuse me."

Suddenly, Rem said that, stood up, and headed towards the window.

Rem opens the window without a sound like that, and she gazes outside of it as she squinted her eyes. She checked on the mansion's main entrance, and she picked out something from her pocket with her right hand.

Subaru: "Rem, what is that?"

Rem: "A little iron sphere. Since I don't have something I'm used to using at hand."

Rem rolls an iron sphere about the size of a golf ball in her palm, and she threw it outside at a high speed, having a shy expression as if she was embarrassed. After one second, there were thick, rough screams.

Rem: "—It hit."

Subaru gives Rem a wry smile as she looked outside and gave him a thumbs up.

When he looked outside while being next to Rem, he saw the white clothed people carrying their unconscious comrades.

Subaru: “They don’t learn do they…Rem has bashed it into their heads so many times for them to learn.”

Rem: “When I bash them, maybe the things they learn get poured out.”

Subaru shuddered at Rem, her not denying the bashing, and he sighed after watching the group that fled. This pattern of the group getting repelled by Rem like this repeated for three days.

Rem: “It was the people with white clothes this time.”

Subaru: “Yep…wait, what’s up with that bothering remark. This time it was people with white clothes?”

Rem: “About the groups that are clearly after Liliana-sama, the white clothed people and the crudely dressed people have mixed attacks. Most likely, I think the white clothed people employed thugs, as they didn’t have enough help.”

Subaru: “Seriously? Are you sure there are two groups? What’s the possibility of them being unrelated?”

Rem: “With this timing, it’s hard for me to think that the two reckless forces have separate goals.”

Subaru also nods in approval at Rem’s point. As one would expect, considering this timing, it would be too unlucky if the white clothed people coming for Liliana were a separate suicidal group attacking them.

But even so, he really was disturbed with the attack pattern.

Subaru: “Can’t we just go all out one time and catch them properly?”

Rem: “I did think about that, but they were really good at escaping. I think I can catch them if I chase them seriously…but I’m worried about going too far from the mansion.”

Subaru: “Even if they get past Ram, there’s still 2-3 boss characters in this mansion.”

Thinking of fighting strength, Rem was in the middle of the pack for real ability in the Roswaal residence.

There was Emilia, who was dependent on Puck, and Roswaal and Beatrice with their solo fighting power. When looked at from outside, this was a mansion that had such an excessive amount of fighting power gathered that it would be foolish to attack them.

Emilia: “But, leaving them on the loose too long would make me worried, too. It would be reeeaally problematic if they became impatient and started acting reckless.”

Subaru: “What I really want to do is solve this quickly. These are hot-headed guys that just come at us at random so I don’t think it’ll be a problem…but at worst, if they stop caring about how they go about it, they might even attack those around them.”

If say the damage reached the Irlam village, the matter would be at the worst outcome. Although, there was the worst case scenario of Roswaal burning the attackers to nothing without sympathy after they attacked his people.

Subaru: “It would be nice if Ram found a clue ASAP so that doesn’t happen.”

Emilia: “Ram is smart, so she’d definitely figure out something right away. We haven’t came up with anything even after listening to that song…”

The “Song” that Emilia spoke of was the “Song That Absolutely Must Not be Sung” that was recognized as the cause of people going after Liliana.

Subaru also listened to it many times to confirm it, and the “Song That Must Not be Sung No Matter What” condition already made no sense to him. However, even Subaru didn't feel like it was a song that had any special meaning.

It being closely related to a secret of a wealthy man making a fortune in a lifetime was also fake considering how it was a plain, pastoral song that was about a home town. Ram was acting now to confirm that.

Beatrice: "You're stuck in a trivial pickle, I suppose. Cutting up those bothersome and boorish people completely would make you feel better.."

Subaru: "People were even finally searching for a peaceful solution, read the atmosphere."

Tilting her cup of black tea to drink, Beatrice cruelly finishes saying that with an unemotional voice.

It was ultimately a last option to end it, but ending it by destroying the hostile people would leave a bad aftertaste. Subaru learned that lesson with the conclusion of the witchbeast uproar.

Not to mention, the people they were dealing with this time were not witchbeasts, but human like he was, so it would the lesson applied here even more.

Subaru: "As long as we have solid defense, we can impair them. … Plus, if we attack aggressively ourselves, they all might proceed at once."

Liliana: "We don't have enough help or information to do that. It's all over already. There's also the option to hang onto our heads and wait for the storm to pass by. Let's do that."

Subaru: "You, why are you so careless about this? Everyone's doing their best for your sake, you know?"

She was probably more relaxed in the time she was put under than she was in all her other days until now. Seeing Liliana relaxing, he guessed that he wouldn't need to have fears about his relationship with her after solving the issue.

But, there was still no hope for a process to arrive at the solution.

Subaru: “Going on the offensive ourselves, eh…”

He mutters the words he said again, and Subaru went into deep thought as he closed one eye. When he did, seeing Subaru’s face from the side, Emilia gently knit her nicely shaped eyebrows.

Emilia: “Oh, Subaru, by any chance are you doing some sort of evil plan again?”

Subaru: “Not nice of you to say again. …Though it sure is an evil plan.”

Subaru makes an evil smile in response to Emilia’s point, and he looks back at the four people inside the mansion. While having the attention of all of the girls, Subaru raised one finger and made a proposal.

Subaru: “I have a plan I want to try out. Can you guys help me?”

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???: “—Still, what a stupid thing you’ve done. But it does make our job easier!”

Subaru stopped his cheeks from twitching as the man spit dirty saliva and laughed.

They were in a dim cabin, and the windows were sealed so that they couldn’t see outside. Light only came from the Ragmart light crystal, and it was still only enough to faintly see their surroundings.

A gang he was now familiar with that acted as rough as they looked. That’s how Subaru assessed them.

???: “If you continued staying at the mansion, nothing would’ve happened because of that monstrous maid, but now you’ve sealed your fate by showing up. You got a bit carried away, don’t you think?”

The gang, who were “just like thugs” with a crude aura, altogether consisted only of 8 people, counting the ones that were in and out of the cabin. These people were at the top of the list of men who treated Subaru cruelly with vulgar looks on their faces.

???: “Oh? So cuuuuute. You’re shaking, aren’t youuuu. Go calm her down, Mr. Handsome.”

Next to Subaru, who was acting frustrated, there was a girl faced down shaking her head. Once the man saw that and spoke to him with a mocking voice, Subaru took her hand to protect her from the laughing men.

Subaru: “It’ll be alright, calm down. You don’t have to worry, it’ll all work itself out…”

???: “How brave. As if this is something that’ll work itself out. We were always careful to avoid being found by that maid. Well, as long as we have the woman, you aren’t needed. After we beat the hell out of you, we’ll let you go.”

Seeing Subaru cheer her up, the man cracks his knuckles loudly to show off. When Subaru took a breath, he realized that she held his hand back tightly.

It was a native dress that only covered her body minimally. She looked lonely with her exposed white shoulders, so Subaru hugged her gently to hide her from the men.

She holds her breath, and the men whistle. Then it happened immediately after.

???: “—Are you serious about getting her back?!”

The door opens roughly along with that voice. The sunlight lights up the room in darkness, and once Subaru squinted reflexively, he saw a person’s shadow out of breath standing while being backlit.

When the shadow came into focus after several flashes of light, Subaru noticed that it was a young man. He was well dressed, and he caressed his hair randomly.

The boy looks around the room, notices Subaru and the others, and widens his eyes. And then,

???: “Oh, Liliana! I finally—wait, who’s that guy?”

???: “He’s someone from the mansion where she hid, and they were caught…Master?”

The eyes of the boy looking at Subaru sharpen, and his face suddenly flushes. Once he saw the thugs acting carefully to not hurt the young man’s mood, he figured that he was their boss—the mastermind.

Subaru makes that judgement, and the young man breathes near him heavily with his nose.

???: “You bastaaard! W□Who said you could touch her like that?!”

Subaru: “Oaah?!”

The enraged boy kicked Subaru into the wall with all his might.

Subaru’s head spins as he got hit with sudden violence, and the thugs around him take his place as they shout.

???: “M□Master, what are you doing?!”

???: “T□T□This guy was getting all intimate with my Liliana!”

The boy, shaking off the men who were holding him back, kneels before Liliana, who he forcefully pulled away from Subaru. He holds his hand out to Liliana, still facing down, and he says,

???: “Ahh, Liliana. We finally meet. It is your servant of love, Kiritaka. When I heard that you were brought to that infamous mansion of the “Demi-human lover”, heart-breaking fear overflowed like spring water. Ah, ah, Liliana…”

The boy named Kiritaka continues speaking to her, acting like he was getting drunk off his own words. Subaru could only frown since he knew his colleague had such a bad reputation that he couldn’t really say that it was a false accusation. While patting her shoulder, he looks back at the thugs and says,

Kiritaka: “Do you all not have any thoughts on working for ‘him’?”

???: “He’s a boss that’s generous with his money. He can have that thin bodied girl, while we take it easy for a while. ‘He’ would probably overlook us doing that for a bit.”

Based off the thugs’ grumbling, it seemed they also knew that ‘him’ meant the boss. Subaru finds out about how they are tight on money and anticipates that he was going to be wrong about all of the fuss around Liliana.

He’d thought that they were surely going for Liliana because of the “Song”, but it looked like she herself was the one Kiritaka, the mastermind, had the hots for.

Expressing love sure may be like paranoia, but the boy couldn’t see what else there was to it.

Kiritaka: “What’s wrong, Liliana?! Why won’t you look at me with your lovely eyes?”

Kiritaka, who had been appealing for love with nothing but passion, knits his brows in response to the girl that continued to keep silent.

Kiritaka: “Why won’t you speak…they must have done something awful when they took you!”

???: “Please let it go, Master! We did as you said. Not to be rude, but there’s no way anybody would think of doing something to a girl with a body this thin…”

Beatrice: “—Annoying squirts won’t shut up, I suppose.”

When Kiritaka and the others started quarrelling, a girl’s low voice interrupts them.

Kiritaka, hearing that with his face lifted, has his facial expression dyed with surprise. He was the only one who noticed it at this time. —That the voice of the girl in his face was different from the one he sought.

Kiritaka: “W□Who a□are you?! You’re not my Liliana?!”

Beatrice: “I don’t have the faintest memory of being named by you people.”

Subaru puts aside his retort inside of him that was ‘Didn’t they do that halfway through?’, and the girl stands up as her pigtails shook. But unlike Liliana’s hair, it was braided into quite elaborate drills.

Beatrice: “Inside and outside, a total of 9 people. —An amount I can count on my fingers, I suppose.”

The next moment, inside and outside of the hut, there was the sound of men screaming roughly in a violently blowing storm.

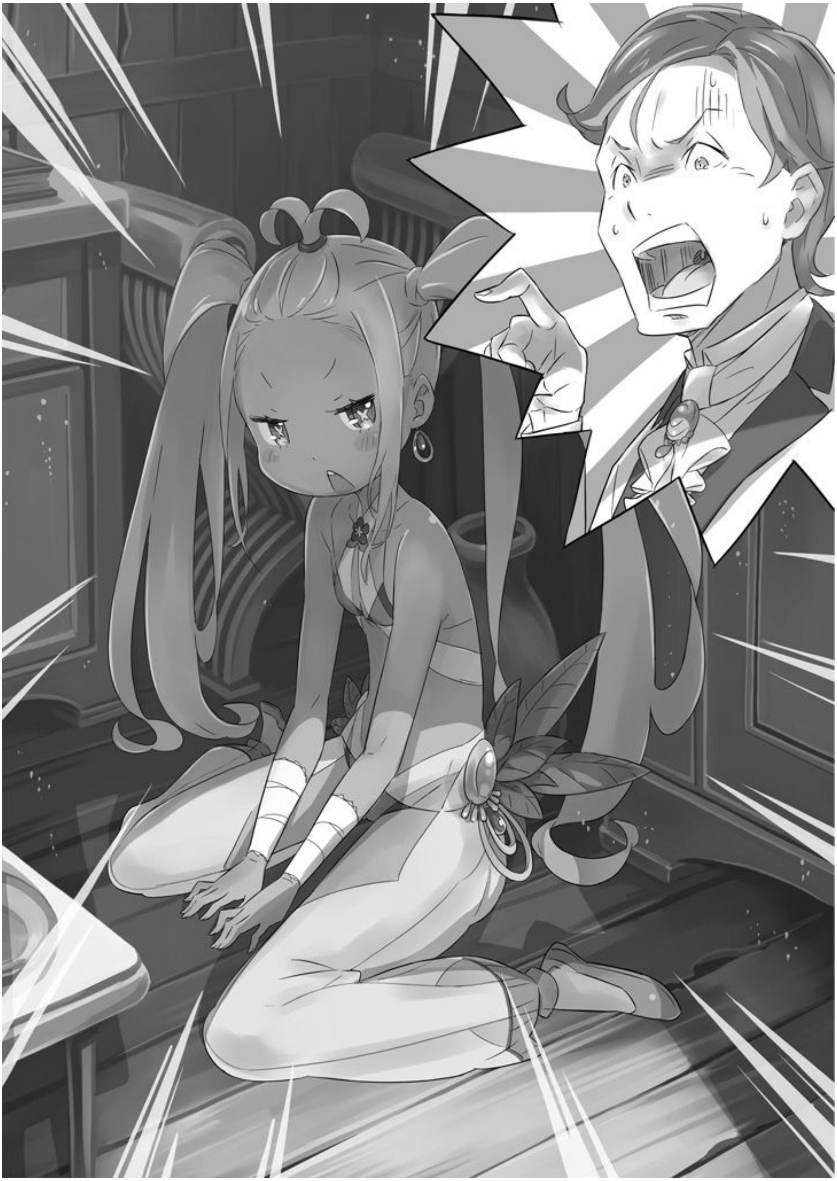

11

Attacking the gang going after Liliana was a simple plan Subaru proposed.

Subaru: “A decoy plan where we try getting caught, since we couldn’t find out where they go after chasing them away, and get taken to the mastermind. Good thing they weren’t an energetic gang.”

Beatrice: “You made me go this far. Of course it was going to go well.”

Beatrice lets out a sigh. She was using the towel Subaru gave her to wipe off her hands and feet.

She wipes off the paint that changed her skin color, and her brown appearance was slowly returning to its usual light skin. Subaru folds his arms while looking at Beatrice, who was wiping her whole body diligently.

Subaru: “Still, the more you return to your usual appearance, the more I feel like something’s weird about that getup.”

Beatrice: “…And whose proposal was it again to make me look like this?”

Subaru: “I mean, yeah it was my proposal, but…I didn’t think you’d look this pitiful.”

When Subaru shrugged his shoulders as if to lament Beatrice, blue veins showed on her forehead.

Beatrice’s current appearance was a disguise to trick the attackers—in other words, exposing dancer fashion that Liliana would usually wear. There wasn’t a significant difference between Liliana’s constitutional feminineness and Beatrice’s constitutional feminineness, so why did he feel more pity for Beatrice?

It was probably because he knew how she usually looked and that she was someone he was friends with.

Beatrice: “If Bubby didn’t ask me and if it wasn’t for that girl’s sake, then I wouldn’t have done this, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Well, by using that as an excuse and expecting it to go well, you surprise yourself with how bad your personality is. …Still, all in all, you really are simple.”

Beatrice: “I feel like you just made a ridiculously irritating assessment of me.”

Subaru: “I complimented you. It’s the latest trend of signs of moe. Not sure if it’ll stick 10 years later, though.”

Subaru ignores Beatrice’s look as she scowled, and he views the disastrous scene in the cabin. On the floor all over the place, there were the beat up thugs that invoked Beatrice’s wrath. Subaru finds that Kiritaka, the mastermind, was now trapped under the large men, and so he put his hands together and prayed.

There was a condition for the decoy strategy, which was that Liliana couldn’t be exposed to danger. Making Rem be her guard, someone the men were being careful of, was a no. Putting Emilia under the bus would be outrageous, so Subaru and Beatrice had to be the perpetrators.

Therefore, Puck asked and convinced Beatrice, who was hesitant, and she was made out to be Liliana, getting taken away from the girls as they screeched, and the decoy strategy was put into action.

Although, Subaru, the one who directed the plan, didn’t expect it to go this well.

Subaru: “It’s scary how fitting you are with my own plans. But since we’ve met the mastermind, Ram’s efforts were in vain. Now there’s even more of a chance that Ram spews venom when she comes back. This is too depressing.”

Beatrice: “If you have time to complain, you should tie these guys up so they don’t get away, I suppose. The younger sister will be here before long, and we’ll have to take these guys back.”

Subaru: “That’s when they’ll have a scary discussion with Roswaal. He’s in this with us, though he had it coming.”

It was the conclusion of the expression of love that went too far. This basically meant that stalkers were scary no matter what age and no matter what world it was. Kiritaka, who foamed at the mouth and fainted, was the only one who knew what was so great about Liliana besides when she was singing.

Subaru: “Anyhow, that was a disappointing conclusion. If the white clothed guys knew that we captured the boss, they would have surrendered and abandoned ship. With this, I think the case is closed.”

Subaru still felt something was missing, but for the time being he just dropped his shoulders in relief. Then, what he picked up with his hand as he reached out was a lyulyre given to them generously that was inside a case. It was an option they brought along after Beatrice disguised herself as Liliana.

Subaru: “It’s undamaged, right? Who knows what Liliana would demand if it broke.”

Subaru, with a simple posture, takes out the Lute carefully and plays it with his fingers. He confirms that it can make a light sound, and Beatrice was surprised when Subaru started to play a random tune.

Beatrice: “You can play…that instrument?”

Subaru: “The ropes of it aren’t really that different from an acoustic guitar. I borrowed it from Liliana every now and then in these past 3 days, and I can usually play it if it’s a 70’s folk song.”

Back at his original world, he would borrow his father’s guitar and spend his free time playing and singing folk songs. It was useless practice since no one was there to listen, but his creativity was finally flourishing now that he crossed over worlds.

Subaru: “Copyright won’t catch up, so I guess now is the time I should start a renovation in this world’s music.”

Beatrice: “As far as I know, this is the first time I’ve seen a human improve only skills that are useless as you are. What’s the point of being good at only those things?”

Subaru: “The fact that there is no point makes me burn with passion. That’s what being romantic is.”

Listening to Subaru’s nonsense, Beatrice made a completely astonished look and sighed. Then, without any particular meaning behind it, she starts to listen carefully with her eyes closed.

With a curious, calm look on her face.

Subaru: “Sheesh. —Guess I have no choice.”

It would be awkward to stop playing in front of Beatrice when she was already ready to listen.

While Subaru used that as an excuse, the two of them had a peaceful concert alone until Rem came running into the cabin with a worried look.

12

Emilia: “So our attackers and the song have nothing to do with each other?”

Emilia, hearing about the circumstances from Subaru, murmurs that with her eyes wide open.

The decoy plan safely ended as a success, and as for the attackers and the mastermind brought into the mansion, they should now be having a nice little chat with Roswaal and Rem.

Subaru went to Emilia and Liliana while he waited for them to get something out of the interrogation, and he was now done with telling the details to the two people who were in suspense this whole time the strategy was carried out.

The two finished listening to the story at the mansion’s courtyard, and they both were relieved now that a peaceful solution was in sight.

Emilia: “Really, thank goodness. Subaru, you aren’t hurt anywhere, right? And is Beatrice safe?”

Subaru: “They roughed me up a bit so I want to cry, but I’ll act tough since I’m in front of Emilia-tan. Beatrice also turned back to normal, changed clothes right away, and shut herself in a room.”

Emilia: “I see. …Beatrice was so cute too. It’s kind of a shame.”

Subaru smiles wryly at Emilia, who became despondent.

As for Beatrice, she must’ve suffered from having to be a dress-up doll. When she came back, she immediately changed clothes, threw the clothes at Subaru, and quickly disappeared into the forbidden archives.

Liliana: “Is that so? …I really wanted to thank Beatrice-sama, that’s too bad.”

Then, Liliana, who had been silent up to this point, let that out quietly.

As one would expect, it seemed like Liliana also had a lot of thoughts on being presented with the settlement of an uproar focused on her, since she was the victim of a pretty insidious stalker.

Subaru: “About that mastermind Kiritaka, do you know him? From what I’ve seen, he seems to have quite the crush on you, but maybe it’s his bad eyesight.”

Liliana: “Ignoring that last part, uh, I do know him. It was before I came here, and before I came to Warwar. There was a commercial town I passed by, and I think there was a heir of a famous merchant family.”

Subaru: “I thought it was going to be like the rich man who got fed up with you, but it’s exactly like it. …Did you not know that you were being followed…or well, I can’t believe you weren’t aware of it.”

Liliana: “He liked the songs a lot, and treated me with stuff like delicious food…but I wanted to leave it at that and say goodbye.”

Subaru: “So you’re saying that everywhere you end up, you always cajole someone?”

Perhaps Liliana’s looks were in high demand in this world, like with the rich man at Warwar. It was a view that conflicted with Subaru’s, as someone who thought Emilia looked the best.

Being stared at rudely by Subaru, Liliana holds onto her thin body with her arms.

Liliana: “W□Why are you looking at me with dirty eyes all of a sudden? Have you finally fell for my charm, knowing that everyone else is so interested in me? Did I steal your heart?”

Subaru: “There, there. I’m really glad that it looks like you are back to your normal self. You are not being stalked because of your own clumsiness, so don’t have shame. Here, I’ll give you your lyulyre back.”

Liliana: “Hmph. That doesn’t satisfy me at all! But I’ll take back my lyulyre.”

He pushes the lyulyre against Liliana, and she accepts it with a dissatisfied look.

Still, if she was fine then she was fine, even if it was just on the surface. The more he could get out of her, the better.

Subaru: “What is it, Emilia-tan? Why are you looking at me with those kind, cute eyes?”

Emilia: “No, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about how Subaru is as dishonest as Beatrice.”

Subaru tilts his head in confusion at Emilia, who gave a slight chuckle.

Liliana: “But with this matter, now I owe a lot to everyone. So I can’t just start talking about a story of a new hero with the lord. I have so much regret. There’s no more hope.”

Liliana viewed the situation objectively; in this situation she put herself in, on one hand, the immediate problem had been resolved, and she was depressed with a shocked look on her face. From her point of view, she was someone who caused trouble repeatedly at the mansion.

Even Liliana, someone who shined with shamelessness, didn't want act any more bold than this.

However, if Liliana knew Roswaal's true motive, she truly was worrying over nothing. Rather, since Liliana the bard had a debt to get involved with the royal election, you could even say that this strife actually lead to a beneficial result.

Subaru: "Well, Roswaal will tell you about that part of the story. He might even give you a backhanded compliment for indebting yourself."

Liliana: "…? What do you mean by that?"

Subaru: "You'll find out soon enough."

Emilia and Liliana both tilt their heads in response to Subaru's speaking. Emilia couldn't wrap her head around the situation behind the scenes, though it would've been nice if at least Liliana could, and it was cute how she was trying to help out of purely good will.

Then, Subaru gets up from the lawn as he went "All right", and he looks up at the mansion. It had been nearly one hour since the start of the interrogation—this should be about the time when they got some sort of information out of them regarding the situation.

Subaru: "It wouldn't be right to make the stalker's victim and the assailants confront each other, but I do want to see what Roswaal has to say about this. I'm gonna go check it out for a bit."

Liliana: "Oh, then before you do that, I'd like to leave my instrument and a change of clothes in my room."

With a serious look, Liliana, who heard that he was going to where the mastermind was, requests him to prepare her things. It's true that it wouldn’t be suiting to have the clothes Beatrice wore and the lyulyre in the confrontation room.

Subaru: “Then let’s leave behind the luggage first. Emilia-tan, you can go to the office.”

Emilia: “Yeah, got it. We need to discipline the evil people properly, after all.”

Emilia, who was gentle and cute, clasps her slender hand as she was in a huff.

While feeling pleasant, Subaru heads towards the direction opposite of Emilia with Liliana. Emilia was heading to the office from the courtyard, while they were heading to the east wing where the guest room was at the front.

And so—

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Emilia, who had been going up the mansion from the courtyard using the main wing stairs, suddenly raises her face because of a sudden presence. She sees Rem land on the landing of the stairs that headed up to the third floor, swirling her skirt.

Emilia, seeing the short edge of her skirt swaying gently, blinks with surprise.

Emilia: “Rem, it’s dangerous to run like that through the corridor.”

Rem: “—. Emilia-sama, sorry. But it’s an emergency.”

Emilia: “An emergency?”

Rem, someone who was usually calm, showed a rare sight of being in a panic, so Emilia raised an eyebrow. Then, Rem trots up to Emilia, and she looks around the bottom of the stairs.

Rem: “Weren’t you with Subaru-kun and Liliana-sama?”

Emilia: “Um, they went to go leave the luggage in the room. …Did you find out something?”

Rem: “Roswaal-sama got them to spill most of the beans. Things like the ringleader is the heir of the company Muse, the person named Kiritaka Muse, and that he is after Liliana-sama because of an extreme crush.”

Emilia: “Yeah. Subaru did tell me that much…”

As for Liliana, she herself had no idea how much of an infatuation he had, and it was strange to her. But Rem shook her head in response to Emilia’s reply.

Rem: “Sorry, but that’s not the point. About Kiritaka, he hired thugs and paid them to bring Liliana-sama to him. Though, his efforts came to nothing because of Subaru-kun’s decoy strategy…”

Emilia: “There’s more to it?”

Rem: “According to Kiritaka, he kept insisting that he had no memory of hiring the white clothed group and that he had nothing to do with them.”

The moment Emilia heard that, she understands why Rem was in such a hurry and jumps down the stairs. With Rem next to her, Emilia ran as fast as she could to the east wing, where Subaru and Liliana went—to Liliana’s room.

Emilia: “—They aren’t…here.”

Emilia doesn’t find the people she sought in the room left open, and her voice trembles because of her own blunder.

14

On top of the rattling cart being pulled, there was Subaru wrapped in a bamboo mat, glaring at the sky.

Liliana and him were going back inside the mansion, and just when they realized they were hit, they were in this situation. He was laying down facing up, and he only saw the blue sky.

It was the worst situation. He was tied with rope from the top of the cloth that covered him tightly, and he couldn't move at all.

Once he made a guess based off this situation of pain being left slightly on his head and being wrapped in a bamboo bat,

???: "Oh, looks like this lad woke up too. Sorry for treating you roughly."

The voice Subaru heard came from someone that noticed he woke up.

When he moved his head to see where the voice came from, he saw a white clothed person sitting. Subaru confirms the bad taste of having pure white from top to bottom, and he was pretty much right about the situation.

He thought they'd caught their boss, but the white clothed people kept acting—so, they were unrelated.

Subaru: "Which means that the Liliana fan and the song are separate matters! This is too complicated!"

Liliana: "I've got it. Please listen. —Liliana: "The Name of a Guilty Flower."

Subaru: "Shut up! This is not the time to be saying that!!"

Subaru roars upon hearing the voice of the girl wrapped in a bamboo mat just like he was.

He wasn't in a place where he could see Liliana, but at the very least, it seemed she had enough composure to say her usual slightly stupid comments. While feeling relief inside thanks to that, Subaru looks at the white clothed man.

Subaru: "Anyways, would it be safe to say that we'll be able to talk without you hitting me and kicking me?"

???: "…Yeah, that'll make it easier for us too. I should've said this earlier, but our top priority is to transport you peacefully."

Subaru: “You really should have. You’re not very convincing.”

When Subaru made that reply, the man said “You got that right” with a soft chuckle. Then, the man takes off the hood of his white clothing, exposing his unshaven face to the air. It was a middle-aged man in his 40s.

???: “We are the mercenary “Scales of the White Dragon”.”

The man, face exposed as he named his organization, was looking to negotiate. While feeling the shaking of the cart platform, Subaru also felt like there was something off about his attitude, which was relatively rational considering how he roughly kidnapped him.

Subaru: “Hey, I think I’m going to feel sick. Can’t you sit me up before we talk?”

???: “If I do that, you’ll then want to lean against something, so it’ll be too much to deal with. I got carried away and tied you up too tight, practically like a pole, so it’d be a pain to make you stand too. Sorry, but you’re gonna have to lie down.”

Subaru: “I’m going to vomit once I hit my limit. All I have is mayonnaise inside of me. Feel the horror of my white vomit.”

He only ate the minimum amount of food this morning because of the decoy plan—he had only slurped mayonnaise he reproduced in the different world, so if he did throw up, that would be the only thing to come out of him.

Then, when the man gave up and threw his hands up upon hearing Subaru’s reply, a different voice came into the conversation.

Liliana: “Is this not a dragon carriage, but a brave ox Farrow carriage? Feels like you’re using a pretty outdated animal. It’s antique now.”

???: “I don’t care if you’re trying to shock me, being sarcastic, or trying to praise me with that, but nothing good will come out of doing any of that, so shut your mouth for a bit.”

Subaru tilts his head as much as he could, and at the corner of his eye he sees someone’s feet caught. It looked like Liliana was laying down facing the opposite direction of Subaru, and she was moving her tiptoes repeatedly.

Subaru: “I wouldn’t really put it as one disaster happening after another. Maybe more like experiencing two disasters and still not figuring out what’s going on.”

Liliana: “The success of the careless decoy strategy completely backfired! I wonder what Mr. Maid has to say about this as the one who proposed it.”

Subaru: “If I can just smack you for acting like you’re not a part of this, I won’t even care what happens anymore.”

Somehow Subaru was keeping calm thanks to Liliana managing to act the way she usually would.

They were actually completely in the palms of the white clothed people’s hands.

Just like Liliana said, they went to an insecure place after the decoy strategy’s success, and they were attacked. The situation had the two groups cooperate, even though they hadn’t even planned to do so, and the groups led them around by their noses.

Subaru: “Now’s about the time when the ones in the mansion should’ve probably noticed that we aren’t there…”

The fact that he had only a few people dedicated to pursuing meant that it was going to be difficult for them to get immediate help.

Even out of the little personnel he had, Ram was out of the mansion to investigate. There was no way Emilia and Roswaal would act directly, and whether Beatrice would help or not was unknown.

Which would mean that the only one who could surely do something was Rem.

Liliana: “And she has to guard the others too, so I’m guessing we can’t count on it?”

Subaru: "…Yeah, that's right."

Those words hit Liliana where it hurt, as if she had predicted Subaru's thoughts.

If he didn't have much options with his forces and the situation, then how would he guarantee their safety—

Subaru: "We won't rely on anyone else, and it'll depend on our own negotiation."

As ready to talk as to act, he carves the path to release them, one that wouldn't incur the anger of the person they were dealing with.

Fortunately, the person had intentions of talking with them. Subaru had no choice but to come up with a solution they both would agree with, and struggle so that they could be released safely.

Liliana: "Do your best, Mr. Maid."

Subaru: "There's a higher chance it'll work if you don't say anything. I'm not going to repeat it again, so just keep that in mind."

???: "Are you two just about done talking?"

The man who had been waiting for Subaru and Liliana to stop talking gets in Subaru's eyes again, perhaps thinking that this would be a good time to do so. The man sinks down onto the cargo platform and sat cross legged.

???: "So I'll introduce us again…we are the mercenary "Scales of the White Dragon"."

Subaru: "Sorry, but I just left my hometown so I don't really know much about the rumors here. That woman probably doesn't know about it either, seeing as she's a bard that goes wherever life takes her, a rootless wanderer. Plus, she's a bit dumb anyways."

Liliana: "Hey, Mr. Maid?! Why're ya callin' people stupid?"

The conversation was going to stop moving forward, so Subaru ignores Liliana's complaint. The man with an unshaved face also treats Liliana the same way, ignoring her voice as he felt his chin.

???: "Even if you aren't familiar with it, I can't do anything about that. Even in Lugunica only one area knows this name, and it's already been almost 10 years. We can't push ourselves as much as we did back then, too."

Subaru: "Back then…did you guys reform or something? If you're going to be naughty, you should consider how old you are."

???: "We neither broke up nor retired. Though, there was a reduction in activity. This is because there's a final job we have to settle. We won't throw in the towel until it's taken care of."

The unshaven man says that with a low voice, determination in his eyes.

A strict aura, and a hint of a tragic man. Subaru guesses that he had some uncommon circumstances, and he sighed while lying down.

Subaru: "What is that last major task needed for you guys to throw in the towel?"

???: "Our mercenary group's safekeeper took every single bit of what we owned and betrayed us. We're going to get back what he stole. We won't stop until then."

Subaru: "…? What does that have to do with Liliana?"

Liliana couldn't possibly be the betrayer, considering their ages.

???: "You see, that damn backstabber built a mansion at our town. That's where he went on a spending spree and lived the good life. …We found his tracks. We were going to get our money back immediately and make him pay. But, that bastard!"

Subaru: "…"

???: "The bastard noticed that we found out where he was, hid the money in a cave, of all places, and sealed it from the top with a "Metia". The key to remove that seal is the "Song"."

Subaru: “The song…! So that’s how it’s related.”

As Subaru heard the unshaved man’s angry voice, “Song” ran through his mind like thunder.

The old man that welcomed Liliana and taught her “the song that shouldn’t be sung”—that person was the safekeeper that betrayed the “Scales of the White Dragon”. The song wasn’t hiding how the old man built a fortune. The song itself was the “key to the seal for the treasure the old man hid”.

The old man forced Liliana to make the key, who happened to pass by, and he drove her out of town to keep her away from the seal. The “Scales of the White Dragon” noticed that Liliana knew about the song, and so they tried to capture her. Kiritaka was just an idiot. Just noise that complicated the situation.

Liliana: “So the one who betrayed you was Warwar’s rich man. Do you want revenge?”

???: “It’s too late to bear a grudge against that guy who betrayed us, so we don’t care about that. What we want back is the treasure…all we want is a significant amount of money. We have to get it back.”

The man facing down had a serious look as he lowered the tone of his voice.

For some reason, they needed a large amount of money. They also didn’t have time to waste.

Subaru: “Do you know where the cave with the money is?”

???: “I do. So all we need is the song to remove the seal. In other words…”

Subaru: “You’d be extremely happy to have Liliana remove that seal with the song.”

The problem was solved, and Subaru and her were released safely.

Subaru looked very cheerful since he found a common ground and a way for them to be released safely. He calls out to Liliana, who shook her tiptoes, to get her approval.

Subaru: “Hey, Liliana. You were listening, right? As long as you sing that “Song That Shouldn’t Be Sung No Matter What” in the cave, the problem is settled. So…”

Liliana: “—Fuse”

Subaru/???: “What?”

The foolish voices of Subaru and the unshaved man overlap.

It was because Liliana’s answer was so unexpected that it made them speak in unison unintentionally.

Liliana stretches her tiptoes firmly. It was almost looked like she was saying that she wouldn’t change her mind—.

Liliana: “I don’t sing to open the seal to caves, nothing like that.”

“…”

Liliana: “Songs are…songs aren’t replacements for stuff that will eventually disappear, like treasure and gold. I refuse! Songs, stories…bards, don’t you dare look down on them!”

15

Subaru adjusted his seating position on the cold, hard ground, trying to ease his aches.

He rubbed his thighs together, sat inside this chilly cave, wondering what the time was. Dusk had been setting in before they’d entered the cave, so it was likely nighttime outside by now.

The howl of the wind would echo through the cave from time to time, brushing against his eardrums, like the wails of many evil spirits.

He could see why this place was feared as an underworld disconnected from the world of men, at least if it were not for the faint glow of moss on the walls and the presence of people hovering nearby.

Subaru: “With the howl of the wind, this place gets shivering cold, even in broad daylight. Even the locals refuse to go near it with all the talk about how no good can come from it. Guess that makes it the perfect place to hide treasure.”

The unshaven man, who was standing by a wall, gave him a fierce grin, as if reinforcing Subaru’s conviction.

His looks and manner of speaking were rather rough, but despite that, he was pretty rational and willing to talk things out with them. He still had his mask off, which he’d removed during their journey, and was interacting with them with his face uncovered.

Subaru: “Though, I think I’ve heard somewhere that a kidnapper showing their face to their hostages is a bad omen.”

Unshaven Man: “It’s your bad for getting involved, bro. It’s gonna be annoyin’ if you’re gonna kick up a fuss about it now. If you’re gonna hold a grudge, then hold it against yourself for being with the lil’ lady back there.”

Subaru: “No way, it’s pretty obvious that I’d hold a grudge against you people. Don’t try and shift the blame!”

Unshaven Man: “I guess that’s how it is.”

The unshaven man gave his belly a pleasant slap and smiled at his hostage, who just wouldn’t shut up.

How could he even smile in a situation like this? Subaru thought to himself.

???: “Quit being so fucking stubborn! You’d better not piss us off too much!”

A furious voice came echoing from deeper inside the cave, drowning out the howl of the wind and bringing all kinds of threats, intimidation and coercion with it. The rage it carried was the real deal. It was obvious to anyone listening that their fury could explode at any moment, bringing violence with it. Yet despite that…

Liliana: “Absooolutely not, I refuse! I don’t sing my songs in any other way than the way they’re meant to be enjoyed! You can’t treat bards like this!”

Matters had been complicated by the frantic anger she was showing in response to him.

The girl’s shrill voice rejected the demands the man had set, and instead kept insisting on the importance of her own professionalism.

Unshaven Man: “Doesn’t look like they’re makin’ any headway.”

The unshaven man briskly scratched his short hair. Subaru completely agreed with what he’d muttered.

They’d both reached conclusions they couldn’t back down from, so it seemed unlikely that they’d give into a compromise.

Several hours had passed since Liliana had tearfully cussed them out. Their heated argument hadn’t stopped, even when they’d arrived at the cave.

The White Dragon Scales were a small group that numbered around ten people in total, which included the unshaven man that was keeping an eye on Subaru. Apparently he was the representative of the group. It was thanks to him taking the sensible approach that they’d, so far, managed to avoid a situation where the others would use violence against Liliana and Subaru.

Nevertheless, there were still several among them who’d suggested making use of the extremists. Even now, a young man with short brown hair and a ghastly voice was engaged in a shouting match with Liliana, spittle flying from their mouths. The youth had a bandage wrapped around his nose; the way he’d acquired this injury served as one of the reasons for his stubbornness.

Unshaven Man: “That’s what he got from bein’ hit by the blue-haired girl when we first began to probe your mansion. His nose got smashed up good, so his resentment towards that is part of the reason why he’s so pissed.”

Subaru could only agree with a "Uh-huh" to what he'd said. There were three more of them that had strong shades of anger filling their voices. They'd all been victims too, who had fallen prey to Rem's small iron sphere.

Subaru: "But Liliana's stubborn as well… like stubborn as heck. Is professionalism really something so important that you'd trade your life for?"

Liliana wasn't going to change her mind, even with each of the men threatening her in tandem.

Though you'd think she was just a frivolous, air-headed woman, she did also have this side to her where she'd stubbornly stick to her beliefs like this. Troublesome and difficult to deal with; she was the very paragon of that.

Unshaven Man: "…It's a big deal for her. There's always something out there that makes you willin' to trade your life for."

None other than the man in white garb voiced his agreement with Liliana's intent, having caught ear of Subaru's muttering.

Subaru turned doubtfully towards him. As soon as he did, the unshaven man fixed his gaze at the back of the cave with an uncomfortable look on his face.

Unshaven Man: "Anyone can eat, breathe 'n sleep if they just wanna stay alive. But, ya know, there's always gonna be stuff you can't compromise on when yer tryin' to do other things in life."

Subaru: "You sure are acting all relaxed. Shouldn't you be in a hurry?"

Unshaven Man: "The other guys are I guess. But for me… I don't really have a reason why I should be in a hurry anymore. And yet, I'm still goin' along with this because I'd like to believe I wasn't just eatin', breathin' 'n sleepin'."

Subaru: "…"

The unshaven man looked down, took the liquor bottle that he had with him, and downed it in one go. He crudely wiped away some drops that had spilled from the side of his lips, and turned his somewhat vacant eyes towards the darkness.

Subaru didn't know the details behind this, nor was he planning on asking. The man wasn't going to tell him that much either. Even so, spending time like this was only going to add to their pains.

Subaru: "Hey, sir. beardy. I'm sorry, but it'd be really sweet if you could loosen this rope a bit, so it's easier to move about."

Unshaven Man: "Heyhey, I ain't gonna use violence 'cuz I'd like to resolve things peacefully, but I can't let you be free like that. It'd spell trouble if you were to be found showin' signs of escape, or whatever."

Subaru: "I know, I know. I'm not going to run away. You can still leave both of my hands tied up. Just let me walk to the back on my own two feet. I've got a bunch of things I'd like to say to Liliana."

The unshaven man pondered Subaru's request for a while, before heaving out a sigh.

Unshaven Man: "It's not like we're gettin' anywhere at this rate… Fine. We've been persuading her, but there's probably a better chance of her bein' swayed by one of her own. Go persuade her properly. For both of our sakes."

The unshaven man untied the rope from Subaru's legs.

Subaru stretched his legs out, which had grown completely stiff in these hours, and after he'd gotten the blood flowing properly in them, he stood up.

Subaru: "You come as well. There's no point in you staying here drinking liquor."

With a jerk of his chin, Subaru headed towards the back of the cave with his arms still tied behind his back. A cold breeze swept across his fringe as he walked forward, and for a few moments, his eyes squeezed shut due to the light of the Lagmite ore.

Then, he tentatively opened his eyes and took in the situation.

Subaru: "…So this is the door that's sealed by the song. What a troublesome Meteor."

There was a black wall in front of him, blocking the way to the deepest part of the cave.

The wall was practically crammed between the rocky passage, with patterns grooved into its surface and a blue crystal in its middle. Though the material it was made of resembled iron at first glance, its stygian appearance gave it an uncannily creepy and oppressive look.

Unshaven Man: "This contraption sets specific conditions 'n won't move unless they're fulfilled. It doesn't have to always be a song, but this door's fine-tuned to use the lil' lady's song as its key."

Subaru: "It's fine-tuned to Liliana's song?"

Unshaven Man: "It won't open if someone else sings the same song. They made the Meteor lis'en to the song back at the mansion, and sealed the cave up like that. That's why only the lil' lady's song is capable of opening it."

Subaru once again stepped towards the Meteor after hearing the unshaven man's explanation. Liliana was standing in front of the black wall, refusing to listen to anything she was told. Along with her were the men clad in white, who were painstakingly trying to get her to sing.

???: "We're just one goddamn step away, don't screw about! Just sing a wee bit and everything will be over!"

Liliana: "I refuse. How could anyone look down on singing so much, to even go as far as saying "sing a wee bit". Though my inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: "—Your hearts, unlike the clothing you wear, are pitch black."

Subaru: "Shut the hell up! You really never change, quit provoking them!"

Subaru snapped at Liliana as she kept provoking them, her face averted away.

The men reacted in surprise at this third party intrusion. Liliana too looked up at him, keeping only one of her eyes open.

Liliana: “Whoa, what’s up Mr. Maid? Have things perhaps gotten to the point where they’re going to beat you up to make me listen to what they have to say? Just to let you know, I’m not going to give in, even if they beat you to a pulp.”

Subaru: “Quit it, this isn’t going to cut it. Besides, if these people get into the mood to play hard, it’s going to be you, the woman, who’s going to have a rougher time. You know that, right? Right?”

Liliana: “Wh-What are you imagining? S-Stop… That’s shameful…”

Liliana’s face turned beet-red, denoting her shame at how the conversation she’d been thrown into had developed. Subaru let out a sigh seeing her thoughtless demeanor and then looked over at the men.

Subaru: “I’m all too familiar with the troubles you’re going through, she doesn’t listen to anything, right? I hate to say this, but I doubt this girl’s gonna change her mind, even if you ruffle her up.”

The men looked at each other awkwardly after Subaru had spoken, his words laced with sighs.

Subaru: “So, you’re definitely not going to sing, yeah? They’re so eagerly awaiting your song, yet you still won’t sing it.”

Liliana: “Mr. Maid.”

Liliana looked straight at him with a serious look on her face.

Liliana: “I’d sing if my song was actually needed. But what these fine gentlemen are looking for isn’t my song. They’re looking for the results my song will bring them. I will never sing for something like that. Even if they cut my throat and tear out my tongue.”

Subaru: “So in the worst case, you wouldn’t budge, even if your life was on the line…?”

Liliana: “Correct, even if my life was on the line. Creases would appear in one’s pride, once you abandon it to save your own skin. Then it would fold quite easily, over and over again. Eventually, the countless creases would make it so your pride wouldn’t be visible to anyone else. I would definitely hate looking at a prideless me in the mirror.”

Liliana chewed her lower lip after she declared that.

Her expression showed resolve towards the possibility that her comments had bought the displeasure of the men, as well as preparedness to be hurt by them.

An unwavering sense of professionalism. Rather, that was already quintessentially Liliana’s way of life.

Subaru let out a sigh at her stubborn attitude, having lost count of the times he’d done so already.

Subaru: “My life is going to be in danger as well if you’re not going to sing. Are you not going to bother, even when it comes to that?”

Liliana: “…hk”

Though she’d kept her gaze steeled, she had let out a small noise, still not showing agreement to what he’d said.

Something wavered in her eyes for a moment, causing Subaru to smile broadly, as if he were saying “Oh well there’s no helping it.”

If she’d been the sort of girl who unreservedly put other’s lives beneath her pride, Subaru would have gladly been able to give up on her.

…However, since she’d hesitated and considered putting a crease in her pride for a moment, there was really no helping it.

Subaru: “It’s as you’ve heard. She’s not going to sing. So I’m not gonna make her do it either.”

Unshaven Man: “Hey, what are you…”

The unshaven man expressed his surprise at what Subaru had said, almost like he was saying, “That’s not what you told me.” He could sense far more dangerous signs developing among the men nearby as well.

Liliana: “Mr. Maid, why are you…?”

Subaru: “If you don’t wanna sing, then you don’t have to. It’s just how I feel about it as well.”

Subaru shielded Liliana from the men’s gazes. Her voice trembled as she looked at him from behind. Hearing how her voice sounded, Subaru realized that he was on the right track and faced towards the front.

Subaru: “Her songs aren’t tools. You’d all understand if you were to actually hear them.”

One of the Men: “You’d better stop screwing around…”

Subaru: “If she doesn’t wanna sing, then I definitely don’t wanna make her! As much as it frustrates me, her singing is really damn good! Just about anyone would be able to see that if they were to listen. I don’t wanna do anything that’d make her pointlessly waste her talent, so I ain’t gonna let her!”

Subaru shielded Liliana as he broke into that tirade, standing in front of the men whose eyes had grown cold.

The unshaven man looked around in panic, but all the other men clad in white seemed ready to cross the line at last, thanks to Subaru’s insistence. One by one, the men stepped forward towards them, the air ripe with tension.

Liliana: “Mr. Maid…”

Liliana called out to Subaru, her voice quivering due to the ferocious looks on the men’s faces.

There was something apologetic about her voice…

One of the Men: “Fucking bastards, I’m gonna get even with this fucker and then force that little girl to sing…”

Subaru: “How about we do this instead!”

One of the Men: “Huuh?”

The white garbed man who’d leaned towards him, looking ready for a fight, was caught off guard by Subaru’s shout and toppled over.

Subaru brought his own face near to his, as he lifted his own up, and said.

Subaru: “…Let’s just ignore the Meteor’s seal while still taking all the treasure.”

16

All it took was a simple change to how they approached it.

The treasure was hidden in a cave located inside a rocky mountain, not an iron-walled fortress or a pyramid made from huge slabs of stone. The only thing blocking their way was this magical door.

Subaru: “Thus, we can just dig a tunnel and go around it. The bedrock is pretty loose, so it should collapse if you dig your pickaxes into it.”

Unshaven Man: “Who would be dumb enough to meticulously hide their treasure in such a brittle cave..?”

The unshaven man muttered that beside Subaru, looking rather shocked, as the latter supervised the excavation with his arms folded.

With sweat pooling down his forehead and his face smudged with dust, the unshaven man looked up ahead of him and said,

Unshaven Man: “Even so, I wonder why I couldn’t get my head around something so simple.”

Subaru: “When you’re so dead set on looking at things in one way, you lose sight of all the options you have at hand. You see, I live my life to find faults in others, that's our main difference."

Unshaven Man: "That doesn't really sound flattering."

He forced a smile on his face as he heard Subaru's un-boastlike boast, before then straightening his back up and returning to his work. The men clad in white were taking turns digging the tunnel with some tools they'd brought along.

They were extremely motivated considering that the treasure they sought was almost within their grasp. The tunnel that would bypass the Meteor would probably be completed in no time.

Subaru: "In that case, I can safely stand down from my post. Guess I'll just be a bystander for now."

Liliana: "…Um, Mr. Maid."

Liliana timidly called over to Subaru as he sat on a rock in afterthought mode.

Both of them had already been freed from their restraints, so if they felt like leaving this place, they could. However, they were sticking around because it'd be a shame to leave without seeing the treasure.

That, and they couldn't really say that their efforts were going to let them off the hook, even if they'd been released without harm.

Subaru: "What's up? It's not like you to be so timid. Why don't you take a seat? Though be careful, the rocks are sharp around here."

Liliana: "Alright… Well then, excuse me, but… Hyaaa?! OW! OWOWOW! It's sharp! It's really sharp! Th-The end nearly went up my bum! It nearly went up my bum…gh."

Subaru: "Didn't I just warn you?! It's really not my fault you know?!"

Subaru frantically defended himself as Liliana rolled about in agony, holding her buttocks. After a little while passed, she sat on a rock that wasn't sharp, with tears in her eyes, and glared at him.

Liliana: “That really hurts. You’re responsible for this, so you’d better give me tons of money!”

Subaru: “How am I even responsible. Besides, you can’t get anything genuine from something you’ll run out of one day, wouldn’t you think?”

Liliana: “You need money to live in the moment. You can’t fill your belly only with dreams.”

Subaru: “Where the hell did you throw that noble image of yours you were showing before? Shouldn’t you go and pick it back up?”

Liliana stunned Subaru with her rapid-fire snobbish remarks before casting her eyes down.

Liliana: “Mr. Maid, um, about before… Why did you stick up for me?”

Subaru: “‘Cuz I’m a guy, and you’re a gal, I guess? Though, I could imagine myself using you as a shield back there, shrinking down behind you and crying out in fear; but, I didn’t want to do that.”

Liliana: “Th-That’s not what I meant. Though, yeah, you did step out in front of me too… But what I meant was, why did you forgive me for not singing for them?”

She said that in a small voice that he could barely make out, seemingly a manifestation of her unease.

Subaru groaned out a “Mhm” in response, and continued,

Subaru: “It’s no biggie, it’s just like I said when I shouted at them. I didn’t let you sing because you didn’t look like you wanted to. It’s not like I didn’t have a backup plan.”

Liliana: “…”

Subaru: “If I didn’t have a backup plan, I would have probably made you sing. I ain’t strong enough to back you up no matter the circumstance, and we ain’t close enough for that either. There was a way to handle both matters, so I took them. That’s all.”

While giving her this rather blunt response, he looked over at the men who were busy swinging their pickaxes. Liliana followed his gaze before then muttering the word “Both” to herself.

Subaru: “Those guys are pretty pushy, and they’re low-lives of course… But they do give off a pretty desperate vibe. They have some kind of goal in mind, so I guess they need that money. They don’t look like they’re acting in self-interest to me.”

It had been the case for both the way the unshaven man spoke, and the youths who’d been seething in frustration.

Something was gnawing at their hearts, something which they needed the treasure to vanquish.

The shrill clang of their pickaxes crashed against the rocks as Subaru waited anxiously for the tunnel to be complete. He didn’t take notice of Liliana gazing at his face in profile, with various mixed emotions swirling across her eyes.

All that was left for him was to wait for the men to let out their cheers of joy.

???: “On closer inspection, I do envy how laid back you are, Barusu.”

Hearing a rather familiar voice saying his nickname, Subaru jumped in fright before turning around.

At the end of his gaze, by the cave entrance, was the figure of a girl in maid’s dress holding a lagmite ore lamp in one hand—Ram.

She looked at Subaru and Liliana, whose eyes were wide open in shock, and gave them a sigh accompanied by a shrug of her shoulders.

Ram: “You’ve totally screwed up, Barusu. I had to go out of my way to come here after Rem desperately told me about this. I even had to put Roswaal-sama’s orders on hold for the time being.”

Subaru: “I’m really sorry about all of this… But why were you even in the vicinity?”

Ram: “I was busy investigating the rich man who’d looked after the singer. I got an urgent message from Rem while I was working on it, meaning I had to round off the investigation. Though, as I’d been expecting, these people in the white outfits are the White Dragon Scales.”

Ram stepped over to where Subaru and Liliana were. She gazed at the men’s back who were busy at work, before letting out a snort.

Ram: “The rich man in question died from an illness a few days ago. It seemed to me like he’d earned a lot of people’s grudges during his life, so his mansion and assets ended up being seized afterwards. That’s where his involvement with the White Dragon Scales comes from. This cave is more or less a hiding place which he came to a bunch before his death.”

Subaru: “And the treasure he hid away, that probably wouldn’t have been taken from him before his death, is about to be recovered now by the very companions who’d double-crossed him ages ago.”

Subaru pieced together the information Ram had given him, gaining a pretty good idea of what was going on.

Having heard that, Ram also seemed to come to the same conclusion. She looked towards the men at work, and said,

Ram: “They probably have some mitigating circumstances, but the actions of the White Dragon Scales are in direct defiance of our lord Roswaal-sama. They all need to be severely punished.”

Subaru: “Well, wait a sec. That’s natural of course, but before that, listen to what I have to say…”

Ram: “Besides, it’s not just the safety of you two that I have to confirm.”

Ram passed down her merciless verdict as Subaru sought for a temporary reprieve. However, she jabbed her finger at Subaru’s face as he tried to stop her.

Ram: “There are two assets that haven’t been recovered from the dead man’s mansion. The first one of those is a Meteor, which he went out of his way to procure for a large amount of money. It’s apparently some kind of door or wall.”

Subaru: “That one’s over there. No one’s paying any attention to it, since we couldn’t get it open.”

Ram: “Well, alright then. The other thing is—Something that the dead man also procured during his lifetime, but this one will be far more troublesome if we don’t find it.”

Subaru: “Troublesome?”

Ram gave a curt nod in reply to his words. There was a small silence before she answered him.

And just as she did…

???: “—ヲ!”

A roar shook the cave, causing the men who were working up ahead to scream.

Dust filled the air as the sound of part of the wall crumbling rang out; the terrain in front of them changed.

Subaru gulped, body stiffening at the abrupt change in the situation.

He could see a stocky arm in his vision covered in thick black hair, whittling away at the rock face.

Ram: “I did say the other one was troublesome.”

Next to him, still looking apathetic as ever, Ram spoke those words with a trace of exasperation.

Ram: “A Witchbeast which the dead man procured from the black market, known as the Sturdy Ape Lauda, was unaccounted for you see.”

The Lauda’s roar sounded like the noise an eighteen-wheeler’s exhaust would make. At least, that’s what Subaru thought.

The Witchbeast's appearance was quite close to that of an ape, as the name Sturdy Ape implied. Nevertheless, it was large enough to completely fill the path in the cave, with its arms being about as thick as Subaru's torso.

The difference in strength between them was such that his arms and legs would probably end up dislocated if the Lauda were even to pick him up gently.

Unshaven Man: "FALL BACK, FALL BACK, FAAAALL BACK!!"

The unshaven man took the situation in and ordered an immediate retreat. The Lauda let out a roar as it tried to chase after the men in white, who were fleeing for their lives with nary a glance behind them. However, the Lauda's giant body was stuck in the passageway, rendering it unable to move as it desired.

Subaru: "Though, this is gonna get real bad if it makes it out to somewhere wide enough where it won't get stuck."

Ram: "We can say the old geezer's a treasurer that keeps guard over his assets, even in death. I just can't believe that a treasurer who betrayed his companions would go as far as using a Meteor and a Witchbeast to try and protect his assets… What an utter good for nothing."

Subaru: "This isn't the time to talk about it! We need to get the hell out of here!"

Ram spat those words with a bored look on her face. Subaru grabbed her by the arm, as they both stood before the fleeing men, preparing to flee with her. But, before he could scamper away, he realized something.

Subaru: "…?! Where did Liliana go?!"

She'd been right beside him until a moment ago, and now she was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe she'd ran out of the cave ahead of everyone else? He probably wouldn't have bothered to stop in his tracks if he thought she was cold-hearted enough to act like that.

Subaru: “That dumbass! Why did she go there of all places!”

Subaru scanned the inside of the cave and found Liliana, placing his hands over his head in exasperation.

As the roars resounded throughout the cave, Liliana was scampering towards the passageway where the Lauda was still thrashing about —Rushing over to where the men in white had left their cart.

Deafening roars, and chunks of rock flying about everywhere. In the midst of this fatal flurry, Liliana stuck her head into the cart in frantic search for something.

Subaru: “Ram! Follow me!”

The moment he realized what was happening, Subaru threw away his hesitation, broke into a sprint and raced towards the cart Liliana was in.

Right before his eyes, the Lauda was twisting its massive body, looking like it was going to wrench itself free from the passageway at any moment.

What was Liliana even preoccupied with at a moment like this…?

Subaru: “Liliana you fucking dumbass! Do you have a death wish? We need to get the hell out of here…”

Liliana: “My lyulyre’s gone. Without it, I’m…”

Subaru: “The brand new one, yeah? I’ll talk to Roswaal after we’re rescued, for now, we need to prioritise getting away from here!”

Liliana: “It’s not the lyulyre itself, it’s the case! I got that case from my Mother!”

Subaru resisted the urge to click his tongue at her after hearing her grief-stricken wail.

He ran his eyes across the cart; however, neither he, with eyes wide as plates, nor Liliana, who was turning the place upside-down, could find the familiar lyulyre’s case. Despite her lyulyre having definitely been brought into the cart after they'd been captured.

Unshaven Man: "What are you two doing there!"

The unshaven man caught sight of them as he fled. Subaru turned around to look at him; seeing the impatient look on his face, he pointed at Liliana,

Subaru: "Where's her instrument gone?! You put it in its case and brought it along, right?!"

Unshaven Man: "Her instrument…? Oh, Ohhh! If you're talking about that, then…"

The unshaven man's face went pale as he looked around, while the Lauda thrashed about close by. His gaze was pointed at the Meteor rather than the tunnel. Subaru instantly understood what he meant.

The lyulyre had been brought to where the Meteor stood, in preparation for Liliana eventually giving in and singing. That's why it was still there.

Subaru: "This is really bad, for fuck's sake! Liliana, get away from here! I'll go grab your lyulyre!"

Liliana: "Wha! W-Wait, Mr. Maid! It's mine, so I'll…"

Subaru: "Listen up, you goddamned idiot! I'm going to get it! Meanwhile, you're going to get away from here! Also, my name is Natsuki Subaru!"

Being called stuff like Mr. Maid all the time was really getting on his nerves.

Subaru picked Liliana up against her will and tossed her over to the unshaven man, who'd come rushing towards them. Subaru pointed to the outside as the man panickedly took her, before running towards the back of the cave.

The Lauda had now pulled half of its body free, wedged right by the passageway he was heading to. It wildly swung its arm out towards him.

Subaru: “Why do I always have to keep drawing the short straw…!”

He regretted his stubbornness, he rued how he’d put up a front. After all, the girl he actually wanted to show off to wasn’t even here. And yet, here he was again risking his life.

The Lauda’s stocky fingers scraped off the rock face as it tried to dig them into Subaru. He just barely managed to avoid them, sliding right in front of the Meteor while dodging fist-sized chunks of rock.

Subaru: “…There it is!”

The lyulyre was right in front of his eyes.

The Meteor was still standing in the crumbling cave, without even a blemish on it. The lyulyre, which was now right beneath him, had also escaped from harm. He felt relieved that he hadn’t ended up wasting his effort.

He picked the case up and turned around without wasting a moment, ready to escape.

Lauda: “—ʒ!”

Subaru’s knees quickly gave way, causing him to stumble down to the floor. And that just barely saved his life.

The Lauda swiped its arm out, grazing the air above him, before then smashing into the Meteor behind. The force of the impact was reflected back at it, giving rise to the Lauda’s screams of agony as they echoed throughout the cave.

The roars crashing against his eardrums kicked him back to alertness. He got his trembling knees in check and darted headfirst down between the Lauda’s legs, grazing its wiry hair, yet escaping from the dead end he was in.

Subaru: “Buah?!”

Its long tail hit the side of his face the very moment he’d thought he’d managed to avoid its massive body.

He flew over, groaning in pain as his body crashed against the rocky ground. The case he was holding in his arms was still safe. I'm such an idiot, he thought to himself.

Subaru: "This sort of thing really isn't worth trading your life for…"

What really depressed him was how he was being so desperate to protect someone else's memories.

Stifling a curse, he spat out the blood that had pooled in his mouth. The blow had split the inside of his lip quite badly. Though the pain he felt was sharp, it did make his awareness keener.

Ram: "EL FULA!"

The Lauda's tail had been about to strike him again from the front, however, a blade of wind severed it at its root.

With darkish blood flying about everywhere, Subaru broke into a sprint, affording himself only a sidelong glance at the tail that was thrashing about like a snake. That magic just now must have been backup from Ram. He could see that both the unshaven man and Liliana had reached the exit of the cave as well.

So long as he made it there, the clear conditions for this place would be met, or so he hoped.

Subaru: "You're really getting on my nerves!"

Even with its tail cut off, the enraged Lauda stood in front of Subaru, blocking his way.

The Witchbeast had smashed up the narrow passageway, finally setting itself free. Now it stood ready for battle, swinging its arms and legs about. Its massive body, when standing upright, was about three meters tall, to the point that its head scraped against the cave ceiling.

Even with Ram backing him up with magic, how much could someone like him really last?

While keeping a firm hold on the lyulyre case, Subaru contemplated on whether he should use his trump-card magic.

He could send the Witchbeast's senses haywire with Shamak and gamble on Ram coming to pick him up while unconscious. The odds were really against him, but there was at least more hope in it than letting this devolve to a fist fight, where his chances of winning would be zero.

Subaru turned to look at Ram over by the cave exit so he could tell her about his plan. She met his gaze dead-on before swinging her arm, her "blue hair" swaying about.

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Her spiked flail, carried by its centrifugal force, smashed into the side of the Witchbeast's face while turning at breakneck speeds. The Lauda's attention had been fixed on Subaru, so it was completely defenseless against the powerful blow that angled in from behind.

That single blow caused half of its head to burst open; tons of blood was pouring out from all of its face organs. It looked back feebly and let out a small whimper, as if it were asking what killed me?

???: "…My apologies."

A silver bell-like voice came in response to the Witchbeast's last throes, leaving behind an ethereal echo.

A blue-white glow filled the cave. Subaru could see a silver-haired girl, with both of her arms held up. And hovering above the palm of her hand was a tiny little cat, wagging his long tail…

???: "Sleep tight, Mr. Monkey. —Have a nice, quiet journey."

The cat gave its farewells in a neutral tone of voice. And straight after that, the blue-white glow became a myriad icicles, revolving in mid-air. They shot out from everywhere and rushed towards the stock-still Lauda.

The missiles of ice pierced the Lauda's entire body. It looked up at the ceiling and opened its mouth wide, trying to let out its final, dying throe; and like that, surrounded by the crackling sound of air, its body turned into a sculpture of ice.

“…”

For a few seconds, the cold air inside the cave was ruled completely by silence.

Without really comprehending what had happened in front of him, Subaru looked up at the frozen remains of the Witchbeast.

The Lauda had met its end encased within the ice, and thanks to that, his own life had been spared.

???: “Subaru!”

Stunned, and wondering what had just happened, Subaru looked up as he heard his name being called.

He turned over to where the voice was coming from. Waving her hand at him was a familiar, good-looking girl: “Emilia. She lowered her brows in relief, a gentle smile appearing on her face as she placed her free hand on her chest.

???: “Subaru-kun! Are you okay? Are you hurt? I’ll get you patched up immediately!”

Then, hurtling down through the treacherous terrain of the cave came Rem, her short skirt billowing. He could see her familiar arme de guerre hanging down from her hand, and finally, he understood everything.

It looked like Emilia and Rem had come to his rescue at the perfect time.

Subaru: “How opportunistic again…”

This time around however, their opportunism had saved him.

Subaru dragged his aching body along, making his own way over to the onrushing Rem.

…It was just as he did that, that cracks began to form down at his feet, along the walls, and up on the ceiling.

They grew wider as the rocky wall began to crumble down. Seeing this, Subaru pointed at the exit as he felt the hairs on his body stand on end,

Subaru: “Get out of here quickly, all of you!”

Several seconds later, the cave with the treasure in it collapsed completely.

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???: “We were super worried after Subaru and Liliana went missing, but that man boasted he knew where Liliana had been taken to.”

With a wry smile on her face, Emilia pointed over at the young man who was spinning around on the spot.

Liliana’s stalker, Kiritaka, should have been tied up. Yet here he was getting onto his knees and handing Liliana a bouquet of flowers that he'd pulled out from somewhere.

Kiritaka: "I, Kiritaka, am a slave to this love. I would come rushing for you, love of mine, whether it be o'er hell and high water, or caves full of Witchbeasts—Oh, but above all else, I'm glad you're safe!"

Liliana: "But, you didn't even come inside the cave, no?"

Kiritaka: "Gnnh! Th-That's because that lady tied me up outside…"

Kiritaka dejectedly spluttered his excuses as Liliana looked at him in disdain.

They had never expected that his presence would have ended up playing a part in resolving this commotion.

Rem: "It seems like the hair bobble he gave Liliana-sama was a Meteor that came as a set of two. Apparently, so long as each of them holds one, it has the ability to tell you where the other is, no matter how far apart they are."

Subaru: "So you mean like a homing device. I guess that's like the very epitome of a stalker nature."

The people who'd been rescued, however, found that clingy love affair to be quite gross.

Emilia and the others had quickly begun searching for Subaru and Liliana, immediately after they'd been kidnapped. But it was with Kiritaka's assistance, and Ram's presence as she conducted her own investigation, that they'd found a break in the deadlock.

Kiritaka's Meteor, along with Ram, who'd anticipated the situation, were able to work hand in hand. The two of them had found the others in their awful predicament just as they'd arrived at the cave.

Rem: "Roswaal-sama has stated that he's willing to let him off the hook this time. Though, he's made it clear that he's not to rope up others in his wooing from now on. It wouldn't be advisable for him to force his feelings onto other people."

Subaru: “Well, as much as it pains me to say, he did save our life, though I ain’t gonna thank him for it.”

Rem had been healing Subaru’s body, and now, she nestled closer to him. Still, since she was so close to him, and ever so soft, he couldn’t really concentrate on his treatment.

Emilia: “But the problem we have now is regarding those people, right?”

Standing next to Subaru, who had an awkward smile on his face thanks to Rem trying to cuddle with him, Emilia turned to look at the collapsed cave. There she could see the figures of the utterly crestfallen men garbed in white.

The cave was completely filled with rock and earth, making it impossible for them to take the treasure to the outside. Although the collapse had been caused by the Lauda, the results would have probably been the same if they’d turned off the Meteor.

Rather, without Subaru and the others, the White Dragon Scales wouldn’t have been able to defeat the Witchbeast. They would have likely been wiped out in the worst case scenario. They should at least be glad that they came away with their lives.

Subaru: “But that’s just how things are… It’s hard for them to admit they’re satisfied with only coming away with their lives.”

The unshaven man had stammered out the reasons why the White Dragon Scales coveted the treasure to Subaru and the others.

An endemic disease had broken out several years ago where they’d been born, with the contamination in the soil being pinned as the cause behind it. They needed a lot of money to mend the soil.

The endemic disease was a strange kind, in which the bodies of people afflicted by it would gradually turn into something like stone, until finally, completely turning into actual stone—It was a diabolical endemic that occurred in lands defiled by a certain Witchbeast.

Emilia: “The aftereffects of the Blacksnake spreading its pestilence.”

Subaru felt a similar gut-wrenching feeling as to Emilia's frustrated mutter.

There was no way to fix endemic diseases originating from Witchbeasts except for cleansing the contaminated soil. To do that, they needed a ton of colorless magic ore, as well as the funds for them.

But those funds had been snatched away from them, due to that one man's betrayal, and so their final hope lay crushed beneath those rocks.

The men's families were back in their homeland. That was why the youth was so frustrated, and the glazed look in the eyes of the unshaven man too, was still pointed towards the family he'd lost.

But it was already too late. All hope was lost, and with it, so would be their homela—

Kiritaka: "So, how about this, I'll employ everyone from the White Dragon Scales. As for the contaminated soil in their homeland, the Muse Company shall take care of all the funds and materials required."

Subaru: "Whaaa…?!"

Raising his voice in disbelief, Subaru was flabbergasted to hear this unlikely suggestion coming from the most unlikely person here.

Likewise, Emilia, Rem and all of the members of the White Dragon Scales opened their mouths in shock.

Then, after making that surprising suggestion, Kiritaka spun round on the spot and looked up at the heavens above,

Kiritaka: "Luckily, the main product of my family-run Muse Company is magic ore. The colorless kind is fairly expensive, but it isn't difficult to get them in bulk. That, and merchants are always in need of swords to protect their wealth. I reckon this will be full of benefits for both parties."

Subaru: "D-Do you… Do you plan on taking all the credit for yourself?!”

Kiritaka: “It’s in a man’s true spirit to live up to the pleas of the woman he loves. But not only that, there’s so much to sympathize in their plight. It’s how do they say it, “One good turn deserves another.”“

His adage was similar to one that went like: “the good you do for others, is good you do yourself.

Speaking like helping people was only natural for him, Kiritaka now looked like a messiah. When they’d first met him, he’d only looked like a huge dumbass blinded by love. Actually, no, once a fool, always a fool.

Even so, there was something as well that bothered him about what Kiritaka had said.

Subaru: “Did you really ask him that, Lilliana.”

Liliana: “…I did. After all, I was the one who turned them down and wouldn’t listen to the situation they were in.”

Liliana cast her eyes down and said that in a quiet voice as she clutched her lyulyre case.

She had flat out refused the men’s frantic, threatening demands both back in the cart and in the cave.

Though, if she was blaming herself for that, then Subaru was equally guilty too. Besides, the Witchbeast would have still been something they couldn’t avoid, even if Liliana had sung to switch the Meteor off. The same applied for the cave-in as well.

Liliana: “Mister Ma-… I’ve just realized that as a bard I’ve always thought that I was meant to travel the world alone, and live alone while singing through it, before dying alone. But it really isn’t like that. People hear my songs where I go, and feel something from them. That effect isn’t something that just blinks out and dies… The world is telling me that it’s not going to leave me behind.”

Subaru: “Are you regretting not dropping your pride for a bit?”

Liliana: “I’m regretting not realizing the importance of things other than pride.”

Liliana looked up at Subaru’s question. There was a beam on her face.

She showed him her lyulyre, poised between her arms as she stroked its case.

Liliana: “Thank you so much for grabbing my lyulyre.”

Subaru: “Yeah, you owe me one.”

Liliana: “For sure. If there’s anything I can do to thank you, then…”

Subaru gave it some thought and said “Right” as Liliana looked up at him.

She had to pay the price for him protecting her cherished item with his life. The demand he made needed to have the same weight to it.

And thus, Subaru had decided what he wanted.

Subaru: “Sing for me, Liliana.”

Liliana: “Huh…?”

Subaru: “I’m knackered, yet we’re all alive despite thinking we were gonna die, so most of our problems are solved, practically. Meaning we need to roll the credits for the grand finale. And those typically come with a song.”

Liliana: “My inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: “—The day you hit your head, was the last normal day of your life.”

Subaru: “Shut up!”

She’d implicitly pointed out that what he’d proposed was strange, though, Subaru was already fully aware of it.

The price he was demanding for risking his life was for her to sing.

It seemed absurd, and it probably, definitely was. Yet, that was okay with him.

Liliana: “Then I shall sing. —A sky transcending dawn.”

She strummed at the strings of her lyulyre as the morning sun peering over the mountains welcomed a new day.

A series of high notes. What she was playing was a soul-stirring melody. The prelude blended in with the chilly morning air, drawing the audience’s gazes towards the singer, as they plunged into the start of the fantasia. Then…

Liliana: “♪ ♫ ♬”

Her voice rang out all the way to the far-away sky.

A raucous, new morning came, pushing the night away as her voice and melody went out to greet it. The birds sang back in response to her song, and even the blowing wind joined the ensemble.

The next thing Subaru knew, tears were trickling down his eyes, unable to contain the emotion welling inside him.

The same was the case for Emilia, Rem and the squirming Kiritaka.

The members of the White Dragon Scales, who’d previously dismissed her song as merely a means to pry open the Meteor, were also moved to tears by the sound of it.

Serves them right. Subaru was sure they would have understood what he meant.

Liliana: “♪ ♫ ♬”

Her song was ideal for an end to this absurd story, so full of coincidence to the point of absurdity.

As for whether the warm tears trickling down his cheeks, and his quivering heart, were a just recompense for staking his life.

…There was no need for him to ask something like that to anyone.

Subaru: “Are you really going to go to where Kiritaka’s from with those guys?”

Liliana: “Yeah, I am. It’s not like the debts the White Dragon Scales owe have nothing to do with me… At the very least, I’d like to stay with them until I have a clear idea when their debts are going to be done being paid.”

It was two days after the series of commotions had ended, Liliana had finished her packing and now said that in a cheerful tone.

Despite their many attempts at dissuading her, she had never caved to their firm persuasions.

Liliana had been the one to suggest Kiritaka to hire the White Dragon Scales, so she insisted she had an obligation to see them through. No one could change her stubborn mind.

Subaru: “Well, I guess that Kiritaka guy is gonna be over the moon, and it should mean you won’t be getting exposed to danger anymore… Though I don’t know what this’ll mean for your innocence. You’d better get Sir. Beardy to protect you.”

Liliana: “I shall do. You have to be prepared for anything when you’re standing by a starving beast. And besides, it seems like everyone in the White Dragon Scales has become captivated by my song.”

As Liliana, who was clapping her hands in high spirits, had said, the men in white clothing had become whipped by her singing.

It was pretty clear that the recital she’d given them outside the cave had really touched their hearts. She’d also been incredibly influential on getting them the funding required to save their homeland. To them, she was practically a goddess of salvation. Since then, they’d been treating her with the utmost respect.

Emilia: “That’s reaaally too bad. You can come back anytime, alright?”

Liliana: “Yeah, gotcha. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Emilia-sama, and everyone else too. When we see each other again, I’ll definitely have a new song prepared. I’m also gonna be looking forward to all the new sweets and stuff. Teeheehee…”

Subaru: “Can’t you keep acting like a heroine for at least ten more minutes?”

Subaru butted into the conversation in awe as Liliana drooled with a vulgar smile plastered on her face.

Several of those who were loath to part with Liliana had gathered here, in front of the mansion. Emilia and Rem especially loved her songs, so they were feeling quite downcast at the prospects of having to say goodbye to her. Even Beatrice had come out of the mansion to give her a short sending off, much to their surprise.

Liliana had only stayed for a few days, but those few days had been fantastic, albeit clamorous.

It had gotten to the point where it looked like they’d really miss her, when they realized they wouldn’t be hearing her singing tomorrow.

Subaru: “Anyways, it seems like Roswaal’s aims were a lil’ off the mark. Since we can’t keep Liliana around, it’ll mean that Operation: “Emilia-tan’s Propaganda Ambassador goes back to the drawing board.”

Although Roswaal’s forecasts being off once in a while was definitely something to gloat about, it was also a little unfortunate that he wouldn’t be able to hear a eulogy about Emilia from Liliana. No, maybe not just a little.

As Subaru wallowed in regret, Liliana waved her hand over to him and said: “Y-You got a mo’?”

Subaru: “What’s up? Beako wanted to tell you one last thing, but she couldn’t get the words out. She’s getting fidgety, so maybe you ought to help her out.”

Liliana: “I will of course, but I’ve got something quick to tell you first.”

Setting the fidgeting Beatrice aside for a bit, Liliana stood on her tippy toes and brought her lips close to Subaru’s ear.

Liliana: “Actually, I heard this straight from the esteemed Margrave himself. Emilia-sama is going to be challenging the grand stage that is the Royal Selection in the future, or something like that. That’s why I was taken in, right?”

Subaru: “O-Oh… So you knew all along…? Well, yeah, you’re right. Are you insinuating something?”

Liliana gave her flat chest a pat, faced with the shrewd preparations Roswaal had set.

Liliana: “Nonono! It would be my privilege to accept of course. The beauty and nobility of Emilia-sama’s character goes without saying. And above all, how can I not sing when gazing at the figure that is the esteemed Great Spirit!”

Subaru: “That Cat Spirit is what makes it for you? Isn’t he just a plain ol’ cat who likes to take naps and stuff?”

He didn’t really get the subtleties for why he was her deciding factor, but the most important thing was that Liliana was going to accept her duty.

He looked forward to the day where he’d be able to hear her play a new heroic tale, sometime in the future.

Subaru: “So, until that time comes, I guess this is goodbye for a while.”

Liliana: “Indeed. Please, look forward to it! I’m going to sing you the best song ever!”

Liliana patted her lyulyre case and pledged to undertake that, with a look of confidence etched on her face.

It was a thing of splendor that she could be so forthright towards her goals.

Liliana: “Also…”

Just as he’d thought their conversation would end neatly there, Liliana looked at him with a flush in her cheeks.

He could feel her excitement coming from the earnest look in her upturned eyes.

Then, after a brief hesitation, she spoke up.

Liliana: “Please let me sing your heroic tale sometime. —Natsuki Subaru-sama.”

Subaru: “…”

Liliana: “Please forgive me for laughing it off when I first heard it. Rem-san was right. You will become a hero someday.”

Liliana flashed a grin at Subaru, whose breath had caught for the time being. Then she turned her back to him in embarrassment, and jogged away. Subaru gazed at her back as she began to exchange her goodbyes with Beatrice, before finally letting his breath out again.

Emilia: “What’s the matter Subaru? Your face is growing suuuuper red.”

Emilia suddenly came over next to him and said that with a glance to his face.

Subaru felt his own cheeks in a panic. His face was still quite flushed, causing him to shake his head in irritation.

Subaru: “Ghaaa!”

Emilia: “Hehe, you’re so peculiar.”

Emilia brought her hand to her lips and let out a small chuckle as Subaru raised his voice unable to control himself.

They were standing side by side, grinning at each other—These two would be, one day, sung about by the Songstress Liliana.

—At this time today though, they were still just Natsuki Subaru and Emilia.

END

The Head Maid's Restless Day Off

1

—It wasn't as if Subaru had any special reason for having these realizations.

Subaru: "Weird. The cart that was here up until now is gone…"

Rem: "About that, I put it away while Subaru-kun was gone."

Subaru: "Oh, okay. Thanks, Rem."

Subaru: "Weird. I thought I had tools out for tending the lawn, but…"

Rem: "About that, I had some spare time, so I took care of it."

Subaru: "Is that so? Thanks as always, Rem."

Subaru: "Weird. I thought I'd give a hand to help set up the tableware because it's just about that time to eat, but…"

Rem: "About that, don't worry about it. Subaru-kun could go take a seat."

Subaru: "Really now. Looks like I won't be making my appearance on the stage. As expected of Rem."

Subaru: "Weird. Come to think of it, the writing practice homework that Ram told me to finish is…"

Rem: "About that, I copied Subaru's handwriting and took care of it."

Subaru: "…I-Is that so? Doesn't that look hmmm, a bit different? Like, I'm thankful, but…"

2

Subaru: "Rem, I think you should at least have one day to rest completely.”

Everyone gathered at scattered times as Subaru made this suggestion.

They heard this suggestion, and then the five people and the one small cat were astonished. However, the person who was the most surprised of all was the aforementioned blue-haired girl—Rem.

Rem, who had been setting up the table right beside Subaru, who sat in his seat, tilted her head in a lovely manner.

Rem: “A day off for for me? Um…did I perhaps do something careless? Which is why Subaru-kun suggested a…”

Subaru: “No, that’s not it. That’s not it at all. In fact, I’ve never had any complaints at all about your work in the first place, but I also want to point out about how that’s problematic as well.”

Rem: “—?”

Even after hearing Subaru’s explanation, Rem only responded with a face expressive of a question mark. She wasn’t aware at all about how she overworked herself, but on the other hand, her employer and the sinfulness of her surroundings proved it.

Rem somehow becomes pitiful, so Subaru head patted this girl who stood next to her. Lately whenever Subaru did this, Rem would be happy and would unconditionally make an expression that looked unreasonably gentle as she received her head pats.

Roswaal: “In other words, you mean that? Subaru-kun wants to act as the employer for me and wants to determine the maid employment conditions. That’s what you mean.”

The person who clearly understood the situation was this person beside the scene of Subaru petting Rem—the head of the mansion, Roswaal. He had the same type of clown make-up applied to his white face this morning, and broke into a smile with his purple painted lips.

Subaru: “Welll, that’s not really exact. I can’t really say that I object, but that's close to what I meant."

Ram: "How rude, Barusu. What a rude thing to say to Roswaal. It's 100 years too early for a maid to object the master, and it's 400 years too early for Barusu."

Subaru: "I don't need that kind of special treatment, but do you not have something in mind as well?"

Ram, someone who has always been cold towards Subaru, cut into the conversation, perhaps because she was displeased with Subaru giving his opinion to Roswaal like that. Subaru frowns at Ram, Roswaal's top advocate, and

Subaru: "Rem is working a bit too hard…or rather, Rem is the only one who has to deal with the mansion's maintenance so much. No matter how you look at it, it's too much on her."

Ram: "That's not true."

Subaru let out a sigh in response to Ram nonchalantly shaking her head.

Subaru: "…Then who made this breakfast?"

Ram: "Rem."

Subaru: "Who woke up, immediately did the mansion's simple cleaning, and immediately let fresh air in?"

Ram: "Rem."

Subaru: "Who woke up, helped you change your clothes, and brushed your teeth?"

Ram: "Rem."

Subaru: "You've continued this conversation the whole time with a composed face, haven't you?!! Are you a king?!."

Ram: "I'm not that great."

Subaru: “I’m not praising you here!!”

The prideful Ram had an arrogant look, which made Subaru feel tired and facepalm. Then a person who hadn’t been in the conversation up until now, sitting to Subaru’s left side, raised her hand.

Emilia: “Hey, may I add in something?”

It was a beautiful girl with soft, silver hair—the girl who said these words with a voice that sounded like a bell. She looked left and right with her blueish purple eyes that looked like as if they had gems in it. This was the person who looked at Subaru—Emilia.

While looking at Subaru, who had his head turned, and Rem, who was thoroughly enjoying her head being pat, she said

Emilia: “I understand that Rem is working reaaally hard, but Subaru and the others are working too, aren’t they? And yet you’re saying that you only want to give Rem a day off?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan. I’m happy for your consideration, but this is about the amount of work she has to do and its intensity. If you look at it that way, Rem works too hard when compared to people like me or Ram.”

Ram: “You’re upsetting me, Barusu. Whether or you are useless or not, being the half man you are, I’m handling my job easily without fail. Don’t group me with yourself in this matter.”

Subaru: “You’re being given the same workload as this half man, so I don’t wanna hear that come from you! Moreover, what do you do when I’m not there? Did you do the work I was supposed to do now?”

Ram: “That’s a silly question, Barusu. —Rem did it.”

Subaru: “You may not be aware of this, but not a single good thing has been said as of right now.”

Seeing that it would be a waste of time to continue talking to Ram and that he should have direct talks, Subaru turned towards

Roswaal. While giggling from wondering about what was so fun about the situation, Roswaal urged the story to move onto the next part with a gesture of holding out his arm.

Subaru: “If we look back a bit, there are other instances of Rem being treated improperly. For example, the demon beasts incident, which was when we prevented the damage without Roswaal.”

The topic Subaru brought up was about the trifling incident that happened just the other day.

Wolgarms, which are demon beasts that live in the forest, had attacked the Roswaal mansion and the latest Earlham Village. It was an uproar in which victims could be had in an instant, but this incident miraculously ended with only several casualties.

On the other hand of the incident, Subaru truly did have a lot of bitter experiences, but he didn’t bring that up.

Roswaal: “Though, you guys should’ve had arrangements to reward your efforts. In Subaru-kun’s case, I think it might be hard to see your actual feelings with just the details of the request you made.”

Subaru: “That’s, um…well, I am grateful for that.”

Subaru gave a side glance to Emilia repeatedly and responded to Roswaal while stammering out his words. Emilia tilted her head in response to Subaru’s look, but she didn’t know about the details about Subaru’s reward.

It would be troubling for Subaru if she knew about how he requested for few various necessary arrangements to be made when he was on the promised date with Emilia. She couldn’t know about this precisely so that it’d seem like he prepared the flower garden and the garland himself.

Subaru: “Let’s stop talking about things regarding my reward. However, if I received a reward for that incident, then that means Rem and Ram should get one too, don’t you think?”

Roswaal: “Are you saying that those two should be treated the same as yourself, a person who should be labeled as a guest, at that time?

If that's so, then I think it's an unreasonable request."

Subaru: "Even if I was something other than a guest, there's no reason in not permitting it, don't you think? Also showing generosity here would make the times in which they show compassion skyrocket, making their their loyalty MAX level! Wouldn't it turn out like that, Master?"

Roswaal smiles at the insistent Subaru, and says "Loyalty, huh." as he looks at Ram.

Subaru looks at Ram, who bowed as if she felt Roswaal's look. He remembers the truth that there was a maid already with a MAX level of loyalty next to him, and then he realized that he failed to choose the right words for persuasion.

Subaru: "You block me from moving forward to no end, Ram."

Ram: "Even if Rem's loyalty and my loyalty towards Roswaal were to sway, it's pointless, Barusu. Before that, you can tie up that statement in the doubt you had when you aimed to cause internal friction."

Subaru: "That was when we survived that fight together too. You sure are harsh!"

They should have cooperated well together to some extent at that time. However, without exception, it failed to have an effect on her compassion. In response to Ram, who exhibited a refreshed, opposing behavior, Subaru becomes unsure of what to say next. However,

Roswaal: "But, well, it's not like we should totally disregard Subaru-kun's opinion on the situation."

Ram: "Roswaal-sama…"

Roswaal: "Don't make a gloomy face like that, Ram. I'm not letting go of my viewpoint. It's just that there's a reason to Subaru-kun's point as well. I was close to oversighting that incident, so if I don't bestow a single reward for you guys who defended against the demon beasts before anything happened, I would be called a poor noble.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama, I would like you to hand over your favorite pen.”

Subaru: “Man, you don’t change your attitude very easily at all!”

In response to Ram frankly indicating what she wanted from him, Roswaal handed over the pen that he had on his chest. Ram accepted the pen respectfully, and softly put it to her chest as she took a step back.

Anyways, this was equivalent of repelling the biggest obstacle. Roswaal was understanding, so Ram’s withdrawal was simple to fix. The next thing to take care of was the main point—the decision would be up to Rem.

Rem: “Subaru-kun?”

Rem, who was being patted on the head endlessly throughout the conversation, blinked with her eyes.

Subaru: “So, well, we’ve obtained the right to be rewarded. It’s an employee victory for us. Alright, you can ask for anything. Ros-chi will take care of all the assets and the authority needed for it!”

Roswaal: “It would be a bit problematic if you set your expectations too high, though.”

Rem was in front of Subaru, and she smiled at him with her blushed face with the kind expression she had in her light blue eyes. He saw the clown let out a wry smile on the side, but anyways, he became aware of it and then decided to ignore it.

Rem: “Thank you, Subaru-kun. But I am happy just by spending time with you and Nee-sama in the mansion. So I don’t need anything more.”

Subaru: “But that would take away the meaning of this whole conversation we’ve been having!”

Or rather, that would mean, in terms of the flow of events, it would be a single person's victory—Ram's victory, who received the feather pen.

Rem kindly being unselfish was a virtue, but for her to not ask for luxuries when she should have—that would wrong; it would be wrong for others to let her do this, and it would be wrong for him to not think of it as something lonesome.

Emilia: "Well, can't we just try what Subaru said in the beginning?"

The person who clapped her hands together and made a suggestion when the conversation started to stagnate was Emilia.

Emilia: "I've been doing some reflecting as I listen to the conversation you guys have been having. Although it is her job, I've always been relying heavily on Rem too. Since I believe this, it would be natural for Subaru and Ram to think the same as people who work together, huh."

In response to Emilia, who sought for agreement to her opinion, Subaru made a bright gesture to indicate his agreement.

Emilia: "So, I also agree with giving Rem a reward. However, Rem said she doesn't need one…so I don't think it'd be right to do so."

Subaru: "So, what do you suggest then?"

Emilia: "In the scene of giving rewards, not being able to give anything would bring pain to Roswaal as well, I think. Rem is a good girl, so I don't mean to restrict her from being rewarded, but properly rewarding her work is also an important role…oh, it's written in the book."

Just when he thought that she said something splendid, it seemed that she only talked about second-hand knowledge. Emilia, who stook her tongue out and gave a bashful smile, said "Thus" to Rem, who had a slightly surprised face, and continued speaking.

Emilia: "I want you to be less undemanding. We want to do something for you because you always work hard, although it might be difficult."

Rem: “Emilia-sama…”

Rem had an amazed look in her eyes as if she was seeing the light. Subaru wasn’t really having much of a change in his heart through reasoning, so Emilia’s persuasion moved him deeply as well.

Ram: “So what does following Barusu’s initial suggestion outline exactly?”

Ram, who was completely calm with the feather pen kept in her breast pocket, threw her question towards Emilia. She accepts the question, raises her finger, and then

Emilia: “That’s easy to explain. Even if we think like this and make requests, Rem would surely say that she is busy and doesn’t have time to think calmly due to her being occupied by her work; all the more reason to give her at least one day to rest. I also think it’d be nice if she could think about her reward too.”

Subaru: “Ahhh, I see.”

Subaru gave honest praise to Emilia’s idea, seeing as she had thought more about it than he expected. It seemed that Ram and Roswaal had the same opinion, as they both had no indication of disagreement with their nodding.

The only question left would be Rem’s take on the proposal.

Rem: “…Emilia-sama. I am truly thankful for your concern. I also only feel shame about myself for not being helpful with some parts of the matter. However, giving me a reward and time to rest is too considerate. I only caused trouble during that incident, and if I’m not at the mansion…”

The apologetic Rem, who had her eyes cast down, started to line up her cautionary objections. Simply put, she had no hesitance in her voice, and you could catch a glimpse of her toughness of persisting in her opinion. Thus,

Subaru: “Rem”

Rem: “Yes. Umm—Subaru-kun, I…”

Subaru: “Let’s take a day off.”

Rem: “Yes. If Subaru-kun says so.”

—It turned out like this.

3

They were still at the breakfast place, so the preparations for her day off were settled on this day.

Subaru proposed that they spent a whole day off to rest from tomorrow, but as expected, Rem was only firmly refusing it.

Subaru: “And with that, I would like to make a decision about Rem’s portion of work for this one day. Rem is going to rest, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that no deficiencies will appear or that she’ll actually be able to let herself rest. We all have personal experiences with just how hard Rem works and we truly feel it, so this should be a very significant program in which we will commence from now on to honestly have her feel our gratitude.”

Subaru forced Rem to go to her room, separating their locations, and he explained the intents of the project that came out before. The person who took his explanation in and raised her hand was Emilia.

Emilia: “Hey, Subaru, can I say something?”

Subaru: “Go ahead, Emilia-tan. Your modest attitude of raising your hand when you share your opinion is nice. What is it?”

Emilia: “I reeaally am in agreement with Rem’s day off and with what you said…but it might be problematic if you don’t talk the others as well to get their agreement.”

Emilia puts a finger on her lips and glances towards the side.

The people gathered there were all Roswaal’s mansion’s residents, excluding Rem. In other words, there were people other than the employee Subaru and Ram. Master Roswaal was also gathered there.

The person who had a particularly dissatisfied looking face was

Subaru: "…How long have you been pouting? You haven't been joining in on the conversation, so this isn't just a matter of you not having a cooperative personality. "

Beatrice: "…Why are you doing this while assuming something like that my cooperation is a given from the beginning in the first place? That's the actual really perplexing matter."

The person who said this and glared at Subaru was this petite girl who sat on her chair with her arms crossed. It was this girl who wore a dress and had creamy colored hair, which was in an ojou-sama type of drills hairstyle—this girl was Beatrice.

While it is true that Beatrice did appear at the dinner table when it was time to eat, she would basically persist in abstaining from getting involved with anything in the mansion. Subaru knew that she would have an uncooperative attitude this time too, so he aimed to compel her to hear him out and confronted her. He expected Beatrice to make a face indicative of not being compelled to get involved even after listening, but

Subaru: "Rem habitually and thoroughly takes care of you too, you know. Who do you think washes your underwear and washes the wet futon when you wet the bed?"

Beatrice: "Why are you saying such sudden things yourself?! Such a lady like myself, when could I—when could I have possibly wet myself?! You need to keep your reckless babbling in check, I suppose!"

Subaru: "It's pretty suspicious of you to deny it so frantically like that. So you really…"

Beatrice: "Don't make a face that looks like you've come close to the truth! I'm telling you I didn't do it, so I didn't do it, I suppose!"

He was just teasing her, but he unintentionally got carried away with the entertainment, seeing how she responded to it. His enjoyment from messing with Beatrice ended quickly, and then he looked at another person's discontent face.

Ram: "Barusu, if you have an excuse for yourself, then say it quickly."

It was the face of the person with such a freezing expression that her hostility was being asserted just from her eyes—something that could be done by none other than Ram. There was no other source for her displeasure for this girl who felt like she absolutely had to cooperate with this experiment in every way possible.

Subaru: "I don't have an excuse to give. It is what I see and it is what I called it, as in it is necessary for all of the mansion's members to unite and make up for the deficiencies created from making Rem rest."

Ram: "Even so, dragging even Roswaal-sama into your tomfoolery is going too far, considering how he is busier than Rem as well, being driven away everyday with his hard work"

Subaru: "And so, this is what your personal assistant has to say."

Subaru went past Ram and called out to Roswaal, who was rocking in his chair.

Roswaal: "Let's see. As for myself as someone who holds responsibility, being occupied with trivial matters isn't really something that should be praised. Just like Ram said, even though things may appear this way, I have a pretty busy position."

Subaru: "I see I see."

Roswaal: "Yep. I thought that it'd never be hard to keep a sense of the maids' circumstances for their labor as a master—and by circumstances I mean making sure that they had an appropriate workload and received appropriate salaries."

Ram: "Roswaal-sama, that's…"

Roswaal was relatively eager as a person who could view different perspectives, as opposed to Ram who was obstinate. Surely in his case, he had a great sense to at least genuinely join in on jolly events.

Subaru: “Hey, respect the will of the actual person in question. Didn’t you say that it’d be 100 years too early for a maid to object the master?”

Ram: “Lowly people like Barusu shouldn’t get carried away with finding people’s faults.”

He was reluctant to admit it, but Ram, the person who took his opinion, had an uncommon type of acuteness in judgement. He had a bitter smile in response to her piercing look and nodded at her as if he was thinking, “So you did listen to my general opinion”.

Subaru: “Okay well, let’s talk about everyone’s share of housework then. First let’s do the general division of the meals, laundry, cleaning…”

Beatrice: “Did you not hear what I had to say?! You didn’t hear me say I wouldn’t do this, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Goddamn you are being a pain in the ass. Emilia-tan, please help.”

Emilia: “Umm, “I will not allow this to be put on the family crest!” was the saying, right?”

Beatrice continued to resist in vain, causing Subaru to have an amazed look on her face. He left it up to Emilia to persuade Beatrice. Emilia heard his request, said the set phrase Subaru taught her, and held out her hand.

A gray furball was on top of Emilia’s palm. When the rolled up furball understood that it was his turn to make his appearance, he expanded his body, shook his pink nose, and looked at Beatrice.

It was Emilia’s contracted spirit, having the same use as Beatrice as a type of weapon used for a battle—this was Puck, the cat spirit.

Puck: “Betty”

Beatrice: “Oo…Bubby. You are cute today as well…”

Puck: “Thank youuu. So Betty…I understand what you are trying to say, but I understand what Subaru is saying as well. Besides, I feel like it is our duty as spirits to occasionally show tolerance for the children’s sake.”

Beatrice’s blue eyes twitched in response to Puck’s calm manner of speaking.

As one would expect, Beatrice’s pride would probably not allow herself to submit to Puck’s standards and change her current opinion

Beatrice Bu-Bubby’s point is expected, I suppose. B-But, I…”

Puck: “Betty. Please.”

Beatrice: “If Bubby says so, then I guess it can’t be helped!”

Subaru: “You sure are simple.”

The problem with Beatrice was solved with extreme ease, and so with this the dissenting opinions were resolved.

The next things to talk about were the allotment of the work and dividing people into groups.

Emilia: “How should we divide people up?”

Subaru: “The general work can be handled just like how I said before. If we include Puck, we have 6 people for it, so if we split up in pairs, I think it would work out well. As for the actual dividing…”

Intense looks quickly came about from the two who had dissenting opinions before. He understood what they generally wanted to say, so he nodded.

Subaru: “How about Ram and Ros-chi, Beako and Puck, and me and Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “Umm, I’m fine with it…but are Puck and Beatrice fine with it too?”

Puck: “Fufufu, Lia is a worry-wart. I am fine with it. I’ll make the best use of this small body’s advantages and pick up coins that fell under the drawers too.”

Subaru: “The opportunities for the application of your advantages are way too narrowed down.”

He didn’t understand why Puck was brimming with confidence, but there was no point estranging him seeing as how he had determination. It was better than having him take care of dinner and mixing all of the cooking with cat fur.

Subaru: “Beako, would you prefer to do the cleaning or the laundry? You choose.”

Beatrice: “Out of those two, I can make use of my magic with the laundry, I suppose.”

Subaru: “OK. Use this as a chance to wash all the soiled underwear you have hidden in your room.”

Beatrice: “You really don’t get it. I am TELLING you I do not do THAT!”

He soothed the enraged Beatrice, and it was decided that Puck and Beatrice would handle the laundry.

The next question was who would be in charge of preparing the meals and who would be in charge of the cleaning, but

Ram: “Roswaal-sama and I will take care of the meals.”

Subaru: “I’m fine with that, but why meals?”

Ram: “Because it wouldn’t be necessary for Roswaal-sama to go through the trouble of going somewhere if it was kitchen work, and there would be no worry about causing trouble through major clumsiness. Worst case scenario, Barusu could even eat vegetable scraps that are left out, right?”

Subaru: “I was born on a year of the rabbit, but I am not a vegetarian.”

Subaru's point was washed away from Ram's scornful laughter.

That being said, the person in the mansion without Rem who had the most balanced abilities for housework was Ram. The meals would particularly show its results clearly in its taste. It was not wrong to choose Ram as the person to be in charge of the meals. At the very least, she also had her killer steamed potatoes up her sleeve. Roswaal's cooking was also a concern, but he didn't have any tragedies with his meals.

Subaru: "Therefore, Emilia-tan and I will inevitably be appointed to the cleaning. I feel that it will be a painful and difficult battle, but will you believe in me and keep up?"

Emilia: "Yes, I understand. I'll work reaaally hard so that I don't hold Subaru back."

Subaru: "Dang this girl's courage is cute."

Emilia took a triumphant pose with her face burned with ambition. Subaru gives a satisfactory nod at his partner's reliable attitude and ends the division of roles peacefully.

Subaru: "Alright. Then let's all get to our own share of work. First of all, Puck and Beako, I'll show you the place with the gathered clothes that need to be washed, so follow me. And…"

Before each of them went into their works with their decided roles, Subaru looked back at the entrance of the dining hall.

He saw a blue haired girl peeping through the gap of the slightly opened door looking towards him.

Subaru: "And about the decision that she would spend her time idly, although she might not be calm."

Rem: "Yes, I understand that…but umm, I am worried."

Subaru: "That troublesome workaholic part of yourself is showing, Rem. Today is "Rem Day". As someone who is a a pro at spending time slothfully, I recommend doing nothing and sleeping on your bed."

Emilia: “Eh? Why? It would be a waste to spend her time that way, wouldn’t it?”

Subaru: “Being wasteful of time is a day off!”

Subaru responded to Emilia’s butting in while feeling something pierce his chest. Nevertheless, on the other side of the door, Rem had a face that was fairly indicative of not deciding to withdraw back into her room.

Subaru: “Wearing a maid outfit even when it’s been decided that you’d rest is not right in the first place. If you decide to be lazy, the you should first start with your appearance. Quickly change your clothes into something slothful and dive into the bed!”

Rem: “But all I have besides my maid outfit is my nightgown…”

Subaru: “Ah! Come to think of it, you said that before! As if that’s any better! No matter how you look at it, isn’t that too cruel for a girl of your age?”

He certainly never saw Rem or Ram wear anything besides maid clothes. It seemed like the nightgown was neglected, but that would be something you’d only standardly wear when you spend time in your own room.

Subaru: “It’s not alright like this. Eventually, it won’t be okay not being able to choose clothes at your own discretion. Welll, since nothing can be done about it today, wear a maid outfit that would allow you to spend your time rather comfortably. “

Rem: “Understood. I will change into maid clothes used for a day off.”

Subaru: “Something like that exists?!”

It looked like she had maid outfits gathered around, satisfying their purposes. It seemed that it was a line up of outfits that were used for battle, work, and trips, though there was no reason to put a limit on maid outfits in the first place.

Anyhow, once he dispersed with Rem, who was doing things with painful reluctance, “Rem Day” finally began.

Subaru: “Okay! Well then, everyone attend their given work with their entire spirit! After all, there’d be no point in doing this if we make Rem believe that the mansion can’t function because of her resting!”

Everyone: “Yeah!”

In response to Subaru’s yell intending to incur enthusiasm, Emilia pushed her first up accordingly.

Each of the individuals around succeeded Emilia with their voices, and then the rather anxious single day began.

4

—And there she was, spending her day off with unprecedented nervousness.

Rem: “Is it really fine for me to not help…? …Nee-sama, Subaru-kun.”

Rem, who had returned to her own room, changed into her resting maid clothes just like Subaru instructed and walked around and around in her room anxiously. She simply could not stay still.

To Rem, doing work was an action that was equivalent of ascertaining her raison d’etre. Of course, this didn’t mean that Rem’s fatigue was unbearable, but it was also true that she couldn’t feel at rest on this day off that took place so suddenly.

Rem: “Let’s take a look after all.”

Rem looked like she was calm and being strong with patience, but the truth was that it was unexpectedly too much for her to handle.

She felt anxiety tensing up within her chest, which was a chest bigger than her sister’s, immediately left her room, and started to move around the mansion while taking quick looks around to make sure no one was there.

Rem: “If I’m not mistaken, then Nee-sama and Roswaal-sama were put in charge of the meals…they should be in the kitchen.”

First, she went to peep on the person who was her other half, the person who she could put the most trust in in regards to work—Ram. She had a tendency to be a bit slothful, although she was better than Rem when it came to thoroughness of her work and her sense of responsibility. Or at least, that’s what Rem assessed; she trusted Ram’s own choice to take charge of the cooking.

She trusted her choice, it was just that she was about two times more worried than she usually was. Rem perceived the sweet aroma coming from a certain innermost passage of the kitchen with her sense of smell and got closer to slip into the entrance.

Ram: “Roswaal-sama. I am sorry for having it come to something like this today. I will make sure to reprimand Barusu after this. …Yess, firmly.”

Once Rem peeked inside, she heard Ram’s frightening voice and she stopped moving.

Ram tried her best to not show her emotions to other people, but Rem, someone who accompanied her since birth, could guess what her older sister was feeling from her calm voice.

As a result of the sensor for her older sister that was cultivated through experience over many years, Rem could perceive when Ram was enraged. Even so, she was angry with a type of intensity that she had seldom witnessed in the recent years.

When she took a glance inside, she saw Ram peeling off vegetable skins with fierce vigor. In Ram’s hand, a person who was skillful at using bladed objects, it looked as if all the vegetable’s skin were starting to peel off like magic.

Roswaal: “You don’t have to overreact to that extent. It’s important for you guys to put aside your feelings for work, seeing as how Subaru-kun hasn’t coaxed people with any of his.”

The person watching over Ram comfortably while resting against the kitchen wall was Roswaal.

While looking at Ram's back, who was working, Roswaal swung around his raised finger. Then the pan that was set on the work table for the fire demon crystal shook, the arising aroma from the steam filled the kitchen, and it flowed towards the corridor as well.

The labor was divided with Ram cutting up the ingredients and Roswaal watching over the pan. Ram's responsibility was a bit bigger than Roswaal's, but if you considered their positions, it would allow them to compromise befittingly. Judging from how Ram looked, she was probably full of feelings of wanting to act as an agent for everything and would have Roswaal sit.

Ram: "Roswaal-sama is too easy on Barusu. If that causes a misunderstanding, he'd be a bum. Even today…"

Roswaal: "Then do you think giving Rem a day off was a mistake?"

Ram: "That's…well, I felt like it'd be fine to let Rem do things the way she wants."

Roswaal: "She certainly has been becoming more enthusiastic than before lately. However, being in high spirits and being made tense are two different things. I believe that this current trend is better than how it was before."

Ram kept her mouth shut in response to Roswaal's words, and Rem held her breath as she listened attentively to the conversation. She was listening to them talk about herself, so Rem became very embarrassed.

She didn't even peep on them with this intention, so it was as if she was similar to a thief.

Ram: "…Let's go now."

Ram and Roswaal's cooperation was steady, since they've known each other for a long time. There was nothing like worry about them breaking off relations with each other either. Just when they were about to leave, Rem took her back off of the entrance. However, Roswaal: “Well, let’s leave it at that I guess.”

She heard Ram’s reply and gently held onto her chest. After that, she peeked into the kitchen to give a last glance. Then, her eyes met Roswaal, who was inside the kitchen.

“…”

However, Roswaal just gave a wink towards Rem, overlooking how their eyes met, without saying anything. She took in the consideration from head of the household, and went away from the kitchen as she headed back to the corridor while once again silencing her footsteps. Roswaal may have noticed that Rem was there from the start.

If that was the case, perhaps he brought up the topic to Ram in order to let Rem know about his opinion.

Rem: “Thank you, Roswaal-sama.”

Rem left behind words of gratitude for Roswaal’s nonchalant consideration and headed towards her next stop.

The next individuals she’d check on were Puck and Beatrice, who should be taking care of the laundry.

In some way, these two were the most unexpected in the current division of groups.

Rem: “Normally you’d think that they should be working at the watering place, but…”

The clothes that needed to be washed were collected in the morning and packed towards the large public bath. Whether they were wet or not wasn’t a problem; it was a place that used a great amount of water, and it was customary for individuals in the mansion to use the watering place of the bath-house to do the laundry.

If they followed that custom, then those two should be doing the laundry there.

Rem: “Now that I think about it, I wonder if they’ll know the differences of the specific cloths.”

She suddenly became aware of an uncertain factor and started to feel uneasy.

Maid outfits and Roswaal's clothing did not have things small accessories like handkerchiefs. As for Emilia's clothes and the women's underwear, these were articles of clothing that could not be jumbled together for laundry.

The color change and the amount of damage done to the material would be extremely unpleasant if they were jumbled together.

Rem: "Even when the laundry has at least always been taken care of by either me or Nee-sama…!"

She repents for having forgotten about that. Rem hurries up and runs toward the west wing's large public path. She hears the sound of water and people talking, which confirmed that those two were there. Next she would pick up the clothes that needed to be washed before they did it recklessly and—

Puck: "Are you sure about this, Betty? If you wash girls' underwear so recklessly its appearance will mess up. It's going to become unusable soon, so wash it with care—that's standard. You're kinda washing the underwear and the shirts one at a time, but if you don't take your time with it for these important things…"

Beatrice: "Hmmm. You're well-informed as expected, Bubby, I suppose. I'll take note of what you said."

Rem was in the dressing room and covering her breath. In front of her eyes, she saw Beatrice putting her hands into the hot water drawn into the bucket washing underclothes. Puck was floating around that scene. He shook his tail and was gazing at the small personal bathtub.

Rem sensed the slight changes of mana and confirmed what Puck was doing as she stood on her tiptoes. It came into her eyes and she held her breath. She saw the clothes being covered with hot water and bubbles, turning round and round in the bathtub. He was most likely making use of his wind and water magic, sometimes dealing with a large amount of clothes at once by spinning them counterclockwise.

Beatrice as well, if you looked at the situation at hand, she wasn't directly putting her hands into the bucket. The water was moving in front of her held out hands and it looked as if it had gained form. She was washing the underwear in a way that made it seem like she was using her own hands.

This was the squandering of magic that gave an overwhelming feeling of life—magic that could be used precisely because they were both paranormal existences.

What they were doing was extremely advanced, yet they were using their magic superbly for the very plebeian laundry duty. She became even more surprised, but Puck was strangely well informed on the life of humans—that was his bag full of wisdom.

Puck: "If you wash the detergent together with it like that, you'll be washing it out too much with the cooling water. If you don't wash it properly, the white material will turn yellow. Having the material in a place with good ventilation and drying it in the shade while avoiding exposing it to the sun would be considerate for the underwear when drying."

Or rather, he was so informed on the life of humans that it was a bit unpleasant.

He may have learned it for Emilia's sake, but where he learned it from was truly a mystery.

Rem: "It seems like I don't have to worry."

The ignorance part of the factor that she was the most worried about was cleared without a sense of danger. Rem disregarded the incomprehensible parts and was felt relieved from her worries, seeing as how this area was fine as well.

Beatrice: "Nevertheless, doing the laundry is troublesome. All those humans dirty various things just by living. Dealing with that is troublesome for them, I suppose."

Puck: "We refresh ourselves after going in and out a bit after all. Or wait, were Betty's circumstances a little different?"

Beatrice: "…Just a little. In regards to dirtying, it's the same as Bubby, I suppose."

Beatrice dropped her tone slightly and then looked into the bucket. Then

Beatrice: "It's troublesome even when using magic, yet doing things like washing clothing one by one feels like an abnormal thing to do. I am already fed up with this just after doing it for a short while."

Puck: "But the people who do it everyday are Subaru and those girls. We don't need to do the laundry, but we do understand the importance of food and cleaning. They get tired from having to take care of all of that everyday, I can understand giving a day off every now and then."

Beatrice: "We-Well it's not like I didn't think a bit about that too."

The genuity of Beatrice's feelings were more perceivable than the genuity of Puck's feelings, which you couldn't see. They were more perceivable because Rem, who already came out of the dressing room, also remembered about how the little girl had a blushed face.

Rem: "Thanks you two for your concern."

She left the dressing room, headed towards the bath, and then bowed. After that, she went towards the place of the last pair for today's share of work. It was the pair that Rem was the most worried about. She was worried about if they'd be able to deal with the butting in and interfering. They were the most worrisome pair. Subaru and Emilia should've been starting the cleaning of the west wing for today.

Emilia: "Cleaning gives that feeling of covering my face with a cloth after all."

Subaru: "That's a phrase you don't hear nowadays…"

Rem was heading towards the third floor of the west wing when she heard their voices and then quietly held her breath. When she put her back against the wall and peeped through the corridor, she saw Subaru holding cleaning tools in his hand and Emilia wiping the windows.

Emilia had her hair put together in the back, wearing an apron and wearing a white cloth on her head. Rem thought it was lovely how Subaru was stealing side glances at Emilia.

Emilia: “Nevertheless, this place isn’t really that dirty either. It looks like it gets cleaned reaaally well.”

Subaru: “Well that’s because the three buildings get cleaned by turns in the daily special rotations. Moreover, the west wing isn’t used that much in comparison to others. Places like this floor’s dance hall are completely unused.”

Emilia breathed on the window and then wiped it, which made squeaking noises. At the side, Subaru was using the stepladder. He checked the windows and above the door and then shrugged his shoulders with a face indicative of losing his will to continue.

Subaru: “Ahhh, I give up. It’s clean here too! I never thought I’d live to see a day where I’d feel displeased about something being clean!”

Emilia: “You really said it. However, that alone shows how Rem does her work with utmost effort. I might’ve not noticed that at all until I looked around like this.”

Emilia smiles at Subaru, who was at his wits’ end, briefly looks over the passageway and let out a sigh.

Emilia: “Something like this cannot be taken lightly. I wanted to do something for Rem’s sake, yet this was also a learning experience for me. Subaru, thank you.”

Subaru: “Eh? Ah, yeah, right. Just what I aimed for. Using a regular day to teach Emilia-tan about having someone support you and allowing Rem to rest too is like killing two birds with one stone, huh?”

Emilia: “Sorry. I don’t really understand what you are trying to say.”

Rem could also relate with not understanding Subaru when he became embarrassed and would start talking fast. Subaru dropped his shoulders and was dejected in a way that made it seem like he had the same impression of Emilia that Emilia had of him.

Emilia: “However, when I clean the mansion like this, it reminds of the thing that happened a little while back.”

Subaru: “What happened a little while back?”

Emilia: “I also tried to work like Rem just for a little bit, though it caused various misunderstandings…fufu, it’s a nice memory to me now.”

Subaru: “Oo, I see. There’s no way you wore something like a maid outfit. There’s no way, righttt.”

Emilia: “Nope, I wore one, although it was short, unlike Rem and the others’ maid outfits.”

Subaru: “Seriously?! Why was I not there?!”

Emilia: “Eh? You weren’t there obviously because you and I still hadn’t met at that time.”

In response to the bitter Subaru, him biting his lips, Emilia was tilting her head with a look of astonishment on her face.

Emilia was a sinful person for being someone who didn’t notice anything even when Subaru was that easy to understand. On one hand Rem felt sorry for Subaru, and on the other hand she also felt relieved from their lack of progress.

Subaru: “Huh? Come to think of it, today I…one, two, three…”

And when she was coming to accept herself, Subaru suddenly started counting the number of times he raised his voice. He counted on his fingers, muttered a small “That’s not okay”, and gazed outside the window. Then

Emilia: “Subaru, what’s wrong?”

Subaru: “I forgot that I have some important work to do. Ahh, this is a matter of neglecting a duty, huh."

Emilia: "Some important work to do…is it something that needs things like time and other people's help?"

Subaru: "Nope, I'll be fine alone. However, it's a type of work that cannot be neglected."

Subaru scratched his cheek and had a face indicative of him regretting his inadequate foresight. Emilia put her fingers on her lips and went into deep thought, scrutinizing Subaru's response as she let out a nod.

Emilia: "Alright. If that's the case, then Subaru can go take care of his work. Surely I'll be fine with this building's cleaning, even if I'm by myself, after all. It's almost done too, so."

Subaru: "…Emilia-tan. Will you be fine without me? You won't feel lonely?"

Emilia: "That really won't make me feel lonely at all, so don't worry."

Subaru: "Why are you denying it with emphasis?"

They had their usual interactions and then Subaru left Emilia's side, seemingly with traces of regret. Emilia waved goodbye with her small hand and then raised her voice to get psyched as she said "OK!" then

Emilia: "Alright, I also told Subaru some ensuring words, so I have to do my best. I gotta show him a site of doing things as if it was a piece of cake, despite doing it by myself. It'll make him laugh later."

Even though Emilia knew about how there was nothing that would make Subaru laugh at her, she took the bucket and house-cloth and went into a difference place of the mansion without minding it. If she was in this mood, then she'd probably have no trouble with her cleaning either. If there was something to worry about, then that would be…

Rem: “I wonder where Subaru-kun went…”

Subaru parted with Emilia and went off to god knows where by himself. The meals, laundry, and cleaning work were all being taken care of when it came to important work that could not be neglected.

Rem: “—Oh.”

While Rem was pondering about where he could be, she remembered about how Subaru was looking outside the window and arrived at the answer.

5

Rem: “Is it okay for me to be with you, Subaru-kun?”

Subaru was standing at the place where he came out of the mansion’s main gate and looked at Rem with his eyes wide open.

Rem’s words caused him to make an embarrassed look with his face and scratched his head.

Subaru: “I guess Rem really did predict it after all…”

Rem: “No, I also forget about it until just a little while ago. I most likely remembered it at about the same time Subaru-kun did.”

Rem let out a small smile and shook her head at Subaru, who appeared to have reflected on the matter.

In reality, Rem possibly wouldn’t have noticed if Subaru never remembered about it. That showed just about how much she had fixated on her thoughts about her sudden day off.

Rem: “As of today, it’s been 3 days since the last check…today it’s necessary to check if the mountain’s barrier is properly established, so. And the chaos of the demon beasts’ incident has finally settled down, so.”

The work that Subaru remembered and Rem had forgotten—it was the confirmation of the barrier.

The reason for yesterday's uproar with the demon beasts was because of them neglecting to control the barrier used for isolating the demon beasts that lived on the mountain. Thus, they stuck another new barrio onto the mountain and were checking on it in fixed intervals until it established. Today was the appointed day for that confirmation, and Rem caught Subaru when he decided to head towards the mountain.

Subaru: "I can go to the designated spot of the crystal stone to check things like the brightness and if it's shining by myself, you know? I'm hiking that much by myself, and yet you're still worried?"

Rem: "I'm always worried about Subaru-kun, but that's not all of it. I want to walk with Subaru-kun. Is that not okay?"

Rem's proposal caused Subaru to look away and pat the tip of his nose with his finger. When Subaru brought his attention to the straightforward Rem looking at him, he let out a sigh as if he was beaten down by her persistence.

Subaru: "You're hiking even on a day to rest. Rem sure is surprisingly fond of the outdoors."

Rem: "You said that I could always rely on you whenever I'm with Subaru-kun, after all. That's what you told me."

Subaru: "That sure puts me on the spot. It's fine, let's go together. No road is long with good company."

Rem: "—Yes."

In continuance with Subaru starting to walk, Rem walks while being half a step back.

This distance and speed were the most comfortable for Rem. They weren't side-by-side, but she wasn't lagging behind either. However, Subaru would occasionally look back to take a glance at her.

It was as if he was checking if Rem was keeping up properly.

Ever since she took notice of that gesture, this position was Subaru's special seat to Rem. This time of being here with him was when she could feel the kindness of the black haired boys' look in his eyes and his warm concern the most.

Subaru: "Hey, Rem. This day was decided by force, but was it a bother?"

Rem: "A bother?"

Subaru: "You looked like you were waiting in front of the gate, but I was just kinda thinking that it didn't look like you were very calm. Never mind, can't do anything about it now. It's just a matter of taking care of things earlier."

Subaru awkwardly trying to guess Rem's emotions caused her to look like she was about to burst into laughter. Just like Subaru said, it was too late to worry about it now, so there was no point in breaking the ice with such anxiety. However, she started to feel a slight inclination to be unkind.

Rem: "That's right. To speak the truth, I was arranging my thoughts when I was doing various work, and then things I wanted to do came into mind, which meant that I was prevented from doing them because of daily work."

Subaru: "I apologize…for being ignorant."

Rem: "I also have various work arranged. I've avoided it today, so that might cause me to be hindered by tomorrow's arrangements and the arrangements after that day as well. It's also true that I've been bothered because of that."

Subaru: "I'm foolish…Y□your little kindness has been a great…"

Rem gave a side glance at Subaru, who was holding onto his chest and staggering. She stuck her little tongue out with real intent of doing so.

He surprised her, so this was enough revenge for her. Moreover, although she was surprised, she didn't feel so bad about getting today's day off.

Rem: "However, I am happy that Subaru-kun worried about me. I was able to find out about what Emilia-sama and Roswaal-sama normally thought about me. I want to express my gratitude for that."

Incidentally, she was able to find out about Puck's mysterious brain and Beatrice's way of using fortitude magic as well. Rem also wanted to try copying that way of washing by turning the clothes round and round in the hot water.

Rem's response caused Subaru to stop walking. He had his mouth wide open, and after that, he curled his lips upon realizing the fact that he had been teased by her.

Subaru: "It seems like you'd be intimate with me enough to pull a joke on me, and that makes me happy. Good grief."

Rem: "Sorry. However, you truly did surprise me with something sudden. Besides, if the mansion can function like it did today without myself, then that makes me feel lonesome."

Subaru: "No. Even if you say that, things like housework especially cannot be done when the potential of war in the mansion becomes concentrated like it did today. Moreover, when I woke up and thought about the amount of work Rem had finished until breakfast, I actually had doubts about if the mansion would function well throughout the day with this potential of war."

Rem: "No matter how you look at it, that's over exaggerating things."

Subaru: "Can you really say that as someone who does the work of about 5 people all by herself? You can properly acknowledge yourself more, you know. I won't complain if you make a smug face just a few times every now and then."

Rem could only be happy about Subaru saying that and giving her his acknowledgement.

If she could get Subaru to say things to that extent, it'd also make it worth it for her to put in efforts in her work.

In the mansion, today she also got a lot of words from Emilia and Roswaal that made her happy.

She had nothing but gratitude for Subaru, who was the first person to say something, and she started to feel nothing but feelings of wanting to repay him for his kindness.

Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Hmm? What’s up? Feel like making a smug face now?”

Rem: “Thank you.”

Subaru: “Why did you just thank me?! Was I not building up for my gratitude for all these times?!”

Subaru gets confused as if he had taken in an unexpected reply as Rem puts her hand on her mouth and smiles.

—She did all this to show that this boy was precious, precisely because he was not aware of it himself.

6

The next morning, Rem woke up earlier than usual, took more care of her personal appearance than usual, finished the routine tasks feeling brighter than usual, and visited Ram at the usual time.

Rem: “…Halfway there.”

She slipped her into the towel blanket, and lifted the body of her habitually complainful sister. She sat behind Ram, whose head was shaking unsteadily, and fixed her hair pink hair with a comb.

Rem: “Nee-sama, here’s the steam towel.”

She handed over the towel steamed with hot water to the yawning Ram. The absent-minded Ram wiped her face hard with it, slowly awakening her consciousness. While she did this, Rem brought out the change of clothes, and she quickly helped Ram take off her nightclothes, changing her clothes into her uniform instead. She was now accustomed to this worker technique.

Ram: “…Rem, you’re in a very good mood this morning.”

Ram was completely awake. Rem was humming while dressing her up, which made Ram loosen her pale lips and mutter those words.

Rem: “Am I…? I guess so. I was able to have a very valuable day off yesterday. It also caused trouble for Nee-sama…”

Ram: "…Did you rest thoroughly?"

Ram enquired her about her day with brief words.

In response, Rem thinks about yesterday. She remembered the dinner with Ram and Roswaal's collaborated meal. She remembered when the clothes were drying when Beatrice slept in the sun, along with Puck who was sent flying by a sudden gust of wind. She remembered Emilia, who broke a vase in the middle of cleaning and then wandered around while looking like she was about to cry. And then she remembered walking with Subaru on the mountain road, along with the words they exchanged.

—Every one of those memories gave Rem an obvious answer to present.

Rem: "Yes, Nee-sama. I had the world's happiest day off yesterday."

Ram: "—I see. That's good then."

In response to Rem answering with a smile, Ram closed her eyes and then nodded with a satisfied look. It was a facial expression that even Rem couldn't see readily; it was Ram's facial expression of feeling at peace from the bottom of her heart.

She quietly turns her eyes towards the window, looking outside with that calm face. Then

Ram: "Barusu makes some useful suggestions too, huh."

Rem: "Yess. Subaru-kun is amazing. You think so too, right Nee-sama?"

Ram: "An expectation like that has made me reconsider my words."

Rem's dishonest sister's reply made her give a childish pout. A gesture like this was something that Rem only showed in front of Ram, although now it was specially increased with another person.

Ram was finished changing into her clothes. She took a pose in front of the mirror and Rem gave an applause. And from there, when they were leaving the passage with just the two of them, Subaru came along at the exact same time while yawning and walking in the corridor.

They took notice of Subaru and then he stifled his yawning with a smile as he raised his hand.

Subaru: “Good morning you two…Why is Nee-sama glaring at me in the morning?”

Ram: “You don’t know? A woman makes a face like this when she finds a dark grey corpse in the morning.”

Subaru: “I don’t want to think of that as the answer to my question!”

It seemed that the conversation they had in the room was being prolonged. Ram was cold to Subaru from the beginning of this morning. Moreover, while holding a wry smile, Rem made a decision to at least have herself treat Subaru nicely.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, please don’t worry about it. Nee-sama is just a little frank.”

Subaru: “That doesn’t act as a follow up with how I was treated as a dark gray corpse.”

It failed for some reason.

There would occasionally be times when Rem’s attempts to show concern didn’t go well. When this happened, she would tilt her head.

Anyhow, Subaru sighed deeply, put aside the shock from just now, and looked at Rem.

Subaru: “By the way Rem, recapping on yesterday, did you enjoy your rest on your sudden day off?”

Rem: “Thanks to Subaru-kun, yes of course I did.”

Ram: “Tsche.”

Subaru: “Nee-sama, you clicked your tongue right now, didn’t you?”

Subaru glared at Ram’s face from the side as she turned away. Rem was satisfied from having found even greater joy while Ram was feeling jealous about their intimacy.

Subaru: “Well Rem being able to smile while looking like she’s enjoying herself is what matters the most.”

Rem, who had loosened her cheeks, spontaneously takes notice of Subaru, and Subaru also let out a smile while scratching his cheek, looking as if he was embarrassed.

Subaru: “So Rem, you only had yesterday as a day to think about it, but did you think about your reward? There’s no way you’re going to tell me something like you had tons of things to do even while resting from everything on your day off, right?”

Rem: “I won’t say that. But as for my reward, I’ve already received it.”

Subaru: “Eh, seriously? I didn’t hear about this. Ros-chi, that bastard. That’s cold of him.”

Puzzling over the matter, Subaru pouted his lips at the head of the household who wasn’t there. However, it was a simple misunderstanding. It was a terrible false accusation towards Roswaal.

Because after all, Rem’s reward was none other than Subaru’s suggestion itself—something that was enough to accept for her.

—Everyone in the mansion showed concern for Rem and worked together, with no compensation, in order to come up with a solution for the one day off. Everyone made her feel her own worth. There’s no way that there was any reward greater than her coming to understand that reality. Thus,

Rem: “—I’ll do my best with my work today too.”

Rem said that, showing a smile to the two people she cared about—a smile that was more charming than usual.

END

The Day I Gave up on Being a Following Star

1

In this world, nations are arranged in a single continuous continent, making up the four countries called the Great Nations.

With their territory in the east, west, south, and north, and while there are various other smaller countries, they are treated as nothing more than vassal states under the protection of one of the Great Nations.

The relative power of the four Great Nations is held in a delicate balance, and except for the newly-emerged nation of Kararagi, this stalemate has not changed significantly in nearly a thousand years.

In the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko in the north, severe cold combines with steep mountains, and for both men and beasts, it is a nation that requires harsh strength. Snow falls throughout the year, and all but a few of its products are made to endure the cold. In exchange, cattle breeding, the veins of magic ore that sleep in the steep mountains, mining and handling magic ore preserve the nation's strength.

As well, the peak of the sacred mountain Pardochia is taught to be one of the dwellings of the Four Great Spirits, reigned over by the Holy Beast Odglass who holds enormous power.

At the founding of the Holy Kingdom Gusteko, Odglass gave the name "Holy King" and exchanged a contract with a spirit arts user who followed her, and since then has always been involved in choosing the "Holy King" who is the head of the nation.

The "Holy King" who leads the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko is determined, regardless of bloodline or origin, by being chosen by the Holy Beast Odglass from one elected out of the citizens to lead the next generation.

The city-state of Kararagi in the west is, compared to the other three Great Nations, a newly-emerged nation with a short history.

Until roughly four hundred years ago, the western portion of the continent looked like a powder keg of several small nations angrily eyeing each other. There was little difference in national power between any of the small nations, and, each fearing being ganged up on by the others, an unproductive era of being wary of each other continued for a long time.

The one who put a stop to that situation was a common merchant who called himself Hoshin.

Hoshin, of uncertain identity and origin, rose in the world simply through his words and business talent and imagination, and in the end, he beat down the small countries that had antagonized each other with military force, using the magic called economic might. Not belonging to any nation, his devilish tactics nevertheless meant that there were people at the center of every nation with connections to Hoshin.

As a result, many small countries bowed before Hoshin, their position as nations was altered to being cities, and the city-state of Kararagi was born with Hoshin being the representative for all cities.

Since then, Hoshin's name became a word referring to rising to prominence, and even after Hoshin's death, many talented people have gathered to walk in the footsteps he left. As well, the city-state of Kararagi was formed into a strong country that the other three Great Nations could not easily meddle with.

The southern Empire of Vollachia holds the oldest history, and with the long-held reasoning of "Wealthy country, strong army", the nation has continued being led by it's emperor.

Reigning from the pinnacle, the emperor holds absolute authority, and the government of the empire is all managed by the emperor.

That arrangement hasn't changed since the founding of the country, and the reason that the empire hasn't collapsed due to a foolish ruler is the sublime law concerning the change of rulership.

The custom is that while he holds the throne, the emperor produces children in all parts of the country, and those children contend for the position of next emperor. To a candidate for the position of emperor, failure means death, and passing through this gruesome process which concentrates the world's hatred and ugliness, a single person is chosen as the next emperor.

An attitude of respect towards this national character has filtered down to the citizens as well, and the imperial doctrine of accepting the supremacy of the powerful and a powerful emperor, is widely thought of as the natural state of affairs.

There is some interaction with other countries, but being blessed with fertile lands and a stable climate, the country is basically able to sustain itself from within, and contact with the outside is not looked on favorably. Instead, they continually embrace the ambition to expand their territory, and their ancient conflict with Lugunica has continued without ceasing.

Hence, in the southwest part of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, the Barrielle domain was continually exposed to a sense of peril.

2

"If you can believe it, I've heard that his Lordship has taken a new wife."

To the inhabitants of the Barielle domain, it was nothing more than a sarcastic topic exchanged during a break from working in the fields.

In regards to Baron Leip Barielle who managed their domain, the opinion of the local citizens wasn't that good. Actually, it would be better to say they held a poor opinion of him.

Taxes and local laws that were lacking in consideration for the citizens. Not only was it far from being an approach that would produce friendship, it was difficult to expect people to feel goodwill towards an authority figure who seldom even showed his face.

With that much of a gap formed between the minds of the lord and the citizens, it wasn't impossible for that to become the seed of a rebellion. In truth, several had been attempted in the last ten years.

However, for a lord that didn't pay sufficient attention to the good intentions of his citizens, he never failed to be wary of their bad intentions. As a result, the attempts were crushed along with cruel demonstrations, and relations worsened by the day.

Because of that, while the lord's announcement would normally be celebrated, to the citizens, it was no concern of theirs. With the baron already advanced in years, taking a second wife at his age didn't arouse their interest.

Doubtless this second wife or whatever would simply make off with most of the fruits of their labor, and prove to be a demon who would leave them only enough supplies to survive on.

The end of lord Liep's lifespan, and the fall of the heirless house of Barielle.

These were the only hopes of the local citizens as they lived day to day, and their first evaluation of her.

Their first evaluation before seeing the red woman known as Priscilla Barielle.

"Huh. What a dreary place, and such lifeless expressions."

That was the first thing she said, while looking over the best field in the village and it's owner.

A voice filled with contempt, and words spoken by one looking down from far above. Many who looked up felt anger that was difficult to endure, but were left speechless the moment they saw her.

Standing there was a red woman.

Her orange hair looked like a reflection of the rays of the sun and was gathered with a barrette, and her more-than-voluptuous body was wrapped in a crimson dress that exposed it generously. Her lightly-colored lips broke into a scarlet smile, and her eyes blazed red as they gazed back at those looking at her.

Even the fan she had chosen to cool herself with was red, so from top to bottom, she was a crimson woman.

From that sort of visual attack, it was clear at a glance that she was someone of high standing, but despite that, everyone still forgot to react.

In addition to the rest, to an extent sufficient to erase the impression given by her outlandish clothing, the red woman was beautiful.

Everyone there, man or woman, couldn't help but tremble at the beauty before their eyes.

"Why are you staring at me with those pathetic eyes? Is that not disrespectful, you lowly imbeciles?"

However, that feeling, too, was completely overridden by the woman's ongoing derisive comments. They had been slow to recognize her contempt, and though the people all held anger in their eyes, they hid it inside and lowered their heads.

The red woman's words were humiliating insults. But, simply by looking at her they could tell that her station in life was completely different from theirs. In other words, there was nothing to be gained by trying to oppose her. Just as they normally did, in the face of unfairness or discontent, they hung down their heads; waiting for the storm to pass was the best plan.

"Oh, I see. Long years of resignation have entirely stolen away your backbone, and turned you all timid, then. That means the old man must be quite a noble, then. I see he is quite good at being oppressive."

"Y… you seem to be a noble. What brings you to this village today…?"

As she looked over the downcast faces of the locals with an expression of comprehension, she was resolutely addressed by the field's owner.

As the owner of the best field and land in the village, even if it wasn't much of a contest, he was the village representative. No one else here was suited to asking the business of a noble.

"Do not be in such a hurry, commoner. It is expected that you would be surprised when a beauty like myself visits suddenly, but I do what I want however I want, and I will not let anyone rush me. You should be grateful for your unexpected good fortune. Just carry on glancing at my fair form from the corner of your eyes, and forget the passage of time."

Bringing her face close to the owner's, the red woman spoke seductively to him close enough that he could feel her breath. At that, the owner backed away, visibly flustered. He could hardly be blamed for that.

Between the owner and the red woman, the difference in age was like a parent and child, but the intense charm she was unleashing was enough to make him forget the difference in years and make a man think of a woman. To call it bewitching would be appropriate.

"Hmm, hmm… Oh, I see."

After unsettling the owner, the woman looked over the nearby fields as though she owned them.

While that was going on, the locals had their hands full stealing glances at her from the corner of their eyes, just as she'd said. They had no motivation to resume working in the fields and be complained at further, but no one even thought to do so.

To do something different than everyone else, and draw the attention of the red woman, was something they all feared.

"Hmm, yes. First here and here, then I suppose those two over there will do. There is little difference between any of them, so you should see it as your good fortune that they caught my fancy."

After briefly looking over the nearby fields, the woman nodded with a satisfied expression.

Looking sharply at the owner, she grinned to see him trembling. In spite of that smile being something that made one think of malice, it was too beautiful to look away from.

“You there, commoner. You own the largest field in the village, do you not?”

“Um, yes. That’s correct.”

“I can tell from looking at your field. It’s terrible, but the land is extensive, at least. Like an old, rotten tree, you hold ambitions unsuited to the limits of your form, much like a certain lord I might mention.”

The inhabitants there slowly realized that those words, filled with contempt and mockery, were directed at none other than Leip, and their faces went pale at the disrespect.

To the domain’s inhabitants, the lord was one who looked down on them from above. To them who had become completely accepting of that idea, the thought that the red woman held an even higher position than their lord never entered their minds. In truth, that would have been overthinking it.

“Well, your field will do. It is a perfectly good stepping stone to use as a basis for comparison. The owner of the good fortune of having my influence bestowed on him will be someone else. The owner of those four meager fields across the road.”

The woman was pointing at fields that, compared to the land of the large field owner, were withered wastelands. Just like the fields, their owners also looked weakly, and their entire household seemed to be getting by day to day supported by the kindness of the other villagers.

As that villager came forward and gave his names, the red woman’s eyes were colored with a bitterly cruel emotion.

It was largely with feelings of disdain, hatred, and complete viciousness that she looked down on him.

“Well, whatever. When you give water to parched grass, anyone can see the change.”

As the inhabitants stiffened as though shot, the woman looked away in boredom. Then she pointed to the parched field, and quietly said something to the man.

The voice whispered into his ear reached only him, and those around them didn't know what kind of unreasonable demand she was making of him. They simply felt pity for him as he nodded his head like a doll.

And when she finished whispering, the woman folded her arms with a satisfied expression. Her abundant breasts shook greatly over her folded arms, and the women looked askance at the men as they couldn't help groaning.

"I forgot to say, I am Priscilla Barielle. The new baroness of all the Barielle lands around here. Let those who are not here know as well. That I am generously forgiving rudeness like that of today, will only happen on this day when ignorance and blindness can be forgiven."

And the woman departed, leaving words that caused the villagers despair as they returned to themselves.

Afterwards, the locals realized that the person calling herself Priscilla Barielle was the new second wife that Baron Leip Barielle had taken. They didn't understand why she would have come to see the domain without any escort, but her insolent arrogance brought Leip's tyranny to mind.

As well, the fact that she was a young woman led them to despair, as it crushed their hope of Leip's age leading to his removal from his position.

It meant that they would suffer under the same cruel rulership as Leip, long into the future.

All of them held that sort of unease and fear about Priscilla's visit, and then they forgot that one month later.

…Because, in the field of the man Priscilla had selected, an impossibly abundant harvest appeared.

3

“Not sure what to say; honestly, that was unexpected. To see them get so attached to you, princess.”

The voice was carefree, but a little muffled and thus hard to hear.

The voice being overlapped with the rasping sound of metals brushing against each other, and it being muffled, were from the same cause—the head of the voice’s owner was completely covered by a pitch-black steel helmet, and he had a habit of playing with it’s joints as he spoke.

He was a person with a terribly unusual outfit; you might even call it outlandish.

His head was covered with a black steel helmet, just as was mentioned earlier, but he was protected by it’s strong defense only from his neck upwards. His well-toned body was covered in rough clothing like that of a bandit, and his feet were, oddly enough, wearing boots woven from leather. A shabby cloth hung from his shoulders and covered his neck, and a rough, wide-bladed sword peeked out from behind his back, hanging horizontally.

In every sense it was a collection of weird features, but there was one spot that stood out more than all the rest.

…The helmeted man’s left arm was missing below the shoulder.

The man, who had a particular loss to go along with his outlandish outfit, projected an abnormal presence simply standing there. Even more so standing next to the red woman—Priscilla Barielle.

“And what do you mean by unexpected? Behold my beauty, which exceeds human understanding. Like baby birds long to be fed, It’s entirely natural that the commoners should worship me, Al.”

“It was just something I’d imagined on my own, but still. Here I always thought you were the type who wouldn’t do anything to put more fish in the pond, princess.”

“Then there would be no reason for me to welcome you. Do you not agree?”

“Now that you say it, that’s true. I guess I was mixed up.”

Accepting Priscilla’s words without complaint, the helmeted man—Al—scratched the top of his helmet with his thick right arm. He looked around at his surroundings as though curious, but his expression and mood could not be seen.

For her part, Priscilla had no reaction to her attendant’s attitude. As she continued pressing forward at a steady pace, the people around her spoke up as they noticed her.

“Ah, it’s Priscilla-sama!” “It’s the dear concubine princess!” “Long live the Sun Princess!”

As one of them noticed her, many others reacted to their raised voice and came rushing out of their houses. The villagers, all with cheerful faces, unanimously honored and praised Priscilla.

“Mhmm. Very good. You should exert yourselves unfailingly, commoners. As long as you continue to bow before my glory and follow me, I would not be so cruel as to deprive you of my compassion. Be sure not to neglect that in the future.”

Priscilla’s words weren’t said to anyone in particular, so much as to everyone there who cheering for her.

It certainly wasn’t a loud voice, but her voice had the power to penetrate and reach everywhere. At the arrogance of those powerful words, Al couldn’t help but cringe, but,

“Understood!” “If it’s for Priscilla-sama!” “Long live the Sun Princess!”

not only did the villagers not take it poorly, they readily accepted her prideful speech.

Al could only shake his head at the discrepancy between his impression of his lady’s character, and the attitude of the locals.

It was only a few days ago that the helmeted man, Al, had been recognized as Priscilla's knight. Suddenly finding herself needing to choose a knight, Priscilla held a gladiatorial contest to meet that need while prioritizing her own preferences.

The approach of searching for a knight for a baroness, without regard for one's origins, led to a great number signing up, and it became a truly successful contest. There, Al was judged worthy in Priscilla's eyes, and was the man who gained the position of knight.

Their relationship was still too new, and the bonds too thin, to call them lord and attendant. During the time he'd been allowed to stay at her side, Al had been observing her carefully, but she was still a mystery to him.

Though she appeared thoughtful, she would immediately put her impulses into action. One might think that she was approachable for the locals, but then one would suddenly see an expression on her face cruel enough to freeze your blood. Even her limbs that seemed so full of femininity had a viciousness that had taken him off guard, stolen his sword, and came within a hair's breadth of sending his head flying.

As a result, even after spending several days together, his current impression was that he knew nothing about his liege.

"Look here, Al. Why are you just standing there? The commoners are terribly curious about you. Who is that very rare sort of a man standing next to a beautiful maiden like myself, they wonder."

"So why don't you explain it to them, princess?"

"Watch how you speak, Al. Even I do not know how many more times I can overlook your boorish behavior because it's amusing. You should take care not to displease me needlessly."

Just when his opinion of her had been improving a little, this happens. The good mood that had been showing on her face until a second ago had changed in the briefest of moments into the eyes of one looking at trash.

"Ah, sorry, that was my fault. Now that you mention it, what kind of attendant passes off the trouble of introductions onto their master? Sorry, sorry, forgive me chonmage.”

“Very well. I forgive you. However, I’ll have you tell me later what you mean by chonmage.”

The unexpected phrase seemed to have succeeded, allowing Al to narrowly escape the signs of Priscilla’s displeasure. Holding a hand to his chest in relief after having confirmed that, Al explained his position to the locals—regaling them with the story of how he came to serve Priscilla, full of humor and the occasional exaggeration.

4

“Priscilla-sama is a wonderful person. To me, she’s the goddess that saved me, oh yes, indeed.”

That was the response to Al’s question from the boy who had nervously brewed tea, clearly not familiar with doing so. His peculiar wording might have been an attempt to curry favor.

The location was the Barielle manor’s lounge. Casually seated on a very comfortable sofa, Al was enjoying his break time to the fullest.

“You’re really fond of the princess, so I thought you might say something like that, Schult-chan.”

Suppressing a chuckle at the boy’s response, Al lifted the offered cup of tea. Then, slightly lifting his head, he deftly brought the drink to the gap that formed under his helmet.

Never removing his helm, and never showing his real face was Al’s consistent behavior. Being one-armed on top of not removing his helmet meant that his eating habits were rather impolite. Since it was impossible to lift his helmet with one hand while eating, he necessarily ate in much the same way as he drank the tea.

“Do my manners… does my impoliteness bother you?”

Noticing the boy standing still and looking at him, Al asked that in a low voice while putting down his cup. Schult held his breath slightly at the question.

He was a thin boy. His skin was white, and his peach-colored hair was distinctive. His crimson eyes were not very assertive, and he gave such a delicate impression that some who looked at him mistook him for a girl. He was perhaps twelve or thirteen years old, but his body didn't look developed enough for that; he appeared only around ten years of age.

The boy who could easily be called a child was wearing a servant's outfit in black, and imitating a butler. Some people would likely find his appearance more pitiful than amusing. In truth, Al found it somewhat painful to look at Schult trying to stretch beyond his limits.

"I haven't got any education. Please overlook my lack of knowledge about proper manners. You get it, right?"

Folding his legs rudely on top of the chair, Al deliberately demonstrated his rough behavior. At that, Schult shook his head side to side while watching him.

"I, too, am uneducated, the same as Al-sama, oh yes, indeed. So, I don't feel that I'm sufficiently refined to complain about Al-sama's behavior."

"Honesty is a virtue, and being straightforward is the privilege of children. I think you're starting to get the look down, but what you've got inside isn't there yet. How long has it been since you came here, Schult-senpai?"

"Since I was rescued by Priscilla-sama, it's been just three months, oh yes, indeed."

Schult didn't even respond to the irony of being called senpai. Perhaps it was cruel to expect an orphan who grew up in a farming village to understand.

This boy butler Schult was an orphan that Priscilla brought back from a farm village in the domain.

When Priscilla brought the thin, starved boy back with her, saying things like "If you polish him, he'll shine," it seems that the mansion's master Leip was seriously furious, but apparently Priscilla paid him no mind.

Just like that, Schult, protected by the good fortune of having caught Priscilla's eye, was guaranteed food, clothing, and shelter, and the boy was remade into a butler.

“It's hard to say if catching the princess' eye is good luck or bad luck, though.”

“I'm very grateful to Priscilla-sama for being kind enough to rescue me, oh yes, indeed. If I'd continued to stay in the village, I'd have been dead and buried by now, after all.”

“That's a cute picture, yep. Things like that make me feel more and more like I don't know what the princess is thinking, and make me wonder just what kinda person she is.”

Her attitude seemed like one that would never be charitable, and yet she saved an orphan. On the other hand, she didn't extend her hand to everyone, and he had no idea what reason she had to take him in.

Was Priscilla actually the goddess that the locals and Schult believed her to be? Or was she a cruel witch that occasionally sent chills down Al's spine?

“Witch. A witch, indeed…”

Speaking aloud the word he'd thought of himself, he couldn't help but smile at the cliche.

The word ‘witch’ that was known as a taboo in this world. Al himself knew all too well how much of a menace was referred to by that word.

“Al-sama, you…”

“Hm?”

As Al was lost in thought, Schult unexpectedly called to him with an unsettled look in his eyes.

The gesture of holding the silver serving tray to his chest was terribly feminine and out of place.

“It’s correct that you have become Priscilla-sama’s knight, yes, indeed? You protect her. I can trust that you are her ally, can’t I?”

As Schult questioned him seeking reassurance, Al closed his eyes inside his helmet.

As a way of calming the fear in his heart, the boy was looking for powerful words from Al. However,

“When you ask like that, whether I’m her ally or I’m plotting something, of course I’m going to cheerfully reply “Yeah, leave it to me. I’m the princess’ amazing, strongest knight!”. As a question, it’s not really appropriate, ya see. Sorry, please try again.”

He could tell that Schult had been hurt by his response.

Despite that, looking at that expression didn’t cause any regret to stir in Al’s heart.

In betraying the pure look directed at him by the boy, Al didn’t hesitate for a moment. For the sake of his goal, he discards everything else. In a sense, certain sacrifices were necessary for achieving his wish.

Repeating the same mistake again and again, as he had in the past, that alone absolutely could not be allowed, after all.

“…What is this? I was wondering where you’d gotten to, and you are holding a gloomy tea party in a place like this?”

In the lounge that had fallen into silence, a beautiful voice that looked down on them from the sky intruded suddenly.

Violently opening the door without knocking, the lady of the mansion pushed inside while swinging the sleeves of her elegant dress. Folding her arms as though trying to lift her abundant chest, she closed one eye, and spoke.

“Schult. Your only role as an attache is to be there when I wish it.

Missing that opportunity in a place like this is inexcusable. Spending time with an eccentric like Al is even worse. For someone like you whose only merit is cuteness, if his messiness where to infect you as well, it would simply be too much.”

“Saying that’s his only merit; you speak way more directly than I do, princess.”

“It is a fact, and when I state it it becomes an even stronger truth. What other value does Schult have at this time? Even then, compared to the other worthless commoners, he is at least a little better. It will be necessary to take away even that merit if he continues to betray my expectations, of course.”

Looking over the pair that had been conversing in the lounge, Priscilla sniffed dismissively and derided them. Al couldn’t help but give a prideful wry smile, but Schult’s face went pale.

“I… I’ll work harder, oh yes, indeed! So… so please… don’t abandon me…”

“Do not cry and cling to me, it is unbecoming. I can adore even your crying face, but relying on that pity from the start is the height of folly. I do not need a common person as my attache. Continue to show me your value.”

After Priscilla cut off his trembling speech, Schult hurriedly wiped his eyes with his sleeve. His eyes were slightly reddened, but Priscilla nodded at him as he earnestly raised his head.

“That will do. If they lack the backbone to change the way they stand, then the likes of you are no better than corpses. Corpses can become fertilizer if they return to the earth, but if they stay atop the earth while being no different from the dead, nothing good comes of it. I will not have you wasting my air. Take every breath as though it were your last.”

“That’s a bit much… If Schult puts that much effort into breathing, he’ll die of stress, y’know?”

Gently reproving Schult as he started breathing with a determined look, Al shrugged his shoulders at Priscilla.

“Princess, you’re dealing with a kid. I think it’d be alright to have a bit more care and compassion.”

“The uncertainty of the world rains down on everyone, adult or child, man or woman. Do hunger and starvation differentiate between the great and small? Does the curse of the plague discriminate based on social standing? All who live are equals. It is not as though we are held in an cage of iron bars, and thus trying to gain peace by letting another determine how you live is simply negligence.”

“Princess?”

As Priscilla spoke those stern words, irritation bubbled to the surface of her beautiful face. Al couldn’t help but take it that the irritation was related to the latter part of what she had just said.

Before he could figure out the source of it, though, Priscilla’s expression changed.

“All that live are equal. …Of course, that does not include myself.”

“Princess…”

smile. As she grinned, Priscilla concluded by saying that with the world’s coldest smile.

It was the mantra Al had heard her repeat countless times since he began serving as her knight.

“…This world is designed to operate in the way that works best for me.”

That was the basis of Priscilla’s confidence, and the words which most defined her existence.

Words that it would be only natural to laugh at, but somehow they had a magic that couldn’t be laughed off.

“Come now, Schult. It is exactly as I just said. Everything in this world is for my convenience…If so, what would be most convenient for me, as I am thirsty?”

“Ah… yes. I’ll pour some tea right away, oh yes, indeed!”

“Imbecile. The contents of that teapot have already cooled. And if you are trying to tell me to drink Al’s leftover tea, it goes beyond rudeness into rebellion. I’ll have your head removed.”

“Please, anything but that! I’ll go brew more right away, oh yes, indeed!”

Cradling the pot in his arms, Schult fled from the lounge.

While listening to the small footsteps fade into the distance, Al smirked at Priscilla and shrugged,

“Princess, you really are mean.”

“A butler who can calmly do the job is fine, but having one who rushes about flustered like a child is amusing as well. If they were looking for a proper waiter, who would go to the trouble of picking up an orphan? I will allow Schult the honor of relieving my boredom now and then.”

“He’s got it rough, too… Just by having the princess’ attention.”

“And what is rough about it? He can speak with me, and is even able to serve me regularly. This much good fortune is an honor that the men of the world would cry tears of blood for, and want so badly they could taste it. There could not be another child as fortunate as that.”

While justifying treating Schult roughly, Priscilla was implying that she sought the same degree of gratitude from Al as well.

Al responded to that greedy look with a noncommittal “Yeah, yeah.”.

“Such a rude man. It seems that you have forgotten that you nearly lost your head at my whim. …Well, fine. So now, Al.”

"What is it, princess?"

"…How is your plotting coming along?"

At that chilly voice, Al held is breath and looked at Priscilla.

There was no mistake that she had chased off Schult, and waited until no one else was around to bring up the topic. To have a bomb dropped in the middle of a casual conversation like that was a surprise like being hit by an actual nearby blast.

If he hadn't been simulating a flow of events like that ahead of time, he'd probably have been caught off-guard.

"It's not really anything so grand as plotting. For now it's just purely getting a good look at things. So you'd noticed that I was quietly sniffing around, then?"

"My eyes and ears and all of myself are not only more beautiful than the ordinary people, they are more capable as well. Not only that, but this is my domain and my garden. If I wish to listen for the footsteps of a mouse or the wingbeats of a bug, they will reach me."

"If you go treating everything like it's yours, your husband Grandpa Leip will cry."

"If I make an old man like that cry, or wither away, it matters little. I don't care in the least."

It was a relationship where one didn't expect the couple to love each other dearly, but for it to be this harsh was regrettable. However, now was not the time to be worried about the future of the local dysfunctional couple.

"If yer upset with me crawling around, then what'll ya do? Am I gonna get beaten with a whip, then?"

There was no reason for the punishment to be that light, but being thought of as rebellious was problematic, too. In the worst case, he would have to consider the option of using his trump card against Priscilla, but…

“Upset? I’m not going to throw a tantrum over you simply wandering around the house. Really, at the point that I invited a brigand like yourself inside, this sort of trifle was expected.”

However, that wariness was show to be off the mark by Priscilla’s unexpected reply.

“…Yer… really ok with that?”

“For a man to sniff, and desperately follow my lingering scent is the natural way of things. I’m not so inconsiderate as to blame a man for following his nature and being swayed by my charm. Also…”

As Al stood bewildered, Priscilla glanced sidelong at him with enough seductiveness to leave him senseless.

“People in uncertain positions like yours can’t survive without trying to find a safe harbor. If I were to blame you for looking to the left and right to be certain of things, it would be as foolish as telling a bird not to fly.”

“…”

“A mercenary swordsman who I have known only a few days. To believe that he has already given me his loyalty with all his heart… to believe that would be the foolishness of a dreamer. It would be a tremendous show of unreason.”

As Priscilla ended her annoyed speech, Al softly let go of the wariness that had been controlling his body.

At the very least, there were no lies in what she had just said. Since she’d thought about it enough to come to that conclusion.

“…Here I was so sure you’d say ‘Comparing myself with others is disrespectful. All the lot of you need to do is look at me and have your vision stolen away by my glory.’”

“None fear turning the eyes of others away from themselves more than those with no belief in themselves. I have every confidence that I am the greatest in the world. Hence, that sort of anxiety has no hold on me.”

Pulling a folding fan from her cleavage, and opening it with a snap, she continued “Also”,

“There is no doubt that I am the most beautiful gem in the world, but that one is superior is only understood properly when there are other jewels to be compared to. In order to grasp how wonderful I am, it’s necessary to compare me to the ordinary masses. Your walking about, too, in the end is nothing other than a roundabout compliment that confirms my greatness. What do you think, is that not a masterpiece?”

“…Yeah, that’s a masterpiece.”

Despite concealing her mouth with the opened fan, Priscilla couldn’t completely conceal her smile. As she spoke of her own unbridled arrogance, Al paused a moment, and agreed.

Priscilla didn’t point out that faint hesitation. She understood that it would be meaningless to do so.

And Al was shaken, to the extent that he didn’t grasp Priscilla’s understanding.

It was a shock. One that made him feel as though he had been struck in the head.

The girl standing before his eyes, barely of age herself, looked like something other than what she had before.

What on earth did she resemble…?

“Priscilla-sama! My apologies for taking so long, oh yes, indeed! I’ve brewed more tea!”

“Too slow!!”

Before he could find the answer he was thinking deeply about, Schult opened the door and came flying into the room.

Priscilla’s angry voice greeted him, and Schult fearfully set out the tea with unsteady hands. Priscilla sat down on the empty sofa next to him, brazenly crossed her white legs and waited.

And while gazing at his terribly unguarded mistress and the red-faced boy butler, Al sank again into deep thought.

5

Al grimaced in an unseen scowl at the smell wafting through his helmet.

This was the second time he had come in to the study, and it evoked the same emotions as before.

The bad air of a room with insufficient ventilation, and the unique smell of antique books. He thought that he'd become used to the combination, but when the smell of cologne used by someone trying to hide their body odor was mingled with the incompletely-hidden smell of the master of that room, it was another story.

As a result, the study had an air that people hesitated to enter without need.

"You're late."

With his enthusiasm already whittled away by the foul smell that greeted him, Al was further disheartened by that joyless voice. He'd been reluctant to move his feet this direction from the start, and now his motivation had fallen below zero. If the one he was meeting was one that would forgive rudeness, he'd have long ago escaped through the door behind him.

However, the person before his eyes was not so lenient as to forgive such an action as humorous.

"You're late."

The repeated rebuke, entirely unchanged from earlier. The hoarse voice conveyed contempt and insult, and sought an commensurate response from the disheartened Al.

Not content simply with blaming him, it would not be satisfied without crushing his will. Such a heartless man.

"You're l…"

“I’m terribly sorry. What with the mansion being so vast, when I’m summoned suddenly, I end up checking here and there all over the place. Were you saying something just now?”

Deliberately speaking over top of the third rebuke, he was rewarded with an ‘tsk’ full of undisguised ill humor.

Somewhat more relaxed after that reaction, Al once again looked squarely at the master of the study.

He was an old man seated at an ebony desk, with the room’s bookshelves to his left and right. He’d been told his age was close to seventy, but his energetic body held the youth of someone in their fifties. His expression, and his ambition-filled eyes, lent themselves to that impression, and his unbowed back and honed build also made him look like quite an individual.

In opposition to that appearance, however, his harsh, self-centered, arrogant personality was a fatal flaw.

The old man's name was Leip Barielle. The lord of the Barielle Barony, and master of the Barielle manor who had taken the Red Woman, Priscilla, as a wife. In formal terms, as the companion of the one that Al had offered his sword to, this was someone that he should respect.

In truth, Al didn't think of him as the least bit worthy of that respect.

"It seems you are accompanying 'that woman', wandering about the domain daily."

"When you say 'that'…?"

"…tsk. 'That woman' means 'that woman'. My wife, Priscilla, of course!"

"Indeed. Oh, I just wanted to be sure. My mother taught me that when they stop calling each other by name, it's proof that the love of a couple is growing cold."

As Liep grew irate, Al gave an appropriate answer, while sticking out his tongue on the inside.

"I hear you're a gladiator, but do you have any memory of your parents?"

"Hey, it's not like all of the gladiators in Vollachia are thrown into the arena right after they're born. There's actually a lot more thrown in there that got into debt after growing up, or who were criminals. Well, the end result is that you end up getting cut apart by someone your age who fought their way up from the bottom."

"Hmmf. It seems like just the sort of scenery the savages in the empire would like. I can just imagine their poor taste."

It was a rare occurrence, but Al found himself agreeing with the prejudice that Leip spat out.

His days as a gladiator were something that, honestly, he didn't like to recall.

Fighting with his life on the line in the battles held seemingly every day, competing for glory or testing his strength didn't agree with Al's nature. Having barely escaped with his life, he was now able to spend his days like this, in relaxation.

"Well, enough about you for now. It's about Priscilla. What do you think about how 'that woman' is wandering about the domain every day, doing as she pleases?"

"She's quite an inquisitive one, is what I think. She's a little different from the image… ah, the way I thought someone connected to a lord would spend their time, yes. She does seem to get a great reception from the locals, though."

"A great reception, is it? Hmmf, they're simply curious about her. It just happened that 'that woman's whim and sudden idea brought bounty to a field. Just with that, the peasants are treating 'that woman' like the god-dragon. I understand it well enough, but there are limits to that sort of nonsense!"

As he slammed his fist into the desk, Leip was grinding his teeth in anger.

It was likely her popularity with the locals that had set off his mood. Al, who was accompanying Priscilla day after day and travelling around the domain, could imagine that much. Setting aside the matter of Priscilla, Leip's reputation in the various villages was poor; to the extent it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it rock-bottom.

'He couldn't have been called me here to listen to him whine, could he?', thought Al in disbelief.

"Not that I'm trying to stand up for the princess, but the incident with the field might not have been a spur-of-the-moment thing. No matter which village we head to, the princess always produces the same result. Everywhere, no matter the condition of the soil. Well, I agree it's hard to believe she has that kind of discernment."

"It's foolishness to think it's discernment. What 'that woman' brings is something more repulsive. If not for that, why do you think she's rumored to be 'The Bloody Bride'?"

Al had shrugged his shoulders, but when he heard the alias that Leip mentioned, he stopped moving.

At that reaction, Leip showed the ugly smile of one who has finally gained what he sought.

"The Bloody Bride" was a derogatory name that followed Priscilla, who now went by the Barielle family name.

Priscilla was a maiden of not yet twenty years of age, but though she was now Leip's wife, it wasn't her first marriage. It was her eighth.

Also, of the seven in the past, every one of those marriages had failed. The cause was the death of her companion—in other words, Priscilla had piled up the experience of being separated from seven husbands by death.

Her companions' deaths, in war, from illness, or by accident, were not from a single cause, and while Priscilla had been suspected of involvement in all their deaths, nothing had come of those suspicions as she made her way to where she was today.

As a result, her existence was famous, amongst those who knew of her, as the "Bloody Bride" who brings ill fortune. The reason that men continued to seek for her despite this, was that Priscilla was beautiful enough to make them forget the rumors of bad luck. That, too, was ironic.

However, Al didn't think that Leip fit into that pattern.

One reason was that he was an old man who's lust had long since dried up, but more than anything was that Leip was not crazed and blinded by Priscilla's charm. That was clear from the way he avoided her, and his bearing just now.

In other words, the old man had some other goal in marrying Priscilla.

And that reason was…

“If she wasn’t a candidate for the upcoming Royal Selection, who would take in a trickster-woman like that? She thinks she can get away with anything just because she’s got a nice face. That event where she made you her knight was more of the same, wasn’t it.”

“…I must say, you’re speaking quite bluntly. Don’t you worry that I might pass this on to the princess, and sour your relations?”

Not only speaking crudely, Leip revealed his crude motives without hesitation.

The Royal Selection—the great event that was rocking the Kingdom of Lugunica. In place of the royal family that had been wiped out by illness, the dragon that would choose the new king had brought about the trial that would open the way to the future. Leip was the man entrusted with the care of the prophecy plates where the future of the kingdom was written, so he held information about the Royal Selection even before the royal family was sick.

And striking quickly, taking Priscilla (who was eligible to be a royal candidate) as his wife, he intended to grasp power over the entire country by placing her on the throne.

It was an obvious plot, and a conclusion that anyone who knew Leip could come to. But, to hear the man himself speak so openly of it. Did he not imagine the possibility that Al, in a show of loyalty, might draw his sword for Priscilla here?

Looking at Al as he sat shocked, Leip let an ugly smile twist his mouth.

“You wouldn’t do anything so foolish, I hope? Nothing befits a mercenary more than ruthlessly seeking his own benefit. You who were raised as a gladiator would never throw your life away for a cheap emotion like indignation.”

“…You understand that quite well.”

Moving the hand that had been touching his sword hilt, he feigned non-hostility.

“However, in that case, what is it you wish? Frankly sir, I think what you’re doing is impressive, but I don’t think there’s anything I can do to help with it.”

“Oh, that’s not true. Originally, someone working for me was supposed to be in your position. In truth, at that assembly of crude individuals, all of the top four except you were under my control.”

“Oh my, a fixed race.”

“And that, too, came to nothing due to that woman’s whim. I need to keep ‘that woman’ surrounded with people who see things my way. I’m sure you understand why.”

If Priscilla’s impulsiveness couldn’t be accounted for, then at the least, in order to correct her course, she needed to be surrounded with those who could be predicted. It was the natural way of things. In that case,

“What about the servant, Schult? That kid is another one that the princess collected, isn’t he?”

“I’ve already given that brat the same talk I’m giving you. Luxury that one could never have as an orphan; the promise of that bought him to my side without a second thought. In the end, ‘that woman’ can’t read people any better than that.”

“Hmmm.”

He recalled Schult speaking proudly of working for Priscilla. Having said that, he didn’t think much of it. Putting oneself first was the instinct of living things. If loyalty was a result of being treated well, then it was natural that one’s feelings would lean more towards one that treated oneself better. Al was no exception to that.

“I understand what it is you want of me, sir. With that, I’d be pleased if we could talk about how I’ll be treated and how I am to act in the future.”

“…Hehe. That’s right, that’ll do fine. Not to worry, I won’t make you regret it. Of course, the same goes for Priscilla. For the sake of my own wishes as well, that woman needs to remain healthy. ‘That woman’, the brat, and you too, all the lot of you need to do is receive happiness under my leadership, after all!”

As Al accepted his suggestion, Leip let out a good-humored, throaty laugh.

At that loud laughter, Al whispered “Sorry, princess” to the mistress he had decided to betray.

…Even at that emotional moment, the phantom of Priscilla in the back of his mind was grinning victoriously.

6

A knight calling himself Gilian Endymion visited the Barielle domain.

A handsome man, with a fearless countenance and a dignified look. His shining blond hair sparkled in the sun, and although he was slender, the gorgeousness of his well-toned body was different from Al’s rough form. His well-tailored knight uniform brought out the young man’s charm, and even an untrained eye could tell that the treasured sword hanging from his waist was not the work of an amateur.

From top to bottom, a true and superior knight—that was the impression given by the young man called Gilian.

“He’s the third son of the Endymion household. As his two older brothers as assisting his father with administering their domain, he, who has a talent for the sword, left on a journey to gather martial fame as a knight. Today, I have imposed on him to spend the time with us.”

Saying this, standing beside the handsome young man and introducing him, was Liep Barielle himself.

And obviously, the old man would not be introducing the guest to Al or Schult. Directly in front of Leip, gazing unconcernedly at Gilian, was the Baroness, Priscilla.

“I understand what you have said about the commoner, but I do not understand your intention in introducing that sort of man to me. I am sure you haven't lost your senses to the point where, as would be appropriate for one like yourself with few years remaining, you intend to give me another man."

"Don't be foolish. Who would let go of a beautiful wife like you? Think of today as being about his hope, and just a little bit of my thoughtfulness."

"To be thoughtful, that's so unlike you."

From the way Priscilla sniffed, it was clear she had no intention of believing Leip's request. Although Leip maintained his composure on the outside, one could almost see that he was biting his lip on the inside.

However, before Leip exploded, Gilian slowly came forward.

"My humble apologies for this sudden visit, and for rudely imposing on you."

It was an elegant gesture, and the kind of low, smooth voice that made women swoon. Gilian knelt before Priscilla.

"However, ever since I heard the rumors of Priscilla-sama at the Barielle domain, I have been looking forward to the day that I could meet you. Truly, I feel that you are the incarnation of beauty from above."

"Oho. You do know how to speak properly, then. My beauty is indeed not of this world. And despite that, the contradiction of having come down to this world—truly, I am a sinful woman."

As Gilian continued to string together flowery words, Priscilla, in high spirits, glanced towards Al. Standing behind her and fulfilling the duty of an attendant, he shrugged his shoulders instead of giving a wry smile.

"Very well. I will allow you to touch my skin, and offer a knight's respect. Understand well that this is happiness beyond your expectations."

"Yes. My humble gratitude."

Speaking harshly, Priscilla lightly extended her hand. Gilian took the white fingers as though handling a fragile thing, and performed a knight's greeting by kissing the back of her hand.

And if that had been the end of it, it would have been like nothing more than a scene from a fairy tale.

"And so, old man. The man you brought has passed my first inspection, but what are you looking for after this? You said something about thoughtfulness."

"It's a simple thing. Day by day, I'm busy with official work, and cannot accompany you as you travel about the domain. To have you going here and there alone has always bothered me."

"Although he's little more than a jester, Al is there, and if I brought you along you would simply be in the way. I have no intention of babysitting you. There was really no need for this."

In response to Leip choosing his words carefully, Priscilla refused to show him any mercy.

A vein stood out on Leip's forehead, long since abandoned by his hair. But, despite that, the old man managed to keep a smile on his face.

"Don't say that. It's just that today, I wanted to give you a nice-looking young man for what I make you endure day by day. He's a gentleman to the ladies as well. I'm sure you'll find him interesting."

"You may be hoping too much of me, but I'll do my best to live up to it. Priscilla-sama, if it's acceptable to you, please allow me the honor."

In place of Leip, who was nearing the limits of his self-control, Gilian himself took up the request.

Leip was one thing, but in Gilian's case, there was nothing unnatural about his sincere attitude. Thinking deeply, Priscilla tilted her head from side to side, and glanced at Al.

“Well, why not. Rather than always looking at a clunky iron helmet, it might not be bad to spend the time looking at the face of a man who is not hard on the eyes. Consideration is a virtue, indeed.”

“…Yes, do that. Sir Gilian, please take care of my wife.”

“Yes! Even if it costs my life.”

It was a slightly overdone, theatrical way to say it, but Priscilla enjoyed it all the more for that.

Gilian had brought his personal ground dragon—an outstanding, famed steed with a blue hide. The excellent ground dragon, which most likely had a pedigree, further pleased Priscilla’s eye for beauty.

Guiding his ground dragon expertly, and straddling the dragon together with Priscilla at her insistence, Gilian flashed his white teeth and gallantly rode away from the front of the mansion.

“They’ve finally left. Damn her for making me go through that song and dance. She’s a detestable woman.”

And, watching the pair leave, Leip spat that while letting his shoulders relax. Al let out a small laugh at the speed of the change, and then he looked towards the direction that Priscilla had disappeared to.

“Gilian Endymion, huh. So he’s another of your pawns, then?”

“Of course. However, the amount of effort I’ve put into that one is different than the others. Deliberately depending on the distant Endymion household, I’ve spent a long time preparing him. Compared to the fighting tournament where they don’t ask where you’re from as long as you have skill, the labor I’ve put into hiding my connection with him is quite different.”

“You always go all-out in your plotting. On that point, I honestly admire you, sir.”

“Hmf. With the way you’re involved in this, you’re no different. … Follow me. We’ll speak about the reason I introduced Gilian and ‘that woman’, and our plan for what will come.”

Pointing with his chin, Leip returned towards the mansion, swaying the sleeves of his robe.

While following him, Al suddenly stopped and turned back towards the direction where Priscilla had disappeared.

Of course, she was nowhere to be seen.

7

Discussion of intrigue was always done in the study.

If one were to guess, perhaps it was something that Leip was fixated on.

Breathing through his mouth due to the foul smell he wasn’t used to, Al idly thought about that.

“Even in my office, the walls may have ears; this study alone is safe. It’s the room that our Barielle family has prepared for holding secret discussions in for generations, after all.”

The change in his expression should have been hidden by his helmet, but Leip shrewdly picked up on Al’s thoughts and responded to them. Having come here, the old man’s mind had been sharpened.

This was in no small part due to the fact that the starting date of the Royal Selection, the stage where his wishes would play out, was fast approaching.

“Over at the capital, things are probably getting fairly serious now, I’d guess.”

“By this point, the royal castle is in an uproar. They must have long since known perfectly well that the king and his bloodline couldn’t be saved. Ignoring the problem, and continuing to put off worrying about the continued existence of the kingdom has resulted in this.

That incompetent lot; they understand nothing!"

Getting worked up as he spoke, veins began to stand out on Leip's forehead. Leip, who was nearly indignant enough to burst a blood vessel, had revealed the prophecy about this matter just a few days ago.

Talk of the death of the king had spread through the town, and the higher nobles were beginning preparations for the Royal Selection. In truth, all of their initial movements were more than a step or two behind Leip.

"Making pawns of those you used to hate; haven't you come to enjoy that?"

"I used to think that I would. Instead, looking back at how I was treated by those incompetents, I've simply become more displeased. The Council of Wise Men, indeed. Why, it's nothing more than a club for doddering old men chosen for nothing more than the standing of their house and their age. The head incompetent Miklotov, the insufferable idiot Bordeaux, I'd like nothing more than to toss them out and let witchbeasts feast on their entrails."

"My, you are angry."

Even if he'd turned the conversation that way himself, it was rather boring to listen to someone else's inner hatred.

While giving a noncommittal reply, Al looked toward Schult, who was cowering in a corner of the room. The boy didn't appear to know the reason he was here, his face was pale, and he had been keeping his head low.

"That's enough for now about the dunces in the capital. It's a waste of time. More importantly, at last it's time for the long-awaited Royal Selection. I need to talk to you about that."

"You've already made the announcement that the princess is a candidate, haven't you?"

"Obviously. Firstly, it's necessary to let them know that what was written on the dragon stone is true. To prove that a candidate can cause an emblem of Lugunica to shine, you see. Originally, I'd hoped to have Priscilla take to role of making it shine, and declaring her to be the first participant in the Royal Selection, but…"

Leip stopped speaking for a moment, with a bitter expression.

"At the place they announced the prophecy, one of the upper-class nobles made the emblem shine. My single miscalculation was that there was a candidate already there."

"Heh. That's quite a lucky guy. So who was it?"

"Duchess Karsten… Crusch Karsten. A mere woman, shamelessly carrying the position her father ceded to her. A savage madwoman with the sword, famous as well for being an eccentric followed by a bizarre retainer. What was the emblem thinking, choosing her? … Of course, the moment Priscilla has been chosen, there's no point worrying about that."

In response to a heartfelt sigh, Al couldn't help but agree and give a wry smile.

Candidates for the Royal Selection were able to make the gemstone of an emblem, handed down in the Kingdom of Lugunica, sparkle. Finding the five who fulfill that condition, and having them compete for the throne, was the content of the Royal Selection.

It was just that much about the selection criteria for those candidates was still unclear. At the moment, things they had in common, their bloodline, even their blessings didn't seem to explain it.

"By the way, sir, how'd you find out the princess is a candidate?"

"…I have no obligation to tell you about that. I may have spoken a little too much, but don't go poking your nose into things. All you need to do is follow my instructions."

"…As you say."

As Leip moved to cut off the conversation, Al meekly stood down.

When Al showed that he would quietly do as he was told, Leip let out a long breath through his nose. Then the old man clicked his tongue at Schult, in the corner of the room.

“How long do you intend to do that? I’ve gone to the trouble of making time to speak to you. If you have time to sit there cowering, show me that you intend to contribute at least a little.”

“Y, yes… My apologies…”

Leip sat behind the ebony desk in the back of the room, and Schult stood directly ahead of him. Seeing that some books taken from the shelves were piled up on the floor, Al plopped himself down on top of them.

“I don’t intend to needlessly drag out this discussion. Let’s get to the point. …It’s about Gilian; I intend to have him act as Priscilla’s knight.”

“Wait, wait, hold on a minute there. If you do that, what happens to me?”

Raising his hand at Leip’s statement, Al inquired that while calling for a pause.

“It’s because that I’m treated as the princess’ knight that I’m being allowed to stay at the mansion.”

“Don’t be concerned. I won’t be stooping to having you thrown out. I don’t let go of valuable pawns, and it would be troublesome to have you silenced, as well. It won’t be as the knight, but I’ll make up some position for you at the mansion. There’s no need to worry about it.”

“I’m not that worried about that point, but what meaning is there in going that far to replace her knight? Of course, it’s probably important that he’s one of your pawns, sir.”

“That’s a simple matter. The people love picturing a master and servant with a knightly knight as the servant. Since things have turned out such that someone who is not of the royal family will be taking the throne, the support of the citizens will not be unconditional as it has been up to this point. The simple, foolish citizens need an easy-to-understand image they can get worked up about.”

At Leip’s fervent words, Al raised his eyebrows in unusual interest.

In other words, it was a public relations strategy. Preparing an eye-catching knight and princess, he altered their ease of acceptance from the moment they were first seen. Since the candidates would be contesting between themselves in the Royal Selection, it would turn into something with an influence that could not be ignored. It might be called excessive attention to detail by some, but…

“I honestly respect your willingness to doing anything that will even slightly improve your chance to win.”

“I’m not sure I like the way you put that, but whatever. As the people’s image of a knight, there should be no complaints with Gilian. Priscilla, too, if we’re only talking about her looks, is easy to recognize as one that draws the eye to a rather disgusting extent. My advance preparations are rock solid.”

“Ah, there’s just one little problem.”

It would be raining on the parade of an old man as he was gloating, but Al held some doubts about the strategy he was so proud of. While being subjected to a displeased glare, Al fiddled with the fittings of his helm.

“Will the princess go back on her own decision, then? At an event she opened herself, I was chosen as her knight at her own direction. I’m not sure she’d change her mind on that.”

“What, is that all? Don’t worry over such little things.”

Dismissing Al’s concern with a sniff, Leip continued while tapping on the desk with his finger.

“A knight who’s easy on the eyes, and an eccentric man in a steel helmet. There’s no question about which one a woman would pick. Or are you confident that women would prefer you over Gilian?”

“Yeah, I guess not. In a flirting contest, I’d lose every time. Not just that, even in a swordfight, I might not be able to beat him.”

“Then there you have it.”

Nodding in satisfaction at Al’s pathetic answer, Leip leaned back, making the chair creak.

With that, he more or less understood the old man’s plans. Indeed, he felt it was all something he could nod and agree with. It was just that…

“Ah, umm…”

Unlike Al, who could see the rationality of it, there was Schult, who had been keeping quiet, but now timidly raised his hand.

“What. Do you intend to cast aspersions on my thoughts as well?”

“No, not at all! I, uh, well… well, about Priscilla-sama…”

While cowering beneath Leip’s harsh glare, Schult gulped and continued.

“You won’t do anything cruel to Priscilla-sama, indeed? In order to make Priscilla-sama the queen, sir… In order to do that, you’ve thought of many things, yes?”

“…Is that all. Don’t bother me with your nonsense. I’ve stated my goal countless times. Since Priscilla is necessary for it, why would I harm her?”

Leip tsk’ed at Schult’s childish worry, and spat back that reply.

“Preparing the path for that woman to arrive at the throne is my role. Indeed, even if she were to decline the Royal Selection, I would force her to participate. Think of yourselves as having the same duty.”

“Well, with the princess’ personality, there’s no way she’d turn down the Royal Selection.”

She'd never back down from a fight, and indeed, never hesitated to boast that everything in this world belonged to her. If a country would become legitimately hers, she'd do it as though there were no other choice.

Without knowing it, as he imagined Priscilla's mad dash for the throne, Al smiled.

"Is that so, indeed. Th… That's good, oh yes, indeed…"

Schult, too, held a hand to his chest in relief at Leip's reply. Even though he'd switched sides for Leip for the payment, he still hadn't forgotten his gratitude to Priscilla for taking him in. Priscilla would take the throne, and he would be rewarded. To him, it was the best possible outcome.

However, the relief the two of them felt

"She's a difficult girl to control, but once I use a curse to turn her into a puppet, she'll do as I wish. With a doll on the throne, the country has all but fallen into my hands."

was shattered by Leip's next words, as he explained the final step of his plan.

"…Huh?"

Unable to breathe, Schult let out a hoarse voice.

The old man let a vicious smile twist his face, and shrugged at Schult's reaction.

"What, could you not hear me? That girl's troublesome willfulness is in the way. I was able to overlook it before the start of the Royal Selection, but now that the importance of every single action is increasing, I can't let it be. Once her debut at the royal castle is finished, I'll take away her will and make her my puppet."

"…Is that really something you can do so easily?"

"I'm sure it's beyond imagining for the two of you. In this world, there are many demands for unimaginable dark deeds. I long ago made connections with a handy fellow who acts as an intermediary for a ‘shaman’.”

Rather than being the stuff of dreams, Leip’s plot was a realistic one. Through cursing her by a shaman, he’d take away Priscilla’s will. This, too, was likely realistically possible.

“Tha…that’s not what you said, oh no, indeed!”

Unlike Al, who was able to calmly accept the facts, Schult’s voice cracked as he spoke out.

“Sir, you’d do nothing to Priscilla-sama, that’s what you said, indeed!”

“I never said I wouldn’t do anything. I said I wouldn’t harm her. If that woman isn’t uninjured, she can’t hope to take the throne. Hence, I’ll do nothing to take away her health. What’s the problem?”

“If Priscilla-sama stops being Priscilla-sama… then what point…”

As Schult spoke in a trembling voice, Leip leveled a displeased glare at him. The cruel color that began to show in his eyes was proof that he was beginning to weigh the usefulness of the boy in front of him against his displeasure.

“Quit trying to look innocent, boy. You’ve already been drawn in by the reward, and betrayed that woman. You’re no longer in a position to be concerned about her welfare. Or is that it? Have you fallen for her charms? To be overcome by the seduction of a whore, completely shameful for a boy… Well, then.”

Leering disgustingly, Leip stood and leaned over the desk, bringing his face close to Schult’s.

“If you want to have your way with her, I’ll allow it after she’s taken the throne. I don’t know what you see in that clump of flab, but you’re drooling over her, aren’t you?”

“…”

Unsurpassed disrespect of women and humiliation of Priscilla.

Schult's face went bright red at that statement, and his delicate arms reached for Leip.

However, Leip avoided him with ease, and instead struck him in the chest with a short tube that was on top of the desk. With a cry of pain, Schult tumbled on the floor of the study.

"To raise your hand against me, the master of the mansion; this is the problem with all the ill-mannered wild dogs these days."

Leip, who had just mercilessly struck a child, looked down at Schultz as he writhed on the floor.

Leip's movement just now had a sharpness unexpected from someone nearing seventy. A long-held, unfulfilled ambition was capable of filling a body with vitality to this extent.

"Now you will burn to death. Your innards will char, and you'll blow smoke from every hole in your body. I'll accept the sight of your miserable condition as recompense for your disgrace."

Pointing the tip of the short tube in his hand at Schult, Leip put the punishment into action with the look of one crushing an insect.

The intensifying mana made the air in the study shimmer, the manifested destruction overtook the young body, the being known as Schult changed to dust in the inferno…,

"…What's the meaning of this?"

"The ball suddenly came my way, so yeah."

The moment before Schult would have been burnt to ashes, Al's sword was unleashed, aiming for the short tube. Instantly dodging the sword swinging up from below, Leip's face twisted in annoyance.

"What reason is there for you to protect that child? All you need to do is watch quietly. You understood that was the position you agreed to, did you not?!"

"If you get that angry, you really are going to bust a vein, sir. Yeah, actually, I'm not sure either why I did that, though…"

In the face of Leip's rage, Al joked as he spoke his honest thoughts.

Even he didn't understand why he'd moved to protect Schult. Thinking about it rationally, it would have been best to use what Leip was saying to his own advantage.

Despite that, Al had now protected Schult after his objection to Leip, and had turned the old man hostile.

Why, what for, he didn't know.

"Al-sama, you…"

From behind Al, who was playing the fool, Schult looked towards him as he groaned.

"Schult-chan, if it hurts, it's alright to cry, ya know? I'll keep it a secret."

"Al-sama… you like Priscilla-sama too, right…?"

"…"

Ignoring Al's teasing, Schult spoke as though he'd had to wring the words out of himself.

And the moment he heard those words, a shock passed through Al's entire body.

Letting out a long, long sigh, Al understood.

"Ah, man, I'm so dumb. …How did I miss something so simple?"

With that realization, he was able to explain all of his confusion up to now.

"You've realized your judgement was clouded? If so, move out of…"

"I get it. I finally get it. I was being stupid. I shoulda seen it right away."

Tilting his head to the side, Al shrugged while kept his one-handed grip on his sword.

“There’s no way I could happily plot together with an old geezer who can’t see how sexy and cute the princess is!”

“…You…fool!!”

Immediately after his curse, Leip pulled out one of the desk drawers with his left hand and threw it at Al. Hacking that apart with his sword as it approached, Al kicked the books at his feet towards Leip and shouted.

“Schult! Get outta the room right now! I’ll handle the rest!”

“Ahh… gh, understood, indeed!”

Grimacing in pain, Schult ran with great effort to the door, and left the room without looking back. That was a good choice. However, Leip mocked that choice.

“How completely foolish the pair of you are! Why do you think I only called the two of you to the study? All the other servants in the mansion are my supporters. There’s no question what will happen to the boy now that he’s left the room!”

“Very prudent of ya. But, ya never know, right? If I were to take you hostage…”

“Surely you don’t think you can restrain me so easily, youngling. In my younger days, I was nothing to scoff at on the battlefield. My war record is no less than that of Bordeaux himself!”

The fighting spirit emanating from Leip as he roared was proof that this wasn’t a bluff.

The short tube the old man held was a ‘meteor’. It’s effect was most likely raising the power of the user’s magic—a simple effect, but because of that, there was no countermeasure.

Comparing that to his own fighting strength, Al quickly judged that he was at a disadvantage. In other words, “The conditions are met. …No need to hesitate in playing my trump card.”

“You idiot…”

“I won’t deny that. It’s nothing personal. Your luck was bad. …Nah,”

Halting his words there, Al continued with the echo of a cynical smile in his voice.

“…Your stars were bad.”

“…!”

Right after he finished speaking, Leip threw away all pretenses and raised the short tube, unleashing his magic.

Conveyed from Leip’s palm, the mana passing through the tube gained overwhelming power. The strength of the magic emerging from the end of the ‘meteor’ had swollen to over five times it’s normal level.

That magic landed a direct hit on the torso of the iron helmet that had been speaking nonsense, bending his body backwards and exploding in the center of it. The shelves were covered with the awful stench of a human body being burned by the intense heat, and the flesh, blood, and organs that had been blown apart.

The bodiless helmet and sword clattered to the floor, and Leip looked over the terrible scene with an air of boredom.

“What sort of trump card was that? What nonsense. Honestly, all of it, nonsense.”

Cutting across the blood-soaked study, Leip began to leave the room. There was only a tiny chance, but if the boy that ran away managed to meet up with Priscilla, it would mean trouble. He needed to find him right away, and finish him.

Thinking that, he extended his hand towards the study’s door knob.

"…Your stars were bad."

"…?!"

Leip was speechless for a moment, then looked behind him.

When he did, he saw a man standing there with his back to Leip. He was a one-armed man wearing a steel helmet, and gripping a sword in his hand…

"Huh? Where'd…"

"Go~a!!"

With no interest in listening to the fool's voice, Leip cast his magic through the short tube and burned him to death once more.

The unleashed flames scorched the man, and the speechless steel helmet once again shattered.

The floor of the study was once more stained with disaster, and Leip backed away, unable to grasp the meaning of the situation.

"Wha… what was that? What just happened…"

Realizing that he was shaking, Leip took a deep breath. His forehead was covered with cold sweat. While roughly wiping it away with his sleeve, the old man looked up and tried to make sense of it.

"…Your stars were bad."

Once again, the man's voice was heard.

8

"…Your stars were bad."

He heard it. That voice struck his ears again.

"Huh? Where'd you go?"

Before his eyes, the man who had lost sight of his enemy looked left and right. Then the man turned about, and when he noticed the man seated behind him, he quickly readied his sword again. However,

“Oh, hey. You’ve run out of steam. From the way it looks… I’m the attacker now. Ah, I see. You’re pretty unlucky, too.”

Speaking as though with sympathy, the man squatted in front of the disheartened old man.

The drooling old man didn’t so much as look up at the man’s face.

“You were so energetic until just a second ago, but you’ve started looking your age all of a sudden. I don’t know how many times we’ve done this, but ya haven’t given up after a few dozen, have ya? Well, there’s no way to know, o’course.”

“…ll me.”

“Huh?”

The voice was like a whisper, and the helmeted man tilted his head.

So that the man would hear it, the old man shakily raised his head.

“Please… kill me.”

As though it might be his only salvation, the old man earnestly sought it.

At that appeal, the man’s shoulders dropped as though he had recalled something unfortunate.

“That’s too bad. Just because someone can’t grasp sexy cuteness, people can’t come to understand each other, after all.”

Standing, the helmeted man lightly shouldered his sword, aiming for the old man’s neck.

Then, the blade swung in a deadly arc, and the old man’s head sprayed blood as it flew through the air.

At last, the old man's nightmare…

"…Your stars were bad."

did not end.

9

Leip's hair was in complete disarray, and his eyes were sunken, as Al brought him out of the study.

Speaking deliriously and drooling, the old man had entirely lost his mind.

"Still, even I feel kinda bad about this, what's up with that?"

As he dragged the old man's heavy body along, Al was mildly repulsed at what he'd done.

Rendering him powerless without killing him, and while it could be said that, taking the long view, rendering him powerless truly was the best option, exactly how did this differ from Leip's own plot, in terms of cruelty?

"Well, the sense of guilt is different between a crappy old guy and a young beauty. When you look at it that way, it feels better."

While quickly imagining up something to justify himself, Al carried on towards the mansion's entry hall. With no one to depend on, Schult could only flee to the outside of the mansion, but,

"…Al-sama!"

At the entry hall, as Al approached the great staircase that connected the first and second floors, a voice called to him from below. Looking, he saw many of the mansion's servants, and Schult standing before the door. In addition, beside him was…

"It seems you have been causing quite a ruckus while I was away."

Having returned with her knight in tow, Priscilla arrogantly stated that with her hand on her hip. Looking up at Al on the upper floor, she sniffed and pouted.

“Come now, Al. How long do you intend to be looking down at me, is that not rude? Come down right now, and explain exactly what happened while I was away.”

“Ah, gotcha. I’d come down if I could.”

“Your reply seems to convey no intention to move at all.”

As Al joked around at the top of the great stairway, Priscilla winked at him and forgave his insolence. However, an infuriated man interrupted that exchange between master and follower.

“Please wait, Priscilla-sama! That helmeted man, does it not appear that he has done something to Leip-sama?”

“Hmm? Ooh. Now that I take a closer look, it is that old bag of bones that Al is dragging around. What is this, then? Did the old man there finally despair over his own idiocy, and hang himself?

Priscilla’s response to what Gilian had pointed out was indiscreet. Gilian was aghast, but Al smiled wryly at her attitude while lifting up Leip.

“Nah, he ain’t dead. Well, his body isn’t dead. But somehow his spirit just suddenly died.”

“Sudden death, is it? Well, he is that age, after all. It is something that happens to old trees.”

“You can’t mean to allow him to pass it off with that kind of explanation!”

Priscilla was trying to look like she would accept it, but Gilian protested fiercely. He stepped in front of Priscilla, drew the knight’s sword at his side, and pointed it towards Al on the upper floor.

“You are fellow with a truly suspicious appearance, but having heard that you were Priscilla-sama’s retainer, I have overlooked it until now. However, it seems now that you were a villain that should not have been overlooked. You’ve treated Leip-sama barbarously.”

“Like I said, he ain’t dead.”

“Nevertheless! I will not allow you to direct your poisoned fangs against Priscilla-sama. From now on, I will take on the role of protecting Priscilla-sama!”

The vociferous Gilian was a knight of justice, and he looked the part. On the other hand, due to his own looks and the half-dead Leip, Al looked like an outright villain.

The hall was full of servants holding their breath and observing the situation. Having said that, likely the only one that was truly concerned for Al was Schult. The other servants were all Leip’s supporters, so even if he did manage to make it past Gilian, the outlook after that was fairly grim.

The conditions for his trump card were not met, either. ‘Well now, how will this turn out’, worried Al.

“It would seem you have grasped your disadvantage. Then stand your ground as I cut you down. I don’t know what sort of vile plan you had, but I will protect Priscilla-sama’s safety from this point on. May her days be full of unchanging serenity, and the path she follows blessed!”

Gilian, all fired up, began to step forward, intending to charge at Al with his sword without further delay.

But, just before he could take that first explosive step,

“Unchanging days of serenity, is it? …How dull.”

Priscilla spoke in a terribly bored voice.

And with the “Crimson Sword” she drew from behind her, she struck down Gilian with a single swing.

“Wha…?!”

Crying out in shock at the unexpected cut, Gilian fell down on the steps with a serious wound on his back. Rolling his body face-up with her foot, Priscilla brought the point of her sword to the nose of the panting handsome man.

“Here I was wondering what kind of sweet talk you would use to sway me, but you prove to be a boring man not only along the way but when in the spotlight as well. On top of that, you will give me unchanging days of serenity, you say? Here we see the epitome of a commoner’s thinking.”

“What do…you…”

“What value does the same thing as yesterday hold? An unchanging thing is simply tiresome. Always show me something new. If you are unable to do that, then at the very least, become a corpse, rot away, become dung, and disappear from my view. Fool.”

To the man who was fond of himself, Priscilla mercilessly sent a shower of cruel words.

What the red woman in front of his eyes was saying, surely Gilian understood less than half of. And before that changed, his chance to reach understanding was forever taken away.

“Wha…”

Gilian’s body, lying fallen on the stairs, suddenly spouted flames. For the handsome man called Gilian Endymion, the burning heat of the flames spreading from his wound would allow no escape from their fiery embrace.

With his throat seared, Gilian was unable to even scream as he burned.

“Princess, maybe it’d be better to put out the fire before the mansion catches on fire?”

“Idiot. It is a flame born of my sun-sword. Obviously, it will ignite only that which I have chosen.”

Her logic was incomprehensible, but Gilian’s flames did not spread to the rug on the steps. Having confirmed that it somehow seemed to be true, Al was amazed by Priscilla’s unconventionality, despite himself.

Incidentally, sometime during that, the crimson sword she had been holding had once again disappeared from view.

“Well, it’d be pretty dumb to be surprised by the princess’ magic tricks after all this. More importantly, what are you gonna do about all this, including the burning guy?”

“No matter how many times one smells it, the odor of a burning person is displeasing. You lot, clean it up at once.”

At Priscilla’s instruction, the servants moved without hesitation, rapidly cleaning up Gilian’s entirely charred remains. Observing this, Al came to a conclusion. That was…

“Well, princess, you saw through the old guy’s plans long ago, then?”

“From the beginning, he made no secret of his intention to use me and seize power in the nation. Given that, it was trivial to imagine how he would proceed. Before one feels annoyance at the insect buzzing around one’s ear, it is only natural to take away the insect’s wings and legs.”

“You’re too much. He was out of his league.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of the old man’s long-held ambition being treated as the antics of a clown and dancing in the palm of her hand.

It goes without saying that she held the hearts of the people, and even in the mansion, there were none who were truly his allies. His sole ally that hadn’t been seized by Priscilla had now been burnt to a crisp.

When you think of it that way, perhaps he was happier losing his sanity while still holding his ambitions.

“By the way, if you had your revenge planned out in that much detail, why didn’t you say anything to us? We put on a weird little act because of that.”

“You have no talent for that sort of thing, I can tell at a glance. Schult is the same. You both get visibly flustered every time you look at me. You have no idea how hard it is not to laugh.”

“Ah, um…P, Priscilla-sama…”

As Al and Priscilla carried on their friendly chat, with Leip tossed onto the steps, Schult arrived below them. When Priscilla folded her arms to emphasize her chest, Schult faltered, uncertain where to direct his gaze.

Perhaps he intended to apologize for having once joined a side that intended to betray Priscilla. However, to do that, failing to choose the right words could lead to calling down her wrath.

If it goes poorly, I’ll have to back him up, is what Al was thinking while feeling a bit concerned, but…

“I’m glad you’re unharmed, oh yes, indeed. …I…I was worried…”

“Mhmm.”

Looking at Schult, whose face was messy with tears, Al was amazed by his own foolishness.

How much nonsensical common sense had he tried to force on the heart of a child barely ten years old, and then gauge the situation based on that?

Hadn’t he just seen a pitiful old man decide what this and that was without trying to actually see it for itself, and suffer a lonely fall without anyone to come to his aid?

“Schult, you are just so adorable. Very well, I give you permission to get my dress dirty.”

“Oop.”

Priscilla pulled the sobbing Schult into her embrace, then, with a pleased expression, wiped his face clean with her dress. Then, with the dizzy young man still sandwiched between her breasts, she turned towards Al.

“Well, isn’t that an enviable position.”

“It is an obvious thing to say, but you were wise to choose me. My compliments.”

“If it’s a choice between an old guy and a sexy-cute girl, you chose the girl. Anyone would do that. I do that, too.”

“Your forthrightness does not displease me. Well now…”

Priscilla looked down at Leip, who lay blank-eyed on the ground, and snorted softly.

“How very, hmm, pitiful it is that my husband of convenience has lost his ability to rule his domain. In this state, the future of the Barielle domain is endangered. Since it has come to this, it seems unavoidable that I take on all authority as the representative of the household. Is it not so?”

“Carrying on the will of your beloved husband, and doing your best in the unfamiliar role of steward, like a good wife. The blind actions of a beautiful girl; it’s a scenario that invites tears, ain’t it? I think I might cry.”

“How very droll of you.”

“You too, princess.”

The well-matched master and servant laughed together, and looked satisfied that, for the moment, the affairs of the house were in order.

And that left Schult, still caught wide-eyed between Priscilla’s breasts. Taking the boy’s head with both hands, Priscilla mussed up his hair, and spoke.

“Well now, whatever is the matter, Schult? You should laugh. I, your favorite person, am in a good mood. You do understand what an attendant should do in that case, yes?”

“Y..yes. I understand, oh yes, indeed!”

At Priscilla’s directive, he straightened his back, dutifully got his breathing under control, and laughed loudly.

Forcing his face to smile with his hands on his cheeks, and using a voice so loud that it was cracking.

“Hahahahaha, oh yes, indeed!”

“That will do. With that finished, you do know what I will wish for next, yes?”

For me to go brew fresh tea, oh yes, indeed!”

“Mhmm!”

Drawing a fan from her cleavage and opening it with a snap, Priscilla descended the stairs. Al followed her, and Schult walked with them, still laughing.

“I’m terribly pleased. This will do. After all…”

Listening to the voice of the laughing girl, Al realized why he had chosen her.

It was nothing, really. A simple matter. Nothing more than that he had, once again, been captured by this girl’s charms.

“…This world is designed to operate in the way that works best for me.”

END

Emilia in Wonderland

1

“And then at the end he said, ‘It’s your heart’!” exclaimed Subaru with a toothy grin and a snap of his fingers.

“Whoa, that’s amazing!” Emilia cried, laughing as she clapped her hands.

The two of them were chatting in the courtyard of Roswaal Manor in the shade of a tree, basking in the breeze and enraptured by stories from Subaru’s home world.

With great skill Subaru recounted his stories while making gestures and before she knew it Emilia was transported into a world of tales. She was honestly impressed by his ability to change his voice and act as both men and women.

“You sure know a lot of stories, don’t you? And they are all ones I haven’t heard of. I’m reaaally impressed.”

“I’m thankful for my memory and the fact that I was born on Earth. I guess impressing Emilia-tan a little was the mission assigned to me by Andersen.”

“Eaarth? Andersen?”

“It’s the name of the spaceship I lived on and the famous author of fairytales who lived there.”

Subaru winked at Emilia, who was tilting her head in confusion. She gave a vague smile and pretended to get it since it was probably something she didn’t need to understand.

Two weeks had passed since Subaru solved the witchbeast incident after moving into Roswaal Manor. His wounds from the incident had healed and he was back to working as a servant when he would sometimes make time to talk with Emilia during his breaks.

Emilia, who was exhausted from her unfamiliar studies, was grateful for Subaru's consideration. And on top of that, his stories were interesting as well, so she couldn't be blamed for asking for more and more.

"Alright then…now that the story is over, I don't really want to, but I have to get back to work. How about you, Emilia-tan?" Subaru asked Emilia as he stood up, dusting off his butt.

Emilia leaned against the tree, her silver hair swaying in the wind, and pondered for a while. "I'll stay here for a while longer," she ultimately decided.

"Alright. See you later. I might get my head chopped off if Ram finds me here."

After Subaru jokingly said that, Emilia watched as he headed back towards the mansion and yawned. "Hmmmm."

Last night, she couldn't find a good place to stop, so she'd stayed up all night reading. That was why she instantly started to feel drowsy like this while enjoying the gentle breeze by herself.

"Maybe I should have gone back with Subaru…" Emilia whispered in a faint voice while slumped over.

She closed her eyes thinking that she shouldn't do it, and then a pleasant drowsiness slowly came over her.

And like that, Emilia's consciousness…

2

"Oh my, no, no! I won't make it if I don't hurry up!"

Emilia, who was on the verge of falling asleep, was seemingly jolted awake by that sudden voice. "Huh, what?"

"I'm in trouble! It's a grave deal! I don't know why, but I need to hurry up!"

Emilia looked around and spotted the source of that voice, then widened her eyes in surprise. As she leaned against the tree, a gray cat walking on two legs—someone she was used to seeing; a kitten spirit who was her family—ran past her.

“Puck? Why have you materialized…oh, wait!”

For some reason, Puck, who was normally palm-sized, was now the size of a human infant. He could essentially change his size at his will, but he rarely did so.

Emilia hurriedly stood up at his easy-going impatient voice, thinking something might have happened. But Puck didn’t even pay attention to her, and…

“I’m going to choose the bottomless hole now!” Puck ran and went around Emilia, his footsteps making adorable sounds, to the back of the tree. And then… “Haiya!”

She heard an energetic voice and felt Puck’s presence moving away.

“Hey! Puck, why are you ignoring me? Sheesh.”

Emilia also hurriedly moved behind the tree after getting shocked by her family’s unusual behavior. But then, Puck was nowhere to be seen, and instead there was a gaping hole in the ground. She wondered if this was where Puck jumped in after shouting.

“Why is there a hole here? …Could it be that Subaru has hidden treasure here…?” She decided who the culprit was based on her bias and then hesitantly looked into the hole.

The dark hole was so deep that she couldn’t see the bottom, and when she started feeling like she was going to be sucked into it, she gasped.

“Pu-Puuuck! Can you hear me? If you can, then please answer me!” she shouted into the hole, but her voice echoed in vain.

Not knowing what to do, she turned back to call someone from the mansion for now. And then…

“—It would affect how the story proceeds, so anyway, dooown youuu goo.”

“Huh?”

The moment Emilia’s body got pulled from behind, she thought she heard yet another voice. She was startled when she felt her shoulder get pulled, but that surprise was soon replaced by the shock of her body falling.

“Wait, no! I’m going to get flattened!”

While falling into the hole headfirst, Emilia was horrified at the thought of going splat. She immediately kicked the wall and fixed her perception of up and down, then grabbed the hem of her skirt that was being pushed upwards by the wind and immediately started thinking of countermeasures—but before she could think of any, she got stopped by something soft.

“Eek—wah.”

Emilia, feeling like she had been enveloped by a bundle of paper, struggled with it, and then crawled out.

She brushed the things that clung to her clothes and hair off and realized that they were dried leaves. It seemed like the dead leaves that had accumulated at the bottom of the hole had protected her from the impact of the fall.

“Haaa… I was so surprised.”

Emilia was relieved, but it didn’t last long, and she looked around restlessly.

It looks like the inside of a hollowed-out tree, so am I inside a tree that’s hundreds of years old? But then again, I fell into a hole in the ground.

“Oh! Puck!”

As she frowned at her doubt, Emilia caught sight of a kitten that was peeking at the passageway at the far end of this space. Puck jumped on the spot when Emilia spoke.

“Oh my, I will be late if I don’t hurry up. I’m in trouble,” he said audaciously after glancing repeatedly at his wrist, which had nothing on it.

“You don’t have anything there! Stop playing weird pranks, I’m mad at you. Stop right there.”

As Emilia kicked back the dead leaves and started running, Puck started running away from her in a hurry. She was surprised at how fast he could run, and even though it wasn’t the right situation for it, she was impressed and thought he was amazing.

Puck, who was running as fast as he could, disappeared from her sight into the corridor that seemingly had no end. Even so, Emilia ran hard, somehow managing to get through the passage, and jumped into a bright room.

“Umm… What is this place? And where’s Puck?”

Emilia silently gasped for breath and was stunned by the scenery that had changed again. It was a cute room filled with brightly colored things. It had flowers she hadn’t seen before on the table, above the fireplace, and on the windowsill.

“I wonder if it’s someone’s room… What if they get angry at me if I enter without permission?”

Although Emilia was in a mysterious situation, she had realistic worries. She searched around the room for Puck and its owner. However, she couldn’t look around for long due to the room being on the smaller side, causing her to quickly slump her shoulders since she couldn’t find Puck. That wasn’t the only reason she did that, either.

“There is a door that looks like it might lead outside, but my body is too big to fit through.”

Even Emilia couldn’t hide her shock at that. She wasn’t aware that she was much bigger than others. It was true that the girls in the mansion, Rem, Ram, and Beatrice were smaller than Emilia and were cute, but…

"No, no. Even Beatrice can't walk through a door of this size. So, the person who made this must have been really careless."

Emilia, who was on the verge of feeling depressed, snapped out of it with a sudden flash of thought and looked around to see if there was anything else. The only thing she found was a key and a strange medicine bottle.

The key is probably the key to that poorly constructed door.

And the bottle containing the medicine had a label on it which said, 'To Emily, with love.'

"…Anne?"

She recalled that the only person who referred to her that way was one of Roswaal's relatives and a much younger friend of hers she had briefly become acquainted with.

I don't know why a gift from her is in this room, but there's no way Annerose would try to harm me. Emilia believed that much right away.

"I'll take this."

So, Emilia gulped down the potion without doubting it. After drinking it all, she noticed her carelessness. "What if it was a type of medicine meant to be applied on the body?" But the change that occurred immediately denied her concern.

"Oh, wah, whah."

The size of the room kept changing every passing second. The table that had only reached her waist quickly became large enough for her to look up at. The windowsill and the vase were also miles away.

"No…this is, my body has become smaller."

Emilia immediately noticed the cause of the change and widened her eyes at the world that had become large. And then she touched her body here and there and was relieved that her clothes had shrunk too.

“People would think that I’m weird if I walked around naked. But I can get through that door now.”

I knew all along that Annerose is amazing.

Emilia completely forgot about solving that little mystery and clenched her fist in triumph. Then she enthusiastically put her hand on the door.

“Ah,” she said in disappointment when she realized that the door was locked. She had left the key on the table, so she couldn’t reach it now.

“There’s no point in being disappointed. Alright, I will do my best to climb it.”

It was by Emilia’s virtue that she didn’t get discouraged, but she looked brave and reckless at the same time when she rolled up her sleeves to challenge the table leg. Suddenly, her amethyst eyes caught sight of something placed next to it. There was a white plate with a pastry placed gently on top of it. There was also a letter leaning gently against the plate’s edge, and when she lifted it up, she saw: ‘For the time you get into trouble due to my lady’s gift. Insurance.’ written on it.

Emilia could only think of one person that wrote in such a distinctive manner.

“Oh my, my? Did a clumsy person forget the key?”

As Emilia was thinking about what to do after picking up the pastry, she looked up when she heard a voice coming from above. The one looking down at her from the table was Puck, wagging his long tail with a key in his hand.

Puck looked down at her with his big, round eyes and a smile that looked strangely human-like. “That’s no good at all. It’s basic to save your progress before making a big decision, you know. Life isn’t that sweet. Like that pastry!”

“Sorry. I don’t understand what you are saying. Plus, I don’t think you said anything witty,” Emilia responded to Puck, who had a smug look on his face.

But she felt like she was having a conversation with someone else she knew and tilted her head.

Puck is acting like Subaru today.

“Leaving that aside, stop playing around and give me the key. And if we don’t get back to the mansion soon, then everyone will get worried.”

“You should worry about yourself rather than worrying about those around you. When you gaze into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you, you know…”

“—There.”

“Meoww.”

Emilia didn’t like Puck’s attitude, as he seemed full of himself, so she ordered her lesser spirits and blew him away with a blast of wind. Swept up by the magic wind, Puck collided with the window and dropped the key, which Emilia caught by sliding across the floor. She then unlocked the door right away.

“Alright, Puck. Stop messing around, we’re going back. Hurry up and get into your crystal… Puck?”

Emilia looked back while talking to him as if she was scolding a child, but her face turned gloomy when she realized that Puck wasn’t by the window anymore. It seemed like he had gone into hiding again.

“Geez. You are causing me a lot of trouble today.”

Emilia angrily opened the door and stepped to the other side. She was welcomed by a meadow and a large forest that could be seen beyond that. Though surprised by the scenery that she had never seen before, she started walking towards the forest, nonetheless. But…

“No matter how much I walk, I can’t get any closer to the forest…”

The forest was right in front of her eyes, but no matter how hard she walked, the distance between her and the forest didn’t seem to get any shorter. Now that her body had shrunk, she couldn’t walk as far as before. “I’m getting hungry too…oh, wait.”

Emilia, who looked worried, remembered that she had wrapped up the pastry and brought it with her. The thing she took out stimulated her appetite with its sweet aroma and instantly made her its prisoner.

“I’ll be having this, Mister Clind.”

She thanked the writer of the letter, a man who also served as Annerose’s butler. The pastry was fluffy, as if it was freshly baked, and she couldn’t help but squirm at the taste that danced across her tongue. She reluctantly ate it all in one bite.

“Hmm? Huh?”

When Emilia looked around after enjoying the sweetness, she noticed that the scenery had changed—she realized that her body had gotten bigger and returned to its former size. She finally understood what ‘For the time you get into trouble due to my lady’s gift. Insurance’ meant.

That convinced her that Clind truly thought of everything.

“Just as I thought, Mister Clind is really amazing…and the forest is right around the corner thanks to it!”

The forest was within her reach as soon as she got bigger. The forest was still big even after she had grown bigger, but she was feeling far less intimidated than before.

Emilia clenched her fist triumphantly and looked at the forest.

“Alright, my adventure starts from here.”

She said a line that could’ve been the last line of dialogue in an anime, then ran towards the forest.

3

—Obviously, her adventure didn’t end there.

It didn’t end, but her feet had stopped. It happened when she was walking in the dimly lit forest with the help of the light provided by the lesser spirits.

“Stop right there. Don’t want someone like you to move ahead, I suppose.”

Once again, a voice came from above and Emilia looked around, searching for the source. Then she spotted a figure lying on a branch and involuntarily covered her mouth with her hand.

The figure on the branch glaring at Emilia with sleepy eyes was Beatrice. The girl shook her fancy dress and vertical rolls, then puffed out smoke using the pipe in her mouth and sneered. “Quite the undisciplined girl you are, to come to Betty’s place with dirty feet. What would your parents say, I suppose.”

“Beatrice, why are you…”

“Hmph. It’s too late for you now even if you’ve noticed who you are up against and who you’ve been rude to. Well, if you are willing to repent then Betty may forgive you…”

“You shouldn’t be smoking a pipe, you are still little! You shouldn’t be doing that until you’re an adult! Subaru said that it stops people from growing!”

Emilia hit Beatrice with her rational opinion after witnessing the young girl smoke. Shocked by her words, Beatrice dropped the pipe from her mouth and then glared angrily at her. “Wh-What an insult, I suppose! You must be out of your mind to be treating Betty like a child! Betty is a respectable lady! A pipe is a lady’s and a grown-up’s privilege!”

“It’s kind of childish to be obsessed with being like an adult…”

“Grrrr! I suppose!”

Beatrice, whose face had turned completely red and was stomping on the branch, was having a temper tantrum.

But as a sensible adult, Emilia couldn’t overlook Beatrice’s misconduct. In addition to that, Emilia was in a position where she was going to ascend to the country’s throne.

I will never back off.

“—Oh, you two. That’s enough. Or else you’ll scare the flowers of the forest.”

A mysterious person suddenly intervened as they were about to continue their argument. It was a black-haired man who had put his hand in front of Emilia and was looking up at Beatrice on the branch.

And though it was obvious, Emilia recognized him from behind.

“Subaru?”

“No, that’s not right, lady. I’m not Subaru, I’m Cheshirebaru!”

Cheshirebaru turned back and gave a thumbs up while flashing his teeth. No matter how you looked at him, he was Subaru. But if you looked carefully, then you'd notice he had cat ears. He also had ears where they were normally supposed to be, so it looked like he had four ears. It was kind of creepy.

"Argh…someone Betty doesn't like has appeared, I suppose."

"If that's what you think, then back off from here, Beako. This Cheshirebaru appears in unexpected places and at unexpected moments. I can stare at your life from good morning to good morning, you know?"

"Being watched all day is too uncomfortable! Argh, don't think that you've won, I supposeee!"

"I supposeeee, I supposeee" Her sharp parting remarks echoed as she dexterously flew above the branches and disappeared.

After seeing that, Cheshirebaru looked back at Emilia and said, "Once again, I've bullied a worthless loli. I want to know what defeat feels like."

"I wasn't done scolding Beatrice yet. And those ears, you are all teasing me, aren't you? I'm going to get angry."

"An angry face is cute too…ow, ow, you'll rip them off if you pull that hard!"

Emilia turned her anger on Cheshirebaru and pulled his cat ears, but the thing she thought was a fake was warm and properly attached to his head.

Cheshirebaru squatted down with teary eyes in front of the surprised Emilia. "I don't know what you're mad about, but if you keep getting angry like that then everyone will be scared of you. You need to enjoy being invincible and use the strongest weapon a girl has: her smile."

"I don't know what you are saying but…yeah. You're right."

Emilia was told that others would get scared if she kept getting angry, which made her feel despondent and lower her posture.

At the sight of Emilia feeling down, Cheshirebaru looked up and scowled. “Alright. You need to party and have fun when you are feeling down. I’ll invite you to a tea party!”

“A tea party?”

“Yeah. A lively, noisy, and crazy tea party deep in the woods!”

After Emilia got invited by Cheshirebaru with a somewhat unsettling invitation, he led her out of the forest. After walking for a while, she saw an open space and a small house in the forest. The house that blended into the forest had a huge table in the garden so that many people could sit together and enjoy themselves.

And at the table were the tea party guests—

“…Oh, it’s you, Cheshirebaru. So you came.”

“So now there won’t just be just us here. I’m glad that it won’t feel like a funeral anymore…”

An extremely gloomy-looking pair…more like two gloomy-looking Subarus were sitting there. That surreal sight caught Emilia off guard, making her forget about the depressing energy around the table.

“Th-Three Subaru’s? Cheshirebaru, what’s happening?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. The ones over there are Hatter Subaru and March Subaru. The first one’s wearing a hat and the other has hare ears. It’s easy to distinguish between them, right?”

Prompted by Cheshirebaru’s explanation, Emilia checked, and the two who had their heads down each had their own quirks: a hat and hare ears. And everything got confusing when the Subaru with cat ears joined them. Leaving Emilia, whose eyes were spinning, Cheshirebaru sat on a seat as if it was only the natural thing to do and shrugged his shoulders at the two Subarus who stared back with dead eyes.

"Hey, come on," said Cheshirebaru. "Don't be so gloomy. Nobody coming after we send out invitations is nothing new for us."

"But isn't it normal for people to hope that today might be different?" Hatter Subaru replied. "Maybe the signals were bad, and they couldn't call us and inform us about them being late."

"Well, it began yesterday and a whole night has passed," March Subaru added. "But even if someone comes, I, March Subaru, am a nice guy who'd say that he wasn't made to wait long."

"Don't do that, I might fall for you," said Cheshirebaru.

"Fall for you, fall for you," parroted Hatter Subaru.

"My era might come. A new tide for me," replied March Subaru.

The three Subarus, who had lifted their heads up, started exchanging some nonsense with each other at a rapid speed. The funeral atmosphere disappeared immediately, and a strange, disorganized, noisy mood replaced it.

He was right. This is a lively, noisy, and crazy tea party.

"Oh yeah! For you two who are sad, shabby, and helpless, I've properly invited a guest for you today. You can applaud me for my fine play."

"Who's the guest?" Hatter Subaru asked. "I'm sure you'll hype us up only to bring Beako, who's doing nothing in the forest, right? I know quite well how useless you truly are."

"Well, even having Beako is better than having no one," March Subaru added. "Alright then, let's put a lot of sugar into Beako's tea and bet on how long she'll be able to endure it! I'll go with five minutes!"

"That's tempting, but that's not it. It's not Beako today, but a different girl. And she's super pretty. A walking oasis I found in the forest that can heal our dried-up hearts—her name is Emilia-tan!"

Just as the excitement had reached its peak, Cheshirebaru pointed towards the forest. Their eyes shining with expectation, Hatter Subaru and March Subaru looked in that direction. But…

“—There’s no one there!!” the three of them shouted.

Fearing getting involved in the madness, Emilia had run away from there long before the others had realized.

4

“I’m reaaally tired…”

Emilia thought that she was used to talking with Subaru, but it was no surprise that dealing with three Subarus was still a tad too much for her. She felt bad about it, but she had given up on the tea party quickly and left the forest alone. Fortunately, it was only a short walk from the venue of Subarus’ Mad Tea Party to the edge of the forest, and when she bathed in the sunlight for the first time in several hours, her body and mind felt refreshed.

“And there’s a much more reassuring landmark than before.”

The thing that Emilia headed for without hesitation after exiting the forest was a tall building in front of her—as far as she knew, it was identical to the royal castle she’d seen in the royal capital, Lugunica.

It’s a castle. There must be someone I can trust there.

Emilia was no longer thinking about how she fell into a hole and how odd it was for there to be a castle here anymore. All she had on her mind was a desire to do something she couldn’t quite put her finger on and a motherly instinct to spank Puck.

“I’ve arrived. Alright, I need to talk to someone…”

Emilia reached the castle and looked around, searching for people, without noticing how strange it was for the castle to be surrounded by a garden of blooming flowers. And then…

“The trial! The trial is going to begin!”

She bumped into a cat who was crossing the flowerbed, shouting loudly. Puck, who had been missing since he was swept into a window, had appeared. And just like that, he rushed into the castle without noticing her.

“You did it again, Puck! And a trial…geez, this is no time to be playing around!”

Emilia puffed her cheeks at Puck for ignoring her, then entered the castle as well. The white light that spread out in front of her made her shield her eyes as soon as she went inside. She timidly removed her hand from her face, and the sight in front of her eyes was…

“So is this…the court?”

It was a huge place. The ceiling was so high that it couldn’t be seen, and it was surrounded by grandstands. The seats were all filled with the audience and the surroundings were dominated by a noisy buzz.

“—Off with her head.”

At the far end of the court was a pink-haired girl who passed down a cruel verdict.

She was dressed as a maid as usual, but the hair ornament on her head had been replaced with a crown—it was Ram.

Ram looked down at the witness stand with a cool expression. And in front of her gaze was Beatrice, who had been tied up and thrown on the ground for some reason, screaming with a red face.

“B-Betty demands a retrial, in fact! This is tyranny of the state, I suppose! Betty has been framed!”

“Off with her head.”

“Is that all you can say, I suppose?! Give Betty a break!”

Though Beatrice pleaded that she had been wrongly convicted, Ram didn’t listen and was determined to execute her. A blue-haired girl was snuggled up next to Ram.

The younger sister, Rem, touched her elder sister's shoulder and said, "Hey, Sister. Maybe you should hear Miss Beatrice out a little…and if it's just about the pastry, then Rem can bake it again."

"What about Ram's feelings of looking forward to the pastry Rem baked but it got snatched away from Ram. There will be no end to this humiliation until the culprit's head is publicly displayed and her skull is made into a cup."

"What a treacherous thing to do just for a pastry!" Beatrice screamed. "You Oni! Devil! The Demon King of the Sixth Heaven!"

The more abuses she hurled, the more her crimes accumulated. Lèse-majesté got added on top of it all, and the court's atmosphere made it seem like everyone had accepted that she'd be executed.

Startled by the tension in the air, Emilia called out to wait. "Wait! The punishment is too cruel for her actions!"

"Oh, so you are going to protect Betty, are you? You really are ignorant of your social standing, child, for you to be defying Queen Ram. Ha-Ha-ha."

It was Puck who responded to Emilia's plea as if she were just some lightweight.

Puck, a gavel in hand that made it seem like he was overseeing the trial, ordered Emilia to stand in the witness stand.

"I don't know what you are talking about, but Beatrice wouldn't go that far. It's too much to behead her. What has happened to you, Ram?"

"How dare this girl talk to Ram in such a familiar manner. But if what you are saying is true, then who else could have eaten Ram's pastry?"

"Betty doesn't know who ate it…but Betty can smell a faint aroma of sweets coming from this girl, I suppose. Betty can sense such things."

"Beatrice?!"

Beatrice, laying all tied up on the floor, sold out Emilia who had just stood up in her defense.

And in reality, Emilia was aware that she had eaten a pastry. She wanted to plead that Clind had made it, but she instantly felt a hostile shift in the court's atmosphere.

"Wait, wait! I feel like I'm getting a reaaally bad feeling here!"

"…Well, if this girl really is the culprit, then she would have just watched Miss Beatrice get beheaded," said Rem. "But she came forward, which means that…her conscience couldn't take it?"

"Aren't you going to look at it like I'm not the culprit?!"

Emilia turned pale, thinking that she would be presumed guilty at this rate. But once again, it was the gentle younger sister who stood by her ruthless elder sister's side who extended a helping hand to the miserable defendant.

"Sister, Sister. There's no way she could be the culprit…"

"Is that so? If Rem says so, then it may be right."

Ram seemed like she was ready to admit that she had been out of line with Rem's intervention. Emilia calmed her heart somehow, thinking that she had gotten out of trouble. And then…

"That's right!" Cheshirebaru exclaimed. "Saying that Emilia-tan is the culprit is a false accusation no matter what!"

"Cute is justice!" shouted Hatter Subaru. "Pretty girls are a treasure! Emilia-tan is my waifu!"

"Let's scare Beako to tears while we're at it!" March Subaru added. "We need to push her to the brink of despair!"

A series of shouts came from the grandstands and everyone's gaze turned towards the source of the commotion. As expected, the ones being noisy were the three consecutive stars: Cat, Hare, and Hat Subaru. It seemed like the tea party had ended.

"Subarus, are you acquainted with the lady here?" Ram said to the three Subarus, who were next to each other.

The three of them flashed a grin and spoke:

"Yeah, we know her!" said Cheshirebaru.

"We had a tea party together!" said Hatter Subaru.

"I'd say we have a deep relationship!" said March Subaru.

"I see," Rem said, nodding in satisfaction after hearing their replies. She then gazed at Emilia and smiled in an enchantingly adoring manner. "Let's behead her."

"Whaaaaa?!"

"Alright. Off with her head."

"Wait! Wait a second! Hey, isn't this strange?! What happened all of a sudden?!"

Emilia panicked and pleaded, but neither Queen Ram nor Minister Rem had any intention of listening. The door to the court opened with a loud bang, and in came a large group of Pucks—dressed as soldiers, a lot of Pucks came rushing in. To her left, right, and every such direction, were Pucks.

"Huh, cute?!"

Emilia felt happiness and fear at the same time as she was surrounded by Pucks dressed in armor, as gardeners, and in bizarre outfits that resembled playing cards.

"Su-Subaru!"

"Why did it turn out like this?" Cheshirebaru wondered. "Someone please get to the bottom of this. That's our only wish."

"Gosh, Subaru, you idiooot!"

"Tee-hee," the three Subarus giggled.

Emilia helplessly got engulfed by a group of Pucks charging into her while watching the three Subarus stick out their tongues.

5

“—Emilia-tan, earth to Emilia-tan.”

“Umm, umm…”

Emilia’s consciousness was awakened by the sensation of someone shaking her shoulder and calling her name.

Her long eyelashes quivered, then she opened her eyes and blinked a couple of times. She then looked up and realized that a familiar face was right in front of her.

“…Subaru?”

“Yeah, it’s me. You surprised me earlier, you know. I was calling you and you disappeared off somewhere. I didn’t expect you to go and take a nap just like that. You must have been tired.”

Subaru smiled for a split second, and then Emilia snapped out of her stupor. She hastily looked around and confirmed that it was the courtyard of Roswaal Manor, then sighed.

“I’m glad…”

“Hmm? What happened? Did you have a scary dream by any chance? Alright, if that’s the case, then you can come jump into my arms. I’ll hold you tightly in my capable arms for as long as you need.”

“Sorry, I don’t get what you’re talking about.”

Subaru, who had his arms spread out, dropped his shoulders, and Emilia tilted her head as she looked at him.

I think I was dreaming, but I can’t remember what I was dreaming about. But I feel like it was really confusing and chaotic. I’m glad it was just a dream.

“Anyway, I’m glad I found you. It’s almost time for dinner, so let’s head back. I’ll keep the fact that you skipped your afternoon studies a secret between us.”

“Well… Sure, thank you. I’ll be careful next time.”

Emilia stood up with the help of Subaru’s hand, then brushed the grass off and straightened her back. And while doing so, she felt like there was something she needed to tell him.

“Subaru… Um…”

“Yeah, what is it?”

Emilia pondered for a while after looking at Subaru’s face after he’d turned towards her. And then… “If you hold a tea party, I’ll come to it even if no one else does.”

“Why would you make such a sad assumption about a hypothetical situation?!”

Emilia burst into laughter after looking at the screaming Subaru.

If she was asked why, then all she could say was:

—I felt like I saw Subaru feeling lonely in Wonderland.

END

Bonus Short Stories

Anastasia Rising in Life Memorial Day

1

Kicking the pieces of wood laying in that backalley, Ricardo cursed his own bad luck in finding the child that had appeared in front of him. He had been sitting down, at the end of a dead-end street still wet from rain, about to eat the pastry he had just bought, when a problem appeared, ready to torment him.

Ricardo: "…!"

The one facing Ricardo in silence was a human child, dirty from head to toe. Her light purple-colored hair was untidy and unkempt, and worn clothes that looked like shabby tags. Her hostile gaze revealed a lack of trust in humanity, which meant she certainly was an orphan from the poorest area of the city.

It is not uncommon to find children without any parents. The rich are very rich, and the poor are very poor. It's a universal rule, and the same is true in Kararagi, where commerce is flourishing.

Ricardo: "Whaddaya want, brat? I just finished working and I'm hungry… I don't want trouble."

???: "You little shit! Where the fuck did you go?"

Suddenly, a yell reached Ricardo's ears, having taken the initiative to try and not be disturbed. In the end, he let out a sigh from his oversized mouth.

???: "Oh! I found you, kid! What's up with you… Huh? Who the hell are you?"

Four hoodlums, with a brown-skinned man as their leader, rushed into that dead-end street. The man's face twisted in anger when he first spotted the child, and raised his voice even louder once he saw Ricardo. But that rage quickly faded once Ricardo got up.

Ricardo: "Why are you so pale? What's the matter now?"

Leader: “That size… What damn kind of demi-human are you?”

Ricardo: “Can’t you see I’m a dogman? A Kobold.”

Leader: “There’s no such thing as Kobolds with bodies like that! You’re bullshitting me!”

As the brown man shouted, Ricardo made a frown, blocking his ears. Ricardo had already lost track of how many times he had heard that spiel, that sort of indignation. In truth, even though he towered at nearly two meters tall, his whole body was covered in brown fur, and his distinctively doglike facial features left no doubts on whether he was a canine demi-human.

Even though he had to admit he was one of the absolute tallest units of among dog-people.

Ricardo: “Oh no, brot’er… I don’t wanna stand in your way. In truth, this brat jumped in while I was eatin’. I was the one that was bothered here.”

Saying this with sternness, it had been enough to make the ruffians look like they had been intimidated by him. Snorting inwards at his lack of guts, Ricardo then tried to leave that place to avoid any further headaches.

Ricardo: “…”

At the very last moment, he took a quick glance at the child as he left the alley. He had no way of knowing what she had done. But judging from how fired up the crooks were, she was probably not going to get away from them unscathed. Ricardo wasn’t one for feeling sorry for others.

However, looking at those pale blue irises so careless, greatly changed Ricardo’s fate.

Leader: “Anyway, come on! At least you’re coming with me!”

Ricardo: “Wait a second, brother.”

The leader of the group grabbed the child’s shoulder, and tried to drag her petite body out of that place. The moment that child showed a sign of desperate resistance, however, Ricardo interrupted. In the narrow alleyway, the brown-skinned man was agitated by Ricardo's gigantic frame and backed up. Before he could open his mouth, Ricardo seized the child's head and hid her behind his back.

???: "…"

Leader: "H-Hey, what are you doing…?"

Ricardo: "You're holdin' a collar in your hand, aren'tcha? That's the kinda collar you put on a slave."

Pointing to the man's hand, he snapped back with a calm voice. That hand was gripping a collar connected to an iron chain, and the ruffians sharpened their gaze in response.

And they finally noticed. The towering demi-human also had the same kind of collar around his neck.

Leader: "You dog, on your neck, that's a slave's…"

Ricardo: "Don't get me wrong. No, my slave contract already ran out. The stone symbolizin' the contract ain't shining, see? I've done my time. I just keep wearin' this so I would not forget those days. But my personal history doesn't matter, what ya guys are doin' does."

While listening to Ricardo's story, the men had reached into their pockets. Sniffing the changing atmosphere, Ricardo pointed towards the child with his chin and continued,

Ricardo: "I wouldn't have stuck my big nose if the kid already had that collar 'round her neck, but I'm worried now that she has yet to use it… It ain't somethin' that can be taken off without a contract, and it ain't right to make that kinda deal in a dark alley like this. Besides…"

Leader: "…Besides what, goddamnit?"

Ricardo: "Ya people ain't talkin' with Kararagian dialect. Where's the shit flowin' from, then?"

Immediately after Ricardo laughed heartily, revealing his fangs, the brown man in front of him moved. Throwing the collar to the side, he drew a dagger with the other, free hand. In one continuous, flowing maneuver, the glowing tip of the dagger glints near Ricardo's thick neck for a sharp blow. Just before that—

Ricardo: "Hoho, an amateur."

The large machete that was propped up against the wall was swung, and the man's neck was snapped well before he could attack. The man's head, struck by that iron slab, turned the whole way around, and his body slammed into the wall and collapsed. Looking at that scene, the other three were paralyzed, shocked at their partner's tragic end.

Ricardo: "Correction… All of ya are amateurs, and very stupid."

The machete flashed a total of three times. Conversely, the number of men that stopped moving was exactly three times as well. That was all that was needed to draw the curtain on the quarrel that had just taken place in that alley, and, after stashing the corpses away to a corner, the monster of a Kobold turned around.

The child was still there, standing, without running away. She was looking at the remains of those men, unafraid but with the same kind of hostility that she had shown previously, just like the one she showed before she nearly was enslaved.

It was not weakness, it was pure, undiluted rebellious spirit—a look that awakened some interest in Ricardo.

Ricardo: "Hey, kid. Well, I'll be damned."

???: "…"

He scratched his head not knowing what to say, when he finally noticed the warmth held in his hand again. It was the pastry he had just bought and was planning on savoring before this had ever happened.

Ricardo: “Do ya want some of this pastry? It’s still warm.”

???: “…I do.”

Then, the child quickly took the pastry from Ricardo’s hand, at the same time her stomach growled, which got a chuckle out of the demi-human. Then, the kid started with an “And”, squinting,

???: “I’m no brat, I’m a girl. Don’tcha you call me that again, ochan.”

And she threw a grudgeful look at Ricardo, the kind not even those slave merchants had been dealt.

2

Ricardo: “However, man, things have gotten dangerous as of late. I didn’t think they wouldva swooped as low as to enslave little children as well. The name and philosophy of the Kararagi City State are cryin’.”

As he left that alley before more trouble emerged, Ricardo let out his internal thoughts with a grumble. By his side, stood the little girl eating that confection, which was most certainly going to be devoured entirely. He couldn’t blame her at all.

Ricardo: “It’s not shameful to be dirty. Ya got plenty of spirit… Bein’ captured by that gang of nitwits is quite the blunder, though. How did ya get caught, lil’ girl?”

Girl: “… T’was nothing, keep your nose outta it, ochan.”

The girl who had just finished eating curses, now walking on a busy street. Seeing as the child had gotten annoyed at that question, the Kobold laughed once again, making her frown even more.

Girl: “And why did ya help me, ochan? Ya know I can’t pay it back.”

Ricardo: “Even I don’t know… It wasn’t exactly by chance…”

He tried to dodge that question as he scratched his head roughly.

The girl didn’t seem to like that answer, but Ricardo was saying the truth, and couldn’t really explain his reasoning, unfortunately for her. Maybe, it had been her light blue eyes.

Girl: “—Ah.”

And as the Kobold reflected on his motivations, the child let out a short gasp. In the direction she was looking to, two silhouettes were dashing towards her. Two fox demi-humans, probably brothers, breathing heavily, running up to her and,

Fox Bro: “Th-Thankfully, you’re safe… You were taken in our stead, what sort of thing may have happened…”

Girl: “Shut up. I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, you must be confusin’ me with someone else.”

Fox Bro: “Of course not! How would I be mistaken ‘bout my benefactor?”

The fox demi-human persisted, while the girl continued indifferent, acting unapproachable.

Girl: “I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about, but don’t ever enter alleyways like that one out of curiosity. There are others like them hangin’ around. They seem to think capturin’ demi-humans… ain’t a problem.”

Fox Bro: “That…”

Girl: “I don’t wanna get involved with that anymo’. Get out of here, go home, and cry wit’ ya momma. I won’t say it again.”

With a hurtful look at the cold girl’s words, the beastmen brothers went away resigned. After they had gone away far enough, the girl then turned to Ricardo, who had been watching them with his arms folded,only then did the child notice that Ricardo was looking at her with his arms crossed.

Girl: “…What’s with that face.”

Ricardo: “Nothin’. Ochan just found out somethin’ that has nothin’ to do with him.”

Girl: “…You’re annoying.”

Ricardo patted the girl’s head, who did not like it one bit and swatted his large hands away. That little event left the Kobold in a very good mood. After confirming those brothers were gone, he turned to her.

Ricardo: “Is that ok? You’re aware ya nearly became a slave for helpin’ them?”

Girl: “Yeah. It was somethin’ I did ‘cause I wanted to. Besides, if their family finds out they were involved with an orphan in a very poor town, they’ll be in trouble. This is best for them and for me.”

Ricardo: “You’re real mature for your age, aren’tcha? Sorry, but I don’t hate it, lil’ girl.”

Girl: “…I don’t like ya much, tho’.”

The girl reacted to that with a murmur and a pout. Ricardo reacted with a hearty laugh, tilting his head, and the girl then pointed at his neck.

Girl: “That collar is proof ya were once a slave. Why are ya still wearin’ it even after your contract is up?”

Ricardo: “Didn’t ya hear? It’s so I can never forget. I can’t forget my past as a slave. I am who I am today ‘cause I was once a slave.”

Girl: “…That’s ridiculous. It’s the same as shacklin’ yourself.”

After hearing Ricardo’s quiet justification, the glint that the girl had shown in that alleyway returned to her eyes. Their light glared him straight-on, the Kobold nearly forgot to breathe.

Girl: “Ya sound like those people from the poorest part of town… You’ve been slaves for so long, you’ve got a loser’s mentality stuck in you, it made ya a coward. They’re just excuses for why ya didn’t make it, and so you can say you’re a lil’ better now.

Ricardo: “Lil’ girl…”

Girl: “That way of thinkin’ is what’s wrong. You’re better now? Absolutely not, now’s the worst moment of all, because ya are standin’ still, not doin’ a thing. I don’t wanna be like that.”

Saying that with a shaky voice, the girl was shedding tears nonstop. Despite having nearly been captured by slave merchants, despite having seen a brutal murder in front of her, she had not cried, yet now she cried for an uncertain future. It was as if she could not forgive herself for being nothing but being a hollow, orphan child, and continued to cry as she leered to the collar worn by Ricardo.

Ricardo: “—Yeah. I hate the worst too.”

Saying those words, he patted the little girl’s head as she wept and looked at the sky, to steel himself to do what he felt was the right thing to do.

3

Ricardo: “Yes, now, ya look presentable.”

Girl: “…”

After having her hair done, which she wanted to let grow, washing her mud-dirtied body, and changing her ragged clothes, into new, beautiful ones, she actually seemed like a decent girl.

However, at Ricardo’s remark, she looked at her appearance, and with restless gestures,

Girl: “Wh-What is this…? Why do I gotta dress like this?”

Ricardo: “I’ve already arranged everythin’. Because you’re gonna start workin’ hard at a bar. Ya wouldn’t be able to work at all, all dirty like that.”

Girl: “W-Work…? This suddenly?”

Ricardo: “Don’tcha wanna change from bein’ the worst possible? Then, you can’t just say it, you have to work like ya meant it.

Besides, what's ya name? I need it so I can give it to the owner."

The girl was confused with this barrage of new information and stuttered before replying to the question posed by Ricardo. In the end, after a good while, she looked away while pouting, and,

???: "I have no name. But I grew up in a hole in the ground, so people call me Anastasia."

Ricardo: "…Gahahaha! That's great! That's a great name! Anastasia, from the hole in the ground, huh?! I'm sure ya gonna be a big girl with' that name!"

Then, pushing the back of the blushing girl, the two left the inn and entered the busy street. Amid the crowd, Anastasia closed her eyes as if looking towards something extremely bright.

Ricardo showed his fangs to that Anastasia, and continued,

Ricardo: "Look 'ere, lil' girl. This is the first and last time I'm helpin' ya. I don't know what to do next. If ya truly are determined, then this will go alright."

Anastasia: "…Why are ya doin' so much for me, ochan?"

The look the girl exhibited was one of heavy doubt and mistrust. For Ricardo, it was actually a relief that was her reaction, instead of a word of thanks.

Ricardo: "Nothin' but whimsy. But I think it's gonna pay off, if ya ask me."

He replied as he stroked the girl's head, punctuating his statement with a loud laugh. Once washed, her hair was thin, and soft, as if representing her gentle heart. Even the fact it was slightly wavy reflected her stubborn nature.

Ricardo: "I hope ya make it big soon. When ya do, I will be proud if ya remember me."

Anastasia: "…Ochan."

Ricardo: “Hmm?”

Called by a whispering voice, Ricardo waited for the continuation that never came. But the girl started running to the other side of the street, where she turned on her heels, and yelled back.

Anastasia: “Today I’m gonna take advantage of your kindness! But don’t ya forget. When I make it big, the first thing Imma do is buy ya. I’ll take off that slave collar with my own hands!”

Ricardo’s finger touched the collar unwillingly, unconsciously. Feeling its cold, hard sensation on his finger, the images of having been once bound by it flashed by. Regardless, he swallowed the memories of the days he thought it was an abomination and smiled.

Ricardo: “I am Ricardo. I’ll never forget what you’re sayin’, Ana-bo.”

A girl whose cheeks were swollen in a pout, and the demi-human who laughed loudly in amusement.

That was how the woman who would one day be in charge in the biggest merchant company in the country, and her first collaborator, once met.

END

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Ferris's Sudden Emergence ☆

1

My neck feels ticklish, and the draftiness down there is making me uneasy. The feeling of the wind on my bare shoulders feels kind of nice though, and I can't get over just how different the world feels just from dressing differently. I know I shouldn't be like this, yet here I am. If I don't stay mindful of it, I'll probably behave the same way as before. I need to be careful.

"Oh, there you are. Perfect timing."

He heard a voice come from behind while walking down a familiar path in an unfamiliar outfit. He turned around and saw a gentle-looking man with a beard calmly walking towards him. He looked like he was almost in his forties, but each of his gestures made him look older.

To put it in other words, he looked older than his age.

"Duke Meckart?" Felix asked. "What's the matter? You look so feeble."

"I don't think I do though? Well, truth be told, my back hurts more than usual today… Eh-hm, that is not what I wanted to talk about. Have you seen Crusch?"

The man—Meckart—smiled calmly at his rather insolent reply.

He is a good-natured man, though I must say that he's not at all suited for the world of political warfare full of scheming and deception.

But even if he was like that, he was the current head of a ducal family that also happened to be one of the most prestigious families in the kingdom. So, things weren't easy for the people around him. While having such an opinion about Meckart, the person who had been questioned put a finger to his lips, and…

“Hmm, Lady Crusch went for a long ride this morning. She said she would be back by lunch, so I think she will be back soon.”

“What?! A long ride?! Why?! I told her beforehand that His Highness, Prince Fourier, would be visiting and that she should receive him!” Meckart’s face turned pale, and it was obvious that he was flustered. He smiled wryly and pointed at the magic time crystal placed in the mansion’s hallway and…

“Regarding that, I…I too have circumstances that make it hard for me to answer.”

Meckart looked at Felix, who had changed to a feminine tone in the middle of his sentence, and lowered his eyebrows in a troubled manner. “I am sorry you are going through so much trouble. If it’s Crusch we’re talking about, she probably forced you again, didn’t she?”

“No, it isn’t like that.”

He smiled softly and brushed his chestnut hair over his shoulder in a natural motion.

Meckart let out a sigh while looking at his gesture. It seemed like he was both impressed and deplored by it. “Seems like you are really getting used to that look, Felix.”

He called the name of the boy—who was being bashful like a young girl.

2

He cut his long hair short and replaced his formal menswear with fashionable women’s clothes. It was his first time wearing a skirt or tight stockings. He wiggled his long, thin tail that protruded from the skirt specially tailored for demi-humans or beastmen. Next, he styled his hair so that his demi-human cat ears would stand out and then put on a flirty smile to complete his new look.

Oh wait, I can’t forget to decorate my hair with my important white ribbon.

Felix Argyle thus assumed the role of a femboy just like had been asked of him.

"…"

He was shocked and pleased to find that his cross-dressing looked surprisingly natural. With this, he could see the promise he had made with his master through, in the best way possible. It would be Felix's greatest joy if he could be of service to her.

Thus, he sincerely wished that he could be useful even in a situation like this, however…

"What is the meaning of this?! I have come here, yet Crusch is nowhere to be seen!"

"Ha, ha-ha-ha!" Meckart laughed nervously. "My daughter is at an age where she may feel embarrassed. Since Your Highness has come here to meet her personally. Maybe that's why she isn't showing up!"

It didn't seem like he could come between the two who were having a verbal tug of war at the gate of the mansion anytime soon. One was Meckart, the master of the manor, whose pale face was even paler and seemed desperate. And the one facing him was a rather handsome boy with long blond hair. He was around the same age as Felix, which put him at around eleven or twelve. His crimson eyes were shimmering like jewels, and he had spoken in somewhat of a carefree tone. With his fur coat, servants following closely behind him, the luxurious dragon carriage that he came out of, and from how a duke was bowing his head down, it was clear that he was from a prominent family.

Or rather, his background was obvious.

"So that's His Highness, Fourier Lugunica."

He was royalty who held the title of Fourth Prince of the Kingdom of Lugunica and was the son of the current king. Now, the reason why a person of such high stature had taken the trouble to visit a duke's domain was because—

"I was wondering where all that noise was coming from, but it turned out to be Your Highness. I had no idea that you had already arrived. Apologies for my impudence," said a girl who had appeared on an earth dragon, expertly controlling it, with her tied-up green hair fluttering in the wind. She was a real beauty.

She was a beautiful girl, and yet, words like pretty or cute hardly suited her. The way she stood reminded people of the sharpness of a sword. She had a gallant, strong face, and piercing eyes. She had such a commanding presence that it was hard to believe that she was a young girl, and the way she carried herself could make anyone gasp. There was no mistaking that she was Felix's master and the girl everyone there had been waiting for.

"Ooh, Crusch! Are you feeling alright? Only you could get away with making me wait like that!"

"My apologies. I was told that Your Highness would be arriving in the afternoon. I did not expect you to arrive before lunch."

"Yes, I hastened the earth dragon since I wanted to meet you."

Fourier became overjoyed and excited at the arrival of the girl—Crusch Karsten. He'd replied to her boastingly, but he had completely missed the mark and puffed his chest arrogantly, as if he had said something admirable. Looking at that, Felix was convinced that he was exactly like he had heard.

Crusch and Fourier were exchanging pleasant remarks, but Meckart, who was a duke and also a father, couldn't watch it in peace. He spoke up, his face still pale. "Hey, Crusch. How long are you planning on playing with the earth dragon? Take it to the stables and then come right back after changing your clothes. Don't forget to take a shower, alright?"

"Yes, alright. Felix, come." Crusch, who had received an order from her father, called Felix, who was standing among the servants.

He reacted to her call like a dog with an "OK!" and quickly went to her side.

“Take the dragon to the stable. You can accompany me on a long ride next time. It feels quite nice on a windy day.”

“I’d love to do that after my training. Oh, and you might need to hold my waist and hands while teaching me, so…”

“That won’t be a problem. If that is what you wish to do, then you can pick a time and date after looking at your schedule.”

With the promise in place, Felix grabbed hold of the reins with a smile on his face. Crusch bowed to Fourier, and as she was about to head back to the mansion…

“Don’t make His Highness wait too long, and change into the dress that has been prepared for you. I will not tolerate any complaints, Crusch.”

“…Father, I have told you many times. I shall no longer wear dresses, only formal men’s attire. I don’t want to be the kind of master that breaks her promise with her retainer.”

“Crusch…”

When Crusch respectfully corrected Meckart’s misunderstanding, Felix turned pale when he found out that he was the reason behind that.

Fourier then interrupted them. “Stop. What is the meaning of what you just said? Speak in a way that even I may understand,” he asked, cutting into their parent-child conversation without reading between the lines.

Crusch briefly told Fourier that she had made a vow to see a certain promise through: to stop acting like a woman, and to become the finest swordswoman and noble. As Felix felt proud listening to that, Meckart put a hand to his forehead and lamented his daughter’s future.

Fourier’s face turning red, he said, “No, no, you cannot do that! What on earth are you saying! Stop being a woman? Stop being stupid! I will not forgive such a thing! Since you are a girl!”

“I believe it would be out of line for Your Highness to dictate to me about what I should be,” Crusch responded rationally to Fourier, who was being emotional.

“Arggghhh…!” Fourier groaned, at a loss for words. His gaze wandered and then landed on the sword at Crusch’s waist. “Alright, then pick up your sword! Use your sword to show me how big your ambition is!”

“…A duel? Between I and Your Highness?”

“Yes! I am learning swordsmanship in the royal castle. Everyone was saying that I have talent. I shall personally teach you the difference between the strength of a man and a woman!” Fourier declared with a bright face, thrusting his fist towards the sky.

Fourier quickly turned around to look at Meckart, then smiled at the pale duke. “I am fine with the garden being the location for our duel! Bring two wooden swords! I shall turn your daughter into a woman!” he so boldly declared.

3

Felix was performing healing magic on Fourier, who was sprawled out in the garden like a torn-up rag. He had seen the duel—which was more of an execution, though it would be referred to as a duel for the sake of propriety—and wasn’t sure who was at fault here.

Was it Fourier’s fault for daring to continue challenging her without realizing the difference in ability? Or was it Crusch’s straightforward personality’s fault, which prevented her from holding back? Either way, the result of the combination of both was the cruel state of the fourth prince.

“Father collapsed with a pale face. It’s possible he might scold me later.”

“Hmmm, he might do that.”

Crusch saw Meckart off as he was being carried away by the servants, looking exhausted. There was no trace of sweat on her, making Fourier's lousy fighting skills seem even more pitiful.

"Uuh… P-Paper thin, it was a paper-thin difference."

"Is that so? Then the paper must be quite thick."

"Lady Crusch, His Highness will feel miserable if you do not treat him a bit more kindly."

It was a straightforward statement, something typical of her, but it was too honest, so Felix gave some advice.

The three of them were talking in a corner of the garden while basking in the breeze. The soldiers accompanying Fourier and the servants of the mansion were looking at them from a distance. They were probably thinking that it was a lovely sight.

"Anyway, Crusch… I did not know that you were so skilled at using swords."

"I am still quite lacking. But, Your Highness. A promise is a promise. From now on, leave me to…"

"I-I know. You can do as you please until I best you at our next match."

The part where he effeminately asked for a rematch was part of his loveable character, and it brought a wry smile to Ferris's face.

Crusch probably thought so too, as her lips were relaxed, and she was smiling.

Felix and Fourier were completely enchanted by her charming, gentle smile.

"I-I need to be strong. Or else I will ruin the reputation of the royal family."

"It isn't like that. Besides, how good you are at the sword won't diminish the prestige of Your Highness and the royal family. The sacred blood pact—as long as the Dragon protects the kingdom, the respect from the people will remain unshaken.”

“Mhm… I don’t think so.”

Fourier immediately tried to conceal his emotions, but Crusch followed up and denied his words.

Fourier looked displeased after hearing what she had to say. “If the Dragon does everything, then why does the royal family exist? That is not a reason for me to stay weak. It shouldn’t be a reason for me to be weaker than you…a woman!”

“Your Highness…”

It was the kind of stubborn words that boys his age would say in front of girls they liked. Felix, however, instinctively sympathized with the rebellious attitude against his own weakness in his words.

Felix felt like Fourier’s words pierced his heart since he once had nights where he would wrap his arms around his knees and cry at his own helplessness.

And Felix wasn’t the only person who was deeply impressed by those words.

“‘Then why does the royal family exist’.” Crusch opened her eyes and mouth and repeated Fourier’s words, tensing her cheeks.

Even Crusch didn’t know just how deeply his words resonated in her mind now. Though she didn’t know it, it was an unshakable fact that it left a mark on her heart and shook her soul.

“Your Highness, let us cross swords like this again. I believe your feelings to be most noble.”

“Hm, is that so? Yes, it is as you say! Hmm, I am glad that you understood me! But it is that! It’s okay if you are a little gentler with me next time! I don’t want to feel pain…”

“You won’t learn anything if I go easy on you.”

“You really aren’t kind at all, are you?!”

“Pffft—” Felix burst into laughter, unable to hold it in after hearing Crusch’s reply and Fourier’s scream.

Fourier stared at Felix for the first time after seeing his reaction. Felix was about to open his mouth to immediately apologize for the disrespect, but… “I thank you as well. You are more skilled in healing magic than the people in the castle. It felt rather pleasant. You have earned my praise. Your name…yes, it was Ferris!”

With a bright face, he boldly said the wrong name. But he seemed so full of confidence that Felix wasn’t sure if he should correct him or not. And then…

“—It’s a fine name. Your original name feels somewhat odd due to that attire. Ferris has a nice ring to it. If you like it, I would like to call you that too… What do you think?”

Crusch smiled gently and revealed that she liked the name he had been called by a mistake. Felix muttered that name in his mouth in front of Fourier, who looked confused, and then nodded. “Yes, then please call me Ferris. I would like My Lady and Your Highness to call me by that name from now on.”

“Hmm? I don’t get it, but oh well. Alright then, Ferris, I’ll be expecting good work from you!”

Fourier’s expressions were that of a person who didn’t understand anything, and he ruined his beauty by laughing loudly. Felix smiled wryly at that, and Crusch tenderly and lovingly said, “—Ferris. Yes. That name seems like a better fit for my woman.”

She said that without thinking, causing a commotion that once again made Fourier explode and Meckart fall unconscious.

END

Volume 6

Chapters 41-53

Chapter 41:
Immature Negotiations

1

“It’s quite an interesting turn of events for you to be my last visitor today, My Guest.”

Despite her schedule being thrown off, Crusch laughed, seemingly in good spirits, and settled deeply into the armchair in the reception room.

Across from her, facing her directly, sat Subaru and Rem. Behind Crusch stood Wilhelm and Ferris, poised and waiting— A scene Subaru felt he’d seen before.

The same location and people as the first time, when he’d declared his return to the mansion. The topic Subaru was about to bring up now was even more contentious than it had been back then.

After all, this wasn’t just about Subaru and Rem returning to the mansion; it was much bigger.

“Fortunately, there’s no longer a reason to dine out. I have time to accompany you until dinner is ready at the mansion.”

“You usually wouldn’t have time like this without any prior notice. Subaru-kyun should really appreciate Lady Crusch’s boundless generosity, you know?”

“Well, the truth is, I just had some free time because my negotiating partner stood me up.”

“Oh, Lady Crusch is so wonderful for not even trying to save face…!”

While the master and servant engaged in their usual banter, Subaru weighed his opening in his mind.

Considering the time limit, he couldn’t afford to hesitate too much.

However, if his delivery was too poor, he wouldn't achieve his goal.

"Well, it's probably best to keep the conversation simple."

If he were to prolong the conversation with roundabout, verbose explanations, it would likely displease Crusch, given her personality.

He knew what he needed to say, so he shouldn't hesitate.

Changing his demeanor and expression, Subaru watched as Crusch adjusted her seating posture. "Now," she prefaced, extending a hand towards him.

"This meeting was requested by you, My Guest. I'll leave the opening to you. —What is it you desire?"

Subaru thought, She really gets straight to the point.

Licking his dry lips to moisten them, Subaru took a deep breath in front of Crusch. Then,

"The Witches Cult is planning an attack on Roswaal's domain. I need your help, Crusch-san, to crush them."

Subaru stated the conditions necessary to achieve his goal directly.

The forces essential for annihilating the Witches Cult— Since they couldn't be expected from Roswaal's territory, he had no choice but to pull them from elsewhere. And despite his short stay, Subaru knew that Crusch possessed that power.

At Subaru's direct words, the four others present showed their respective reactions.

Wilhelm's reaction was a mere twitch of his eyebrow. Ferris's eyes widened in surprise, and he looked at Crusch with concern. Rem, beside Subaru, silently pressed her lips together, her gaze piercing his profile.

And then,

"I see, the Witch Cult."

Crusch rested her chin on her clasped hands, her elbows on the reception room table, and smiled.

It was a captivating, alluring smile, showing a new side of her to Subaru, who had always strongly associated her with a stern and intense impression.

In any case, the die was cast.

Since he had directly plunged into the main topic, he had no choice but to continue non-stop. Calming his quickening heartbeat, Subaru waited for Crusch's next reaction.

However, she didn't utter anything beyond her initial remark. Subaru, finding this puzzling, slightly furrowed his brow.

"What's wrong? I told you, it's your turn to speak."

"No, well… I said what I needed to say…"

"Are you implying that simply stating a demand is the end of it? You must explain why you seek this demand, what evidence supports it, and what benefits we stand to gain by acceding to it. Without demonstrating these, it cannot be called a negotiation."

Crusch narrowed one eye, looking bored, as Subaru choked on his words.

Realizing that he was about to fall into her pace, Subaru inwardly chastised himself and continued speaking.

"Right, you're absolutely correct. My apologies, that was rude of me. It's just, I don't have much experience with negotiations like this."

"It's important to understand one's own inexperience. Don't worry about it. However, I have set a time limit until dinner. —Do not forget that."

She showed magnanimity while also mentioning the time limit, a clear display of carrot and stick.

Subaru re-organized what he needed to say.

“First, the reason I want to borrow your strength is… simply put, we’re short on fighting power. Our numbers are completely insufficient against the Witch Cult’s. As a result, we can’t counter their attack.”

“Indeed, a simple explanation. But isn’t Lord Mathers enough for that? His ability to wipe out groups is among the best in Lugunica. Numbers shouldn’t be an issue.”

“That would be true if they were all in one place, but that’s not the case. Since Roswaal can only be in one place at a time, we’re doomed if two locations are attacked.”

At the very least, it was confirmed that the Witch Cult would attack the village and the mansion. And hypothetically, they seemed to have also attacked passing dragon carriages. The word “evacuation” was uttered several times by Petelgeuse, which was the basis for this.

“I see, I can understand that. However, wouldn’t that be a dereliction of duty on Lord Mathers’ part as a lord? It is a lord’s obligation to maintain military power to protect their own territory. If he neglected that, overestimating his own strength, I would have no choice but to lower my evaluation of him.”

“You’re absolutely right on that front. In any case, that’s why we can’t resist the Witch Cult’s indiscriminate methods. We need more fighting power, in terms of numbers, for that reason.”

If the attack locations were limited to two, they would need enough military power to defend both simultaneously. Since Roswaal might be absent, if Rem and Ram were to handle one side, the other would require another reliable presence.

Subaru glanced at Wilhelm as he pleaded with Crusch. If possible, he definitely wanted to enlist Wilhelm’s help.

Wilhelm must have understood the meaning of Subaru’s gaze, but he showed no reaction. Crusch, looking at Subaru who had slightly lowered his eyes, waved her hand at Ferris beside her.

“The Witch Cult. It seems they’ve begun to move, after all.”

“Indeed. Well, it was expected once Lady Emilia, a half-elf, stepped onto the public stage.”

Ferris agreed with Crusch’s words, and Subaru frowned at his attitude.

Before he could question it, what drew Subaru’s attention was the surge of emotion emanating from beside him. When he looked over, a silent Rem was looking down, her lips pressed tightly together.

Seeing her intentionally emotionless expression, he could tell that her inner turmoil was anything but calm.

The first time he heard the phrase “Witch Cult” was from Rem, he recalled. The Witch Cult, which seemed to be an abhorrent entity to her, was now Subaru’s greatest enemy as well. He was probably making a face as grim as hers.

Seeing Rem’s indignation, Subaru cooled his head. Crusch, observing his state, swept her long green hair behind her back. “And then?” she asked, tilting her head.

“I understand the situation. Next is your reason for choosing our house as your collaborator and… the basis for that choice.”

“We’re choosing you, Crusch-san, as collaborators because it’s the most promising option given the current situation. You’re taking care of me and Rem, and compared to the other royal selection candidates, I think you’re in a position that makes it easier to cooperate.”

This was a part he had prepared an answer for, expecting to be asked.

Truth be told, if Subaru were to be completely honest, there was another party who would be even easier to deal with than Crusch. However, prioritizing ease of contact in the current situation led to him initiating negotiations here first.

“Easier to deal with, huh.”

Crusch muttered softly in response to Subaru’s answer, then smiled meaningfully. To Subaru, who couldn’t gauge the intent of her smile, she raised a finger and said, “Allow me to correct one thing.”

“Perhaps my treating you as guests has caused a misunderstanding, but there’s something I want you to reconsider.”

“…What is it?”

“I am not treating you as enemies. It is a fact that Emilia is already a political adversary to me. Understand? I am already in opposition to her.”

Emphasizing her surprisingly harsh words, Crusch clearly stated her position.

At her attitude, Subaru recalled the first iteration.

“No, but still, you’re currently… us…”

“That is because a contract has been formed. It is only because there is a contract between Emilia and me, albeit through her attendants, based on mutual compensation, that I have taken you in. If that agreement ceases, our positions will be clear, and in matters unrelated to the agreement, we are merely adversaries.”

Cutting off Subaru’s clinging words sharply, Crusch held her ground.

Even in the first world, she had clearly declared hostility to Subaru when he broke the contract. That could be called sincere, or inflexible.

In other words,

“There’s no chance of forming an alliance, then?”

“That has nothing to do with this. I told you, Natsuki Subaru. If this is a negotiation, you must present mutual benefits that both parties can agree to. So far, you've only confirmed the reason and the preconditions. I need to hear the rationale and the pure advantage for us to lend you our forces."

"However," she continued, after a pause,

"Regarding the rationale, it could be said that it's not strictly necessary. It was expected that the Witch Cult would begin to move once Emilia's lineage became known to the public. Whether the source of that information is reliable or a product of imagination, there is a near certainty either way."

Crusch apparently had no doubts whatsoever about the premise of this negotiation—that the Witch Cult had made its move. This seemed to be a common understanding unique to this world, shared by those living within it, which was a stroke of luck for Subaru, who was negotiating as an amateur.

The fact that the Witch Cult was so widely known, frankly, was on a level that made his skin crawl.

"In short, what's needed for this negotiation are mutual benefits. In your case, by borrowing our strength, you can eliminate the threat of the Witch Cult. So then, what do we gain by lending you our hand? Let me hear it."

"J-Just pure humanitarian aid or something…"

"An amusing jest. So amusing, in fact, that I'm tempted to jokingly order Wilhelm to draw his sword."

Only Wilhelm and Ferris were armed in the room, but the fact that she'd order Wilhelm, not her primary knight, indicated the power balance.

In any case, this was not a situation to be avoided with jokes. Subaru spun his mind at full throttle.

"Ah, well, you know. For example, if you lend a hand in this crisis, we could owe your camp an enormous favor…"

“—If I were to accept that proposal, it would mean Emilia’s withdrawal from the Royal Selection. Are you aware of that when you say it?”

“Huh?”

His words were cut off, and at the sharp interjection, Subaru’s mouth hung open. But Crusch’s gaze, looking at Subaru, was like a dangerous blade.

“Of course, isn’t it? To completely entrust the crisis of one’s own territory to a lord from another territory is a problem even before considering whether one has the qualities of a queen. If one cannot protect and command one’s own people, how can one possibly bear the burden of a nation? Natsuki Subaru—let me correct one more misunderstanding.”

Raising a finger, Crusch pointed it at the silent Subaru, as if to pierce him.

“You are conducting this negotiation on behalf of Emilia’s camp. The validity of all your statements rests on her, and your words carry Emilia’s weight. You should not make judgments lightly, nor can you easily go back on what you’ve said.”

“Ah, um…”

“With that said, I ask again. —If this matter creates a debt, it means the defeat of Emilia’s camp. Is that acceptable?”

Of course, it wasn’t.

Only now did Subaru truly begin to understand where he stood.

Subaru wasn’t in a casual debate where he bore no responsibility. This was a situation where a single word could shake the positions of many people and even influence the fate of the kingdom.

The stage Subaru had willingly stepped onto was precisely such a pressure-filled arena.

“Even so…”

Feeling crushed by the weight on his shoulders, Subaru bit his lip, his voice trembling.

As Crusch had said, if he accepted her help under the current conditions, it would put Emilia in an insurmountable disadvantage.

How much could she possibly recover in the Royal Selection, having fallen so far behind at this early stage?

If he were to make this proposal to Crusch, Emilia's Royal Selection would end here.

If he couldn't borrow her strength, Roswaal's territory would only face ravaging by the Witch Cult fanatics.

The scales swayed, and pain and creaking incessantly assaulted Subaru's brain.

As noise assaulted every corner of his thoughts, Subaru gritted his teeth and came to a conclusion:

"Even so, I need your help."

"…Even if it means withdrawing from the Royal Selection?"

"Better to be alive, right? —Once you're dead, it's over."

Subaru slumped his shoulders, unable to hide his disappointment, as he replied.

Once you're dead, it's over. Subaru didn't have the courage to witness the horrific state of that village and the incredibly tragic death of Rem, who was standing beside him, with his own eyes again.

If he could save lives by bowing his head and enduring humiliation, then he should do so.

Crusch, accepting Subaru's answer, pulled back her chin and said, "Understood."

"—In that case, the Karsten House will not lend you any forces."

She stated that definitively.

2

—For a moment, Subaru's world froze; he couldn't comprehend what Crusch had just said.

"—Huh?"

The sound that escaped him, though punctuated with a question mark, was just meaningless noise born of incomprehension. Crusch, accepting it, gracefully crossed her long legs.

"I repeat. Our house will not provide aid to the Mathers territory as you requested—and by extension, we will not lend forces to Emilia."

She repeated it, breaking it down into even clearer terms.

Her perfectly composed demeanor only made Subaru, who was struggling to grasp it, feel more foolish.

"You're ki—!"

The next moment, anger surged, and Subaru almost spat out the words, but he managed to check his impulsiveness just in time.

Raising his voice and yelling emotionally had never improved a situation. Moreover, his opponent was far more experienced and composed than he was.

He tapped his knee, maintaining a rhythm to temper his fervor.

"Why… why would it be like that…?"

He squeezed out the obvious question.

Before appealing to emotion, he had to first hear her side. Then, he'd search for a compromise and align their positions to find a solution. This was a fundamental of negotiation, and he couldn't just abandon it.

Petelgeuse's murderous intent— The fate of an entire village—rested on Subaru's judgment.

To Subaru's low query, Crusch held up two fingers. "First," she began.

"Your offer of Emilia's withdrawal from the Royal Selection, which you painfully accepted as our gain… Is not a valid hand in this negotiation. Do you understand?"

"Wh-Why not? A rival less is a substantial return for you guys…"

That's precisely why, because he couldn't trade it for lives, he had wagered it as the heaviest counterweight on the scales.

He knew Emilia was aiming for the throne, but he weighed it against so many lives.

Subaru bit his lip, refusing to back down, but Crusch shook her head.

"Don't you realize what you're saying? Emilia's withdrawal, as you described it, would occur regardless of my involvement."

"What are you—"

Subaru was about to finish his sentence, "—saying," when he suddenly understood.

As Subaru's face stiffened in stunned realization, Crusch nodded.

"As you said, without anyone's help, Emilia cannot protect her own territory. That directly means Emilia's withdrawal from the Royal Selection. I don't even need to lift a finger."

"Rather," Crusch waved the finger she still held up,

"It would be a greater detriment if other factions found out that my camp improperly interfered and caused Emilia's withdrawal. As you know, our house is currently in the most advantageous position in this Royal Selection. I want to avoid making enemies of the other factions all at once by prematurely knocking one of them out."

By doing nothing, she would gain precisely the advantage Subaru had offered. There was no need for her to deliberately take risks, like pulling chestnuts from the fire.

Then—

“Are you just going to abandon Roswaal’s territory… that village to the Witch Cult?!”

“Let me correct your misunderstanding. Don’t change the subject, Natsuki Subaru.”

Crusch’s cold gaze pierced through Subaru’s shouting. Her expression sharpened.

“It is Emilia who lacks the power to protect her territory, and it is Emilia who will lose her people due to her incompetence. It is decidedly not me.”

Powerless, incompetent— Subaru felt as if he had been punched in the head by those words.

He wanted to argue against Crusch’s claims. But only childish emotional arguments came to mind, and he couldn’t muster the strength to counter her logical reasoning.

“It seems you have nothing more to say.”

Crusch, her eye half-closed, murmured at Subaru’s repeated opening and closing of his mouth. She then looked out the window with her open right eye, gazing at the sky.

“It’s almost the hour of the earth—dinner time. Right on schedule.”

Ending the conversation, Crusch made to stand.

Subaru, desperate at her unapproachable demeanor, cried out,

“W-Wait!”

He gestured with his hand to stop her as she was about to rise, and Subaru, hovering in his seat, moistened his lips and desperately tried to find a way to continue negotiating with Crusch.

“A-Are you seriously going to abandon them? The villagers have no fault, no reason!”

However, what came out of Subaru’s mouth was just a string of effeminate words, clinging to her mercy. Hearing this, a faint disappointment flickered in Crusch’s eyes.

“I told you. It is not I who lacks the power…”

“To know and then abandon them! Isn’t that evil?! If you have the power, if you can help, why won’t you help?! What’s wrong with helping?! If it’s another territory, are you just going to look away because it won’t affect the votes?!”

He interrupted, screaming his rage, despite knowing it was rude.

Crusch frowned at Subaru’s outburst, and Ferris, his eyes blazing with anger at the sheer impudence, started to step forward, saying, “Just a moment—” But,

“Ferris, it’s fine.”

“But, Lady Crusch… that’s too much.”

“It’s raw spirit. If I don’t respond, my standing will diminish.”

Ferris grumbled in discontent, but quietly retreated at Crusch’s command. Watching him out of the corner of her eye, Crusch settled back into her chair.

“To overlook, to abandon, is that not evil, you ask?”

Deeply, with a sigh, she replayed Subaru’s words.

Seizing on her attitude as a hook, as a last possibility, he clung to it.

“That’s right! You’re aiming to be queen, aren’t you? You’re going to bear the burden of the entire country, aren’t you? Then what kind of queen abandons an entire village?!”

Subaru passionately argued, spittle flying, fists clenched.

As Subaru's words pressed on, Crusch closed her eyes in thought, then slowly,

"Let me correct one thought."

She said, holding up two fingers, and fixed Subaru with a piercing gaze.

Subaru flinched at the sharpness of her gaze, but then frowned at the discrepancy between her fingers and her words. Crusch then allowed a small, provocative curve to her lips.

"This is the second of the two reasons I gave earlier. That should answer most of your questions."

The first reasons— That is, why Crusch wouldn't help Emilia. The answer was:

"The answer is—because your story lacks the credibility to move our house."

Her statement, which seemed to overturn all their previous words and premises, struck Subaru hard. With just one word —"lack of credibility"— their previous exchange was dismissed.

"Huh?"

"The Witch Cult, you say. Indeed, it's plausible they might move. Their doctrine and past activities make that clear. The problem lies beyond that."

"Beyond that…?"

"It's a simple matter. How can you pinpoint where they will strike next?"

Crusch pointed her raised finger at Subaru, her voice and gaze sharp.

"Their elusiveness is unfathomably thorough. The fact that they've survived for nearly four centuries without being eradicated is good proof of that. How then, did you come to know their next folly?"

"That's… but you just said earlier that wasn't…"

"The obscurity of their intelligence network is proven by history. If you've grasped it, then show me your evidence. Otherwise, there's only one reason you could know."

In Subaru's place, Crusch slowly, thoughtfully, articulated:

"That you, too, are a member of the Witch Cult."

"You're kidding—!"

This time, a scream surged up his throat, about to erupt in full fury. However it was stopped again, just in time.

This time, it wasn't the result of his own conscience or self-control.

"…"

—It was due to the intense, truly demonic aura emanating from Rem, who had been silently observing the exchange between Subaru and Crusch all this time.

Beside Subaru, Rem sat upright in her chair, hands on her knees. However, a power so immense it seemed to distort the very air overflowed from her expressionless face, and it was clear as day that it stemmed from the recent conversation.

"Lady Crusch, please cease your jesting."

Receiving the gazes of everyone in the room, Rem spoke in her usual tone, then demurely tilted her head towards Crusch.

"There's no way Subaru could be a part of the Witch Cult."

"—Is that so? Considering Natsuki Subaru's statements, if he cannot explain how he knows, then there is no other conclusion to draw. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?"

"—No."

Did Crusch notice the momentary hesitation?

Only Rem, who could sense the Witch scent from Subaru, felt something catch in Crusch's casual baiting and her tongue clicked.

In any case,

"Regardless. For those two reasons, our house cannot lend a hand to Emilia. —In the first place, you haven't been given the authority to negotiate, have you?"

"—Uh."

"Earlier, I threatened you by saying Emilia's fate rested on your shoulders, but that's a problem even before that. There is nothing for you to bear in this current situation."

Running wild on his own, trying to protect on his own, failing selfishly.

Crusch's words, cold and sharp, gouged and tore at Subaru's raw heart.

His passion dissipated, and what filled Subaru's chest transformed from hot to cold. His mouth opened and closed clumsily, like a fish gasping for air.

Crusch looked at Subaru with pitying eyes.

"You currently lack the power to move me. Quietly, allow yourself to be protected."

"—!"

Those were words repeated to him again and again, over and over.

They forced Subaru to admit his powerlessness, thrust his ignorance upon him, demanded his inadequacy, and mocked his reckless, clumsy foolishness— A rotten sympathy.

Nothing went as he wished, and a gnawing frustration dominated Subaru.

Why, why did everyone prevent Subaru from achieving his desires? What was wrong? He was supposed to be doing the right thing. He believed it was right, believed he could help, and acted accordingly.

“The Witch Cult is coming! They’re going to slaughter everyone in the village…!”

Subaru pleaded, his voice filled with anger and sorrow, so intense it felt like his throat would tear.

He had seen the sight. He had touched the deaths.

His loved ones, precious beings, everything frozen, transforming into white crystals.

It was something that would surely happen. A merciless reality that would inevitably occur if left alone.

Why wouldn’t they understand? Why wouldn’t they let him stop it? Why wouldn’t anyone interfere, and simply let Subaru twist fate?

“Kill, just kill them! Those damned Witch Cultists, just kill all of them! That way, everything will be fine! Don’t you understand?! Those guys, they shouldn’t be alive! Kill, give me the power, kill, lend it to me!”

He knelt on the floor, prostrating himself, begging.

If only he could rub his head against the floor and plead, if only someone would look down with pity in their eyes, he would play the fool, do anything, just for their help.

He would imitate a dog, take on the role of a beast, anything. If only that killing intent could be realized—

“—Is that the source of your actions?”

Subaru’s act, unhesitatingly exposing his shame, “Hatred for the Witch Cult, is that why you approached Emilia?”

—It elicited not a shred of pity from the authority figure who allowed no personal feelings to influence her judgment.

Chapter 42:
A Night of Breakdowns

1

Torn apart by her cold gaze, Subaru's shoulders trembled, silent. He no longer knew if it was from anger or sorrow—just a torrent of mixed emotions sweeping him away.

All he could say was,

"No… I'm actually… everyone's…"

Crusch's assertion was completely off the mark. To say he was motivated by hatred for the Witch Cult was nothing but a misguided, prejudiced view.

Subaru's feelings, their very source, had always, always been for someone else's sake. They had to be. Yet, his words wouldn't clearly follow, and Crusch, listening, shook her head.

"You cannot deceive others with lies that can't even deceive yourself. What else would you call the light in your eyes right now but madness and murderous intent? Do you realize, Natsuki Subaru?"

"…"

"You've had that look in your eyes ever since you returned to the mansion."

The dry accusation laced with pity, or perhaps sympathy? In any case, Subaru's reaction to hearing it was dramatic; he involuntarily touched his eyes, trying to confirm with his fingertips something he couldn't see. Yet, the very act proved he couldn't entirely deny Crusch's words.

"I don't know why you're so fixated on the Witch Cult. Many have had their lives twisted by them. Perhaps you are one of them. Your anger, your hatred, may be justified. However it has no bearing on this negotiation."

"What if—"

"Hmm?"

Subaru persisted, unwilling to let the negotiation end, even as Crusch declared its conclusion. He held his breath, waiting for her to continue, her one eye closed.

"What if I do hate the Witch Cult? What then? Yeah, they're the world's pests. It'd be far better to kill every last one of them. I do think that. But as you said, that has nothing to do with this."

An undying hatred, an unyielding despair, the craving for Petelgeuse's death festering in Subaru's chest—all surged through his body as negative energy. He knew it wasn't the kind of thing that would give others a good impression. But even so, right now, such feelings were necessary to maintain his sanity. And he prided himself on being able to assert what needed to be done without being swayed by those emotions.

So,

"That wouldn't be a reason to break off negotiations, would it…!"

"You're straying from the topic again, Natsuki Subaru. The question of whether the origin of your actions is hatred has no bearing on the validity of the negotiation itself. However, it does heavily relate to your unsuitability as a negotiating partner. One might even say it's hard to call it unrelated to the negotiation."

"Unsuitable… what do you mean by that…"

Subaru gritted his teeth, literally, and continued to press his questions, as if squeezing them out. Crusch folded her arms, patiently dissecting Subaru's questions with the same tolerance one might show a disobedient child.

"If we assume the origin of your actions is hatred for the Witch Cult, then isn't it possible that your very approach to Emilia was merely a stepping stone for that purpose?”

Listen, Crusch said, raising a finger on her folded arm.

“If Emilia announces her candidacy for the Royal Selection, and her origins are revealed on the public stage, it’s clear the Witch Cult will start to move according to their dogma. For once, there wouldn’t be a more effective decoy to pin down their leaders, who usually leave no trace of their activities.”

“You’re saying I’m using Emilia as bait to get revenge on them?!”

“Given your current behavior, do you truly believe screaming ‘no’ would be convincing? Hatred dwells in your eyes, and murderous intent seeps into every word. Both are so deeply ingrained they cannot be stripped away, faded, or even forgotten.”

No, no, no, no, no.

Crusch’s statement absolutely did not capture Subaru’s true nature. The root of Subaru’s feelings stemmed from a desire to save someone. The murderous intent toward Petelgeuse was merely a necessary component to achieve that goal. To suggest he’d mistaken the means for the end, focusing solely on that, was nothing but a wild conjecture.

Since things wouldn’t be resolved without killing them, what was wrong with seeking the means, the methods, to kill them? They deserved to die. They shouldn’t be allowed to live. He was right. Since he was trying to do the right thing, everyone should cooperate with him.

“My hatred and their wickedness are unrelated! They! They shouldn’t be alive! That’s why they should all be killed! Then everyone will be saved! Everyone will be helped! No one will have to die, so they deserve to die, and…”

“I told you, Natsuki Subaru. You cannot deceive others with lies that cannot even deceive yourself.”

As Subaru retorted, panting harshly, eyes bloodshot, her voice was cold. Crusch narrowed her eyes, looking up at the gasping Subaru from her seated position.

“Your assertion that you are not motivated by hatred, by murderous intent, by hatred for the Witch Cult, is unconvincing.”

“Why…?”

“Don’t you understand?”

As Subaru hoarsely asked again, Crusch’s eyes held clear pity. Subaru, still not grasping her meaning, merely furrowed his brows. Receiving this, she lowered her gaze, unable to hide her disappointment and disillusionment.

“—You haven’t once said you want to save Emilia.”

“—Huh?”

“Your words merely pretend to want to save someone, to protect others, but underneath that facade, black emotions are boiling. At least, you don’t resemble the person I saw in the throne room.”

Unable to comprehend the meaning of her words, Subaru’s gaze wandered.

—He didn’t want to save Emilia?

That couldn’t be true. Ever since he fell into this world and she first saved his life, Subaru had always lived for Emilia. It was true in the throne room, at the training grounds, and even now. If he left this situation unchecked, she and the village would be lost. He was acting for that very reason. Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely, he was not consumed by hatred—

“We cannot allow you to proceed further than that, sir.”

Suddenly, that voice broke the silence and was thrown at Subaru.

The moment his consciousness snapped back to reality, standing before Subaru was an old man with straightened posture—Wilhelm. He stood beside Crusch across the table, watching Subaru with a faint trace of pity in the wrinkles that spoke of his age. That condescending gaze, that attitude, that pitying expression, oddly irritated him.

"—Subaru."

As his frayed emotions turned to irritation, he felt a tug on his sleeve. Looking down, he saw Rem, still seated, pinching the edge of his clothing with her fingertips. Her composed face held a sense of urgency and a touch of sadness.

"Please calm down. Raging here won't solve anything. Even if you were to rage, Rem is no match for Sir Wilhelm."

"…Rage? What are you talking about? Rage, or anything like that…"

"Whoa, whoa, isn't that a bit much, nya?"

He was about to say he wouldn't, but Ferris shrugged and sighed heavily at Subaru. He looked up at Subaru, then pointed at the arm not clutched by Rem.

"You've got a teaspoon clutched in your tightly clenched fist, what are you planning to do with that, nya? Maybe your parents didn't teach you well, but that grip is unacceptable, nya."

It was Ferris's remark that made him realize for the first time. Subaru's right hand was gripping the spoon that had been with his teacup. And he was holding it with the handle reversed, in a rough grip as if to strike something with it.

—When did I even do this?

"Just because you've been found out, don't stop raging, nya. If you make a big scene here, Old Man Wilhelm will cut you in half while Rem tries to stop him, nya?"

"I would prefer not to give such an order. We have spent several days together, and political issues would arise. Most of all, the room would get dirty."

Despite being the one almost subjected to disrespect, Crusch, looking up at him, remained composed. It seemed to show the breadth of her character, and it also seemed to mock Subaru's weakness, who could only entrust his anger to such a tiny piece of metal. All of it was terribly irritating.

"So, no matter what, you won't lend a hand, huh?"

Therefore, words of defiance preceded any apology. In response, Ferris looked displeased, and Wilhelm closed one eye, looking at his master. Crusch herself simply answered, "Yes," to his question.

"Your statements lack credibility, and any cooperation would not yield attractive benefits for us. —Therefore, we shall observe quietly."

"The Witch Cult will come. When they do, you'll be the one who killed those villagers. Your 'sloth' for knowing and doing nothing will kill that village."

"What an arrogant way to speak. In that case, just one thing."

Subaru spat out the moniker of the despicable man and glared at Crusch. Receiving his clouded gaze, Crusch stood up and looked directly into Subaru's eyes. Her clear, penetrating gaze gave Subaru an unpleasant sensation, as if she were peering into his very soul from deep within his eyes. And then,

"I can largely discern whether the person I'm facing is lying. I've always prided myself on never having been deceived by others."

Crusch suddenly began to speak of such a thing. She peered into the depths of Subaru's eyes, which changed color in suspicion.

"From that experience, I must say, you are not telling a 'lie'."

"Then…"

"You are stubbornly convinced that a delusion, which you yourself don't perceive as a lie, is the truth. —That is nothing short of madness, a madman, Natsuki Subaru."

Right here, right now, Subaru clearly understood that this negotiation had broken down. He couldn’t imagine achieving anything important with someone who would treat him as having the same nature as that madman, that hateful man. Most of all, his heart could no longer bear this level of humiliation.

Subaru gritted his teeth, and blood traced a path down his chin from where he'd bitten the corner of his lip. Seeing his pathetic state, Crusch said,

"Ferris, you should heal him."

"Don't bother!"

Subaru rejected it far faster than Ferris could move, turning and leaving his chair. His destination was the exit of the reception room, and,

"It's almost dinner time, aren't you joining us?"

"Eating with a madman sounds disgusting, doesn't it? I don't care if you're a man of culture or a kabuki actor, that's a bit too far-fetched."

Replying to her sarcasm with sarcasm, Subaru reached for the reception room door. Turning his head back briefly, he saw Rem, too, had straightened her posture and was bowing politely to them.

"It was a short time, but we apologize for any inconvenience. On behalf of our lord, Rem express our gratitude."

"Is that your… no, Lord Mathers' answer?"

"Yes. Rem has been instructed to respect Subaru's wishes in everything."

It was an incomprehensible exchange, and from Subaru's side, he couldn't see Crusch's face. However there was a noticeable sense of regret in her voice as she spoke to Rem, who was bidding farewell. It was a different emotion from the clear severance she had directed at Subaru, and even that felt somehow irritating.

Seeing Rem approach with quick steps, Subaru opened the door. It was someone else's house, but he knew his way around. The path from here to the entrance, and then out the gate to the noble district of the capital, was clear.

“Do you have a plan?”

“Just be a good queen, the type of dictator that leaves the weak to die.”

He spat out his reply to her final words as he closed the door roughly. And so, the negotiation with Crusch concluded in a disastrous fashion.

2

It was well past dusk when negotiations broke down and Subaru stepped into the noble district. The sun had already sunk below the western horizon, and the world was slowly being enveloped by the curtain of night. Crystal lamps illuminated the streets at regular intervals as Subaru, arms crossed, leaned against an iron fence, waiting for Rem to emerge.

“Damn it, everyone’s just…”

Subaru tapped his crossed arm with his fingers, letting out a frustrated groan. He replayed his recent exchange with Crusch, reliving the humiliation of being outmaneuvered. Swirling in his chest was the regret of failing to secure her cooperation, and

“Those stubborn fools… Why do they stand in the way of what’s right…?”

A feeling akin to an unbearable hatred for those who obstructed his path.

Subaru’s plan to eradicate the Witch Cult shouldn’t be wrong. Therefore, their refusal to cooperate must be what’s wrong. They couldn’t understand because they hadn’t witnessed the tragedy, the mercilessness, the wicked man’s cackling laughter, they hadn’t heard it, hadn’t felt it firsthand. That those guys were pests, not worth keeping alive.

“That’s enough, it’s fine now. Forget about your failures and those heartless people. Focus on what’s right in front of you…”

It was better to move forward, even a little, than to wallow in self-reproach. Besides, asking Crusch for help was merely a secondary option for Subaru. There were other, more promising candidates for annihilating the Witch Cult. That is,

“Rem is sorry to keep you waiting, Subaru.”

Rem appeared, passing through the gate, as Subaru was tapping his foot in frustration. In her hands were the belongings she’d used during her stay at Crusch’s mansion for the past few days— Subaru had been waiting for her to retrieve them, as they couldn’t just leave without them. It wouldn’t look good to leave with such a grand statement only to return for forgotten items. In place of Subaru, who couldn’t go back, he greeted Rem, who was carrying the luggage in both arms.

“My bad. Hand over the luggage. I’ll carry some too.”

“It’s fine. It’s not heavy, and you’re still recovering, Subaru.”

However, she firmly refused Subaru’s offer. Normally, Subaru would have pressed the issue more, but with his mind occupied by other tasks, it wasn’t something he needed to insist on. He quickly lowered his outstretched hand and said,

“Speaking of which, Rem, you’re not against leaving Crusch’s place, are you?”

“No. If that’s what Subaru has decided.”

“Well, it’s a bit late now. After all that, there’s no way I can just leisurely continue my treatment. What with the favors and all, I feel bad for Emilia-tan.”

Emilia, who had offered something in return and entrusted them with Subaru’s treatment. There was some guilt for repeatedly disregarding her kindness in such sudden ways. Regarding that, once the Witch Cult matter was settled and he reconciled with her, they would need to talk properly. It would be okay; surely she’d talk with Subaru after he’d saved them from their predicament. For that to happen, Petelgeuse definitely had to die.

“Subaru. About the negotiations with Lady Crusch…”

"She just kept spouting off complicated nonsense about credibility and benefits. She has no heart. Who'd follow someone like that?"

Subaru cut off Rem, who seemed about to say something, and then abruptly ended the conversation. Perhaps out of consideration for Subaru's feelings, Rem didn't pursue the topic further. Instead,

"What will we do now? If what Subaru said is true, we don't have a moment to lose."

"If it's true?"

"—! We don't have a moment to lose. Lord Roswaal's mansion… should we go back?"

Subaru interjected at her hesitation. Rem ignored him, and Subaru put a hand to his chin, shaking his head. "No," he said,

"If we go back alone now, we won't be able to do much. We need to go back with sufficient forces to counter them. Even without that, we need an alternative plan."

If Subaru and Rem went back alone, it would just repeat the previous outcome. Alternatively, if they left earlier than before, there was a chance they could reach the mansion without encountering the cultists—

"Ultimately, my unease about confronting them with the forces remaining at the mansion hasn't changed."

The only ones who could fight were effectively Ram and Rem. Emilia, if she cooperated with Puck, might also be counted among the fighters, but the rest were just villagers and Subaru, amateurs. All the Witch Cultists led by Petelgeuse were armed, and their combat ability, while not on par with Rem's, was on a level that Subaru couldn't hope to contend with. The chances of the villagers and Subaru being included in the fighting force were very slim.

"We don't have enough numbers, enough fighting power. What in the world is Roswaal doing…?"

If he were there alone, he could potentially wipe out the Witch

Cult's forces if used effectively. Yet, in both the previous loops, his presence hadn't been confirmed. The same went for Emilia; where in that mansion were he and she—?

"Subaru, about Lord Roswaal… If he's following his schedule after leaving the royal capital, there's a very high possibility he's not at the mansion right now."

"—! You knew? That Roswaal not being at the mansion was part of the plan?"

"Lord Roswaal was supposed to visit Garfiel's… um, a prominent figure in the domain, and he might be staying there for several days."

"Damn it, what terrible timing! Is that why they can't deal with the attack?!"

Subaru tore at his hair and cursed at Rem's answer, which confirmed his fears. As expected, that perverted lord wasn't at the mansion during the crucial period. If that became the fatal cause of the domain being ravaged, then,

"It's not just an excuse for Crusch; it's a problem with the lord's competence…"

As Roswaal's image transformed from "perverted but competent" to "perverted and incompetent," a truly hopeless state, Subaru frantically racked his brain. This meant that since Roswaal, the greatest fighting force, couldn't be counted on, the situation of overwhelming lack of combat power, as envisioned earlier, continued. This would be the same even if Subaru and Rem returned safely, and so,

"As I thought, there's no option but to return with reinforcements."

He looked up and declared, then nodded to Rem, who was watching him with bated breath. The plan was set. And they had no time to spare. To surpass the results of the previous two attempts, they had to leave the royal capital by tomorrow at the latest. Considering that it was now early night, they had about half a day.

“Anyway, we have no choice but to find someone else who might cooperate. Rem, are you familiar with the geography of the royal capital?”

“Rem has visited several times, and Rem has spent a few days touring with Subaru, so Rem is reasonably familiar. …But who?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? —The most likely candidate, the righteous handsome guy.”

3

It was no exaggeration to say that Reinhard van Astrea was the ideal person for Subaru.

He possessed a martial prowess that could only be described as divinely favored, and handsome looks bestowed by the blessings of a goddess. His personality was gentle, treating everyone without discrimination, and above all, his sincerity was beyond doubt. Subaru was convinced that he would secure Reinhard’s unwavering cooperation, considering his character as an absolute symbol of justice who would never overlook even the slightest evil.

The wickedness of the Witch Cult, of Petelgeuse, debased human dignity. That was unforgivable, and what Subaru couldn’t forgive, Reinhard would surely never forgive either.

Furthermore, there was the calculation that Reinhard wouldn’t bring up clever reasons like mutual benefit, as Crusch and Felix had. It would be foolish to wield such self-serving interests in negotiation before someone as sincere as him, someone whose heart glowed with righteousness. If it was truly about justice, he wouldn’t allow any oversight that would sacrifice the citizens. Therefore, for Subaru, the breakdown in negotiations with Crusch wasn’t even a setback.

Reinhard would surely be on Subaru’s side. With his astonishing swordsmanship, he would surely cleave off Petelgeuse’s head.

Feeling his lips twist with anticipation and an even greater sadistic satisfaction, Subaru slowly walked towards him— Only to arrive at an deserted villa and learn the fact that his hero had “departed the royal capital two days ago”.

Night was falling. Roughly twelve hours remained until the time limit to leave the royal capital. Approximately four days until the mansion was attacked and that tragedy unfolded.

Dark clouds began to gather over this latest attempt to annihilate the Witch Cult.

Chapter 43:
A Pig's Desire

1

"You wouldn't think it to look at me, but I'm quite fond of books."

The girl, seated in a luxurious chair with one arm resting on the armrest, spoke these words.

In her other hand, she held an elaborately bound book, open and already past the halfway mark. The way her eyes scanned the pages was somehow different from her usual demeanor.

She wore a thin, negligee-like garment, with a white cloth of the same color draped over her shoulders. Her voluptuous curves were laid bare without a hint of modesty, yet the girl seemed oblivious to the man's gaze.

She was absorbed in the world of her book, so naturally it was hard to believe she was receiving a guest.

Slipping his sneakers across the carpeted floor, Subaru stood dumbfounded and at a loss.

He had been let inside, but the room's occupant showed no interest in him. When he tried to force the conversation, all he got was that initial remark.

Could it be that she was telling him to wait until she finished the book since she was almost done?

"Surely not…"

He tried to dismiss the thought that had bloomed in his mind, but watching her gracefully turn the pages, he couldn't quite shake his unease.

In fact, Subaru knew that she was the kind of person who might say something that unreasonable.

Her orange hair was like the reflected sun, and her crimson eyes like flames that could scorch everything they beheld. Her skin was a translucent white, her figure exquisitely curvaceous.

With her mouth closed, quietly gazing at her book, her beauty was beyond words.

If only her personality hadn’t been cultivated to irritate others, how unfairly would God have dealt with her?

The girl’s name was Priscilla Barielle.

She was one of the royal selection candidates, and the next person Subaru had come to ask for cooperation.

2

Subaru found out that Reinhard was absent from the royal capital while he was staying at a mansion he was using as his residence.

It was a villa used by the Astrea family, Reinhard’s birth family, and according to the elderly couple managing it:

“To prepare for the royal selection, Lady Felt and her family have returned to the main estate. We can communicate between here and the main estate with a dialogue mirror, but…”

The crucial path between the royal capital and the Astrea main estate reportedly takes nearly four days by dragon carriage. Since Reinhard left the capital two days ago, he hadn’t arrived at the main estate yet.

When Subaru asked for the location of the main estate, he learned it would take at least five days to reach Mezares territory. No matter what he did, Reinhard’s participation was hopeless.

“Both Roswaal and Reinhard… useless when it matters most…!”

Subaru bid farewell to the elderly couple and clutched his head once the villa was out of sight.

Their bad timing this time was uncanny. With the disappearance of the only candidates who would have unconditionally lent their strength, Subaru truly lost his composure.

It was painful that he hadn’t even considered Reinhard’s absence before being rejected. Moreover, with his departure two days prior, it was impossible to make it in time with ‘Return by Death’.

If he wanted Reinhard’s cooperation, it could only have happened in the first iteration, where he could have spent the two days before ‘Return by Death’. However that was impossible for Subaru, who had unknowingly wasted those days, unaware of the tragedy that awaited him.

“There’s no point in crying over spilled milk… Think, think, think, think, think, think, think, me… I don’t have enough power, numbers, or time. All I can do is wrack my brain.”

Subaru desperately racked his brain, trying to come up with a fallback plan.

With Crusch out and Reinhard out, Subaru, who knew few people in the royal capital, had almost no cards left to play.

If the reports of the Witch Cult’s appearance were questioned for their credibility, as Crusch had suggested, then storming the knight’s barracks seemed unlikely to yield cooperation.

Above all, Subaru was not in a position to directly negotiate with the Kingdom’s knights, and before that, it was expected that he was in very bad standing with them.

Subaru hadn’t forgotten the ugliness of those who cheered and egged on during his decisive battle with Julius at the training grounds, watching him get beaten to a pulp. He didn’t think such people would lend him a hand, nor did he want to ask them.

Having been abandoned by Crusch, whom he had believed to be sincerely supportive until then, suspicion swirled within Subaru towards others.

In fact, during the latter half of the incident at the training grounds, there were no knights cheering; rather, many frowned upon Julius’s actions. However, Subaru at that time couldn't have known that, nor would he have had the luxury to confirm it after his subsequent exchange with Emilia.

In Subaru's mind, the knights were still shameless wretches deserving of abuse. Even if he swallowed his pride and begged, he didn't believe they would genuinely listen to him.

Thus, Subaru had no choice but to pretend not to notice that his past actions were narrowing his options, and frantically devise a fallback plan.

If the Royal Knights couldn't be relied upon, Subaru knew only two people left in the capital. And with one of them, for the same reasons as the knights, bowing his head was absolutely impossible.

That left only one candidate.

"Subaru, what will we do now? Rem is…"

"It's fine. Leave it to me. Rem doesn't have to do anything. You don't have to. Just stay behind me, always."

Seeing Subaru lost in thought, Rem started to say something.

Interrupting her, Subaru continued to think, offering her a faint smile.

It was dangerous to put Rem in harm's way.

He knew she wouldn't hesitate to throw herself into danger, even sacrifice her life, to protect him.

Since that was the result of Subaru's actions, which had saved her and made her dependent on him, he had to accept it. Having accepted it, he absolutely had to avoid any outcome where she would be lost.

For that reason, Subaru stubbornly refused to let Rem step forward.

Subaru had to do it himself. Otherwise, he couldn't protect Rem, saving Emilia and the villagers would be meaningless, and his hatred for Petelgeuse wouldn't be satisfied—

"Huh, something feels…"

For a moment, Subaru touched his temple, feeling as if a very unsettling thought had crossed his mind.

It was as if he prioritized killing Petelgeuse over saving Emilia and the others. On top of that, it was crazy to think that Emilia and the others' lives had to be saved by his own hands.

It was a momentary lapse. As long as he was aware of it, Crusch's words were off the mark.

"It's okay. It's okay. I am, truly, doing the right thing."

Subaru affirmed himself, as if convincing himself, as if biting back the words, as if unseeing what he had seen, as if sealing off an abyss.

If he didn't affirm himself, he couldn't maintain his sanity.

3

The next morning, after spending a night at the inn, the two visited Priscilla's mansion on the outskirts of the royal capital.

It was the Barielle estate, located on the edge of the aristocratic quarter, and it was once the residence of Priscilla's deceased husband, an old man named Leip Barielle. He was apparently a figure of some standing in the royal palace, and his name was even known to Rem. However—

"At the very least, this can't be that dead geezer's taste."

Even from a distance, the mansion's splendor, reflecting the morning sun, was dazzling.

The roof must have been repainted very recently; its golden hue was so lavish it looked as if gold leaf had been scattered over it, shining with a fresh glow. Maintaining such brilliance would likely require frequent repainting.

Beyond the gate, the mansion walls were adorned with numerous elaborate decorations, no less extravagant than the roof. Every window facing them was an artistic piece with intricate designs carved into it.

Subaru had never actually seen anything like “nouveau riche” taste, but the visual assault strongly suggested this was exactly that kind of money being spent.

“Well, well, well, actually, this is Princess’s taste. They did it pretty much as a rush job, you know? She only came to the capital from her territory about a month ago. I sympathize with the guys who worked all night, but when you’re slapped in the face with a bag of gold coins, you can’t complain.”

“No, getting hit in the face with a bag of gold coins is pretty much the same as getting punched. Don’t try to gloss over it like it’s a bundle of cash.”

In some mysteries, people even fill socks with sand to make a blunt weapon. Being beaten to death with a bag full of gold coins? Cause of death: nouveau riche, indeed.

“Is that so?” Al tilted his head, scratching the back of his neck through a gap in his helmet. He was a mercenary hired by Priscilla, and apparently, like Subaru, a fellow countryman summoned from Earth to this other world.

His frequent use of modern slang and eccentric fashion sense made the consistency high, but given that he was summoned nearly twenty years ago, a generation gap was undeniable.

Anyway, disregarding Subaru’s inner thoughts, Al, who greeted them at the gate, yawned with an alarmingly unguarded demeanor.

“So, what brings you here so early in the morning? As you can see, I’m low blood pressure, so mornings are my absolute weakness, seriously. I’m neck and neck with the King of Carp.”

“Okay, I don’t need to hear about some super dangerous guy who shoots a Crusher Beam when he levels up. I know it’s rude to drop in unannounced, but I need to talk to your Princess."

"Princess?"

Al, who had been swaying bonelessly, straightened up and stared intently at Subaru and Rem.

Behind his black helmet, the sharpness of his gaze, which they couldn't discern, left them feeling uncomfortable. After watching Rem for quite some time, Al clicked a joint in his helmet.

"Ah, I've had my fill of maid-san content. Alright, I'll announce you."

"Surely this mansion has maids too. Not to mention the light reaction."

"Whoa, whoa, you don't understand Princess. Princess, who thinks she's the cutest, doesn't hire maids. The mansion is full of only shota butlers."

"Sounds awful to hear… My opinion of her is plummeting, but just announce us for now."

"Kay," Al mumbled in an unenthusiastic voice and disappeared into the mansion.

Rem, beside Subaru, silently stepped back, her expression remaining neutral. However, the way she tightly clutched Subaru's sleeve revealed an uncontainable anxiety. Even if Subaru wanted to comfort her, he was overwhelmed by an equal amount of anxiety, rendering him helpless.

Though he couldn't think of anyone else to rely on, it was remarkable how much anxiety their interaction with the attendant stirred, even before the main person appeared.

For Subaru, who had no time to be choosy, this was his last resort.

"Maybe coming at this hour was a mistake. With Priscilla, she'd probably just say something like, 'You're disturbing my precious sleep time—'"

"Hey! She'll see you!"

Subaru's words, spurred by anxiety, were cut off by Al's loud shout as he leaned halfway out of the mansion's entrance and waved.

After a moment of stunned silence, Subaru tentatively pushed open the gate and walked towards Al, who was beckoning him.

"You… you got an appointment so easily?"

"It might surprise you, but Princess is actually a morning person. On the other hand, she goes to bed super early. Anyway, this way, this way."

Al probably chuckled behind his helmet at Subaru's flustered reaction, then casually led them inside. Stepping into the mansion, it was clear that the interior, like the exterior, had undergone significant modifications.

The corridors, lined with an excessive number of artworks, were actually a hindrance to walking. The sight of everything, down to the lighting and picture frames, being adorned with precious metals, felt almost insane.

"At first, your eyes might sting, but you'll get used to it. It's better now because it's morning, but the corridors at night are seriously terrifying."

"Don't talk about scary night corridors like a child, you're a grown man."

"The statue's eyes glow at night, you know?"

"Then your master is crazy."

Looking up, Subaru saw that the eyes of the statues lining the corridor were indeed embedded with something like jewels. They would probably glow when it got dark. Madness.

Al tilted his head as if sensing something amiss with Subaru quietly overlooking these artistic sacrileges, but he didn't comment on it. Subaru tried to be considerate of Rem following behind him, but

Rem, who was clutching his hem, had been frequently sniffling and kept her gaze fixed on his back, as if seeing something suspicious.

Then,

"Princess is on the top floor of this mansion. It's a luxury suite, taking up the entire floor."

"Sounds like a hotel suite somewhere. Can we go up?"

Subaru asked as they reached the stairs, and Al, pointing upwards with his thumb, nodded and said meaningfully, "Yes, go for it bro."

Subaru gave him a questioning look.

"No, no, no, I'm not being mean. Princess said she'll only see the 'brother'. The young lady will be escorted to a guest room."

"Do you think I'd entrust her to someone who just talked about 'maid-san content'…?"

"Don't worry, I'm also told to wait outside her room. It's frustrating, a real shame, but the young lady's escort is a shota butler."

Anticipating Subaru's concern, Al gracefully stepped aside, and a boy with blonde curly hair and blue eyes appeared from behind him. The boy, who could only be described as a beautiful youth, was clad in a small-sized butler uniform, exuding an endearing precociousness.

"Well then, make sure you don't offend the guest."

As Al casually patted his shoulder and gave instructions, the shota butler gracefully gestured, "This way," attempting to escort Rem. For a brief moment, Rem looked at Subaru with hesitation.

"Sorry, please wait until I finish talking. I'll take all the dangerous individuals, including him, upstairs, so you can relax and be at ease."

"Dangerous individual, that's harsh, brother. Though I am often called a suspicious person."

"Actually, 'suspicious person' is a lower rank than that."

Subaru gave Al a cold look as he blandly responded, then turned back to Rem and stroked her head to reassure her.

Rem, whose hair was ruffled by the stroking, narrowed her eyes playfully and softly said, "Understood," reluctantly accepting. Then,

"Please pay special attention to that person over there," she whispered, leaning slightly closer to Subaru.

Her eyes had briefly flickered towards Al, and he was likely the one she was warning him about. While Al's appearance was indeed among the most suspicious Subaru had encountered in this other world, this warning was questionable given that he somewhat trusted him. But,

"Mm, got it."

Naturally, Rem had a higher level of trustworthiness.

Considering the exchange at Crusch's mansion, he couldn't completely trust someone just because they were from the same world. He should approach this as if it were enemy territory.

After seeing Subaru nod, Rem, led by the shota butler, disappeared down the corridor. She left with a lingering reluctance towards Subaru.

"Whoo! You're good, bro. You're loved, aren't you?"

"If you're going to whistle, do it properly. Can't you, just like me?"

There was nothing colder than making whistling sound effects with your mouth.

This behavior, familiar to Subaru who had never been able to whistle despite countless attempts, made him feel a sense of kinship. Al's rather heavy reply, "Ah, my lips aren't exactly intact," stopped him short.

Anyway,

"It wouldn't be good to keep the young lady waiting, and it'd be even worse to keep Princess waiting too long and incur her wrath. Let's just head upstairs already."

"It helps that you're quick to understand… By the way, what's Priscilla's mood like?"

When attempting an important negotiation, it was best to avoid a situation where the other party was in a bad mood. While this might not significantly affect other people, with Priscilla, that invisible "mood" status seemed likely to have an exceptionally large impact.

Al tilted his head languidly and said, "Nghhh," to Subaru, who harbored such concerns.

"I don't think it's good or bad, but then again, that's not really reliable, is it? Princess's mood changes constantly, before, after, during, and all around a conversation. She doesn't have a fixed preferred topic either, so you'll just have to rely on your improvisation skills."

"A gamble then… my biggest weakness."

Receiving such encouraging advice from the chief attendant, Subaru ascended to the upper floor, his face clouded with anxiety.

Up the stairs, past a landing, was a door.

"Inside here is Princess's overly spacious private room. I haven't been called inside, so I'll wait here. Go on in."

Al said casually and sat down on a step in front of the door. As he did, he unstrapped the Guan dao from behind his back and placed it on his lap.

"Try not to upset her too much, alright? I don't want her throwing a tantrum, and when she's in a bad mood, she makes a ton of unreasonable demands."

"…Sorry, but I've come to make some pretty unreasonable demands myself."

Subaru responded curtly to Al’s plea, then took a breath and pushed open the door.

Then—

4

Now, time returns to the confrontation with Priscilla at the beginning.

Subaru, ushered in by Al, found her waiting in a spacious hall further inside. However, she was seated on a raised chair, elegantly reading a book, without so much as a glance in his direction.

Since he wasn’t kicked out, he assumed he was acknowledged as a guest, but her lack of action left him unsure how to proceed.

As he hesitated, time continued to tick away.

Deciding that hesitation only led to stagnation, Subaru steeled himself and took a breath, ready to jump into the topic.

“—Now then,”

The moment he was about to speak his first word, the crisp sound of a book closing echoed through the room.

Priscilla, closing the book in her hands, shut her eyes. She savored the lingering numbness in her palms from closing the book, enjoying the post-read silence for a while. Then,

“That was a boring story.”

“You seemed pretty engrossed in it for being boring…”

“When one reads, it’s proper to immerse oneself in the world of the book. Then, once the story is finished, one voices their thoughts. How could one call it boring without reading it?”

To Subaru’s weak retort, Priscilla responded unexpectedly like a proper book lover.

It seemed her claim of being a book lover was no lie. Declaring that she wouldn't criticize without reading, she carelessly tossed the finished book into the air.

"—Ah."

Before Subaru's stunned eyes, the moment the thrown book reached its apex, it was suddenly engulfed in intense heat and burst into flames.

Consumed by furious heat from cover to content, the book vanished instantly. After a blink, only black ashes fluttered down.

"Now then, you're taking away my precious morning reading time. —You've at least brought a story that will pique my interest more than that last book, haven't you?"

Priscilla laughed salaciously and wickedly, re-crossed her slender legs, and pointed a pale finger towards him.

Feeling as though heat was being pressed against his forehead from her fingertip, Subaru felt a cold sweat break out on his back as he said,

"—The candidate Emilia, and the current situation surrounding her, I need your help to break through it."

5

"Witch Cult, huh…"

Priscilla rested her head on her armrest, tapping her knee with the fingers of her other hand. Having finished recounting nearly the same details she'd shared with Crusch, she muttered softly, eyes closed, as if lost in thought. Subaru, noticing her apparent feelings about the Witch Cult, pressed on:

"If we leave them be, they'll harm the villagers. I want to defeat them before that happens. For that, I need your strength…"

"Heh, heh."

"—?"

As Subaru tried to extract agreement with a barrage of pleas, Priscilla's shoulders trembled, her face hidden as she looked down. "What's going on?" Subaru wondered, furrowing his brows, when she suddenly looked up with an explosive burst of laughter.

"Hahahahaha! Amusing! You are amusing, Subaru. Indeed, you've stirred my heart far more than that book just now. Such buffoonery, when taken this far, is a kind of exquisite skill."

She laughed, and laughed, mocking Subaru.

Subaru's instincts told him this was not a benevolent smile, but the kind a ferocious carnivore displays, the kind a cat shows when toying with a mouse before killing it.

"What's so funny?"

"The sheer absurdity of you not understanding. Good heavens, you! Do you not realize how incoherent your actions are right now?"

Priscilla threaded her fingers through her orange hair, twirling a lock around her index finger, as she asked with genuine amusement. Her condescending tone, as if she could see right through him, sounded familiar. It was the same tone Subaru had encountered countless times at Crusch's mansion, as if to say he was slow-witted.

Priscilla snorted at Subaru, whose gaze unconsciously hardened.

"Whether you have no one else to rely on or whatever, all you're doing is going around telling other factions about your own camp's weaknesses. 'Oh, we're short on strength for this and that reason…' You must have a remarkably blissful mind."

Priscilla tapped her temple with her finger, ridiculing Subaru's actions.

Her utterly contemptuous demeanor made Subaru's mind go blank. He hadn't expected such blatant mockery.

As Subaru remained silent, unable to process his emotions, Priscilla looked down at him.

“Being reckless is fine, but you lack thought. Far too much. You try to help, and you only drive them into a corner. Your actions are those of an incompetent busybody. You’re unmanageable; you’d be better off dead.”

Having said her piece, Priscilla stood from her chair, bent forward, and stared directly into Subaru’s wide eyes. “In fact,” she began,

“I might as well just lop off your head.”

The next moment, the fan drawn from Priscilla’s chest lightly touched Subaru’s neck.

He hadn’t seen her approach, hadn’t even seen her arm move— It was incredibly fast.

The sensation of the fan’s edge, warmed by Priscilla’s body heat, touched his right carotid artery. It wasn’t a sharp blade, yet it gave Subaru the illusion that his head would fall the moment she moved it.

As Subaru instinctively held his breath, Priscilla muttered boredly, “Can’t even follow with your eyes, can you?”

“To be foolish and dull is truly beyond saving… However, your loyalty, to act for your master even after such harsh treatment, is truly admirable.”

As she spoke, Priscilla removed the fan from Subaru’s neck, opened it to cover her mouth, and narrowed her eyes. “Therefore,” she continued,

“Even I can’t bring myself to simply laugh at your actions and send you away. So, I shall give you an opportunity.”

“…An, an opportunity?”

“Yes, an opportunity. A ‘chance’, as you call it.”

Perhaps she heard it from Al; Priscilla extended the folded fan towards him, speaking a modern term with an uncertain pronunciation. For some reason, Subaru couldn't evade it as it came straight and calmly towards him. When it pressed his forehead, his upper body swayed, and he landed on his backside.

Thus, their eye levels reversed. Subaru, now in a renversé position, looked up at Priscilla with surprise and protest, but—

"…"

"Lick it."

Before his eyes, Priscilla's bare foot, now removed from its shoe, was presented close-up.

Subaru didn't understand the meaning of her words, his gaze wandering between her face and the foot before him. Priscilla snorted at Subaru's lost expression, then spoke cruelly, as if lecturing a misbehaving child or tormenting a slave:

"Crawl on the floor, chew on the shame and humiliation, and like a pathetic, comical stray dog, lick my foot. —If you can do that, I will consider your proposal."

"Wha—?!"

"If you don't want to, that's fine, too, you know? If you prioritize your petty pride and abandon the master you wag your tail for, that's fine. That, too, would bring me pleasure."

Priscilla covered her mouth and sneered, implying she'd enjoy it either way.

Priscilla's utterly malicious attitude made Subaru's guts boil with rage. But he managed to restrain himself from raising his voice and acting on his emotions at the last moment.

If he let his emotions take over now, the negotiation would collapse.

Above all, there was no denying that he had coaxed a willingness to compromise from her.

He looked at the foot still extended before him and Priscilla’s face, which mocked him.

Closing his eyes, he saw the silver-haired girl and the pink-haired maid. Then, the faces of the village children and adults appeared one after another, and the boiling magma slowly began to subside.

Then,

“I… I underst…and.”

Swallowing his humiliation, Subaru took Priscilla’s foot in his hand.

Compared to the painful deaths Emilia and the villagers would suffer, what was the humiliation Subaru endured here? If he could avoid that future and reach the world they deserved, he didn’t care if he had to become a dog or anything else.

His trembling lips neared the white instep, about to touch its smooth skin—just before,

“Ah, you really have—degenerated into such a boring man.”

His nose was violently kicked, and Subaru was lightly sent flying through the air.

Spinning, his vision blurring, Subaru didn’t understand what was happening. A tremendous impact shook his head, disorienting him, and the sensation of floating was immediately cut short by the feeling of hitting something hard all over his body.

After a moment of silence, he finally realized he was sprawled on the ground. A viscous liquid dripped copiously from his nostrils.

“What you possess is neither loyalty nor devotion. It is a filthier, dog-like dependence and pig-like desire. You are a lazy pig, always wanting. A pig’s desires are the most hideous.”

A constant ringing in his ears and nausea bounced wildly inside his skull.

Priscilla’s voice reached him from somewhere, but the content didn’t register in his mind.

Only,

“Even if you repel the Witch Cult, a faction that harbors a lowlife like you, I will crush it when it’s exhausted. Your imprudent actions have made me decide so.”

Small hands gripped his chest, pulling him up roughly.

More blood flowed from Subaru’s nose as he was forced upright, and more merciless words were hurled at him as he choked for breath.

“—Be proud. You are the one who will lead that woman, Emilia, to ruin.”

He was shoved hard, and Subaru’s body slid across the floor, reaching the entrance door. A trail of blood marks remained where he had rolled, but Priscilla’s expression seemed to say that seeing Subaru himself was more unpleasant than the stains.

“—Aldebaran!”

When Priscilla cried out sharply, the only door connecting to the outside opened from the other side.

Drawn by her call, the figure in the jet-black helmet appeared.

He looked around the room, and upon seeing Subaru lying bloody by the door, he put his single arm to his head.

“Whoa, whoa, what’s going on here…?”

“Throw out that unpleasant rag. If you care, you can even cut him down.”

“Of course I care, about various things… Come on, let’s go, brother.”

Without protesting his enraged master, Al grabbed Subaru’s body, easily lifted him with one hand, and hoisted him onto his shoulder.

“Don’t get so angry, Princess. Your cute face will lose its value with that ferocity.”

“If you don’t want your already ruined face to be further ruined, take him away quickly. I won’t say it twice, Aldebaran.”

“Stop calling me by that name.”

Al said dismissively, then left the room with Subaru on his shoulder.

Quietly closing the door, Al quickly began to descend the stairs.

“For now, it’s best to get out of here fast. Knowing Princess, she might change her mind and say to lop off your head. Get out before you get chopped.”

“Oh… oh…?”

“This is no good. I’ll go get your lady friend, then you’re on your own.”

Seeing Subaru still dazed, Al sighed, shrugging his one-armed shoulder, and then descended the stairs even faster, practically flying down.

6

“Subaru!”

Rem’s face instantly blanched, and she rushed over to Subaru, who was slumped against the gate. She touched Subaru, who was limp and unresponsive, checking the extent of his injuries, and began chanting healing magic, “Water mana…”

“What happened?” she asked the suspicious one-armed man standing beside her, as a faint light touched Subaru’s face.

Receiving her question, Al tapped the ground with his toe, looking sheepish.

“Ah, well, you see. It seems he pissed off our Princess. I told him to be careful not to… but I guess it’s impossible to perfectly predict a cat’s mood as a human.”

Although he looked sheepish, Al’s tone held no trace of guilt. He sympathized with Subaru, but felt no remorse for his master’s violent outburst. Rem, realizing this, was stunned and about to protest, but—

“—Rem, it’s fine.”

“Subaru. You are conscious? Are you alright?”

As the concussion subsided, Subaru’s consciousness began to clear, and he spoke to Rem. Her face brightened at this, and she closed her eyes to concentrate further.

“Subaru is truly someone Rem can’t take my eyes off of. Rem only left you alone for about an hour, and you come back with injuries like this.”

“I… I didn’t mean for this to happen…”

As his blood circulation began to normalize, blood started flowing from his nostrils again. He quickly put a hand up to catch the dripping blood, and Rem gently placed a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket to his face.

“Hold this. Once the wound heals, the bleeding will stop after it’s flowed out completely.”

“—Okay.”

Subaru held his nose as Rem instructed, accepting the healing while feeling a gentle warmth seep in.

Seeing this, Al commented, “Looks like he’ll be fine,” and then,

“No point in sticking around, so I’m heading back too. I don’t know what you two talked about, but it looks like it didn’t go well. If I’m too slow getting back, Princess might seriously start talking about cutting off his head or something.”

“Cut Subaru…?!”

“Don’t make such a scary face, miss! I said she might start talking about it! So get out of here before she says it. I don’t want to do something like that either.”

Al waved his single hand dismissively at Rem’s overreaction, then relaxed his shoulders and took a sloppy step back.

“Alright, take care of yourself, brother. And you too, miss… Ah, I think you said Ram? Take care.”

“—Ram is Sister’s name. My name is Rem, Sir Al.”

Rem introduced herself in a light tone as Al turned to leave.

Suddenly, Al stopped.

He looked slightly upwards, then slowly turned back towards them.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s Ram, isn’t it?”

“It’s Rem… Excuse me, Lord Al, have you met Sister somewhere?”

Rem asked, mistaking her twin sister for herself, but Al gave no answer.

He touched the helmet covering his head with his one arm and muttered, “What’s going on…?”

“The young lady is Rem… and your older sister is Ram?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I know this is a strange thing to ask, but… is the young lady’s sister alive?”

“…? Rem doesn’t understand the intent of your question, but Sister is, of course, alive.”

The moment Rem responded, Subaru, who had been silently listening to their conversation, felt goosebumps prickle his skin. Surprised by this strange reaction, Subaru couldn’t help but shiver.

Then,

“—You’re not kidding, are you?”

Low, cold, the words struck his eardrums with a heavy resonance.

It was a whisper squeezed from Al’s throat as he looked down, touching his forehead through his helmet.

At the same time, Subaru realized that the chill that had seized his skin was caused by an unknown, ominous aura emanating from Al.

His instincts screamed a warning: Do not be here. Rem seemed to feel the same way.

“Subaru, can you stand if Rem lends you her shoulder?”

Rem, interrupting the treatment, asked, still hunched over, her guard clearly raised.

Subaru nodded, pulling his chin in, and waited for Rem to move. He had to be taken out of here when she made her escape.

However, their caution was rendered baseless by—

“Relax, I’m not going to do anything.”

Al shook his head, suppressing the ominous aura he had been emitting.

The sudden disappearance of the chill made Subaru realize he had forgotten to breathe. Rem, too, visibly relaxed her neutral expression.

Al, the cause of their reactions, then said,

“Sorry to break the tension, but get going. I think you understand now, but I don’t seem to be in a very good mood either.”

“—Understood. Please tell her thank you for her time.”

“Aye, got it. Be careful.”

Exchanging somewhat cold pleasantries, Rem lent Subaru her shoulder, and they began to walk. Leaning his weight on her small frame, Subaru moved away from the Barielle mansion. They went down the slope, putting distance between themselves and the mansion gate. Suddenly, Subaru glanced back for a moment.

—Al was still staring intently at them, at Subaru’s back.

7

“Don’t screw with me. Is that… is this really happening? It makes me sick.”

The muffled murmur echoed only within the black helmet.

Chapter 44:
Departure from the Royal Capital and Reunion

1

Negotiations with Priscilla Barielle had collapsed, and now, truly, all paths were closed off.

Crusch and Priscilla had flat-out refused him, and Felt, who had Reinhard on her side, was nowhere to be found. Bringing up the matter with Julius's camp, who could only be an enemy, was out of the question. Subaru, with his bad reputation among the knights, had even thrown away any right to appeal to the authorities.

In other words,

"So, securing combat power, which was my immediate goal, is impossible for me…"

Overwhelmed by despair and powerlessness, Subaru touched his nose and muttered.

His nose, which Priscilla had kicked in, was somehow reattached, and the remnants of the nosebleed were gone; it was practically back to normal. However, Rem, who had treated him, warned Subaru to "please rest" when he tried to move immediately, so he was currently staying put.

They had moved from the noble district and were now in the commercial area of the capital's lower city.

Just like the main thoroughfare, crowds of people bustled about today, and Subaru watched the passing human tide from inside a snack shop.

He silently ate a meal resembling pork and lettuce sandwiched between bread-like food, satisfying his hunger alone.

The morning had been thoroughly wasted at Priscilla's mansion, and it was probably around noon now. He had only about seven or eight hours left until his self-imposed deadline to leave the capital, so his time was running out.

Despite this, the situation wasn't just stagnating; it was actively getting worse.

Considering that straightforward solutions had been shut down, one could argue that it had at least narrowed down his options, but…

"I'm not so optimistic as to mistake this for progress. Damn it, that arrogant woman… Forgetting the favor I did her…"

Subaru twisted the corner of his lips and spat out his bitterness, bringing up how he had helped her when she was surrounded by ruffians during their first meeting.

It was true that she had acted as if she owed him nothing, but he hadn't expected her to refuse even someone desperately pleading for help like him.

On top of that, she had kicked Subaru, insulted him with some inexplicable logic similar to Crusch's, and then unceremoniously thrown him out. Al too. His heartlessness, not saying a word about his master's outrageous behavior. What good was a fellow countryman like that? Useless.

"To hell with all of them. They don't know anything, they don't understand anything… They can't protect anything, but they keep getting in my way…!"

He gnashed his teeth, irritably tearing at the bread and meat.

His mouth, roughly chewing, was filled with anger and humiliation; he couldn't taste anything.

He needed to think of a second-best plan, a next step, but Subaru's mind was filled only with bitter complaints and curses directed at the people he had encountered so far.

These fools spouted nonsense, hindering Subaru's path as he tried to protect and save everyone, effectively aiding the wicked Petelgeuse.

“I wish everyone who gets in my way would just d—”

“Rem is sorry to keep you waiting, Subaru.”

Subaru’s dangerous remark was cut off by a blue-haired girl whose apron dress swayed—Rem.

She sat in the empty chair across from Subaru.

“You have sauce on you, Subaru.”

She reached out and gently wiped the corner of Subaru’s mouth with a cloth in her hand.

Subaru, letting her do as she pleased, silently looked at Rem, requesting a report. There was, of course, a reason why she had separated from Subaru and acted independently.

That was:

“Rem reported to the Knight’s Headquarters that the Witch Cult’s activities would take place. Rem mentioned Lord Roswaal’s name, so Rem wasn’t turned away at the gate, but…”

Subaru bit his lip at her weakening tone toward the end of her sentence.

Instead of Subaru, who wouldn’t be well-received by the knights, Rem had been sent to the Knight’s Headquarters as Roswaal’s envoy.

He had thought that if she suggested the Witch Cult’s existence, perhaps they could get the knights to move, but…

“It didn’t go well, huh?”

“…It seems the Knight’s Headquarters has received many similar reports. The Witch Cult’s background is unclear, so any suspicious reports are immediately forwarded up the chain.”

“Ah, I see. So it’s like how witches were treated back in the days of witch trials… If that’s what they’re using as a cover, it’s not funny.”

For every person who implicitly feared the Witch Cult, a phantom Witch Cult activity was constructed.

If that fear was drawn up and collected by the Knight's Headquarters, and as a result, the value of real information became diluted and disappeared, how utterly counterproductive was that?

Rem's shoulders drooped apologetically, but he had no intention of blaming her.

This was not Rem's fault; the cause lay in the knights' negligence and the Witch Cult's depravity. The knights should meticulously scrutinize the veracity of incoming information, and the Witch Cult's very existence was nothing but harmful. Subaru gritted his teeth at these inconveniences and made a decision.

"If gathering forces is impossible… it's frustrating, but there's no other choice."

"What will you do?"

"It's decided. We're going back to the mansion. We'll return and get Emilia and Ram out. Either to the capital or wherever Roswaal has gone. In any case, that place is dangerous."

Petelgeuse's cackle echoed in his mind, and Subaru clenched his fists in vexation.

Even if he wanted to smash that skeletal face, his hands couldn't reach that far. He vaguely knew their hiding place. Still, he didn't have enough forces even for a surprise attack, and even if he tried with their current strength—Rem would be on the front lines.

He didn't want that.

He couldn't bear that.

It was absolutely out of the question for Rem to be hurt, or even worse, put in a life-threatening situation, because of Subaru's actions or the results of his thoughts.

If he couldn't prepare any combat power other than Rem to fight

Petelgeuse, then he shouldn't even consider confronting them.

His guts were still churning with murderous intent, and an endless torrent of hateful curses resonated continuously within his skull. Resonating. But…

"Still a day and a half— If we can leave the capital now, we can reach the mansion by the third day. If so, there should be time to get Emilia and the others out."

Recalling the first iteration, Subaru repeatedly verified the time limit.

Three days spent idly at Crusch's mansion. Hearing that there was a shadow of unease in Roswaal's territory, he spent one day with Rem, and then another half day with Otto, whom they picked up in a village along the way. After that, they traveled to the location on foot, greeting the sunrise of the fifth day with slaughter.

In other words, if they could arrive on the third day, there was still leeway.

"The second time… Damn it! How many days was I out of my mind?!"

On the other hand, the second iteration held no value in organizing the timeline.

Immediately after returning, Subaru, whose mind had become abnormal, remembered nothing of the journey back to the mansion with Rem. How many days had Rem spent at Crusch's mansion, carrying the deranged Subaru, and when had they fallen into Petelgeuse's hands?

In any case,

"Time for thinking is precious. Rem, let's arrange for a dragon carriage. This time we can't rely on Crusch or anyone… So, what should we do?"

"Dragon carriage arrangements usually require using specialized stores. However, the use of dragon carriages is quite busy right now, so it's hard to say if we can arrange one immediately."

Receiving Rem's somewhat uncertain reply, Subaru wolfed down the rest of his meal and stood up, urging her, "Anyway, let's just go."

Ideally, they could rent a fast, long-distance dragon carriage. At worst, they would have to consider the method from the first world, swapping carriages along the way.

Grabbing his belongings, and growing increasingly exasperated with a reality where nothing went his way, Subaru quickened his pace, as if grudging every second.

Behind him, Rem, whose stride didn't match his, struggled to keep up. Subaru, without even a glance, never noticed.

2

"Today, the main street feels particularly charged with a sense of danger," Subaru remarked, leaning his back against a familiar wall, noticing the different atmosphere of the passing crowd.

It was a view he'd only experienced for a few days and hours combined, but even with such limited exposure, the difference was palpable to Subaru— The shopping street today had a strong sense of unease.

That was because,

"Word of the Royal Selection has spread, and people are finally gathering from all over," Kadomon, the scar-faced fruit seller who had become quite familiar, replied with a sigh, resting his brawny arms on the counter and narrowing his eyes in boredom.

He casually glanced at Subaru, who had stopped in front of his shop as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"When changes happen in the capital and the clientele changes, what sells also changes. If you just stand there, you'll scare away the busy season that's finally coming to my shop, so beat it."

"Even if the capital and the customer base change, the owner's face hasn't, so this shop's sales won't change either. More importantly, the number of people has increased, hasn't it?"

Subaru retorted with sharp sarcasm to Kadomon's complaint, then added a question. The shop owner made an especially displeased face but touched the white scar on his face with a finger and replied, "Yeah."

"A lot of traveling merchants from outside have come in. Well, timing is key for business opportunities. If you join late, there's less profit. The shrewd ones probably got in quickly, set up their goods, and are already raking in money."

"I wonder what a shop owner with no business sense, who still arranges unsellable appa in front of his shop, is thinking with such a big chance right before his eyes. Ah, I just don't know."

"Do you have a grudge against my shop? Do you die if you don't talk trash when you come here?"

Subaru threw out a slightly duller barb than usual and then looked at the street again.

Indeed, just as Kadomon said, within his sight, there seemed to be more vendors looking for places to display their wares than customers rushing to buy products.

Their feet naturally gravitated towards the area of the main street where street vendors set up, while others, pulling dragon carriages, headed towards the noble district.

"I understand peddlers setting up stalls, but what's with the dragon carriages heading to the upper district?"

"They probably went to directly unload goods to the nobles up there. If they do it right, they can make more profit than going through a merchant guild, and the important people will remember their faces. If they mess up, they'll be marked, and there's a chance they won't be able to come back down, though."

Kadomon said with a disinterested tone, as if he wasn't interested in other people's money-making schemes. Subaru gave him a perfunctory reply, his eyes still fixed on the passing dragon carriages.

Could he at least manage to borrow just one of them? In the worst-case scenario, if a dragon carriage couldn't be arranged, he would have to consider stealing one.

If it was a problem that money could solve, he should do it because human lives were more valuable. If it became a problem that money couldn't solve, then he would still commit a minor crime under the pretext of saving lives.

It was a completely different matter than stealing a bicycle from a parking lot, but Subaru resigned himself to it as unavoidable. And as he watched the dragon carriages, Kadomon seemed to think Subaru was interested in their cargo.

"With more people coming because of the Royal Selection, both demand and supply are increasing. Right now, what's especially valuable are iron products, and weapons like swords and spears, and armor. They're being bought up not only from outside but also from shops that were already established in the capital."

"Iron and weapons… I think I've heard that before."

He touched his chin, trying to recall where, and remembered it was a scene from a conversation with Otto in the first world.

Otto, who had a large amount of oil, was faced with the decision of whether to hang himself because iron products and the like were selling for high prices in the capital, and he had drowned himself in alcohol.

Combined with Kadomon's story, it seemed Otto's desperate situation had been set in stone even at this point.

Even so,

"Swords and armor. If they're collecting iron, are they doing something related to that? Are the people collecting it planning a war?"

"Well, they're fortifying their defenses… but it's a bit odd. If that were the reason, they'd usually do it in their own territory. If they gather too much in the temporary residence of the capital, they'll get bogged down and it'll be troublesome."

"From the way you're talking, you know the name of the person collecting them?"

Subaru casually asked, playing along with Kadomon's conversation. Kadomon crossed his arms, nodded wisely, and said, "Yes."

"It's Duchess Crusch Karsten. In other words, one of the Royal Selection candidates."

"Crusch…?"

A name much closer than he expected came up, and Subaru furrowed his brows, showing his surprise. On reflection, there were indeed points that matched up.

Crusch had received many visitors daily. Subaru had assumed this was part of diplomacy to secure connections with influential people, but in reality, there might have also been negotiations with merchants who brought in such goods.

In fact, as far as Subaru knew, the last person Crusch had met was a merchant deeply involved in the capital's economy, a man named Russell.

Suddenly, he felt like he wanted to hear more details, but a contradictory feeling that he shouldn't waste his thoughts on such unnecessary things made him hesitate.

While he was doing that,

"Hey, isn't that your companion waving over there?"

Following Kadomon's finger pointing across the street, Subaru turned his head to see Rem jogging towards them, waving. When she reached Subaru, her shoulders bounced, and her expression brightened just enough for someone familiar to notice.

“Found one! Somehow, Rem thinks we can rent a dragon carriage for long-distance travel.”

“Really? That’s great news. I didn’t have high hopes given how busy that shop was earlier…”

The dragon carriage rental shop was extremely busy, and negotiations had been difficult, just as Rem had worried. Judging that he couldn’t do much by being there, Subaru had left the negotiations to Rem and visited Kadomon to organize his thoughts while chatting.

Rem, who seemed to have successfully managed the subsequent negotiations, smiled faintly with a hint of pride.

“Yes. She was quite stubborn, but we agreed to pay a little more. Rem apologizes for making a decision on her own and using some of the travel money.”

“No, that was a great decision. At this point, we shouldn’t be stingy with money for our objective.”

Apparently, the system was that the shop staff would bring the dragon carriage to the capital’s entrance.

She had told them to meet immediately, so it would be hectic, but they would start moving right away.

“Well, that’s how it is. It was a short time, but thanks for everything, old man.”

“Leaving the capital, are you? You, I don’t mind, but it’s a shame about the young lady.”

Kadomon’s harsh words concealed genuine regret, likely because Rem had filled in for him at the shop several times, each time achieving a dramatic increase in sales.

The reason he didn’t simply chase away Subaru, who was arrogant and rude, was largely due to his good nature and Rem’s contributions. In any case, “Thank you for everything, Sir Kadomon. Rem will definitely stop by again when Rem visits the capital.”

“Thanks for being so polite. … Truly, I’m sorry for being so rude with my words, even though you must be the attendant of a highly-ranked person.”

“No. Rem, now, is Subaru’s before she is Lord Roswaal’s attendant. Please continue as before.”

“…I hate you even more now, I do.”

Kadomon made a big grimace at Rem’s reply, his scar crinkling, and he held out a paper bag to Rem. Subaru peered into the bag from beside Rem as she accepted it; it contained a variety of colorful fruits.

“It’s a token of appreciation for your sales contribution and patronage. Be careful on your journey.”

“…Old man. You’ll never make sales if you keep doing things like this. Your wife and daughter will lose patience with you.”

“I didn’t give them to you, I gave them to Rem! Now get going!”

Chased away by his rough kindness, Subaru and Rem hastily left the spot.

Until the very end, his interactions with Kadomon were free of any lingering resentment or ill feelings. It was just enough to save his heart a little—and Subaru tightened his slackening cheeks.

Laughing and being at peace were not necessary now.

After everything was settled, he would laugh without needing to hold back.

For that, such emotions were not needed now.

They were not needed.

3

The ground dragon pulling the carriage Rem rented was exceptionally large, even among the ground dragons Subaru had seen, and it thundered across the grasslands with powerful hind legs.

Its leg strength kicked up so much dust that it obscured their vision for a while. Though their speed increased, their view remained hazy. Sitting next to Rem on the driver's seat, Subaru squinted through the dust.

"It's fast… which is good, but can't we do something about this?"

"This ground dragon is originally meant for transporting heavy cargo. So, its running style doesn't consider passengers, and they said it can't run quietly even when specializing in fast travel."

"We were lucky to rent it, and it can run without rest, so I guess we can't complain… Still, this dust is rough. Isn't there anything we can do?"

Teary-eyed, he fumbled through his luggage, but the results were disappointing.

Resigned, he wrapped a thin towel around his mouth as a makeshift dust mask, and did the same for Rem, who was holding the reins.

"Okay, that's done. This should keep our mouths from getting gritty, and it's a bit better, right?"

"Yes. As for our vision, we'll just have to put up with it."

With their mouths covered, they looked like gangsters from some bygone era, but they didn't have the luxury to joke about it now.

Once the hindrance to observing their journey lessened, Subaru's thoughts naturally delved deep. As far as the eye could see, grasslands stretched out, and in this verdant world, changes rarely occurred. The only things that shifted were the positions of clouds in the sky and the slow but steady movement of the sun—which signified the passage of time, slowly burning Subaru's heart.

Their time management should be quite advantageous.

The day and a half spent in the capital was, frankly, unproductive and wasted time, but departing with the dragon carriage on the second day was a huge benefit.

Even if they considered the setting sun's position as their starting point, they would likely reach the mansion by tomorrow morning after half a day's ride on the highway. Arriving by the morning of the third day meant they would arrive half a day earlier than when he left Crusch's mansion in the first world.

There should be plenty of time to get Emilia and the others out of the mansion and escape.

If there was a problem—

"The possibility of encountering the Witch Cult again, like last time…"

His memories of the second world were unclear, but if the cave he woke up in was their hideout, and it was on the way to the mansion, then the encounter must have happened during their return trip.

The two of them, traveling back in a dragon carriage or something, were attacked by the Witch Cult, and as a result, Subaru was captured, and Rem, who came to rescue him, was killed—that seemed natural.

After that, even though he didn't feel it directly, he estimated it must have taken about a day or so for Subaru to break free from his restraints and escape the cave.

"So, they've been lurking around the mansion for a few days now."

He couldn't pinpoint the exact date.

If the timeline of the second iteration was the same as the first, the tragedy at the mansion and village would occur on the morning of the fifth day. If he calculated that Subaru was held captive for about a day and a half, then the encounter with them would be between the third and fourth days. In other words, "Since we're scheduled to arrive tomorrow morning, the possibility of an encounter hasn't disappeared…!"

A guttural grind, a familiar sound, brought blood to his teeth.

If they had departed yesterday, this concern would have been greatly alleviated. But with their current travel time, they were pushing dangerously close to the risk zone. He couldn't be optimistic.

"…"

Subaru subtly glanced sideways at Rem, who was focused on driving, holding the reins.

If they were to encounter the Witch Cult in battle, he would inevitably have to rely on Rem again. Or perhaps if he warned her beforehand about the possibility of encountering the Witch Cult and urged her to be cautious, they might avoid repeating the same mistake.

When he tried to vocalize it, Subaru realized he couldn't speak.

It wasn't the terrifying fear of a black mist appearing and the excruciating pain of his heart being crushed in a frozen world. There was certainly fear of that pain. Every time he remembered it, every time he experienced it, the pain was so piercing he wondered if his hair would turn completely white. It was unbearable to endure while sane. Even when he used it, it was only possible because of some inexplicable emotional explosion. If he were told to do it again, he would shake his head.

However, it wasn't that pain that made Subaru hesitate to talk about the Witch Cult now.

—Could it be?

Would Rem really believe him?

"—!"

Just thinking about it sent a shiver down his spine, and Subaru instinctively hugged his shoulders as if he couldn’t bear it.

His heart hammered absurdly fast, and a wave of nausea rose, pressing against his organs. The stress of his extreme mental state and the fatigue of his sleepless body were eating away at Subaru’s willpower and physical strength.

For Subaru right now, Rem was the most trustworthy person in the world.

Abandoned even by Emilia, and successively treated dismissively by Crusch and Priscilla, Subaru’s mind had fallen into a world of suspicion, unable to trust anything.

He couldn’t imagine a situation where his trust in Crusch and Priscilla would be restored, and even with Emilia, he couldn’t picture them genuinely laughing and talking until Petelgeuse was killed and their safety secured.

That’s why Subaru only had Rem now.

She was the only one he could fully entrust everything to, feel at ease with, and call a companion.

What if he confided in her about the Witch Cult and her expression clouded with doubt? —The thought alone was terrifying.

“Is this really the time to be a coward…?”

He tried to say it aloud to drive away his fear, but the sound was more like a breath than a voice. The volume, barely a whisper, was drowned out by the ground dragon’s rumble, not even reaching himself.

Still, he had to tell her.

As long as there was a possibility of encountering the Witch Cult, not knowing would just mean repeating the last time. Subaru had lost his life and returned to seize the best outcome.

So—

“Re-Rem… um, I need to talk about something—”

“Subaru—there are people gathered ahead.”

However, his voice of strained determination was cut off by Rem’s sharp voice.

“Huh?” Subaru questioned, following her gaze, and saw several foreign objects appearing on the road ahead where the ground dragon was running.

—Could it be a Witch Cult ambush?!

Subaru was so surprised, his heart nearly leaped out of his mouth at the too-early development, but as the shadows gradually drew closer, their true nature, now taking on definite outlines, became clear.

It was—

“—Hey! Could you stop the ground dragon for a bit? Shall we exchange some information?!”

Waving both hands in the middle of the road and shouting loudly, calling for them to stop—it was Otto, the merchant.

4

“Ah, I’m sorry. Thank you for stopping. At this time of year, there are many people heading towards the capital, but not so many coming from the capital. I was just hoping to talk to someone like you.”

The young man —Otto— said with a smile, greeting the two who had stopped their dragon carriage.

He wasn’t drunk or looking like he despaired of the world. Of course, he showed no signs of injury; it was clear that Otto the merchant was alive and well.

Leaving him behind in the first world, despite his desperate pleas, had been a slight thorn in Subaru’s heart. However, considering the horrific state of the village afterward, leaving him behind might have actually been a fortunate decision for Otto.

Anyway,

“Are all the people gathered here traveling merchants or something?”

“Indeed, they are traveling merchants. Everyone here is just eager to make a killing in the capital, which is the center of attention right now.”

Otto rubbed his hands together and offered an ingratiating smile as Subaru looked past him and asked.

Behind Otto, several dragon carriages were parked by the side of the road, and men, presumably their owners, were gathered in a group. There were around ten of them, ranging in age from young like Otto to about forty. Among them was the thin man who had introduced Otto to Subaru in the first world.

As soon as they saw Otto and Subaru finish their greetings, they slowly began to gather around the two, introducing themselves one by one and starting conversations.

The topics mainly revolved around the current state of the capital, changes before and after the Royal Selection, and fluctuations in currency value— All points that naturally concerned merchants.

Honestly, Subaru begrudged the time spent stopping to talk, but as soon as he confirmed Otto’s presence, the option of ignoring him and passing by disappeared.

Fortunately, he had confirmed Otto’s safety (which was natural in the third iteration), so he intended to leave as soon as the conversation reached a lull.

“Are you planning to depart now? It’s already night; won’t it be dangerous? We’re planning to camp here tonight, so… if you’d like, you could join us.”

Just as the one-sided “information extraction” masquerading as an exchange ended, Otto stopped Subaru and Rem, who were about to leave.

As he said, the last vestiges of the sun were already fading from the sky, and night was beginning to fall over the grasslands from beyond the orange-tinted horizon.

Soon, the Lifaus Highway would be completely swallowed by night, and visibility would rely solely on the light produced by crystal lamps.

The gathered merchants had already begun setting up their camp, and preparations for a fire were already made in the center of the area where the dragon carriages were parked.

They probably judged that wild dogs or bandits that might appear on the road would be less likely to attack if such a large group was together. While Subaru admired the merchants' wisdom, he begrudged even that safe time now.

"Don't say that, Otto. Aren't you just trying to reduce your excess oil stock because you missed the season? Don't act all charitable!"

Just as Subaru was about to refuse, a voice jeered at him. Laughter erupted from behind, and Otto, who was the target, made a sour face.

"That's not my intention at all. It's purely out of goodwill. Well, it's not that I don't have any desire for you to bring some oil for meals or lanterns, if you happen to have any…"

"Is something wrong with the oil?"

Rem asked Otto, who slumped his shoulders and spoke as if defeated. He raised his eyebrows at her question, then, after a rather affected shrug, replied,

"Well, you see. It seems I made a blunder with this business opportunity. I'm stuck with a large quantity of oil that's of questionable value as merchandise. It was supposed to fetch a lot of money in Gusteko to the north… but now, at this time in Lugunica, I wonder how much of my loss I can recover."

His distressed demeanor was probably a ploy to elicit sympathy.

He probably wasn't underestimating them as people who would fall for such a trick, but it was clear he hoped to sell the oil at a decent price if it worked out—that level of calculation was transparent.

Rem seemed to understand this as well. Though sympathetic, she didn't seem to have any further thoughts, merely offering a perfunctory "Is that so? That's tough."

"Even if I go to the capital, I don't know if I can get rid of all this oil. If I have to sell it for next to nothing, I'll be bankrupt. —Bankrupt, I tell you."

He seemed to have said it twice because it was important, but Subaru didn't possess the kind of generous goodwill that would make him offer to buy all his oil.

They had a relationship from the first iteration, but their involvement this time was minimal. He wished for happiness in Otto's future, but his own future was the top priority.

Now, they had to race down the road through the night and enter the Mathers territory as quickly as possible.

The possibility of encountering the Witch Cult, and strategies to safely escape with Emilia and the others— His thoughts were focused on these. He was about to utter words of farewell when he suddenly realized something.

If he could make something happen with money, shouldn't he?

"Otto, I have something to discuss… no, a business proposition."

Subaru's expression suddenly turned serious as he whispered. Otto's eyes widened. But sensing no hint of a joke in his tone, he immediately straightened his posture.

"If it's a business proposition, I'm all ears, customer. What do you need?"

"I'll buy all the oil loaded in your dragon carriage. In return, lend me your legs."

Subaru pointed at Otto's earth dragon —that familiar carriage— and then, spreading both hands, he spoke in a voice loud enough for the merchants preparing to camp to hear.

"All you merchants and dragon carriages here—anyone willing to sell their legs for money, I'll buy all of you!"

Chapter 45: Encounter

1

—I don’t want to die.

“Haah, haah, haaaah, haah, haah—”

Gasping for breath, stumbling clumsily, spitting out the grass and dirt that got into my mouth when I fell, with drool and bloody vomit dripping from the corners of my lips, I race through the impenetrable darkness.

The light of the crystal lamps has vanished into the distance, and darkness has fallen over the road, where even the moonlight is obscured.

An almost deafening silence echoes in my skull; no reliable sound can be heard. My own breathing, even the sound of my heartbeat—nothing can be heard. I’m stranded in a world of absolute silence.

—I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die.

Kicking the ground, I’m certainly moving forward in the darkness. Yet, the unlifting darkness makes my position uncertain, and I don’t even know where my feet are heading.

I’ve already lost count of how many times I’ve stumbled and fallen. If each time I strayed from the original path, then where am I headed now?

There was a place I had to go.

There were people I had to meet.

There were people who aimed for that goal with me.

Yet, here I am, surrounded by endless darkness, utterly alone.

“Is anyone—!”

Terrified by the darkness that engulfs my vision and the silence that severs the world, I raise my voice.

My hoarse throat, my voice trembling so much I can taste blood, must have reached beyond the night. The only reply to that scream is the painful, repeated torment of silence.

No one is here. I’ve been left behind.

There’s no sign of anyone returning. Of course. No one wants to die.

Knowing that staying here, returning here, remaining within the reach of this darkness means losing your life—who could come back?

I feel despair slowly seep into my heart. My chest grows cold, and my limbs begin to go numb as if ice water, not blood, flows through my veins.

I’m aware of the end, and my body is refusing to resist.

Just,

“No… I don’t want to… die…”

My heart, my emotions, my soul, refuse the body’s reaction to accept the end.

I shake my head, throwing a tantrum against this fate trying to force an end upon me. I drag my lead-heavy limbs, limbs that no longer convey any fighting spirit, and push forward.

Forward—no, I’m fleeing. Keep fleeing. No purpose. Just scrambling in fear. Forever, lost and confused.

—From far, far away, beyond the darkness, a sound can be heard.

Shaking the air, pushing back the darkness, the end approaches, taking shape.

Desperately, with a look of agony, I continue to flee, slow as a turtle, trying to distance myself from what is pressing in from behind.

As he displays such a pathetic and shameful spectacle, Subaru thinks:

—How did it come to this?

2

“All you merchants and dragon carriages here—anyone willing to sell their legs for money, I’ll buy all of you!”

The peddlers exchanged glances at Subaru’s “business proposal”, seemingly thinking it was some kind of joke, and let their cheeks relax into an unpleasant smile.

However, everyone’s expressions changed when Rem, embodying Subaru’s will, held up the bag containing their travel funds, opened its mouth, and showed its contents around.

From that point, led by Otto, a scramble of eager volunteers began.

As a result, out of the fourteen peddlers at that relay point, ten decided to accompany Subaru and his group.

Initially, the negotiations were difficult, but thanks to Otto’s suggestion, everything landed smoothly. His method, which ensured no one lost out, was this:

“We’ll entrust the transportation of all cargo to the four individuals with large dragon carriages and vehicles. The profits will be distributed later in the royal capital via the guild. In this case, we’ll reconcile the freight charges with the sales, you see.”

Otto, skillfully consolidating the differing claims, explained this with a beaming face, standing at the head of the ten accompanying merchants. Despite being the youngest, his immediate ability to devise a path that satisfied everyone, and his persuasive words, showed his innate talent as a merchant.

Of course, for him, it was probably the result of being desperate not to miss a once-in-a-lifetime chance to cleverly dispose of inventory that could determine the fate of his merchant career.

“I’m happy you’re buying my oil, but what’s the reason you also need dragon carriage ‘legs’?”

Watching his fellow merchants transfer their goods, Otto folded his arms and asked Subaru, who was concerned about their departure time.

In response, Subaru prefaced with, “Well,” then continued,

“We’re heading back to the Mathers territory. For now, our cover is that we’re servants of the Margrave Roswaal.”

“I know him. Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, with his ‘demi-human fetish’. I’ve heard he’s quite an eccentric among Lugunica nobles with titles.”

Subaru gave a wry smile at Otto, who was peeking up at him, gauging his reaction. If Ram had heard that, she’d be furious, but—

“Well, I can’t deny it. He is kind of a pervert.”

“You say that about your employer! No, actually, I kind of expected that answer, which is why I brought it up. But still, Mr Natsuki, you don’t look like a noble’s servant.”

“I’m still an apprentice. The only things I’ve gotten passing marks on are sewing and bed-making.”

Anyway,

“Assuming I believe you’re on an errand for the Margrave… why do you need dragon carriages? Honestly, a Margrave would surely have his own dragon carriages, wouldn’t he?”

“Like I said, we need a lot of them. We have a large amount of stuff to transport, so it’d be ideal if the carriages were empty… Though in your case, Otto, since we’re buying your oil, it can’t be helped.”

"I appreciate it. So, the goods you're transporting are…"

He smiled at the corners of his mouth, rubbing his hands together as if to gauge Subaru's mood. But behind his narrowed, relaxed eyelids, his eyes were frozen with a lack of emotion, peering into Subaru's.

It seemed he didn't entirely believe Subaru's story about being a Margrave's envoy. Beyond that, regardless of the truth of the identity, he seemed concerned about the danger level of what they were being asked to transport.

That was a natural concern.

If his identity as the Margrave's attendant was true, they would be transporting something that required hiring outsiders.

Conversely, if his stated identity was false, they would end up aiding people impersonating those connected to the Margrave. It was only natural for him to exercise maximum caution.

Subaru couldn't afford to have them refuse the job due to such suspicions.

Therefore, Subaru decided to tell them the reason he hired them without holding anything back.

"The goods we're transporting are… people."

"People?"

"Yes. Humans, that is. There's a small village near the Margrave's mansion, with fewer than a hundred villagers in total. I want to load those people onto the carriages and move them."

That was the reason Subaru had suddenly thought of hiring Otto and the others.

The dragon carriage Subaru and Rem were riding in was quite large, designed for heavy cargo, and the vehicle pulled by the dragon was considerably sized. The shopkeeper had said it could easily pull over a dozen people.

"Humans… you say. You don't mean, by any chance, that you want us to transport corpses, do you? Because if so, I'm very sorry, but I'll have to refuse."

"…I want to bring you along so that doesn't happen."

If they had multiple dragon carriages, they could evacuate all the villagers.

Initially, before encountering Otto and the others, Subaru, in his haste to meet Emilia, had completely forgotten about the villagers' escape.

If he had realized this later, at worst, he might have had to load only the mansion residents, including Emilia, and the village children onto the dragon carriage, transport them to a safe zone, and then risk multiple round trips.

In that sense, meeting Otto and the others here could be called a twist of fate, a rare stroke of luck that worked favorably for Subaru.

Subaru, noticing Otto's furrowed brow, indicating undeniable distrust and confusion, uncrossed his arms and prefaced with, "Actually," then said,

"Soon, there's going to be a large-scale witchbeast hunt in the entire area around the Margrave's mansion."

"Witchbeast hunt, you say?"

Subaru nodded, affirming for Otto, who leaned forward at the unexpected word. He then made a serious face and continued,

"Witchbeasts, Juggernauts, have inhabited that area since long ago. Until now, a barrier kept them separate from humans, and we managed somehow… Recently, a Juggernaut crossed the barrier and caused damage. It was quite a commotion."

"That's why you decided on a witchbeast hunt? But…"

As Otto tried to press the point, seemingly having reservations, Subaru silently pulled up his right sleeve. Otto then let out a choked

“Ugh!” of surprise.

His trembling eyes caught sight of the vivid remnants of tooth and claw lacerations on Subaru’s upper arm. Moreover, countless other unerasable scars were etched beneath his clothes.

“By the Margrave’s kindness, I received treatment in the royal capital when I nearly died. Now that my treatment is mostly done, I’m on my way back.”

“I… I see… So that’s it. Then, why isn’t the Margrave arranging the dragon carriages himself? Why are you doing it on the road, Mr Natsuki?”

“The Margrave intends to simply clean up, without moving the residents. However as you can see from my body, there’s a chance the witchbeasts might cause trouble. So I want to take out insurance. It’s not that I don’t trust my master, though.”

Subaru lowered his gaze and confessed apologetically. Otto grunted softly, “Hmm,” and after a moment of silence,

“Understood. I’m sorry for prying into things you didn’t want to discuss. I’ll explain it well to everyone without mentioning your injuries.”

Looking at Subaru with concern, Otto’s usually good-natured face showed a bitter expression. He probably felt guilty for inadvertently touching upon Subaru’s injuries.

In that regard, he seemed a little too soft-hearted for a merchant.

“Don’t worry about it. You can tell everyone exactly what I said. It’s much better than being needlessly suspected.”

Otto, who seemed to be a good person at heart, nodded, apparently satisfied.

Watching him, Subaru secretly clenched a small fist, thinking that he himself was much more of a villain.

It was about an hour after the negotiations concluded that they left the camping ground where the merchants had gathered.

Their cargo had been transferred to four dragon carriages, leaving nine merchants and their now-lighter wagons. Adding Otto, who still had his oil, made ten companions. Including the dragon carriage Subaru and Rem were on, that made eleven—it would be quite cramped, but it should be possible to fit all the villagers.

Bidding farewell to the remaining group, who would head to the capital in the morning, Subaru and the eleven dragon carriages departed the main road in the dead of night.

The thin merchant who had introduced Otto to Subaru —Ketty— was among the ones staying behind. As he waved, Subaru felt a profound sense of their paths truly diverging.

“If we keep running through the night, we should enter the Mathers territory sometime after dawn, wouldn’t you say?”

Otto, riding his own carriage alongside theirs, called out, looking over at Subaru.

He wasn’t raising his voice much, yet it still reached them, apparently due to the ground dragon’s blessing of wind. Not being affected by wind or tremors must extend to things like this.

For Subaru, who had a sand cloth wrapped around his mouth, making breathing difficult, not having to shout was a genuine relief. He nodded and replied, “Sorry about the no breaks.”

“Oh, no! I have no complaints whatsoever. With the chance to clear out my inventory and get generous freight fees, I’m invincible! I’ve even run for three days and three nights straight!”

“Sounds like you’d collapse and sleep right after negotiations finished.”

“Huh?! Did you read my mind?!”

Subaru gave a wry smile at Otto, who was flustered that his punchline had been stolen. Then, Subaru shifted his gaze to Rem, who was holding the reins.

With the sand cloth Subaru had re-wrapped covering the lower half of her face, Rem's expression, as she looked straight ahead, was even more unreadable than usual. For Subaru, who prided himself on being able to discern her emotions despite her usual lack of expression, this was a somewhat unsettling situation.

Especially now, when he was dying to know what she was thinking.

Just then,

"—Subaru."

"…! Ah, oh, what is it, Rem? Is something wrong?"

Subaru, who had been staring intently at her profile, was startled when she spoke. He swallowed a gasp of surprise, then spoke with an exaggerated calmness.

Hearing this, Rem gave a small shake of her head and said, "No," then,

"It became quiet, so Rem wondered if you were tired. It's a bit bumpy and sandy, but it's alright if you want to sleep. Rem will keep watch."

"I'd like to say I'll take you up on that, but my eyes are wide open. Besides, it'd look way too uncool to make you do all the work."

"Subaru, you're still recovering."

Subaru was silenced by Rem's considerate and deferential attitude.

Her words were gentle, but her will was firm and unyielding. At the very least, Rem would absolutely never assign Subaru a task on this dragon carriage that would burden him.

Each time she treated him with such kindness, an unremovable thorn pierced Subaru's chest.

He didn't know Rem's true intentions for being so sincere and devoted, and wanting to know, yet not wanting to know, his conflicting heart twisted.

“Rem, are you…”

“Yes.”

Suddenly, that anxiety slipped out, and he called her name.

It seemed to have clearly reached her, and she immediately responded, waiting for Subaru’s next words.

The source of the anxiety he had unwittingly stumbled into. Now, he could pull back with a simple “never mind”, and Rem probably wouldn’t press him. But it was clear that not knowing what Rem was thinking when she didn’t press him would torment him.

In that case, he might as well just be blunt.

“Rem, don’t you have any doubts about what I’m doing? I haven’t explained anything to you. Not about the Witch Cult, or about hiring these merchants like this.”

He gritted his teeth, suppressed his weakness, and forced out the question, holding back his voice that threatened to waver with anxiety. It was something he had wanted to ask for so long, but had been too afraid.

Hearing him, Rem closed her eyes once, then,

“Lord Roswaal has instructed Rem. All actions in the royal capital are to respect Subaru’s wishes.”

She replied, her face showing the frozen expression of a servant.

Hearing that answer, Subaru’s face stiffened in disbelief.

She followed Subaru’s words because Roswaal had commanded it.

Then it was as if,

“Instructed… by Roswaal…?”

"Yes. While Rem hasn't been ordered to do anything specific, Rem was told to follow Subaru's policies in everything Rem does in the royal capital. Rem also intended to do so as much as possible."

Rem's supplementary words, for some reason, didn't quite register in his mind.

Only one thought echoed dispassionately in Subaru's head:

"Roswaal's command…"

She didn't object to Subaru's actions and followed them because her master had commanded her to.

Did that mean her obedience to Subaru up until now wasn't her true intention?

No, more than that, even the fact that Rem was by Subaru's side like this…

"Subaru?"

Rem, perhaps finding Subaru's silence puzzling, tilted her head toward him, her brows faintly furrowed. Even her worried gaze looking at Subaru, he couldn't accept with an honest heart now.

Was all of it— Her worried care, her gentle support when he felt like collapsing, her constant presence by his side when he was on the verge of madness from loneliness, her following him and affirming his belief in what was right— All merely because Roswaal's command was foremost in her mind?

To be even more extreme, did Rem perhaps not truly approve of Subaru's actions in her heart?

"—!"

Nausea surged, and Subaru instinctively swallowed the acidic bile rising in his stomach. The restrained urge to vomit had nowhere to go, becoming a bomb that spread shivers throughout his body, raging within him.

His limbs tingled, his vision flickered, and his brain itched unbearably. An urge to smash his skull open and plunge his fingers in to scratch it wildly made his breathing ragged.

His fingers, pressing into his scalp, never broke through his skull. He could only gnash his teeth at the unyielding itch and endure the crushing pressure as if his stomach were being squeezed.

He didn't want to think about anything. He didn't want to think.

The more he thought, the more he replayed, the more he sought, the further what he wanted receded, his ideals transformed into fantasies, and his hopes were painted over with despair and disappointment.

"Subaru?"

He hated it. He was sick of it.

He didn't want to think. He didn't want to doubt. He didn't want to believe. He didn't want to be betrayed.

He clutched his head, shutting out all external stimuli and withdrawing into himself.

Rem called Subaru's name a few times, but perhaps thinking Subaru was trying to sleep in that position, she stopped speaking further and looked straight ahead again.

At that moment, Subaru was finally, truly, utterly alone.

4

"—ru. Rem is sorry, please wake up. Subaru."

A call, and the sensation of consciousness being stirred.

The feeling of someone's hand on his shoulder. Lifting his face, he rubbed his blurry eyelids to clear his vision, and in the brightening view, he saw a familiar girl's face.

"Rem, huh. What is it?"

Consciousness surfaced from unconsciousness, and the moment he recognized her, a dull pain throbbed deep in his chest. However it wasn't unbearable.

Struggling to keep it from showing on his face, Subaru waited for Rem, who had reached out to him, to answer. After apologizing for waking him, she said,

"We should be arriving at the road's fork soon. It's a path we couldn't possibly miss if it were bright, but now we're relying solely on the crystal lamp's light."

As she spoke, she pointed to the ground dragon still kicking the ground single-mindedly—to the glowing crystal lamp attached beneath its thick neck.

In this world, where streetlights and other lighting devices don't exist, securing visibility at night relies on the glow of lagmite ore, the light of primitive torches, or, more naturally, unreliable moonlight.

For a night-sighted ground dragon, the lagmite ore alone was probably enough to run without losing its way, but,

"Unfortunately, for me, it's pretty much invisible. There's a small one on the driver's seat too, but I can only see my hands."

There was a dedicated lamp inside the dragon carriage, but it wasn't bright enough to illuminate the entire driver's seat. Anyway,

"So, you're saying we're lost?"

"No. Before we get lost, Rem had wanted to confirm the map. The map is in the luggage at your feet, so could you please get it out?"

"At my feet, this?"

He fumbled in the darkness with his toes and pulled the object that hit his foot closer.

He lifted the considerably heavy item onto his lap and rummaged inside, but, “Ugh… I can’t quite tell which one’s the map. Besides, even if I find the map, won’t it be too dark to see?”

“Don’t underestimate a Oni’s night vision… is what Rem would like to say, but Rem is not that confident about her night vision, either…”

Rem’s expression clouded over, wondering what to do. Then, suddenly, something flashed in Subaru’s mind in the darkness. Come to think of it,

“Hold on a sec.”

Calling out to Rem, Subaru pulled out the small pouch containing his personal belongings. Inside were the hand towel Rem had given him, a pouch of spending money, and other items. He rummaged his hand inside, searching for the desired sensation, and,

“Found it.”

In Subaru’s hand was a cold, hard sensation.

Rem tilted her head, unable to identify it in the darkness, but Subaru opened what he hadn’t touched in a long time and pressed the power button.

“Haven’t turned it on in a while, but it better not be dead… Oh.”

After a brief silence, a “startup” effect appeared on the screen. Exactly one second later, Subaru’s hands were suddenly illuminated by a dazzling light.

With the sudden bright light, Rem raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Subaru, is that…?”

“It’s a lost technology, no, a future technology: a mobile phone. Barely, atleast it’s alive and well, thank goodness.”

It was its first startup since the day he was summoned to this world, and despite its low battery, the phone shone brightly.

It was one of the items he had brought from his original world when he fell into this one. Although he had brought several other personal items, this mobile phone's utility was probably by far the highest. Though that came with the limitation of its battery life.

"I kept it off because I didn't know when I'd use it, but I never thought the day would come when it'd be useful as a light."

Grateful for civilization's unexpected use, Subaru illuminated the luggage. Spotting a rolled-up map inside the light-filled bag, he quickly pulled it out and held it out to Rem's lap.

"I'll shine the light, so take a look at the map."

"Yes, thank you."

As he illuminated Rem's view, who was looking down, Subaru let out a small sigh that she couldn't hear.

It seemed he was managing well without revealing his trembling emotions.

"Mr. Natsuki, what is that? I've never seen anything like it."

Otto, his voice almost cracking, was intensely curious about the phone in Subaru's hand. Otto, riding to the left of their carriage, leaned forward to peer at it.

"A crystal lamp I've never seen… no, it doesn't look like crystal. In fact, I've never seen the material before."

Lured by Otto's excited observations, another dragon carriage, slightly behind, pulled up on their right. Likewise, an older man with a bandana wrapped around his head stretched his neck to look. But he too, with a childlike sparkle in his eyes unfitting his age, was fixated on the phone in Subaru's hand.

Normally, Subaru would have welcomed their reaction and cracked a joke or two, but unfortunately, he didn't have the capacity for that right now.

Shaking his head, Subaru prefaced with "Sorry", to the two who wanted an explanation.

“It’s a secret tool given to me by the Margrave. If too much is known about it, one might go missing. It’s best you forget you ever saw it.”

“Wow, what kind of shady, money-smelling backstory is that?”

Subaru inwardly gritted his teeth, seeing that he had only piqued Otto’s interest further. However, their conversation was interrupted by Rem, who said, “I understand”.

She looked up from the map, pointed ahead in their direction of travel, and said,

“A little further ahead, there’s Flugel’s Great Tree. If we follow the road that leads northeast from there, we should be able to enter the Mathers territory.”

“Flugel’s Great Tree?”

When Subaru tilted his head at the unfamiliar name, Otto, still huffing excitedly, raised a finger and said, “Well, you see,”

“Flugel’s Great Tree is the name of a massive tree that towers into the clouds in the middle of the Lifaus Highway. ‘Towers into the clouds’ is an exaggeration, but it’s truly enormous. The legend says a sage named Flugel planted it several hundred years ago.”

“So, Flugel’s Great Tree, then. Do they not know why he planted it, or anything about that?”

“Well, it’s a story from hundreds of years ago. Mr. Flugel, too, is a bit of a mystery, beyond the story of him planting the tree.”

Subaru wondered what made him a sage, but he kept it to himself.

After driving straight for a while, a massive tree towering beyond the night gradually became clearly visible even to Subaru’s eyes.

“I see… That’s amazing.”

If he were to compare it to anything from his original world, perhaps the "thousand-year-old tree" class giants he'd seen in TV specials would come close.

Otto said this tree was several hundred years old, but perhaps the growth rate of plants here was different; despite its shorter age, the Great Tree possessed a majesty comparable to those ancient trees.

A trunk so tall that its peak couldn't be seen even when looking up. The branches, stretching skyward, were immense in number, and the foliage was equally vast. Supporting the thick, powerful trunk were countless roots, sprawling across the ground like coiling great serpents, sinking into the ground.

It wasn't in the middle of a great forest; such an enormous tree stood alone in the plains, making it an unmistakable landmark.

Next to Subaru, who was awe-struck by its size, Rem coolly handled the reins, subtly changing the dragon carriage's course. According to the map, they would now head northeast and enter the Mathers territory. Watching the Great Tree approach, then gradually recede, Subaru thought,

"If I had more battery and peace of mind, I would've taken a picture."

He peered at the screen, which showed only one bar of battery life remaining, and muttered with regret. Hearing Subaru's murmur, Otto asked, "Huh, what was that?!" Subaru irritably replied, "Nothing!" and lowered his raised hips back onto the driver's seat.

Then, tearing his attention away from the Great Tree, Subaru suddenly noticed something.

"Hey, where did that bandana guy who was riding on the right go?"

He looked around, but the person who should have been there was nowhere to be found.

Had he suddenly fallen behind? Subaru checked slightly behind them, but there was only the dragon carriage that had been following the bandana-clad man, leaving a gaping void where he should have been.

“Don’t tell me he got separated looking up at the tree.”

“What’s wrong, Mr Natsuki? Are you looking for something?”

“Looking for something? He’s your buddy! Where did that cool old man with the bandana, who was riding on this side just now, go? Is he reliving his childhood by climbing trees?”

Subaru irritably hurled sarcasm at the carefree Otto, blaming him for the oversight.

However Otto, on the receiving end of Subaru’s irritation, looked bewildered, as if he didn’t understand what was being said, and tilted his head.

“What are you talking about, Mr Natsuki? No one was riding on my opposite side.”

—Huh?

Subaru was dumbfounded, unable to voice his confusion at the meaning of Otto’s words.

Otto stared at Subaru, who had frozen, and showed no sign of joking. He answered with genuine bewilderment, having seemingly processed Subaru’s statement.

However that was precisely what Subaru couldn’t understand.

“What are you talking about? Just now, you were both looking at the phone with keen interest, drooling practically.”

“Oh, it’s called a phone, is it? More importantly, can you guarantee my safety after I’ve heard that?”

“Don’t play dumb!”

Subaru snapped at Otto, who was trying to brush off his words, and looked to his right. The same empty space stretched out, the presence that should have been there was nowhere to be seen.

He couldn’t have not been there. Subaru remembered his face and his voice.

“—?”

Then, while staring intently at the empty space, his vision blurred faintly.

A fuzzy, indistinct sensation, as if mist had fallen before his eyes. Subaru blinked several times. Still, the unsettling feeling wouldn’t clear.

The vague darkness continued to parallel him, and it felt eerily unsettling, fueling his anxiety.

So, Subaru unfolded his phone again and shone a light into the space on his right.

He was searching for a trace of the person who should have been there, wanting to know the true nature of the indescribable, unsettling sensation that couldn’t be erased.

In the illuminated light—

“—Huh?”

Subaru met eyes with an incredibly colossal eye floating in the darkness.

A roar echoed, and fog enveloped the Lifaus Plains.

—Fog enveloped the Lifaus Plains.

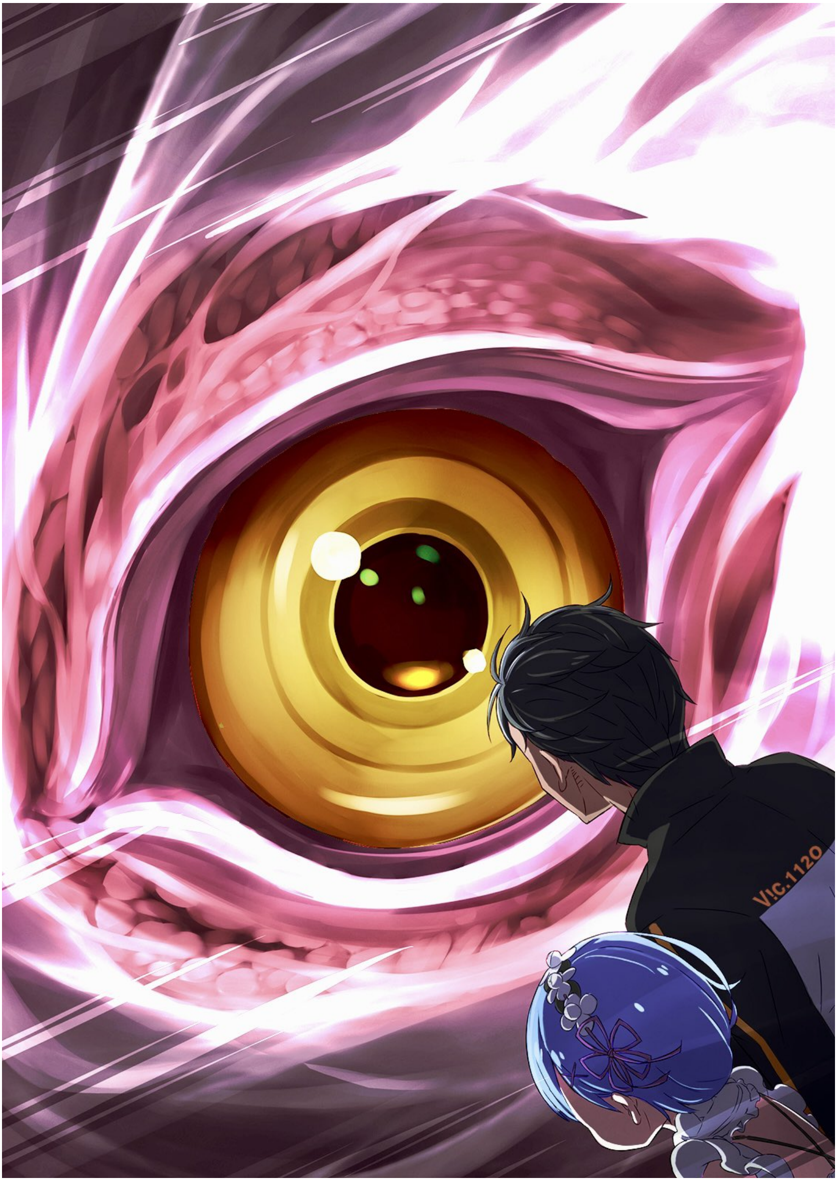
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Chapter 46:
The White Whale's Maw

1

Blasted by a wind filled with spray, Subaru felt as if he'd been punched square in the face.

"—gh!"

The tempest, like a physical blow, lifted his body, threatening to hurl him over the driver's seat and out into the open. His outstretched fingers found nothing to grasp, and he was about to fall into the unprotected darkness—

"—ru!"

A hand gripping the back of his collar forcefully pulled him down. He was slammed onto the seat, landing on his rear. At the edge of his sparking vision, he saw Rem, one hand reaching for his neck, the other pulling back on the reins. Her usually composed profile was etched with terror, her sharp eyes fixed on the direction of the whipping wind.

"—!!"

Rem opened her mouth and roared, revealing sharply pointed canines. But even her fierce battle cry was swallowed by the storm, failing to reach even Subaru, who was right beside her. However, the mana permeating the air heard her scream, though his eardrums did not.

Mana converged at Rem's exhaled incantation, and world-altering magic activated. Three spears of ice, each as large as Subaru himself, materialized in mid-air, their sharp tips aimed at the darkness.

After a moment of suspension, the ice spears shot forth like arrows with tremendous force. The ice projectiles, moving at a speed barely discernible to the eye, streaked towards their target in the darkness. They struck—their points embedding themselves in the surprisingly close edge of the seemingly endless void.

Immediately after,

"—Huh?!"

He felt his neck gripped again, and then he was abruptly pulled upwards. The seat receded as if he were being extracted, and Subaru, unable to resist, shot straight into the night sky. He soared over the driver's seat, leaving the dragon carriage behind, and from his perch in mid-air, he watched the carriage below rapidly shrink into the distance.

Falling. Not a fall from a horse, but from a dragon—as that escapist thought crossed his mind, Subaru saw it.

An enormous, sideways mass utterly obliterated the dragon carriage.

The heavily built carriage body was torn to shreds like paper, and the large ground dragon pulling it was also scattered by the impact — Blood, flesh, and organs splattered onto the road, transforming into a minced mixture of wood and meat.

The unreality of the scene turned Subaru's mind blank. It was a shocking sight that made him forget the fact that he was currently suspended in mid-air. What brought Subaru, whose consciousness was reeling from the catastrophe before him, back to his senses was:

"To the left—!!"

A girl's voice, close by, barked out. In that instant, his body, unable to brace itself, tumbled onto a hard floor. A dull ache shot through his shoulder and hip, but before he could protest, he was flung by the centrifugal force of a sharp turn. He rolled, and just as he was about to be thrown out again, he managed to grab onto something like a rope with his fingertips, stopping himself just in time. After a beat, Subaru lifted his head and looked around, realizing he was in the cargo bed of Otto's dragon carriage.

He was clinging to part of the tarp-covered carriage's fastenings, a rope tangled around his wrist, as he struggled to stand amidst the violent shaking. Then,

"No, Subaru! Don't stand up! The ground dragon's blessing has worn off. Rem and Subaru can't move properly!"

Rem's sharp warning flew at Subaru, who was struggling to stand upright. He saw Rem, who had landed on Otto's carriage in the same way, bracing herself by digging the edge of her right hand into the floor. Even with her physical abilities, standing upright in this shaking was difficult.

The familiar violent shaking was due to the ground dragon's physical support blessing having ceased. With the ground dragon's blessing, which eliminated obstacles like wind, sound, and shaking, gone, he felt nauseous and found it difficult even to stand.

Understanding this and seeing Rem, Subaru finally grasped the situation. Rem had carried Subaru and leaped from the exploding carriage to Otto's carriage. If her judgment had been even a moment slower, they both would have shared the same fate as the carriage— Their limbs blown off, joining the unrecognizable mincemeat.

Shaking off the shiver that ran down his spine, Subaru pressed himself against the edge of the cargo bed, raising his voice to be heard over the wind and the sound of their movement.

"Wh-What happened?! What in the world is this…?"

The anomaly that had occurred in mere tens of seconds was too dense for his mind to process.

"Don't you understand?!"

Otto turned back to Subaru's confusion, letting out a cry that sounded like a scream. His face was pale, and he yelled, his teeth chattering,

"Night fog is out! There's only one thing that big that swims through the sky with fog!"

His voice was tainted with the tremor peculiar to despair. As if to confirm, as if to reject what he didn't want to admit, he shook his head reluctantly, desperately drawing breath into his convulsing lungs, and Otto shouted with all his might.

"—It's the White Whale!!"

2

The White Whale.

The only time I'd heard that name, before or since, was in the first iteration. The name of the monster said to be shrouded in fog, blocking the highway. Because of that White Whale, which had supposedly appeared on the Lifaus Highway, the first iteration had to detour on the way back. One could say that was why I didn't make it in time for the tragedy that befell the village and the mansion the first time. However I'd never actually encountered it, nor had I heard its name again until now.

"Could it be that it's showing up at this timing?!"

When we left the capital half a day ago, there should have been no reports of the White Whale's appearance anywhere. Rem hadn't mentioned it, and most importantly, Otto and the others, whose profession should have made them wary of the White Whale, were still using the highway. The White Whale's appearance must have happened after Subaru and the others departed.

—No, even worse, could it be that it appeared on the highway at this very moment?

The timeline fit. In the first iteration, Subaru and the others departed on the third day. By then, the highway was already blocked by the White Whale's appearance. Now it was the middle of the second night— If the White Whale's appearance became known in the morning, the highway would be blocked by tomorrow. In other words, if they were going to collide, it had to be tonight.

"To think that at this time of year in Lugunica… we'd run into… the White Whale… Oh, Dragon, Dragon. Save us, save us…"

Otto muttered prayers for salvation with vacant eyes, like a Buddhist chant. Seeing him completely devoid of not just fighting spirit but even vitality, Subaru truly understood the merchants' fear of the White Whale. In the previous world, Otto had described the White Whale to Subaru as a symbol of ill omen for merchants. At the time, Subaru had thought he was being overly dramatic, but seeing Otto's utter exhaustion now that he'd actually encountered the fog, he couldn't help but feel how childish that description had been.

Otto's lips trembled, his mind elsewhere, yet he still managed the reins. His ground dragon, sensing the White Whale's presence, was in a state of panic, kicking at the ground with a speed that disregarded its remaining stamina, accelerating.

Feeling the direct impact of the shaking throughout his body, Subaru turned and peered into the darkness. He searched for the White Whale, but the lightless abyss had completely shut off the world. It was already a deeply dark night, where even his hands were barely visible without light. And on top of that,

"I thought something felt sticky… so it's fog."

He felt drops on his forehead that weren't sweat, and grimaced at the wet sensation on his palm. In a night already devoid of light, with fog on top of it, securing vision was hopeless. Indeed, the light from the crystal lamp illuminating the ground dragon's neck was blurred by the night fog, barely performing half its function.

"Rem! Can you see the White Whale?!"

"It's too dark, absolutely impossible! …But!"

Subaru looked behind, to the side, and up, searching for a fish-like shadow. Rem responded to Subaru's voice with a pained tone, stopping her words as if contemplating something. He looked at her, concerned, but she was only a silhouette; even her expression was indiscernible in the thick fog.

The fact that the White Whale, the cause of this situation, was invisible only amplified the terror. When Subaru first saw what he thought was the White Whale's eye, it was probably larger than the circle he could make with both his arms. For a single eyeball to be that massive meant the White Whale truly possessed a physique comparable to a whale, as its name suggested.

"Rem's preemptive attack should have hit… There's a chance it retreated."

Was that too optimistic? The power of the ice spears launched by Rem's incantation was among the strongest magic he had ever seen; it was powerful enough to kill Subaru three times over with just one spear. Even a creature of immense size would flinch if it sustained a deep wound.

"What about the other carriages…?"

"They've scattered and fled. When the fog appears, separate immediately and escape. With luck, you won't be caught by the White Whale and should be able to get out of the fog."

Indeed, there were no other carriages running alongside theirs. The other carriages, which had certainly been following behind, seemed to have scattered in various directions according to that manual.

—Internally, Subaru bit back his regret at losing the precious means of escape he had secured.

The timing was terrible. The plan to evacuate the villagers had collapsed again. If the fog hadn't appeared, it would have been a precaution against other threats.

"No use regretting it. Let's just get out of this fog quickly…"

Feeling the discomfort of his internal organs churning from the violent shaking, Subaru thought about the problems after their escape. If they were down to one carriage, they would need to figure out a way to evacuate the villagers after getting Emilia and the others to safety. This would also mean a significant loss of time. Just as Subaru's vision extended beyond the immediate crisis to what lay ahead— That is, the path of the carriage—

"—!!"

A jaw lined with powerful, millstone-like teeth was bearing down on them from the front, about to swallow the carriage whole.

A roar thundered, and the overwhelming sound and blast caused the ground dragon to cower. Its legs tangled, scraping the ground, and the wheels lifted, causing the carriage bed to tilt sharply. A jar of oil burst through the tarp and flew off, and Subaru, clinging to the edge, was almost thrown out.

Desperately clinging to the carriage bed, he looked straight ahead— In the darkness, only the grimy teeth inside the White Whale's mouth stood out clearly.

At this very moment, Subaru belatedly realized how naive his perception had been.

Encountering the White Whale and wandering through the deep night fog. There was no longer any room to think about what would happen after escaping the fog; the problem had shifted to how to survive this very moment.

"—Uwaaaaaah!!"

As the jaw, large enough to easily swallow the carriage, bore down on them, a roar erupted, and with a shock, the plank floor of the carriage bed exploded. It was Rem who had kicked off, leaping forward like a bullet. From beneath her white prim, fluttering in the storm, her sharp horn was exposed in her Oni form. Rem, wielding a chained iron ball she had pulled from somewhere, shouted,

"—Run through to the left!!"

"Left left left left left!!"

The iron ball smashed down on the White Whale's upper jaw from directly above, causing it to spew dark blood-smoke and slightly close its open maw. Otto's carriage, driven by him spitting saliva and frantically controlling the ground dragon, rushed past the giant face that was still advancing, digging into the earth. The right side of the moving carriage bed, unable to fully avoid the massive body, was caught in the intersection, scraping with a sound like hard rock and then crumpling and flying off. The carriage bed, having lost a wheel, groaned loudly, lost its balance, and was about to flip over.

Naturally, Subaru, who was on it, was also about to be thrown into the darkness, helpless.

—Am I going to die?

Just before the consequence of his delayed judgment was about to mercilessly scatter his body, a light clinking of metal chains echoed amidst the roar, followed by a merciless pain as his torso was squeezed— He was pulled up from below his feet as if being extracted, and then dragged forward. And then,

“Take this—!!”

With the iron ball that had pulled Subaru up in her right hand, Rem, who had destroyed the connection between the driver’s seat and the cargo bed with her free left hand, grabbed the edge of the cargo bed as it began to separate and move away— At that instant, a load so immense that the ground dragon pulling the carriage neighed was generated, and with a single roar, the large cargo vehicle was hurled backward by Rem.

The super-large mass projectile, like throwing a small house, directly struck the flank of the White Whale as it passed. The sound of splintering wood echoed, and the White Whale’s writhing tail exploded the ground, scattering clods of earth. It was unclear if there was any damage. However there was no doubt that the White Whale was still alive and well. And most importantly, it had turned its body, swimming through the air, and glared at them.

“D-D-Did we do it—?!”

Even without fully understanding what had happened, Otto seemed to grasp the fact that most of his carriage was gone. Hope, mixed with desperation, was plastered superficially onto his voice as he asked the question, as if to justify the sacrifice. The thundering roar. The unending rumble. The pressure of despair closing in from behind. Facing these, he knew it was a meaningless delusion.

“Why is it so persistently after us…? We’re not the only prey, are we?!”

Otto screamed, cursing his misfortune. His words were filled with resentment at the unfairness of being attacked when there were eight other candidate groups. Subaru felt the same, but seeing Otto continue to curse foully, he refrained from speaking. It felt as if he had glimpsed a part of how Subaru himself might have used them as stepping stones, or a meat shield, if he had faced the Witch’s Cult.

Besides, there was no time to spare for such thoughts.

The threat of the White Whale still loomed behind them, and its speed as it swam through the air surpassed that of the ground dragon. Even with the ground dragon shedding the burden of the cargo, it was only a matter of time before they were caught. And if they were to lose the ground dragon, Subaru and the others would have no chance of escaping on foot.

He had to think. Is there anything? Anything? Anything? But no solution came to mind. Even trying to devise haphazard plans, with the spreading night fog making even the ground invisible, he couldn’t find a single hint. And as Subaru wasted time, once again unable to choose anything, the Oni girl made a decision herself.

Rem quietly approached Subaru, who was clinging to the carriage body, enduring the violent shaking. Though she must have been feeling the same impact, she moved with steps that betrayed no discomfort, coming close to Subaru and saying,

“Subaru. Please take this.”

“What?! Is there something that can fix this situation…?”

A heavy pouch was pressed into Subaru’s hands, who had slightly raised his face as if seeing a glimmer of hope. He frowned at the weight, and immediately realized from the feel of the outside of the bag that it was a money pouch containing gold coins or other currency.

What good would this money do in this situation? Subaru couldn't suppress a chill as Rem handed him the travel money, and he forced a smile onto his face.

"R-Rem…? I know coin-tossing can break game balance, but that's just… in games…"

"Rem will descend to the ground and engage. In the meantime, Subaru, please escape the fog with this person."

Rem told Subaru this in a voice clearly tinged with resolve.

Subaru, who had been trying to lighten the mood with a dry joke, was struck silent. In the meantime, Rem turned only her head and said,

"Sir Otto, please take care of Subaru. The promised reward is in his hand. —Please escape the fog and report the White Whale's appearance."

"M-Money?! This is no time for that, our lives are at stake!"

Otto's reply, who hadn't heard the exchange behind him. Still, the fact that he was desperately driving the carriage was conveyed, and Subaru saw Rem's lips relax in relief. And Subaru hadn't missed it. Telling Subaru and Otto, who would be escaping, to report the White Whale's appearance meant,

"You… Rem, you're not planning on coming back alive, are you?!"

Rem's expression clouded with a tragic determination. The world remained dark and deep, yet for some reason, her white face alone seemed strikingly clear to Subaru at that moment.

"I won't let you, I won't let you! If you die, I'll… I'll!"

He dropped the gold coin pouch at his feet and pulled Rem, who stood before him, by the waist. He held her small body in his arms, trying to keep her from leaving. If he let go of her hand, she would throw her life away and leap out. He had to stop that. Otherwise,

"Ah…"

Amidst the surge of emotion that brought tears to his eyes, Rem, embraced, let out a warm sigh. He lowered his gaze at the incongruously ecstatic sound, and in Subaru's arms, Rem looked up at him, smiling dreamily.

"Rem was born for this moment, wasn't she?"

"What are you…"

He couldn't continue his words.

An impact struck the back of his neck, and a sensation of the world flipping over assaulted Subaru. Rem, who had reached out to hug him back, had struck the back of his head with a hand chop. Strength drained from his body, and he leaned against Rem's body as if collapsing.

"Re-Rem… what are you doing…"

Not only his vision but his consciousness swayed violently, and Subaru, finding it difficult even to lift his head, desperately clung to the girl. Rem looked at Subaru, struggling like this, with a loving gaze, and whispered into his ear as his consciousness faded. It was,

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“It’s alright. Rem will always be behind Subaru.”

—You don’t have to do anything. Just stay behind me.

Subaru himself had told her that, this morning, before they departed. So, true to those words, she stood, would stand, to protect Subaru’s back.

“No… I didn’t mean it that way…”

His consciousness was fading. Drifting away. He couldn’t hold on.

He felt as if he was hugged tightly once. A gentle, soft sensation was pressed against his forehead, then quickly pulled away.

That was the last of it.

Chapter 47:
At the End of Disgrace

1

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—Ah.

A jolt, an impact—the sensation of his face being struck.

That stirred Subaru's consciousness from its blank state, and he awoke to reality.

He lifted his face and tried to sit up, but the swaying prevented it. His hand slipped, and just before he could fall headfirst to the floor again, a weight supporting his abdomen stopped him.

A heavy, hard sensation pressed against his stomach. He touched it, confirmed it was a bag filled with gold coins— With that, his memory of the moments just before he lost consciousness flooded back.

"—Rem?!"

"Mr Natsuki?! You're awake?!"

Tossing aside the bag of gold coins he'd been clutching, Subaru swept his gaze around, still on all fours. The darkness remained thick, and the violent shaking confirmed he was definitely still on the dragon carriage.

In front of him, Otto responded to Subaru's cry, turning only his head. He watched Subaru shake his head and try to move forward.

"Don't move. You hit your head, and the divine protection has run out. The ground dragon is at full speed; we don't have the luxury of accommodating you!"

"I don't care about that! Rem, what about Rem?!"

Subaru retorted with a shout to Otto's voice, scanning every corner of the driver's seat. The carriage, having lost its trailer, was unbalanced with only the driver's seat remaining. The space for a person to ride was limited, so he didn't even need to desperately search to realize she wasn't there.

Even so, he couldn't accept the fact until he saw it for himself.

"Answer me, Otto. What happened to Rem…!"

"That young lady…"

Seeing Subaru in such an agitated state, nearly lunging at him, Otto must have understood the danger of not responding.

He gasped, then made the agonizing decision to deliver the next words:

"To let our carriage escape… she got off to confront the White Whale."

The last exchange before he lost consciousness —the fact that it had actually happened— was conveyed to him.

"…"

At those words, Subaru gasped once, then said,

"Go back."

"Huh?"

"I said go back! We have to save Rem. Go back right now!"

In the cramped driver's seat, Subaru closed the distance and grabbed Otto.

Otto, preoccupied with controlling the chaotic ground dragon, couldn't react to Subaru's rough actions. His collar was seized, and he panicked, "Hey, wait!"

"A-Are you serious?! Go back… What good would going back do?! Didn't you see how terrifying that monster, the White Whale, is?! It's suicide!"

"Precisely because I saw that monster up close, I'm telling you to go back to save Rem!"

Subaru's voice strained as he glared at Otto, who was shaking his head and refusing the order.

The threat of the White Whale was burned into Subaru's eyes. With that massive body, it moved faster than the carriage, and a single flick of its tail easily sent a large vehicle flying. What's more, even in the fog, it easily pinpointed their location, and Rem's magic seemed to have done little damage.

Without a doubt, it was the greatest adversary he'd faced since falling into this world.

Compared to that, dealing with Elsa, who was humanoid, or challenging countless hordes of Juggernauts would have seemed to offer much clearer strategies.

However for this, he couldn't imagine a way to win.

"That's exactly why I can't leave Rem here…!"

Subaru knew full well the strength of Rem when she became an Oni.

His understanding told him: even with her, she was nothing more than a helpless weakling before the White Whale.

If he left her behind, she would surely be lost.

That would be meaningless. There would be no meaning for Subaru to survive. Subaru had returned to rescue her. To save her.

Her presence was indispensable to the future Subaru desired.

Without Rem, Subaru would even lose sight of himself. He wouldn't be able to affirm himself. Subaru needed her, someone who would affirm him.

“I won’t let her pull such a ridiculous stunt as buying time. If we’re going to escape, we’ll all escape! Otto, go back! Otherwise…”

“Are you an idiot?!”

However, Subaru’s voice was drowned out by an even louder roar.

The hand gripping his collar slid up and twisted, and in an instant, his feet left the floor, and he was slammed onto the driver’s seat on his back.

“Agggh!”

“If you think you can forcibly persuade a merchant, who sometimes travels alone on roads with no divine protection, you’re gravely fogaken.”

Twisting Subaru’s wrist, which he still held, Otto pinned Subaru’s arm, turning him face down. The one doing this was Otto’s right arm, still holding the reins with the other.

Otto panted, addressing the groaning Subaru, who was taken aback by the unexpected counterattack.

“Please understand. That’s your current state. What do you think you can do by going back in that condition? Are you going to waste the feelings of that girl, the one who stayed behind for us?!”

“Don’t you dare talk about Rem! You, who would abandon Rem… Who would leave her to die, have no right to speak of her! Go back! Save Rem, right now!!”

“Agh! This is hopeless!”

Otto clicked his tongue at Subaru, who thrashed and struggled to free his pinned arm. He then looked straight ahead, keeping the ground dragon running in a straight line.

“Don’t you understand how terrifying the White Whale is, even after seeing it?! It’s reigned in this world for decades, and there have been countless attempts to kill it! The fact that it's still alive is proof of its strength!"

Otto's voice was filled with intense anger and frustration as he lectured the obstinate Subaru from above, "Do you understand?!"

"Hundreds of armed people have challenged it, and still they can't kill it! What good will it do for us to go there, without weapons, without the power to fight?! Save the girl who stood before it?! We can't even do that! We couldn't possibly!"

"Before we even try…!"

"Some things are obvious! A subjugation force formed by the Lugunica Kingdom… There's no way anyone can defeat a monster that even killed the previous Sword Saint…!"

His strained confession contained a trembling, as if holding back tears.

Otto himself harbored an unshakeable rage towards the monster. Yet, to vent that anger, the opponent's presence was too overwhelming.

To make the stubborn Subaru understand, he himself was forced to utter words that emphasized the opponent's magnitude, repeatedly breaking his own spirit in the process.

"Sword… Saint…"

Amidst this, Subaru, who had shown no willingness to listen, lost his momentum. His dazed lips spoke a single word from Otto's outburst.

'Sword Saint' —That was the title given to the strongest person Subaru had encountered since falling into this other world, and for Subaru, it was a symbol of strength itself.

Even if the previous Sword Saint wasn't the same person as Reinhard, if they possessed enough power to bear the same title, then—

"The White Whale, which killed that…?"

Would it be stronger than Reinhard?

Subaru felt terror rapidly consuming his heart.

Reinhard's existence, his strength, was the very 'strength' Subaru yearned to possess. If even Reinhard would have to kneel and perish before that powerful, monstrous being— Then,

"How can that be…? Why is this happening…?"

He wanted to save Rem, to rescue her. If he didn't go back now, it wouldn't happen.

His heart understood, yet the crucial fighting spirit wouldn't reach his limbs, his soul.

Otto looked at the crumbling Subaru with a look of pity and said in a small voice,

"I am weak, and you are weak. That's why we can't save that girl. —We can't keep up with that girl's strength."

—Rem wasn't strong either.

Subaru knew that, he should have known, yet he couldn't utter a single word in protest.

He remained slumped, surrendering to the rocking of the dragon carriage, as the ground dragon sped straight through the darkness.

Rem, left behind, was still receding into the distance.

Subaru moved away from her without stopping, continuing to move further and further away.

2

It was about five or ten minutes after Subaru had hunched over.

"Mr. Natsuki, is that…?"

Otto, who had been silently riding the ground dragon until then, called out to Subaru, his eyes fixed on something he spotted ahead.

Slowly, Subaru raised his head and crawled next to Otto, looking in the same direction he was. —Beyond that, a faint light could be seen through the darkness.

“It’s obscured by the fog, but… it’s a human light!”

“Are we… breaking through the fog?”

“Even if we do, it should be night outside, so a light would be unnatural… It’s probably someone, like us, who got caught in the fog…”

As if to confirm Otto’s speculation, the other party, who must have noticed them as well, came charging straight towards them. After a moment, it was indeed a dragon carriage that pulled alongside them, and the man shouting from the driver’s seat was—

“Finally… finally, people…! Hey, this is fog, right?! That means the White Whale… the White Whale appeared…!”

A middle-aged man cried out, foam flecking the corners of his mouth, in literal panic.

Caught in the night fog, he sought answers, pulling his dragon carriage alongside theirs as if he’d found a tiny ray of hope.

Otto knew that his voice carried a nuance of desperate hope, wishing it were all a misunderstanding, but he still shook his head.

“Yes, it’s the White Whale. We’ve already encountered it. Fortunately, we should have escaped for now, but we don’t know when or where we’ll run into it again until we’re out of this fog.”

“I-Is that true…? Ah, this is the worst. Why, why is this happening…?”

Watching the man despairingly hold his head, Subaru glared at Otto’s profile next to him, who had just explained. It felt as though Otto, by saying “fortunately”, had completely forgotten the fact that they had left Rem behind.

Without knowing whether his anger was justified or merely a means to distract from his guilt, Subaru called out to Otto, “Hey.”

“Yes, Mr Natsuki?”

“Don’t talk like that, Otto. ‘Fortunately’, you say… How do you think Rem felt when we… left us behind…?”

Every time he spoke of Rem, who had been left behind, a searing pain, like thorns twisting his heart, shot through him. The thought that she, left behind, might be using her wits to survive against the White Whale—such a hopeful notion couldn’t even form in his mind after witnessing that horror.

At this point, Subaru had no choice but to admit it.

Rem stayed there, once again to save Subaru and the others, to save Subaru—and to die.

“Rem, who are you talking about?”

That tragic resolve and feelings of hers—

“—Huh?”

“No, I mean, who is Rem? There wasn’t anyone by that name among the other merchants who scattered… Who are you talking about?”

Otto tilted his head, unable to grasp the meaning of Subaru’s words.

That gesture clearly felt like an act of trampling on Rem’s last wishes, and—

—He swung his raised fist and punched him hard across the face.

Immediately, a violent jolt shook the dragon carriage, and Subaru, losing his footing, toppled backward into the driver’s seat. Otto, similarly knocked sideways in the driver’s seat, clutched his face and quickly scrambled up to face Subaru, his eyes wide.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

Otto's eyes were wide with disbelief at Subaru's violent act. Subaru felt the same disbelief about Otto's words and actions.

Pushing himself up from where he'd fallen backward, Subaru bit his lip and snarled, "Don't mess with me."

"What are you talking about…? You're asking 'who is Rem', after she stayed behind to let us escape?! Don't mess with me! You… do you want to die…?!"

Otto continued to play dumb as Subaru persisted.

His vision turned red with uncontrollable rage. Time seemed to slow, and the surging murderous intent commanded Subaru to snap the thin neck of the man before him.

He reached out, ready to forget everything and crush that ungrateful life, when—

"Wh-What are you two doing?! This isn't the time to be arguing, is it?! If you have time to make a fuss, just get out of the fog…!"

The man in the parallel dragon carriage cried out in alarm, seeing the two glaring at each other, on the verge of turning their shouts into a deadly fight.

The man's desperate pleas for them to stop could not possibly reach the two locked in a stare-down. The man's voice didn't even register in Subaru's ears; he was about to act on his hostility towards Otto.

What stopped him, just barely, was an action from the adjacent dragon carriage.

However, it wasn't the man's earnest persuasion that led to their reconciliation.

"Get through the fog and escape the White Whale—"

The man, who had been discussing a practical escape plan, was thrown into the White Whale's jaw, which swallowed the ground and the dragon carriage from behind.

The White Whale, with its mouth aimed straight up, having swallowed the ground dragon pulling the carriage, let out a tremendous sound of destruction and death throes.

Wood and iron were crushed, and the ground dragon screamed as its flesh was ground by teeth like millstones. The man's voice, muffled by the sound of destruction, did not carry, and was fleetingly extinguished before the reality.

"N-No way—"

Subaru and Otto were speechless at the silent approach and devastation of its colossal body.

Otto's eyes flickered at the reappearance of the White Whale's imposing figure and its threat, and Subaru—

"Wh-Why… are you here…?"

Subaru muttered in a trembling voice, dropping to his knees as he looked at the White Whale's flank.

The still-present White Whale, seemingly uninterested in the despair of the two tiny beings right beside it, was engrossed in savoring the banquet unfolding within its mouth.

"If you're here… then what happened to the girl who stayed behind to lure this colossal beast away?"

Faced with such an overwhelming presence, he couldn't help but ask a question that already had an answer.

Of course, the grotesque creature before him wasn't going to answer Subaru's question. Slowly, the White Whale swallowed the food in its mouth and, after sending it to its stomach, looked down at the parallel dragon carriage —at Subaru— with its large eyes, as if appraising its next prey.

"U-Uwaaaaaahhh—!!"

Otto, unable to bear the pressure, was the first to lose his composure and screamed.

The ground dragon also recognized the White Whale's presence and, obeying its master's command on the reins, increased its speed even further. For a moment, they pulled away, trembling at the overwhelming mass behind them.

"Why, why, why, why, why… are you so relentlessly pursuing us…? We were supposed to have gotten away…!"

Clinging to the accelerating dragon carriage, Subaru, his body limp, barely registered Otto's words. He was trying to avert his eyes from his own despair by listening to Otto's screams and lamentations.

"Why us, out of everyone…? In this darkness… why…? Is there, is there some kind of… marker… on us?!"

Otto's cry, sobbing and rejecting the imminent death, struck a painful chord in Subaru's chest. But in Otto's desperate wail, Subaru felt an unforgivable image forming in his mind.

The White Whale relentlessly pursuing them. The reality of that monster closing in on them as if they had a target on their backs. It was—

"No way…"

Subaru tumbled backward into the driver's seat, his eyes fixed on the White Whale swimming in the darkness behind them.

The deep black of the world obscured even its massive body, making it indistinct. However, even in that darkness, the front of the colossal body, the monster opening its huge mouth and bearing down on them, could be faintly made out.

The existence of the grotesquely twisted horn protruding from the White Whale's head.

—The Juggernauts that had formed a pack in the Witchbeast Forest looked like large wild dogs with horns.

The witchbeasts, said to have been created by the Witch's power, had a habit of being attracted to the Witch's scent emanating from Subaru and attacking. In other words—

"Could that monster… the White Whale, also be a witchbeast…?"

Subaru uttered an unbelievable possibility, shaking his head at the reality he couldn't accept.

If he thought about it that way, everything clicked into place. The reason it singled out Subaru's dragon carriage so quickly among the scattered carriages. The reason it relentlessly pursued their carriage even after jumping to Otto's. The reason it managed to catch up to their carriage, even after Rem had braced herself for death and descended to the ground to buy them time.

The presence of the White Whale relentlessly pursuing them in the darkness. Rem's hesitation, as if she had noticed something about its pursuit.

"Is it… my fault…?"

Subaru was there. Did that mean, the White Whale relentlessly targeting this carriage, chasing the scent of the witch clinging to him?

Did Rem realize this fact before anyone else, and that's why she got off the carriage herself to protect Subaru? To protect Subaru. For Subaru's sake.

"No, Rem… I… I can't… because of me…!"

Overwhelmed by an unbearable weight and grief, Subaru covered his face and crouched down.

The fact that he had lost Rem, and the fact that he was the reason for her loss, assailed Subaru from both inside and out. As Subaru was crushed by such despair,

"Mr Natsuki…"

Otto approached from behind, calling out to him in a quiet voice and touching his shoulder.

His fingertips trembled, as if he didn't know what to say. His weak hand gripped Subaru's shoulder,

“Otto…”

“Die.”

The next moment, his body was forcefully pushed forward, losing its balance, and he was thrown headfirst from the dragon carriage.

—Huh?

His vision inverted, and his body spun wildly, losing all sense of up and down as he was flung off.

In the completely inverted world, he saw Otto reaching out toward him, laughing maniacally. Otto's mouth was wide open, showing his white teeth, and drool dripped from it.

“No… I don't want to die… Help… I don't want to die! I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die… No, no, no, no… Help me, Rem, help me…”

Whimpers, weak pleas, and an endless, grimy clinging to life leaked from his lips.

A weakling who could do nothing, a loser who achieved nothing, a piece of trash who could protect nothing, still cried out, clinging to the lives he had lost and the lives he had caused to be lost, desperate to save his own.

He crawled, stumbled, slid through a sea of blood, bit into stones, threw away all his pride and dignity, peed himself, mixing the red of blood with tears and drool, clinging to his life.

It was pathetic. It was tragic. This was the very definition of a disgrace.

A sight everyone would turn away from in its absurdity, hurling words of scorn, deeming it painful to even witness. Humans couldn’t possibly find beauty in clinging to life in such a way.

It was miserable. Even the way an insect lived was more endearing. To defile the dignity of a noble and proud existence for one’s own sake— That was truly ‘the greed of a pig’ itself.

“No… I don’t… want to die… Help…”

Still, he crawled, still he fled in panic, pathetically lamenting, seeking any possibility to cling to life.

His body, long since drained of strength, couldn’t move forward; his fingertips brushed grass, no longer having the strength to dig into the dirt. Even the energy to cry out had long been squeezed dry, and rolling onto his side was his last effort.

“I don’t… want to die…”

So, the plea for his life leaked from Subaru’s mouth as he lay on his back.

That was his final resistance. He could do nothing more. He could think of nothing. He could initiate nothing; he could only submit.

Yet, the impact never came.

The familiar sensation of death, the terrifying future of being crushed, never arrived.

The fear of waiting for an end that might never come easily breaks a person’s spirit.

Writhing in terror that was unbearable, Subaru struggled with his trembling body, searching for that despair, his gaze sweeping around,

“…Huh?”

—He realized that the White Whale, which should have been close by, was nowhere to be found.

Subaru ran on, driven by nothing but a desperate clinging to life.

“I don’t want to die… I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die…”

His breath hitched, his legs faltered, and dripping blood obscured his vision. Regardless, Subaru ran on, uncaring. His sight was already lost in the profound darkness and the deep mist. He couldn’t even comprehend that blood had entered his eyes.

In the embrace of a night devoid of stars or moon, Subaru couldn’t even see his own limbs. Even as his feet pounded the ground, he couldn’t be sure he was truly running on solid earth. Perhaps, without realizing it, Subaru had long been swallowed whole by the White Whale, and was now merely moving deeper within its being, heading towards his own end in its belly.

“Hmph!”

A dangerous thought flashed through his mind, chilling him to the bone, and Subaru ran on, tears streaming down his face. He didn’t even know if the tears were from pain or despair anymore.

In the darkness, Subaru was utterly alone.

He had lost Rem, been abandoned by Otto, and even the White Whale had left him behind. No one would care for Subaru, a being who had lost all purpose.

“I don’t want to die.”

He no longer even knew why he felt that way. What was the point of being alive? What was there to gain by not dying?

He couldn’t save anyone, couldn’t protect anyone. He was useless, incapable of anything. What meaning could there be in the life of such a man?

There was no answer. He understood nothing. It was a question so vague he wasn’t even sure if an answer existed. Would the day ever come when he found it? And if it did, would he be the one to grasp it?

Were these rambling thoughts merely a self-defense mechanism, a way to distract himself from the pain and fear? Or was his own mind, still clinging to self-preservation even in such a situation, truly abominable?

Still, he ran. He kept fleeing. He didn’t know when the formidable witchbeast he had left behind, the one that swam as long as the mist remained, would pick up his scent again and reappear. Perhaps even such fear was a luxury Subaru couldn’t afford right now.

“—Huh?”

After exhausting every self-deprecating thought and running out of curses, it arrived suddenly.

He had emerged from the edge of the mist, and moonlight suddenly pierced his vision.

The abrupt end to a darkness that seemed infinite left Subaru in disbelief, yet his body continued to run. It was as if he feared this soft moonlight would vanish if he stopped.

After running for a while longer, Subaru finally clearly acknowledged that this was not a convenient delusion. With that acceptance, the sensation of blood flowing through his limbs returned, and the fact that he had survived permeated his mind.

However what welled up was not joy at having grasped life, but—

“Again… I…”

Only disappointment in himself for having clung to life once more after such a pathetic struggle. Even with the life he had so desperately craved in his hands, it brought him no emotion now. On the contrary, an unbearable guilt surged within his chest, and a forgotten sense of shame threatened to consume him.

“Rem… Rem…!”

He covered his face, continuing to shed hot, uncontrollable tears. Even knowing he had no right or value, Subaru could do nothing but call her name and try to soothe his own soul.

How much time had passed as he slumped down and continued to weep? With a slow, creaking sound, it came towards Subaru, who was huddled on the ground.

“You…!”

It was a single dragon carriage and ground dragon, stained with blood, its form distorted, approaching him unsteadily. The familiar sight was unmistakably Otto’s ground dragon. However, the young man who had pushed Subaru off was nowhere to be seen on the driver’s seat of the dragon carriage it pulled.

“Why are you… Where is he, Otto?”

The questions spilled from his lips, but naturally, there was no answer. Subaru, who had stood up, also staggered towards the approaching dragon carriage and, looking up at its terribly damaged form, noticed something.

The numerous cross-shaped daggers stuck around the driver’s seat and the traces of blood.

They had been attacked after passing through the fog. He couldn’t imagine how Otto, who had fled so frantically for his life, had faced the despair that had assailed him afterward. What had happened was clear from seeing the ground dragon moving alone like this.

“…Let’s go.”

Subaru mumbled, lifting his aching body and climbing into the driver’s seat. He kicked away the stuck blades, grabbed the nearly severed reins with his functional right hand, and mimicked what he’d seen, giving the ground dragon commands.

Unused to the feel of his master’s reins, the ground dragon looked up at Subaru with confused, clear eyes. But after seeing him repeatedly wave the reins, the ground dragon, for whatever reason, slowly began to move its feet, following the road.

Under the glow of the silver moon, the dragon carriage slowly began to move.

A pairing of those who had both lost precious things, as if licking each other’s wounds, slowly, slowly, under the stars’ mocking gaze.

Slowly, slowly, the dragon carriage continued to run.

It continued to run.

Chapter 48: Indescribable

1

The dragon carriage continued its creaking journey.

Leaning back against the driver's seat, gripping the reins in a perfunctory manner, Subaru was utterly exhausted, his consciousness hazy. Fatigue, injuries, and above all, immense mental strain weighed heavily on him.

His broken bones and cut forehead remained untreated, and his dislocated left shoulder throbbed intermittently. The sensation of his cracked teeth in his mouth was utterly repulsive, and his clothes, soiled with blood, mud, and urine, transmitted a chilling cold directly to his skin.

Why had he survived?

Even as his consciousness hovered on the edge of oblivion, Subaru pondered, not quite falling into a dream. He had been protected by Rem, lost her, abandoned by Otto, shamelessly begged for his life, even cast aside by the White Whale, and then, defenselessly, he had traversed the misty road and emerged. Beyond that, he had stumbled upon the dragon carriage and was now moving further and further down the road with a ground dragon that had lost its master.

Where was this road leading him, he wondered? And even if it led somewhere, what could he possibly do once he arrived?

He had believed that he was driven solely by the desire to protect, to save, to help. But in reality, he had merely sugarcoated the things he didn't want to see with pretty words. He had realized he was nothing but a lump of flesh, selfishly clinging to his own life.

When he left Rem behind before the White Whale and ordered Otto to turn back, had he not felt a sense of relief, feigning heartbreak when Otto protested? If even a Sword Saint couldn't defeat such an opponent, then returning would only be a dog's death. Rem wouldn't want that either. Therefore, he didn't need to go back. He didn't need to die.

He wanted to believe that he hadn't thought that way. Yet, as a matter of fact, Subaru had begged for his life before the White Whale, an entity he should have hated. He had cried and screamed that he didn't want to die, soiled himself, crawled, and fled in terror. In that moment, Rem's safety had not once crossed his mind. All he had thought about was how to desperately cling to his ridiculous and pitiful life.

Now that he had miraculously survived, there was nothing he could do with this salvaged life. He was just breathing, pointlessly consuming oxygen. For Rem to throw her life away to protect a man like him, what a foolish thing she had done.

"Even so… the most foolish one is…"

She was nowhere to be found now. The merchants who had accompanied him had also vanished, leaving Subaru utterly alone.

The ground dragon, without waiting for Subaru's instructions as its passenger, seemed to understand his unspoken wish and continued down the road. The fact that the road was moderately paved was the only evidence that this journey wasn't endless, but a path that would eventually lead somewhere.

Anywhere was fine. Just take him anywhere.

Feeling utterly resigned, Subaru finally released the reins and lay down in the driver's seat. Just above his prone form, a cross-shaped dagger he hadn't managed to remove was still lodged. It was a remnant of the Witch Cult's attack, which Otto must have encountered after passing through the fog.

Would Subaru, perhaps, meet the same fate as Otto and be attacked by the Witch Cult? Or, if he were to face such a situation again, would he once more beg for his life, just as he had with the White Whale? Even if it were Petelgeuse he faced?

"Petelgeuse."

Uttering the name softly, Subaru became aware of the emptiness in his heart. Calling the name of that madman who had brutally murdered Rem, ridiculed Subaru, and was the root of all evil, brought no ripple of emotion to his heart. Just a few hours ago, the unending rage towards that man had been the only thing giving Subaru genuine vitality. Hatred had driven his feet forward, indignation had made him hold his head high, and murderous intent had given him the will to live. Now, that tainted vitality was nowhere to be found.

Having lost even the will to kill, even his hatred, what was he doing?

"What in the world am I…?"

The wheels of the dragon carriage groaned, emitting a terribly shrill sound that grated on his eardrums. Wincing at the pain the sound caused, Subaru slowly sat up. He saw that, at some point, the ground dragon had stopped. Naturally, the dragon carriage, following the ground dragon's movement, had also ceased its forward motion, and the now motionless scenery was—

"A forest…?"

Pushing through a forest path surrounded by trees, the dragon carriage was now moving on bare earth. It must have been a while since sunrise, for when he looked up, he could feel the sunlight lightly burning his body. As he became aware of it, the warmth slowly permeated his body, and then—

"—Huh, Subaru?"

A high-pitched, rather silly voice suddenly called his name, startling Subaru. Leaning forward, he looked down from the driver's seat to the ground where the voice had come from, confirming the presence of several small figures.

"It's really Subaru!" "What's up, Subaru?" "You're filthy, Subaru!" "You stink, Subaru!"

They, too, recognized Subaru and began to point and laugh at his miserable state, their voices rising. However it wasn't a malicious, mocking laughter; rather, it was the kind reserved for close acquaintances, and—

"You guys…"

Pointed at by the familiar village children, Subaru's throat constricted. He knew these faces. He had seen them several times over the past few days. All of them had been twisted by pain and grief, faces he had only seen after they had stopped moving.

These were the smiling faces of the children living in the village near Roswaal's mansion.

Subaru stared blankly, then looked beyond the forest path, towards a hill. Seeing white smoke rising, a sign of life, Subaru realized:

He had finally arrived at the place he had so desperately yearned for, so intensely wished for.

Only when he had lost everything, despaired of everything, and given up, had Subaru managed to make it in time.

"—Subaru?" "Huh, what's wrong?" "Oh, watch out!"

The children's voices grew louder, and he could tell they were worried about him. He understood, but his head was too heavy, and he couldn't support his body anymore.

Like a taut string snapping with a sound, Subaru's consciousness, too, quietly and deeply fell, as if released from all his anguish.

"Ah, falling—"

—Falling.

2

When Subaru awoke, the first thing he saw was a familiar white ceiling.

The simple ceiling, adorned only with a crystal lamp, was unusual in a mansion filled with overly decorative rooms. It made him realize how much of an ordinary person he was for choosing this room as his own. The pillow beneath his head was still uncomfortably hard and high, and he quickly understood that he was lying in bed, loosely covered by a sheet up to his shoulders.

Regardless of how terrible his condition, Subaru's nature was such that his consciousness fully awakened almost immediately upon waking. He slowly looked around the room, confirming it was the one he had spent several days and nights in. And in the midst of that,

"—Ah."

Beside the bed, a girl sat on a chair, quietly absorbed in a book.

Dressed in a black-based apron dress, her shoulder-length hair adorned with a vibrant white prim, she was a striking figure. Her pretty, well-defined profile showed no emotion, a somewhat stiff beauty proclaiming her noble spirit both inside and out.

The moment he noticed her, Subaru sprang up, startling the girl who hadn't realized he was awake, and took her hand. Her eyes widened at Subaru's sudden action, and she stared fixedly at his face. Subaru felt a wave of relief that her face, her demeanor, her gestures, her every movement, were exactly what he had longed for.

"—Why are you touching me so casually, Barusu?"

Cold and indifferent, the sensation of his hand being shaken off, and her tone of voice, shattered his illusion. The reunion with the girl he thought he had lost was painfully revealed to be a mere fabrication the moment he noticed the girl's hair was pink. This was the twin sister, identical to the girl Subaru wanted to see, save for her hair color.

"I understand you're happy to see Ram after several days, but pouncing on me so instinctively is more brutish than manly. You beast."

Ram moved her chair away from the bed, her gaze filled with contempt. The coldness of her gaze and words revealed a clear difference from her sister, who looked so much like her. This wasn't the reunion with the one he sought, and Subaru was once again reminded of his own arrogance. Hadn't he thrown away even the desire, even the right, to wish for such a thing?

Subaru fell silent, biting his lip and looking down, causing Ram to furrow her brows in puzzlement. To her, this was merely a light jest, on par with a morning greeting. It was the start of the kind of playful banter that the usual Subaru would have met with a loud, exaggerated reaction. Yet, instead of playing along, Subaru was silent, his face grim.

"Hmph. —Please don't make Ram do things that aren't her style."

As she spoke, Ram leaned in, her outstretched hand pressing down on his head. Then, sliding her fingers through Subaru's short black hair, she began to stroke it slowly. The quiet, gentle rhythm seemed to soothe Subaru's racing heart, filled with mercy and care, causing an unexpected ripple of confusion in Subaru, who knew the girl named Ram.

"You're making a rude face, Barusu. Surprised?"

"Yeah, I'm surprised… You're the type to kick someone when they're down, aren't you?"

"There's no maid more skilled at reading the atmosphere than Ram, you know. Tormenting Barusu now would be overly malicious. I'll save it for later and unleash it then."

"Correction, you're the worst after all."

Subaru responded to Ram, who was already meticulously planning her next prank, yet he could feel on his skin that the affection hadn't left her fingertips. Despite their entirely different demeanor and words, they were indeed sisters. The quality of their compassion felt so similar that it squeezed Subaru's chest.

There was something he had to tell her, and it wasn't a conversation that could be avoided. No, it was a conversation that must not be avoided. He had to at least be able to do that much.

"Ah…"

As he fumbled for how to tell her, where to even begin, her fingers left Subaru's head, and a sound of reluctance slipped from his lips. He quickly clapped a hand over his mouth to stop it, but Ram's eyes, already glinting mischievously, were much faster. She looked at Subaru's abashed face, her eyes still sparkling, and asked,

"Did you want more?"

"I'm not a kid. I don't need it…"

He retorted, and Ram let out a rare "Hmph" through her nose. Had it really been nearly two weeks, in his perception, since he'd last seen such a gesture from her?

"You say that, looking like a child about to cry. Your stubbornness is exactly like a toddler's."

Ignoring Subaru's sentimentality, Ram shrugged and spoke condescendingly. After watching Subaru stumble over his words for a while, she said,

"Alright then, Barusu."

"—Yeah."

Subaru replied as Ram moved the chair and sat opposite him, gazing at him. Her gaze seemed to pierce through his eyes, directly into his heart. Naturally, Subaru shifted uncomfortably, and Ram paused for a beat before saying,

"—Now, I'll hear your story."

3

"It was quite a sight. One minute, an unknown dragon carriage pulls into the village, and the next, there's a half-dead, grimy Barusu. When the villagers came to the mansion to call Ram, I honestly thought it was some kind of joke at first."

Ram calmly recounted the events leading up to Subaru losing consciousness and being carried into the mansion. She pointed at Subaru, who was listening in silence.

"Your dislocated shoulder and cut forehead. Your broken ribs have been set, but they'll open up if you strain yourself. Your blood- and mud-stained clothes have been disposed of. And don't worry, I'll keep the… 'leakage' a secret from Lady Emilia."

"…Yeah, that'd be a big help."

Subaru's voice was hoarse, and Ram shrugged, a bored expression on her face. She probably intended to use this information as leverage to heap impossible demands on Subaru later, but with him in this state, that wouldn't work.

Ignoring her intentions, Subaru confirmed that his injuries were indeed healed, just as Ram had stated. His left shoulder moved without issue, though with a faint ache, and there was no discomfort in his forehead or chest. Healing magic was truly a blessing. The problem was…

"The one who healed my injuries was…?"

"Lady Emilia."

Ram stated the very thing Subaru had been dreading, without hesitation. She put her hands on her hips, prefaced it with "It couldn't be helped," and then looked at the downcast Subaru with a worried gaze.

“I asked Miss Beatrice first, but she refused. I knew there was a risk of that, as she’s a difficult person.”

“Did… Emilia say anything?”

“That’s something you should discuss with her yourself.”

Subaru, touching his still-sore shoulder, asked hesitantly, but Ram’s reply was cold. The low temperature of her gaze made Subaru’s shoulders tremble, and seeing his pathetic reaction, Ram sighed.

“Ram doesn’t know what happened between Lady Emilia and Barusu in the capital. I can guess something happened, but I haven’t heard the details. Nor am I interested. Judging by Barusu’s reaction now, you must have done something worthless, as usual.”

“That’s harsh.”

“I think it’s an appropriate assessment, wouldn’t you agree? At least for a coward who lacks the courage to broach an uncomfortable topic and instead leaps at a different subject to procrastinate.”

Ram saw right through his thoughts, snorting softly. Hit squarely by the truth and mercilessly slammed, Subaru couldn’t utter a sound.

He knew the words she was waiting for. After all, he had returned, but her presence wasn’t beside him. It was the topic that should have been brought up immediately, without a second thought. Was her silence, her waiting for him to speak, a sign of her kindness or her strictness? —Most likely, it was a gentle yet stern consideration.

He couldn’t rely on it forever. Even Subaru had that much sense. Above all, there was so much he had to talk about. So much. So, Subaru took a sharp breath, his gaze wandering, forcing himself to overcome his body’s every feminine attempt to buy time, and finally, with a choked whisper, he said:

“—Rem is dead.”

The moment he spoke, something slipped out of Subaru’s chest. It had been a heavy, suffocating lump deep in his heart, but the instant he uttered those words, it crumbled, falling into his stomach, demanding to be acknowledged.

It was only when he felt the hot sensation on his cheeks that he realized what that lump had been.

It was sorrow, regret, and a plea for a lost life. Up until now, he had only acknowledged it with his lips, but he finally accepted it, finally swallowed the unbearable truth, understanding it as it dissolved into his mind and body.

—I let Rem die.

Tears streamed down his face. And then he realized. He finally realized. Subaru had caused Rem's death countless times. This was the fourth time he had personally experienced her death, including the loops back in the mansion. It took four times of her dying for him to finally realize. This was the first time he had shed tears for her, for her sake.

Just because he cried for her didn't absolve him of his actions. He had wasted the time she sacrificed her life to create, groveled and begged for his life from the one who killed her, and then fled, even turning his back on that truth. Now that he saw his own ugliness, now that he couldn't look away and escape, at least, for her sake, who had dedicated herself to such a man—

"I… couldn't do anything. There was fog on the road… the White Whale appeared. And Rem tried to get me to escape… but all the other dragon carriages got separated too, and I was left alone in the fog… and in the end…"

He couldn't form coherent sentences. His words were choked with sobs, his speech jumbled. Excuses poured out of him, endlessly, and he felt as though it was defiling Rem's last moments. Unable to bear it, Subaru clamped his mouth shut, giving up on speaking impulsively. He had admitted his sin. Now, he would accept the punishment. For that, he needed a clear explanation—

"Who, Rem?"

—.

——.

———.

He didn’t understand what she had said.

“Huh, eh, wh… what?”

Unable to comprehend the meaning of Ram’s words, Subaru asked again, his voice sounding idiotic. Rem, who? What did that mean?

Ram looked at Subaru with an inquisitive expression, as if he were the one saying something strange, and repeated:

“Who is Rem, Barusu?”

Without even a flicker of an eyebrow at the name of her twin sister, she asked who it was.

“No, wait… Don’t be ridiculous…! She’s your, that’s your sister’s name, isn’t it?! It’s Rem, isn’t it? It’s Rem. It’s Rem!”

“Ram’s sister…”

Putting a finger to her lips, Ram closed her eyes, thinking deeply. Just that gesture, trying to remember, was already unbearably frustrating for Subaru. He wanted to shout at her, to drag her out into the fogy road right now and throw her in. After a moment of silence, she said:

“Ram’s sister, Rem. Ah…”

“You remembered?!”

Subaru jumped at the exclamation, his eyes widening as if he’d seen a ray of hope. However Ram merely nodded once at Subaru, then gave him an incredibly blank stare.

"It's impossible to remember something that never happened. Ram has always been alone. I couldn't possibly have a sister."

She stated it plainly, without any hint of teasing. Subaru shook his head at her demeanor, muttering, "That's impossible."

"What are you… saying…?"

"—Ram doesn't have a sister."

Her tone was far from someone hiding something or forcing their emotions to freeze. It was utterly cold and matter-of-fact.

—In her mind, the existence of her twin sister was truly gone, from its very foundation.

"If Rem didn't exist, then what about the commotion in the witchbeast forest?! You, Rem, and I, the Juggernaut—"

"You're truly being absurd, Barusu. Annoying as it is to admit, half of the credit for eradicating the Juggernaut's horde goes to Barusu's contribution; the rest was all Ram's efforts and Lord Roswaal's power… There's no room for some long-lost sister named Rem to slip in there."

Ram stubbornly refused to acknowledge her sister's existence, despite Subaru's protests. Even the outcome of those repeating days in the mansion seemed to have taken a different turn in her memory than in Subaru's. Subaru had run himself ragged, spitting blood, advanced with Rem, was protected by Rem, went to the forest with Ram to save her, who had rushed ahead, and burned his soul there, risking his life. Such events, which should have happened, were now painted over in her mind as false.

He didn't understand. Why was she answering that way? It made no sense.

"This isn't even a joke… Even as a nightmare, it's too poorly made…"

"Ram is always serious. It's Barusu who's dreaming, isn't it?"

"Don't you dare—!"

Enraged by Ram's unyielding attitude, Subaru threw off the sheets and got out of bed. His still-recovering body wobbled at the legs, but the uncontrollable surge of emotion made him lift his face, preventing a pathetic fall.

"Barusu, if you stand up now, you'll—"

"Shut up! Just… just watch!"

Ram reached out a hand, seeing Subaru sway. He roughly slapped her outstretched hand away, then took careful, deliberate steps. Once he was sure he wouldn't fall, he burst out of the room.

Subaru had been laid in his private room on the second floor, the one used by servants. Although there were several servant rooms, in reality, only three people in this mansion actually fit that role, so most of them were empty, unused spaces. Subaru knew that all the other rooms on the same floor were empty, so he passed their doors without a glance, as if they weren't there.

His destination was the stairwell, and he hurried towards the upper floor. Along the way,

"If you keep pushing yourself when your strength hasn't returned, you'll collapse and cause Ram trouble."

Ram, who was following behind him, called out those words, but Subaru, walking with bristling shoulders, didn't listen. He climbed the stairs much slower than usual, then went straight down the third-floor corridor of the mansion, heading for a room he had entered countless times. The third room from the west staircase on the third floor of the servant's quarters—there, the answer that should prove his feelings were neither a nightmare nor a delusion had to be.

He stood before the door, grabbed the doorknob, and pushed it open in one swift motion. No hesitation was needed. If he wasted time here, he would only give his heart a chance to become afraid. —There was no need for time to worry or waver. He burst into the room without a knock or anything, and there, a simple but modestly decorated girlish room was—

"…No way."

There was nothing.

The room he stepped into contained only a bed, neatly made in form but nothing more, and a small desk at the back of the room, just like the other rooms. Her room had indeed been simple, but that didn't mean it was this utterly featureless, generic space.

"That can't be right…!"

Subaru looked around the room, then rushed out, disbelief etched on his face. Ignoring Ram, who stood silently by the door, watching him, he poked his head into the hallway and counted. The third room from the stairwell. He couldn't have miscounted, and besides, he had been there so many times he didn't even need to count. He could get there with his eyes closed.

—So why?

"Barusu, are you satisfied now?"

She must have understood what Subaru had come to check. Ram quietly questioned Subaru, who was aghast, having found nothing he sought. Her expression was tinged with sorrow, showing a concern for Subaru that was unthinkable for her usual demeanor. It was precisely because he felt that concern so acutely that Subaru couldn't help but understand.

"Rem isn't… here…"

"—Such a person never existed in this mansion."

Ram shook her head, looking directly at Subaru, whose eyes were clouded. Then, taking a breath, she added,

"Ram doesn't have a sister."

This time, as if to deliver the final blow, she spoke those words

again.

4

Subaru had been disciplining himself, believing he had a responsibility to bear for Rem's death.

Rem had sacrificed her life for Subaru. He had to bear that responsibility. And just when he was finally about to take a step forward, to accept something too heavy to carry, something he would have thrown away and run from before.

"I…"

—Did he not even have the right to beg for forgiveness?

Everything was pushing Subaru away. Everyone was leaving Subaru behind. His actions, taken for Emilia's sake, weren't accepted by her, and the chasm between them remained unbridged. Rem, who sacrificed everything for Subaru, would tragically lose her life with each repetition. And when he tried to take responsibility for that life, the world stripped even that duty from him. Time, the world, the Witches Cult, the White Whale— Every obstacle stood in the way of Subaru's desires.

Why? What was wrong? Why was the world so cold to him, and why did all his hopes betray him?

It was…

It was—

"Barusu, go back to your room."

Ram spoke to Subaru, who stood frozen, his thoughts stagnant in a daze. She moved closer, pushing Subaru's back towards the stairs.

"You must be tired; that's probably why you're confused. Go back to your room and continue your dream in bed. Ram has been called, so I have things to do. I can't keep doting on Barusu."

Even in the face of Subaru's shock, Ram's judgment was harsh towards him. She offered no comforting words about staying by his side; she simply went to fulfill her duties. With one firm push, Ram moved away from Subaru towards the opposite set of stairs. Before she left, she turned back once more and instructed, “Go back to your room and sleep.” Then, she finally departed, leaving Subaru alone in the hallway.

Wobbling, he staggered in the direction of his private room, just as Ram had told him. Perhaps, as she said, if he lay down on the bed and let his consciousness sink, he could escape this feeling of utter loneliness, as if everything was abandoning him. It must be a bad dream, he thought. It was strange to get into bed to dream while already dreaming, but if the goal was to face a dream by pursuing one, it didn’t seem like a bad idea.

Above all, if he could just shift his consciousness to sleep, he could surely bid farewell to the noise that kept swirling in his skull, over and over again. He should just run away. He had run, and run, and run and run, and made it this far. In the same way, as before, if he just ran and kept running and stumbled away—

“Running… what will that accomplish?”

Subaru murmured, his feet halting just before descending the stairs. He pulled back the foot he was about to step down, the foot that wanted to flee. He lifted his chin slightly, turning his gaze in the opposite direction from going down.

Running wouldn’t solve anything. Once again, Subaru was about to betray Rem. Why had she protected him, letting him escape from the White Whale? To allow Subaru to achieve his goal. Subaru’s goal was to keep the people in this mansion safe from the clutches of the Witches Cult. If he were to abandon that goal now and throw his consciousness into escape, then that would be—

“More cowardly than begging for forgiveness, wouldn’t it?”

He turned around, his back to the stairs he had been about to descend. This time, there was no hesitation in his steps. Subaru passed the room of the girl whose existence had been erased, and headed for the same stairs where Ram had disappeared. At the top of the stairs, in the wing accessible only from that direction, awaited the reason Subaru had returned.

He slowly ascended the stairs, carefully stepping on each riser. He climbed the spiral staircase, and at the top was a door leading to a single room. As his hand touched the doorknob, Subaru noticed how remarkably quiet his heart's beating was.

When he had burst into the lost girl's room just now, his heart had pounded. Now, it beat with a terribly quiet rhythm. He couldn't tell if it was because he was calm, or if his heart had sunken heavily past the point of pounding. But,

"Lend me your courage, Rem—"

As he spoke that name, a tiny surge of strength flowed into Subaru's hand. It moved the doorknob that had felt heavy and unyielding, gently pushing open the door that had seemed stubbornly shut. And beyond the opened door, the girl seated at the desk turned only her head to look at him.

"—Subaru?"

Hearing the bell-like voice call his name, Subaru closed his eyes. He savored the deeply inexpressible emotion that surged through his chest and entire body, and then, finally, he remembered.

—That he had returned to hear that voice of hers.

With silver hair, translucent white skin, and deep violet eyes. Her fragile beauty tinged with an air of sadness, she stood up— Emilia spoke.

"…Why did you come back?"

5

It sounded so terribly weak, and Subaru's consciousness was drawn more to the tone of her voice than the meaning of her words.

Emilia's lips trembled, and a lifeless light flickered in her eyes. Two weeks in his subjective experience, about one week in the real world— That's all the time that should have passed, yet she looked slightly smaller as she gazed at him. She seemed thinner than when he'd last seen her. Her voice and eyes were heavy with fatigue, making him wonder if she hadn't slept at all.

Emilia, seemingly driven to this state by herself, and more so by external interference. Subaru knew the reason. That's why he had come back to her. So,

"Let's go, we can't stay here."

He stepped forward, ignoring Emilia's question, and reached out his hand. Emilia's eyes widened slightly at his forceful manner, and she pulled back a little, putting distance between them. As the gap he had tried to close widened, Subaru frowned, and Emilia shook her head.

"Go…? Where? No, for what purpose?"

"Anywhere but here. If you ask 'for what purpose', I'd say 'for you', I…"

"Again with that?"

Emilia's voice was filled with disappointment. Her deep amethyst eyes shimmered faintly, and she glared up at the silent Subaru.

"You suddenly came back, covered in wounds, making me worry. — Weren't you supposed to be getting treatment from Ferris in the capital? Why are you here now?"

"A lot happened! I'd love to explain, but we don't even have that much time. Please, just listen to me. Let's get out of this mansion together…"

"I told you I can't, didn't I? I told you I can't trust you if you're like that… I told you."

Emilia stubbornly shook her head, rejecting Subaru with a trembling voice. This was a continuation of the exchange they'd had in the waiting room of the royal castle, and more than anything, it was a repetition without progress. Subaru's desperate feelings weren't reaching her, and Subaru couldn't understand why Emilia wouldn't understand his intentions. Yet,

"If you refuse, I'll drag you out by force. In a few days, you'll understand, whether you like it or not, that I was right. So…!"

"Wait, wait, Subaru. What's wrong with you? You weren't like this before. I… me, Subaru, you…"

"Just shut up and listen to me!!"

The moment he roared, Emilia's shoulders trembled slightly. Before Emilia, whose eyes widened in disbelief, Subaru gasped, still fueled by his outburst, glaring intensely at her.

"You can't stay here. You'll regret it. Absolutely. It won't help anyone. No one will be saved. I don't want to suffer anymore, and I don't want to cry!"

"What are you… talking about? Subaru, I don't understand."

"Shut up! You guys… you, you just need to do as I say! Then it'll work out. It will! Why won't anyone understand me…!"

Tearing at his hair, Subaru spewed curses, not at Emilia in front of him, but as if unleashing his resentment for all the absurdities he had faced. Subaru's angry, shouting words probably made no sense to Emilia. But for Subaru, there was no other place to vent. All the absurdities Subaru had encountered— This was something he could only let out in front of her, their starting point.

Watching Subaru plead with a tearful voice, Emilia's eyes lowered slightly. Then she whispered, "I'm sorry," before continuing.

"I don't understand what Subaru is saying. I can't understand. I want to, but I don't have the time to… There are many things I have to do, pressing in on me. So…"

"It won't work out."

Cutting off her words, Subaru crushed Emilia's thoughts with a brief statement. Emilia gasped softly, blinking repeatedly as if unable to accept Subaru's words, which were filled with nothing but malice. Looking at her, Subaru felt as if he were seeing a mirror image of himself. The empathy for having every intention and wish thwarted. It brought Subaru a terribly cruel yet sweet sensation.

"It won't work out. You're no good. You'll fail. You can't do it. You're completely useless. All talk. Unsavageable. Unsaved. You'll pile up recklessness and imprudence, and you'll see a mountain of corpses equal to their number. —That is your future."

It was a dark, ugly, vile, repulsive—pleasure.

Each word, each syllable he spoke, vibrated in her eardrums, and he could feel the pain in her expression, a crack in her heart, a blade piercing her thoughts. In that moment, all of her attention was on him. For just that fleeting instant, there was a dark joy in knowing that all of Emilia was devoted to him.

Her resolve trampled, her determination laughed at, her actions maliciously thwarted, her past mocked as futile, and her future declared utterly bleak. Watching Emilia be tormented by each of these, Subaru—

"Why?"

Emilia whispered, a faint sound.

Emilia's expression twisted in anguish from Subaru's heartless words, from the pain of having a future of only darkness foretold. But even then, her deep purple eyes never clouded. Captivated by their mysterious radiance, and seeing the world reflected within them— That is, Subaru himself, whom she was gazing at—

"Subaru, why are you crying with such a pained expression?"

—He realized that he was crying, while wearing a distorted smile.

"…"

He felt everything bounce back. Reflecting on each word that had trampled her feelings while he cried, it was clear: those were all words that weighed down on Subaru himself.

Subaru, too, had his resolve, determination, actions, past, and future denied.

He felt as though anything he did would be pointless. He also knew there was a sense of obligation, urging him to do something. No one knew why he was doing it anymore. But if he did know anything, it was that—

“I… for Rem, who sent me here… no, who brought me here… for Rem, there are things I have to do…”

“Rem?”

Subaru’s halting words. Listening to his unintelligible sentences, Emilia tilted her head at the suddenly spoken word. The way that word sounded coming from her mouth clearly showed she didn’t know its meaning, so—

“—You too.”

“Eh?”

“You’ve forget Rem too—”

Forgotten by even her twin sister, with every trace of her existence vanished, and even the person who was his reason for risking his life to return, didn’t remember her. Where would her days, her time, her thoughts, her way of life, her wishes, all disappear to then?

Those smiles, that anger, those tears, that touch, all the things that made her who she was— What would become of them?

“—Fine, I’ll tell you everything.”

The words that came out of his mouth were those of someone who had reached their breaking point.

Emilia looked surprised, her face showing a faint “Eh?” at Subaru’s words. Looking up at her face, Subaru reaffirmed the source of the feelings that had driven him this far. If her presence, her memories, were simply going to vanish into oblivion like this, then—

“It’d better to expose everything, even if it means spitting up blood.”

He made his decision. To confess everything, to tell the truth, to lay bare the depths of his heart.

Subaru’s gaze changed, and sensing it, Emilia gasped. Before her, Subaru placed a hand on his chest. His heart was pounding rapidly. It was the fear born from already understanding the outcome of what he was about to do.

It was pain. A pain so intense it could drive him mad. His heart would be toyed with, as if crushed in a hand, subjected to suffering that would never end, unable to even scream.

He thought. He also thought this:

Who cares? What does it matter? What is pain compared to this suffering?

Not being believed, not being understood. More than anything, if he had to endure the suffering of no one remembering Rem’s existence, then pain was nothing.

—Let it come. I’ll give you my heart.

“Emilia. I’ve seen the future. I know it. That’s because I… I ‘Return by De—’”

The moment he tried to confess everything, speaking the words aloud, the stagnation returned.

As anticipated, the world’s movements gradually slowed, eventually coming to a halt. Immediately, the scenery began to lose its color, and all sounds that had been there vanished. The sound of the wind, breathing, heartbeats— They receded, receded, and didn’t return. His consciousness left all five senses behind, and Subaru became isolated from the world.

—Then, as if not to leave the isolated Subaru alone, the palm of an unwanted benevolence slowly materialized.

The emerging black mist silently, yet with a gliding speed, formed the shape of an arm. Before, only his right arm had clearly taken shape. But now, even the left arm, which had appeared as if chasing it, clearly formed up to the shoulder before Subaru. Both hands approached Subaru; the left continued to caress him lovingly. The remaining right hand slid into his chest, slipped past his ribs, and reached his heart.

A soft, unsettling sensation of his heart being toyed with in the palm of a hand sent shivers throughout his body. Unlike before, when it had delivered instant, violent pain, the black mist, which literally held Subaru's life, manipulated him viciously, as if trying to break his resolve with extreme terror.

The expected pain didn't arrive, and a quiet dread began to sprout in Subaru's heart. Unlike the previous actions of the shadow, its behavior now showed a cunning intelligence, toying with Subaru. This would tear at Subaru's heart even more deeply, and the pain would manifest in a different form than before. Subaru almost screamed with his unmoving throat at the unexpected way the torment was delivered. His unmoving teeth refused. Even if pain, terror, and the unknown tormented Subaru, he would absolutely not look down.

Otherwise, it wouldn't be worth it. Otherwise, he wouldn't be forgiven. In this world where no one remembered her existence, if Subaru, who bore the responsibility for her death, was to beg for forgiveness, it could only be from his own soul.

Let all the pain and suffering come, however they wished. In return, Subaru would pour out everything he had experienced, reclaiming all that he should have gained. With that, the negotiation with the black mist would be over.

It was too grim to be mere bravado, and too much would be lost for it to be a simple decision.

But for Subaru, it was a resolute determination that had never solidified before.

—This resolve, this determination, would not be easily broken.

Staring at the black mist toying with his heart, Subaru held his breath, waiting for the impending moment. But the mist showed no sign of unleashing its malice on Subaru. Precisely because it could do it at any time, it could also refrain from doing it indefinitely. In a world where time was stagnant, if a war of attrition was waged, there was no choice but to fight until one's spirit was worn down. Even if he was hot-blooded now, unable to imagine breaking, there would come a time when he would collapse, swallowed by resignation, and wish for the end. —Such a thought was too naive.

He would endure any hardship, for hours, for days. He hadn't died so many times for nothing. If he wasn't going to die, he could endure any amount of pain. Subaru's resolve was—

"—Huh?"

Suddenly, colors began to emerge in the stagnant world. The pain that should have come ended with a mere gesture and vanished. Sound, color, and time steadily returned to Subaru, who was left bewildered.

Breathing, heartbeats, the sounds of the world starting to move again surrounded Subaru, and 'normalcy' began to prevail, as if mocking the dazed Subaru.

Uncertain of the black mist's true intentions, Subaru blinked repeatedly. But even as he wondered if it was some mistake, even as he braced himself for the stagnant world to return after blinking, the world's colors remained unchanged.

Had the black mist realized the immaturity of its actions in the face of Subaru's unyielding resolve? He almost scoffed at the idea, thinking "No way", but the possibility that his own determination had brought about an unexpected outcome prevented him from doing so.

Even now, he could still feel the sensation of the black mist's right hand softly gripping his heart. If it had squeezed, by now—

"…"

Thinking that far, Subaru suddenly had a question. He clearly remembered the right hand gripping his heart, scheming to break his spirit. During that time, where had the left hand gone, the one that had first touched his cheek, the one that had slipped from his awareness—

"—Fuh."

Before he could find the answer to his question, Emilia in front of him mumbled something.

Her voice pulled his consciousness back to reality, and Subaru remembered the rest of the words he had to speak. The quiet, unreal stillness, as if he were dreaming, caused him some confusion, but considering its impact on what Subaru was about to do, it was nothing but a positive turn.

The time constrained by what could only be called a curse, forbidding him from explaining the situation, was finally over. He would reveal everything, share the future he had gained, and this time, his actions to achieve the world everyone desired would finally bear fruit—.

"Ah."

Suddenly, Emilia's body leaned forward, collapsing onto Subaru. Instinctively, he reached out and caught her. He felt a warm, soft sensation in his palms, and Subaru was slightly unsettled—

Splatter.

"—Eh?"

Splatter, splatter, splatter.

"—Emilia?"

Splatter, splatter, splatter, splatter.

Emilia, whom he had caught, was now spitting out large amounts of blood from her mouth.

—While the right hand touched Subaru's heart, where had the left hand disappeared to?

With her face buried in Subaru's shoulder, Emilia's vomiting of blood wouldn't stop. The immense amount of fresh blood gushing out stained Subaru's body crimson, and Emilia's body grew lighter.

"Stop… eh? Wait, what?"

He tried to lift her face to stop the blood gushing out, but her weakly moving neck, her limp, hanging shoulders, her lightless eyes — They told him everything.

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—Before Subaru's eyes, Emilia was now losing her life.

"OOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH—!!!!!!"

A scream echoed. If screaming, screaming until his throat burst, could make him forget everything, then he wished his throat would be cut, torn, and ripped out right now.

In his arms, Emilia's body, her strengthless body, grew lighter. The gushing blood wouldn't stop. Subaru's body turned red, redder and redder.

—When the right hand touched Subaru's heart, the left hand had been on Emilia's.

His resolve, his determination, his actions, his past, his future, were trampled by mockery.

His firm resolve, the determination he had just solidified against being shattered, was pulverized, driving Natsuki Subaru into the abyss of despair.

—The scream trailed higher and higher, never fading.

Subaru had finally, finally…

—Killed Emilia.

Chapter 49:
The Beast of the End

1

—It was as if I'd finally squeezed out every last drop of blood, vomit, and tears from my body.

How much more do I have to cry?

How much more do I have to suffer?

Have I truly done something so unforgivable? What about my actions could have possibly displeased them so much? Why won't they just grant me a quick, merciful end?

I've been wounded, my heart trampled, precious people snatched away, those I should protect left unsaved, and the life of the most important person to me was cruelly extinguished by my own hands.

—Whose punishment is this, exactly?

"I… I…"

I was wrong. I misunderstood. I got carried away. I foolishly thought I could use the "Witch's Curse" that clung to my soul to my advantage, simply because I'd managed to turn it around once. The careless idea that I could return even if I died fueled this, leading me to underestimate the abominable existence known as the "Witch".

All of that accumulated into this horrific scene before me now.

Collapsed, with Emilia in his lap, Subaru's vacant eyes wandered. How much time had passed since Emilia's life was lost? Her body, when he touched it, had long since grown cold, and the fresh blood she'd coughed onto Subaru had also lost its warmth, turning frigid. Her soft limbs were beginning to stiffen everywhere, forcing Subaru to accept that what lay before him was an undeniable reality.

Yet, even understanding this, no reason for his emotions to stir emerged. He was just too tired. He had suffered so much already; wasn't that enough? How many people in this world had endured more suffering than Subaru? Compared to his past self, he had pushed himself unimaginably hard, and he had made countless efforts to make things right. Still, the worst could not be avoided, and calamity mocked him.

If everything he did was futile, meaningless, and pointless, then perhaps ending it all right here—

"—You look like you're about to say you're the unhappiest person in the world, in fact."

The voice, dripping with undisguised contempt, echoed as it looked down on the stunned Subaru. In the room, which should have been empty, Subaru lifted his head at what sounded like a hallucination, turning his gaze toward the entrance. His neck rotated slowly, maddeningly so. And then, finally, in his now-focused vision, a single girl stood looking at him.

She was a beautiful girl with long, cream-colored hair divided into two large ringlets, wearing a luxurious dress like one a Western doll might wear. She lived in this mansion, and in the repeating days leading up to this, she was the last person he hadn't seen, despite her supposed presence in the mansion.

"Beatrice…"

"Have you become even more of a simpleton since I last saw you, I suppose?"

Uttering the harsh words, the girl —Beatrice— crossed her slender arms and lightly lifted her chin, surveying the devastated room. Seeing the blood-soaked floor and Subaru, and Emilia submerged in a pool of blood, she said,

"You've certainly made quite the mess, in fact."

She commented on the situation with shocking nonchalance, almost with a sigh. Was that truly the only thought that came to her mind upon seeing the unmoving Emilia and Subaru holding her with such hollow eyes?

Even such a faint sense of indignation failed to well up in Subaru now. He, the very person who had caused this disaster, had no right to be driven by righteous anger, and succumbing to passion would only increase his exhaustion. In that sense, Beatrice's current demeanor, one that didn't involve questioning him with a horrified expression, was rather welcome to Subaru. It would have been even better if she would just leave him to wallow in his despair alone.

"Bubby can't come out, I suppose."

As she spoke, the girl walked closer and knelt. When the petite girl lowered herself, her head was almost at the same height as the seated Subaru's. She looked at Subaru, who remained motionless with vacant eyes, and then, still with a contemptuous gaze, pierced his profile.

"Even if I told you to look for him, you probably wouldn't listen, in fact… Perhaps you just don't want to get your hands dirty, I suppose."

Muttering in a small, reluctant voice, Beatrice reached out to Emilia, who lay on her back. Subaru vaguely thought she might do something to the deceased Emilia, but her small hand smoothly slipped into Emilia's clothes. There was no hint of magic in her fumbling hands or gestures as she searched inside; she was simply rummaging through Emilia's body.

An unspeakable discomfort arose from her actions, and Subaru began to open his mouth to reprimand her. However, his parched lips only let out a faint breath, refusing to form any meaningful words. As Subaru struggled in vain

"Found it, I suppose."

Beatrice pulled her hand from the clothing, revealing a glowing green crystal in her palm. It was a familiar sight, one of Emilia's crystal stones. It was the vessel used by her contracted spirit —Puck — which Emilia always carried with her. That crystal stone was now…

“Broken…”

“The one who broke it is being awfully innocent… Though you probably aren’t even aware of it, in fact.”

Looking sorrowfully at the stone, now split in two in her palm, Beatrice dropped it to the floor. With a faint clatter, the stone fell and sank into the blood on the floor. The sparkling green light was stained by the color of fresh blood, and its dim glow eventually vanished.

—What happened to the broken crystal stone and the spirit that should have been inside? What became of that spirit who called the girl now sleeping in his arms his “daughter” and loved her more than anyone? What was he thinking?

“Don’t worry, Bubby won’t die, I suppose. He just needs a little time to come here since he lost his vessel, in fact. —You don’t have much time, I suppose.”

Answering Subaru’s unspoken question as if it were obvious, Beatrice swept her long hair back. As he caught a glimpse of her vertical curls bouncing, Subaru felt a sense of relief. If that spirit was alive and coming to this place, then surely…

“—Do you have anything to say, I suppose.”

Subaru sighed with a terribly out-of-place sense of relief. Keeping her eyes at his level, Beatrice asked Subaru in a calm voice. The serenity of her voice made Subaru question why she showed no emotion toward the situation. But he didn’t feel like vocalizing that. Moving his mouth, Subaru’s lips formed not a question about the inexplicable Beatrice, but rather a purely selfish plea:

“Kill me.”

It was a request that took advantage of her kindness, clung to her, and disregarded her goodwill.

I wanted to die, right then and there.

I was sick of everything. Exhausted by it all. I'd been abandoned by everyone. There was no hope left in this world.

I just wanted to die. To die and end it all. Even if I could die and start over, I'd probably just end up with the same outcome. Whether I could die and start over or not, at the very least, I didn't want to be in this world anymore.

Emilia was dead, Rem had been erased from existence, and Subaru had nothing to show for it.

So,

"Kill me…"

An end was Subaru's only salvation now.

If hating the object of his hatred, or acting for the sake of those he wanted to protect, no longer served as excuses to keep his heart alive.

If he could have one wish granted, he begged to have this hopeless life pecked away.

To have this miserable, foolish body, which had trampled the dignity of lives it touched, rendered feelings meaningless, and been forsaken by everything, burned to ash and annihilated.

The girl before him, possessing supernatural power, should have been able to do it.

She probably hated Subaru, and if she were to grant his wish, she would surely give him a gruesome end, one befitting his foolish actions.

Subaru, this foolish human, hadn't changed even after dying nine times.

This would be the tenth. A nice round number. It was a good time for gods, Buddhas, goddesses, and Witch to give up on him. So, "Kill me, here."

Embracing Emilia's corpse, Subaru pleaded with Beatrice.

If this was to be his end, he wanted it to be with her corpse in his arms. His final, selfish whim, after always getting his way and ultimately causing the worst.

He tightened his grip on her, closed his eyes, and awaited his end.

Then, how much time passed in silence?

It was then that a faint voice suddenly echoed, reaching Subaru, who had selfishly fallen into a moment of calm.

"…fact."

"—Huh?"

It was a small, frail, hoarse voice.

Involuntarily, Subaru asked again, opening his closed eyelids to look up at the girl. The girl, who had been kneeling beside Subaru, stood up and looked down at him.

Hugging her small body with both hands, as if she were feeling cold, she said,

"To ask Betty to kill you… that's too cruel, in fact…"

Said with a tearful face and voice, Subaru was utterly bewildered.

He blinked, again and again, waiting for the expression on the girl standing beside him to change. However no matter how many times he repeated it, the profound sorrow in her expression remained.

It was an expression unlike any he knew of her.

She had hated Subaru, always treated him coldly, and occasionally revealed a kindhearted side that couldn't completely disregard his feelings, but he had fundamentally believed her to be capable of being utterly heartless.

Even if she wouldn't readily accept, and he might be rejected, he expected it to be accompanied by scorn and derision.

"You don't understand anything… You don't understand anything, I suppose…!"

He hadn't expected his request to be killed to be rejected with such sorrow.

"Be-Beatrice…?"

"Betty won't grant any of your wishes, in fact. If you want to die, do it yourself, I suppose… Betty refuses, in fact."

Shaking her head, Beatrice closed both eyes, her face devoid of emotion. The tears that had welled up were hidden deep within her eyes without falling, and as the girl raised her arm,

"The scenery…?!"

It began to warp.

Subaru saw the space around him distorting, cracks appearing. It felt like a premonition of the world collapsing, and in his anxiety, he instinctively hugged the cold body in his arms tighter.

Looking down at him, Beatrice muttered "You're the worst" in a voice devoid of warmth,

"Everything's already ruined anyway, but it's a problem if you stay here, I suppose. —At least, I'll protect this mansion, in fact."

"What… no, Beatrice, you…"

"—Betty is different from Roswaal, I suppose. Even if it's meant to gain a future, Betty hates all pain, all hardship, all suffering, all sadness, all fear, in fact."

An unasked question was met with an unanswering reply.

However, Subaru couldn't form words due to the poignant emotion embedded in those words, and his body was caught in the twist of the warped space. —There was no pain.

“At least, Betty wants you to die where Betty can’t see, in fact.”

Her final murmur, though feigning coldness, was accompanied by a terribly lonely smile.

He couldn’t say anything, he understood nothing. Only one thing was conveyed.

—Beatrice was saddened by Subaru’s decision, his actions.

The distortion reached its limit, and the crushed space exploded, vanishing.

A momentary sense of something like static in his vision swept through the world, and immediately after, the atmospheric distortion was nowhere to be found.

All that remained was the gouged-out, blood-stained floor, a vestige of where Subaru and Emilia had been.

Standing beside the empty space where the two had been, Beatrice put a hand to her forehead as if tired, covering her eyes with that hand, hiding herself from the world.

“—Mother, how much longer does Betty have?”

3

The rift in space spat Subaru out onto a pile of moss-covered, tangled vegetation.

“Bwaugh!”

He plunged face-first into it without warning, tasting grass in his mouth before lifting his head. Hastily, he spat out dirt, leaves, and a bug caught on his front teeth.

“Ugh, bleh, hah… Where is this…?”

Shaking off the repulsive sensation of a bug crawling on his cheek, Subaru furrowed his brow as he looked around.

His vision was filled with a cluster of dim trees, and after a full rotation of his head, there was no sign of their continuous line breaking. In other words,

“A forest… At night…”

Fortunately, the moonlight wasn’t completely obscured, allowing him to barely see.

A world dominated by the rustling of leaves in the wind and the chirping of insects could only be a twilight forest. As he realized this, Subaru understood that half a day had passed since he expected to wake up in the mansion.

At the same time,

“Is it safe to assume this is some kind of spatial transfer…?”

The atmosphere had warped, he’d been thrown into the resulting rift and flung into the forest.

Unless this was some kind of hidden garden stage within the mansion, it was safe to assume he’d been transferred somewhere far away. If Beatrice was the one who did it, she possessed the power to connect her library and other room doors as she pleased.

However, even if he understood that, her true intentions remained a mystery.

She had refused Subaru's plea to kill him and forcibly sent him outside the mansion via spatial transfer. Her tearful face still lingered in his mind.

He had thought that if she refused, she would simply abandon him, unable to even bear the sight of him. Yet, she had looked at Subaru as if she were disappointed—

"Then, it's almost as if…"

…she had been expecting something from him.

Subaru shook his head, dismissing this as an overly self-centered and egocentric thought.

He already understood and accepted that he was a jinx, capable of nothing. The world was hopelessly merciless, and everyone he tried to save met a brutal end.

What could anyone expect from Subaru, knowing this yet being unable to stop it?

If he couldn't expect anything from himself, then no one else could possibly expect anything from him.

Moreover, to demand it even from someone who supposedly hated him was simply "arrogance" gone too far.

"I'm hopeless, aren't I…?"

With a desolate smile, Subaru slowly bent his knees. Then, his movements felt sluggish, and he realized, far too late, the horrifying truth.

Emilia's corpse was still resting on his lap, just as it had been in the mansion room.

“Emi…lia…”

In the dim world, her pale face was faintly illuminated by moonlight.

Her death mask showed neither agony nor peace, but simply the confusion of not understanding what had happened. She had been alive, and her heart had suddenly been crushed in a world where time had stopped. It was doubtful if she even had time to comprehend the pain.

However, even if she hadn’t felt pain, he couldn’t believe it was a salvation.

Subaru had little experience with instant death, but he had died about nine times more than the average person. He didn’t want to believe that any of those deaths were peaceful, nor did he think death would be a salvation. —Except for himself now, that is.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, truly… I’m sorry.”

As he looked down at her face, droplets fell onto her pale cheek.

Tears he had believed to be dry welled up again, once more forcing an unending torment upon Subaru.

He heard voices. Voices accusing him. Everyone he had ever met hurled cold, angry insults at him.

Among them were the silver-haired girl and the blue-haired girl—

“Someone… anyone, please…”

—Kill me.

Enduring the ceaseless insults, Subaru picked up Emilia in his arms and stood up.

He then began to walk slowly through the night forest, trampling grass and breaking branches.

In the distance, he heard the howling of a beast.

Now, he felt like he could accept meeting that black witchbeast with horns. He wanted it to tear apart his flesh and mana, to utterly devour him and kill him.

A beautiful death like Emilia's was unfitting for him now.

He wanted to be killed horribly, trampled until he lost all human form, all dignity.

Otherwise, unless that happened, Natsuki Subaru would never be saved.

4

As he walked through the forest, Subaru realized something.

"Here… across this ditch, and then…"

He carefully descended a slope, using exposed roots like steps. The handicap of being unable to use his arms was draining his energy more than expected, yet strangely, he felt no fatigue.

His body, pushed beyond its limits, seemed to suppress any cries of pain, and his worn-out mind sharpened his focus. Navigating the dark night, using only his lower body, was effortless; his vision, which should have been unable to see even a few meters ahead, was as clear as if illuminated.

This wasn't just because Subaru's body was exerting itself like a flame about to burn out. Simply put, it was a familiar path.

There it was—

"Ah, you're here."

A smile, one of misplaced relief or perhaps resignation, formed on his lips.

It was the mad grin of someone stained with blood and worn down mentally. An ominous smile that would make anyone witnessing it recoil in disgust and choose to flee.

However those it was directed at were accustomed to such madness.

—Subaru was surrounded by a group cloaked in black garments, blending into the darkness.

They emerged from the shadows of the forest, encircling Subaru silently, without a sound, their very presence fading as they stared intently at him.

Bathed in their gaze, devoid of any discernible intention—neither hostility nor benevolence, malice nor goodwill—Subaru recalled the world where he had first encountered them.

Yes, back then—

"It's the same…"

As if echoing his memory, the black-robed figures all bowed their heads in unison.

It was the first sign of "respect" they had shown Subaru, despite their previous lack of discernible will.

Subaru didn't understand the specifics of why they directed such an emotion at him. What was clear was that they were Witch Cultist, and the darkness that clung to Subaru had some connection to this 'Witch'.

"—Move."

He thought he had so many questions he wanted to ask.

Before he had surrendered to this utter resignation, there would have been countless things he wanted to demand answers to. But now, even such sentiments were merely useless burdens.

At Subaru's terse command, the black-robed figures retreated smoothly without protest, sinking back into the darkness.

As their presence vanished from his sight, the already silent world seemed to become even quieter.

He realized he could no longer hear the chirping of insects or the rustling of wind.

Was it as if all living things detested them? He remembered that even in previous iterations, when the Witch Cult appeared, not a single insect sound could be heard.

Perhaps it meant that the presence of the Witch Cult —Subaru's presence alongside them— was a despicable situation. —That seemed like a fitting assessment for him now.

The non-obstacles vanished, yet their presence had given Subaru certainty.

The slight hesitation in his steps completely disappeared, and Subaru's progress, stepping over roots and treading on soil, was unstoppable.

His path eventually led him out of the forest and onto a rocky area with sheer cliffs.

—There, a cave, its entrance blocked by a large boulder, awaited.

"We've been expecting you. Disciple of Love."

A gaunt man, sporting a mad grin that mirrored Subaru's own, greeted him.

5

"Oh my~, oh my? Is that, by any chance, the… half-elf girl you're holding in your arms?"

Petelgeuse tilted his head, looking at Emilia in Subaru's arms as he stepped on the grass. With his head still tilted parallel to the ground, he gleefully stuck out his tongue, drooling.

"To think she lost her life before even undergoing the ordeal… What misfortune! What a tragic end! Ah! And, and, and… how diligent you are! Before we even moved! To take the half-elf's body! Her life! From her!"

Petelgeuse swung his arms, dramatically shouting about Emilia's death.

Subaru noticed that, at some point, cultists had crawled out of the cave and surrounded them, all intently listening to Petelgeuse's madness.

He was insane.

"Me… diligent…?"

"Yes! That's right! Diligent! Ah, how wonderful! Unlike us, who are slow to judge, dull in wisdom, and lacking in the resolve to act! You are the first to embody the Witch's will!"

Hearing Subaru's faint murmur, Petelgeuse laughed gleefully and rushed towards him, sliding to his knees and slamming both hands onto the dirt. "Compared to that!" he cried,

"How slow, foolish, and deficient I and my fingertips are! Ah! Forgive me! Forgive this unworthy body that cannot repay love! Forgive this unfaithful body that is slothful! Please, please forgive this deficient one who cannot respond to the love you bestow…!"

Tears streamed down Petelgeuse's face as he repeatedly slammed his arms against the rock face, drawing blood.

Despite the violent self-mutilation, with blood splattering and bone visible through the torn skin of his wrists, his frenzied actions didn't stop. Far from stopping him, the surrounding cultists knelt in imitation of Petelgeuse, each beginning to express their apologies to the being they worshipped in their own way.

Subaru felt nothing, even witnessing the madness of these lunatics.

Before, just a day ago, Subaru would have rushed to take Petelgeuse's life without a second thought.

Now, seeing the man he should have hated right before him, no emotion stirred within him, and his desire remained unchanged.

"Ah, what can I do for you, who have accomplished the trial in place of this unworthy one who cannot repay that person's feelings? I want you to tell me. What can I do to show my love, to prove that I am not slothful?"

"Kill me."

To Petelgeuse, who was pressing in, weeping and pleading, Subaru quietly uttered those words.

Thrown such an abrupt statement, even Petelgeuse's expression showed astonishment—

"Is that all you wish for?"

—He didn't show it, and without hesitation, he shoved Subaru.

Petelgeuse watched Subaru stumble back, then formed an ecstatic expression.

"Ah, how wonderful, how wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful! How diligent I am, to immediately bring salvation and love to a faithful follower who has completed the ordeal and seeks salvation! Ah, I will not be slothful! My thanks to you! My love to my diligence!"

Without any doubt about Subaru's desperate answer, without any remorse for his own actions, and without a single waver in the laws of this world, Petelgeuse unleashed his murderous intent.

Seeing the madman's form, Subaru closed his eyes, a turmoil stirring within him.

—With this, at least, Subaru's desire in this moment would be fulfilled. So,

"Even so,"

Petelgeuse muttered something to Subaru, who felt the approaching murderous intent on his skin.

"To not even overcome a single trial, and moreover, to not even face one of the great sins, to harbor such a grand ambition only to stumble on the first pebble…”

That was,

“—Ah, you were truly ‘ Slothful‘!”

That was an insult to Emilia’s death.

“…”

The moment he opened his eyes, Subaru saw a black mist in the shape of a palm looming before him.

For a moment, memories of pain flashed through his mind, chilling him to the bone. There was one difference from that time: his body moved. His legs moved. His arms moved. Therefore, he could dodge.

Dodging the slowly approaching black palm, Subaru, still holding Emilia, leaped sideways. The palm, having overshot, vanished as if bewildered, and Subaru, following it with his eyes, exhaled roughly. Then,

“…You, did you see the Unseen Hand just now?”

With a trembling voice, his gleaming eyes wide open, Petelgeuse looked at Subaru.

He put his thin, twig-like fingers into his mouth and bit them off one by one. With each one, a sickening sound of flesh bursting and bone cracking echoed, and as blood dripped,

“No, no. This is wrong, mistaken, incorrect, erroneous. My authority, the authority of ‘Sloth’, my ‘Unseen Hand’ granted by favor! It is not permitted for others to see it!!”

Spitting blood, chewing on the fragments of nails and bone remaining in his mouth, Petelgeuse turned his bloodshot eyes on Subaru.

There was unmistakable murderous intent gleaming there, distinctly different from the fanatical emotions he had displayed before. What was contained within was purely a murderous intent stemming from hatred towards Subaru's very existence

.

—Suddenly, black arms erupted from behind Petelgeuse as if gushing forth.

Petelgeuse's shadow split, forming multiple palms, numbering seven in total. They were strikingly similar to the cursed arms that appeared when Subaru tried to reveal "Return by Death", the sight of them sent shivers of terror down Subaru's spine.

But,

"If I can see them…"

…I can dodge them.

The black arms were not particularly fast. Their terrifying aspects were their long reach and their strength to tear a human body apart, but what was fundamentally terrifying was their 'invisibility'.

Now, with that invisibility rendered ineffective, they couldn't reach Subaru, who, as a burnt-out husk of a life, was exhibiting abnormal physical abilities.

"Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why… Can you dodge them?! Can you see them?! This is mine… Only mine…!!"

"I just decided I don't want to be killed by you."

Subaru spun around to dodge a palm, then leaped forward to avoid another reaching finger. He immediately ducked to avoid arms closing in from both sides, then rolled in close to Petelgeuse.

He savored the sight of the madman's distorted expression of shock, a dark pleasure cheering within him.

—He remembered. He had intended to kill this man.

"—Bu-gah!"

With a leap, he plunged headfirst, delivering a headbutt to Petelgeuse's nose. Petelgeuse, caught off guard, reeled back, scattering blood, and Subaru, feeling a sharp pain in his forehead, flew backward.

His vision, blurred by the blood dripping from his forehead, saw the palms flailing wildly, losing their precision. His front teeth must have hit, cutting his forehead. The profuse bleeding obscured his right eye for a fleeting moment.

—Seizing that opening, Subaru's body was thrown, using his grabbed leg as a pivot.

The moment he was slammed against a large tree, Subaru didn't cower; instead, he held Emilia's body tightly in his arms.

Not clinging, but protecting.

"—Gwah!"

He crashed hard on his back, feeling as if his spine had snapped.

Multiple ribs simultaneously gave way, and several of his recently healed wounds burst open all at once, initiating a chorus of intense pain. Subaru convulsed like an insect on the ground where he fell.

"How pathetic! How utterly pathetic! Ah, good. Truly good. If I were to remain 'Slothful' like this, my actions would be in vain. Ah, indeed, I must diligently, strive for love…"

"Shut up, you idiot…"

Subaru hurled insults at the madman who was about to loudly mock his own superiority.

His breathing sounded abnormal, and he felt severe damage to his lungs. The pains in his abdomen competed to be the worst, and his consciousness flickered white.

Even so, Subaru smiled, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

“What love, you fool. The ‘love’ you supposedly received… I can see it too, can’t I? …You’ve been cheated on, serves you right.”

“What are you! Saying… Saying, saying, saying, saying, saying, saying… My brain, my brain is trembling, trembling, trembling, trembling, trembling, trembling, trembling, trembling!”

Foaming at the mouth, Petelgeuse raged.

He walked right up to Subaru, then kicked Emilia, still held in Subaru’s arms, forcefully away from him.

His fingers lacked strength, and Subaru couldn’t hold onto Emilia as she was kicked away.

Emilia rolled, hitting tree roots and coming to a stop. With a cruel sneer, Petelgeuse looked at her body out of the corner of his eye and then,

“You will not be forgiven for insulting my love! Ah, I’ve decided, I’ve decided! The half-elf who was to be given the ordeal has perished, but the sins of those who basely sheltered and supported her remain!”

Shouting, spewing out nothing but displaced anger, Petelgeuse stomped on Subaru. He crushed Subaru’s palm with his heel, and a black palm squeezed Subaru’s neck, preventing him from screaming.

His breathing cut off, his upper body lifted by a strength that threatened to tear his neck itself, Subaru, his core bones shattered, couldn’t even utter a sound from the intense pain.

Petelgeuse’s expression seemed somewhat relieved at Subaru’s state.

“First, I will eradicate all those connected to the mansion, then I will offer the lives of the nearby villagers. Leaving nothing behind, sloppiness is a sign of ‘Sloth’. I and my fingertips, who hold diligence supreme, will take everything, and bring everything down. —The road has already been blocked! No one can cross the fog and interfere!"

Spitting saliva in his excitement, Petelgeuse ranted at Subaru.

Then, he said "Before that," and breathed his foul breath onto Subaru,

"You seemed to be holding her very preciously… If I destroy that half-elf's body, how wonderfully will she scream?"

Petelgeuse tilted his head, twisted his lips, and his eyes gleamed with curiosity. From behind him, five more arms, separate from the one strangling Subaru, rose and moved independently towards Emilia's corpse.

Each grasped a limb, and her neck, in its palm.

"Can you see? Do you understand what is about to happen?"

"…St-Stop…!"

The terror that now assailed Subaru was precisely because he could see.

He vividly remembered what that man's black arms had done to Rem's body when they were invisible. Now, that was being directed at Emilia's body.

Subaru's view of life and death was a dry one. A body that had lost its life was merely a lump of flesh, with no possibility of a soul residing within it. Heaven and hell surely didn't exist; after death, only darkness awaited.

He had lived with such a dry view of life and death, thinking "I'm so cool", and he hadn't changed his mind even after arriving in this world.

He regretted that now.

Even if her soul didn't reside in her body, that body was Emilia. His soul couldn’t help but cry out in sorrow at its desecration.

However now, Subaru had no power to stop it, and Petelgeuse deepened his mad grin even further.

“—What are you doing?”

The voice suddenly descended as if from the heavens, landing on the eardrums of everyone present.

“—!”

Petelgeuse’s expression changed, and his gaze wandered, searching for the source of the voice.

So much power, and such a chilling, sharpened anger, were contained within that voice.

Indeed, Petelgeuse, sweeping his gaze around, found it.

A moment later, Subaru, enduring the pressure on his neck, also saw it in his blurred vision.

“I repeat.”

—Accompanying an immense quantity of icicles that seemed to cover the sky, there was a cat with gray fur.

His ragged breath turned white, and a chilling cold that froze the world swept through the forest.

The black-robed figures, still kneeling, and Petelgeuse, who had been grinning madly, were struck speechless.

“What are you doing to my daughter— You lowlifes?”

—The beast of end, staining the world white, had now come to end the world for the tenth time.

Chapter 50:
Where Sin Lies

1

Ever since coming to this world, Subaru had experienced death countless times, in myriad forms.

Considering that for most living beings, life is a one-shot, all-or-nothing game, Subaru, who had already gained his tenth challenge, was a seasoned veteran when it came to “death.” He possessed a sharpened sense that only he could perceive, a sense born from his forced, involuntary familiarity with death.

—It was the ability to clearly sniff out the distinct scent of impending death.

“Look at you all, doing as you please.”

The voice, accompanied by a bone-chilling pressure, rained down from the sky. As Subaru looked up, icicles floated, covering the sky, their sharp tips pointing downwards. A tiny shadow commanded these freezing blades.

He squinted, and only then, with conscious effort, could he discern that it was a cat-like creature with grey fur. However, it was an unusual sight, standing upright on two legs, its short arms stretched out and clasped together, its unusually long tail swaying, and a pink nose.

Faced with this being that spoke human words, Petelgeuse and the Witch Cultists were struck speechless. And Subaru, also collapsed on the ground, felt his throat seize up from a different kind of shock.

It was the first time he had witnessed this being, a spirit, acting with such overt rage. And he could feel the world dying from the aftershocks of that anger alone.

"…Puck."

The air around the floating spirit —Puck— turned a white mist, and the surrounding forest began to crackle and transform. Trees turned from green to white, their leaves, branches, and trunks freezing over, their mana drained as they withered and fell. The same effects began to appear on the ground: first the grass and plants died, then the soil, and finally, its chilling touch extended to Subaru and the Witch Cultists who lay on that very soil.

His skin tingled, and a burning pain spread throughout his body, like a scald. A gradual feeling of exhaustion welled up from deep within him, even breathing became a chore, and his consciousness began to drift. Mana collection— Subaru was familiar with it, the debilitating feeling caused by a spirit's forced mana extraction. What Puck, now enraged, was doing on a global scale was the very same thing that had once been done only to Subaru.

Indeed, in Subaru's vision, as he stifled a groan, Petelgeuse stumbled backward, sweat beading on his forehead, and the kneeling cultists gasped for air like fish out of water. Puck looked down at their state and let out a soft "Hmph" from his adorable nose.

"The Witches Cult, huh? Even after four hundred years, you haven't changed at all. In every era, you always do the things that grieve me the most."

With that, his black eyes moved, and Puck's gaze fixed on a single spot in the forest. Following his gaze, Subaru saw that there was a sole area unaffected by Puck's mana drain. While the entire surroundings were frozen and dying, there was a patch of green left untouched. —It was where Emilia's body lay, leaning against the roots of slender trees.

"Ah, my poor Lia. …You died without understanding anything, didn't you?"

The voice, which had been deliberately devoid of inflection, now carried an undeniable hint of sorrow. After gazing at Emilia sadly and forlornly, Puck slowly turned his eyes to the survivors present.

“The sin of taking my daughter’s life is grave. Not a single one of you shall return alive.”

“What does a mere spirit, what, what, what, what, what, what, what are you talking about?! A half-devil who failed the ordeal is nothing but a filthy impurity! Your ‘Sloth’ for failing to protect that foolish girl is what should be condemned! Ah! Ah! Ahhh! My brain, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles!!”

Petelgeuse spat, looking up at the sky and extending both hands towards the threatening Puck. His bloodshot eyes darted erratically, and Petelgeuse’s murderous intent swelled. Even knowing the spirit’s immense power, Petelgeuse chose to resist. This wasn’t a choice born of bravery. For him, the distinction between strong and weak was utterly meaningless.

Because,

“All phenomena, all possible phenomena are recorded in the Gospel! The Witch loves me! Therefore, before my diligence, which repays her love! You lazy ones have no means of resistance!”

—Love, death, love, depart.

For Petelgeuse, his faith in the Witch was nothing less than an act of repaying her love, and he firmly believed that only demonstrating his love for the Witch through his actions was the absolute truth of the world. All actions demonstrating love for the Witch took precedence, and anyone who dared to impede such actions would be shattered before that love. —For his love for the Witch surpassed all.

“The half-devil died! You, too, shall receive the recompense for your sloth! Perish for the Witch’s favor! For the love that makes your heart tremble!”

Waving his arms and howling, Petelgeuse stamped his foot. Puck’s eyes, looking down at Petelgeuse’s madness on the ground, remained utterly cold. It was a clear, penetrating gaze, not one of pity or anger, but one that saw no value in the target. And as he bathed in that gaze, Petelgeuse reached for his head, an exaggerated gesture to draw attention, and behind him, the kneeling figures in black began to move—

“Die.”

—The raining ice blades mercilessly pierced the backs of the black-clad figures, bursting from their stomachs and pinning them to the ground, ending their lives. Like insects impaled for display, their torsos and limbs were pierced and tethered to the earth, and the black-clad figures died without a single cry of agony. The ice stakes embedding their wounds rapidly spread freezing erosion through their impaled bodies, leaving a row of grotesquely posed ice statues in the forest.

Without a single preparatory movement, Puck took nearly twenty lives in an instant, his gaze unwavering. But Petelgeuse, hand still on his head, watching him from the corner of his eye, was equally unmoved. He paid no heed to his followers, who had moved at his command and literally become stepping stones. He used the fleeting moment when Puck’s attention shifted from him.

“—My brain, trembles.”

The moment Subaru saw Petelgeuse’s lips contort into a sinister grin, he watched as Petelgeuse’s shadow exploded outwards. From his fallen, ninety-degree tilted perspective, Subaru saw countless black hands shoot out from Petelgeuse’s shadow, rushing towards Puck floating in mid-air.

Black hands that, given his true power, Puck should undoubtedly be able to avoid. Yet, Puck, with his arms crossed, seemed utterly unconcerned by their approaching threat. —He couldn’t see them.

“Puck—!”

“Stay quiet, Subaru. —You’re different.”

Puck calmly told Subaru, who was trying to warn him of the danger. Interrupted by his voice, Subaru’s warning didn’t reach the spirit, and the approaching hands gripped his small body, enveloping him.

"Hmmph?"

Puck's tiny body was small enough to be covered by a single adult's hand. When seven black hands reached him, his body was completely obscured from Subaru's view. Moreover, each of those hands possessed enough power to easily tear a human body apart. Even as a spirit, what would become of him under such physical force—especially since the owner of those black hands was the Witch Cult fanatic, Petelgeuse?

"Carelessness! Negligence! That is Sloth! You should have finished me off immediately! Despite your power, you failed to do what was necessary. That is what brought about this result !!! !!"

The "Unseen Hand", visible only to Subaru, crushed Puck's enveloped body. Within that densely packed, black mass, the spirit's body was about to be obliterated by the malicious force—

"Pointless."

The next moment, the black mist instantly blew away, and Subaru saw.

"It's too soon for you to invoke the Witch's name with this level of power— four hundred years too soon. If you truly intend to kill me —"

Trees snapped under the excessive strain, and a long tail swung amidst the fallen timber. The frozen remains of the black-clad figures shattered into countless pieces, and the front paws that caused it turned the ground they touched into a world of absolute zero. His quiet breath alone was equivalent to a blizzard, and the golden eyes glowing brightly within the white mist looked down upon the dying land with merciless light.

Why stood there was—

"—Show me half of what Satella could do, a thousand shadows extended."

A grey-furred, cat-like quadruped, its massive body spanning the forest. It was the majestic manifestation of the lord of ice, the one who had once brought down the mansion in another world and driven Subaru to his death.

2

The grey beast, transformed into a colossal figure that truly looked down upon the world, swelled with a cold so intense it painted vision white, making it painful even to keep one's eyelids open.

"…"

Despite the faint pain, Subaru's consciousness was no longer there. He simply stared, dumbfounded or perhaps awestruck, at the beast that was too massive to fit into his vision without looking up, unable to utter a sound.

"What…?"

A trembling voice suddenly echoed in the freezing world. The tremor in the voice wasn't due to the piercing cold. The speaker himself, like Subaru, wouldn't have the luxury of thinking about the cold.

"What have you brought forth, you?!"

It was Petelgeuse who screamed, shaking his head as he looked up. His parched lips split vertically from the recent shriek, a trickle of red blood oozing out—but even that froze instantly, stanching the flow. With a wind that threatened to prevent his eyes from opening again if he dared to blink, Subaru replayed Petelgeuse's scream and looked up at the beast once more.

No matter how much he pondered, there was only one answer to Petelgeuse's words. That is,

"Is that you… Puck?"

"You can't tell just by looking? Though that's a mean thing to say."

In response to Subaru's faint question, the massive grey beast moved its enormous mouth. Each word brought a gale, and the giant beast, without smiling, confirmed Subaru's question with sarcasm. At the same time, Subaru understood something.

—Why he had died the way he did, at the very end of the last loop.

“Impossible.”

Ignoring Subaru’s silence, Petelgeuse squeezed out the words. He put his fingers into his mouth one by one, biting off their tips without hesitation, as if trying to forcibly cling to his consciousness fading in the cold.

“Impossible, impossible, impossible, impossible, impossible, impossible, impossible! A mere! Spirit! A mere spirit! It’s impossible for it to possess such… such power! Such power is…”

“—Echidna.”

“…”

Foam of blood spilled from the corner of his lips, and Petelgeuse, who had been wide-eyed, stopped moving. Interrupting the madman’s words of denial was a word Puck whispered. The moment Petelgeuse heard what sounded like a name, he clamped his mouth shut.

“If you’re from the Witch Cult, you’ll understand the meaning of that name, won’t you?”

As if to prod Petelgeuse’s frozen thoughts, Puck posed a question. Petelgeuse’s reaction was dramatic. There was the sound of something hard cracking, and Petelgeuse spat something out. What he spat out was a white fragment—a back tooth, broken from being ground too hard. And then,

“Filthy…!”

Glaring at Puck with bloodshot eyes, Petelgeuse drooled blood from his mouth, staining his jaw and the collar of his cassock crimson, he continued,

“It’s abominable to even speak that name! Ah! You foolish, pathetic, lazy one who knows no fear! In front of me! In front of us, the

Witch Cult! To utter the name of a fallen Witch other than the Witch of Envy, Satella…!!”

Perhaps capillaries had burst, for Petelgeuse’s blood-stained eyes were a deep crimson. Tears of blood streamed from the corners of his eyes, and the madman, spitting bloody foam, pointed his mangled hand at Puck,

“It’s nothing less than an insult to our faith, our love! The time we’ve devoted!”

“—A human, barely a few decades old, shouldn’t speak of time to a spirit.”

Puck said coldly to the stomping Petelgeuse, his golden eyes glowing. That alone stopped Petelgeuse, who had been shivering in madness. No, he hadn’t stopped consciously. He was being forcibly frozen from his feet up.

Lying down, in his hazy vision, Subaru watched his hated enemy succumb to death. Petelgeuse, freezing, must have also realized his end was near. Facing his death, he looked up at Puck with glittering eyes,

“The depth of faith has nothing to do with time! Because you possess time equivalent to infinity, you waste most of it uselessly. Don’t lump us in with lazy people like you! Ahhhhhhh, my brain, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles, trembles!”

Even facing his demise, Petelgeuse’s fanaticism showed no wavering whatsoever. To Subaru, who knew the horror of “death”, the absolute phenomenon, better than anyone, Petelgeuse’s attitude was truly deranged. To maintain his composure like that in the face of death—that was truly proof of pure madness.

“Death isn’t even a punishment. —That’s why I hate you people.”

“The ordeal have been fulfilled! Eventually, my body will reach the venerable Witch and join her ranks. …Ah, I look forward to that time…yes!”

Spreading his arms and looking up at the sky, Petelgeuse let out a cackling laugh. The blizzard intensified, the wind dyeing his emaciated body white, and gradually his voice and movements slowed, then began to fade. Even so, Petelgeuse did not stop laughing, and until his cackles finally ceased, his expression remained one of pure, almost joyful, madness.

"—You got away with it, didn't you?"

Muttering, the grey beast swung its front paw, shattering Petelgeuse's ice statue. With a single strike, his upper and lower body separated, and the upper part, falling to the ground, crumbled under the crushing weight from above. His remaining lower torso was lost among the fragments of the black-clad figures that had shattered earlier, his demise beyond doubt.

—Just as Puck said, even in death, his will could not be broken.

Witnessing his hated enemy shatter and their life brutally extinguished, Subaru felt only an overwhelming emptiness in his chest. This was the man he had hated so much, the man he had wanted to kill. He had believed that Petelgeuse's existence was the root cause of everything, the eye of all problems. If only he could kill that man, everything would surely go well, he thought.

But what was the result?

Petelgeuse was defeated, and the threat of the Witch Cult could be considered removed. However, Rem, whose presence should have shared in this joyful outcome, had vanished from the world, and Emilia, with whom he should have reconciled with good news, Subaru himself had allowed to die. Subaru himself had abandoned responsibility in the face of their deaths, tried to throw away his own life but couldn't even do that, and his foe was vanquished by another avenger—yet his spirit remained unbroken. In the end, he had accomplished nothing. That was the only outcome of this ordeal.

"Now then—"

As Subaru reeled from his powerlessness, Puck, who had silently witnessed Petelgeuse's end, looked down at Subaru. Realizing anew that this giant beast was Puck, Subaru keenly felt his immense power. Earlier, when the knights and wise men in the royal capital had trembled in fear upon seeing Puck, Subaru had watched as if it were someone else's problem, but now—

"Shall we talk?"

—Now, he understood their feelings all too well.

His consciousness was hazy from the cold. All signs of the pain that had raged within him had vanished, and he felt no sensation from his injured spine, broken ribs, or internal organs pierced by bone fragments. He was hearing the quiet footsteps of approaching death. Before those silent, dark steps, trivial sensations like pain receded into the distance. But,

"If you think you can simply disappear, you're gravely mistaken."

"—Gah!!"

In the cold, his eyelids, which had been closing under an enveloping drowsiness, jolted open as the pain he thought had receded now burned with an incredible heat. His throat seized up in agony, and when Subaru looked at the afflicted area that cried out in pain, he saw that his right leg from the knee down had been repeatedly stabbed by thin ice needles.

The information of the wounds, received visually, traveled to his brain, and his hypersensitive brain correctly transmitted the pain throughout his body. Blood burst in the back of his eyes, and his vision turned crimson. This wasn't just "painful". It transcended pain; it was a living hell manifesting in his body.

"Subaru, you've committed three sins."

Looking down at Subaru, who writhed and screamed in agony, the grey beast continued speaking as if nothing were amiss. Despite his gigantic size, with a mouth full of sharp fangs, and even a changed voice, the fact that his tone remained the same was terrifying. As Subaru's mind raced with pointless thoughts, trying to distract himself from the torment, Puck swung his long tail, toppling the frozen trees.

“First, your break your contract with Lia. You seem to lack understanding of how heavy a promise is for a spirits arts user. Carelessly breaking that contract, and how much that hurt Lia’s heart… you probably don’t even know.”

As the last word of his sentence was uttered, the tip of his left foot was pierced next. The tip of an icicle, having entered through the sole of his foot, emerged from his knee, and the ice stake, still embedded in Subaru’s body, branched out, agitating muscle fibers and nerves, bursting pink flesh from the inside.

—The pain dominated his brain. He couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t understand, didn’t want to know. It hurt, it hurt.

“Second, ignoring Lia’s request and coming back. Without that, the Witch Cult would have waited a bit longer, and there would have been more time before the fog appeared. If not for that, perhaps some things could have been saved.”

Just like the black-clad figures, Subaru’s outstretched hands were pinned from above by icicles. What was different from their complete freezing was that the icicles, revealing sharp cross-sections, remained impaled through the backs of his hands and moved towards his elbows—the middle of his arms, from wrist to bicep, was cleanly severed, flesh, bone, blood vessels, and nerves exposed to the air.

“And third, letting Lia die.”

All his wounds simultaneously froze, and the pain that had been grinding away at Subaru’s soul suddenly receded. The crimson pain, like nerves immersed in magma, was abruptly snatched away, and

Subaru, having forgotten how to breathe, convulsed his lungs and throat, desperately gasping for air.

He gasped for a while, finally getting the hang of breathing. As his lungs expanded and oxygen permeated his entire body and brain, his consciousness slowly began to return. He had thought before that suffering, despair, and pain were lesser than “death”, but now that thought was nowhere to be found.

“Pain”, “death”, and “fear”— All these things that humans abhor— All possessed the power to break a weak human like Natsuki Subaru, equally.

In a world where tears forming at the corners of his eyes instantly turned into drops of ice, Subaru realized that his four limbs were already beyond repair. Frozen together with his wounds, they had become one with the ground, and any attempt to move them would easily tear them off at the shoulders or thighs. In effect, even though his limbs appeared connected, it was clear to him now that he was like a human doll.

“—According to our contract, I will now destroy this country.”

Puck told Subaru, whose consciousness was sluggish and who was beginning to comprehend death. It was the first moment he, who had appeared on the scene carrying anger, clearly showed an emotion differentiated from rage.

“I will bury everything under ice and snow, and make it a farewell gift to Lia.”

“…That’s, not, right.”

“It’s not about whether she’d be happy. What’s decided, what’s promised, cannot be broken. Even if it’s a contract made with myself.”

In response to Subaru’s incoherent voice, Puck continued, “But”,

“I know it will end without being fulfilled. Even if I try to expand the world of ice and cover the entire land, like the forest where Lia and I lived —Reinhard, the Sword Saint, will surely stand in my way. I cannot defeat him.”

Uttering the name of the red-haired hero, Puck murmured as if lamenting the difference in their power. Subaru couldn’t believe those words, their meaning. Even Puck, so immensely powerful, so overwhelmingly strong, declared he had no chance against the Sword Saint. And yet, knowing this, knowing he would be struck down midway, he held onto his stubborn resolve not to stop.

“Why…?”

“—Lia, Emilia, is my reason for existence.”

Puck answered Subaru’s question. Rubbing his nose against the ground, writhing as if to hide his large face from Subaru’s sight, Puck spoke in a somewhat lonely voice,

“In a world without her, there’s no meaning for me to exist. In that case, let the world disappear, a fit of pique from me. —Everything about me ended when she died.”

Shaking his head, Puck concluded his words, and the wind suddenly intensified. The wind grew significantly colder, piercing his skin, freezing his eyelids, and even beginning to freeze the blood circulating in his body. —The end was near.

“If I freeze a person slowly, gradually, from their fingertips and toes, where do they die? Are you curious, Subaru?”

“…”

“I’ll take your silence as a yes. You can find that answer for yourself.”

Slowly, slowly, the encroachment of the frost began to consume his flesh. Beyond his already frozen limbs, his shoulders and thighs began to freeze, bringing with them the same level of destruction, intense pain, and despair that his limbs had endured.

“—The fog has appeared. Looks like you’ve summoned a troublesome fellow before you die.”

If pain could drive him mad, then shatter this sanity already. Tear it, break it, shred his heart. Otherwise,

“Gluttony… Ah, I believe it’s now called the White Whale? You called that, let Lia die, and now you’ll lose your own life… Truly, you’re hopeless, aren’t you?”

He couldn’t hear. Someone’s voice was distant, only his own screams continued to echo. Gradually, the screams faded, and laughter, cackling laughter, could be heard.

Cackle, cackle, cackle.

It was a familiar laugh. The voice of the man he had hated to death. He felt an inexplicable need to confirm where it was coming from, and his consciousness blurred as he searched for the source of the laughter. And then, he realized.

The cackling, uncontrollable laughter, was coming from his own mouth.

The pain vanished, and pleasure began to dominate his brain. A world of madness expanded, and he stepped into a landscape so distorted it was almost pleasant.

The cackling wouldn’t stop. It was laughter mocking himself.

He let Rem die, killed Emilia, and even he himself died a pointless death. Ah, truly, what a mess.

“—You truly are Slothful, Subaru.”

With a snap, his consciousness cut out. And it wasn’t just his consciousness or his life that had broken. —Something far more, something he had desperately held onto, had just snapped with a sound.

With a snap, it had broken.

Chapter 51: Entreaty

1

Everything vanishes into a world of white.

Whether my frozen body melted, shattered, or will remain forever encased in ice, I don't know.

The fate of the body left behind felt utterly irrelevant to me now.

Only one thing became perfectly clear.

Again and again, each time witnessing a brutal end, each repetition worsening the situation, until finally, with my own hands, I destroyed the very thing I most wanted to protect— Only then did I finally realize.

—Natsuki Subaru is not, nor ever will be, someone anyone expects anything from, not even himself.

2

Even after experiencing it countless times, the sensation of my lost five senses suddenly returning was something I could never get used to.

The cold air would permeate to the core of my being, and I'd lose even the feeling of cold, a sense of loss like sinking endlessly into a white void. Then, that feeling of losing everything would abruptly clear, and after a blink, everything would be back to normal.

The limbs that had been so brutally tormented now pulsed with blood, and the utterly violated nerves functioned normally, as if they'd forgotten all pain. The biting cold air vanished, and the sunlight was humid enough that I'd be sweating if I didn't roll up my sleeves.

"…"

"—Tch!"

"—Ah."

In the bustling crowd where I stood frozen, sounds flew from right and left, thrusting an unforgiving workload upon my supposedly dead hearing, demanding its immediate return. Processing these meaningless noises, Subaru checked the movement of his limbs. Both arms, which had been filleted, his right leg, which had become like a bed of nails, and his left leg, which had burst from being impaled, were all intact. He stood firmly on the ground, and his fists were tightly clenched.

Everything was back to normal. The control over his lost body had returned, and Subaru felt a wave of relief.

More than anything—

"Subaru, why are you spacing out?"

Across the counter, a blue-haired girl tilted her head, looking at him with concern.

Abandoned by everything, overwhelmed by an unbearable sense of powerlessness, despairing in self-inflicted disappointment and loss, dying a pointless death with no way out, and then returning,

"Rem."

"Yes, Subaru's Rem… What's wrong?"

Responding to his brief call, Rem then ducked under the counter and stepped outside. Coming before the still Subaru, she reached out her hand towards his face and touched his cheek. Her brows furrowed with concern, and a shadow of worry crossed Rem's delicate features.

"Rem apologizes, she didn't notice. You must be tired. To forget Rem's duties and become engrossed in something else, Rem is a failure as a maid."

"Tired… Ah, yes… That's right."

Subaru lifted his hand and covered Rem’s hand on his cheek. Rem’s eyebrows rose in surprise at the contact, but she held back her reaction, seeing Subaru’s utterly haggard expression and voice. Without even looking at her, though she seemed about to say something, Subaru clung to Rem’s presence, so surely there in his palm—to her warmth, as if to make sure she wouldn’t slip away.

“I dropped it, wore away… I’m exhausted, aren’t I?”

Even so, the one he had surely lost was truly here.

“—Subaru?”

—Subaru resolved that he would never let go of this, right before his eyes, again.

3

I quickened my pace through the crowd, descending a gentle slope.

I winced as a ground dragon carriage kicked up dust right beside me, but my gaze remained fixed straight ahead. My steps were unwavering, aimed directly at my destination. Looking back, I realized I’d been lost so many times during these repeated days.

Lost in who I was, lost in Emilia’s heart, lost in my own purpose, lost in what to do to grasp the best future, lost in a whirlpool of madness, lost between life and death—ultimately, just a lost person who stumbled into another world.

Now, Subaru, who couldn’t even manage a proper step before, was pushing forward with an unprecedented clarity of purpose.

He finally understood. The loops, the repeated days, were not in vain. The third iteration, what happened in that loop where Subaru was truly pushed to his limits, both physically and mentally, clearly taught him.

What Subaru could do.

What Subaru must do.

"—Kun!"

His cleared gaze was fixed on his objective, and his feet powerfully kicked the ground with each stride. His body felt light. Freed from every heavy burden on his heart, there was nothing for Subaru to fear now.

"Subaru, please listen!"

He tugged her arm, and once they finished descending the slope, they headed towards the main street—one of the widest in the royal capital. They wove through the throngs of people coming and going, pushing against the human tide. As they approached a familiar road, Subaru's momentum only increased. His surging emotions were reflected in his breathing, his steps, and his buoyant body.

Suddenly, entering the shade, Subaru looked up at what was blocking the sun. Above him, filling his vision, were the walls surrounding the royal capital and the main gate connecting the inside and outside, a break in those walls. He'd once been taught that the unreadable 'Ha' and 'Ro' characters carved above it spelled "Royal Capital Lugunica."

This meant that Subaru —no, both of them— were now at the royal capital's main gate.

"—Subaru!"

Her following steps, which had been gradually giving way, stopped, and his arm was forcibly shaken off. With their connection broken, even Subaru had no choice but to stop. He paused and turned around. Rem was looking at him, her eyes clouded with confusion.

"What's wrong? What happened? You have to explain…"

She placed her left hand on her right arm, which he'd grabbed, and her plea made her seem to shrink slightly. Hearing her words, Subaru understood that her confusion was natural. From her perspective, he had suddenly changed and dragged her along. He hadn't explained anything on the way, and rushing her like that, it was only natural for her to be upset.

“Ah, my bad, Rem. I was a bit too impatient. There was just so much I had to, you know, think about. So I skipped the explanation, I’m sorry.”

“Honestly, it’s troubling. Rem knows Subaru thinks a lot, but you still have to tell her… Though Rem doesn’t dislike being forced.”

Placing both hands on her cheeks, Rem, who was slightly flushed, let out a sigh of relief. She must have heard the calm, modulated tone return to Subaru’s voice and decided that his strange behavior earlier was just a slight overreaction on her part.

Indeed, seeing her relief, her concern was understandable. Subaru’s transformation right after “Return by Death” must have been dramatic for Rem, who had only experienced a few seconds of it.

In fact, there was a difference of “seconds” versus “days” of accumulated experience between them. Furthermore, Subaru had accumulated those “days” three times, shaping his current self. Looking back calmly, his inner gloom during this period must have been something even he would want to turn away from.

He had disgraced himself at the Royal Selection, was half-killed by Julius at the training grounds, created a fatal rift with Emilia, was abandoned in the capital, and lost his purpose.

Spending idle time at Crusch’s mansion, he had endlessly struggled to find answers to what he could do, what he had to do. Then, his confusion suddenly cleared, quite literally in the blink of an eye. For Rem, it must have been a bolt from the blue.

“Sorry for worrying you. I’m okay now. I feel like I’ve only shown you my pathetic side, getting knocked down and knocking myself down, but I finally understand.”

“No. Thinking about Subaru isn’t a hardship for Rem… ‘Finally understand,’ you said?”

Rem’s voice was light as she responded to Subaru, whose eyes were now clear of confusion. It had been so long since they’d had an exchange like this, and Subaru couldn't hide the slight joy in his heart. Then, to Rem's lingering question, Subaru nodded and said, "Yeah."

"I've been agonizing and going off track, causing trouble for everyone, and honestly, I feel incredibly bad about it, but I finally figured out how to resolve things peacefully. No, come to think of it, I probably saw it from the beginning, and I should have been told… but I'm stubborn, you know."

"Rem thinks that's one of Subaru's wonderful qualities, though…"

Subaru gave a wry smile at Rem's softly mumbled words. Then he looked up at the sky, letting its vastness and height sink into his eyes. For the world, which had always looked down on Subaru unchangingly, it must have been a frustrating time. But now, he could finally put an end to that heart-wrenching period.

The answer had been right in front of him all along. No matter where Subaru went, what reckless challenges he took on, or how foolishly he acted, it had followed him without a single complaint. Yes,

"I've decided, Rem."

He looked directly into the eyes of the girl standing within arm's reach.

Her shoulder-length blue hair swayed in the wind, and Subaru was reflected in her clear, twin eyes. The black-based apron dress that enveloped her small frame was devoid of unnecessary embellishments, embodying her noble nature. The white primroses adorning the top of her blue hair looked resolute, and her small, well-defined features delicately adorned the charming form of the girl.

"Yes, Subaru."

Her pink lips formed a smile, and her narrowed eyes gently curved into an arc. The sweetness of her voice was filled with a melting affection, permeating Subaru with an irresistible allure as he was about to speak just one word.

“First, let’s rent a ground dragon carriage. The reception might be a bit crowded because of the Royal Selection chaos, but we’ll still make it by tomorrow afternoon, so I think there should be a bit more availability now.”

He wanted a fast one, with good stamina.

They needed to keep moving. Day and night, lightly, without needing to rest, a ground dragon that could keep going.

“A ground dragon carriage…?”

Rem tilted her head, repeating the words Subaru had spoken. Confusion flickered in her eyes; she probably couldn’t see the conclusion of Subaru’s rather rushed plan. But Subaru, feigning not to notice her bewilderment, gestured towards the gate.

“It might take a while to pick out a ground dragon, so we might as well use any spare time to stock up on food and stuff. Oh, I really dislike the crumbly type of portable food. I’d rather just have water than eat that.”

He recalled a class in his compulsory education where they actually tasted preserved food and emergency rations under the guise of experiential learning, but for Subaru, both were unpleasant memories that he’d have to rate as “no”. If that’s how it was in his original world, with its developed seasonings, the taste of preserved food in this world was even less trustworthy.

“No, but on the other hand, maybe some magical power makes preserved food surprisingly delicious…? We managed to make mayonnaise, so maybe there’s a spirit of ‘try before you throw’ alive here too…”

“Um, Subaru?”

“Huh, oh, sorry, my thoughts just went off on a weird tangent. What’s up?”

Correcting his rambling, Subaru smiled gently at Rem, slightly bending at the waist to meet the girl's gaze. Rem was silent for a moment at Subaru's earnest demeanor, then, her lips trembling, as if shaking off hesitation, she said,

"Well, Rem apologizes. Rem isn't very perceptive, so she doesn't understand what Subaru is trying to do. Um, what are you…?"

"Oh! That's right, my bad! Sorry, I didn't realize at all! No, I was completely convinced I was already explaining what we were doing and making plans, how embarrassing!"

Subaru slapped his knee, laughing brightly at his oversight. After laughing at his blunder for a moment, he said,

"After everything I've been made to realize, everything I've experienced, and through various circumstances, this is where I am now, but the answer was right there all along."

A wry smile, truly a bitter smile, formed on his face. He had tasted bitter defeat. He had chewed on regret. He had shed tears at unreasonableness and impermanence, been toyed with by cruel fate, and been covered in his own and others' blood, and in dirt.

The answer to all of it was now crystal clear.

"Rem."

Calling the girl's name, Subaru slowly reached out his hand to her. Seeing his outstretched hand, Rem waited for Subaru's next words. Responding to her posture, Subaru let his surging feelings ride on his tongue—

"Let's run away. Together. As far as we can go."

He had clearly declared his defeat to fate.

4

"…Eeh?"

Perhaps not understanding the meaning of my words, only a faint sigh escaped Rem's throat. While acknowledging her understandable reaction, I shook my head.

“From now on, I’m leaving the capital and heading far west… or north. They say you can’t enter the Southern Empire, so those are the only two options. I hate the cold, so personally, west is my top pick.”

“Um, no, well…”

“The distance is honestly vague, and it’s a completely rash decision, so I don’t think it’ll be an easy journey. Oh, also, what do I do if there’s no way to return the ground dragon carriage? Would it be better to buy one rather than rent?”

I figured it was a system similar to car rentals, but I was unfamiliar with those intricacies, having not reached the age for a license. I hadn’t accompanied Rem when she rented a ground dragon carriage last time, so I didn’t know what kind of paperwork was exchanged. I couldn’t imagine the shop doing business without considering the possibility of someone just running off with it, so I assumed some conditions were properly agreed upon—

“Wait, please!”

Rem stopped me in my thoughts. She held out her palm towards me, a rare look of impatience on her face.

“Run away… what, what do you mean? From what Subaru is saying, it sounds like you’re trying to leave this country, Lugunica…”

She voiced her guess, her tone barely concealing her disbelief, then let out a small “Ah” and her expression brightened slightly.

“Could it be that you’ve thought of something amazing again? Something that will help Lady Emilia or Lord Roswaal…”

“That’s not what this is, Rem.”

“Eh—”

She clung to the hope, drawing a future so utterly believing that my words meant what she wished them to. But I quietly shook my head, clearly stating my denial.

“I told you, I’m running away. If I stay in the capital, I can’t do anything. Even if I go back to the mansion, my powerlessness won’t change. —I’ve finally realized that.”

Powerlessness, emptiness, the unreasonableness of the world— They had weighed heavily on my body. Now, after admitting that those things, which had entangled me the more I tried to deny them, were undeniable facts, how light I felt.

“So, let’s run away, Rem. We can’t stay here. Everyone, everyone kept telling me that. I didn’t want to admit it, I desperately kept denying it… but ah, yes. I am weak. No one ever needed me at all.”

I must have been conceited. I had been mistaken. I had misunderstood, gotten carried away.

Falling into another world, given the power to redo fate a little, and then, by chance, things went well, and I felt like I had saved someone twice— That’s why I made mistakes. Even though I had no power, no feelings, no right to help anyone.

“Such a thing…”

“It’s true. I was told explicitly. —I was told again and again.”

That I wasn’t needed.

In the first iteration, I ignored Emilia’s wishes and rushed out of Crusch’s mansion. I didn’t listen to Rem’s words trying to stop me, and the result was that terrible disaster. In the second iteration, I didn’t pay for creating that scene, escaped reality, and ended up scattering Rem’s life tragically, again saving no one. The third iteration produced the most despicable outcome. Along the way, I got merchants involved, Rem was swallowed by the White Whale, and I took Emilia’s life with my own hands. The Witch Cult was probably massacred by Puck, but if Puck turned that rampage on the whole country after my death, the damage would be beyond comparison to anything before.

If I were to go back even earlier, to the days that couldn't be redone, at the Royal Selection in the royal castle— At that very moment, I couldn't even help Emilia, could I? Far from standing beside her, I butted in and dragged her down, and instead of making up for it, I was completely beaten by another candidate's knight. And then, I had a falling out with Emilia, hurting her with words I never intended to say.

"…Kuh!"

I felt a dry laugh burst from my throat.

Thinking back, it was a masterpiece. When I calmly reflected on my actions and thoughts, I clearly felt how much of a jinx I was.

—Want to help Emilia? I must be able to save someone? Without me, everyone will surely be doomed?

What delusions. What misconceptions. Oh, what arrogance. All I had done was worsen Emilia's position, greatly betray and hurt her heart that had considered me, and foolishly cause Rem, who had followed me, to die every time.

Amazing, everyone must have known this would happen. That's why everyone told me to be quiet. To do nothing. To stay out of the way, that my power wasn't needed, to disappear. Everyone around me who told me that knew the future far better. I should have known, but I couldn't do anything, couldn't understand, couldn't comprehend—I was so different from them. Maybe everyone else was actually looping?

"Otherwise, who would expose such a pathetic sight… like me?"

I was miserable. More than anything, I felt so sorry for myself, helpless. A clown is only a clown because they act with the readiness to be laughed at by others. So, I, who wasn't aware of being pointed at and laughed at by the audience, wasn't even a clown. —I was just a hopeless fool.

"So I decided to disappear. That should be fine, it is fine. No matter what I do, it'll just be one more corpse… or even more, depending on the situation.”

Corpse, corpse, corpse, corpse, corpse.

Someone’s corpse I didn’t know. Someone’s corpse I knew. Someone important’s corpse. Someone precious’s corpse. Someone I believed in’s corpse. Someone I wanted to believe in’s corpse. —Someone’s corpse I…

I was sick of it. Why did I have to suffer like this? I’d suffered so much, couldn’t I be rewarded? I knew that things like “effort always pays off” or “if you set a goal, anything is possible” were pipe dreams. But even so, was it wrong to wish for even a tiny bit, to avoid the worst?

“Let’s run, Rem. I, and you, shouldn’t be here… in this country.”

Throwing everything aside, disregarding it all, I decided to run away. And on this escape, this decision that would earn scorn from all sides, I decided to take only the girl before me —Rem— with me.

There was something I couldn’t let go of, even when I tried to throw everything, absolutely everything, away. Loneliness was terrifying. Loneliness was dreadful. In this vast world, this dark world where nothing made sense, even knowing it was the right thing to do, abandoning protection and running alone was too frightening to allow.

That’s why I had hope that only she, only Rem, would come with me. In all the repeated days, only she had stayed with me. She had witnessed my ugliness, my pathetic words and actions, my misguided way of life. Because it was her, I thought she was worth betting on in the end.

Three times, in all the repeated iterations, I had let Rem die.

To prevent her from dying, I mustn’t return to the mansion. Even if I reached the mansion, or on the way there, she would meet a tragic end, scattering her life. So, should I keep her in the capital? That wouldn’t work. Even if she spent time in the capital, if news of the

Roswaal mansion’s anomaly reached Crusch’s estate, she would rush out of the capital to save the territory. Surely, I wouldn’t be able to stop her once that happened. Only I would be left behind at Crusch’s mansion, hearing the aftermath later. I could clearly envision myself losing everything and becoming empty.

To prevent Rem from dying, Rem must not know anything.

If I truly wanted to save Rem, I couldn’t stay here.

“Even if you tell Rem that suddenly, Rem can’t…”

To my plea, however, Rem shook her head slightly. It seemed like a gesture of denial, but in reality, it showed her hesitation. My words were too sudden for her to process. More than anything, the amount of information I was offering as a basis for her judgment was too little.

She couldn’t possibly agree to suddenly abandon everything and run away.

Yet, despite understanding the unreasonableness of it, I still had to convince Rem. I no longer knew the limits of how much information I could give.

It felt like anything I said would invoke the Witch’s curse. Any action I took felt like it would fall victim to an unreasonable fate.

I was at a dead end. Trapped in fate’s cul-de-sac. So the only card I could play was a plea. To simply appeal to her good nature. Even knowing how utterly despicable it was, knowing I was exploiting her dependence on me.

“There’s no time. I’m truly sorry it’s so sudden. Really, truly. I apologize from the bottom of my heart… However, please choose.”

“Choose…”

“Me, or someone else… please choose.”

With so little information given, and spoken so suddenly, I hated my own cowardice in forcing such a choice, and the desperate situation. But it was also true that giving Rem time to think slowly was inconvenient. I couldn't deny that I was using this situation to my advantage.

In a situation with limited time to think, with me, an object of dependence, pleading before her— I had a chance.

A chance, or perhaps it was a desperate hope. A selfish hope that Rem, only Rem, would forgive my degradation, my escape.

"Let's get a ground dragon carriage and head west. Leave Lugnica, far west… to Kararagi, was it? We'll buy a small house there and live together."

Speaking quickly, I began to describe the future I envisioned. It was an ordinary, peaceful future, surely unrelated to unreasonableness or cruelty.

"It'll be bad for Roswaal since I'll be using the travel money, but we can just say I'm borrowing it and pay him back someday. For now, once we get our lives settled, I'll definitely work hard… I've never worked before, but I'm sure it'll be fine."

Less than a high school graduate and a shut-in. A natural indoorsman with no part-time job experience. Even my work after coming to this world, as an apprentice servant at the mansion, was like child's play at best. It would probably be extremely difficult to find a decent job, but I would cling to it and get one. Compared to pain, hardship, and dying, it was completely easy.

The more I thought about it, the more my future opened up. Compared to the days when I struggled and thrashed, aiming for only one future and inviting the worst disasters, how happy this was.

"Even if it's modest, if you're there, I'm sure I can do my best. Just having someone waiting for me at home with a smile, no matter how tired I am, if I think Rem is waiting for me, surely…!"

Even if everyone I left behind pointed fingers at me wherever I escaped to, if Rem was by my side, I felt I could endure it. So, please, I have no greater wish than this—

“Choose me…!”

I squeezed out the words, my hand still outstretched, pleading.

“If you choose me, my everything will be devoted to you. My whole life is yours. I’ll serve you, live only for you… so please.”

I couldn’t look at Rem’s face right then. I didn’t have the courage to see what expression she wore. I had no courage left, not a shred. If I had, perhaps a different outcome could have been reached. Because there was nothing left in me, the cowardly, despicable, pitiful me.

“Let’s run away with me… Live with me…!”

I pleaded from the bottom of my heart, asking her not to die, only her.

Having poured out my heart with a parched voice, my heart pounded, and my breathing was ragged. A feeling of exhaustion, like I’d sprinted at full speed, and intense mental depletion assailed me. And then, a silent period weighed heavily on me.

Rem gave no answer. The sounds of the bustling crowd now seemed distant, and how the surroundings viewed the two of us having such a conversation in public— Such trivial matters didn’t enter my consciousness at all now.

Unable to bear it, I slightly opened my tightly squeezed eyes, peering at Rem’s expression before me. Enduring the fear that perhaps the answer might be etched on her face.

“…”

Silently, unaware that I was watching her, Rem kept her lips tightly sealed. Her expression seemed to be trying to maintain a neutral facade, yet there was a slight strain between her eyebrows and at the corners of her eyes, showing she couldn’t maintain her usual composure.

I could see confusion, bewilderment, and hesitation swirling within her. The multitude of words I had just spoken were shaking Rem's heart deeply, strongly, violently.

The silence stretched on. An eternity, it felt like, slowly pressing down on my back with a creeping impatience. Eventually, that time came to an end.

"—Subaru."

Gently, with an affectionate resonance, my name was called.

The moment I heard that voice, that tremor, I was convinced my plea had reached her. She would accept me. She would forgive my weakness, and embrace Natsuki Subaru, flaws and all.

My heart swelled with emotion. For the first time, I felt like I had been rewarded. Then I looked up,

"Rem cannot run away with Subaru."

With a terribly sad expression, Rem clearly rejected my wish.

"Because,"

"…"

"When talking about the future, you have to be smiling, don't you?"

With an expression that was a mix of tears and laughter, Rem spoke the words—the words I had once said.

Chapter 52:
From Zero

1

—I lost the bet.

Rem's tear-streaked smile and the echo of his own past words crushed Subaru. His heart was filled with the utter exhaustion of having lost a gamble he had staked everything on.

Subaru had believed —no, hoped— that she, with her strong dependence on him, might choose him.

Perhaps she would abandon everything else and pick him.

It was a fleeting dream, an arrogant thought. He should have known better from the start.

He couldn't find any worth in himself, which was why he'd chosen to run away, so what had he even been hoping for?

"Right now… I might not be able to smile, but… Look, if we just go through with it, I'm sure we'll be able to smile together… Yes, that's right. So, um…"

Even though the conclusion had already been reached, what tumbled out of Subaru's mouth next was a pathetic, womanish attempt to salvage things.

He couldn't think of an effective rebuttal to Rem's words. Yet, he had to keep talking, or his hope would vanish. Maybe, just maybe, she might still change her mind.

If he just kept talking to her, surely—though that, too, was a convenient way of thinking.

"…Rem has thought about it too."

Gazing at Subaru, who looked as if he were clinging to her, Rem closed her eyes and murmured.

She tilted her perfectly sculpted face slightly upwards.

“When we arrive in Kararagi, first, we’ll rent lodging. We’ll want a house to build a foundation for our lives, but considering the money we have on hand, we can’t be unreasonable. First, we need to find a way to secure a stable income.”

She held up a finger, adding to Subaru’s earlier vision of the future.

“Fortunately, Rem has received an education thanks to Lord Roswaal’s arrangements, so she thinks it will be easy to find some work in Kararagi. As for Subaru… you might have to look for manual labor, or perhaps take care of Rem’s personal needs.”

Rem chuckled softly, teasing Subaru about his helplessness.

It was an accurate assessment for Subaru, who had little knowledge of this world’s culture and was utterly incompetent when it came to practical skills.

“Once our income is stable, we should find a more suitable place to live. In the meantime, Subaru should study so you can get another job… It might take a year or so until you can actually work. We’ll have Subaru work hard, and you should become independent soon.”

Unexpectedly, her educational philosophy was rather strict.

When she occasionally helped him study in Ram’s stead, her teaching method was gentle, but she was merciless with assignments and problems. He’d grumbled about it, but he also liked that about her, attributing it to her strictness with herself.

“Once we’re both working and have saved up a decent amount of money… We might even buy a house. We could even open a shop. Kararagi is a prosperous merchant city, so Rem is sure your wild ideas, Subaru, could be put to good use.”

Rem clapped her hands, sketching an overly optimistic future in the air.

Subaru, too, could clearly see the scene she envisioned.

In it, Subaru would still be causing Rem trouble and being pampered, but he would undoubtedly be working hard, sweating with some sense of responsibility.

He truly wished it could be that way.

How happy would he be if he could strive hard for her, and only for her?

“Once our work is on track… Well, it’s a little embarrassing, but… we could have children. Since they’d be half-oni and half-human, they’d surely be mischievous kids. Whether they’re boys or girls, twins or triplets, they’ll be adorable.”

With flushed cheeks, Rem shook her head slightly at her imagination, which had run a bit too far ahead.

She counted on her fingers, and when the count terrifyingly exceeded ten, she stopped.

“It won’t always be fun, and Rem doesn’t think everything will go as perfectly as we imagine. We might not have a boy, and only girls might keep coming, making Subaru feel out of place in the family.”

“…Rem.”

“However, even when the children grow up and reach an age where they might treat you coldly, Rem will always be on Subaru’s side. We might even be known as the famous lovey-dovey couple in the neighborhood, spending our time slowly, aging together…”

“…Rem…”

“Rem apologizes, Subaru, but if possible, please let Rem go first. On the bed, holding Subaru’s hand, surrounded by our children and their children, quietly saying, ‘Rem was happy’, and then being sent off…”

He couldn’t lift his face.

Rem's vision of the future quietly, gently, wounded Subaru's heart.

"Happily, so happily… I can end my life."

"If you've thought about it that far…!"

Rem concluded her description of a future filled with such a vibrant, almost ticklish, happiness that made him want to claw at the depths of his chest.

What remained in Subaru's heart after listening was an inexpressible, sorrowful passion.

His throat trembled. A heavy weight sank in the pit of his stomach. His head ached. Something hot welled up behind his eyes, and he shook his head to try and disguise it.

"If you thought… that far ahead…!"

She could have just run away with him, no matter how far, no matter where—

That plea,

"If Subaru smiles and wishes for that future… Rem truly believes it would have been worth dying for."

It didn't reach her, who was holding back even greater sorrow than Subaru, yet still smiled.

Stunned, Subaru stared at her heartbreaking smile and finally understood.

No matter how much he pleaded, he couldn't change Rem's will.

He had truly, undeniably, lost the bet.

"…"

A heavy, crushing fatigue pressed down on his shoulders.

He felt a weakness that threatened to make him collapse right there, but he barely managed to endure that indignity. Covering his face with his hands, Subaru despaired.

Rem had refused to go with him.

That meant the means to save her had been cut off. If he stayed by her side to protect her, what awaited them was the cruel fate that would befall her on her way to the mansion—an unchangeable tragedy, a cruel cul-de-sac of destiny.

Then, was he to abandon Rem and escape alone?

If he did, an uncertain future would remain, but at least he could escape the unavoidable despair looming before him. Of course, the outcome of events that would occur whether Subaru was there or not wouldn't change. It would merely be a small mercy, allowing Subaru not to witness that fact— If he covered his eyes and ears and pretended not to know, he wouldn't have to face that reality.

Even that small amount of salvation was something Subaru desperately craved right now. But what salvation could there be if he accepted it alone?

Whether he challenged fate, drowned in madness, threw everything away and fled, fate would never allow it.

Then, what could Subaru possibly—

"If Rem can live with Subaru… The fact that you thought to take Rem to the place you wanted to escape to makes Rem genuinely happy from the bottom of her heart right now. Rem is so happy. —But Rem can't."

Placing a hand on her chest, Rem tore up the escape ticket Subaru had offered, yet still, with a myriad of emotions, she lowered her head, her cheeks flushed.

She herself understood that the dream she had just spoken of would come true if they ran, and ran, and kept running.

Even though she called that story "happy", she still denied it because, “Surely, if we ran away together now… Rem would feel like she’d be leaving behind the Subaru she loves most.”

“…”

What on earth was Rem saying?

Subaru slowly raised his head, looking at her with bewildered eyes.

Rem kept a sorrowful smile directed at Subaru, yet her eyes pierced him with unwavering resolve. To Subaru, who was overwhelmed by her spirit, she continued.

“Subaru. Please tell Rem what happened.”

He shook his head. Impossible. If he did, Rem would die.

“If you can’t tell me, then trust me. Rem will surely figure something out.”

He shook his head. Impossible. If he let her do that, Rem would die.

“…At least for now, let’s go back? If we take our time and think calmly, a good idea might come to us.”

He shook his head. Impossible. If he waited, everyone would die.

“I’ve worried enough… I’ve thought enough. I’ve suffered enough… That’s why I gave up.”

No one believed Subaru.

No one had any expectations for Subaru.

Everyone had warned him, telling him not to do anything, against his shallow foolishness.

He had ignored all of that, worn himself down, made a fool of himself countless times, and reached this point.

That time, that emotional erosion, for Subaru—

“—Giving up is easy, but.”

Suddenly, Rem refuted Subaru’s faint words.

—Giving up is easy.

The moment those words registered, an inexplicable shock ran through Subaru’s entire body.

It was an overwhelming impact, like being struck by lightning through the crown of his head, something inexpressible that exploded in his chest. A searing sensation, as if every pore on his body had opened, consumed him.

“Giving up… is easy…?”

“Subaru?”

“Don’t you dare…!”

To Rem, who had bewilderment in her eyes, Subaru’s resentful voice, gritted through his teeth, escaped.

No way. Giving up is easy? Casually abandoning your goal, turning your back, and running off with empty hands is supposedly easy?

What a ridiculous thing to say.

“Giving up is NOT easy!!”

His uncontrollable, pent-up emotions exploded, spilling from his tongue.

Rem flinched in surprise at Subaru’s yell, and people passing through the main gate of the capital turned their heads, wondering what the commotion was about.

Ignoring the intrusive stares of the crowd, Subaru glared only at Rem standing before him.

“Do you really think I’m giving up because I’m not doing anything, not thinking about anything, just cutting everything off clean and throwing it all away because it’s easy?!”

It was a bitter decision. A decision reached after shedding tears of blood and experiencing his throat becoming hoarse from screaming, yet still realizing it wasn't enough.

Giving up everything— It was just a phrase, but the sacrifice he had made to reach that conclusion, that could never be trivialized.

"Giving up was never that easy for me…! It was so much easier to think 'I'll fight', 'I'll figure something out'… I just can't do anything… There's no path anywhere! All roads lead to giving up…!"

The cul-de-sac of fate blocked every path presented to him, mocking Subaru.

No matter how many times he challenged it, how many times he confronted it, how many plans he made, how many times he tried to entrust it to others, and even when he tried to escape.

It was no longer possible to salvage everything.

When even the people he wanted to help rejected his outstretched hand, how could he still be told to keep trying? Who could tell Subaru he was giving up too soon?

Could anyone truly speak those words after experiencing the same hardships, the same pain and predicament, and seeing the same hell as Subaru?

"If I could do something… I, would… I, too…!"

He truly wanted to do something.

He truly wanted to help, to save, to prevent it from being taken away.

He couldn't reach it. He wasn't allowed to reach it. All of this was the result of Subaru's accumulated days, of all that time turning against him.

That's why Subaru—

"Subaru."

Rem called out to Subaru, who was slumped over, having squeezed out his voice and exhausted his emotions.

The ringing in his ears was terrible, and it was bitter to have exposed such pathetic true feelings. Subaru couldn't even look up at her face.

To such a pathetic, helpless, and utterly defeated loser of fate,

"Giving up is easy."

"…"

"But."

Rem repeated the words that had just enraged Subaru.

Feeling something unbelievable in her words, Subaru's lips trembled, and he raised his face.

Why didn't she understand?

Even after all this, could she still not comprehend his suffering?

That inner frustration, that dissatisfaction, that emotional outburst born of lashing out,

"—It doesn't suit Subaru."

Dissipated before her, as she gazed directly into Subaru's black eyes and declared it.

2

Rem spoke clearly, as if she believed it to be absolutely, undeniably true.

"Rem doesn't know how much pain Subaru has endured, or what you've learned that causes you such suffering. Rem knows it's not something she can lightly say 'Rem understands'."

"…"

"Even so, there are things Rem does know."

"…"

"That Subaru is not the kind of person who gives up halfway."

Before the man despairing before her, who had thrown everything away and was now speaking of surrender, Rem wove her words without shame, without fear, without wavering.

"Rem knows."

"…"

"Rem knows that when Subaru wishes for a future, you're someone who can speak of that future with a smile."

"…"

To the man who spoke of a world that should have been calm and peaceful after escaping with Rem, but with a face contorted by guilt and regret, Rem wove her words with direct eyes, neither scoffing nor showing disappointment.

"Rem knows."

"…"

"Rem knows that Subaru is someone who cannot give up on the future."

Rem stated this emphatically to Subaru, who was looking down, as if chewing on her words.

In her eyes, there was only sincere radiance, only a profound belief in Subaru.

Subaru was overwhelmed by that fierce, strong glow.

It was nothing more than her misunderstanding. A ludicrous misconception, an overestimation of the person Subaru truly was.

He didn't know how noble or proud the person reflected in Rem's eyes was.

The real Subaru couldn't possibly be such a magnificent person.

Complaining, crumbling in adversity, aware of his own pathetic insignificance, and trying to run away, covered in feelings of defeat — That was Natsuki Subaru.

"No… I'm not that kind of person… I, I'm not…"

"No, you are. Subaru hasn't given up on everyone… on Lady Emilia, or Sister, or Lord Roswaal, or anyone else."

She denied him with a strong tone. But she was wrong. Subaru had abandoned them.

"I gave up, I did. It was impossible to save everyone from the start… My hands are too small, everything just slips through, and nothing remains…!"

"No, that's not true. Subaru has—"

Again and again, she denied Subaru's surrender.

Why, even after he had exposed himself in such an ugly way, would she not acknowledge his faults? How did he appear to her?

That was so unpleasant, so unbearable, that—

—No matter how much, no matter what you say.

"—What do you! What the hell do you actually know about me?!"

Passion, a burning fire inside his chest, a scorching red, erupted violently.

Shouting, Subaru slammed his fist into the wall beside him. A dull thud, blood splattered on the wall from his bruised knuckles, and he roughly smeared it with his palm.

"I'm just that kind of guy! I have no power, but my ambitions are sky-high, no wisdom, but I can only dream big, I can't do a damn thing, yet I struggle pointlessly…!"

Everyone has at least one good quality.

Everyone extends that one quality and goes to a suitable place.

—Natsuki Subaru didn't even have that. Even without that, the height of his desired destination was disproportionately too high.

"I…! I hate myself!!"

He'd always laughed things off, played the fool, and kept running, avoiding reality he never seriously confronted—and now, before it, Subaru exposed his true feelings for the first time.

Natsuki Subaru hated himself more than anyone, more than anything.

"Always just talk! Acting so high and mighty when I can't do anything! I never do anything, but I'm a full-fledged adult when it comes to complaining! Who do I think I am?! How can I live without any shame, huh?!"

He couldn't better himself, so he resorted to the petty tactic of putting others down to make himself look better. He didn't want to admit he was inferior to others, so he'd stoop to nitpicking to protect his flimsy pride.

"I'm empty. I'm hollow inside. Of course… It's obvious. It's perfectly obvious! Do you know what I've been doing until I got here, until I met you all like this?!"

Before he fell into this other world.

What he had been doing in his original world, during those ordinary, unchanging, boring days—

"—Nothing, I did absolutely nothing."

He indulged in idleness, sank into sloth, and spent his days utterly disconnected from effort or self-improvement.

Yet, he hadn’t given up on himself; he just thought conveniently that if the time came, he’d get serious.

“I’ve done nothing… I never done a single damn thing! I had so much time! So much freedom! I could have done anything, but I did nothing! This is the result! This is who I am now!”

If he had used his ample time effectively, Subaru surely could have become anything.

The real Subaru had largely wasted the time he was given, and as a result, he gained nothing, nor did he create anything.

So when he genuinely wanted to do something, he had no power, no wisdom, no skills to accomplish it.

“All of my powerlessness, all of my incompetence, every single bit of it! It’s all… the result of my rotten core…! To have done nothing and then presumptuously think I can achieve something, there’s a limit to that… The price of my laziness, my grand habit of wasting my life, is going to kill both me and you.”

He was beyond saving. He was hopeless.

Even if he were reborn, he would surely follow the same path, waste the same amount of time in the same way, arrive at this place with the same mindset, and feel the same regret.

His rotten core wouldn’t change. Natsuki Subaru possessed only such shallow humanity. That fact was unwavering.

“That’s right, my core hasn’t… Even living here, it didn’t change anything, I thought. That old man Wilhelm saw right through me. Didn’t he?”

Remaining in the capital, Subaru had studied the sword under Wilhelm at Crusch’s mansion.

Time and again he was defeated, and though battered, Subaru kept challenging him, yet the old man had seen through his true intentions.

"I thought it was pointless to lecture someone who has no intention of becoming strong on the mindset required to do so."

During their days of training, after defeating Subaru, the old man spoke of the swordsman's mindset and shook his head.

At the time, Subaru had denied it, saying he didn't understand what he was talking about— Deeep down, he clearly understood what it meant.

"I wasn't trying to get stronger, or trying to make something happen… I was just taking easily understandable poses, pretending I wasn't doing nothing, that I was making an effort… just to justify myself…"

He'd been abandoned by Emilia, and utterly humiliated at the Royal Selection.

He couldn't bear the stares and attention from those around him after that, so he pretended to be "making an effort" in a way that was visible to them, trying to protect himself.

—I'm doing fine. I'm not doing nothing. I'm trying to change.

That's how he'd looked for reasons to compromise, and that's how he'd arrived at that action.

Even though the very idea of "trying to change" was proof that nothing had changed at all.

"I want to say 'it can't be helped'! I want to be told 'there's nothing you could do'! That's all! Just for that, I pretended to put my body on the line! Even studying with you was just a way to hide my awkwardness! My core, that small, cowardly, dirty core of mine that only cares about how others see me, hasn't changed at all! It hasn't changed…!"

His bluffs peeling away. His vanity crumbling.

The vanity of not wanting to be thought ill of, the selfishness of wanting to insist he wasn't wrong, burst through his thin shell.

"…I knew it all along, really. That it was all my fault."

It would have been easier to blame someone else, to make an excuse, and loudly attack it.

He wouldn't have to look at his true self, wouldn't have to show his true self, and as long as the surface didn't peel off, no one would see what he harbored inside.

Weak, selfish, and all he did was yell, yet he craved to be loved.

To avoid seeing such an ugly self, to avoid having such an ugly self seen.

"I'm the absolute worst… I hate myself."

Exhaling all the murky darkness that had accumulated in his chest, Subaru breathed heavily.

He had thoroughly spewed out that muddy, turbid mess, the pent-up frustration from since he came to this other world—no, from when he was in his original world.

He thought his own humanity was sickening.

Even after spewing it out, the nauseating feeling wouldn't disappear. Shouldn't it feel a little lighter after venting what had been held inside?

Not only did it not feel lighter in the slightest, but the foolishness he had finally realized through his words now overwhelmed him with shame, making him want to die instantly.

After spewing out such filth, the weakness of only thinking about himself immediately afterward was the most pathetic thing of all.

Just now, in front of Rem, who had been looking at him with eyes full of belief, he had effectively smeared black paint over the light she saw, telling her it was all a sham, and yet Subaru prioritized his own self-pity before worrying about her.

In the end, that's just how it was.

Even recognizing and feeling his unpleasant parts, his bad parts, his missing parts, didn't automatically mean he could immediately improve them. Rather, the visible holes were unfathomably deep and dark, perhaps even robbing him of the will to do anything about them.

The gaping void was proof that Natsuki Subaru was an incomplete human being. His unwillingness to act in the face of it would also serve as passive self-indulgence, reinforcing that fact.

Subaru, who wasn't even worth pity. Hearing the depths of his grimy ego clinging to the bottom of his heart, even the blue-haired girl finally—

"Rem knows."

"…"

"That Subaru is someone who has the courage to reach out, even in the darkest, most uncertain abyss."

—Even then, Rem didn't abandon Subaru.

3

Subaru felt an unprecedented sense of impatience from Rem's absolute affection and complete trust.

He had cursed himself so terribly, exposed such ugly truths, confessed directly that everything was a lie, and that he was a hopeless good-for-nothing.

—Why was she looking at Subaru with such loving eyes?

"Rem likes it when Subaru strokes her head. Rem feels like we connect through your palm and her hair."

Quietly, haltingly, she suddenly began to confide in the silent Subaru.

"Rem likes Subaru's voice. Every time she hears a word, she can feel her heart warm. Rem likes Subaru's eyes. They're usually sharp, but

Rem loves how they soften when you're trying to be kind to someone."

Rem continued, pressing on Subaru, who couldn't say anything.

"Rem likes Subaru's fingers. Even though you're a boy, you have beautiful fingers, yet when Rem holds them, they're strong and slender, reminding me that you are indeed a boy. Rem likes the way Subaru walks. When we walk side by side, Rem likes how you sometimes turn back, as if checking if Rem is still following."

His heart was screaming.

Each time Rem connected another word, a scream echoed in Subaru's chest.

"…Stop."

"Rem likes Subaru's sleeping face. So defenseless, like a baby, and your eyelashes are a bit long. When Rem touches your cheek, you become calm, and you don't even notice if Rem mischievously touch your lips… It makes my heart ache so much, and Rem loves it very much."

"Why…"

Why did she keep saying such things?

To such a foolish, empty Subaru, why did she keep throwing such words at him?

"If Subaru says he hates himself, then Rem wants you to know that she knows you have so many good qualities."

"That's all… a delusion…!"

What Rem saw was a convenient illusion.

The real Subaru wasn't that kind of person. The real Subaru was dirtier. There was a more malicious Subaru, the exact opposite of how Rem saw him so favorably.

"You just don't understand! I know myself best!"

"Subaru only knows about himself! How much does Subaru know about the Subaru that Rem sees?!"

Subaru instinctively raised his voice, and Rem shouted over him, cutting him off.

Subaru was startled by her raising her voice for the first time since coming here. Startled, he gasped, and finally noticed the large tears welling up in Rem's eyes, despite her efforts to maintain a neutral expression.

There was no way her feelings weren't hurt by Subaru's words.

There was no way her kind heart wasn't pained by hearing the full extent of Subaru's self-loathing.

Still, she believed in Subaru.

Even after knowing the twisted inner self he had described so maliciously, Rem believed in Subaru.

"Why… why do you believe in me so much…? I'm weak, and insignificant… and I ran… It was the same last time, I ran, so why…?"

—How could she believe in him so much, in him, who was so pathetic, so unreliable, always losing to his own weakness? How could she believe in him, when he couldn't even believe in himself?

"—Because Subaru is Rem's hero."

Subaru's heart quietly trembled at those words, expressing unconditional, complete trust.

No matter how many disadvantages were piled upon him, no matter how many flaws were flaunted, that single phrase contained a wish powerful enough to repel all that negativity.

Then, Subaru, belatedly, finally realized.

He had been mistaken. He had misunderstood. He had been wrong all along.

He had deluded himself into thinking that she, only Rem, would tolerate his degradation indefinitely. He had mistakenly believed that no matter how weak or pathetic he exposed himself to be, she would forgive him.

That was an error. A mistake. A fatal foolishness.

—Rem alone would never permit Subaru's weakness.

Everyone told Subaru to do nothing, to stay still, not to do anything useless.

Everyone kept telling Subaru not to expect anything from him, that his actions would be futile.

—Rem alone would not tolerate Subaru's weakness.

She alone kept telling him to stand up, not to give up, to save everyone.

No one expected anything from Subaru. Even Subaru himself had abandoned Subaru, but she alone would absolutely never abandon him, nor would she accept it.

It was a "curse" that Natsuki Subaru had placed on her.

"How you came to save Rem in that murky forest, in a world where even my sense of self was vague, when all Rem could think of was raging wildly."

"…"

"How you became a decoy to fight the witchbeast, allowing Rem, who was awake but couldn't move, and Sister, who was exhausted from overusing her magic, to escape."

"…"

"How there was no chance of victory, and your life was truly in danger, yet you survived… and returned to Rem's arms, still warm."

"…"

"How you woke up, smiled, and said the words Rem wanted to hear most, at the time Rem wanted to hear them most, from the person Rem wanted to hear them from most."

The "curses" Subaru had placed on her were recounted by her own lips.

Those "curses" were deeply gentle, binding her heart with chains of trust, still holding her captive even now.

"Rem's time had been stopped. From that fiery night, the night Rem lost everything except my sister, Rem's time had been stopped all along."

Speaking of fragments of a harrowing past, Rem gazed intently at Subaru.

Her gaze was filled with unwavering devotion.

"Subaru gently melted the stopped time and the frozen heart, and set them moving. Subaru can't possibly know how much Rem was saved at that moment, that morning. Or how happy Rem was."

Therefore, Rem continued, placing a hand on her chest.

"—Rem believes. No matter how painful or difficult things get, even if Subaru seems about to lose. Even if no one in the world believes in Subaru anymore, and Subaru himself can no longer believe in yourself—Rem believes."

Speaking, Rem took a step, closing the distance.

Within reach, she extended both hands and wrapped her arms around Subaru's neck, who was still looking down and unable to move. The pulling force wasn't strong, yet the unresisting Subaru was held in her embrace, helpless.

With his head cradled against Rem's chest, due to their height difference, he heard her voice descend from directly above him.

“The Subaru who saved Rem is a true hero.”

He felt her lips pressed against his forehead, a warm sensation.

Heat spread from the contact, and an inexplicable emotion swelled within Subaru’s chest.

Blood flowed through his previously unmoving limbs, and the noise that had filled his skull cleared.

“No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t save anyone.”

“Rem is here. The Rem that Subaru saved is here, now.”

“I’m empty, I’ve done nothing. No one will listen to me.”

“Rem is here. If it’s Subaru’s words, Rem will listen to anything. Rem wants to listen.”

“No one expects anything from me. No one believes in me. …I hate myself.”

“Rem loves Subaru.”

The hand touching his cheek was warm, and the eyes gazing at Subaru up close were moist.

Her presence, her very being, affirmed the profound “truth” of her words.

“Is it okay… for someone like me…?”

No matter how many times he challenged it, how many times he started over, he ruined everything each time.

Everyone died. He couldn’t reach them. He let everyone die. He didn’t think enough.

Empty, powerless, foolish, slow to act, and even his desire to protect someone wavered, a half-baked person.

Was it okay to be like that?

“It has to be Subaru.”

“…”

“It has to be Subaru, or it’s not okay.”

If there was someone who believed in him, even when he couldn’t believe in himself.

Could Natsuki Subaru fight?

—Could he fight fate without giving up?

“If you’re empty and have nothing, and you can’t forgive yourself for that— Let’s start now, from here.”

“What…?”

“Just as Subaru set Rem’s stopped time in motion, now, you’ll set in motion the time that you thought had stopped.”

He had been regretting, shaming, and trying to surrender to the past where he had done nothing, the days where he could do nothing, and the time he had spent meaninglessly.

To that Subaru, Rem smiled.

“Let’s start from here. From one… no, from zero!”

“…”

“If it’s hard to walk alone, Rem will support you. Let’s share our burdens and support each other as we walk. You said that, didn’t you, that morning?”

Subaru had said they would stand side-by-side and talk about the future with smiles.

Subaru had said they would lean on each other, support each other, and walk on together.

"Please show me your cool side, Subaru."

He had only shown his uncool sides.

Subaru himself was the one who had placed an indelible "curse" on her.

Subaru had a duty to fulfill that responsibility.

"…Rem."

"Yes."

She responded quietly to his call.

He lifted his face. Looked forward. Gazed into Rem's eyes. They were calm, gentle, waiting for his answer.

So Subaru wanted to be the Natsuki Subaru she loved.

"—I love Emilia."

"—Yes."

At Subaru's confession, Rem nodded with a smile, as if she had known all along.

At that smile, at her kindness, Subaru, knowing it was cruel, still—

"I want to see Emilia's smile. I want to help with Emilia's future. Even if she tells me I'm in the way, even if she tells me not to come… I want to be by her side."

He reconfirmed those unchanging feelings, now that he had received Rem's feelings.

The way he felt that swelling emotion was different from before.

"Using 'because I love you' as an excuse to expect everything to be understood… That's arrogant, isn't it?"

"…………"

"It's okay if she doesn't understand. Right now, I want to help Emilia. I want to bring Emilia, who is facing a difficult and painful future, into a future where everyone can smile."

So,

"Will you help me?"

He extended his hand, asking Rem, who was right beside him.

He knew it was cowardly, accepting her feelings even though he couldn't reciprocate, knowing he was taking advantage of her devotion, yet because she loved him, a man who still couldn't give up on the future of someone important to him.

"I can't do anything by myself. I'm lacking in everything. I don't have the confidence to walk straight. I'm weak, fragile, and insignificant. So, will you lend me your hand so I can walk straight?"

"Subaru, you're a terrible person. You're asking something like that of someone you just rejected?"

"It's hard for me to ask this of someone who just rejected my once-in-a-lifetime proposal, too."

Subaru chuckled weakly, and Rem let out a small, uncontrollable giggle.

They laughed together for a moment, and then Rem straightened her posture, elegantly pinched her skirt, and curtsied.

"I humbly accept. If that is what it takes for Subaru —Rem's hero— to welcome the future with a smile."

"Alright, watch me, from the best seat."

She took his outstretched hand, and Subaru pulled Rem closer, having exchanged a vow.

Rem let out a small "Ah", and her small body fit perfectly into Subaru's embrace. Grateful for the soft, warm presence of the girl who loved him,

"—The man you fell for is going to become the coolest hero ever!"

His chest was hot.

The embraced Rem pressed her face into Subaru's chest, hiding her expression.

Her breathing was hot. Her forehead and cheeks, rubbing against him, were hot. Surely, the tears streaming from her eyes were the hottest of all.

—Even now, Subaru couldn't bring himself to like himself. He still hated himself.

However, there was a girl who said she loved such a Subaru.

There was a girl he wanted to be liked by, even as such a Subaru.

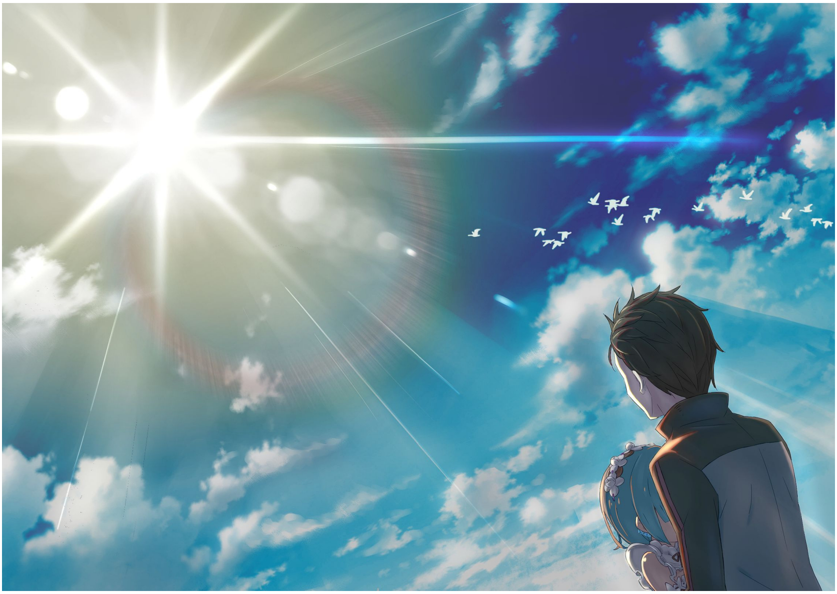

—Emilia, I’m watching you. Rem, you’re watching me. So, I won’t look down.

“…”

It was borrowed courage, but he believed the feelings in his heart were real.

From here, let’s start from zero.

Natsuki Subaru’s story.

—Starting life in another world, from zero.

Chapter 53:
The Distributed Card

1

Silence, thick with tension, filled the hall.

Subaru tasted that tension on his tongue, wetting his parched lips before clenching his fist, a small victory for taking the first step in addressing the situation.

Above all, having everyone crucial to the current predicament gathered here was vital for him.

He had no power, not enough wisdom. If there was anything he, who lacked ability and connections, could do, it was to ensure his previous deaths weren't in vain.

"It seems I can finally understand the purpose of delaying dinner to gather us all."

The beautiful woman dressed as a man, Crusch Karsten, who was seated with her hands clasped on her lap, broke the silence. Her dignified expression showed a hint of understanding as she murmured this.

The first knight standing beside her narrowed his eyes slightly at his master's words, his adorable cheeks puffing out a little as he said,

"Oh really? Ferris is still pretty skeptical, nya~. How could a boy who was so pathetic suddenly get eyes like that, I wonder?"

Though his tone and expression feigned jest, the gaze Ferris directed at Subaru as he spoke was anything but careless. Even without great strength, his fervent desire to keep his master out of harm's way was palpable.

"…"

Still maintaining silence and not joining the conversation between master and attendant was Wilhelm, who stood rigidly to Crusch's left, opposite Ferris.

A sharpened sword aura emanated from him as he stood with his sword at his hip, eyes closed. Not a trace remained of the kindly old man who had greeted Subaru and Rem upon their return. He was now wholly immersed in his role as a public servant, a sword for his master, Crusch.

The setting was a detached villa in the upper echelons of the Royal Capital's noble district, used by the Karsten family during their stays. In line with the master's wishes, the decor was kept minimal, with the exception of this reception hall, which was appropriately adorned to welcome guests.

It was natural for the aforementioned three, along with the estate's staff, to be present. As for the other faces in the hall, excluding them—

"Returning to the fold is somewhat uncomfortable. Mr Subaru, I trust you have a story that will dispel this discomfort."

He must have noticed Subaru subtly scanning everyone's faces. The elegant man with dull blonde hair and a stylish goatee, Russell Fellow, a shrewd businessman who managed the Royal Capital's commerce, smiled as he met Subaru's gaze.

Subaru shrugged at Russell's remark, which could be taken as a warning.

"Rem's gone to get the last person now, so just a little longer. I can't guarantee they'll come, but… I have a chance."

"I look forward to their swift arrival. By the way, might I inquire about the basis of your confidence?"

Russell likely had an idea of who Subaru was waiting for.

Subaru shook his head at Russell's question, saying, "It's a simple matter."

"They said themselves they're sensitive to the smell of money. If that's true, they'll show up no matter what. You're the same, right, Russell?"

"Well, well… you've hit a sore spot."

Russell pressed a hand to his forehead, acting as if he'd been outmaneuvered. Of course, this exchange was made with the understanding that their respective hands were somewhat revealed.

An ostensible sense of security would be nothing more than a pretense, and in the first place, Subaru lacked the skill or composure for such cunning.

What supported Subaru now was simply borrowed courage.

"Everyone, thank you for your patience."

A few minutes later, the hall door opened to reveal a blue-haired maid—Rem. She bowed her head so everyone in the room could see, then looked at Subaru.

"Okay."

Making a small circle with the fingers of her right hand, Rem approached Subaru and stood on her tiptoes slightly to whisper in his ear.

"They'll be a little late, but they promised to come."

"Is that so? Good, you did well, Rem."

Snapping his fingers at the report, Subaru nodded, having found a way to turn a suboptimal situation into the best possible one. He then surveyed the waiting faces.

"The last participant will be a bit late, but the cast is assembled for now. No need to make you wait any longer. —Let's begin."

At Subaru's declaration, each person reacted, sensing a shift in the atmosphere.

Crusch gave a faint smile, and Ferris tightly pressed his lips together. Wilhelm remained utterly silent, his expression unchanged, while Russell settled deeply into his chair.

Receiving all their gazes, Subaru stamped his foot firmly once, steeling his resolve.

He felt his heart beat high and strong.

Blood rushed through his body, and at the same time, a great unease reared its head, threatening to plunge him into darkness.

But,

“Subaru.”

Softly, Rem, standing beside him, touched his sleeve as if to reassure him in his anxiety.

It was a touch through clothing, not direct skin contact—yet Subaru felt a sense of relief as if he had received aid from ten thousand.

Rem was watching. He couldn’t possibly do anything disgraceful.

With a defiant smile, hiding his fear behind it, Subaru prepared to challenge the first wall.

To navigate conditions as narrow as a needle’s eye and weave a happy ending.

To take one step closer to the hero believed in by the girl who said she loved him.

“There’s one thing I’d like to confirm, Natsuki Subaru.”

As Subaru braced himself and looked forward, Crusch’s voice came, a single finger raised. She waved that raised finger from side to side, meeting Subaru’s gaze.

“The purpose of this gathering. —From your own mouth, that is.”

With an arm resting on the armrest and her cheek in her hand, her shrewd eyes looked at Subaru.

Even though she likely understood, her stance in making Subaru articulate it showed no trace of leniency.

From the very beginning of the conversation, the match had already started.

Subaru understood this now, especially after his repeated failures.

“Right, of course—”

So Subaru gestured broadly, maintaining his composure so as not to be overwhelmed by Crusch’s piercing gaze, and with a confident smile to avoid repeating past mistakes, he declared,

“An alliance between the Emilia and Crusch factions, under equal terms— This is the negotiation for those terms.”

Numerous walls stood before him— The first challenge to overcome these obstacles was about to begin.

—After his exchange with Rem in front of the Royal Capital’s main gate, Subaru had resolved to restart himself.

He believed this was the honest way to be for the girl who had laid bare her entire heart and still chose to believe in him.

“Considering that, there are just too many walls we need to overcome…”

Reflecting again on the myriad walls before him, he could understand the weakness of his own heart, which had almost broken just moments before. The situation remained unchanged, seemingly one step away from checkmate.

Nevertheless,

“We have to do something, right? Lend me a hand, Rem?”

“Yes, anything for Subaru.”

He scratched his head and spoke before organizing his thoughts, and Rem readily nodded.

Rem’s unwavering trust shone in her fervent gaze, filling Subaru’s chest with both courage and a sense of duty.

He chose not to point out the faint redness at the corners of her eyes.

They had moved from the main gate to a corner of the lower district, leaning against a wall amidst the bustle.

Looking back and recalling their exchange at the main gate, he had hesitated to continue the conversation there. After all, he had laid bare all his complexes, practically in tears. If he had revealed Rem’s feelings in response, enduring the stares of the gawking onlookers any longer would have pushed his mental endurance past its limit.

Passing through the lukewarm gazes with Rem still in his arms, they finally reached a place out of sight of the onlookers and took a breath. In any case,

“There’s no doubt we lost time. Even if it was just an hour… it’s precious now.”

As he had previously confirmed, the limit before the overwhelming tragedy at the mansion was five days. —In reality, it was about four and a half days.

If nearly two of those days were spent traveling, the effectively usable time was two days.

“So, the walls we have to overcome are, one, two, three, many, many of them.”

There were many hurdles to clear, and their difficulty was vastly different from before.

Each one was independently despair-inducing, and their combined assault made them an almost indescribable challenge.

The first, naturally, was the Witch Cult.

If he didn’t somehow stop the fanatics led by Petelgeuse, not only the mansion but also the villagers would perish.

The second was Rem's death, which would inevitably come, in various forms.

Whether Subaru accompanied her or she went ahead alone, her fate always converged on death. The first time, when she died out of his sight. And the despair of the second and third times, when he lost her before his eyes— The shock of those incidents, it was no exaggeration to say, had driven Subaru to give up.

The third was the unimaginable wall that would be triggered by Emilia's death, a precondition that simply couldn't be ignored— The indiscriminate revenge of the Great Spirit Pack.

Recalling it, all of Subaru's deaths in this loop seemed to have ended with freezing by Puck.

This, in turn, produced circumstantial evidence that Subaru had never once arrived in time to save Emilia from a life-threatening situation in any of these worlds.

None of these walls could be disregarded.

If even one was overlooked, the future world would not be the one Natsuki Subaru desired, and it would betray the image of the hero Rem believed in.

"—A few things."

Subaru murmured, having sorted out the problems.

In front of him, Rem, watching him in silent contemplation, did not respond to his murmur. She knew his utterance wasn't seeking a reply.

To expect the best judgment from her beloved hero, and to contribute to the utmost.

That was how she maintained her composure now, and it was the greatest show of affection she could give.

Watched by Rem, Subaru, within the limited time, replayed memories that transcended those limits, letting his thoughts race in search of a single clue.

Believing that somewhere, there lay dormant a possibility, however slight, to move this seemingly impossible checkmate situation.

—Twist your mind, burn your heart.

His body and abilities couldn't keep up with his ideals now. If he couldn't even manage this much, then even a single step towards being a hero would be a laughingstock.

—Remember, think.

Don't let his three deaths be in vain. Don't let the will of the girl he had let die three times be in vain. All the worlds that had ended three times weighed heavily on Subaru's shoulders—

People he met, conversations he had. Parting, encounters, anger, madness, sorrow, the Witch.

Then—

"There's a possibility… right?"

Suddenly, a mere sliver of possibility flashed through his mind.

Each thread was thin and weak, and if forcibly connected, it was uncertain when it would snap. It was too unreliable to entrust everything to.

That's precisely why it was worth going "all in".

"Rem. There are a few things I need to tell you and a few things I want to ask."

"Yes."

To consolidate the rough draft he had just conceived, Subaru sought Rem's cooperation.

Now, before he began to disclose information to her, he first filtered out only the information that wouldn't infringe on the Witch's curse

—

“The news of Emilia joining the Royal Selection created the conditions for the Witch Cult to move. They’re going to rampage, targeting Emilia… and the mansion and village for some incomprehensible reason. I want to stop them.”

“The Witch Cult…”

For a moment, a dangerous emotion flickered in Rem’s eyes when she heard that term.

She suppressed that emotion with self-control, and then nodded slightly at Subaru’s words.

“Lord Roswaal was also considering the possibility of the Witch Cult moving. Rem isn’t privy to the details, but countermeasures should have been planned.”

“It’s just, that alone won’t be enough.”

In fact, it was unclear what preparations Roswaal had made against the Witch Cult.

Whether they failed, or whether they were activated but didn’t reach their target, was uncertain. As a result, those prior measures bore no fruit, and the white hell unfolded.

Knowing that future, what Subaru needed to do was secure self-defense without relying on Roswaal, and thereby find a way to protect the lives of the people in the mansion and village.

“The Witch Cult will likely attempt a quick decisive battle. Rem, what about the mansion’s forces?”

“…It’s difficult to say, but there’s a high possibility that Lord Roswaal isn’t at the mansion right now. He was scheduled to visit influential people in the domain immediately after returning from the Royal Capital.”

Rem said evasively, her words difficult, the same news of Roswaal’s absence that had previously appalled Subaru. Hearing it, he confirmed the fact that only Emilia, Ram, and Beatrice would likely be at the mansion.

Just three of them, and considering Beatrice's uncooperative attitude, it was highly doubtful she would participate in a fight against the Witch Cult.

He recalled the brief conversation he'd had with Beatrice last time.

How she had looked at him with eyes like a child whose expectations had been betrayed when he asked her to kill him—

"Sorry, but that'll have to wait for now."

Though it pained him to leave her tearful gaze behind, Subaru said to Rem, who was waiting for his words, "Then,"

"Only two can fight. Even if Rem and I return, it'll be a drop in the bucket."

"The majority of the main residence's combat power undeniably relies on Lord Roswaal's individual abilities. If Frederica had remained, things might have been different."

Nodding back at a regretful Rem, Subaru ironed out the details to avoid any discrepancies in information between himself and Rem at this preparatory stage.

Regarding the Witch Cult and the mansion's combat strength, there was nothing more to add.

Therefore, the next topic was the main point.

Composing himself, Subaru looked directly into Rem's eyes.

Seeing Rem raise her face, sensing the change in atmosphere, he said,

"—Rem, tell me everything Roswaal ordered you to do in the Royal Capital."

"…"

Subaru expected a bewildered expression, or perhaps surprise at being caught off guard.

However, Rem's reaction to his words betrayed all his expectations.

"—Yes. As you command."

She nodded at Subaru's words, and most importantly, she broke into a genuinely happy smile, and a single tear escaped the corner of her eye.

2

"An alliance, huh?"

Crusch murmured, her gaze fixed on Subaru as he declared the purpose of the meeting.

She thoughtfully lowered her chin slightly, then glanced at Rem. Silently understanding the meaning of her searching look, Rem slowly shook her head.

"As per Lord Roswaal's instructions, Rem has said nothing. —Everything Subaru has discovered, he's arrived at on his own."

"I don't doubt your loyalty. But, I see…"

Crusch showed understanding, more like realization than mere acceptance. She then turned her understanding gaze back to Subaru.

"Then, for this negotiation, the authority has been delegated from Rem to you —Natsuki Subaru, correct?"

"Yeah, that's how it is. Roswaal… our master, he certainly pulled a nasty trick."

With an exaggerated sigh, Subaru clicked his tongue at the image of the blue-haired figure's unpleasant smile in his mind.

The directive for Rem's actions in the capital had been given to her privately, without Subaru's knowledge. She had been strictly ordered never to reveal it to Subaru unless he figured it out himself.

“It’s not like there weren’t things bugging me from the start. For one, it’s obvious our faction is chronically short-handed.”

As far as Subaru knew, the Roswaal faction, which backed Emilia, was critically understaffed.

At the mansion itself, there were only the sisters Ram and Rem, Roswaal, and Beatrice, who was questionable to even count as personnel. Occasionally, other associates were mentioned, but even gathering all the unfamiliar names, it was hard to imagine them making a significant difference.

Under such circumstances, the fact that Rem had been left with Subaru in the capital, even under limited conditions, had always felt like a nagging inconsistency in the back of his mind.

Of course, the official reason could be seen as an act of courtesy, to repay Subaru for saving their territory from crisis with treatment and other forms of compensation, making it rude to leave him alone in the capital.

“I can’t imagine that pervert would let Rem go just for such a merciful reason. If I kept pushing the idea that there had to be some hidden agenda…”

“Naturally, our house, which had the most opportunities for an audience, would be chosen.”

Shifting her crossed legs, Crusch picked up Subaru’s words and completed his conclusion. Subaru nodded in affirmation, prefacing his next words with, “Also,”

“I’d heard that Rem and Crusch were secretly meeting night after night. I hate how stupid I was for not even bothering to think about what they were talking about.”

He could only self-deprecate, wondering how self-absorbed he had been. It had taken four revisits of the world for him to finally notice Rem subtly scattering hints for him to pick up on the hidden intentions— That’s how dense he was.

"The nightly discussions were about concluding an alliance. Regarding the conditions we're offering… I've heard all about them from Rem."

"The magical ore from Elior Forest, the subdivision of its mining rights, is the main bargaining chip."

Crusch interjected, cutting off Subaru's words, as if it was nothing to hide, something he had only vaguely hinted at.

Immediately, someone else's eyes lit up upon hearing it.

"Well, now, that's a conversation not to be missed."

Russell, who was also seated in a guest-purpose leather chair like Crusch, leaned forward slightly, his eyes gleaming.

"Mining rights for magical ore are, quite frankly, more valuable than ever with the rising demand for minerals. This is especially true if they are from unexplored lands."

Subaru couldn't hide his surprise at how eagerly the merchant had latched onto the topic.

When he first heard about this from Rem, Subaru had been so worried that he thought, "If this doesn't work, we might have to rethink the terms."

"What do you mean, the demand for ore is rising?"

"The season is about to shift from Red Day to Yellow Day, and then Blue Day. This year, in particular, the influence of water mana is expected to be strong, so there should be high demand for heating purposes."

Russell held up a finger, clearly answering Subaru's question.

The "Blue Day" and "Red Day" he mentioned were terms for the seasons in this world. As he understood it, Red Day was "Summer" and Blue Day was "Winter." Yellow Day was "Autumn" and Green Day was likely "Spring." In any case, it seemed clear that heating equipment would sell well before winter.

“Magic ore itself is a pure crystal of magical power containing mana. Depending on subsequent processing, it can be imbued with elemental properties and used for various purposes. It excels in strength, and if used correctly, its durability can be trusted. There’s hardly a more manageable product.”

“In exchange, the absolute quantity is small. Once a property is added, it cannot be undone. Many mining sites are managed by the kingdom itself, and a significant portion of the ore is diverted to public works. Only a minuscule amount circulates in the market; in simpler terms, it’s only available to the country and the wealthy.”

To Russell’s enumeration of the magic ore’s virtues, Crusch countered by listing its downsides in terms of usage, attempting to undermine its value.

However, Russell was undeterred, shaking his head and saying, “That’s precisely why.”

“One simply cannot resist the discovery of an untouched mining site. If that discovery is spoken of by the attendant of the Marquis Mathers, who built his fortune through the excavation and trade of magic ore —Furthermore, by the knight of Lady Emilia, a Royal Selection candidate— Its credibility and trustworthiness are exceedingly high.”

Russell spoke with heated enthusiasm, glancing sideways at Subaru as he did.

It was clear that his attitude, feigning a greedy eagerness for mining rights, also strongly contained a veiled warning to Subaru.

In other words, he was cutting off Subaru’s escape route, implying that since Subaru had brought up that material in his presence, there was no turning back now.

However,

“Yeah, you can trust me on that. During this long Royal Selection, I’m not so off the mark as to bluff the first party I’m trying to team up with.”

Since Roswaal presented it as a condition, there was no room for Subaru's personal will to intervene. This also meant there was no room for anxiety to intrude, and to put it bluntly, it relied on Roswaal's credibility as a lord. He certainly couldn't say that to Roswaal himself.

Anyway, Russell nodded in understanding at Subaru's reply, saying, "I see".

"It seems there's no need to worry about your readiness as a negotiator. I apologize for my testing remarks, it was rude of me."

"No, it's fine. I'm going to be leaning heavily on your input in our discussions from now on, Russell."

From the start, Subaru had no expectation of Russell having a high opinion of him.

The first time they met in the third world, Russell was aware of the disgraceful display Subaru had made at the Royal Selection. Naturally, he had assumed there would be an opportunity for Russell to question Subaru's abilities in a negotiation setting and confirm them.

Although Subaru had planned to prepare easy topics to avoid being cornered during the main discussion, he couldn't hide his relief that Russell had taken the bait in an easily avoidable situation.

However, if that relief showed so readily on his face, it wouldn't meet Russell's approval, so he had no choice but to respond with an air of importance, even after accepting the apology.

"That being said, now that you've apologized like this, I'd hope you'd overlook one or two missteps, wouldn't you?"

"So, that's why Russell Fellow is participating, then. Surprisingly, you make quite shrewd judgments."

Crusch muttered, a hint of a smile on her lips, seemingly grading Subaru and the merchant's exchange. Since the meeting hadn't been cut short, he was probably just barely passing.

Making such a judgment, Subaru continued his polite smile, putting a hand to his head.

“While securing an advisor by dangling a profitable opportunity is certainly a goal… I called Russell because it’s related to the main topic.”

“Oh, the main topic—”

At Subaru’s words, spoken as he scratched his head, the air in the room completely changed.

Crusch, who had until then maintained a posture of simply observing the meeting, straightened her posture, quietly closed her eyes once, and then slowly directed her sharp gaze at Subaru.

Before such an intimidating presence, so strong it felt like a wind had swept through, Subaru did not flinch, but resisted.

He had been exposed to oppressive violence enough to make him sick. Compared to that, Crusch’s gaze had no negative emotions whatsoever that would make one cower. There was only a commanding presence that straightened one’s posture and sharpened slack thoughts.

“I acknowledge, Natsuki Subaru. That you are the representative of Marquis Mathers, and a formal envoy from Emilia. In this negotiation, the content exchanged between you and I will be taken as exchanged directly between Emilia and I.”

Standing directly before someone, one could feel this much pressure.

Crusch wasn’t intentionally intimidating Subaru right now. She had simply shifted her consciousness from Crusch as a private individual to Crusch Karsten as a public figure. This was proof that the very presence of the head of the Karsten Duchy held such power.

This was the sight of the most formidable woman in the Kingdom of Lugunica, currently closest to the throne.

Amidst a shiver-inducing admiration, Crusch extended a hand towards Subaru, who stood his ground, and personally signaled the start of the negotiations.

“You should have already heard, but I will ask again. The negotiations between myself and your attendant… Rem, have not reached an agreement, even with the subdivision of mining rights and so forth included. You are fully aware of this point, are you not?”

“…Yes.”

He had heard from Rem that the negotiations were difficult and that her delegated authority was insufficient to reach an agreement. While the image of Rem lamenting her powerlessness came to mind, half of his lament was for his own lack of discernment, completely unaware of her struggles.

Combining these two regrets into one, Subaru decided to fully utilize the fortune of gaining future regrets in advance. That was the difference in development from the previous loops.

“I also want to confirm, but in reality, the previous conditions weren’t enough, right? Without excessive interference in each other’s factions, the subdivision of mining rights in Elior Forest. Plus, agreements on the handling of the mined magical ore itself.”

“The draft was presented by Rem. I must say, as expected of the Marquis Mathers. While securing ample profit for their own faction, it also brings twelve times the benefit to us. Normally, I would jump at it and immediately prepare a written agreement, however…”

Subaru couldn’t comment on the specifics of those numerical exchanges.

He could only pray that no intricate details would come up, as he might blurt out something like, “Then I’ll give you all the mining rights!” if pushed.

“In this case, there’s significant concern regarding the party with whom we’re trading. Do you understand?”

It wasn’t that his prayer had been answered, but the content Crusch spoke of after pausing was different from his anxiety.

However, it certainly wasn't welcome news.

"It's not about Roswaal being untrustworthy… is it?"

That was just wishful thinking. If Roswaal's conduct were the issue, he would compel him to lead a pure and righteous life from now on, but that wasn't the problem Crusch was raising.

It was an unavoidable issue that would perpetually follow Emilia.

"A rival candidate in the Royal Selection. Moreover, a half-elf… a transaction with Emilia, who is subject to accusations of being a half-demon. One cannot help but be cautious when considering the future ramifications."

Hearing her state that in a low voice, Subaru felt an unexpected disappointment.

The impression Subaru had of Crusch could best be described by words like "majestic" and "sincere".

In the Royal Selection, she had truly embodied those words in her stance and unwavering statements, so her current concern for public opinion felt out of place.

"Could that be… just a pretense for refusal?"

"Subaru-kyun? Ferris thinks it's not very nice to casually blurt out things like that during an important negotiation, nya? Nya~?"

Ferris had blue veins throbbing on his forehead despite his smile. The scary part of his smile had a strange masculine quality, and Subaru hurriedly covered his mouth and bowed his head.

Seeing this exchange, Crusch subtly curved the corner of her mouth.

"If you respond too frankly, it makes me, who responded with a pretense, seem rather shameful. I've learned something today. When you're always surrounded by the same people, opportunities like this are rare."

With that, his rudeness was overlooked through a line of reasoning difficult for Subaru to grasp.

Nevertheless, constantly relying on compassion would only create obligations and ultimately lead to a disadvantage for him.

Subaru nodded slightly.

“So, pretense aside… Can I assume that, deep down, you have no aversion to forming an alliance with Emilia?”

“Natsuki Subaru, let me correct your thinking.”

Crusch raised a finger and pointed it at him.

“The value of a being is determined by the nature and brilliance of its soul. Origin and environment are not the decisive factors that define one’s true essence.”

Of course, she wasn’t so naive as to deny that these could be indirect factors.

Nor did she lack the imagination to consider how much unreasonable hardship Emilia’s circumstances, the reality of being a half-elf, had forced upon her.

Therefore, Crusch nodded once.

“There was no falsehood in the words Emilia spoke at that Royal Selection. Precisely because there was genuine resolve and pride, I acknowledge Emilia as one of the rival candidates.”

“That’s complicated, so what does that mean?”

“The theatricality is a matter of my personal preference, forgive me.”

Seemingly aware of her own grandiose speech, Crusch briefly let a small smile play on her lips, then, after a single blink, her expression tightened.

“I will not use Emilia being a half-elf as a reason to reject an alliance. Rather, Emilia's existence, given that she is not politically hostile, can even be considered an opponent I do not actively need to confront. An alliance would not be objectionable."

"Then…"

"Do not rush to an answer, Natsuki Subaru. Whether I accept your proposal or not will largely depend on your answer from this point forward."

Crusch restrained Subaru, who was leaning forward at the promising reply, and questioned him again.

In other words, what would Subaru, having been granted negotiating authority, bring to the table?

"The mining rights in Elior Forest, they are certainly very beneficial to us. On the other hand, I feel there's no need to hastily advance the Royal Selection. The deadline is three years. Rushing the situation too much could leave lingering problems later."

"So, the benefits of allying with Emilia don't outweigh those disadvantages?"

"Slightly different. As it stands, the benefits and disadvantages cancel each other out. From our house's perspective, we need just one more push, a pretext, so to speak."

Crusch herself seemed keen on forming the alliance.

However, the complexities of a ducal house, a position that had grown too large, likely meant that not everything could move as freely as she wished.

That's why she was seeking it.

Something that could move the situation and silence the voices around her.

"…"

As he tried to speak, Subaru was slightly surprised by the sensation of his throat constricting.

Tension and anxiety swelled in his chest, blocking his throat as he tried to step forward.

He took a breath, and then mentally replayed what he was about to say.

He hadn't confirmed its certainty with anyone. He couldn't deny the possibility that it might be a completely off-base, irrelevant statement.

However he believed in his own idea: she would go for it.

"To finalize the alliance, we'll offer mining rights and… information."

"—Information."

Hearing that, Crusch touched her long hair, prompting him to continue.

The decision hadn't been made yet. This was the crucial moment.

"Yes, that's right. What I can offer is a certain piece of information."

"Tell me. Will what you speak be enough to sway us?"

Extending the hand that had been touching her hair towards him, Crusch waited for Subaru's words.

Naturally, a slight tremor ran through his legs and fingers. But the warmth he felt faintly around his elbow dispelled it.

Rem had placed her fingers on Subaru's arm, igniting his borrowed courage.

Taking a breath, Subaru spoke it all in one go.

"—The time and place of the White Whale's appearance. That's the one card I can play."

Bonus Short Stories

Felt Forms a Hooligan Squad

1

???: “It’s been a while since so many people have gathered in this mansion.”

Looking at the people meeting at the parlor, the elderly woman commented that with a smile. As she served black tea to each guest, her gait of walking was almost as if she was prancing around. However, her refined gestures and inability to sense the mood objectively are not unusual.

At the present moment, regretfully, the room cannot be said to have an atmosphere gentle enough for full enjoyment of a tea party.

At that moment, seven people had joined the room, even though four of those were of such standing that they would never have entered such a house in their lives.

???: “Are you gonna keep frownin’ like that? Well, I also took a while to get used to it, honestly, so I can’t really say much…”

A girl, looking even more carefree than the elderly woman serving tea, laughed. She had blond hair, red eyes, and pronounced canines, but her most distinguishing characteristic was her childish appearance. Maybe, in a few years, she could become a truly beautiful woman, especially if she wore proper clothing: her current taste was just too plebeian.

???: “I’m so sad that Felt-sama removed her dress the moment we came back…”

Felt: “Those clothes are just too suffocating, and it’s so annoying to walk around in them. Sorry Obaa-chan, but I’m not gonna wear that type of dress inside the house. Only when it’s unavoidable.”

Grandma: “Oh young master, did you hear? Felt-sama said she’ll start wearing those dresses.”

???: “Yes, I did. And I’m very glad to hear that she finally started fulfilling your wishes.”

Felt: “Don’t gimme that smirk! I would do it only when I have to! Only when necessary!”

The two who exploited the young Felt’s opening, were the elderly lady, and the red-haired knight, Reinhard.

This mansion was Reinhard’s residence, built in the Noble District of the Royal Capital. In the past two months, Felt has completely settled in, but the original residents are constantly trying to get her to do new things. In the middle of this routine exchange, a shadow with a large hand—old man Rom—intervenes.

Rom: “I’m sorry to interrupt this laid-back conversation… But let’s talk about what really matters here. I’m starting to feel sorry for these clearly uncomfortable rascals.”

Felt’s guardian pointed towards a trio of men trying to make themselves as small as possible with his chin. The group was composed of one short, one average-sized and one tall man, all wearing rags that did not fit the glamour that befitted a noble’s mansion. To make things worse, all three had bruises all over, and the average-sized man was knocked-out still. Then, the other two looked at each other, and the tallest one spoke up fearfully.

???: “Uhh… We ended up going with the flow, but… What is this group? I understand that the Sword Saint wants to make us fit into society, but what does that have to do with the old man from the loot house and the brat over there?”

???: “Gaston, you dumbass! Pay some fucking attention! I don’t even wanna wonder why, but can’t you see that brat is their ringleader? Be careful, damnit!”

Felt: “You’re also dumb as rocks. Who are you calling a brat? If you want to have a secret talk, do it in private, in private.”

The short one grew louder with impatience, and then grew quieter at the sound of Felt’s ill humor. Felt snorted at the situation, scratching her blond hair.

Felt: “It’s annoying to explain this properly… Reinhard, get them up to speed quickly.”

Reinhard: “Yes, Felt-sama. You should know that the King of Lugunica, and that the entire Royal Family has passed away?”

???: “—Passed away?”

???: “I’ve even heard rumors about their deaths, but those things don’t really have anything to do with us, so I never cared about it…”

In the daily life of a slum dweller, there is no opportunity to lament the death of the Royal Family. Reinhard squinted his eyes for a moment, before continuing his exposition.

Reinhard: “In other words, in the absence of a King, the Council of Sages has decided to elect a new monarch. Based on that, a new King shall be chosen from a few candidates, in preparation for the Dragonfriend Ceremony.”

???: “And what does that have to do with you…?”

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, who stands among us, is one of said chosen people vying for the Royal Throne. I am her loyal knight, and Rom-dono is her only family.”

???: “…What?”

Reinhard’s explanation was succinct enough, having only disclosed the important parts, but it was enough to stun the two men. Felt liked that reaction, smiling maliciously, before they turned to her and raised their tone.

???: “That kid is a candidate to become the King?! The most important person in the Kingdom?!”

???: “Why is that happening, why would she be a candidate? She’s just a mud-stained dog from the slums! Nothing but an ill-natured brat, working as a thief-for-hire!”

Reinhard: “Of course, we cannot ignore her past misdeeds, and we intend to compensate her past victims rightfully. My mission is to support her throughout, and that includes such details.”

Felt did not enjoy having her criminal past exposed like that, but pouted even further hearing Reinhard’s comment. It was apparent that their master-knight relationship had a vacuum that was yet to be filled. Rom picked up the cue and continued.

Rom: “At the very least, it seems all the worries you might have had were already discussed. If it’s any good, Felt-chan did not want to be a candidate at all, and only decided on that recently. Right?”

Felt: “At this point, I’m not gonna continue saying I didn’t have a choice. The truth is, yes, I decided to become King to slap those bastards in the face. I’m not gonna go back on my words.”

Hearing Felt’s assertions, the outcasts looked unsure of themselves. For them, it was a shocking twist, and found themselves thinking what kind of confusing situation they had found themselves into. And then-

???: “…Fuck all of that. If you want to be the King, that’s your own damn problem.”

—Coming beyond the two misfits, a voice was heard: that of the man who had fainted, as he got up slowly. Throwing a sharp gaze at Reinhard, he was displaying a lack of confidence in those words, that his companions had already dispelled.

Felt: “You’re not like the other two, you look like the most boneheaded of them. At the very least, you have the courage to speak up even after Reinhard knocked you out.”

Average Guy: “…What? Oh, so that’s why my neck hurts, damnit… Was it you, Sword Saint?!”

Felt: “Oh, so you hadn’t noticed it at all… I’m not so impressed anymore.”

Reinhard’s calm face neutralized any possible hostility by the average-sized man. The power gap between the two was so massive, that the man looked like a whining loser. Anyhow, the conversation's focus came to the question from the three hooligans.

Reinhard: "So, the reason why we brought you here is…"

Rom: "Wait, Reinhard. You should not be the one that has that conversation with them. That has to come from Felt-chan's mouth directly."

Reinhard immediately acted upon old man Rom's words, who had directed his gaze towards his granddaughter. And so, Felt stepped forward and faced the trio, who looked quizzically towards her.

Felt: "The reason why I brought you three is simple. As was said, I am in the middle of a dispute for this Kingdom's throne. I do not intend to lose. In fact, I want to win at all costs."

Average Guy: "Ha! You're out of touch with reality. What do you know about the world, having been born and raised in the slums? Aren't you underestimating those nobles, huh?

Felt: "…"

The man who had fainted until now that point greatly contested her point, albeit with a touch of sadness. His companions looked towards him as well, insinuating some past episode. However, no matter the circumstances, Felt was not going to change her mind for anything.

Felt: "You are correct, but I won't let myself be intimidated by such things. What worked for me previously may not work anymore, but I do not intend to change my essence. I will win my way, and for that, I need people to help me."

Average Guy: "And you want to get those helpers from the slums? If you seriously think that we're gonna wag our tails if you give us a bit of money, you're dead wrong. Don't look down on us."

Having already anticipated the rebuttal to come, the average-sized man slammed his fist on the table and continued,

Average Guy: "It looks like a bit of extra money does indeed ruin people's mentality. If all you wanna do is to act superior by doing a favor to the poor people from the slums, I'll let you know we will not accept that."

Felt: "Well, for what reason?"

Average Guy: "You know why—It's because I don't like you, brat."

The man capped his rebellion by showing his middle finger. The other two also sobered up and became serious in a single instant, looking at Felt as if they agreed with their friend.

Reinhard: "…"

Reinhard looked surprised with the stubborn attitude. No way had he expected them to refuse the offer in such a firm manner.

Felt: "Ehhh, did you hear that, Rom-jii? I knew these were the right people."

Rom: "Yes… We don't want those who are poor not only in money, but also spirit."

Despite the refusal, the young girl and her grandfather exchanged smiles, which was not only surprising to Reinhard, but also to the trio of hoodlums. So, Felt showed her protruding canines, and turned to them.

Felt: "I like what you guys are made of, not doing what you don't want to do, despite the reward, just because you don't like it. That's just like me."

Average Guy: "…What are you saying?"

Felt: "You know, I hate this Kingdom."

Felt suddenly looked at the delinquent dressed in black and white.

Felt: "I find those who speak of patriotism idiotic, and I couldn't stand seein' looking at the grey sky from the slums. I've always wanted to rip the pristine pretty clothes of those rich bastards, who think they are great just because they had the privilege of being born rich. Well, I still want to do that.”

???: “I don’t know if it’s okay for a person who wants to become King to say that…”

Felt: “Don’t you think it would be interesting to see what kind of country arises if someone like me became King?”

Felt laughed at the astonishment from the hoodlums, and continued before the trio could even think,

Felt: “I truly believe my essence is the same as yours. Of course, we do not have the same personality, and I’m not like you as to resign myself to a life in the slums, but…”

Average Guy: “Then what’s the same between us?”

Felt: “We’re the same, because we came from the same place, and hate the same things. I have not changed, but this opportunity came to me, and I still hate those useless bastards who can do nothing but order others around. And I will become the King without having to change a thing about myself.”

Her declarations were completely bereft of the character befitting a Royal Candidate. She had caused the dissatisfaction of many people present in the Royal Election Ceremony, but the contents of her speech were unaltered. After all, even if her words fell on the deaf ears of those who looked at her from above, satisfied with the status quo remaining unchanged, they resonated strongly on the populace that echoed the same frustration as she did.

Trio: “…”

The three rascals’ expression had changed. They had not found an answer yet, but the hints for their answer had already been handed over by Felt.

Felt: “I don’t want to do you a favor or to make you my subjects. All I have to offer is a little bit of fun, you know? Imagine if we can pull the carpet from under those bastards upstairs? Wouldn’t that be real fun? Let’s do that. Together.”

???: “Are you for real… And you think you’ll become a good King doing just that?”

Felt: “Well, I know that won’t do. But I don’t think it’s wrong to try and drain a bit of that backed-up swamp. If all those who hate the same things I do unite, then maybe we can do something very big. The voices that went unheard until now, can now be heard, exactly because I became a Royal Candidate!”

Laughing in amusement, the young girl was imagining an optimistic future. Her somewhat childish idea was not credible, nor was it realistic. And she had easier, wiser ways to be able to live decently. Because of that…

Average Guy: "…I am Rachins."

Big Guy: "I am Gaston, gentle and strong."

Small Guy: "I-I am Camberley… For the record, I don't trust you fully, okay?!"

The three rascals looked at each other and introduced themselves one-by-one. Understanding that as acceptance from their end, Felt turned to old man Rom and tapped his large hand. Following suit, she grabbed the sweet laid upon the table and exclaimed,

Felt: "Sweet, that settles it then! To celebrate, let's eat obaa-chan's sweets, eat, eat, eat! They're very good. The tea is probably cold, but the sweets still taste the same."

Rachins: "Tsk, I nearly forgot she's just a damn brat… I wonder if we didn't jump on board without thinking?"

Looking at Felt messily eating cookies, Rachins burst that out with a smile.

2

???: "Felt-sama is such a character. Only today can I really understand why the young master is so devoted to her."

During the night, a secret talk was being had in the dimly lit corridor of the Astrea mansion. The moonlight coming through the window was the only source of light, but it was nothing of the sort of a romantic encounter, just a meeting between a master and its servants.

???: "All I'm doing, is following what destiny dictates… That being said, I have to confess I am relieved in knowing she is a person worthy of my sword, and maybe I am a bit biased…”

???: “Felt-sama is a really interesting young lady you have taken in. Don’t you think, ojii-san?”

Even if only two people were conversing, three were present: Reinhard, and the elderly couple of butlers, who had looked after their young master ever since he had been a child and were like family to him.

Reinhard: “It may be a bit rushed, but I’m thinking of bringing Felt-sama with me to the main residence. Now that the Royal Election has begun in earnest, she has much to learn. I will require your assistance in reorganizing this House, which is lacking.”

Grandma: “You do not need to be so worried about that, young master… If only the head of the family, and his predecessor had been more careful.”

Reinhard: “As expected, you’re so strict, granny. Do you want to say anything towards your previous comrades in arms?”

Grandma: “Oh, pardon my insolence. Ojii-san, you have to stop me whenever I get too excited.”

Ashamed of her rudeness, the elderly maid covered her own mouth with her hand. The elder man next to her put his hand to his forehead, showing a mischievousness not befitting his age.

Grandma: “So… The young master is thinking of returning to the main mansion…? I will be lonely. When are you intending to depart?”

Reinhard: “I believe three days will be enough to prepare, but I will not stay longer than that. I am very sorry, having to separate you from Felt-sama. And—”

Reinhard paused for a second, and looked towards a small room on the other side of the wall.

Grandma: “About his wife, do not worry, you may leave her in our care. About Heinkel-sama… Are you sure we can allow his passage?”

Reinhard: “Yes, I am. I cannot revoke his right. I’m always giving you such a hard time.”

Grandma: “Young master is striving to be the best he can. We are very proud of you.”

Those had been words of genuine trust, without the intention of comforting Reinhard. Feeling as if he had been saved by those words, Reinhard looked towards the pale circle of the moon, clinging to it as if wishing something existed beyond it.

Reinhard: “Carol, Grimm. Everything will become busier from now on. Thank you very much.”

Grandma: “Yes, I am at your service.”

Grandpa: “—Young master.”

After hearing the reply from the couple that had been called by name, the Sword Saint turned away from the wall and continued walking along the corridor, knowing the two elders who had been serving the Astrea for long were still bowing behind him.

—And, assuredly, that was the day that would symbolize the beginning of everything.

END

Anastasia's Kararagi Merchant Path

1

Kararagi City States was the name of the country that emerged from the union of several cities. Although it had enough power to face the other three great nations—Lugunica, Vollachia and Gusteko –, it is said that its foundation was full of difficulties and obstacles.

???: "And the one who brought all these cities together to establish Kararagi was the famous 'Hoshin of the Wilderness', that became the first president of this country"—said a man with a loud voice.

???: "This guy Hoshin is the boss in Kararagi, then?"—asked a little girl's voice.

???: "He was, but that was hundreds of years ago. Since then, it's always the president that rules around here."

???: "President… And this person changes?"

???: "It changes whenever the president dies, or every five years when a new one is elected by vote. The rulers of the cities come together and elect the next president. Although, nowadays, this has become just a formality."

???: "What do you mean? Seems like a good way of choosing a leader."

???: "Because if someone wants to become the president, all it needs to do is buy the rulers, be it with money, women or booze… Hoshin's philosophy died a long time ago."

???: "In the end everything comes down to money, right? It must be tough, uncle."

The sigh that the girl let out made even the man sigh as well. The problem was that his blow was so strong that it messed up her hairstyle.

???: “Hey, look what you did! I got all dressed up today and you are ruining it!”

???: “Look at you, worrying about your looks… I miss the old Lil’ Ana that lived all dirty in the alleys, this way you will make me cry.”

Anastasia: “That’s because I get tips from the old geezers at the bar when I look pretty. If you give me too, I can reward you with my angelic smile”

She made her turquoise eyes shine, giving a mischievous smile showing her tongue. That gesture, showing that she was perfectly aware what her greatest weapons were, provoked a laugh from the man.

???: “Gah, ha, ha! You picked the wrong client if you are trying to sell your smile. I already bathed you, a silly smile won’t be enough to take my money. Come back when you grow some boobs and ass.”

Anastasia: “Saying things like that and you are not even drunk… Ah, I have to get back to work. Tell me some more stories later.”

With a wave, Anastasia got back to work and Ricardo let out a sigh. He stretched a hand to grab his beer on the counter and noticed the empty mug.

???: “Here, another one”

A woman, the owner of the bar, placed a new one on the counter.

Owner: “Ana is a good worker. I have to say, I was worried when you brought her here, but she is helping a lot. We even have clients that come only to get a glimpse of that smile.

Ricardo: “So it’s true that there are Lil’ Ana fans? I don’t get what they see in a midget like her.”

Owner: “She has something that captivates people around her, and you should know that, you were one of her victims, am I right?”

Receiving winks from the owner, the man just took the cold mug to his mouth.

He was a demi-human dog with brown fur and a big muscular build, his living armor. A relatively famous mercenary that always visited the tavern when he had a chance.

Owner: “Looks like Ana is enjoying the work here, and she helps me a lot. I hope she stays for long.”

Ricardo: “I don’t think so, no.”

Ricardo murmured to himself, something he hardly ever did.

It is undeniable that Anastasia was gifted with the talent to be the poster girl for the bar. But…

Ricardo: “Lil’ Ana, living as a waitress for a nasty bar doesn’t sound bad… It really doesn’t…”—the man kept murmuring

Compared to the days when she lived with eyes of sheer hostility, the change was shocking. But Ricardo knew the real desires of the girl, and the endless, pure ambition.

Ricardo: “And above all else, as a waitress, you won’t be able to fulfill that promise you made to me.”

He unconsciously touched the collar around his neck and felt the cold hard iron on his fingertips. That collar was from the time when he was a slave, and he kept using it after achieving his freedom, as proof of his past.

At the same time, he had the strange certainty that the girl would be the one to rip that out.

Owner: “…Hey, sorry to interrupt your daydream but, did you just call my bar nasty?”

Ricardo: “Oh, you shouldn’t listen to other people’s thoughts!”

Owner: “You are the one that doesn’t know how to talk low with this huge snout!”

Seeing the owner hit Ricardo with the tray, the whole tavern burst out laughing. Amid the spectacle, even Anastasia was laughing, that brought a small satisfaction to the dog-man.

2

Took about a month for his next visit to the tavern. Despite how it looked, Ricardo lived quite busy days and couldn't give too much attention to a little girl he randomly found on the streets. After all, paying the bills was the only way to keep his freedom.

But he couldn't deny his eagerness to see the bold little girl after a month, and, for this reason, he didn't hide his disappointment when the owner told him the news.

Ricardo: "What? Lil' Ana was hired by a trading company?"

Owner: "Yea… It happened all of a sudden, I couldn't believe it myself."

Ricardo: "What do you mean 'all of a sudden'?! She wasn't taken by force, was she?!"

Owner: "Slow down! That's not what I meant. She talked to them and agreed, no one forced her to do anything. She even gave me some money as compensation… Hey, don't look at me like that, I didn't let her go for the money."

Ricardo: "I didn't say anything. Besides, I wouldn't leave her with someone I didn't trust."

Ricardo couldn't believe he got that shaken with Anastasia's absence. Nevertheless, he kept pressing the owner with more questions, aware that she was a bit embarrassed.

Ricardo: "Anyway, tell me how everything went down. Even if it was sudden, something happened, right?"

Owner: "I'm telling you, it really happened fast… All I can remember is the guy saying he was 'buying Ana's gift'…"

Ricardo: "Gift…? Don't you tell me it's about her charm with customers and they are forcing her onto things a little girl should never do! Are you sure it was someone from a trading company? Not a slave merchant, right?!"

Owner: "Stop coming at me panting like that! I even got his name and all, go check for yourself if you are so worried. It's the Chuden Trading Company, they are based in the far east of the city."

Hearing that, Ricardo emptied the mug in a single swig and stood up aiming straight for the door.

Owner: "Hey, do you think beers are free?"—the owner shouted.

Ricardo: "Put it on my tab, I'll pay next time!"

Owner: "You are always like that! By the way…"

The woman was a little afraid to talk about, but she did it anyway.

Owner: "I think the guy who came to talk to Ana said something about tabs as well…"

Ricardo: "What? Tabs? Doesn't make any sense… Whatever, I'll check them out!"

With his objective set, Ricardo went into the streets like a bullet, going straight towards the Chuden Trading Company, not knowing the reason he was in such a hurry.

3

Chuden Trading Company belonged to the famous Ryushika Trading Company conglomerate. Based in a strategic city that connected all commercial hubs throughout Kararagi, Ryushika had a fast expansion in the hotel industry, and Chuden followed right behind it.

As far as public knowledge went, Ricardo was not aware of any shadowy stories involving Ryushika, and, to his relief, the reencounter with Anastasia was way easier than he anticipated.

Anastasia: "Uncle, hi. I was worried when you vanished from the bar. Did the owner tell you about my new job?”

When Anastasia saw Ricardo arguing with a guy in the reception, she came to greet him like it was nothing out of the ordinary. Relieved seeing the girl doing fine, Ricardo threw the man he was holding by the collars, astonishing everyone in the lobby that witnessed the scene.

Anastasia: “Uncle, did you get hired to fight with someone here? If that is the case, stop it before I get fired.”

Ricardo: “I’m not liking this ‘know-it-all’ face of yours, kid.”

As Anastasia clapped her hands with a big smile trying to deescalate the situation, Ricardo soothed down. With the situation seemingly under control, the man hurled by Ricardo got up, looked at the girl and asked:

???: “Anastasia, this man is…?”

Anastasia: “Oh, Mr. Chuden, he is an uncle that I know. He was probably missing me because we didn’t see each other before I left the bar.”

Ricardo: “It’s nothing like that at all, you mi…! Wait, did you just call him Chuden?”

Chuden: “Yes, I’m Chuden, Company representative, pleased to meet you.”

Introducing himself with the same name as the Trading Company, the man was still young and a little overweight. His harmless facial expression was enough to tell Ricardo that he was not someone cut for violence.

Ricardo: “You are the one who stole Lil’ Ana from the tavern then? I have nothing to say about that, no… But I’m the one who introduced her to the Owner, you know? I’m just wondering what made you hire her.

Chuden: “Hmm, I understand, you are worried about Anastasia.”

Ricardo: “No! That’s not it! Lil’ Ana, you are getting this all wrong, don’t fool yourself.”

Anastasia: “I didn’t say anything…”

Startled by the comment from Chuden, Ricardo lost himself trying to justify his actions, which left Anastasia somewhat sad because, after all that happened, she was thinking that the dog-man was worried about her.

Seeing Ricardo’s reaction, Chuden invited them to a meeting room so they could talk more easily, and when everyone sat down, he said:

Chuden: “Basically, the reason I hired her was love at first sight.”

Ricardo: “Wait, what?! Isn’t that what Hoshin called a ‘lolicon’?!”

Chuden: “Hold on, it was just a way of saying. I fell in love with her gift. I’m sure Anastasia is a genius, and I’m not talking about Divine Protections. A real genius.”

It seemed a little odd how much he overestimated a child like Anastasia and, to Ricardo, everything sounded more like a fantasy, making him start to wonder whether leaving the little girl working there was a bad idea.

Chuden: “For example… Do you remember the amount of your last tab at the tavern?”

Ricardo: “I don’t, no. Not the exact amount.”

Chuden: “That’s what I thought. But I heard about something that happened at the end of last month when the regulars went to pay their tabs. Please, try and guess what Anastasia did.”

Ricardo didn’t answer, knowing that Chuden was going to say it regardless.

Chuden: “She calculated the amounts for all twenty customers, without checking anything. Nobody seemed to be impressed by that, but I didn’t let it go unnoticed.”

Ricardo: “Maybe she looked at the Owner notes earlier that day.”

Chuden: “Impossible, she didn’t know how to read at the time. And that’s not all, she even mastered writing in just two weeks here.”

As Chuden shook his head having a hard time believing all he himself was saying, Ricardo couldn’t shut his mouth close. Anastasia seemed to be the only one having a hard time keeping up with the grown-ups conversation.

Chuden: “Now you probably understand the reason I hired her. I’m sure that Anastasia will become a monster in the future… One working for the Chuden Trading Company.”

Ricardo: “You are going to use her for your own success, is that it?”

Chuden: “I believe that both of us will profit from this, me and Anastasia. She perfectly understood all of this and accepted coming work with me, so, you can’t meddle.”

Apparently, Ricardo would never get a good image of Chuden. At the same time, he agreed that Anastasia had a promising future, and that’s why he suggested:

Ricardo: “Changing the subject a bit, this Company is growing a lot lately, don’t you think you need a little more security?”

Chuden: “How so?”

Ricardo: “I’m sure you understand that several matters, in the end, come down to violence. And no matter how much money you have, it will not shield you forever. Don’t you think it’s better to be prepared?”

Chuden: “Are you offering to be our bodyguard? I wonder what you see in this girl.”

Having understood the real reason behind that offer, the merchant grinned, and the answer came in kind.

Ricardo: “What I see… My future. The day she takes this collar off me and I become truly free… I think I can see how far I can go.”

Chuden: “Very well, we can sort the details later.”

And just like that, the two men shook hands, surprising the little girl that didn’t understand any of that.

Anastasia: “Hey, what did you two agree on?”

Ricardo: “That I’ll start working here too. There are a lot of thugs out there nowadays, you know? My presence alone will scare the weak ones.”

Anastasia: “Did you really want to be close to me that much? Wow, I’m really a bad woman.”

Once she understood what it all meant, Anastasia burst out laughing, and seeing this, Ricardo caressed her head, forgetting for a moment how strong he was.

Ricardo: “Giving dreams to someone like me… I guess you are a bad woman after all.”

Saying that, the big man laughed looking at the girl, pouting with her messy hair.

END

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The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Blue's Studies

1

That suggestion from Fourier was abrupt as always.

The place was the Karsten domain in the Kingdom of Lugunica, in the guest room of Duke Karsten's mansion.

"You want Ferris to acquire skills from…a healer in the royal capital?" said a girl with long green hair after putting down a cup of black tea and tilting her head.

She looked gallant and had amber-colored eyes. She still retained the young appearance of a teen yet had a well-defined face, so she would surely be beautiful in the future. Her name was Crusch Karsten.

"Yes! Meckart has been asking for my advice for a while. I too highly value Ferris's healing skills, thus I brought forth this offer!"

The one who responded to Crusch was also a beautiful-looking young boy. He had blonde hair that shone like the sun and gemstone-like crimson eyes. A white fang popped out of the corner of his mouth when he smiled casually, making his reckless personality visible from his appearance alone. Even though Fourier Lugunica was like this, he was the fourth prince of the Kingdom of Lugunica, so it was something of a surprise.

"Father consulted Your Highness? Ferris's healing skills are something that I am proud of, but, keeping that in mind, what did Father consult Your Highness about?"

"Hm? It was about whether you want Ferris's healing skills to improve further or not. I am contributing to your swordsmanship training, but Ferris has a lot of room for growth… That is what Meckart assumes, at least. So I thought that she should be taught by the court healer in the royal castle."

“I see. As expected of my father and Your Highness. You have keen perception,” Crusch casually praised.

“Oh, it’s nothing! But I shall permit you to praise me more! Do praise!” Fourier exclaimed, laughing cheerfully while slapping his knee.

Crusch took a quick glance at the person remaining quiet next to her.

It was a girlish pretty boy who had neck-length chestnut-colored hair and round yellow eyes. His slender body was clad in female clothing, and as he had demi-human blood, he had distinctive animal ears and a tail. It was the person being talked about, Ferris.

Crusch looked at Ferris, who was looking down and sitting silently with his hands resting on his knees. “What do you think, Ferris? Do you intend on accepting His Highness’s proposal?”

“I am yours…Lady Crusch. As such, I don’t want to leave your side. But if you command me to go, then…” Ferris’s gaze wandered, and then he quietly looked at Crusch in an imploring manner.

Crusch went silent for a while at his weak attitude and then looked at Fourier. “You heard her, Your Highness. I personally think that I should leave it to the free will of the servant, but… Your Highness, can you command me?”

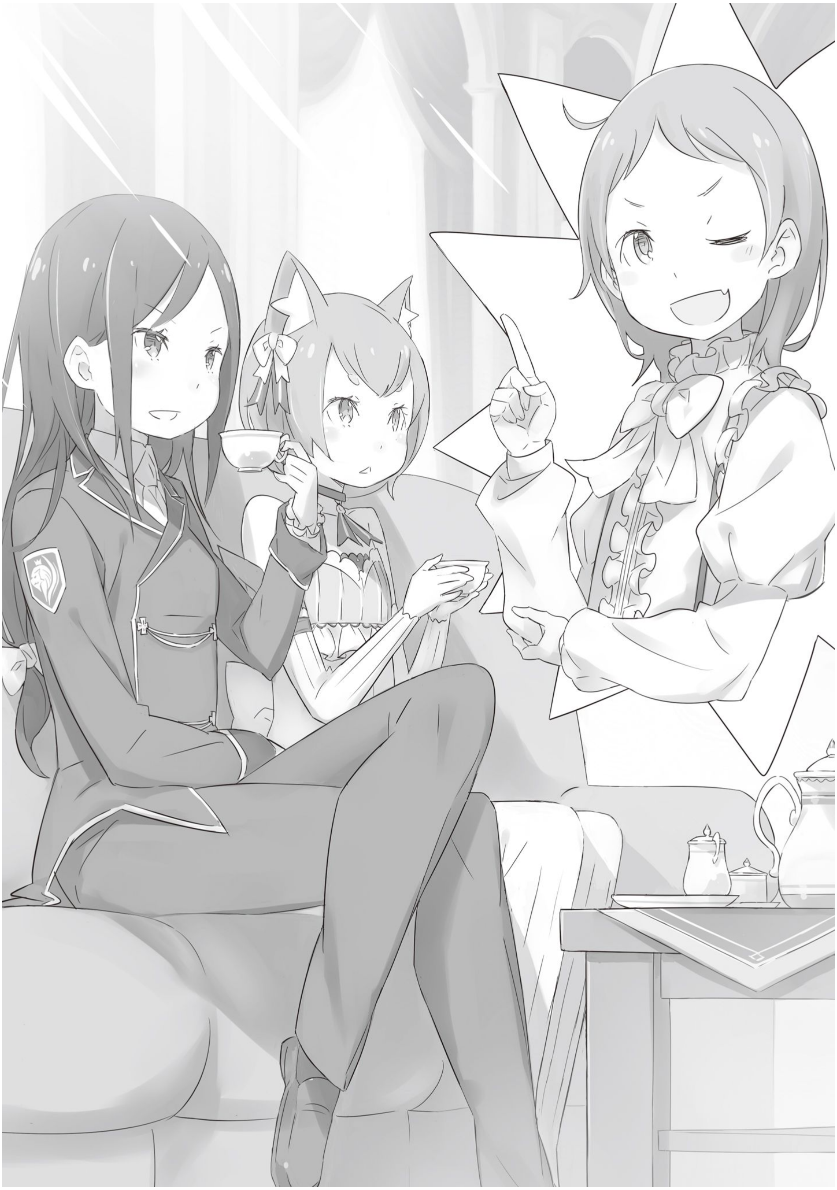

“Hm, what do you want me to command you to do?”

“Can you command me to order Ferris to go to the royal capital?”

She was playing with words. Ferris’s widened his eyes and Crusch smiled mischievously. And then…

“I do not quite get it, but alright. Crusch, I command you to order Ferris to head to the royal capital!”

“As you command, Your Highness. Ferris.” Crusch bowed reverently, then directed her amber-colored eyes at Ferris. He reflexively shrugged his shoulders, and then she gave him the order. “Do as His Highness says and learn from the healer in the royal capital.”

2

As far as Ferris could remember, this was the first time he had ever visited the royal capital.

“W-Woah…” Ferris stuttered, choking up with emotion, after getting off the dragon carriage that had picked him up and looking down at the city below the castle.

The sight was that overwhelming.

“It is magnificent, is it not? I also think that the view from here is superb.”

The person proudly crossing his arms next to him was Fourier, who he had ridden with on the way there. He was exceptionally carefree despite being royalty. It was unheard of for a royal to travel in the same carriage with someone else’s retainer while acting like good friends.

“Yes, it’s amazing. So this is the royal capital… The Kingdom of Lugunica’s largest city.”

“And it is also a place that has been under my family’s protection for centuries. It makes me proud, and I feel weighed down by all of the responsibility. Ha-Ha, even though I know that not much is expected from me!” Fourier exclaimed, saying something that was hard for anyone else to comment on.

“No, well, it isn’t…” Ferris replied, not sure how to respond.

As they stood blocking the entrance to the main gate of the royal castle, they heard a voice come from behind. “I am glad to see you have returned safely, Prince Fourier.”

Ferris turned around and looked up at the person who had said that and jumped in surprise. The man was tall, but his harsh, tense expression was a little too intense for a child’s heart.

Nonetheless, Fourier smiled cheerfully, showing off his teeth after confirming who it was. “Oh, Marcos! Well done welcoming us! Was it peaceful while I was absent?”

“I humbly inform you that we knights worked as one to maintain peace in the royal capital while Your Highness was away. Fortunately, there were no signs of unrest, and the people are living in peace.”

“Mhm, not bad! Oh yes, I will introduce Ferris to you too!”

Fourier grabbed Ferris’s hand and forced him in front of Marcos—the man who acted formally—with a little push. The suddenness of it surprised him, but Fourier tapped on his shoulder, and…

“This is Ferris. Ferris is my friend, and she is going to be an elite healer in the future. You can depend on her if something happens. Even if your head gets cut off, Ferris will make it grow back safe and sound!”

“Your Highness, don’t you think you’re overestimating me a little?!”

Ferris panicked at his overvaluation. But Marcos narrowed his eyes at what Fourier had said. “Are you from House Argyle by any chance?”

A wave of anxiety washed over Ferris since his family name was suddenly brought up, making his breath catch in his throat. Fourier was tilting his head next to him, but it seemed like Marcos knew about his situation.

After looking at Ferris's animal ears, Marcos touched his square jaw, as if in thought. "No, I did not mean to pry. I was rude to you, His Highness's friend. My apologies if I made you uncomfortable."

Ferris shook his head and rejected Marcos's apology. "No… You didn't say anything bad."

The knight said nothing in reply and looked at Fourier. "You said that she is going to be a healer, so is she the person you mentioned before, Your Highness?"

"Correct! The healers have made the necessary preparations, right? Since that is what Ferris was invited here for."

"Everything has been taken care of. But the soldiers will start their training soon, so I humbly recommend leaving to go there now. And…" Marcos lowered his voice and whispered into Fourier's ear. "Lord Bordeaux Zergev will be coming today to conduct an on-site inspection."

"—? Is that a problem? It is true that Bordeaux is a bit noisy, but…"

After that Fourier frowned, and Marcos didn't look at Ferris so he wouldn't know they were talking about him. "Her ears and tail. Lord Bordeaux doesn't like demi-humans. So it would be better if he does not see him."

"Well, well, that is absurd. If you choose your friends by blood alone, then you will be the one who gets discriminated against in the end. Tell Bordeaux that for me."

"You can tell him that yourself, Your Highness. My status prevents me from making such comments," Marcos replied, taking a step back.

Fourier looked displeased and then gestured at Ferris to come with him. Following his lead, Ferris bowed to Marcos and left.

After they were out of his sight, Marcos tilted his head. “I thought the eldest child of House Argyle was a boy, but it turned out to be a cute lady.”

3

“I was told you have learned the basic uses of mana. So, you can learn the rest through practical experience. There is no shortage of injured here, after all. He-He-heh.”

The one who said that with his distinctive laugh was a skinny, white-haired court healer. It was the healer that had come to the castle upon Fourier’s request, and he was one of the most excellent healers in the kingdom’s employ. He wasn’t the only one, however, as several more had made their way to the castle as well. Rather extravagant indeed just to train Ferris. Ferris understood that it was Fourier’s good will, but…

“You must be joking again, Your Highness,” said a healer.

“A demi-human girl? Here?” scoffed a second healer.

“I refuse to take part in this,” declared a third healer.

The number of healers complaining about being summoned unreasonably weren’t in the minority. They might have been talking in secrecy, but Ferris’s ears could easily pick up what they were saying about him behind his back. The thing that Marcos whispered into Fourier’s ear before was no exception.

“You do not look so well, Ferris. Don’t tell me you’re nervous?”

Fourier was being considerate towards Ferris who was facing down without knowing his subordinate’s disrespect and his smile made Ferris sad. It agonized Ferris’ heart further since he was fond of Fourier and felt indebted to him.

“The military training ground is next to the royal castle. It’s where they train the knights and city guards, but their training is intense, not to mention extreme, so they’re basically always bleeding and breaking bones, he-he-heh.”

The Skeleton Healer laughed at the place that pumped out injured people. It was unclear if he liked healing or just seeing blood and guts, but he seemed somewhat better than the other healers.

Ferris followed him around and learned by watching how he healed the injured knights and city guards. “So you don’t heal everything with healing magic,” he observed.

“The amount of mana an individual has is limited. It would be unacceptable to keep healing light wounds and then end up having no mana for the gravely injured. People become reckless when they think that wounds can be healed easily. If perfectly mastered, a healer can save someone on the verge of dying. It is a power that can twist fate depending on the situation.”

“Can save someone, on the verge of dying…”

Ferris reflexively clutched his chest since he was familiar with the situation the Skeleton Healer was talking about. It reminded him of the time he almost killed Crusch and saved her by unleashing some kind of extraordinary power.

“The power to save people is certainly amazing. But refrain from using your power excessively since when people get used to it, they start being reckless and end up losing their lives because of it. He-Heh-heh.”

“I feel like, I have learned a lesson…”

You can perform first aid on a simple cut or bruise by bandaging it or cooling it with water. Anyone can do it if shown how, too. The Skeleton Healer might have been unorthodox in a lot of ways compared to other healers, but Ferris honestly felt like he could learn a lot from him.

While he was in his thoughts, a voice reverberated throughout the training ground.

“—The knights have lost their edge. Everyone lacks spirit. Spirit.”

The voice belonged to a giant bald man standing at the entrance, his arms crossed as he looked around. The man was entering old age, yet his straight posture and trained body were full of youthful energy. There was a light buzz, and the healers—excluding the Skeleton Healer—rushed towards him.

“L-Lord Zergev!” a healer exclaimed. “What brings you to the training ground…”

“Don’t come near me. Such a nuisance. I stopped by since I was conducting an inspection. Fulfil your duty, your duty!” the old man shouted, spit flying, as he stepped into the grounds, driving away those who were trying to butter him up.

The atmosphere of the training ground suddenly grew tense, and the city guards who had been half-assing it until now kicked their training into overdrive.

On the other hand—Ferris hid himself in order to hide from the old man, Bordeaux. He was positive that he was the person who didn’t like demi-humans that Marcos mentioned.

Thinking that he would inconvenience Crusch and Fourier if he got found and worsened the old man’s mood, Ferris tried to make an early departure—but was soon stopped by Fourier, who had grabbed his shoulder. And then…

“Oh, Bordeaux! It has been a while. Have you been well?”

No one knew what he was thinking, but he charged straight at Bordeaux while pulling Ferris along. While Ferris was in a state of bewilderment, Bordeaux noticed them approaching and smiled. “If it isn’t His Highness Fourier. It is rare to see you at the training ground. Oh, maybe that isn’t the case. I have heard about it, Your Highness. That you have recently developed a passion for swordsmanship. If it’s fine with you, would you permit me to teach you a few moves?”

“No stop, you will hurt your back if you do things that aren’t good for your age. More importantly, I want to introduce you to my friend, Ferris.”

Fourier pushed forward Ferris towards Bordeaux just like with

Marcos, and Bordeaux was friendlier than expected.

However, Bordeaux's expression turned cold when he saw Ferris. "Those ears and that tail… You are a demi-human—with all due respect, Your Highness, if I may give you any advice, then…"

"If you are going to tell me to choose my friends wisely, I will not hear it. I told you that I was going to introduce my friend to you. The friendship has already been established. Are you ordering a royal to throw away what he has acquired?"

"Y-Your Highness…"

Fourier, who was always smiling and often seemed somewhat oblivious to things, had a tense expression now and his voice was stern. The sight of that made Ferris speechless. Or perhaps you could say that everyone there was equally speechless.

"Introduce yourself, Ferris. In a way that you would not be ashamed to be my friend and Crusch's retainer."

Feeling something moving up his spine, Ferris stepped forward, obeying the command. He reverently bowed to Bordeaux, who was looking down at him. "I am honored to have been given the opportunity to introduce myself. My name is Felix Argyle. I serve as a retainer to the daughter of Duke Karsten, Lady Karsten."

"And Ferris is also a friend of mine. She will be a healer in the future as well. Is that clear, Bordeaux?" Fourier said, wrapping his arm around Ferris and pulling him in. "I will not allow you to humiliate my friend from now on, no matter what the reason may be. If you rashly demean others, your actions will eventually come back to haunt you. Never forget that!"

"Understood." Bordeaux knelt on the spot and bowed—giving his utmost respect. The old man then rose and looked at Ferris. "His Highness has given you his stamp of approval. Be fully aware of how big a deal it is. As long as you live up to his expectations, I will overlook your lineage and evaluate you fairly. You have my word."

Bordeaux lifted his face up and spoke in a voice that everyone in the training grounds could hear. “You knights have lost your edge! However, there is still hope yet for the kingdom we offer our loyalty to! The results of today’s inspection are good just from being able to confirm that. Train hard, warriors!”

Bordeaux took his giant body and left the training ground after laughing in satisfaction. A couple attendants followed after him, and Ferris finally felt himself relaxing.

“There was quite a commotion on day one. I am looking forward to this month-long apprenticeship. He-He-heh.” The Skeleton Healer laughed nastily thinking that it wasn’t his problem, and Ferris sighed.

He looked at Fourier next to him and then hesitated for a few seconds. “Th-Thank you very much, Your Highness. But…are you sure it’s okay to say something like that?”

“Hm? I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but my status is higher than that of Bordeaux’s! I am a royal! Even if he is a member of the Council of Wise Men, I am above him! There is no need for me to feel intimidated! Well, maybe I am, but only a little!”

“Hee-Hee…but it made me happy. Why did you say those things?”

Fourier, now back to his usual self, sheepishly rubbed below his nose with his finger. “Who knows, but my words were genuine. W-Well, I admit that Crusch played a bit of a role too… But you know, Ferris—it is the duty of men to protect women!” Fourier shouted, his arms crossed and wearing his usual cheerful smile.

Unable to hold it in after hearing what he said at the end, Ferris let out a hearty chuckle.

END

Ex 1:
The Dream the Lion King Saw

Anastasia’s Most Important Travelogue

1

It was a quite pleasant and sunny day.

???: “It’s so sad havin’ to go back and forth from the office on a day like this! I’ll take a stroll, come with me!”

And, just like that, the protest could be heard, along with the sound of a sheaf of papers hitting the desk. Julius, who was focused on reading in a corner of the room, couldn’t hold his giggles.

???: “Oy, Julius? Did ya hear what I said?

Julius: “Yes, of course. I’m sorry, I was lost in your beauty.”

???: “Look at you, talkin’ like that without a speck of guilt. I’m not like these girls from Lugunica that fall for your pick up lines.

Anastasia, the girl who proposed the stroll, was already grumpy and started pouting with the knight’s remark. She had her typical Kararagi accent, but don’t let the cute appearance and innocent mannerism deceive you. The girl called Anastasia Hoshin was, from Julius Juukulius’ perspective, one of the most influential figures in the kingdom today.

Julius: “Well, in any case, I’ll gladly accept the invitation. Will Mimi and Hetaro come as well?”

Anastasia: “Nah, no bodyguards today. I wanna walk alone with you, Julius.”

???: “Hey, I heard that! This is treason! Abultery!”—Mimi, listening to the conversation, didn’t like to be left behind.

Anastasia: “It’s ‘adultery’, Mimi. I’ll get dressed, can you wait for a bit?”

Julius: “Of course, milady. Take as long as you need.”

With that, Anastasia waved her hand and left the room. Ladies usually take a considerable amount of time to get dressed and, even though the president of the Hoshin Trading Company values efficiency above all, she didn't neglect the power of good looks. Which means, this is going to take a while…

Julius: "Mimi, let's wait for lady Anastasia in the living room, shall we? Can you go ahead and ask them to make us some tea?"

Mimi: "Yes, sir! Leave it to Mimi!"

Watching the little girl leaving the room all excited, Julius started to get himself ready to accompany Anastasia. If ladies get all dressed up to go out, it's the duty of men to prepare themselves to live up to them, to be worthy of their company.2

When Julius got to the living room after getting changed, Mimi was seated in front of the table where sweets and teas were served, anxiously swinging her legs. When she realized that the knight had arrived, the little girl's face broke into a wide smile, but soon frowned holding her nose.

Mimi: "Ung? Julius? Why do you smell like that?"

Julius: "I sprayed some perfume. Does it bother you?"

Mimi: "No! I just got a little startled! I'm not very good at diffefe-… differen-… direffentiate people by their faces!"

Julius then sat down in front of Mimi, who was enjoying the sweets on the table and, intrigued by her comment, asked:

Julius: "Does it mean that you guys identify us by our scent?"

Mimi: "If you are alone and you are someone I know, I can tell by looking. But when there are a lot of people it gets really hard. Then it has to be by the smell!"

Julius: "Hmm, I see… I'm surprised that you, cat demi-humans, rely so much on smell. I imagined that this would be the case for Captain Ricardo since he is a kobold."

Although, when it comes to that man, it wouldn't be surprising if he is only half kobold, since they are known to have short stature and Ricardo is over two meters tall.

Remembering the big man who is always speaking loudly with his characteristic Kararagi accent, another question came to Julius.

Julius: "You and your brothers are also from Kararagi, correct? Why don't you three have the typical accent from there?"

Mimi: "Ah, about that. Good question, good question!"—Mimi nodded and explained. —"That's thanks to the Great Elder! Mimi, Hetaro and Tivey learned to speak and fight from the Great Elder!"

Julius: "Great Elder…?"

Mimi: "He was an old man who showed us the way of life! He died in a cool way!"

Because of the way the kitten spoke, it didn't sound as serious as it should have, since it wasn't hard to imagine that this person was like a foster father for the triplets. And, apparently, an elder strong enough to train them to the point of being vice-captains of a troop like the Iron Fang.

And just when the conversation had come to an end, Anastasia appeared in the room.

Anastasia: "Sorry to make you wait. I'm ready."

She had changed into a garment called kinomo, a traditional costume from Kararagi. It was a long dress made from white fabric with aniseed floral patterns. Certainly a type of clothing that you hardly saw in Lugunica, but Anastasia looked great in it.

Julius: "I don't think I'll ever get tired of saying how good you look in your dresses, milady. It is as if they were made specifically for you."

Anastasia: "Jeez, he doesn't know when to give up… Well, not that it bothers me"—she smiled greedily, a little embarrassed. —"Mimi, I'm going out with Julius, but don't mess around. I don't wanna find anything dirty or broken when I get back.”

Mimi: “Hihi! Easy! This is Mimi’s specialty!”

The scene of a little girl hitting the table didn’t inspire a lot of confidence but, at that point, all that remained was to pray and leave the rest to the servants. Julius offered his arm to Anastasia, who gently accepted with her hand.

Julius: “Milady… Are you sure about wearing the scarf? I believe you will feel hot considering the weather today.”

As pointed out by the knight, despite the kinomo, she was still wearing her fox scarf, which, apparently, seemed to be her favorite. Although it was beautiful scarf, and clearly one of the highest quality, it really didn’t make sense to wear it on hot days.

Anastasia: “Ah, well, you’re right, but… I don’t mind it.”

Julius: “… I understand. And where are we going today?”

Sensing that it was a delicate matter, Julius didn’t insist and changed the focus of the conversation. The scarf could be many things, from a simple amulet to a powerful metia. Perhaps, when she feels a greater sense of trust between the two, Anastasia would reveal the truth.

Anastasia: “An impeccable knight indeed…”—whispered the girl, only to herself.

2

Anastasia: “Today I have no plan or goal! All I want is to clear my head a bit! This is a mission of utmost importance, you know?”

With that premise, the stroll between Anastasia and Julius began. Of course, from the beginning, the impeccable knight wasn’t worried about the “mission”, considering that they were in the capital, the largest city in the kingdom. Going to the commercial district was enough for Anastasia to forget her troubles amid all those shops and stalls.

Stall Owner: “What is it, little lady? Do you have a problem with my appas?”

Anastasia: “No, my problem is with you, the seller! Have you never stopped to think that your scary face and hoarse voice scare customers away? The appas are crying!”

Stall Owner: “Grr…! You brat…!”

Even now, she was arguing with a fruit vendor with a huge scar on his face. Luckily, the guy seemed to be a sensible man and Julius thought it was not necessary for him to intervene.

Julius: “Well… She doesn’t seem too concerned about not attracting attention”—the knight laughed at the scene his companion was making.

Although she was in a more than special position, being a candidate for the throne, there were not many people who knew this yet, so it was a matter that should be handled with great care.

Anastasia: “Phew… In the end he was a surprisingly reasonable man”—said Anastasia when she got back from the fruit stall.

Julius: “If he has the flexibility to accept criticism, he might have a good chance of prospering.”

Anastasia: “Well, that’s something I can’t say… We cannot forget about talent, or the lack of…”

What was hinted by the girl was clear, the fruit vendor had zero aptitude for being a salesman.

Julius: “If we are only talking about appearance, Captain Marcos of the Royal Guard is intimidating as well.”

Anastasia: “True, that fruit vendor would be able to compete with your captain… Humph, look at the subject we ended up in, Julius.”

The girl smiled at Julius’ joke, revealing all her graciousness that was being enhanced with the kinomo. She had an appearance that naturally caught the eyes of men and, as much as she loved saying that Mimi was adorable, she was not left behind. Or, perhaps, she was fully aware of it and used her poison in her favor.

Anastasia: “What? Is there something on my face?”

At the question, Julius shook his head sideways. Regardless of Anastasia’s true nature, the Impeccable Knight had already made his decision. The only thing was, he still wasn’t sure that the mysterious girl from Kararagi would choose him back.

Anastasia: “And here you go again, making this strained thoughtful face. Thinking too much will only end up attracting bugs, you know?”

With that comment, Julius reflexively took a hand to his face, only to realize that he had been tricked by Anastasia, who opened an innocent smile right away.

Anastasia: “I’m not telling you not to think, but there is no point in thinking about something if you can’t come up with an answer. Since I took you out for a walk, how about relaxing a little?”

Julius: “Relax…? Wait, by any chance, was today’s walk because of me…?”—Julius’ eyes widened in astonishment.

Anastasia: “I knew you hadn’t noticed. I could see that you haven’t advanced a single page of your book. Here, eat this appa.”

Speechless, he humbly accepted the fruit that was offered. Julius felt as if he had been scolded, that he wasn’t the only one who paid attention to others and even felt a little ashamed at having lost sight of himself.

Anastasia: “You know, I want to see you being yourself every now and then, without posing as something else. This was the secret goal of today’s stroll.”

Saying that, she rubbed the appa on her clothes and bit, completely ignoring it’s peel. It was not a very lady-like way of eating, but, being influenced by her, Julius did the same and felt the juice filling his mouth.

Julius: “Milady…”

Anastasia: “Hum?”

Julius: “This appa is still green, isn’t it?”

Anastasias: “Oh, true! Jeez, that guy! Even his appas are bad!”

Furious, the girl immediately turned and went straight towards the fruit vendor with the scar on his face. The not-so-Impeccable Knight, watching her back and feeling the slightly sour taste in his mouth, for some reason, couldn’t resist the sudden urge to laugh.

At least, those were his true laughs, without posing, fulfilling Anastasia’s secret goal while she wasn’t looking.

END

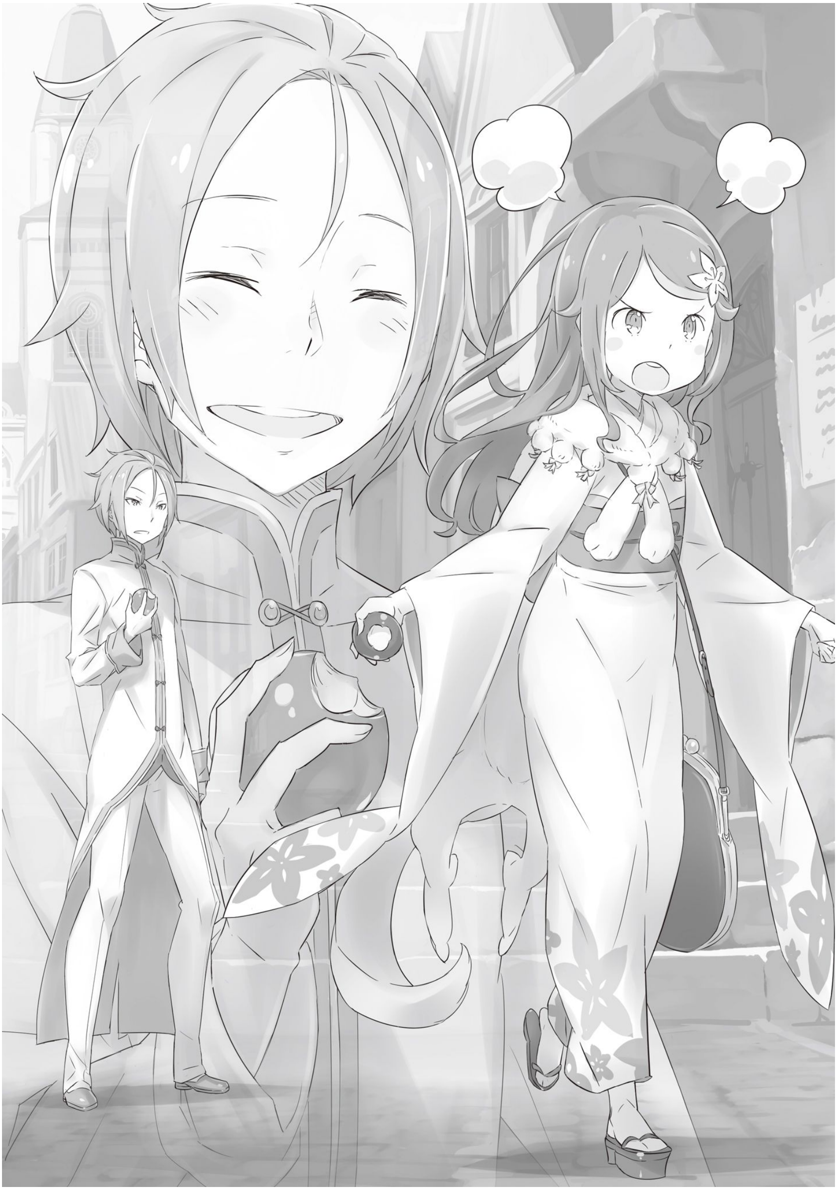

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Days Without Her Follower

1

The Karsten Duchy in the Kingdom of Lugunica was known for its excellent governance and was one of the best domains in the kingdom. The ducal family there had been serving the royal house for generations, going all the way back to the kingdom's founding, and the current head of the House's—Meckart's—governance was highly regarded by both the kingdom and the people of his domain. For that reason, people had mixed feelings about his successor, who would have to carry on his legacy: his daughter.

The people of the kingdom that believed the rumors about her thought that she was a sword freak. And the people of the domain who didn't know her well thought her an odd girl, but the people who knew her true self had a different opinion altogether.

She—Crusch Karsten—was the only one who was of worthy enough character and skill to carry forth the ducal family name. She never stopped working hard and improving herself. She was uncompromising and hard on herself, so the people who knew her considered her a true noble. She was still so young, yet she shouldered such heavy burdens.

Due to her status, the change in her was immediately felt by everyone close to her.

"It seems like she hasn't been sleeping well at night," commented a servant.

"She hasn't been able to eat much," another servant added. "Lady Crusch used to eat a lot, but she's been leaving leftovers a lot lately…"

"She seems inattentive even when swinging her sword, which is dangerous," a third servant said.

The servants working in the ducal household were troubled by the change in Crusch, who they had known since she was but a babe. Meckart's influential servants, both the military personnel and the civil servants, had sensed the change immediately.

"I haven't seen it during her general culture lessons or while she is studying military strategy books, but…" said one of them.

"Her only acting like that during her free time makes it even more painful to watch," added another.

Everyone close to her agreed that her behavior was typical of her since she didn't try to cause trouble for others in spite of it all. And it rather impressed them. It was an attitude that was very reliable to have from a person that stood above everyone else—a ruler—but it wasn't something a 14-year-old should be prepared to do, much less an only-daughter.

Meckart, after listening to the opinions of the people who cared about her, slowly got up off the chair. It took him a while to get up, not because he didn't want to confront her, but due to being old and having weak joints.

"I have been acting strange lately…you say?" said Crusch, who had been summoned by Meckart, while furrowing her well-defined eyebrows.

She was a beautiful fourteen-year-old girl who looked mature for her age. Her amber-colored almond-shaped eyes and her lustrous, beautiful hair—both were like her mother's, which Meckart saw as his wife's mementos. His wife also had a fierce personality like Crusch's. It would be no exaggeration to say that winning her over and marrying her was the bravest thing he had ever done.

"Father?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, sorry, sorry. Well, it is just that I was thinking that you were starting to look more and more like Helena… Oh no, that is something unrelated. Well, yes, it was about how you have been lately."

"No, I am happy that you said I am becoming like my mother, but I cannot agree with what you said about me acting strange. In what way have I been acting strange?"

"I do not see any problems with how you conduct yourself, your studies, or your noble duties. We still need to talk about you dressing as a man but…the topic is different this time."

Crusch narrowed her eyes in the middle of his reply, giving Meckart the chills.

Crusch had started dressing as a man a few years ago; wearing men's clothing she liked and using strong and hard words. It was around the same time that she began devoting herself to the art of the sword.

Meckart had been trying to persuade her to stop for several years, but he had yet to succeed. However, that wasn't the issue here, and Meckart crossed his arms. "I have heard that you haven't been sleeping well lately. I hear you haven't been able to finish your meals either."

"That is…a periodical thing. Father, you also know that girls have such a thing that occurs each month."

"Huh?! Oh, aah, yes, of course, I know that, but…"

As a father, he could do nothing but lose his composure when a woman's issue was brazenly used against him. He was aware that he was being deceived, however, so he used that to press her for an answer.

"Crusch, stop lying. I know that, your periodical thing, has no relationship whatsoever with how you have been acting. I have already looked into it."

"Father, I can see the wind of lies blowing around you without having to look…"

"A-Anyway! You are acting strange! And I know what is causing that!" Meckart just came out and said it since it seemed like he was easily going to lose the argument.

Crusch seemed somewhat dissatisfied, but it seemed from her expression that she was now curious about the cause. Meckart, feeling like his stomach was churning after being stared at silently by the almond-shaped eyes that were like his wife's, then spoke about the cause of her current change. Which was—

"Crusch…you are in agony now because you are separated from Felix."

Crusch's eyebrow quivered when Meckart pointed it out. Conversely, as it was the only reaction she showed the whole time, he silently praised her willpower.

Felix Argyle—AKA Ferris—was Crusch's retainer, and he didn't serve House Karsten but Crusch directly. Just as the name suggested, his sex was male, but the way he spoke, dressed, and acted were all very feminine, so it was really hard to tell that he was a man at first glance.

He is greatly indebted to Crusch for a certain reason and is serving her with all his heart. Crusch reciprocates his subservience with an equal amount of kindness. Calling them an ideal master and servant—would be an exaggeration, but there is no doubt that they have an ideal relationship.

"Said Felix is mastering healing magic in the royal capital now. How you've been acting recently coincides with the amount of time he has been there."

"Father… I was wondering what you were going to say, but it seems like you are just overthinking things." Crusch smiled slightly and shook her head at Meckart's point. Seeing as her attitude remained unchanged, he was afraid he had missed the mark.

Crusch started speaking to Meckart, whose stomach was hurting, with a sigh:

"It is true that I have been worried about Ferris often while he has not been around. He went there due to the recommendation of His Highness, Fourier, so I am not worried about how they are treating him. It's just that the work at the clinic is extremely rigorous. But if we want Ferris to truly improve, then we need to let him stay there and gain experience in treating people who are close to dying. He is the kind of person who is prone to putting on a brave face. I do feel concerned that he will put others before him and wear himself out. If his healing magic's usefulness gets noticed by the clinic, then they might pull him away from my command…no, I do not think that something like that would happen, but it is obvious that they would want a highly capable healer like him…"

"Hold your earth dragons. I get it, you can relax. I know how much Ferris means to you."

Having talked more eloquently than he had expected, Meckart was overwhelmed.

He faced a similar situation when he made Felix talk about Crusch, but he did not think that he would receive the same passion from her.

It seemed like Meckart's daughter was head-over-heels for that cat-eared retainer—more than he had imagined.

"I hope you understand now."

Looking relieved, it seemed like Crusch was satisfied by Meckart's reaction. Her somewhat happy look wasn't something he could see often on his daughter. So Meckart smiled with a bit of jealousy towards the boy who was her retainer and said:

"Yes, I do—I understand, so let's go to the royal capital soon to see how things are going there."

And he set off to take care of Crusch's anomaly once and for all.

2

"Ooh! Crusch! Over here! It is I! Glad you came!"

She immediately heard an enthusiastic voice when the dragon carriage pulled up to the main gate of the palace. Meckart leaned out and saw a blond-haired boy—the Kingdom of Lugunica's Fourth Prince, Prince Fourier—welcoming Crusch, who had stepped out before him, with a broad smile.

Meckart, a duke, and his daughter, Crusch, were both in a position where they ought to show him his due respect, but they felt relaxed around him because he had always been friendly with them over the past few years.

“Thank you for taking the time to welcome us, Your Highness. I cannot express my gratitude enough for accepting my father’s request even while being so busy,” said Crusch, who wasn’t all too happy about visiting the royal capital, in a passive aggressive tone that was hard to catch.

“It’s nothing. I could never turn down a request from you. You can continue to count on me from now on! You can contact me if you have any business in the royal capital! Yes!” But the broadminded Fourier accepted it generously. More like, it was written on his face that he was extremely happy to be able to interact with Crusch.

The fourth prince has a crush on my only daughter, and if you were to ask me, ‘What’s so scary about that?’ I could only tell you: everything. But as a father, there is a part of me that honestly feels like it’s a lovely thing. If their relationship continues to grow, them standing side-by-side one day won’t be an impossibility. If that were to actually happen, I would at least—

“Meckart! I appreciate your effort! It seems like you were also worried about Ferris. Well, it is obvious since you are her father figure!”

“Huh? Ah, no, Your Highness, it isn’t like that…”

Fourier talked to Meckart who was pondering, with an unreserved expression and nodded. He tried to correct it but…

“That is right, Your Highness,” Crusch interrupted him. “Father forced me to come here with him this time. I told him that we should wait for Ferris and look forward to seeing how much she has grown when she returns but…he did not listen to me.”

“I see, I understand. But you should try to understand Meckart’s feelings. Parents will always love their children. In cases where someone is entrusted with a child, such feelings might fade away over time, but in Meckart's case, his feelings only grew in strength, so there's nothing wrong with what he did. That is what I think!"

"How profound," Crusch replied. "A great insight indeed… So, where is Ferris?"

Meckart was baffled since a rare thing had occurred during that conversation. Crusch unintentionally hiding her true feelings, Fourier making false inferences as usual but was touching on the core of the matter, and Crusch not being able to hide her true feelings.

Maybe it is due to my age, but I can't keep up with the pace of young people's conversations. Perhaps a change of governance in the ducal house might not be too far away.

"The clinic is really busy today, but Ferris is probably working at the training ground. People get hurt all the time there, so it is a good place to go if you want to improve your healing magic. Now, this way."

As Meckart was feeling like throwing in the towel, Fourier started making his way towards the training ground while explaining things.

Crusch was nodding along, but how much she was actually taking in was a mystery. Meckart followed them and noticed a subtle change of heart.

He wasn't aware of it till now due to being worried about Crusch, but there was something inside of him that was looking forward to seeing Felix at work. It was a surprising discovery for him.

"Though, I did not intend to belittle His Highness's words."

Meckart had never had the nerve to think of himself as a substitute for his father, but Felix was a lovely family member to him. A daughter that acts like a son and a son that acts like a daughter—it is somewhat of a strange combination, but I think I'm starting to accept them deep down.

“The brave men from the order of knights cross swords every day in the training ground. I also join them from time to time so that I might best you with the sword one day.”

“That must be…very stressful training for the soldiers.”

“That is right, that is right! Oh, it’ll come into view any moment now!”

The three of them reached the training ground without it being clearly stated what made it so stressful for the soldiers.

The training ground adjacent to the royal castle was a simple structure, it was just a stone wall built in a circle. The purpose of it was clear due to its simplicity, and the soldiers training there had high morale.

The environment in which steel clashed against steel and voices like angry shouts were exchanged seemed to be free of petty pride and laziness.

“…”

The passageway that Meckart and the rest went through led to a service entrance where they could look down over the entire training ground. Meckart looked down at it from there and searched for Felix. He was a boy who stood out no matter where he was, so he thought that he could find him quickly, but…

“There,” Crusch declared.

As one would expect, there was no one better than Crusch when it came to finding Felix. Meckart spotted the cat-eared boy immediately after following her line of sight.

Felix had taken off the girly clothes he usually wore and was wearing the healer uniform of the clinic, which was white and had blue lines. He placed his hand on an injured person and activated his healing magic with a serious face.

“Ooh, so she was there. Then, let us talk to her as soon as she is done with heagah!” Crusch came up behind Fourier, who had noticed Ferris a bit later, and covered his mouth. He squirmed, his face turning red. He did so not because she had covered his mouth, but due to the sensation he felt when she rubbed up against him.

“Your Highness, thank you for your consideration. But…”

“We were thinking of heading back without interrupting her work. Right, Crusch?”

Crusch, who was holding Fourier down, widened her eyes at Meckart’s words. She relaxed her lips and nodded.

She then released Fourier, who turned around with a still-reddened face. “I-I-I-I do not get it but…are you both fine with that?”

“Yes—this is enough. I shall reflect upon the tastelessness of my actions.”

Crusch bowed her head to Fourier, admitting honestly that she was worried about Felix.

Fourier looked troubled, but when he saw Meckart bow too, he said, “A-Alright, I get it. Your feelings were conveyed. That is enough. I will keep what happened today a secret from Ferris. That is what you want, right?”

“Yes. As expected of you, Your Highness, you are indeed most wise.”

“Ha-Ha, that goes without saying. But if you truly do intend on returning now, then you obviously have plenty of time to spare. Crusch, accompany me. A rare flower has bloomed in the garden.”

Crusch glanced sideways at Meckart after getting invited by Fourier.

Meckart smiled gently at his daughter’s gaze and nodded. “You can go. Do be careful not to bother His Highness.”

“Alright. Then I shall accompany you, Your Highness. Do show me those flowers.”

“Sure, sure! Then let us go. It is this way! Follow me!”

Fourier started trotting away, and Crusch followed after him, albeit walking at a slower pace. As he watched the two wander off, Meckart felt like everything was going to be okay.

Crusch will go back to normal now. My daughter’s ability to take care of herself is topnotch to begin with, so if the cause of her change gets dealt with, she’ll easily be able to go back to her usual self. That alone would have been quite the harvest, but I got twice the yield this time it seems.

“Best of luck… Do your best.” Meckart, his back facing the service entrance, narrowed his eyes and looked down at Felix working. It was as if he could see all the hard work Ferris, his son that he was proud of, was putting in.

I feel like the servants’ lukewarm eyes were not only directed at Crusch when they were seeing us off. I see, so Crusch was not the only one who felt lonely. Like daughter like father, we cannot look at ourselves properly, Meckart thought, his shoulders shaking from laughing uncontrollably.

END

Volume 7

Chapters 54-62

Chapter 54:
Negotiations of an Alliance

1

Life is all about playing the hand you're dealt.

Whether it's your birth, your looks, your talent, skills you've honed through effort, or the goodwill you've cultivated— It all boils down to the same thing.

Subaru is painfully aware that he lacks in every one of those areas right now. Rem, by some miracle, affirms him completely, but he knows full well how far he is from the ideal Natsuki Subaru she sees. Compared to that ideal, the cards in Subaru's hand are few, and their quality is clearly inferior.

However when you're facing a real match, nobody wants to hear your complaints. Everyone has to play the hand they've been dealt.

All that's left is knowing when to play your cards, how to play them, and when to bluff.

"—The White Whale."

That single phrase, the name of a hand that would likely have the greatest impact among his face-down cards, caused a shift in the expressions of everyone in the room.

Crusch narrowed her eyes in contemplation and murmured the name, while Ferris glanced sideways at her master with a hint of worry. Russell, ever the merchant, furrowed his brow in disgust at the detestable name, and above all else—

"—!"

Everyone in the room must have felt a dark, potent surge of sword energy sweep through for a moment. Of course, those involved in combat felt it. Crusch, skilled in martial arts; Rem, of the Oni race;

Ferris, a member of the Royal Knights. However even Subaru and Russell, who had little connection to martial arts, distinctly felt the oppressive sensation, as if it were touching their very core through their skin.

The source was—

“My apologies. I am still inexperienced.”

Wilhelm, who had been meditating with his eyes closed, opened one eye and apologized without changing his expression. The old swordsman, who had apparently brushed every corner of the room with his honed sword energy, touched the hilt of the sword at his hip as if embarrassed by everyone’s gaze.

“I apologize for interrupting the discussion. I wouldn’t mind excusing myself from this place, but…”

“No, you can stay. I wish to hear your opinion.”

Crusch rejected Wilhelm’s quiet suggestion and gave Subaru a meaningful look. She propped her arm on the armrest, rested her cheek on her palm, and prefaced her next words with, “So?”

“The White Whale, a rather sudden word to be thrown out. Am I correct in assuming the White Whale you speak of is the ‘Fog Witchbeast’?”

“Yeah, it should be. The giant whale that spews fog and swims through the sky. —That White Whale. I know its next appearance, both the time and place. I want that information to be considered as leverage for an alliance.”

Subaru tilted his head at Crusch, asking, “What do you think?” and left the judgment to her. Crusch placed a hand on her chin, assuming a thoughtful pose. However, before she could make an initial decision—

“May I ask a question?”

It was Russell who raised his hand, requesting the right to speak. When Subaru nodded, allowing the question, he held up a single finger and said, “Then, if you’ll excuse me…”

“First and foremost, we must confirm something… Mr Subaru, do you truly grasp the value of being able to predict the White Whale’s appearance?”

“…At the very least, it could reduce the number of traveling merchants caught in the White Whale’s appearance. We could revise transport plans in advance, and I think it could reduce casualties too.”

“That thinking is far too shallow.”

Russell’s tone grew stronger as he cut off Subaru’s unconfident answer. He grandly waved his hand, sweeping his arm towards the large window of the hall, pointing outside.

“Do you know how many lives have been lost due to the White Whale, born from the Witch’s hand? Caravans unlucky enough to be swallowed by the White Whale’s fog, vanishing without a trace. The former Royal Knights who sought to subjugate the White Whale, only to be routed halfway through their mission. The White Whale is not just enormous; it is not merely terrifying.”

Russell’s attitude as he spoke of the White Whale’s terror was fervent. Subaru understood that it was an expression of self-mastery born of weakness, seeking to share negative emotions. When faced with an overwhelmingly powerful “enemy,” people tend to protect their fragile hearts by praising the enemy’s might.

“Avoiding it is the most crucial thing of all. At the very least, if one can foresee the appearance of the White Whale, a symbol of disaster for merchants, it holds meaning and value beyond ten thousand gold!”

Clenching his fist, Russell passionately declared the value of the information Subaru possessed. However,

“But,”

He suddenly extinguished the passionate light in his eyes, unclenching his fist and waving his hand flippantly.

"Even that value of ten thousand gold only holds meaning if the accuracy of that information can be trusted. Mr Subaru, you stated that you know the next appearance of the White Whale. However if you have no means to prove it, it is merely wordplay meant to mislead."

"Russell Fellow has largely spoken my thoughts. I would like to hear the basis of your statement."

Crusch followed Russell, who shrugged with a pleasant smile, and questioned the authenticity of the information Subaru presented.

In response, Subaru felt a cold sweat trickle down his back. However, he managed to maintain a defiant smile on his face, struggling to keep any weakness from showing. While enduring, he played his next hidden card to those who had taken the bait. Carefully, exactly as he had prepared beforehand.

"The reason I can predict the White Whale's appearance is due to this."

He spoke, pulling something from his pocket and placing it on the table with a thud. Everyone's expressions stiffened slightly as they looked at what had been slid into the center of the table, surrounded by them all. —Immediately after, confusion uniformly clouded their eyes.

"Natsuki Subaru."

"Yeah."

Subaru responded to Crusch's quiet call of his name, puffing out his chest without fear. Without commenting on Subaru's audacious demeanor, Crusch pointed to the object sitting in the center of the table.

"What exactly is this?"

She pointed at the exotic item from another world, with its striking black sheen —a cell phone— and tilted her head at Subaru.

Subaru's precise knowledge of the White Whale's appearance was a mischievous twist of fate, a culmination of many coincidences. While such twists usually spell fatal situations for Subaru, this time, it worked in his favor.

During his third loop, when he encountered the White Whale, Subaru had his cell phone with him. In the dark carriage, he'd been searching for a light to check the map and had just managed to find his phone in his luggage and turn it on. With only a little power left, the phone brightly cut through the darkness, perfectly serving its purpose.

Though, immediately after, he ran into the White Whale, rendering both checking the map and securing transportation utterly futile—

"In that moment, at that instance."

The carriage next to them had vanished, and Subaru held up his phone to peer into the darkness. That's when his eyes met a massive eye that appeared from beyond the dark, peering back at him.

Immediately after, Rem's preemptive strike plunged them into battle. As he was flung through the air by the White Whale's roar and tail swipe, fragmented, continuous images, like a stop-motion film, burned themselves into Subaru's mind. Among those images was his phone, flying from his hand, and on its screen, clearly displayed, were the numbers: "3:13 PM".

Given that day and night had flipped when he was summoned to this world, that time wasn't a pure indicator of the hour. However, if seen as a reference point from a different scene, it held significant meaning. More than anything,

"It's no wonder you wouldn't know. This is what you'd call a 'magic device' excavated from my hometown. This is the basis of my statement."

—The cell phone itself, with its unknown origin, could be a useful weapon in negotiations.

Russell, eyes wide at Subaru's statement, was the first to reach for the phone. Just before his fingers touched it, he seemed to realize he was being too hasty and asked, “May I touch it?” Subaru nodded, watching him pick it up.

“It has a rather strange texture. It feels like metal, yet it isn’t. The surface is smooth… Does this part open?”

Russell let out a small gasp of surprise as he opened Subaru’s flip phone, a “Galapagos phone” in his world, and light spilled from it. The standby screen usually displayed an anime character, but before this meeting, he had switched it to a standard clock face. Even if someone fiddled with it, they’d only find the sparsely populated contacts list.

“It lights up, and the pictures changes… No, but I can’t discern the content. Are these unfamiliar characters, or perhaps… pictures?”

The screen flickered, displaying a second hand animation, but people in this world, whose concept of a clock’s form was entirely different, couldn’t understand the meaning of the clock face. The numbers at the bottom of the screen, indicating the time, were likewise incomprehensible; at best, they’d appear as geometric patterns writhing about. This was only natural, as Subaru experienced similar feelings of wonder every day.

“It’s a special script; I don’t think anyone can read it.”

“You can operate it… is that what you’re saying?”

“It’s not like I can use all its functions.”

Subaru chose his words with utmost care in response to Crusch’s question. When facing Crusch —no, in any situation where Crusch was present— there was one crucial condition to avoid. Subaru’s mind was fully engaged, choosing his words to avoid stepping on that landmine.

“So, you are saying this. —This ‘magic device’, as you call it, acts as a ‘warning stone’ that signals the approach of the White Whale.”

“I haven’t heard of a warning stone, but I suppose so.”

From the name, it was likely some kind of magic ore that served as an alarm in this world. He guessed it was a tool that reacted to sounds, presences, or mana movements, emitting light or warning sounds.

“A magic device that signals the approach of the White Whale… What’s your assessment, Russell Fellow?”

“Honestly, I’m at a loss. Magic devices vary greatly from individual to individual, and it’s rare for identical ones to be unearthed. Communication mirrors, for which replication methods have been established, are merely exceptions among exceptions… Therefore, it’s difficult to verify the true purpose of this magic device.”

Asked to judge a tool outside his knowledge, Russell avoided making baseless conjectures. Currently, Russell’s position was not yet aligned with either Subaru’s or Crusch’s; he remained a benevolent third party. The course of the negotiations would significantly influence his own stance. Naturally, his eyes were stern as he assessed which side would benefit him.

As a result, Crusch, having been refused an answer by Russell, furrowed her brow in difficulty.

“In that case, there appears to be no way to verify its authenticity. It is difficult to take your claims at face value. What do you propose?”

“Indeed, it’s a tricky situation. If only there were some way to prove it.”

Spreading his hands, Subaru turned to Crusch with a gesture that implied he was at a loss. She squinted one eye skeptically at Subaru’s attitude and words, then exhaled a small “Hmm.”

“Shall we try bringing it close to a witchbeast to make it activate? Or is there someone who can prove that this magic device reacts to witchbeasts?”

“Let me correct you on one thing.”

Raising a finger, Subaru waved it, aiming to playfully retaliate against Crusch.

“The magic device doesn’t react to witchbeasts themselves. If it did, it would be constantly ringing senselessly due to all the witchbeasts living all over the place.”

“—Meaning it only reacts to the threat of witchbeasts?”

Crusch responded to Subaru’s point, then was about to dismiss it with a scoff, “Such a convenient tale…” But before she could react,

“—Ah.”

Someone let out a small sound, a sigh of understanding. It was none other than Rem, who still had her fingers on Subaru’s sleeve.

She put a hand to her mouth, as if embarrassed that her own thoughts had intervened in the conversation, but before Crusch could hear her apology,

“That was an interesting reaction, Rem. Do you have any idea?”

At Crusch’s probing voice, Rem briefly glanced at Subaru’s profile. Seeing gratitude and concern in his eyes, Subaru nodded to reassure her.

“If you have something, you can tell them.”

“—Yes. If Subaru says so.”

With permission, Rem stepped forward, turned to Crusch, and, pointing to the cell phone on the table, said,

“As it concerns matters within the domain, I cannot speak in great detail, but… Recently, there was an incident involving witchbeasts. Lord Roswaal himself acknowledges that Subaru was the one who acted most swiftly to resolve the situation.”

“An incident involving witchbeasts —and you realized its precursor with this magic device?”

“It was the kind of problem that would have been too perceptive to notice without any reason.”

Fearfully, Rem slightly tilted her head, glancing at Subaru. She must have privately wondered how Subaru had detected the Juggernaut incident. Her doubt, or rather, pure question, was now being resolved by the “magic device” Subaru had presented.

“…”

Crusch’s gaze, hearing Rem’s answer, silently pierced her. Her sharp eyes seemed to pour consciousness into Rem’s, creating the illusion of seeing through to her very core. Only a few seconds passed, but it was a period of oppressive pressure that felt as though it drained physical strength.

“—You are not lying.”

Crusch stated, indicating a certain understanding and trust in Rem’s answer. Hearing her words, Subaru struggled to keep his blatant relief from showing on his face, but inside, he couldn’t help clenching his fists and giving a silent fist pump.

Of course, everything Subaru had said about the “magic device” (the cell phone) and its functions was nothing but a grand, utterly baseless bluff. It was a charade built on layers of bluffs, and if the truth of its falsehood were revealed, it would be considered rude at a negotiation described as “equal” and an act of barbarism that could warrant being cut down.

However, Subaru had managed to completely deceive them by carefully choosing his words and skillfully steering the conversation.

In response to Crusch’s questions, Subaru had not lied even once. The cell phone was not a device that randomly rang at the presence of witchbeasts, and Subaru, who was even too lazy to use its email function, certainly wasn’t “mastering” its features. He had navigated situations where he couldn’t get by with silence and diverted the topic, and the most challenging part, getting a third party to affirm the “magic device’s” function, he had somehow achieved by guiding Crusch’s interest towards Rem, who unconsciously spoke in Subaru's favor. Subaru had predicted that if he brought up the "magic device" reacting to witchbeast threats, Rem would connect it to the Juggernaut. Indeed, Rem linked the Juggernaut incident with the phone, and her reaction perfectly captured Crusch's interest.

Rem had simply spoken what she believed to be true. However, that understanding was different from the actual truth.

"You speak as if you can tell whether someone is lying."

"To boast, that is precisely the case. Observation skills—that sounds good, but in reality, it is the blessing of the 'Divine Protection of Wind Reading' bestowed upon me."

Crusch responded to Subaru's probing remark with an unexpected answer. Subaru had always thought Crusch's "ability to see through lies", which she mentioned in a previous loop, was simply due to her sharp insight.

"To read the wind means to use what is unseen as a basis for judgment. Naturally, my eyes can see the 'wind' surrounding a person. When one speaks falsehoods, a certain wind blows around them. —Rem had none of that."

"Oh, oh, I see. I didn't know that."

"A wind of agitation is blowing, Natsuki Subaru. Well, it would be extremely unfair for you not to know about my Divine Protection of Wind Reading in a negotiation."

Subaru struggled to hide his inner turmoil, forcing a strained smile at Crusch's blunt and somewhat malicious remark. A Divine Protection that allowed one to inevitably discern the truth of another's words was a kind of cheat. Even if it was just discerning "yes" or "no," it could be a vile tactic in a negotiation, where words were like cards being played.

At any rate,

"Regardless of your current demeanor, what Rem said contains no falsehood. At the very least, it serves as evidence that you possess a means to detect the threat of witchbeasts in advance."

Crusch, trusting her "Divine Protection of Wind Reading" after questioning the veracity of Rem's words, overlooked the cunning loophole Subaru had prepared. Subaru felt guilty for attempting to deceive such a noble opponent, but he showed no trace of his inner turmoil on the surface. He understood that his excuse, that he wasn't intending to tell a fundamental lie, wouldn't hold water.

They had both clarified their positions and resolved to face each other in a negotiation. Therefore, he should feel no guilt about choosing a method to play the cards in his hand in a way that made them look good to his opponent. Furthermore, lacking the resolve to "lie" completely would be the height of rudeness.

"Can you trust the effect of this magic device?"

"That would be premature. Though I could discern there was no underlying connection, it is still the defense of one's own attendant. This is a judgment that could affect the future of the Royal Selection—and by extension, the future of the kingdom. It cannot be made lightly."

Subaru's plan to persuade her here was, as expected, dismissed. Information on the White Whale's appearance—he seemed to have gained a minimum level of credibility for it, but only enough for it to be discussed further rather than laughed off. To raise that credibility and elicit the answer Subaru desired—

"—Can my company join the discussion about that magic device?"

Suddenly, a voice rang through the room, one belonging to no one else present. Surprised, Subaru hastily turned to see someone leaning against the open hall doors, tapping the door with the back of her raised hand.

"Isn't it strange that the person who called me is the most surprised, huh?"

She looked at Subaru's dumbfounded face, then let her soft features twist into a mischievous smile, gently running her fingers through her wavy, light purple hair. Her soft hair, reaching her waist, resembled dandelion fluff, and her gentle features naturally conveyed a sense of peace to others. However, the eyes that formed her smile held an unwavering, predatory glint, and within her mind resided a monster of the economic world, where numbers fiercely competed.

"—Anastasia Hoshin."

Crusch quietly murmured the name of the visitor in a low voice. In response, Anastasia, whose name had been called, smiled and said, "Thank you kindly."

"I rushed here because I was summoned, but starting a business discussion without me is quite unfair, isn't it? Such an interesting and profitable venture… Can I join in too?"

Saying the opposite of her cheerful tone, Anastasia crossed the hall and moved towards the center. Subaru held his breath as she walked, sending a fleeting, anxious glance behind her. The open doors slowly closed, and no other visitors followed her in—

"Julius isn't coming, so rest assured, okay?"

"—!"

Anastasia quietly revealed this as she passed Subaru, seeing through his inner agitation. When she met Subaru's surprised gaze with her profile, she shrugged with a troubled "Oh, no, no…"

"Right now, Julius is under disciplinary confinement by the commander's orders. He's in the middle of being punished for meddling with another child without his lord's command. What a troublesome knight."

"Confinement…"

Subaru couldn't hide his surprise at learning this unknown fact, repeating the word like a parrot. He had assumed the incident at the training grounds was a consensus among the Royal Knights, and that his humiliation would be buried without ever becoming public.

He glanced sideways at Ferris, who smiled back at Subaru with an innocent expression. If Ferris had known and hadn't told Subaru— That was quite harsh. Or perhaps, had this been Subaru even half a day ago, he would have laughed at Julius's predicament, feeling good about it, and never considered it a lesson for himself. Perhaps his knight had known that.

At any rate,

"You were summoned… Does that mean Natsuki Subaru summoned you?"

"It was his cute girl attendant, actually. Normally, I'd be turned away at the gate, but… being a Royal Selection participant, and hearing talk of selling 'White Whale' information, I couldn't not come."

Anastasia replied to Crusch's question, looking at Subaru. Subaru nodded, dropping his chin in response to her gaze, and felt the situation shift dramatically.

—With this, everyone he wanted at this negotiation table was finally gathered.

Crusch, as an equal alliance partner. Russell, representing the royal capital's merchants, added to contend with Crusch. And now, Anastasia, Crusch's rival candidate, also competing with Russell—

"Excuse me, but I have a question, Mr Subaru."

"Ah, what is it, Russell-san?"

Raising his hand, Russell posed his question, keeping Anastasia in his sight. Subaru nodded, and he touched his chin beard, prefacing his words with, "I certainly hope not, but…"

"I would like to ask the true intention behind inviting Lady Anastasia to this meeting. She is a Royal Selection candidate, and the Hoshin Trading Company, while new, has influence even among the royal capital's merchant guilds. As this makes my position in this meeting unclear, I cannot help but ask."

“Would you be mad if I said it was to weigh options?”

Subaru replied, closing one eye, and the air in the room instantly changed. Russell’s face showed discomfort at his suspicion being confirmed, and Crusch’s meditative expression became stern. Only Anastasia’s demeanor remained unchanged, the predatory gleam in her eyes, present from the start, not wavering in the slightest.

“So, you are saying this? —That you intend to pit Anastasia Hoshin and my house against each other, to see who will pay more for the ‘White Whale’ information, and then choose your ally based on that?”

“…”

“If so, that is a truly shallow choice, Natsuki Subaru.”

Crusch unleashed her assertiveness on the silent Subaru, standing up from her chair and facing Anastasia. Naturally, with their height difference, Anastasia had to look up at her, but,

“Oh, this is nice, Ms Crusch. A person at the top, afraid of being pushed down from below… Seeing that face gives me shivers.”

“I wouldn’t call that good taste. Though, for one who makes their desires the correct path, perhaps it is a natural judgment… However, my stance remains unchanged.”

Crusch received Anastasia’s provocative words with a serious expression, then averted her gaze from her and pierced Subaru with sharp eyes.

“As you’ve heard, Natsuki Subaru. If you are expecting a bidding war between my house and the Hoshin Trading Company, I must tell you you are mistaken. My house has no more reason to cling to the White Whale information than the merchant factions do. Therefore, there is no reason for us to play into your intentions…”

“Whoa, hold on, both of you, calm down!”

Subaru held out his hand towards Crusch, who seemed about to cut off not only the White Whale discussion but also the alliance negotiations entirely, feeling quite flustered internally. Crusch, taken aback by Subaru's words, inadvertently fell silent. Behind her,

"By 'hold on', do you mean your purpose isn't to drive up prices between candidates?"

Russell, who had been observing the scene and hoping to gain an advantage, tilted his head. Subaru nodded in response to his question.

"I don't think I can manipulate anyone that easily. I know very well that my hands are small… I can barely manage to hold just one person's hand."

He idly waved his empty hand, and it was gently enveloped by a warm palm from the side. It was Rem. She softly clasped Subaru's trembling fingers, and when he turned to her, she nodded with a faint blush on her cheeks.

"So, yeah, that's it— I can barely hold anyone's hand…"

"Ah, yes, yes, how touching. So, what happens next with the discussion?"

"My apologies. Um, what I mean is…"

Flustered by Rem, who had become more physically affectionate since his confession, Subaru drew courage from the warmth in his palm and resumed the conversation.

"I played the White Whale card, invited two leading merchants from the capital, and created this grand situation… Now, I have a proposal."

Snapping his fingers, Subaru drew everyone's attention and bared his teeth in a fierce grin. Boldly, confidently, without a hint of weakness or hesitation, Subaru slowly pointed his snapped finger at Crusch.

"Will you listen?"

"—It was I who interrupted your story and stated an incorrect conclusion. Therefore, I have an obligation to consider your proposal. Speak.”

Crusch stood with her arms crossed, facing Subaru with a dignified posture. The oppressive wind intensified, making his skin prickle with unavoidable goosebumps. Even Anastasia looked at Subaru in the same way, the pressure simply doubled—if he were alone, he would have likely joked and laughed it off and fled.

“…”

The sensation in his clasped hand returned sharply. He hadn’t been called by name, nor had they exchanged any secret signals. Purely and simply, Subaru was happy with Rem’s feelings. That alone was enough for Subaru to fight even the Witch.

He closed his eyes, held his breath for a moment, and felt thought and oxygen circulate in his brain. They would take the bait, he was sure. He had thought, thought, and thought it through. He had replayed the first, second, and third loops in his mind countless times, gathering the information he had gained and forming a predicted scenario. It wasn’t certain. He hadn’t heard it from anyone’s mouth. However, there was information to be gained from this very negotiation, and that scenario suggested a single possibility. Whether it was a convenient illusion for him, or a miracle that would make his three deaths not in vain— Now, it was time to play.

“Crusch-san, your…”

“…”

“My information will definitely be useful for your planned subjugation of the ‘White Whale’.”

—Subaru’s knowledge of the future and Crusch’s objective.

The shared objective of both aiming for the “White Whale”—that was precisely the basis for Subaru judging her —Crusch Karsten— to be a suitable alliance partner.

Silence fell upon the hall, giving everyone a moment to think.

It gave time to Crusch, Anastasia, Ferris, Wilhelm, and Russell. Each of them, reflecting on Subaru's recent words, closed their eyes as if to ponder their meaning.

That silence, though only a few seconds long, pressed down on Subaru's mind with immense pressure. His stomach ached, his insides screamed, and a high-pitched pain, like an iron bar striking his skull directly, vibrated in his teeth.

He had taken a gamble. He had made his move. From this point on, unlike the previous flow of conversation, this wasn't something he could clearly simulate. He couldn't imagine the reactions of others; he just had to adapt to the flow of the situation. First, how would Crusch react to his opening gambit?

"One thought I must question, Natsuki Subaru."

Breaking the silence, it was Crusch who spoke first. She uncrossed her arms, raising a single finger from them and pointing it at Subaru.

"Where did such a wild idea come from? Why do you believe my house would be contemplating such a thing?"

Her monotonous voice showed no agitation or confusion; no emotion was conveyed. Her dignified demeanor as a ruler permeated her every action, and Subaru, naturally intimidated, looked away, preambling with, "Um…"

"Rem."

"Yes."

"Give me a good smack on the back."

"Yes."

After saying it, he thought, "Ah, 'good smack' might be an overstatement", but it was too late. A tremendous impact, a fierce, dry sound, exploded, and Subaru momentarily thought his insides had all fallen out through his stomach from the sheer force.

Of course, she must have held back to some extent, but the clear, reddish imprint of her small palm must have been etched onto Subaru's back. Setting that aside, Subaru refocused himself with the pain and warmth, and turning to the others who were watching the exchange with surprise, he said,

"My apologies for the unsightly display. I just needed a little wake-up call."

"…To correct oneself's spirit when cowering before a challenge is something everyone can relate to. I shall not blame you. Before tackling something grand, I, too, sometimes rely on the superstition I was taught long ago: writing 'enemy' on my palm and swallowing it, to, in turn, 'swallow' my opponent."

"Lady Crusch, Lady Crusch. Ferris taught you that charm ages ago. Are you still remembering it?"

Ferris approached, confessing his past mischief in a low voice. Crusch, with a slight surprise on her brow, said, "What…?"

"It was a lie?"

"It's not a lie if it helped clear Lady Crusch's mental doubts, even if it's unprecedented. Ferris is happy to be of help to Lady Crusch."

"Is that so? You thought of me? Then I forgive you."

Watching Crusch so easily fall for Ferris's glib words, Subaru felt as if the difficulty of the negotiation had somewhat decreased, and he was a little encouraged. At any rate, with such a surprisingly silly exchange between master and servant unfolding, Anastasia also put a finger to her lips and tilted her head, saying, "Hmm."

"I also do a charm before important business negotiations. If I put gold, silver, and copper coins in a bag and jingle them by my ear, courage wells up… What's with that face?"

"I just thought, 'This isn't the conversation of people competing for the top of the country', that's all."

Subaru decided to dismiss their comments as trivial matters before an important one, and he closed his eyes to their remarks. Anastasia pouted her lips in dissatisfaction at Subaru's reaction, fiddling with the fur stole she was wearing, the same one she wore at the Royal Selection today.

"Well, enough with the breaks… I want to hear the rest of what you were saying earlier. Would you mind continuing?"

"Ah… Sorry for making you go to the trouble."

He muttered the latter part so quietly it was almost inaudible. Anastasia simply waved a small hand in response, not mentioning whether she had heard him. It was clear that her interaction with him just now was a deliberate attempt to buy Subaru time to collect his thoughts. While it was highly likely that Crusch and the others were being genuine, Subaru took advantage of their goodwill to organize his thoughts once more before speaking.

"The first strange feeling I got was when I heard about iron products —in other words, weapons— being bought and sold at high prices."

Slowly, as if savoring each word, Subaru gathered scattered pieces of information. These were bits of knowledge he had gained in the first, second, and third iterations.

"There's a place that's collecting large quantities of weapons and armor that used to be dirt cheap. I found out it was Crusch-san's place by just wandering around the merchant street, more or less."

Was it someone among the traveling merchants who had laughed, wondering if she was preparing for war? In fact, Subaru had deduced that Crusch was preparing for war.

The difference in their thinking was that her opponent was not humans, but a powerful Witchbeast.

"It seems they were collecting them quite rapidly, enough to affect the market. So quickly, and what's more, they were gathering weapons in the capital, not in their own territory. It's only human nature to think something must be up, right?”

“To connect that to the ‘White Whale’ is too far-fetched. The ‘Whi’ of ‘White Whale’ hasn’t even come up. It’s true that my house is collecting weapons and iron, but you can’t assume it’s for the purpose of subjugating the White Whale, can you? It could be that we’re simply gathering forces and aiming to take over the country by force, ignoring the outcome of the Royal Selection.”

“There’s no reason for such a reckless act, and I know you’re not that kind of person.”

If the person he faced was great, then he believed he had enough discernment not to misjudge them. There was likely no one whose character was as unwavering, even from a distance, as Crusch. Could he harbor such doubts about someone who embodied sincerity and integrity?

To Subaru’s reply, Crusch briefly said, “Is that so?” Then, looking at Subaru with an intrigued gaze,

“Even so, I am somewhat surprised. I had fully expected your presence in the lower city during the day to be merely a pastime to pass the time— It seems I was the one lacking discernment. Forgive my underestimation.”

“Yeah, ah, that’s right. I mean, I wasn’t just fooling around, you know.”

Guilt pricked at him as Crusch exhaled in admiration. In truth, her assessment was remarkably accurate. Subaru’s character, as he justified himself after the fact, would be fully affirmed by the underestimation she had held of him until now.

Shaking his head and regaining his composure, Subaru continued, looking at Crusch.

“When I realized you were collecting weapons, I naturally thought it was preparation for war. The question was what you were trying to fight, but… that, well, a certain merchant let it slip.”

“A certain merchant?”

Recalling his earlier wanderings in the lower city, Subaru lightly obscured the part where he had gained the hint. Regarding the part Subaru obscured, Crusch closed one eye and looked meaningfully at Russell with the other. At her gaze, Russell flinched as if saying, “Oh, no,” shaking his hands and head to deny any suspicion. Perhaps finding no deceit in his demeanor, Crusch merely let out a somewhat uncomprehending sigh.

In fact, it would likely be impossible to detect any trace of a lie from Russell at this point. However, the suspicion was not wrong. The one who had uttered the words that made Subaru suspect Crusch was targeting the ‘White Whale’ was none other than Russell himself.

Subaru had first met Russell in the previous iteration when he was returning from a discussion at Crusch’s mansion. At that time, his meeting with Crusch seemed to have broken down, but Subaru hadn’t forgotten what he had answered Wilhelm’s question on his way out.

—That if Crusch’s plans succeeded, it would be a welcome development for merchants like themselves.

If he had made that statement in anticipation of Crusch becoming queen, then the apparent breakdown of the meeting didn’t make sense. Yet, if there were other possibilities that would benefit Crusch and Russell—and by extension, the merchants of the capital —

“Crusch-san is almost single-handedly leading the Royal Selection, but it seems she’s not very popular among the merchants. My usual fruit vendor was complaining about it.”

“I won’t deny it. It’s most profitable to draw money from where it is. I admit that commerce in my territory incurs taxes.”

“However,” she continued, acknowledging Subaru’s point,

“I intend to repay that in the form of security, however— I am aware that from an outsider’s perspective, that benefit is difficult to convey.”

"Indeed. Unlike those who benefit directly in Crusch-san's territory, merchants in the capital can only judge Crusch-san's character based on superficial information."

It was true that she, as a ruler, managed her territory well. However, those not in a position to witness her abilities firsthand could only base their assessment of her on superficial information they had heard or seen.

Just as Emilia was shunned simply for being a half-elf. She, too, was shunned by those who only saw the negative aspects of her harsh way of life.

"So I thought, Crusch-san probably doesn't like people who judge others superficially, but sometimes even those people need to be won over as allies. So, what's the best way to improve their perception…?"

"If people judge you based on bad superficial stories… then you just need to cover up that superficial bad story with a good one, right?"

Anastasia took over the end of Subaru's sentence and stated her conclusion. Then she looked up slightly as if reviewing the current conversation, and a smile spread across her lips.

"Well, it's a convenient story, isn't it? Things aren't that simple, and there's a high possibility of miscalculation to begin with. Aren't you stretching things quite a bit to fit your narrative?"

"I can't deny it. It's certainly true that Crusch-san is collecting weapons and that she's trying to win over merchants with something big. But whether that connects to the White Whale is wishful thinking. Perhaps it is just because I know the White Whale will appear soon, and I'm just linking it to that."

But, he continued, looking directly at Crusch. Crusch's expression, as she met Subaru's gaze, showed no emotion, making it impossible to discern her thoughts. However, no words of denial came out. In that case,

"I'll say it again. Regarding the alliance between Emilia and Crusch, what the Emilia camp can offer is the right to mine ore in Elior Forest, and information on the White Whale's next appearance. In short, the honor of defeating the witchbeast that has troubled the world for so long!"

"…"

"If my words are completely off the mark and not at all what you intend, then by all means, cut me off. If I'm wrong, I don't mind if it's just a transaction for the information on the White Whale's next appearance."

Even with just that information, the two merchants present would likely manage to turn a profit and help Crusch save face. There was a strong possibility that the capital's merchants would also change their perception of Crusch positively. But,

"But if your goal and my wish align—"

Spreading his hands out in front of him, Subaru appealed to Crusch. To take his hand, to prove the value of the future he had seen, and to break down the walls.

"To subjugate the White Whale. —Let's go hunting!"

That monstrous entity, that nightmarish, powerful witchbeast. The symbol of disaster for the traveling merchants, the seed of hateful memories for Subaru. Subaru proposed to Crusch the subjugation of the witchbeast that controls the Fog.

"One question I shall ask."

Looking down at Subaru's outstretched hand, Crusch raised a single finger towards him. Subaru instinctively felt that this question was the final hurdle to overcome her.

Up until now, Subaru had managed to slip past her 'Divine Protection of the Wind Reading' And beyond that, he had succeeded in drawing out his objective, the crucial part of the negotiation. Now, for the final showdown—Subaru held his breath, wondering what she would ask, "Are you—certain you know the time and place of the White Whale's appearance?"

—Ah, no, Crusch.

He murmured inwardly, adding words to the breath he had swallowed and letting them pass his throat.

"Yes, it's true."

—Then you can't make me lie.

"I can guarantee this information, the time and place of the White Whale's appearance. I'd even stake my life on it."

Literally, it was information he had obtained by staking his own life and paying with the lives of others. There was no doubt about its certainty, and this was not the time to be hesitant.

"—There are some doubts, but I suppose it must be said that you saw through our intentions admirably."

Crusch exhaled softly, closing her eyes as if resigned and replying thus. At first, Subaru couldn't grasp the meaning of her answer. But as her words slowly permeated his brain and took shape, their outline became clear.

"Then…"

"There are suspicions, there are doubts. There are many points that don't make sense, making it difficult to readily agree. However,"

Crusch clenched the hand with the raised finger, then extended that hand toward Subaru. His outstretched hand was grasped from above by her hand,

"I shall trust your determination in creating this situation, and I shall trust these eyes."

The negotiation was successful. Seeing their handshake, one person visibly relaxed his shoulders—Russell. He let out an exaggerated sigh, shaking his head as if saying, "Oh dear."

"I was a bit on edge, but I'm glad it worked out. Mr Subaru, you certainly kept your promise before the meeting."

"Yeah, sorry about the short end of the stick, Russell-san. Once the White Whale is dealt with, I'll hand over the cell phone to you, as promised."

Subaru returned a mischievous smile to Russell, who was beaming at the two shaking hands. Hearing their conversation, Crusch blatantly frowned.

"So, it was indeed connected."

"I'm the one who called you here, you know? After your discussion with Russell broke down yesterday evening, I visited him and pretty much laid out the whole plan."

"Please don't take it the wrong way. In truth, we tried not to show any unnatural favoritism. Our relationship is purely in anticipation of the alliance being formed."

Crusch closed her eyes and snorted at Subaru and Russell, who spoke casually.

After finishing his information exchange with Rem before the negotiation, Subaru immediately contacted Russell. He had caught him as he was leaving Crusch's mansion and returning home after their discussion had broken down, and that's when he brought up the current proposal. To an opponent who couldn't see through lies, Subaru had proceeded from the start as if he already knew about 'Crusch's White Whale subjugation', securing the passive cooperation of one of the few people in the capital outside of Crusch's faction who knew of her intentions.

The 'monster alarm' talk using the cell phone was also pre-arranged — Though Russell hadn't been informed that the cell phone wouldn't actually function as an alarm.

Receiving those answers, Crusch now slowly turned her gaze to Anastasia. Anastasia met Crusch's gaze with a gentle smile.

"What's wrong, Ms Crusch?"

"I understand the connection between Russell Fellow and Natsuki Subaru. However that makes your position unclear. Why were you summoned here?"

"Well, one reason is to add to the persuasion, I suppose."

Looking around the room with amusement, Anastasia touched the fur of her collar.

"Two Royal Selection candidates and one of the capital's leading merchants. Bringing so many involved parties to an alliance negotiation means you can't afford careless information or remarks. So, just my presence here will add weight to his words, won't it?"

Isn't that right? Anastasia tilted her head, having read Subaru's intentions. Inwardly, Subaru could only break out in a cold sweat and offer a noncommittal, forced smile. In fact, he had indeed aimed for that. If they even slightly thought that a Royal Selection candidate wouldn't spew outright lies when gathering other candidates, then his plan was working. The fact that Anastasia had read through that and participated indicated that she, too, was far from a simple opponent.

"Then what is the other reason?"

"That's even simpler. —I'm a merchant."

Anastasia put a hand to her mouth and chuckled mischievously, then bounced forward. She then gently placed both her palms over Subaru's and Crusch's hands, which were still clasped together.

"I wholeheartedly support the subjugation of the White Whale. For us merchants, the White Whale's existence is a matter of life and death, and if it's defeated, it would be a huge help. If you patronize the Hoshin Trading Company for preparations and other things, that would be perfect, wouldn't it?"

"Please wait. In that regard, the capital's commercial guild should take precedence. Lady Anastasia, if you're going to interfere, please understand the proper channels."

Russell cut in, speaking up against Anastasia's mercantile spirit. As the merchants exchanged glances, sparks flying, Crusch, having heard their remarks, looked at Subaru with some doubt in her eyes. And then,

“Wait. From what you two are saying, it sounds like time is of the essence, isn’t it?”

“I haven’t heard the crucial details, but the way you’re bringing it up gives that impression. Are you actually feeling a bit rushed?”

Subaru unconsciously held his breath, seeing her narrowed, sidelong glance. However, at this point, concealing any more information would cause problems. Resigned, he said,

“Yes, that’s right. —According to the magic device, the White Whale will appear in about thirty-one hours from now. The location is… near Flugel’s Tree.”

“Thirty-one hours…!”

“Flugel’s Tree.”

Crusch gnashed her teeth at the short amount of time remaining, and Anastasia tilted her head at the appearance location. Yes, it was a race against time. The information on the White Whale’s appearance time and location would only be valuable until just before its appearance. If the goal was to subjugate the White Whale,

“Within thirty-one hours, we must deploy a subjugation force on the Lifaus Highway and immediately defeat the White Whale the moment it appears.”

“What’s needed for that is…”

Subaru responded to Crusch, who had quickly grasped the situation, and looked around the people in the room. Then, the elderly swordsman —Wilhelm— stepped forward, as if continuing Subaru’s words. Breaking his silence, he said,

“First, the formation of the subjugation force. This has already been proceeding smoothly for several days. Indeed, preparations were made to coincide with the White Whale’s appearance period. I believe it is due to Lady Crusch's great fortune that it coincided almost perfectly with the start of the Royal Selection."

"You catch on fast! The White Whale's appearance period…"

Does it have a pattern? Subaru asked in surprise. In previous worlds, from the way Otto and others spoke, the White Whale's appearance seemed completely random in both time and place, which was why it was feared as a phantom monster.

"That's the result of Old Man Wil's persistence. He's been thinking about nothing but that for fourteen years and doing all sorts of things, you know."

Ferris replied to Subaru's questioning voice as he spoke. He stood next to Wilhelm, touching the broad-shouldered old man's arm.

"With Old Man Wil here, there's no need to worry about training or morale, but I can't deny we're a bit unprepared. Everyone would make a fuss if they heard Lady Crusch brought an army to the capital, so we gathered them secretly."

"Indeed. We still haven't fully prepared the weapons and equipment, but…"

Wilhelm nodded at Ferris's words. The old man then turned his sharp gaze to Subaru, and then to Anastasia and Russell.

"That's why you two are here, isn't it, Subaru-dono?"

"Well, yeah, it was a 'just in case' kind of thing, I guess?"

Scratching his head, Subaru answered Wilhelm's words with a weak, humble reply. Receiving Subaru's passive affirmation, Russell touched his chin.

"We've already mobilized the guild and are making preparations. We'll gather everything necessary from all the shops in the capital by tomorrow afternoon."

"Hoshin Trading Company will do the same. The areas outside the guild's jurisdiction are ours, and we've got plenty of other goods prepared, so you can look forward to it.”

Following Russell, Anastasia also declared her strong cooperation. She then shot a glance at Crusch, who looked like she wanted to say something, and stuck out her tongue.

“A merchant never misses a business opportunity. That’s why I answered the summons. Ah, it’s just irresistible, the moment you sell something to someone!”

Anastasia couldn’t hide her shiver, her face contorted in ecstasy as she pressed her hand to her cheek and laughed. Her flushed cheeks and lovely appearance made for a very picturesque scene, but with a greedy disposition at its core, it was hardly endearing.

“It’s not just about goods, but the best thing to sell is a favor. It has no form, no loss—and no price tag.”

“You’re an ally now, so it’s fine, but hearing that again, this merchant is terrifying!”

Subaru shrieked, and Anastasia was in high spirits, saying, “Isn’t it great?” Seeing their exchange, Crusch exhaled as if disarmed.

“You blocked my path before the negotiation, then. I see. In this situation, it seems I was the one lacking resolve. I am impressed, Natsuki Subaru.”

“It’s just that my preparation and review went well, that’s all. Honestly, I’m truly relieved.”

This was the first stage of the negotiation, that is, the breakthrough of one of the walls that needed to be overcome. Although it was the result of extensive prior preparation, it still felt like a razor-thin success. The fact that an irregularity had favored Subaru could also be considered a point of reflection. Still,

“I managed to save face in the capital, didn’t I, Rem?”

“—Yes. As expected, Subaru is wonderful.”

Saying that, he gently squeezed the hand that had been held the entire time, the one opposite to the hand he offered Crusch, sharing the victory of the negotiation with Rem. On second thought, she must be the one most pleased with the success of this negotiation.

When she first remained in the capital, unable to confide in Subaru, she must have faced Crusch in negotiation in solitude. She must have challenged the negotiation with all the authority she was allowed, and yet she was unable to maintain the alliance. If it had failed, the Emilia camp's predicament would remain unchanged, and the future of Subaru's treatment, even if there was a prospect, would be uncertain. There was no doubt that all these anxieties had exhausted her mind and body.

Had he been able to repay her, even a little, for that anxiety and all the worry he had caused her? If so, that alone made Subaru happy right now.

Thats when—

"—Subaru-dono."

As Subaru exchanged joy with Rem, a voice suddenly called out to him. Looking up, he saw Wilhelm, who had approached close by, looking at Subaru with serious eyes. Naturally, as Subaru felt his posture straighten and looked up at him, the old man paused for a breath.

"Thank you."

He said briefly, then knelt down and bowed. Subaru couldn't hide his surprise at this sudden action. However, Subaru was the only one who reacted that way; the others all had expressions that showed a certain understanding of Wilhelm's actions. Even Rem, even Anastasia.

"You have my gratitude, equal to that which I owe my liege, Lady Crusch. I thank you for granting this unworthy body the opportunity for revenge."

"Um, that… eh?"

Wilhelm ignored Subaru's confusion and removed his sword, scabbard and all, from his waist. He then placed the sword on the floor, resting his hands on it in a gesture of profound respect.

“The Trias I previously introduced myself as was an old family name. As the one who took the previous Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea, as my wife, and thereby sullied the lineage of the Sword Saints— That is I, Wilhelm van Astrea.”

Taking a breath, Wilhelm’s eyes gleamed with renewed vigor.

“I thank you for the kindness of granting this old man the opportunity to slay the hateful witchbeast that took my wife.”

Wilhelm’s words were deep, piercing. Everyone in the room listened intently to his words, all waiting for Subaru’s reply.

Pushed by that expectation, Subaru took a small breath.

“Oh, oh. I-I knew that, of course. Naturally, I thought Crusch-san would go along with the White Whale subjugation because of that, so—”

“Natsuki Subaru.”

Crusch interrupted his slightly stammering reply. She gazed at the flustered Subaru, still holding his hand, and whispered,

“The wind of lies is blowing from you.”

With that, she proved the efficacy of her ‘Divine Protection of the Wind Reading’ by seeing through Subaru’s first lie that he couldn’t completely conceal.

Chapter 55: Outpost

1

“Slay the White Whale—.”

Once the preliminary negotiations concluded and those two words, “slay the whale”, began to take on concrete meaning, those involved quickly sprang into action. Russell and Anastasia, the two merchants, wasted no time, running around the capital to gather every weapon and tool they could find, just as they had promised. Crusch, too, was fully engrossed in assembling the subjugation force and securing the necessary dragon carriages, preparations she had been making for some time.

Watching their movements, Subaru finally understood why, in the previous iterations, securing dragon carriages became so difficult after three days. News of the White Whale’s appearance must have reached the capital, prompting Crusch to deploy her forces onto the highway around that time.

Seeing everyone frantically rushing about, Subaru couldn’t stay still, even though it was almost late night.

“I’ll—”

“There’s nothing you can do, is there, nya?”

Just as Subaru was about to offer his help, someone stepped in to dash his spirits. It was Ferris, covering his mouth with a yawn and with tears welling in the corners of his eyes. Subaru glared at his feminine face with a scrutinizing gaze, and Ferris twitched his chestnut cat ears.

“Procuring supplies and organizing the subjugation force aren’t in your domain, are they, Subaru-kyun? You’d only mess things up and make them more complicated, so you should just behave, nya.”

"Like hell I will. Everyone's moving around like crazy because I said I'd do it. I'm just gonna—"

"Nope, that's where you're wrong."

Ferris interrupted Subaru sharply, pressing a finger to his lips. Subaru narrowed his eyes, forcibly cut off, and Ferris then used the same finger to flick his nose.

"Ferris doesn't really—or rather, doesn't like that 'it's my fault' way of thinking at all, nya."

"Why not? In reality…"

Wasn't it Subaru's suggestion that caused everyone to work through the night? For the instigator to just wait around shamelessly…

"Lady Crusch decided to subjugate the White Whale for Old Man Wilhelm's sake, nya."

Ferris suddenly mumbled in a small voice. Subaru instinctively responded with a bewildered, "Huh?"

"The White Whale's subjugation is Old Man Wilhelm's long-cherished wish. When the previous Sword Saint —Old Man Wilhelm's wife— was killed by the White Whale, he apparently wasn't by her side."

"The previous…"

"He desperately gathered information about the White Whale. Where it appeared before, where it appeared afterward. The season, time, weather, and every other condition were laid out, and finally, he managed to grasp a faint pattern. However no one would listen to him…"

Wilhelm, alone, pouring over books and documents, his eyes bloodshot. How many nights had the old swordsman spent waiting for an opportunity to avenge the monster that killed his wife? His persistence finally bore fruit, and Wilhelm found a glimmer of hope regarding the White Whale's movements. That was, “The kingdom no longer had the courage to challenge an opponent capable of annihilating a subjugation force that included a Sword Saint. Even if he tried to find other supporters, it was like shouting into the void. I think Old Man Wilhelm’s state of mind must have been desperate, nya.”

Even if he wanted to avenge himself, he couldn’t even reach the feet of his hated enemy. Subaru understood the despair that such powerlessness could create within oneself. The sin of weakness never let you escape.

“He even considered abandoning everything and challenging the White Whale alone, nya. He probably thought not being able to fight was more shameful than not being able to win. —Men are foolish, aren’t they? His wife surely wouldn’t have wished for such a thing.”

“That’s right.”

It was Rem, standing beside Subaru, who agreed with Ferris. She had been listening silently until now, and as she shook her blue hair, she gently gazed at Subaru’s profile and placed a hand on her chest.

“Rem wants the person she loves to always be healthy. Even if Rem were gone, she would want to be remembered with a smile.”

“…It’s too early to talk about becoming a memory, you know.”

Unable to bear Rem’s sentimental words, Subaru lightly poked her blue hair. Then, he changed his fist to an open palm and slowly ran his fingers through her soft hair, caressing it. Rem, accepting Subaru’s rough gesture, narrowed her eyes lovingly.

“It was Lady Crusch who spoke to Sir Wilhelm—”

“Lady Crusch, nya~.”

Ferris let out an impressed sigh, as if recalling that moment.

“Lady Crusch is truly a kind person. Even when someone is desperate and grieving, and no one else pays them any mind, Lady

Crusch still extends a helping hand. Just like that time—oops, oops.”

Ferris quickly covered his mouth with his hand, sealing off the rest of his words, and then stuck out his tongue with an embarrassed smile.

“Alright. No more talking. In short, what I’m trying to say is that it’s thanks to Subaru-kyun.”

“Thanks to me…?”

“We went off on a tangent, but that’s what we were originally talking about, wasn’t it?”

With the conversation having drifted to Wilhelm’s past, Subaru also recalled the forgotten topic. It had originally been about the frantic preparations for the White Whale subjugation.

“It’s ‘thanks to’, not ‘because of’, nya~. These two might seem similar, but they’re completely different, you know? Now Old Man Wilhelm can finally repay his wife. Even announcing his family name properly…”

“Ferris. You’re a bit too loose-lipped, aren’t you?”

“Nya?!”

Ferris let out a small yelp at the voice from behind and turned around with an awkward expression. Standing there was an old gentleman with his hands clasped behind his back. He stared intently at the shrinking Ferris with narrowed eyes.

“I don’t think it’s good taste to spread other people’s embarrassments, do you?”

“It’s not really exposing the past, but Ferris sees it more like a new anatomical chart of Old Man Wilhelm, nyaa…”

Ferris put his fingers together and pouted his lips, drawing out his words coaxingly. He looked adorable, and with cat ears, he might be tempting, but he was a man. Naturally, his charms had no effect on Wilhelm.

“In any case, it’s not something one should prattle about without the person’s permission, is it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dismissed unceremoniously, Ferris drooped his shoulders and shuffled away. As Subaru watched his retreating back, a sudden silence fell over the room. Having unintentionally heard Wilhelm’s past, Subaru felt intensely awkward. He considered spilling his own dark history to cancel it out, thinking it would be an even exchange, but he decided against it at the last second, figuring it would make him seem like a cornered social outcast. As a result, the silence continued, and Subaru racked his brain to find another topic—

“I apologize for making you hear such unpleasant stories. It’s merely the trivial, idle time of an old man. Please forget it.”

However, Wilhelm spoke first. Seeing the bitter, weary smile that graced his lips, Subaru resolved to respect his wishes. Do not ask anything; that was the old man’s intent. He would ask nothing.

“—You truly love your wife, don’t you?”

—Rem-san?! Subaru was so startled that he mentally used an honorific. With that much force, Rem had unexpectedly stepped into a minefield.

Oblivious to Subaru’s anxiety, Wilhelm raised an eyebrow and paused for a moment.

“Yes, I love my wife. More than anything, more than anyone, no matter how much time passes.”

Wilhelm’s confession carried the weight of all the years embedded within it. Subaru had heard Wilhelm speak of his loving wife several times in the past. Each time, it conveyed how much Wilhelm cherished his family, but reflecting on it now, knowing she was deceased, brought a different kind of emotion.

"I still have preparations for tomorrow, so I'll take my leave. Both of you, please rest well tonight."

Turning his back to the two silent figures, Wilhelm spoke and walked away.

"Tomorrow—"

Subaru instinctively called out to his retreating back. Wilhelm stopped, but didn't turn around, and Subaru said,

"Tomorrow, both I and Rem will be joining the fight."

"That is…"

"Do you really think allies would just stand by while a powerful foe is being fought? Don't worry, Rem can fight, and… I can do something too."

Subaru rattled off his words, preempting any denial from Wilhelm. Then,

"Let's work together and smash that whale bastard! I'll give it everything I've got!"

Giving a thumbs-up and a flashing smile, Subaru vowed to fight alongside Wilhelm. Wilhelm remained silent for a moment after this declaration, but then,

"My wife was a woman who loved to admire flowers."

He said quietly, his words taking a different turn from a direct response to Subaru's vow.

"She disliked wielding a sword, yet she was loved by the sword more than anyone. She was only allowed to live by the sword, and my wife, too, accepted that fate."

Knowing the power of the current Sword Saint, Reinhard, one could fully understand that such a divine protection was far too much for a human body. It was so immense that it narrowed the future and possibilities of the one granted that blessing to an almost infinite degree.

“It was I who broke my wife’s sword and made her abandon the name of Sword Saint.”

Wilhelm had once told Subaru that he was “untalented”. That was why he had dedicated half his life to the sword to reach his current level.

How many times had this old man suffered setbacks and had his spirit broken before achieving his cherished wish? And then—

“I took her as my wife after she cast aside the sword and became simply a woman. I thought that by doing so, everything would be forgiven, and she could live as Theresia, not the Sword Saint. —The sword did not let her escape.”

Why had the woman who was supposed to have abandoned the sword joined the White Whale subjugation force? Wilhelm’s reminiscence did not touch upon this point.

“Subaru-dono, my thanks.”

In one breath,

“In tomorrow’s battle, I will find the answer with my sword. I will finally be able to visit my wife’s grave. Finally, I can go to meet my wife.”

Leaving those words, Wilhelm exited the room for good this time. Subaru, left behind, couldn’t help but feel a sense of respect for Wilhelm’s resolve, as one man for another. People could truly be that sincere and unwavering in their love.

“Subaru…”

Then, Rem’s voice suddenly fell in the quiet room where the two remained. Subaru silently turned his gaze towards her, and their eyes met as she looked up at him.

“If Rem were gone, would you remember her for just as long?”

"…That's bad luck, so I don't want to answer."

Subaru said with a disgruntled voice and lightly poked Rem's forehead with his finger. She placed her hand on her forehead where his finger had touched, and then smiled blissfully, as if she had received the answer she had wanted.

2

The next morning. Time limit until the White Whale subjugation—Seventeen and a half hours.

"You can count on me, bro!"

In the garden of Crusch's mansion, where the cold morning air still lingered, a cheerful voice boomed loudly. It was a voice that seemed to reach every corner of the spacious estate.

Subaru, who received it up close, directly in front of him, was not amused. He clutched his ears and grimaced exaggeratedly, glaring in protest, but—

"The miss already told me all about it! We're gonna join the whale hunt today, so count on us!"

"You're too loud! Can't you see my expression with those innocent eyes of yours?!"

Spoken to with a voice like a strong gale, Subaru's defiant yell inadvertently grew louder. The beastman with a dog-like face, with sharp fangs lining his wide-open mouth, laughed, seemingly enjoying Subaru's best efforts at shouting.

His entire body was covered in short, reddish-brown fur, with slightly darker, burnt-brown hair decorating his elongated head like a mohawk. His eyes were sharp, and his blade-like canine teeth gleamed in his mouth, but there was a charm to him as he let the corners of his eyes crinkle in boisterous laughter. However, he was easily over two meters tall, and his powerfully built physique, clad in what appeared to be black leather clothing, exuded a sense of wildness and civilization having reconciled after a fistfight.

He called himself a “Kobold”, but by no means did he have the physique of a Kobold. Subaru’s image of a Kobold was a small, bipedal creature with a dog’s face. Two of the characteristics matched, but just that last one being different changed the impression so drastically.

“No, no, Natsuki. Ricardo has ears that don’t hear inconvenient things, you see. The trick to getting along with him is to talk to him from a proper distance.”

“Is that why you, the one who introduced him, are standing so far away?! My carefully styled hair is getting totally messed up! Not that it’s long enough to style, anyway!”

Yelling as he ran his hand back and forth over his short hair, Subaru complained to Anastasia, who was standing at a distance, making no effort to hide her suppressed laughter. Seeing Subaru’s reaction, the beastman—Ricardo—poked his shoulder with his large palm.

“What are you saying to the miss, kid! She’s my employer, so be a bit gentler with her! She usually can’t talk to anyone without thinking about money, so she’s starving for normal friends right now, she’s an easy target!”

“Ricardo. You’re not good at keeping secrets, so it’s best not to say bad things, alright?”

“That’s not a bad thing! I’m worried about the miss! She came all the way from Kararagi and doesn’t have many acquaintances, so she must feel lonely, right?! That’s why, here! Look! Ta-daaa! It’s your friend number one!”

“Don’t chatter away using people as a go-between! And don’t keep shaking people’s heads so much! My neck’s gonna break!”

Having his head shaken with superhuman —or, in this case, literally inhuman— strength, his neck joints seriously made strange noises, so he withdrew from the spot. Tumbling away to escape Ricardo’s range, Subaru checked his muscles by adjusting the angle of his forcibly twisted neck.

“Close call, close call. It wouldn’t be funny if I got injured and withdrew from a casual chat before the decisive battle. Even I, with my mood so hyped up, can’t accept that kind of punchline…!”

“What’s up with this weird kid, huh? I’m just trying to be friendly.”

“You’re using physical force, aren’t you?! I can’t stand people who are more overbearing than me!”

Shaking his head in a peek-a-boo style, Subaru maintained his distance from the approaching Ricardo by moving in a circular motion. The two continued their standoff, slowly, but without closing the distance. Anastasia observed their exchange from outside the circle, a baffling sight to an outsider. Then,

“It seems you two have met.”

Saying this, the emerald-haired beauty —Crusch Karsten— descended into the garden. She wasn’t in her usual formal attire, but in light armor with greatly reduced ornamentation. The armor had open joints in various places, prioritizing ease of movement, which seemed to raise concerns about its defensive capabilities, but —

“Battle attire should prioritize ease of movement. Don’t worry, it’s armor imbued with the blessing of earth. As long as my mana doesn’t run out, it will exhibit sturdiness beyond its appearance.”

“This world is still cheating with magic and blessings, huh… I wonder if I have some blessing sleeping inside me too, just not awakened yet.”

“No matter how long you sleep, you don’t forget how to breathe, do you? For those with blessings, it’s the same. If you’re not aware of it, you might as well give up.”

Subaru had experienced a similar denial from someone else a long time ago. He pouted his lips and clicked his tongue, discarding his wish. Crusch glanced at Subaru’s childish reaction, then stood in front of him, looking up at the beastman who was scratching his head.

"Indeed. I've heard tales, but you are a soldier beyond rumors. You are Anastasia Hoshin's…"

"I'm just a hired hand. Lady Crusch, you yourself are even more impressive in person…"

Ricardo snorted and looked down at Crusch, who stood with her arms crossed, looking up at his massive form. He wrinkled his snout and chuckled, making a guttural sound.

"You're a remarkable person. This royal selection, it's going to be quite tough, isn't it, miss!"

"That's why I'm trying to gain favors like this, you know. How much is written on the price tag depends on Ricardo's performance, you see."

Ricardo burst into loud laughter, echoing dramatically, at Anastasia's shrug. Subaru worried that Ricardo's blunt attitude might displease Crusch, but Crusch, facing him, showed no sign of minding Ricardo's behavior. She glanced at Subaru.

"Did you rest well last night?"

"Thanks to you, yeah. Though, knowing that you all were busy moving around while I was leisurely sleeping didn't make the sleep feel great."

"A place for everyone, and everyone in their place. Your job was fulfilled last night, when you gathered me, Russell Fellow, and Anastasia Hoshin, and concluded the White Whale subjugation. Though, it seems you have no intention of ending it there."

Turning around, Crusch looked Subaru directly in the eye. Feeling uncomfortable under her direct gaze, Subaru squirmed.

"You said you'd participate in the subjugation battle… Can you fight?"

"Can I fight? No. If you're counting me as a fighting force, I'd say you're a bit too desperate, even if you just need a cat's paw. Make it a dog's paw, though; it's bigger."

"Wasn't I just talking about myself?!"

"No, you weren't! Seriously, you have such convenient ears, oi!"

Yelling back at Ricardo, who had interrupted, Subaru scratched his forehead to compose himself, then prefaced with "However,"

"Against the White Whale, I, as a person, might actually be useful… I think."

"Tell me. What is your basis?"

"I don't really want to believe it myself, but… it seems my body odor has a tendency to attract witchbeasts."

Subaru subtly changed his phrasing as he explained his plan for joining the battle. The lingering scent of the Witch emanating from Subaru's body—the precise circumstances of how it permeated his flesh were unknown, but like with the Great Rabbit, it was reasonable to expect it to play a role in attracting the White Whale.

The problem was that the White Whale's threat was dozens of times greater than the Great Rabbit's, and Subaru alone couldn't even evade the White Whale's approach, let alone intercept it.

"So, riding a fast dragon carriage or something, and constantly racing past the White Whale's nose to distract it… I think that's the most effective way to use me without taking casualties."

Honestly, it was a plan that even he felt dubious about saying aloud. He was offering himself up as live bait, someone not expected to contribute as a fighter, but who could be useful by being thrown around the battlefield. It was a division of labor that would make even a suicidal person blanch, but—

"Surprisingly, there's no hint of falsehood."

Crusch, who had been resting her chin in her hand with a skeptical look, relaxed her shoulders. The "Divine Protection of the Wind Reading" must have exposed the truth of Subaru's statement and led her to consider the effectiveness of his strategy. She nodded once.

"Then, I shall have you use an earth dragon with excellent speed and stamina. If you ride with Rem, there should be no issue with mobility. However, you are fundamentally to follow my instructions."

"Oh, so you're going to the battlefield too, Lady Crusch?"

"Do you think I'm capable of sitting deeply in my mansion chair, waiting for good news?"

Flicking the metal fittings of her armor with a finger, Crusch wore a bold smile on her regal face. Subaru shook his head at her dashing appearance and quietly apologized for asking something so obvious.

"—It's almost time."

Receiving Subaru's apology, Crusch closed one eye and murmured. As if on cue, relevant parties began to gather in the garden one after another.

Leading the way, the figure who appeared was Wilhelm, his attire changed to battle gear. The lightly equipped old swordsman wore only the minimum protective gear guarding his vital points, with a total of six slender swords hanging from his waist, three on each side. Following behind him, Ferris was clad in what appeared to be curved knight armor for women, with only a dagger fastened to his waist. This posture indicated his clear decision to focus on rear support, considering his own abilities.

Arriving late was Russell, with his dull blond hair. His face, after an all-nighter, showed fatigue, but only his eyes shone brightly, indicating his high spirits. As Anastasia and Russell, who had already arrived in the garden, joined up and began some conversation, Ricardo, shaking his massive body, laughed with a ferocious twist of his mouth.

As the main figures began to assemble, they were followed by a continuous stream of seasoned soldiers whose names Subaru didn't know. They were likely members of the subjugation force Crusch had organized. Perhaps only the key figures had been called here, as their number was quite small, about ten. And what's more, "They all look… pretty short on youth, don't they?"

Subaru mumbled the thought that came to his mind. In front of him, the members of the subjugation force were lined up behind Wilhelm, and their average age seemed quite high. Wilhelm, at the head, was over sixty, and the knights accompanying him didn't seem to be under fifty either. As someone who had personally witnessed Wilhelm's strength, Subaru felt no anxiety about the old swordsman's skill, but what about the others—?

"They are all individuals with a connection to the White Whale, apparently."

"Rem, huh?"

"Yes. Subaru's Rem."

Saying this, Subaru turned his gaze to Rem, who had suddenly appeared by his side as if bubbling up. Her expression was as unreadable as ever, and her attire remained a maid's uniform despite heading out to battle. When he had pointed this out during their morning rendezvous, she had replied,

"This maid uniform is handmade by Lord Roswaal and is a combat maid uniform with protective blessings. So there is nothing to worry about."

Apparently. There were uniforms for going out, for cooking, for chores, for entertainment, and for combat—a wide range. Yet, the only option was a maid uniform, so Roswaal's fetish was as expected. Anyway,

"So, 'connected to the White Whale' means… former members of subjugation forces, or something like that?"

"Many of them seem to have retired from the front lines, but they gathered at Sir Wilhelm's call. Their training and morale both seem more than sufficient."

"A situation with old soldiers burning for revenge, huh… That's exciting."

While saying this, Subaru also wondered if their past connection to the White Whale and their inclusion in this subjugation force was also part of Crusch's "kindness", which Ferris had mentioned last night. If that would jeopardize the operation itself, it would be counterproductive, but Crusch didn't seem like the type to compromise on such matters. Wilhelm's persistence, too, shouldn't be so lenient as to lightly bring dead weight onto the battlefield. In some cases, he might even thin out unnecessary burdens before reaching the battlefield.

"Come to think of it, that position is exactly me this time…!"

"Lady Crusch's subjugation force is like that, but… those people over there…"

Setting aside Subaru, who was trembling with trepidation, Rem was concerned about the opposite side of the garden from the old soldiers of the subjugation force. It was a group deployed at the edge of the garden, exuding an atmosphere as if from a different dimension. Following Rem's gaze and seeing that group, Subaru let out a sigh of understanding.

"Those are Anastasia's private soldiers… or rather, the mercenary group she hired, I heard. They're from Kararagi, so their way of speaking is unique, and their appearance is unique too."

"They're full of uniqueness. But, that's them, isn't it?"

He'd probably get used to their Kansai-dialect-like way of speaking eventually, but for Subaru, the problem was their appearance, which was hard to get used to. Anastasia's mercenary group, starting with Ricardo, their leader, was comprised entirely of bipedal animals—in other words, beastmen.

There was Ricardo, who looked highly combat-capable at first glance. There were also others with physiques comparable to his, and even bear-like beastmen with fluffy white fur, no taller than Subaru's waist. Seeing that they carried staffs, they were likely specialized in magical rather than direct combat. About thirty of them were lined up, adding a nice touch of otherworldly fantasy to Subaru's experience.

“Anastasia herself can’t fight, so it seems she’s lending her financial power. I heard Ricardo is just lingering around me, so try not to pick a fight with him.”

“If he doesn’t harm Subaru at all, Rem has no intention of causing trouble herself. Oh, Subaru, your hair is messed up after Rem just fixed it.”

“Oh, that was Ricardo messing it up just now, you know?”

“Let’s smash him.”

“That’s a quick conclusion!”

With his hardly messed-up hair threatening to become a source of conflict, Subaru hurriedly stopped Rem. Then, he casually checked the time—it was almost time for departure.

“Before that, though.”

A tense atmosphere began to fill the garden, and following the already aligned subjugation force, the other relevant parties also began to straighten their postures. Crusch, stepping forward, seemed about to begin her pre-departure address. Slipping through the moment, Subaru, with Rem in tow, headed towards the two merchants who were conversing.

“I’m counting on you two as merchants —people who will at least listen if the money is good enough— and I have something I want to talk about.”

He decided to lay a “groundwork” before the White Whale hunt.

3

“—Four hundred years.”

The words marked the beginning, spoken as the appointed time arrived and the assembled warriors gathered.

A heavy resonance, a taut atmosphere. Amidst a sharp sensation that felt like pain shooting through strained spines, Crusch, the focus of all eyes, stood proudly. She thrust the Carsten family's engraved holy sword into the ground, placed her hand on its pommel, and in a single breath, swept her gaze across everyone's faces.

"Four centuries have passed since the worst calamity befell the world. The 'Witch of Envy' ran rampant, and the White Whale, born from her hands, turned the world into its hunting grounds, trampling the weak as it pleased."

The Witch of Envy, who in the past destroyed half the world and whose terrifying tales still linger. The Fog Beast, her servant, who even now, with its master defeated, continues to enjoy its freedom. A true monster that has caused countless sacrifices and swallowed up myriad fighting spirits.

"The number of lives taken by the White Whale is immeasurable. Coupled with the insidious nature of its fog, it's safe to say that no one truly knows the exact count of its victims. Over these four hundred years, the number of engraved gravestones, and those without even a name, has only grown."

Some old soldiers bowed their heads at Crusch's words, gritting their teeth to stifle sobs. Others dug their nails into clenched fists, drawing blood. There were old swordsmen who had held an unceasing storm of emotions within their chests, quietly awaiting the chance to unleash their rage.

Their regrets, the grudges accumulated from countless corpses, began to shroud the garden's air in a dark, murky gloom. —But,

"However, those days of regret end today."

"…"

"We will end it. We will strike down the White Whale and bring an end to countless sorrows. We will give proper tears to the sorrow that couldn't even reach sorrow."

"—!"

"We will end this pitiful witchbeast, who, having already lost its master, still obeys an endless command.”

A warmth spread through their chests. Without a word, the same deep emotion that Subaru felt was clearly shared by everyone present.

The old soldiers who had bowed their heads, who had clenched their fists, the old swordsman who had closed his eyes— All now looked up, their eyes fixed on Crusch standing before them. Receiving the heat of their gazes, Crusch thrust her hand forward and raised her voice.

“We march! —To the Lifaus Highway, to Flugel’s Great Tree!”

“—Ooh!!”

Responding voices overlapped, creating the illusion of a thunderous roar shaking the garden as feet stamped the ground. Carried away by the surge of fighting spirit, Subaru also cheered loudly. Amidst it all, Crusch, stronger and higher than anyone else, drew her sword and thrust it skyward.

“Tonight, by our hands—we strike down the White Whale!!”

The White Whale Extermination—the greatest operation since being summoned to this other world, now begins.

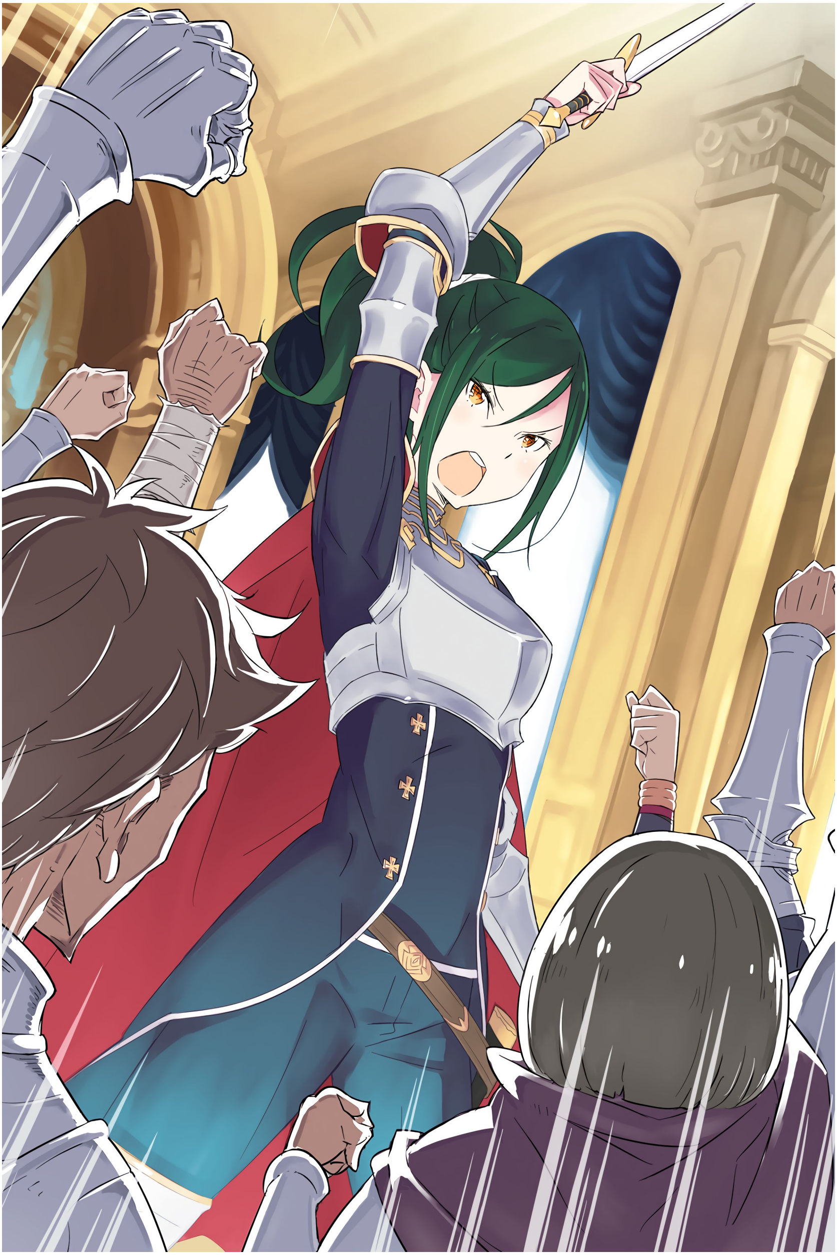

Chapter 56:
Start of the Decisive Battle

1

The expedition to subjugate the White Whale will be led by Crusch Karsten.

Crusch has full command over the subjugation force she organized, with the leader of the force being Wilhelm van Astrea, from the lineage of the Sword Saint— The “Sword Demon”.

The subjugation force under Wilhelm is divided into about ten platoons, each led by the veteran soldiers who attended the speech in the garden.

Each platoon consists of roughly fifteen members, bringing Crusch’s total subjugation force to about one hundred and fifty.

However, the total military strength doesn’t end there. There’s also a group of thirty beastman mercenaries, lent by Anastasia, led by Ricardo— Apparently known as the “Iron Fangs”. Ricardo commands the entire group, with two vice-captains under him.

The vice-captains are:

“I’m Mimi.”

“I’m Hetaro.”

They are two cat—no, two cat-like beastmen who give a small bow.

Their short fur is orange, and their height, reaching only about Subaru’s waist, closely resembles Subaru’s image of a dwarf-type beastman.

Additionally, they have very charming faces, and their pure white robes, which completely cover everything but their heads, suit them well. To put it simply:

“They’re so cute, I want to kidnap them.”

“We hear that a lot.”

“Big sister, don’t say things like that again…”

The girl who introduced herself as Mimi nods at Subaru’s comment, and the boy who introduced himself as Hetaro gently scolds her, looking slightly flustered. Apparently, with their identical appearances, they seem to be twins.

Subaru, wondering internally if beastman births are like animals, where many are born at once. Subaru nods to the two of them and asks:

“You said you’re vice-captains… are you two strong?”

“Of course! We’re the strongest when we’re together!”

“Oh… ah, yes. That’s right. Big sister and I will do our best.”

Is their relationship one where the assertive older sister is reined in by her passive and cautious younger brother? It also makes Subaru wonder if all twins in this world have an older sister who leaves the support role to the younger sibling.

Anyway:

“Even though our boss is the leader, when the fight starts, he rushes ahead and doesn’t pay attention to his surroundings at all.”

“So we’ll give instructions to everyone in his place.”

“Ah, I see… I can imagine the struggle.”

Subaru can picture the towering figure of Ricardo laughing boisterously and charging into the center of the battlefield with gusto.

Perhaps their opinions align with Subaru’s imagination, as Hetaro sighs, slumping his small shoulders and saying, “Exactly!”

“We’ll follow Lady Crusch’s command, but we’ll fight the White Whale our own way. In that regard, we hope to avoid causing confusion for Mr Subaru… Subaru?”

“…No, I’m just surprised at how incredibly thoughtful and serious you are. You’re small, but it’s impressive how much you think about things.”

“Hehehe, aren’t I amazing?”

“Big sister, you get carried away so quickly. …Cute.”

When Subaru praises Hetaro, who seemingly showed himself for a perfectly valid reason, Mimi inexplicably puffs out her chest with pride. Hetaro, while admonishing Mimi, quietly lets slip his true feelings at the end. It seems her increasing arrogance might also be her brother’s fault.

Currently, the White Whale subjugation force, numbering approximately one hundred and eighty, is marching towards the roots of the Flugel’s Great Tree, where the decisive battle with the White Whale will take place.

After the preliminary speech at Crusch’s mansion concluded, Subaru and his companions quickly rendezvoused with the subjugation force outside the royal capital and have been proceeding at a moderate pace for about half a day.

According to Subaru’s portable device, there’s exactly half a day left until the White Whale is scheduled to appear. Five hours have already passed since they departed the royal capital, and considering the remaining distance, they are now at the halfway point— They should have enough time to rest before the decisive battle with the White Whale.

“Once we reach the Great Tree, we’ll need to finalize the battle plan again. My role is going to be pretty important too, I think.”

“This time, it’s better for Rem to stay close to Subaru rather than go to the front lines, isn’t it? —Rem absolutely doesn’t want to regret anything like with the Juggernaut.”

Rem, holding the reins beside Subaru on the coachman's seat, who speaks with quiet determination at Subaru's murmur. She manipulates the reins, controlling the ground dragon, while glancing sideways at Subaru.

"Honestly, Rem is against it. Rem think it's too dangerous to attract the White Whale with the Witch's Scent… And besides, for that smell to be coming from Subaru…"

"We'll use whatever we can. If it increases our chances of winning by even a tenth of a percent, it's a bonus. I'm full of shortcomings, so I have to do something like that to catch up."

"Subaru is wonderful."

In the face of Subaru's resolve, Rem stubbornly turns her face away, refusing to budge on that one point. It's a small, sulky gesture, but seeing her emotions overflowing, Subaru can't help but let out a soft, wry smile.

Rem had always strived to be expressionless, calm, and emotionless.

While she had opened up somewhat and shown a softer side of her emotions since the monster incident, the stiffness that was still present in her is now almost completely gone.

Ever since Subaru confessed his inner weaknesses and she, in turn, confessed her feelings for him, the richness of her emotional expressions is incomparable to before.

"Time had stopped, but now it moves", was her own phrase, and it was precisely true.

That's why:

"I want to win."

He quietly voices that hope.

Currently, Subaru feels confident that the situation is far better than in previous loops.

His demands, which no one would listen to no matter how much he pleaded before, have been met, and his relationship with the Crusch camp, which should have coldly rejected or abandoned him, is now good. He also feels that his bond with Rem has grown stronger, despite the embarrassing fact of having spilled his guts.

However on the other hand, it's also true that he's stepping onto a more dangerous path than ever before.

The White Whale's threat is still vividly burned into Subaru's mind from having witnessed it up close.

Even Rem's combat power was completely ineffective, and its colossal body could pulverize even large dragon carriages with a mere flick of its tail, which couldn't even be called an attack. Its open maw swallowed ground dragons whole along with the earth, and the death throes of flesh being ground by its sturdy, millstone-like teeth still echo in his ears.

Just thinking about facing it makes his limbs tremble uncontrollably.

However, every time Subaru's heart leans towards weakness in this way:

"…"

Rem's eyes beside him peer into Subaru, as if seeing through his heart.

That alone makes Subaru's heart blaze, as if forgetting its fear. In front of her, right before Rem's eyes, he cannot allow himself to remain the weak, useless, hopeless Natsuki Subaru.

If he is to regain his composure, optimistic hope is more fitting than pessimistic despair.

Indeed, the current situation forces him onto a dangerous path. It's a situation born of necessity, and he hasn't been given enough time to prepare everything perfectly.

All Subaru could do in the limited time was call upon the best personnel and completely leave all other roles to them— His usual reliance on others.

Even so, they didn't ask for more from Subaru, and they certainly didn't treat him as a useless burden.

He just has to do whatever he can, as diligently as possible, in each moment.

Since his own scope of what he can do is extremely narrow, he must at least properly grasp the breadth of that scope and consider what he can do within that narrow range.

"What's up, bro? —You've got a look of resolve on your face."

Suddenly, Ricardo, riding alongside the dragon carriage, smiles and says this to Subaru.

Subaru glares at the dog beastman with the large axe strapped to his back and defiantly twists the corner of his mouth.

"You bet. It took a while, but it clicked perfectly. I'm amazing when I'm resolved, you know? I'll never give up on the future, even if I die."

"Now that's a greedy thing to say! The lady would be thrilled to hear that! You really are perfect to be the lady's friend, bro!"

"If it weren't for our positions, I wouldn't mind shaking your hand… Ah, but if I try to get along with Anastasia, there's that troublesome guy around."

Subaru suddenly recalls the refined man who would stand by Anastasia's side.

It feels like a long time ago that he was beaten by him and left bloody in the middle of the training ground. Though, in the flow of a world that doesn't share loops, only about five days have passed.

Ricardo places a hand over his large mouth at Subaru's words, letting out a rare, knowing chuckle. Seeing the mischievous emotion in his eyes as he glances sideways, it seems he's heard about Subaru's embarrassing blunder.

Naturally, a sulky sentiment wells up inside Subaru's chest, and he turns his face away.

"If you're going to laugh, then burst out laughing. Even I'm aware of how little I read the room back then."

"Nah, nah, what I'm laughing about is something else entirely. Well, you'll figure it out naturally soon enough, and it'd be uncool to spill the beans here."

Satisfied, Ricardo snaps a thin whisker beside his nose with his finger, concluding the topic.

Subaru tries to protest his suggestive demeanor, but gives up, figuring no good answer would come from pressing him, and decides to bring up another topic.

"By the way, I've been wondering ever since we left the royal capital…"

"What is it, ask anything you want. We're buddies, you and me. Even though we don't know each other that well, I'll tell you if it's not too much! If it's too much, it depends on the money! Money!"

"The way you're so particular about money, you really are from Kararagi… That big dog you guys are riding, it's amazing, isn't it?"

Subaru points to the creature under Ricardo's excited bottom, struggling to find the right words to describe it.

The animal Ricardo and the beastman mercenary group are riding is completely different from the ground dragons led by Crusch's subjugation force.

A large dog, perhaps, is the closest description. Its physique is that of a large carnivore —surpassing lions and tigers in his original world— and despite its low posture, it has a presence that doesn't pale in comparison to ground dragons.

Ricardo nods in understanding at Subaru's question, saying "Hmm," and lightly pats the dog's back with his large palm.

"You don't see them much here, do you? This is a creature called a Liger. They're as prized in Kararagi as ground dragons are here. Due to territorial disputes or something, they're hard to breed in other countries like Lugunica, so there aren't many of them."

"Liger…"

At first glance, based on Subaru's experience, it looks like some kind of Ulgarm subspecies. However there are no horns on its head, and its face is clearly more endearing compared to the fierce appearance of the witchbeasts.

If witchbeasts are more wolf-like, then Ligers can certainly be said to be more dog-like.

However, the sight of Ricardo, a dog-type beastman, riding on such a colossal dog, looks strange from the outside—

"There's something oddly incomprehensible about that image. Don't you feel any discomfort yourself?"

"People say that sometimes, but not really. For us, even if they look similar, we can clearly distinguish between beastmen and animals. Don't worry, I don't feel uncomfortable even if you think that."

"No, I thought it was rude to say, so I apologize properly. My bad."

"Gahaha, you're a proper one, aren't you!"

Ricardo bares his teeth and laughs, then gently strokes the Liger's nape. The Liger remains unresponsive, but the way it carries its master seems to have a dog-like sense of loyalty, just like its appearance. The connection between them, it seems, is a commonality even across worlds.

"Compared to ground dragons, Ligers lose in horsepower, but their agility is incomparably better. When the battle with the White Whale turns into a free-for-all, it'll be our time to shine, so watch closely."

"Horsepower, huh. Even if dragons and dogs are popular, that's still the comparison for pulling power… Come to think of it, I haven't seen any horses."

He'd heard from Emilia and others that they exist. However given that he's never seen one, their prevalence seems quite low.

Subaru then points to the rear, towards the back of the marching subjugation force.

"So, you're pulling one vehicle like a dog sled with a bunch of them? Considering the dogs might get tired before the actual battle, wouldn't it have been better to leave it to the other ground dragons?"

"You gotta manage your own luggage yourselves. While I appreciate the concern, the Ligers pulling the carts are properly trained specifically for that. We can't pamper them, besides the White Whale isn't necessarily our only enemy."

Subaru involuntarily suppresses his inner turmoil from showing on his face. Ricardo, meanwhile, seems oblivious to Subaru's surprise.

"If we get ambushed by bandits on the way, there won't be any time to deal with transferring luggage, right? So, we handle our own business as much as possible."

"…If they had the courage to attack a fully armed group like this, they wouldn't be bandits. If they did, it wouldn't be courage, but simple, roundabout suicide."

"That's right!"

Ricardo laughs heartily and slaps the Liger's back as if to spring it forward. The Liger responds with a low growl and steps forward.

He then gallops towards the front, seemingly heading towards Crusch, who is at the head of the march.

Subaru watches his retreating back and takes a breath, his mind racing.

Even if he overcomes this impending battle with the White Whale —this grand showdown— Subaru still has many more walls to overcome.

“Being a hero is really tough, seriously.”

Despite muttering such a tired remark, Subaru’s expression forms a smile.

What he needs to do and what he wants to do align, and there are people who support him in doing it. —Could there be a more rewarding situation than this?

With their fighting spirit in perfect condition before the upcoming battle— They shall challenge fate once more.

2

Fortunately, the march proceeded without incident and according to schedule. The subjugation force arrived at the Flugel’s Great Tree just as the moon began to rise— The start of the night, with approximately six hours remaining until the White Whale’s appearance.

Last time, due to the circumstances, Subaru couldn’t observe it closely, but the sheer thickness and height of the trunk, surpassing even the thousand-year-old trees estimated in his original world, continued to impress him with its grandeur the more he looked up from its base.

“It’s so —huge.”

“You seem happy, Subaru.”

Rem, standing beside him, points out with a small laugh as Subaru, his voice filled with excitement, steps onto the massive, undulating roots of the great tree that bulge from the ground. In response to her words, Subaru jumps down from the tree root, saying, “Well, you know.”

“Men are naturally moved by things that are big and look strong. I was impressed when I first saw a ground dragon, but nature is incredible too. Flugel did a great job."

He genuinely praises the sage's great feat of planting the tree. He seems to be a great person who did nothing else but plant trees, but if he accomplished at least one deed that left his name in history, then it's fine. He can only pray it wasn't a result of self-aggrandizement, though—

"Oh, there's a name carved into the trunk. We're not on a school trip, are we? Who actually does this kind of thing? No manners, no manners. Rem, lend me your carving knife."

"Rem doesn't have one, and it's not allowed, even for Subaru."

Rem admonishes Subaru, who tries to carve his unnecessary assertion into the trunk with his palm. She laughs softly at Subaru, who pouts and openly expresses his displeasure, then Rem looks up at the great tree.

"The White Whale appears here, right?"

"Yeah, it does. My phone… This magic device will ring when it's time."

He pulls his cell phone from his pocket, hooks the strap on his finger, and dangles it as he replies to Rem. The timer is set, and an alarm will sound when the White Whale is scheduled to appear— At 03:13 PM.

There's no deception regarding this point, and Crusch and the others were convinced during the meeting after their arrival. Not being able to tell the full truth did stir up some guilt, but for now, he's resigned himself to the fact that they'll just have to be convinced by the results.

Keeping the truth from even Rem requires enduring an even stronger pain, but—

"That magic device will notify you of the witchbeast's presence…"

"Yeah, that's right. Honestly, without this, my value this time is…"

"—You're lying, aren't you?"

Suddenly, Rem, narrowing her eyes, asks this, and Subaru's heart definitely stops.

A voiceless "ha" escapes him, and his heart begins to beat again. What did Rem just ask him? He looks up, meets her gaze, reconfirms that her intention isn't due to his mishearing, and his lips tremble.

"Wh-What are you saying? If this is a lie, how would I…"

"You're speaking like a Kararagin, it doesn't suit you, Subaru."

"No, seriously, what kind of suspicion is it to say this is a lie? Crusch-san and the others were convinced…"

Deciding that deception wouldn't work, Subaru still tries to stick to his lie.

If he were to be pressed, it would undoubtedly worsen the situation. Previously, during the mansion loop, the Witch's Hand had activated even in situations where Subaru was forced to reveal information about "Return by Death".

It wasn't because Subaru wanted to speak. Even in situations where he couldn't get through without speaking, that hand would torment Subaru's heart. —So, what about now, after it has evolved to the malicious extent of crushing Emilia's heart?

—He absolutely must not let Rem know.

"Lady Crusch and the others have simply judged that Subaru has no need to lie. Rather than necessity, Rem believes they considered the disadvantages of lying. If you did such a thing, you'd make enemies not only of Lady Crusch but also Lady Anastasia and the Royal Capital's Merchant Guild."

"Th-That's…"

It's an undeniable truth.

Crusch could have refuted Subaru's clumsy theoretical development endlessly. The same goes for Russell and Anastasia, two people accustomed to negotiations.

Yet, the fact that they're turning a blind eye to some suspicious points is largely due to the circumstances rather than trust in Subaru.

Subaru set up that situation, and there's no need for him to deceive the people present in that situation.

Of course, Subaru understood this when he negotiated the alliance, and he cannot deny the fact that he maintained equality by adding the presence of others to his own insignificance.

That's precisely why it can even be said that Crusch and the others have no need to seriously expose the truth or falsehood of Subaru's "lie". As long as the results follow, any minor inconsistencies in what Subaru said are the kind of things they can simply forget.

However, Rem is different.

Rem's position remains unchanged; she is Subaru's ally. Subaru is well aware that in this other world, she is now the one who treats him with the most genuine concern.

Continuing to lie to her gnaws at Subaru's heart in a completely different way than lying to Crusch and the others. He even wants to pour out his emotions and cling to the pure affection she shows him.

However, such a thing is absolutely impossible.

"Rem, I…"

"It's alright, Subaru."

"Huh?"

Subaru tried to devise a way to protect her with words of excuse.

However, Rem, with a smile on her lips, shook her head, rejecting

him.

To a surprised Subaru, who couldn’t close his mouth, Rem looked at him with earnest eyes.

“Rem knows that Subaru is lying, because Rem has been watching Subaru all this time.”

She blushes with an embarrassed smile and playfully puts a finger to her lips. Then she points that finger towards Subaru.

“Rem also knows that you can’t tell her the reason for that lie. There is no need for you to worry about Rem just because you can’t tell her, okay?”

“…”

“Rem trusts Subaru completely.”

At the base of the Flugel’s Great Tree, the wind caresses the space between the two facing each other.

Rem places a hand on her chest and declares before the silent Subaru.

“If Subaru says he knows where the White Whale will appear, Rem believes him. If he says the Witch Cult is targeting Lady Emilia and the others, Rem believes that too. Even if the moon were to fall and the country were to be destroyed, if Subaru said so, Rem would believe it.”

“…I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Yes, that’s right, but that’s how serious Rem is.”

Her smile fades, and Rem then looks at Subaru with a sudden seriousness. Then she quietly lowers herself, holds the edge of her skirt with both hands, and bows.

“This body, this heart, are completely devoted to Subaru. — Therefore, Rem will never, ever doubt Subaru, now or in the future.”

"…"

"So, there's no need for you to push yourself, trying to make Rem believe you or trying to deceive Rem with lies— There's no need at all."

Subaru barely managed to suppress the hot lump rising in his throat.

Then he pressed his temples, looked up, and opened his trembling mouth wide.

"Ah, looking up at a big tree really gets me excited!"

"Yes, that's right."

"I won't be able to calm down unless I keep looking up at the top of the tree for a while. There's absolutely no other reason, but I can't look down for a while."

"Yes, that's right."

To prevent tears from spilling, Subaru kept his face turned upwards, putting on a brave front.

Rem, however, gently embraces Subaru's weak bravado with love and compassion, without exposing it.

Now, once again, Subaru truly understood his own foolishness.

He should have just told Rem everything from the beginning.

Although he couldn't tell her everything, if he had been able to convey the tragedies that would occur, Subaru surely could have avoided the second and third tragedies.

He couldn't explain the reason, because he thought she wouldn't believe him if he told her, Subaru decided he had to do it alone, repeating every failure.

However Rem was different.

She doesn't ask for explanations. Even without being told, she trusts Subaru. Even now, she loves and cherishes Subaru, who cannot speak the truth.

"It's 'thank you' rather than 'I'm sorry', isn't it, in times like these."

Desperately defending the levee of his tears, Subaru somehow manages to lower his face and meet Rem's gaze. Rem nods with a full smile at Subaru's answer.

"You're welcome. Rem is much, much, much, much more grateful to Subaru, so we're even."

"I feel like I'm already getting way more back than anything I've done for Rem, from my perspective."

"That's not true at all."

Rem looks down slightly, shaking her head as she denies Subaru's words.

Subaru raises his eyebrows at her attitude and tries to overturn it by adding more words of denial, but—

"Even though Rem knows talking about this would only cause Subaru pain, it's Rem's selfishness."

"I don't think that way at all. I'm the one keeping secrets, so I'm the bad one."

"It's still selfish. Even so, Rem Apologizes."

Her tone is tinged with self-deprecation, but Rem's face, when she looks up, is clear. Seeing Subaru flinch at her contradictory appearance, Rem tilts her head slightly.

"It pains Rem beyond endurance that she cannot be the kind of person you feel you can entrust even a small part of your burdens to, Subaru."

"I…"

Rem’s resolve, the depth of her feelings, are still conveyed to him now.

Leaning his back against the trunk of the great tree, Subaru takes a deep breath.

The courage to put into words the warm feelings welling up in his chest.

“I-I love Emilia.”

“Yes.”

Once, it was a rehash of words he had exchanged with her before.

Subaru knew that these words would deeply hurt and torment her, yet he spoke them again.

However,

“But…”

“…”

“When I look at you, my heart trembles… You can think I’m a terrible person.”

He himself thinks they are terribly convenient words.

However they were Subaru’s true feelings. He knew he couldn’t reciprocate Rem’s feelings, but her words were the only ones that could warm his heart so much.

Rem lets out a somewhat heated sigh, “Hmph.”

“Subaru, you really are a terrible person.”

“…I know.”

“Just kidding. Rem loves you.”

“I… I know, I said!”

With her feelings clearly stated again, Subaru's face instantly turns crimson.

If it weren't for the night, that redness would surely have been conspicuous. Subaru starts walking, as if to hide his blushing face.

"Let's head back soon. We need to get our minds and bodies perfectly ready right before the White Whale appears."

Before passing by Rem, he takes her dangling right hand.

With her hand held, Rem let out a small "Ah", but quickly matched Subaru's brisk pace, and with a mischievous look, she gazed at the side of the boy's face, who was trying not to look at her.

"Subaru."

"…What is it?"

"Rem doesn't mind being your second wife."

His feet almost stopped at those words.

He couldn't help but glance at her, and Rem, with a mischievous cat-like expression, waited for Subaru's reply, wagging her tail vigorously.

Ah, honestly, this girl, no matter what—

"If Emilia-tan is tolerant of polygamy."

"Then, when we get back, we'll have to convince Lady Emilia, won't we? Rem will do her best."

Clenching her fist with the hand opposite to the one being held, Rem smiles, putting a little spirit into her words.

His tension dissolved by her playful words, Subaru clearly realized his own weakness, that he truly couldn't win against her.

Be it Emilia or Rem, in these situations, a man simply cannot win against a woman.

He didn’t mind admitting that weakness, unlike his previous self.

3

The appointed time was drawing near, and a tense atmosphere of pre-battle anticipation filled the base of the Great Tree.

Having taken turns for meals and naps, the subjugation force was in perfect condition. The ground dragons and Ligers, who had endured the long march, had also gotten sufficient rest and now seemed to be eagerly awaiting their riders’ commands.

Everyone held their breath, calmed their minds, and waited for that moment.

They held their breath unnecessarily, as if even the sound of a sword sliding from its sheath might have some effect, and everyone waited for time to pass in silence.

In the sky above the Lifaus Highway, the clouds moved swiftly on this windy night. Each time the moonlight was obscured by the clouds, people would constantly look up, as if a giant beast had blocked out the light. Such was the level of vigilance it instilled.

“Only a few minutes left until the appointed time”, Crusch murmured quietly, glancing at Ferris beside her, who gave a small nod. Even Ferris, who had served by Crusch’s side for many years and should have been accustomed to such situations, showed no hint of his usual jests. He wasn’t swallowed by the oppressive tension; he understood that he was a lifeline for this subjugation force and was committing to that role.

The final number of victors in this battle would likely change depending on Ferris’s performance. Crusch did not doubt her faction’s victory, but she wasn’t so arrogant as to believe the White Whale could be defeated without sacrifice. However, she was confident enough to believe that she could significantly reduce the inevitable casualties. Whether it should be called confidence, given that it was a reliance on her retainer, Ferris, was somewhat debatable.

Wilhelm had already drawn two swords from his waist, holding one in each hand, ready to charge at any moment. The serene sword energy he exuded was honed to perfection, refined even at this moment, as he approached the realization of his long-cherished desire. Crusch couldn't help but feel a captivated admiration for his pure, unadulterated essence as a "Sword Demon".

She truly believed that a person could, through sheer purity, elevate their soul to such a degree. She sincerely hoped that one day, she too could reach that realm.

Beside Wilhelm, the members of the subjugation force, their faces etched with tension, also showed high morale. Following Crusch's orders, they had already silently completed preparations for a preemptive strike. They, too, must have had their doubts about tonight's sortie. There simply wasn't enough time to build the kind of trust between them and Subaru that would establish the reliability of his information, especially regarding the crucial fine details. Yet, the fact that they didn't voice their objections was out of respect for Crusch's judgment, and Crusch was aware of her duty to fulfill that responsibility.

She could feel a pleasant battle fervor slowly burning within her. As the appointed time drew near, and the scent of death, fire, and blood loomed, Crusch began to truly feel alive.

As a ruler, she tried to discipline herself and strive to be honorable. However, she also wouldn't deny the unchangeable essence rooted deep within her heart. That was—

"—!"

Suddenly, a sound echoed through the Lifaus Highway, shrouded in the dark night.

Light sounds chained together, overlapping to form a natural rhythm that vibrated their eardrums. Looking towards the source of the sound, she could see Subaru, holding a glowing magic device. The music was flowing from that device in his hand.

In other words—

“All units, be on alert—”

According to Subaru’s declaration, the White Whale would appear within one minute of the magic device ringing. If they believed his words, it wouldn’t be surprising if its colossal body began to swim through the sky at this very moment. The location, too, must be correct now that the device had sounded. There was plenty of room for doubt, but Subaru had no reason to deceive them. Naturally, Crusch sharpened her senses, anticipating the appearance of the creature.

However,

“…”

In the silence, there was no sign whatsoever of the mighty witchbeast appearing.

To say she was anticlimactic wouldn’t be accurate, but at the fact that nothing happened even after a minute, Crusch, uncharacteristically, couldn’t help but feel a premonition of unease. She didn’t want to think they had been deceived.

The silence on the Lifaus Highway remained unbroken, and the surrounding scenery showed no change. Even now, the moonlight was obscured by clouds drifting across the sky, and a dark, massive shadow enveloped their vision—

“—!”

Looking up, Crusch immediately cursed her own shallow thinking.

The moonlight was obscured, and a shadow had fallen.

The cloud-like mist that blocked the light slowly descended, looming before their eyes.

It was a witchbeast, its enormous fish-like silhouette floating in the sky.

At the same instant Crusch gasped, almost all of the subjugation force members realized the same truth. As their wills unified, their gazes turned to Crusch.

—They were awaiting the command for a preemptive strike.

They had successfully gained the initiative and suppressed the White Whale's initial appearance. All that remained was to launch their ambush according to plan and dominate the battlefield.

"…"

Taking a breath, Crusch resolved to issue the first command.

The White Whale was still unaware of their minuscule presence. It quietly turned its head, as if trying to ascertain its location, its movements uncertain and, more importantly, full of openings.

"—Everyone—"

She was about to say "full assault", when—

"—Let 'er rip!"

"—El Huma!!"

A command bypassed Crusch, and simultaneously, mana unfurled with the chanting of a spell.

Four incredibly powerful icicles, forged with tremendous density, materialized simultaneously into the world—and were launched, striking the White Whale's torso. A beat later, the White Whale's shriek and gushing blood rained down upon the earth.

Looking in a hurry, she saw Subaru and Rem rushing forward on a single ground dragon. Subaru, clinging to Rem's waist, gave a triumphant fist pump, while Rem, having delivered the preemptive magical strike, wore a look of utter satisfaction, as if she had fulfilled her role perfectly.

The subjugation force was shaken by these two rushing ahead—or rather, leading the charge. Seeing this, Crusch couldn't help but let her mouth twist into a wide grin.

It wasn’t anger. It was from laughter.

“Everyone— Follow those fools!”

Crusch’s command, cutting through the confusion, rang out, and the members of the subjugation force reacted instinctively, commencing their attack.

A tremendous cloud of dust rose, and beyond it, the White Whale’s shriek echoed loudly once more through the night sky of the Lifaus Highway.

The battle to subjugate the White Whale had, at long last, begun.

Chapter 57:
White Whale Conquest Battle

The tremors of the ground dragon transmitted directly to his rear, and Subaru licked his parched lips to moisten them, controlling the bouncing motion.

The alarm on his cell phone rang on schedule, announcing the appearance of the White Whale on the twilight Lifaus Highway. It would appear in about a minute— The problem was that its exact time and location couldn't be pinpointed to the second or by coordinates.

He scanned his surroundings, sharpening his senses, and waited for that moment. Then, just as he thought the moonlight was obscured by a cloud, he realized that the "cloud" was actually the immense underbelly of a giant being, and Subaru witnessed the fulfillment of his memories.

At the same time, others around Subaru also began to notice its presence, and a sense of unease spread. Everyone waited for the signal for the coordinated attack, as planned. However, Subaru and the others were a mere half-beat faster than the moment Crusch gasped.

"—Let 'er rip!"

"—El Huma!"

Responding to Subaru's shout, Rem imbued the mana she had already begun to gather with direction through her incantation. Four massive ice spears, as menacing as bundled tree trunks, shot forth, piercing the wind and slamming into the colossal body's torso.

The sound of the ice spear tips crushing against something hard echoed, but just before they shattered completely, the tips embedded slightly into the witchbeast's belly, widening the wound and drilling inside —gushing blood.

The White Whale's shriek reverberated across the plains, and as they endured the eardrum-numbing atmospheric tremor, the ground dragon carrying Subaru and Rem charged forward.

To be clear, Subaru and the others were by no means rushing. If they hadn't moved at that instant, if their movement had been delayed by even a fraction of a second, the White Whale would have perceived this preemptive strike. That fleeting moment was the watershed. Even Crusch, a master of her craft, gasped in awe before the White Whale's majesty, knowing that the slightest hesitation could mean life or death.

Even if one confidently anticipated its arrival, a ripple still forms in the human heart when the event actually occurs. Even a small ripple can distort thought, distortion leads to stagnation, and stagnation invites defeat—the battle was dangerously close to beginning at a disadvantage for them.

Yet, the reason Subaru and the others made it in time was, in a word, "the power of love". The existence of magic tools and the reliability of their functions— Crusch's group's fraction-of-a-second delay in judgment was caused by a subtle, almost imperceptible, distrust of that. There was also impatience regarding the unseen witchbeast, so it was understandable that a slight shadow fell upon their judgment. But Rem believed Subaru's words, his declaration that the White Whale would appear at that very moment, without a single doubt or shred of suspicion. Therefore, she was able to gather her maximum magical power according to the time Subaru specified, and unleash it the moment she confirmed the White Whale's appearance.

What else could this be called if not Rem's love?

"Analyzing it like that is super embarrassing—!"

"Subaru, hold on tighter. You'll be thrown off!"

As Subaru internally analyzed how they initiated the battle, Rem, who was holding the ground dragon's reins, shouted this. Her words were part of the strategy— The second phase after the preemptive strike.

“Everyone— Follow those fools!”

Behind them, a half-step behind the charging Subaru and his group, the subjugation force, responding to Crusch’s command, ignited their cannons one after another. The loaded magic stones were launched, exploding in mid-air and transforming into destructive power corresponding to their colors, hitting the White Whale’s torso in rapid succession.

Flames, ice, and earth transformed into blades, spears, and hammers, striking and widening the wounds Rem had created. A mist of blood erupted from the writhing colossus, raining a dark, thick downpour onto the road. Dodging the mist-like blood that obscured their vision, the ground dragon deftly maneuvered, aiming for the White Whale’s rear in a wide arc. It was all according to plan.

“Make it aware of my presence, and position ourselves so the subjugation force can attack its back!”

“The crystal of dispelling darkness is about to shatter, close your eyes!”

Already in combat, a pure white horn protruded from Rem’s forehead. Looking up, Subaru hastily obeyed Rem’s bared-teeth instruction, looking down and closing his eyes— The next moment, the world blinked.

A blinding white light exploded in the sky, scorching the world with a brilliant white glow for an instant. The intensity of the light, strong enough to penetrate his closed eyelids and assault his optic nerves, choked Subaru’s throat with surprise. A few seconds later, when he cautiously opened his eyes and looked around,

“Whoa, it’s just as they said. That’s amazing.”

The darkness of the night had been swept away, revealing a world where visibility was secured as if it were broad daylight. Overhead, instead of the already set sun, shone the “crystal of dispelling darkness” launched simultaneously with the preemptive strike on the White Whale. This crystal, when shattered, generated an artificial light source and illuminated the darkness. Though it was supposed to provide only a faint glow to lighten the dimness,

“They bought a mountain of them with money and connections and shattered them all at once. Instant artificial sun, huh?”

“If it could submerge into the night, even the White Whale’s massive body would be hard to find. —Now, this is where it begins!”

The effect of the crystal stones, gathered by the two strongest merchants in the Royal Capital working together and running everywhere. The Lifaus Highway, previously plunged in night, was now filled with the brightness of day, vividly illuminating a world that had until then relied only on moonlight. In other words, it also —

“That’s…!”

—revealed the full extent of the witchbeast called the “White Whale”, which they had never clearly seen in broad daylight until now.

“—!!!!!”

Perhaps angered by being exposed to the light of day, the White Whale opened its massive mouth and roared. The deafening sound was no longer just a mere sound; it was akin to an act of destruction. The atmosphere vibrated, and the violent roar instilled fear even in the trained ground dragons’ primal instincts.

The monstrous form that caused this was bleeding from various parts of its colossal body, yet its movements showed no loss of vitality as it looked down upon the humans challenging it.

“How… big…”

His throat, not intending to tremble, did so, and Subaru couldn’t stop the sensation of his limbs becoming numb as if paralyzed. The threat of the White Whale, which Subaru had seen, touched, and had things stolen by, was now clearly revealed to be merely a fraction of its true presence.

The White Whale— As its moniker suggested, the witchbeast's form was covered in white. Its skin, roughened like bedrock, was covered in countless white hairs, and its toughness prevented all but the most powerful attacks from damaging its interior. Its full form, seen from a distance, certainly resembled a whale as described in lore, but its size exceeded expectations by two full sizes.

To Subaru's knowledge, the largest whale in the world was the blue whale— Around thirty meters in length, literally the largest and heaviest mammal. Howver the White Whale's body, observed visually, easily surpassed thirty meters, approaching fifty meters in scale. At this point, it was less like a living creature and more like a mountain. A white mountain, for some reason, leisurely swimming through the sky.

"Subaru."

A voice called Subaru, whose teeth were chattering uncontrollably from fear, and whose fingertips were starting to tremble. It was the girl, her back to him, holding Subaru tight around her small waist. Just in front of him, close enough to hear her breathing, she didn't turn to face him.

"Are you scared?"

It was an inquiry of trust, not a provocation. Subaru bit down hard, forcibly twisting his mouth, then said,

"Yeah, I'm scared. —Scared of how brilliantly I'll shine in the future after defeating that thing and being praised!"

Subaru cracked a joke to meet the girl's expectations, then patted her shoulder from behind.

"My life is entirely in your hands! Now, let's run like hell!"

"Rem's life is also Subaru's. —Then, let's do it."

Rem smiled gently and cracked the reins at Subaru, who gave a thumbs-up and bravely ordered their retreat. In response, the ground dragon neighed, unperturbed by the monstrosity, kicking up dust as it galloped across the earth. Subaru and the others were heading directly for the White Whale's lower right side, aiming to run diagonally and circle around to its tail.

The White Whale's gigantic eyes turned towards Subaru and the others, who were leading and approaching it most closely. Its jaw, large enough to swallow an entire house, opened, and its mouth, lined with millstone-like teeth, sucked in the air, preparing to unleash a roar at them. Subaru and the others braced themselves for another roar like the one that had broken their initial momentum—but above their heads,

"Looking away so casually, you must think little of me—!"

An invisible blade flashed horizontally, cleanly and shallowly slashing the White Whale's open head in a straight line. There wasn't even the sound of blade on rock; the attack, which smoothly cut through the tough bedrock-like skin, caused blood to gush from the White Whale's massive body again.

Turning and scanning for the blade's origin, Subaru saw Crusch's ground dragon leading the subjugation force, following close behind them. Standing on the back of the sleek black ground dragon, the beautiful woman, who seemed to have unleashed the attack with a valiant pronouncement —in her swung- through arm,

"She's not holding… anything?!"

"It's Lady Crusch's sword skill, 'One Blow, One Hundred Felled', famous for its intangible sword that ignores range," Rem answered in a low voice to Subaru's astonishment. He was unfamiliar with the anecdote she mentioned, but the mere words gave him a general understanding of the situation, and the convincing effectiveness of Crusch's seemingly unarmed combat prowess.

The White Whale's initial movement was thwarted by the invisible attack, and follow-up attacks struck its now stagnant form. Members of the subjugation force continued to launch magic stones, concentrating their firepower on the White Whale's colossal body. Damage accumulated from successive impacts, and the writhing behemoth began to lose altitude.

The White Whale's massive body, which had been at cloud height, began to descend. When its altitude was no longer so high that one had to crane their neck straight up, that was—

"—The blade's reach."

The ground dragon bounded, leaping into the air with a lightness unsuited to its massive size. Still, the difference in mass compared to the mighty White Whale was clear. The ground dragon floating before its nose must have seemed like a mere insect to the White Whale, but—

—A straight, swift sword flash deeply and vertically split the witchbeast's snout.

The sound of the battle, filled with roars, certainly ceased at the sight of silver effortlessly slicing through white bedrock-like skin. This was not magic, nor power from enchanted minerals, nor destruction brought by an intangible blade; it was proof that a physical block of iron was wielded by human hands. It was proof that the culmination of a human's life, the vast majority of which had been spent training, had indeed reached the snout of the witchbeast that generated fog and dyed the world white.

"—Fourteen years."

Sticking his sword into the split snout, a figure crouched down and muttered. Maintaining his posture by thrusting the sword opposite to the one he had swung, a trained back brushed off the blood that wet his blade from the attack—there, enveloped in sword energy strong enough to distort the air,

"I've dreamed of this day, purely and solely."

The White Whale writhed as the figure straightened his back. As if to shake off what was on its nose, the White Whale's massive body twisted in mid-air, barrel-rolling and sweeping through the air. A fierce wind raged across the sky above the road, and everyone gasped, eyes wide, at the result of the colossal body's maneuvering. But,

"—!!"

The White Whale, twisting back to its original position, roared in pain, spilling fresh blood as it thrashed its tail. The vertical wound on its nose now had a horizontal cut added, forming a cross-shaped wound on its forehead, and the figure lightly stepped onto the White Whale's back.

—The Sword Demon grinned, his wrinkled cheek twisting into a cruel grimace.

"Fall here, and become a corpse. —You lump of flesh."

With that, Wilhelm's body, gripping swords in both hands, cut through the air. He raced along the White Whale's back from its head towards its tail, his swinging blades mercilessly hacking at the bedrock-like skin along the way. Effortlessly slicing through the tough, resilient skin, scattering dark blood mist into the sky as he rushed— He was truly the "Sword Demon".

Gripped to its body, the White Whale, though shaking its massive frame, had no effective way to strike Wilhelm. It twisted through the air again with a hurricane-force spin, attempting to dislodge the lightly running old swordsman, but—

"How cooperative of you, to come so willingly to be cut."

Just before the White Whale spun in mid-air, Wilhelm leaped briefly, stabbing his swords in and lifting himself. As the White Whale spun in place, the impaling blades cleanly sliced through its body, effectively presenting itself to the blades. The Sword Demon, half-drenched in the gushing blood fog, his body mottled red, laughed. Laughing, his old body raised both swords above his head and aimed for the colossal body's flank. The descending blades vertically shaved the bedrock-like skin on its side, and as they swung down in a V-shape, they sliced off flesh. A piercing shriek rang out, and the White Whale's tail lashed out horizontally at the falling Wilhelm. But just before the direct hit, Wilhelm's ground dragon rushed in, scooped up the old swordsman, and smoothly escaped the attack's range. Just as the White Whale, fueled by rage, tried to pursue Wilhelm, “Shut yer trap, ya idiot. We’re your opponents too!”

A single great-axe blow penetrated its oral cavity, gouging out one of the White Whale’s teeth, which was large enough to embrace, from its root. With a dull thud, the yellowish molars flew off. Straddling a liger, Ricardo, who was cheering, then diagonally traversed the White Whale’s face. The great dog, praised for its agility compared to ground dragons, fully displayed its quickness, dashing around the White Whale’s body in the sky with its master on its back.

“Alright, alright, it ain’t over yet!”

From atop the running liger’s back, Ricardo’s great axe, spitting saliva and curses, swung down. The beastman crushed bedrock, gouging out the flesh beneath and scattering blood. The accompanying liger also made full use of its fangs and claws, deepening and sharpening the wounds it created. And following Ricardo’s fierce efforts,

“Alright, here we go!”

“Big sis, don’t get too far ahead! Everyone, now!”

The twin vice-captains, kitten-beastmen riding small ligers, spread out and gave orders, and the beastmen mercenary group’s ligers began clinging to the White Whale’s body one after another, running across its vast flesh and trampling it.

Spears and swords were swung, most of them deflecting off the bedrock-like skin, but steadily inflicting damage by piercing through the shattering outer layer. The sight was like a beast swarmed by venomous insects. As it thrashed its body at the enemies clinging to various parts, incrementally increasing its wounds, and revealing the weakness of its colossal body’s inability to maneuver nimbly,

“—All personnel, fall back!”

Crusch’s furious roar pierced the battlefield, and the mercenary group clinging to the White Whale’s body simultaneously leaped off. The ligers in mid-air landed lightly on the ground, and seeing this, the White Whale made a wide turn to counterattack— However that judgment was a forsake.

“You’ve exposed your flank—!”

Crusch’s second attack from above— A downward slash— diagonally cut the White Whale’s side, and following that single stroke, another wave of attacks followed. This was the attack from the unit that had not participated in the assault until now, focusing solely on casting spells.

“—!!”

Incantations overlapped, creating manifestations of destruction from refined mana. In a contradictory sky where the sun and moon coexisted, a second sun appeared in the low sky. Even understanding that it was a concentrated fire magic, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sheer intensity of the world being instantly roasted by the high heat.

A great fireball, over ten meters in diameter, scorched his skin even from a distance, burning so fiercely it threatened to evaporate the moisture in his eyeballs behind his eyelids. When the fireball gained an initial, wavering velocity,

“—Whoooooa!”

That initial velocity immediately transformed into acceleration, and the great fireball directly struck the White Whale’s torso, which had turned its flank— Burning flesh from the created wound, heating and boiling its internal organs. The White Whale’s scream and the explosion roared across the bright night sky.

The shattered fireball scattered burning debris across the plains, and the mercenaries running below hastily evacuated. Subaru and Rem, among them, retreated, their eyes fixed on the White Whale, whose white fur was engulfed in flames. With such overwhelming results —the success of an unprecedented ambush— the White Whale couldn’t even retaliate. Perhaps they could escape with zero casualties, without it being able to do anything.

"That felt like a good hit! Can we keep this up?!"

Subaru clenched his fist in triumph on the back of the ground dragon, which had stopped amidst a cloud of dust, keeping its distance from the aftereffects of the flames. In truth, they had completely suppressed the White Whale so far and inflicted no small amount of damage. It was unclear whether previous subjugation forces had lacked strength, or if it was simply because their preparations were thorough for this moment, but there was a sense of elation, as if victory was already in sight. However, in response to Subaru's words,

"No. —Honestly, Rem wished to bring it down to the ground with that."

Rem shook her head regretfully, glaring at the burning beast floating in the sky. Prompted by her words, Subaru looked up, narrowing his eyes suspiciously as he observed the White Whale. Its white fur was still burning, its entire body being roasted by the flames, and it was writhing, but there was no sign of the fire going out. Injuries from slashes and magic stones were spread across its entire body, and the sight of it dripping blood was visibly painful. However,

"Its altitude… hasn't dropped."

The White Whale's body remained in the sky above. It wasn't a distance that a liger couldn't reach with a jump, but it was still far too high for a single person to challenge. More importantly, they couldn't move on to the next phase of the plan unless it was brought to the ground.

"We used up all our opening gambits. If it still won't fall, then it means they're tougher than us, eh?"

Ricardo, with his great axe on his shoulder, his fur wet with splattered blood, came alongside them. He snorted through his dog-like nose, his whiskers trembling as he looked up at the White Whale.

"From what I can tell after a few hits, it's not easy to get an attack through its thick hide. You need brute force like with my weapon, or skill like Wilhelm's, otherwise it's a war of attrition."

"Physical attacks might be like that, but magic attacks seem to be getting through, don't they?"

"That's also a delicate matter. At first glance, it looks like attacks are hitting spectacularly, but the white fur on its skin scatters mana and reduces the power. Rem's attacks aren't getting through as much as they appear."

Rem spoke regretfully, lamenting that her maximum-power magic wasn't having the desired effect. When Subaru turned to her, he could indeed see that while the White Whale's body had numerous shallow wounds, none were of the type that would immediately impede its combat. But at least,

"That fire magic just now seems to have burned the white fur and is getting through."

"Burn the mana-scattering fur, then you can scrape off the roasted skin underneath with a blade— Simple, ain't it?"

Ricardo bared his fangs in a ferocious grin, agreeing with Subaru's insight. He then lowered his great axe, patted the liger's back, and swung his head around, gaining speed again as he headed for the front lines. Then,

"I'll keep wearing it down like before! Tell Crusch to hit it with those big shots at key moments too!"

He made a presumptuous request, then slipped under the White Whale, leaping again to target its back. Looking over, even Wilhelm, who had supposedly distanced himself, was now aiming for the White Whale's back from its tail end, and the subjugation force, having reached the same conclusion as Subaru's group, was also swiftly moving into action. In other words, they were continuing the all-out attack.

"Right now, the firepower is concentrated, so if we get closer, we'll actually get in the way. Rem, can't you launch any magic?"

"It takes time to cast a spell of the same scale as before… Still, mana is scattered, so Rem's magic won't inflict damage. Anything less than that power simply wouldn't have enough impact."

Following Ricardo's argument from earlier, Rem might have more success by charging into the front lines with her morning star and inflicting physical attacks on its rock-hard body with brute force. However, Subaru would be a hindrance to that, and if they were to follow the strategy Subaru had devised for later, Rem and Subaru couldn't be separated here.

"It's frustrating, do we just have to watch until something changes…!"

"We're just as frustrated as you are, nya."

As he spoke, another ground dragon pulled alongside Subaru and Rem's, which was running at a slow pace. Mounted on the heavily armored ground dragon, equipped with ground dragon armor, was a lightly dressed cross-dressing knight—Ferris. He narrowed his eyes mischievously, looking at Subaru.

"Ferris, with limited offensive means, basically just watches, nya? I'm used to it, if you can call it that, but I always feel this frustration, nya."

"In return, you're the lifeline of the subjugation force, specializing in healing. I can't have you on the front lines. Just focus on that role completely, please."

Subaru responded to Ferris, who maintained his usual demeanor even in this situation. Ferris tilted his head slightly, surprised, saying, "Oh?"

"It feels like your state of mind has changed, Subaru-kyun, what happened?"

"If I had to say, I just became a slightly better man."

Subaru answered with a bitter expression, scanning the moving battlefield. Ferris hummed, touching a finger to his lips and nodding.

"Did Rem perhaps make Subaru-kyun a man, nya?"

The answer was both yes and no. Subaru was irritated by Ferris's crude laughter, giving a thumbs-up. He was about to open his mouth to yell at the knight, wondering if this was the time for such jokes, but—

"Sir Wilhelm—!"

Rem's shout made his gaze frantically return to the front, catching sight of the old swordsman running along the White Whale's back.

Wilhelm, holding his sword vertically with the blade facing down, sliced along the White Whale's back. As Wilhelm's shadow raced from its tail to its back, gushing fresh blood followed like a fountain.

This was truly what they meant by a lion's ferocious charge. Wilhelm's single-handed, almost unbelievable, sharpness of attack boosted the subjugation force's morale, and the continuous throwing of magic stones and the mercenary group's ligers' combined tactics gained momentum.

The White Whale, writhing in pain in mid-air and uttering broken cries, was utterly unable to respond to any of it. The Fog Witchbeast—the monstrous entity that had tormented the world for so long—was in such a pitiful state, and Subaru felt certain that the tide of battle was turning in their favor.

"Chaaaaaaarge!"

With a single shout, Wilhelm's sword strike split the White Whale's head vertically, and the old body rushed through, lightly leaping from the White Whale's tip. As he spun in mid-air, the inverted old man was then—

"Heave-ho!"

Ricardo, who had jumped straight up, swung his great axe. The whirlwind, with its blunt edge, targeted not the White Whale, but Wilhelm, who was inverted in mid-air. Wilhelm met the blow with the soles of his feet, "Shi—!"

Wilhelm's body was launched as if repelled, and the swords held in both hands raged as they passed through the White Whale's face. The White Whale's snout and cheek were brutally torn to shreds. Not content with just the wounds and fresh blood, Wilhelm regripped both swords and launched a thrust— The converging attacks from left and right horizontally sliced above and below the eyeball, and the quickly reversed blades then vertically split the wounds on both sides. As a result,

"Its left eye is falling—!"

Deeply gouged by the rectangular cuts, the White Whale's left eye was severed. Someone's words became reality, and the falling eye, gushing red blood and white bodily fluids, impacted the ground with a tremendous roar, shattering it. A half-beat later, Wilhelm landed directly beside the fallen eyeball. He then thrust his sword into the rolling eyeball, lifted it so the White Whale above could see, and—

"—Pitiful."

He curled the corner of his mouth, uttering a single word with a gruesome smile.

The White Whale, toyed with by the Sword Demon's brutal fighting, had no means to retaliate. With one eye neatly gouged out, the disparity in combat power was clearly not dictated by physical size. But that provocative act—

"The White Whale's eye color…!"

"It's coming!"

"Subaru, keep your head down—!"

The moment they noticed the change, Ferris screamed, and Rem accelerated the ground dragon. Receiving the wind and hastily bracing himself against the sudden acceleration, Subaru imprinted the White Whale's form onto his mind amidst the violent shaking. —That change, that transformation, it was…

"—!!"

It roared, its remaining single eye, filled with rage from having one eye gouged out, glowing crimson. With its blood-red eye, it glared down and tilted its body towards the subjugation force, who were frantically trying to create distance from its madness. Then, a change occurred in the White Whale's body.

—The instant it first appeared, Subaru couldn't suppress a hard-to-describe feeling of revulsion.

The White Whale's mouth opened. No, that description was both right and wrong. To state the fact accurately, it was this:

—Countless mouths appeared all over the White Whale's body, and they all simultaneously bared their teeth and opened.

"—!!"

A piercing shriek vibrated the plains' atmosphere high, causing a discomfort that felt like claws directly raking the minds of those who heard it. Not only humans, but even animals like ground dragons and ligers shivered down their spines at that roar. It appealed to their instincts, making their legs falter, naturally transforming them into vulnerable prey.

Then,

"—Ah."

From every single mouth on the White Whale's body, the 'fog' that dyed the world white was released. It instantly poured across the vast plains as far as the eye could see, stealing the light that had been secured from the world and painting everything pure white.

—The roar of the 'fog' witchbeast rose, and the difficulty of the subjugation battle skyrocketed.

The end of the White Whale's Subjugation was still unclear—.

Chapter 58:
Threat of the Mist

1

A roar echoed across the Lifaus Highway.

The White Whale, majestically swimming through the sky, screeched high-pitched sounds from every open maw on its colossal body. Unlike the earth-shaking roars, the sounds leaking from its countless, unevenly sized mouths were sharp, like wind tearing at something.

Subaru couldn't suppress the revulsion, a sensation distinct from being punched in the eardrums, that made his whole body bristle.

Despite the massive preemptive strike they'd launched, and the furious efforts of Wilhelm and the beast-human mercenary group, the damage inflicted on the White Whale was far from minor.

Their combined firepower would have been overkill even if Subaru died a hundred times, and to compare it to other witchbeast, it seemed powerful enough to wipe out a pack of Ulgarms ten times over.

It had taken all that head-on. So, even if it wasn't enough to end the fight, they had expected it to take significant damage and fall to the ground, but—

"Damn it, the fog…!"

As it shrieked from its entire body, the White Whale's countless mouths simultaneously spewed out "fog." Across a wide area of the road, the encroaching fog falling from the sky invaded the world, gradually painting their vision a hazy white.

This was the true power of the "fog" witchbeast.

The road filled with fog, obscuring their vision and disrupting their coordination. More than anything, despite its colossal, sky-high white body, it seemed to melt and vanish into the white sea created by the fog.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me…!”

“—Subaru, please entrust your life to Rem!!”

In front of Subaru, whose throat trembled at the shocking tactic, Rem leaned forward and shouted. As an answer, Subaru leaned deep into her back and hugged her waist.

The ground dragon spun in response to Rem’s swift handling of the reins, scraping the earth as it began to gallop. Ferris, who had been beside them moments ago, similarly turned his ground dragon’s head through a sharp turn towards the inside of the fog. If the White Whale had entered combat mode, a counterattack was inevitable. Naturally, injuries were unavoidable. In such a situation, that’s where his moment, known by the name “Blue”, would be—

Immediately after,

“—All units, withdraw!!!”

A furious shout echoed from beyond the fog, holding back those who were about to plunge into the white darkness. The voice was unforgivably Crusch’s. Before Subaru could lift his head to ask what was happening,

“Whoa?!”

With a split-second decision, the ground dragon changed its direction of travel, and Subaru’s body, thrown by the centrifugal force, shifted to the left. In front, Ferris’s ground dragon, also making a sudden turn, went right. As Subaru’s group split left and right, right down the middle— A fog with dense mass swept through in a single blast.

The surging fog covered their entire vision, and if their evasion had been even a moment too late, it would have surely swallowed Subaru and their ground dragon whole.

If he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, he might have laughed it off, asking why they were making such a fuss over just fog, but witnessing its unnaturalness firsthand made it impossible to crack a joke.

The fog gouged out the ground of the plain it touched as if melting it, literally dissolving everything in its path as it swallowed them whole.

If they had been exposed to that, they would have vanished to a place not of this world.

“This is the real ‘fog’…!”

Among the several details about the White Whale’s terror that were briefed to the subjugation force beforehand, one was the destructive power of this “fog”.

There were two types of fog emitted from the White Whale’s mouth: one was a diffusion type that purely obscured vision and expanded its own range of action. The other was the vanishing type that had just now, before their eyes, completely made the ground disappear.

The latter was what the White Whale used as an attack. The terror of that fog wasn’t just its unstoppable power and damage, but its true threat lay elsewhere. That was—

“—Haaah!!”

With a flash of spirit, a valiant voice reached them from beyond the fog, and the next moment, the fog covering their vision was suddenly swept away.

Looking up, they saw Crusch standing on the ground dragon’s back, her arm swung through, beyond the cleared vision. She had probably used an application of an invisible blade to cut through the pervasive fog and secure their visibility.

She roughly wiped her sweat-soaked forehead, then lowered herself onto the running ground dragon’s back and looked around. As if using her as a beacon, the scattered subjugation force gathered, and Crusch spoke to the leading members,

"—How many were taken?"

"Our unit strength is twelve— Three are missing."

"…Who was taken?"

"I don't know…!"

An older squad leader responded to Crusch's question, then shook his head at the follow-up.

It was an incomprehensible exchange. The squad leader, who knew the number of his troops, still said he didn't know the identities of the missing members.

But,

"We are fourteen, one missing."

"Our unit is two. Also unknown."

"Six… I apologize! We were deep in position, couldn't avoid the fog…!"

Similar reports came in one after another, and none of the squad leaders could name their missing comrades.

This abnormal situation was the truly terrifying aspect of the "fog" controlled by the White Whale. In other words,

"The fog of Vanishing…!!"

Literally, any existence that was exposed to the "fog" and vanished was erased from the world itself.

Even if the fact remained that someone had vanished, no one's memory retained who they were. This was the true reason why Crusch had precisely arranged each squad of the subjugation force to fifteen members.

If a squad was short-handed after being hit by the "fog", it was no longer possible to know who had been taken. The number of squads was kept consistent only to recognize the fact of the missing members.

When Subaru had encountered the White Whale in the previous loop, a strange phenomenon had occurred.

That was when Otto, a merchant traveling with him, completely erased the existence of fellow merchants and Rem, who had stayed behind to stall, from his memory. At the time, Subaru had believed Otto had simply erased inconvenient memories out of terror, but it made sense if it was considered an effect of the White Whale's "fog".

The fellow merchant and Rem, who had vanished from the world due to the fog, were also erased from everyone's memory. Just as Ram, her twin sister, had lost Rem from her memory upon returning to the mansion.

And yet, once again,

"Only I remember…"

Subaru muttered this undeniable reality in a daze.

He alone remembered the vanished merchant, and Rem, who had sacrificed herself to let Subaru escape, just as he hadn't forgotten them in that loop.

Among the old soldiers leading each squad gathered around Crusch — The faces of two of the fifteen men had already been replaced.

The original squad leaders had vanished due to the "fog", and their recognition had shifted to the reality that their replacements had always been the squad leaders. Thus, no one noticed the sudden personnel change.

This abnormal situation once again made Subaru realize that this fog witchbeast had a strong connection to the "Witch".

The black, demonic hand that bound Subaru to this world was likely also not unrelated.

"Now that we're immersed in the fog, we don't know where it will try to erase us from next. Bunching up is a bad move. —Disperse, and use the fog-Clearing Crystal Stones."

Crusch looked around at the assembled subjugation force and swiftly concluded the discussion. As she saw everyone nod in agreement, Subaru noticed with wide eyes that Wilhelm and Ricardo were not among them.

—Surely, those two haven't vanished as well.

"You're back, Wilhelm."

However, Subaru's inner trepidation was denied by the figure emerging from beyond the fog.

Slowly clearing the shadows from the depths of the dense fog was Wilhelm, swinging his blood-soaked sword from atop his ground dragon. Covered in splashes of blood, a truly gruesome sight, he wiped his face with his sleeve as he rejoined them,

"I got ahead of myself. —What's the damage?"

"Seventeen in total… roughly one squad has vanished. We can't even properly honor the fallen."

Vanishing, quite literally, meant the erasure of existence.

Only a void remained, the sense that people who were there were now gone from everyone's memory.

Where did the bonds, thoughts, and love that were supposedly there until then disappear to?

Looking, a pack of Ligers appeared from behind Wilhelm, and among them were Ricardo and the two vice-captains riding large Ligers. It seemed that, like Wilhelm, the group that had stayed close to the White Whale in combat had suffered fewer casualties.

"A troublesome fog has appeared. We don't have many Fog-Clearing Crystal Stones… If we misuse them, it's over."

"If we can land another concentrated attack of the same magnitude, it should fall to the ground. Since we've lost sight of it, this is the time to use them to avoid a surprise attack. Any objections?"

Everyone silently affirmed Crusch's words.

Receiving their affirmation, she nodded and looked at the support group led by Ferris,

"Ferris. Launch the Fog-Clearing Crystal Stones. We only have enough for two uses. Handle them carefully."

"Preparation is already complete, yes. Just give the order whenever."

Crusch nodded in response to Ferris tapping his chest, then she looked around at everyone's faces before the battle resumed,

"This is the crucial moment! The effectiveness of our attacks on the White Whale is proven by the feeling remaining in your hands! Indeed, it is formidable. Its true nature is unknown. Our deaths might, at worst, not even remain in anyone's memory. However!"

Crusch, who, though a sword at her hip —the Karsten family's treasured blade— would be useless for her unarmed strikes, drew it and raised it to the sky, her voice rising,

"For the sake of the dead whose names cannot be inscribed on their tombstones, and for the sake of the weak who will likely be exposed to the threat of fog in the future world, we will defeat it, even if it means sacrifice— Follow me!!"

"—Oooooh!!"

Each of them raised their weapons to the sky and cheered in unison.

An immense surge of morale shook the fog, igniting and inflaming their flagging will to fight.

"Fog-Clearing Crystal Stones—Launch!!"

Following Crusch's command, those under Ferris's command simultaneously raised their cannons—and immediately after, with an explosive roar, the crystal stones shot up into the fog beyond,

“The fog, it’s clearing—!!”

The light bursting from the shattered crystal stones instantly swept away the fog that had covered their vision. Of course, it didn’t clear all the fog that covered the entire plain.

It merely thinned the overall density, alleviating a state where securing vision was difficult. But even that was a sufficient effect.

—The “fog” released by the White Whale seemed to be a mutation of the White Whale’s mana.

In short, the directed, materialized dispersal of mana corresponded to the “fog”. Fog-Clearing Crystal Stone was its common name; its correct name was Anti-Magic Crystal— An item that, when possessed, had a one-time substitute function against magic attacks.

Shattering multiple such crystal stones simultaneously produced the effect seen this time. It was a risky gamble, as it would even dampen the power of their own magic attacks if the atmosphere weren’t filled with fog.

“Not enough to clear all the fog, huh.”

“Instead, our magic is also unaffected. Rem is also at full power.”

Rem, clenching a small fist, answered, her horn on her forehead glowing.

Feeling the circulating mana surrounding her on his skin, Subaru nodded, recognizing that Rem was once again channeling her magic.

“—Alright! No time to be scared. I haven’t been any help until now. How about we make our move!”

“Yes! Let’s go!”

The reins clattered beneath the ground dragon’s neck, and the ride bounced with its neigh.

Clinging to Rem’s waist on the running ground dragon, Subaru’s gaze wandered over the thinned fog above, searching for the White Whale.

The subjugation force, spurred on by Crusch’s command, also dispersed and scanned their surroundings, searching for the colossal beast. The tension of not knowing when the battle would begin started to dry their mouths.

The White Whale’s appearance remained unknown. It was similar to the feeling they had before the battle began, waiting for the White Whale’s appearance in the abyssal darkness, and then—

“—Fog.”

Suddenly, a bad premonition ran through Subaru’s mind.

There was no particular basis for it. He was just thinking back to the effects of the Fog-Clearing Crystal Stones, the use of magic when those effects wore off, and even the circumstances of his previous encounter with the White Whale, and this anxiety welled up.

—While different in effect from the Fog of Vanishing, if the fog covering this entire area was also expelled by the White Whale, was its threat truly only for obscuring vision?

However faster than that question could escape his lips,

“—!!!”

A high, high roar echoed through the thinned Lifaus Highway.

And then, madness spread.

2

The first anomaly occurred among the group of ground dragons running alongside them.

Unlike the White Whale's roars until then, the piercing shriek wasn't a low, rumbling vibration of the air, but rather an unpleasant sensation, like sharp claws tearing at one's eardrums.

As Subaru's throat tightened from the auditory assault that raised goosebumps on his back, and even Rem tensed up, Subaru suddenly noticed something amiss.

"Hey! What's wrong?!"

Riders were being violently thrown off the ground dragons running next to them.

Hearing Subaru's shout, Rem, realizing the anomaly, made the ground dragon U-turn towards them. Weaving through the confused ground dragons that had lost their riders, Subaru went to the fallen men.

"Are you okay?! Falling off like that is more than just a minor injury…"

Concerned about the extent of their injuries, Subaru spoke, then his words caught in his throat.

The state of the fallen men was beyond simply assessing the depth of their injuries.

One man was foaming at the mouth, eyes rolled back, convulsing. Another groaned, drooling, frantically tearing at his own arms until they bled. A third gnashed his teeth until they shattered, hitting his head against the ground as if enduring pain.

Their symptoms weren't consistent, but one thing was clear.

"This is…"

"It's directly affecting their minds… it's similar to mana sickness, but far more malicious…!"

Rem answered, putting a hand to her forehead, clearly in distress.

Seeing her state, Subaru softly murmured, "Mana sickness…" then his eyes snapped open, looking around—at the fog.

“Could it be, the effect of this fog…?!”

Surrounding the enemy forces with fog dense enough to obscure vision, then launching a full-scale abnormal status magic from an unavoidable state. —The power and results were plain to see.

It didn’t seem like only a few people around Subaru’s group were affected. In fact, looking as far as their vision allowed, groups everywhere else had similarly stopped,

“So some have resistance and some don’t… I don’t feel anything.”

“Rem is a little affected by the excessive mana density… Rem will calm down now.”

Leaving Rem, who was beginning to take deep breaths, for a moment, Subaru dismounted his ground dragon and went to those affected by the fog. He tried to at least stop their self-harm, but—

“Hey! Stop that! You’ll get hurt… Whoa!”

“Ahhh! Ah-hi-hi-hi-ahhh!”

He reached out an arm to stop them and was scratched mercilessly on his forearm. Subaru groaned from the shallow lacerations and instinctively jumped back to create distance. The man then resumed attacking himself, not pursuing Subaru further. Blood splattered, and whimpering sounds spread through the air.

“It hurts, but isn’t this seriously bad? If this keeps up, they might not stop until they die!”

“Subaru! Your injuries?!”

“It stings so much I’m almost crying, but it’s nothing major! More importantly, if we don’t do something about this, everyone will self-destruct! Can’t we do something?”

He asked the now calmer Rem, but she looked at the knights writhing on the ground and shook her head with a troubled expression.

“Unfortunately, Rem’s healing… its effectiveness is uncertain. If it were just simple external wounds, perhaps, but it’s directly interfering with their insides through their gates. Such powerful mana contamination requires a skill level like Sir Ferris’s to handle…”

“For starters, how much can anyone resist this mental contamination? Besides me and Rem, almost everyone here is incapacitated!”

The unit that had been heading in the same direction as Subaru’s group was almost completely wiped out— Only the squad leader and two others seemed unharmed, desperately trying to stop their self-harming comrades, just like Subaru’s group. With more than half of the roughly ten members contaminated, the extent of its effect was—

“If Ferris, who’s crucial, gets contaminated, we’re completely screwed, what do we do…?”

If this was the situation just for Subaru’s group, then it would be desperate if other squads were in the same state. If key combatants like Crusch and Wilhelm, or vital support like Ferris, fell, there would be truly nothing they could do.

“Those who can move, get the injured to the roots of the great tree! Some forceful action is unavoidable!”

Crusch’s voice rose again from beyond the dense fog, and responding shouts followed continuously. It seemed she was unaffected by the contamination, but it was clear she was struggling to bring the situation under control.

It was a shift in strategy immediately after ordering a full-scale attack. The frustration in her voice was palpable, and even anger surged at the White Whale’s tactics, which didn’t immediately incapacitate but caused endless casualties.

“I’ve heard that injuring people makes it easier to collapse a front line than killing them… but for a monster to use it like this.”

“Sir Felix seems unharmed. If his healing can reach everyone, at least the effects of the contamination should be removed, but…”

Subaru understood what Rem was trying to say as she faltered.

The important thing was that it would tie up Ferris’s hands and divert resources to recover the injured. And above all—

“There’s not enough time. We can’t just wait defenseless for the whale’s attacks while Ferris treats everyone.”

“At worst, the White Whale might swallow us all whole with fog. I don’t want to believe it has that much intelligence… but given it created this situation, optimism is…”

“It might be doing this instinctively… no, either way, you can’t underestimate the hunting methods of witchbeasts.”

Crusch must be prepared to risk danger to rally the subjugation force and have Ferris treat them.

Naturally, she must understand that some breakthrough is needed to buy time. Whether an effective one will emerge, however, seemed quite difficult.

“—Haaah.”

He exhaled deeply, emptying his lungs.

As he removed oxygen from his body to the limit, his chest naturally tightened—he could feel his own heartbeat slowly, rhythmically pulsing.

He was surprisingly calm, and he gave himself a wry smile.

He was always swept away by the situation, tossed about by the events before him, and his heartbeat would constantly race, reflecting his inner turmoil.

Why was he so calm now, facing this decision?

"…Even if borrowed, courage is still courage, huh?"

Patting his chest, Subaru took a deep breath. He held it for a moment, closed his eyes, then opened them as he exhaled. He looked forward. In front of him, Rem, riding the ground dragon, looked down at Subaru.

As if anticipating what Subaru would say, what he would wish for.

"Rem, come with me to the most dangerous place."

"Yes. —To wherever you go."

Rem accepted Subaru's request without hesitation, even with a smile.

In response, Subaru ran to the ground dragon, leaping onto its back, then addressed the knights who remained on the ground, struggling with their rampaging comrades,

"Rem and I will draw the White Whale's attention. While we do that, you all get treated by Ferris. Those who seem okay, after Ferris treats you, rejoin us!"

"Draw its attention?! How on earth will you…?"

"Like this."

Smiling at the old soldier who voiced his doubts, Subaru inhaled, opened his throat, and—

"—Those who can hear, cover your ears!! Those who can't, stay as you are!!"

His full-throated shout echoed through the fog.

Rem listened to Subaru's roar with a comfortable expression, then covered both her ears. The knights closest to them also hastily covered their ears, and presumably, all the subjugation force members within earshot did the same.

Just as Subaru had requested during the pre-operation briefing.

Then—

"—I will 'die'…"

The moment he spoke it, surging terror gripped Subaru's heart.

If his plan failed, and that black, demonic hand reached out to his comrades around him, to Rem right in front of him—

However,

—I'll give you my heart, so lend me your hand!!

Subaru's eyes widened, suppressing his weakness, shouting in his mind— Immediately after, it came.

I love you.

It was a faint, small, fragile voice, like a whisper in his ear.

What was this intensely passionate feeling that made his chest tremble?

Subaru couldn't suppress the emotion that brought tears to the corners of his eyes. He chased the receding shadow of the voice, feeling an urge to embrace it immediately.

In the overwhelming warmth where adoration filled his entire being, his consciousness burned pure white—

"—I'm back."

After a fleeting encounter, Subaru's consciousness reawakened to the real world.

The sensation that had dominated Subaru's consciousness moments before receded, and he couldn't even recall what emotions he had felt then. Only a strange sensation remained, as if the intense pain he had braced for hadn't arrived.

Still,

"Rem, how is it? Does the Witch's scent…?"

"Yes, it smells!"

"It's working as intended, but couldn't you phrase that better?!"

With Rem's endorsement, even though he felt unsatisfied, his goal was achieved.

Subaru clenched his fist and looked around.

"We're leaving here immediately! We'll try to stay away from the roots of the tree as much as possible, so try to rendezvous with Crusch and the others!"

"Understood! Good luck!"

"You too!"

Sent off, Subaru patted her shoulder, and Rem spurred the ground dragon forward.

Currently, the fresh scent of the Witch's lingering presence —a contradictory phrase if taken literally— must be emanating from Subaru's body. The question was how effective this would be on the White Whale.

"Thinking back to the Ulgarm, it had an effect that covered the entire forest, but how about this time…? Honestly, it's an unknown."

When he had encountered the White Whale in the previous world, it had persistently pursued Subaru after he moved to Otto's dragon carriage. Considering Subaru hadn't made any Witch-related statements at that point, a Subaru emanating a stronger scent now should be perfect bait for the White Whale—

He thought that, and immediately after.

"—?!"

The ground dragon, which had been moving forward, suddenly sharply lifted its neck as if noticing something, then spun around sharply on its own initiative—Subaru let out a shriek of "Ugh!" as he was almost thrown off by the centrifugal force, frantically clutching Rem in front of him.

“What is…!”

“It’s the White Whale!!”

Right next to Rem, who was pressed close to him, a huge jaw suddenly tore through the fog.

By a hair’s breadth, avoiding Subaru’s group who had moved out of its path, the White Whale’s jaw slid just to their left, chewing the earth and swallowing the grassland in its path.

Rushing past, barely grazing its rock-like, sturdy hide, the White Whale, having passed right beside them, lifted its jaw behind Subaru’s group and instantly swallowed what was in its mouth.

The witchbeast confirmed that no intended target was mixed in with its chewing, flipped its colossal body, and turned its neck towards Subaru’s group, who were retreating at full speed.

A roar chased after them.

“Whoa-oh-oh-oh?!”

Overwhelming pressure from the colossal mass bore down from behind.

Chased by the crushing sensation, Subaru’s ground dragon kicked off the ground with all its might. However, the speed of the pursuing White Whale was extraordinary.

It swam through the sky with a mountain-like body, closing the distance at a speed that seemed to outrun the wind.

Faster and faster, the White Whale approached, as if it would swallow the world whole.

Its snout was incredibly close, close enough for its breathing to reach their backs.

"Rem!!"

"El Huma!!"

Responding to Rem's incantation, three ice spears simultaneously shot up from the ground.

They unerringly pierced the White Whale that was pursuing Subaru's group from directly below, striking its relatively softer underside amidst its hard outer shell— Attempting to stop its movement by impaling it.

But,

"It's not stopping—!!"

The ice spears, as thick as a hundred bundled together, snapped off at their bases, and the sound of crystals shattering echoed with a piercing shriek. As they shattered, the ice spears returned to mana, and blood gushed from the White Whale's wounds, which had lost what sealed them, but its movement didn't falter.

After such injuries and blood loss, where was the end of its unflagging durability? Subaru once again trembled at the high hurdle of bringing down the White Whale.

However,

"Unlike with the Ulgarms, we're not fighting one-on-one here!!"

"—!!"

Subaru provoked the now-distant White Whale by raising his middle finger. Even without understanding the meaning of Subaru's gesture, the White Whale opened its mouth and roared as if feeling anger.

Its colossal body—

"Riaaaaaaah—!!"

From its side, Wilhelm's leaping slash split it vertically.

Wilhelm landed squarely on the White Whale's back, his blade deeply piercing its flesh, and gushing fresh blood created a mist of crimson.

Then, two Ligers aimed for the blood-soaked back of the White Whale. Riding on their backs were two adorable, identical-looking cat beast-humans—.

"Big Sis, match me!"

"Let's go, Hetaro!!"

The Ligers, ascending the back from left and right in a cross, Mimi and Hetaro leaped off their backs. They took each other's hands and landed on the wound Wilhelm had created. Then, looking at each other, they simultaneously opened their mouths and—

"Wah—!"

"Hah—!!"

Immediately after, the White Whale began to bleed again from every single one of its wounds, shaking its massive body violently and rapidly losing altitude.

Writhing in agony, letting out sounds of pain, the White Whale barely avoided crashing. The twins leaped off its back onto their Ligers, breathless.

"Trump card finished!"

"Leader, please!"

"Alright, alright, leave it to me! If the little guys worked so hard, I gotta do my part too!!"

Replacing the two who dismounted, a large Liger climbed onto the White Whale's body from its tail.

As Ricardo's Liger ran like the wind, peeling away the rock-like hide with his great axe to create wounds, fog approached them.

The dense fog spewing from the countless mouths opening on the White Whale's body was targeting Wilhelm and Ricardo, who were on its back. This fog, distinctly darker in color, could be considered the "fog of Vanishing" that erased anything it touched from existence.

Its speed wasn't so fast that it couldn't be evaded, but more than anything, a barrage opened with every mouth. Ricardo's Liger twisted its body with difficulty, and Wilhelm also swiftly dodged the fog with agile movements, his great axe strikes and sword slashes continuing to dance on the White Whale's back.

Vertical slashes cut down mouths that let out distorted roars, and the great axe ravaged the insides of its oral cavities, crushing their function. The Liger's claws, though subtly, also kept the attacks at bay, and more importantly, the cannons of the Beast-Human Mercenary Group, which had caught up, began a renewed offensive of bombardment with magic stones across its entire body.

The White Whale began to be pushed back again by the subjugation force's offensive power. Seeing its colossal body twist and its oral cavities begin preparations to spew fog,

"Rem!!"

Faster than Subaru's call, Rem turned the ground dragon around, making Subaru, who was emanating the Witch's scent, run around the White Whale's snout. The White Whale, its concentration disturbed by this, reflexively turned its head towards Subaru's group— Only for its plan to be thwarted by a slash.

"—!!"

"Don't be so unfaithful as to look away. I've been head over heels for you for fourteen years."

A thrust pierced the White Whale's forehead, and Wilhelm's movement paused as his blade sank into the hard part. But he immediately abandoned his third sword, powerfully kicked the hilt of the released sword to drive the blade even deeper, held his fifth drawn sword in his right hand, and hacked mercilessly at the White

Whale's head with both blades as he moved towards its back.

He literally silenced the mouths in his path one after another with his blade, then rejoined Ricardo, who was rampaging with his Liger, running it crisscross. The dog-faced beast-human laughed joyfully, looking as if drunk on blood.

"This is getting fun! It's tougher than I thought, but it's nothing!"

"No… it feels a little too easy."

Wilhelm responded in a low voice to Ricardo's cheer, biting his lip as he continued to carve its back with light steps.

Ricardo, who peeled off a protrusion on the White Whale's back with a raised great axe and plunged its flat tip inside to gouge it out, closed one eye.

"Are you… worried about something?"

"It's hard to believe that the Sword Saint… My wife, would have been outmaneuvered by a witchbeast of this caliber. Even considering that we seized the initiative and weren't split by the initial fog…"

While Wilhelm was contemplating, swinging his blade, the White Whale suddenly moved significantly.

Its writhing movements, previously aimed at shaking off Wilhelm and the others clinging to its back, suddenly changed. The White Whale turned its head upwards and rapidly ascended into the sky.

On the rapidly tilting footing, Ricardo skillfully commanded his Liger to scramble down the rock face, somehow managing to disengage before reaching a dangerous altitude. Wilhelm,

"Before I dismount, I'll take one more thing—!"

Turning his body, the old swordsman leaped gracefully across the colossal beast.

As the White Whale ascended, Wilhelm, leaping downwards, climbed it in reverse. Weight shifts and forceful posture control by piercing with his blade. With body movements accumulated over years of experience, he ran down the White Whale's body, and Wilhelm's slash at its point of arrival swung widely vertically— One of the White Whale's dorsal fins, which had many mouths on its surface, was blown off at its base.

"—!!"

Hearing the White Whale's scream, Wilhelm kicked off the rock face towards the ground.

A fall from such a high altitude would normally be certain death, but just before hitting the ground, Wilhelm pulled something from his pocket and threw it directly downwards— A small explosion of a magic stone generated a gust of wind from below, and a ground dragon snatched Wilhelm from the side, slowing his descent.

"Wilhelm-san!!"

"…"

Subaru called out, trying to confirm his safety. However Wilhelm didn't respond, his gaze tilted upwards, directed at the sky above.

Subaru followed his gaze and saw the White Whale's tail swimming far above.

Blood dripping from the severed dorsal fin rained down with violent force, dyeing the plain's grass crimson, while the silent Wilhelm's fighting spirit remained undiminished.

Subaru didn't expect the White Whale to escape like this, but its objective in ascending into the sky was currently unknown.

The beast-human mercenary group was also beginning to gather, and the situation of the injured gathered at the roots of the great tree was precarious, but—

"It's coming."

Wilhelm, looking up at the sky, murmured softly.

Everyone’s vigilance instantly maxed out at the sight of the old swordsman, narrowing his eyes and readjusting his grip on his two swords. Holding their breath, they waited for its move—and regretted it.

They should have immediately dispersed, without waiting for the White Whale’s actions above them.

“—The fog is falling!!”

Shouting at the top of her lungs, Rem wordlessly spun the ground dragon around and immediately disengaged from the front line.

The surrounding ground dragons and Ligers also began to run, but there was no longer any time to even look up to check on the safety of others.

—The “Fog of Vanishing”, swelling up to cover the entire sky, was falling directly towards them.

That colossal, cloud-like descent could only be avoided by escaping its range. Resistance was futile against the destruction that swallowed rocks and trees whole.

They could only run, praying they would make it in time.

It was terrifying to even look up, with only the pressure of soundless oblivion descending from directly above.

Clinging desperately to the ground dragon’s back, lowering their posture, they ran to their limits—

“Did we make it?!”

A brightness, as if passing beneath a dark cloud, shone through, and Subaru, turning his head back, saw it.

On the ground being crushed by the fog, there were multiple shadows that hadn’t made it and were swallowed.

Desperate humans, fear and rage etched onto their faces, were swallowed by the fog from the head down and disappeared.

Ground dragons and all vanished, leaving nothing behind after falling to the ground and dispersing. No one's memory, not even their names, remained. Only Subaru remembered their deaths.

"Ugh… ah."

Subaru let out a small groan. In front of him, the scattered figures, broken up by the fog, were distant.

Their numbers were clearly much reduced from the previous offensive. Not just the subjugation force members, but the beast-human mercenary group wasn't unharmed either.

At least the main forces, Subaru thought, scanning his surroundings.

"Wilhel…"

He spotted Wilhelm, barely clinging to the ground dragon's back, having escaped the range of the fog. He tried to call out to him—and then noticed.

—From beyond the dense fog, a witchbeast with a gaping maw was closing in on Wilhelm.

"Run—!!"

"Ngh—?!"

Subaru's shout and Wilhelm noticing the threat closing in from behind happened almost simultaneously. But it was already too late for any effective reaction.

The White Whale's mouth, which had approached silently, swallowed Wilhelm and his ground dragon whole, along with the very ground beneath them.

The earth was scraped away, a five-meter square of ground was gouged out entirely, all into the White Whale's mouth.

"Ah…"

Before that shocking sight, not only Subaru but even Rem lost their voices in surprise.

Knowing his old man’s tenacity, the sense of loss was extraordinary. More than anything, with the main fighting force lost, the situation was rapidly deteriorating.

“This is bad!!”

Then, a different person’s voice rose close by.

Faster than Subaru could react to the voice, their ground dragon was violently struck from the side by a Liger, throwing them off.

“Whoa?!”

They tumbled to the ground with the groaning ground dragon, hitting various parts of themselves and grimacing in pain. The perpetrator of this sudden violent act, judging by the voice, was Ricardo, but before Subaru could question his intention,

“—!”

Suddenly, Subaru saw a red flower scatter before his eyes.

“Eh?”

A mangled Liger carcass, torn apart and scattering chunks of flesh, lay on the plain. The large beast-human who should have been riding it had vanished, leaving behind a massive amount of fresh blood.

The White Whale, swinging its blood-soaked tail, swayed its colossal body and swam through the air.

Whether he was protected, or what happened to Ricardo, these questions floated in his mind.

However a more undeniable fact called out to Subaru.

The White Whale swimming before him, which had swept Ricardo away with its tail. And then, “No way…”

Turning back, he saw the White Whale, which had swallowed Wilhelm and the ground, beginning to chew.

In front, and behind—and high above, still shadowing the sky, was a leviathan-like shadow.

—Three White Whales trembled their countless mouths across their bodies, roaring with laughter and stirring up despair.

Slowly, slowly, Subaru felt despair once again tighten its grip on his heart.

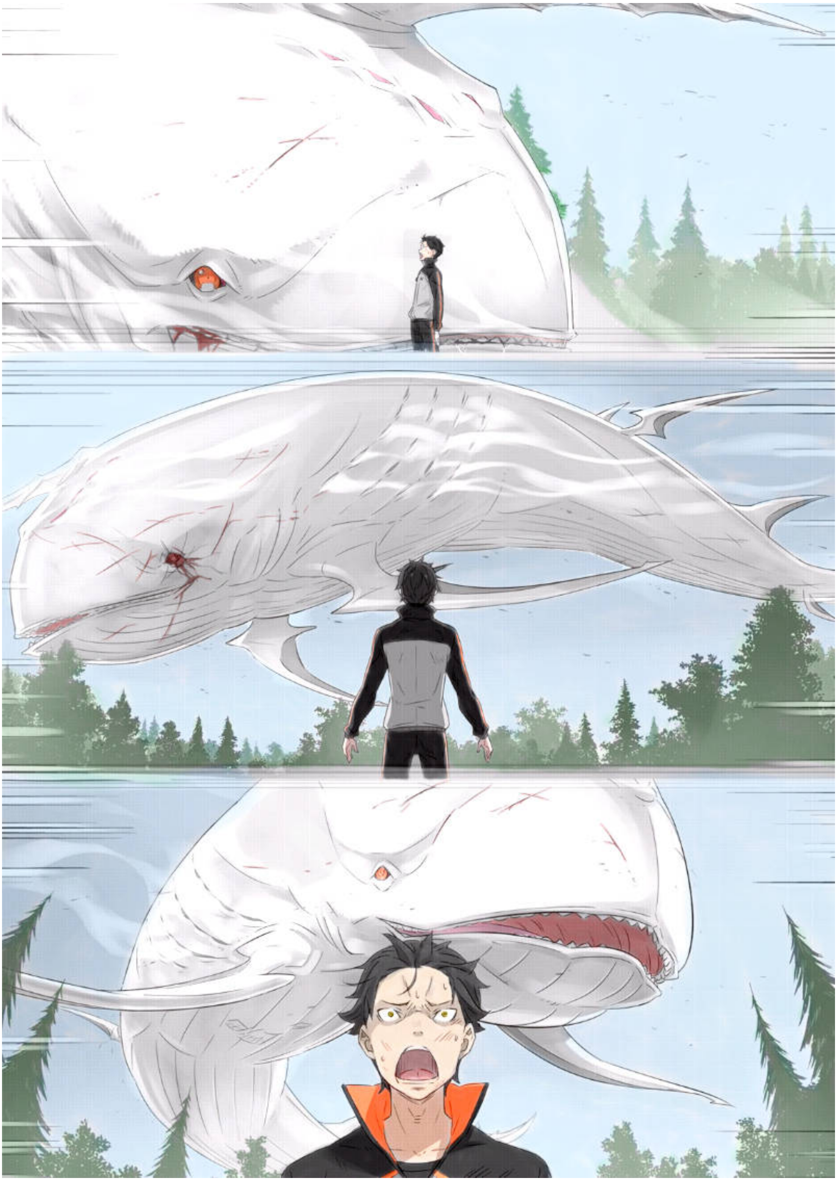

Chapter 59:
A Bet Fighting Against Despair

1

High, high, and far, far away, roars of laughter echoed, overlapping.

In a world enveloped by fog, three monstrous fish-like shadows swam, their colossal bodies swaying.

Grotesque beings with countless distorted mouths all over their bodies, continuously emitting piercing shrieks. Products of malice that had devoured countless travelers and brought immeasurable lives to naught.

Even a single one of them possessed enough threat to plunge people into despair, and now, with their numbers tripled, they mocked the humans who dared to resist.

Looking up at the colossal body of a White Whale floating overhead, a faint sound of someone falling to their knees reached them. Gradually, it became continuous, followed by the clatter of weapons dropping.

Looking over, one of the knights who had joined the subjugation force hung his head, his shoulders slumped, crouching with his face buried in his hands. His shoulders trembled, and the sobs rising in his throat could not be stopped by anyone.

None of his comrades surrounding the knight had a single word to offer either.

Despite bringing full equipment, preemptively striking with overwhelming firepower, and launching an all-out assault— They faced this unreasonable situation.

The halving of their forces due to mental corruption was severe, and the remaining main combatants were shattered by a surprise attack from a newly appeared White Whale.

Even if they gathered their remaining strength, it was less than half of their initial force. On top of that, they had to face three times the number of witchbeasts—there was no way they could win.

Everyone instantly realized this, understanding that their lives, their purpose, would end here.

The terror and ghastliness of the witchbeasts. The heavy weight of the precious bonds stolen by those beasts. Their utter helplessness, unable to repay those bonds.

When everything they had built collapsed, and the hearts they had sustained broke, who could blame them for falling to their knees?

When an irrational, unyielding reality pressed down, who could deny surrender?

"—Don't let them swallow us!!"

Suddenly, a roar thundered across the plain, which had almost fallen silent.

Startled, everyone looked up at the voice, seeing a shadow leaping towards one of the White Whales, kicking off the ground—the figure of a young girl, her maid uniform skirt fluttering, a vicious spiked iron ball clutched in her hand.

Enveloped in a powerful gust of wind, the roaring iron ball directly struck the nose of the momentarily halted White Whale. It easily shattered the hard outer skin, gouging and piercing the exposed bone and flesh, still propagating destruction.

A shriek rose, and the White Whale thrashed its tail, lifting its head to ascend into the sky. Its tail was then impaled by blades of ice extending from the ground, halting its movement, and the swirling iron ball struck again. With a single blow from the small girl, the White Whale's massive body swayed violently, splattering blood.

"If we can avoid being swallowed, we still have a chance—!"

Clutching his aching shoulder, a boy, blood streaming from his forehead, shouted.

Stepping forward, he gave instructions to the girl swinging the iron ball, his face contorted with the vexing frustration of his own powerlessness, unable to participate in the fight. Yet, he stepped forward.

As the ground dragon lying beside him slowly rose, he awkwardly, yet firmly, mounted its back, clearly unaccustomed to riding, but gripping the reins tightly and powerfully,

“Not yet!! —Nothing is over yet!!”

In front of the knights dominated by despair, as if to rouse his own spirit, the boy looked up, baring his teeth, eyes wide, glaring at the White Whale, and shouted.

“—Don’t you dare think this level of despair will stop me!!”

Vic.H2o

2

Subaru felt it distinctly— The slow approach of despair's footsteps.

One above, one behind, one in front— A total of three. This was no joke.

How much strength had they poured into just one, and how much damage had they inflicted? And now, when things got tough, they called two more friends for the real show? This was ridiculous.

How much more unreasonably would fate toy with them before it was satisfied?

Thrown to the ground, shielded by Ricardo, Subaru gritted his teeth, still sprawled. If he didn't clench his back molars, weakness, sobs, would surely escape.

A sudden, fleeting sensation of the world going dark. A feeling of disappointment as his brain struggled to cope with the unbearable situation, threatening to lose consciousness entirely.

He could feel familiar despair mocking him, familiarly wrapping an arm around his shoulder.

—Well, isn't it about time you gave up this time too?

A dim, faceless shadow opened its mouth in a crescent shape, urging him to surrender in a familiar voice. Subaru clearly accepted the gravity of the situation before him.

Around him, knights, like Subaru, could be seen here and there, kneeling.

They, too, understood that the situation before them was hopeless. Even the spirit to resist had been stripped away; everyone's eyes had lost their light, and the will to grip their weapons had been extinguished.

He glanced at them, sinking into the voice of despair that had its arm around his shoulder, and then noticed.

Right beside him was Rem, also thrown from her ground dragon like Subaru. Lying on her side, she was propped up on one elbow, her beautiful profile etched with anguish.

Her cheeks were stiff, her lips pale, her eyelids trembling. Looking closely like this, he casually thought, Her eyelashes are long.

—She looks much better when she's smiling, he also thought.

So,

"Your turn's been over for a long time."

He roughly shook off the familiar arm from his shoulder.

He flashed a smile at the shadow, whose mouth was twisted into a frown as if surprised by Subaru's action, then delivered a full-force right hook— The black shadow shattered, and at the same time, his body stopped trembling.

This was pathetic. Disgraceful. There was no time for hesitation, no time to stand still.

So what if two more whales appeared?

His limbs could move. His head could be raised, and his eyes could see. His voice worked, his voice could reach. Rem was here. Rem was alive. This was not the time to give up on picking everything up.

—Stand up.

Again and again, countless times, his spirit had been crushed.

—Stand up.

He had been tossed about by unreasonable fate, each time forced to face the end of despair.

—Stand up.

He had given up everything, thrown everything away, tried to flee to a place beyond, only to be denied even that, forced to confront his own heart.

—Stand up.

For what purpose?

—Stand up!

“For this moment, damn it!”

He slammed his fist into the ground, using the momentum of his propped-up upper body to stand.

Rem looked at Subaru with a surprised expression as he roared and lifted his face. He looked down at her, extended a hand, and glared at the White Whale before them.

“It’s not over yet. —I won’t let it end.”

“…Subaru.”

“Let’s do this, Rem. It’s showtime.”

Hesitantly, she impatiently grasped his outstretched hand, and he pulled her up.

Embracing the girl who had risen, Subaru faced her close-up, and said,

“Giving up doesn’t suit us. Not me, not you— Not anyone!”

3

Rem, roaring, furiously leaped at the White Whale, plunging her right fist into its rocky hide and scaling its body. As she climbed, her swinging iron ball loudly chipped away at the whale, creating a shower of blood as she relentlessly attacked. The White Whale writhed, groaning in pain.

Rem was attacking the one that had swallowed Wilhelm from behind. Subaru had seen its jaw move for mastication, but it shouldn't have passed down its throat yet.

In the worst case, he might have been crushed by those millstone-like teeth, but—

"As long as his head isn't crushed, Rem will somehow pull him out—!"

Subaru pulled the reins, leaning his weight onto the ground dragon's back, feeling utterly unreliable.

This was almost entirely on the fly for Subaru, not Rem, to handle the reins. The journey to the Flugel's Great Tree and a mere two hours after arriving— That was all the practice time Subaru had to handle a ground dragon alone.

With no prior experience riding horses in his original world, a mere few hours of practice meant Subaru couldn't possibly control a ground dragon freely.

He could only manage to give directions and speed commands, and then cling on for dear life to avoid being thrown off. Still, the intelligent ground dragon seemed to understand Subaru's intentions and limitations, careful not to dislodge its inexperienced rider.

This was a good ground dragon. Fast, strong, and most importantly, intelligent. From now on, your name is Patrasche. Thinking of a loyal companion, no other name came to mind.

"Let's go, Patrasche! Circle around the whale's nose!"

Shouting loudly, he flicked the reins, urging the ground dragon forward. Patrasche responded, surging ahead, suppressing its instincts to charge directly at the massive White Whale.

The White Whale, desperately twisting to shake off Rem clinging to its body, suddenly sensed Subaru's approach and involuntarily turned its head towards him. Right into its side,

"Smelling Subaru is Rem's privilege—!"

Rem leaped, delivering a kick with cannon-like force.

The enormous face momentarily blurred, and then the pursuing iron ball flew, pushing aside the air— Piercing through its cheek, ravaging its mouth, and exiting the opposite cheek, taking several teeth with it.

The White Whale shrieked, spewing copious amounts of yellow fluid and fresh blood. Its body finally crashed to the ground, thrashing indiscriminately like a fish out of water.

The ground was gouged, and clumps of earth scattered violently. Its flailing tail cleaved the earth, swept the wind, and unexpectedly approached right beside Subaru—just barely missing him,

“Meow-meow and Mimi, to the rescue!”

A cat beast-girl intervened just before the strike, swinging her staff to deploy a magical barrier.

The yellow glow repelled the attack, and through the created gap, the Ligers and ground dragons surged forward.

Catching his breath, Subaru turned to the cat-girl, Mimi, who had saved him in the nick of time.

“You saved me! I said something cool about starting a counterattack, and then I almost died immediately!”

“Hehe, you can praise me more! For today, big brother worked hard, so let’s call it even!”

“Worked hard…?”

Subaru tilted his head at Mimi, who puffed out her chest and then smiled at him. The girl then lightly flicked her cheek whiskers with a finger.

“Everyone else was trembling and couldn’t stand up, but you were the fastest to recover, right? You’re amazing, you’re awesome! Second only to Mimi, though!”

"It's nothing much. It's just that this level of despair isn't enough to make me give up."

Subaru bit his lip, responding to Mimi's loud praise.

That's right. It wasn't anything to be praised for. How much hardship had Subaru endured and experienced until now?

Compared to the overwhelming despair he'd faced before, the current situation was still something they could fight through—Why would he have the luxury of wallowing in surrender?

If he had time to play with despair, he'd rather spit up blood looking for hope.

Fighting back was, by far, much, much easier than giving up.

"—!"

As Patrasche surged straight ahead, a fish-like shadow suddenly appeared in front of them, opening its massive jaw.

So close that Subaru could almost see the dark red, grotesque organs deep in its throat, he instinctively leaned to attempt an evasion. But the fog filling the White Whale's mouth erupted slightly faster than his action—

"Close your mouth—!"

An invisible blade, swung down from above, vertically split the White Whale's wide-open mouth from the side. With a shriek, the White Whale's mouth snapped shut due to the force of the slash, and it slid across the ground, writhing, as Subaru and Mimi passed by. Looking up after their narrow escape, they saw Crusch rushing from across the battlefield.

She ran alongside Subaru, looking displeased at the White Whale.

"At first glance, the situation is at its worst. What happened to Wilhelm?"

"The fact that you remember means he wasn't swallowed by the fog, at least… It's up to Rem's struggle."

Subaru replied, turning his head and keeping an eye on the White Whale attempting to turn and pursue them. Crusch, in turn, let her gaze wander similarly. Her eyes stopped at the sight of the White Whale leaping, causing the ground to rumble, and Rem desperately swinging her iron ball on its back, creating a sea of blood.

"What do you make of it, Natsuki Subaru?"

"What do I make of it? What do you mean? If you mean our chances of winning, I'd selfishly say my life or death makes a difference."

"That's not it. Don't you find it strange?"

Crusch's slash from her swinging arm struck the nose of the White Whale attempting to approach from behind. A roar rose, and feeling the vibration of the air on his back, Subaru looked at her, saying, "Strange?"

"The number of White Whales has increased to three. On the surface, it's a desperate situation. However if White Whales are indeed a species that forms groups, how could that fact not have been conveyed to anyone?"

"I don't quite get what you're trying to say."

"There must be some trick to it."

Crusch stated clearly, turning her dignified face towards Subaru.

Naturally, pierced by her strong gaze, Subaru straightened his posture.

"You mean… find it?"

"We will buy time with your evasive maneuvers and our supporting fire. In any case, it won't last long. We must do something— Retreat is no longer an option."

Declaring this, Crusch's ground dragon changed direction, moving away from Subaru.

She made a wide detour, circling the glaring White Whale, and then went to each of the scattered subjugation force units, shouting.

“Stand up! Lift your heads! Grasp your weapons! For what purpose have you come this far!”

“…”

The men, sunk in despair and grief, who had hung their heads, now raised their gazes.

Before them, Crusch stood tall, holding her drawn holy sword aloft to the heavens.

“Look at that man! He is weaponless, powerless, a weakling who could be blown away by a mere gust. A helpless man whose defeat I have witnessed with my own eyes!”

With her sword, she indicated the running figure —Subaru atop the ground dragon— and Crusch raised her voice even higher.

More than anyone else, that man is the weakest.

He has no strength to fight. No ability to survive. A man riddled with defeat, who has been crushed again and again.

Yet, that weakest man is roaring, quicker than anyone, that he can still do it.

The most powerless man in this place is gritting his teeth, enduring pain, holding back tears, spitting up blood, yet still looking up, trying to resist.

“So why, then, should we hang our heads?”

“…”

“Our strength is weak; even combined, it’s uncertain if we can reach the beast’s throat. Even so, if the weakest man hasn’t given up, why are we allowed to fall to our knees?!”

“Oh, oh…”

The demoralized men looked at each other, encouraging their trembling knees to stand.

They picked up their dropped weapons, and their ground dragons, awaiting their masters’ ride, stood beside them.

Reaching out, gripping the reins, the knights who had supposedly fallen to their knees mounted their ground dragons. The ground dragons neighed, and upon their backs, the knights, too, drew their swords and hoarsely roared.

A battle cry erupted. To rouse their own spirits, to take pride in their souls.

Behind the struggling, weak boy, they roared and raged to cast off the foolishness of crouching and hanging their heads.

This emotion was called ‘shame’. ‘Shame’ cut through fear, resignation, and negative emotions, making the knights raise their heads and giving them the strength to step forward.

“Let’s go— All units, charge!”

“Ooooh—!!!”

Swearing on their supposedly humbled souls, the knights advanced again.

Dust rose from the ground dragons’ hooves, and the subjugation force, now fewer than fifty strong, charged down the road, furiously assaulting the two White Whales swimming within striking distance.

Hearing the surging morale of the subjugation force and Crusch’s shout that brought it about, Subaru couldn’t suppress a bitter smile on his lips.

“Calling me a weakling and a loser, saying whatever she pleases…”

The fact that he didn’t even feel like denying it was, indeed, a serious wound.

They could call him whatever they liked, use him however they pleased. It was true that Subaru had come this far by being powerless, by constantly losing, by constantly being broken and giving up.

Knowing that, Subaru could now roar here.

He wouldn't end up constantly losing, couldn't be left constantly broken, couldn't keep giving up, and couldn't afford to be powerless.

"I'm counting on you, Patrasche. One more time, get to its nose and get out immediately!"

The ground dragon tilted sharply, scraping the earth, making a sharp turn, and again charged towards the White Whale.

In front of them, the mixed squad that had separated from Crusch provided supporting attacks against the White Whale, which was frantically trying to shake off Rem clinging to its body. Knight swords sparked, scraping the White Whale's hide, while cavalry riders, maintaining distance, paralleled the colossal body and unleashed bombardments with magic ore.

The White Whale shrieked, thrashing on the ground. Even its writhing movements in pain were unavoidable violence for those nearby. One ground dragon and its rider were sent flying by a single blow, and the sound of bones shattering echoed as they were crushed under immense weight.

Blood gushed, and one life was extinguished. —Subaru burned that image into his mind.

A chill ran down his spine. Failing to make it in time, the inability to save them was the result of Subaru's decision.

The result of Subaru saying they should start this fight. He couldn't avert his eyes. If he did, if he refused to accept it, Subaru would lose to the emotion of 'shame'.

When he had lost to his own heart, when he had faced his most despicable weakness, he had once been deeply and gently rejected for it, so he couldn't afford to be spoiled any further.

The thrashing White Whale sensed Subaru's approach and opened all its mouths.

Feeling a sickening rush of blood draining from his face, he entrusted himself to the ground dragon's full speed, cutting through the wind. —Right beside him, the 'fog of Disappearance' unleashed from countless mouths grazed past.

If even a single finger touched it, he would be erased, and Subaru's existence would end. The imagination of being enveloped by a sense of loss, different from 'death'. sent shivers down his spine.

However,

"El Fula!" "Like we'd let you!" "Where are you even looking?!"

Wind magic dispelled the fog, and roaring blades and hammers crushed the mouths releasing the fog.

The fog barrage slightly thinned with the knights' support. But still, the firepower was desperate. Subaru's nerves sharpened, sensing the end from the encroaching sensation of disappearance throughout his body.

He left the running path to the ground dragon, and on its back, Subaru's body performed evasive maneuvers. He flung his arms up, doing push-ups. He avoided the fog approaching from behind by almost doing a handstand on the ground dragon's back, completely losing his balance and falling off—

"Guts… Ooooh!"

He clung on barely, gripping the reins and hooking his knee into the stirrup. The grip strength he had forged by endlessly swinging a wooden sword for no reason in his original world barely held his slipping palms in check against the vibrations, swaying, and impatience.

A half-dragging escape— Breaking through the barrage.

As his vision cleared, and the ground dragon slowed, Subaru, in a movement that would appear utterly disgraceful from behind, remounted. His already limited stamina was further depleted, and he then turned towards the other White Whale— The one Crusch's forces were attacking.

"Stir things up… Haah. Damn it, it's not just about risking your life, you need to use your head too!"

Exhaling raggedly, Subaru again exposed himself to the life-threatening decoy act, while pondering the 'trick' that had come up in his earlier conversation with Crusch.

Three witchbeasts— Subaru was ignorant and uninformed about the White Whales. Thus, he was completely behind them in understanding the threat of the 'fog', and the long history of their existence in this world.

However, even Subaru had questions. Would Wilhelm, who had pursued the White Whale for fourteen years as his wife's killer, overlook such critical information as 'the White Whale exists in multiples'? If it hadn't been known, could simultaneous appearances like this have never happened before?

"Why did they suddenly increase…? The premise of there being three from the start doesn't fit…!"

He felt like he was grasping at something. But before that, Patrasche's desperate sprint reached the White Whale's olfactory range.

The White Whale's gaze, which had been following Crusch as she sliced its underbelly with her holy sword, swung widely and turned towards Subaru. At the same time, a dense fog accumulated in its opened mouth was exhaled with a roar that tore through the air, becoming an enormous destructive force.

Patrasche sharply changed its angle and charged forward. It evaded the raging fog, but was a mere half-step short of escaping its effective range. —That missing half-step for Subaru and Patrasche was,

“That’s our job!”

“We won’t let you!”

Mimi and Hetaro, who had intervened, bought them time.

Beside Subaru, who couldn’t fully escape, the twin beast-children opened their mouths, unleashing overlapping roars of “wa” and “ha”— The clash of high-pitched sounds created ripples that converted into destruction at a distance, and an enormous shockwave plowed the plains like a surging tide, scattering even the approaching fog head-on.

“Whoa! That’s incredible!”

“Right, right! Praise me more!”

At Subaru’s concise praise, Mimi puffed out her chest and beamed with satisfaction. Beside her, Hetaro, out of breath, muttered, “Sister, really…” and then, flanking Subaru on both sides with their running Ligers,

“We’ll provide support. Without Subaru’s presence… We can’t see a way to win this battle.”

“Can’t we just go ba-boom, then whoosh-bang, and then zash-pow-bam?”

“To go ba-boom and zash-pow-bam, we need Subaru’s cooperation, Sis.”

“Huh.”

The twins continued their surprisingly tense conversation, sandwiching Subaru.

Subaru ignored Mimi, who seemed to have no grasp of the dire situation, and turned to Hetaro, who seemed more reasonable.

“That combined attack just now, you used it on the White Whale, right? Can you do it again?”

“I’ll squeeze out every last bit of mana, but one more time is my limit. —Until the commander recovers, my sister and I will protect you.”

“Ricardo’s alive?!”

Subaru exclaimed at the unexpected good news, and Hetaro nodded.

Relief spread through Subaru’s chest at his attitude. He had thought that Ricardo’s Liger had been gruesomely killed, and that Ricardo himself might have been obliterated without a trace by the copious amounts of fresh blood.

“Commander has a message for you too, from his deathbed.”

“A message… It’s not ‘that’ll cost you dearly’. is it?”

“I think he’ll tell you that himself later… It’s this. Ahem, ‘Well, it got lighter. Me not dying is proof of that.’ That’s all.”

Hetaro dutifully mimicked Ricardo’s voice, even adopting the Kansai dialect— The Kararagi dialect. Not commenting on the quality of the impersonation, Subaru pondered the meaning of the conveyed words.

It was literally a message Ricardo had delivered to him at the risk of his life. If he focused on the meaning contained within it, and its true intent—

“Your impersonation doesn’t sound like him at all.”

“Yeah, totally not! No talent!”

“This isn’t the time for that!”

Mimi echoed Subaru’s tactless comment, and Hetaro retorted with a voice close to tears, but Subaru ignored them and looked up at the sky.

Two White Whales, entangled with the divided subjugation force, were still locked in fierce combat.

The White Whale floating in the sky was the first of the three witchbeasts to appear, and it had fled into the sky after their initial fierce attack. It continued to look down on Subaru and the others from high altitude, without joining the fight.

Its behavior seemed somewhat unnatural to Subaru.

Their fighting strength had decreased, and the current battle situation was one where the reduced numbers were further divided into two opposing forces. Although Subaru's distraction had an effect, if the White Whale in the sky were to join either battlefield, the tide of battle would turn drastically. If one side were to be devoured, it would be over.

Yet, why was that White Whale doing nothing—?

"Ricardo's message…"

Lighter, Ricardo told Subaru.

That he hadn't died, risking his life, was proof of that. What did that mean? What was lighter? His life? Certainly, life was cheap on the battlefield. However it didn't seem to mean that. Lighter, lighter.

"In this heavy, very hard situation, what the hell is lighter…!"

He surrendered himself to the ground dragon's sway, once again cutting across the White Whale's nose. The White Whale, which had been entangled with Crusch's forces, turned its mouth towards him, but Crusch's invisible slashes and thrown magic ore struck into its open maw, scattering blood fog.

The knights' roars rose. One by one, their numbers steadily dwindled, yet only their unending morale now supported the front lines.

Could people who resolved to resist, even facing imminent death, become this strong?

The full subjugation force had barely managed to challenge the White Whale, and now, having lost their main force and even reduced their overall numbers, their fighting strength was still balanced. —If this wasn't the power of will, then…

"Even so, the idea of the omnipotence of will is an overstatement."

With that thought, Subaru suddenly looked up. He looked back at the White Whale he had left behind, narrowing his eyes and glaring at the retreating beast's face.

Then, he realized.

"If that's the case…!"

He gritted his teeth, a tremor running through Subaru's entire body at the surge of possibility that welled up.

He conveyed his will to the reins, and Patrasche, with a sharp reversal, furiously charged towards the other White Whale. Rem, fighting valiantly, unleashed her Demonic power, making successive wind tunnels in the White Whale's body with her iron ball while riding one of the Ligers. Despite her apron dress being drenched in the beast's blood, she bravely smiled when she noticed Subaru approaching.

Her blood-stained smile only highlighted the horror, but impiously, Subaru found Rem's appearance noble and utterly endearing.

In this truly disadvantageous battle, she still believed in Subaru's reckless resolve.

He had to answer that trust, that affection.

"—!"

Without exchanging words, Subaru's ground dragon and Rem's Liger intersected, and Subaru rode his mount towards the White Whale's nose, while Rem rode hers towards its tail.

There was no need to stop and talk. Both already knew Subaru had his role, and Rem had hers.

Circling to the White Whale's head, the beast, sensing Subaru's approach, turned its head towards him. Multiple mouths appeared right beside its head, beneath its eye, baring fangs, drooling, and spewing white fog. Too slow. Not even a deterrent.

"Boom! Bash! Zumbara-bar!"

Straddling Patrasche in a figure-eight, Mimi's Liger darted around freely. Each time Mimi, striking a pose on the back of the large dog, uttered a made-up sound effect, the tip of the staff in her palm glowed, and the resulting magic barrier blocked the fog, buying Subaru time before impact.

"This is gonna cost you, big bro!"

"When this is over, I'll thank you a hundred times!"

"Then it's a deal!"

Trusting in Mimi's cheap reply, Subaru overtook the paralleling White Whale, forging ahead, and then tilted his head, glaring at the beast. He confirmed the White Whale glaring back at him with its 'single eye,' and a confident grin twisted Subaru's face.

"Just as I thought. You guys weren't three separate whales— You've been splitting!"

The White Whale fighting Crusch's forces also lacked its left eye.

The same was true for the White Whale he had just passed. Of course, the last one, floating wounded in the sky, would be the same. —The missing left eye meant Wilhelm's slash.

The reason why not just one, but the other two, shared the same wound, was clear.

It was none other than the one in the sky splitting and giving birth to the other two.

"The fact that a single blow is light, and that we can fight to some extent, that must be the trick!"

The fact that Ricardo wasn't killed by a single tail strike despite the surprise attack.

The fact that the White Whale, which should have been evenly matched with such a powerful force, could be fought to some extent by a subjugation force with drastically reduced numbers.

—Subaru, the cynic who couldn't believe in convenient plot devices like miracles or the power of will, saw in this the fundamental reason for the appearance of multiple White Whales.

It possessed the one-hit kill 'Fog of Vanishing', the White Whale sacrificed durability for the sake of more attacks. The violence of numbers— If its imposing presence alone broke the subjugation force's spirit, the battle itself would have ended.

It was hard to imagine a witchbeast understanding human psychology to execute such a strategy, but the fact remained that 'splitting' had precisely that effect.

What would have happened if Subaru hadn't roared at that moment?

Subaru didn't know what would have happened if he hadn't roared. He had the potential to see futures where he didn't roar, but he didn't want to see such futures.

He never wanted to see their faces for an extended period again—

"—What is it?!"

Before Subaru, who had arrived at a conclusion, the White Whale, which had been trying to pursue him, changed its movements. It scraped its floating body against the ground, gliding while digging into the earth with its underside. In a gesture as if it could no longer tolerate some foreign sensation,

"Sister, now!"

"It's hard when you're itchy and have no hands!"

Hetaro, seeing an opportunity, leaped forward, and Mimi, moving to encompass, let out a misconstrued comment about the White Whale's movement. Though the twins' communication was questionable, they moved in sync, sandwiching the White Whale's body from both sides, and simultaneously opened their mouths—

"Wa—!"

"Ha—!!"

With the resonant attack from both sides, the White Whale's body significantly warped, and within its constricted body, several organs, unable to withstand the pressure, were crushed. Its hard outer skin also distorted, cracks ran through it, and fresh bleeding erupted from various wounds, giving the White Whale its greatest damage yet— and,

"—Gyaaaaaah!!"

A part of its underbelly, which had been scraping the ground, swelled from within, then burst open, spewing blood and flesh. As a torrent of dark red fluid gushed onto the ground, carried out by the flow was—

"Wilhelm-san?!"

The old swordsman, who had been swallowed whole by the White Whale and whose survival had been despaired of, had returned.

As the subjugation force restrained the rampaging White Whale, Subaru rushed back to the fallen Wilhelm. Wilhelm, covered in copious amounts of blood, knelt on one knee, supporting himself with his impaled sword, and said,

"…Imprudent. I was careless…"

"You don't need to talk! Ah, damn it, I don't know what to do, but if you're alive, that's what matters most. Let's get back to Ferris's place right away!"

Subaru moved to offer a hand, but noticed Wilhelm's left arm—the one opposite his sword-wielding right—was almost completely severed from the shoulder, and dismounted his ground dragon. He then tried to help Wilhelm onto Patrasche by lending him his shoulder, but—

“Not… yet. I am not, yet…”

“Is this the time for that?! You’ll die before the whale does! And don’t give me any of that sleepy talk about ‘this won’t kill me’! When it comes to life and death, I’m the veteran here!”

“What, are you…”

Despite being battered, Wilhelm’s eyes still held the faint light of battle. Subaru silenced his recklessness with a shout and forcefully lifted his body. Then,

“Grandpa came out!”

“Wilhelm, are you alive?!”

The approaching twins saw Subaru holding the old man and came right up to them. They looked at each other and nodded.

“Subaru. Wilhelm to Felix’s place?”

“Felix… Oh, Ferris. Yes. He’s on the verge of death. Honestly, I’d want to take him myself, but…”

Subaru tilted his head, glaring at the White Whale, which was beginning to reactivate.

The wound on its belly was deep, and there was an unending discharge of bodily fluids, but the beast, opening and closing its mouths and emitting faint fog, showed no sign of losing its will to fight.

Currently, Subaru’s distraction was undoubtedly contributing significantly to the balance of power. If Subaru were to carry Wilhelm and leave now, it would be a decrease in fighting strength—

“That would be the best-case scenario. Worst case, I might drag the whale right to where the injured are gathered. Wilhelm-san, can I leave him to you?”

“We’ll do it with our Ligers… Have you thought of something?”

Hetaro took Wilhelm from Subaru, and struggling with the size difference, somehow got him onto the back of his large dog. He then looked up at Subaru, pulling his sister’s hand, who was clapped her hands innocently, saying, “Gotta do my best~.”

“If you have a plan, I’ll listen. If not, I’ll have to take my sister’s hand and escape from here.”

“Eh, why? We haven’t beaten that guy yet…”

“You be quiet, Sis.”

Mimi pouted her lips unhappily at her brother’s sharp retort.

Watching the twins’ exchange, Subaru nodded in understanding. “That’s right.”

“You guys are mercenaries. Unlike me, Crusch, or the knights who resent the whale, you’re just hired for money… You don’t owe us your lives, do you?”

“We just don’t have an obligation to throw our lives away. I don’t want to be misunderstood.”

Despite his timid face and demeanor, Hetaro said what needed to be said with resolve. Looking down at the small beast-person who was only about waist-high, Subaru said, “My bad,” before continuing,

“No time. I think we have a chance. For now, send Wilhelm-san to the rear… Rem and Crusch, huh? I need to talk to the main people.”

Subaru leaped onto Patrasche’s back as if flying and raised his head.

He glared fiercely at the fish-like shadow swimming leisurely in the sky.

"So, the White Whale has split up, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure. The location of the wounds, and their strength. Frankly, you guys, who've been directly fighting it, probably feel it more, right?"

"Rem was completely absorbed in the fight, but… yes, that might be true."

Rem and Crusch, who had rejoined them, nodded and expressed their agreement even before Subaru's explanation.

They had sent Wilhelm off to Ferris's side, carried by the Liger Hetaro had been riding, and then picked up Crusch and Rem along with the twins riding together.

The battle against the two White Whales was now entrusted to the subjugation force and the Beastman Mercenary Group. Their high morale and surprising coordination barely compensated for the lack of main combatants.

A few minutes— If Subaru continued his distracting maneuvers around the whale's nose, he could at least buy them time for a strategy meeting.

Riding alongside them on his ground dragon and Liger, Crusch, who had nodded at Subaru's theory, looked up.

"I agree that it's weaker than the original. However what do we do, understanding that? Even wounded and weakened, its threat still surpasses ours. Even with Ferris's healing, those who've fallen won't be able to return to the front lines."

"It hurts that Wilhelm and Ricardo aren't joining us, but we can't be unreasonable. We just have to win without them."

"Killing three White Whales. Easy to say, but a high wall to climb."

"We don't need to kill all three. —Just one should be enough."

Subaru's words made Crusch's eyebrows twitch.

Subaru nodded back at her, seeing her interested gaze, and pointed a finger towards the sky.

“What do you think that bastard is doing, letting its two clones fight fiercely while it watches from above?”

“Healing its wounds, without joining the fight…?”

Rem answered hesitantly to Subaru’s words, but Subaru shook his head.

From what he could see, even though it was a witchbeast, its biological functions didn’t completely deviate from normal creatures. High-speed self-healing—the White Whale didn’t seem to possess such an absurd, despair-inducing ability, at least.

In that case,

“That one’s the main body, then?”

“That’s what I’m betting on.”

Crusch’s realization made her look up, and Subaru also nodded in agreement.

To be frank, it was just speculation.

However, there was no longer any doubt that the three White Whales were a single one that had split. The problem was how to defeat the now-multiplied White Whales, and his insight was aided by the following:

“I think the reason it isn’t coming down, not joining either of its copies, is because it can’t afford to be hurt itself.”

“That makes sense. Conversely…”

“The two below might not cause the main body any real damage even if we kill them.”

Even if they struggled to defeat a White Whale, its corpse might disperse into fog and immediately reproduce into a new individual.

If that happened, they'd enter an endless loop, and it was clear that they, with their limited continues, would quickly give up.

"The reason it isn't coming down and how to defeat it are connected. What do we do then? If it flies that high, we have no way to attack it."

Hetaro, who had been listening quietly, looked up at Subaru, his dark eyes moist with the question. As Subaru was met with the adorable cat eyes, Crusch looked up at the White Whale floating in the sky.

"Even with my Divine Protection, reaching that high is no easy feat. I might manage one strike, perhaps… but I don't believe that would bring it down."

The White Whale that had escaped into the sky had reached roughly the same altitude as the clouds.

Its positioning, even higher than when it first appeared, seemed to betray the unpleasant nature of the White Whale, and Subaru couldn't help but make a bitter face.

At that height, even cannon fire using magic ore would significantly reduce accuracy.

"Rem. Can you, like, float a mountain of ice right next to that bastard…?"

"Rem apologizes. The further mana is from my hand, the harder it is to control. Lord Roswaal might be able to, but not Rem."

Rem's face was filled with genuine regret for not being able to help, despite seeing a possibility that could break the stalemate. Subaru waved his hand at her, bending his neck in resignation.

He had a plan in mind.

After waiting for Crusch's answer, Hetaro's answer, and Rem's answer, if the best course of action didn't emerge, there was a second-best option he hadn't wanted to use.

"I have a plan that's a bit too much of a gamble… Are you in?"

Subaru closed one eye, asking for their resolve before revealing his second-best plan.

It could be said that it was a truly tasteless question.

—Subaru knew that from the moment they rushed to this place, they were all fools who wouldn't hesitate at such a gamble.

5

From high above, the White Whale silently looked down upon the conflict below.

If one were to observe the battlefield, divided into left and right, the struggle splitting the plain was cleanly sectioned by a colossal tree reaching towards the heavens.

In both battlefields, small humans clung to the witchbeasts' massive bodies, plunging in the steel gripped in their hands, brandishing stones that ignited flames, and cleverly resisting.

Flames rose, and each time the beast's groans reached it from below, the White Whale swimming in the sky exhaled white fog.

The fog hanging over the battlefield favored its counterparts below, steadily pushing the struggling, tiny beings into a disadvantage.

The scurrying shadows dwindled in number, one by one, as time passed. Swallowed by the 'fog', their very existence erased.

It wouldn't be long before everything was consumed and this pointless battle ended.

It was only a matter of time before the balance of power collapsed and total disintegration began.

If the White Whale possessed human intelligence, it would have thought so and been convinced of its victory.

However in reality, the White Whale had no such intelligence. It merely acted according to its instincts, to ensure its own survival and to utterly destroy its opponents.

To question why it made such judgments would be tasteless; it was merely beastly instinct.

Thus, the White Whale, guided by instinct, calmly and precisely intended to torment its prey to death.

"…"

It exhaled fog, painting the ground white.

Though interrupted, it had to spread the fog and cover the world below. That, too, was an instinctual command, the very meaning of its existence.

Just as the White Whale had detached its awareness from the scene below, it suddenly swiveled its enormous single eye, refocusing its attention downwards.

It had sensed a tremendous convergence of mana and had seen the source of that flow.

"El Huma."

At the center of the vast swirling mana stood a blue-haired girl.

Kneeling, beside the girl who was giving direction to the carefully refined mana, a long ice spear, revealing a sharp tip, was slowly forming.

A ten-meter-class frozen weapon of destruction aimed its sharp point at the White Whale's underbelly.

Its target was clear, and performing this in such a visible manner was a fatal forsake.

"—Please!"

Receiving the girl's prayer-like cry, the ice spear launched from the ground towards the sky.

Its tip, naturally, aimed for the center of the White Whale's body, soaring through the air.

Accelerating rapidly, the icy intent to kill approached with sky-piercing force—but it was abruptly thwarted, a miscalculation made by the distance needed for acceleration and by being seen at the moment of launch.

The White Whale swung its tail, swimming through the air as it swept aside the wind.

With just that, its colossal body moved out of the ice spear's range. The spear passed right by the White Whale's body, easily missing its target.

The White Whale writhed its massive body, watching the ice spear pass by.

When even the base of the ice column finally moved past it— It could truly be called a miracle that the White Whale heard a faint, tiny sound of something shattering.

—A devilish miracle from God, meant to inform it that this was an irreversible sound.

"—Hey there. Up close, you're even grosser than I thought, aren't you?"

An incredibly light sensation pressed down on the rock-like skin of its massive body.

At the same time it registered the presence that had landed on the tip of its head, the White Whale detected the diffusion of mana as the ice column, which should have passed by, vanished without a trace.

—Then, the source of an unbearable stench floating right before its nose.

"Come on. —Just so you know, I'm a guy with a reputation for being so annoying that you can't ignore me, got it?"

The White Whale heard the stench, its voice laced with a malicious grin, utter those words.

6

The prologue to Subaru's reckless plan was to grab onto the ice spear Rem created and head for the sky, then smash the 'fog-Clearing Crystal' to detach himself—and cling to the White Whale.

Despite Rem's vehement objections, he pushed through by repeatedly yelling, "I believe in Rem!" and received the trump card, the crystal—the 'Devil-Exorcising Crystal'—from Crusch.

He predicted that the White Whale would easily evade a clearly telegraphed finishing move, and this was his trap using Subaru himself. Conversely, if the White Whale hadn't evaded, Subaru, clinging to the base of the ice column, could have been pulverized by the impact. In a sense, it was a razor's edge.

"If we're talking about razor's edges, this situation is one too… or rather, it's seriously terrifying!"

Desperately clinging to the White Whale's nose, Subaru felt its rough skin and fur against his palms, openly expressing his revulsion at the high-altitude wind and the powerful creature's stench.

With Subaru —a being radiating the Witch's Lingering Scent— clinging to it, the White Whale's demeanor visibly changed. The beast, which had maintained a calm composure until then, clearly entered a state of frenzy, drooling fog and saliva from every mouth across its body, wildly welcoming Subaru with roars of laughter.

Of course, Subaru couldn't just unleash a finishing move to bring down this colossal beast while still clinging to the White Whale. Reality wasn't sweet enough for him to awaken power with mere resolve, and even if he were to unleash Shamak with the resolve to sacrifice himself here, it would just be a clumsy fool losing consciousness, slipping, and falling to his death.

So, what Subaru would do, clinging to the White Whale, was:

"So, come and get me. —Be prepared, alright?"

Subaru let go, his body sliding down the rocky skin before the White Whale could even begin an attack— Entering a freefall. The fool, no longer unconscious, began to plummet towards the ground.

The White Whale turned its head towards Subaru, performing this grand suicide, and moved slightly to pursue him, but then stopped its tail, as if hesitating.

It likely sensed, by instinct, that if it let Subaru go, he would only be able to perform the same actions against it as before.

Indeed, a formidable instinct. However, that wouldn't do. Therefore —

"At this height, I don't have to worry about anyone else hearing. This is a special service, listen up! Because of you, Rem died, and I've got some serious trauma, damn it!"

The moment he finished speaking, Subaru's body, which had been cutting through the wind, was severed from the world.

All sensation faded, and his consciousness, which had been dominated by the feeling of his organs being pulled upwards, lost touch with reality, lured into a place where the concept of time did not exist.

I love you.

He felt as if something had whispered in his ear.

The next moment— Agonizing pain surged through Subaru's entire body, as if scorched by lightning.

A hand, entering from an unseen position behind him, slipped through Subaru's sternum and grasped his heart, squeezing it tightly, violently, yet as if confirming something precious.

The unreality of his life-governing organ being roughly handled. The foreign sensation of a vital part being freely controlled by another— The end of a world where he couldn't even scream was heralded by the sound of the wind and his own groans.

Then,

"I'm… back!"

"—!"

Before him, the White Whale, mouth agape, was plummeting directly towards Subaru.

Lured by the increased scent of the Witch from his confession, the beast's instinct was overwritten by an even greater hatred.

Roaring, its eyes crazed as if it had forgotten the struggle below, the White Whale attacked, intent only on erasing Subaru's existence.

Subaru was terrified of the White Whale, which tore through the wind, rapidly closing the distance.

In a state of freefall, Subaru had no way to evade this charge. At this rate, he would be chewed up in the White Whale's jaw before hitting the ground, heading straight for BAD END 10, 'Fish Bait'.

If things remained as they were.

"—Rem!"

"Yes, Subaru!"

To Subaru's roar, which was almost swallowed by the wind, the girl's voice certainly responded.

At the same time, an ice column, emerging from the side, crashed into the White Whale's flank, which had been fixated solely on Subaru. It ravaged the inside of its jaw, breaking several teeth and slowing its movement.

Seizing that opportunity, Rem, mounted on Patrasche, snagged Subaru's body, which was in mid-freefall, with her morning star.

His waist constricted by the iron chain, Subaru groaned, "Guh!" at the sensation of his trajectory being forcibly altered— A familiar sensation. This was the second time Rem had saved him from a falling situation. The first time was during a prank on a dragon carriage on their way to the capital.

“You really should experience everything…”

This time, he managed not to faint.

The chain was pulled in, and Subaru’s body fell somewhat roughly onto Patrasche’s back. Rem was, of course, riding there, so Subaru’s body landed directly into her embrace.

“You saved me!”

“You’re welcome.”

“What are you saying?!”

Subaru retorted succinctly to Rem, who put her hands together in thanks, and then looked up.

Right past them, the White Whale’s face sped by—

“—!”

Unable to kill its momentum, the White Whale’s head smashed into the ground. A thunderous roar and dust cloud rose from the shattered earth, and the ground trembled violently from the impact.

With that tremor at his back, Subaru ordered Patrasche to go full speed ahead—and from behind them, the White Whale burst through the dust cloud.

Its head horribly mangled by the tremendous impact, the White Whale still pursued Subaru, screaming mindlessly.

Its majestic swim, once seemingly surpassing the wind in speed, was now a chaotic mess, a mere shadow of its former velocity. Its intensity was overwhelming.

Scraping the ground, slapping the earth with its tail, the White

Whale furiously bore down on them from behind.

Leaning forward, committing all his weight, Subaru staked his life on Patrasche's hidden strength. This was the ground dragon that had devoted itself desperately and diligently to Subaru. Though for a short time, Subaru had enough trust to bet his life on its run.

"I'm counting on you, Patrasche! You're a dragon, aren't you?! Show me something cool—!!"

"—!"

Patrasche neighed, and Subaru felt its speed pick up even more in the wind.

The White Whale's roar thundered, and he felt his eardrums roughly vibrate, blurring the world.

Straight, straight, just running, running, galloping through.

Swimming, swimming, the White Whale furiously closing in to devour Subaru.

That's when—

"Eat this—!!"

"—!"

Two thunderous roars echoed, followed immediately by a chain of sounds like something tearing away. The undeniably close intervals of sound narrowed, approached, and then,

Casting a mighty shadow, Flugel's Great Tree crashed directly onto the White Whale.

"—!!!"

Magic ore, unseen blades, vibrational crushing— With its base gouged out by a concentrated force of destruction, the great tree planted by the Sage, after hundreds of years, crushed the colossal body of the witchbeast that plagued humanity.

The White Whale, charging straight ahead, was directly crushed from above by the weight of a tree over a thousand years old. Against this fundamentally different level of power than any destruction it had received before, even its formidable outer hide offered no defense.

A shriek rose, a tremendous shockwave swept through the Lifaus Highway, and the blast cleared away the fog.

Pinning the White Whale under the great tree, its pained roar echoed, unable to move. Yet, despite suffering such immense power, its vitality refused to be extinguished.

As the White Whale struggled, trying to escape the immense weight, right at its nose—

"—I dedicate this to my wife, Theresia van Astrea."

Raising the holy sword borrowed from his lord, a single Sword Demon descended.

To bring an end— To this life-or-death struggle, to fourteen years of obsession, and to four centuries of conflict between humans and the White Whale.

V!c.ll2o

Chapter 60:
Wilhelm van Astrea

1

Let’s talk about Wilhelm Trias.

Wilhelm was born the third son of the Trias family, minor nobility in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

The Trias family was an old, distinguished house that had historically governed lands near the border of Gusteko, a northern country located to the north of the kingdom. However, their past glory as a renowned martial family was long gone. By the time Wilhelm was born, they were little more than a minor barony with a small domain and few subjects— In short, an example of fallen nobility.

His elder brothers, though modest, possessed the qualities expected of a lord. For Wilhelm, the third son, the Trias family provided just enough comfort to prevent destitution and a privileged environment that allowed him the freedom to choose his own future.

Being much younger than his brothers, Wilhelm grew up free from the entanglements of inheriting the family. Unlike them, he lacked the talent for civil service. The path that would define his future was revealed through an encounter with a single sword.

Adorning the manor’s great hall was a heavily engraved sword, a relic from a time when the Trias family was celebrated for its martial prowess within the kingdom. Now, it was merely a decorative heirloom, a shadow of its former self, left behind in the Trias household.

The moment Wilhelm picked up the neglected blade and drew it from its sheath, he was captivated by its allure.

Before he knew it, carrying the unsheathed sword and swinging it in the backyard from dawn till dusk became his daily routine.

He first touched a sword at the age of eight. By fourteen, having grown accustomed to the sword's weight and length, his limbs had lengthened, and he had shed his awkwardness. There was no one in the territory who could match Wilhelm in swordsmanship.

"I'm going to the capital to become a soldier in the Royal Army. To become a knight."

At fourteen, he left home after uttering those foolish words, the kind any boy might think of at least once.

The catalyst was his eldest brother, who began to lecture Wilhelm, who was engrossed only in sword practice and spent his time with the local ruffians, pretending to be a rogue. "What will you do in the future?" he asked.

Wilhelm didn't think about the future; as long as he was enjoying the present, that was enough. The moments when he wielded his sword and truly felt himself growing stronger— Those were his only joys.

His brother's words to his own brother, who had no future prospects, were harsh. Bombarded with nothing but logical arguments, Wilhelm was at a loss for words, and out came his aforementioned naive declaration.

What followed was a heated exchange, the inevitable "You don't understand how I feel!" Wilhelm actually ended up leaving with just some money and his sword.

Though his departure was unplanned, Wilhelm's first journey to the Royal Capital was somehow accomplished before his money ran out. He had always intended to eventually showcase his swordsmanship in the capital. The plan had merely been accelerated, and it was an unexpected journey undertaken without his family's permission.

Elated, Wilhelm arrived in the Royal Capital and immediately headed for the Royal Castle, knocking on its gates to join the Royal Army as a common soldier, hoping to make history.

In this day and age, anyone attempting to enter the castle gates in such a manner would be regarded as a rogue and, naturally, turned away at the gate.

However, at the time, the kingdom was embroiled in a civil war in its eastern territories —a conflict with the demi-human alliance—and was so desperate for soldiers that no matter how many volunteers they recruited, it was never enough.

It was into this urgent situation that a young boy, claiming to have some skill with a sword, presented himself. He was welcomed with open arms, and Wilhelm joined the Royal Army without significant obstacle.

Thus, Wilhelm stepped onto the battlefield, untouched by hardship or setbacks. Before the formidable wall of reality, his swordsmanship was mercilessly thwarted, his previous arrogance utterly crushed, forcing him to his knees in a bitter, unforgettable experience—the baptism of a first battle that everyone undergoes.

However, Wilhelm's sword skill at this point already far surpassed that of a fifteen-year-old youth with no combat experience.

"Huh, turns out life's pretty easy, isn't it?"

Upon seeing the young soldier pile up demi-human corpses on the battlefield and plunge his sword into them, everyone couldn't help but imagine that his future would be drenched in blood.

From morning till night, Wilhelm continued to swing his sword until he was utterly exhausted. He maintained this routine for six years, from the age of eight until he was fourteen.

Even after joining the Royal Army in the capital, he dedicated all his available free time to practicing his sword. His swordsmanship was already among the best of the knights with actual combat experience, and the name of this country swordsman, who hadn't even received a knight's investiture, became known throughout the Royal Army with expectation, and to the demi-human alliance as something detestable.

Unbroken by reality, yet never satisfied with himself, Wilhelm continued to wield his sword on the battlefield, burdened by a sense of ennui.

He found a dark joy blossoming within him only at the moment he cleaved through another’s flesh with his sword, bathed in their blood, and proved himself stronger than the life he took.

Before long, Wilhelm began to slay people with a smile, and the name “Sword Demon” began to be uttered on the battlefield with both fear and hatred.

Though his military achievements easily surpassed the fingers on both hands, Wilhelm never received a knight’s investiture. He didn’t socialize with others, was relentlessly dedicated to his sword, and on the battlefield, he rampaged without regard for his allies, plunging into enemy lines and returning after causing a bloody spectacle. Such a person hardly deserved a glorious title like “knight”. Especially in this kingdom, where ancient chivalry still thrived, Wilhelm, despite his contributions to the kingdom, was continuously treated as an anomaly.

Wilhelm had no desire to change this situation.

He couldn’t bring himself to fight with the noble honor of a knight, competing over the lives of others or the purity of his own soul. In battle, people died, blood flowed, and lives were crushed.

He knew he wasn’t suited to be a knight if he enjoyed that feeling, and he certainly didn’t want to become one if it meant losing that enjoyment.

A distorted craving for battle had long consumed the young Wilhelm’s heart.

A crack began to appear when he was eighteen— Four years into his military career in the Royal Army, around the time when no one in the military was unfamiliar with the name “Sword Demon”.

2

She was a girl with long, beautiful red hair, so exquisitely beautiful in profile it made you tremble.

It happened during a day of forced leave. The warfront had expanded, and Wilhelm had been pulled back to the capital from the front lines. His protests that he was unnecessary were ignored.

Suddenly freed from his immersion in the space between blood and death, Wilhelm, with time on his hands, passed through the castle gates, his beloved sword in hand. The Trias family sword, which he'd grabbed when he stormed out of the house as a sort of souvenir, was quite worn, but this sword, his companion for over a decade, felt the most natural in his hand. He could use other swords, but for losing himself in the throes of battle, this one was, after all, the best.

With his sword by his side, Wilhelm headed to the undeveloped district on the outskirts of the capital. "Under construction" sounded good, but he'd heard the work had been halted a long time ago. At least, it had already stopped when Wilhelm first came to the capital, and there was still no sign of resumption. The rumor was it would remain that way until the war with the demi-humans was settled.

"…"

The undeveloped district was deserted in the early morning. If anyone was there, they were likely shady characters using it as a hideout. A slight show of his killing intent was enough to send these small-timers fleeing without a trace.

Clearing his mind, Wilhelm calmed his spirit, drew his sword, and—swung. What came to mind were the countless, inexhaustible mannequins he had already fought and cut down thousands upon thousands of times. Dodging, striking with the blade, maneuvering his body, severing heads.

It was practical training he had repeated over and over since childhood. The strength and speed of his imagined opponents grew with each passing year, and before he knew it, the one he was fighting now was—

“You’ve got a nasty look in your eyes.”

—A hollow swordsman with murky eyes, a mouth slack with madness, clearly not sane—none other than his own reflection in the mirror each morning.

Fighting himself, there was no other opponent within the shadows of Wilhelm’s current being who could truly match his skill. Rumors spoke of many skilled fighters among the Royal Army’s elite, the Royal Guard Knights, but Wilhelm’s battlefield offered no opportunity to fight alongside them. Naturally, his opponent became limited to himself.

Whenever he was granted a holiday, fighting his unkillable self became Wilhelm’s routine. Before he knew it, this corner of the undeveloped district had been labeled “Sword Demon’s territory”, and gradually, no one even approached it anymore.

“Convenient”, he rationalized, immersing himself in what could only be called his world of darkness. Within it, swordplay, impossible to wish for in reality, unfolded, and only there could he feel the meaning of his existence.

“—Oh, I’m sorry.”

The unexpected intrusion into Wilhelm’s solitary world was a beautiful girl.

He had stepped into the undeveloped district as usual, intending to swing his sword and engage in his self-inflicted duel, when he sensed an earlier presence and stopped. The section Wilhelm used was relatively level ground, an ideal spot in the abandoned area, spacious and perfect. This intruder, of all people, was occupying Wilhelm’s sanctuary, tilting her head at him.

“Oh, there’s someone here this early in the morning. In a place like this—”

“…”

The girl smiled faintly at Wilhelm and said something—but Wilhelm’s response was simply to unleash his killing intent.

An amateur would have fled immediately, overwhelmed by the intent. Even a professional, sensing Wilhelm's skill, would likely have discreetly left the area.

However, incredibly, the girl—

"…Is something wrong? You look scary."

—casually brushed off Wilhelm's killing intent and continued.

Feeling irritated, Wilhelm clicked his tongue.

An opponent unaffected by killing intent—that meant someone completely unrelated to martial arts. Anyone who knew even a little about the presence of violence would react significantly to Wilhelm's killing intent. But for those entirely unfamiliar with it, it was merely an intimidating presence. For some, that intimidation might even be perceived as simply narrowing one's eyes.

In the case of the person before him, she was precisely the latter of the latter type.

"What's a woman doing in a place like this, this early in the morning?"

Wilhelm sighed, still feeling her gaze fixed on his face, and responded. The girl hummed softly in response.

"I'd love to return the question, but that would be a bit too mean, wouldn't it? And you don't look like someone who appreciates jokes."

"This area has a lot of dangerous people. A woman shouldn't be walking alone around here."

"Oh, are you worried about me?"

"I could be one of those dangerous people, you know."

Wilhelm retorted sarcastically to the girl's jest, clinking the hilt of his sword to assert its presence. But the girl paid no mind to Wilhelm's actions. "This", she said, pointing beside her.

The girl, sitting on a step, pointed beyond a rise in the ground. Wilhelm couldn't see past it from his position, so he furrowed his brow, and she beckoned him over.

“I'm not that eager to see it…”

“Come here, come here. Just come.”

Feeling his lips twitch at her coaxing, like she was humoring a child, Wilhelm closed his eyes to calm himself and approached the girl. He stepped onto the rise, leaned over to peer beyond it, and saw—

“…”

A field of yellow flowers, illuminated by the morning sun, stretched out before him.

“The development stopped midway, right? I thought no one would come here, so I sowed some seeds. I came here to see the results.”

The girl whispered, as if confessing a secret, to the speechless Wilhelm.

He had been coming to this place for a very long time, but Wilhelm had never noticed this flower field. A flower field he could have seen by simply looking a little further in and widening his gaze.

“Do you like flowers?”

The girl asked, looking at Wilhelm's profile, who still hadn't spoken.

He turned his face towards her and stared intently at the girl's faint smile. Then—

“No, I hate them,” he replied, his voice low, his mouth twisted.

3

And so, Wilhelm and the girl's encounters became frequent.

In the mornings, when he went to the undeveloped district during his time off, she would arrive before him, quietly gazing at the flower field, basking in the wind. And when she noticed Wilhelm, she would ask,

“Have you come to like flowers?”

He would shake his head, then immerse himself in swinging his sword, as if forgetting her presence. After sweating, lost in his imagined duel, he’d look up to find her still there.

“You really have a lot of free time, don’t you?” he’d say sardonically, which became their routine.

I think the time they spent talking gradually increased. Conversations, initially only after he’d finished swinging his sword, began to happen briefly before, and extended a little longer afterward. Gradually, he started arriving earlier, sometimes even stepping onto the leveled ground before the girl. He’d even get a slight surge of emotion, a faint smile, when she’d say, regretfully, “Oh, you’re early today.”

It must have taken about three months of these encounters before they exchanged names.

The girl, who introduced herself as Theresia, playfully stuck out her tongue, saying, “It’s a bit late, isn’t it?” When he introduced himself in return, he confessed, “Until now, I’ve just been calling you ‘Flower Girl’ in my head,” which made her pout.

Once they knew each other’s names, I think they began to delve a little deeper into each other’s lives. What had been polite, innocuous exchanges gradually changed in nature.

One day, Theresia asked him why he swung his sword.

Wilhelm answered without hesitation, saying it was simply because he had nothing else.

As ever, his days in the military remained bloody. The war with the demi-humans intensified, and the monotonous work of dodging magic, getting close to an enemy, and slashing them from crotch to jaw continued. He'd charge across the land, break through the winds, leap into enemy lines, and lop off a general's head. Returning to his own ranks with the severed head impaled on his sword, he'd sigh, receiving praise mixed with awe and dread.

He suddenly noticed flowers at his feet on the battlefield, swaying in the wind even as they were soaked in blood.

At some point, he realized he was instinctively trying not to step on them.

“Have you come to like flowers?”

“No, I hate them.”

“Why do you swing your sword?”

“It's all I have.”

Their usual exchange with Theresia— When talking about flowers, Wilhelm could even smile in response. However when discussing his sword, he gradually began to feel pain repeating the same ingrained answer.

Why do I swing my sword?

He thought of the days he had “stopped thinking” by telling himself it was all he had. Seriously beginning to search for an answer to that question, Wilhelm went back to the very first day he held a sword.

What did he think then, as he looked up at the sword in his small hands, too big for his palm, not yet stained with blood, its unclouded blade shining, reflecting the light?

One day, still lost in a swirl of unanswered thoughts, he made his way to their usual spot.

His steps were heavy, and facing what awaited him felt depressing. This might be the first time in his life he’d had to think so hard. He was about to settle on the simplistic answer—that he had kept swinging his sword precisely because it allowed him to avoid thinking—when,

“—Wilhelm.”

The girl, already there, turned to him and called his name with a smile.

Suddenly, his soul was shaken.

His feet stopped, and he couldn’t hold back what welled up inside him. A sudden realization overwhelmed Wilhelm, threatening to crush his very being.

Everything he had discarded, everything he had left behind by sacrificing himself to thoughtlessly swinging his sword, came gushing out. He didn’t know why. The catalyst was unclear. It had always been on the verge of breaking a taut dam, and suddenly, at this moment, it reached its limit.

Why do I swing my sword?

Why did I start swinging my sword?

He had yearned for the sword’s brilliance, its power, and the purity of living as a blade. That was part of it. But the beginning, he realized, must have been different.

“I have to be able to do what my brothers can’t.”

His brothers were completely unskilled in matters of the sword and such.

Yet, his brothers were trying to protect their home in their own ways. So, he wanted to help them, and he sought a different way to protect.

In doing so, wasn't he then captivated by the sword's brilliance and power?

"Have you come to like flowers?"

"…I don't hate them anymore."

"Why do you swing your sword?"

"It's all I… could think of, to protect."

After that, their customary exchange ceased.

Instead, he found himself initiating conversation more often. He realized that his purpose in going there was no longer to swing his sword, but to talk to Theresia. What was once a place for thoughtless sword practice gradually transformed into a place where he desperately racked his brain to come up with topics of conversation instead of sword forms.

It was around this time that the "Sword Demon's" behavior on the battlefield began to change.

Before, he only thought about how quickly he could get close to an enemy and how many lives he could reap. However gradually, his body shifted its focus to how he could fight without incurring losses for his allies. He began prioritizing incapacitating enemies over killing them, and more often returned to supporting allies instead of pressing deep attacks. Naturally, the way people looked at him began to change.

People started talking to him more, and he started talking to others more.

Discussions about a knight's investiture, which had been entirely unrelated to him before, began to surface, and he even started considering accepting it with a slight ulterior motive.

A little more honor, he thought, would add a certain prestige to his true intentions.

“The investiture came up, and I became a knight.”

“Oh, congratulations. You’ve taken a step closer to your dream, haven’t you?”

“My dream?”

“You took up the sword to protect, didn’t you? A knight is someone who protects others.”

In that moment, it felt as if her smile was etched into the very thing he wished to protect.

4

Time continued to pass.

With his new position as a knight and the increasing number of people he interacted with in the army, information naturally began to flow in. The civil war with the demi-humans was escalating, with battle lines repeatedly seesawing back and forth. Wilhelm, too, experienced not only victories but also numerous defeats. Each time, he struggled to protect what he could within his sword’s reach, enduring days of bitter frustration when he couldn’t.

There’s no doubt that the widening circle of his acquaintances played a part in him hearing that the flames of war had spread to the Trias family’s territory.

The civil unrest, which had initially started in the eastern part of the country, had expanded, and a small part of its northern advance had reached the Trias family’s domain.

He had received no orders. If he hadn’t forgotten his position as a knight, his loyalty to the Royal Army he belonged to, then unauthorized actions would have been forbidden. However for Wilhelm, who now harbored the feelings he had when he first grasped his sword, these restraints meant nothing.

The familiar territory he rushed back to had already been largely ravaged by the enemy's invasion.

Confronted by the fading reality of the familiar landscapes he had left behind more than five years ago, Wilhelm drew his sword, cried out, and plunged into the bloody mist.

He cut down enemies, stepped over corpses, shouted until his throat was hoarse, and was drenched in their blood. It was the battle of a demon who lived by the sword, gave life with the sword, and could find meaning in life only through the sword.

They were vastly outnumbered. There were no reinforcements, and their original fighting strength was weak. Unlike fighting alongside comrades, Wilhelm was alone, given no opportunity to withdraw. Realizing how much he had believed he was fighting solely by his own strength, he accumulated wound after wound— Until he could no longer move.

He collapsed onto a pile of corpses, his momentum broken by the unending enemy forces, and Wilhelm understood that death was imminent. His beloved sword, his longtime companion, lay beside him, and he lacked the strength to even grasp its hilt. As he closed his eyelids, his life flashed before him, revealing only himself endlessly swinging a sword.

A momentary scene where he was about to conclude that his life had been lonely and empty— Then, one after another, faces of people flashed before him. His parents, his two brothers, the mischievous friends he had made trouble with in the territory, the comrades he had fought alongside in the Royal Army, all came to mind— Finally, Theresia, with flowers at her back.

"I don't want to die…"

He had always believed that living by the sword and dying by the sword was his true desire. Yet, as he truly surrendered everything to a life of blades, what assailed Wilhelm in the face of the end he had supposedly desired was only an unbearable sense of desolation.

The enemy soldiers, whose numerous comrades he had cut down, would not forgive his faint last words. A demi-human with green scales and an extraordinarily large physique raised the greatsword in its hand, mercilessly bringing it down upon Wilhelm—

"…"

The beauty of the ensuing sword slash was burned into his eyes, never to be forgotten.

A sword-wind raged, and with each gust, the limbs, necks, and torsos of the demi-humans were cleanly severed. A murmur of awe spread like a tidal wave through the enemy ranks, but the speed of the running blade was far, incomparably faster, producing death in masses.

A nightmarish scene unfolded before his eyes. Blood splattered, and demi-human lives were cut down without even a scream. The too-vivid slashes extinguished the light of life without even informing the victims themselves of their demise. Whether it was cruel or merciful, no one could tell anymore. If there was one thing that was clear, it was this:

He would never, ever, in his lifetime, reach that realm of swordsmanship.

He had dedicated the majority of his not-so-long life, unsparingly, to living as one who wielded a sword. It was precisely because he was Wilhelm that he could comprehend the immense height of the relentless swordplay unfolding before him. Also, the truth that it was a realm his untalented self could never reach.

If what Wilhelm had created was a valley of bloody mist, then what spread before him was truly a sea of blood. The size of the piled corpses was incomparable. The swordplay did not cease until the demi-humans who had invaded the Trias territory were utterly eradicated.

Witnessing the overwhelming slaughter, Wilhelm was eventually carried away by his belatedly arrived comrades. While his wounds were being treated, he couldn't take his eyes off that figure. The figure walked away majestically, her long sword swaying. Seeing that not a single drop of blood had touched her, a shiver ran through Wilhelm's entire body. He would never, ever, reach that place.

It was only after returning to the capital that he heard the name "Sword Saint". Around the same time, the Sword Saint's name began to resound throughout the land, replacing that of Wilhelm the Sword Demon.

The "Sword Saint"— A legendary being who once slew the Witch.

Only their divine protection now remained in their blood, continuing to guard one of the family as a transcendent being. The name of the current Sword Saint had never before been revealed— but that was only until this moment.

5

It was several days later, once his wounds had healed, that he could finally make his way to their usual spot.

Clutching his beloved sword, Wilhelm slowly, deliberately, walked towards it. He was certain she would be there. And just as he expected, Theresia was sitting in the same spot, unchanged.

Before she could even turn, he drew his sword from its sheath and lunged. Just as the blade, falling in a clean vertical cut, was about to split her head in two— Two fingers pinched and stopped the tip of his sword. Amazement choked him, and a smile crept to the corner of his mouth.

"Humiliation."

"—Indeed."

"Were you… laughing at me?"

"…"

"Answer me, Theresia… no, Sword Saint!"

He wrenched his sword free and attacked again, but she dodged with movements that didn’t even disturb a single strand of hair. His leg was swept out from under him, and he fell ungracefully, unable to break his fall. An unyielding wall, an immeasurable gap, existed between them.

“I won’t be coming here anymore.”

He lunged repeatedly, and each time, he was met with a counter-attack and struck down. His beloved sword had, at some point, been taken from his hand. Struck by the flat of the blade, his breath was knocked out of him, and he couldn’t move an inch.

Too distant. Too weak. Unreachable. Not enough.

“With a face like that… Don’t you dare carry a sword.”

“I am the Sword Saint. I didn’t understand the reason before, but now I do.”

“Reason…”

“To wield a sword, to protect. I think that’s good.”

He had given her a reason— Her, who loved admiring flowers and couldn’t find meaning in wielding a sword.

Especially her, who was stronger than anyone, and whose sword reached further than anyone. If so, to atone for the sin he had given her—

“Wait for me, Theresia…”

“…………”

“I will take the sword from you. I don’t care about the divine protection or the role you were given… To swing a sword… to appreciate the beauty of the blade, don’t taint it, Sword Saint.”

A foolish demon spoke of the sword to the retreating back of the Sword Saint, who was beloved by the sword. After that, the two never met in that place again.

The figure of the Sword Demon vanished from the Royal Army, and in its place, the Sword Saint began to spread her name throughout the military.

With Theresia's valiant efforts—as if embodying the phrase "a match for a thousand"— The tide of the war quickly turned. Though an individual, her martial prowess was no longer on a personal level. The resounding epithet of "Sword Saint" was despair-inducing even for the demi-humans who knew the ancient legends.

The civil war ended after about two years from the Sword Saint's entry onto the battlefield. The resolution was left to a meeting between the two leaders, and at the very least, the fighting between those who wielded swords had concluded. To celebrate the end of the war, a modest yet grand ceremony was held in the capital.

The ceremony included numerous awards and honors for the beautiful and, above all, powerful Sword Saint. People from across the nation flocked to the capital and the royal castle, eager to catch a glimpse of her, and a wave of fervent admiration enveloped the young hero who had ended the war.

It was then, breaking through the fervor, that the Sword Demon appeared, as if in a sudden dance.

Before the unruly figure who had drawn a sword, the guards bristled. Stopping them and stepping forward was none other than the Sword Saint herself, on the verge of receiving her commendation. Everyone held their breath as the girl, also drawing her sword, faced the intruder.

The beauty of her stance was so refined, it was almost hesitant to put into words. In contrast, how ominous was the figure facing her?

Clad in a brown jacket, every visible patch of skin was taut with dried rain and mud. The sword in his hand looked paltry compared to the ceremonial blade of the Sword Saint; though its hilt was magnificent, the blade itself was warped, even showing reddish-brown rust.

On the dais, the king stopped the knights who moved to assist the Sword Saint. With bated breath, everyone watched the Sword Saint step forward, her swordplay flashing.

Blade met blade with a sharp clang that pierced through the audience. Flashes of light chained together, kicking up wind, and the two shadows began to slide at bewildering speed. Faced with that sight, the hearts of the breathless spectators were overwhelmed by an immense, profound emotion.

Attack and defense changed with furious speed. The two swordsmen exchanged blows, their positions shifting from ground to air, wall to sky. At their sight, some even found themselves shedding tears.

Humans could reach such a realm. A sword could inspire such beautiful sentiment in others.

Swordplay intertwined, blades locked in a struggle, tips flashed, and they struck each other repeatedly. And finally,

"…"

The reddish-brown blade snapped in half, its tip spiraling through the air. Then, the ceremonial sword held by the Sword Saint—

"My…"

"…………"

"It's… My victory."

The ornate treasured sword clattered to the ground, and the tip of the broken sword hovered inches from the Sword Saint's throat. Time seemed to stop, and everyone knew it— The Sword Saint's defeat.

"You, who are weaker than me, no longer have a reason to wield a sword."

"If I don't carry the sword… Then who will?"

“I will inherit your reason for swinging a sword. You just need to become my reason for swinging it.”

He threw back the hood of his jacket. Beneath the reddish-brown grime, Wilhelm glared at Theresia with a sullen expression. She shook her head slightly at Wilhelm’s attitude.

“You’re awful. You’ve made all my resolve and determination meaningless.”

“I’ll inherit all of that too. Just forget about ever holding a sword and live carefree… Let’s see. You can just live peacefully behind me, perhaps growing flowers.”

“Protected by your sword?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll protect me?”

“Yes.”

Theresia placed a hand on the flat of the sword pointed at her and took a step forward. They faced each other, close enough to feel each other’s breath. Tears welled in her moist eyes, then fell as Theresia smiled.

“Do you like flowers?”

“I don’t hate them anymore.”

“Why do you swing your sword?”

“To protect you.”

Their faces drew closer, the distance shrinking, then disappearing. After their lips, which had touched intimately, parted, Theresia’s cheeks flushed, and she looked up at Wilhelm.

“Do you… love me?”

“—Figure it out.”

He turned his face away, blurting out the words gruffly. The audience's frozen time resumed, and the guards surged towards them. Seeing some familiar faces among them —comrades he had once fought alongside— Wilhelm shrugged. Theresia pouted at his curt attitude, just like in one of their moments by the flower field, laughing together.

"There are some things I want you to say!"

"Ugh."

He scratched his head, scowling in embarrassment, then reluctantly turned back to Theresia, leaning in close to her ear.

"Someday, when I feel like it."

With that, he masked his shyness with words.

RURANOBE
GISH||PROUD

7

The gleaming treasured sword easily cut through the rock-like hide, and wind rushed past.

“Ooooooooooh—!!”

As the aging swordsman charged, roaring, blood gushed from the blade’s wounds, painting the sky crimson.

He was a wreck. His left arm hung precariously from his shoulder, and the blood soaking his entire body, a mixture of enemy and his own, had turned a dark, murky color. The effects of the healing magic, even for a brief moment, could only staunch the bleeding and restore a fraction of his stamina. He remained in a critical condition, in need of rest.

Yet, looking at Wilhelm now, who would dare mock him as a dying old man? If you saw the light in his eyes, the powerful stride of his steps, the brilliant swiftness of his blade, heard the resounding, tearing cry of his spirit, witnessed the radiance of his very soul before you— Who could mock the culmination of that old man’s life as foolish?

The blade streaked, and the writhing White Whale shrieked, its immense body trembling with agony. There was no hesitation in the Sword Demon’s blade as it raced across the back of the beast, pinned motionless beneath a great tree. The blade entered near its head, exited through its back, and reached its tail. Upon landing, he spun back, tearing through its underbelly, aiming for the head once more.

One swing— A long, deep, and sharp slash that circled around, cleaving the White Whale in two.

Leaping, the Sword Demon landed again on the White Whale’s halted snout. Shaking the blood from his blade, the Sword Demon, reflecting his own image in the White Whale’s right eye —the only one remaining— said,

“I will not accuse you of evil. It is useless to preach good and evil to a beast. Between you and me, there is only the absolute law of life and death, where the strong reap the weak.”

“…”

“Sleep. —Forever.”

With a final, faint whimper, the light faded from the White Whale’s eyes. Naturally, power suddenly drained from its colossal body, its collapsing form and dripping fresh blood creating an earthquake and a crimson torrent.

No one could utter a word, feeling the blood that seeped underfoot. Silence descended upon the Lifaus Highway, and then—

“It’s over, Theresia. Finally…”

Above the motionless head of the White Whale, Wilhelm looked up at the sky. He dropped the treasured sword from his hand, covered his face with his free hand, and the Sword Demon, now without his sword, said in a trembling voice,

“Theresia, I…”

His voice was hoarse, yet it held an undying, overflowing love.

“I love you—!!”

Words of love known only to Wilhelm, words that had remained unspoken. The surge of emotion he had never once been able to express, until the day he lost his beloved.

What he should have confessed when she once asked him, Wilhelm finally uttered after decades.

On the corpse of the White Whale, the Sword Demon, having dropped his sword, wept and cried out his love for his deceased wife.

“Here, the White Whale has been vanquished.”

A lone, clear voice quietly echoed across the plains in the night. The men, who had been speechless at that voice, looked up. Everyone saw the young girl, riding a ground dragon, stepping forward.

Her long green hair was disheveled, and the ornaments on her attire were ruined by the wounds she’d sustained in battle. Her face was stained with her own blood, making her look utterly disheveled. Yet, in their eyes, the girl shone brighter than in any previous moment.

If the radiance of one’s soul determines a person’s worth, then this was only natural.

The treasured sword had been lent out; the current Crusch was not carrying a blade. Therefore, she raised her empty fist to the sky, clenching it for all to see.

“The Beast of the Fog, which has lived for four hundred years and threatened the world— Wilhelm van Astrea has slain it!”

“—Oh!!”

“This battle, it is our victory—!!”

The proclamation of victory rang out from their lord, and the surviving knights cheered. In the now clear plains, the signs of night returned. The moonlight illuminated the people below, as it should, a true night.

And so, after centuries, the battle with the White Whale concluded.

Chapter 61:
The Road to the Mathers Domain

1

Amidst the moonlit plains, cheers erupted.

The sight of the knights' raised swords reflecting the moonlight was even beautiful. The massive body of the White Whale lay beneath Flugel's Great Tree, and a wave of euphoria enveloped the group surrounding it. Everyone was caught up in the thrill of victory, shedding tears of joy at the fulfillment of their long-held desire.

As if to douse their joyous spirits,

"—!!"

Two powerful roars ripped through the air of the Lifaus Highway, which had momentarily fallen silent. These were not the slain White Whale but rather two of its doppelgangers, having lost their main body. Their colossal forms writhed on the ground, raging ferociously, yet somehow their outlines were beginning to blur indistinctly. The supply of mana from the main body had ceased, and they were gradually losing the ability to sustain their physical forms. Left alone, they would likely vanish within minutes—a truly pathetic sight. However,

"Crude."

With a single word, an arm swung, unleashing an unseen blade of wind that cut short their grotesque display. A gusting wind slash entered from the head, easily cleaving through the White Whale's now weakened hide as it writhed in agony. It was struck in two, left and right, its very existence literally scattering into mist.

The remaining doppelganger was pulverized by a single shot from the subjugation force's cannons. Its scattered mana also dissolved into the atmosphere, causing its colossal form to vanish completely. This time, the battle to subjugate the White Whale truly came to an end. But—

"We can't just bask in triumph."

Clenching her fist, Crusch acknowledged the surge of exhilaration within her chest, yet she shook her head, not letting it show on her face. This wasn't a story where everyone cooperates to defeat an evil beast, and the tale ends with "happily ever after." That kind of ending is reserved for picture books. In reality, where "happily ever after" continues, there are endless tasks that need to be done.

They had to rescue the surviving injured, respectfully bury the dead whose bodies remained, and trace the footsteps of those who had died without leaving remains.

As Crusch sighed before dealing with the aftermath, she noticed something. Not far from the White Whale's corpse, the figure of the main contributor was desperately raising his voice.

2

"Rem…! Rem, open your eyes…!"

Subaru desperately called out to the girl limp in his arms, her face drained of color. The ground dragon, nestled close by, nudged him worriedly with its black snout. However Subaru was too consumed by a furious impatience to respond to the affectionate gesture of his beloved ground dragon.

—The strategy to lure the White Whale by Subaru's scent and crush it under the Flugel tree had been a brilliant success.

It was a plan that might have been met with opposition due to the reluctance to fell an ancient tree. However, the pragmatic Demi-beast mercenaries had no compunctions, and even Crusch showed a remarkable open-mindedness, readily agreeing that it was necessary if it came to that. As a result, the plan, which placed Subaru himself at great risk, was executed and yielded unprecedented results. Yet, if this was the price, it was simply too high.

“This can’t be happening… Please, Rem… I can’t do this without you…”

Before him, Rem still showed no sign of responding to Subaru’s desperate calls. Her limp limbs seemed devoid of will, and his tearful cries echoed emptily in the air, passing through her eardrums unheard.

They had sprinted through the approaching trunk of the great tree, hotly pursued by the White Whale. The colossal beast crashed directly into the tree, and the violent tremors and impacts scattered everything indiscriminately. Among those caught in the blast were Subaru and his companions, who had been running right beside it.

Amidst the violent shock that disoriented him, leaving him unable to tell up from down, Subaru remembered being protected by a warm sensation. The moment he realized it, a tremendous impact resounded, slamming him and that sensation onto the ground.

Shaking his head, Subaru emerged from the haze of semi consciousness and realized he was sprawled on the ground. He looked up and saw that he was being held by someone—and then he knew it was her body, the one that had embraced him until the very end.

“…Suba…ru-ku…”

“Rem—?!”

Her eyelids fluttered, and the eyes beneath them reflected Subaru with a weak glimmer. His own reflection in her eyes looked so frail, as if unconsciously accepting the harsh reality that was closing in.

“Thank god… Ah, it’s me. Do you recognize me, it’s Subaru. Rem, your body is…”

“Subaru… Rem is glad you’re safe…”

“…!”

His throat tightened. He saw Rem smile in relief, ignoring her own condition, simply overjoyed to see him unharmed, even as he struggled to utter words of concern through his tear-choked voice.

“The witchbeast… what happened to it…?”

“…It fell. We defeated it. It worked out. Everything worked out! I’m not hurt at all… It’s all thanks to you…”

“Is… that so. Then Lord Roswaal and Lady Emilia… must be alright too…”

“They’ll be fine. Leave it to me. Rem, you don’t have to say anything right now, just rest… No, don’t… close your eyes… Ah, damn it, what do I do…?”

He didn’t want her to force herself to speak. Yet, if her mouth didn’t utter words, his anxiety wouldn’t dissipate. An irresistible force of destiny seemed to be trying to snatch her life from Subaru’s hands, filling him with a frantic impatience. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know how to help her.

He didn’t know, all Subaru could do was hold her hand and grip tightly the arm he had wrapped around her.

“It hurts, Subaru…”

“Sorry. My bad. If I don’t hold you like this, you might disappear somewhere…”

“Rem will not go anywhere… Rem will be by Subaru’s side…”

To Subaru, who was whining like a crying child, Rem smiled with a maternal warmth, and then, suddenly, her body went limp. The sensation of her body softening in his arms made Subaru’s throat freeze in terror. He could hear the sound of blood draining from his ears, leaving everything behind.

“Rem…? Rem! Please, Rem… Open your eyes…”

“Rem is so sleepy… Rem Apologizes… Rem will just sleep a little, and when she wakes up, Rem will be right there… For Subaru…”

“I don’t care about any of that! You don’t have to do anything. Just be by my side, that's all I want… So please, Rem…"

Even though she was in his arms, she was gradually slipping away, and Subaru desperately tried to hold onto her, straining his voice. But his voice didn't reach her, though she was right in front of him.

"Can I… be selfish?"

"…! Say it, say anything. I'll listen to anything, and I'll do anything for you…!"

"Rem wants to hear you say you love her…"

In a faint, weak voice, Rem whispered, looking up at Subaru. Subaru pushed away the tears blurring his vision and shook his head. Then he leaned his face close to hers,

"I love you."

"…"

"I love you so much. Of course I do… I can't do this without you."

These were words from the bottom of his heart. If he were to pour all of himself into this moment, it would be nothing but his unvarnished truth. He couldn't have made it this far without her. He couldn't live without her.

"Ah… I'm so happy…"

Tears traced the corners of Rem's closed eyes in response to Subaru's confession. She received his words happily, and a faint blush spread across Rem's cheeks. With that final blush, it felt as if the strength truly left her body.

"Wait…"

"Rem loves Subaru."

"Don't screw with me, stay by my side! Are you going to leave me with nothing but regret again?!"

He couldn't bear the thought of a future he had grasped for that didn't include her. He had known that for a long time, and her presence had only grown immeasurably larger since then. So,

"If you're not there in the future, where we are supposed to laugh and talk… I don't want it."

"Can Rem be by your side in that future?"

"…Of course. I won't let you go anywhere else."

Closing his eyelids, shaking off the tears that threatened to fall, Subaru looked directly at Rem. Then he declared,

"You're mine. I won't hand you over to anyone."

"—Rem will take that as a promise."

"Huh?"

A strangely rational reply came, and Subaru let out a bewildered sound. Then, Rem slowly opened her once-lifeless eyelids and, unbelievably, sat up in Subaru's arms. She tilted her head and smiled at Subaru, who was still stunned and unable to grasp the situation.

"Subaru's side is already reserved by Rem… You can't take it back, can you?"

Completely unlike someone who had been on the verge of death, Rem playfully winked, her finger gently touching Subaru's lips.

Subaru's shoulders slumped, and he sagged to the ground. He let out a breathless sigh, then looked up at Rem with a weary stare.

"You… you, you… YOUUUUUU!"

"Yes, Subaru's Rem. In name and in fact."

The usual answer sounded impudent now, and Subaru couldn't continue his words. Still, the fact that the girl in front of him was safe filled his mind, and even though it was a situation where he should have been justifiably angry, he was too happy.

“After we finally were honest with each other, you’re going way too wild…”

“A girl who is honest about her love is strong, Subaru.”

Subaru was flustered by Rem, who no longer intended to hide her feelings for him. He felt his face redden with embarrassment and other emotions as he let out a small sigh.

“…If you had died, I would have died too.”

“Oh. To be thought of so much, Rem is truly blessed.”

“No joke, seriously.”

Subaru responded to Rem’s slightly laughing reply with nothing but the unvarnished truth. If she were lost, Subaru would surely have reset the world. Even if he hadn’t been given the opportunity to reset, he would undoubtedly have tried. That’s how significant Rem’s presence was in Subaru’s heart now.

“Then, Rem absolutely can’t die, can she?”

“Of course not. Even if you die, I won’t let you die.”

He leaned in, pressing his forehead against hers, gazing into her eyes from up close. Rem looked at Subaru’s gesture with adoration, and Subaru felt a tickle at the closeness of her presence, their breaths almost mingling. Naturally, his gaze was drawn to her peach-colored lips, and he felt his heart rate subtly quicken—

“—You two, isn’t that enough already, nya~?”

Ferris, who had been observing their flirting from a distance, interrupted their crucial moment with an exasperated look, making a grand nuisance of himself. He was undoubtedly doing it on purpose.

3

“Look at Subaru-kyun, calling out so desperately. He’s so cute, like, ‘I can’t live without you!’”

“Shut up! You’re staring, reflect on your terrible taste!”

“Anyway, if you’d just calm down, you’d realize. The fact that Ferris, who’s been going around treating the injured, didn’t immediately go to Rem means her injuries aren’t life-threatening.”

“Is this really the time to be calm?! My favorite…! My beloved…! My precious girl…! My girl is injured and unconscious, of course I’d be confused!”

“The parts that a guy can’t quite say in various situations are a boy’s pure heart, aren’t they~”

Ferris chuckled, unfazed by Subaru’s yelling, as he directed a blue glow from his palm towards Rem. Subaru, despite his mounting frustration, couldn’t hide his relief as Rem’s expression gradually softened.

While he couldn’t entirely agree with Ferris’s words, the fact that Ferris, who treated the seriously injured first, had put Rem off until later, must mean it was true. His master would never tolerate him treating Rem or Subaru, crucial forces from another faction, lightly. As Subaru considered this conclusion,

“Are you unharmed, Natsuki Subaru?”

Came the voice of Ferris’s master, Crusch, as she gracefully stepped through the grass. Despite being stained with blood and mud, Crusch’s upright posture was beautiful. Her inherent, undiminished dignity permeated the aftermath of the battle, embodying the very word “Valkyrie.”

“More or less. I’m glad to see you’re safe, too, Crusch-san.”

“I am. However, the casualties on the subjugation force are by no means small. Even after defeating the White Whale, those who disappeared will not return.”

Crusch nodded in response to Subaru’s raised hand, but her expression turned somber as she looked around. Her gaze fell upon the White Whale’s corpse, still crushed beneath the great tree.

In her line of sight, the less injured members of the surviving subjugation force gathered, apparently attempting to first remove the tree from atop the White Whale.

“What are they doing?”

“We must transport the White Whale’s corpse. Some kind of action is also necessary for Flugel’s Great Tree, which was sacrificed in the operation. After a battle, there’s no rest.”

“Transport it… That huge corpse?”

He asked, thinking he’d misheard, but Crusch’s demeanor remained unchanged. Subaru quickly looked back at the White Whale, gazing at its colossal body, which measured some fifty meters in length.

“Doesn’t that seem impossible?”

“To say it’s impossible is simply not an option. This is a threat that swam the world’s skies for four hundred years. Only with its corpse as definitive proof can people find true peace of mind. At worst, it might only be the head.”

Listening to Crusch speak regretfully, Subaru reconsidered and realized her judgment was only natural. For Crusch, the subjugation of the White Whale held significant meaning as an appeal to the merchants in the Royal Selection. With high public support as the frontrunner in the Royal Selection, and now having also earned the goodwill of the merchants —a former concern— her position was solidified.

“Wait, did I just give her a seriously bad push?”

It was late to realize it, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had achieved something so significant it was beyond repair in terms of favoring another faction. A cold sweat trickled down Subaru's back, feeling as though he had inadvertently exacerbated the disadvantage of his own faction. But,

"You wear such a grim expression. —You don't look like the hero who brought down the White Whale."

"Emilia-tan will probably call me a traitor first thing… Wait, what did you just say?"

"The hero who brought down the White Whale. —I would not be so shameless as to claim all your achievements as my house's own."

Crusch turned her gaze from the White Whale back to him, piercing Subaru with eyes as sharp as a sword. Blinking at the dazzling light that seemed to demand he straighten his posture, Subaru met her gaze. As he did, Crusch slowly placed a hand on her chest and,

"My gratitude for your cooperation this time is boundless. Without you, the White Whale would not have been subjugated, and my path would have been cut short."

Saying this, she bowed deeply to Subaru. Subaru froze, caught off guard by the sincere gratitude from such a noble person. In his entire life, he couldn't recall ever receiving such direct appreciation from someone of a higher standing.

"N-No… ZPlease don't. I didn't do anything that great…"

"You accurately predicted when the White Whale's would appear in both time and place, worked tirelessly to gather forces when the subjugation team alone wasn't enough, spurred on the resolve of wavering knights, proposed a desperate, life-risking strategy, and then flawlessly executed it."

As Subaru stammered out his reply, Crusch listed the results of his actions in this battle. Seeing the outcome of his deeds, recounted so clearly, he could only conclude,

"Even I think I went insane with that performance…"

"'Lion-hearted' isn't quite the right word. However, there is no doubt that you are the main player in this battle. If your actions were to be belittled, I would swear on my honor to correct it."

Crusch's praise, delivered with earnest eyes and straightforward words, contained no calculation or hesitation. She was a person who embodied sincerity, and there was surely no trace of falsehood in the gratitude she expressed. This alone made Subaru smile wryly, remembering their relationship just the night before their departure.

"I'm glad to see my evaluation has improved so much."

"There is no need for modesty. I must admit that my assessment of you a few days ago was greatly mistaken. You have brought invaluable good fortune. Normally, for such a feat, I would wish to welcome you into my house and reward you accordingly, but…"

"Please, don't."

Crusch narrowed her eyes, inviting Subaru with a low voice. However Subaru immediately raised a hand to decline her offer.

"It's not about loyalty or allegiance, but my trust is already placed where it belongs. I genuinely think you're a good person and that you'd be a great queen, but…"

Crusch would surely become a king who would lead her people with unparalleled integrity. She possessed such capacity, and her character had been repeatedly demonstrated in this deadly situation. It was dazzling for a small person like Subaru, who had constantly lied, and he couldn't help but admire her with envy.

"—I'm going to make Emilia queen. Not for anyone else, but because I want to."

"…I knew this, but it still stings a bit."

Receiving Subaru's answer, Crusch's lips softened, and she lowered her chin. Then she uncrossed her arms, clenched her white fingers into fists, and extended them towards Subaru.

"Very well. I will reward your achievements in a different way. I swear on the name of Crusch Karsten, that promise shall be fulfilled.”

She declared solemnly, then unclenched her fists and looked at her palms. she then lowered her voice slightly,

“Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve been so pleasantly rejected. To not even show a pretense of hesitation… It’s almost a refreshing sense of defeat.”

“…I think you’re an amazing person. If I were all alone and drifting, I’d definitely lean on your hand, I think.”

If he were adrift, with nothing decided, and a person like Crusch extended such a hand, he would undoubtedly cling to it without hesitation, relying on it and entrusting everything. However, the current Subaru had someone he wanted to reach out and hold, someone whose hand supported his wavering back.

“As for the alliance, I’ll be counting on you. Even if we end up as enemies in the end, let’s get along until then.”

“Natsuki Subaru. Let me correct your thinking.”

Crusch shook her head at Subaru’s words, her lips tightening into a stern expression. A tense aura once again emanated from her, and Subaru felt a tingling sensation down his spine, his eyes widening. To Subaru, Crusch held up a finger, thrusting it before his face.

“Even if the time comes for us to decide who is superior, I will remain amicable towards you.”

“…”

“Even on the day of our inevitable separation, I will not forget the debt I owe you today. Therefore, even when the time comes for us to be adversaries, I will continue to show you respect and remain friendly until the very end.”

Lowering the arm with the raised finger, Crusch declared clearly in a dignified tone. Her demeanor sent a chill down Subaru’s spine this time. It wasn’t born of negative emotion, but simply from being overwhelmed by something truly great.

—This was the person known as Duchess Karsten, Crusch Karsten.

“If the first and second spots in my heart weren’t already taken, I’d be in serious trouble.”

“Hmph. As a woman, I haven’t considered anything further than that. There were indeed moments that struck a chord, but it’s rather a high price regardless of my own will.”

Crusch chuckled faintly, responding to Subaru’s lighthearted attempt to conceal his agitated feelings. Then she changed her expression, her eyes becoming extremely calm as she prefaced, “So,”

“If possible, I would like to transport the injured and the White Whale’s corpse to the capital as is. However, it seems you still have some mission remaining.”

“…So, people with divine protections can tell, huh?”

“One merely needs to look into a man’s eyes to know. The power of a divine protection is not necessary.”

Gazing intently into Subaru’s black eyes, Crusch closed one eye as she answered. Then she scanned Subaru from head to toe.

“You must not be unharmed either. Is this something you must do, despite that?”

“It’s something I have to do, even if I’m severely injured. In a way, this whale hunt was for the sake of achieving that. No offense.”

“Oh, so this White Whale subjugation was an afterthought?”

Despite the potentially offensive wording, Crusch showed no signs of anger. She seemed intrigued by Subaru’s purpose, whatever it was, murmuring “Interesting” as she rested a hand on her chin.

“The alliance with my house must also have been made with that in mind. If so, I can somewhat guess the role you’re seeking… Do you need help?”

“I do. It’s just… Honestly, I didn’t think it would be this tough.”

Subaru responded weakly, shrugging his shoulders as he surveyed the situation, filled with injured people. What awaited Subaru after the White Whale’s defeat was his return to Mathers territory, where Emilia was waiting, which meant confronting a detestable group. Ideally, he would have liked to borrow the strength of Crusch’s faction for that battle against his hateful opponents, but—

“With this many injured, I can’t ask for too much. You, Crusch-san, have to make decisions as a head of house, not just based on emotion. To ask for help on top of this…”

“Then it would be fitting for this old body to be worked to death.”

Suddenly interjecting the conversation was a tall, quiet figure approaching—the old swordsman, Wilhelm, covered in splattered blood, his left arm still painfully injured. He approached without showing the slightest sign of his injury, extending the treasured sword he held in his right hand towards Crusch.

“Lady Crusch, I return what you lent me. Furthermore, I express my deepest gratitude for this matter. It is only with your cooperation, Lady Crusch, that my lifelong wish has been fulfilled. —Thank you.”

“My purpose and your lifelong wish simply aligned. —You may keep that sword for a while longer. You would be of no use unarmed after this.”

“Yes. Thank you graciously.”

Crusch briefly replied to Wilhelm’s strained words of thanks, and with a nod of her chin, Wilhelm turned to Subaru. Up close again, the smell of blood emanating from him was tremendous, and the surging sword ki inadvertently brought a tension that felt like a blade pressed against Subaru’s timid liver. However, the taut atmosphere from before the battle—he was now freed from it, and it was true that Wilhelm looked brightened.

He looked directly at Subaru, then knelt on one knee. It was the deepest bow, the highest form of respect for an opponent, which he had also shown the night before their departure. And then,

“Natsuki Subaru-dono. This White Whale subjugation was achieved only with your cooperation. It is thanks to you that this body has been able to fulfill the meaning of its life until this very day. My gratitude. My gratitude. —I offer my gratitude with my whole being.”

“…”

Wilhelm, who had spent half his life devoted to the sword and over ten years to exact his revenge. Swallowed by the vast wave of passion in his words of gratitude, Subaru was nevertheless unable to speak, fearing to stammer. He took a moment to compose himself, waiting until he could properly voice his response to the old man’s words. For he absolutely could not show a disgraceful appearance in the face of Wilhelm’s resolve.

“It was your own strength, Wilhelm-san. You thought about defeating that White Whale, researched, trained, and fought without giving up…”

He must have experienced setbacks countless times and almost given up, thinking his tenacity wouldn’t be enough. He couldn’t imagine that he had never been tempted to abandon everything and be freed from his obsession. Because Subaru, who knew more than anyone the weakness of the heart, the pain of losing to oneself, and the unreasonableness of being obstructed by fate, understood the hardships Wilhelm faced in achieving the fruition of his strong resolve. Therefore,

“You loved your wife so much, that you were able to defeat the White Whale. If I was able to help even a little with that, then nothing could make me happier. I don’t know if this is the right thing to say, but… Congratulations. And— Thank you for your hard work.”

“…”

Raising his face at Subaru's words, Wilhelm's eyes, within his wrinkled face, widened. The feelings and emotions Subaru felt were those he had empathized with and imagined on Wilhelm's behalf. He didn't think he could convey it all in those few words, and Wilhelm probably wouldn't appreciate someone speaking as if they understood everything. However, he still couldn't hold back his desire to speak. To the elder who had fought against fate, who had burned with love for his lost wife for fourteen years and kept running until now, words of appreciation.

"—You have my gratitude."

Wilhelm replied briefly, his voice trembling. Then he looked down slightly, waited just a few seconds, stood up, and stretched his back. Then, looking towards Crusch, he received her nod and,

"I have received permission from Lady Crusch. I will place myself at your disposal, Subaru-dono. Please make full use of me for your purpose."

"No, really?"

Subaru looked to Crusch for confirmation, and she nodded, affirming it. He looked closely at Wilhelm again, feeling both reliable and terrified at the unyielding pressure of the Sword Demon, even with his injured arm.

—Wilhelm's cooperation was exactly what Subaru had wished for.

In the current situation, where even a slight increase in combat strength was desired, the power of the Sword Demon, Wilhelm, was something he craved desperately. However, the old man's injuries, even to an amateur eye, were not minor. To Subaru's concerns, Crusch shook her head, saying, "No problem," and,

"Ferris!"

"Yes, Lady Crusch!"

At her sharp call, Ferris appeared swiftly, as if gliding. He bounced to Crusch's side, his cat ears twitching slightly.

"What is it, Lady Crusch? Ferris is currently in a state of grand rotation, but Lady Crusch's requests are of course the highest priority, so it doesn't matter, nya~."

"You, take responsibility for what you're saying midway!"

Subaru interjected, criticizing Ferris's casual abandonment of his role as a healer, and Ferris made a sour face. Crusch then asked him, "What about the life-threatening injuries?" and Ferris put a finger to his lips.

"Most of the emergency treatment is done, so there's no one who'll die immediately if left alone, nya? It's a blessing in disguise, but they were all pretty tenacious."

His affected posture was irritating, but Subaru breathed a sigh of relief at the answer. At least, Rem's body wouldn't be in serious danger. Considering how much Ferris had teased Subaru in the latter half of their conversation, it seemed his worry had been mostly unnecessary, but it was still reassuring to hear of her safety again. At any rate, Crusch responded with a solemn "Understood," then,

"Can the injured be transported? If so, Ferris, this is enough for now. You will follow Natsuki Subaru after this and fulfill your role as an ally."

She commanded Ferris thus. Subaru was once again surprised by her words. Removing Ferris, the 'Blue', from this location meant prioritizing Subaru's needs once the minimum safety of the injured was secured. This was a decision that prioritized consideration for Subaru over her own position, and naturally, it should have caused resentment in Ferris, who was devoted to Crusch—

"Understood. Ferris will accompany Subaru-kyun. I also have to treat Old Man Wilhelm along the way."

"That would be troublesome."

"In return, Old Man Wilhelm will have to swing his sword, so isn't it a fair trade, nya?"

He didn't buy it. Ferris accepted it as a matter of course, and Wilhelm acted as if he hadn't doubted the decision. Subaru couldn't hide his surprise at the exchange between the master and her two retainers. Ferris then glanced sideways at Subaru.

"So, about half of the remaining subjugation force that seems alright… About twenty-something people, nya. I'll bring them to cooperate with Subaru-kyun. Nice to meet you~"

"Nice to meet you~? That's too casual! Is that really okay?!"

"What is?"

"What is what…? Everything. Can you even trust my judgment?"

The more he thought about it, no one else in the capital had poked at his wounds quite like Ferris. Although he always wore a friendly smile and acted charmingly, Subaru somehow knew that Ferris harbored strong contempt for his weakness. Subaru thought it was natural to feel aversion to obeying such a person, but,

"It's not that I trust Subaru-kyun, it's that I don't doubt Lady Crusch's judgment in deciding to trust Subaru-kyun. Don't get that wrong, okay?"

Ferris snorted, as if to emphasize, scoffing at Subaru's thoughts. Subaru resisted the urge for a vein to pop on his forehead from Ferris's malicious attitude, took several deep breaths, and then managed to stammer out, "Thanks." Then,

"Oh, I forgot to mention, Rem will be staying behind… or rather, she has to return to the capital with Lady Crusch, so please understand."

"—Why?!"

Suddenly, a strong voice of denial rang out in response to Ferris's casual remark. It was Rem, behind them, who had been watching the exchange. She sat up halfway, glaring at Ferris with resentful eyes.

"Rem, Rem is fine. Subaru is going somewhere dangerous again, so how can Rem not…?”

“Even if you say that, your body won’t move, will it? You faced the White Whale almost alone and even used the highest-tier magic multiple times… Rem’s body is extremely depleted and empty right now, nya. As a healer, I cannot allow her to push herself any further. Do you understand, nya~?”

“But!”

Rem tried to stand up and argue, as if she couldn’t accept it. But her arms, raised to support herself, had no strength, and she nearly collapsed, unable to support her trembling body. Subaru rushed over and hastily supported her collapsing form.

“Careful. —Hey, please, don’t overdo it, just like Ferris said.”

“But! Rem doen’t want to, it hurts. Rem can’t bear it.”

Looking back at Subaru, who was close by, Rem’s eyes welled up with large tears. More than being left behind, what she feared most was,

“When Subaru is in trouble, Rem wants to be the first to reach out. When Subaru is lost, Rem wants to be the one to push him forward. When Subaru challenges something, Rem wants to be by his side to stop his trembling. That is Rem’s only, only wish. So…”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Huh?”

To her tearful voice, to her words overflowing with affection, Subaru felt his lips naturally relax into an embarrassed smile.

“Our hands are always connected, and you’ve pushed my back countless times. Even if I tremble, just thinking of you makes it all okay. —You’ve been saving me all along.”

“…Ah.”

“It’s okay, Rem. I’ll take care of everything. I’m your hero. I decided to take that step. So, there's nothing to worry about."

Her trembling eyes looked up at Subaru, and her heated cheeks flushed red. Subaru smiled at her, baring his teeth in a fierce grin.

"I even brought down the whale. Your hero is super, demonically strong, right?"

"Subaru-ku…"

As if unable to contain what was welling up inside, Rem's attempt to call Subaru's name was cut short. Then she struggled to swallow the impulse several times, taking multiple gasps before finally, tears streamed from the corners of her eyes.

"—Yes. Rem's hero is the best in the world."

She simply smiled, crying.

4

Leaving half the guards with Crusch to escort Rem and the other injured back to the capital, Subaru led the remaining subjugation force straight for Mathers territory.

With Wilhelm and Ferris at the forefront, the subjugation force accompanying Subaru numbered twenty-four. Although significantly fewer than anticipated, they remained a crucial fighting force. Besides, they weren't the only ones joining him.

"Ah, even so, you, big bro, ended up getting all the good parts, didn't ya!"

"Danchō! Mimi too! Mimi tried super, super hard!"

Two demi-beast, riding large dogs, chattered loudly. One was Ricardo, who had almost become "ugly fireworks" while protecting Subaru, and the other was Mimi, who maintained her childlike demeanor even in the midst of a life-or-death battle. Not just the two of them, but about ten more surviving demi-beast mercenaries were also coming along. The remaining injured would apparently return to the capital, led by the other vice-captain, Hetaro.

"Even so, your brother was so out of breath, how are you so energetic?"

"Hetaro's a wimp, see? Unlike Mimi, who trains, he's a total softy. How pathetic!"

She laughed, gleefully mocking her brother's weakness. Subaru figured it was probably just the older sister who was a physical beast. She was the berserker type, who couldn't get enough of fighting. Given her adorable kitten-like appearance, it almost seemed pitiful that she was like that.

"Well, we did a lot, but don't you worry. The young lady asked us, so we'll cooperate with your objective, big bro."

"Cooperate with my objective, you say? Do you even know what I'm trying to do…?"

"You're going to pick a fight with the Witch Cult, aren't you?"

Subaru choked on his words at Ricardo's suddenly low voice. He instinctively tightened his grip on the reins of Patrasche, his ground dragon, and heard the creature whinny softly, as if concerned for its rider. Ricardo bared his teeth at Subaru's stiff profile. "No need to be surprised, is there?"

"For merchants, information is paramount, and we're employed by the young lady. That means we keep our eyes and ears open to a certain extent, including background details. Our big ears aren't just for show, you know."

"Yeah! Mimi's got big ones too!"

"That's not about you, little one."

As Mimi reacted diagonally to Ricardo's joke, earning a wry smile from him, Subaru quietly gasped, realizing how underestimated Anastasia's reach was. However, since he needed their cooperation for his objective, he couldn't stay silent, and it was natural to disclose the information. Though, he wanted to wait until he saw the results of those matters that served as Subaru's insurance—set up before leaving the capital.

"Oh, looks like we're about to link up."

"Huh?"

Subaru noticed Ricardo looking into the distance, and he quickly followed his gaze. But all Subaru saw was the deep, night sky over the plains; he couldn't make out what Ricardo was looking at. As Subaru strained his eyes, still seeing nothing, Ricardo chuckled softly.

"No need to push yourself so hard, you'll see when they get here. Don't worry."

"I want to eliminate uncertainties as soon as possible. Don't hold back."

"Alright then, I won't hold back. —They're a bit far, but coming from that direction is the other half of our mercenary group."

"Half?"

Subaru tilted his head, asking, unsure what Ricardo meant. Half? But the injured were supposed to be with Crusch and the others, returning to the capital.

"Half means exactly that. Originally, we 'Iron Fangs' only sent half our personnel to subjugate the White Whale. The other half had other tasks."

"Other tasks, you say?"

"Someone needed to prevent others from entering the highway and getting caught in the battle, right? So, they were tasked with blockading the other side of the highway beforehand. They left last night, so you didn't get to meet them."

Subaru nodded in understanding as he listened to Ricardo's explanation. Still, it was hard to agree with the point that they hadn't put all their effort into subjugating the White Whale, but there was a possibility that Crusch's White Whale subjugation could have failed with a complete wipeout. In that case, Anastasia's decision to avoid losing all valuable forces was probably not wrong.

For Subaru, who had few cards in hand and no choice but to go all out, it was a completely different dimension of concern. Anyway,

“So, the ones coming now are the rest of your comrades? Do they have a leader too?”

“Mimi’s little brother, Tivey, is leading them. He’s an amazing guy who can do combined attacks with Mimi, instead of Hetaro!”

Mimi puffed out her chest, proudly answering Subaru’s question. Just hearing her reply, his expectations for the rest of the comrades slightly lowered.

“No, but his brother was normal. So there’s a slim chance this brother is normal too…?”

“I know you’re worried, but Tivey’s actually quite smart among us, you know? He handles the finances and negotiations, and he’s good at handling Mimi too. He’s an upgrade from Hetaro.”

“Don’t say that, Hetaro will feel bad…”

Including the fact that he was left behind as expendable, Hetaro seemed almost too pathetic. Putting aside that pity, if such individuals joined and further strengthened their forces, it would be a bonus. They should wait for their arrival and then create an opportunity for another discussion. Subaru racked his brain, wondering how to explain their confrontation with the Witch Cult to the Crusch faction, including Wilhelm and Ferris. Just then, as Ricardo had said, the pride of ground dragons gradually approached, raising a cloud of dust before Subaru’s eyes.

“—Hm?”

Subaru subtly uttered a small sound, noticing a sudden anomaly. Among the group of approaching ground dragons, he saw one distinct shadow mixed in. As the distance closed, and its blurry outline became clearer, a ground dragon emerged in the now distinct vision.

Riding on the back of that ground dragon was…

“—Why are you here?”

“You still have a rather rude way of addressing reinforcements, don’t you?”

Facing each other on their stopped ground dragons, Subaru and the other figure stood opposite. A man with meticulously combed purple hair, clad in the solemn armor of the Royal Guard, a languid smile playing on his lips.

—His fated rival, Julius Juukulius, gazed at Subaru with an elegant demeanor.

Chapter 62:
Settling the Past and the Future

1

Patrasche turned her head with a movement like wrinkling her snout, intimidating the blue-skinned ground dragon glaring in front of her.

Subaru lightly stroked Patrasche's neck, expressing his agreement with the agitated ground dragon in a small voice: "I feel the same way."

Though they'd only known each other for a short time, the bond forged between Subaru and Patrasche was strong enough to have pulled them through the brink of life and death together.

It was as if Patrasche's thoughts were being transmitted directly to Subaru through the reins.

"I hate to interrupt your moment, but could you stop tempting my ground dragon? Yours is quite impressive too. Mine might just follow along."

"What?! Patrasche! You're trying to pick someone up?! Who said I feel the same way?! You're getting all lovey-dovey before a life-or-death battle!"

"That ground dragon probably doesn't want to hear that from you, bro, especially after the show you put on before we left."

Subaru yelled at Patrasche's unexpected betrayal, and Ricardo, who was propping up his cheek beside him, muttered in exasperation.

Subaru gulped and fell silent, and stepping forward from beside him was—

"Fancy meeting you here, Julius. You're living the good life, aren't you? We were fighting for our lives just a few hours ago."

“I have no defense against that. However, allow me to correct you, Ferris. I am not the person named Julius. Let’s see… I’ll call myself Juli.”

Julius shrugged at Ferris’s sardonic gaze and spouted that nonsensical gibberish. Naturally, everyone’s eyes narrowed at the meaningless fake name, but he met their gazes with a cool smile and said,

“Hypothetically, it would be unthinkable for someone of a knight’s standing to join a group of hired hands and stoop to being a mercenary. There is no record of a person named Julius Juukulius joining the Iron Fang; what you have here is merely a man named Juli.”

“Nya-kay. As always, proper knightly chivalry from a respectable house is such a pain, isn’t it? Good thing Ferris’s family is a fallen noble house.”

“I don’t consider chivalry a pain. I do, however, think it’s problematic to have to be so careful just to help a friend. —As an aside, I should also make it clear that the disciplinary suspension Julius Juukulius received was lifted last night, as soon as the day changed.”

“What a ridiculous precaution… Is there even a point to that fake name, then?”

Subaru clicked his tongue and grumbled, listening in on Julius and Ferris’s conversation. His averted gaze and twisted lips made it clear he was sulking, and since that was indeed the case, there was no excuse.

Julius, hearing Subaru’s small grumbling, suddenly looked over. He then advanced his ground dragon and positioned himself directly in front of Subaru.

“I’m glad to see you’re more energetic than I expected. —How is your physical condition?”

“—!”

At Julius's question regarding his health, Subaru's mind clicked.

Julius's question, which was nothing more than teasing or sarcasm, was enough to bring back memories for him from several days ago —though for Subaru, it felt almost two weeks ago.

Receiving such an utterly provocative statement as a deterrent, Subaru felt insults bubbling up to his throat and barely managed to swallow them down and restrain himself.

He cleared his throat, took a deep breath, composed a calm face, and smoothed his short bangs with a theatrical gesture.

"Oh, well, it was just a scratch, right? A little spit and it healed, right? What about you? For someone claiming to be reinforcements, aren't you a bit late to the party? What, were you busy writing a letter of apology to the higher-ups because you got too serious with amateurs?"

Inferring the background circumstances from the topic of the disciplinary suspension, Subaru retorted with his signature taunting attack. At that, Julius's face showed a slight hint of being taken aback.

"I wasn't talking about that, but about your honorable injury from the witchbeast subjugation… I'm glad to see that wound has also recovered. It wasn't as dramatic a wound as it looked, after all. You, who are so good at gaining sympathy, would often writhe around in exaggerated pain."

"Hahahahahahahahaha."

"Fufufufufufufufu."

Dry laughter intertwined between the two, and an explosive atmosphere began to permeate the air.

Just when one might expect the others to intervene, Ferris and Ricardo merely watched with amused expressions, while Mimi had disappeared into the other group, searching for her brother. Inevitably, the role of settling the situation fell to—

"It's good to rekindle old acquaintances, but isn't this hardly the time for it, both of you?"

Stepping forward and admonishing them was the old swordsman on a ground dragon —Wilhelm.

Wilhelm, with the treasured sword entrusted to him by his master at his hip, looked at Julius directly, his calm, authoritative eyes narrowing.

"Your timely reinforcement is beyond appreciated. Our forces were quite depleted from the battle with the White Whale… As one who dragged others into my personal quest, I was indeed anxious."

"Wilhelm-san, that's not…"

Subaru interjected, hearing Wilhelm's lowered tone.

The White Whale subjugation was one of the obstacles Subaru had to overcome due to various conditions. Subaru's self-serving intentions were certainly involved, and there was no reason for Wilhelm to feel burdened.

It was frustrating that he couldn't explain everything, but Subaru raised his voice, hoping to at least dispel that sense of obligation. But before the words could fully form,

"You've truly become a sight to behold, Sir Wilhelm," Julius murmured quietly, looking at the old man.

In front of Subaru, who looked up, Julius noticed the light in Wilhelm's eyes, as if a weight had been lifted.

"You're a different person from when we last met… Even Reinhard will find some solace in this."

"Indeed."

Wilhelm placed a hand on his chin and lowered his eyes.

How much inner conflict must have been contained in that brief moment of hesitation?

Subaru, unaware of the circumstances, could only furrow his brows at the current exchange, but the eyes of those around them, observing them, once again indicated those who knew the story.

In front of Subaru, who was displeased at being left out, Wilhelm raised his lowered face.

“I could not be straightforward with him. Even though I knew he was faultless and meant no harm, I could not forgive him. —Eventually, I will face the consequences.”

“That alone will be enough for him to gain something meaningful.”

Julius affirmed Wilhelm’s bitter words with a nod. Then, Julius slowly turned his intelligent gaze toward Subaru.

Naturally, Subaru straightened his back, bracing himself for a resumption of their earlier verbal sparring, but—

“I must offer my thanks.”

“—Huh?”

As Subaru inadvertently blurted out, Julius gracefully dismounted his ground dragon. He then looked up at Subaru, who was still atop Patrasche, and bowed at the waist.

“The subjugation of the White Whale this time was a heavy responsibility that should have fallen to the Knightly Order. I express my gratitude for putting an end to a calamity that nations had neglected for many years—”

With such a fluent gesture of gratitude, Subaru, whose negative feelings toward Julius had been running high, was instantly unable to respond. At that moment, Ferris, beside a bewildered Subaru, interjected, “Hold on, hold on.”

“The White Whale’s subjugation was, ultimately, led by Duchess Karsten —It was Lady Crusch’s accomplishment, so please don’t misunderstand that. Old Man Wilhelm also defeated it.”

“I understand. I heard from Julius directly —who engaged him in combat— that he himself doesn't possess the power to defeat the White Whale."

Julius continued to maintain the facade that he was a different person from Julius. He acknowledged Ferris's statement, but then added, "However,"

"There's no doubt that his presence played a significant role in the subjugation of the witchbeast. Ferris, wouldn't you agree that's the correct assessment?"

"Nya~. That's… yeah, I guess so…"

Pressing his fingers together, Ferris mumbled and reluctantly backed down. Having talked the cat-eared girl into submission, Julius once again addressed Subaru.

"Thanks to you, people can now forget their days of living in fear of the fog. —Lady Anastasia will also be greatly pleased."

"If it were just the first half, I'd accept it honestly, but with the second half added, it's hard to say yes straightforwardly."

"My friend's long-standing regret… can also reach a turning point."

Julius closed his eyes, speaking as if sighing.

Subaru understood that "that friend" likely referred to the red-haired hero, but he didn't know the details of the handsome man's long-standing regret.

Could such a person also have a past filled with regrets?

At any rate, being straightforwardly thanked was certainly not a bad feeling.

It was something to genuinely celebrate that Wilhelm's long-held wish had been fulfilled, and Subaru was aware that his cooperation had played some part in it. Yet, inwardly, Subaru's feelings toward Julius were extremely complicated.

Though he tried to act tough, the first thing that came to mind in

Subaru's heart when facing this handsome man was his weak, intimidated side.

Even overcoming that weak part, the next thing waiting was a defensive rebelliousness, shielded by bravado to hide his weakness. While he genuinely appreciated the reinforcements, his resentment toward the unpleasant character of their liege lord, who would send in separate forces, especially Julius, was a bottomless pit of darkness that could be endlessly listed.

However, Subaru showed none of these negative emotions on his face.

Swallowing his complex and bizarre emotions, Subaru did only one thing instead.

"Ta-da!"

He proudly distorted his cheek and laughed in a way that seemed to provoke his opponent.

"What a villain!"

"That's irritating."

"Oh no, I almost laid hands on him."

"His nostrils are flaring!"

"Hey, hey, the booing from my allies is incredible! Is this what I get for showing off a little and boasting about my accomplishments?!"

Subaru hurled his anger, spitting at the critical audience, then turned back to Julius, breathing heavily. After calming himself with a loud voice and deep breaths, he asked,

"So what do you want, after all? Why did you come?"

"—You really did it, didn't you?"

"Huh?"

Ignoring Subaru’s question, Julius muttered something with a hint of deep emotion.

He shook his head, saying “No,” in front of Subaru, who had asked him to repeat himself.

“To clarify, the ‘Iron Fang’ ,which is under contract with Lady Anastasia, has been lent to Lady Crusch… no, to you, specifically for the duration of the White Whale subjugation.”

“Wait? Was that right? But I thought the young lady’s story…”

“Big sister, please be quiet.”

Mimi tried to interject at Julius’s statement, but she was stopped by the cat-like beastman who had appeared beside her. Subaru frowned, taking in their exchange while listening to Julius’s words.

At Subaru’s attitude, Julius raised a hand slightly and continued, “In short,”

“Once the White Whale is subjugated, there is no longer a reason for our cooperation. Our services are no longer required. —Yet now, what are you planning to do

?”

“Julius is being forgetful. The young lady said all sorts of things before we set off, didn’t she? Mimi doesn’t remember though.”

“Please be quiet.”

The kitten’s comedy routine in the background was a distraction, but Subaru was slowly starting to understand what Julius was trying to say. In other words,

“You’re telling me to choose whether to pull out or continue as reinforcements, right here?”

“I’ve been instructed to sell our services at a high price, you see. Perhaps our strength isn’t needed in this situation?”

Julius pointed behind him suggestively, pressing Subaru for a decision.

However, this was not a situation for a rash decision fueled by irritation. It would be easy for Subaru to give in to anger and send them away, but that would be a foolish act, crippling his own forces before the greatest obstacle still ahead.

Yet, simply accepting the "high price" Julius spoke of was also problematic. Continuing to issue empty promises was a terrible negotiating tactic, and more importantly, Subaru's decision would affect many lives and the future of one young girl.

Subaru glanced sideways at a silent Wilhelm and Ferris, who were waiting quietly without any intention of intervening. If Subaru were to request their assistance here, they would likely take measures such as hiring the "Iron Fang" through the "Crusch Faction" in this negotiation.

However that would only mean the favor was owed to a different party. Currently, Subaru and Crusch were in a balanced state, each owing one favor, and it would be unwise to alter the current situation where Subaru's favor was more heavily weighted due to Crusch's strong sense of obligation.

Next, looking at Ricardo's mercenary group, Ricardo stood with his arms crossed, his dark eyes closed in quiet observation. Mimi also mimicked him, closing her eyes, occasionally twitching her orange cat ears and fluttering her adorable little nose.

Earlier, Ricardo's reason for joining the fight against the Witch Cult had seemed tenuous, but now that Julius had brought up this negotiation, it made sense. He knew it was an unavoidable negotiation and was simply acting as if he was along for the ride.

"Dirty. As expected of a money grubber, dirty…"

"That's quite a thing to say, while you look at my face. I don't really want to do this either, taking advantage of someone's weakness is… It's just that I like money more."

"Your struggle is shallow! I wasn't relying on you in the first place!"

He had no intention of seeking assistance from the enemy leader—even if he was only a nominal boss—Ricardo. In any case, it was an unpleasant negotiation where Subaru's only remaining answer was "yes."

This would put Anastasia in unilateral debt to him, separate from the Crusch faction, which had balanced their favors. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Subaru had no choice but to clench his teeth and endure the frustration, as he couldn't refuse the reinforcements here.

If only the reinforcements could have passed through without creating a debt problem—

"Fog… White Whale… highway and time limit, and the end… Witch."

His thoughts racing, Subaru suddenly blurted out words that flashed through his mind. These disconnected thoughts began to align, relying on faint clues, and then—

"What if I said the White Whale subjugation isn't over yet?"

"—An interesting statement, indeed."

Julius narrowed his eyes and spoke, reacting to Subaru's seemingly spur-of-the-moment words.

Behind him, not only the beastman mercenary group but also the members of the subjugation party—especially Wilhelm, whose expression was wide-eyed—showed that Subaru's conscience was being pricked.

However, in a different sense than the old man's long-cherished wish being fulfilled, Subaru had realized another problem that couldn't be ignored. That was—

"There's a possibility that the White Whale, the witchbeast of the fog, is a pawn of the Witch Cult. I know someone who said something to that effect."

—Was that during the third world, at the very end of the previous loop?

He thought it was when he was surrounded by the Witch Cult in the forest, defeated by Petelgeuse's Unseen Hand, and utterly overwhelmed by powerlessness as Emilia's corpse was trampled.

At that time, that madman, while cursing him obscenely, certainly blurted out:

The road has been sealed. No one can cross the fog.

Why did he know that? Why did he speak as if it were his own doing? And the clincher was the single word uttered by the beast of the end that froze the world:

"Someone who seemed to know everything called the White Whale 'Gluttony'. If that's true, if it's one of the Witch Cult's hands… then its appearance must be related to where I'm going."

If Petelgeuse had summoned the White Whale to the highway to obstruct access to the Mathers territory, its purpose would, of course, be nothing other than their crazed actions. In other words, the White Whale's blockade of the highway was to attack the mansion—Emilia.

"I need to make the Witch Cult pay for the upper hand they got. For this time, and for four hundred years worth. Only then will the White Whale subjugation truly be complete."

"…"

"This is a job your employer commanded, dangling a reward, mercenary. Don't abandon it halfway. Or will you pay the penalty and back out?"

Subaru challenged him boldly, gauging Julius's reaction.

Inwardly, he was impressed by the flimsiness of his own statement, but the current Subaru had grown capable of putting on a brazenly smiling facade.

It was an inference from scattered information about the future. And even then, it was from more fragmented pieces than ever before, heard in a situation where his consciousness wasn't clear, making its credibility thin even to himself.

He had pieced it together to make it sound plausible, but he didn't know if it would be convincing. But if he could at least gain an opening to continue the negotiation—

"—Let's call that a passing grade, for now."

"Huh?"

"I'll make it sound a bit better on our end, but generally, I'll go along with your assertion. Lady Anastasia's reputation will also be preserved."

"Wa-Wait a minute!"

Subaru held out his palm, trying to stop Julius. However Julius calmly accepted Subaru's flustered state.

"What is it? The mercenary group will continue to cooperate. The payment has already been made by Lady Anastasia, as agreed. There shouldn't be any problem, right?"

"So easily… I mean, what's with this understanding?! You're…"

He was about to say more, but then he realized something deeply unpleasant about himself.

He wished Julius, who was considering his circumstances and willing to cooperate despite his clumsy arguments, was not such a good person.

Subaru realized that deep down, he wished Julius would remain an unpleasant person with whom he could never truly understand.

"Well, it's not like there's no reward, is it? If he were a stupid fool, we'd just fleece him once and be done with it, but with a clever opponent, there are plenty of opportunities to fleece him."

"So you're still going to fleece me in the end, aren't you…?"

Seeing Ricardo interject, Subaru gladly latched onto that. And he hated himself for always taking the easy way out.

Subaru's self-loathing and other-loathing mingled, unilaterally worsening the situation.

However, in the face of this situation, Subaru let out a deep, deep sigh.

"I'm… wrong. Damn it, ok, I was wrong. Fuck. This isn't what I want to say but. Even back then, I was the one who…"

Subaru put a hand to his forehead, struggling to utter a rational answer. But the words wouldn't come. He understood it in his head.

This was a moment to thank Julius, who had come with reinforcements and shown his intention to participate. Even what happened before was a result of Subaru's short-sightedness, and now that he could look back calmly, it was clear who was at fault.

Or even the result of Julius's actions back then.

"…"

Julius stood silently, not reacting to Subaru's stumbling words.

He would probably understand what Subaru wanted to say, and he could even speak the answer before a speechless Subaru.

However he didn't, and Subaru hated him terribly for not doing so. If only he could have continued to hate him and nothing else.

"I was wrong. I'm sorry, I… I apologize."

In a low voice, as if forcing the words out, Subaru spoke them.

For Subaru, it was a memory too loathsome to look back on, but a moment he absolutely had to face someday to move past it, and a person he eventually had to settle things with.

Julius heard Subaru’s spoken apology and quietly closed his eyes. Then he slowly lowered his chin.

“I, too, apologize for my discourtesy. While I won’t retract all of my actions and words from that time, I sincerely apologize for disrespecting you.”

Julius responded to Subaru’s apology with those words.

His words were overflowing with sincerity, and Subaru felt, quite easily, the unpleasant emotions that had been churning inside him simply melt away.

Knowing that, Subaru dismounted, just like the “knight” standing before him, and faced him directly at the same height as his tall stature.

“I was wrong. But—”

“Hm?”

“I absolutely despise you. —I feel bad about it, and I’m grateful you came, but I hate you. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, I intensely, hate, you!”

He broke the last sentence into phrases, pausing after each one as he declared it.

Julius, thus struck head-on, was momentarily dumbfounded, and then suddenly his expression broke.

“That’s fine. I, too, don’t feel much like we’ll ever be friends,” he said, and then, in a truly theatrical gesture, he swept his hair back and laughed.

2

We need to get our heads straight.

They sat in a circle, the key figures facing each other to discuss what lay ahead.

Subaru stood at the center, surrounded by Julius, Ferris, Ricardo, and Wilhelm.

"Uh, honestly, I'm not good at leading stuff like this, so when you look at me with such serious eyes, it's kinda embarrassing, or rather…"

Again, being surrounded by people of higher "human aptitude" than himself made him shrink back. Subaru, originally a shut-in in his old world, had no experience standing in front of people, let alone being the kind of person who could lead others.

However they looked at Subaru with a certain trust despite his apprehension, and to Subaru's consternation, he didn't dislike it.

"Alright, let's sum things up. Uh, where we're heading now is the Mathers domain… or rather, Roswaal's mansion. The Witch Cult will probably —no, definitely— show up there."

"The Witch Cult…?"

At the mention of the Witch Cult, everyone's expressions turned serious. Many of them must have been somewhat prepared from the flow of the conversation so far, but actually knowing their opponent's identity still seemed to hit them hard.

Subaru didn't know how widely known the Witch Cult's existence was in this world, or how they perceived it—but for Subaru, their existence could be summed up in one word: "the worst."

From everyone's reactions, it seemed safe to assume that was a shared understanding.

"Subaru. How did you realize the connection between the White Whale and the Witch Cult?"

It was Julius who called him "Subaru" so casually.

Ever since Subaru's frank confession earlier, Julius's attitude had been oddly familiar. Honestly, Subaru had mixed feelings about that too, but—

"Unfortunately, I've had experience running into Witch Cultists. It didn't end well, and I have plenty of unpleasant memories, but… someone let it slip."

"I see… So the Knightly Order's suspicions weren't wrong."

"That's right. It seems the documents Old Man Wilhelm was chasing also led to that conclusion."

"You knew?"

Julius acknowledged Subaru's words, and Ferris agreed. Subaru expressed surprise at their reactions, but Wilhelm gently shook his head.

"I discovered the connection by chance. The distribution of White Whale appearances and the records of the Witch Cult's activities seemed to coincide in an unusually high number of places. —It's not enough to be called definitive proof, however."

"The White Whale's appearance was the main thing, and the Witch Cult was more like an extra, you know. Even Ferris was skeptical when she first heard about it."

"There were similar rumors circulating within the Knightly Order as well. Although, they were treated as mere hearsay… A laughing matter, if you will."

Julius shrugged, and Wilhelm sighed, "It's understandable." Listening to their exchange, Subaru scratched his head.

"Anyway, it's lucky for me that there was already a basis for you to believe the story. Regardless, believing what a Witch Cultist said… feels pretty unreliable, but I do think the White Whale is definitely connected to them. Originally, aren't witchbeasts creatures created by witches?"

"That's what's said. The existence and origin of witchbeasts are unknown. Sometimes they reproduce like normal creatures, and sometimes they suddenly appear like the White Whale. Though, exceptions like the White Whale are pretty much limited to the Black Serpent and the Great Rabbit."

"I feel like I just heard some words I can't ignore, but can we just move on because it sounds scary?"

After seeing everyone nod that it was okay, Subaru cleared his throat and continued.

After stating that they would confront the Witch Cult, the next thing everyone needed to know was:

"The Witch Cult's target is Emilia, and they intend to burn down not just the mansion but the nearby village as well. So we have to somehow drive those bastards away."

"Drive them away. That's quite a soft thing to say, isn't it?"

Ferris narrowed his eyes alluringly, prolonging the end of his sentence meaningfully as he looked at Subaru. It was a gesture that sent a shiver down Subaru's spine. However, the other party was a man.

"What do you mean, 'soft'?"

"Why don't we just cut all those guys down? From past records, that's the correct way to deal with them, you know?"

"…………"

Hearing Ferris casually declare genocide, Subaru's mouth fell open in surprise.

He wasn't surprised by Ferris's radical statement, but by his own "soft" comment.

He had been repeating in his head that he should kill those guys, that they deserved to die, but he was surprised by the change in his own mindset that led him to use such mild words.

It was probably because Subaru's priorities had changed.

"If we can protect the mansion and the villagers, that's enough for now. Drive away the Witch Cult, or blow them away, or crush them, or kill them, or twist them apart and flatten them and burn them to ashes and pulverize them…”

“O-Okay. I understand the extent of your anger towards them perfectly.”

“—Ha! Damn it. No, that’s not it. It’s not like I’m filled with anger and hatred, prepared for battle. It’s a wicked assumption that that’s why I approached Emilia-tan!”

“No one said that?!”

As he spoke, his anger resurfaced, startling Julius and Ferris. However, his unnecessary excuse-making also yielded something.

Unlike in previous worlds, the motives for Subaru’s actions seemed to be completely unquestioned in this timeline. Subaru wondered what was different.

“After sacrificing yourself so much to take down the White Whale, who would make such a wicked assumption now? Subaru-kyun, you’re surprisingly distrustful of people, aren’t you?”

“Distrustful or not…”

He had indeed been suspected by Ferris and Crusch themselves.

However the laughing Ferris didn’t seem to doubt him at all, in a way completely different from merely feigning it. Was this also a change brought about by Subaru’s altered intentions and actions?

In any case,

“There’s no longer any room to doubt that the Witch Cult will make a move. Given their activities, it was expected once Lady Emilia announced her candidacy for the Royal Selection.”

Julius nodded in understanding, touching his chin. His familiar attitude, and the fact that Subaru had never had the chance to question this before, made Subaru raise a hand.

“I just wanted to ask, where does this conviction that the Witch Cult will move if Emilia-tan gets involved come from? It’s pretty strange how everyone just accepts it… especially since a lot about the Witch Cult's true nature is unknown."

"You say you know the Witch Cult will move, but then you say things like that?"

Ferris tilted his head in exasperation at Subaru's question. Being laughed at for his ignorance was an expected reaction, and Subaru said, "Hold on, hold on," holding up his palm towards Ferris.

"We don't have much time. Let's keep it snappy. So, what's the deal there?"

"I think it's strange for the one who doesn't know to be leading this, but… listen, the Witch Cult devoutly worships the Witch of Envy, Satella. You know this, right?"

"Sort of. Honestly, that's just the surface, like what I read in a picture book."

"Of course. There's hardly anyone left who's seen her in person. Even I only know from hearsay. Well, it's good if you know that the Witch Cultists worship Satella. However what about the fact that Satella, that witch, was a half-elf?"

"That, too, well…"

The picture book Subaru read didn't contain that information, but he had heard it when he asked Beatrice about witches.

In the capital as well, Emilia's appearance and origin were frequently compared to the 'Witch of Envy', often becoming a topic of conversation. Subaru, for one, used to be indignant, feeling it wasn't something she should be blamed for.

"You mean Emilia-tan's appearance is just like the Witch's, right? But that's no reason to blame her. It's misplaced resentment."

"Most people don't think so. That's all Satella did. However, going back to the Witch Cult… simply put, the existence of half-elves is an annoyance to them."

"Huh?"

A surprised sound burst from Subaru's throat.

He turned his head, trying to ascertain the meaning of the words, but the reactions of those around him showed no particular surprise towards Ricardo. That meant it was a shared understanding, and—

"Why? Logically… it's disgusting to even try to trace the logic of people like them, but logically, how could they persecute a half-elf who is like the witch they worship…?"

"Precisely because they worship and believe her to be the ultimate being, they cannot tolerate beings that are similar yet different. Similar yet different, imposters. —That existence."

It was a terribly cold voice, filled with a bone-chilling bloodlust.

Subaru looked up, instinctively turning towards the person who had spoken. That person was also looking at Subaru, their gazes intertwining. Subaru was fixated by the gaze, as if his very soul was being peered into, but the person in question—

"Nya~Nya, Ferris is just making a guess, nya?"

His expression quickly broke as he stuck out his tongue, making the previous atmosphere vanish.

Subaru was speechless at this sudden, almost drastic change, but Ferris, seemingly oblivious to his confusion, leaned forward.

"The Witch Cult's reasons for acting crazy aren't new, so isn't that good enough? The real question, I think, is which leader of the Witch Cult is targeting Lady Emilia?"

"Sin Archbishop, then."

"—?! You know that name?"

Ricardo agreed with Ferris's change of topic, and Subaru pounced on the word that came up.

Sin Archbishop—that was the title Petelgeuse claimed, and he had explained that he was in charge of ‘Sloth’.

“Are the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishops famous?”

“Just that such individuals exist, yes. Long ago, before the Witch of Envy rampaged, there were other witches besides Satella, apparently.”

“Pride. Wrath. Sloth. Greed. Gluttony. Lust. —Six witches bearing the names of the Great Sins, correct? All of them were said to have been devoured by Satella, who bore the name of Envy.”

Witches bearing the names of the Sins—he had heard that somewhere before.

In this world, “witch” referred only to Satella, the Witch of Envy, and the other witches bearing the names of the Great Sins no longer existed. But—

“I don’t know if ‘executives’ is the right term for the Witch Cult’s higher-ups, but I’ve heard that those in that position take on the names of the Great Sins in place of the lost witches. Envy is the symbol of Satella, whom they worship. So, the other six— six Sin Archbishops.”

“Six…”

Subaru gasped at Julius’s explanation, breaking into a cold sweat at the unfathomable depth of the hostile Witch Cult.

When Petelgeuse claimed ‘Sloth’, he had anticipated that other beings would be in charge of the other Sins. The Seven Deadly Sins, for Subaru, was a fantastic term full of chuunibyou elements familiar from subcultures, but the negative impression of ‘Sloth’ he had personally experienced was too strong for him to embrace it as a heart-pounding concept.

However,

“The White Whale, which was supposed to be ‘Gluttony’, we took down. Another Sin Archbishop should also show their face in the

Mathers domain we're heading to. This is a chance to really shake up the Witch Cult."

"Oh, you're confident, nya~. Well, Ferris agrees that this is a good opportunity to crush the enigmatic Witch Cult. Those guys have been pretty disrespectful."

"From the perspective of showing no signs of activity, the Knightly Order has also endured much hardship against them for a long time. Not just me, but many knights as well. It's truly a blessing to have this opportunity."

Ferris and Julius agreed with Subaru's opinion, Ricardo offered a warlike smile, and Wilhelm simply nodded solemnly in response.

With that decided, Subaru's task was to plan a strategy, utilizing their current forces and the information about the future he possessed. —Though, the plan itself was terribly simple, and the groundwork had already been laid.

"This plan, at worst, we would've had to do with half our current numbers, but thanks to Julius joining, the numerical anxiety is gone. I think we can do it."

"I would like to correct one thing. My name is Juli. While I am close to the eldest son of the Juukulius family, I would appreciate it if you'd be careful about that."

"That persona is just a hindrance outside of official settings! Besides, if you were serious about pretending to be someone else, you wouldn't show up dressed as a Royal Guard Knight! Your cover is too shallow!!"

Subaru yelled at Julius, who was putting on a shallow act of concealment, then, still breathing heavily, he looked around at everyone's faces. Then, after a cough,

"Alright, then, a simple explanation of Witch Cult hunting that even a monkey could do—let's begin!"

With a villainous grin, Subaru unveiled his plan.

The plain where the moonlight began to fade—the last night before clashing with the Witch Cult was breaking, and the morning of this loop’s final day was beginning.

Bonus Short Stories

Librarian Beatrice's Log: Restart

1

With a soft thump, she gently closed the book she had finished reading.

Shutting the thick, skillfully-bound book that rested on her knees, the girl let out a sigh that seemed incongruous with her child-like appearance, one that somehow carried the weight of years.

The girl sat atop an aged stepladder, constructed of wood. Wrapped in an elegant dress, with her pale, cream-colored hair in curls, she was a person with doll-like beauty.

The girl's name was Beatrice—she was the librarian of this silence-filled library, known as the 'Forbidden Library', and a magic user of rare quality who had passed many a year here.

"No matter how many times I read it, 'The Guillotine of Magritsa' never loses its charm; just a masterpiece, you know."

Whispering in satisfaction, Beatrice's fingers traced the title of the book on her knees.

Countless shelves, and innumerable books collected on them. Story after story acclaimed as masterpieces, specialized treatises from the past that were now difficult to acquire, or even forbidden books that no one knew the history of; the 'Wisdom' that existed in the Forbidden Library in the form known as books was limitlessly vast.

In a sea of books that one couldn't finish reading in a lifetime, it was no surprise that there were stories that Beatrice was fond of, and had read over and over. The book she had just finished reading, too, was one such story.

"What sort of book shall I read next, I suppose?"

The calm that fell over the Forbidden Library was, to Beatrice, who was both a librarian and a reader, the best possible environment.

Through Beatrice's spell, known as 'Door Crossing', the Forbidden Library was entirely isolated from the outside world. Not only were light and darkness shut out, but even bothersome interpersonal relations could not be brought into this place. The only thing that made a sound in the room was herself, and there were countless books to read—truly a utopia that a book lover would drool over.

However…

"Of course, after a tragedy, something that would ease the heart would be…"

"Beatrice-sama…"

"Mhmm, losing oneself in another tragedy while still carrying this feeling of melancholy would be…"

"Beatrice-sama? Where are you?"

"It might be amusing to read the same story again, once more from the start…"

"Beatrice-sama…? Beatrice-sama…?"

"Aagh! Could you be any more noisy, annoying, and clamorous, you know?!"

Popping down off the stepladder, she ran towards the door of the library with the book still clasped under her arm. When she placed her hand on the knob and opened the door, for just a moment, a distortion formed in the space between the Forbidden Library and the outside world it was connecting to. Breaking through that thin, film-like sensation, Beatrice flew out into the mansion's hallway. At the end of the hallway, facing the other direction, was a blue-haired girl; Beatrice glared at her back.

"You've been going on with this noisy bustle for a while now, I suppose! Exactly what business do you have with Betty this late at night, you know?!"

“My apologies, Beatrice-sama. But thank goodness. You were still awake, then.”

As the girl turned towards her, Beatrice still held the book to her chest as she frowned.

In the direction of Beatrice’s pouting gaze, a girl wearing a servant’s uniform approached. She was the younger of the servant sisters who were responsible both for the mansion and its inhabitants—the more capable one. Her name was Rem, wasn’t it?

When Rem stood before Beatrice, she politely bowed her head to one who outwardly looked far younger than herself, and said,

“As it happens, Beatrice-sama, Roswaal-sama is calling for you. It seems there is a matter that he simply must have your assistance with.”

“For him to be leaving it to a servant to summon me, he must be thinking quite highly of himself, I suppose. He seems to have forgotten that there is no hierarchical relationship between himself and Betty, you know.”

“…”

As Beatrice showed the poor mood she was in after having her reading time disturbed, Rem held her silence. Offering her opinion and incurring the displeasure of either Beatrice or Roswaal would be troublesome.

Seeing Rem tighten her cheeks and the corners of her eyes in an effort to remain expressionless, Beatrice sighed.

Even though she exceeded her older sister in capability, there was a part of her that was behind in mentality. It also felt to her like the older sister was simply far above average in that respect, but none of that mattered to Beatrice.

“…Aah. Hurry up and show Betty the way, before she changes her mind, I suppose.”

“…! Yes, thank you. Rem will guide you.”

When she agreed to compromise, Rem gave off an air of relief as she bowed her head again.

The girl wasn't very good at concealing what she was feeling. As it was, it seemed unlikely she'd be able to hide her thoughts from anyone who wasn't truly lacking in perception. There wouldn't be that many people who were so unobservant, though.

While Beatrice was harboring that impression, a voice unexpectedly reached the back of her mind. It wasn't a voice that maintained a distinct form, but due to it being a voice with 'Power', it's intentions were conveyed clearly.

"Mm… I've received instructions from Bubby. It seems you should prepare hot water, a clean washcloth, and a single guest room, I suppose."

"A guest room?"

"That's right, you know. It seems that half-wit girl is bringing someone back with her, I suppose."

With an air that suggested someone was bringing something bothersome for her, Beatrice let out a gloomy sigh.

While following the maid who was thinking over her instructions, Beatrice adjusted her grip on the book she was carrying.

"Good grief, this is honestly so much trouble."

Looking back at it, Beatrice was completely shocked at how bad everyone aside from herself was at handling their responsibilities.

…That was setting aside for now how poorly she'd handled her own responsibilities and desire to meddle in the affairs of others, in that she'd forgotten to tidy up her books, and, unable to tolerate the noise outside what should have been a quiet Forbidden Library, she had rushed out of it.

2

"O~h my, you found her much faster than I had expe~cted. Was this a victory for Rem's dogged determination… or perhaps simply a defeat for Beatrice's will to fight on?"

When they arrived, guided by Rem, at the mansion's entrance hall, a tall man who had already arrived turned to face them.

He was a strange fellow with long indigo hair, white makeup applied to his face, and eccentric clothing. This man with his nonsensical air was Roswaal L. Mathers, both the master of this mansion, and Beatrice's long-time acquaintance.

As he gazed down at her cheerfully, Beatrice narrowed her eyes, and snorted softly.

"You must think quite highly of yourself to summon me like this, I suppose. You really shouldn't be giving such cruel orders to your own servants, you know."

"Despi~te that, I expected that you would be more likely to appear if I had Rem search for you than if I searched myse~lf. Su~rely, if I had started searching the mansion high and low, you'd have been so entertained by it that you wouldn't have come out to see me, wouldn't you sa~y?"

"…Now that you mention it, that might be true, I suppose."

The sight of Roswaal, who never lost his relaxed attitude, walking around the mansion searching for her would be a rare thing. Since it was Rem, she took pity on her and showed her face, but she couldn't deny the possibility that if it had been Roswaal, she'd have taken some time to enjoy it.

"You see, isn't it just like I sai~d?"

"Hmf, having you stand there looking like you've seen through everything isn't much fun. So, is it still not time for the errand you called Betty for?"

"The errand itself should be calling momentarily. …Rem?"

After his pretentious reply, Roswaal called to Rem, who was standing at his side. The girl lightly lifted up her own blue hair, and placed a hand on her well-shaped ear.

"… Yes, the senses nee-sama is sharing are getting closer. It seems they should be reaching the gate soon. Would it be alright for Rem to go and greet them?"

"I'd be pleased if you wou~ld. Ah, I don't think there will be a problem, but… do be careful."

Nodding to Roswaal's instruction, and then bowing to Beatrice, Rem headed towards the entrance. When she opened the large doors and went outside, a cool evening breeze blew into the manor, and one could catch a glimpse of the mansion's front grounds and front gate on the other side of the door. Near the iron gate, a dragon carriage raised a cloud of dust as it arrived.

In the carriage's driver seat, a girl identical to Rem—her elder twin sister could be seen.

"The older of the sisters has returned as well; I'd like to see Bubby soon, you know."

At the return of her only family, Beatrice's expression had softened. The best outcome here would be for this to be simply rejoicing together at meeting again, but there was both the thoughts that were sent to her earlier, and Roswaal's summons. There was no way it would end that easily.

"The return of your dear older brother… bu~t, I'm a little jealous. You and I are old acquaintances, too, but you've never made that face for me."

"You shouldn't say such creepy things, I suppose. And you're being far too obvious, you know. You aren't interested in Betty, or anyone else, I suppose. There's only ever been one person on your mind, you know."

"We~ll, you're not wrong about that. But that doesn't mean that it's a lie to say that I feel like I'd like to get along well with you. … Although this matter is separate from that."

"I can't feel anything but worried about that, I suppose."

Simultaneously, Beatrice’s face tightened at Roswaal’s words, and Rem met up with her older sister Ram in front of the gate. After the sisters had spoken together about something, they immediately moved to the carriage, and a silver-haired girl descended from it. … To Beatrice, it was someone who put her in a complicated state of mind.

But this time, there was someone who drew her attention more than the silver-haired girl. It was…

“It seems there was some sort of blackened, dingy-looking fellow riding with her, you know.”

“I’m not sure if you would say riding, or being carried along. I’m su~re you’ve realized it, but that’s the reason that I ca~lled for you.”

“You can’t be serious, I suppose.”

Realizing that her worries had been right on target, Beatrice furrowed her brow, and waited for the girls to arrive.

The boy being lowered from the carriage was unconscious, and the maid sisters were each lifting one end of his body, which swayed back and forth as they tried to move him.

“Um, um! That boy really helped me out, so… I wish you’d carry him a little more gently… Um, are you listening? That looks rea~lly painful, doesn’t it?”

Near the boy who was being carried, the silver-haired girl ran about, flustered and looking concerned. Neither her shoulder nor her silver hair showed any sign of the little shadow that Beatrice was seeking.

“…It seems I’ve drawn the short end of the stick, you know.”

Beatrice’s sigh reeked of age, completely at odds with her child-like appearance.

It seemed that the boy who had been carried in had made crucial efforts in overcoming a problem that occurred for the silver-haired girl—Emilia—during her journey in the capital.

From what was said, after Emilia carelessly had her precious emblem stolen, not only had he tenaciously determined its whereabouts in her stead, and struggled to do this and that to return it to Emilia, but he had gone on to risk his own life to protect Emilia's.

"Ah, this is much too suspicious, I suppose. There's no doubt that someone like that is a spy or something, you know. It would be best to make a clean break of things here and let him die naturally, I suppose."

"Well, it's certainly true that it's far too convenient. What would you have us do, Emilia-sama? Shall we let him die?"

"Why are you saying such cruel things?! Please, help him."

Flustered by the cold suggestion offered by Beatrice, who had listened to the explanation, and Ram, who had given the explanation, Emilia requested healing for the boy.

The unconscious boy had a fairly serious wound in his abdomen. Currently, the wound had only been closed by simply healing magic, and even if it was only left as it was now, he could be expected to recover if he rested quietly.

To be sure, this was speaking of only if he did absolutely nothing but rest in bed.

And, she got the feeling that this boy, left on his own, definitely would not remain in bed.

"There's little choice so I'll heal him, but… this is something that I normally absolutely wouldn't do. I'm doing you a favor, so tomorrow, I'll have you let me take Bubby all day, I suppose."

"…! Very well. If that's what you'd like, I'll make sure to speak to Puck about it. Thank you, Beatrice. I am indebted to you."

"…That's an old-fashioned way of putting it, you know."

"Huh?!"

Setting aside Emilia as she expressed surprise, Beatrice set right to healing the boy and getting it over with. Before the immense power of Beatrice, the maintainer of the Forbidden Library, it was a trivial task.

Despite that, she'd demanded a proper reward, so the terms weren't bad for her. It would be troublesome if their relationship developed into one where she was called upon casually. Beatrice was no one's errand girl.

Beatrice's role was the librarian of the Forbidden Library, nothing more and nothing less—on that point, she would never budge.

"There now, I've healed him up, I suppose. Take care of the rest as you please, you know. Do make sure not to let him push himself, I suppose."

"Mhmm, thank you, Beatrice. I'm indebt… I'm… I'm most grateful!"

"That's old-fashioned talk, too, you know."

As Emilia smiled openly, Beatrice pointed out the expression she'd used and turned her back.

Such a straightforward gaze was difficult for her to deal with, but Beatrice lacked the will to tell Emilia that directly.

4

With the boy's healing taken care of, Beatrice retired quickly to the Forbidden Library.

Most likely, the boy would wake up sometime in the morning. Although his body had been restored, it would take time for his stamina and such to recover after being so exhausted. Having said that, Beatrice's healing magic was even capable of producing results in restoring said stamina and the like, so it was unlikely that any significant problems would remain.

“It seems that those girls have returned to their room as well; with that, we should be able to get back to a peaceful night.”

Seating herself on a stepladder in the center of the room, she sighed as she brushed at her knees.

The Forbidden Library was essentially safe from the influence of the outside world, but Beatrice’s perception was wide-ranging, and it was that indeed that allowed her to grasp what was going on inside the mansion. In the end, the serenity that Beatrice truly loved would only come when all the residents of the mansion were sound asleep.

However, there had been a few too many fusses tonight. Somehow, she couldn’t even work up the urge to reread the book she was carrying.

“It was such a nice night, and now look what’s become of it, you know. Bubby is out of mana and resting, and I can’t see him until morning; what a day, I suppose. If it was going to turn out like this, why did Betty… Hmhm.”

Just as the day was reluctantly drawing to a close, Beatrice hummed softly to herself at the tail end of it.

Just as was stated earlier, Beatrice knew what was going on inside the mansion like the back of her hand. Something was nagging at her perception. It was…

“That injured boy’s room. He’s woken up, I suppose.”

Paying special attention to his situation, just in case of sudden changes, had yielded results. Sensing the boy get up off his bed and move around, Beatrice pursed her lips.

That was quick, was her first thought. Of course, her healing had been perfect. She was confident that she had restored the boy completely, without so much as a scar. She was confident, but he had gotten used to the healing magic oddly quickly. For this to be possible, either there was something peculiar about the nature of his body, or he had good compatibility with Beatrice’s magic.

“Ah, ew, ew… what a revolting thing to imagine, you know.”

Repulsed by what she’d thought up by herself, Beatrice felt like she was nauseous in her chest. In the same moment, a plot sprouted in her heart to use this boy to clear up the nausea.

“Now that it’s decided, I’ll just play with him a little bit, I suppose.”

While still seated on the stepladder, Beatrice fully mobilized the power of her own shadow magic, she “remade” the space of one floor of the mansion—a corner of it that included the guest room that the boy was in.

Originating from the guest room he was in, she connected the space of the end of the hallway to the other end, forming an endless corridor. An illusion made it impossible to see where the corridors met, and she chose a perpetual darkness for the outside of the windows, with no sign of light.

With this, she had completed the trap. With no way to tell which way to go, and no way out, the boy would be psychologically cornered.

“On top of that, any door except the correct door… the door to the first room, will have a special gimmick, you know. Your body will forget about gravity, your consciousness and awareness of reality will be exactly opposite, and there will even be upside-down rooms, I suppose.”

It felt like she might have gone a bit overboard with her control and alteration of her territory, but she was satisfied with the result.

Incidentally, this prank used many different shadow magic spells that had been lost to time, and some researchers into magic would faint if they saw it mis-used this way, but Beatrice wasn’t concerned about that.

“Now, do a grand dance in the palm of Betty’s hand, you know!”

This, that, and all of it was solely for the purpose of seeing the boy running about frantically, snot dribbling from his nose. She was simply letting off steam after being unable to meet with her brother, so although he had saved someone’s life, he could at least entertain her for a little…

“…Or perhaps, the possibility that the first door is the goal, as it tends to be.”

The Forbidden Library’s door opened with a click, and a foolish face peered inside.

Snap judgement, an instant choice, an immediate breakthrough—feeling a sense of wasted effort that wasn’t suitable compensation for the amount of work she’d expended, Beatrice put on her sourest face.

“…What a profoundly aggravating man you are, I suppose.”

And so, for the first time, she tasted a sensation she would repeat time and time again in the days to come.

It was the beginning of the end of the quiet days she had spent in the Forbidden Library.

END

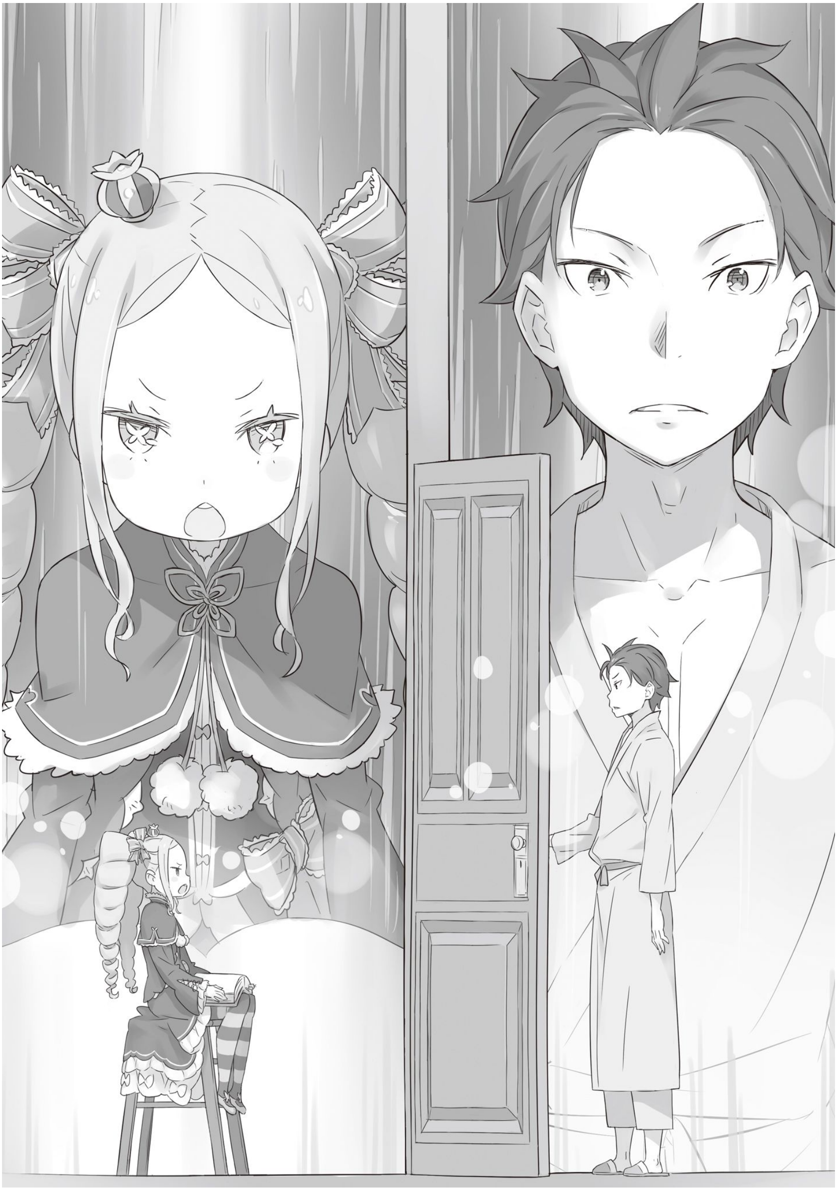

The Great Spirit Puck's Nyan Nyan Sunny Day

1

“Hey, Subaru…can we stop doing something like this?”

“What are you talking about, Miss Rabbit? Quitting right now would be like throwing away my manhood.”

“I don't think you would lose it, and who's Miss Rabbit?”

Such peaceful words were being exchanged at Roswaal Manor at noon. A boy and a beautiful girl were exchanging words in a slightly hushed and mature manner. They were Natsuki Subaru and Emilia, respectively.

They were close to each other, moving without making a sound in the hallways of Roswaal Manor, which was where they were currently staying. They were carefully executing a stealth operation—to be precise, they were following their target.

“We'll be in trouble if our target notices us. Emilia-tan, be as quiet as possible… And you smell really good when you're this close. Are you wearing perfume or something?”

“I'm not wearing any, but…leaving that aside, I don't think there's any point in doing something like this. Even if we act foxy like this, we'll be spotted immediately.”

“Nobody uses the word foxy in this day and age…”

“Su-Ba-Ru.”

They exchanged their usual lines, but Emilia looked angry this time, surprisingly. Subaru thought her angry face was cute, too, and at the same time glanced at the end of the corridor again—

“Ah, damn it! We've lost our target! Emilia-tan, dash! Dash while being sneaky!”

"Huh? Wha? Dash?"

"It means to run while being sneaky! Watch and learn!"

"I can't do something skillful like…woah, Subaru, you are good at the sneaky dash."

Emilia hurriedly chased after Subaru, who was ahead of her demonstrating a peculiar running skill without making a sound. She desperately tried to mimic his running style, but it wasn't so easy to do.

Her effort is heartwarming, but for now, our priority is to pursue our target. He saw a long tail disappearing around the corner in the corner of his eye. It was a familiar-looking long tail that must have belonged to their target, a calm and laidback cat spirit—Puck. They didn't know where Puck went after leaving Emilia's side and flied freely around the mansion. To find that out was their goal—to conduct biological research on the great spirit Puck's behavior, that was the duty they were given.

"Oh, Subaru! Look, I was able to do the sneaky dash! Look, I can be reaaally quiet!"

"You improved really quick?!"

Even if you didn't make a sound while running, you wouldn't be able to tail someone if you didn't talk quietly.

It was a desperate tailing scene by two people who needed to look the definition up in a dictionary.

2

It all began after they'd finished today's breakfast and were taking a post-meal break.

Usually, the weird events at Roswaal Manor began with Subaru's words, and mostly when everyone in the mansion had gathered for meals. There was an unspoken agreement that everyone at Roswaal Manor would eat together unless there was a grave issue. It was a loose rule, something that a normal family had, but Subaru liked rules like that at Roswaal Manor. He believed that the more people you shared meals with, the better. In fact, many new discoveries were often made during meals, and it was also fun. The atmosphere where everyone chatted freely was a far cry from the formalities of your typical nobleman's house, and it was a time in which you could relax a bit. Also, him having questions often lead to events during such meals, but his question this time was a very simple one.

And that was—

"Well, what does Puck do when he isn't with you, Emilia-tan?" Subaru asked while tilting his head in the dining room after they'd finished eating and washed the dishes.

"Huh?" Emilia, who was having her after meal tea was surprised when she heard Subaru's words. There was no sign of the cat spirit in question on her beautiful hair or on her thin shoulders. And that was something to be expected since Puck floated out of the dining room alone a moment ago after letting Emilia know.

Emilia widened her eyes at that question.

"No, you see," Subaru said with a shrug. "It's a known fact that you and Puck have a contractual relationship, and I know that Puck is usually by your side, but…there are times when he moves around freely like this, right? So do you know what he does during that, Emilia-tan?"

"Puck when I'm not around…?"

Emilia looked as if she had never thought about it when Subaru asked. It seemed like her policy was to not interfere in Puck's affairs, for better or worse, and to not impose her will too much in Puck's activities during his free time.

"Well, I think the key to making a pet live long is to not stress it out, but I also think they need some tough love sometimes."

"Ah, Subaru, you are making fun of Puck, aren't you? Puck would definitely be angry if he heard that, so don't say something like that," Emilia chided as she lifted her eyebrows sharply, which was unusual for her, after her contracted spirit was treated like a pet.

“Listen here,” Emilia said after lifting her finger at Subaru. “Puck is a lot more mature than you think. I’m sure that he’s doing something reaaally important when he isn’t with me. Puck is, of course, always working hard for world peace.”

“What’s up with that really vague kinda understanding? It’s like the opinion of a kid who doesn’t know what their parent does but thinks that they are probably doing something great!”

Subaru had no idea what his father did for a living when he was a child, but he had such a vague trust in him. He still didn’t know much about it even though he’d grown up. But now he thought that it was something that equaled world peace since it was a job that was enough to sustain his wife and son.

“In any case, since you don’t know about it, I need to get serious and start investigating. I don’t have to work until the afternoon today, so I might as well go after him.”

“That’s in bad taste… I think it’s better not to do it.”

“You can’t stop something that’s already set in motion. And Emilia-tan, aren’t you a bit curious deep down? I’m not saying that he’s doing something bad, but if he is really working hard for world peace then it’s more of a reason to see what he’s doing.”

“Well, that’s…”

“Let’s go check it out!”

“…Ok.” Emilia, who easily gave in when pressured, got persuaded by Subaru while in a state of bewilderment.

This was how the two of them rushed out of the dining room and how they started following Puck.

3

—Luckily Puck, who had left the dining room before them, was found immediately, and the tailing began. However, it couldn’t be said that the subsequent pursuit of Puck was very fruitful. It wasn't that they had lost him or that he had found out about them following him, the problem was what he was doing.

“Puck is scratching the wall of the mansion with his claws, but why do you think he's doing that?” Subaru asked.

“He's probably checking the mansion's durability,” Emilia answered. “Puck is patrolling around checking things like that to make sure that everyone stays safe. He's amazing.”

“To me it just seems like he's taking care of his overgrown nails.”

“Oh, Subaru, look! Puck started moving really fast! He might have found something.”

“He rushed into the restroom with such speed, so isn't it that? The thing called ‘Toilet High’ where cats get really energetic before and after using the toilet.”

“That's not… Oh! He came out just as fast. We are going to lose him!”

“He's flying around the mansion quite energetically. Is something happening in here…?” Subaru wondered.

“I get it!” Emilia exclaimed. “Since we had a witchbeast commotion before, he is checking whether there's an opening in the barrier or not. Or he's secretly putting up a new barrier just in case…”

“To me, it just looks like he is searching for a place to sunbathe, or he's patrolling his territory.”

“He went into the kitchen!” Subaru shouted.

"He probably, has something reaaally important…"

"He got a small fish from Rem and came out eating it."

"Snacking! He's going to get fat!"

"Is that what the issue is?

While they were keeping an eye on Puck, he did whatever he wanted to since it was his free time—a bit too free.

I mean, as far as I have observed, his behavior is completely like that of…

"A cat… And it looks like he's a housecat that has completely forgotten its wild instincts."

"I was thinking about it, but I don't think Puck's nails grow, so he doesn't need to file them. He doesn't need to use the restroom either. And he just needs my hair and shoulders to be his territory. See, Puck isn't weird."

"You found something to cling to, and now you're trying like mad to refute everything I said."

Usually, Emilia often lost against Subaru's arguments, however, she couldn't afford to lose when it was about her only family. She kept pushing back, and she was certainly trying to make a point with her words.

I didn't doubt it till now since Puck was really acting like a cat, but Puck is a spirit, and I don't think he needs to do all the things that cats have to do. It's like Emilia said, there might be a reason behind him filing his nails and being in a toilet high.

"But, snacking in the kitchen doesn't really mean anything, right?"

"Ma…Maybe he is saving up his energy for an important task later?"

It seems like Emilia also doesn't think that it was very convincing since her sentence ended with a question. And the idea of him having an important task later also seems fishy. And if Puck curls up and starts sleeping, then even Emilia would have to admit defeat. But—

"—Alright, I guess it's almost time," muttered Puck, who had become full after swallowing the small fish he'd received.

His voice was deep, and his side profile looked tense—the atmosphere had changed.

"Could it be that he really has something to do…? Is it something like fighting other cats to be the boss cat?"

"There's no way Puck would fight stray cats. Puck's territory is inside my body. It's in here."

"You made an unintentional erotic comment, but Puck is on the move now. Let's go after him."

As Puck floated up with a serious look and started moving in a straight line, they began pursuing him. The way he flew, glancing around, clearly showed a sense of tension and caution that he didn't have before. Seeing things like that made Subaru and Emilia tense.

Eventually, Puck arrived in front of a room with his hair standing on end due to his cautious state. Subaru and Emilia looked at each other after realizing whose room it was.

"…That's…my room?"

"Maybe Puck has some business with you, Subaru…"

Subaru and Emilia looked at each other and tilted their heads. From everything they'd observed so far, they had a pretty good idea as to how Puck behaved. But they weren't sure how it connected with him visiting Subaru's room.

"…" Then Puck put his tail on the doorknob without saying a word and slowly opened the door. It was surprising to know that he used his tail to open doors, but it was even more surprising that he had snuck in without saying anything.

Naturally, Subaru's mind recalled the recent witchbeast commotion.

—He recalled the difficult relationship between him and the twins that had flared up during that. At the time, the two of them suspected my origins and were watching me to see if I was a dangerous person, so maybe Puck is cautious like that.

"Subaru…" Emilia softly called Subaru, who had looked down anxiously with listless eyes.

He came back to his senses after hearing her voice and shook his head, forcing a smile. "I'm fine," he said. "Let's go clear things up."

I'm prepared to work hard and clear up the misunderstanding if Puck is suspecting me. I was able to do it with Rem and Ram, so I can do it with Puck too—

"—Hm?"

He was just about to put his hand on the doorknob and step into the room since he was thinking of talking with Puck. He heard a rather loud rustling noise from inside the room.

Hm? It's sounds somewhat familiar, but I wonder what it could be? Subaru tilted his head in wonder. And then it hit him.

And then—

"Hey, you! You good for nothing cat."

"Meow?!"

Puck, who was frolicking on the bed, got startled when Subaru entered the room. Puck looked back with his round eyes widened, and only half of him was visible for some reason—it was because he was playing around in the plastic bag from the convenience store and making rustling sounds.

"I was wondering what was up with that serious look, and then this turns out to be the punchline! You are a cat! Just a cat!"

“Hey, don’t startle me,” Puck replied. “It’s my private time now.”

“If we are going to talk about private things, then this is my private room! What are you doing playing with someone else’s plastic bag? You are totally a cat!” Subaru shouted at the unapologetic Puck, criticizing his suggestive attitude.

Then Subaru looked back at Emilia and pointed his finger at Puck. “Hey, look, Emilia-tan! This is his true form! He’s a cat!”

“No, maybe he’s just trying to do something great using your white bag… I’m sorry, I can’t do this.”

“Emilia-tan gave up on supporting him!”

At the end, it developed into a situation where Emilia gave up on supporting Puck and the ordeal ended noisily.

After everything was said and done, they came to the conclusion that ‘Puck during his free time is free!’

—After that, Emilia started to be seen making Puck report what he had been doing during his free time at the end of the day. Seeing that, Subaru thought that it definitely looked like a pet being disciplined.

END

猫

Ex 2:
Sword Demon Love Song

Librarian Beatrice's Log:
Page 2

1

The Forbidden Library was filled at all times with solemn serenity.

Beatrice, who saw herself as the librarian of the Forbidden Library, felt that's how it was, and that was how a library was meant to be. A treasure trove of tales and knowledge only attained it's proper state when filled with blessed silence.

Hence, the Forbidden Library was one of the most prominent sanctuaries for 'Books' in the world—and it now faced an unprecedented crisis.

"Mornin'. Is Beako here?"

"…No, she isn't, you know."

"Ah, she's not, I see… Hey, don't pull that old trick on me. She's right here."

"At the very least, I don't recall having opened the door for you, I suppose."

Roughly closing the book she had been reading, Beatrice jumped down from the top of the stepladder and glared at her visitor. The one who had walked into the library, looking as though he owned the place, was a black-haired black-eyed boy with a cheerful smirk on his face.

Natsuki Subaru—an impertinent fellow who had recently been entering and leaving Beatrice's Forbidden Library as he pleased.

Carried into the mansion only a few weeks earlier, the boy had, since then, worked as a servant, but he'd acted exceptionally familiar with Beatrice. Perhaps his peculiar nature, that allowed him to more or less come and go as he pleased to the Forbidden

Library (where outsiders shouldn’t be able to arrive easily), was a factor in the development of his attitude.

“What on earth have you come here for, you know? Despite what you may think, Betty is busy, I suppose.”

“When you say busy, it’s just reading, right? Children should be outdoors! If you’re going to play, go play outside.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you know. As if Betty would frolic like a child, I suppose.”

“Don’t go pouting just because you don’t know anyone. Should I go talk to Petra and the others for you?”

“Why do I even bother speaking with you, you know?! No one is speaking of such simplistic things, I suppose!”

When it came to dealing with Beatrice, Subaru’s attitude was always like this. While having her tranquility disturbed by this exchange, Beatrice played with the curls in her hair irritably.

“Regardless! Get to the point, state your business and get out! Come now, quickly!”

“Um, that was my business. I just came to say that since the weather is nice, maybe you’d like to go play outside.”

“…! Mind your own business, I suppose!”

“Geroppa?!”

Towards the one who rubbed her the wrong way more than she would have thought possible, she unleashed a wave of magical force from the palm of her extended hand. Struck by an invisible shockwave, Subaru shrieked as he was thrown out of the room—the door closed, and space itself wavered.

‘Door Crossing’ activated, and the library connected to another door in the mansion. With this, the room’s quiet would return.

Sighing at what had occurred, Beatrice turned to resume reading the book she was holding on to…

“…I’ve entirely forgotten how far I’d read, you know.”

With her desire to read entirely crushed, Beatrice’s ‘tsk’ conveyed annoyance from the bottom of her heart.

She couldn’t help but think that lately, this, that, and everything just wasn’t working out properly.

2

In truth, ever since Subaru had come to stay at the mansion, the environment that Beatrice lived in had been in a state of ongoing change.

It had begun with Subaru, and his over-friendly way of interacting with her, but there had been changes in the others that lived in the mansion as well. For instance, the maid sisters that she had known for a relatively long time were a good example of this.

“Beatrice-sama, pardon me. May I have a moment of your time?”

“…You called me, so I came, but what sort of cargo is that, I suppose?”

Hearing a voice calling, she had connected the door to the mansion’s front entryway. Upon doing so, she found there the peach-haired maid, Ram. Carrying many baskets filled with vegetables, Ram boldly straddled the threshold of the library and bowed her head.

“Oh, it’s just that all these baskets are so much trouble, so Ram was wondering if you would kindly convey her to the kitchen via the library.”

“Since when has Betty become your handywoman, you know?!”

“Well then, that means that you won’t allow it?”

“Mggh… J, just this once, I suppose…!”

After using ‘Door Crossing’ to connect the Forbidden Library to the kitchen, it did indeed reduce the trouble with the packages a little. When Ram passed through the door and gave a quick curtsey in thanks, Beatrice sniffed her nose at her to display her displeasure.

“Ah, Beatrice-sama, please wait a moment.”

“…And now it’s the younger of the sisters. If it’s some foolish errand, I won’t allow it, you know.”

Having been in the kitchen, Rem noticed Beatrice and quickly walked over to her. She shook her head to Beatrice with a ‘I wouldn’t dream of it’, and then, lowering her voice, asked,

“Rem would like to add pepples to this evening’s supper; how many of them can she add before you wouldn’t want to eat it?”

“…If it’s no more than three, I’ll put up with it, I suppose.”

“Understood. With that, we’ll add four, so please try your best.”

“You…!”

“It isn’t good to be picky, no matter the situation. You still have room to grow, Beatrice-sama.”

“What do you mean about the future… no, never mind, you know. I’m starting to get a headache, I suppose.”

In response to Rem speaking to her in a fashion that could only be called motherly, Beatrice bent her lips into a truly impressive frown.

Her attitude was clearly different from the way that she had interacted with Beatrice until only recently. Faltering before that change in the sense of distance between them, Beatrice dejectedly withdrew into the Forbidden Library.

But, as she left, just before she closed the door…

“What did Beatrice-sama say?”

“It seems she’ll do her best with up to four pepples. Let’s put five in!”

Hearing that sort of unsettling conversation, Beatrice at last looked up to the ceiling as though lamenting.

“All of this is from that man’s bad influence…”

3

…As that sort of day piled one on top of the other, the very limits of Beatrice’s tolerance were plumbed.

And the limits of that patience were suddenly, abruptly torn through.

“…Beako! Beako! You gotta get me to my room!”

While narrowing her eyes at the disrespectful tone of voice, Beatrice glared at the room’s entrance. Unable to conceal her irritation at the commotion, she completely forgot her anger at the scene that came next.

“Y…you! What are you doing looking like that, I suppose?!”

As Beatrice spoke in a voice that was all but a shriek, before her eyes was Subaru, dripping wet. Soaked in water from head to toe, he was half-naked, clad only in his underwear.

“Puck got me good! I’m soaked thanks to that jerk! I wanna get changed, so please connect the library to my room. I can’t go around the mansion getting everything wet.”

“It won’t do to get the library wet, either! Quit joking around, I suppose!”

Obviously, simply hanging around the entrance wouldn’t get the books wet. However, this was holy ground where tranquility was prized. Absolutely not a place where a half-naked, half-drowned rat would be admitted.

“You really do the most selfish things… this isn’t funny, you know!”

“I’m sorry, this is an emergency measure. I’ll never use it this way again.”

“You said that last time, too, when you used it as a shortcut to the bathroom! If you think I’ll allow it because you call it an emergency measure, you’re entirely wrong, you know!”

“Yeah, but that was an emergency measure, too, c’mon! I’m sorry about this time, too!”

With her head boiling over at Subaru’s complete lack of any sign of regret, Beatrice snapped her fingers. Just as he’d asked, “Door Crossing” connected the entrance and his private room. However, she had no intention of allowing him to leave peacefully.

“Just like always, get out… I suppose!”

“Bonjobi!”

Struck head-on by the shockwave, Subaru was blown away, tumbling head-over-heels into his room.

Without even watching him go, Beatrice used “Door Crossing” to seal off the Forbidden Library. Hurriedly grabbing a cleaning cloth, she cleaned up the floor that Subaru had gotten wet. And when the cleaning was done…

“That man… he absolutely will not get away with this, you know. He must learn what Betty’s anger means, I suppose.”

With anger smoldering in her chest, and a cloth clutched in her hand, Beatrice’s voice trembled.

4

Closing the door that connected to the Forbidden Library, Beatrice began walking ponderously on the mansion’s carpets.

For Beatrice to go outside of the Forbidden Library, without a specific task in mind, was rare. It was her belief that, as long as she had the role of constantly caring for the library as it’s librarian, she should remain there as much as possible.

Bending that belief, she was now taking action outside the Forbidden Library. The truth behind that was…

“If Betty isn’t inside the library, he shouldn’t be able to come and go so easily, you know.”

She resented it, but the reason that Subaru was able to reach the Forbidden Library was that he had good compatibility with her wavelength.

Put simply, Subaru was finding the Forbidden Library by using Beatrice as a landmark. It was likely that he wasn’t aware of it, but it was irritating nonetheless. Regardless, to prevent his invasion of the library, she was separating herself from it. In a certain sense, she was getting her priorities confused, but Beatrice hadn’t noticed that.

“What’s more, this time I just can’t let it go, I suppose. I’m going to give him a piece of my mind, you know.”

Treating her as a handywoman was one thing, but the vandalism of the Forbidden Library had finally crossed a line inside of Beatrice. With a soaked cleaning cloth in one hand, Beatrice was thinking of providing Subaru with some disciplinary action.

As she was getting goosebumps over her idea, imagining that it would go on to become a revenge drama famed throughout the world, just at that moment Subaru came into view on the far end of the hallway.

“I’ve found you, I suppose. I’ll get right on with…hmm?”

At the instant she’d thought of running over and landing a flying kick, her feet stopped moving as she became aware of a presence at Subaru’s side.

Before Subaru’s eyes, floating in front of his face, was Beatrice’s dear older brother, Puck.

Without thinking, Beatrice held her breath at the sight of the two of them, apparently deep in conversation about something. The air about them suggested she mustn’t disturb them, and yet the one she needed vengeance on was right in front of her; Beatrice was caught between a rock and hard place. On top of that…

“…! They’re coming this way, you know!”

Having finished their conversation, Beatrice saw them heading towards this part of the hallway. Fearing that they’d find out she’d been eavesdropping, she frantically tumbled into a nearby guest room. But, through some twist of fate, she heard them stop in front of the room. To further avoid them, Beatrice hid in the closet.

Not a moment too soon, just as someone entered the room, Beatrice finished hiding. Quietly peeking outside as she heard the door close, she saw Puck floating in the center of the room.

She wouldn’t mind being found if it was only Puck, she thought, but she had no way to explain why she was hiding. Thinking that she had no choice but to stay hidden and avoid being found, Beatrice held her breath…

“…Meow! Meoweow, me~w”

“…?!”

In the room that Beatrice was peeking into, Puck abruptly began rolling on the floor and crying out sweetly. On top of that, as he curled up his tail and looked around with big, round eyes, his charm was off the charts, and Beatrice, not grasping what Puck was doing, could only watch the kitten’s antics in fascination.

…Bubby, what are you doing?! Ah, but how adorable you are, I suppose!

5

“Beako~, you the~re?”

“…I’m not, you know.”

“Are you planning to make a habit of that? You’re right here, aintcha? …Seriously.”

On the afternoon of the same day, Subaru came to visit Beatrice after she'd returned to the Forbidden Library. Glancing at him, she saw he was carrying cleaning tools and smiling weakly.

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“What brings you…Please tell me you’re not going to say you want to do some cleaning, and need me to connect to another room, I suppose.”

“Nah, that ain’t the plan. C’mon, this morning I dripped water in the entrance and caused trouble, right? So, I thought maybe I could do some cleaning in the Forbidden Library to show I was sorry…”

“An admirable thought, you know. However, there’s no need, I suppose.”

As Subaru showed a rarely-seen subdued attitude, Beatrice shook her head while smiling faintly. Seeing her reaction, Subaru widened his eyes as though surprised.

“…Your expression is strange, you know.”

“Uh, I’d say you’re being stranger here. Usually you’d be angrier… though I’m glad you’re not angry. You look kinda happy, did something nice happen?”

“Not really… Oh, yes, yes. There was something I wanted to say to you, I suppose.”

“Oh, I know, right? That’s more like my Beako. Alright, bring it on! I can take it!”

As if he were strengthening his resolve, Subaru crouched down where he was, and positioned himself as though preparing to be struck by something. Indeed, this was a posture that might allow him to endure a shockwave.

It’s just that the words Beatrice tossed towards him were, just this once, something else entirely…

“Now and then, even you can do a half-decent job of something, you know. My compliments, I suppose.”

“…eh?”

"You showed me something nice, you know."

The reason wasn't really clear to her, but it seemed that Puck looking cute like that had been an idea hatched by Subaru.

Well then, she felt like she ought to express her unabashed thanks for being able to see it. In regards to having gotten the Forbidden Library wet, she wouldn't mind allowing this accomplishment to offset it.

Subaru's mouth opened in shock at Beatrice's carefree sentiment.

"B, Beako… have you got a fever or something?! This is terrible! It must be because you're stuck in a place like this with no sunlight…! I, I'll call a doctor! You'll be well soon…"

"You should accept someone's gratitude a little more graciously, I suppose!"

"Maikou~~!"

After she reappraised him in only a moment, Beatrice's shockwave washed over Subaru and he was flung from the Forbidden Library.

The noisy boy disappeared, and the serenity it deserved once more descended on the Forbidden Library. Accepting that with a blissful feeling, Beatrice thought to herself.

…For the sake of this feeling of gratitude for the peace and quiet, perhaps she might be willing to allow a bit of noise now and then.

"No, that would be spoiling him too much, you know…"

Raising a hand to her forehead as though exhausted, Beatrice returned to the top of her stepladder and immersed herself in a book.

The faint hint of a smile etched onto her face was something that not even she herself would recall having seen before.

END

The Great Spirit Puck’s Nyan Nyan Nyan Sunny Day

1

“—Lately, I feel like Lia’s eyes look cold when she looks at me,” Puck said, looking serious with his arms crossed as he floated in front of Subaru’s face.

It was in the morning, right after everyone was done with breakfast. Rem was in charge of cleaning up the dining table, and Subaru was on his way to clean the bathhouse in the basement of the mansion as directed by Ram. As usual, he showed his affection towards Emilia and exchanged snarky remarks with Beatrice, but then he was stopped when he came out of the dining room.

“In the past, Lia believed me unconditionally and was fooled by me, but nowadays I feel like she has become less naïve. Subaru, what do you think?”

“First off, I’m starting to get worried about leaving Emilia-tan in your care.”

The fact that he doesn’t have any malicious intent makes it worse.

Subaru lost interest in taking it seriously and headed for the bathhouse, but Puck didn’t seem to care and followed him, flying around the back of his head.

“Hey, hey, take it seriously. I am serious about it, this is a serious matter.”

“Alright then, I’ll answer you with some seriousness. Since you demonstrated being a really good for nothing cat, she might be pumped up as the owner and wants to discipline you, I guess?”

“Stop that! I’m not in a mood to hear jokes like that. You are quite rude.”

Puck puffed his cheeks as if he was offended and started slapping Subaru’s face with his tail. But Subaru didn’t mean to joke around, and for the most part, it was his honest opinion. It was only the other day that Subaru and Emilia found out what Puck did when he was on his own. His behavior was that of a house cat for the most part, which shocked Emilia, who had believed that Puck was contributing to world peace.

“Until then, Emilia-tan had innocently believed that her parent was doing an admirable job…”

“It’s not good to say things like that. There’s no such thing as a noble or lowly job. Every job is admirable. If you word it like that, then…”

“There’s no such thing as a noble or a lowly job, but in your case, that isn’t a job! It’s just your natural instincts!” Subaru shouted at Puck, who was being shameless, then took his jacket off in the changing room, rolled up his pants, and entered the bathroom with a mop in hand.

He then proceeded to clean it with a practiced hand.

“But even so… I’m worried about Lia. So many things have changed for her, so maybe she’s feeling tired because of that.”

“I think your behavior recently has been her greatest source of fatigue.”

“My my… It’s quite troubling that her greatest source of fatigue is unaware.”

The sources of her headache were blaming each other, but things couldn’t be judged since Emilia wasn’t there.

Puck then clapped his hands as if he’d struck upon a great idea. “Maybe, she is in her rebellious age…? A lot of things would make sense if I think that way…!”

“Does it make sense though?”

“I feel like the skin-to-skin contact between Lia and I has been lacking lately. Lia is busy nowadays, and I’ve been letting her off the hook since I felt like she should be independent from her parent… This isn't good!"

"It's not she who needs to let go of her attachment to her parent, but you who needs to let go of your attachment to your daughter, isn't it? Before you could even do that, you were losing your sanity and about to turn into a cat. Not a stray, either, but a house cat," Subaru called out after he finished mopping, but Puck didn't have any intention of listening to his opinion.

Subaru shook his head at the pondering spirit and pointed at the water inside the bathtub. "Hey, Puck. Use that water to wash the floor in exchange for the consultation fee. It'll be much faster than using the hand tub. You can do that much, right?"

"Hmmmm?"

Even though he was inattentive, Puck extended his hand towards the bathtub at Subaru's request and concentrated his mana. And then—as expected of his large mana reserves—the water in the bathtub rose and started floating around the tub.

"Woah! Amazing! That's sooo cool, man!"

It wasn't quite jelly-like, but the surface of the water rippled as it floated around. And as long as it slowly descended to the floor, Subaru's request would be fulfilled. But…

"—Yeah, I'm sure of it. The thing Lia and I are lacking is parent-child communication!"

"Waiiiii—?!"

As soon as Puck had come to some sort of conclusion to his thoughts, he stopped controlling the solidified water.

Immediately, the de-solidified water came crashing down, turning into an overwhelming wave. The rough waves smashed into Subaru at the waist, flipping him upside down and taking him into its murky flow.

"Bah! Hey! It isn't on the same level as boxers getting wet ya know?!" Subaru shouted while shaking his head after popping his head out from the tub.

However, as the culprit had already disappeared from the bathtub, his cries echoed in vain.

And while Subaru was left soaking wet alone—

“You are making a lot of noise, Barusu. Don’t play around just because no one is looking…”

“Ah.”

Ram had opened the door to the changing room and peeked inside. She looked at Subaru, who was submerged in the bathtub and all wet, squinted at him, and let out a deep sigh. “Do you want to drink the used water so badly that you’d resort to such cheap tricks? Disgusting.”

“I’m not that advanced!!”

In the first place, it’s the warm water that both Roswaal and I have soaked in, and it gets changed every time, anyway.

—I’ve only thought about it once or twice.

2

After the incident in the bathroom, Subaru changed his clothes even after taking Ram’s mild eyes of disdain. Since he’d gotten his servant attire dirty, he was wearing his tracksuit now.

He touched his partially dry hair and walked down the corridor thinking of what to do with Puck. “That piece of shit ran away after doing all that to me. I won’t let him get away with it…” He reached the stairs with that in his heart.

“Oh?”

Something suddenly fell on the stair landing from the floor above. A small ball had hit the wall and rolled towards Subaru’s feet. It was palm-sized and probably something like a tennis ball. He picked it up and found that it felt and weighed like a tennis ball, too.

"Why is there a…tennis ball here?"

"Oh, Subaru."

Emilia had showed herself from the floor above while he was tilting his head with the tennis ball in his hand.

She looked at the ball in Subaru's hand and scrunched up her pretty eyebrows in an apologetic way. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I wasn't startled, but is this yours, Emilia-tan?"

"No, it's more like it's Puck's but…no, never mind, it's fine. Can you return that to Puck? Since I'm busy now." After saying that quickly, she tapped on Subaru's shoulder and went further downstairs.

"That's fine by me but…oh well."

Subaru felt like something unusual was going on since she wasn't usually that bossy, but someone else came towards him there.

"Subaruuu."

"What's up with that pathetic face and voice? Emilia-tan said that she's busy."

Puck dizzyingly and weakly swayed down to Subaru. Subaru caught his body with his left hand and Puck started at the ball in his hand with a pathetic face.

"Aah, so you had it… Unfortunately, the communication strategy has failed. I took your advice, but it didn't work."

"Since when did this become my idea? But what did you do? I would hope not, but was it something like you getting the ball that Emilia-tan throws?"

If that's the case, then it is undoubtedly communication between a pet and its owner. And that's not the kind of relationship owners have with a cat, but with a dog.

Puck stretched his ears angrily at that. “It’s not thattt. It’s a game of catch of course, when it comes to parent-child interaction. I wanted to get closer to her by asking questions like ‘What does Lia want to be in the future?’”

“You wouldn’t get it, but what, are you like from the Showa period?! You already know what Emilia-tan wants to become! She wants to be the ruler of this country!”

“No, no, what Lia really wants to become is…oh wait, it isn’t the right time to say it.”

“That’s something deep! No, I don’t need to know something like that!”

Subaru started to doubt if Puck really wanted to repair their relationship as they continued to talk like that. But it seemed like Puck was taking a real toll from his atrophied ears and tail.

“Well, if the relationship between you and Emilia stays cracked then you guys might not be able to coordinate well in a critical moment. That would be troublesome for you.”

“Yeah…so I have thought of my next plan.”

“Tell me.”

“After giving it some thought, it’s possible that Lia has gotten used to my charm. So, I thought of going back to the basics and doing it more unscrupulously.”

“Say what?”

“Weren’t you the one who asked for it?”

“I said that because I was expecting you to say something decent!”

Having come to an odd conclusion, Puck flew off softly from Subaru’s hand. Subaru followed Puck without a second thought as he crossed through the stair landing and went towards the corridor lined with guest rooms. Puck picked one of the guest rooms and energetically turned back at Subaru in front of the door.

“I’m going to train here from now on to overcome my past self. It’s futile to try to stop me.”

“I won’t stop you, and I won’t peek, either. All of our talk up until now was meaningless.”

“—I’ll go, in order to regain our family bond and—to be a family once again.”

“The only thing super cool about it is your dialogue.”

Puck went into the guest room right in front of him with a melancholic air. After staring at the door, Subaru didn’t peek, but put his ear next to the door to listen to what was happening inside.

“—Meow! Meow! Meaaa.”

“…” Hearing the sounds of training, Subaru sighed deeply, then moved away from the door to complete his remaining chores. He dragged his unusually tired body around even though it was only midmorning.

3

“Subaru, isn’t it almost time for a break? Would you like some tea?” Emilia asked after entering the garden to reward Subaru for his hard work as he was putting away the tools after finishing the last chore of the morning, which was tending to the garden.

“Oh, it makes me really happy that it’s an invitation from you, Emilia-tan. Have my daily efforts finally paid off?”

“—? I don’t really get it, but if you are working hard, then I hope they paid off.”

“That answer of yours tells me I’m not putting in enough effort. Thank you,” Subaru said, giving Emilia, who didn’t get it, a wry smile, then washed his hands and joined her.

“Let’s do it in my room,” Emilia said, inviting Subaru.

While they were walking towards her room, Emilia suddenly started talking in a hushed voice. “Hey. Is Puck bothering you?”

“He is bothering me a lot, but it isn’t something you need to worry about. It’s a man’s destiny to get into trouble with his father-in-law… That being sad, he was feeling down.”

“I thought so. Maybe it’s because I’m being harsh with Puck.”

“Oh, so Puck wasn’t imagining it.”

Seeing that Emilia looked serious, Subaru scratched his head.

It seems like Puck wasn’t wrong about Emilia acting like that on purpose.

“Can I ask you why?”

“It’s…well, maybe I am sulking a bit. I thought Puck would be more mature, but I really lost my energy due to that incident the other day.”

“Oh, just like I thought…”

The cause and the things that followed being the same as Subaru had speculated, he put his hand on his forehead, but then immediately laughed at the worried-looking Emilia.

“It isn’t a big deal,” he said. “I can understand your feelings, Emilia-tan, but he needs to learn a lesson sometimes. He wouldn’t bat an eye if anyone else did that to him, so knocking him down a peg like that will do him some good, too.”

“Is, that…so. Yeah, you are right. Puck needs to reflect on things a bit.”

“That’s the spirit! And I really think that there’s something wrong with what he did…”

Subaru had no other option but to be considerate to Emilia.

And Puck brought this situation upon himself for the most part, so he needs to reflect upon it and feel down.

It seemed like Subaru's words had eased Emilia's mind since she didn't look anxious anymore. And then they reached her room.

Let's go in and have some tea—

"Well then, Subaru. I have prepared tea for…"

"—Meowwww."

Emilia's feet stopped the moment she stepped into the room. Her gaze was directed to the front, at the center of the room, from where she heard a sweet, flirtatious cry. Subaru frowned at that and looked inside the room over Emilia's shoulder. And…

"Meo, meo, meow. Meeoowww…"

There was a cat dancing in a cute, calculated manner, twisting his long tail, his round eyes glistening. The sight of his fluffy fur, quivering ears, and the sad purr was a sweet trap that stimulated the primitive human desire to protect something. —It was the ultimate calculated charm, perfected by a house cat.

"Puck…"

"Meow, meow, mew, mew…"

Emilia's voice trembled after seeing Puck like that. Recalling her conclusion from before, it was clear how she would react to the sight of Puck, who had lost his wild instincts. But—

"Oh no, Puck, you are so cute…! What happened to you? Cute…!" Completely losing against Puck's calculated charms, Emilia picked him up, blushing.

She then proceeded to rub her cheeks against his. It seemed like her conclusion and resolute decision had completely faded away.

"Meow…make up," Puck requested in a sweet voice.

"Make up? Yes, sure, sure," Emilia said, easily giving in. "Puck, you are so cute. I am sorry for being stubborn."

Puck thrust out his palm energetically at Subaru, who was looking at them with a blank face.

He’s acting like ‘It all went well thanks to you’, but that’s a false accusation. Anyway, leaving all of that aside… “The reason why a house cat gets too cocky is because there’s a problem with the owner’s way of disciplining it…” Subaru muttered in a resigned voice as he witnessed Puck and Emilia playing with each other.

They probably won’t stop playing until the tea gets cold, he thought to himself.

—And in fact, their adorable merrymaking didn’t end until lunch was called.

END

Volume 8

Chapters 63-74

Chapter 63:
Flash of Sloth

1

“Among the Witch Cult, the most famous would probably be the two representing: ‘Sloth’ and ‘Greed’.”

Julius told Subaru this as they rode side-by-side on their ground dragons. Subaru was clinging to Patrasche for dear life, while Julius, accustomed to riding, looked effortlessly dashing. Subaru wished Julius wouldn’t ride beside him since he felt so pathetic in comparison, but Julius, whether aware of Subaru’s struggles or not, continued,

“The Sin Archbishops’ names are known, but the two whose names actually come up in their activity records are those two. Sloth is more frequent, but Greed causes more damage.”

“Sounds like bad news… how widely known are they?”

“Their details aren’t that widely known.”

As Subaru reluctantly responded, Julius stroked his swaying bangs and glanced at him. He looked down at Subaru, who was stiffly enduring the shaking, and asked,

“May I continue the story?”

“No need to be so considerate. Back where I’m from, we ride ground dragons like this all the time. Hey, Patra… you! Stop shaking! You lizard!”

“Perhaps your trust in your ground dragon is insufficient. A ground dragon is your legs, but not your possession. You must entrust them with your trust and surrender to the wind to truly synchronize…”

“Enough with the lectures. Just tell me the rest of the story you were talking about.”

Subaru stuck his tongue out at the ever-condescending Julius, and urged him to continue the story, all while trying to synchronize with Patrasche. Julius sighed deeply at Subaru's uncooperative attitude, then shook a raised finger from side to side,

"The Sin Archbishop 'Sloth' has a very high participation rate in the Witch Cult's activities. 'Sloth's' name is involved in roughly over half of the damage the Witch Cult causes in various places."

"So he's a busybody, then?"

"It's presumed he has an extraordinary obsession with being the first to charge into battle. For someone named 'Sloth', he's quite a diligent worker, isn't he? —If only his vigor weren't directed towards heretical deeds."

Subaru recalled Petelgeuse, who relentlessly forced himself to be diligent, and others to strive for the same. Although he bore the name 'Sloth', he himself seemed to despise true 'sloth'. Was that rebellious spirit the reason for 'Sloth's' abnormally high activity frequency within the Witch Cult?

"But if he shows up that often, how come his details aren't known? Couldn't the Knights have cornered him or something?"

"Generally, it's impossible to even sense a sign of the Witch Cult's activities. It's only after the damage has occurred that we realize it was the Witch Cult's doing; they're that kind of group. Simply surviving an encounter isn't easy."

"However, that will not be the case this time."

Julius responded to Subaru's question with a hint of vexation. But the one who powerfully denied the gentle man's answer was another rider, positioned opposite Julius and flanking Subaru—Wilhelm. The old man, with quiet fighting spirit in his eyes, slid the sheath of the treasured sword at his hip,

"If we can suppress them from the outset, it will truly become a battle of pure strength. With myself, the rest of the unit, Sir Ricardo, and Sir Julius joining, I do not believe we are inferior."

"Yes, you're right. I think so too."

Subaru calmly analyzed the difference in their fighting power and affirmed Wilhelm's statement. If they compared pure combat strength, the Witch Cult led by Petelgeuse shouldn't be able to stand against their numerically superior forces. Additionally, Petelgeuse's own combat strength wasn't particularly high. If one could just get close enough, even an amateur like Subaru wouldn't have trouble dodging his attacks. If Wilhelm were to close the distance, he could probably take off Petelgeuse's head in an instant.

—The biggest problem in dealing with him is still his 'Unseen Hand'. The crucial point is whether they can slip through those endlessly extending, black, hazy hands and get close to him. It's no exaggeration to say that this will determine victory or defeat. And only Subaru can counter that 'Unseen Hand'.

"This is the plan, taking that into account. I'm counting on you, Wilhelm-san."

"Understood."

Wilhelm solemnly lowered his chin and replied briefly, radiating nothing but reliability. Next to Subaru, who felt an urge to completely entrust himself to him, Julius nodded several times, saying, "That's right,"

"I, too, have no intention of losing if we can bring this to a direct sword fight. Until now, I've regretted missing those opportunities… but this time, that won't happen."

Quiet anger simmered in Julius's eyes. As a member of the Royal Guard, he too must have harbored strong feelings towards the Witch Cult, who had consistently evaded capture. Subaru completely agreed with him on that point.

"Actually, we got sidetracked talking about Sloth, but what about the other famous one, 'Greed'?"

"Unlike Sloth, Greed doesn't have many reported cases. However, the damage from the incidents where his name was involved was too immense.”

“Immense damage…?”

At Subaru’s uncomprehending words, Julius, bathed in the wind that made his profile serious, closed his eyes in thought,

“The Vollachia Empire, located south of the kingdom. They attacked and took down a city called Garkla, which was known as a fortress city for its impregnability. —By himself.”

“Took it down?! A city? By himself?!”

“Soldiers must always be strong—that spirit permeates their land, and even a single soldier in that country is a demon in battle. A Sin Archbishop calling himself ‘Greed’ single-handedly attacked and brought down the fortress city defended by such soldiers. He even defeated Vollachia’s hero, ‘Eight-Armed Kurgan’.”

Wilhelm continued, adding to Subaru’s gaping astonishment. He spoke the name of the hero said to have been defeated by Greed, and then, knitting his whitened brows, a nostalgic emotion flickered in his eyes. When Subaru fell silent upon noticing that look, the old swordsman subtly shook his head, glancing at Subaru’s reaction,

“I crossed swords with Kurgan several times. —He was a fine wielder. I cut off six of his eight arms, and in return, I was impaled through the stomach. We were both on the verge of death, so it ended in a draw, a mutual suffering.”

“He just casually dropped a brutal old story!”

The episodes from the Sword Demon’s active days were honestly quite like a light novel, and unsettling. While Subaru felt like delving deeper into that, he didn’t have the insensitivity to do so with Wilhelm recounting the fact that his formidable rival had been killed. Still, the story of ‘Greed’ was purely disheartening for Subaru.

“Sloth and Greed. As well as four more… no, three more, excluding Gluttony. It’s going to be tough going.”

"—You're already looking ahead, aren't you?"

"Reluctantly, but I have a strong feeling it's highly probable."

Facing an impending confrontation with the Witch Cult, Subaru looked into the distance, eyes set on the future. The decisive battle with Petelgeuse, 'Sloth', was an unavoidable situation, including his meddling. A decisive confrontation with Petelgeuse meant a definitive conflict with the Witch Cult.

"Inevitably, there will be a moment when we clash with the next Sin Archbishop or whatever… It's an annoying, spiteful development, but if you defeat one, another one comes with their buddies, that's a standard pattern in delinquent manga."

The problem in reality is that things don't just end after a clash and a resolution. If it won't end until one side is annihilated, then as long as Subaru continues to strive forward by Emilia's side, opportunities to confront Sin Archbishops will surely arise.

"My stomach already hurts just from hearing about Greed. Help me."

"It's hard to find the words when you're so dejected about something that hasn't even happened yet. —Subaru, you should focus on the present."

"I know, I know. I'm just a little nervous with Sloth right in front of us."

Subaru lowered his chin at Julius's admonishing words and braced himself. Just before that, he heard Julius softly murmur "Sloth…?" but Subaru dismissed it as nothing important.

The night began to turn white, and faint sunlight began to rise from beyond the dark sky. They had already set foot in the Mathers territory, and the anti-Witch Cult alliance, a merger of the subjugation force and the beastmen mercenary group, was riding their ground beasts with high spirits.

Their path ahead did not lead to Roswaal, the lord's, mansion. Subaru had considered heading straight to Roswaal's mansion and having everyone guard Emilia and the villagers who remained there as one possible strategy. He could even calculate that it would likely be a lower-risk option in terms of protecting them. But,

“I’m the only one who knows they’re definitely coming, and if we go in to guard, the timing will shift. If that happens, I won’t know the future anymore.”

If an armed group entered the mansion, even Petelgeuse might reconsider his plan. That fanatic might still force his way through it, but even that would already deviate from the future Subaru knew. Having defeated the White Whale, the morale of this alliance was currently very high. However, it was difficult to say how long that morale could be maintained against an enemy whose arrival was unknown. Fearing an unknown enemy would weaken morale, and it would also impose a considerable burden on Emilia and the villagers who were constantly being protected. It would no longer be a certainty.

“So, there’s only one way to do this well, in a way that aligns with the future I know—by launching a preemptive strike and finishing it quickly!”

Fearing an unknown opponent was not the course of action for Subaru, who had seen the future. He had to find a way to maximize the chance he had gained through his Return by Death, which shouldn’t have existed. Therefore, that method, that possibility—

2

As he felt the fallen leaves under his soles, Subaru slowly moved forward.

He walked through the dim forest, treading on uneven ground. The sun was already high in the sky, its light filtering through the gaps in the trees. The wind blowing through was damp, and Subaru, aware of his quickening heartbeat, felt the cold sweat on his forehead.

—Subaru was completely alone right now.

Walking isolated through the cold, windy forest, Subaru didn't even have Patrasche, who had raced alongside him on the road. His hands were empty, and his shoulders slumped as he walked, making him look utterly unreliable.

"—I left Patrasche behind. She couldn't keep up with this fight."

Subaru chuckled faintly, letting out a small breath. He had been walking alone like this for quite a distance. He threaded through thin trees, stepped on and broke fallen branches, and carefully descended slippery slopes to avoid falling. The path was barely a path, hesitant to even be called an animal trail, simply obstructing Subaru's journey.

This was probably his third time walking through this forest. Thinking back to the first and second times, when he had held someone in his arms, he should have been much lighter now. Yet, his steps felt heavier than before. Was it a matter of his feelings towards where he was headed? Or was it because the person in his arms back then was someone who made Subaru forget his fatigue?

"Probably both… but it's nothing to be proud of."

Both the first and second times resulted from his inability to protect the person in his arms. And if this third time meant he was empty-handed, then he absolutely had to avoid repeating it. That's why he was doing this now.

"…"

He avoided stepping on brightly colored, poisonous-looking mushrooms and used a nearby tree trunk for support to make a small leap. The moment he landed, he felt the air change on his skin. It wasn't the kind of sensation that made his skin tingle with tension, like before the fight with the White Whale. The current air wasn't tingling; it was accompanied by a clinging gloom, forcing Subaru to become acutely aware of the sweat all over his body, which he hadn't noticed until now.

"Here it is… It's like that feeling when you suddenly realize there's a cockroach in the corner of a quiet room."

A silent standoff with an unmoving black object X. At the end of a solitary struggle that seemed endless, one feels a sense of eternity, as if time itself is stretched out. A simply unpleasant sensation, similar to that moment, crawled all over his body. He sharpened his eyes, and the forest scenery to his right and left looked similar—then, he noticed a strange sense of familiarity, as if he had seen it before. No, he had truly encountered a familiar landscape.

"I walk these unpathed roads and arrive every time, so my sense of direction, or perhaps my intuition, is so sharpened it's almost laughable."

Or perhaps, he should say his nose was getting better. Calling himself a hunting dog specially trained for the Witch Cult would sound cool, but it was a role he'd rather decline. He wanted to return it after this time.

"—Thanks for the welcome."

Subaru squinted into the dimness ahead and offered his thanks. There wasn't an ounce of genuine warmth in his voice, but he knew well that those he was addressing lacked the humanity to care about such things. It occurred to him now, what exactly were they? Like mindless puppets, they writhed without words or claims. What was their true intention?

"I guess they wouldn't answer if I asked them that, would they, Witch Cultists?"

"…"

Suddenly, Subaru was surrounded by men in black robes, blending into the darkness. The sound of the wind and the chirping of insects had disappeared from the world at some point, and the stage for their appearance was already perfectly set. Thus, there was almost no surprise in this encounter. There was only relief, out of place as it was, at their appearance exactly as he had intended.

"I'll ask your leader for the details, so… for now, just disappear."

"…"

“I don’t really get it, but I’m higher in the hierarchy, right? Please.”

He raised a hand, gesturing for them to go somewhere. The black-robed figures bowed their heads as if showing respect to Subaru, and in that same posture, they smoothly melted back into the darkness. This, too, was the reaction he had expected. While somewhat complicated, they held no hostility towards Subaru. As long as he didn’t show ill intent, or unless Petelgeuse gave an order, there was no need to worry about them attacking.

“It’d be easy if they’d just retreat to some other country and never show their faces again, just by me telling them to.”

Subaru sighed, slumping his shoulders as he knew things wouldn’t be that convenient. If there wasn’t a chain of command like Petelgeuse, there was a non-zero chance of that working, given the unfathomable nature of these unseen beings. However, in their current priorities, Subaru’s position was likely below Petelgeuse. He remained a thorn in his side. Nevertheless, their immediate retreat was good news. His preparations were excellent—there was a chance his groundwork could have failed, and a battle might have broken out right here. Even though he acted confident during the current encounter, it was a very close call. He found it a little amusing how much he’d toughened up, able to step into such a situation without fear, considering how cowardly he used to be. He self-analyzed it as being closer to desperation than true resolve, though.

“Well, it’s not a bad trend. Just a little more, please, my liver.”

Confirming that the black-robed figures had vanished, Subaru stepped onto the earth again. As he moved through a world dominated only by his own breathing and footsteps, he almost felt a delusion of time stopping, walking endlessly alone in an unending darkness. However, such sentiments quickly ended as the trees opened up to reveal a sheer cliff.

A high, towering rock face spread out before him, the forest abruptly ending as if carved by a giant claw. A massive boulder blocked the ground directly below the cliff, and by some principle, if Subaru touched it, the path to a hidden cave would invite him into its cold, dark walls. But before he could touch the rock, a shadow greeted him, looking his way even faster.

"—I've been awaiting you, desu. Beloved faithful." A man stood with outstretched hands, his face alight with joy. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken. His dark green hair had an unhealthy sheen, and his limbs, visible beneath his black robes, were as thin and weak as withered branches. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, but his overall frailty made him look fifty, which wouldn't be surprising. Only the glittering light in his unblinking eyes, staring at him, shone with a mad glow, pouring over Subaru as if devouring him. "I am the Witch Cult, Sin Archbishop, in charge of 'Sloth.' Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti… desu!" Drooling from the tip of his extended tongue, the madman—Petelgeuse—cackled, welcoming Subaru.

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“—I’ve been awaiting you. Beloved faithful.”

A man stood with outstretched hands, his face alight with joy. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken. His dark green hair had an unhealthy sheen, and his limbs, visible beneath his black robes, were as thin and weak as withered branches. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, but his overall frailty made him look fifty, which wouldn’t be surprising. Only the glittering light in his unblinking eyes, staring at him, shone with a mad glow, pouring over Subaru as if devouring him.

“I am the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult representing ‘Sloth’. Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti…!”

Drooling from the tip of his extended tongue, the madman —Petelgeuse— cackled, welcoming Subaru.

3

Facing his archenemy, Petelgeuse, Subaru realized he was surprisingly calm.

He probably hadn’t hated anyone more in his short life.

He’d thought only of killing this man, his vision going red, his thoughts consumed by a burning murderous intent.

This man was the worst disaster, mercilessly and cruelly slaughtering the people he cared about, those he held dear.

He’d sworn he’d break this man’s neck with his own hands, but now, facing that gaunt, menacing figure, all Subaru felt was a strange sense of relief.

It was the same kind of relief he’d felt when he’d successfully made contact with the Witch Cultists earlier.

“Welcome, beloved child, favored by the Witch! Wonderful. Wonderful. WONNNNDERFUUUUL! How profound is the love that cloaks you! How lofty is the love that envelops you! How fervent is the love that embraces you! For a devotee of such favoritism as yourself to reveal themselves here! How truly, truly wonderful!”

As Subaru was having these thoughts, Petelgeuse was already in top gear. He thrashed his head, clawed at the back of his bony hands, profusely bleeding from self-inflicted wounds, unable to contain his joyous frenzy.

The first time, it was fear. The second, hostility. But now, seeing it for the third time, it finally settled into the natural emotion of disgust. All Subaru felt towards Petelgeuse’s way of life was an unknown revulsion for an incomprehensible being.

Subaru suppressed the urge for his cheek to twitch and took a deep breath in front of Petelgeuse. Calming himself, he lightly raised a hand.

“I’m flattered by the grand welcome. Though I’m not entirely sure it’s sunk in yet.”

“That’s understandable! My own beginning was sudden as well. Everyone, on a certain day, realizes they are ‘loved’. Once you realize it, you can never let go of that love. —For love is everything!”

Petelgeuse gleefully latched onto the topic Subaru had thrown out, trying to find an opening in the conversation. He spread his outstretched hands, his blood-dripping hands trembling, and sang praises of love, heedless of his own easy trampling of others’ lives. A horribly twisted kind of love.

“To love! To the love that has been bestowed! I, we, must respond with diligence! Thus, ordeals, I give trials. I hurl trials. To find meaning in my receiving the Witch’s favor in this world, this era, these days, this hour, this instant, this very moment, to love, to love, to love, to love, to love, to love, to love, to love, to love, to love, to LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE!”

“So, you can’t be lazy, huh? You have to be diligent to truly repay that love.”

"Exactly—!"

Petelgeuse looked up, overjoyed beyond measure at Subaru's apparent understanding of his words.

Subaru didn't want to agree with or understand a madman's opinion, but he continued to suppress the rising disgust, facing him. To buy time, to gain something, however small.

"Uh, so, am I supposed to join you here? Are there any procedures, like, papers to sign or stamps to press? I don't have my official seal, so is a thumbprint okay?"

"I feel that the love bestowed upon you is too pronounced for you to join me here and now… This rich scent of the Witch hasn't even been granted to me. Perhaps 'Lust' or 'Wrath' would surely envy you… Could it be, are you perhaps 'Pride'?"

"Pride…?"

Petelgeuse took a step closer to Subaru, tilting his head ninety degrees as he asked.

Subaru could only respond with confusion to the direction of the question. He had no answer to whether he was "Pride". What he called "the Gospel" was also beyond his comprehension.

Unable to give a proper answer, yet also forbidden from letting the moment pass in silence, Subaru fell silent. Petelgeuse furrowed his brows in suspicion, then,

"—My brain… trembles."

Petelgeuse muttered, a small, hoarse voice.

From that faint voice, the trembling, all the joyous frenzy from before, had vanished, leaving only an extreme emptiness that instilled unease and dread in anyone who heard it.

Just facing him, a gnawing unease welled up, and Subaru realized his breathing had quickened.

His heart pounded, rattling his sternum so hard it caused pain.

His knees began to tremble uncontrollably, and he felt an oppressive force that would make it difficult to even stand properly without conscious effort. In that wind of pressure, Petelgeuse tilted his head the other way, raised his right hand, and bit down on his fingers, crushing them in his mouth.

“Present the ‘Gospel’. The proof of your love—”

He reached his left hand inside his black robe and pulled out a book bound in jet black.

Skillfully opening the book, about the size of a dictionary from Subaru’s original world, he flipped through the pages, his bloodshot eyes scanning them. And then,

“Your description is not in my Gospel. So, why exactly have you appeared here, visited, and what meaning do you bring to me?”

“If that book’s called ‘The Gospel’, then, well. A few things happened, and I don’t have it on me right now.”

“A few things, you say?”

“Yeah. —I used it as a pot holder and it got all dirty, so it was gross and I threw it away.”

—This was the turning point.

The moment Subaru’s flippant answer reached his ears, Petelgeuse’s expression twisted into a savage sneer.

Immediately after, the madman’s shadow expanded explosively, and from it, countless black demonic hands stretched into the air. Each palm was a manifestation of nightmare, possessing the power to effortlessly tear apart a human body.

They soared high into the sky, glaring at Subaru like rearing snakes, then accelerated sharply, leaping to entangle him.

—Just before,

"Follow, ME!!"

Pulling his palm from his pocket, he tossed the magic stone he'd been holding skyward.

Stained red, it was an attack color, yet its destination wasn't Petelgeuse but the sky. It rose high, and the magic stone thrown into the dawn sky burst, emitting light.

At the same time, Subaru backstepped with all his might. He gained even a little distance from Petelgeuse in front of him, getting out of the range of the black hands that were closing in to sever his limbs.

"How naive! Naive naive naive naive naivenaivenaivenaivenaiveNAAAAAAAIIIIIVVVVE! It is!"

As Subaru began to flee, Petelgeuse stepped forward, extending his "Unseen Hand" to attack him.

Seven demonic hands swirled from all directions, above and below, left and right, closing in on Subaru, eager to bring down divine punishment upon the apostate who had disregarded the Witch's favor.

But—

"Wah—!"

"Haa—!!"

Overlapping roars shook the air, causing immense destruction to erupt from the earth.

The rocky ground peeled back, clods of dirt swirled up in the wind, and the resulting fissures created a spiderweb of cracks across the land, leaving gashes on the sheer cliff face.

"Wha—?!"

Before Petelgeuse's eyes, as he turned back, the combined attack of the twin beast-kin siblings shattered the large boulders piled high at the base of the cliff. —This meant they had also blocked one of the

Witch Cult’s meeting places, hidden behind the rocks.

“Bury me alive, I dare you. —Suffer and atone for what you’ve done.”

Subaru flipped him off, baring his teeth, and roared his defiant words.

Before the trembling Petelgeuse, the rock face, unable to bear the destruction from the cracks, crumbled for the most part, crushing the Witch Cultists hidden beneath it.

Dust rose, and the impact vibrated through the ground as a tremor. Isolated, Petelgeuse opened his mouth wide, tears streaming from his eyes.

“What… what have you…!”

He clawed at his own head with raised hands, digging in his fingers and pulling out clumps of hair. Hair tore in his rough movements, blood spilled from his scalp, and still consumed by unending fury, he stamped his feet,

“My fingertips… to be so brutally, mercilessly, chaotically, randomly, carelessly, meaninglessly, murdered, killed, annihilated… Oh, oh, oh! My brain! My brain! My braaaain… trembles, tre-tre-tre-tre-tre-tre-tre-trembles!”

“Ew, that old man’s kinda scary~”

“Witch Cultists are all like that, big sis.”

The beast-folk siblings, Mimi and Tivey, watched Petelgeuse lamenting like a child, whispering conspiratorially with disgusted expressions.

The two had been accompanying Subaru, masking their presence, and at the signal of the magic stone Subaru threw, they leaped out, blocking the path of reinforcements exactly as planned.

Petelgeuse slowly glared at the two who had achieved a feat worth a thousand gold.

Mimi, who had never once shown any negative emotion until now, let out a small,

“Eep…”

Shuddered, her eyes wide, at whatever expression she saw on Petelgeuse’s face, invisible to Subaru who was facing away.

Tivey, her younger brother standing beside her, though resembling his sister, had a more intelligent gaze, now mixed with revulsion and fear, and his body stiffened, unable to make a sound. And then,

“Be ‘Slothful’—”

The moment Petelgeuse uttered those words, a black mist exploded across the world.

With a force and speed that completely enveloped his vision, Subaru, who had no means of resistance, felt his throat freeze as the jet black mist pressed in to crush him.

He hadn’t expected such a hidden card beyond the “Unseen Hand”—

“Huh?”

A dumbfounded sound escaped his throat, and Subaru tilted his head, looking at his raised palm.

The black mist was supposed to have struck his entire body. It had undoubtedly swept over him, yet he felt no abnormality whatsoever.

“What…?”

Checking his unaffected limbs, Subaru voiced his confusion and blinked. But as for Subaru, who was unharmed,

“—Agh,”

The two beast-kin let out pained gasps and collapsed to the ground.

Mimi and Tivey's faces were contorted, sweat pouring down their faces, struggling to breathe as they gasped, opening and closing their mouths.

This was the damage from Petelgeuse's actions just now.

As the two stopped moving, Petelgeuse's elongated shadow began to writhe again, and his black demonic hands pointed their fingertips at the two—

"—Hey, you! Don't you dare ignore me! Your opponent is me!"

"…Oh, right, it is."

Subaru stomped the ground and roared, spitting. Petelgeuse, hearing him, looked back as if regretting his immediate reaction, staring at Subaru with empty, hollow eyes that reflected nothing. Those vacant eyes vaguely reflected Subaru, and,

"As I thought, it has no effect on you."

"Huh?"

Unlike Mimi and the others, Subaru was unaffected by Petelgeuse's declaration just now.

Petelgeuse then fixed his gaze on Subaru with a calm expression, the frenzy gone.

"Good. Good. —That is good! Good good good good good good good good GOOOOOOOOD!"

He lowered his head forward, then arched his back as if to spring up, shouting and cackling. After laughing for a while, Petelgeuse pointed at Subaru with an unprecedented vivacity, blood dripping from his mangled fingertip.

"Good. I understand! Let us do it, let us do it. Let us compete, you and I, to see who is more worthy of favoritism, of love, of receiving the Witch's passion! Oh, to love, to love, to LOOOOVE!!"

"…Sorry to interrupt your excitement, but…"

Tapping the ground with his toe, Subaru looked at Petelgeuse, who was loudly proclaiming a challenge.

Petelgeuse narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Subaru's attitude, which was far from warlike.

"What is it?! Now! Right now! I! Am about to stake my fate and challenge a trial—"

"I've left your opponent to someone else."

Subaru told Petelgeuse coolly, as he pointed a finger and tried to say more.

Petelgeuse's eyes widened at the answer, and just as he was about to voice his question—

"DIIIIEEEEEEEE—!!"

Leaping through the gaps in the trees, a blade fell in a diagonal cut, entering Petelgeuse's right shoulder—and exiting his left side, bisecting his body diagonally with the old swordsman's strike.

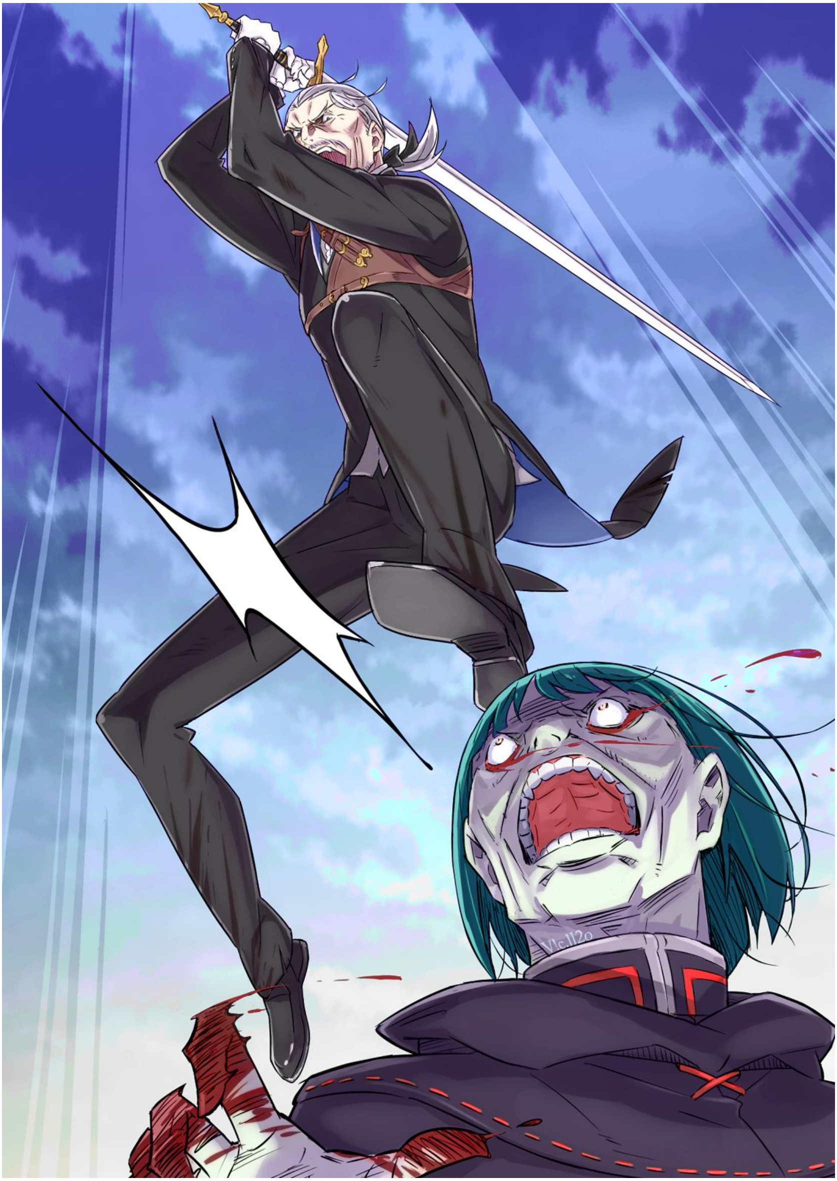

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Chapter 64:
Circumstances of the Witch Cult Hunt

1

“The gist of this Witch Cult hunt, which even a monkey could do, is simple… it’s like fishing for the White Whale. I use my scent to lure others, then defeat the ones who bite. Easy, right?”

The faces of those gathered in a circle contorted uniformly at the flippant nature of Subaru’s proposed plan. While their reactions varied—some bewildered, some worried, some anxious, and some simply mimicking the strange expressions of their neighbors—they all shared the same fundamental assessment. Namely:

“Isn’t it dangerous to treat them like unintelligent beasts? No matter what, they can’t be so easy an opponent that they’d be reeled in with the same tactics as a witchbeast.”

“They are easy opponents, believe it or not. At least, if it’s the pattern where competent people, like those who can erase their presence, follow behind me, it should work with high probability.”

Subaru shook his head at Julius’s remark, recalling past memories.

In the forest, where the Witch Cult had set their traps, Subaru’s presence seemed to be known to them instinctively. No matter which route he took, they would always appear before him. This was undoubtedly proof that the lingering scent of the Witch, which they could detect, emanated from Subaru’s body.

However, there was a suspicion that while the Witch Cultists could sense Subaru’s presence, their ability to detect other presences wasn’t particularly superior.

“The last time the Witch Cult and I were involved, they were so obsessed with me that they didn’t notice another opponent who flew in from behind.”

Subaru vaguely remembered a moment in his hazy memories when a Witch Cultist, reaching out to subdue him, had their head crushed by an iron ball.

—It was a memory from when Rem desperately tried to protect Subaru from the Witch Cultists after he'd been thrown from the dragon carriage, battered and groaning.

At that time, they hadn't noticed Rem's presence until she launched a surprise attack.

This was partly because they were overly focused on Subaru, and also largely due to Rem being skilled at masking her presence in the mountains.

In other words:

"If I dangle myself as bait, they won't notice anyone else who isn't in their line of sight. That way, we can lure out the ones who should be scattered throughout the forest and locate their hideouts."

"Then raid the discovered hideouts, huh? —But the anomaly would quickly spread. It's clear that the cultists in other hideouts would then start to move."

"That's why we need numbers. We monitor the discovered hideouts, and after the appropriate signal, we launch a simultaneous attack to capture them all at once. What do you think?"

As Subaru punctuated his proposal by raising a finger, Julius touched his lips in thought. Beside him, Ferris nodded in admiration, saying, "Nya-tural-ly." Ricardo and Mimi, from the mercenary group, also expressed their approval, deeming it worth considering. Amidst this,

"There's just one thing that concerns me, though,"

A small beast-man, Tivey, raised his hand as he spoke. He was roughly the same height and had a similar face to Mimi, with a monocle adorning one eye, making him an adorable boy.

Introduced as the youngest brother of Mimi and Hetaro, he looked at Subaru with eyes that glowed with even more intelligence than his sister and brother.

"Our employer seems to know an awful lot about the Witch Cult's affairs, but can we really trust this information? We're talking about the Witch Cult, after all—the enigmatic, vague, and ambiguous one."

Tivey voiced his suspicion, casting a doubtful gaze at Subaru, who seemed to know too much. At his perfectly reasonable question, Subaru clicked his dry tongue softly.

"I have a… history with them. Honestly, I figured you'd try to out me like this. I figured it, but… you just have to trust me."

He couldn't explain.

If he spoke of Return by Death, his heart—whether his own or another's, he couldn't tell—would be wracked with pain like the end of the world.

So, this was the absolute limit of what Subaru could do. If they demanded anything more, he couldn't comply.

Upon hearing Subaru's answer, Tivey narrowed his eyes further, about to press for more. —But,

"Honestly, just telling us to trust you without any basis…"

"I don't know what you're worried about~. You gotta be more big-hearted, aren't you a boy, Tivey~?"

Mimi, Tivey's sister, laughed boisterously and gave him a hard slap on the back of his head.

There was a tremendous thud, and Tivey's neck lurched forward as if it might snap off. Mimi grabbed him by the back of his neck as he stumbled, turned his face toward hers, his eyes wide with confusion.

"This big bro here, he tried really, really hard to beat that big fish, didn't he? Someone who tried that hard wouldn't be thinking anything bad about us, Mimi and the others. You don't even have to think about it, you're so silly~!"

"Sis, you…!"

Tivey shook his head, trying to refocus and retort, but Mimi, laughing cheerfully again, cut him off at the knees. She matched the timing by thrusting her forehead at Tivey's forward-leaning face—they collided, and sparks seemed to fly from Tivey's eyes.

"Ow!"

"You're always, always being so… 'cocky'? No, 'cocky'? 'Too clever by half'? 'Prissy'…?"

"S-Sophomoric?"

"Yeah, that's it! If you keep being like that, you won't grow big~!"

The sister who had head-butted her brother poked his newly-formed bump on the forehead with her finger, making his eyes tear up even more, then glanced back at Subaru.

"Tivey didn't fight that fish just now~. So maybe he can't believe this big brother, but if that's the case, you can just believe in your big sister!"

"…………"

"Because your big sister believes in this big brother, Tivey, you should believe in your big sister, and then, on top of that, try believing in this big brother too. And if anything happens, your big sister will protect only you~!"

Mimi patted her brother's shoulder, laughing. Tivey's eyes widened in surprise for a moment at her words, but he soon let out a sigh, his expression deflated.

Seeing Tivey's reaction, the surrounding people who had been watching their exchange burst into smiles. As laughter filled the air, Mimi tilted her head, looking puzzled.

"What's wrong?"

"Don't worry about it. Actually, you're fine just as you are. Well said."

A large palm completely covered Mimi's small head from directly above, roughly stroking her.

Ricardo continued to playfully stroke Mimi, who closed her eyes, seemingly tickled, as her neck was twisted and turned.

"There are some things that bother me, but now's not the time to doubt our big bro. We passed that stage a long time ago."

Ricardo winked at Subaru, who was left bewildered by the flow of events. Following Ricardo's lead, Wilhelm nodded, saying, "Indeed."

"My long-cherished wish was fulfilled thanks to your cooperation, Subaru-dono. Therefore, it is inevitable that I respond to your plea. There is no need for doubt or suspicion."

"I…"

Subaru's lips trembled at the trust in Wilhelm's eyes.

No excuses came. He couldn't tell them everything. Yet, Wilhelm, Ricardo, and Mimi still believed him. This was,

"That is the trust born from the results you achieved, Subaru-dono."

Even without knowing the full story, the track record Subaru had built was enough for them to trust him.

Just as Rem had unreservedly trusted Subaru, they too, though perhaps bewildered by the veracity of Subaru's words, harbored no doubt about his true intentions.

Repeating "Return by Death", and finally gaining a way to convey future information to them—that connection was now, right before his eyes, solidly established.

“N-Not that I’m happy they believed me! These aren’t tears of joy; they’re just from remembering when I forgot to record the final episode of my favorite anime, so don’t get the wrong idea and think I’m happy!”

—This shy deflection by Subaru at the end of their exchange is another story, but the Witch Cult hunt operation proceeded swiftly as planned from there.

Subaru entered the Mathers territory alone, heading into the forest where the Witch Cult was likely hiding. Behind him, individuals skilled in stealth, like Mimi, Tivey, and Wilhelm, followed closely but discreetly. If Witch Cultists appeared, drawn by Subaru’s scent, they would let them lead them to their hideouts. Then, a portion of the subjugation force would be laid in ambush, repeating the process.

“If we take what Pete-ko said at face value… there are probably ten hideouts.”

Petelgeuse had referred to his subordinates as “fingers”, if Subaru remembered correctly. He also recalled Petelgeuse calling the group Rem fought and annihilated during Subaru’s recapture the “ring finger”. If that was accurate, then including Petelgeuse’s own hiding place, the Witch Cult was likely divided into ten small groups this time.

Indeed, thanks to Subaru’s efforts wandering through the forest, spreading his scent, they successfully found seven hideouts. However, by the time they had two left, the sun was quite high, and spending any more time could risk exposing the ambushers. Based on that judgment, despite some lingering anxiety, Subaru proceeded through a familiar patch of woods toward the cliff where Petelgeuse waited. There, he confronted the aforementioned “Sloth”—

“Did we get him?!”

Wilhelm’s leaping slash struck, cleaving Petelgeuse’s slender body diagonally from behind. Petelgeuse’s face contorted in shock, cut from shoulder to hip, and his bloodshot eyes glared at Subaru.

“No way—”

What the madman was about to say would remain unknown forever. The silver flash arced, shedding blood and cutting through the air, sweeping horizontally, and the madman’s head flew lightly into the sky, gushing a fountain of blood.

Subaru was speechless at the gory sight of a head flying off in front of him. Immediately after, a massive figure leaped down from directly above, swinging a long cleaver held in both hands, crushing the headless, collapsing torso with a messy, forceful blow. The loud squelch of flesh being squeezed between earth and steel echoed, and hearing a wet gurgle, Subaru felt a surge of nausea. He managed to endure the burning sensation in his throat, forcing himself not to vomit, and squatted down, looking up with tear-filled eyes.

“It’s… over, right?”

“If it ain’t over after this, I’ll start believin’ in that Witch’s blessing stuff myself.”

Ricardo, cleaver resting on his shoulder, replied to Subaru’s timid question. Subaru averted his gaze from the sight of him scraping bits of flesh off the blade with his finger, and looked down—at the remains of Petelgeuse, which no longer retained any semblance of its original form. With a body so utterly destroyed, it felt almost artificial and unreal. Relieved that the nausea was receding, he thought,

“I wonder if everyone else managed alright.”

“Although the Sin Archbishop was our main target, our main force was concentrated here. —However, I trust Ferris and Sir Julius to command without issue.”

Wilhelm, having checked the severed head and returned, shrugged slightly. The old swordsman vouched for them, but Subaru couldn’t shake his anxiety. They had the numbers, and it was a surprise attack on known hideouts. He had instructed them not to hold back, and the primary goal was to bury them alive, so problems should be unlikely, but—

“Witch Cultists are pretty formidable fighters. Even Rem struggled against them.”

“Aside from Ferris, That boy Julius should be fine. Among us, only Wilhelm and I can genuinely contend with him.”

“…Is that so? He’s that strong?”

Subaru’s feelings were somewhat complicated by Ricardo’s answer. He was thrilled that Julius was strong, as he was a reliable ally, but his lingering aversion to Julius made it subtly difficult to accept. At any rate,

“This hole’s plugged up, no reinforcements, right?”

“With my and Big Sister’s resonance wave, the cave under the cliff completely collapsed. If anyone was inside, they’re out of luck, sorry, sorry.”

The beast-kin siblings returned after confirming the collapsed, buried cave. Receiving Tivey’s report, Subaru was again relieved that the danger here had been eliminated. Then he squinted one eye, looking at what remained of Petelgeuse.

“Taking him out in one swift, unexpected strike. —Honestly, it was a questionable method, but don’t take it personally. You’re far more of a scumbag.”

Though it had been averted in this world, Petelgeuse’s actions were still unforgivable to Subaru. He had heard that this man, calling himself “Sloth”, had caused similar widespread devastation in various parts of the world before. There was no room for leniency.

The Witch Cultists buried under the collapse could probably be considered equally guilty. Looking back, Subaru didn’t recall them directly harming him, but remembering how badly Rem had been hurt by them, a simmering rage welled up within him.

“Witch Cultists… what are these guys…?”

“Hm?”

“What are these guys trying to do, by doing all this? Witches are these incomprehensible beings hated by everyone in the world.”

Everyone tilted their heads at Subaru’s muttered question. Only these four had accompanied Subaru for the Petelgeuse subjugation. Wilhelm furrowed his brow thoughtfully, Ricardo wrinkled his nose with apparent disinterest. Mimi was kicking dirt onto the decaying Petelgeuse, and the only one left to speak was the remaining person.

“Perhaps they have a death wish? Otherwise, it could be decadent thinking, or they believe they’re the most unfortunate in the world and want company in their misery?”

“That’s so negative. I can’t say I don’t understand a single bit… though I’d choke on my words if I did.”

A death wish, the desire to engulf everything and make it all disappear, is something anyone pushed into a desperate situation can probably relate to. Subaru, in particular, had a strong tendency for it, so he understood it to some extent.

As Subaru spoke these sentimental words, Ricardo shot him a sharp look, waving a hand dismissively, baring his fangs.

“No good, don’t you dare sympathize with these types. You can’t understand these guys, not one bit, not even a single hair. Otherwise, they’ll pull you in thinking you’re one of them.”

“I’m not talking about anything that grand! It’s just scary to think there are people like us who you can’t understand even one thing about what they’re thinking!”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Ricardo poked Subaru’s forehead with his finger, then pointed that same finger at the cave, and at Petelgeuse’s body being buried under the earth.

"You can't think of them as 'the same kind of human'. We and they are different creatures. That's why we can't understand each other, and words won't get through. If you seek understanding, don't be surprised if the 'Gospel' is delivered."

"Gospel… you know something about it?"

That word, Petelgeuse had uttered it many times. "Gospel"—Subaru had always thought it was referring to the black-bound book Petelgeuse held, but—

"I'm also curious why you were so eager for the Witch Cult hunt. Do you have a history with them too?"

"…Listen, bro. Since you don't seem to know, I'll tell you: it's common sense to avoid getting involved with the Witch Cult, and to not try to understand them. Just like how Witches are so hated, it's common knowledge. The Gospel isn't some difficult, complex thing either."

Ricardo shook his head, brushing off Subaru's question as if it were bothersome. Subaru opened his mouth to object to his attitude, but before he could, Wilhelm interjected,

"The 'Gospel' is something that all members of the Witch Cult possess… yes, you could even call it a scripture."

"Scripture…?"

"Apparently, it's sent to anyone who shows promise of joining the Witch Cult. Once you get your hands on it… poof, you're a Witch worshiper, just like that."

"Wha—?!"

Subaru gasped involuntarily at Ricardo's jocular explanation. If he read deeply into those words, did it mean that people who received the book called "Gospel" could be brainwashed by it and unwillingly forced into the Witch Cult?

"If that's the case, then the ones who got buried alive were just caught in the crossfire…"

"Subaru-dono, that is incorrect."

Wilhelm quickly calmed Subaru, who was pale and flustered. He nodded deeply, reassuring Subaru, whose eyes were darting around.

"By the time the 'Gospel' arrives, that person can no longer turn back. When they open it, their will is clear. There is no such salvation as being brainwashed for those people. Did the Sin Archbishop you faced seem sane to you?"

"N-No, he didn't, but… I felt like he was an exception."

Petelgeuse's deranged behavior, in a different sense from brainwashing, raised concerns about the extent of the Witch Cult's corruption. Honestly, it was difficult to draw a convincing conclusion based on that, but Subaru couldn't imagine Wilhelm offering false comfort, so he swallowed his concerns and put them aside.

"Hey, hey, isn't it good enough now? There's no point chitchatting here, let's go back to everyone else already~!"

Mimi, who hadn't participated in the conversation until now, spoke up impatiently. Wagging the tail sticking out from her lower garment, she finished roughly burying Petelgeuse's corpse, then bounced up and down in place.

"We already killed the enemy, so we have to go check if everyone else managed to kill theirs, right? Come on, let's go~!"

"Your way of speaking is so drawn out, but when I listen closely, you're saying some pretty dangerous things. Combined with your cute appearance, I'm actually experiencing quite a culture shock."

"Hehe~, saying I'm cute makes me blush~!"

Subaru sighed at Mimi, who only heard the convenient part and blushed, then turned around. The cave was completely silent, and there was no shocking sign of Petelgeuse's remains starting to regenerate, at least for now. It was quite an anticlimactic situation, but as Mimi said—what could be done here, and at least today's confrontation with the Witch Cultists, was over. And in the best possible way: a complete victory for Subaru's side.

"No, but… do you really think it went that well? It's me, you know? How many times have I sincerely tried my best only to be betrayed? There's no way a story like that… there has to be some kind of pitfall, somewhere…"

"What are you being so paranoid for? Let's go already! We're gonna keep them waiting!"

Ricardo said with an exasperated look at Subaru, who was muttering, unable to fully believe his own success. At his call, Subaru mumbled a reluctant "Oh, right", still holding onto a subtle disbelief, and followed them, leaving the spot. They had to circle the forest and reunite with their comrades placed in various locations. Only after confirming their safety could this battle be concluded as a victory. And then,

"—Isn't this a flag that he's going to revive after pretending to be gone?!"

Subaru ran back, kicking up dust with a slide. He looked up straight ahead; Petelgeuse's crude grave was still there, and there was no sign of anything crawling out from underneath. No revival flag, it seemed.

"Phew, of course not, that's such a third-rate horror."

"What are you doing now?! Get back already or I'll get seriously angry!!"

Ricardo punched Subaru, who couldn't shake his paranoia, and roughly hoisted him onto his shoulder. Carried by the tall beast-kin, Subaru finally left the spot. This time for good. And then—

"Since big bro is so noisy, just in case~"

Mimi launched a magic stone, blasting Petelgeuse's grave to smithereens. This time, without a doubt, Petelgeuse, the Witch Cult Sin Archbishop 'Sloth', was utterly pulverized.

“Well, it seems things went smoothly on your end, then,” Julius said, a smile on his face as he looked up at Subaru, who had picked up Patrasche midway through their journey through the forest and was now mounted on her back.

A soft sigh escaped Julius’s lips, his bangs slightly disheheveled, and his dignified Knight’s uniform bore a few spatters of blood. Watching him wipe the blade of his slender sword, it seemed their side hadn’t achieved a crushing victory through a preemptive strike.

“When your signal went up into the sky, four individuals unfortunately happened to be outside. We had no choice but to simultaneously destroy their hiding place and eliminate the cultists. One might say it’s fortunate I was here. Ferris would have had a bit more trouble.”

He finished speaking, sheathing his cleaned sword. Where he turned his head, as mentioned, lay the bodies of four black-clad figures. They were neatly dispatched, each with a single blow, not marring his elegant demeanor. Each had been pierced in the neck or torso, bleeding out onto the ground. From Subaru’s memory, they should have been quite skilled, subtly proving Julius’s high level of ability.

“So, the Sin Archbishop?”

“Wilhelm lopped off his head, and Ricardo crushed his torso. After that, the little cat sister playfully blew his corpse to smithereens, so he’s definitely gone.”

Even Subaru was surprised that the grave itself had been pulverized, but if Mimi insisted she did it for his sake, it was hard to complain. He still did, though. Incidentally, Mimi, who had been mercilessly scolded by everyone, was now completely sulking, her lips pouting as she curled up on her brother’s back. Her brother, being carried, was completely caught in the crossfire.

As Subaru nodded reflectively, Julius’s gaze shifted behind him—towards Wilhelm. Receiving the meaningful look, Wilhelm quietly affirmed, “There’s no mistake.” Only then did Julius break into a full smile.

“Hmm, I’m relieved. If Sr Wilhelm says so, then it must be true. At the very least, it seems we’ve broken the Witch Cult’s command here.”

“You didn’t trust my answer, did you?! I wasn’t messing around; I checked with my eyes peeled! In fact, I checked two or three times!”

“My apologies. Now that I’ve apologized, let’s move on.”

“Don’t you ‘move on’! That’s what I hate about you!”

Subaru stomped his foot, openly enraged by Julius’s aloof attitude. Julius glanced at Subaru as if he were looking at something mildly amusing, then surveyed his surroundings.

“Ricardo is nowhere to be seen, where is he?”

“That fake kobold is with Ferris. Wilhelm-san said there’s currently no sign of combat in the forest, so we thought it would be faster to split up and meet them.”

At worst, the lack of combat might mean the fighting was already over. In that case, it would be a terrible situation, with the group including the combat-inexperienced Ferris having been annihilated in an instant.

“Well, that’s why I had them gather strong fighters with Ferris. This way, even if she’s specialized in healing and useless at attacking, somehow…”

“Thanks for your concern, darling~”

A breath feathered into his ear from behind, and Subaru’s limbs stiffened in shock. He glanced back with just his eyes, seeing a small, pretty face staring at him up close. Knowing it was a man, his face didn’t turn red; it went pale instead.

“Who benefits from this, really? Stop it, seriously stop. I’m not kidding, if you do that again, I’m going to punch that cute face of yours with my ultimate punch. A Big Bang Attack.”

"Oh, you're just so shy, you're adorable. Don't worry, Subaru-kyun's Ferris came back just for you, okay?"

Disgusted by Ferris's wink and blown kiss, Subaru checked his condition, shoulders slumped. At a glance, he looked no different from when they parted. Unlike Julius, it seemed things had gone perfectly well on their side. Ricardo, who had returned with Ferris, was followed by the other members who had been with Ferris. So, it seemed—

"Everyone's reunited safely… no one failed, right?"

"It seems combat occurred in two locations, including here, but there were no problems. As expected of those trained under Sr Wilhelm. Their fundamental strength is different."

Subaru had heard that the members accompanying Ferris were particularly chosen. Given the rarity of Ferris's "Blue" moniker and his skills, this was expected treatment. But if that was the case, he still didn't quite understand Crusch's intentions in readily sending him to the front lines.

"That's Lady Crusch's sincerity, duh. Don't make me spell it out, idiot."

"Ugh…"

Subaru's thoughts seemed to be entirely transparent, as Ferris completely read his mind and verbally abused him. At any rate,

"Most of the Witch Cult is annihilated, but… the problem is that two hideouts are still missing. We've crushed the head, so optimistically, I'd think they'd retreat, but…"

"They're the Witch Cult. Thinkin' normally, you'd best not."

Ricardo, arms crossed, affirmed Subaru's concern. The surrounding opinions seemed to agree with him, many pulling their chins down heavily, their expressions grim. Indeed, Subaru also considered leaving these uncertain elements unattended to be out of the question. Therefore, he chose a solid approach for them as well.

“We’ll search the forest and hunt down the remaining Witch Cultists. It’s not about a violent massacre, but… at the very least, I think they’re worth capturing.”

“I think there’s a high probability they’ll commit suicide… It’s always been that way.”

Julius calmly stated this, as if to correct Subaru’s overly optimistic view. Subaru gasped, but Julius too had a pained look on his face.

“If we can avoid killing them, it’s certainly best to do so. I agree with prioritizing capture and searching for the remaining cultists. However, I also think it’s about time we report the situation to Lord Roswaal, don’t you agree?”

“…Oh, right. You’re right.”

At that suggestion, Subaru suddenly remembered a reality that had completely slipped his mind. Subaru had deliberately chosen not to rush straight to the mansion and remove Emilia from danger, but instead prioritized the swift elimination of the Witch Cult. A large part of this was to avoid shifting the known status of Petelgeuse’s attack by changing the future too much. Now that he had successfully defeated Petelgeuse himself—

“I… can go back to the mansion, can’t I…?”

As soon as he muttered this, a sudden sense of reality washed over Subaru. Blood began to rush to his face, and a sensation he hadn’t consciously felt in a long time made his whole body intensely hot.

Now, he could return to the mansion with his head held high. He could proudly show his face to Emilia, boast of his achievements, and apologize for his clumsy behavior and various betrayals of trust from a few days ago. He could wholeheartedly apologize to her, whom he had so unconsciously hurt when he was only thinking of himself. And only after reconciling could Subaru truly restart his relationship with Emilia.

“Oh crap, I’m fired up! If that’s the case, I want to go home as soon as possible. Go home! Yankee go home!”

"You're free to get all excited, but prioritize our discussion here, okay? So, what are we actually going to do? About the Witch Cultists, that is."

Seeing Subaru squirming impatiently, Ferris narrowed his eyes mischievously and admonished him. Subaru choked on his words, and Julius, shaking his head resignedly, raised a finger, gathering everyone's attention.

"Let's do this. We'll split into two groups: one heading to Lord Roswaal's mansion, and the other continuing to search the forest for the Witch Cultists. Subaru, as the messenger and, more importantly, a concerned party, should go to the mansion. There's no guarantee they won't be attacked by the Witch Cultists en route. Sr Wilhelm and a few others for escort should be sufficient. The rest of us, led by myself and Ricardo, will explore the forest. How does that sound?"

Julius, having swiftly summarized the plan, looked at Subaru for confirmation at the end. An unnecessary sense of defiance welled up in Subaru, given Julius's expression that practically said, "I've saved you the trouble," but Subaru took a deep breath and suppressed it.

"Let's do that. Everyone, please follow Julius's arrangements."

"Understood."

When Subaru made his request, the old swordsman nodded in response. That set off the agreement of the others present, and the matter was settled. With everyone's will unified and gathered together, Julius suddenly raised his hand, prefacing with, "May I?"

"I am not Julius, but Juli, a wandering mercenary. Just don't get that wrong."

"Nobody remembers that setting anymore!!"

And so, a unified cry from everyone echoed through the forest sky.

"This is bad. My heart's pounding so hard I feel like I'm going to throw up."

Patrasche whinnied softly at Subaru, who leaned against her, muttering weakly. The somewhat displeased attitude was probably because the intelligent ground dragon sensed that Subaru on her back was genuinely feeling nauseous. Yet, the fact that she didn't throw him off showed the trust that had grown between them, at least for now.

"Perhaps the fatigue from riding an unfamiliar ground dragon has settled in now that you're at ease?"

"That might be part of it, but probably not all. …To be honest, the thought of facing Emilia-tan again is just making me explode with fear."

After all, he'd left her on the worst possible terms. For Subaru, that had been over two weeks ago, and the intense emotions of that moment had largely dissipated. But for Emilia, it had only been four days. Unlike Subaru, she likely hadn't experienced any dramatic emotional shifts since then. This had already been confirmed in the previous loop, during the brief time he had spent with her. The same went for the terrible mistake Subaru had made back then.

"I don't know the full details, but I believe you two had a rather… heated parting?"

"You hit the nail on the head, and it's brutal. That's why it's so awkward to face her. Ugh… my stomach, my stomach hurts. And my chest hurts from lovesickness."

"You seem to be suffering more than when you faced the White Whale. I understand the feeling."

Wilhelm smiled at Subaru, who was trying to distract himself with jokes. Surprised by his gentle demeanor, Subaru exhaled a "Huh," impressed.

"Wilhelm-san, did you also feel heavy-hearted when you fought with your wife?"

"Of course. In my case, if I angered my wife, I physically couldn't win. I was often forcibly cut down by her sword."

"A Sword Saint is really something else, huh?!"

"Afterward, I would hold her tightly in my arms until her anger melted away."

"Man, you really go for the intense wife stories, don't you?!"

Fired up by the tales of his resurrected wife, Wilhelm looked rather refreshed. Envying his uninhibited attitude, Subaru slapped his own cheek hard. His senior was going out of his way to try and soften his hardened heart. To disregard that sentiment would be a failure as a man.

"You're not seriously going to keep pushing the 'wife stories' in an innocent way, are you?"

"I'm not sure what you're implying. —Oh."

Wilhelm responded with an unconcerned expression to Subaru's timid question. Then, suddenly, his eyes narrowed as he looked ahead. Following his gaze, Subaru realized they had unknowingly entered a wider, main road—the one leading to the mansion and the village—and were now close enough to see the village itself. Wilhelm's gaze was fixed on the slightly visible entrance of the village.

"That's the closest village to the mansion. Oh, Wilhelm-san knows that, right?"

"Yes. I visited the mansion once with Ferris. We passed through the village too, but… it's strange."

Wilhelm, still with narrowed eyes, began to exude a subtle tension. Stirred by his ominous demeanor, Subaru felt a bad premonition welling up from the pit of his stomach.

"Wh-What's wrong? Is something weird…?"

"An unusually large number of dragon carriages are stopped in the village. —Subaru-dono, please wait here. I will go and check."

With that, Wilhelm gave similar instructions to his accompanying subordinates. Then, lightly kicking off the ground, he sprang forward with wind-like speed, seemingly gliding into the village in an instant.

Approximately three minutes passed after Wilhelm rushed inside. Subaru gnashed his teeth, his anxiety mounting, wondering if the anomaly he had avoided had returned. What flashed through his mind were the gruesome deaths of the villagers he had seen twice before, and Petra's emotionless face was clearly etched in his memory. He never wanted to see that again. And yet, he had tried so hard to avoid it, so why—?

"Subaru-dono,"

A knight suddenly called out to Subaru, who had closed his eyes and was on the verge of tears. He instinctively turned his head, and the knight pointed towards the village, indicating something. Following his finger, Subaru saw Wilhelm waving at the village entrance. There was no trace of the previous tension in his posture, and rushing over, Subaru finally understood why.

Inside the village, numerous dragon carriages, over twenty of them, were lined up. Naturally, the ground dragons pulling them and their drivers were also in the village. Where this unfamiliar fleet of dragon carriages had come from, the reason was—

"Oh, right. That's my insurance, isn't it?"

"It appears so. You arranged this when you left the royal capital?"

"Yeah. I asked Anastasia and Russell-san for a little favor."

Subaru gave a wry smile at the impressive sight of the lined-up dragon carriages, then looked towards the center of the village. There, a scene unfolded where what appeared to be the representative of the dragon carriage fleet and the village representative were arguing. They were likely at odds because of a miscommunication between the two parties. If the arrival of the dragon carriage fleet was as Subaru had intended, it would take some time to smooth things over, so now was precisely the time for mediation.

“Hold on, hold on! Okay, listen up! I know you both have a lot to say, but first, hear me out!”

Subaru dismounted Patrasche, rushed over, and stepped between the two parties, who were on the verge of a heated argument. The two arguing individuals were a man and a woman. Subaru first looked up at the man, who seemed more agitated. Seeing the man, Subaru involuntarily let out a small “Ah.” It was a familiar face. He was the person who had introduced Otto to Subaru during the very first loop, and—

“Your name is, uh, I forgot… but you’re a merchant who came here on an announcement from the royal capital’s guild, right?”

“Yeah, but… who are you? You don’t look like a merchant.”

“I’m more on the employer’s side. There’s just a slight mix-up in communication. I’ll smooth things over with both the higher-ups and the people here.”

If the letter he had entrusted had been delivered to the mansion, this confusion shouldn’t have happened, but it probably hadn’t reached Emilia yet. If she knew the situation, she would have made the best judgment.

“Well, anyway, stop please.”

Subaru gestured for the man, who was about to press further, to stop, and subtly scanned his surroundings. He wondered if Otto, the merchant he had many dealings with, might be among them, but he didn’t see him after a quick glance, which left him a little disappointed. Then, he turned and faced the woman. She seemed to be standing as the village representative, with reddish-brown hair softly grown out and slightly upturned eyes—.

“Just listen to me for now. For the sake of this unforgettable, friendly sanpaku-eyed person—who are you?”

At Subaru's words, the woman in front of him furrowed her brow as if to say she didn't understand. However her reaction was what Subaru couldn't comprehend. Because,

"I know everyone in this village by face, and I'm confident they know me. But I don't know your face… so who are you, standing here acting like a representative?"

Driven by his impatience, Subaru grilled her with rapid-fire questions. That was Subaru's first and most critical slip-up since he had been maintaining his vigilance up until this very moment of this very day.

—Suddenly, as if exploding, the woman's shadow in front of him rapidly swelled.

"—What?!"

Subaru was speechless at the familiar sight, and by the time he realized it, it was too late. The swelling shadow rose into the sky, swirling and spreading, transforming into countless black demonic hands like unraveling threads—and attacked everyone in sight.

The assembled merchants, the villagers observing from a distance, Wilhelm and his subordinates who had rushed forward sensing Subaru's anomaly, and Subaru himself, the only one who had noticed the phenomenon happening before his eyes but had frozen, missing his chance.

Black arms wrapped around everyone's necks, completely immobilizing them.

"This can't be… but this is…"

Gasping under the intense pressure on his throat, Subaru's forehead drenched in sweat as shock permeated his entire body. This phenomenon, this event, was undeniably that of the one he had supposedly killed—.

"Ah—my brain, it trembles."

Subaru heard a woman murmur this from in front of him.

Subaru’s eyes widened in horror as he stared at the person before him. At a distance where he could almost reach out and touch her, the woman, with her face cast down, put a raised finger into her mouth and violently bit off its tip. Blood dripped, and as everyone immobilized by her actions held their breath in the strange, silent world, the woman lifted her face.

Her mouth was stained with blood, adorned with a gruesome, mad laugh—.

“I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult…”

Heheheh, heheheh.

“—Representing ‘Sloth’—”

Mad laughter, roaring laughter, mocking laughter, echoed—

“—Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti!!”

He heard the woman loudly proclaim the name of the man he had killed.

Heheheheheheh, the mad laughter echoed.

Heheheh, heheheh.

—Heheheh, heheheh, heheheheheheheheh.

Chapter 65:
The Consequence of Sloth

1

Hearing the echoing laughter, Subaru desperately fought back the dread rising in his throat, his sluggish thoughts suddenly kicking into overdrive.

—It makes no sense. Why is the woman in front of me claiming to be Petelgeuse? I killed him, blew his body to smithereens. He should be dead. Were there more of them? That's ridiculous. The White Whale was enough of that absurdity!

"You… what did you…!"

"Oh my, you seem quite surprised, don't you? To elicit such a reaction, it makes my return all the more worthwhile!"

Snapping her fingers, the woman pointed at Subaru with the hand opposite the one she'd presumably crushed. A crazed grin plastered on her face, she opened her mouth wide enough to show the back of her throat and licked her lips.

A shiver ran down Subaru's spine at that laugh, and he clearly saw the commonalities with the madman he'd killed. The way she spoke, the way she laughed, and above all, the presence of the 'Unseen Hand'—

"Wait… you only had seven arms… didn't you…?"

As far as Subaru knew, Petelgeuse's black demon hands had totaled seven.

At least, Subaru hadn't seen more than that, and Petelgeuse, who should have gone all out against Puck, hadn't displayed more arms than that number either.

However now, the number of arms he saw easily exceeded seven, and the extended limbs were already close to twenty.

“You… you can see the ‘Unseen Hand’, can’t you?”

Narrowing her eyes, the woman’s voice was sharp with menace at Subaru’s question.

Even in the previous iterations, Petelgeuse had harbored strong hostility towards anyone who could see his demon hands. That didn’t seem to have changed, even now that she’d become someone else, and she harbored more hatred than ever for the content of Subaru’s words, saying,

“My love’s answer, given only to me… why can you… see it?! Oh, favored believer, surely you aren’t…!”

“Get away from Subaru-dono—you.”

A sharp voice suddenly cut in as the woman’s lips trembled.

Beyond the woman, whose bloodshot eyes glared in that direction, the one who spoke was—

“Wilhelm-sa—n…”

It was Wilhelm, his neck clutched by a black witch hand, his feet slightly lifted from the ground.

His movements sealed by an invisible arm, the old swordsman struggled to free himself, but the fierce intensity in his eyes showed no signs of fading.

If there were even a moment when the ‘Unseen Hand’ released its grip, the old man would, in a flash, cleave the woman’s neck and cast Petelgeuse back into hell once more.

Before the oppressive killing intent emanating from the Sword Demon, the woman—though Subaru resisted calling her Petelgeuse, Petelgeuse distorted her otherwise plain yet refined girlish face into an ugly grimace, saying,

“Ah, you seem to be a diligent one. I understand. I understand, don't you think it's understandable?! It's wonderful, beautiful, truly noble, a steadfast spirituality is evident! The proof that what one believes in! What one pushes through! What is firm is established within oneself! It's… really, really good!"

"Stop spouting nonsense, you lunatic."

"Lunatic! That's a truly correct assessment! Yes, I am mad with love! With love, reverential love, bequeathed love, compassionate love, grateful love, craving love, benevolent love, respectful love, family love, ultimate love, selfish love, pure love, doting love, affectionate love, intimate love, trusting love, deep love, humane love, carnal love, regretful love, earnest love, exclusive love, hatred love, loyal love, favored love, poor love, biased love, blind love, fraternal love, pitiful love, love, love, love, loveai ai ai ai ai ai iiiiiiiiihh!!"

Her eyes wide, her tongue extended, Petelgeuse arched her back and tore at her head.

Wilhelm looked at her madness with eyes that saw something abominable. Looking around, the other captives, their faces contorted in agony, similarly showed disgust at the madman's distorted display of love.

While in the center of this maelstrom of negative emotions, Petelgeuse repeated her twitching smile several times, then slowly scanned her surroundings, saying,

"Ah, it's lonely not to hear the praise that should be heard… Perhaps I should exert myself a little!"

"No, stop…!"

Petelgeuse lightly raised both hands, making an unreasonable demand of her unresponsive surroundings. Subaru, imagining the worst of what the madman intended, called out to stop her, but Petelgeuse smiled much faster than his voice could be uttered, and,

"Now— Be 'Slothful'."

In a different way than his worst imaginings, 'Sloth' raged through the village like a disaster.

Until then, all those whose movements had been sealed shared one commonality: though their faces were contorted in agony, they suppressed their voices. This was likely due to a self-preservation instinct to not draw Petelgeuse's attention, but a larger reason was simply that their throats were being compressed.

The numerous extended arms gripped the throats of everyone they restrained, lifting their bodies as if stretching them slightly. Their breathing wasn't stopped, but it was just short of allowing them a full breath to counterattack—such was the malicious act.

Now, with Petelgeuse's single word, that restraint was suddenly released, and—

"—Aaaahhhhhh!!"

Within the village, the overlapping screams of those released from the pressure on their throats reverberated.

2

There was a man, drooling and banging his head against the ground.

There was a woman, eyes rolled back, foaming at the mouth from her body's disobedience.

There was a merchant, covered in blood from self-mutilation, exceeding even Petelgeuse's self-inflicted wounds.

There was a knight, his magical power rampaging, bleeding from every orifice of his body.

The village echoed with screams and shouts, a horrifying scene of apparent madness.

"This is…"

It was eerily similar to a phenomenon that had occurred just a few hours earlier, during the battle with the White Whale.

The phenomenon on the foggy road, when those who heard the White Whale's roar lost their minds, collapsing and unable to move.

However this situation, triggered by Petelgeuse's single word, was far more devastating than that.

"You resisted more than I expected."

Petelgeuse tilted her head slightly from side to side as she spoke, gazing with amusement at the people still screaming, their throats seemingly about to burst.

Her demeanor, as if she might hum a tune in the face of such devastation, left Subaru no doubt that she was indeed the same being as that man. But,

"Why are you… here…?"

"We were in the middle of our conversation, and I hadn't yet performed the ordeal, that was my reason for coming here. — Although, thanks to you all crushing most of my fingers, only this frail body remains."

Speaking in a syrupy tone, Petelgeuse sensuously ran her hand over the contours of her own body. Subaru felt nothing but disgust at her suggestive gestures and glared at the witch hand still gripping him, trying desperately to pull away. But,

"Damn it, I can see it… but I can't interfere!"

"As expected, you can see the 'Unseen Hand', can't you? It's extremely unpleasant, but if you are 'Pride', then it makes sense…"

The madwoman observed Subaru struggling, leaning closer with interest.

Her judgment was that it wouldn't be dangerous to approach Subaru, who was floating and unable to move. And indeed, her judgment was correct. Subaru could do nothing.

—Subaru,

"Get her—Patrasche!!"

"What—"

The moment she spoke, reacting to Subaru's cry, the ground dragon lowered its body and violently slammed into Petelgeuse from the side.

The 'Unseen Hands' had extended to the necks of all survivors present, but they were solely focused on restraining humans. They hadn't interfered with the ground dragons left behind near the village entrance. Subaru, whose restraint was looser, had noticed Patrasche circling around Petelgeuse and bought some time.

"Guh—!"

Even with the body transfer, the new body was as slender as it appeared.

The charge of a ground dragon, weighing hundreds of kilograms, possessed more than enough force to easily send the diminutive figure flying.

Petelgeuse, flung through the air, bounced off the ground and slammed into a nearby house. Dust rose, and as her form vanished, leaving behind a cry of pain—the 'Unseen Hand's' restraint released Subaru.

"It's off! Now… Wilhelm-san!"

"—I'm alright, somehow. But this…"

Rubbing the bruising on his neck painfully, Wilhelm, who seemed to have escaped the effects of the mental contamination, looked up at his surroundings. The 'Unseen Hand's' influence was temporarily lifted, but the mental contamination affecting the others had not ceased.

Even now, the suffering people continued to bleed from self-mutilation, nightmares, and fatally worsening physical conditions, screaming ceaselessly. If this was of the same quality as the mist emitted by the White Whale, then—

"Only Ferris can cure this?!"

"Or perhaps if we strike down the source, it's the kind of curse that will cease."

As despair caused Subaru to clutch his head, Patrasche, who had saved him from his predicament, nudged his nose against him as if to say, "Calm down", pressing against his shoulder.

Taking a deep breath at the ground dragon's gesture, Subaru looked at Wilhelm's profile as he drew his treasured sword.

"Is there a chance we can defeat her? Or in the worst case, should we retreat and call Ferris…?"

"It would certainly be more reliable if Ferris were here. However, can we afford to leave that being here and retreat? If we return to the forest, there's no doubt that she will next head for Lord Roswaal's mansion. —Lady Emilia would be in danger."

"—!"

That, above all, had to be avoided.

He didn't know why. He didn't know, but Subaru was certain that Emilia and Petelgeuse must not meet.

If she and that lunatic met, it would undoubtedly lead to something terrible for Subaru.

That, he absolutely could not accept.

"It seems your resolve is firm, Subaru-dono. Please stand back and observe."

"His method is to bind us with invisible hands. No matter how strong Wilhelm-san is, those hands…"

"If one knows there are invisible arms, there are ways to fight them. More importantly, Subaru-dono, are you certain it is 'Sloth'? I certainly have the memory of having slain 'Sloth'."

“…I don’t understand the principle, but I think that’s certainly true. In the worst case, like the White Whale, this could be the main body and the previous one a fake. And I just didn’t know that.”

“I am not doubting you.”

Wilhelm gave a wry smile at Subaru’s somewhat apologetic words. At the elder’s magnanimous attitude, Subaru felt ashamed of his own small-mindedness showing even in such a situation.

However, before he could respond,

“—Ah, it hurts. It hurts. It hurts. My brain trembles. It trembles.”

An arm stretched from the wall of the collapsed house, and Petelgeuse, her upper body stained with blood and dirt, peered out. Deep lacerations were visible on the upper half of her body as she crawled out sluggishly, clearly indicating the significant damage from Patrasche’s unprotected charge.

Yet, despite that, there was no sign of fading vitality in her glittering eyes; rather, it emphasized her vengeful madness.

“Good. The ground dragon is good, after all. Friendly to humans, loyal, and above all, wise and diligent! Wonderful! Adorable! Diligent! Yes, being diligent! It is a virtue to be praised above all else! If being slothful is the most shameful sin, then being diligent is the most praiseworthy virtue! If sloth is faithlessness unworthy of devotion, then diligence is the act of a believer worthy of favor!”

Swinging her arms, shaking her head, stamping her feet, extending her tongue, and drooling, Petelgeuse lavished praises on Patrasche with a face full of insane laughter.

As for Patrasche, being praised in such an odd manner seemed to be unacceptable even across species, and with the most difficult-to-read reptilian expression, she showed her utmost disgust, leaning towards Subaru as if choosing him. A cute and reliable companion.

“My hardworking partner isn’t happy about it, you perverted… Ah wait, are you a perverted woman now? I get that there’s a certain demand for gender-bending stuff, but who benefits from your gender-bend, you piece of trash?”

“Gender-bend? I don’t understand what you’re saying, but whether the recipient is pleased or not by the lavish praise has no bearing on me! I thought it was wonderful. The emotion welling up in my chest, to be slothful enough not to express it in words is something I can never forgive. I cannot forgive, I must not forgive, it must not happen. Therefore, I will use every word, love, love, love love love love love!”

“An impossible conversational partner is troublesome in any age. — There is no longer any meaning or purpose in words. Wilhelm van Astrea, here I come!”

Lowering his stance, Wilhelm declared his name and moved with the speed of wind.

The Sword Demon’s body dashed across the ground in a single bound, attempting to leap before the slowly moving Petelgeuse. However Petelgeuse, as expected, seemed wary of that first strike.

“Oh, scary. You are also diligent. Therefore, I shall do this.”

‘Unseen Hands’ erupted from the ground, forming a wall that completely covered Petelgeuse’s front. If he charged straight in, his entire body would be ensnared by the unavoidable witch hands.

Subaru, knowing the unseen threat that Wilhelm couldn’t perceive, shouted at the top of his lungs,

“Arms in front! Fall back—!”

“—Understood.”

Wilhelm abruptly halted his momentum with his right foot and dodged the wall looming before him. Leaping sideways, the old swordsman spun around, raising his drawn sword vertically, and—

“Tch—!”

The ground, struck by a diagonal slash, split open, and a rain of dirt poured down on Petelgeuse.

If it had been a strike powerful enough to shatter the very earth, it might have held meaning as an attack, but—

“That’s just harassment…”

“I don’t understand the action, but surely you’re not being slothful, are you?”

Petelgeuse seemed to share a similar impression of Wilhelm’s actions, sighing and overlaying Subaru’s hoarse voice. Without replying to her disappointed tone, Wilhelm continued to move across the ground, his swinging sword continuously showering dirt.

With a casual flick of her arm at the unpleasant gesture, Petelgeuse muttered, “That’s enough” and,

“Even if diligent, an incompetent worker is as repulsive as sloth. If you still won’t cease your futile struggle, then so be it—before the favor granted to me, be torn apart and vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish vanish!”

Shadows exploded, and Petelgeuse’s ‘Unseen Hands’ rushed towards Wilhelm.

Their number exceeded thirty, incomparable to what Subaru knew of Petelgeuse’s. Subaru, who had been trying to verbally convey the approaching demon hands, found his throat choked, the situation unchanged even if he managed to convey one or two.

That fatal delay directly led to Wilhelm’s life—

“Wilhelm-sa—”

The ‘Unseen Hands’, which mercilessly destroyed whatever they touched, assailed the entire body of the old swordsman, who could not perceive their existence. Subaru lamented his powerlessness, hallucinating the sight of the approaching fingertips ravaging the old body. But,

“I told you.”

He ducked under the outstretched fingertips, sidestepped as he spun, dodging the relentless demon hands one after another. Slipping through the gaps between the arms, the old man, having evaded every incoming threat, wore a defiant smile on his cheek, saying,

“If one knows there are invisible arms, there are ways to deal with them.”

The Sword Demon had indeed proven the truth of his earlier words right before their eyes.

“Impossible. Impossible, impossible, impossible, impossiblepossiblepossiblepossiblepossiblepossible—”

It was Petelgeuse whose throat trembled at Wilhelm’s exceptionally curt words.

The madwoman scowled at the fact that her trump card had been easily evaded, biting into her molars with the fingers of her raised right hand one after another, her bloodshot eyes darting in every direction,

“Unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable… Even you, can you really see my ‘Unseen Hand’?”

“I can see it. —Once the trick is known, it’s nothing more than a child’s parlor game.”

Wilhelm declared with an air of boredom, and with the tip of his spinning blade, he once again scraped the earth.

The falling rain of dirt struck the still trembling Petelgeuse, serving as the ultimate provocation to the madwoman.

However, through the repetition of that action, Subaru realized Wilhelm’s intention. And he could only marvel at the Sword Demon’s terrifying tactical insight.

The reason Wilhelm had been raining down dirt wasn’t simply to provoke Petelgeuse’s short temper through harassment.

By raining down dirt, Wilhelm had created a situation where he could visually ascertain the trajectories of the ‘Unseen Hands’ as they manifested.

The ‘Unseen Hand’, which physically interferes with the human body, is a mysterious phenomenon that simply cannot be seen. He likely interfered with mana to deploy such a spell, but Wilhelm had turned that against her.

That is, he judged that the arms would pass through the gaps in the dirt rain and diligently evaded those points. Nevertheless, the onslaught created by over thirty arms was not easily avoided, and it was indeed a feat of divine skill, thanks to Wilhelm’s superhuman reflexes.

“Now, you’ve had enough surprise. —Are you ready to be cut down?”

Pointing the tip of his blade, Wilhelm threatened in a low voice.

The chilling killing intent contained within it sent a shiver down Subaru’s spine, even though the blade wasn’t aimed directly at him. Of course, Petelgeuse, who was directly exposed to that killing intent, must have felt even less alive.

In fact, Petelgeuse, who had been in a crazed state, seemingly losing the boundary of reality, now seemed to regain a sense of it as she panicked,

“Wait, wait. This shouldn’t be happening, this situation, this development, this predicament, it shouldn’t befall me! I was diligent! I refused to be slothful, and to repay love! For love! For affection! To repay favor as a believer, I was more devout and diligent than anyone! And for that, I…”

“You are loved because you did this. You are loved if you do only this much. My ears rot from the superficiality of the ‘love’ you speak of.”

Wilhelm dismissed Petelgeuse’s pathetic screams as if he had heard utterly repulsive delusions. In his eyes, a fierce sword aura, separate from killing intent, burned, and,

“Love is not something to be forced, begged for, or stolen. What you speak of is not love, but mere self-satisfaction.”

“—What do you—”

Ignoring Petelgeuse as she tried to speak, Wilhelm made a final, grand sweep to churn the earth. He showered Petelgeuse with the falling rain. However within that dark rain, Petelgeuse carved a delighted, insane laugh,

“Then, how about this?!”

She screamed, extending both hands towards them.

In response to her arms, ‘Unseen Hands’ slithered across the ground, lifting the bodies of the knights who had been lying there, suffering from mental contamination.

These sturdy men were all survivors of the subjugation force, clad in the same equipment as Wilhelm, comrades bound by strong ties —she had set her sights on them.

Her eyes gleaming with madness, Petelgeuse opened her throat as if to applaud her own actions,

“Now, how is this?! Your friends, colleagues, subordinates, comrades, allies—held hostage like this, what kind of pathetic spectacle will you make—”

“—Don’t underestimate knights, you scoundrel.”

Leaving her mutterings behind, Wilhelm’s body shot forward like a bullet.

His stomping foot gouged the earth, and in the blink of an eye, the old body flew, leaving even time behind. Petelgeuse, with a stunned expression, instinctively pulled demon hands from the shadows—but it was too late.

A deeply embedded blade pierced her lower abdomen and protruded from her back, and the two, face-to-face at close range, exchanged expressions.

One was plastered with dazed shock, the other's eyes burned with a too-quiet rage,

"When one grasps a sword to protect, and becomes a knight, one does not regret one's own life. Stop insulting my—our comrades, enough is enough."

"Ah… how, could…"

A trembling hand reached for her own wound, touching the blood flowing along the sword and widening her eyes. Then Petelgeuse turned her blood-soaked hand towards Wilhelm's face, and the old swordsman did not dodge. The Sword Demon, who had cut down countless lives, knew that she no longer had the strength to do anything.

"You… ah… truly, truly, truly, diligently…"

As if adoring him, Petelgeuse's fingertips patted Wilhelm's cheek.

The old swordsman allowed the madwoman to do as she pleased, slowly drawing the treasured sword's blade from her abdomen. A large amount of blood spilled, and Petelgeuse, losing strength, collapsed to her knees.

"Do you require assistance?"

"—No need. Ah, the sensation of life draining away is wonderful. Blood flowing out. The source of life pouring away. The diligent things that have supported my body until now, lost, gone, vanished, vanished, vanishedvanishedvanishedvanishedvanished."

Collapsing sideways, Petelgeuse watched with amusement as her blood stained the ground even deeper. With joyful, joyful, joyful trembling lips, her eyes lost focus, and eventually, the light died.

Witnessing this, Subaru let out a breathless "Ha." Before a battle that made him completely forget even to breathe, it was as if his body had forgotten it could move.

“Is it… over…?”

“I have stopped her breath. And those around, it seems too.”

To Subaru’s hesitant question, Wilhelm, wiping his sword blade, replied softly.

Looking around at his words, indeed, the people who had been suffering from mental contamination earlier had calmed down, and despite their wounds, it seemed no one had died.

Even those who were last used as hostages, though barely, were still alive.

It seemed that this time, truly, it was alright to feel relieved.

“What was that all about, in the end, this thing?”

Subaru stamped his solidified feet on the spot to loosen them, and after confirming they obeyed, he turned towards Wilhelm.

In front of the standing old swordsman, the fallen Petelgeuse No. 2 was completely silent, and her dead form, if judged by appearance alone, seemed like nothing more than the corpse of a completely unrelated woman.

However, in reality, this woman had been Petelgeuse just moments ago.

That madness and the authority of the ‘Unseen Hand’. Those couldn’t have been illusions or anything of the sort; a convincing conclusion had to be reached for the phenomena that had occurred, even if forced.

“Like the White Whale, were there multiple ‘Sloths’? If so, it would make sense of the stories of them causing havoc in various parts of the world…”

“I have never heard of multiple Sin Archbishops carrying the same ‘Sin’, but these are individuals whose true nature is opaque. We cannot definitively say it is impossible.”

Bringing up the White Whale caused Wilhelm's tone to drop slightly.

Indeed, if the current hypothesis were true, it would be a grave situation. The possibility of multiple beings like Petelgeuse existing was unthinkable.

“Worst case, this woman isn't the main body either… like the White Whale, could there be another main body? If we don't even know if one has appeared this time, how can we deal with it?”

“I am also concerned about the other members exploring the forest. We were able to deal with the invisible arms thanks to Subaru-dono being here, but they have nothing.”

“—! That's right! Then it's bad, we need to go back and link up immediately!”

There were two remaining groups of Witch Cult remnants in the forest. He didn't want to think that another Petelgeuse might be in either of them, but the possibility couldn't be denied.

Subaru turned around, reaching for Patrasche's reins right beside him, intending to return immediately. But,

“Anyway, we need to go back right away… Patrasche?”

Subaru reached out his arm to jump on, but Patrasche didn't accept him. Instead, the ground dragon slightly lowered its head and snarled ferociously, glaring at Subaru.

Her posture was as if she were looking at an enemy—

“No way… possession…?!”

Realizing that possibility, Subaru recoiled in terror.

If that were true, Petelgeuse might be able to possess even a different species like Patrasche—

“Wilhelm-san! This is bad, that bastard, Patrasche—”

“Bluh.”

A gushing, suffocating smell of blood splattered across his face as he turned around.

“Huh?”

Stunned, Subaru received the lukewarm substance on his face, his mouth agape, blinking.

In front of him, the old swordsman who should have been standing where he turned was gone. No, he wasn’t gone, but he wasn’t in the form Subaru knew.

Wilhelm’s tall, well-trained body, perhaps ten centimeters taller than Subaru. Above those broad shoulders, there was no neck.

A twisted, ugly cross-section was exposed, and a rising black mist was seen writhing and dancing beyond the blood-gushing torso.

“Eh… heh… Unseen, Hand…?”

He stared blankly straight ahead.

Before him was Patrasche, whom he had assumed was possessed by Petelgeuse.

Her neck, too, was violently torn off right before Subaru’s eyes, and flung away with a heavy thud. Her massive body crashed to the ground, a not-insignificant tremor running through his feet.

At the same time, Wilhelm’s torso also lay on its side behind him. Before and behind Subaru, the lives of his reliable comrades, with whom he had just shared victory, were lost.

“This… huh? What… what…?”

His thoughts turned completely white, unable to form anything coherent.

He turned and looked down at the fallen Wilhelm. His head was nowhere to be found. There was no way to stop the gushing blood, nothing to do but watch as red stained the earth.

Suddenly, he noticed he had pulled the treasured sword from Wilhelm’s corpse.

He extended his arm as far as it could go with the long blade, aligning the tip with his own throat.

With difficulty, he finally aimed, and Subaru tilted his head.

“What… happened…?”

He understood nothing.

Understanding nothing, he pulled his extended arm sharply towards him.

A hot sensation rushed through his throat, and all strength drained from his body.

He understood nothing. He couldn’t comprehend. But there was one thing he did understand.

—Ah, he was dead.

Chapter 66:
—Fight

1

A swaying, drifting sensation, as if floating in water, permeated my entire body.

It was a dark world, endlessly dark.

No light source could be found; I couldn’t tell up from down, left from right. I felt no contact with anything, and before that, I couldn’t even feel my own limbs or the workings of my sensory organs like eyes and ears.

Even my consciousness was hazy, my thoughts unsettled.

Where was this? What was I? Why was I like this? Only aimless thoughts drifted and overflowed.

“—doing”

Suddenly, someone’s voice reached me from within the pitch black.

It wasn’t a sound that reached my trembling, earless eardrums, but consciousness itself. Hearing it, which directly shook my thoughts, I turned my awareness without finding the owner of the voice.

“—loving”

It was terribly fleeting, a sound that squeezed the listener’s heart with sorrow.

Thus, my own heart, hearing it, was painfully, agonizingly squeezed. But this sensation was accompanied by a somehow nostalgic sense of relief, incessantly evoking a beloved feeling that brought tears to the verge.

If I had fingers, I’d reach out to the voice’s owner.

If I had a mouth, I'd call the voice's owner's name.

If I had arms, I'd embrace the voice's owner.

If I had legs, I'd run to the voice's owner's side.

If I had a body, I'd never have to let go of the voice's owner.

Now, in this place, none of that was allowed to me, and it was terribly sad, irritating, painful, frustrating, and utterly regrettable.

"—I love you"

The same feeling.

Clearly, words took shape, vibrating as if striking my emotions, and a non-existent mouth cried out an explosion of feeling aloud.

The same feeling. No, more than that. No matter how much warmth was given, piled up, it surely wouldn't measure up to this burning desire for the other person.

Even if the other person felt the same, mine was still greater.

Love accelerated as if in a competition, yet the only one missing was the person to whom it should be delivered.

Swelling emotions, overflowing affection, brought forth unstoppable sins.

—The sloth that couldn't wipe away tears of sorrow.

—The lust that yearned to melt and become one.

—The gluttony that desired to devour and seize everything.

—The greed that wanted to love, seek, desire, and obtain everything.

—The wrath against an unreasonable world that wouldn't allow it.

—The pride that scorned everything but her.

The space, stained black, was being painted over with immense love.

My heart trembled. My soul was screaming. My very existence, having lost its form, yearned for it.

To give up everything, to expose everything, to vanish into this void. If only I could do that—

“Really?”

Suddenly, the call changed its tone, unsettling my heart.

Words that questioned my resolve. Words that asked if I affirmed shaping my current emotions into reality.

Of course, it’s obvious, what is there to hesitate about? So I thought.

However something was different. Something was catching. Something stopped my heart.

There was bewilderment. There was hesitation. Confusion. What on earth was this so—

“Can you end it?”

—I can’t possibly end it.

To the question, an answer came instantly, for some reason.

I didn’t know the beginning or the end, what I had seen or what I had sought, anything at all.

Full of unknowns, with nothing but unknowns, my emotions refused to accept remaining in ignorance.

I can’t end it. I can’t possibly end it. It hasn’t ended. I won’t let it end.

“What do you want to do?”

I want to do something about it. I will do something about it. Doing something about it is what I—

“It’s what I’m supposed to do.”

A voice escaped.

I realized my feet were on the ground. I had feeling in my limbs, and I clearly understood myself.

I still didn’t know what I had left behind. But I knew I had to run somewhere, that there was a place I had to rush to.

“You can’t meet me yet.”

“I know.”

I understood nothing. However I understood that.

Suppressing the urge to reach out, I turned my back on the voice and started running.

If I stopped for a moment, the lingering regrets would surely be too overwhelming to start running again. So I wouldn’t look back. I wouldn’t even turn my attention. Leaving it behind, abandoning it, moving further and further away—but one day, I would surely take that hand.

“—I love you”

The voice faded, and the world collapsed as if peeling away.

In front of me, in the pitch-black world, a single white light, the end of the darkness, became visible.

I ran, ran, ran, getting closer. When I reached it—

“Subaru.”

Finally, Natsuki Subaru felt his name called by that beloved voice, and he—

"—Bro?"

"Huh?"

Suddenly, my name was called, and at the same time, I felt a hand shaking my shoulder.

Pushed by a rough, firm palm, Subaru's consciousness returned to reality.

—The instant he grasped that, an immeasurable shiver ran through Subaru's entire body.

In just a few blinks, Subaru understood everything.

The blank space that had just appeared in his continuous consciousness—it was the disappearance and rebirth of his existence after experiencing death, something he'd gone through countless times before.

And then,

"No… way…!"

After overcoming such immense hardship, such dire straits, he had lost his life once again.

As a result, Subaru had lost every step of the process he'd gained on his way to that place—

"What's up, bro? You just completely zoned out, seriously."

Looking back in a hurry, Ricardo's dog-like face, with a suspicious look, was right there. A beastly breath wafted over his face, and Subaru instinctively,

"Frandass?!"

"Ow! What're you doing?!"

He unintentionally slapped Ricardo's snout away with his arm, and Ricardo, suddenly subjected to such rough treatment, blinked in confusion. At Ricardo's cry, surrounding gazes also turned their way, wondering what was happening.

Within that storm of gazes—Julius was there. Ferris was there. Mimi and Tivey, members of the subjugation force were also present, and above all,

"Are you feeling the fatigue, Subaru-dono?"

There was Wilhelm, speaking those words, showing concern for his condition.

"Ah…"

A breath escaped, like air letting out, and Subaru gently relaxed his shoulders, slumping, only now realizing he had been sitting on the ground.

Feeling the cold earth on his backside, Subaru lightly clenched the fist resting on the ground, confirming the rough sensation of grass and dirt within it, then murmured,

"The save point… it was updated…"

A narrow escape from death— It was a stroke of luck, not even a laughing matter, that brought him relief.

3

As far as I could tell from listening to everyone around me, Subaru had apparently returned right in the middle of a Witch Cult counter-strategy meeting, after the battle with the White Whale and his reunion with Julius.

Apparently, while I was giving a brief lecture on "Witch Cult hunting, even a monkey could do it," from their perspective, I suddenly seemed to have zoned out, my consciousness tripping to another world. In reality, given that I had regressed at that point, their interpretation wasn't wrong, but anyway.

"It was Petelgeuse… right? No, not 'right'."

Subaru wore a complex expression, caught between the good fortune of being able to return to this scene and the misfortune of being forced to 'Return by Death' in the first place.

'Return by Death' was nothing but a blunder, but the most important thing was that he had returned to his current location. At worst, there was a significant chance that he would have returned to the perpetually wounded face of the struggling greengrocer.

"Come to think of it, I remember going back to the old man's place the first time too… What is this? What kind of connection is this? Does this world have some kind of save point function attached to old men?"

There are all sorts of save points: public phones, mysterious crystals, old typewriters, or even confessing to a priest at a church.

"When you think about it, an old man as a save point is a fresh concept… Ricardo's similar in type too, so is that the connection for 'here and now'?"

"What's wrong with you, bro, staring at my face so much? Something wrong?"

"Nothing."

Subaru quickly averted his face, letting out a sigh to keep Ricardo from seeing his current expression.

He sighed, let his thoughts drift in a random direction to calm himself, just enough to barely disguise the uncontrollable trembling of his fist.

It wasn't that the fear of death, or the relief of being able to regain his life after falling, didn't contribute to the trembling.

They did, but what truly shook Subaru to his core was a different emotion—no, a passion.

The unquenchable, furious passion he held for his hateful, worst enemy, Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti of 'Sloth'.

That was the fundamental reason why Subaru was now burning with an uncontrollable tremor from within.

“Possession—that’s what I should call it. Abandoning his original body and moving into another, and that’s how he… Wilhelm-san and Patrasche.”

Subaru had witnessed, right before his eyes, the brutal twisting off of two heads—one human, one animal. Immediately after, his thoughts were hazy about what he was thinking, but he knew the outcome of the actions he took with that hazy mind.

He pulled the sacred sword from Wilhelm’s corpse and pierced his own throat.

It was true that he was shocked by the old swordsman’s death, but Subaru didn’t treat his own life so lightly or carelessly as to immediately commit suicide and wish for a redo.

It was possible that he considered it and chose the same outcome, hoping for a redo, but even then, he would have thought more thoroughly before doing so.

Which means,

“I don’t want to believe it, but… he got inside me?”

It was the worst situation imaginable, even just by its description, and the most awful state to even think about.

Of all things, to share a body with the most despicable being in this world, and even worse, if you looked only at the result, to have lost the struggle for control and been forced to commit suicide.

He had thought he’d been closely bound as a vessel and soul for seventeen years, but he was forced to realize how cold their relationship had been. Easily taking on other souls, what a loose body.

“That damn bastard, I already thought he was the worst… but now the meter’s completely red. What am I supposed to do?”

Subaru placed a hand on his chin, unable to do anything but gasp at the terrifying nature of Petelgeuse's authority.

If he could possess anyone he chose, without picking, and prolong his life, that would mean the inevitable eradication of his existence.

No matter how many times you killed him, if he could possess those around him and survive, then you wouldn't be able to destroy him unless you wiped out all of humanity.

He wanted to believe that he didn't possess such an unfair ability.

"In this kind of pattern, how can he be defeated? If possession has conditions, that's the easiest scenario to understand, but it's hard to discern. A limit on uses… I don't know that either."

If there were conditions for possession, even discerning them would be difficult to hypothesize.

His first body was a thin man, then a woman in her late teens or early twenties when they next met. Finally, Subaru's body. No commonalities could be found.

If there was a limit on uses, that would also be troublesome; he couldn't see a limit, and currently, he would have to be killed at least three times to die.

"If I knew one kill wasn't enough, I could probably mention it to Wilhelm-san and just defeat him… but if I can't see the endgame, even killing him will turn into a war of attrition."

At this point, Subaru realized the high difficulty of completely defeating Petelgeuse.

Looking back, even his fearlessness of death hinted at this possibility. If he could survive by switching bodies one after another, as he did when Puck froze him in the previous world, it all made sense.

At worst, truly the worst-case scenario—

"Giving up on defeating Petelgeuse… is that an option?"

If he prioritized Subaru's original objective, then it was indeed one of the means he should choose. It was a frustrating thought, though.

Natsuki Subaru was rushing back to the Mathers domain with his companions for no other reason than this: he desperately wanted to save the people in the mansion and village, more than annihilating the Witch Cult.

There had been a time when those feelings wavered, and he sought revenge with the annihilation of the Witch Cult as his supreme goal, driven by hatred. But now, that passion had subsided.

The one who made Subaru think this way was none other than the blue-haired girl.

Without her dedication, Subaru would still be wandering in deep darkness, lost without an exit, his heart worn thin.

What she told Subaru was not "defeat them".

It was to not give up on the lives of those important to him.

It was humiliating. He couldn't suppress the urge to gnash his teeth in frustration.

However even that was one way Subaru could help— No, one way only Subaru could save them.

Only Subaru, knowing of the Witch Cult's attack, could preempt it and rescue Emilia and the others. Prioritizing the Witch Cult's annihilation was merely about eliminating the root cause; if survival was the priority, then the option of escape was also worth considering.

Above all, the White Whale was defeated, and the alliance was still ongoing.

This time, they lacked sufficient preparation to defeat 'Sloth'. If they solidified their preparations to defeat 'Sloth' beforehand and devised a strategy similar to the White Whale, an opportunity to destroy him would naturally arise.

Therefore—

“Subaru-dono.”

Suddenly, his name was called in a quiet voice, and Subaru, who had been lost in a sea of thought, looked up.

In front of him, Wilhelm was looking at Subaru with eyes as clear as a reflected lake. His heart pounded loudly. It felt as if his very core was being seen through.

“Do you have some concern?”

“Ah, no…”

“It would be best to speak it. There is no need to bear it alone.”

To the stammering Subaru, Wilhelm pressed on as if to say he understood.

Noticing their exchange, the people around them also began to gather their gazes.

Feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed by the vortex of gazes, Subaru shook his head slightly.

“No, it’s not like that. I was just trying to organize my thoughts. It’s pointless to talk when things aren’t sorted out, right? So…”

“So, you were about to head towards the option of giving up, were you not?”

“Giving up, that’s not… it.”

Though gently, Subaru felt one of his considerations being denied and twisted his lips. ‘Giving up’ was a poor choice of words. Subaru simply wanted to avoid losing sight of his objective.

He had lost so many things because he had lost sight of it before, so now that he was given a chance to redo it, he wanted to make sure he didn’t let it slip from his grasp this time.

However to Subaru's thoughts,

"Subaru-dono, it may be the height of tactlessness for me to say this, but I will say it."

"O-Oh. It's a bit much when you're so formal. Yeah, I'm listening."

"—Fight."

Low, it was a 'word' that made the air tremble.

However, Subaru's body, his heart, his soul, certainly trembled upon receiving it.

Opening his eyes, Wilhelm —the Sword Demon— was staring directly at Subaru.

The demonic aura leaking from his entire body enveloped Subaru, gripping him and refusing to let go.

"If you have resolved yourself to fight, to resist, then fight with all your heart and soul. Do not give up for a single moment, a single second, not even an instant, but greedily cling to that single point of victory you envision. There must be no compromise, none whatsoever. If you can still stand, if your fingers can still move, if your fangs are not yet broken, then stand, stand, stand, stand, fight. —Fight."

"…"

It was strikingly similar to the words Subaru had once received from Wilhelm.

In the garden of Crusch's mansion, when Subaru was beaten down with a wooden sword, Wilhelm had, for that moment alone, shown a glimpse of the Sword Demon within him and spoken of the mindset for battle.

At that time, Wilhelm had called Subaru, who heard those words, a "person with no desire to grow stronger," and indeed, Subaru hadn't been serious in facing him.

However now, it was different. He believed so.

Because he felt he could be different, that he wanted to change.

“You’re saying, don’t compromise?”

“—Yes. No matter how difficult the path.”

“By choosing to fight, I involved many people in the battle with the White Whale. Now too, I’m involving everyone here by deciding to fight. —People will die, you know.”

As he spoke, he could feel his own courage shrinking.

The lives of others weighed heavily on Subaru’s judgments, thoughts, and actions. He now clearly realized that this had always been the case.

In the battle with the White Whale, Crusch’s intentions were also at play. The countless casualties and the weight of those lives in that battle rested on the shoulders of both Subaru and Crusch.

However the coming battle was different. This was a battle Subaru chose, Subaru desired, and Subaru started, involving others despite it all.

Subaru had to bear the lives of all those standing around him, equally, as they challenged this battle. This wasn’t a matter of duty or responsibility. It was a matter of soul and pride.

“Even so, you’ll go along with my selfishness? You’ll entrust your lives to my greedy, self-serving whims?”

“Why bring that up now, is it?”

To Subaru’s question of resolve, Wilhelm even offered a small smile.

Looking around, the others were also watching Subaru with similar expressions. Only Ferris had a grim face, which was entirely characteristic of him.

To Subaru, who was unable to move, surrounded by such gazes, Wilhelm nodded.

“To act in order to protect what you wish to protect—that is precisely the way of a knight. Therefore, as those who share the same aspiration, who among us could object to Subaru-dono’s path?”

“—!”

At Wilhelm’s words, the knights simultaneously drew their swords.

The beast-kin mercenary group, slow to react, saw this and, all with slight wry smiles, responded by drawing their own weapons and raising them slightly.

“I understand the feeling of lamenting insufficient power even when one has the will. —That is why we are here. We are now Subaru-dono’s sword. We are the power to grant Subaru-dono’s wish.”

“Sword…”

“Let us do what must be done. Not for anyone else. For your own—not selfishness, but your own wish.”

Subaru felt something drop from his chest, like a weight.

It was the same process as the dark thoughts surrounding Subaru clearing, and at the same time, an almost itchy embarrassment welled up.

—Above all, an unbearable euphoria of reliability.

“I have to save Emilia and the others.”

“Yes.”

“But it’s also true that I have to confront the Witch Cult bastards.”

“Yes.”

“Honestly, I thought it might be better to run. There’s a possibility this fight could be more troublesome than I thought. At worst, just knowing they're coming is a big win, so I thought maybe running was an option."

If it were the Subaru from before, he would surely have chosen that option.

He would have rationally reconciled his emotions and continued fighting down a less-than-ideal path until he achieved a passable result.

However when the knights affirmed him to this extent.

If he didn't respond to this—would he even be a man?

"This is the only chance to strike 'Sloth' of the Witch Cult. I can't predict when he'll come next, and there's no guarantee what form he'll take next time either."

"…"

"That guy, I have to finish him here. —Absolutely."

If he put it off, if he just escaped this time, there was no way he could escape the demon's clutches. He was tenacious. It was certain he would extend his demonic hand again somewhere, in a form Subaru didn't know. And when that happened, Subaru might not be in a position to intervene.

He should consider that such an opportunity as this time might never come again.

To be so pride as to think there would be a next time, or to be so clever as to compromise for the next best thing.

"Save Emilia and the others. Take down the Witch Cult. The tough part is having to do both. Are you ready? I… I've finally made up my mind."

"—Shall we go?"

"Yeah, let's go. It's a race against time. I'll get my thoughts in order on the way."

There were still things Subaru had to think about, obstacles he had to overcome, and hardships he had to endure.

Even so, because there were people who would lend their strength to the powerless Subaru. Because there was someone who would support the weak-willed Subaru's heart. —He could look forward, without bowing his head.

He would resist 'Sloth', which obstructed fate.

He would confront his own 'Sloth', which tempted him to escape to the easier, weaker path.

That is what it means to fight, and what it means to live.

Natsuki Subaru's battle to defeat 'Sloth's Petelgeuse.

—Natsuki Subaru's battle, once again begins.

Chapter 67:
Spirit Knight

There were countless things they had to consider.

As Subaru and the others resumed their march to the Mathers territory, cutting through the wind, two main objectives lay before them:

“Keep Emilia and the villagers safe from danger at the mansion.”

“Fight the Witch Cult planning the attack and take down Petelgeuse, the ‘Sloth’.”

Last time, they prioritized the latter, hoping to achieve the former simultaneously by succeeding. However, Petelgeuse’s unexpected tenacity in clinging to life thwarted that plan.

They didn’t know the extent of his possession, under what conditions it worked, or on whom. However the fact remained: he had gotten ahead of Subaru and the others, ambushed them at that location, and caused that catastrophe.

Overconfidence was forbidden—no, they had to employ every possible measure to achieve the best outcome.

“In that case, temporary evacuation —at worst, abandoning the mansion and the village— is essential.”

Subaru understood how heartless this decision would be for them.

It wasn’t easy for people to accept throwing away their familiar lives and running off with just the clothes on their backs. However they had to do it.

Their lives should be more important.

While he knew there were times when things had to take precedence over life, life itself should still be the highest priority, save for a very limited number of possibilities.

That was one thing Subaru absolutely wouldn't compromise on.

"Considering the time, we'll have to handle the evacuation and the Witch Cult Hunt simultaneously."

It was unclear how thoroughly Petelgeuse had prepared, but given that he'd hidden a group of that size around the mansion, it was too convenient to assume the village remained completely unaware of any unusual activity. Nine times out of ten, there would likely be lookouts, just as there had been when they attacked Subaru's dragon carriage on the highway.

If they rushed the evacuation, there was a higher chance the Witch Cult would discover it and act. Therefore, they needed to crush the Witch Cult before they could make a move.

"The procedure from last time should mostly be fine… Though it bothers me that we only found eight hideouts. But if we can find the remaining ones this time,"

Their chances of victory would significantly increase. At the very least, they could completely eliminate the possibility of being ambushed by unseen Witch Cultists. If the threat they had to deal with was limited to Petelgeuse, that would still be a sufficient outcome.

As for dealing with Petelgeuse, the biggest concern,

"It's no use if I'm not there to counter the Unseen Hand."

That was the one line he could never concede.

Last time, by prolonging the conversation and drawing Petelgeuse's attention, Wilhelm's surprise attack had allowed them to defeat the first Petelgeuse. This time, the flow of events could follow that precedent. The problem was encountering him a second time or more—

"No, should we consider capturing him alive? If he dies and then possesses someone, then if we don't let him die, it might work…"

Saying it aloud, it felt like a surprisingly huge blind spot.

Petelgeuse had seemingly possessed people twice before, both limited to when the possessed body died. They hadn't been able to narrow down the conditions for subsequent possessions. But if they could create a situation where he couldn't possess anyone in the first place, that would change everything.

If the surprise attack worked, creating that situation might not be so difficult.

"That's right. Just because we have to 'take him down' doesn't mean we only have to think about killing him! I don't know if there's a method like sealing him, but if it's possible,"

He felt it was doable.

If they knocked him unconscious with a surprise attack, they could gag him and tie him to a tree. If they isolated him at a distance where even his Unseen Hand couldn't reach, he'd just be a powerless madman, screaming and raving.

After that, it would be even better if they could ask Puck to put him in a cryo-stasis-like state and display him somewhere in an inaccessible, secluded area.

"You look like you're thinking something wicked."

Julius spoke to Subaru, whose lips twisted into a villainous smirk as a ray of hope appeared. Running alongside, he had silently observed Subaru lost in thought, but he must have noticed the change in his expression and realized a breakthrough had been made.

With a slight softening of his handsome profile, he lightly brushed back his wind-swept hair and said,

"If your thoughts have come together, I would like to hear them. Your judgment, having decided to fight."

"There might be holes, so I want to refine it a bit more… Time's short, but should I ask everyone to stop again?"

In any case, he needed to add several clarifications and changes to his earlier explanation.

Calling out to each person in their marching group and gathering them in a circle again would take a fair amount of time. It was irritating to feel like it would dampen their spirits when time was of the essence—

“No, there’s no need for that. I’ll take on the responsibility of relaying your words.”

Shaking his head slightly, Julius dismissed Subaru’s decision as unnecessary. Unable to grasp the intention behind his words, Subaru furrowed his brow slightly. Then, in front of him, Julius lightly flicked the fingers of his raised right hand, and the next moment—light overflowed.

“What—! You, that’s…”

“The faint glow of will that fills the atmosphere. If you’ve been by Lady Emilia’s side, you must have seen this beauty, haven’t you?”

Julius smiled back, pride in his eyes. Surrounding him, faint lights swam, accompanying him as he rode his ground dragon.

Subaru knew the true nature of those lights. He had seen them countless times, up close, beside that beloved girl.

It was—

“Lesser spirits…”

“To be precise, buds before they gain the status of spirits. They are what you might call—Quasi-Spirits.”

“Quasi-spirits… Don’t say it like ‘Quasi-Knight’.”

Subaru managed to respond, his lips twitching at Julius’s insistence on the term.

His face twitched not because he was depressed comparing his own face to Julius’s perfect one radiating self-satisfaction. Putting aside such trivial thoughts, Subaru considered Julius’s identity, accompanied by quasi-spirits—which meant,

“You were a Spirits Arts User?!”

“It would be more accurate to say ‘I am also a Spirits Arts User.’ As a knight, I believe I haven’t neglected my efforts in refining my sword skills. To call me more precisely, I would like you to call me this:”

As Subaru gasped in surprise, Julius closed his eyes, creating a brief pause. Subaru opened his mouth.

This flow, and this development, meant the next line to be spoken was—

“Grand Magus—!!”

“Spirit Knight… Mmm?”

He was wrong.

Julius gave Subaru a puzzled look as he stammered, trying to echo a famous line. Subaru quickly flushed with embarrassment and waved his hands, trying to cover his blunder, saying, “Oh, no, that’s not it,” as he fumbled.

“Ah, ahh, ahem. So, Spirit Knight! Yes, Spirit Knight, then! I see, hmm, that’s amazing, I’m convinced. Yes, truly. Spirits, huh… Spirit Knight?!”

“I’m glad you’re surprised. I didn’t expect it to be quite so much, though.”

Julius gave a wry smile as Subaru pretended to be calm, trying to process and understand, then spitting out his surprise.

As he gently extended his arm forward, shimmering lights gathered, as if perching on his arm. These were six different kinds of spirits, each emitting light of a different color. Recognizing this fact, Subaru realized.

Commanding six spirits of different colors meant, "Could it be that you can use all six types of magic?"

"—I see. You're quite quick-witted to notice that point without prior knowledge. It seems you haven't been spending your time under Lord Mathers doing nothing."

"No, it's not like I really received any magical instruction from Roschi… Ah, I guess there was a little bit in the bath."

The memory of receiving a brief lecture on magic while they both dangled their bits in the bath was a distant one now. Looking back, that too was an experience lost in this world.

Putting aside Subaru's muttering, which only a time traveler could understand, Julius showed him the spirits circling his arm.

"As you've guessed, with the cooperation of these children, I can wield all six types of attributes. For now, they are still just quasi-spirits, but the day will surely come when they bloom as beautiful flowers. That will be the true moment for me and them to stand as Spirit Knights."

"Sorry to interrupt your moment, but do quasi-spirits have genders? When they become full spirits… are spirits all like Puck, with strong personalities and physical forms? He seemed to think of himself as a male, or rather, a man."

In Puck's case, he seemed to view himself as Emilia's father figure, so his gender was likely correct. Sometimes he even showed the complex feelings of a mother, and you could glimpse his struggles.

Anyway, Julius tilted his head as if it were obvious in response to Subaru's question.

"How could I not treat such beautiful, radiant children as females? What is it you're wondering about?"

"It makes me sick to think we might understand each other on that point! Can we move on, because this isn't getting us anywhere?!"

"Just a joke, have a graceful heart. —Now, In and Nes. I ask of you."

Julius shrugged dramatically at Subaru's outburst, then called out to the two lights—white and black—perched on his fingertips. The spirits suddenly began to glow brighter.

"These are In and Nes, the quasi-spirits who govern yin and yang. By combining elemental magic and harmonizing their interference with mana, you can achieve something that's usually considered difficult."

"Something like…?"

"A will that's conveyed without words—that is, the advanced mind-reading magic, 'Nect'."

He winked with one eye, and the light rushed to engulf the group.

And then, in Subaru's mind, swallowed by the light, suddenly began to flow—

SETOWI

“I’m hungry~! I’m hungry hungry hungry hungry! Riger’s back fur is so warm~, I’m sleepy~, but if I sleep I’ll get yelled at~. Tivey always takes away my snacks when he gets mad~, that’s so mean~, Mimi’s supposed to be my big sister, booo. I want a ringa~!”

“SHUT UUUUPPPP—!!!”

Thought waves from an impossible distance and mind poured into Subaru with incredible force. Whose they were, there was no need to consider, but the surging waves didn’t stop with just one person. That’s right.

“About two more hours until Mathers territory, then a battle with the Witch Cult. A visit to Theresia’s grave will have to wait until we return to the capital.” “Damn, these injuries are really starting to ache. This isn’t the time to complain, but if I can’t take it anymore, I might have to get serious.” “Big Sis is making that face she makes when she’s hungry. I shouldn’t spoil her, but if I don’t, it’ll be a hassle. My brother isn’t here so I have to suffer like this.” “It’s a command so I guess I have no choice, but I’m worried about Lady Crusch~. I hope she returns to the capital safely. We defeated the White Whale, so now the Royal Selection is like Lady Crusch’s solo run, stable and all? Ahh, I want to go home and be praised soon!” “Chikuwa Daimyojin.”

“Who was that just now—?!”

“That would be you. Let’s lessen the empathy a bit. Perhaps your mana interference is a bit weak. Having it be too strong is also a problem.”

Seeing Subaru almost short-circuit from the massive influx of information, Julius instructed the pair of spirits to reduce its intensity.

Once the flow of others’ superficial thoughts subsided somewhat, and he confirmed that he could now filter information, Subaru turned back to Julius.

“So, this ‘Nect’ magic… is the reason we don’t have to stop?”

"It's a perfect magic for strategy meetings. Its effect isn't very long, nor does it work over a wide range. Furthermore, to share consciousness to this extent requires a certain degree of trust between us. It can also serve as a test to gauge whether one trusts another. It's difficult to apply in combat, though."

"Is that so? If you could hear people's thoughts, wouldn't you be super strong in a fight?"

In manga and anime, telepaths are often among the strongest characters—that's practically a trope.

However Julius smiled faintly at Subaru's simple idea and shook his head.

"I said it was empathy. If it's too weak, thoughts won't reach as they are now, but if it's too strong…"

"Then what?"

"You would lose the boundary between yourself and others. Don't you think it's a rather terrifying thought to be cut down and die by your own hand?"

"Ugh… Is that how it is?"

Apparently, intruding into others' thoughts carried unexpected dangers.

Subaru grumbled softly about the convenience offset by such difficulties, but Julius continued, "However…"

"It's rare for In and Nes to misjudge the Nect magic. Perhaps, Subaru, you have a high affinity for spirits."

"Affinity for spirits, you mean like we get along well?"

"That would be it. This is largely an innate quality. Whether one can become a Spirits Arts User hinges entirely on being familiar enough with spirits to form a contract with them. Have you had any such experiences before?"

"Even if you say so…"

Holding the reins, he couldn't cross his arms and frequently tilted his head in thought. However, in Subaru's original world, the very existence of spirits wasn't acknowledged. Even after coming here, he hadn't had any opportunities for a Great Spirit to rush in and go "ear-bone!" during a crisis. In fact, his experience with spirits was…

"The most I've done is occasionally glimpse Emilia-tan talking to the lesser spirits in the mansion garden every morning. Other than that, I've only talked to Puck… Oh, my experience level is so low…!"

"If you haven't been blessed with opportunities, that can happen. Perhaps after this is all over, you might consider asking Lady Emilia for guidance. I think there's a possibility."

Subaru furrowed his brow at Julius's words, his lips softening.

Julius maintained his elegant composure at this reaction, asking, "Is something wrong?" Subaru replied, "No," averting his gaze from him.

"I was just wondering why you're being so cooperative. Don't you have some ulterior motive?"

"Spirits Arts Users are simply few in number. It's rare to find someone with whom one can share such topics. Therefore, I won't hesitate to offer a helping hand."

"If I could use it right away, I'd consider it, but it's not really that kind of situation… Well, I'll gratefully accept your goodwill, though."

Despite the unexpected possibility offered to him, Subaru put off considering it. He had been told he had no talent for swords or magic. While he had no expectations for his own talent as a Spirits Arts User, right now, he simply couldn't afford the time.

"For now, about that Nect… that's what it was, right? I'll take it. Make it weak, just enough to be convenient like telepathy. I'm done with people's thoughts flooding into my head."

"I've roughly grasped the wavelength from before. There's no problem. —Nect."

Julius pressed a finger to his lips, and the pair of spirits dwelling there began to glow.

Immediately after the pretentious incantation, a faint light enveloped their surroundings as before.

"Ah, ahh, how is it? Can everyone hear me?"

Hesitantly, Subaru transmitted his thoughts. The intention behind it was for it to reach them; if the magic had misfired, he would just be a pitiable chuunibyou patient convinced there was a mind-reader present.

"We hear you, Subaru-dono."

"We hear you, don't worry."

"Mmm-hmm! I know it! You're trying to read Mimi's mind! You spy for the enemy organization!"

More or less, the replies Subaru expected came back. Only one person seemed to be acting like a cute chuunibyou patient, but he gently ignored that and continued.

"With Julius's magic, it's like telepathy, or something similar. I have a few additions to what we discussed earlier, so please just listen for now. Questions and anything else are welcome as we go."

Relieved that he felt everyone's consent, Subaru began to recount his earlier draft plan. It was an amateur's plan, full of holes, but if they all put their heads together, it would become something decent.

Searching for solutions, and never stopping thinking and acting to achieve the best outcome.

That was Subaru's way of fighting, for someone who couldn't swing a sword, use magic, or do anything.

“So, the first change is, I need some of you to go into the village ahead of us. There, I want you to rendezvous with the insurance I arranged.”

“Insurance, you say?”

What reached his mind directly was hard to distinguish by tone, but instead, he could identify the speaker by the emotional waves transmitted. Naturally, the calm tone was Wilhelm’s, and Subaru found himself nodding in response to the mental voice.

“Oh, I accidentally nodded. That Japanese part of me, bowing politely over the phone, showing up here…!”

“Bro, you’re getting all emotional at a weird time, but you should really make good use of the magic. That Young Master Julius is scary when he gets mad.”

“I don’t possess such narrow-mindedness to get angry over something like this. However, I must give a lower evaluation for squandering limited time.”

“I’ll—I’ll do it properly! I was just about to do it! The insurance! The insurance thing!”

Ricardo and Julius’s exasperation reached him, and after experiencing the strange sensation of stammering mentally, Subaru slowly began to outline the strategy.

“Before we left the capital, I asked Anastasia and Russell to spread the word: ‘Lord Mathers wants to hire merchants heading for the capital along the highway. He’ll buy their cargo at their asking price, so he wants them to lend their services.’”

“—! Subaru, that’s…”

“It’ll be a painful expense… but it’s not worth the lives of the territory’s people. As a lord, that’s just common sense, isn’t it? Especially since that guy’s, well, absent or something and useless when it matters most.”

It was a rather terrible reason—if a situation could be solved with money, and it wasn't his own money, there was no reason to hesitate—but Subaru's plan seemed to be working.

Indeed, last time a considerable number of merchants had gathered in the village, lining up dragon carriages and ground dragons at the edges of the village, preparing.

Preparations to evacuate Emilia and the villagers, carrying them all away at once.

"I've had an envoy leave the capital with a letter, sort of a formal dispatch. It says the Witch Cult might attack and asks them to evacuate using the merchants' dragon carriages. I don't know if there's any complicated handwriting analysis or judgment needed here, but I think Emilia-tan will make the right call."

He thought there would certainly be confusion at first.

In fact, even if the letter arrived safely, Subaru knew its contents wouldn't be easily accepted. That's why he believed the problem lay elsewhere.

It was:

"To make them judge the letter's contents quickly, it's not just the merchants, but someone who thoroughly grasps the situation should go."

"You're quick on the uptake, that helps. In reality, it's almost certain that the villagers and merchants will quarrel. We need to smooth that over and get them to evacuate quickly. Honestly, I know it would be quickest if I went myself, but…"

Subaru was well aware that as someone they knew and who had earned a certain degree of the villagers' trust, his persuasion wouldn't take much time.

As someone with no combat ability, it was certainly best for Subaru to go to the village as an envoy and persuade Emilia and the others at the mansion. But that wouldn't do.

If Subaru went there, dealing with the Witch Cult would inevitably fall to the remaining main forces. He didn't even consider the possibility of them losing to mere Witch Cultists, but Petelgeuse was a different matter entirely. To confront him head-on,

"To face a Sin Archbishop, I have to be there. As it stands… only me and Wilhelm-san can defeat him."

"—May I ask for your reasoning? Without conceit, I don't believe my skills would be a hindrance to Sir Wilhelm. Moreover, sending you to the main battlefield…"

It was Julius who immediately countered Subaru's words.

Subaru understood the meaning and basis of his pride. Indeed, in terms of sheer skill, Julius could certainly handle Petelgeuse. But that wouldn't do.

When facing that madman, skill or resolve didn't matter.

"The Sin Archbishop uses some kind of strange trick, I don't know what it is, but it makes the victim lose their sanity and become unable to fight. I call it 'mental pollution,' and the only ones I can think of who can withstand it are me and Wilhelm-san."

"Mental pollution, you mean like the White Whale's mist?"

Ferris's voice reached him, and Subaru sent a thought of agreement.

Then, he turned to Julius, who was riding alongside him, without speaking.

"The White Whale used that same method of making people lose their minds. In that battle, I saw those who didn't lose their sanity… but I don't know your resistance, since you weren't in the White Whale fight."

"If I were to lose my sanity on the spot, I would become a hindrance to your fight… Is that what you mean?"

Julius closed his eyes regretfully, he probably couldn't think of a logical rebuttal.

His struggling expression and strong regret directly conveyed to Subaru made him understand the pain of his inability to participate in the White Whale battle.

Subaru averted his gaze, sensing that directly touching his emotions any further would become troublesome.

“So, Wilhelm-san. I want you to fight the devil with me.”

“My body is now Subaru-dono’s sword. You wield it, and I will cut. —To question my resolve on that path would be uncouth.”

“Oh my god, that’s so cool I’m getting wet.”

“Where? What?”

“Big Sis should be quiet.”

While Subaru trembled, overwhelmed by the cool declaration that made him want to be embraced, the siblings were performing their comedy routine.

It had to be said that this was an utterly irreverent turn for a strategy meeting, but it was also part of their current charm. After all, they weren’t functioning as an army; they were just a motley crew of misfits united by a common goal.

Since he was the one leading them—a listless, powerless, ordinary, and morally questionable person—that’s how it would be.

That’s why Subaru didn’t hesitate, nor did he feel overly pressured.

He would entrust what could be entrusted, do what needed to be done, and somehow make everything work out.

“Alright, then I’m counting on you. —I’ll rely on you, cling to you, and let you carry me.”

Chapter 68:
Sloth Capture Front

1

Subaru felt a clammy, unpleasant sweat trickle down his forehead.

How many times had he ventured alone into the dark forest now? If he counted the times he was chased by the Ulgarms or his twilight chases with Rem, Subaru was quite used to scrambling through exposed dirt in the mountains.

However, each of those instances had been urgent, and he certainly had no memories of calmly traversing beast trails. The sensation of treading on grass in those recent days had been utterly dreadful, and nothing had changed, even now, with the same objective.

No, with his hatred for his rendezvous growing, one could say his mood had soured even further.

Subaru inhaled, then exhaled, trying to control his quickening pulse. The cold sweat reminded him of the malice awaiting him, and his spirits sank.

He yearned for a calm heart, to possess a heart of steel.

He wished for a strong, resilient, and unwavering spirit that wouldn't be swayed by any passion or cower before any malice.

If he could achieve that, he thought, surely he could have avoided hurting many people and handled many situations much better.

Why was he, weak, fragile, and utterly helpless, standing in such a place? Why him?

Weakness threatened to crush Subaru's spirit. His trembling knees seemed to root him to the spot, anticipating the impending disaster.

A part of him thought, "Couldn't it be someone else?" Then, "You said you wanted me."

Now, Subaru stood, clinging only to those words.

He encouraged his trembling knees and chastised his faltering heart, his face set forward.

Wiping away his sweat and gritting his teeth to keep them from chattering, he knew his destination was just ahead.

"…"

The shadows surrounding Subaru bowed respectfully, as if paying homage. Previously, Subaru would have felt intense disgust at being treated as a superior being.

Not now. Now, he smirked triumphantly at the reverence from those detestable beings—because they had made him this way.

"This is actually the ninth time I've said this in this forest, but get lost. Go back to your nests quietly and don't show your faces for a while. I have important business with 'Sloth' up ahead."

"…"

With a wave of his arm and a somewhat determined expression, Subaru spoke, and the figures in black melted into the darkness. They were still as enigmatic as ever.

Compared to the easily identifiable Petelgeuse, their threat level might be lower, but perhaps their unknown nature made them even more unsettling.

Leaving such thoughts behind, he walked straight down the path created by the vanished figures in black.

He leaped over slippery moss and stepped over winding tree roots. Suddenly, his vision opened up to a sheer cliff face blocking his way, towering high.

Directly in front of it, the malice that awaited him stood.

"I've been awaiting you, favored believer—"

Petelgeuse stood there, arms outstretched, his face alight with joy as he adopted a welcoming posture. This was the third time he'd heard these familiar welcoming words. Their unchanging nature somehow conveyed the genuine depth of the man's intentions.

"I am Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti! Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing 'Sloth'!"

"I know", Subaru almost spat out in irritation, but he managed to stop himself just short of interrupting the declaration.

Even though he had resolved to remain calm and solemn, Petelgeuse's madness alone grated on Subaru's nerves, provoking him beyond measure.

Subaru exhaled, then inhaled, re-acknowledging the weight on his shoulders. This helped him regain some composure, and he allowed a small, easygoing smile to form on his lips.

"Thanks for the grand welcome. To be greeted personally by an Archbishop is a great honor… I didn't think I was worth that much myself."

"There's no need for modesty. The dense favor overflowing from your body. It cannot be hidden, and surely you are not unaware? The affection you embody already rivals even a Sin Archbishop!"

Waving his arms at Subaru's words, Petelgeuse vehemently lectured, stamping his feet on the ground.

His eyes, lit with a manic gleam, shone brightly, and he extended his tongue, licking Subaru with a literal gaze from head to toe.

"When I sensed it, I thought 'no way', but truly… are you not 'Pride'?"

"Even if you say 'Pride', I don't quite understand. Could you tell me a little more, in detail? About the Archbishops… and the ordeals?"

The word "Pride" had come up in conversation, and Petelgeuse's suspicion of Subaru being Pride had been a recurring exchange in previous loops. Subaru seized the opportunity, trying to extract information about the “ordeals” Petelgeuse had mentioned repeatedly.

The ordeals, in other words, likely referred to the entire assault plan. If he could get that information, it would be easier to formulate a countermeasure. If asking this enraged Petelgeuse — though a bit early— it would simply signal the start of the battle.

In response to Subaru’s somewhat resolved words,

“It’s fine. Information about the road blockade will likely take some time to spread. The same goes for the start of the ‘ordeals’—we still have plenty of time.”

“Oh… a road blockade, huh?”

Far from getting angry, Petelgeuse seemed rather pleased by Subaru’s seemingly cooperative attitude. He clapped his hands gleefully and stepped towards Subaru.

Feeling cold sweat on his back from the madman’s approach, Subaru maintained a composed demeanor, tilting his head.

“A road blockade? Are you playing some kind of trick?”

“It’s ‘Fog‘. I think that explains enough?”

“I see. That explains it.”

Subaru responded curtly to the brief answer.

With just that exchange, he was now certain that Petelgeuse and his group had not yet heard about the White Whale’s defeat.

While he knew the White Whale was an agent of the Witch Cult—in this case, “Gluttony”—their coordination had been an unknown factor, but now it was clear.

If they believed the road was blocked by fog—there were likely no other Witch Cult members stationed on the road. Letting Emilia and the others proceed straight down the road now seemed like a viable strategy.

“But blocking the road with fog and conducting your ‘ordeals’ without any interference, huh? You play dirty, Petelgeuse-san.”

“The ordeals are sacred and inviolable! No matter the hardship, one must overcome all difficulties to face them, or else it is disingenuous to love! Yes! To love! To the love directed! To the love given! We! Must respond!!”

“Ah, crap, I hit his switch.”

Subaru’s careless turn of phrase seemed to have flipped Petelgeuse’s “love” switch.

Petelgeuse arched his back, looking upwards, eyes wide as he roared. Subaru’s voice couldn’t reach him. He fervently stretched his arms towards the sky, as if some unseen entity existed there, shedding a single tear amidst his madness.

“Everything is for love, to die for love! To the existence itself, the outrageous silver half-elf, and the sin of bearing it! An ordeal of whether she can still walk that path! We must test if she is truly worthy! Whether she can be diligent, not slothful! That path! With my own hands, with this body, with this —love!!”

“Test if she’s worthy…?”

“Yes! That is what the trials are for! Therefore, one must be tested, one must test! To incorporate the Witch Factor, to see if one’s body is suitable for the vessel—!”

Petelgeuse fumbled in his robes and pulled out a black-bound book.

He lovingly turned its pages with his fingers, caressing each word of the densely packed text like a madman.

“My role recorded in the Gospel, a testament of love I must fulfill! If you are ‘Pride’! You should understand this surging emotion of mine! For us Sin Archbishops to gather all at once, it has been four hundred years since such a thing last occurred!”

“Wait! Witch Factor, ‘Pride’—this conversation isn’t making any sense yet…”

“The Gospel! I demand the presentation of the Gospel! I want to burn the love you have been bestowed upon my eyes! That’s right, RightRightRightRightRightRightRightRightRiiiiigghhtt!!”

Petelgeuse lunged forward, his face so close Subaru could feel his breath. A putrid odor reached him, and his extended tongue almost touched Subaru’s nose. A sudden surge of disgust made Subaru leap back slightly.

Petelgeuse’s gaze followed him, as if Subaru’s reaction was unexpected, and he tilted his head ninety degrees, forming a grotesque posture.

“The Gospel, the presentation of…”

Hearing him say that in a quiet voice, with those mad eyes, Subaru decided this was as far as he would get.

There were still countless things he wanted to ask, and what he had managed to extract was hardly substantial. But for now, nothing more was possible. So,

“Alright, just wait.”

Subaru reached into his robe, complying with Petelgeuse’s demand.

He wasn’t pulling out a Gospel, but rather, the answer that would show the madman, who demanded proof of his allegiance, exactly who Subaru was.

“This is—my answer!”

He shouted, swinging his drawn arm straight up—and instantly, the light of the magic crystal blazed, a white flash visible from anywhere in the forest.

Petelgeuse shielded his eyes from the blinding light but immediately judged Subaru to be an enemy.

“Bearing such favor upon your person… what insolence—!!”

Petelgeuse glared at Subaru with an enraged expression. His shadow exploded, and the black, murderous demonic hands stretched out.

The demonic hands rushed directly for Subaru’s neck. Subaru ducked low, sidestepping past their fingertips.

“Wilhelm-san! Twins!”

At Subaru’s call, Mimi and Tivey, who had been stealthily following behind him, burst out of the forest.

The siblings simultaneously kicked off trees and soared through the air, spinning as they leaped over Petelgeuse’s diminutive figure towards the cliff face—opening their mouths, a roar reverberated.

“Wha—!”

“Ha—!!”

A resonant wave ripped up the earth, and the rock face, engulfed by the vibrations, collapsed with a thunderous sound. The second successful burial surprised Petelgeuse, who blinked at the sheer destruction. And from behind his wide-open guard,

“To turn your back on an enemy—!”

Wilhelm dashed forward, low to the ground, like a serpent.

The old swordsman’s speed was like the wind. Petelgeuse, noticing his approach, turned around—but it was far too slow.

The shadows lunged at the Sword Devil, but the raised blade swung up and down far faster.

The slash landed with a dull thud, severing Petelgeuse’s right arm midway up the bicep. Time seemed to freeze at the vivid wound, but the blade’s movement was uninterrupted. It flashed white and spun around—and with a resounding smack, the flat of the sword struck the back of Petelgeuse’s head.

"—Gah!"

The sharp blow instantly unfocused Petelgeuse's eyes, and he collapsed to his knees without resistance. At the same moment, a torrent of blood gushed from the wound where his right arm had been severed.

Subaru stared blankly at the ground, which was now thoroughly stained crimson, then hurried towards Petelgeuse. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, intending to staunch the bleeding, as he couldn't afford for the madman to bleed to death, but—

"Subaru-dono! It's still dangerous!"

"Dangerous, you say… whoa?!"

Wilhelm's sharp voice stopped Subaru. As Subaru started to turn, he was startled to see Petelgeuse lurching upright in front of him.

The madman swayed violently, still with his eyes rolled back, foam bubbling from the corners of his mouth, yet he managed to turn his head.

"The response from my fingertips… has ceased… what did you do…?!"

Spewing a fatal amount of blood, Petelgeuse paid no mind to his rapidly shortening lifespan, sticking out his bloodied tongue and performing his madness.

He must have resisted losing consciousness with pain so intense it almost made him bite off his tongue. It was a method only possible for a mind that didn't flinch from self-harm, but at this point, it was extremely bad.

"Wilhelm-san! It'd be bad if he dies, knock him out and tie him up!"

"To subdue without killing—it's not my strong suit, but as you wish!"

The Sword Devil replied, swaying his body up and down, and leaped forward with an uncanny motion.

Petelgeuse, still with unfocused eyes, turned his face towards Wilhelm, extending the swelling shadow hands towards the old swordsman. But,

“They’re erratic… because of the head damage, huh!”

The number of extending arms increased to thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, but their movements towards Wilhelm were uncoordinated. They wavered, trembled, and created useless, undulating motions, unable to catch up to Wilhelm, who moved like the wind without any intention of avoiding them.

Above all, Wilhelm’s bewildering footwork didn’t allow it.

“Seriously?!”

Wilhelm’s figure blurred slightly as he swayed up and down, and in the next moment, the old swordsman seemed to be simultaneously present both above and below. One clone kicked off the ground from above, while the other moved low to sweep at the feet—a masterful body-splitting technique. Even Petelgeuse foamed at the mouth at this extraordinary feat.

“A pitiful fool who knows nothing of favor—!”

“I know nothing of the love you speak of. This body is busy enough loving just one woman—!”

A battle cry met his challenge, surpassing it with sheer swordsmanship. Petelgeuse, pale-faced, swung his unseen hands. Perhaps his rage had overcome his injuries, for they relentlessly pursued both of Wilhelm’s split images, raging as they tried to entangle and tear apart the old man’s body with their fingertips.

“I got —you!”

“Unfortunately,”

However, Petelgeuse’s triumphant smile instantly vanished as the images disappeared beyond his grasping fingertips.

Wilhelm’s figures, which should have been attacking from both above and below, vanished—and then, neither above nor below, the figure of the old swordsman running straight across the ground materialized directly in front of the madman.

“Im, possible…!”

“The essence of killing intent, sword energy, and footwork application—did you enjoy the exquisite swordplay, I wonder!”

He twisted his body, and the groaning flat of the sword struck Petelgeuse’s left temple.

A sharp, steel-on-flesh impact echoed, and blood momentarily spurted from his cracked forehead. Petelgeuse, who did not lose consciousness even after taking that blow, moved his neck, still feeling the cold touch of the blade on his left cheek.

“Your sword’s brilliance is tremendous… you are truly a diligent person… bleh?!”

“My apologies,”

Petelgeuse tried to extend his tongue towards the blade still pressed against his cheek. However the scabbard of Wilhelm’s treasured sword, drawn from his waist, struck the opposite side of his face.

“It’s a borrowed item from my master. —I can’t imagine returning it defiled by a lowlife’s saliva.”

“I, Im… Possible…!”

He swung both hands, sheathing his treasured sword with a light clink. Then, in a flowing motion, he returned it to his waist. Immediately after, Wilhelm gave a faint smile to Subaru, who watched in astonishment, and bowed at the waist.

“As per your instructions, the Archbishop—has been captured alive.”

As the old swordsman transformed into an old gentleman, the unconscious madman finally collapsed to the ground.

“He’s unconscious now, right? Are you sure? Is it safe to approach? No, I can’t have him die, so I need to give him first aid quickly.”

“You’re such a scaredy-cat, mister. It’s fine if this guy just dies, isn’t it?”

“Big sis, you were supposed to have been told that his death would cause problems. Anyway, I’ve managed to stop the bleeding for now.”

Around the collapsed and motionless Petelgeuse, Subaru hovered nervously while Mimi pointed and laughed at him. Ignoring the two useless individuals, Tivey efficiently wrapped cloth around Petelgeuse’s arm, dressing the wound to stop the bleeding.

Meanwhile, Wilhelm surveyed the collapsed cave. The old swordsman returned and gave a generous nod to Subaru, who urged for results with his eyes.

“From what I can see, it’s completely buried. I don’t think there’s another exit to the cave, so it’s safe to assume the Witch Cultists inside have been annihilated.”

“I see… I guess that’s not exactly news to pump our fists about, though.”

“Why not?”

Even though they were enemies, it was a situation involving life and death.

Subaru wasn’t yet so accustomed to the ways of this other world that he could openly celebrate such news. Finding this strange, Mimi, despite her adorable features, spoke with a cruel view of life and death.

“If you think about complicated stuff when you’re beating up enemies, you’ll never finish. You beat up enemies, you save everyone. You get money, you sleep in your futon. I think it’s better to do that than to think about complicated stuff.”

"That's a good, simple outlook… No, it's probably just me being too soft. I'm not going to argue about that. More importantly…"

Subaru's gaze drifted towards the forest, thinking of the others who should have acted on his signal. Since they were largely following the previous plan, the surprise attacks should have succeeded for every group.

However, this time, there were two more hideouts to attack than last time. Additionally, several people had been sent ahead to the village, which meant the combat strength in each location was reduced.

He had struggled to reassign Ricardo to a different position and ensure that the groups that seemed to have struggled last time didn't lose strength, so he hoped no mistakes had occurred.

"Besides, we've got the crucial Petelgeuse secured here."

He nudged the unconscious Petelgeuse with his foot, flipping him over.

His limp body, combined with his thinness, looked frail. Without his usual madness, he could easily pass for a sick man. His black robes were now soaked with his own blood, making him appear even closer to death.

"So, what will you do with him? Will you leave him behind with a guard?"

"That's a tough one. There's no guarantee he won't wake up and escape with his 'Unseen Hand', and if he gets away, we might not be able to deal with him… For now, we have no choice but to take him with us."

"The 'Unseen Hand', you say… It may be ungraceful to mention the inscrutability of the Witch Cult now, but a spell different from both magic and spirit arts is unsettling, isn't it?"

"It's also different from curses or that kind of thing. If I compare it to my world's common sense, it's closer to psychic powers. You could even say the Unseen Hand is a variant of psychokinesis."

Following the caster's intent, invisible hands perform actions.

It was precisely that; if applied to modern knowledge from his original world, it would fall under psychokinesis. The fact that Subaru could see it meant it was likely a different category altogether.

"Anyway, there's no way to prevent it. Even if we bind his hands, it probably won't affect the 'Unseen Hand.' Speaking of which, how do you restrain mages?"

"If your opponent is a mage, you simply need to cover their mouth to prevent them from chanting. It's difficult with spirit users, as spirits themselves can manipulate mana."

"I see. Indeed, Puck doesn't seem like the type to stay quiet even if he heard Emilia-tan was captured."

After seeing his true form, Subaru's perception of that small, grey-furred cat had changed considerably.

Regardless of Puck's usual demeanor, his entire being was devoted to Emilia. Even if the aforementioned situation occurred, scattering everyone other than Emilia would be a trifle for him.

Subaru wasn't confident he could calmly converse with the usually peaceful Puck again. He didn't want to believe things had changed, but…

"And what are you doing while I'm lost in thought, little one?"

"Not 'little one', it's Tivey. Yes, just a quick search of his belongings."

Tivey rummaged through Petelgeuse's pockets after finishing the treatment.

The black robe's pockets seemed surprisingly deep, and Tivey pulled out item after item that had been stowed inside.

"Portable food and a lagmite stone. Oh, he even has a wallet."

“That’s a surprisingly mundane item list for someone like him. Also, that’s not very polite, no matter that you’re a mercenary.”

“I pride myself on being the intellectual of the group, but at heart, I’m still a mercenary. Taking spoils from the vanquished is… what is this?”

While uttering such stark realities, Tivey tilted his head, holding a black-bound book. Subaru recognized it and let out an “Ah!”

“That’s the book Pete-ko called the Gospel.”

“—! This is the Gospel! Ew, I touched it!”

Tivey reacted instantly with revulsion at Subaru’s words.

He dropped the Gospel he was holding as if it were hot, threw it on the ground, and then kicked sand over it as he backed away. He looked just like a panicked kitten.

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https://www.deviantart.com/robinalv

"Be careful with books… as a book lover myself, that's a bit disheartening. Even if they're just light novels."

Recalling the many stories he had devoured, Subaru picked up the fallen book and brushed off the dust. However Tivey shook his head at him.

"Y-You should let go of it right away, I think. The Gospel is like proof of initiation that reaches the Witch Cultists' hands. If you touch it, your head might go crazy, you know?!"

"I don't think my mental damage resistance over the past few days has increased enough for me to be driven mad by just one book… I can't read what's inside."

He flipped through the contents, but the writing was in some mysterious language that was neither the I-script, Ro-script, nor Ha-script Subaru had been studying.

It looked somewhat like overly artistic hiragana, but it was too stylized to read, making comprehension difficult. Regardless,

"I'll keep it, just in case. Even if I can't read it, someone else might."

It was an Archbishop's possession. Perhaps this "Gospel" could provide a clue to understanding their true nature.

That was the hope behind keeping it, but Tivey's gaze, watching him, still couldn't hide his apprehension.

"Don't be so scared. Besides, for someone so scared of the book, you were pretty diligently searching his pockets, weren't you?"

"Between a cursed person and a book that might curse me, I'm more afraid of the latter. Besides, if I and Big Sis are here, defeating a cursed person is no problem."

"Oh, yeah! Mimi and Tivey can do it easily!"

Still not engaging with the content of the conversation, the older sister agreed with her brother's words through her actions.

Feeling even a touch of amusement at their exchange, Subaru, still clutching the Gospel, looked down at Petelgeuse lying on the ground.

"So, were there any other notable belongings? If there was a map, we might find a rendezvous point for his subordinates, or if we're lucky, even a Witch Cult meeting place."

"I don't see any such belongings. Aside from that Gospel, he looks like he came out with only the clothes on his back."

In terms of light clothing, Petelgeuse's attire was indeed peculiar. But twisting his head wouldn't provide an answer.

Deciding that no further gains could be made here, Subaru turned around.

"For now, restrain him tightly and keep watch so he doesn't wake up. If he does wake up, just hit him once to knock him out again. It's brutal, but can I count on you, Wilhelm-san?"

"I am called the Sword Devil; I shall undertake it. What's next, evacuation?"

Wilhelm tied Petelgeuse up with a rope and, hoisting the small figure onto his shoulder, asked. Subaru nodded, confirming, "That's right."

"Regardless of clearing out the Witch Cult, getting Emilia-tan and the others to safety is the priority. After we get everyone away from 'Sloth', we'll decide what to do with him."

"Dropping him into the outside world from the Great Waterfall while he's unconscious. Or perhaps sealing him in a magic stone like the Witch they worship, that's also an option."

"I want to hear more details, but let's put it off. It's good to have options."

They would iron out the details of Petelgeuse's fate later.

Wilhelm’s vigilant eyes would eliminate the possibility of escape and suicide. All that was left was for the other teams’ attacks to succeed and for them not to make any missteps.

“Alright. Well then, finally, after a long time… shall we go meet my goddess?”

In some ways, this required even more nerve than facing Petelgeuse.

With his heart burning with such resolve, Subaru and the others headed towards the village, aiming for a rendezvous.

3

Exiting the trees and rejoining the road, Patrasche and the other ground dragons, who had been waiting, greeted Subaru’s group.

The plan was for successful assault teams to ride the ground dragons they’d left behind and rendezvous at the village. So, by the time Subaru arrived, only one team remained unaccounted for.

Though he felt a slight unease, that dissipated when he realized the remaining team included Ricardo and Lyra.

“Well, I think we’re over the hump. You got your revenge from last time, too. You can praise me, Patrasche.”

Subaru, with a hint of self-importance, addressed Patrasche, who knew nothing of his previous demise—being strangled by a thick neck. The ground dragon, as if reluctantly humoring her rider, rubbed her snout against him.

“Whoa, whoa, what’s this? You actually have a cute side… Ow, wait, that hurts, your scales are rough and scratchy, ow, ow, ow, hey, come on, cut it out…!”

Subaru stumbled backward and fell to the ground, but Patrasche continued to rub against him relentlessly. As a result, Natsuki Subaru was left helplessly rolling on the ground, his best clothes ruined and covered in dirt.

He stood up grumbling, glaring at Patrasche, but the noble ground dragon feigned ignorance in front of her dirt-stained rider.

“To think there were days I believed we understood each other… What kind of treatment is this? You just wait, you lizard! Someday, I’ll ride you until you’re whimpering!”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while, Subaru-dono, but the ground dragon you’re riding is female.”

“You’re a girl?!”

Subaru was aghast at the unexpected revelation of his companion’s gender.

That changed the meaning of their recent displays of affection. If this were a light novel, he might expect a personification development in the future, but—

“My hands are already full with my heroines, so no can do! Your feelings are appreciated, but even if you’re personified, I can’t accept them… cough!”

A sideways swing of her tail landed perfectly in his ribs, making Subaru choke and writhe in agony. Patrasche, as always, looked down at him with cool eyes. It seemed that only a parameter of affection existed between Subaru and her.

“F-From now on too… I’m counting on you.”

Patrasche, as if to say, “That’s fine”, lowered her back, and skillfully let the wobbly Subaru climb on. Together, they headed towards the village.

Along the way, there was a moment when Wilhelm struck the reawakening Petelgeuse, knocking him unconscious again with a blow that made one want to avert their eyes. While this was happening—

“I can see the village now.”

“—It seems the others have already arrived.”

As the village gradually came into view in the distance, Wilhelm narrowed his eyes and reported this to Subaru. As always, no matter how hard Subaru squinted, he could only vaguely make out the village's shape. How different were their physical compositions?

Nevertheless, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing that their companions, who had been leading the waiting ground dragons, had arrived safely.

This time, there was no worry of Petelgeuse having gotten ahead of them at the village, as he was secured. If they could successfully evacuate Emilia and the others from the village, they could face the Witch Cult without any lingering concerns—

"…I sense some trouble."

"Huh? No way. Why? Didn't we handle things pretty well this time?"

However, leaving Subaru's sense of relief behind, Wilhelm's face clouded over. Subaru didn't believe he would lie pointlessly here, so he urged Patrasche forward and galloped into the village grounds.

And there, Subaru saw,

"I humbly implore you. —My name is Julius Juukulius. A Royal Guard Knight, belonging to the Royal Guard Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica!"

Kneeling, bathed in the gazes of the villagers and merchants surrounding him, the handsome man loudly declared his name—it was Julius.

Chapter 69:
The Fragments of Each Day

1

—An unusual atmosphere enveloped the village.

At the center of the village, the Witch Cult subjugation force could be seen, led by Julius, who was on one knee with his head bowed. None of them seemed to be severely wounded, so it was safe to assume the surprise attack on the Witch Cult itself had been a success.

After that, the plan was for each team to enter the village and guide the evacuation, but…

“What in the world is going on here?”

Unable to grasp the situation, Subaru furrowed his brows, seeking an answer from the scene before him.

In the village center were Julius and the subjugation force. Standing behind them, as if hiding, was a group of merchants who appeared to have just arrived. As before, it was the familiar faces, minus Otto, lined up side by side, their profiles etched with deep anxiety and confusion.

Facing this group were the villagers, all familiar faces to Subaru as well. The children seemed to be hidden indoors, while the adults, including the youth group, stood face to face with the knights.

At the head of these villagers, directly confronting Julius, was—

“—Ram!”

A lovely girl with short, pink hair, looking charming in a delicate apron dress. Yet, her expression was sullen, and the arrogant way she folded her arms sharply distinguished her from her sister.

She was a major source of Subaru’s emotional support, and the fact that she had the same face only amplified the sense of discord, a significant incongruity upon reflection.

"Subaru, you're here—"

"…Barusu, you're back."

At Subaru's loud call, the two leaders of the groups reacted simultaneously.

Julius's face lit up as if he'd seen a ray of hope, while Ram's expressionless face, devoid of emotion, formed a displeased frown.

Feeling a complex reaction to Julius's welcoming mood and a wry amusement at Ram's unfriendly demeanor, Subaru dismounted Patrasche and rushed toward them.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, I don't get the situation, but calm down anyway. How about you let me handle this problem?"

"Barusu? That's utterly ridiculous… Anyway, what nerve do you have coming back here?"

"I'm glad your sharp tongue is still intact. Don't think that'll get me down."

Ram gave Subaru a dismissive, cold stare, but seeing him effortlessly deflect her sharp words, a hint of surprise flickered in her eyes. Finding a certain pleasure in this, Subaru cleared his throat and turned back to Julius.

"What happened… I'm dying to ask, but first, a confirmation. It's safe to say the surprise attack went well, right?"

"Flawlessly, thanks to the signal you sent up. Although, a few of them had gotten out of their hideout, so we couldn't avoid drawing our swords."

"It's fine as long as there are no casualties on our side. We handled things well too. Wilhelm has custody of the Sin Archbishop."

Subaru pointed, and Wilhelm, positioned slightly away from the commotion, raised a hand. At his feet lay Petelgeuse, wrapped in a mat, and Wilhelm's hand rested on his sword hilt, ready to act instantly if anything happened.

Seeing this, Julius let out a sigh of relief and said, "As expected."

"The preliminary stage of the operation has largely succeeded, I suppose. However, a problem has arisen."

"So it seems. I don't know what's going on, but…"

A gaze pierced the back of his head, where quiet, hushed discussions were taking place. Turning to the source, he met Ram, who stood with folded arms, trying to burn Subaru with her gaze.

Subaru sighed, shrugging his shoulders with a weary expression.

"After days apart, don't be so prickly. I'm not asking for a hug, but I think I can expect a warm word or two, can't I?"

"Do you want a sharp insult, one that brings warm blood to the surface? I can't indulge Barusu's masochistic tendencies. What is this group doing here?"

"What do you mean, 'what are they doing'? I painstakingly wrote that letter, didn't I? If merchants are here, then envoys from the capital should have arrived too."

"Subaru, that's the problem."

Subaru tilted his head, confused by Ram's questioning. From behind him, Julius reached out, touched his shoulder, and presented the issue. But Subaru still couldn't quite grasp its meaning.

"The letter… the official letter, you mean. Yes, indeed, the envoy brought a letter. An official letter, they called it."

In a low, quiet voice, Ram reached into her maid's uniform.

Subaru recognized the lack of intonation in her voice and blinked, wondering what was happening. It was a prelude to Ram feeling an unbearable anger.

“An official letter delivered with a grand envoy—a blank official letter, how amusing. May I ask what this means, Barusu?”

The letter, thrust out as if to accuse him, was unfolded before Subaru’s eyes.

For a moment, his vision blurred out of focus, then, startled, Subaru took a step back and saw it. The letter in Ram’s hand—the official letter—was completely blank.

“Blank?! Why?! That can’t be right… because!”

“I opened it, expecting important news, and this is what I got. On top of that, unknown people have been barging into the village, and now even an armed group. It would be crazy not to be on guard.”

“That’s not it! These people are from Crusch-san’s camp, and Anastasia-san’s mercenary group… no, first of all, the content of this letter is…”

“Su-ba-ru-kyun~!”

Snatching the letter from Ram’s hand, he stared intently at the blank page. He then tried to blurt out a confused, excuse-like explanation, but it was cut short by a finger that suddenly reached out from behind him.

He turned, wincing at the pain in his ear, to find Ferris’s cat-like smile close to his face. Ferris flicked Subaru’s nose with the hand opposite to the one pinching his ear.

“Ow!”

“Calm down, take a deep breath, and let’s sort out what needs to be said, ‘kay? No need to rush, most things are going smoothly, so don’t you worry. Right?”

“Even if you tell me to calm down, it’s not that easy to just calm…”

“Shall I kiss you with my tongue to forcibly calm you down?”

“I’m calm! My blood just rushed away at an incredible speed!

Cooldown!”

Before the mischievous eyes could come any closer, Subaru straightened his back and retreated from the spot. He put some distance between them in a triple axel-like stance and then looked down at the letter in his hand again.

It looked exactly like the letter he and Rem had painstakingly written together at Crusch’s mansion before leaving the capital, meant to be carried by the envoy Anastasia had arranged.

However, it seemed the contents had completely vanished, or rather, had been swapped out.

“So, this uproar is the result of the preliminary information not getting through. Then, what was Julius shouting his name about earlier?”

“I was getting carried away and almost started a conflict, you see. I had no choice but to reveal my name and try to calm things down. Your arrival made that worry moot, however.”

Julius stroked his purple hair, then sighed wistfully, “However…”

“Now everyone knows I am Julius, a Royal Knight.”

“Just so you know, everyone who knew your face and name already knew, okay? —Putting that aside, I appreciate you stopping what was almost a riot.”

“No, it’s a knight’s duty.”

Julius smiled, not taking offense at Subaru’s indirect thanks. Feeling a vague irritation at his demeanor, Subaru cleared his throat and looked at Ram again.

Her sharp gaze had grown even more intense, two shades sharper than before, after having her conversation interrupted multiple times. He felt a strong premonition that he might physically be cut at any moment.

“The official letter being blank was… well, a misunderstanding on our part. The main points are two: the Witch Cult is lurking, targeting the mansion, and we've prepared dragon carriages with the help of the merchants for an evacuation. We want you to ride in them with the villagers and flee to a safe place."

"Are you going to tell me these heavily armed gentlemen are merchants too?"

"Ah… no, these people are…"

Subaru stammered, responding to Ram, who maintained her hostile stance. But the answer to her last question came not from Subaru, but from—

"We are reinforcements, preceding the alliance recently formed between Her Grace Duchess Crusch Karsten and Lady Emilia."

A chestnut-haired figure stepped forward and knelt. His respectful, deferential bow was flawless, and his graceful movements were proof of excellent training.

The knight, dressed in women's clothing and adorned with cat ears, delivered his formal address with a refined posture that was unimaginable from his usual whimsical, mischievous demeanor.

Ferris looked up at the standing Ram and said in a quiet voice,

"My name is Felix Argyle. I am the foremost knight of Her Grace Duchess Crusch Karsten and her representative for this alliance. Words cannot express my apologies for any communication failures, but… I would humbly request that you prioritize listening to Sir Subaru's explanation now."

"…Alliance."

Ram muttered softly, then looked at Subaru. She touched her thin lips, a difficult frown creasing her brow.

"It seems you fulfilled your role in the capital."

"I think if you'd just made it clearer what you expected of me, I wouldn't have struggled so much."

Subaru, without boasting about his achievements, simply stated his honest feelings. Roswaal's secret orders were too obscure. He'd died three times and received countless hints from Rem before finally grasping a clue. It was a true 'first-time killer' type of challenge.

"So, I've mainly fulfilled my role in the capital. Now I just need to achieve the purpose of my return, and I want to welcome tomorrow with everything in order. Therefore, I'd like to expedite the evacuation, but…"

"…Ram noticed the strange presence lurking in the forest too. It was quite unsettling because it didn't directly show up on her Clairvoyance. Yes, the Witch Cult."

Ram's Clairvoyance allowed her to synchronize with the vision of beings whose wavelengths matched hers, then move from one vision to another. If her words were accurate, it seemed she couldn't find a single Witch Cultist with a matching wavelength. Whether to rejoice or lament was debatable, considering the pros and cons.

"We've largely defeated them, about eighty percent. We've captured their commander here too."

Subaru reported the current results to the displeased Ram. Hearing this, Ram blinked in surprise, the first time she had done so in this situation.

"Doesn't that mean they're pretty much annihilated?"

"When it comes to these guys, if you see one, you should assume there are thirty. We can't rest easy until we've hunted them all down. So, to be absolutely safe, evacuation is essential."

"Is holing up in the mansion a bad idea?"

"They'd burn it down without a second thought. If you don't want the mansion, full of our memories, to be incinerated, it's better to just run."

As Subaru offered this rather chilling analogy, Ram visibly winced. She seemed to have reacted to the word "burn," perhaps having a bad memory of fires. Something Rem had once mentioned briefly crossed his mind, but he couldn't quite recall it.

Anyway,

"We've secured enough personnel to safely transport the villagers and the three of us from the mansion. Roswaal isn't here, is he?"

"No. Lord Roswaal is currently at the Sanctuary… with Garfiel. Ram has been ordered to wait here for Lady Emilia's decision."

"Emilia-tan, huh…"

Subaru looked around at Ram's answer, searching for the silver-haired girl. But it seemed she hadn't yet come down to the village, as she was nowhere to be seen.

At Subaru's gesture, Ram let out a small sigh.

"Lady Emilia is resting at the mansion. —She's had to endure a bit too much recently."

"Endure?"

"You'll understand soon enough, Barusu."

Subaru tilted his head, puzzled by Ram's cryptic words, but she didn't elaborate. Deciding that he wasn't getting anywhere with her, Subaru clapped his hands to gather everyone's attention, intending to at least get this group onto the dragon carriages.

"Alright, everyone, listen up! Good morning, everyone, it's been a while! My name is Natsuki Subaru! It's only been… a week, I think. I don't want to believe I've been forgotten, but I'm back!"

As he called out loudly, villagers who had been watching from a distance began to peek out one after another. Their suspicious expressions fixed on Subaru, then, recognizing a familiar face, their features began to relax slightly.

As the intensity of their gazes softened, Subaru raised both hands for everyone to see and spun around.

"I'm sorry to ask this so soon, but I need a small favor. It's a simple request. Think of it as a little picnic. I've rented dragon carriages and reserved seats for everyone. The seats are a bit hard, but they're special models with divine protection, so they won't be too bumpy. Please form groups with your friends and get in. It would be a huge help if you could go out and play for half a day, or a full day."

Subaru, by saying something akin to "Alright, everyone, form groups with your favorite people!" was unwittingly picking at his own old wounds. When that kind of announcement was made, Subaru, given his social awkwardness, would usually be immediately relegated to the 'leftover' group, and even then, he'd still feel out of place.

As he recalled such unpleasant memories from the past, the villagers exchanged glances at Subaru's present call.

"Why do we have to run away by doing something like that?"

A man with a crew cut hesitantly asked this question. The representative of the youth group, constantly touching the hilt of his sword, looked at Subaru.

"You're trying to keep things light, but you mean we're running away, right? Abandoning the village… why do we have to do that?"

"This is just how I am, so don't try to find any hidden meanings, but there's no need to exaggerate by thinking about abandoning the village, okay? Really, just give us half a day…"

"—It's the Witch Cult, isn't it?"

When the crew-cut youth quietly murmured this, a ripple of unease spread throughout the village.

It wasn't just the villagers; the group of merchants, who had been watching to see how the discussion would turn out, also reacted. Their faces were etched with tension, and their lips trembled.

"It really is the Witch Cult."

"How terrifying… why are such dangerous people here?"

"It's obvious. It's just obvious. Damn it, what was the lord thinking…"

"Why would a half-demon… a half-elf…"

"Hey, hold on."

Subaru held up a hand, silencing the villagers' quiet yet unmistakable words that trembled the air.

With a throat that felt dry and constricted, Subaru walked toward where the voice had come from. He turned to one of the slender young men and asked,

"What did you just say?"

"I-I didn't say anything wrong, did I? In fact, them coming here too…"

"I just asked! What you just said!"

Subaru snapped, his eyes sharp, his tone almost like he was about to grab him.

Immediately, the young man, who had been subjected to the angry outburst, his eyes darting miserably, looked around for help, but everyone looked down and didn't respond.

Abandoned by his unfeeling surroundings, he looked back at Subaru with resignation.

"I-If you get involved with a half-elf, the Witch Cultists start causing trouble. That's common knowledge. Even children know that. Yet the lord, of all people, apparently recommended a silver-haired half-elf to the King…"

"What does that have to do with what we were just talking about?"

"Because! Can't you see?! For the lord to openly support a half-elf is going to provoke the Witch Cult! In fact, you're here because of that, so if that's the case… then!"

"—Don't you dare say something stupid like 'if only such a child never existed', alright?"

The youth, carried away by momentum, was about to say something he shouldn't. But Subaru, who had anticipated his words, was quicker.

Subaru pushed the breathless youth's chest with his palm and looked around. He saw that everyone had the same fear in their eyes as the young man, and Subaru let out a deliberately loud sigh.

"Who do you think put this village in danger?"

"…"

"Who exactly committed such evil deeds that they're feared as witches or whatever?"

"…"

"Aren't all of you looking at the wrong people? I get that it's easier to vent your frustrations on someone you know is there, rather than unknown entities, and I'm one of those people, so I can't really lecture you, but…"

Everyone's frustrations flow from top to bottom.

Everyone prefers to direct their grievances and whispers toward those weaker than themselves. Subaru, as a representative of the weak, understood this better than anyone.

Even so, Subaru wanted to believe this, even if he knew it was selfish.

"I know I'm the worst. So, I want to believe that everyone else has something good about them, somewhere. I know it's a kid's selfish wish, but please. —Don't make me think this wasn't worth the trouble."

Subaru strongly wanted to help Emilia, Ram, and Beatrice at the mansion. Just as much, Subaru wanted to help the villagers he had spent his days with. Even though their time together was short, Subaru had begun to grow fond of the villagers who had treated him warmly. That's why he didn't want them to betray his impression of them.

With this selfish wish, Subaru bowed his head.

"Whether it's Roswaal or anything else, that doesn't matter right now. And anything about Emilia… the half-elf girl at the mansion, we can deal with that later. It's dangerous in this village right now. So, I want you to evacuate. I've prepared for that."

From the previous young man's attitude, he could sense a deeply rooted prejudice against half-elves.

Subaru had only known of it superficially, but now, seeing familiar people direct it toward someone close to them, he realized his knowledge had truly been superficial.

Had Emilia always endured such contempt?

As Subaru bowed his head, someone suddenly stood beside him.

It was Julius, resplendent in his flamboyant Royal Knight uniform. He stood proudly beside Subaru, bending his tall, slender frame in a deep bow.

"Please, I beg you to listen. I swear by the pride of dragons and knights that your safety is assured. For now, please, listen to his words."

"…"

Thoughts of "meddlesome" or "still so dramatic" ran through Subaru's mind, but what truly filled his heart was pure gratitude for Julius.

Feeling a little awkward at having such thoughts about the handsome knight's profile, Subaru kept his head bowed and averted his gaze from Julius beside him.

"I'm not going to thank you."

“Hmph. —That’s what I wanted to hear.”

Indeed, he truly thought this man was insufferable.

2

“It feels like ages since I’ve walked through the mansion with Barusu like this. Even though it’s only been about a week.”

“I completely agree. Though I imagine the content of our sentiments differs considerably.”

“Oh, really?”

“Absolutely.”

As they walked side by side down the corridor of their nostalgic home—Roswaal’s mansion—Subaru and Ram exchanged such casual remarks.

Thinking back, he had only managed to reach Roswaal’s mansion and explore its interior twice during his repeated days. The first time was in a mansion completely devoid of any signs of life.

“—Ram.”

“Did you call?”

“Nah, just remembering Ram. You, Ram, right now, are perfectly fine as you are.”

“Barusu, your nonsensical way of speaking is even more irritating after so long.”

Ram coolly brushed off Subaru’s teasing remarks with a serene expression.

She walked a little ahead, in her maid’s uniform—in the first world, Subaru had found her lifeless body on the bed. He remembered that the only comfort at that time was that her death hadn’t been gruesome.

In the second iteration, the mansion collapsed due to Puck's rapid growth, and in the third iteration—just recalling it sent shivers down his spine.

"Barusu, you're walking past."

"Oh, sorry, sorry… wait, this is—"

Unaware that Ram had stopped, lost in thought, Subaru walked past her, then turned back to look at the door. Ram had led him to a guest room, which was—

"Isn't this Emilia-tan's room?"

"Right now, it's just Ram, Lady Emilia, and Lady Beatrice in the mansion, so we're gathered in the central wing. Especially after how tired she was last night."

Recalling what Ram had told him, Subaru lowered his gaze slightly, thinking of Emilia's emotional strain.

He had just been roughly told by Ram what Emilia had been doing since returning to the mansion. After returning from the capital with Roswaal, and after he left to visit various influential figures, she had apparently been studying tirelessly, even foregoing sleep.

"She was engrossed as if possessed. As if something unpleasant had happened in the capital and she was trying to forget it."

"Ugh…!"

"As if something unpleasant had happened with a man in the capital and she was trying to forget that man."

"Don't insert weird words in between! I can't… completely deny it, but…"

Ram sighed at Subaru's trailing off. Then, she shook her head in exasperation, pointing to the room door.

"She must have gotten even more exhausted after Ram noticed the anomaly in the forest with her Clairvoyance and reported it. You can tell from the villagers' attitude just now, can't you?"

"I can vaguely imagine, but I don't really want to put it into words. —Rejection, huh?"

"Rejection? Barusu has quite a gentle imagination."

Ram scoffed at Subaru's words, then immediately erased her expression. After a beat of silence from Subaru, she spoke in a tired tone.

"—Denial, you mean. If it were rejection, there would still be a hand to reach out. To have an outstretched hand slapped away means it was touched. But what about denial?"

"…………"

"If they even shun being touched, how can you ever bridge the distance?"

Subaru gasped, unable to answer Ram's probing words.

Ram didn't seem to expect an answer from him either. Without showing disappointment, she sighed, signaling time was up, and then continued, "I was being mean."

"Noticing the ominous presence in the forest, Lady Emilia went down to the village to try and evacuate the villagers to the mansion. And she was denied. You know Barusu, she's not so understanding that she'd back down immediately after being denied."

"But I also know she's not the kind of girl who wouldn't be hurt by being treated so cruelly, as if there's no way to reach her."

Unable to suppress his irritation, Subaru bit his tongue and glared at the corridor window, narrowing his eyes at the distant view of the village beyond.

It wasn't that they were particularly narrow-minded or heartless.

This was a common reaction, the ordinary treatment Emilia had continuously received. Was it truly so arrogant to wish that this, at least, could change?

“Then, is this feeling of mine, this utter indignation at the unreasonableness of the world, also ‘pride’?”

Having said his piece, Subaru closed his eyes once, then turned toward the door as if shaking off negative emotions.

He had wiped away the negative emotions from his face, trying to forget them, at least for this moment. As if respecting Subaru’s intentions, Ram didn’t comment on it.

“Lady Emilia, are you awake?”

Two small, firm knocks echoed in the cold morning air of the corridor.

A few seconds passed after Ram’s call and knocks.

“—Ram? Yes, I’m awake.”

A beautiful, silver-bell-like sound, captivating to hear, lightly touched Subaru’s earlobe.

The calm, noble, and resolute purity of her voice made Subaru temporarily forget the anxiety that had been in his chest.

All the various worries—what to say when he met her, what words to string together—all flew away in that instant.

He had returned to hear that voice, to meet her.

“Excuse me, Lady Emilia. —Barusu has returned.”

Pushing open the door, Ram bowed respectfully and reported the subordinate’s return to the temporary mistress.

Following her small figure as she led the way inside, Subaru, forgetting to breathe, stumbled in halfway, his steps unsure.

“Eh, Subaru—?”

“Lo—”

He hadn't planned it, but he had hoped to greet her with a smile when they reunited. So, Subaru put on as gentle a smile as possible, lightly raised a hand, focused on Emilia who had turned back to him—

—And Emilia's back, her fair skin dazzling from being mid-change, was burned into his eyes.

"—Oh, how rude of me."

Smoothly, Ram stuck out her tongue and playfully hit her head with her fist in front of the two rigid figures.

However, neither of the two, excluding Ram, had the presence of mind to retort to her mischievous gesture.

They gazed at each other silently, Subaru's gaze sweeping from Emilia's face, to her exposed back, down her slender, gracefully long legs, and even to her bare toes as if tracing them.

The moment his prepared smile turned into a lecherous grin—

"What are you doing to a maiden before her marriage—"

Suddenly, a small gray cat landed before his eyes, unleashing magic power at Subaru's frozen, leering face—powerless, Subaru's body was sent flying into the corridor. Ram, rushing after him, leapt into the corridor, just before Subaru was about to crash into the window.

"If the window breaks, it'll be a big problem."

"Feh?!"

Just in the nick of time, the window opened right before impact, and Subaru's body was flung outside by the momentum. Fortunately, it was the first floor, so he avoided a fatal fall, but he slid face-first across the dew-covered grass, rolled, and finally stopped by crashing into a flowerbed.

The taste of dirt was in his mouth, and a wall of heavily fertilized mud was before his eyes. His only good outfit was already bloodstained and now covered in dust, and his mean look was just how he was born.

“Puck, you overdid it… Geez, Subaru, are you okay?!”

From far, far beyond the mansion window, he heard the frantic voice of the girl he loved, and for some reason, Subaru let out a small chuckle.

Nothing was settled yet, nothing was over, but the fragments of the days he had longed to experience again seemed to sparkle brightly.

Subaru continued to chuckle, quietly, until Ram, who had come to greet him, reached out her hand as if seeing something uncanny.

Chapter 70: The Meaning of Having Came Back

1

"—Why did you come back?"

Emilia stared at him, her expression intensely serious, and asked.

Subaru saw his own face reflected in her quiet, gleaming, indigo eyes. The serene light, like a perfectly still lake surface, seemed to pierce right through him, seeing into his very soul.

Naturally, a shudder of emotion ran through Subaru's entire body.

He wasn't sure if it was a positive or negative feeling stemming from her clear, penetrating gaze.

However there was only one answer Subaru had to her question.

"—Why did you come back?"

The question was repeated.

Even though Subaru didn't answer, the question wasn't meant to rush him. Subaru held his breath at the softly pressing question, lightly moistening his lips with his tongue.

Then, after briefly closing his eyes—

"Hey."

"…"

Silence answered him. However it wasn't a withheld reply; it was an invitation for him to continue. Knowing that, Subaru didn't falter and formed his next words.

They were facing each other, both holding complex emotions, yet they had been given this chance to speak—

"After all that chaotic commotion just now, isn't it pretty hard to maintain this atmosphere?"

"…Coming from you, Subaru, that really doesn't sit right with me."

At Subaru's wry remark, Emilia let out a deep sigh and, looking utterly powerless and resigned, allowed a faint smile to touch her lips.

2

Ram's guidance in Subaru's "lucky pervert" moment met a spectacular demise thanks to Puck's fatherly, educational intervention.

After that, with Ram's continued "assistance," Subaru was thrown into the garden. He kept grinning unsettlingly until Ram helped him up, earning her a strange look. Eventually, his disgraceful appearance made its way to Emilia—

"Did you hit your head hard? You were upside down, but did you strain your neck? Oh, there's dirt in your ear… Why are your clothes covered in blood and mud? Are you okay? Are you hurt? Here, if you're hurt, hurry and take them off…"

"Whoa, wait… No, no, not now, there are people watching and it's still daytime, so don't just strip me—!"

"You really must have hit your head hard…"

"I'm always like this! Thanks for worrying, but that look in your eyes is killing me!"

Pushing away Emilia, who kept reaching out to him with concern, Subaru shook his head, rotated his neck to dislodge the dirt from his ear, brushed off his clothes, and then, to show he was perfectly fine, did some high knees on the spot before re-entering the drawing-room.

Inside, separated by a small round table, Puck and Ram, the masterminds of the recent commotion, were facing each other, calmly enjoying tea.

"Your tea is excellent."

"Oh no, it's not nearly good enough to earn such praise from the Great Spirit."

"What are you two so calmly having tea for?"

Subaru interrupted their typical polite exchange, slamming his hands on the table and glaring at them. However, the two ignored Subaru's scowl and continued to sip their tea with perfect composure. Puck's tiny cup made for a strangely surreal sight.

They both swallowed their tea. Then, after a breath, they looked up at Subaru in unison.

"Thanks to Ram's little 'oopsie', you got quite a show, didn't you? Let's just call it even."

"Why are you acting so high and mighty? Are you the king?"

"You should be grateful for my boundless mercy that your head is still attached. When I think of the unspeakable shame Lia felt, I deeply lament my own lack of power."

"And you tried to blow my head off! I swear, there aren't many people who've died from a 'lucky pervert' incident!"

The world is a vast place, so perhaps there are people who've died that way if you look hard enough. Still, even Subaru, with his impressive record of consecutive deaths, would pass on that particular demise.

Anyway, after all that—

"It's fine if you're not hurt. There are a lot of things we need to talk about, but…"

Subaru frowned at their unrepentant responses. Walking past him, Emilia murmured in a quiet voice.

Her silver hair flowed with her movements, and as she turned, a shimmer arced. Subaru, captivated, watched as she sat on the bed and stared at him.

"—Why did you come back?"

And so, she returned to her initial question.

Finishing that recollection, it was clear that maintaining seriousness was indeed difficult.

Subaru scratched his head at the situation, which had inadvertently turned comical, though he hadn't intended to make light of it. Oblivious to Subaru, Emilia pouted, her lips turned down as if sulking.

"Ugh, it's all, all Ram and Puck's fault. It wasn't supposed to be like this… it shouldn't be like this. Honestly."

"My deepest apologies, Lady Emilia. If your anger has not yet subsided, I am prepared to accept any rebuke or punishment. —Barusu is."

"Don't you have any awareness that you're the one who caused this?!"

"Ram always believes Ram is superior and Barusu is inferior."

"You… you bully! You're a bully! I've never seen a maid who's so far from obedient, with such a brazen 'might makes right' attitude!"

Given her perfectly refined demeanor and appearance, Ram's audaciousness was shocking to witness again. As he continued this conversation, which showed no progress from the days he'd left behind, Ram suddenly narrowed her eyes and observed Subaru carefully.

"Wh-What is it…?"

"Your face looks a little less anxious. About a hair's breadth better than before."

"—!"

Subaru involuntarily held his breath at her mercilessly considerate words.

In truth, just moments ago, Subaru's limbs had felt as heavy as lead, and his heart had been gripped by anxiety rather than excitement at the prospect of reuniting with Emilia.

However now, that sense of impatience and unease had somewhat eased, and his tongue, which should have been parched, felt no pain.

He realized it was Ram's consideration, an attempt to lighten his mood, and a deeply complex feeling of gratitude washed over Subaru. Therefore,

"You know, you're so hard to understand, sometimes I wonder about you."

"Women always toy with men using unanswerable riddles. If we were easily understood and grew boring, men would simply wander off, wouldn't they?"

"You're just trying to smooth things over with some plausible-sounding nonsense, aren't you? I'm not impressed. —Though I am grateful."

"Lady Emilia. Barusu just thanked Ram for letting him peek at your changing. He is the lowest kind of pervert, this man."

"I wouldn't make such an elaborate perverted comment! You were just being yourself before, weren't you?!"

His gratitude nowhere to be found, Subaru shouted his retort while Ram covered her ears, feigning deafness. Her utterly brazen "business as usual" attitude finally left Subaru speechless.

However, upon seeing their exchange—

"—Hehe."

"Oh."

Subaru watched as Emilia put a hand to her mouth, letting out an irrepressible burst of laughter. She tried her best to hold it in, but when Subaru noticed her efforts and raised an eyebrow, she seemed to give up.

"It's just, you two are just messing around like that… it makes me feel silly for trying to hold back."

"It's fine! It's better to talk and laugh than to be angry and sulking, right? A lot has happened, but it's always better to talk and laugh about it. For that, I'll play the fool as much as it takes. Right, Ram?"

"—Hmph."

"Huh, she's not playing along?!"

Subaru, delighted by Emilia's response, inadvertently got carried away, his words tumbling out, while Ram looked at him with disdain. The more Subaru reacted, the more Emilia's lips curved into a smile, creating a loop.

"You two really haven't changed. It feels like… I haven't genuinely laughed in such a long time."

"Indeed. Ram has not seen Lady Emilia laugh like that in quite some time either."

Emilia used a finger to wipe away the tears at the corners of her eyes as Ram, bowing slightly, quietly stated.

Emilia's expression stiffened slightly upon hearing that, and Ram, seeing it, acted as if she had accomplished her task.

"Barusu. I'll leave the rest to you, so handle it well."

"Wait, what about you? What about this weird atmosphere?"

"I've created an easy atmosphere for you to talk in, haven't I? The rest is Barusu's job. Ram has many preparations to make, and is busy. Because of the reason Barusu brought."

Subaru had no choice but to fall silent under her serene gaze, which looked up at him pointedly.

Confirming Subaru had no objections, Ram bowed deeply to Emilia.

“Lady Emilia, Ram has preparations, so I will excuse myself for a moment. As for the situation, Barusu will explain… Ram will follow Lady Emilia’s judgment and instructions.”

“Ram… but, I…”

“Ram will follow any of Lady Emilia’s judgments. That is Lord Roswaal’s instruction.”

Cutting off the hesitant Emilia, Ram stated only that plainly and then left the room. Her gaze, directed at Subaru just before the door closed, was incredibly sharp, instilling in him the feeling that he needed to straighten his back. Right until the very end, he had caused her trouble.

Looking at the table, Puck was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps he had stealthily slipped into Emilia’s hair, or maybe he had dissipated into mana and left the scene. At any rate, officially, the room was now empty save for the two of them.

Subaru and Emilia, alone.

“It feels like it’s been a really long time since you and I talked like this, Subaru.”

Subaru, who had been enduring the awkward silence, unable to find a way to start the conversation, was broken out of it by Emilia’s words.

As Subaru looked up, Emilia’s eyes, still seated on the bed, were calm, and he could see no lingering embers of that past intensity.

First, he felt he had managed to overcome the initial awkwardness in the face of that fact. Though, rather than overcoming it, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had been allowed to overcome it.

“Yeah, being away from Emilia-tan felt like a thousand years in a day. My Emilia-ase levels were dropping daily, and I thought I'd suffocate from the deficiency."

"Emilia-ase" was Subaru's colloquial term for the "Emilia component" that filled him through actions like conversing with Emilia, gazing at her, or smelling her lingering scent.

When the deficiency reached its final stages, it would manifest in harmful side effects like despair and cynicism, making prompt replenishment an urgent and troublesome symptom.

"Is that why you came back?"

"—Nah, that's part of it, but it's not the only reason."

Emilia's response to his lighthearted remark was flat.

Subaru took it as a cue and, with a remarkably calm heart, began to think.

He had to reconcile what had happened when they had gone their separate ways, back then, in that place.

"Wanting to see Emilia-tan is the biggest reason, but of course, there are many other reasons. The next most important is—I wanted to be your strength."

"—!"

Subaru saw Emilia gasp, her hand gripping the bedsheets tightly. Her expression stiffened, and deep agitation spread in her amethyst eyes.

However, she quickly hid the shock that ran through her under a feigned calmness, plastering on a superficial smile that even Subaru could see through.

"What… what are you talking about? Strength? There's nothing really. There's nothing for Subaru to worry about, nothing at all…"

"You're terrible at keeping secrets, Emilia-tan. I came all the way up here through the village, you know? I pretty much know what happened."

"…I see. So that's it."

At Subaru's observation, Emilia's smile faded, losing its strength.

Even so, she was admirable, somehow managing to lift her face, which had begun to droop, and not avert her gaze from Subaru. A person overwhelmed by powerlessness quickly gives in to their own will and looks down. But she would not allow herself to do that.

"You see, Subaru. I… well, I'm a half-elf."

"Yeah, I know. I was at the Royal Selection, and I had chances to hear about it from various people. I probably know more about it than you think, Emilia-tan."

Approaching, Subaru moved to Emilia's side, who was seated on the bed. He then knelt to meet her eye level, reflecting himself directly in her indigo eyes.

"I don't resent being a half-elf. I think there's no point in comparing myself to others and pointing out differences, and I don't want to demean myself by thinking that being different is a bad thing. That's how I feel about my own blood."

"Yeah. I think that's incredibly admirable."

"But, it seems people around me don't see it that way so easily. Just being a half-elf makes a lot of people feel anxious and scared."

Emilia spoke calmly, trying to suppress her emotions as much as possible, narrating it plainly. Subaru, listening, was desperate not to let the overwhelming, tightening affection in his chest show on his face.

In that way, the sight of her, diligently battling her surroundings and the lamentations of her own weak heart that arose from them, was beautiful, noble, and fragile enough to seem as if she might vanish.

"Ram told me. There's a strange atmosphere in the forest. Even the

Lesser Spirits are terrified every morning because they sense something dreadful. Surely, something terrible is going to happen. Something so awful you'd want to turn your eyes away."

"…"

"That's the situation right now. It's dangerous for you to come back here, Subaru. So, if possible, you should leave the mansion immediately… Your treatment must still be ongoing, right? So…"

"If I just left, what would you do, Emilia-tan? You're in danger, and so are the villagers, right? Do you think I'd be the kind of guy who'd just leave without hearing about that?"

Despite her plea, Subaru shook his head directly. In response, Emilia bit her lip faintly, then, with a slight "Um," hesitation laced her tongue.

"Of course, I'll leave the mansion as soon as I'm ready too. I have a lot of things to think about once I meet up with Roswaal. The villagers will come with me. I even talked to them in the village about it…"

"They didn't listen to you, did they? Wasn't that what your earlier preamble was about? You're stumbling over your words, that's not like you, Emilia-tan."

"Ah…"

Realizing the incoherence of her own words, Emilia closed her mouth awkwardly.

Her demeanor was incredibly fresh to Subaru, but it wasn't the kind of feeling that brought him any joy. So, Subaru tilted his head toward the door leading to the village.

"—I've made preparations to evacuate the villagers and you, Emilia-tan."

"…Huh?"

"I bowed my head to all sorts of people in the capital and gathered multiple merchant dragon carriages in the village. It's enough to evacuate everyone. There's even a spot for you and Ram. I couldn't arrange first-class, though, since comfort wasn't the priority."

Emilia's eyes went wide as Subaru's words tumbled out one after another, unable to keep up. Still, Subaru, emphasizing the urgency of the situation and trying to demonstrate his reliability in somehow managing everything, continued:

"Most of those suspicious black guys lurking in the forest? We dealt with them thanks to the strong allies I brought from the capital. The rest of them, we'll deal with them properly after everyone's evacuated. I'll get everything done."

"Wait, just… Subaru, why did you…?"

"Maybe it's because various people advised me, warned me, made me reflect, taught me, let me rely on them, supported me, believed in me, made me believe in myself, made me want to believe, or made me try to believe… I guess that's how they helped me."

Emilia was speechless at Subaru's non-answer.

However it was all Subaru's honest feelings. The things he had been given in the days since he separated from Emilia and remained in the capital were indescribable. He had lost things too, but he came here to reclaim them. The things he had gained in those days were far greater for the current Subaru.

"I… I said terrible things to Subaru."

"It's fine. If I said I didn't care, that would be a huge lie, and honestly, there were times I cared so much it felt like a nightmare, and I thought I'd become depressed from nothing but negative thoughts."

"I'm so sorry, I really am…"

"If you just accept that without brushing it off, I'd have nowhere to stand. Oh, but, well, we're like this now, so don't worry about it. I'll keep worrying about it though, so I don't forget how stupid I can be."

Emilia's eyes widened at Subaru's words. Subaru nodded in return, his mind vividly recalling that scene, those few hours in the royal castle.

He could never forget it. He must not forget it. That humiliation, that deserved rejection.

His own foolishness, so stubbornly self-centered that he made Emilia say things she didn't want to. So,

"Now, I want to help you. I've prepared for it. It's far from perfect, but it's the best I can do with my limitations. So, I want you to take my hand."

"But, I… I can't be that weak…"

"It's okay to be weak, Emilia-tan."

Subaru smiled irresponsibly at her, who hesitated to take his outstretched hand.

Her position, her role, her future demanded her to be strong. That was probably correct. Subaru, having seen Crusch's nobility, Anastasia's tenacity, and Priscilla's arrogant self in the capital, thought those were indeed kingly qualities.

But he also thought this:

"I'm super weak and hopeless too, but I've managed to get by with various people reaching out to me. I plan to keep getting by, relying on others, of course, I don't intend to just keep borrowing. I want to pay back what I've borrowed, and use the hand that was pulled to pull others."

"Ah…"

"So, isn't it fine if you're just being pulled along at first? Even if you're weak now, let's get strong someday. For that, just sitting back-to-back is just right for now."

There's no need to be perfect from the start.

The idea that a king should be strong, noble, and more righteous than anyone else is a childish one. Yet, he knew that everyone harbored that childish illusion for such a figure.

That's why she, who aimed to be queen, was never allowed to be weak by anyone.

—However, Subaru wondered, was being weak such a bad thing?

Even if you're weak, you can still aim to become stronger, to walk forward with your head held high.

If so, then wouldn't it be fine to walk alongside someone who thinks and believes that way?

"Many people led my hand, which is why I'm here. If I can, I want to be the one to lead your hand too."

"Subaru…"

"So, take my hand, Emilia-tan. If you can allow someone to stand beside you, not in front or behind, on the path to becoming queen."

Seeing her hand slowly reach out, Subaru allowed a small smile to play on his lips.

Then, impatient to wait, as soon as their fingertips touched, he firmly grasped her hand, and pulling her arm as she let out a small gasp, Subaru also stood up.

Still holding hands, the two stood and gazed at each other from a close distance.

His heart pounded. Emotions threatened to burst. Hiding such strong feelings, Subaru twisted his lips into a mischievous grin.

"Was it a little easier to stand up?"

"…Subaru, you idiot."

In response to his question, Emilia lowered her eyes and murmured in a small voice.

Subaru's smile vanished at her reaction, and he panicked, wondering if he'd said something wrong.

"Subaru, you idiot. Seriously, you really are an idiot. Idiot, idiot, idiot."

"That's too much! No, I know I'm an idiot, yes, I'm sorry."

"I was thinking so much, you know. That I was going to be queen, and that there were so many things I had to learn and be able to do for that. I shouldn't be spoiled, and it's not good to rely on others, I was thinking so, so much!"

Placing her free hand on her hip, Emilia's voice grew lively towards the shrinking Subaru.

Listening, Subaru cradled his head in his free hand, having no choice but to endure the sudden, Emilia-induced downpour.

"The villagers wouldn't listen to me, and Ram, she listens to what I say but doesn't offer opinions. And Puck… it's useless to even ask him, and Roswaal just disappeared… I was just thinking all by myself, for so long."

At such a crucial time, neither Subaru nor Rem were with her.

If Subaru had been there, he surely could have eased the psychological burden she endured.

"I even started thinking about pretending to be a wicked witch and raining ice on the village, forcing everyone to evacuate."

"Th-That's probably a good thing you didn't do that. Let's keep it cool, okay?"

"You came back before I started! My head was already in a mess just from that, and now you're saying all sorts of things… Honestly, it's just so troublesome."

She let out a small, airy sigh, and a brief silence fell over the room.

Subaru felt awkward, at a loss, unable to understand Emilia's feelings. He'd made so many overly confident remarks, he wanted to punch his past self now, but it was too late.

If he could, he'd want to go back and pretend it never happened, and try again with more perfect words of persuasion, but that wasn't possible. Natsuki Subaru, the man who couldn't even make the most of a revenge opportunity. He truly was foolish, to his dying day.

"Subaru, you're making a hundred faces."

"Nobody says 'hundred faces' these days… It's been a while since we had this kind of exchange."

Putting his hand to his face to calm his facial muscles, Subaru looked at Emilia.

Just then, she looked up at him too. Their eyes met, and time stopped.

To the motionless Subaru, Emilia's expression was calm. She then parted her lips slightly.

"I… I think I said terrible things, but I don't think I said anything wrong."

"—Yeah, I think that's fine. I don't think my feelings at that time were wrong either. I just think the method, the expression, the process, and the result were all wrong."

"Doesn't that mean everything was wrong?"

"I'm deeply regretting it! But I still believe my feelings weren't wrong."

He would not lie about that alone.

Seeing Subaru's stubbornness, Emilia smiled faintly. Then,

"You're still holding my hand. Your hand is really warm, Subaru."

"I think my face and ears are just as hot right now, but… you're not going to say let go, are you?"

"You held my hand so firmly and pulled me up."

Lifting their clasped hands, Emilia swung them by her face.

Her smile joined his hand, and a profoundly warm sensation permeated Subaru's chest.

"Will you help me again, Subaru?"

"If you'll still allow me to."

At Subaru's answer, Emilia closed her eyes.

As if letting the received answer sink into her body, searching for her own reply within.

Then she opened her eyes, looking firmly at Subaru with her amethyst gaze.

"Tell me. About all the people and things you've prepared, Subaru."

"Alright, listen. And if you think it's amazing, you can praise me."

"Don't get carried away."

She lightly poked his head with her free hand.

It didn't hurt, but he was so happy that she had touched him that way, that tears, which shouldn't have been there, welled up in the corners of his eyes. Subaru turned his face away to hide them.

"Then, let's talk with Ram present. Seriously, I have so much I want to talk about, an inexhaustible amount, but that'll have to wait until we get past this current hurdle."

"Okay, I understand. I'm really curious, but let's do that for now."

Taking Emilia's hand, feeling pleased that she didn't resist, Subaru began to walk towards the door.

He needed to join Ram, who had left earlier, and help prepare the things to take out of the mansion. Julius and Wilhelm would probably be handling the evacuation of the villagers well.

The resolution of Subaru's internal struggle and his approach to Emilia, while the complete answer was postponed, had at least temporarily been reached.

In a sensation like a burden lifted from his shoulders, he was suddenly pulled back by his hand.

"Subaru, there's just one thing I have to say now."

"Hm?"

Pulled by Emilia, who had stopped, Subaru also stopped and turned around.

Then, to Subaru's questioning face, Emilia held her breath for a moment, and then, with a smile that bloomed like a flower, she said,

"Welcome back."

—He strongly felt that he had come back for that smile.

Chapter 71:
The Little Girl of the Forbidden Library

1

“Hey, Subaru. What was ‘Tararattararara’?”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s just an old greeting from my hometown. It means, ‘Your smile is so lovely, I could just lick it up.’”

“Then don’t ever say it again, okay?”

“That’s surprisingly harsh!”

A brief exchange after Emilia smiled at him, saying “Welcome home”.

Emilia’s refreshing smile was like a blooming flower, washing away all the negative emotions—the anxiety and impatience—that had clouded Subaru’s heart.

In response, overwhelmed by an uncontrollable pounding heart, he tried to force the gentlest smile possible and say “I’m home,” but then,

“Tararattararara.”

“Huh?”

He completely flubbed it. That was the long and short of it.

It was so pathetic and embarrassing, he couldn’t even bring himself to tell the truth.

Subaru tried to brush it off with a casual joke, and though he felt a bit dejected when it was rather sharply cut short, he and Emilia began to search the mansion for Ram. As it turned out, they found the maid they were looking for within just a few minutes of starting their search.

"Oh, you were faster than I expected."

Ram said, looking up at them from where she was ungracefully sitting on the stairs in the entrance hall.

Subaru let out a small sigh at her easygoing nature, so far from obedient, almost as if she were the mistress of the mansion.

"Even I'm surprised by how much you do things your own way. I thought I was pretty selfish, but you beat me outright without even needing a judgment."

"Winning anything feels good, so prostrate yourself, Barusu. —So, has your discussion concluded?"

The first part of her question was for Subaru, the latter part for Emilia, who was walking behind Subaru.

Emilia nodded slightly to Ram's question.

"Subaru mostly explained it. —It seems Lady Crusch's subordinates and Lady Anastasia's hired people are coming to the village. Subaru also hired some merchants… It's for our escape, right?"

"Yeah. The merchant's dragon carriage should be able to fit all the villagers, and there's a lot of goods on board that could serve as food during the evacuation. It was a pretty good idea, right?"

"Even for Barusu, that's commendable, Ram will frankly praise you. Rejoice."

"I can't rejoice when you say it like that!"

Ram's response, which always kept herself in a superior position, aside, thanks to their earlier discussion in the room, Emilia was smoothly receptive to Subaru's proposal.

Originally, she probably wanted to resolve the situation with her own hands, but,

"If I only focus on that and overlook what's important, that would be counterproductive. I'm okay, so you don't have to look so worried.”

“I’m not worried. I can feel your trust in me through your hand…”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’ve been holding it this whole time. Was it bothering you?”

Because of his unnecessary comment reminding her, the hands that had been clasped together without any issue until now parted. A feminine “Ah” escaped him, but it was too late.

Leaving Subaru, who was holding his now-separated hand up to his face and regretting his slip of the tongue, behind,

“So, Ram. I want to evacuate the villagers, but… where do you think we should go? I know I should really be the one to decide, but…”

“Lady Emilia has no local knowledge, so I won’t ask the impossible. If Ram may offer an opinion… going to the Sanctuary where Lord Roswaal headed would be best.”

“The Sanctuary… will it be safe there?”

“I cannot say for certain, but Lord Roswaal is there, and though they have their reasons, there are defensive forces. It would be much more certain than holing up here.”

Emilia thoughtfully placed a finger on her lips at Ram’s suggestion. Subaru leaned out from beside her and addressed Ram, starting with, “But first of all,”

“I keep hearing bits and pieces, but where is this Sanctuary Ros-chi went to? It often comes up with other names I’ve heard a few times, but… if I don’t know that, I can’t really make a judgment, can I?”

“The judgment is to be made by Lady Emilia. There’s no need for Barusu to worry… although that’s cruel to say. Ram doesn’t have the authority to tell Barusu that either. Lord Roswaal hasn’t given permission, so you’ll just have to keep worrying.”

“Ros-chi’s permission, huh…”

Ram remained unresponsive to Subaru's narrowed eyes. Judging that he wouldn't get anything more from her attitude, Subaru recalled the information he had heard about the Sanctuary so far.

That said, there wasn't much information on it. It was where Roswaal had gone, a place where a prominent figure in the territory resided, and as he just heard, a place where defensive forces other than Roswaal existed.

"Can I at least ask about the distance and whether they're friendly towards us? Those are essential criteria for judgment, at least."

"—Approximately, it's about eight hours by dragon carriage. Since they're in cooperation with Lord Roswaal, it's a given that they won't be hostile. However,"

Ram had been answering Subaru's questions fluently, but she paused briefly, and unusually for her, bit her lip slightly, showing hesitation. Subaru frowned in suspicion at her reaction, but Emilia understood the meaning of her reaction more clearly.

"Are you worried that half-elves might not be welcome?"

"I don't wish to burden Lady Emilia, but that is correct. The Sanctuary gathers only those with 'reasons,' so it's hard to say how much being a half-elf would stand out there… I cannot say for certain."

Again, the issue of prejudice against half-elves surfaced.

Subaru's irritation was nearing its limit with this problem that confronted them wherever they turned. But disregarding Subaru's inner turmoil, Emilia lightly drew back her chin.

"It's something I'm aware of, so it can't be helped. If my presence isn't an issue, then it seems we can evacuate the villagers to the Sanctuary, right?"

"Lord Roswaal, as the lord, would never wish to treat his subjects roughly. In that regard, Garfiel, the representative of the Sanctuary, can indeed be trusted."

With that reply, which conveyed clear trust, Emilia closed her eyes in apparent understanding. Then, she subtly glanced at Subaru, who was silently seething with suppressed anger.

“Subaru, do you have any other good ideas?”

“Well, if the Sanctuary is eight hours away and safe… then I don’t think we need to propose another route.”

In the worst case, if they struggled to find a refuge, returning to the royal capital had been one idea. Currently, with the White Whale subjugated, the Lifaus Highway was passable.

A dragon carriage could reach the royal capital in half a day at full speed. Since there were many women, children, and elderly, they would likely lose a bit of time being considerate of them, but it still wouldn’t take a full day.

They could also reunite with Crusch, who should have returned, and Rem, who was accompanying her. Measures against the Witch’s Cult would also be easier to formulate, as they were all working towards the same goal. He also thought that Crusch and Emilia, as allies, should have a proper face-to-face discussion.

“But well, there are quite a few risks involved in that too.”

First, the distance was farther than to the place called the Sanctuary.

Given that there were still unknown factors regarding their and the enemy’s strength, it was best to avoid long-distance travel as much as possible. Between half a day and a quarter day, the latter was the better choice.

Second, if the distance increased, it would take longer to return to the Mathers territory. As long as the threat of the Witch’s Cult remained, the subjugation team would have to accompany Emilia and the others until they were safely evacuated. Even if they returned after dropping them off to hunt down the remaining members of the Witch’s Cult, the possibility of them escaping due to the passage of time was undeniable.

And third, whether the safety of the Lifaus Highly was truly secured.

Subaru had once, in a previous loop, encountered the White Whale and, though barely, survived and returned without dying. At that time, the accompanying merchant Otto had thrown Subaru off the dragon carriage and successfully escaped through the fog—or so it seemed.

But in reality, it appeared he had later been attacked by the Witch's Cult and lost the life he had just saved. That incident occurred just before entering the Mathers territory after passing through the Lifaus Highway.

Subaru suspected that members of the Witch's Cult were waiting at the exit of the fog.

They hadn't encountered them this time, but that was probably because their forces outnumbered the enemy at that point, so they were overlooked.

However, if they returned with a large number of non-combatants, what would be the possibility of still being overlooked? Especially with Emilia, their target, in tow.

"When you think about it that way, there's nothing to think about, really."

"So, Subaru, you also think we should go to the Sanctuary?"

"That's the best option right now. If I can talk to Ros-chi, I can probably say something more constructive, and I don't want to burden the villagers with the move."

At the very least, it would be difficult to proceed with anything until the full picture of the territory's situation became clear. Roswaal's stance on the Royal Selection was also still somewhat ambiguous.

Subaru believed that Roswaal's vague way of speaking, lacking in specific details, largely influenced the parts Emilia was earnestly agonizing over by herself.

"In short, it means I'm going to give that gentle-looking guy a good talking-to."

"I thought we were talking about where to flee… how did it end up like this?"

"I had to go through and figure out a lot of the small details myself, and it just ended up that way. I mean, honestly, if that guy had just used clearer words when he talked, there wouldn't have been so many problems, right? This is why smart people are like this…"

Because his own mind worked quickly, he expected the same processing power from others. It was a common trait among geniuses. Ordinary people running a lap behind could barely keep up.

Anyway,

"The destination is decided, and Ram knows the location. We should leave as soon as preparations are complete. Will it take long?"

"I don't have anything in particular to take. Ram…"

"While there are many teas and valuable items I wish to take, the fate of those whose desires are too strong is often bleak, so I shall give up. I have packed some necessary documents and clothes, so I am ready at any time."

Ram gestured with her hand towards a bag placed next to the stairs, visible to Subaru. It seemed her packing was already complete, leaving Subaru utterly amazed by her foresight.

"I always thought girls took forever to get ready, but that's amazing! So, no forgotten passbooks or seals, right? If not, let's head straight to the village!"

"Tsūchō?"

"Inkan?"

Subaru found it amusing as Emilia and Ram both tilted their heads with question marks floating above them. Then, he looked up at the upper floor of the mansion.

The two, following his gaze, must have realized what Subaru was looking at. They opened their lips awkwardly.

"I'm sorry, Subaru. We don't know Beatrice's whereabouts. I haven't seen her once since returning from the royal capital."

"More precisely, I haven't seen her face once since Lord Roswaal and the others departed for the royal capital. She won't come out when called for meals, nor when the Great Spirit calls her."

"Beatrice ignoring even Puck, that's unusual."

Hearing their words, Subaru touched his chin, wondering what to do. But recalling events from the previous world, he quickly abandoned the thought, finding it foolish to worry.

He slapped his cheeks with both hands, the dry sound clearing his mind.

"I'll bring Beatrice, so the two of you go to the village first. Ferris and Wilhelm from Crusch's group… and a wandering mercenary named Yuri are there, so if you meet up with them, things should move forward. Leave the drill loli to me."

"Are you confident you can find her?"

"It's not that I'm confident, but… I have a feeling she won't run from me. She probably really likes me."

"To say such a thing in front of that difficult person, you've got guts."

Emilia chuckled softly at Subaru's reply, and Ram snorted, "Hmph," as usual. Subaru shrugged at the two of them, then spun around on the spot, "Well then," he said, and started heading upstairs.

"You're about to witness firsthand the methods of a former shut-in, on what's effective for pulling a shut-in outside!"

2

“What in the world, isn’t this weird?!”

Subaru had made a grand exit, but his confident search for Beatrice was smoothly hitting a snag.

Normally, when Subaru went to call Beatrice for meals, opening just one door would typically lead him to the forbidden library where she was. Sometimes, he’d even open the dining room door intending to call her from there, only for it to connect directly to the library.

Beatrice’s magic, which she called “Door Crossing,” was too advanced for Subaru to understand, but it seemed to be a spatial transfer magic using Yin magic.

Despite being a young girl, Beatrice was an excellent user of Yin magic, and she used Door Crossing to randomly move her “castle,” the forbidden library, within the mansion. She essentially always set up a tricky transfer, providing only one correct door.

Subaru had arbitrarily named his own ability “Door Breaking,” a peculiar trait unique to someone who inexplicably picked the right door on the first try, despite having no sense of the atmosphere.

“For that to stop working now is beyond disappointing. I just bragged so much to Emilia-tan and the others, and saying, ‘Oops, couldn’t find her!’ isn’t going to cut it. Come on, please!”

Subaru muttered, pushing open door after door in the servant’s wing. He had already opened every room in the central wing, wasting a considerable amount of time. This was the first time he’d struggled so much to find Beatrice, and despite his lighthearted words, he couldn’t help but feel an unpleasant sweat break out on his forehead.

Nevertheless, Subaru wasn’t searching for Beatrice without any basis. He was certain she was still somewhere in the mansion.

In a previous iteration, when Subaru arrived at the mansion one day late, Beatrice was indeed there. At that time, Subaru was also overwhelmed by the situation, so they hadn't really had much of a conversation, but,

"This time, with a bit more time, everyone has a little more leeway. Beatrice will probably listen to me a little…"

It wasn't all optimism, but if he didn't tell himself that, he couldn't silently continue this solitary task. After all, constantly opening and closing doors in an empty mansion only to be disappointed would make him look utterly pathetic to an outsider.

"Damn it, can't find her! This is bad! No time! Is this it, should I just give up, throw in the towel, and run away?! My conscience aches thinking of Emilia-tan's trusting gaze, but it can't be helped! I'll tell everyone Beatrice had a tummy ache and wouldn't come out of the bathroom, so I gave up and came back—"

"—Can't you think of a better excuse, I suppose?!"

His muttering, accompanied by him tearing at his hair, was suddenly interrupted by a retort from beyond the opened door.

Before his eyes, the room, which should have been a restroom, transformed into a library packed with piles of paper not meant for wiping—in other words, books.

The familiar forbidden library, encountered after a long time, and its guardian, a girl in an extravagant dress, stood as always in front of him.

Stepping into the room, he saw a wooden stepladder placed directly across from the door. On its rung, a girl sat, engrossed in a thick book.

"Beako, safely found in the bathroom—my intuition isn't so bad after all."

"It's just pitiful that you missed so many times and still didn't give up, I suppose. For Betty's honor, I thought it would be troublesome if you spread strange rumors, in fact."

"Don't worry about it! Everyone poops, and sometimes you just have a tummy ache and don't want to answer! I'm sorry for saying insensitive things while you were straining, my bad!"

"Was what you just said the most insensitive thing in the world, I suppose?!"

Beatrice stood up from the stepladder, fuming with indignation. As the girl's twin drills trembled, Subaru waved a hand lightly, saying, "My bad, my bad."

"Anyway, it's been a while. I was about to search the whole mansion because you wouldn't open up to me."

"…This is how Door Crossing usually works when I'm not letting my guard down, in fact. You weren't really supposed to be able to enter here, I suppose."

"That loses all credibility now that you let me in! Such a tsundere!"

"I only let you in because you might have spread scandalous rumors, in fact!"

After yelling, Beatrice immediately made an embarrassed face, as if ashamed of her outburst. Subaru's lips softened at her ever-changing expressions, and he walked towards her.

"Anyway, I'm glad to see you. Sorry to ask right away, but could you get ready to leave? There's a bit of a problem if we stay in the mansion…"

"Betty isn't going, in fact."

"Huh?"

Subaru's steps halted at Beatrice's words, which immediately cut off his suggestion.

He looked up to see her gazing up at his dumbfounded face, sighing.

"Betty said she isn't going, in fact. She has no intention of leaving this forbidden library, let alone the mansion, I suppose. Just remember that and leave, in fact."

"Wait a minute, you're just not seeing the situation. You can't stay here, it's dangerous, so come with us. I'll explain everything from scratch!"

"Betty understands mostly without an explanation, I suppose. Also, stop treating me like a child, in fact."

Beatrice glared at Subaru, then reached for a bookshelf and pulled out a book that looked like an encyclopedia, too big for her hands. She held it as usual and returned to the stepladder. Sitting down and opening it on her lap, she seemed completely normal, as if she had no intention of evacuating.

"Hey, hold on, we're not done talking. Don't act like it's over."

"Betty has nothing more to say, I suppose. You're just trying to continue, but Betty's conclusion won't change even if you do. You don't have time to waste either, I suppose?"

"Ugh… If you understand that much, then cooperate! I'm taking you. You're being taken by me. Okay?"

"Betty refuses, in fact. It's the same no matter who comes. —Yes, no matter who comes, Betty will not let them set foot in this forbidden library, I suppose."

Beatrice stated firmly, her eyes still on the book, in a quiet tone.

Subaru scratched his head at her stubborn attitude and sighed.

"Listen, okay? It's not just me making noise, or Ram bringing food, who's coming here. I don't want to say it, but the Witch's Cult is coming. Their indiscriminateness is outrageous. Someone like you, staying in the mansion…"

"Betty showed you the power of Door Crossing, in fact. If there are those who still try to intrude… Betty won't show any mercy, I suppose."

"—!"

For a moment, a dangerous aura surged from Beatrice, sending a cold shiver down Subaru's spine.

He gasped, realizing it was the aftershock of the magical power erupting from her entire body.

The immense torrent of mana, even for Subaru who had only briefly touched upon magic users, felt extraordinarily powerful.

"—! Even so, I'm taking you with me."

"Still saying such things…"

"It's not about whether you're strong or not strong! You're a girl, and you're small, and that's reason enough! I don't need any other reason not to leave you in a dangerous place!"

Despite being overwhelmed by her intensity, Subaru stomped his foot on the library floor and shouted.

Beatrice's eyes widened in surprise at his forward, insistent figure, then she closed them as if enduring pain.

Subaru frowned at her reaction and was about to approach to take her out, when,

"Betty isn't going with you. Please stop confusing me anymore, in fact."

"I'm not wrong. You are wrong. —That's my final answer."

"You are quite stubborn, I suppose. —That's what I dislike about you, in fact."

Beatrice mumbled something small, almost inaudible. Subaru was about to ask her to repeat it, but before he could, Beatrice stood up from the stepladder.

"Understood, I suppose, Betty gives up, in fact. As you say, Betty will do it, I suppose."

"Oh? Oh, good then. If you understand, that's fine. For a second there, I braced myself, thinking you'd stand up and blast me away with magic."

"It would be easy for Betty to erase you from this world, leaving only your shadow… but Betty isn't cruel enough to do that, in fact."

Beatrice casually made a chilling remark as she returned the extracted book to the shelf. As he watched her move, Subaru suddenly noticed something and raised an eyebrow. Perhaps he had let his guard down when Beatrice said she would accompany him. It was just a thought.

"Speaking of which, there are a lot of books here, but are you perhaps proficient in scripts other than Iroha?"

"What are you suddenly talking about…? Iroha, you referring to 'I' characters. I suppose? That's a way of calling it that would anger a specialist."

"Right, right, my bad, apologies. So, back to the main topic…"

Subaru forced a smile at Beatrice, who was glaring at him with a deadpan expression, then rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a book. It had a black binding, and its contents were—

"It's this one. The writing inside is somehow unfamiliar to me. I thought you might know something about it…"

"—Why… are you holding that now, I suppose?"

Suddenly, a firm voice cut him off.

He looked to see Beatrice's already large eyes widen even further, staring intently at the 'Gospel' in Subaru's hand.

Subaru, who had brought up the topic lightheartedly, was surprised by her sudden change in demeanor.

"Why are you holding that now, I suppose? Answer me, in fact."

"Why…? I took it, from that idiot in the Witch's Cult. He was clutching it so carefully, I thought there might be some kind of hint written in it."

"Took it? From the Witch's Cult? Of all people, you…"

Beatrice placed a hand on her forehead, her complexion changing slightly as her shoulders trembled. Her already pale face lost even more color, and Subaru watched the girl's wandering gaze in confusion.

He instinctively reached out, feeling as if she might collapse at any moment.

"H-Hey, are you okay? If you're not feeling well, don't push yourself…"

"Betty is… This is no good, in fact. To let him hold this… Could Roswaal have been…?"

"Heeey? I'm sorry you're looking so serious, but caaan you heeeear meee?"

"Betty is thinking now. Please wait a moment."

Beatrice silenced Subaru, who was circling her anxiously, with a single glare. Silenced, Subaru closed his mouth and observed Beatrice, who was meditating with her eyes closed, her expression changing.

Since there seemed to be no reaction for a while, he idly opened the Gospel in his hand, flipping through the incomprehensible pages as usual.

And then, he suddenly noticed something.

"The latter half of this book is blank… But was there a page like this earlier?"

The fact that the contents were written in an unreadable script and that the latter half of the book was completely missing, as if pages had fallen out, remained the same. However, he couldn't shake the feeling that new text had appeared on the last printed page, text that wasn't there before.

It was a book with unreadable content. If he were to say it was just his imagination, that would be the end of it.

“—What do you want to do with that book, I suppose?”

Then, Beatrice, who had been deep in thought, suddenly asked.

With a hand to her mouth, Beatrice, seemingly having reached a conclusion, posed the question to Subaru. In response, Subaru said, “What do I want to do, you ask…” and continued,

“Decipher the contents… though I’m not interested in the Witch’s Cult’s doctrines, I just want to know if there’s any genuinely useful information. If not, I don’t want to keep a book from such a creepy owner.”

“…At least, Betty cannot read its contents, in fact. However, if you don’t wish to keep it, Betty can hold onto it for you, I suppose.”

“Hold onto it?”

“It’s an unknown book, a book that an unknown owner cherished, I suppose. If you’re hesitant to hold onto it, Betty will take it from you, in fact.”

Beatrice hesitantly extended her hand towards him.

From her gesture, it was clear that she didn’t desire the book for herself. It wasn’t a suggestion of reselling it for profit.

It was a genuine offer of goodwill. And, from her earlier remarks, it seemed she understood that this book was at least a Gospel. Therefore,

“Sorry, but I’m rejecting that offer.”

Subaru lightly pressed down on her outstretched hand and firmly stated.

Beatrice blinked for a moment at Subaru’s words, then immediately changed her adorable expression to a stern one.

"Wh-Why, I suppose? You must intuitively know that it's not a good thing, in fact. At least, you must know it doesn't attract good things, I suppose. In that case, instead of keeping it yourself, give it to Betty…"

"My contrarian nature makes me not want to give something away if it's desired, even if I don't need it… but that's just a pretense. To be honest, it's because of that."

This book, this tome called the Gospel, seemed to hold great significance for followers of the Witch's Cult. Furthermore, this Gospel belonged to Petelgeuse, one of the cult's executives.

Subaru vividly remembered how obsessed that man was with this book. Even with him secured and deprived of means of resistance, his vigilance remained unchanged.

"It's a book a scary old man might come drooling to get back, you know? Just because it's creepy to hold, handing it to a little girl isn't something a man does, is it?"

"—!"

"If it's dangerous, I'll hold onto it. I came here to get you to safety, didn't I? Intentionally putting you in danger would be completely counterproductive. Please, don't make me out to be a heartless guy."

Subaru chuckled lightly and tucked the Gospel into his pocket, hiding it from Beatrice's sight. What did Beatrice think as she watched this sequence of actions?

She blinked once, then parted her lips as if to say something—

"—Ugh."

Ultimately, she closed her mouth without saying a word and turned her face away.

Subaru felt something unnatural about her behavior, but her averted face, as if refusing further inquiry, prevented him from pressing the issue. So, he cracked his neck as if changing the subject.

“Ah, well, never mind. Anyway, if we’ve decided to move, please hurry. I’d be troubled if you had too much luggage, but a couple of important books are fine. Also, I think it’d be good to have two or three changes for that unnecessarily extravagant dress.”

“…The library will follow Betty automatically if she moves, in fact. More importantly, were you able to persuade the other two in the mansion, I suppose?”

“That’s a really convenient thing to hear. Yes, persuading the other two is all set. You’re the last one here. Let’s all evacuate to the Sanctuary where Roswaal is.”

“Roswaal, I suppose… What about the maid’s sister you went with, I suppose?”

Suddenly, Beatrice brought up Rem.

Subaru was surprised that Rem was mentioned by her, raising his eyebrows slightly. Then, thinking it was a good sign, he softened his expression.

“Rem’s waiting at the capital right now. We had a bit of a big fishing trip on the way back. It was so big that she’s probably preparing it lavishly for us. Once everything’s settled, let’s all go and get some.”

“You speak quite happily, in fact. —Did something happen, I suppose?”

“Ugh.”

Subaru couldn’t deny that he’d spoken a bit too fast, overreacting to Rem’s name. Beatrice’s sharp remark hit a nerve, making him choke up. He whistled and turned his face away.

“N-Nothing at all!”

“It would be strange if you didn’t grow fond of her after being treated so intimately, I suppose. Betty won’t spread rumors, I suppose. Do as you please, in fact."

"I-It's not like I'm trying to hide it, okay? It's just, it takes courage to suddenly report it to Emilia-tan or her actual sister, you know… or rather, it's a strategic retreat."

Subaru mumbled weakly, rubbing his fingers together, and turned his back to Beatrice, looking down in shame.

The current situation largely influenced things, and it was true he didn't have the courage to suddenly report it. Emilia would also be taken by surprise if he suddenly declared, "I'm going to get both you and Rem!" Even though he'd already decided that.

"Having high goals is a good thing. It gives you something to strive for when you make an effort. I generally don't dislike effort. It's just that I haven't had a goal until now—!"

His mouth, which had been building up excuses to buoy his spirits, suddenly stopped at an unexpected sensation.

From behind, he felt a warm sensation on his back, being embraced with arms wrapped around his waist from behind. Small, slender arms were wrapped around his stomach, making it clear who the other person was.

It was Beatrice.

"What, Beatrice? You startled me. Don't do that suddenly, please."

"That reaction is quite genuinely irritating, I suppose. —But, it's enough, in fact."

"Huh?"

Immediately after tilting his head at her unexpected words, a vivid light suddenly burned his eyelids.

Before he could realize it was the result of the entrance door opening by itself,

"Farewell—"

"Ugh, oh?!"

The arms that had been wrapped around him in an embrace let go, and he felt a strong pressure from behind, pushing him forcefully. Unable to resist, his body lurched forward, stumbling.

He then plunged into the door as if being sucked in—

"Beatrice—!"

"Betty… cannot go with you, in fact."

He turned his body, casting his gaze into the room just before passing through the door.

The girl, barely visible in his sight, had large tears welling up in her eyes.

"—!"

Without being able to say a word, his vision blurred. His body was caught in the distortion of space, walking an impossible path on its own, and the connection to the forbidden library was severed.

Subaru's body was then expelled from the space of the forbidden library and vanished somewhere far away.

"—'am."

Having witnessed that, Beatrice slowly closed the door, which had been left open.

The sound of the air being cut off, and a deep, profound silence once again settled upon the forbidden library.

"—Mother."

In a small, tearful voice, Beatrice called that name.

The large tears had already vanished from her eyes, but her expression remained unchanged.

"how much longer… does Betty…?"

Beatrice, on the verge of collapsing in tears, walked to the stepladder and leaned her weight against it as if falling. Then she reached out and pulled out the book she had placed on the opposite rung of the stepladder—the one facing the rung she usually sat on—and clutched it.

“Mother… Mother… Mother…!”

Like a lost child, clinging, with the book clasped to her chest, Beatrice’s voice continued to echo through the quiet forbidden library like a sob.

The black-bound book in her arms did not answer her.

Chapter 72: Understanding and Lack of Understanding

1

—Thinking back, it was my first time experiencing a transfer without losing consciousness.

That strange sensation of my foot landing somewhere other than where it should. The peculiar feeling of the air, which I should have been able to sense, now touching my skin as something entirely different. The unnatural sensation of my internal organs clashing, defying gravity and inertia.

All those unpleasant feelings mixed and lumped together.

That's what Subaru felt the moment he was thrown out of the forbidden library by Beatrice and snapped back from unconsciousness.

"—I knew you were prone to doing unexpected things, but to have my common sense so easily shattered… it's rather difficult to maintain my composure."

"Next time, I'll show you at the New Year's hidden talent show. It'll be a combined attack with me and… the drill loli. We're in the village, right?"

"That should be correct. By the way, if my guess is right, I believe you emerged from the door of what might have been a livestock shed."

Julius pointed at the ground, his expression twisting into something a little sympathetic. Following his finger, Subaru noticed he was standing in a pile of bird droppings.

"From a toilet, to a chicken coop covered in shit… She really went out of her way to mess with me in that split second."

Muttering complaints, Subaru slowly walked out of the livestock shed, shaking his lifted foot. The chicken-like birds remaining inside, seeing Subaru, the sudden intruder, leave, began pecking at their feed with what seemed like relief.

Subaru glanced at them, then craned his neck to survey his surroundings. It was, without a doubt, the village landscape he had just passed through.

"Was that, by any chance, teleportation magic just now? If so, you've had a remarkably rare experience. Magic that connects separate spaces is almost a lost art, even among Yin affinity magic. There should be less than five people who can wield it."

"'How lucky' is not the right way to put this. That idiotic girl, what am I going to do with her…!"

Subaru's eyes, bloodshot with anger, turned back towards the mansion as he lightly responded to Julius's admiration. Flashing through his mind was the girl with cream-colored hair in vertical drills, the one who had abruptly cut him off and acted on her own.

The look of sorrow she had given him when they parted was burned into his eyelids, refusing to fade.

"With a face like that, what was she thinking? This is ridiculous. At this rate, I'll just have to drag her out by force…"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

A leisurely voice suddenly reached Subaru, stopping him just as he was rolling up his sleeves and flexing his shoulders, brimming with motivation. Subaru made a guttural sound, and his movements froze at the familiar voice.

Slowly, Subaru turned his head with an unnatural, almost neck-cracking movement—and saw a grey-furred cat floating in mid-air, approaching him.

At the same time, Julius also noticed its presence. He straightened his back, then bowed respectfully.

"It's been a long time, Great Spirit."

"There's no need to be so formal. My rank as a spirit is just for show, and I don't intend to bestow blessings on anyone but Lia. Yes, I am truly the deadbeat of the spirit world…"

"There's no need for a reason to revere a being of great power. Furthermore, if I may add, I am but a humble spirit arts user myself. Including the lesser spirits under my contract, there is no reason for me not to revere you."

"How elegant. Very good, very good."

Puck listened to Julius's overly polite address while stroking his own whiskers. Subaru, meanwhile, watched him, a cold sweat breaking out on his back.

His heart pounded, and his limbs felt numb. Emilia was nowhere to be seen around Puck. He was acting alone. That fact deeply unsettled Subaru.

"It's troubling to be stared at with such intensity, Subaru. I know I'm impossibly cute after not seeing me for so long, but still."

"…As a humble fluff-lover, it's terrifying how I can't completely deny that."

Unconcerned by Subaru's inner turmoil, Puck, looking down at him, said something playful. Shrugging his shoulders, playing along with the lighthearted remark, Subaru resisted the paralysis caused by the mental pressure. However, his pulse was still racing.

If he had to name this feeling, Subaru thought, it would definitely be fear.

Subaru was now experiencing undeniable terror towards the small cat in front of him, who was idly swaying its long tail and speaking foolishly.

If that being unleashed its true power, Subaru would be scattered as easily as dust blown away. Subaru had experienced this three times already.

Telling him not to be nervous, not to be afraid, was a cruel request.

“So, what did you mean by that just now?”

“Just now?”

“Don’t immediately forget what you said… You stopped me from going to get Beako, didn’t you?”

Subaru, annoyed at Puck who seemed to have genuinely forgotten his own words, asked again while trying to hide his complicated feelings. Puck then lightly clapped his hands and said, “Ah.”

“It’s exactly what I said. If you try to take Betty out, it’s better if you don’t. You met her and talked, and she pushed you away, didn’t she? Well, that’s her answer.”

“It’s dangerous to stay in the mansion. The Witch Cult is highly likely to rampage. This isn’t the time for leisurely talk about not being found…”

“I don’t think Betty’s door transfer can be broken, and even if it could, that would just be how it is. That’s her answer.”

Subaru involuntarily widened his eyes and held his breath at the words thrown at him.

He wanted to ask if it was a joke, but the small cat in front of him maintained its expression and demeanor. Its attitude, which could only be described as serious, made Subaru say,

“That’s too cold, no matter how you look at it, isn’t it? She adores you that much, and yet you…”

“I think of her like a sister too, you know. But that familial love and her choice of destiny are completely different stories. It’s troublesome to lump them together.”

“You…!”

Enraged by the cruelly detached answer, Subaru inadvertently stepped forward. Unable to believe Puck would take such an attitude, he reached out his arm, intending to grab him and make him retract his words. But,

“Subaru, stop there.”

“Guh, you’re stopping me too… saying I’m wrong…!”

“I don’t fully grasp the situation, but it’s not that. It’s a futile effort to try and change the Great Spirit’s mind. Our values are different from theirs. They cannot be reconciled.”

Julius held Subaru back with his arm and shook his head. As if to prove his words, Puck, looking down at the enraged Subaru, remained calm and elusive. It was as if he felt nothing from their current exchange.

“What’s wrong?”

Blinking his dark eyes, Puck tilted his adorable face slightly and asked.

However, the fact that his voice, expression, attitude, and gestures were no different from normal seemed incredibly abnormal to Subaru at that moment.

Subaru’s relationship with Puck, counting from his summoning to this other world, was relatively long. He had exchanged many words with Puck, whom he encountered around the same time as Emilia, and had developed a certain fondness for his inhuman nature, believing they had gotten along well so far.

However, Subaru now completely failed to understand the inner workings of someone he thought he knew so well.

Despite his appearance, Puck was quite human-like; he could laugh, his voice could tremble with anger, and he should even be able to grieve for someone’s unfulfilled wishes.

“Emilia would surely be angry if she heard this.”

“—That’s none of your business, Subaru.”

For the first time, it was a clear rejection from Puck's mouth.

In front of the looking-up Subaru, Puck turned his back while still floating in mid-air. Then,

"In any case, Betty won't be showing her face again. I don't think the Witch Cult will be keen enough to notice the forbidden library either. In her case, it's probably safer if she doesn't come out. If you're family, you have to trust her."

"…If we're family, shouldn't we fix it when we think someone's wrong?"

"Wanting to help and protect everyone. Subaru, that's a line a fully capable adult should be saying, someone who can take care of themselves properly."

Puck responded harshly to Subaru's strained words, drifting further away.

Subaru could only watch Puck's too-small back with bitter regret. Julius, standing beside him, patted his shoulder as if to comfort him.

"I'm not doing this for sympathy. Stop it, it just makes me feel pathetic."

"Your aspirations are admirable, and that is a knight's quality. But for now, as his existence suggests, you lack too much. —So, what will you do?"

"What do you mean… what about?"

"Everything. The villagers have been persuaded, and they're already at the stage of boarding the dragon carriages. Lady Emilia and her female attendant are also in a different dragon carriage from the villagers. All that's left is for us to be ready to depart… And the person you were just talking about?"

While Subaru was talking with Emilia and Beatrice in the mansion, Julius and the other members of the subjugation force seemed to have managed things well.

Preparations for evacuation were complete, with only the lingering concern of those who remained in the mansion on their own.

“If we take too long and are late for the evacuation, it’ll be meaningless… Damn it, I’ll resent you, Beako. If only you had just come along.”

“Regret it later. The more time we take, the more we will fuel the anxiety of the residents we’ve finally managed to calm. I believe now is the turning point.”

Subaru bit his lip at Julius’s remark, shaking his head in deep thought, stomping his foot, and then groaned, “Aargh!” before saying,

“We’re evacuating to a place called the Sanctuary, guided by Ram, the mansion maid, where Roswaal is currently. They say there’s enough fighting power and at least safety is guaranteed.”

“…Are you sure?”

“No, I’m not. I’m not, but… I have no choice.”

Grinding his teeth in frustration, Subaru looked back at the mansion.

Was she still there, the girl, sitting on a stepladder in a dark room, behind a door that no one would open, quietly engrossed in a book?

“Always making me worry, you bad girl. Please, please don’t get found… I’ll deliver Emilia-tan and be right back for you.”

Clasping his hands together, Subaru offered a prayer to a god he didn’t even believe in.

And so, with that perfunctory prayer, he forcibly settled his heart, and though still dragging his effeminate feelings, he began to walk.

“After guiding them to the Sanctuary, I’ll come right back and use the mansion as a base to hunt down the remaining Witch Cultists. How’s Petelgeuse… the Sin Archbishop?”

“Sir Wilhelm and Ferris are constantly with him. If there are any signs of him waking, Wilhelm-sama will strike. Ferris can detect mana, so feigning sleep won’t work on him at all. He’s the optimal lookout.”

“I see, that’s reassuring… Alright, let’s go. Patrasche!”

Heading towards the village exit on the main road, Subaru raised his hand and called the earth dragon’s name. And the black earth dragon, whose nickname had become firmly established, approached Subaru, turning around majestically as if anticipating its master’s ride, offering its back.

“The only thing supporting me right now is the trust I’ve built with you, honestly.”

“…”

Lightly stroking its sturdy, scaly flank, Subaru then, not exactly gracefully but with reasonable movement, leaped onto its back and used the reins to make Patrasche start walking.

The herd of earth dragons —the merchants’ dragon carriages— were already awaiting the signal to depart, and veteran warriors, weapons in hand, surrounded them, watching.

“Subaru, they’re waiting for your command.”

“Mine?”

Suddenly, Julius, who had mounted his own earth dragon and ridden alongside him, spoke to Subaru.

As if to confirm his words, the numerous gazes directed at him sent knowing glances of agreement. Naturally, his chest warmed.

Unsure if the emotion was embarrassment or a type of inspiration, Subaru raised his fist high and shouted,

“—To the Sanctuary, we depart!!”

“—Ohh!!”

The overlapping voices of the knights rose high into the sky, and the great migration began.

2

“I met someone called ‘Juli, the Wandering Mercenary,’ and I was super surprised!”

Emilia pouted, resting her chin on her raised knees, and glared at Subaru with narrowed eyes. Her childish gesture was unbelievably cute, and Subaru found himself captivated. Emilia continued, looking even more sulky, “I was just… really, really surprised.”

“I’m also really surprised by Emilia-tan’s cuteness right now, but what happened?”

“It’s the Wandering Mercenary! I thought Juli was someone I didn’t know at all, but it turned out to be Julius. You two fought so much, when did you make up?”

Her voice rose slightly, then she pointed gently towards the stopped dragon carriage. Julius could be seen talking with the Beastman Mercenary group. Subaru grimaced, looking utterly disgusted as he saw him.

“We didn’t make up. That’s Juli, the Wandering Mercenary. Our relationship is just a flimsy one, connected by money, as employer and mercenary. Of course, we’re cooperating.”

“You’re being so stubborn… Boys just don’t understand that kind of thing. You should make up with Julius, just like you did with me.”

“I wanted to make up with Emilia-tan so much my heart was practically breaking, but I really don’t want to make up with him. I hate him, forever.”

Subaru declared with a sullen expression, enunciating his words brokenly and rhythmically swinging his arm. Emilia sighed in exasperation at his stubbornness, shaking her head weakly in resignation.

Approximately four hours had passed since they departed from

Roswaal's mansion and the evacuation began.

They had covered about half the distance to their destination, the Sanctuary, and were now at the entrance of a forest path, where they had stopped their march to take a break.

It was a large-scale movement, with a good number of children, elderly, and women, so pushing them too hard would cause problems. This was Julius's judgment as he led the vanguard.

Though he felt a twinge of impatience at stopping, once the break began, Subaru was astonished to realize the fatigue he hadn't noticed earlier suddenly weighed down his entire body.

It was no wonder; since his negotiations with Crusch at Crusch's mansion two days prior, he hadn't had a single moment of peaceful rest.

"Travel time for the whale subjugation, and the actual battle. Right after that, we formed the Witch Cult countermeasure team and ran all night, then cut down Petelgeuse, and now we're here… Huh. No wonder I'm tired."

He reflected on the unexpectedly heavy workload he'd accumulated, and, exhausted, tipped back some water. It was water given to him by one of the merchants, in a bamboo-like container. Thanks to some kind of magic, the icy-cold water slipped down his throat, filling him with energy.

"Ahhh! I live for this one drink!"

"Barusu, you sound like an old man."

As Subaru groaned involuntarily from the refreshing drink, Ram, holding a similar container and serving, cut him off with a single word and walked past.

As he glared hatefully at her retreating back, Emilia, sitting beside him, chuckled softly.

"Subaru, your face seems to have changed a lot."

"Really? Well, I guess so. Honestly, I'm unbelievably tired, so I feel like the dark circles under my eyes are something else. Ugh, lack of sleep is the enemy of good skin."

"It's not that… You just look more like a man, I think."

Subaru choked on his breath, surprised by her smiling comment. To prevent her from seeing his momentary stagnation, he scratched his head and turned his face away, trying to hide his blush.

"So you thought I was neutered until now?"

"Neutered…?"

"Gah, I just dropped an unexpected bomb to hide my embarrassment… My pure eyes are burning!"

Emilia tilted her head, unable to grasp the vulgar word, looking adorable and causing Subaru pain.

As Subaru writhed, clutching his chest, a white fingertip stroked his silver hair, pushing it back.

"Did Beatrice listen to you?"

"…………"

"You met her, but it didn't go well… Is that what your silence means?"

"Was it that obvious?"

"Then it's a hit. Hehe, maybe I'm starting to understand your feelings, Subaru."

Emilia's smile didn't waver, even as Subaru lowered his eyebrows miserably. Feeling unworthy of such a smile at the moment, Subaru consciously averted his gaze from her, though he wished he could keep looking. Emilia reached out to Subaru's profile, and her slender fingers touched his cheek. Surprised, he looked back at her.

"Don't make that face. I know how much you tried for Beatrice, Subaru. Even after parting like that, you still came back to me. There's no way you'd abandon Beatrice."

"She's selfish and opinionated, that girl. She just went off on her own and locked herself away. Once I deliver Emilia-tan and everyone, I'm going straight back, dragging her out, and giving her a good spanking."

"Won't Beatrice get really mad if you do that?"

"Compared to our Tom and Jerry antics, that'd be nothing. Emilia-tan, if you have anything you want to tell her, I'll make sure to tell her off for you."

As he bantered in the playful tone Emilia had helped him regain, her expression suddenly hardened. Subaru's eyes widened when he noticed, and Emilia lowered her gaze slightly.

"I haven't really talked much with Beatrice. So, I don't know what to say."

"Not really…?"

He started to speak, but then Subaru realized.

In all their days at the mansion, he couldn't recall a single instance of her and Beatrice conversing.

Beatrice would only approach Emilia to speak with Puck, who was always by Emilia's side. Once that was done, the girl would pass by Emilia without a word, or even a glance. Emilia, too, seemed to accept it.

"It seems Beatrice avoids me," Emilia replied, sensing the reason for Subaru's silence.

Emilia's amethyst eyes wavered as Subaru remained speechless, and she searched her memories.

"When I first met her at Roswaal's mansion, Puck and Beatrice instantly hit it off. Though, they were alone together then, so I don't know what they talked about."

"Those two have a weird relationship, acting like siblings."

In the first place, the combination of a kitten brother and a young girl sister made no sense. What common ground did these two have that would allow for a sibling dynamic?

Emilia shook her head again at Subaru's puzzled look.

"I'm sorry, I don't know that either. But Puck told me not to press on the subject of his relationship with Beatrice as part of our contract."

"A contract… you mean like with spirits? Huh? Can you really include such private details in a contract?"

"It's the spirit's own criteria for deciding whether to connect with the user. The terms of a contract vary completely depending on the spirit, they say. For a high-ranking spirit like Puck, you're supposed to pay a really high price, but…"

Emilia trailed off, closing her mouth awkwardly. Subaru, confused by the sudden silence, prompted her with "But?", and she closed her eyes.

"Puck is… well, he's incredibly lenient with me, so the conditions are all very simple. There are just a few more of them."

"Besides 'don't question your relationship with Betty,' there are other things?"

"A few. Like my hairstyle in the morning has to be what Puck chooses, or doing simple exercises when I wake up and before bed, and not being picky about food. Talking to the tiny spirits morning and evening, and grooming Puck's fur too…"

"That's just spoiling you rotten! He's just making sure you live a healthy, wholesome life! Spoiling you rotten!"

Subaru couldn't help but repeat his retort twice, astounded by Puck's doting nature. Emilia blushed and looked down at Subaru's reaction.

“That’s why I didn’t want to say it! I didn’t think it was strange at all until I left the forest, but… after living at Roswaal’s mansion, I started to think it might be a little weird…”

“What is that cat teaching my innocent Emilia-tan…? It’s annoying that Emilia-tan is constantly being guided towards my preferences! What is he? Is he my Cupid despite how he looks?!”

If Puck was like a foster parent, then Emilia’s current innocent goddess-like demeanor was a result of Puck’s upbringing. It was a shame that Subaru, despite having just had a rather prickly exchange with Puck, found himself almost forgiving him out of self-interest.

Anyway,

“That’s why I can’t ask Puck about it… but for some reason, Beatrice avoids talking to me. And I don’t know why.”

Emilia closed her eyes, returning sadly to the original topic of conversation. Her long eyelashes trembled slightly, and he could see the rigid expression on her face struggling to contain sadness.

Moved by her expression, Subaru scratched his cheek with a finger.

“Alright, I get it. Then, this time, you and I will pay a visit to Betty’s Forbidden Library.”

“Huh?”

“The Forbidden Library. That moldy, unhealthy room where Betty, the bookworm, just coops herself up. If she lives like that, just reading books in a place like that, she’ll ruin her eyes and end up a sickly child with glasses as thick as milk bottle bottoms. Before that happens, we’ll make her learn from Emilia-tan, who works hard day and night to maintain her beauty and health!”

Subaru clapped his hands, thinking it a brilliant idea, in front of Emilia’s wide, blinking eyes.

Puck and Beatrice were close, and Puck and Emilia were also close. So, if they threw Beatrice into a situation where Emilia was carrying out Puck's suggestions, wouldn't there be some hope for improving their relationship? Even if not, getting a result that confirmed the method didn't work was still progress. Progress that said it didn't progress.

"You have to try everything first, Emilia-tan. If she runs away when you try to talk to her, then this time, let's try to grab her. She might still run away, but before she does, she'll probably complain loudly. And if you complain back loudly enough… eventually, you'll be able to laugh and talk."

"…"

Subaru's rough and optimistic communication lesson.

Even Emilia couldn't hide her surprise at the extreme and nonsensical content. And after a few seconds of frozen silence, she suddenly,

"Hehe."

She laughed, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Oh, I got an Emilia-tan smile."

"Haha, what are you saying? Subaru… no, amazing. Subaru is amazing, truly amazing. Yeah. Mhm… amazing."

Subaru, secretly wishing he could record the latter half of her praise, felt surprisingly ticklish from being complimented so much.

Unaware of Subaru's reaction, Emilia let out a deep sigh.

"Next time, maybe I'll try that. Maybe I'll try talking to her that way this time."

"Yeah, let's do it. For that, we'll focus on the evacuation now. After that, I'll go back full-force, secure Betty full-force. Then I'll hand her over to Emilia-tan full-force."

"You're always full-force, aren't you?"

"I've recently learned that nothing good comes from half-assing things."

Subaru stuck out his tongue in response, and Emilia mimicked him, sticking out her tongue slightly. Though a mimicry, the cuteness difference was tenfold, shocking Subaru. Leaving Subaru rigid, Emilia said, "It's almost time," and brushed off the hem of her clothes, which had gotten dirty from sitting.

"The hour we planned for our break is almost up, so we need to get ready. Did you get some rest, Subaru? Are you not pushing yourself too hard?"

"Thanks to Emilia-tan, the relaxation effect is insane. E.M.H. (Emilia-tan. Magical. Healer)."

"There you go again… It's been a while since I've heard those strange words."

Subaru, happy to be having this exchange again, also brushed off his backside and stood up.

Then he twisted his waist and looked around, subtly, so Emilia wouldn't notice.

They had thirty dragon carriages stopped, creating a sizable resting area.

Each group of merchants and villagers gathered together, exchanging anxieties and information. And during that time, aside from Ram, who was wandering around serving, not a single person approached Emilia and Subaru.

If it were out of consideration for the good atmosphere between the two, it would be heartwarming, but that wasn't the case.

—No one wanted to associate with Emilia, a half-elf.

Even the sturdy knights of the subjugation force, who had overcome hardships with them, were not exempt from this prejudice. While they tried not to show it in their expressions or actions in front of Subaru, given such an opportunity, the part of them that rejected her presence naturally emerged.

Aside from Subaru and Ram, the only ones who interacted with her naturally were Julius, Ferris, Wilhelm, and Mimi, who seemed oblivious to everything.

During the evacuation, in what was essentially a shared fate, this was the situation. Subaru's expression clouded with anxiety about the future, and he wiped his face with his palm to prevent Emilia from seeing his troubled look.

He roughly wiped, swung his arm, thrust a finger skyward, and made a grand turn.

"Alright, time to get going again! I know you want to stay with me, Emilia-tan, but you'll have to brave it and get back in the dragon carriage."

"By the way, Subaru, it feels like the ground dragon you're riding has been glaring at me a lot… You're quite well-liked, aren't you?"

His casual remark was smoothly ignored, and when he looked where she pointed, he saw Patrasche glaring at Emilia. Her gaze seemed to hold even the pride of a mount not wanting its master taken.

"Hey, partner, are you jealous of Emilia-tan? Stop it, you and I are inseparable. I won't give that up. Though, my soul is entrusted to Emilia-tan—cough!"

As he tried to appease her in a smooth tone, he was blown away by Patrasche's swinging tail midway through. Watching Subaru tumble vigorously on the ground, Emilia shrugged her shoulders in exasperation.

"If you keep saying sweet things to every girl you meet like that, you'll end up in trouble. You should save them for the person who truly matters, shouldn't you?"

"M-My brightest star… is always… you…"

"Yes, yes. Alright, let's go."

Emilia gave a perfunctory reply to Subaru, who was rolling on the ground clutching his bruised side, and got into the dragon carriage. He saw that everyone else around them was also finishing their break and beginning to move to resume their journey.

“Barusu. No matter how tired you are, sleeping on the ground shows a complete lack of self-awareness as Lord Roswaal’s servant.”

Ram, following Emilia into the dragon carriage, looked down at Subaru, who lay abandoned on the ground, with disdain.

3

The break ended, and the journey to the Sanctuary resumed.

Unlike the Lifaus Highway leading to the capital, this route, winding through hilly terrain, was a significant burden not just for the ground dragons but also for their riders. It wasn’t just the continuous inclines; they had to navigate rough forest paths and rocky stretches, sometimes even squeezing through narrow passages barely wide enough for a single dragon carriage.

Naturally, the fatigue accumulated for the villagers unaccustomed to such marches, and for Subaru, a complete novice, it was overwhelming. Time and again, he consciously pushed through, bracing himself as his nerves threatened to snap.

“Excluding breaks, we’ve been traveling for about six and a half hours… I’d say it’s about time we got a clear idea of where this ‘Sanctuary’ is…”

Subaru leaned his entire weight against Patrasche, who, his clever partner, adjusted her movements to ease his burden. He tilted his head, surveying the slanted world around him.

However, ahead lay a path flanked on both sides by low hills, obscuring anything beyond, leaving their destination still unknown.

“Subaru, I believe we should be getting a sense of our destination soon…”

“Why didn’t you bring that up ten seconds earlier? Then I wouldn’t have had to be disappointed twice."

Perhaps it was the advantage of his training. Julius, still moving with elegant grace despite the journey, chuckled at Subaru's weary, slumped words.

He used a finger to smooth his wind-swept bangs, then narrowed his eyes at the same path below the hill that Subaru had just seen.

"Indeed, this path looks like it will slow our march again. —We cannot afford to let our guard down."

"…I know. If I were the enemy, I'd make my move about now."

When Subaru replied to Julius's sharp tone, the knight looked at him askance, a hint of surprise in his eyes.

"I'm surprised to find myself in agreement with you. Do you truly believe an attack is imminent?"

"It's better to assume there will be one. It's too unsettling that there hasn't been any movement until now, and we still have a Sin Archbishop left in our hands. I'm not expecting camaraderie or anything like that, but… they're not the kind of people to just give up."

"You seem quite certain. I share your sentiment."

Nodding in satisfaction at Subaru's answer, Julius tapped the hilt of his sheathed knight's sword and looked towards the middle of the marching line of dragon carriages—the one carrying Wilhelm and Ferris, who were monitoring Petelgeuse.

"If he dies, he possesses another body, huh? If that's true, it's an extremely troublesome Authority. Ultimately, the best course of action would be to borrow the power of the Great Spirit and seal him away."

"So that's it, huh? I thought that was the best option too. It's frustrating, though."

Petelgeuse was the one person Subaru truly wanted to kill, if he were honest.

Part of it was his own hatred urging him on, but even more so, it was a sense of righteous indignation. He didn't know the full extent of that man's deeds. He didn't know, but he did know one thing.

—This man deserved to die here.

"That's an incredible thought. If I were back in my original world, I'd never be able to seriously consider something like that."

He could have glibly said "die" or "kill," but since coming to this world, he had been constantly made to realize the value and weight of life. He doubted he could ever utter those words lightly again.

To be taught that lesson, and still feel this way, meant that man was beyond saving.

No, it meant there were some people who simply shouldn't be saved.

—That's when it happened.

"—Subaru!"

"—?!"

Suddenly, Julius let out a sharp cry, and Patrasche halted according to his raised hand. The swift command spread throughout the ranks, and the march came to an immediate stop.

The halt was ordered by the elderly knight leading the vanguard. He drew his sword, raised it to the sky, and shouted with all his might for everyone to hear.

"—Ahead, multiple figures in the path flanked by hills! Dressed in black… it's the Witch Cult!!"

The report was delivered loudly. Subaru and Julius exchanged glances, nodded, and then started running towards the front of the confused column.

As they ran, Julius, then Subaru, not to be outdone, shouted,

“Act calmly! Knights of the Kingdom, protect the citizens! ‘Iron Fang,’ follow me!”

“Don’t panic, it’ll be fine, I’ll deal with them somehow! We’ve got lots of strong, cool knights here, and there’s even a tough, wild mercenary group! Alright, Mild, don’t show your face, protect your mom! Petra, you just expect my victory!”

At Julius’s command, the knights and mercenaries moved, and at Subaru’s cry, the anxious villagers pulled their heads back into the dragon carriages.

Seeing this, the separation of combatants and evacuees was successful. Subaru and Julius, who had surged to the front, brought the advancing Witch Cultists into view.

Witch Cultists emerged one after another from beyond the hill—their number, approximately thirty.

Two unlocated hideouts meant their numbers were slightly higher than expected for the remnants.

“Even if I were Petelgeuse, I would have prepared a separate unit, not for direct assault. It’s not surprising… How about it, Julius? Can we do this?”

“They are more numerous than anticipated, but we still outnumber them. Furthermore, this is a head-on clash. There’s no reason for the Witch Cult, who hide in shadows and act vilely, to be a match for us knights.”

Julius drew his knight’s sword, answering Subaru’s question with a dignified demeanor.

Following his lead, the knights one after another drew their weapons, and the mercenary group, astride their Ligers, began licking their lips as if anticipating the smell of blood.

Feeling the surge of fighting spirit, Subaru looked behind him.

At the front of the lowered dragon carriages was Emilia's carriage. He could see her silver hair fluttering through the open small window, and her amethyst eyes looking at him with worry.

He raised a finger to reassure her, then shifted his gaze further back.

There, Petelgeuse remained captured and silent, while Wilhelm, having dismounted, held his sacred sword, vigilantly guarding against threats both internal and external.

"We'll crush the Witch Cultists in front of us, and then freeze Petelgeuse. —Looking back, it's been a long journey, hasn't it?"

However, the end of that journey was finally in sight.

There was no basis for it. But his soul vaguely understood. His heart knew that every single being here was the complete fighting force for each other.

Therefore, there was no hesitation in giving their all.

"Annihilate the Witch Cult. All units—"

Taking a breath, Julius let out a loud command.

Their fighting spirit surged explosively. Just before everyone was about to charge forward with the next shout—

"—!!"

A thunderous explosion, powerful enough to rupture eardrums, reverberated.

A tremendous tremor ran through the ground, and their bodies swayed, caught in the shockwave and blast. A metallic ringing echoed in his skull, and his vision flickered.

"What…?"

Unable to even hear his own words, yet certain of the explosion's source, Subaru turned his head back.

—There, only the traces of ‘the dragon carriage that should have been carrying Petelgeuse’ remained, having vanished without a trace.

“Damn—!!”

The moment the possibility dawned on him, Subaru understood his own shortsightedness.

At the same time, the surrounding knights and mercenaries saw the same thing as Subaru and were speechless. As their fighting spirit was doused, the Witch Cultists approached from the path beyond the hill—the woman leading them smiled grotesquely.

“Now, the beginning of —the end!!”

Black witch hands stretched upwards, with a force and pressure that seemed to envelop the sky.

Stretching upwards.

Stretching—upwards.

Chapter 73:
Unscrupulous Sloth

1

—Black ruin, covering the sky with a force and mass that could easily be mistaken for a nightmare.

At the feet of the woman with the distorted smile, there seemed to be no limit to the “Unseen Hands” gushing forth from the swelling shadows.

The number of hands reaching into the sky, palms turned toward us —easily approaching a hundred, too many to count.

“—Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti!!”

“Oh? To be called by name before I even introduce myself is quite curious?! I should be moving different fingers than the ones you know!”

As Subaru bellowed, his voice filled with rage amidst the swirling dust, Petelgeuse stomped his foot, his expression growing even more amused, though his words conveyed confusion.

“It seems most of the fingers I had hidden in the forest have been annihilated, destroyed, utterly wiped out, but that cannot be helped! The precious, irreplaceable lives of my devout followers, which must never be treated in vain! They existed for this very moment, this instant, now! Ah! Ahhh! My love, my favoritism! My beloved Witch!”

In a frenzy of excitement, Petelgeuse bit off one finger after another from his right hand, which he’d thrust into his mouth. He adorned the battlefield with his blood-soaked, crazed laughter, swinging his dripping arm.

“Now, begin the end, and declare the end of the end! And and and and andddd! Before my love, before my diligent service! Offer your body, your life, your soul—this is it!!”

Simultaneously with his declaration, the arms covering the sky rained down on them—and the Witch Cultists surrounding the raging Petelgeuse also charged forward, holding cross-shaped daggers.

In contrast, their own preparations were a step behind, caught off guard by the enemy’s initial assault.

Around them, the subjugation force was still deeply affected by the chaos of the explosion from behind, and thick smoke billowed from the blast crater—the safety of the two main combatants who had been there was a concern. But,

“No time to be spacing out! It’s either kill or be killed—isn’t that right!”

Ricardo roared, brandishing his large鉈 and flashing his sharp fangs. Just that was enough to quell the confusion among the Beast-kin Mercenary Group, and with their leader at the forefront, all of them spurred their ligers forward.

At the same time, Julius, holding his knight’s sword high, drew the gaze of the knights.

“Do not let the despicable acts of these villains disturb your hearts! The situation behind us, with citizens to protect, remains unchanged. —All units, charge!!”

The sword swung, and Julius’s ground dragon was the first to dash forward. Following suit, the knights also raised their weapons high, lining up their steeds on the path of the finest knight.

And so, the combined force of mercenaries and knights charged—leading the charge was Natsuki Subaru, clinging awkwardly to a graceful black ground dragon, Patrasche.

Before the two leaders could calm their confused comrades, Subaru had ordered Patrasche to leap headfirst into the oncoming threat of the Witch Cult.

He had no chance of winning.

In fact, Subaru, whose combat capabilities hadn't changed, was so powerless he could be killed just fighting one Witch Cultist with a dagger.

But even so, Subaru had to lead the charge. Because—

"Hey, Pete! Aim for me! —I can see all your many hands really well!!"

"—?!"

Suppressing his fear, Subaru wore a deeply taunting smile and flipped him off, freezing the crazed expression on Petelgeuse's face.

As if to prove his words, Subaru maneuvered Patrasche to evade the writhing Unseen Hands that attacked him.

He tilted right to avoid extending arms, and lowered his stance against palms thrust straight forward. He evaded the mass of arms blocking his front with a sharp turn, and left behind the demonic hands closing in from all directions with a burst of speed.

It wasn't Subaru's skill that was high; the main reason for the successful evasion was Patrasche's immediate understanding of Subaru's intentions through the reins.

To Subaru, who had proven his words by the narrowest of margins, Petelgeuse distorted his seemingly innocent female face with rage and humiliation.

"What nonsense… that cannot be! Why, why, why, why, why, why, why… my, the favoritism given to me, only to me! You, with those eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes?!"

"Is the Witch just a cheater? Oh, oh, oh, oh, were you played? How pathetic!"

"What an insult! What humiliation! What disgrace! Not only to me, but to my beloved's guidance, such words… This cannot be allowed! It must not be allowed! It must never be allowed!!"

With bloodshot eyes wide open, Petelgeuse frothed at the mouth as he pursued Subaru. The clustered black demonic hands became a powerful palm, pressing to crush him, but Patrasche sharply evaded to the left, breaking through—the earth ripped open by the aftershock, carving a deep fissure in the grassland as if gouged by a giant's palm.

"That was close! Seriously, it's going to be one close call after another from now on… But with this!"

Petelgeuse, his eyes burning with hatred, had completely lost himself and fixed his aim solely on Subaru.

Subaru, while feeling a shiver of dread at having the madman's wrath directed at him, clenched his fist, seeing the situation unfold just as he had intended.

From the previous loop's circumstances, he had predicted that the number of Unseen Hands Petelgeuse would have after his possession-resurrection would increase.

If countless of those fatal demonic hands, invisible to ordinary people, were deployed, even the numerically superior subjugation force would be driven to annihilation.

Therefore, Subaru chose to thoroughly provoke Petelgeuse's fanatical obsession with the Witch, making himself the sole target.

Meanwhile, behind them, the clash between the Witch Cultists and the subjugation force had begun.

The initial blow struck by the numerically superior subjugation force sent several Witch Cultists flying into the air in a spray of blood. However, it was also clear that the unfamiliar knights were struggling against the eerie, gliding movements of the Witch Cultists.

It would be too optimistic to expect immediate reinforcements after drawing them away.

Subaru regretted that if only Wilhelm, with his unparalleled skill in human-to-human combat, were still alive.

"My thinking was too shallow, that was my mistake… If he has the ability to possess after dying, I should have anticipated he had a way to commit suicide!"

The explosion of the dragon carriage carrying the old Petelgeuse was precisely for that reason.

Petelgeuse had likely planted bomb-like devices on his cultists' bodies beforehand, instructing them to activate them as needed.

As a result, the old Petelgeuse's body successfully transferred to a new one, taking the dragon carriage and their main forces in the vicinity with him.

Smoke still billowed from the blast crater, and there was no sign of Wilhelm or Ferris. —He didn't think they were simply blown to bits, but.

"I can't be optimistic enough to think they got away unharmed. —Just as planned, I'm counting on you!"

"This cannotcannotcannotcannotcannotcannotcannnoooottt—!!"

Petelgeuse raged, shaking his head, and Unseen Hands spread out to block his path. But Subaru immediately countered and closed the distance, striking Petelgeuse's surprised face with a,

"S-Smash!!"

"Bafah?!"

Patrasche's pivot leg gouged the ground as she drifted, and flying clumps of earth struck Petelgeuse's face directly. Subaru flipped him off while his face was covered in dirt, then circled provocatively.

"Hey, hey, having a bunch of hands doesn't mean anything if your head's useless. You should learn from me and Patrasche's perfect synchronization, connecting eye-to-eye, hand-to-hand, and heart-to-heart. Are you, by any chance, slothful?!"

"—!!!"

Petelgeuse was so enraged he lost even his words, silently sending forth palms of death.

However, excited by Subaru, who possessed extraordinary talent in “provocation,” Petelgeuse’s attacks were lacking precision due to the noise in his thoughts.

In other words, despite having the advantage of countless palms,

“Your brain can’t keep up. It’s a joke when the hardware’s decrepit compared to the software’s required specs. Did you make your brain tremble too much?!”

In this situation where a single misstep meant instant death, Subaru couldn’t completely suppress his laughter at his own ability to still crack jokes. A faint chuckle escaped him, further provoking Petelgeuse.

What should have been a hair’s-breadth struggle was turning into an evasion exercise that felt almost routine.

Just hours ago, he and Patrasche could barely synchronize their breathing, but now their very heartbeats aligned, their intentions undeniably transmitted through the reins.

Julius had said, ‘Entrust your trust, and let the wind guide you.’

—The meaning of those words now, he understood not with words, but with his heart!

“—Ru!!”

Breaking through the rising dust, Subaru’s eardrums, hot with elation rather than nausea from the centrifugal force of the sharp turn that churned his insides, suddenly caught a sound.

From far away, what reached him was a voice calling his name, and the owner of that unmistakable voice was,

“Subaru—!!”

Emilia was visible in the distance, leaning out of the window of the dragon carriage attempting to rapidly accelerate and escape the combat zone, her long silver hair whipping wildly in the wind.

Evacuation from the combat zone—it wasn't just her dragon carriage. The merchant's dragon carriages carrying the villagers were also beginning to flee in the same way, and their evacuation, escorted by several knights, was all according to prior arrangements.

—The Witch Cult's last desperate struggle; that was an anticipated development.

If they had many non-combatants during a battle, they wouldn't be able to cope with the unscrupulous fighting style of the enemy. Therefore, the merchants had been instructed beforehand to evacuate if a battle began. To prevent chaos among the villagers, only those who could listen calmly were informed, and they were dispersed among the carriages in preparation for the situation.

And naturally, Ram, who had to navigate to the Sanctuary by another route, had also been informed—but,

"Why…?!"

Subaru hadn't told Emilia.

From the receding dragon carriage, he could see Emilia's face distorted in anguish.

He could tell that an unbearable shock of betrayal was etched there, and it struck a deep, tearing pain in Subaru's chest.

However, Subaru concealed his inner turmoil, and despite the vibrations and fierce wind, he let go of the unfamiliar reins with one hand and gave a thumbs-up.

"Leave it to me, piece of cake! It's Natsuki Subaru! You go on ahead, Emilia-tan! —I'll catch up soon and have a touching embrace with you!"

"—!!"

He didn't know if she could see his teeth glinting from that far away, but only an inarticulate sound reached him from the dragon carriage as it sped into the distant forest path.

After confirming that their group had safely exited the combat zone, Subaru exhaled deeply and turned back to Petelgeuse.

"I'm surprised you waited so patiently. Are you the type who understands emotions?"

"Silence! Silence! Silence! Silence! I was not idle, you merely continued to evade! Insolence! Disrespect! The Witch's love! Her embrace! How foolish of you to reject it! Why, why do you…!"

"Oh, were you attacking? Your palms are so slow when I can see them, I thought you'd stopped, like a fly would land on them. My bad. You can keep going slowly, it's fine by me… Oh."

Subaru, continuing to provoke him with his full talent for lighthearted jabs, suddenly raised an eyebrow at a change in the battlefield's atmosphere. Behind Petelgeuse and Subaru, who were facing each other in a one-on-one battle, a significant change occurred in the clash between the Witch Cult and the subjugation force.

—Several Witch Cultists were simultaneously blown into the air in a bloody mist.

"Nuh-huh-huh-huh!!"

A gleaming treasure sword danced with blood and sunlight as it struck, its blade raging with incredible speed. Arms, legs, necks, and torsos in the path of the slashes were cleanly severed, and the flying enemies were relentlessly pursued and finished off by the knights.

Covered in an abundance of blood, the sword demon charging across the battlefield—Wilhelm had joined the fray.

"—Wilhelm-san!"

Subaru cheered at his continued presence, and Petelgeuse bit through the corner of his mouth in annoyance.

As if responding to Subaru's cheer, Wilhelm, moving low to the ground, severed the legs of two more enemies at the knees. He dodged incoming fireballs with practiced movements, accelerating with explosions at his back, and continued to reap death.

With Wilhelm's participation, the momentum suddenly shifted in their favor.

Ricardo and Julius also began a fierce assault as if to follow the sword demon, the sound of flesh tearing with every swing of the great nata, and sparks of mana flashing with every gleam of the knight's sword.

Further beyond, at the site of the exploded dragon carriage. A figure emerged from the clearing smoke, covering his nakedness with a charred canvas draped over his shoulder.

It was Ferris. He, too, seemed to have taken the full impact of the explosion at close range, yet he was still alive. Furthermore, there was no sign of damage to his beauty, which could be mistaken for a woman's, nor to his meticulously styled hair. Only his clothes seemed to have suffered the damage.

"Oh, no—I died again, didn't I, Old Man Wilhelm! I won't forgive those guys anymore, tear them to shreds!"

A small fist thrust into the air, the half-naked boy-girl cheered on the sword demon with a high-pitched voice.

Subaru felt something unsettling about his condition and his shout, but he turned a triumphant smile towards Petelgeuse.

"Your desperate self-destruction caused no casualties… The tide has turned! Just give up already!"

"Give up? Do you think such a thing, such foolishness, such idiocy is permissible?! Do you think I, I who am 'Sloth', would sink into such a 'slothful' choice, abandoning thought and will?! This is the ultimate insult! Humiliation! If only to repay my love with the utmost diligence…! If that alone is the reason to wash away this defilement—!!"

Spreading his hands, the Unseen Hands that had been emanating from Petelgeuse's entire body suddenly vanished.

Subaru felt a bad premonition from Petelgeuse's stance. However, the distance he had created for evasion proved to be his undoing, preventing him from closing in quickly enough.

As a result,

"Oh Witch! My beloved's guidance! I offer, I offer myself! Now, you foolish apostates who turned your backs on favoritism! You dry vulgarians who know no love!"

"Wait, Petelgeuse—you bastard!!"

"Now—be 'Sloth'!!"

The next instant, a black wave spread out, covering the battlefield—and the battle lines collapsed.

2

Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing 'Sloth'—Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.

For Subaru, this was his fourth confrontation with this man. Yet, he could confidently say that since being summoned to this world, no other adversary had tormented Subaru as much as Petelgeuse.

Each repeated encounter had cost Subaru his life eleven times in this world. And each of those deaths, never occurring in the same way twice, was etched into his soul with an unforgettable vividness.

Time and again, Natsuki Subaru had fumbled away his life in this other world. Sometimes due to an insurmountable power gap, other times because of an unavoidable irrationality, occasionally a momentary lapse in vigilance, and often as a result of misaligned intentions.

There had been horrific enemies. Encounters that threatened to shatter his spirit. Overwhelmingly powerful beings. Against them, the powerless Natsuki Subaru had been broken countless times.

Yet, Subaru had always managed to rise again. But this man's sheer depravity was uniquely different, standing head and shoulders above all the rest.

There was 'Unseen Hand', stretching invisible arms to tear everything apart.

There was 'Possession', allowing him to abandon his deceased body and transfer his soul into a subordinate's, thus preserving his life.

Then there was 'Sloth', a authority that could unequivocally be called the worst in a multi-person battle.

The forgotten terror of its rampage enveloped the battlefield, shattering the morale of the subjugation force, which had been pressing forward with furious momentum. No, it wasn't their morale that was broken, but their sanity.

"—!!"

"—Agh?!"

Screams and shrieks echoed across the battlefield, and many dropped their weapons. Most significantly, the Witch Cultists were completely unaffected by Petelgeuse's 'Sloth'.

"Stop…!"

Subaru yelled, trying to halt their movements, but at that moment, words held no meaning.

Faster than Subaru's voice could reach them, the cross-shaped daggers swung and drew blood. Gushing blood triggered anguished cries, and the front line was instantly broken.

Subaru was unaffected by 'Sloth', so he didn't know what symptoms the mental corruption it caused inflicted upon its victims. However, everyone under its influence foamed at the mouth, rolled their eyes back, and were driven to the brink of madness by non-existent hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, and phantom pains.

Only about fifteen of the original fifty-strong subjugation force managed to resist the mental corruption. The rest collapsed on the spot or were cut down, bleeding, by the Witch Cultists' blades. The silver lining was that most of the main fighting force remained.

"How bizarre—! This is like the White Whale's fog…!"

Wilhelm deflected the blades of three attackers in front of him with a single swing, dragging a fallen comrade back as he retreated. Similarly, Ricardo had the cat siblings on either side, and Julius conjured a sandstorm with wind magic, providing a blinding diversion.

"Oh, it seems more of you remained than expected! This is marvelous, truly delightful! With so many talented individuals still standing, the Cult can be said to be secure!"

"Talented…? What the hell are you talking about! No, more importantly, this situation…"

This was bad.

With just one move, the situation had been completely turned on its head.

In terms of fighting strength, factoring in those they'd taken down before the mental corruption spread, the numbers were roughly even. But with more injured than dead on their side, active fighters would be diverted to help them.

The Witch Cultists, on the other hand, showed no regard for their injured comrades. They trampled over the bodies of comrades who could still be saved if tended to, charging forward recklessly, even if mortally wounded, prepared to take an enemy with them.

Most importantly—

"You, it seems you were merely a diversion intended to draw my attention?"

"—!"

Petelgeuse had seen through Subaru's plan, and the shock was clearly visible on Subaru's face.

Noticing this, Petelgeuse clapped his hands, twisting his cheeks into a truly delighted grin.

"I seeeee! What a truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, diligent idea! I don't know how you learned about my Unseen Hands and my fingertips, but knowing that, your current and past movements make sense! And… now that I understand, there's no reason for me to concern myself with you."

Having said his piece, Petelgeuse turned on his heel. His gaze was fixed on the battlefield where knights and Witch Cultists clashed, and if his shadowy fingertips reached out there, it was inevitable that their side would be further disadvantaged.

Subaru gasped at the malicious act, ordering Patrasche to charge at the madman's back. At the very least, if he could inflict non-lethal damage with a body blow—

"—You, are you slothful?"

"—Ugh?!"

However, Subaru's desperate, momentum-driven charge was nothing but a pawn in Petelgeuse's hand.

Extending a shadow, an Unseen Hand approached from behind—outside Subaru's line of sight—grabbed Patrasche's tail, which was speeding through the wind, and effortlessly tossed the massive ground dragon into the air.

After the tremendous force and the sensation of being punched by the wind, Subaru plummeted, buffeted by the air so much that he couldn't tell front from back—and then slammed onto the grassy ground on his back.

"Cough—h-ha."

His whole body groaned, sparks flew before his eyes, and his vision went black.

The impact on his back sent shockwaves through his internal organs, his convulsing lungs rejected oxygen, and the vomit rising in his throat burned.

A beat later, ringing in his head and a lightning-strike pain in his limbs shot through him, and a pained groan escaped Subaru's writhing throat.

—Painful, bad, terrible, painful, painful, bad, bad!

With his numbing limbs and convulsing insides dominating his consciousness, Subaru's mind, unable to think clearly, cursedly rattled off these dangerous signals.

He had to do something with instant judgment, but it wouldn't form into a definite meaning or a correct course of action within him.

Pushing aside his disregarded rationality, only instinct screamed.

Move or die, I don't want to die, I have to do something to live.

However his body, despite his instinct's command, wouldn't move, and Subaru could only gasp for breath, barely clinging to life. Then —

"—Oh?"

"How diligent this is…"

Subaru let out a groan of incomprehension at the sudden sensation, and Petelgeuse, seeing the result, expressed awe with a look of reverence.

What had just happened? Subaru wondered, as a floating sensation churned his whole body, and he managed to turn his neck to realize —

Patrasche had him by the waist in her mouth, attempting to pull him away from Petelgeuse's grasp.

The jet-black ground dragon, not even bothering to have him mount, was concerned for her master, who couldn't move. Saved by her unwavering loyalty, Subaru successfully escaped his confrontation with Petelgeuse.

Petelgeuse, too, seemed somewhat impressed by Patrasche's decision to protect her rider without instruction, and tears streamed from his eyes as he covered his face with his hand.

“Ground dragon… Oh, ground dragon! This is wonderful! Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, ahhhhhhh-aaaaah-iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

Petelgeuse, shedding torrential tears, stomped his feet and spun around maniacally. He extended his palm towards the retreating ground dragon, not in attack, but with fingertips pointing upward, as if reaching out to a fading loved one.

“Love! Supreme love! Unconditional love! Pure love! How wonderful this is! How beautiful this is! How awakening is the spirit, the will, the very being, the way of loving, that drives it to run solely out of concern for its master! Oh, oh, ohh! Diligent! You are truly, a diligent devotee of love! Ee-ee, excellentttttt!”

The ecstatic madman was engrossed in his solo performance, showing no interest in their escape.

Subaru was carried further, across the plains, bypassing the battlefield and heading to the rear. There, Ferris was attending to the wounded.

“Subaru-kyun?! Were you attacked?! Are you dead?”

“Barely… alive. My whole body aches like hell, but thanks to Patrasche… oof!”

Subaru responded with a wry smile to the harsh greeting. The moment he reached Ferris's side, he was roughly tossed onto the grass.

He landed face-first, and the mix of leaves and dirt in his mouth stunned Subaru. He then turned to Patrasche, intending to complain —

"You, if you carried me all this way, couldn't you have been a little more careful with—"

However the sight of the ground dragon's mangled form froze his throat.

When Patrasche was thrown by the Unseen Hand, her tail had been gripped. The part where her tail met her body was torn from the root, and a massive amount of blood gushed out, staining the grassland red even now. Besides that, two gouges were carved into her flank, and perhaps from being thrown and slammed into the ground, her left foreleg was completely crushed from the tip.

Without a doubt, she was literally covered in wounds.

Perhaps having expended all her remaining strength to bring Subaru to the rear, Patrasche's massive body collapsed onto the grassland with a thud. She lay there, breathing shallowly and faintly, as if dead.

Involuntarily, Subaru clung to her body.

"Hey! No way… Patrasche! You, you… I, my… my judgment error, caused this… Hey!"

He called out and touched her, but Patrasche showed no response. In fact, her breaths became shallower, and her life force steadily weakened.

"Fe-Ferris! Patrasche is… please, help her…"

"This child nobly fulfilled her role in protecting you. Just be proud of that."

Ferris replied sharply to Subaru, who turned back, pleading with a trembling voice.

For a moment, Subaru didn't understand the meaning of that response. It wasn't the answer he wanted. It was as if he was being told to give up on Patrasche.

"That ground dragon lived out her life. You and I, we can't save everything. You understand, don't you?"

Ferris said, cutting him off so cruelly that Subaru felt it at the time. He almost retorted against Ferris's attitude, but Subaru didn't know what to say.

Only a sense of loss, as if Patrasche's presence, which he was still touching, was drifting away and blurring, remained in his palm—

"And because you left… the Archbishop is making his move!"

"—!"

Turning his face at the sound of the voice, Subaru saw the Unseen Hand extending towards the battlefield.

In the path of its palm were two knights, an old knight and a young knight, both uncorrupted and fighting valiantly.

"You two, watch ou—!"

Faster than his voice could reach them, the palm tore the heads from the necks of the two knights.

Blood spurted, the heads gripped by the black palm floated in the air, their stunned expressions crushed like fruit the next moment. A beat later, their bodies convulsed and collapsed, followed by a roar of laughter.

"Now! Now! Now, now, now, now, now, now, now!! The beginning of the end! It ends! Let's end the end, and dedicate everything! I am now deeply moved, moved to tears, and filled with emotion! Therefore, with my own hands, with love, I wish to grant you all a peaceful end!"

Petelgeuse's laughter and selfish pronouncements were unending.

Subaru saw countless Unseen Hands extending from the shadows, selecting their prey as if licking their lips.

Wilhelm and the others braced themselves, wary of the invisible threat, but there was no way to defend against the unseen witch's hand, which meant instant death upon contact.

“What do I… do?”

Desperately, Subaru racked his brain.

In this situation, only Subaru understood the full extent of it. If there was a plan to overturn things, only Subaru could conceive it.

Yet, even as his brain felt like it was boiling, no answer came. Moreover, his consciousness was still half- 끌려 away towards Patrasche, who was currently fading away.

—What do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do, do, do, do, do, do, do, do.

His brain churned so hard it felt like it would burn out, but only ragged breaths escaped his lips.

In a situation that threatened to make him despair, Petelgeuse, without waiting for his decision, raised both hands as if to declare time was up—

“—Mph?!”

With an instant decision, a small figure leaped away, and a moment later, mana converged on the spot where Petelgeuse had been—an ice stake erupted from directly beneath him, barely missing the madman.

“Who in the world is that?!”

Petelgeuse raised his voice and turned, looking up at the hill.

Everyone else present followed his gaze and noticed her presence.

The wind blew, her silver hair fluttering in the breeze, and a beautiful girl stood with the sunlight at her back.

She was breathless, sweat on her forehead, yet her indigo eyes had not lost their power.

“—That’s enough, you villain.”

A bell-like voice, sharp and dignified, carried on the wind across the grassland.

At her sight, Petelgeuse’s eyes widened in delight, and Subaru’s in shock.

Subaru’s throat filled with despair at his own regret for letting the madman meet the girl who should never have met him.

—The end is near. The end is approaching, without any light in sight.

Vic.ll2o

Chapter 74:
Fulfillment of the Contract

Natsuki Subaru was plagued by an obsession: this situation simply couldn't happen.

He didn't know why. There was no rational basis for it, just a vague unease. Yet, the certainty that it must not happen was firmly rooted in his chest.

On the hill, Emilia's silver hair streamed in the wind as she held out her hand towards him, while Petelgeuse, arms wide open, seemed to welcome her with a joyous expression—a fateful encounter. Subaru had unconsciously tried to avoid these two meeting at all costs. Yet now, in a desperate, cornered, and utterly helpless situation, Emilia was here, and Subaru had no plan, no countermeasure.

"Why…?!"

Anger flared within him, eclipsing surprise and regret. It was anger at himself for knowing this situation had to be avoided and yet failing to prevent it. And more than anything,

"You should've known, Puck!!"

His furious shout tore across the grasslands, reaching the spirit floating beside the silver-haired girl. The spirit, however, didn't turn its attention to Subaru, its gaze fixed solely on Emilia's profile. It flapped its paws, circling Emilia, its face etched with an unfamiliar anxiety.

"Lia! No! Get out of here right now! He's a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult! You shouldn't have met him! You shouldn't be here!"

"It's too late to go back, and I'm not going to. I wasn't raised to just sit back comfortably while everyone else fights like this."

Emilia replied, her cheeks taut with a certain tension, to Puck's desperate plea. Puck put a paw to his face, shaking his head and muttering, “No, no,” at her stubborn stance.

“It’s not about who’s doing what! It’s the Witch Cult! It’s the Witch Cult… Ah, I just remembered now! The ordeal! It’s an ordeal, Lia. The Archbishop imposes trials! And I can’t interfere with those trials due to our contract! This is as far as I can go! So…!”

Puck cut himself off, his expression stiffening as if forbidden from saying more. Even Emilia widened her eyes slightly in surprise at the little cat, who usually maintained such a composed demeanor and never deviated from his own pace.

“Puck… do you know something?”

“I don’t know anything! But I know something! I can tell. That’s why it’s no good, Lia. Go back immediately. If you stay here, if you meet them, something more terrifying than death will surely happen!”

Puck’s answer was no answer at all. But despite his agitation, he didn’t physically stop Emilia, nor did he forcefully control the situation with his immense power. This frustrating helplessness ignited an unbearable rage in Subaru. Unsure why his chest burned so fiercely, he cried out,

“If Emilia comes out here… what was I fighting for?! —And you!”

“You dare say that?! Lia ignored my words and came all this way for whose sake…!”

Puck, too, strained his voice in response to Subaru’s angry, distorted face. Subaru realized the undeniable truth in Puck’s words, and he was overwhelmed by self-reproach.

It was an obvious, undeniable conclusion. There was only one reason she would have gotten off the fleeing dragon carriage and returned to the battlefield.

Subaru and the others had stayed behind, risking danger without saying anything, without telling her anything. She always chose to make sacrifices for others, steadfastly following her heart even if it meant being disliked. —Such a person wouldn't simply accept being protected.

It was a misjudgment. Subaru had made another one. And that misunderstanding, compounded, was now exposed at the worst possible moment.

—There was no more time to lose.

"Puck is…"

Still on the hill, Puck was clinging to Emilia, pleading with her to reconsider. However there was no way he could bend her strong will. Emilia, half-resigned to Puck's lack of cooperation, closed her eyes and began to chant, relying solely on her own magical power.

The unsettling madman, Petelgeuse, who had remained silent, began to speak,

"Oh… ah, what a glorious day it is. Truly a reflection, a vessel for which there could surely be no more suitable body…"

Tears streamed down his face. The madman, his voice trembling with uncontrollable fervor, took a step toward the hill. His steps wavered, but his advance was nothing less than a countdown to ruin.

"…"

Puck was useless. Subaru, driven by a sense of mission, stood up. As soon as his hand released its grip, Patrasche's breathing quietly stopped. A single tear traced Subaru's cheek. He roughly wiped it away with the back of his hand and began to run.

"Subaru-kyun?!"

Leaving Ferris's startled cry behind him, Subaru sprinted, forgetting the creaking pain in his entire body. He didn't even glance at the battlefield where Witch Cultists clashed with the subjugation force, his eyes fixed solely on the girl on the hill.

Only he could prevent her encounter with the madman now. He didn't know how much help his insignificant self could be. He didn't know, but he still had to do it. Otherwise, why…?

"Please, do not interfere!"

Sensing Subaru's approach, Petelgeuse tilted his head and looked back, his shadow expanding. A jet-black demonic hand shot out, rapidly closing in to ensnare Subaru. The pressure of the palm felt as if it would tear his limbs off, yet Subaru twisted his body, slipping through the gap without slowing down, evading it. At this crucial moment, despite the heavy fatigue and injuries he should have been feeling, his concentration sharpened, triggering a change in his body.

It was the unleashing of desperate strength. Subaru's body moved beyond its limits, narrowly avoiding the encroaching palms. Petelgeuse clicked his tongue at Subaru's extraordinary movements.

"It is vexing, but you can see the Unseen Hand…"

"Don't open your filthy mouth any further! You won't do anything else!"

The distance between them closed to under twenty meters, and the number of demonic hands overflowing to tear Subaru apart now covered his entire field of vision. But there was no fear of being torn to shreds. What propelled Subaru forward was the burning flame of impatience, overriding his fear of death and scorching his entire being.

He stepped forward, dodging a palm that grazed his cheek. His left cheek and ear were brutally torn, and the pain of spurting blood seared his nerves. But pushing his consciousness to the limit against the agonizing pain, Subaru's body pressed forward, forward—and his outstretched arm reached out, threatening to grab Petelgeuse's slender shoulder,

"If the Unseen Hand proves disadvantageous, then it cannot be helped, right?"

"—Foul play!"

"—Ul dona."

Petelgeuse, with a bored expression, uttered a short incantation. The moment Subaru heard that word and widened his eyes in astonishment, the ground beneath him violently shook, and his stance crumbled as if his pivot foot had been swept away. And then,

"No way…?!"

"The Unseen Hand is a mark of favoritism bestowed only upon me… but have I ever said that I can only manipulate that?"

Petelgeuse tilted his head ninety degrees, uttering a malicious taunt as he moved away. No, the ground beneath Subaru's feet had surged upward with incredible speed, thrusting his body, which had been directly above it, into the sky.

The entire area beneath his feet had sprung up like a spring-loaded platform, effortlessly launching Subaru's body into the air. The height easily exceeded ten meters—

"—Ugh, ah?!"

Still off-balance, he was slammed back down onto the jumping ground, the impact on his chest knocking the wind out of him. His vision blurred with the shock, and in that state, thrown into the air, Subaru had no effective way to avoid the fall. Falling from a great height. And, as he'd previously learned from "True Murphy's Law," there was a high probability of falling headfirst. Now, once again, he was plummeting headfirst, about to break his neck and die—just before,

"Subaru—!!"

At the same moment a clear, urgent cry rang out, a translucent mass rose from directly below, catching the falling Subaru. While it was designed to soften the impact of the fall as much as possible, due to its very nature, damage was unavoidable. Subaru opened his eyes with a pained grimace at the hard sensation and cold touch against his skin, and what he saw was—

"An ice… mountain? No, a tower…?"

A mountain of ice, built up to the same height as the rising earth to rescue the flung Subaru—that was the true nature of the mass that had saved Subaru from falling to his death.

His bloodied skin clung to the ice mountain, and he grimaced at the skin-peeling pain as he pushed himself up. Subaru felt both the relief of having survived and the crushing weight of an irreparable mistake.

—There was no need to wonder whose hands had created this ice mountain.

"—Emilia!!"

Turning around, Subaru pushed himself up on the slippery ice mountain, his face turning frustratedly toward the hill. However the rising earth, now a sheer cliff, blocked his view, isolating Emilia, Puck, and Petelgeuse on the other side of the hill, preventing him from seeing their movements.

Only, Emilia's chanting had been interrupted. She couldn't see Petelgeuse's Unseen Hand!

"Worst… this is the worst. To get around the wall…"

He had to get off the ice mountain and over the wall of raised earth. The land that had risen to block the hill was like a sheer cliff, making it geographically difficult to go around to the other side. Subaru couldn't do it alone.

The skin on his palms stuck to the ice, and the peeling pain seared his brain. The sharp pain, repeatedly bringing tears to the corners of his eyes, he literally bled as he descended the ice mountain. Fortunately, there were multiple handholds, and coupled with his desperation, he descended the ice mountain surprisingly quickly, half-falling. But without a moment to catch his breath, he looked up at the wall, lost.

"This wall… Damn it, that bastard was playing me…!"

Subaru slammed his bloodied hand against the dirt wall, gritting his teeth and once again regretting his shallow thinking. He had thought that if he could just seal Petelgeuse's "Unseen Hand," he could neutralize him, and he had underestimated him. As a result, he had been completely outmaneuvered—

"—Subaru-dono!"

"…Wilhelm-san?"

From behind the distraught Subaru, the old swordsman rushed up. With fewer injuries and his precious sword at his hip, he nodded to Subaru, glaring at the wall.

"I caught a glimpse of Lady Emilia. —Is the Archbishop on the other side of this?"

"Yes… yes! I was defeated! Emilia… she mustn't meet him, Petelgeuse! Something terrible will happen… I can't explain it well, but it's bad. That alone…"

Subaru clung to Wilhelm, unable to articulate the reason for his urgency, frustration welling up. Wilhelm nodded at Subaru's incoherent words.

"Leave it to me. I shall cut open this wall with my own hands now."

"You say cut…?"

To Subaru's question of how he would cut this impossibly high wall, Wilhelm gave a remarkably concise answer through action. With a flashing white blade, he gouged into the wall, and then a continuous barrage of slashes began to tear through the dirt. The answer was simple: he would literally "cut it open."

"Whoa…"

Witnessing the true Sword Demon's slashes up close, Subaru couldn't help but be captivated by his overwhelming skill. Even in this critical moment, the beauty of the flashing blade, the pinnacle of his slashes, truly showed him what it meant to reach the "summit of the sword."

Behind them, while Subaru and Wilhelm were separated from the front lines by the wall, the battle between the Witch Cultists and the subjugation force was entering its climax. The subjugation force—the Beastman Mercenary Group—fought well, Ricardo's great axe sending Witch Cultists flying. And behind him was Julius, commanding six semi-spirits of different glows.

"Ia, Kua, Iku, Aro, In, Nes—all of you, lend me your strength."

The semi-spirits, called by name, intensified their respective glows in response. The next moment, six kinds of light illuminated the slender sword in Julius's hand, transforming into a rainbow blade that sent the "Finest Knight" into the fray.

"Finally ready, are ya! You sure kept me waitin'!"

"My apologies, Ricardo. I've burdened your valiant efforts greatly. —Now, I shall show you the results worthy of that hardship."

Julius responded gallantly to Ricardo's shout, lightly swinging his rainbow-glowing sword. In the air, a rainbow traced the path of his blade, and its radiance danced with light. It was fantastical. Yet, as for its practicality, that remained unclear. Julius, brandishing that blade, approached the Witch Cultists. A black-robed figure noticed him, raising a dagger from their waist, and lunged at the calmly advancing knight. To this,

"My sword now interferes with all creation. —To challenge me is futile."

A rainbow flashed, and the black-robed figure's dagger, along with their arm, vanished. A cut that drew no blood. With both arms lost up to the elbows, the black-robed figure couldn't even comprehend the meaning of the damage inflicted upon them before another slash consumed them.

"Now—only those who wish to be captivated by the rainbow's brilliance, stand before me!"

Declaring his intention, Witch Cultists rushed at Julius, who raised his sword. Alongside Ricardo, Julius met them—a truly dependable sight. And here too, "We'll break… through the wall!"

"—Hmph!"

Beyond the excavating slashes, a faint light shone through the wall. As Subaru cried out with hope for a breakthrough, the tip of the precious sword brilliantly pierced the wall. Wilhelm, covered in dirt, kicked the wall down with a front kick, securing a passage wide enough for a person. Following the Sword Demon, who slipped through, Subaru, too, peered through to the other side of the wall.

He had lost a considerable amount of time. During that time, he had been completely unable to interfere. If Emilia had been lost as a result—

"Emi—"

However, Subaru's worst nightmare had unfolded in a completely different way.

"—Ah, it hurts, it hurts, it hurrtts."

Petelgeuse groaned in pain, his voice trembling at the end of his sentences, and blood flowed. Already, a considerable number of icicles pierced his left lower abdomen, and as for his left foot, a stake protruding from the ground had broken through his instep, pinning him to the earth.

Behind Emilia, facing him, numerous ice blades still floated, waiting to be unleashed, the tide of battle clearly in Emilia's favor. And precisely because it was clear—it was the worst possible outcome.

"—Emilia!!"

Subaru screamed, trying to force out words to prevent it from becoming reality. But before Subaru could speak, Petelgeuse, on the verge of death, reached out a hand towards him—extending a jet-black demonic hand even faster.

The approaching hand, whether due to Petelgeuse's dwindling life force, was impossibly slow. Even after pulling Wilhelm out of the way, who couldn't see it, there was still enough time for a leisurely stroll. However, that demonic hand, which Subaru didn't perceive as a threat,

"Look out, Subaru—!!"

To Emilia, who knew nothing, it could only appear as a fatal blow to Subaru. Therefore,

"Ah, the abandonment of thought—you are 'Sloth', isn't that right?"

A face twisted in mad laughter was severed by a shower of ice blades and flew into the air. Blood spurted from the decapitated torso, and the lifeless body collapsed. The airborne head fell into the grasslands beyond, landing with a heavy thud, out of sight.

Emilia had stopped the madman Petelgeuse's breathing. It was a "worst case" of a different kind than Subaru had envisioned.

"Subaru-dono. It seems that one is…"

Confirming the death of the Archbishop, Wilhelm's expression softened slightly. Similarly, Emilia, though chewing on the regret of her actions, also bore a hint of relief on her shoulders. Before the two of them, Subaru raised his face. And then he opened his mouth,

"Both of you, get away from me right now—too late!!"

Just before he could reach out with both hands and push Wilhelm away, his mouth moved and spoke words not of his own intention. Immediately after, Subaru felt the illusion of the ground beneath him swelling. No, his shadow exploded, and countless arms emerged from it.

They rose silently like writhing snakes, targeting the nearby Wilhelm. But the old swordsman barely made it. Even though he couldn't visually perceive the threat of the Unseen Hand, he sensed Subaru's immediate warning and instantly twisted his body, leaping with the speed of wind to Emilia's side.

Subaru —Petelgeuse— glared at them with vexation.

"The worst feeling… right. Is having someone else in your head this disgusting…?!"

He dug his fingers into his wound, his consciousness flickering with pain, struggling to maintain his sanity. If he didn't stay vigilant, he felt he'd be taken over immediately. The sensation of another, a despised entity, so brazenly residing within his mind. Given the previous incident, he should have anticipated this. That's why this situation, of all things, had to be avoided

.

"What… Subaru, what's wrong?"

"No, Lady Emilia. Right now, that is Subaru-dono, and yet not solely Subaru-dono. —Subaru-dono! Are you conscious?!"

Wilhelm restrained Emilia with his arm, calling out to her as she looked at the strange Subaru with concern. Subaru grimaced in response, answering by backing away. The matter of "possession" was something they had all discussed and understood within the subjugation force. Wilhelm must have realized, from Subaru's demeanor, that he was struggling against the madman's consciousness.

Naturally, his expression hardened, and the tip of his precious sword was aimed at Subaru. He wouldn't immediately attack, but his guard was certainly up. And that was what Subaru had requested of him before the battle began.

"I'm… glad you kept your promise, Wilhelm-san."

"I ask that you not force me to cut you… Can you not somehow escape without being completely dominated?"

"How do you think…? Honestly, I'm not even sure if I can maintain my sanity right now. If I let my guard down, I feel like I'll immediately… gouge out my neck or something."

His arms spasmed, and if he lost focus, he could feel his raised fingertips crawling towards his throat. If he left them unchecked, they would gouge out his neck with power pushing the limits of the human body, ending his life in excruciating pain. He was always such a lowlife, trying to make him commit suicide.

“Besides… with others, he uses them himself… but with me, he tries to make me kill myself immediately? What’s his deal…?!”

His voice trembled, his fingertips trembled, and his gaze began to wander. His mind was being invaded by Petelgeuse, and control of his body was gradually being stolen. He already couldn’t feel his feet. Slowly, his existence as Natsuki Subaru was being painted over by the existence of Petelgeuse, creeping from one end to the other.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had such difficulty possessing someone.”

“Talking to a spirit… I guess I’m really at my end. Damn it.”

A phantom Petelgeuse appeared in his mind. The image was of the first Petelgeuse he’d seen—a vision that should have been blown to smithereens by now. However that ghostly figure circled around Subaru, looking him over as if licking him, while Subaru desperately resisted.

“Such good resistance, such good expression, such a good attempt! A trial! An ordeal, ordeal, ordeal, ordeal, ordeal! This is how an ordeal should be! For me, for the Witch, and for the half-devil who is merely a vessel, it is all the same! An ordeal! Oh, a trail of love!”

“Don’t make noise in my ear, damn it. What ordeal… If I just suppress you like this… there’s no way someone who can beat me in strength of will exists…”

He bluffed, put on a brave front, and tried to steel his heart. If he didn’t, he felt he would immediately give in to this self-destructive urge. Or perhaps he’d extend an arm from the shadow at his feet, on the verge of bursting, and utterly crush everything around him beyond recognition.

If this impulse was what Petelgeuse always harbored, then indeed, he could find a sort of understanding for the madman’s bizarre and grotesque behavior up until now.

If he craved destruction this much, he could easily bite off his own fingertips. If he wielded an authority so difficult to control, it would be no wonder if he lost his mental balance.

—Is this the world Petelgeuse sees?

"—I do not seek understanding."

For the first time, the supposed phantom Petelgeuse coldly spoke to Subaru. Until now, Petelgeuse had expressed anger, madness, and ecstasy as emotions. For the first time, the color of emotion drained from his face. It was, in a way, more chilling than any of his previous attitudes.

" I do not seek to be understood by anyone. Above all, sympathy is an insult to the love I receive! A humiliation! Nothing less than disgrace! To simply think, contemplate, be conscious of, and strive only to repay the favor! Only then can I be

saved

!"

"You…!"

The phantom of Petelgeuse drew closer, extending his tongue to restrain Subaru. Disgust and a hint of pity flashed through Subaru's mind, but he immediately dismissed them as a momentary lapse. Still, the madman and the ordinary man struggled, vying for control —and then,

"—Subaru!"

"Subaru-kyun!"

"Bro!"

Behind him, having annihilated the last of the Witch Cultists, Julius, Ferris, and Ricardo rushed forward.

"Subaru!"

"Subaru-dono…!"

"…"

From the front, Emilia and Wilhelm descended the hill, their faces a mix of lingering caution and the worry that seeped from behind it, as they approached.

His heart pounded, louder and stronger. His mind reeled at the sight of the assembled faces, and most of all, Emilia stood right beside him. Subaru's heart, trembling at her proximity, suddenly brightened.

"…"

Suddenly, the trembling in Subaru's limbs stopped. The aftershocks of fighting what had been trying to burst from within him, which had caused his limbs to tremble, vanished, and he exhaled a long, slow breath.

"Subaru…?"

Emilia tilted her head at Subaru's composed demeanor. Hesitantly, her fingers reached out towards him, about to touch his cheek.

Just before her white fingertips touched his cheek, Subaru's raised hand took hers. "Ah," Emilia whispered, and her amethyst eyes, looking at him, intertwined with his black ones. And then, Subaru's cheek slowly curved into a smile,

"—Lia, no!"

"I finally caught —you."

Puck sprang forward, issuing a warning cry, but Petelgeuse's cheek-splitting grin was faster. Everyone immediately tried to move to protect Emilia, who was now being held by the arm, but they were all bound by the rising black demonic hands.

"Nya?!"

"What's this?! Just like Bro said!"

"This is the Archbishop's… 'Unseen Hand'!"

Ferris, Ricardo, and Wilhelm, bound and forced to the ground, groaned in pain. Arms rising from the ground grasped their limbs, forcing them onto all fours as if their hands and feet were weighed down with lead. But,

"—It seems there's someone with a bad compatibility, right?"

"It seems so… I demand you release everyone unharmed."

Julius, who had narrowly evaded the demonic hands by leaping backward, drew his sword. Petelgeuse, who had stolen control of Subaru's body, glared vexedly at Julius, who had somehow escaped the Unseen Hand's restraints.

"—A Spirits Arts User,

are you

?"

"And if so, what of it?"

Petelgeuse clicked his tongue, clearly annoyed. Julius, maintaining his calm demeanor, was likely trying to buy time to devise a strategy. However,

"Buying time is useless. The vessel is already in my hands—"

As he spoke, Petelgeuse lifted Emilia's white arm, which he still grasped. Emilia, unable to resist, was hoisted into the air by countless Unseen Hands, her mouth even sealed, preventing her from chanting. Emilia writhed desperately, struggling to escape. Beside her, the Great Spirit, who should have always watched over her, forbade himself from any intervention.

"Why… why am I here…? Lia, oh, Lia, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Why… if I can't help here, why did Echidna…!"

His murmuring carried a note of regret, and resignation weighed heavily on his small body. Hearing this, Petelgeuse suddenly stopped moving. He tilted his head, slowly looking down at the small cat with a creaking motion.

“You bastard, don’t mess with me…!”

It was righteous indignation, an uncontrollable outburst of anger. That explosion temporarily reawakened Subaru’s consciousness, which should have been driven into the void.

Despite having had all will to resist broken, the sight of the pathetic Puck alone was enough to stir his consciousness back to life. In that case,

“Ordeals, contracts… ridiculous, damn it. Then why are you… here?! Why… did you come this far…?”

Anger flared in Puck’s eyes as he looked up at Subaru, and they glared at each other. However, after exchanging such undying hatred, Subaru’s consciousness once again threatened to be swallowed by Petelgeuse’s flickering shadow. His consciousness was fading, and this time, he knew it would surely be crushed. So,

“—Do it, Julius.”

“What are you saying?”

“If this continues, I’ll be taken over and everyone will be wiped out… If that’s going to happen, stop it.”

He entrusted his wish to Julius, who held his sword and was the only one capable of conveying his will to his body in this situation. At least to break this deadlock, he wanted Petelgeuse to be killed. And if a vessel was needed for that, he would play the part.

“No, Subaru. You must think. I am a knight and a spirit user. I have a contract to assist your objective. To go back on that would be…”

“My objective is to save Emilia… My life is a separate matter…”

Julius’s face twisted in agony at Subaru’s strained answer. Subaru couldn’t help but laugh at Julius’s first expression of distress, a man who had always maintained an elegant and composed demeanor.

His cheeks relaxed, and a small sigh escaped his lips.

“Foolish, foolish, foolish, foolish, foolish, foolish, foolish, foolish, foolish, foolish!”

The phantom Petelgeuse reappeared, circling Subaru as if cursing him for his decision. Laughter bubbled up at the comical sight, and finally, a faint chuckle escaped his throat.

“Subaru, I…”

“Don’t make the wrong judgment, Sir Knight—”

Subaru urged Julius with a trembling voice, as Julius tried to voice his hesitation. However Julius still couldn’t commit. Pushing him forward, interrupting the conversation that everyone was watching with bated breath, was—

“—Subaru-kyun is about to be taken over, and Julius can’t bring himself to execute him. So, there’s no other way, is there?”

Ferris, who had been bound by the demonic hands and forced onto the ground, raised his head and smiled faintly from his painful position. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and a single strand of hair fell, a beautiful sight. His attire, consisting only of cloth draped over his shoulders, was undeniably alluring, even knowing he was male.

The smile that split his red lips was truly worthy of being called “demonic.”

“Wait, Ferris. What are you—”

“I’ll make it so there’s no turning back.”

Ferris clicked his tongue softly before Julius, who tried to stop him. A small, kiss-like sound echoed, and Subaru = Petelgeuse blinked, waiting for a change. However, nothing seemed to happen.

—Immediately after, Subaru’s entire body was instantly seared by the sensation of his blood boiling.

"—Ah, ha?!"

Hot. Hot, hot, hot. Hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot hot.

His throat was hot, his eyes were hot, his body was hot, his tongue was hot, his nose was hot, his hands were hot, his ears were hot, his feet were hot, his blood was hot, his soul was hot, his life was hot, hot hot hot.

His blood boiled, his internal organs simmered, and his brain emitted such a high fever that his vision blurred. Suddenly, this sudden and fatal change in his body made Subaru unable to utter a single word.

"AaaaaaAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAaaaaaaaaaaaaaAaAAaaaa—?!"

Just before his eardrums burned out, Subaru saw Petelgeuse, tormented by the same pain. Since they shared a body, Subaru's suffering was his suffering. And that meant that he, too, was experiencing this hopeless end.

—A feeling of "serves you right" welled up, only to immediately dissipate before the pain.

Suffering, rolling, convulsing, unable to move. When he noticed, everyone who had been bound was now free. Of course. With the person who should be using the Unseen Hand in this state, who could bind whom?

"Ferris! You, why…!"

"It wasn't his wish. To protect what he wants to protect, it's his greatest desire… right?"

Subaru could no longer even move a single finger to express his suffering. He understood what had happened, that Ferris had caused it, and that Wilhelm had confronted Ferris. Emilia knelt, shaking the dying Subaru's shoulder.

“Wait… Subaru, no, this is wrong, it’s bad. Please. Wait… no, no, no. I…”

Her voice was tearful. For whom was she crying? She was crying for someone. She had always been so good-natured, always for someone else. He thought, perhaps, he would be happy if that someone was him.

“I can’t watch this.”

Ricardo shook his massive body and turned away. From beside him stepped forward the Royal Guard Knight with slightly disheveled purple hair—Julius, clutching his rainbow sword, a touch of desolation in his expression.

“…Ferris’s actions are a result of my own failing. I will eventually pay for this.”

He didn’t feel like telling him not to worry about trivial things. Instead, he wanted him to worry more, to never forget. For if he forgot how much Subaru had suffered, then Subaru truly couldn’t find peace.

—The tip of the rainbow sword was placed against Subaru’s neck, where he lay.

“No… no, Julius. Subaru is still…”

“His lifeforce is out of control… There’s nothing more.”

Emilia said something to Julius, but the knight shook his head, not listening. The sound of their conversation grew distant. Distant, distant, disappearing somewhere.

“This can’t be… my, I! Love, favor! I was supposed to have received the blessing of the Gospel…!”

—Shut up, come with me to hell.

Far, far away, falling into some unknown place, falling, falling. Ah, was he going to die again? Plummeting into the abyss, losing everything, carrying all his failures, to die a miserable death once more.

He looked back at the world. So that he would never forget what went wrong, what the cause was.

"—Subaru, I'm sorry."

He heard a tearful voice, the voice of the girl he most wanted to hear, and then his consciousness faded. And then, ah, he understood. This failure, and its reason.

"I—"

—Subaru shouldn't have reconciled with Emilia.

Bonus Short Stories

Librarian Beatrice's Log: Page Three

1

…In truth, the situation was more or less as she had expected.

The ominous foreboding was itself something that Beatrice had been unable to escape.

In the first place, the premonition had started the moment she had heard who had been selected to head to the capital this time around.

The first two were Emilia and Roswaal; that was fine.

She hadn't been told the details, but the two aforementioned had business at the capital's castle. Naturally the two of them would be going. There was no question that Puck would accompany Emilia, so although that was lonely, it couldn't be helped.

Further, it seemed that Natsuki Subaru, the boy who had been hanging around Emilia these last few weeks, would be going along as well. On top of that, he had been the one to drop in to the Forbidden Library to tell her about it.

Going on and on about something she hadn't asked about, Subaru showed entirely no consideration for Beatrice as she was trying to concentrate on reading. He was a truly infuriating fellow, so she was relieved that she wouldn't have to see his face for a while.

Finally, one of the maids would accompany them to handle seeing to their needs. Normally, the older of the maid sisters would take on that role, the one who was unwaveringly loyal to that good-for-nothing Roswaal.

However, just this once, it didn't turn out that way. The one who had asked to accompany them was the younger of the maid sisters. The older one had yielded that role to the younger, and as a result, the older sister and Beatrice would be the two to remain in the mansion.

That fact itself wasn't something that she minded. Beatrice hadn't particularly gotten close to anyone in the mansion—Puck was an exception—and she had no intention of being friendly to them.

No matter who it was that she would be spending several days alone with in the mansion, it wasn't something that she would give a second thought to.

…That was based on the assumption that her routine as a librarian was not disrupted.

"Good morning, Beatrice-sama. This is your breakfast of steamed yam."

"I see, I suppose. Leave it there, you know."

"It's noon, Beatrice-sama. I've prepared a steamed yam for your lunch."

"Hmm, I see, I suppose. I'll put the plate out later, you know."

"Here is your supper, Beatrice-sama. This evening, perhaps a steamed yam will do."

"…I, I see, I suppose. Steamed yams aren't bad, you know. Hmm, that's fine, I suppose."

"Good morning, Beatrice-sama. Breakfast has been especially steamed with extra effort."

"For pity's sake, I suppose! There are limits to what Betty can take, you know!!"

When, a bit more than a day after the party had left for the capital, a meal of steamed yams was offered for the fourth time, Beatrice reached her limit, came flying out of the Forbidden Library, and poked the older of the maid sisters with her finger.

The girl, Ram, with peach-colored hair and faint red eyes, and an altered maid outfit that exposed white skin, held a steaming plate in one hand and tilted her head; her expression showed no reaction to what Beatrice had pointed out.

“Beatrice-sama, if you need to visit the bathroom, there’s no need for you to go to the trouble of telling Ram about it.”

“Oh, come now! Who was speaking about that kind of limit to endurance?! You’ve been disrespectful nearly from the beginning, but lately it’s been happening a little too often, you know?!”

“You’ve gone and unmasked her, have you? Ram has been like this since she was born.”

“And now you’re showing too much of your true face, I suppose! There are limits to impudence as well, you know!”

Ram’s haughty irreverence wasn’t something that had begun recently, but before now, she would not have talked back directly to Beatrice’s face. In light of this change, no, this deterioration, Beatrice ended up stamping her foot.

“You can’t get away with overdoing that, just because Roswaal is away, I suppose. I demand that you shape up in your duties as a servant, you know. Firstly, put some effort into improving the food situation, I suppose.”

“You say that, but Ram has been laboring diligently each time on the flavor of the steamed yams. The salting, the duration of steaming, the selection of yams and mayonnaise… Isn’t it too early to be getting tired of them?”

“What matters! Is that it’s all the same meal, you know! Can you not make anything besides steamed yams, I suppose?!”

“Ram isn’t proud of that fact.”

“That’s exactly right, you know! It’s nothing to be proud of, I suppose!”

As Ram gave a faint impression of standing her ground proudly, Beatrice spoke roughly to her, wide-eyed.

She couldn't stand the warm scent of salt that drifted faintly in the hallway. Atop a plate were placed freshly steamed yams, and next to them white mayonnaise—the curious condiment that Subaru had devised—was arranged as well. There was no question it would be delicious. Beatrice loved mayonnaise.

However, if she were to show approval here because of that, she couldn't hope for the situation to improve.

"So, for now, Betty must harden her heart, and briefly forget about mayonnaise."

"Depriving yourself like that… *munch munch* could have ill effects on your health, Beatrice-sama."

"That's Betty's steamed yam, I suppose! Don't think you can just go ahead and eat it, you know!"

As they were speaking, Ram's hand had reached for the plate. Stealing her breakfast from that hand, and while snarling like a cat, Beatrice glared at Ram and asserted herself.

"You rely too much on your little sister… *munch munch* You're entirely forgetting… *munch munch* your duties as a… *munch munch* servant, I suppose… *munch munch*"

"Beatrice sama, some tea?"

"*munch munch*…I'll take some, you know."

From a teapot placed on the serving cart, the fragrant aroma of tea was spreading through the hallway. Accepting the tea poured into a cup, Beatrice's eyes narrowed in satisfaction at the warm flavor.

The steamed yam, delicious. The tea that Ram brewed, this was also delicious. Honestly, although one could hold nothing but doubt about Ram's ability as a servant, her yam steaming and tea brewing were perfect. Satisfaction.

"But this is no time to be satisfied, I suppose!"

"Beatrice-sama… Hasn't Barusu been rubbing off on you lately?"

"There's no call for that kind of insult, you know!! I can't believe you, I suppose…!"

Trembling furiously, Beatrice expressed her indignation at having something like that pointed out. It was unthinkable for her to be under the influence of the black-haired youth who had come to stay at the mansion. How long did they think she had spent here?

There was no way that she would be open to change now, after all this time.

"Setting that aside, it's quite strange, isn't it. Normally, Ram is the one to accompany Roswaal-sama, so it's exceptionally rare to have a chance to be alone in the mansion with Beatrice-sama."

"…At this moment, Betty, too, is painfully aware of that."

"Are you always making demands of Rem like this, when she stays together with you?"

"Demands! Did I say demand, I suppose?! I didn't say that! Your little sister can do anything, so there's no need for Betty to go to the trouble of saying anything, I suppose."

As Beatrice clutched the hem of her dress and ground her teeth, Ram nodded at her solemnly. Although Beatrice had just plainly stated that Rem exceeded Ram in ability, Ram showed no sign of concern.

Not only that, she smiled faintly at Beatrice.

"Ram is very proud of her little sister Rem, after all."

"If nothing else, I'm impressed by the strength of your heart…"

When placed in a situation of being compared to someone else, being found inferior is hard to take for anyone. Even for Beatrice, it was something she had personal experience with. It was something she felt more particularly when she was next to Puck.

There was no doubt that he was her beloved big brother. Despite that, she did feel an urge to envy him over the difference in the circumstances they had been placed in.

“Ram loves everything about Rem, after all, including her surroundings. It’s a different situation than yours, Beatrice-sama.”

“…Listen to you, talking as though you know anything about it, I suppose.”

“It’s just a bit of conversation. Besides, Ram has her hands full with her own concerns…Please be at ease.”

“At ease, you say? I wasn’t particularly worried, you know.”

While Ram spoke with a sparkle in her eye, Beatrice responded while licking at the salt and mayonnaise that had stuck to her hand. Then, after draining the cup of tea, the meal was finished. After wiping her fingertips with a cloth, Beatrice turned towards the hall’s doorway—the door that connected to the Forbidden Library. Behind her…

“Beatrice-sama.”

“What is it, I suppose? Let me remind you I’m expecting something more palatable for lunch, you know.”

“It’s not that; it’s only that something like eating while standing in the hallway is poor manners…”

“Setting aside that you nibbled at it first, what an outrageous bit of abuse, I suppose!!”

With her hand still on the door, Beatrice bellowed at Ram as she returned to the serving cart. Ram maintained her unruffled expression, and continued her speech with an “In addition, “.

“Ram has a full plate of jobs to attend to. Because of that, she has no time or effort to expend on meeting Beatrice-sama’s demands. Please extend your understanding to her.”

“That doesn’t sound like how someone hoping for understanding would put it, you know…?”

“Whether it’s stated politely or rudely, the steamed yam future will not change, after all.”

“Then at least say it politely, I suppose!”

As Beatrice seethed, Ram once more smiled faintly, and curtsied politely where she stood. If nothing else, the gesture was the perfect image of a maid, and Beatrice let loose a drawn-out sigh.

She watched Ram’s back as she pushed the serving cart, moving off into the distance.

“…This might be the most I’ve ever looked forward to the return of Roswaal and the others, you know.”

She whispered that with a tired-out face and voice.

2

With that sort of heartwarming exchange as a basis, Beatrice passed the dragged-out days of her time watching over the mansion.

The return of Roswaal and the others was on the fourth day after they’d left by dragon carriage—in other words, having no one but Ram for company went on for three days, and during that time, it should be noted that the meals were all steamed yams.

Regardless, thanks to their safe return from the capital, most of the problems that had been making Beatrice suffer stopped being problems. That was not, however, thanks to Rem, who, on her return to the mansion, took care of all of Ram’s accumulated chores at once, and offered meals other than steamed yams.

Unfortunately, Rem had not returned to the mansion. And it was not only Rem, but also Subaru who had gone along with her to the capital. The two of them remained at the capital, and the group that returned to the mansion consisted of the pair of Roswaal and Emilia, and Puck along with them.

As well, the various problems were not resolved; rather the matter was concluded with a decision that they would be set aside for later and shelved.

All of that came about thanks to Roswaal's first visit to the Forbidden Library in a long time…

"Beatrice. It's been so long, do you mind if I come i~n?"

"…Oh, it's you, I suppose."

When the man dressed as a clown opened the door and brazenly stuck his head inside, Beatrice sighed.

Beatrice was seated atop a wooden stepladder. When spending time in the Forbidden Library, that was her constant position. In truth, it wasn't that often that she met with Roswaal in this room.

Indeed, what was occurring here today was something that hadn't happened for several years. She didn't remember it that well, though.

"What brings you here, you know? Just so you know, Betty won't lend you any help with that crestfallen girl, I suppose. That's your jurisdiction, and not something Betty needs to involve herself with, you know."

"Tha~t's quite cold of you. Even when the Great Spirit whose so important to you is heartbroken over Emilia-sama? Even though you were kind enough to lend Subaru-kun a ha~nd?"

"…"

Although the provocative words seemed to be testing her, Beatrice held her silence and narrowed her eyes. Seeing her guarded attitude, Roswaal shrugged, and then walked over right to her side. He smiled, and though perhaps it was her imagination, he seemed to be enjoying himself; Beatrice found it suspicious.

"Somehow, you look like you're in a good mood, I suppose."

"Does it look that wa~y? Me, in good spirits?"

"…It does, you know. If you enjoy that girl being saddened in the capital that much, you'll forgive me if I question your tastes, I suppose. Maybe it was too late for that from the point you started wearing makeup, you know."

"O~h, don't be like that. It's the sort of thing that tends to put one in a good mood. For me~, the time for my dearest wish is coming steadily closer. With what's just happened, I'm sure of it, you se~e."

"When you say your dearest wish, you can't mean…"

"The dearest wish of the Mathers clan, indeed. If I put it that way, it's easier for you to understand, perha~ps? To you, who are both the guardian and librarian of the Forbidden Library, handed down from the time of the first Roswaal, yes?"

Roswaal closed one eye, and Beatrice, caught in the gaze of his yellow pupil, was at a loss for words.

The facts that Roswaal had spoken of were something that only Beatrice could grasp the true significance of. Seeing a slight glimpse of its meaning was something only Roswaal and Puck could do. And, by now…

"By now, Betty… is no longer concerned about what will happen, or what might happen, I suppose."

"That's a terribly sad thing. Howe~ver, there's something to look forward to. Hope, too, still remains. I know of your kindness and weakness. Isn't that right, Betty?"

"Why you…!"

Called by a familiar nickname, Beatrice lifted her head as though she were ready to lash out.

However, that exact reaction was what Roswaal had hoped for. He nodded at her, looking satisfied. Seeing that for herself, Beatrice immediately brought her rampant emotions under control.

Then, hugging her knees atop the stepladder, she turned her face away from Roswaal as though escaping from his gaze.

"Hope and expectations both have long ago dimmed, faded, and worn away. So Betty will always stay here… I wish for nothing more or less than that, I suppose.”

“I suppose you could say that. But… if possible, I would wish for you, too, to obtain happiness. You are worthy of that.”

“…There, indeed, you can say whatever you want when it’s only words, you know.”

As Beatrice’s cheeks bent into a cynical smile, Roswaal’s eyes lowered with just a hint of sadness. But, when he raised his head again, not a trace of that pity remained on his face.

He simply clapped his hands, and continued “That’s fine.” with his usual demeanor.

“No matter what sort of choice you decide on, I just wanted to let you know first. You’ve had as much time as you could want to worry over it, bu~t that time was necessary regardless. In order for you to be properly prepared.”

“…”

“I will head to ‘Sanctuary’. On the surface, it will be seen as going to explain about the Royal Selection to Garfiel and the others, but the truth of it is exactly as you are already aware. At the tomb, Teacher is waiting.”

“…We aren’t awaited, I suppose. At the very least, neither Betty nor yourself.”

“Ah, that’s true. I can’t disagree. …That’s why we must go to meet her. That’s what the time was for. That’s what this chance is for. That’s all there is t~o it.”

Loosening his lips, Roswaal showed a smile.

It was something different from the smiles that frequently showed up on his face, based on irony or mockery.

It was simply a genuine smile that looked forward to the future that awaited, anticipating wholeheartedly seeing it with his own eyes, the smile of a young man full of youthful innocence.

"…"

Finishing with that, Roswaal turned away from Beatrice, and withdrew from the Forbidden Library.

Exactly as he said in his last words to Beatrice, he would head to 'Sanctuary'. If that occurred, Beatrice had a fairly good idea of what would happen.

Left alone in the Forbidden Library, Beatrice reflected on Roswaal's words, and closed her eyes.

"After all this time…"

After all this time, she couldn't think that anything would change. Unlike Roswaal, she wasn't able to hold on to hope or expectations.

But on the other hand, just maybe, if something were to be set into motion…

"Mother… How much longer must Betty…?"

That sad whisper, that nevertheless carried a faint intensity, fell to the floor of the Forbidden Library, and vanished.

END

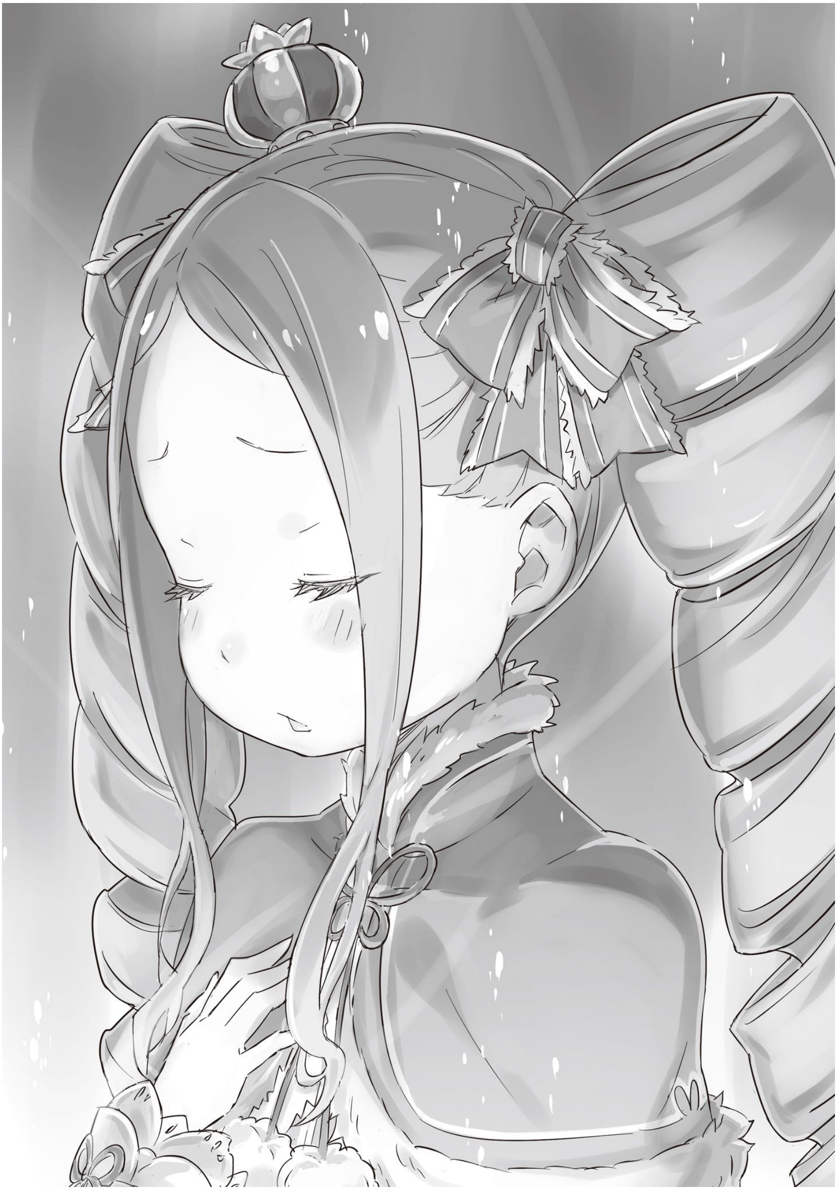

The Great Spirit Puck’s Nyan Nyan Tricks

1

An air of strained tension drifted on and on inside the dragon carriage.

In the Kingdom of Lugunica, in the royal capital Lugunica, was found the royal castle Lugunica. In front of it, many dragon carriages headed to the castle were currently waiting in an orderly line before the castle gate.

Normally, it would be rare to have this many people streaming into the castle, but today was a special day. Due to that, many people were making their way to the castle, security had been strengthened, and everyone was being checked carefully as they entered.

Inside the dragon carriage as it continued to inch its way forward, one could hear the sound of the frame swaying, rocked by the wind. A ground dragon’s Blessing of Wind Evasion protected against wind and sound that would interfere with travel, but when a ground dragon stopped moving it’s feet, the blessing’s effect was lost. This vast traffic jam was enough of a slowdown to cut off the blessing.

“It looks like we can’t get into the castle any time soon.”

Gazing at the state of things outside the window, a beautiful silver-haired girl murmured that to herself. Amethyst eyes drenched in sorrow, the girl who spoke with a silver bell voice was named Emilia.

“There shouldn’t be any need to worry about being late. But your cheeks are getting all stiff, Lia. If you don’t relax a little, your cute face will go to waste, won’t it?”

Picking up on what Emilia had whispered, a tiny shadow responded to her with a carefree, joking voice.

With a grey fur coat, a cat small enough to easily sit on the girl's narrow shoulder—he looked like nothing so much as a kitten, but was nevertheless a being that had the intelligence to comprehend human speech, a Great Spirit.

"It's fine. There isn't a girl anywhere that can beat Lia in cuteness. I can guarantee that for you."

"This isn't a day to be talking about who is cute and who isn't. I know you're doing your best to cheer me up, Puck, but that's rea~lly missing the point."

"Oh, is that so? The other candidates are all girls, too, so I was sure that was it."

"…Oh, you really are hopeless."

Emilia had to cover up a laugh as the spirit, Puck, played the fool for her on her shoulder. Seeing the tension on the side of her face disperse, if only a little, Puck nodded in satisfaction. Then…

"A~s expected of the Great Spirit, handling Lady Emilia is something you have a firm grasp of, i~sn't it."

Their exchange was complimented by an individual sitting across from them, dressed as a clown—Roswaal. He crossed his long legs elegantly, and continued while sending his gaze towards the scenery outside the window.

"Having said that, I can't entirely disagree with what the Great Spirit has surmised. This is a ceremony to select who will next sit on the throne, but currently, the only ones chosen by the dragon gem fitted to the emblem have been women… Indeed, the writings on the dragon tablet mention five priestesses, after all. It's only natural to think of that as the dragon's preference, the~n."

"In truth, if you think of it as continuing the bloodline, it's probably convenient for all the candidates to be girls, but… it's favoring one side a little too much. The candidates all have cute faces, too."

After responding to Roswaal's ironic smile, Puck turned back to Emilia with an 'Oh'.

"But there's no need to worry, no one can hold a candle to you, Lia, no matter who it is. Have confidence in yourself."

"I'm not really sure what kind of confidence you're talking about, but… Mhmm, alright. But…"

Cutting her words off there for a moment, Emilia tilted her head. Placing a finger on her lips, she continued.

"What do you mean when you say 'thinking about continuing the bloodline'? Why would girls be better?"

"…?"

Emilia's eyes were wide, and her expression said she didn't get it. Roswaal narrowed his eyes at that reaction, and then stared at Puck, sitting on her shoulder.

"Great Spirit, isn't that a little too overprotective, h~mm?"

"She can't be interested in what she doesn't know. This, indeed, is the very best of defensive measures for my daughter. That's my thinking, and that's what I've put into practice."

"Allow me to correct myself. That's not overprotective, but rather fairly controlling, wouldn't you sa~y?"

Puck looked somewhat hurt as he shrugged at what Roswaal pointed out. However, Emilia didn't quite grasp the meaning of what they were talking about. It did seem certain that they were talking about her, however.

However, they weren't given the time to go any deeper into the matter.

"Oho, it seems we've started moving. The front gate's come into view. Please prepare to enter the castle soon.”

“…Yes, I see. I’m all set.”

“Ready your heart as well, of course.”

Just as she nodded in response to Roswaal’s repeated words, the dragon carriage arrived at the castle gate.

When the doors of the various carriages were opened, Roswaal was the first to descend from the carriage. Following after his tall body, Emilia, too, moved to the outside. With her hair blowing in the warm breeze, she faced forward.

“…”

All at once, she could feel the tension in her surroundings on her skin, and Emilia drew her lips together sharply.

The clear recognition directed at her appearance, her silver hair and amethyst eyes. Even though she’d been preparing for it, it clawed at Emilia’s heart despite her preparation. However…

“It’s alright, Lia. …I’m at your side.”

Burrowed into her hair, she had family treating her kindly, close enough that she could feel his breath.

As her heart was rescued by that presence, Emilia looked up at Castle Lugunica, towering before her eyes.

On this day, at Castle Lugunica, the talks regarding the ceremony to select who would next take the throne would be held.

2

After the identity check at the castle gate was finished, Emilia was shown into the VIP waiting room.

Inside the warmly colored, well-ordered room, expensive furnishings and paintings were beautifully arranged.

One of the paintings was of the three heroes spoken of in stories handed down in the kingdom—the Divine Dragon, the Sword Saint, and the Sage, and stone statuary using the Divine Dragon as a motif could be seen at various locations around the castle.

Not feeling like he could look on it favorably, Puck decided that it was in rather poor taste.

“If they’re going to be decorating with this sort of thing, they’d be better off just hanging pictures of fruit. Why, I might even draw one or two for them, myself.”

“O~h, this is unexpected. To think that the Great Spirit makes a hobby of dabbling in art.”

“Well, I’ve never painted, but maybe I can paint. See, I’m just a bundle of possibilities. The philosophy of not letting one’s whims be bound by rules, doesn’t that sound like an artist?”

“I feel like that sort of trait is closer to a cat than an a~rtist.”

Saying that entirely without malice, a smile of amusement appeared on Roswaal’s face.

In his attitude’s words and hidden meanings, he was making no effort to treat Puck with the respect due to a Great Spirit.

In truth, Puck himself didn’t care for thoughtless respect or worship. Even calling him a Great Spirit was just something the people around him had begun doing by themselves. He wasn’t proud of it; it meant nothing to him.

“Well then. You’ve gone to the trouble of calling me here and leaving Lia alone in the waiting room. Is it alright for me to think that you’ve called me to talk about something important?”

“Naturally, an important task is waiting for Lady Emilia. She needs time to unify the spirits… if I were to say that, you wouldn’t believe me, then? In truth, it’s something di~fferent.”

Shaking his head with a clownish gesture, Roswaal folded his short arms and looked up at Puck.

Just as was said, there was no sign of Emilia in the room the two were meeting in. After they'd been shown to the waiting room, Emilia was left there by herself, and Puck was called by Roswaal to another room.

Leaving Emilia behind when she was uneasy was a concern, but Roswaal didn't seem like the sort that would take meaningless action at a time like this. Reluctantly, he had responded to the summons.

"Of course, if you're playing some kind of prank, I'll leave right away. I enjoy a good prank, too, but right now, when Lia is shaking like a kitten, I'm worried for her like a father cat."

"You truly do care for Lady Emilia, Great Spirit. I assure you I understand your worries fo~r her. For Lady Emilia, this may become her great moment in the spotlight… or an embarrassing debut."

"…I'm still not very happy with the idea of having that girl standing up in front of people. Lia says she'll do it no matter what, so I'm just doing what I can to help out."

It was easy to imagine the harsh situation Emilia would be placed in, several hours from now. For that alone, Puck was emotionally opposed to not only the events of today, but participating in the Royal Selection from the start.

There really was no reason for her to be unjustly injured, or to go to the trouble of making herself a target.

He kept Emilia distant from everything that would hurt her. That was Puck's reason for existing.

"However, Lady Emilia has already chosen her path. Well then, our duty is to clear and pave the road that she will walk, as well as we are able, wouldn't you say?"

"…If you'd quit beating around the bush, we could get this over with."

"We~ll then, I'll be brief. A few hours from now, Lady Emilia will stand on the stage of the Royal Selection. At that time, it is certain that those who do not think kindly of her origin will shower her with heartless condemnation. Their distrust is deeply rooted, and it's plain to see that they are vulgar enough to jump at the chance to abuse someone while maintaining appearances."

Roswaal fluidly explained his rather cruel conjecture to Puck.

Puck listened in silence; by and large, he was thinking the same thing. It wasn't hard to imagine after the looks that were directed at Emilia when she arrived by the other who had business at the castle.

"When the Royal Selection begins, the candidates will be given a chance to express their own thoughts. Something you might call a public declaration of belie~fs."

"A public declaration of beliefs… something about it seems quite overblown."

"It's a big affair for the kingdom, after all, so it's only natural for it to be overblown and exaggerated. Also, I've informed Lady Emilia about the declaration. However,"

Cutting off his words there, Roswaal closed one eye and pierced Puck with an amber gaze. With a slight pause in his speech, Roswaal's head wobbled as he shook it.

"The time of public declarations is likely to be an excellent opportunity for those who loathe Lady Emilia's origin. I even have some idea of who may speak up fi~rst."

"Hmm, and what then? Are you going to reprimand the one you're thinking of before the Royal Selection starts?"

"Tha~t's an option, too, but they have a strong belief in never giving in to the threat of violence. We're somewhat well-acquainted with each other, so there's no doubt they'd brush me off."

"Well then, what do you want to do? I don't enjoy saying it, but I'm not that much use outside of situations that call for brute force. Unless they're an unparalleled cat lover."

At that point, Puck continued “Or perhaps,” as he washed his face.

“Is that person in fact an unparalleled cat lover? You intend to subvert them, not with feminine wiles, but with feline wiles?”

“I’m acquainted with them, but I couldn’t say with any confidence that they love cats that much. So~, let’s try something else. Won’t you join me in putting on a little play?”

“A play?”

The intriguing word ‘play’ suddenly jumped out at him. Roswaal had referred to what lay in Emilia’s immediate future as a stage. The word ‘play’ was certainly not unrelated.

“When you say ‘play’, what do you plan to make a play of, and how?”

“As I was saying earlier, the candidates’ declaration of beliefs—It’s easy to imagine things getting out of hand when they attempt it. The reason for that is not restricted to Lady Emilia; it’s a gathering of candidates with truly unique, original ways of thinking.”

“So they’re not just pretty faces, then. Well, I suppose that makes sense, too.”

“It’s just that, even in that setting, Lady Emilia’s origin makes her an easy target. Both the unchangeable circumstances of her birth, and the kingdom’s deeply-rooted rejection of half-devils are pasts that are difficult to change, after all.”

“…That’s true. I see your reasoning.”

“Hence, what we need to change isn’t the perception of half-devils. Rather, it’s the perception of Lady Emilia herself.”

Roswaal snapped his fingers, and set the end of one of them aglow.

The magical process of gathering mana from the surrounding air, and changing it into vividly-colored light, looked simple but required an extremely high level of concentration. This was proof that Roswaal was a rarity amongst magic users.

“The reason I’m allowed to act as I do is simple. Certainly, there’s the accomplishments of all the Mathers that came before me, but… the greatest factor is that I have the ability to overwhelm others.”

“You mean you want Lia to show she can, as well? No, that’s not it. You want me to become that for Lia, then.”

Having taken in what Roswaal was saying, Puck curled his long tail around himself and thought about it. The idea certainly did have some merit. But it was also a scheme that carried risks.

“But, don’t you think that this could invite even more opposition from the others? In the eyes of those that fear Lia because she’s a half-elf, wouldn’t it make them even more afraid if Lia is strong?”

“Certainly, that might happen. Ho~wever, we know Lady Emilia’s character. Even if Lady Emilia is exposed to baseless condemnation, she would never do something like using the Great Spirit’s power to unleash her anger. All that we need to do is convey that to those who will be in attendance today, by means of this gathering and our play.”

Saying that, Roswaal noted “In order for that to happen,” as he continued.

“Great Spirit, your power will be necessary. “The Beast of the End” of the Elior Forest. When Lady Emilia has you you by her side, you who laid low the “Mediator”, one of the four great ones, and yet she shows that she will not resort to using that power, then to them, she will surely change from being a “half-devil” to the candidate named “Emilia”.

“…You’re quite good with words. I understand a little of what Lia must have felt when she was taken out of the woods.”

His tone held neither desperation nor earnestness. Yet despite that, Roswaal’s words had a power to them.

His words had the power to make one feel that they held the best possible method of dealing with the situation that awaited them. They not only showed consideration for the desires of others, but bestowed what they craved without hesitation.

Precisely because of that, though, it was easy to think of them as the honeyed words of a swindler or something like that.

“Out in front of the castle, you went and called me controlling, but I think maybe you’re doing quite a bit of that, too.”

“I’m aware of it, yes. So~, what is your reply? Of course, if you turn me down, Great Spirit, I’ll simply move ahead with a different pla~n.”

“The right to choose is entirely in my hands. …It’s unfair of you to be trying to make me feel that.”

He thought deeply as he considered taking the devil’s, or rather Roswaal’s, proposal. In the back of his mind was the image of Emilia sitting nervously in the waiting room. Lately, it seemed that his mental image of his dear daughter was always nervous.

If it reduced the burden on her, even if only by a little, then he was of a mind to put on an act or do whatever else it took.

“…Fine. I’ll accept your proposal. I take it I can’t tell Lia about the arrangement?”

“The mere idea of having Lady Emilia try to put on an act is u~nthinkable.”

“You’re not saying that to be polite, you mean exactly what you said. Well, I don’t think Lia is good at keeping a straight face, either, so I agree with you.”

He felt proud of how he’d raised Emilia to be open, honest, and straightforward, but she was fatally unsuited to intrigue.

Despite that, if the scene was properly prepared, he was sure she would perform up to his expectations.

“So about the act, then, what are you going to do, and how? You’re not going to wreck the castle, are you?”

“The best outcome would be to give everyone a strong impression of the Great Spirit’s presence, in a way that doesn’t damage the castle. …Fortunately, he should create an opportunity for us to do tha~t.”

“He who?”

“Why, Subaru, of cou~rse.”

When an unexpected name was suddenly brought up, Puck widened his eyes at Roswaal.

It was the boy that, outside of the castle, Emilia had distanced herself from so he wouldn’t get dragged into today’s events. Emilia had made him promise to wait, and Subaru was supposed to have nodded in agreement to that, but…

“You gave him some sort of instruction that would make him break his promise to Lia? I can’t say I’m pleased to hear that.”

“Certainly not. I’m well aware how important promises and contracts are to spirit arts users. Even then, there’s no way to stop him. …That’s a~ll I meant to say.”

Immediately, Roswaal to Puck bowed with a dramatic flourish, and Puck sighed at him. At the same time, an image passed through the back of Puck’s mind of Emilia, and the boy who it seemed may be running to her side.

Would Subaru end up running to the castle then, just as Roswaal hoped? Or was he waiting quietly at the inn for Emilia, just as he’d promised her?

Either way, the thing that Puck prayed for would not change. The only thing.

…May there be nothing but joy in his dear daughter’s future.

Wishing that, Puck continued to lend an ear to Roswaal’s plotting.

END

Thinking of You on the Night Before the Decisive Battle

1

Rem watched the preparations proceeding solemnly, her heart swelling with quiet excitement.

“So many people have agreed to Subaru’s idea…”

Below, a large crowd had gathered in the gardens of the Karsten mansion in the noble district of the royal capital, raising morale for tomorrow’s operation.

Rem, too, was desperately trying not to reveal her true feelings. Right now, she couldn’t possibly show her face near Subaru.

If she saw Subaru’s face now, she likely wouldn’t be able to hold back her tears as they overflowed. She didn’t want to show him that side of herself.

—Currently, Rem was in the guest room of the Karsten mansion, and she was assigned the task of packing for Subaru and herself.

The group will leave the mansion tomorrow morning, heading to the Lifaus Highway, aiming for the Great Tree of Flugel. Their goal was to defeat the Witchbeast of the Mist, known as the ‘White Whale,’ and the person who played a key role in planning the operation was none other than Subaru.

After falling out with Emilia, Subaru had been extremely haggard for a while, until a certain daytime scene—the moment he asked Rem to run away together, everything changed.

But from the moment Subaru—during that scene in the daytime—suggested to Rem that they run away together, everything changed.

Even now, she still thought that way.

“If I had taken his hand and ran away with him… what then?”

What would have happened if she had run away with him, as she wished?

In that case, there might have been a path to happiness, just like the future Rem had envisioned.

But surely, Subaru then wouldn't have been smiling as he is now, and Rem wouldn't have been able to smile either.

That's why Rem doesn't regret her choice.

She just wants to be allowed to dream a little.

"Since he had desired me so passionately, I think Rem deserves at least that much."

With those words spilling out, Rem stuffed her belongings into her packing bag and slammed it shut with all her might.

2

"Really, Rem-san, you're such a good-hearted girl."

Rem had just finished packing and was heading to the dining room when she heard a gentle voice. When she turned towards the voice, she saw a girl with beautiful lavender hair smiling at her.

"Lady Anastasia."

"Running all over the capital for Natsuki-kun, and now helping out with preparations? You're such a hard worker, I'm impressed."

With her hand on her cheek, the girl—Anastasia—expressed her admiration with a gracious tone. Receiving this praise, Rem distributed the tea she had prepared to the people around her, providing them with a moment of respite.

"When you overwork yourself, your efficiency drops. Rem's sister often says that too."

"Oh, you have a sister? She must be just like you, a diligent worker."

"No, Rem can't even compare to her sister. Rem's sister is truly amazing."

"Is that so…? Well, well, I'd really like to meet her someday."

As Rem thought about her sister, Ram, a smile formed on her lips, and Anastasia made a meaningful remark. The emotion that flickered in her light blue eyes felt almost like an appraisal to Rem,

"I'm happy to be appreciated. But neither I nor my sister would ever change where our loyalty lies."

"Haha, thanks for the advice. But you know, persuading such a stubborn girl is where my skills really shine. It's more rewarding for me when someone starts off reluctant."

Rather than being offended by the disrespectful remark, Anastasia looked at Rem with an even more delighted gaze.

"I'm confident in my ability to read people. That's why I'm quite hurt when it comes to Natsuki-kun."

"Because of Subaru-kun?"

"He didn't seem like the type to set such a big thing in motion. It only took a few days for me to realize that my judgment was wrong. I lost a bit of confidence."

Touching the scarf around her neck, Anastasia let out an exaggerated sigh. Her ever-changing expressions and rich emotional display created a friendly atmosphere—enough to make one wonder if she really was a candidate in the Royal Selection.

It was precisely because Rem knew Emilia, Anastasia, and Crusch that she had such an impression.

But at the same time, she felt a sense of pride.

"Subaru-kun is not the kind of shallow guy that can be seen through so easily."

"…You're completely smitten, aren't you?"

“Yes, I’m completely smitten.”

Smiling, Rem responded to Anastasia without hesitation. Then, as she handed her a cup of tea, she added,

“Please continue to look forward to Subaru-kun’s developments. I’m sure Subaru-kun will continue to achieve many things that will amaze you, Lady Anastasia.”

“—Rem-san, do you remember what you said?”

As she watched the hot tea being poured, Anastasia slightly narrowed her eyes and asked this question.

Rem tilted her head in response, and Anastasia wet her lips with tea before continuing,

“You said your loyalty wouldn’t change… so who is your master, Rem-san?”

To that question, Rem gently placed a finger over her lips and replied,

“Of course, it’s Rem’s wonderful hero.”

3

“Is that you, Lady Crusch?”

“Hmm, Rem?”

Calming her inner excitement to some extent and deciding it was about time to return to Subaru, Rem spotted a figure standing on the mansion’s balcony—Crusch—and walked over to her.

The handsome woman, dressed in a masculine style, let her long green hair sway in the wind as she gazed down at the people working in the garden.

“Am I interrupting your rest?”

“No, I don’t mind. I just came up for a bit of cool air.”

In response to Rem's question, Crusch firmly shook her head.

Rem knew that since the negotiations with Subaru earlier in the evening, Crusch had been moving around tirelessly, giving instructions and calling out to others.

Over the past few days, Rem had come to understand Crusch's strong sense of responsibility, her dedication to her mission, her honest nature, and her unwavering conviction.

After all, during her stay at the Karsten mansion, Rem had joined Crusch every night at the negotiation table for the Royal Selection.

Those nightly meetings had been almost like a confirmation of the powerlessness of her words and position. However—

"Things really turned out just as you said."

"…Yes. However, I apologize once again for the repeated discourtesy."

As Crusch spoke with a slight smile on her lips, Rem picked up the hem of her skirt and offered a graceful curtsy.

It was a gesture reflecting the apology for the rudeness she had shown over the past few days, as well as a reflection on her past words and actions.

However, upon receiving the apology, Crusch began with "No," and continued,

"There is no need to apologize. Rather, it is I who should be ashamed of my short-sightedness. Thanks to my divine protection, I have more information to judge by than others. I was deceived by that, and now I've realized it."

"…"

Rem had no words to respond to the noblewoman's statement.

She had already spoken too many words for a mere servant. The fact that Crusch did not reproach her for it was due to her generosity.

Subaru would definitely stand up again, she simply continued to repeat those words. And Crusch had simply come to acknowledge it.

“That said, everything is still unresolved, so there is no time to catch a breather. Tomorrow, when the White Whale appears at the Great Tree of Flugel, we will finally take the stage. Until then, let’s hold off on drawing any conclusions.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“…You don’t seem to be worried about anything, are you?”

Suddenly, Crusch narrowed her amber eyes and spoke to Rem. Though the question lacked a subject, it was clear what kind of worries she was asking about. So—

“—Rem received the most important thing just a few mornings ago. So, there’s nothing I’m afraid of.”

“…Natsuki Subaru is truly blessed.”

“No.”

As Rem spoke while smiling, Crusch also relaxed her lips. However, Rem shook her head, interrupting Crusch’s admiration.

Then, turning to Crusch, who held her breath, she spoke.

“The fortunate one is Rem.”

To get to be close to her amazing sister and the greatest hero.

She was truly blessed, Rem believed that from the bottom of her heart.

4

—Truly, truly, many people have come to recognize Subaru.

“Subaru-dono, thank you.”

The hero of the past, sung about by bards, expressed his thanks.

“Thanks to you, our long-cherished wish will be fulfilled. There is nothing that makes us happier.”

Those who fought against a tragic fate tapped Subaru on the shoulder.

“What’s up, bro—? That’s a determined-lookin’ face you got there.”

A battle-hardened mercenary looked at Subaru’s profile and laughed like that.

Those who would fight alongside him, those whose cooperation he sought, those who were earnest in their wishes—all of them listened to Subaru’s words.

Seeing this up close, Rem’s heart raced.

—There must be more, so much more to come.

“Rem, are you okay?”

Noticing Rem’s quickening heartbeat, Subaru, who was riding the earth dragon with her, wrapped an arm around her waist and spoke up.

“You’re not saying much, are you feeling worried? Or maybe you’re struggling with riding an unfamiliar earth dragon…”

“No, that’s not it at all. I’m perfectly fine.”

In response to Subaru’s concern, Rem shook her head.

The jet-black earth dragon that Rem was handling was one of the dragons loaned to them for this operation. Subaru had chosen it, and perhaps as a sign of his keen insight, it was extraordinarily capable.

A hero brings together worthy individuals. Rem also wanted to do her best as one of those supporting him.

“What about you, Subaru-kun, are you feeling worried?”

“I’m super anxious, and really hesitant, you know? But it’s like the die has been cast—or rather, I threw it myself.”

Subaru scratched his short black hair with a wry smile. At times like these, his ability to be honest and truthful was also one of his virtues.

For Rem, who struggled with showing her vulnerable side to others, she knew how much courage this must have taken.

To do it so easily, even though he felt how scared he was, Subaru was—

“—What I want to do and what I have to do are the same thing now. So, I feel like I have no choice but to do it.”

“Then, it’s the same for Rem.”

What she wanted to do and what she had to do were aligned. That’s why she could give it her all. That was something Rem wholeheartedly agreed with.

“After all, I believe in you, Subaru-kun.”

With all her heart, Rem confessed this to Subaru in front of the great tree.

There’s no need to link her trust with the things she can’t say. Rem had already entrusted everything to Subaru.

To put it in Subaru’s words, the die had long been cast. And Rem was deeply captivated by the outcome. That was enough.

“That is a lie. I love you.”

“I…I know that, geez.”

And so, she felt sorry for causing trouble like this, wanting to have

Subaru all to herself, even just a little.

“Rem is fine with being the second wife.”

If Subaru’s virtue was speaking his true feelings without pretense, then she hoped he would forgive her for this playful bout of sincerity.

—She was surprised at how much she actually expected from him.

She wanted him to be a hero. She wanted him to be just a boy. She wanted him to smile. She wanted him to never give up. She wanted him to stay healthy. She wanted him to think of her sometimes. —There were so many things she wanted.

“Because of you, Subaru-kun, Rem has become completely greedy.”

And knowing that he would forgive her for being like this, Rem was sure that she would continue to depend on him endlessly.

So at least, at least…

“…”

Before the giant tree, a large group of people lined up, awaiting the arrival of the Witchbeast in the dark of night. In the space where even their breathing was stifled, a strange sound reverberated—amidst the commotion, anxiety, and tension, Rem closed her eyes.

There was nothing to fear. —Ironically, the earth dragon’s will, transmitted through the reins she held, was the same as Rem’s.

A faint murmur spread as an ominous shape appeared overhead. At that moment, Crusch hesitated and took a breath.

“Everyone—”

Then, a boy from behind thrust his fist into the air.

“—Nail it!!”

“—Al Huma!!”

The gathered mana was converted into power, manifesting magic into the world. The attack shot out overhead, heading straight for the Witchbeast.

At the same time, the earth dragon charged forward at full speed. The sensation transmitted through the reins, the unspoken understanding—it was simple, just believe in Subaru. That alone was enough.

“All hands, follow that pair of fools!!”

Behind them, Crusch’s command rang out, and a great number of people started running. Chasing after Subaru who led the way, they pursued his back.

The hero Rem believed in, Subaru was rising to become a true hero. This was the prologue, the beginning of a story.

—Immodestly, Rem couldn’t suppress her smile, and the battle to defeat the White Whale, started by the two of them, commenced.

Comic Alive Collection 2: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 2

A Love Song for EMT

1

It all began one afternoon after Subaru had finished doing his chores around the mansion…

"—Hey, Subaru, is it alright if I ask you to do a little favor for me?"

"Hmmha?"

Suddenly hearing the voice of someone that sounded like a silver bell, Subaru turned around, a pastry still in his mouth. The one who had called out to him from the entrance of the dining room was a beautiful girl dressed in white.

A half-elf with long silver hair that seems to sparkle like the light of the moon, amethyst eyes that look like precious jewels, and possesses beauty that no human can match—Emilia is her name.

"Oh, are you perhaps still working?" she asked. "I'm not getting in your way, am I?"

"Nah, I'm just relaxing at the moment," Subaru replied. "I don't think any countries exist where eating snacks while on the job is considered proper etiquette."

After swallowing the half-eaten pastry whole, Subaru grinned at the concerned-looking girl. As Emilia breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing his reply, he raised his eyebrows in surprise due to the unusual object in her arms. That's one of the musical instruments of this world that feels rather familiar to me: a—

"It's a lyulyre. I thought that thing was gathering dust in the mansion's storeroom." Supplementing Subaru's response was a girl in a maid uniform also taking a break in that very room. It was a girl with short blue hair, adorned in a somewhat revealing custom-made maid's outfit—the super maid, Rem—Subaru's colleague, and the mansion's head maid.

Rem, a jack-of-all-trades when it came to housekeeping, handled all the work around the mansion. She was also the one who had made the pastries Subaru was eating, and they were currently enjoying some tea together during their break.

"I don't think Liliana forgot it, so, is that the lyulyre that was covered in dust in the storeroom?" Subaru asked.

"Even Liliana wouldn't forget her precious instrument… I think," Emilia replied.

"I can see how much trust you have in Liliana based on how discreet your reply was."

"Don't start fooling around—it's because of Liliana that Roswaal cleaned this on a whim. He said you should play a song for a change of pace since I've been focused on my studies."

"So he nominated me to do it, huh. That's pretty thoughtful for a guy like Rosy."

Subaru took the lyulyre being timidly presented to him and lightly plucked the strings. A light sound was produced in the room. I see. Seems like it's been maintained well.

A lyulyre is a stringed instrument made of wood and is kinda like a guitar from my world. It's a bit on the small side, but if you can grasp how to play it, the scales aren't all that different.

"Subaru, can you play a lyulyre?" asked Rem, her eyes wide at the sight of Subaru checking how the instrument sounded as if he was familiar with it.

"Yeah, I can do it since the basics aren't different from the AG I had at home," he replied. "Liliana gave me a bit of training, so I can play most of the folk songs from where I'm from."

"AG…?"

"It's an acronym for acoustic guitar. Well, you can think of it as a folk instrument from my country."

He recalled the dark-skinned girl who had vigorously trained him while looking at Rem, who was tilting her head. Liliana—she is a songstress who was, until recently, treated as a guest here. As she made a living out of singing, her voice and performance skills were amazing.

Not to mention that the women in the mansion had become her fans, even Subaru had secretly become a fan of hers. However, in contrast to her prodigious talent, her personality was questionable, and she was severely lacking in the humanity department. Anyway, the situation surrounding Liliana was settled, and the mansion had returned to normalcy. A few days had passed since then, but it seemed like the longing and curiosity for music was still going strong inside Emilia. She must have been crazy about it since she had gone to ask Subaru to play a song for her during his break.

"So, Subaru," Emilia began. "Can you play the songs that Miss Liliana sang?"

"I would like to avoid that since I'll be compared to her if I play the same songs," he replied. "I can play them, but I would be hard-pressed to play them and tell the tales at the same time. Mainly because of my singing voice."

"But you are amazing, Subaru," Rem commented. "Rem can't even imagine what other amazing skills you have that are of no use in the mansion!"

“Nah, it isn’t that much of a big deal… Wait? Something about your words didn’t really click with me. I wasn’t being praised, right?”

“—?” Rem, who was holding her hands in a praising pose, looked confused by her unintentional scathing criticism. She looked cute, but that made it seem like she was speaking her mind, which stabbed Subaru in the chest.

But these two girls have placed their hope in me. I want to look cool in front of them. “Alright then, the Sword Demon’s Love Song…is a bit hard, so I’ll go with a folk medley from the 70’s.”

“Eeeeh.”

“Don’t be disappointed. It’s also a masterpiece,” he assured them.

He smiled wryly at the dissatisfied voice and tapped on the lyulyre to create a rhythm. Emilia and Rem sat on the sofa together and began to clap lightly along with the music.

“It sounds more upbeat than an AG, so please use your imagination to make up for it.” As Subaru said his introductory remarks, he flipped the music sheet in his memory and plucked the strings of the lyulyre.

After he had started skipping school, Natsuki Subaru hated doing nothing, so he spent his time learning various skills—practicing the guitar was one of them. You never really know what life has in store for you since wasting all that time back then ended up making two beautiful girls happy.

Folk songs from the 70’s were often rather sad songs, reflecting the conditions and trends of the time. Even if it lacked vocals, the sad theme of the song was expressed in the instrumental. Subaru could see shades of loneliness and melancholy appear in the eyes and expressions of the girls listening to the song. Their reaction frustrated him as he played the tune. It made his heart ache looking at their faces, so— “Secret Technique: “Teeth Guitar! …Ow-Ow-ow!”

“Subaru! Oh no! What a stupid thing to do!” Emilia exclaimed.

“Subaru?! Aah, why did you do something so stupid?!” Rem scolded.

“You guys don’t have to say it together…ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch!”

He damaged his lips and gums during his performance due to the strength of the recently tightened strings in an attempt to lighten up the sorrowful melody.

Teeth Guitar was a magical skill that used your teeth to play the guitar and was a super-technique that only the best guitarists have mastered. Obviously, it wasn’t something a third-rate guitarist like Subaru could do. He bled and created a big mess.

“Alright, calm down, Subaru. Pain, pain go away,” Rem chanted.

“Ouch, ouch, it hurts…not anymore! It’s healed! Aah, that was painful, thank you.”

Rem cast a healing spell with a pale light by holding her hand over the writhing Subaru’s face. As the pain faded away, the wounds caused by his mouth getting torn up by the strings closed, which he was grateful for.

Emilia looked at it with an angry face, her hands on her hips. “I was wondering what you were going to do, and you surprised me sooo much. Jeez, don’t make me worry by doing something weird like that.”

“Sorry, sorry. I thought the song choice wasn’t good even though I was the one who chose it. It isn’t that 70’s folk songs are bad, it’s that I made a mistake by choosing a song that didn’t fit the mood.”

If I’m going to play something, then a song that can entertain the audience and make them feel comfortable is best. Folk songs should be used when I intend to shorten the distance between me and the girl I have feelings for.

“So, I’ll save the song I just played for another time,” Subaru said. “Wait for me, Emilia-tan.”

"—? I don't understand what I should be waiting for," Emilia replied, "but alright… And is your performance over now? Is that all you can play?"

Subaru felt relieved since Emilia wanted him to play more, even though she didn't state it clearly.

It seemed like Subaru's performance had met Emilia's expectations, regardless of the song choice. Rem also seemed to agree with Emilia since she didn't interrupt the conversation. As for him, he got excited when people expected something of him. He even got excited when people didn't expect anything of him. However, he really wanted to meet the expectations of those two as much as possible.

"But I've only practiced folk songs from the 70's, damn it! Why didn't I practice more hip-hop music back then…"

"Are you troubled, Subaru? If that's the case, then I think you should try playing one of Miss Liliana's songs," Rem suggested with a raised hand as Subaru was cursing his past actions.

It was really amusing since Rem's cute scheme could be seen behind her offer. Surprisingly, she was the one who was the most interested in Liliana's songs. Rem, who had a deep knowledge of poetry and traditional songs, probably wanted to make Subaru sing while making it seem like a proposal.

I was enchanted by all of Liliana's songs, but… "I'm not good enough to copy other people's songs just by listening, nor do I have good enough skills compared to Liliana. Other than folk songs… I guess I can play 'I Stepped on a Cat' (The Flea Waltz)?"

"Subaru, you need to apologize properly for that…" Emilia chided.

"Don't look sad, it'll make me sulk! It was by mistake! It wasn't on purpose, and it is a masterpiece with a title like that! I'll lecture the person who stepped on the cat later!"

This traditional piano song was often disparaged due to its title. Emilia gave him an accusing look, then heaved a sigh of grief as he kept apologizing.

After that, she clapped her hands and mischievously relaxed her lips. “Well, if you play Liliana’s song, then I’ll let it go. I won’t laugh at you even if it’s bad. So please don’t be nervous, alright?”

“It’s as Lady Emilia said. No matter how bad it is, no matter how awful it is, no matter how many times you fail, Rem won’t laugh at you, Subaru. Please fail without any worry. It’s fine. Rem will comfort you while you cry out loud.”

“You guys don’t have to worry that much. I won’t cry, alright?!”

They started worrying about Subaru crying in case he made a mistake, and now there was no going back.

I guess I can’t get out of playing the songs that I have memorized by listening. I’ve learned some of the songs Liliana played from her, too, so there’s no reason why I can’t play them.

But even so, Subaru’s performance skills were poor, and he was self-taught. He started learning it by staring at his father’s guitar and some sheet music, then he continued practicing so he wouldn’t lose to his father’s annoying stares, who would stand on the other side of the sliding door with a grin on his face.

“Even if it’s really bad, don’t laugh at me. I won’t cry, either,” he said in his defense as he picked the lyulyre up again. After that, he lightly tilted his head and winked at Emilia with a slightly swanky gesture. “By the way, do you have any requests…any songs you want me to play, milady?”

“Oh, if that’s the case, then I would like that song! That—”

Emilia merrily clasped her hands together as Subaru got ready to play something for them. She then closed her eyes and slightly cleared her throat, as if she was recalling something. “La, la, la la la—”

With the voice that sounded like a silver bell, what sprang forth from Emilia’s lips was a song, carried by her short breaths. Subaru and Rem gasped unconsciously at the enchanting sound her beautiful voice created. Her enchanting voice had the ability to capture the hearts and shake the souls of those who heard it. It was for personal reasons that Subaru's heart throbbed every time she spoke to him, but the magic of her beautiful voice could surely be felt by people other than him. It travelled through his eardrums and into his bloodstream, and his soul was moved by the unbearable emotions that welled up from within. He didn't even feel worthy enough to listen to her singing voice at such a close proximity to her.

"…"

She had started singing in order to convey the song, but Emilia got so excited that she couldn't stop. Neither Subaru nor Rem had any means to stop her. They simply continued to listen to the magic, the song being sung by her beautiful voice in silence until the end. Eventually, the song came to an end and Emilia exhaled deeply, "—Aaa," and then for the first time realized that she had been absorbed in her singing, losing control of herself.

Her white cheeks turned beet-red in embarrassment, and she hastily looked at Subaru and Rem in a panic. "So…Sorry. I just felt reaaally good while singing…"

"…I could see that, so no worries," Subaru assured her. "So you like to sing?"

"I don't know. Singing isn't something I'm familiar with… But yeah. I suppose I like it." Emilia put her hand on her mouth and nodded somewhat sheepishly.

'I suppose I like it.' Subaru would normally have to cook up a scheme to get her to say the words she'd spoken under her breath, but now that he'd heard them, he didn't think he'd do that this time. And it was not unrelated to Rem, who was gently pulling on his sleeve next to him.

"Subaru…" she said.

"I know," he replied.

Rem directed her light blue eyes at him as if wanting to say something. Subaru saw through the emotions in her eyes and nodded. Her calling his name, and him nodding—that's all they had to do to communicate.

—No, it was only natural for people who had heard Emilia's elegant voice to experience such emotions.

Things need to be acted upon. That was the greatest lesson Subaru had learned in this mansion. After stumbling through multiple loops, he understood it intuitively. Making a choice and acting upon it was the only way to make this unreasonable world change—so he challenged fate once more.

Subaru closed his eyes once after looking at Emilia, whose cheeks were still red. "Hey Emilia-tan… I don't really know what to say, but."

"?—Yes?"

Emilia tilted her head while putting her hand against her silver hair, looking at Subaru as he chose his words. The trust in the amethyst eyes looking at him was different from the trust Rem had for him. That emotion made his chest tighten, but he suppressed his sentiments and made up his mind. "Emilia-tan, you are…"

"—What was that sound? It sounded like a bird's dying screech. What kind of a silly game are you playing during your break, Barusu?" said someone in an arrogant tone after opening the door in the middle of Subaru's sentence, shattering his resolve.

It was a girl with pink colored hair and rose-pink eyes who had stepped into the room—Ram—who looked identical to Rem apart from the color of her eyes and hair, and her bust size. She gave a somewhat grumpy look around the room and looked at the three of them one-by-one as they stood there. After that, she started thoughtfully reflecting and spoke exactly five seconds later—"Can we just pretend Ram never said that? It feels rather strange to ask that of you, but that's what she thinks."

"It's amazing how you grasped the situation so quickly, but you ruined everything, Sister!”

Subaru’s scream exploded at Ram, who had suddenly jumped into the frame and brilliantly conveyed the point he was going to convey.

2

—Emilia, who has the voice of an angel, is unbelievably tone deaf.

That’s all it was if you put it into words, but Subaru was struck by a shock that went beyond that. Has there been a tragedy of this magnitude in recent years?

A pretty voice and tone-deafness; it wasn’t only Subaru that had been shocked by that reality. Rem also couldn’t hide her disappointment and grief at the reality she was facing. Emilia’s devastating singing ability was shocking for her, too. Who could have guessed that Emilia’s beautiful bell-like voice could turn into a cacophony of such caliber?

“God, what has this child done to be treated this way?” Subaru lamented. “How cruel can you be…?!”

“Please, don’t say it like that!” Emilia exclaimed in embarrassment. “I don’t want this anymore! It’s embarrassing; I’m sooo embarrassed!”

Emilia, her ears that were slightly longer than a human’s red to the tip, hid her face in the sofa. Ram had taken her time to come complain about Emilia’s haphazard singing. Emilia was confused about what she had said at first, but now she clearly understood what she meant after hearing Subaru’s poor excuses and explanation that had been meant to make her feel better. As a result of her understanding the situation, she sunk into the sofa with a sullen face.

“I-I think in the first place, you guys are exaggerating things. It’s true that I have never had the chance to sing before and that I haven’t learned how to sing, but…it is weird that it’s that bad. You all are trying to tease me and make a laughingstock out of me, aren't you? I won't be fooled that easily," said Emilia, talking quickly as she hugged her knees. She was like a child trying to turn their face away from a reality they didn't want to accept, trying to deny what was.

Subaru looked her in the eye and started speaking to her sincerely, as if he was trying to make her accept things. "I understand your feelings, that it is hard to believe and that you want to doubt things. But it isn't like that. Have I ever lied to you… Well, to be honest, I have lied to you a couple of times. I have done mean things a lot, just to see you turn red due to being teased."

"Is that so?!" Emilia exclaimed. "I didn't know that! Since when have I been teased? Hey, when?"

"It isn't the time to talk about such things!" he retorted. "Don't look away from the issue!"

"Alright… It doesn't feel like something isn't adding up…"

Subaru had accidentally had a slip of the tongue, but he somehow managed to divert Emilia's attention with the momentum. And Emilia, who got fooled by it, looked disgruntled. But he waved his hands, as if he was pushing her dissatisfaction away.

"It's true this time. I swear there's not a single lie in it."

"Subaru…"

With a sincere voice and serious tone, and with honest words, Subaru conveyed what needed to be conveyed: "—You are a victim of God's mischief."

"Why are you being so mean?!"

"It's because I can't believe such a horrible thing! Why are you tone-deaf, Emilia-tan?! You are extremely cute and have a beautiful voice, but nobody will be happy if you sing like that! If someone is to blame, then it's God that needs to be blamed! Or your parents are to blame for neglecting you until you ended up this way!"

"Whaaa…"

Emilia looked worn out after hearing Subaru put emphasis on how tone-deaf she was. To her, it seemed somewhat like someone else's issue despite him being passionate about it. It was probably because she wasn't aware of her own tone-deafness.

Tone-deaf people who aren't self-aware—and sensory deafness is a type of tone-deafness that's the hardest to fix. Unlike motor deafness, which is a throat problem, it is extremely difficult to fix since the patient isn't self-aware. In other words, in order to defeat this difficult enemy, the cooperation of the family is essential.

"Puck, come here!" Subaru snapped his fingers and summoned the person responsible for this problem by calling out his name.

He didn't have the authority to summon Puck, who was a spirit, but Emilia, who was his contractor, lost to Subaru's spirit and called out to the green crystal that shone on her chest. And then… "I got summoned and came out meow, meow, meowww."

Particles of pale light flew out from the gemstone, which then took on the form of a small cat spirit.

The spirit appeared with an air of innocence about him, firing off a line of dialogue—Puck landed on Emilia's shoulder, took his long tail into his hands, and then groomed himself.

"What's up?" Puck asked. "Is there something you wanted me to do? I had plans to take a day off today."

"What's up with talking like a busy businessman?" Subaru wondered. "And weren't you listening to the conversation outside from inside the stone?"

"I told you right, that I was taking a day off today. So I was having a nice sleep."

"You really are spending your day off like a working dad…"

It's true that working hours are from 9am to 5pm, so I can't help but think the cute cat is an office worker.

Leaving aside how the kitten spent his day off, Subaru explained the situation till now with a mix of light gestures. Eventually, after Puck finished listening to his story, he nodded and looked at Emilia. “I see. —Subaru is putting it like that, but are you really tone-deaf, Lia?”

“I don’t…feel like I am… I think that Subaru is exaggerating things a little. I’m singing properly. I’m not messing around.”

“It would have been…better…way better…if you were messing around!” Subaru shouted.

Subaru knelt down after looking at Emilia’s sulky face and repeatedly hit the floor. Puck looked at both their faces and then rubbed his pink nose. “I’ll have to listen to it first to be sure. Lia, if you would.”

“…Alright, but I won’t like it if you laugh at me.”

“I would never do such a thing,” Puck assured her. “Even if the entire world laughs at you, I won’t.”

“You sound unnecessarily super cool,” Subaru commented.

Puck’s overly passionate reply made Emilia close her eyes with a sigh. She then hummed to get into a rhythm and tried to find a good place to start, but the thing is, her humming was already out of rhythm. Regardless, the song began. After getting over how bad her singing was earlier, her voice had more range this time around, so she was in good condition, and it seemed like she was aware of that, so her face radiated happiness after she finished singing.

“How was it?” Emilia asked Puck confidently, looking like she’d had fun.

Puck rubbed his face after he listened to her. “Yeah, let’s see. I really did feel confident in the way I raised you till now. I truly believed from the bottom of my heart that you grew up to be the cutest and smartest and the best child in the entire world.”

“Oh…is that so? That’s…embarrassing…”

Having gotten praised a lot out of the blue, Emilia laughed sheepishly in a ticklish way, but after he had finished praising her, Puck added, “But I’ve never regretted not raising you properly more than I did today…”

“—What?”

“I’m sorry, Lia. —I couldn’t be the best father in the entire world for the cutest girl out there. That’s the only thing I regret.”

The moment he said that, Puck rolled off Emilia’s shoulder as if he’d run out of energy. As the spirit started falling off her thin shoulder, Subaru caught him by quickly extending his hand.

Puck looked up at Subaru with a weak movement of his neck while resting on his palm. “I’m sorry, Subaru… All of this is due to my lack of ability…”

“It’s enough! It’s alright, Puck. It isn’t like, it isn’t like it’s anyone’s fault. Since, since you are regretting it so much! Our feelings are the same, isn’t that right?”

“Ha-Ha… I feel saved with just those words alone… I kinda feel really sleepy now.”

The light faded from Puck’s round, black eyes, and his body lost strength. The outline of the spirit’s body became blurred, and then began to scatter, turning into particles. Subaru screamed desperately, wanting to stop him from disappearing. “No, no! Puck! Puck!”

“Thank…you…for everything…”

Subaru wailed as the spirit began to vanish in his palm—and after she witnessed the tragedy between the boy and the kitten, Emilia said, “I don’t want to deal with this anymore! You two are idiots! Idiots! Um, idiots!”

Emilia ran out of the dining room all upset after being teased.

““—We overdid it.”“

Regretting what they had just done, Puck and Subaru looked at each other, then rushed after Emilia, who had run off somewhere.

3

“There are three main causes of tone-deafness,” Subaru explained. “Not being able to catch the sound, not being able to produce the sound, and not being able to grasp the rhythm. If we can eliminate these problems one-by-one, then we can theoretically eradicate any sort of tone-deafness. In short, Emilia-tan’s tone-deafness is a flaw that can be fixed!” Subaru emphasized with a lifted fist as Puck pulled off a textbook marketing response to enhance his message.

“Meow-did you say—?!”

The theory that Subaru had just proposed was something he had seen on TV before.

I don’t know how reliable it is, but it should be better than doing the tone-deafness treatment without anything to go on.

If the main causes of tone-deafness are pitch, throat, and rhythm, then the solution could naturally be narrowed down.

“First, let’s find out what’s behind Emilia-tan’s issue in a simple way. Based on what I could deduce after listening to her singing, there are two reasons behind her tone-deafness: “pitch and rhythm. Leaving rhythm aside, she can produce sounds and has a cute face.”

“Subaru, Subaru, you are getting off track,” Rem informed him.

“Damn, that wasn’t it. No, I mean she does have a cute face, but the point it that she can produce sounds. So, there are two problems that need to be overcome: “pitch and rhythm. Now, repeat after me!”

“Pitch and rhythm!” Puck repeated after Subaru. Both were eager to solve the tone-deafness issue.

But, next to those two… “Hmph.” …was Emilia, who sat on the floor holding her knees, sulking. She wasn’t keen about what Subaru and Puck were talking about at all.

Everything had been going well until Emilia had run off and they had to catch her, but when she was brought back, she just sulked a lot. Even so, her ears were twitching, and she was listening to their conversation, which was really honest and cute of her.

“Since Emilia-tan enjoyed Liliana’s songs, it means she can tell whether the singing is good or bad. Her being ok when it comes to other people’s singing but not good when it comes to her singing is probably because her brain is unconsciously complementing hers. Let’s fix that.”

“It’s easier said than done. How are you going to fix it?” Puck asked.

“Usually, making her listen to a proper song hundreds of times or making her hum till she gets the tune are the ways to fix it, but… Making her aware of her tone-deafness is fairly easy. For starters…”

In response to Puck’s question, Subaru prepared to enter the first step of Emilia’s Tone-Deafness Correction Plan. However, the moment he was about to bring out his weapon… “—She has been listening to you quietly for a while, but how can you do as you please here?”

A terribly sullen voice interrupted him, and Subaru shook his head in dismay. He turned towards the person who had spoiled his enthusiasm and sighed at her smug face.

“Jeez… Everyone is being positive about it, so don’t do anything to spoil it. You need to learn how to read emotions and not just books. Read the atmosphere, would ya?”

“When it’s coming from none other than you, it only infuriates Betty. Leaving that aside, Betty doesn’t really understand why you are doing that in her Forbidden Library.”

The girl sitting at the back of the room on a step ladder clicked her tongue as she closed the book with a loud bang. The girl had luxurious-looking vertical rolls and was wearing a fluttery dress, looking as pretty as a doll. She was Beatrice, the librarian of this library, and also a resident of this mansion. As could be seen, Subaru and Beatrice were like cats and dogs—he wanted to be on good terms with her, but since she was a girl that was fun to tease, he couldn't help but provoke her, which was something that troubled him.

"Well it can't be helped, can it? This mansion doesn't have a soundproof music room, and what are we going to do if we do it in another room and Emilia's singing leaks out? If word gets out that Emilia-tan is tone-deaf, then the royal selection would be the least of our worries."

"Is my singing that bad?"

Even Emilia couldn't stay indifferent when she heard that it would be bad for her standing in the royal selection. Beatrice gave her a cold look when Subaru pointed that problem out.

"What the future holds for that girl is none of Betty's concern. And that is not a good enough answer as to why you are making such a ruckus in this private library, I suppose."

"Beako, you know what I'm talking about, right? Her voice would leak out from a normal room, but I don't have to worry about it in the Forbidden Library since this room is spatially cut off from the outside world. It won't bother anyone no matter how much she practices here!"

"Betty is saying that it is extremely bothersome!" Beatrice jumped down from the stepladder, grabbed at the hem of her dress, and shouted at him with a red face.

Her anger was justified, and she had a good point. But it was also true that the Forbidden Library was needed for Emilia's singing lesson. Therefore, Subaru used his trump card against her.

"Betty… Are we really that much of a nuisance? Do you want us to leave…?" Puck moistened his round eyes, held his tail, and called out to Beatrice while looking up. The cunning appeal of the kitten was perfectly coordinated with Subaru even though they hadn't planned it together.

Beatrice suddenly lost the momentum from before and looked daunted. “Bu-Bubby, there’s not a single thing wrong with you, I suppose! But the Forbidden Library is…”

“Yeah, I know this room is important to you, but it’s true that we need your help with this, Betty. So please, help me out.”

“Bubby…”

Beatrice looked up to Puck as an older brother, and his appeal tugged on her heart strings. She was also a girl who couldn’t refuse requests to begin with. Their victory had been assured from the beginning.

“It’s a win,” Subaru muttered.

“I… It can’t be helped, I suppose. It’s alright. Betty can’t deny it if it’s Bubby’s request.”

Beatrice accepted the request without a hitch, not noticing Subaru’s muttering with an evil look on his face.

It makes me worry that she might get conned by a bad dude in the future.

However, the conditions had now been met. After Subaru and Puck nodded at each other, Puck flew into Subaru’s palm, giving him a dynamic high-five with the use of his entire body.

And thus, this was how Emilia’s lesson began in the Forbidden Library with the permission of its caretaker…

“It may be a hard and painful path, but let’s not falter and give it our best!” Subaru exclaimed.

“Hip hip hooray!” Puck cheered.

“Not even once have I said that I want my tone-deafness to be fixed…” Emilia complained. “No no, I may be a bit bad at singing, but I have never asked for it to be fixed…”

Everyone had responded differently, but they were all getting excited for it, completely ignoring the victim of the entire affair.

4

“Alright then, I feel like starting the lesson officially… Emilia-tan, how long are you planning to sulk? It’s a really important topic, you know?”

“But you guys are overexaggerating it when I’m just a little amateurish at singing. Subaru, Puck, I don’t like either of you.”

“You don’t hear people say amateurish in this day and age. And how stubborn are you?”

“I don’t know.”

It was also due to her being teased during the conversation before that Emilia, who was the victim in this, lacked seriousness. It wasn’t only about the tone-deafness, such problems required the person facing them to have a will to fix them. So, first she needed to face herself seriously.

“You are usually straightforward, so why are you so stubborn about your singing?” Subaru asked.

“It’s because it’s embarrassing,” Emilia replied. “It’s embarrassing that I’m unaware of my tone-deafness while you and Liliana are good at singing… I don’t want to believe something like that.”

“Oh my, your resistance is adorable. But it would be troublesome if it’s like that…”

Emilia looked away, her cheeks red. Her will to resist was gradually weakening. But Subaru thought that it lacked a decisive blow, so he cracked his neck.

“—In order to help people who are tone-deaf, the best way is to make them listen to their own singing. It would be a piece of cake if I could record it, but sadly we don’t have such a convenient tool here.”

So I’ll give up on using the inventions of science and rely on more primitive means.

“Is that a…bucket?” said Emilia, widening her eyes as she looked at the object in Subaru’s hands. Her surprised eyes were looking at a metal bucket. There was no mistaking it.

“It’s our guest, Mr. Bucket. This guest lecturer will teach Emilia-tan about her tone-deafness. I have washed it properly, so there won’t be an issue, hygiene-wise. So, you can be rest assured.”

“How can Mr. Bucket be used? Can I go inside?” Puck wondered.

“Enough with the showing off that you are a cat by wanting to go into narrow spaces, for now. Its usage is easy—it simply needs to be put on Emilia-tan’s head, then she can sing.”

“—What?” Emilia asked in confusion.

“Ah-ha-ha, I suppose.”

Subaru’s declaration startled Emilia, and Beatrice couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

“Um… Sorry, I guess I didn’t hear that properly,” Emilia said. “What am I going to do with that bucket?”

“You need to wear it,” Subaru replied. “Wear it and sing. You are going to be a bucket-style heroine.”

“Subaru, you idiot! I was sooo close to taking you seriously!”

Emilia was about to dash out of there after seeing Subaru offering her the bucket with a smile, but he quickly caught her arm. “Wait, wait a minute! You got me wrong, I’m not kidding! If you sing while wearing this, then the sound will reflect back at you! I’m not lying!”

“It’s what you get for lying all the time, I suppose. You’re like the falo-herder boy in Hoshin of the Wilderness, in fact.”

“I can hear you saying something similar to The Boy Who Cried Wolf, you annoying loli! Stay shut for a bit!”

After silencing Beatrice, who had interrupted him, Subaru began explaining himself to Emilia, who was looking at him with suspicion.

It might be the first time she's given me such a stern look since the first day I got summoned to this world when I called Emilia the Witch's name that she was using as an alias.

A single bucket had brought such a catastrophe. In any case, Subaru desperately tried to convey his sincerity. "If you listen to your own voice, then you'll understand the level of your singing! I'm not lying. Just pretend you've been tricked and sing, and then you'll understand!"

"Pretend that I have been tricked?! So you are planning on tricking me! I won't be tricked anymore!"

"You have become so paranoid. I wonder whose fault it is…"

"You made me eat the failed mayonnaise yesterday after telling me to pretend I had been tricked! I remember how angry I was back then, which makes me even angrier now!"

"Shit, it was my fault! Yesterday's me, you idiot! But I'm a different man today! I'm doing this for you!"

It looked as if Subaru was trying to drag her down a dangerous road, but he still vigorously tried to lead her down it. And the good-natured Emilia gave in.

Emilia looked at the bucket had been given to her and timidly held it above her head—and asked, "You won't laugh, right?"

"I won't, I won't laugh, I won't laugh at all."

"Really, really?"

"I won't laugh at you no matter who laughs at you."

"Is that a line fit for situations like this?" Puck asked from above his shoulder, but Subaru ignored him. To make Emilia put the bucket on, he wouldn't hesitate to use any sort of cool line.

Possibly having been encouraged by his powerful words, Emilia put the bucket on with a determined expression. It fit snugly, and the simple bucket hid her face.

—It's the sudden emergence of a bucket-style heroine.

"What is this feeling?" Subaru wondered. "I knew it beforehand, but it hurts me to see Emilia-tan like this."

"Don't worry, Lia," Puck said. "You are still the prettiest girl in the world even with that bucket on your head."

Subaru and Puck were overcome with feelings of guilt, but Puck loved Emilia no matter what she looked like. Subaru felt like he'd lost to him when it came to his affection for her, but even with a bucket covering her head, he just knew she wasn't happy with all the praise.

"Ah-ha-ha, I suppose." Beatrice laughed with her face hidden behind the book she lifted, but her laughter was clearly audible.

While being exposed to such a crowd, Emilia courageously turned her bucket-covered face towards Subaru. "So, do I need to sing like this? It's reaaally tight. Woah, it's loud."

"Not many people get to hear their own voice. Sing a song like that. Just sing a song to enjoy your singing voice. If you want me to, I can play something to go along with it."

Subaru volunteered to back her up with his lyulyre, but Emilia shook her head with the bucket on.

It's a surreal sight, but Emilia probably has a gallant face under the bucket.

"It's alright, I'll do it alone first."

"Is that so? You can tell me if you get anxious. I'll do my best to help you out."

I wonder how much of a help a third-rate guitarist could be when it comes to Emilia's tone-deafness.

Emilia pulled her chin in after hearing Subaru's words. And then…

"La, la, la la la—"

Emilia started singing after creating a rhythm with a hum without Subaru's support. It was coming from behind the bucket, so it was muffled, but the song had no significant changes. In short, she was still tone-deaf, but if it was going according to the plan, then she could hear her singing, too.

"It's horrible," said Puck.

"Yeah, it's horrible," Subaru agreed.

"It's really horrible," Beatrice also agreed.

Puck sighed in grief, Subaru tearfully agreed, and on top of that, Beatrice, who had demonstrated her generosity for Liliana's music, frowned in displeasure. Musicality was something that was out of Emilia's reach, and it wasn't right to blame her for it, but…

"—Ah."

"Oh?"

The singing stopped suddenly in front of Subaru and the others, who were listening to her pitiful song.

After ending her song on a rough note, she took the bucket off in front of the three of them, who were befuddled by her actions. What first emerged was the silver hair that had been contained within the bucket, which was then followed by Emilia herself.

And then… "Please leave me alone for a bit," Emilia said, and then the girl who had finally realized that she was tone-deaf left the Forbidden Library all on her lonesome.

"—No, you can't just walk away! You've been running away all day!"

Subaru chased after Emilia in a great rush as soon as he came back to his senses.

5

“We’ll do the lesson so that Emilia-tan can look at her bad side and learn to be a better girl! First, you need to overcome the inability to hit the right notes! Ok?!”

“O…Ok.”

Emilia had once run away, but after she was brought back with a teary face, she became obedient to Subaru’s instructions. It seemed like her realizing that she was tone-deaf had left quite an impact on her. She didn’t look so good, but it looked like she was determined to practice.

“The method to overcome pitch tone-deafness is to listen to one song over and over again and memorize the right tune. It’s best to fix it while wearing the bucket from before. It’s also good if you keep humming all the time.”

“But how would I know what the right tune is? Liliana isn’t here anymore…”

“Well, it isn’t like Liliana is the only one who can sing with the right pitch. Well, even Beako can do it. Hey, sing a bit.”

“Huh? Why does Betty need to do such a thing?” Beatrice protested, not happy about being asked to sing on such short notice.

“Hey, hey.” Subaru shrugged his shoulders. “The venue for the lesson is here, anyway, so it’ll end faster if you help out. If it doesn’t end fast, then we’ll have to visit here again and again.”

“Argh… But even so, Betty doesn’t want to be bossed around by you.”

“Alright, alright, so it’s that, right? You’re the kinda lady who likes to critique others, but can’t do anything on her own, right? Ok, sure. You can head to the corner there and continue with your reading, then.”

"Who's all talk?! Stop talking nonsense! Alright, Betty will do it, I suppose!"

Beatrice fell for Subaru's provocation, hook, line, and sinker. He became worried by how easy she was to control, but for now, her gullible nature was a strong ally.

The gullible girl started taking rigorous steps and firmly pointed her finger at Emilia. "I'll teach you since you can't do it," she said. "—I'll teach you the quintessence of music!"

"That's going a bit too far," Subaru commented.

"Ye-Yes, Teacher. I got it. Please teach me well…and I'll do my best."

"Excellent!"

Beatrice's declaration, along with a high evaluation of herself, won Emilia over since she was feeling threatened by her tone-deafness.

I want to work as a team at this pace to fix Emilia's tone-deafness.

"In order to develop a good sense of rhythm, I recommend that you make your own rhythm by moving your body while singing. It's fine if you just clap and step, so let's do it along with a melody." Subaru explained while clapping.

"Alright, Lia. Let's clap together. Come on, meown-two, meown-two."

"Meo-Meown-two, meown-two…" Subaru mimicked him to encourage Emilia.

Upon seeing Puck clapping soundlessly with his little paws, she hurriedly followed his lead. "Meown-two…waaa!"

"There now, Betty will start singing, I suppose. She'll discipline you until you become capable of doing it," said Beatrice cruelly, putting the bucket on Emilia's head while clapping.

Now there was a girl with the bucket on her head, a little girl who was giving the girl a sharp look, and a kitten merrily flying around them—an unusual sight to be sure, for someone who wasn't aware of what was going on.

"This is unreal. It's as if I am having a nightmare… If this were an actual dream, I'd check myself into a hospital pronto once I woke up."

Anyway, this lesson should improve Emilia's tone-deafness, at least theoretically. The two girls and kitten seem to be focusing on it, so I'll go solve the other problem.

"Sorry, I have to go hunt a pheasant."

"What do you mean by hunting a pheasant?" Beatrice asked. "I can't understand you at all, I suppose."

"I have to go to the restroom. Don't make me say it, it's embarrassing."

Subaru left the room, leaving Emilia and the others behind, after making Beatrice feel dejected. He thought that Emilia's expression turned anxious as he was leaving the room, but he didn't see it since she was wearing a bucket.

Her Door Crossing activated when he exited the Forbidden Library. It was a form of teleportation that could be connected to any door in the mansion, and the exit this time was set right next to Roswaal's office.

"Nice work, ya damn loli."

She knew Subaru wanted to go to the "bathroom" as an excuse to do something else and thus was being considerate.

After making a snarky comment, Subaru knocked on the door of the office.

"Rosy, it's me. Can I bother you?"

"—Sure. It was about the time I wanted to hear your storryyy," Subaru entered the office room boldly with the permission of the owner of the room. Sitting on an ebony desk in the large office was the freak in a clown's attire, the owner of the mansion—Roswaal L. Mathers.

Roswaal, who was also Subaru's employer, looked at him with his heterochromatic eyes.

"Wellll, it seems you've started something raaather amusing by dragging Lady Emilia into something."

"It isn't like I dragged her into anything, it's like she dragged herself into it, but you know what, I have a lot of things to say, so please just spare me this once."

"You want me to let go of you dragging her into trivial matters when the royal selection is nearing?"

Roswaal had hit him where it hurts yet held expressions of amusement all the while. He seemed to be waiting with open arms to see what kind of counterargument Subaru would make.

He is a master with bad taste, Subaru sighed.

"It may seem like a waste of time, but it's always important to take a break, right? I'm sure we've all sensed that she's been working too hard lately and bottling up her stress."

On the first day Subaru got summoned, there was the insignia theft incident in the royal capital, and that was followed by all the hubbub in the mansion about the witchbeast problem, which was then followed by the incident with Liliana the other day. Emilia was there during all those incidents, but she wasn't able to confront the root of the problems and solve them herself.

It was due to her position not allowing her to approach dangers on her own, but even so, she might have felt powerless. I think the reaction to that is linked to her recent overcrowded schedule.

Emilia doesn't hesitate to push herself for the sake of others. The fact that such a person has relied on me during her short break might be a sign of trust, and if that's the case, then it makes me happy.

“You miiight want to try a bit harder if you want to convince me.”

“She’ll learn abdominal breathing while learning how to sing. It will make her voice clearer, and that will give her an edge when making speeches! If her tone-deafness gets cured, then her confidence will increase, and her expressions will get brighter! And as the beauty of her singing becomes known to the world, Emilia-tan will become both a queen and a diva, putting her in a double bind—!”

“Aah, alright, alright. I understand, I undeeerstand. I’ll allow a bit of a break.”

Roswaal raised a while flag at Subaru’s continuous barrage of convincing sales pitches. It wasn’t because he was struck by his persuasion, but rather due to his own consideration for Emilia’s recent attitude.

“I don’t know how much of it was under your control, but weren’t you the one who gave her the lyulyre in the first place? Hasn’t everything been going according to your plan, then?”

“My status complicates a lot of things. And there’s also Lady Emilia’s personality. It wouuuld be good if she rests if I tell her to rest without any twists. Do you think she would listen to me?”

“I don’t think so. She’ll nod and work even more in places you can’t see.”

It’s probably because of such a dazzling appearance that it makes me want to support her. Regardless of Roswaal’s intentions, he too is in a position to support Emilia. Even if we differ in our feelings for her, I’m sure he can understand my intentions.

“Anywaaay, is Lady Emilia’s singing…that horrible?”

“It’s horrible. She has a beautiful voice, so it is a miracle in a bad way.”

“You must be joking. Aren’t you exaaaggerating things?”

"It's as if someone took a luxurious ingredient that everyone envies and cooked it on a griddle until it turned pitch black."

"That's such a waste."

"Yeah, a waste."

That's the only cruel truth that couldn't be hidden by compassion.

"Alright then" Subaru raised his hand after they nodded to each other in understanding. "I'll return to the Forbidden Library now. I left telling them that I was going to the toilet, so if I take too long, they might suspect that I was going for the big one."

"Well, about that. I think it's alreaaady too late for that since a significant amount of time has passed. Anyway, do help Lady Emilia out."

"Sure. I'll Emilia-tanize Emilia a bit more."

"Oh myyy… Ha-Ha-ha, you are goood with words."

Roswaal laughed out loud at Subaru's way of wording things. Their mutual understanding now renewed, Subaru left the room all proud after getting the permission he'd negotiated for.

"Alright then, I have to return, but…has Beako changed the position of the room?"

For starters, he opened up the door of the room next to the office that had been connected to the Forbidden Library before. Under normal circumstances, the location of the Forbidden Library would have been changed, and what lied beyond that door would be the reference room full of stacks of paper, but… "Oh, lucky I was able to enter just like that."

Luckily, the Door Crossing hadn't been changed, and Subaru was able to enter the Forbidden Library without a hitch.

"I'm back. Sorry, the restroom was packed and had a long queue…"

Subaru entered the Forbidden Library while making a sloppy excuse and looked at Emilia, Beatrice, and Puck, who were standing in the back. They were right where he'd left them…

"Nooo! Not that! Please, not thaaat!" Emilia screamed.

"I can't take this anymore, I suppose! You are taking music lightly! I'm going to make you sing outside with that bucket on your head, I suppose! What you're lacking is the sense of danger!"

"Betty, listen to me," Puck began. "I'll feel sorry for her if you do things she doesn't like. Stop it. She's cute even if she's tone-deaf."

"You spoil her too much, I suppose! That's the reason why this girl is so arrogant!"

Beatrice, who had rolled up her sleeves and gotten fired up, pulled on Emilia's waist with all her might while she still had the bucket on. As the bucket-faced girl clung to the bookshelf, Puck clapped while twirling around them.

"…"

I wonder how much carnage they've caused in the nearly ten minutes I've been gone. I can guess what might have happened, and if it's as I have predicted, then all I can do is sigh.

Anyway… "It's a fun activity that we started to relieve Emilia-tan of her stress, but is it really working? I wonder if I got my priorities wrong when it comes to this."

Subaru, somewhat worried that the promise he had made with Roswaal might go to waste, immediately joined up with the three of them in the middle of their noisy lesson.

6

"Well, Emilia-tan, do you think the training had any effect?" Subaru asked. "Do you think you can do it a bit?"

"Leave it to me," Emilia replied. "Puck and Beatrice trained me rigorously. I am a new person now… Well, it might be a bit much to say I'm a new person, but I have gotten better."

"Woah, the confidence grew and then shrunk!"

Emilia, whose face made it look as if she had broken out of her shell after overcoming the hard training, puffed her chest at Subaru's query. At her feet was the bucket that had been her comrade-in-arms. Its shiny surface looked as if it was watching over its student, who was going to show the results of their training.

"But can practicing like that really cure tone-deafness?"

"If that kind of training was all it took to cure her nightmarish tone-deafness, then it would be easy peasy."

"Hey, you two outsiders! Don't make her lose motivation by saying unnecessary things! We'll see some results soon!" said Subaru, silencing the two of them, who were whispering behind Emilia's back as she did her vocal exercises.

But Emilia, who was concentrating in the middle of the Forbidden Library, didn't notice and signaled Subaru with her eyes. "…Mm, mm, mm! Good! Alright, Subaru, please do it."

"You can leave it to me, Emilia-tan. And don't cry, no matter what happens."

"You there, you're the one who trusts her the least, in fact," Beatrice spat.

On Emilia's signal, Subaru got the lyulyre in position, holding it gently in his hands. He plucked the strings, creating a light rhythm. What ended up being played softly was an excerpt from a piece called the Sword Demon's Love Song.

In all honesty, it's frightening to play it when I compare my skills with Liliana's, but… "It would be disgraceful if I stayed in my comfort zone while Emilia-tan is giving it her all."

If Emilia disgraced herself, then Subaru could share in her disgrace by playing poorly. All he was thinking about was how to cover her is she messed up. Her tone-deafness was that extreme.

And that's why my expectations for her during the moment when she's showing the results of her training is…

"—La, la, la la la."

"…"

Emilia began singing, and from her lips spun a voice that sounded like a bell. —At that moment, Subaru, who had been prepared for a catastrophe, gasped, and Puck and Beatrice widened their eyes in awe.

This was because she'd perfectly grasped how the beginning of the song was supposed to go, and the pitch and flow were also perfect.

"…"

Emilia closed her eyes and moved her shoulders as her heart pleased, surrendering herself to the song. She followed the rhythm just like she'd practiced, perfectly grasping the notes she'd learned, and sang the song just like she'd been taught.

—It was the enchanting singing of an angel that captivated all, sung with a voice that sounded like a silver bell.

Emilia had said that she had never been taught how to sing. In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the singing of the girl who didn't even know the basics had been painful to hear.

However, Emilia, who was honest and pure of heart, practiced earnestly in order to overcome her tone-deafness. She was able to absorb things like a sponge—

"…"

Subaru, who was about to lose himself in the song, hastily concentrated on his own performance. Her singing was magical, and his performance did not match well with it. Even so, in order to not be left behind, he desperately plucked the strings to stay in sync with her.

"—. Thank you very much," Emilia said with a bow.

Subaru eventually got back to his senses after putting his full concentration into his performance. Her song now over, Emilia looked up, waiting anxiously for everyone's evaluation of it. Emilia, who wasn't even aware of her own tone-deafness, probably had no idea what it had sounded like.

"Wa…was it still bad? I think so, since if it could be fixed that easily, none of you would look so troubled…" She took them being unable to move due to sheer shock in a bad way.

Subaru shook his head, banished his surprise, and ran towards Emilia. "No, no, no! Emilia-tan, it was amazing! What in the world happened to that dying bird screech from before?!"

"What do you mean by dying screech?!" said Emilia in surprise, tilting her head as Subaru made various expressions, not expecting such an evaluation "Was it cured at least a little…by any chance?"

"It isn't just a little. It was perfect, perfecto! That's exactly what I wanted to hear!" Subaru casually sung Emilia's praises.

"Yeah, yeah, it was really good, Lia," Puck chimed in, following Subaru's example. "I'd expect nothing less from my most pretty Lia."

Emilia widened her eyes at the words of the kitten that had landed on her shoulder as well as Subaru's. Her face looked like she still couldn't believe it.

"It's as Bubby said, I suppose. It wasn't that bad."

"Beatrice…"

"But don't get too full of yourself. You still need practice. It's still not as good as that songstress, who is only capable of singing."

Beatrice praised Emilia's singing while at the same time praising and dissing Liliana. Upon hearing her words, Emilia put her hand on her mouth, her face making it seem like she'd begun to accept what was happening.

"I'm happy. I'm not tone-deaf anymore. I have overcome tone-deafness.”

“Yeah! It feels like we accomplished something huge!” Subaru exclaimed. “Even if all we did was cure some tone-deafness!”

“Hey now, I’m not tone-deaf anymore. I am ex tone-deaf. You need to say things honestly.” Emilia teared up, creating an emotional mood, and Subaru and Puck nodded at her.

Emilia then let out an intense sigh, prompting Beatrice to sigh at them deeply, as if she’d had enough. “Anyway, Betty thinks we are done here. She’s going to have to ask you to leave the Forbidden Library, I suppose.”

“Ooh, sorry about that,” Subaru said. “But we couldn’t have done it without you, you know. Thanks for the help.”

“Betty did it for Bubby, albeit unwillingly, I suppose. Besides, Betty thinks that some parts of the song still need refinement. The fun-fun-fun-fuuun-fun part at the beginning, specifically.”

Beatrice, who was eager to chase them out of the Forbidden Library, seemed to leave them a parting give in the form of pointing out an issue with Emilia’s song. It was at the moment she started humming that the Forbidden Library’s air froze.

Subaru, Emilia, and Puck turned towards her with stiffened expressions.

“…Wh-What is this about? Why are you making those faces?”

“Beako? What was that? Is it the beginning of the Sword Demon’s Love Song by any chance?”

“What else does it sound like? That’s exactly what it is,” said Beatrice unapologetically, without a shred of doubt.

Subaru understood it after looking at her attitude while she puffed her thin chest. Then he looked behind him at Emilia and said, “Emilia-tan.”

“Yes, you don’t need to say a thing, Subaru. I know what you mean," Emilia replied, nodding at Subaru's call.

Their hearts had become one at that moment. Emilia gently lifted something up from the floor in silence, then walked towards Beatrice.

"What is that supposed to be?" she asked Emilia, who was approaching her.

However, it wasn't Emilia, but Subaru, who answered. "Isn't it obvious—you are going to be the second bucket-style heroine as of this moment," Subaru said emphatically, pointing to the bucket in Emilia's hand.

—The little girl, who had arrogantly said something about the quintessence of music, was just as tone-deaf as the angel.

"So, you are also unconsciously tone-deaf! What the hell is up with this mansion! And why do you guys have such pretty voices for tone-deaf people? It totally ruins everything! What kind of evil deeds did you do in your past lives?!"

"How on earth could Betty be tone-deaf? That's a ridiculous accusation! That's a tremendously absurd accusation, in fact! You're just trying to make Betty go through hell as payback because you're into that girl, I suppose!"

"Beatrice, it's alright. I was able to get better properly because of Mr. Bucket. You'll get better if you wear it and sing. Go ahead, put it on. Put…oh, it might be cute!"

"Shaaa, I suppose! Gaaaah, I suppose! Not in a million years, in fact!"

The three of them ran around in a flurry, having a little fight over whether she was going to wear the bucket or not. Puck washed his face with a dampened paw, laughing and floating above them.

"Hmmm, the quintessence of music…we won't be able to enjoy the sound of it anytime soon, will we?" Puck said snobbishly, summing up the day that had begun with a lyulyre.

Ram is Order

1

—They were deep within a forest.

They could not see well, and the pungent odor coming from the grass beneath their feet made it difficult to breathe.

The darkness that made it impossible to see more than a few meters ahead of them was caused by the branches above their heads blocking the sunlight. Subaru stepped on the ground and carefully fumbled his way through the foliage.

Even the passing of time seemed vague once you got lost in the darkness. Although he had gotten prepared at dawn and entered the forest early in the morning, it seemed as if the sun had already set, as he was covered in a veil of darkness.

“Well, you don’t need to worry about that now that I’m here.”

An increase in anxiety led to an increase in fatigue. But every time Subaru felt weak, a carefree voice scolded it away. He smiled wryly at the carefree voice’s words, then looked up at the person above him. “Dad, you always think about getting off from work on time. Don’t forget to shoot a flare for me before you get exhausted and head straight home.”

“Hey now, do I seem like a klutz who would abandon such an important duty? Lia told me to take good care of you. So I’ll do my besttt.”

The one who responded to Subaru with a chuckle was a cat spirit—Puck.

While touching his beard in a stately manner, he said, “But like,” he paused. “This place is pretty out there.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But we don’t need to start worrying just yet.”

“Hahaaa, you’re acting tough. You are a boy, after all.”

Subaru stuck out his tongue awkwardly when Puck saw through his tough guy act. Even if Puck was with him, he couldn’t forget how uneasy walking through the dark forest made him.

The reason why he was in such a situation was because—

“Curse you Ram… I’ll haunt you if I die because of this.”

Subaru clicked his tongue and said the name of the companion that had gotten separated from them—the last member of the peculiar trio that had entered the forest.

It was an urgent task for Subaru now to meet up with the arrogant and pompous pink-haired girl—Ram.

“It’s a superstition that dead souls turn into hollows, but hollows typically stay in the places they died in.”

“Is that something like location-bound ghosts?”

“It’d be funny if you turn into a hollow after getting lost in the forest and wander around it for eternity.”

“That would really suck!”

Thanks to the exchange of joking remarks and banter, he felt a little less uneasy. Subaru, feeling grateful for the consideration of the spirit floating next to him, wiped the sweat off his forehead and looked ahead.

He felt like he was saved by the fact that he wasn’t alone in the dark forest brimming with nothing but silence.

That was why he thought he needed to find the girl who was all alone in the forest as soon as possible.

2

It all started a day or so ago, going back to the afternoon before Subaru and gang entered the forest.

“Haa, it sure is peaceful…”

Subaru felt at home leaning his upper body sloppily against the dining table. He was dressed in a black servant’s uniform that hardly suited him. Though his initial feeling that he was dressing up as something he was not had somewhat faded away since he felt like he was a bit of a better fit now.

At least, that was what he thought when he assessed himself in the mirror every morning.

“You seem like you are in a reaaally good mood, Subaru. Did something good happen?”

Emilia, who had braided her hair, tilted her head next to Subaru. Her beautiful silver hair was made into a new hairstyle every day, which entertained him with a different kind of loveliness each day.

“If we were to talk about something nice, it would be that you are lovely as always, Emilia-tan. You are like a welcome rain that always fills me with newfound joy.”

“Am I, really that gloomy?”

“How on earth did you come to the conclusion that it was something like a rainy season from this conversation?!”

Pickup lines didn’t have any effect on Emilia, who was an airhead. Although, it was because she was like that that he could flirt with her like that.

“I think I’m getting addicted to not being taken seriously… No, I do want to be taken seriously, it’s just that a man’s heart is complicated and hard to understand…!”

“There you go again, worrying about things alone. Boys are difficult to understand… Oh, this tea tastes nice.” Ignoring Subaru, who was in agony over his unresolved feelings, Emilia gently brought the cup to her mouth and smiled after taking a sip.

The afternoon tea party at Roswaal Manor—it had become a routine to gather in the dining room in the afternoon and rest their bodies and souls. It was at the time of day when the servants would take a break from their work and Emilia would take a break from her studies. Those who had some time off would naturally head towards the dining room and take a little break together. It was a routine that had taken root sometime after Subaru had come to the mansion.

Of course, people would only do it when they had time for it, so it was rare for everyone in the mansion to gather at the same time. The regulars were Subaru, who would finish his work early in order to meet Emilia, and Emilia, who routinely took a break around this time.

It was difficult for everyone to attend the tea party, and today was no exception.

“Rem and Rosy are busy, so it can’t be helped, but Beako needs to socialize more.”

Subaru frowned at the thought of the young girl who never showed up even though she didn’t have anything to do.

Emilia put her hand on her mouth and laughed a little at his sullen face. “You two get along really well, and you always have her in your thoughts.”

“I think ‘get along well’ is a bit of a misnomer. It’s true that she is someone that I think about, but it needs to be worded differently… it’s like that feeling you get when dried shredded squid gets stuck in your teeth. Know what I mean?”

Emilia became further amused at Subaru’s evaluation that would have caused an argument if Beatrice had heard it, making him give a languid wry smile.

It happened when the two of them were enjoying the tea party together…

“—Seems like you are having a lot of fun.”

The voice that suddenly interrupted them in the dining room sounded somewhat cold and stiff. It had come from the girl standing at the entrance to the dining room after having opened both doors. She glanced at Subaru's overly relaxed face with indifference, then said:

"While Ram was busy making tea cakes, you indulged in your lewd activity… Barusu, it seems like you've become someone important."

"I was just having a little chat with Emilia-tan and that makes me lewd? Sis, you were the one who said you would be responsible for making the tea cakes, so doesn't that make me not guilty?"

"Ram didn't like the fact that you were taking things easy while she was working."

"You're just a tyrant…!"

Subaru goggled at the unreasonableness, and the girl—Ram—sneered, her eyes lacking even the slightest hint of charm. "Ram is just adding her personal bias to your job performance evaluation, even though she normally looks at things impartially."

"If that's true, then don't add any unnecessary perspectives to it. Evaluate me as the person I am."

"If Ram removes her personal bias from the current evaluation, then you'd have to start eating your tea cakes from the floor, Barusu."

"Why is it that my rating goes down when you remove your bias?!"

Ram's eyes seemed serious, and, unable to hide his dread, Subaru became outraged by it. Ignoring his complaints, she placed the plate with pastries on it on the table. As she did so, Subaru poured tea into the empty cups and prepared her portion in front of the chair opposite to his. Emilia burst into laughter at the two who had finished setting everything up for the tea party.

"What happened, Emilia-tan? You're making such a cute face."

"It's because you two are in sync even though you're being spiteful. It was a little amusing looking at you guys."

"Disgusting."

“It hurts, so at least sugarcoat it!” Subaru shouted at the girl, who seemed like she didn’t like it from the bottom of her heart, holding his chest. “But Emilia-tan made a good point too. Since the person who works with me the most is you, Sis. We split the chores up between us and do them every day, so it’s only natural that we’d be in sync a little, right?”

“You pervert.”

“Can you please reply after understanding the sentence properly?!”

She’s unapproachable as usual. I wanna praise myself for not getting disheartened.

Anyway, Subaru’s position at Roswaal Manor was something like this:

Ignored by Emilia, snapped at by Beatrice, treated with scorn by Ram, and Rem was the only one who was extremely attached to him.

I think I’m in a really blessed situation.

“But it’s pretty cool to see pastries you made, Ram. I’ve seen Rem’s a lot, but I had no idea you were capable of making anything other than steamed potatoes, Sis.”

“You can talk gibberish when you are asleep, Barusu. Ram has told you before—Ram’s specialty is steamed potatoes. She doesn’t even know how to make pastries.”

“What were you making your younger sister who’s so busy she can’t even join the tea party do?” Subaru blurted out after he was indirectly told that she had gotten her sister to do it.

He recalled when Rem came to inform him of her not being able to join the tea party with a disappointed face. The taste of the pastry in his mouth was both pitiful and sweet.

“But seriously, this mansion would be fucked without Rem’s cooking. I’m not going to be haughty like you, Sis, since I know I’m in no position to criticize someone else’s cooking skills.”

Since I was without a doubt a parasite in my previous world. I was a supernova of the parasite society who skipped school, didn't help with chores, and was unusually good at sewing and bedmaking.

Due to having such a background, Subaru wanted to change the topic and looked at Emilia.

Then Emilia, who was chewing on a pastry, covered her mouth and said, "Me? Ah-ha, Subaru, you might think that I'm someone who can't cook, but I'm actually pretty good at it. I used to live alone… Well, Puck was with me too, but I lived alone for a pretty long time. A lot of things are a doddle for me."

"You don't hear people say 'things are a doddle' in this day and age… And how should I put this… What you're saying makes sense, but it just doesn't seem plausible knowing you, Emilia-tan."

That was all due to Emilia actually being a klutz even though she tried to give off the image of a capable woman. After spending weeks with her in the mansion, his original impression of her changed drastically. His viewing of her as being a genius that was strong in the beginning soon faded away due to occasionally seeing her goofy and childish side in their daily life. But even so, her honest, kind, and straightforward personality hadn't changed, and he could definitely say it was one of her good qualities.

Leaving that aside, it's also true that she has the aura of a 'Beauty that was somewhat of a klutz'. Like the recent revelation of her being tone deaf, I feel like there are many more hidden secrets lying around.

Emilia puffed her cheeks in disapproval at Subaru's worried gaze. "Mmmm, you look like you don't trust me. Hmph, alright. If you are doubting me so much, then I'll make you eat my cooking next time. You'll be reaaally surprised, so be prepared."

"Huh? I wasn't aiming for it, but got a home-cooked meal event? Am I going to die?"

One of Subaru's bad habits was to start expecting the worst if something good happened to him. In fact, ever since he got summoned this world, it couldn't be denied that good events would often get cancelled out by bad events. Most of the time, the bad event preceded the good event, so he became anxious whenever a good one happened first.

"Subaru, are you okay? You look troubled. Does your tummy hurt?"

"I-I'm fine. And even if my stomach burns, I'll finish the food you cook no matter what. Trust me."

"Can you at least try to have a little faith in me?!"

Subaru made Emilia sulk with his good-for-nothing imagination. Ram would usually go on the offensive here—but there was no sign of that no matter how much he waited.

"Hm? Miss Ram? Did something happen?"

"…"

He looked back, feeling let down, and saw Ram staring down at the tea. She took a sip, wetting her lips with it as if to confirm something, and then looked at Subaru.

That look sent chills down his spine. The sharpness of her ever-sharp gaze was stronger this time.

"Hey, Miss Ram, did something unpleasant happen…?"

"Barusu, which tea shelf did you pull this tea from?"

"Tea? Oh, you mean the tea leaves! Oh, you know, the ones hidden deep inside the tea shelf. It seemed like a really expensive one, so I snuck it out…hot hot hot hot hot?!"

"Eek! Subaru?!"

After Subaru reported the results of his treasure hunt, his treasure got poured all over him. As he rolled around the floor due to having hot tea poured all over his head, Emilia hurriedly emptied the contents of a water jug on him. It was a disastrous scene where Subaru was lying on the floor, soaking wet with tea and water.

Emilia glared at Ram for her sudden outburst of violence. “What a horrible thing to do, Ram! Subaru’s clothes and the floor are all dirty now!”

“Don’t just worry about things getting dirty, worry about my burns too!”

But Ram didn’t react to Emilia’s scolding that had missed the point nor Subaru’s screams. Emilia and Subaru looked at each other at that.

“Hey, Miss Ram, are you going mad? What are you…?”

“How dare…”

“Ram?”

“How dare you, Barusu.” Ram couldn’t stifle the anger and agitation in her trembling voice.

So, Subaru couldn’t say, “You’re the one at fault here.” back at her. He couldn’t do anything but look at the equally confused Emilia.

3

Apparently, the situation didn’t seem to just end with being punished for using the hidden tea without permission. The tea was treasured—he was right about perceiving it as such—but the reason it was treasured wasn’t due to its taste, quality, or price, it was due to its efficacy.

“That tea has the ability to boost mana circulation in the body. It’s effective on Ram’s old scar.”

“By old scar you mean…”

“The horn.”

“Oh, aah…I see. It’s that scar…”

Subaru was the one who got shaken by Ram’s bold answer. Ram and Rem were born as Oni’s, which was a demi-human race. Their outward appearance was the same as a human's apart from one thing, which was that a white horn grew from their forehead when they got excited. But Ram was someone who had lost her horn and called herself hornless. Subaru hadn't heard how she had lost her horn, but he knew it was a rather sensitive topic. That was why he felt nothing but guilt after hearing that the tea he had used without permission had medicinal properties that helped with her old scar.

"Where did you get that tea from? It's completely my fault this time. I'll pay you whenever I get the money, so…"

"Unfortunately, the tea that has an effect on Ram's scar isn't easily available. That's a special product that Ram has made by blending medicinal ingredients together and adjusting the taste to her liking."

"Ugh, seriously? By the way…how bad would you feel without it?"

"Not bad at all, Ram would just have to endure sleepless nights for the foreseeable future."

"I'm really sorryyy?!"

It was more important than Subaru had thought, so he couldn't help but prostrate himself and apologize. He'd made a grave mistake without thinking about it—it was as if he had done something that was a microcosm of human history. That blunder would be extremely hard to fix.

"So, where can the ingredients for that special blend be found?" asked Subaru, sitting upright on the floor, since he couldn't not take responsibility.

Ram gave a faint smile while crossing her arms and looking down at Subaru. That smile gave him chills for some reason. "I see, so you do intend on helping Ram with collecting the ingredients, right?"

"Yeah, since it's my fault… But Sis, why do you have a scary look in your eyes?"

"Rest assured, it'll be easy. All of them can be hunted in the vicinity of the mansion."

Subaru wanted it to be just his imagination that he had heard ‘hunted’ instead of ‘collected’ being used for the ingredients.

In the end, it was decided that they would leave the next day to gather the ingredients for the special tea.

It was a hasty decision, but the burden on Ram’s body was accumulating with each passing day. That’s why it was better to be hasty. Fortunately, the ingredients for the tea could be found in the mountain forest near the mansion, so it was a daylong hike for Subaru.

“It would have been the best if Rem could go with you, but…”

“Oh well. You aren’t like Ram, you know. The mansion wouldn’t be able to function if you left for a day. It’s what they call being the right man for the job. I’m the right man, but I’m not sure if going to the mountain is the right job for me.”

It was so early in the morning that dawn had yet to arrive, and four figures had gathered at the entrance hall of the mansion. Subaru and Ram, who were about to depart to the mountain, and Emilia and Rem, who were seeing them off.

As mentioned earlier, Emilia and Rem were unable to accompany them due to the circumstances in the mansion. For that reason, Rem couldn’t stop worrying since last night, and even now, she was giving instructions to Ram.

“Sister, Sister. Please take care of Subaru in the mountains. And Subaru, don’t carelessly touch any suspicious-looking leaves there, you will get rashes. Be careful not to step on the moss on the rocks, it’s going to make you slip. And a spell to stop you from crying if you fall…”

“I’ll endure it! I won’t cry even if I fall! I’m not that much of a troublemaker!”

“Alright, alright, I get it, Rem. Ram needs to spit on Barusu’s knee if he cries, right?”

"Don't make it sound so dirty!"

Rem was filled with worry and had become overprotective, and even Ram's reply to her was perfunctory in the later half.

Emilia was next to them listening to their conversation and hiding her yawn with her hand. "I think it'll be fine since Ram is with you, but don't push yourself too hard. You probably won't encounter witchbeasts since there is a barrier, but watch out for the weather and the insects. It might swell up if you get stung."

"I'll let you gently stroke the bump, so it's alright. And though he'll be a great help, is it really ok to lend Puck to us?" asked Subaru, the pendant that Emilia usually wore around his neck.

The crystal stone giving off a green glow was where her contracted spirit—Puck—resided. It was a form of insurance for the two who were going to go into the mountains that Emilia had given to Subaru out of worry.

"I made a request last night, so it's fine. And even if Puck stays here, he'll just interrupt my studies as usual. So it's far more reassuring if he stays by your side."

"Well, well if that's the case, then I'll take you up on that and borrow your pet cat."

Subaru smiled wryly and flicked the pendant with his finger.

The spirit sleeping in there is supposed to come out whenever he wakes up. I'll rely on his powers on the mountain.

"I don't think anything bad will happen, but if something does happen, Puck will let me know. I'll immediately know where you are when he does, and Rem will definitely go help you, so don't worry."

"You know, it makes people feel guilty when they have to call for rescue after getting lost in the mountains, so I'll be careful."

Subaru thanked Emilia's thoughtfulness and tapped on the ground with the toe of his well-worn sneakers. He was dressed in a jersey, taking into account that he would be hiking in the mountains. If he threw in a bag to put the ingredients he collected into, the Backpacker Subaru would be complete.

“Barusu, are you ready? We’ll leave soon.”

“Yeah, yeah. As you wish, Sis.” Subaru responded to Ram, who spoke to him in her usual tone, then turned to the still-sleepy Emilia. “Alright. I’ll be going then. Rem, I hate troubling you like this, but please take care of everything today.”

“It’s alright. Your lunch is in the bag, so please eat it with my sister on the way there.”

“As a matter of fact, the lunch I made is in there too” Emilia added. “I bet you can guess which one it is.”

Subaru and Ram set off for the mountains in the morning mist, seen off by Emilia, who was in a slightly panicked mood, and Rem, who had a worried look on her face until the very end.

4

“And about the ingredients for the tea…what exactly do you need?” Subaru asked, looking at Ram’s small back after they entered the mountain road instead of the city road. They had left the mansion and veered away from the path leading to Earlham Village that they were used to taking.

“There are four ingredients that we’ll need. First, the Mileajia Flower. It’s a rare flower, but it’s in the flower garden where you flirted with Lady Emilia, Barusu.”

“Wh-Wh-Wha-why do you know about that?!”

“We can get it later since we know where it is. The second one is inside the forest and called the Baloe Mushroom, which only grows on the roots of a specific tree. You dry it and grind it into powder. It’s poisonous by the way.”

“It’s poisonous?! Is it safe to consume?!”

“It’s okay, they’ll make you immune instead. And the third one is hard to get: “the seed of a red fruit that only grows only at the top of a Bork Sun Tree.”

“Ooh, finally an ingredient that really seems hard to get.”

“A Bork Sun Tree is a really tall tree. Its fruit, apart from the seeds, is extremely poisonous, so much so that your fingers will melt if you touch them with your bare hands. Be mindful of that.”

“It’s poison again! Are you the type that dies if you don’t ingest poisonous substances?!”

“There’s only a fine line between poison and medicine, and too much of a medicinal effect can turn into poison. Ram forgot to tell you, but meleajia’s aren’t poisonous, although they are insectivorous.”

“My beautiful memories of my time with Emilia-tan are being defiled by insectivorous flowers!”

Speaking of which, it sends shivers down my spine when I think of the fact that the tea I thought tasted good was made up of 75% that. It might have a nice effect on her horn scar, but I wonder if it has any adverse effects on a normal body.

“Am I gonna be okay after drinking this?”

“That’s what you will be using your entire day to prove, Barusu.”

“Gaah! I was being used as a test subject without realizing it!”

“Ram is joking. The effect appears right after you drink it. You would have died during the night if it was something harmful.”

“That isn’t a joke! Is it really safe?!”

He opened his mouth and attempted to cough up the tea he drank yesterday, but it had already been absorbed into his system. Subaru prayed that nothing bad would happen and then shifted his attention to the topic of ingredients. “So, what’s the last one? I’m getting a bad feeling about it already.”

"The last one is…well. Ram will keep it a secret until it is found. Consider it your punishment."

"Can there be a greater punishment than drinking poison?"

"You drank it willingly, and you technically poisoned Lady Emilia as well."

His sarcasm having been replied to with sarcasm, Subaru became quiet and didn't say a word. Ram, who had been listing the names of poisonous things till now, was keeping the fourth ingredient under wraps.

The last ingredient could either be something totally normal or a horrifying substance so disgusting no one even wants to say its name. If these are the only two options, I don't even wanna know which of the two it is, I just hope with all my heart that it is the first one.

"But you know, going into the woods reminds me of the time we went looking for Rem."

"The time when you got bitten by dogs and were beautifully saved by Master Roswaal, right?"

"You aren't wrong about it being a miserable and beautiful memory, but we won't encounter witchbeasts this time, right? All I have in the gear department is my item bag and Meteor Knife."

"Meteor Knife" was the name that Subaru gave to the knife he used. Many vegetables had fallen prey to Meteor Knife, but it had never been useful as a weapon. It would be better to shamelessly flee rather than fight a witchbeast with it.

"Don't worry, nobody is counting on you to fight, Barusu. Ram doesn't want to be scolded by Rem later…Why should Ram get scolded?"

"No, it's that, I'm sorry. Oh, that's it! Roswaal annihilated all the Wolgarms in the forest, right? So why do we need to worry about witchbeasts?"

“Wolgarms aren’t the only witchbeasts in the forest. Rather, now that there’s a vacancy, shouldn’t other witchbeasts be fighting over it now? There shouldn’t be any witchbeasts more dangerous than a Wolgarm, but if you do encounter one, all that’ll be left of you are your bones, Barusu.”

“I know that without being told. I don’t want to have anything to do with witchbeasts ever again. Ah well, I don’t think I’ll ever encounter them again as long as I do my best to lead a quiet and decent life.”

“Ram wonders why, but she feels like your wish won’t come true, Barusu.”

“Why though?”

“It’s woman’s intuition.”

I wonder why the sound of ‘woman’s intuition’ is so compelling even though it’s just a hunch.

Subaru, feeling that things weren’t adding up, tilted his head at the doubt that came into his mind. “I was wondering, but what’s the difference between witchbeasts and normal animals?”

“—They are nothing alike.”

It wasn’t Ram who answered his question. The familiar voice had come from the glowing pendant on Subaru’s chest—from the glintstone from which light particles were overflowing, which then took on the form of a cat, materializing a spirit into the world.

The palm-sized kitten floated in front of Subaru’s eyes and spoke while giving his body a good stretch. “The difference between animals and witchbeasts when it comes to appearance is whether they have a horn or not. But there are animals with horns, so that’s not the only indicator, but witchbeasts always have a horn, you see. It’s better to keep that in mind.”

“Thank you for the explanation. And it seems like you woke up earlier than usual.”

“Lia told me to take good care of you. I can stay with you longer if I stay in my low energy mode. Leave the livening up so it doesn’t get scary to me.”

“That definitely isn’t the job Emilia-tan entrusted you with.”

Puck made a random statement with his chest puffed. The cat then sat on Subaru’s shoulder and poked his cheeks with his paw while swinging his tail.

“Great Spirit, Ram is sorry you had to accompany us all this way.”

“Hmm, it’s okayy. Lia probably wants to relax while her parent isn’t keeping an eye on her.”

“What are you, a caring gentleman? And it’s pretty unusual that even Ram uses formal language with Puck.”

“It’s just for show.”

“I don’t dislike such honesty and straightforwardness.”

A straightforward Ram, a forgiving Puck, and Subaru smiling wryly at that.

If I calm down and think about it, this is a really rare trio. A combination that has never occurred in the mansion.

“I hope we don’t turn into the foolish trio. Emilia-tan told you about today’s objective, right? I’m counting on you.”

“Yeah, rest assured. If it starts raining, don’t hesitate to use me as an umbrella.”

“That’s a really limited usage, and I’m going to get soaked considering your size.” Subaru sighed after imagining putting a wet cat on his head. “Hey Ram, I’m really starting to see a lot of animal tracks on this path, do you have an idea where the ingredients we are looking for are?”

“It’s a stupid question. How many times do you think Ram has entered the mountain to collect the ingredients?”

“I was worried that Rem did this considering the daily chores. By the way, do you have the location on the map so that even I can understand…”

“Let’s start by drawing a map of your own in your mind.”

“So, you mean I need to experience things first. Alright Boss.”

One of the ingredients was a secret, and on top of that, he was dependent on Ram’s memory for finding them all. He was obviously useless when it came to fighting, but he was also useless when it came to knowledge.

—Why was I even brought here? he wondered. “For carrying things and as comic relief…?”

“Oh, I won’t lose when it comes to livening things up. Ha-Ha, let’s see who’s better,” said Puck in a carefree tone as Subaru thought about his role, leaving aside who was responsible for the current situation.

That voice sounded too carefree, so he crushed Puck by tilting his head.

“Meoww.”

“Oh, it feels good. Take this, and that.”

“Meow, meow, meow.”

Although he wasn’t used to hiking, Subaru liked the sensation of the fur against his cheek, so he continued to hike up the mountain he wasn’t used to hiking while hearing Puck’s squeals.

“—Haaa.” Ram sighed in dismay at the sight of the two of them who lacked seriousness.

5

After that, the adventure of the trio was repeatedly beset by various problems. Subaru inadvertently touched a plant that caused rashes when touched, slipped on mossy rocks, carelessly cut his hand with

Meteor Knife while collecting the mushroom they were looking for, and lost his grip climbing the Bork Sun Tree and fell down. He was almost in tears after overcoming all of the problems that hounded him from all sides. If it weren't for Rem's spell, he might have broken down in tears by now due to the pain and feeling pathetic.

"How amazing of Rem to have given me advice about things that might happen…"

"Ram can't stop being disappointed that you made all of Rem's worries come true. How can you so precisely ignore the things she told you to watch out for?"

"Stop, don't make shit up like that! It's not like I just ignored her advice, I did my best, but it just wasn't good enough! Don't just judge the result, judge the effort too!"

"Results are everything."

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

Subaru, who was completely drenched, was getting first aid done on his wounds by Puck. He had no idea Puck could use healing magic, so it was surprising to him.

"I was the one who taught Lia spirit magic, you know? Well, I don't have much of an aptitude for healing magic, so I can't treat grave wounds like Betty, but I can do enough to lessen someone's pain."

"My bad. You have a time limit, yet I made you use your MP."

"It's fine. You're the one who's going to be in trouble if I disappear anyway."

"I have a feeling that you don't intend on pushing yourself in order to stay."

The scrapes on his knees and elbows now healed, Subaru gave a grateful high-five to the furball dancing in the air. Ram glanced at them while sitting next to a small stream that was too slow to be called a torrent. They couldn't drink from it without treating it first, but it was a perfect place to kick back and relax.

It was now a little after noon, and Ram suggested that they should have lunch there because of the location and the fact that she was hungry. Subaru had followed after her and had just so happened to get treated for his wounds.

“We’ve had a tough time until now, but at least we were able to grab some of the ingredients. We somehow got the mushroom and the seeds, and we know where the flowers are. It’s easier than I thought.”

“Ram told you it wouldn’t be dangerous. And Barusu, you are the one who’s been making things difficult today.”

“Argh, I can’t deny that…!”

Due to his continuous blunders so far, he had no room to refute Ram’s criticisms. He soaked and washed his wounded right hand in the flowing water and dusted his tracksuit off, barely returning it to its initial state. He washed Meteor Knife, which he had used for collecting mushrooms, in the river as well, and after resting for a bit —

“Since we are here, we need to note down this river properly.”

While looking at the flow of the river, Subaru took out a piece of thick paper and a crayon-like tool from his bag. The crayon was only available in one color, but it could produce exquisite drawings. He didn’t forget to add annotations here and there in Japanese.

“You have been doing that since we entered the mountain. What kind of game is it?’

“It’s not a game! It’s something that has proper worth!”

Subaru argued with Ram as she peeked at what was in his hand while rummaging through the lunchbox. He shoved the picture he had just drawn at Ram’s face. “Look, I’m mapping. People make maps when they go through unexplored lands. You won’t have to deal with any problems later if you know where things are, right?”

“That’s quite skilled of you. But would that map ever be used? Even if the ingredients for the tea run out, Ram would come here to collect them. Rem could do it too if Ram tells her where they are."

Ram started questioning the purpose of the map, and Subaru rolled the map up with a wry smile. She's right. It might be unnecessary for her since she's used to collecting the ingredients, but…

"It's just a hypothesis I came up with, but…"

"Hypothesis?"

"The tea runs out and it becomes so hard on you that you become bedridden. And Rem is away from the mansion taking care of some work when you need her. Roswaal is somewhere else too. You don't have anyone that you can rely on! If something like that happens, then even I can collect the ingredients if I have this."

It's something that can only be used in the case of an extreme emergency, but…

"It would really put me at ease if we have this map around just in case something like that happens."

It's all good if it never gets used, but in the case it does come in handy, it'll all be thanks to my decision to make this map. People make rescue tools with the thought that it would be better if they never have to get used. Such a contradiction exists for all of them.

"…" Ram quieted down for a moment at Subaru's reply, a serious look on her face. It seemed like she was slightly surprised, and he scratched his head at her rare reaction.

The thing he had just said might be something embarrassing depending on how it was received.

"We-Well, anyway, if we have this then I feel like I would be able to make it back alive in case I get lost! Nothing is more important than staying alive, so it'll be worth it to take precautions."

Subaru started talking fast in order to hide his embarrassment and put the rolled-up map into his hip pocket.

It needs to be written down properly, including the things I've written in Japanese, once I return to the mansion. It’s my first time mapping, but I think I did a good job if I do say so myself.

The fact that he was simply quite skilled at things was a strength that Natsuki Subaru never knew he had.

“Now, let’s eat. If we don’t hurry up, my stomach is gonna shrivel up,” Subaru said with a clap of his hands, resetting the mood.

“—You’re right. Yes, let’s do that,” Ram replied, agreeing with Subaru’s suggestion. She unwrapped the lunch and paused for a moment in thoughtful silence. “Since your consideration reached Ram’s heart for a change, let her reward you for that.”

“Huh, what do you mean by that? It’s making me feel restless, and frankly, it’s only giving me a bad feeling, so I’m gonna have to decline.”

“Oh, it seems like Ram’s old horn scar is starting to ache. Ram feels like she might have a fever.”

“Don’t take my conscience hostage! Alright! Come at me! I’ll take whatever you dish out!”

“It isn’t something to make such a fuss about. Ram just thought of giving you the biggest one.”

Ram showed the reserved Subaru the rice ball in her left hand. It was around the size of a child’s fist, making him feel relieved once he saw it.

“Man, you surprised me there. I was scared of what it was going to be. That’s an acceptable size, or rather, a normal size.”

“Ram supposes so. Well then, take it.”

And then, as Subaru was feeling relieved, Ram presented the real one she had been hiding in her right hand. Its size, which seemed to be around the size of a child’s head, put him at a loss for words.

“By the way, the shape isn’t that great, so it was definitely made by Lady Emilia.”

“I kind of knew that! Damn it, what’s with that ‘As a matter of fact, the lunch I made is in there too’ when you don’t even intend on hiding it! You had zero intention of hiding it!”

I figured she made this next to Rem, but I wonder if that was actually the case. If this was the result of her making it while standing next to her, then the thought of her showing off her cooking skills to me someday scares the living daylights out of me.

Subaru looked at Puck like he was his last ray of hope, but the spirit shook his head at his gaze. “Lia is cute. I think everything can be forgiven because of that.”

“Damn it, I understand that feeling!”

Subaru decided to confront it head-on after seeing Puck look at him with a distant, resigned look in his eyes. The taste of a simple rice ball will be the same regardless of who makes it.

Just to be sure, he tasted Rem’s rice ball first, taking in all of her considerate feelings, and then challenged Emilia’s.

“—It’s heavy.”

The mass on his lap was overwhelming. So much so that Subaru’s perception of what a rice ball was supposed to look like was turned on its head.

He gulped and put his hand on the wrapping in order to take a look at it—

“There’s another wrapper beneath this one?”

He unwrapped the paper after making up his mind, but what he found was another sheet of wrapping paper beneath it. It was probably because she made it too big and couldn’t keep it all together with only one sheet. So as a countermeasure, she wrapped several sheets around it and succeeded in holding it all together.

It’s like sealing an extremely powerful demon behind layer upon layer of barriers.

“No, what kind of thing is this?”

Subaru was dumbfounded by his own thoughts, then unwrapped it and checked what was inside. Feeling impatient because the actual rice ball wasn’t showing up, he unwrapped the sheets one after another—

“““—Ah.””“ Three voices overlapped, including Ram and Puck’s, who were watching with bated breath.

The moment Subaru tried to peel off the stuck wrapper, the rice ball started losing its balance on his lap, then fell off and started rolling away. That round-yet-not-round object bounced on the ground and rolled off just like that.

“Wait, wait, wait!”

Subaru hastily got to his feet and chased after the rolling rice ball. The situation was just like the famous old tale, The Rolling Rice Ball. It was almost a perfect reenactment. Before the rice ball could enter the slope and accelerate, Subaru caught the wrapper with a fingertip. He was relieved by that, but in the next moment—

“Oh?”

His feet suddenly fell out beneath him, and he was flung into the air. He looked down and saw that the slope went down at a sharp angle. The two words “slip” and “fall” came to mind.

Subaru was impressed and growled at the accurate reenactment of the folk tale. Of course, in a bad way.

“Barusu—!”

“Dababababababababa—!”

While hearing Ram’s panicked voice, Subaru rolled headfirst down the steep slope while holding the rice ball to his chest. While thinking that the only lucky thing was that the ground was soft thanks to the grass growing on it—

6

—And finally, the story has returned to the beginning where Subaru and Puck were travelling together.

“I thought I was going to die when I fell and started rolling…”

“I thought the same. But I’m glad you didn’t die. And that we were able to contact the pink-haired girl.”

“It helped out a lot since you can fly…it’s alright if you lift me up and fly, you know?”

“I think it would just make your hair fall out.”

“Why would you fly while holding my hair?! There are other ways to do it!”

While having such a conversation, Puck and Subaru were aiming to meet up with Ram. Puck had immediately flown down after Subaru tumbled down the slope to check whether he was dead or alive. Subaru had caught him there and had him use lesser spirits to communicate back and forth with Ram about the rendezvous point. Ram insisted that she could just make her way down the slope, but Subaru, who had done enough rolling that day, dismissed the idea by saying it was too dangerous.

“We’ll be able to meet up if we walk along the slope. I can’t deliberately make her do something dangerous.”

“I told her something like that through gestures. Do you want to hear the reply?”

“Hah!” Subaru exclaimed, imitating Ram’s sneering.

“Woah, you’re good,” Puck remarked, as if impressed. “By the way.” The kitten tilted his head at Subaru, who was cringing. “Were you able to eat the rice ball that Lia made?”

“Yeah, the thing inside the wrapping was safe. Apart from the impact of how it looked, it tasted just fine. The salty taste felt special too when I thought about how it was squeezed by Emilia-tan’s hands…”

“Maybe I should join in next time when they make them again. Are you confident that you’ll get mine right?”

“The punchline would be that the rice ball with a lot of fur in it would be yours, huh?”

Their pointless conversation continued, but that was just something Puck did so that Subaru wouldn't get worried. They had been walking along the slope for two hours, separated from Ram—after they had told her where to go—but they kept going deeper into the forest where it enveloped them in an even deeper darkness.

I might have made the wrong decision. Such a bad thought gave rise to a cycle of negative thoughts.

"—Subaru, stop." Just as Subaru let out a long sigh of exhaustion, Puck pulled on his ear from his shoulder.

Subaru held his breath at that sensation and became tense. Immediately, an unpleasant sound grated against his eardrums. It was a sound that intimidated other creatures, a sound that was physiologically unpleasant. The source of that sound slowly appeared in front of them from the bushes. It had slimy, wet scales growing on its green body, and its mouth, which had a row of sharp teeth, was making an intimidating sound, as if it was sucking blood. However, the most notable features were the two pairs of red eyes that were glowing in the dark.

A two-headed snake—a snake with two heads on its body—was glaring at Subaru. Short, white horns were growing from its heads.

"Is…it the kind of snake that disguises itself as a witchbeast?"

"That's an interesting interpretation, but that's a witchbeast. It's a Two-Headed Snake. It's quite ferocious and is poisonous."

The witchbeast in front of his eyes didn't have two heads splitting from its torso as an extension of it. It was far more simple. There was another head on its tail. It was indeed a two-headed snake, true to its name, but…

"It's not a two-headed snake but more like a buttheaded snake? Where does it poop from?"

"Witchbeasts turn the things they eat into mana, so they don't poop basically."

"So they're like idols. And it seems like they're also picking a fight with the ecosystem.”

Although Subaru appeared to be relaxed, his instincts were screaming at him to be wary of the two-headed snake in front of him. The witchbeast was around two meters long and was around ten meters away. It could cover that much of a distance in a single breath.

“I didn’t ask, but is today’s Puck the type that can fight?”

“A-ha, a witchbeast like that is a piece of cake for me. But I don’t have Lia’s assistance, so I won’t be able to talk to you after I take it down.”

“It’s better than dying, so please do that, teacher.”

“I guess it can’t be helped. I won’t let you down then…oh.”

While they were talking, the color of the two-headed snake’s body and eyes changed. The witchbeast changed into an aggressive color and then immediately twisted its huge body and tried to leap at Subaru—

“Furaaa!”

In the next moment, a blade of wind sliced through the two-headed snake, turning it into rings of flesh. It died in front of the surprised Subaru without even so much as a death throe. He witnessed the death of the witchbeast as it spewed out blue-green blood, and then looked at Puck. The cat shook his head.

And then… “Ram knew that her woman’s intuition was right.”

The one who had come out from the bush that the witchbeast had come out from and made a sarcastic remark the moment they did was Ram.

After meeting up again after several hours, Ram ended up saving Subaru, who was in dire straits, with a wand in hand.

“Haa, thanks Ram.”

“Did your map come in handy during your hike?”

“Sis, the joy of our reunion was short-lived, but it’s wonderful how you never miss the opportunity to add the spice known as sarcasm.”

Ram sneered at Subaru, who had sat down in relief, and then went near the carcass of the two-headed snake after putting away her wand. As she carefully observed the carcass of the witchbeast, Subaru said, “He-Hey, what are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Ram is doing what she came here to do. Although it went according to Ram’s plan, you did a good job, Barusu.”

While saying that, Ram cut open the body of the two-headed snake that had been sliced into rings with a blade—right in the center—and tore off some kind of white crystal from it.

“This is a pure mana crystal that forms inside the body of witchbeasts. It’s bigger than expected.”

“So that’s the fourth ingredient? It was inside a venomous snake. Man, that’s worse than I imagined.”

As Ram satisfyingly retrieved the ingredient, Subaru felt disappointed that the worse of his two predictions ended up being right. It was obvious why Ram was keeping quiet. If he had known witchbeasts were involved, he would have been more cautious, and—

“Hah! Now I understand why I was brought here! You were planning on using my ability to attract witchbeasts to gather the snakes, weren’t you?”

“You are unusually sharp today. Thanks to you, the search for witchbeasts that would normally take a few days or so was completed in less than half a day. Ram commends you for being useful.”

“You…”

Even Subaru felt angry at Ram for being unapologetic.

Subaru and Ram were the two who went into the witchbeast forest together to rescue Rem. She obviously knew of his ability and how dangerous it could be. And if she still made the witchbeast cross the barrier despite knowing that and used him as witchbeast bait, it was like getting stabbed in the back—

“No, wait? When did it cross the barrier?”

Subaru realized the prerequisite for it was strange and then looked at Puck. Even if he has a carefree personality, he is a spirit at the end of the day. Could it be that this cat isn’t aware of the barrier?

“Hmmm, did you not notice it? Subaru, it’s—”

“Great Spirit.”

Puck was about to address Subaru’s suspicion, but Ram interrupted it by calling out to him. Subaru felt like something was off from their exchange, but Ram ignored it and started walking. But she suddenly lost her footing, and…

“Hey, Ram!”

Subaru quickly grabbed the groggy Ram’s arm and supported her falling body and was shocked by how insanely hot it was. Her forehead and the nape of her neck were drenched in sweat when he took a look at her.

“It’s just like the time when we were fighting the Wolgarms’ and you used too much mana! Hey, Ram!”

“It’s not a big, deal… Let go of Ram’s hand.”

She was being more stubborn than stout. Not letting her get in even so much as a grumble, Subaru picked her up just like last time. Her body was light as usual. And it kept getting hotter.

“Lecherous.’

“Shut up and just be a piece of luggage! Hey, Puck! Throw that ingredient into the bag too! And after that, lead me to the Bork Sun Tree. The map will come handy…you know the way, right?!”

"Seems like my evil plan got exposed. Alright, alright, I'll do that."

Subaru started running after Puck as he flew ahead of him while carrying the reluctant-looking Ram. Running without regard for his surroundings, his feet and shoulders got scratched by twigs, bruising him.

Subaru ran with several scratches on his skin. It would happen to anyone who ran without regard for their surroundings. So, it was only natural that Ram's white skin had many red marks as well.

7

"In other words, she didn't intend on using you as bait to begin with. She just needed you to walk near the barrier and lure out an appropriate witchbeast. But since you chased after the rice ball and left the barrier, you complicated things."

Subaru and the rest had returned to the mansion at around dinnertime, just like they had declared that morning.

Needless to say, the three returned covered in wounds, so they did not get to enjoy a peaceful dinner after that.

"I think she was trying really hard to find you using Clairvoyance up until you met up. So I think that was the reason why she was so worn out. She'll never admit it though."

"And why were you helping Ram out?"

"It's because I was asked to do so. It's not like I was actually cooperating with her since I just had to protect you when you got into trouble. It was just an extension of Lia's request, you see. Well, you got into trouble because of her rice ball, so I'd like to apologize to you about that on her behalf."

The spirit who had helped him navigate even past his working hours disappeared after telling him the truth.

Night had long since fallen outside the window, and the spirit who had worked overtime would definitely sleep in tomorrow. Subaru also really wanted to hit the hay, but the nearest bed was unfortunately occupied by someone who was already sound asleep, so his wish was unlikely to come true.

“I won’t be able to relax until I at least complain lil’,” said Subaru next to Ram, who was sleeping on the bed, as he scratched his head.

The mansion had gone into an uproar when Subaru returned with an unconscious Ram. Especially Rem, who was in such a great panic due to the unusual situation that Emilia became more dependable.

She healed Ram’s abrasions, wiped her body, dressed her, and carried her to the bed. Subaru got interrogated—leaving out the part about Emilia’s rice ball—and explained what happened and gave the ingredients they had collected to Rem. The tea was being made by now.

Though Subaru had been told to rest, he had come here instead of returning to his room. I at least need to vent my pent-up frustrations at her when she wakes up.

And then—

“Lecherous.” That was the first thing Ram said after opening her eyes slightly and seeing Subaru standing by her bedside.

“…Just saying, but Rem gave me permission to be here.”

Subaru gave a wry smile at Ram being like she usually was, then pounded his chest. “As you can see, we got back to the mansion in one piece. I gave the ingredients we collected to Rem. By the way, my map was a huge help in getting back here. You can never be too prepared, right?”

In fact, the simple map Subaru made had an extraordinary effect on things. He made Puck lead him to the Bork Sun Tree that stood out like a sore thumb, then went straight to the mansion by following the map. If it weren’t for the map, we might be spending the night in the forest right now.

“Well, if that had happened, Rem would have rushed there after Puck informed her about that… If you’ve learned your lesson, you need to admit that maps are useful. And trust your companions. Don't use them as bait without permission."

"…But that was the most efficient way, wasn't it? If you want to complain then complain."

"Not complaining is my way of complaining. Since that seems to work better on you two sisters."

Ram was looking sideways at Subaru while resting her head on a pillow, her cheeks slightly stiffened. Subaru grinned at her reaction and felt satisfied at the situation.

"Puck told me everything. It pissed me off, but I'll leave it alone."

"It's a commonly held belief that spirits are righteous and tightlipped, but after getting to know that Great Spirit, Ram has had second thoughts about that. Ram will never count on him again."

"Don't talk bad about him, since his touristness saved our lives… And I'll go get Rem now. I need to tell her that you've woken up."

Subaru shrugged his shoulders at Ram, who was complaining about Puck.

"Wait, Barusu. Ram has a request…no, an order."

"Don't correct it in a way that saps the motivation right out of me. So what do you want from me?"

"There should be a white packet in the back of the desk drawer there. Brew tea with that for Ram. For the two of us."

Following Ram's instructions, he opened the drawer and found a packet tucked in the back. And the thing inside was—

"Hey, isn't this your special tea…"

"It's only natural to save some just in case. Now go."

Subaru then went to the dining room at Ram's order, an order that held enough pressure behind it to demand his obedience. He felt weak and wondered what all the hard work today was for. Once there, he boiled the water and prepared the tea.

Come to think of it, most of the work in the mansion falls in Rem's domain, but brewing tea is the only thing I learned from Ram. She is very picky about tea.

"There, I'm back, miss. It's the snake liver tea you ordered."

"It wasn't made with a snake's liver. It was made with a dog's intestine."

'That doesn't make much of a difference."

Contrary to the warm aroma, the ingredient had been obtained through cruel means. Subaru poured the tea into two cups and handed one to Ram, who had sat up. Subaru also grabbed a cup and sat down in a chair.

It smells really good. The smell makes it hard to believe that it's made from powdered mushrooms, seeds of a poisonous fruit, an insectivorous flower, and a crystal from inside the body of a witchbeast—

"I know I'm the one who brewed it, but it's hard to get in the mood to drink it when you know what it's made of… Anyway, how come you call it tea when there aren't any tea leaves in it?"

"Ram processed all of the ingredients together and mixed them with the tea she likes to improve the flavor. It's classified as tea, so don't worry," she said, before tilting the cup without hesitation.

Having no choice, Subaru did the same. The heat and the aroma passed over his tongue and overflowed out of his nose. The rich flavor of the tea made it easy to drink, so much so that he had a hard time believing that a dog's intestine and various poisons had been added to it.

"I wonder if it's like this more due to my tea brewing skills than the quality of the tea itself?"

"Don't be silly. A lot of flavor has definitely been lost because you brewed it so poorly. You didn't use the correct water temperature, and neither did you pour it properly."

The harsh feedback put a damper on Subaru's excitement, and he kept drinking it with a bitter face. Even though it was easy to drink, he couldn't bring himself to like tea. His tongue was childish as usual.

"Aah, I want to drink soda. I wonder if I can make fizzy drinks somehow…"

"Ram has never heard of that drink before. If you know how to make it, then you can ask Rem."

"It's the same as mayonnaise in that the ingredients are a bit vague. No, it's even more than that."

The taste that made him feel like he was back in his distant homeland—they went through a lot of trouble to recreate it. Fresh eggs, good quality oil, vinegar, and salt and pepper to adjust the taste. And lastly, patience. The mayonnaise that was successfully recreated through much trial and error with Rem and Ram was now stored in Roswaal Manor's kitchen. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that bringing mayonnaise to this world had been Subaru's greatest achievement since he was a mayonnaise addict.

"But I'm just a mere mayonnaise addict. So being unparalleled in another world using otherworldly knowledge is a pie in the sky."

"Ram thinks you are babbling nonsense again, but she understood that Barusu is useless when it comes to Barusu's wishes."

"It's quite a figure of speech that I'm useless to myself, though you aren't wrong."

Subaru gave a wry smile at what Ram had pointed out.

She's right about that, and I should say that it's frustrating.

Ram squinted at Subaru for having such an attitude. And then she tilted the cup and moistened her tongue and lips with tea. "Ram doesn't know what people in your homeland like drinking, but not knowing the taste of tea is such a great loss in life.”

“It’s not that I don’t know how it tastes, it’s just that it tastes like leaves.”

“You may as well be dead if you can’t enjoy drinking tea.”

“Is tea the only thing that matters in life?!”

Ram sighed at his surprised reply and turned her head sideways to look at him with her pink eyes. “That’s right.” She paused. “You’re so pitiful like that, so…pay close attention to how Ram brews tea from now on.”

“…”

She declared that she’d brew the tea herself next time and quietly brought the cup to her mouth. Subaru felt like his cheeks were strangely relaxed after hearing her words.

I don’t know why, and she hasn’t even apologized about today.

But he felt like it was fine for now. It was comfortable yet weird, with no arguments over differences, no apologies in order to make up, and no promises being exchanged.

If our relationship is like this, I can look forward to joining her for tea again, even though I don’t even like tea.

—The scent of tea was drifting in the air, and it was a day where Subaru thought like that.

Operation Kokkuri

1

The hall is covered in tension.

They watched over the situation, nobody being able to take a breath. There were three people around the table in the center exchanging looks at each other. These three people were Subaru, who was sweating from the forehead, Beatrice, who had a wrinkled brow from her frowning, and then Puck, who quivered his ears, listening attentively.

Emilia and Rem had serious looks on their face as they watched over the situation with eyes, indicating that they were anxious and confused. However, Subaru had no composure to take care of their anxiety right now.

Subaru: “Sup with that pale face, Beatrice? If you strain yourself so much, you’d even make Hollows want to run away.”

Beatrice: “You really just said that, I suppose. I’m not straining myself. There’s no reason at all for me to get serious. Look at yourself. Your nostrils are flaring.”

Puck: “Now now, let’s calm down you two. It’s only a game, you shouldn’t get so serious.”

Beatrice responded to Subaru’s provocation with a rageful smile that didn’t suit her childish face. Puck was the only one that stayed composed upon seeing the two rivaling each other with spirit while touching his whiskers, brushing the situation off as the usual.

Beatrice: “You’re not wrong, Bubby. …However, this is more of a match, rather than just a game. I musn’t lose to the likes of humans.”

Puck: “Betty sure is an obstinate person. How about it, Subaru. If you can be the adult here this one time and give…”

Subaru: “Puck.”

Puck tried to calm those two down as an outsider. Subaru cut him off and continued to speak with a serious face as Puck tilted his face slightly to the side in doubt.

Subaru: “—If you’re gonna talk about giving in and not giving in, you should untense your tail first.”

“…”

Subaru: “If you can’t do that, then you’re no different than me and Beako. Don’t you think so?”

Puck: “Jeez, Subaru sure is a troubling one too…”

Puck folded his little arms and let out a sigh in response to Subaru’s low toned questioning. After that, the spirit that had an appearance of a cat looked straight through Subaru with his round eyes.

Puck: “—It seems like I also have to play against you guys with all I’ve got.”

An overwhelmingly intimidating wind blows against him. It seemed as if Subaru was going to bend backwards from the feeling of oppression. However, he frantically puts up with that wind, lets out a fearless laugh, and then looked at his two opponents.

Emilia: “Why has it comes to this…”

Inside of the devastating wind of that decision, Emilia whispers these words, seemingly with chagrin, as she watches over those 3 individuals.

Emilia puts her hand on her chest. Her blueish purple eyes were filled with gloom. To her side, Rem gently placed her hand onto Emilia’s slender shoulder. Rem shakes her head at Emilia, who looked over her shoulder.

Rem: “They cannot be stopped. We can no longer do anything but watch.”

Emilia: “Why is it like this. They were having that much fun up until a little while ago, and yet…”

Rem: “Because they have something they cannot give up—”

In response to Emilia sinking into sorrow, Rem grumbled weakly, seemingly doing so with a sigh. When Emilia opened her eyes wide in astonishment from hearing that sound, Rem let out a nod while gazing at the three individuals.

Rem: “Subaru-kun and the others surely have something they cannot give up. Thus, occasionally they have to be like that and collide with each other …perhaps.”

Emilia: “That’s why they collide with each other like that?”

Rem: “I think so.”

With that, Rem did not look away from the three people with serious expressions at the table. Seeing Rem do that, Emilia also put her hands together to pray and closed her eyes.

She prays, “I pray that these three come to a conclusion without hurting anyone”.

As for who she was praying to, in this situation it would be—

Emilia: “—Please, Kokkuri-sama.”

Emilia calls out a name of an unfamiliar spirit and quietly offered her prayer.

They surround the table. The three individuals facing each other—those three spread the surrounded table with white paper. On it were several characters and digits, along with a single coin placed on it.

Those three individuals put hands and a tail on the coin and continued to glare at each other endlessly.

They included their prayers with faces that looked so serious that they would even disturb a descended god and—

Subaru: “Just something that came to my mind, but how do people treat ghosts here?”

Suddenly, Subaru asks this question at the place where they sat together after breakfast.

All the members of the mansion gathered together. Time for exchanging words was valuable at this one place. As of the other day, topics would generally be talked about at this time—topics being things like the matter of Rem being given a whole day off.

Today was no exception. Everyone looked at Subaru, who let out a meager question.

Ram: “Rem, Rem. Subaru said something again.”

Rem: “Nee-sama, Nee-sama. That’s something that makes him Subaru-kun.”

Beatrice: “I don’t see that, I suppose. Clearly it’s just him being a burden with a troubling matter.”

Beatrice’s followed up with the interaction of the sisters, which was an interaction he was already completely familiar with, as she let out a sigh.

Roswaal: “You’ve come up with something interesting again, huh.”

This person sitting in the seat of highest honor opposes the group of girls’ reactions and clapped his hands cheerfully.

He had clown make-up and wore a striking outfit, along with a personality of tending to say eccentric remarks. He was an oddball who had a type of perception for everything, differing from the ordinary person. This was Roswaal L Mathers.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun brings in a fresh topic everyday, so it doesn’t get boring. Wearisome days prevent people from growing up. I’ve also been taught that stagnation is the most abominable offense out there.”

Subaru: “It’s not that big of a deal, but from now on give me some hope for my growth.”

Subaru said words that couldn’t be labeled as cynicism or his true thoughts and roughly looked over the people in the dining room.

Subaru: “So going back to my initial question, I’d like to talk about ghosts. Well, to be honest, I’m a type of viewer that doesn’t really believe in them, so I’ve been set on ignoring the summer spirit TV shows.”

Subaru was not the type to be afraid of psychic phenomenon, though he did put aside his previous declaration.

With this, Subaru, who was unexpectedly a realist, was negative towards occult phenomenons. He could not believe in things without having real experiences of them. That was his theory. It was a pretty typical idea for young men of the present.

Puck: “They were brought into a different world, so I believe in them. Also, I’ve seen Kappa when I was little, so Il believe in them because of that too. To the side of a dirty river, a middle aged man with dark green skin was washing dishes. That was Kappa.”

Emilia: “Umm, Puck? I don’t really get what Kappa is, but…well, what’s this ghost thing Subaru is talking about in the first place?”

Puck’s observation, something that nobody believed because it happened when he was young, was a misfire even in this different world.

Subaru had his shoulders dropped, but the person who made a displeased face at him was Emilia, the person who sat in the seat next to him. She put one of her fingers on her face and tilts her head in a lovely manner.

Emilia: “I’ve never heard about ghosts, but…are they some type of sweet candy or something?”

Subaru: “Your anticipations for dessert came out bluntly, huh. However, you don’t know about ghosts? Seriously? I think of them as spiritual type of things—well I wonder if that gives you an image.”

Emilia: “Ghosts, Kappa, Renkon…are these words that only Subaru knows of again?”

Subaru: “Putting the first two things aside, the last one is definitely something I saw in a bento.”

The unfamiliar words caused Emilia to have a troubled face. Subaru judged that it seemed that she truly had clue about what those words meant and turned around to Rem.

Subaru: “Rem do you know what ghosts are? They are beings that have translucent bodies, wear white clothes, and fly into the sky while having a triangular decoration attached to their heads.”

Rem: “Nope, unfortunately I also don’t know about them. …If I come across a person like that, I’d be scared.”

Ram: “I agree with Rem. Freaks who fly in the air? Haa, I’d get knocked out if I was half asleep and saw one, Barusu.”

Subaru: “Lately I’ve been catching sight of that Roswaal-san flying into the air. What do you think of that?”

Ram: “He does something that an ordinary person can’t do at a moment’s notice, so I think it’s precious. Barusu, you show some respect too”

In response to Ram shamelessly honoring the Head, Subaru becomes weary and looked at Roswaal, the person in question. He lets out a shrug in response to his glance and

Roswaal: “That expectant look troubles me. Alright, guess I can hold you next time and we can fly into the sky together. Would that satisfy you?”

Subaru: “Didn’t understand a single thing you say. That’s what I’ve assessed. “

Roswaal: “I wasn’t serious. Moreover, ghosts and spirits…those things aren’t talked about much in Lugunica. As far as I know, those words may have been used among Kararagi city-state people, perhaps. I'm also not very informed on the specifics of ghosts, but I feel like I've heard about them several times."

Emilia: "Huh, so they say it at Kararagi. Now that I think about it, Subaru is abnormally informed on weird things. If that's the case, then it wouldn't be weird for you to be abnormally informed on Kararagi too."

Emilia nods many times with an enlightened expression at Roswaal, who shed some of his knowledge on the topic.

On one hand Subaru was happy about Emilia's trust, but on the other he was bothered by how she treated his understanding as abnormal. However, Subaru put that aside for now and cocked his head in puzzlement at the lack of responses around him.

In his original world, the concept of ghosts was something that was universally common knowledge, not considering about whether people believed in them or not. The idea of ancestral spirits was something that was established long ago to an extent.

The deceased and the living, bonds and spirits—that concept of life and death—these felt like things that could not be separated.

Subaru: "Ah, could it be because spirits are here? Now that I think about it, the light of the spirit you can see at night at the garden is ghost-like. It's damn ghost-like."

Emilia: "—? You mean spirits are ghosts? I thought spirits were spirits."

Roswaal: "No no, Emilia-sama. The ghosts and spirits Subaru-kun is talking about are the same as these things called "Hollow"."

"…"

With the sound of a click, Subaru felt the atmosphere freeze.

Emilia stiffens with a smile at Roswaal's words. However, she was not the only one. Rem and Ram of course became firm, along with Beatrice who had an indifferent face, indicating that it was no concern of hers.

Subaru widens his eyes at the girls' reactions and asks a question to Roswaal like that.

Subaru: "Ummm, what are Hollows?"

Roswaal: "They are said to be passed away life's thoughts and regrets left behind in the world for the living, unable to return to Od Laguna, continuing to drift about in the realm of the dead… that's where these existences are, perhaps."

Subaru: "Ah, that's definitely a ghost. I see. So they're called Hollows, huh."

However, contrary to the two men who understood this existence, the group of girls were greatly disturbed. Emilia's expression was especially pale. She touched Subaru's arm gently with her trembling fingers.

Emilia: "Th-The ghosts Subaru was talking about are Hollows…?"

Subaru: "Seems like they were. But I've come to understand it thanks to that, though it's not like it's a big deal or anything."

Emilia: "You said it's not a big deal, so why did you talk about Hollows? That's weird. Surely it's because…I got it. Subaru saw a Hollow. You saw one in the mansion. That's why you suddenly became interested in Hollows. I don't like this. Why did you talk about it like that? If I didn't become aware of it, then I could've gone on without knowing about them. That's cruel. Subaru-kun, you idiot. So cruel. Subaru is planning on dragging us into this because he's scared himself—!"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan has quite the persecution complex."

Emilia started to talk rapidly, violently shaking Subaru's shoulder, being unable to hold back her emotions.

Subaru manages to let out a kind smile at Emilia while being surprised by the force from her shaking his shoulder.

Subaru: “It’ll be okay, calm down! Even if I were to get someone involved with damage from occult stuff, Emilia-tan would be the last one I’d involve. Beako would be the first sacrifice.”

Beatrice: “Why’d you bring me up there? I don’t understand, I suppose!”

Emilia: “Really? Are you being seriously serious? You’ll make Beatrice your first sacrifice?”

Beatrice: “You too. What are you saying with your confusion?! I want to beat up the both of you, I suppose.”

Rem: “That’s right. I don’t get this. The person that Subaru-kun should depend on first for this is me. Beatrice-sama should not be used for this!”

Beatrice: “Why must I be insulted like this?! This is shameless, I suppose!”

There was Emilia, becoming confused and speaking of choices that she’d normally be unable to speak of, and there was Beatrice, who wouldn’t be quiet. When the self-recommending Rem participated in this war, the discussion turned into complete chaos.

Under these circumstances of not knowing if that chaos would settle down, Emilia looks at Subaru with wet eyes.

Emilia: “Is Subaru going to inform us on Hollows? You’re gonna tell us about how you know tons of things about them. Like how you are with stars.”

Subaru: “That’s not true. At best, all I know of is stuff like Okiku-san’s Banchousarayashiki, where she breaks plates and had remaining regrets, Oiwa-san, who flipped out in a grudge against her husband who betrayed her, or Miminashihouichi, who had her ears torn off because she forgot to write on them.”

Emilia: “Awwa-awawawa”

Roswaal: “Subaru-kuuun. Emilia-sama is going to faint, so let’s stop here.”

The frightened Emilia's cuteness caused Subaru to unconsciously get carried away with his entertainment. He gets rebuked by Roswaal and gently tapped Emilia's shoulder while having a wry smile.

Subaru: "Just kidding, just kidding. I've never seen Hollows in this mansion. The only mysterious experience I had was with Kokkuri, a once in a lifetime…scratch that, because Hollows are unrelated to it."

Emilia: "Bu-But Subaru…weren't things like Kappa and Renkon talked about earlier?"

Subaru: "Kappa is a middle aged man who lives at a river with a face indicative of unhealthiness, and Renkon is a vegetable. "

He bows his head at his childhood memories. Emilia was more precious than ever right now.

It was worth it for Emilia to try her best to calm down, as her chaos was now slowly settling down. Then the Emilia who somehow managed to calm down blushens and

Emilia: "Hey, I think Subaru has the wrong idea. I don't get frightened by Hollows at all. It's just that I'm a little bad at dealing with them."

Subaru: "By a little you mean very?"

Emilia: "A little means a little! God, Subaru you idiot! You bully!"

Emilia was angry, but she was certainly not persuasive with her words. Still continuing to calm down the angry Emilia, Subaru turns around to face Rem and the others.

Subaru: "Come to think of it, your guys' facial expressions have been tough. Could it be…?"

Ram: "What do you mean by "Could it be"? If you don't include the subject in that, then I can't understand you. Barusu, a person poor at asking questions, has missed his chance through his own foolishness. This conversation is over."

Subaru: "If you make such a blunt response like that, then you already know the subject!"

Ram clicked her tongue at Subaru's reference, although she was three times more bitter than usual. Rem, who quietly went in front of her sister to protect her, shaked her head at Subaru.

Rem: "You're wrong, Subaru-kun. Nee-sama doesn't get frightened by Hollows. However, just having these circumstances being different than not having an attack land on someone after striking… Rem also feels the same way."

Subaru: "You're saying I have bad chemistry in battle?! You don't have to talk with an assumption that I'd get knocked out!"

Rem: "It is Nee-sama's and my duty to fight in order to protect people. Don't worry, even if a Hollow were to appear, I would put my life on the line and protect Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "It was just hypothetical talk, and yet the topic has come to this."

It started out as a casual conversation, and yet it turned into a talk about readiness when faced with awfully serious moments. Unlike Emilia, who got scared from theoretical ideas, Rem and the others didn't look cute with their awareness of how they were bad at dealing with ghosts.

Subaru: "Then Beako making a sullen face means that you're scared too I guess. Are you able to go to the bathroom by yourself a night?"

Beatrice: "Cut it o-stop treating me like a young girl like that. There's no reason for me to be afraid of something suspicious like Holo in the first place, I suppose."

Subaru: "Then why are you pissed off? Something get caught in your teeth?"

Beatrice: "Don't you anger me with something stupid! …The reason why I show displeasure towards Hollows is so that I can encloud that really precious existence this way, I suppose."

Subaru: “Really precious…ah! So that’s why…”

Subaru understood the source for Beatrice’s anger and nodded his head affirmatively.

Subaru: “Spirits and ghosts give a similar feeling after all, huh. I’ve come to understand your irritation too.”

Beatrice: “It’s irritating for the real and suspicious Hollows to look down upon all the spirits.”

Beatrice folds her arms in displeasure with a face indicating that she damaged her self-respect.

Subaru also thought of this earlier, but mistaking spirits for Hollows was a case in point that made his hypothesis probable. Or rather, perhaps Subaru was the only one who reasoned that ghosts existed because spirits did.

Emilia: “—! Then Puck is a Hollow?! Noo! Even when I believed in you!”

Puck: “You call me, then here I am. Nya nya nya nya nyaaan! … What the. Lia, what’s wrong? You look like you’re about to cry. Who is the cause for this?! I’ll show them a piece of my mind!”

Emilia: “It’s your fault.”

Puck: “Damnittt. I’m an idiot! Satisfied now?”

Emilia was panicking once again, but the skit of the materialized Puck had unfolded. Emilia’s adeptness at using spirits was irrelevant. The differences between spirits and Hollows generally could not be understood, though Emilia was prone to getting extremely scared.

Subaru: “But it’s surprising how everyone is bad with Hollow, though it seems like the meaning of bad is different in this case.”

Roswaal: “The grasp of these ghosts you’re talking about and the grasp of the Hollows that we know of may be different. At the very least, we are aware of how Hollows are existences that aren’t friendly with the living. Corpses moving on the battlefield, wicked thoughts that curse the living…there are many examples like that to show their unfriendliness.”

Subaru: “Moving corpses huh. Sorry for not taking the fact that this world has magic seriously at all.”

Subaru actually had real experiences with magic. He shivers at Roswaal’s examples and looks over the girl camp again with their anxious looking faces.

He saw no signs of the calm atmosphere during breakfast that had lasted about ten minutes. The reason for this was because of Subaru rashly bringing in the topic of Hollows, essentially breaking that calm atmosphere into mere fragments.

The atmosphere dissolves this way and the aftertaste was really bad. Thus—

Subaru: “—Alright, I have a proposal!”

Subaru kicks his chair, stands up, and thrusts his finger at the ceiling. This makes everyone open their eyes wide while Subaru spins around his held out arm.

Subaru: “Seems like there’s some misunderstandings, however I did not bring up Hollows to scare you all. Understand that first.”

Emilia: “Then what was the talk about Kiku-san from Banchousarayashiki, Iwasan, and Renkon-san for?”

Subaru: “Hurry up and forgot about those things and the vegetable already. You got it all wrong. It’s fiction!”

Emilia makes a relieved expression upon hearing that it was fiction. It was possible to still doubt if it would be okay, but for now she had a stance of intending to hear him out, so he took this opportunity.

Beatrice: “It’s too late for that assessment, I suppose. The damage done by the Hollow talk is something that can no longer be resolved.”

Subaru: “I will replace that perception of yours that’s smeared with prejudice, Beako. —through necromancy that is!”

Emilia: “Necromancy?”

Subaru raised a thumb at the scornful Beatrice, and then Emilia tilted her head at Subaru, who made his declaration with a loud voice. Emilia expresses a question mark at the unfamiliar word, making Subaru smile with distorted cheeks.

Subaru: “Yes, necromancy! At my home town it’s a written technique used to take down spirits, and by spirits I mean ghost spirits! In other words, necromancy is a ritual to summon Hollows!”

—?!￼”

Upon hearing Subaru’s astounding idea, everyone’s expression changed simultaneously.

Emilia: “Summoning Hollows? You can do that?”

Subaru: “There are loopholes and underhanded tricks for everything. Emilia-tan, how about you think of this one thing as challenging it after you felt deceived?”

Emilia: “If I think of it that way, then that would mean I was deceived until the end!”

Rem: “Is it really okay to do that? Nothing bad will happen?”

Rem takes place of the disturbed Emilia as she rapidly took a step forward and drew closer to Subaru.

Rem: “It is typical for people to think of Hollows as evil existences. I do not want to doubt Subaru-kun, but if by any chance something…”

Subaru: “Ho-Hold up. The thing that people are scared of when it comes to Hollows and ghosts is their unfamiliarity with their nature, right? If they get dragged out by necromancy, you’ll come to understand them and their scariness will be reduced by half.”

Rem: “Even if it’s reduced by half, scary things are scary!”

It wasn’t shown in Rem’s face, but in truth, she may have gotten relatively frightened.

She gets close to the trembling Emilia and was propped up by her shoulder, but it seemed that Emilia was pretending to comfort her, being covered in her own helplessness.

Beatrice: “Fufumm, you say some useful things sometimes too, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Now that’s some unexpected reinforcement. Are you in agreement with me, Beako?”

When Subaru becomes surprised from the very unexpected approval ballot, Beatrice snorted her nose with her arms crossed.

Beatrice: “I also have a lot of things I want to say to the Hollows now. If we summon those guys through necromancy, I’ll hit them, I suppose.”

Beatrice was burning with ambition at the idea of necromancy with an expression full of hostility. Anyhow, it seemed like she wasn’t seriously against them either, so he gave a final look at Roswaal.

The decision was in Roswaal’s hands. He collectedly extended both of his hands in response to Subaru’s look and

Roswaal: “Sounds good. Try and do it how you want to. To be honest, I’m also interested in the necromancy used to summon Hollows. I want to see this without fail, after all.”

Subaru: “Now you’re talking! As expected of Ros-chi. You are reasonable!”

Subaru received the approval of the well understanding Head, as he became filled with delight seeing how Roswaal was understanding of his thoughts.

Subaru: “And with that, let’s set up the preparations for necromancy! What’s wrong? It’s not that hard to makes preparations for it. We just need a big, white paper, a feather pen, and a coin.”

Ram: “Those are very cheap. It’s counterfeiting.”

Subaru: “The cheap simpleness is the gimmick of instant necromancy. Back at my home town, it exploded with popularity before and it was all the rage.”

Emilia: “So Hollow played at Subaru’s hometown, huh. You are reeeally brave…”

Subaru gives a vague smile at Emilia, who was giving him strange admiration, and left out the details on the matter. If he were to talk about the details of the necromancy that became popular, Emilia would be frightened again.

Anyhow, only minor effects of this necromancy appeared. Then there was also a rumor which said that the practice had become prohibited, as marks were left on a good amount of boys and girls’ hearts.

That ritual’s name was called thus at his hometown:

Subaru: “From here, the Roswaal residence’s first “Kokkuri-san” shall now commence!”

3

—Kokkuri-san is something that exploded with popularity in Japan for a period of time. It is a kind of necromancy.

The influence of it was fierce. Even now, it is so popular that in one area it is even prohibited.

There is a theory that says Kokkuri parodizes the names of “foxes(kitsune)”, “dogs(inu)” and “tanuki”. People generally think that they are summoning low class animal spirits via ritual.

In Subaru’s world it is an outdated game, but it is still generally common knowledge, and it is at least well known for people to know about the flow of the ritual’s sequences, along with the tools one needs to prepare for it.

Subaru: “Simply speaking will not summon Kokkuri-san. This is because I need to make the preparations necessary to talk with Kokkuri-san.”

Rem: “So that’s why you have paper and a pen? Are you going to communicate with Kokkuri-san through writing…?”

Subaru was spreading white paper over the table when Rem, who had her morningstar in her hand, nervously asked this question.

Holding a weapon like this was something you wouldn’t normally see on an average day at the mansion. In other words, it seemed that today was preparation for extraordinary battle to Rem. She had all the preparations set to turn Kokkuri-san into small fragments.

Ram: “That’s an ugly “E” character. Feels like your daily studying hasn’t been taking its effect.”

Subaru: “Shut up, Nee-sama. If you can read it, then that’s all that matters.”

Subaru responds to the Ram out of wariness, whose abusive language was harsher than usual, and continued to write characters on the white paper while feeling discouraged. That was all of the E characters, in sequential order, to correspond with the hiragana in this world.

Subaru: “The last columns to prepare are the number column, the man column, and the woman column. And something that cannot be forgotten, the gate used to let Kokkuri-san go in and out.”

He methodically writes the e characters, the numbers 0 through 9, man and woman, and lastly the choices “yes” and “no” for preparation. Writing “Torii” during that time would mean that everything would be ready.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, lend me some money.”

Emilia: “Okay. Don’t waste it.”

Puck: “Kinda feels like something a man financially dependent on a woman would do.”

Subaru ignores the utterance from the scandalous Puck and put the gold coin Emilia gave to him on top of the Torii illustration. Then he nods at Rem and Emilia. The three people take their seats.

Subaru: “Before we begin, here are some important points to note. First off, the three of us will put our index fingers on the gold coin, but make sure you don’t take it off until it’s over. It wouldn’t be pretty if you did.”

Emilia: “O-Ok. Got it. Don’t take off your finger huh. …can I freeze it?”

Subaru: “It’s not about physically sticking to it. Let’s try doing it deliberately. Also, about the Hollow that will answer the questions we have for Kokkuri-san…they can be customarily loud. You will get scolded if you do not follow the sequence properly. Please follow my instructions in the way that they have been told.”

Rem: “Scolded…so that means that moment would be a good opportunity, huh. I feel like I understand what Subaru-kun is expecting of me.”

Subaru: “Feels like you don’t get it, so I’m gonna tell you that there is a standard prohibition on attacks.”

Emilia was serious with a pale face. Rem had fighting spirit dwelling in her light blue eyes. These things made Subaru feel anxious.

However, around them there was Beatrice, who was full of hostility, and Ram, whose aggressive attitude was getting worse. Roswaal and Puck were the same as always, but it would probably wouldn’t help keep his anxiety in check.

There was no reason for them to have this much willpower for carrying out the operation for Kokkuri-san in the first place, but—

Subaru: “A man’s adventurous spirit is beyond help, precisely because of how he gets fired up in stupid times like these…”

Beatrice: “Stop saying that stuff. Hurry up and get this started. Quickly I say, I suppose.”

Subaru looks like a fool with his cynical attitude. He pulls himself together and reaches out to the coin with his finger. Emilia and Rem follow. Their fingers pile on top of each other on the coin.

They start to feel a slight tension. The ritual begins while they all hold their breath—.

Subaru: “—Kokkuri-san, Kokkuri-san. Please come forth. If you are there, please move towards “yes”.”

It was a magical chant. Subaru says the custom words for it with that type of enthusiasm.

Emilia and Rem felt power with their fingers caused by those words. However, there was no change with the coin. Subaru glares at the coin that didn’t give even a slight movement, wets his dry lips, and tries once again.

Subaru: “—Kokkuri-san, Kokkuri-san. Please come forth. If you are there, please move towards “yes”.”

He says those words once again, but there was still no change.

This naturally relaxes the atmosphere in the hall. The participants Emilia and Rem give out a sigh of relief, and they heard a sigh from the back that sounded unamused. Beatrice was surely in a bad mood from this result, just because of her high expectations. — That’s what he thought immediately afterwards.

Emilia: “—Ah!”

Emilia raises her voice in surprise. Rem widens her eyes and is at a loss for words. Subaru also held his breath.

They reacted like this because the coin they had their fingers on slowly moved towards yes.

Subaru: “P-Please move back towards Torii.”

Subaru receives looks from those two as if they were appealing to him and clumsily remembered the next instruction. In response to the instruction, the coin moved from “yes” to the Torii position, making Subaru feel confident that the necromancy was a success.

The ghosts were doing deeds and there were influences on the participants’ subconscious, but for now they had accomplished the first step.

Subaru: “A-Alright, so it moved down. Kokkuri-san should answer most of our questions with it like this. Anything you guys would like to ask?”

Emilia Su-Subaru, you show us how it’s done first.”

Rem: “…Yes, I think we should go with that. I still can’t see the Hollow.”

Emilia didn’t hide her fright, while Rem had a misunderstanding about the ritual, as she thought it was to crush the ghosts.

Seeing as how they shut down their right to ask a question, after Subaru thought about it for a bit, he

Subaru: “—Kokkuri-san, Emilia-tan is afraid of Hollows, right?”

Emilia: “Subaru?!”

Emilia raised a criticising voice, but the coin had already moved. The gold coin slides onto the “yes” spot, and Emilia’s sentiments were made clear—though they were already obvious.

Subaru: “Thanks. Kokkuri-san, move back towards Torii.”

Subaru is satisfied with the result. When he requests for the Kokkuri to move back to its origin, he moves smoothly towards above the Torii illustration. This was the flow of sequences for Kokkuri-san.

Subaru: “So these are the basics of Kokkuri-san. Next we would do the question and answer session again so that we aren’t rude to Kokkuri-san…Emilia-tan, what’s up with that look?”

Emilia: “I-I’m telling you I’m not scared. I think the answer to that question was a mistake. Subaru must have moved his finger. I won’t be fooled.”

Kokkuri: “Nope.”

Emilia: “Hyan?!”

Kokkuri-san crushed Emilia’s cute willpower without mercy. Emilia, who let out a shriek, learned her place from his pointing out and let out a “Sorry…” with a faint voice.

Rem: “—Kokkuri-sama. Should we have meat or fish for today’s dinner?”

Kokkuri: “Meat.”

Immediately after that, Rem, who was watching the flow of the game up until now, threw a question at Kokkuri-san with astounding courage. The border of the E character slips away. Rem gives her thanks to Kokkuri-san, who gave an answer for today’s dinner, and then shifted her attention towards Subaru and the others.

Rem: “I believe Kokkuri-san has credibility with his answer. We have no fish for ingredients at the kitchen, so the dinner being a meat dish…I am the only one who should know about that.”

Emilia: “Eh…Then isn’t this amazing?”

Emilia comprehends the intent behind Rem’s question and uses her free hand to touch her mouth, exposing her astonishment. She blinks her eyes and stared firmly at the coin. Then

Emilia: “Kokkuri-san is amazing. I was surprised.”

Kokkuri: “Not particularly.”

Emilia: “Sorry for doubting you. Moreover, you’ve even been talking to us reeaally politely.”

Kokkuri: “A common thing.”

Emilia: “Is that so? A common thing…but misunderstanding you is a very sorrowful thing to do, so I apologize. I’ll be careful.”

Kokkuri: “No prob.”

Subaru: “Was Kokkuri-san really able to have such relaxed conversations?!”

Kokkuri-san’s behavior broke into a mess of pieces in response to Emilia, who reflected on her behavior.

When these things went down, the coin was sliding on the paper. The contrast between the pleasantness of the conversation and the impression given by the image gave quite the strange feeling.

Anyhow, it looked like Emilia had complete trust in Kokkuri-san, so her expression was different in comparison to how she was frightened by Hollow earlier. In some respects, Rem came face to face with the exchange of heart-warming foreign culture, so it seemed that her fighting spirit also settled down.

Rem: “Emilia-sama, can I talk to Kokkuri-san too?”

Emilia: “Ah, sorry. Kokkuri-san, can Rem talk to you too?”

Kokkuri: “Sure.”

Subaru: “He’s suppose to answer with “Yes” there, not “Sure”!”

In regards to the ritual, Kokkuri-san was now a participant as a fourth viewpoint, rather than a guest of honor.

It differed quite a lot from what the image they had heard about from rumors, but perhaps the Kokkuri-san of this world was just like this. He was really different from Japan’s Kokkuri-san, who is hard to deal with, according to rumors.

Rem: “Is Subaru-kun satisfied everyday with my cooking?”

Kokkuri: “Sounds right.”

Rem: “Does Subaru-kun enjoy his work at the mansion? Is it tough for him?”

Kokkuri: “A pleasantly tired feeling.”

Rem: “Is Subaru-kun getting along well with Nee-sama?”

Kokkuri: “Indifferent towards the antagonizing hate.”

Rem: “Is Subaru-kun…”

Subaru: “Uh, Rem-san? Even if you don’t ask Kokkuri-san, I can at least answer that kind of stuff if you ask me directly, you know?”

Rem: “No, asking you directly is embarrassing, so…”

Subaru: “This method is indirect, but your questions sure aren’t!”

He didn’t understand Rem’s point about her embarrassment, but it seemed that she had befitting merit to associate with Kokkuri-san. Nevertheless, perhaps you could say that the first stage had been completed with the apparent satisfaction of Rem’s curiosity.

Subaru: “Alright then, it’s regretful, but let’s pray for his departure. —Kokkuri-san, thank you. By all means, please go back home.”

Emilia: “Thank you. Let’s speak again sometime.”

Rem: “I pray that nothing bad happens along the way home and that you return safely.”

Subaru was particular about his formality, while Emilia and Rem entered a stance for an extreme farewell. They all bid their goodbyes, and the coin swiftly headed towards the Torii. And then, the feeling of oppression that vaguely drifted about in the hall vanishes, which made everyone understand that Kokkuri-san had gone home.

Subaru: “And that’s how it is. How was it? Kokkuri-san wasn’t a scary Hollow, right?”

Rem: “Yeah, that surprised me. I couldn’t see him, and yet he really was there. Could it be that spirits are…but it didn’t seem like it…”

Roswaal: “There was no mana interference from what I saw. It feels like I saw the amazingness of necromancy, though it was mysterious.”

Roswaal, the person who had been silent up until now, makes sure of the ritual’s ending as he nods his head in admiration. The leading person for magic applies his metaphorical seal of approval. Subaru was also proud of Kokkuri-san, as if it was something personal.

Puck: “Looks like it wasn’t a deed of a spirit. If it was a spirit, Vollachia would notice it. How’d you feel about it, Betty?”

Beatrice: “…I won’t acknowledge it. The existence of Hollows, in and of itself, is something blasphemous to spirits, I suppose.”

Puck: “Betty?”

Beatrice responds to Puck’s questioning with a quite, indignant voice. That response causes Puck to widen his eyes, as Beatrice compromises at the table with her arm waving “bye-bye!”.

Beatrice: “I will take your spot, young sister. I will expose the bogus trickery that happened just now, I suppose.”

Ram: “Wait Beatrice, what are you saying? There was no bogus trickery anywhere.”

Subaru: “You don’t really hear bogus nowadays, huh…putting that aside, do you doubt the Kokkuri-san that you saw? If so, then how do you explain what just happened earlier?”

Beatrice: “Listen up, you be quiet now. Or are you scared of me exposing the truth of the matter? If you are, then I guess that can’t be helped either, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…The rice cake is ready. You’ll pay for this, Drill Loli.”

Rem gives her seat up to Beatrice. Subaru also once again sinks into his chair. Beatrice sees this and then glares at Emilia.

Beatrice: “You too. Change places with Bubby, I suppose. There’s no way there are people that side with Kokkuri. The two of us, me and Bubby, will make these lies clear, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What suspicions do you have for the people that side with Kokkuri? Also how will Puck participate in this?”

Puck: “How about with my tail?”

Subaru: “…Ah! I understand. That’s fine. Let’s do it with your tail.”

Puck, who came flying, floats above the table, and holds out his long tail as he puts it on the coin. Subaru and Beatrice also follow, and the arrangements to start were put in order, though they were awkward.

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “It’ll be fine, Emilia-tan. Look. I will protect Kokkuri-san—”

Emilia: “Okay, I believe you.”

Emilia puts her hands on her chest and gives a nod to Subaru with a gesture that seemed to be a prayer. He makes sure of it and then when he takes a deep breath, he directs his consciousness towards the Torii drawn on the paper.

Subaru: “—Kokkuri-san, Kokkuri-san. I apologize for continuing this, but if you are there, please move towards the “Yes” spo—that was fast.”

Kokkuri: “You call me too much.”

Subaru: “True. Of course you’d get mad. Being summoned immediately after returning would of course make you mad. My apologies.”

Subaru prostrates himself in response to the faint displeasure hinted in Kokkuri’s sentence. However, the two people who were having their first experience with Kokkuri-san widen their eyes in response to the slight surprise.

Puck: “At the very least, I am not moving. How about you, Betty?”

Beatrice: “…I also have not done that shameless thing, I suppose. Even if I was and if I wanted to, I would just pulverize him”

Kokkuri: “Absurd.”

Puck: “He’s speaking, Beako.”

Beatrice: “This is shameless!”

In any case, you could say that this was a win for the Kokkuri side against the beginning hostilities.

Kokkuri-san moved with a “Bring it on” and waited for a question. It seemed that his anger from being summoned in succession had been assuaged. While this happened, the coin slipped swiftly across the paper. Kokkuri-san truly was uncalm.

Subaru: “There. Go ahead and ask a question, Beako. Go fight him.”

Beatrice: “I’ll show people how you disappear, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Just how rude can you be at the start?! Expecting him to pop out without even having called him in response to being prompted to ask a question is just like the PC dolphin!”

Kokkuri: “Wonder what I should do∼”

Subaru: “But wow Kokkuri-san, you are a major sadist towards Beako!”

Kokkuri-san enters a strong counter in response to Beako, who should have had challenged him first. Even Kokkuri-san saw through the reddened Beatrice’s natural groping.

Puck: “Alright, what does Lia think of me?”

Kokkuri: “A hard working younger brother.” [Kokkuri: “Sometimes a mother.”

Puck: “Fufufu, this is amusing. Alright, what do I think of Emilia?”

Kokkuri: “A cute, hard working daughter.” [Kokkuri: “Sometimes a mother.”

Subaru: “You two think of each other as a mother sometimes?”

Puck let out profound laughter, while Emilia frantically shook her head and denied it. This was also a parent-child relationship he didn’t understand, but it confirmed Kokkuri-san’s insight.

Beatrice: “Fufumm. If that’s the case, then tell me what Bubbyn thinks of me, I suppose.”

Kokkuri: “Honorific”

Beatrice: “—? Honorable? What is the meaning of this? He thinks I’m honorable…?”

Kokkuri: “Say honorific.”

Beatrice: “Why has this guy only been awfully strict towards me?”

Whether he had completely ruined her mood or pleased her, Kokkuri-san was skilled at hitting the right areas. Afterwards, he skillfully dodged Beatrice’s question too. This little girl was that furious, and yet she became completely dispirited.

Anyhow, it was unlikely for Beatrice to doubt Kokkuri-san’s existence now that she had argued with him until now. In some way, her goal had been accomplished. Thus, it was about the time to wish for Kokkuri-san to go back home and—

Rem: “Ah, Subaru-kun. Can I do one last thing?”

Subaru: “Hm? Oh, Rem wants to ask something too?”

Subaru ponders about her actions, as Rem holds her hand up, responding to Subaru with a “Yes”. Standardly, only the participants would be able to ask Kokkuri-san questions. Perhaps this would anger Kokkuri-san.

Kokkuri: “Come at me.”

Subaru: “Kokkuri-san is a handsome man who is anything but angry. It’s fine, Rem. Go ask a question.”

Rem: “Then I will take up that offer. —To tell you the truth, lately the amount of stored mayonnaise has been decreasing over night. What is the cause of that?”

That was the moment the unconcerned Rem threw in her question. The coin lodged with Kokkuri-san in it that had been sliding casually until now stops its movement. The coin that suspended on top of the Torii illustration shakes the situation of Subaru and the others having their fingers placed on it. It was more than a slight movement.

“…”

These three hold their breath and glare at each other as Emilia and the others become disturbed from the situation.

—Thus, the story was coming back to the beginning.

4

While putting all their strength into the coin they touched, the three cautiously peeped at each other's attitude.

The cold sensation felt at their fingertips was an indication that it would face towards "correct" and would start to move. However, it was impossible this time for it to recite "correct".

The Roswaal residence's preserved mayonnaise was being revived in this world by Subaru and the others, who were mayonnaise lovers. It was being done through Rem's everyday earnest inclusion of the produced flavor.

The quality was inferior compared to the type of quality back at Subaru's original world, but it was an absolute must for his eating habits.

There were people who snuck bites of that mayonnaise every night. —To be completely honest, that was Subaru's doing. Occasionally he wouldn't be able to hold himself back and would creep into the kitchen at midnight, snatching the mayonnaise. However, it was impossible for him to be found out.

Subaru: "Force is entering your shoulder, Beako. Puck you too; what's up with the swelling of power with your tail?"

Beatrice: "You too. Your cheeks are stiffening. Even under normal circumstances your excessive smile is atrocious, I suppose. Kokkuri-san also is ugly. No doubt about it."

Puck: "Come on you two. We can still talk this out as of right now. Let's stop this foolishness and have more constructivity, shall we? Look, we can even go out and have a picnic."

They were restraining each other, but would still not loosen their power put into the coin.

Subaru was putting in power to avoid having the truth exposed, but they were desperate to destroy his obstruction. At this rate, he will become a criminal—

Emilia: “Ah, the coin…!”

Emilia was there watching over them. While trembling, she tried to watch the coin that started to move. However, the coin’s speed was slow. The movement was so dull that it seemed it would tear apart the paper lying underneath it. The E characters the gold coin slowly traced were “be”, “a”, “ and “to”. —Of course, Subaru was moving it.

He put a false accusation on her before he was exposed, making the situation indefinite. He had no choice.

Subaru: “Ohhtoh, if we go by this flow, then the criminal appears to be…”

Beatrice: “Do-Don’t play games! Take a closer look, I suppose…!”

When she spoke out to the shameless Subaru, the resisting Beatrice’s fingers shone vividly. Immediately after, the wind spirals the girl’s name in the middle, and Subaru notices the increase of strength on the coin.

Subaru: “You, no way…!”

Beatrice: “See, take a good look. This movement clearly shows your…”

Just like Beatrice said, the coin changed its course, turning the “ri” into “su”, following with “ba”. There was no doubt that she was using some sort of magic just for this purpose.

Emilia: “Be a to su ba?”

Emilia reads the E characters just like how they appeared and was bewildered. But, it would be problematic like this. If the name finishes in a straight line next, Subaru’s crime would be as clear as day.

Subaru: “But with this you’ve already burnt Kokkuri-san’s grey brain cells!”

Beatrice: “Th-This? No way, I suppose…!”

Just before it narrowly reached “ru”, somehow it slid over and hit “pa” and “tsu”. If it reached the straight line at this rate, the conclusion would be decided.

Emilia: “Be a to su ba pa tsu?”

Subaru: “With this, next will I will show you Finishing Kokkuri!”

Puck: “I won’t allow it, Subaru! This is where I will show you, a person who showed negligence, Counter Kokkuri!”

Beatrice: “I will cooperate with Bubby, I suppose! With the two of us, it will be Intimate Kokkuri!”

They take a stab at Subaru’s opportunity, who rushed the match, as Puck once again slips the coin towards “su”. Beatrice also backs up that force, as Subaru is cornered into fighting defensively.

At this rate, he will be defeated. —This was the moment he thought that.

Kokkuri: “Cut it out.”

“…”

The coin that the three of them had put their strength into rotates at high speed, and then not only Subaru, but Beatrice and Puck too repel from the table. The coin that was released from their physical strength grows wild and traces characters to scold the three people who ridiculed him.

Kokkuri: “A child mourning at your unsightly quarrel is here.”

Subaru: “A-A mourning child…?”

Kokkuri: “Emilia”

Subaru is surprised by Kokkuri-san’s answer and turns around. He saw Emilia standing there, who was watching the three of them with sorrowful eyes. She had her arms on her chest. Perhaps she was praying.

Kokkuri-san noticed how the three people who shoved their crimes into each other's faces despaired.

Kokkuri: "Remember it." [Kokkuri: "The loving heart." [Kokkuri: "The kindness." [Kokkuri: "The love."

Emilia: "Ko-Kokkuri-san. You…"

Kokkuri: "I am no longer needed." [Kokkuri: "What's next is" [Kokkuri: "Your guys' story."

Subaru could not speak in response to Kokkuri-san's concern. Kokkuri-san leaves those last words and then heads toward Torii. There was no time to stop him. The atmosphere changes.

Rem: "…Looks like Kokkuri-san went home."

The feeling of his presence fades away. Rem puts the reality that everyone understood into words. When she touched the paper left behind on the table, she put her hand on the Torii and gold coin.

Rem: "I am sorry. I said something unnecessary and angered Kokkuri-san."

Subaru: "N-No. Rem, it's not your fault. It was my fault for bringing up Kokkuri rashly in the first place. It must've been a bother to Kokkuri-san too."

He was surprised from Kokkuri-san's excessive friendliness, but just from that, he had feelings of guilt.

Thus, there was only one way to show his regret.

Subaru: "Rem, about the mayonnaise…"

Rem: "Yes. In the end, we never found out who the criminal was, but…"

Subaru: "Um, that's wrong. The criminal is…"

Subaru looked straight into Rem’s eyes and bowed in shame. Then —

Subaru: “I am the criminal.” [Puck: “I did it.” [Beatrice: “I was just provoked by a demon, I suppose.”

Rem: “What?”

The three of their voice’s overlap. Rem, who had confessed with them, widens her eyes. However, the people that were the most surprised were none other than those three. They exchange glances at each other’s faces and opened their mouths in dumbfoundment.

Emilia saw that situation, but she lastly pinches the gold coin and

Emilia: “Kokkuri-san, Kokkuri-san. Could it be that you knew everything?”

Then, she asked this question to the silent coin with a small smile on her face.

5

Ram: “—What a farce that was huh, Roswaal-sama.”

They decided to check the hall where the mayonnaise incident criminals were writing their earnest apologies later. Ram speaks out to the person walking in front of her, Roswaal. He then shakes his shoulder, laughs, and

Roswaal: “Wasn’t it quite the enjoyable show? Subaru-kun is really amusing. I don’t get tired of him. Splendid. Just splendid.”

Ram: “Don’t warm up to Barusu that much. Even now he is doing something outrageous.”

Roswaal: “That was just me having fun again”…if I said that, I wonder if you would get mad.”

In response to the jolly Head’s words, Ram let out a slight sigh without objection.

From the beginning, Ram would never oppose Roswaal's opinion. Pouring her whole soul into meeting the head's wishes certainly was her loyalty. Thus—

Ram: "How did you move that coin?"

Roswaal: "Through the use of wind and earth magic. I scattered mana through wind, deceiving them, and guided the coin through local impact. It seemed that Beatrice and the big spirit noticed it and then disregarded it."

The shy Roswaal's answer causes Ram to be reminded of the two people who seemed to be accomplices. These accomplices were the gleeful kitten, and the seemingly indifferent little girl who accompanied him.

Ram: "Putting that aside, I had an uncomfortable feeling just about the last interaction. The big spirit and Beatrice were both digging their own graves."

Roswaal: "It was an unexpected development after all. At any rate, the last thing was the only thing I didn't understand as well."

Ram: "Huh?"

Roswaal: "I didn't understand how not everything was our game. Also, there was no mana interference at that time. Well well, what did Subaru-kun call it. Hm."

Roswaal winks at Ram, who took in his statement in dumbfoundment. Whether it had been his way of joking, or if he was seriously enjoying himself with the mystery, even Ram herself could not read between the lines.

It would be fine if it was all Roswaal's trick. —However, if by any chance it wasn't…

Ram: "From now on, having that ritual at the mansion…let's prohibit people from playing Kokkuri-san. Yes."

She nods intensely and clearly make that decision in her heart.

Thus, the “Kokkuri-san” game that entered into this different world became taboo, just like in his previous world. Or at the very least, it would never be played again at the Roswaal residence.

Furthermore, the way it became summon “Emilia-sama” instead was a whole different story.

Librarian Beatrice’s Reluctant Promise

1

Holding her breath and opening the door, she checked both sides of the hallway.

Straining her ears, she looked for sounds. She couldn’t sense anyone approaching. Lightly pumping her fist while saying, “okay,” the young girl ran out as she stepped onto the red carpet.

While the soft carpet did mitigate some of the sound, it couldn’t also erase the young girl’s uncertainty. Currently, the young girl felt not only that her footsteps were an obstacle, but that her breathing itself was one.

The rows of doors, the long way until the end of the hallway, she was wary of every little thing in this long passage. As she looked for a place to hide—

“—Boo!”

“—hk!”

Right after her gaze wandered while looking for a place to hide, a boy jumped out from the shadow of a vase in front of her. This child spread his hands to the sides of his face and opened his mouth wide while snot dripped from his nose.

Immediately she ground her molars, and suppressed the strength of the mana she was about to throw out. She nearly blew away the young boy right in front of her eyes. The girl was relieved by her own self-control and the boy’s dumb luck.

And then—

“Hmphya, I suppose!”

“Gyan!”

Her palm, having given up on releasing mana, instead was used to slap the side of the boy's face as he made a silly expression. Watching the boy roll after giving a short scream, the girl pulled on her drills with a finger.

"Hmph! That's what you get for surprising me, in fact. This isn't a joke, I suppose!"

"Ah! Found her!"

"You're right! She's there! Lucas got done in!"

"But, even if Lucas got done in, we have Lucas the second and the third!"

"Urgh urgh, in fact."

The moment she celebrated her victory, a boisterous detached force came running from the other side of the hallway. Clicking her tongue at those voices, the girl touched the nearest door, and tried to Cross the world by habit when—

"—From just this, I cannot not admit defeat, I suppose."

Withdrawing her hand, the girl shook her head, then ran to the other side of the hallway. She stepped on the belly of the boy she slapped on the way, making him raise a shameful voice. "Ahii."

"Go now, catch heeer!" "Go now, get heeer!" "Go now, Strip heeer!"

As she heard the voices of the companions of the boy she stepped on coming from the rear, the girl lined out a map of the mansion in her brain. Then, she frowned towards the children chasing her,

"I absolutely, will not bend to your whims, in fact "

Her determination bleeding into her voice, the girl—Beatrice—held onto her skirt as she ran with all her might.

2

"Hey Beako, isn't your body going to break if you spend all your time locked up in here?”

Eyeing the great number of books crammed into the bookshelves, Subaru voiced such a question while sitting on the floor.

This was a room shrouded by an aged and grandiose atmosphere.

This spacious room had no windows, and the only source of light were magic lamps littered around the inside of the room. The white stones inside the glass cases fulfilled their role of illuminating dazzlingly and brightly.

However, even those lights couldn’t fully illuminate this cramped room lined with bookshelves.

“If you keep reading books in a poorly lit room, your eyes will go bad. This room doesn’t even have windows, so there’s no ventilation either. Being in a room with bad air also isn’t good for your lungs “

“You’re a man concerned with every petty little detail, I suppose. What Betty is doing and where Betty is are up to her… First thing, the air inside the Forbidden Archive is purified with Mana, so it is purer than pure, in fact”

“For real? Damn, Mana is crazy. That’s why this room is so relaxing to be in? Man, I thought it strange. I was wondering why a room filled with Beako’s carbon monoxide was so nice to be in”

“I did not quite understand, but I do know that what you said was something disgusting, I suppose!”

Unable to bear this worthless conversation, the one who raised her voice was Beatrice, sitting on a stepladder.

Her face flushed red, and she stuck her finger out at Subaru, who was sitting boldly in the room.

“Every single day, why do you come out and poke your nose into Betty’s business, in fact! This is not a place you can just come in to sit and kill time in, I suppose. This is the sacrosanct unassailable

Forbidden Archive, in fact.”

“Even if it’s called the forbidden archive, the name’s not got much weight to it if I can just waltz in, does it?”

“Betty doesn’t want you coming in, and yet you just manage to somehow waltz in on your own, I suppose!”

Beatrice, the same as always, exploded at Subaru, who tracked dirt into the room. Jumping from the step ladder as she did this, she haughtily raised her chin at Subaru, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor.

On the sides of her head, her luxurious ringlets bouncing like springs were captivating.

“No matter how much I use Door Crossing, you find it right away like it was obvious… You’re the first fellow, who has ever tracked this much dirt into the forbidden archive, in fact”

“Boing boing, boing boing.”

“Now which part of Betty are you looking at, and what are you playing at, I suppose! Listen to what I’m saying, in fact!”

“Whoops!”

He quickly grabbed the partly-read book Beatrice threw due to how angry she was. Beatrice, her face flushing red once again, glared at Subaru with her big wide pupils. Seeing this as a small puppy yapping, Subaru gave a small chuckle.

“What are you laughing at… You’re a thoroughly irritating man, I suppose.”

“My bad, my bad. But, c’mon, don’t go throwing books after you’ve read them, put them back in their proper shelf. If you don’t bother cleaning, the floor will be buried before long.”

“You’re a hundred years too early to be trying to lecture Betty the Librarian of the Forbidden Archive on how to handle books, in fact.”

“Well I just witnessed this little librarian yeeting a book…”

Despite how much pride and awareness she had of herself as a librarian, her treatment towards books did not seem to be the kindest.

Taking the book Subaru presented her, Beatrice quickly put it into the bookshelf next to her. The books arranged there had bindings and titles all over the place; it was a completely arbitrarily done job.

“Hey, what happened to your pride as a librarian? If you arbitrarily put them back like that, you’ll end up skipping a sequel and regret it. A long time ago, I had a pair of twins end up just a lone person that way.”

“That advice seems to have an awfully personal feeling to it, but it is an unnecessary concern, I suppose. The Forbidden Archive is a revolutionary place that does not need to conform to your common sense, in fact.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you return the books to the shelf, a mechanism will later return the book to its designated spot, I suppose.”

“The Forbidden Archive is awesome, or more like spooky!”

It was too bad for the prideful Beatrice, but Subaru’s thoughts leaned more towards it being uncanny than awesome. Subaru was currently observing the shelf that Beatrice inserted the book into.

“Eh, Seriously? The book just goes back on it’s own? That’s amazingly convenient, but seeing it happen feels nightmarish. Or more like, you don’t need a librarian at that point. Why are you here?”

“It seems like you can’t hold a conversation with Betty unless you put her down for every little thing, in fact…”

This time they were doubts without any ill intent, but Beatrice still took them as his usual jesting. The girl then moved from Subaru’s side and took out a book from the nearby bookshelf. There were many thick and lengthy books in the forbidden archive, so there was a bit of danger in the manner in which she was doing it.

That said, for no reason in particular, he attempted to reach a hand out—

“Unnecessary concern, I suppose.”

As such, she gave her uncute response, making him laugh wryly.

“Welp…Then, I guess I might as well leave for today.”

Resting her hips atop the stepladder, Beatrice entered reading mode on the open book on her lap.

Once she was in this condition, her reactions would worsen during it. Subaru could also discern how to behave to not disturb her reading. This was the perfect timing to evacuate.

As Subaru headed towards the exit of the Forbidden Archive, Beatrice didn’t direct a single word at him. Subaru, remembering something, turned around towards the girl who consistently treated him cruelly.

“By the way, did you hear, Beako? I heard that tomorrow for two days, Roswaal and Ram will be leaving the mansion for a while.”

“…I heard, in fact. But, that has nothing to do with Betty, I suppose.”

Even for something meant to be small talk, Beatrice was awfully curt. As if he couldn’t take that attitude after all, Subaru cranked his head like he was pondering,

“You can’t really mean they have nothing to do with you. It’s the lord of the house and… Well, I can’t really find how to put it into words properly, but couldn’t you at least see him off? Roschi might even jump from joy y’know?”

“I cannot even imagine Roswaal jumping for joy, in fact. I will say this as many times, but Betty has nothing to do with that, I suppose.

—Something like saying farewell."

With her eyes cast down upon the book, Beatrice cut her words off there.

Silence immediately fell upon the Forbidden Archive, and Subaru let his window for leaving the room go. The sound of page-turning stopped, and an uncomfortable atmosphere spread within the area.

What now, thought Subaru, back to his own statement.

It wasn't like he thought that far with that statement. Simply, he was aware of the fact that he had said something nosy about Beatrice and Roswaal's relationship. But even then—

"Subaru. Take care. Farewell."

"…"

Suddenly, Subaru's heart was caught by a voice he recalled from the back of his mind.

Trying not to think about it, trying not to remember it, that voice which he had been strongly made aware of reverberated in his skull.

The parting which he had not been aware was a parting, the kind voice that had come from behind him. Subaru did not have a clue what to answer to that usual voice.

"—Actually, you should show your face too when we see them off tomorrow."

"…Huuh"

Subaru's whisper, which had broken the silence, made Beatrice, who had her eyes down towards the book, sigh.

Without lifting her face, simply raising her eyes towards Subaru, she shot a stiff glare at him.

"This is the third time, in fact. That has nothing to do with Betty, I

suppose.”

“You’ve got nothing to lose or anything. It’s not like you have anything keeping you busy either, if you’re just going to be shutting yourself in your room anyways. Then, why not poke your head out a little and…”

“How insistent, in fact.”

As Subaru was hounding her, Beatrice flatly cut him off.

“First of all, whenever Betty is free she is here, I suppose. Something like ‘anyways’ isn’t going to make me give in, in fact. If you really must insist, then why not drag me out by force, I suppose?”

“…”

“What’s more, within this room there exists no manner in which you could win against Betty, in fact.”

There was a quiet but unflappable stubbornness within Beatrice’s words.

It was something that normally didn’t show in her indignant retorts to Subaru: “a deep-seated sleeping rage. Which threatened to become a great flame if awoken. Understanding that, Subaru raised a white flag.

“I get it… Sorry for speaking out of turn. G’night.”

As he meekly withdrew, the pressure Beatrice was releasing faded. When he exited the room as well, the girl said nothing.

“Tch, she’s so damn obstinate.”

The moment the door shut, he could somehow feel the space warp around it. When he attempted to open it again, the door, which had been connected to the Forbidden Archive just a moment ago, now returned to its place as a connector to an empty guest room.

Beatrice’s Door Crossing was a spatial magic which could connect the Forbidden Archive to whichever door she liked within the mansion. Since the right to decide on the door was down to Beatrice, it made it extremely complicated to get in contact with her. Though for some reason, that particular idiosyncrasy did not apply to Subaru's guesswork.

"But really, what was up with Beako's attitude just now…"

"—What's this? Subaru, what are you doing around here?"

Feeling uneasy from that last exchange, Subaru, who was frowning, heard a voice call out to him from the side. Turning around, the one he saw coming down from the landing of the stairs was Emilia, who had her silver hair bunned up.

She approached Subaru, who was standing stock still in the hallway, and quizzically tilted her head with a slight smile.

"This way is to my room, you know? If you wanted to greet me before bed, you just did it a while ago."

"Aah, I was just passing by. Emilia-tan, fresh out of the bath? So cute."

"Yeah yeah."

Emilia took on Subaru's spontaneous praise with a completely habitual attitude.

In actuality, the wryly laughing Emilia's cheeks and neckline were flushed and dyed in red, her long silver hair damp. Being under the same roof as the girl within his heart and seeing that side of her was the utmost blessing for a boy.

"Subaru, you're staring and breathing very hard, is something wrong? Do I, look weird?"

"No, the weird one here would be me, actually. Emilia-tan's loveliness is always making me lose my mind so… Wait, we're digressing again. That's not it, you look just fine."

"—?"

Putting the jokes and nonsense to the side, Subaru moved his face closer to Emilia's puzzled face. She smelled nice. But, that's not the problem here.

"It's tempting to just continue to stand here and talk with Emilia-tan too but, I kinda need to ask something from you. It's a little late right now, but could you lend me Puck?"

"Puck?"

Pressing a finger against her cheek, Emilia's eyes opened wide at the sudden request.

"It's already his bedtime, but I think he'll come out if I call for him. But, what do you need from Puck… Ah, I get it. Sleeping alone is lonely after all."

"If that's what made you convinced then it's like I'm incredibly pathetic isn't it? That's not it, I have something I want to discuss with Beako actually. If Emilia-tan could also join in it'd be a real help."

"With Beatrice?"

Emilia's eyes opened wider and wider, but all Subaru gave her was a devilish laugh.

That face was practically like the smile a naughty brat would make as he announced his prank.

"I'm thinking of teaching a little thing or two to that shut-in."

3

The next day, Subaru showed his face in the Forbidden Archive once it was past noon.

Just as always, Beatrice, who was sitting on the stepladder, didn't welcome Subaru. On top of that whole thing last night, her hiding her face with the book today had a much more stubborn atmosphere to her than usual as well.

“Yo, Beako. Rozchi and Ram set out already. You didn’t go see them off at all, so he cried so much his clown makeup fell off.”

“In that case, it was worth it for Betty to not go see him off, in fact. —If all you wanted was to come and talk about such meaningless things, then hurry out, I suppose.”

Shooing away, like she was trying to wave off a bug with her hands, Beatrice waved her arm. Left with no angle of approach, he scratched his head. Subaru then nodded with an “Alright”,

“Beako, let’s continue our conversation from yesterday for a bit. Ok? Alright, thank you.”

“You just keep going like the self-centered guy you are, in fact! Don’t just do whatever you want, I suppose!”

“Then that self-centeredness, I’ll just go ahead and exploit it to it’s limit. Let’s resume our talk about seeing them off. If saying farewell is too much then how about saying welcome back?”

“How about nothing, you have no room for argument, in fact. I dislike what I dislike, thus I refuse, I suppose. I don’t understand why you are so obsessed with that, in fact.”

“Why well, you see, because it’s something very important.”

At Beatrice’s questioning, Subaru crossed his arms and nodded repeatedly.

Ever since they started this back and forth yesterday, Subaru had gone over these questions by himself. The conclusion he came to from that was a little hard to put into words.

“It might be an exaggeration, but you must say the things you have to say when you have to say them. Otherwise you might end up regretting it. You also must have had moments where you thought ‘Oh no, I messed up!”

“…That has, never happened to Betty, I suppose.”

Beatrice averted her gaze, half-heartedly denying Subaru’s words.

From her attitude Subaru had earned a response, and now was the time to press on.

“The fact you’ve never had that happen must be because you’re a shut-in! Can’t help you there!”

“That term, it is unusually irritating so stop it, in fact. It just feels like it’s unreasonably putting down Betty’s existence, I suppose.”

“Anger that strikes the bullseye is the proof of an awakening from the bottom of your heart.”

“I keep telling you every time that I have no idea what your words mean!”

Subaru, who was pointing with his finger, had Beatrice making a fed-up face at him. She stuck a finger into her own hair rolls, and bounced them up and down like a spring.

“Why don’t you hurry up, and tell me what it is you want to say, I suppose. Just quickly say what you want to say, and get lost from the Forbidden Archive, in fact”

“Beako, won’t you make a bet with me?”

“A bet…?”

“Yes, a bet. Let’s have a little contest.”

At the abrupt strange proposal, Beatrice, her face looking like she had no idea what she just got told, knitted her brows. She stared fixedly at Subaru, in a manner full of suspicion.

“A bet…? What are you talking about all of a sudden, I suppose. I have no reason to take that, in fact.”

“If you judge things on whether they’re necessary or unnecessary, you’ll become a boring adult. I don’t think becoming an adult with no chill like Roswaal is the best of ideas, either.”

“I will concede that point to you, I suppose.”

Their opinion aligned when it came to the currently absent lord of the mansion. Leaving beside Roswaal, whom he just used as a simple steppingstone to gain common understanding, Subaru raised a finger as he said, "So that's why."

"To avoid becoming boring adults, let's play and make a little bet between us. It's our special right as kids, you and me, to be able to get away with playing with fire and have it be just a funny story later."

"…No idea what that bet could be, but what does Betty gain from winning it, in fact?"

"Shrewd one, aren't ya. Can I take it that you're feeling like participating if you've got interest in the prize?"

Beatrice, who was narrowing her eyes, didn't say anything. Simply, the fact that she didn't say any words of refusal was a gain. Towards her, Subaru stretched out his right hand. Beatrice's face was suspicious, however—

"You're called, jump out."

"NyaNyaNyaNyaaan."

In accordance with Subaru's call, a cheerful voice accompanied an overflowing light on his hand. The light soon shaped into the silhouette of a cat. Not a portable cat, mind you, but the cat spirit, Puck manifested right in front of Beatrice.

While the kitty cleaned its face, those round black pupils looked at her mischievously,

"It's a request from Lia, and I also have an opinion about this, so I'll cooperate… Subaru, you've got quite the rough handle on cats."

"Having to ask a cat for help, and it turns out the cat's actually really helpful, many such cases."

In terms of both actual strength and amicability, he ended up turning to Puck relatively a lot. This time as well, the foundation of this plan was based on Puck, and the effect was as could be observed—

“Haaw…Bubby is so cute and fluffy today as well. You’re just so dreamy to Betty, I suppose.”

As expected, Puck appearing on top of his hand was a K.O. for Beatrice. Her cheeks flushing, Subaru laughed bitterly at the sight of the girl gazing at the kitty with the eyes of a maiden.

“Your patterns are so predictable it’s way too plain, or so I’d like to complain but, if you do win this bet, you will earn “The Right to fluff Puck for a day”. I’ve obtained the consent of both the actual person and their guardian.”

“To correct you, I’m actually Lia’s guardian. Don’t get that part wrong.”

His tail standing straight up, Puck reminded them of one important aspect. With that said, Beatrice nodded her head continuously at Subaru’s proposal.

“N-Not too shabby of a recompense, in fact. It seems you have just a bit of the right idea, I suppose.”

“I’m incredibly concerned about whether you might get deceived by some bad men in the future.”

“Did I hear some unnecessary concern just now, in fact?”

“Just your imagination, gaslighting isn’t real. So, in the case that I win… It’ll be obligatory for you to give farewells and greetings. And not just to Roswaal, but everyone in the mansion, too.”

At the conditions Subaru outlined, Beatrice’s expression suddenly changed.

Of course, from how the conversation had been going she must have imagined this. The color of surprise in the girl’s eyes was deep.

“I don’t mean for this to apply to something like going shopping at the village. But, similarly to the other day, at the very least show your face to say farewells and greetings with everybody else.

There's no need to go out of your way to have an unpleasant attitude, right?"

"…I really do not understand why you're obsessing so much with that, I suppose."

Though she stared at Puck as if in thought, Beatrice seemed to resign herself right away. The girl gracefully went down to the ground from the stepladder, and walked forward towards Subaru.

"Let me hear the details of the bet, in fact."

"Then, that means you'll take the loss conditions?"

"That is if I lose, I suppose. Go on, tell me, in fact."

As if peeved by the fact she was going along with Subaru's suggestion, Beatrice pursed her lips as if displeased. Before she changed her mind, Subaru turned only his head towards the door behind him.

"The rules are simple, it's Tag. —No, Double Tag I guess?"

"Oni chase…? A game you split the roles of a person and an oni, and have the oni chase the person, I suppose."

"That's right, that's exactly it. However, the rules are a little bit different this time. You'll also be playing the role of the chased this time, while inside the mansion."

Subaru continued explaining with a "Basically", as Beatrice had a question mark floating atop her head.

"Right now, Emilia-tan is running around the mansion. The one you are tasked to chase down and catch, is the runner Emilia-tan. However, if you were simply chasing after Emilia-tan it wouldn't be that fun. Wait no, if I had to do that, that'd actually be a blast."

"Subaru, Subaru, you're digressing."

"My bad. So then, You chase after the runner Emilia, and you'll also be running from someone trying to catch you. If you manage to catch Emilia-tan you will win. On the other hand, however, if you get caught before catching Emilia-tan you will lose. —That, is Double Tag."

With a slight adjustment from Puck, Subaru finished explaining the description of the contest. Beatrice, having heard that, scrunched up her brow and fiddled with her own ringlets.

"The conditions are limited to just inside the mansion? What about the garden or outside the gate, in fact?"

"The garden is fair game, but outside the gates is not. Also, Door Crossing and magic are both forbidden. Since teleporting in Tag would be way too overpowered, and you can't go injuring people with Magic."

"Hmph, that's too big a handicap for Betty, I suppose. Without magic, how will I catch her, in fact."

"Why don'tcha use your head for that one? Try hiding in the shadows, or circling around her. Those same conditions apply to Emilia-tan, so the only thing that will decide victory is underhandedness!"

"If that explanation was meant to give me spirit, then something must be wrong with you, I suppose."

Though weary, Beatrice was also seriously thinking about this contest.

With Door crossing sealed, and without magic either, Beatrice was no more than a simple little girl. Even with the same condition, Emilia had too much physical ability.

However, in a contest of underhandedness, Emilia was certainly the weakest one in the mansion. The reason was her being too honest, but even then, with these rules for Tag, Beatrice had enough chances.

"Fine, in fact. I am in, I suppose. —However, the younger of the twins is forbidden from participating, in fact."

“You noticed?”

“It was obvious, I suppose. Even Betty can see that the physical strength of the Oni race is unbeatable without magic. I must have you allow me to properly draw that one line of precaution, I suppose.”

Exposing Subaru’s craftiness, Beatrice felt proud in crushing that countermeasure of his.

If he denied this condition, Beatrice would reject the contest itself. In the first place, Beatrice’s argument was solid. Subaru had no choice but to stop Rem from participating.

“I will count to one hundred after you leave, then begin chasing you. Puck will remain in the forbidden archive, so if you try to cheat using Door Crossing, we will know immediately.”

“Don’t look down on me, in fact. Something so shameless, is not something I would do, I suppose.”

Confirming their conditions, Beatrice handed Puck to Subaru, who had the kitty he received transmit the fact that the bet was a success to Emilia.

“—Hm, alright. Lia is also raring to go it seems. She started running around the mansion.”

Puck informed them that the conditions had been prepared with a face that made him look like he was about to yawn. In accordance with that, Subaru beckoned Beatrice, and the girl gallantly headed for the door with her skirt fluttering.

“I will end this quickly, so that I may enjoy my tryst with Bubby, in fact.”

Whichever plan could she have made? Beatrice exited the forbidden archive with a wave of her hand. Seeing her off, Subaru began to count numbers out loud.

“Oooone, Twoooo, Threeee, Foooour, Fiiiive…”

Their literal Oni Card called Rem now out of the picture, it seemed Beatrice felt like she had won.

However—If she thought she’d beaten Subaru in underhandedness, unfortunately for her, she was also honest to the point that it’d be easier to count her from the weaker side.

4

The moment she exited Door Crossing, Beatrice confirmed she was standing in front of the dining hall.

Beatrice had the right to choose where it transfers to. The one who chose this exit point was herself. She had confidence as well, that for the sake of her plan, starting here was optimal.

“Well then, let’s go on start searching, and finish this up swiftly, I

suppose.”

Her indisposed attitude from before starting was nowhere to be seen. When it came down to the game itself, Beatrice was serious.

Immediately, she began her exploration of the mansion in search of her target: “Emilia. However, right before that, she raised her head at the presence of a person. At the end of the hallway was a blue-haired girl.

A maid who originally was meant to be her strongest rival, the younger of the twins, Rem.

“Beatrice-sama, it seems you accepted the challenge.”

“As you can see, in fact. But, I didn’t acknowledge your participation, I suppose. That man’s trickery doesn’t work on Betty, in fact. He should be heartbroken about his plans being foiled right about now, I suppose.”

“Yes, as expected of Beatrice-sama, you have quite the discerning eye. It would seem you saw through everything Rem was instructed by Subaru to do.”

Rem’s usual expression was mixed with a bit of despondency as she lowered her head. Previously, she wasn’t a girl who would show these kinds of expressions. Whose influence this was from, went without saying.

That was unpleasant, and as such, Beatrice snickered.

“If you’ve learned your lesson, you should stop taking that man’s help, in fact. It is pointless, I suppose.”

“I see then. If Beatrice-sama wins this bet, then I will take it into consideration. But, I really do think Subaru-kun is amazing.”

“—?”

A smile surfacing to her face, Rem praised the foolish Subaru who had gotten his plans foiled. Remembering the sense of unease in her smiling posture, Beatrice raised her eyebrows. It was right after

that.

“Tadaaa!” “Tadadaaa!” “Tadadadadaaa!”

Voices suddenly resounded across the mansion along with the sound of doors bursting open one after the other.

That surprise attack made Beatrice’s shoulders jump. She turned around, and the ones who came tumbling out of those open doors were several children she didn’t have any recollection of.

“Wh-Who are they…?”

“They’re children who live in the nearby Earlham Village. They’re very close with Subaru-kun, and readily agreed to cooperate with today as well. Subaru-kun is virtuous as always”

“It’s not the time to be saying that, in fact! Why would you just let human children into the mansion…”

“We received proper permission from Roswaal-sama before he left. The rooms which would pose an issue if entered have been closed off. As such, Beatrice-sama, please also be careful so as to not enter the third floor of the main wing, as well as the personal rooms, changing room, and treasury.”

Rem smoothly appending warnings and precautions left Beatrice speechless. The children, finding the frozen Beatrice, immediately pointed their fingers at her.

“That’s the girl Subaru talked about!” “The shut-in!” “Her dress is cute!”

Thus, confirming their prey, they advanced as a group towards Beatrice. Overwhelmed by their intensity, Beatrice ran to the opposite side of the hallway in a panic.

“By the way, those children are also an It for Beatrice-sama. Do your best running, so as to not get caught.”

Being whispered that by Rem, who was running parallel to her, Beatrice’s face became beet red.

“He…! Was far more devious than Betty had imagined, I suppose!”

Without alluding to the number of Its that would be chasing Beatrice, he let her see him get frustrated at Rem being seen through, pretending that his cards had been taken away, then deployed the children.

With just how much drive had he engaged his guiles for such a trivial bet.

“Go there!” “Catch her!” “Strip her bare!”

While running from the children who were loudly chasing after her, Beatrice continued to single mindedly lay insults on Subaru, who was looking at her with wide nostrils, within her head.

“That bastard will not get away with this, in fact!”

5

And after much of that, Beatrice’s Double Tag reached a fever pitch.

“Ah. It’s Beatrice. I gotta run!”

“I found you, I suppose! You’re not getting away, in fact!”

Finding Emilia in the west wing and chasing her, the difference in nimbleness and stride left her in the dust in the blink of an eye. However, her running was too honest, so if she just circled around her—

“There she is!” “Found her!” “My wife!”

“Those kiddoes are here, I suppose! Just give it up already, in fact!”

However, obstructed by the children who came jumping from her flanks, Beatrice had to roll over and escape. If she overextended and got caught it’d all be for nothing. In addition, the stamina of those children knew no bounds. They were no geniuses, but in the purest of senses their energeticness was a menace, they were a formidable enemy.

“And the brats aren’t the only issue, I suppose…!”

The running Emilia, and the hindering children. Although they were unpredictable in nature, in Tag, they had a weakness called honesty. Rather the problem was…

“—That bastard has still not shown up even once, in fact.”

The one who offered the bet, Subaru, had yet to come out from the Forbidden Archive to tag Beatrice. Beatrice hadn’t caught sight of that wicked form of his even once.

After all, even Beatrice didn’t think she could handle Subaru as easily as the children. Besides losing to him in speed, his eccentric imaginings wouldn’t lose to the children, either.

With just the fact that he crossed her when explaining the rules, Beatrice’s wariness towards Subaru had reached unprecedented levels.

On one hand, she wanted him to come at her, but on the other hand, she didn’t want him to come at her.

The moment she thought like that, her mind had already finely lost, and Beatrice, who was concentrating to her utmost, did not realize that.

“—Hah!”

Going down the stairs in one jump, her skirt fluttered as she made contact with the ground. She firmly stepped onto the rug and broke into a sprint, crossing the passage from the west wing to return to the main wing. And,

“No, I mustn’t!”

Emilia, who just happened to poke her head out of the room ahead, was noticed by Beatrice and began running away. Catching that dancing silver hair, Beatrice sped up, determined to not let her escape.

“You won’t escape anymore, I suppose! Peacefully surrender yourself, in fact!”

“No! I’m having so much fun! I wanna play more! I’ll put in effort!”

“I’m telling you to not put any effort in, I suppose!”

Both of them ran while having their disparaging exchange. As they did so, the sound of their voices was picked up by the children, who appeared from further behind Beatrice.

“There!” “Finally!” “Spotted!” “Victory!”

“Couldn’t be more obnoxious, in fact!”

Oblivious of what Beatrice meant, the children fiercely pursued her.

With Emilia at the head, Beatrice in the middle, and the children chasing her tail, it could be anyone’s game.

In this crystallization of Double Tag, Emilia didn’t run upstairs, but down instead. She jumped all the way down the stairs from the second to first floor, heading not to the east wing, but to the very center of the mansion.

“That’s it, I suppose!”

If she turned just her head around, she’d see that the children at her rear were a fair distance away. The hunter Beatrice was just letting out a victory yell over her catching the rabbit before her eyes, before they caught up to her.

“Ummm, errrr…”

Her eyes darting side to side as she looked around, Emilia thought about where she should run. As if to capitalize on that expression, Beatrice took a chance.

To lead Emilia towards that place, to where she had placed a trap in the center of the main wing—

“Wait, in fact! I won’t let you escape to the dining hall, I suppose!”

"—The dining hall!"

So honest—.

If there was any reason for Emilia's defeat, that reason would indeed have to be that personality of hers.

At Beatrice's yelling, Emilia reflexively thought the dining hall was her means of escape. That honesty of hers made Beatrice, who took advantage of it, feel anxious.

That said, a game was a game. And so long as they were caught in a trap, a rabbit's fate was decided.

"Huh? This is—"

Throwing the dining hall door open, Emilia, who had jumped into the room, could be heard making a dismayed voice. The dining hall she jumped into was the room that was initially connected to the forbidden archive with Door Crossing.

In other words, since she hadn't refreshed Door Crossing, the door to the dining hall was still connected to the forbidden archive. Aside from being cornered in the forbidden archive, Emilia had truly stopped her feet at the unexpected sight.

Bringing down an unmoving prey in your own familiar territory, for a hunter, was a cinch—.

"It would seem, Beatrice was a step… ten steps ahead, in fact!!"

Confirming her victory, Beatrice made a sharp turn and jumped straight into the dining hall—into the forbidden archive. Then her hand reached for the back of Emilia, who had stopped in surprise, and,

"—Welcome!"

"Wha-?!"

The arms that came from the side quickly nabbed Beatrice's body.

Held by both arms from behind, Beatrice's legs hung in the air. Turning around as if wondering what had happened, she locked eyes with the devilishly smiling Subaru.

"Match over~. Sorry but, as you can see, this is Subaru's win, Betty."

Looking at Beatrice, who was being held up, Puck coldly announced that, sitting upon the stepladder.

Off to the side, Emilia had a slightly bitter smile, and the children who caught up began high-fiving each other right outside the room, leaving Beatrice dumbfounded.

"I told you, didn't I? Beatrice"

Adjusting his hold on the wordless Beatrice, Subaru looked at the girl face-to-face.

"—That this was a contest of underhandedness. Did you think you could beat me?"

That smile irritating her, Beatrice drove her knee into Subaru's solar plexus.

6

"From the start, I could imagine you'd use the forbidden archive to entrap Emilia. After all, you have a bit of a habit of using Door Crossing to play with people."

"Grrrr, I suppose…"

Hearing the post-match brief, Beatrice growled in frustration. Finding satisfaction in that vexed face, Subaru rubbed his gouged solar plexus.

—Subaru's strategy regarding Double Tag, was simple.

First, the trap set for the role of the It who would chase Beatrice. The plan was to let her become aware of Rem's existence beforehand, then throw the reinforcements called children at

Beatrice, who was in over her head.

With that measure in place, Beatrice's leeway would be taken away, and with the plan to bait her using Emilia, they'd deal the decisive blow.

"I told Emilia your starting point and I had her run into the forbidden archive at the so-called critical moment. All that was left was getting myself in position in the forbidden archive. The moment the hunter is about to hunt their prey, is when the real opening appears."

Beatrice had no words of objection against the proud Subaru's art of war. Since she'd completely danced on top of Subaru's palm, she'd seem like a sore loser no matter what she said.

Hugging her knees on top of the stepladder, she was putting her all into glaring at Subaru.

"But man, what a goof that was. What was that, what was it you said? That Beako was one step…ten steps ahead? Unfortunately for you, I was eleven steps ahead!"

"Cut it out, you're getting quite in over your head, I suppose!"

"babmph!"

Unable to take his boasting anymore, Beatrice's rage exploded, blowing him away with a shockwave. Beatrice snorted at Subaru, who'd hit the wall and bounced.

"I acknowledge your underhandedness, but I have no obligation to endure ridicule, in fact. In the first place, Betty didn't even want to join in on this bet, I suppose. That was…"

"You want to pretend this contest you took part in didn't happen, well isn't that too good for you? Even Puck would get angry and saddened. He'd say "I don't remember raising you like that.""

"You're a really annoying guy, in fact…"

Beatrice, who was trying to throw the entire match out, clicked her tongue at Subaru's impression. However, seeing that stubborn profile, Subaru sighed.

"Well, if you absolutely must refuse, then I guess I won't avoid reconsidering."

"…How lucky I am, I suppose."

"Since you're being childish and all. I also feel a little like I thoroughly destroyed you too hard by going in fully prepared. You just danced so beautifully on the palm of my hand that I accidentally…"

"You too, haven't been made to dance enough with Betty's magic power, in fact?"

Being honest with his own feelings and communicating them a bit too honestly, Subaru made Beatrice discontent.

However, there was some honesty to his feelings there. Of course though, he didn't think the bet itself was a mistake.

"A part of it is that I can't really force you, y'know? While I think I could also make you do it even if you're unwilling, it's kinda like forcing you to do it is a little different from my original intentions."

"You should have said that from the start, I suppose… What you wanted to do, in fact."

"Weeell, it's a mystery even to me. But, I feel like I saw what I wanted to see today with the challenge as a pretext. —Seeing you run around all energetically like that"

"Hmph…"

While sitting cross legged on the floor, Subaru laughed at Beatrice as she pouted.

"You might have been reluctant, but I had fun. I think Emilia-tan and the kiddoes from the village did too. That's not too bad as a compromise."

"Feels like Betty got all the short ends of every stick, I suppose."

"That is that and this is this. Just think of it as a lost cause and give up."

After saying that to the sulking Beatrice, Subaru stood up and headed towards the door of the forbidden archive.

They had thoroughly turned the mansion into a playground. As such, like he'd promised Roswaal, he had to return the mansion to how it was before, or else the scary scary scolding of Ram awaited him.

"Beako"

Just before exiting the room, Subaru turned to Beatrice.

She didn't reply. However, Beatrice gave Subaru a glare so harsh it hurt.

"Let's play again sometime."

Neither affirmation nor denial, none of those actions occurred before Subaru closed the doors.

Door Crossing activated, and Subaru was transferred to the entrance to the dining hall. Both Emilia and Rem were standing right there as Subaru raised both of his hands with a dejected face.

"Hey, good work there."

"Yes, Subaru-kun did good work as well."

"Sorry for troubling you so much, Rem. Like having to deal with the kiddos and stuff, sorry I pushed that on to you. They're annoying and won't listen to anyone, right?"

"That's not the case at all. All of them were very nice and obedient, I gave them some fried snacks as gifts before returning them to the village, but they said they wanted to come again."

"So they treat you way different from me?!"

They acted completely insolent to Subaru, but meek with Rem it seemed. Next time, he'd need to cross examine while doing their daily radio calisthenics.

He also had to give them his gratitude for their cooperation as well.

"So then, were you able to talk with Beatrice properly? She wasn't mad?"

Subaru, who was making a sour face at the attitudes of the children, had Emilia tilt her neck at him in a puzzled manner as if wanting to know more. Her gaze, fixed on the dining hall doors, focused on the forbidden archive beyond them.

"For the time being, it seems like she admitted to the results of the match…but seems like the result of the bet is in a delicate spot. I also considered that kind of secondary as well."

"Is that so? Then, what did you do the game of tag for?"

"Well, that was to play. I thought to show that unhealthy shut-in little girl about the fun of running around with your all together with kids your age. In that sense, I think it went well."

Subaru, winking playfully, made Emilia make a bit of a surprised face. But, soon enough, she sighed in a dumbfounded manner and smiled.

"Yes, that's right. Beatrice surely also had fun. After all, I had toooons of fun."

"That's what's most important… So then, all that's left is to do the clean-up after the festival."

Fascinated by Emilia's smile, Subaru scratched his cheek, as if to hide his embarrassment. Doing so, Rem pulled lightly on Subaru's sleeve.

"The clean-up is important, but first let's have a short rest. Roswaal-sama and Nee-sama's return is tomorrow night, after all. There is still plenty of time."

“Right, Rem prepared some fried snacks. Let’s have a bit of teatime and do the clean up after that. The truth is that I would also have liked to invite Beatrice though…”

“Aaah, she’d probably, decline…I guess?”

“In that case, I’ll have Puck bring her over. Then we’d be even.”

Her fouled humor might get a little better if Puck entertained her. But It’s hard to think that Emilia’s proposal had that kind of selfish motive.

“So then, Subaru-kun, let’s go.”

“Yeah yeah, let’s go.”

“I get it I get it. We also shouldn’t cut corners from being in a rush and end up scolded by Ram.”

The reason behind their somewhat high spirits was perhaps because this day was meaningful to them both. If that was the case, it was worth it for Subaru to have worked his guiles.

“It’d be nice, if you could also think the same.”

While thinking of the girl who wasn’t here, Subaru muttered that to himself. Then, the dining hall doors, which were letting out a sweet fragrance, gently opened.

7

By the time they finished the clean up after the game of tag, around a whole day had passed—when the master of the mansion’s return was close at hand.

“Those brats, they did go at it relentlessly, didn’t they?”

“It’s good they did not break anything. Since we did gather everything that could be broken by the children in one place beforehand”

“Ah, good work you two! I’m sorry I could only help you until halfway through.”

Subaru, who was rolling his shoulders, and the smiling Rem next to him, had both come to the entrance hall. While doing so, Emilia, who was coming down the stairs, reunited with the pair, joining them as they stood in the hall.

“But even then, having even Emilia-tan coming to welcome him, just how blessed can Roschi get?”

“Really? But, after hearing what Subaru said yesterday I thought that it’s something important to do. While I didn’t really think about it that hard before, I thought from now on I wanted to do it earnestly.”

“I-It’s not something you have to put that much effort and thought into, so do it in moderation ok?”

Gripping her fist, the awfully spirited Emilia gave a wry laugh. Her honest and serious side was too quickly affected by a little idealism.

It happened as they were having their usual exchange.

“…”

Suddenly, the sound of someone’s footsteps entered the ears of all three of them. They sounded small, and even somewhat hesitant, when the three of them realized their origin, their eyes went wide in surprise, and each of them laughed.

The person behind the footsteps approached the three of them without saying a word, then spilled out a defeated sigh.

Without touching on the reason at all, the three of them accepted the small silhouette as a fourth member.

“…”

No one said anything about the silhouette joining in. They all simply naturally understood that things were as they should be.

Time quietly passed. Eventually, the entrance doors opened up with talking voices—

"—Welcome back."

Thus, the three cheerful voices overlapped with a single more reserved voice, and greeted the lord of the manor.

Some Like it Cold

1

—It was a very slight omen for change.

Rem: “Good morning, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Ahfu, good morning. …Hey, Rem. It’s a bit cold today, don’t you think?”

Rem: “I think so. It might be a bit chilly this morning. As expected of Subaru-kun, such keen insight.”

Subaru: “Well anyone would at least recognize cold weather…”

Subaru hurriedly made the topic into a talk about the temperature with Rem, who he met at the corridor early in the morning in the Roswaal residence. It was still morning, but the air was a lot colder than before. Yesterday it was hot enough to bring out sweat, but there was quite the difference in temperature throughout the night.

Subaru closes the front of his uniform to combat that coldness, buttoning his shirt all the way up to its collar.

Subaru: “I don’t feel so concerned about my matter with the cold when I see your appearance, Rem. Do you not have any seasonal maid outfits? That outfit would be rough in this weather.”

Rem: “If we get fully into ice season, there are maid outfits for the cold season. The material is thick and there’s cotton stuffed in it, so it’s very warm.”

Rem responds like that while wearing her usual maid outfit with a smile. It had a design where her shoulders and legs were boldly exposed. The excessive skin shown that would normally be a joy to see was cold now.

By the way, ice season is a way to denote a season with cold weather that is similar to winter. On the contrary, it seemed that hot seasons were denoted as “fire seasons”, and that there were changes with how people referred the four seasons in this world.

Subaru: “However, shouldn’t you wear ice season clothes with this type of cold instead? If you have trouble proposing that change, then I’ll make the direct appeal to Ros-chi.”

Rem: “I’m happy about you worrying about me, but my sister and I are already used to it, so it’s fine. This is not something you need to bother Roswaal for.”

Rem shook her head firmly in response to Subaru’s concern. He couldn’t understand her once again, but he held back on voicing his opinion.

Subaru: “Well, if you say so, Rem…by the way, where’s Nee-sama? Not with you this morning?”

Rem: “Nope. Nee-sama is sleeping in a bit, as it seems she doesn’t want to get out of bed with the morning being cold.”

Subaru: “Didn’t you just say you and Nee-sama were used to it?!”

Subaru imagines how Ram is being cozy in her bed by herself at this moment, and lets out a sigh as he feels an obligation to punish the older sister, who is spoiled with her younger sister’s mercy.

Subaru: “You don’t need this. It doesn’t matter if it’s cold or hot. I’m going to hammer the fact that there are no breaks for residential maids into Nee-sama’s head. Let’s go, Rem.”

Rem: “But Nee-sama is tired from her daily work, so sleeping in on the occasional cold day isn’t that…”

Subaru: “Let’s go, Rem!”

Rem: “Yes, if Subaru-kun says so!”

Rem’s has a change in heart within an instant, and she casually follows Subaru from behind, who starts walking with his arms waving. And in the end, he got stuck with doing work for this day while receiving resentful complaints from Ram, who was dragged out from her futon, being blown on by the cold breeze as well.

2

—And then came the day after he experienced the coldness of Ram's attitude and the cold wind.

Subaru: "Afu…Not only am I sleepy, but it's also the cold seas…oh, what the, Beako?"

Beatrice: "Yuck, I suppose."

When Subaru woke up and exited the corridor, he came across a rare sight of a young lady wearing a dress, walking in the empty corridor—he happened to meet Beatrice.

This was a girl with magnificent drills that greatly stood out, who didn't turn around even though she was the second person to walk around in the mansion sneakily—the first person obviously being the head of the mansion.

Subaru: "What are you doing up this early in the morning? There's no way you stayed up all night, right? If you do nothing but stay up late, you'll stop getting taller, plus your eyes will go bad if you read in the dark."

Beatrice: "That's an unusual and nosy warning. My height and eyesight have nothing to do with…I don't have time to mess around with you in the first place, I suppose. Now, go get lost."

Subaru: "Fine fine. Putting that aside, isn't today really cold? Yesterday was kinda cold too, but today is even colde…"

Beatrice: "You don't get anything, I suppose! I told you I'm not going to play around with you!"

Subaru tries to compromise with the shouting girl, Beatrice, while shrugging his shoulders at the coldness that was more intense than yesterday. She gave him a nasty look, but Subaru did not pay attention to it, as he sniffs up mucus with his nose.

The reason for the tension in the atmosphere was because of the freezing cold wind that came blowing in every now and then. It even looked as if the leaves swaying with the wind, seen in the dim and cloudy view out the window, were in pain.

Subaru: “It’s easy to catch a cold when the seasons change, so be careful.”

Beatrice: “Hmm. It’s pointless to worry that much about me. I’m not that weak enough to have you worry about me. Don’t get too full of yourself, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Worrying about you…or rather, taking care of you if you catch a cold sounds like a pain. I feel bad for Rem when I think about her not coming across your room easily and having the porridge she made become cold as a result. At least be admirable when you catch a cold. You sure aren’t a cute loli.”

Beatrice: “Why must you complain to me for the results of your hypothetical outcomes?!”

Beatrice was blamed with his imaginations, and she angrily resents him for it. She quickly puffs up her face, turns towards Subaru, and swipes her hand as if she was shooing away an insect.

Beatrice: “Anyways, I am very busy. You go ahead and burn yourself out with the things you need to do while you risk your life, not caring about whether it’s cold or not cold, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That’s bull. Saying you’re busy when you’re someone who just reads books in her room…oh, that’s right.”

Beatrice: “…I’m leaving now.”

Subaru: “You should help out with the work at the mansion sometimes too. You’ll shrug off the cold if you move your body, and there will be less worry about getting a cold from insufficient exercise. It’s killing two birds with one stone, yeah!”

Subaru makes this suggestion with a smile as he holds onto the shoulder of the girl who sought to turn his back on him, Beatrice. In response, Beatrice turns around with a displeased look and says

Beatrice: “…Let go of me, I suppose. How many times do I have to tell you that I am busy? Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Subaru: “Okay okay, I get it I get it. I’ll talk to Roswaal so that you get the proper money for your portion of work, so help out with stuff such as weeding the garden like a kid.”

Beatrice: “Wh-Wha?! I cannot believe you think that I am puffing up because of a reason like that! Also, listen to what I am saying, I suppose! Listen! Seriously, stop screwing around with me!”

Subaru picks up the girl with a reddening face, Beatrice, and took her away as he started to walk while she acts violently against him. She was resisting it, but today she surprisingly wasn’t using any magic to counterattack.

The insufficient part of her resistance was convenient for him, though that was a bit of a miracle.

Subaru: “Aaalright, time to run! Let’s knock out this coldness at full spirit!”

Beatrice: “Once I get down, the first thing I’ll knock out is you, I suppose!”

Subaru shouts at Beatrice, who erupts in anger, and cheerfully ran over to the mansion’s corridor.

The sound of Beatrice’s screechy, angry voice continued to be heard throughout the mansion throughout the rest of the day.

3

—And then came the day after he played with around with Beatrice.

Roswaal: “Ooooh, look what we have here. You’re up early, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Oh…ohh…it’s Ros-chi. Goo…good mor…good morning…”

There was no day that resembled a day off for an employee’s work.

Subaru met the head of the mansion early in the morning at the corridor—the chief of the Roswaal Mathers' estate.

As always, his face was applied with clown makeup. This eccentric noble was doing his usual patrolling today as well.

His heterochromatic eyes—Subaru receives a look from his blue and yellow eyes. Once he exchanged morning greetings with him while shivering, his cracking head and cheeks stiffen, and he looked out the window.

Roswaal tilts his head curiously at Subaru's appearance.

Roswaal: "Doesn't look like you're in a very good mood this morning, huuuh. What happened?"

Subaru: "Nothing happened. It's just that it's cold!"

Subaru listens to him say something undeniable and breathed out foggy breath as he talked big.

It was cold, too cold. Subaru tramples on the bed in this cold that was extreme enough to to freeze his own mucus.

Subaru: "No matter how you look at it, this weather is too abnormal! I thought that it was just my imagination up until yesterday…but clearly that's not the case today! The windows are frozen, and my breath is pure white!"

Subaru pointed his fingers at the frozen window. He had countless blankets wrapped around his body. He had his steward clothes on top of his night jersey. It was a style that completely insulted the style of royalties. Even when he was wearing these clothes, the chills were eating away Subaru's life through the openings of them.

Subaru: "The hell is up with this?! Does the change in season really come at us with such sudden force? The temperature has been going down 10 degrees each day these past 2 days! Even a bear would freeze to death from not being in time for hibernation being attacked by the cold with this kind of force!"

Roswaal: "My oh my, you are weeaak. Can you not do "that"? "By keeping myself up with my mind and body, just how much would the temperature go down, my presence of mind speaks”□□□”

Subaru: “Don’t see myself being convinced with you wearing those fluffy clothes and fur, though.”

Roswaal talked about the force of will, but he appeared to be perfectly protected against the cold, so he wasn’t convincing. He wore layers of arctic clothes of thick fur, and they looked as if they would even allow him to bear the intense cold of snowy mountains.

Subaru: “At this rate the difference in protection against the cold is so great that it wouldn’t be unthinkable for it to be a reason for murder…*sniffle*”

Roswaal: “Seeing you sniffle with a sinister look like that certainly indicates that you’re just about at your limits, huuuh. I overlooked the cold up until yesterday, but as expected, this is a bit…”

Subaru: “Judging from the way you’re talking about it, do you know why it’s this cold? If so, then let’s do something about it. If the source of this is some sort of witchbeast like “Jack Frost”, then let’s exterminate it. Let’s do it ASAP too. Sensei, please *sniffle*”

Subaru instigates him to join in with his idea little by little, as Roswaal puts his hand on his chin. He was just about at his limit with his drooping mucus and his frozen train of thought. He was reaching the point where he’d be capable of causing a moral hazard by taking everyone else’s clothes off.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun, are you peerhaaaps pretty bad with cold weather?”

Subaru: “I complain about winter being cold, summer being hot, spring making me sleepy, and about matsutake mushrooms being expensive in the fall. I’m the classic example of a weakling, *sniffle*.”

Roswaal: “Don’t know what matsutake mushrooms are, but I’m understanding that you are a young man with very short patience. If that’s so, then there’s nothing that can be done about it. We aren’t going to go complain.”

Roswaal waves his fur mantle and starts to walk as if to guide Subaru, who followed him. Subaru steps on the long fur carpet and squints to look out the clouded window.

Roswaal: “Interested in what’s out there?”

Subaru: “No, I’m not. I wasn’t raised in a snow country, so I’m not well informed on this, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we were to have snow with it being just this cold. See, I’m worried about clearing the snow on the village’s fields, if we were to have snow that is.”

He’s been told that it’s almost time for the harvesting of the fields for the Alam village near the mansion.

Subaru, being someone who was intimate with the villagers, had made a promise with the children to help with the season’s harvest. Even without that promise, snow was not welcoming weather for it.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun you…get along particularly well with children, huuuh.”

Subaru: “Just a coincidence. Besides, I’m not fond of those selfish, rash creatures called kids. However, they hug me, so it can’t be helped…”

Roswaal: “Yes yes, that’s what’s commonly known as being “tsun tsun” back at Subaru-kun’s home town, riiiight.”

Subaru: “*sniffle*! Ahh, shit, my noseee! *sniffle**sniffle*! Oh shitt!”

Subaru uttered inconvenient words and sniffled to force a cover up. Roswaal overlooks that with suppressed laughter and traced the window with the finger of his held out hand.

Roswaal: “Well, have no worry; it is this cold, but it shouldn’t reach all the way to the village. Since after all, this chill is only around the area of the mansion.”

Subaru: “I can’t relax! What is up with that mysterious phenomenon? Do we just assume it’ll sort itself out?!”

Roswaal: “This cold won’t spread, since there are two girls who went around and dealt with it. I wonder if they did it sneakily before they got caught by you yesterday.”

Subaru: “…Talking about Beatrice and such?”

Roswaal’s words cause him to remember Beatrice’s strange behavior from yesterday. He didn’t know what she was doing since early morning, but perhaps she was decreasing the amount of damage from the chill.

If that was the truth, the person she was helping would be—

Roswaal: “I don’t need to explain who is the source for this cold, do Iiii?”

Roswaal, who was guiding him, stopped walking at the same time Subaru arrived at an answer.

Subaru was very familiar with the the room of the Roswaal’s residence west wing’s top floor that was right before his eyes. This is because this was a place he’d visit once without fail during the day to see the room’s owner.

Roswaal: “Emilia-sama, sorry to intrude you this early in the morning. Can we come in for a biiiit?”

Emilia: “—?! Roswaal?! Uhh, uhh, hey wait! Wait!”

When Roswaal called out at the door, they heard rushing sounds from the room as a voice responded to them.

It was a silver bell like voice that Subaru knew even beyond the door, but it caused him to show that he felt very conspicuous disturbance and uneasiness. He felt uncomfortable. He also felt uncomfortable about the owner of the room being up at this time.

They spent several weeks under the same roof. She wasn’t very good at waking up.

Roswaal: “Suuubaru-kun”

Roswaal calls Subaru’s name, who was knitting his eyebrows, and pointed at the room’s doorknob. Surely he wasn’t asking him to open the door, was he? Subaru reaches out for the doorknob while having doubt in his mind.

Subaru: “It’s cold! What is up with this thing?! Emilia-tan, can we come in?!”

Emilia: “Eh?! What, Subaru’s here too?!”

Subaru: “I am here, but you didn’t pay attention to what I said. You have something else to say, don’t you?!”

Emilia: “Something to say…something to say? …Good morning?”

Subaru: “How polite of you to greet…wait no! Ahh, dammit, I’m opening the door!”

The doorknob he felt was so chilled to the point that he thought that he was feeling ice. It was highly likely that there would be an even more intense chill within the room, considering how cold the doorknob was.

Subaru: “I’m coming in! If you are in the middle of changing your clothes, then thanks!”

Emilia: “Not “sorry”?!”

Subaru opens the door to the room, having both his concern and secret intentions come out at the same time. The door had a resistant that made a sound, which sounded as if it was coming off from the floor, and once that happened, the blocked cold wind came overflowing from the room.

Subaru: “No wayy! It’s coldd!! Whatt is the meaning of this?!”

Subaru shrieks at the cold wave that was beyond his expectations and looks inside the room with an astonished look in his eyes. Upon looking inside, he saw Emilia against the bed with both hands held out as she stood still.

Her face quickly blushes, and while she used the bed to hide that from Subaru he says

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, just what is…”

Emilia: “Yo-You can’t just do that! For you to enter without getting permission from the owner of the room first, that’s just rude…yes that’s reeaally rude, right? See, um, hey, do it again!”

Subaru: “And that’s what Emilia-tan says, but what does the owner of the mansion have to say about it?”

Roswaal: “I grant you permission to enteeer.”

Emilia: “Roswaal!”

Subaru pushes aside Emilia’s request with sophistry and stepped into the room.

The source of the cold wave was without a doubt the inside of this room. It’s identity was made clear from Roswaal’s evidence, Beatrice’s actions, and from Emilia’s childlike attitude of trying to cover up the mischief.

Subaru: “Where is Puck, the source of all this? I have a bone to pick with him, as someone who is a representative for those sensitive to cold.”

Emilia: “The source? What do you mean by source? He didn’t do any…er weelll, that’s not really right, but I don’t know.”

Puck: “—It’s fine, Lia. No matter what you do, it seems this is about the limit for hiding it, soo.”

She was bad at realizing it was time to give up and acted flustered, but what helped Emilia out of the situation, someone who couldn’t make tricky lies, was the resignation of none other than the perpetrator of the riot himself.

In response to that voice, Emilia ruffles her eyebrows, turns around at the bed, and puts her hands on her waist.

Emilia: “Jeez, Puck you idiot! I was so close to fooling them too…”

Puck: “Eh, it would’ve been impossible even after 100 years.”

Emilia: “Eh?!”

Putting aside Emilia, who was unironically surprised, Subaru takes a peek at the bed behind her. The spirit who was behind the case for the cold wave was circling around on top of the blanket.

Subaru: “You really do seem like a cat when you do that.”

Puck: “Mmm, sorry for causing trouble.”

The grey furball moves himself around in response to being called out to, and his black, round eyes look at Subaru. The kitten that was small enough to hold on one’s hand, Puck, shrugs his shoulders, gives a wry smile at Emilia, and says,

Puck: “Don’t get mad at Lia and Betty, okay? You two, think of this as something I did for myself.”

And that is how he covered up for his beloved daughter and younger sister with care.

4

Subaru: “Magicletting Period?”

Subaru puzzles over the unfamiliar word with a frown on his face.

He was at the Roswaal’s residence’s dining room, and all of them were gathered together. Everyone was surrounding Puck, who was on top of the table, including Ram, who was bad at getting up, and Beatrice, who tried to run away.

There was another source for the cold wave that was had these past few days, not just Puck. Just what had they found out here? What popped up into the conversation as an additional source was the start of the “Magicletting Period”, some particular vocabulary.

Subaru: “What is the Magicletting Period? It’s not just a mating season?”

Puck: “I’m not an animal, and I don’t have something like a mating season. That’s rude.”

Subaru: “That comment worries me from all angles.”

Subaru turns to his surroundings with a bewildered face in response to Puck, who was washing his face with an exposed appearance of a cat. Once he did this, the person who raised her hand at his glance with a “yes” was Rem.

Rem was in a maid outfit for ice season, which she hadn’t used until yesterday. There was a lot less exposure in this outfit, but even then, looking at the legs exposed with the short skirt made him feel chilly. It was common for him to not understand the mentality of a girl wearing a skirt in winter, even when he crossed into this world.

Rem: “The Magicletting Period is a phenomenon that happens periodically just for the existences that have strong magical power. Each of their od for the strength of their magical power—the od influences the attributes of the magical stones, so it’s really limiting.”

Subaru: “Is od once again something that is different from mana and gate?”

As far as Subaru’s knowledge went, mana was the source for the magical power of this world. Gate is the organ that circulates mana inside and outside the body, and it seemed that gate had a direct relation to the quality of a sorcerer’s attributes.

Incidentally, Subaru’s attributes as a magic user were mediocre. To make matters worse, as of now, he’s been firmly told to not use magic because of how he allowed himself to use his gate unreasonably.

Subaru: “Judging from what Rem said, I’m guessing od is more important than mana and gate?”

Ram: “—That ignorance is enough to become a crime against

Roswaal, you being the employee that you are.”

And then Ram let out a blunt sigh at Subaru, who said something that showed his shallow understanding of magic. Ram was next to Rem, bundled up in even thicker clothes. She makes a scowling expression with her light pink eyes and says,

Ram: “I’m questioning your common sense now that you’ve said that you don’t know about od. You’ve reached an extreme level of imprudent shallowness, Barusu.”

She always abused him with her words, but they were even sharper in this cold wave. Ram scolded Subaru with her look, holding onto her sister’s arm to keep herself warm while she breathed foggy breath.

However, unlike Rem, she had cute earmuffs on, so her look had no effect.

Subaru: “I’ve thought this since the day before yesterday, but Nee-sama is really bad with the cold, huh.”

Ram: “Weak points and strong points are entirely subjective matters. I do not live life while seeing things with a narrow outlook like that. Stop saying oblivious things, it’s stupid. Go die.”

Subaru: “The second half of your statement was piercing!”

Beatrice: “This is just the usual, but leaving this up to you guys wouldn’t really allow the conversation move forward, I suppose…”

The impatient girl, Beatrice, sees the exchange between Subaru, who didn’t forget to provoke her even in this cold, and Ram, who was displeased, and forces her way into the conversation. She wore her usual dress as she pointed her finger at Subaru.

Beatrice: “It can’t be helped, so I will give an explanation. od is a life stone…it’s a source of magical power that spirits, humans, witchbeasts, and any other type of life have within them, no doubt about it, I suppose. od is like a type of vessel for magical power, so it’s also an organ that saves up the mana taken in from gate.”

Subaru: “Hmmm, a vessel that stockpiles magic. Go ahead and continue.”

Beatrice: “The way you’re speaking irritates me, I suppose… Anyways, we’re dealing with a great amount of mana of outstanding od. However, there’s a limit to any type of vessel’s capacity, I suppose. And the mana that overflows because of the od meeting its limit…it’s necessary to emit it before that happens.”

Subaru: “Bring it out before your stomach explodes inside, huh. … So something like constipation?”

Beatrice: “Think about how you word it, I suppose!”

As Beatrice finishes her explanation, she resents Subaru, who interpreted what she said in his own way. However, he was now able to understand the details of the riot that happened thanks to her.

Subaru: “In other words, it’s this cold because of Puck letting out his saved up mana.”

Emilia: “…Yeah, that’s what it is. Sorry for not saying anything about it.”

The truth of the situation becomes clear. Emilia hung her head in despondence. Subaru sees Emilia’s behavior of taking responsibility for this pet cat’s actions as a guardian and gave a side glance to Puck, the war criminal. Then he says

Subaru: “That’s some bothersome reduction of constipation…is it something that’s done regularly?”

Puck: “About once a year. I let it out moderately when I lived with Lia in the forest. However, you guys may be having these reactions because of how I’ve been quiet about the matter ever since I came here. Tehehe”

Subaru: “Don’t you “tehehe” me!”

Subaru makes a face of astonishment at the cat that let out a shy laugh. After that, he folded his arms and continues.

Subaru: “Well, I won’t complain because it’s necessary for you to let out your magical power. But why did the effects of it suddenly get stronger these past three days? There are other ways to do it, aren’t there?”

Puck: “Hmmm, I was being careful about it’s effects and did it little by little since the start. However, considering how the amount of mana was greater than usual, and how I thought that nobody would say anything even when it got cold, I thought to myself “Hmm? I wonder if I can do it a little more? Alright, I can I can! Everyone is surprisingly simple to deal with!”…”

Subaru: “You are careless with your work!”

Just when he thought this was perhaps due to circumstances beyond his control, it was actually the result of simple negligence.

In any case, the peculiarity from sensing the temperature lower 10 degrees each day is something anyone would notice. Thinking about how this chilling cold was a result of Puck getting carried away with himself caused displeasure to grow.

Beatrice: “It is essential for a great spirit like Bubby to go through the Magicletting Period. Out of consideration for Bubby’s cuteness and hairiness, put a stop to this meaningless noise, I suppose. *sniffle*”

Subaru: “You’re having the sniffles too! Or rather, I thought you’d be in a pickle too once this got found out, but you played a trick and put on a barrier to trap the coldness. Am I right? Tell me the truth!”

Beatrice: “*Bffft*. I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

Subaru: “You just blew your nose!”

The top of Beatrice’s nose became red, but she still continued to defend Puck. When Subaru became dumbfounded by the obstinate girl’s attitude, Emilia took his place and came into the conversation with a “Wait”.

Emilia: “You see, Puck and I have been reeaally thinking about the incident that happened. However, Puck should've been close to finishing his Magicletting Period…right Puck?"

Puck: "Yeah. At the same pace, about three days would've been enough."

Subaru: "We wouldn't be prepared for that! If it got cold at this pace, we would fall over from freezing to death!"

Puck wasn't being serious enough about the matter, considering how he was the one responsible for it. It seemed like Puck did not feel the coldness himself, and so he kind of felt like it was something they'd have to deal with themselves.

Subaru: "By the way, I wasn't worried about Puck because he's a spirit and has fur that combats the cold, but aren't you cold with such thin clothing, Emilia-tan? I want to see Emilia-tan with fluffy thick clothes."

He showed his true motive with the last part of his words, but the first part was him seriously worrying about Emilia. Emilia was wearing the thin dress that she always wore, even in this cold.

In response to Subaru's point, Emilia looked down with an increasingly apologetic look.

Emilia: "Well um, I am contracted with Puck, you know? Which is why the effects from receiving Puck's magic are kept in control. So, that's why um, I am umm, good with this cold…"

Emilia becomes more and more apologetic, and the assumptive girl looked as if she got smaller. She was acting self punishing a lot this time partly and seemingly because of how she felt guilty about how she was fine with the cold.

The pricks of her conscience would be scathing if she were the only one to avoid damage because her parent's uproar.

Subaru: "Isn't it a bit pitiful to cause this much trouble for your daughter? Let's think of something to do about it."

Puck: "I get it okay, I'm sorry. Even I think it would be nice if there was another method, but did you think of something? I'm fine with using all of my mana."

Subaru: "How about you shoot some relevantly powerful magic into the sky?"

Puck: "In other words, you're giving me "that"? The permission to cause destruction and destroy this wor—"

Subaru: "Not giving you that."

Puck: "Just kidding~"

Be it a natural disaster or destroying the world, the exchange was aloof, even if it was a joke. Subaru had a feeling that he wouldn't receive a satisfactory response if he tried to carelessly affirm it, so he held back on speaking rashly for a bit.

Ram: "But the problem with this cold is the hindrance it causes for work. The efficiency of my work has actually gone down remarkably these past three days."

Subaru: "Well if you don't get out of bed, then yeah I'd think your efficiency would drop. Is this Magicletting Period only related to spirits? How about powerful magic users…like Ros-chi and Beako?"

If it included powerful magic users, then they shouldn't be exceptions either. After he tried to take a stab at his interest, Roswaal shrugged his shoulders, and Beatrice was fixing her drills.

Roswaal: "In my case, I use my magical power daily and keep it in check. I have my everyday business to take care of, so my od is always fine."

Subaru: "Why is it that in your everyday business Ram…ah, forget about it. I don't want to know."

In response to Roswaal's side glance, Ram blushes and looks downward. If the suspiciously inappropriate relationship between the head of the mansion and the maid was close to what he thought it was, it would be vivid to him and he wouldn't want to know about it.

Beatrice: “I do fine with my preservation of the forbidden archives and my “door crossing”, I suppose. Yes yes, and lately it’s been useful for striking a loud mouthed human.”

Subaru: “Yeah yeah, cute cute.”

Subaru brushes off her provocation, ignores the pouting girl, and looked at Emilia and Rem.

Subaru: “Then how about Emilia and the others? Mating season…er I mean Magicletting Period, do you guys not have that?”

Rem: “The demonic commending period is only limited to magical powerful attributes that are strong enough to outbreak, so…”

Emilia: “Myself as well, as a magic user, the demonic commending period doesn’t really seem to be related to me…ah, but there were plenty of experiences through Puck. So I’m sorry for this incident. I regret it…”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan sure is joking a lot with her masochism today!”

She had an honest and serious personality, but as for today, it was backfiring on her. This was the one time where Subaru would take the place of the calm faced little girl that they were holding as a criminal and would have no choice but to pitch in and help.

Subaru: “Alright, then I guess I’ve got no choice but to give it what I’ve got and look for a solution. First of all, when was the most recent time you used magic while feeling good about it?”

Puck: “If we’re talking about recently, then it might be when I used it to fight against a wicked girl at the king’s capital. I used enough to soak up all my mana.”

Subaru: “The motivation that just came to me is coming out because of the faded wound of my stomach!”

He had a memory of when he suffered damage from “guts hunting” and had gripping pain from the scar he received just a month ago. This was just to let out magical power, so it was impossible to energetically prepare a dangerous opponent like that.

Puck: “If that can’t count, then maybe it was at the forest when Roswaal came to see Lia. It’s embarrassing to admit it, but I do feel like it was very enjoyable.”

Roswaal: “Ahhh, that certainly was exciting. That might’ve been the first time in my life I experienced a magical battle of that scale, perhaaaps.”

Puck: “I did surprise you because it was sudden without an appointment. Hahaha”

Roswaal: “Well we seriously did clash with each other for the whole day and night, after aalll.”

They were casually laughing with each other, but contrary to the atmosphere, the truth was that it was very dangerous. If these two really did compete with each other like they said, it would be so catastrophic that you’d call it “Apocalypse Now”.

Emilia: “After that, I heard that the map had to be rewritten, but…”

Subaru: “Okay, that’s out too! I reject the strategy of writing a formidable enemy as a “friend”!”

Emilia: “Eh?!”

Subaru: “Don’t give me that! Don’t change the topography because of a fight! Apologize to Inou Tadataka!”

Emilia: “I am sorryyy Tadataka-san. Am I fine now?”

Subaru gets her to apologize to the great man who created a map, and then gets worried from realizing how this was a more difficult challenge than he thought it’d be. He wanted Emilia to lend him knowledge if she could, being someone who had an abundance of experience, but

Emilia: “Puck didn’t really bother anyone when I was with him at the forest, and I didn’t really think the Magicletting Period was that much of a problem. And so I was in a pickle…”

Subaru: “And then these few days are the result of worrying. I understand your feelings of wanting to do something yourself, Emilia-tan, but that's when everyone else…that's when it's okay for you to rely on everyone, myself in particular."

It didn't feel bad to rely on someone. That was something that was even more relevant if it was Emilia. Next there would be Rem, sometimes Ram, then Beatrice and Puck, and it would be okay to add Roswaal to that list too. Then also the villagers, the children, and—wait, isn't that surprisingly a lot of people?

It seemed that he had increased the amount of acquaintances he had in this world. If that was the case, he wanted to take care of those bonds.

Subaru: "If the world turned into ruins and a journey begins to defeat the devil king Puck, it would be troublesome…When it comes to peacefully making temporary measurements, we could… oh that's right."

Emilia: "—! Subaru, did you think of something weird again?"

Rem: "As expected of Subaru-kun. I am impressed."

Subaru: "Those expectations are false starts!"

Subaru gives a wry smile at Emilia, who got her teeth into the matter, and Rem, who was making quick judgements. He walks up to the dining room's window completely filled with clouds, rubs the window with his palm, and looks towards the mansion's courtyard.

Subaru: "The coldness is restricted to this mansion because of Beako's barrier, huh."

Beatrice: "That's right, I suppose. If the chill escapes to anywhere besides the building, then the garden trees and the flower beds would become pitiful. That's why I kept the barrier at a moderate extent, I suppose."

Subaru: "I see you show consideration for the garden. I'll sincerely give you my props for that one. …By the way, about the barrier, can you tamper with the barrier even now? If you can, then I have a request for you."

Beatrice: “There’s nothing I can’t do, I suppose. However, what do you want to do?”

Subaru: “Fufufu, something that is interesting, fun, and crosses over the Magicletting Period, of course.”

Subaru snaps his his fingers with one hand while having the other touching the window, and then points at the ceiling. Roswaal was the only one who had one of his eyes closed while chuckling, while everyone else responded to that gesture by opening their eyes wide.

While having Subaru’s figure reflecting in his yellow eye he says

Roswaal: “I won’t object something that seems interesting. I also had great interest in the spiritism from a few days ago, after aalll. And so, what do you have planned for this mansion and the great spirit’s Magicletting Period? I wonder.”

Subaru: “I’ll write out the formulation of the plan and I’ll read the project. Back at Hokkaido of my hometown…there are notes about my home town in a broad sense, but it’s a festival of that hometown. Let’s squander the rest of Puck’s mana in a grand way.”

What came to Subaru’s mind was a snowscape festival that has only been seen on TV. It was a grand festival held in white snow countries, and borrowing the name from its pioneers he would call it—

Subaru: “The first chitty chitty—the holding of the Roswaal residence’s snow festival!”

“…”

He had a decisive look with his thumb put up and his teeth sparkling. Everyone responds to Subaru’s announcement by holding their breath.

Emilia: “Chitty chitty snow festival…”

Emilia heard that name, says it again, and then tilted her head.

Then—

Emilia: “Do we need…that chitty chitty part?”

—She let just the adoption of that part pass by her, and then he would begin to work out the details for the snow festival.

5

And with this and that, the plan suddenly headed towards implementation, progression is made—

Subaru: “Alright, it’s begun. The first snow festival! Everyone, do you all want to go to New York—?!”

Everyone: “Ye-Yeahh…!…?”

Voices of approval raised sparsely in response to Subaru’s spirit, who was leading a meeting in front of the public.

Subaru wasn’t having much results with their spirit, but he didn’t mind it, as he gazed at the scenery before him. To Subaru and the people he had on board with his plan, the first thing to take care of was making the festival have a fun atmosphere.

Currently, Subaru and the others viewed the Roswaal residence’s front garden that became a snowy landscape, and on it there was a great number of people. To be specific, the people that were gathered were mainly the residents of the Alam village.

The villagers had ice season clothes to protect themselves against the unreasonable cold, but they had something more than displeasure against the coldness on their facial expressions. Something was standing out vaguely.

Festival—it was because the unspirited people had roughly no reaction to that one word.

Puck: “Nevertheless, for this to be a snow festival…Subaru’s ideas surprise me as always.”

And then the one who made his appearance was Puck, who came out from being rolled up in Subaru’s scarf. The one who used his remaining mana to create this landscape gazes at the festivals participants and caresses his whiskers.

Subaru: “In regards to not using up resources wastefully, you cannot make light of modern people who lived through the days of gluttony. At any rate, if you can’t hide it, you might as well have a party.”

Puck: “I didn’t think this would become a party. Humans complain about it getting colder, and yet they don’t complain about the snow. It sure is hard to understand how you guys think.”

Subaru: “It is like a natural calamity, but humans do have this habit of getting excited at snow and typhoons.”

Puck: “Hmm, yeah that is confusing.”

Even when Puck heard Subaru’s explanation, he tilted his head in confusion.

Humans were beings that wanted to do stupid things every now and then, although a paranormal being like him may not have understood it. They get scared of natural menaces, but occasionally they are able to turn them into fun. They truly were inconsistent creatures.

Villager: “Subaru-sama, go on!”

Subaru: “Oops, right right. Sorry!”

And then a villager called out to Subaru, who had been talking with Puck. Incidentally, they shouldn’t be able to see Puck, so it looked as if Subaru was talking to himself for a long time. However, they did not talk about it, which showed how the villagers understood Subaru to a high extent.

Subaru: “Anyhow, I’ll explain the rules. To put it briefly, you all have this mansion’s front garden! Use the snow and ice here. The idea of this snow festival is to compete against each other with your creative personalities and creative powers in an artistic festival! There’s also a wonderful gift prepared, so by all means, aim for victory!”

Everyone: “Yeah—!”

The villagers who acted as participants got extremely excited from hearing a single word about a wonderful gift. It was a festival organized by the feudal lord Roswaal. It was natural for them to have their expectations rise for a gift.

Subaru: “Alright, then you all have until this fire fades away! Ready, let’s rock and roll!”

Everyone: “—?”

Subaru: “Oh, by rock and roll I mean start! Start, start!”

They followed Subaru’s command and the snow festival starts, although there was a questionable misstep.

Each of the villagers cooperated and went to work, but they required a good amount of concentration power and skillful fingers to create a snow sculpture. He looked forward to seeing what type of artistic masterpieces they’d come up with.

Subaru: “Will it be marvelous? I wonder if it’ll be marvelous.”

Subaru gazes at the villagers, who took the challenge of creating a snow sculpture with seriousness, and he jumps off the snow platform, appearing to be satisfied.

From this point on, a few hours would have to pass for the performance show to finish. While he waited, he headed towards the other part of the snow festival where one more experiment with the remaining mana was being held.

There were the long-awaited snow and ice. It would be a shame if the party ended on a simple note.

Subaru: “How’s the work going over here?”

Young man: “Ahh, Subaru-sama. Looks like you’ve had success too. We are doing well here as well.”

The person that responded to Subaru’s greeting and turned around was this young man of the young people group of the village. He sweated from his forehead and was breaking ice. Similarly, there were group members here and there working by putting ice onto carts.

Subaru: “Nevertheless, it looks like they’re enjoying themselves, playing in the snow over there. Don’t you think you got the short end of the stick?”

Young man: “No we didn’t. This is also for the sake of the village. Also, the feudal lord said that it seemed that the fire season is going to be hot this year, so I wanted to show my thanks for this proposal.”

The head of the young people group laughs while wiping the sweat off his hair in a crew cut, not even having a care for the breeze. Subaru nods at his response, and is relieved from knowing how his plan didn’t end up being a forceful one.

In every direction, he saw young men breaking ice, working hard for the snow festival. They saw this as an honorable duty to take up, as they prepared the ice for fire season and for the village’s ice house.

They simply could not miss out on preserving food and ice to cool themselves against the heat during hot weather season. In this world where there wasn’t a technique to make ice, the ice house was very important.

Subaru just happened to remember being told about that, being someone who went in and out of the village frequently.

Subaru: “But heavy labor is heavy labor. Even when it really would be advisable for myself to help too…”

Young man: “That’s not the case at all, because we are helping Subaru-sama. If we spend any more time at this rate, we’ll be hit divine punishment. Moreover, you also showed us something good.”

Subaru: “Something good? Did something really happen?”

Subaru did not have an occasion come to mind. He tilts his head and the head of the young people group looks away in response. When he sought to follow his eyes, he saw Rem and Ram running around the front garden in a hurry. They were engaged in managing the snow festival, and the ice season maid appearance's freshness looked as cute as ever.

Young man: "Just from seeing that appearance, you feel moved. Isn't that so, Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "…Ahh, that might be true. If it really is okay to, then I'm glad."

The group members give deep nods in response to the satisfied leader's words. If that was their way of showing a consensus, then Subaru understood that it was a firm handshake between him and the leader.

Subaru makes sure of their spirit, and once again returns to the meeting place for the snow festival. As one expected, Subaru also didn't know much about the snow, but if he went around and gave advice moderately—

Child: "Ah, it's Subaru!" [Child: "There he is, it's Subaru!" [Child: "Have a taste of white terrawr!"

Subaru: "Ohh, you guys sure are lively even when it's cold!"

The people who met Subaru, who returned to the meeting place, were kids simply bursting with high spirits. They made steam come out from their hot bodies and were running around enthusiastically, oh so enthusiastically.

Child: "Wahahaaa, snowww!" "Child: "Jyahahaaa, snowww!" "Child: "Bahahaa, snowww!"

They slip on the snow, sprawl on it, and then rolled around. These kids were fully enjoying the snowscape. They transformed into captives of the snow, but Subaru did not laugh, as he remembers their childish minds. He simply gave a deep nod.

Subaru: "But someday you'll realize it. You'll realize the truth that you guys were the ones playing in the snow and…"

Petra: “Ah, looks like Subaru doesn’t have anything to dooo. Hey, hey look! I made this with snow!”

The girl that stepped up to Subaru, who was showing shallowness while being pretentious, simply chops away his current state. This was the beautiful girl of the village whose future they were looking most forward to, Petra.

Petra had a rabbit made of snow placed on her hand.

Subaru: “Ohhh, it’s a snow rabbit! They make mountain hares here too?!”

Petra: “Ehehehh, cute, isn’t it? Did it come out well?”

Subaru: “It did it did! Alright alright, then I have something even more wonderful arranged. Watch this.”

Petra: “—?”

Subaru finds leaves and pebbles in a place nearby as Petra tilts her head. When he put it on the mountain hare she made, just like that, the arrangements for its eyes and ears were done.

Petra sees this and her expression quickly becomes bright.

Petra: “Wow, amazing! Subaru that’s amazing! It became a rabbit! A rabbit!”

Subaru: “Heheeem. Right? If you get that happy, then my spirits will rise too! Alrightt, then let’s make it more powerful! Let’s not only put on eyes and ears, but a tail and wings too. Also, a missile, a function for transformation assembly, a cockpit, and a caterpillar too…”

Petra: “Ah, hey wait, wait…”

The mountain hare was being remodeled within Subaru’s hand, as he did not hear Petra’s voice, who was trying to stop him. After a few minutes, it lost its initial look, and transformed only into a simple weapon to hurt people. He completed the “Aviation assault model great fire power war weapon Y U K I—U S A G I”.

He also hurt the innocent girl's mood a lot, though that was natural.

Subaru: "Yeahhh, a woman's heart is as fickle as autumn weather… a girl's mood is hard to understand. *spit*"

Subaru spits out the snowball that hit his face, and saw Petra off, who became more distant. It seemed that the tickling boy heart could not match the little girl's tastes.

Subaru: "I guess Petra is more of a real robot type of girl, rather than a super robot type of girl."

Child: "Hmmm, I feel like you're wrong either way."

Subaru: "Nah, it's too early to come to conclusions. Next time I'll attack with the real robot route."

The future where he'd once again get hit with a snowball by Petra is decided, and then Subaru looks around the exhibition hall with the snow sculptures that were starting to be finished. He saw many poor quality works, considering how it was their first time making snow sculptures, but even then, they were artistic masterpieces created through everyone combining their efforts. It was difficult to put a specific label on it.

Subaru: "But wouldn't it be a shame to lean towards a realistic motif? Perhaps it's because there's no concept of characters. There's a lot of castles and animals…oh, this looks pretty good!"

Child: "Ohh, thank you, Subaru-sama. This is my Wolgarm masterpiece!"

Subaru: "It's like you're implying I'll forget about the incident after they pass just because of the cold! I'm not laughing!"

It was a snow sculpture of the witchbeasts that caused an unprecedented dilemma where they were chased away from the mansion and village just a few days ago. The source for his goosebumps wasn't just the cold, as the fear and the tension from the incident were still fresh in his mind.

Subaru: "I do like the stress on impact, and I want to evaluate your efforts. However, you did not show enough consideration for the judge's mental trauma. Thus, I give this seven points! I look forward to your next piece of work!"

When Subaru criticized the snow wolgarm, the male creator gave a bitter smile, as he said "8th in points, huh". Seeing that interaction, Puck tickles the back of Subaru's neck with his tail.

Subaru: "Afun, what is it?"

Puck: "It's about your grading of this snow festival, but who are you doing this with?"

Subaru: "Me, Roswaal, and the village's chief as a masked judge are participating in the grading. If the judge's face comes to light, people might try to buy their rank through bribing him, after all. I have an attitude of being determined to deny that type of dirty manipulation of ranks in this festival for the competition of art."

Puck: "Seeing how you're doing all that, I'm wondering if there are people who want the wonderful gift."

Subaru: "It sure is a possibility. The present is a wonderful gift that is a one of a kind in this world."

Whether it had a money type of value or not, the only thing rare about it was the handwriting. When Puck found out about how the wonderful gift would come from his pocket, he makes a surprised face with an "Oh, really?".

Puck: "It's not Subaru's concern, and yet you were really generous with this."

Subaru: "Aren't Emilia-tan and you the ones who are worried? Cooperation is something you'd do. Usually."

The labor wasn't that big of a deal. Subaru was enjoying the festival in itself. He did not even hesitant on making such promises for cooperation. When it came to debt, Subaru was the one who had far more.

Puck: "Hmmm…I do feel a lot of "that" about that side of you,

Subaru.”

Subaru: “You are being too vague, so I don’t get what you’re saying. I can’t understand if you simply put it as “that”□□□”

Subaru reacts to Puck’s voice, who let out a chuckle, and then he suddenly stopped walking. When he did, the young ladies working at the front are noticed by Subaru, and then they happily clap their hands.

Rem: “Ah, Subaru-kun! Please take a look. It’s a sister collaboration snow sculpture made by Nee-sama and I!”

Subaru: “So Rem and Nee-sama aren’t helping, but participating instead. That’s surprising.”

The cheerful girl Rem points at their work that was directly nearby. To the side of the snow sculpture, there was Ram, who was wearing thicker clothes than the rest. She had her arms folded, looked at Subaru, and snorted her nose.

Ram: “Oh, Barusu. Looks like you were called over by our artistry and arrived defenselessly.”

Subaru: “Putting how you make it sound as if I’m willingly walking into disaster aside, I did come to see you guys. Why is Ram participating in this extremely cold festival? You even looked like you didn’t want to help.”

Ram: “I have permission from Roswaal-sama. Do you perhaps highly prefer Rem and the others to play outside of the mansion in the snow while only I act lazy in the bed?”

Subaru: “You are being unnecessarily aggressive, but you’re saying that you don’t like being left out, right?”

When Subaru becomes dejected from Ram’s perverseness, Rem gently stepped in front of her. Then she holds onto her sister’s hand, whose nose was red from the coldness, and says

Rem: “I forcefully invited Nee-sama. Nee-sama says that playing in the snow is childish, but I really want to play with Nee-sama…”

Subaru: “Do you not feel guilty for making your sister say this much, Nee-sama?”

Ram: “I’m superior for feeling Rem’s love strongly. Be jealous.”

It was difficult to talk down a person started to have a defiant attitude. Subaru quickly gives up on breaking through farfetched arguments, and then looks at the sisters’ snow sculpture collaboration. The snow sculpture had a white cloth covering all of it and was the size of a life size human. Speaking of Rem’s skillfulness, it had quite the sense of an artistic masterpiece.

Subaru: “Rem and Ram, this is a masterpiece created through the concentration of your guys’ power, skill, and sisterly love.”

Rem: “Yes, I think Nee-sama’s instructions helped with my ineptness, and then this is perhaps the best result.”

Subaru: “Didn’t you just look at Nee-sama? The truth has come out! …so, what is the name of this work?”

Rem: “Yes. The name is “The wonderful Subaru-sama statue”!”

Subaru: “I can see the end result just from the name!!”

Rem neglects Subaru’s shouting and removes the cloth that covered the snow sculpture. Once she did this, the exposed snow sculpture represented a single man. You could see how particular the details were in this gem.

They were fanatical about the details; the small parts were fairly polished. The results of this snow sculpture simply had the potential to overpower the other works. It was just that, if he had to point out just one fault about the snow sculpture, then it would be that it didn’t nail down a certain motif.

Rem: “Nee-sama wanted to make Roswaal-sama, while I wanted to make Subaru-kun, so our opinions differed.”

Ram: “It’s the conclusion that resulted from finding a meeting ground.”

Subaru: “It seems like you conceded, but you didn’t!”

The sisters talking about their secret story causes Subaru to have trouble evaluating the snow sculpture before him. It was beautiful how they dealt with a single work as sisters, but to think that those efforts resulted in a blasphemous type of snow sculpture…

The “Wonderful Subaru-sama Statue” collaboration work looked like it was copying Roswaal at one glance, but you could also feel indications of Subaru’s looks on it. It had a model that drove his way of seeing things mad when trying to put it into words.

Roswaal: “Oh, what do we have hereee? Being gathered around a place like this, what are you all…oh, this is…”

Roswaal, who was going around the exhibition hall and grading works, meets up with Subaru and the others, who were in front of the Subaru-sama statue. He comes face to face with their snow sculpture, and then Roswaal shows a stiffened expression that was seldom seen. He loses the appearance of a smile from his mouth, is unable to make a comment, and looks around restlessly.

Ram: “Ah, Roswaal-sama…you’ve seen something embarrassing. However, take a good look please.”

Rem: “It is a collaboration between Nee-sama and I. The whole body is there, but please evaluate it without favoritism.”

Ram and Rem see that the marker was present, and then they sought for evaluation. Ram having an overflowing amount of self confidence was the usual, but Rem also had some self confidence, who was someone that spoke humbly.

You could see that they had expectations for a high score for their snow sculpture, but—

Roswaal: “Alright, sorry to break it to you, but it gets 5 points.”

Ram: “And thennn?”

Subaru: “That’s final! It is what you see! You’re praying for a rise from this!”

Ram: “I can’t believe this…”

Ram looked at Roswaal with astonishment, but he shook his head and raised his right hand. He had four fingers raised, giving them even less points than the amount Subaru gave.

Incidentally, each judge had 10 points, so a perfect score would be a total of 30 points.

Roswaal: “The results weren’t bad, thouuugh. It kinda feels like these results are giving me the chills.”

Ram: “The concept shouldn’t have been wrong…just as I thought, Barusu was obstructive.”

Rem: “This can’t be right! Nee-sama and I negotiated our ideal visions, so it’s odd to be unsuccessful. Surely this is just because the times still haven’t caught up.”

Ram and Rem heard Roswaal’s brief review, and then the sisters rushed into discussing about it. However, if those were the things they reflected on, then it felt like their next work they’d finish would be indescribable again.

Subaru: “Or maybe it’s because we could only feel weird about them as people who have been used as the theme…”

Emilia: “Ah! Subaru, I found you! Beatrice and I also snuck into the competition. If you’d like, come see the snow sculpture…oh, wow. What is this? This snow sculpture gives off a preeetty weird feeling.”

Subaru: “Righttttt, I couldn’t be righttt.”

Emilia casually came by and also showed a strong reaction against the “Wonderful Subaru-sama Statue”.

This meant that mankind hadn’t arrived at the time where they’d catch up with that sense yet.

Anyhow, the first snow festival went on like that—and Petra was decided to be the winner. The winning work was the “Aviation assault model great fire power war weapon Y U K I—U S A G I”, which earned a total of 28 points.

It was a victory obtained by her in a way that was cunning with determination.

6

Emilia: “I think it’s weird how I received 9 points even when I tried that hard…”

Puck: “The event might’ve been a bit of a tough one for you and Betty. Look, how should I put it…it’s because your guys’ snow sculpture didn’t really have much artistic impression.”

Emilia and Puck exchange words at the front garden after the snow festival and the cleaning.

Emilia looked displeased as she stood in front of the Puck snow sculpture she made, pouting with her face. Next to it, there was Beatrice’s Puck sculpture that she made. They received 9 and 7 points, respectively—ever since the results of that grading, she wanted to guess the meaning of how she apparently left out details in regards to the portrayal.

Perhaps one should say that mankind wasn’t quite at the stage where they would be able to evaluate the avant garde snow sculpture.

Emilia: “But Subaru really only said weird things. He is well informed, huh. It shouldn’t have been possible to have a festival using snow, being near the great Elior forest, after all.”

Puck: “It was a festival that was possible because it was an area where snow is rarely seen. If we lived in an area where we had no room to enjoy snow, then he wouldn’t have come up with this festival.”

Emilia: “That’s right, I suppose…Yeah, maybe.”

Emilia gives a deep nod at Puck’s words while looking around at the remaining snow sculptures in this exhibition hall at night.

Thanks to Subaru's idea of having a snow festival as a solution for Puck's Magicletting Period, his od was in a stable condition. The intense chills these past few days would also completely settle down tomorrow.

Emilia: "But if that's the case, then surely these snow sculptures will melt tomorrow too, huh. There's so many of them too. It's reeaally a shame."

Puck: "That's how snow works after all. Its form does not last forever. That's all. That's all there is to it."

Puck's words cause Emilia to feel subtle discomfort and didn't point out anything. She just stops walking in the middle of looking around at the snow sculptures and looked up at the sky with shining stars.

The starry sky spreads all over up high, looking down at the snow sculptures in the air free of the cold.

Puck: "It's too bad Lia, Beatrice, and the children of the mansion weren't able to win."

Emilia: "That girl's mountain hare was well done, so it can't be helped. Roswaal and the old man gave high praise for it. …though it was weird how Subaru was quiet about it considering how he was in high spirits."

Puck: "I have no comment for that. However, I wonder if she liked the wonderful gift."

Emilia: "I wonder too. It was Subaru's hometown's…what was it called…corn potage? Something like that."

The prize for winning the snow festival was a mysterious item that he had. It had never before seen letters and drawings lined up on it. The bag that had a strange feeling—it seemed that there was food inside, but it was a little weird.

Incidentally, at the same time Petra was eating the "Corn Potage Snack" at the village and was being taken aback by the deliciousness of it, but that was another story.

Emilia: “Maybe it would’ve been a good idea to consult Subaru from the beginning. If we did, it would’ve been settled without fretting about time like that.”

Puck: “That’s trueee. However, you can’t grow up as a child who leaves anything and everything up to someone. Even if you can’t manage it, try your best until you know it, okay?”

Emilia: “Yes~ I understand.”

Emilia’s giggles as Puck caresses his whiskers, letting out a “Good”. After that, they had a short moment of silence, then Emilia suddenly begins to speak.

Emilia: “Hey, do you remember what Subaru said at the end of the festival?”

Puck: “—When it becomes the Magicletting Period next year, let’s have a snow festival again. I usually don’t like festivals, but if it’s that child, then they do feel like a party.”

Emilia: “I reaally feel a little “that”…about that side of Subaru.”

Puck: “Yeah. I also feel “that” about it.”

If Subaru was here for this situation, he might’ve made a pout at being left behind by the two who were having a vague conversation. It was a conversation that could only be followed if he had known them for a long time and had a family like relationship.

Emilia: “Next year, huh. …I’m not sure what the future has in store. I wonder what will happen.”

Puck: “It’ll be what Emilia wishes for. I think that would be nice if it turned out like that. Not considering if we’ll be able to do something like what Subaru said at that time, that is.”

Emilia: “Are you against snow festivals, Puck?”

Puck: “I’m not. I also had fun, and you looked like you were having fun too, after all. …However, I don’t know if Subaru will be happy or not when I stay by your side until next year.”

“…”

Emilia held her breath quietly in response to Puck’s words.

She was in a serious situation and couldn’t make any rash judgements. Even the environment surrounding her would have sudden changes after a year.

Her heart was to blame for having Subaru—for dragging that kind boy into that vortex.

Puck: “His stomach’s wounds, the wounds caused by the witchbeasts biting him—that child’s remaining scars are the result of Lia’s actions. I know you haven’t forgotten about it, but you need to keep that in mind.”

Emilia: “—Yeah.”

Puck had an easygoing voice, and yet he was never just soft with his words when talking with Emilia.

Emilia nods, and Puck washes his own face in silence. After that, he gazes at the snow sculptures around Emilia and says

Puck: “But it would be nice if we have it again next year. Have a snow festival, I mean.”

“…”

Puck: “Being able to do it next year would mean me having too much mana to the point of having a demonic commending period, and nobody other than Subaru would be able to lead a festival.”

If they could have a snow festival next year too, then that would mean Emilia would spend another year safely and that Natsuki Subaru would stay at the mansion too.

Emilia: “Ye-Yeah. —Yeah, I think that’d be nice too.”

Emilia gives many nods at Puck’s unexpected words and a smile comes on her face. In response to Puck's beloved daughter's smile, he flips his whiskers in a seemingly satisfied manner and—he keeps the dangerous unease in his chest to himself.

Would they be able to have another snow festival next year? Would they protect the conditions needed from now for the year?

Would Emilia's safety, Subaru's safety—and on top of them, Puck's own safety, and the other determining factors—

There were many big changes that came about in these several months. From now on, just how much of that—

Emilia: "Puck, what's wrong?"

Emilia tilted her head at Puck's look, who kept silent. In response to her, Puck immediately makes his ears stand with his usual manner and

Puck: "Mmm, it's nothing. I was just thinking about how it will become hot as usual starting tomorrow."

Emilia: "Ah, come to think of it, that is true. Subaru and Ram might start throwing complaints at each other again."

Emilia worries about the next day as a matter of course without paying attention to Puck's fear.

Puck responds to his honest, straightforward beloved daughter's emotions by continuing to swing his tail while keeping his mouth shut.

—While the silence is kept to indicate something would happen in the year for next year's snow festival.

Alcohol Panic

1

There is a multitude of unused establishments within the Roswaal L Mathers territory's main mansion. It is located away from the city, but close to the mountain forest, and is a site that has a size comparable to a small castle, being made up of three different wings.

The main wing consists of principal establishments such as the dining hall, the parlor, and the large public bath, while the east wing has establishments such as the guest room used for visitors, and the private room for the mansion's residents and maids. And lastly, there is the west wing that has many multipurpose establishments.

The west wing is used much less in comparison to the other wings. It would be enough to classify the establishments as multi-purposed, but to be exact, you could say that only establishments of disordered roles were gathered at the west wing.

It had an uneventful dance hall, along with a warehouse containing unadorned paintings and other works of art. There were things like unvaluable books in Beatrice's forbidden archives; there was too much unused establishments.

Hence, although the west wing was included in the cleaning rotation, it was a completely unused building in regards to everyday life. There was a place in the west wing that people went in and out of the most, but it was just a storage room in the corridor that connected to the main wing, so it was understandable how it became deserted.

Subaru: "Therefore, it's not really worth completely cleaning it up like this for 3 days…or wait, I wonder what kind of point of view that Nee-sama has on it."

Subaru took off his uniform coat, and said these words with his sleeves tucked in while having the duster in his hand.

He sweeps away the floating dust with his hand with a frown on his face. It was apparent that the dust fluttering in the air would not go away, no matter how thorough he was with the cleaning. It really was quite the annoying opponent to deal with.

Subaru: “I really do wonder where dust goes and comes from. Nee-sama, what do you think?”

Ram: “What…? Stop saying stupid things. Move with your hands, not with your mouth. No matter what Barusu says, Roswaal’s wishes shall be fulfilled perfectly. That is our job.”

Subaru: “Okay okay, I understand. Then I will do my…the hell?!”

Subaru raised a criticizing voice at the perpetrator who kicked his butt while he was making his admirably splendid speech. After taking a look, he saw Ram, the person who answered him coldly, on top of the wooden box at the corner of the room with her legs elegantly crossed.

Of course, she was there without a mop or dust cloth in her hand, yawning with her hand on her mouth, cleaning—

Subaru: “Just when I thought you were working without complaints, I see this! We’re a team that halves the work between us, aren’t we? If it’s quartered instead, we won’t be able to finish!”

Ram: “If you are unable to feel shame about your own incompetence, then you are done as a human…you are useless, Barusu.”

Subaru: “Can you take a good look at the current situation, then speak?! Look at it objectively. You think I’m the useless one?”

Ram: “Nothing will change if you’re missing a little help for something like cleaning an unused storage room.”

Subaru: “Whatever happened to the Ram that said she’d fulfill Roswaal-sama’s wishes perfectly?”

Ram sighed with feigned ignorance at Subaru widening his eyes, which he did because of the withdrawal of her previous refreshing marks.

The Roswaal residents' routine duties were split between three people: "Subaru, an employee, and the two sisters, Ram and Rem. However, 80% of the mansion's functions were taken care of by Rem, while Subaru and Ram cooperated for the remaining 20%—they were taking care of it, but these were days of dire distress.

These two, who halved the labor between each other, were imposed with this work, but it was clear that they were feeling discouraged with cleaning and tidying up the unused storage room of the unused west wing.

Having the cleaning actually start was enough to completely kill Subaru and Ram's motivation.

It was standard for the mansion's cleaning to be done in rotation, cleaning the three wings one day at a time. Their motivation declined quicker because of how the west wing had cleaning three days prior, and because of how it wasn't very dirty considering that.

Subaru: "However, there's a reason behind what you say too. I'm using the duster, but I feel like the dust is just flying away and the feeling of achievement…achoo!"

Ram, who was skipping out on her work while sitting on top of a wooden box, saw Subaru sneeze from the dust with the duster in his hand. And to make matters worst, just as the collected dust flew into the air, the cusp of it invaded the shelves at the side. Subaru crouched and picks up the tool, whose use he did not understand, that fell on the floor, seemingly with annoyance.

Subaru: "Dirtying things myself and tidying things up by myself, bad things sure are happening one after another…oh?"

In the midst of picking up the tool that he dropped, Subaru found an incomprehensible joint on the floor. He traced the floor with his hand, and when he checked to see what it was, it seemed to be that there was a wooden cover for underfloor storage.

Subaru: “Ram, there is a hidden door here, but do you know what’s inside?”

Ram: “…Don’t know. Forget about it, Barusu. There’s a chance that insects will come flying out the moment you open it. If you’re gonna do it, then do so after I leave this room and lock it.”

Subaru: “Why lock the door? Also, it’s already too late.”

Subaru pulled the knob of the storage that he found and lifted the underfloor cover at once. Ram’s words gave him a bad image in his head, but his curiosity got the best of him.

Immediately after that, Ram quickly got off the wooden box and rushed over to the room’s door. While giving a wry smile at Ram, who had preparations to run away efficiently, Subaru nervously peeked into the underfloor storage and—

Subaru: “—Ohh?”

And then Subaru widened his eyes in astonishment.

2

Roswaal: “—And thus, the things you discovered from the underfloor storage are mi~ne. Subaru bowed respectfully and respectfully pushed the wooden box in front of him onto the desk.”

The search of the west wing’s storage room—as a result of the search that caused him to forget about the initial goal, an unexpected treasure was discovered.

The person who received Subaru’s report, Subaru appearing to have his chest puffed up with pride, was the person sitting at the work desk, Roswaal. The daytime version of him as a feudal lord was busy with businesses he had to take care of, which contrasted with how he had an eccentric outfit, eccentric speech, and eccentric behavior.

However, when Subaru rudely cut into hist time, Roswaal was far from displeased and instead seemed to be happily letting out a loose smile.

Roswal: “I see~. Come to think of it, quite a while back, by chance I heard about a wine cellar somewhere in the villa. Under the floor of the west wing…to think that it was in a place like that…”

Inside the wooden box that was placed on the desk appeared to be an expensive bottle of sake decorated with wood chips.

Subaru heard him say wine cellar, but he was more puzzled about a different part of Roswaal’s statement.

Subaru: “Hm? Did you just say villa? But that sake was found under the mansion, you know?”

Roswaal: “Ahh, that’s easy to explain. This mansion is located here just to prepare for Emilia-sama’s king election, and it’s essentially my residence’s villa. The Mathers’ principal residence is more towards east. Well, the place I’m in is the Mathers’ mansion, so there’s not really much importance in distinguishing between the two.”

Subaru: “It’s a villa with it being this big? Then the principal residence must be…actually, I’m scared to know, so I won’t ask. Anyways, about that unexpected thing, that basement isn’t one of Roswaal’s preferences, huh.”

Roswaal: “I am currently the head of the family, but before that it was my father’s and my grandfather’s. Perhaps the basement’s wine cellar was my grandfather’s idea, or maybe it was a prank by my grandmother. I’ve been told that they were heavy drinkers.”

Subaru frowned at Roswaal, who smiled with his purple painted lips. It was quite the unrelated matter to Subaru, considering how he was talking about his own grandfather. Roswaal closes one of his eyes at Subaru’s doubt and

Roswaal: “Ah~, my bad. I didn’t mean to have you hear about it. … But things like that are true.”

He was apt to forget about his excessive workload at the mansion, but this place truly was a different world. The common knowledge on life expectancy in this world most likely differed a lot from the common knowledge on it at Subaru's original world.

Things like the long living races and the magical existences could not simply be compared with modern medicine.

Subaru: "…Anyhow, I thought I'd at least report it and brought it, but what are you going to do about your grandfather's leftover collection? A lot of it is still unused."

Roswaal: "Hmm, good point. Keeping it in the basement like that as something like ground reinforcement would be wasteful, huh. —By the way, Subaru-kun, how are you with sake? Are you the type that can drink however much he wants? Or are you perhaps someone who gets red just from the smell of it and says thing like "I don't wanna go home tonight…"?"

Subaru: "That line I've heard about, something I've heard comes out at mixers, is said here too, huh. …Also, I've never really been an active drinker. Drinking is for after I turn 20."

Roswaal: "20? My goodness, that takes some patience."

Subaru replied to Roswaal while wrinkling his brows to frown at his doubt.

Subaru was actually being truthful. There wasn't really any particular reason for Subaru to get his hands on sake when he was back at his original world as a minor. By the way, he also never went to a single mixer before.

Natsuki Subaru spent his days doing things completely unrelated to sake, tobacco, and women.

Roswaal: "My, that is surprising. Considering Subaru's personality, I thought you'd definitely try to look cool and get your hands on things like alcohol and tobacco."

Subaru: "I kinda get what you think of me, but unfortunately, you are wrong. Actually, there was a time when I tried putting one of the cigarettes my father forget to put out on my mouth once, but…"

Roswaal: "But?"

Subaru: “The moment I did, my father returned, and I was hit plenty of times. To make matters worst, I was scolded by my mother, her fallaciously saying that I wouldn’t get taller…anyway, those hands were traumatizing.”

He may have learned about tobacco and sake if he had bad friends, but fortunately, Subaru had no bad friends, let alone any good friends. Thus, he had no opportunities.

Subaru: “Even if I were to try and stray off onto the wrong path, I couldn’t find any in the first place…huhuu, what a joke.”

Roswaal: “You are feeling nostalgic about that, but if that’s the case, you probably wouldn’t be very happy about being given this as a reward.”

Subaru: “Ah, that’s true. There actually was a time where I was offered this sake before from this geezer and drank it, but I only thought about how it was burning my throat, stomach, and head. Or rather…”

Roswaal sought to award Subaru alcohol as if it was something natural. Subaru responded to this by pointing at the box.

Subaru: “Can someone of my age really drink this? I said this earlier, but I am still below 20 and am a minor. Im at that age where I can’t look at porn sites without a guardian, you know?”

Roswaal: “I do~n’t really get it, but I feel like you wouldn’t be able to look at them even if you had a guardian. Putting that aside, in Lugunica you’re OK to drink sake if you’re above 15.”

Subaru: “Ohh, that’s useful…”

Subaru properly used his “OK”, and Roswaal continues speaking with a “Moreover”.

Roswaal: “It’s the kingdom’s rule, but each region prefers to have their own territorial laws. In other words, the territorial laws around this vicinity are decided at my own discretion.”

Subaru: “Wow, that’s abuse of your authority. By those territorial laws, the judgement of my innocence and…actually, normally you'd be innocent by the king's laws after you're older than 15, but…"

Even though the law assured him, there was no change about his indifference towards the sake gift.

It was natural because he didn't know its taste and value. Having said that, treating it as an item he'd sell would be rude towards Roswaal, who was handing it over to him as a reward.

Subaru: "It's even decorated with a ribbon. Should I put it at the end of the room…? It'll refresh, and after I turn 20 I can open it in commemoration, having the deep emotions in my chest walk me towards the future. Stuff like that."

Roswaal: "That's a far-sighted plan. Finishing work before you sleep, the time you eat after a hot bath…wouldn't even be necessary to seek chances to drink sake too. It's not pro~crastination."

Subaru: "Unreasonably offering sake to someone who can't drink seems to be called alcohol harassment. It might become an incident for a lawsuit, so be careful. Moreover, you say these things, but does Ros-chi drink?"

Roswaal: "I drank to some extent back then, but the times I do have been lowered remarkably these past several years. Well, I'll drink on occasions like banquets. Basically, I keep my limits in mi~nd. Also"

Roswaal shook his shrugged with his shoulders. He said that he only drank to a certain extent, but even with that attitude, an overwhelming aura came floating from him. He could not imagine what his drunk self would be like.

Subaru: "But, I'm kinda interested in how I would be with alcohol."

He had no interest in it until now, but he suddenly became interested in his drinking limits because of how they were talking about sake the whole time.

Once it became like this, he wasn't just curious about himself, he was also a bit curious about how much Emilia and Rem could drink as well.

However, if there was no occasion for it, he'd never be able to find —

Subaru: "That's right, let's have a banquet! Ros-chi, you said you drank alcohol on celebrations, right?"

Roswaal: "Hm? Yea~h. I did certainly say that. I do drink enough to feel good if it's for special gathe~rings. I am human, after all."

Subaru: "Rightt! If it's a gathering, then there's no stopping you."

Roswaal: "Huhuhu, sheesh. —What are you planning with getting me drunk?"

Subaru: "That's rude. You're not who I'm aiming for, Ros-chi!"

He retorts Roswaal's statement, him giving Subaru a meaningful look, and then Subaru clapped his hands. That expression made his face look bad—no, he did not have a face of an evil man; he just had scary eyes.

However, that was just the face Subaru had whenever he said something astounding, something that was also typical of him. Roswaal had a look that seemed to be a look of expectation in his eyes in response to Subaru's expression.

Subaru spoke of his idea with magnificence, though he wasn't sure if he could live up to his expectations.

Subaru: "If we prepare a celebratory gathering, then it would be okay to bring out the sake in the basement for a banquet, right?"

Roswaal: "—Indeed. Well it didn't really seem to be a useful wine cellar after all. To some extent, I'm kind of entrusting the purpose of the remaining sake to you. Nevertheless…"

Subaru: "Nevertheless what?"

Roswaal: "Using a banquet as an excuse to see Emilia-sama and

Rem get messed up…Subaru-kun is planning something that's pretty typical for a bo~y."

Subaru: "That wasn't even my intention. Stop thinking like that could be my only intention!"

Roswaal: "No no no, I don't mind it."

Subaru: "I told you, that's not it!"

He had no intention for that at all, but his ulterior motive grew a bit, and the plan of the banquet began.

3

Subaru: "And thus, a plan to hold a cherry blossom viewing party has been decided, so please actively participate!"

Emilia: "Cherry blossom viewing?"

As soon as the abrupt boy Subaru visited the room, Emilia tilted her head at him.

Today Emilia had her hair up in a ponytail and she wore a long skirt. She had her finger on her cherry blossom lips, but she wasn't surprised by this sudden proposal.

She became used to Subaru's sudden proposals. This was a reaction she had because of her guessing the situation.

Emilia: "I've never heard of cherry blossom viewing, but it sounds kinda fun. Viewing cherry blossoms, huh."

Subaru: "Yes. Back at my hometown, these cherry blossoms would bloom into a pink color after ice season. At that time there would be boisterous merrymaking under the sakura trees…that's what cherry blossom viewing is."

Emilia: "Huh? But, I feel like that isn't really viewing flowers…"

Subaru: "That's the darkness of cherry blossom viewing caused by not being able to experience it too much. Well, it's held to be boisterous after all."

Subaru smiles wryly at his pokes at the essence of cherry blossom viewing and concludes the discussion on it.

In short, Subaru, who received a reward for discovering the wine cellar, gave this proposal, but holding a cherry blossom viewing to honor the mansion—this was what the banquet gathering was passed off as.

It wasn't about Subaru wanting to drink; it was more about his interest in everyone else's reactions to it.

He might've been particularly interested in seeing someone like Emilia make a complete 180, being sexy after drinking. If the situation turned into something like that, perhaps a dangerous charm would grow.

Subaru: "There will be things like sake and food as treats to enjoy the pretty cherry blossoms. That is the greatest goal of this cherry blossom viewing we'll be having! It's not because there will be sake and that I want to see Emilia-tan get messed up or anything, okay?"

Emilia: "Ah, I understand. Jeez, that's not okay, Subaru."

Subaru: "Eh?! What?! There's no way you've found out my plan! Impossible!"

Emilia: "Children shouldn't drink sake, or else they will stop getting taller."

Subaru: "No way! The same reason my mom had?! Also, I'll have you know that I'm not a child that breaks the kingdom's laws! I'm 18 this year, after all! I have Roswaal's permission! I am an adult! An adult!"

Emilia: "I don't think an adult would make such a fuss like that. But, Subaru is 18, huh. That's reeaally surprising…I thought you were younger."

He was scolded for a reason he's been told of sometime in the past, and then Emilia gives a bittersweet smile at Subaru, the noisy one.

She probably added that one word precisely because she didn't feel like his face was fitting for his age.

Subaru: "Foreigners do say that the Japanese seem to have childish faces. By the way, how old did you think I was?"

Emilia: "12…no, 13! About 13!"

Subaru: "Isn't that younger than Felt?! Also, there's wasn't much of a difference even after you corrected yourself!"

Or more accurately, it wasn't much different than Earlham Village's children's judgement. The children tried asking Emilia what age they looked to her, but the conversation wouldn't go anywhere, no matter how much time elapsed.

Subaru: "Phew, I'm tired. Also, you've been saying that I'm a child, but how about you, Emilia-tan? Can you drink sake? Are you the type that is okay with everything on the menu, from top to bottom?"

Emilia: "Sorry, I don't really understand what you're trying to say."

He imagined Roswaal to be a heavy drinker, but he could not figure out how much Emilia would be able to drink. She could be an extreme heavyweight, and he could also imagine her to be an extreme lightweight.

Emilia mumbled an "Ummm" at Subaru, who narrowed his eyes to investigate and

Emilia: "You said that, but I've also never drank before. Ah, I'm also of drinking age. I'm not 13."

Subaru: "I'm not wondering about that. If Emilia-tan was 13, I would be committing a crime."

Emilia: "Why would that be?"

Subaru: "It's because Emilia-tan is so cute that it makes me want to commit a crime."

Emilia: “And guess what, it’s about sake, but Puck said, “Don’t drink i~t”

Subaru: “You heard me, but you’re going to ignore me?!”

Subaru was taken aback from Emilia’s new way of warding him off, but she had no reaction to that; instead, her neck pendant glowed, and a different voice came into the conversation.

Puck: “—That’s obvious. Sake is a drink for bad adults. Lia will always be my cute daughter, so you don’t need to get involved with stuff like that.”

The particles of the overflowing light from the pendant formed the shape of a kitten at the same time he said those overprotective words. The manifested kitten spirit sits on Emilia’s shoulders and pats her cheek with his paw.

Puck: “I won’t allow you to stray my child off onto the wrong path. I will drink every bit of the sake that is shown in front of Lia, after all. I will not hand Lia over, shasshasha”

Subaru: “Ah, so you want to participate and drink too, huh.”

Puck, who was shadow boxing, labeled himself as Emilia’s guardian, and yet it was just him really wanting to get his hands on alcohol. Anyways, it seemed like he approved of the cherry blossom viewing, so that was relieving.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, how about you? Are you okay with Puck participating?”

Emilia: “Eh? Yeah, I’m fine with it. It seems like Puck doesn’t want me to drink sake, but I can enjoy myself too by eating delicious food while viewing flowers. But how about everyone else?”

Subaru: “Roswaal is OK with it, considering it was something I planned with him in the first place. So, if Ros-chi is okay with it, then Ram should be fine too. I need to ask Rem for things like preparing the food, so if I ask her as sincerely as possible, I’ll get her consent. I’ll be helping with the cooking too, so.”

At first, Subaru had rough fights with peeling vegetable skins, but thanks to him being a person of small capabilities, he had been helping with the cooking lately. His ambition was different from Ram, whose improvement of her steamed potatoes has been on a halt for many years. There was also the difference in levels of enthusiasm between him and the lecturer.

Emilia: “Rem sure does seem to reeaally enjoy herself whenever she cooks together with Subaru. I’ve got it! How about I help with the cooking too? Subaru did doubt my cooking skills before.”

Subaru: “Something like that did happen before. …wait, I haven’t been open with my suspicions about that before.”

Emilia: “*Pout* You are stubborn. I made a delicious rice ball, didn’t I?”

Subaru: “The flavor was delicious. It’s just that I was kinda worried about how it looked.”

Previously, there was a time when Subaru had a pile of errands to do and the bento that Emilia made him hold—inside was a simple rice ball, but the shape was different from one and its size was strange. It was big enough to have a child’s head in it. Eating all of it would be enough to waste his stamina.

It wasn’t about the flavor; he had problems with amount of seasoning and its condition. That is how Subaru evaluated Emilia’s cooking skills.

Emilia: “Hmph. If you say that much, then fine. I’ll definitely cause you to be dumbfounded when we cook for the cherry blossom viewing. And after that it will be too late to apologize, by the way.”

Subaru: “If we’re talking about being dumbfounded, then it’s already happened plenty! But well, I’ll look forward to it.”

Emilia had an angry face, while Subaru had a relaxed one. Emilia was dissatisfied, being someone who wanted to triumph over Subaru, but she was looking forward to the anticipated event, so it couldn’t be helped.

Emilia: “So when will the cherry blossom viewing be held?”

Subaru: “Even if I said “There’s no time like the present!”, we don’t have enough prepared for it today. However, if we don’t do it as fast as possible, the hype will die down, so talk to everyone, and it will be held the day after tomorrow.”

He wanted to make a specific schedule such that it wouldn’t conflict with the schedule of the mansion’s busiest person, Roswaal. They would hold the cherry blossom viewing on a day when he wouldn’t be away from the mansion for the night.

Subaru: “Guess it would be best to hold it at the forest’s flower garden right? Since it’s called cherry blossom viewing. It really would be awesome if cherry blossoms were there, but the season and the world are different, so.”

Puck: “Looking at a bunch of flowers while drinking sake…hmmm, that is elegant. Ah, but there’s something I’m worried about if we do hold it at the forest.”

Subaru: “Something you’re worried about?”

Subaru was lost in his thoughts deciding where the meeting place would be when Puck entered the conversation with his tail standing up. While washing his face with his hand, the kitten said “You see” at Subaru’s doubt as a preface to his next statement and

Puck: “If it’s held away from the mansion, Betty can’t participate. That child won’t leave the mansion, because that is her duty.”

Subaru: “Eh, Beako’s? I don’t really get it, but can’t she sneak away just for a little bit? Plus, the person in charge of the mansion approved of the cherry blossom viewing, you know?”

Puck: “Subaru, I get what you’re trying to say. But the reason Betty stays at the forbidden archives isn’t necessarily because Roswal told her to. Thus, that child won’t leave the mansion.”

In response to Puck, him being awfully conclusive about the matter, Subaru explained his reasoning and then kept silent.

You could say that Subaru had a difficult type of relationship with Beatrice, who secluded herself in the forbidden archives. However, he would feel guilty if he left her out and had the cherry blossom viewing. There was no doubt about that.

She was a dishonest little girl. If they had something like a cherry blossom viewing without her and she found out about it, she would obviously never let that go.

Subaru: “Ahhh, Beako is hard to deal with! …Wait, but didn’t she come all the way to the village to heal my injuries before? What was that about?”

Puck: “That was an exception among exceptions. I was the one that made the request, but I was surprised with how she listened.”

Perhaps Beatrice’s merciful heart was moved because it was a highly urgent situation. Whatever the reason may have been, the conditions were too different to label a situation between life and death as a game.

Emilia: “If Beatrice can’t go, then the cherry blossom viewing is off…right?”

Emilia looks down with seemingly regretful eyes at Subaru, who was silent and didn’t have any good ideas come to mind. He saw the lonesome look in her eyes, and then Subaru’s spirit got fired up, as he had to do something about it.

Beatrice wouldn’t leave the mansion. She could not see the flower garden if she didn’t leave the mansion. His original intention was to have a banquet, using cherry blossom viewing as an excuse to have one. It was important to accomplish the duties and prepare the place. These were the things he was thinking about.

Subaru: “—Alright, then let’s do this!”

Subaru came up with an idea to recover from this hopeless situation and clapped his hands loudly.

Subaru’s epiphanizing behavior caused Emilia’s bluish purple eyes to shine, as if they were glimmering with hope.

4

—After 2 days where this and that happened, the appointed day for the party immediately arrived.

After obtaining Emilia’s consent, the preparations for the party moved at a quick pace. This was because of Rem, the enthusiastic girl, put in major effort for Subaru’s idea that he was mostly responsible for.

Rem: “I cannot let Subaru-kun embarrass himself, so I’ll work at full power too.”

These were the strong words of Rem, who chopped up the fish and meat so fast that you couldn’t see her cute face.

Thanks to Rem cooperating without a hint of disagreement on her face, the parties preparations progressed smoothly, despite the increase in work. Subaru and Emilia helped with the cooking and the preparations for the hall too, but the extent of the effects they had will not be revealed in order to preserve their honor.

In any case, they were right before the start of the banquet. Subaru left the preparations for the hall up to Rem and the others, and headed over to a place to fulfill a role that only he could do.

This certain place was—

Subaru: “So yeah, the preparations are there. If you come, everyone would be there.”

Beatrice: “…I don’t understand why I’d go, I suppose.”

Subaru moved freely throughout the mansion and found the forbidden archives through his explosive intuition. Beatrice previously overreacted in all of her reactions, but lately she’s had a face of complete resignation. On one hand, he thought quietly to himself that he was glad about it, but on the other, he also felt unsatisfied. Thus, he threw away those feelings away for today.

Subaru gave a friendly tap to Beatrice’s shoulder, who was sitting on the usual stepladder. Then

Subaru: “I’m telling you to stop missing the point. Today is the day for everyone in the mansion to view cherry blossoms together. You’d probably complain if I told you in advance, so I made it a surprise just for you!”

Beatrice: “The first and second half of your statement contradict each other! I don’t really know what a cherry blossom viewing is, but whatever it is, if I have to participate in such a foolish event…”

Subaru: “See? I thought you’d say that. A persuasion that should’ve taken two rounds has been settled in one instead. You were going to end up participating while complaining anyway, so stop wasting time and let’s go!”

Beatrice: “You are being bothersome, but I get it. So stop making that face, I suppose! You are irritating! Irritating! What do you know about me?! And anyway…”

Beatrice shakes off Subaru’s hand, who was trying to bring her out, and she jumped off the ladder. And then surely she was glaring at Subaru with her light blue eyes.

Beatrice: “Be it cherry blossom viewing or some other event, I will not leave the mansion. Just do it with you and the others, I suppose. I will not go to any…”

Subaru: “I won’t allow it. Leaving you pouting at the mansion and going to the party? I’d feel unpleasant and there’s no way I’d be able to enjoy the party. Have fun and be a sacrifice for our sake. No buts.”

Beatrice: “Wh-Who gave you the right to say such a thing?!”

Subaru: “Ah-Ah-ah, can’t hear you~”

Subaru shut his ears in front of Beatrice and ignored her opinion as she yelled. That behavior caused Beatrice’s face to get redder and redder, but Subaru still continued to speak to that girl with an angry heart.

Subaru: “Puck told me that you have some complicated circumstances and that you can’t leave the mansion. Thus, I took those conditions into consideration and polished the plan. Hence, the preparations are already done, and all that's left is for me to kidnap you."

"…"

Subaru: "Honestly, I understand your feelings. Whatever type of fun event it is, going out for it just before it happens is troubling enough to kill. However, the truth is, if you do try and go out, you will have fun in one way or another. I'll give you the first forceful push."

There was no response from Beatrice, who had a sullen face. However, this was precisely because she answered with a sigh of resignation and a loose posture. Subaru lets out a slight smile, taps her shoulder, and then brings her out of the forbidden archives.

And just like that, the two stood up, left the mansion's corridor, and finally reached—

Subaru: "Come in come in. We are the final participants."

Beatrice: "Jeez, just what are you planning, I suppose…"

He pushes the back of the girl with an unenthusiastic face, Beatrice, and opens the door in front of them. And then Subaru lets out a smile of satisfaction at the doubtful girl, whose eyes were filled with astonishment as she glanced to the side.

Subaru: "And thus, today is the party for deepening the friendship of all the mansion's members…the Roswaal residence organization's first "Stargazing" party! "

Subaru jumps in front of the startled girl, Beatrice, and makes a grand declaration with his hands spread out.

This was the Roswaal residence's west wing's top floor—the forgotten dance hall. In this dance hall that had been decorated, something that hadn't been done for a long time, a wind blew from the open terrace, caused by the quick footed dancers enjoying themselves. Food was lined up at the corner of the spacious room, but the amount was moderate because of how many participants there were. Instead, they were completely absorbed with the quality and its appearance.

Emilia: "—Ah, it's Subaru and the others. Beatrice is with him too!"

The arrival of Subaru and the others gets noticed by Emilia, who came to the hall beforehand, and then she raised her voice at them. Everyone else responds to that voice, and Rem rushed over to them.

Rem: "Good work, Subaru-kun. Leaving Beatrice-sama up to Subaru-kun was the best idea after all. As expected of the person in charge of the mansion's Beatrice."

Subaru: "Heh, I'm embarrassed. Well, this is the least I could do as the best Beatrice worker."

Beatrice: "I don't recall you being the person in charge of me, nor do I recall you being my worker! This is extreme disgrace, I suppose!"

Beatrice was angry at the two cheerful individuals, but Subaru and Rem calmly ignored her. Beatrice quivered angrily at that treatment, but a small silhouette gently swooped down upon her shoulder.

Beatrice's suddenly became cheerful upon seeing the furball that appeared right beside her face.

Beatrice: "Bubby!"

Puck: "Welcome Betty. I thought that you'd perhaps lack the willpower to go and wouldn't come…but as expected, Subaru knows what makes you tick."

Beatrice: "N-No way that's true! Bubby will always be my number one, I suppose. Yeah. Yeah, that's it. That's definitely true, I suppose."

Puck: "Ahaha, I'm happy. That would be nice if it really was true."

For some reason Beatrice's cheeks stiffened just for a second in response to Puck's reply. However, Subaru took no note of their exchanges and listened cautiously to Rem's explanation of the hall.

Rem: "The cooking and the setting of the table were done by Emilia-sama and Nee-sama. Subaru-kun also helped with the pre-cooking, enough so that there was less labor than usual."

Subaru: "Is that so? But didn't things like the hall decorations increase the amount of work? I'm really sorry about that. I'll definitely make up for it somehow next time."

Rem: "Don't worry about it. In exchange, tonight I'll have you let me see your sleeping face for longer than usual."

Subaru: "Hm…? Didn't you just say something kinda odd? Sleeping face?"

Rem: "Nope, I didn't say anything odd~"

He felt like he heard something that he could not ignore, but the matter was avoided due to Rem's cute smile. For now, Subaru headed towards the terrace to lead the stargazing party while he tilted his head.

Emilia: "Subaru, good work. You brought Beatrice over too. Impressive impressive."

Subaru had went to greet Emilia. She patted his head while smiling at this terrace exposed to the nightwind. The feeling from the touch of her white fingertips caused Subaru to narrow his eyes awkwardly.

Subaru: "Well, kinda seems like you've been satisfied like this. Kinda feels like I want to make you aware of how I am a man, not a kid, and you're a woman, through a certain request. That's the kind of dilemma I'm having."

Emilia: "—? I know that Subaru is a little man and that I am a woman."

Subaru: "Umm, you see I want to take away the unnecessary part of that label so…"

Ram: “Barusu”

Ram, the person who stood next to the terrace standing with Roswaal, gave a sharp glare at Subaru, who was giving in to his ulterior motive. It seemed like she was telling him “Hurry up and start” with her look and her tone, so Subaru gave a bitter smile.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, here you go.”

Subaru: “Oh, thanks.”

Rem acted as a waiter and presented a silver tray as if the timing was planned. There were glasses of sake on it. He took one and looked around him.

Emilia, Rem, and Roswaal and the others—everyone had a glass in their hands. Beatrice was next to Puck and was also holding a glass of juice while pouting.

Subaru: “Ehhh, I thank you all for participating in today’s “Stargazing Party” at the Roswaal residence. After this, we will work together for one cause, and that is to deepen friendship with this party. Well then, first I’d like to talk about the benefit of the essential part of this party. I will talk about the three three essentials of life—”

Emilia: “Hey, hey, Subaru. By any chance, is that talk going to be reaaally long?”

Subaru: “No, I was going to make a joke saying, “Aren’t they your stomach, your wallet, and your store of patience with your mother?” but…”

Ram: “Barusu”

Subaru once again had that sharp look shoot through him. He dejectedly hands over the floor to the one who hosted the program —in other words, the mansion’s representative, Roswaal.

Roswaal, who had been laughing at those interactions, raises his glass slightly and

Roswaal: “Even if I have a long greeting, it’ll just have dampen everyone’s enthusiasm. Thus, I have one thing to say—The people who have gathered here like this are comrades, no matter what circumstances. There may be various hardships in the future, but we will join forces and overcome them. And so, let’s have a toast for today’s divine protection of the stars.”

Everyone: “—Cheers!”

Everyone tilted their glasses and overlapped with their voices in response to Roswaal’s speech, which was so normal that it was a letdown.

The bumping of their glasses makes a light sound, and then the banquet calmly began under the starlight of the night.

5

Well, that was how the stargazing party began enjoyably and calmly.

It was called a banquet and a gathering, but it wasn’t specifically to celebrate something. If there had to be label for it, perhaps it would be called the celebration of the settlement of the witchbeasts incident, along with the celebration of the recovery of the casualties that resulted from it.

The abundance of food set up on the table was a result of having more than the usual amount of passion being put into making it. Of course, it wasn’t as if Rem’s usual cooking was missing anything crucial, but there was a special flavor in it tonight.

He looked up at the stars and enjoyed a little bit of sake while banqueting on those dishes.

He wasn’t able to make the plan of viewing cherry blossoms under the full bloom cherry trees into a reality, but they had a whole view of the sky of the crisp and cold night from the terrace. Throughout the whole sky, he saw stars that glowed, a sight that fared with cherry trees.

The air was refreshing and perfectly clear. The open sky had not a single cloud. He was enjoying the stars, and yet all the best conditions were lined up. It was the best situation for stargazing sake. Subaru's own name was also associated with the stars, and he was enthusiastic about being able to persistently show his vast knowledge of stars.

However—

Emilia: "Hmmm? Wats wrong, Subaru? You sheem kwinda…aha, that's a reeaally weird face. Also, it's unfair uf you to have that much. Subaru is planning on making everyone have all the candy to themselves~"

Subaru: "I feel hurt from you saying I have a weird face, and plus I am not having a lot! Ahhh, jeez. Emilia-tan, you can't do that. Look, see how much you spilled…"

The girl who came snuggling up to him, Emilia, had a happy smile with an embarrassed face. The boy who calmed her down, Subaru, makes a displeased expression with his lips and once again empties the glass with one gulp. The amber liquid fades his cherry blossom lips, he starts to feel a little sick, and then lets out a sigh of hot breath.

Emilia: "Oomyoo…sake is goood. It's unfair that this stuff has been kept a secret from me until now. Everyone kept this hidden from me. Sneaky…sneaky? Yeah, that was sneaky~ huhuhu"

Subaru: "Ahh, damn this girl's cute!"

Emilia sat down on the terrace's floor and was pouring more sake into her glass. Looking at the amount of empty sake bottles that had already been lined up, you could say that Emilia had quite the drinking capacity.

She wasn't drunk enough to pass out, though considering that, it was pretty quick for the situation to turn into what it currently was.

Subaru: "Speaking of what I imagined, this would be it. Speaking of what I impression I had, this would be it. However, on top of being weak to sake, Emilia-tan also has bad drinking habits, huh…"

Based on what he saw from socializing with Emilia up until now, Subaru had thought that Emilia probably would only be either extremely tolerant with alcohol, or extremely weak with alcohol. The result, as you see—he was still happy with her cute but rambunctious relationship with alcohol, not causing trouble with things like her beginning to take off her clothes, or her beginning to vomit.

Though it was very worrying, considering how she wouldn't listen to him if he suggested that she stop drinking.

Subaru: "If I could I'd stop her. I want to put her to sleep, and I'd even sing a lullaby to do so, but…"

Emilia was leaning on him with her amorous cheeks that made him dizzy. He had a reason for not stopping the situation. It was simply because he couldn't move.

This is because—

Rem: "—Subaru-kun"

Subaru: "Yes, what is it, Rem-san?"

Rem: "Hed"

Subaru: "That hurts you know, Rem-san."

Subaru sits with his legs crossed at the terrace. Rem had her head placed on his lap. She had an ordinary unemotional expression, but her face was red enough to make him worried.

Rem used Subaru's lap as a pillow, but her movement was slow and she had few requests. She was now just biting on Subaru's thigh as if it was an afterthought. She wasn't showing signs of a bad drunk.

But, he had doubts about if he could call it a drinking habit. Rem sure was drunk, but unlike Emilia, she didn't have a single sip of sake.

Subaru: "To think that you got this dead drunk just from the smell of sake and not from the air and the atmosphere…But if that's the case, then what happened with the sake used in things like the cooking? There was even times where Ros-chi poured wine.”

She also served glasses of sake at the start of the stargazing party. In response to Subaru’s doubt, the girl on his lap, Rem, moved only her head and looked up at him.

Rem: “Pleasee don’t make funs of me, Subaru-kun. Subaru-kun. Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “The usual calling me three times, huh. Umm, what is the meaning of this?”

Rem: “I feel shtrained because I’m alwaysh doing important work. But, todayy is a fun gathering, sho I feel a bit relaxed. Soo, it’s yoouuur fault, Subaru-kun.”

She smiled with her whole face. However, the way she spoke was suspicious, and on top of that, she had inconsistent reasoning.

Moreover, at the middle of the conversation, she put her arms around Subaru’s back and was pushing her head against his stomach. It was a violent way of spoiling herself, but this girl was a complete drunk. While being surprised from this side of her, Subaru casually patted Rem’s head, and she purred in delight.

Subaru: “What are you, a cat?! You are an oni…or rather, with my knowledge I imagined onis to be tolerant of sake. But perhaps the history about that is inaccurate when it’s a different world.”

Ram: “I don’t know what you are comparing onis too, but it’s true that the oni clan is a race that is tolerant of sake. Ever since I was little, I also drank at the adult’s banquets.”

Once Subaru cocked his head in puzzlement at oni drinking capabilities, he heard Ram from behind responding to his doubt.

Subaru: “You really just admitted to underage drinking as if it was nothing, huh. I’m not trying to meddle with the Oni rules…but the expression you have and the way you’re speaking make me suspicious.”

Ram: “Of course. We train differently.”

When Subaru turned around, he saw Ram sitting on a chair elegantly tilting a glass. She was wearing maid garments, and yet she conducted herself with overflowing elegance as a female noble would show. This is what her constant behavior of unbreakable confidence and her constant remarkable dignity reminded him of.

That girl who acted like a female noble, Ram, glared at Rem holding onto Subaru with her arms and

Ram: “I see that Rem is enjoying the drinking party. How lovely.”

Subaru: “This is enjoyment…it looks like she’s extremely enjoying herself, but Rem being like this really is just the atmosphere. She hasn’t had a sip of alcohol, and yet this is how she is. Was Rem like this at the oni village banquets?”

Ram: “…Rem and I had complicated situations. Moreover, I also didn’t want to get Rem involved in adult only gatherings.”

Ram responding while looking down caused Subaru to hesitate from asking more. He just heard about the sisters’ horns the other day. Asking about their hometown was taboo.

When he completely forgot about it and brought up the topic, he wanted to believe that his judgement was becoming cloudy because of the sake.

—He found it really hard to understand the situation around him, but in truth, Subaru also was drinking a lot of sake.

It would be nice if he got intoxicated and started to have a new side of himself, like Emilia and Rem, to be charmful, but sadly, Subaru was tolerant with alcohol.

He was not drunk and could still interpret his situations. He was quite amazed with his own genetics.

Subaru: “The flavor of sake wasn’t bad. …That’s what I’ve learned, and I guess the fact that I shouldn’t get girls to drink sake carelessly.”

Ram: “I feel like that also is pushing it too far.”

He was shocked because of all the countless empty sake bottles that were around Ram, who said those words and tilted a sake cup. Things like her attitude, genetics, talent, and other random things all depicted her manner as an oni.

Subaru: “Ram is a heavy drinker, just like I thought. Which means that the others…Puck, wow.”

He headed towards the hall, saw Puck on the table, and then opened his eyes wide.

Puck boasted himself and had said “I won’t let Lia drink sake”, but it seemed that he completely forgot about that spirit and was immersed in a bowl of sake, enjoying his bath of alcohol.

At the front, he saw Roswaal give a sake cup to the person he was talking with; it was a spirit and an imperial sorcerer being surprisingly friendly with each other. And then—

Subaru: “Ah, I see. Beatrice, that rascal.”

Subaru searches around for a little silhouette, and looks at the girl beside the terrace. Beatrice sat on the railing of the empty terrace, her hair swaying along with the wind.

He saw her poignant expression, which was an expression indicative of loneliness, making Subaru let out a sigh.

Subaru: “Well, guess I’ll go mess with her for a bit. Emilia-tan, I’m sorry, but look after Rem.”

Emilia: “Hmmm? Ya, got it. Here here, Rem, come here~. Mmhuhu, sooo cute.”

He politely unwraps arms of the still eyed girl that she had around his back, Rem, and left her to Emilia. Emilia takes the unmoving girl, and hugs her happily as a reward. The two cute girls rubbed their cheeks against each other while Emilia gently rubbed Rem's blue hair.

Subaru: "…I want to take a picture of this."

Ram: "I'll burn it into memory."

Ram let out a vigorous nod at Subaru, who didn't want to let the situation pass by him. He left the rest up to Ram's memory and headed towards the terrace, where Beatrice stood still.

She was certainly gazing at the starry sky. He leans against the railing next to her and smiles.

Subaru: "Don't let it end with the two of us. You wouldn't be able to bear being seen as a loner, don't you think?"

Beatrice: "That would be an unreasonable insult, I suppose. Also, mind your own business. …You are the one who said to not drink sake in the first place, I suppose. What am I supposed to do?"

Subaru: "Becauuse, I did invite you, but when I imagine a girl like you drinking alcohol, then I couldn't allow it. It's painful imagining a girl that had the taste of sake slip into her memory drink in the forbidden archives by herself. I don't want to think about it."

The purpose of this party was to have fun. There was no reason to make this girl commit crime. Or rather, this certainly was something Puck should have put an end to.

Subaru: "And yet, that cat is drinking heartily in an alcoholic bath. What kind of hedonist is this guy?"

Beatrice: "I won't let you insult Bubby, I suppose. Moreover, Bubby's behavior shows just how much he trusts me. So it's not like I feel lone…"

Subaru: "Ah! Emilia-tan and Rem are closer than they were earlier. Wait…!"

Beatrice: “It is beyond rude for you to come this far and do things like talk with me inattentively, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Ahh! No, you’ve got it wrong! Emilia-tan and Rem were getting into this thing over there and I was feeling these good manlike feelings. It’s not like my heart’s been stolen, but I need a camera…!”

Beatrice: “You are not convincing me at all!”

On the other side of the terrace, Emilia was patting Rem’s body, while Rem purred with Emilia embracing her. On top of the situation being lovely, they were also being gay.

Subaru: “I’m so sad that I’m not over there…!”

Beatrice: “It’s fine, I suppose. Roswaal has taken Bubby away from me. It would be suiting for me to shiver in the nightwind all by myself.”

Subaru: “My bad, my baddd. The host will get hurt if a pouting guest pierces through him like that with words. Jeez, guess I’ve got no choice.”

Subaru laughs at the girl who insulted him as unfaithful, and he jumps off the railing just like Beatrice did. However, just before he settled on the ground, he felt giddy from the sake and was about to fall.

Subaru: “Ohwa?! Sh-Shit! I thought I was gonna become smashed tomato!”

Beatrice: “Can you not laugh at a talent like risking your life like that? Even if you were to die like a smashed insect, I probably wouldn’t be that amused, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Don’t take responsibility for hospitality when I’m at the risk of life! That was really dangerous, huh.”

Subaru wipes off his cold sweat, and sat down next to the shocked girl, Beatrice. She wasn’t welcoming him, but she wasn’t running away either. This meant that Beatrice was okay with him sitting next to her.

Subaru: “Alright, then I will have a lovely talk with you, seeing how you’re lounging around. I actually wanted to use the starry sky as a way to talk about romantic topics and get lively with Emilia-tan, but the alcohol had an unparalleled amount of effect on her, so the plan has been setback.”

Beatrice: “I hear nothing but a schemer that sounds like he’s had his plans foiled, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Yes, that’s true. I know that’s true! But forget about that for now. And so, about the stars back at my hometown…over there, each of the stars have many anecdotes to go with their names.”

Subaru had these talks about stars, which people would certainly listen to, and it managed to make Beatrice interested and brought a smile to her face. Subaru holds his breath as she looks up at the stars throughout the sky while she showed enthusiasm like that.

When Subaru looked up at the starry sky, he was confused for a second, although this was something that happened every time.

—At any rate, the stars high up in the sky looked different from the heavenly bodies that Subaru knew well.

There was the Polaris star that stood out, shining brightly, and there was the Big Dipper that lined up near it. He did not know where the seasonal, awaited Summer triangle was. Neither did he know where the Winter Triangle, the Orion constellation, and the Cassiopeia constellation were either.

Ironically, he’d quickly know the answer if he looked up at the night sky. He’d understand that the stars in this world were in completely different locations compared to the stars in his world, based off their arrangement.

Beatrice: “…Looks like you forgot about them. If you have nothing to say, then I’m gonna go over there, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I didn’t forget about them. I was just puzzled because there are so many…first, look. The excessively glowing star over there is Polaris. Basically, if you get lost, rely on that star. That way is generally north.”

Beatrice: “No way. That’s south.”

Subaru: “Okay, then they’re the southern polar stars.”

Beatrice: “What do you mean “Okay then”?! It sounds like you’re just improvising whatever’s suitable!”

In truth, Subaru really was saying whatever was suitable. However, he hid that fact behind a bold smile and continued talking. If he pulled out here at a scene like this, he would be defeated, though he didn’t know what the match was, probably due to the sake.

In response to Beatrice’s doubtful look, Subaru points at the southern polar stars and

Subaru: “Look for other stars using those southern polar stars as a starting point. Look a bit lower, do you see how the five stars line up to form an “M”? That is the Cassiopeia constellation.”

Beatrice: “I don’t know what an “M” is, and I don’t see a form of anything.”

Subaru: “Don’t see it, feel it. Ah, if you don’t know what an M is, you can think of it is an anchor instead. The story behind Cassiopeia…well you see it’s a story about a prideful, loveable mother named Cassiopeia who displeased the people around her because of how she boasted about her daughter Andromeda too much. Something like that.”

Beatrice: “…The stories behind the stars sure do stink of humans, I suppose.”

Beatrice is amazed by Subaru’s stories. He relaxes his cheeks at that impression, which she let out with a sigh.

Subaru: “Riiightt? Back at my home town, people treat the stars like gods, but so many of those “gods” are only troublemakers. So they’re quite human! And that is what’s interesting about them.”

Beatrice: “Calling them gods is exaggeration. You sure did explain complex existences in a pretty egotistical way.”

Subaru: “When you think of supernatural existences, you think they’re awesome. But, when you see a similar existence, a spirit, submerge himself in a sake bath without a care in the world, then that’s not convincing at all.”

Ahead of him, Subaru saw Roswaal pouring new sake into the empty alcohol bath that Puck was in.

Beatrice was also looking at the scene. While making an expected serious face, she said

Beatrice: “Bubby is a great spirit that is unusual in every way. So uh, stop using Bubby’s composure as a standard for spirits, I suppose. Bubby is just super special.”

Subaru: “Thank you for managing a difficult followup. So, about the other stars…that’s right, okay! Let’s look for the one and only Subaru!”

Beatrice: “…Huh?”

In response to Subaru snapping his fingers and his teeth glistening, Beatrice perceived him as a pitiful thing, causing Subaru to hurriedly shake his head at her behavior.

Subaru: “Wait wait wait, don’t pity me! It’s different. Subaru is my name, but I am named after a star. “Subaru” is a star cluster that has many stars gathered together. So I’m suggesting that we should look for that.”

Beatrice: “Your parents have done a cruel thing to you, naming you after a twinkling star in the night sky like that, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Don’t look down upon it by implying it failed to live up to its name!”

He actually did care about it. It seemed like he was going to come in conflict with that complex, so Subaru pointed his finger at the sky while covering it up with a frivolous attitude.

Subaru You might not be interested, but stay with me for a little bit more. I thought I'd spout some drunk nonsense, so."

Beatrice: "…I didn't go as far as to say I wasn't interested."

"…"

Beatrice whispered those words quietly to Subaru, who was in high spirits. When he opened his eyes wide at that unexpected word, the little girl looked away slightly. Her cheeks were slightly red.

Subaru: "What is this what is this? You are a dishonest loli! It can't be helped. It just can't be helped! Alright, then I guess I'll continue the super fun talk about the starry sky!"

Beatrice: "You are loud, I suppose. You're irritating."

Subaru: "Yeah yeah, cute cute!"

Subaru's attitude improved completely because of Beatrice's attitude and started to talk a lot with a good mood. He looks up at the unfamiliar starry sky, and started to talk about an abundance of misdirected stories without stopping.

He kind of felt like the ease of his head was joining together with the ease of his heart.

6

Beatrice: "Roswaal"

Roswaal: "Oh, had enough with your rendezvous with Subaru-kun?"

Roswaal says this, shakes his glass, and smiles at the girl who came back from the terrace, Beatrice. In response to the clown's words, Beatrice gives a displeased looking frown.

Beatrice: "Keep your jokes reasonable, I suppose. Me having honest fun times with that? I'm not amused."

Roswaal: "Jeez you are not honest with yo~urself. That part of you doesn't change, hu~h."

Beatrice: “That’s a given, I suppose. I’m not Bubby’s next apprentice for that aspect. Moreover…”

Beatrice glances at Ram, who sat facing Roswaal. Roswaal guesses the meaning of that look. When he gave an acknowledging gesture with his chin, Ram silently left her seat.

Ram drinks the glass of sake in her hand dry, bows, and then headed towards the terrace. Subaru, Emilia, and Ram were sound asleep, lying down peacefully.

Ram covers each of them with prepared blankets one at a time. She did it politely with Emilia, affectionately with Rem, and then with Subaru, she did in it a way so that his face was concealed.

Roswaal: “Girls not used to drinking are cute. Subaru-kun did appear to be fine, but it seems like he surprisingly hit his limi~t.”

Beatrice: “He collapsed as if he couldn’t take it anymore, I suppose. The way he walked and the way he talked were suspicious from the start…he’s always crazy, so it makes sense how I wasn’t noticing it.”

Roswaal: “In comparison, you supported him as if you understood how he became unable to move from his drunkenness. Did you see a difference between that and the usual Subaru-kun…? I wonder.”

“…”

Roswaal: “I’d like you to stop making that scary look with your eyes, since it’s just a mere jo~ke.”

Beatrice lets out a long, tired sigh at Roswaal, whose intention was to tease implicatively. This heavy, frail sigh was as long as the amount of time they’ve known each other.

Roswaal shrugs his shoulders in resignation at that gesture she made, which didn’t suit her childish appearance.

Roswaal: “Did you not enjoy this evening? “

Beatrice: “Did you think otherwise? Boisterous partying like this… as someone who hates peace being disturbed, this is something that irritates me the most.”

Roswaal: “You sure about that? When I consider how you’ve been lately, I can’t honestly nod my head at that. You were just submitting to the silence of peace. The real you is…”

Beatrice: “Roswaal”

The sharp look and the sharp voice she gave Roswaal made him stop speaking in the middle of his sentence. Just then, an awkward atmosphere came floating in. However, that—

Puck: “Betty”

Beatrice: “…Bubby”

The third person that was left at that place, Puck, tilts his head in doubt while being in a bowl of sake.

Puck: “Betty, you didn’t really like this party?”

Beatrice: “…That…that’s not really true, I suppose. Just seeing Bubby enjoying himself is enough happiness for me. However, today Bubby reeks of liquor, so I won’t hug you, I suppose.”

Puck: “Nyan.”

Puck splashes inside of the bowl of sake and then sinks. He drinks all of the sake in the bowl in one gulp and drives away the smell of liquor from the body as he jumps out.

Puck: “How do I smell?”

Beatrice: “You still reek of liquor.”

Puck: “Then how about this?”

In response to Beatrice’s judgement, Puck’s body illuminates while he shakes his whiskers. The cat’s body reconstructs after that flicker of light, and then all of the effects from before were gone.

Roswaal: “Being able to go on without having a hangover, what a convenient nature.”

Puck: “In exchange, the sake I drank and the food I ate are gone, though. Looking it that way, the bodies of spirits aren’t very amusing.”

Puck winks at Roswaal’s straightforward impression and then climbs onto Beatrice’s shoulder. Puck brings himself close to her cheeks, his liquor smell being gone, and then Beatrice glares at Roswaal.

Roswaal: “Oh, that’s an angry face. What the he~ck happened?”

Beatrice: “I just want to hear your real intention, I suppose. What was the point of this thing tonight?”

Roswaal: “It’s just like what I said before the to~ast. Everyone here needs to work together for the problems in the future. —For the sake of my dearest wish, these are the members. That’s what I’ve decided.”

“…”

Roswaal: “You should prepare yourself too. The time for fulfilling that long long contract is near. At the very least, I am prepared for it.”

Roswaal talks in a serious tone and heads towards the terrace with a glass in his hand. Roswaal had the sleeping boy and the others projected into his eyes beyond the world of blue amber.

Beatrice, who knew his dearest wish, did not affirm his decision, nor was she negative towards it. And then the reason Beatrice abandoned choosing one is because she had chosen to take up a vast amount of time.

Roswaal: “…No matter what happens, I am wishing for your success. That is one of my few motives, as a person who only forms lies.”

Beatrice: “This is some boring sentimentality, I suppose. Are you saying that I should have sympathy for you?”

Roswaal: “Empathy. After all, You and I are unique accomplices in this world.”

Roswaal says those words and put up a fresh glass onto the table. The glass was filled with amber sake. The clown pushes the glass in front of the girl.

Beatrice: “What is this?”

Roswaal: “It’s yours. It would be cruel if you ended up not being able to drink a single drop of sake after you were invited to this banquet. Plus, the children who disagreed with you drinking seem to be sound asleep.”

Roswaal closes one of his eyes with an evil smile and offered the sake to Beatrice. Beatrice responds to those words by reaching for the glass. However, just before that, the wind blew.

The breeze that flew in from the terrace and filled the stillness of the night caused Beatrice to remember a conversation from before.

“…”

And then, she pushes the glass back and rejected the offer of sake.

Beatrice: “I won’t drink it, I suppose.”

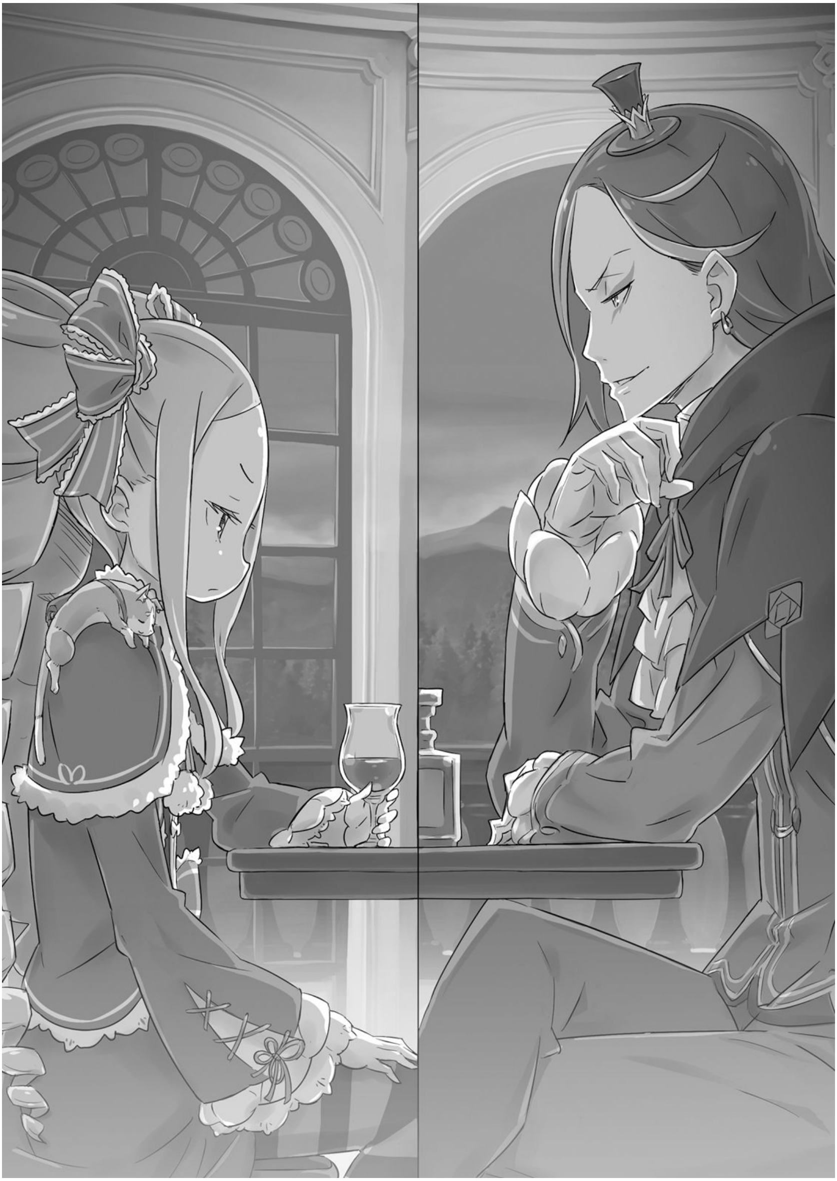

Roswaal: “Is this you being faithful to Subaru-kun? Once again, you are surprisingly…”

Beatrice: “Don’t misunderstand me here. The reason why I won’t drink isn’t because I listened to what that kid said, I suppose. …It’s because my mom told me not to a long time ago.”

Roswaal kept his silence as a response to Beatrice’s reply. Seeing how it had an instant effect on him, Beatrice pet Puck’s back with a face indicating that she was done with the matter.

She did have a night like this before. —Under the night sky, Beatrice’s mother did not make a pleasant face at Beatrice tasting sake. She felt like there were also other voices that told her to stop.

Thus, the person that continued to stagnate in the forbidden archives could not violate the words her mother said that day.

Beatrice: “That’s all there is to it. —What he said has nothing to do with me, I suppose.”

Beatrice says this explanation and never tasted the sake.

The night of the banquet advances.

The night of the banquet where the host learned about the taste of alcohol and the troubles with it, and where the girls’ drinking habits became completely exposed, slowly advances.

Only the starry sky looked down on those peaceful hours in silence.

Bonus Short Stories

Emilia and Ram’s Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship

“Ugeh…”

The moment the girl entered the guest room without even knocking, she ended up raising her voice at the sight that awaited her within.

The girl possessed sweet, lovely features. Sporting short, uniform hair, her almond eyes shone a light crimson. But contrary to her lovely appearance, the girl seemed to have a sharp, intellectual aura about her.

But even that aura dissipated as she grimaced at the unpleasant sight before her.

“—That voice, is that you, Ram? Sorry to surprise you.”

The next voice did not come from the girl—From Ram, it came from a person who was already in the room beforehand.

This voice was as clear as a silver bell, and merely hearing it would shake the listener’s heart for better or for worse. But this time around, the voice sounded strangely confined as it reverberated through the room. This was only natural.

The reason being that the owner of the voice was in this room with a bucket completely covering their head.

“…What is this, Emilia-sama. To cover your head with a bucket in a place like this.”

“Fufufu, can you not tell just by looking?”

“I can only imagine that this is Barusu’s fault.”

“You’re kind of acting like this is reeeally weird? Also, Subaru does have something to do with this whole bucket thing, but I’m keeping this secret from him. Please keep quiet about this.”

“Barusu has something to do with this, but it’s a secret from him…? That’s rather complicated, Emilia-sama.”

With the bucket still on her head, Emilia was sitting in a chair in the middle of the guest room. Ram’s conversation with her while unable to even see her face failed to touch on the heart of the matter, and was thus going nowhere.

“Hmm, Alright, I’ll explain. Off you go.”

Perhaps having noticed Ram’s frustration, Emilia slowly took her bucket off.

As she did so, her long, glistening silver hair spilled out of the bucket. This hair which was alluring as moonlight itself flowed down her back as she blinked and set her amethyst eyes on Ram.

All the while, she held the bucket to her chest as if it was precious to her. Ram knit her brows.

“As far as Ram remembers, you were not afflicted with a perverse obsession with buckets.”

“Yeah, it’s not like I’m particularly crazy about buckets either. But this bucket right here is my sensei, so that’s why things ended up like this.”

“…”

She was awaiting a normal response, so this answer that made her head hurt all the more caused Ram to narrow her eyes. In response to this reaction, Emilia hurriedly waved her hands,

“Ah, no, that’s not it! Umm, I’d better explain from the start. Do you remember what happened this afternoon? Not that I really want you to…”

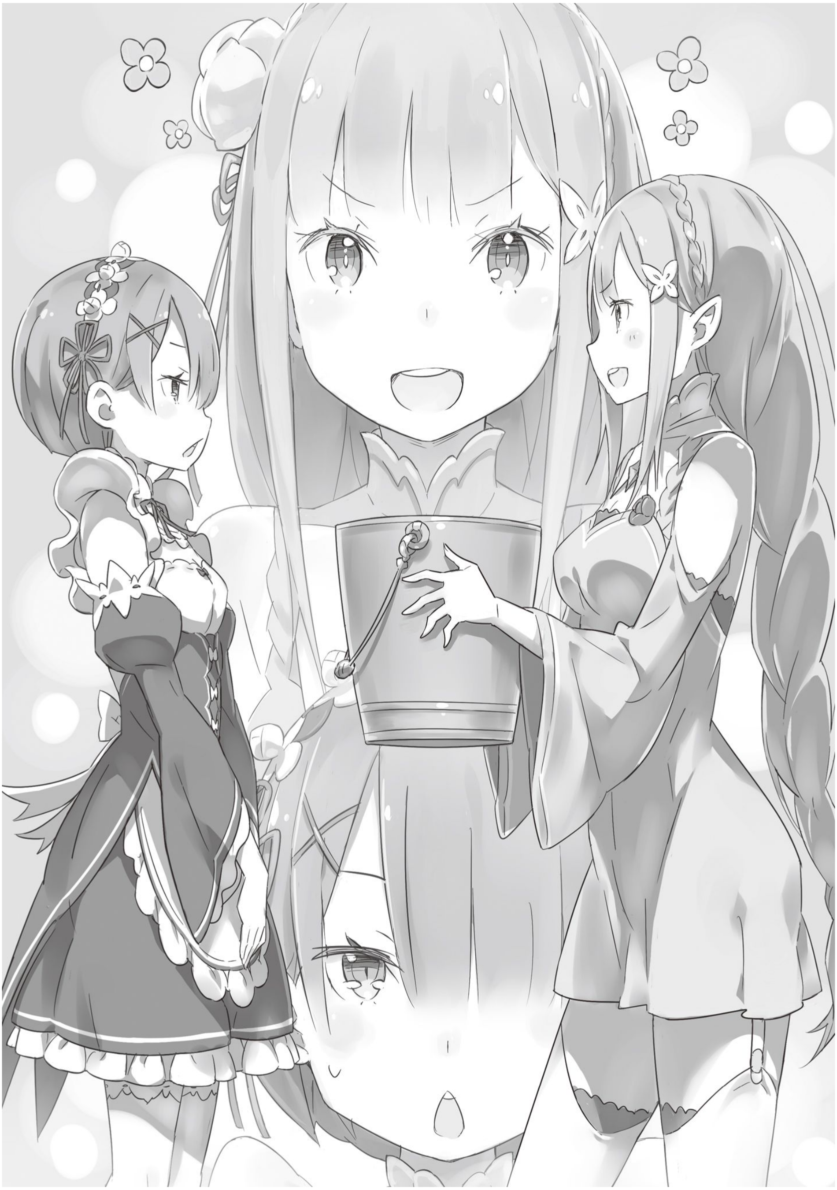

"Are you referring to that singing that sounded like a bird's death throes?"

"Th-That's… What I'm talking about, yeah, right…"

When Ram bluntly got right to the point, Emilia hung her head with a sad smile.

As Ram cast a sidelong glance at Emilia's disheartened state, the events of several hours ago replayed in her mind. This was during their short break after they had finished the first stage of work in the mansion, and everyone had some free time to do as they pleased.

Ram was walking around the mansion looking for her much beloved little sister when she heard it, a completely bizarre voice entered her ears when she passed by the dining room. Suspecting that this voice that sounded very much like a bird being strangled to death was yet another one of her colleague Subaru's pranks, Ram barged into the room, but—

"But what I actually found within that room was your unfortunate figure sincerely attempting to sing."

"Don't call it unfortunate! Although I will admit that that was kind of horrible."

"Kind of."

"Reeeeally horrible! Are you happy now? You're so mean, Ram! Beh—!"

Tormented by a strange sense of stubbornness, Emilia's attitude turned completely sullen. However, Ram tilted her head, not feeling the sense of disappointment she had expected from this response.

Ram had assumed that Emilia who knew of her tone deafness was someone who was easily influenced.

"Despite this, you are not discouraged. Does this mean you've suddenly become defiant in this short time?”

“I don’t know what kind of impression you have of me, but I haven’t become defiant or discouraged or anything! Nor do I even have time for that sort of thing, I’m burning up!”

“Heeh, is that right.”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m burning up. I’m seeeeeriously on fire.”

In response to Ram’s indifferent reply, Emilia’s eyes sparkled as she repeated herself any number of times. Her expression was very clearly saying, ‘Ask me what I’m so excited about, ask me, ask me’, causing Ram to sigh.

“Emilia-sama, it truly does seem to me that Barusu has had a hand in this.”

“I don’t think that’s the case, though…”

“…Well then, for what reason exactly are you burning up?”

“Ah, you want to know? Fufu, and with that I shall return to the tale of the bucket. This must be quite the shock, isn’t that right?”

“I suppose so, it would be absurd if the bucket had no relation to this.”

As Emilia showed off the bucket she was holding, Ram momentarily felt relieved that they were finally returning to the topic at hand. Emilia’s fingers gently stroked the bucket’s surface as she continued,

“Subaru told me about this. That there are some ways to correct t-tone… Deafness.”

“Please continue without shame.”

“And then, he said the first step was to put a bucket over my head to confirm my tone deafness. It thought that was another one of his pranks at first, but that wasn’t the case at all. Subaru was seriously thinking about how to help me, so I figured I should do my best as well.”

Her enthusiasm was splendid, but the connection between her tone deafness and this bucket remained unclear. Although reflecting on their conversation thus far, Ram could hazard a guess as to what was going on here.

"You wanna know what the connection is between tone deafness and buckets?"

"Yes, absolutely. When you have a bucket over your head, the sound of your voice reverberating within would allow you to comprehend the extent of your tone deafness. If there exists some other explanation, please do elaborate."

"…Ram, could it be that you actually knew what buckets could do all along?"

"Well, Ram has been using buckets for quite some time after all."

The contents of their conversation were utterly meaningless and thus her responses became increasingly perfunctory as well.

As Ram boldly boasted in her formal manner, Emilia's attitude seemed to be one of comprehension, "I see." This straightforward reaction made Ram feel just a little uneasy.

—From Ram's perspective, her relationship with Emilia posed some unusual difficulties.

It went without saying that to Ram, her one and only master for life was none other than Roswaal. Her body, mind, and soul, everything she had—Barring her love for her little sister, it would be no exaggeration to say she devoted all of herself to him.

And Emilia was absolutely indispensable to Roswaal's plans. Consequently, Roswaal welcomed her into his mansion and treated her as someone even higher than himself.

Of course, Roswaal had ordered Ram and Rem to follow his example, but—

"…She's completely unreliable."

That was the sort of impression Ram had of Emilia.

When she accompanied her to the capital, she separated from Ram and ended up having the insignia that qualified her as a royal selection candidate stolen from her. Such incidents caused Ram's wariness to steadily build up over the four months they'd known each other.

At the very least, Emilia was not someone Ram felt like she could count on just like that. She was also completely lacking in refinement, there was a limit to how flawed she could be as a person.

"So you have decided to practice on your own in order to correct your tone deafness, Emilia-sama? And moreover, at this hour."

"Umm, That's how… It is. I mean, if I were to sing in my room it would probably be an inconvenience to everyone else. There's no one around this part of the building, so I thought it would be fine to sing here."

"Meaning you did not expect Ram to come looking around here. Ram does not do this very frequently, however."

Showing consideration in her own way, Emilia had decided to move elsewhere and Ram had ended up happening upon her, that appeared to be the gist of it. Perhaps one could call this a false alarm. All the more so now that she had discovered that Emilia was merely practicing to correct her tone deafness.

"Although I do not think this is something one ought to go as far as to cut into their sleeping hours for."

"Even I can't say anything in response to that. But I ended up bothering Subaru and the others a whoooole lot today, so… I want to do this properly."

"…"

"The truth is that the reason everyone went along with my singing practice was for my sake, isn't that right. Not to correct my tone deafness, but to, umm… How do I put this?"

“To relax, is it?”

“Right, to relax. It was reeeeally fun, but in all that fun the tension ended up leaving me, so I wonder if that was how it was.”

Emilia donned a faint smile as she spoke, Ram who was an outsider could not give her an accurate answer.

However, she could make a guess.

The reason Roswaal let Emilia have some time to enjoy herself even though she should have been studying every single day in preparation for the royal selection—Everyone in the mansion knew that Emilia had been pushing herself too hard these past several days, and that willpower of hers was going nowhere.

Simply put, Subaru and Roswaal were working together in secret in order to change Emilia’s mood.

“Even though he is Barusu, to think he had fun conspiring with Roswaal-sama, what a crafty little…”

“Ram? Your eyes kind of look super fierce right about now, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine. I merely lost my cool for a moment. Well then…”

Having noticed the consideration of those around her, Emilia whose mood should have changed was now staying up late to practice singing. This was completely backwards, or rather, Ram got the feeling that their original objective was a failure.

As Ram thought such things, Emilia placed a finger on her lip and smiled in response.

“It’s alright. Everyone came together to teach me how to relax properly. Now, while I’ll be sure to remember that, I also want to be able to sing.”

“Although it seems to me that having you sing was secondary to them.”

“I know that. But I want both. Is it wrong to say that?”

As Emilia tilted her head, her attitude displayed the simple desire to overcome her shortcomings, and Ram assented having understood this. Emilia really was a little different after all.

“Do you not think you have become greedier than you used to be, Emilia-sama?”

“Don’t you know, Ram? That I’m actually trying to become the ruler of this country.”

Compared to the scale of this goal of hers, most other things were hardly even worth mentioning. This response of hers caused Ram to smile.

This was not a wry smile nor was it one of ridicule, it was a rare smile from the bottom of her heart.

“Ah, you’re smiling. Did I say something funny?”

“I wonder? It’s just, Ram’s opinion of you has changed ever so slightly.”

“Really? That makes me pretty happy then.”

Those words meant that Ram was looking down on her before, but Emilia decided to ignore that part and accepted it wholeheartedly.

Honest and easily deceived, one might think she would be easy to manipulate as a puppet. But due to her flaws, she could also do things that were completely unexpected. This girl’s nature was truly bothersome.

However—

“But to earnestly give it your all despite your flaws… I cannot say I dislike it.”

That nature was something Ram always saw in her darling other half.

No matter how different they were from her beloved little sister, Ram could not hate anyone who strived to overcome their shortcomings. Because that was a feeling Ram could not understand.

“Did you say something just now?”

Emilia looked puzzled, she could not quite catch Ram’s murmur which was as quiet as a whisper. Meeting her gaze, Ram shrugged slightly.

“Yes, I did say something. I was wondering if your rigorous training has produced any results, Emilia-sama.”

“Mm, I can’t overlook what you just said. Very well. You came at exactly the right time, so listen closely. The truth is I improved quite a bit in the afternoon alone. But I’ve advanced even further beyond that now!”

“Well then, please give it your all.”

Extending her hand towards Emilia who was full of vigor, Ram sat down on the guest room’s unused bed. This ruffled the sheets slightly, but it was Subaru who would have to fix them tomorrow. No problem.

“La, la, lalala—”

Receiving Ram’s signal and her gaze, Emilia looked just a little tense as she started singing. Her voice was slightly too shrill when she started, but it settled down soon enough. She was actually singing.

Considering she started with a sound that could be described as a bird’s death throes, her current advancement could be considered a historic achievement.

“…”

She started burning up as she sang and swayed her shoulders as she became increasingly engrossed in her singing. Even Ram who was listening intently ended up closing her eyes and devoting herself to the song before she knew it.

‘The Sword Demon’s Love Song’ was an extremely popular love song passed down in the kingdom for generations. Liliana, a traveling minstrel who had once stopped by the mansion, had performed it so well that even Ram was secretly taken in. Of course, Emilia’s singing was still lacking a number of ways compared to hers. She still made mistakes that stood out. But it wasn’t bad.

“…”

When the song approached its end, it was as if the scenes the lyrics described were manifesting in her closed eyes. Realizing just how deeply absorbed she was in this song, Ram smiled wryly.

And with that smile still on her face, the song came to a close, and Emilia turned to look at Ram.

“That is all. Your impressions, please.”

“Yes… Nine points.”

“Eh! You mean out of nine?”

“You’re quite audacious all of a sudden. I mean out of a hundred, of course.”

This scathing appraisal caused Emilia to drop her shoulders in dejection. However, she immediately clenched her fists tightly and looked up.

“But I’ve gotten a little better, right? How many points would I have gotten when I first started?”

“It is rather absurd that you think you would get any points at all.”

“It was that bad?!”

To begin with, even calling it singing would be an insult to the concept of songs. That was how bad it was. So compared to that, Emilia’s current level definitely got a passing grade.

"But I'm sure a passing grade is not enough to satisfy you."

"I suppose so. I wanna work harder and become better. Also, it looks like I'm still no good with songs besides the Sword Demon's Love Song after all…"

Scratching her cheek in an embarrassed manner, Emilia pointed out her flaws. Ram sighed at Emilia's ambition and the enthusiasm that came with it.

At this rate, this singing practice that was supposed to be a change of pace for her might once again cause her to overexert herself, putting them back at square one.

"Very well, then let us do this every other day. You shall practice here only on a fixed schedule. Ram shall free up some time as well."

"…You'll do this with me? Ram, with me?"

"It would be worrisome if there wasn't someone watching over you."

This was what Ram truly felt, of course she also had the ulterior motive of doing it for Roswaal's sake.

But even setting that aside—The song wasn't bad, she thought.

"Thank you, Ram. I'll do my best with you and bucket-sensei!"

"Please do not place Ram on the same level as that bucket."

And with this bumpy conclusion, it was decided that for now, these nightly practice sessions would continue.

END

Beatrice and Rem's Cumbersome Cleaning

1

"Gah, I suppose."

The moment the door was opened without a knock, the girl was greeted with that sort of voice by the room's owner.

The girl had a face with soft, lovely features, and light blue eyes that made one think of the calm surface of a lake. Her hair, the same color as her eyes, was trimmed short, and her body was wrapped in a maid outfit that had been altered to provide more exposure. Her round eyes held both faint surprise and relief, and surprise won out for the moment.

Her gaze was directed towards the middle of the room, where someone was seated on a stepladder in the center of the forbidden library.

"Beatrice-sama, please forgive me for bothering you so late at night."

The maid, Rem, was late in bowing her head because of her surprise—the room's owner let out a long sigh at her.

The room's owner was a little girl who appeared far more childlike than Rem. However, her sigh carried a curious sense of age, and was terribly mismatched with her doll-like outward appearance, which was well-suited to her gorgeous dress.

It goes without saying that judging her by human standards might itself be a mistake.

"Truly, to be visiting someone this late, you haven't learned your manners, you know."

"Yes, I have nothing to say for myself. But…"

"You shouldn't say 'But' right after saying 'I have nothing to say for myself', I suppose!"

Going red in the face, and shaking her unmistakable curled hair, the little girl, Beatrice, raised her voice. While once again lowering her head at this reaction, Rem nevertheless spoke her thoughts.

"Beatrice-sama, it seems that you are more irritable than usual this evening."

"…Well, listen to you, you know. What would you know about Betty?"

"This is only Rem's intuition, but perhaps it's related to a bucket?"

"…?! Wh, wha, what evidence do you have to go and say something like that, I suppose?!"

"It's because you're cradling that bucket so carefully, Beatrice-sama."

"Drat, you know…!"

In a single moment, the chill in the air was dispersed by Rem's pointed question. All that was left was Rem's victorious look after laying hands on the truth, and Beatrice, wide-eyed after being found out.

And in Beatrice's arms, just as Rem had pointed out, a bucket was cradled…For the last few days, there had been an important connection between the Roswaal manor and buckets.

"Rem was surprised as well. To think that you were concerned about being tone-deaf, Beatrice-sama."

Letting out a sigh composed of surprise and admiration in equal parts, Rem nodded several times.

Beginning from the stay of the minstrel Liliana, Emilia's tone-deafness came to light, and she began training to correct it. After that, it seems that the situation expanded further, and Beatrice's tone-deafness came to light as collateral damage…

“Rem, too, has heard that buckets are useful for correcting tone-deafness. Honestly, when she first heard that from Subaru-kun, she was skeptical, but Emilia-sama’s ‘Sword Demon’s Love Song’ has improved markedly…Rem wishes you good luck!”

“You should really do something about the habit you have of occasionally rubbing salt in people’s wounds without realizing it, I suppose!”

“…?”

Being reprimanded after trying to offer support, Rem tilted her head to the side with a questioning look on her face. At Rem’s response, Beatrice held up the bucket while looking even more weary.

“Setting that aside! Setting that aside, it would be troubling if you were to misunderstand! It’s not like Betty is being moved to action over a meaningless measurement of this and that about singing, I suppose. I would never agree to let someone make me wear a bucket, and saying that I’m tone-deaf, well, calling that a bold-faced lie would be generous.”

“Well then, may I request a verse from ‘Sword Demon’s Love Song’?”

“Even if you request it, I won’t sing, I suppose!”

“It’s fine. As a result of Emilia-sama’s state of affairs, Rem has recently been carrying earplugs with her.”

As Rem took white earplugs from a pocket, Beatrice scowled at her. However, not wanting to get caught up in the flow of things, she firmly shook her head.

“A, anyways, Betty being tone-deaf is nothing but a lie spread by that man, I suppose. He’s trying to ensnare Betty with evil rumors, you know. You shouldn’t be deceived, I suppose.”

“…In that case, Beatrice-sama, why are you holding a bucket?”

“If you think about how a bucket is used, you’ll understand that right away, you know.”

"Besides wearing it?"

"Would you stop talking about wearing it, I suppose!"

A use for buckets besides wearing them; when she was asked that, Rem was immediately lost in thought.

Was there actually a use for them besides wearing? Recently, anyone around Rem who had been speaking of buckets was either wearing one, or trying to get someone to wear one.

"Goodness, I can't think of anything besides the usual, using it for cleaning up…"

"That's! Correct! You know! What other way to use it would there be, I suppose?!"

"I see, you really outwitted me. Nicely done, Beatrice-sama."

"I wasn't, I wasn't trying to outwit you, you know…"

As Rem showed her admiration with a curtsey, Beatrice let her shoulders sag with an exhausted expression. The little girl atop the stepladder cradled the bucket to her chest, and let out the biggest sigh yet.

"I didn't think of you as the sort of girl who would say such outlandish things, I suppose…"

"Beatrice-sama, too, has never spoken like this with Rem in the past."

"…and you never spoke so impertinently, either, you know. As well,"

Glaring reproachfully, Beatrice stared at Rem. And then, she finally drew her attention to what had been at Rem's feet, ever since she entered the forbidden library.

For her midnight visit to the forbidden library, Rem had not come empty-handed. Around her feet where several different cleaning tools, and amongst them was, of course, a bucket…

“…I’ll at least ask what you’ve come here to do, I suppose.”

“That would be to allow the bucket you are holding to be used for its original role, Beatrice-sama.”

If one wasn’t wearing it, then the original role of a bucket was none other than being a cleaning tool.

As Beatrice narrowed her eyes at that reply, Rem smiled faintly and announced:

“…I thought we could begin a simple top-to-bottom cleaning of the forbidden library.”

2

“Simple, and yet a top-to-bottom cleaning, I have some doubts… you know.”

Remaining seated on the stepladder and looking nonplussed, Beatrice mumbled quietly to herself. Paying no mind to what she heard, Rem used a feather duster to delicately brush the bookshelves that filled the forbidden library.

It was a vast, grand forbidden library. The Roswaal manor was a fairly large-scale building, but even then, fitting in a library of this size was no simple matter.

Unrestrained by real space, it was a monumental feat only made possible by mastery of shadow magic, the superspell that connected another dimension with this one, Beatrice’s “Door Crossing”.

In the forbidden library that was completely cut off from the influence of the outside world, it was said that even the passage of time could go unnoticed. Whether that was true or not, even the books in the forbidden library that were clearly ancient showed no sign of deterioration. For that very reason, the precious tomes remained in their original condition.

Unfortunately, Rem wasn’t equipped with the sort of discerning eyes that would allow her to see their value at a glance.

“Damaging or ruining the books will not be permitted, I suppose. Be extremely careful, you know.”

“Yes, I understand. It’s only a matter of brushing off the dust, and wiping them clean.”

Without stopping her cleaning, Rem quietly responded to the cautionary words that Beatrice tossed to her.

The important point of cleaning a library was, as you’d expect, taking care not to damage the books. Paper absorbs water and oil easily. It seemed unlikely that mold would grow in the forbidden library, but if dust could accumulate then perhaps mold could grow as well. Using as little water as possible, Rem focused on using the duster.

“…”

For a short time, silence reigned in the forbidden library, broken only by the swish-swish of Rem wielding her duster. As that went on, Beatrice’s eyes were lowered to the book she had been reading, but she turned the pages slowly. Repeatedly turned back to the same page, she eventually muttered “Oh, enough” and raised her head.

“Isn’t there something you want to say to Betty, I suppose?!”

“Something from Rem to Beatrice-sama? Ah, you are adorable as always this evening, Beatrice-sama. Please be at ease. Sadly, you’re no match for nee-sama, but…”

“Why is Betty being belittled over an unrelated matter, you know?! Never mind that; don’t you think there’s anything strange about the situation where you’re being made to do the cleaning all alone?”

As Beatrice swung her legs while seated on the stepladder, Rem tilted her head with a ‘Hmm’.

Rem hadn’t the faintest idea what Beatrice was trying to say. Originally, it was the events of the bet a few days ago between Subaru and Beatrice that led her to decide on cleaning the forbidden library.

Giving Beatrice a sense of belonging in the mansion…While scratching her head at the meaning of the plan Subaru had hatched, Rem gained a chance to enter the forbidden library for the first time in a long while. At that time, there was something inappropriate to the serene space—put plainly, the air smelled of a lack of sufficient cleaning.

Since then, she'd been walking about in the mansion night after night, cautiously looking for an opportunity…

"Rem is doing just as she had wished to do, so she doesn't feel any problem in particular…"

"It looks like the servant mentality has seeped into your very bones, you know. The fact that Betty is holding a bucket is because she planned to use it…not wear it, I suppose."

"If you weren't planning to wear it, then you, too, were going to clean the library, Beatrice-sama?"

"Lately, someone's been entering and leaving the forbidden library without permission, and so the influence of the outside world has been streaming in frequently. Normally, feather-dusting is unnecessary here… that's how it should be, but despite that, well, as the librarian of the forbidden library, this is a serious state of affairs."

"…"

Mumbling and going red in the face, Beatrice spoke quickly as she strung together various reasons. Looking straight at the face of the girl who wasn't looking her way, Rem came to a sudden, strange realization.

It was unclear what sort of whim it was, but it seemed that Beatrice wanted to help with the library's cleaning. However, she was sensitive about it, and couldn't bring up the idea herself. Rem, too, was familiar with being unable to openly talk about one's own desires…In the past, she'd caused trouble for her older sister Ram time after time because of it.

Rem, who was timid and lacked courage, was saved many times by her sister's consideration and kindness. The days of trying to be a replacement for her sister were something she'd put behind her, but…

"I won't hesitate to imitate nee-sama's good points."

Even if she couldn't become her replacement, there were hundreds and hundreds of things about Ram that were worth imitating. Thinking about this moment as one of those times, Rem was able to gracefully extend her hand.

As Rem offered the hand opposite the one holding the duster, Beatrice looked down at it.

"What's this?"

"Normally, it would be very rude to ask Beatrice-sama to help out with the cleaning, but… I do understand your sense of responsibility as the librarian. So, just this once."

Imitating Subaru and Roswaal, Rem winked at Beatrice.

Glancing sideways at that expression, Beatrice took Rem's hand with a resigned attitude.The young girl stepped down from the stepladder, and lightly brushed the hem of her skirt.

"In that case, I'll take you up on that offer, you know. As a special exception, I suppose.It's not like I ran my mouth off about having the bucket for cleaning, and after that you actually started cleaning so I had no choice but to go along with it, you know. Don't get the wrong idea, I suppose."

"At this moment, Rem understands the circumstances of the situation better than anyone else in the world, so there's no need to worry."

As Rem nodded in response to the absurd excuse, Beatrice sniffed and took the duster from her. Holding it as she turned slowly towards a bookshelf, she began dusting violently. Rem rushed to speak up in response to the rather majestic use of the duster.

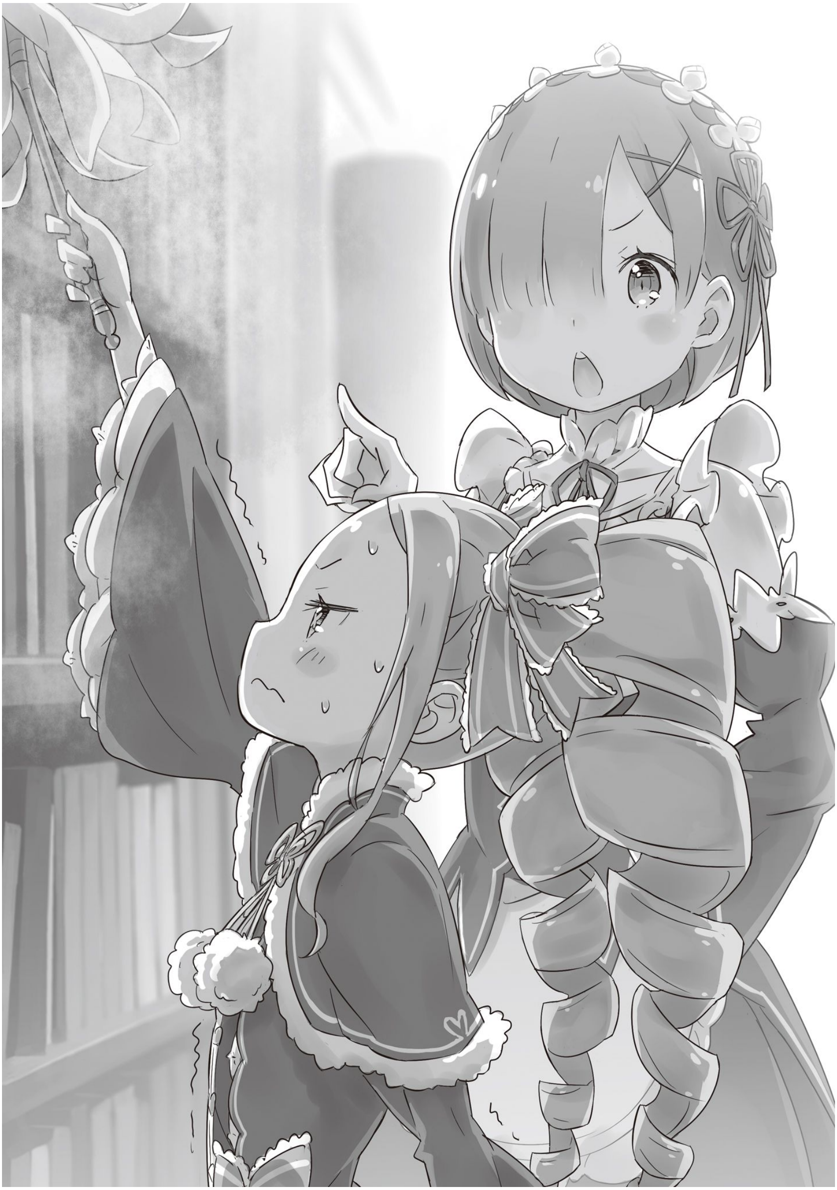

“Th, that won’t do, Beatrice-sama.If you use it that roughly…”

“…? But, to get the dust to come off, you have to use about this much strength, you know.”

“Even so, the books will be damaged! When the dust has hardened…you can remove it with an old toothbrush, like this. Ah! Please don’t move a book around holding onto just the cover…!”

“Such a fussy girl, I suppose. Really, the books of the forbidden library aren’t like the flimsy books outside it. They’re nothing but good solid books, so something like this won’t damage or break them…ah.”

Grasping the cover of a thick book, Beatrice had been shaking it violently. A fairly dramatic sound occurred near her hand, and the contents of the book fell completely out, leaving the cover behind.The dislodged pages scattered on the floor.

An unpleasant silence settled over that scene, and Beatrice cleared her throat.

“Well, this sort of thing happens now and then, you know.”

“Where did the sense of responsibility of the forbidden library’s librarian go…No, thinking back calmly about it, it does seem like Beatrice-sama has always been throwing and stepping on her books…”

As she thought back on it, Rem didn’t have that many memories of interacting with Beatrice. However, even with her scarce experiences with setting foot inside the forbidden library, between the numerous books piled on the floor, and the books that had been thrown at Subaru over these last few weeks, she’s seen poor treatment of the books fairly frequently.

“Beatrice-sama, this isn’t good. With this, the great spirit will be upset with you as well.”

“Thi…this has nothing to do with Bubby, I suppose! On top of that, if Betty isn't good enough, then what about that foolish girl? Bubby never scolds her, I suppose."

"That's because Emilia-sama's way of doing things is simply a bit masculine; she can still manage most things."

The topic of Emilia's life skills came up, but Rem's evaluation of her was exactly as she said. Further, Emilia made no excuses for her limitations. Rem envied her in that.

Setting that aside…

"While it may be presumptuous, it seems there's no choice but for Rem to give Beatrice-sama some guidance."

"There's not really any need to get so serious about it…"

"It simply won't do. Once you've decided to do it, do it properly. Rem, too, wouldn't want to do something halfway. Let's get cracking!"

While Beatrice suddenly began to have second thoughts, Rem approached with a serious look on her face, and announced that. A sense of responsibility filled her chest, and Subaru's voice echoed in the back of her mind. Studying letters, doing odd jobs around the mansion; when Rem stood in for Ram as the one in charge of guiding him, he would call her this.

"Tonight, Rem is Beatrice-sama's 'Spartan demon instructor'."

"I don't think you understand what that means, you know!"

"It appears that Subaru-kun is fond of demons, so it probably means something very good. Now I'm blushing. But blushing aside, let's Sparta."

"nga~h! What a turn of events, I suppose!"

With her pale blue eyes burning brightly, Rem caught Beatrice as she attempted to flee. Then, turning up the sleeves on the little girl's dress, she gave her a duster and a dry cloth.

“Firstly, cleaning must be done from the top. It’s far more than can be done in a single day, so even when Rem isn’t here, please do your best and keep working at it, Beatrice-sama.”

“A~h, why did it turn out like this? …This, that, and all of it, it’s all his fault, you know.”

Pushing Beatrice onward as she pouted, Rem instructed the little girl in everything she needed to know about “Library Cleaning”.

Under that demon instructor’s Sparta, the librarian who had served for so long was rebuked time after time—each time, she ended up cursing the black-haired young man.

END

Volume 9

Chapters 75-END

Chapter 75:
Reunion x Postponement x The Eyes of Reversal

1

—A complete loss of sensation in his limbs, and an intense, burning pain as if his entire body were being incinerated. His consciousness blacked out, and he plummeted headfirst, leaving behind all sound and everything else.

For Subaru, “death” was akin to that sensation.

Having died countless times and in countless different ways, Subaru alone understood the commonalities that arose when experiencing “death.”

“Return by Death” was similar to having those lost sensations violently reawakened all at once.

A massive influx of information would suddenly flood back into him: the lost sensations, the sensory organs meant to perceive them, and the brain that was supposed to organize that information, all of which had previously shut down.

It was only natural that he’d become disoriented, unable to process everything, and be slow to grasp the situation.

In other words—

“Mmm.”

“Agh—?!”

A shiver ran down Subaru’s spine as he felt a gentle nip on his earlobe, and he scrambled backward, almost tumbling over. His heart pounded from the intense, sweet sensation he’d never experienced before. He frantically looked around to see:

“I thought you were spaced out, so I played a prank, and what a delightful reaction… Ferris is gonna get addicted to this.”

Ferris said, laughing alluringly, gracefully posing with a finger to his lips. At the same time, Subaru realized the teeth he'd felt on his earlobe belonged to Ferris, and he collapsed.

"My first sweet nibble… taken by a cross-dresser…!"

"You don't need to be that down about it. More importantly, let's continue our discussion. Your eyes suddenly flew off somewhere, and we're still stuck with our momentum broken."

Ricardo retorted, scratching his large ear, to a dejected Subaru on all fours. Those around him nodded in agreement, indicating that Subaru's quick recovery was desired.

In front of them, Subaru continued to show his shock and exhaustion, still struggling to process the impact of having experienced "death."

—He died. He died again.

He failed. He hadn't thought things through enough. Despite having warned himself and those around him not to let their guard down, to always be vigilant, it still wasn't enough.

Just before his consciousness faded and his life returned to the heavens, he recalled Emilia's tear-streaked face.

His chest tightened.

He had fought all this time with only one thought: he absolutely did not want to make her cry, did not want to make her sad.

Yet, through his own death, Subaru had inflicted an unhealable sorrow upon her.

"—Let's sort this out."

Ferris crept closer again, as if to spur on Subaru, who had been scowling in regret and silence. However, Julius, raising a hand midway, cut him off.

He wagged a finger at the pouting Ferris, then turned his refined face toward Subaru.

“From here, we head to the Mathers territory, where the Witch Cult awaits. Our objective is the annihilation of the Witch Cult—and the essential condition here is the capture of the leading Archbishop. Also, to prevent them from being caught in the fight with the Witch Cult, the residents of Roswaal Manor and the surrounding areas will need to be evacuated. As for transportation for the evacuation…”

“I’ve already secured merchants by asking Anastasia-san and Russell-san… My apologies. I’m calm now, it’s fine.”

Wiping his mouth, which had been panting, Subaru returned to his spot in the circle and apologized to Julius. Julius, in response, raised an eyebrow in slight surprise.

“There’s no need to concern yourself. Rather, I’m glad to confirm that my understanding is correct. It seems you’re not particularly skilled at explanations.”

“Like I said before, I’m not used to talking in the middle of a large crowd like this. Remember, a shut-in’s social skills decline in proportion to the number of people they’re facing.”

Julius’s sarcasm—in this case, likely intended to distract a flustered Subaru. Subaru consciously ignored the irksome feeling of recognizing that thoughtfulness, along with an inexplicable tickle.

Then, he looked around again, becoming aware of the nearly fifty people staring at him.

This was the third time he was explaining the situation in front of them.

Even for an inexperienced shut-in, going over the same scene three times was enough to get used to it. The weight of entrusting others with their lives still pressed heavily on his shoulders, but—

“The Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishops are formidable foes. The Witch Cultists aren’t easy to deal with either, and I’m sure there will be casualties on our side in this fight. First, I need everyone to understand that.”

"…"

When Subaru began to speak after his preface, everyone responded with silence. However it wasn't a negative silence. It was because everyone was intensely focused on Subaru, determined not to miss a single word.

This was a form of trust, which meant—

"We defeated the White Whale, and honestly, I think everyone would want to return to the capital immediately for a triumphant return. You're tired, and there isn't anyone here who isn't injured. In this situation, I don't know what to say to all of you who are lending your strength to protect my… my master… only 'thank you.'"

He turned his head.

Subaru etched into his mind the faces of each and every one of the many pairs of eyes staring at him. Among the faces he imprinted, he recognized several that had been torn apart by the unseen hand in the previous loop.

He wouldn't forget their faces.

These were the people whose lives had been restored through Subaru's death and "Return by Death."

Yet, in the battle ahead, Subaru would once again cause someone's death through his own choices. A bloodless victory, whether against friend or foe, was impossible.

If he had been more capable, perhaps it wouldn't have come to this.

If Subaru were strong enough to repel anyone, wise enough to find a way out of any situation, noble enough to never be disheartened by adversity, and an idealist who would never tolerate any weakness, perhaps he could avoid casualties.

However that was impossible. Subaru was weak, foolish, and even his heart was fragile.

He couldn't stand on his own without someone's help, nor did he believe in himself enough to manage without clinging to someone.

That's why—

"Let's defeat the Sin Archbishop this time. To do that, I'm going to give everything I can, everything I have to offer, without holding back. So, please, lend me your strength."

"…"

"I need everyone. —Please, help me protect the people I care about."

Subaru put his hands on the ground and bowed his head.

He pressed his head firmly down, an embarrassing, cheap, and worthless head. This was the first time he had ever truly, earnestly, "bowed his head" like this.

"Subaru, raise your head."

"…"

At Julius's voice, Subaru slowly lifted his face.

Spread out before him was a chaotic dance of light, blinding like the morning sun.

—It was none other than the sight of knights kneeling, holding up their drawn swords.

This was the second time he'd felt his heart supported by the gleam of swords.

Only Subaru, who could actually experience "Return by Death," could truly comprehend this. Through countless, unwilling "Returns by Death," Subaru had come to a realization.

The world unfolded in myriad different ways, repeating over and over again.

Even in such a world, what consistently happened was born from “a strong, strong human will, unaffected even by the world’s fluctuations.”

In other words, the feelings of those who helped Subaru in the same way, again and again—

“No matter how many times it repeats, no matter how foolish I am and come back… you’ll still lend me your strength. You’ll make me stand up, again and again.”

Just like Rem did.

Just as Rem supported Subaru no matter how many times it repeated, their presence also strongly propped up Natsuki Subaru’s wavering will.

For Subaru, this was “salvation” that surpassed anything else—any power he could be given, any wisdom he could be granted, any hope.

“Sorry for bringing down the mood right before the decisive battle. Forget it… or don’t, but keep it a secret from everyone.”

“Let’s just say we’ve got a good story to tell before we meet Lady Emilia. Now, could you tell us about the Witch Cult?”

“I’m not bringing a roaming mercenary like me in front of the noble Emilia-tan. After the job’s done, take your money and go home. — Alright, I’ll talk.”

Subaru exchanged their usual lighthearted banter with Julius, then slapped his own cheeks to hide his embarrassment. He took a breath, then looked up.

“First, the Sin Archbishop leading the Witch Cult is the representative of ‘Sloth,’ and—”

He had no time to regret being killed, to wallow in failure.

He had to transform the cause of his death and the reason for his failure into possibilities to struggle against and fight through.

That was why he had returned.

2

In his mind, Subaru re-evaluated the new facts revealed in the previous loop and the conditions they needed to overcome. He then relayed all the information without reservation to the subjugation force.

Understandably, there was considerable unrest among the subjugation force as they heard about things like the “Unseen Hand” and “possession.” Since these techniques differed so fundamentally from any magic they knew, it was difficult to expect them to easily accept it. With only one known form of magic, imagining other heresies wasn’t easy.

On the contrary, Subaru, having been exposed to nothing but fictional settings, could accept these concepts more flexibly. The bloodline of the Japanese, the homeland of subculture, had inherited the understanding to readily accept and digest worldviews where superpowers, magic, and curses coexisted.

“Anyway, putting aside such idiotic conclusions, let’s talk about Petelgeuse…”

As before, dealing with the “Unseen Hand” remained Subaru’s responsibility; he was the only one who could counter it. Under special circumstances, if Wilhelm’s skill allowed, they could potentially manage it with the sand-scattering tactic from two loops ago, but in terms of certainty, it was difficult. Subaru facing it was still the optimal approach.

Furthermore, a more troublesome fact about “possession” had come to light: Petelgeuse—or rather, the body being possessed—had a self-destruct function. Since he could switch hosts upon death, they should have anticipated that he would always have a means of suicide. That was the biggest cause of their failure last time.

Given that the self-destruction occurred while the host was unconscious, it meant the self-destruction could be activated by a will separate from the possessed host. In other words, there was a high probability that all Witch Cultists were rigged with a self-destruct mechanism.

Even if they managed to destroy all the targets of his transference—

“He’ll ultimately try to take me over…”

That was the biggest hurdle.

Two loops ago, he was completely overwhelmed and forced into suicide. Last time, he resisted significantly, but the current situation was, as they say, indicative of the result. It was a very rough guess, but once it became a struggle for control, it was likely very difficult to push Petelgeuse’s spirit out.

That’s why they had concluded last time that preventing possession was the goal, but—

“Puck’s useless, too. If the ice-sealing strategy is out, we’re genuinely at a dead end.”

The despair Subaru felt when Emilia and Puck appeared on the battlefield was still unforgettable.

The thought alone sent a shiver down his spine, leaving him breathless. However, he still couldn’t understand why he felt such a strong aversion.

What he did clearly understand was that he absolutely refused to let that situation repeat.

“Emilia-tan and Petelgeuse must not meet… I don’t know why, but I have a bad feeling about it. No, I do know why, actually.”

Allowing such a pervert and a sweet girl to meet could not, by any favorable interpretation, have a positive effect on the girl. It was only natural to feel revulsion.

He quickly dismissed this unanswerable problem and began to search for a strategy.

“Since Puck is unusable, and Emilia-tan can’t meet Petelgeuse, she’s out of the running as well… Julius, can't your spirit magic freeze a person solid or something?"

Subaru, hand on his forehead, thinking hard, called out to Julius, who was riding alongside him. They had already moved from the circular strategy meeting, and were now well on their way to Mathers territory.

Of course, carrying Subaru and kicking the ground powerfully was his reliable partner, the one whose existence made Subaru deeply thankful for the opportunity to restart through "Return by Death"—Patrasche.

Subaru leaned into the trust transmitted through the reins, gently stroking Patrasche's back as they ran. He could tell Patrasche cast a quick glance his way, as if to say, "Don't get too familiar."

"Pardon me for saying so, but haven't you improved remarkably quickly at riding? Just a moment ago, I felt you were more being carried by that ground dragon."

"It's about entrusting your faith and letting the wind guide you, right? Going through that predicament together maxed out my trust gauge for her. Oh no, I've been conquered…!"

Subaru squirmed, wrapping his entire body around Patrasche's back. Patrasche, as if annoyed, shook her upper body, jostling Subaru wildly.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa?! Hey, don't be shy! I know you love me even if you act all tsundere about it!"

"I can't shake the feeling that there's a fundamental disconnect in your perception… but it would be undignified for me to interfere with your relationship with the ground dragon, so I shall refrain. —Now then."

Julius sighed, as if resetting the conversation, to Subaru, who was lightly patting Patrasche's back to calm her. Then, he winked at Subaru.

"To answer your earlier question… I can only say it's difficult.

While it’s true I can use fire-attribute magic through my contracts with the six spirits, I am neither a pure spirits arts user nor a spirit myself. If you expect such precise execution of a spell, I cannot confidently affirm it.”

“You’re surprisingly timid. Won’t that make the title of ‘Finest’ cry?”

“I have no particular attachment to that moniker. Being unable to admit what one cannot do, and prioritizing vanity over trust, is far more significant. Are you not the same?”

“You’re really a nasty guy, aren’t you…”

Subaru sighed, averting his gaze from Julius and acknowledging his own insignificance.

At this point, Subaru had just revealed the fact of Julius being a spirit user. Soon, they would transition to a full-group meeting for continued travel, using Nect, a composite Yin-Yang magic. While they still hadn’t devised a plan that could be called 100% successful —

“We’ll just have to make the most of the plan we’ve refined as much as possible, and hope it works out.”

Relying on the newly acquired information, and carefully considering the crazy things the madman had said, Subaru refined his plan. It was a decision that caused him great pain, and—

“I confirm, Subaru. Are you truly alright with moving according to this plan?”

“Don’t be redundant. I’m the one who proposed it, so there’s no way I can just say, ‘Nah, I’ve changed my mind,’ now. …Emilia-tan will probably be mad, though.”

After using Nect to transmit the plan’s outline to everyone, Julius questioned Subaru’s resolve.

Subaru responded with a blank expression, and in his mind’s eye, he pictured the beloved girl.

The smile he had just received, the warmth of her hand when they reconciled, her tearful voice just before he lost consciousness—they blurred gradually behind his eyelids, fading away.

He bit his lip, admonishing himself for almost succumbing to effeminate sentimentality. Deeply disgusted with his own nature, which was about to justify weakness under the pretense of “isn’t there another way?”, Subaru accepted the painful choice.

“Don’t make that face. It’ll dull my resolve; it’s not like you.”

“However, this is too unfair to you. If we put more burden on us, we could reconsider the conditions…”

“Don’t give me chances to act spoiled and say ‘No!’ like that. Even the courage you see me squeezing out, it’s all borrowed.”

Subaru replied with a wry smile to Julius, who kept checking his resolve.

Being worried about like this, no matter who it was from, was nice. However, Subaru had already accepted these burdens as necessary and chosen this path. Therefore—

“I haven’t thrown away the future where I can laugh with Emilia-tan in the end. It’s just that the path to get there looks a little steep. Besides, if we play our cards right, no one but us will even notice how steep it is. Easy, right?”

“…I envy your audacity, being able to boast ‘easy’ like that. I just can’t suppress the unease I feel towards things that aren’t justly evaluated. I am still immature.”

“Hey, come on, my finest knight! The only reason I can stay this optimistic, and the only way I’ll get to passionately embrace Emilia-tan in the end, is if I have your strength! …Hey! What are you making me say?! That wasn’t my true feelings! Don’t misunderstand me!”

“You’re a busy man. —But I understand your sentiment.”

Julius couldn’t help but laugh at Subaru’s flustered expressions.

Subaru snorted at the sight of the handsome man, turned his face away, and gazed towards the horizon.

In the distance, the end of the grassland and the tip of the forest began to faintly appear. Once they arrived, they would pass through several forest paths and enter Mathers territory.

Subaru's heart stirred, and he felt a grinding sensation, but he continued to look forward.

"…"

"Oh? What is it? Are you worried about me? You're a cute one."

As if considering the silently contemplating Subaru, Patrasche subtly swayed her back from side to side as she ran. Subaru responded to her concern with a pat of his palm, then rummaged through the luggage strapped to his back.

Inside was the crucial element of his current plan. As his fingers found its texture, relief and a faint pang of pain simultaneously settled in his chest.

However he would not hesitate anymore.

He had made his decision. He had repeatedly asked himself if this was the best course of action. The fact that he still couldn't completely accept it was Subaru's weakness. It was a problem Subaru had to solve by himself.

"Alright, this time, I'm finally going to claim the best part—"

"Of course, you shall. Don't worry, we have meticulously planned this. There's no need to consider failure. Our preparations are perfect. Once this is over, I'd like to share a drink with you."

"Don't you dare raise a death flag—!!"

Subaru's angry shout rang out at Julius's words, even though Julius shouldn't have known the concept of a "death flag." His voice echoed, loud enough to reach even the distant sky of Mathers territory.

3

—The sharp morning sunlight pierced Emilia's sleep-deprived eyes, and she stirred, roused from bed by a faint pain.

Her silver hair, which had fallen across her forehead, cascaded down as she sat up, shimmering like moonlight reflecting a waterfall. She blinked a few times, remaining half-sitting, and for a moment floated in a state between sleep and wakefulness. Lately, her sleep had been restless, and she was conscious of her lingering fatigue. However, she knew these were necessary burdens, problems she had chosen to shoulder herself. There were no excuses.

"It's morning already…"

She had probably fallen asleep a few hours after midnight—meaning she'd only managed about two hours of sleep. Her head felt heavy, and her thoughts were sluggish, as if mired in mud.

She wasn't typically a morning person. It took her time to shake off drowsiness and even more time to start her day. Given the difficult problems that had plagued Emilia these past few days, it was no wonder that lingering fatigue and endless worries were chipping away at her spirit.

—A week ago, she was called to the capital, where all the Royal Selection participants gathered. Four days had passed since she returned to the mansion, formally given authority as its mistress. The immense pressure that had rained down on her in just those few days was enough to overwhelm the girl that was Emilia.

"I thought I understood… but I really only thought I understood, didn't I?"

Emilia bit her lip, clutching the sheets as she thought of her own inadequacy. Her mind flashed back to the past week, which had passed in a blur. Summoned to the capital, meeting the other Royal Selection candidates again, performing an unaccustomed political maneuvering to deliver her policy speech, and then—

"…Subaru."

Emilia closed her eyes, as if enduring pain, as she uttered the name of the boy she had left behind. How was that cheerful, easily hurt, and somehow always desperately trying to help others, slightly overly zealous boy doing now?

The argument they had during their last parting, his expression like a child left behind, was burned into her eyelids, searing Emilia's conscience repeatedly.

Making him wear that face, making him say those words, making him hear words she didn't want to hear—it was all her fault.

Yet, Emilia still believed that it had been for the best. She didn't think she should have avoided the emotional explosion that led to them expressing their true feelings and ultimately parting ways.

Rather, it was the correct choice to air their grievances then and go their separate ways. It was the right decision. Subaru and she shouldn't be together.

She was a half-elf, after all.

An existence deemed evil simply by being. An existence whose very being was denied. An existence that was shunned, excluded, looked down upon, rejected, and targeted by negative emotions.

Being together could never be good for anyone. On the contrary, being near her would surely cause that kind boy unpleasant experiences. In fact, because Subaru "was by Emilia's side," he ended up fighting a duel with Julius and was severely wounded, both physically and mentally.

She didn't want him to experience that feeling again, nor did she want to cause it.

At the end of their argument, Subaru must have given up on her, she thought. Emilia had rejected Subaru, who had given her boundless, unconditional kindness, by throwing selfish words at him. Though he raised his voice and acted as if he were yelling, to Emilia, he looked nothing more than a crying child.

The truth he murmured at the very end—that alone, she believed, was her sole regret.

—A hope that Subaru, perhaps, might treat her not as a half-elf, but as something separate from such a designation.

It was a faint, fleeting, futile hope. She had hurt him to push him away, yet selfishly craved comfort. Subaru clearly rejected Emilia's womanly plea. He firmly cut her off.

—That he couldn't not give Emilia special treatment.

After those words, she closed the door, creating a physical distance between them. She felt a clear sense of disappointment spread in her chest, disappointed in herself. Disappointed in her own greed, feeling uncomfortable with kindness that was only given, using various pretexts to hurt and push away the kind boy, and then feeling terribly lonely once she had actually put distance between them.

Shaking off the separation from Subaru, she had been desperate since returning to the mansion from the capital.

There was so much Emilia needed to know, so much she needed to learn. Originally, she had lived deep in the forest, avoiding contact with people and unaware of worldly affairs. She hadn't even known what a "king" was until she left the forest.

And now, she, such a person, aimed for a throne that would entrust her with the lives of people living in vast territories. Emilia was aware that this was an incredibly reckless and ignorant decision. But she had to do it.

—Because she had reasons strong enough to compel her.

"Lia, you're frowning. You're not cute when you do that, so maybe stop?"

Suddenly, as she leaned out of bed, her thoughts were interrupted by a leisurely voice. Looking up, her sapphire eyes met a small spirit with gray fur. To her, he was like family, having been by her side since she could remember.

"Good morning, Puck. You're early today."

"Morning, Lia. I woke up a bit early… is what I'd like to say, but honestly, I was worried about you. Yesterday was probably a bit of a shock."

Emilia lowered her gaze at Puck's words, as he floated idly, swaying his long tail. She recalled yesterday's events, the direct cause of her heavy head and heart—the moment she was rejected when she tried to speak to the nearby villagers.

"I knew it would happen, though."

"Even if you know you're going to fall, when you fall, blood comes from the wound and it hurts. I think understanding something and actually experiencing the pain are different things."

Puck mercilessly blocked her escape, responding to Emilia's childlike tone. Emilia knew he wasn't being mean, simply stating facts and his honest feelings, so she couldn't think of a rebuttal.

"Puck…"

"Hmm?"

"Puck, um, what do you think I should do? For me… no, not just me, but for everyone, to do better?"

"You should do whatever you like, Lia. I'm on your side no matter what you do, and I'm only an enemy to anyone who stands in your way."

It was a reassuring answer from her strongest ally, but not the one she sought. And Emilia knew perfectly well that such an answer was all she'd get. Puck was Emilia's ally, but he wouldn't agonize with her over her problems. He was her absolute affirmative, and nothing more.

"No matter what you do, you can't abandon the village, can you? Ram went to the village again this morning, so shouldn't we wait for her report?"

"…Right, Ram. She hasn't rested at all either, has she?"

Puck's murmuring words didn't reach her, and Emilia thoughtfully pressed a finger to her lips. In her mind, she recalled the many unusual occurrences that had happened yesterday.

—After returning from the capital, and ever since Roswaal left the mansion for negotiations with influential figures, Emilia had focused on gaining knowledge from the academic and specialized books given to her to study. She devoted herself to her studies, grudging sleep and as if fleeing from guilt. It was late the night before last that Ram reported to her, "There's a strange presence in the forest."

Even with Ram's clairvoyance —her ability to synchronize with others' vision and expand her visual range by switching targets—she couldn't ascertain the identity of this presence. However, she couldn't choose to do nothing about its existence. So, under the pretext of strengthening defenses, Emilia went down to the nearby village and urged the villagers to evacuate to the mansion—and was rejected.

Emilia was surprised that she had been shocked by this. She thought she had long since become accustomed to being disliked, shunned, and detested by others because of her heritage, but she was surprised to find that her heart still held the capacity for hurt. Then, it suddenly dawned on her.

She had been hoping. That by throwing herself into the flow of grand events and taking a step to change her standing, the reactions of those around her would naturally change from before.

Such a convenient thing was impossible. The fact that she had some connection with the villagers might have been a distant cause for her heightened expectations. However, at that time, she had hidden her identity. She couldn't possibly admit, even if her mouth were torn, that she had been on friendly terms with them in that state.

"What am I doing, after all?"

She was hurt by the rejection, yet she desperately pleaded, only to be unheard, and she had meekly retreated to the mansion. Just as she was agonizing over whether she could do nothing but sit idly by, the next report that came in was that a large group of merchants had suddenly descended upon the village.

Her eyes widened in confusion at the incomprehensible report, when a person claiming to be the merchants' representative arrived, carrying an official letter. The seal bore the crest of none other than Duchess Crusch Karsten. When she broke the seal of the letter, whose contents she couldn't imagine—

"It was just a blank piece of paper inside."

As Emilia looked at the paper spread on the desk, Puck, as if reading her thoughts, preempted her and stated the outcome. Yes, the official letter had been blank.

When she questioned the representative about the true intent, he shook his head, saying he hadn't been told the contents. Ram, who was present, appeared greatly displeased and drove them out of the mansion. She then headed towards the village, presumably to negotiate with the merchants for their departure.

—Part of her felt a sense of duty, wondering if she should just leave it to them.

Equally, she feared the possibility of the situation becoming more complicated if she went herself. She noticed that the merchants who had delivered the letter were looking at Emilia with glances tinged with fear and aversion.

The fact of the Royal Selection had already been publicly announced, and the candidates' names and backgrounds were known to the populace. There was hardly anyone left who didn't know Emilia was a half-elf. From now on, those looks, those attitudes, that rejection, would become commonplace everywhere.

She should have been used to it, to freezing her heart. She should have been used to ignoring the pain of fresh wounds, forcefully wiping away the flowing blood, and still walking without looking down. So, to suddenly focus on it now—

“Lia, someone’s returned to the mansion.”

“…Ram, perhaps. Has the situation in the village been resolved?”

Interrupting her thoughts at Puck’s call, Emilia changed and stood up. Since Puck hadn’t requested a specific hairstyle today, she simply ran a comb through her hair and let it fall down her back. Her silver hair swaying, Emilia sighed softly, then left the room. She then headed towards the entrance hall to greet Ram, who she assumed had returned. No matter how the village situation had been resolved, there was much to discuss, including what to do next.

“Ram, I’m sorry for leaving everything to you. About what happens next—”

“Lady Emilia.”

Emilia spoke as she saw Ram open the large front door and enter the mansion. Ram looked up at the sound of her voice, then moved aside from the doorway.

“—Lady Emilia, please forgive my sudden visit.”

Passing through the door Ram held open, an elderly figure stepped into the mansion. Emilia raised her eyebrows slightly in surprise at the familiar person.

“Um, if I recall… you were with Lady Crusch, weren’t you?”

“Yes. I am Wilhelm Trias, permitted to be at the lowest rank of retainer in the Karsten Ducal household. I have come this time as my master’s proxy.”

Emilia felt humbled as the old gentleman introduced himself, kneeling and performing the deepest bow. And as the initial strong impression of his sharpness faded, she noticed that the old gentleman’s attire bore visible marks of numerous injuries.

“Your attire, why is it like that?”

“My apologies for my unsightly appearance. On the way here to the

Mathers territory, I had the misfortune of encountering a witchbeast. I simply had to wield my sword a little."

"You're… not injured, are you?"

"There's no cause for concern. Rather, I wish to convey my master's intentions."

Emilia nodded to Wilhelm, who urged her to get to the main point rather than worry about his well-being. The mention of Crusch reminded her of the official letter. Emilia began, "An official letter arrived from Lady Crusch, but—"

"The contents were blank… and we were at a loss as to how to respond."

"Blank, you say. —I see, the situation is exactly as I heard."

Hearing Emilia's words, Wilhelm subtly narrowed his eyes. There was an inexplicable intensity in that mere gesture, causing Emilia to involuntarily choke up. Wilhelm, however, shook his head at her reaction, saying, "No."

"Regarding the blank official letter, it was not our intention… However, I am aware of its original contents. Please, do not worry."

"Contents… I see, so it was a mistake or something. Good, that it wasn't… harassment."

As she quietly added her final, unnecessary concern, Wilhelm's lips curled into a small smile, saying, "Of course not." Then, his expression grew serious.

"Lady Emilia as well as Ms Ram, I ask that you board the merchant's dragon carriages stationed in the village. And for now, that you evacuate from this vicinity—that is my master's intention."

4

—Wilhelm's explanation could be summarized as follows:

A notorious criminal organization, infamous even in the kingdom, had infiltrated Mathers territory. There was a high probability they were hiding in the nearby forest, and a subjugation force had been organized to defeat them. Crusch Karsten was appointed as the leader of this force, which was assembled under her name, given certain authority, and dispatched to Mathers territory. The plan was for this force to flush out the aforementioned group, and to minimize harm to the surrounding area, residents were advised to evacuate. The merchants were hired to provide transportation for this evacuation, and the plan was for them to carry the villagers and Emilia's group to safety.

"Why is Lady Crusch involved in maintaining public order in Roswaal… Mathers territory?"

"This is just between us, but Lord Roswaal has proposed a treaty alliance. The details involve the allocation of mining rights for the magical stones contained in Elior Forest, do you understand?"

"—Yes, I see."

Emilia nodded, concealing some indignation at Wilhelm's hushed reply. While Emilia had been racking her brain alone, wondering what to do, Roswaal had apparently been working behind the scenes, pushing things forward. She knew it all along, but still, even if he was using Emilia's presence, he clearly didn't have any expectations for her.

"But, even if we evacuate…"

"Ideally, we would like Lady Emilia to head to the capital and hold a meeting with the head of the household, Lady Crusch. However, it's difficult to take all the residents to the capital…"

"Half of them will be guided by Ram to the Sanctuary. There should be enough safety and space to accommodate them there."

Emilia's anxieties and concerns, which she was about to voice, seemed to have already been considered. With Wilhelm and Ram answering her questions so efficiently, Emilia had no words of opposition. However, the feeling that things were moving too quickly and that she was merely being swept along was hard to accept.

“Listen, I’m still wondering… about this.”

“—Excuse me!”

Just as she was about to press her questions, the conversation was cut short by the sound of a door being violently flung open. Looking over, she saw a young man tumbling in as if he had kicked the door open. The young man, wearing a white robe, stared intently at Emilia, then slowly turned towards Wilhelm.

“Strange movements have been observed from the group lurking in the forest. They may be about to move. There’s no time to spare…”

“Faster than we anticipated… With this many people entering the village, it was only a matter of time before they were noticed, I suppose.”

“What shall we do, Sir Wilhelm?”

“—Emilia-sama.”

In response to the young man’s question, Wilhelm looked up at Emilia, his gaze sharpening. Pierced by his blade-like, keen eyes, Emilia gasped softly, understanding that there was no time to waste in idle contemplation.

It wasn’t that she had no questions. However, the fact remained that there was a strange presence in the forest, as Ram had sensed, and Wilhelm’s identity was vouched for by Crusch’s name. Above all, with Roswaal absent, she was the one with the authority to make decisions for this mansion and territory. No matter how disoriented the situation made her feel, she had to make the decision herself. Therefore—

“—Understood. I gratefully accept your kindness. As for persuading the villagers…”

“It has already been completed without a hitch, Lady Emilia.”

Ram calmly stated that the biggest concern had been cleared.

Emilia then turned to look back at the mansion, furrowing her brow about what to do with its last resident. But even that was quickly addressed when a small cat, floating down from the upper floor like a leaf dancing in the wind, appeared.

“Betty says she’s not going. She’s closed door crossing, so the rest is up to you. And the subjugation force, you shouldn’t do anything to the mansion, okay?”

“Understood, Great Spirit.”

Puck, who had gone to confirm Beatrice’s intentions before Emilia could even make a decision, returned. He then burrowed into Emilia’s silver hair, secured his usual spot, and yawned. Then, he whispered so only Emilia could hear:

“You do whatever you want. I’m on your side.”

“—Let’s move. We don’t want to put the villagers in danger.”

Emilia waved her arm, giving the instruction. Ram indicated her compliance with a curtsy, holding the edge of her skirt, and Wilhelm nodded graciously. Only the young man who had brought the report subtly clutched the edge of his robe.

“That’s more like it,” he murmured softly, though Emilia didn’t hear him.

5

—Once the two from the mansion joined the village, the process of boarding the dragon carriages began.

The villagers seemed quite obediently following the members of the subjugation force; they showed no signs of complaining or significant anxiety. In fact, many even seemed somewhat excited by the unusually large number of dragon carriages.

Emilia was greatly surprised by their efficiency, but what surprised her most was when she heard her dragon carriage assignment.

“—Nice to meet you, miss.”

"Um…"

The bright-haired girl bowed her head. She was one of the children Subaru had befriended, whom Emilia had seen many times in the village—her name, if she remembered correctly, was Petra. She was around eleven or twelve years old, one of the older children in the village. With her at the forefront, other children were assigned to the dragon carriage Emilia was supposed to board.

"Isn't this some kind of mistake? Because…"

"It's no mistake. Lady Emilia, you will be riding in this carriage with these children. Due to the seating arrangements in the carriages, it simply can't be helped."

Driven by anxiety, Emilia caught hold of the young man who had been busily moving around nearby. However, his reply was entirely different from what Emilia had expected, only increasing her apprehension.

—Traveling in the confined space of a dragon carriage, together with children.

She couldn't help but feel it was an attempt that would cause an extremely unpleasant sensation, not so much for Emilia, but for the other party.

"Are there no other carriages? These children, too…"

"You think they'd dislike riding with you, don't you?"

"…"

"Did you confirm that with these children? Or are you just assuming they'd dislike it, that they'd hate you?"

The young man continued, pressing Emilia as she fell silent. She realized he was the same person who had rushed into the mansion earlier, quite an intrusive young man. Tilting her head at the strange sensation, Emilia stammered, "That's not…"

"I know without asking. So, for the sake of these children, another carriage…”

“I don’t think it’s good to use children as an excuse to run away from your own weakness.”

This time, Emilia gasped, choked by his utterly rude tone. Then, in front of her, he knelt down, meeting the eye-level of the young girl who had been anxiously watching their exchange.

“How about it, Petra? Do you want to ride in the same carriage as this lady?”

“…”

Please don’t ask such a question, Emilia thought, clutching the pain in her chest. It was a question with an obvious answer, and an obvious answer that would cause her pain. Knowing she would be hurt didn’t make the pain any easier. Puck was right. Even if you’ve been hurt countless times, a new wound brings new pain. So why, she wondered, would he—

“No, I don’t mind! I’m happy to be with miss.”

“…Huh?”

Emilia gasped in astonishment. Petra walked up to her and gently took her hand. From their clasped fingers, the warm body heat peculiar to children flowed, and Emilia blinked. As she stood there, unable to hide her surprise, Petra smiled shyly with an adorable expression.

“Miss… you’re the potato stamp miss, right? You always came with Subaru to watch the morning radio calisthenics.”

“…………”

“I couldn’t see your face, but I could tell you were always having fun, miss. I saw Subaru having so much fun talking with you. Subaru liked miss so much… so, I’m not scared of you either!”

“…Ah.”

Something welled up inside her, and Emilia involuntarily let out a small sound. Her eyes felt hot, her throat constricted, preventing words, and a pain shot through the back of her nose.

“Miss, let’s ride together? They said everyone was trying to make you all alone. So I’ll hold your hand.”

“—Yes, yes.”

“You don’t have to be lonely anymore, okay?”

“—!”

Innocent, pure eyes, completely devoid of the world’s injustices, malice, or anything tainted. Just that—the feeling that was always there for Emilia, the persecution that was always there, the discrimination that should have been normal—none of it was present in those eyes.

“Me too!” “I wanna be with the missus!” “Let’s go already!”

The children started to clamor loudly, and a boy about Petra’s age—Mild—began to admonish them and push them into the carriage. Watching the boisterous children, Petra chuckled softly.

“Shall we go, miss? They might be a little noisy, though.”

“…No, it’s fine. I’ve gotten used to being bothered by noise next to me this past month.”

She shook her head, and a smile naturally appeared on her face. She began to walk, her hand still held by Petra. The warmth of another’s hand felt on her fingertips. The blessing of being spared the pain she had stubbornly claimed to be used to, without even realizing it.

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“That’s right… I need to thank you too.”

Stopping and turning, Emilia looked for the young man from earlier. She wanted to say a word of thanks to him for leading her to this small happiness.

“…Huh? Where did he go?”

However, the young man was nowhere to be found where she had just turned.

6

—He pushed through branches, trampled grass, and darted through the animal path as if leaping. He ducked under trees, broke through thickets, and entered a dim area, emerging into an open space surrounded by dense greenery.

He stopped and waited a moment. Three more shadows, just like him, dashed into the clearing. The four figures nodded at each other, and one knelt in the center while the other three stood guard. The person kneeling reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, hand mirror-like object. It was undeniably a mirror, but in the dimly lit forest, where light sources were extremely limited, he couldn’t even easily check his own face.

However, for the mirror’s owner, this was no problem at all. His original purpose wasn’t to see his own face. The goal was to “connect to another place” through the mirror.

He poured magic into the hand holding the mirror, infusing mana into the engravings carved along its rim. Once initially activated, this rare magical artifact—a dialogue mirror—would absorb minuscule amounts of mana from its surroundings to fulfill its purpose. Most such devices were built-in and too large to carry, making a portable one like this exceptionally rare. The man felt a surge of exhilaration as his sense of duty grew, realizing how important his position was, entrusted with such an item and role.

Just as he opened his mouth to speak through the mirror to the other side—

“I see, so that’s how you were leaking information. These dialogue mirrors are pretty convenient, aren’t they? …Before you get all fired up with duty, you might want to remember your comrades’ faces.”

A figure, similarly crouched, spoke right beside the kneeling man. The man gasped and looked up, forced to feel an intense sense of incongruity with the person standing before him. It was as if his consciousness refused to recognize someone right in front of him.

“If you can’t even tell faces apart, then to me, you’re just ‘comrades’ who reek of the same stench. —Screw you, you small fry.”

Saying this, the figure in the white robe stood up and spat out the words. Then, before the stunned men—Witch Cultists—he shook his head and pulled back the hood that had completely covered it.

What was revealed was black hair, a color possessed by only a very limited number of races in this world. His three-white-eyed glare overtly expressed his ill humor, accompanied by a defiant, provoking smirk.

Seeing that much, the Witch Cultists finally clearly understood who it was.

“The sin of interrupting my emotional reunion with Emilia-tan is a heavy one, you guys.”

Pointing a finger skyward, the white-robed figure, woven with “recognition hindrance magic,” fluttered its hem. Natsuki Subaru then delivered his declaration to the men:

“Now, spill it. Tell me everything you know!”

—To show them his glimmer of reversal, he snapped his fingers with a loud flourish.

Chapter 76:
Behind the Scenes x Trickery x Pinky Promises

1

—Let's go back in time a bit, to the strategy meeting en route to Mathers territory.

"We're not telling the villagers or Emilia-tan that the Witch Cult is closing in. The reason for evacuation… I think something vague, like bandits or brigands have infiltrated the area, should be fine."

"The basis for concealing the truth is… I suppose I don't need to ask."

Julius sighed in understanding as he heard the opening of Subaru's plan. He felt similar reactions coming back from several of the people connected via the speaking stones.

"Thanks for the understanding reaction… Just as you all thought, if it gets out that the Witch Cult is involved in this commotion, there's a high chance the victims' resentment will be directed at Emilia-tan. I didn't want to think of them as people like that, but…"

Subaru knew full well that things wouldn't turn out as he hoped, having seen it firsthand.

Emilia's lineage was no exception even for those good-natured villagers; she was merely a detestable bloodline to be shunned.

His indignation and rebellious spirit against that twisted discrimination were endless, but he couldn't overturn them immediately here and now. Subaru temporarily forgot the deep-seated irritation simmering in his chest, calming himself with a long sigh.

"Bandits, then. Let's stick with that. The guys who were causing trouble in the capital region have infiltrated here, and Duchess Karsten's camp, our ally, has come to assist. How about that?"

"It's cliché, but it's not as flawed as it sounds. The problem is whether Lady Emilia and the villagers will be fooled by it…"

"Actually, with this many people assembled and the advance merchant troop already there, I think it's enough to distract them from any unnaturalness, don't you? Besides, we're not trying to fool every single person. I have someone in mind who won't misjudge that part."

Julius half-closed an eye and replied, "Is that so?" to Subaru's confident demeanor. Taking his place, the one who fired questions at Subaru's plan was…

"I understand you want to keep Lady Emilia from being criticized, but if that's all, I don't quite understand Subaru-kyun's idea just now, nya~?"

"You don't understand… which part?"

"The part where you're not planning a dramatic reunion with Lady Emilia, nya, Subaru-kyun."

The one who mercilessly probed the part of the plan that most troubled Subaru's heart—it was Ferris.

He didn't hesitate even when Subaru stammered, pressing his questions further:

"You've allied with Duchess Karsten, cooperated in the White Whale subjugation. And now you're returning with reinforcements to defeat the external enemy threatening the territory—this sounds like some kind of heroic tale, nya. I heard you had a terrible parting, but I think this is more than enough to redeem your reputation, nya~."

"Listing them out like that makes my achievements sound idiotic… Well, considering the consequences of what I actually messed up, I don't think I can make up for it with anything less than this kind of feat."

"Ferris thinks Subaru-kyun should reflect on his actions a little more objectively, nya."

When Ferris grumbled that about Subaru's self-deprecating remark, agreement seemed to ripple from those around him. While he was happy for their concern, he couldn't stop self-deprecating, remembering the foolishness he'd committed during his separation from Emilia.

How many achievements would it take to erase such foolish actions and harsh words?

"There's no way I can erase them. That was my true self back then."

The selfish, overconfident person who shamelessly sought his beloved's heart. Now, looking back, he wanted to avert his eyes from his ugliness—but that was also him.

"That's why, honestly, I want to go back with achievements and apologize for everything that happened then, but…"

"You can't do that, nya?"

"If she knew I was here… no, if she knew I was staying in the village to fight the external enemy, she's not the kind of girl who'd meekly run away. Nine times out of ten, she'd stay with me. Or she'd turn back halfway. She's that kind of girl."

"But you two had a fight, didn't you? Even so…"

"If she were the kind of girl who'd feel relieved leaving the person she quarreled with to face death, then… I wouldn't have been so devoted to her."

The biggest failures of last time were neglecting caution against Petelgeuse's maliciousness despite expecting his counterattack, and letting Emilia meet the madman when he knew they shouldn't—those two.

Regarding the former, a solution is starting to become clear from refining several hypotheses. It's ironic that this is also thanks to dying last time.

Regarding the latter,

"Not letting Emilia-tan realize that the external enemy is the Witch Cult and that they're targeting her. Not informing her that someone connected to her… that is, me, is in the subjugation force fighting the external enemy. These are the essential conditions for keeping Emilia-tan away from the battlefield. I'm stating it definitively."

"Is it really necessary to be that cautious, nya? I think Lady Emilia wouldn't be a hindrance even if she joined the subjugation force, nya? She even has that Great Spirit with her…"

"Considering Duchess Karsten's example, I think it would be best for Emilia-tan to lead from the front to gain fame… but I'll pass this time. I can't let Emilia-tan undergo the Witch Cult's—the Archbishops' ordeal."

Subaru's resolute declaration was met with a shrug and an expression of understanding from Ferris. Receiving that, Subaru looked around to see if there were any other questions, and sighed in relief after confirming that no one raised any doubts.

"For convincing the villagers, it'll be more reassuring if they know it's me and… Duchess Karsten's army. I'd like Ferris and Wilhelm-san to cooperate."

"Understood." "Roger that, nya."

As he heard their consent, Subaru pulled a white robe from his luggage and put it on, feeling a slight unease about the length of the sleeves and hem.

Made larger for its original owner, it covered Subaru's body without issue.

"The faint scent of Emilia-tan is boosting my motivation—!"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that last remark… but from what I can see, that robe seems to be imbued with a rather unusual spell."

"To tell you the truth, it's the special medicine that's been protecting me from Emilia-daze deficiency these past few days. On sleepless nights, I secretly press it to my face and use it to relieve my pent-up feelings… Hey, what's with that look? I can't help it!

Getting excited over your crush's possessions is a path everyone goes down, isn't it?!"

Subaru felt as if Julius's ground dragon, which had been running alongside him, had widened its distance, and he became indignant. Julius sighed in exasperation at Subaru and then, prefacing with "So," he continued,

"To return to the topic… that robe? The moment you put it on, your presence seemed to fade."

"Ah, apparently it's woven with some kind of 'perception hindering' spell or something. It's a convenient item handmade by Roswaal… and originally Emilia-tan's personal possession. By chance, yes, by chance, it's in my hands now. I didn't steal it, okay?"

"I'll pursue its origins eventually, but… Ah, I see."

Midway through his reply to Subaru, Julius nodded, understanding dawning on him. Subaru felt an unpleasant sensation, as if his thoughts had been read, and he glared at the handsome knight with an even worse look, saying, "What is it?" But the knight remained composed.

"I suppose it's a renewed understanding of your self-sacrificing nature. To be frank, it's not logical… You are quite the opposite of Lady Anastasia."

"Since I intend to get everything I want in the end, I think there aren't many people more greedy than me, actually. Emilia-tan's praise and everything else, they'll all be mine. It makes me fired up!"

As Subaru gripped the reins and bared his teeth in a smile, Julius sighed for what felt like the umpteenth time, then looked forward and muttered in a voice no one else could hear,

"Occasionally, like now, there are times I curse this body of mine as a knight."

That was what he mumbled.

2

—Up until now, the plan was to enter Mathers territory and immediately eradicate any Witch Cultists whose locations were known.

However, this time we couldn’t start a fight with the Witch Cultists right away and provoke their vigilance. We had to maintain as much stealth as possible, exit the highway, enter the village via the forest path, and persuade the villagers about the evacuation.

Honestly, being ambushed by Witch Cultists at this point would have been a fatal development for the operation. If we were to engage the Witch Cult even once, all the plans we had so carefully crafted would be rendered useless.

Fortunately, no such rude interruption occurred during our march into the territory, which we undertook with the highest level of caution ever, and:

“We’ve arrived safely… Oh, it’s tense, it’s really tense.”

By the time the subjugation force reached the village entrance, the atmosphere in the village was already thick with suspicion.

We had presumably ridden straight and fast to get to the village, but seeing the cluster of dragon carriages parked at the edge of the village, it looked like the merchants had arrived sometime last night.

Considering that Subaru and the others had fought the White Whale in the middle of the highway, rested, and then departed, it was only natural for the advance merchant party to have a few hours’ advantage, even with their detour. In other words,

“The blank letter of introduction has already been delivered to the mansion…”

Seeing that, Emilia, who received it and was likely greatly confused, and the person who was beside her and also saw the same document, “First a merchant bringing a blank letter of introduction, and now an armed group appearing… It seems you don’t understand whose territory this is.”

She greeted Subaru and the others, who strode boldly into the village, with hostility, looking up at them with an insolent expression, hands on her hips.

A lovely-faced girl with short, pink hair, her small frame clad in a maid’s uniform—Subaru knew, however, that beneath that cat-like charm, she hid a sharp and deceptive personality.

“So, what business brings you all to this village? This commotion… I can’t believe it’s unrelated to the merchants who suddenly showed up in the middle of the night.”

“I know there’s been some misunderstanding, but don’t glare at me with such hostility. It’s our first reunion in a while, you could at least do a little tap dance with a smile, you know?”

“Selfish excuses… I’ve heard that nonsense before.”

Subaru replied from atop Patrasche with a playful gesture to her sharp gaze. Then, at his response, the girl —Ram— raised an eyebrow as if realizing something. Staring intently, she fixated on Subaru, clad in the white robe, and said,

“…Barusu?”

“Yep, that’s right. Seriously, this robe is amazing. Even when talking to someone I know, they have to doubt and scrutinize me, still half-believing. It’s demonic.”

Subaru threw back his hood, revealing his face, and let out a sigh of admiration. Then he twisted his body and dismounted gracefully from the ground dragon.

“For now, about this situation—oof!”

He failed his landing. A dull crack echoed from his ankle, and sharp pain shot through his brain. He crouched on the spot, almost in tears.

“L-Let’s… let’s talk…! What’s the hidden agenda behind this whole scene, please let me explain…!”

“Your constant sloppiness is truly Barusu-like. I heard you were left behind in the capital after offending His Grace… What nerve do you have to show your face back here?”

“Are you really that merciless?! I can’t really argue, but yeah, I’m back, showing this face! Though I didn’t come back empty-handed.”

Forgetting the pain in his ankle, Subaru stood up with force, gesturing with his hands in front of Ram to show he was well. As Subaru and Ram stood face to face, talking,

“—Hey, that person at the front of that group…”

“Isn’t that Mister Subaru, talking to Miss Ram?”

“Ah, it’s Subaru! You’re back?”

The villagers, who had been watching the situation’s progress with anxious expressions and probably leaving the negotiation entirely to Ram, began pointing at them and talking amongst themselves.

This was likely the result of Subaru’s appearance upgrading the unknown, mysterious group to ‘a mysterious group led by someone we know’.

“So, what business brings such a large number of people back with you? If this is retribution, Ram, as the caretaker of the mansion, will have no choice but to resist to the end.”

“Do you really think I’m that ungrateful?! If I do something bad, I deserve to be scolded, right? And holding a grudge or sulking about it… Well, I did, but…”

“Just as I thought. We’ll use Barusu as a hostage and force our way to the mansion.”

“That’s a quick conclusion! I’m not holding a grudge or sulking right now, so believe me!”

Subaru, parrying Ram who might actually try to put him in a headlock with her small staff, raised an open palm towards her.

“Retribution is out of the question, and I didn’t involve this many people for a prank… Did you receive the letter of introduction from the merchant?”

“…If you can call that blank paper a letter of introduction, then yes, I received it. Ram interpreted it as more of a challenge, however.”

“Were you always that hot-blooded? Don’t take everything so aggressively, eat some small fish and get some calcium to calm down.”

Subaru gave a wry smile at Ram’s constant biting remarks, then explained that the blank letter of introduction was a mistake. Ram nodded reluctantly, but then said,

“So, regardless of the letter’s content, the formality is to be trusted. In that case, what was the original contents?”

“Why, of course, it’s about my original purpose for staying in the capital—the alliance between Emilia-tan’s and Duchess Karsten’s camps.”

Subaru flared his nostrils at Ram’s question and proudly gestured with his arm towards the assembled subjugation force. As if on cue from Subaru’s gesture, two figures stepped forward from the group.

It was Ferris and Wilhelm. They stood beside Subaru and greeted Ram with their respective bows.

“I am Wilhelm van Astrea, dispatched on this expedition as an envoy of Her Grace, Duchess Crusch Karsten.”

“I’m Ferris, Duchess Crusch’s top knight, nya. Old Man Wilhelm is the leader of the group behind us, and Ferris is the assistant leader, nya? Nice to meet youuuu.”

Wilhelm’s solemn greeting contrasted sharply with Ferris’s utterly frivolous one.

Presented with such contrasting greetings, Ram blinked, uncharacteristically taken aback, and said,

“Your polite greetings are much appreciated. I am Ram. I serve as the head maid at the mansion of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers.”

She immediately switched her demeanor, gracefully pinching the hem of her skirt and bowing politely. Just observing this gesture, one could indeed glimpse the perfection of her maid training. Though, when it came to actual work, her serving skills were quite rough around the edges.

“The reason these two and the others have come is simple. I think Ram has probably noticed already… They’re reinforcements to drive away the suspicious individuals lurking in the forest.”

“…How did Barusu know that?”

“It’s pretty famous news in the capital, actually? The margrave’s territory, which openly supports a half-elf and gets shunned by everyone else. —There’s no better place for up-and-coming bandits to choose as a temporary hideout, you see.”

Subaru lowered his voice and smoothly lied to Ram’s question. Ram narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at Subaru’s reply, while Ferris and Wilhelm changed the wrinkles on their faces with their respective reactions. However,

“That’s the pretense.”

“Huh?”

“Keep your voice down, and don’t make a loud surprised noise, I don’t want anyone else to hear… The ones in the forest are the Witch Cult. They’re targeting Emilia, and they intend to kill everyone in the village.”

“—!”

Subaru leaned in close, lowering his voice, and told Ram the truth.

Ram’s eyes widened slightly at the revelation, and she gasped as if choking. Then,

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what’s going on? That’s not what we discussed, nya. Weren’t we supposed to keep quiet and go with the bandit story?”

Subaru shrugged and shook his head at Ferris, who interrupted, clearly surprised by the sudden change in plans, “Hey, hey,” he said.

“You can’t expect to fool everyone with such a childish trick. I intended to tell Ram the truth from the beginning. If there’s no one on the evacuating side who’s privy to our circumstances, we won’t be able to handle unforeseen situations.”

“—Is she to be trusted?”

This time, Wilhelm asked with a sharp gaze at Subaru, who revealed the true intention of his disclosure. Subaru met the Sword Devil’s gaze head-on and nodded confidently, “Yes.”

“There’s no one more suitable than Ram to be in on this. After all, if our story doesn’t line up, Emilia-tan will be in trouble… and that equals a disadvantage for Roswaal. You wouldn’t misjudge that, would you?”

With a testing tone and a provocative smile, Subaru turned back to Ram. Ram closed one eye at Subaru’s words, and a small smile touched her lips.

“What’s wrong, Barusu? You’ve become quite cunning since I last saw you.”

“I learned the hard way that to stop thinking leads to bad things. So, what’s the real answer?”

As Subaru wiggled his finger at the end of his raised hand, Ram let out a long, small sigh, then slowly shook her head as if resigned.

“—If it benefits Lord Roswaal, Ram will do anything and cooperate with anything. Does that answer satisfy you, Barusu?”

“Yeah, perfectly. You’re a model attendant, Ram.”

Ram accepted the agreement to deceive her temporary master for the sake of the master she truly served. Subaru smiled at her with the expression of a mischievous kid playing a trick—no, plotting mischief.

3

“I’ve thought this for a long time, but Barusu truly seems to be an idiot.”

—This was Ram’s first comment after Subaru had thoroughly explained the operation’s outline and she had finished listening.

Even while interjecting with questions, she had listened to Subaru’s entire plan, expressed her understanding and agreement, and then added those final words.

“I’m flattered to be praised so much.”

“Just say it… Seriously, you’re not going to tell Lady Emilia anything, are you?”

“I keep telling you! Stop dragging out my lingering feelings, everyone! I’m fine, it’s okay, no problem! In fact, isn’t it super exciting to secretly and heroically save that important girl in her time of need?”

Ram sighed in resignation at Subaru, who stubbornly maintained his flippant attitude. Then she looked at Wilhelm and Ferris.

“I sympathize with the stress you must feel, just like with our servant trainee.”

“While Subaru-dono’s impulsive actions, words, and emotional expressions are somewhat prominent, he is a person of great promise. At my age, there is much he can teach me.”

“Ferris hasn’t quite figured out Old Man Wilhelm yet, so maybe I’ll just take Miss Ram’s words at face value? Well, I do think he’s gotten a little better, nya.”

Wilhelm's high praise and Ferris's slight tsundere reaction. Ram looked at Subaru after hearing their responses.

"You seem to have successfully endeared yourself to them."

"Your opinion of me is abnormally low, isn't it? It's fair, I guess, but it still bums me out."

And so, their conversation with Ram came to a close.

Once she accepted that she had no objections to Subaru's plan, most of his concerns vanished. The only remaining issue was—

"I know it's been a while since we last met, but can everyone please listen to what I have to say?!"

Stepping into the center of the village, Subaru waved his hands wildly, gathering everyone's attention.

The uncomfortable merchants, the anxious villagers surrounded by strangers, and the members of the subjugation force who had been ordered to stand by, all simultaneously fixed their gaze on Subaru.

Though it was his intention, having everyone's eyes on him at once heightened the tension. Subaru managed to push down the pressure he felt with a sense of mission, then put on a smile.

"First off, this commotion is pretty much my fault. It seems like communication wasn't getting through in a lot of places. I want to try and smooth things over… is that okay?"

He raised a finger to the sky, addressing everyone.

Only silence returned his question, leaving him with a terrible feeling of being left behind.

Getting no reaction from such a large crowd after a call out was mentally draining. He suddenly felt like apologizing to his homeroom teacher for all the times he'd napped during HR back in his old world.

Just as Subaru was getting lost in this nostalgia,

"—Let us hear what you have to say."

A single person stepped forward towards Subaru, saying this.

It was none other than a familiar figure with distinctive white hair who emerged from among the villagers, commonly known as 'Village Elder,' an ordinary old man unrelated to the actual village chief position.

The Village Elder, with the dignity of a representative, stroked his impressive beard.

"We were anxious, not understanding the situation. You're going to explain it… and if it's the village's benefactor, we can't very well refuse to listen."

"Village's benefactor? That's a bit much. I just…"

"That's being too modest, Master Subaru. That night, if you hadn't gone into the forest and brought the children back, who knows what would have happened. After that, there's not a soul in the village who doesn't know what you did."

A young man with a buzz cut stepped forward, interrupting Subaru who was about to object to the Village Elder's words. The youth, a member of the young men's association, roughly raked his fingers through his short hair.

"Don't look so anxious, everyone will listen. You've done just as much for us as Lord Roswaal has."

"Don't see through my little rabbit mind, pretending to be brave and all… I'm happy, but seriously, I'm super embarrassed! I look like an idiot for putting on a serious face!"

Subaru clutched his head, unable to bear the unexpected warm words that made his ears feel like they were turning red. He then spun around in place for a moment to cool down. Meanwhile, the villagers slowly gathered around Subaru, ready to listen.

Naturally, they formed a circle, like during radio calisthenics.

“Oh, well, group activities are always useful. I’d love to jump into some radio calisthenics for the first time in a while with this momentum, but we don’t have time, so let’s get straight to it.”

The number of eyes on him was roughly the same as before, but the gazes directed at him were familiar ones.

Their friendly demeanor, so characteristic of the people he knew, filled his heart with joy. Last time, Subaru felt he had seen their negative side here and was anxious if he could handle this explanation well, but:

“If there’s good, there’s bad. That’s just how humans are.”

Subaru muttered softly, then closed his eyes, forgetting his anxieties by gritting his teeth. Then, regaining his usual defiant, impudent urchin look, he stamped his foot on the ground.

“Alright, everyone, lend me your ears for a moment of quiet. This might be a bit shocking for you all, living peaceful, relaxed lives, but please listen calmly. Actually…”

—Interjecting with clever jokes throughout, Subaru conveyed the false information about the ‘bandit arrival’ to the villagers. He also adjusted his voice volume so that the seemingly eavesdropping merchants could hear, and explained everything without allowing questions or interruptions until the very end.

“So, that’s why I took the liberty of acting while the lord was absent. The subjugation force that came are some of the finest elite troops in the capital, and what’s more, they belong to a ducal house! They’re seasoned professionals, so you can rest assured… What do you think?”

He spoke in a lighthearted manner, pushing reassurance like a sales pitch, then tilted his head at the very end to gauge their reactions. He tried to maintain an optimistic attitude as much as possible to avoid fanning their anxieties, but even so, given the situation, the villagers’ unease was palpable.

“It’s sudden, but we have livestock to tend to…”

"The fields need care too. Can't we just settle this without leaving the village?"

"With this many people, couldn't we fortify the village and keep the bandits out?"

Such opinions began to be heard sporadically.

It's difficult to persuade when every single one of those opinions has at least some valid points. Subaru was about to open his mouth, trying to somehow bundle it all with sophistry, but…

"You seem to be mistaken, we are not giving you a choice."

"Wait!"

Ram cut in with a voice so cold it seemed almost heartless, completely bypassing Subaru, who had been trying to pacify them and find a compromise.

As the villagers looked up in alarm, she crossed her arms and snorted softly.

"Since Barusu is talking, it might feel like a suggestion, but this is a higher intention—a lord's command, reflecting Lord Roswaal's wishes. Your safety, your lives, all of that is secondary. You will obey the Margrave's proxy."

"You can't say it like that! I know you're a harsh-speaking character, but I can't just let that slide here. These people have their lives to consider…"

"Barusu, you lack self-awareness just as much."

Ram pierced Subaru with a sharp gaze as he tried to argue further. He didn't flinch, but furrowed his brow, unable to fathom her intentions.

"In this situation, the only one who can claim to be Lord Roswaal's proxy here is Barusu, who was entrusted with the negotiations in the capital. As the lord's proxy, you must fulfill your duty to the villagers."

"Duty, you say…"

"A lord has a duty to protect the lives and peace of their people. If evacuating them for their safety is a lord's duty, then ensuring compensation for any disadvantages that come with it is also a lord's duty."

She said it flatly, then pouted at Subaru as if to say, 'Don't make me spell it out.' At her attitude and the content of her words, Subaru scratched his head and shook it exaggeratedly, yelling, "Ugh!"

"You're really hard to understand. What is it? Or am I just so bad at reading a woman's heart that it's hopeless? So annoying."

"It's insulting to think Ram can be easily understood. All of Ram is dedicated to Lord Roswaal. I don't want Barusu to understand me at all."

Her curt reply and her enraptured statement about her master. If you only looked at that part, you'd certainly think she and Rem were sisters, beyond just their appearance.

So, Subaru cleared his throat, as he was about to blush from an unnecessary memory of his interactions with Rem, and turned back to the villagers.

He nodded at them, who looked anxious at the argument that had broken out in front of them.

"Ah, I'm sorry about Ram's harsh way of speaking. Honestly, my opinion is the same. Everyone evacuating… that's a decided matter. I really don't want to give orders or anything, but it's risky to stay here and guarantee your safety. My opinion is that we should spend whatever effort we can to avoid risk."

"…"

"Of course, I understand everyone's concerns. The livestock, the fields, you probably can't even properly prepare if you're suddenly told to leave. So, about compensation for that… I don't have the authority, but I only have one head to bow, so I'll bow this head and plead with Roswaal. I'll do my best to ensure no one is at a disadvantage.”

As he spoke, Subaru was once again reminded of how limited his reach was.

Feeling pathetic, yet resolved to show his sincerity, he knelt down so everyone could see.

A murmur spread, and Ram’s eyes widened. Only Wilhelm and Ferris, who were behind him, watched Subaru’s actions with a resigned expression.

“—Please, everyone, I know you have a lot to say, but please bear with it. Then, please, let us protect you all.”

“…”

“I’m begging you. That’s why I came back.”

The silent villagers remained mute, as if something was caught in their throats.

It made sense—Subaru, who was their benefactor, was pressing his forehead to the ground, pleading, ‘Please let us protect you.’

Their positions were completely reversed.

From an outsider’s perspective, it was a baffling sight, but it was certainly a very Subaru-like scene.

“—Ah, you just can’t help it, can you, Master Subaru?”

Someone’s voice could be heard, as if bubbling over.

That sparked it, and the impulse to laugh spread throughout the surroundings.

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"When he says he'll protect us so earnestly, we can't help it."

"Oh dear. I actually feel my heart warming up for the first time in a while."

"Master Subaru is truly a troublesome person."

Subaru tentatively lifted his face.

The dazzling morning sun burned his eyes from beyond the human barrier, and for a moment, his vision turned white. He shielded his eyes with his hand, then looked out at the world that emerged.

"…Thank you, everyone."

"—No, thank you, Master Subaru."

Surrounded by troubled smiles, Subaru laughed, looking as if he was about to cry.

4

—Thus, the villagers' persuasion was amicably resolved through a strangely peculiar discussion where those offering protection bowed their heads to those being protected.

We gave the merchants a similar explanation about the "bandit" scenario and instructed them to evacuate, splitting into two groups: one towards the Sanctuary and the other towards the capital. After assigning the dragon carriages and villagers, and just as everyone was about to board and begin moving,

"I have just one more request,"

Subaru said, raising his hand and drawing the villagers' attention.

Though the previous discussion had been amicably settled, Subaru hesitated to voice his next suggestion under their gaze.

To be honest, he himself felt it was a subtle point whether this suggestion was even necessary. However, for two reasons, he wanted this proposal to go through. They were—

"I'd like someone to ride along with Emilia… the half-elf girl in the mansion."

At Subaru's suggestion, the previous lively atmosphere instantly fell silent.

As an awkward silence began to settle over the village once more, Subaru struggled to keep his disappointment, thinking, "Just as I thought," from showing on his face.

"I think you all know about the royal selection proclamation in the capital. That Lord Roswaal… is a supporter of a candidate, and that candidate is the half-elf girl."

"…"

"I know you're all uneasy. I understand there are many things that are hard to digest. Even so, I'm asking you. Please don't let her ride in the dragon carriage alone."

He wasn't sure if his voice conveyed anxiety or sorrow.

Listening to Subaru's words, the villagers exchanged glances, their expressions thoughtful. Still, it wasn't impossible to feel that just their consideration was a different development from before.

However, sensing that a positive response wasn't likely, Subaru quickly raised his hand to say, "My bad," and cut his losses, but—

"—Petra?"

Before Subaru could raise his hand to stop himself, a small palm was already extended upwards.

Surprised, Subaru looked at the owner of the hand, and she puffed out her red cheeks, looking at the adults around her.

"Why isn't everyone listening? Subaru's so troubled, and he's asking with such a tearful face. Why won't anyone help him?"

Her words were terribly honest and unadorned, and precisely for that reason, they cut deep.

Devoid of all the entanglements adults held, it was the strongest punch in the world, allowed only to a child.

The adults grimaced with even greater guilt than before, trying to find words to soothe the girl, but—

“The miss at the mansion, she’s the one who always wears white clothes, right? She brings the stamp for radio calisthenics.”

“Huh, ah…! Yes, yes, that’s right. She’s the stamp missus.”

Looking back, Subaru couldn’t help but smile as he remembered the peaceful days.

A time of calm, when he could simply enjoy everyday life. Every morning, he would go down to the village with Emilia, do radio calisthenics with the villagers, and stamp their hands with the potato stamp he’d carved.

Yes, memories of happy days—and by her side during those days, she was there.

Perhaps a familiar image had been in a corner of their memories, as the adults also began to understand the meaning of Petra’s words. And while their hesitation kept them silent, the children around Petra also started raising their hands one after another.

“Me too! I’ll ride with her!” “If Petra’s riding, then it can’t start without me, right?” “You’re not gonna let just big brother look cool, I’m going with Petra too!” “Subaru looks like he’s about to cry so let’s help him!” “Yeah, let’s do it!”

The children clamored, and in their center, Petra smiled proudly.

Subaru placed a hand on his chest, feeling a sense of relief at her expression, which was too cute to be called a triumphant smirk.

“Can I ask you? That girl, she’s so tough and stubborn and headstrong, but she gets lonely, and I worry if no one’s watching over her.”

“I guess I’ll watch over her for Subaru.”

A sigh of relief escaped Subaru’s lips.

Then Subaru walked over to Petra, who had made the promise, and held out his pinky finger to her. Smiling at the bewildered girl,

“This is how we do it: we hold out our pinky fingers and hook them together. Then we sing ‘Pinky promise, solemn oath’ and break it off. Can you do it?”

“Y-Yes!”

A more energetic reply than he expected came back, and Subaru smiled, saying, “That’s the spirit,” as he intertwined his finger with the girl’s. Then he slowly taught the confused Petra the song.

“Pinky promise, solemn oath,”

“If you lie, you’ll swallow a thousand needles!”

“—Pinky promise broken!”

Their fingers separated, and a promise —a contract— was exchanged.

Petra promised Subaru that she would never leave Emilia alone, and Subaru promised them that he would absolutely protect them and the village’s safety.

—This promise, this time, absolutely, he would not break.

“This time, let’s go without any lingering worries. Let’s do it, everyone!”

Subaru punched his fist into the air, and everyone present raised their fists. Just as a cheer was about to erupt, voices rising high,

“—Ah! It’s a stealth operation, so everyone quiet, quiet!”

Everyone quickly had to shut their mouths, which was a bit of an anticlimax.

5

—As an aside.

“Ehehe…”

Subaru, who had given the command, was stroking the girl’s head with his other hand, opposite the one he had clenched. No one but the cat-eared knight and the pink-haired maid noticed that the girl’s cheeks were flushed, and she was gazing at Subaru with intensely warm eyes.

Chapter 77:
Prisoner Negotiations and Reunion

1

—The scene returns to the moment Subaru removed his hood and revealed his identity to the Witch Cultists.

As Subaru snapped his fingers high above his head and confidently delivered his lines, the Witch Cultists, who had been merely observing the situation until then, sprang into action.

One, holding a Dialogue Mirror, and two others, flanking Subaru, simultaneously reached into their robes, pulling out daggers shaped like crucifixes—

"—Too slow."

With a single word, pointing out the cultists' misjudgment, the Sword Demon descended from between the trees.

A silver flash streaked through the air, and the arm of the cultist gripping a dagger was severed halfway up the bicep, flying through the air. Blood splattered, and the gleam of the blade, streaking through the darkness, painted a path of cruel beauty.

The thud of the arm hitting the ground and the sound of gushing blood spattering on fallen leaves created a chain reaction. Yet, even as they were consumed by the searing pain of losing an arm, the Witch Cultists immediately decided to retreat without a single groan. They bent their knees, spun around, and tried to escape in three different directions. However,

"My apologies, but your footing is already within our grasp."

Their feet, just about to step forward, sank into the ground, causing all three to lose their balance and drop to their knees. Immediately, blades were pressed against the necks of the men attempting to stand.

Wilhelm, who had struck first, and Julius, who had made the ground muddy with his follow-up. And then,

“It was Ferris, just here for the good parts!”

Ferris, with an expression like a peace sign, and having uncharacteristically drawn a dagger, was beaming affectionately at Subaru.

Ignoring his flippant demeanor, Subaru exhaled a sigh of relief that the situation had progressed largely as anticipated.

Aside from Subaru, only these three, highly capable and trustworthy individuals, had come to this location. The rest of the knights remained in the village to guide the evacuation. As for the mercenary group, they had been assigned to a different task. If this mission had failed, that fallback plan would have been crucial, but —

“Glad it went well. If I’d messed up after acting so cool, it would’ve been more than just embarrassing. Ferris, can you handle the hemostasis? We can’t have them dying before we get answers.”

“I don’t think you should be saying that with such a pale face, nya~?”

A strained voice and dry lips. He thought he was hiding his expression by putting his hand to his forehead in the dark, but he’d been seen right through. Subaru made a bitter face at Ferris’s remark and closed his eyes once.

The gruesome exchange that had just unfolded before him.

Unlike the witchbeast incident or the battle with the White Whale, he still wasn’t used to seeing humans fighting and cutting each other down. The deaths of people, and the corpses, still felt like something from another world.

Feeling almost dizzy from the unreality of the severed arm, Subaru lightly shook his head to banish his faint-heartedness. While he composed himself, Ferris applied hemostasis to the Witch Cultists to prevent blood loss, and then Julius and Wilhelm sequentially bound

them.

“Still, you had a good eye to spot an informant among the merchants, nya~.”

“It was obvious they’d switched the blank letter the moment we heard about it. Ram said the envoy from Crusch-sama’s camp who brought it immediately turned back to the capital after hearing that… This time, we were short on time, so our selection of collaborators for transport was sloppy. The world is usually a little worse than your worst expectations.”

Subaru calmly responded to Ferris’s praise with an answer born of experience, then sighed deeply as he looked at the prisoners.

A gaunt man, an elderly man. Above all, the man holding the Dialogue Mirror, who had been trying to pass on information to Petelgeuse—Subaru recognized his face.

“I remember you. You’re Ketty, right?”

“—Why?”

“Hmm, why indeed? Feel free to ponder as much as I have, you know?”

Called by name, the man —the merchant named Ketty— uttered a single question. Subaru replied evasively, feeling a slight shock that someone he knew was an enemy, yet at the same time, a certain sense of understanding given the preceding events.

Ketty was someone Subaru had encountered in the very first loop that began in the capital.

After the Lifaus Highway was covered in fog, Subaru, abandoned by Rem while detouring, had met him while desperately running through a village to secure transport. Through him, Otto was introduced, and in that first loop, Subaru had managed to return to the Mathers territory. Though, by that point, everything was already too late—a worst memory.

In the second iteration —which was hopeless anyway— then the third iteration.

Driven by vengeance, he rushed through the road and encountered a group of merchants midway. It was again Ketty and Otto who were overseeing them. Subaru, with the same idea as this time, hired Otto and his group to secure transport for the villagers, bidding farewell to Ketty, who remained behind, saying he was “heading to the capital.” Afterwards, Subaru encountered the White Whale, and the merchant group was annihilated.

Thinking about it now, even though he was present at crucial junctures of their actions, he had seemingly, as if on purpose, avoided all the troubles. This meant that,

“It’s because he was in the know, isn’t it? If we’d left him alone, the location of the Sanctuary, which was supposed to be unknown, and our two-pronged evacuation efforts, would have been completely exposed.”

“However, fortunately, we seem to have thwarted their initial move. Furthermore, this should allow us to pre-empt the Witch Cultists who must be lurking in the forest.”

As Subaru collected his thoughts, Julius took over, nodding slightly. Subaru agreed; it was an expected outcome, but—

“Aren’t these guys awfully tight-lipped? If we try to force them to talk, I have a feeling they’ll just yell, ‘Glory to the Witch Cult!’ and kill themselves.”

“Indeed, the Witch Cultists have a deeply rooted custom of not fearing death. For four hundred years, their unfathomable nature has been partly due to this. Entire captured groups committing suicide, leaving the truth shrouded in darkness… it’s not uncommon.”

Wilhelm affirmed Subaru’s grim speculation.

Subaru stuck out his tongue, saying “Ugh,” at their stereotypical fanatical mindset, and was worried Ketty and the others might self-destruct on the spot.

To dispel Subaru's concerns, Ferris clapped his hands loudly and said,

"Alright, alright, no more gloomy talk, nya~. Ferris isn't out here on the front lines for nothing, nya~."

"No, you eagerly followed along when I mentioned I had a lead on an informant. Honestly, I wondered how you'd manage without any combat ability."

"My, how rude, nya. Let Ferris clear up Subaru-kyun's terribly misguided notions, nya~."

Ferris winked charmingly, making Subaru glum, then slowly approached the men. He then rolled his large cat-like eyes, carefully observing all three. Targeting the elderly man among them, he touched the man's forehead with his right palm.

His delicate fingers gripped the man's forehead firmly, and he exhaled a tiny breath. Then,

"Mix it up—"

"—!!"

Ferris's palm glowed faintly, and a pale light enveloped the man's entire body, centered on his forehead. It was the same light as when he performed healing, and Subaru had received that very same healing many times to repair the abnormalities in his Gate—but the effect was dramatically different.

"Ah… guh… ugh!"

Just as the pale light enveloped his entire body, the man suddenly began to convulse, his eyes wide, his tongue lolling out in agony.

His eyes instantly bloodshot, saliva dripped from the corners of the groaning man's mouth. Soiling the ground with drops, the man continued to gasp like a fish, enduring the never-ending torment.

"Hey! What in the world are you…?"

"I'm just interfering with the water inside their bodies to make them suffer a little, nya. Don't worry, I won't turn them into vegetables. —Though I will turn them into dolls, nya."

Subaru raised his voice at the sudden act of prisoner abuse—especially one where he couldn't tell what was happening from the outside—but Ferris coolly continued, humming a tune. Subaru felt a chill down his spine at the sight, but Wilhelm clapped him on the shoulder from behind.

"It may seem a bit rough, but it's a necessary procedure when dealing with the Witch Cult. Please, Lord Subaru, bear with it."

"It's not like I'm so soft-hearted that it pains me to see enemies being hurt, but… seeing them suffer this much, I kind of want an explanation, honestly."

Observing the situation out of the corner of his eye, Subaru twisted his mouth, expressing displeasure at the unchanging, torture-like treatment of the man. Then, as Subaru stood there discontentedly, Julius raised a finger and said, "To explain it simply,"

"Ferris applied water-element magic to them under the guise of healing, didn't he? He seems to be able to interfere with the mana he passed inside them, and to some extent, deprive them of their influence."

"…So, what does that mean?"

"It means that anyone Ferris touches, if their resistance is a little low, will turn into an obedient little kitten for Ferris, nya~."

Ferris, satisfied, brushed his knees as he casually replied to Subaru's furrowed brow. He waved off Subaru's suspicious gaze with an easy gesture, then pointed to the Witch Cultist he had just touched, saying, "There, it's good now."

"There's a time limit, but now I think you can get some information out of him, nya? Once the effect wears off, you have to wait a while before you can do it again, nya~."

As he spoke, Ferris slowly turned his head, looking at the remaining two Witch Cultists, and smiled deeply, saying,

“There are still two more, so it’s perfectly fine, nya.”

“Sometimes, I feel like I catch a glimpse of your sadistic side, and it freaks me out… You’re not serious, are you?”

“If we can get the information out of them, then I won’t have to be serious, nya.”

Ferris placed a finger on his lips and swayed his body, laughing off Subaru’s concern.

Subaru looked to Wilhelm and Julius for their opinions on Ferris’s attitude, but both shook their heads in unison.

“It is not a means to be praised for its humanity, but we must accept it as a small matter before a great one. As for the remaining two, if possible, we would like to escort them to the capital as they are.”

“They are valuable sources of information. The Witch Cult has been operating in the shadows for a long time. We must use them effectively to grasp their tail.”

The opinions of the two aligned with Ferris’s stance, and Subaru, recognizing that this was no time to be picky about methods, closed his eyes to his internal dissatisfaction.

Then, clearing his throat, he faced the Witch Cultist, whose eyes had already become unfocused, and said,

“Alright, let’s just ask what we need to. How many Witch Cultists are participating in this attack? How many groups have they split into and are hiding in the forest?”

“…”

“Hey, he’s supposed to answer honestly, but he’s clammed up.”

A silent response to his question. Subaru looked at Ferris with suspicion, who shrugged his slender shoulders from side to side and stuck out his tongue, saying,

“They can’t answer what they don’t know, nya. Silence means they don’t know, right? Let’s move on, next, next!”

“Unsatisfying. Alright, then let’s talk about Petel… the Sin Archbishop who’s leading you. Tell me his name, appearance, and what he can do.”

“Archbishop’s… name… is Petelgeuse… He’s a thin man, with green hair… and a gaunt face where his bones stick out…”

The man mumbled, answering Subaru’s questions honestly. Listening to his answer, Subaru felt a strange sense of understanding, thinking, “Ah, so even his followers think he looks sickly thin,” and continued his questioning. But then,

“What abilities does he use?”

“…”

“How many ‘fingers’ have you hidden in the forest.”

“…”

“Your birthday, blood type, and favorite body part on a girl.”

“…”

“I give up!”

Subaru quickly reached his breaking point with the sheer number of silent responses.

Even with the caveat that they couldn’t speak about what they didn’t know, interrogating someone with so much undisclosed information about their own organization was a tough job. It was even possible that Subaru held more information than they did.

Subaru ran his hands through his hair, pondering what to do, when Ferris, who had supposedly stepped back, tapped him on the shoulder as if unable to bear watching.

"Honestly, Subaru-kyun, you're just hopeless, nya."

"Don't say that, Feriemon, these guys are too ignorant…"

"What's 'emon,' where did that come from?"

"Similarities with cat ears… Oh, he lost his cat ears!"

Ferris, deeming Subaru's response to be nonsense, sighed and swapped roles with him in the interrogation. Subaru, disheartened by the implicit criticism of his inadequacy, ceded the floor, and then,

"Hmm… what's this?"

He picked up an object that had fallen at his feet—a Dialogue Mirror, unused, that had dropped from Ketty's hand. Wiping off the grass and dirt, he scrutinized it and found it remarkably similar to the folding hand mirrors he knew. "Compact" might be the closest image.

"A mysterious item that transforms you if you chant a magic spell… No, it is actually a mysterious item. Abracadabra, amen and ramen."

Subaru mumbled something random, opening and closing the compact in his hand. The mirror inside reflected his grimace, which he hadn't seen in a while, and on closer inspection, he realized his complexion was terrible, a mix of dirt, sweat, and blood. Emilia couldn't see him like this.

Just as he was consoling himself with that thought about the current situation, the hand mirror suddenly changed. Its edges began to glow and heat up.

"Whoa… oh? Hey, did I touch something weird?"

He frantically fiddled with the Dialogue Mirror in his hand, but the light gradually intensified, showing no signs of fading. The suspicion that he had broken it grew stronger, and at the same time, his past conversation with the bald old man about "magic tools being traded at very high prices" came to mind, making him break out in a cold sweat.

Julius noticed Subaru's internal struggle with a financial crisis.

"Subaru, what in the world are you…?"

"I-I didn't do anything! I just used some weird magic words, I swear I didn't do anything special! But now it's getting kinda weird…"

"Could it be… you dispelled the activation spell?"

Julius, slightly surprised by Subaru's stammering excuses, rushed over. He then looked at the Dialogue Mirror in Subaru's palm with an incredulous expression.

"Dialogue Mirrors are common among magic tools, but connecting to a paired mirror requires proper procedures. In particular, the activation spell is one of the only parts you can freely manipulate once connected, and there are limited ways to extract it other than asking someone who knows it…"

"Huh, wait, what does that mean?"

"It means you've almost completely accomplished what Ferris was trying to extract just now. If you can release the Dialogue Mirror's activation spell and identify the connected mirrors…"

Julius took the Dialogue Mirror from Subaru's bewildered hands and began to manipulate it, gathering mana at his fingertips. At first glance, it almost looked like he was operating a smartphone or a tablet, leaving Subaru, who was stuck at flip phones, to just wait patiently.

However, what seemed like a complex operation finished in just about ten seconds.

"—Well done, Subaru. We've now located the other Dialogue Mirrors connected to this one."

"Awesome… So, it's like a GPS function, right? Can you tell from here?"

“I don’t know what a ‘GPS’ is, but yes, we know the locations of the Dialogue Mirrors. The Dialogue Mirrors connect to two places… one is in the forest, but the other is a bit further away.”

Subaru followed Julius’s gaze as he looked up from the Dialogue Mirror and toward the forest. Though obscured by the green of the trees, if Subaru’s sense of direction was not mistaken, Julius was looking toward the mountains, a place he had been before.

The west side of the village—the very forest where the Ulgarm pack had been.

After Roswaal’s witchbeast extermination, the presence of dangerous creatures should have likely decreased. With its sheer cliffs, it was a place Subaru had once “thrown himself from,” so its significance was not lost on him.

“The Witch Cult is there, then… That’s a new one.”

Petelgeuse’s “fingers”—Subaru predicted that this term referred to the madman’s agents lurking in ten different locations. Through his two previous loops, Subaru had already roughly identified eight of these hiding spots.

If he considered these three merchants, who had been hiding informants, as one of the previously unknown locations, then the newly revealed spot would be the very last one.

“Only two locations show up on the Dialogue Mirror. Can we assume there are no Dialogue Mirrors in other places?”

“Even though they circulate often in the market, Dialogue Mirrors are still rare magic tools. The method of production is known, but considering the funds, time, and effort involved—it’s hard to say it’s very worthwhile.”

Subaru nodded along to Julius’s shrug, though he held a different opinion.

Subaru hadn’t had any particular interest in military or war-related information in his original world. Even so, he knew the importance of speed and accuracy in information transfer.

Could they truly not imagine the developmental potential of this technology, which they dismissed as “not worthwhile”?

“Well, putting aside my thoughts on mobile phone proliferation for now, if that’s confirmed, then it’s good. If reliable information transfer relies on Dialogue Mirrors, and their owners are in two locations…”

—He concluded that one location was likely Petelgeuse’s.

It was natural for the head of the group, the leadership at the end of the command chain, to possess a Dialogue Mirror. And if there was one with a spy lurking within the opposing group, and then another location, that would be—

“A backup, or a trump card… Either way, we’ve got their tail.”

Subaru clenched his fist, biting his lip at the turn of events, feeling a renewed sense of resolve.

Then, he turned towards Ferris, who was still interrogating, and Wilhelm, who continued to keep watch, intending to share the information.

“You two, lucky for us, the Dialogue Mirror worked. With this, the remaining…”

“—!!”

Subaru approached, defenselessly raising his hand. The moment the prisoners saw the Dialogue Mirror glowing in Subaru’s hand, their demeanor, which had been docile until then, completely changed.

The two, other than the one Ferris had put under his spell, twisted their faces into ferocious expressions and, while still bound, launched themselves at him, leaping as if to fly.

“—Oh.”

Subaru froze in shock. Ketty, still bound, lunged at his throat, baring his fangs as if to rip it out. However just before he reached him, “My apologies—”

A slash cut through the air, and the tall torso was split in two, falling apart.

Ketty, scattering a large amount of internal organs and blood, let out a beast-like roar and convulsed on the ground, having lost his lower body—then died with a malevolent expression.

Unlike Ketty, who had been subjected to Wilhelm’s slash, the other one—

“Bu-bu-bu-bu-a-a-a-fa-a-ba-ba-ba-ba—”

Still in the posture of having lunged forward, he collapsed to the ground, his limbs trembling, his tongue hanging out as if his throat were parched, and his eyes bloodshot.

His skin, visibly reddened even in the dim light, and his blood vessels were swollen, unable to withstand the internal pressure, with green patterns covering his entire body.

“…Hey, hey.”

Subaru mumbled, realizing he had somehow collapsed to the ground. Julius, who had come from behind, lent him a shoulder and helped him up. Though, his lower legs weren’t cooperating, and it took him quite a while to stand.

“My strength of will was too great, and I lost my temper. My apologies.”

Wilhelm sheathed his blood-wiped sword, apologizing for cutting down Ketty. Then, he squatted down and examined the convulsing body of the other man.

“He, too, no longer breathes. —Ferris, you’ve done something cruel.”

“It was so sudden, I couldn’t help it, nya. I don’t want Subaru-kyun’s neck bitten off and get scolded by Lady Crusch. …What’s wrong?”

Ferris stuck out his tongue at Wilhelm, who had confirmed the death. Not looking at their exchange, Subaru stared at the dead man's body, which was covered in what looked like blisters.

His expression was one of agony, his face so distorted that his original features were unrecognizable at a glance. It was an incredibly brutal way for a person to die, and above all—

"I didn't even touch him, but… did you do this?"

"That's right, nya. A little application of water magic. —Even gentle mana that heals wounds can become poison if too much is poured in. It's problematic if the water in your body gets too healthy, right, nya~?"

Subaru could not hide his horror at Ferris, who, unperturbed, twitched his cat ears on his head.

The man's death—it was so gruesome that even Wilhelm, who had just cut someone down, showed a bitter expression. Seeing Ferris do it with no remorse whatsoever sent shivers down Subaru's spine.

Most of all, if what he just said was true,

"You…"

"Hm?"

"…No, never mind. The other one's fine, right?"

Subaru shook his head slightly, abandoning further inquiry as it felt like poking a sleeping dog.

The question he swallowed was this:

—You could kill me the same way, couldn't you?

Ferris's magic that caused the water in the body to run wild. If it was limited to those who had received healing —healing mana— from Ferris, then Subaru perfectly fit that condition.

He remembered the overwhelming pain and death that had afflicted him during the previous attack.

Violent heat, as if his entire blood was boiling, even his brain.

If Ferris had done that, then that death was exactly the same as the man before him—

“The survivor is going to be taken to the capital for interrogation… right?”

“Ferris’s suggestion still holds sway over him, so there shouldn’t be a problem. So, Lord Subaru, about the Dialogue Mirror you mentioned was usable.”

Wilhelm responded to Subaru, who, looking pale, averted his gaze from Ferris. He subtly stood so as to obscure the bodies and Ferris from Subaru’s view.

“If the location is known, let’s launch a surprise attack. Otherwise, if they become suspicious due to a lack of regular contact, our advantage will be lost. Before that happens—”

“…That’s true, yeah. We’ll do that. But still…”

Subaru nodded at Wilhelm’s suggestion, organizing his thoughts.

Petelgeuse. The eight known hiding spots from experience. The newly discovered last location. The Dialogue Mirror. Emilia and the others fleeing. The battle. The possession. Spirit Arts.

“—Ferris.”

“Nya~?”

“If you can control that person, you can make them use the Dialogue Mirror to talk, right?”

Subaru, whose thoughts had accelerated, opened his eyes and asked Ferris. He blinked once at the question, then happily parted his lips and said,

“I can, nya? It’s easy-peasy to intentionally send misinformation to connected parties using the Dialogue Mirror. —Shall we do it?”

“Yeah, let’s do it. Don’t make them say anything too elaborate. We don’t want to raise suspicion by giving too much away. Just something like ‘no change in situation, continue standby’ will be fine.”

As long as their anomaly wasn’t communicated, it was a confirmed fact from experience that the enemies would remain quiet until at least midnight.

As long as the fact of their escape by dragon carriage wasn’t exposed, keeping Emilia and the villagers out of danger wouldn’t be difficult.

“Find out their regular contact method and have them convey the current information to the two connected locations.”

“There might be codes or something, so I’ll be careful about that too, nya. Fufuun, Subaru-kyun might have matured a bit, Ferris is happy, nya~.”

Nodding at Subaru’s instructions, Ferris, for some reason pleased, took the Dialogue Mirror and cheerfully turned back to the man. Watching him interrogate and gather intelligence while humming, Subaru called out to Wilhelm and Julius.

“I have a request for both of you, or rather, I want you to accept roles as we enter the final phase. Is that alright?”

Man proposes, God disposes—to achieve victory, every possible hand must be played.

For destiny had never once smiled upon Subaru without him doing anything.

2

—With the Witch Cultists who had infiltrated the merchants now eliminated, and the internal threat removed, the immediate worries had vanished.

"May fortune be with you—"

Emilia's words, as she boarded the dragon carriage, and her gaze, filled with both gratitude and concern for Subaru and the others remaining in the village, were deeply etched in his memory.

Subaru's heartache at not revealing his identity to her, hidden under an invisibility cloak, was difficult to express. Honestly, he wished he could confide in her right now and hold her hand.

"Well, I'll just think about it and endure for now. I've got the memory of holding her hand without getting yelled at, so I'm not going to cry."

He brushed off his feelings with a casual remark, watching the departing dragon carriage with the knights.

Several escort knights on ground dragons were guarding the carriage during the evacuation. They took extra precautions to be as inconspicuous as possible, even splitting into two groups mid-journey.

One group, with Ram, headed for the Sanctuary, and the other, with Emilia, for the capital. Roswaal was supposed to meet them at the Sanctuary, and Crusch at the capital. With thorough backup plans in place, their safety was, in a sense, far greater than Subaru's.

The children who had begged to ride with Emilia also held her hand firmly as they boarded the carriage. Remembering Emilia's genuinely joyful reaction filled Subaru's heart with warmth.

He did notice Petra's eyes, next to Emilia as they boarded the carriage—they seemed to burn with some kind of rivalry, which bothered him a little, but he decided it probably wouldn't have a major impact. Especially since Petra was a child who usually listened to Subaru well.

"Letting the joyful emotion wash over me, and using the situation to get Emilia-tan away. …I've really become a scumbag who manipulates people's hearts. It's a far cry from when I was rumored to be someone who couldn't read people or the atmosphere."

He had also asked the children to not mention Subaru's name and not let Emilia go outside while in the dragon carriage.

Subaru had concluded that both the former and the latter were reasons she had returned to the battlefield last time.

At that time, if someone had been riding with Emilia in her dragon carriage, if someone had been there to stop her actions—would things have turned out differently?

If someone genuinely cared for her and held her back, the kind Emilia surely wouldn't have been able to disregard them.

Subaru had intentionally created this situation by giving the children a role and by keeping his presence from Emilia.

If she ever learned the full truth later, she might despise him for it.

Even if he knew the future through Return by Death, deceiving someone's heart for that reason, let alone manipulating them for his own convenience, was unforgivable. So,

"I'll definitely keep this a secret for the rest of my life…"

He wasn't good enough to say "it's safe as long as it's not exposed," but he certainly wasn't a masochist who would willingly expose himself. He resolved to take it to his grave.

Just then, to Subaru,

"Looks like the villagers and the half-elf girl have left, then."

Ricardo, the large beastman, approached with a rough tone, swinging his great axe over his shoulder. Subaru grimaced at his slightly blood-splattered figure and let out a small sigh.

"Don't call my cute Emilia-tan a 'half-elf,' you half-dog."

"Whoa, being called a 'half-dog' is more humiliating than I thought! I've learned something new today! Excellent, excellent!"

His sarcasm was met with booming laughter, leaving Subaru with no choice but to give a wry smile. Then, his expression suddenly vanished, and he looked up towards the forest.

“So, how was it? The ambush?”

“We knew their location, and they weren’t on guard at all. It wouldn’t be right for mercenaries who’ve been paid to mess that up. We handled it perfectly.”

Ricardo opened his beastly mouth wide, showing his fangs as he laughed belligerently.

As if to prove his words, mercenary groups on Ligers successively burst out of the forest, circling the now-empty village, demonstrating their continued vigor.

“Hee-hee! Kill ‘em all!”

“We captured prisoners properly, though. Don’t say such bad things, big sis!”

Seeing the brother and sister, who were leading the charge, having such amusing yet unsettling conversations, it seemed the results were excellent.

Even knowing the high probability of success, it was a situation that had filled the sending party with anxiety. Subaru breathed a sigh of relief at their safe return.

“Oh, and by the way, there’s a small problem.”

Then, Ricardo lowered his tall back and leaned in close, whispering to Subaru. Sensing something ominous in his demeanor, Subaru furrowed his brows.

“Wh-What is it? I have a bad feeling, so please try to say it with as much excitement as possible.”

“Really? Well, then, if you insist!”

Ricardo, taking Subaru’s attempt to mask his fear seriously, responded in an incredibly loud voice. A ringing in Subaru's ears echoed in his skull from the eardrum-shattering volume, making him wince. Mimi, riding a Liger, dashed around them, shouting, "Hee-hee! It's a festival!"

"Shut up! That's not what I meant! What if our movements get exposed after we worked so hard to evacuate everyone quietly?!"

"Bro! Bro! Your voice is loud enough already!"

Ricardo burst into laughter at Subaru's shouting.

Unsatisfied with the sudden change in his demeanor, Subaru shook his head, saying, "Never mind."

"Just tell me. If there's a problem, we need to know before executing the plan so we can adjust. Right now, we need to eliminate even one uncertain factor…"

"Nah, there won't be any problems with the plan, probably. It's just that, while we did capture the Witch Cultists… there's a separate issue."

"Separate issue…?"

Not understanding what Ricardo meant, Subaru tilted his head, expressing his doubt. Ricardo nodded at Subaru's reaction, and as if to say it was faster to show than tell, he raised his arm.

"Hey, bring that guy over here."

His subordinate nodded and ran off, returning with a Liger.

A bound human was riding on its back, and as it gradually approached, Subaru's expression shifted from doubt to unease, then to certainty.

"When we ambushed the Witch Cultists' lair, he was in the back. Looks like this guy was just unlucky and got captured by them."

Ricardo said, scratching his head, as the gagged figure groaned in front of him. He seemed to be complaining about unfair treatment, or perhaps begging for his life. After overcoming his initial shock at the pitiful sight, Subaru—

“Pfft!”

Couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

He pointed a finger, roaring with laughter at the bound and helpless figure.

“You! I thought you were gone, but you got captured, Otto!”

With that, he shouted the name of the final character, who, due to bad luck, hadn’t shown his face until now.

Chapter 78:
Insanity of Madness

1

After Subaru’s uproarious laughter finally died down, Otto, whose identity had at last been confirmed, was released from his restraints.

Rubbing his bound wrists and the corners of his mouth where the gag had been, Otto, his face still red, glared at Subaru with resentful eyes.

“Thanks for saving me… though I’m not exactly in the mood to say it sincerely.”

“Hey, hey, what kind of talk is that towards your lifesavers? If people remember you as an ingrate, it’ll make doing business a pain in the neck and just choke you out in the long run, you know?”

“Agh! So you already know all about my situation! Thank you! I owe you my life! I felt like I was already dead!”

Subaru’s teasing, which alluded to Otto’s background, made him shout out an exasperated apology.

The communication mirror taken from the informant, and the two hideouts connected to it—one was determined to be the cave where Petelgeuse was hiding, and the remaining one was believed to be the location of the last “finger” that Subaru hadn’t known about. Therefore, in parallel with guiding Emilia and the others to safety, Subaru had given instructions to the beast-human mercenary group to launch a surprise attack and eliminate the danger beforehand.

As a result, the Witch Cultists, who had received false reports due to Ferris’s suggestion, had no inkling of their movements and were caught off guard, annihilated by the surprise attack—with several prisoners taken, and for some reason, Otto, who had been captured by them, successfully rescued. Even better news was the identity of the prisoners Ricardo and his group brought back—more specifically, there was a familiar woman among them.

“She’s the woman Petelgeuse has possessed twice. So far, his possession rate with her is one hundred percent.”

Regardless of whether he chose her willingly, there was a high possibility that if Petelgeuse lost his current body, the next person he would possess was among the prisoners. Since she had been knocked unconscious and restrained, even if Petelgeuse were to lose his current host, the likelihood of him choosing to possess her next had decreased. And since the locations of other potential backup hosts were already known to them—it was safe to say they had taken a big step closer to victory.

The blank imperial letter, the last “finger.” As several fragmented pieces began to connect, Subaru felt a sense of certainty that he was correctly forming the “paper of the future.” The fact that Otto had been rescued this time could also be considered a part of that.

From the forest, the mercenary group’s pack of Ligers appeared, along with Otto’s ground dragon, which Subaru also recognized, pulling a dragon carriage. Having had his entire fortune seized and his life held in their hands, Otto must have felt as if he wasn’t truly alive. In fact, it wasn’t hard to imagine what Otto’s fate would have been if things had proceeded as they did before. Thinking that if he had cleared it as before, he wouldn’t have had the chance to reunite with him like this, the mistake was worth it.

“Yeah, well, we’ll just say that’s how it is. Pfft.”

“What was that reaction? Did I do something to you?!”

Otto yelled at Subaru, who spat to hide his embarrassment and frustration, but Subaru brushed it off with a casual “that’s that” and changed the subject.

“So, how did you end up getting captured? It’s weird that it was just you.”

“Well… there were some circumstances that are very difficult to put into words…”

“Most of the people coming to this territory now are merchants who’ve gathered at Roswaal Mansion from the capital, looking for quick cash, you know?”

“You practically know all the details and you’re still asking, aren’t you?! Yes, that’s right! I jumped at that lucrative offer, thinking I could get ahead of everyone else, so I rushed down a bad road trying to be the first one there, and unfortunately, I ran into the guys who were set up in the forest and got caught! Go ahead, laugh if you want!”

“Nah, I mean, when you tell me to laugh after hearing such a greedy story, it kinda makes me pull back a bit…”

“I’m not satisfied!!”

Subaru lightly crushed Otto’s attempt to laugh it off with false bravado and once again sneered at his shameful, unreasonable shouts. It seemed that his merchant’s spirit and surprisingly reckless side hadn’t changed, which was a relief. Feeling good about their long-awaited conversation, Subaru quickly scanned him.

—To see if there was anything suspicious about his demeanor, or any strange hostility.

Ricardo, who was observing the two from a distance, was exercising similar caution. Given the circumstances under which he had been brought out of the hideout, it could be said that most of the suspicion had already been cleared at this point, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Considering that Ketty, the leader of the merchants, had been an informant, even Otto, with whom he had built a relatively close relationship, could not be trusted carelessly.

Each time he repeated such doubts, Subaru found himself disliking the way his heart grew hardened. No matter how many times he repeated the world, Subaru couldn’t truly know people’s true intentions, their hearts, or their pasts. Therefore, he had no choice but to keep doubting. He struggled to be trusted, all while unable to truly trust others at heart.

"I've really become a nasty guy, haven't I?"

"What was that?"

"I said, 'Glad you're safe.' You'll be safe in this village for now, so just stay put. As for that get-rich-quick scheme, all I can say is, 'My condolences.'"

Subaru disguised his self-deprecation with a light remark, and at his words, Otto looked around with a surprised expression. Then, belatedly, he realized that the sight he was looking for wasn't among the villages, and his face showed it.

"N-No way… Could it be, by any chance, already…?"

"You missed your chance to jump on that money-making scheme. Well, you'll just have to accept that just being alive is a profit in itself. Good luck selling your oil."

Subaru patted Otto's shoulder sympathetically as his face turned pale, and leaving him on the verge of collapsing, Subaru looked over the group that was preparing. His eyes met Ricardo's, who was watching him. Ricardo twitched his nose as if to say Otto had been assessed, and then rejoined Mimi and the others. Subaru breathed a sigh of relief, sensing he had also received the veteran mercenary's stamp of approval, and roughly explained the situation to Otto, trying to prevent any further recklessness from him in this place. Although Otto seemed somewhat distracted, Subaru finished explaining the situation with gestures and hand movements, with Otto interjecting occasionally.

"So, that's why the 'mountain bandits' in the forest —you already know them, they're the Witch Cultists— the people here are the subjugation force to defeat them. In the meantime, this might become a battlefield, so we were gathering merchants to evacuate the villagers. I'm sorry you got completely caught up in the mix, but we can't let you leave the village now, so you'll have to wait here until things are settled. Okay?"

"O-Okay?"

“I’m glad you accept. A few people will remain, so please make sure you don’t stray from them. Alright then, let’s talk again once everything’s cleared up.”

Having said only that to the stunned Otto, Subaru put him aside for now. Instead, he headed towards the subjugation force, which seemed to have finished their squad formation and alignment, and called out to Julius and Ricardo, who were leading them. Julius, who turned around, looked at Subaru and then at Otto in the distance.

“It was a reunion with an acquaintance, wasn’t it? Have you warmed up to your old friend enough?”

“I laughed like an idiot, talked nonsense, and then secretly peered into the depths of his being to see if he was hiding anything. I feel like such a bad person I’m starting to believe I’m an idiot.”

“It’s good to know you’re satisfied. If you no longer need to doubt someone you don’t want to doubt, then that’s enough, I’d say. — What about him?”

Julius admonished Subaru’s self-deprecating remark and asked about Otto’s fate as he looked disheartened. In response, Subaru lowered his chin and spread his arms, indicating the village.

“We’ll leave him in the village. There’s going to be a standby squad anyway, so they’ll protect him there. I’d rather not add more trouble by making him chase after the evacuated group now.”

“That would be best. Then, prolonging this only creates unnecessary risks. Shall we move soon?”

Julius nodded at Subaru’s answer and, narrowing his eyes, asked a question filled with fighting spirit. In response to his call, Subaru saw the knights lining up and Ricardo’s expression tighten. The fighting spirit intensified, and the atmosphere of the battlefield grew thick.

Subaru lifted his chin, gazing at the sky, and let his thoughts drift for a moment. There were some uncertainties, but he was confident he had eliminated as many risks as possible. He had done his utmost, and now all that remained was to wait for fate to smile upon them. In that case, spending any more time would only be a foolish act that would dampen their morale.

“—Let’s do it. Stick to the plan.”

Subaru lowered his gaze, looking over everyone as he quietly rallied them. In response, the knights also nodded and began mounting their waiting ground dragons and Ligers.

Beside Subaru, Patrasche, eager for her turn, came up to him with high spirits. He stroked her firm hide with his palm before climbing onto her back.

Julius and Ricardo were lined up on either side of Subaru, and with their gazes on his back, Subaru took a small breath.

“Alright, let’s do this, everyone. I’m counting on you, so lend me your strength—!”

2

Based on his previous battle experience, Subaru had a theory about Petelgeuse’s “possession.”

First, Petelgeuse’s “possession” works by transferring his consciousness to another body when his current one stops functioning.

Second, the targets for possession aren’t just anyone; they’re limited to the bodies of his subordinates, whom Petelgeuse refers to as “fingers.”

Third, given the “finger” analogy, there are likely a total of ten spare bodies. One is stationed at each hidden location, ready to be swapped into in an emergency.

Fourth, even if Petelgeuse isn’t killed but only rendered unconscious, if another “finger” detects it, a system is in place to forcibly make the current body commit suicide, triggering the possession phenomenon and executing the transfer.

Fifth, if all the “fingers” to possess are lost, Petelgeuse will resort to possessing Subaru’s body as a last resort. This possession is incredibly potent, and no matter how strongly Subaru tries to maintain his consciousness, he won’t be able to resist it. —That sums it up.

“Putting it into a bulleted list really highlights how unbelievably unfair it is. He also has ‘Unseen Hand’ and the authority of ‘Sloth’? That’s just too malicious to even talk about.”

The shadowy, invisible demonic hands, “Unseen Hand,” deliver fatal blows.

“Sloth” is a mental contamination that crushes the will of those without resistance and drives them insane. And even if you overcome those and take his life, “Possession” means he can’t be killed in one go.

If life were a one-shot game, this lineup would make anyone throw in the towel.

If Subaru were to challenge him without any prior knowledge, he’s confident he’d be killed a hundred out of a hundred times. It’s only by repeatedly enduring and maintaining his memories, continuously strategizing, that he’s finally seeing a glimmer of hope. This explains why the Witch Cult has been so dominant for 400 years.

Petelgeuse possesses powers specifically tailored to kill on first encounter.

If you think of it as a surefire pattern that works on anyone, it makes sense why he’s so highly valued within the Witch Cult, so much so that his name is exceptionally well-known.

That’s precisely why Subaru is indispensable in confronting Petelgeuse.

He’s the only one who can face someone who easily pulls off first-encounter kills with the experience of not being a “first-timer.”

It’s no exaggeration to say that Natsuki Subaru is Petelgeuse’s natural enemy.

Subaru exited the dense forest, heading towards a familiar cave he had visited many times before.

The world was covered in green as far as the eye could see, a place where one could easily lose their sense of direction, yet his steps showed no hesitation. He had trodden this path countless times for the same purpose. His senses, his feet, guided him there as if tracing experiences etched into his memory.

Not once had Subaru approached that place with a fighting spirit.

Both last time and the time before, Subaru had resigned himself to his role as a mere pawn for buying time, or rather, for diversion, and he focused solely on completing that task.

Before that, he had been consumed by murderous intent, a sense of desperate finality, and those negative emotions alone.

This time, it was different. This time, it wasn't like that.

Subaru had come here with his resolve to fight firmly set.

To personally bring an end to a long, enduring feud and the battles he had repeatedly fought.

"—Welcome, most beloved faithful."

The forest opened up, revealing a wider view. Subaru felt the sunlight on his eyelids and the hard rock beneath his feet. Squinting, he looked ahead to see a towering cliff blocking his view, and a gaunt figure standing in front of it, arms wide open, welcoming him.

This must be their fifth encounter.

One would think that repeatedly facing someone would eventually lead to a somewhat favorable impression—but with this man, it seemed that would never be the case.

"I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing 'Sloth.' Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti…!"

Petelgeuse extended his fingers towards Subaru, introducing himself with his now-customary line. The madman, his black priest's robes fluttering and yellowed teeth bared, looked at Subaru with an excited tone.

"It is a good day, a wonderful day. To think that on this fated day, when I had just decided to undertake the ordeal, I would be able to welcome a new child of love…! My heart feels like it will burst with tears of joy, emotion, and admiration!"

He placed a hand on his chest, contorting his slender body as if embracing himself. Struggling to keep revulsion from showing on his face at the madman's bizarre antics, Subaru took a small, deep breath and said,

"It is an honor to meet you, Archbishop. It is truly embarrassing to have joined you right before the ordeal is to commence. However, if you would allow this body and soul of mine to join the ranks of the faithful undertaking this trial, there would be no greater honor."

Subaru bowed, knelt, and showed Petelgeuse the utmost respect. Witnessing this, Petelgeuse's eyes welled up with tears again in what seemed like overwhelming emotion, and he soaked his cheeks with a torrent of them.

"Oh, oh, what a magnificent spirit! What a clear display of love! So much! I cannot recall a time when I cursed my own slothfulness more! To think that I, that the Witch Cult, has not welcomed a devout faithful like you as a comrade until now is nothing less than a failure born of my sloth! Oh, please forgive me! Please forgive my sloth for overlooking even a single drop of the guidance of love that you pour into the world—!"

Perhaps to counter Subaru's kneeling, or rather, to express the depth of his own emotion, Petelgeuse threw his limbs to the ground and began to punish himself by striking his forehead against the rock face. This self-mutilation, carried out with merciless force, tore open his forehead and caused blood to flow, yet he didn't seem to mind.

Considering his habit of biting his fingers and his penchant for self-harm, Subaru had assumed he simply enjoyed it. However, now that there was a possibility that this body wasn't Petelgeuse's own, it became harder to simply dismiss it as mere self-mutilation.

In any case, it wouldn't do for him to self-harm to the point of dying right now.

Their covert plans hadn't fully progressed yet. They still needed to buy time and lead the situation exactly where they intended.

"Archbishop, please stop. The Witch would not be pleased by such actions."

"Ah, but, but, but, but, but, but, but, but, but, but, but, but, but! To be forgiven for the slothfulness of my actions! My foolishness! My faithlessness in not repaying love! There is no other way than to punish and discipline myself!"

"That's not true. If it were the Witch, she would surely be pleased to see you carry out the ordeal and repay her favor, rather than see her beloved faithful harm themselves."

Subaru approached and stopped Petelgeuse from continuing his self-harm, telling him this. Petelgeuse abruptly ceased his erratic movements, his eyes wide as he looked up at Subaru. Subaru silently nodded, feeling a shiver of dread creep into his heart from Petelgeuse's fervent gaze.

Suddenly, a skeletal hand forcefully grabbed Subaru's arm.

"—Everything, just as you say."

"—!"

"Oh, I was wrong, I was mistaken, I was not righteous! Yes! The ordeal! What I must do now is not self-punishment, self-harm, or suicide, but the ordeal! To respond to the beloved Witch's favor, carrying out the ordeal is the mission to which I must stake my very life! To forget that and revel in self-pity, how foolish! Oh, your words have opened my eyes! Wonderful, wonderful, wonderfullllllll—!"

Petelgeuse violently shook Subaru's gripped arm, expressing one-sided gratitude before standing up. He roughly wiped the blood dripping from his forehead with his robe's sleeve, then bit and crushed a finger in the same mouth that had just declared self-pity foolish.

"My slothful self has no value. Diligence is the most noble thing in this world, and sloth is the most despicable vice. Therefore, I will forever distance myself from my inherent sloth through diligence. Oh! You are truly diligent, aren't you! To be able to welcome you as a new faithful is truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, truly, a joyous thing!"

His words had no consistency, and his logic was completely disjointed.

He spoke of regretting self-harm, then bit his finger. One moment he was shedding tears of shame over his rash actions, and the next he was laughing joyfully as if he'd forgotten everything.

Subaru thought he understood that Petelgeuse's words and actions were erratic, but even with that understanding, he still couldn't keep pace.

He caught a glimpse of such a deranged personality that Subaru, who was trying to continue the conversation to buy time, inadvertently fell silent.

"—Let's talk about the ordeal."

Holding his breath and closing his eyes, Subaru suppressed those incomprehensible emotions and spoke.

He brought up the "ordeal," the main objective of this attack that the madman had mentioned repeatedly. As far as Subaru knew, Petelgeuse had never delved into the contents of the ordeal.

Petelgeuse called this attack an "ordeal" and consistently spoke of testing Emilia. So what exactly was his true intention?

What would it take to overcome the "ordeal" that Petelgeuse posed? Subaru had no desire to understand the madman at all, but he couldn’t face him unless he believed there was some basis for his actions.

At the very least, if he couldn’t believe he could understand what they sought at the end of this ridiculous endeavor…

“Upon our meeting, I would very much like to hear about the purpose of this activity—the ordeal, Archbishop.”

“—The ordeal.”

Petelgeuse muttered, as if suddenly erasing all prior emotion.

A shiver ran down Subaru’s spine at his quiet demeanor, but he managed to keep it from showing on his face and waited for him to continue.

Previously, when he had tried to delve into the topic of the ordeal like this, he had been asked to present the Gospel, and the conversation had broken down. What would happen this time?

Swallowing a strangely bitter mouthful of saliva, he felt his stomach burn in the silence.

Just before he could no longer stop the cold sweat from beading on his forehead and running down his face,

“The ordeal! Yes, the ordeal! It is a trial! We must carry out the ordeal! If we do not test, if we are not tested, I came for that very reason!”

Petelgeuse’s face lit up, and he began to bounce around on the spot.

Subaru, stiff with tension, was momentarily stunned by the sudden, loud shout. Before him, Petelgeuse continued in his high-pitched falsetto,

“We must test! We must test if this newly discovered half-elf is worthy of bringing down the Witch! If the body is worthy as a vessel, we secure it; if not, we make them pay the price for their disrespectful birth!”

“Bring down the Witch? A vessel? …The price?”

“Loneliness! Negative emotions! The very gloom is what elevates the nature of the vessel to be worthy of the Witch! Therefore, my slothful self, my will, my fingertips must perfectly prepare it! Oh! For love! For love! We must repay it!”

As the madman reached his fingertips skyward, as if to grasp the heavens, and with the content of his words, Subaru felt a chill run down his spine as he saw a kind of answer.

If “vessel” and “bring down” were to be interpreted as he understood them, then…

“If, as a result of the ordeal, that half-elf is found worthy as a vessel… then you will bring down the Witch into that vessel…”

“The Witch of Envy, Satella, will manifest in the world —again! How long, how much, how much I have waited for that day, that moment, that instant! If I can be of help, a small aid, a foundation for that… there is no greater joy!!”

Petelgeuse’s voice was filled with joy as he shed tears of emotion.

Listening to it, Subaru felt a nauseating discomfort at the fact that the Witch Cult’s objective was far more malicious than he had imagined. In other words, they acted so cruelly, committed such massacres, pushed Subaru so far—

“You don’t see any value in Emilia, do you?”

To them, Emilia’s existence was merely a vessel to contain the Witch’s soul.

Before the Witch’s soul entered, no matter how noble the body’s owner’s will, how earnest, how loved—none of that meant a thing.

This was an endless insult to Emilia’s very existence, and for Natsuki Subaru, whose heart was stirred by her, it was an unbearable humiliation.

In the process, turning a village into a scorched wasteland likely caused them no remorse, no concern whatsoever. They could unconsciously disregard that each life they took had a story, dreams, and a tomorrow.

If not, how else could they so calmly, without even laughing, perform such horrific acts?

"—Monster."

For a moment, in the single word of enmity that escaped Subaru, Petelgeuse didn't notice.

A monster with incomprehensible thoughts, with ideals that could never be shared, a monster with whom he would never understand —that was Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.

"Archbishop, I have listened to your profound discourse. I am truly impressed by the Witch Cult's philosophy; it exceeds what I had heard. I will most certainly accomplish the ordeal."

"Oh! As expected, you are wonderful! Yes, that is it, that is it, that is how it must be! If we do not unite, single-mindedly, and throw ourselves into our true purpose, we will lose our meaning as ourselves! My fingers, my feet, my eyes, my nose, my mouth, my tongue, my blood, my bones, my flesh, my soul—all of them are for dedicating to the Witch! From the moment I received her favor, from the moment I knew I was loved, my existence is but dust and ashes meant only to repay that love with my whole being… Oh! How slothful!!"

Subaru's flattery, which tasted rotten even to him, seemed to be taken at face value by Petelgeuse, who showed no suspicion.

Proudly, he spoke of his overflowing, self-serving faith. He then reached into his robe and pulled out a black-bound book —the Gospel— and began to turn its pages.

"The words etched in the Gospel, that speak of love! They make me resolve to act! To uphold love, to carry through with my actions, obstacles are indispensable! Obstacles must exist! Obstacles are a matter of course…! Therefore, my daily diligence, my faith that resists sloth, is tested, tested, the time of ordeal given to me—!”

Petelgeuse followed the words on the page with his finger, foam forming at the corners of his mouth, his bloodshot eyes darting across the text.

To Subaru, who had once succeeded in snatching the Gospel from his hands, the book in Petelgeuse’s grasp was nothing more than a foreign book filled with incomprehensible characters.

However, Petelgeuse must have understood what was written.

With each word he traced, his cheeks flushed with excitement, and his eyes filled with joy and delusion.

Then,

“—Present your Gospel.”

Tilting his head ninety degrees, bending at the waist, and spinning around, Petelgeuse looked at Subaru.

Subaru froze at those words, then closed his eyes, realizing the inevitable question had come. In his experience, even if the conversation had barely been coherent, this question from Petelgeuse would always cut it short.

Every single Witch Cultist was said to receive a Gospel, which served as their scripture.

The background of how they were chosen or who sent them was a shadowy part of the Witch Cult that even Wilhelm and others didn’t know.

Even setting aside those unknown aspects, possession of the Gospel itself was a required proof of being a Witch Cultist.

“Please present your Gospel. I desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, desperately, want you to tell me what the Witch has bestowed upon you.”

With each “desperately,” he tilted his head left and right, gazing at Subaru with movements so dizzying they could make a viewer sick.

Judging from his posture and demeanor, Subaru concluded that the signal he was waiting for hadn’t come yet. The task of buying time was still ongoing—to keep the conversation going, he first took a breath.

“About the Gospel…”

“Yes, the Gospel. If you have been recognized as a faithful, it should be in your hands…”

“Actually, it might be some kind of mistake, but the Gospel has not been delivered to me.”

Interrupting Petelgeuse’s agreement, Subaru revealed he didn’t possess a Gospel. Petelgeuse’s eyes widened at his words, but before he could say anything, Subaru thrust out his palm, saying, “Hold on a minute!” and interjected. Then,

“It’s true I don’t have a Gospel! But… my love for the Witch truly overflows within my heart! Even if I don’t have a physical Gospel, what else could this intangible emotion be but the lament of my soul to repay the love I’ve been given?!”

“—You are…”

“Even if the form is different! I, too, am merely a leaf, just like you, Archbishop, completely devoted to the Witch. I will assist with the ordeal with all my being. I will dedicate everything, thinking of the Witch. No, my very existence, down to the last fragment of my soul, has already been entirely yielded to the Witch!”

Subaru continued, throwing out words in rapid succession, not allowing Petelgeuse to retort. He raised his fist, stomped his foot, and contorted his face as if squeezing out his innermost thoughts.

“Or, Archbishop! Sir Petelgeuse, will you deny this lament of my soul?! Will you laugh at my miserable and foolish appearance, clinging to an intangible love?! That’s fine too, I can accept that. But! Even so! This faith of mine cannot be shattered by anyone.

Love, love alone, is everything!”

Subaru punched his fist towards the sky, having said everything he wanted to with complete abandon.

As for Petelgeuse, he quietly listened to Subaru’s ragged breathing, and at the end of his shouting, he let out a “Hmph,” and said,

“What a fresh whisper of love…”

As if struck by lightning, the sternness in Petelgeuse’s expression vanished.

The madman was deeply moved by Subaru’s words, tears flowing down his face as if his heart had been cleansed.

“Please forgive my sloth for doubting you. You are wonderful, truly wonderful without exaggeration. Unlike me, who lacks the confidence to loudly declare my love without a physical Gospel, without the Gospel. A rich favor that speaks for itself—you are truly worthy of it.”

Kneeling in utter admiration, Petelgeuse placed a hand on his chest, showing respect for Subaru’s faith. If one were to isolate that moment, Petelgeuse’s demeanor indeed looked like that of a devout religious figure.

Observing his attitude, Subaru couldn’t help but feel a certain sentiment. It was—

“This guy’s a pushover.”

“Did you say something?”

“Please raise your head, Archbishop. I am not so grand a being as to be treated that way. More importantly, aren’t we—equally devoted to the Witch and meant to cooperate to repay her love?”

Subaru put on a perfectly sincere smile, as if to deceive him, and extended his hand to Petelgeuse. Petelgeuse blinked, then took Subaru’s hand, saying “That is right,” and stood up, closing the Gospel in his hand with a snap.

"Calling myself a Sin Archbishop, I seem to have been too narrow-minded. I am ashamed of myself. For your consideration, I thank you. I swear to respond to the Witch's love, which brought about this encounter, with the utmost diligence!"

"Yes! Exactly right! Let's continue to strive together!"

"Oh, joyous words. Even without the Gospel, your resolve is truly magnificent—such strong favor, are you not perhaps 'Pride'? If so, even without the Gospel, you should be aware of having absorbed the Witch Factor, I think."

"Witch Factor—?"

Subaru tilted his head again at a word he had heard before but whose meaning eluded him.

Petelgeuse nodded at his questioning voice.

"The faithful receive the Gospel, and those in my position as a Sin Archbishop receive the Gospel along with a Witch Factor. Without the Witch Factor, to speak of the ordeal is…"

He stopped speaking abruptly. As Subaru frowned at his demeanor, Petelgeuse tucked the Gospel into his robes and pulled something else out instead.

In his outstretched palm, he held a faintly glowing hand mirror—

"—!"

"My apologies. A contact from my fingertip… It seems there's been a change in the situation. Our meeting must have something to do with it. I hope it's good news."

Petelgeuse, looking down at the communication mirror, didn't notice the slight change in Subaru's expression. Without noticing, he opened the hand mirror and saw himself reflected in its surface.

"It is I. Is there some anomaly—"

"Uh, what was it again? Oh, right. Tra-tra-tra!"

"Huh?"

His expression froze before the image and words of the person reflected in the mirror.

Watching Petelgeuse's stunned reaction, Subaru vaguely understood what was reflected in the communication mirror he couldn't see.

Even the sight of the person with cat ears shaking, waving, sticking out their tongue, and speaking the prearranged password.

"Who are you…? Why is my fingertip…?"

"Tra-tra-tra."

"Huh?"

In front of the questioning Petelgeuse, Subaru quietly repeated it.

Petelgeuse tilted his head, hearing Subaru's murmur. Subaru gave a wide grin to Petelgeuse, who clearly indicated his incomprehension.

It was a completely different smile from the forced one he'd worn earlier—his true smile, like a mischievous brat with a twisted mouth and bared teeth.

"It means, 'We succeeded in the surprise attack.'"

"What…? I don't understand what you mean…"

"You don't understand, huh? Ah, don't worry."

Subaru kindly explained the meaning of the password, then nodded to Petelgeuse, who still showed no understanding. And then,

"—Because I understood what you were saying just as little!!"

A full-force right straight landed squarely on the madman's face the —pent up- frustration he had endured finally exploded, sending the slender body flying.

Petelgeuse groaned as he tumbled, his eyes rolling back as he couldn't hide his surprise at the sudden violence that had assailed

him.

Looking down at the pathetic man, Subaru unclenched his fist and pointed a finger.

Then, he declared,

“I endured a lot, but I’ve reached my limit. Now, let’s end this, Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti!!”

Chapter 79:
The Self-Proclaimed Knight and the Finest Knight

Subaru thrust out his right hand, middle finger extended, and declared war with his fist. Petelgeuse, knocked down by the blow, wore a dazed expression, unable to wipe away the blood trickling from the corner of his split lip. His lips trembled, quivering,

“What in the world… do you understand what you’re doing?! I am a Sin Archbishop, a Sin Archbishop blessed with the Witch’s favor! For you, who also receives her love, to strike me…!”

“Outrageous, you say? Sorry, but I’m sick of hearing that kind of talk. I’m not going to discuss you or what you believe anymore. The Witch, she can go to hell, Petelgeuse.”

Subaru scoffed at the madman, whose face was frozen in a grimace, and then lightly beckoned him, a clear provocation. As if that gesture reminded him of his fury, Petelgeuse slammed his hand on the ground as he rose, his bloodshot eyes widening as if they might pop out.

“Fine! I understand! If you, if you have forgotten the Witch’s favor, her grace, if you claim ignorance, then I will use the love bestowed upon me to make you atone for that disrespect! I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand, I don’t understand! Why! Why do you reject love! I don’t understand your true intentions!”

“Is the world insane, or am I? When you’re cornered by irrational circumstances, and nothing goes your way, you tend to fall into a dead end of thought and wonder that…”

Subaru listened to Petelgeuse’s spittle-laced ravings, recalling the calamities that had befallen him and the turmoil in his heart during those times.

He remembered those moments when he insisted he was right, loudly proclaimed that everyone else was wrong, and then threw childish tantrums, screaming and yelling.

How was that any different from the madman's behavior before him now?

"Well, I always think it's a difficult question to answer, but I can say this much."

"…"

"You're the crazy one. I'm right. —Let's end this here, Petelgeuse!"

Petelgeuse's eyes trembled with a dark delight at Subaru's words.

It was a murky joy, born of his intoxication with his own diligence, as he prepared to punish the fool who dared disrespect his faith. At the same time, Petelgeuse's shadow exploded, and countless demonic hands stretched out from beneath him toward Subaru, aiming to tear off his limbs, twist his neck, and bathe in his blood.

However,

"Why—?!"

"Come here, bogeyman, to the sound of my hands clapping—! Though I'm not that relaxed!"

Twisting his body and leaping widely from side to side, he narrowly dodged the approaching palms. The number of approaching arms stopped at seven, likely not because Petelgeuse was underestimating Subaru, but because he still didn't grasp how many 'arms' had returned to him.

In any case, the number was manageable, the speed was slow, and since it wasn't even a surprise attack, avoiding the initial blow wasn't all that difficult.

Of course, if they were to follow the usual script, there would have been no need to risk such close proximity. It would have been enough to incite Petelgeuse's frenzy from a distance and leisurely evade his indiscriminate ‘Unseen Hands’.

However this time, Subaru didn’t choose that option. Even knowing the danger, he chose to confront the ‘Unseen Hand’ in close proximity to Petelgeuse. He was doing it to snatch victory, even while brushing past the ‘Unseen Hand’ that could turn his bones to dust with a mere touch.

“Impossible, it shouldn’t be… Why?! Can you see my! My bestowed favor! The authority of Sloth, the ‘Unseen Hand’?!”

“Ask the Witch who supposedly covered my body with her stench. Oh, wait, unlike me, you don’t have permission to meet her freely, do you?”

“What do you mean by that…?! You, it’s as if you’ve spoken with the Witch! With Satella…!”

“We’re so close, she has touched my heart. Literally.”

Petelgeuse’s face turned beet red with indignation, and he bit down on his fingertips to suppress an unbearable surge of emotion. There was the sound of nails, bone, and flesh being crushed, and a dull thud as if his teeth might break from their roots.

At the same time, the amount of shadow gushing forth increased in response to his emotions, and sweat beaded on Subaru’s forehead as the difficulty of evasion skyrocketed. However, this also revealed a certain truth to Petelgeuse,

“‘Unseen Hands’ are returning?! Why is this?! My fingertips… what happened to my fingertips!!”

Even though his own number of ‘hands’ had increased, Petelgeuse was agitated, as if confronted with an unacceptable truth. And so he should be. The increase in the number of Petelgeuse’s ‘Unseen Hands’ meant that—

“As expected, the ‘Unseen Hands’ he used to control his subordinates—his ‘fingertips’—are returning to his main body because they’ve lost their targets.”

Subaru had confirmed that when Petelgeuse was defeated and possessed another body, the number of ‘Unseen Hands’ he could use tended to increase.

He also knew that the number tended to increase after a surprise attack that wiped out the ‘fingertips’—the hiding places of his subordinates.

From this, Subaru had previously inferred that if the host body wasn’t destroyed, he would revive by possessing another. And if the host body was destroyed, the ‘Unseen Hands’ would increase, strengthening his combat power. Subaru was utterly fed up with Petelgeuse’s troublesome nature.

It seemed that his inference was correct, as the madman was agitated by the increased number of usable arms following the disappearance of his ‘fingertips’. Subaru clenched his fist, confident in the accuracy of his deduction, but

“The survival of the main target is going to be much tougher!”

Petelgeuse, still in a state of confusion, didn’t extend the maximum number of ‘Unseen Hands’ Subaru had ever seen, which was over a hundred. However, the number of encroaching black palms still exceeded twenty, already far beyond Subaru’s capacity.

He ducked, slid in, performed a rondat, twisted, and leaped high. His footing was bad, causing him to fall on his backside, a fine play that helped him make a miraculous dodge just above his head.

Feeling a searing pain in his tailbone, Subaru, half-sobbing, got to his feet and put some distance between himself and Petelgeuse.

Currently, he had no injuries from the ‘Unseen Hand’. His scraped knees from the fall and the tailbone pain were excruciating. He might even have a crack.

“Hey, hey, how pathetic, you can’t reach me! Aren’t you ashamed to expose your incompetence and try to gain sympathy, especially when you’re supposedly blessed with favor and all that? Aren’t you, the fool, Slothful?!”

“—There are a few points of concern.”

Subaru tapped his foot on the rocky surface, interjecting his taunts. However, in response to Subaru’s provocative remarks, Petelgeuse dispelled his previous rage and calmly murmured.

He held up a finger, covered in blood, and waved it as if to show it off,

“Losing my fingertips is unavoidable. My diligence was insufficient, my thoughts did not reach far enough, I was slothful! I admit it, I have no choice but to admit it. But, but, but, but there are too many things I don’t understand even after thinking about them! How you can see the ‘Unseen Hand’, your skill in pinpointing the fingertips’ locations, and why you, who possess no direct combat ability, would offer yourself before me!”

“…”

“Therefore, I think this. There’s no point in thinking about things that can’t be understood. Therefore, I, who am not slothful, shall consider and agonize over matters that can yield results. —Why did you appear before me? Why do you draw my attention with provocative actions and words? It is because—”

—This is bad, Subaru instinctively thought, reading Petelgeuse’s intentions, and bit his lip.

He had thought that by endlessly provoking and taunting Petelgeuse, he could keep him focused only on immediate matters and prevent him from discerning Subaru’s true intentions. But he was naive.

Too many convenient situations had unfolded for Subaru, and conversely, too many hardships had piled up for Petelgeuse. As a result, it had given him an opportunity to calmly re-evaluate the situation.

If Petelgeuse correctly perceived the current situation and deduced a perfectly reasonable solution, Subaru would be finished. And, contrary to Subaru’s hopes, Petelgeuse realized it.

“If the ‘Unseen Hand’ can be seen, and it takes time to deal with it—then I shall mobilize all my fingertips and resolve this with a numerical advantage!”

“He figured it out normally—!”

Simply put, the force Subaru could draw out on his own was limited to Petelgeuse himself. Even then, it was an imperfect form that would fall short if the ‘Unseen Hands’ grew to an enormous number.

Currently, thanks to Subaru’s desperate acting to buy time, the ‘fingertips’ of Petelgeuse had been annihilated by the separate contingent of the subjugation team. Including the merchant and the hidden ‘fingertips’, nine locations have been confirmed.

However, the last location has not yet been touched, and where that last location is—it’s right there.

Directly below the cliff face at Subaru’s back, there’s a rock larger than Subaru’s height. Behind it is an entrance leading to a cave, and the last ‘fingertip’ remains beyond that.

If Witch Cultists were to swarm out from there, Subaru’s forces would be completely overwhelmed. Therefore, Petelgeuse’s sudden realization now was tantamount to a death sentence for Subaru.

“Wah—!”

“Ha—!”

However that was only if it had happened a few minutes earlier.

“What?!”

A resonant wave churned the forest air mightily, becoming a raging torrent of destruction that peeled back the rocky ground and tore through the center of the cliff face as its final stage.

The entire cliff section directly above the large rock crumbled, the collapse expanding to engulf the cave, the large hole, and partially, Subaru, who was dangerously close.

“Dangerdangerdangerdangerdangerdangerdanger—!!”

His skull barely grazed by a rock mass that would have crushed it, Subaru crawled out of the dust storm, looking as if he had barely escaped with his life.

Pointing at Subaru’s undignified state and holding her stomach, laughing in a high-pitched voice, was:

“Ahahahaha~! Big bro is running away like a bug~! Look, Tivey, look, look~!”

“I am looking, and I think the timing was bad. If it had been any other timing, I think bro would have been beaten to a pulp.”

The younger brother admonished his elder sister, who was innocently laughing after causing destruction that nearly engulfed Subaru. With a mix of relief that they “made it in time” and resentment that he “nearly died, seriously,” Subaru rushed towards the beast-human siblings.

“You two, I’m glad you came, you damn rascals.”

“Oh my, big bro, you’re saying it wrong? It’s ‘Thank you!’ ‘You’re welcome!’ Yay!”

“I think it was the correct statement, expressing a feeling of both wanting to thank and not wanting to. But still,”

Tivey narrowed his eyes, his cat-like pupils sharpening as he glared at Petelgeuse. In his line of sight, Petelgeuse stared blankly at the collapsed cliff face with a Noh mask-like expression.

His stance, demeanor, and appearance showed almost no combat threat.

If it came to a test of strength, a sprint, or a fistfight, Subaru could win in any of those areas. It would be even more so for Tivey and Mimi, siblings who made a living from fighting.

However, Petelgeuse’s terror lay in a different dimension than such obvious threats. Subaru didn’t miss the slight flicker of fear that crossed Tivey's face, perhaps sensing this.

"Is that a Sin Archbishop? …Just looking at him gives me a bad feeling, like my mind will become unstable."

"When you gaze into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you—that's what the ancients said. You shouldn't look too directly. I recommend looking out of the corner of your eye, or indirectly through a mirror. It's best not to get too close."

"Why~?"

"His breath smells incredibly fishy and it's physiologically impossible. It kind of stings my eyes."

Calming Tivey, who seemed about to be swallowed by the atmosphere, with a lighthearted remark, Subaru looked at Mimi, who was laughing cheerfully. However, she only tilted her head cutely, looking puzzled, and apparently felt no threat whatsoever. Amazing.

"Anyway, it's great that you two joined up. We wiped out the reinforcements, and honestly, I was about to be game over."

Considering that Subaru's hopes would have been crushed if the two had arrived even a little later, or if the current wave of attacks had been delayed, it was truly a last-minute intervention.

Thanking them for saving his life, Subaru glanced at the forest out of the corner of his eye,

"So, how's the main guy? Still can't link up?"

"Juli should be here soon. Me and Sis just got here first by a small margin."

"Who's Juli? Not Julius? If it's Julius, he'll probably be here soon~. I can smell him."

Lightly dismissing her brother's concern for Julius, the sister pointed at the forest and snorted her nose.

It was unclear how much to trust her completely cat-like sense of smell, but if a rendezvous was near, then nothing could be better.

Though extremely regrettable, the capture of Petelgeuse could absolutely not be achieved without Julius's cooperation.

"—Still, it's strange."

Petelgeuse, who had been silently lost in thought until now, slowly turned his head. His rolling eyes widened as they settled on Subaru, and he extended his tongue, dripping saliva,

"That attack just now must mean you have known the location of the cave, which I had concealed with a visual discrepancy spell. You also somehow saw through the presence of the fingertips I had hidden in the forest. You possess eyes that can see my 'Unseen Hand' as well as its existence. Considering you destroyed the fingertips beforehand, it seems you know even more than that."

Petelgeuse pulled out the Gospel from his robe again and ran his eyes over the pages. He repeatedly reached the last page and then returned to the beginning, repeating this cycle, yet his mouth began to twist as if the answers he sought remained elusive,

"The Gospel! My guide to destiny, has nothing written in it! Then what is your existence?! You receive favor, yet despite that, you scorn the Witch! You stand in my way as I conduct the ordeal, thwarting all my plans…!"

Petelgeuse stomped his feet, showing his unbearable irritation through his actions.

To Petelgeuse, Subaru's actions must have been utterly incomprehensible. His pre-emptive strike on the trial, allowing the villagers and Emilia to escape, the decimation of his subordinates by surprise attack, and the exposure of his own authority and secret techniques—all at the hands of someone who also shared the Witch's favor, his very anchor.

What else could this be but a nightmare for Petelgeuse?

Reflecting on his own actions, Subaru almost laughed at how perfectly his obsessively thorough plan to crush Petelgeuse had fallen into place.

Even after doing all this, Petelgeuse was still a man whose depths were unknown. Subaru had already faced death five times in the loops originating from the Royal Capital.

Five times, Subaru had ended the world without saving anyone.

It was only by accumulating such despair and experience that he could finally reach this level. He didn’t care about nightmares for a madman. Subaru had seen nightmares, literally to the point of death.

So now, what lay before him was the reality Subaru had finally wished for.

“Indeed, indeed, indeed, indeed, you are ‘Pride’—!”

“My name is Natsuki Subaru.”

Interrupting the voice that gnashed its teeth and tried to call him ‘Pride’, Subaru pointed a finger.

Then, he declared to the stammering madman,

“I am the knight of Emilia, the silver-haired half-elf. I don’t know about ‘Pride’ or whatever, but that’s the only title I want, I don’t need anything else.”

He had kept running to make those words a reality.

Mimi gasped “Hoo-eeh!” in admiration at Subaru’s words, and Tivey closed his eyes, subtly lowering his chin. And Petelgeuse, who had received the words head-on,

“That’s enough.”

He let out a somewhat exasperated sigh and shook his head. He shook it. He shook it. He shook it, violently, wildly,

“You dare not repay love! You’ll regret this sloth that fears not even witches! What sloth! What sloth! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha… sloth!”

Petelgeuse yelled, spreading his arms and opening his mouth wide, his shadow swelling monstrously.

The number of rising black witch hands reached the maximum Subaru had ever experienced—easily exceeding a hundred, they stretched into the sky, and then the shadows scattered in all directions.

“Are you serious…?”

The sheer power of the black palms easily snapped trees and effortlessly lifted fallen logs that had been broken in half. From the collapsed cliff face, several rock fragments the size of Subaru’s head were picked up. Still, the empty hands roamed the forest, seeking prey, returning with menacing objects in their grip and rising into the air. The sheer number, weight, and lethality—just seeing it made him feel like he could die a hundred times over.

“If you can see the Unseen Hand, then how about pure violence?! Can you avoid all the nearly one hundred acts of violence, the diligent destruction my authority demonstrates?! Come now, come now, come now now now now now now now now now now now! Are you ‘Sloth’?!”

Without time to utter a word of warning, those acts of violence were hurled at the three figures standing frozen. Rocks and fallen trees rained down simultaneously—faced with a bombardment that filled their vision, everyone cowered as if transfixed.

“Wha—!”

“Ha—!”

The moment their targets were in sight, the siblings’ shouts met the incoming destruction.

Resonance waves shook the air, and numerous hurled obstacles shattered, scattered, and burst into tiny fragments. Still, not everything was broken through.

"Ooh?!"

"Don't space out!"

"You'll die!"

Pulled backward simultaneously from both sides, Subaru was lifted and moved back. Just a few moments later, the unresisted rock fragments crashed one after another onto the spot where Subaru had been, sending tremors through the ground.

Beyond the rising smoke, Petelgeuse's cackling laughter echoed. And as if to amplify that laughter, more arms appeared above the smoke, already preparing to hurl another mass projectile.

"The strategic objective here has already been achieved! The Fingers are wiped out, and the last remaining one has been successfully buried alive…! Which means…"

"Which means what?"

"What're we gonna do?"

"—Retreat! Retreat!"

At the same time as Subaru's pathetic cry, the projectiles were launched again. Feeling the presence of death behind them, Subaru and the siblings leapt back, evacuating the area.

They kicked off the uneven ground and plunged into the forest for cover. Enduring a storm-like wind pressure, they sprinted through the forest, knowing the situation was dire.

"This is bad, bad, really bad! Damn it, unexpected! Those arms can do more than just tear people apart?! Where's Julius?! Patrasche—!!"

Subaru's words tumbled out in extreme confusion as he ran across the grassy ground. Mimi and Tivey ran alongside him, keeping an alert eye behind them.

Unlike the two of them, who were used to running, Subaru's steps were shaky, and he had to watch his footing lest he trip. Why could he never just calmly stroll through the forest? It always felt like he was running for his life.

“Whoa—?! What’s that—?!”

Next to Subaru, who was muttering his grievances at full throttle, Mimi let out a disgusted cry. Drawn by her voice, Subaru glanced back and genuinely regretted what he saw.

Of course, Petelgeuse wasn’t going to let Subaru and the others escape. He was pursuing the three who had gone into full-speed flight—but his method of movement was impossible.

Petelgeuse was curled up, holding his knees in a seiza-like position. He was gripping his own curled body with “Unseen Hands,” moving by extending countless witch hands like spider legs. The power of the black palms was still intact, and any obstacles in his path were uprooted and scattered. Just straight ahead, a malevolent “Sloth” tore through the forest in pursuit.

“He’s floating, but I’ve never seen such a creepy way to float!”

“Ah, that’s right! Is that how it looks to you guys?!”

The scene was different for Subaru, who could see the “Unseen Hands,” and for them, who couldn’t. For Mimi and the others, it must have been a nightmarish sight of Petelgeuse flying in a seiza position, but for Subaru, it was a nightmare beyond nightmares—being carried by countless arms. It was merely a question of which was worse: the worst, or worse than the worst.

The situation worsened further.

“—Ah! Be ‘Sloth’!!”

“Dammit—!”

Immediately after the roar from behind, a black light instantly incinerated the world. That momentary flash that covered Subaru’s vision had no effect on him. But for the two running alongside him…

"Ow?"

"…ugh!"

Their strength drained, and the siblings were about to collapse, but luckily, outstretched arms caught them simultaneously. Subaru cradled their small bodies under both arms and ran through the forest, holding the dazed duo.

It was the manifestation of Petelgeuse's insidious secret technique, "Mental Corruption." It was one of Petelgeuse's authorities that robbed everyone of their will to fight, except for Subaru and a few other resistance-trained subjugation squad members.

He had thoroughly explained this mental corruption to Mimi and Tivey.

That they likely couldn't resist it, and that if they were corrupted, their minds would lose balance and they would suffer.

However even after hearing that information, the two had come to Subaru's aid. Even knowing their will to fight would be broken if they faced it, they had still come to help Subaru.

That's why,

"Why don't you abandon your dead weight and flee?! Those foolish idlers who succumb before the authority of 'Sloth'! Why do you desperately protect them?!"

"Shut your damn mouth, you idiot! I'm a fluffy-fanatic! If a fluffy-fanatic abandons fluffy kids, how could tomorrow's meal taste good?!"

He couldn't abandon them.

With the two in his arms, Subaru's speed continued to accelerate. Petelgeuse, closing in from behind, seemed surprised by Subaru's hidden strength, but the distance between them still continued to shrink.

Between Subaru, who was desperately running through the forest's rough terrain with two children in his arms and unfamiliar footing, and Petelgeuse, who tore through the rough terrain and obstacles without hindrance, the initial conditions for their chase were already different. He wouldn't be able to escape for another few dozen seconds.

That desperate situation—

"I love you, Patrasche—!!"

Subaru leapt over a natural depression and, bursting through the trees, saw black scales ahead. His partner, who had been waiting, crouching with a sleek, velvety back, responded to Subaru's call and had run all the way here. Subaru literally threw himself onto her back, wrapping his arms around Patrasche's body to keep the siblings in place, then shouted,

"GO!!"

"—!!"

Whinnying, Patrasche lowered her posture and took a sharp first stride—instantly catching the wind.

The rough forest path and the various obstacles strewn about, Patrasche powerfully trampled and surmounted them all with strong strides. The ground wasn't even a beast path, just a pure green expanse.

If ground dragons were similar to horses in his original world, then for Patrasche, trained to run on flat land, running on the rough forest path was an unthinkable outrage. And there was no time to walk slowly; it was a full-speed sprint.

"You're the best—!"

Even his earlier cry hadn't been an earnest belief that Patrasche would come to his rescue. It was just a desperate, exasperated nonsense that tumbled out of his mouth in a pinch.

Patrasche responded to it, entering the forest of her own accord to help Subaru. How many times had this ground dragon saved Subaru since the battle with the White Whale?

“Everyone, everyone… I absolutely, definitely won’t…!”

Mimi, Tivey, even Patrasche, had continued to lend a hand to his pathetic self.

Therefore, Subaru had to respond. He had to respond to what was given with something even greater than what was given. For that was the only answer that would make the flower of trust bloom.

“However far, however far… just how many cards were you hiding?! If you knew even this, even this, then just who are you…!”

—He hadn’t read this far.

Subaru inwardly responded to Petelgeuse, then reached for the reins and gave Patrasche instructions. Patrasche sensitively picked up the clumsy commands, tilting her body slightly and turning in the direction Subaru desired. Little by little, little by little, so subtly that Petelgeuse chasing from behind wouldn’t notice, yet surely—he was turning back.

Leaping over depressions, squeezing through gaps in the trees, bursting through the forest and getting covered in mud, racing through the dim green labyrinth shielded from sunlight, they found themselves—

“We’re back!”

“This is… where we were just now?!”

Bursting out into an open area again, it was the cliff battlefield where they had confronted Petelgeuse just moments before. Returning to the scene heavily marked by destruction, Subaru scanned his surroundings. However, before he could find what he was looking for, Petelgeuse let out a strange cry,

“I don’t know what you’re plotting, planning, or aiming for! All of it, absolutely everything! It shall perish here, vanish, and be gone!!”

Other witch hands, separate from those crawling on the ground, once again lifted fallen trees and rock fragments, hurling mass projectiles at them, exposed in an area with no cover.

Patrasche, sensing the threat, tried to accelerate and shake them off, but it was impossible to dodge the relentlessly approaching onslaught—Patrasche raised her tail and tried to shield her master even a little. At that instant,

“El dona.”

A wall of earth rose from the ground, an improvised barrier directly intercepting the hurled destruction. The barrier cracked under the impact, then fulfilled its purpose and immediately returned to its original earth form.

For a moment, Subaru, still curled up on Patrasche’s back, blinked blankly, unable to comprehend what had just happened in that instantaneous offense and defense. Then,

“I came to our meeting point and couldn’t find you. I was a little worried.”

“…That’s because you’re slow. What were you dawdling over to be this late from schedule?”

“It took time to transport the injured to the village. I was aghast when I arrived, but… I’m just glad we could rendezvous.”

“It’s thanks to our goddess… Later, introduce me to your male companion.”

Subaru slumped, stroking Patrasche’s flank. In response, Patrasche shook her body as if to say, “That’s none of your business,” but in the face of his current relief, such a protest was like a gentle breeze.

At any rate,

“My apologies for the delay. It seems the situation is progressing as planned.”

Drawing his slender sword, a handsome man walked gracefully over the rocky ground and stood beside Patrasche.

Subaru couldn't recall how many times he had felt irritated by the sight of his light purple hair swaying in the wind and the hem of his Royal Guard uniform fluttering. Yet, that figure, which invoked such irritating memories, now, at this very moment, was frustratingly dependable.

"Julius Juukulius, Knight of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica."

Announcing his name, Julius held up his drawn sword vertically, pointing it at Petelgeuse.

Petelgeuse, who had stopped at the forest exit at his appearance, widened his eyes, awaiting the next words. Quiet breathing, silence, and then the six types of lesser spirits shining around Julius.

"I am the sword of the Kingdom, here to cut you down."

"A Spirit Arts user, right? …No matter how far, truly, no matter how far…"

More than the declaration, Petelgeuse was showing intense anger at the sight of the lesser spirits fluttering around Julius. This sight, this reaction, made Subaru feel that the hypothesis he had discussed with Julius was even more likely to be true.

"Julius."

"He's clearly insane at first glance. He appears to be floating, but that must be the power of your 'Unseen Hand' you spoke of?"

"Yeah, he's like a spider, floating by extending his arms."

Julius gave a small shrug in response to Subaru's answer, saying, "That's unsettling." Then he glanced at the siblings Subaru was holding.

"Are the two of them… injured? They seem off."

"I told you, it's mental corruption. If you get hit, your mind breaks… That's why I told you not to come. But I really appreciate it."

Expressing his gratitude with a snarky remark, Subaru pulled the two children closer. Then, Mimi stirred in his arms, her small mouth moving as if trying to convey something.

He gently leaned his ear close to listen, and she said,

"If you win here, you'll be super cool."

He widened his eyes and looked at her, and Mimi was smiling genuinely amidst her distressed gasps. The impact of her expression, her attitude, and her words on Subaru was immeasurable. So,

"Let's do this, Julius."

"Are you certain?"

At Subaru's call, Julius spoke, as if asking for his resolve.

Subaru pulled his chin in response to that question, his eyes burning with an unyielding determination.

"Can't pull back, can't break, can't lose. I don't want to lose anyone else."

"I am the man who thoroughly defeated you. I still believe my actions had my own reasons and significance, but to you, they were nothing more than self-righteousness."

In response to Subaru's answer, Julius recounted the unforgettable events that had occurred between them. The humiliation and pain from that time vividly resurfaced, piercing his chest.

"I am not asking you to dig up the past or atone for sins. Your resolve is heavy, and your decisions and actions have shaped the path to this point. Therefore, I must ask. In this situation, with my presence beside you, can you truly achieve your goal without reservation?"

"…"

"Can you trust me?"

Julius's question was terribly vague, out of place, and immature.

However it was necessary to make Subaru confront the sharp thorn that had been continuously asserting its presence in the deepest part of his heart.

At the Royal Selection, Subaru had made an utterly disgraceful display, and instead of redeeming himself, he had gone to the training grounds, further staining his reputation, and had everything crushed by Julius.

He had been able to stand up again only thanks to the devotion of a single girl who had supported him by his side.

Now that he had stood up, if he were to recall his past feelings, what would they be like?

What color of light did that burning passion from that moment, that instant, now ignite within Subaru?

"—I hate you."

"Yes, I know."

"Your elegant-looking hairstyle annoys me, and your overly polite way of speaking feels suspicious. Yet, you clearly look down on me. Oh, and when I first saw you, you kissed Emilia-tan's hand, didn't you? If I were to kiss every last bit of Emilia-tan's body from now on, that would be an indirect kiss with you, wouldn't it? Don't mess with me!"

Thinking back, Subaru had disliked Julius even before they exchanged their first words.

Given how Emilia had been treated dismissively, Subaru had harbored ill feelings towards Julius from the start. It had escalated in the Royal Selection hall, exploded at the training grounds, and the embers had continued to smolder.

Even at this very moment, it was fiercely hot, burning relentlessly in Subaru's chest.

"My limbs were broken, my head was cracked open, and even my permanent teeth were rooted out like I was brushing them. It's fine now that I've healed, but normally, that would be traumatizing enough to make me unable to walk outside. Do you even know what restraint is, you bastard?"

"I'll have you know, I held back quite a bit."

"Seriously? That's you holding back? You really are the most annoying guy."

Subaru, who called himself a knight, had layered powerlessness, ignorance, and recklessness, making a fool of himself.

Julius, who had beaten Subaru down, fulfilled his power, ability, and role, and demonstrated what it meant to be a knight.

Subaru felt sorry for himself being cast as the victim, but if he were to look at it objectively, that figure was precisely the "knight image" that Subaru endlessly sought.

"—I hate you, 'Finest' Knight."

"…"

"That's why I'll trust you. My humiliation knows what an amazing knight you are."

More than anyone else in this place, more than anyone else in that place, Subaru knew Julius's sword.

That's why Subaru entrusted his fate to him. Because he knew the weight of that sword from back then.

"I'm counting on you, Julius. —I'm entrusting everything I have to you."

"…"

Subaru dismounted from Patrasche and faced Julius.

Julius closed his eyes in response to Subaru's words, and a few seconds later, slowly opened them. Subaru was reflected in his gaze. He took a short breath, held it, and said,

“Then I shall answer with my whole being—”

Julius raised his sword to the sky and murmured, and the lesser spirits blessed it.

Circling around the sword, the vibrant spirits danced in the sky, with the white and black lesser spirits shining particularly brightly.

The glow intensified, strengthened, and then emitted a blinding light—

“—Is the charade over now?”

Petelgeuse, crawling out of the forest, interjected, seeing that their exchange was coming to an end.

Floating in mid-air, Petelgeuse tilted his head. His bloodshot eyes wandered, and with unfocused gaze, he pointed at Subaru and the others.

“What can one Spirit Arts user do? For a mere spirit to stand in the way of my, my path, my love, my loyalty, is utterly presumptuous! Therefore, perish, vanish, and be gone! Yes, Indeed, be gone, gonegonegonegonegonegone—!”

Extending his tongue, biting his fingers, and letting blood drip from his mouth, Petelgeuse screamed a death sentence and stretched out his “Unseen Hands” all at once toward them.

The surging black palms, filling their vision like a tsunami, sought to engulf and crush Subaru and the others whole—at that instant,

“—Clarista.”

A flash of iridescent light instantly sliced away the encroaching “Unseen Hands.”

Sparkles danced, illuminating the blade’s trajectory with reflected light. The black delusion that should have been in the path of that trajectory vanished, and the destruction that should have occurred was also gone.

"—Huh?"

Petelgeuse's stunned voice.

In response, Julius swung his iridescent knight sword and, prefacing his words with "There's no need to be surprised," said,

"If I can be touched by it, then I can also touch it. If it's an ability that can interfere, then there's nothing that this blade, combining all six attributes, cannot cut."

Julius held his knight sword, imbued with all six contracted spirits, and stated this calmly. However, Petelgeuse's question wasn't about that.

He trembled, pointing at Julius with his bruised, reddish-black fingers,

" You, you shouldn't be able to see it. You shouldn't be seeing it. The 'Unseen Hand' was cut…! That fact is less of a problem than this! See, see, you should, you should, you shouldn't, shouldn't, shouldn't, shouldn't, should not, not, not, not, not be able to!"

Petelgeuse choked on his words, stunned, terrified of losing his anchor.

At his appearance and demeanor, Subaru felt a certain empathy for the first time—and, overriding that, the pleasure of a "serves you right." He truly felt like he had finally outsmarted him.

"I'm the one seeing it, Petelgeuse."

"—?"

"I'm the one seeing your 'Unseen Hand.' Julius is just seeing what I'm seeing. It's more unsettling than I thought, though."

—The true essence of the high-level communication magic, "Nect."

Julius had told Subaru that when using this magic, which was used for widespread multi-person communication, “if you heighten empathy too much, you lose the boundary between self and other.”

That meant a synchronization of senses, and if they connected even deeper, it meant,

“It should also be possible to consciously share and maintain a portion of our senses—when you first brought this up to me, I doubted your sanity.”

“But it worked, didn’t it? A man needs guts; you gotta try anything.”

Julius, who was synchronizing a percentage of his five senses with Subaru, would be seeing what Subaru was seeing—the sight of Petelgeuse being suspended by the “Unseen Hands,” hanging like a grotesque giant spider.

Similarly, Subaru was also feeling the surging mana throughout Julius’s body and the warm wave emanating from the lesser spirits.

“If you ask me, I don’t want to keep this situation going for long.”

“I completely agree. I’d respectfully decline if asked again.”

At Subaru’s wry words, Julius gave a sarcastic laugh and braced himself.

His rainbow-colored sword pointed forward, aimed at the pathetic, foolish, yet utterly undeserving madman whose trump card, the “Unseen Hand,

Screaming, blowing apart Petelgeuse’s shadows, he flung his demonic hands, no longer even aiming properly, in every direction, scattering destruction purely on impulse.

Before that grotesque display, Subaru took a deep breath, steeling himself, determined not to avert his eyes.

“Alright, I’m sick of this ‘sharing feelings’ thing. —Let’s just end this.”

“Yes, let’s.”

An upward slash obliterated the raining black demonic hands, and a returning strike bisected a palm that had lunged in from the side. Watching the vanished arm turn to particles and dissipate into shadows, Julius smiled.

“With your eyes, I shall cut him down. —My friend, Natsuki Subaru.”

Chapter 80:
The End of Sloth

1

—A rainbow's radiance strikes down the encroaching darkness.

The clash had already spanned dozens, even scores, of exchanges, and Subaru continued to watch, enduring the intense pain coursing through his body, as sword and palm scraped against each other.

Julius's sword—a blade wreathed in rainbow hues—was enhanced by "Clarista," a composite magic of six attributes. This allowed its tip to reach even Petelgeuse's authority, "Unseen Hand."

With every slash, the severed demon hands dispersed, turning to dust and vanishing into shadow. Though the exact principle was unclear, "Unseen Hand" seemed incapable of regenerating in the face of these rainbow sword strikes. Each shadow lost, one after another, ignited a visible fury in the madman's expression.

"This isn't funny! This isn't a joke! This cannot be! To trample my love…my loyalty…with such a method…!"

Spewing irritated curses, Petelgeuse extended arms from the seemingly inexhaustible, swelling shadows, aiming indiscriminately at Julius's arms, legs, and head.

The parrying blade met them, or Julius twisted his body to evade, as the finest knight danced across the battlefield—literally, dashing through it in a sword dance.

"—!"

The number of "Unseen Hands" tearing through the air and closing in was always over ten. There was no way to sweep them all away with a single swing. For every one he cut down, for every evasion, unavoidable injuries still marred Julius's body.

He miraculously hadn't sustained any fatal damage, like being gripped or torn apart. No, not a miracle, but a result made possible by Julius's exceptional combat prowess.

It was precisely because Subaru was aware of supporting Julius's razor-thin victory that he could keep his eyes fixed on the scene before him.

Black fingertips grazed his thigh, and Subaru grimaced at the pain of his leg being gouged. He grit his teeth against the agony, suppressing a cry as a sharp sensation tore through his shoulder.

Through "Nect," a shared sense—Subaru and Julius's bodies and five senses were currently synchronized at a considerably deep level. This allowed Julius to see Petelgeuse's "Unseen Hands" through Subaru's vision, and conversely, Subaru could feel the overwhelming mana emanating from the rainbow-hued knight sword in Julius's grip.

However, disregarding these benefits, it wouldn't be an overstatement to declare this synchronized state highly unstable.

Visual synchronization sometimes caused multiple scenes to overlap, creating an unsettling sensation as if his right and left eyes were seeing entirely different landscapes. Physical empathy conveyed not only the exhilaration of battle permeating Julius's entire body but also the sharp pain etched into his flesh, directly to Subaru.

Constantly experiencing "two sets" of sensations—the touch of wind on skin, the feeling of feet pressing into the earth, the taste of blood and saliva mixing in his mouth, the dull, murky ringing in his ears—the strain on his mind and body was more than simply double.

How much easier would it be if he could seal off his taste, smell, pain, and touch senses now? It was the dilemma of an itchy sensation in a spot he absolutely couldn't reach, like an itch on the back of someone else's head.

"Honestly, I really just wanna get this over with…"

Subaru moistened his lips with his tongue, muttering this amidst the mass of discomfort that enveloped his entire body. This feeling, too, had probably been conveyed to Julius. He couldn't afford to be careless.

If he could instinctively give in to weakness, he'd abandon all his senses and shut down his consciousness right now. Despite proposing this strategy himself, he felt that much aversion to empathizing with another.

However there was nothing to do now but seal away those helpless, weak feelings.

Because—

"My body's gradually getting used to it. Subaru, shall I speed up?"

"Yeah, I'll keep up, so don't worry!"

As he spoke, Julius lowered his stance and plunged into the overwhelming mass of shadows. Slipping, crawling low, he dodged palms and swept away three witch hands at once with an upward slash from directly below. Annoyingly weaving through the dispersing, dust-like shadows, he immediately counterattacked with a ground-gouging stomp—the palm aiming for the end of his action shimmered and scattered before the rainbows counter attack.

Julius lightly twirled, swinging his rainbow sword as if to shake off the lingering malice of the demon hands attached to it. Behind his handsome, stern face, his eyes remained closed, never once opening.

Due to visual synchronization, if they were to fight with both their eyes open, their vision would alternately overlap, blurring the world. Thus, Julius had decided to close his own eyes, entrusting all visual information to Subaru's sight.

This unforeseen turn of events initially bewildered Subaru, and he was about to vehemently complain about Julius's judgment, but reasons emerged that forced him to swallow all his objections.

One was that Julius's decision to abandon his own sight was correct. This at least avoided the folly of hesitating when faced with two overlapping scenes.

The other was the conclusion of Julius's thoughts that led to him abandoning his sight.

"Idiot, idiot, you're messing with me… You really are a pain in the ass!"

Abandoning his own vision and entrusting all he saw to Subaru meant that he was proving with his life that he trusted Subaru to fight without looking away.

Furthermore, entrusting all his senses to Subaru's vision wasn't a simple matter. Subaru's eyes were, after all, Subaru's body's, not an accessory to Julius's body.

This meant Julius was currently performing the astonishing feat of fighting while perceiving his own body from an objective, third-person perspective, as if looking from behind.

"This ain't like a game… If it is, then it's a shitty game where it's game over if you get caught once. Entrusting your life to that, both you and I are crazy."

Julius's body soared through the air, leaping to avoid the whip-like trajectory of an arm and grabbing a tree branch. Subaru craned his neck to keep him in sight, careful not to let them get too far apart. Because, after all,

"You needn't worry only about me! If I just defeat you, then it's all over!"

Petelgeuse's real target wasn't Julius, who was risking his life on the front lines, but Subaru.

Subaru was the linchpin of this battlefield, the "eyes" needed to overcome "Unseen Hand." And for Petelgeuse, above all, Subaru was the great sinner who had made a mockery of his faith.

"Julius, watch out! Get back! Get back! Follow me!"

“My, my, how troublesome!”

Kicking off a tree trunk, Julius landed near Subaru with inhuman agility, a horizontal leap. Simultaneously, “Unseen Hands” closed in on both of them. Julius completely ignored the palms aimed at his back—reducing the damage to a mere graze on his skin with minimal movement—and pierced the demon hand that tried to rip off Subaru’s neck with a thrusting tip.

Next, the rainbow’s gleam arced, clearing away the palms that had grazed Julius. Turning the crisis around, the knight, still with closed eyes, smiled at Subaru:

“I understand your desperation, but why don’t you try defending yourself a little? At this rate, I can’t even face the enemy head-on.”

“I’ll throw those words right back at you! I can’t calmly watch either! Can you see the desperate knight through my eyes, huh?”

“I see a handsome man with a troubled expression, eyes closed. He looks like he’s blessed with good lineage and talent.”

“There’s a suspicion that you and I are seeing different things!”

Subaru stuck out his tongue at Julius’s self-praise, then frantically retreated from the surging wave of palms. Subaru tumbled, while Julius, combining a backward leap with slashes, caused the arms to disappear before advancing again.

What was terrifying about Julius was his ability to adapt to the act of controlling his own body from an overhead perspective, even in the midst of battle.

Unlike Subaru, his experience of pushing his body to its limits and enduring pain, and his life as a knight who grew stronger in battles exchanging killing intent, strongly influenced this.

Subaru’s current limit was to tremble in fear of battle, unable to perform even at his usual level, let alone above it.

Warriors, including Julius, elevated themselves in battle, bringing forth more than their true strength.

The fact that Subaru was involved in a part of such a warrior's battle was barely supporting his timidness and weak will.

His back and thighs, grazed and gouged by palms, his brain hammered by the throbbing pain in his shoulder.

Gritting his teeth and enduring the pain, Subaru didn't look away.

Dashing, leaping, sliding in, countering, stomping, recoiling, advancing, ducking under, standing firm, slipping through, circling around, side-stepping, twisting his body, looking back, charging in, springing up, kicking, refining his actions.

Slicing away, cutting down, thrusting, cutting upwards, kicking away, flowing cuts, striking, sweeping, piercing, cleaving, flashing, bringing down, knocking away, cutting and sending flying, slicing and dicing. The accumulation of sword strikes and slashes turned "Unseen Hands" back into dust.

As the ominous darkness spread, threatening to engulf his vision, the figure of the knight performing a sword dance with a rainbow-colored sword was so beautiful it seemed unreal.

It was a scene so fantastical that one might almost forget it was a fight to the death.

This feeling was likely because Subaru could sense the spirits' pulsations through Julius. Something similar in the raining palms—

"This can't be… This can't be happening…! Why? Why?! How can this be, my authority! I was loved, I must be loved, I am loved! I am loved! This much, this much, this much! If not, why, why, why, why, why… why did the Witch guide my existence?!"

"I can't indulge your incoherent ramblings. The black witch hands have been sufficiently reduced in number. Above all, fighting through Subaru's eyes has become familiar to my body."

Turning his head in the direction of the screaming Petelgeuse, guided by sound, Julius subtly held his breath, then pointed the tip of his sword at the madman.

"—It's about time I seriously cut you down. The root of the threat that has menaced the kingdom… no, the world, for so long, 'Sloth,' ends here."

"Impossible! You won't! I…! For four hundred years, I have diligently served the Witch, embodying her will, showered in her favor! And I… I, of all people, to be thwarted by such… by such a foolish wretch who only leads minor spirits! It absolutely cannot be!!"

Baring his teeth, Petelgeuse unleashed his fury at Julius's declaration.

The content of his outburst made Subaru feel that the speculation he and Julius had exchanged was strongly coming true. Then, he was, after all—

"Julius—!"

"I know! Sin Archbishop, prepare yourself—!!"

With a stomp that gouged the earth, Julius's body leaped forward.

Petelgeuse opened his mouth, screaming something as he frantically deployed "Unseen Hands." Hands spread into the air, to the ground, into the forest, pressing in from all directions, without a gap, to envelop Julius's body—

"—Al Clarista!!"

A rainbow aurora incinerated the world, and the palms that were about to crush Julius vanished in an instant.

It was Clarista's highest-tier magic, clothing the sword in rainbow light.

Though for an instant, the encirclement Petelgeuse had created completely disappeared, clearing a path without any obstacles between Julius and the madman—!

Petelgeuse, who had been floating in the air but lost even the demon hands that sustained him in the aftershock of the rainbow aurora, fell to the ground. His emaciated body trembled with rage as he struggled to his feet.

Julius, running towards the madman, moved without hesitation. He held his posed blade straight, its tip once again glowing with rainbow light, aiming for Petelgeuse's chest.

"You won't!! Ul doona!!"

Spreading both hands, as if to meet Julius head-on, Petelgeuse chanted. Immediately, a torrent of mana interfered with the earth—earthen walls rose in front of Julius, encircling Petelgeuse from all sides, moving the madman away from the blade.

Then, from behind this barrier, powerful black palms, gathered together, circumvented and aimed to embrace Julius's body.

At this rate, Julius would need one more action to break through the wall, and that movement would delay his action against the witch hands by one step. This was a choice between a fatal wound for Julius or losing the chance to corner Petelgeuse.

—If only Julius were fighting alone here.

"Burn, fighting spirit! Roar, magic ball! —My full power is 120 kilometers per hour!!"

Twisting his body, lifting his leg, and stepping in as he rotated his shoulder for a full swing—a magic stone was hurled from Subaru's hand at a speed that was somewhat misleading for a fastball.

The throw, released from the hand of an ordinary person who hadn't specially practiced pitching, nonetheless struck directly at its target with the concentration of an extreme state.

"What is this…?!"

The destructive energy hidden within the red magic stone shot past Julius's back and slammed into the earthen wall that was acting as a barrier—there, it exploded with light and intense heat, filling the space in front of Petelgeuse with red flames.

“Could it be, this from the very beginning…!”

“Your defeat is that you faced this battle alone!”

Leaping through the flames, Julius’s thrust pierced Petelgeuse’s chest.

The rainbow light penetrated Petelgeuse’s body, and the aurora incinerated his emaciated form from within.

He was slammed against the earthen wall behind him, impaled like an insect on display, flailing his limbs and spitting frothy blood from the corner of his mouth.

“Foolish, foolish, f-foolish… This, my body… This…”

“A blade that binds six attributes will burn your body from within. If your true nature is as we suspect, then you should simply vanish!”

Julius twisted the impaled sword, making Petelgeuse scream.

The knight sword’s radiance intensified, and before its light, Petelgeuse couldn’t even use “Unseen Hand” to distract, nor could he overturn the situation with a chant.

However, Petelgeuse’s frenzied gaze still showed no sign of giving up on life.

“I can’t end! It can’t end! It shouldn’t end! I have diligently served! To succumb to lazy resignation, to a lazy end, is unthinkable! So, then, no matter what…!”

Screaming, struggling, writhing, Petelgeuse pushed open his wound, amplifying the source of his pain. In sync with his movements, Julius pushed the tip even harder, moving the blade to destroy his heart—and then,

“I’ve lost my fingertips, and even now my body is being damaged… but, but, but! I still! I still have! A body remaining…!”

All his previous hosts had been crushed beforehand, and Petelgeuse screamed defiance against surrender at the end of his last body.

His eyes, filled with madness, stared directly at Subaru.

A shiver ran down Subaru’s spine, and Petelgeuse’s mad laughter deepened.

“Ah—my brain, it trembles.”

“—!”

The next moment, Petelgeuse’s body, impaled by Julius, crumbled as if its strings had been cut. The light left his eyes, and all life ceased, vanishing from his limp, downward-tilted head.

The moment he saw that reaction, Subaru knew what was coming. He immediately placed his hand on his chest, drawing something from his pocket, and at the same time,

“Julius! Release it!!”

“Understood!”

Responding to Subaru’s call, Julius kicked over Petelgeuse’s corpse, then turned and rushed towards Subaru. His eyes were open, and immediately, the doubled sensory pressure that had been weighing on Subaru’s body vanished.

In its place, another presence intruded into Subaru’s body. It was—

“As I thought, your body has the aptitude to contain me! Even you, surely, didn’t anticipate this! Ah, ah! Ah! You’re truly slothful, aren’t you?”

Petelgeuse’s mad laughter echoed so close it felt as if it were nestled beside his brain.

Next, Subaru’s body, against his will, reached out its right hand towards Julius, who was running closer. Then, Subaru’s shadow swelled, and “Unseen Hands” erupted from within, aimed at Julius, who had lost his means of sight—

"Ugh!"

"—Huh?"

Subaru's body, which had been about to perpetrate the atrocity on Julius, swayed unsteadily. A floating sensation, as if feverish, suddenly made his skull vibrate violently, and Subaru collapsed to the ground without even being able to break his fall.

As he fell, the dialogue mirror he had been holding clattered from his hand.

"If I know your location through the dialogue mirror, this much is possible, nya~. But Subaru-kyun, to devise a self-sacrificing plan, you're such a silly-billy ♪"

From the surface of the dialogue mirror, which he could no longer confirm, a familiar mischievous voice reached his eardrums. It was Ferris, who had been observing the situation through the mirror and, as per Subaru's instructions—at the signal of Petelgeuse's possession—transformed Subaru's body into a "puppet," similar to the Witch Cultists he had interrogated.

However, Subaru's consciousness was still intact, and it was merely a localized mana surge of water, limited to depriving him of bodily freedom.

"If I can't maintain a sane state of mind, there's no way I can use 'Unseen Hands,' right?"

"No way… No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! You… I anticipated even me possessing your body and doing this?!"

As the Petelgeuse in his mind trembled in astonishment, Subaru, in a hazy, drunken state, defiantly replied, "Of course."

As Subaru and Petelgeuse continued their struggle, Julius, who had rushed over, paid no mind to the fallen Subaru. He retrieved Mimi and Tivey, who were lying at Subaru's feet, and then placed them on Patrasche, moving them away from the battlefield. With this,

"A hostage strategy with 'Unseen Hands' is impossible. Are you ready to give up yet?”

“Give up… I will steal your body as I am, and I will be me, I will be me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me?!”

Petelgeuse, in a frenzy, truly began to go mad, beyond his usual state.

Listening to Petelgeuse’s glitching words, Subaru responded with a sigh to the stubborn madman, then, as if resolved, closed his eyes.

“Ferris might genuinely try to kill me if you possess me. So, I’ll fight you my own way.”

“What… are you going to do?”

Taking a breath, Subaru recalled the previous loop.

The final moment when Petelgeuse possessed his body in the battle on the plains. Subaru, battered and broken by the mana surge Ferris caused in his body. That unimaginable suffering, and the madman’s figure screaming just like Subaru. In other words,

“Forcing synchronization with another—that’s the true nature of your possession. Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti of Sloth… no, Spirit Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti!”

“Me—!!”

Subaru shouted his speculation aloud, confronting the Petelgeuse within him.

In their discussion, Subaru and Julius had arrived at the answer to Petelgeuse’s true nature.

When a certain speculation about the true nature of his possession and its mechanism formed, they reached the conclusion that it could only be that.

Petelgeuse was a spirit who gained bodies by forcibly overwriting and possessing others. “Aptitude” meant discerning those with sufficient aptitude to form a contract with Petelgeuse, and possession was the result of a one-sided, selfish contract formation.

Julius's rainbow blade —"Clarista"— bound all six attributes, an ultimate mana destruction art that could break through the protection of any attribute. It contained the power to cleave even Petelgeuse's main body, a spiritual entity composed of mana. That's why his sword could reach Petelgeuse.

"Me! A spirit! I don't want to be lumped in with such a lowly existence! I am a being who has overcome spirits! I have transcended spirits, escaping an ambiguous, wavering existence, and gained a single will through favor—a chosen existence! And you! You dare speak as if you understand, you bastard!"

Petelgeuse, enraged by Subaru's words, screamed, his existence exploding.

His words, ironically, served to confirm their speculation. Thus, Petelgeuse, in denial of that fact, revealed his fury, refusing to acknowledge it.

"Love changed me! Love gave me will, meaning to my existence! All of it, everything, is the Witch's blessing, the Witch's favor! Then, then, then, then, then, then! This body, this soul, everything should be offered for the Witch!"

"Your sermon is quite enough. —Then, I'll grant you a special meeting."

"What! With whom! What are you talking about—!!"

"With the Witch you've been waiting for—."

At that answer, the Petelgeuse in his mind widened his eyes, his face stiffening in shock, losing his words.

Burning the astonished expression onto his eyelids, Subaru took a deep breath, drawing that moment closer.

—Come on.

"—I can 'Return by Death'!"

The moment the taboo words left his lips, the world's movements slowed.

Then, it arrived—

2

In a world stretched wide with only darkness, that presence was led.

There was nothing; it didn't even know where its own body was.

Only consciousness existed; it couldn't perceive anything else.

Even if it tried to reach out an arm, the arm's presence wasn't visible, and it seemed nothing in this world could be touched by an arm.

Indeed, its awareness of body parts like hands and feet was starting to blur. What meaning did the presence or absence of a body hold in this world?

Abandoned in this world, severed from its physical form, existing only as consciousness, as a soul.

That terribly unreliable sensation, that overwhelming sense of loss—it realized there was a part of itself that felt intensely nostalgic for it, and consciousness strengthened its feelings of rejection, finding this fact hard to accept.

However, a change came to the world of darkness, a change so profound that the direction of its own emotions, the target of its overwhelming passions, all ceased to matter.

"…"

It was a human figure, appearing in that jet-black world, shrouded in a darkness so deep it seemed to paint over the black itself.

It was a woman, that much it could sense. Her face, her limbs, all were hazy, indistinct, nothing clearly defined.

Yet, in such a world, consciousness arrived at a single truth and rejoiced.

Blessing the encounter with the presence that had appeared before it, filled with trembling emotion.

All the days leading up to this moment had existed for this encounter.

Long, long days it couldn't even remember—all of them had been spent for this very instant, this mere fleeting moment.

It was frustrating that fingers didn't exist. It wanted to step closer, to take her hand immediately.

It was frustrating that a mouth didn't exist. It wanted to put the full extent of these feelings into words and unleash them.

It was frustrating that a body didn't exist. If desired, it wouldn't mind offering up its entire flesh.

It was frustrating to be only consciousness. Because this was all it had to offer.

"…"

She remained silent.

It could distinctly feel that her consciousness was directed towards it. Just thinking that it was within the world she was conscious of made it feel as though it was ascending to heaven.

Then, the "love" it sought was spoken from her lips, and consciousness reached the true answer—

"—Wrong."

It was a voice colored by deep, faint disappointment.

Consciousness had been ready for any words to thrill its heart as if it were hearing a heavenly voice. Yet, despite finally hearing that voice, what assailed consciousness was the shadow of anxiety, refusing to cease its outpouring.

In the place where “love” was supposed to be spoken, where it was supposed to reach the answer it had longed for, here—

“—You are not that person.”

Disappointment filled the voice. Then it was immediately replaced by another emotion.

Namely—

“Why is someone who isn’t that person in my and that person’s place—?”

Rage was imbued in the voice.

They were words that denied it. Words that rejected it.

Not understanding the meaning of being treated this way, consciousness tried to utter a lament, clinging to her words.

Consciousness had no mouth. No limbs to convey its will. All consciousness had was itself; it could not touch her, exchange words with her, let alone be loved by her, and,

“—Vanish.”

The confusion, bewilderment, and lamentation of consciousness conveyed nothing to her. Even if they did, they held no meaning.

For her, consciousness was worthless, meaningless, and futile.

Rejection and denial affirmed the despair of that consciousness.

With that, consciousness was severed from the framework of this isolated world, sinking further and further away, vanishing as if dissolving before the longed-for encounter.

Her figure receded.

That figure, for which it had yearned so intensely, so ardently, disappeared into the distance.

She no longer paid any heed to the lament of that consciousness.

She simply looked down quietly,

“I love you, I love you”

She just kept chanting “I love you,” but it wasn’t for this consciousness; it was for someone else entirely.

3

“Ugh! I’m back!”

The sensation of his heart being crushed, the witch hand assailing Subaru in a world where time stood still—he was sure it was the Witch's hand, leaving her scent on him.

The Witch of "Envy"—she was surely connected to Subaru's "Return by Death" in some way. Perhaps she was even the one who invited Subaru to this world, and,

"Someday, I'll figure it out… But for now!"

Subaru forced his still-uncooperative limbs to tremble, somehow clawing at a rock to pull himself upright. He wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth onto his shoulder, enduring a pounding in his ears and an unyielding nausea, finally managing to stand with great difficulty.

Supporting himself with a hand on the rock, Subaru looked straight ahead.

"This… can't… be…"

Ahead, Petelgeuse's corpse, dragging a trail of blood, began to move again. He had possessed Subaru, tasting the Witch's palm through their synchronized senses.

Facing the intense pain, which he hated even to recall, Petelgeuse giving up and releasing Subaru's body was the expected last resort.

—It was concerning, though, that he didn't remember hearing Petelgeuse scream, being too preoccupied with writhing in pain himself.

"At worst, I was ready to repeat it as many times as it took until you left… But to give up after just one try, you're a real spineless coward."

As he spoke, Subaru felt his arms give out, about to collapse. Just then, an arm reached from behind him, barely catching him and pulling him upright.

It was Julius. He had returned with Patrasche, and after confirming that Petelgeuse had retreated from Subaru's body and returned to his dying husk, he said,

“This time, let’s finish it.”

He drew his sheathed knight’s sword, and the renewed Clarista magic dyed the blade rainbow-colored.

With the shimmering, trailing blade in hand, Julius charged straight towards Petelgeuse.

Dragging his body, Petelgeuse, on the verge of death, couldn’t react to Julius’s approach.

The damage to his pierced body, and an expression far more defeated than that, showed Petelgeuse dragging himself along, utterly crushed by despair.

Eventually, his body reached the edge of a cliff, where he leaned his back against the rock face and turned to face them.

Having lost even the will to put on his mad act, Petelgeuse looked up at Julius with a dazed expression. Then his gaze shifted to Subaru—and suddenly, his eyes ignited with fierce emotion.

Tears welled up, drenching Petelgeuse’s cheeks in torrents.

Unlike the tears of joy he’d shown many times, these were simply a testament to an incurable, unredeemable delusion, overflowing purely from vexation.

Petelgeuse shed tears, his voice trembling, reaching out towards the heavens as if trying to grasp something that wasn’t there, screaming.

“Witch… Witch! Witch! Witch! I offered everything to you to this extent! I discarded everything for you to that extent! I gave you everything I could think of, so why?! Why?! Why do you abandon me?! Why?! Why?! Witch! If so… then why did you give me love… your favor…?!”

“What you offered wasn’t faith or love, and certainly not yourself. It was merely the passersby who happened to be walking around you."

Subaru sharply cut off Petelgeuse's pleading lament.

There was no value in listening; Petelgeuse's words were merely the product of self-righteousness, of self-absorption. As Wilhelm had said, it was presumptuous to even call it "love."

"—!"

Julius sprinted, closing in on Petelgeuse's gaunt body.

Petelgeuse only vaguely turned his now tearless eyes towards the raised blade—the knight's sword tip pierced his chest again, and a torrent of light exploded.

A mass of mana residing in the body—the rainbow aurora utterly incinerated the spirit's existence, making Petelgeuse vanish from the world.

The blade was withdrawn, and Petelgeuse stared blankly at his bleeding chest.

Then he turned his unfocused eyes skyward, reaching his hand towards the heavens, still,

"—My brain… trembles."

One "Unseen Hand" shot up from the shadows towards the sky, extending endlessly towards the dazzling sun.

However, that hand grasped nothing, and the palm reaching into the void eventually greatly gouged the cliff face, violently carving into the rock and creating cracks.

—It likely wasn't an intentional act. It was probably meaningless even to Petelgeuse, merely a manifestation of his delusion.

A collapse occurred above Petelgeuse's head, and large fragments of the gouged cliff face broke off. Directly beneath them was Petelgeuse, still reaching for the ungraspable heavens, and, “I was loved—”

A mass of rock crushed his body from directly above, and the sound of flesh and bone being pulverized echoed grandly.

Ground tremors and explosions erupted in a chain reaction, and in an instant, Petelgeuse’s gaunt body was buried under a grave marker of rubble.

Julius, having escaped the collapse, walked to the spot where Petelgeuse had been. His gaze fell upon a large amount of fresh blood flowing from under the boulder. Seeing it, he shook his head, sheathed his drawn knight’s sword, and turned around.

Subaru, too, walked towards the spot without a single word.

His steps were unsteady, and compounded by the uneven ground, his pace was terribly slow, but he reached the grave marker and let out a small breath.

There was no admiration, no sense of accomplishment, no satisfaction.

Only a hollow feeling of emptiness spread through his chest.

Subaru didn’t commit the tactlessness of speaking concepts like victory or defeat here.

He merely uttered the words that passed through his blank mind.

“Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.”

With that single phrase, this battle was brought to an end.

—The Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing ‘Sloth’, Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.

—The battle of Julius Juukulius, the Finest Knight, and Natsuki Subaru, the self-proclaimed knight.

Before the grave marker of rubble, Subaru took a small breath and said,

“—You really were ‘Slothful’, weren’t you?”

Chapter 81:
Pursuit

1

Subaru exhaled a short breath at Petelgeuse's tombstone, averting his eyes from the other traces of battle.

When he turned around, he was greeted by Julius dusting off the hem of his clothes, and Mimi and Tivey, who had dismounted from Patrasche's back, shaking their heads.

The effects of the spiritual contamination on the siblings seemed to have largely cleared. It was likely due to the demise of its source. While he couldn't quite unravel the mechanism of the spiritual contamination, he hoped there would be no lingering ill effects.

"It's not very convincing coming from me, someone who once had that guy literally inside my head… But seriously, there's really nothing left, is there? That's terrifying."

Petelgeuse was a spirit, and at one point, he had even tried to form a contract.

Beings that try to force contracts upon you, whether in his original world or this one, never leave a good impression. This was especially true for a madman who had escalated to a mutual killing spree.

"A mutual killing spree, huh? That's a line I'd never say in my everyday life."

Shaking his head, Subaru realized his sensibilities were becoming tainted by this other world. Even if he couldn't judge whether it was a good or bad thing.

His unusual sentimentality was probably due to the sense of relief that came from overcoming a major challenge. Looking back, this loop, which started in the Royal Capital, had been a continuous series of the biggest hurdles since he was summoned to this world.

It wasn't strange to feel a sense of exhaustion now that they had achieved their final objective.

"I never thought I'd feel sentimental after defeating Petelgeuse… Get a grip, me. If I calm down, look up, and think about it, there's still a ton to do."

After all, his initial and biggest goal of reconciling with Emilia hadn't been achieved yet in this loop.

Starting with their quarrel and separation in the Royal Capital, followed by the alliance with the Crusch camp and the subjugation of the White Whale. Then, the events surrounding the Witch Cult subjugation, where he tricked them with false information to evacuate the villagers. And the post-event explanations, including cleaning up after these situations—he had finished the physically demanding events, but now there was a host of emotionally draining ones.

However,

"Since I won't get hurt or die, this is much easier. You really only realize the importance of peaceful days after you lose them. Though for me, it's been 'everyday life love forever' from the start."

Anyway, they needed to return to the village, rendezvous with the subjugation force, and discuss their next moves. They would have to split into two groups to meet up with Ram and the others, who were heading to the Sanctuary, and Emilia and her group, who were heading to the Royal Capital. If they delayed, Emilia and her group would reach their destination.

Subaru worked his mind as he walked across the rocky ground. Suddenly, his steps halted as he noticed something. His gaze fell upon a trail of blood—the path Petelgeuse had crawled along from his tombstone, and at its starting point,

"—A Gospel."

Perhaps it had fallen from the hem of his robes, or perhaps he had dropped it in a last-ditch effort to cling to it. The Gospel lay there, its cover stained with blood and dirt.

Subaru walked over, picked it up, and quickly flipped through its pages. It looked no different from when he had examined its contents in his previous world. The characters forming the text inside were still in an unfamiliar script, and the latter half of the pages were still blank.

Now that Petelgeuse had been defeated, there was no longer any way to get information from a central figure like a Sin Archbishop.

“Conversely, this might be the only clue… For now, I’ll hold onto it and consult with Crusch-san or Ros-chi.”

By the way, Roswaal being mentioned after Crusch in his current statement was simply due to the difference in their trustworthiness. Roswaal’s absence during a time of crisis had severely impacted his popularity, lowering his approval ratings despite being in the same camp. Much is expected of his future contributions. Although, frankly, it would be best if a situation where Roswaal had to play a major role never arose.

Wiping off the dirt from the Gospel, Subaru dragged his feet back to where Julius and the others were. Although he had suffered almost no direct physical harm, the phantom pains from when he synchronized his senses with Julius still throbbed in various parts of his body.

Even if he received treatment, how long would it take for the pain from these invisible wounds, which weren’t actual injuries, to fade? The thought alone was somewhat frightening. Amidst these thoughts, Subaru suddenly saw Julius’s expression grow stern.

“I’d like to say we’ve finally reached a conclusion, but we must return to the village immediately, Subaru.”

Before Subaru could ask “What?”, Julius looked up.

His expression tightened with seriousness. In his hand, Julius held a communication mirror, just like Subaru had picked up moments ago. If the connection hadn't been cut, he should still be in contact with Ferris.

Subaru furrowed his brows at the unsettling atmosphere and silently urged him to continue. The knight nodded and said,

"Ferris's interrogation revealed something concerning from the Witch Cultist. The evacuated people might be in danger."

His words threatened to shake the very foundation of Subaru's intentions.

2

"Welcome back! Glad to hear you successfully took down the Sin Archbishop, nya!"

Ferris greeted the four, who had returned to the village at full speed on their ground dragon, speaking of dangerous things with genuine delight. Subaru sighed, feeling the tension suddenly dissipate at his unconcerned attitude. But then again, Ferris was always like that, so there was no point in commenting on it now.

Subaru looked around, surveying the members of the subjugation force gathered in the center of the village.

This assault was a surprise attack where they held an overwhelming advantage. Yet, the sight of more than a few injured individuals hinted at the unfathomable depths of the Witch Cult. The only saving grace for Subaru was that there were no fatalities.

"Everyone made it back, right?"

"I gave the 'tra-tra-tra' signal, nya! I made sure to crush all the other 'fingers' besides the main one. We even took some prisoners, and thanks to them, we learned some things, you know?"

Narrowing his cat-like eyes, Ferris glanced toward the edge of the village. Four figures in black robes were bound there, including one of the merchants they had captured earlier.

The prisoners were all looking down, seemingly dazed and disoriented, likely having already lost their mental balance at Ferris's hands.

Feeling both reassurance and a touch of horror at his skill, Subaru frowned and silently questioned him with his eyes about the details of the summons. Ferris, still with narrowed eyes, lowered his chin.

"What I heard from the captured person is that there seems to be a separate unit, nya. Not hiding all over this area, but more like monitoring the highway?"

"Hey, hey! Don't tell me you're talking about more of Petelgeuse's 'fingers,' are you?! The forest, the cliff, and the merchant group make ten spots! Ten fingers should be the end of it, right?! You're not going to start saying childish things like including his feet, are you?"

"The place he himself was isn't a 'finger' but the main body, so haven't we only crushed nine 'fingers,' nya?"

Ferris pressed him with that retort. Subaru choked on his words, realizing it was a logical argument that, despite sounding like sophistry, he couldn't deny. His gaze darted around as he racked his brain for countermeasures if that were the case. What if the corpse buried beneath that tombstone wasn't the last one—

"Wow, you have such an unyielding gaze, nya."

"—Huh?"

"Just now, Ferris intended to tell you something that would turn your world upside down, but… instead of giving up, you immediately tried to figure something out, didn't you? Yes, yes, I think that attitude is good."

Winking and smiling at Subaru, Ferris erased his previous demeanor. Subaru blinked once at the change, then a flush spread across his face.

"Don't tell me you were messing with me?!"

"No, that's not it, nya. You're expecting too much. If what I just said was just Ferris's mischief, then you wouldn't have to worry anymore, so I can understand wanting to cling to that, nya. But I don't think that part's good."

Stung by the teasing tone, Subaru once again fell silent, annoyed at being cornered. But he held back his desire to retort and shook his head.

"Anyway, what you just said is true, right?"

"It's true, nya. Oh, but it's not related to the 'fingers' talk, nya. It seems like the 'Sloth' Witch Cultists are done for. —The ones guarding the highway aren't related to 'Sloth.'"

Subaru frowned at Ferris's words, understanding their meaning in just a few seconds. If there had been contact with Witch Cultists other than 'Sloth' in this battle, there was only one possibility.

"Witch Cultists of 'Gluttony'—!"

"If the White Whale is 'Gluttony,' then it would be strange for it to be alone, nya~."

Subaru clenched his fist in understanding at Ferris's answer, his eyes narrowed.

This was from a previous loop. When the White Whale appeared and Subaru passed through the fog, he had a close call with Witch Cultists. At that time, it was Otto who was attacked, and the fact that their location didn't match Petelgeuse's 'fingers' had bothered him.

—In other words,

"There are Witch Cultists hiding somewhere on the Lifaus Highway?"

"Yep. What are you gonna do?"

Ferris tilted his head and asked. Subaru put a hand to his mouth in response. If his current assumption was correct, the situation wasn't completely out of the woods yet. However, he couldn't let that panic him into making poor judgments. Although,

“I should have anticipated this to some extent. That’s what the insurance is for, right?”

“You’re making a scary face, nya. Where did the cute, weak Subaru-kyun go?”

Raising both hands in a cheer, Ferris closed his eyes at Subaru’s answer. Ferris’s reaction was proof that he felt the same sense of security about that ‘insurance’ as Subaru did. The insurance Subaru had placed was—

“Why do you think I knew the difficulty of dealing with ‘Sloth’ would increase and still allocated our strongest forces to Emilia-tan and the others? I dedicated resources for this kind of situation.”

As he spoke, Subaru’s gaze swept over the group that had returned to the village.

Among them, the most reliable fighter in the subjugation force was missing. —The Sword Demon, Wilhelm van Astrea, was nowhere to be seen.

Before the decisive battle with ‘Sloth’ Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti, Subaru had asked the Sword Demon not for his help as a sword in battle, but for his role as a shield to protect important people.

He had originally been wary of the possibility of Witch Cultists hiding due to factors like highway surveillance. Therefore, he had taken the utmost care to ensure that Emilia and the villagers, who had been evacuated to the Royal Capital, would not suffer any harm.

In the battle against Petelgeuse, aside from Julius, who was a spirit user, anyone who “couldn’t counter spiritual contamination” was equally susceptible to being possessed. Beings afflicted by spiritual contamination were outside Petelgeuse’s possession targets; they couldn’t fight, but they also wouldn’t turn against them, making them safe allies.

Conversely, individuals like Wilhelm, who had resistance to

Petelgeuse's spiritual contamination, could potentially invite Petelgeuse's possession. Therefore, Subaru chose to keep those susceptible to possession "other than himself" away from the battlefield, and he faced the battle only with himself, who had a countermeasure against possession, and Julius, who was Petelgeuse's natural enemy.

"Do you know how many Witch Cultists are hiding on the highway? There were nearly a hundred 'Sloth' cultists around here alone. Even Wilhelm-san would be outnumbered if there were too many…"

"I said they were 'monitoring,' didn't I? The numbers aren't that big, nya. If it's twenty or thirty, Old Man Wilhelm and his aides can handle it, so I don't think there's a problem."

Subaru's concern was the case where a large group of Witch Cultists was waiting, but Ferris's words negated that. Originally, the White Whale, a single entity responsible for 'Gluttony,' was more than enough of a threat on that foggy highway. It was plausible that the number of cultists with such a role, even if they weren't directly under it, wouldn't be very large.

"—If the matter could be resolved with just that, I wouldn't have rushed our return like this. Ferris, you shouldn't be so roundabout."

However, Julius, who had been attending to Mimi and Tivey behind them, seemed to have noticed Subaru's moment of relaxed relief. He walked over, clapped Subaru on the shoulder, and reproached Ferris. As Subaru frowned, wondering what Julius meant, Ferris's lips curved into a small smile and he said,

"I trust Old Man Wilhelm's abilities, and an attack by a small number of Witch Cultists isn't something to worry about, nya. If push comes to shove, even Lady Emilia can fight, so there's no anxiety in terms of combat power. However, there's just a tiny little thing that's bothering me, nya."

"What is it, what's bothering you?"

Ferris formed a small circle with his fingers, expressing his tiny concern. He nodded at Subaru's urging, then quickly moved aside as if yielding the floor.

"From here on, let's hear from the person who noticed the crucial part himself. So, here's Otto, who gave us valuable insight!"

As Ferris clapped and cheered, an uncomfortable-looking Otto appeared from behind him. As Subaru's eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected arrival, Otto bowed his head to Subaru and said, "I'm sorry."

"I apologize for surprising you. First of all, I'm glad you returned safely. If you all were defeated, my own safety wouldn't be guaranteed."

"It's good that you're honest with yourself, but… what did you notice? To be honest, I have a bad feeling about this from the start."

Scratching his ear, Subaru felt a growing sense of unease. Otto nodded, keeping his voice subdued so as not to agitate Subaru's anxiety.

"Just now, I noticed that a merchant I know —Mr. Elgrid— was taken prisoner there, and he was… a Witch Cultist, wasn't he?"

"His name sounds really cool, that old man… Well, your question is correct. If someone you know says he's one, then that Ketty person was too."

"It's about that Ketty person."

Subaru felt sympathy for Otto, imagining how heavy his heart must be to hear that an acquaintance was deeply involved in a malicious cult. However Otto showed little interest in Subaru's concern; instead, he stepped forward.

"I'm surprised and regretful that Mr Ketty was a Witch Cultist, but that's not the problem. —Ketty's dragon carriage was used for evacuation, wasn't it?"

"—? Oh, yes, it was. Regardless of the owner, there shouldn't be a problem with the belongings. We were really cutting it close with the number of dragon carriages, so we couldn't afford to leave it unused."

"The luggage that the merchants had in their dragon carriages was unloaded in the village, and instead, the residents were put on board for evacuation… Is that correct?"

Subaru replied, still puzzled, to Otto's insistence on details. Otto then put a hand to his chin and, with a gesture of certainty, closed his eyes, saying, "Just as I thought." A short silence followed, and as Subaru grew impatient, wondering what it was,

"Among the luggage that was supposed to have been unloaded from the dragon carriage, something that should be there is missing."

"Something that should be there… meaning?"

Subaru's eyes scanned the scene as he recalled the merchants' various loads stored in the village warehouse. Many of them had originally intended to deal in iron products in the capital, so most of their goods were swords, armor, and other weapons and protective gear. The only oddity was Otto's oil, which they had protected last.

"What about it?"

"I told you I rushed here to get ahead of everyone, didn't I? That means I heard about the profitable deal in the Mathers territory at the same place everyone else did. Of course, I also had contact with Mr Ketty the day before yesterday. At that time, something that Mr Ketty was supposed to have loaded in his dragon carriage isn't among the luggage."

"Luggage that was supposed to be loaded…?"

Subaru realized, from Otto's tone, that the situation was taking an ominous turn. To confirm Subaru's apprehension, Otto slightly lowered his chin and said,

"—A large quantity of fire magic stones. Enough to blow up seven or eight dragon carriages without a trace, those are missing."

“Ketty’s dragon carriage, the one belonging to the deceased, is being used for Emilia’s evacuation group.”

Subaru’s brain cells, after hearing Otto’s story and searching his memory, came to that conclusion. For the dragon carriages that had lost their original drivers, one person from the subjugation force was chosen to take on the role of driver for each. He didn’t remember which specific carriage it was, but Wilhelm had also been assigned that role, and the Sword Demon was certainly riding in one of those carriages.

“Is it true that it was loaded with magic stones? Could they have been unloaded along the way?”

“Would cultists, who intended to ambush the villagers and Lady Emilia during their evacuation in an emergency, do such a thing? Subaru, optimism and wishful thinking are different things.”

“You’re making a perfectly valid point at this moment… No, I get it. It’s my fault.”

Julius, narrowing his eyes, admonished Subaru, whose lips trembled with impatience. Subaru, running a hand through his hair, apologized honestly and then asked Otto for more details.

“There are no magic stones in the warehouse. I checked, and that’s for sure. Did you see the actual items in the dragon carriage before you came here, Otto?”

“Unfortunately, yes, clearly. They were cheap ones, not even fist-sized, but there was a full sack of them. I think it’s enough to achieve their objective if they were all crushed at once.”

However, the existence of such a sack had not been confirmed. Subaru and Julius had only decided to reuse the suspicious dragon carriages that the Witch Cultists had been using precisely because they had ensured their safety.

“We confirmed that no magic formulas were embedded… but we never considered the possibility of simply placing magic stones directly in the carriage itself. It's my oversight, I apologize."

"It's not your fault. I should have noticed."

Shaking his head at Julius's apology, Subaru bit his lip at his own lapse. In a world where magic was commonplace, if Julius, a spirit user, focused on magical methods, then Subaru should have been the one to suspect physical methods. As a result of his oversight, Subaru was forced to realize that the situation he thought he had overcome had once again run aground.

"The Witch Cultists' attack won't be a problem if Wilhelm-san is there. In terms of sheer power, there shouldn't be anyone who can get past him. But a booby trap is a different story. With something like this, there's nothing you can do if you don't notice it."

"Of course, it's also possible it's a wild goose chase. We're just suspecting it, and in reality, the magic stones were distributed among the cultists. There are no explosives rigged in the dragon carriages… That's also a possibility."

Otto's words were probably not meant to console Subaru's impatience. He was presenting a possibility for Subaru to deny. Playing into that expectation, Subaru shook his head and said, "No."

"We've body-checked the prisoners and the confirmed dead. We haven't found any magic stones, or even a Gospel… The magic stones are definitely in the dragon carriages."

Such a level of malicious obsession, Petelgeuse would certainly pull it off. In fact, Subaru knew that Petelgeuse had once blown up a dragon carriage with his own body. At that time, he had assumed the explosives were rigged to Petelgeuse's body, but…

"It's not impossible for him to have rigged similar devices on the cultists, or the dragon carriages…! Ferris! Can you fly a dragon carriage now and catch up to the evacuation group heading toward the Royal Capital?!"

"It's pretty tough, nya? The Royal Capital group left about an hour and a half ago… and their goal is to evacuate without being found, so they probably won't be flying at top speed."

Originally, the 'Sanctuary Group', whose base couldn't be exposed, and the 'Royal Capital Group', who didn't know that the threat of the fog had disappeared, had different levels of stealth requirements. The Sanctuary Group prioritized not being found, but the Royal Capital Group focused on getting through the highway quickly. There were considerable problems even with just catching up to them.

"Again… Is it happening again? After all this, I'm going to…!"

Would he have to face his loved ones' fates being decided in a place beyond his control once more? Subaru was about to be overwhelmed again by the feeling of his own powerlessness, which he had experienced before. But as he gritted his teeth against the approaching despair,

"May I say something, Mr Natsuki?"

Otto, interjecting in the conversation with a raised hand, had a serious look in his normally gentle eyes. Subaru recognized the change in his demeanor. It wasn't in this world, but in his previous one, during their true first meeting—Otto, who was in a drunken stupor from heavy drinking, had made the same face during their conversation, right before a negotiation.

In other words, he now…

"You're saying you have something you can trade with me right now, Otto?"

"I don't dislike someone who catches on quickly. —Mr Natsuki, I'm currently on the verge of ruin. The cargo I was carrying, I don't know if I'll be able to sell it for next to nothing after missing the timing. I gambled on this profitable venture for a big comeback, but because of my greed, I missed the crucial moment, a huge disaster. They say being alive is a profit, but I'm not in a position to laugh about it."

Otto's situation sounded miserable, more comical than tragic, but Subaru had no time to dwell on it now. He nodded, silently urging him to continue. Otto took a small breath, blinked once, and then looked up again.

"Let's make a deal. If you agree to it, I promise to use my utmost effort to get you to your destination—to catch up with the dragon carriage that went ahead."

"You can catch up… right? How, if we leave now?!"

"I'd like you to give me your assurance before I explain that. That you'll agree to the deal. What I'm offering is something quite significant to me, too. I can't cooperate easily. Even if I were threatened."

"I won't resort to violence. If there's a way, tell me. Whatever conditions you set, if I can do it, I'll do anything."

Grabbing Otto's shoulders, Subaru pressed him for the conditions he was about to state. He had already repeated this five times, and now, Subaru was confident that he had achieved the most complete results ever. Compared to throwing all those results away, how much happier would it be to kick aside despair and make one last push?

At Subaru's plea, Otto stopped breathing for a moment. For him, too, the conditions he was about to offer were a make-or-break moment that could determine the course of his future. He could see a flood of complex emotions passing through his eyes with immense speed in an instant. Overcoming those conflicts, Otto stated his conditions. They were:

"I want Mr Natsuki, as someone affiliated with the Margrave Mathers, to arrange an opportunity for me to meet with Lord Mathers. If possible, I'd also appreciate it if you'd purchase the oil from my cargo as a reward for my efforts this time. …At my asking price, how about it?"

Narrowing his eyes, Otto put on a merchant's face and spoke as if testing Subaru. It was a basic negotiation tactic: to state the maximum demand first and then try to extract concessions from there. Otto himself probably didn't believe for a moment that Subaru would accept such an exorbitant price. However, he also saw that it was possible to extract significant concessions from Subaru given the urgent situation. There was no need for guilt or remorse in exploiting the situation. A merchant on the brink of ruin would be foolish to miss a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

With that resolve, Otto waited for Subaru's next words. And in front of him, Subaru swallowed and said,

"Are you serious, that's all you want again?! Alright, I'll buy anything, and if you want to meet that weirdo, I'll let you meet him as much as you want. The deal's done!"

"Huh? What's that? Scary."

A reflection of his previous iteration—in a way Otto himself couldn't possibly know, the negotiation between Subaru and him once again resulted in Otto's victory. Whether he would be happy about this "win by default" was another story.

4

"I'm sending Ia with you. If it turns out there are magic stones hidden in the dragon carriage, Ia should be able to sense them. Make good use of her."

With those words, Julius entrusted one of the semi-spirits he had contracted with to Subaru. The spirit, glowing with a faint red light, circled above Subaru's head, following Julius's instructions. Eventually, as if satisfied, it landed on top of Subaru's head. It settled there as if it had found its permanent spot. Subaru's scalp felt gradually warm.

"Hey, isn't there a risk of me going bald with this? My biggest life goal is to absolutely avoid being bald and fat."

"Ia won't materialize for very long. If she senses your mana flow, she'll meld in quietly… See, she's already invisible."

Julius laughed off Subaru's concern and pointed, and indeed, the warmth on his head was gone. However, even though she was invisible, he could still feel her presence nearby. Subaru nodded in understanding, wondering if this was what it felt like to be accompanied by a spirit.

“Seriously, are you sure about entrusting a spirit to me?”

“I don’t want to regret letting you go when you have no knowledge of spirits. Ideally, I’d want to go with you, but…”

Julius trailed off, a look of frustration on his handsome face. Subaru understood the source of his vexation. It was the person sitting forcibly on the ground next to him, placing a hand glowing with blue light on his body.

“Don’t say unreasonable things when you’re covered in so many injuries. I can tell even if you’re trying to act tough. Besides, your mana is almost completely depleted. You used too many powerful spells, didn’t you?”

“I had assistance from the Buds. I used very little of my own magical power. Though, seeing my state like this, I truly feel I have no talent.”

“That’s just you being sarcastic. Ugh, anyway, are you sure about this?”

Feeling the spirit’s presence beside him, Subaru made one last confirmation with Julius, who was focused on healing. Julius lowered his chin and replied simply, “Yes.”

“I’m lending my beloved child to a friend. I’d like you to treat her with appropriate care, too.”

“Can you please stop calling me ‘friend’ so casually to my face? I let it slide earlier because of the situation, but I’d like to properly discuss that later.”

Subaru replied brusquely to the irksome address. Julius simply met his words with a smile, and an uncomfortable Subaru, trying to deflect, looked at Ferris.

“I’m leaving the others’ treatment to you. Both Julius and those little cat siblings.”

“Aye, aye, Subaru-kyun, be careful, nya. If Subaru-kyun dies, Lady Crusch will surely be disappointed… you know.”

The lowered tone at the end of his remark was a slight concern, but in Ferris’s case, he always had that pleasure-seeking side that enjoyed unsettling Subaru. Ignoring it for the most part and gratefully accepting the important part of his message, Subaru waved to the two and headed for the village entrance. Patrasche and Otto, who was connecting his ground dragon to a dragon carriage, were waiting there.

“Well then, shall we go, Mr Natsuki?”

“Yeah, I’m counting on you for directions and everything else, Otto.”

Climbing into the driver’s seat and sitting next to Otto, Subaru looked forward. Beside Otto’s imposing ground dragon, which was his pride, stood Patrasche with her jet-black body. There was a considerable size difference between them, and Subaru felt some apprehension about them pulling the carriage together, but…

“The Divine Protection of Wind Protection works on ground dragons, so there’s no problem even with two creatures of different sizes pulling together. Both are females, and from what I ‘heard,’ their relationship doesn’t seem to be bad.”

Perhaps sensing Subaru’s question from his expression, Otto, who was now in the driver’s seat, said that as he gripped the reins. Subaru tilted his head, finding the word “heard” that Otto used rather odd.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, I was just thinking that the Divine Protections in this world are incredible. I guess I should think of them as a kind of talent, but there’s just too much that’s beyond my common sense.”

“You talk about the Divine Protections in this world as if they’re someone else's problem, Mr Natsuki. Those with Divine Protections have their own struggles, you know. Especially my Divine Protection of the Soul of Language; I couldn't control it when I was little."

Otto chuckled in response to Subaru's admiration and spoke of his own Divine Protection.

Otto's Divine Protection of the Soul of Language. Its disclosure and use were the terms of the deal Otto offered in exchange for his cooperation with Subaru. The effect of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language was simple and clear: it allowed one to exchange "spirit words" with any opponent.

"Even being able to converse with animals, including ground dragons. That's why you could rush here by the shortest route to the Mathers territory."

"I pushed my ground dragon… Frufoo quite hard. I asked birds and insects about shortcuts and bad roads, anything, and I really went all out."

Apparently, he had traveled through what couldn't even be called roads and was the first to arrive in the Mathers territory. The result was being captured by the Witch Cult, as if to say, "Congratulations on winning first place"—it was hardly laughable.

Anyway, according to his Divine Protection,

"Catching up to Emilia-tan and the others who went ahead won't be difficult."

"No, it will be difficult, actually! It's just that there's a good possibility, and besides, cooperating was a condition of our deal just now, so whether it leads to a result or not, and whether the magic stones that might be rigged will explode, are all unknown…"

"Catching up to Emilia-tan and the others who went ahead won't be difficult—!"

"It's annoying when you say it with such a determined face!"

Otto shouted at Subaru’s repeated, overwhelming trust, but there was truly no time to dwell on it. Subaru erased the emotion from his face, took a small, long breath, and said,

“I’m counting on you, Otto. You’re my only hope.”

“…Seriously, that’s a killer line, damn it.”

As if moved by Subaru’s solemn words, Otto sighed with a resigned expression. Then he firmly gripped the reins and commanded the two ground dragons to start running. The carriage was pulled, and Patrasche and Frufoo powerfully pushed off the ground, beginning their pursuit of Emilia and the others.

“Oh, come on, I’ll do it! I’ll do it and make you owe me, and I’ll suck you dry to the bone—!”

Otto’s desperate shout, mixed with the Divine Protection of Wind Protection, echoed into the sky, audible only to Subaru.

5

Following the aforementioned events, Subaru and the others were now racing down the highway, chasing after Emilia’s group. The continuous stretches of rough terrain had been a nightmare, a parade of environments so challenging that, if he were to start recounting them, half a day would be filled with his grievances against Otto.

There were actively suicidal descents down near-vertical cliffs, and navigating dilapidated suspension bridges that looked like they’d collapse any second (and actually did, right after Subaru’s group crossed). He’d braced himself for Return by Death countless times during these life-threatening maneuvers.

However, all that hardship had paid off. Subaru and the others, having entered the halfway point of the Lifaus Highway, were making excellent time. This situation was a miracle, something they probably couldn’t replicate even if asked to perform the same insane sprint again.

“If I don’t convince myself of that, I’ll be too scared to touch

Patrasche ever again!”

Otto was one thing for making the dragon carriage go through such terrible roads, but it was Patrasche and the other dragon that had actually run through those deadly paths, obeying his commands through the reins. If this level of activity was possible depending on the handler, then it was understandable that Subaru felt anxious about how he’d interact with Patrasche in the future.

Anyway,

“Let’s cut through the woods on the left! It’s the shortest way to the Royal Capital!”

“Woods?! That doesn’t even look like a game trail! Are you really sure?!”

“…”

“Why are you silent, you?!”

Ignoring Subaru’s angry shouts, Otto maneuvered the dragon carriage toward the woods. Subaru, resigned to his fate, clasped his hands together, praying he wouldn’t hit any trees directly, and ducked his head in a defensive posture in the back of the carriage. The carriage bounced as it hit a tree root, and the sudden green in his vision confirmed they were in the woods. Entering a heavily obstructed area at top speed seemed like a suicide mission, but to Otto, who could literally communicate with the ground dragons, it seemed to be a routine maneuver. If he was the standard for merchants, then perhaps it was a profession that required more courage than one might think.

“—Mr. Natsuki!!”

As Subaru was lost in thought, Otto’s voice suddenly rang out. Startled by the urgency in his voice, Subaru scrambled toward the driver’s seat. When Subaru poked his head into the driver’s seat, Otto had his hand to his ear, looking around.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

“The trees are noisy, or rather… the birds and insects are making a huge fuss, then they’re gone. And Fulfuu is getting scared too… Something, something’s coming!”

At Otto’s urgent warning, Subaru also held his breath and looked around. However, in a forest where trees covered his entire field of vision, his vigilance was useless. Otto, reading Subaru’s thoughts, nodded and said, “Understood.”

“I’ll veer sideways and get out of the forest immediately. Mr Natsuki, keep an eye on the rear—”

“…No, we don’t need to anymore.”

Subaru stopped Otto with a hand as he tried to change course and give instructions to the ground dragons. His face was turned backward, just as he had been about to guard the rear as Otto instructed, looking at the scenery being left behind by the carriage.

Trees were snapped and sent flying, and the forest died in succession from the brutal force. Destruction surged, the ground directly behind them ripped up, and “it” was heading straight for them, ignoring the surrounding damage.

“Drive faster, Otto. —Don’t let it catch us, no matter what!!”

“Mr Natsuki?!”

Stopping Otto as he turned to look back, Subaru rushed to the back of the carriage and roared at the approaching entity, his face contorted in undisguised fury.

“You—how persistent can you be, you bastard!!”

In Subaru’s line of sight, a vast, pitch-black shadow was writhing.

Extending black demonic hands as if oozing from a corpse, a mass of delusion that had long lost its human form —Petelgeuse’s remnant— was closing in on Subaru from behind.

Chapter 82:
The Gospel Called Love

1

—Horrific, ghastly, ominous.

As Subaru saw the presence looming behind him, these negative emotions flashed through his mind. That's how abnormal Petelgeuse's current form was.

The body, crushed under the rockfall, was half-destroyed. Its right half was mangled, bones exposed, and the scalp peeled back from its head, revealing alternating patches of red and white. Its right leg was missing below the shin, and its dangling limbs showed not the slightest hint of life.

It was a dead person. It was a corpse. The desperate struggle of a cadaver. It was the distorted spirit's final, desperate attempt to cling to life, forcefully possessing another's body and bringing it under its control.

Because—

"—My body! My flesh and my bodyyyy!"

"Don't you remember what a horrible time you had inside me…!"

As he spoke, "inside me" struck Subaru as an awfully worded phrase, even for himself. However Petelgeuse's stubborn persistence was, by far, even more astonishing.

The surrogate body, now a corpse, had ceased all vital functions. Petelgeuse—or rather, the spirit itself inhabiting the body—was using its 'Unseen Hands' on its own flesh, binding its limbs and forcing them to move. It couldn't even control the force precisely; with every movement, the bones of its limbs creaked, and its flesh was squeezed and torn apart.

If this self-destructive act continued, he risked losing the body he possessed and dissipating. But—

“Waiting for a time limit is too tough, isn’t it… Damn it!”

Subaru slammed his fist against the swaying edge of the carriage, grinding his teeth and spitting out his frustration.

To escape the forest, to flee the presence behind them, Patrasche and the others pulling the dragon carriage increased their speed further. With the divine protection of ‘Wind Evasion,’ their speed was truly like the wind itself. However, Petelgeuse, destroying the forest in pursuit, outpaced them.

It was like the last glimmer of life; just as a candle flame burns brightest before flickering out, a malevolent black flame swayed violently.

Pitch-black demonic hands bound its limbs, and a hand plunged into its chest likely served as a substitute for its stopped heart. As an extension of its collapsing body, it stretched along the ground, now merely a mass of shadows—a monster born of obsession and twisted life force.

“Is this a spirit…? Where’s the spirit…? Shouldn’t it be something more sacred?”

The image of a spirit in Subaru’s mind should be brighter, grander, adorned with a fleeting beauty that made one hesitate to touch it.

Yet, what was this? This dim, obsessive, distorted, and ugly existence that filled him with unbearable revulsion just by looking at it, utterly devoid of any grace.

“I really get now how gentle Puck and the quasi-spirits look in comparison.”

“—Mr Natsuki! What’s behind us?!”

Subaru’s annoyed click of his tongue coincided with Otto’s shout. Unable to see directly behind him from the driver’s seat, the nightmare closing in remained out of his sight.

Perhaps, for him, that was a blessing. Waving his hand to stop Otto from leaning out to look back, Subaru raised his voice, determined not to let him see what was behind them.

“Just a big, black beast chasing us. You probably stepped on its tail somewhere you don’t know about. It’s screaming really loud and its face is scary, so it’s best not to look.”

“Are you really trying not to show me?! You’re just saying things that make me obviously curious, though?!”

“Just drive! If I get bitten, you’re next!!”

“Whoa—that’s scary!”

Subaru spurred on Otto, who was gripping the reins, urging him to hasten their pace. But even with Otto’s newfound motivation, it was the two ground dragons at the end of his reins that were running. They were already at full speed and couldn’t be pushed any faster.

Which meant—

“Stopping you, that’s my role, then. My big moment in the final act… How many ‘final acts’ are you gonna make me do?! What part of you is ‘Sloth,’ you useless busybody!!”

“Witch… Satella…! Lo-Lo-Lo-Love me, love, love, love… love me, love, give me love, with love, be loved, I love, love, lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-love, LOOOOOOOOOOOOVVVVVVVEEEEEEEEEEEE!!”

“You and I aren’t loved by anyone! What kind of rom-com tries to crush the heart of the one they love?! I’m done with this!”

Petelgeuse lifted his face, his shriek echoing within a visage that was nothing but a death mask.

He was a dying man, truly betrayed, yet still screaming his unwavering ‘love’ for the Witch. For the first time, Subaru found himself pitying him.

V!c.ll20

His cries for a body, his screams for the Witch's 'love'—behind them lay the yearning to be loved, the insatiable thirst of a spirit rarely perceived due to its bodiless nature, endlessly gnawing at his existence.

—Of course, that doesn't excuse his actions.

"I don't have special moves or super magic. But I'm your opponent. I won't let you get past me, and I'll absolutely not let you meet the person ahead of me…!"

"Mr Natsuki, you really think that of me…!"

"Can you just shut up for a bit?! I'm trying to look cool right now!"

Subaru snapped back at Otto, who seemed to be either teasing or serious, then turned to face Petelgeuse, who was closing in.

Thanks to Julius's interception, the total number of usable 'Unseen Hands' had decreased. Also, since some were being used for his own life support, the number of demonic hands he could use to attack, at a glance, was—seven, the same as at the beginning.

Slowly, Petelgeuse dragged his body forward, clawing at the ground. The raised demonic hand snapped a branch and slammed down from above, cracking the ground. Its fingertips grazed the back of the cargo bed, gouging out the edge regardless of its strength.

If the next strike landed squarely in the middle of the cargo bed, the dragon carriage would surely overturn. Subaru would be thrown off, swallowed by Petelgeuse, and this time, devoured headfirst.

"If he realizes he can't possess my body, then a mutual destruction plan is definitely what he'll go for."

"Mr Natsuki, we're clearing the forest—!"

Simultaneously with Otto's voice, the green of the forest abruptly cleared.

Bursting out of the trees, the carriage accelerated down a grassy slope, sliding as it fell. Petelgeuse, tearing at the earth in pursuit, absorbed fallen trees and rocks into his shadowy mass, becoming a distorted embodiment of evil as he ascended the slope.

—They were out of the forest and onto the main road. Soon, they would catch up with Emilia and the others.

He couldn't let Petelgeuse reach them, or Emilia. Even without knowing the specifics of the Archbishops' 'trials', a tragedy was inevitable.

Therefore, for that reason, then—

"We're out of the forest. —No holding back now!"

"Love! Loving! Only love is everything—!!"

Petelgeuse laughed, shedding tears of blood, his mouth open with missing teeth.

Listening to that piercing voice, Subaru opened a part of the cargo from the back of the carriage. He pulled out something heavy, and the pungent smell that poured out stung his nose.

Then, hugging it, he pointed a finger at the blood-stained face.

"—Burn to ashes, Petelgeuse."

"—!!"

The 'Unseen Hand' stretched upwards, drawing back as if to unleash a destructive waterfall from the sky. However Subaru's movements were faster than its descent.

Raising the pot with both arms, he flashed a wicked grin—and hurled the oil pot.

The black demonic hand descended.

To crush the dragon carriage along with the cargo bed and blow Subaru to pieces.

He straightened his arm and held his index finger like a gun.

A red glow appeared at its tip—a ‘Red’ quasi-spirit, borrowed from Julius, dwelled there.

“Lend me your strength, Julius Juukulius.”

“Yooouuuu—!”

Petelgeuse screamed, an arm descending from directly above. Its appearance was horrendous, like an unspeakable evil god.

His fingertips tingled, burning. The spirit lending him power was named ‘Ia’. So,

“Ia! Ia! Hastur—!!”

An imperfect incantation, an imperfect caster, and an uncontracted quasi-spirit.

A combination of imperfections, yet an act unified by a single will.

To interfere with the world, a single spark was all that was needed.

Mana, on the verge of depletion, interfered with the atmosphere through the spirit’s power, and bursting sparks burned the air, rushing towards Petelgeuse. The gruesome face, smeared with blood and oil, opened wide—

“—Aaaaaaaah!!”

—In that instant, Subaru’s vision was enveloped by a brilliant, expanding red.

Petelgeuse’s entire body, fueled by the oil he’d been doused in, burst into a furious blaze. His body scorched by the undulating flames, Petelgeuse’s inarticulate scream tore through the air.

For Subaru, who had only bare-handed physical attacks and no effective means against a spirit like Petelgeuse, this was the biggest and last blow he could deliver.

At worst, he had considered the possibility that magic-less flames would be ineffective against a spirit, but judging from Petelgeuse's statements about needing a body, he concluded that attacking his near-dead physical form wouldn't be useless.

Seeing him writhe in agony and heat, his dying screams erupting, it seemed his judgment wasn't mistaken.

Without telling Otto, who thought he had unloaded the cargo in the village, one of the oil pots he had brought for some unknown purpose proved useful here. If it was this effective, he thought he should have pilfered two or three more, but he didn't have time for such regrets.

Petelgeuse's raised the 'Unseen Hand', shaking with excruciating pain, swung down like a reaper's scythe.

Petelgeuse, shaking his head as his vision was burned by the flames, wasn't aiming precisely.

Subaru instinctively rolled sideways, making an emergency dodge to the unstable edge of the cargo bed—immediately after, the arm slammed down terrifyingly close, grazing the sole of Subaru's foot.

The wooden cargo bed warped under the impact, the section where the demonic hand struck buckling easily like paper. With half his body showered in splintered wood from the C-shaped gouge in the cargo bed, Subaru gritted his teeth and dragged his right foot deeper into the cargo bed.

"—Ow! Ah, gah!"

His calf was deeply gouged by the grazing fingertips, and profuse bleeding made him break out in a cold sweat. His vision flickered with the pain of flesh being torn and the sensation of blood draining away. He instinctively pressed his palm against it to staunch the bleeding, but without a tourniquet, it was futile.

And above all,

"Give it to me, hand it over, offer it up…"

Burning black fingertips reached for the widely swaying edge of the dragon carriage.

Then, slowly, he raised his upper body, forcibly dragged his torn lower half, and with a sickening squelching sound, the jet-black mass fell onto the cargo bed.

Squirming demonic hands shaped his flabby flesh, and the slender, bone-protruding body of his original host had lost its form. 'Unseen Hands' erupted from his back and sides, and aside from his severed right arm, he now sported four additional demonic hands alongside his original left, giving him a malicious appearance.

He dragged his pulpy lower body, dead from the knees down, with arms protruding from mid-thigh acting as substitutes for his lost legs.

His face, hanging limply, showed only whites of his eyes, and even his tears of blood were half-carbonized by the flames. His entire body was still being licked by tongues of flame, and only the tattered remains of his priestly robes were barely discernible, which only highlighted his ugliness.

A gruesome monster, openly proclaiming its human skin disguise.

"You're in a terrible state, you bastard… Though I'm not one to talk."

Subaru, wincing with pain that threatened to contort his face, stood up, feigning toughness. His leg was still bleeding, so he didn't have much time. However, the same was true for his opponent.

Petelgeuse was already rotting away, and now, drenched in flames, he was on the verge of burning to ashes. He didn't want a prolonged battle either. The confrontation should be over in an instant.

He didn't have many cards left to play. In fact, he had very few.

All Subaru could do was the incomplete magic Shamak, and low-level fire magic borrowed from a quasi-spirit. Beyond that, it was just fighting bare-handed, ignoring the pain.

The options were so few it was almost laughable, but he had to use one of them to break through this situation. He had exhausted all his strategies. All that was left was cunning.

“Myyy, bodyyy, won’t disappear… I cannot, cannot disappear…”

“That’s why! I told you you’d just get hurt if you entered my body! What about the Witch? You and I are just being tossed around!”

Dragging himself forward, Petelgeuse stumbled over his words, still seeking Subaru’s body. Subaru roared back at his persistent figure, trying to break the madman’s spirit.

However, Petelgeuse’s reaction to the roar was different this time:

“—Witch, Satella.”

He suddenly muttered in a clear voice, and Petelgeuse raised his face.

Half-collapsed, his face missing a cheek and revealing its interior, it closely resembled an anatomical model he had seen in school. With the inside of his skin exposed, Petelgeuse’s inverted eyes returned.

His unfocused eyes wavered, gradually forming an image of Subaru.

“You are, dangerous… Dan-Dangerous, dan-dangerous, dan-dan-danger-danger-danger-danger-danger-danger-danger-dan-dangerous!”

“Huh—?!”

“Receiving favor, receiving, having received it. Denying love, and me, me me me, pushing me, pushing me to this extent, death death death death death death death death death death death death hee —”

“—!”

Petelgeuse’s head bobbed erratically, spouting incoherent words. Suddenly, an arm shot out from his body towards Subaru, grazing his shoulder and side and piercing the wall behind him. —It wasn’t so fast that it was invisible. He just couldn't react because there was no wind-up.

The current Petelgeuse's thoughts were so chaotic that his movements could no longer be gauged by normal senses. He always had the danger of doing something unpredictable the next moment, but when his movements reached a dimension where they couldn't be anticipated, Subaru was helpless.

The 'Unseen Hands' were still stretched out, sandwiching Subaru, forming a straight path between the two facing each other at the front and back of the cargo bed.

If he just slowly closed the distance, Subaru would be swallowed without being able to resist.

Before, when his instincts —his desire for a body— were rushing ahead, he probably would have attacked Subaru more primally. This situation, born from regaining some intellect after hearing the Witch's name, was simply worse.

"To the Witch, the Witch, Satella, Satella, loved, love, love! I love her! I am loved! Satella, you, you made me, me me me me! I haven't forgotten for a moment, I haven't forgotten… Even if you forget, I, haven't forgotten!"

Tears flowed. Not tears of blood, but real tears.

Truly, for the first time at this point, Petelgeuse screamed words of sanity.

Words, will, dragged Petelgeuse from the insane darkness back to reality. Petelgeuse's murky eyes held a clear will as he glared at Subaru,

"You are dangerous! Eventually, you will be a threat to the Witch Cult! Before that! Before you, before you lay a hand on Satella! Here! Right here! By my hand! With my diligence! To break away from my 'Sloth' and make my love true… you will die!!"

His upper body swayed violently back and forth, and copious blood gushed from Petelgeuse's entire body. It was rupturing his flesh from within, a sign that the accumulated energy of his ‘Unseen Hands’ was about to burst out. Petelgeuse was now less interested in seizing Subaru’s body than in killing Subaru to leave no worries for the Witch he worshipped.

It was a deliberate, intelligent thought, separating him from a beast.

“If you had stayed a monster, I would’ve lost.”

Subaru drew his hand from his pocket, and Petelgeuse’s eyes widened at what he held.

Subaru felt a pang in his heart at his reaction. He turned away, refusing to acknowledge the fleeting sentiment, and swung his arm wide.

From the end of his arm, swung straight up, a black-bound book — the Gospel— was thrown.

“Ah… Satella.”

The word that escaped Petelgeuse’s lips was a low, quiet sound, exactly like someone calling a deeply beloved person in comfort.

Looking up at the sky, Petelgeuse raised his fleshy arms heavenward, and the jet-black demonic hands followed, shooting up to aim for the Gospel suspended in mid-air. His fingertips grazed the cover, and the moment he grasped it, it happened.

The book, thrown high above the cargo bed, fluttered in the wind, on the verge of being blown away by its momentum. That meant it was directly experiencing the resistance of the wind and momentum, and the act of reaching for the Gospel in that state was —

“—?!”

Petelgeuse’s body, which had been looking up, was violently buffeted by the strong wind and tilted sharply backward. His dragging feet shattered the gouged floorboards, and half his body sank as if thrown out.

This phenomenon occurred because his fingertips escaped the effective range of the ‘Windbreak’ divine protection, a natural ability of ground dragons that even affects the running dragon carriage.

Once, in a dragon carriage heading to the royal capital, Subaru had experienced the same situation after a prank.

In the cargo bed of a dragon carriage without a windbreak, without the divine protection, one would directly experience the full force of the wind pressure and shaking at top speed, making it impossible to maintain one’s posture.

“—Oh, ohhhhh!!”

The moment Petelgeuse tilted sharply, Subaru roared and lunged forward.

He forgot the pain in his gouged foot and torn shoulder, springing out as if catapulted. He had no grand techniques to determine victory or defeat. Therefore, he couldn’t afford to miss the decisive moment.

This was the only instinct Subaru had gained from repeatedly traversing the boundary between life and death.

Running, Petelgeuse raised his face towards the approaching Subaru and opened his mouth, shouting something. Subaru heard nothing. He just frantically lowered his stance, plunging headfirst towards Petelgeuse’s chest.

An ‘Unseen Hand’ was launched. The speed of the outstretched palm was slow, even appearing to stagnate due to his extreme concentration.

He tilted his head. His body wouldn’t move as he wished. The palm would avoid a direct hit, but it was in a position that would surely graze his cheek and neck. He knew the pain was coming. There was a pressure that made him want to close his eyes.

In such a situation, he couldn’t help but remember something. A memory of constant, excruciating pain. It was a bygone era, and he had always thought of it as a meaningless time, but—

"—Wilhelm-san taught me two things."

The palm arrived. The surface of his tilted neck, and parts of his cheek and ear, exploded with a pain like being pressed by burning iron. His thoughts ignited with pain, and his vision began to flash white.

He dodged it. He took a breath. It wasn't over yet.

"That I have absolutely no talent for swordsmanship, and…"

His thoughts burned with pain, then relaxed with relief. As these two sensations fought to seize his consciousness, Subaru looked straight ahead.

Beyond the dodged palm, another palm aimed directly for Subaru's face this time—

"—To have the guts not to close my eyes when I get punched!!"

He shouted, lowering his head and ducking. The pain of the palm grazing the back of his neck, yet he gritted his teeth. Ahead, Petelgeuse's eyes widened in astonishment. Inside his no-longer-human body, only his face, with its exposed bones and muscle fibers, seemed to retain a hint of humanity.

"—!"

A full-swing punch slammed into his face, delivering a fatal blow to Petelgeuse's already tilting body—the impact caused his receding body to stumble heavily on the broken floor, and he was thrown out of the dragon carriage. And then,

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—"

Hanging upside down, Petelgeuse was dragged by the dragon carriage. A part of his priestly robe snagged on the damaged edge of the cargo bed, keeping his body tethered to the carriage while being scraped along the ground.

Blood scattered, flesh burst, and even the ‘Unseen Hands’ that formed his body peeled away, as Petelgeuse’s existence disintegrated. Still, Petelgeuse, upside down, lifted his collapsing face and glared at Subaru on the cargo bed,

“End, end, unending, not ending, not ended, is, it, not?!”

“—No, it’s over now.”

Looking down at the incredibly tenacious Petelgeuse, Subaru suddenly noticed something in the corner of the cargo bed—the Gospel, which Petelgeuse had reached for and surely grasped, had fallen there.

He picked it up and flipped through the pages. In the latter half, he encountered blank pages.

“Gospel, that, that is… it shows me the future, affirms my actions, tells me how to repay my love, my love is… ah!”

“So you were acting according to this? —Then,”

Petelgeuse moved his shoulder as if reaching for the Gospel. But his right arm was already gone, and his left arm, which had been about to fall off, had lost everything from the upper arm down due to friction with the ground. Losing all his limbs, even his ‘Unseen Hands’, Petelgeuse, on the verge of fading away, clung to the Gospel one last time.

Subaru held open the blank page for him to see, scooped up the blood flowing from his own neck with a finger, and then forcefully pressed it onto the Gospel, marking it with crimson.

“Here, you ‘end’—!”

The word “End” was boldly etched in red characters on the blank, open page.

Seeing it, Petelgeuse’s eyes widened and his lips trembled. The wave of emotions spreading through his eyes was too complex for Subaru to decipher anymore.

Before that surge of passion could be put into words, the end arrived.

The dragon carriage bounced, and the hem of Petelgeuse's robe, caught on the cargo bed, came loose. This caused Petelgeuse's body to fall to the ground, and his torn, extended robe, before hitting the earth—got caught in the spinning wheel of the dragon carriage.

Dragged by the entangled robe, Petelgeuse's light body, devoid of blood and limbs, was pulled closer to the wheel. The end was in sight. The sound of tearing fabric mingled with the splattering of blood, and in his final moments, Petelgeuse looked up at Subaru and screamed.

"—Natsuki Subaru—!!"

A shriek echoed, transforming directly into a death throe.

Still screaming Subaru's name, Petelgeuse's body, along with his scream, was swallowed by the wheel, caught and crushed, blood and fragments of flesh scattering as his life ended.

His physical body disappeared, and his existence as a spirit, which had resided within it, also dispersed, swept away in that spectacular demise.

At the very last, one of the 'Unseen Hands' stretched out before Subaru.

Its palm stopped just short of gripping Subaru's face, then vanished, crumbling away from its fingertips. This truly signified the complete disappearance of Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.

This time, just sleep, for good… Petelgeuse.

Convinced it was over, Subaru collapsed onto the cargo bed.

Immediately, the pain he had ignored until now resurfaced, and Subaru was half-crying from the pain—no, he was rolling around in tears.

"It hurts, this is bad, I'm gonna die, I'm really gonna die, this hurts, this is bad, this is bad…!”

The tears wouldn’t stop. The pain wouldn’t stop either. His bleeding wounds throbbed, and that pain stimulated his entire body without mercy. So, the pain in his chest was just an extension of the pain from his wounds.

There was nothing to pity. The madman, the mad spirit Petelgeuse, had no redeeming qualities worthy of sympathy. He rampaged in his self-righteousness and then met his end.

Screaming of blind love, acting selfishly, and then rotting away alone.

No one needed to pity Petelgeuse’s fate.

—No one but Subaru had to feel that way.

“Nobody’s gonna understand you. You deserved to die. You deserved to kick the bucket. Nobody, nobody will ever forgive you. —So, I pity you, that’s all.”

A lonely monster, understood by no one, unable to give love to the one he sought it from.

Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti had truly vanished this time.

Leaving nothing behind in anyone’s heart or mind.

Only in Subaru’s chest, he drove a wedge of pity, truly, this time.

2

“Mr Natsuki, you’re covered in an insane amount of injuries, are you alright?”

“Of course I’m not alright! I cried my eyes out, I tell ya! It was the biggest bawl-fest since the anesthetic wore off while I was getting a cavity drilled. Right now, every single one of my wounds is singing a chorus of ‘It hurts! It hurts!’”

Subaru moved from the half-destroyed cargo bed to the driver’s seat, nervously stemming the bleeding from his wounds with the first-aid supplies Otto offered. Merchant journeys apparently come with their share of dangers, so it seems these medicines and tools are always kept on hand. He was certainly saved by Otto's thoroughness.

"I don't know how well otherworldly medicine will suit my body, though. This ointment, is it okay for sensitive skin? My skin is actually pretty delicate."

"It's medicine that activates mana in your body to speed up wound healing. You're so battered that it hurts just looking at you, so treat it quickly. Chop chop."

"Alright, alright. What's the deal, just a little joke… Ow! What is this?! Oh, this is bad! It hurts! It stings! Hey, it stings, I'm gonna dieeeeee!"

"Effective medicine is usually incredibly stingy. The pain will disappear soon. —Until then, you'll experience hellish agony."

Otto grinned, a look on his face like he'd finally gotten his revenge, as Subaru writhed in pain from the wound medicine. Subaru, wiping away fresh tears with his fingers, saw a devil in Otto's profile.

"So, how far behind are we?"

"We're not behind at all. In fact, thanks to both ground dragons doing their best in the face of an extraordinary crisis, we're doing quite well… Seriously, what was chasing us?"

"A sloth. Don't you know them? They hang upside down from tree branches, long arms and all."

Otto let out a small sigh at Subaru's playful answer, then seemed to give up on further questioning and glared ahead. Following his gaze, Subaru also looked forward, staring intently at the grasslands of the Lifaus Highway. The road stretched as far as the horizon, and he still couldn't see the shadow he sought, but—

"I'll definitely catch up. This time, I'll save you."

He mumbled, then slapped his cheek to renew his resolve. A sharp pain shot through his wound, but thanks to the medicine, the bleeding had already stopped, and he only ended up half-crying.

“Do you think we’ll make it?”

“We will make it!”

Otto’s words weren’t born of weakness, but rather a test of Subaru’s determination. It was likely meant to gauge Subaru’s resolve and, in turn, affirm his own course of action.

Subaru sniffled, twisted the corner of his mouth, and revealed a toothy grin.

“It’s about time Rem got tired of waiting for good news. A man’s gotta live up to expectations, right?”

“Is that the name of the girl you’re in love with?”

“That’s the name of the girl who’s in love with me!”

Otto looked momentarily dumbfounded, hearing Subaru say it so boldly, without self-consciousness or embarrassment. Then, a wide grin broke out on his face.

“Ah, well, you certainly can’t help but try to look cool for her, can you!”

Otto exclaimed cheerfully, and the reins were given a strong vertical shake, making a dry sound.

The two ground dragons neighed, and the speed of the dragon carriage, cutting through the wind, increased even further.

They raced, and raced, flying down the road as the dragon carriage sped on.

To find that precious thing, now far off in the distance beyond the horizon.

Time passed moment by moment. However Natsuki Subaru looked forward.

Natsuki Subaru simply, wholeheartedly, looked forward.

Chapter 83:
Comparing Answers

1

The dragon carriage picked up speed, the violent shaking and the roar of the wind filling the cargo hold.

“Whoa—!”

“It’s okay, hold on tight. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Emilia offered a brave smile, huddling with the children and enduring the jolts. Seeing her smile, Petra, whose eyes were clouded with anxiety, bit her lip and nodded. “Mm-hm.”

She’s a strong child, Emilia thought, feeling a surge of strength from the girl’s attitude. The other children, too, seemed to follow the elder girl’s lead, huddling together and biting back their fear.

Every one of these children was strong. Despite being on the verge of tears from anxiety and fear, not one succumbed to weakness; they stifled their cries, maintaining their composure. It was precisely the children’s strength before her that allowed Emilia to maintain her own composure, unwilling to show a pathetic display.

Normally, a moving dragon carriage should be protected by the ground dragon’s “Windbreak” divine protection. This divine protection also applies to carriages accompanied by ground dragons, designed to protect those under its care from external forces—such as wind resistance and vibrations. However, this particular dragon carriage was currently outside the “Windbreak” divine protection, and Emilia and the children inside were directly bearing the full brunt of its movement.

The reason the divine protection had ceased was simply because the dragon carriage had stopped once. The ground dragon’s “Windbreak” divine protection is contingent on the ground dragon’s continuous movement; it’s a divine protection that remains active as long as the dragon is running. However, once movement stops, the divine protection's effect ceases, and there's a drawback: it takes a while for it to reactivate.

Given this, it was common sense for a dragon carriage that had stopped to wait until the divine protection could reactivate before setting off again.

"—!"

However this dragon carriage, rushing ahead, couldn't afford even that brief stop. Emilia squeezed the warmth of the hand she held, confirming its presence, then lifted her face, listening intently to the situation outside the carriage, beyond the canopy.

The dragon carriage Emilia and the others were riding in was originally used for peddling, so naturally, the cargo area, excluding the driver's seat, wasn't designed for comfort. The cargo hold, protected by a canopy to prevent damage to its contents, had no small windows, and the only light source in the sunless interior was the faint glow of the brought-in lagmite ore. They had layered blankets on the floor to create makeshift seats, and everyone sat huddled together on them. Besides Emilia, there were seven children, and the driver was a young man from the village's youth association.

Their dragon carriage led a line of about four others carrying villagers and merchants, all escorted by knights riding ground dragons individually. Two hours had passed since they left the village under the guise of evacuation to protect themselves from bandits in the territory. The previously calm situation had drastically changed just about ten minutes ago.

To avoid provoking the group hiding in the forest, the convoy of dragon carriages prioritized stealth as much as possible when leaving the mansion and village. The total of twelve evacuation carriages eventually split into two groups: the Royal Capital group and the Sanctuary group, diverging paths with Ram and the others leading the Sanctuary group in just over an hour. For the next hour, even though they couldn't see outside, the carriages' journey along the road should have been relatively peaceful, but then,

"—Lady Emilia, may I have a moment?"

A light touch on her back informed Emilia that the dragon carriage had stopped. Before she could even question what that meant, a white-haired old man peered in, pulling back the rear canopy of the carriage.

The old man, who introduced himself as Wilhelm van Astrea, was a knight from the Crusch faction. Even though she was inexperienced, Emilia, as someone who knew battle, could instinctively feel the exceptional skill of this man, who wore a gentle smile. Because of this, Emilia couldn't help but feel an unnecessary tension when interacting with him. Even now, her response was a beat late when she saw the person who had called out to her.

Emilia took a moment to utter a short "Yes." The old gentleman, however, simply nodded slightly without dwelling on it.

"A slight concern has arisen. Therefore, I would like to take a few knights to 'survey' the area. If I may have your permission?"

"Survey…?"

"Yes, a 'survey.' It won't take much time. We intend to catch up and rejoin you immediately. Is that acceptable?"

Wilhelm's deferential tone, accompanied by a bow, made Emilia thoughtful. She sensed an oddness in the old man's word "survey" and quickly realized it was out of consideration for the children around her. Wilhelm chose to let Emilia and the others, his protection targets, go on ahead without using direct words. If he were to take forces to deal with this "concern," it meant…

"Am I… not needed?"

She couldn't help but voice the question, even though she knew it was rude given his consideration. Hearing Emilia's words, Wilhelm narrowed his eyes. It was the kind of reaction he had anticipated. However,

"Lady Emilia, please continue evacuating by carriage. I entrust the children to you."

A faint smile touched Wilhelm's lips, and in his eyes, as he looked at Emilia, there was none of the negative emotion Emilia had expected. There was only a broad, loving glow, like that of an adult watching over a difficult child, which confused Emilia.

Without allowing her to pursue the reason for her confusion, Wilhelm withdrew his hand from the canopy and turned his back to her.

"Since we've stopped, the journey ahead will likely be quite bumpy. Please, do not let go of the children's hands."

"Oh…"

"It must be a master-servant bond, indeed. Your eyes are so much like his."

With that last, reflective murmur, Wilhelm's figure was obscured by the canopy and vanished. Emilia furrowed her brows, not understanding the meaning of his murmur, but the sensation of the dragon carriage starting up again quickly distracted her.

And so, the story returns to the present situation: thrown into a violent shaking and the roar of the wind, huddled together with the children.

Wilhelm had left the carriage convoy with several knights, leaving only two knights to guard the evacuation group. Emilia could tell that the villagers in the following carriages were experiencing the same jolts—that is, the same anxiety—as those in this leading carriage. She couldn't see outside, but she had a way of knowing:

"Hey, someone bumped into the old men and someone else in the back. It's a fight."

"Can you tell how many?"

"There are eight of us, and sixteen enemies… exactly double. But I don't think it'll be a problem, will it? That old man was seriously amazing."

Emilia responded to Puck, who was sending her jocular thoughts, with a nod of her chin. This was a telepathic conversation with Puck, who wasn't materialized, and Puck could grasp the situation outside to some extent through the mana filling the atmosphere. Through him, Emilia was learning about the external situation and trying to understand what was happening.

The presence of Puck, a high-ranking spirit, consumes a considerable amount of mana just by materializing. In combat, his mana consumption doubles, making it extremely difficult for Emilia to maintain his presence for extended periods. Therefore, given the pressing situation, Puck's form was currently sealed within the crystal stone, his vessel. This was to preserve enough power for him to act at full strength in an emergency.

"Well, it's also to prevent me from innocently appearing in front of the kids and being used as a toy, you know."

"You do have a look children would like, Puck, so if it could ease the minds of anxious children, that might not be a bad thing."

"You're thinking scary thoughts, my daughter. Anyway, that's what it's like outside."

Puck responded to Emilia's lighthearted remark—or rather, her lighthearted thought—and Emilia inwardly nodded, biting her lip at her own powerlessness. To Emilia, who had offered her assistance, Wilhelm had chosen to refuse, even though he understood her intentions. This didn't indicate her lack of ability, but rather, more accurately, a lack of trust. Even if Wilhelm was acting favorably, considering Emilia's position, he couldn't simply accept her proposal. Though they were allies, Emilia and their master would ultimately become political rivals. The difficulty of forming a purely friendly relationship between them had been, unexpectedly, made clear to her.

Now, that shackles of her position were utterly frustrating. She didn't possess the abilities befitting that position, nor could she wield authority. Both inside and out, she was known to be a mere ornament, and frankly, she didn't even flatter herself into thinking she was suitable. Because of such hindrances, her freedom of action was restricted, and even now, she couldn't help the children reaching out with trembling hands. In such a state, for what purpose was she even…

"—Subaru."

The moment she whispered the boy's name, Emilia realized her own incorrigibility. The shame of calling that name in this situation, and the foolishness of having thrown away her right to do so, made her feel as if her world had gone dark.

Her weakness and baseness: in a dire situation, she was clinging again to the boy she had abandoned. After having hurt him so terribly with her words, leaving an indelible wound, tearing at his heart, and pushing him away, how could she possibly call his name? If she had any right to call his name now, if there was any situation where she was permitted to call his name, it would be—

"Everyone's okay, don't worry! No matter what happens, miss will protect you all!"

—Only when she could move, having resolved to protect someone, just like that boy. At Emilia's call, the children, who had huddled close and held hands, looked up. Their eyes were filled with tears, and their lips, which had trembled with anxiety, were bitten tight. But upon seeing Emilia's violet eyes, those expressions vanished, and they nodded to each other, speaking in unison:

"We're, we're okay—!" "Miss, you shouldn't worry about us!" "W-We promised, so we're fine, and we'll never let go!"

The children clung to Emilia, their voices clearly a bluff. Emilia stiffened in surprise, never having experienced so many people clinging to her fingers, wrists, shoulders, and waist, feeling so much body heat. Yet, it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. Only, for some reason, their words had an indescribable oddness to them.

"Promise…? You promised someone? What did you promise?"

"Not to let go of the missus." "That if we don't stay with her, she'll do something reckless." "That someone needs to watch her, because they're worried about her."

Emilia was startled, and her face turned pale at the successive answers. While feeling a strange defiance towards those words, she bit her tongue, realizing she genuinely didn't know what she would have done without the children. Was this also Ram's instruction, perhaps? But she wondered if Ram even had that much time. Besides, the way they phrased it was like…

"…"

At that point, a strange premonition caused a faint pang in Emilia's chest. Once she noticed it, the pang accelerated its insistence, chipping away at Emilia's patience, making her eyes waver with confusion. Closing her lips as if in deep thought, Emilia then moistened them with her tongue. Her lips, drier than she'd realized, relaxed with the moisture, and with a sigh, she posed her question.

"Who said they were worried about me…?"

"Oh, no, that's…!"

Petra's expression changed, and she instantly tried to cut off the words. Her reddish-brown hair, shoulder-length, swayed as she clung to Emilia, trying to stop her, but it was too late.

"Subaru—!" "Subaru said it—!" "That the missus gets lonely, so he's worried—!" "Subaru… oh, was that not supposed to be said…?"

The children blurted out the name, vying for first, and when the last child realized her slip and covered her mouth, all of them had a knowing look. Petra covered her face with her palm, muttering "Oops," and Emilia blinked at the name that had been uttered so many times.

"Suba…ru…?"

She had a premonition. From the children's words, Emilia recalled his image. But a feeling of denial had rushed ahead; that couldn't be right. After all, Emilia had hurt him with terrible words and left him behind at the royal castle. There, where he most certainly wanted Emilia to reach out her hand, Emilia had withdrawn hers and turned her back. At the most crucial moment, she had rejected him, the one who most sought someone to cling to.

Why would his name come up now, at this moment when she resented her own powerlessness the most? That shouldn't be happening. That couldn't be happening.

Emilia's life had been devoid of expectations. If she hoped, she was betrayed; hopes quickly wore thin and lost their shine. Through numerous experiences, Emilia had come to accept this sad reality as inevitable. Thus, she instinctively feared holding expectations for those around her. Even when she wished to, fear took precedence, and she couldn't open her hands.

Being distanced, being abandoned—these were commonplace for her. Being approached, being needed—these were unthinkable for her. That's why she rejected Subaru, who acted so familiarly and seemed willing to abandon everything for her. She couldn't believe it. Not his actions, attitudes, or words, but her own heart's capacity to accept them. If she expected, and expected, and expected, and then what she had built up crumbled, Emilia would be overcome with a pain more severe than being cut.

It was this fear that made her refuse to continue facing Subaru. If she were to be pushed away eventually, it was better to push herself away first. Before anything decisive could accumulate between them and then collapse. Yet, why—

"Subaru, was he in the village? Did he come back?"

As the children fell into an awkward silence, only Emilia's stunned murmur escaped. The dragon carriage still hadn't stopped its furious dash, and the reason for it hadn't been shaken off either. She couldn't free the children from their anxiety, yet she couldn't move from her spot.

In the midst of such a situation, her heart was severely shaken by the name she had overheard. The children's silence, by itself, confirmed her current question.

If he —Subaru— had returned to the village and was involved in this evacuation, then everything made sense. Ram, who shouldn't have been able to leave the village, had strangely managed to communicate with the suppression force. The villagers, who should have been growing increasingly anxious and dissatisfied during those troubling days, had followed this evacuation plan without showing reluctance. Even the members of the suppression force, in a land they were visiting for the first time, couldn't have easily created such a situation without conflict with the local residents.

All these difficulties were now resolved by fitting in that one piece: the boy.

If Subaru had led the suppression force back, Ram would have approached negotiations with them without preconceptions. The villagers, who owed Subaru a great debt, would likely be willing to accept his proposal, and they wouldn't treat the suppression force he brought carelessly. More than anything, the stance of remaining in the village with the suppression force, drawing the threat to themselves to allow the villagers and Emilia to escape, was, upon reflection, so utterly him. Too much like him.

It was too much like the Natsuki Subaru Emilia knew.

"Why—"

The murmured words were tinged with pathos, and her violet eyes trembled faintly with emotional upheaval. If these actions were Subaru's, then they were far too consistent with his past actions. Even after she had hurt him so much, caused him so much pain, and made him so sad, why would Subaru still…

She didn't understand why he would try to save her. It was the question she had thrown at Subaru when he was at his lowest, both in mind and body, on the royal selection grounds, on the training ground. At that time, Subaru hadn't given Emilia an answer. The answer he gave made no sense, and the words he tried to rephrase were swallowed, never spoken, leading to their separation.

She posed the question, but no answer returned. So, even now, she remained without that answer. She had believed that ending without knowing was the right path for both of them.

"Why…!"

"That's not…!"

Emilia's choked words made Petra's face flush, and her lips twisted. Emilia gazed at the girl with a pleading look, as if the girl somehow knew the answer to her question. But before either of them could speak,

"—?!"

The dragon carriage swerved violently, throwing Emilia and the others inside around dramatically. Emilia instinctively grabbed the wall, and with her free hand, she hugged Petra beside her. Petra, in turn, hugged the boy next to her, and this chain continued, barely keeping everyone connected. However, before they could feel relief, the carriage continued to swerve. It was as if it was trying to escape something.

"Lia, someone's coming up behind us, really fast—!"

"—!!"

At Puck's warning, Emilia looked up and turned her face towards the rear. Beyond the canopy, which fluttered in the wind, offering glimpses of the outside—there was the cause of this swerving, the figure of something in pursuit.

Emilia instinctively tried to move, to counterattack. But her body, as she tried to stand, was held back by a light weight and couldn't move. She lowered her gaze and saw them: the children huddled close, looking up at her with earnest faces, determined not to let go of her clothes or hands.

"Don't let go!" "Don't leave—!" "Keep your promise!"

The children held Emilia tightly, refusing to let go. Faced with a restraint she could easily shake off, Emilia couldn't move. Petra looked up at her face, her tearful eyes wide.

"Are you going to make Subaru cry this time?!"

"—?!"

A shock ran through Emilia at that cry, and this time, she was truly frozen. The moment she stopped moving, the dragon carriage skidded sideways to a violent halt, and centrifugal force slammed into them. The sudden braking caused the weight to shift, and the light bodies of the children, still clinging to her, lifted and were thrown around. However, being violently thrown to the floor was avoided thanks to the blankets they had spread out. Swallowed by the impact, Emilia shook her head and looked up.

"What in the world…?"

"Lia! They're right behind us!"

Puck, who had materialized in the emergency, floated in the air, pointing behind them in the tilting carriage. Following his voice and movement, Emilia turned her head and instinctively shielded the children behind her, looking at the canopy. A vortex of magic began to rise around her, slowly chilling the small space within the dragon carriage. Then, a presence approached, and the canopy was pulled back. Emilia, about to begin an incantation, was stunned.

"How…?"

Breathing heavily, a boy climbed into the dragon carriage, his shoulders heaving. At his sight, in her confusion, Emilia's violet eyes trembled violently. Her lips quivered, and forgetting the situation, Emilia called out his name in a faint, weak voice.

"—Subaru."

She had called his name.

2

Looking back, Subaru thought, it was a terrible first meeting.

An hour after being summoned to another world, thrown into a situation where he literally didn't know left from right, or even right again, he was completely at a loss. He'd stumbled into an alley, encountered thugs who preyed on the weak like him, and was almost beaten to death, barely hours into his otherworldly trip.

Beaten black and blue, covered in dust and mud, on the verge of death, that's when Subaru encountered that silver gleam.

He remembered every single one of her words, her actions, her nobility from that moment.

And because he could never, ever, ever, ever forget it, Natsuki Subaru was still standing on two feet, alive in this world.

"Mr Natsuki, look—!"

The dragon carriage, carrying Subaru and speeding along the Lifaus Highway, cutting through Petelgeuse's relentless onslaught—Otto, who had been scanning the endless grassland, called out to Subaru in a high voice. Following his cry and gaze, Subaru saw a faint, shimmering shadow barely discernible on the distant horizon. Confirming its definite presence, clearly not an optical illusion, Subaru clenched his fist.

"There! Otto! Full speed ahead!"

"You don't have to tell me, I'm already going all out!"

The reins cracked, a dry sound echoing as the two ground dragons neighed. The black ground dragons stared straight ahead, and Subaru knew they were giving their all to fulfill his intention, standing on the pulling carriage.

Saved by that first encounter, then accompanying her on her search for a while. Even though Subaru was useless, she didn't abandon him, and though she must have been overwhelmed with her own troubles, she didn't give up on herself or Subaru. Subaru learned that she was stubborn, tried to act tough, was obstinate, and yet, kind.

He remembered walking beside her, feeling an uncharacteristic shyness and a pounding in his chest. And he remembered how those sweet feelings were ruined by his own unforgivable actions.

His belly ripped open, sinking into a pool of blood, the sensation of consciousness being snatched away by the burning heat of intense pain and the coldness of blood loss. Yet, her voice, and the moment her body was torn apart, were etched so strongly into his heart that he could never forget them, no matter what.

It was then that he swore. Subaru had indeed sworn.

“I will definitely—save you.”

He had worked tirelessly to keep that vow. Piling up deaths, carving open fate, somehow overcoming the suffering, Subaru had met her, saved her, and gained her smile. Subaru would never forget the deep emotions that moved him in that moment.

Ahead, the scene blurred by the ground dragons’ sprint began to take shape. It was a battlefield: a group in black fighting knights on ground dragons. Several corpses already lay on the ground, and darting around them with incredible speed was—

“—Wilhelm-san!!”

“Subaru-dono?!”

Wilhelm, who had just cut down a single Witch Cultist, cried out in surprise at Subaru’s call from the rushing dragon carriage. He shook the blood from his sword and looked at Subaru’s sudden appearance with a questioning face, but—

“Where’s Emilia?!”

Understanding the urgency in Subaru’s subsequent shout and expression, he immediately cast aside his doubts, pointing his sword further ahead in their direction of travel.

“Straight ahead! Towards the Great Tree!”

Subaru looked up, gazing further beyond the horizon. He realized the Lifaus Highway was already more than halfway to the Royal Capital side—they had reached the vicinity of Flugel’s Great Tree, where the decisive battle with the White Whale took place. Nodding, Subaru sped past Wilhelm and the struggling battleground without slowing down. He didn’t stop to ask about their safety. That would be an insult to their valiant efforts, and above all, Subaru had exchanged the necessary words at their parting.

Subaru had entrusted Emilia and the others to Wilhelm, and Wilhelm had responded, Leave it to me.

Therefore, there was no need for Subaru to stop here, nor for Wilhelm to ask Subaru many questions. Their gazes met for only an instant, and then Subaru's dragon carriage left Wilhelm behind.

The sudden appearance of the dragon carriage made the Witch Cultists pause, and several of them prepared to kick off the ground to pursue it. —However,

"Your opponent is me."

Two black-clad figures, who had carelessly shown an opening, were cut down by the Sword Demon's blade, which had pressed close from directly behind them. The Sword Demon, his body half-stained with blood, looked on with satisfaction as the dragon carriage sped away.

"A perfect opportunity to repay a debt to a benefactor. Fortunately, the person who made the request understands, even without words. —What an honor this is."

Wilhelm held the treasured sword entrusted by his master in his right hand and received a knight's sword, thrown by his subordinate, in his left. He crossed both swords in front of him, and his gaze, beneath the gleam of the blades, pierced through his enemies.

"Who dares interfere with a man going to meet his woman? You, and I, are too bloody to be present at a reunion. —All of you, lay down your corpses and be done with it."

At that death sentence, the Witch Cultists, who should have been emotionless, stiffened. Within the tense atmosphere, the Sword Demon, a smile on his lips, charged forward in a forward-leaning posture. That smile was a complex one, like that of a demon reveling in blood, and also like an old man wryly smiling at his own youthful mistakes.

—The day he truly came to believe he'd live in another world.

Reunited with her, and meeting new faces, Subaru found his place to live. By her side, becoming her strength, doing something for her, even if he couldn't see the future, he was content.

Then those days suddenly fractured, and crushing despair repeated itself. There were people he wanted to believe in, and he pushed himself to protect them, yet there was the pain of not being trusted, almost throwing everything away. And then, there was the acceptance of his weak self. Saved, protected, showing countless uncool sides, and finally standing up. Standing up, running around, getting hurt and starting over, summoning resolve, hoping for the ideal, Subaru once again found daily happiness and spent that time blessed by her side.

"Mr Natsuki, I see them! The evacuation carriages, those must be them!"

"Yeah—no doubt about it!"

Finding the cluster of carriages speeding away from the battlefield, Subaru felt his heart pounding faster. Even before Subaru could put his surging feelings into words, Otto, reading his intention, and Patrasche accelerated the carriage. As the distance rapidly closed, he saw confusion spreading through the group ahead, who had noticed their approach.

The sight of the carriages beginning to swerve filled him with impatience, even though he knew it couldn't be helped. Subaru strained his voice, desperately calling out to the drivers to stop.

"Stop! It's me! I'm not the enemy! Stop, please stop—!!"

It was a desperate plea, but those fleeing were equally desperate. Their intentions remained at cross-purposes, but as they drew almost parallel, the driver finally noticed Subaru.

"Master Subaru—?!"

"Stop! It's an emergency! I need to check inside!"

Sensing something extraordinary in Subaru's urgent face, the driver steered the reins, instructing the ground dragon to stop. Instantly, unable to completely kill its momentum, the dragon carriage swerved violently, bouncing with a tremendous sound, almost flipping over.

"Ia, come out! Otto, unhitch Patrasche!"

Then, impatient to even stop, Subaru leaped from the carriage, which had just begun to slow down. There was no way he could land gracefully; he fell awkwardly, flung by the momentum of inertia—he rolled to absorb the impact, immediately stood up, and rushed to the side of the carriage. He ran to the front carriage, a canopied cart tilted heavily from the impact. Ia, who had flown out from his hair, landed on his fingertip, asserting her presence with a faint, tingling heat.

Feeling reassured by that warmth, Subaru rushed to the carriage, pulled back its canopy, and thrust his head inside. As sunlight pierced the darkness and his vision cleared,

"—Subaru."

When he realized that silver bell-like voice had called his name, Subaru was struck by a shock so profound he felt as though he might collapse right there. In his line of sight, gazing at him with bewildered eyes, was a beautiful girl with silver hair and violet eyes. A single girl whose figure he had chased countless times, for whom he had wished endlessly, and who had broken him again and again, yet he could never give up on her.

Overwhelming emotions pounded in his chest, and Subaru desperately held back the uncontrollable surge of passion that threatened to spill from his lips and the corners of his eyes. He shook his head, instantly casting aside those doubts.

"Ia! Can you tell?!"

The faint glow on his fingertip danced in the air, floating around inside the dragon carriage as if responding to Subaru's call. That fantastical scene of exploration quickly came to an end. Ia's trajectory, as she floated searching for her objective, suddenly became erratic, and the spirit moved closer to the edge of the carriage, rocking up and down as if to indicate something was there.

He rushed over, straining his eyes to find the anomaly at the spot indicated by the quasi-spirit. He saw that one of the floorboards was slightly discolored, and it was a new board, distinct from the others.

"Puck! Can you peel off just this part without damaging the surroundings?!"

"You appear suddenly and then… oh, I see."

Despite the abruptness of Subaru's voice after such a long time, Puck's displeased expression lasted only an instant. The Great Spirit must have sensed the same thing the quasi-spirit felt beneath the floorboard Subaru pointed to. Waving his small hand, a converging torrent of mana froze one of the floorboards. Subaru then stepped on it, breaking it open, and reached his hand into the created hole. And then,

"—Found it!"

Pulling a burlap sack from the bottom of the hole, Subaru hastily peered inside. Just as Otto had described, it was packed tightly with magic ore. The faint, glowing ore seemed to be gradually increasing in temperature even now—no, in fact, it was clearly beginning to emit intense heat.

—Perhaps it was time-limited, or finding and taking it out was the cause, or maybe the current impact to the carriage triggered it.

Whatever the reason, the magic ore in his hand had become hot—meaning it had undeniably entered the sequence of imminent detonation.

"Puck, stopping this explosion is…"

"Stopping it is probably impossible. But I could protect everyone completely.”

Puck shook his head at the plea, but hinted at a trump card, guaranteeing Emilia’s safety. This likely meant Puck would manifest in his true form and, with his colossal power, forcefully protect everyone from the explosion—a desperate measure. Subaru understood the principle, and indeed, he knew Puck could do it. But,

“No, that won’t work!”

Shaking his head, Subaru rejected Puck’s proposal. He believed that plan could indeed protect everyone. However, if he allowed it, everyone present would witness Puck in his Great Spirit form, and that monstrous appearance would be etched into everyone’s memory. The immense power, and the existence of Emilia, the contractor who commanded it. For her, who still carried a deep rift in her relationship with the villagers, how profoundly would that impression affect her?

He pressed a hand to his forehead, his thoughts racing. Think of a way. The total amount of magic ore is considerable; if mishandled, this entire area could become a scorched wasteland. In a situation on the verge of explosion, it’s doubtful whether the idea of throwing it far away is even feasible. On the other hand, if I leave everything to Puck, it will cast a shadow of anxiety over Emilia’s path. Even if I accept that lives are irreplaceable, it’s too soon to give up before even thinking. Subaru has no right to judge whether something is irreplaceable or not. So he would think. For her sake, for Emilia’s sake, this time, truly, in the deepest sense, what he could do for her.

“—I see.”

A murmur escaped him. Only one thought had flashed into his mind. Whether it could be put into practice was ambiguous; it was a conclusion that could only be called absurd. But if there was a possibility, this was the only method he could think of, and by some miracle, a chance of success remained.

The moment the idea struck him, Subaru’s body moved as if propelled. He picked up the heavy burlap sack, difficult to lift with both hands, and prepared to leap out of the carriage with it. Then, from behind him,

“Wait…!”

Emilia called out, her voice trembling, stopping him. His feet, which shouldn’t stop, did. His body, which shouldn’t turn, did. His eyes, which shouldn’t meet hers, looked directly into them. In a moment when there was no time for words, they were about to exchange them.

“Subaru… why…!”

That “why” contained not just the immediate “why” of this moment, but every “why”—why he had rushed in this instant, why he had created this situation, and surely, reaching back even further, a re-examination of the exchange they’d had in that room in the royal castle.

At that time, Subaru couldn’t give her an answer. All the disorganized emotions from that time resurfaced. Each and every one of them wasn’t entirely wrong, but they weren’t entirely right either. It was a chance he’d gained only once, then lost again, a scene he’d postponed. Meeting Emilia again, having the chance to speak, there were mountains of feelings and words he wanted to convey. Like stars. So many that even if he poured them all out, they would never run dry.

Countless words came to mind, rising to his lips only to vanish. All his profound emotions, the feelings he had accumulated, his whole being had longed for this moment. What should he say, what should he convey? What words should he choose, what attitude should he take?

“Why…?”

The question again. He took a small breath, and then Subaru uttered just a few words.

"—I love you, Emilia."

—That was the one and only meaning for Subaru to live, bruised and broken as he was.

3

With one breath, he dove through the canopy, tearing it, and leaped from the dragon carriage.

The moment the sunlight seared his eyes, causing him to wince, a dark body stood before Subaru, shielding him from the light. It was Patrasche. His companion, even before hearing Subaru's voice, had turned her back as if sensing everything.

He reached out, scrambling onto Patrasche's back as if flying. He hugged the hot burlap sack, sandwiching it between his chest and Patrasche's back, then gripped the reins and pulled them tight. The ground dragon neighed, and after a beat, Patrasche began to run, heading straight for the sun.

Behind him, Otto looked surprised by Subaru's actions. The young man with the buzz cut, who had been driving, stood dumbfounded. Then, bursting through the canopy, the children and Emilia leaped out. He could hear voices, calling his name. He didn't look back; he couldn't.

He had left behind all the feelings he needed to convey, all the words he wanted to say. There was nothing more for Subaru to do there. Now, there was only what he had to do.

Patrasche became the wind. Due to the earlier stop, the "Windbreak" blessing wasn't active, and the jolts and wind relentlessly assailed Subaru, threatening to throw him off. But the jet-black ground dragon skillfully protected her master, and Subaru, placing all his trust in her, surrendered himself to her movements.

Swirling with the jolts and wind, Subaru gazed intently forward. It must be there. His certainty quickly turned into fact, and Subaru urged Patrasche toward the object that had entered his sight.

The heat radiated by the magic ore; the ore, glowing red through the burlap sack, began to scorch Subaru's stomach and Patrasche's back. He gritted his teeth, wrapping his arms tightly to ensure he wouldn't drop it. Amidst the encroaching pain, Subaru saw it through his tearing eyes.

—It was the legendary Great Tree, which had lain broken from its roots for countless years, and at its base lay the corpse of a massive witchbeast, its head missing.

They must have put all their effort into transporting the head. The remaining colossal body was frozen solid with an astonishing density to prevent decay, and the chilling air around it was so intense that his breath turned white just by getting close. Subaru urged Patrasche towards the side of that giant mass of flesh, aiming for the center of the lying White Whale's carcass—where a deep wound, caused by the Sword Demon's strike, existed.

"—!"

Leaping from Patrasche's body, Subaru shoved the burlap sack into the wound. Despite the frozen body, the opening was large, enough to completely engulf the sack. Instantly turning, Subaru grabbed Patrasche's reins and swiftly turned her around. They circled the carcass and plunged to the other side of the fallen Great Tree.

Dragging Subaru, who was half-hanging, Patrasche galloped across the grassland. The convergence of mana could be felt behind them, and both Subaru's and the ground dragon's throats let out roars. Only the violent tremors and the sound of the wind enveloped the world. His body was swept along by the movement, and he knew he had reached his destination with the sensation of impact.

His body pressed hard against the tree trunk, and Patrasche, curled up, covered Subaru's body from above. —The next moment,

"—!!"

A violent impact and blast, a deafening explosion, roared across the road, and a wave of heat leaped over the carcass and the great tree, scorching Subaru's and Patrasche's skin. Through his closed eyelids, a red glow threatened to pierce his deep-set eyeballs, but Subaru held fast to the crushing weight, gritting his teeth and enduring the pain. His entire body felt as if it would be torn away by the shockwave, experiencing the sensation of even this immense tree being greatly moved by the explosive force, and then, gradually, the shock and heat wave subsided—.

"—?"

Realizing that all sensation had vanished, Subaru raised his head in a daze. He tried to speak, but the ringing in his ears was so intense he heard nothing. Nothing appeared in his open eyelids; his optic nerves must have suffered severe damage. His outstretched hand touched the ground dragon's skin beside him, and the mere fact that its body had indeed moved registered in his palm, allowing his shoulders to relax in relief.

He couldn't see anything, couldn't hear anything. But he was alive. Patrasche, apparently, was also alive.

He felt something wet repeatedly stroking his sooty face. He couldn't see, but it might have been Patrasche's tongue. A feeling of finding it adorable, like a dog, mixed with the terror of his skin being sandpapered, welled up simultaneously. However, his voice and fingers couldn't move to stop it.

He was truly exhausted. So many things, too many things, had piled up. Maybe he could rest for a little while now. He felt his consciousness slowly drifting away, surrendering himself to the approaching darkness. His vision wouldn't clear. His body wouldn't move. His ears still heard nothing.

"—!"

Only a faint vibration of the atmosphere brushed his skin, and his head, somehow moving, turned towards it. He heard nothing. He shouldn't have heard anything, yet for some reason, he felt incredibly good. He heard nothing. Now, nothing—

"—Subaru!!"

Ah, what was that? —He did hear it, didn’t he?

With that final sigh of relief, Subaru’s consciousness plunged into a deep, deep sleep.

Chapter 84:
A Story That's Just That

1

—Before Subaru knew it, his consciousness was once again drawn into a world of darkness.

A consciousness adrift, vague and wandering. Stripped of every organ—hands, feet, eyes, ears—the existence known as Natsuki Subaru floated in the void, a mere name-bound awareness.

In this world, there was never a ground, nor an end in sight. Only an endless expanse of darkness, stained in jet black, with shadows consuming everything.

However, though Subaru had been summoned here unconsciously as before, there was one clear difference this time.

Previously, his memories would be vague, and even possessing his own will was difficult within that eternal night. Yet now, Subaru could clearly perceive his own existence.

With no hands, feet, or body, he couldn't translate his will into action.

Still, he was permitted to guide his will toward thought, to ponder with reason.

A ephemeral dream world, forgotten upon waking.

The garden of shadows, always bringing a constricting nostalgia to Subaru.

The beloved 'someone' he encountered every time he came here, whose face and voice remained unknown.

He watched as the darkness before him shimmered, and shadows slowly began to form a human shape.

A slender body was born from the jet black, with a right hand and a left hand distinctly connected to the body, forming it. The being that was once only a single hand had regained both arms, and the palms that emerged stretched out toward him, seeking Subaru's presence.

Subaru's heart was instinctively captivated, wanting to touch, wanting to seek.

However he had no hands to respond, no mouth to speak his words, and thus, he could do nothing.

Subaru couldn't touch her, and she couldn't touch Subaru.

How much time had she spent creating her body, just to seek Subaru? How much time, and what sacrifices, did those extended arms represent?

Unconsciously grasping a fragment of this, Subaru was crushed by his own powerlessness.

"—I love you."

The shadow, surely twisting its unseen face in anguish, whispered words of love to Subaru.

He wanted to answer those words, he had to answer. To reciprocate with his voice, with action, with love.

He could only face the love offered to him with love in return. Yet —,

"—Subaru."

Someone's voice called Subaru's name.

His formless consciousness realized that the voice wasn't from the girl before him, but from behind. His non-existent eyes looked back. In the depths of the darkness, a point of light emerged.

The voice was indeed coming from there.

“I love you.”

“Subaru.”

Words were cast simultaneously. He wanted to reciprocate the love. He had to answer the call.

The voice of the girl standing before him, the voice of someone reaching from the light behind him—as if guided, as if pulled, Subaru’s consciousness slowly, gradually, moved away from the garden of shadows.

Drawn towards the light.

At this inclination of Subaru’s heart, the voice before him took on a painful tremor.

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you—”

“—Please, Subaru.”

The repeated whispers of love. The name called, filled with only pure emotion.

He remembered his own name. He remembered the person who called him by it.

He remembered what he had to do. He remembered where he had to go. —That’s why he couldn’t stay here.

“Love me…”

“Next time, I’ll surely come to you.”

His non-existent mouth, a will that shouldn’t have been able to communicate, interrupted the words and declared his decision.

The silenced voice. The increasing distance. His consciousness was swallowed by the world of light from the world of shadows, enveloped in a pure white radiance and vanishing.

"—I'll be waiting."

Leaving only that final murmur, Subaru's consciousness melted within the light—

2

His consciousness surfaced from the sea of sleep, breaking through the surface of awakening, and his eyelids opened.

The sunlight harshly stung Subaru's waking eyes, making them tear up, and through his blurry vision, he saw faintly glowing amethyst eyes. They were so close, close enough to feel breath, captivatingly beautiful, and breath truly reached him from those pink lips—making him panic to death.

"Your face is too close?!"

"Whoa, oh, Subaru, you're awake! Ah, good. Really."

He realized that the close proximity was Emilia's eyes and that her face was close enough to feel her breath, instantly snapping his consciousness from vague to fully awake. Emilia looked at the flustered Subaru, calmly exhaling with a relieved look, oblivious to the pounding in his heart.

Damn, she's cute. As he watched her gesture, Subaru noticed that his and Emilia's positions were oddly angled.

"I'm lying down, and Emilia-tan is sitting seiza style. And, considering there's a heavenly feeling under my head at this distance…"

"You don't need to do such a weird check, it's a lap pillow. Is it uncomfortable?"

"How peacefully do you think I was sleeping? Of course it's not uncomfortable. It's the best reward I could ask for after all that effort."

Without hesitation, Subaru kept the weight of his head on her lap and chuckled. Emilia, seeing Subaru's smile, subtly tightened her mouth, which had been relaxed in relief.

The atmosphere shifted. Having confirmed each other's safety, they needed to talk about more.

"Um, can I ask what happened with everything?"

"I'm the one who wants to ask what happened with everything… It's about what happened after the magic stone you took from the dragon carriage exploded, right? It was really a lot."

Still in the same posture, Emilia lowered her gaze and slowly began to recount the events.

How Subaru had suddenly jumped out of the dragon carriage without explanation, and ridden off on a ground dragon much faster than anyone could pursue. How she tried to chase him but was held back by Pack and Otto, and nearly fainted when she saw the explosion rising in the distance. How she frantically searched for Subaru and found him and Patrasche collapsed under the fallen Flugel's Tree. And how Patrasche had apparently covered Subaru, protecting him.

"What happened to Patrasche? I remember feeling like she was licking my face all over before I lost consciousness."

"She kept licking you even after you passed out. When I tried to pull her away to treat you, she growled so angrily. If that merchant… Otto hadn't talked to her, I might not have been able to start treatment."

"Damn you, Patrasche. How rude to Emilia-tan… No, it means she was trying to protect me no matter who came. How incredibly loyal is that dragon? I'm falling for her."

His acquaintance with Patrasche had only been about a day and a half, but the number of life-or-death situations they'd faced together already topped anything since he arrived in this world. This loop, in particular, had been one grueling ordeal after another. In fact, he wouldn't have made it this far without Patrasche's cooperation. She was merely a ground dragon borrowed from Crusch, but if Crusch was offering a reward—

“I’ll take Patrasche. Yeah, I’ll do that. Let’s be partners for a long, long time… So, where is Patrasche?”

“Her burns were severe, but it seems her life isn’t in danger. I did the first aid, but now Ferris is looking after her, including Wilhelm too.”

“Ah… Ferris joined up too.”

Ferris’s name came up in the conversation about treatment, and Subaru relaxed his shoulders in relief. Apart from his teasing remarks towards Subaru, there was no doubt about his skill as a healer. Patrasche’s treatment would surely proceed without any issues.

At the same time, the fact that Ferris, who should have been significantly delayed in leaving the village, had already joined them meant—

“By any chance, have I been sleeping for quite a while?”

“I think about four or five hours. If we didn’t have the dialogue mirror, we might have been rushing to the capital to find a healer by now.”

As she spoke, Emilia held one of the dialogue mirrors that Petelgeuse and his group had used. Julius had one, Ferris had one, and Subaru had another, which she had apparently borrowed from his pocket after he lost consciousness. She likely noticed Ferris’s call. Thanks to being able to contact him, Subaru’s treatment was also able to happen.

“So, everyone’s reunited, then?”

“Ferris, yes… and Julius, too. I was really, really surprised. I never imagined you and Julius together.”

“There’s a reason for that, Emilia-tan, bluer than mountains and deeper than oceans. Explaining it from scratch is, frankly, kind of depressing, you know…”

Emilia’s surprise at the relationship between Julius and Subaru was difficult to put into words. In fact, even Subaru himself wasn’t sure what their relationship was anymore.

He was an irritatingly detestable rival, a pretentious and disagreeable but undeniably skilled collaborator, and a comrade-in-arms they relied on each other in situations where their mistakes could cost them their lives.

In short, if he had to describe him in one word—

“I hate that guy.”

“Why the sudden broken speech?”

“I tried to express my feelings for that indescribable guy with as few words as possible, in my own way. You can guess the result… Where is everyone now?”

It felt itchy to continue that topic, so he changed it. Emilia gave Subaru a helpless smile and continued, “Right,”

“They’re resting until Ferris finishes all the treatments. But I think they’ll be done soon, so we’ll probably head back to the capital… I guess I need to talk with Crusch, thanks to all your hard work, Subaru.”

“Oh, I worked super hard. I bluffed and cheated my way through a lot of crazy situations. Just thinking about it still gives me a stomachache!”

“Yeah, really… Thank you.”

When Emilia thanked him so directly, Subaru instantly felt embarrassed for his overly boastful remark. Still, it was true that his actions had a positive outcome for her. There was no need to hide it anymore.

Realizing that fact anew, a pure feeling of joy overflowed within Subaru.

He felt as though he had accumulated so many memories since those days, since the time of their separation. With each repetition, Subaru had lived through time Emilia didn't know.

Using everything he had gained during that time to the fullest, Subaru had reached this moment. The results were truly worthy of praise, and he had the confidence to prove it.

He had done so much. He had accumulated so much. Finally, he had reached this point.

And so, this time, Subaru felt he had earned the right to give proper meaning to that moment, to that foolish word he uttered during that time.

Looking around, they seemed to be in the back of a dragon carriage with the hood open. There was no one else around; only Subaru and Emilia were present. He didn't know what the others were doing, but in the silence, only the rustling of the wind could be heard, and the world was cut off, belonging only to the two of them.

Strangely enough, the situation was the same as that time.

Waking up from an unconscious, injured state, in a place just for the two of them.

"It feels like I've been dreaming for a long time…"

In fact, the countless events that had occurred from that moment of separation until this loop —this final loop— felt unreal, as if they were a dream or something similar. So many extreme situations had occurred, and Subaru had been repeatedly thrown into the abyss of despair.

Indeed, they could only be described as a continuous string of nightmares—

"A bad dream… no, that's not right."

"Was it a good dream?"

Emilia tilted her head, picking up on Subaru's words and posing a question.

Closing his eyes at her words, Subaru recalled the days he had been on the verge of declaring a ‘nightmare.’ They were certainly a string of desperate situations, never to be looked back upon with a smile, and indeed a series of moments he wished he could erase from his memory.

He had acted foolishly, behaved selfishly, imposed his will, had his expectations brutally betrayed, was struck by disappointment and despair, fell into mental collapse, gave a part of himself to madness, was dominated by resignation and nearly threw everything away—and from there, he was saved.

It couldn’t be undone. If it hadn’t happened, the Subaru he was now wouldn’t be here.

So, though those days were like a dream, a time filled with only hardships.

“It was a good, real dream.”

That long, long, nightmarish time remained only within Subaru.

He could make it the past. But he couldn’t make it a dream. He would embrace all the tragic results of his actions, all the calamities he brought about.

That was the cross Subaru had to bear, trapped by the out-of-the-ordinary power of ‘Return by Death,’ and with that power, he had carved out a future.

“How much have you heard?”

“I haven’t heard almost anything. Julius said to hear it from you.”

“That bastard, seriously so meddlesome.”

Did he think he was being considerate? His ‘nice assist’ was so perfect it made him want to puke.

Subaru cursed Julius’s arrangement with a mischievous grin and sighed.

He held his breath for a moment, looked at Emilia, and said,

“That day, you asked me ‘why,’ didn’t you? Why I would help you. Why I worked so hard for so many things. Why, you asked.”

“Yes, I did. Then you said it was because I helped you… But I didn’t do anything like that. I couldn’t do anything at all. I was always being helped by Subaru, and I couldn’t do anything for you. And yet, Subaru got hurt because of me…”

“No, back then, I was out of my mind…”

He started to say he was out of his mind but couldn’t quite finish.

He wasn’t out of his mind. The Natsuki Subaru at that point, that weak, foolish man who only thought of himself, believed that what he was doing was right.

He just thought his pushy, self-serving emotions would be simply accepted.

Subaru knew the end of the man who loudly proclaimed such a selfish love. He experienced it firsthand and crushed that love with his own hands.

He also burned into his eyes the figure of the person who truly demonstrated the existence of dedicated love.

“Back then, I was only thinking about myself. I admit it. Even while saying it was for you, I was just drunk on the idea of ‘myself working hard for you.’ I just selfishly thought if I acted like a drunken fool, you’d accept it.”

“Subaru…”

“I’m sorry. I used you to feel good about myself. All those words back then, they were right. I was wrong… But there was something that wasn’t wrong too.”

He used Emilia for his own sake. Subaru affirmed her tearful cries. But looking back at the part of himself that was rejected in that moment, there was still one thing he couldn’t concede.

"I want to help you. I want to be your strength. That's sincere and true, no lie."

"…Yeah, I know."

Emilia nodded at Subaru's words.

Then her amethyst eyes widened, and she blinked once, gazing at Subaru.

And then,

"Why do you help me?"

The words spoken to him then. The words asked again just hours ago.

Now, once more, the words offered, seeking an answer. Subaru's answer was singular.

"—Because I love you, Emilia. I want to be your strength."

Looking straight into her eyes, Subaru clearly stated it.

—In the end, the origin of Subaru's actions converged on that simple truth.

Wanting to be her strength, wanting to be by her side, wanting to help her, wanting to see her smile, wanting to be next to her, wanting to live a future with her.

All of it, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, down to his very soul, with his entire being, he loved Emilia.

That's why even when Subaru faced death, even when he literally died multiple times, even when he was hurt, hated, and suffered, he would crawl back, cling on, and return like this.

How much of a detour did he take just to arrive at such a simple answer? He was amazed at his own foolishness.

"…"

Hearing Subaru’s answer, Emilia closed her lips and chose silence.

Looking up at her with a strangely calm feeling, Subaru, suddenly filled with a sense of accomplishment, realized something immense.

—Wait, am I, like, seriously confessing and waiting for a reply here?

For Subaru, who had never confessed or been confessed to in his life, this was an incredibly monumental event. No, wait, he had been confessed to. In this world, by the lovely, adorable Rem. However that was a separate matter. His feelings for Rem and his feelings for Emilia were different issues, even if the vector was the same.

As Subaru silently agonized internally without changing his expression, Emilia’s face suddenly crumpled. She bit her closed lips, and her widely open violet eyes narrowed slightly, looking as if she was about to burst into tears.

“I, I’m… a half-elf.”

“I know.”

Emilia reconfirmed something too obvious with a trembling voice.

Subaru’s immediate answer made her gasp, and then she shook her head,

“With silver hair, and being a half-elf… because I look like the Witch, many people shun and hate me. Really, truly, they hate me.
”

“I saw it. I know it. They’re fools with no discernment.”

To be swayed just by appearance, and even more ridiculously, because she resembled a great sinner of the past. Who could say they hated her without seeing anything of her true nature?

“I don’t have many friends because I have little experience socializing. I’m naive, so I sometimes say strange things… And, because of a contract, my hairstyle is different almost every day, and the reason I have to become queen… it's really, really selfish…"

She tried to list her flaws, and the parts where she said unnecessary things showed her nervousness. Even her weakness in trying to verbalize and affirm her lack of self-confidence was endearing now. So,

"No matter what anyone says about you, Emilia, and no matter what you think of yourself, I like you. I love you. I super love you. I want to be next to you forever. I want to hold your hand forever."

"Ah…"

"If you tell me ten things you dislike about yourself, I'll tell you two thousand things I like about you."

He lifted his head from Emilia's lap, met her eyes, and spoke.

Emilia's eyes, looking at Subaru with her mouth slightly open, quickly filled with tears. Large drops flowed out with a blink, tracing clear paths down her white cheeks.

"That's how I want to treat you, my 'special treatment.'"

"…This is the first time I've ever been happy about special treatment."

He reached out a hand and gently wiped away those flowing tears. As his hand touched her cheek, Emilia's palm covered his, exchanging their intensely warm body heat.

She closed her eyes, feeling Subaru's fingertips on her cheek, and asked,

"Why two thousand?"

"Because a hundred times isn't enough to express my feelings."

When Subaru grinned, Emilia also showed a tearful smile.

Her smile was so dazzling, and even the falling tears were like jewels. He laughed at how easily satisfied he was, getting such contentment from a single smile.

As he laughed, Emilia rubbed her cheek against Subaru's fingertips, saying,

"I'm happy. Really, truly happy. I never thought there'd be a day someone would tell me they loved me."

In her life until now, 'special' had directly meant discrimination.

That's why she was so afraid of being 'specially treated' by anyone. Even knowing her feelings, Subaru would 'specially treat' her.

Even if no one else did, only Subaru in this world would.

"What… what should I do? Subaru, you're telling me how you feel… but I don't know what to do."

"No need to rush. I'm not looking for an immediate answer anyway. It's already a decided matter in my mind that I'll get a proper 'yes' from you eventually."

She had little experience being liked by anyone, and that part of her was as cute as a child. He wouldn't rush her or demand an answer.

He wanted to be the person she turned to with her feelings when she truly understood what it meant to be liked by someone, and when she realized she could love someone in return.

He strongly wished to be a man worthy of receiving that affection.

"Is it… okay? For me… for someone like me, to receive so much happiness. To feel such joyful, extravagant feelings…"

"It's fine, let's be extravagant. You can never have too much happiness, and if it overflows and you have extra, you can just share it."

—Therefore.

“Take your time, Emilia. Slowly, carefully, leisurely, let yourself fall in love with me. As I walk beside you, I’ll do my best to make you absolutely smitten.”

A small sound, “Hee,” escaped Emilia’s throat.

She then put her hands to her cheeks and began to shed uncontrollable tears.

Reaching out, Subaru gently stroked her long, beautiful silver hair, as if combing it.

Softly, softly, gently.

All the while, Emilia kept crying and crying.

Subaru kept gently stroking his beloved, precious Emilia.

—Beneath the approaching evening sky, the foreigner and the silver-haired half-elf huddled together, exchanging their feelings.

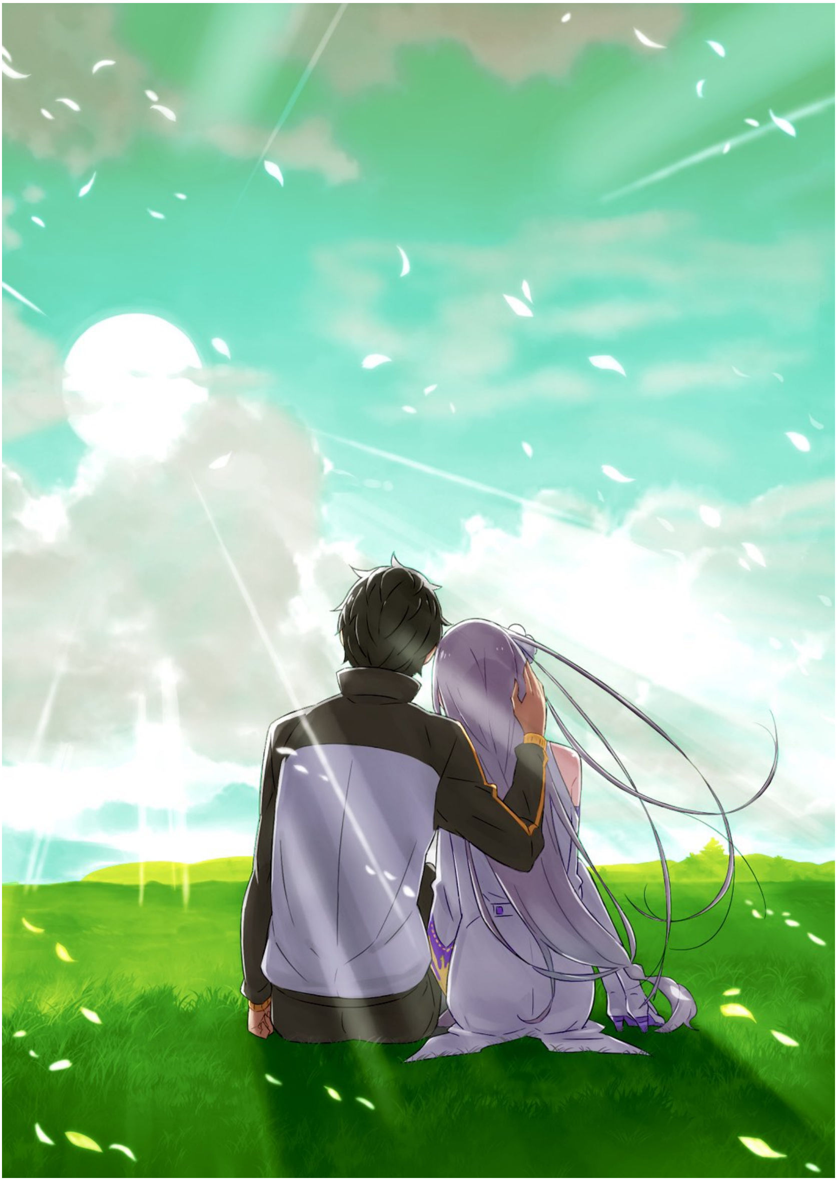

A long, long succession of hardships and despair.

Overcoming them, they finally found this calm, quiet time.

This was simply a story just to attain this moment.

A story of detours, continuous misunderstandings, and persistent wandering, just for that.

A boy lacking confidence conveyed his feelings to a girl lacking confidence.

He worked hard just for that— That’s all this story is about.

Interlude I: The Dragon Carriage

The dragon carriage rattles along quietly as it continues down the highway.

Protected by its Divine Protection, those inside the carriage felt barely any effect from the wind. Leaning back and leaving himself to the silence, Subaru thought of how this marked the first time he had ever ridden a carriage in a calm manner.

The first time, when heading from Roswaal's mansion to the Royal Capital, was supposed to be the most at ease. But that one turned into something horrible halfway through thanks to Subaru's own screwup, and in the end there was no room to feel any ease at all. But there's several things he only managed to pull off because he had that experience, so he can't exactly call it a bad one.

And all the ones from the second time on were heading from the Royal Capital to Roswaal's. Since those trips all happened due to the Witch Cult, there's really no way he could've felt relaxed and calm during any of them. Thus, this is Subaru's first time riding a carriage without any sense of panic or haste.

Subaru: "Say… Petra, isn't this kinda close?"

Petra: "No? Is there some problem, Subaru?"

Looking up at Subaru, with her reddish-brown hair swaying, is Petra. She has been holding Subaru's hand ever since the carriage took off, sitting on his left, huddled up close against him. Subaru had first thought it was because she was scared what with all that had happened, but with how she's persistently been smiling so brightly and holding his hand, it's almost as if…

Subaru: "Feel like a dad. My supposedly-absent paternal instincts, now, are bubbling up from within me…!"

Petra: "It's not fair how you've been all about the lady. Shouldn't it be okay? You said there's still time until we reach the city."

Emilia: "Petra. What we were doing before was, erm, something a lot different. Look, me and Subaru were having a talk that we needed to have, which was sooo important. I wasn't trying to keep him to myself."

Petra: "Hmmph. I'm never ever gonna lose to you, Miss."

Says Emilia timidly, and says Petra back intimidatingly. Subaru can't quite get a grasp on the situation but going off what she's saying and how she's acting, it doesn't seem like Petra dislikes Emilia or anything. It's probably just a result of his playful relationship with Petra. But being that Emilia is not used to children, her concern is nothing to laugh about.

Subaru: "Don't take what she says too seriously, Emilia-tan. Things kids say, y'know? You gotta smile, grin, sourire back and ignore most of it."

Emilia: "I couldn't be such a charlatan, just because I'm talking with someone young."

Subaru: "Who says charlatan anymore?"

Emilia: "Mmpf, you're teasing me like that again."

Emilia pouts, dissatisfied, and Subaru gives an easy apology while his face breaks into a smile. Petra tugs Subaru's sleeve disapprovingly, indicating that she also must get her attention.

Seated between two beautiful girls, Subaru has been blessed with an uncommon happening for Subaru. With one girl being in love confession standby mode, and the other one being worth having some expectations for in three years' time—but really.

—Right now, Subaru's carriage is headed from Lifaus Highway to the Royal Capital.

This carriage, which is not the one that had been installed with the bomb, is being driven by one of the youths of Arlam Village's young men's brigade. Inside are Subaru and Emilia, and the children as well.

At first the everybody had given their quiet consideration by leaving Subaru and Emilia to themselves, but then Petra happily shoved herself in and now here we are.

Complaining to children for intruding on together time was of course something Subaru would not quite do, but that said Petra's incursion did have its benefits.

After all, he only just got done saying a bunch of embarrassing stuff to Emilia. He gave the on-confession-response-standby-mode Emilia that smooth "I'll wait", but the flame of love is still blazing in his chest with combustive ferocity. Couple that with the achievement he felt about getting here, and all breaks are off.

Worst case, he'd end up pre-emptively demanding something more than a lap pillow.

Subaru: "Ah man, that really was pretty risky there. Acting that cool about things and then that, hell that'd be mortifying."

Petra: "What would?"

Subaru: "Just talking about how you saved me, Petra. Ah, that's right, you kept your promise not to leave Emilia-tan alone. You're amazing, amazing."

Petra: "Ehehehee."

Subaru gently pats Petra's hair as he gives his double thanks. If Petra and the other kids had let go of Emilia's hands, she might have pushed herself again and gotten hurt. That that hadn't happened, and that all of Subaru's toiling had procured the results he wanted, was unmistakably thanks to everybody, including Petra's, help. Seriously, blessed. Too blessed.

Subaru: "There's so many people I have to thank once this's calmed down…"

Crusch, Ferris, and Wilhelm from Crusch's faction. Loathe to admit it but Julius, and the members of Iron Fang from Anastasia's faction. Must speak to barely memorable Russel too, and make good on that promise to give him the cellphone.

Kinda inexcusable that that exchange would end in Russel being duped, but considering the happiness Subaru had gained as a result, it was better to ignore that and put it aside as something trivial. Sorry Russel.

Subaru: “There’s a mountain of things I gotta think over, too…”

First, he absolutely has to look into what Roswaal was doing this whole time. And he probably needs to discuss with Crusch and Anastasia as to how to divvy things up from the White While and Sloth fights. Especially regarding the White Whale. If what Crusch said can be believed, Subaru was in position to claim a fraction of the glory.

It wasn’t that he was lusting for prestige, but if he—being part of Emilia’s faction—could get even some slight fame, that would surely help Emilia. You could call it shameless, but Subaru would rather be proactive here.

And then after sorting out the immediate affairs, there’s securing Arlam Village and getting things in order there. The future looks laden with difficulties.

—And, before addressing any of that, there is still one mountain that Subaru has to scale.

Subaru: “Uhm, err, Emilia-tan… I have something, extremely important to tell you.”

Emilia: “Mmhm, whaaat is it?”

Emilia twines her fingers in her silver hair as she turns to face Subaru properly, her amethyst eyes full of trust. Every time Subaru sees that light in her eyes, he can feel the success that his own actions have brought. Can feel it, but just how will Emilia respond to what he is about to tell her? Just thinking about it is honestly terrifying.

Subaru is going to tell Emilia about an unavoidable issue—That is, of course, about Rem.

If we're going back to the topic of who Subaru's giving his thanks to, there is unmistakably no one who saved Subaru as much as Rem. Her intense love and devotion mended Subaru's broken spirit and restored his will to stand up and challenge fate.

If she hadn't been there then, Subaru would not be standing here now. Without her presence, he never would have escaped from the hell called surrender. When Subaru was most in suffering, in pain, and hopeless, Rem was the one who stood with him and supported him. Was it truly so strange that Subaru felt intense love for this girl?

Until now, Subaru had wholeheartedly believed that his feelings would only be devoted to one single person. And in truth, there was only one sweetheart in the world out there for Subaru, and that was Emilia.

However, without any change in his feelings towards Emilia, Rem's presence had evoked something of identical size inside Subaru's heart. So, Subaru had decided. It might be tasteless but being that he can't abandon his love for either of them…

— He will take both Rem and Emilia.

Rem had already permitted him to have such an unseemly idea. The remaining problem is persuading Emilia, and although Rem proposed that they convince her together…

Subaru: "If I keep relying on Rem even for that, I'm really crossing the limit for awful."

Even if opportunity comes to bring Rem in so that she can contribute to the talk, Subaru's the one with the responsibility to first broach the topic. He is trying to get two girls to love him, so this is the minimum tier of hurdle he needs to cross.

Subaru takes a breath, his heartbeat slamming in his chest, as he considers what to say. He looks at Emilia. She's staring at him. Mega cute.

Subaru: “This’s something incredibly hard to say, but I want you to listen. Of course, I’m sure we’ll have to tell her sister at some point too, but… first, to Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “…Mhm?”

Emilia looks perplexed at Subaru’s unneeded and stumbling preface. Anguishing over his own weakness for prolonging issue, Subaru frantically forces the wheels in his head to turn. In never before-seen, full brainpower. Forcing his synapses to fire so hot they might spark, finding the absolute best answer—!

Subaru: “Honestly, it’s about Rem. Rem kinda, told me she l… you, you can get what I’m saying, right? So, with that confession there, where this’s going’s I guess sorta selfish but…”

Subaru feels sweat rise on his brow as he frantically gets to cutting the ice. He’s already entered some kind of excuse-scented direction on this, but he figures that Emilia, being not bad at conjecture, will understand what he’s saying. Emilia raises her hands.

Emilia: “Hold on,”

Emilia: “Subaru, calm down. I’m starting to lose what you’re trying to say, but I can tell that you’re trying sooo hard. You’re a good boy, take it slowly.”

Subaru: “«You’re a good boy» is a crazy depressing thing to hear! Or no, I really wasn’t being a man. Yeah, let’s just go straight for it. Alright, so, well, actually, Rem told me she loves me, and once you love me too it’s sorta… like, you’ll both be mine, or something?!”

A momentum-propelled confession of two-timing. Even Subaru is repulsed by what he just said. Emilia’s reaction would surely be something similar, or maybe she’d look at Subaru with eyes hosting disappointment and scorn. Under those pessimistic abstractions, Subaru timidly looks at Emilia, and…

Emilia: “…”

Her reaction is nothing that Subaru envisioned. Her brows scrunch up as she silently puts her finger to her lip, in thought. Perhaps she’s meditating over Subaru’s comment, thinking up a suitable punishment for him—and, with an atmosphere that leaves no room for jokes—

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yes.”

Hearing his name, Subaru looks Emilia straight-on. Emilia, too, faces Subaru’s resolved gaze straight-on. However, there’s some confusion in her eyes, and with Subaru unable to comprehend what would make her react like that, her next words, which in the truest of meanings, transcend Subaru’s comprehension, are—

Emilia: “—Rem… Who is that?

Fragment:
Natsuki Rem

1

—Beneath a pristine sky of blue, Subaru squints up at the downpour of daylight.

He hears someone crying.

A girl crying. Crying with all her might, using all the strength in her little body. Seeing her pour all her soul into showcasing her emotions, Subaru idly wonders how it is that kids have so much energy. And after thinking it, he's stunned at himself for how geriatric it is to think such a thing.

Subaru: "I already knew that I'd gotten old, but noticing it being an unconscious instead of conscious thing sucks. And when I was trying be still full of youth and boundless energy."

???: "The hell is that about youth and boundless energy. You ever take a damn objective look at yourself?"

Thus, some insults coming from Subaru's side were heard. The familiar, crude voice makes Subaru sigh as he lazily turns to look at the speaker. Subaru is seated on a chair, and a boy stands next to him at even eye level. The boy frowns in response to Subaru's silent staring.

Boy: "But anyway—"

Boy: "Do something about Spica's crying already! Seriously can't handle it."

Subaru: "But I'm done for. Your heartless words have torn my tender soul to shreds. I've reverted to the mind of a child like Spica and I'm gonna start bawling. Forgive me and all that."

Boy: "There's nothing forgivable about a grown man doing that in public!”

The boy gesticulates vigorously as he retorts to Subaru’s immature manner of sulking. The action prompts the baby cradled in Subaru’s arms, Spica, to take a deep breath. The two guys give useless statements of “ah” and “ouh” and—there comes the emotional explosion.

Spica: “Aaaa— hk!”

Subaru: “Aaaaugh! She’s crying! Spica’s crying! Look here Rigel, you better do something ‘bout this, you’re her brother!”

Rigel: “If you’re gonna say that then isn’t it you’re the one who’s gotta do something if you don’t wanna be terrible!”

In a corner of a main street of a lively townscape, two guys pass the responsibility around as they cradle a baby.

Passersby look over at the noisy three, wondering what’s going on. But after seeing the two of them running about in circles, they look away like “What, just the same as always”, and ignore it.

So the two’s pattern of running around continues undisturbed. Could call it charming, or just as easily call it riotous and unpleasant.

Subaru: “We’ve got a little girl bawling her whole soul out over here, and not a single person’s giving us a hand… Shit, what’s wrong with society?! Have people’s souls become so barren?”

Rigel: “This isn’t the time to winge about the world! If we don’t stop Spica’s crying, what’ll she say when she gets back—”

???: “When who gets back?”

Rigel: “Well, who else—”

Rigel crosses his arms, nodding, and glances behind him. When his face stiffens and he falls stupefied, his mouth gaping open in dumb shock. Following Rigel’s gaze, Subaru also catches sight of this new character, and his eyebrows spring up.

Subaru: “Oh,”

Subaru: “Done shopping?”

???: “Yes, without problems… It seems you two have had some trouble.”

Subaru: “Nope, Spica’s just super energetic. I’m raising her so once she’s running circles like this, she’ll be running circles around guys. She’s got a future as a bad girl, heart’s pounding here!”

Spica’s eyes open slightly as she notices the woman, and opens her hands before reaching out to her. Her uncomfortable posture dictates her demand for swapsies, the alienation wounding Subaru’s poor paternal heart.

Subaru: “That said, I ignore what she wants and make her cry again then this’s just winding up where we started. Oui, all yours.”

Woman: “She’s all mine.”

Subaru’s tone is pretty reckless, but he is awfully gentle as he hands Spica over. A smile rises on the woman’s face as she sees his fingers, cradling the babe like something ephemeral and precious. The woman accepts Spica and cradles her securely to her chest, before gently rocking her.

Woman: “No, your father and brother are just no good. It’s essential for you to swiftly grow larger and scold them as well.”

Subaru: “Hey now, don’t go implanting things in her head while she’s still an infant.”

Subaru imagines himself, having just done or said something stupid, stuck between the two angry girls with their arms akimbo. And then adding Rigel to that picture,

Subaru: “What, that’s not as bad as I thought. Actually, that’s such a happy fantasy that I might start crying maybe.”

Rigel: “No damn thanks. Getting yelled at by my little sister would completely crush my dignity as a brother.”

Subaru: “There’s no dignity out there that stays uncrushed after running in circles with me. I see, I see it… Loving your sister and constantly spoiling her, your future is one of being whipped.”

Rigel: “Don’t push this on me just ‘cause you’re whipped yourself! I’m never gonna be like that.”

Subaru twiddles his fingers in a mysterious fashion as Rigel gives his objection. The one to furrow their brows at Rigel’s refutation isn’t Subaru—But the blue-haired woman who had been watching happily over the two’s back-and-forth. In a calm, but firm tone, the woman calls Rigel’s name.

Woman: “Rigel.”

Woman: “Is that any way for you to have been speaking in public? It is not tolerable.”

Rigel: “Ugh, but I mean…”

Woman: “Your mother hates «but I means». And, your previous statement was incorrect.”

The woman gives the calmed Spica, cradled in her arms, a tender smile.

Woman: “Your mother does not have your father whipped. Because your mother, always puts your father in number one.”

Spoken with her cheeks flush, a statement more embarrassing than bawling like a baby in public.

Rigel throws his arms up in surrender. Feeling something akin to an itch, Subaru smiles. The woman softly brushes her hair back as she blissfully watches over the family scene.

Rem’s long hair, blue as the sky and caressed by the wind, sways in the breeze.

2

They’re in a corner of a city in Kararagi—A spot that you could maybe or maybe not call a park. Subaru spaces out as he sits on one of the benches there.

He watches the blue-, short-, spiky-haired Rigel run about back and forth with his somewhat brattish friends. The way he talks with his dad is impermissible but watching him playing like this makes him seem like something cute.

Subaru: “If only we could do something about those nasty serial killer eyes of his.”

Rem: “We mustn’t. Those nasty eyes are who Rigel is. Even if he is enjoying himself, no matter how gleeful he is, strangers seeing him for the first time will think him nefarious and displeased because of his face. That is who Rigel is.”

Rigel: “I can hear you, and mom, your support actually really hurts!”

Screams Rigel, who has been caught by the oni and is in a state of being frozen, in this game that Subaru popularized called Freeze Oni2.

Subaru gives him a casual wave and so does Rem, hers small and careful so as not to disturb a sleeping Spica. Rigel pouts with his sharp sanpaku3 gaze dissatisfied. He looks like Subaru did in his childhood photo albums, and unbearably so.

Subaru: “Which means it’s already decided that his future will end up like this. I’d shudder if I were him… Being told that I’d tun into me in twenty years.”

Rem: “Skilled at cooking and incredible at housework. Will acquire an ideal, wonderful wife who is respectful and devoted to her valiant husband… Would be what you meant?”

Subaru: “What’s with that normie outburst? Wait, I’m the normie!”

Subaru puts his hand to his head and pokes out his tongue. Rem gives a small laugh and puts her hand to her mouth, before clicking her throat and glancing at Subaru.

Rem: “If you don’t deny that and adorn me so in compliments, do you realize I will get carried away?”

Subaru: “Where did I adorn you with compliments, in that exchange? All I did was purposefully not deny you praising yourself. Eh, that said it’s unmistakable truth and there’s nothing deniable about it.”

Actually, if you let Subaru get away with unrestrainedly, unabashedly talking about Rem, things turn into something horrible with all the compliments flying around. Being that it’s midday with kids scuffling in the park, lots of their family members and neighbors are around. If Subaru starts with the lovey-dovey talk even once, the entire thing will escalate and inadvertently be the main topic of all the neighborhood gossip tomorrow.

That doesn’t sound so bad, is a tempting poison in Subaru’s thoughts, but he consciously ignores it and immerses himself in peace and harmony.

He closes his eyes while basking in sunlight, creating the illusion that he is floating upon the light’s warmth. Something begins to drag his consciousness away, his exhaustion after consecutive late nights overpowering his attention. His head grows heavy, wavers. And,

Subaru: “Wha—”

Rem: “If you are tired, take my shoulder. As Spica is currently monopolizing my arms.”

Subaru opens his eye to find Rem, who has scooched over to his side and is propping him up. With their height difference, his head will fit perfectly in the crook of her shoulder if he leans over.

Feeling some embarrassment, he looks down at Spica as she sleeps in Rem’s arms—with her father’s black hair, and her mother’s adorable face. A sweet, innocent life yet ignorant of the world.

Subaru: “Ohhh, that damn Spica. You might be my darling daughter, but you’re a bad girl for monopolizing my sanctuary.

You're sentenced to tickle torture later."

Rem: "You will have to wait until nighttime to monopolize my breasts."

Subaru: "We're in a park in the middle of the day right now so could you please watch what you say?!"

Hearing that incredible line prompts Subaru to jerk far, far back. He glances over, to find that Rem is blushing beet red. How to put it,

Subaru: "My wife is mega cute."

Rem: "Only because I am so loved."

The two share a smile. Rem's being beaming, Subaru's being kind of weird—but it's still a smile.

Getting embarrassed at their prolonged mutual gazing, Subaru scratches his cheek to collect himself. "Then, I'll oblige" he says as he boldly rests his head on Rem's shoulder.

Her long hair feels strangely nice as it tickles his cheeks in the wind. While sniffing its scent, Subaru rubs his cheek against Rem's shoulder.

Rem: "That tickles, darling."

Subaru: "Ah, sorry. Did something and it felt good and I got super excited. Now I'm following Spica's example and'm all settled down. I'll leave the being unsettled up to Rigel. Ewww, Rigel's suuuch a kiiiiid!"

Rigel: "I can hear you, stupid dad! Stop bringing me up all the time!"

Rem: "Rigel. Your sister is sleeping, please be more considerate."

Rigel: "This isn't goddamn right!"

Screams the frozen Rigel, but no one in the family's gonna back him up. Actually, nobody is going to help Rigel. His role is one of being teased.

Subaru finds that Rigel's personality, speech and behavior coincides a lot with his own, but Rigel's peers' neglect to shun him might be the only point where his luck outstrips Subaru's. That said, Subaru also felt that he was part of the community when he was a child. Rigel's future isn't looking so bright.

Subaru: "Gotta make sure Spica doesn't turn out like that. Rigel's unfortunate, but you take after Mom and have a bright future awaiting you. I'm just praying you don't get caught in the grips of a useless guy like me."

Rem: "There is not anybody who could substitute for you. You are the only copy of my darling in the world."

Subaru gives a small smile, and the two fall into silence. With the gentle wind tickling him, and Rem's body heat on his skin, this world of innocence could about swallow him.

Days of manual labor have built up some physical strain in Subaru. These occasional instances of family time are where he delights in the happiness of daily living. Basking in sunbeams, watching his son get teased by his friends, napping while cuddling up to his wife, while she cradles his daughter.

—Was this not sweet happiness?

Rem: "Subaru—"

Subaru opens his eyes at the sudden address. He glances over to see Rem, her head tilted slightly towards him. Her pale blue eyes reflect Subaru, her lips trembling, suggesting that she has something to say.

Subaru: "That name…"

Rem goes silent.

Subaru: "Been a while. You've only been calling me «darling» or «your father» lately."

Subaru closes his eye, his mouth relaxed, but Rem's tense. Her attitude makes Subaru think of several years ago, back when they had just run away, where this kind of thing was incredibly common. She'd been trying to keep Subaru from noticing, but Subaru paid more attention to Rem than she thought.

Subaru closes his eyes. Feels the breeze. Rem was the one who proposed they all go shopping today. Subaru has a bit of a guess as to why.

Subaru: "It's been eight years since that day, now."

Rem: "So you noticed…"

Subaru: "Well, it's a huge turning point for me… No, for us. I noticed, remembered, didn't forget… Would never forget."

The day he knelt before fate. Abandoned everything… and ran away.

He had meant to give up on everything. But there was one thing he couldn't surrender that day. Their decision that day, and her love— Because that was there, Subaru was now here.

Rem: "Subaru, do you…"

It's a nostalgic form of address, and one that Rem consciously phased out of using shortly after they fled to Kararagi. Partly to indicate their status as a couple to those around them, but also to make a change from the past.

Subaru had purposefully never referenced this fact until today, and Rem had never told him her reason for it either.

A whirlpool of complex emotion churns in Rem's eyes.

Rem: "…Have any regrets?"

Subaru: "Regrets?"

Rem: "Yes. About running away. About giving up. About throwing so much away. About, me being what you…"

Subaru: “If you say «settled for» I’ll get super mad. I get to come home hand-in-hand with Rigel and Spica! Oh, nah, don’t really need Rigel. Just leave him behind.”

Subaru sees Rigel’s face turn sour, but he feigns ignorance while shooting him the “I’m having an important discussion right now” look to send him hurtling down into the abyss. He turns back to Rem.

Subaru: “Y’know,”

Subaru: “This is seriously super late to mention, eight years down the line and all, and I really have no idea how much effect this’ll have after saying it tens or hundreds or thousands of times, but…”

Rem: “Yes.”

Subaru: “I love you more than anything in the world. You’re my only wife, and I’m your only man. You’re not the kinda cheap woman a guy like me could get by making compromises.”

He gets himself upright and bounces his finger off Rem’s forehead. Rem looks surprised as Subaru brings his face closer to hers.

Subaru: “Just as I pledged that day, everything I am belongs to you. I devote myself to you, give myself to you, live only for you. — Though now, also for our children.”

Subaru brings his face closer and steals a kiss, nothing more than fleeting contact.

While close enough to feel the other’s breath, Subaru makes a mischievous face, the one that never changes no matter how much he ages.

Subaru: “So, that ease you?”

Rem: “…I’m sorry. I am always uneasy. Because I continuously fall more deeply in love with you, Subaru. I believe that there could be nothing happier than this, and then it happens that I experience even greater, further happiness. Happiness, and love, and so unease.”

Tears well up in Rem's eyes while she speaks of happiness, simultaneously shaking her head. She puts her forehead to Subaru's, each sharing the other's warmth.

Rem: "It feels as though one day, my darling who I touch like this, will disappear."

Subaru: "Relax. I'm not leaving you, and I'm never gonna disappear. So long as your love for me hasn't exhausted, we'll never be separated."

Rem: "Subaru, my love for you would never be exhausted—"

Subaru: "Well then, together forever. I love you, Rem."

Again, Subaru kisses Rem. Teeth meet soft lips, her face frozen in surprise as Subaru plunges in deeper. Their tongues intertwine, her saliva hot on his tastebuds.

There is where he separates. Rem takes a little breath, her breathing now longer and heavier. Subaru raises his finger.

Subaru: "And besides,"

Subaru: "Don't say stupid things about it being a compromise or whatever. What's a compromise? You mean we had Rigel and Spica out of sympathy, not love? Spica's the embodiment of our planned love, and Rigel's a kid born from the recklessness and flaring passions of the love in our youth."

Rem: "…It certainly was a time when Rigel was born."

Says Subaru with hand on hip in lecturing posture. Rem smiles and counting the memories off on her fingers…

Rem: "We had moved to Kararagi and finally found jobs and a residence, and what we needed to do was slowly, carefully prepare our foundations to live, and yet…"

Subaru: "No well look, I was young and impatient."

Rem: "You were supposed to be exhausted after work, Subaru, and yet bedtime certainly saw you lively."

Subaru: "No, well, look, I was young and had stamina."

Rem: "The time that we acquired formal employment and the time I became pregnant were almost simultaneous. How paled my face turned then."

Subaru: "Sure are hard to accept, those follies of your youth."

Rigel's face sours at getting treated like a mistake, but he appears to read the mood and manages to control himself. Pretty good son. Subaru gives him a nod, and Rem also turns her gaze to him.

Rem: "But,"

Rem: "Honestly, I was happy when I was pregnant with Rigel."

Subaru: "And I was too. When I first found out, my nose leaked and I pissed myself a little, and after I got you to punch me to make sure I wasn't dreaming man it got bloody."

This probably happened because she had been inches from exploding in rage, but she punched him hard enough that when he slammed against the wall, the whole of their temporary residence slanted.

If Subaru hadn't managed to brace himself, he feasibly could have died. That one aside, Subaru remembers everything from when Rem told him she was pregnant, and all the warm feelings that surged through his chest back then.

But Rem shakes her head. Subaru tilts his head, not getting it. A slight shadow comes over Rem's smile.

Rem: "My happiness was surely different from your pure one, Subaru. What made me happy… was my delight that I would never lose you."

Subaru goes silent.

Rem: "Rigel is the bond between you and me in tangible form. The phrasing is not nice, but with a baby being born between us, we would be bound together by something that could never be severed… That is why I was happy.”

Maybe this was what was making her so anxious back then. They had abandoned everything and fled to a new land together, with only each other to cling to. Meaning that Rem was constantly terrified that she may lose Subaru.

Rem’s self-esteem is low enough to put up a good fight with Subaru’s. Considering how Rem undervalues herself, life with Subaru meant constant exhaustion between the extremes of happiness and the extremes of terror.

What ended those extremes was the new life born between them.

Subaru: “You didn’t believe?”

Rem: “No, I did. I believe in you more than anyone in the world, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Not that. I don’t mean not believing in me… You didn’t believe in yourself?”

Rem’s breath catches, and she gives a small nod. Her mental image of Subaru is inordinately grand. Her own presence, in opposition to that, must feel unnervingly minuscule.

—She must not have noticed that Subaru had always held the exact same unease. Even though Subaru had always considered Rem a girl far, far too good for himself.

It makes Subaru smile. Seeing that, Rem puffs out her cheeks.

Rem: “Fine. I was stupid. Of course you would laugh.”

Subaru: “No no no. I just had that thought again. That you and I have the exact same character, but despite that my wife truly is the cutest in the world.”

Subaru’s sneak attack makes Rem freeze for a moment in surprise, and she blushes. Seeing her reaction makes Subaru feel vividly that yes, he loved her. He loved Rem more than anyone in the world. Was in love with her. He could scream it from the top of lungs. And in reality, he occasionally did. They're a pretty famous, fiery couple in the neighborhood.

Rem: "—Rigel, Spica."

Subaru: "Hm?"

Subaru tilts his head. Rem looks up at him.

Rem: "They are both the names of stars. The names of stars from the place where you lived."

Subaru: "Yup. My dad was fundamentally a crazy, unfortunate kind of man who'd spell «common sense» as «common cents», but I think him naming me Subaru was a good decision. I really like it, my name. Subaru's a star name too, see.4"

An assignment in primary school required that the students investigate the origins of their names, which was how Subaru came to learn the history behind his own. Upon learning that he was named after a cluster of the stars that painted the night sky, he felt uncharacteristic glee.

Ever since, despite his tendency to drop hobbies quickly, perusal of manuals and indexes about stars alone remained a long, long-standing custom. He knew the names of most stars, and whenever he had the opportunity to name something, his selection would of course be,

Subaru: "A star name, basically. My online usernames were star names, and if I ever needed an alias or a fake name it'd probably be from a star. In some sense, aren't these sparkle names?!"

Rem: "I would not know in what sense you mean, but I think it's wonderful to take names from stars. When we have our third, let's do the same."

Subaru: "Talking about a third right now's kinda pretty hasty. Like, Spica's still an infant."

Rem: “I believe it would be fine to entrust her to Rigel once she’s no longer breastfeeding. Why do you think I cautioned you that we couldn’t have another child until Rigel was larger?”

Subaru: “It doesn’t really stand out since I’m around, but you’re pretty damn harsh on Rigel too, Rem!”

Subaru stands up, brushing off his behind. He turns his back toward Rem, revolves his hips,

Subaru: “Wanna put our shopping down, so say it’s ‘bout time to go home. Outside we have the public eye bothering us and we can’t get as lovey-dovey as we want.”

Rem: “Indeed. I am in the mood for full-strength full-power lovey-dovey for the first time in a while.”

Subaru: “C-Can my libido really keep up with an oni’s stamina…?”

Subaru mutters to himself in terror, then holds his hand out to Rem, still seated on the bench. Rem leisurely takes his hand and pulls herself up, simultaneously pulling Subaru into her arms. Subaru takes his time relishing the warmth of hugging both Rem and Spica, then…

Subaru: “Right, off we go then. To our home.”

Rem: “Yes, darling.”

Subaru holds the shopping bag in one hand, Rem’s hand in the other. Subaru walks a half-step ahead of Rem, who huddles up close behind him as she follows. They go over to their son, still frozen in the middle of the square.

Subaru: “Hey, my son who is presently enjoying the Sapporo Snow Festival. This game of Freeze Oni isn’t going anywhere and watching it is the peak of boring, so me, mom, and your sister are going home. You go stay at a friend’s overnight.”

Rigel: “Aren’t you just plain goddamn throwing me out?! Or no, actually, let’s talk about how my parents were there in the middle of a park in broad daylight, kissing.”

Subaru: “That’s what you get, Mr. Jealous. Too bad, Rigel. This Rem’s for my use only.”

Rigel: “Shut up!!”

Rigel screams in anger, setting his sharp sanpaku gaze on the chortling Subaru. But Rigel sees that Subaru seems to enjoy all this, and gives a long, deep sigh. Rigel shakes his head.

Rigel: “Cool it, cool it, me. Don’t get caught up in dad’s pace. Cool it, cooool it. Right, cooled it. So, what were you talking about with mom?”

Subaru: “Hmm? Stuff like how your name’s a star name. Actually, the first candidate for your name was Vega, but…”

Rigel: “That’s badass! Why didn’t you?!”

Subaru: “Uh, because it’s badass? Felt like you’d be hard to deal with in your rebellious age, so we stopped on that one. I knew that age would pass eventually, but this father’s heart of mine didn’t wanna get bested by its son.”

Rigel: “That’s how far you imagined the future of a just-born infant?!”

Rigel jumps up as he retorts to Subaru’s clever joking. And…

???: “Ahh, Rigel moved! Rigel broke the rules of Freeze Oni!”

Rigel: “Ah!”

The Oni verbally assaults Rigel at this critical juncture. Rigel’s throat freezes. Subaru gives Rigel’s shoulders a slap.

Subaru: “Guys who break the rules of Freeze Oni play a penalty game. Oni’s gonna get tickled ‘till he can’t laugh or cry anymore. — Good luck.”

Rigel: “Don’t say something so stupid with such a serious expr… Hey, what, you guys! Sto— Wait! Don’t take this man’s words seriously! Wa, wuahaaaaaaaaaaa—!”

Children appear one-after-another to chase Rigel around. Rigel flees. But they capture him. They push him to the ground, his limbs restrained, and assault his body with their merciless fingers.

Subaru: “Farewell, my son. You were a good boy. Your father was the one at fault.”

Rem: “Rigel. Your mother and father have important things to discuss, so stay overnight at a friend’s house for today. Also, you are forbidden to use your horn. So as not to tear your clothes.”

Rigel: “I, I’ll remember this, you heartless parents—!!”

Spica sees her big bro getting tortured by scores of tickly hands and makes a happy-sounding noise. Seems like she’s got a promising kind of personality to her. She’ll probably become a bigger star in the Natsuki household than Rigel.

With his somewhat twisted exhibition of love for his darling Rigel conveyed, Subaru takes Rem’s hand and starts walking. Towards the tranquility and happiness-filled abode in which his precious family live.

Rem: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Rem tugs on his hand, prompting Subaru to stop walking. He glances back. The moment he does, a strong wind blows past the two. Subaru unwittingly closes his eyes, slowly opening them again once the wind’s noise subsides.

The wind caresses Rem’s long, blue hair, which glimmers so much as if to melt into the sunlight. Rem, with her hair grown long. Subaru more or less knows in counter to whom she had done that. When Subaru now thought of long-haired girls, the first image to arise in his mind was that of the most precious woman in the world, right here in front of him.

Cradling their beloved daughter, her long blue hair gently tousled in wind, Rem smiles at Subaru. For Subaru, that was the smile of his most beloved, which evoked adoration in him paralleled by no other.

Rem: “I, right now, am happier than any in the world.”

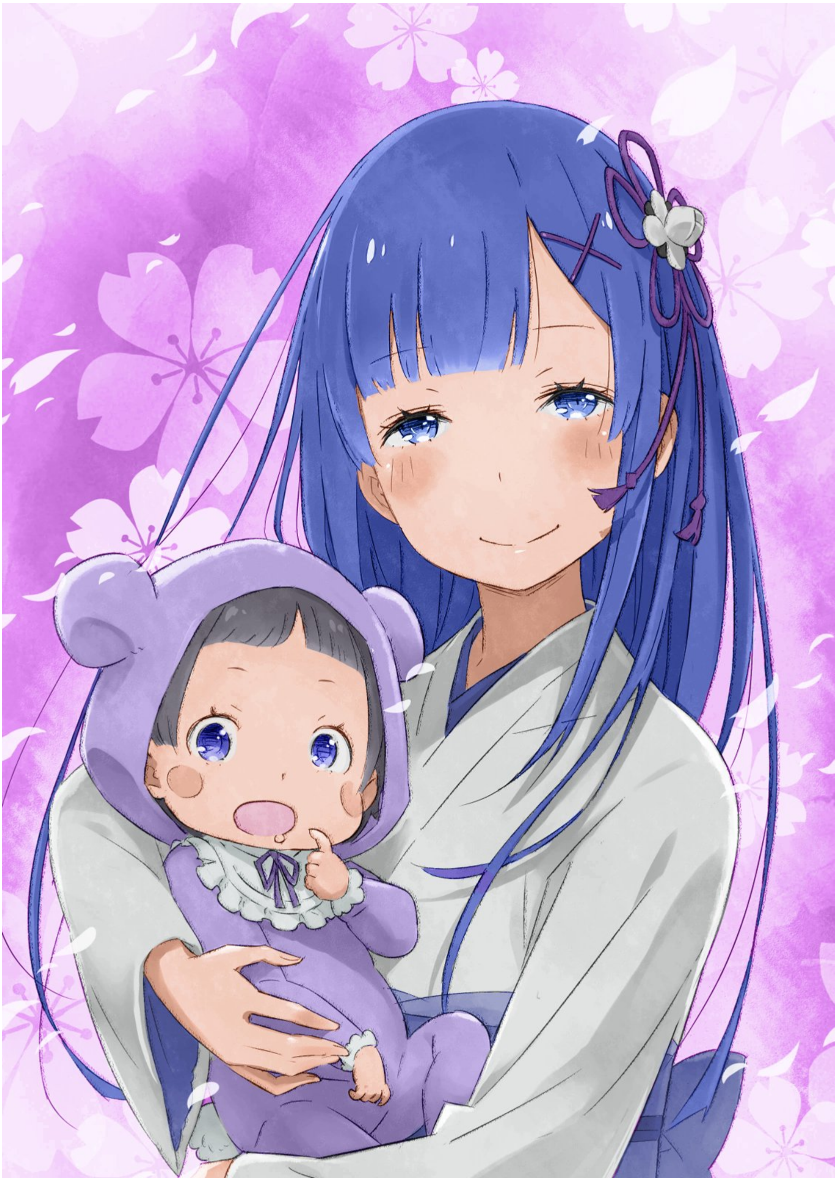

Interlude II:
Let's Eat

1

—In the swaying dragon carriage, Rem was only thinking of him.

Suddenly hearing someone calling her name, Rem softly lifted her face and narrowed her eyes against the bright radiance of the sun.

She gazed at the entourage of dragon carriages ahead. Inside them, were the wounded soldiers of the battle with the White Whale.

All in all, only their most urgent wounds had been treated and more than a few of them were still seriously injured. Yet, despite their pain, the corners of their lips revealed only the sense of accomplishment for having fulfilled a long-cherished dream. After carrying this dream for so many years, to see it finally realized meant more to them than injury or death. Having achieved what they set out to do, they now ride towards the Royal Capital on their triumphant return.

Taking all this into her sight, Rem hated herself for not being able to hold back the pain inside her heart.

Crusch: "You look anxious, Rem. Are you still worrying about him?"

Rem: "…Crusch-sama."

Glancing towards the voice, it was Crusch sitting beside her.

Wrapped in light bandages, it was commendable how Rem revealed no signs of the seriousness of her injuries, but it was impossible to conceal her depleted stamina. The fact that they rode in a carriage was also because Crusch didn't feel comfortable letting Rem ride a ground dragon alone in this condition. So she resolved to accompany her, at least until the Royal Capital is within their sights.

Sensing Rem's unsettled look, Crusch casually shrugged.

Crusch: "Compared to this…"

She shook her head,

Crusch: "He has Wilhelm, Ferris, the elites of the expedition, and Ricardo's mercenary company, all there to assist him. Besides, Anastasia must have predicted this turn of events. Even if the adversary's strength is a concern, I don't think there is any reason they would lose."

Rem: "Even so, I still can't help but selfishly worry."

Crusch: "Still can't remove the source of anxiety, huh… When the obstacle is within you, it would be possible to improve yourself until it is overcome. But when it's about other people, it does become quite difficult… Ah, I am quite terrible at comforting people after all, my apologies."

Seeing Rem sink deeper into her worries, Crusch realized she had misspoken and lowered her eyes. But seeing the always cold and formal Crusch suddenly so out of character, Rem couldn't help but curl the corners of her lips into a smile.

Crusch: "Mn, that's good."

Seeing this, Crusch nodded contently,

Crusch: "Natsuki Subaru said it before, «a smile suits Rem better, doesn't it?». Even though it sounded like it came out of nowhere, it wasn't an entirely stupid thing to say."

Rem: "Crusch-sama… You know when you smile, you give off a completely different impression. You're usually stern, yet once you smile you become…"

Crusch: "People do say that. I can't say I'm not angry about it. I guess just because I don't smile for no reason in front of people, I'm becoming rather unlovable…"

Rem wasn't sure whether to take that as a joke, but seeing Crusch's gentle smile, her lips opened into a smile as well. Courageous and proud, to Rem, who had always been lacking confidence, Crusch was an ideal woman. But of course, in Rem's heart, the highest honor was reserved for none other than her older sister, Ram.

Crusch: "Ahead of their path is the Witch Cult… Even though it was more or less to be expected considering Emilia's identity, until we know more about them, caution is necessary. Natsuki Subaru realizes this, but surely Lord Mathers has a plan as well?"

Rem: "The depths of my master's mind, Rem couldn't possibly know. Even if you ask me, I wouldn't be able to say."

Crusch: "That's harsh. Now that we're allies after all, a little information slipping around wouldn't be too bad."

Perhaps it was meant to distract Rem from sinking into negative thoughts again. Indeed, it was thanks to Crusch that Rem wasn't left alone with her worries.

Besides, Crusch made a good point. A man such as Roswaal L. Mathers must have had a grand plan for all this. Surely Subaru's actions were all furthering his master's goals, while also at the same time recovering his lost reputation.

Or, actually, with the slaying of the White Whale, his reputation had already far surpassed what it was before.

—Hero, Natsuki Subaru.

To Rem, whose heart and future he had saved, this assessment is only a matter of course, and considering the bright future he has yet to create, it is also more than justified.

And then, to be at the side of that radiant hero, a place he could occasionally turn to and make sure that she was there: if only that place could hold her existence, then there is nothing else in the world Rem would wish for. With this alone, she would be content.

When Subaru appears in her mind, Rem's heart is always full of turmoil. It becomes warm, and perhaps calm. Yet somehow it also becomes full of pain, of anxiety, of longing and worry. To give her heart at once so much happiness and so much suffering, only Subaru could do this to her.

With a smile carved upon her lips, Rem's thoughts turned to her future: her and Subaru's future.

Stealing a glance at the side of Rem's face, Crusch exhaled a sigh of relief. Caressing the scabbard of her Knight's sword with her fingers, her eyes stared in silence into the road ahead—Her thoughts were of the long path to the Royal Capital.

Crusch: "—h?"

Rem: "—?"

Crusch squinted her eyes, the same instant Rem heard a noise and raised her head.

What Crusch's eyes captured was something off about the dragon carriage up ahead. The noise Rem heard came from the same direction. In fact, both clues were leading to the same conclusion.

In Crusch's eyes, the dragon carriage disintegrated. In Rem's ears, the prelude to collapse echoed like the sound of raindrops.

A mist of blood sprayed out. The image of the dragon carriage in front of them suddenly transformed into a pitiful blur.

The ground dragon, the carriage, and all the wounded inside were completely uprooted, and then shattered mercilessly by overwhelming devastation.

Crusch: "—! Enemy attack!"

Her astonished throat delayed only an instant, before Crusch bellowed out the rally call. With Crusch at the helm, the surrounding dragon carriages sensed the crisis and prepared for battle.

Rem, pushing away all sensations of injury and exhaustion and with her morning star in hand, stood up at once— On the other side of the blood mist was the upright shadow of a man.

Who is that man, now burning into her sight, standing in the middle of the road?

Without weapon, without armor, without fear. Without compassion or malice or intent—!

Crusch: "—Run him over!!"

Crusch's command came roaring from atop the driver's platform. Hearing the command, the Knight-driver snapped the reins in acknowledgment. With a cry, the ground dragon led the carriage charging— with surging momentum capable of shredding any victim coming into contact.

Without deviation from the mark, it was a head-on collision into the upright figure. The man showed no intention of moving. And just like that, the two objects touched, the slender body about to be ripped to shreds by the—

Rem: "Crusch-sama—!"

With this cry, Rem picked up Crusch by the waist and flew off the side of the carriage. There was no time to reach for the driver, Rem landed biting her lip, thinking this.

And then, right after—

Man: "Agh, really? Don't do that. I didn't even do anything, and someone wants to crush me to death. Really, that isn't what people should be doing. I don't think so."

He spoke with the relaxed demeanor of a man leisurely walking in a park or basking in the sun or some such situation.

If it weren't for the shattered debris of what used to be the dragon carriage, Rem would not have found this scene to be so bizarrely horrifying.

No matter how you look at it, the man doesn't seem anything out of the ordinary.

His body was slender, and his neat white hair was neither long nor short, nor particularly odd. His black clothes were neither flamboyant nor shabby, and his face was not eye-catching at all. He looked so very ordinary that perhaps no matter where you put him, he would not seem out of place, and if you met him on the street, you'd forget him within ten seconds.

But the fact is, upon encountering this man, the ground dragon was ripped in two, its feet still in mid-stride, and then, along with the driver and carriage, shattered into countless indiscernible pieces.

The most frightening part is, though Rem never looked away, all she saw was this man merely standing there.

Not doing anything, just by standing there the man survived collision with a charging dragon carriage, and still stood there as if it were nothing.

Crusch: "Thank you, Rem, for saving me. But… it seems the situation hasn't improved."

Still being carried in Rem's arms, Crusch thanked her, stood back up, and in the same instant drew her Knight's sword from its sheath. For the driver who followed her order and was shattered into a thousand pieces as a result, Crusch grieved his death in her heart and narrowed her eyes,

Crusch: "To so cruelly murder my subjects, do not think this will end so easily… Who are you?"

With her naked blade gleaming with the intent to kill, she threw these words at the man. Taking in these words, the man touched his chin and began nodding as if he understood.

Man: "Ah I see I see right right, you don't know about me. But I know about you. The whole Royal Capital… actually, the whole country is talking about you. You are a candidate to be the next Monarch, after all. Even I, so out of touch with the world, can imagine what a great burden…"

Crusch: "Idle talk ends now— Answer my question, or the next time I shall slay you."

Man: “That’s really extreme! But then you wouldn’t be able to run a country otherwise. Yet this sentiment, I really don’t understand it one bit… This desire to wear the crown, and take up all those responsibilities, how can anyone understand it? Ah, ah, even though I don’t understand, I won’t disagree with you. I’m not so arrogant as that, not one bit. Unlike you…”

Not paying any attention to Crusch’s demand, the man just kept on and on. And then,

Crusch: “—As I said, that was the last chance.”

As Crusch coldly pronounced these words, her arm swung out a blade-of-wind.

Crusch’s wind-magic combined with swordsmanship unleashes an invisible slash— Renowned as “One Blow, One-Hundred Felled”5, it is a powerful ultra-long-range slash that can sever a man’s body without him even knowing where, or who, it came from.

Back then, when the Witchbeast Great Rabbit appeared in the plains of the Karsten Duchy, she slew all the Witchbeasts under the Great Rabbit’s command in her first ever battle, and it was that time onward Duchess Crusch Karsten earned the name “One Blow, One-Hundred Felled”.

Even the White Whale’s adamant skin was opened by this blade, as it played no small part in bringing down that colossal Witchbeast. Compared to the White Whale, this small, frail body could not possibly withstand… Yet,

Man: “…Attacking someone while they’re talking, just where are your manners?”

Head tilted, as if flaunting how his body took no damage, the man just stood there.

His existence was utterly unaffected by a slash that could rend even the White Whale’s armor. The man’s body— No, even his clothes were unscathed.

He did not defend the attack. Rather, it was something wholly different and unknown.

Crusch could not help but hold her breath, and Rem froze in place, after witnessing something so far outside the realm of understanding. In front of them, the man sighed for the first time.

Man: “You know…”

He went on with a tone lowered by displeasure,

Man: “I was talking. Wasn’t I talking just now? And then you interrupted me. Isn’t that a bit impolite? Don’t you think that was wrong? I have the right to speak… even though I don’t really want to have to point this out, but to not interrupt people when they’re speaking… isn’t that just common social decency? You’re free to listen or not listen I won’t bother you about that, but just what are you trying to do by not letting me talk?”

As he ranted, the man occasionally stomped the ground with a displeased expression on his face. And just like this, he pointed his finger at the two in front of him, both now eerily speechless.

Man: “And now you’re quiet, what is this? You’re listening. You were listening, right? Wasn’t I asking you something? Then give me some kind of reply, it should be like that, right? You won’t even do that, don’t even want to do that. Ah, ah, freedom. That’s your freedom. You see me ranting and you want to kill me, then when I ask you a question, you ignore me like I’m the wind. So, it’s like that, is it? Well you’re free to do that. Alright, let’s just say it’s like that. But then, what is that supposed to mean?”

Seeing the two standing silently in front of him bracing for an attack, he tilted his head and stared at them with his sharp eyes, and then, with a smothered voice,

Man: “You’re disregarding my rights— One of my only few possessions, right?”

Just as a chill ran up Rem’s back, the man took a step forward. His drooping arm lifted, sweeping up a small gust of wind.

Then, on the same line as the motion of his arm— The earth, the air, and the world parted in two.

Round and round and round, Crusch's severed left shoulder flew into the air.

Still grasping onto the sheath of a Knight's sword, the arm dropped down in a spray of blood. Crusch, blown off her feet by the impact, fell to the ground, convulsing in pain and mass loss of blood.

Rem: "Crusch-sama—"

Stunned for few seconds, Rem rushed to the side of the fallen Crusch. She placed her hands on Crusch's wound and with the small final remnant of her Mana, applied all her power to stop the bleeding.

Crusch's shoulder flowed bright crimson, the flesh, bones, nerves and arteries were all perfectly severed. A clean and masterful attack, Rem sighed with a rather inappropriate admiration.

Crusch: "Ferris… Oh… You?"

Under Rem's healing hands, Crusch looked on with unfocused eyes, muttering indiscernibly, and, with her remaining right arm, grasped tightly onto Rem's knee. Proof that she still possessed the strength to live. Crusch clenched her teeth, enduring her pain.

Rem kept her eyes on the man's every movement.

She has no means of defending against his strikes. At the first sign of an attack, to leap away with Crusch is the only thing she could do.

In a moment of eerie realization—for some reason Crusch and Rem are all alone—why hasn't anyone come to their aid? In this critical juncture, with their lord gravely wounded, those Knights who did not cower even in the face of the White Whale, why—

???: "Ahh, seriously… No matter how much we eat, it's not enough! This is why we can never stop living. Eating, feeding, chewing, biting, eating down, eating up, chewing up, chewing down, licking, lapping, sucking, inhaling, devouring, gluttonous drinking!

Gluttony! Ahh— Thanks for the meal!”

All of a sudden from behind came the shrill, ear-splitting voice of a teenager.

Like the first man, the youth’s voice sent chills running up Rem’s spine. Her body stiff, she turned to look at him. The youth stood among several empty carriages, from head to toe he was covered in blood.

His long, dark-brown hair extending all the way down to his knees, his body was short, about the same height as Rem, and perhaps two or three years younger—perhaps not much older than the kids in the village near the mansion.

Under his hair, only a thin, blood-soaked rag covers his slender body. Every inch of his skin is coated with blood.

Of course, none of the blood was his. It was from the Knights lying at his feet.

While Crusch and Rem were in a standoff with the man in front, the Knights had engaged the enemy behind them. In the end, before Rem even sensed any combat, it was already over.

Rem: “You people, are…”

Her voice quivering, Rem, with Crusch in her arms, backed up until both enemies were within her field of vision. Blood from Crusch’s shoulder had dyed the road red. Now the air turned cold, as if mocking their weakness, their fear.

Hearing the question, the man and the youth looked at each other.

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As if it had all been arranged, they nodded to each other. Then with the same deranged smile of violent delight, they announced their name.

Man: “Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Greed, Regulus Corneas!”

Youth: “Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Gluttony, Ley Batenkaitos!”

2

Ley: “We sensed our pet got killed, so we came to have a look. But then, ahh— What a delightful harvest! So great, how great, pretty great, sure’s great, maybe great, surely great, isn’t it great, definitely sure is great! Tenacity! Love! Hatred! Chivalry! So many joys and sorrows interspersed! Which’s exactly why, which’s exactly why, eating them is filling![6]”

Witch Cult— and Sin Archbishops, to boot.

When those words reached Rem’s ears, she stood frozen in place.

With an exhilarated expression the youth stomped on the ground while howling in strange noises. Spinning, as if dancing, his arms pointed to the fallen Knights, and then looked at them as if with overwhelming compassion.

Ley: “Sure’s great, to come over in person to do the eating. We haven’t really gotten a chance to meet anyone so full of grit like these guys lately. Our starvation feels sated for once in ages!”

Regulus: “That’s what I don’t understand about you, Batenkaitos, your hunger isn’t real hunger, and the one being filled isn’t even you. Why can’t you be satisfied with just the way you are? We only truly possess what we hold in our own two hands and can carry with our own two arms. If you realize that, you will be able to control your desires, no?”

Ley: “We don’t need, and we don’t like, lectures. We’re not going to deny what you're saying or say it's incorrect, but we also don't care. Ahh— Seriously, we and us coooouldn't care less about anything but satiating this hunger!"

Batenkaitos of Gluttony descended into a fit of deranged laughter, and Regulus of Greed shrugged disinterestedly.

Two Sin Archbishops appearing in the same place at the same time, Rem sank into thought.

In terms of strength, defeating these two is impossible.

Even though Crusch's bleeding had been stopped, she is still in critical condition. Whether the Knights are dead or comatose, they can no longer fight.

To heal Crusch, Rem had already overspent her mana, though if she were to transform into demon mode, she will be able to absorb mana from the atmosphere and put up a fight. But against these two, victory is inconceivable.

On the one hand is the flawless offense and defense of Greed. Known to be able to capture a city single-handedly, it is impossible to measure the full extent of his power. On the other hand, Gluttony is no less formidable. Though his abilities are as-of-yet unknown, he has managed to wipe out an entire battle tested army within seconds. No matter what, Rem could not see victory waiting for her in the near future.

She quickly scanned the battlefield; the Liger carriages are nowhere to be seen. The demi-human mercenaries were tasked with transporting wounded soldiers—and the head of the White Whale. They might have escaped in the chaos and be retreating full speed toward the Royal Capital right now. Commanding them must be the Fang of Iron Vice Captain—Hetaro—bright and resourceful, and possessing great common sense and judgement…

If given enough time, perhaps he will return with reinforcements.

But, even so—it will probably not arrive in time for Rem.

Rem: "White Whale…"

Regulus: “Eh?”

Ley: “Huh?”

She muttered quietly, and both Sin Archbishops tilted their head.

She held her breath for an instant, having found a clue to stall for time. Before they lost interest, she continued.

Rem: “Did you want the Whale back? Because we are transporting the severed head to the Royal Capital right now.”

Ley: “Head? Ahh, so that’s what was stinking funny. Well, we don’t really need the head or anything, and not like there’s any point taking the dead one back, so it’s fine. We can just make another one if we want… Well, it’d take the same amount of time to raise it though.”

Saying this, Batenkaitos snapped his neck and ground his teeth,

Ley: “Compared to this…”

He said forcefully, and continued,

Ley: “What we’re more interested in than the White Whale’s death is whoever it was who killed it. Maybe the thing wasn’t perfect, but they still killed something built up over four-hundred years of making. We were certainly anticipating a uniformly ripe, in-season bunch… Ahh, this was more than we could’ve imagined!”

His head shaking up and down, his long hair wildly swinging, the youth laughed with saliva flying from his mouth, clacking his teeth as he did so.

Ley: “Love! Chivalry! Hatred! Tenacity! Accomplishment! The utter satisfaction of feeling that which was, for so long, so long, hoarded, piled, simmered and boiled, passing down our throat! Does a gourmet banquet greater than this truly exist?! Maybe not, likely not, surely not, plainly not, not a chance, not any chance, not any chance it could be! Gluttonous drinking! Gluttony! Any and everything! Our heart, our stomach, trembles in delight and fullness!”

Nothing he was saying made any sense.

As if losing control, Batenkaitos broke into shrill, convulsive laughter. Silently, Rem turned her eyes to Regulus, and Regulus waved hello.

Regulus: “Unfortunately, unlike him… I’m here purely, purely by accident… Not my intention at all… Of course, do I have hunger and desires like his? To hold such selfish, meaningless desires… Unlike his unsatisfied stomach torturing him, I, on the other hand, am completely, utterly, content with myself!”

Spreading his arms wide like a cross, Regulus stood in front of Rem with an utterly refreshing expression.

Crusch’s left arm was severed, yet his two arms are still free to bend and turn, it was like an act to flaunt his very existence.

Regulus: “Conflict, I hate that… For me, just merely enjoying the calm and safety of regular life is enough, I have no more need than that. Static, unchanging time and myself, that’s the best. Because my hands are small and powerless, for me, just for myself, just to protect my meager possessions I must use up all my strength. That’s my kind of fragile existence.”

Regulus emphasized it by clenching his hand into a fist. The hand that claimed countless lives, and the arm of a woman. Such an explanation is just taking it too far.

Be it Batenkaitos, a madman in a trance of deranged laughter, or Regulus, a self-righteous, self-satisfied and self-indulged blabbermouth, they certainly are Witch Cultists.

A storm of boiling rage was rising in her heart.

Rem laid Crusch, still faintly breathing, down on the grassy plain. She forced her quivering legs to stand. In her hand, she held her morningstar, and squeezing out the final drop of her depleted mana, spears of ice formed in the air around her.

Seeing this, Batenkaitos and Regulus’s expressions changed.

Regulus: "Was anybody listening? I believe I said I don't want to fight? If you're going take an attitude like that, then, then that's ignoring my wishes… That's violating my rights. One of the few meager possessions I was permitted to have… My property. Taken from me. —To me, already so few in my desires, this is… unforgivable!"

Rem: "Enough is enough, Witch Cultist."

Raising her head toward Regulus, Rem pronounced these words firm and resolute. Toward the disappointed-looking Regulus, Rem rattled her iron chains.

Rem: "Sooner or later, a hero will appear. The amount of pain and suffering your self-indulgence and conceit had caused in the world, will be known to that hero. Rem's deeply beloved, one and only, hero."

Ley: "Ehh, a hero. Well then, we'll be looking forward to them too. If you believe in them so much, that guy must be delicious for sure!"

Clapping his hands, body angled forward, Batenkaitos stuck his tongue out at Rem. His eyes were not the eyes of a man looking at an enemy, much less at a woman. They were the eyes of a starving beast looking at his food.

The fallen Knights behind Batenkaitos began to blur, and became indistinguishable.

Their existence, their position, none of it is now comprehensible to Rem. Why are they lying there, who are they, and what relation do they have to herself?

Just like the nightmare of one's existence being erased by the White Whale's mist. So, the Whale's master, Gluttony, possessed the same Authority.

Rem: "…Head Maid of the Household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Rem—"

Intending to proclaim her identity, Rem shook her head. In this moment, the name she really wanted to say was,

Rem: "—Right now, I am only someone who is beloved by the person she loves. Companion of the hero, the one I love the most in all the world, no matter what. Natsuki Subaru's companion, Rem."

A pristine white horn emerged from her forehead; an immense surge of mana flew into her body from the atmosphere.

Her body drinking in new strength, the chain of her morning star writhing, rattling, the ice spears around her ringing in anticipation.

She opened her eyes, taking in the world and the feeling of the atmosphere. In her mind, she was seeing his face.

Rem: "Prepare yourselves, Sin Archbishops. Rem's hero shall bring punishment upon you!"

Raising her morning star, the same instant the ice spears flew, Rem's body shot forth. As if in reply, Batenkaitos' mouth stretched wide open, full of fangs.

Ley: "Ahh, nice backbone— Well, let's eat!"

Clash met clash, and in that instant, she thought—

“I wish, when he realizes I am gone, it would cause a small ripple in his heart.”

—This alone, was what Rem wished for in her final moment.

Interlude III:
To Each, Their Oaths

1

—Lying on the bed, her expression was serene. To Subaru she looked like she was sleeping.

Her lashes are so long… He thought in a daze, gazing at her closed eyes. She'd usually make an effort to keep her face expressionless, but in her sleep, a softness befitting her age was showing on her cheeks. Come to think of it, Subaru had never seen her asleep.

She always woke before him and went to sleep after he did. Subaru knew, to keep herself resolute, she had always tried to bury the childish side of her, but that stubborn facade had collapsed so many times before Subaru's eyes.

Be it surprised, or embarrassed, pouting or about to cry, or after opening their hearts her smile gleaming under her tears, there should be so many, so many chances to see them again—

Subaru: "—Rem."

Even calling her name, caressing her soft, white cheeks, she made no response.

On the bed, deep in her slumber, the maid's dress so familiar on her shoulders, the white headband that adorned her hair so blue and beautiful as the sky, were all gone.

The attire she wore in her work, and in battle—She had no need for them now.

???: "There you are."

In the room silent and stagnant as though time had stopped, someone called to Subaru.

Slowly turning, as though reluctantly, he looked behind him. It was a young woman with long, softly swaying hair. She wore a simple yet elegant dark blue evening dress, and even as she walked toward him, she seemed overflowing with grace.

But all her movements had a slightly muddled hesitation about them, which combined with the elegance of her person gave out a rather odd impression. Subaru cannot help but feel a sense of awkwardness when he is near her.

Long Haired Girl: “She…”

Subaru: “Still hasn’t changed. Even though I can’t do anything… I thought I could at least stay here with her. But that’s such a cowardly thing to say.”

Long Haired Girl: “Still, this… would make her happy, wouldn’t it?”

Seeing Subaru’s downcast expression, the woman timidly tried to console him. But hearing this, Subaru shot back a stare at once fierce, bitter, and cruel. His senses sharpened at her words; his eyes locked onto hers. Without meaning to, it was already far beyond his control. Noticing his reaction, the young woman placed her hands over her lips, “I’m sorry”, she apologized.

Long Haired Girl: “I said something I shouldn’t have, and hurt you, didn’t I?”

Subaru: “No… No, I am the one who should apologize. I was only venting my anger all pent up inside… If I behave like this, Rem will be really, really angry with me, won’t she? «You shouldn’t be hurting people’s feelings like that, Subaru», or something like that.”

He shrugged and said that softly in Rem’s voice. In his mind, he heard her voice saying those words. A voice only he could hear. His impression sounded nothing like her, but there is not a person left in the world who could point that out.

Against Subaru’s empty words and gestures, the woman sadly lowered her eyes, and held her left wrist with her right hand.

As if a shadow had descended between them, the room returned to silence.

This familiar feeling… Natsuki Subaru shouldn't stay like this, should he? Subaru shook his head internally.

To sink into the depths of an ocean of despair, is easy, even if only so the piercing anguish would go away. But it doesn't suit him—as the man she believes in, as the man Rem loves above all the world, this is not what Natsuki Subaru should do.

Never.

Subaru: "…You were looking for me, then?"

Long Haired Girl: "Yes, I want to hold a meeting with everyone present, so I've asked everyone to gather in the lounge, if it's alright with…"

Nodding with an expression like she's just been saved, the woman got right to the point. But then she stopped halfway through and furrowed her brows rather awkwardly. It took a while before Subaru noticed this.

Subaru: "My name is Natsuki Subaru."

Long Haired Girl: "…I'm sorry, Natsuki Subaru-sama. I will be sure to remember. Even though I've been told how much I am indebted to you… Please excuse me, my apologies!"

Subaru: "It can't be helped, can it? There must a lot of things you need to remember right now, don't worry about it."

As if to say she was very, very sorry, the young woman lowered her head.

Then, seeing her recover again with perfect grace, even femininity, Subaru cannot help but feel a sense of surreal incongruity stabbing at his chest. But even Subaru wasn't brash enough to say this out loud.

Shaking his head, Subaru decided to put that aside for now, and stood up.

Turning to the girl on the bed, he gently touched the hair on her forehead.

Subaru: “I’ll be back, Rem.”

Breathing softly, she really exists.

—Having been forgotten by all the world, this was her only remaining existence.

With Rem behind his back, Subaru turned to face the young woman.

Subaru: “The lounge is it? Let’s not make them wait, let’s go.”

Long Haired Girl: “Yes, let’s go, Natsuki Subaru-sama.”

Her head slightly inclining forward, softly smiling, she seemed at that moment like something out of a dream—her long, green hair, flowing with her every movement.

Hating having to admit this, Subaru turned away, hiding a genuine smile emerging on his face.

Subaru: “Thank you for coming to fetch me, Miss Crusch.”

With this name, Subaru thanked the long-haired girl—who seem to have become a different person entirely.

2

—By the time Subaru arrived in the Royal Capital, it was already over.

His conversation with Emilia on the road were all gone from his mind.

The girl sitting safely next to him, Subaru should feel content, and relieved, having finally, finally saved her. But in the relentlessly galloping dragon carriage, the only thing on Subaru’s mind was the other girl.

Emilia: “Rem… Who is that?”

Looking confused, she tilted her head as she said this.

He scrambled to look for the smallest hint of a joke, something in her voice, in her expression, hoping against hope the words “Just kidding~” would come out of her mouth…

Whether it’s Petra, or the other kids, no one remembered her.

Having confirmed this fact with everyone on the carriage, Subaru commanded the driver to rush to the Royal Capital with all haste, on his face was the desperate expression of someone riding into death itself.

Impossible. There must be a mistake.

It was all going so well. Everyone was saved, the objective was completed. Despite enduring so much pain and sorrow, taking so many scars within his heart that will never, ever heal, everything worked out in the end.

And still—

???: “Aha! It’s Subaru-kyun! Impressive, Crusch-sama, you managed to find that capricious little stray!”

On the way to the lounge, seeing the two in the hallway, someone called out to them.

Shaking around in a short dress, liberated from the Knight’s garments, a pair of catlike ears twitched. Ferris walked over to them and gently picked up Crusch’s hands.

Crusch: “Ferris-san…”

Ferris: “I’m just Ferris! Ferris and Crusch-sama have known each other for a very long time-nyan. If you still add a -san to my name I’m going to die of loneliness and despair-nyan.”

Holding up Crusch’s hands in one hand, Ferris used the other to nudge Crusch in the shoulder. At such affectionate interaction, Crusch looked like she wasn’t sure what to do with herself, but essentially accepted it as it is, and with a “Sorry”, she lowered her

head.

Crusch: “To become just like before… Even though it’s not easy, I will try my best, Ferris… Yes. Just Ferris.”

Ferris: “It’s alright-nyan, because Ferris is always Crusch-sama’s companion, and will always stay by your side. And to be together with such a cute version of Crusch-sama, Ferris will find even more reasons to fall for Crusch-sama-nyan, just the thought of that makes Ferris happy-nyan!”

Playfully swinging Crusch’s captured hands up and down, Ferris blew her a kiss.

Watching them, the unease growing inside Subaru’s heart became unbearable.

Even though Crusch had changed so drastically, Ferris treated her the same as always, and accepted her as always, it was something beyond what Subaru could understand.

Inside that smile of Ferris’, how much inner struggle must be lying within? Subaru doesn’t know, nonetheless, the thought of it alone filled him with sentiment.

Ferris: “Subaru-kyun, get in the lounge-nyan. Emilia-sama and old man Wilhelm are waiting for us.”

Subaru: “—A… Ah.”

His thoughts must have added something into his voice, but Ferris didn’t seem to notice. Saying “This way, Crusch-sama”, Ferris led her by the hand.

In the subtle atmosphere between Subaru and Ferris, Crusch tried to hide the uncertainty looming between her brows. She looked at them, one and then the other, and in the end not saying a thing, silently followed behind Ferris’ steps.

Taking a deep breath, Subaru bit his lips, and closed his eyes.

His mind was on edge. His heart felt desolate. In that state he didn’t want to see anyone at all. But it can’t be helped. He will not make excuses to comfort himself.

Because the last thing he’d want to do, is to blame her for his pain.

This way, they made their long-overdue entry into the lounge.

Noticing all eyes were on him, Subaru looked around the room. Other than himself, there were four people present, Emilia, Wilhelm, and one step before him, Crusch and Ferris. Seeing he must be the last one, Subaru closed the door behind him, and ever-so-naturally sat down next to Emilia.

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “No problem. I’ve calmed down now, Emilia-tan —I, am, alright.”

To Emilia’s worried call, Subaru lightheartedly retorted. Only his eyes weren’t looking at her. Rather, he couldn’t see her at all.

If he met Emilia’s eyes now, he would have revealed a despised part of himself. The very thought of it filled him with uncontrollable dread.

Ferris: “Now that everyone is here, let’s begin!”

With the sound of a clap, everyone’s attention landed on Ferris.

It would be impossible for Crusch to direct a meeting in her condition, so that task fell to Ferris.

Roughly surveying everyone present, Ferris walked to the front of the room with an arm in the air.

Ferris: “Since there are no objections-nyan, let’s assess our situation.”

Thus, with a smile, a meeting from which everyone wanted something completely different, began.

3

—After the battle with the White Whale, on their way back to the Royal Capital, Rem, Crusch, and the punitive expedition, bringing with them wounded soldiers and the Whale's severed head, were ambushed by two Sin Archbishops.

Half of the expedition perished. The demi-human mercenaries accompanying them retreated immediately and avoided annihilation.

Ferris: "When the Vice-Captain Hetaro brought the Royal Capital's Knights back to the scene, the Sin Archbishops were already gone-nyan. Only our Knights' bodies and…"

Crusch: "People who were like me… right?"

Crusch furrowed her brows at Ferris' last few words, biting her lip. With a dejected expression, she must have felt it was all her fault.

To her, the Crusch in Ferris' story might as well be referring to another person.

Because—

Crusch: "My memory was erased… By a Sin Archbishop?"

Ferris: "Probably-nyan. I've attended to the other patients with the same condition as Crusch-sama. Their memories are completely gone, there is nothing Ferris' healing magic can do-nyan. Even now Ferris has no idea what the cause is…"

Wilhelm: "Sin Archbishop, Gluttony. This Authority— it must be him."

Wilhelm nodded gravely, and with a stern gaze he looked to Crusch. But, seeing Crusch shrivel under his gaze, Wilhelm closed his eyes in apology.

Wilhelm: "I was inconsiderate of Crusch-sama's condition and frightened you. I am deeply sorry. I still have much to learn."

Crusch: "No… I should apologize for being such a useless master… Even though I am trying my hardest to remember everything about

Wilhelm-sama…”

Hearing Crusch call him Wilhelm-sama, the old swordsman cringed.

Seeing his sworn master suffering so, the guilt and shame of having failed to protect her brought pain onto Wilhelm’s face. Glancing toward Subaru, who at this moment must be carrying the very same feeling in his heart, Wilhelm seemed to understand him.

On the other hand, Ferris, whose attitude toward Crusch would not waver in spite of everything… seemed to disregard Subaru’s feeling completely.

Ferris: “Sin Archbishop of Sloth has been dealt with. And then there’s Gluttony and Greed. There is a limit to what can be done-nyan. Something so rare as two Sin Archbishops moving together, I’d be surprised if Emilia-sama’s rise has nothing to do with it.”

Emilia: “…Me?”

Her name suddenly mentioned, Emilia looked at Ferris with a surprised expression. Nodding to her, Ferris continued.

Ferris: “The Witch Cult will never tolerate the existence of a half-elf such as Emilia-sama. They are usually quiet and creep in the shadows, but now they’re all suddenly making such a ruckus, there is obviously a connection here.”

Listening to Ferris’ speculations, Subaru crossed his arms, and pondered on a conversation they had before.

The night before the battle with the White Whale, when Subaru discussed with Ferris and Crusch the possibility of a Witch Cultist attack, they had accepted his suspicions readily. That means there must have been precedents…

Emilia: “But um… Even though I don’t know much about the Witch Cult… The Witch refers to the Witch of Envy, right?”

Raising her hand nervously, Emilia uttered this entirely unexpected question.

Subaru doubted his hearing, Wilhelm and Ferris' expressions froze. The only people who weren't astonished by those words were Crusch, and Emilia herself.

Seeing their reactions, Emilia became even more nervous.

Emilia: "Sorry! I can tell from your reactions that that's something I should know, really, really, should."

Subaru: "But… Emilia-tan… you know about the Witch, you were the one who told me…"

The first time they met, she had given him the name Satella, and then after he had died, he tried to call her by that name again. His memory of her anger… meant that she knew that name was forbidden.

But Emilia shook her head at Subaru's words,

Emilia: "Near the forest where I lived there was a small village… they hated me because of my likeness to the Witch of Envy… So, I know how the Witch is regarded in the world, but things like the Witch Cult…"

Ferris: "How Emilia-sama lived in the past let's just put that aside for-nyan! But to say that you don't even know about the Witch Cult at this point is just too outrageous-nyan!!"

Shoulders raised, as if mocking, Ferris' hands flung up with a sigh.

Seeing this attitude from Ferris, Subaru's anger rose, and staring into Ferris' eyes he retorted.

Subaru: "How can you say this? To admit you don't know something, do you realize how much courage that takes? To ask what is necessary, what is wrong with that?"

Ferris: "Subaru-kyun is really persuasive-nyan! You really are master and servant-nyan!"

Ferris relentlessly mocking Subaru's unhidden displeasure, Subaru was about to stand up in anger— But, Crusch: “Ferris. I cannot overlook what you just said. Apologize at once.”

The moment before Subaru’s strength injected into his legs, the words of reproach rang out in the room.

In her dark blue evening dress, up to now frail and timid, she transformed all of a sudden—majestic and fierce, her gaze was that of a Knight.

Crusch: “As Natsuki Subaru-sama said, to ask what you do not know, is nothing deserving of mockery. Even you do not have that right. Understood?”

Ferris: “…Understood, Crusch-sama.”

Her forceful words subsiding, Crusch seemed to return to the soft-spoken girl of a moment before. But as if having heard something from the awe-inspiring Crusch of the past, from this now frail and feminine girl, Subaru could not hold in his astonishment. Ferris too, could not contain the shock within his eyes.

Ferris: “Emilia-sama, please accept my apology for my rudeness. Subaru-kyun too.”

Subaru: “You… N-No, it’s fine. Then, let’s talk about the Witch Cult now. Emilia-tan wants to hear it. And to be honest, I don’t know the details either…”

Seeing Subaru back down, half giving up, Ferris lightheartedly replied with an “Understood-nyan”. A finger lightly touching the lower lip, Ferris shook around in the short dress.

Ferris: “Firstly, as Emilia-sama said, the Witch Cult is an organization that worships the Witch of Envy. Ever since the unstoppable rise of the Witch four-hundred years ago, these fanatics have been active. To the Knights’ order, all affiliates of this organization are to be killed-on-sight.”

Emilia: “Killed-on-sight… How could you carry out such extreme orders?”

Ferris: “The Witch Cultists will not hesitate to burn a village or an entire city just to accomplish their goals. In fact, the village near Lord Roswaal’s mansion came close to falling victim to these Cultists, and one of the Sin Archbishops that took part in the ambush had once managed to single handedly capture a city in the Vollachian Empire in the south.”

Emilia kept on blinking her eyes, as if unable to take in these facts. Subaru understands her reaction, because the horrors of the Witch Cult had already been carved deep into his heart.

He now uses Petelgeuse as the standard unit of measurement for insanity.

But in terms of strength, Greed sounds like something on a completely different level than Petelgeuse.

Ferris: “Wait, wait, I’m getting sidetracked-nyan… The Witch Cult Sin Archbishops, each named after one of the six Sins, other than Envy, are the executives of the organization.”

Emilia: “The six witches… were Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Wrath and Pride, right?”

Ferris: “Yes, and especially well known among them are Sloth and Greed. Greed, as previously mentioned, is known for annihilating entire cities. Sloth, on the other hand, seemed to be behind every little disturbance caused by the Witch Cult. But Sloth has already been beautifully eliminated by our punitive expedition-nyan… Right, Subaru-kyun?”

Subaru: “Yes… Sloth is dead. I saw him disintegrate with my own eyes, there is no mistaking it.”

Subaru confirmed Ferris’ words, his mind playing back the final moments of the abominable Petelgeuse. Screaming Subaru’s name, full of hatred… Even long afterward, the sound would not leave his ears. Like a curse, it kept on howling…

—Was that the reason behind Subaru’s cruel fate?

Ferris: “There are now five remaining Sin Archbishops. Two of them were responsible for the ambush on Crusch-sama. Their movements are always mysterious, and so even after four-hundred years the efforts to eradicate them barely made any progress. As to their objective… It is said that they want to revive the Witch of Envy-nyan."

Subaru: "Revive… the Witch?"

Unable to disregard these words, Subaru jumped up, tipping over his chair. Noticing this gave the girls a fright, Subaru waved his hands up and down.

Subaru: "To revive her… Is that even possible? The Witch has been dead for four-hundred years, right? To make something like that come back to life…"

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono, the Witch of Envy is not dead. Her life is still preserved at the edge of this world. Unfortunately."

To the agitated Subaru, Wilhelm quietly revealed this fact.

Speechless, Subaru looked to Wilhelm, and met his eyes, serious and severe.

Wilhelm: "Near the Great Waterfall, the Sealing Stone Shrine is located. The Witch is there, her indestructible existence sealed inside. For even with the power of the Dragon and the Sword Saint combined, she cannot be destroyed."

Subaru: "Sealed… I might have heard that before… but to revive her, why don't they just destroy the seal?"

Where did Subaru hear that before? But more importantly is the question…

…If the witch was sealed, they merely need to break the seal, but instead, every time a half-elf appears, they wreak havoc in the world with senseless murder and destruction. Just what is the Witch Cult trying to do? But at this question, Wilhelm shook his head.

Wilhelm: "To approach the temple is almost impossible. First, there is very little mana near the Great Fall, under those circumstances, no one can withstand the Witch's Miasma. Secondly, they cannot bypass the Sage."

Subaru: "Sage…?"

Wilhelm: "The Sage Shaula. Along with the first-generation Sword Saint, and the Divine Dragon Volcanica, these were the heroes who sealed the Witch. Then he/she retired to the Pleiades Watchtower near the Great Waterfall. But retired in name only, even now, for he/she is constantly watching, for those who would revive the Witch. —That is, as the story goes."

Subaru: "They must be… quite old…"

Four hundred years is quite a long breath, even for Sages. But that is beside the point. Subaru decided to set that aside so Ferris could continue.

Subaru: "Well now we know why the Witch can't be unsealed, but then how do they revive her?"

Ferris: "Even if you ask-nyan, Ferris isn't a Witch Cultist and doesn't know either. All we can do is torture a Witch Cultist and have them spit it out-nyan."

Brushing off Subaru's question, Ferris took on an "I give up" expression. Even though Subaru wasn't satisfied, there was no point pursuing the question further. In any case, Emilia nodded.

Emilia: "So that's… why I'm treated like this… But why didn't Puck…"

Subaru: "Did Puck say something just now? There is a mountain of things I need to ask him!"

Emilia: "Puck didn't respond… Even though he seems to have materialized… I only know he's nearby…"

Seeing Emilia shriveling in her seat, it did not even occur to Subaru to say "there, there". In fact, to talk to Puck is something he absolutely must do.

Besides, there is no way to predict where or when the Sin Archbishop of Greed will appear. Puck's input will also be crucial.

Ferris: "That's all there is to say about the Witch Cult-nyan. So, on top of that, let's move the discussion to the future."

Subaru: "The future…?"

Turning to Subaru with a clap, Ferris, with a jubilant smile, said

Ferris: "To put it simply, this Alliance… let's dissolve it-nyan."

4

The atmosphere in the lounge froze. Only Subaru's mind was heating up.

Taking in those words, he pondered a moment, quietly licking his lips.

Subaru: "Dissolve the Alliance? What are you trying to say?"

Ferris: "Exactly what it sounds like-nyan. As things are right now, our Alliance will not be mutually beneficial-nyan."

Perhaps because Subaru kept his composure, Ferris' expression revealed a touch of admiration.

Rather annoyed by Ferris' expression, Subaru wondered if Ferris was setting up the Alliance as a bargaining chip to gain an advantage in the negotiation. The more he thought, the more he commanded himself to keep calm. But even so, his head was nearly boiling.

Subaru: "Mining rights aside, we coordinated our efforts to defeat the White Whale, and after everything is done, now you want to back out after reaping the benefits? That's a bit scandalous no matter how you look at it."

Ferris: "More detriment than benefits, Subaru-kyun."

Subaru: "Ah?"

Compared to Subaru's aggressive attitude, Ferris went on casually, wagging a finger.

Ferris: "Nyan? Gluttony and Greed appearing together, for starters. After killing Sloth, an Alliance with Emilia-sama's camp will only make us targeted by the Witch Cult… Considering what happened to Crusch-sama… Do you still believe it's in our interest to form an Alliance right now?"

Subaru: "That is…"

Glancing toward the completely different Crusch, Subaru hesitated to counter Ferris' argument. Because deep in his heart, he was carrying the same wounds.

This time, it wasn't Subaru who refuted Ferris' words.

Wilhelm: "I disagree, Ferris."

Leaning forward in his seat, Wilhelm's stern gaze stared into Ferris' eyes. Ferris, eyelids narrowed, let out an "Eh-?" with a thin smile.

Ferris: "What do you mean-nyan? After what Gluttony did to Crusch-sama, what do you think is the benefit of an Alliance that will draw the Witch Cult to us?"

Wilhelm: "To kill Gluttony… An opportunity to avenge our master."

Ferris: "Vengeance? Is that more important to you than Crusch-sama's life?!"

Against Wilhelm, Ferris refused to give ground.

Weighing heavily on both their minds, were thoughts of their master.

Ferris: "If we continue to deal with the Witch Cult this disaster will only repeat again! Crusch-sama right now can't even protect herself! When that day comes… If it's physical wound or emotional wound, Ferris can heal you… But if you die it's all over isn't it?!"

Wilhelm: "But we cannot remain idle while the offender roams free.

Crusch-sama's memories, when we defeat the Sin Archbishop, there is a chance they will return. To give up this early, is far too rash."

Ferris: "Defeating that bastard will bring the memories back? I say, Wilhelm, to think lost memories can be brought back by killing the thing that ate it… Are you daydreaming or do you think this is some kind of fairy tale w—"

Wilhelm: "—Felix!!"

With an ear-splitting roar, the swordsman's aura resounded in the room. As if a gust of wind had swept in—was the sensation felt by everyone present.

All wincing from the shock, only Wilhelm's keen gaze remained intact.

Wilhelm: "Felix… What you said just now. Never utter it again in front of Subaru-dono."

Ferris: "…I'm sorry."

Called by his true name, twice, Ferris closed his eyes with grief and remorse.

The others turned their eyes to Subaru, who was already sitting once more. His hands clenched tightly, faintly trembling, blood seeped through the gaps between his fingers, as if about to cover them whole.

Subaru: "…Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Don't worry… I won't say anything like «I understand» or «it's alright»… Even though I want to understand how you feel… that forgotten child… because I don't understand anything, no matter what I say, it won't be fair to you…"

Subaru looked up, into Emilia's violet pupils that flickered with sadness. In her eyes he saw a reflection of himself, in all his weakness… is that the Natsuki Subaru she sees?

As if saved by that tender regard, Subaru shook his head.

Subaru: “To say something like «it’s alright»… even if I rip my mouth apart right now I won’t be able say it. But I am fine. Ferris, don’t worry about it. I… will not give up, as long as there is the tiniest fragment of hope left.”

Ferris: “Really-nyan… Subaru-kyun sure doesn’t like to give up…”

Watching Subaru trying to act like he was fine, Ferris’ countenance broke down into a smile. But his position remained unchanged.

Ferris: “As for Ferris-nyan, I don’t agree that we should continue the Alliance. I will return Crusch-sama to herself, just watch. So something like vengeance against Gluttony should just be set aside for nyow.”

Wilhelm: “What we should do, and how… Crusch-sama, you must decide. It is not in our position to do it.”

In the end, it all falls on her. Both their eyes focused upon her, and Crusch, as if understanding, nodded.

Crusch: “There is still plenty that I do not know. And what I was before, I cannot remember. I want to tell you now, that it will be disorienting, being around me… But even so, I thank you for placing in me your esteem, and trust. And if I could, I want to live up to that expectation. For that, I shall try my best.”

Despite losing her memory, it seemed her strength of character remained.

Just what is the essence of a person? Seeing Crusch like this once more, even after forgetting everything she knew, Subaru could not help but ask himself that question.

But as to the Alliance, there is no better choice than to put the negotiations on hold for now.

Ferris: “In any case, if the one who holds all the key information concerning Emilia-sama’s faction… Margrave Roswaal isn’t present, then there is nothing we can do-nyan. So for our next negotiation, let’s hold it on the condition that the Margrave be in attendance.”

Crusch: “Yes, that is for the best. Then this meeting…”

Ferris: “Will be a secret—So pretend it was about something other than an Alliance-nyan.”

Ferris shot a sharp glance at Subaru, saying this in an unusually low voice.

Subaru swallowed, but seeing no reason to disagree, he nodded. From their perspective, this decision made sense. If Crusch’s current condition is known to the public, her status as the most competent candidate will vanish.

In fact, the repercussions of Crusch’s amnesia becoming public knowledge is of the same magnitude as the prestige of slaying the White Whale. It is for precisely this reason that Anastasia wasn’t invited to this meeting.

Ferris: “Regardless of Julius, Anastasia will certainly use this information to her advantage. Good thing Crusch-sama’s condition hasn’t been seen by those kids of hers.”

Subaru: “…She will be present at the meeting these achievements will be discussed, what do we do about that?”

Ferris: “We can make an excuse and say she is unwell. Ferris will think of something. As for Subaru-kyun, your side just need to keep this secret, understood?”

Requesting only silence, Ferris would not allow any further entanglement between their two factions. Subaru, noticing this, only nodded.

In the end, the meeting concluded without any progress whatsoever.

Acknowledging the desperation of their situations, more than anything else, the two factions are aligned in the uncertainty of their futures.

Subaru: “Thank you for back there, Wilhelm-san.”

After the meeting in the lounge, Subaru called out to Wilhelm outside the Karsten Mansion. Stopping in his steps, Wilhelm turned to Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Not at all. I was of no help, I’m ashamed of how deficient I am. Above all, I was unable to assist you today.”

Subaru: “Don’t say that, without Wilhelm-san, we wouldn’t have defeated the White Whale. And afterward I was able to entrust Emilia and the villagers to you. I am really really grateful!”

These were unpackaged, genuine words of gratitude. But even this could not lift the gloom from Wilhelm’s face.

Never forgetting a past kindness, always carrying the pain of others within himself. This man… isn’t he too good-natured for his own good? Subaru smiled at the thought.

Subaru: “Even though the situation hasn’t settled yet, have you had a chance to visit your wife’s grave? Even though it’s no consolation, but at least you avenged…”

Wilhelm: “—!”

At Subaru’s words, Wilhelm’s face suddenly collapsed with deep emotion.

Seeing those intertwined waves of grief and sentiment, Subaru didn’t know what to do. Noticing Subaru’s hesitation, Wilhelm bowed deeply.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono, I must apologize!”

Subaru: “Wait, don’t be like this, you have nothing to be sorry about, I should be thanking you right now…”

Wilhelm: “No, that is not true. The words I spoke in the meeting were not out of genuine desire to be your ally. It was my vain, selfish sentiment that made me support the Alliance. For concealing my guilt, I am deeply ashamed.”

Not understanding Wilhelm's words, Subaru furrowed his brows.

Seeing this, Wilhelm took off his overcoat, and rolled up his left sleeve—revealing a bandaged wound around his left shoulder. Through the outer cloth one could see that the inner layers are wet with blood.

Subaru: "Does it hurt? You should get Ferris to look at that."

Wilhelm: "This wound cannot be healed. It was dealt by an opponent who possessed the Divine Protection of the Death God.

Subaru: "Can't be healed? …Then, Wilhelm-san!"

Even Subaru knows the outcome of an unhealable wound. Normally, if bleeding can't be stopped, it's like a timer being set on one's life. But unlike Subaru, who looked full of apprehension, Wilhelm shook his head calmly.

Wilhelm: "My life is not in danger right now."

Subaru: "How can that be? That wound… What kind of attack…"

Wilhelm: "I did not receive this wound today or yesterday. It was from a long time ago, and it recently reopened. But, for me right now, the wound is too large."

Listening to Wilhelm's quiet words, Subaru's small body quivered and contracted. Not knowing the reason behind that reaction, even the roots of his teeth felt like they didn't fit in his jaw. All this came from the Sword Demon in front of him, an incredible aura that could freeze one's liver solid. Continuing in his calm, gentle voice—

Wilhelm: "The effects of a Divine Protection becomes stronger, when the owner of the Divine Protection is near. When the owner of the Divine Protection of the Death God approaches, the wounds they inflicted will open."

Subaru: "Then that means… the person who inflicted your wound long ago… is near…"

Wilhelm: "The one who wounded my left shoulder… Is the Sword

Saint of the previous generation.”

Listening to Wilhelm, Subaru’s breathing stopped. Gazing into Wilhelm’s eyes, he saw the frozen glitters of emotion.

Wilhelm: “Theresia van Astrea. The wound dealt by my wife has reopened. In order to find out why, I must continue to pursue the Witch Cult…”

6

Lost in a daze, Subaru stepped into the room where Rem was sleeping.

Ever since returning to Crusch’s mansion, whenever there is a chance, he would come to stay with her.

Even though he knew it would not happen, somewhere in his heart, in his weakness, he hoped she could just wake up.

In this state, he no longer had the courage or the will to face Emilia. Being Emilia, perhaps she would understand after all. If she was by his side now, it will only bring her pain. Unless Subaru looked for her, she would give him time to himself, even though she couldn’t stop worrying.

If Emilia was here, he’d probably cry, if only to comfort that weakness within his heart. Though he hated that weakness, he could not cut it from himself.

Subaru: “Rem… Even though you told me I’m strong, I… without you with me, I can’t find it Rem… I can’t…”

Nothing changed from when he left for the lounge.

Softly breathing. Her heart was beating. But other than this, there was not a single sign of life. Right now, only Subaru’s heart still carries her existence. But,

Subaru: “—It’s you… which wind blew you here?”

Puck: “Me being here, is that so strange? Even I had some kind of relationship with this girl before, right? Then occasionally coming here, what's wrong with that?"

Subaru: "Where do you get the nerve…"

Gently touching Rem's sleeping forehead, Subaru glanced to his side —Floating in the air, was a small grey cat wagging his long tail, looking at him.

At the meeting he was nowhere to be found, yet he showed up here. Noticing Subaru's severe glance, Puck seemed taken aback.

Puck: "Why're you looking at me like that? Did I do something?"

Subaru: "…Right now, you didn't do anything… Go find Emilia, as long as you go float around somewhere else."

Puck: "Is that so? That's a curious thing to say. Even though my freedom isn't restricted, if that child gets in trouble while I'm not there…"

Flicking his whisker, Puck murmured leisurely. Then, floating up to Subaru's face,

Puck: "But I think it's better that I talk to Subaru right now."

Subaru: "…Acting like you know everything, it's really pissing me off."

Subaru turned his gaze away. Even so, Puck silently waited for him. Subaru sighed, even though meekly following along annoyed him.

Subaru: "You didn't tell Emilia about the Witch Cult… What are your intentions?"

Puck: "No intention at all, if you can live without knowing some things, then not knowing is fine too. If Lia asked me, I would have told her, but she didn't ask… People like that, if you just avoid them then it doesn't matter, right?"

Subaru: "Yes, there are times when it's fine to not know some things. But this is totally not the case for Emilia is it?! That girl came out of the forest, to become the Monarch, she is fighting to win the Royal Selection! There is no way to avoid the Witch Cult like that. —You know this, of course you know this."

Pressing low his voice, Subaru pursued Puck's intentions. But Puck, wobbling in the air, easily dodged Subaru's vigorous questions.

Puck: "The Witch Cult appearing… I suspected it too. But whether I would convey that to Lia is a completely different matter."

Subaru: "Even if it meant endangering her, and everyone else around her?! I don't know what you're thinking, but if things went the way they were Emilia would have—!!"

Puck: "I see… You did all this to save Lia. This child too… She sacrificed herself to help her. In that case I really need to thank this child…"

Subaru: "—!"

In that instant, disregarding all the world, Subaru threw his punch.

At the Spirit in front of his eyes, without a trace of hesitation, he swung with all his might. The Spirit, easily avoiding his strike, washed its face with astonishment.

Puck: "What are you doing, all of a sudden?"

Subaru: "Don't you dare touch Rem. Not with your hands, or your words…"

Surprised himself, his voice broke quietly. The emotions brewing in his heart, perhaps they became too impossible to bear.

With his round eyes, Puck gazed deep into Subaru, and with an "I understand", he stretched his little body.

Puck: "I said something inconsiderate, sorry, I shouldn't have said it. Instead of this… Let's talk a bit about Gluttony."

Subaru: "…Talk? What will that do now?"

Puck: “If you learn the nature of the thing that ate this girl’s name and memories, perhaps there is hope of fulfilling your wish, after all.”

Jumping at those words, Subaru’s face flung up. Seeing this reaction, Puck nodded, then he turned up his small pink nose as if searching for a memory.

Puck: “The Authority of Gluttony, to put it simply, is eating. When he eats a person’s name, all memories about this person is taken, and when he eats a person’s memories, that person’s own memories are taken. If both are taken, then the person becomes an empty shell. An empty shell won’t do anything and could not do anything. This girl’s condition, is just that.”

Subaru: “Name… Memory…”

Crusch’s memory. Rem’s memory and name.

Such is the effect of Gluttony’s Authority.

Subaru: “After killing the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony… Will the memories return…?”

Puck: “Ah, what would happen? Throw up everything that’s been eaten… even though I don’t like to think about it, is that something that can be done? You’ll need to ask the man himself…”

Subaru: “But the possibility exists, doesn’t it?! Rem’s memories, the possibility of retrieving Rem’s memories…!”

Turning back… Rem is still deep in her slumber.

Still softly breathing. Her heart was beating. Her body is still alive, only her memory, and her name, were eaten by that fiend.

Subaru: “Sin Archbishop of Gluttony— I will absolutely annihilate you.”

Puck: “Even though I still think it’s not that simple…”

Puck’s last few words didn’t enter Subaru’s mind.

Subaru, right now, is defending that final fragment of hope like the very last bastion in his heart.

—When he arrived in the Royal Capital, he found Rem after the attack, and when he knew all was lost, without a shred of hesitation, Subaru stabbed a dagger into his own throat. What he felt at that moment, he could no longer remember. Everything had turned out so perfectly, so perfect beyond everyone's expectations—But the truth is, throwing it all away in that instant, none of it mattered to him.

If he lost Rem, if it meant walking into a future without her, no matter how many times he must endure that pain, he will—Only this, Subaru clearly remembers.

Penetrating his throat, in blood, pain, searing heat, and loss, he lost all consciousness.

When he woke, what he saw was Rem lying in a bed.

The save point had moved forward. The place of return had changed. Subaru saw hell, and only hell.

Again! It must be some mistake; he must kill himself again… But Subaru hesitated. He was not afraid of pain or death. But he realized…

…Even if he returned to the previous save point, he could not save her.

At the save point before the battle with Petelgeuse, after the battle with the White Whale, Subaru and Rem had already went in separate directions for several hours. It is too late to catch them before the ambush. But even if he could, Emilia will be abandoned. And even if he sent the expedition to Emilia with the plan and rushed to the ambush, how will he defeat two Sin Archbishops?

To defeat Petelgeuse, Subaru's presence is indispensable, and Emilia's escape cannot be managed without Wilhelm's protection.

To sacrifice Emilia to save Rem, or to sacrifice Rem to save Emilia—Without sacrificing one or the other he couldn't save anyone at all.

Faced with this impossible choice, Subaru lowered the dagger from his throat.

Unlike being erased by the White Whale's mist, though forgotten by all the world, Rem's body remains here. Beside her, unable to do anything, he merely sat there in a daze…

But that time spent in cruel futility ends here. It ends now.

Holding Rem's sleeping hand, Subaru confirmed his resolve. Of one thing he is certain, he will—

Subaru: "Retrieve… Rem, I promise… I will retrieve your memories."

It was a promise. That right in front of your eyes, the man you fell in love with, will become the greatest hero the world has ever seen. We are still half-way on that path, aren't we?

Subaru: "I promise… Your hero will come for you. Wait just a little longer."

Lifting his face, teeth bared. It was a declaration of war.

The fiends shall regret the day they laid hands on what is sacred and inviolable.

For I, Natsuki Subaru, shall bring punishment upon you.

Subaru: "I will —I promise I will!"

In the days starting from zero, I can no longer endure a single one without the thought of you by my side.

So I must retrieve…

The days that are lost, the days I have walked with you, and all the days I will walk with you again… With my own hands, I swear I will take it back once more!

Extra Chapter: King's Game

1

—One fateful day, Subaru's ideas brought forth a miracle.

"Hey Emilia-tan, you're studying to become the king, right?"

Subaru's after-meal small talk cuts through the silence. The manor's chief resident, sitting squarely at the center of the dining hall, turns toward him. Unable to resist, everyone's ears prick up to listen in on their conversation.

—This coincidence would be the first of many twists of fate.

Sitting next to Subaru, a girl casually curls her long, silver hair about her finger, her other hand affectionately poking a cat-like spirit. Hearing his question, Emilia gently turns her head.

"Yeah, that's right, but why ask all of a sudden?"

"Well, it's not really 'all of a sudden.' It's always been kinda hanging out in the corner of my mind. The thought that, the girl sitting right next to me, the one glaring at a plate of peppers, if things work out, she'll actually be the king someday."

"Don't talk to me about the Green Devil, peppir."

Returning Subaru's banter with her own, an unamused Emilia pokes at his forehead. The lightness of her touch, the thought that beyond this solid nail lies her abundant softness, enraptures him. Ram observes Subaru with a side glance as she passes by, carrying a small tray with a single teacup, steam rising from its lip.

"What a slovenly face."

she utters, flatly expressing her disgust. Subaru grimaces back, baring his teeth like a child.

“Popping out of nowhere with such weird timing. Don’t go around staring at people’s faces then. Also, only bringing out tea for Roschi, isn’t that just a bit too much favoritism?”

“Favoritism? This is simply a matter of Ram’s priorities. At the top is Master Roswaal, then Lady Emilia and the Great Spirit, and behind an unscalable wall, in the deepest pits of the mustiest cave… I suppose Barusu might be there.”

“I don’t remember such a wide popularity gap?!”

Puffing her chest out, Ram boldly ignores Subaru’s protests. With a near gliding motion, she makes her way toward her master. At the head of the table, his eyes on a book, Roswaal notices Ram. He takes the cup of black tea with a steady motion and brings it to his lips, savoring the taste,

“Hmhmmm—Ram’s after-meal tea reaaaally helps with settling down. You could saaaaay I live just for this one cup, no?”

“Your words are far too kind.”

When dealing with Roswaal, Ram’s attitude is comparatively graceful and obedient. Witnessing the staggering difference in treatment right before his eyes, Subaru strangely loses his will to fight back. Instead, a depressive feeling begins to possess Subaru.

“Please don’t be too upset, Subaru. My sister is just doing Rem a favor.”

A voice rebukes the sulking Subaru. Its owner, a young girl garbed in maid dress, steps out from the galley. —With a large tray in each hand, Rem carries teacups for the remaining residents.

Seeing Subaru’s head turn toward her, Rem’s face brightens, her hands lifting the trays with incredible ease.

“Subaru’s tea, Rem absolutely wanted to make it for him. Rem even had her sister reteach her the basics.”

“Hohoo—what an admirable server’s spirit, Rem. Alright, that determination of yours, I’ll personally taste it!”

“Yes, please do. Under my sister’s watch, this tea was brewed with Rem’s bone-breaking, blood-spewing resolution. Rem brewed as if betting anything and everything on this single cup. Now, please enjoy.”

“You’re whittling down your soul over a casual tea break?!”

Nodding back at a shocked Subaru, Rem places her all-or-nothing tea onto the table. A gentle trail of steam rises from its surface. At a glance, it looks like perfectly normal tea, but Rem poured her blood and soul into it. The iron content must be amazing.

“Well, no use getting worked up. Lemme see,—ohh, delicious! Compared to normal tea, I can’t disagree that it seems to bring about this totally different impression that it doesn’t necessarily not give off this faintly pleasant feeling probably!”

“Wait, so does that mean it’s good? Does it?”

Emilia tilts her head at Subaru’s overly-spirited impression. In all honesty, Subaru thought the tea was delicious. Delicious, but how it differs from regular tea, he has no clue. In the first place, Subaru rarely ever had stylish drinks like black tea and coffee. In his own world, with his childish taste, he mainly drank soda or, on a good day, some hot chocolate.

“Now that I think about it, it’s been a while since I’ve had Cola. Carbonated water, I think it came from carbon dioxide, so maybe we can make it here too.”

“Subaru, Subaru, how was the tea?”

“Hm? Oh, delicious! Wow, I can really taste your passion in this!”

“Really! …By the way, does your body feel hot, Subaru?”

“Hot…? Nah, I don’t think I feel anything like that.”

His head cocked, Subaru frowns at Rem’s strange observation.

While somewhat strong, the tea didn't noticeably affect his body. All he feels is its gentle warmth pleasantly spreading through his stomach.

With Subaru's dismissive reply, Rem briefly gazes at him. With a slight disappointment in her eyes, she hides her mouth behind a tray,

"If Subaru enjoyed it, then Rem is happy."

"Your face and your words and the color of your eyes and that last question don't seem to match up though?"

"That's not true. More importantly, if Subaru is satisfied with the tea, Rem doesn't mind being praised, yes?"

"You're pretty needy, y'know! Well, I guess it's alright. C'mere."

Seeing Rem flutter her eyes in anticipation, Subaru waves to beckon her over. With Rem's body drawn close, the palm of his hand caresses her blue hair. An invisible tail wags happily behind her as she blissfully closes her eyes. The faint sound of her gentle sniffing, the way she snuggles up to him, Subaru's heart is in a panic.

Having completely forgotten his original goal, Subaru is suddenly struck with a piercing stare from behind.

"*sta—are*"

"It's amazing how, even when glaring with such scornful eyes, a beauty stays a beauty… What's up?"

"Don't 'what's up' me. Our talk, if you cut off part-way, I'll get reaaally bothered about it."

"'Our talk?'" replies Subaru, a genuine confusion in his voice. He wrinkles his face and puts a finger to his lips. Emilia's eyes begin to flare, panicking Subaru as he raises up his arms,

"Sorry, lo siento, I overdid it, please forgive me!"

"I'll forgive you, and I'll even hear you out, so just say what's on your mind. Come on, one, two."

Emilia's waving hands urging him on, a clueless Subaru smiles bitterly as he scratches his head. At the brink of death, he suddenly mutters an "Ah,"

"Emilia-tan, you're aiming to become the king, right?"

"That question, I'm pretty sure you asked me something like that already…"

"The route splits here. Anyway, to become a king, you obviously need to be very skilled. But don't you think 'preparedness' is just as important?"

"'Preparedness…'"

Emilia mutters back with a rather shocked face, her eyes blinking at Subaru's statement. Most likely, she thought his idea would be completely unrelated. While Subaru would have liked to meet her expectations, he thought her surprised face wasn't bad either.

Luckily, after the initial shock, a look of agreement appears in her eyes, as if to say "You've got a point."

Seeing this, Subaru snaps his fingers with a boastful "Right?"

"The resolution to stand above all, the strength to withstand the pressures of people's expectations. And above all else, the indomitable will to pursue one's convictions—! To call yourself a king, one must wield these essential traits!"

Clenching his fist tightly, Subaru stands to deliver a loud and impassioned speech. Naturally, the stares of everyone converge on him. Joy, disgust, astonishment, loving affection, Subaru bathes in a mix of feelings as he looks about the room.

In the midst of this, Emilia timidly raises her hand,

"Subaru, I can see where you're coming from, but… what do you actually plan on doing?"

"Simple. As a king candidate, these traits are necessary to Emilia-tan. So I was thinking, how about we help you practice?"

"Umm…?"

He brings his face in close and snaps his fingers. Emilia, unable to follow along, blinks in confusion. Snickering at her puzzlement, Subaru decides to push through with spirit alone.

With a wicked smile, Subaru boldly stamps his foot on a chair, raising himself up. From his new height, he looks about the room, his finger pointed straight to the heavens as he pulls his signature pose. And he yells,

"The first ever Roswaal Manor King's Game begins now!"

2

"The rules are simple! First, we prepare lots for everyone. One lot has the king's stamp while the rest are duds with numbers on them. We all draw, and the king uses the numbers to make commands. The commands are absolute, the king's orders must be obeyed. —That's it!"

At the center of the dining hall, Subaru explains the rules of the [King's Game]. Roswaal nods at the game's simplicity, his hand cradling his chin. Satisfied with Subaru's brief rundown, he heartily laughs,

"I seeeee. What simple yet maaaaarvelous rules."

"Simple, but with a sense of tension… you could say that's the essence of this game."

Subaru flashes Roswaal back a thumbs up. He then turns toward Rem who is excitedly preparing the lots. While he trusts her, fairness was essential to the King's Game.

In this game, victory came down to sheer luck,—On the other hand, real kings are decided by blood and lineage. Yet, if the King's Game fell into such a pattern, cynicism would quickly bring its end.

"The lots are finished."

"'Kay, lemme see… Yup, no problems. Let's do this!"

Subaru quickly inspects Rem's lots.

A number is written on the end of each wooden stick. The only exception is Subaru's chibi drawing of Puck, serving as the king's stamp.

Even under careful scrutiny, Subaru can't find any trick or feature to distinguish it from the duds. This game should proceed without a hitch.

"So the person who draws Puck becomes king?"

"Exactly. Also, the king makes commands using the numbers. Everyone else should make sure to keep their own number hidden. The randomness is part of the thrill afterall."

"Oh my. But that means it won't be possible to bombard Barusu with hard labor."

"We have this rule because of people like you! No calling out names either!"

After lecturing Ram, Subaru sighs as he looks around the table. Since it's immediately after a meal, everyone would be present.

Emilia, Rem, Ram, Roswaal, then there's Puck and Subaru and—

"Huh, hey, where'd Bea-ko go? Pretty sure she was in the corner, frantically pulling the green peas from her omelet rice."

"Miss Beatrice rushed out the dining hall when Subaru tried to stand on the chair."

"That damn drill loli… messing with my plans. Alright, wait here for a bit."

With that, Subaru flies out the dining hall in a full-on sprint.

And then, exactly two minutes later,

“Heeey, I’m baack—”

“Honestly, what in the world is that sixth sense of yours?! Betty won’t be getting tangled up in your nonsense!”

“Yeah yeah, attention seekers sure like to bad-mouth. Okay, that should be everyone.”

Forcibly slinging Beatrice over his shoulder, Subaru plops her onto a chair. With his hands on her shoulders to block off her escape, Beatrice surrenders with a defeated sigh. She moves next to Puck, glaring daggers back at Subaru.

Dodging her razor-sharp stare, Subaru decides everything is set.

“Do it.”

“Yes.”

Rem, seeing Subaru’s outstretched hand, places the lots without hesitation. Seeing exactly one lot added for Beatrice, Subaru desperately holds back a grin. However, a distinctly wicked sharpness was already emerging on his face.

Puck shuffles the wooden sticks in a chaotic flurry. With the numbers hidden, everyone reaches for a lot.

“Okay, everyone got one? Then let’s go with the traditional phrase here,—Whooo’s the king?”

Subaru yells with a wide grin as everyone pulls their lot. Dropping his gaze down, an extremely disappointed Subaru finds his lot marked with the number [2].

Once one discovers they’re not the king, all that’s left is to wait and see who is. —And then, timidly raising her hand,

“Hey, mine’s got Puck on it.”

And so, the first draw goes to Emilia.

In her hand lies Chibi Puck's stamp, and on her face, a blend of surprise and modest embarrassment,

"Umm, so what do I do now?"

"Emilia-tan, you're the king now, so just go all out with the commands. Like making [2] pet the king's head, or making [2] hold the king's hand, or making [2] nap in the king's lap pillow, or making [2] lovingly feed the king, or making [2] promise to take the king on a hot date…"

"Then [2] takes all the peppirs from the king's dinner and eats them—!"

"Nuooooo! Inception FAILED! I'm number [2]!"

As Subaru screams, hands shaking his head, a genuinely surprised Emilia remarks "Oh, so Subaru was [2]!"

That said, orders are orders. Only by complying can Subaru protect the sanctity of the King's Game.

"Anyway, if there aren't any peppers in tonight's dinner, then I'm off the hook!"

"Rem. I'll be counting on you for a menu buuursting with peppirs. A dinner table simply paaaainted green, I hope to see it tonight."

"Damn Roswaal… You sure catch on fast don'cha!"

Having lost his escape route, Subaru turns to Rem. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, this girl must suddenly make one of the hardest decisions of her life,

"Rem wants to prioritize Subaru. But, Master Roswaal is Rem's employer. That's why, ignoring his request is… Rem is sorry."

"What's the real reason?"

"When eating peppirs, Lady Emilia stands out, so it's hard to notice, but Subaru makes a face at them too. Rem thought to use this chance to correct him."

“You watch me pretty carefully, huh?!”

In terms of looks, texture, and taste, peppers and peppirs are virtually identical. With his childish taste, Subaru hates them. While he pretends to tolerate them in front of Emilia, he secretly wants to avoid peppirs at all costs. Subaru actually hates quite a few vegetables, including tomatoes, eggplants, and turnips. —Rem undoubtedly knows this as well.

“Anyway, let’s just start the second round. Alright, whooo’s the king?”

“Oh hey, it’s me.”

Despite his desperate yells, Subaru once again draws a dud. Following Emilia, the next bearer of fortune is the grey-furred cat spirit—Puck uses both hands to carry a lot as large as him. Tilting his head to the side,

“Calling out names is against the rules right? Then… how about [5] finger-flicks [1]’s forehead, or something like that?”

“Oohh, calling out two numbers at once… Puck, you’re not an amateur, are you?”

“Can this game even have pros and amateurs? …anyway, who’s [5] and [1]?”

As Puck’s black eyes restlessly search the room, two raised lots meet his sight. Ram holds a lot with [5] marked on its end while a [1] is marked on Emilia’s.

“This means Ram must flick Lady Emilia’s forehead. Oh my, how disrespectful, how irreverent. To be forced to finger flick Lady Emilia… What a terrifying game this is…!”

“Ram, you say that, but you actually seem reaaally into this… Umm, you’re just acting right? Right? But… don’t make it hurt too much, okay?”

“It wouldn’t be a finger flick if it didn’t hurt. Hya.”

“Kyaaa—! Owowow! That reaaally hurt!”

As a red mark emerges on Emilia’s lovely forehead, Ram relaxes with a satisfied look on her face. While Emilia looks about ready to cry, such lighthearted shenanigans are the very essence of the King’s Game. Considering the rules and spirit of the game, Ram’s attitude was actually more appropriate.

“From here on, nobody should target Ram for revenge. Don’t try to get back at each other either. —Okay, let’s start round three! Whooo’s the king?”

With this game’s chaotic, random nature, a person could never have the chance to order or be ordered. The desire to avoid leaving anyone out, as the organizer of this game, Subaru holds this modest thought in his heart,

“—DESTINY, DRAAAAAAW!”

But with the King’s lot in hand, Subaru no longer cares for such a petty cause. Fists clenched as he makes a guts pose, Subaru chants “YES, YES, YES”, thanking the Dragon.

“Are, are you really that happy? You’ve only become king once though.”

“Playing the King’s Game without achieving kinghood is pointless, Emilia-tan! Alright, let’s do this… Then again, suddenly going full throttle and ruining the atmosphere wouldn’t be good. Yeah, no good.”

While he sounds unambitious, it’s often said that impatient beggars don’t prosper. The best strategy, Subaru decides, is to calm down and take his time. First, he should focus on crafty opening moves to bolster his endgame. Eventually, after lulling everyone into a false sense of security, when their guard is at its lowest, a decisive strike —

“—Number [3], take off just your underwear.”

“—huh?”

A decisive strike. Catching a glimpse of Emilia, Subaru's patience suddenly runs thin. As the command escapes his mouth, the air seems to freeze dry, everyone's dumbfounded stares on his face. However, once made, a command cannot be taken back.

As the others stare on in disbelief, wondering if they misheard him, Subaru nods back affirmatively,

"Number [3], takes off, their underwear. HURRY!"

"Eh, wait, what? You can make commands like that?!"

"Of course you can! Aren't the king's orders absolute?! If the king told you to die for him, then isn't it an underling's duty to follow that order and stake their very life?! Even if just for now, aren't I the king, and everyone here my underling?! Then if I say 'strip,' then you must strip! So strip!"

Pounding the table, Subaru begins his fevered tirade.

Emilia opens and closes her mouth, speechless, while to her side, Roswaal bursts into laughter. Ram stares at Subaru with the deepest, harshest disdain. Nobody notices the glint in Rem's eyes as she looks down to check her lot. And beside the flustered Emilia, an unconcerned Puck. And finally, in the process of sneakily escaping the room, Beatrice—

"Hey Betty, what number are ya?"

"I was hoping you'd keep quiet, Bubby?!"

Caught by Puck, Beatrice turns around with a panicked face. Seeing her reaction, Puck grabs the lot laid in front of her chair,

"Oh hey, it's [3]. Looks like Betty's gotta strip. But hey, if I was [3], what would I even do? I'm basically naked afterall."

"In that case, I'll make you some clothes, so just put them on and strip them off. Seems kinda pointless but… Anyway, Bea-ko, huh."

Subaru glimpses at Beatrice. She stands near the dining hall entrance, her noble face turned bright red, her small hands clenched and quivering,

“God… read the atmosphere a little.”

“You’re the last person who deserves to say that! What kind of ridiculous command are you spewing! Why would Betty even bother obeying such an order…”

“Hmm, ohhh, I see, I see. So you’re just going to callously ignore the game’s biggest rule. Uh huh, I get it.”

“Wh-, what’s with that scornful tone of yours…”

Shaken by the clear disappointment in Subaru’s words, Beatrice nervously turns away. Side glancing at her, Subaru gives a trite “Nothing really” as he sighs wearily,

“You know, in games like this, there’s sort of this implicit pact of trust between players. At least, that’s what I think. Like, no matter what the command, we should challenge it with sincerity and effort. The resolution to take on the task given to you… you could think of it like your dignity as a person.”

“Dignity, you saaaay.”

An amused Roswaal can’t contain himself as he interrupts. Subaru replies with a firm “Yup, dignity” as he nods boldly. Suddenly, he points a finger at Beatrice.

Intimidated by his forcefulness, the drill-haired girl faintly draws back.

“It’s not about results! What’s important is the will to protect our oath! You, who took part in this game, have received an order from the king. You could say that this order represents the king’s implicit trust. The effort you make to meet this trust halfway… that is the proof of the precious bond between you and I.”

“…”

“It might just be a one-sided sentiment. After all, this is solely my opinion, and you have every right to disagree. But y’know… here’s what I think. By playing the King's Game like this, what we're really doing is confirming the bonds between us. These threads of fate that our eyes can never truly see,—and yet, I definitely feel them binding us together."

With a hand crossed over his chest, Subaru relentlessly pits his heart against hers. The weight of his rhetoric, the violent torrent that is his emotions, Beatrice can only drop her head against them, her lips quivering. But with a look of genuine kindness, Subaru reaches his hand out toward hers,

"That's why… just strip already."

"…"

"It's kinda gotten annoying, so how about you just read the atmosphere and take off your underwear. It's not like I'm really anticipating it. I probably won't even react all that much. So?"

"—You should just die, I suppose."

Suddenly, an invisible shockwave of tremendous force blasts against Subaru.

3

"I have confirmed Miss Beatrice removing and putting back on her underwear in the neighboring room. There should be no problem regarding the rules. Satisfied, Barusu?"

"…Yeah, I'm good."

As Ram scornfully reports back, a red-faced Beatrice trails behind her. With a defeated look, Subaru wearily answers.

For pushing Beatrice past her limit, Subaru was violently sent flying. Left, right, up, down, direction itself feels utterly meaningless after taking the blow. As his eyes spin in their sockets, Rem gallantly rushes over to tend to him,

"Are you alright, Subaru? It's still too early to be moving about… If Subaru wants, he can lie on Rem's lap, yes?"

“A situation even a king would envy. And during the King’s Game, no less. Really tempting, but the game must go on. Thanks though.”

Declining the devoted Rem’s offer, Subaru somehow gets up, and the two rejoin the group. Despite everything, no one seems to have dropped out.

“You guys… when all’s said and done, you’re all pretty sadistic, huh.”

“Wouldn’t it be quite saaad for that to be the final act? Besides, I haven’t eeeven had a chance to be the king nor a victim yet.”

“Calling them kings and victims, you really do catch on fast… Well Bea-ko’s a tsundere, so of course she’s back for more, but what about you, Emilia-tan?”

Insulted, Beatrice glares back harshly, but Subaru casually ignores her. In front of him, a flustered Emilia waves her hands erratically as she replies,

“That’s, I, you know I just… umm-”

“Yeah, what’s up? If you’ve got something to say, I’m all ears.”

“Y-, you won’t laugh… right?”

“Me? Laughing at Emilia-tan? That’s ridiculous. Even if you acted like a clown, I still wouldn’t laugh at you, Emilia-tan.”

Though Beatrice continues to glare hatefully, Subaru pays her no mind, a refreshing expression on his face. Emilia seems to be internally debating—in her head, a small council agrees to trust him as she makes a little nod,

“You know I, I’ve never really done this before, playing together with so many people… It was, really fun and… If we stopped here, I feel like it’d be a waste.”

“What the heck, this kid’s so cute.”

Subaru can’t resist as Emilia, cheeks flushed red, bashfully explains herself. Feeling teased, she puffs her cheeks,

“See, you always poke fun at me like that. This is reaaally embarrassing, you know.”

“No, it’s not like I’m poking fun… damn, am I going to die explaining myself like this? …Please forgive me!”

Subaru falls to Emilia’s overwhelming strength. The others gaze at her gently, empathetically. While they now feel willing to continue, the harsh glares piercing Subaru still seem to linger.

That said, with Emilia’s feelings in mind, the game starts anew.

“Whooo’s the king!”

Grabbing their lots, everyone hastily drops their gaze. A lot marked [4] lies in Subaru’s hand. While somewhat frustrated, he decides that consecutive kinghoods would dullen the game. Thinking this, and yet still treading his feet angrily, even after Emilia’s innocent remarks, is the man named Natsuki Subaru.

Next to Subaru, hoisting up the lot marked with chibi Puck, is Rem. While she bears her usual cool demeanor, her eyes are fiery and bright,

“Rem is the king. His Majesty, the King. Rem did it, Subaru. Rem became king.”

“Well, I’m happy for you, but you’re way too excited! We gotta keep dishing out orders so everyone gets a turn… Well, Your Majesty, what is your command?”

“Oh yes, that’s right. How careless of Rem.”

Rem’s furiously wagging tail droops for a moment, but she just as quickly brightens up again. Then, gazing intensely at Subaru,

“Well then, Suba-… number [1], please hug the king in a loving embrace, yes?”

“It’s SUPER obvious who you’re targeting here! And sorry to break it to you, but I'm NOT number [1]!"

Subaru flashes his lot, and a shocked Rem falls to her feet. From her morbid expression, you would think the world was ending. While rare to see such great despair in the King's Game, Subaru, recalling her target, feels uneasy.

In any case, whoever is number [1] must now hug Rem,

"Rem, come here."

"Sister…!"

Rem raises her head to see her sister raising the lot marked [1]. With a small dash, she jumps into her Ram's open arms.

A beautiful sisterly love—is how you could describe it, if not for what she whispers into Rem's ear,

"Look closely, Rem. In the end, this is all Barusu amounts to. A fickle, intolerant man who can't grant Rem even a single wish… This king selection game has made that painfully clear."

"Would you not slander me in front of one of my only allies! Also, this game's about the king selecting, not being selected. You make it sound like a completely different game!"

"Sister… Sister… Rem, won't give up."

As Ram comforts her, Rem rubs her cheeks against older sister. Seeing these beautiful twins so intimate, Subaru fights desperately to keep his delusions under control. Clearing his throat nervously, he pushes on to the next game.

"Alright, let's get back into the spirit of things here… Whooo's the king!"

"Oh my, it appears I've fiiinally done it. But now that I'm king… I unexpectedly can't deciiide on a command."

A smiling Roswaal waves the king's lot in his hand. Hearing his announcement, Subaru breaks into a cold sweat. —Out of everyone here, this unpredictable man is the game's biggest wildcard.

Since long ago, those who enjoy the King's Game could be separated into different archetypes.

Subaru, earnestly greedy for anything and everything within reach, is an [Omnivore].

Rem, who singlemindedly pursues a certain individual, is a [Carnivore].

Puck, who casually dishes out commands with little care or thought, is an [Herbivore].

Emilia, who enjoys the King's Game for the game itself, is a [Dinner Guest].

And finally, Roswaal, who clearly sees the suffering of his victims as the very point of the game, is a [Glutton].

Unafraid of becoming a victim himself, a threatening existence who seeks only to be entertained—that is the man who now reigns as king.

With a deep breath, Subaru prays that the [3] in his hand escapes being called. And then Roswaal, after glancing at the nervous Subaru,

"Well then, hooow about Number [3] chugs some milk mixed with tabasco sauce!"

"Damn you Roswaal! Like you're aiming for me!!"

"Here, Barusu—. Show us something nice—."

As if colluding with him, Ram responds to Roswaal's ruthless command at lightning speed.

In her hand, she cradles a cup of milk with an uneven, reddish hue. Laden with tabasco (other-worldly tabasco), this substance reeks of an ungodly stench.

"…really?"

"The King's Game, a confirmation of the bonds between us. These threads of fate that our eyes can never truly see…"

"When you put it that way… damnnit! Here goes Natsuki Subaru!—gah, ough, my throat… burning… Abdul!"

Clutching his scorched throat, Subaru crumbles to the floor. On the verge of tears, he slams his emptied cup onto the table.

"How's that, HUH! Pulled through, HUH! Any complaints, HUH!"

"No, no, that should be quiiite enough for now. Also, let's put a ban on cleansing your palate. Well then, on to the next game, shaaall we."

"Damn you, next time I'll definitely… Whooo's the—DESTINYYYYY, DRAAAAAAW!!"

Overjoyed at drawing the king's lot, Subaru completely forgets his anger toward Roswaal.

Raising Puck's stamp up into air, Subaru's eyes gleam brightly.

"Okay! Number [2]! Number [2] has to let the king stick his face in their breasts! At least until the next game! How's that!"

Staring at Emilia, Subaru yells his command.

With seven participants total, by not including himself, four out of six are women. Emilia is his top pick, but Rem wouldn't be bad either. Ram would be, well okay. And the one holding the lot marked [2] is,

"Hey, you got some sort of grudge against me—?!"

"That line is entirely Betty's, I suppose?! You, what are you even thinking?!"

Facing Beatrice yet again, Subaru screams, and Beatrice screams back. However, the commands are absolute, the king's orders must be obeyed. In any case, after overcoming the underwear command, this order hardly phases Beatrice.

“Come on, hurry on over then. Quickly, so Betty can finally play with Bubby.”

“Damn, this is just disappointing… Whoa, they’re seriously flat! You damn loli, this is practically a crime scene… what’s the matter? Did someone cast the [Flat Chest] status abnormality on yo-OWOWOWOWW!!”

“The next time such nonsense dribbles out your mouth, I’ll accelerate time for your scalp and leave you a skinhead, I suppose. Come on now, whooo is the king!”

With the disinterested Beatrice finally onboard, the ensuing games progressed smoothly and much less violently.

Skipping through a digest of events,

“This time for sure…! Subaru, will you… No, Number [5], please kiss the king’s forehead…!”

“I’m not even number [5]! Also, would you stop blindly demanding these things?!”

“Oh, that’s me. Okay Rem, lemme just give you a quick peck…”

“You don’t see too many forehead kisses nowadays!”

“Number [6], go around the manor garden… no, it’s faaar too cramped. Hooow about going to the back mountains and checking on the barrier. Just a quick, eeeasy ten rounds or so.”

“That would kill me! And just after getting blasted and… wait, are you targeting me?!”

“Then, Number [4], clean Lady Ram’s room. If there’s even a speck of dust left, it’ll be the whip for you.”

“Lady Ram’s so queen-like it’s refreshing, damnnit! But seriously, it’s like both you and Roswaal are hounding me… You, you better not be using your [Clairvoyance]?!"

"…hmph, and if I was, what of it, Barusu."

"Don't spin this like I'm the one in the wrong here! I knew something was off!"

"DESTINYYY AGAAAIIIN! Alright, Number [4] serves the king a homecooked meal filled to the brim with love… YOU AGAIN?!"

"You can have this thing I burned and boiled and dried, I suppose."

"You guys sure are friendly. I'd like to spend some time with Lia too."

"Oh hey, it's me. Well, how about Number [2] feeds me that mayonnaise thing I've been craving lately."

"Oh my, oh myyy, quiiite a pampered attitude for a great spirit. I would be hooonored to carry out this request."

"Nobody cares! Do it in the corner or something!"

"Yes, finally it's Betty's turn, I suppose. Bubby… err, Number [4] lets Betty rub their belly. Until I'm satisfied!"

"Despite how I look, I'm actually quite ripped!"

"You, do you have some sort of grudge against Betty?!"

"I'm the one ready to flip my shit! What are you, my soul mate?!"

And so, a slew of bittersweet events come one after the other.

With the game reaching its twentieth round, feelings of weariness and accomplishment push the King's Game towards its climax.

"Oh, it's me, I'm the king. Let's see, let's seeee… What should I dooo?"

After drawing the king's lot, Emilia ponders cheerfully with a finger to her lips. Cheeks faintly red, she seems unusually energetic today. As Subaru looks on, he feels a mix of attraction and unease.

Finally, the spirited girl in front of him nods with a cheerful “Okay,”

“Then, Number [6]… how about they compare the opposite gender to animals?”

“I’m [6], but… why?”

“Boo. Just do it. C’mon, Subaru. Hurry, hurry!”

Subaru can’t help but tilt his head as Emilia lightly drums against the table, urging him on. Surprised by her unwomanly behavior, he nevertheless strokes his chin and thinks,

“Well, Ram’s a cat and Rem’s like a puppy. Bea-ko’s a bear… and Emilia-tan’s a bunny, I guess.”

“How so?”

“I was thinking what kind of animal cosplay would suit everyone. Cat ears for the fickle, moody Ram, and dog ears for the gentle, obedient Rem. Emilia-tan is kind of lonely and cute so she gets bunny ears, and… well, ‘Bea-ko’ sounds kinda like ‘bear’ so she can have bear ears, I guess.”

“Compared to the rest, Betty’s reasoning sounded very lacking, I suppose!”

“Who would worry so seriously about this… Huh? Emilia-tan, what are you-”

With a goofy smile emerging on her face, Emilia raises her hands up. Waving them around, she giggles with a cute “Ehe—”

“Fine detail isn’t really my specialty, but hoow’s this!”

“How’s what… oooohhh!”

The brilliant light emanating from her hands begins to fade. And what suddenly appears on top of Emilia’s silvery hair is—a transparent bunny-ear headband.

With a glance, Subaru recognizes it as her ice. He marvels at how perfectly this bunny-eared heroine matches the charming image in his head.

“It’s quite cold.”

“Is this, what Subaru was imagining…?”

“Honestly, I can’t agree with this…”

Alongside the bunny-eared Emilia, as if playing out Subaru’s delusions, the other girls don their respective animal ears.

Sharp, pointed cat ears exhibit Ram’s wild boldness while Rem’s drooping puppy ears show off her piddling yet loveable nature.

The round bear ears on Beatrice probably reflect her sweet side, or something to that effect.

Overwhelmed by this beautiful scene, Subaru falls to his knees as if in prayer,

“If only my phone battery didn’t die, all the pictures I could’ve taken. At least let me burn this scene into my mind… now, on to the other matter…”

As Subaru burns the girls’ brilliance into his eyes, he can’t help but worry about Emilia’s transformation.

Such a marvelous command, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say it was the game’s crowning achievement—but for Emilia, this should be far beyond her limits.

If anything, she was the type to aggressively prevent scenes like this.

“Subaru, Subaru.”

“What’s up, Rem?”

Seeing Rem beckoning him over, Subaru lends her an ear. With the dog ears on her head, she cutely tilts her head, "Is Rem cute? If Subaru wants, he can pet Rem's head and spoil her…"

"Yeah, really cute, but right now, my favorite Rem is the one who explains what's going on!"

"Is that so, how disappointing. But Rem still wants to be praised, so she'll explain. Lady Emilia's strange behavior is probably due to the effects of the [Fannel fruit]."

"Fannel fruit?"

At Subaru's question, Rem nods with a trite "Yes." Reaching into the pocket of her maid dress, she picks out a small berry,

"This is the Fannel fruit. By grinding it into a powder and ingesting it… suddenly, one becomes completely honest with themselves. Quite surprising, yes?"

"I see, yeah, surprising… So then, how did Emilia-tan ingest this thing?"

"Probably, when Rem tried to give Subaru some Fannel fruit-laced tea, she made a mistake and gave it to Lady Emilia instead… Ah, Subaru, don't rub my head so hard, it hurts, it hurts!"

"Bad kids need to be punished! Wait, so that's what you were asking about!"

Subaru finally realized the reason she asked him "if his body felt hot." By mistake, the medicine meant for Subaru went to Emilia instead, and she became cheerful like this as a result. But that would mean,

"If it's supposed to make you honest, doesn't that mean Emilia-tan's actually pretty childish…?"

"Booo, you two are always so close… Nooo faaiiirrr—"

As Subaru's fists rub fiercely against Rem's head, the now childish Emilia boos, shaking in protest. Sulking, she turns her head away, “Just when I thought you were treating me nicely. Aaalways bringing my hopes up like this… meanie. Meanie. Me—aa—niiie—.”

“She’s getting seriously upset for some reason, what do I do?!”

Childishly throwing a tantrum, Emilia recklessly rocks the table back and forth. At a loss for what to do, Subaru begs for help but,

“Well, Barusu… since this situation is Barusu’s fault, we’ll leave you to take care of it.”

“That sounds good, I suppose. Bubby, come here and drink some tea with Betty.”

“Lia’s pretty cute like this, but it’s probably safer to keep my distance. So, we’ll leave it to you, Subaru.”

“Weeell then, I have quiiite a bit of paperwork to attend to. I’ll be heading back to my office now.”

“You traitors! I’ll never trust you guys again!”

With the residents abandoning him one after the other, besides Subaru, only Emilia and Rem are left.

With just three people, continuing the King’s Game is no longer possible.

“Can’t be helped, let’s call it quits here… More importantly, what should we do about Emilia-tan?”

“No stopping! Don’t wanna—! Let’s keep playing—! Let’s play—!”

“Rather than becoming honest, this looks more like age regression… If being honest means becoming a spoiled kid, it’s kind of sombering.”

Stubbornly shaking her head, Emilia desperately tries to continue the game. Subaru reaches out his hand to calm her, but in her state, she absolutely won’t listen to reason.

Eventually, ignoring the baffled Subaru, Emilia grabs for one of the lots,

“Okay, it’s me, I’m the king! Umm, Number [1]! Number [1] has to obey the king!”

“Emilia-tan, you can’t play the King’s Game by yourself…”

“Rem drew [2], so that logically makes Subaru Number [1].”

“Rem?!”

An unexpected betrayal, Rem listlessly waves the lot marked [2] with her hand. Bringing it to her lips, she quietly whispers “Just for now” over to Subaru.

“Lady Emilia, I am at your command. Heeding the king’s orders is an underling’s duty afterall.”

“Okay so, Number [1] has to, Subaru has to…”

“…Please go easy on me though. My legs are buckling from all that running, and my throat still burns a bit from the tabasco, and that home-cooked meal was just awful.”

But despite his fears, Subaru presses on.

With Emilia like this, he decides to take on whatever may come. Though he’d prefer not to stress his body or deal with crippling after-effects.

“Could you, pet my head?”

“Huh?”

At her unexpected request, Subaru accidentally raises his voice.

When he opens his eyes, Emilia is staring back at him.

“My head, will you pet it? Do it like how you pet Rem, gently.”

“Huh, wait, that’s all you want?”

“Come on, hurry. Huu-rryy—”

Emilia’s feet flail wildly. Pushed by her childishness, Subaru takes to her side and reaches for her long, silvery hair,

“Is-, is this okay?”

“A little softer… yeah, like that.”

As Subaru pets her head, he feels the delicate sensation of Emilia’s smooth, silvery hair sifting between his fingers. Reminding himself it’s just a command, he somehow manages to keep his nervous hand from shaking.

Like this, Subaru closes the gap between them, his heart beating furiously as he caresses her soft hair—

—Despite making such indecent commands, in the end, he was actually quite a timid boy.

And then… “…Huh, Emilia-tan?”

“…”

Realizing Emilia had gone quiet, Subaru turns to find her sleeping peacefully, her upper body slumped carelessly over the table.

On her tranquil sleeping face, he spies a hint of satisfaction,

“It appears she’s fallen asleep. The Fannel fruit has a strong drowsiness effect, after all.”

“I’m not even going to ask what you planned to do after making me honest and putting me to sleep… Well, at least now I see why you kept the game going.”

“Rem thinks that even Lady Emilia needs some time to feel at ease. Afterall, the weight on her shoulders is no ordinary burden.”

As if she was feigning ignorance all along, Rem quickly reassumes her aura as an omnipotent maid. Gently stroking Emilia’s hair, she turns toward Subaru, “Rem will be escorting Lady Emilia back to her room, but… would Subaru like to carry her?”

“Well, it’s a legitimate reason to hold her. Plus, I’d be the worst if I had you carry her back yourself. Do I even have an option?”

With a strained laugh, he quietly takes Emilia into his arms.

Being even lighter than she looks, her daintiness surprises Subaru. He suddenly remembers to head upstairs, toward Emilia’s room.

“You know, it’s nice to relax like this once in a while. It was pretty fun too.”

“Yes, it’d be nice to play again sometime. Though the cleanup will be tough.”

Opening the dining hall door, Rem leads while Subaru, carrying Emilia, follows from behind. Cocking his head at Rem’s words, Subaru turns around. Behind them lies a disastrous scene, vestiges of the proud dining hall that once stood there.

After this, he and Rem will have to combine their utmost powers to straighten up whatever remains. Afterall, Ram certainly won’t help them.

“I wonder if these dog ears’ll ever melt. How long’re you gonna keep them on anyway?”

“Its composition doesn’t seem to be the kind that melts… If Subaru wishes, Rem doesn’t mind wearing them forever.”

“They’re cute, but not something to wear everyday. How about letting me see them again the next time we play?”

“—Yes. Let’s do that then. It’s a promise.”

Seeing Rem’s blissful smile, Subaru can’t help but smile back.

In his arms, Emilia stirs slightly, a peaceful expression on her face. It was as if their own smiles somehow put her at ease, a truly heartwarming scene.

△▼△▼△▼△

—This story takes place a mere five days before Subaru and Emilia separate at the capital.

Subaru, Emilia, and even Rem. Not one of them could anticipate the harrowing future before them.

But if only one thing could be said for their uncertain future…

—They failed to keep the promise.

The seven residents of the Roswaal Manor being together and enjoying the King’s Game, would never happen again.

Bonus Short Stories

Emilia and Ram's Very Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship

1

That night, in a room at the Roswaal manor, a clear singing voice echoed.

It was already several hours after sunset; an hour where healthy people would normally be in their beds. Something like singing loudly in the middle of the night was normally an action that would lead unavoidably to a reprimand. Even the mansion of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers was no exception to this.

However, if noise was the only reason for the reprimand, then in this one room only, it wouldn't be a problem. That's because this room was the west wing's music room, with soundproofing installed.

Hence, reprimands towards that singing voice would not be due to it having disrupted sleep…

"…Emilia-sama, you're not putting your full effort into singing this evening."

The reprimand instead was due to the singer's heart not being put into her voice.

Seated in a chair, with her light red eyes narrowed, the one who had spoken out was a girl in a maid uniform. Her pink hair was styled short, and her adorable features held a cold, clever expression.

One of the mansion's servants, she was the the elder of the twin sisters, and the haughty, disrespectful one—Ram.

The one Ram's cold words and gaze were directed to—the owner of the singing voice—let her song fade with a "Mmm…" and turned around slowly with an unhappy look.

She was a girl with long, beautiful silver hair, and features so well-arranged they might make one tremble. Her clear white skin was flushed faintly in embarrassment, and her amethyst eyes glowed with an anxious light. Her form, covered with thin nightclothes, had a bewitching elegance, but the biggest impression was made by the bucket she was holding in her hands for some reason.

The girl—Emilia—turned, held the bucket to her chest, and looked down.

“You can tell, then?”

“Yes, Ram can tell. Her eyes and ears are first-class, after all. Also, you’ve carelessly dropped the bucket several times now.”

“Mmm, that’s right. I’ve been rude to Professor Bucket too…”

With an apologetic face, Emilia stroked the bucket several times with graceful fingertips. It was an odd situation, both in terms of the picture it made, and the way things were turning out, but Ram refrained from any response except a sigh.

Emilia, with bucket in hand, and Ram were together in the music room late at night for secret training to improve Emilia’s tone deafness. A travelling minstrel’s stay at the mansion had brought Emilia’s tone deafness to light, and Ram had promised to help her improve.

The current situation was that once every second day, that scene of training was repeated in the night, but…

“Emilia-sama, time is limited and precious. Training that cuts into sleeping time is bad for your appearance as well… Don’t forget that this sacrifices Ram and Emilia-sama’s beauty for tomorrow.”

“I feel veeery badly about that, but… is it really that terrible?”

“Indeed, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it one of the greatest losses in the world. Rem is worried about it as well.”

“Mmm, that is bad, isn’t it. I’m very sorry.”

Disheartened, Emilia’s shoulders sagged. Perhaps it was just one’s imagination, but it seemed that her unusually long ears—evidence of the elven lineage of her blood—those long ears also drooped, showing proof of her self-reflection.

Just as it looked like, Emilia had an honest, serious personality. Her character was unquestioned, so the state she was in tonight was all the more disturbing. She was a girl who, for better or worse, always focused on what was in front of her; for her to be so obviously distracted was not a common thing.

“Aah, very well then. …Emilia-sama, if there’s something you’re worried about, please tell me.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Roswaal-sama has instructed me to attend to your every need, after all.”

She had offered her loyalty to Roswaal, and to earn his reward she set aside any annoying, troublesome feelings. Also, Emilia’s growth and mental health were of vital importance to their camp.

If she could be of assistance for that purpose, it was really no trouble at all…

“Actually, I wanted to talk with you a little about Subaru…”

“Gah.”

That helpful posture crumbled away with the next word.

2

“Lately, Subaru has been helping out with various things around the mansion, right? So, I was thinking I’d like to thank him somehow, but…”

“Aha.”

“But, there’s nothing Subaru wants, and when I try to thank him, he tries to pass it off with a joke like ‘I don’t need a thing. Your smile is enough!’.”

“Mhmm.”

“So, instead of trying to ask him, I decided I’d try to think of something myself.”

“Huh.”

“…Ram, are you actually listening?”

Emilia, burning with motivation, frowned with dissatisfaction at Ram’s listless replies. However, the one who wanted to swell with dissatisfaction and explode was Ram. On the topic of Subaru—in regards to Natsuki Subaru, Ram’s impressions had become extremely complex and troublesome.

He’d saved Emilia at the capital, and after being hired as a servant at the mansion, put all his effort into becoming the key to resolving the witchbeast incident. He’d worked his way into the heart of Ram’s beloved little sister, Rem, and was a troublesome young man noisily passing life day by day—it wasn’t that she wasn’t thankful to him. She had absolutely no intention of tell him that directly, however.

“So you see, Ram is listening properly, but her will to give a proper answer is diminishing.”

“Hmph, you’re saying that sort of thing again… you’re sort of like Subaru in that way.”

“Emilia-sama, there are things it’s fine to say and things you shouldn’t say. Apologize.”

“Aww… Even though Ram said the same thing to me earlier…”

When Ram lowered her voice after that humiliating assessment, Emilia apologized with a face that showed she didn’t agree with it. Ram accepted that apology, and continued “And so”,

“In the end, Emilia-sama, what is it you’d actually like to do?”

“Umm, actually I’m not sure… Say, a while ago Subaru made a big fuss over trying to make mayonnaise, right? Do you remember?”

"How could Ram forget? Storing and replenishing it somehow became Ram's job."

Mayonnaise was a curious seasoning, apparently famous in Subaru's hometown. It's main ingredients were eggs, oil, and vinegar, and after various twists and turns, it had been reproduced at the Roswaal estate. Ram wasn't very fond of its distinct flavor, but not only Subaru, but also Emilia and Beatrice liked it, so regularly replenishing the stock had somehow become part of Ram's daily work.

"Remembering that, Ram's blood starts to boil… Why does she have to do this extra work?"

"Subaru was really excited over that mayonnaise, and if we could make him that happy again, I think that would be a way to thank him. So, isn't there something you can think of?"

"Something Ram can think of?"

"If we knew something about Subaru's hometown, or something like that, I thought it might give us an idea."

As Emilia clenched her fists in front of herself, her face full of motivation, Ram folded her arms.

Honestly, much about Natsuki Subaru's identity was unknown—speaking more concretely, many things about him were suspicious. Of course there was the timing of his joining the Roswaal estate, and information about him before he met with Emilia at the capital was could be called vague, at best.

However, even at the critical period of the Royal Selection, Roswaal had carried on a hands-off policy in regards to Subaru. Well, that was Roswaal. Naturally, Ram obeyed him, believing he had something in mind.

"Well, from his appearance, Ram would guess that Barusu is from somewhere outside Lugunica… a rich kid from a wealthy family in some appropriate country."

It wasn't as common lately, but Subaru lacked common knowledge in odd places. However, Ram felt that this wasn't due to a poor standard of living in his past, but rather the opposite.

His fingers, teeth, and skin were pretty. His speech was improper in many ways, but he had a rich vocabulary. That was the gift of an excellent education, and showed he'd been treated very well by those he lived with.

"Mmm, that's what I think too. Secretly, I was trying my best to figure out where he comes from, and I read lots of books, but…"

"From your expression, Ram takes it the result wasn't favorable."

"I wondered a little if he wasn't from the Kararagi city-state… Subaru sometimes uses odd expressions, but it's not really the Kararagi accent, is it."

Even out of the four major nations, the culture that had taken root in the Kararagi city-state was distinctive. Emilia's guess wasn't bad, but Ram, too, felt that it wasn't Subaru's country of origin.

Regardless, Ram was not in possession of the answer to the question occupying Emilia's thoughts. Honestly, she thought that the fastest way to find the answer would be simply to try asking Subaru directly.

"If we did that, the whole point of this plan would be ruined. It's important to get ready secretly, so that Subaru doesn't find out. I talked with Puck about it, too."

"Blast, you didn't have to go that far…"

"Ram, you made a reeeally scary face just now…"

Thanks to the advice of the Great Spirit, Emilia's will to complete her goal had become abnormally troublesome. Despite that, Ram didn't have any means of finding the right answer without any clues, either.

So, the help she extended to Emilia as she continued to mumble softly to herself, was not in the form she had hoped for.

“Since it’s Barusu, Ram thinks that he’d be very happy no matter what Emilia-sama was to give to him…”

“It wouldn’t do for Ram to be taking Subaru’s jokes seriously, too. He won’t answer me honestly, after all.”

“It’s your own fault, Barusu; after all your joking around, she won’t believe what you say now.”

As Emilia waved her hands with a blushing face, Ram shrugged at her in resignation.

“Emilia-sama, Ram doesn’t know the taste of Barusu’s hometown, but perhaps she can tell you a way to make him happy.”

“Really? How can we do that?”

“The mayonnaise that Barusu likes; there’s a way to make it taste even better.”

At Ram’s words, Emilia clasped her hands together and her eyes lit up.

As she did that, the bucket that had been held in her arms fell to the floor, and a shrill noise resounded through the music room.

3

“You know, nee-sama. I’m still not sure why I’ve been called here, and it’s scaring me.”

“Stay quiet and seated, Barusu. Nothing bad is going to happen.”

“When you say it like that, it’s even more scary…OK, OK, don’t glare at me!”

At Subaru’s unmanly muttering, Ram’s glance towards him exposed her scorn. Subaru wilted under the sharpness of that gaze, and Ram snorted in contempt.

The location was the dining room, and the date was the day after the night-time conversation. Subaru had no idea what was happening, but Ram had a goal in rushing him to the dining room, and forcing him to sit down.

The boy in the butler uniform was looking around uneasily, wondering what was going to happen. However, his expression suddenly changed due to a faint, warm aroma began to enter the room.

“Oh? That’s kind of a nice smell…”

Subaru sniffed the air, and then turned towards the dining room door as it opened noisily. As he did, he saw Emilia’s form, pushing a cart with a silver tray atop it.

“Emilia-tan?”

“…Sorry to keep you waiting, just kidding.”

As though she were trying to imitate Ram or Rem, Emilia spoke just a little humbly, before sticking out her tongue teasingly. Watching from the side of her eyes as Subaru was smitten by that gesture, Ram walked over to the cart Emilia had brought, and quickly set out it’s contents in front of Subaru.

“Um… Is it alright if I ask what the occasion is?”

“Hoho, a very good question indeed. This is, in fact, Ram’s and my everyday expression of thanks to Subaru.”

“Huh?!”

Emilia’s confident, proud declaration drew a simultaneous cry from both Subaru and Ram. The response showed amazement as well, but at it, Subaru turned around exaggeratedly.

“Wait wait wait! Why is Ram surprised too? What’s going on there?!”

“Yes, please explain this, Emilia-sama. Ram expressing thanks to Barusu? Ram can’t see what you mean at all. There’s simply no way…!”

"That's taking it a little far, isn't it?!"

"That's right. I know you're a little embarrassed, Ram, but still…"

As Ram trembled in humiliation, Subaru and Emilia's reactions were completely unexpected. Emilia touched a finger to her own lips, and continued with a face devoid of malice.

"Just recently, Subaru assisted Ram with gathering ingredients for tea, and he helped with cleaning up after the snow festival, didn't he. I understand that much, you know."

"That was…"

Faced with an uncomfortable truth, Ram was left open-mouthed by Emilia's rare on-target assessment. And, as she hesitated to make a counterargument, Emilia's attention shifted towards the puzzled Subaru.

"Anyways, this is proof of our thanks. So, hurry and open it up, Subaru."

"Oh, uh, got it. I gratefully accept Emilia-tan's kind feelings, and Ram's rare gratitude."

Ram wanted to tell him not to accept her gratitude without her permission, but she was yet again too slow getting a word in.

The plate atop the silver tray was covered by a silver lid. Grasping it's handle, Subaru fearfully checked the contents of the plate, and found…

"Steamed…potatoes?"

"Not just any steamed potatoes. These are steamed potatoes specially crafted by Ram and I!"

Bit by bit, Ram's cooperation and unlikely gratitude were revealed as an accomplished fact.

Setting aside Ram's chagrin, Subaru listened to Emilia's excited explanation, and took a steamed potato in hand. Holding the freshly-cooked potato that was still giving off steam, he looked back and forth at the two of them.

Emilia looked on expectantly, Ram frustratedly, with their eyes lit up.

“Nom… nom… munch munch…?! No way, this is…!”

“Yes! That’s right! You can tell? So, you can tell, right?”

“It has lots of mayonnaise worked into the middle…! B…baked potato! It’s a baked potato!” (note: Subaru said ‘baked potato’ in phonetic japanese, so the word is unfamiliar to Emilia and Ram.)

“That’s it! It’s a… ‘baked potato’! But that’s not all…”

As Subaru called out the name of a food she’d never heard, Emilia face broke into a happy smile. Then the two of them, speaking together turned towards Ram.

“The seasoning is just right!”

At those radiant faces and voices, Ram’s bad mood vanished completely.

“…Well of course. Ram’s steamed potatoes are the second most delicious in the world, after all.”

Repressing a sigh at the possibility of steamed potatoes and mayonnaise, Ram replied like that.

…And there’s just a little more to the story.

“Nee-sama, I heard from Emilia-sama. Together with Emilia-sama, you treated Subaru-kun to the greatest steamed potatoes or something.”

“…It’s not like that, Rem. That wasn’t my intention at all.”

“No, it’s fine. To know nee-sama is being kind to Subaru-kun makes

Rem very happy, as well. …If she’s a little bit lonely about it, that’s just Rem being selfish.”

After hearing the story of the baked potato, Rem smiled like that and walked away.

Having been spoken to like that by her beloved little sister, Ram extended a hand that didn’t reach her sister’s back, and eventually clenched that hand into a fist. Her hand trembled, and she ground her teeth…

“…Barusu, this cannot be forgiven.”

For several days afterwards, Ram was determined to oppress Subaru, and Subaru himself wailing “Why is this happening to me?!” was the result.

END

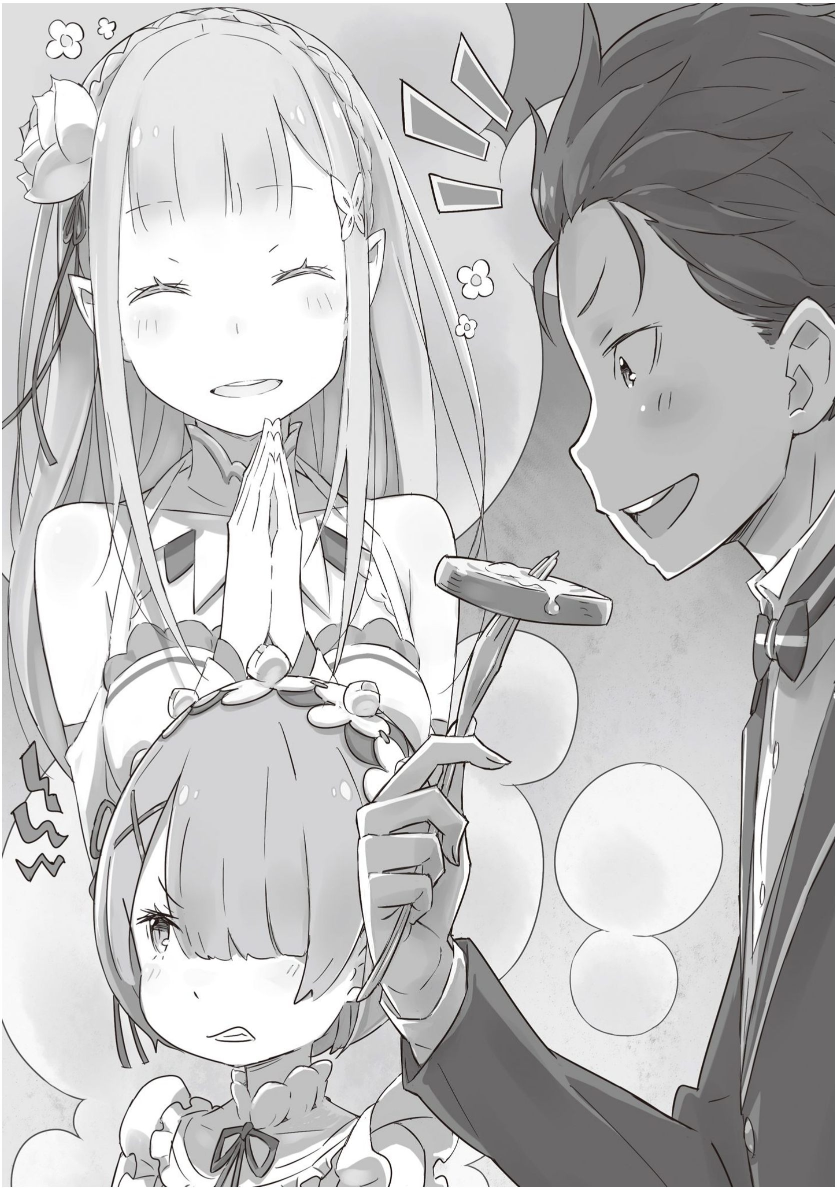

Beatrice and Rem’s Cumbersome Service

1

Silence and solemness reigned in the forbidden archives, and a touch of tenseness pervaded it.

“…”

The person watching over the place was this girl sitting on the stepladder, quieting her breathing as she swallowed her saliva. She wore a magnificent dress, and she had a faint hint of tension on her face that was pretty like a doll’s. She spent a tremendous amount of time in making her faint colored hair into drills, and she played with them calmly with her hands.

The girl was Beatrice—she was a guard of the forbidden archives, and she was the owner of the room as a librarian.

“…”

The forbidden archives was more than just a place where Beatrice worked for most of the day.

This place was the best with a suitable temperature and the smell of old books in the atmosphere, even when she was sitting on a stepladder while immersing herself in books. This librarian girl who loved her books naturally felt at peace spending time in the forbidden archives, and she became satisfied with being able to spend everyday in ease.

That girl in the forbidden archives stiffened her face from the sense of tension, and it wasn’t all too early for her to cower with her small body.

The cause of her tension would be—

Rem: “—Beatrice-sama.”

Suddenly, there is a voice that interrupts her thoughts.

It was a voice that came from a room with a countless amount of bulky books in the forbidden archives with an infinite amount of bookshelves lined up. A single girl who called Beatrice's name was standing there.

Beatrice having her name called causes her to look up. In response to Beatrice's look, the girl gently slides her finger on the bookshelf and says

Rem: "What is this?"

Beatrice: "You make a big deal out of everything!"

She shows her the filth of the white dust on her finger, and Beatrice shouted at the girl who said those words. Beatrice's face became red and she yelled. Once again, she was disqualified from that certificate to clean.

2

Rem: "Beatrice-sama, I have told you many times. It is standard to start cleaning from the top."

Beatrice: "I did start from the top, I suppose! I dusted it! I did it just like you told me without complaining! It gets on the cleaning tools here and there so I couldn't do anything about it!"

Beatrice gets frustrated and continues to raise her voice at the unfair evaluation of her work. Then, the girl in front of her accepts Beatrice's insistence, and then she puts her hand on her face with a slightly surprised look.

Beatrice: "Why are you making that look?"

Rem: "Well, I was just thinking about how it's somehow really cute when Beatrice-sama talks like that."

Beatrice: "Whenever I hear you occasionally say those rash remarks, I feel like you've been influenced and it's all his fault. I'm fed up with this!"

Rem: "My…to say that Subaru-kun and I go well together, you're making me blush."

Beatrice: "That's a far-fetched interpretation, I suppose!"

Beatrice becomes exhausted from the girl who looks downward touching her blushed face.

It was the girl with eyes that had the same type of light blue color her short hair had. She had her eyes closed slightly and gently. She wore the Roswaal residence's honorable business maid clothes that were highly exposing, and it fit the cute girl nicely.

She was a maid of the mansion, the younger sister of the twins, and she had a hypocritical type of courtesy—it was Rem.

Rem: "Nevertheless, when it's this spacious, there's a lot of cleaning to do after all."

Rem replaces her embarrassment from before, and a maid's duty fills her eyes as she looks around the forbidden archives. Just like that girl said, cleaning the forbidden archives with an enormous amount of books was not a simple task.

Not to mention, that task was even more difficult when it was assigned to the short librarian.

Rem: "Beatrice-sama, maybe it is difficult for you to do it by yourself here after all…"

Beatrice: "Young sister, I let you in occasionally like this only out of consideration for your usual work. It's also just a duty of checking on the progress of the cleaning, I suppose."

Rem: "Stubborn aren't you."

Beatrice: "You're like your sister when you say that."

She says that she's similar to Ram, and Rem made a happy look after having a bit of a surprised face. That expression was different than what she was aiming for, so Beatrice gives a tired sigh again.

—It was the cleaning of the forbidden archives, and Rem's periodic supervising that came along with it.

It started as a result of the incident that happened a few days ago, and it was a trivial secret kept between the two of them. That being said, it wasn't really a big deal, although Rem did point out about how the management of the archives was very unacceptable, as someone who was fussy with her excessive seriousness.

Anyhow, progress couldn't be made with the cleaning of the archives because of the lag from Beatrice's lack of motivation. Rem dropping her shoulders as she thought about the lack of effect her periodic supervising had was also a given.

Rem: "Beatrice-sama, there's actually something serious I need to talk to you about."

Beatrice: "Something you need to talk to me about?"

She failed her cleaning inspection, and Beatrice raises her eyebrows making a look that said "Tonight, I am done for".

Rem: "Yes. I have a request unrelated to cleaning."

Beatrice: "Huhh…I'll have you know that I have no intentions to become friends with you guys, I suppose. These last few days were out of sudden impulse, or something."

Rem: "But, it's a request that I can only ask of Beatrice. It's very important."

Beatrice: "…Well, if it's something only I can do, then you can say what you have to say, I suppose."

The situation gets dealt with, and Beatrice's mood starts to somewhat recover. Rem nods at Beatrice, and then she pointed towards the mansion's entrance. A door was there. At first glance, it was a door, but that was the "Door Crossing" intermediary object that allowed her to connect to the Roswaal residence forbidden archives as she liked.

And now, in front of that door there was a single cart—it was something placed there that was often seen around the Roswaal residence, and it was used to carry food and tea.

Beatrice: “I’ve wondered about this since the beginning. Why did you bring a cart?”

Rem: “It’s because this cart is actually related to my request.”

Rem threw out her chest slightly with pride and stepped towards the cart’s side. After that, once she picked up the silver tray placed on the cart, she presented it to Beatrice, who sat on the stepladder with a look of suspicion on her face.

Then, she held all of it and told her this

Rem: “I’m requesting that you work with me to develop mayonnaise cuisine for Subaru-kun.”

When Rem opened the tray’s lid with a cheerful look, nasty, warm steam rose into the room. The thick smell of the mayonnaise forced back the smell of the books that she was used to.

Beatrice: “Yuck, I suppose.”

Beatrice says, and she frowned with a truly displeased face.

3

Mayonnaise was a special condiment that seemed to have been famous back at Subaru’s hometown. It was Subaru’s favorite, and ever since that flavor was reproduced in the mansion, they always paid careful attention for the stockpiles of it.

Of course, Rem used that mayonnaise and wanted to contribute to Subaru, but…

Rem: “That’s not all I have to ask.”

Rem wanting to devote herself to Subaru was already a normal thing, so there wasn’t really any deep reason behind her wanting to do something for him.

However, there was a chance for something to start with this type of motivation that even made her get Beatrice involved.

That was—

Rem: “Nee-sama and Emilia-sama actually treated Subaru-kun to mayonnaise cuisine the other day. They put in their usual gratitude and…they kept it a secret from me.”

Beatrice: “…”

Rem: “No well, I’m fine with it. I know that Subaru-kun is lovely, and it’s lovely seeing Nee-sama and Emilia-sama going as far as to cook to show their thanks. …But, I am a little…just a little…just slightly disappointed that I wasn’t there.”

Beatrice: “…”

Rem: “Because I’m thankful for Subaru-kun too. So, I realized that I have to try my best too so that I don’t lose to Nee-sama and Emilia-sama!”

Beatrice: “That doesn’t explain why you came to me!”

Beatrice shouts at Rem, the girl who intruded the forbidden archives and brought a cart.

Rem puzzles at that rage. She really was wondering if her explanation was insufficient, or if she caused a misunderstanding.

Rem: “Beatrice-sama, please calm down. My explanation wasn’t good enough. To put it in a way that doesn’t cause any misunderstandings…I want to do Subaru-kun a service.”

Beatrice: “You said that nobody else could accept this request, and yet it’s become even more indecent, I suppose!”

Rem made a fist in front of her chest as she said “Let’s do this!”, being full of motivation. That attitude causes Beatrice to look up at the ceiling as if she was grieving. Rem pushed the cart even closer to her and says

Rem: “I already see the path to a new meal. Next I just have to allot the mayonnaise. If I can just arrange that perfectly, then I can show it to even Subaru-kun."

Beatrice: "What are you telling me to do with you doing all that…"

Rem: "Yes. Beatrice-sama will taste the…see, don't you and Subaru-kun like mayonnaise? It seems like your guys' tastes are close too… that's unfair."

Beatrice: "I don't care, I suppose! That's a false accusation! Don't just get jealous at whatever you want, I suppose!"

Beatrice claims her innocence at Rem, who had a light in her eyes that looked just a little dangerous. Then, Rem returns to herself with a "I can't do that", and after clearing her throat with an "Ahem" she says

Rem: "Anyways, Subaru-kun and Beatrice-sama have similar tastes. Thus, if I make a dish that you like, then Subaru-kun will like it too."

Beatrice: "I get what you're trying to say. I guess it's fine to ignore your rash remark of you saying that him and I like similar things. But, that's as far as my kindness goes."

Rem: "Beatrice-sama…"

Beatrice folds her short arms and turns her face away as if brushing off Rem's proposal. She curves her lips, fully expressing her intent to refuse her proposal.

In response to Beatrice's firm declaration of her intent, Rem dropped her shoulders, thinking "It can't be helped", and—

Rem: "—Yes, open wide."

Beatrice: "*Gulp*, I suppose. —Huhh! Damn it!"

She scoops up the cooking, holds out the spoon, and Beatrice becomes shocked, as she ate it involuntarily. However, her surprise lasted only for a moment. She immediately changes to an entranced expression and says

Beatrice: “Mmmm…You put it in my mouth, I suppose. But, it doesn’t taste bad. Not bad.”

Rem: “That really makes me happy. It seems like Nee-sama and Emilia-sama invented a steamed “Baked Potato” by putting a cut in a yam potato and putting mayonnaise into it. So, I looked for some possibilities, and I worked on a mayonnaise cuisine that’s delicious even if it gets cold.”

Rem explains her new cuisine idea to Beatrice, whose mouth was dirty from the yam potato.

The source of the steam coming from the plate was the smashed vegetables dressed in mayonnaise inside the steamed potato. Furthermore, cutting up the fresh vegetables and putting them inside caused it to take in a new flavor.

Rem: “There are fitting and unfitting vegetables in there, but with this Beatrice-sama and Emilia-sama will eat it, even when you don’t like vegetables, and Subaru-kun should like it too!”

Beatrice: “I don’t like how it’s a byproduct of the objective to please that guy, but it didn’t taste bad, I suppose. I’ll praise you and say that it matched my tastes enough.”

Rem: “Thank you!”

Rem did a curtsey with a complete smile on her face while holding the tray in one hand in response to Beatrice’s praise.

She makes sure of her look of satisfaction, and Beatrice reached her hand out wanting another bite. However, she gets stopped quickly because of Rem’s hand.

Beatrice: “…”

She quickly reaches out her hand. She quickly gets stopped. She reaches out. She gets stopped. She reaches out. She gets stopped.

Beatrice: “Why are you interrupting me! Stop giving yourself airs!”

Rem: “No, I’m not giving myself airs. It’s just that, it would be a problem for you to eat this dish's mayonnaise cuisine."

Beatrice: "I don't understand, I suppose. Would it be wasteful or something because there isn't enough…?"

Rem: "—No, it's the opposite."

Rem steps to the back silently in front of Beatrice, who squinted with displeasure. Then, she points, and what awaited Beatrice was the countless number of dishes on top of the cart that had been remaining there.

If all of those were dishes waiting to be tasted by Beatrice, then—

Rem: "I told you. I want to make the best dish that matches Subaru-kun's tastes. Hence, I wanted Beatrice-sama to cooperate with me little by little."

Beatrice: "Little by little! You said little by little! You really are perverse…"

Rem: "Yes, open wide."

Beatrice: "Aan, I suppose…mmm, it's delicious. Don't mess with me, I suppose!"

Rem changes the little amount of mayonnaise and tries to figure out the best taste. She wasn't just paying attention to the mayonnaise, but the solt and vinagar that made up the mayonnaise too.

No matter how much time they had, it wasn't enough. The path of cooking was a very deep one.

Rem: "There's still another dish ready! There's no time to rest! Let's both do our best just like Nee-sama and Emilia-sama did!"

Beatrice: "Wa-Wait…in the end, this is just me doing my…"

Rem: "Don't just try the hot ones, but the cold ones too please! Ahh, please taste it thoroughly!"

Beatrice: "Gulp, I suppose—!"

Rem had a bad habit of starting to only see the things in front of her, while Beatrice had a personality of being helpful with this and that. Those things bit each other like devils, and a tragedy was born.

Then on another day, Beatrice's troubles paid off, and the new cuisine was offered to Subaru.

Subaru: "Potato salad! This is potato salad! Rem, you came up with this, huh!"

Rem: "Yes, I put in my devoted spirit. I won't mind it if you praise me."

Subaru: "Ahh, thank you. I'm really happy. …By the way, why is Beako's whole face shiny, and why is her cheeks chubby? Did you get fat?"

Beatrice: "Whose fault do you think this is—??!!"

Subaru didn't care about the hardships, while Rem didn't feel like talking about them. Then, the voice of Beatrice, the person who made put in the most effort and got the short end of the stick, resounded throughout the Roswaal residence's dining hall.

END

Short Story Compendium 1

Emilia's Capital Touring Chronicle (Volume 1; Animate)

1

"—The capital really is suuuuper huge after all."

With her hands joined in front of her chest, the girl said this in a lively voice as her eyes sparkled at the scenery before her.

She was a beautiful girl. She possessed long, silky silver hair that reached her hips. Her braided silver hair was accentuated by a white flower accessory, quite literally giving her a flower-like loveliness.

Her skin was as fair as virgin snow, her slender, well-proportioned limbs were draped in a dress with a white theme, and her amethyst eyes that were admiring the townscape sparkled so beautifully it was if there were jewels embedded in them.

Her beauty was such that one would not hesitate in the slightest to call her the loveliest girl in the world. However, the way the girl was looking around her surroundings full of excitement was just a little too childish to fit that description.

Her eyes followed the sea of people passing to the left and to the right. Once glance at her eyes that were full of curiosity as if looking at something novel would be enough to tell that what she was feeling was somewhat akin to someone from the country visiting the big city for the first time.

"You're very cute when you're having fun like this, but perhaps it's about time you returned to reality—"

Raining on her parade was a voice whispering so it would only reach her slightly longer than normal ears. However, there was no one around her. But the voice was quite literally right by her ear, so —

"—M, Come on, I already know that the situation has gotten a bit troublesome. You're being so mean even though I only stopped for a moment."

"Well, it's not like I want to earn my daughter's ire by endlessly scolding her either. But this is going to be quite a bother to the others as well, and you don't want that either, right?"

"That's true, but…"

The voice continued its sound argument and the girl despondently lowered her head in response. As she did this, a small figure nimbly pushed its way through her hair out to her shoulder. This was—

"Anyway, try looking around for a place that looks familiar. There's no point in getting dejected."

Offering this forward-thinking proposal while stroking its whiskers was a cat small enough to fit in one's palm.

It was coated in gray fur, with big, round eyes and a pink nose. Setting aside its size, that was all there was to say about its appearance, but where it differed most from an ordinary cat was in the fact that it was standing on two legs.

Waving its tail that was about as long as the rest of its body, the cat purred atop the girl's shoulder.

"I suppose your final option would be to build up your courage and ask someone. Can you do that, Lia?"

"Don't make fun of me. Of course I can do something that simple. Puck, you blockhead, you're always treating me like a kid."

"How else would you treat a kid that ended up losing their attendant because they were having too much fun?"

In response to his words that were both carefree and flippant, all the girl could do was pout.

The cat known as Puck smiled as the girl started behaving like a kid immediately after complaining about being treated like a kid.

“Alright, this is going to be a real problem if the sun goes down. You’d better find your way while I can still help you, Emilia.”

“I’m not some lost kid. I just ended up getting a little confused about the area!”

Becoming stubborn in response to his call, the girl—Emilia started walking with a prim expression.

Toward the endless sea of people before her, in order to find the servant girl she had lost.

2

The capital city of Lugunica, possessing a population exceeding 300,000, was the world’s foremost metropolis in terms of populace and was the core of the Dragon Kingdom,

At its center was the royal castle, and the city—The royal capital was a melting pot of all sorts of races, always bustling with activity and overflowing energy, one could spend their entire day watching the people walking on the streets without getting bored.

In particular, the commercial district, also known as the ‘trading street’, which was home to countless stalls and hawkers, and had any number of high quality goods or curios imported from other countries lined up due to which it was always dizzyingly busy.

“…Humans really are amazing.”

Somehow making it out of the wave of people, Emilia escaped to the side of the street and paused to take a breath. Smoothing down her ruffled silver hair, she once again examined the street once she was done with her short break.

The trading street was filled to the brim with people passing back and forth, conversing and negotiating endlessly. One street, just a single shopping street had this many people on it. Just the mere thought of how difficult it would be to find a single person in all of this depressed her.

“That girl was wearing a rather conspicuous outfit herself, but…

Even that doesn't really mean much in the capital, huh."

Puck who was slipping back into her hair spoke her thoughts out loud. Poking the cat as if she were touching her hair, Emilia lowered the ends of her eyebrows looking troubled.

"Yeah, that's going to be a problem… Also, you'd better be careful too, Puck. It'd cause a real panic if anyone were to see you, you could just go back into your crystal since you don't have anything to do."

"I do have something to do, though, I'm your conversation partner. It'd be a problem if you started crying because I left you alone. But anyway, what are you going to do? Wanna haphazardly wander around at random with no destination whatsoever?"

"The way you put it seems like I'd probably never ever find her. I'll have to use my head on this one."

Shaking her head at his proposal, Emilia tapped her head with her finger.

With this, Emilia fell deep in thought and Puck started grooming his fur as he patiently waited for her brilliant idea. But what emerged from her was not a brilliant idea—

"—Look, Puck. It looks like there's a bit of a quarrel going on over there."

"Liiiaaa."

"A little! Just a little bit! I'm curious, so I'll head over there for just one moment!"

On the other side of the street, she could see that some curious onlookers were gathering around a stall some distance away. In response to what Emilia said when she saw this, Puck sighed in a somewhat troubled manner.

"Hey, Lia, you're in trouble yourself, you know?"

"Y-You're wrong. It's not like I want to help them or anything…

Right, I just feel like taking a look.”

Looking as evil as she could and yet still quite cute, Emilia ran over to the disturbance. Making her way through the crowd, she made it to the front of the onlookers. And then—

“C’mon, Mimi keeps telling you—. Mimi doesn’t do things like dining and dashing. Mimi just ended up losing Hetaro who had the wallet, so Mimi’s in a lot of trouble!”

“You too, young lady, how many times are you going to make me repeat myself. I don’t know about this missing person, but you’ve already eaten my product, so I must receive the appropriate compensation. Aah, if your companion isn’t with you, you could use your possessions instead....”

“Mimi’s got this staff and stuff, but if Mimi hands it over the lady’s going to be super mad at Mimi!”

The sight of the two who were quarrelling in the middle of all of these rubberneckers caused Emilia’s eyes to widen.

One of the two parties who were arguing was a tall, dark-skinned man, and judging by his appearance he was probably the owner of the stall in question. And facing him was the one who had been arguing with him all this time, a person with a small build who was much shorter than him.

They were a cat-like beastman bearing round ears and orange hair. They were probably of the catman race. In terms of height they barely even reached Emilia’s waist, and their large white robe covered their entire body. Possessing cute, round eyes and an adorable nose, she was a girl whose entire body seemed to exude loveliness.

Judging by the contents of their conversation it seemed as though she was unable to pay the bill she owed the stall, but,

“Mimi doesn’t want to be thought of as someone who dines and dashes either. You want this staff, old man?”

“I feel guilty after all! That’s quite a decent staff, isn’t it? How troublesome…”

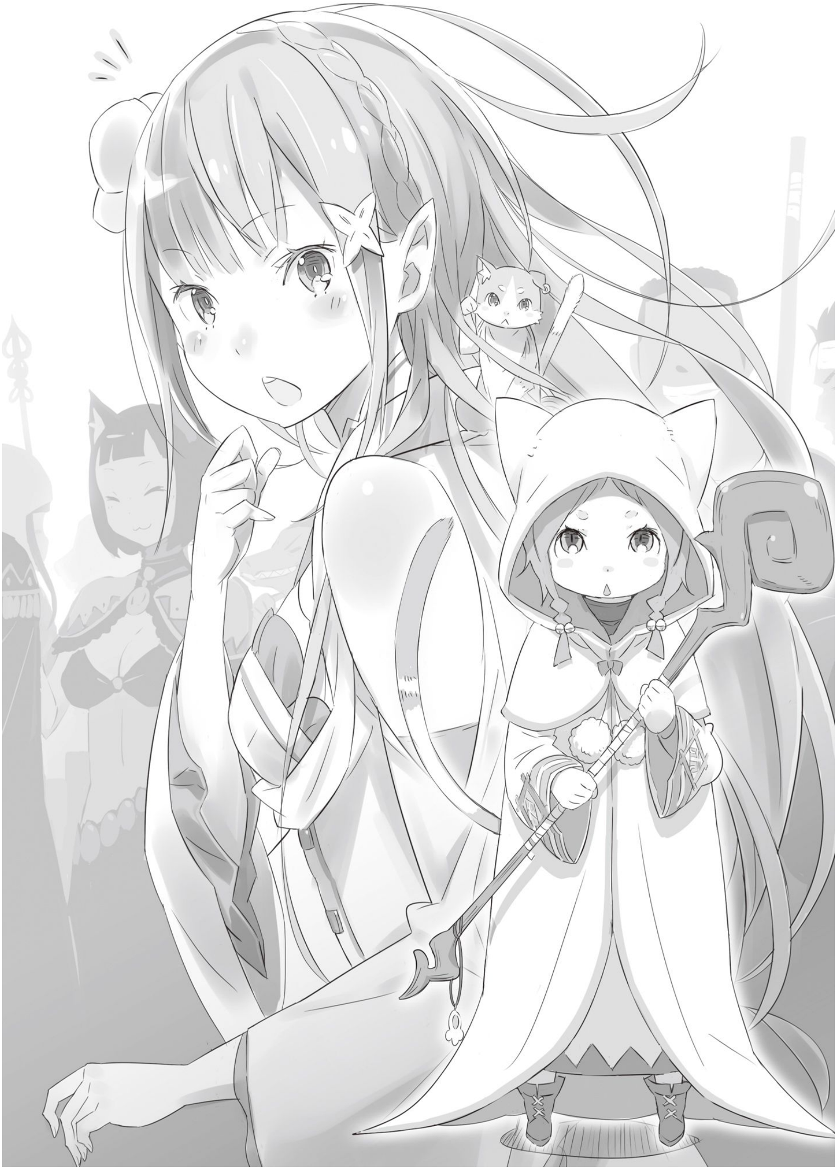

"Gosh, that Hetaro, getting lost so easily! Mimi's mad at you as your older sister."

"Excuse me…"

As the concerned parties started wearing themselves out, someone raised their hand and interfered. The girl and the shopkeeper were both surprised, the one standing between them was none other than Emilia.

Emilia had timidly stepped in, and with the two of them staring at her she continued, "Umm,"

"I happened to overhear, but… Basically, you just need compensation for what this girl ate, is that right?"

"Ah, yeah, that's right, but… Young lady, are you this girl's acquaintance?"

"Eh, this lady's my acquaintance? First time I'm hearing of it! I don't know her at all!"

"No, I don't know her either. This is my first time seeing her."

"Ehh—?!"

Emilia and the kitten, caught between the airheadedness of these two the shopkeeper screamed in despair. But Emilia disregarded this and quietly reached into her pocket.

"But I'll pay for her. That should solve everything, right?"

"That would certainly be a great help, but… You don't even know this girl, right?"

"True enough, I don't know her, but… She does look reeeeally cute."

This felt sloppy even for an excuse made up on the spot, but the shopkeeper seemed to conclude that Emilia was being considerate in her own way.

The shopkeeper nodded as if giving up, and Emilia smiled at him as she pulled out her purse.

“…Eh, eh?”

The hand digging around in her pocket was unable to grasp what it was supposed to. Emilia carefully checked every nook and cranny of her bosom, hips and sleeves and then nodded deeply.

“—Looks like I dropped my purse somewhere.”

The heartrending murmur of the girl who had lost her attendant in the middle of the capital and was now completely penniless dominated the area.

3

Having announced that she would shoulder the girl’s debt, Emilia was now in quite the predicament now that it turned out that her purse was missing.

Her attempt at philanthropy, or rather, philcathropy had ended up like this. Feeling Puck sigh in exasperation from within her hair, Emilia was unable to say anything in response as she fretted.

She had to find some way to break through this situation. But just how in the world could she—And then, in that place that had fallen silent, her brain arrived at one hope. That was,

“—I’m going to perform. If you find it entertaining, please toss me some money.”

“Eh?”

This impromptu announcement of a street performance caused all the bystanders to tilt their heads.

Among all these faces of astonishment, only Emilia who started preparing with a face that looked as though she was intending to do this from the very start, and the catman girl who was delighted, “Ooh! A performance! How fun!” Were different.

Needless to say, not even Puck was able to follow this completely unexpected idea of hers. The cat rustled around in her hair as he changed position, and quietly whispered into Emilia’s ear.

“Lia, Lia, I’m afraid to ask this, but what’s this all of a sudden?”

“I just remembered, Puck. If you show off some unique performances in a place with lots of people around, you can get money, isn’t that right? I think this is the perfect solution for me and this girl since we’re both broke!”

“You’re definitely cute when you’re trying hard, but there are times when I wonder if I went wrong somewhere while raising you. For instance, now would be one of those times.”

It was already too late to turn back, and Emilia had no intention of turning back either, Puck’s lamentations had no effect on her.

Neglecting to even prepare the bystanders for what was to come, Emilia took a step forward and started breathing deeply. Standing before the stall, right in front of all of these onlookers, the area naturally ended up getting monopolized by Emilia.

“I shall now have an extremely rare animal perform for all of you.”

“I’ve suddenly got a bad feeling that I’m about to get wrapped up in this.”

“Let’s go.”

Emilia thrust her right hand out in front of the onlookers and declared this.

The spectators seemed baffled as she showed them her empty palm. Unfazed by their reactions, Emilia signaled to Puck who was taking quite a while to emerge from her hair.

“C’mon, please. Hey, Puck. Come out.”

“It’s not that I mistimed my appearance, it’s that I don’t want to appear at all. But I'd rather not humiliate you in front of everyone, so I suppose I'll have to come out."

Shrugging his shoulders as he sighed, Puck was dejected as he reluctantly forced himself to creep out of her hair. His appearance instantly caused a commotion, and even as this happened he continued to walk across her upper her arm and elbow until he finally reached her palm where he raised both paws and proclaimed, "Victory"

The crowd grew excited in an instant. Emilia thought this response meant she was doing well—

"This is an extremely rare animal. I shall now have it…"

"S-Spirit! It's a spirit! She's a spirit user!"

"Crap, run! Drop your weapons and all the money you have and run!"

Perhaps she should have him dance, as Emilia thought up a program the crowd in front of her dispersed and ran off. They dropped everything they had on them, and the panic started spreading to people who weren't even involved. Like this, the commotion continued to spread and when the dust finally settled, the street was completely deserted.

Emilia was dumbfounded by this, and Puck who was still on her palm started grooming his face with his palm as he spoke,

"Just about everyone would run away if they saw a spirit. It was just like you said."

"That's true, but… They didn't need to be that surprised, did they?"

Accepting Puck's words, Emilia sulked a bit as she looked around her surroundings. She was surrounding by all the things the onlookers had discarded. Going by the rules of street performances, all of these things now belonged to Emilia. Of course, she wouldn't actually take them.

"…Your dancing is so cute, it would have been nice if they saw it before they went home.”

“To call that reaction going home, I quite like your elegance.”

The two had this frivolous exchange. And then—

“Ohh! This cat’s really talking! How? How can you talk? Are you the same as Mimi? Are you a catman? You’re tiny! Super tiny! Ufuhahaha—”

“This kid’s pretty bold, huh. If you consider appearance alone we’re certainly rivals in terms of prettiness, but we’re entirely different beings.”

“Is that so? How do ya know that?”

“I’m Lia’s father, and you’re that Hetaro kid’s elder sister, isn’t that right?”

“It’s true—!”

For some reason, Puck’s joke caused the aforementioned girl to explode with laughter. Anyway, she was genuinely happy that this girl stayed with them.

If even she had run away, even Emilia would surely be hurt.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Emilia’s eyes widened as she examined the fallen items. The reason for this was one of the items by her feet—A white purse placed on top of some somewhat dirty wrapping.

She crouched down and picked it up, and then nodded when she confirmed its feel.

“It really is the purse I lost… Why is it in a place like?”

“—Perhaps some kind hearted soul brought it here?”

Puck said this as if bored, and yawned as he slipped back into her silver hair.

He was basically declaring that he was done. This upset the catman girl, but she immediately returned to her usual self and started wagging her tail when Emilia stroked her head.

“Ufuhihihi, you’re super good at this, lady! You’re probably a match for the lady! You’re definitely far above the captain!”

“Yeah? Fufu, thank you.”

“Mimi can tell you’re a really good person, so Mimi’s gonna remember ya! If you ever have something troubling you or someone you wanna drop, just tell Mimi and it’ll all be fine!”

“Drop… I don’t really get it, but okay. I’ll be sure to remember you too.”

She didn’t really understand what this cute catman was saying, but Emilia magnanimously accepted her words.

Emilia then turned around as she continued to stroke the girl’s head. Behind her was the shopkeeper who even though the situation had completely left him behind, continued to man the stall because he could not abandon it.

Now that she had her purse back, Emilia approached the dumbfounded shopkeeper and opened it.

“Um, so, how much did she owe you?”

And she once again resumed her philanthropy under the guise of nosiness.

END

Emilia’s Starry Sky Classroom (Volume 2; Animate)

1

Emilia, who was walking down the corridor, stopped her steps when she was called from behind.

“Are you leaving at this hour, miss?”

The long silver hair swayed as the girl turned. Then, her amethyst eyes reflected the silhouette of the person who had asked the question.

“I’m just going to go to the garden. I still haven’t been able to talk to the spirits today because of the confusion this morning… And I can’t break the pact,” she replied with a gentle smile.

Hearing this, the other person, in this case Rem, closed her eyes slightly.

“Confusion… Do you say Subaru?”

“W-Well …Yes, but…”

Rem’s tone of voice was a little harsh, which made Emilia smile uncomfortably. Seeing this reaction, the maid added:

“Any problem you have, please don’t be shy to talk to us. Especially considering that Subaru became an employee of the mansion.”

“It’s not that I feel shy… It’s true that it all started because of Subaru, but I have a part of the blame for being so entertained with his conversation,” Emilia admitted with a small sigh.

As a spirit user, despite her main companion being the Pack, she had the help of several lower spirits. Therefore, keeping the promise made to them was an obligation that she could not neglect.

“I can’t be privileging only Pack, otherwise the others will be upset.

So I usually take the time to talk to them every morning, so they can help me when I need it most."

"I didn't know about these details of the technique of manipulating spirits. I know very little about it."

"It is normal, not least because there are very few spirit users. Did you learn to use magic with Roswaal?"

"Yes. I learned the basics from my sister when we were children, and since we came here, I have been instructed by Master Roswaal."

The Marquis de Mathers, despite all his eccentricity in terms of language, dress and other personality details, was also the magician in direct service to the royal family, known and recognized as the greatest magician in the kingdom. Thanks to that, both Rem and Ram, both under his instruction, had a high caliber in magic technique in their respective elements of preference, water and wind.

"I hope I don't get involved too much in situations that you both need to use magic…" Commented Emilia.

"I understand your concern, but it will be inevitable. What happened in the capital was only the beginning, I am sure that similar incidents will be repeated throughout your candidacy."

Instead of consoling, Rem chose to alert her master of the risks. And her strict stance was not only with others, but mainly with herself, which Emilia considered a great quality.

"I know. I can't be naive forever, let alone look down after receiving so much help from Roswaal and the two of you."

"My sister and I just obeyed the master's orders. Of course, it will be a great satisfaction to be able to help you, Miss."

Then, seeing the maid bow, Emilia also threatened to do the same, but gave up when she remembered the last time she was scolded for it. Even simple gestures like that, now, carried a greater meaning for the candidate to the throne and she needed to get used to it.

“So, I’m going to go to the garden. I promise not to stay long.”

“Yes ma’am. Ah, one last thing.”

Rem, before Emilia started walking again, asked: “What should I do if Subaru asks me where to find you?”

The maid’s concern was natural, since they had just talked about the boy having hindered Emilia in conversation with the spirits. Despite this, the silver-haired girl shook her head sideways and said:

“Don’t worry, you can tell him I’m in the garden.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I don’t want to treat Subaru as a hindrance, and I just need to take my obligations more seriously. In addition… I’m a little curious to know the continuation of the conversation I had with him in the morning.”

“Miss Emilia, or you take obligations seriously, or listen to Subaru stories.”

“I-I know! But I will really do everything right.”

“By the way, if I may ask the question, what was the conversation you were having with Subaru about?”

“Hum… Do you usually look at the night sky Rem?”

“The night sky…? I don’t think much… At most, I am guided by the stars when I have to go out at night.”

“I know, and I was like that too. But that is not it.”

So, Emilia went to the hall window and looked up at the sky. The world had already lost the sunlight, and what lit the landscape in its place was the moonlight and the scattered brightness of countless stars.

“…”

Rem also did the same and went to the window, to which Emilia added: “When you have an opportunity, ask Subaru about the stars. I’m sure that, like me, you will also have fun looking at the sky at night.”

2

“Beatrice, can I get Puck back…?”

“…You can’t, right? But do what…”

The girl Emilia talked to did not hide her dissatisfaction as she hugged the gray kitten tightly in her arms.

“What is it, Lia? Are you hypnotized by my cuteness?”

“Pack, Just yourself. In fact, I kept thinking that Beatrice always makes a face at me.”

“Natural, isn’t it? For Betty, you are a bad girl that keeps the brother from me. Ideally, I would never see your face or that idiot’s face again, okay?”

If it was anyone else, those words would have hurt Emilia, but she knew Beatrice didn’t really have bad feelings about her, so she just laughed.

“I have a pact with Lia, and you know the importance of that, Beatrice. But I promise I’ll play with you again.”

“Do you really promise? Do you promise to come back to Betty as soon as you can, brother?”

After the dramatic farewell, the kitten jumped on Emilia’s shoulder and settled in his usual place, between the silver strands of hair, and said:

“For a change, I didn’t see time go by in the library. It’s already night, isn’t it? Because of your clothes, I imagine you’re going to talk to the spirits in the garden, am I right?”

“Right. I didn’t have time to talk to them in the morning and I can also see the stars that Subaru spoke… Hey, I know! Beatrice, are you busy now?”

“If Betty is busy…?”

Once again, the girl frowned at the question. Everyone at the mansion knew that the librarian never acted sympathetic to anyone, but Emilia was under the impression that Beatrice was especially harsh with her and Subaru. Even so, she suggested:

“If you have no appointment now, how about going for a walk with me? I want to be more friends with you, Beatrice. And today I have a very interesting subject to tell you!”

“Too bad it was Subaru who told you first…”

“Do not disturb, pack! And then? what do you say?”

She stared into the girl’s eyes, but without giving too much time, Beatrice turned her face and replied:

“A pity, but I’m very busy right now, understand? Not to mention that I have no interest in knowing about the stars.”

“Not even if it’s quick? Rem was so interested…”

“Don’t think you’ll be able to convince Betty with stories about that idiot, okay? I bet he stays giving random names to stars and is having fun like a fool.”

“Wow, incredible. How did you know?”

Emilia was truly surprised by Beatrice’s precise comment. According to Subaru, the dispositions of the stars were different in his homeland, and apparently he was suffering from knowing which was which.

“Subaru seemed to understand a lot about astronomy, only he said that the stars are not the same here, and there where he grew up. He spoke of Vega, Altair… B-Betelgeuse?”

“…Geuse…”

“Hi?”

“…It’s nothing. Now go quickly, do you hear?”

After popped the tongue, the librarian expelled visitors from her library. Before the Door Crossing was activated, however, she just said goodbye to Pack by waving her hand, and then immediately disappeared.

“I really wanted to be friends with Beatrice…”

“Believe it or not, but in the beginning, she and I fought every day. But look how intimate we are today. All thanks to the long time we spent together… Just like you, Lia.”

In other words, Pack was telling Emilia not to be in a hurry, which seemed to convince her. Then she headed back towards the garden and, when she left, she was greeted by a pleasant night breeze.

“…I think it’s good here…”

Saying, the girl sat on the grass in one corner of the garden. Then she looked unconsciously at the sky and laughed. As Rem told herself, she never paid much attention to the night sky. Of course, there were times when she looked up and was amazed by the beauty of the starry sky, but it was never something that would make her repeat every night.

“Subaru is so excited when he talks about the stars…”

At first, the boy was confused by the different disposition of the constellations, but that soon changed to curiosity. For Emilia, Subaru’s eyes that saw the starry sky shone more than any bright spot above.

“You are very happy today, Lia,” Commented Puck.

“You know, I really am. The sky remains the same as always, but just because I changed the way I saw it a little bit, it became much more beautiful.”

He also said that the name “Subaru” was taken from a group of stars, the “Pleiades” in the language of his homeland. And that is why he was always interested in astronomy and knew so many mythologies about it.

“That band full of stars is the Milky Way, if I’m not mistaken. In the legend, two lovers cross it once a year to meet, on a day called Tanabata.”

“Why do I get the impression that this story is more cruel than beautiful?” Wondered the kitten.

“How was the story? The lovers Hikoboshi and Orihime were separated as a form of punishment, but Hikoboshi is allowed by the star king to cross the Milky Way once a year and go to find his beloved.”

“Well, I guess it’s no use talking about it now…”

Emilia’s eyes sparkled as she told the supposedly romantic story, but Pack was still not convinced. Despite him, the girl was very fond of the myths about the stars, and looked forward to hearing stories from Subaru.

In any case, she could not lose focus on the initial objective:

“So, Puck, I’m going to call the guys.”

With that, the kitten moved away from her a little. The reason for this was so that the lower spirits would not be intimidated by the Pack, which was a Great Spirit.

“I’m sorry for not being able to talk to you this morning. But now we have all the time in the world.”

Following her whisper, warm flashes began to emerge around her. Each was an inferior spirit who had answered the girl’s call, and the clarity of the lights showed that they were happy, making Emilia smile.

And so, the conversation between them began, serenely, only in their world. Until…

“H-Hey! Wh-Wh-What a coincidence we meet here, huh?”

…A boy in a butler’s uniform came up raising a hand. Another astronomy class was about to begin, under the tutelage of the blinding moon.

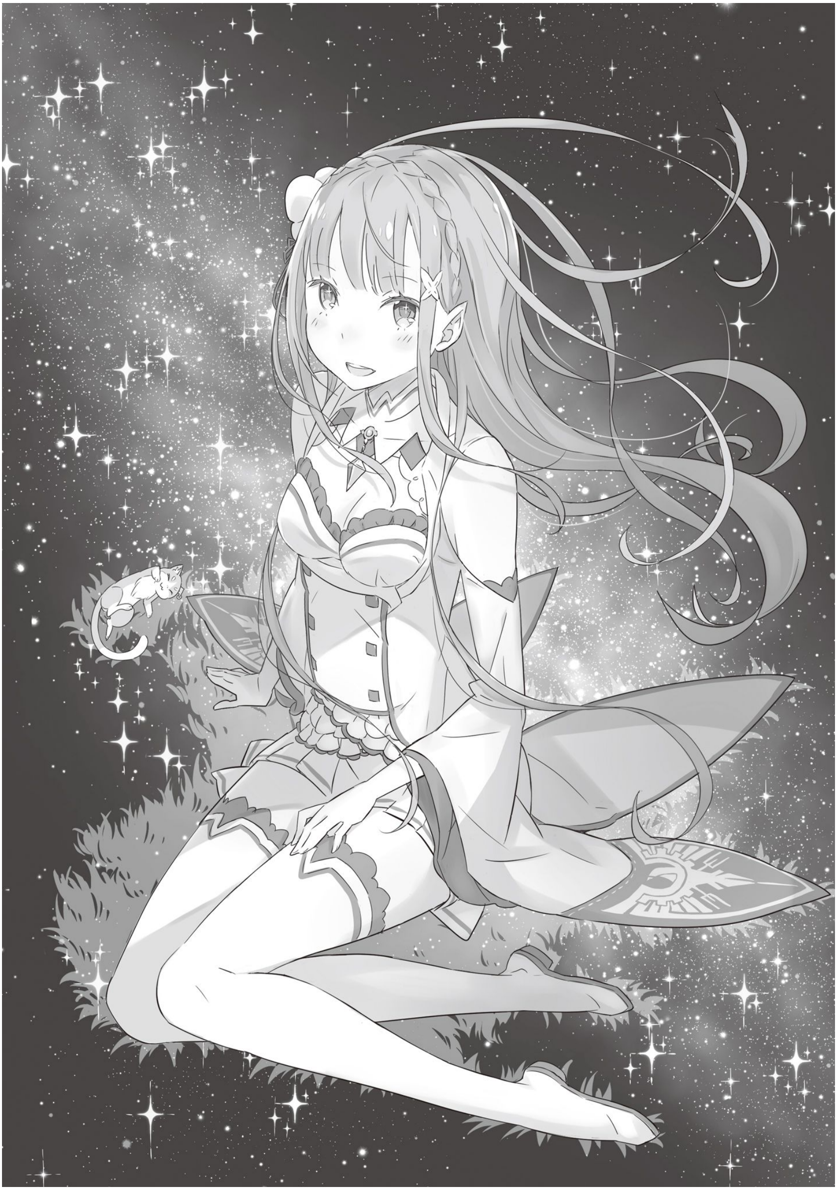

Emilia’s First Date
(Volume 3; Animate)

1

The day of their promised date began with a morning blessed with a clear, cloudless sky.

“I feel like a braid definitely looks best on you these days, but it’s regrettable that I have to show it to Subaru. As for your clothes, I suppose it would be best to stick with the white theme. We’ll add a highlight with your hair accessories, and then, after that…”

Floating around in a hurry before the silver-haired girl sitting on the bed—Before Emilia was the cat spirit she had formed a contract with, Puck.

As she watched the gray furball stress himself out, Emilia placed a finger on her cheek.

“I don’t think you have to worry about it that much, it’d probably be fine if we just went with the usual…”

“No way! Forget about your partner, this is your first date. You absolutely have to be the cutest in the world!”

“Gosh, you’re making such a big deal of it.”

Puck’s fighting spirit seemed to be blazing for some reason, Emilia stealthily sighed so he wouldn’t see it.

Acting as her foster parent, the cat spirit who was essentially her family had been in this state since last night. At this rate, the preparations alone would exhaust her before she even took a step outside. —Even though she was supposed to go on a ‘date’ with Subaru today.

“Listen closely, Lia. On today’s outing, Subaru might try to approach you to hold your hand or something of the sort, but you definitely must not allow that. Don't get caught up in the flow of things, no matter what. The most important traits in a woman are modesty, shyness, and just a little bit of submissiveness. I'm always telling you this, so I'm sure you understand."

"Okay, I get it already, jeez. If you're that worried, you might as well come along."

"I want to respect his courage as a man. There's no way I could do something so tactless."

"But then your words and actions are completely contradicting each other…"

"My feelings as a male wanting to support him and my feelings as a parent wanting to forbid this are battling it out within me… Hngh, Lia, you'd better go while I can still hold myself back…!"

"Right, right."

Puck's theatrics as he made his jokes were probably due to Subaru's bad influence.

She certainly felt like he was already this way to begin with, but she also thought he had gotten even worse about it now.

Quickly finishing up her personal grooming, Emilia beckoned Puck over to her with her hand. Puck readily responded to her call and perched on her shoulder, after which he started massaging her cheek with his paws in a fancy manner.

"Alright then, Lia. I'll be sleeping in my Yorishiro, but if Subaru tries to do anything that strays from the path of decency, be sure to call me out."

"Come on, you don't have to worry about that sort of thing. Alright, nighty night. Take it easy."

As Puck saw a giggling Emilia off, his body dissolved into particles of light. The faint light was then absorbed into the crystal on her chest, and the noisy cat watching over her fell silent.

Therefore, Emilia flicked the crystal with her finger after which she jauntily walked out of the room.

Even Emilia understood that her heart somehow felt stimulated as if it was expecting something.

2

“Did I keep you waiting?”

“No, I’ve only just gotten here myself.”

Standing before the tree they had decided to meet at, Subaru responded like so to Emilia who had just linked up with him.

Emilia nodded at his response, and then turned back to the mansion as she continued,

“You said you wanted to meet outside the mansion, and say that stuff we just said… Can I ask if there was any particular meaning to that?”

“They both seem rather fitting for a date, don’t you think! Leaving the mansion together wouldn’t feel very much like a date, and when you meet outside the sort of conversation we just had is an absolute necessity.”

It seemed like he had arrived much earlier than her, and used a twig or something to draw several pictures of Puck in order to kill time under this tree.

Seeing this, it seemed to her that at the very least his statement that he had only just gotten here himself was a complete lie.

“Hmm, so that’s how it is. I really don’t know anything about this sort of thing.”

“By the way, I would still reply ‘I’ve only just gotten here myself’ even if you were super late, it’s a sign of my noble manly heart.”

“But wouldn’t that mean you were reeeeally late too…”

“There’s certain things you shouldn’t point out even if you notice, aren’t there?!”

This seemed to be an obligatory exchange. Subaru lectured her about its importance as she accompanied him, and when he was done he placed his hand on his jaw and started staring at her intently.

“Eh, what’s wrong? Do I look weird somehow?”

“The characters for weird and romance look quite similar, huh, but setting that aside, there’s only a tiny bit that’s weird about you, and that tiny bit is also charming in itself so it’s all good. More importantly, you’re looking extraordinarily cute today as well! … Have you dressed up a little more than usual today?”

Subaru, alert as he was, noticed the subtle changes in her hair, accessories, and so on. He accurately guessed where Puck had spent his efforts, surprising Emilia.

“You noticed? Puck was a lot more enthusiastic than usual today.”

“Ooh, great job! Not bad, Puck. And here I thought for sure that his feelings as a father would make him put up some resistance when it came to his daughter’s first date.”

“Yeah, he was reeeeally conflicted about it, but he’s sleeping in my crystal right now so you can relax.”

Emilia showed him the crystal on her chest with a faint smile, causing Subaru to don an expression of relief, “I see.” He then cleared his throat, and humbly bowed before her.

“Well then, I suppose this is the beginning of our first date. I consider it a great honor that you would allow me to escort you.”

His butler outfit was completely flawless from head to toe. Subaru didn’t really have much choice since he did not possess any other formal clothing, but to Emilia it truly seemed to fit this gesture.

Consequently, she obediently stood next to Subaru who was holding his elbow out to her, intending to link arms with her.

“Umm, is this okay?”

Her fingers grasped his cuff ever so slightly as she looked to him with upturned eyes and asked this. Puck had told her not to take his hand, so she was rather anxious wondering if this was okay. But in response, Subaru,

“This isn’t what I was hoping for, but that’s a performance beyond my expectations! Your loveliness truly is demonically inspired…”

Subaru covered his face with his palms and writhed around, it didn’t look like he was angry. Relieved by this, Emilia pulled on his cuff as she started walking.

“So, what exactly do you do on a ‘date’?”

“First of all, we’ll head to the village. After that, we’ll pay our respects to the dead… And then, how about going to see some flowers. Slowly, calmly, there’s no rush.”

Bathed in the warmth of his gaze, Emilia looked at his profile as he said this with a smile, after which she responded “That sounds nice” with a smile so lovely it was enchanting.

3

“Thank goodness the children seem alright. You seemed reeeeeally popular too, Subaru.”

“I wonder if that’s something to be so happy about, it’s actually pretty problematic in its own way, Emilia-tan.”

Subaru who muttered this with a grave expression was currently dusting off his butler outfit which was covered in dust and dirt.

When they first arrived in the village, the two set went to receive some flowers for their visit to the grave. Subaru had already asked the children to prepare a bouquet in advance.

There were no problems thus far, their troubles started after they had obtained the flowers.

Even the fact that he was on an important date had no meaning to these innocent children. Regrettably, Subaru ended up getting surrounded just like he usually did and was ultimately reduced to this wretched state that he always ended up in.

“Even with this, they were probably holding back because you were there. If it weren’t for that, I’d be going through something even more horrible right about now.”

“Come on, you’re exaggerating. Those kids just like you, isn’t that right.”

“If this were any other day, I would have snot spread all over my back right now. Fortunately, I was able to avoid that fate today.”

“That’s what usually happens?!”

Emilia suddenly started to gaze upon him with pity.

Forming a complicated expression in response to her sympathetic gaze, Subaru turned around somewhat exhausted and, “Ah.”

This caused Emilia to turn around as well, and there she found the children from the village who had been following them.

“Come on, you guys can’t tag along this time. I told you that Emilia and I were going to be having a thrilling, lascivious tryst, didn’t I? Get outta here, scram!”

“Ehh, what a tyrant.”

“Ehh, what a rude guy.”

“Ehh, what an unruly kid.”

“I’m no unruly brat. Also, we’re getting close to the barrier which if you remember you were forbidden from approaching. Unless you want to hear Muraosa’s long, boring, droning lectures, you’d better head back right now. Head back, and have fun playing that frozen demon game I taught you or something.”

[T/N: Frozen Demon = Freeze Tag]

Subaru waved his hand as if shooing away insects, causing the children to mutter complaints as they retreated.

Emilia watched this exchange as if she found it charming, but she suddenly realized that among the children, there was a cute girl staring directly at her.

She was a lovely girl with reddish brown hair and red cheeks like an appa. When her eyes met Emilia's, she stuck her tongue out with a noise before she ran off.

"That Petra, what's with that attitude of hers. I'll be sure to give her a good talking to tomorrow. Are you alright, Emilia-tan? If the shock has rendered you unable to walk, I'm more than willing to princess carry you in my arms."

"No, I'm used to it, so it's fine. Something of that level isn't anything worth making a fuss over."

"Making a fuss, not something you hear very often these days… And I'm the one hurt by the statement that you're used to this…"

"It's fine. Come on, our 'date' isn't over just yet. Let's go."

Emilia said this to Subaru whose face looked like he wasn't telling her something, after which she immediately started walking. Subaru seemed a little troubled, but he ultimately ended up walking over to Emilia's side without saying anything.

Emilia felt somewhat disgusted at herself for relying on his consideration like this

"—Alright, we're here, we're here.".

After they walked a bit further, Subaru stopped and pointed at the trees.

At first glance they appeared to be a perfectly normal cluster of trees, but there were blue crystals embedded high up in their trunks, and the evenly spaced trees formed a barrier that responded to evil mana in the atmosphere—Miasma.

The witchbeasts known as Ulgarm which had been inhabiting the forest were all wiped out, but it was very likely that a different type of witchbeast would soon take over the now empty territory. The barrier had not yet outlived its usefulness, and thus it was once again restored.

“We can’t enter, so sorry, but this is as far as we go.”

Standing right before the barrier, Subaru found a spot people weren’t likely to frequent and placed the bouquet there. Having done this, Subaru joined his hands and closed his eyes while still on his knees, and then lowered his head as if in prayer.

It was an unusual method of praying, it was her first time seeing such a thing. Perhaps it was a custom from his home town which he would not speak to her in detail about. Seeing this from the side, Emilia too placed her hand on her chest and prayed for them to rest in peace

She had heard that all living things, even witchbeasts, would have their souls cleansed when they returned to the Od upon death. She hoped they could get along when they once again incarnated into this world in a new form.

That was a life lesson Emilia had picked up—Someone had probably taught it to her.

“Sorry to make you play along with my self-satisfaction. It’s alright now, everything’s OK.”

Dusting off his knees, Subaru stood up and smiled at Emilia. Coming to her senses, Emilia confirmed that Subaru wasn’t forcing himself to smile after which she nodded, “Yeah.”

“So, what we’re doing next is… Visiting a field of flowers, is that right?”

Drawing up their ‘date’s’ itinerary in her mind, Emilia asked about their next destination. To confirm this, Subaru snapped his fingers in satisfaction,

“That’s right, a flower field. This is a pretty big deal in itself, you know?”

Saying this, he smiled with a playful expression that fanned the flames of her expectations even further.

4

Having left the forest, with her bangs dancing in the wind, Emilia could not suppress her voice of admiration.

“W-W… Wow!”

She advanced through the forest with Subaru leading her, and the greenery that had been blocking her view thus far cleared away in an instant. The vivid scenery filled her vision with endless, beautiful colors.

“How about it?! I was rather surprised myself when I first saw this, but… It really is pretty grand after all, isn’t it?”

She couldn’t even respond to Subaru who was boasting right beside her, her gaze was fixed on the scenery before her.

Red and yellow, white and blue, flowers were blooming all over the place, and none of them overwhelmed the others, the field of flowers was in complete harmony. The fact that a flower garden like this was formed naturally could only be called a miracle.

“This seems to be some sort of secret garden to those brats, I really had to work hard to get them to talk about it.”

“A wonderful place like this… How did you get them to tell you about it?”

“Hehe, it was all for my date with you. I suppose you could say it was a bit of compensation for letting them violate my rights as a human being for days on end.”

The conditions of this exchange probably resulted in Subaru getting covered in unfathomable amounts of dirt and snot.

While she certainly found this pitiable, she definitely could not forget about how deeply the scene before her eyes moved her.

Perhaps she was once again being spoiled by him. To have her chest filled with such pleasant emotions.

"—Also, this too is a present from me to you, Emilia-tan."

And thus, Subaru said this to Emilia whose hand was against her chest as he extended his hands toward her. "Eh?", Emilia was late to react as Subaru touched her silver hair,

"This is… An ornament, made of flowers?"

"It's a crown of flowers, so to speak. Perhaps it's not much compared to the real thing, but you could think of it as a rehearsal for when you one day ascend the throne? I definitely want to give you one adorned with the finest jewels by my own hand some day, but… For now, this is the best I can do."

Subaru said this in a rather pompous tone as he winked at Emilia.

His actions caused Emilia to feel a slight throb in her chest. For some reason, her heart suddenly turned lively for a moment. She wondered what exactly that sensation was, strangely enough it did not occur again.

But she did know that it made her feel terribly warm, and it naturally brought a smile to her face.

"Thank you, Subaru."

On that day, Emilia gave him her finest smile, and Subaru was so entranced he could not even speak.

Emilia felt immense gratitude toward Subaru and continued.

"If possible, I'd like to go on another 'date' with you sometime."

This killer line of hers pierced his heart magnificently.

END

Rem Meets Subaru
(Volume 1; Toranoana)

1

…Feeling her chest tingle, the girl looked outside the window.

The girl looked at the path in front of the gate that lead to the main road, visible from the mansion window, then looked back.

Rem: “Roswaal-sama, it seems Nee-sama is coming back. It looks like she’s in a bit of a rush, though.”

Roswaal: “Hmmmm, she’s coming back earlier than plaaaned. Since she’s coming back soon, that must mean that she had left there at niiiiight.”

The man responded carefreely to the girl who gave a report based on her chest tingling, and he really sounded like he was feigning ignorance.

It was a person who was sitting in a leather chair and held a cup that gave out steam. He had long indigo blue hair. His different colored blue and yellow eyes were mesmerizing; you could say that at a glance he looked like a frail, handsome man.

However, the clown makeup applied on his face ruined these classy impressions.

Roswaal: “In a rush. I wonder if something happeneeeed. Do you know the details?”

Rem: “I’m sorry. I don’t know much about the situation. But, it seems Beatrice-sama has work to do.”

Roswaal: “Beatrice does? I see…But, that means a bone has been brooooken.”

When Roswaal looked up at the ceiling upon hearing her explanation, he pompously put down the cup onto the desk. After that, he fixed the posture of his long legs, and when he turned around to face the girl as he moved the chair, he said,

Roswaal: “At any rate, the things Ram does usually aren’t pointless…I think. Sorry, but can you go find Beatrice? I think she may be a little late, thooooough.”

Rem: “Yes, understood.”

After receiving her master’s orders, she lightly held onto the maid outfit she was wearing and answered with a perfect curtsy. On her lowered head, where she wore a white head dress, she had somewhat short blue hair.

After the servant bowed, Roswaal tugged on his chin approvingly and said,

Roswaal: “Well then, please take care of business. …Rem.”

The girl—Rem bowed formally again, and quietly left the office.

2

With her blue hair swaying, Rem walked briskly through the mansion’s spacious corridor.

It was Lugunica Margrave Roswaal L Mathers’ mansion. Rem was the head maid of this mansion. She was a maid that could do everything and did most of the mansion work.

Even though the Roswaal mansion was pretty big for a mansion, there were currently only two people who were permanent maids due to various reasons—there were only Rem and her twin sister Ram. So, Rem made up for lack of workers and took care of most of the mansion work by herself.

And then today, she had been contacted by her sister that had been away from the mansion for business, then the exchange from earlier happened.

Rem: “Judging from the range of synesthesia, I suppose Nee-sama will be back in about an hour.”

There did exist magic where they could communicate in real time that also cancelled far distances, but the sisters didn't need that.

The synesthesia the twins had—Rem and her sister Ram possessed a special ability that relayed strong emotions and small thoughts. She had felt her sister's return and her slight sense of impatience precisely as a result of synesthesia.

However, at this point in time it was uncertain whether she'd be able to do what her sister had asked of her.

Rem: "If only the Great Spirit was here, things would be much easier…Beatrice-sama?"

Rem boldly rose up to the difficult challenge, talking about how there was no use in asking for too much.

The challenge was very simple—open every single door that she sees. However, there was almost 100 doors in the mansion. This was, of course, no easy task.

Rem: "Beatrice-sama, which one are you in?"

She opens the door that had a "reference room" plate on it. She was met with a bunch of books and a pile of a countless number of books. It was normal, since it was a reference room.

Normally, there aren't any people who permanently stay in the reference room. Rem wasn't going to do that either.

Rem: "Beatrice-sama? Beatrice-sama?"

While calling out to her, Rem calmly opened doors one after another, though at an unusual pace. After doing that for five minutes…

Beatrice: "Augh! You're so annoying, loud, and noisy I can't stand it!"

A lone girl comes out of the next room with a loud but cute voice.

It was a little girl that had her hair put into drills, and she wore a magnificent dress. Seeing this girl that had dollish looks appear, Rem straightened herself and bowed deeply.

Beatrice: “You’ve been so loud, and you just don’t pipe down, I suppose! What in the world do you want from me at this time of night?!”

Rem: “I apologize, Beatrice-sama. But, thank goodness you’re still awake.”

Beatrice: “Hmph, even if I was sleeping, the noise would wake me up. You sure do have guts, little sister.”

The girl—Beatrice arrogantly snorted at Rem, who bowed, with a book held to her chest. She was acting all high and mighty, but Rem didn’t even care.

Beatrice was someone of a noble position. The way she interacts with Rem, a maid, is something to be expected.

Rem: “By the way, Beatrice-sama, Roswaal-sama needs you for something. I’ve been told that he really needs your help for it.”

Beatrice: “For him to summon me through a maid, he’s become quite an arrogant one, I suppose. It seems he’s forgotten that there is no hierarchical relationship between me and him, I suppose.”

Rem: “…”

Beatrice, who seemed to not like this selfish way of going about things, was becoming grumpy since she had been summoned late at night.

Beatrice: “Haah. You should hurry up and show me the way before my mood changes, I suppose.”

Rem: “…! Yes, thank you. I’ll show you the way.”

Beatrice broke the momentary silence, then expressed tolerance in a way that showed that she had gave in. Saved by her thoughtfulness, Rem started walking through the corridor as she guided Beatrice.

Beatrice: “Mm…I heard Nii-chan’s instructions. He said to prepare a bath, a clean towel, and the guest room, I suppose.”

Rem: “The guest room, you say?”

Beatrice: “Yes. …It seems that foolish girl is bringing someone back, I suppose.”

Murmured Beatrice in somewhat of a displeased manner while showing no emotion in her eyes. Rem thought about Beatrice’s instructions in her mind without mentioning what she’d said.

The guest room is always ready. All she has to do is prepare some sheets and let in some fresh air. Then heat up the bath, prepare a clean towel—she immediately realized that they were bringing in a wounded person.

With that, she also understood why Beatrice was needed.

…Beatrice is a great healer that Rem could never compare to. She hears the earth dragon growl from afar, and had a feeling that the dragon carriage was very close.

3

…The black haired boy laying down on the bed was breathing profoundly in his sleep as though he was dead.

Healing the boy in the boy that had been taken in took at dawn took a lot of time; outside the window, the sun was already setting westward in orange light. It wouldn’t be long before night approaches.

Emilia: “Now he should be relieved…yeah.”

Sitting on a chair next to the bed, breaking into a smile out of relief was a silver haired girl—it was Emilia.

Emilia was the one who took this boy back and asked for his injuries to be healed. Now that the commotion finally settled down for the time being, Rem threw a question at Emilia.

Rem: “Emilia-sama, now that things have settled down, I think it’s about time for you to tell me what’s the situation…”

Emilia: “Mm, you’re right. Umm, this boy’s name is Subaru. I had a lot of trouble at the capital…but that’s when he helped me out. I owe him my life, and a lot of other things.”

Rem: “Is that so?”

At her vague explanation, Rem shot a glance at the person next to her—she looked at her pink haired twin sister who looked identical to her.

Being looked at by her sister, the older sister—Ram kept her stone face, shook her head, and said,

Ram: “Even I don’t know the situation in detail. It’s something that happened while Emilia-sama and I were separated.”

Rem: “Separated…? I thought you were with Emilia-sama to escort her…”

Ram: “It was to encourage Emilia-sama to be independent and have a strong sense of responsibility.”

Rem: “As expected of Nee-sama…I’m very impressed.”

She spoke in a bit of an insolent way, but Rem unconditionally accepts what Ram says. Seeing those sisters interact like that, Emilia burst out laughing.

Emilia: “You two really do get along reeeeaally well. But, don’t make me laugh too much. I want to let this boy get some good rest.”

Rem: “This boy must be someone you met while being separated from Nee-sama.”

Emilia: “Nope, he’s not. Subaru is my…my, my what?”

Emilia put her finger to her chin and started to worry with a serious expression on her face. It didn’t seem like she was trying to put off

Rem. She saw that she really was at a loss for an answer.

If she wasn't trying to hide something, this must be someone whom she had too little information on in the first place since she was having trouble explaining.

…Then perhaps this was a kind of a person that mustn't get close to Emilia.

Ram: "…Rem. This person saved Emilia-sama's life. Roswaal-sama acknowledged that fact, too. No matter how stupid he looks, he's our guest. You do understand what that means, right?"

Rem: "But, Nee-sama—"

Ram: "Rem."

She calls her name once for a moment. Rem felt like her sister had looked deep into her heart, and after that she couldn't continue.

Emilia stared at the silent sisters in confusion, then slowly sat down.

Emilia: "I actually want to stay by his side until he wakes up…but apparently he won't wake up until morning."

Ram: "We were told that she used up most of his mana to heal, after all. I was surprised that Beatrice-sama helped heal someone she didn't even know."

Emilia: "Because of that, Puck will be Beatrice's for a day tomorrow. Also, Roswaal is…gone from the mansion for tonight, I think."

Rem: "He was called over suddenly, so he left the mansion before the afternoon. He plans on returning tomorrow night."

Emilia: "I see. Well, let's leave the room for now."

Emilia, who seemed to be satisfied with the sisters' replies as she had a quick stretch, prompted them to leave the room. Then, lastly Emilia ran her fingers through the bangs of the boy laying on the bed—through Subaru's bangs.

Emilia: "I have so many things I want to talk about with Subaru when he wakes up."

Rem felt like she was whispering, and it sounded like it had some sweet anticipation to it.

When they left the room, they separated in the corridor for each of their plans. Emilia's duty to report the trouble in the capital to Roswaal was one in particular.

Emilia: "Hmm, he's gonna get mad at me. How do I explain this…"

Emilia dropped her shoulder, and was trudging towards her private room in the mansion. Rem watched her go, said goodbye to Ram who had work left to do, and went to the kitchen to prepare dinner —

Rem: "…Before that"

Rem confirmed that they were gone and snuck into the room where the boy was sleeping in.

She silently closed the door with her back and walked up to the bed in the gloomy room that had the lights off.

Rem, who held breath, only heard the sleeping boy's soft breathing. The boy's innocent sleeping face reflected in Rem's light blue eyes.

…She didn't know who this suspicious boy was, or what he was after.

Emilia had explained that he was a lifesaver, but she just could not believe that he didn't have an ulterior motive. Emilia was beautiful, but she was so vulnerable that just watching her would make you uneasy, and there was no end to people with bad intentions going after her.

…Before problems arise—before peace is disturbed, maybe I should do something.

Dangerous thoughts rise up in Rem's head, and she silently reached for the boy's neck. Then…

Subaru: "Ehehe, you're cute even when you're mad…parallel worlds, fantasies…"

With a very sloven look on his face, the boy talked in his sleep like a slob while drooling.

Just as Rem heard that, she didn't know what to do with her hand, and

Subaru: "…Aagh"

Seeing the sleeping boy shriek after being flicked by her finger made her feel relieved.

Rem: "I don't think I'll ever get along well with this guest…Please leave as soon as possible."

Only Rem's superficially polite murmur was left in the guest room before she exited it.

Continued in Volume 2

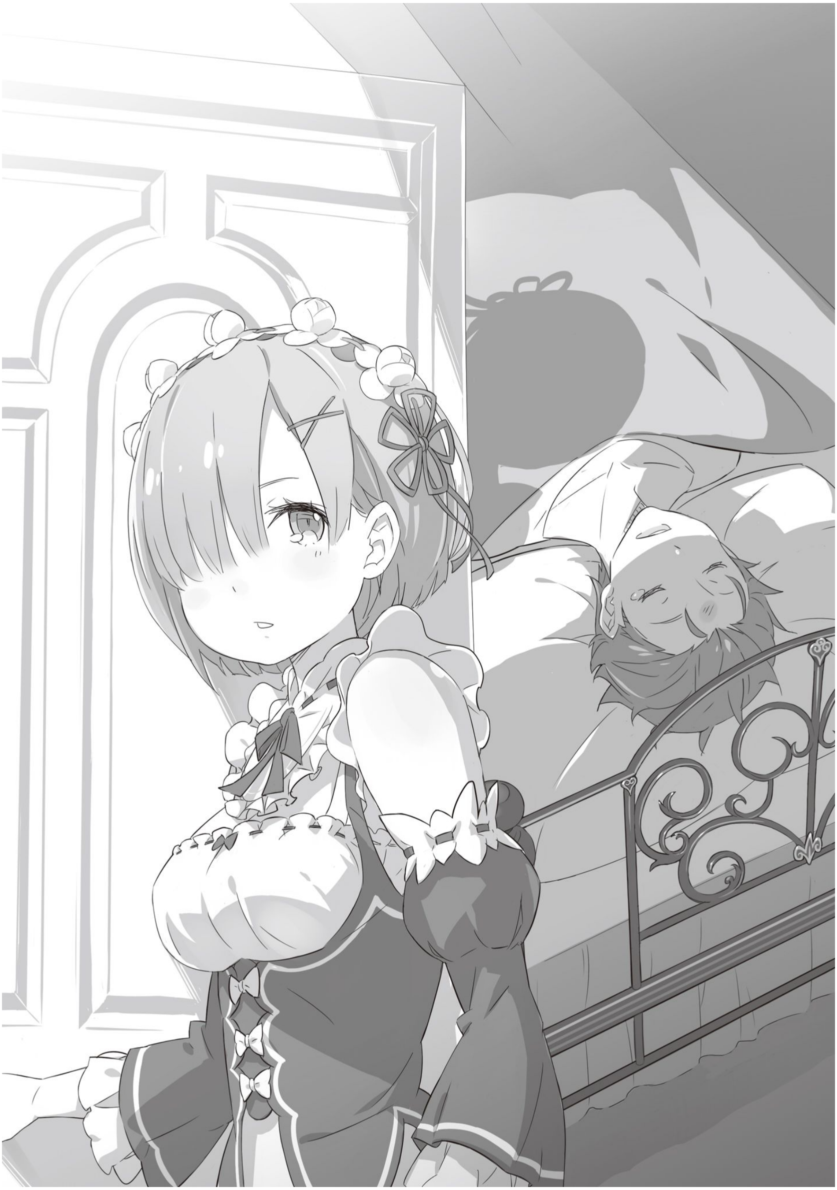

Rem’s Latte Art
(Volume 2; Toranoana)

1

It was three days after a new servant had entered the Roswaal manor.

“…What are you doing, Subaru-kun?”

Holding open the door leading back to the dining hall from the kitchen, Rem tilted her head and asked that.

The current time was after lunch. Preparation of food was Rem’s job, but cleaning up afterwards was included in that as well. Having finished that, she’d just now come to check on how the newly-hired servant was handling cleaning up the dining hall.

“Oh, hey Rem. Don’t worry about the cleaning, it’s done. It’s break time now.”

Greeting Rem as she returned to the dining hall was a black-haired boy who was smiling casually at her.

He had black hair, a color that was rarely seen in the kingdom, and his features had a peculiar way of making him feel younger than the age he’d given. The eye color and the color of his skin were rare as well, and his point of origin was still unclear.

Regardless, there was no mistaking the way that his over-snug butler’s uniform didn’t suit him at all; this was the new servant that the Roswaal manor had welcomed, Natsuki Subaru.

For a moment, Rem was silent as her gaze judged him—Subaru didn’t show the least sign of being aware of it, and stood looking pleased with himself, without a care showing on his face. It looked like nothing more than the innocent face of a mischievous boy, and this only strengthened Rem’s suspicion about his age.

Could a boy with this sort of childlike face truly be the same seventeen years of age as herself and her sister?

“Well, that’s fine. So why are you in such a good mood? Because you piled up the plates nicely, or spread the tablecloth nicely?”

“No way?! Do you think of me as the kind of guy who would make a ‘Yeah, I did it!’ face from a little job like that?!”

“When I think back to how you worked on your first day, I don’t think such an opinion is that far off the mark.”

“Gaah, I can’t really deny that… but, just you wait. I’m a man with incredible potential for growth…The rebellious skyrocket that could one day threaten even your position is climbing now…!”

“What’s this now? What will happen one day? Please speak clearly.”

Leaving behind Subaru as he ground his teeth in frustration, Rem turned her eyes towards the dining hall’s table where Subaru had been playing up until now. It was a fairly wide table, and could be used for dining and discussions for ten people or more. Naturally, the recent lunch was taken here, so cleaning it up had been Subaru’s responsibility, but…

“…This is a cup you forgot to put away, is it not?”

Looking at the cup placed on the table, Rem raised an eyebrow a little. If there was nothing unusual about it, she might have taken it as something that hadn’t been cleaned up, or Subaru’s cup for his break. However, it was clearly different.

As Rem pointed it out, Subaru’s face broke out in a wide ‘You noticed?’ grin.

“Yeah, actually I’ve wanted to try that out ever since I noticed there’s something like coffee around here as well. It was really rough trying to get the milk close to what I remember, but sometimes ya just gotta try it.”

Subaru extended both his hands towards Rem, while dancing festively. Held in one hand was a cup poured full of a drink made from beans, originating from the Vollachian Empire, called coff. And, in the other hand was a container of milk.

And, as for what Subaru was doing with those two things…

“You’ve used the milk to draw a picture in the coff, then?”

In the black fluid in the cup, a white pattern had been used to draw a little picture of a cat.

Rem couldn’t help but let out a sigh of exasperation mixed with wonder at his playfulness.

2

“So you keep the coffee…er, the coff hot, and then the trick is to make the design a little at a time while keeping the milk at the bottom. There’s different ways to do it, but first, the basics are…”

Seemingly to have mistaken Rem’s first sigh for admiration, Subaru cheerfully began to explain, and poured another cup of piping hot coff so she could see.

The aroma of the steaming coff spread through the room, and Rem sniffed quietly. Struggling not to let her interest show on her face, for the moment she simply kept her attention on Subaru’s hands.

When the cup had been poured about half-full of coff, Subaru next switched to the container of milk and began to fill the cup the rest of the way. The foamy milk was something new to Rem, and she couldn’t help but open her eyes wide.

“What have you done to this milk?”

“This? This here is the end product of a lot of difficult work. Honestly, steaming it would be ideal, but I just don’t have that kind of equipment, so I used the magic crystals in the bathing room instead. There was a lot of trial and error involved, I’ll tell ya. I couldn’t get it quite right.”

The foamed milk wouldn’t turn out like that simply by heating it.

She was terribly interested in what sort of struggle Subaru, who she didn't think could use magic, had gone through with the magic crystals. However, Rem quickly remembered her own duties, and that she was in charge, and put away her curiosity.

She should make him put away the cup and coff right away; even on break, one should be cautious of playing around. She should, and yet…

"To make sure the milk doesn't spread too far, you keep it on the inside like this. Then, a layer of milk builds up a little at a time, so when you keep the unruly bit of it under control and redo it…"

"ah…"

"There you go, the first step of the first step! The completion of a heart design!"

Lifting up the container of milk, Subaru spun about and unveiled the finished product.

Making way for him, Rem blinked at yet another surprise as she viewed the result.

The white design drawn in the cup was a fanciful thing built up from countless layers of milk. Without thinking, she let a sigh of admiration escape her lips.

"Amazing…"

"Oh, oh oh? What's that, what's that, please speak up. Feel free to shower me with praise! Isn't it amazing?!"

"It's a skill you could never gain without being an amazingly idle person."

"Don't you think you should apologize to all the latte artists throughout the world?!"

As Subaru started getting full of himself, she abruptly gave him a back-handed compliment.

While it was simply out of the question to openly recognize his accomplishment, there was no escaping the fact that it was not only a rare ability, but a craft that required exceptional skill. Even this pattern that he had called the first step made that clear. The picture of a kitten that Subaru had first drawn in that cup—the Great Spirit that accompanied Emilia, how incredibly difficult would that be?

"This is called 'latte art'?"

"Yep yep. Latte is sort of the name of this drink, and you make art with it. Back where I'm from, it's an essential skill for a first-class waiter."

"Latte art and sewing as well; you're quite good with your hands at little skills, Subaru-kun."

"When you call them little skills, it really makes them sound like something that isn't an essential part of life! Besides that, I can do magic tricks and play the guitar and cat's cradle and ball-and-cup toys and yo-yo and lots of things, you know!"

Presented with a list of skills she'd never heard of, Rem doubted their existence. However, there was the precedent of the latte art. Perhaps all of them were from a world of little skills that Rem knew nothing of.

"And thinking about it now that I've said all that, what am I trying to do with nothing but skills that have no practical use?"

"Boasting all that and then becoming depressed about it… You must have lived a life free of boredom, Subaru-kun."

"That's a surprising evaluation of me when my goal in life was to live in seclusion and play with cats on the porch."

Subaru shivered. Seeing him looking like that, Rem felt even more certain.

Subaru was most likely a person who grew up in a very fortunate environment.

It was true of his work as a servant as well, but she felt that he mostly had no experience engaging in hard work before now. That’s why his fingers were pretty, and in some areas he was lacking knowledge and common sense needed for life. In exchange for that, being able to enjoy something like latte art was a sign of the frivolity of the upper class born from a life of ease.

That fact itself was neither a good thing nor a bad thing. Being unable to choose one’s birth was the same for everyone, regardless of whether one was poor or rich. Subaru was making an effort to learn his job. Regardless of the results.

So, even if one were to overlook that he was playing like this during his break time…

“Well, there’s a few things I’d like to say about your merciless poison tongue, Rem, but… fine, here.”

“…huh?”

Taking the offered container of milk, Rem let out a surprised voice without meaning to. She looked back and forth from the milk in her hand and Subaru’s face. Subaru scratched his head as she looked at him.

“Whadaya mean, ‘huh?’. Looking all anxious to try it like that, don’t give me that.”

“Saying that she looks anxious to try; Rem wouldn’t…”

“When your face looked like you were dying to try it like that? You don’t need to be embarrassed about it. You’re a cute girl too, Rem, so what’s wrong with playing a little now and then?”

Turning his attention away from Rem as she backpedaled, Subaru poured another cup of coff. Then, placing the cup before her, he offered it with a look that said ‘Go ahead’.

“Um, for you to have implied that Rem really wanted to try that. Well, it would be a lie if I said that I didn’t want to even a little tiny bit, not in the least, just a little, perhaps slightly…”

“I get it, I get it. I’m forcing you to try it even though you don’t want to. So, just once, please do."

"…Well, when you put it like that, it can't be helped. Honestly, Subaru-kun, you're so troublesome."

Pestered until she was left with no choice, Rem hid the glee she couldn't help but feel and turned towards the cup.

Recalling Subaru's process from earlier, the order of things seemed to be that one first poured milk into the slightly tilted cup, building a layer on the interior and drawing a pattern. Envisioning Subaru's movements that she'd been watching wide-eyed, she overlayed her own movement and imitated them…using the white pattern on the black liquid, she drew from her heart.

Rem looked back towards Subaru. And, he looked to her and nodded forcefully.

"Well, that's how it turns out on a novice's first try. Don't worry about it!"

"Rather than playing endlessly, Subaru-kun, please get back to work right away."

While holding the messy art in front of her, Rem stated that in the coldest voice she had used yet.

3

"…Rem, what are you doing?"

Surprised while she was concentrating by a voice from behind her, Rem's little shoulders jumped.

Looking behind her to the dining hall's entrance, standing in the entrance was a girl with sharp, pale red eyes—her older sister Ram.

Rem's eyes briefly lit up at the sight of her beloved sister, but she quickly remembered what she was doing, and her expression stiffened. Suddenly, she tried to hide what was on the table, but…

"…Isn't this what Barusu was playing at?"

It was impossible for her to deceive the sister who had always been better than her at everything, and Ram immediately saw through Rem's clumsy attempt to cover it up. As Rem shrank, Ram looked over the countless cups Rem had been working on, and the failed latte art, and narrowed her eyes.

…It would soon be nearly an hour since Rem had chased Subaru out of the dining hall, saying that she would clean up.

The state Rem now found herself in was that, until Ram arrived (after becoming frustrated with the work when Rem did not return), she had forgotten the time and been trying her best at latte art.

Glancing quickly, she could see that the magic crystal that showed the time had changed color, and she finally realized that break time had long since passed. It was shameful. On top of that, her sister had found out.

"It's rare for you to lose track of time playing at this sort of thing, Rem."

"I…I'm sorry, nee-sama. I'll clean it up right away. I'll catch up right away on my work, too. Oh, I should never have been doing something like this…"

"Don't be silly, Rem. I'm not upset about it. I just thought it was unusual."

As Rem shrank back, Ram's expression softened in a way that only someone close to her would recognize.

Then she poured coff into an empty cup, took hold of the milk placed nearby, and began to gently pour it into the cup.

"Doing her work with all of her might is one of Rem's good points, but occasionally it's good to do something with all your might even if you can't expect any results from it. If there's no leeway in your heart, nothing will ever go right for you."

"…Are those Roswaal-sama's words?"

"Yes, as expected of Roswaal-sama. They're wonderful words. I feel the same way, too.”

Thinking of her master with an enchanted look on her face, Ram’s eyes were gentle as she stared into the cup. Having finished pouring milk into it, inside the cup in her hands was…

“This is… a pattern I’ve never seen before. A pattern… no, a letter…?”

“It seems that this is how you write ‘older sister’ in the letters of Barusu’s homeland. He insisted I look at it while he was studying in the evening, so I learned it no matter how little I wanted to.”

Although she’d never seen the letter before, there was no mistaking that it had been drawn by a combination of reliable skills. Rem marvelled at her sister’s talent, and gazed shyly at her.

“Were you practicing latte art as well, nee-sama?”

“Not really. It’s called latte art, is it? I simply imitated what Barusu was doing earlier.”

As Ram spoke about it as though it were nothing, Rem couldn’t help but catch her breath. Cutting off the momentary hesitation before her sister would think it strange, Rem smiled softly.

“Impressive as always, nee-sama. Subaru-kun will be jealous, too, no doubt.”

“It might be entertaining to crush Barusu’s areas of expertise one by one like that. Regardless, that’s enough of this for now. I’ll clean this up and catch up with you.”

Saying that, Ram took the containers of coff and milk and headed off to the kitchen to clean up. Watching her go, Rem compared her own botched creations lined up on the table with the ‘older sister’ that Ram completed on her first try, without any practice, and sighed softly.

“…You truly are impressive, nee-sama.”

Herself, unable to create a single thing she was satisfied with, and her sister, who was able to complete it so easily and skillfully.

It was something she should have already understood, but when she had a chance to compare them like this, she was once again made painfully aware of how far she had to go. To Rem, it was a harsh prompting towards self-reflection and self-discipline.

“Well, all of this needs to be cleaned up, then.”

Speaking to no one in particular, Rem collected all of the used cups onto the tray.

And, at the end, she gathered up Ram’s ‘older sister’ artwork,

“Mm…bitter.”

avoiding damaging the pattern in the milk, and moistening her tongue with the slightly cooled coff,

“First, I’ll have to teach Subaru-kun how to grind the beans.”

Deciding to teach him about her own area of expertise, she followed Ram’s path towards the kitchen.

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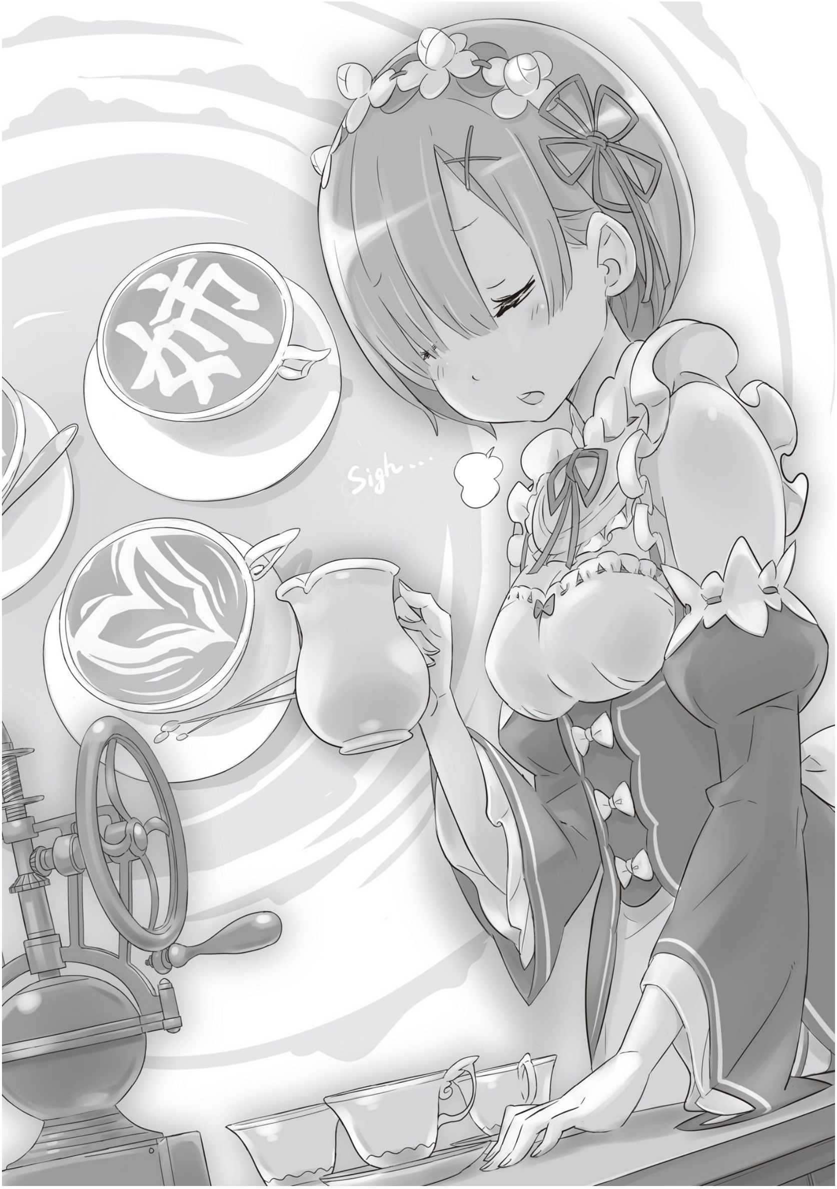
Sigh...

The Best Day of Rem's Life (Volume 3; Toranoana)

1

Her body was hot, her face was red, her chest swelled with her excited breaths that wouldn't calm down.

Cooking, cleaning, laundering. Even though she found herself busy with all kinds of daily chores, she was long distracted from work. Her thoughts were already occupied by other things.

Hurrying through the corridor, half of her was wondering how to quickly finish the rest of her work, while the other half did nothing but think about the source of why her heart was pounding.

"…Ah."

Suddenly, because she saw something, the girl voiced a shy word.

Even she could hear how full of joy her inadvertent voice held. She felt her cheeks burning. Then the girl—Rem, increased her pace.

"Oh! You're almost done with your chores, Rem?"

Noticing Rem's presence as she neared him, the boy ahead turned around with a grin.

Short and black hair, sharp sanpaku eyes, a mischievous child's smile. Rather than being very manly, he's more on the cute side. No matter which trait, they all caused "The Horn" inside her to tremble excitedly. Bowing her head in front of the boy, Rem unconsciously smiled as she stopped.

"Yes… Would you like to have some tea together, Subaru-kun?"

She had the look of a girl in love that called out her beloved's name.

2

Rem, at this point, was aware of the incurable sickness that caused her flustered state.

She could not get the boy out of her mind. Rather, it would be easier to calculate how much time she spent a day without thinking about him. This was to be taken literally. Whether she was asleep or awake, she would be thinking about him.

“Rem, I didn’t know you were such a carefree person…”

Isn’t that far too much? Even she questioned how abnormal her love was.

The only other person Rem knows that is afflicted with this sickness is Ram nee-sama. Rem understood that, Ram’s admiration towards Roswaal was the same as Rem’s own feelings towards Subaru. But Rem can’t imagine being like nee-sama, where she won’t reveal those expressions uncontrollably.

…Nee-sama sure is amazing.

This was Rem’s unwavering love towards her sister. After losing her horn, many aspects of her abilities had become worse than Rem’s, but none of it has harmed Rem’s respect towards nee-sama.

Because of this, Rem wondered if her sickness was more severe than her sister’s.

“—Rem?”

A male’s voice entered her ears. It could be said to be a little childish, but it was also one that had gradually left boyhood. That was the impression the voice gave.

Her blue hair swayed as Rem tilted her head and looked at the person whose voice it came from.

“Yes, is something wrong, Subaru-kun?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong, but… aren’t you a little too close? Wouldn’t it be inconvenient when drinking tea?”

"Really? Rem doesn't find it at all inconvenient."

Close enough that they could feel each other's breath, Rem replied to Subaru's troubled smile with an endearing voice.

The two were in the living room of Roswaal's mansion, where they enjoyed their afternoon tea on the same couch.

Subaru's left arm was tightly stuck next to Rem's right arm.

Though the two had maintained some distance in the beginning, without him noticing, Rem had nestled closer bit by bit.

"Subaru-kun, would you like some more snacks?"

"Eh? There's more? This is really good, these things that Rem made are delicious!"

"Yes. That's because I was praised like this before by Subaru-kun… There's around a hundred of them, is this enough?"

"Are you planning on feeding me until I'm a pig?! Two or three is enough!"

After she received Subaru's praise on the baked cream pastry a few days ago, it was served countless times during their tea time.

Rem excitedly stood up.

"Then, I shall go prepare. If Subaru-kun disappears while I am preparing, then I'll be sad."

"I wouldn't do something that mean. How about we promise on it, a promise."

"…Okay."

Long-awaited by her, Rem stretched her pinky out, while Subaru extended his own with an "it can't be helped" smile. Their pinkies entwined each other, and shook up and down to seal the promise.

"—Hair… cut"

…Was it because of Rem's sickness that Rem was not thinking clearly? She felt as if they had made such an agreement before as she thought about what she blurted.

It was around a week ago, after the Witchbeast turmoil subsided. The morning the wounded Subaru opened his eyes, Rem apologized and requested to atone for the trouble. Instead, she received a gentle "punishment [curse]." That morning, Rem's heart was captured. Rem was captivated by the future he described in their promise.

But recently, she had become less satisfied. She wanted more precious promises about the future. Even though Subaru would give a wry smile while he agreed to the promises Rem made, he never refused her selfish desires. So, her love could only grow bigger and bigger.

"That's right, we did promise something like this."

With his warmth still left on her pinky, Rem was about to step out the room when she stopped. Subaru pointed at his hair when she turned around, and revealed his usual, mischievous smile.

"We made a promise about trimming my hair before. I think it's about time I need your help, right?"

The boy must not have known how much those words made Rem's heart beat like crazy.

3

…With Rem's skill, taking care of Subaru's hair would be straightforward.

Although it was a fairly simple promise, for Rem, it was more important than anything else. The reason why would be…

"Because this was the first promise with Subaru-kun."

"Just like you have questions about me, I have a lot to ask about you. That's why, let's take care of everything and then talk. We can talk until our throats are sore. Let's make a promise."

He firmly tugged Rem's hand, and hooked their pinkies together.

While Rem was confused by their intertwined pinkies, Subaru already shook on it.

"We made a pinky promise."

"Th-That was…?"

"It's the ceremony my hometown does when making a promise. If you break it, you're forced to swallow a thousand needles. It's a punishment of hell."

Subaru's monologue had already surpassed Rem's understanding.

Rem was confused and utterly speechless. To which Subaru snapped his finger, flashed a toothy grin, and said, "I trust Rem, so I want to do something to earn Rem's trust. That's why I made that kind of promise."

"…"

"I said it before, didn't I? I'm the kind of person that would keep his promise after making one. Plus, I have Emilia's blessing, so I'm not concerned at all when I say 'dun worry 'bout it.' "

"Hehe…"

Dumbfounded, Rem was unable to hold it in as she laughed. Seeing Rem smile, Subaru followed suit with a chuckle of his own.

"Then it's a promise. Rem really will ask a lot of things."

"Yeah. I also have things I must ask of you, like my hair."

"Hair…?"

"That's the reason why you keep staring at me all the time."

Hearing Subaru's words, Rem was speechless as her eyes widened.

With her blue eyes filled with guilt, she let slip, “Subaru-kun, Rem was–”

“It’s fine. You were concerned about the clumsy me, who had a pitiful haircut, so you kept looking at me… am I right?”

In his first loop, Subaru had made a promise with Rem. It was Ram’s words that started it, to help Subaru fix his shabby haircut.

Subaru finally understood Ram’s words at the time. The real meaning behind it.

It was evident in Rem’s stares that, at the time, she held a sense of distrust towards Subaru, so Ram immediately said his hair was messy to fool him.

Now he knew, the opportunity of that promise was borne from a lie.

That’s why… smiling inside, Subaru wanted to make the promise of a lie into something truthful.

“Once we safely return, I’ll leave it up to you for the style. Make it so that Emilia can’t help but snuggle up to me.”

“…But Rem can’t help when it comes to the character.”

“Please be more gentle about saying those things!”

It was a conversation of which the two did not know where it was going.

Noticing Subaru’s intentions, Rem followed with a joke, which made Subaru extremely happy.

“Once I leave the children to the villagers, I’ll regroup with you immediately. Don’t force yourself too hard.”

During the witchbeast turmoil, in order to save the children outside of the village, Subaru and Rem set foot into the forest and made this promise. And at the time, Rem’s love for Subaru had not yet blossomed.

Therefore, fulfilling this kind of promise to Rem had an extreme significance.

“It’s not that I forgot. It’s because I’ve been running around lately that I haven’t had the chance. Even if I mentioned it, once I remember there’s a guy who can’t read the mood, I could only postpone it.”

“It’s not like Subaru-kun to have worries at all. It would be better if you were more like your usual self, where you don’t think before you speak, cause a mess, then run around trying to fix it.”

“Eh?! Why do I feel nostalgic about this feeling of pain in my heart from Rem’s harsh words?!”

Pushing her chest on the back of the chair, Rem leaned forward slightly to look at Subaru, and laughed harder.

Although this kind of Rem is unbelievably cute, I definitely cannot say that out loud, Subaru secretly decided.

In order to fulfill the haircut promise, the two arrived at the mansion’s atrium. A chair was placed in the middle of the groomed lawn, and with a towel tied around Subaru’s neck, everything was ready.

“After changing hair styles, it’ll give the impression of a different person. It’s quite common in anime and manga, huh.”

“If it’s done indoors, it’ll be difficult to clean up. Whether it be preparations beforehand, or cleaning up afterwards. If it’s outside, then we just need to sweep the ground and wash your head. About how short should I cut it to?”

In Rem’s point of view, Subaru’s hair was still fairly short. There’s only a small portion that was messy, and gave a bad impression. Once that bit is trimmed, it’ll be perfect.

“Yeah… I’m not that good at specifying my hair length. Rem can just cut it to the length where it looks the coolest!”

"Subaru-kun is always at his coolest"

"The purpose of my haircut was denied?! It was over before it began?!"

The chair swayed as Subaru shook. Holding Subaru's shoulder with her hands to prevent him from struggling, Rem stared at Subaru's head carefully.

Though her answer was not a lie, she thought his hair certainly didn't look the best.

"This responsibility is quite heavy."

"Um… Rem-san? It's fine even if you don't think about it too much? Don't worry too much, just do as you said before and fix the hair ends, slightly groom it…"

While Subaru gingerly proposed a solution, that voice didn't reach Rem.

Moisturizing Subaru's hair slightly, Rem brought out a pair of silver-shining scissors and put on a determined pose.

"…"

Facing her immediate challenge, her hand stopped. Rather, it couldn't stop. Her right hand was trembling violently.

Clickity, Clackity. Rem was stunned by her own hand's trembling. Though she had kept calm, all her nervousness was redirected to her right hand.

"Subaru-kun, this is bad. My hand won't stop trembling."

"Hm? A little bit of trembling is fine… Oi, isn't this trembling too excessive?! Is this even ok?! This level of shaking would crack a skull! Don't tell me you're actually not accustomed to giving other people haircuts?!"

"Rem is responsible for nee-sama and Roswaal-sama's haircuts… but Subaru's is the first time…"

"There's no way a barber would be able to make a living if he said such a thing!"

A barber that refused to serve first-time customers would no doubt go bankrupt. But that matter wasn't important right now. Rem's hand was still trembling fiercely because she had to give Subaru a haircut.

"Well… even though I told you 'it's fine if you mess up, don't worry about it!' I guess it's hard to change your feelings so quickly. But to be this nervous… Even if the cut is slightly bad, after a week it'll recover."

"But, because of Rem, Subaru might have a endure a week of a bald state…"

"If I'm going to become hairless, then it's probably better to stop, right?!"

She extended her hand again to stop the chair that Subaru sat on from shaking. Rem proceeded to rack her brain to stop her trembling hands. All of a sudden, she inadvertently blurted out what she was thinking. It was…

"Does Subaru-kun have any uneasiness by entrusting Rem, this kind of person, with this?"

Those were the words she had unintentionally said. But after they were spoken, they left behind a depressing and heavy pressure on Rem's shoulders.

Yes, that must be it.

No matter how you look at it, the fact that Rem had tried to kill Subaru-kun does not change.

Rem almost executed Subaru twice at the witchbeast forest. And if one were to count Subaru's final act of becoming bait to die, then it was thrice.

“Twice inside the forest, Subaru-kun saw Rem’s nature. Rem’s Oni personality… even before that, Rem also…”

Subaru-kun’s presence at the mansion was an unsettling factor, and Rem had questioned whether to eliminate him.

That suspicion will surely wrap itself around the fragile heart that upholds Rem, and will someday explode.

If Rem doesn’t resolve this here and now, then Rem will surely cause Subaru-kun to die.

Up to this point, this sense of guilt has plagued Rem, the perpetrator. Then, as the victim, Subaru-kun must naturally be in even more pain. Then why? Why can he show Rem this kind of smile?

Why is he able to sit in front of Rem so carelessly?

“Rem.”

A calm voice. Subaru was calling out her name. She was suddenly at a loss, and could not form a response.

Towards that self-deprecating confession, what would he say?

Scared.

Don’t want to hear it.

Don’t want to destroy this illusion of intimacy. Her heart beat furiously from fear.

“In my hometown, there’s a fairy tale called ‘The King with Donkey Ears.’”

“Yes… Eh…?”

"Once upon a time, there was a king with very long donkey ears. When the king needed a haircut, he would call a barber into the palace. But, no matter who, they would laugh out loud when they saw the king's donkey ears. And as a result, would be beheaded by the king. Among them, there was a barber that finally managed to hold back and not laugh. But to withhold the king's secret, the barber eventually could not take it. He ran up a mountain, dug a hole, and shouted in it."

Subaru cupped his hands and shouted, "the king has donkey ears for ears!!! He shouted again and again. At last, even the trees around him recorded it. He then made a flute out of those trees, and blowing into it would make the sound 'the king has donkey ears for ears.' In the end, because all the citizens of that country used the flute, the secret now had become known to everyone."

"Eh…?"

Although it was an interesting story, Rem was unable to understand the underlying lesson and looked at Subaru, puzzled.

At Rem's expression, Subaru smiled.

"Rem's forehead has an Oni's horn!!!"

"!!!"

Subaru shouted once again, causing Rem to jump. Towards her reaction, Subaru patted his knees.

"The king was ashamed of his donkey ears, so he beheaded everyone who spilled his secret. Rem, are you ashamed of being an Oni?"

"N-No such thing. Rem being ashamed of her birth… something like that isn't too big of a concern."

"Would you find me telling your secret unforgivable?"

"No. Rem believes that Rem coming from the Oni tribe is something that doesn't need to be kept hidden."

Returning Subaru's gaze, she gave him a firm answer. Subaru sat back down.

"Then there's no problem! Since there's no possibility that Rem would harm me because of her origins, then I have no reason to be worried. Ahh… I'm relieved."

"B-But, the things Rem did to Subaru-kun—"

"If you anger a girl, you'll get an extremely scary stare. It's something that boys learn about from their fathers early on. Since it's my fault for forgetting such a thing, let's just call it even, ok?"

Such an outrageous sophistry left Rem speechless.

Subaru looked back to see Rem keeping silence, and continued, "Well… how's your trembling hand doing?"

"Ah…"

Her gaze fell on her hands after hearing those words. It was then Rem noticed her trembling had stopped. Even with the scissor's tip pointing at Subaru's head, her fingers did not have a trace of hesitation.

The kind of changes Subaru's words brought to Rem's heart were unknowable. After all, everything he'd said has had a major impact to Rem's feelings. Those unstoppable ripples stirred her heart.

But Rem knew without a doubt that her own timidness had been swallowed whole by the sickness of her heart and disappearing without a trace.

Knowing that Rem's trembling had stopped, Subaru relaxed and leaned his back on the chair, entrusting himself to Rem. He pointed at his head.

"Well, please give me a cool hairstyle. One that'll be handsome enough that Emilia-tan can't help but fawn over me."

The naive boy did not notice his words deeply stabbed into the girl's heart behind him. But even his innocence was something that she loved. Rem smiled.

“…Subaru-kun, no matter when, is always fascinating.”

END

Rem's Maiden Heart is Super Complex
(Volume 5, Manga Arc 1, Volume 1; Gamers)

—Sometimes, Rem seriously doubted that his mind was trying.

For example, when Rem saw him sleeping on the floor during a break.

Rem: "Subaru-kun, if you sleep in such a place, you'll catch a cold."

In the terrace dyed in warm sunlight, so as to not wake up the dozing Subaru, Rem whispered to him in a Really thin voice.

That she didn't wake him up, though it appeared as if she were about to, was because Rem possessed a great sense of morality.

Rem: "Geez, Subaru-kun really is no good."

Saying so in a happy tone, Rem decided to stay right beside Subaru as he basked in the sun. When it came down to it, preparation was key. From there, Rem's bustling was barely perceptible to the eye, so fast and diligent was her work.

She set the nearby chair right next to Subaru, and placed a lap blanket on the napping Subaru so he wouldn't catch a cold. Then, she layed out snacks and tea on the table in case he would crave some upon waking up. To make sure that her older sister Ram wouldn't encroach, she appointed her to a job in the basement.

To Emilia, she made sure to instruct her to take a break in her own room, by offering snacks and tea. She then collected and submitted all the documents to Roswaal in order to make sure that he would be shutting himself in his office. As a precaution for Beatrice making an appearance, she closed every door around. And, last but not least, Rem seated herself next to Natsuki Subaru.

Even at that time, Rem hadn't let her self-restricting rule of "To Never Leave Subaru-Kun's Shadow" slip from her mind. Even if it were the scent of Subaru's vomit, she would stand in it as much as she could.

But still, Rem, without holding back any of her passion, had requested to stay by Subaru's side until he had reached his limit. More specifically, Rem has been continually looking at Subaru, so much so that she could pierce a hole through him with her mere gaze.

Rem: "Ha~ah…Subaru-kun is cute…"

Rem who, in public, never showed a mushy expression, enjoyed Subaru's sleeping face.

Usually, his sharp eyes were unnecessarily intimidating, his mouth moved to the point of giving the impression that he may die if he didn't stop yapping, and his shoulders were bent unless he was conscious of putting up the correct posture for his spine—but as soon as he displayed his fragile sleeping form, those worries disappear from Rem's mind.

Subaru: "…R…em?"

When she took notice, Rem's face was extremely close to Subaru's face, to the point that her breaths could be felt on Subaru's eyes. Her heart about to explode, Rem masked those feelings behind a smile.

Rem: "Subaru-kun, if you sleep in such a place, you'll catch a cold."

Subaru: "Hm, Ah…ah, did I fall asleep? My bad my bad, I'll be careful…Yaaawn"

Watching Subaru's yawn, so large that he couldn't hide it with his hand, Rem reaffirmed the warm feeling on her chest,

Rem: "Geez, Subaru-kun truly is a helpless person."

END

Ram’s Flirting Refusal
(Volume 1; Melon Books)

“Really, Emilia-sama is such a pain.”

Looking at the crowd of people walking passed her, the young girl places her hand to her forehead. Despite showing such a tired expression and grumbling, the girl normally had an adorable face. With her sharp facial features and her left eye concealed by short peach pink colored hair. The typical impression would be that of a beautiful girl, but it might be better to say she gave an impression of strength in spite of her cuteness.

Her expression remains relaxed and cool, her lone visible eye not betraying the slightest hint of emotion.

Amidst the noisy crowd, the young girl looked around and sighed seeing no signs of her target. However, her gaze remained determined. her pale skin and petite frame like that of a dancer. An Oni, looking like a cute little animal but so much more. She walked the streets of the Capital City Lugnica, wearing a maid’s uniform, which on its own was eye catching.

Although the uniform was decided upon to suit the interests of her master, the girl had no objection to such an outfit. The design attracted many curious stares from people on the street, but the young girl had grown accustomed to them.

“—She said to just wait a while here, how annoying.”

She was unable to find the “master” of her own master, and gave a dissatisfied shrug.

The pink haired girl’s name was Ram. No family name, it’s just Ram.

She works as the maid of a nobleman of the Dragon Kingdom, Roswaal L. Mathers, an on this day she’s come to the Capital.

As capital of the Kingdom of Lugnica, The city is more lively than others in the country. For Ram, who has had numerous visits to the Capital, and become familiar with the city as a result of following her master's orders. Ram wasn't particularly interested in the city, but—

"It's always Emilia. He already said from the beginning Ram would lose such a target."

After making a slight judgment on the character of the target, Ram, who is still pacing back and forth, continues to search.

If you haven't

If you haven't looked for someone like a stupid person in such a wide place since you have separated with the person for less than 15 minutes, it is more appropriate to judge whether the other person has searched far enough away from the initial position. However, if the she is going to the left at the very beginning, it will be totally luck. If you choose the wrong one, it will be very difficult to find her. If she doesn't, then there is no way of returning.

"Even something as simple as sending a letter, she gets lost. Ram must blame Emilia-sama's curiosity. This was underestimated, Ram isn't in the wrong."

Ram evaluates her current master, who was nowhere to be seen, and the result is the current situation.

In spite of this, no matter how absurd it was, Ram is certainly displeased with the current events.

"If only she had chosen a place to meet, it's no good. Even with my Clairvoyance, Ram cannot handle so many people…"

"Hey Hey! You there in the maid uniform!."

"…As a result, you can only personally inquire about it. It's really troublesome."

"Hey Hey Hey!Don't ignore me so casually ! Here ! Look at me !"

Hearing an annoying voice that had been calling out from the beginning, the person began scolding the ignorance of Ram as she walked away. When she turned to face the person speaking, Her facial expression dramatically changed.

“Hey, that look disgusts me from the bottom my heart. Missy, are you sad?”

“Anybody who is not only dressed in suspicious clothing, but even talks in a manner that makes people feel that they have no way to come to know it, will always receive this expression.”

Although Ram was harsh in her first meeting with the person, this time no one would criticize her attitude.

This is because the man who is standing in front of Ram is really beyond common sense.

With a dark, angular helmet, his head is completely covered. If this is the case, he can be recognized as an suspicious man.While his head is concealed in armor, from the neck down instead, he is dressed like a villager with cheap and simple materials. He wears shoes consisting of straw ropes on his feet. Can he even become more suspicious?

“The law and order of the Royal Capital has also begun to be corrupted. Now it’s time to call the guards over. Please wait a moment.”

“If you think of me as a perverted old man, you should be more conscious of your own safety, right?! What’s the point of waiting in the same place?!”

The tough-looking man, responding to Ram’s harsh approach, stopped in desperation. He stopped and loudly called out after Ram, who was staring straight at him with a pointed gaze.

“That’s not really a friendly look. Wait a minute please, I’m just looking for someone, so I’d like to find out where that someone may be.”

“What a coincidence, I’m also very busy trying to find someone here. Well, you're free to keep searching."

"That's too cold for someone wearing a maid outfit which symbolises service, isn't it?!"

Extending his hand to try to stop Ram from leaving, Ram who sidesteps to avoid the other person suddenly notices—the man had no left arm.

"Oh, did you stop out of sympathy? Anyways, that's right, since I lost my arm, my life has seen and suffered all sorts of awesome fates ! I'm relying on the warmth and sympathy of others to live and survive. Quite unfortunate, aren't I? "

"If you don't have enough hands, just ask a cat. If you've enough feet, please find it on your own. That's all ."

"Isn't that too harsh?!"

Toward the helmeted man before her, Ram's face began to lose it's angry glare. The man waved his right hand in panic.

"Wait Wait!I just want to find her!May I ask, have you seen a young lady with orange hair who looked almost the same age as you but had very large boobs?"

"I have never seen her. apart from what I have done so far in order to send you away, this time it's a message from my heart."

"This confession is persuasive!! No way…Well, could you tell me please who you're looking for?"

"I haven't answered, because I don't intend to answer."

"This is nothing but coldness. We're both simply searching for our people!"

"There is no "we". This is pointless."

Ram isn't entirely sure, but out of dissatisfaction with the man's heart, she refuses his assistance. She does not doubt there is dissatisfaction, but the reason for rejection is another problem altogether.

Seeing the silent Ram. the man gave a sad and dejected look as a result.

“Ah…yeah I understand, I’ll stop here. It’s not getting either of us anywhere.”

“I already knew that this was meaningless from the very beginning, but you still wasted the time of mine. What do you really intend to do about myself leaving… Oh yeah, nothing. I didn’t expect anything out this conversation anyway.”

“I’m sorry to hear I’ve troubled you!”

Giving a glance to the man yelling after her, Ram lets out a”sigh…” toward him and then leaves. She doesn’t remark further or offer a goodbye. It’s completely disgusting. Then she hears behind her—

“Well then, Bye, Ram”

Said innocently as she was leaving, and Ram stopped after hearing it. However, the shadow of the man with a helmet has already disappeared.

“—Did Ram ever mention her name?”

Ram mutters this to herself brushing her hand against her pink hair.

Ram’s search still hasn’t progressed well thanks to the helmed man wasting too much of her time.

“Hey! It’ll be best if you keep quiet! Cause us any trouble and this won’t end happily.”

“Isn’t it too inconspicuous? walking down busy streets in that eye catching outfit?”

“We’re not in a patient mood, wouldn’t you say? Maybe we should get a little rough?”

Ram stares at the three sh*t faces with disappointment.

The three thugs, one tall , one brawny, and one short came out of nowhere to begin threatening Ram.

“It would seem the security of the Capital truly is no better than the wilderness.”

“huh? Wilderness? Where are you from? Doesn’t seem like you’re from The Capital.”

“I mean you’re no different from wild animals spending your day scrounging for food and behaving in this barbaric way.”

Listening to their idiotic chatter Ram gave a look of disgust, in that moment the men looked to each other blankly, then laughed.

“Hey wait! Don’t mess with us !”

Unable to read the girl’s attitude, the tall thug pulls two knives and points them toward Ram.

“Don’t make me laugh ! You can’t possibly escape, unless you brought the Sword Saint, you’re in trouble!”

“Aah, I guess her lucks run out.”

“Haha, even if we actually have to fight, victory is ours.”

Intimidating, berating, the hateful words continue. Ram frowns hearing this, and then for the first time it seemed like she let out a helpless sigh.

“Hey, Just don’t move lady—”

“Ram is still trying to show patience, because this is an important task ordered by Lord Roswaal. …But now, I am at my limit with this.”

Ram whispers these words annoyed and reaches for a small wand within her dress. She points it to the sky and light starts to shine, magic power bursts in the atmosphere to create a strong wind surrounding her.

“Hey! Don’t go trying any funny business—Wuah!”

The man with the knives was blown away against a wall and buried in debris from the impact. Seeing the brawny man try to make a run for it while his remaining companion froze in place, Ram had already reacted before the fleeing man could even notice.

“Ah, Aayy?!”

the large man waved his arms trying to cast aside her wand, but immediately he was thrown into the sky. Slamming into the ground on his back accompanied by a scream before finally the man fainted on the ground.

And then—

“Is there something else you want to say to Ram?”

“Wait…Wait ….Sorry?”

“It’s right of you to apologize. —But Ram won’t forgive you.”

The short man gave a nervous smile before being launched into the sky by the merciless Ram.

The three thugs were dumped into the alley like trash, and Ram patted her skirt looking up at the dimming sky.

“The sun has completely set… The target should have already gone back to the mansion.”

Ram’s conditions for finding her target have become more unfavorable. If she is not found quickly, the situation will become very bad. Looking up at the moonlight, Ram suddenly noticed.

“The light is—”

Ram looked up at the starry night sky of the Capital and notices Aurora Light waves in the sky.

The waves sweep around, and Ram emerges with a strong sense of intuition and rushes off toward the source of the Aurora Light without hesitation. The person she is searching for is this way, she doesn’t know why, but Ram is sure of it.

“Ram was just about to start thinking that Ram was finally done with being involved with trouble—Ram really is a troublesome person .”

Ram runs towards the lowest district of the capital—The Slums, and toward the deepest point of the slums.

She arrived, and in front of her, Ram finds her target holding a teenage boy’s hand. She realizes that the boy will come to the master’s mansion along with her target.

But that’s for another story…

Continued in Volume 1

Ram and the Night Study Group (Volume 2; Melon Books)

"…Barusu, you have good handwriting."

At Ram's commentary, the sounds of pen on paper that had continued up till that point suddenly stopped.

The boy right next to her sitting facing his desk, Subaru, looked up at her with surprise on his face.

"What?"

"Well, I mean, what's up with that all of a sudden? I mean, it's not like I want you to get upset with me, but having you praise me out of the blue is more unsettling than you might think."

"It's nothing. I was merely stating what I thought. As you're still in the middle of learning, now and then it's good to look away from everything you have left to do, and note that the way you write the letters is adequate. I'm only saying that you have good handwriting."

"The moment you add in an 'only' there, it kinda kills my gratitude for what you're saying!"

As Ram praised him in her own way, Subaru ended up looking up at the ceiling, dissatisfied. But, he quickly chuckled and smiled as though he'd regained his humor.

"Well, setting aside that you said 'only', heh, is that so. I'm honestly happy to hear that you think I have good handwriting. It means it was worth all the frustration when I was going to calligraphy class back when I was little."

"Also… no, it's nothing."

"What was that?! When you almost say something and then stop, it usually turns out to have been important, so don't swallow your words, spit ‘em out! If it’s words of praise, I’ll happily take all you’ve got!”

After giving a thumbs-up, Subaru indicated himself with the thumb while looking full of himself. Ram nodded deeply at him.

“Indeed, I’ll go ahead and say it, then. Good results must be properly praised. Poor behavior must be scolded, and one must take care with giving food as well. …I read that long ago in a book, and I’m putting it into practice.”

“That sounds a lot like how I’d raise a dog, y’know?!”

“It’s similar, in the sense that you still need to learn how to behave, isn’t it?”

“Ah, I walked right into that!”

As Subaru arched his spine backwards, the chair’s backrest let out a loud creak.

With a simple bed and an unpretentious desk, this was the private room of a servant, allocated to Natsuki Subaru for his own use. The extreme scarcity of personal possessions was due to it being only a few days since he had begun his employment.

In this room with nothing in it, evening after evening was filled, not with amorous moments, but the “Acquisition of Letters”.

“Barusu, you’ve gotten it wrong again. That should be more than enough of repeating the same mistakes.”

“Ow.”

With the tip of a wand held in her hand, she lightly smacked the hand that Subaru was holding his feather pen in. Losing his grip on the pen, he rubbed the reddening back of his hand while glaring accusingly at Ram.

“Hey, isn’t that a little too Spartan?! I’m the type that grows more from being praised than scolded!”

"If you want to be praised, then you must produce results. If you do, Ram will praise you in spite of herself."

"Don't praise me like you hate doing it! Actually, never mind that… can't you go a little easier on me with the studying? I still can't really tell the letters apart and all."

"A lack of effort."

Ram cut off Subaru's self-excusing words without mercy.

Subaru simply sighed and shrugged as though he'd been expecting a response like that.

"Well, you can say that, nee-sama. It's true that until you actually experience it, you can't understand how rough it is to encounter a foreign culture. I'm not just studying writing, I'm trying to learn my job too, after all."

"…Very well, go on."

"In other words! If you're going to say that I haven't studied hard enough, then I'm certain you must be more than familiar with, and exceptionally skilled at, this sort of thing, is what I'm saying."

While Subaru rushed his words out at high speed, Ram drew her eyebrows together, as if to ask what he was trying to say. Seeing that, Subaru smiled to himself as though he had achieved his aim, and retrieved something from one of the desk drawers. It was…

"Tada! Behold the hiragana alphabet!"

"…and this is?"

What Subaru had retrieved was a large paper that entirely covered the desk. From one side of it to the other, the paper was entirely filled with densely-packed symbols she had never seen before.

"These are letters we use back where I'm from, called 'hiragana'. Here you'd call them 'I-glyphs'."

"You mean this is the official language of the Kingdom of Barusu?"

“Will you please cut it out with things like country names that should only exist in my head?! Elaborating too much on the details and going so far as to produce a written language would be a pathetic black mark on my record!”

“Among the children’s tales we’re using for your instruction book, there’s a story called ‘The Lonely King’. It really is an exact match for your current state, Barusu. You’ll get a laugh out of it, so look forward to it.”

“And now you’ve needlessly spoiled it for me!”

Perhaps because he could imagine the grimness of the contents from the title alone, Subaru began making a pained face. Paying no mind to him as he did, Ram looked over the letters that Subaru had called hiragana.

There didn’t seem to be any pattern to them. Each one had its own particular shape, and to Ram’s eyes, it looked like nothing more than pictures of a snake or the like that a child had drawn as a prank.

“What of it? After showing Ram the alphabet of the Kingdom of Barusu, what did you want her to do?”

“Well, I mean, I was thinking that while I’m practicing writing like this, you’ve got a lot of spare time, too, right? So I thought you might like to try meeting a foreign culture, too, just to kill time. Along with that, you can learn how rough it is to learn letters, and maybe you’ll learn to be a bit more understanding towards me.”

As Subaru placed quite a bit of emphasis on his true intentions in the later half of that, Ram’s shoulders drooped in exasperation.

He could come up with such, hmm, elaborate vexations.

“For her own part, Ram can’t think of a reason that she should accept your proposal.”

“Well, how does proving the legitimacy of your assertions sound, then? If you can master that right away, then I’ll admit you were right when you said ‘a lack of effort’ earlier. From now on, I won’t contest your education policies, and I'll work like a horse at learning just the way you want. It's just, if it doesn't go like that, then…"

"If it doesn't go like that, then what?"

"Then try to be a little kinder to me! Along with Rem! It's a promise! This matters!"

As Subaru stated his claims while making the chair creak, Ram's expression was that of someone looking at a troublesome farm animal. Subaru faltered a bit under the glint in her eyes, but although he withdrew some of his attitude, he didn't withdraw his claims.

Growing tired of glaring, well, not really, but giving up on it for now, Ram sighed.

"Spending time with Barusu drives up the count of sighs day by day."

"I hear that a lot."

"Yes, it's the correct assessment. …Let me see that."

As Subaru regained his attitude and stuck out his chest, Ram took the paper with the 'hiragana' written on it. Looking it over briefly, it seemed to correspond somewhat to the 'i-glyphs' of the common tongue.

"The order of the letters is similar to the 'i-glyphs'?"

"More or less, yeah. But I'll give you a once-over explanation. I want to fight as fairly as I can."

It seemed that before she knew it, it was being treated as a contest, but if it was a contest, Ram didn't feel like losing. In contests, no matter who it was against, Ram's creed was total victory.

Ram lent her ear to Subaru as he explained the 'hiragana' while pointing them out, and more or less worked their placement and ordering into her head, and memorized their shape and stroke order while guessing at how they were formed based on their structure.

It didn't take long for Subaru to finish his explanation of what he called the fifty sounds. Then grinning at her, he noted "Now neither of us has a handicap".

"The allowed time is until today's study ends. There will be a little quiz at the end, so we'll see if you can answer it, Ram."

"Fine, let's do it. Having you work like a horse will make things easier for Ram as well."

"Hehehe, you look sure you'll win, but I'm gonna change that overconfident look into a teary one!"

While giving a response entirely suited to an insignificant person, Subaru dove headfirst into concentration. Looking at that from the corner of her eye, Ram sat down on the bed and embarked on her acquisition of 'hiragana'.

…Suddenly, she couldn't help but think that it had been a long time since she had spent time studying like this.

"Barusu, where did you study the alphabet?"

"Well that's out of the blue, here when I've gotten focused. If you're trying to throw me off, it's not…"

Glancing back at Ram, Subaru cut himself off mid-sentence.

Perhaps the reason he didn't continue his banter was that Ram's expression, illuminated by the room's dim light, was tinged with something that made him nostalgic for home.

Holding his silence briefly at the look on her face, he suddenly, roughly scratched at his head.

"When you ask 'Where?', it's kinda hard to say. My parents taught me at home… is the most accurate answer, I think. I honestly don't remember having studied at kindergarten."

"'Kindergarten'?"

"It's a school for little children, just really little children. It's basically a place to play, eat, and sleep, but, well, maybe it's a place where the importance of group activities is taught while they're kids?"

The height that Subaru was showing with his hand was roughly the same as the desk, or less. It seems it would be a school where children around the age of four or five would attend; Ram had gone to something similar back in her home village.

"A school, I see. Were you able to attend, Barusu?"

"Kinda, I guess. I attended properly during mandatory education… when I was free to choose for myself, I sort of stopped going. And then, as I was sliding along like that, I ended up here."

Subaru's eyes were downcast, and his manner suggested this was a difficult topic for him to speak of. Given how he looked, Ram judged that it would be cruel to press the matter further.

Even with what had just been said, it led her to guess that Subaru's station in life had been fairly high, at the least.

It was only conjecture, but it seemed likely that Subaru's place of birth had been in the upper class of a small kingdom, separate from the four great kingdoms.

The world was divided into four parts by the four great kingdoms, however it was also dotted with small kingdoms that were not attached to the great kingdoms, and Ram had heard that many of them cultivated their own unique cultures.

Subaru's unusual appearance, and his explanations of a culture Ram had never heard of, were a little too solid to dismiss as a made-up tale. He was likely a runaway or something similar.

The 'hiragana' she held in her hand spurred on this reasoning as well.

"What about you, Ram, how long have you been working at Roswaal's place?"

“Ram’s first meeting with Roswaal-sama was when she and Rem were around eight so… that would be nine years ago, then. By now, she’s been serving nearly ten years.”

“Heh, nine years… wait, nine years since you were eight, are you seventeen? The same age as me?”

“And what’s the meaning of you being surprised by that, I wonder?”

“You look young, in an older-sister sort of way. But seriously. If you’re seventeen, then Rem is too. That’s unexpected…I thought maybe you were younger than me.”

“Referring to someone younger than yourself like an older sister, you should keep your lusts in check, Barusu. And Ram was mistaken as well. From your lack of composure, Barusu, she wondered if you weren’t more of a child.”

This wasn’t teasing, rather it was her actual thoughts.

Many things about him, including his facial features if you set aside the evil look of his eyes, feel like a little child. In particular, the frivolity of his words and actions didn’t make one think of him as a seventeen year old, an age when one should have gained an appropriate amount of maturity.

Though if one were speaking of a mismatch between age and appearance, that would apply to many here at the mansion.

“But, eight years old? That’s pretty young to be depending on someone outside your family. You must have gotten consent from your parents… or is it just normal over here to start an apprenticeship around that age?”

“It’s not unusual to leave one’s parents while still a child. Although in Ram and Rem’s case, there was a different, special reason for it.”

“‘Special’ meaning…?”

“It’s simple. If she wasn’t together with Rem, Ram hated it and threw tantrums.”

"Ah, 'zat so."

They had only been around each other a short time, but Subaru nodded in understanding of the relationship between Ram and Rem.

Ram was well aware that her own ability with chores was placing a burden on Rem. And also that Rem made up for what her sister lacked, and just barely kept the mansion running day-to-day.

Hence, she had no intention of nit-picking at Subaru's understanding to correct it.

Aside from Roswaal, another co-worker who was now away from the mansion, and a few other close acquaintances, she didn't feel the need for anyone else to understand the relationship between herself and Rem.

That would be the case for as long as it remained unclear how Subaru would end up fitting in at the mansion.

"…The time for idle chatter is nearly past."

Above the room's doorway, the magic time crystal's color was changing to a deep yellow, showing that the time had reached the deepest part of the night. It was nearly time to bring the evening's studies to a close.

"Sure is. Well, thanks for all your help tonight. Let's do this again tomorrow…"

"You may be on the verge of regretting assuming that tomorrow will come, Barusu."

"My bad! Just joking around! Okay, it's time for the showdown. Here's the question; try reading it, and writing out your answer in 'hiragana'!"

As he said that, Subaru removed one sheet from the stack of paper he had for practicing on, with the word 'Question' written in it with i-glyphs, followed by a sentence in hiragana, and presented it to her. In exchange, he retrieved the hiragana chart she held.

“Now then, I’ve taken back the hiragana chart. You’re as helpless as a babe in the woods. Hehehehe, go ahead and answer if you can! And get it wrong, and from tomorrow on, both of you sisters can be kinder when you teach me i-glyphs!”

Working himself up with his crass reasoning, Subaru laughed mockingly as he imagined Ram looking distressed.

On the other hand, not deigning to pay any attention to Subaru’s small-time villian act, Ram looked over the ‘hiragana’ question. She observed the conglomeration of wriggling letters for a while, and then…

“Done.”

Taking a feather pen in hand, Ram smoothly wrote out her answer in the area labelled ‘Response’ in i-glyphs. When she finished writing, she took the answer sheet and smacked it into Subaru’s face.

“…”

“The question was ‘The names of the sisters that live in the mansion’, and the answer is ‘Ram and Rem’.”

“No way, you…?! You got it perfect?! Seriously, that quickly?!”

Checking Ram’s answer against the question, Subaru collapsed dumbfounded on the spot. His reaction confirmed to Ram that her guess had worked correctly.

Based on Subaru’s personality, she’d imagined that he would come up with a question about the mansion and matters related to it. After that, choosing Emilia, Beatrice, and the twins themselves as candidates, remembering a limited number of letters was simple.

“In other words, what matters is one’s grasp of the essentials. Barusu, you remember what you promised, yes?”

“W…wait. There must be some kind of trick to it. I’m too dumb to figure it out, but you must have done something sneaky… I think…!”

As Subaru stood there being a poor loser, Ram flicked him in the forehead with her finger, then headed for the doorway as she yawned. Then, turning back as she opened the door, she looked back at him rubbing his reddening forehead.

“Tomorrow should be fun. Have pleasant dreams, Barusu. Ram certainly will.”

“You demon…”

Subaru’s frustrated face disappeared behind the closing door. The timing of his last embittered remark was so good, Ram nearly laughed in spite of herself.

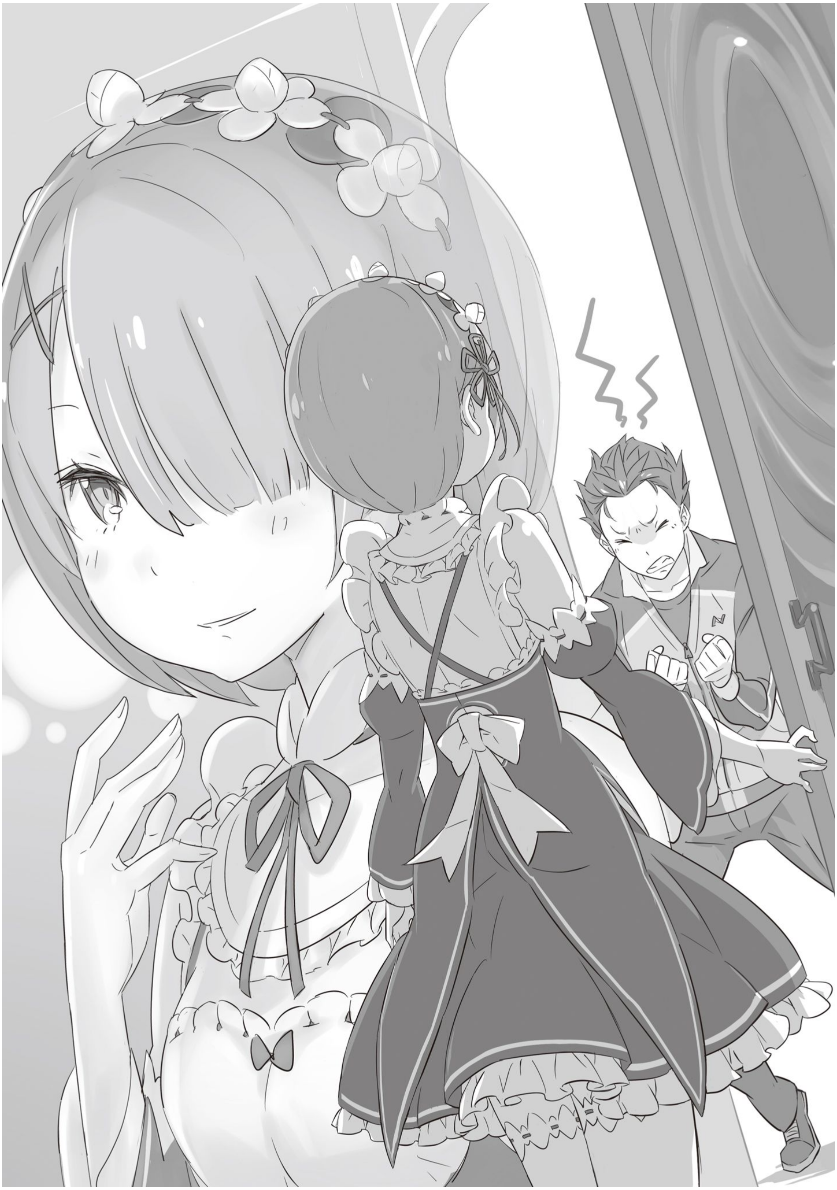

“With that, Barusu should learn to take things a little more seriously.”

Ram was very pleased with herself after having not only mercilessly toppled Subaru, but also provoked him to greater effort from tomorrow on.

Retreating away from the room before the whining became audible, she started looking forward to the look on Subaru’s face tomorrow.

“But still…”

A sudden thought occurred to her. It was about the ‘hiragana’ that Subaru had written.

“…It feels like I’ve seen it somewhere before.”

That whisper fell into the hallway, and faded away without reaching anyone; even from Ram’s own memory, it passed away as something largely unimportant.

END

Ram’s Older Sister Heart is Complicated (Volume 3; Melon Books)

1

“Nee-sama, nee-sama. Please listen to this. Today, Subaru-kun was able to get out of bed.”

“Hmm, yes.”

“Nee-sama, nee-sama. I’ve promised to cut Subaru-kun’s hair. What kind of haircut do you think would look good on him? He looks wonderful no matter what, but…”

“Ah, hmm, yes.”

“Nee-sama, nee-sama. Just now, Subaru-kun was able to go to the bathroom by himself. Please compliment him!”

“Hmm…?”

2

“It’s simply incomprehensible.”

Sitting and holding her head in her hands, Ram let out a sigh with a weary expression on her face.

Day by day, her usual routine was one taking care of trifling odd jobs while following her younger sister around as she handled the heavy work. However, her drive had now withered to the point where even those odd jobs were bothersome.

“That, too, is entirely Barusu’s fault.”

“What kind of baseless rumors are you making up about me on my first day back on the job? More importantly, how bold do you have to be to let me do all the work when I’m just recovering my health?!”

Where Ram's gaze lingered woefully, Subaru wiped a shelf with a rag held in one hand, and howled.

Currently, Subaru and Ram were together in one of the guest rooms in the Roswaal manor's east wing. Visitors to the mansion were rare, but cleaning the guest rooms and maintaining the furnishings was nonetheless a required daily labor.

On this day, the two of them were seeing to the airing out of one of those guest rooms. As a work assignment, It was almost too light, but it was necessary to let Subaru get used to it gradually after returning from medical treatment.

There was no way for Subaru to know that Rem had spent her entire saved-up salary on the brand-new butler uniform he was wearing on his return to work.

His lack of awareness of that fact became yet another seed of dissatisfaction to Ram.

"It's likely pointless to expect that sort of thing from Barusu, though. Honestly, what does Rem see in a man like this? It hurts to think about it."

"Won't you please quit muttering to yourself and lend a hand, senpai? I'm doin' the best I can here!"

"You likely returned to work early to put a stop to Rem's worries. If you really have that sort of resolve, then you shouldn't be whining no matter what kind of difficulties you encounter. …It's not manly at all."

"Neither my resolve nor my manliness are excuses for you to be slacking off on the job!"

Subaru was going on about something or other, but Ram covered her ears and pretended not to hear. Having said that, it was obvious to see that while Subaru was making a fuss, he was moving stiffly and being cautious about spots here and there on his body.

Roughly a week since the witchbeast commotion – thanks to Rem's devoted nursing, and the healing spells that Beatrice regularly cast on him due to some whim, he was in more or less perfect condition.

It's just that, that was speaking of nothing more than surface appearances. Ram, who had heard Roswaal and Beatrice's assessments, knew how serious the remaining injuries on the inside were.

And despite that, how infuriating was the sight of him refusing to let the pain show on his face. Did he think that Rem would feel responsible if he kept on staying in bed?

In truth, that was correct if one considered Rem's feelings. Ram's cute little sister was clumsy with her own heart, and pushed herself to the breaking point shouldering this burden and that. She was a worrier down to her very core.

"So, although it's true that Ram had hoped that someone would bring that under control…"

"What's that?"

"Your face is dull. You get ahead of yourself easily. You have no learning or strength worth mentioning, and not only are you penniless, you're reckless… Finding someone who brings together so many unfortunate attributes is actually fairly difficult, indeed."

"Just so you know, even I can tell that you're making fun of me, y'know?"

For him not to express anger at that point made her think that he lacked spirit as a man. Truthfully, it was exactly because she was aware of this that she was willing to speak so impolitely.

Having thought that far, Ram was suddenly stunned.

…The way that thought just now made it seem as if she was depending on Subaru's good nature was quite disagreeable, wasn't it?

"…"

Standing up without allowing her irritation to show on her face, Ram casually ran a finger along the edge of the room's window frame. Seeing that there was white dust on her fingertip, Ram turned back to Subaru.

"Barusu, what's this?"

"You're supposed to be taking care of that part, you know?!"

She'd intended to point out poor results in his cleaning, but Ram was miffed to have her own deficiency pointed out instead. Her already-scarce drive to work diminished further, and Ram wanted to go lie down in her room soon.

"But really, you're even more listless than usual. I'm just guessing, but are you actually not feeling well?"

Resting his weight lightly on the table, Subaru said that while gazing in her direction.

At his glance and question, Ram drew her eyebrows together in displeasure.

His worry was off the mark. It was true that in the last few days, she'd exceeded her limits in utilizing mana due to the witchbeast commotion, and her gate's condition wasn't good. As part of settling matters afterwards, she'd travelled between the mansion and the village time after time, and she'd been tasked with a daily survey of the boundary in the forest to ensure there were no failings in it. As well, her nights were spent assisting Roswaal, who was as busy as ever, by handling paperwork in his place, and this morning, too, she'd slept little more than an hour.

Her body felt heavy, it was difficult to think, and just keeping her eyes open was tiring. Her limbs moved sluggishly as though filled with lead, and, perhaps due to her poor circulation, her entire body seemed to be creaking.

"But, that's entirely normal."

"I'm not sure what that 'but' is talking about; just don't push yourself, alright?"

As she rubbed between her eyes after realizing how heavy they were, Subaru walked right next to her and, with a ‘Let me see’, placed his palm against Ram’s forehead. Ram stiffened as she realized her carelessness.

“Fever…doesn’t seem quite right, maybe just a mild fever? If you’ve gotten worn down, it wouldn’t hurt to take a break just for today… owowow!”

“Who gave… you permission to… go ahead and touch Ram? One really can’t let down their guard around you. Filthy.”

Pinching the back of the hand that had touched her forehead, Ram sniffed dismissively as she made Subaru cry out. Rubbing his hand as he jumped back, Subaru glared at Ram as he went teary-eyed.

“You little… I’m trying to show some concern here, you could be nicer about it.”

“Ram doesn’t need your sympathy. More to the point, how can you be concerned about Ram’s problems on top of everything else? If you’ve got time to worry about her, worry more about Rem…”

While saying that, Ram moved away from the side of the resentful-looking Subaru. Continuing like that, as she went to move on to cleaning the next guest room…

“…ah”

Whether the hoarse, quiet voice belonged to Subaru or Ram, she couldn’t tell.

Only that, immediately after the soles of her feet lost sight of the feeling of carpet, her vision went dark like a curtain coming down with a whoosh, and her body could no longer support the heaviness of her head.

3

…When she awoke from a sleep so deep that she saw no dreams, she was met by the sensation of a cold cloth on her forehead.

“…This is… Ram’s… room?”

She slowly pushed her eyes open, and when her fuzzy vision cleared she was greeted by a view of a familiar private room.

It was a simple, undecorated and dreary bedroom. Only the pink curtains, along with the sheets and thick blanket on the bed, brought flowery colors to the room, to match it to Rem’s tastes.

Aside from that, leaving one with utterly no sense of her self was what made it the room of the girl known as Ram.

“Oh, you’re finally awake, are ya? Honestly, you really had me freaking out there, c’mon.”

When she raised her upper body on the bed, and turned her head to the side, Subaru appeared holding a pottery bowl filled with water. Looking over her memories of just before losing consciousness, and her current condition, Ram understood.

“Barusu, you pervert…”

“That’s the first thing you say after suddenly collapsing?!”

“Ram’s clothing has been changed. The sweat has been cleaned from her back as well; how meticulously you must have licked all over her body. Filthy.”

“You think up some really scary stuff, y’know?! It was Emilia-tan that changed your clothes and wiped the sweat off! There’s no way I could do that, and licking? What do you think I am, some kind of boogeyman?!”

From Subaru’s explanation as he claimed false accusations, it seemed that immediately after she’d gone unconscious in the guest room, Subaru had made sure it was nothing serious, and called for help right away. As Rem was away from the mansion for shopping, he’d called Emilia, and asked her to take care of Ram.

“Is that so. It’s not that you caused trouble for Emilia-sama without any thought at all, then.”

“No matter how much I’ll jump at any chance to have contact with Emilia-tan, when it’s time to do what matters, I’ll do it. So, how are you feeling, actually?”

“The first face Ram saw after waking up was so evil-looking, it really soured her mood.”

“Tell me about your health! I don’t care about your mood!”

“Don’t shout at a sick person. You really are a boy incapable of consideration for others, aren’t you.”

“Ghgizagigi”

As Subaru ground his teeth in chagrin, Ram let slip several weighty sighs.

…The truth behind that was that she was berating herself for what she honestly felt were her own blunders.

That she showed weakness to Subaru, and, through her own carelessness, mistreated a part of Rem's feelings that she should have taken consideration of. That she felt just a little serenity, too.

"Well, if you can run your mouth the same as always, then you're probably fine. Here, have some water. Emilia-tan said it was probably overwork, too, so you'll get better if you just take it easy for a while."

Not noticing Ram's internal conflict, Subaru offered her a pitcher of water. Taking it, Ram sipped at it to moisten her throat. At her side, Subaru retrieved the damp towel that had fallen from her forehead, and wet it again in the room's washbasin.

Given that it was Subaru, taking that kind of care was quite out of character.

"Mm, *hk*"

She had been thirstier than she'd thought, and after draining the pitcher, Ram slowly lay down on the bed. Right away, Subaru placed the damp towel on her forehead; it felt nice.

"That's unusually thoughtful of you, Barusu."

"Heheh, I'm so glad to meet your approval, nee-sama."

Speaking flippantly, Subaru dragged a chair to the side of the bed and plopped down on it. Facing the opposite of the usual direction, he sat with the backrest hugged into his stomach.

Ram frowned as his attitude suggested that instead of returning to work, he was thinking of staying to tend to her.

"If it's just a matter of sleeping, even Barusu could do it. Anything Barusu can do, Ram can do as well."

"Your repertoire of abuse never runs dry. …Don't worry about it. By now, there's no way I'd get today's jobs done anyway, so I'll just watch until you go to sleep. Want me to hold your hand?"

"Please don't say such creepy things. The thought of you watching me sleep gives me chills.”

“Hmf, is that so.”

Subaru frowned, and looked like he was pouting. Wondering if he was that upset simply because he’d been unable to hold her hand, Ram’s gaze towards him became increasingly stern.

It was just that, a situation where she was lying in bed like this, and someone was watching over her at her side was…

“This reminds me a little of long ago.”

“When you say long ago, Ram, you mean that you’ve experienced being tended like this? From how steady you normally are, it’s tough to imagine you being frail.”

“…Shortly after Ram lost her horn, it was common for her to fall ill like this. It was also partly due to being unable to control mana properly, and it ended up placing a burden on Rem.”

Perhaps because he’d intended to tease her, Subaru’s face fell when he realized the topic was her horn. Mildly pleased that she’d put Subaru to silence, Ram smiled faintly.

…Nine years ago, just after Ram (having lost her horn) had been taken in by Roswaal, the total amount of mana she was able to manipulate inside her body was vastly reduced, and her body, unable to withstand the alteration, fell ill many times. Each time, Rem cared for her at her bedside.

She’d overdone it for the first time in a long while. The bill for that was falling into the same sort of condition that she had back then. Perhaps the reason she couldn’t laugh at it at all was because the one caring for her was no longer her little sister.

Back then, while caring for Ram when she’d fallen ill, Rem would often hold her hand.

On nights when it seemed like Rem would be crushed by needless guilt, of course Ram held her hand as well.

Perhaps it was because, thanks to Subaru's banter, she was able to remember that sort of thing.

"…Barusu."

"Hmm?"

Assaulted by a sudden sleepiness, Ram was on the edge of losing her hold on consciousness, unable to endure the weight of her eyelids.

Just before that, she spoke unexpectedly, her voice calling out to the boy beside her…

"…"

What she had said at the end, she wasn't sure.

Still unsure, Ram once again submerged into a deep, deep sleep.

4

"…Nee-sama is sleeping soundly, then?"

"Mhmm, like a log. I guess it's impressive that she kept up the verbal abuse right until she went to sleep."

As he looked down at Ram's sleeping face, Subaru responded to Rem (who had returned from shopping) with a wry smile. Insistently proving that the body and heart are separate things, Ram remained herself, even if weakened.

Removing her gaze from Subaru's pained smile, Rem's eyes went wide with a 'Hmm?'.

"Subaru-kun, are you holding nee-sama's hand for her?"

"Right at the very end, she went and called out to me with a really forlorn look on her face. Maybe not forlorn, it was more of a… dunno, it's hard to put into words."

Subaru thought to himself about what was meant by the emotion

Ram showed at the end, and her thin, soft voice. But, Rem shook her head at Subaru’s troubled thoughts.

“Rem is sure it could only mean that nee-sama has finally accepted Subaru-kun. There’s a part of nee-sama that’s just a tiny bit more suited to being aloof than most people, after all.”

“You could take that different ways, but basically you’re saying she’s a bit difficult to handle, then.”

“No, that’s not true at all. The part of her that’s just a little bit stubborn is precious, that’s all.”

“When I hear you say that, it really does feel like you two are sisters…”

Holding a strong belief in her heart, and being unwilling to let others sway her from it. When Subaru responded with that nuance, Rem tilted her head with a “Is that so?”, seemingly unaware of his meaning.

Subaru’s wry smile deepened at her reaction, then he looked down at his own hands. His right hand was, even now, still grasped in Ram’s palm as she lay on the bed.

Seeing her face as she slumbered, Subaru let out a little sigh.

“You’d be cute, too, nee-sama, if only you could always look as gentle as this.”

That was his appraisal of Ram with a peaceful look on her sleeping face.

END

Librarian Beatrice’s Log: Restart (Volume 7; Melon Books)

1

With a soft thump, she gently closed the book she had finished reading.

Shutting the thick, skillfully-bound book that rested on her knees, the girl let out a sigh that seemed incongruous with her child-like appearance, one that somehow carried the weight of years.

The girl sat atop an aged stepladder, constructed of wood. Wrapped in an elegant dress, with her pale, cream-colored hair in curls, she was a person with doll-like beauty.

The girl’s name was Beatrice—she was the librarian of this silence-filled library, known as the ‘Forbidden Library’, and a magic user of rare quality who had passed many a year here.

“No matter how many times I read it, ‘The Guillotine of Magritsa’ never loses its charm; just a masterpiece, you know.”

Whispering in satisfaction, Beatrice’s fingers traced the title of the book on her knees.

Countless shelves, and innumerable books collected on them. Story after story acclaimed as masterpieces, specialized treatises from the past that were now difficult to acquire, or even forbidden books that no one knew the history of; the ‘Wisdom’ that existed in the Forbidden Library in the form known as books was limitlessly vast.

In a sea of books that one couldn’t finish reading in a lifetime, it was no surprise that there were stories that Beatrice was fond of, and had read over and over. The book she had just finished reading, too, was one such story.

“What sort of book shall I read next, I suppose?”

The calm that fell over the Forbidden Library was, to Beatrice, who was both a librarian and a reader, the best possible environment.

Through Beatrice's spell, known as 'Door Crossing', the Forbidden Library was entirely isolated from the outside world. Not only were light and darkness shut out, but even bothersome interpersonal relations could not be brought into this place. The only thing that made a sound in the room was herself, and there were countless books to read—truly a utopia that a book lover would drool over.

However…

"Of course, after a tragedy, something that would ease the heart would be…"

"Beatrice-sama…"

"Mhmm, losing oneself in another tragedy while still carrying this feeling of melancholy would be…"

"Beatrice-sama? Where are you?"

"It might be amusing to read the same story again, once more from the start…"

"Beatrice-sama…? Beatrice-sama…?"

"Aagh! Could you be any more noisy, annoying, and clamorous, you know?!"

Popping down off the stepladder, she ran towards the door of the library with the book still clasped under her arm. When she placed her hand on the knob and opened the door, for just a moment, a distortion formed in the space between the Forbidden Library and the outside world it was connecting to. Breaking through that thin, film-like sensation, Beatrice flew out into the mansion's hallway. At the end of the hallway, facing the other direction, was a blue-haired girl; Beatrice glared at her back.

"You've been going on with this noisy bustle for a while now, I suppose! Exactly what business do you have with Betty this late at night, you know?!"

“My apologies, Beatrice-sama. But thank goodness. You were still awake, then.”

As the girl turned towards her, Beatrice still held the book to her chest as she frowned.

In the direction of Beatrice’s pouting gaze, a girl wearing a servant’s uniform approached. She was the younger of the servant sisters who were responsible both for the mansion and its inhabitants—the more capable one. Her name was Rem, wasn’t it?

When Rem stood before Beatrice, she politely bowed her head to one who outwardly looked far younger than herself, and said,

“As it happens, Beatrice-sama, Roswaal-sama is calling for you. It seems there is a matter that he simply must have your assistance with.”

“For him to be leaving it to a servant to summon me, he must be thinking quite highly of himself, I suppose. He seems to have forgotten that there is no hierarchical relationship between himself and Betty, you know.”

“…”

As Beatrice showed the poor mood she was in after having her reading time disturbed, Rem held her silence. Offering her opinion and incurring the displeasure of either Beatrice or Roswaal would be troublesome.

Seeing Rem tighten her cheeks and the corners of her eyes in an effort to remain expressionless, Beatrice sighed.

Even though she exceeded her older sister in capability, there was a part of her that was behind in mentality. It also felt to her like the older sister was simply far above average in that respect, but none of that mattered to Beatrice.

“…Aah. Hurry up and show Betty the way, before she changes her mind, I suppose.”

“…! Yes, thank you. Rem will guide you.”

When she agreed to compromise, Rem gave off an air of relief as she bowed her head again.

The girl wasn't very good at concealing what she was feeling. As it was, it seemed unlikely she'd be able to hide her thoughts from anyone who wasn't truly lacking in perception. There wouldn't be that many people who were so unobservant, though.

While Beatrice was harboring that impression, a voice unexpectedly reached the back of her mind. It wasn't a voice that maintained a distinct form, but due to it being a voice with 'Power', it's intentions were conveyed clearly.

"Mm… I've received instructions from Bubby. It seems you should prepare hot water, a clean washcloth, and a single guest room, I suppose."

"A guest room?"

"That's right, you know. It seems that half-wit girl is bringing someone back with her, I suppose."

With an air that suggested someone was bringing something bothersome for her, Beatrice let out a gloomy sigh.

While following the maid who was thinking over her instructions, Beatrice adjusted her grip on the book she was carrying.

"Good grief, this is honestly so much trouble."

Looking back at it, Beatrice was completely shocked at how bad everyone aside from herself was at handling their responsibilities.

…That was setting aside for now how poorly she'd handled her own responsibilities and desire to meddle in the affairs of others, in that she'd forgotten to tidy up her books, and, unable to tolerate the noise outside what should have been a quiet Forbidden Library, she had rushed out of it.

2

"O~h my, you found her much faster than I had expe~cted. Was this a victory for Rem's dogged determination… or perhaps simply a defeat for Beatrice's will to fight on?"

When they arrived, guided by Rem, at the mansion's entrance hall, a tall man who had already arrived turned to face them.

He was a strange fellow with long indigo hair, white makeup applied to his face, and eccentric clothing. This man with his nonsensical air was Roswaal L. Mathers, both the master of this mansion, and Beatrice's long-time acquaintance.

As he gazed down at her cheerfully, Beatrice narrowed her eyes, and snorted softly.

"You must think quite highly of yourself to summon me like this, I suppose. You really shouldn't be giving such cruel orders to your own servants, you know."

"Despi~te that, I expected that you would be more likely to appear if I had Rem search for you than if I searched myse~lf. Su~rely, if I had started searching the mansion high and low, you'd have been so entertained by it that you wouldn't have come out to see me, wouldn't you sa~y?"

"…Now that you mention it, that might be true, I suppose."

The sight of Roswaal, who never lost his relaxed attitude, walking around the mansion searching for her would be a rare thing. Since it was Rem, she took pity on her and showed her face, but she couldn't deny the possibility that if it had been Roswaal, she'd have taken some time to enjoy it.

"You see, isn't it just like I sai~d?"

"Hmf, having you stand there looking like you've seen through everything isn't much fun. So, is it still not time for the errand you called Betty for?"

"The errand itself should be calling momentarily. …Rem?"

After his pretentious reply, Roswaal called to Rem, who was standing at his side. The girl lightly lifted up her own blue hair, and placed a hand on her well-shaped ear.

“… Yes, the senses nee-sama is sharing are getting closer. It seems they should be reaching the gate soon. Would it be alright for Rem to go and greet them?”

“I’d be pleased if you wou~ld. Ah, I don’t think there will be a problem, but… do be careful.”

Nodding to Roswaal’s instruction, and then bowing to Beatrice, Rem headed towards the entrance. When she opened the large doors and went outside, a cool evening breeze blew into the manor, and one could catch a glimpse of the mansion’s front grounds and front gate on the other side of the door. Near the iron gate, a dragon carriage raised a cloud of dust as it arrived.

In the carriage’s driver seat, a girl identical to Rem—her elder twin sister could be seen.

“The older of the sisters has returned as well; I’d like to see Bubby soon, you know.”

At the return of her only family, Beatrice’s expression had softened. The best outcome here would be for this to be simply rejoicing together at meeting again, but there was both the thoughts that were sent to her earlier, and Roswaal’s summons. There was no way it would end that easily.

“The return of your dear older brother… bu~t, I’m a little jealous. You and I are old acquaintances, too, but you’ve never made that face for me.”

“You shouldn’t say such creepy things, I suppose. And you’re being far too obvious, you know. You aren’t interested in Betty, or anyone else, I suppose. There’s only ever been one person on your mind, you know.”

“We~ll, you’re not wrong about that. But that doesn’t mean that it’s a lie to say that I feel like I’d like to get along well with you. … Although this matter is separate from that.”

“I can’t feel anything but worried about that, I suppose.”

Simultaneously, Beatrice's face tightened at Roswaal's words, and Rem met up with her older sister Ram in front of the gate. After the sisters had spoken together about something, they immediately moved to the carriage, and a silver-haired girl descended from it. … To Beatrice, it was someone who put her in a complicated state of mind.

But this time, there was someone who drew her attention more than the silver-haired girl. It was…

"It seems there was some sort of blackened, dingy-looking fellow riding with her, you know."

"I'm not sure if you would say riding, or being carried along. I'm su~re you've realized it, but that's the reason that I ca~lled for you."

"You can't be serious, I suppose."

Realizing that her worries had been right on target, Beatrice furrowed her brow, and waited for the girls to arrive.

The boy being lowered from the carriage was unconscious, and the maid sisters were each lifting one end of his body, which swayed back and forth as they tried to move him.

"Um, um! That boy really helped me out, so… I wish you'd carry him a little more gently… Um, are you listening? That looks rea~lly painful, doesn't it?"

Near the boy who was being carried, the silver-haired girl ran about, flustered and looking concerned. Neither her shoulder nor her silver hair showed any sign of the little shadow that Beatrice was seeking.

"…It seems I've drawn the short end of the stick, you know."

Beatrice's sigh reeked of age, completely at odds with her child-like appearance.

It seemed that the boy who had been carried in had made crucial efforts in overcoming a problem that occurred for the silver-haired girl—Emilia—during her journey in the capital.

From what was said, after Emilia carelessly had her precious emblem stolen, not only had he tenaciously determined its whereabouts in her stead, and struggled to do this and that to return it to Emilia, but he had gone on to risk his own life to protect Emilia's.

"Ah, this is much too suspicious, I suppose. There's no doubt that someone like that is a spy or something, you know. It would be best to make a clean break of things here and let him die naturally, I suppose."

"Well, it's certainly true that it's far too convenient. What would you have us do, Emilia-sama? Shall we let him die?"

"Why are you saying such cruel things?! Please, help him."

Flustered by the cold suggestion offered by Beatrice, who had listened to the explanation, and Ram, who had given the explanation, Emilia requested healing for the boy.

The unconscious boy had a fairly serious wound in his abdomen. Currently, the wound had only been closed by simply healing magic, and even if it was only left as it was now, he could be expected to recover if he rested quietly.

To be sure, this was speaking of only if he did absolutely nothing but rest in bed.

And, she got the feeling that this boy, left on his own, definitely would not remain in bed.

"There's little choice so I'll heal him, but… this is something that I normally absolutely wouldn't do. I'm doing you a favor, so tomorrow, I'll have you let me take Bubby all day, I suppose."

"…! Very well. If that's what you'd like, I'll make sure to speak to Puck about it. Thank you, Beatrice. I am indebted to you."

"…That's an old-fashioned way of putting it, you know."

"Huh?!"

Setting aside Emilia as she expressed surprise, Beatrice set right to healing the boy and getting it over with. Before the immense power of Beatrice, the maintainer of the Forbidden Library, it was a trivial task.

Despite that, she'd demanded a proper reward, so the terms weren't bad for her. It would be troublesome if their relationship developed into one where she was called upon casually. Beatrice was no one's errand girl.

Beatrice's role was the librarian of the Forbidden Library, nothing more and nothing less—on that point, she would never budge.

"There now, I've healed him up, I suppose. Take care of the rest as you please, you know. Do make sure not to let him push himself, I suppose."

"Mhmm, thank you, Beatrice. I'm indebt… I'm… I'm most grateful!"

"That's old-fashioned talk, too, you know."

As Emilia smiled openly, Beatrice pointed out the expression she'd used and turned her back.

Such a straightforward gaze was difficult for her to deal with, but Beatrice lacked the will to tell Emilia that directly.

4

With the boy's healing taken care of, Beatrice retired quickly to the Forbidden Library.

Most likely, the boy would wake up sometime in the morning. Although his body had been restored, it would take time for his stamina and such to recover after being so exhausted. Having said that, Beatrice's healing magic was even capable of producing results in restoring said stamina and the like, so it was unlikely that any significant problems would remain.

"It seems that those girls have returned to their room as well; with that, we should be able to get back to a peaceful night."

Seating herself on a stepladder in the center of the room, she sighed as she brushed at her knees.

The Forbidden Library was essentially safe from the influence of the outside world, but Beatrice's perception was wide-ranging, and it was that indeed that allowed her to grasp what was going on inside the mansion. In the end, the serenity that Beatrice truly loved would only come when all the residents of the mansion were sound asleep.

However, there had been a few too many fusses tonight. Somehow, she couldn't even work up the urge to reread the book she was carrying.

"It was such a nice night, and now look what's become of it, you know. Bubby is out of mana and resting, and I can't see him until morning; what a day, I suppose. If it was going to turn out like this, why did Betty… Hmhm."

Just as the day was reluctantly drawing to a close, Beatrice hummed softly to herself at the tail end of it.

Just as was stated earlier, Beatrice knew what was going on inside the mansion like the back of her hand. Something was nagging at her perception. It was…

"That injured boy's room. He's woken up, I suppose."

Paying special attention to his situation, just in case of sudden changes, had yielded results. Sensing the boy get up off his bed and move around, Beatrice pursed her lips.

That was quick, was her first thought. Of course, her healing had been perfect. She was confident that she had restored the boy completely, without so much as a scar. She was confident, but he had gotten used to the healing magic oddly quickly. For this to be possible, either there was something peculiar about the nature of his body, or he had good compatibility with Beatrice's magic.

"Ah, ew, ew… what a revolting thing to imagine, you know."

Repulsed by what she'd thought up by herself, Beatrice felt like she was nauseous in her chest. In the same moment, a plot sprouted in her heart to use this boy to clear up the nausea.

"Now that it's decided, I'll just play with him a little bit, I suppose."

While still seated on the stepladder, Beatrice fully mobilized the power of her own shadow magic, she "remade" the space of one floor of the mansion—a corner of it that included the guest room that the boy was in.

Originating from the guest room he was in, she connected the space of the end of the hallway to the other end, forming an endless corridor. An illusion made it impossible to see where the corridors met, and she chose a perpetual darkness for the outside of the windows, with no sign of light.

With this, she had completed the trap. With no way to tell which way to go, and no way out, the boy would be psychologically cornered.

"On top of that, any door except the correct door… the door to the first room, will have a special gimmick, you know. Your body will forget about gravity, your consciousness and awareness of reality will be exactly opposite, and there will even be upside-down rooms, I suppose."

It felt like she might have gone a bit overboard with her control and alteration of her territory, but she was satisfied with the result.

Incidentally, this prank used many different shadow magic spells that had been lost to time, and some researchers into magic would faint if they saw it mis-used this way, but Beatrice wasn't concerned about that.

"Now, do a grand dance in the palm of Betty's hand, you know!"

This, that, and all of it was solely for the purpose of seeing the boy running about frantically, snot dribbling from his nose. She was simply letting off steam after being unable to meet with her brother, so although he had saved someone’s life, he could at least entertain her for a little…

“…Or perhaps, the possibility that the first door is the goal, as it tends to be.”

The Forbidden Library’s door opened with a click, and a foolish face peered inside.

Snap judgement, an instant choice, an immediate breakthrough—feeling a sense of wasted effort that wasn’t suitable compensation for the amount of work she’d expended, Beatrice put on her sourest face.

“…What a profoundly aggravating man you are, I suppose.”

And so, for the first time, she tasted a sensation she would repeat time and time again in the days to come.

It was the beginning of the end of the quiet days she had spent in the Forbidden Library.

END

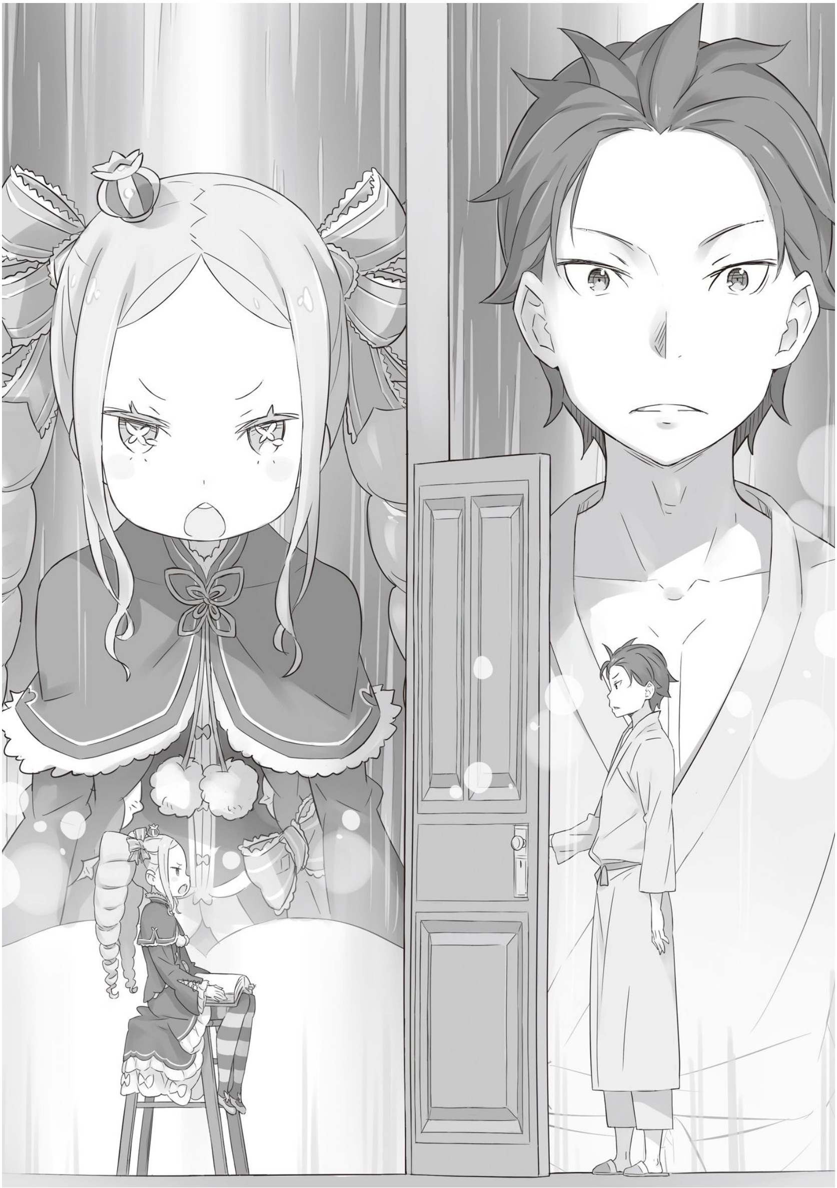

Librarian Beatrice's Log:
Page 2
(Ex 2; Melon Books)

1

The Forbidden Library was filled at all times with solemn serenity.

Beatrice, who saw herself as the librarian of the Forbidden Library, felt that's how it was, and that was how a library was meant to be. A treasure trove of tales and knowledge only attained it's proper state when filled with blessed silence.

Hence, the Forbidden Library was one of the most prominent sanctuaries for 'Books' in the world—and it now faced an unprecedented crisis.

"Mornin'. Is Beako here?"

"…No, she isn't, you know."

"Ah, she's not, I see… Hey, don't pull that old trick on me. She's right here."

"At the very least, I don't recall having opened the door for you, I suppose."

Roughly closing the book she had been reading, Beatrice jumped down from the top of the stepladder and glared at her visitor. The one who had walked into the library, looking as though he owned the place, was a black-haired black-eyed boy with a cheerful smirk on his face.

Natsuki Subaru—an impertinent fellow who had recently been entering and leaving Beatrice's Forbidden Library as he pleased.

Carried into the mansion only a few weeks earlier, the boy had, since then, worked as a servant, but he'd acted exceptionally familiar with Beatrice. Perhaps his peculiar nature, that allowed him to more or less come and go as he pleased to the Forbidden Library (where outsiders shouldn't be able to arrive easily), was a factor in the development of his attitude.

"What on earth have you come here for, you know? Despite what you may think, Betty is busy, I suppose."

"When you say busy, it's just reading, right? Children should be outdoors! If you're going to play, go play outside."

"Don't be ridiculous, you know. As if Betty would frolic like a child, I suppose."

"Don't go pouting just because you don't know anyone. Should I go talk to Petra and the others for you?"

"Why do I even bother speaking with you, you know?! No one is speaking of such simplistic things, I suppose!"

When it came to dealing with Beatrice, Subaru's attitude was always like this. While having her tranquility disturbed by this exchange, Beatrice played with the curls in her hair irritably.

"Regardless! Get to the point, state your business and get out! Come now, quickly!"

"Um, that was my business. I just came to say that since the weather is nice, maybe you'd like to go play outside."

"…! Mind your own business, I suppose!"

"Geroppa?!"

Towards the one who rubbed her the wrong way more than she would have thought possible, she unleashed a wave of magical force from the palm of her extended hand. Struck by an invisible shockwave, Subaru shrieked as he was thrown out of the room—the door closed, and space itself wavered.

'Door Crossing' activated, and the library connected to another door in the mansion. With this, the room's quiet would return.

Sighing at what had occurred, Beatrice turned to resume reading the book she was holding on to…

“…I’ve entirely forgotten how far I’d read, you know.”

With her desire to read entirely crushed, Beatrice’s ‘tsk’ conveyed annoyance from the bottom of her heart.

She couldn’t help but think that lately, this, that, and everything just wasn’t working out properly.

2

In truth, ever since Subaru had come to stay at the mansion, the environment that Beatrice lived in had been in a state of ongoing change.

It had begun with Subaru, and his over-friendly way of interacting with her, but there had been changes in the others that lived in the mansion as well. For instance, the maid sisters that she had known for a relatively long time were a good example of this.

“Beatrice-sama, pardon me. May I have a moment of your time?”

“…You called me, so I came, but what sort of cargo is that, I suppose?”

Hearing a voice calling, she had connected the door to the mansion’s front entryway. Upon doing so, she found there the peach-haired maid, Ram. Carrying many baskets filled with vegetables, Ram boldly straddled the threshold of the library and bowed her head.

“Oh, it’s just that all these baskets are so much trouble, so Ram was wondering if you would kindly convey her to the kitchen via the library.”

“Since when has Betty become your handywoman, you know?!”

“Well then, that means that you won’t allow it?”

“Mggh… J, just this once, I suppose…!”

After using ‘Door Crossing’ to connect the Forbidden Library to the kitchen, it did indeed reduce the trouble with the packages a little. When Ram passed through the door and gave a quick curtsey in thanks, Beatrice sniffed her nose at her to display her displeasure.

“Ah, Beatrice-sama, please wait a moment.”

“…And now it’s the younger of the sisters. If it’s some foolish errand, I won’t allow it, you know.”

Having been in the kitchen, Rem noticed Beatrice and quickly walked over to her. She shook her head to Beatrice with a ‘I wouldn’t dream of it’, and then, lowering her voice, asked,

“Rem would like to add pepples to this evening’s supper; how many of them can she add before you wouldn’t want to eat it?”

“…If it’s no more than three, I’ll put up with it, I suppose.”

“Understood. With that, we’ll add four, so please try your best.”

“You…!”

“It isn’t good to be picky, no matter the situation. You still have room to grow, Beatrice-sama.”

“What do you mean about the future… no, never mind, you know. I’m starting to get a headache, I suppose.”

In response to Rem speaking to her in a fashion that could only be called motherly, Beatrice bent her lips into a truly impressive frown.

Her attitude was clearly different from the way that she had interacted with Beatrice until only recently. Faltering before that change in the sense of distance between them, Beatrice dejectedly withdrew into the Forbidden Library.

But, as she left, just before she closed the door…

“What did Beatrice-sama say?”

“It seems she’ll do her best with up to four pepples. Let’s put five in!”

Hearing that sort of unsettling conversation, Beatrice at last looked up to the ceiling as though lamenting.

“All of this is from that man’s bad influence…”

3

…As that sort of day piled one on top of the other, the very limits of Beatrice’s tolerance were plumbed.

And the limits of that patience were suddenly, abruptly torn through.

“…Beako! Beako! You gotta get me to my room!”

While narrowing her eyes at the disrespectful tone of voice, Beatrice glared at the room’s entrance. Unable to conceal her irritation at the commotion, she completely forgot her anger at the scene that came next.

“Y…you! What are you doing looking like that, I suppose?!”

As Beatrice spoke in a voice that was all but a shriek, before her eyes was Subaru, dripping wet. Soaked in water from head to toe, he was half-naked, clad only in his underwear.

“Puck got me good! I’m soaked thanks to that jerk! I wanna get changed, so please connect the library to my room. I can’t go around the mansion getting everything wet.”

“It won’t do to get the library wet, either! Quit joking around, I suppose!”

Obviously, simply hanging around the entrance wouldn’t get the books wet. However, this was holy ground where tranquility was prized. Absolutely not a place where a half-naked, half-drowned rat would be admitted.

“You really do the most selfish things… this isn’t funny, you know!”

"I'm sorry, this is an emergency measure. I'll never use it this way again."

"You said that last time, too, when you used it as a shortcut to the bathroom! If you think I'll allow it because you call it an emergency measure, you're entirely wrong, you know!"

"Yeah, but that was an emergency measure, too, c'mon! I'm sorry about this time, too!"

With her head boiling over at Subaru's complete lack of any sign of regret, Beatrice snapped her fingers. Just as he'd asked, "Door Crossing" connected the entrance and his private room. However, she had no intention of allowing him to leave peacefully.

"Just like always, get out… I suppose!"

"Bonjobi!"

Struck head-on by the shockwave, Subaru was blown away, tumbling head-over-heels into his room.

Without even watching him go, Beatrice used "Door Crossing" to seal off the Forbidden Library. Hurriedly grabbing a cleaning cloth, she cleaned up the floor that Subaru had gotten wet. And when the cleaning was done…

"That man… he absolutely will not get away with this, you know. He must learn what Betty's anger means, I suppose."

With anger smoldering in her chest, and a cloth clutched in her hand, Beatrice's voice trembled.

4

Closing the door that connected to the Forbidden Library, Beatrice began walking ponderously on the mansion's carpets.

For Beatrice to go outside of the Forbidden Library, without a specific task in mind, was rare. It was her belief that, as long as she had the role of constantly caring for the library as it's librarian, she should remain there as much as possible.

Bending that belief, she was now taking action outside the Forbidden Library. The truth behind that was…

“If Betty isn’t inside the library, he shouldn’t be able to come and go so easily, you know.”

She resented it, but the reason that Subaru was able to reach the Forbidden Library was that he had good compatibility with her wavelength.

Put simply, Subaru was finding the Forbidden Library by using Beatrice as a landmark. It was likely that he wasn’t aware of it, but it was irritating nonetheless. Regardless, to prevent his invasion of the library, she was separating herself from it. In a certain sense, she was getting her priorities confused, but Beatrice hadn’t noticed that.

“What’s more, this time I just can’t let it go, I suppose. I’m going to give him a piece of my mind, you know.”

Treating her as a handywoman was one thing, but the vandalism of the Forbidden Library had finally crossed a line inside of Beatrice. With a soaked cleaning cloth in one hand, Beatrice was thinking of providing Subaru with some disciplinary action.

As she was getting goosebumps over her idea, imagining that it would go on to become a revenge drama famed throughout the world, just at that moment Subaru came into view on the far end of the hallway.

“I’ve found you, I suppose. I’ll get right on with…hmm?”

At the instant she’d thought of running over and landing a flying kick, her feet stopped moving as she became aware of a presence at Subaru’s side.

Before Subaru’s eyes, floating in front of his face, was Beatrice’s dear older brother, Puck.

Without thinking, Beatrice held her breath at the sight of the two of them, apparently deep in conversation about something. The air about them suggested she mustn’t disturb them, and yet the one she needed vengeance on was right in front of her; Beatrice was caught between a rock and hard place. On top of that…

"…! They're coming this way, you know!"

Having finished their conversation, Beatrice saw them heading towards this part of the hallway. Fearing that they'd find out she'd been eavesdropping, she frantically tumbled into a nearby guest room. But, through some twist of fate, she heard them stop in front of the room. To further avoid them, Beatrice hid in the closet.

Not a moment too soon, just as someone entered the room, Beatrice finished hiding. Quietly peeking outside as she heard the door close, she saw Puck floating in the center of the room.

She wouldn't mind being found if it was only Puck, she thought, but she had no way to explain why she was hiding. Thinking that she had no choice but to stay hidden and avoid being found, Beatrice held her breath…

"…Meow! Meoweow, me~w"

"…?!"

In the room that Beatrice was peeking into, Puck abruptly began rolling on the floor and crying out sweetly. On top of that, as he curled up his tail and looked around with big, round eyes, his charm was off the charts, and Beatrice, not grasping what Puck was doing, could only watch the kitten's antics in fascination.

…Bubby, what are you doing?! Ah, but how adorable you are, I suppose!

5

"Beako~, you the~re?"

"…I'm not, you know."

"Are you planning to make a habit of that? You're right here, aintcha? …Seriously."

On the afternoon of the same day, Subaru came to visit Beatrice after she'd returned to the Forbidden Library. Glancing at him, she saw he was carrying cleaning tools and smiling weakly.

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にくきゅー

“What brings you…Please tell me you’re not going to say you want to do some cleaning, and need me to connect to another room, I suppose.”

“Nah, that ain’t the plan. C’mon, this morning I dripped water in the entrance and caused trouble, right? So, I thought maybe I could do some cleaning in the Forbidden Library to show I was sorry…”

“An admirable thought, you know. However, there’s no need, I suppose.”

As Subaru showed a rarely-seen subdued attitude, Beatrice shook her head while smiling faintly. Seeing her reaction, Subaru widened his eyes as though surprised.

“…Your expression is strange, you know.”

“Uh, I’d say you’re being stranger here. Usually you’d be angrier… though I’m glad you’re not angry. You look kinda happy, did something nice happen?”

“Not really… Oh, yes, yes. There was something I wanted to say to you, I suppose.”

“Oh, I know, right? That’s more like my Beako. Alright, bring it on! I can take it!”

As if he were strengthening his resolve, Subaru crouched down where he was, and positioned himself as though preparing to be struck by something. Indeed, this was a posture that might allow him to endure a shockwave.

It’s just that the words Beatrice tossed towards him were, just this once, something else entirely…

“Now and then, even you can do a half-decent job of something, you know. My compliments, I suppose.”

“…eh?”

“You showed me something nice, you know.”

The reason wasn’t really clear to her, but it seemed that Puck looking cute like that had been an idea hatched by Subaru.

Well then, she felt like she ought to express her unabashed thanks for being able to see it. In regards to having gotten the Forbidden Library wet, she wouldn’t mind allowing this accomplishment to offset it.

Subaru’s mouth opened in shock at Beatrice’s carefree sentiment.

“B, Beako… have you got a fever or something?! This is terrible! It must be because you’re stuck in a place like this with no sunlight…! I, I’ll call a doctor! You’ll be well soon…”

“You should accept someone’s gratitude a little more graciously, I suppose!”

“Maikou~~!”

After she reappraised him in only a moment, Beatrice’s shockwave washed over Subaru and he was flung from the Forbidden Library.

The noisy boy disappeared, and the serenity it deserved once more descended on the Forbidden Library. Accepting that with a blissful feeling, Beatrice thought to herself.

…For the sake of this feeling of gratitude for the peace and quiet, perhaps she might be willing to allow a bit of noise now and then.

“No, that would be spoiling him too much, you know…”

Raising a hand to her forehead as though exhausted, Beatrice returned to the top of her stepladder and immersed herself in a book.

The faint hint of a smile etched onto her face was something that not even she herself would recall having seen before.

END

Librarian Beatrice's Log:
Page 3
(Volume 8; Melon Books)

1

…In truth, the situation was more or less as she had expected.

The ominous foreboding was itself something that Beatrice had been unable to escape.

In the first place, the premonition had started the moment she had heard who had been selected to head to the capital this time around.

The first two were Emilia and Roswaal; that was fine.

She hadn't been told the details, but the two aforementioned had business at the capital's castle. Naturally the two of them would be going. There was no question that Puck would accompany Emilia, so although that was lonely, it couldn't be helped.

Further, it seemed that Natsuki Subaru, the boy who had been hanging around Emilia these last few weeks, would be going along as well. On top of that, he had been the one to drop in to the Forbidden Library to tell her about it.

Going on and on about something she hadn't asked about, Subaru showed entirely no consideration for Beatrice as she was trying to concentrate on reading. He was a truly infuriating fellow, so she was relieved that she wouldn't have to see his face for a while.

Finally, one of the maids would accompany them to handle seeing to their needs. Normally, the older of the maid sisters would take on that role, the one who was unwaveringly loyal to that good-for-nothing Roswaal.

However, just this once, it didn't turn out that way. The one who had asked to accompany them was the younger of the maid sisters.

The older one had yielded that role to the younger, and as a result, the older sister and Beatrice would be the two to remain in the mansion.

That fact itself wasn't something that she minded. Beatrice hadn't particularly gotten close to anyone in the mansion—Puck was an exception—and she had no intention of being friendly to them.

No matter who it was that she would be spending several days alone with in the mansion, it wasn't something that she would give a second thought to.

…That was based on the assumption that her routine as a librarian was not disrupted.

"Good morning, Beatrice-sama. This is your breakfast of steamed yam."

"I see, I suppose. Leave it there, you know."

"It's noon, Beatrice-sama. I've prepared a steamed yam for your lunch."

"Hmm, I see, I suppose. I'll put the plate out later, you know."

"Here is your supper, Beatrice-sama. This evening, perhaps a steamed yam will do."

"…I, I see, I suppose. Steamed yams aren't bad, you know. Hmm, that's fine, I suppose."

"Good morning, Beatrice-sama. Breakfast has been especially steamed with extra effort."

"For pity's sake, I suppose! There are limits to what Betty can take, you know!!"

When, a bit more than a day after the party had left for the capital, a meal of steamed yams was offered for the fourth time, Beatrice reached her limit, came flying out of the Forbidden Library, and poked the older of the maid sisters with her finger.

The girl, Ram, with peach-colored hair and faint red eyes, and an altered maid outfit that exposed white skin, held a steaming plate in one hand and tilted her head; her expression showed no reaction to what Beatrice had pointed out.

“Beatrice-sama, if you need to visit the bathroom, there’s no need for you to go to the trouble of telling Ram about it.”

“Oh, come now! Who was speaking about that kind of limit to endurance?! You’ve been disrespectful nearly from the beginning, but lately it’s been happening a little too often, you know?!”

“You’ve gone and unmasked her, have you? Ram has been like this since she was born.”

“And now you’re showing too much of your true face, I suppose! There are limits to impudence as well, you know!”

Ram’s haughty irreverence wasn’t something that had begun recently, but before now, she would not have talked back directly to Beatrice’s face. In light of this change, no, this deterioration, Beatrice ended up stamping her foot.

“You can’t get away with overdoing that, just because Roswaal is away, I suppose. I demand that you shape up in your duties as a servant, you know. Firstly, put some effort into improving the food situation, I suppose.”

“You say that, but Ram has been laboring diligently each time on the flavor of the steamed yams. The salting, the duration of steaming, the selection of yams and mayonnaise… Isn’t it too early to be getting tired of them?”

“What matters! Is that it’s all the same meal, you know! Can you not make anything besides steamed yams, I suppose?!”

“Ram isn’t proud of that fact.”

“That’s exactly right, you know! It’s nothing to be proud of, I suppose!”

As Ram gave a faint impression of standing her ground proudly, Beatrice spoke roughly to her, wide-eyed.

She couldn’t stand the warm scent of salt that drifted faintly in the hallway. Atop a plate were placed freshly steamed yams, and next to them white mayonnaise—the curious condiment that Subaru had devised—was arranged as well. There was no question it would be delicious. Beatrice loved mayonnaise.

However, if she were to show approval here because of that, she couldn’t hope for the situation to improve.

“So, for now, Betty must harden her heart, and briefly forget about mayonnaise.”

“Depriving yourself like that… *munch munch* could have ill effects on your health, Beatrice-sama.”

“That’s Betty’s steamed yam, I suppose! Don’t think you can just go ahead and eat it, you know!”

As they were speaking, Ram’s hand had reached for the plate. Stealing her breakfast from that hand, and while snarling like a cat, Beatrice glared at Ram and asserted herself.

“You rely too much on your little sister… *munch munch* You’re entirely forgetting… *munch munch* your duties as a… *munch munch* servant, I suppose… *munch munch*”

“Beatrice sama, some tea?”

“*munch munch*…I’ll take some, you know.”

From a teapot placed on the serving cart, the fragrant aroma of tea was spreading through the hallway. Accepting the tea poured into a cup, Beatrice’s eyes narrowed in satisfaction at the warm flavor.

The steamed yam, delicious. The tea that Ram brewed, this was also delicious. Honestly, although one could hold nothing but doubt about Ram’s ability as a servant, her yam steaming and tea brewing were perfect. Satisfaction.

“But this is no time to be satisfied, I suppose!”

“Beatrice-sama… Hasn’t Barusu been rubbing off on you lately?”

“There’s no call for that kind of insult, you know!! I can’t believe you, I suppose…!”

Trembling furiously, Beatrice expressed her indignation at having something like that pointed out. It was unthinkable for her to be under the influence of the black-haired youth who had come to stay at the mansion. How long did they think she had spent here?

There was no way that she would be open to change now, after all this time.

“Setting that aside, it’s quite strange, isn’t it. Normally, Ram is the one to accompany Roswaal-sama, so it’s exceptionally rare to have a chance to be alone in the mansion with Beatrice-sama.”

“…At this moment, Betty, too, is painfully aware of that.”

“Are you always making demands of Rem like this, when she stays together with you?”

“Demands! Did I say demand, I suppose?! I didn’t say that! Your little sister can do anything, so there’s no need for Betty to go to the trouble of saying anything, I suppose.”

As Beatrice clutched the hem of her dress and ground her teeth, Ram nodded at her solemnly. Although Beatrice had just plainly stated that Rem exceeded Ram in ability, Ram showed no sign of concern.

Not only that, she smiled faintly at Beatrice.

“Ram is very proud of her little sister Rem, after all.”

“If nothing else, I’m impressed by the strength of your heart…”

When placed in a situation of being compared to someone else, being found inferior is hard to take for anyone. Even for Beatrice, it was something she had personal experience with. It was something she felt more particularly when she was next to Puck.

There was no doubt that he was her beloved big brother. Despite that, she did feel an urge to envy him over the difference in the circumstances they had been placed in.

“Ram loves everything about Rem, after all, including her surroundings. It’s a different situation than yours, Beatrice-sama.”

“…Listen to you, talking as though you know anything about it, I suppose.”

“It’s just a bit of conversation. Besides, Ram has her hands full with her own concerns…Please be at ease.”

“At ease, you say? I wasn’t particularly worried, you know.”

While Ram spoke with a sparkle in her eye, Beatrice responded while licking at the salt and mayonnaise that had stuck to her hand. Then, after draining the cup of tea, the meal was finished. After wiping her fingertips with a cloth, Beatrice turned towards the hall’s doorway—the door that connected to the Forbidden Library. Behind her…

“Beatrice-sama.”

“What is it, I suppose? Let me remind you I’m expecting something more palatable for lunch, you know.”

“It’s not that; it’s only that something like eating while standing in the hallway is poor manners…”

“Setting aside that you nibbled at it first, what an outrageous bit of abuse, I suppose!!”

With her hand still on the door, Beatrice bellowed at Ram as she returned to the serving cart. Ram maintained her unruffled expression, and continued her speech with an “In addition, “.

“Ram has a full plate of jobs to attend to. Because of that, she has no time or effort to expend on meeting Beatrice-sama’s demands. Please extend your understanding to her.”

“That doesn’t sound like how someone hoping for understanding would put it, you know…?”

“Whether it’s stated politely or rudely, the steamed yam future will not change, after all.”

“Then at least say it politely, I suppose!”

As Beatrice seethed, Ram once more smiled faintly, and curtsied politely where she stood. If nothing else, the gesture was the perfect image of a maid, and Beatrice let loose a drawn-out sigh.

She watched Ram’s back as she pushed the serving cart, moving off into the distance.

“…This might be the most I’ve ever looked forward to the return of Roswaal and the others, you know.”

She whispered that with a tired-out face and voice.

2

With that sort of heartwarming exchange as a basis, Beatrice passed the dragged-out days of her time watching over the mansion.

The return of Roswaal and the others was on the fourth day after they’d left by dragon carriage—in other words, having no one but Ram for company went on for three days, and during that time, it should be noted that the meals were all steamed yams.

Regardless, thanks to their safe return from the capital, most of the problems that had been making Beatrice suffer stopped being problems. That was not, however, thanks to Rem, who, on her return to the mansion, took care of all of Ram’s accumulated chores at once, and offered meals other than steamed yams.

Unfortunately, Rem had not returned to the mansion. And it was not only Rem, but also Subaru who had gone along with her to the capital. The two of them remained at the capital, and the group that returned to the mansion consisted of the pair of Roswaal and Emilia, and Puck along with them.

As well, the various problems were not resolved; rather the matter was concluded with a decision that they would be set aside for later and shelved.

All of that came about thanks to Roswaal's first visit to the Forbidden Library in a long time…

"Beatrice. It's been so long, do you mind if I come i~n?"

"…Oh, it's you, I suppose."

When the man dressed as a clown opened the door and brazenly stuck his head inside, Beatrice sighed.

Beatrice was seated atop a wooden stepladder. When spending time in the Forbidden Library, that was her constant position. In truth, it wasn't that often that she met with Roswaal in this room.

Indeed, what was occurring here today was something that hadn't happened for several years. She didn't remember it that well, though.

"What brings you here, you know? Just so you know, Betty won't lend you any help with that crestfallen girl, I suppose. That's your jurisdiction, and not something Betty needs to involve herself with, you know."

"Tha~t's quite cold of you. Even when the Great Spirit whose so important to you is heartbroken over Emilia-sama? Even though you were kind enough to lend Subaru-kun a ha~nd?"

"…"

Although the provocative words seemed to be testing her, Beatrice held her silence and narrowed her eyes. Seeing her guarded attitude, Roswaal shrugged, and then walked over right to her side. He smiled, and though perhaps it was her imagination, he seemed to be enjoying himself; Beatrice found it suspicious.

"Somehow, you look like you're in a good mood, I suppose."

"Does it look that wa~y? Me, in good spirits?"

"…It does, you know. If you enjoy that girl being saddened in the capital that much, you'll forgive me if I question your tastes, I suppose. Maybe it was too late for that from the point you started wearing makeup, you know."

"O~h, don't be like that. It's the sort of thing that tends to put one in a good mood. For me~, the time for my dearest wish is coming steadily closer. With what's just happened, I'm sure of it, you se~e."

"When you say your dearest wish, you can't mean…"

"The dearest wish of the Mathers clan, indeed. If I put it that way, it's easier for you to understand, perha~ps? To you, who are both the guardian and librarian of the Forbidden Library, handed down from the time of the first Roswaal, yes?"

Roswaal closed one eye, and Beatrice, caught in the gaze of his yellow pupil, was at a loss for words.

The facts that Roswaal had spoken of were something that only Beatrice could grasp the true significance of. Seeing a slight glimpse of its meaning was something only Roswaal and Puck could do. And, by now…

"By now, Betty… is no longer concerned about what will happen, or what might happen, I suppose."

"That's a terribly sad thing. Howe~ver, there's something to look forward to. Hope, too, still remains. I know of your kindness and weakness. Isn't that right, Betty?"

"Why you…!"

Called by a familiar nickname, Beatrice lifted her head as though she were ready to lash out.

However, that exact reaction was what Roswaal had hoped for. He nodded at her, looking satisfied. Seeing that for herself, Beatrice immediately brought her rampant emotions under control.

Then, hugging her knees atop the stepladder, she turned her face away from Roswaal as though escaping from his gaze.

“Hope and expectations both have long ago dimmed, faded, and worn away. So Betty will always stay here… I wish for nothing more or less than that, I suppose.”

“I suppose you could say that. But… if possible, I would wish for you, too, to obtain happiness. You are worthy of that.”

“…There, indeed, you can say whatever you want when it’s only words, you know.”

As Beatrice’s cheeks bent into a cynical smile, Roswaal’s eyes lowered with just a hint of sadness. But, when he raised his head again, not a trace of that pity remained on his face.

He simply clapped his hands, and continued “That’s fine.” with his usual demeanor.

“No matter what sort of choice you decide on, I just wanted to let you know first. You’ve had as much time as you could want to worry over it, bu~t that time was necessary regardless. In order for you to be properly prepared.”

“…”

“I will head to ‘Sanctuary’. On the surface, it will be seen as going to explain about the Royal Selection to Garfiel and the others, but the truth of it is exactly as you are already aware. At the tomb, Teacher is waiting.”

“…We aren’t awaited, I suppose. At the very least, neither Betty nor yourself.”

“Ah, that’s true. I can’t disagree. …That’s why we must go to meet her. That’s what the time was for. That’s what this chance is for. That’s all there is t~o it.”

Loosening his lips, Roswaal showed a smile.

It was something different from the smiles that frequently showed up on his face, based on irony or mockery.

It was simply a genuine smile that looked forward to the future that awaited, anticipating wholeheartedly seeing it with his own eyes, the smile of a young man full of youthful innocence.

"…"

Finishing with that, Roswaal turned away from Beatrice, and withdrew from the Forbidden Library.

Exactly as he said in his last words to Beatrice, he would head to 'Sanctuary'. If that occurred, Beatrice had a fairly good idea of what would happen.

Left alone in the Forbidden Library, Beatrice reflected on Roswaal's words, and closed her eyes.

"After all this time…"

After all this time, she couldn't think that anything would change. Unlike Roswaal, she wasn't able to hold on to hope or expectations.

But on the other hand, just maybe, if something were to be set into motion…

"Mother… How much longer must Betty…?"

That sad whisper, that nevertheless carried a faint intensity, fell to the floor of the Forbidden Library, and vanished.

END

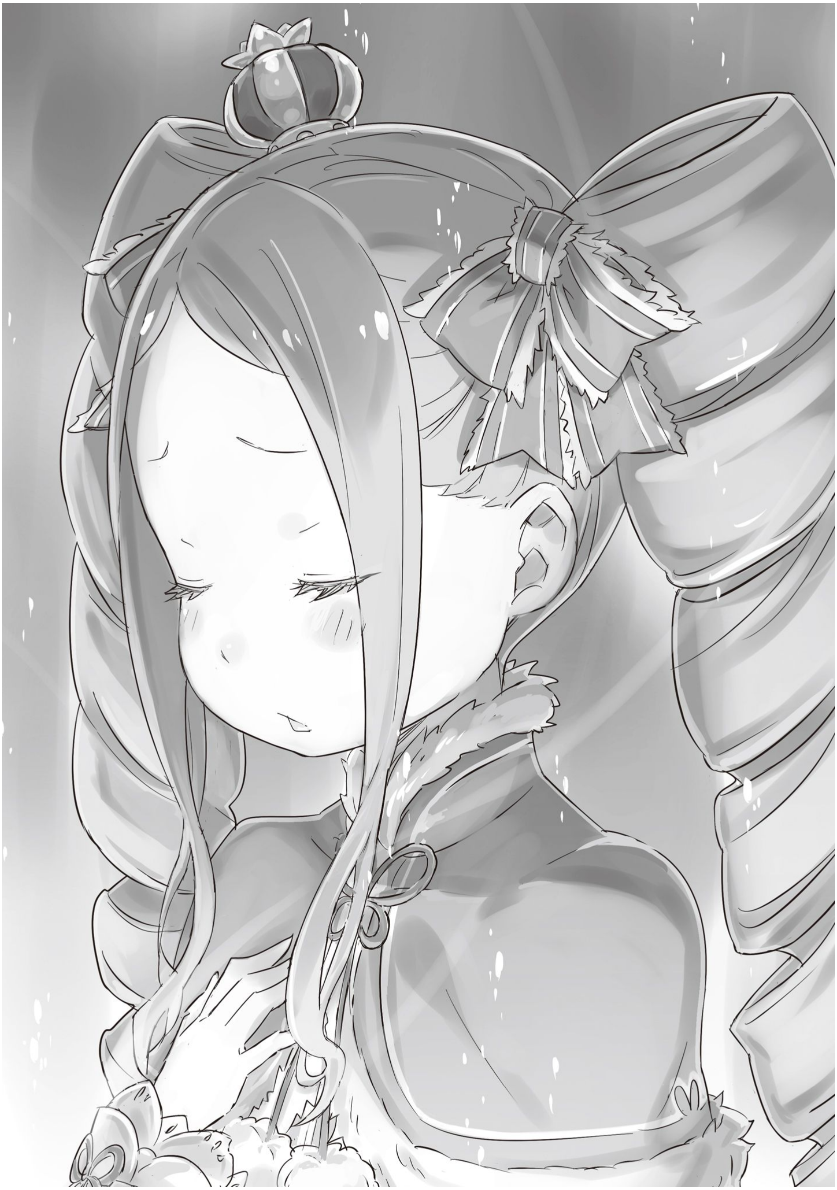

The Great Spirit Puck’s Nyan Nyan Sunny Day (Volume 7; Toranoana)

1

“Hey, Subaru…can we stop doing something like this?”

“What are you talking about, Miss Rabbit? Quitting right now would be like throwing away my manhood.”

“I don’t think you would lose it, and who’s Miss Rabbit?”

Such peaceful words were being exchanged at Roswaal Manor at noon. A boy and a beautiful girl were exchanging words in a slightly hushed and mature manner. They were Natsuki Subaru and Emilia, respectively.

They were close to each other, moving without making a sound in the hallways of Roswaal Manor, which was where they were currently staying. They were carefully executing a stealth operation—to be precise, they were following their target.

“We’ll be in trouble if our target notices us. Emilia-tan, be as quiet as possible… And you smell really good when you’re this close. Are you wearing perfume or something?”

“I’m not wearing any, but…leaving that aside, I don’t think there’s any point in doing something like this. Even if we act foxy like this, we’ll be spotted immediately.”

“Nobody uses the word foxy in this day and age…”

“Su-Ba-Ru.”

They exchanged their usual lines, but Emilia looked angry this time, surprisingly. Subaru thought her angry face was cute, too, and at the same time glanced at the end of the corridor again—

“Ah, damn it! We’ve lost our target! Emilia-tan, dash! Dash while being sneaky!”

"Huh? Wha? Dash?"

"It means to run while being sneaky! Watch and learn!"

"I can't do something skillful like…woah, Subaru, you are good at the sneaky dash."

Emilia hurriedly chased after Subaru, who was ahead of her demonstrating a peculiar running skill without making a sound. She desperately tried to mimic his running style, but it wasn't so easy to do.

Her effort is heartwarming, but for now, our priority is to pursue our target. He saw a long tail disappearing around the corner in the corner of his eye. It was a familiar-looking long tail that must have belonged to their target, a calm and laidback cat spirit—Puck. They didn't know where Puck went after leaving Emilia's side and flied freely around the mansion. To find that out was their goal—to conduct biological research on the Great Spirit Puck's behavior, that was the duty they were given.

"Oh, Subaru! Look, I was able to do the sneaky dash! Look, I can be reaaally quiet!"

"You improved really quick?!"

Even if you didn't make a sound while running, you wouldn't be able to tail someone if you didn't talk quietly.

It was a desperate tailing scene by two people who needed to look the definition up in a dictionary.

2

It all began after they'd finished today's breakfast and were taking a post-meal break.

Usually, the weird events at Roswaal Manor began with Subaru's words, and mostly when everyone in the mansion had gathered for meals. There was an unspoken agreement that everyone at Roswaal Manor would eat together unless there was a grave issue. It was a loose rule, something that a normal family had, but Subaru liked rules like that at Roswaal Manor. He believed that the more people you shared meals with, the better. In fact, many new discoveries were often made during meals, and it was also fun. The atmosphere where everyone chatted freely was a far cry from the formalities of your typical nobleman's house, and it was a time in which you could relax a bit. Also, him having questions often lead to events during such meals, but his question this time was a very simple one.

And that was—

"Well, what does Puck do when he isn't with you, Emilia-tan?" Subaru asked while tilting his head in the dining room after they'd finished eating and washed the dishes.

"Huh?" Emilia, who was having her after meal tea was surprised when she heard Subaru's words. There was no sign of the cat spirit in question on her beautiful hair or on her thin shoulders. And that was something to be expected since Puck floated out of the dining room alone a moment ago after letting Emilia know.

Emilia widened her eyes at that question.

"No, you see," Subaru said with a shrug. "It's a known fact that you and Puck have a contractual relationship, and I know that Puck is usually by your side, but…there are times when he moves around freely like this, right? So do you know what he does during that, Emilia-tan?"

"Puck when I'm not around…?"

Emilia looked as if she had never thought about it when Subaru asked. It seemed like her policy was to not interfere in Puck's affairs, for better or worse, and to not impose her will too much in Puck's activities during his free time.

"Well, I think the key to making a pet live long is to not stress it out, but I also think they need some tough love sometimes."

"Ah, Subaru, you are making fun of Puck, aren't you? Puck would definitely be angry if he heard that, so don't say something like that," Emilia chided as she lifted her eyebrows sharply, which was unusual for her, after her contracted spirit was treated like a pet.

“Listen here,” Emilia said after lifting her finger at Subaru. “Puck is a lot more mature than you think. I’m sure that he’s doing something reaaally important when he isn’t with me. Puck is, of course, always working hard for world peace.”

“What’s up with that really vague kinda understanding? It’s like the opinion of a kid who doesn’t know what their parent does but thinks that they are probably doing something great!”

Subaru had no idea what his father did for a living when he was a child, but he had such a vague trust in him. He still didn’t know much about it even though he’d grown up. But now he thought that it was something that equaled world peace since it was a job that was enough to sustain his wife and son.

“In any case, since you don’t know about it, I need to get serious and start investigating. I don’t have to work until the afternoon today, so I might as well go after him.”

“That’s in bad taste… I think it’s better not to do it.”

“You can’t stop something that’s already set in motion. And Emilia-tan, aren’t you a bit curious deep down? I’m not saying that he’s doing something bad, but if he is really working hard for world peace then it’s more of a reason to see what he’s doing.”

“Well, that’s…”

“Let’s go check it out!”

“…Ok.” Emilia, who easily gave in when pressured, got persuaded by Subaru while in a state of bewilderment.

This was how the two of them rushed out of the dining room and how they started following Puck.

3

—Luckily Puck, who had left the dining room before them, was found immediately, and the tailing began. However, it couldn’t be said that the subsequent pursuit of Puck was very fruitful. It wasn't that they had lost him or that he had found out about them following him, the problem was what he was doing.

"Puck is scratching the wall of the mansion with his claws, but why do you think he's doing that?" Subaru asked.

"He's probably checking the mansion's durability," Emilia answered. "Puck is patrolling around checking things like that to make sure that everyone stays safe. He's amazing."

"To me it just seems like he's taking care of his overgrown nails."

"Oh, Subaru, look! Puck started moving really fast! He might have found something."

"He rushed into the restroom with such speed, so isn't it that? The thing called 'Toilet High' where cats get really energetic before and after using the toilet."

"That's not… Oh! He came out just as fast. We are going to lose him!"

"He's flying around the mansion quite energetically. Is something happening in here…?" Subaru wondered.

"I get it!" Emilia exclaimed. "Since we had a witchbeast commotion before, he is checking whether there's an opening in the barrier or not. Or he's secretly putting up a new barrier just in case…"

"To me, it just looks like he is searching for a place to sunbathe, or he's patrolling his territory."

"He went into the kitchen!" Subaru shouted.

"He probably, has something reaaally important…"

"He got a small fish from Rem and came out eating it."

"Snacking! He's going to get fat!"

"Is that what the issue is?

While they were keeping an eye on Puck, he did whatever he wanted to since it was his free time—a bit too free.

I mean, as far as I have observed, his behavior is completely like that of…

"A cat… And it looks like he's a housecat that has completely forgotten its wild instincts."

"I was thinking about it, but I don't think Puck's nails grow, so he doesn't need to file them. He doesn't need to use the restroom either. And he just needs my hair and shoulders to be his territory. See, Puck isn't weird."

"You found something to cling to, and now you're trying like mad to refute everything I said."

Usually, Emilia often lost against Subaru's arguments, however, she couldn't afford to lose when it was about her only family. She kept pushing back, and she was certainly trying to make a point with her words.

I didn't doubt it till now since Puck was really acting like a cat, but Puck is a spirit, and I don't think he needs to do all the things that cats have to do. It's like Emilia said, there might be a reason behind him filing his nails and being in a toilet high.

"But, snacking in the kitchen doesn't really mean anything, right?"

"Ma…Maybe he is saving up his energy for an important task later?"

It seems like Emilia also doesn't think that it was very convincing since her sentence ended with a question. And the idea of him having an important task later also seems fishy. And if Puck curls up and starts sleeping, then even Emilia would have to admit defeat. But—

"—Alright, I guess it's almost time," muttered Puck, who had become full after swallowing the small fish he'd received.

His voice was deep, and his side profile looked tense—the atmosphere had changed.

"Could it be that he really has something to do…? Is it something like fighting other cats to be the boss cat?"

"There's no way Puck would fight stray cats. Puck's territory is inside my body. It's in here."

"You made an unintentional erotic comment, but Puck is on the move now. Let's go after him."

As Puck floated up with a serious look and started moving in a straight line, they began pursuing him. The way he flew, glancing around, clearly showed a sense of tension and caution that he didn't have before. Seeing things like that made Subaru and Emilia tense.

Eventually, Puck arrived in front of a room with his hair standing on end due to his cautious state. Subaru and Emilia looked at each other after realizing whose room it was.

"…That's…my room?"

"Maybe Puck has some business with you, Subaru…"

Subaru and Emilia looked at each other and tilted their heads. From everything they'd observed so far, they had a pretty good idea as to how Puck behaved. But they weren't sure how it connected with him visiting Subaru's room.

"…" Then Puck put his tail on the doorknob without saying a word and slowly opened the door. It was surprising to know that he used his tail to open doors, but it was even more surprising that he had snuck in without saying anything.

Naturally, Subaru's mind recalled the recent witchbeast commotion.

—He recalled the difficult relationship between him and the twins that had flared up during that. At the time, the two of them suspected my origins and were watching me to see if I was a dangerous person, so maybe Puck is cautious like that.

"Subaru…" Emilia softly called Subaru, who had looked down anxiously with listless eyes.

He came back to his senses after hearing her voice and shook his head, forcing a smile. "I'm fine," he said. "Let's go clear things up."

I'm prepared to work hard and clear up the misunderstanding if Puck is suspecting me. I was able to do it with Rem and Ram, so I can do it with Puck too—

"—Hm?"

He was just about to put his hand on the doorknob and step into the room since he was thinking of talking with Puck. He heard a rather loud rustling noise from inside the room.

Hm? It's sounds somewhat familiar, but I wonder what it could be? Subaru tilted his head in wonder. And then it hit him.

And then—

"Hey, you! You good for nothing cat."

"Meow?!"

Puck, who was frolicking on the bed, got startled when Subaru entered the room. Puck looked back with his round eyes widened, and only half of him was visible for some reason—it was because he was playing around in the plastic bag from the convenience store and making rustling sounds.

"I was wondering what was up with that serious look, and then this turns out to be the punchline! You are a cat! Just a cat!"

“Hey, don’t startle me,” Puck replied. “It’s my private time now.”

“If we are going to talk about private things, then this is my private room! What are you doing playing with someone else’s plastic bag? You are totally a cat!” Subaru shouted at the unapologetic Puck, criticizing his suggestive attitude.

Then Subaru looked back at Emilia and pointed his finger at Puck. “Hey, look, Emilia-tan! This is his true form! He’s a cat!”

“No, maybe he’s just trying to do something great using your white bag… I’m sorry, I can’t do this.”

“Emilia-tan gave up on supporting him!”

At the end, it developed into a situation where Emilia gave up on supporting Puck and the ordeal ended noisily.

After everything was said and done, they came to the conclusion that ‘Puck during his free time is free!’

—After that, Emilia started to be seen making Puck report what he had been doing during his free time at the end of the day. Seeing that, Subaru thought that it definitely looked like a pet being disciplined.

END

猫

The Great Spirit Puck's Nyan Nyan Nyan Sunny Day (Ex 2; Toranoana)

1

"—Lately, I feel like Lia's eyes look cold when she looks at me," Puck said, looking serious with his arms crossed as he floated in front of Subaru's face.

It was in the morning, right after everyone was done with breakfast. Rem was in charge of cleaning up the dining table, and Subaru was on his way to clean the bathhouse in the basement of the mansion as directed by Ram. As usual, he showed his affection towards Emilia and exchanged snarky remarks with Beatrice, but then he was stopped when he came out of the dining room.

"In the past, Lia believed me unconditionally and was fooled by me, but nowadays I feel like she has become less naïve. Subaru, what do you think?"

"First off, I'm starting to get worried about leaving Emilia-tan in your care."

The fact that he doesn't have any malicious intent makes it worse.

Subaru lost interest in taking it seriously and headed for the bathhouse, but Puck didn't seem to care and followed him, flying around the back of his head.

"Hey, hey, take it seriously. I am serious about it, this is a serious matter."

"Alright then, I'll answer you with some seriousness. Since you demonstrated being a really good for nothing cat, she might be pumped up as the owner and wants to discipline you, I guess?"

"Stop that! I'm not in a mood to hear jokes like that. You are quite rude."

Puck puffed his cheeks as if he was offended and started slapping Subaru's face with his tail. But Subaru didn't mean to joke around, and for the most part, it was his honest opinion. It was only the other day that Subaru and Emilia found out what Puck did when he was on his own. His behavior was that of a house cat for the most part, which shocked Emilia, who had believed that Puck was contributing to world peace.

"Until then, Emilia-tan had innocently believed that her parent was doing an admirable job…"

"It's not good to say things like that. There's no such thing as a noble or lowly job. Every job is admirable. If you word it like that, then…"

"There's no such thing as a noble or a lowly job, but in your case, that isn't a job! It's just your natural instincts!" Subaru shouted at Puck, who was being shameless, then took his jacket off in the changing room, rolled up his pants, and entered the bathroom with a mop in hand.

He then proceeded to clean it with a practiced hand.

"But even so… I'm worried about Lia. So many things have changed for her, so maybe she's feeling tired because of that."

"I think your behavior recently has been her greatest source of fatigue."

"My my… It's quite troubling that her greatest source of fatigue is unaware."

The sources of her headache were blaming each other, but things couldn't be judged since Emilia wasn't there.

Puck then clapped his hands as if he'd struck upon a great idea. "Maybe, she is in her rebellious age…? A lot of things would make sense if I think that way…!"

"Does it make sense though?"

"I feel like the skin-to-skin contact between Lia and I has been lacking lately. Lia is busy nowadays, and I've been letting her off the hook since I felt like she should be independent from her parent… This isn't good!"

"It's not she who needs to let go of her attachment to her parent, but you who needs to let go of your attachment to your daughter, isn't it? Before you could even do that, you were losing your sanity and about to turn into a cat. Not a stray, either, but a house cat," Subaru called out after he finished mopping, but Puck didn't have any intention of listening to his opinion.

Subaru shook his head at the pondering spirit and pointed at the water inside the bathtub. "Hey, Puck. Use that water to wash the floor in exchange for the consultation fee. It'll be much faster than using the hand tub. You can do that much, right?"

"Hmmmm?"

Even though he was inattentive, Puck extended his hand towards the bathtub at Subaru's request and concentrated his mana. And then—as expected of his large mana reserves—the water in the bathtub rose and started floating around the tub.

"Woah! Amazing! That's sooo cool, man!"

It wasn't quite jelly-like, but the surface of the water rippled as it floated around. And as long as it slowly descended to the floor, Subaru's request would be fulfilled. But…

"—Yeah, I'm sure of it. The thing Lia and I are lacking is parent-child communication!"

"Waiiiii—?!"

As soon as Puck had come to some sort of conclusion to his thoughts, he stopped controlling the solidified water.

Immediately, the de-solidified water came crashing down, turning into an overwhelming wave. The rough waves smashed into Subaru at the waist, flipping him upside down and taking him into its murky flow.

“Bah! Hey! It isn’t on the same level as boxers getting wet ya know?!” Subaru shouted while shaking his head after popping his head out from the tub.

However, as the culprit had already disappeared from the bathtub, his cries echoed in vain.

And while Subaru was left soaking wet alone—

“You are making a lot of noise, Barusu. Don’t play around just because no one is looking…”

“Ah.”

Ram had opened the door to the changing room and peeked inside. She looked at Subaru, who was submerged in the bathtub and all wet, squinted at him, and let out a deep sigh. “Do you want to drink the used water so badly that you’d resort to such cheap tricks? Disgusting.”

“I’m not that advanced!!”

In the first place, it’s the warm water that both Roswaal and I have soaked in, and it gets changed every time, anyway.

—I’ve only thought about it once or twice.

2

After the incident in the bathroom, Subaru changed his clothes even after taking Ram’s mild eyes of disdain. Since he’d gotten his servant attire dirty, he was wearing his tracksuit now.

He touched his partially dry hair and walked down the corridor thinking of what to do with Puck. “That piece of shit ran away after doing all that to me. I won’t let him get away with it…” He reached the stairs with that in his heart.

“Oh?”

Something suddenly fell on the stair landing from the floor above. A small ball had hit the wall and rolled towards Subaru’s feet. It was palm-sized and probably something like a tennis ball. He picked it up and found that it felt and weighed like a tennis ball, too.

“Why is there a…tennis ball here?”

“Oh, Subaru.”

Emilia had showed herself from the floor above while he was tilting his head with the tennis ball in his hand.

She looked at the ball in Subaru’s hand and scrunched up her pretty eyebrows in an apologetic way. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I wasn’t startled, but is this yours, Emilia-tan?”

“No, it’s more like it’s Puck’s but…no, never mind, it’s fine. Can you return that to Puck? Since I’m busy now.” After saying that quickly, she tapped on Subaru’s shoulder and went further downstairs.

“That’s fine by me but…oh well.”

Subaru felt like something unusual was going on since she wasn’t usually that bossy, but someone else came towards him there.

“Subaruuu.”

“What’s up with that pathetic face and voice? Emilia-tan said that she’s busy.”

Puck dizzyingly and weakly swayed down to Subaru. Subaru caught his body with his left hand and Puck started at the ball in his hand with a pathetic face.

“Aah, so you had it… Unfortunately, the communication strategy has failed. I took your advice, but it didn’t work.”

“Since when did this become my idea? But what did you do? I would hope not, but was it something like you getting the ball that Emilia-tan throws?”

If that’s the case, then it is undoubtedly communication between a pet and its owner. And that's not the kind of relationship owners have with a cat, but with a dog.

Puck stretched his ears angrily at that. "It's not thattt. It's a game of catch of course, when it comes to parent-child interaction. I wanted to get closer to her by asking questions like 'What does Lia want to be in the future?'"

"You wouldn't get it, but what, are you like from the Showa period?! You already know what Emilia-tan wants to become! She wants to be the ruler of this country!"

"No, no, what Lia really wants to become is…oh wait, it isn't the right time to say it."

"That's something deep! No, I don't need to know something like that!"

Subaru started to doubt if Puck really wanted to repair their relationship as they continued to talk like that. But it seemed like Puck was taking a real toll from his atrophied ears and tail.

"Well, if the relationship between you and Emilia stays cracked then you guys might not be able to coordinate well in a critical moment. That would be troublesome for you."

"Yeah…so I have thought of my next plan."

"Tell me."

"After giving it some thought, it's possible that Lia has gotten used to my charm. So, I thought of going back to the basics and doing it more unscrupulously."

"Say what?"

"Weren't you the one who asked for it?"

"I said that because I was expecting you to say something decent!"

Having come to an odd conclusion, Puck flew off softly from Subaru's hand. Subaru followed Puck without a second thought as he crossed through the stair landing and went towards the corridor lined with guest rooms. Puck picked one of the guest rooms and energetically turned back at Subaru in front of the door.

“I’m going to train here from now on to overcome my past self. It’s futile to try to stop me.”

“I won’t stop you, and I won’t peek, either. All of our talk up until now was meaningless.”

“—I’ll go, in order to regain our family bond and—to be a family once again.”

“The only thing super cool about it is your dialogue.”

Puck went into the guest room right in front of him with a melancholic air. After staring at the door, Subaru didn’t peek, but put his ear next to the door to listen to what was happening inside.

“—Meow! Meow! Meaaa.”

“…” Hearing the sounds of training, Subaru sighed deeply, then moved away from the door to complete his remaining chores. He dragged his unusually tired body around even though it was only midmorning.

3

“Subaru, isn’t it almost time for a break? Would you like some tea?” Emilia asked after entering the garden to reward Subaru for his hard work as he was putting away the tools after finishing the last chore of the morning, which was tending to the garden.

“Oh, it makes me really happy that it’s an invitation from you, Emilia-tan. Have my daily efforts finally paid off?”

“—? I don’t really get it, but if you are working hard, then I hope they paid off.”

“That answer of yours tells me I’m not putting in enough effort. Thank you,” Subaru said, giving Emilia, who didn’t get it, a wry smile, then washed his hands and joined her.

“Let’s do it in my room,” Emilia said, inviting Subaru.

While they were walking towards her room, Emilia suddenly started talking in a hushed voice. “Hey. Is Puck bothering you?”

“He is bothering me a lot, but it isn’t something you need to worry about. It’s a man’s destiny to get into trouble with his father-in-law… That being sad, he was feeling down.”

“I thought so. Maybe it’s because I’m being harsh with Puck.”

“Oh, so Puck wasn’t imagining it.”

Seeing that Emilia looked serious, Subaru scratched his head.

It seems like Puck wasn’t wrong about Emilia acting like that on purpose.

“Can I ask you why?”

“It’s…well, maybe I am sulking a bit. I thought Puck would be more mature, but I really lost my energy due to that incident the other day.”

“Oh, just like I thought…”

The cause and the things that followed being the same as Subaru had speculated, he put his hand on his forehead, but then immediately laughed at the worried-looking Emilia.

“It isn’t a big deal,” he said. “I can understand your feelings, Emilia-tan, but he needs to learn a lesson sometimes. He wouldn’t bat an eye if anyone else did that to him, so knocking him down a peg like that will do him some good, too.”

“Is, that…so. Yeah, you are right. Puck needs to reflect on things a bit.”

“That’s the spirit! And I really think that there’s something wrong with what he did…”

Subaru had no other option but to be considerate to Emilia.

And Puck brought this situation upon himself for the most part, so he needs to reflect upon it and feel down.

It seemed like Subaru's words had eased Emilia's mind since she didn't look anxious anymore. And then they reached her room.

Let's go in and have some tea—

"Well then, Subaru. I have prepared tea for…"

"—Meowwww."

Emilia's feet stopped the moment she stepped into the room. Her gaze was directed to the front, at the center of the room, from where she heard a sweet, flirtatious cry. Subaru frowned at that and looked inside the room over Emilia's shoulder. And…

"Meo, meo, meow. Meeoowww…"

There was a cat dancing in a cute, calculated manner, twisting his long tail, his round eyes glistening. The sight of his fluffy fur, quivering ears, and the sad purr was a sweet trap that stimulated the primitive human desire to protect something. —It was the ultimate calculated charm, perfected by a house cat.

"Puck…"

"Meow, meow, mew, mew…"

Emilia's voice trembled after seeing Puck like that. Recalling her conclusion from before, it was clear how she would react to the sight of Puck, who had lost his wild instincts. But—

"Oh no, Puck, you are so cute…! What happened to you? Cute…!" Completely losing against Puck's calculated charms, Emilia picked him up, blushing.

She then proceeded to rub her cheeks against his. It seemed like her conclusion and resolute decision had completely faded away.

"Meow…make up," Puck requested in a sweet voice.

“Make up? Yes, sure, sure,” Emilia said, easily giving in. “Puck, you are so cute. I am sorry for being stubborn.”

Puck thrust out his palm energetically at Subaru, who was looking at them with a blank face.

He’s acting like ‘It all went well thanks to you’, but that’s a false accusation. Anyway, leaving all of that aside… “The reason why a house cat gets too cocky is because there’s a problem with the owner’s way of disciplining it…” Subaru muttered in a resigned voice as he witnessed Puck and Emilia playing with each other.

They probably won’t stop playing until the tea gets cold, he thought to himself.

—And in fact, their adorable merrymaking didn’t end until lunch was called.

END

The Great Spirit Puck's Nyan Nyan Tricks (Volume 8; Toranoana)

1

An air of strained tension drifted on and on inside the dragon carriage.

In the Kingdom of Lugunica, in the royal capital Lugunica, was found the royal castle Lugunica. In front of it, many dragon carriages headed to the castle were currently waiting in an orderly line before the castle gate.

Normally, it would be rare to have this many people streaming into the castle, but today was a special day. Due to that, many people were making their way to the castle, security had been strengthened, and everyone was being checked carefully as they entered.

Inside the dragon carriage as it continued to inch its way forward, one could hear the sound of the frame swaying, rocked by the wind. A ground dragon's Blessing of Wind Evasion protected against wind and sound that would interfere with travel, but when a ground dragon stopped moving its feet, the blessing's effect was lost. This vast traffic jam was enough of a slowdown to cut off the blessing.

"It looks like we can't get into the castle any time soon."

Gazing at the state of things outside the window, a beautiful silver-haired girl murmured that to herself. Amethyst eyes drenched in sorrow, the girl who spoke with a silver bell voice was named Emilia.

"There shouldn't be any need to worry about being late. But your cheeks are getting all stiff, Lia. If you don't relax a little, your cute face will go to waste, won't it?"

Picking up on what Emilia had whispered, a tiny shadow responded to her with a carefree, joking voice.

With a grey fur coat, a cat small enough to easily sit on the girl's narrow shoulder – he looked like nothing so much as a kitten, but was nevertheless a being that had the intelligence to comprehend human speech, a Great Spirit.

"It's fine. There isn't a girl anywhere that can beat Lia in cuteness. I can guarantee that for you."

"This isn't a day to be talking about who is cute and who isn't. I know you're doing your best to cheer me up, Puck, but that's rea~lly missing the point."

"Oh, is that so? The other candidates are all girls, too, so I was sure that was it."

"…Oh, you really are hopeless."

Emilia had to cover up a laugh as the spirit, Puck, played the fool for her on her shoulder. Seeing the tension on the side of her face disperse, if only a little, Puck nodded in satisfaction. Then…

"A~s expected of the Great Spirit, handling Emilia-sama is something you have a firm grasp of, i~sn't it."

Their exchange was complimented by an individual sitting across from them, dressed as a clown – Roswaal. He crossed his long legs elegantly, and continued while sending his gaze towards the scenery outside the window.

"Having said that, I can't entirely disagree with what the Great Spirit has surmised. This is a ceremony to select who will next sit on the throne, but currently, the only ones chosen by the dragon gem fitted to the emblem have been women… Indeed, the writings on the dragon tablet mention five priestesses, after all. It's only natural to think of that as the dragon's preference, the~n."

"In truth, if you think of it as continuing the bloodline, it's probably convenient for all the candidates to be girls, but… it's favoring one side a little too much. The candidates all have cute faces, too."

After responding to Roswaal's ironic smile, Puck turned back to Emilia with an 'Oh'.

"But there's no need to worry, no one can hold a candle to you, Lia, no matter who it is. Have confidence in yourself."

"I'm not really sure what kind of confidence you're talking about, but… Mhmm, alright. But…"

Cutting her words off there for a moment, Emilia tilted her head. Placing a finger on her lips, she continued.

"What do you mean when you say 'thinking about continuing the bloodline'? Why would girls be better?"

"…?"

Emilia's eyes were wide, and her expression said she didn't get it. Roswaal narrowed his eyes at that reaction, and then stared at Puck, sitting on her shoulder.

"Great Spirit, isn't that a little too overprotective, h~mm?"

"She can't be interested in what she doesn't know. This, indeed, is the very best of defensive measures for my daughter. That's my thinking, and that's what I've put into practice."

"Allow me to correct myself. That's not overprotective, but rather fairly controlling, wouldn't you sa~y?"

Puck looked somewhat hurt as he shrugged at what Roswaal pointed out. However, Emilia didn't quite grasp the meaning of what they were talking about. It did seem certain that they were talking about her, however.

However, they weren't given the time to go any deeper into the matter.

"Oho, it seems we've started moving. The front gate's come into view. Please prepare to enter the castle soon.”

“…Yes, I see. I’m all set.”

“Ready your heart as well, of course.”

Just as she nodded in response to Roswaal’s repeated words, the dragon carriage arrived at the castle gate.

When the doors of the various carriages were opened, Roswaal was the first to descend from the carriage. Following after his tall body, Emilia, too, moved to the outside. With her hair blowing in the warm breeze, she faced forward.

“…”

All at once, she could feel the tension in her surroundings on her skin, and Emilia drew her lips together sharply.

The clear recognition directed at her appearance, her silver hair and amethyst eyes. Even though she’d been preparing for it, it clawed at Emilia’s heart despite her preparation. However…

“It’s alright, Lia. …I’m at your side.”

Burrowed into her hair, she had family treating her kindly, close enough that she could feel his breath.

As her heart was rescued by that presence, Emilia looked up at Castle Lugunica, towering before her eyes.

On this day, at Castle Lugunica, the talks regarding the ceremony to select who would next take the throne would be held.

2

After the identity check at the castle gate was finished, Emilia was shown into the VIP waiting room.

Inside the warmly colored, well-ordered room, expensive furnishings and paintings were beautifully arranged.

One of the paintings was of the three heroes spoken of in stories handed down in the kingdom – “God Dragon” “Master Swordsman” “Sage”, and stone statuary using the “God Dragon” as a motif could be seen at various locations around the castle.

Not feeling like he could look on it favorably, Puck decided that it was in rather poor taste.

“If they’re going to be decorating with this sort of thing, they’d be better off just hanging pictures of fruit. Why, I might even draw one or two for them, myself.”

“O~h, this is unexpected. To think that the Great Spirit makes a hobby of dabbling in art.”

“Well, I’ve never painted, but maybe I can paint. See, I’m just a bundle of possibilities. The philosophy of not letting one’s whims be bound by rules, doesn’t that sound like an artist?”

“I feel like that sort of trait is closer to a cat than an a~rtist.”

Saying that entirely without malice, a smile of amusement appeared on Roswaal’s face.

In his attitude’s words and hidden meanings, he was making no effort to treat Puck with the respect due to a Great Spirit.

In truth, Puck himself didn’t care for thoughtless respect or worship. Even calling him a Great Spirit was just something the people around him had begun doing by themselves. He wasn’t proud of it; it meant nothing to him.

“Well then. You’ve gone to the trouble of calling me here and leaving Lia alone in the waiting room. Is it alright for me to think that you’ve called me to talk about something important?”

“Naturally, an important task is waiting for Emilia-sama. She needs time to unify the spirits… if I were to say that, you wouldn’t believe me, then? In truth, it’s something di~fferent.”

Shaking his head with a clownish gesture, Roswaal folded his short arms and looked up at Puck.

Just as was said, there was no sign of Emilia in the room the two were meeting in. After they'd been shown to the waiting room, Emilia was left there by herself, and Puck was called by Roswaal to another room.

Leaving Emilia behind when she was uneasy was a concern, but Roswaal didn't seem like the sort that would take meaningless action at a time like this. Reluctantly, he had responded to the summons.

"Of course, if you're playing some kind of prank, I'll leave right away. I enjoy a good prank, too, but right now, when Lia is shaking like a kitten, I'm worried for her like a father cat."

"You truly do care for Emilia-sama, Great Spirit. I assure you I understand your worries fo~r her. For Emilia-sama, this may become her great moment in the spotlight… or an embarrassing debut."

"…I'm still not very happy with the idea of having that girl standing up in front of people. Lia says she'll do it no matter what, so I'm just doing what I can to help out."

It was easy to imagine the harsh situation Emilia would be placed in, several hours from now. For that alone, Puck was emotionally opposed to not only the events of today, but participating in the Royal Selection from the start.

There really was no reason for her to be unjustly injured, or to go to the trouble of making herself a target.

He kept Emilia distant from everything that would hurt her. That was Puck's reason for existing.

"However, Emilia-sama has already chosen her path. Well then, our duty is to clear and pave the road that she will walk, as well as we are able, wouldn't you say?"

"…If you'd quit beating around the bush, we could get this over with."

"We~ll then, I'll be brief. A few hours from now, Emilia-sama will stand on the stage of the Royal Selection. At that time, it is certain that those who do not think kindly of her origin will shower her with heartless condemnation. Their distrust is deeply rooted, and it's plain to see that they are vulgar enough to jump at the chance to abuse someone while maintaining appearances."

Roswaal fluidly explained his rather cruel conjecture to Puck.

Puck listened in silence; by and large, he was thinking the same thing. It wasn't hard to imagine after the looks that were directed at Emilia when she arrived by the other who had business at the castle.

"When the Royal Selection begins, the candidates will be given a chance to express their own thoughts. Something you might call a public declaration of belie~fs."

"A public declaration of beliefs… something about it seems quite overblown."

"It's a big affair for the kingdom, after all, so it's only natural for it to be overblown and exaggerated. Also, I've informed Emilia-sama about the declaration. However,"

Cutting off his words there, Roswaal closed one eye and pierced Puck with an amber gaze. With a slight pause in his speech, Roswaal's head wobbled as he shook it.

"The time of public declarations is likely to be an excellent opportunity for those who loathe Emilia-sama's origin. I even have some idea of who may speak up fi~rst."

"Hmm, and what then? Are you going to reprimand the one you're thinking of before the Royal Selection starts?"

"Tha~t's an option, too, but they have a strong belief in never giving in to the threat of violence. We're somewhat well-acquainted with each other, so there's no doubt they'd brush me off."

"Well then, what do you want to do? I don't enjoy saying it, but I'm not that much use outside of situations that call for brute force. Unless they're an unparalleled cat lover."

At that point, Puck continued “Or perhaps,” as he washed his face.

“Is that person in fact an unparalleled cat lover? You intend to subvert them, not with feminine wiles, but with feline wiles?”

“I’m acquainted with them, but I couldn’t say with any confidence that they love cats that much. So~, let’s try something else. Won’t you join me in putting on a little play?”

“A play?”

The intriguing word ‘play’ suddenly jumped out at him. Roswaal had referred to what lay in Emilia’s immediate future as a stage. The word ‘play’ was certainly not unrelated.

“When you say ‘play’, what do you plan to make a play of, and how?”

“As I was saying earlier, the candidates’ declaration of beliefs – It’s easy to imagine things getting out of hand when they attempt it. The reason for that is not restricted to Emilia-sama; it’s a gathering of candidates with truly unique, original ways of thinking.”

“So they’re not just pretty faces, then. Well, I suppose that makes sense, too.”

“It’s just that, even in that setting, Emilia-sama’s origin makes her an easy target. Both the unchangeable circumstances of her birth, and the kingdom’s deeply-rooted rejection of half-devils are pasts that are difficult to change, after all.”

“…That’s true. I see your reasoning.”

“Hence, what we need to change isn’t the perception of half-devils. Rather, it’s the perception of Emilia-sama herself.”

Roswaal snapped his fingers, and set the end of one of them aglow.

The magical process of gathering mana from the surrounding air, and changing it into vividly-colored light, looked simple but required an extremely high level of concentration. This was proof that Roswaal was a rarity amongst magic users.

“The reason I’m allowed to act as I do is simple. Certainly, there’s the accomplishments of all the Mathers that came before me, but… the greatest factor is that I have the ability to overwhelm others.”

“You mean you want Lia to show she can, as well? No, that’s not it. You want me to become that for Lia, then.”

Having taken in what Roswaal was saying, Puck curled his long tail around himself and thought about it. The idea certainly did have some merit. But it was also a scheme that carried risks.

“But, don’t you think that this could invite even more opposition from the others? In the eyes of those that fear Lia because she’s a half-elf, wouldn’t it make them even more afraid if Lia is strong?”

“Certainly, that might happen. Ho~wever, we know Emilia-sama’s character. Even if Emilia-sama is exposed to baseless condemnation, she would never do something like using the Great Spirit’s power to unleash her anger. All that we need to do is convey that to those who will be in attendance today, by means of this gathering and our play.”

Saying that, Roswaal noted “In order for that to happen,” as he continued.

“Great Spirit, your power will be necessary. “The Beast of the End” of the Elior Forest. When Emilia-sama has you you by her side, you who laid low the “Mediator”, one of the four great ones, and yet she shows that she will not resort to using that power, then to them, she will surely change from being a “half-devil” to the candidate named “Emilia”.

“…You’re quite good with words. I understand a little of what Lia must have felt when she was taken out of the woods.”

His tone held neither desperation nor earnestness. Yet despite that, Roswaal’s words had a power to them.

His words had the power to make one feel that they held the best possible method of dealing with the situation that awaited them. They not only showed consideration for the desires of others, but bestowed what they craved without hesitation.

Precisely because of that, though, it was easy to think of them as the honeyed words of a swindler or something like that.

“Out in front of the castle, you went and called me controlling, but I think maybe you’re doing quite a bit of that, too.”

“I’m aware of it, yes. So~, what is your reply? Of course, if you turn me down, Great Spirit, I’ll simply move ahead with a different pla~n.”

“The right to choose is entirely in my hands. …It’s unfair of you to be trying to make me feel that.”

He thought deeply as he considered taking the devil’s, or rather Roswaal’s, proposal. In the back of his mind was the image of Emilia sitting nervously in the waiting room. Lately, it seemed that his mental image of his dear daughter was always nervous.

If it reduced the burden on her, even if only by a little, then he was of a mind to put on an act or do whatever else it took.

“…Fine. I’ll accept your proposal. I take it I can’t tell Lia about the arrangement?”

“The mere idea of having Emilia-sama try to put on an act is u~nthinkable.”

“You’re not saying that to be polite, you mean exactly what you said. Well, I don’t think Lia is good at keeping a straight face, either, so I agree with you.”

He felt proud of how he’d raised Emilia to be open, honest, and straightforward, but she was fatally unsuited to intrigue.

Despite that, if the scene was properly prepared, he was sure she would perform up to his expectations.

“So about the act, then, what are you going to do, and how? You’re not going to wreck the castle, are you?”

“The best outcome would be to give everyone a strong impression of the Great Spirit’s presence, in a way that doesn’t damage the castle. …Fortunately, he should create an opportunity for us to do tha~t.”

“He who?”

“Why, Subaru-kun, of cou~rse.”

When an unexpected name was suddenly brought up, Puck widened his eyes at Roswaal.

It was the boy that, outside of the castle, Emilia had distanced herself from so he wouldn’t get dragged into today’s events. Emilia had made him promise to wait, and Subaru was supposed to have nodded in agreement to that, but…

“You gave him some sort of instruction that would make him break his promise to Lia? I can’t say I’m pleased to hear that.”

“Certainly not. I’m well aware how important promises and contracts are to spirit arts users. Even then, there’s no way to stop him. …That’s a~ll I meant to say.”

Immediately, Roswaal to Puck bowed with a dramatic flourish, and Puck sighed at him. At the same time, an image passed through the back of Puck’s mind of Emilia, and the boy who it seemed may be running to her side.

Would Subaru end up running to the castle then, just as Roswaal hoped? Or was he waiting quietly at the inn for Emilia, just as he’d promised her?

Either way, the thing that Puck prayed for would not change. The only thing.

…May there be nothing but joy in his dear daughter’s future.

Wishing that, Puck continued to lend an ear to Roswaal’s plotting.

END

Emilia and Ram's Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship (Short Story Collection 2; Melon Books)

"Ugeh…"

The moment the girl entered the guest room without even knocking, she ended up raising her voice at the sight that awaited her within.

The girl possessed sweet, lovely features. Sporting short, uniform hair, her almond eyes shone a light crimson. But contrary to her lovely appearance, the girl seemed to have a sharp, intellectual aura about her.

But even that aura dissipated as she grimaced at the unpleasant sight before her.

"—That voice, is that you, Ram? Sorry to surprise you."

The next voice did not come from the girl—From Ram, it came from a person who was already in the room beforehand.

This voice was as clear as a silver bell, and merely hearing it would shake the listener's heart for better or for worse. But this time around, the voice sounded strangely confined as it reverberated through the room. This was only natural.

The reason being that the owner of the voice was in this room with a bucket completely covering their head.

"…What is this, Emilia-sama. To cover your head with a bucket in a place like this."

"Fufufu, can you not tell just by looking?"

"I can only imagine that this is Barusu's fault."

"You're kind of acting like this is reeeally weird? Also, Subaru does have something to do with this whole bucket thing, but I'm keeping this secret from him. Please keep quiet about this."

"Barusu has something to do with this, but it's a secret from him…? That's rather complicated, Emilia-sama."

With the bucket still on her head, Emilia was sitting in a chair in the middle of the guest room. Ram's conversation with her while unable to even see her face failed to touch on the heart of the matter, and was thus going nowhere.

"Hmm, Alright, I'll explain. Off you go."

Perhaps having noticed Ram's frustration, Emilia slowly took her bucket off.

As she did so, her long, glistening silver hair spilled out of the bucket. This hair which was alluring as moonlight itself flowed down her back as she blinked and set her amethyst eyes on Ram.

All the while, she held the bucket to her chest as if it was precious to her. Ram knit her brows.

"As far as Ram remembers, you were not afflicted with a perverse obsession with buckets."

"Yeah, it's not like I'm particularly crazy about buckets either. But this bucket right here is my sensei, so that's why things ended up like this."

"…"

She was awaiting a normal response, so this answer that made her head hurt all the more caused Ram to narrow her eyes. In response to this reaction, Emilia hurriedly waved her hands,

"Ah, no, that's not it! Umm, I'd better explain from the start. Do you remember what happened this afternoon? Not that I really want you to…"

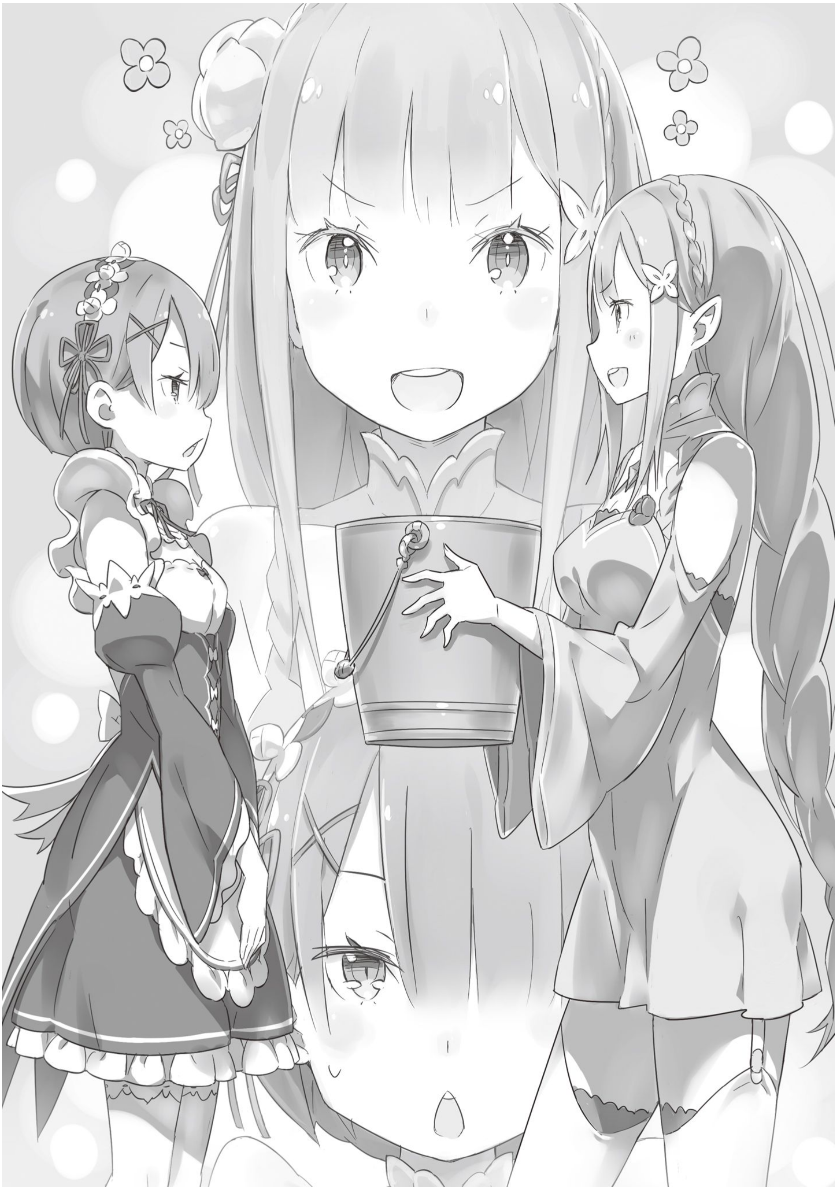

"Are you referring to that singing that sounded like a bird's death throes?"

"Th-That's… What I'm talking about, yeah, right…"

When Ram bluntly got right to the point, Emilia hung her head with a sad smile.

As Ram cast a sidelong glance at Emilia's disheartened state, the events of several hours ago replayed in her mind. This was during their short break after they had finished the first stage of work in the mansion, and everyone had some free time to do as they pleased.

Ram was walking around the mansion looking for her much beloved little sister when she heard it, a completely bizarre voice entered her ears when she passed by the dining room. Suspecting that this voice that sounded very much like a bird being strangled to death was yet another one of her colleague Subaru's pranks, Ram barged into the room, but—

"But what I actually found within that room was your unfortunate figure sincerely attempting to sing."

"Don't call it unfortunate! Although I will admit that that was kind of horrible."

"Kind of."

"Reeeeally horrible! Are you happy now? You're so mean, Ram! Beh—!"

Tormented by a strange sense of stubbornness, Emilia's attitude turned completely sullen. However, Ram tilted her head, not feeling the sense of disappointment she had expected from this response.

Ram had assumed that Emilia who knew of her tone deafness was someone who was easily influenced.

"Despite this, you are not discouraged. Does this mean you've suddenly become defiant in this short time?”

“I don’t know what kind of impression you have of me, but I haven’t become defiant or discouraged or anything! Nor do I even have time for that sort of thing, I’m burning up!”

“Heeh, is that right.”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m burning up. I’m seeeeeriously on fire.”

In response to Ram’s indifferent reply, Emilia’s eyes sparkled as she repeated herself any number of times. Her expression was very clearly saying, ‘Ask me what I’m so excited about, ask me, ask me’, causing Ram to sigh.

“Emilia-sama, it truly does seem to me that Barusu has had a hand in this.”

“I don’t think that’s the case, though…”

“…Well then, for what reason exactly are you burning up?”

“Ah, you want to know? Fufu, and with that I shall return to the tale of the bucket. This must be quite the shock, isn’t that right?”

“I suppose so, it would be absurd if the bucket had no relation to this.”

As Emilia showed off the bucket she was holding, Ram momentarily felt relieved that they were finally returning to the topic at hand. Emilia’s fingers gently stroked the bucket’s surface as she continued,

“Subaru told me about this. That there are some ways to correct t-tone… Deafness.”

“Please continue without shame.”

“And then, he said the first step was to put a bucket over my head to confirm my tone deafness. It thought that was another one of his pranks at first, but that wasn’t the case at all. Subaru was seriously thinking about how to help me, so I figured I should do my best as well.”

Her enthusiasm was splendid, but the connection between her tone deafness and this bucket remained unclear. Although reflecting on their conversation thus far, Ram could hazard a guess as to what was going on here.

“You wanna know what the connection is between tone deafness and buckets?”

“Yes, absolutely. When you have a bucket over your head, the sound of your voice reverberating within would allow you to comprehend the extent of your tone deafness. If there exists some other explanation, please do elaborate.”

“…Ram, could it be that you actually knew what buckets could do all along?”

“Well, Ram has been using buckets for quite some time after all.”

The contents of their conversation were utterly meaningless and thus her responses became increasingly perfunctory as well.

As Ram boldly boasted in her formal manner, Emilia’s attitude seemed to be one of comprehension, “I see.” This straightforward reaction made Ram feel just a little uneasy.

—From Ram’s perspective, her relationship with Emilia posed some unusual difficulties.

It went without saying that to Ram, her one and only master for life was none other than Roswaal. Her body, mind, and soul, everything she had—Barring her love for her little sister, it would be no exaggeration to say she devoted all of herself to him.

And Emilia was absolutely indispensable to Roswaal’s plans. Consequently, Roswaal welcomed her into his mansion and treated her as someone even higher than himself.

Of course, Roswaal had ordered Ram and Rem to follow his example, but—

“…She’s completely unreliable.”

That was the sort of impression Ram had of Emilia.

When she accompanied her to the capital, she separated from Ram and ended up having the insignia that qualified her as a royal selection candidate stolen from her. Such incidents caused Ram's wariness to steadily build up over the four months they'd known each other.

At the very least, Emilia was not someone Ram felt like she could count on just like that. She was also completely lacking in refinement, there was a limit to how flawed she could be as a person.

"So you have decided to practice on your own in order to correct your tone deafness, Emilia-sama? And moreover, at this hour."

"Umm, That's how… It is. I mean, if I were to sing in my room it would probably be an inconvenience to everyone else. There's no one around this part of the building, so I thought it would be fine to sing here."

"Meaning you did not expect Ram to come looking around here. Ram does not do this very frequently, however."

Showing consideration in her own way, Emilia had decided to move elsewhere and Ram had ended up happening upon her, that appeared to be the gist of it. Perhaps one could call this a false alarm. All the more so now that she had discovered that Emilia was merely practicing to correct her tone deafness.

"Although I do not think this is something one ought to go as far as to cut into their sleeping hours for."

"Even I can't say anything in response to that. But I ended up bothering Subaru and the others a whoooole lot today, so… I want to do this properly."

"…"

"The truth is that the reason everyone went along with my singing practice was for my sake, isn't that right. Not to correct my tone deafness, but to, umm… How do I put this?"

“To relax, is it?”

“Right, to relax. It was reeeeally fun, but in all that fun the tension ended up leaving me, so I wonder if that was how it was.”

Emilia donned a faint smile as she spoke, Ram who was an outsider could not give her an accurate answer.

However, she could make a guess.

The reason Roswaal let Emilia have some time to enjoy herself even though she should have been studying every single day in preparation for the royal selection—Everyone in the mansion knew that Emilia had been pushing herself too hard these past several days, and that willpower of hers was going nowhere.

Simply put, Subaru and Roswaal were working together in secret in order to change Emilia’s mood.

“Even though he is Barusu, to think he had fun conspiring with Roswaal-sama, what a crafty little…”

“Ram? Your eyes kind of look super fierce right about now, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine. I merely lost my cool for a moment. Well then…”

Having noticed the consideration of those around her, Emilia whose mood should have changed was now staying up late to practice singing. This was completely backwards, or rather, Ram got the feeling that their original objective was a failure.

As Ram thought such things, Emilia placed a finger on her lip and smiled in response.

“It’s alright. Everyone came together to teach me how to relax properly. Now, while I’ll be sure to remember that, I also want to be able to sing.”

“Although it seems to me that having you sing was secondary to them.”

“I know that. But I want both. Is it wrong to say that?”

As Emilia tilted her head, her attitude displayed the simple desire to overcome her shortcomings, and Ram assented having understood this. Emilia really was a little different after all.

“Do you not think you have become greedier than you used to be, Emilia-sama?”

“Don’t you know, Ram? That I’m actually trying to become the ruler of this country.”

Compared to the scale of this goal of hers, most other things were hardly even worth mentioning. This response of hers caused Ram to smile.

This was not a wry smile nor was it one of ridicule, it was a rare smile from the bottom of her heart.

“Ah, you’re smiling. Did I say something funny?”

“I wonder? It’s just, Ram’s opinion of you has changed ever so slightly.”

“Really? That makes me pretty happy then.”

Those words meant that Ram was looking down on her before, but Emilia decided to ignore that part and accepted it wholeheartedly.

Honest and easily deceived, one might think she would be easy to manipulate as a puppet. But due to her flaws, she could also do things that were completely unexpected. This girl’s nature was truly bothersome.

However—

“But to earnestly give it your all despite your flaws… I cannot say I dislike it.”

That nature was something Ram always saw in her darling other half.

No matter how different they were from her beloved little sister, Ram could not hate anyone who strived to overcome their shortcomings. Because that was a feeling Ram could not understand.

"Did you say something just now?"

Emilia looked puzzled, she could not quite catch Ram's murmur which was as quiet as a whisper. Meeting her gaze, Ram shrugged slightly.

"Yes, I did say something. I was wondering if your rigorous training has produced any results, Emilia-sama."

"Mm, I can't overlook what you just said. Very well. You came at exactly the right time, so listen closely. The truth is I improved quite a bit in the afternoon alone. But I've advanced even further beyond that now!"

"Well then, please give it your all."

Extending her hand towards Emilia who was full of vigor, Ram sat down on the guest room's unused bed. This ruffled the sheets slightly, but it was Subaru who would have to fix them tomorrow. No problem.

"La, la, lalala—"

Receiving Ram's signal and her gaze, Emilia looked just a little tense as she started singing. Her voice was slightly too shrill when she started, but it settled down soon enough. She was actually singing.

Considering she started with a sound that could be described as a bird's death throes, her current advancement could be considered a historic achievement.

"…"

She started burning up as she sang and swayed her shoulders as she became increasingly engrossed in her singing. Even Ram who was listening intently ended up closing her eyes and devoting herself to the song before she knew it.

‘The Sword Demon’s Love Song’ was an extremely popular love song passed down in the kingdom for generations. Liliana, a traveling minstrel who had once stopped by the mansion, had performed it so well that even Ram was secretly taken in. Of course, Emilia’s singing was still lacking a number of ways compared to hers. She still made mistakes that stood out. But it wasn’t bad.

“…”

When the song approached its end, it was as if the scenes the lyrics described were manifesting in her closed eyes. Realizing just how deeply absorbed she was in this song, Ram smiled wryly.

And with that smile still on her face, the song came to a close, and Emilia turned to look at Ram.

“That is all. Your impressions, please.”

“Yes… Nine points.”

“Eh! You mean out of nine?”

“You’re quite audacious all of a sudden. I mean out of a hundred, of course.”

This scathing appraisal caused Emilia to drop her shoulders in dejection. However, she immediately clenched her fists tightly and looked up.

“But I’ve gotten a little better, right? How many points would I have gotten when I first started?”

“It is rather absurd that you think you would get any points at all.”

“It was that bad?!”

To begin with, even calling it singing would be an insult to the concept of songs. That was how bad it was. So compared to that, Emilia’s current level definitely got a passing grade.

“But I’m sure a passing grade is not enough to satisfy you.”

“I suppose so. I wanna work harder and become better. Also, it looks like I’m still no good with songs besides the Sword Demon’s Love Song after all…”

Scratching her cheek in an embarrassed manner, Emilia pointed out her flaws. Ram sighed at Emilia’s ambition and the enthusiasm that came with it.

At this rate, this singing practice that was supposed to be a change of pace for her might once again cause her to overexert herself, putting them back at square one.

“Very well, then let us do this every other day. You shall practice here only on a fixed schedule. Ram shall free up some time as well.”

“…You’ll do this with me? Ram, with me?”

“It would be worrisome if there wasn’t someone watching over you.”

This was what Ram truly felt, of course she also had the ulterior motive of doing it for Roswaal’s sake.

But even setting that aside—The song wasn’t bad, she thought.

“Thank you, Ram. I’ll do my best with you and bucket-sensei!”

“Please do not place Ram on the same level as that bucket.”

And with this bumpy conclusion, it was decided that for now, these nightly practice sessions would continue.

END

Emilia and Ram’s Very Bumpy Master-Servant Relationship
(Volume 9; Melon Books)
(Translation Pending)

Beatrice and Rem’s Cumbersome Cleaning (Short Story Collection 2; Toranoana)

1

“Gah, I suppose.”

The moment the door was opened without a knock, the girl was greeted with that sort of voice by the room’s owner.

The girl had a face with soft, lovely features, and light blue eyes that made one think of the calm surface of a lake. Her hair, the same color as her eyes, was trimmed short, and her body was wrapped in a maid outfit that had been altered to provide more exposure. Her round eyes held both faint surprise and relief, and surprise won out for the moment.

Her gaze was directed towards the middle of the room, where someone was seated on a stepladder in the center of the forbidden library.

“Beatrice-sama, please forgive me for bothering you so late at night.”

The maid, Rem, was late in bowing her head because of her surprise—the room’s owner let out a long sigh at her.

The room’s owner was a little girl who appeared far more childlike than Rem. However, her sigh carried a curious sense of age, and was terribly mismatched with her doll-like outward appearance, which was well-suited to her gorgeous dress.

It goes without saying that judging her by human standards might itself be a mistake.

“Truly, to be visiting someone this late, you haven’t learned your manners, you know.”

“Yes, I have nothing to say for myself. But…”

“You shouldn’t say ‘But’ right after saying ‘I have nothing to say for myself’, I suppose!”

Going red in the face, and shaking her unmistakable curled hair, the little girl, Beatrice, raised her voice. While once again lowering her head at this reaction, Rem nevertheless spoke her thoughts.

“Beatrice-sama, it seems that you are more irritable than usual this evening.”

“…Well, listen to you, you know. What would you know about Betty?”

“This is only Rem’s intuition, but perhaps it’s related to a bucket?”

“…?! Wh, wha, what evidence do you have to go and say something like that, I suppose?!”

“It’s because you’re cradling that bucket so carefully, Beatrice-sama.”

“Drat, you know…!”

In a single moment, the chill in the air was dispersed by Rem’s pointed question. All that was left was Rem’s victorious look after laying hands on the truth, and Beatrice, wide-eyed after being found out.

And in Beatrice’s arms, just as Rem had pointed out, a bucket was cradled…For the last few days, there had been an important connection between the Roswaal manor and buckets.

“Rem was surprised as well. To think that you were concerned about being tone-deaf, Beatrice-sama.”

Letting out a sigh composed of surprise and admiration in equal parts, Rem nodded several times.

Beginning from the stay of the minstrel Liliana, Emilia’s tone-deafness came to light, and she began training to correct it. After that, it seems that the situation expanded further, and Beatrice’s tone-deafness came to light as collateral damage…

“Rem, too, has heard that buckets are useful for correcting tone-deafness. Honestly, when she first heard that from Subaru-kun, she was skeptical, but Emilia-sama’s ‘Sword Demon’s Love Song’ has improved markedly…Rem wishes you good luck!”

“You should really do something about the habit you have of occasionally rubbing salt in people’s wounds without realizing it, I suppose!”

“…?”

Being reprimanded after trying to offer support, Rem tilted her head to the side with a questioning look on her face. At Rem’s response, Beatrice held up the bucket while looking even more weary.

“Setting that aside! Setting that aside, it would be troubling if you were to misunderstand! It’s not like Betty is being moved to action over a meaningless measurement of this and that about singing, I suppose. I would never agree to let someone make me wear a bucket, and saying that I’m tone-deaf, well, calling that a bold-faced lie would be generous.”

“Well then, may I request a verse from ‘Sword Demon’s Love Song’?”

“Even if you request it, I won’t sing, I suppose!”

“It’s fine. As a result of Emilia-sama’s state of affairs, Rem has recently been carrying earplugs with her.”

As Rem took white earplugs from a pocket, Beatrice scowled at her. However, not wanting to get caught up in the flow of things, she firmly shook her head.

“A, anyways, Betty being tone-deaf is nothing but a lie spread by that man, I suppose. He’s trying to ensnare Betty with evil rumors, you know. You shouldn’t be deceived, I suppose.”

“…In that case, Beatrice-sama, why are you holding a bucket?”

“If you think about how a bucket is used, you’ll understand that right away, you know.”

"Besides wearing it?"

"Would you stop talking about wearing it, I suppose!"

A use for buckets besides wearing them; when she was asked that, Rem was immediately lost in thought.

Was there actually a use for them besides wearing? Recently, anyone around Rem who had been speaking of buckets was either wearing one, or trying to get someone to wear one.

"Goodness, I can't think of anything besides the usual, using it for cleaning up…"

"That's! Correct! You know! What other way to use it would there be, I suppose?!"

"I see, you really outwitted me. Nicely done, Beatrice-sama."

"I wasn't, I wasn't trying to outwit you, you know…"

As Rem showed her admiration with a curtsey, Beatrice let her shoulders sag with an exhausted expression. The little girl atop the stepladder cradled the bucket to her chest, and let out the biggest sigh yet.

"I didn't think of you as the sort of girl who would say such outlandish things, I suppose…"

"Beatrice-sama, too, has never spoken like this with Rem in the past."

"…and you never spoke so impertinently, either, you know. As well,"

Glaring reproachfully, Beatrice stared at Rem. And then, she finally drew her attention to what had been at Rem's feet, ever since she entered the forbidden library.

For her midnight visit to the forbidden library, Rem had not come empty-handed. Around her feet where several different cleaning tools, and amongst them was, of course, a bucket…

"…I'll at least ask what you've come here to do, I suppose."

"That would be to allow the bucket you are holding to be used for its original role, Beatrice-sama."

If one wasn't wearing it, then the original role of a bucket was none other than being a cleaning tool.

As Beatrice narrowed her eyes at that reply, Rem smiled faintly and announced:

"…I thought we could begin a simple top-to-bottom cleaning of the forbidden library."

2

"Simple, and yet a top-to-bottom cleaning, I have some doubts… you know."

Remaining seated on the stepladder and looking nonplussed, Beatrice mumbled quietly to herself. Paying no mind to what she heard, Rem used a feather duster to delicately brush the bookshelves that filled the forbidden library.

It was a vast, grand forbidden library. The Roswaal manor was a fairly large-scale building, but even then, fitting in a library of this size was no simple matter.

Unrestrained by real space, it was a monumental feat only made possible by mastery of shadow magic, the superspell that connected another dimension with this one, Beatrice's "Door Crossing".

In the forbidden library that was completely cut off from the influence of the outside world, it was said that even the passage of time could go unnoticed. Whether that was true or not, even the books in the forbidden library that were clearly ancient showed no sign of deterioration. For that very reason, the precious tomes remained in their original condition.

Unfortunately, Rem wasn't equipped with the sort of discerning eyes that would allow her to see their value at a glance.

“Damaging or ruining the books will not be permitted, I suppose. Be extremely careful, you know.”

“Yes, I understand. It’s only a matter of brushing off the dust, and wiping them clean.”

Without stopping her cleaning, Rem quietly responded to the cautionary words that Beatrice tossed to her.

The important point of cleaning a library was, as you’d expect, taking care not to damage the books. Paper absorbs water and oil easily. It seemed unlikely that mold would grow in the forbidden library, but if dust could accumulate then perhaps mold could grow as well. Using as little water as possible, Rem focused on using the duster.

“…”

For a short time, silence reigned in the forbidden library, broken only by the swish-swish of Rem wielding her duster. As that went on, Beatrice’s eyes were lowered to the book she had been reading, but she turned the pages slowly. Repeatedly turned back to the same page, she eventually muttered “Oh, enough” and raised her head.

“Isn’t there something you want to say to Betty, I suppose?!”

“Something from Rem to Beatrice-sama? Ah, you are adorable as always this evening, Beatrice-sama. Please be at ease. Sadly, you’re no match for nee-sama, but…”

“Why is Betty being belittled over an unrelated matter, you know?! Never mind that; don’t you think there’s anything strange about the situation where you’re being made to do the cleaning all alone?”

As Beatrice swung her legs while seated on the stepladder, Rem tilted her head with a ‘Hmm’.

Rem hadn’t the faintest idea what Beatrice was trying to say. Originally, it was the events of the bet a few days ago between Subaru and Beatrice that led her to decide on cleaning the forbidden library.

Giving Beatrice a sense of belonging in the mansion…While scratching her head at the meaning of the plan Subaru had hatched, Rem gained a chance to enter the forbidden library for the first time in a long while. At that time, there was something inappropriate to the serene space—put plainly, the air smelled of a lack of sufficient cleaning.

Since then, she'd been walking about in the mansion night after night, cautiously looking for an opportunity…

"Rem is doing just as she had wished to do, so she doesn't feel any problem in particular…"

"It looks like the servant mentality has seeped into your very bones, you know. The fact that Betty is holding a bucket is because she planned to use it…not wear it, I suppose."

"If you weren't planning to wear it, then you, too, were going to clean the library, Beatrice-sama?"

"Lately, someone's been entering and leaving the forbidden library without permission, and so the influence of the outside world has been streaming in frequently. Normally, feather-dusting is unnecessary here… that's how it should be, but despite that, well, as the librarian of the forbidden library, this is a serious state of affairs."

"…"

Mumbling and going red in the face, Beatrice spoke quickly as she strung together various reasons. Looking straight at the face of the girl who wasn't looking her way, Rem came to a sudden, strange realization.

It was unclear what sort of whim it was, but it seemed that Beatrice wanted to help with the library's cleaning. However, she was sensitive about it, and couldn't bring up the idea herself. Rem, too, was familiar with being unable to openly talk about one's own desires…In the past, she'd caused trouble for her older sister Ram time after time because of it.

Rem, who was timid and lacked courage, was saved many times by her sister's consideration and kindness. The days of trying to be a replacement for her sister were something she'd put behind her, but…

"I won't hesitate to imitate nee-sama's good points."

Even if she couldn't become her replacement, there were hundreds and hundreds of things about Ram that were worth imitating. Thinking about this moment as one of those times, Rem was able to gracefully extend her hand.

As Rem offered the hand opposite the one holding the duster, Beatrice looked down at it.

"What's this?"

"Normally, it would be very rude to ask Beatrice-sama to help out with the cleaning, but… I do understand your sense of responsibility as the librarian. So, just this once."

Imitating Subaru and Roswaal, Rem winked at Beatrice.

Glancing sideways at that expression, Beatrice took Rem's hand with a resigned attitude.The young girl stepped down from the stepladder, and lightly brushed the hem of her skirt.

"In that case, I'll take you up on that offer, you know. As a special exception, I suppose.It's not like I ran my mouth off about having the bucket for cleaning, and after that you actually started cleaning so I had no choice but to go along with it, you know. Don't get the wrong idea, I suppose."

"At this moment, Rem understands the circumstances of the situation better than anyone else in the world, so there's no need to worry."

As Rem nodded in response to the absurd excuse, Beatrice sniffed and took the duster from her. Holding it as she turned slowly towards a bookshelf, she began dusting violently. Rem rushed to speak up in response to the rather majestic use of the duster.

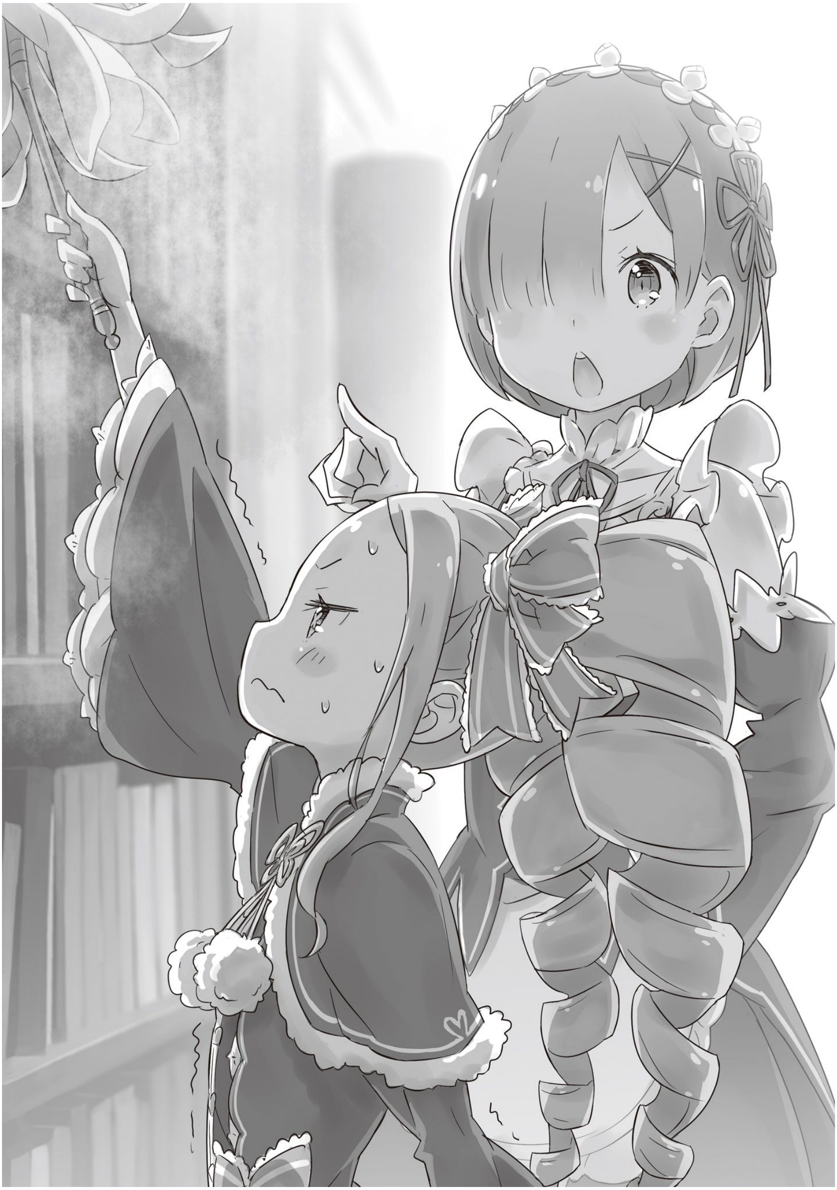

“Th, that won’t do, Beatrice-sama.If you use it that roughly…”

“…? But, to get the dust to come off, you have to use about this much strength, you know.”

“Even so, the books will be damaged! When the dust has hardened…you can remove it with an old toothbrush, like this. Ah! Please don’t move a book around holding onto just the cover…!”

“Such a fussy girl, I suppose. Really, the books of the forbidden library aren’t like the flimsy books outside it. They’re nothing but good solid books, so something like this won’t damage or break them…ah.”

Grasping the cover of a thick book, Beatrice had been shaking it violently. A fairly dramatic sound occurred near her hand, and the contents of the book fell completely out, leaving the cover behind.The dislodged pages scattered on the floor.

An unpleasant silence settled over that scene, and Beatrice cleared her throat.

“Well, this sort of thing happens now and then, you know.”

“Where did the sense of responsibility of the forbidden library’s librarian go…No, thinking back calmly about it, it does seem like Beatrice-sama has always been throwing and stepping on her books…”

As she thought back on it, Rem didn’t have that many memories of interacting with Beatrice. However, even with her scarce experiences with setting foot inside the forbidden library, between the numerous books piled on the floor, and the books that had been thrown at Subaru over these last few weeks, she’s seen poor treatment of the books fairly frequently.

“Beatrice-sama, this isn’t good. With this, the great spirit will be upset with you as well.”

“Thi…this has nothing to do with Bubby, I suppose! On top of that, if Betty isn't good enough, then what about that foolish girl? Bubby never scolds her, I suppose."

"That's because Emilia-sama's way of doing things is simply a bit masculine; she can still manage most things."

The topic of Emilia's life skills came up, but Rem's evaluation of her was exactly as she said. Further, Emilia made no excuses for her limitations. Rem envied her in that.

Setting that aside…

"While it may be presumptuous, it seems there's no choice but for Rem to give Beatrice-sama some guidance."

"There's not really any need to get so serious about it…"

"It simply won't do. Once you've decided to do it, do it properly. Rem, too, wouldn't want to do something halfway. Let's get cracking!"

While Beatrice suddenly began to have second thoughts, Rem approached with a serious look on her face, and announced that. A sense of responsibility filled her chest, and Subaru's voice echoed in the back of her mind. Studying letters, doing odd jobs around the mansion; when Rem stood in for Ram as the one in charge of guiding him, he would call her this.

"Tonight, Rem is Beatrice-sama's 'Spartan demon instructor'."

"I don't think you understand what that means, you know!"

"It appears that Subaru-kun is fond of demons, so it probably means something very good. Now I'm blushing. But blushing aside, let's Sparta."

"nga~h! What a turn of events, I suppose!"

With her pale blue eyes burning brightly, Rem caught Beatrice as she attempted to flee. Then, turning up the sleeves on the little girl's dress, she gave her a duster and a dry cloth.

“Firstly, cleaning must be done from the top. It’s far more than can be done in a single day, so even when Rem isn’t here, please do your best and keep working at it, Beatrice-sama.”

“A~h, why did it turn out like this? …This, that, and all of it, it’s all his fault, you know.”

Pushing Beatrice onward as she pouted, Rem instructed the little girl in everything she needed to know about “Library Cleaning”.

Under that demon instructor’s Sparta, the librarian who had served for so long was rebuked time after time—each time, she ended up cursing the black-haired young man.

END

Beatrice and Rem’s Cumbersome Service
(Volume 9; Toranoana)
(Translation Pending)

Short Story Compendium 2

Felt’s Job
(Volume 1; Gamers)

1

“…So I’d like for you to pick up the dragon-shaped insignia from that woman. The reward will be ten holy gold coins… would this be enough for you to take the job?”

It couldn’t be better. I shook hands with the black-clothed woman whom had made the request.

For all her feigned absent-mindedness, she’s got a tracking gaze that’s like a snake, I thought.

Still, this is the slums, so there ain’t any nice people who’d ask ta steal stuff around here.

I didn’t ask for the details of the circumstances, since we had a tacit agreement that I didn’t need to know.

That’s why we only spoke about the target’s appearance and location whereabouts, where to deliver the stolen goods, and parted without any other questions. …Ta be honest, I should be happy about that.

After all, it’s an important job worth ten holy gold coins. It’s a large bounty that’s ton more than ma savings from doing odd jobs up until this point, I can’t let this chance get away.

In this world, if you want to do anything, you need money. You need money to be happy.

I refuse ta spend ma last days in this den of losers. I’ll definitely get outta here someday, I’ve had enough with living in such a gloomy place.

“With this reward and my savings, I…”

I won’t have ta sneak around in the shadows of the capital. I can go out in the open without worries.

It won’t just be me, definitely someday…

2

This city that I was born and raised in is apparently the biggest one in the kingdom, and is called “the capital.” Honestly, even if I didn’t know about the other cities, I still would’ve considered this city too big.

Still, even though I live in the capital, it’s at the bottom rung slums—a stupid place where shadows gather. The world of the capital sure lacks glamour.

This is how I would best describe the capital. The aristocrat district is where rich people’s homes are lined up, and a place where I could earn some small change by sneaking around; the commoner district beneath is a world’s difference; and the shopping district is filled with greedy shops that would do anything to even earn a single copper coin. Lastly, below everyone are people like us from the slums, who desperately try and steal from those above us.

Weaklings become food, that’s the ironclad rule of this world. This is even more so in the slums, where you can only rely on your own strength to survive. In my case, I used my agile hands to steal from other people’s pockets.

At first, they were petty jobs like stealing a coin purse from someone I passed by on the streets. At some point, I broadened out and began working by stealing based on people’s requests.

By the time I realized it, I had become a master thief. I was no longer doing it just to earn money, I was working for the sake of a greater goal. Step by step, I was getting closer to it, I was sure of it.

…Then this important job happened to land in my lap, and now I’m one step away from my goal.

Ten holy gold coins. Of course, the higher the reward, the more difficult it is ta steal. But I’m not carefree enough ta be scared of something like that. It’s a great chance ta escape from the slums, and that’s good enough.

Then…

“-is it really alright to go for that woman full of openings?”

Hearing that conversation held at the street, I turned my head to look for the woman described.

White clothes with golden birds woven on it, and long, dazzling silver hair. Even though her clothes and appearances are uncommon and eye-catching, ma attention seems to be elsewhere.

“She’s sorta jumpy… like she came from da countryside.”

The woman was looking around restlessly as she carefully walked along the edge of the street. Since I was also rotten and raised in the capital, I could tell at a glance who was unfamiliar with the capital, and was therefore easy prey.

My intuition from my many years of experience told me that she was obviously a country bumpkin. She gave off the feeling that she was not cautious of her surroundings, but rather, worried about being swallowed by the crowd. …Her defenselessness is enough ta make me want ta hold my head in anguish.

“Just as I thought, she gathered a bunch of us to go after Ms. Grey…”

Keeping my distance while tailing the woman, the faces I saw a moment ago started appearing on the streets.

They’re the same as me, thieves with their target set on this defenseless woman. It’s only natural for ruffians ta congregate in a flash towards someone who’s that unaccustomed ta the capital. It’s a painful lesson she’s going ta have to learn.

“For you guys, stealing that might mean today’s grub money, but if I get it, I’m swaggering away with ten holy gold coins!”

I was seriously troubled on how I could properly threaten them so that they would leave. Well, since so many of these guys are terrible at tailing, it would be easy ta just stick a knife in one of their backs.

But right before I got ready to act… "…?"

One of the men tailing the woman had a puzzled look on his face as he looked around. He then tilted his head, changed directions, and disappeared down the streets as if he had forgotten about the woman.

If that was the only case, it was simply a matter of the man realizing his inexperience and withdrawing, but when others also began leaving as well, that's another story.

"Wha…? Why did every single one of them disappear?"

When I realized it, all the people whom I thought were going to pursue the woman had vanished.

Only two people remained. The carefree woman, completely oblivious to having just been targeted by a group of people, and I, who had maintained a careful distance while following.

Confused about what had just happened, I studied the woman from behind. Staring, staring, staring… and suddenly, the woman's figure looked blurry. I shook my head.

"What was that just now…?"

What a strange feeling. I think it might be magic or something.

Old Man Rom told me stories about how this world has mirrors that can talk ta people from far away, flying clowns, and even walls that people can walk through. That woman can probably use those kinds of magic.

"So that's why she could walk around the capital while being so defenseless… Shit, this is bad."

In front of me was a woman casually strolling around the capital, but unlike before, looking at her back from afar now sent shivers up my spine.

As expected of ten holy gold coins, it won’t let me have it that easily.

“Alright, if that’s how you’re gonna be, I won’t lose to you. I’ll definitely get that insignia…”

Fired up again, I was about to clench my hands and chase after the woman when I found myself taken aback. That was because…

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

She was shyly apologizing to some bastard who had bumped into her on the street. It seems like she’s embarrassed because she wasn’t paying attention in front of her, but that wasn’t the case. That other guy did it on purpose.

At that moment, that person had quickly stolen the woman’s coin purse. “What’s even happening?! Argh, shit! It can’t be helped then!” Scratching my head in frustration, I reluctantly ran forward.

The one I ran after was not the woman who was merrily touring the capital, but rather, the man who took the purse from the woman.

Seeing him pull ahead even though we had the same aim hurts ma reputation.

Plus, if the requested insignia is in that purse… This is the worst possible outcome.

Even if I were ta look away for a bit, it would be hard ta miss someone who stands out as much as her. So I should prioritize the thug who would not be easily found once he enters the slums…

“His movements aren’t bad, but the alleyways are like ma backyard ta me.”

His ability to slip into the crowd was amateurish compared to mine, so I had planned on cornering him somewhere unobtrusive by waiting at the end of the alley he escaped towards.

“…Looks like you meddled with someone quite out of your league.”

But it seemed like there was a scary old gramps holding an awfully magnificent sword at the throat of the thug.

From head to toe, the old gramps was in a nicely tailored black formal wear. And though he seemed calm relative to the contents of the words he spoke, that calm impression was offset by savageness of the upheld sword.

Above all else, his body emitted a distinct aura—something unique to extremely dangerous people.

Very occasionally will the capital get these people who give off this sort of vibe, and I hate it. They might be disguised as a patrol guard, or act as a shopping district store's security… this old gramps is also one of them.

"Take out what you stole. If you do that, I shall let you go."

He had a smile on his face, but his eyes showed no signs of joy as he spoke.

The bastard being glared at probably already looked inside, I thought, as the man hurriedly placed the coin purse onto the outstretched hand of the old gramps, and sprinted away as soon as the sword left his throat.

Conversely, I failed to escape, and was left with no choice but to stand there with a stunned "what should I do" look.

"It looks like you had the same idea, Miss." I gulped.

The old gramps standing in front of me gently looked down, but I couldn't see his smile as anything other than malicious. I genuinely thought I was going to be eaten.

"What a sharp child. It seems I still have much to learn… Now then, here."

After saying that, the old gramps handed the purse over to me. I quickly accepted it, and was surprised by how light it was compared to what I expected.

“Please return that to its owner. If I were to hand it back, things might get a little complicated.”

“A-Are you sure? Don’tcha think I might take this and run away?”

“You did bother to chase all the way to here. Besides, you wouldn’t do something like that, would you?”

The old gramps’ gaze sharpened for just a moment, and it felt like my heart was being grasped. I was left with no choice but to nod. Seeing that, he gave a satisfied nod and headed towards the street, giving me a pat on the head with his coarse palm as he walked by.

“Aah! Jeez Grandpa Wil, where did nya go? Feli was worried, nya know?”

“I apologize, some boorish things came up.”

As soon as I returned to the main street, I noticed the old gramps was apologizing to someone. However, I didn’t turn to look because I was in a hurry to leave this place… or rather, escape it.

Occasionally, things like this would happen, so the capital is a scary place. Locations where there are lots of people mean those kinds of dangerous people are more likely to appear. It’s something you have to bear in mind.

“Th-This should be far enough, I should be fine for now…”

After I ascertained that I was far enough away, I breathed a deep sigh of relief. After that delay, now it’s time ta check the contents of the purse. It would be great if the insignia I’m after is in here, but I don’t have much expectation.

My expectations were low because it was related to how light and thin the purse was. “And what’s inside is… What is this, pocket money for a kid?!”

The amount was at the level where if you bought some candy from the shopping district to eat, it would run out relatively soon. Ta be honest, I had ma suspicions about whether or not that woman actually had the gem-embedded insignia like ma client claimed.

Her appearance fits, but the item is missing. Did she drop it or something?

“Crap, that’s right! Even if the purse is safe, it’s more important that I steal the insignia from that woman. If someone else took it, this would’ve been pointless!”

I might’ve been careless, but that woman was even more careless than me.

I hurried back to the street where I had stepped away from the woman, and began searching the crowd for the conspicuous woman. This is when I noticed that the street was rowdier than when I had left just a moment ago.

It was awfully clamorous, with many people throwing their belongings as they ran off. I looked around in confusion until I saw a silver-haired figure at the center of the commotion.

I was a bit relieved to find the woman, who had a reluctant look on her face, and drooped shoulders.

As to not be perceived by anyone, I feigned indifference and tossed her purse onto the pile of stuff thrown around her.

After having started a commotion in front of the shopkeeper’s store to pay for something, she noticed the purse, gave the shopkeeper a look, and went to collect it from where it was dropped.

3

After that, I continued to tail the woman. While I was searching for a chance to steal from her, I very clearly understood something.

“…This woman is a really nice person.”

I learned of this by eavesdropping a conversation from behind me. Supposedly, the reason for the commotion earlier was because a child cat-beast human next to her had tried to dine and dash.

Then this woman had nothing ta do with it, was what I thought initially.

Apparently she tried to shoulder the kid's meal fee, but realized her purse was gone. Undiscouraged, she seemed to have earned the money by putting up some kind of performance. Well, it turned out ta be some ruckus that I can't understand.

She would then walk with the cat human for a bit, part from the child, and wander about. Even though she used up everything in her purse, she doesn't look ta be ending her walk any time soon.

To be honest, I was getting tired of following her, but because I had observed her for so long, I was able to make an educated guess on where the insignia was. While walking, she constantly checks the side of her clothes near the waist.

There's something important there… It's not her purse. She's hiding something else.

"…"

Time ta steal it, I decided, and got out of the streets to avoid being in the woman's line of sight. Using the buildings' walls, I hopped onto the roof and observed her movements. Doesn't look like she noticed. I can jump over there, grab the insignia from her pocket, and escape by running into the alleyways. I was confident about it.

But I feel just a tiny bit sorry for stealing the insignia from her.

Those who request thievery are scoundrels; but those who get robbed are also evil in some way—those were my beliefs. However, I didn't know how this woman could be applied to it.

"There's no point in thinking about something I can't understand. …I just gotta do what I normally do."

Those were words that even I saw as a means to convince myself with. They were pointless excuses.

Having said those excuses, I took a deep breath. From the roof, I jumped straight towards the woman.

My forelock fluttered in the wind as I landed. The wind flapped at her hair as I landed. While witnessing her look of surprise, I reached towards her.

…In my hand was a dragon-shaped insignia, its jewel shining bright red.

Continued in Volume 1

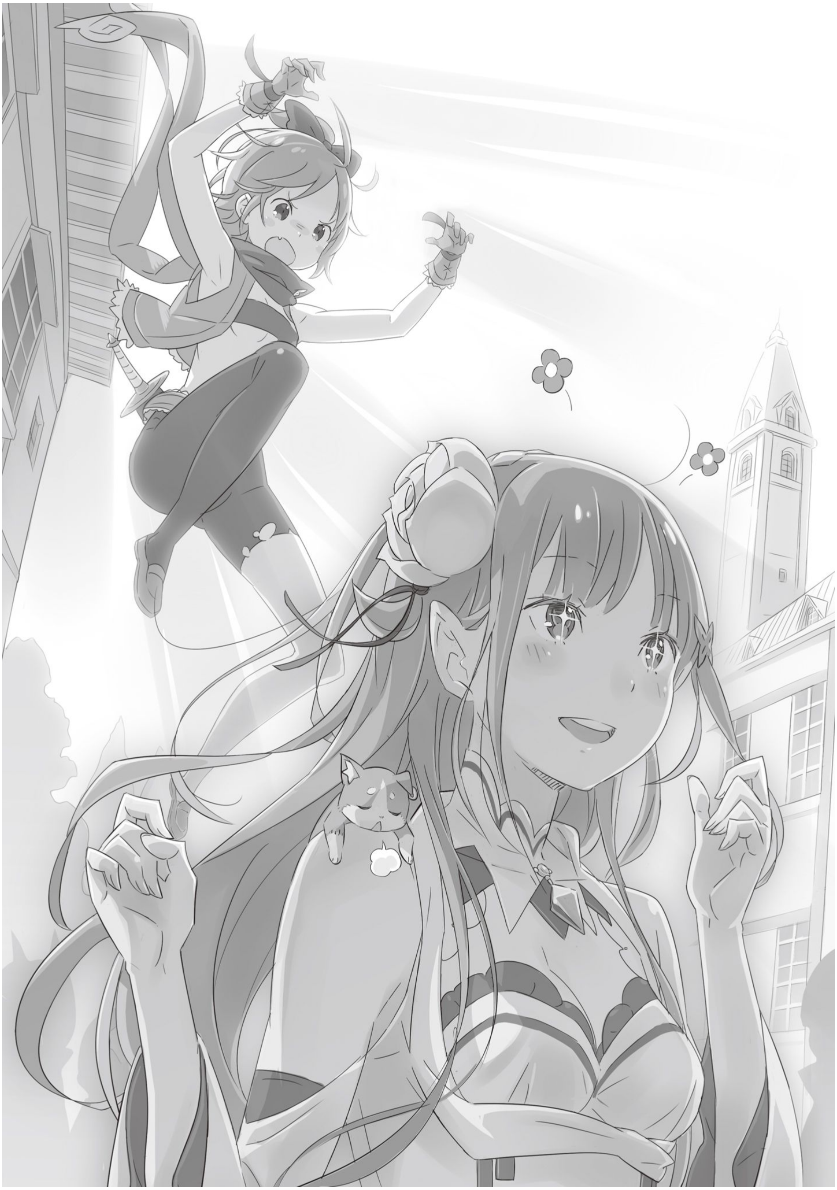

Felt’s Imprisonment Life
(Volume 2; Gamers)

1

As soon as I woke up, the first thing I felt was a softness throughout my body that I had never felt.

“…Ngah?!”

Without understanding anything, I raised my body while scratching my head. My eyesight was still a little blurry, but I saw a pillow all soaked with drool. Well, I think it was a pillow, I had never seen one so soft, but it should be. Looking around, I soon realized that I was on top of a huge bed with my body covered by a smooth sheet.

“Where am I…?”

Being in a room and on a bed that had nothing to do with a brat who grew up in the slum, my first thought was whether this was not a dream. For me, mornings started on an old couch, a shabby blanket and an unpleasant smell in the air. It is true that I have the goal of one day leaving this life, but I did not want to see it come true in a dream.

“Is that what I really wish deep inside…? What a weird dream…”

“Looks like you woke up.”

I was terrified when I heard someone else’s voice, and when I turned around, he was standing by the door: he was the red-haired bastard. At the same time, I tried to get the knife from my waist, but it was this time that I realized that I was naked, with only the sheet covering my body.

“If you are concerned about your clothes, they are being washed and restored. The servants will already bring temporary clothes, wait just a little while longer.”

“…Wait a minute.”

“Yes?”

I wasn’t in the mood to listen to the bullshit of the tall blue-eyed redhead who was standing in the doorway. I didn’t like it that he obeyed me right away, but I let it go.

“Screw my clothes for now, because there are more urgent things to be dealt with. You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“I have some guesses, but I lack conviction. If you can tell me…”

Seeing me staring at him ugly, that damn redhead, one of the most famous guys in the capital… “Sword Saint” Reinhard just shrugged, I got angry at his reaction and screamed:

“Where am I?! And what do you intend to bring me here after leaving me unconscious?”

Because of the scream and my agitation, the sheet almost fell off my body and I had to hold it at the last minute. Only that made the bastard chuckle and I was even more irritated.

“I apologize for my insolence. Please allow me to explain the reason that led me to do what I did to you, in the minimum details.”

That’s what he said after making a serious face and kneeling, while punching me with his blue eyes.

2

Sitting with my legs spread on the bed and my body covered with only a sheet, I popped my tongue in anger. I don’t like the idea of having to play his game, but it’s no use complaining without knowing anything.

“Okay, you can tell me why a noble knight abducted me and kept me naked in captivity.”

“Yes, I will be as honest as possible to end the misunderstanding.”

With a smile on his face, he reached into his shorts pocket. Unlike the time I saw him in the slum, he now wore only a basic T-shirt, shorts and jacket. In fact, I had never seen anyone look so well dressed just like that, what anger.

“Firstly, this residence, located in the upper part of the capital, belongs to the Astrea family. We don’t use it very often and I apologize for forcing you to stay in such a tight room.”

“Was that ironic? about ten of my tents could fit in this room.”

Of course he didn’t mean it and he didn’t want to be insensitive, but I frowned anyway. Then he apologized and took something out of his pocket.

“I think you remember this here,” he said, showing me the object.

“…Isn’t it the badge I had stolen?”

“Technically, no. The badge that you know is currently back in the hands of Miss Emilia. This one is another, but of the same type.”

Now that he spoke, the color of the jewel in the dragon’s mouth was really different from what I remembered. What I tried to steal was red, this one was green.

“And what about it? I don’t need it at this point anymore.”

“Please take it in your hands and you will understand.”

“…”

I wanted to respond with a “I’ll understand what?”, but I kept quiet. Not only because Reinhard’s stare sort of intimidated me, but it was because I had already taken the badge from his hand without thinking. At that time, I saw that the green stone started to shine.

“Done, what’s up? He’s just shining and I still don’t understand anything.”

“The “just be shining” is the most important part. As you can see, the stone did not emanate any light while it was in my hand. And it had not emanated from anyone, with the exception of very few, including you.”

“Chosen …? For this stone?”

I laughed because I thought it was ridiculous that he was doing all that just because of a shiny stone, but the bastard just approached his face without changing his expression and replied:

“No, it wasn’t for the stone. —The lady was chosen by the Dragon… Or perhaps, by fate.”

“Fate… Há! It was just what I lacked!”

And here I thought he was going to say something that was serious.

“Listen, here, Reinhard. “Fate” is the magic word that people who give up on anything love to use. Life should be easy for those who believe in “fate”, since the culprit of everything will always be him, right…? but look here, I don’t need it…”

“…”

“To hell with “fate”, I’m not going to be following impositions that I don’t even see. I don’t know why you’re all happy there, but don’t get me into this.”

I’m tired of seeing people who like to run away using “fate” as an excuse to give up. The lack of strength, intelligence, money and dreams is all his fault. If “fate” only serves to cover up weaknesses, I don’t need it. I am the only one responsible for my life.

“…”

All Reinhard did was look at me with a serious face. Until, a while later, he opened his mouth again:

“Miss Felt, not everyone can go against fate. Only a selected handful of people, possessing qualification, determination and means, are able to oppose him.”

“Shut up, I’m not here to be debating with you. So what if that little stone shines? End of conversation. I'm going to go back to my tent, give me back my clothes."

Nor do I have the courage to hang around naked, and that outfit was a gift from Grandpa Rom, I couldn't leave behind.

"Unfortunately, I cannot fulfill your request. The one who makes the Dragon Ball shine has the duty to introduce herself to the castle. As a citizen of the kingdom, you will have to obey."

"…Ah, get screwed! Citizen of the kingdom?! And when did the kingdom do anything for me?!"

"As miserable as your condition was, if you live in the capital, you receive the protections of the kingdom directly and indirectly. I will not allow you to deny them."

"It's not like I live here by choice, is it? I just don't leave the city for lack of money, but now I got enough. So, let me out of here!"

"I can't, please give up."

My patience had reached the limit with this conversation that was not going to get anywhere. Reinhard continued with his usual calm face, while I started to get out of control. So I pulled my hair hard, took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down.

"A-Alright… I'm going to think calmly about what you're talking about. In return, I have a request to make."

"May I help. however, you will have to stay in this house until we have an official response from the castle. Any other request, I am willing to answer."

"I just want my clothes back. Until when will you make me stay naked, huh, noble knight?"

I spoke with a tone full of irony and saw Reinhard's eyes widen a little. Then, he apologized and turned his back on me.

"I'll call the maid, I believe your clothes are rea-…"

"Bye, sucker!!"

I took advantage of Reinhard's hesitation and threw the pillow on the back of his neck. And looking at him, I jumped out of bed at the same time and ran. When I looked out of the corner of my eye, he had grabbed the pillow with his hand, but I didn't intend to stop.

"Hah!"

I pulled the sheet off the bed and threw it in a way that it would open, hiding both him from my view and me from him. Now, yes, it was the perfect opportunity to get past him and escape through the door. But… that would be an amateur thing.

"Until never more!"

What I did was jump back and open the window by force, holding myself tightly on the curtain. From what I checked while talking sitting, the room was at most one floor high, which would be a safe height for me to cushion the fall with the curtain and run out after landing. And that was when I was sure of the escape…

"…What?"

…The curtain that was supposed to hold my weight was cut by the part connected to the window. The worst thing is that the cut was so straight that even with a sword it would not be so easy to leave it that way, but Reinhard only had an open hand, implying that it was with her that he had cut it.

"…You monsteeeeeeeeeeeer!!"

"It's the second time I've been called that in the past two days."

As he spoke, he passed by me after jumping out of the window. But as he gained speed "running" through the wall, he reached the floor before me and caught me with a pillow.

"…Excuse me."

In this, the sheet that covered my body wrapped itself around me as if it were a dress, and now I was there like a little princess in the bastard’s arms. I’m angry.

“My fault in not having presented the house, but we have stairs that connect the floors.”

“Learned to speak ironies, huh? Get me on the floor! Until when will you be holding me naked?!”

I even tried to get rid of him, but Reinhard just waved his arms and balanced me anyway, making it clear that he had no intention of letting go.

“If you are able to escape this house, I will give up. However, I warn you that the servants and I will try to prevent it at all costs.”

“Oops, word of knight, huh? No going back later. If I can get away, you won’t bother me anymore!”

I pointed a finger at his face and made him promise. After he agreed with his head looking into my eyes, he turned his face towards the house and said:

“Apparently, the servants noticed the mess. Let’s go back to the room.”

“Tch! See if you carry me carefully, noble knight!”

3

We were greeted by an elderly couple when we arrived at the room. According to Reinhard, they were the ones who took care of the house, that is, I would only need to run away from three people. It would be easy, just arriving at night and I was going to get out of this house.

“…Hey, listen.”

“May I help? it looks great on you Miss.”

For a change, I was irritated, and Reinhard continued with his damn little smile. Beside him was a grandmother with a harmless smile holding a bunch of dresses in all colors. And one of them, a yellow color, was the one that covered my body.

“Wh-Where’s my clothes…?”

“It is properly stored. While in this house, please wear the clothes we have here. Stay calm, we bought enough for more than a month.”

“You bastard! I swear I will run away, can you hear me?! I swear!!”

I only know that with my scream it certainly echoed throughout the mansion.

Continued in Felt Saw!

Felt Saw!
(Volume 3; Gamers)

1

…I'll get it this time, I thought, as I leaped over the redhead with clenched fists.

I kicked off the wall and jumped towards the ceiling where I grabbed onto the hanging lights and swung forward like a pendulum; and as I had intended, the moment my feet hit the carpet, I was able to accelerate.

“Yes! Gotcha this time. Serves ya- gyah?!”

During my escape's parting shot, I was caught by the neck and my legs were left kicking the air.

“Ugeh,” I cried, as my nape was squeezed and I dangled like a cat.

“Felt-sama, it is not proper for a girl to say ‘ugeh.’”

“That so? Ugeh, ugeh, ugeeehh.”

Hearing that, I repeated it as harassment towards the guy I should have been able to leave behind.

Continuing to hold me like a cat by its scruff, he stared at the ceiling.

“Still, in just a few days you were able to leave my side once… that's quite an accomplishment.”

“Don't pretend ta praise me ta brag about it! And I'm not a stray cat, lemme go!”

“Well then, may we consider today as my win again?”

While I was thrashing my legs about, Reinhard directed a smile at me.

“Fuck!” I spat, as I threw all my feelings of anger, worthlessness, and other various emotions towards his smile.

2

Ten days had passed since I was confined by that bastard, Reinhard.

“Feel free to try if you think you can escape from me,” he had proposed, as if to mock me after trapping me. Regrettably, for the past ten days, all of my dozen or so escape plans have failed. I was still unable to get out of this abduction situation.

It was as if he had eyes across the entire mansion, immediately appearing wherever I tried to flee. With that said, I should use this time while he’s not here to escape…

“Here, Felt-sama. It’s such a waste for you to ruin your cute face by being miffed all the time.”

A plate of sweets was offered towards the dissatisfied me, and my stomach rumbled as I smelled its fragrance. Seeing my instinct to touch my abdomen, the old lady that provided the sweets smiled.

She was called “nanny” by Reinhard, and is the wife of the couple that works at the mansion. Her work seems to involve stuff like cooking and cleaning.

She looked to be over 60, and was someone had trouble dealing with, albeit in a different sense from that of Reinhard.

It might be because she was always smiling, which made me feel uncomfortable, as if I was being cursed at.

“Today’s snacks are baked confectionaries. Felt-sama, would these fit your taste?”

As I looked back and forth between the confectionary and the old lady, her already wrinkled face creased further as she encouraged me to try it.

I guess I gotta do it.

I picked up a piping hot confectionary and stuffed it in my mouth. Its sweetness quickly enveloped my mouth.

“Mmm!”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling.

Even though I was unwillingly captured into this mansion, and I hated their pretty clothes and soft beds, their food was just something else. You couldn’t compare it to that of the slums.

“Is it no good after all? Ta bring Granny along when I escape.”

“Fufu, it makes me happy to be invited, but… if I were to leave, Gramps would starve to death. Though, Young Master can handle everything on his own.”

“Aww, guess it was no good.” I pouted after being rejected by Granny.

By the way, Gramps—Granny’s husband—is an extremely reticent worker. That’s how I saw it when he took care of the garden, went shopping, and such. After all, I found it difficult to even talk when I went shopping with him before.

“Besides, even if I snuck out ta escape, I’ll be found no matter where I go and then ma tired body would be dragged back to the mansion by ma legs…”

“It’s not good to trouble your two elders. Sigh. My, oh my, how troubling.”

“Well, Granny, you also don’t hold back punishments each time I run away…”

Even without Reinhard here, I still couldn’t leave because Granny and Gramps were in the way. Their movements made it clear they were no ordinary elders. Perhaps it was because they were acquainted with Reinhard, or perhaps everyone with connections to nobles were like this.

“In that case, it’s money, huh… By the way, I haven’t seen Reinhard around, he ain’t here?”

“Indeed, Young Master is at the Royal Castle because of some matters he must take care of. However, he should be returning shortly. I understand Felt-sama is feeling lonely, but please bear with it as Granny shall accompany you.”

“I ain’t feeling lonely. I’m done eating, so I’m leaving.”

I licked the cream stuck on my hands as I got up from my seat.

To be honest, I wanted to lick the plate as well, but the last time I did that, Granny got so furious it felt like the world was about to end.

“I have to tidy up and clean the residence, hence I cannot attend to you… so please be careful not to do something dangerous. I don’t know what Young Master would do after all.”

“I’m not a kid, ya don’t hafta worry. Thanks for the food.”

Swinging my arms, I left the dining room to leisurely walk about the mansion. With that said, because I was here for ten days, I had explored most of the mansion.

Basically, the doors to the outside were locked, and since I had jumped out of the windows on the first day, the windows were modified to no longer open. At worst, I could break the windows to escape, but the moment I tried that, three people rushed over and caught me.

“Even so, I’ll definitely get outta here…”

It’s true that it wouldn’t be bad to wallow in such comfort, but there was a reason I had to go back no matter what.

“Rom-jii… wonder if he’s doing alright…”

That was the name of my only family member, whom I had left behind in the slums.

Ten days ago, because of a blunder I made, he got involved and ended up getting hurt. I was captured by Reinhard soon after, so I wasn't able to confirm Rom-jii's safety.

It's not a wound he would die from, but if asked about, it wasn't something even he could avoid answering easily.

"That's why I hafta go back no matter what, but what can I do to escape…?"

As I finished my thought, I halted—at the end of the hallway I was walking down was a door that led to a room.

"This room… was usually closed ta prevent anyone from entering, right?"

The door had a large, rugged bell on it, and I clearly remember being warned about not entering it.

Right now, there was no key on it, but twisting the doorknob easily opened it.

I checked my surroundings to confirm there was no one nearby before slipping into the room.

The air was chilly, and my initial thoughts were that it was a dimly lit room.

Even though it was daytime, the windows were blocked by thick curtains, preventing any sunlight from coming in. The interior was quite dreary, with nothing that stood out aside from the bed at the center.

A candlestick lay beside the bed, with its faint light providing the only illumination in this room.

"What, how boring. I honestly thought they would be hiding some treasure or somethi-?!"

Initially finding the room to be a letdown, I noticed something that left me speechless. It was so shocking, I thought my heart was going to explode.

…On the bed laid a sleeping woman.

It wasn't the fact that a woman was sleeping there that startled me, but rather the fact that she didn't breathe like someone who was asleep. I didn't get that impression from her.

Even after confirming it with my eyes, it didn't seem like that was the case.

"What… is this? She's…"

I couldn't feel the presence of a living person from her even as I moved closer.

You would think that would mean she was a corpse or a doll, but that was not the case. Her cheeks and lips indicated that her blood was still flowing, and if you looked closely, her chest did rise and fall from breathing.

Although she was alive, there were no signs of her life.

"I can't understand. In fact, who is she? …Don't tell me that bastard Reinhard imprisoned other women as well?"

"…That is a terrible misunderstanding. I cannot help but say your assessment was very unexpected."

"Gyaaah!"

Hearing a voice from behind made me lose my wits. I screamed and leaped across the other side of the bed with my hands.

I glanced at the entrance, and there stood Reinhard.

He was leaning against the door, and had a rare, troubled look on his face as he pushed aside his forelock.

“It seems I had slackened just a bit… I have made an oversight, it seems.”

“This isn’t like ya. By the way, mind letting loose who she is? If ya keep quiet, I’ll see ya as criminal who abducts a bunch of women. “

“She is my mother.” Reinhard readily replied towards my question.

His answer only made me respond with “What?” as I looked at the woman on the bed.

She had long golden hair, and was beautiful enough to make your eyes pop. At most, she seemed to be twenty years old. I would have believed it if Reinhard said it was his older sister instead. He sure sucks at lying.

“In ma mind, yer a criminal who abducts people and lies about it…”

“I don’t blame you for finding this hard to believe, but my mother—Luanna Astrea—suffers from the Sleeping Beauty sickness, and her appearance remains unchanged as she remains asleep. It’s already been seventeen years.”

“Sevent—?!”

Hearing him say “seventeen years” made my jaws drop. If that was true, then she has been sleeping before I, who was fourteen, was even born. No, wait…

“Reinhard, how old are ya?”

“I will be nineteen this year… I only have memories of my mother up until I was two years old.” He shrugged with a wry smile as he talked about his mother.

For some reason, his matter-of-fact reaction rubbed me the wrong way, and I pursed my lips.

“So ya locked yer sick mom in the corner of the mansion and left her there to sleep, did ya?”

“…Those words are quite hurtful. Sadly, the cause of this sickness is unknown. At the very least, should a treatment be discovered, we will act to ensure she will recuperate at a separate residence in the capital. “

“…Don’t say something like this so matter-of-factly.”

His response was something he must have said enough times to forget what it even means. It was like a prepared answer, and it irritated me even more.

“This is family yer talking about! Even though yer not doing anything, you dare talk big about it ta me. You piss me off!”

“But facts remain facts. Felt-sama’s words are justified, but I believe we should leave it at that for now.”

“Huh, that so!”

If I talked with this bigot any more, I felt I would go crazy from anger.

Reinhard’s mother really didn’t wake up, even after those loud voices. Her face was into my memories through the corner of my eyes, and I got off the bed to leave the room.

“Felt-sama.”

However, Reinhard grabbed my arm and stopped me.

I looked back at him with a face that said I would bite him, but he didn’t seem to mind as he said “I would appreciate it if you do not disclose to anyone else about my mother’s situation. I also want you to never enter this room again.”

“You…!”

“Also, I am grateful for your concerns earlier.”

For a moment, my mind went blank at his words. Once I understood what he meant, blood rushed to my head in anger as I realized just how utterly disgusting this bastard is.

He knew just why I was angry, and the reason behind what made me angry.

“Reinhard! Yer a seriously disgusting guy!”

Pulling back the arm that was gripped, I dashed out the room.

Behind me, Reinhard closed and locked the door before walking next to me. I was annoyed enough that I didn’t have to look to know he had an unpleasant smile on his face.

“By the way, Felt-sama, I went to the imperial capital’s guardhouse this morning.”

“…What.”

“It’s about the old man that was with you. Apparently, after the uproar the other day, he ran away from the guardhouse during his treatment. I do not know where he went after that.”

Hearing that, I inadvertently stopped.

Reinhard was saying something along the lines of “I am very sorry,” but I wasn’t listening to him.

If Rom-jii escaped from the guardhouse, that means…

“Fer now, it’s safe ta say he’s fine…”

“I would have preferred to secure the person in question before reporting his safety to you, but…”

“Sigh, ya don’t need ta. Ma family is not something ya need ta concern yerself too much about. Besides, fer someone like ya, ya can’t understand the dirtiness of living in the slums.”

I poked at Reinhard’s chest, and then continued walking happily with a grin. He also showed a bit of relief on his face as he walked alongside me.

Suddenly, something came up in my mind about his face.

“It looks like ya really do look like that mother of yers, Reinhard.”

“…Really?”

Immediately after I said that, Reinhard suddenly looked happy. His reaction surprised me a little, and I replied with “Y-Yeah” while nodding.

“The shape of yer eyes and nose are exactly the same. Putting aside her being yer mother, I believe that she’s yer family.”

“Do you still view me as a criminal who abducts and confines young girls?”

“Multiple kidnappings aside, the fact that yer keeping me trapped here is the truth!”

… But before long, I’ll be sure ta escape ta Rom-jii’s place.

Thinking that, I decided against spitting on the annoying Reinhard.

Walking down the corridor, I was drawing up my next plan of action for escaping.

Continued in Felt Rises to Center Stage

Felt Rises to Center Stage
(Volumes 1-3; Gamers)

1

Feeling the vehicle sway on my ass, I scowled at the damn redhead who sat in front of me.

“Do not keep looking that discouraged forever,” Reinhard said.

As always, he had the usual unpleasant smile, from someone who doesn’t believe that malice existed in the world, which came to seem like he was provoking me, playing in my face that I am a loser.

“You recognized my victory, remember?”

“Tch, are you happy to have beaten me on a bet?”

I practically threw myself on the seat and with my arms crossed because I knew that Reinhard didn’t like it when I didn’t behave like a “lady”. Only the bastard continued to look sleepy without caring, as if I were just like a tantrum child.

“Sucker.”

“Oops.”

That was me trying to put the sole of my shoe in Reinhard’s white pants, but the guy wasn’t even caught off guard and managed to move his leg off to avoid my foot. So, I tried a second time, then he kicked his foot on mine to get him out of the way. If I looked uncomfortable, he went on with a teasing smile.

“Take it, take it, take it, take it, take it.”

“Oh, ops, hm, no, ah.”

“Each “take it” was a kick, but they were all defended. So, I thought there was no point in just trying to face it and that I would need a more elaborate plan, so…”

“…Gentleman, please.”

But before I put my plan into practice, the grandma who saw us from the front seat told us to stop. She looked at me and Reinhard and said:

“Don’t make a mess in here, behave yourself, both behave.”

Her voice was not that of someone who was angry, it was more of someone who made a dear request. So, I lowered my foot and Reinhard also shrugged. It seems that he hinted that it was my fault and I got more angry.

“TAKE IT!”

“Oh.”

Too bad that not even that last kick hit, so I had to settle for stamping my feet on the floor.

2

The vehicle we used to call, “Dragon Carriage”, is nothing more than a carriage that has earth dragons in place of horses. I don’t even need to say that it is something that has nothing to do with me, and that was the first time I traveled on it inside the passenger wagon without being hidden among merchants’ goods. In fact, unlike the merchants’ drakes, this one was all chic.

“And so? After all, where are we going? isn’t it time for you to tell me?” I threw the question to Reinhard without being able to stand the silence.

The guy then opened his blue eyes, looked me in the face and said.

“Well… what if I say it’s a surprise?”

“Do you want to be hit? No matter how good you are at dodging, if I decide I’m going to hit you, I’ll hit you. Better not even think about sleeping until then.”

“There is no need to threaten me, as we are already arriving. As grandpa and his earth dragon are calm, we ended up taking a little longer trip.”

Reinhard’s answer was about the grandpa who drove the vehicle, but I didn’t ask him why we were late and he didn’t even explain what I wanted to know. To start with, all of this was just happening because I was muggle to fall for the bastard’s trick. But in my defense, I was starting to get a little anxious about not being able to get away from that house and that made me nervous.

The bid went something like this:

“Miss Felt, what about making a bet with me? We will throw a coin and, if you hit the side that falls, you will be free to leave.”

“Are you serious?! I’m in! But I’m going to throw the coin!”

And I lost. Worse than I was the one who threw the coin and I was the one who chose which side was going to fall, so Reinhard couldn’t have cheated. That, without even checking what he would want from me first if he won. You know, I never really thought about it until that moment, but things that happened to me made me think that maybe I was a little dumb. This gambling story was another example.

“…Miss Felt, our destiny is in sight,” informed Grandma.

Since I was kidnapped by Reinhard, I found myself reflecting on my actions more often, but being interrupted by Grandma’s voice, I looked out the window. It was a landscape of the capital that seems familiar, except that I had never seen it myself. After all, it was the Noble District, the area of the city that has less to do with me. I showed my tongue to the tasteless mansions lined up with them and the only thing that mattered was showing who had the most money. Then, I looked in the direction we were going and… I regretted it. I really hoped that that way ahead, at the end of that straight street and that there was no way out, was not our destination.

“This is where we are going, the center of the kingdom, the Castle of Lugunica.”

Unfortunately, this is what Reinhard told me, as if he had read my thoughts. Facing his profile, I realized that my shoulders were shaking a little.

“There is no use turning the face that I know you’re laughing, you bastards!”

3

It didn’t matter how much I cried or kicked, those people didn’t have a drop of mercy. Apparently, they wanted to squeeze me like a floor cloth.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch! It hurts! I already said it hurts!”

“Please hold on just a little bit longer, this is necessary for any lady.”

“I don’t remember becoming a lady and I don’t even plan to be!”, But I wanted to shout it, but I saw that it wasn’t going to happen.

Around me, there were six girls trying to tighten my body with a thing they called a corset. It looked like they were companions of the castle, and in the corner of the room was Grandma with a smile watching over me.

If not, even grandma I could win, I had no chance being in enemy territory. So, I just let it be brought up to that room and I was since being treated like a toy by the six girls, who put on and took off a lot of dresses on me.

The instant I entered the castle, I lost any chance of escaping the dragon carriage and I was locked in this room. Reinhard left saying that he had something to do, but at least I didn’t need to change in front of him. In the end, the chosen outfit was a yellow dress similar to the one I had to wear at Reinhard’s house, but I could feel it by the fabric texture that was of a better quality.

“This is suffocating me and the fabric bothers me… What does that bastard want from me, huh…?”

“If you intend to complain to the young master, let it be only after being properly presentable. Rest assured, that dress looked great on you," said Grandma.

"Damn it if it was good! What anger to have to do everything the way that bastard wants…"

Anyway, for the peace of mind of the chaperones, I stopped struggling and let them squeeze me. Even after the corset, there was still a lot of place in the dress that I needed to adjust and my suffering continued. I swore I would fly kick Reinhard later.

And it was at such an hour that the door was suddenly opened and a hoarse voice invaded the room.

"…cense. Is Sword Saint here?"

As the girls had not finished dressing yet, they were petrified without knowing what to do. I just looked at the guy who came in and did a quick analysis. He was a not-very-old uncle with a slightly flushed face and a badly shaved beard. He staggered a little bit as if he were the drunks in the slum, and it would be perfect if he had a belly out with a bottle of drink in his hand, but that was not the case. Surprisingly, he wore the crumpled Royal Knights' uniform and carried a sword at his waist. Incredible as it seemed, he was a knight.

Then the uncle searched the room with his eyes and let out a breath bad smell of alcohol.

"Whaaat? They told me that the Astreas would be here, hey…"

"…How dare you enter the room where a lady is dressing?!"

Whoever shouted at the man scratching his head was Grandma. I could see on her face that she was angrier than when I licked her plate, only her exaggeration seemed a little strange.

The answer came with the man's reaction to her:

"Ah, is it you, grandma? I thought it was an old vase that scared me."

“Frankly, unbelievable that you prefer to offend me before apologizing for entering without knocking. If I no longer have the minimum dignity as a knight, how about leaving the sword on your waist hanging on the wall?”

“Sharp as always… But I’ll tell you, Grandma. I think you are the one who should be careful how you address me, huh?”

“…Master Heinkel…”

I could hear Grandma say the guy’s name very quietly, which made him smile a little disgusting. And my patience was almost at the limit.

“Hey, uncle, you’re too loose for those who were invading the place where a girl is changing. Which is? Didn’t you realize it’s already time for you to apologize to me?”

“Hã?”

With that, the man looked at me for the first time, and when his blue eyes reflected me, he put a hand on his forehead and said:

“Ah, right, it was bad there, young lady. I didn’t think I was going to disturb a child by changing, nor did I care about you.”

“Do you want me to leave an unforgettable impression on your face?”

Seeing that uncle tease me, I already lift the skirt of my dress and get ready to give him a nice kick. Only, before the shock happened…

“Vice-captain Heinkel, you must know the reason for the meeting… From that, can’t you really deduce who this lady might be?”

…Grandma entered our midst. I didn’t understand anything about what she said and apparently neither the guy.

“It was bad, but I don’t know anything, no… For a change, I’ll have to be locked up quietly in my room, Marcos didn’t tell me anything.”

"…The royal selection."

"…!"

When uncle heard Grandma's whisper, his expression changed instantly. If before he seemed to be making fun of the whole world, now he was looking at me with a serious face, from head to tiptoe. So…

"Há… Há, há, há… há, há, há, há, há!" He laughed. "Understand. Now I understand! Then that's it?! You mean that kid chose a child of that size as a sacrifice this time?! What a joke, huh?! It can only be a joke! How not to laugh at that."

"…!"

He had kicked one of the bookshelves and spread a lot of stuff on the floor as he burst out laughing. While the girls were intimidated by this, I took a step forward and got closer to him. I didn't understand anything about their conversation, but I'm sure the guy was making a fool of me. And of all things, what I hate the most is that they make a fool of me.

"He's laughing now looking up, and since he's drunk, it's just me giving a good kick that he will fall to the floor. Easy."

"…Hold the emotion there, young lady. I'm drunk, but you won't be able to touch a finger on me."

The problem was that even before I gave the kick, the guy came out of nowhere in front of me releasing the breath of alcohol, making me take a few steps back.

"In a little while, you will also understand that you and I, we are in the same situation. At that time, if you want, I can comfort you."

Saying that, the uncle just laughed and left the room without fixing anything. When the door closed, Grandma came to my side and wiped my face with a tissue.

"Is everything okay, Miss Felt? I'm sorry, if I had managed to react in time, you wouldn't have had to go through this discomfort…"

“Relax, I was just annoyed, but he didn’t do anything. Do you know that uncle, grandma?”

“…Yes. He has an intrinsic relationship not only with me, but with my husband and the young master… So I apologize sincerely.”

Grandma showed a pained face that made me feel sorry for her. In the same way, the other girls were also all upset and the atmosphere in the room was very heavy in a very unpleasant way.

“Well, I almost didn’t understand what that guy came to do, but it’s over. Forget it.”

“But, miss…”

“We better pack up the things on the shelf he kicked and finish dressing me, right? I don’t think you’re going to like me walking like that.”

I held out my arms to the ladies waiting to show that there were still things to do, like closing a bunch of buttons and covering the corset. I didn’t need to be an expert to know that I wasn’t ready yet. At first, the girls were a little confused, but soon four of them came to dress me and the other two started to arrange things sprawled on the floor.

“Aaagh… What a paaaaaaaaaaain… Grandma? Why are you making that face?”

As I suffered from the tightness of the dress, I noticed that she was looking at me with her eyes wide open, as if she was frightened by something.

“Nothing, miss. I was just thinking that, like always, the young master got it right again.”

“Tsc, how about we don’t talk about him? I don’t want to remember that annoying face.”

Against my will, I ended up remembering the face of that bastard and, at the same time, I realized something: the drunk uncle who came to make a mess in the room also had bright red hair, the same tone as Reinhard.

“Yeah, at least now I know people with red hair suck,” as I came to the conclusion of the day, next to me, Grandma, looked at me with a satisfied face and someone who knew everything. She stayed like that until a knight appeared in the room and took me outside.

Continued in Volume 4

Felt Gathers Thugs
(Volume 4; Gamers)

1

Sitting in the dragon carriage with my legs on top of the bench, I sighed, and decided to finally break the ice.

???: “So, in the end, everythin’ went exactly as you planned.”

Look, in all my life, I think I have never been so upset before. They put me in a disgusting and uncomfortable dress and threw me into a meeting that had nothing to do with me all of a sudden, without bothering to explain anything at all.

Still, the redhead in front of me had a few words of choice.

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, even if you are not in public, you should strive to keep up a dignified front. A real lady should act with poise, even among close friends or alone.”

Felt: “Well, I wish those ladies would just explode! And did you really have the nerve to call yourself an close friend of mine to my face? Stop kiddin’ around, get outta here!”

I’ve lost track of the sheer amount of times Reinhard has nagged me with etiquette and finesse and all those pretty things, but I will not refrain from showing my displeasure and my pouting face to him. Worst of all, I’ve now been involved in this deal called a Royal Election or whatever, and I will be forced to spend too much time around this bastard, since he’s appointed himself as my Knight in this whole ordeal.

Felt: “I kinda let myself go with the flow there, I should have thought about it better… I’m already regrettin’ having to deal with your shit for such a long time.”

Reinhard: “I believe it would have been difficult to pick any knight other than myself, Felt-sama. As far as the Royal Election is concerned, your unknown pedigree and having been raised in the slums are very delicate matters. At the very least, I cannot think of anyone else that would be courageous enough to support you during the meeting…"

Felt: "Hey, I know all that! It's exactly because of that that I call you a damn bastard! I'm plenty sure that a lot of those knights and fancy nobles think you're wrong in the head!"

???: "Calm down, Felt-chan. I know it's a waste of time telling you to calm down but throwing a tantrum will not do you any good."

The only reason that I wasn't in an even fouler mood was the owner of the hoarse voice that interrupted the conversation, Rom-jii, who was sitting next to me, making the dragon carriage look smaller because of his presence.

Felt: "Yeah, ok, fine, but I have a number of things on my mind that need to be spo-… Okay, fine, whatever, nevermind, in the end they're nothin' but excuses."

Rom: "You don't need to put up a tough front in front of me, Felt-chan."

Felt: "I'll do that once things get really bad. I can't complain about everything when the so-called Royal Election has just started."

I am happy that Rom-jii is always worried about me, but I cannot depend on him forever… I know, today I'll sleep perched on his big arms just a tiny bit. Then, Rom-jii patted my head and turned to Reinhard.

Rom: "Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea… I think this is the first time we are able to talk calmly face-to-face."

Reinhard: "That's right, when I found you at the loot house the other day, you were already unconscious. By the way, how is your condition? When word arrived that you had escaped the guard post, I got worried."

Rom: "Yeah, I can see that you're worried… Luckily, I'm alive. But I'm not the one who matters most right now, it's Felt-chan. You…

You really want to make her the King?”

With a serious, lower tone, Rom-jii asked that of Reinhard as if threatening him. I actually felt him putting more strength into his arm, and it really got the impression Rom was really going to jump Reinhard depending on his answer. The thought of warning him that his chances of succeeding were none passed my mind, but…

Reinhard: “Yes, I do. Felt-sama was chosen by the insignia, officially becoming a Royal Candidate. I am her knight, and will gladly give my life so that her ambition may be realized.”

Rom: “It is, to put it lightly, strange that someone such as the Sword Saint is that obsessed with a girl as little as Felt… I’ll have you know she’s small even when compared to girls her age.”

Felt: “Hey, Rom-jii!”

I started kicking up a fuss, but Rom-jii held my head in his large hands and continued, turning to Reinhard,

Rom: “I did not want to mock you, I am serious. Now that you are a part of that Royal Election business, everything that may happen is not just child’s play. I cannot let you go on this journey without trusting your companions. Because of that, we need to have an honest conversation with the Sword Saint. Do you understand?”

Reinhard: “Absolutely. May I call you Rom-dono?”

Rom: “You can call me jiji if you want to, but I can imagine it’s not really your taste. So what, are you gonna tell me your true intentions or not?”

Rom-jii crossed his arms, changing his posture on the bench, and I did the same looking straight at Reinhard’s annoying face. A few seconds later, however, he removed his sword from its place at his waist, and extended it to me while kneeling.

Felt: “…And what am I supposed to do with that?”

Reinhard: “Before anything else, I want to demonstrate my absolute loyalty towards Felt-sama. This is the proof that Felt-sama is my master, and that my sword belongs to her, and her alone. We can continue this talk after it is accepted.”

Rom: “Come on, Felt, take it. I feel it’s the right thing.”

With Rom-jii’s approval, I took up the sword. It was heavier than expected, with a large slash mark halfway along the white scabbard, as if a gigantic animal had stuck its claws in.

Rom: “According to the legends, the Holy Dragon Volcanica itself engraved its claws upon that scabbard.”

Felt: “Volcanica? That dragon from the legends? You’re pulling my leg, aren’tcha?”

If that was true, it would mean that the sword was hundreds of years old. If it had been inherited over several generations until today, it meant it was quite the treasure. But my hands were shaking while I held it, and it was not because of how valuable it was, and how much money it was worth. Then,

Rom: “So, there is no higher proof of loyalty than handing a sword like this to Felt-chan, is that it?”

Reinhard: “Precisely. This is the Dragon Sword Reid, and only the Sword Saint is able to draw it from its scabbard in times of great need. As there is only one Sword Saint in any given generation, I’m sure you understand the magnitude of my gesture, handing it to Felt-sama.”

Felt: “I guess I understand. Let’s see… Ehhh.”

If it was truly such an amazing sword, I thought of taking a quick peek at its blade and attest its sharpness. But when I tried to remove it from its scabbard, it did not budge even a tiny bit. Almost as if the blade had fused with its scabbard.

Felt: “Oy, it’s not going out! This sword is broken or something!”

Reinhard: “As I said Felt-sama, it can only be withdrawn from its scabbard in times of need. Right now, not even I am able to draw it.”

I wasn’t sure if that was exactly the truth, but if Rom-jii had not said anything, it was no regular sword at the very least. I gave up trying to look at it and simply put it on my lap, looking at Reinhard.

Felt: “Okay, good, the sword’s here with me. So you can start talking.”

Reinhard: “About my motivations and my real intent in supporting you to become the next King of Lugunica, correct?”

Felt: “Yes, yes, exactly. That’s the first step, without that, we cannot-”

Reinhard: “I know the true reason why the old Order of Royal Knights was disbanded.”

Rom: “…!”

I really could not understand what Reinhard was trying to say, but Rom-jii’s reaction made it obvious as to its significance. He was looking shocked, eyes wide open, and a trembling voice.

Rom: “H-How… How do you-?”

Reinhard: “I believe you know the answer to that, Cromwell-dono.”

Rom: “I do… So you know about me as well… You must also be aware that you will be ignoring that person’s wish?”

Reinhard: “If that is what destiny has chosen, then so be it.”

With Reinhard’s reply, Rom-jii forced the yellow smile of someone who did not want to accept defeat. I had no idea as to why, even if the subject of the conversation was me.

Rom: “…Felt-chan, this young man will not betray you. Rather, he cannot betray you. I guarantee it.”

Felt: “What do you mean? Just like that? Damnit, you need to explain what’s goi-”

When I tried to raise my voice and object, Rom-jii just put his hand over my mouth and pet my head once again. He knew I was unable to get mad at him whenever he did that.

Rom: "…You are my grandchild, my only family. Trust me, Felt-chan."

Felt: "…You're playin' dirty."

He didn't tell me anything, but he didn't let me ask anything either. So the only thing I could do was to look back at his face while holding back the tears. Through my misty sight, the only thing I could see was Rom-jii with the happiest sight of the day.

???: "…Enviable."

I got the idea that someone said something along those lines, but I was not sure if it was just my imagination. After all, at the same time, I blew my nose pretty loudly.

Felt: "Hmph!"

2

Felt: "Wow, everything was blown away, huh, Rom-jii?"

Rom: "Yes, nothing was left standing, but it is better like this. Otherwise, we would probably want to fix everything or build it back up."

Reinhard: "As the one responsible for this, it makes me glad to hear that."

Felt: "We're not trying to rid you of your guilt, so quit actin' so pleased with yourself."

I was talking to Rom-jii and Reinhard, in front of a small mountain-sized pile of rubble. It had been the place where the loot house once stood; I had ordered the dragon carriage to come to this location while returning from the Royal Castle.

Felt: "Will you guys let this stay like it is, or will you build somethin' in its place?"

Reinhard: "…Right now, all public construction in the capital has been halted. Some say it's due to the economic crisis affecting the Kingdom right now, but I personally believe it's not the only reason.

Felt: "If you let a pile of trash just sit around, then naturally the trash will flock to this place, yeah? You people who look down from up high really make me sick… Damnit."

I kicked a pebble on the ground due to my rage. It was plain to see it was an uncomfortable matter for Reinhard as well, so he just stared blankly. But, suddenly, he stepped forward and said loudly,

Reinhard: "…Who's there?"

In the direction he shouted to, I saw three shadows not-so-very-hidden in the middle of the street. Looking better, it looked to be three punks who had been beaten up, a little dude, an average one, and a tall fella. They looked bruised and blood-stained, almost as if they had just gotten escaped from a fight. Seeing that, Reinhard gave up being on alert, and actually showed some worry.

Reinhard: "They're beaten up? Something must have happened…"

???: "Shut the fuck up! Gimme all your valuables, now, if you want to live!"

The one yelling that was the guy in the middle, the one with normal height, stepping forward with a knife in his hand, menacingly.

???: "Calm down, Rachins! Now is not the time…"

Rachins: "You fucking idiot, now is the only time! We fucked up using Russell's name, they're gonna kill us three! We need money to escape from here!"

That guy looked desperate, and really wasn't looking like he was open to debate with his companions either. He again turned to us, pointing his knife and getting closer and closer. Honestly, I think I could have done something about it, but…

Reinhard: "…That's enough."

…Reinhard was faster than I was and socked the punk. As he had cut through cloth using nothing but his hand in the past, I actually thought he was about to behead the guy right there, but luckily, he only fainted.

???: "…What?"

Seeing that their friend had been knocked out in a blink of the eyes, they were stunned. The knife the average height guy held went spinning into the air, being grabbed by Reinhard as if it was nothing. And only then did the punks realize just who they were dealing with.

???: "Red hair, and sky-blue eyes… Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea??!!"

???: "Are you kidding me?! Why must a guy like this show up right at this time…?!"

Reinhard: "If you know who I am, then this becomes easier for all of us. Your friend is just unconscious, his life is not threatened in any fashion. I promise not to do anything more if you leave this place right now. What do you say?"

Those poor sods were shaking in their boots in fear. The way Reinhard spoke, it seemed like he was giving them the option to tuck their tails between their legs and run, but in reality, it was nothing but a veiled threat. The real problem is that the sucker honestly thought he was being the good guy, and that annoyed me to no end. Wanna know why? That's exactly what the rich like to do to the poor, what the Kingdom does to the common rabble.

Felt: "Wait a second there, Reinhard."

Before even thinking about it, I stuck my nose in between them. Reinhard was a little surprised, but I stepped over the guy laying on the ground unconscious, and turned to the other two.

Felt: "That fella there on the ground, he said you guys need to run away. What the hell did you do?"

???: “Ugh…”

When faced with that question, they looked defeated, as if they had reached rock bottom. That is the reality of those who live in the bottom rung… That’s what the Kingdom does to these people.

Felt: “Take a good look, Reinhard. You see what the slums are really like? You tried to be the good guy and let them leave unharmed, but that’s not going to do any good. Here, our lives are worth less than a grain of rice. I’m betting on them becoming’ dogfood by tomorrow.”

Reinhard: “I feel the same, Felt-sama. What do you propose we should do, then?”

Felt: “It’s what I said in the Castle. I hate this Kingdom. I want to burn it all down. And when I say ‘all’, I mean both the ones on top,”

I said, pointing at the oppressing Castle in the distance,

Felt: “…And the ones here below.”

I said, pointing at the rubble of the loot house.

Finally, I pointed at the three idiots next to me, and said,

Felt: “Come with me, you three. Let’s turn that shit you call your life upside down.”

Reinhard: “Felt-sama?!”

“Oh man, Reinhard even squeaked a lil’ bit there, how delightful”, I couldn’t help but think.

But he was not the only one surprised; obviously, the punks were also shocked. Well, if they did not understand it, I have no choice but to make it clear to them.

Felt: “I will destroy this Kingdom. I will build a new, improved one, in its place. And how will I do that, if I am not able to change the lives of 3 scoundrels livin’ in the slums?”

No one was saying anything. But I did not regret what I did, calling over those 3 to join me, and I was not gonna change my mind. After all, I could trust in the backing of my only family member.

Rom: “Young man, I suggest you just accept it. Once an idea pops up in her head, that girl will not change her mind. Besides, isn’t it fun?”

Rom-jii walked up to Reinhard and threw those words at him, before picking up the guy fainted on the floor.

Reinhard: “Fun…?”

Rom: “She’s a slum dog, the incarnation of the Kingdom’s greatest shame! The first companions she picks are a trio of half-baked thieves! If that’s not fun to you, I don’t know what is, Sword Saint.”

Felt: “Not that it’s a lie or anything, Rom-jii… But there are nicer ways to say that, you know!”

With my hands crossed behind my head, I laughed at his words. Then he turned to the punks, and continued.

Rom: “Come with us, you three. Even if you just want to hide from Russell, if he’s truly after you. Meanwhile, get to know Felt-chan, and decide by yourselves what you wanna do with your life.”

After he was done talking, Rom-jii walked away from the slums, where the dragon carriage had been left.

???: “Oy, wait! I don’t understand anything you’re talking about…!”

???: “Me neither, but we can’t just leave Rachins alone! I’m going with them!”

The big one was doubting the whole thing, but when the little one ran after Rom-jii, he made up his mind and followed. For some reason, seeing those two really made my heart jump a little bit. Then, I turned to Reinhard.

Felt: “What about you? Are you gonna just stand there or what?”

Then, he just closed his eyes and turned towards me, standing there until I decided to go towards the dragon carriage as well, thinking how to explain the presence of these rascals to the grandpa and grandma waiting for us.

Reinhard: “…Felt-sama… I’m not mistaken, you truly should become… So, I…”

Unfortunately, I was already a bit too far away to hear Reinhard’s whisper, so I was not able to pick up on what he said.

END

Felt Forms a Hooligan Squad (Volume 6; Gamers)

1

???: “It’s been a while since so many people have gathered in this mansion.”

Looking at the people meeting at the parlor, the elderly woman commented that with a smile. As she served black tea to each guest, her gait of walking was almost as if she was prancing around. However, her refined gestures and inability to sense the mood objectively are not unusual.

At the present moment, regretfully, the room cannot be said to have an atmosphere gentle enough for full enjoyment of a tea party.

At that moment, seven people had joined the room, even though four of those were of such standing that they would never have entered such a house in their lives.

???: “Are you gonna keep frownin’ like that? Well, I also took a while to get used to it, honestly, so I can’t really say much…”

A girl, looking even more carefree than the elderly woman serving tea, laughed. She had blond hair, red eyes, and pronounced canines, but her most distinguishing characteristic was her childish appearance. Maybe, in a few years, she could become a truly beautiful woman, especially if she wore proper clothing: her current taste was just too plebeian.

???: “I’m so sad that Felt-sama removed her dress the moment we came back…”

Felt: “Those clothes are just too suffocating, and it’s so annoying to walk around in them. Sorry Obaa-chan, but I’m not gonna wear that type of dress inside the house. Only when it’s unavoidable.”

Grandma: “Oh young master, did you hear? Felt-sama said she’ll start wearing those dresses."

???: "Yes, I did. And I'm very glad to hear that she finally started fulfilling your wishes."

Felt: "Don't gimme that smirk! I would do it only when I have to! Only when necessary!"

The two who exploited the young Felt's opening, were the elderly lady, and the red-haired knight, Reinhard.

This mansion was Reinhard's residence, built in the Noble District of the Royal Capital. In the past two months, Felt has completely settled in, but the original residents are constantly trying to get her to do new things. In the middle of this routine exchange, a shadow with a large hand—old man Rom—intervenes.

Rom: "I'm sorry to interrupt this laid-back conversation… But let's talk about what really matters here. I'm starting to feel sorry for these clearly uncomfortable rascals."

Felt's guardian pointed towards a trio of men trying to make themselves as small as possible with his chin. The group was composed of one short, one average-sized and one tall man, all wearing rags that did not fit the glamour that befitted a noble's mansion. To make things worse, all three had bruises all over, and the average-sized man was knocked-out still. Then, the other two looked at each other, and the tallest one spoke up fearfully.

???: "Uhh… We ended up going with the flow, but… What is this group? I understand that the Sword Saint wants to make us fit into society, but what does that have to do with the old man from the loot house and the brat over there?"

???: "Gaston, you dumbass! Pay some fucking attention! I don't even wanna wonder why, but can't you see that brat is their ringleader? Be careful, damnit!"

Felt: "You're also dumb as rocks. Who are you calling a brat? If you want to have a secret talk, do it in private, in private."

The short one grew louder with impatience, and then grew quieter at the sound of Felt's ill humor. Felt snorted at the situation, scratching her blond hair.

Felt: "It's annoying to explain this properly… Reinhard, get them up to speed quickly."

Reinhard: "Yes, Felt-sama. You should know that the King of Lugunica, and that the entire Royal Family has passed away?"

???: "—Passed away?"

???: "I've even heard rumors about their deaths, but those things don't really have anything to do with us, so I never cared about it…"

In the daily life of a slum dweller, there is no opportunity to lament the death of the Royal Family. Reinhard squinted his eyes for a moment, before continuing his exposition.

Reinhard: "In other words, in the absence of a King, the Council of Sages has decided to elect a new monarch. Based on that, a new King shall be chosen from a few candidates, in preparation for the Dragonfriend Ceremony."

???: "And what does that have to do with you…?"

Reinhard: "Felt-sama, who stands among us, is one of said chosen people vying for the Royal Throne. I am her loyal knight, and Rom-dono is her only family."

???: "…What?"

Reinhard's explanation was succinct enough, having only disclosed the important parts, but it was enough to stun the two men. Felt liked that reaction, smiling maliciously, before they turned to her and raised their tone.

???: "That kid is a candidate to become the King?! The most important person in the Kingdom?!"

???: "Why is that happening, why would she be a candidate? She's just a mud-stained dog from the slums! Nothing but an ill-natured brat, working as a thief-for-hire!”

Reinhard: “Of course, we cannot ignore her past misdeeds, and we intend to compensate her past victims rightfully. My mission is to support her throughout, and that includes such details.”

Felt did not enjoy having her criminal past exposed like that, but pouted even further hearing Reinhard’s comment. It was apparent that their master-knight relationship had a vacuum that was yet to be filled. Rom picked up the cue and continued.

Rom: “At the very least, it seems all the worries you might have had were already discussed. If it’s any good, Felt-chan did not want to be a candidate at all, and only decided on that recently. Right?”

Felt: “At this point, I’m not gonna continue saying I didn’t have a choice. The truth is, yes, I decided to become King to slap those bastards in the face. I’m not gonna go back on my words.”

Hearing Felt’s assertions, the outcasts looked unsure of themselves. For them, it was a shocking twist, and found themselves thinking what kind of confusing situation they had found themselves into. And then-

???: “…Fuck all of that. If you want to be the King, that’s your own damn problem.”

—Coming beyond the two misfits, a voice was heard: that of the man who had fainted, as he got up slowly. Throwing a sharp gaze at Reinhard, he was displaying a lack of confidence in those words, that his companions had already dispelled.

Felt: “You’re not like the other two, you look like the most boneheaded of them. At the very least, you have the courage to speak up even after Reinhard knocked you out.”

Average Guy: “…What? Oh, so that’s why my neck hurts, damnit… Was it you, Sword Saint?!”

Felt: “Oh, so you hadn’t noticed it at all… I’m not so impressed anymore.”

Reinhard's calm face neutralized any possible hostility by the average-sized man. The power gap between the two was so massive, that the man looked like a whining loser. Anyhow, the conversation's focus came to the question from the three hooligans.

Reinhard: "So, the reason why we brought you here is…"

Rom: "Wait, Reinhard. You should not be the one that has that conversation with them. That has to come from Felt-chan's mouth directly."

Reinhard immediately acted upon old man Rom's words, who had directed his gaze towards his granddaughter. And so, Felt stepped forward and faced the trio, who looked quizzically towards her.

Felt: "The reason why I brought you three is simple. As was said, I am in the middle of a dispute for this Kingdom's throne. I do not intend to lose. In fact, I want to win at all costs."

Average Guy: "Ha! You're out of touch with reality. What do you know about the world, having been born and raised in the slums? Aren't you underestimating those nobles, huh?

Felt: "…"

The man who had fainted until now that point greatly contested her point, albeit with a touch of sadness. His companions looked towards him as well, insinuating some past episode. However, no matter the circumstances, Felt was not going to change her mind for anything.

Felt: "You are correct, but I won't let myself be intimidated by such things. What worked for me previously may not work anymore, but I do not intend to change my essence. I will win my way, and for that, I need people to help me."

Average Guy: "And you want to get those helpers from the slums? If you seriously think that we're gonna wag our tails if you give us a bit of money, you're dead wrong. Don't look down on us."

Having already anticipated the rebuttal to come, the average-sized man slammed his fist on the table and continued, Average Guy: “It looks like a bit of extra money does indeed ruin people’s mentality. If all you wanna do is to act superior by doing a favor to the poor people from the slums, I’ll let you know we will not accept that.”

Felt: “Well, for what reason?”

Average Guy: “You know why—It’s because I don’t like you, brat.”

The man capped his rebellion by showing his middle finger. The other two also sobered up and became serious in a single instant, looking at Felt as if they agreed with their friend.

Reinhard: “…”

Reinhard looked surprised with the stubborn attitude. No way had he expected them to refuse the offer in such a firm manner.

Felt: “Ehhh, did you hear that, Rom-jii? I knew these were the right people.”

Rom: “Yes… We don’t want those who are poor not only in money, but also spirit.”

Despite the refusal, the young girl and her grandfather exchanged smiles, which was not only surprising to Reinhard, but also to the trio of hoodlums. So, Felt showed her protruding canines, and turned to them.

Felt: “I like what you guys are made of, not doing what you don’t want to do, despite the reward, just because you don’t like it. That’s just like me.”

Average Guy: “…What are you saying?”

Felt: “You know, I hate this Kingdom.”

Felt suddenly looked at the delinquent dressed in black and white.

Felt: “I find those who speak of patriotism idiotic, and I couldn’t stand seein’ looking at the grey sky from the slums. I’ve always wanted to rip the pristine pretty clothes of those rich bastards, who think they are great just because they had the privilege of being born rich. Well, I still want to do that.”

???: “I don’t know if it’s okay for a person who wants to become King to say that…”

Felt: “Don’t you think it would be interesting to see what kind of country arises if someone like me became King?”

Felt laughed at the astonishment from the hoodlums, and continued before the trio could even think,

Felt: “I truly believe my essence is the same as yours. Of course, we do not have the same personality, and I’m not like you as to resign myself to a life in the slums, but…”

Average Guy: “Then what’s the same between us?”

Felt: “We’re the same, because we came from the same place, and hate the same things. I have not changed, but this opportunity came to me, and I still hate those useless bastards who can do nothing but order others around. And I will become the King without having to change a thing about myself.”

Her declarations were completely bereft of the character befitting a Royal Candidate. She had caused the dissatisfaction of many people present in the Royal Election Ceremony, but the contents of her speech were unaltered. After all, even if her words fell on the deaf ears of those who looked at her from above, satisfied with the status quo remaining unchanged, they resonated strongly on the populace that echoed the same frustration as she did.

Trio: “…”

The three rascals’ expression had changed. They had not found an answer yet, but the hints for their answer had already been handed over by Felt.

Felt: “I don’t want to do you a favor or to make you my subjects. All I have to offer is a little bit of fun, you know? Imagine if we can pull the carpet from under those bastards upstairs? Wouldn’t that be real fun? Let’s do that. Together.”

???: “Are you for real… And you think you’ll become a good King doing just that?”

Felt: “Well, I know that won’t do. But I don’t think it’s wrong to try and drain a bit of that backed-up swamp. If all those who hate the same things I do unite, then maybe we can do something very big. The voices that went unheard until now, can now be heard, exactly because I became a Royal Candidate!”

Laughing in amusement, the young girl was imagining an optimistic future. Her somewhat childish idea was not credible, nor was it realistic. And she had easier, wiser ways to be able to live decently. Because of that…

Average Guy: "…I am Rachins."

Big Guy: "I am Gaston, gentle and strong."

Small Guy: "I-I am Camberley… For the record, I don't trust you fully, okay?!"

The three rascals looked at each other and introduced themselves one-by-one. Understanding that as acceptance from their end, Felt turned to old man Rom and tapped his large hand. Following suit, she grabbed the sweet laid upon the table and exclaimed,

Felt: "Sweet, that settles it then! To celebrate, let's eat obaa-chan's sweets, eat, eat, eat! They're very good. The tea is probably cold, but the sweets still taste the same."

Rachins: "Tsk, I nearly forgot she's just a damn brat… I wonder if we didn't jump on board without thinking?"

Looking at Felt messily eating cookies, Rachins burst that out with a smile.

2

???: "Felt-sama is such a character. Only today can I really understand why the young master is so devoted to her."

During the night, a secret talk was being had in the dimly lit corridor of the Astrea mansion. The moonlight coming through the window was the only source of light, but it was nothing of the sort of a romantic encounter, just a meeting between a master and its servants.

???: "All I'm doing, is following what destiny dictates… That being said, I have to confess I am relieved in knowing she is a person worthy of my sword, and maybe I am a bit biased…”

???: “Felt-sama is a really interesting young lady you have taken in. Don’t you think, ojii-san?”

Even if only two people were conversing, three were present: Reinhard, and the elderly couple of butlers, who had looked after their young master ever since he had been a child and were like family to him.

Reinhard: “It may be a bit rushed, but I’m thinking of bringing Felt-sama with me to the main residence. Now that the Royal Election has begun in earnest, she has much to learn. I will require your assistance in reorganizing this House, which is lacking.”

Grandma: “You do not need to be so worried about that, young master… If only the head of the family, and his predecessor had been more careful.”

Reinhard: “As expected, you’re so strict, granny. Do you want to say anything towards your previous comrades in arms?”

Grandma: “Oh, pardon my insolence. Ojii-san, you have to stop me whenever I get too excited.”

Ashamed of her rudeness, the elderly maid covered her own mouth with her hand. The elder man next to her put his hand to his forehead, showing a mischievousness not befitting his age.

Grandma: “So… The young master is thinking of returning to the main mansion…? I will be lonely. When are you intending to depart?”

Reinhard: “I believe three days will be enough to prepare, but I will not stay longer than that. I am very sorry, having to separate you from Felt-sama. And—”

Reinhard paused for a second, and looked towards a small room on the other side of the wall.

Grandma: “About his wife, do not worry, you may leave her in our care. About Heinkel-sama… Are you sure we can allow his passage?”

Reinhard: “Yes, I am. I cannot revoke his right. I’m always giving you such a hard time.”

Grandma: “Young master is striving to be the best he can. We are very proud of you.”

Those had been words of genuine trust, without the intention of comforting Reinhard. Feeling as if he had been saved by those words, Reinhard looked towards the pale circle of the moon, clinging to it as if wishing something existed beyond it.

Reinhard: “Carol, Grimm. Everything will become busier from now on. Thank you very much.”

Grandma: “Yes, I am at your service.”

Grandpa: “—Young master.”

After hearing the reply from the couple that had been called by name, the Sword Saint turned away from the wall and continued walking along the corridor, knowing the two elders who had been serving the Astrea for long were still bowing behind him.

—And, assuredly, that was the day that would symbolize the beginning of everything.

END

Priscilla's Cheers for Me: Entertainment Part (Volume 5; Animate)

1

"Well now, this is quite a collection of fools who think too highly of themselves."

Looking down on the scene below her, the woman concealing her mouth with a fan spoke without concealing her contempt.

Cruel beauty, and loveliness like a poison flower. A bewitching girl, who unleashed her beauty like an attack.

Orange hair like the sun, gathered up with jeweled hair pins scattered through it, with her body wrapped in a blood-red dress that boldly exposed her shoulders and upper chest. Her bountiful breasts asserted their existence nearly to the point of spilling out, and complemented the girl with a bewitching allure that would scorch men's ability to reason.

Her blazing crimson eyes were looking down at a castle-like courtyard made of stone—the event being held there, and the feverish madness of the participants.

It was a wide yard, but lacked the artwork and flower beds that are usually found in nobles' mansions. Instead, stone paving was laid on the ground, and a circular stone stage was placed in the center of the site.

The event's participants surrounded the stage, and while raising a roar of hoarse voices and the clanging of metal on metal, their attention was stolen away by the clash of arms occurring on the stage.

"…An exhibition match, competing with martial arts. Well, what an impressive collection of people with too much time on their hands."

Looking down at the madness where jeers flew, the stage was stained with blood and sweat, and sparks flew from weapons, the girl spoke with an expression that said she couldn't be more bored. As she did, someone down in the courtyard noticed her looking down at them, and all at once, all eyes were drawn to her.

It was a stare imbued with the intensity of a rude crowd of men wearing helmets and armor, and wielding rough weapons. While all of that focused on herself, there was no change in her cool expression.

"See that you all do your utmost. If you do that, perhaps these days that wear down your flesh and blood will be suitable for me to look upon."

Opening her fan with snap, she haughtily cast those words down at them. Though her voice wasn't that loud, it rang equally in the ears of everyone in the yard, and their madness erupted again.

…Even while watching that, her red eyes remained entirely cold.

2

"Priscilla! How many times have I told you?! Showing your face in front of them is too strong a shock! Just wait quietly in your room for the results!"

"This is an event that I opened for myself. If I were to not observe it, how would the zeal of the commoners be rewarded? It would be the epitome of inelegance. Indeed, you should stop repeating yourself, you bucket of bones."

"Bucket of bones…why you… Wha… what is it you think I am to you?"

"A husband who bought a concubine for gold, are you not? Quit making such a fuss over such little things, bucket of bones. It will put me in a bad mood, and you will be the one troubled by that the most. It makes no difference to me, either way."

"Gh…"

The old man stood, choking on his words, grinding his teeth while a vein stood out on his forehead. He seemed to be nearing the age of seventy, but he stood straight for someone of his age, and his movements were youthful. If one thought of his excessive ambition as the driving force behind this, then the human desire for gain truly is nothing to scoff at.

While narrowing her gaze on the man who was exposing his anger, the girl—Priscilla—thought along those lines.

The relationship between the old man and Priscilla was that of a couple with a tremendous age difference. However, there wasn't a trace of bonds or affection between them; it was a relationship entirely run on necessity.

To the old man, it was his ambitions. To Priscilla, it was… a result of the environment that she'd become used to by now.

"From the very beginning, I was opposed to this. You don't understand the importance of choosing a knight! Pedigree! Status! The dignity of a knight is directly connected to the evaluation of his master's person! To choose that sort of critical follower in this sort of nonsense, of all things…"

"I will do exactly as I please. Do not forget that I have only joined in your plot because it does not go against my whims. Know that the flowering of your long-held ambition depends on each and every one of your words and actions catering to my mood. See that you do your utmost, commoner."

While dealing insensitively with her husband as he spoke hoarsely, Priscilla swung the sleeves of her dress and returned to the window. Despite having been told repeatedly not to show her face, she walked onto the terrace without hesitation.

Caressed by the wind, holding a hand to her hair as it streamed behind her, she looked down at the valiant warriors.

All of them had come seeking the prize of this fighting tournament—in other words, they were men who, seeking the position of Priscilla's knight, had decided to wield their weapons and shed their blood.

Priscilla’s husband, Leip Barielle, was a man who worked in a key position in the Kingdom of Lugunica. If one were to become the knight of his wife, Priscilla, there was no question that they would be given exceptional benefits.

Normally, this was an honor that would not be bestowed on anyone who was not an ‘actual knight’, someone who was part of the royal knights. This time, it had been announced that they would gather together martial artists without official positions, and choose a knight from among them.

Penniless mercenaries, and those without the social status to hope to become a knight, leapt at the chance, and it’s resounding success had led to the fever pitch of the current events in the yard.

Every bit of this, large and small, was done at Priscilla’s initiative, over Leip’s objections.

“It is quite an assembly of commoners, indeed. But even with this many gathered…”

Even while looking down at the realization of her proposal, with so many glory-seeking warriors gathered together, Priscilla’s expression did not brighten.

Disappointment at unmet expectations dwelt in her eyes, and her heart continued to grow colder towards the mens’ fervor and conflict. It was not the face of one who was enjoying themselves. It was the look of one observing a barnyard territorial dispute.

“There is no one who would make my heart dance, then. At this rate, perhaps no one will become my knight.”

She murmured something so selfish that if Leip, still inside the room, had heard it, he might have actually burst a vein.

Neither would it have been odd if the martial artists, upon learning that nothing would come of so many of them gathering, had then and there rushed to attack Priscilla and those with her. The reason that Leip was looking pale despite his anger was that he knew he didn’t have sufficient troops stationed at the mansion to keep control of the martial artists.

All of these unfortunate futures would be decided on by a single whim of the girl known as Priscilla.

“…Hm?”

Just as she was about to give in to boredom and turn and walk away, Priscilla stopped.

Turning at the waist to check on something that had caught the corner of her eye, she walked over to the railing of the terrace. Placing her hands together on the waist-height railing and looking down at the garden, she saw it.

“…Hey now, if you cringe like that, someone could really have their feelings hurt. Who? Me.”

Saying that, a man stood atop the stone stage, glaring down at the men around him. Why did this man draw Priscilla’s attention? The answer is simple.

It’s because at the moment he appeared, the roar of the crowd ceased as though it had been doused with water. And the reason for that would be clearly understood the moment you saw him.

He was a man in an unusual outfit. His head was protected by a pitch black full helmet that covered his entire face. Despite that, below the neck he was wrapped in a cheap-looking cape, and finished off with light linen clothing on his upper and lower body. His feet, too, wore sandals woven from plants, and affixed with cloth, so he was sacrificing everything aside from ease of movement.

And more than anything else, what drew the attention of the people surrounding him, was that the left arm that should have been there, wasn’t.

It would be one thing to see that while walking around the town, but quite another at a fighting tournament where they were supposed to be competing with martial arts. Anyone would understand without even having to think about it, how much of a handicap it was to be one-armed.

“In that case, does it mean he has great confidence in that one arm?”

It’s likely that everyone there came to the same conclusion as Priscilla. With a wide-bladed sword over his shoulder, the fully-armored warrior facing the one-armed man began shortening the distance between them without letting down his guard.

In response to that, the man cracked the bones in his neck, and lazily spoke.

“Oh, oh, now you’ve gotten all serious. …Just so you know, I’ll cry if I lose.”

Drawing the sword that was sheathed horizontally behind his waist, he began casually closing the distance while tossing jokes.

3

“Interesting. Interesting, interesting, interesting, interesting. Mhmm, interesting!”

Accompanied by the sound of her fan opening and closing, Priscilla repeated that with a terribly pleased look on her face.

Walking restlessly about the room, a faint excitement colored Priscilla’s cheeks. Her appearance gave off an air of passion that was out of the ordinary, and not intended by the woman herself.

Leip, seated nearby, groaned softly at her bewitching elegance. An old man whose lust should have long since dried up, he shook his head to try and deny the thirst-like emotion pouring into his heart.

“What do you mean, interesting?! Honestly, what are you thinking?! You sent away everyone you had gathered, even the victor, and the only one left is that?! Are you insane?!”

“I have no intention of getting absorbed into a meaningless debate about whether I am sane or mad. Who, indeed, has declared you to be sane? The correctness of my actions will be proven by providence, through their results. You should not waste my time with tedious words. Instead, hurry up and bring him to me.”

“You little…”

As Leip sat unable to speak past his exasperation, Priscilla showed no hint whatsoever of giving ground to him. At the point the air in the room was stagnating to its worst, a knock was heard from outside the room.

“Leip-sama. Priscilla-sama. I’ve brought him.”

“Mhmm. I’ll permit it. Enter.”

As Priscilla responded before her husband, there was a brief hesitation outside the door. Then, a youth in his early teens came into the room, along with…

“When I’m suddenly called for by the higher-ups like this, an easily-spooked guy like me gets a little nervous.”

With the joints of his helmet rattling, the one-armed man entered. He looked around the room unconcernedly, and shook his shoulders when he realized that Priscilla was staring at him.

“It is my great honor to have been invited. …Should I kneel, perhaps?”

“I care not. There is no value in the empty posturings of the common rabble. Show me where your worth lies. If not for that, then there was no point in having called for you.”

“What a scary lady. …I hope I didn’t come to the wrong place.”

“You lout! How dare you speak to my wife like that!”

Watching Priscilla and the man exchange disrespectful words, Leip’s patience ran out. He marched over next to him, frothing at the mouth at his ongoing rudeness.

“This barbaric attitude and behavior! And what do you mean by keeping your face concealed, after having come to this place. For unseemly behavior like yours, I will strike you down here and now…”

“Bucket of bones.”

“What?! I’m in the middle of something…”

“Do be quiet.”

Priscilla’s attack was launched along with her words. Her closed fan struck the back of Leip’s head, and the red-faced old man fell without a sound. After having knocked her husband flat, Priscilla paused a moment, and then turned her eyes to the boy butler who was standing by.

“Take him away.”

At the short command, the boy butler obeyed without any sign of hesitation. Lifting the large-framed old man with his shoulder, even while his feet were dragging on the floor, the boy took him out of the room as though quite familiar with doing so.

As the door closed with a click, the only ones left in the room were Priscilla and the man.

“Well then, at last that nuisance is out of the way.”

“I’m not really in a position to point fingers, but isn’t this a little too eccentric? Also, suddenly being alone in a room with a guy who’s this suspicious-looking; it seems like you’re a little too lacking a sense of self-preservation.”

“You think you could do something to me? Don’t think so highly of yourself, commoner. The only thing that can do anything to me is my own will. Nothing aside from that can have any effect on me at all.”

Seeing Priscilla speak proudly in complete self-confidence, the man shook his head and let out a deep, deep sigh.

“I surrender. This is way harder than I imagined. What can I show you that would make you approve of me, princess?”

“Hmm, yes. …Show me you can survive.”

The moment after she finished speaking, Priscilla’s body spun at high speed.

She spread the folding fan she was holding and tossed it in the air to block the man’s sight. He immediately swept it away with his right hand. However, by that time Priscilla had already slid to his side, and extended her hand to his waist—she grasped the hilt of the man’s weapon, the broad-bladed sword, and drew it.

“Hah.”

A short breath out. One flash of the drawn blade. Carried by centrifugal force, the blade mowed horizontally through the man’s neck. …I definitely got him. That conviction passed through the back of Priscilla’s mind.

“This is really what they mean by getting away by the skin of your teeth.”

But, at the end of her swing, the tip of the sword had cut nothing more than a shallow scratch in the man’s neck; he had leaned back out of the way. A head sent flying, and a fountain of blood erupting. It was a solid enough strike that one could vividly imagine that occurring. That result had been avoided by a literal hair’s breadth.

“Please spare me, princess. You’re not gonna try that again, are ya?”

“…Be at ease. I have seen all I needed to with that one swing. Hmm…interesting, indeed.”

As the man asked that fearfully, Priscilla smiled faintly and tossed his sword back to him. Seeing the unsheathed blade spinning in the air, he rushed in a panic to where it was going to land.

“But there’s no way I can catch that!”

With a sharp noise, the tip of the sword tore through the room’s carpet, and buried itself in the floor.

“Look here, commoner. What sort of disrespect is that? What do you think you are doing to my carpet?”

“Hey, it’s not my fault. No matter how you think about it, it’s you that went off like that, princess. Actually, how am I supposed to look at this? Can I pat myself on the back for meeting with your approval?”

“As long as the interest you provide me continues to be more valuable than this carpet. Whether it’s this moment just now, or your performance as a sideshow… your actions have value to the extent that they entertain me.”

“…”

At Priscilla’s words, the man gulped a little. Imagining the face on the other side of the helmet, Priscilla pulled a fan from her cleavage (different from the fan that had fallen to the floor), concealed her mouth, and continued.

“And so, what do you mean by not removing your helmet even in my presence?”

“…I messed up a little, and now it’s not a face I can show to people. I wouldn’t want to put you in a bad mood, so please put up with it. What’s more, I haven’t introduced myself yet.”

“Very well, I’ll allow it. Asking the name of a jester, and placing him by my side, is part of my generosity. Tell me your name.”

Without any sort of formal exchange, and with an imperious attitude, Priscilla allowed him to offer his name.

“…Aldebaran. My name is Aldebaran. Princess. I’d like you to just go with Al, basically, but I wanted to give you my name properly. …You’re my master, after all.”

“It has a nice ring to it. You have a good name, Aldebaran. And, I am generous. I will not ignore the first request from my attendant. I shall call you ‘Al’.”

As Al lowered his head in gratitude, Priscilla sniffed softly. Then, as she watched Al pull his sword from the floor,

“After this, I will be throwing myself into a contest that will determine the course of the country. It is a contest whose outcome is already apparent, but the way will most likely be rough. Al, I command you to clear the way for me. I trust you have no objections?”

“Ah, of course. …That’s the reason I’ve rushed to your side like this.”

Aldebaran’s murmur carried a deep meaning, but Priscilla overlooked it as unimportant.

It was obvious that he was a man with secrets. She knew well that they hadn’t yet shown each other enough of themselves for him to swear fealty from his heart. Despite that, Priscilla was able to be at ease because of the conviction she held.

It was her philosophy on life itself…

“…This world is designed to operate in the way that works best for me.”

That was the reason for the absolute self-confidence and self-esteem that the girl called Priscilla Barielle continued to carry.

Continued in The Day I Gave up on Being a Following Star

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins☆ (Volume 4; Toranoana)

1

When Felix Argyle was young, the world was a colorless, transparent place.

Without color, without sound, without flavor, without warmth.

Nothing was given to him, and nothing was taken away. From the start, he possessed nothing.

In a room so dark he couldn’t see even his own hands, atop a bed he’d laid on for so very long that his own scent had worked its way into it, passing the time by thinking about nothing was all that he had.

Occasionally, food was pushed in through the gap under the door. Depending solely on the faint light, he crawled on the floor and rushed eagerly to the food like a dog would. Grabbing the cold food in his hands, occasionally pushing his nose into the bowl like an animal, sloppily getting his face dirty while biting and chewing his food.

When he finished eating, he would push the tray and dishes against the door, return unsteadily to his bed, and pass the time silently. If the dishes happened to be removed at some point, he paid it no mind.

Even if he’d lost sight of what it meant to be alive, he had no reason to die so he didn’t die. Putting the food that was offered into his mouth, too, had no more meaning than that.

“…”

He opened his mouth and tried to speak. Whether his voice emerged or not, he wasn’t really sure. Perhaps his ears were dead; perhaps his throat was dead. Or perhaps in truth it was he himself that was dead?

Idly giving himself to pondering such endless thoughts, Felix passed the time. Thinking back and forth about life and death, too, was something he had repeated more times than he cared to count.

"…"

Once more, it felt like the air was shaken. His mouth was closed. He hadn't tried to speak. What was it that he thought he'd heard? Perhaps an insect had made its way into the room. His unsanitary self, and the food he'd scattered as he ate. It was the sort of environment where insects might breed and fly around.

Even though he felt nothing, the thought of passing the time in a room together with an insect was somehow unpleasant. For someone who was even less than an insect to think that; would the insect mock him for it?

"…"

He heard something again. Had he laughed, perhaps? Trying to touch his own face, his fingers sliced through thin air. He'd lost track of even the location of his face. He let out a sigh at his completely broken mind.

…It was the next moment.

"I will take a lack of response as agreement…!"

Right after he thought he'd heard a gallant voice, the door was kicked open from the outside with a violent crash.

The hinges were sent flying by the impact, and the dishes that had been heaped in front of the door were scattered. At the sudden intrusion and sound of breaking pottery, Felix's body shook and, from atop the bed, he looked towards the door.

Brilliant light poured through the doorway that had lost it's door, and even the agitated dust could be seen floating in the air like something from a fantasy. A small silhouette advanced calmly through that light.

“Is Felix Argyle, the firstborn of the Argyle family, here?”

Felix felt that the voice was terribly strained with emotion.

After all, if you listened closely, it was the voice of a young child. A high-pitched voice suited to that age was intentionally ornamented with gallantry and firmness, turning it into a voice that would pass through the eardrums and pierce the heart.

But, it wasn’t something that seemed overdone. There was nothing forced in the attitude of the voice’s owner. It was simply that the development of the speaker’s body couldn’t keep up with the speed of her heart.

“…”

Still lying prone on his bed, Felix stared wordlessly at the intruder. Her eyes were narrowed in the dim light, and when they adjusted to the darkness, she finally noticed Felix.

And, changing her expression to a little smile,

“I see you there. …Come now, the time has come for you to be freed from this injustice.”

Saying that, she clasped Felix’s filth-covered hands without any hesitation.

2

As warm water was being poured on his head, Felix was at last able to feel that this was really happening.

The water traversed his long-grown hair, and washed off the grime all over his body. The clear water that had been poured on his head had been colored pitch black by the time it reached the floor of the bathing room.

“This is quite refreshing, isn’t it.”

Watching as the filth was washed off of Felix, the one bathing along with him spoke cheerfully. It was a young girl, wearing nothing on her pale body. Her green hair was long, and a strong conviction dwelt in her eyes. Her beautiful, dignified features made her seem more fearless than one would expect from her age.

Even though she was no older than him, Felix couldn't help but turned his gaze downward due to the great difference he felt between them.

"Don't cast your gaze downwards. Your eyes will become clouded. If your spirit grows dim, you may lose sight of your reason to live, as well."

She smoothly cut off Felix's fears. Taking the arms that Felix was still unable to move properly, the girl's skin touched his as she cleaned his body with a washcloth.

While having the filth washed away from his body, Felix finally wondered who she was. Why had she taken him out of that room, and why was she close to him now?

"The Argyle household is under my household's jurisdiction. Seeing a problem, and taking action, are only natural."

"Juris…diction…"

"That's right. It seems there had been rumors for quite a while. The eldest son of the Argyle family was an illegitimate child, he was seen as detestable, and his existence was hidden deep inside the mansion, they said."

"…"

At the words "illegitimate child", Felix's body trembled slightly.

They were words he'd heard many times before he was thrown into that darkness. Even though he didn't understand their meaning, he knew that they meant something unacceptable. That was why he was put in that place…

"You were seen as an illegitimate child because of those ears atop your head, you see."

“These…”

“The Argyle household is a family of humans. Naturally, both of your parents are human as well. For you to have demi-human ears in spite of that, it was only natural for infidelity to be suspected. However, it’s already been proven that that was an error.”

“…huh?”

On the verge of looking downwards again, Felix raised his head at the girl’s declaration. Her face was right in front of his eyes, close enough to feel her breath, and his cheeks began to redden involuntarily.

“Because of a blessing I’ve had since birth, I can see through the lies of others. Your mother was not unfaithful. I confirmed it myself. After that, I climbed up the Argyle family tree and found the cause. Your ears are a throwback, a recessive trait from a distant relative four generations back.”

Felix was holding his breath. She smiled at him, and continued.

“It was all begun by a misunderstanding. …It is no sin for you to be alive.”

“…”

“Raise your head, look forward, and live with unclouded eyes. It might be difficult to do it right away, but I will help you as well. So for now, please believe in me.”

At that time, the smile she ended with looked like the carefree girl’s true face.

Chapter 3

When the bath was over, the new clothing he put on was his first in longer than he could remember. Having the fabric not stick to his skin, and being able to slide his fingers along the cloth, were quite nostalgic as well.

The wind blew across his freshly-cleaned skin, and the flaxen hair that had grown long was waving in the breeze. Following a servant of the mansion going before him, he pressed forward bit by bit, with a faltering motion, as though remembering how to walk.

“…Felix-sama, we have arrived.”

Saying that, the elderly butler opened a door, and with a burst of wind, a large room came into view.

In the Argyle manor’s great hall, food was placed out buffet-style, and he could see that preparations had been made to welcome back the eldest son who had been freed from the darkness.

All eyes were focused on him, and Felix became aware that his heart was beating rapidly. His pulse became more strained, and he started feeling short of breath. He started feeling that he wouldn’t be able to stand without leaning on something, and looking around for something to support himself with, Felix placed a hand on a nearby table.

“Felix…”

Out of the quiet murmuring, that voice found its way into Felix’s ears.

Without thinking, Felix looked towards it and noticed. It was the voice of a woman looking intently towards him with trembling eyes, a woman with long flaxen hair.

Mother. Mother’s expression was stiff, and she was covering her mouth with a hand. Next to her was a bearded man, and he finally realized that the person holding his mother’s shoulder was his father. His parents were standing right there.

“Felix, I’m sorry. I…we…”

The parents who had thrown him in a place like that, were right there.

“…”

His mother took a step forward, and tried to speak with a sobbing voice, but Felix wasn't listening. His hand wandered about the table that had been supporting it, and the moment it felt something hard and cold, it gripped firmly. A knife. Holding it in a reversed grip, he looked up at his mother as she walked unsteadily towards him.

"…!"

If he stepped forward, it would reach. The moment he was sure of that, Felix's body sprang towards his mother.

But after being shut away for so long, his legs faltered, and the strike he'd aimed at his mother's chest cut through the air without even grazing her. She let out a shrill scream, and his father and the others nearby realized the cause of her cry. But there was no longer any way for him to stop.

Hate. Hate. He hated everything. He hated everything so very much, and he could not stop.

"…Aah!"

He jumped once more towards his mother, who had fallen backwards and was now scrambling away. He wouldn't let her get away this time. He raised the silvery sparkle over his head, and it's point shone as it aimed for his mother's chest…

"You fool…!"

The feeling of the blade burying itself in flesh filled his hand, and Felix was struck by a fierce impact, falling to his side on the floor. The knife clattered on the floor after being ripped from his hand, and the great hall's carpet was spotted with red.

He'd definitely stabbed her. He'd done it. With these hands, the object of his vengeance had…

"…"

The stagnation that had pooled in his chest vanished as though it was draining away through a newly-opened hole. A dark smile appeared on Felix's face at that sensation, and he raised his head.

…The green-haired girl was bleeding, and lay collapsed on the great hall's floor.

"…huh?"

At this scene he had not imagined, Felix's thoughts came to a halt.

Sound faded from the world, color faded, and it seemed as though even motion had faded. A world opened up, the same as the one he'd been in in that dark room, and the only difference was that the girl's bleeding would not stop.

While no one else was unable to move, Felix made himself crawl over to the girl, and arrived at her side. Taking her listless form in his arms and raising her, he spoke.

"Wh…why… why did you…?"

"…fool."

The girl's eyes were closed, and she gave a brief answer to Felix as he trembled. She feebly forced open her long-lashed eyes, and looked at his wretched face.

"Open your…eyes. Raise your head, and look forward. To live with unclouded eyes… does not mean to fulfill the darkness you have inside."

"But, but I… then what should I have done? It's cruel, isn't it? It's unfair, isn't it? After being treated like that… how can I forgive everyone…?"

"There's no need… to forgive…don't misunderstand. Your feelings are legitimate. It's only natural. It's simply that you tried to go about it the wrong way…"

"Wrong way… What's… the right way?"

"A way of living, that brings no shame to your soul."

Her weak voice became clear for just a moment as she passed on that conviction. Strength returned to her eyes, she raised her head, and she looked straight at Felix as she spoke.

“Never forget, Felix. …Live in a way that brings no shame to your soul.”

“Ah, aah, aaah!”

Having said what must be said, the strength left the girl’s body. When he could tell that the body in his arms was becoming heavier, even as the life in it became lighter, Felix was assaulted by a horrible sense of dread.

Back in that place, during the time when he couldn’t even tell if he were dead or alive, he’d been conscious of his own death many times. A fear that he never felt during any of those times, ruled him now.

“N…no. No. No, no, no, no… You…can’t. You can’t…!”

A life being lost. The one he owed a debt to. The girl’s honest eyes, that looked forward. His own soul.

Countless words flew around in his confused head, and Felix looked up at the ceiling and screamed aloud. With his throat shaking, and crying out until it seemed he would cough up blood, he denied the deepening shade of death enveloping the girl.

Instantly, blue-white light poured from all over Felix, and it then spread to the girl’s body.

“…”

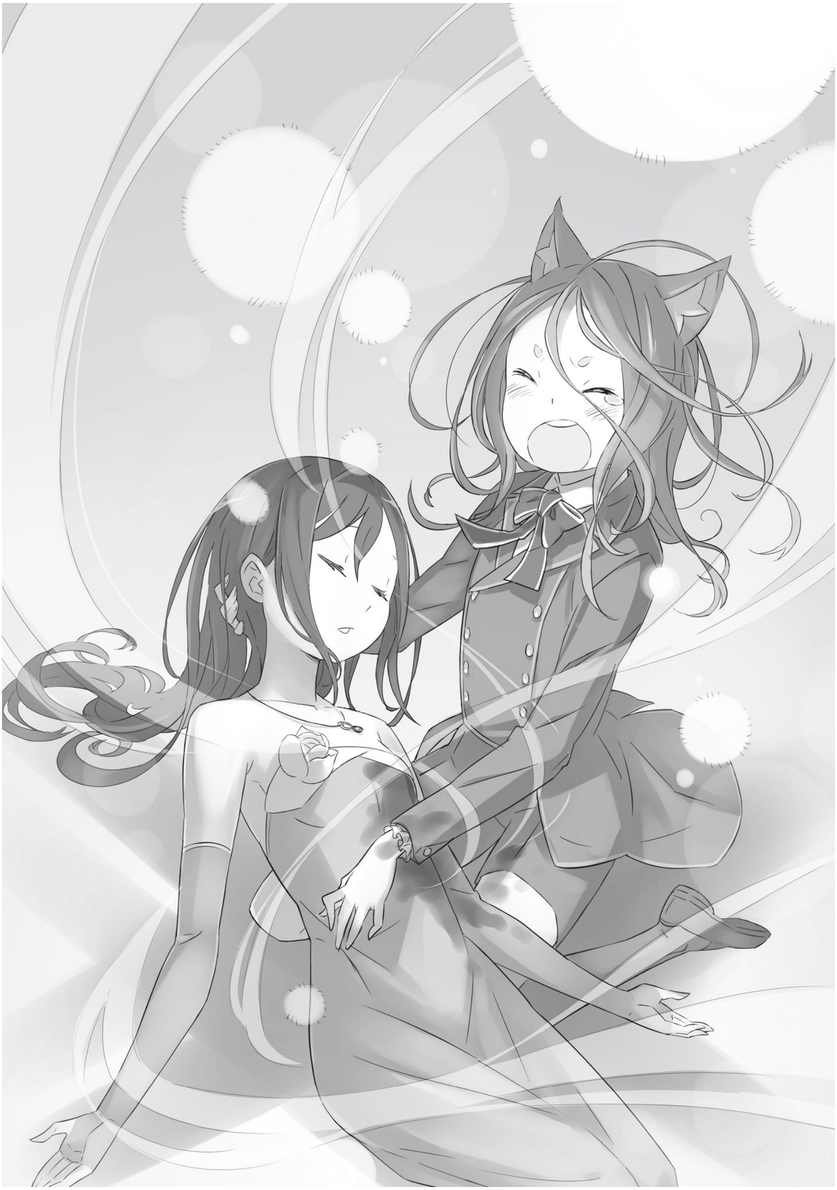

Felix blinked. It was a talent for magic that even he himself was not aware of, that had never had a chance to blossom—Felix Argyle the “Blue”, who would become able to utilize healing power sufficient to have his name recorded in the history of the kingdom. It was the light of his first healing.

The healing power bestowed vitality on the girl’s body, closed her wound, and compensated for her life’s mana that had flowed away. Color returned to her pale cheeks, and her halted breathing began again.

“…It appears I… escaped death. It would seem… you are telling me to live on.”

“…Mhmm. Um…yeah. I mean, yes.”

As the girl opened her eyes, Felix nodded at her, and spoke politely.

Beyond any doubt, there was only respect in his voice. The girl had used her body as a shield to protect him from his mistake. When he’d been as good as dead, she made him raise his head, and taught him how to live.

If she wished for him to live in a way that brought no shame to his soul, then…

“Please let me stay beside you. I want to use up my life by your side. I know it will be the best place for me to make my soul shine.”

He could tell that her eyes narrowed once as she listened to the words of one who had stabbed her. The girl sighed at him as he waited fearfully for her answer, unknowingly holding her tighter in his arms.

“Crusch Karsten.”

“…huh?”

“My name is Crusch Karsten. You should learn the name of your master, at least.”

Though her body still would not move on it’s own, she smiled proudly.

When he realized that he would be allowed to stay with her, Felix looked upwards, and cried.

“…ah”

With a loud voice, with tears dripping and dripping, like a child that had forgotten to cry, like a child that had recalled how to cry, like a newborn babe raises its voice.

With Crusch stroking his head with her palm, he continued crying for a long, long time.

Continued in The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: The Chapter of Vows☆

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: The Chapter of Vows☆
(Volume 5; toranoana)

“…!”

The tip of the wooden sword split the air as it was swung, and the boy grit his teeth.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his fingertips felt slightly numb. His body was heavy with fatigue, and while breathing heavily with his shoulders bobbing up and down, he stuck the wooden sword into the ground and looked up to the sky.

The panting, flaxen-haired boy was the owner of a slender-framed body with pale skin.

Yellow eyes, and hair that reached his back. His slender figure and soft features were so delicately groomed that other people were often mistaken about his gender.

Despite being in his early teens, one could already glimpse how fair the boy would become in the future. Perhaps he was even terribly ashamed of his appearance, that would have so much envy directed towards it.

The figure of a man that he promised to become, and himself as he was now—how great a mismatch there was between them.

“Gh…”

Right after he was assaulted by self-loathing, the boy took his wooden sword again as though trying to wipe away the unpleasant thoughts. He tried to force himself to return to swinging it, but the strength of his grip hadn’t yet fully returned.

The wooden sword slid away from his fingers, and spun through the air with the force of the swing. As it headed through the air spinning end over end, and he stood and watched its course while deriding himself…

“You’re here again, are you? Your effort is commendable, Felix.”

Having come down to the back yard, she spoke in a familiar voice while catching the spinning sword.

After being momentarily taken with amazement at her unerring movement, the boy—Felix—hurriedly knelt where he was. Then, raising his head, he spoke with a trembling voice to the one approaching him.

“Cr…Crusch-sama! My humble apologies for this terrible rudeness. For my carelessness to have…”

“It’s no great matter. Don’t shrink so. As well, you were here first, and I came in afterwards. For me to have come within reach of your sword without having first spoken to you was a failing on my part.”

The generous response was delivered in the still-high voice of a young girl.

That was because the one standing in front of the kneeling Felix was a girl who was the same age as he was.

Duchess Crusch Karsten—a girl with beautiful, long, green hair that was nearly black, a gallant gaze and a countenance filled with aspiration. She was also both Felix’s master, and his benefactor.

Crusch’s narrowed line of sight was directed down towards the top of Felix’s head. Atop his flaxen hair was his terribly unmistakable characteristic—he had animal ears.

This, indeed, was the very cause of the situation that Crusch had saved Felix from, and the greatest turning point that had led to him serving the one he would follow till the end.

Ears that he had once thought of as loathsome were now, in front of his lady, something he was faintly proud of. From the way that he couldn’t quite control the swaying of his long tail, prouder than he himself could realize.

Though Crusch was consciously keeping her expression firm, at the sight of Felix's flushed cheeks and swaying tail, her stern expression suddenly softened into a kind one.

"Felix, I, too, feel like exercising a little. Do you mind if I continue to borrow your sword?"

"Y..yes, of course! Would it be alright if I watched by your side… no, from off to the side?"

"There's no need to choose such a humble position. If you'd like to watch, watch from wherever you like. I don't think that I'm such an intolerant master that I would be bothered by my retainer watching me."

As Felix's face brightened in delight, Crusch finally broke into an unmistakable smile. Then, as Felix made way for her, she stood perfectly straight.

"…sh."

The course of the wooden sword strike unleashed by her beautiful standing figure was entirely the same Felix's earlier swing. Despite that, its speed, sharpness, weight, brilliance and skill were clearly different. It was such a vivid slash that one might think the air itself hadn't realized that it had been cut through.

Obviously, this was an illusion largely caused by Felix looking at it in the best possible light, but it was a fact that there was a vast difference between her sword skills and his. An isolating chasm dividing their sword talents that there was no way to bridge.

"…Your expression changes so easily, Felix. Just when I thought you looked pleased a moment ago, now you look quite crestfallen."

"Ah…"

Having finished the first movement of the exercise, Crusch glanced to the side at Felix as he watched her, and spoke her thoughts to him that way. On hearing his master's words, Felix lowered his eyes, ashamed of himself.

"It will soon be half a year since you came to our household, won't it. … Is that it? That's right."

Looking at Felix as he held his tongue, Crusch seemed to have properly read what was going on in his heart.

Felix was very aware, and ashamed, that he hadn't made any progress at all, in the days since he'd been welcomed as Crusch's retainer.

Every day, without fail, he'd swing his wooden sword, exerting himself to become worthy to be Crusch's knight.

However, his body couldn't keep up with his will to become stronger. Due to his long confinement at his original home, his body had passed through the most important growth phase without knowing any development.

He had long since realized that the increasing stress on his body was as meaningless as piling sand on a sandcastle that was being destroyed by the wind.

"Once more, you are looking downwards."

"Once they become aware that the road to knighthood has been cut off, anyone would feel glum."

"Yes, that's true. That was thoughtless of me. Even I would be unsettled if I was unable to trust in my own sword skill. I should have been more careful of that."

Crusch's words of consideration dug painfully into Felix's heart.

The guilt of receiving an apology from the master he respected. Further, that his heart wasn't calmed in the least by her words. He felt that he was a terribly wretched being, and wished that he could disappear.

Despite having been saved, he was unable to return anything of value to the one who saved him. With that, it would only be natural for even his oath to be thought of as words of convenience, quickly forgotten once the moment was past.

Not wanting to be thought of that way, he'd continued to throw himself into the sword despite knowing it wouldn't lead to anything.

"Felix."

Raising his head at the call, he suddenly realized that Crusch had moved to the side of the courtyard. A small flower garden was there, and under a gardener's care, flowers of many colors blossomed.

Crusch crouched down in front of one of them, and casually grasped it by the stem—a flower that produced a beautiful bloom, but also guarded it with sharp thorns.

"Crusch-sama?!"

As Crusch winced at the slight pain, Felix ran to her side and took her hand. If one looked closely, a bead of blood had formed at the tip of a white finger, and was running down her finger toward the palm of her hand.

Hastily focusing his awareness, Felix awoke the mana within himself. Placing that faint sensation on his own fingertip, faint blue-white light flowed out to envelop Crusch's injury.

In only a few seconds the wound had closed, and there wasn't a trace of it left after the blood was wiped away. Once he had verified that, Felix let out a sigh of relief.

"Felix. Even after this, will you still continue to cloud your eyes with the belief that you have no value?"

"Crusch-sama…you don't mean…?"

Opening and closing the hand that the injury had disappeared from, Crusch nodded to the bewildered Felix.

"Someone who protects others with the strength of a sword—who decided this is what it means to be a knight? Power is not what a knight holds dear. What a knight values is will. He cherishes the will to protect others. If a knight's power can be used to protect the injured, then there is nothing strange about a knight's power being used to heal the injured."

"Crusch-sama… is that… what you want me to be?"

"I'm simply speaking of what I think is the way a knight should be. To speak plainly, I don't even think it's necessary for you, my retainer, to be a knight at all. If, despite that, you still feel concerned about knighthood… You can simply be a knight that does not rely on the sword. As well,"

As Felix stood speechless, Crusch closed her eyes and continued.

"When I was on the verge of death, it was none other than you who saved me, Felix. Back then, even if the Master Swordsman had been there, I could not have been saved. At that time, the only one who could save me there was you. Well then, in my view, you have more than earned the right to call yourself a knight."

One couldn't help but note that her opinion was excessively favorable towards Felix.

It's true that Felix had saved Crusch when she was at the brink of death, but it was also he who had placed her in that state in the first place. Crusch's words were putting a good face on a deed whose good was balanced out by its bad.

"If you can't help but be fascinated by the sword, I will not stop you. There's nothing so inelegant as dampening the enthusiasm of a young boy, after all."

No matter what path Felix chose, Crusch would surely approve of it.

It was that overwhelming trust from his master that melted Felix's stubborn heart. No matter how long he spent at it, he would never begin to approach Crusch's skill with the sword.

It was enough for him to at last accept the need to give up, that he'd long since been aware of.

"I won't give up on becoming a knight. But, I'm sure I'll turn out a bit different from the usual sort of knight. Will you forgive me for taking you at your word?”

“If it casts no shadow on your soul, then I’m happy with it.”

With those brief, Crusch-style words of encouragement, Felix was at last able to give a relaxed smile.

Seeing Felix’s smile, Crusch smiled faintly as well.

“You really do have a nice smile. Perhaps it would injure your pride to say it, but you have a smile that gently eases the hearts of those around you.”

“I love your smile, Crusch-sama. It makes me feel from the bottom of my heart that I want to follow you.”

“My father often calls it ‘A face that’s not cute at all’, though.”

She tried to pass the words off as a joke, but a flicker of pain was visible in her amber eyes. Noticing that, Felix was, for a moment, at a loss for words. But only for a moment.

“Is there something about the duke’s words that bothers you, Crusch-sama?”

“…Did it show so clearly on my face that you could tell right away?”

“No. I think I was only able to tell because I’m always looking at you.”

“Honest as always.”

Speaking with a smile in her tone of voice, Crusch let out a small sigh.

“If I was going to be born without any girlish charm, it would have been better to be born a boy. No doubt my father thinks of me that way.”

“That can’t be…!”

“No, it’s fine. It doesn’t wound my heart. I think it’s exactly right as well. Surely you are not unaware of how the gossips speak of me?”

Duke Carsten’s daughter was a sword-crazed wild woman, was their opinion of her that he had heard. Those who knew nothing of her disposition touched on the topic however they pleased, without knowing the truth.

“It’s mysterious. While on one hand I am rebuked for being a woman who wields a sword, on the other I am strictly told to master things as a man would, in order to succeed the duke. The people around me; do they want me to be a man or a woman?”

There was nothing resembling sarcasm in Crusch’s voice. What she held was purely that doubt, exactly as she’d spoken it.

And no matter what the people around her might say, Crusch herself had already decided on an answer.

“I was speaking grandly to you about how a knight should be, but there is only one path that I am able to choose to be. Succeeding the duke, and becoming the next duke. That path has no use for sword skill or being a woman.”

“…Then eventually, you will have to lay down the sword?”

“It’s unlikely that I would be given the chance to bloom. I do have one faint wish. Even though I may not be able to reach the level of a great fencer or Master Swordsman, or that Sword Demon, I would at least like to reach my own limits… would be that wish.”

As Crusch described her lofty ideal with an ephemeral smile, Felix’s breath caught in his throat.

A feeling of remorse rose up and filled him. Crusch Karsten wasn’t the sort of person who should have to give up on anything. All the more wrong for her to have to take actions that would push aside her dearest wish.

“Even… even if you succeed the duke, there must be a way for you to continue to wield the sword.”

"Felix?"

"If it's you, Crusch-sama, I'm sure it's possible for you to find a way to move forward while keeping everything in balance. Taking over for the duke, and taking your sword skill to it's ultimate limit; there's no need to give up anything."

As Crusch stood wide-eyed, Felix pled desperately.

He didn't want to see what she looked like when she was giving up on something. Crusch had everything that he had wanted so much he could taste it. There was no way he could endure watching her throw it away.

"If you are lacking in something, then I'll make up for it. I know I'm weak, and I there's only so much I can do. But still! I will!"

"I'm very glad you would say that. However, even though you speak of helping… Perhaps you could be a butler to the duke, but I'm not sure how you could be involved with the other two…"

"Well then…!"

Crusch's eyes must never become clouded. She was someone who should always be looking upward and forward as she walked.

He was the only one who needed to stand still in the darkness, waiting for a tomorrow that never came.

"Well then, I'll take over being a girl for you, Crusch-sama!"

"…"

"As you've seen, I can't help with the sword. But, if it's being like a girl, I can help!"

As Crusch stared at him in amazement, Felix grasped the significance of what he'd just said without thinking.

Thinking that there's no turning back now, Felix looked straight at Crusch as he ran with it.

"…Do you understand what you're saying?"

"I do! …No, I don't really know what I'll need to do, but I understand! I'll be a girl for Crusch-sama!"

Breathlessly, Felix cried out without giving Crusch a chance to raise an objection.

"I… I'll take care of being a girl, so I'll give my boyhood to you! Please; I know it might not be much, but please accept it!"

"You… ah, haha."

Seeing Felix wide-eyed with excitement, Crusch was suddenly unable to keep her face stern, and she began to laugh.

Felix was momentarily worried about his master's reaction, but Crusch immediately shook her head.

"It certainly wouldn't do to not accept something offered by my retainer. As a result…"

While saying that, Crusch undid the ribbon holding her hair, and gently pulled it free.

Escaping the constraints of the white ribbon, her beautiful green hair spread rapidly in the breeze. Unconcerned with that, Crusch took the undone ribbon and placed it in Felix's flaxen hair as he stood stiffly.

Like a large flower in bloom, the ribbon adorned the boy named Felix.

"Mhmm. It looks good on you… or perhaps that's not a compliment?"

"…It is. Crusch-sama's concern is better than any sort of recognition."

With a deliriously happy look on his face, Felix honestly revealed his true feelings.

It was a strange feeling. The hands that were too weak to hold a sword, the legs that couldn't support him the way he wanted, the delicate frame that quickly ran out of energy; until just a moment ago, he'd thought of them as a loathsome curse.

Now that, thanks to them, he was able to respond to his master's small request, he could think of them as a better gift than any other.

"If it becomes unpleasant for you, return it to me at any time. I will return what you gave me as well, without fail."

"That will never happen. So please, let me always serve at your side."

"I see."

Felix responded without hesitation to Crusch's considerate words.

Seeing Crusch smiling and looking satisfied as she turned away, Felix felt for a brief moment that he had been able to do something helpful for the sake of this precious girl.

Then, while looking at her beautiful hair fluttering in the wind, he said

"With that, please allow me to give you a replacement ribbon."

while touching the ribbon decorating his own hair.

END

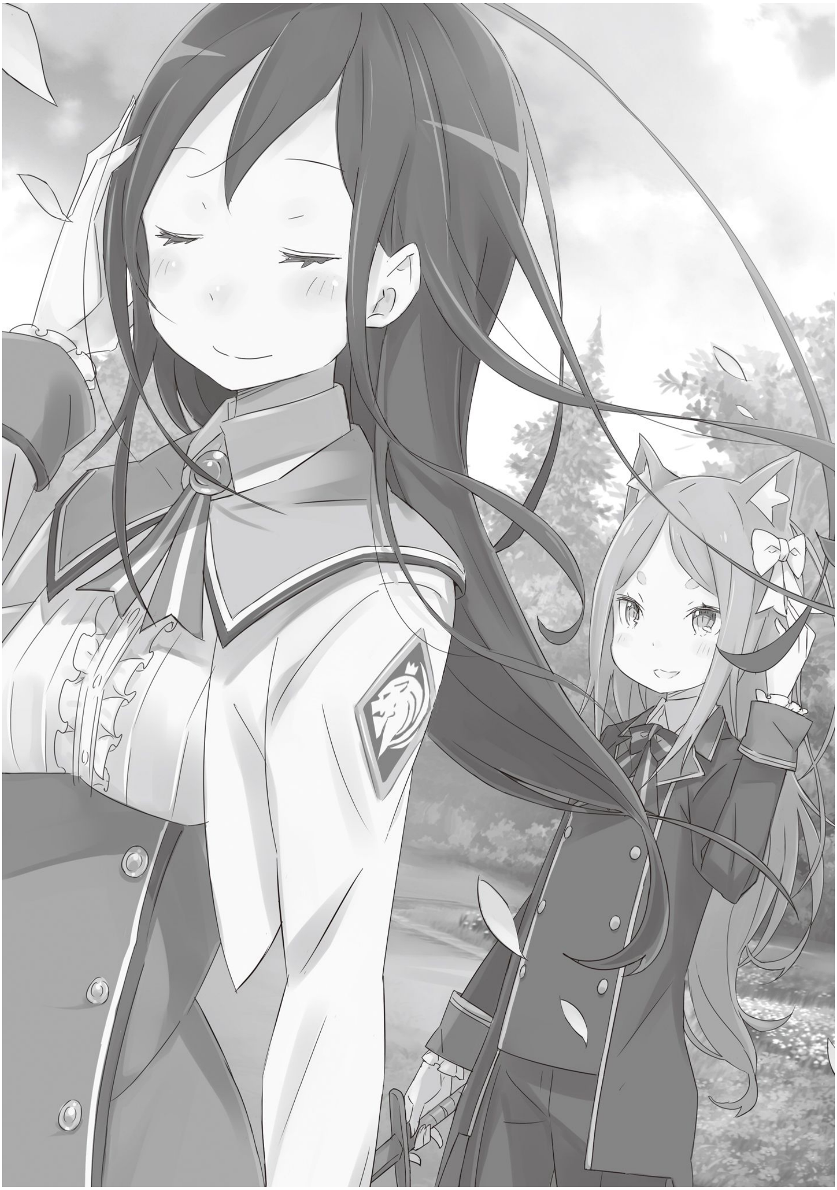

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch: Ferris's Sudden Emergence☆
(Short Story Collection 1; toranoana)

1

My neck feels ticklish, and the draftiness down there is making me uneasy. The feeling of the wind on my bare shoulders feels kind of nice though, and I can't get over just how different the world feels just from dressing differently. I know I shouldn't be like this, yet here I am. If I don't stay mindful of it, I'll probably behave the same way as before. I need to be careful.

"Oh, there you are. Perfect timing."

He heard a voice come from behind while walking down a familiar path in an unfamiliar outfit. He turned around and saw a gentle-looking man with a beard calmly walking towards him. He looked like he was almost in his forties, but each of his gestures made him look older.

To put it in other words, he looked older than his age.

"Duke Meckart?" Felix asked. "What's the matter? You look so feeble."

"I don't think I do though? Well, truth be told, my back hurts more than usual today… Eh-hm, that is not what I wanted to talk about. Have you seen Crusch?"

The man—Meckart—smiled calmly at his rather insolent reply.

He is a good-natured man, though I must say that he's not at all suited for the world of political warfare full of scheming and deception.

But even if he was like that, he was the current head of a ducal family that also happened to be one of the most prestigious families in the kingdom. So, things weren't easy for the people around him.

While having such an opinion about Meckart, the person who had been questioned put a finger to his lips, and…

“Hmm, Lady Crusch went for a long ride this morning. She said she would be back by lunch, so I think she will be back soon.”

“What?! A long ride?! Why?! I told her beforehand that His Highness, Prince Fourier, would be visiting and that she should receive him!” Meckart’s face turned pale, and it was obvious that he was flustered. He smiled wryly and pointed at the magic time crystal placed in the mansion’s hallway and…

“Regarding that, I…I too have circumstances that make it hard for me to answer.”

Meckart looked at Felix, who had changed to a feminine tone in the middle of his sentence, and lowered his eyebrows in a troubled manner. “I am sorry you are going through so much trouble. If it’s Crusch we’re talking about, she probably forced you again, didn’t she?”

“No, it isn’t like that.”

He smiled softly and brushed his chestnut hair over his shoulder in a natural motion.

Meckart let out a sigh while looking at his gesture. It seemed like he was both impressed and deplored by it. “Seems like you are really getting used to that look, Felix.”

He called the name of the boy—who was being bashful like a young girl.

2

He cut his long hair short and replaced his formal menswear with fashionable women’s clothes. It was his first time wearing a skirt or tight stockings. He wiggled his long, thin tail that protruded from the skirt specially tailored for demi-humans or beastmen. Next, he styled his hair so that his demi-human cat ears would stand out and then put on a flirty smile to complete his new look.

Oh wait, I can’t forget to decorate my hair with my important white ribbon.

Felix Argyle thus assumed the role of a femboy just like had been asked of him.

“…”

He was shocked and pleased to find that his cross-dressing looked surprisingly natural. With this, he could see the promise he had made with his master through, in the best way possible. It would be Felix’s greatest joy if he could be of service to her.

Thus, he sincerely wished that he could be useful even in a situation like this, however…

“What is the meaning of this?! I have come here, yet Crusch is nowhere to be seen!”

“Ha, ha-ha-ha!” Meckart laughed nervously. “My daughter is at an age where she may feel embarrassed. Since Your Highness has come here to meet her personally. Maybe that’s why she isn’t showing up!”

It didn’t seem like he could come between the two who were having a verbal tug of war at the gate of the mansion anytime soon. One was Meckart, the master of the manor, whose pale face was even paler and seemed desperate. And the one facing him was a rather handsome boy with long blond hair. He was around the same age as Felix, which put him at around eleven or twelve. His crimson eyes were shimmering like jewels, and he had spoken in somewhat of a carefree tone. With his fur coat, servants following closely behind him, the luxurious dragon carriage that he came out of, and from how a duke was bowing his head down, it was clear that he was from a prominent family.

Or rather, his background was obvious.

“So that’s His Highness, Fourier Lugunica.”

He was royalty who held the title of Fourth Prince of the Kingdom of Lugunica and was the son of the current king. Now, the reason why a person of such high stature had taken the trouble to visit a duke's domain was because—

"I was wondering where all that noise was coming from, but it turned out to be Your Highness. I had no idea that you had already arrived. Apologies for my impudence," said a girl who had appeared on an earth dragon, expertly controlling it, with her tied-up green hair fluttering in the wind. She was a real beauty.

She was a beautiful girl, and yet, words like pretty or cute hardly suited her. The way she stood reminded people of the sharpness of a sword. She had a gallant, strong face, and piercing eyes. She had such a commanding presence that it was hard to believe that she was a young girl, and the way she carried herself could make anyone gasp. There was no mistaking that she was Felix's master and the girl everyone there had been waiting for.

"Ooh, Crusch! Are you feeling alright? Only you could get away with making me wait like that!"

"My apologies. I was told that Your Highness would be arriving in the afternoon. I did not expect you to arrive before lunch."

"Yes, I hastened the earth dragon since I wanted to meet you."

Fourier became overjoyed and excited at the arrival of the girl—Crusch Karsten. He'd replied to her boastingly, but he had completely missed the mark and puffed his chest arrogantly, as if he had said something admirable. Looking at that, Felix was convinced that he was exactly like he had heard.

Crusch and Fourier were exchanging pleasant remarks, but Meckart, who was a duke and also a father, couldn't watch it in peace. He spoke up, his face still pale. "Hey, Crusch. How long are you planning on playing with the earth dragon? Take it to the stables and then come right back after changing your clothes. Don't forget to take a shower, alright?"

"Yes, alright. Felix, come." Crusch, who had received an order from her father, called Felix, who was standing among the servants.

He reacted to her call like a dog with an “OK!” and quickly went to her side.

“Take the dragon to the stable. You can accompany me on a long ride next time. It feels quite nice on a windy day.”

“I’d love to do that after my training. Oh, and you might need to hold my waist and hands while teaching me, so…”

“That won’t be a problem. If that is what you wish to do, then you can pick a time and date after looking at your schedule.”

With the promise in place, Felix grabbed hold of the reins with a smile on his face. Crusch bowed to Fourier, and as she was about to head back to the mansion…

“Don’t make His Highness wait too long, and change into the dress that has been prepared for you. I will not tolerate any complaints, Crusch.”

“…Father, I have told you many times. I shall no longer wear dresses, only formal men’s attire. I don’t want to be the kind of master that breaks her promise with her retainer.”

“Crusch…”

When Crusch respectfully corrected Meckart’s misunderstanding, Felix turned pale when he found out that he was the reason behind that.

Fourier then interrupted them. “Stop. What is the meaning of what you just said? Speak in a way that even I may understand,” he asked, cutting into their parent-child conversation without reading between the lines.

Crusch briefly told Fourier that she had made a vow to see a certain promise through: to stop acting like a woman, and to become the finest swordswoman and noble. As Felix felt proud listening to that, Meckart put a hand to his forehead and lamented his daughter’s future.

Fourier’s face turning red, he said, “No, no, you cannot do that!

What on earth are you saying! Stop being a woman? Stop being stupid! I will not forgive such a thing! Since you are a girl!”

“I believe it would be out of line for Your Highness to dictate to me about what I should be,” Crusch responded rationally to Fourier, who was being emotional.

“Arggghhh…!” Fourier groaned, at a loss for words. His gaze wandered and then landed on the sword at Crusch’s waist. “Alright, then pick up your sword! Use your sword to show me how big your ambition is!”

“…A duel? Between I and Your Highness?”

“Yes! I am learning swordsmanship in the royal castle. Everyone was saying that I have talent. I shall personally teach you the difference between the strength of a man and a woman!” Fourier declared with a bright face, thrusting his fist towards the sky.

Fourier quickly turned around to look at Meckart, then smiled at the pale duke. “I am fine with the garden being the location for our duel! Bring two wooden swords! I shall turn your daughter into a woman!” he so boldly declared.

3

Felix was performing healing magic on Fourier, who was sprawled out in the garden like a torn-up rag. He had seen the duel—which was more of an execution, though it would be referred to as a duel for the sake of propriety—and wasn’t sure who was at fault here.

Was it Fourier’s fault for daring to continue challenging her without realizing the difference in ability? Or was it Crusch’s straightforward personality’s fault, which prevented her from holding back? Either way, the result of the combination of both was the cruel state of the fourth prince.

“Father collapsed with a pale face. It’s possible he might scold me later.”

“Hmmm, he might do that.”

Crusch saw Meckart off as he was being carried away by the servants, looking exhausted. There was no trace of sweat on her, making Fourier's lousy fighting skills seem even more pitiful.

"Uuh… P-Paper thin, it was a paper-thin difference."

"Is that so? Then the paper must be quite thick."

"Lady Crusch, His Highness will feel miserable if you do not treat him a bit more kindly."

It was a straightforward statement, something typical of her, but it was too honest, so Felix gave some advice.

The three of them were talking in a corner of the garden while basking in the breeze. The soldiers accompanying Fourier and the servants of the mansion were looking at them from a distance. They were probably thinking that it was a lovely sight.

"Anyway, Crusch… I did not know that you were so skilled at using swords."

"I am still quite lacking. But, Your Highness. A promise is a promise. From now on, leave me to…"

"I-I know. You can do as you please until I best you at our next match."

The part where he effeminately asked for a rematch was part of his loveable character, and it brought a wry smile to Ferris's face.

Crusch probably thought so too, as her lips were relaxed, and she was smiling.

Felix and Fourier were completely enchanted by her charming, gentle smile.

"I-I need to be strong. Or else I will ruin the reputation of the royal family."

"It isn't like that. Besides, how good you are at the sword won't diminish the prestige of Your Highness and the royal family. The sacred blood pact—as long as the Dragon protects the kingdom, the respect from the people will remain unshaken.”

“Mhm… I don’t think so.”

Fourier immediately tried to conceal his emotions, but Crusch followed up and denied his words.

Fourier looked displeased after hearing what she had to say. “If the Dragon does everything, then why does the royal family exist? That is not a reason for me to stay weak. It shouldn’t be a reason for me to be weaker than you…a woman!”

“Your Highness…”

It was the kind of stubborn words that boys his age would say in front of girls they liked. Felix, however, instinctively sympathized with the rebellious attitude against his own weakness in his words.

Felix felt like Fourier’s words pierced his heart since he once had nights where he would wrap his arms around his knees and cry at his own helplessness.

And Felix wasn’t the only person who was deeply impressed by those words.

“‘Then why does the royal family exist’.” Crusch opened her eyes and mouth and repeated Fourier’s words, tensing her cheeks.

Even Crusch didn’t know just how deeply his words resonated in her mind now. Though she didn’t know it, it was an unshakable fact that it left a mark on her heart and shook her soul.

“Your Highness, let us cross swords like this again. I believe your feelings to be most noble.”

“Hm, is that so? Yes, it is as you say! Hmm, I am glad that you understood me! But it is that! It’s okay if you are a little gentler with me next time! I don’t want to feel pain…”

“You won’t learn anything if I go easy on you.”

“You really aren’t kind at all, are you?!”

“Pffft—” Felix burst into laughter, unable to hold it in after hearing Crusch’s reply and Fourier’s scream.

Fourier stared at Felix for the first time after seeing his reaction. Felix was about to open his mouth to immediately apologize for the disrespect, but… “I thank you as well. You are more skilled in healing magic than the people in the castle. It felt rather pleasant. You have earned my praise. Your name…yes, it was Ferris!”

With a bright face, he boldly said the wrong name. But he seemed so full of confidence that Felix wasn’t sure if he should correct him or not. And then…

“—It’s a fine name. Your original name feels somewhat odd due to that attire. Ferris has a nice ring to it. If you like it, I would like to call you that too… What do you think?”

Crusch smiled gently and revealed that she liked the name he had been called by a mistake. Felix muttered that name in his mouth in front of Fourier, who looked confused, and then nodded. “Yes, then please call me Ferris. I would like My Lady and Your Highness to call me by that name from now on.”

“Hmm? I don’t get it, but oh well. Alright then, Ferris, I’ll be expecting good work from you!”

Fourier’s expressions were that of a person who didn’t understand anything, and he ruined his beauty by laughing loudly. Felix smiled wryly at that, and Crusch tenderly and lovingly said, “—Ferris. Yes. That name seems like a better fit for my woman.”

She said that without thinking, causing a commotion that once again made Fourier explode and Meckart fall unconscious.

END

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Begins: Blue’s Studies (Volume 6; toranoana)

1

That suggestion from Fourier was abrupt as always.

The place was the Karsten domain in the Kingdom of Lugunica, in the guest room of Duke Karsten’s mansion.

“You want Ferris to acquire skills from…a healer in the royal capital?” said a girl with long green hair after putting down a cup of black tea and tilting her head.

She looked gallant and had amber-colored eyes. She still retained the young appearance of a teen yet had a well-defined face, so she would surely be beautiful in the future. Her name was Crusch Karsten.

“Yes! Meckart has been asking for my advice for a while. I too highly value Ferris’s healing skills, thus I brought forth this offer!”

The one who responded to Crusch was also a beautiful-looking young boy. He had blonde hair that shone like the sun and gemstone-like crimson eyes. A white fang popped out of the corner of his mouth when he smiled casually, making his reckless personality visible from his appearance alone. Even though Fourier Lugunica was like this, he was the fourth prince of the Kingdom of Lugunica, so it was something of a surprise.

“Father consulted Your Highness? Ferris’s healing skills are something that I am proud of, but, keeping that in mind, what did Father consult Your Highness about?”

“Hm? It was about whether you want Ferris’s healing skills to improve further or not. I am contributing to your swordsmanship training, but Ferris has a lot of room for growth… That is what Meckart assumes, at least. So I thought that she should be taught by the court healer in the royal castle.”

“I see. As expected of my father and Your Highness. You have keen perception,” Crusch casually praised.

“Oh, it’s nothing! But I shall permit you to praise me more! Do praise!” Fourier exclaimed, laughing cheerfully while slapping his knee.

Crusch took a quick glance at the person remaining quiet next to her.

It was a girlish pretty boy who had neck-length chestnut-colored hair and round yellow eyes. His slender body was clad in female clothing, and as he had demi-human blood, he had distinctive animal ears and a tail. It was the person being talked about, Ferris.

Crusch looked at Ferris, who was looking down and sitting silently with his hands resting on his knees. “What do you think, Ferris? Do you intend on accepting His Highness’s proposal?”

“I am yours…Lady Crusch. As such, I don’t want to leave your side. But if you command me to go, then…” Ferris’s gaze wandered, and then he quietly looked at Crusch in an imploring manner.

Crusch went silent for a while at his weak attitude and then looked at Fourier. “You heard her, Your Highness. I personally think that I should leave it to the free will of the servant, but… Your Highness, can you command me?”

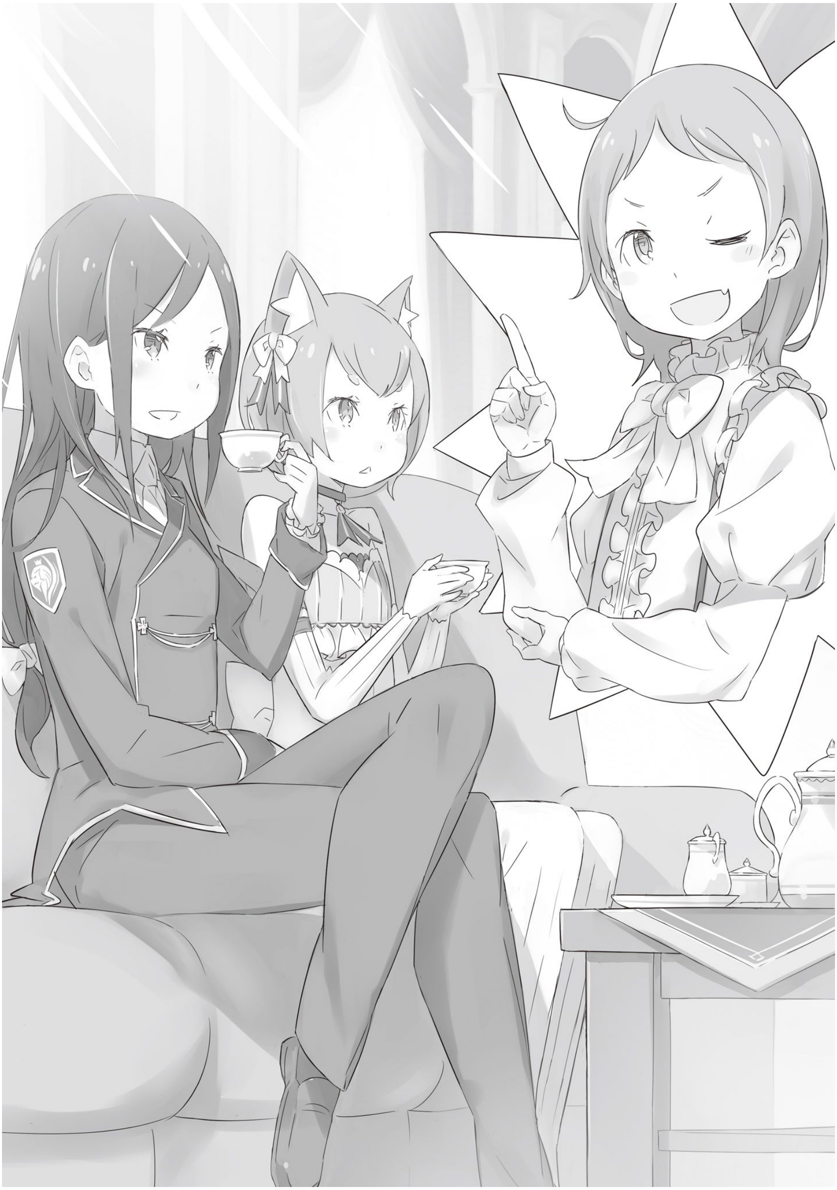

“Hm, what do you want me to command you to do?”

“Can you command me to order Ferris to go to the royal capital?”

She was playing with words. Ferris’s widened his eyes and Crusch smiled mischievously. And then…

“I do not quite get it, but alright. Crusch, I command you to order Ferris to head to the royal capital!”

“As you command, Your Highness. Ferris.” Crusch bowed reverently, then directed her amber-colored eyes at Ferris. He reflexively shrugged his shoulders, and then she gave him the order. “Do as His Highness says and learn from the healer in the royal capital.”

2

As far as Ferris could remember, this was the first time he had ever visited the royal capital.

“W-Woah…” Ferris stuttered, choking up with emotion, after getting off the dragon carriage that had picked him up and looking down at the city below the castle.

The sight was that overwhelming.

“It is magnificent, is it not? I also think that the view from here is superb.”

The person proudly crossing his arms next to him was Fourier, who he had ridden with on the way there. He was exceptionally carefree despite being royalty. It was unheard of for a royal to travel in the same carriage with someone else’s retainer while acting like good friends.

“Yes, it’s amazing. So this is the royal capital… The Kingdom of Lugunica’s largest city.”

“And it is also a place that has been under my family’s protection for centuries. It makes me proud, and I feel weighed down by all of the responsibility. Ha-Ha, even though I know that not much is expected from me!” Fourier exclaimed, saying something that was hard for anyone else to comment on.

“No, well, it isn’t…” Ferris replied, not sure how to respond.

As they stood blocking the entrance to the main gate of the royal castle, they heard a voice come from behind. “I am glad to see you have returned safely, Prince Fourier.”

Ferris turned around and looked up at the person who had said that and jumped in surprise. The man was tall, but his harsh, tense expression was a little too intense for a child’s heart.

Nonetheless, Fourier smiled cheerfully, showing off his teeth after confirming who it was. “Oh, Marcos! Well done welcoming us! Was it peaceful while I was absent?”

“I humbly inform you that we knights worked as one to maintain peace in the royal capital while Your Highness was away. Fortunately, there were no signs of unrest, and the people are living in peace.”

“Mhm, not bad! Oh yes, I will introduce Ferris to you too!”

Fourier grabbed Ferris’s hand and forced him in front of Marcos—the man who acted formally—with a little push. The suddenness of it surprised him, but Fourier tapped on his shoulder, and…

“This is Ferris. Ferris is my friend, and she is going to be an elite healer in the future. You can depend on her if something happens. Even if your head gets cut off, Ferris will make it grow back safe and sound!”

“Your Highness, don’t you think you’re overestimating me a little?!”

Ferris panicked at his overvaluation. But Marcos narrowed his eyes at what Fourier had said. “Are you from House Argyle by any chance?”

A wave of anxiety washed over Ferris since his family name was suddenly brought up, making his breath catch in his throat. Fourier was tilting his head next to him, but it seemed like Marcos knew about his situation.

After looking at Ferris's animal ears, Marcos touched his square jaw, as if in thought. "No, I did not mean to pry. I was rude to you, His Highness's friend. My apologies if I made you uncomfortable."

Ferris shook his head and rejected Marcos's apology. "No… You didn't say anything bad."

The knight said nothing in reply and looked at Fourier. "You said that she is going to be a healer, so is she the person you mentioned before, Your Highness?"

"Correct! The healers have made the necessary preparations, right? Since that is what Ferris was invited here for."

"Everything has been taken care of. But the soldiers will start their training soon, so I humbly recommend leaving to go there now. And…" Marcos lowered his voice and whispered into Fourier's ear. "Lord Bordeaux Zergev will be coming today to conduct an on-site inspection."

"—? Is that a problem? It is true that Bordeaux is a bit noisy, but…"

After that Fourier frowned, and Marcos didn't look at Ferris so he wouldn't know they were talking about him. "Her ears and tail. Lord Bordeaux doesn't like demi-humans. So it would be better if he does not see him."

"Well, well, that is absurd. If you choose your friends by blood alone, then you will be the one who gets discriminated against in the end. Tell Bordeaux that for me."

"You can tell him that yourself, Your Highness. My status prevents me from making such comments," Marcos replied, taking a step back.

Fourier looked displeased and then gestured at Ferris to come with him. Following his lead, Ferris bowed to Marcos and left.

After they were out of his sight, Marcos tilted his head. “I thought the eldest child of House Argyle was a boy, but it turned out to be a cute lady.”

3

“I was told you have learned the basic uses of mana. So, you can learn the rest through practical experience. There is no shortage of injured here, after all. He-He-heh.”

The one who said that with his distinctive laugh was a skinny, white-haired court healer. It was the healer that had come to the castle upon Fourier’s request, and he was one of the most excellent healers in the kingdom’s employ. He wasn’t the only one, however, as several more had made their way to the castle as well. Rather extravagant indeed just to train Ferris. Ferris understood that it was Fourier’s good will, but…

“You must be joking again, Your Highness,” said a healer.

“A demi-human girl? Here?” scoffed a second healer.

“I refuse to take part in this,” declared a third healer.

The number of healers complaining about being summoned unreasonably weren’t in the minority. They might have been talking in secrecy, but Ferris’s ears could easily pick up what they were saying about him behind his back. The thing that Marcos whispered into Fourier’s ear before was no exception.

“You do not look so well, Ferris. Don’t tell me you’re nervous?”

Fourier was being considerate towards Ferris who was facing down without knowing his subordinate’s disrespect and his smile made Ferris sad. It agonized Ferris’ heart further since he was fond of Fourier and felt indebted to him.

“The military training ground is next to the royal castle. It’s where they train the knights and city guards, but their training is intense, not to mention extreme, so they’re basically always bleeding and breaking bones, he-he-heh.”

The Skeleton Healer laughed at the place that pumped out injured people. It was unclear if he liked healing or just seeing blood and guts, but he seemed somewhat better than the other healers.

Ferris followed him around and learned by watching how he healed the injured knights and city guards. “So you don’t heal everything with healing magic,” he observed.

“The amount of mana an individual has is limited. It would be unacceptable to keep healing light wounds and then end up having no mana for the gravely injured. People become reckless when they think that wounds can be healed easily. If perfectly mastered, a healer can save someone on the verge of dying. It is a power that can twist fate depending on the situation.”

“Can save someone, on the verge of dying…”

Ferris reflexively clutched his chest since he was familiar with the situation the Skeleton Healer was talking about. It reminded him of the time he almost killed Crusch and saved her by unleashing some kind of extraordinary power.

“The power to save people is certainly amazing. But refrain from using your power excessively since when people get used to it, they start being reckless and end up losing their lives because of it. He-Heh-heh.”

“I feel like, I have learned a lesson…”

You can perform first aid on a simple cut or bruise by bandaging it or cooling it with water. Anyone can do it if shown how, too. The Skeleton Healer might have been unorthodox in a lot of ways compared to other healers, but Ferris honestly felt like he could learn a lot from him.

While he was in his thoughts, a voice reverberated throughout the training ground.

“—The knights have lost their edge. Everyone lacks spirit. Spirit.”

The voice belonged to a giant bald man standing at the entrance, his arms crossed as he looked around. The man was entering old age, yet his straight posture and trained body were full of youthful energy. There was a light buzz, and the healers—excluding the Skeleton Healer—rushed towards him.

“L-Lord Zergev!” a healer exclaimed. “What brings you to the training ground…”

“Don’t come near me. Such a nuisance. I stopped by since I was conducting an inspection. Fulfil your duty, your duty!” the old man shouted, spit flying, as he stepped into the grounds, driving away those who were trying to butter him up.

The atmosphere of the training ground suddenly grew tense, and the city guards who had been half-assing it until now kicked their training into overdrive.

On the other hand—Ferris hid himself in order to hide from the old man, Bordeaux. He was positive that he was the person who didn’t like demi-humans that Marcos mentioned.

Thinking that he would inconvenience Crusch and Fourier if he got found and worsened the old man’s mood, Ferris tried to make an early departure—but was soon stopped by Fourier, who had grabbed his shoulder. And then…

“Oh, Bordeaux! It has been a while. Have you been well?”

No one knew what he was thinking, but he charged straight at Bordeaux while pulling Ferris along. While Ferris was in a state of bewilderment, Bordeaux noticed them approaching and smiled. “If it isn’t His Highness Fourier. It is rare to see you at the training ground. Oh, maybe that isn’t the case. I have heard about it, Your Highness. That you have recently developed a passion for swordsmanship. If it’s fine with you, would you permit me to teach you a few moves?”

“No stop, you will hurt your back if you do things that aren’t good for your age. More importantly, I want to introduce you to my friend, Ferris.”

Fourier pushed forward Ferris towards Bordeaux just like with

Marcos, and Bordeaux was friendlier than expected.

However, Bordeaux's expression turned cold when he saw Ferris. "Those ears and that tail… You are a demi-human—with all due respect, Your Highness, if I may give you any advice, then…"

"If you are going to tell me to choose my friends wisely, I will not hear it. I told you that I was going to introduce my friend to you. The friendship has already been established. Are you ordering a royal to throw away what he has acquired?"

"Y-Your Highness…"

Fourier, who was always smiling and often seemed somewhat oblivious to things, had a tense expression now and his voice was stern. The sight of that made Ferris speechless. Or perhaps you could say that everyone there was equally speechless.

"Introduce yourself, Ferris. In a way that you would not be ashamed to be my friend and Crusch's retainer."

Feeling something moving up his spine, Ferris stepped forward, obeying the command. He reverently bowed to Bordeaux, who was looking down at him. "I am honored to have been given the opportunity to introduce myself. My name is Felix Argyle. I serve as a retainer to the daughter of Duke Karsten, Lady Karsten."

"And Ferris is also a friend of mine. She will be a healer in the future as well. Is that clear, Bordeaux?" Fourier said, wrapping his arm around Ferris and pulling him in. "I will not allow you to humiliate my friend from now on, no matter what the reason may be. If you rashly demean others, your actions will eventually come back to haunt you. Never forget that!"

"Understood." Bordeaux knelt on the spot and bowed—giving his utmost respect. The old man then rose and looked at Ferris. "His Highness has given you his stamp of approval. Be fully aware of how big a deal it is. As long as you live up to his expectations, I will overlook your lineage and evaluate you fairly. You have my word."

Bordeaux lifted his face up and spoke in a voice that everyone in the training grounds could hear. “You knights have lost your edge! However, there is still hope yet for the kingdom we offer our loyalty to! The results of today’s inspection are good just from being able to confirm that. Train hard, warriors!”

Bordeaux took his giant body and left the training ground after laughing in satisfaction. A couple attendants followed after him, and Ferris finally felt himself relaxing.

“There was quite a commotion on day one. I am looking forward to this month-long apprenticeship. He-He-heh.” The Skeleton Healer laughed nastily thinking that it wasn’t his problem, and Ferris sighed.

He looked at Fourier next to him and then hesitated for a few seconds. “Th-Thank you very much, Your Highness. But…are you sure it’s okay to say something like that?”

“Hm? I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but my status is higher than that of Bordeaux’s! I am a royal! Even if he is a member of the Council of Wise Men, I am above him! There is no need for me to feel intimidated! Well, maybe I am, but only a little!”

“Hee-Hee…but it made me happy. Why did you say those things?”

Fourier, now back to his usual self, sheepishly rubbed below his nose with his finger. “Who knows, but my words were genuine. W-Well, I admit that Crusch played a bit of a role too… But you know, Ferris—it is the duty of men to protect women!” Fourier shouted, his arms crossed and wearing his usual cheerful smile.

Unable to hold it in after hearing what he said at the end, Ferris let out a hearty chuckle.

END

The Saga of the Great Duchess Crusch Extra: Days Without Her Follower
(Ex 1; toranoana)

1

The Karsten Duchy in the Kingdom of Lugunica was known for its excellent governance and was one of the best domains in the kingdom. The ducal family there had been serving the royal house for generations, going all the way back to the kingdom's founding, and the current head of the House's—Meckart's—governance was highly regarded by both the kingdom and the people of his domain. For that reason, people had mixed feelings about his successor, who would have to carry on his legacy: his daughter.

The people of the kingdom that believed the rumors about her thought that she was a sword freak. And the people of the domain who didn't know her well thought her an odd girl, but the people who knew her true self had a different opinion altogether.

She—Crusch Karsten—was the only one who was of worthy enough character and skill to carry forth the ducal family name. She never stopped working hard and improving herself. She was uncompromising and hard on herself, so the people who knew her considered her a true noble. She was still so young, yet she shouldered such heavy burdens.

Due to her status, the change in her was immediately felt by everyone close to her.

"It seems like she hasn't been sleeping well at night," commented a servant.

"She hasn't been able to eat much," another servant added. "Lady Crusch used to eat a lot, but she's been leaving leftovers a lot lately…"

"She seems inattentive even when swinging her sword, which is dangerous," a third servant said.

The servants working in the ducal household were troubled by the change in Crusch, who they had known since she was but a babe. Meckart's influential servants, both the military personnel and the civil servants, had sensed the change immediately.

"I haven't seen it during her general culture lessons or while she is studying military strategy books, but…" said one of them.

"Her only acting like that during her free time makes it even more painful to watch," added another.

Everyone close to her agreed that her behavior was typical of her since she didn't try to cause trouble for others in spite of it all. And it rather impressed them. It was an attitude that was very reliable to have from a person that stood above everyone else—a ruler—but it wasn't something a 14-year-old should be prepared to do, much less an only-daughter.

Meckart, after listening to the opinions of the people who cared about her, slowly got up off the chair. It took him a while to get up, not because he didn't want to confront her, but due to being old and having weak joints.

"I have been acting strange lately…you say?" said Crusch, who had been summoned by Meckart, while furrowing her well-defined eyebrows.

She was a beautiful fourteen-year-old girl who looked mature for her age. Her amber-colored almond-shaped eyes and her lustrous, beautiful hair—both were like her mother's, which Meckart saw as his wife's mementos. His wife also had a fierce personality like Crusch's. It would be no exaggeration to say that winning her over and marrying her was the bravest thing he had ever done.

"Father?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, sorry, sorry. Well, it is just that I was thinking that you were starting to look more and more like Helena… Oh no, that is something unrelated. Well, yes, it was about how you have been lately."

"No, I am happy that you said I am becoming like my mother, but I cannot agree with what you said about me acting strange. In what way have I been acting strange?"

"I do not see any problems with how you conduct yourself, your studies, or your noble duties. We still need to talk about you dressing as a man but…the topic is different this time."

Crusch narrowed her eyes in the middle of his reply, giving Meckart the chills.

Crusch had started dressing as a man a few years ago; wearing men's clothing she liked and using strong and hard words. It was around the same time that she began devoting herself to the art of the sword.

Meckart had been trying to persuade her to stop for several years, but he had yet to succeed. However, that wasn't the issue here, and Meckart crossed his arms. "I have heard that you haven't been sleeping well lately. I hear you haven't been able to finish your meals either."

"That is…a periodical thing. Father, you also know that girls have such a thing that occurs each month."

"Huh?! Oh, aah, yes, of course, I know that, but…"

As a father, he could do nothing but lose his composure when a woman's issue was brazenly used against him. He was aware that he was being deceived, however, so he used that to press her for an answer.

"Crusch, stop lying. I know that, your periodical thing, has no relationship whatsoever with how you have been acting. I have already looked into it."

"Father, I can see the wind of lies blowing around you without having to look…"

"A-Anyway! You are acting strange! And I know what is causing that!" Meckart just came out and said it since it seemed like he was easily going to lose the argument.

Crusch seemed somewhat dissatisfied, but it seemed from her expression that she was now curious about the cause. Meckart, feeling like his stomach was churning after being stared at silently by the almond-shaped eyes that were like his wife's, then spoke about the cause of her current change. Which was—

"Crusch…you are in agony now because you are separated from Felix."

Crusch's eyebrow quivered when Meckart pointed it out. Conversely, as it was the only reaction she showed the whole time, he silently praised her willpower.

Felix Argyle—AKA Ferris—was Crusch's retainer, and he didn't serve House Karsten but Crusch directly. Just as the name suggested, his sex was male, but the way he spoke, dressed, and acted were all very feminine, so it was really hard to tell that he was a man at first glance.

He is greatly indebted to Crusch for a certain reason and is serving her with all his heart. Crusch reciprocates his subservience with an equal amount of kindness. Calling them an ideal master and servant —would be an exaggeration, but there is no doubt that they have an ideal relationship.

"Said Felix is mastering healing magic in the royal capital now. How you've been acting recently coincides with the amount of time he has been there."

"Father… I was wondering what you were going to say, but it seems like you are just overthinking things." Crusch smiled slightly and shook her head at Meckart's point. Seeing as her attitude remained unchanged, he was afraid he had missed the mark.

Crusch started speaking to Meckart, whose stomach was hurting, with a sigh:

"It is true that I have been worried about Ferris often while he has not been around. He went there due to the recommendation of His Highness, Fourier, so I am not worried about how they are treating him. It's just that the work at the clinic is extremely rigorous. But if we want Ferris to truly improve, then we need to let him stay there and gain experience in treating people who are close to dying. He is the kind of person who is prone to putting on a brave face. I do feel concerned that he will put others before him and wear himself out. If his healing magic's usefulness gets noticed by the clinic, then they might pull him away from my command…no, I do not think that something like that would happen, but it is obvious that they would want a highly capable healer like him…"

"Hold your earth dragons. I get it, you can relax. I know how much Ferris means to you."

Having talked more eloquently than he had expected, Meckart was overwhelmed.

He faced a similar situation when he made Felix talk about Crusch, but he did not think that he would receive the same passion from her.

It seemed like Meckart's daughter was head-over-heels for that cat-eared retainer—more than he had imagined.

"I hope you understand now."

Looking relieved, it seemed like Crusch was satisfied by Meckart's reaction. Her somewhat happy look wasn't something he could see often on his daughter. So Meckart smiled with a bit of jealousy towards the boy who was her retainer and said:

"Yes, I do—I understand, so let's go to the royal capital soon to see how things are going there."

And he set off to take care of Crusch's anomaly once and for all.

2

"Ooh! Crusch! Over here! It is I! Glad you came!"

She immediately heard an enthusiastic voice when the dragon carriage pulled up to the main gate of the palace. Meckart leaned out and saw a blond-haired boy—the Kingdom of Lugunica's Fourth Prince, Prince Fourier—welcoming Crusch, who had stepped out before him, with a broad smile.

Meckart, a duke, and his daughter, Crusch, were both in a position where they ought to show him his due respect, but they felt relaxed around him because he had always been friendly with them over the past few years.

“Thank you for taking the time to welcome us, Your Highness. I cannot express my gratitude enough for accepting my father’s request even while being so busy,” said Crusch, who wasn’t all too happy about visiting the royal capital, in a passive aggressive tone that was hard to catch.

“It’s nothing. I could never turn down a request from you. You can continue to count on me from now on! You can contact me if you have any business in the royal capital! Yes!” But the broadminded Fourier accepted it generously. More like, it was written on his face that he was extremely happy to be able to interact with Crusch.

The fourth prince has a crush on my only daughter, and if you were to ask me, ‘What’s so scary about that?’ I could only tell you: everything. But as a father, there is a part of me that honestly feels like it’s a lovely thing. If their relationship continues to grow, them standing side-by-side one day won’t be an impossibility. If that were to actually happen, I would at least—

“Meckart! I appreciate your effort! It seems like you were also worried about Ferris. Well, it is obvious since you are her father figure!”

“Huh? Ah, no, Your Highness, it isn’t like that…”

Fourier talked to Meckart who was pondering, with an unreserved expression and nodded. He tried to correct it but…

“That is right, Your Highness,” Crusch interrupted him. “Father forced me to come here with him this time. I told him that we should wait for Ferris and look forward to seeing how much she has grown when she returns but…he did not listen to me.”

“I see, I understand. But you should try to understand Meckart’s feelings. Parents will always love their children. In cases where someone is entrusted with a child, such feelings might fade away over time, but in Meckart's case, his feelings only grew in strength, so there's nothing wrong with what he did. That is what I think!"

"How profound," Crusch replied. "A great insight indeed… So, where is Ferris?"

Meckart was baffled since a rare thing had occurred during that conversation. Crusch unintentionally hiding her true feelings, Fourier making false inferences as usual but was touching on the core of the matter, and Crusch not being able to hide her true feelings.

Maybe it is due to my age, but I can't keep up with the pace of young people's conversations. Perhaps a change of governance in the ducal house might not be too far away.

"The clinic is really busy today, but Ferris is probably working at the training ground. People get hurt all the time there, so it is a good place to go if you want to improve your healing magic. Now, this way."

As Meckart was feeling like throwing in the towel, Fourier started making his way towards the training ground while explaining things.

Crusch was nodding along, but how much she was actually taking in was a mystery. Meckart followed them and noticed a subtle change of heart.

He wasn't aware of it till now due to being worried about Crusch, but there was something inside of him that was looking forward to seeing Felix at work. It was a surprising discovery for him.

"Though, I did not intend to belittle His Highness's words."

Meckart had never had the nerve to think of himself as a substitute for his father, but Felix was a lovely family member to him. A daughter that acts like a son and a son that acts like a daughter—it is somewhat of a strange combination, but I think I'm starting to accept them deep down.

“The brave men from the order of knights cross swords every day in the training ground. I also join them from time to time so that I might best you with the sword one day.”

“That must be…very stressful training for the soldiers.”

“That is right, that is right! Oh, it’ll come into view any moment now!”

The three of them reached the training ground without it being clearly stated what made it so stressful for the soldiers.

The training ground adjacent to the royal castle was a simple structure, it was just a stone wall built in a circle. The purpose of it was clear due to its simplicity, and the soldiers training there had high morale.

The environment in which steel clashed against steel and voices like angry shouts were exchanged seemed to be free of petty pride and laziness.

“…”

The passageway that Meckart and the rest went through led to a service entrance where they could look down over the entire training ground. Meckart looked down at it from there and searched for Felix. He was a boy who stood out no matter where he was, so he thought that he could find him quickly, but…

“There,” Crusch declared.

As one would expect, there was no one better than Crusch when it came to finding Felix. Meckart spotted the cat-eared boy immediately after following her line of sight.

Felix had taken off the girly clothes he usually wore and was wearing the healer uniform of the clinic, which was white and had blue lines. He placed his hand on an injured person and activated his healing magic with a serious face.

"Ooh, so she was there. Then, let us talk to her as soon as she is done with heagah!" Crusch came up behind Fourier, who had noticed Ferris a bit later, and covered his mouth. He squirmed, his face turning red. He did so not because she had covered his mouth, but due to the sensation he felt when she rubbed up against him.

"Your Highness, thank you for your consideration. But…"

"We were thinking of heading back without interrupting her work. Right, Crusch?"

Crusch, who was holding Fourier down, widened her eyes at Meckart's words. She relaxed her lips and nodded.

She then released Fourier, who turned around with a still-reddened face. "I-I-I-I do not get it but…are you both fine with that?"

"Yes—this is enough. I shall reflect upon the tastelessness of my actions."

Crusch bowed her head to Fourier, admitting honestly that she was worried about Felix.

Fourier looked troubled, but when he saw Meckart bow too, he said, "A-Alright, I get it. Your feelings were conveyed. That is enough. I will keep what happened today a secret from Ferris. That is what you want, right?"

"Yes. As expected of you, Your Highness, you are indeed most wise."

"Ha-Ha, that goes without saying. But if you truly do intend on returning now, then you obviously have plenty of time to spare. Crusch, accompany me. A rare flower has bloomed in the garden."

Crusch glanced sideways at Meckart after getting invited by Fourier.

Meckart smiled gently at his daughter's gaze and nodded. "You can go. Do be careful not to bother His Highness."

"Alright. Then I shall accompany you, Your Highness. Do show me those flowers."

“Sure, sure! Then let us go. It is this way! Follow me!”

Fourier started trotting away, and Crusch followed after him, albeit walking at a slower pace. As he watched the two wander off, Meckart felt like everything was going to be okay.

Crusch will go back to normal now. My daughter’s ability to take care of herself is topnotch to begin with, so if the cause of her change gets dealt with, she’ll easily be able to go back to her usual self. That alone would have been quite the harvest, but I got twice the yield this time it seems.

“Best of luck… Do your best.” Meckart, his back facing the service entrance, narrowed his eyes and looked down at Felix working. It was as if he could see all the hard work Ferris, his son that he was proud of, was putting in.

I feel like the servants’ lukewarm eyes were not only directed at Crusch when they were seeing us off. I see, so Crusch was not the only one who felt lonely. Like daughter like father, we cannot look at ourselves properly, Meckart thought, his shoulders shaking from laughing uncontrollably.

END

Anastasia’s Prosperity Record (Volume 4; Melon Books)

1

Noticing that the arranged time approached, Julius Juukulius looked skyward.

Julius: “It’s nearly time… I lose track of time every time I start working on documents.”

Removing his glasses, he gently pressed his tired eyes, after a long period of looking at tiny letters. He always wore these glasses when he had to fulfill his duties as a noble, but when assuming his role as a knight, he took these off. That detail was part of Julius’s philosophy, who believe he should keep his noble and knights roles separated.

???: “Nii-sama, the time to get ready has come.”

Some seconds after that, there was a knock on the office door, and a moderate voice was heard from the other side.

Julius: “I am finalizing everything here. Thank you for your reminder, Joshua.”

Joshua: “Put yourself in my shoes. You told me it was an important meeting for our House and consequently, for the whole Kingdom of Lugunica. It’s natural for me to be worried.”

In response, a man of delicate features entered the room. His hair was styled in a ponytail, and showed a gentle smile. His name was Joshua Juukulius, Julius’s brother, who was 4 years younger than him, and one of his unconditional supporters. Even though he was physically weak, and wasn’t blessed with sword talent, he was a class apart when it came to smarts and had an easier time with studying compared to his older brother.

Joshua: “Nii-sama? Is something the problem?”

Julius: “…No, nothing, I was just spacing out. I’m alright.

Joshua: “Good, then leave the job of cleaning this up to me, and go change so you can meet your visitor.

Julius: “I could do that myself, but… You’re better than me at that, Joshua.”

Joshua: “Haha. That’s right. Most importantly of all, you should not keep a lady waiting.”

After that suggestion, Joshua winked at his brother, who was quite surprised with that gesture, despite the fact he was quite the upright gentleman, even if he ignored his familial bias.

Julius: “I was not expecting you to make that sort of joke, Joshua. Who did you learn it from?”

Joshua: “Who else could it be but yourself, brother?”

His immediate answer was another surprise to Julius who, despite that, agreed with Joshua’s assessment, and started reflecting on his usual behavior around his brother.

2

???: “Glad to meet ya. I am Anastasia Hoshin, the president of the Hoshin Trading Company.”

The one graciously laughing in the parlor was a girl who was apparently young, and was not very tall. She had wavy purple hair, and she covered her body with a white cloth, made out of animal fur. Her soft lips were always pursed in a smile, and her light blue seemed to calm down anyone who talked with her. Julius was not an exception to this, and was swallowed by her charm, and needed a moment to compose himself.

Julius: “The pleasure is mine. My name is Julius Juukulius, heir of the Juukulius House. Thank you for agreeing to meet me, Anastasia-sama.”

With his hand on his chest, Julius performed a knights’ curtsy to

Anastasia. Looking at that act of formality, the girl raised her eyebrows slightly.

Anastasia: “It’s alright, let’s not make this too formal. You sought me out, after all. I accepted the invasion because I felt both of us could get a lot outta this conversation.”

Julius: “I am glad to hear it. Was there any issue during the trip? I attempted to take precautions for every possible problem, but if there was anything that caused you discomfort, please do not hesitate in telling me.”

Anastasia: “Nah, it was so peaceful that I have nothin’ to complain about. Quite the opposite, my only worry right now is that I may be hasslin’ ya too much.”

She said, with a shy smile on her face.

Anastasia had a very noticeable accent, characteristic of the powerful country to the West, Kararagi, a federal city-state composed of many cities. The origin of that accent was deeply related to the country’s own origin as well.

The worry shown in the girl’s face, however, was easily identified if one followed the direction of her gaze, towards what was happening behind Julius’s back.

???: “Woooooow! You got a lotta expensive things, mister! It’s all shiny! How cool!”

???: “Onee-chan, calm down… Don’t touch other people’s things! If that thing falls…”

???: “Lookie here, Hetaro! It’s gold! I’m all golden!”

Hetaro: “S-S-S-Sisteeeeer…!”

Two little children had run into the room and were playing around in a corner. Neither of them was tall enough to reach Julius’s waistline, and were aptly described as feline demi-humans with orange fur, wearing a white overcoat. The way they spoke clued people into their relationship as brother and sister, but the girl kept touching and picking up every object in sight, leaving her brother exasperated at her behavior.

Anastasia: “I’m sorry for this mess, but she means no harm. I’d be happy if ya were understandin’.”

Julius: “I’m not as strict to the point of chastising children for being children. But may I inquire who are they?”

Anastasia: “In theory, they’re my bodyguards. They may not look like it, but they’re pretty strong, ya know? They’re second fiddle only to my army’s captain, who stayed behind with the merchants.”

Obviously, Anastasia’s explanation surprised Julius, who looked again at the demi-human siblings. If they were indeed strong warriors belonging to a fighting force, despite their cute appearance, that would mean that they belonged to no other but Anastasia’s renowned personal army.

Julius: “So, they both belong to the Iron Fang?”

Anastasia: “Yes, and they’re both vice-captains on top of that. In truth, they’re triplets who work together, but the last remainin’ one, who’s a lot better at handlin’ money, stayed behind as punishment.”

It was common knowledge that the Iron Fang mercenary army was the strongest of its kind in Kararagi, and it was at the exclusive service of the Hoshin Trading Company, and would step in to solve only the most extreme of conflicts.

Anastasia: “Anyways, today is only meant to be a first meetin’, so don’t worry too much ‘bout them. I promise ya I have no intention to start a fight, I actually want to keep a good relationship between us.”

Julius: “I must still apologize for my lack of temperament. Even though I am a Royal Knight, I ended up having quite the exaggerated reaction at becoming aware they belong to such an elite army.”

Anastasia: “Ya know, your reaction is actually rather refreshin’, as many people don’t believe it at all when they learn.”

Looking at Anastasia's calculating gaze, Julius was forcefully reminded of the girl he was facing. Despite her tender age, she already had quite the list of accomplishments, having already distinguished herself in the highly competitive commercial atmosphere of Kararagi. And now, she had the wish to expand her business into Lugunica.

Anastasia: "Alright, let's start this from zero. Currently, the Kingdom of Lugunica is facin' an economic recession, and the public coffers have never been this dried-out before, which is makin' it difficult for the ones in charge to manage the Kingdom. Am I right?"

Julius had to put in quite some effort to maintain a composed and inexpressive face, as Anastasia did not hold back in picking her first topic. The subject of Lugunica's precarious financial situation, was a critical matter. As such, it was information to which the majority of nobles were not privy to; even those working for Lugunica's government were mostly unaware of this fact. Obviously, outsiders should not know that either.

Anastasia: "Before ya start lookin' for a culprit, I'll assure ya no one revealed anythin' they shouldn't. 'Twas a conclusion I got from sightseein' in the city myself."

Julius: "Sightseeing…?"

Anastasia: "Negociatin' starts before getting' to the table, by researchin' the subject I want to discuss. I assume you've also done your research on me, no? In my case, I like walkin' 'round with my own two feet, and takin' a good look with my own eyes."

Appreciating the vague aroma of her tea, Anastasia divulged her philosophy as if it was a natural thing to do.

Originally, this meeting with Anastasia had been proposed by Julius, who had set his eyes upon the Hoshin Trading Company, which was expanding very rapidly in Kararagi and had remarkable potential for expansion. He had thought that it would have been possible to bring it to Lugunica, so that it would help with its economic comeback. Now, it was purely Julius's responsibility to reign in the girl in front of him in a proper fashion, so that his wager would not come back to bite him. However, right now, it was Anastasia who was in total control of this meeting.

Anastasia: “To be honest, I’m not very interested in Lugunica as it is now. Even if my Company expands to this country, we’ll only be able to profit at the start of operations, and it won’t last long. That is because, in only a short time, this Kingdom’s administration’ll be in ruins, and I don’t wanna be investin’ money and manpower knowin’ that.”

She had no reserves in appraising Lugunica’s current state harshly. However, as the hair of the Juukulius Family, Julius was perfectly aware of how her words rang true, and did not know how to reply, choosing to remain silent about her statement. However, Anastasia added,

Anastasia: “That bein’ said… I see some potential in the Juukulius House. Not only you, but from what I grasped, your brother is also quite capable, ya know? Even if this Kingdom’s fated to fall, as far as I’m concerned, I don’t think it’s a poor choice to keep a good relationship with your House in the long term.”

Julius: “…”

That was a very clear provocation. Even if he knew that, if Julius remained quiet, it was because Anastasia’s words had the power to enchant his own heart.

At that very moment, his voice, his gestures, his gaze, all these things were weapons that Anastasia could use in this negotiation.

At that very moment, Julius was nothing but her opponent, an opponent she must defeat. For that reason…

Julius: “…Unfortunately, that will not be possible. The House of Juukulius swore absolute loyalty to the Kingdom of Lugunica, and it shall fall alongside the Kingdom. That being said, I have no doubt whatsoever that its greatest goal is to work tirelessly so that the worst may not come to pass.”

Anastasia: "…"

With that confident statement, which left no room for doubt, it was Anastasia's turn to end up completely stunned. She knew she was going to be rejected, but not with such conviction. Her light-blue eyes were open wide in a genuine expression of shock, which curiously made Julius think her more attractive compared to the times she acted in calculated fashion.

Mimi: "Heeey, miss! Look at dis, miss! Isn't this cool?! This is so cool!"

Once the two sides had disclosed the first cards they held in their hands, everything pointed that the meeting would end up fruitless. Right at that time, the little demi-human girl came bursting into the conversation giggling like a madwoman. She then turned to Julius, smiling ear-to-ear, and asked,

Mimi: "Mister, is dis here yours? Why does it look like a lizard?"

Julius: "This is not a lizard, but a dragon. It is the symbol of our Kingdom."

Anastasia: "Mimi! Stop hasslin' Julius so much. C'me here, gimme that."

What the girl named Mimi held in her hand was an insignia, with an embedded jewel in its center. That was an item of ultimate importance to the Kingdom of Lugunica, and it should have been well-kept, however…

Julius: "Anastasia-sama. I don't mean to be rude, but that insignia is an artifact of great value and…"

Anastasia: "Yes, I apologize. I'll give it back, of course. But hey, this is quite the beautiful glow, ain't it?"

The girl smiled faintly when she noticed that the jewel encrusted in the insignia glowed slightly, and looked at it as if she were hypnotized.

Yet, more than anyone else present at that place, the one that was most stricken by shock was, obviously, Julius himself.

After all, that glow could only meant one thing. He could only kneel as a reaction.

Julius: “Anastasia-sama. It seems that we need to have an even more important conversation.”

Anastasia closed her eyes after witnessing that sudden change in Julius’s behavior who, in turn, began thinking on the possible results of the events that had just occurred.

The President of the Hoshin Trading Company, a foreigner, had reached the conclusion that Lugunica had no value whatsoever, to her.

But what if she had the chance to analyze the Kingdom’s workings from within? Would she keep the same opinion in not wanting to get involved with it?

More than that, what would she do if she had the power to directly influence the Kingdom’s course?

Julius: “…”

And if, by chance, she accepted to be a part of what the glow of the insignia implied…

What would Julius himself choose?

END

Anastasia's Moving Picture Scroll (Volume 5; Melon Books)

On that day, in a small, reserved corner of the Royal Capital, a small celebration was taking place.

???: "Come on, you guys! Instead of actin' up, if ya don't finish cleanin' up quickly, I won't be able to make that daisukiyaki pancake!"

The one clapping and commanding the group was a short girl. She wore a long white coat, made out of animal fur, and had wavy purple hair. Her neck was adorned with a white fox scarf and, combined with her own lovely appearance, the girl gave an impression of purity to all who saw her.

The woman's name was Anastasia Hoshin. A young and beautiful merchant, running a large commercial company called the Hoshin Trading Company, hailing from the Kararagi City-State.

And in front of her stood an unoccupied building, totally empty on the inside—her new base of operations, established in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

???: "Come on! We gotta hurry so that the boss can make her special pancake! Let's go!"

???: "W-Wait, onee-chan! That box has fragile objects in it, if onee-chan carries it this roug… Oh! Oh!!"

Little silhouettes ran back and forth near Anastasia, who witnessed their work with her hands on her hips. At that moment, one of the children tripped and fell, but managed to throw the box she was holding into the air.

???: "Oy! You're hopeless, Mimi! You hafta realize how small ya are, how short yer arms are, how careless ya are, and how cute yer face is! Oh! Nevermind the face! Just be aware of the rest!"

Mimi: “Ah, captain! You’re the bestest! You’re carryin’ mine too even tho you’re already carryin’ a lot!”

The beast of a man was able to catch the girl and the box she held before they fell. The girl was carried up as well, laughing hysterically, pulling at the demi-human’s dark brown hair styled like a mane.

The girl laughs innocently, and the beastman forgives her with a toothy smile. Anastasia couldn’t help but loosen her cheeks at the sight of the girl’s younger brother in a panic in front of the two.

???: “I see this is being quite the lively relocation.”

The one who made that comment was a very spiffy-looking young man with a tense expression on his face, who had walked up next to the girl. He appeared to be approximately in his mid-teens. and had his lilac hair dressed in a ponytail. His face could be said to be androgynous and he had a slender build; if it weren’t for his transitioning voice, he may have been easily confused for a girl.

Anastasia: “Right? Not only those two, but everyone here is cheerful just as ya see. I think the only exceptions are the other two vice-captains, and the old Oji-chan workin’ in the administration. Please try to endure it.”

???: “Yes, that lines up with what I was told. But is it possible to keep a normal life among this ruckus?”

Anastasia: “Well, in Kararagi, you can’t get by speakin’ in hushed tones. That’s why everyone speaks loudly, gestures wildly, tells their stories melodramatically, and lies shamelessly. Joshua-kun, remember that.”

Joshua: “So you’re telling me that lying is done as naturally as breathing… I’ll keep that in mind.”

Without changing his facial expression, Joshua Juukulius accepted that advice, a gesture that Anastasia appreciated.

It felt good to meet people who knew how to actively incorporate external elements to better themselves, whatever the influence. His ambition was also suitable for his young age, and family background.

Now all that was left was for him to taste frustration and hardship, and be greedy enough to stand back up again, and succeed in life.

???: “Joshua-san. May I help you with that?”

Joshua: “Thank you. Let me see, you’re Vice-Captain Tivey, right? Well then, I request you bring that there.”

Correction. Her appraisal of that young man was even higher now. She appreciated the fact that he was able to correctly guess which one of the three triplets had come to him, which was important to her, who could match their names with their appearance instantly.

Anastasia: “It is rare to find someone who is able to tell apart the triplets in so lil’ time…”

Anastasia tilted her head, wondering if it was truly that difficult to differentiate them. It was true that they were similar, but each of them had their unique charm. It was a mystery.

Tivey wears a monocle and was the smartest among the three, Hetaro always had a worried face, revealing his sensitive side, and Mimi was simple-minded and the very embodiment of cute innocence. Those were the triplet Vice-Captains of the Iron Fang, the mercenary army of the Hoshin Trading Company. And the one who was in charge of all troops, the Captain of all those soldiers, was the beastman from before.

???: “What is it, boss-lady?! What’s that creepy smile, huh?! Are ya hungover or somethin’?! We can’t deal wit’ ya right now, we’re busy!”

Anastasia: “That’s a terrible accusation, Ricardo. Hurry up and get your work done. Otherwise, Ricardo’s food will end up in Mimi’s stomach.”

Mimi: “Ooooooh! Mimi’s gonna have a full belly!”

Ricardo: “Why not?! I’m working harder than everyone else, too!”

Ricardo opened his enormous mouth, talked loudly, made exaggerated gestures and laments himself loudly. His mouth was so big and full of fangs, he could eat Anastasia in two bites. His muscular body was covered with brown body hair, and his furry tail was swinging in excitement from one side to another.

Such features, as well as his canine-looking face, were irrefutable proof that he was a dog demi-human.

Mimi, who was riding on Ricardo's shoulders, is also a kitten demi-human, with orange body hair, and wiggling cat ears. Anastasia's Iron Fang was a mercenary group, composed solely of beastmen.

In fact, almost everyone helping with the relocation were beastmen, as the only humans present were Anastasia, Joshua, and another man.

???: "…It's being quite the cheerful relocation, isn't it, Anastasia-sama?"

The beautiful voice, that seems as if it were blessed by the wind, belongs to the young man standing right next to Anastasia.

Purple hair that is slightly darker in color than Anastasia's own, which had a light color. The young man's eyes, who adjusted his bangs are yellow, and his face so enchanting many women would be put in a daze if he smiled.

As opposed to Joshua's thin body, his was well-toned, and far from looking frail. The best way to describe it would be beautiful and strong.

Anastasia liked excellence, above all. Besides excellence, she also enjoyed pretty things. For that reason, that man who was a perfect fusion of excellency and beauty, was extremely desirable for her.

If she weren't resolute in her ambition, and didn't possess greed that far surpassed her carnal desires, she might have had her heart snatched away by that man. The Kingdom of Lugunica's Impeccable Knight, Julius Juukulius, stood a class apart just like that.

Anastasia laughed at Julius, who had changed to comfortable clothes after coming back from work.

Anastasia: “You brothers said exactly the same thing.”

Julius: “That’s extremely embarrassing. To follow my own younger brother’s footsteps…”

Anastasia: “Nah, I don’t think so. You brothers get on pretty well. I actually got a lil’ jealous.”

Taking a step back, she narrowed her eyes with both Julius and Joshua in her field of view. Joshua, realizing he was being looked at by Anastasia, turned his head and asked,

Joshua: “Does Anastasia-sama not have any siblings?”

Anastasia: “Hmm? Well, I’m not sure.”

In response, she tilted her head and closed one eye. Reacting, Julius reckoned his brother “Joshua”,

Julius: “I do not like such inquisitiveness. That is not a very nice thing to do, especially to ladies. Pay heed to that.”

Anastasia: “Ah, nonono, if you scold ‘im like that, I’ll lose my temper. It’s just that I didn’t understand and answered in a weird way.”

Waving, Anastasia smiled at Joshua, who had retracted himself, and touched the fox scarf wrapped around her neck, deep in thought for some time.

Anastasia: “Tivey?”

Tivey: “Yes, ma’am. Joshua-san, you can leave the organization of these materials to me, so you three can have an important talk together.”

Anastasia: “You understood it all from one word, I’m mesmerized by how cute and competent you are.”

It was not by chance that Tivey was known as the most astute and gentlemanly of the Iron Fang. Without him, such a large group, composed of people who lacked in perfectionism, would not work together as well.

Even with Anastasia's compliment, the little kitten demi-human kept the same facial expression and started to take care of Joshua's lot of tasks. The young man had a troubled face initially, but his brother put his hand on Joshua's shoulder.

Julius: "Do you wish to go somewhere else, Anastasia-sama? It'll be hard to offer guarantees that other people will not eavesdrop…"

Anastasia: "It's alright, it's no secret. Besides, if I don't keep an eye on this bunch, they'll start slackin' off. Let's stay at this place."

Turning to Joshua, she continued.

Anastasia: "In fairness, about your question from before, it's not like I was tryin' to dodge the question, ya know. I've no memories of my family, so I honestly can't answer ya."

Joshua: "…Are you saying you cannot remember your past?"

Anastasia: "No. As long as I've been self-aware, I was already alone, livin' in the most miserable place in Kararagi. 'Twas a miracle I didn't become a slave. And not only do I not know my own parents, but I even had to give myself a name."

Joshua must have had a good upbringing. He couldn't have imagined that. As she had said, both her name and her family name were self-given. When she was living in a hole in the ground, she dreamed to one day crawl out of it, and so her name was a pun on the word "hole"

It was comical to think that her ambition and pride had been so strong, even as a dreamer with nothing to her name.

Joshua: "So your surname, Hoshin, was also something you decided to give yourself?"

Anastasia: "Well, I don't think there's anyone else with that surname. Especially in Kararagi, no one'd be as bold as to do that.

After all, the most famous legend among us merchants is Hoshin of the Wastes. It's quite the ridiculous claim."

In fact, Anastasia's sanity was questioned many times at the time the Hoshin Trading Company was founded. She couldn't stifle a short laugh, thinking of the conversation she had at the time with Ricardo.

Anastasia: "If you're askin' if I'm sane or not, I'm pretty sure I lost it quite some time ago to be honest…"

The current Captain of the Iron Fang had once upon a time spent a lot of time worrying about it, but he was actually the first person to support this crazy gamble to move to Lugunica. Apparently, greed was contagious.

Joshua: "I understand… Now, the apparent reason why Anastasia-sama trusts demi-humans, and has an army such as the Iron Fang under her command, has become clear to me."

Anastasia: "That so. You are able to tell all that just from what I spoke?"

Joshua: "Yes. It is understandable from the story of your origin and name, allied to what little I was able to see from your personality. It's exactly because of you having such peculiar ideas, that you have no hesitation in appointing Demi-Humans in high positions, of all things."

Anastasia widened her eyes with Joshua's direct statement, who was looking at her as if analyzing her. Julius however, was clearly surprised at his younger brother's rant.

That shock turned to anger, and Anastasia acted before Joshua was reprimanded.

Anastasia: "I see… Joshua-kun, ya really are protective of your older brother, aren'tcha?"

Julius: "Anastasia-sama?"

Anastasia: "Joshua-kun's troubled. Me, a foreigner, is stickin' her nose into such an important topic for the Kingdom of Lugunica, with the backing of the Juukulius House… Which, in turn, is represented by yourself, Julius. Your brother is playin' the villain so he can know if I'm truly worthy of your trust."

Joshua said nothing in reply, getting paler. Anastasia could even see his eyes trembling slightly. That was enough for Anastasia.

Anastasia: "I'm sorry, but you're wrong. All I believe in, is that race has nothin' to do with people's abilities. My staff, other than bein' real helpful, they are all so very adorable. Why would I not give them the treatment they deserve?"

Joshua: "…In Lugunica, discrimination towards demi-humans has yet to be totally eradicated."

Anastasia: "I know, and I think that's the kinda stuff that normally happens in a country with such a long history. I can imagine people still have a lotta grudges from the time of the demi-human War… But lemme tell ya, I think that's just damn silly."

Anastasia shrugged at Joshua's defense.

Anastasia: "Race or blood, neither say absolutely nothin' about a person's worth. The only things that matter, are one's essence and willpower. When I sit upon that throne, I will follow that philosophy to a T, alright?"

Joshua: "…So Anastasia-sama is truly vying for the throne?"

Anastasia: "Oh, so that's what ya were worried 'bout?"

How seriously are you making a claim for the throne of another country? From Joshua's point of view, he was right to question the dedication of a person in that position. That was natural. Her way of thinking was very out of the ordinary in the Kingdom of Lugunica, so she would be at a clear disadvantage.

However, Anastasia was willing to bet her own soul.

Anastasia: "Alright then, how about a promise? I'll compete for the throne with all I have, and I swear I won't cut corners when it comes to the Royal Selection at any moment. I don't need to say that I'm not a strange actor from Kararagi that wishes to benefit Kararagi in anyway, right? I've never been this serious in my life, ya know."

Joshua: "If you make such careless promises, you might come to regret it, one day."

Anastasia: "No, I won't."

If Joshua was not yet convinced, Anastasia made it a point to drive it home, penetrating him with her gaze.

Anastasia: "I'll keep my promises, no matter what they are. «Posthumously too Hoshin keeps his promises, is Kararagi's national belief, and that too is my sort of determination. From the moment I decided to use his name as my own, I also decided I'd never trample on his legacy."

Joshua: "…"

Anastasia: "That's why we keep our promises. No matter what."

That is the true meaning of having borrowed the name of Hoshin, the founding hero of Kararagi. Joshua gulped, and beside him, Julius kneeled, emotion visible on his face. Seeing him, after a few seconds, the younger brother followed his lead.

Julius: "Anastasia-sama, please, forgive my naïve brother's rudeness. However, I must confess I truly admire your words. Now, I was able to ascertain that your arrival to Lugunica was a blessing."

Anastasia: "I'm happy wit' your compliment, but all I did was state the obvious, ya know? Well, if it was enough for you to know how serious I can be at times, that's alright… Ah, now I'm startin' to feel embarrassed 'bout it, I'm going all red."

The girl was shyly smiling as she turned one way and the other with her face held in her hands. Then both brothers stood up, and Joshua looked at Anastasia in silence.

Joshua: "…"

The boy had no idea of what he should say. Maybe, the world Anastasia had lived in could not be understood by applying the common sense of the Kingdom of Lugunica. But if that's how things were, then…

Anastasia: "Joshua, work yourself to the bone, and get a lil' bit hungry until the evening."

Joshua: "Eh…?"

Anastasia: "And then, when that's all over, I'll thank ya with my wonderful and special daisukiyaki. Mimi and Ricardo love it, and I'm sure you're gonna like it so much you'll fall off your chair."

With Anastasia's words, punctuated by her beautiful smile, Joshua's first reaction was to stay and ponder on those words for a few seconds, until he ran to Tivey to help him with organizing files, his determination visibly flaring up.

Julius: "I am very sorry, Anastasia-sama. My brother still has a narrow-minded view of the world, and that led him to confront you."

Visibly proud of herself, Anastasia pushed out her chest with her hands on her hips.

Anastasia: "Then, today'll be the day in which he'll start crackin' out of his stubborn shell. Your race or hierarchy doesn't matter when eatin' delicious food. Once he understands that, he'll learn to treat these children as equals."

With a bitter smile at Julius's noticeable emotion, Anastasia stroked the fox scarf wrapped around her neck as if out of habit. The fox scarf swung quietly, as if it had been tickled by her fingers.

END

Anastasia’s Rising in Life Memorial Day (Short Story Collection 1; Melon Books)

1

Kicking the pieces of wood laying in that back alley, Ricardo cursed his own bad luck in finding the child that had appeared in front of him. He had been sitting down, at the end of a dead-end street still wet from rain, about to eat the pastry he had just bought, when a problem appeared, ready to torment him.

Ricardo: “…!”

The one facing Ricardo in silence was a human child, dirty from head to toe. Her light purple-colored hair was untidy and unkempt, and worn clothes that looked like shabby tags. Her hostile gaze revealed a lack of trust in humanity, which meant she certainly was an orphan from the poorest area of the city.

It is not uncommon to find children without any parents. The rich are very rich, and the poor are very poor. It’s a universal rule, and the same is true in Kararagi, where commerce is flourishing.

Ricardo: “Whaddaya want, brat? I just finished working and I’m hungry… I don’t want trouble.”

???: “You little shit! Where the fuck did you go?”

Suddenly, a yell reached Ricardo’s ears, having taken the initiative to try and not be disturbed. In the end, he let out a sigh from his oversized mouth.

???: “Oh! I found you, kid! What’s up with you… Huh? Who the hell are you?”

Four hoodlums, with a brown-skinned man as their leader, rushed into that dead-end street. The man’s face twisted in anger when he first spotted the child, and raised his voice even louder once he saw Ricardo. But that rage quickly faded once Ricardo got up.

Ricardo: “Why are you so pale? What’s the matter now?”

Leader: “That size… What damn kind of demi-human are you?”

Ricardo: “Can’t you see I’m a dogman? A Kobold.”

Leader: “There’s no such thing as Kobolds with bodies like that! You’re bullshitting me!”

As the brown man shouted, Ricardo made a frown, blocking his ears. Ricardo had already lost track of how many times he had heard that spiel, that sort of indignation. In truth, even though he towered at nearly two meters tall, his whole body was covered in brown fur, and his distinctively doglike facial features left no doubts on whether he was a canine demi-human.

Even though he had to admit he was one of the absolute tallest units of among dog-people.

Ricardo: “Oh no, brot’er… I don’t wanna stand in your way. In truth, this brat jumped in while I was eatin’. I was the one that was bothered here.”

Saying this with sternness, it had been enough to make the ruffians look like they had been intimidated by him. Snorting inwards at his lack of guts, Ricardo then tried to leave that place to avoid any further headaches.

Ricardo: “…”

At the very last moment, he took a quick glance at the child as he left the alley. He had no way of knowing what she had done. But judging from how fired up the crooks were, she was probably not going to get away from them unscathed. Ricardo wasn’t one for feeling sorry for others.

However, looking at those pale blue irises so careless, greatly changed Ricardo’s fate.

Leader: “Anyway, come on! At least you’re coming with me!”

Ricardo: “Wait a second, brother.”

The leader of the group grabbed the child's shoulder, and tried to drag her petite body out of that place. The moment that child showed a sign of desperate resistance, however, Ricardo interrupted. In the narrow alleyway, the brown-skinned man was agitated by Ricardo's gigantic frame and backed up. Before he could open his mouth, Ricardo seized the child's head and hid her behind his back.

???: "…"

Leader: "H-Hey, what are you doing…?"

Ricardo: "You're holdin' a collar in your hand, aren'tcha? That's the kinda collar you put on a slave."

Pointing to the man's hand, he snapped back with a calm voice. That hand was gripping a collar connected to an iron chain, and the ruffians sharpened their gaze in response.

And they finally noticed. The towering demi-human also had the same kind of collar around his neck.

Leader: "You dog, on your neck, that's a slave's…"

Ricardo: "Don't get me wrong. No, my slave contract already ran out. The stone symbolizin' the contract ain't shining, see? I've done my time. I just keep wearin' this so I would not forget those days. But my personal history doesn't matter, what ya guys are doin' does."

While listening to Ricardo's story, the men had reached into their pockets. Sniffing the changing atmosphere, Ricardo pointed towards the child with his chin and continued,

Ricardo: "I wouldn't have stuck my big nose if the kid already had that collar 'round her neck, but I'm worried now that she has yet to use it… It ain't somethin' that can be taken off without a contract, and it ain't right to make that kinda deal in a dark alley like this. Besides…"

Leader: "…Besides what, goddamnit?"

Ricardo: “Ya people ain’t talkin’ with Kararagian dialect. Where’s the shit flowin’ from, then?”

Immediately after Ricardo laughed heartily, revealing his fangs, the brown man in front of him moved. Throwing the collar to the side, he drew a dagger with the other, free hand. In one continuous, flowing maneuver, the glowing tip of the dagger glints near Ricardo’s thick neck for a sharp blow. Just before that—

Ricardo: “Hoho, an amateur.”

The large machete that was propped up against the wall was swung, and the man’s neck was snapped well before he could attack. The man’s head, struck by that iron slab, turned the whole way around, and his body slammed into the wall and collapsed. Looking at that scene, the other three were paralyzed, shocked at their partner’s tragic end.

Ricardo: “Correction… All of ya are amateurs, and very stupid.”

The machete flashed a total of three times. Conversely, the number of men that stopped moving was exactly three times as well. That was all that was needed to draw the curtain on the quarrel that had just taken place in that alley, and, after stashing the corpses away to a corner, the monster of a Kobold turned around.

The child was still there, standing, without running away. She was looking at the remains of those men, unafraid but with the same kind of hostility that she had shown previously, just like the one she showed before she nearly was enslaved.

It was not weakness, it was pure, undiluted rebellious spirit—a look that awakened some interest in Ricardo.

Ricardo: “Hey, kid. Well, I’ll be damned.”

???: “…”

He scratched his head not knowing what to say, when he finally noticed the warmth held in his hand again. It was the pastry he had just bought and was planning on savoring before this had ever happened.

Ricardo: “Do ya want some of this pastry? It’s still warm.”

???: “…I do.”

Then, the child quickly took the pastry from Ricardo’s hand, at the same time her stomach growled, which got a chuckle out of the demi-human. Then, the kid started with an “And”, squinting,

???: “I’m no brat, I’m a girl. Don’tcha you call me that again, ochan.”

And she threw a grudgeful look at Ricardo, the kind not even those slave merchants had been dealt.

2

Ricardo: “However, man, things have gotten dangerous as of late. I didn’t think they wouldva swooped as low as to enslave little children as well. The name and philosophy of the Kararagi City State are cryin’.”

As he left that alley before more trouble emerged, Ricardo let out his internal thoughts with a grumble. By his side, stood the little girl eating that confection, which was most certainly going to be devoured entirely. He couldn’t blame her at all.

Ricardo: “It’s not shameful to be dirty. Ya got plenty of spirit… Bein’ captured by that gang of nitwits is quite the blunder, though. How did ya get caught, lil’ girl?”

Girl: “… T’was nothing, keep your nose outta it, ochan.”

The girl who had just finished eating curses, now walking on a busy street. Seeing as the child had gotten annoyed at that question, the Kobold laughed once again, making her frown even more.

Girl: “And why did ya help me, ochan? Ya know I can’t pay it back.”

Ricardo: “Even I don’t know… It wasn’t exactly by chance…”

He tried to dodge that question as he scratched his head roughly.

The girl didn't seem to like that answer, but Ricardo was saying the truth, and couldn't really explain his reasoning, unfortunately for her. Maybe, it had been her light blue eyes.

Girl: "—Ah."

And as the Kobold reflected on his motivations, the child let out a short gasp. In the direction she was looking to, two silhouettes were dashing towards her. Two fox demi-humans, probably brothers, breathing heavily, running up to her and,

Fox Bro: "Th-Thankfully, you're safe… You were taken in our stead, what sort of thing may have happened…"

Girl: "Shut up. I don't know what you're talkin' about, you must be confusin' me with someone else."

Fox Bro: "Of course not! How would I be mistaken 'bout my benefactor?"

The fox demi-human persisted, while the girl continued indifferent, acting unapproachable.

Girl: "I have no idea what you're talkin' about, but don't ever enter alleyways like that one out of curiosity. There are others like them hangin' around. They seem to think capturin' demi-humans… ain't a problem."

Fox Bro: "That…"

Girl: "I don't wanna get involved with that anymo'. Get out of here, go home, and cry wit' ya momma. I won't say it again."

With a hurtful look at the cold girl's words, the beastmen brothers went away resigned. After they had gone away far enough, the girl then turned to Ricardo, who had been watching them with his arms folded,only then did the child notice that Ricardo was looking at her with his arms crossed.

Girl: "…What's with that face."

Ricardo: "Nothin'. Ochan just found out somethin' that has nothin' to do with him.”

Girl: “…You’re annoying.”

Ricardo patted the girl’s head, who did not like it one bit and swatted his large hands away. That little event left the Kobold in a very good mood. After confirming those brothers were gone, he turned to her.

Ricardo: “Is that ok? You’re aware ya nearly became a slave for helpin’ them?”

Girl: “Yeah. It was somethin’ I did ‘cause I wanted to. Besides, if their family finds out they were involved with an orphan in a very poor town, they’ll be in trouble. This is best for them and for me.”

Ricardo: “You’re real mature for your age, aren’tcha? Sorry, but I don’t hate it, lil’ girl.”

Girl: “…I don’t like ya much, tho’.”

The girl reacted to that with a murmur and a pout. Ricardo reacted with a hearty laugh, tilting his head, and the girl then pointed at his neck.

Girl: “That collar is proof ya were once a slave. Why are ya still wearin’ it even after your contract is up?”

Ricardo: “Didn’t ya hear? It’s so I can never forget. I can’t forget my past as a slave. I am who I am today ‘cause I was once a slave.”

Girl: “…That’s ridiculous. It’s the same as shacklin’ yourself.”

After hearing Ricardo’s quiet justification, the glint that the girl had shown in that alleyway returned to her eyes. Their light glared him straight-on, the Kobold nearly forgot to breathe.

Girl: “Ya sound like those people from the poorest part of town… You’ve been slaves for so long, you’ve got a loser’s mentality stuck in you, it made ya a coward. They’re just excuses for why ya didn’t make it, and so you can say you’re a lil’ better now.

Ricardo: “Lil’ girl…”

Girl: “That way of thinkin’ is what’s wrong. You’re better now? Absolutely not, now’s the worst moment of all, because ya are standin’ still, not doin’ a thing. I don’t wanna be like that.”

Saying that with a shaky voice, the girl was shedding tears nonstop. Despite having nearly been captured by slave merchants, despite having seen a brutal murder in front of her, she had not cried, yet now she cried for an uncertain future. It was as if she could not forgive herself for being nothing but being a hollow, orphan child, and continued to cry as she leered to the collar worn by Ricardo.

Ricardo: “—Yeah. I hate the worst too.”

Saying those words, he patted the little girl’s head as she wept and looked at the sky, to steel himself to do what he felt was the right thing to do.

3

Ricardo: “Yes, now, ya look presentable.”

Girl: “…”

After having her hair done, which she wanted to let grow, washing her mud-dirtied body, and changing her ragged clothes, into new, beautiful ones, she actually seemed like a decent girl.

However, at Ricardo’s remark, she looked at her appearance, and with restless gestures,

Girl: “Wh-What is this…? Why do I gotta dress like this?”

Ricardo: “I’ve already arranged everythin’. Because you’re gonna start workin’ hard at a bar. Ya wouldn’t be able to work at all, all dirty like that.”

Girl: “W-Work…? This suddenly?”

Ricardo: “Don’tcha wanna change from bein’ the worst possible? Then, you can’t just say it, you have to work like ya meant it.

Besides, what’s ya name? I need it so I can give it to the owner.”

The girl was confused with this barrage of new information and stuttered before replying to the question posed by Ricardo. In the end, after a good while, she looked away while pouting, and,

???: “I have no name. But I grew up in a hole in the ground, so people call me Anastasia.”

Ricardo: “…Gahahaha! That’s great! That’s a great name! Anastasia, from the hole in the ground, huh?! I’m sure ya gonna be a big girl with’ that name!”

Then, pushing the back of the blushing girl, the two left the inn and entered the busy street. Amid the crowd, Anastasia closed her eyes as if looking towards something extremely bright.

Ricardo showed his fangs to that Anastasia, and continued,

Ricardo: “Look ‘ere, lil’ girl. This is the first and last time I’m helpin’ ya. I don’t know what to do next. If ya truly are determined, then this will go alright.”

Anastasia: “…Why are ya doin’ so much for me, ochan?”

The look the girl exhibited was one of heavy doubt and mistrust. For Ricardo, it was actually a relief that was her reaction, instead of a word of thanks.

Ricardo: “Nothin’ but whimsy. But I think it’s gonna pay off, if ya ask me.”

He replied as he stroked the girl’s head, punctuating his statement with a loud laugh. Once washed, her hair was thin, and soft, as if representing her gentle heart. Even the fact it was slightly wavy reflected her stubborn nature.

Ricardo: “I hope ya make it big soon. When ya do, I will be proud if ya remember me.”

Anastasia: “…Ochan.”

Ricardo: “Hmm?”

Called by a whispering voice, Ricardo waited for the continuation that never came. But the girl started running to the other side of the street, where she turned on her heels, and yelled back.

Anastasia: “Today I’m gonna take advantage of your kindness! But don’t ya forget. When I make it big, the first thing Imma do is buy ya. I’ll take off that slave collar with my own hands!”

Ricardo’s finger touched the collar unwillingly, unconsciously. Feeling its cold, hard sensation on his finger, the images of having been once bound by it flashed by. Regardless, he swallowed the memories of the days he thought it was an abomination and smiled.

Ricardo: “I am Ricardo. I’ll never forget what you’re sayin’, Ana-bo.”

A girl whose cheeks were swollen in a pout, and the demi-human who laughed loudly in amusement.

That was how the woman who would one day be in charge in the biggest merchant company in the country, and her first collaborator, once met.

END

Anastasia’s Kararagi Merchant Path (Volume 6; Melon Books)

1

Kararagi City States was the name of the country that emerged from the union of several cities. Although it had enough power to face the other three great nations—Lugunica, Vollachia and Gusteko –, it is said that its foundation was full of difficulties and obstacles.

???: “And the one who brought all these cities together to establish Kararagi was the famous ‘Hoshin of the Wilderness’, that became the first president of this country”—said a man with a loud voice.

???: “This guy Hoshin is the boss in Kararagi, then?”—asked a little girl’s voice.

???: “He was, but that was hundreds of years ago. Since then, it’s always the president that rules around here.”

???: “President… And this person changes?”

???: “It changes whenever the president dies, or every five years when a new one is elected by vote. The rulers of the cities come together and elect the next president. Although, nowadays, this has become just a formality.”

???: “What do you mean? Seems like a good way of choosing a leader.”

???: “Because if someone wants to become the president, all it needs to do is buy the rulers, be it with money, women or booze… Hoshin’s philosophy died a long time ago.”

???: “In the end everything comes down to money, right? It must be tough, uncle.”

The sigh that the girl let out made even the man sigh as well. The problem was that his blow was so strong that it messed up her hairstyle.

???: “Hey, look what you did! I got all dressed up today and you are ruining it!”

???: “Look at you, worrying about your looks… I miss the old Lil’ Ana that lived all dirty in the alleys, this way you will make me cry.”

Anastasia: “That’s because I get tips from the old geezers at the bar when I look pretty. If you give me too, I can reward you with my angelic smile”

She made her turquoise eyes shine, giving a mischievous smile showing her tongue. That gesture, showing that she was perfectly aware what her greatest weapons were, provoked a laugh from the man.

???: “Gah, ha, ha! You picked the wrong client if you are trying to sell your smile. I already bathed you, a silly smile won’t be enough to take my money. Come back when you grow some boobs and ass.”

Anastasia: “Saying things like that and you are not even drunk… Ah, I have to get back to work. Tell me some more stories later.”

With a wave, Anastasia got back to work and Ricardo let out a sigh. He stretched a hand to grab his beer on the counter and noticed the empty mug.

???: “Here, another one”

A woman, the owner of the bar, placed a new one on the counter.

Owner: “Ana is a good worker. I have to say, I was worried when you brought her here, but she is helping a lot. We even have clients that come only to get a glimpse of that smile.

Ricardo: “So it’s true that there are Lil’ Ana fans? I don’t get what they see in a midget like her.”

Owner: “She has something that captivates people around her, and you should know that, you were one of her victims, am I right?”

Receiving winks from the owner, the man just took the cold mug to his mouth.

He was a demi-human dog with brown fur and a big muscular build, his living armor. A relatively famous mercenary that always visited the tavern when he had a chance.

Owner: “Looks like Ana is enjoying the work here, and she helps me a lot. I hope she stays for long.”

Ricardo: “I don’t think so, no.”

Ricardo murmured to himself, something he hardly ever did.

It is undeniable that Anastasia was gifted with the talent to be the poster girl for the bar. But…

Ricardo: “Lil’ Ana, living as a waitress for a nasty bar doesn’t sound bad… It really doesn’t…”—the man kept murmuring

Compared to the days when she lived with eyes of sheer hostility, the change was shocking. But Ricardo knew the real desires of the girl, and the endless, pure ambition.

Ricardo: “And above all else, as a waitress, you won’t be able to fulfill that promise you made to me.”

He unconsciously touched the collar around his neck and felt the cold hard iron on his fingertips. That collar was from the time when he was a slave, and he kept using it after achieving his freedom, as proof of his past.

At the same time, he had the strange certainty that the girl would be the one to rip that out.

Owner: “…Hey, sorry to interrupt your daydream but, did you just call my bar nasty?”

Ricardo: “Oh, you shouldn’t listen to other people’s thoughts!”

Owner: “You are the one that doesn’t know how to talk low with this huge snout!”

Seeing the owner hit Ricardo with the tray, the whole tavern burst out laughing. Amid the spectacle, even Anastasia was laughing, that brought a small satisfaction to the dog-man.

2

Took about a month for his next visit to the tavern. Despite how it looked, Ricardo lived quite busy days and couldn't give too much attention to a little girl he randomly found on the streets. After all, paying the bills was the only way to keep his freedom.

But he couldn't deny his eagerness to see the bold little girl after a month, and, for this reason, he didn't hide his disappointment when the owner told him the news.

Ricardo: "What? Lil' Ana was hired by a trading company?"

Owner: "Yea… It happened all of a sudden, I couldn't believe it myself."

Ricardo: "What do you mean 'all of a sudden'?! She wasn't taken by force, was she?!"

Owner: "Slow down! That's not what I meant. She talked to them and agreed, no one forced her to do anything. She even gave me some money as compensation… Hey, don't look at me like that, I didn't let her go for the money."

Ricardo: "I didn't say anything. Besides, I wouldn't leave her with someone I didn't trust."

Ricardo couldn't believe he got that shaken with Anastasia's absence. Nevertheless, he kept pressing the owner with more questions, aware that she was a bit embarrassed.

Ricardo: "Anyway, tell me how everything went down. Even if it was sudden, something happened, right?"

Owner: "I'm telling you, it really happened fast… All I can remember is the guy saying he was 'buying Ana's gift'…"

Ricardo: "Gift…? Don't you tell me it's about her charm with customers and they are forcing her onto things a little girl should never do! Are you sure it was someone from a trading company? Not a slave merchant, right?!"

Owner: "Stop coming at me panting like that! I even got his name and all, go check for yourself if you are so worried. It's the Chuden Trading Company, they are based in the far east of the city."

Hearing that, Ricardo emptied the mug in a single swig and stood up aiming straight for the door.

Owner: "Hey, do you think beers are free?"—the owner shouted.

Ricardo: "Put it on my tab, I'll pay next time!"

Owner: "You are always like that! By the way…"

The woman was a little afraid to talk about, but she did it anyway.

Owner: "I think the guy who came to talk to Ana said something about tabs as well…"

Ricardo: "What? Tabs? Doesn't make any sense… Whatever, I'll check them out!"

With his objective set, Ricardo went into the streets like a bullet, going straight towards the Chuden Trading Company, not knowing the reason he was in such a hurry.

3

Chuden Trading Company belonged to the famous Ryushika Trading Company conglomerate. Based in a strategic city that connected all commercial hubs throughout Kararagi, Ryushika had a fast expansion in the hotel industry, and Chuden followed right behind it.

As far as public knowledge went, Ricardo was not aware of any shadowy stories involving Ryushika, and, to his relief, the reencounter with Anastasia was way easier than he anticipated.

Anastasia: "Uncle, hi. I was worried when you vanished from the bar. Did the owner tell you about my new job?”

When Anastasia saw Ricardo arguing with a guy in the reception, she came to greet him like it was nothing out of the ordinary. Relieved seeing the girl doing fine, Ricardo threw the man he was holding by the collars, astonishing everyone in the lobby that witnessed the scene.

Anastasia: “Uncle, did you get hired to fight with someone here? If that is the case, stop it before I get fired.”

Ricardo: “I’m not liking this ‘know-it-all’ face of yours, kid.”

As Anastasia clapped her hands with a big smile trying to deescalate the situation, Ricardo soothed down. With the situation seemingly under control, the man hurled by Ricardo got up, looked at the girl and asked:

???: “Anastasia, this man is…?”

Anastasia: “Oh, Mr. Chuden, he is an uncle that I know. He was probably missing me because we didn’t see each other before I left the bar.”

Ricardo: “It’s nothing like that at all, you mi…! Wait, did you just call him Chuden?”

Chuden: “Yes, I’m Chuden, Company representative, pleased to meet you.”

Introducing himself with the same name as the Trading Company, the man was still young and a little overweight. His harmless facial expression was enough to tell Ricardo that he was not someone cut for violence.

Ricardo: “You are the one who stole Lil’ Ana from the tavern then? I have nothing to say about that, no… But I’m the one who introduced her to the Owner, you know? I’m just wondering what made you hire her.

Chuden: “Hmm, I understand, you are worried about Anastasia.”

Ricardo: “No! That’s not it! Lil’ Ana, you are getting this all wrong, don’t fool yourself.”

Anastasia: “I didn’t say anything…”

Startled by the comment from Chuden, Ricardo lost himself trying to justify his actions, which left Anastasia somewhat sad because, after all that happened, she was thinking that the dog-man was worried about her.

Seeing Ricardo’s reaction, Chuden invited them to a meeting room so they could talk more easily, and when everyone sat down, he said:

Chuden: “Basically, the reason I hired her was love at first sight.”

Ricardo: “Wait, what?! Isn’t that what Hoshin called a ‘lolicon’?!”

Chuden: “Hold on, it was just a way of saying. I fell in love with her gift. I’m sure Anastasia is a genius, and I’m not talking about Divine Protections. A real genius.”

It seemed a little odd how much he overestimated a child like Anastasia and, to Ricardo, everything sounded more like a fantasy, making him start to wonder whether leaving the little girl working there was a bad idea.

Chuden: “For example… Do you remember the amount of your last tab at the tavern?”

Ricardo: “I don’t, no. Not the exact amount.”

Chuden: “That’s what I thought. But I heard about something that happened at the end of last month when the regulars went to pay their tabs. Please, try and guess what Anastasia did.”

Ricardo didn’t answer, knowing that Chuden was going to say it regardless.

Chuden: “She calculated the amounts for all twenty customers, without checking anything. Nobody seemed to be impressed by that, but I didn’t let it go unnoticed.”

Ricardo: “Maybe she looked at the Owner notes earlier that day.”

Chuden: “Impossible, she didn’t know how to read at the time. And that’s not all, she even mastered writing in just two weeks here.”

As Chuden shook his head having a hard time believing all he himself was saying, Ricardo couldn’t shut his mouth close. Anastasia seemed to be the only one having a hard time keeping up with the grown-ups conversation.

Chuden: “Now you probably understand the reason I hired her. I’m sure that Anastasia will become a monster in the future… One working for the Chuden Trading Company.”

Ricardo: “You are going to use her for your own success, is that it?”

Chuden: “I believe that both of us will profit from this, me and Anastasia. She perfectly understood all of this and accepted coming work with me, so, you can’t meddle.”

Apparently, Ricardo would never get a good image of Chuden. At the same time, he agreed that Anastasia had a promising future, and that’s why he suggested:

Ricardo: “Changing the subject a bit, this Company is growing a lot lately, don’t you think you need a little more security?”

Chuden: “How so?”

Ricardo: “I’m sure you understand that several matters, in the end, come down to violence. And no matter how much money you have, it will not shield you forever. Don’t you think it’s better to be prepared?”

Chuden: “Are you offering to be our bodyguard? I wonder what you see in this girl.”

Having understood the real reason behind that offer, the merchant grinned, and the answer came in kind.

Ricardo: “What I see… My future. The day she takes this collar off me and I become truly free… I think I can see how far I can go.”

Chuden: “Very well, we can sort the details later.”

And just like that, the two men shook hands, surprising the little girl that didn’t understand any of that.

Anastasia: “Hey, what did you two agree on?”

Ricardo: “That I’ll start working here too. There are a lot of thugs out there nowadays, you know? My presence alone will scare the weak ones.”

Anastasia: “Did you really want to be close to me that much? Wow, I’m really a bad woman.”

Once she understood what it all meant, Anastasia burst out laughing, and seeing this, Ricardo caressed her head, forgetting for a moment how strong he was.

Ricardo: “Giving dreams to someone like me… I guess you are a bad woman after all.”

Saying that, the big man laughed looking at the girl, pouting with her messy hair.

END

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Anastasia’s Most Important Travelogue (Ex 1; Melon Books)

1

It was a quite pleasant and sunny day.

???: “It’s so sad havin’ to go back and forth from the office on a day like this! I’ll take a stroll, come with me!”

And, just like that, the protest could be heard, along with the sound of a sheaf of papers hitting the desk. Julius, who was focused on reading in a corner of the room, couldn’t hold his giggles.

???: “Oy, Julius? Did ya hear what I said?

Julius: “Yes, of course. I’m sorry, I was lost in your beauty.”

???: “Look at you, talkin’ like that without a speck of guilt. I’m not like these girls from Lugunica that fall for your pick up lines.

Anastasia, the girl who proposed the stroll, was already grumpy and started pouting with the knight’s remark. She had her typical Kararagi accent, but don’t let the cute appearance and innocent mannerism deceive you. The girl called Anastasia Hoshin was, from Julius Juukulius’ perspective, one of the most influential figures in the kingdom today.

Julius: “Well, in any case, I’ll gladly accept the invitation. Will Mimi and Hetaro come as well?”

Anastasia: “Nah, no bodyguards today. I wanna walk alone with you, Julius.”

???: “Hey, I heard that! This is treason! Abultery!”—Mimi, listening to the conversation, didn’t like to be left behind.

Anastasia: “It’s ‘adultery’, Mimi. I’ll get dressed, can you wait for a bit?”

Julius: “Of course, milady. Take as long as you need.”

With that, Anastasia waved her hand and left the room. Ladies usually take a considerable amount of time to get dressed and, even though the president of the Hoshin Trading Company values efficiency above all, she didn’t neglect the power of good looks. Which means, this is going to take a while…

Julius: “Mimi, let’s wait for lady Anastasia in the living room, shall we? Can you go ahead and ask them to make us some tea?”

Mimi: “Yes, sir! Leave it to Mimi!”

Watching the little girl leaving the room all excited, Julius started to get himself ready to accompany Anastasia. If ladies get all dressed up to go out, it’s the duty of men to prepare themselves to live up to them, to be worthy of their company.2

When Julius got to the living room after getting changed, Mimi was seated in front of the table where sweets and teas were served, anxiously swinging her legs. When she realized that the knight had arrived, the little girl’s face broke into a wide smile, but soon frowned holding her nose.

Mimi: “Ung? Julius? Why do you smell like that?”

Julius: “I sprayed some perfume. Does it bother you?”

Mimi: “No! I just got a little startled! I’m not very good at diffefe-… differen-… direffentiate people by their faces!”

Julius then sat down in front of Mimi, who was enjoying the sweets on the table and, intrigued by her comment, asked:

Julius: “Does it mean that you guys identify us by our scent?”

Mimi: “If you are alone and you are someone I know, I can tell by looking. But when there are a lot of people it gets really hard. Then it has to be by the smell!”

Julius: “Hmm, I see… I’m surprised that you, cat demi-humans, rely so much on smell. I imagined that this would be the case for

Captain Ricardo since he is a kobold."

Although, when it comes to that man, it wouldn't be surprising if he is only half kobold, since they are known to have short stature and Ricardo is over two meters tall.

Remembering the big man who is always speaking loudly with his characteristic Kararagi accent, another question came to Julius.

Julius: "You and your brothers are also from Kararagi, correct? Why don't you three have the typical accent from there?"

Mimi: "Ah, about that. Good question, good question!"—Mimi nodded and explained. —"That's thanks to the Great Elder! Mimi, Hetaro and Tivey learned to speak and fight from the Great Elder!"

Julius: "Great Elder…?"

Mimi: "He was an old man who showed us the way of life! He died in a cool way!"

Because of the way the kitten spoke, it didn't sound as serious as it should have, since it wasn't hard to imagine that this person was like a foster father for the triplets. And, apparently, an elder strong enough to train them to the point of being vice-captains of a troop like the Iron Fang.

And just when the conversation had come to an end, Anastasia appeared in the room.

Anastasia: "Sorry to make you wait. I'm ready."

She had changed into a garment called kinomo, a traditional costume from Kararagi. It was a long dress made from white fabric with aniseed floral patterns. Certainly a type of clothing that you hardly saw in Lugunica, but Anastasia looked great in it.

Julius: "I don't think I'll ever get tired of saying how good you look in your dresses, milady. It is as if they were made specifically for you."

Anastasia: "Jeez, he doesn't know when to give up… Well, not that it bothers me"—she smiled greedily, a little embarrassed. —"Mimi, I'm going out with Julius, but don't mess around. I don't wanna find anything dirty or broken when I get back."

Mimi: "Hihi! Easy! This is Mimi's specialty!"

The scene of a little girl hitting the table didn't inspire a lot of confidence but, at that point, all that remained was to pray and leave the rest to the servants. Julius offered his arm to Anastasia, who gently accepted with her hand.

Julius: "Milady… Are you sure about wearing the scarf? I believe you will feel hot considering the weather today."

As pointed out by the knight, despite the kinomo, she was still wearing her fox scarf, which, apparently, seemed to be her favorite. Although it was beautiful scarf, and clearly one of the highest quality, it really didn't make sense to wear it on hot days.

Anastasia: "Ah, well, you're right, but… I don't mind it."

Julius: "… I understand. And where are we going today?"

Sensing that it was a delicate matter, Julius didn't insist and changed the focus of the conversation. The scarf could be many things, from a simple amulet to a powerful metia. Perhaps, when she feels a greater sense of trust between the two, Anastasia would reveal the truth.

Anastasia: "An impeccable knight indeed…"—whispered the girl, only to herself.

2

Anastasia: "Today I have no plan or goal! All I want is to clear my head a bit! This is a mission of utmost importance, you know?"

With that premise, the stroll between Anastasia and Julius began. Of course, from the beginning, the impeccable knight wasn't worried about the "mission", considering that they were in the capital, the largest city in the kingdom. Going to the commercial district was enough for Anastasia to forget her troubles amid all those shops and stalls.

Stall Owner: “What is it, little lady? Do you have a problem with my appas?”

Anastasia: “No, my problem is with you, the seller! Have you never stopped to think that your scary face and hoarse voice scare customers away? The appas are crying!”

Stall Owner: “Grr…! You brat…!”

Even now, she was arguing with a fruit vendor with a huge scar on his face. Luckily, the guy seemed to be a sensible man and Julius thought it was not necessary for him to intervene.

Julius: “Well… She doesn’t seem too concerned about not attracting attention”—the knight laughed at the scene his companion was making.

Although she was in a more than special position, being a candidate for the throne, there were not many people who knew this yet, so it was a matter that should be handled with great care.

Anastasia: “Phew… In the end he was a surprisingly reasonable man”—said Anastasia when she got back from the fruit stall.

Julius: “If he has the flexibility to accept criticism, he might have a good chance of prospering.”

Anastasia: “Well, that’s something I can’t say… We cannot forget about talent, or the lack of…”

What was hinted by the girl was clear, the fruit vendor had zero aptitude for being a salesman.

Julius: “If we are only talking about appearance, Captain Marcos of the Royal Guard is intimidating as well.”

Anastasia: “True, that fruit vendor would be able to compete with your captain… Humph, look at the subject we ended up in, Julius.”

The girl smiled at Julius’ joke, revealing all her graciousness that was being enhanced with the kinomo. She had an appearance that naturally caught the eyes of men and, as much as she loved saying that Mimi was adorable, she was not left behind. Or, perhaps, she was fully aware of it and used her poison in her favor.

Anastasia: “What? Is there something on my face?”

At the question, Julius shook his head sideways. Regardless of Anastasia’s true nature, the Impeccable Knight had already made his decision. The only thing was, he still wasn’t sure that the mysterious girl from Kararagi would choose him back.

Anastasia: “And here you go again, making this strained thoughtful face. Thinking too much will only end up attracting bugs, you know?”

With that comment, Julius reflexively took a hand to his face, only to realize that he had been tricked by Anastasia, who opened an innocent smile right away.

Anastasia: “I’m not telling you not to think, but there is no point in thinking about something if you can’t come up with an answer. Since I took you out for a walk, how about relaxing a little?”

Julius: “Relax…? Wait, by any chance, was today’s walk because of me…?”—Julius’ eyes widened in astonishment.

Anastasia: “I knew you hadn’t noticed. I could see that you haven’t advanced a single page of your book. Here, eat this appa.”

Speechless, he humbly accepted the fruit that was offered. Julius felt as if he had been scolded, that he wasn’t the only one who paid attention to others and even felt a little ashamed at having lost sight of himself.

Anastasia: “You know, I want to see you being yourself every now and then, without posing as something else. This was the secret goal of today’s stroll.”

Saying that, she rubbed the appa on her clothes and bit, completely ignoring it’s peel. It was not a very lady-like way of eating, but, being influenced by her, Julius did the same and felt the juice filling his mouth.

Julius: “Milady…”

Anastasia: “Hum?”

Julius: “This appa is still green, isn’t it?”

Anastasias: “Oh, true! Jeez, that guy! Even his appas are bad!”

Furious, the girl immediately turned and went straight towards the fruit vendor with the scar on his face. The not-so-Impeccable Knight, watching her back and feeling the slightly sour taste in his mouth, for some reason, couldn’t resist the sudden urge to laugh.

At least, those were his true laughs, without posing, fulfilling Anastasia’s secret goal while she wasn’t looking.

END

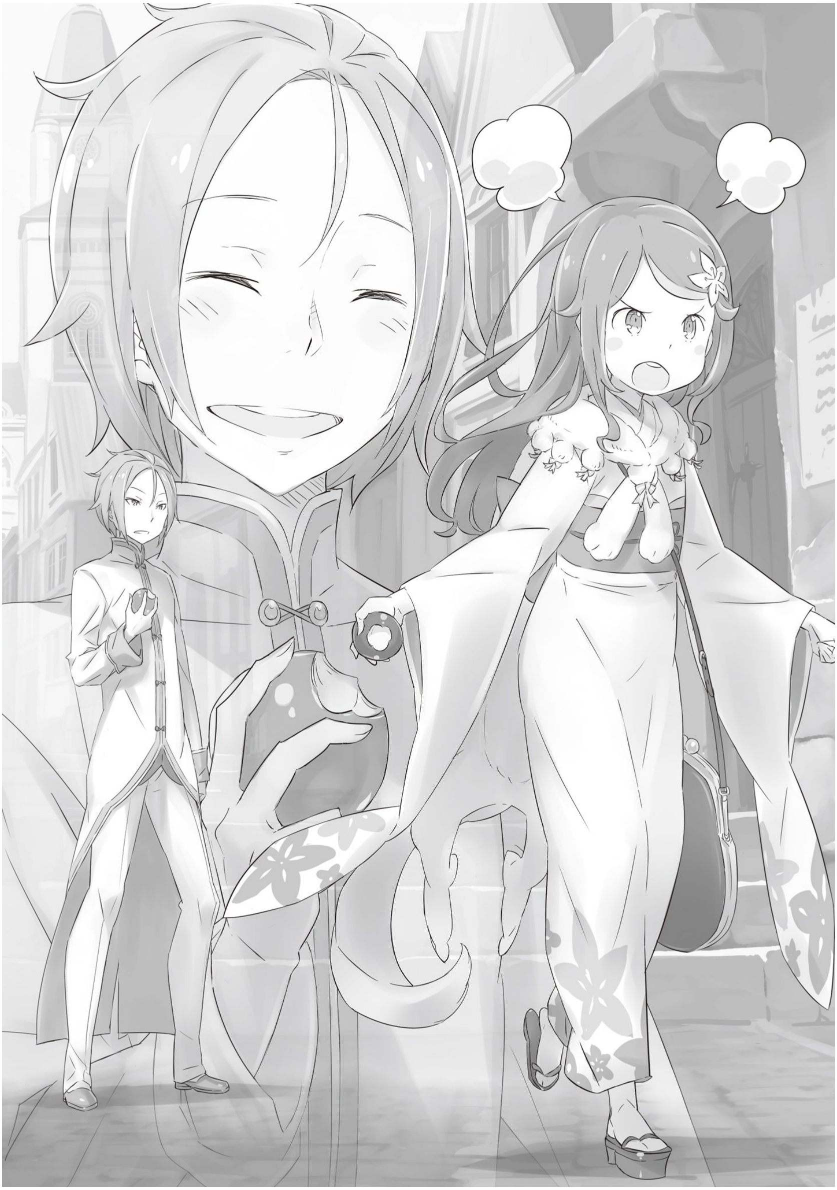

The Awkward Duo
(Manga Arc 1, Volume 1)

1

Natsuki Subaru had practically no experience with walking around the neighborhood alongside someone of the opposite sex.

The last woman he'd walked around holding hands with had been his mother; he would need to go back to when he was a primary school student to find a time where he'd had rapport with the opposite sex, outside of relatives. Considering that he had to go all the way back to when there was no distinction between male and female to find any memories of that, that spoke volumes about his relationships.

Subaru: "E-Even so, this business of trying to find that girl among this crowd is like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

Subaru kept making talk with the girl walking right next to him, unable to stand the awkward silence. He wouldn't have known how to pass the time otherwise.

The Girl: "I guess you're right… But it's not like we can just give up. If we have to find a needle, then a needle we must find. Though I really only have myself to blame for letting my guard down."

The girl who'd given him that reply was so beautiful that he felt like his eyes were about to explode.

She had snowy-white skin and long silver hair that shimmered like moonlight. Her white garb greatly accentuated her innocence, and her amethyst eyes were full of determination as they gazed off ahead.

Her picturesque beauty stood out even from Subaru's shortish life. And to make matters worse, he could hardly get to grips with himself in the fact that she matched his tastes to a tee.

Regardless though, that wasn't the only reason why Subaru was walking with her.

Subaru: "Either way, I owe you for helping me out, so I'm gonna give it my all for you, my young lady."

The Girl: "I already told you that you don't need to do any of this… You sure are an odd boy."

Though the girl stubbornly refused to admit it, the fact was: she'd saved his life. He really didn't need any more reason than that to help her.

Subaru: "Well, even so…"

Walking up ahead of the girl, he strutted down the narrow alley at rapid pace. Then, he stopped in his tracks, turned around and struck his usual pose as she tilted her head in doubt.

Subaru: "By the way, it feels like we're going somewhere with less people around, are you sure it's this way?"

The Girl: "Wasn't it you who knew the way?"

It felt like great troubles awaited them ahead, yet this strange duo's trek was already going awry.

2

The girl had practically no experience with walking around the neighborhood alongside someone of the opposite sex. Or rather, she could hardly remember spending time with someone like this.

???: "…Are you a little nervous perhaps?"

A voice suddenly came whispering in her ear, causing a slight smile to creep onto her face.

The Girl: "Just a little. But now's not the time to worry about such things."

She purposely stiffened her lips as she replied back to the voice in something like a whisper. Though it wasn't like they were actually speaking, they were using something like "thought-waves" to communicate; a kind of magic that utilized the path between a contracted spirit and its contractor to share their thoughts.

The young man next to them heard nothing of their current conversation as he went around in circles in search for someone to call out to.

He was a strange young man. She hadn't taken notice of this when she'd first come across him cornered by those thugs, but he was dressed weirdly. That, and he had unusual black hair and dark eyes; plus, once in a while, he'd say stuff in a strange language that she'd never heard before. He was probably a foreigner, but even so, there was a lot of odd stuff about him.

He was strangely prudent for his confidence, and seemed to know a lot despite lacking in common sense. Even the girl could tell that something wasn't quite right—in spite of believing she couldn't speak for others.

???: "But it's definitely thanks to Subaru that we were able to get closer to our objective. You have to give him credit for that. Don't you think he'd be delighted if you gave him some praise?"

The Girl: "Quit with the silly talk. I doubt he'd be delighted even if I said something to him."

The tone of his voice sounded pleasant, in contrast to her's which showed signs of discouragement, probably because she understood where she stood. Nevertheless…

???: "But that boy gave off the impression that he didn't care about stuff like your identity, didn't he? I don't know what you think about that though, Satella-san."

There was a small hint of blame there in his words, which the girl accepted, along with the pang of conscience that came with it.

Her cheeks still flushed whenever she recalled how the black-haired boy, who'd called himself Natsuki Subaru, had effortlessly accepted her confessing to being a half-elf.

There'd probably never been a moment in the girl's life where shame had filled her heart as much as it did now. Subaru's reaction back then had been completely unexpected for her. It had made her aware of just how shallow and conceitful she was, bringing her almost to the verge of tears.

And what really couldn't serve as her saving grace was her own heart for being so happy about it.

Satella: "Maybe I'm just a reaaaally bad person…"

Subaru: "Hm? Did you say something?"

Satella: "…No, nothing. Let's just hurry and search the slums."

Flustered, the girl tried to pass off for the fact that she'd let that slip out loud, rather than as a thought-wave. She pushed the young man forward as he tilted his head in confusion.

They'd helped a lost child out, and thanks to that, they'd been able to get a strong lead from its mother, who'd told them about the slums, where stolen goods end up.

How could she even reward this young man after he'd led her this far?

Having completely forgotten that she'd saved his life when they'd first met, the girl continued to fret, not realizing that they were even with each other.

3

Seeing that the girl named Satella was getting more and more discouraged, Subaru began to question in dismay whether he'd screwed up by acting as her escort.

Her objective—which was searching for the insignia—seemed to be going well so far.

They still hadn't found the item in question, but he did feel like they were making good progress in tracking it down.

There was no question that looking for the lost child had given them valuable information and blown a wind in their sails.

Even so, ever since they'd started searching the slums, Satella had been acting strangely, sighing and such every time she glanced his way.

Subaru: "I mean, it sure is damaging when someone looks at your face and sighs at it. And if that isn't painful enough already, it becomes four times as effective when a beautiful girl does it."

Anyone snubbed by such a beautiful girl would have been hit just as hard; such was the fiercesomeness of this special attack.

The fact that this girl wasn't satisfied didn't match with all the life experience he'd accumulated so far; now if that isn't a bitter pill to swallow, he mused.

Subaru: "Though, well, I don't really have any life experience to match with this sort of thing."

That's why he was making great efforts, using his liveliness, to try and cover up for his lack of experience. Yet so far, all of the topics, quips and American jokes he'd brought up had fallen flat. Then, all that he had left was to reward her with actual results; thus he decided he would go back to his original plan, and show her the fruits of his hard work.

Subaru didn't realize that acting like that was only making the girl more and more discouraged.

Subaru: "I have to let her see my cool side by showing her some results. I need to take advantage of this windfall."

People's general attitudes towards Subaru asking them questions had improved a lot since they'd come to the slums. Strange as it was, most people in the main streets hadn't even bothered to give them a moment of their time; whereas, in the back streets, they'd gotten far more welcoming responses.

Even now, Subaru was still holding some kind of dried fruit an old woman had given him while saying: “Here, eat this and live strong.” He didn’t feel courageous enough to put it in his mouth, but all the same, her consideration was well-received.

Subaru: “Guess I’ll just feed it to Puck or something. Come here kitty-kitty, *chchchchchch*”

Satella: “Please don’t give him anything strange, it’d be a real pain if he were to get a taste for it.”

Puck: “If you think that I’m going to fall for these cheap tricks that only work when feeding strays, then you’re sorely mistaken.”

The grey kitten pushed its way out from Satella’s silver hair and emerged onto her shoulder. Apparently he was supposed to be a great being known as a “Spirit”, but Subaru saw him as no more than a cat, albeit a rather peculiar one.

Satella’s response had also felt more like something you’d say to a pet than a Spirit.

Subaru: “The way you’re saying it, you sound to me like a character flag where you’ve been completely hooked in…”

Puck: “Hmmph. You can only say these things to me now. Just you wait until I unleash my true strength, you shall regret all of your careless remarks… Meowmeowmeow!”

Yet half-way through his grand speech, he flicked the tip of the Spirit’s—Puck’s—nose with a few blades of grass he’d twisted together. As soon as he did, the Spirit began to swipe his paws at it, acting very much like a cat. Indeed he was all bark and no bite.

Subaru: “You sure are damn good at raising and triggering flags…”

Puck: “It pains me to admit it… But I really can’t resist playing with it…!”

(TL Note: The term flag Subaru likes to use is in reference to games or other such computer programs setting flags. Raising them refers to setting them, while triggering to reaping the rewards of the flag.

He’s basically saying he’s set the flag by offering the food to Puck, and then reaped its rewards after Puck went into cat-mode.)

Puck’s face had turned positively cat-like as he played, now completely under Subaru’s spell. As she watched them, Satella couldn’t help but burst out into a few small chuckles.

Subaru saw her reaction, and with that, one of his missions had been cleared; one that he’d been pouring the same amount of enthusiasm into as their search for the insignia. He raised his thumb up, eliciting a discreet nod from Puck.

She looked far better with a smile on her face.

At least that was something which both Subaru and the Spirit were in agreement with.

4

Satella: “No… It’s nothing. I’ll give him a proper apology when I get my insignia back.”

Puck: “I don’t know what you’re trying to apologize for, it’d be nicer to give him a thank-you rather than a sorry. And if that gets you smiling some more, then that’d be fantastic.”

Satella: “You dummy.”

Subaru had stepped into the loothouse, all the while putting on a show of bravado. The girl had sent him off, grateful from the bottom of her heart. She had so much to tell him when he came back after fulfilling their goal.

Satella: “Though… I’m way way more of a dummy than you…”

The girl was standing watch outside just like the young man had asked her to.

She quietly brought her hand over to the pendant she wore over her chest. It was inlaid with a bright green crystal, and within it, slumbered the Spirit that she relied on more than anyone else in this world.

She’d ended up keeping both him and Subaru around her for too long today.

Perhaps Puck wouldn’t be able to forgive her, no matter how much she apologized, especially for how dishonest she’d ended up being with Subaru. Though apologizing would be the thoughtful thing to do, her very idea of it was shallow.

At least for now, all she could do was pray that no harm would befall that goofy young man.

Satella: “…Huh?”

And yet, her prayer was interrupted by the sound of a sudden crash.

She snapped her head up and ran into the loothouse, her amethyst eyes vigilant.

The loothouse was a large, old, single-story building located deep inside the slums. Only a few minutes had passed since she’d sent Subaru out into the pitch-black awaiting him behind its enormous closed doors.

Satella: “…Subaru?”

The girl stepped inside without any hesitation, still keeping her guard up.

She kept herself focused, and made sure that the Minute Spirits drifting around her were ready to kick into action at a moment’s notice. Then, she squinted her eyes through the darkness, when suddenly, she spotted a white glow coming from something that had fallen in a corner of the room.

It was coming from the light source—the Lagmite Ore—that she'd given Subaru.

Satella: "…?!"

She hesitated for a moment, wondering whether she should walk over to it. However it was at that moment that the decision was made for her.

The girl felt something whistling towards her. She immediately turned around, giving her Minute Spirits a command—But before they could carry out her order, her body was ravaged by a sharp blade.

The blow pierced through her and she clattered down onto the hard floor, unable to do anything about it. She could feel a terrible cold gripping her, far more pronounced it was than the scorching heat. Yet, it was only for a moment that she could feel them.

Satella: "…Ah"

Countless thoughts, feelings, resolutions, memories and decisions flashed through her mind. It was as if they were a muddy stream, sweeping away all of her fears and regrets. In the hour of her death, the girl realized that she'd become completely empty.

She hadn't found out anything. She hadn't realized anything. Things were just ending without beginning. Yet it was in that moment…

???: "Just you wait…"

She could hear a voice. A voice that seemed to be almost fading, a voice full of anguish and regret.

A voice, that like hers, was on the brink of death. It was nearing its last, yet still unwilling to admit defeat.

But then, why is it that I…

???: “I will definitely…”

Why is it that I want to believe in the words that would follow?

The story, however, ends here for now. The girl’s thoughts unrewarded, the young man’s unheard; even so, the story winds back and starts anew.

Perhaps, only then, would the time they’d spent together be rewarded.

END

Emilia’s Blog Practice
(MF Bunko J Summer School Festival 2015)
(Translation Pending)

Another World / Reincarnation SS Paper (Kadokawa's Fourth Label Crossover)

"Hey, Subaru, Subaru. We're reaaally cutting it close! It seems like it's time for us to start working."

"What happened, Emilia-tan? Panicking like that? It isn't good to panic like that, you know. Your pretty face will get ruined… Wait, it's pretty."

"Gosh, this isn't the time to be talking like that. Look, this is our chance to introduce Re:Zero, so we need to do our darndest!"

"I don't hear the word 'darndest' being used in this day and age… But alright! It's a chance to have fun with Emilia-tan, so I'll hop aboard! Time to introduce Re:Zero!"

"Umm, the proper name for Re:Zero is 'Re:Zero—Starting Life in Another World,' and the main point of this introduction, the plot of this story, is… It's a story where Subaru dies a lot in a world he isn't familiar with."

"That's really vague, and is it just me, or does that make it sound like I'm just dying a lot without doing anything?!"

"It's in the looping events genre, and Isekai x Return by Death are the foundations of the plot; it's the story of an ordinary boy that works reaaally hard to help the girl he likes. Hey, Subaru, who is this girl you like…"

"Aaah-Aaah-aah! I can't reveal that part since it has to do with a boy's pure heart! Anyway, it's a story about an ignorant, incompetent, powerless, reckless protagonist whose initial status is disappointing, and his only weapons are his ability to rewind time by dying and his unwillingness to give up! Isn't this script terrible?!"

"The world gets rewound with his death. —The important bonds and memories that had been formed there get lost and only remain within Subaru, who starts over from square one all by himself. That’s reaaally a cruel and sad thing.”

“But even so, I’ll do it over and over again. Even if no one remembers how kind they were to me and how we laughed together, it’ll always be in my heart. I’ll always have the memory of having a good time with everyone and the hope that I’ll be able to spend time with them again tomorrow.”

“A looping events fantasy in another world, ‘Re:Zero—Starting Life in Another World’. It’s a story of a very weak boy’s continuous perseverance; a story of fortitude and struggle.”

“—Even if you had forgotten me, I won’t forget you.”

“The fifth volume and the first collection of short stories have already been published! They are on sale with great reviews! Please support us at your local bookstore, too!”

“You’re super enthusiastic about your work all the way up until you complete it. You’re seriously an angel, Emilia-tan! E.M.T!”

Arc 4:
The Everlasting Contract

Volume 10

Chapters 1-23

Chapter 1:
In the Place we Have Returned

1

The grey gloom of the sky mirrored the state of Subaru's heart.

In front of Crusch's mansion, six dragon carriages lined up in a row. Those that fled from the Roswaal domain, the villagers of Earlham (or so the place was called) were all loaded up. Only the final special carriage was reserved for Subaru and Emilia.

The road would be long. So unlike the way here, they won't be riding with the children, since there was a mountain of things he had to say to Emilia… and he wasn't so insensitive as to let the children ride alongside her…

"I will become rather lonely."

Silently gazing at the dragon carriages, Subaru heard a voice from behind him.

Turning to see, it was Crusch looking at him. Her long green hair caressed by the misty wind, she closed her eyes, and seeing her, Subaru scratched his head. "It's not like anything will happen if I stay here, I'd feel bad to just keep sponging on your hospitality. To be honest, I really should be taking some time to recover, but it can't be helped."

Opening and closing his hands, Subaru thought about the state of his health, and smiled awkwardly. Back then, it was to recover his health that he came to Crusch's mansion in the first place. Roswaal had a hand in sending him here, and it still annoyed him to see that Clown's wishes fulfilled so perfectly. As a matter of principle, even if he fulfilled any of that guy's wishes, it should be by continually stomping it.

"Mr. Natsuki Subaru, you know you're welcome to sponge here as long as you like… Even though it's hard to say that out loud."

“Thank you for your offer… but while I want to, there is still a pile of loose ends I need to tie up. There’s the White Whale, Sloth, and the whole deal with the Merchant’s Guild...” Declining Crusch’s offer, Subaru shook his head. He was thinking of Julius and Anastasia.

Out of the three factions that joined forces against the White Whale and “Sloth”, only Anastasia’s purely benefited.

Crusch’s camp, by slaying the White Whale, had accomplished a glorious feat four hundred years in the making—but Crusch’s amnesia was a devastating blow.

As for Subaru and Emilia’s camp that defeated Sloth, the supposedly well-informed Roswaal’s absence from it all doesn’t bode well at all.

In terms of casualties, although they didn’t suffer heavy losses like Crusch’s camp, to Subaru, his loss was far too great to bear.

In comparison, only losing a portion of her mercenaries and supply trains, Anastasia’s forces are almost completely intact. And even though she wasn’t the main player in either battle, her forces made tremendous contributions with minimal losses, a highly profitable investment.

While the damage to their forces made the other two factions hesitate in publicizing their victories, it was not a concern for Anastasia.

In order to check Anastasia’s ascent, close coordination between Crusch and Emilia’s factions will be necessary…

...Seeing Subaru deep in those thoughts, Crusch yawned lazily. Subaru’s brows frowned when he saw this, and Crusch, an embarrassed expression on her face, only waved “nothing” with her hands… “Sorry to be so sentimental…but I’m ashamed I can’t repay you for your kindness...”

Subaru: “The ones that repay favors right away are not worthy opponents. Don’t worry about it when there is so much on your plate. Besides, we received plenty in return already.”

Listening to Crusch's courteous words, Subaru turned to look at the front of the special carriage. Compared to the others, it looked like an overly-decorated high-class VIP dragon carriage, and the honor of pulling it went to—

Crusch: "Such an unambitious request… You want to treat this earth dragon's wounds and take care of her?" Crusch asked.

Subaru: "I do owe this earth dragon a great deal. Even though it's only been a relatively short time, the number of times we rode into the brink of death is more than I can count. And I intend to face many more challenges together with her, so I won't consider Patrasche to be a toy."

Crusch: "—In that case, I have no need to worry."

The earth dragon—Patrasche—glanced at Subaru as he spoke, and then, as if rejecting his admiration, turned to Wilhelm. The old swordsman, who up to now had been checking the carriages before their departure, nodded at their conversation.

"Diana are the most difficult breed of earth dragons to please," he said. "To shield her master with her own body, Subaru must be quite adored by this earth dragon."

"Even though I don't remember much, before the battle with the White Whale, I just decided to choose this one all of a sudden."

It's true we have a bond. This was more than fortunate, because if I picked any other earth dragon, whether it be the White Whale or Petelgeuse, I wouldn't have made it out alive. Anyway… "I can no longer be satisfied by any other earth dragon besides you… Ah, seductive Patrasche!"

Touching the smooth texture of the side of Patrasche's stomach with the palm of his hand as if to show off his affections, Subaru looked into Patrasche's rather pissed-off looking eyes.

To Subaru's overly intimate molestation, the earth dragon reacted with an expression of profound disgust from the bottom of its heart, and jerked her body as if trying to break his fingers. "Ow! That's overreacting just to hide your embarrassment! Though with all that exercise wiping windows back in Junior High, my fingers won’t break so easily!”

Wilhelm: “The earth dragon is joking with you. Such amiable communication must be an indication of the unwavering trust between you two.”

Subaru: “Does that look like communication? It seemed to be just me offering my love one-sidedly and Patrasche rejecting me with her body language!”

That unspoken trust on the battlefield…was woefully absent right now. Now it was just a sassy attitude… But in the end, even with the cold demeanor, Patrasche allowed him to pet her.

Anyway—

Subaru: “So, I got my name into the credits for slaying the White Whale, and then I saved Emilia by killing Sloth. And now I got my beloved earth dragon… The reward is quite nice isn’t it.”

Wilhelm: “Killing the White Whale, how significant that was, Subaru-dono not realizing this is something admirable indeed. Perhaps one day the world will properly thank you for this great achievement. I look forward to that day.”

Subaru: “Yeah I think so too! Wait... but wasn’t I just running around the Whale’s nose like bait all that time?”

To Subaru’s not even humble words, Wilhelm looked on with a warm smile. His insides itching from that warmth, Subaru shook his head as if trying to get rid of that feeling.

Subaru: “All that aside… I won’t be seeing you for a while, Mr. Wilhelm. Please take care of your wound.”

Wilhelm: “Sorry I made you worry. It seems the distance is getting farther, the bleeding has stopped. But no matter what, the day when I fight alongside Sir Subaru again will come. Until then.”

Wilhelm’s wound—the unhealable wound dealt by the Previous

Generation Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea. Mentioning this brought a sharpness into Wilhelm's gaze. His mind turned to the Sin Archbishops that assaulted Crusch, Greed and Gluttony.

If the death of the "Sword Demon's" wife had to do with something other than the White Whale, these two are the most likely suspects.

Subaru, same as Wilhelm, holds a strong hatred for Gluttony. No matter what, they must eventually come face to face with this Sin Archbishop. While the Witch Cult is something they would rather avoid, Gluttony is an entirely different matter. For they must defeat this Sin Archbishop to retrieve those irreplaceable things… Crusch's memory is one, and more importantly—

"Subaru-kyun, Rem-Rem is settled in, want to check?"

Saying this, from the carriage window poked out a head with cat-like ears—Ferris. Seeing Ferris step out of Patrasche's special carriage, Subaru walked over. Peeking in, in the spacious interior, some seats had been replaced with a makeshift bed, and on it, a girl was sleeping.

She was not wearing the familiar maid's dress, but wore a soft blue sleeping gown, that matched the color of her hair. A girl in an unwaking slumber, forgotten by all the world. She loved Subaru, and Subaru loved her. Perhaps, she was that kind of girl.

Subaru: "That thing is safe right?"

Ferris: "Hey I've been careful, I am a healer, meow. Though Rem's physical wounds are already healed, she is no longer a patient, meow."

Silently, Subaru gazed at her sleeping face. Ferris' words were brash, but the side of Ferris' face showed something different from the usual playfulness. Perhaps Ferris was feeling the pain of his own powerlessness, not in regards to Rem, but Ferris's peerless master, Crusch.

Ferris: "You really want to bring her with you?"

Subaru: "Yes, I'll bring her with me. She won't get better by staying here… no I didn’t mean it’s your fau...”

Ferris: “I know nyan, Subaru-kyun isn’t that mean nyan.”

Seeing Subaru’s embarrassment after his remarks, Ferris smiled awkwardly.

Ferris: “In fact.”

Pointing a finger at Subaru,

Ferris: “Aside from Rem, an even bigger concern is Subaru-kyun isn’t it?”

Subaru: “Me?”

Ferris: “Don’t play dumb nyan, your gate is over-strained nyan. While healing you I had to forcefully inject a large amount of Mana through your gate, it could be a bit damaged nyan. Are you feeling weak or tired, physically and magically?”

At Ferris’ question, Subaru turned his neck and shoulders. Spinning around, he couldn’t find anything wrong. He jumped a bit and there seemed to be nothing to worry about.

Subaru: “No problem. Both the used parts and the unused parts are fine. Putting the gate aside, I don’t usually use magic anyway.”

Ferris: “You’re not a magic user after all. If it’s Ferris, Ferris would have to avoid using magic except in emergencies nyan… en, that’s good nyan.”

Seeing Subaru aloof to the critical condition of his health, Ferris gave up. With wide, round eyes, Ferris looked around Subaru’s neck, pulling around his collar.

Ferris: “But no more straining yourself. Even though Ferris can squeeze out every toxin from Subaru-kyun’s body, if your gate shatters into a thousand pieces Ferris won’t be able to fix it nyan. So take the time to properly recover it… about two months nyan.”

Subaru: “Two months without magic… for a guy who didn’t use magic for 17 years, it's nothing!"

Joking around after hearing the diagnosis… come to think of it, Subaru hasn't even been in this world for two months, even though from his perspective it was more like 4 months—it all feels like a very long time.

Thinking about all that happened since he came to this world, how hard would it be to finally rest for two months? He wasn't sure himself.

Subaru: "En… although I do always manage to get myself caught up in some disaster… Wait, did I just trigger a "Flag"?! I think I heard the sound effect!!"

Ferris: "Too bad, Ferris is no expert on treating brain problems nyan."

Subaru apparently appalled by his own remarks, Ferris looked at him rather disinterestedly.

Affected by this reaction, Subaru decided this conversation should be coming to an end. After some thought, he reached out his hand to Ferris.

Ferris: "Nyan?"

Subaru: "No, I really should thank you for everything you've done to help me. For healing me, and when we're against the Whale and "Sloth" if it weren't for you, it would've all been a mess... and for Rem, thank you."

Ferris: "...nyan. You don't seem to be mocking me nyan, so be it."

Subaru: "Ooo! My ability < > has activated! Stay calm!"

A clumsy expression of thanks, but Ferris seemed to like it. In any case, his feelings got through. Ferris held onto the out-reached hand, and they shook.

Subaru: "Such soft, slender fingers… I can't imagine what you'd be like with masculine hands."

Ferris: “On the cute and perfect Ferris, wouldn’t that be too disappointing nyan? Be it body hair or skin, everything on Ferris is all natural nyan.”

Ferris raising a hand with pride, Subaru caught a glimpse of the impeccable white legs under Ferris’ skirt. Taking in the sheer beauty of its form, Subaru’s shoulders dropped dejectedly.

Subaru: “But, he’s a guy...”

Ferris: “Yep, Ferris is a man in body and soul nyan.”

Subaru: “How do you get so smug about it? Which part of that is like a man?”

Dressed like a beautiful girl, calling Ferris a man is just too much—Although Subaru isn’t traditional or anything like that, even he knew Ferris’ behavior is the opposite of what would be called manly.

Against Subaru’s question, Ferris placed a finger on the corner of those lips. And with a charming shake of the waist,

Ferris: “Because, Crusch-sama said this suits Ferris, what I am, I am, and this most suits the radiance of Ferris’ soul. —Crusch-sama’s words, Ferris shall repay with everything that I am.”

Subaru: “But...”

…the current Crusch doesn’t know this… but Subaru held back his words. Even if he doesn’t say it, Ferris already knows. And if he does say it, it will only hurt.

Subaru, more than anyone, would hate to do this. If someone talked about Rem, Subaru would be just as agitated. Perhaps Ferris knew this as well.

“—No matter what becomes of the House of Karsten.”

Subaru: “...?”

Suddenly, the voice struck Subaru’s eardrums.

Quiet, cold, a voice of frozen emotion.

Who that voice belonged to… if he heard it now, it would still give him pause.

Head lowered, Ferris' expression is hidden behind the hair of his forehead, impossible to see.

In this way, Ferris held tight onto Subaru's hand.

Ferris: "Only Crusch-sama, I will protect with my life."

Subaru: "…Ferris?"

Ferris: "That – Is – Why."

In front of the dumbfounded Subaru, Ferris' head suddenly lifted, smiling with a jubilant voice. But compared to the playful, mischievous eyes Subaru was so used to seeing, in this instant, it appeared as if those eyes were lying.

Ferris: "Remember the agreement, Subaru-kyun! Otherwise all the Mana in your body will go on a rampage frying your brain until you die nyan."

Subaru: "What are you saying with that smile on your face?! And why are you threatening an ally?!"

Ferris: "Threatening? More like a death sentence nyan."

Subaru: "Worse than I thought!"

Flinging Ferris' hand out of his own, Subaru turned away. For a brief moment, in all this commotion

—he faintly hoped perhaps Rem would react.

Sighing slightly, he pushed his dashed hopes out of his mind.

Near the luggage outside the dragon carriage, he found Emilia and Crusch talking.

Emilia: "Ah, Subaru. Is Rem-san's bed prepared?"

Subaru: “Yep Ferris set it up perfectly. Behold! This is me and Patrasche’s GREAT CIRCUS COMBO! We’ll show you something even the Great Kinoshita Circus wouldn’t be able to show you!”

Emilia: “Even though I don’t know what you’re talking about, I got a bad feeling about this… let’s not do the Great Circus.”

Subaru: “The sky! It’s too unfortunate! But my heart had already been beating up and down expectant of Emilia-tan’s misattribution of arousal!”

Subaru called it the “In this speeding carriage my life is in danger, could this increase in heartbeat be LOVE?!” self-directed battle plan.

But to hear Emilia say “Rem-san”… a piercing pain of unfathomable degree lingered in Subaru heart, refusing to disappear.

For an instant, Emilia’s eyes caught onto Subaru’s mouth, which had suddenly stopped moving. But before her words came out, Ferris came up behind Subaru.

Ferris: “Well, the dragon carriage is prepared nyan. Sorry it took so long nyan. It’s sad to say goodbye—Crusch-sama, anything to say?”

Crusch: “En, yes.”

Ferris went to Crusch’s side. Subaru went to Emilia’s. Taking them both within her sight, Crusch took a deep breath, and placed a hand in front of her chest.

Crusch: “First, though I have said it many times before, you have my deepest gratitude. Even though I can no longer remember, I know that before I lost my memory, I wanted us to cooperate, and to be friends. I thank you once again.”

Emilia: “No… I, Crusch-sama, there is nothing to thank me for. These days I’ve only been kept in the dark and left out of everything...”

Subaru: “En, it’s true Emilia-tan didn’t do anything. But I have everything handled so don’t worry. After all, my achievements are my Emilia-tan's achievements too!"

Seeing Emilia shriveling in embarrassment, Subaru pounded his chest proclaiming this. Stealing a glance at Subaru, Emilia nodded slightly.

Emilia: "Thank you Subaru… Even though I don't remember becoming "your" Emilia..."

Subaru: "M – my battle plan to "subconsciously inject impression of a romantic relationship into third party listeners" has been seen through…?!"

Emilia: "Because I was listening carefully… oh, sorry about that."

All the air pressure deflating from his chest, Subaru sank down, and Emilia apologized to Crusch, who was quietly observing their amiable exchange.

Crusch: "No, the relationship between you two seem wonderful. I must quickly work to return to the way I was with Ferris and Wilhelm."

Ferris: "Ferris will always be open to Crusch-sama in both body and soul nyan!"

Ferris, covering his cheeks with both hands, swerved left and right. While Ferris was swerving like an octopus behind her, Crusch seemed to accept it as it is, with a warm, even feminine, smile emerging on her face.

Crusch: "We will meet again very soon, I think, Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama. I wish we would forever be friends."

That was not a lie, it must have been her true thoughts… Subaru thought this.

Despite losing her memory, she did not lose the nobility of her heart. Honesty illuminates her conduct, false flattery and lies are not compatible with that.

Perhaps because that came through so clearly, Emilia's eyes opened wide with surprise, her lips trembling faintly.

Emilia: “I am… For Crusch-sama, I am an opposing Candidate. The Alliance… one day it will return to competition between us.”

Crusch: “En, that is true. With Emilia-sama as an opponent, I will take care not to fall behind, so I will do my best as well.”

Emilia: “And even without that, I am a Half-Elf. With silver hair… Doesn’t it scare you?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan that’s...”

She didn’t need to ask that, Subaru thought, trying to stop her. Seeing the desperate determination on the side of Emilia’s face, he knew this conversation mustn’t continue.

Emilia was serious, in asking that question. The emotional part of her knows she should never bring up her identity lightly.

Above all, to bring it up in front of Crusch Karsten. Subaru knew, to let this continue would be…

Crusch: “The soul determines the value of its own existence. For myself, and for others as well, to live with the Soul’s fullest radiance, unashamed, is the way we should live.”

Emilia: “—.”

Crusch: “Somehow it feels like I’ve said that many times before. How should I say it... Now that I’ve listened to myself, that was pretty sophisticated, wasn’t it?”

Crusch covered her mouth and couldn’t hold in her laugh. Hearing this, Emilia stood dumbfounded, and did not say a word.

Crusch: “Emilia-sama, are you ashamed of the way you carry out your life?”

Emilia: “…I’m, not. Even if everyone around me thinks so, as long as I am not hated by myself, I can carry on and live this way.”

Crusch: “If so, then don’t regret anything. Improve yourself, try your hardest, and stay true to the self you deserve. —You have a beautiful Soul.”

Smiling, Crusch extended the hand in front of her chest toward Emilia.

Crusch: “To get to know you, I am happy. Fear? Not a single bit.”

Biting her lips, Emilia carved those words into her memory, her chest hurting with emotion. She gazed at the outstretched hand. Crusch patiently waited for her. Then, Emilia’s fingers met the palm of Crusch’s hand, and they exchanged a handshake softly.

Crusch: “No matter what, I expect we will meet again soon.”

Emilia: “M-Me... no. Me too, this time I should stand tall in front of Crusch-sama, shouldn’t I? Until then, I wish you the best of health.”

This way, the two fellow Candidates of the Royal Selection, their promise to each do their best, was sealed.

Looking on from the side, Subaru’s heart swelled with the sense of accomplishment. That was one of the goals of Subaru’s struggle after struggle… Even though in the end it’s impossible for everything to be perfect…

Subaru: “...after everything we accomplished… why do I still have this sad expression on my face? I don’t want to blame it on you… I don’t...”

Glancing toward the dragon carriage, appearing in Subaru’s eyes was the girl sleeping inside.

In such a happy occasion, Rem would not forgive me like this… Rem wouldn’t want to… I’m so selfish, aren’t I?

Crusch: “Natsuki Subaru-sama, please take care. I will look forward to your future activity…and her recovery.”

Subaru: “Much more activity from me… I don’t think that’s a good idea… To be honest, I’m the kind of guy that runs around trying to do everything as the last resort and still ends up being completely useless. About Rem… Miss Crusch is not an outsider. No matter what, she will recover. I promise, she will.”

Crusch extended her hand to Subaru. But to shake hands in this state, isn’t that way too embarrassing? To cover up his embarrassment, Subaru gave her a high five.

A small sound rang out, and the brief contact between Subaru and Crusch’s hands ended. Her hand bouncing off, Crusch’s eyes blinked ever so slightly.

Crusch: “We will certainly meet again.”

With these words, the master and servant bowed, seeing Subaru and Emilia off.

2

On the road home, a strange, stifling gloom descended on the dragon carriage.

The carriage itself, Crusch had gifted to Subaru along with Patrasche, as another sign of gratitude. Even without the ornamentation, it was clear that it was an expensive piece of craftsmanship. But from the softness of the seats to the glamour of the interior, everything felt a bit excessive.

The spacious interior could fit ten people and still have room left over, so it’s no wonder they didn’t know what to do with themselves, with only three passengers riding inside.

In the carriage, Emilia, Subaru and Rem kept the silence. Rem was, of course, sleeping. Sitting next to her, Subaru was waiting, without even the thought of moving from his place. Perhaps out of consideration for the unconscious Rem, Emilia held back her words.

Subaru: “…m.”

This is bad, Subaru thought, crossing his arms. Though it’d be outrageous to have a lighthearted conversation under these circumstances, there is so much they need to talk about. They have to decide on their stance regarding the Royal Selection, they need to get up to date on the Alliance with Crusch's faction, and they still haven't even talked about what happened over the past few days.

Then there was Rem. How would she be taken care of at the mansion if no one but Subaru remembers her? Even though it's inevitable, just the thought of what Ram might say, when she sees the unconscious Rem, sends shivers down his spine.

Emilia: "I know you're worried, but right now I feel the atmosphere might have been better if the kids were riding with us..."

Of course, the children were also in the entourage heading back to Roswaal's domain. But they are riding with their parents right now. If they asked about Rem, it would be difficult to explain, and what if the villagers think it's a disease… Unfortunately, the result is the current silence.

What to do now. —It is unusual for Subaru to feel so restrained, he looked up at the ceiling thinking.

"I don't know what, but can't you two think of something to talk about?! Aaaah, I can't take this awkward silence anymore!!"

Subaru: "What are you saying?! Sneaking in out of the blue?! Wait, were you there all along?"

Otto: "That's rude! Of course I was here! Do you even remember the conditions under which I agreed to help you out?!"

Otto said in an over-exaggerated way, sticking his head into the carriage from the opening in front, sending a bit of spittle flying along with his voice. Otto was the one driving the carriage, sitting outside in the driver's seat. He stuck his head through the hole connecting to the carriage's interior just to comment on the quietness inside the carriage.

At Otto's objections, Subaru tilted his head and nodded while muttering "Ah, ah."

Subaru: "I remember, I remember. Right, I remember you asked me to help you meet Roswaal, right? … Ah, but, what can I say..."

Otto: “What is it?!”

Subaru: “Well if you’re just chasing after guys it’s one thing, but when the guy is Roswaal… I’m straight by the way, and I already have Emilia, so please don’t come after me.”

Otto: “That’s not why I want to talk to him at all! What do you think I am?!”

Subaru: “A trader looking for some excitement?”

Otto: “Why do you treat me like a pervert?!”

Looking at Otto as if pitying him from the bottom of his heart, Subaru shook his head sadly from side to side. Emilia, who had been quietly observing their conversation, suddenly opened her eyes wide and said with a surprised expression.

Emilia: “You two… are really good friends, aren’t you? I’m surprised!!”

Subaru: “Oy, oy Emilia-tan. Please stop it with the jokes. Putting me in the same basket as this money-grubbing merchant… The only thing I’m greedy for is your love!”

Otto: “You’re greedy too then!! Ah, wait, I’m not greedy to begin with!”

Subaru: “Otto, shut up.”

Sighing at the travelling merchant, Subaru got up and took hold of the flap to close the window to the driver’s seat.

Otto: “Ah, wait, don’t just treat me like I’m in the way!”

Subaru: “Ok, shutting you out!”

Pulling the flap shut with a clap, the face of the man who had been trying until the very end to say something finally disappeared. Joining his fingers and stretching his arms like someone who had just completed a rough task, Subaru turned around to see Emilia blankly looking up at him.

Subaru: “…Puh.”

Emilia: “Hihahaha!”

Looking at each other’s faces, they suddenly burst out laughing.

For a while they let themselves be taken along by their laughter, but after a little while, their laughter started to wane, until silence once again descended upon the carriage.

At that moment,

Subaru: “Letting this heavy atmosphere be, really isn’t like me, is it?”

Emilia: “You’re right, it’s not like you at all. The Subaru I know is a much more spirited, unreasonable, lively person. So much so that no matter what I’m feeling at the moment, he completely blows all my bad feelings away.”

Subaru: “I feel like that could also be translated into an airhead who can’t read the mood...”

In any case, Otto being there had actually cleared up the mood tremendously. Thanking Otto for this would probably make him angry, but nevertheless, Subaru thanked him in his mind while getting up and sitting down next to Emilia as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Seeing this put a wry smile on Emilia’s face.

Emilia: “You always just naturally sit next to me huh, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Well, it’s natural for someone to want to sit next to the girl they like, so I want to sit as close as I can, and breathe the same air as you.”

Emilia: “Geez, the first half of that sentence was embarrassing, and yet somehow the second half of that sentence gave off a really bad feeling.”

Being hit straight with an earnest confession of love made Emilia’s face turn red, but the pervertedness of the second half made her scowl. Leaning his head toward her at her reaction, Subaru said

Subaru: “Hmm, I was just trying to act like I always do, you know.”

Emilia: “Come to think of it, I guess you’ve always been like this. It’s because you’re like this, that I’m never able to just take in what you’re saying...”

As Emilia looked at him, her voice turned into a quiet mumble, then faded completely. Subaru scratched his head, considering whether or not he should pick up the conversation…

Subaru: “Guys just can’t mentally handle being straightforward, and not pretending to be kidding around when it comes to this sort of thing. Me loving Emilia-tan, me looking at Emilia-tan in a perverted way, and me wanting to help Emilia-tan are all my true, honest feelings. You can believe that you know?”

Emilia: “I believe it, but believing and accepting are two different things...”

Subaru: “That’s fine with me, believe me, and I’ll work hard until you accept my feelings.”

Thinking about it again, that was a pretty aggressive proclamation. In fact, hearing that from Subaru, Emilia’s face was blushing.

Fighting hard to remain unflustered, her cheeks and ears already turned so red that her expression couldn’t keep up. She must never have had anyone confess their unconditional fondness for her before. Of course Subaru, the one trying to hit on her, didn’t have any experience either, so his face was also completely red.

Even so,

Subaru: “Rather than walking on with a downcast expression, this is more like me. Right, Rem?”

Emilia: “…just now, did you say something?”

Subaru: “I was just thinking how nice it would be to lift up your hair so I could stare at your neck pervertedly.”

Emilia: “Right there, you are trying to distract me again… You care a lot about Rem-san, don’t you?”

Subaru still trying to wisecrack his way out, Emilia’s incisive words blocked his escape. Accepting defeat, Subaru smiled bitterly, and turned toward Rem, still sleeping on the bed.

Subaru: “I do, yes. Immensely… I care about her. I’m always thinking I must do something, and I think, and I want to keep on thinking. Even though I wanted Emilia-tan to be the first in my thoughts, this can’t be ranked… I’m sorry.”

Emilia: “I’m not a bad child that will get angry and throw a tantrum. I won’t get angry about something so important… I can tell just by looking, she is very important to you, Subaru.”

Like Subaru, Emilia turned her narrowed gaze to Rem in her sleep. Her lips trembled. Then after a short moment of hesitation, she asked, “You… like her. Don’t you?”

“I like her. I love her. I love her as much as I love you.”

“I don’t know how I feel about this, but… Subaru, are you the kind of guy that flirts around?”

“I thought I was supposed to be a pretty faithful guy, but having someone be so devoted to you is… A guy whose heart isn’t moved by that, I don’t think he could have a drop of blood or tear in him.”

Thinking back to the loops over the past few days, he remembered, how many times he had received Rem’s unconditional love. Receiving it all, how could his heart not move? By the time he noticed, her existence inside his heart had already grown far too large to ignore.

“Even though you told me that you love me.”

“Just to make it clear, I love Rem a lot, but Rem still loves me WAY more, you know? She’s completely fallen head over heels for me, and I seriously can’t understand why.”

Hugging his shoulders, he wondered how she could love him so selflessly. To be loved this much by a girl like Rem, was he really worth it?

He still couldn't help but wonder why. But even so… as the man she fell for, the very least he could do, is to try to live up to what she saw in him.

Seeing Subaru's downcast self-appraisal, Emilia's lips relaxed.

"I think I understand her."

"Huh?"

"The reason Rem-san came to reeally love you. I'm sure it's because she got to see Subaru's good side up close, a lot. You're kind of like a disease that sometimes becomes really incredible, and does some reeally incredible things."

"A disease? I… can't actually deny that."

Subaru scratched his cheek and pouted, showing his dissatisfaction. Emilia, unaffected, held her stern expression as if to say, "it's true you know", then, closing her eyes, she said, "I won't fall for you that easily you know."

"That makes the effort all the more worth it! One day, I will make Emilia-tan go all gooey and fall for me, wake Rem from her sleep, and settle this in a nice way. Aaaah, I'm smiling just thinking about it!"

To have Emilia and Rem each pull on one of his hands, fighting over his one and only body. That would be a such a blissful, incredible sight.

Which is why definitely, definitely one day—

"I'll have you two pull me until I split into a thousand pieces!"

"I have no idea what you're thinking, but I feel like I have to say this: I'm not going to do anything like that!"

After that conversation, the discussion inside the carriage went on smoothly.

After all, they've been waiting for the larger half of a day to talk. And since there was a lot they had to talk about, they had only just enough time to do it.

Sharing everything about the past few days with Emilia, eventually Otto joined their conversation as well, and even took part in their planning for the future.

To sum it up, "Basically, if we don't meet with Roswaal then we can't plan anything, right?"

After all that, the conclusion was the same as the starting point of the conversation.

Roswaal is the only person who understands the full capabilities and powers of Emilia's Faction, so nothing can proceed without him.

"Well, if Ram, who went to the Sanctuary, met Roswaal, we could naturally get him to return to the Mansion. But I'd slap him in the face first, before we have a good talk with him."

"You're very aggressive toward your employer, huh, Mr. Natsuki?"

"I think I have a right to do that after all he did! He'd deserve every bit of it!"

Thinking back on the mess Roswaal left for Subaru to clean up, this was more or less an appropriate response. In fact, Emilia didn't seem to have any intention of stopping Subaru, as if permitting him to do it "just this one time."

As their discussion was summed up and their topic turned toward matters of the Roswaal domain, their dragon carriage left the forests and entered the village.

—They instantly realized something was wrong.

The village that Subaru had gotten so used to seeing, seemed just as desolate and dreary as right after the battle with Petelgeuse. There was not even any sign of the soldiers of the Expedition that stayed behind.

To put it simply, it seemed like none of the villagers had returned.

“I don’t see anyone, Mr. Natsuki. It doesn’t look like the area was devastated or anything, it just looks like nobody is here.”

Getting off the dragon carriage, Otto voiced his thoughts as he looked around the village with several of the returning villagers. Even Subaru, who looked with a different group, came to the same conclusion.

In the somber silence, memories of past loops—where the villagers were slaughtered, massacred by Petelgeuse’ fingers, all of a sudden struck Subaru like a nightmare returning. But he was certain that he was just overthinking it.

But then, that raised another question—

“Ram said from here to the Sanctuary is only about 7 to 8 hours… but then why are they later than us, if we stayed in the Capital for three days?”

“They might not know that we took down the Witch Cult, so maybe they’re being cautious?”

“Roswaal abandoning his lands? I assume if Roswaal fought Sloth face-to-face, Roswaal would probably win. Even if it isn’t Sloth’s style to fight in the open, Roswaal should have at least come here to scout.”

Roswaal, who could even fly, could easily return to his territory. If he intended to, he could scout the perimeters of the Mansion for any remaining threats, and ensure the land was safe to return to. But he didn’t.

“Either he’s being overly cautious or...”

“Something’s happened in the Sanctuary?”

Both Subaru and Emilia's opinions matched. Looking at each other, they shared a nod.

No matter what, they have to find out what the situation at the Sanctuary is.

Besides their concerns, the villagers had worries of their own.

After all, about 60% of the villagers had headed for the Sanctuary. Those that returned from the Capital: the children who resolved to accompany Emilia, their parents, and the young men's militia that went with them, only comprised about 40% of the villagers. Without the rest, the functioning of the village is severely affected.

Besides, the people's minds tend to always turn to the worst.

"Anyway, we have to do something… For now, let's head back to the Mansion. I want to settle Rem down as well. Plus, Otto, you don't have anywhere to stay, so come to the Mansion with us."

"What?! To trouble the ma-margrave for lodging?! If I have to be in such a heck of a situation, I would rather sleep in the dragon carriage!"

"Shut up, you're already involved. Better get used to it because I'll use you until you die off!"

Ignoring Otto's objections, Subaru said goodbye to the villagers and told Patrasche to head for the Mansion.

In a distance of 15 minutes on foot, and 5 minutes by carriage, lies the nostalgic Mansion of Roswaal.

Last time, he didn't have the chance to appreciate the sight, so when he looked up at it again, this time, there was something emotional about it all.

"Well, nothing seems to have changed. …Ram and the others don't seem to have returned, either."

"But, Beatrice must still be inside. I hope she knows where the Sanctuary is."

“Wha- really? Crap… I thought Emilia-tan would know where the Sanctuary is. Then how do we confirm if Roswaal’s alright?”

The fundamental objective of their plan collapsing, Subaru furrowed his brows at the looming darkness ahead.

Emilia’s beautiful face also showed the colors of grief. Otto, unable to join in the conversation, only looked up, enchanted by the great Mansion and its surroundings, as if driving through a dream.

“Tch. Crap. Well, we just have to hope Beatrice knows something about it.”

“Hey, why were you clicking your tongue while staring right at me?” Otto inquired.

“Tch. It’s your self-consciousness. No one cares about you as much as you think.”

“Wow that’s a terrible comment!”

Ignoring the partially depressed Otto, Subaru parked the dragon carriage in the front yard, and headed straight to the entrance.

First, get Beatrice, then, scout the Mansion, then, secure a bed for Rem, then think of future plans again—

“I’m back, Roswaal’s Mansion! Here comes my nostalgic h...”

Saying that, pushing open the grand door, Subaru’s voice clogged up.

Because what greeted him was a completely different sight than what he expected.

The entrance hall was spread with gorgeous carpets, in the corners of the stairs leading to the upper floors were expensive looking vases filled with colorful flowers.

From the ceiling, hung beautiful crystal lamps that could be the chandeliers of this Parallel World.

The familiar entrance hall… was very much different from what he expected.

Instead of what he expected—

“It’s not even vandalized... it’s actually arranged?!”

The mats were straightened nicely without a single crease, and the flowers in the vases in the corners of the stairs were blooming vibrantly, the chandeliers were delicately taken care of and were shining graciously, even more than usual.

Stunned by this surreal scene, Subaru lost his words and stood still.

Because of his amazement, his reactions were all too slow.

“—Who is it?!”

A small, weak, almost inaudible sound. Subaru frantically shot his glance toward its direction.

But, when he noticed the Shadow, it was already too late.

The Shadow had already run up behind him and then—

Subaru saw it. From behind him, as if eclipsing the moon, the shadow engulfed him whole.

In that shadow… a mouth filled with white fangs, as if of a beast, were clear in the back of his eyes.

—And in the next moment, before he could even realize… Subaru’s consciousness, and his world, had been dragged to darkness.

Chapter 2:
Jeers and Thanks

Hey, Subaru, dying here would be pretty miserable. Still muddled, lying there shaking his head, Subaru lifted himself up and looked around.

He was usually good at waking up, but the reason he couldn't get his thoughts together was simply because he wasn't exactly "sleeping". He tried hard to remember what had happened before he lost consciousness, but the first thing that occurred to him was that he was in a very familiar room.

Subaru: "This is the Mansion's living room… isn't it?"

"Oh, Subaru, you're awake?" a voice mumbled as if trying to make sure, then the door opened, and Emilia's face poked through.

Her silver hair in a braid, she had a slightly bright expression on her face as she walked over to Subaru on the couch, and bending over, she met his gaze.

Being stared at so intently by her wide, round eyes, Subaru shrank down a little.

Subaru: "Uhm, Emilia-tan, what happened?"

Emilia: "As soon as you entered the mansion, we heard you scream. Otto and I were really shocked. Then when we ran inside to see..."

Subaru: "I, was sleeping?"

Emilia: "Saying it like that is a little deceiving...but it's not technically wrong, I suppose?"

Emilia put a finger to her lips, and tilted her head slightly to the side. There was no sense of urgency in her reply.

Scrambling when he just woke up, now seeing her in this relaxed manner, Subaru realized there was no emergency. Yet even so, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was out of the ordinary.

He was certain that just before he lost consciousness, some kind of animal with sharp fangs had—

“Emilia-sama, might I have a moment?”

There was a knock on the door from the outside, followed by the sound of a woman’s voice calling out to Emilia. Looking in the direction of the voice, she gave her assent with a small “Sure”, and the door opened slowly.

Looking at the door casually opening, Subaru couldn’t help but feel mystified. I don’t recall ever hearing that voice before.

His doubt was soon confirmed when he saw what stood just outside the doorway.

“I brought drinks and additional hand towels—oh, I see you are awake already.”

The form of the smiling woman imprinted itself into Subaru’s eyes.

It was a woman with long, almost translucent blonde hair, the lines of her back were in perfect posture. Her appearance and behavior was in every way refined, and in her fluid motions there was not a hint of unnecessary movement.

She was wearing the same familiar outfit as other servants of Roswaal Manor —the cute and practical maid’s uniform, with not so much as a crease or wrinkle visible.

The plate in her hands held a water pitcher and hand towels, which she placed softly down on the stand in the center of the room without making a sound. —If she were being scored, she would have passed with flying colors…

…that is, only if you overlooked her ferocious-looking physique and her fiendish smile.

The uniform may be worn perfectly, but the one wearing it was slightly taller than Subaru, with an athletic build similar to his. If she were a he, it would have seemed healthy and strong, but when it was on a female, everything instantly crumbled.

What's more, the smile at the end of her perfectly fluid motion — was completely ruined by the set of sharp fangs peeking out through the corner of her mouth. Looking even closer, there was something unnatural about the sharpness of her gaze, and her greens pupils seemed to give off a glinting light, like a carnivorous, feline beast eyeing its prey.

Frederica: "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am a servant of the household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Frederica Baumann…]

Subaru: "Scary face—?!"

Her respectful introduction was interrupted by the overly candor words that slipped out of Subaru's mouth. Upon hearing this, the woman's expression congealed, and after her fiendish eyes blinked several times —tears began to form.

Frederica: "…sniffle, sniffle..."

Subaru: "Wha…?"

Emilia: "Subaru you dunce!!"

Without a word, the woman turned her face away, and even Subaru was shocked. Right after, he was assaulted by both an angry voice, and the painful sensation of having his ear pulled. "Ow, ow!" Letting out a cry and turning to look, he saw Emilia with her usually gentle brows furrowed angrily.

Emilia: "That's a terrible thing to say to a girl! Frederica did so much to take care of you and you..."

Frederica: "I-I ask that you might let it go, Emilia-sama. It is quite alright. I was…I was the one in the wrong after all. I was so happy to have been called back to the mansion, I got too over-excited… and forgot that my looks are usually unpleasant for many..."

Pulling on the hem of Emilia's sleeve, she—the woman called

Frederica—was shaking her head. With her other hand she was covering her mouth.

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Frederica: “I apologize for startling you so. More than that, I did something very inappropriate a short while ago. I never thought I would mistake Master Natsuki Subaru for an intruder.”

Subaru: “Intruder...ah, wait a minute. I think I understand what happened now.”

Released from Emilia’s chastisement for the moment, Subaru massaged his ear while taking in her words. In fact, he kind of realized the gist of what happened.

Basically, the mysterious figure he ran into right after entering the mansion was—

Subaru: “When I returned to the mansion, Miss Frederica thought I was an intruder, and so tried to take me out. Then, Emilia-tan came in after me, and cleared up the misunderstanding, and that brings us to now…right?”

Frederica: “That’s exactly right…you really can process things quickly I see.”

Subaru: “There are things I can’t read from just the situation though…no, before that.”

Frederica’s agreement confirming his thoughts, Subaru then turned his gaze to Emilia who was now standing behind Frederica, nudging her chin to point in Frederica’s direction. He was painfully aware of the meaning behind Emilia’s action. So Subaru stood up from the couch, and facing Frederica, said

Subaru: “Nice to meet you, I am very sorry for saying something so uncalled for all of a sudden. I know I can’t make excuses like having just woken up, or that I was just joking around and expect to be forgiven. You can decide whether to boil or fry me…though I would be really thankful if there wasn’t much pain involved.”

To say he was acting like a man, it was more like Subaru dipped his head while saying this somewhat limp apology.

They definitely started off on the wrong foot, but unlike her, who had only attacked a suspicious intruder, Subaru's words were just completely rude. So, just as he said, if it would clear up her anger, Subaru would willingly accept any kind of punishment.

Preferably without physical pain, and his hopes were rather leaning towards emotional abuse instead…

That much was the commitment of the man Subaru's rather effeminate apology.

Frederica: "—Haha, you really are a funny guy."

With those words, her smile hiding behind the hand covering her mouth, Frederica blew it all away.

At the question mark floating above Subaru's head, Frederica bowed, the translucent, golden hair flowing around her face.

Frederica: "I should really be the one apologizing. On Emilia-sama's request, I have been testing you."

Subaru: "Testing?"

At Frederica's words, both Subaru and Emilia tilted their heads. They had no idea what she was talking about.

It'd be fine if Subaru was confused, but if he were to believe her words, then it would be strange to see Emilia showing the same air of confusion as well. Looking at their synchronous response, Frederica's smile deepened.

Frederica: "Even though I may have been acting according to my sense of duty to protect the mansion, what I did to Subaru-sama was still rude. I was prepared, or rather left with no other choice, but to be relieved of my position after such an act."

Subaru: "No, I think you jumped to that conclusion way too soon. I'm a guy who will understand if we talk things out, right?"

Frederica: "Then, Emilia-sama asserted herself ever so firmly. She really tried so hard, I thought for sure even my face would turn red from the flowery things she was saying about Subaru…”

Subaru: “Wha?!”

Shocked by what she had just said, Subaru let out a strangled cry, looking towards Emilia. While Emilia was standing there trying so hard to hide her own deep scarlet countenance.

Emilia: “Fre–de–ri–ca–!”

Hands on her hips, Emilia uncharacteristically let out a hysterical voice, glaring sharply at the maid. On the receiving end of all that, Frederica calmly retorted

Frederica: “Oh my, so scary… I see Emilia-sama hasn’t changed, still not cute at all. Normally, whether what I said was true or not, turning red and getting flustered would have been the prettiest response.”

Emilia: “Eh, really…? Wait, I’m not going to get tricked today. Even someone like me, always getting tricked, would learn to know better! That’s right, I know when you’re lying, one of your eyes goes lazy!”

Frederica: “I had no idea that was the case. By the way Emilia-sama, did you know that whenever you lie, your ears get a little longer?”

Emilia: “No way?!”

Emilia’s expression of victory, an arm outstretched and a finger pointing towards Frederica, was interrupted when she darted her hands back to grab both her ears. Getting this response, at that point Frederica’s victory was complete.

Still flustered, Emilia seemed not to have realized she lost, but Subaru, who had been watching her intently, let out a sigh and shrugged his shoulders.

Subaru: “Seems like I’ve been completely defeated… My name is Natsuki Subaru and… do I even need to do an introduction?”

Frederica: “Yes, of course. I would love to hear it. Let’s start over and get to know each other properly this time.”

With those words, Frederica removed the hand covering her mouth, revealing a smile lined with pointed fangs. This time, seeing her weaponized-smile, all the wind left Subaru’s lungs.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, I think I heard of you… a maid who quit a little while ago before I arrived here, right? I came to the mansion about a month ago… so it’s been three months since you left?”

Frederica: “That seems to be right. I had resigned my position due to personal reasons, and I still remember how painfully lonely it felt, leaving here. … But it seems that I was able to return much sooner than I expected.”

Covering her mouth with her sleeve, Frederica smiled. As long as she covers her mouth, her beautiful golden hair and her cold, barely passable gaze, would combine into something even resembling feminine beauty. But her mischievous personality and her mouth-full of fangs tend to negate that no matter what.

In the living room of Roswaal Manor, Subaru and Frederica have just exchanged some basic information beyond their names. Listening to her self-introduction again, he seemed to recall having heard that name before.

Subaru: “Three months ago, so that means you’re acquainted with Emilia-tan, right?”

Emilia: “Hrmph! That would be correct, yes.”

Subaru: “Who says ‘Hrmph’ these days? Also sulking like that is so outdated it’s cute, geez.”

To Subaru’s question and gaze, Emilia sat down onto the couch, averting her eyes as if refraining from joining the conversation, though she was obviously still listening intently. She had been acting like this ever since she realized, too late, how Frederica had tricked her. But that aside, Subaru: “It’s only been two or three days since you returned, right? We left from the village three days ago...four if you count the traveling time. It seems to be quite a coincidence.”

Frederica: “I was surprised too when I returned to the mansion to find it empty. Luckily, there was a letter explaining things in the master’s study, so I avoided the worst of the confusion.”

Subaru: “A letter?”

Frederica: “Yes, from Ram. She was the one who called me back to the mansion, though she was rather haphazard in her communication... I know it’s indulging her too much to pass it off as her personality, but that’s how I feel.”

Through Frederica’s half-awkward smile, Subaru saw the time-worn bond she and Ram must have shared, and all the wonderful days they have passed together. At the same time, erased from her memories, her time spent with Rem must have been just as long.

Subaru: “Could you tell me why Ram called you back?”

Frederica: “I don’t completely understand the reason myself. But Emilia-sama was here at the time, I am sure she would know.”

At once, both their gazes poured onto Emilia inquisitively. Even now, Emilia continued to maintain her “I’m still really, really angry,” attitude, turning her face away. But, as she slowly became unable to resist the attention focused on her, she tried to steal a quick glance in their direction. Only, it ended up being a rather obvious glance.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, cheer up… or, actually, I’m not the one who upset you this time. Frederica, apologize properly would you?”

Frederica: “I ask for your forgiveness, Emilia-sama. What I did a moment ago was not nice and I apologize. I was so happy we could meet again after so long, my bad side just, slipped out.”

Emilia: “…You won’t tease me like that anymore?”

Frederica: “No, I will refrain from doing so. For all the world I will never again tease Emilia-sama in that manner again."

Subaru couldn't quite get rid of the feeling that the wording of Frederica's apology left some room for interpretation. However, our Goddess Emilia seemed to believe in those words without a second thought, and her up-to-now sulking expression relaxed into one that seemed to say, "I suppose it can't be helped."

Emilia: "I understand. I'm not angry anymore. Is that good enough?"

Frederica: "Yes, I am very sorry for before, Emilia-sama. —Too easy."

Somehow, only Subaru heard that last part. He jerked his head to look at Frederica, but she was playing dumb. Emilia, who had no idea she was being considered "too easy," placed a finger to her cheek and said,

Emilia: "So, let's see. The reason Frederica was called back to the mansion… umm."

Subaru: "Yeah, yeah. Rushing to call back someone you fired would mean there's some kind of emergency…actually, I think I might have an idea."

There was indeed an emergency, it was only a few days ago that the Mansion and Earlham village were targeted by the Witch Cult. Considering her skill, which had been able to knock Subaru unconscious in an instant, Frederica must be another shady maid of Roswaal Manor with some crazy combat abilities. In short, Ram must have called her back to buff the mansion's defenses during their state of—

Emilia: "It was because Ram's aptitude for housework is catastrophic, and the mansion ended up in an unimaginable state of disarray. It was only a few days, but it kept getting harder and harder to live in."

Subaru: "That's actually a very compelling reason!! She really is all talk and no… wait, Ram knows she's hopeless, she even said so herself! She's right about that at least, but then she should have put in some effort to improve!! Right?!"

Subaru's chest felt like it would explode from how compelling that reality was compared to his over-guessing of the situation.

Emilia let out a wry smile at his outburst, and shifted her gaze to the living room—or rather, to the entirety of the mansion, as though she could see through its very walls.

Emilia: "But, since Frederica returned, the mansion really has become quite tidy. I think Ram made the right decision in leaving it to someone capable, rather than make things worse by ignoring it."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, I don't think you meant it, but that statement's like a slap to the face! And, well, I still don't think that's a good enough reason for her to give up so easily."

Frederica: "Putting Ram's assessment aside for the moment, it has been such a long time since I have been given the opportunity to do some really worthwhile work. Luckily, since no one was around, I was able to spend the time on further cleaning the mansion."

Listening to Frederica speak of diligently holding up this household, Subaru held his breath, unable to ignore the pain wrenching in his heart.

For this, was the forces of the world compensating for the eradication of Rem's existence by the Authority of Gluttony.

Subaru: "I guess since Ram can't run the mansion by herself, the obvious solution was to rely on someone else..."

So Ram had contacted Frederica, who had resigned, asking her to return to the mansion. Without Rem, the Roswaal estate couldn't continue to function, and so, Rem's replacement, Frederica, had arrived.

Yet, the only one in the world who knows of this sad truth is Subaru. Ram had only done as necessity demanded, without stopping to think about why she needed Frederica's help all of a sudden, or just how she had managed to take care of the estate until then. That was all there was to it.

But,

Subaru: “Sorry for being serious all of a sudden but… is it a requirement for all the maids of Roswaal’s Mansion to be so quirky?”

Frederica: “…? Considering who our master is, what’s the point of even asking that question?”

Subaru: “That’s annoyingly persuasive!”

At this point, all of Subaru’s doubts have been answered. Seeing his response, Frederica nodded her head contentedly, and resuming her perfect posture, stared fixedly at Subaru. Then, casually, in a lowered voice,

Frederica: “By the way, the driver of the dragon carriage outside the mansion has been left out there for over an hour now…is that alright?”

Subaru: “Hmm? Oh, you mean Otto. I see, it’s already been an hour… Well, I don’t think it’s that big of an issue. I want to hurry and let Patrasche rest in the stable, but you don’t need to pay attention to that Otto guy too much…”

Otto: “For a companion who shared a near-death experience together, that is really quite heartless, Mr. Natsuki! I never thought I was lower in priority than a earth dragon!”

Right on cue, Otto dramatically opened the doors to the living room. His shoulders hunched up angrily, he was glaring at Subaru while disapprovingly breathing through his nostrils. At his entrance, Subaru slowly stood up, shook his head, and sighed.

Subaru: “No, Otto, you’re mistaken.”

Otto: “How am I mistaken? It’s too late to take back your words from a moment ago…”

Subaru: “It’s not that you’re lower in priority than a earth dragon.

It's that you are much, much lower in priority than a earth dragon."

Otto: "That's twice over! That's even worse!"

Content with Otto's response and foot-stomping, Subaru turned his gaze toward the window. That is, toward the front yard where the dragon carriage pulled by Patrasche was parked.

Otto followed his gaze, and seemed to understand its meaning. With a still somewhat bitter face, he spoke,

Otto: "I've already put Patrasche in the stables. She is a proud and difficult child, but she didn't want to cause Mr. Natsuki any trouble, so she was quite docile."

Subaru: "Hearing that from you, it makes me doubt your Divine Protection of "Animal Whispering". If she were a woman, Patrasche would have been a total kuudere, even though she'd be soft on the inside. When did this change happen??"

Otto: "How would I know that kind of thing. More importantly..."

As Subaru was still struggling to understand just what made Patrasche so devoted to him, Otto moved the conversation to the other matter regarding the dragon carriage, that is—

Otto: "What should be done about the girl sleeping in the carriage? I think it's rather pitiful to leave her shut up in there. If you are busy I could carry her to a room..."

Subaru: "—Don't you lay a finger on Rem."

There was not a hint of malice in Otto's proposal. But his own voice was ice cold… Subaru himself was surprised by the razor sharpness of it, when he saw Otto flinch.

It was almost a whisper, the words were low and dark, a reflection of the viscous heaviness of his mind. It was good that this did not reach the ears of the girls, but still, Subaru was deeply disturbed by the abnormality of the sound that had escaped his throat.

Subaru: "...I'll bring her in, so you don't have to do anything. Your back would be screaming if you had to carry around a girl anyway.”

Otto: “You know, merchants are always handling heavier goods during their work. We aren’t as weak as you seem to think, Mr. Natsuki.”

Subaru tried to cover up his last statement with a quip, and was thankful for Otto’s conciliatory reply, which came after a moment of hesitation. He let out a sigh.

No matter what, his reaction was too extreme. Even though it wasn’t intentional—Or rather, it was precisely because it was not intentional that it was a problem. His nerves had been on-end, and anyone who even tries to interfere with Rem, regardless of their intentions, seemed to him to be an enemy.

Subaru: “This is not a good pattern…Damn it, I feel so wretched. Why am I always so…”

He was supposed to have overcome this, yet here he was immediately stumbling over the first pebble he came across. Why does he never have the strength to stay standing tall?

If Rem was here, if Emilia was watching—if both of them were here now with him, surely he would have that unwavering strength.

Subaru: “I brought it upon myself… No, I forced Rem to pay that price. What a deadbeat I am!”

There should have been a better, more perfect way.

He had believed that he did his uttermost, up to the end of the loop several days ago he deeply believed that. But there must have been an even better, seamless, perfect outcome somewhere. But Subaru had missed his chance to find it, in his complacency, in his cowardice, he compromised into an imperfect future. And Rem’s sacrifice was the price.

If he had been more competent, he would have noticed it.

Before evacuating Emilia and Ram from the mansion, the handwritten letter he had given to Crusch’s messenger had already turned blank. He had thought that a Witch Cultist accompanying the messenger had switched the letter in a ploy to sow confusion, but that is laughable.

There was no chance the Witch Cult could have been aware of their threat, and how could he have believed that the Witch Cult would use such a roundabout way to plant seeds of distrust between their two forces? More than that, if they went to all this trouble, compared to a blank letter would it not have been more effective to alter the contents?

Then why, why was the handwritten letter blank? If it was not the work of the Witch Cult, then there could only be one answer.

Subaru: “Rem wrote the letter. I was the one who asked it to be delivered, and Crusch was the one who gave it to the messenger, so the reality of it being handed over remained, and only the contents were erased.”

That is the Authority of Gluttony, and the fate of those whose name and memories were eaten. An existence erased from the world, leaving only a complex web of incongruities behind. If you weren’t aware of it, you’d never feel the unease, you’d never even realize anything had been missing.

If that was the case, for who, or for what, would have been the purpose of that existence—.

Looking deeper into the fact that the letter was blank, properly investigating, fathoming, delving into the truth, perhaps he could have done it.

What Emilia had said then, come to think of it, the letter had arrived on the evening before the final day. At that moment, the contents of the letter were already gone, then Rem would have been attacked before that time. If so, then hardly any time had passed since Subaru and Rem had parted ways. The chances of being able to catch up were minuscule, but at least there was a chance.

Only, Subaru had let that chance slip by. Why it had slipped by, he could no longer tell. Had he really not felt anything was out of place?

Ram, with her sister-complex, Emilia, who was aware they had left Rem with him in the Capital, yet they had not mentioned Rem at all, so why—

Subaru: "—Ah."

He finally realized it.

At that moment, Subaru let out an idiotic cry and brought his hand to his forehead. With wobbly movements he slid over to the wall, and smashed his head as hard as he could against it.

Shock and pain. But once wasn't enough, again, again, and again he repeated.

Emilia: "Wh, Subaru?!"

At his inexplicable action, the three with him were shocked into speechlessness. But Emilia was first to return to her senses, and called out to him bewilderedly. She gripped his shoulder from behind, turning him around,

Emilia: "What's wrong all of a sudden? It's not like this is the first time you've done something strange, but this is… Oh—, look your forehead has gotten all red!"

Subaru: "The extent of my stupidity, from the bottom of my heart I am amazed, really."

Feeling the coolness of the tips of Emilia's fingers on his forehead, Subaru shook away his head in a trance of self-loathing. Like he said, he could not bear to look at this own foolishness.

Then, suddenly drawing close to Emilia, Subaru fixed his gaze into her's.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, I have a favor to ask."

Emilia: "Wh, wha—? Hold on, Subaru, your face is close, and your eyes are scaring me…"

Subaru: “My helpless idiocy… could you please insult me a little?”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Startled, Emilia grew wide-eyed. Seeing rejection in her response, Subaru reached out to place both hands on her shoulders, holding her tightly preventing her from running away, and then brought his face in even closer.

Subaru: “Please. Don’t forgive me, just insult me.”

Emilia: “Th, that, I can’t do that. I don’t think you’ve done wrong or anything...”

Subaru: “JUST FIND A WAY!”

Emilia: “Even if you ask me that...”

Subaru: “Please! If you do this for me, I’ll offer you my very soul...!”

Emilia: “Saying something this heavy is only making me more uncomfortable! Geez, I guess I really don’t have a choice.”

Emilia hesitated agonizingly against Subaru’s desperate, perverse plea, but finally she nodded in resignation. She cleared her throat and looked up at Subaru.

Emilia: “Subaru you blockhead!”

Subaru: “Uuu—”

Emilia: “You naughty, hyperactive, stubborn, selfish, rascal, don’t know when to give up, get way too cocky jerk!”

Subaru: “Gu...gu...gul...”

Emilia: “No one asked you, yet you only worry about other people, and don’t know your limit. You’re a softie who supports a hated half-elf. When I am rebuked and feeling depressed, you take my place, and behave rashly, get abused and do reckless things.”

Subaru: “gu...Eh?”

Emilia: “You listen but don’t respond properly, a coward who flirts and then runs away. A fool who comes to help someone in trouble, even after they had a huge fight. When things just aren’t working out, when you want something you say the right thing it’s so unfair. Then, when it’s all over, and everyone is running around taking care of the loose ends, you go to sleep by yourself and slack off. Subaru, you dullard!”

Subaru: “Dullard, now there’s a word you don’t hear much anymore...You know, Emilia-tan.”

He had been expecting a rebuke, but the abuse he received was far from it. The words didn’t scratch at his heart and leave ugly scars, instead they were deep and kind, and left their mark on his and Emilia’s hearts alike.

At Subaru’s call, Emilia kept her gaze pointed up at him, pursing her lips.

Emilia: “What.”

Subaru: “How do I say this… is that how you feel about me?”

Emilia: “I know, it’s like all my feelings just flew out. Then I sort of went with it and after a while I had no idea what I was saying. … Subaru, do you think that is how I really feel?”

Subaru: “I wonder. When you get caught up in the moment, are they your true feelings...I don’t know if I could tell.”

At the very least, Subaru had experience regretting things he said in the heat of the moment.

Were those long pent up feelings wanting to finally escape her heart, or just the thoughtless emotions of a moment blurted out all of a sudden?

He thought no one could ever answer that question.

Subaru: “Thank you, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “All I did was say bad things about you. To get thanked for that...Subaru, you really are abnormal aren't you?"

Subaru: "'Abnormal', but for Emilia-tan alone. If I hear it from you, then no matter if it's insult, abuse or a traffic safety poem, it will stir up my pleasure senses."

Emilia: "The last one I didn't understand, but it seems like something I reeally don't need to know so I'll forget I heard it. —So, are you satisfied now?"

She tried to respond while suppressing a giggle, but in the very end, her eyes looked tinged with sorrow.

It was unfair, the raw expression she showed him sometimes, and it was why he couldn't leave her be.

In answer to her gesture, Subaru smiled a broad smile that showed his teeth.

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm fine now. Actually, maybe I'm still not okay. But, if I were to get a kiss from Emilia-tan to break my curse, I should be able to find the courage I need, if only..."

Emilia: "That's too bad, because the request office has closed for the day."

Subaru: "Damnit! I screwed up! Why am I always...too late...ah!"

As if full of regret, Subaru fell to pieces. Seeing this, Emilia let out a wry smile. After spending some time looking wretched, Subaru finally stood up and looked around the room.

Subaru: "That said, I'm afraid there is some business I need to take care of. I feel bad for leaving everyone and Emilia-tan, but I need a little time. I don't think it will take too long but...What's with your face, Otto?"

Otto: "I feel like charging you for reparations after witnessing that ticklish scene, but I'll leave the negotiations on pricing for later… What were you doing?!"

Otto, forgotten until now, voiced his discontent, to which Subaru crossed his arms and cocked his head in contemplation. Come to think of it, Otto doesn't know about the last person in this mansion he has yet to become acquainted with.

If that's the case, to tell Otto where he was planning on going next, just what words would be proper.

After agonizing over the problem for just a bit, Subaru unfolded his arms and said,

Subaru: "Well, I'm going to go meet a loli with drill curls holed up in a room that smells like mold."

With that, he completely abandoned any responsibility to explain the situation, and left Otto to his state of confusion.

Chapter 3:
Reunion and Disagreement

Slowly, focusing only on turning the doorknob in his hand, Subaru held his breath.

He had a feeling this was the one.

Quietly wandering through the mansion like this, he'd all of a sudden notice a door that particularly draws his attention.

Leaving Emilia and the others behind in the living room, having been granted a little bit of time, Subaru wandered through the mansion alone, and found it just as he set foot into the hallway on the second floor.

The moment he touched the doorknob, his suspicion turned into conviction, and as he started to push it open, there was not a single doubt in his mind.

And, taking in the existence of "that room", in that place, at that very moment, he stepped inside,

Subaru: "Hey, it's been a while."

The Forbidden Library, just as he remembered it, stretched out in front of his eyes.

The little girl, who is the master of that dimly lit room, hadn't changed a bit either. —Sitting on a stepladder like it's a makeshift chair, she was in the middle of leafing through a book.

Beatrice: "—The mansion was noisy today, I figured you returned I suppose."

Her eyes lifted for a moment to take Subaru into her gaze. —However, after muttering as if she was bored, she immediately lost interest, and dropped her eyes back into her book.

Beatrice: "If you're back, that means Nii-cha must be back as well. I sense that girl, and a few other annoying insects as well I suppose.”

Subaru: “Puck hasn’t shown up yet, he’s recharging his batteries I think. Ah, I don’t like how you talk about Emilia-tan like she’s in the same category you know! Though I don’t mind the part about Otto.”

Beatrice: “You’re really noisy.”

Beatrice huffed her nose at Subaru’s smalltalk, and rearranged her legs under her extravagant dress. Seeing that, Subaru continued to walk closer, stringing words together as he did so.

Subaru: “But it sure has been a long time since I saw you. Since that time with Bete… Ah, wait, that didn’t happen… the last time was before I left for the Capital wasn’t it? It’s about ten days now...”

Beatrice: “Not long at all I suppose. While Betty is in this room, the flow of time outside really doesn’t matter that much.”

Subaru: “And there you are saying strange things again, geez. Also, when you’re talking with someone, you really shouldn’t have your nose buried in a book you know! Seeing me again after ten days, I’d understand if you’re so happy that you want to hide your blush but still...”

Beatrice: “I can make your mouth spit blood instead of noise until you turn pale in the face, you know.”

At the girl’s unhidden annoyance, Subaru loosened the tension in his face.

Whenever he comes to talk with the girl guarding the Forbidden Library, Subaru couldn’t help but want to do things to poke at her stubborn attitude and mess up that deadpan expression of hers.

Cracking jokes and clowning around, annoying her until she gets really pissed off, then keep prodding her until she finally couldn’t stand it anymore and throws him out.

There is a part of himself that thoroughly enjoys these exchanges. But just why does he always have this feeling towards her, he isn’t quite sure if he knows.

Beatrice: “I take the fact that you’ve returned as a sign that the recent disturbances around here have settled, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You noticed... Well that’s only natural I guess. Emilia and Ram ran around all over the mansion looking for you, you know? It would be nice to apologize to them later.”

Beatrice: “Betty? Apologize? To whom, and for what, I can’t imagine why I should do such a thing.”

Huffing with her perfectly formed nose, Beatrice closed her book with a loud clap, and rose from her seat on the stepladder. Then, putting the thickly bound book back onto its shelf, on tip-toes, she stretched as hard as she could to reach for the one right next to it.

Seeing she was having trouble getting it out, Subaru walked up beside her.

Subaru: “This one? Here.”

Beatrice: “...No, it’s the one next to it I suppose. If you’re trying to give help that people haven’t asked for, at least try to help them correctly.”

Subaru: “Such a thankful loli… Oy, careful not to drop it. You will get hurt if this brick falls on your toes.”

As Subaru was pulling out the book with one hand, he found it surprisingly heavy. Once he had carefully handed it over to her, Beatrice accepted it, hugging it to her chest. Subaru briefly tried to read the title, but as someone who could barely understand anything beyond the “Yi” alphabets, it was too far beyond Subaru’s ability to comprehend.

Beatrice: “I don’t think I will thank you I suppose.”

Subaru: “I know you’re trying to follow the tsundere path and all, but frankly, you saying that and you just straight up saying “Thank you” pretty much carry the same meaning at this point.”

At least, the fact that she'd acknowledge that his actions would be generally considered worthy of thanks, was in itself a testament to her good will.

In response to Subaru's retort, Beatrice frowned and turned her face to the side. Seeing her obstinate attitude, Subaru scratched his head,

Subaru: "I don't mind if you never thank me until the end of time, but make sure to at least thank those two, ok? They were really worried, leaving you behind in the mansion."

Beatrice: "It's not like I ever asked them to..."

Subaru: "Don't say something lame like that. Most people never asked to be born but are born anyway, and even if you don't want people to worry about you they will still worry. ...And that second part is only true when you have kind hearted people around you."

There was no need to specify that Emilia and Ram were that kind of people. Emilia's everyday way of life pretty much gives her a good-person score of 100 out of 100, although Ram's score would probably go into negative numbers, how she is on the inside is a different matter.

Regardless, Beatrice didn't show any sign of agreeing with him. Instead, turning away, she bit her lip slightly and said,

Beatrice: "But in the end, they still left the mansion I suppose... without Betty."

Subaru: "What do you mean? Are you trying to say you didn't want to be left behind? You cut yourself off with that Hikikomori Door spell, far away, would it have been too troublesome to come out yourself?"

Beatrice: "It's "Door Crossing". Don't change it to a ridiculous name like that I suppose. Besides, such a suggestion is insulting to Betty."

Without acknowledging Subaru's words, Beatrice continued facing to the side, her obstinate attitude unbroken. He sensed this time there was something different, and dangerous, beyond her usual act. Subaru furrowed his brows and didn't know what to do.

With her acting like this even before they'd started talking about what he had actually come here to ask her, he wondered how he could bring it up now. Even so, perhaps he still had one more trick up his sleeve to lift up her mood...

Subaru: "Oh well. If you're going to be that stubborn, I'll just tell Emilia-tan that you wouldn't stop repeating "thank you" with tears of gratitude streaming from your eyes."

Beatrice: "You shouldn't make up lies?! It's been a very long time since I last shed a tear I suppose."

Subaru: "What, you're saying you're too embarrassed to cry? If you say that kind of thing while you're still a kid, you're gonna find it hard to express your emotions when you grow up you know? Kids shouldn't worry about what other people think and just cry when they're sad."

Beatrice: "I have some reservations listening to this coming from a man who cried his heart out on the lap of the woman he likes."

Subaru: "Can't you please forget about that?!"

Perhaps Emilia herself knew not to remind Subaru of this embarrassing history.

He was acting like an idiot to distract himself from the dread he carried deep inside his heart, unconsciously building up an increasingly unsustainable dam.

Lying on Emilia's lap, all this collapsed, and all the emotions he had been bottling up ever since first being summoned to this world came rushing out in a flood of tears.

Reminded of that time again, his face felt like it was about to burst into flame. Although, along with that heat, deep within his heart he also felt a radiant light shining from that memory.

Scratching at his cheek, while trying to redo the seal on that particular memory, Subaru snuck a quick glance at Beatrice.

Looking bored as always, she had sat back down on the stepladder with the book Subaru had retrieved for her. She had just slowly started letting her eyes run over its contents.

She was clearly trying to shut off any further conversation, but if he were to let her do that, there would be no meaning in him coming here in the first place.

Subaru: "Anyway, putting crying or not aside... I have something I want to ask you, is that ok?"

Beatrice: "You're free to ask I suppose."

Within her reply, accompanied by the sound of a page turning over in her book, there was the unspoken message "whether I answer or not is another story". There was no indication of cooperation from her, but at least she gave him permission to ask. Subaru quietly mumbled "alright then" under his breath and, intending to breach the subject of his visit—.

Subaru: "—Come to think of it, considering all that commotion was going on outside, wasn't your reaction kind of lacking?"

However, what came out of his mouth didn't carry the meaning he had intended, and instead only served to reignite the conversation he had just tried to close off.

Hearing Subaru's words, Beatrice raised her eyes from her book. Sensing his reflection within her clear, immaculate gaze, Subaru sucked in a small breath,

Subaru: "Wh… while you were sitting in here acting like nothing was happening, it was getting pretty crazy outside you know? This strange group of guys had the mansion surrounded, and..."

Beatrice: "Stop it."

Subaru: "If I hadn't somehow managed to bring back reinforcements with me from the Capital, you have no idea what would have happened. And, it's not like it was easy for me to make my way back here..."

Beatrice: “I really want you to stop now I suppose.”

Subaru: “It was actually a journey so rough, if I were to tell it to you, both you and I would be in tears by the end, but having finally cleared that hurdle…!”

With a loud, cracking noise, Subaru’s rant was forcibly cut off.

Looking around, the source of the sound was the book Beatrice had been holding in her hands which she had slammed shut with all her strength. Subaru tried to understand Beatrice’s expression, and her intentions, but she turned to face him with a sharp and merciless glare, and said,

Beatrice: “How about you say what you actually came here to say, you spineless coward.”

Subaru: “…yeah.”

He couldn’t deny it.

She was right, and had clearly seen through his attempt to run away. To run away from the answer to the question he knew he had to ask.

Subaru: “Do you…”

Gulping down his breath, he squeezed shut his eyes, listening to the beating of his heart.

Beyond his closed eyelids, he saw her sweet smile, smiling back at him.

Subaru: “Do you… remember Rem?”

—His question became sound and, having exploded into reality, could no longer be taken back.

In the loops after the slaying of the White Whale, Subaru had only spoken to Beatrice once in the Forbidden Library.

The purpose of that conversation was to convince her to escape from the Witch Cult, but she refused, and in the end, the girl was left in the mansion all alone.

While he could no longer remember everything they had discussed, looking back, there was one fact that he could not miss.

Beatrice, at that point in time, had asked him about Rem, who was supposed to have returned with him.

By that time, the handwritten letter had already turned blank when it reached the Mansion.

In other words, the conversation took place after Rem had been attacked by the Sin Archbishops, and Beatrice, who had never seemed to care much about Rem up to that point, had suddenly asked about her—

Subaru: “Answer me. Do you remember Rem who used to live in this mansion?”

He wanted her to remember, she must remember, thinking this, Subaru’s voice distorted toward the end.

The depths of his memories confirmed this, and his ever weakening heart, so close to sinking, to drowning, yearning to be revived, would not deny this…

Beatrice silently stared at Subaru.

Within her pupils, there was neither feeling nor emotion. What she was thinking was impossible to read.

Normally, she was a girl whose emotions are easy to understand, but at this moment, Subaru could not pick up anything at all. His teeth itched, it was as if time stood still, and Subaru’s heart was burning down to ashes.

Subaru: “Hey...”

Why don’t you say anything.

You either remember, or you don’t, it’s not a difficult question to answer…

…Of course, there was only one answer he wanted to hear. That Beatrice remembers Rem, and that she would laugh at the sheer stupidity of his question.

Memories eaten, name swallowed, removed from the world, what a stupid notion that is.

Let her feel as he feels, let her feel that same indignation at the cruel outrageousness of this World. Or, even if they could just share the common reality of her existence, perhaps they would find the solution together, and that would be enough.

So, tell me you know her.

Like Emilia, like Crusch, like Wilhelm, like all the others, Rem—don't tell me you have forgotten her.

Wanting to hear her answer. Dreading to hear her answer. Agitation, contradiction, his emotions wrenched and twisted.

Then, to Subaru's faltering, convulsing heart, Beatrice spoke

Beatrice: "—I don't want to answer."

She turned her gaze away from Subaru, answering neither yes or no.

Losing his breath with a "Ha", for an instant, Subaru's mind stopped. Then bewilderedly flinging his arms in the air

Subaru: "Wa, wait. What do you mean you don't want to answer? Doesn't that question only have the answers YES or NO?"

Beatrice: "I don't know what you mean by '/yes/'or '/nō/' I suppose. And my answer will never change. I don't want to answer."

Subaru: "I'M SAYING THAT ISN'T AN ANSWER!"

Swinging his arms down, Subaru stepped forward furiously.

The girl sitting on the stepladder did not even glance at his intense gesture, and only firmly closed her lips. Seeing her obstinate attitude, flames engulfed his chest, impossible to stop.

Subaru: “Those are not the words I want to hear from you!”

Beatrice: “Why does Betty have to answer in words you want to hear I suppose? ...Stop making a fuss. The Library will get disordered I suppose.”

Subaru: “You...!”

Subaru stormed toward Beatrice.

The face that did not even want to look at him, Subaru wanted to force it around and ask her face to face how could she say something so heartless. But,

Subaru: “…”

The moment he was about to touch her, Beatrice looked at Subaru.

And then, in that instant, her eyes filled with waves of emotion, Subaru’s hand stopped. Because it was as if she—

Beatrice: “That question of yours, are words querying about someone eaten by ‘Gluttony’.”

Subaru: “—! So, you...”

Beatrice: “This sort of thing, if one is familiar with the Authority of Gluttony, is not difficult to deduce I suppose. Roswaal too, and Nii-cha, and Shaula would all know this as well.”

Subaru: “Ros…?!”

An unexpected name flying out, Subaru’s throat clogged up.

Roswaal knowing the Authority of Gluttony—does that mean there might be a chance that he remembers Rem? No but before that,

Subaru: “How much do you guys know about the Witch’s Cult?

Even Roswaal should have known, that once Emilia's identity as a Half-Elf was known to the public, the Witch Cult would start taking action. Yet, if I didn't do anything, the Mansion and the village would all have been destroyed. What is going on?"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "There is no way he didn't plan anything, that was what Rem and Crusch told me. Yet, it looks to me like he didn't prepare for anything at all, because if he did, how could it have end up so catastrophically…"

Beatrice: "Betty doesn't know how much Roswaal has thought about it I suppose. But… I don't think Roswaal would have thought nothing on it."

Listening to Beatrice's statement, Subaru narrowed his brows, trying to pick out some indication of Roswaal's preparations at work during the battle against Petelgeuse. Yet, no matter how much Subaru searched through his memories, he couldn't find anything of the sort.

Subaru: "Is it a misconception? Or are we overestimating his capabilities? If Roswaal did something, then why was I faced with so much trouble…"

Beatrice: "If you don't know, then no one could possibly know."

Her sigh carried a color of disappointment, Beatrice seemed to have given up on his lack of understanding. Even though he was displeased by her attitude, Subaru noticed the conversation had strayed off the topic.

Subaru: "Wait, compared to that, if you know something about the Witch Cult, tell me everything. About the Sin Archbishops, about 'Gluttony', there's a mountain of things I want to ask you… and this too."

One after another, Subaru wanted to ask Beatrice everything.

Subaru put his hand into his jacket, and took out a book with black binding.

The book, dirtied with black-ish blood on the cover and partially on the inside, was the loot he received after a fierce battle against a formidable opponent, several days ago.

Subaru: “I know this thing is a really important and deep part of the Witch Cult… I can’t read what’s inside, but as the guardian of the Forbidden Library you might know something...”

Beatrice: “—A Gospel.”

Looking at the book in Subaru’s hands, Beatrice’s eyes opened wide.

Her peach-colored lips trembled, staring at the Gospel with a frozen gaze.

The illegible words written on the cover—she skimmed over them, and with an incredulous expression,

Beatrice: “Why do you, of all people, have...”

Subaru: “I plundered it, but it’s not that I actually wanted it, you know. Like I said, the Witch Cult had the mansion surrounded. So I took it off of their leader. The owner... doesn’t exist in this world anymore.”

Beatrice: “Took it...but, that.”

Beatrice’s voice quivered, as she reached out her hands for the Gospel held by Subaru.

Though he hesitated, seeing Beatrice’s small fingers trembling, Subaru slowly placed the Gospel in her hands. Receiving the book, as if checking, she traced her finger over the mysterious letters on the front cover, and

Beatrice: “Its owner... died, you said, I suppose?”

Subaru: “...Yeah. He’s dead. He got engulfed by the carriage wheels and ... I killed him.”

All things considered, Petelgeuse wasn’t directly killed by Subaru.

But still, everything from the reason, the circumstances, to the events leading up to the reality of his demise, were all inevitable extensions of Subaru's actions.

Subaru wanted to kill Petelgeuse, for if he didn't take that man's life in a duel to the death, in his Soul, he would never be able to forgive himself.

Therefore, Subaru had no reservations about his intention to murder Petelgeuse.

But even without reservations, it could not be said that dirtying his hands did not leave him with any regrets. He could not pretend it didn't affect him, nor would his heart lie for him on this matter.

The fact that he killed Petelgeuse, and had once been killed by Petelgeuse as well, he will never be able to forget.

For as long as he lives, he will be carrying the life he took from that man—but these sentiments did not come out of Subaru's mouth.

Petelgeuse was an existence that deserved to die, and Subaru, believing this, murdered him.

That's all.

But, to all these thoughts carried within his words, Beatrice did not show any reaction.

She only quietly murmured "I see…", keeping her eyes dropped down at the Gospel in her hands,

Beatrice: "So even you went leaving Betty, huh, Geuse…"

Subaru: "—? Who is that?"

Beatrice: "There is no need for you to know. What happened to the 'Witch Gene', if you have killed 'Sloth' I suppose?"

Subaru: "Witch, gene…?"

At Beatrice's question, Subaru wrinkled his brows and tilted his

head.

Seeing this gesture from Subaru, Beatrice's expression was one of bafflement, and she narrowed her eyes as if trying to read Subaru's emotions from his expression. But, searching, her gaze could not find what it was looking for.

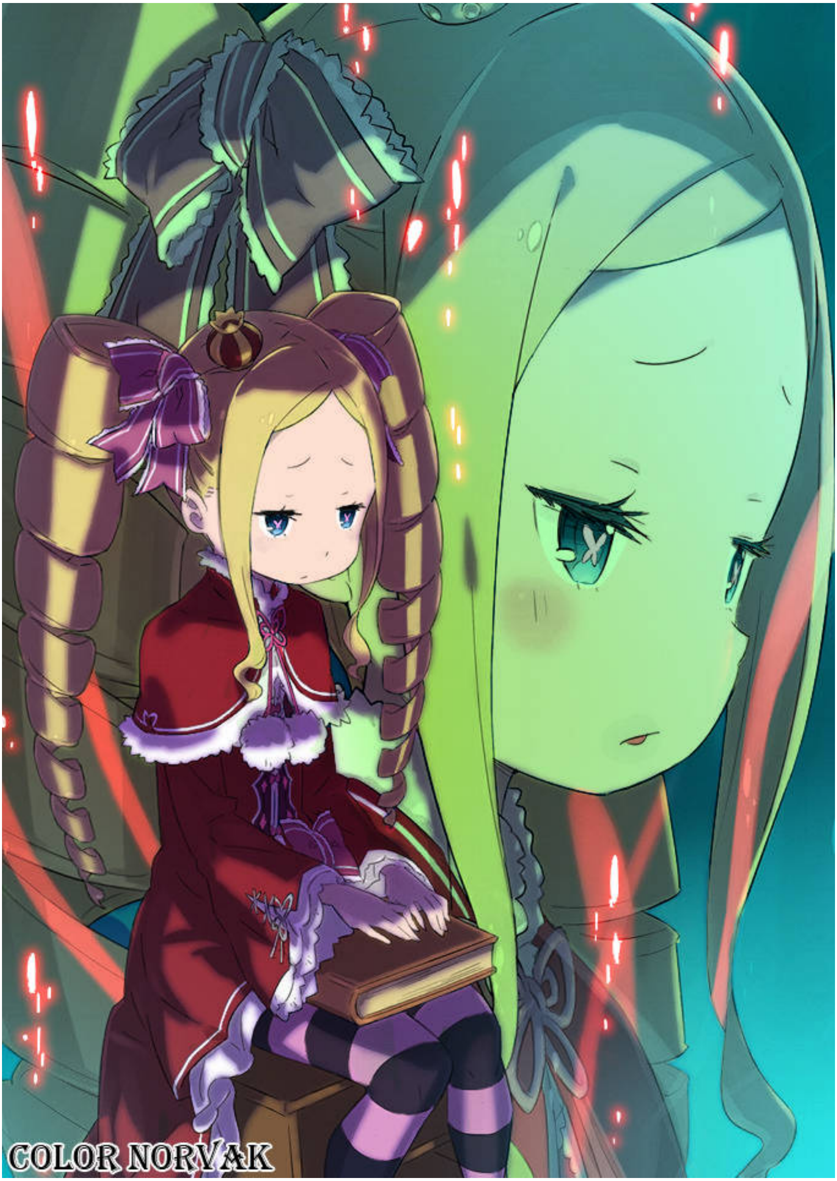
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Subaru clicked his tongue in agitation,

Subaru: “Tch, don’t use professional terminologies on a guy who doesn’t know anything about the situation, come on. What is that, ‘Witch Gene’? Ugh sounds wonderful already.”

Beatrice: “You don’t know…? Wait, seriously? Then, for what reason did you kill ‘Sloth’ I suppose? I don’t understand.”

Subaru: “I was just getting rid of falling sparks! What are you trying to tell me!”

The conversation that just doesn’t seem to mesh is straining Subaru’s patience, but unlike Subaru, who was trying to force the pace, Beatrice is getting closer and closer to a complete silence. Placing the back of her hand against her lips, as if in deep thought, she only continued gazing at the front cover of the book,

Beatrice: “I, don’t know. …This is beyond Betty’s ability to decide.”

Subaru: “What are you trying to decide alone —hey.”

Shaking her head, Beatrice threw the Gospel at Subaru.

Quickly catching the thrown book, Subaru breathed a small sigh of relief and,

Subaru: “What are you doing all of a sudden. I’m not saying it’s dangerous, but it is still an eerie book. Handle it more carefully!”

Beatrice: “—You should hold onto it, I suppose. What would the Witch Gene choose, or not choose… Either way, a decision will be forced. When that time comes, if it helps you in your decision, Geuse would be able to pass on peacefully too, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What do you mean a beverage passing on! You’re…!”

Nothing at all, Subaru understood none of it as he clung to the incomprehensible words. But, before Subaru could say anything, there was a strange feeling forming behind him.

—There was the sound of space being bent by an unnatural force. Subaru instinctively understood, though he didn't know why he knew this,

Subaru: "Are you going to kick me out? I haven't been able ask you anything yet… You want me to leave with just this, seriously?!"

Beatrice: "The answers you want to hear, and the words you want to hear—why must Betty say them I suppose? Selfish… Stop being Prideful."

Subaru: "Pri…! —Just tell me, I want to know! I won't ask for any more! So, please…"

Beatrice: "—Betty is…"

All the hair of his back stood on end—for they were being physically drawn backwards by a force pulling Subaru's entire body back.

Space was distorting—only when he turned his head to look behind him, he saw that the door which was supposed to be shut, had been opened, and he knew that the space of absolute darkness shall soon engulf him.

No wind was blowing, nor were his legs or arms being grabbed by anything.

Only, there was an indescribable pressure all over his body from the front, and a gravitational force invisible to naked eyes from the rear, as if embracing him, pulling him away.

—Absolute and forceful, it was the true form of Door Crossing.

Subaru: "Beako… Beatrice!"

Beatrice: "What is trying to get out is your body, and your soul."

Subaru: "What are you—"

Beatrice: "Your heart doesn't want to hear the true answers, because of your weakness your gaze avoids reality, and your selfish mind does not want to look at your own Sins. All this, distances your body further from this Forbidden Library.”

But,

Subaru: “I—”

Beatrice: “Betty is not… a convenient tool for you.”

Subaru: “—?!”

Beatrice: “What you want to hear, when you want to hear it, in words you want to hear, in the way you want to hear it... I am not a convenient existence, like that.”

As these words wrenched through Beatrice’s lips, Subaru could not pronounce another syllable.

They penetrated deep, and pierced the mark, and completely unprepared, Subaru was mauled by those word into speechless astonishment.

Then, as void emerged, Subaru’s body’s resistance collapsed, and

Subaru: “Cra—”

This way, as if being sucked into the door behind him, Subaru’s body was pulled toward the Door Crossing.

If he goes through, he would be kicked out of the Library. At the last moment, Subaru grabbed the edge of the door, and as his other half was about to swing out, he stomped onto the other end.

Panting, clenching his teeth tightly, he looked up—in front, there was a girl with an expression full of sorrow.

Beatrice: “If you have something you want to know, ask Roswaal. —Nii-cha or Betty, won’t say anything to you.”

Subaru: “...Why are you, almost crying.”

At Subaru’s final query, Beatrice cast down her eyes, and did not respond.

At last, the girl extended her fingertips and wrapped them around Subaru's fingers on the door—and took them off.

Sucked in. Thrown off. Locked out.

To the door, from the Forbidden Library—by the heart of a girl named Beatrice.

Subaru: "…"

Sliding through, the door vomited him out and sent him flying into the hallway.

In front of his eyes, the door that threw him out closed up violently, seeing this Subaru extended out his hand to the flap, but it was too late.

Subaru: "That Drill Loli…"

The other side of the door was not the Forbidden Library, only another unused guest room.

He looked around at the Mansion, but couldn't feel the sixth-sense which connects him to the Forbidden Library.

—Today, he can't meet her anymore.

This realization fell on Subaru's heart.

What he wanted to hear, what he wanted to know, rather than that, he was only turned round and round by the girl's mystifying words, and kicked out before gaining anything.

Subaru: "What the hell! If you know something, then cough it up, you stingy brat! You mopey shut-in-hikikomori! Which son of the Natsuki-family do you think you are?"

Subaru kicked at the door which up until a few moments ago had been connected to the Forbidden Library, and let out a long sigh.

Shaking his head, he tried to forget the image in his mind—The last thing he saw at the time of their parting, Beatrice's expression, would not leave him.

But, surely she was…

Subaru: "With a face almost crying like that, stop shutting yourself in all alone, stupid."

Thinking it was his fault that she had that expression on her face, and having accomplished nothing, he could not blame her at all.

Chapter 4:
The Next Place

—After Beatrice ejected him from the Forbidden Library, Subaru returned to everyone in the living room empty handed, looking rather ashamed of himself.

Awaiting him, the living room was the same as when he left. The only difference was that Otto was now sitting in Subaru's seat, and seemed to have just finished discussing something with Emilia.

Putting on a face that left no doubt in anyone's mind just how much he resented another guy talking to Emilia in anything vaguely resembling an intimate way, Subaru headed towards Otto.

Subaru: "I see you're happily chatting with Emilia-tan while I was gone, it would be nice if you go and drop dead now."

Otto: "It's not in my nature to just sit around silently and let time pass… More importantly, what kind of sane person says a line like that immediately after coming back?! It's very unpleasant when you always take your anger out on me you know!"

Subaru: "D-Don't talk like you can understand! As soon as I buy your oil and fulfill my promise, it's all over between us, we're through! So don't get the wrong idea here!"

Otto: "Could you please not talk like there's something between us that might cause a misunderstanding?!"

In the short span of time it took Otto to yell at him for being a tsundere, Subaru, as if suddenly completely losing interest, turned towards Emilia.

Kept out of the conversation, she was clearly waiting for him and Otto to finish talking, and seeing him looking at her, she looked back up at him and asked,

Emilia: "—Were you able to meet with Beatrice?"

A surprisingly difficult question. On the one hand, the answer to her question was YES, but the answer to the question she was actually asking was closer to a NO.

While he had been able to make contact with her, he hadn't actually broached the most essential topic. He almost wanted to laugh at what a limp, indecisive, cowardly Adventure RPG protagonist he was.

Subaru: "No, it just wasn't happening."

Emilia: "Oh… Oh well, I guess that was to be expected. When Beatrice hides using 'Door Crossing', I guess there's no way to find her. Neither Ram nor I have managed to meet her after all, so..."

Subaru: "Ehm, actually, I did manage to find her. But she was, how should I say this… I guess she was in a bad mood, a bit mopey… Anyway, I wasn't able to get an answer from her. Stupid, right?"

Emilia: "You… found her?"

Having thought that he'd never been able to make contact with her in the first place, Emilia's eyes widened in astonishment. A bit surprised by her reaction, Subaru let out an "Ah?" and nodded his head.

Emilia: "I've been thinking this for a while, but… You and Beatrice are actually really close, aren't you?"

Emilia murmured in a low voice, lightly touching her lower lip with her finger as though pondering something.

In response, Subaru put on his best disapproving frown, working hard to further improve the expression that was shaping his face into something no one could misinterpret.

Subaru: "Me and Beako, friends? Please… She's like my arch-nemesis, ever since the moment we met. The first time we met she sucked out all of my Mana you know?! I don't think there's enough time left in the world for that horrible first impression to go away!"

Emilia: "Even though you made up with Julius? After all that happened between you? Subaru you're like this sometimes, being stubborn in a reeeaally meaningless way."

Subaru: "Being meaninglessly stubborn is the measure of a man! I'm the kind of guy who continues to carry around that kind of stupid idea, even though I know it's a bunch of crap. Plus, I HAVEN'T made up with Julius. I, hate, that guy, FOR-EH-VAR."

Emilia: "Sure, sure."

Emilia lightly brushed aside his disingenuous objections with a small laugh. Seeing this, Subaru screwed up his face to show his dissatisfaction. However, on the inside, he just felt relieved that the subject had been laid to rest.

He still hadn't had time to process his conversation with Beatrice. The sad expression on her face at the very end, he had no idea of how to even begin to make sense of it.

Subaru: "By the way, where's Frederica gone off too? How could her good judgment be so lacking that she would leave my Emilia-tan and Otto alone together..."

Emilia: "Setting aside the matter of me supposedly belonging to anyone for another time… Frederica has gone off to prepare one of the guest rooms… Since we're going to need a place for Rem-san to rest."

Subaru: "Ah, I see."

Subaru responded in a low whisper. Emilia, looking pained, narrowed her eyes.

While he hated himself for causing this expression on her face, he simply couldn't hold back the rending pain filling up his chest every time he was reminded of Rem.

However, with a blink and a shake of his head, he extinguished the grief from his expression to keep his pain from extending to Emilia. Relaxing his lips he said,

Subaru: "In that case, I better get Rem from the dragon carriage.

She shouldn't be lying out there all alone… Oh, sorry about what I said before, Otto."

Otto: "No, no, I don't blame you. After all, I sense that… a lot has happened between her and Mr. Natsuki. I can hardly ask you to have your emotions in check given the circumstances."

Subaru: "It's just that when I think of you touching my Rem with your dirty, money-grubbing hands, I can't help myself… I'm really sorry."

Otto: "There's no way you'd say something like that if you were really sorry! I also really don't think that's a line a person who just labelled a totally different girl as his should be saying!!"

Subaru: "That's just me using you in my plan to make Emilia-tan fall jealously in love with me. Don't make me say it out loud, idiot."

Otto: "You said that out loud all on your own!!"

Grinning at Otto's reliably explosive reaction, Subaru snuck a glance at Emilia's face. Having been intently observing their exchange, Emilia's lips seemed to soften just a little, and the sorrow of moments ago had all disappeared. Confirming this, Subaru drew a small sigh of relief.

Emilia: "Subaru and Otto seem to be reeaally close. Even though you only met just recently…"

Subaru: "Huh, that's what you got jealous at?! Compared to my feelings for you, Otto is just a toy, a plaything on the side! I want a real and passionate relationship with you, Emilia-tan!"

Otto: "Why am I the one being discarded?! Even though this whole thing has no basis in reality, I still really don't like that!!"

Seeing the two guys heat up more and more, Emilia suddenly burst out laughing. Covering her mouth with her hand, her shoulders shuddering with laughter, Emilia managed to squeeze out an "I'm sorry" before she was finally able to continue.

Emilia: "I don't think this is the kind of situation where I should be laughing like this, but I just can't help myself… Are you sure you two haven't actually known each other for a really long time?"

Subaru: "He's a travelling merchant you know? Once his business is over, he'll be out of here before you know it... Actually, just the thought of an un-shipped male character other than myself coming near Emilia-tan, aaah I can't stand it!"

Otto: "I don't know what that is, but in the short time I've gotten to know you I can already tell it's probably something really awful so I don't like it—!"

Seeing Otto putting his hands on his head with a somewhat traumatized expression on his face, Subaru snorted loudly, twisting his mouth.

In a way, those exaggerations were actually his true feelings. Ever since baring his heart to Emilia, Subaru chased her with an air of indomitable invincibility, and his heart is set ablaze with jealousy whenever another guy approaches her.

This is surely because the depth of his possessiveness, and jealousy, are both many times that of any normal person.

The rampant conversation in the living room was coming to an end just as Frederica returned from preparing the guest room.

Otto: "I was thinking, I'd like to check on how things are in the village nearby. Since I'm holding onto the certificates for the other merchants regarding the purchasing of their cargo, I can, to an extent, take care of distributing things to the village. Though I'll get the Margrave to pay for the costs later, of course."

After saying this, as if the fatigue from the long trip did not affect him at all, Otto hustled off towards the village.

No matter how much he showed the face of a calculative merchant, his proposal was, as 60% of the evacuees had not yet returned, nothing short of aid and support for the still nonfunctional Earlham village.

Watching Otto hide all this behind a money-hungry demeanor, Subaru was forced to quickly cover up his sense of gratitude by pretending to spit on the ground.

Frederica: “I have prepared a room in the servants quarters as instructed. …Strangely, there was only one room that appeared to have been thoroughly cleaned.”

Subaru: “Thoroughly cleaned... The innermost room on the second floor?”

Frederica: “—Yes, that’s right. Only that room seemed clean, as if everything had been thrown out except the bed… Do you, know something about it?”

As Frederica spoke of the room she had just prepared, Subaru struggled hard to keep his grief from emerging in his eyes.

The room she talked about—the innermost room on the Mansion’s second floor in the eastern wing, was the room Rem had used. Hearing the explanation that everything in the room must have been tidied up, Subaru deeply felt the overwhelming power of Gluttony’s Authority: the eradication of existence.

Subaru: “...No. I just had a hunch; there’s no real meaning behind it.”

Frederica, who saw the truth behind Subaru’s words, didn’t say a thing.

She too, seemed to possess an extraordinarily excellent disposition as a maid.

Most likely, Rem and Frederica were the two who had kept Roswaal’s overly-spacious mansion functioning… Ram doesn’t count.

Going around back of the Mansion, a soft snorting sound greeted Subaru as he headed towards the dragon carriage.

Looking at where the carriage was parked, he saw an unfamiliar building that looked like a storehouse—most likely it was the place used to shelter dragon carriages, like a garage.

He saw the building, and Patrasche stabled in the adjacent barn.

The earth dragon with jet black skin let out a valiant cry, extending her neck out towards the approaching Subaru in a gesture of tenderness.

Placing a fingertip against the approaching nostrils, he tickled the rough skin.

Subaru: “Sorry I never thanked you properly, Patrasche. A lot of things happened, and I know it’s late, but, I’m counting on you from here on out too, partner.”

Patrasche: “…”

In answer to Subaru’s words, Patrasch licked the palm of his hand with her rough tongue. Looking at their friendly exchange, Frederica tilted her head.

Frederica: “She really cherishes you. One look, and anyone could tell she is a competent earth dragon, yet to see how tamed she is… it’s astounding.”

Subaru: “I haven’t done anything close to taming her? If normal earth dragons are difficult to pet and hug, then I guess it’s just because Patrasche has a deeper emotional capacity than the others. Or, maybe I’m just so incapable, she can’t leave me be.”

It’s not like Subaru was being humble, it was simply the only way he could appraise Patrasche’s lovableness.

Within just 3, 4 days from meeting her, how many times had he had his life saved by this softhearted earth dragon.

Conversely, Subaru hadn’t done anything for her in return yet. He couldn’t help but think his meeting with this earth dragon was nothing short of a blessing.

As though understanding Subaru’s self-assessment, Patrasche extended her head, which was licking Subaru’s hands, and rubbed her muzzle against the inattentive Subaru’s cheek. Surprised at the sudden offensive, Subaru smiled wryly at the raspy sensation on his face.

Frederica: “I, think I understood what kind of person Subaru-sama is. —You, have your own hardships.”

Subaru: “…”

Instead of Subaru, who had his hands full with Patrasche, Frederica’s words and kind gaze were directed at Patrasche, who was frolicking with him.

Patrasche stopped her movements for a moment at the deep emotion behind Frederica’s words, looking at her with the pupils of a reptile, before resuming her toying of Subaru.

In that moment, the women somehow understood each other, and Subaru was completely unaware.

Anyways,

Subaru: “Sorry for making you wait, Rem. I’m sure it was cramped and dark, right? I’m gonna carry you to your room now, okay?”

After spending some time playing with Patrasche, he headed for where the dragon carriage was parked—in other words, to where Rem had been left sleeping.

There was no change, Rem was still in a deep sleep. She didn’t raise any objections.

Sulking at being left behind, her head turned away, cheeks puffed out…saying “Subaru is so mean!”, or laughing at Subaru’s apology —none of it will happen.

Frederica: “—I heard about it earlier, but still I am surprised.”

From behind Subaru, who was immersed in nostalgia, Frederica, who saw Rem for the first time, was unable to hide her surprise. When Subaru tilted his head at Frederica’s surprised response, she quietly shook her head.

Frederica: “Nothing. It is just, her face looks very similar to the Ram

I know. The only difference I see is the color of the hair… twins, as you said.”

Subaru: “I’m sure it must be hard to believe, what with losing your memories and all, but I’m glad you believed me. It would make me glad if you remembered her, without thinking it was some kind of cruel joke.”

Nodding at the reason for Frederica’s surprise, Subaru stretched his palm out to touch Rem’s cheek.

Somehow, he felt no warmth nor coldness. There was no doubt all her life-functions were active, but there was nothing left living within her.

Confirming what he had already checked countless times, Subaru again received an incurable wound to the depths of his heart. Even knowing this, he still could not help but check.

Frederica: “Subaru-sama. It would be fine for me to carry...”

Subaru: “I want to do it. Please let me. I want to be the one that takes Rem to the Mansion… to her room. Sorry I’m being selfish.”

Frederica: “Not at all, it’s really touching. Your eyes look like those of a murderer, but you are kind, I see.”

Subaru: “I also have a heart that gets damaged from such casual dissing!”

Responding to Frederica’s words, Subaru wrapped Rem up in his arms. He has carried her several times now to move her, but even so he was reminded of how light she was.

It was with this body she had stood in front of him, fighting hard to protect his useless self. The more he dwelt on this, the more his feelings of just how precious she is swelled up.

Subaru: “I’ll wake you, as soon as I can. So, please, scold me angrily for feeling the softness of your body with these fingertips of mine.”

Frederica: “It was such a good line, until you had to go and ruin it.”

Subaru exited the dragon carriage, leaving Frederica's disgruntled words behind him.

He nodded a quick goodbye to Patrasche, who had poked her head out of the stables. Subaru then entered the mansion, led by Frederica.

Led to the Eastern Maid's room—The bedroom, the room that once was Rem's.

Frederica: "You talked, with Lady Beatrice."

The statement was thrown out abruptly, as they walked.

Subaru, who had been carefully going up the stairs, looked up at Frederica's back.

She narrowed the pupils of her sharp eyes, and looked back down at Subaru with a gaze that held only intimidation. Although, Subaru understood it was only a misunderstanding, as he had the same kind of eyes, with more white area than was usual.

Coming to the correct assumption that his silence was affirmation at her question, Frederica said,

Frederica: "Is she doing well? I ask because, since my return to the Mansion, I have yet to see her face."

Subaru: "I already told Emilia-tan, but she was doing ok…I guess. Though, I couldn't talk to her as much as I normally do, since she was in a worse mood than usual."

Frederica: "Is...that so."

As though anxious, her expression at Subaru's answer was not a bright one.

Seeing that look, Subaru couldn't help but wonder about something. It was about what the role of the girl named Beatrice actually was, in the Mansion.

Up until now, Subaru had not dug deep into her position or background.

The girl, in the Mansion of Margrave Roswaal, stayed in a mysterious magical space, the Forbidden Library, and was treated by Rem and Ram as both guest and nobility.

Then again, she seems to childishly adore Puck, a spirit Contracted to Emilia, a candidate for the Royal Selection, as though he were an older brother. Also, the way she behaved towards Subaru seemed appropriate for her age, though her actions during their last encounter—they were all mysteries.

Subaru: “Umm, Frederica, you’ve been working in the Mansion for a while?”

Frederica: “Oh, are you interested? Emilia-sama, the girl in your arms...and Lady Beatrice…you seem to have a lot of interests.”

Subaru: “Stop mixing Beako in so smoothly, I’m not interested in young kids. You can see that both my hands are filled with Emilia-tan and Rem, right? Frederica is…Honestly, it’s only been a short time, but you’re not my type.”

Frederica: “Oh, I’m hated.”

Subaru: “It’s no good, you trying to yank my chain feels just like what one of Roswaal’s maids would do. Oh, and it’s only an issue of personal preference; I don’t hate you or anything.”

Frederica’s eyes danced, and she laughed at Subaru’s comeback, while covering her mouth with its cruel-looking fangs.

Frederica: “I’m not much concerned. You, also seem to be a worrywart.”

Subaru: “It’s because I hurt you when we first met. You laughed it off, but it still hurt a bit, didn’t it?”

Frederica: “...”

At Subaru’s words, Frederica’s eyes flickered with an expression of surprise this time. The smile wiped from her face, she stared at him.

The gold in her eyes sparkling, she slid her gaze to meet his, and Subaru was met with the sensation that she was trying to look through him.

Slowly letting out a small sigh, Frederica said,

Frederica: “It is not very often that someone sees into my heart. I would appreciate it, if you refrained from doing so.”

Subaru: “I just tried to put back together what I’d trampled over. Besides, I’m one to talk, what with my eyes being just as fierce looking...well, for me it’s the whole family though.”

Since both his parents had naturally fierce expressions, their son had it too.

During dinner, they all wore the same expressions as they squirted out mayonnaise from their own personal tubes, and it probably looked as though they were performing some Black Magic around the dining table.

Frowning as he saw his own memories objectively, Frederica deepened her sigh even further.

Frederica: “You are not a discomforting guy, just really strange. I think I understand why Emilia-sama behaves the way she does.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, what?”

Frederica: “It is nothing. This time, Emilia-sama would truly be upset with me. What will you do once you know how long I have worked here?”

Shaking her head, Frederica shifted the topic back.

Even though he couldn’t make sense of those words, Subaru too returned to the original topic.

Subaru: “So the thing is, I wanted to talk about Beako… Beatrice. If you worked here as a maid for a long time, then I wanted to ask how long she’s been living in the Mansion.”

He hadn't voiced it as a question or anything, but from Subaru's estimation, Frederica was several years older—Around 23 or 24. Even if she was a veteran maid of ten years, and since Beatrice was around twelve now by all accounts, all he had to do was count back and he could come up with an estimate.

But, at Subaru's question, Frederica shook her head.

Frederica: "I am sorry, but I do not know. Lady Beatrice has shut herself up in the Library a long time, since before I started working in this Mansion."

Subaru: "Ah, well I guess it can't be helped. Your background as a maid doesn't necessarily mean it directly correlates with how long you've worked in Ros-chi's Mansion. So you came to the mansion as an expert maid then..."

Frederica: "No, that is not the case, Subaru-sama."

Frederica interrupted Subaru, who felt his conclusion had been denied by a rather plausible reason.

As Subaru furrowed his brows, she straightened her back, and complemented by her vicious countenance and a noticeable concern, she said,

Frederica: "The only place I have worked at as a Maid, is here at the Master's mansion. And when I was first taken in as a servant, I was 12 years old. That was over 10 years ago."

Subaru: "...Wait, isn't that weird? Because, calculating back since then, that would mean Beako has been shut-up in that moldy room from when she was a toddler."

Frederica: "Don't you, already know?"

As though criticizing Subaru's stubbornness, Frederica shook her head.

With her attitude confirming a doubt he had held within his heart, Subaru understood what he had tried to avoid thinking about too deeply.

In other words, the girl in the library—

Subaru: “Her appearance hasn’t changed. ... I guess she really isn’t human then.”

Frederica: “Since the beginning of the Mathers Family, the librarian who took an oath to continue watching over the Forbidden Library —that is who she is, the Great Spirit Lady Beatrice.”

Unable to detect a lie in her words, Subaru was left with no choice but to accept them.

The true identity of the girl he had interacted with until now, was an existence that belonged to a completely different dimension.

Subaru: “Great Spirit… that title is the same as Puck’s, but she looks really different and all.”

Frederica: “It relates to the absence of a Contract and the oath…… no, this is more than I should say. Please forget it.”

Subaru: “Impossible, totally impossible.”

How many times had Subaru’s ignorance caused him to be dragged around by what other people knew but wouldn’t share.

Frederica did not care about Subaru’s scornful glare, and tightened her lips; it seems she had no intention of touching the subject again. At her attitude and behavior, Subaru sighed, recognizing that he would be unable to pursue talking about Beatrice.

Remembering their talk had continued on while their legs had ceased moving,

Subaru: “Frederica.”

Frederica: “Forgive me, Subaru-sama. My tongue was a little too loose. I was just glad someone appeared that cares about Lady Beatrice. Please, forgive me.”

Subaru: “It’s okay, but my arms are at their limit.”

His upper arms shaking, Subaru looked up at Frederica with a stiff expression on his face.

He was acting strong because “it’s a light light body” and “anything’s possible with love”, but things like his arm strength, muscle stamina, and so on, ignored those lines, attacking him in force.

Frederica: “Oh, oh.”

Subaru: “So, step away, please!”

Subaru swore to himself he would never do something as foolish as setting Rem down on the floor, or handing her to Frederica; then brushed past her and her offer to switch, heading to the guest room with hurried steps.

The sounds of soft footfalls running echoed from behind; it seemed Frederica was following behind him. Reflecting on the horrible way he had ended their talk, he arrived in front of Rem’s room.

Emilia: “—You really, took your time.”

Emilia said, her expression showing how monotonous her wait for Subaru had been.

Laying Rem down on the bed, Subaru pulled the quilts up over her chest. The beating of her heart, and the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, gave testament to the fact that she still lives. Until the day her eyes open again, he wondered just how much time she would spend here.

Subaru: “I guess that’ll depend on how hard I try, huh.”

Turning his feelings into a new vow, Subaru gently brushed away Rem’s hair resting on her brow, and then, he turned around to face Emilia, who had been standing silently behind him.

Subaru: “Sorry for making you wait. Frederica and I ended up talking about all sorts of things, and I wound up with some serious build-up of lactic acid in my biceps.”

Emilia: “It’s wonderful if you were sidetracked in conversation. What were you and Frederica talking about?”

Subaru: “I started by asking some questions relating to rehabilitating the shut-in little girl. How long has she been shut-in, when did it start, how she treated people after it happened… they’re all closely related to her recovery.”

Emilia: “Hmmm, I see. Subaru, you’re really informed when it comes to shut-ins. It’s amazing.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, I’m sure you didn’t mean it but… your words sometimes cut me to my core. Just like right now.”

It was a bit disconcerting how genuinely she seemed to be praising him. Emilia, her expression purely innocent, tilted her head and looked at Subaru, who was frowning. He replied with a wry smile, and shrugged his shoulders.

Emilia: “So, you weren’t able to get Beatrice to tell you anything, then?”

Subaru: “Her mouth is shut firm and she doesn’t budge. By the way, I know I’ve asked this a lot already but …where’s Puck?”

Emilia: “—No luck, there’s still no response. This happens once in a while, but the timing is reeealy horrible this time. Geez, this is really distressing.”

Reaching into her shirt, Emilia pulled out the green crystal stone. Fit in a pendant, the stone was faintly glowing. Within, a bewitching light swirled where the Great Spirit resided. It was the link that sealed the Contract between Emilia and Puck, and Subaru, having seen his materialized form going in and out of that crystal almost daily, knew this as well. Only, as one could deduce from their conversation, there has been no hint of him within the crystal stone these past few days. He was gone —It was hard to believe, but he wasn’t responding to their calls.

Subaru: “This, happens sometimes? But, that’s got to be really exasperating for you.”

Emilia: “Whenever I really, really need Puck’s help, he always comes. So, I don’t think he’s not watching… I’ve asked him about what he does when he’s not around, but he’s never told me.”

Hearing Emilia’s apologetic words, Subaru scratched his head, saying, “That’s…”. He couldn’t hide his disappointment at the fact that Puck, who was aware of everything, would choose to remain silent. With this, all the important figures he could have relied upon for help with his doubts, had all gone silent at once.

Subaru: “Puck and Beako, both quit talking to me at the same time. …This blows.”

Emilia: “I know...Hey, Subaru, what should we do?”

Subaru, resting his hand on his forehead, was in deep thought when Emilia asked him for his decision.

He cast down his eyes at her call. Seeing the reliance and trust that dwelt within her gaze, he despised himself for feeling so happy at a time such as this. Realizing that she was relying on him, out of that trapped, stifling feeling, he understood what he must do.

Subaru: “Since the two who might actually know something suddenly went quiet, we really don’t have a choice but to move on. …Although, even if we find that guy, whether he’ll tell us anything is another matter...”

Emilia: “You mean Roswaal, right?”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s about time he spilled his guts and told us everything that’s been going on, I think.”

Seeing Emilia’s grasp of the situation, Subaru nodded his head. Since she recognized his train of thought, she was probably thinking the same thing as well.

Emilia placed a hand over her chest, and seemed relieved that their opinions aligned.

Emilia: “I’m so glad, that Subaru agrees with me. I was wondering what I would do if you object to my proposals like Roswaal and

Ram always do.”

Subaru: “I might disagree depending on the details, but overall, I’m a hundred-percent behind Emilia-tan, you know? Even if I disagree with you, it’ll always be because of my love for Emilia-tan, I hope you can believe me.”

Emilia: “Love… —Subaru, you reeeally know how to pick the opportunity to flirt.”

Subaru’s irresponsible pick-up line took Emilia by surprise, and she quickly turned her face away. Subaru’s cheeks were reddening slightly as well as he clenched his fists, while Emilia, still refusing to look at him, said,

Emilia: “Then, I have a proposal for you, Subaru, since you’re always on my side.”

Subaru: “Alright, let’s hear it, whatever you want.”

Subaru placed a hand to his chest in respectful subservience. Seeing this, Emilia closed one of her eyes saying “Since you said it so nicely”, pursing up her lips and looking back at him.

Then, taking a moment to let out a deep breath, Emilia stared directly into Subaru’s dark pupils.

Emilia: “There are things we need to talk about with Roswaal, and we also have to know what happened with the villagers, right? That’s why, I want to go to the “Sanctuary”“

Subaru: ““Sanctuary”…”

It was the name of a place he had heard countless times at Roswaal Manor. Subaru had unfortunately never been able to find out where it was, but the evacuees led by Ram had headed there to avoid the Witch Cult. At the very least, now that the sect of the Witch Cult led by Petelgeuse had been annihilated, the threat level at the “Sanctuary” should be no more than that of the mansion.

Emilia: “I’ve been told it’s a place I’d need to visit sometime anyway, so I think this is the perfect time. I’ve decided that this time, I'll finally talk with Roswaal about everything."

Subaru: "W, wa, wai, wait a minute! You aren't thinking of leaving me behind are you?!"

Emilia: "Eh?"

Holding his hand up in front of him at Emilia's enthusiastic words, Subaru put a damper on her decisive declaration. But even so, Subaru had to say it.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, I know you're getting pumped, and I'm in agreement, but you can't just leave me behind. I know I'm weak and dimwitted, but I'd hate it if I couldn't try my best by your side. I know it's selfish, but please understand!"

Hearing Subaru's ardent, relentless words, Emilia's eyes widened.

But they were unmistakably his true thoughts. Subaru was going to stay with Emilia. If he wasn't with her, he couldn't protect her. He couldn't do anything for her. There was no pretense to his feelings, it was simply that his existence was necessary to help her. It had nothing to do with him wanting something in return, it was simply what he wanted to do.

Emilia's expression still showed her astonishment at the forcefulness of Subaru's words. Deciding that now would be the best time to throw her off balance, he continued.

Subaru: "It's no use if you try and stop me. I'm going with you. I've no intention of getting left behind. Whether it's the "Sanctuary" or Roswaal we're going to face, nothing will stand in the way of my burning love for—"

Emilia: "There's no way I'd leave you behind. Come with me."

Subaru: "I don't want to get left behind, no no NO! —wait, what did you say?"

Subaru, still half-way down on the floor and about ready to grovel and plead, asked Emilia this question.

Seeing his display, Emilia placed a hand against her lips, her face reddening ever so slightly.

Emilia: "Like I said, come with me. I'd be too anxious if it was just me."

Subaru: "Eh, Emilia-tan..."

Emilia: "Subaru, I'm counting on you. I don't think you're weak, or dimwitted. I, need your strength."

Subaru: "…"

The impact those words had on Subaru went beyond description. His mouth agape, Emilia's face clouded over with uncertainty at his stillness. Lifting up her hand, as though struggling over whether to reach out and touch him or not,

Emilia: "Ah, uhm, wh, what's the matter? Did I say something strange again?"

Subaru: "The switch to my motivation is in your hands. Whether it's on or off, depends on just a word from you. I can't take it."

Covering his face in his hands, Subaru spoke teasingly to Emilia. "Eh? Eh?? What do you mean?", unable to read the intention behind his words, Emilia fumbled for a reply. Seeing her so confused, he almost wanted to rub it in her face. After all Subaru had just went though at her hands, he's savoring every last bit of it.

Frederica: "—It sounds like you've come to an agreement."

Subaru: "Gyaa—?!"

Their exchange, which must have looked like two people flirting, was tragically interrupted by a knock on the door followed by Frederica's entrance.

Emilia wasn't surprised by her arrival, but Subaru, trying hard to conceal the thumping of his heart, couldn't help but glare at her. Even though Frederica must have easily seen through Subaru's feelings, not a hint of it appeared in her calm, but still vicious-looking expression.

Frederica: “I have no objections about the two of you heading to the “Sanctuary”. However, preparations will take about two days.”

Subaru: “By preparations, does that mean you’re coming with us?”

Frederica: “Not at all. As I still have duties here, I will be unable to accompany you. I will instead give the directions to the “Sanctuary” to the earth dragon you brought back with you.”

Subaru: “You mean Patrasche?”

Subaru widened his eyes at the unexpected proposition. His response received a “Why, yes” from Frederica, who continued as though it were obvious. “Earth dragons are very clever creatures. If you instruct them properly, they can understand which roads to take well enough that a guide is unnecessary. Since she seems especially clever, I don’t think it will be an issue.”

Subaru: “Patrasche, you just keep on getting more and more valuable! Really, just what triggered this turn of events?”

Frederica: “More importantly, there are several things I must tell you two.”

Subaru tilted his head trying to understand his partner, but Frederica ignored his question, straightening her muscled body, she looked at both of them,

Frederica: “If you are headed for the “Sanctuary”, there are several things I would like you to remember. Especially Emilia, I would like you to be careful of the issue of your birth and appearance.”

Emilia: “—Yes, I’ve prepared myself. After all, I’ve heard it’s a place with some complicated issues.”

At Frederica’s dire warnings, Emilia tightened her jaw, the look in her eyes carried her strength of will. To show he respected her decision, Subaru moved to stand beside her.

Subaru: “Honestly, I don’t know anything about that place except that it’s called the Sanctuary...but my supreme goal is to support Emilia-tan. So I’ll listen to whatever you have to say.”

Frederica: “Actually, I sense a very refreshingly pure, ulterior motive there.”

Exasperation and admiration flashed through Frederica’s eyes at the same time, then, blinking once, she pushed down her sentiment, and held up a finger.

Frederica: “In that case, let me tell you about the “Sanctuary”. But before that, there is one thing I need you to remember.”

Subaru: “Need us...”

Emilia: “…To remember?”

Subaru and Emilia’s heads tilted at the same time. Seeing this, Frederica nodded with a “Yes”, dropping her voice ever so slightly.

Frederica: “—Beware of someone named Garfiel. Within the Sanctuary, you two must be very careful, of coming into contact with that man.”

Chapter 5:
Team Emilia

Just as Frederica declared, it was two days later when they set out for the Sanctuary.

In between her duties at the mansion, Frederica had been teaching Patrasche in the stables about the location of the Sanctuary. Since she was responsible for most of the work at the mansion, Subaru suggested she could lighten her workload if she just told him the location of the "Sanctuary" directly, but

Frederica: "My apologies, but the location of the Sanctuary is of great importance to our master. As a mere servant, I cannot act rashly in this matter. I would have preferred to not even teach it to the earth dragon if I could avoid it."

So she politely refused to teach him.

Although it didn't sit well with him, complaining about Roswaal's over-cautiousness wouldn't get him any closer to the Sanctuary. And considering how things were unravelling, Subaru had no choice but to submit to Frederica's judgments.

And so, Subaru spent two uneventful days hanging out with the villagers, and, returning to the role of a servant, performing some of the menial tasks at the mansion.

All the while, pursing up her lips in annoyance that Puck still wouldn't come out, Emilia, who also had nothing to do, would timidly follow Subaru to the village and make an effort to reduce the distance between the villagers and herself. And also, reading all sorts of books and texts Subaru couldn't understand, she spent her time building her knowledge.

As they each spent their two days in their respective ways, there were a few changes that occurred.

The first was,

Otto: “Aaah! Why is everything dumped in a heap?! Documents that need to be prioritized, documents that can be discarded as soon as they’ve been read, and documents that aren’t even worth reading, when they aren’t sorted properly it ends up like this…!”

Scratching his head violently while grumbling, Otto sorted the documents around him at an incredible speed. Quickly looking over a document and roughly grasping its contents, he tossed it into one of the giant sorted piles on the table, then onto the next, and the next, he continued to separate and organize. Watching Otto’s eyes and hands flicker here and there, turning his head from side to side so quickly one would almost expect to see flames shooting out, across the table, Subaru, resting his chin in his hands, sighed in amazement,

Subaru: “Haa, that’s amazing! If it was me, even if they were printed out neatly it’ll still be gibberish to me…”

Otto: “It’s not as if I’m trying to understand them. I’m only separating them into documents relating to finances, relating to petitions, and various other types efficiently first. If only each document was sorted when they first came in… But, looking at this arrangement, it’s organized in a way that only the man himself could understand, I’m afraid.”

It was unheard of, that Subaru should find himself feeling a sense admiration for Otto, who was glaring at the mountain of documents looking rather appalled. Hearing him speak of the documents’ owner—Roswaal’s face emerged in Subaru’s mind, and he couldn’t help but feel that, despite being blurted out casually, Otto’s theory was probably spot on.

It’s a frightening thought, to think Roswaal would be so capable that he could see some kind of logic to this giant pile of documents. But the problem was, that since no one else could understand it, without him here, there was no choice but to sort them all from scratch.

Otto: “Ok, it’s in broad categories now. Next, is to arrange them in chronological order… But before that, maybe I should separate them more into processed and unprocessed first…”

Subaru: “I don’t know whether I should call you meticulous or obsessive compulsive, but Otto, you’re definitely a Type-A, aren’t you.”

Otto: “What’s a /taɪp eɪ/? That doesn’t sound like anything good at all.”

Seeing Otto stare at him, Subaru waved his hand from side to side without bothering to explain. It’s not like he actually believed that blood type had anything to do with one’s personality, aside from being useful as a half-assed conversation topic.

Incidentally, Subaru is Type-B —or rather, the entire Natsuki-family is Type-B. Whenever this was mentioned to someone, the reply they get would always be “I knew it”, and so it wasn’t a very pleasant subject for them.

Otto: “Wait, now that I think about it...”

Subaru: “What’s that, why did you stop? You were going at such a great pace, keep going.”

Otto: “As someone who cares about efficiency, I don’t really mind doing this, but isn’t this situation a bit odd? Why am I, a travelling merchant, standing in the Margrave’s office with sweat all over my forehead working so hard to sort through his documents? Isn’t my position a bit odd here?”

Subaru: “That took you pretty long to notice, didn’t it?”

Seeing Otto only just now noticing all this, Subaru lowered his head and laughed deviously. The reason Otto was performing this menial task—rearranging documents pertaining to the Margrave’s affairs no less, was all entwined with Subaru’s schemes…

That is, to secure useful talents for the Emilia-faction in the Roswaal-camp.

In the present situation, as Subaru sees it, Emilia’s position in the Royal Selection isn’t good at all. As her Knight, or at least as someone generally recognized as such, he was instrumental in repulsing the Witch Cult and slaying the White Whale, but, compared to the abysmal negativity still surrounding Emilia's situation, just how much of an effect did all this have is still a question.

Compared to each of the other camps, Emilia was behind before the race had even begun. Further increasing the difficulty of her position was the fact that her key supporter, Roswaal's true intentions are still utterly indiscernible. Although he was publicly backing her, so far, Roswaal's performance as her patron could only be described with the word "failed."

He failed to prepare a single countermeasure against the Witch Cult even though he should have foreseen it from a mile away, and now, after having overcome that threat, they don't even have a way to contact him. If he could just come out and announce whether he is an ally or enemy already… either way, he is certainly a troubling existence.

On top of that, the people surrounding Roswaal all tended to keep their mouths shut when it comes to their master's true intentions. Revering Roswaal above all else with unquestioning devotion, Ram's behaviour was only to be expected, and Frederica, with her strong dedication to her role as a servant, would not say anything either. Even Puck and Beatrice would not break their silence on the matter to Subaru and Emilia.

In other words, there was not a single person Emilia could safely confide in.

Of course, Subaru wanted to become that person to her, and was in fact acting in a way befitting such an existence, but Subaru's reach was too short, even compared to an average person. He was sadly aware of the fact that he was not a man who could reach her every itch, and by himself alone, he could not wipe away her every discomfort, and this bothered him to no end.

So then, the one who caught Subaru's eye was the man going back and forth between Earlham village and the mansion, the one who would smack his lips after dinner and tea saying things like "Aaaa, having no ambition and getting settled down like this would surely make anyone rot" while smiling relaxedly… Otto.

Subaru: "In other words, the "if there aren't any allies around, why not start cultivating some now" battle plan."

Otto: "I find what you suddenly said somewhat disturbing, but what does that have to do with me?!"

Subaru: "Hmm, I dunno… Maybe… Ah, Mr. Otto. You still haven't sorted the documents over here."

Otto: "Oh, sorry. Let's see, the mining locations for arcane minerals and the quantities of their reserves and this... AREN'T THESE THE KIND OF DOCUMENTS OUTSIDERS ABSOLUTELY SHOULDN'T BE ALLOWED TO SEE?!"

Subaru: "Aah, you saw… I see, you saw them… Aaah, ok, ok. Yeah, well, I'll to do my best to explain it to Roswaal, so don't worry, ok?"

Otto: "It's amazing how nothing in that sentence puts me at ease!"

While Otto was complaining and trying to hold the documents he'd just been given as far away from his eyes as possible, Subaru just grinned, acting like he was only some innocent observer. Seeing Subaru's attitude, Otto's face took on a look of horror, and he said, with his lips shaking,

Otto: "I don't want to believe it, but are you really trying to make me disappear by showing me documents no outsider should see, and then not coming to my defense when there's trouble? Just to trample over the terms of our agreement?"

Subaru: "Of course not! The payment for your cargo and the favor you asked, I intend to fulfil all of them. And on top of that, I'm going to drag you even further into this, until you're in so deep that you won't be able to run away."

Otto: "Do you really have to be so twisted?! I'm just a little traveling merchant, I don't know why you are trying to put so much weight on my shoulders, but please stop it!!"

With a face that looked completely overwhelmed, Otto tried to object. Hearing this, Subaru felt he might have gone a little too far, so nodding his head lightly and changing up his expression, he mumbled “my bad” softly,

Subaru: “I went a bit too far there. I have so many different things filling up my plate, and I’m in such a hurry to sort out all these tangled threads, that I didn’t even think to ask you how you felt about it, sorry.”

Otto: “Ah, no, if you become so reasonable all of a sudden, I’ll feel disoriented. ...Uh, I wonder if I can ask, but… What makes you expect so much from me?”

Seeing Subaru suddenly talking to him so normally, Otto got a bit confused, but he basically accepted this, and asked him this question.

After all, from his perspective, he had only known Subaru very recently, and there wasn’t really anything to justify much trust between them. Of course, even for Subaru, their relationship wasn’t a very strong one.

They had some contact in the previous loops, so now he had a slightly favorable impression of him, but that was all.

But if so, then why was he drawn to Otto like this?

Subaru: “Honestly, it’s not like I have any particular reason to be interested in you or anything. It’s not like I value you as an individual… so it has mostly to do with you meeting the criteria.”

Otto: “That’s awfully frank! —I guess I can understand… but what was the criteria?”

Subaru: “The fact that you’re completely unrelated to any of the factions in the Royal Selection. And being good at weighing gains and losses, and your ability to negotiate and gather support are obviously valuable qualities. And, most importantly, you don’t seem to discriminate against Emilia for being a half-elf, or see her in a different way because of it.”

Otto: “…”

Hearing these three reasons, Otto stared at him without saying a word.

Considering the situation Subaru and the others had found themselves in, these are all conditions that cannot be neglected. And up to now, as Subaru judged, this man: Otto Suwen, was the only person to have met all of them.

Otto, still without a word, was waiting for Subaru.

Unlike when they were bantering just moments earlier, his eyes were lit with a calm, calculating brightness, flickering as if trying to peer into Subaru's mind.

Subaru understood he was being evaluated. Nor was he trying to hide. He had been evaluating Otto to begin with, so of course this is only fair, but…

Subaru: "Also, and this is just my personal opinion..."

Otto: "—Let's hear it."

Subaru: "I feel like I can get along with you. Frankly, even though there is nothing better than gaining more allies for Emilia-tan, it's an extra bonus if we can get along. Ah, and also because you don't have any feelings for Emilia-tan as a woman. Because if it ever comes to that, even if we were lifelong friends I'll have to cut you down...!"

Otto: "You'd kill your love rivals?!"

Subaru: "If I had any rivals, I'll have zero confidence in me being able to win! Don't you underestimate my self-loathing! In my life up to this point, the number of people who actually like me can be counted with a single hand, you know!"

Specifically, his parents, Rem, Wilhelm, Emilia, and with some reservations, Julius and Reinhard… and that's about it. Actually, come to think of it, the count went past one hand just now.

Receiving this kind of appraisal after coming into this Parallel World… perhaps he was actually becoming more respectable after all. Even though he couldn't see any of it in the mirror.

Anyway,

Otto: “Geez, you really are a refreshingly straightforward person. But, without any kind of reservations when sitting across a merchant on the negotiation table, you might as well be a sitting duck, you know?”

Subaru: “If this were a negotiating table even I might try to hustle you a little, but it’s not a merchant and a duck sitting here, it’s just me and you, right? But, if that’s how you see things, I’ll go change my equipment and my attitude...”

Otto: “After having just praised me for my aptitude as a merchant, you go and say something like that? That idiom about how your tongue hasn’t even dried before changing your words applies perfectly here! ...What is it with you?”

With a bothered-looking expression, Otto sighed, and all signs of the suspenseful and guarded attitude of moments ago disappeared from his face. He took a quick glance at Subaru, who was trying to look indifferent, and said,

Otto: “I don’t know why I’m saying this here but, Mr. Natsuki, I have a goal too… It’s not something so grand that I could brag about to other people, but it is a dream nonetheless.”

Subaru: “I think a man’s dreams can either be so ridiculous that they need to be ludicrously exaggerated, or so ridiculous that they have to be kept inside and never told to anyone, those are the only two kinds there are, I feel, but are you going to tell me yours?”

Otto: “The fact that I agree with you is really unpleasant… Anyway, you see, I was born the second son of a fairly successful merchant family. Ever since I was little, I was brought up in an affluent environment, though when it came time for me to become independent, I didn’t receive much support.”

Subaru didn’t know how many similarities there would be between the sibling situations of this world and the world where he came from, but at least the same basics of passing on titles and inheritance seemed to apply here as well —specifically, that it would be passed on to the eldest son.

In that case, as Subaru had expected of a fantasy-world set in the middle ages, Otto, having been born as the second son, only had a choice of either becoming his elder brother's assistant, or aiming for independence by himself.

Otto: "While helping my brother manage his business, I learned the fundamentals of the trade, and managed to save up enough money to set out on my own. With that money, I bought Furufu, my earth dragon, as well as a wagon to go with him, and… Well, I also had the Divine Protection I was born with, so all in all, it went pretty smoothly, I think.

Subaru: "By Divine Protection, you mean the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering", right? Being able to talk to different kinds of animals, depending on how you use it, I guess you could make quite a crazy profit from it."

Otto: "But it's not as useful as you make it sound… There are quite a few inconvenient problems that comes with it that Mr. Natsuki hadn't thought of. In any case, it was followed by several years of me plugging away and barely scraping by, but in that time, something of a dream had sprouted inside my mind..."

Continuing with his story after delving into how he became independent, Otto once again brought up the word "dream". Hearing that, for no particular reason, Subaru sat up properly, as if to listen attentively. Receiving this attention, Otto smiled warmly, and started off with "It's a pretty common dream, you know",

Otto: "Any merchant who's been a traveling merchant will have this dream. —It's to own a place of my own, just like having my own castle, to have my own shop… to settle down there and do business there. If I could have this in some big city, it'll probably be the greatest happiness a merchant can hope for."

Subaru: "That's your dream, Otto?"

Otto: "It's a pretty boring thing to hope for… But after having traveled and traveled, in the end, all I want is just to have the same thing I had when I was growing up. But, well, I guess you could say, that environment had been the symbol of happiness for me.”

Scratching his cheeks in embarrassment, Otto spoke faster and faster to try to cover it up. Subaru took in Otto’s answer, and, wondering whether he would get a favourable reply, he leaned back, and dropped all his weight into his chair.

But, aloof to Subaru’s concern, with a “That’s why”, Otto continued on,

Otto: “A chance to make a big shot like the Margrave indebted to me… as the second son of a trader family, as a traveling merchant, and as a great merchant of future to come, I can’t possibly let such an opportunity pass me by. Especially considering I’d be selling a favor to someone who might become the future King of this country, it’s a business opportunity so huge that even if I redo my entire life I won’t be able to find the likes of it again, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “Ok, so you’ll join us then. Thanks, I’m glad. I knew you’d make the right choice, Otto. Now keep sorting the documents.”

Otto: “What?! That was a pretty good speech just now wasn’t it?? Isn’t that reaction too lacking?!”

Subaru: “I feel like letting it make an impression on me would mean that I lose somehow… Well anyway, the moment you touched these documents that no outsiders are allowed to see, there was already no way out for you. Kekkekeke!”

Otto: “No matter how I look at you, you’re still a terrible person!”

At the end of this long conversation, it seemed as though nothing had actually changed, and Otto didn’t receive much compensation for his newfound determination.

But even while teasing Otto like this, deep down, Subaru was thankful for it... Though these words will never come out of his mouth.

Otto: “But I have to say this first, unlike Mr. Natsuki who supports Emilia-sama unconditionally, I’m only cooperating because of the present circumstances. If the Margrave and Emilia-sama ever fight amongst themselves inside the faction, I'll need to weigh the gains and losses before choosing a side. So please don't mistake me for a full-fledged ally."

Subaru: "If you're weighing Emilia-tan and Roswaal on a balance scale, you're completely in my hands. I will slowly and surely feed you all of Emilia-tan's good qualities, so don't you worry. —You heard everything loud and clear just now, right?"

Brushing aside Otto's long-winded excuse, at the end his last sentence, Subaru turned his face and his words toward a completely different direction. Seeing Subaru do this, Otto, stunned with a dumbfounded expression on his face, turned his gaze to where Subaru was looking. And there,

"Yep… I mean, Yes. I heard it properly, Subaru-sama."

With a lovely smile, the girl in maid's uniform swung her chestnut-colored hair, standing there at the door.

Of the changes that took place in the Mansion during these two days, this was the second.

–

With only Frederica, (Subaru was also helping, but his ability as a servant was half-assed at best, and his health still hasn't fully recovered yet) managing everything at the mansion alone was physically impossible. So Frederica, understanding this, went down to the village personally to recruit some help, and that's where this girl jumped in with open arms—Petra Leyté.

Being a resident of Earlham village, and being among those who evacuated to the Capital, she had safely returned with them. But since most of the other villagers had not yet returned, it must have been an unsettling time for her.

But still, when Frederica came to recruit a new maid for the mansion, she instantly jumped in. And as there were no other candidates who were interested, she was picked up, and was now working in the Mansion in temporary employment.

Subaru: “You are still so small, but you’re leaving your parents and coming here to work as a maid, you’re amazing, Petra.”

Petra: “I’m already twelve, so I’m an adult who can work now… Actually, I am just an adult. Subaru-sama could you treat me like one please?”

Subaru: “I will consider it, if you say it politely, after you get the “temporary” part removed from your “temporary employment” and after you get an official certificate from Frederica. Until then, I’ll always treat you like a cute little girl~.”

When he patted her head clumsily as she squirmed around, the girl, with her neatly arranged hair all messed up, let out a quiet “Eeek —”, and clung onto him tightly. It was a completely different reaction than what he expected, but it was certainly a lot better than being abused and spat on.

In any case, she was at an age where she wants to be older than she is and stand up on tiptoes. Petra, with her surprisingly strong character, and her own way of growing up, her aptitude for being a maid was really quite high. Although she didn’t meet all the points, in cleaning up the Mansion and preparing food with Frederica’s support, she has already surpassed Subaru in ability.

…Well, Subaru is really useless.

–

So, from outside the door of the Master’s office, she had been pricking up her ears to listen in on the conversation inside. She was, of course, acting on Subaru’s instructions, and needless to say, it was all part of his scheme to lure out Otto’s commitment and cut off his escape.

Noticing all this, Otto’s face turning red, he glared at Subaru,

Otto: “It was a s-set-up—?!”

Subaru: “It’s nothing to be concerned about. With a third person involved, your statements earlier are now legitimate official record. It was an emotional, heartrending manipulation in order to secure witness testimony for the jury later… so think of it like that."

Otto: "What is so emotionally heartrending about a man talking about "manipulation"?!"

Hugging his own head, Otto, finally understanding there was now nowhere to run, shouted at them in a half-crying state, but it was too late. Giving Otto a grin, Subaru held up his thumb to Petra, who was standing at the door.

Subaru: "Good job, Petra! But won't you get scolded by Frederica, using time on something like this?"

Petra: "Right now, I'm spending my time sweeping the corridor. Using even more time to sweep the corridor in front of the the Margrave's office, I wouldn't be scolded."

Subaru: "You're very shrewd~. Even a small girl is a woman, after all…"

Listening only to the second half of Subaru deeply emotive words, Petra cheerfully loosened her cheeks. Seeing her predictably unchanging reactions and attitudes, it was true that there was something in there that warmed Subaru's heart.

Petra, like Otto, is another ally who is not under the influence of Roswaal.

Compared to Otto, there was not much she could do for Emilia, and her significance and influence is probably even less than Subaru's. But, she is not afraid of Emilia. On the road to the Capital City during their evacuation, she wholeheartedly remained at Emilia side. Subaru would not forget that, and, probably, Emilia would never forget either.

Her being there, perhaps there will be a time when Emilia will be saved by that existence.

Subaru: "It never hurts to have more allies. What you can do isn't a problem… What is important is what you are willing to do, and what you will strive to able to do for that person. After all, if I am counting the number of things I can do, it'll look really bad for me…"

His merits and his deficiencies, Subaru could probably count with his fingers and figure out that he had more deficiencies. But even so, he wants to be her ally, and so he has to use the few things he does have to their full potential, and keep on going, one way or another.

With a to-hell-with-it attitude, with nothing to stop him, embracing this over-optimistic explanation,

Subaru: "We are definitely small, but let's do our best from now on. This is what we are, the very first members of the Emilia-faction!"

Making a fist and punching it out into the air, Subaru made his declaration.

Seeing that, Petra and Otto, having been left out, looked at each other's faces, and

Otto: "I never said that I'm a part of that faction, right? Please don't misunderstand, okay?"

Petra: "I want to be an ally of big sister too, but I don't want to lose to her in what's important…"

Otto looked appalled, holding his head. Petra, joining her hands behind her back, looked down and muttered hesitatingly.

But still, in the end, they succeeded in matching up their fist bumps, so that there could be no doubt remaining in any bystander's mind that they totally knew what they were doing.

—The two days before setting out toward the Sanctuary, even though it was only a tiny step forward, there was something real in all of that, and, thinking this, the wait had already come to an end.

Chapter 6:
On the Road to the Sanctuary

1

Frederica: “I will not be able to accompany you, so please take care during your journey. Also, if you would, please tell the Master that Frederica is watching over the estate.”

It was the morning of departure, and the dragon carriage was parked outside the front of the mansion. Coming to see them off, with these words, Frederica bent the small of her back in a bow.

Her form in her bow was so beautifully refined, that anyone receiving it would be intimidated into naturally straightening their backs.

In any case, receiving this, Subaru and Emilia met each other’s gaze.

Emilia: “I am the one who should be sorry, I know how hectic things are right now… Roswaal is absent, and I really should be the one acting in his stead, yet...”

Subaru: “Anyway, Emilia and I are clueless when it comes to caring for the mansion. Even if I can handle routine tasks, everyone could see how much of an amateur I am when numbers are involved. I tried throwing Otto into all that to sort it out, but it’s like sprinkling water on hot coals.”

Looking at the results over the past two days, Subaru could only smile wryly at how futile their efforts had been.

He and Otto wandered aimlessly through the cluttered office, and the only thing they learned was that “it’s impossible without any explanation from the one responsible” …That one statement pretty much summed up the extent of their progress.

Frederica seemed to have a rough idea, but it would take time to cover the discrepancy after her months of absence. Actually, thinking of how much work was involved in just maintaining the mansion, it wouldn't have been right to increase her workload even further.

Emilia had attentively taken care of some of the simple tasks, but aside from that, she had no choice but to plug her ears to the rest of it, even though she knew they would start piling up.

Subaru: "It's like that feeling when you put off doing your summer holiday's homework, and then the next thing you know, it's the first day of the new semester. But I was never the kind of guy who doesn't hand in his homework, though."

Emilia: "I don't really understand, but isn't that a good thing? Right now, I feel the complete opposite, and my chest reeealy hurts. It's not that I feel guilty, but I know it's not good to leave everything neglected like this."

Subaru: "It's not actually our fault, that's how I would rationalize it, but it's hard for Emilia-tan, isn't it? Well, I totally understand how unpleasant it feels to just watch things go from bad to worse..."

It was vexing, to have to neglect things that really shouldn't be put off. But while he could sympathize with Emilia's sense of guilt, it was also true that there was not much he could do to help.

In the end, he was insufficient, so the only thing to do is to call someone more competent:

Otto: "The earth dragons are all ready to go. Even though it's only been a few days since they exerted themselves, Mr. Natsuki's Patrasche looks like she's chafing at the bit to get going."

Subaru: "She's a good hard-working girl, isn't she? Her previous owner must have had an impressive character, unlike her current one… You think she can guide us there? It'd be horrible to get lost on the way and end up stranded."

The one who broke into their conversation was the man sitting in the driver's platform of the dragon carriage, conversing with the two earth dragons, Patrasche and Furufu—Otto.

Since the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering" only applied to Otto, to a bystander, he just looked like he had a screw loose in his head while he was talking to the earth dragons, but Subaru didn't remark on it.

Not noticing that Subaru was sending him a heart-warming look, Otto only responded to his question with a straightforward "uh-huh", nodding.

Otto: "Frederica's directions were good, and there doesn't seem to be any problems. I'm sure we can make the trip in under half a day."

Subaru: "I see, I see…But, were you really planning on coming too?"

Otto: "Of course I am coming!!"

After Otto's gave his seal of approval on Patrasche's directions, Subaru nodded and moved on to his next question, to which Otto stomped noisily on the wooden platform, bulging his eyes.

Otto: "After all, this will be my first meeting with the Margrave. Sure, I was the one who asked you to introduce me, but imagining the kind of introduction you'd give if I wasn't there…It's too frightening, I can't just leave it to you!"

Subaru: "Oy oy, I'll get all flustered if you keep trusting me so much."

Otto: "Yeah, though we've only known each other for a short while, I already trust you 120% —I can be certain that Mr. Natsuki will alway do exactly what I don't want you to do!"

Subaru twisted his lips at these words, and Emilia, who had been listening silently up to now, let out a sudden burst of laughter.

The two men turned to the source of the laughter at the same time, and Emilia timidly raised up her hand,

Emilia: "Really, you two are such good friends. Whenever I see you together, you're always bickering so affectionately, it makes me kinda jealous."

Subaru: "If you want, I'll be affectionate toward Emilia-tan too, only I'll be flirting instead of bickering. I'll move Emilia-tan's bickering time to Otto's timeslot, and replace it with the affectionate time from Otto's timeslot."

Otto: "If you do that, there won't be anything between us except insults and fist fights?!"

Subaru was pretty confident in his skill with words and insults, but if it comes to fighting Otto in a melee, he's not entirely sure he could come out on top. Otto looks pretty genteel, but Subaru knew personally how strong he was.

In a previous loop, after a harsh exchange, Otto had thrown him off a carriage. Knowing that his opponent wasn't just a pushover, Subaru figured his chances were pretty slim if they ever ended up head-to-head.

Subaru: "Thinking about it like that, my combat abilities are crazy low. I knew that already, but it's still depressing."

Like previously mentioned, Subaru would lose to Otto, and it goes without saying that he couldn't beat Emilia, who knows magic. He had already been demolished by Frederica, and there was no need to mention the sleeping Rem or the shut-in Beatrice. In that case, the only one Subaru had a chance against in the mansion was—

Subaru: "Come to think of it, the only one I've got a chance of beating is Petra, and I don't see her around. What gives?"

Emilia: "I'm scared to ask… but how did your train of thought shift to who you can beat? Anyway Petra has been in the mansion…oh, here she comes."

A bit astounded by Subaru's futile efforts to gain victory by process of elimination, Emilia looked toward the mansion, her purple eyes faintly flickering. Being affected, and looking toward the same direction, he saw the form of a girl swinging her sleeves in her brand-new maid's uniform as she ran up to where they stood.

Petra: "Wait, wait a minute. Suba-, Subaru-sama…!"

Subaru: "You don't need to rush, I wouldn't do something so heartless as leaving all of a sudden, only Otto would do something like that. Right, Otto?"

Otto: "Don't you remember what you just said three seconds ago?!"

Smiling at the out-of-breath girl, who was resting her hands on her knees, Subaru pulled Otto into the conversation with some light-hearted teasing as he waited for the girl to catch her breath. Then, wiping her brow softly, Petra looked up.

Her flushed cheeks and her big, round eyes looked adorable. She let out a long breath, releasing her fatigue, and shifted her angelic face into a smile.

Petra: "I wanted to give you this before you leave. Please take it with you."

With that, she held out her hand, revealing a simple handkerchief that seemed nothing out of the ordinary.

The edges of the white cloth were laced with a golden-color, and the tips of his fingers told him it was made with meticulous workmanship. Receiving it, he turned it over to look at the other side.

Subaru: "It's…embroidered. Oh, it's really good."

Sewn into the surface of the white cloth, was an embroidery that was most likely hand-stitched by Petra herself. It was done with grey, pink and black colored threads, and the design was something Subaru was very well acquainted with. Just then, Emilia, who had been peeking over his shoulder, let out a small laugh "Aha."

Emilia: "It's the same Puck you drew, Subaru. Oh wow, it's really well done."

Subaru: "My disfigured Puck, yeah this is really well done. There mustn't have been much time to study it either."

Petra: "I got the stamps after doing the Radeeo Calisthenics every morning."

Forgetting to speak politely, Petra pulled something out from around her neck. It was the stamp card Subaru had made and given out to the village children. —Every morning when they participated in the radio calisthenics, he had stamped their cards with an image he'd engraved onto a sweet potato, in place of a real stamp.

She held in her hand the most recent stamp, the disfigured Puck's "Gloomy Monday". She must have worked hard, pricking her fingers as she sewed in the design.

Subaru: "It really is well done. As a Sewing Master, I can't afford to lose here."

Petra: "Will you take it...Ah, no. Would you please take it?"

Subaru: "It's actually, "Would you please accept this". —Of course, I'll gladly accept it. It seems a shame to use it for wiping blood, sweat or tears, so I'll just keep it close as a good luck charm."

Carefully folding the handkerchief, Subaru tenderly, and with great care, put it into his chest pocket before looking back towards Petra. Then, as gently as he could—he looked to the vicious, narrowed eyes and the sharpened fangs filling up the diabolical smile that was currently pointed at Petra. Hearing his words, Petra placed both her hands on her blushing face and looked away.

Petra: "I shall await your safe return. Oh, and big sister and the noisy guy too."

Emilia: "It kinda seems like I'm just an extra..."

Otto: "Wait, wasn't my assessment a little too harsh?!"

Emilia and Otto responded to Petra's words in turn, a wry smile making its way onto their faces. Subaru couldn't help but find himself smiling, as Petra seemed to think nothing of the dense pressure emanating from Frederica behind her.

He had no doubt that the moment they leave, Petra will be set upon Frederica's harsh education. Petra, live strong!

Subaru: "Well then, while it's hard to leave you all, we should be on our way."

Emilia: "If we spend too much time talking here, it'd have been meaningless to try to leave so early."

Subaru interjected, putting an end to the vibrant conversation, before hopping up into the cargo space of the dragon carriage. After that, he held out his hand,

Subaru: "If you would, Emilia-tan. Into my arms."

Emilia: "I'm sure it would be pleasant to see the scenery from the driver's platform once in awhile?"

Subaru: "Ahh, heartless! E M K (Emilia-tan Major Koakuma*)! — Oh, wah!" *little-devil

Being treated so cruelly, Subaru was almost about to withdraw his hand, when it was pulled so forcefully that he nearly fell out of the carriage as Emilia passed casually beside him.

Her silver hair brushed against his nose as she went by, until she landed inside the dragon carriage with a tiny sound. Softly sitting down across from Subaru, she tilted her head looking at him,

Emilia: "Something wrong?"

Subaru: "Nope—, nothing—?"

With these words, Subaru loudly stomped his way over to where she was, and plunked himself down beside her. Considering the inside of the carriage was very spacious, Emilia smiled at Subaru's cramped use of it.

Otto, watching their exchange, grumbled "I can't stand being associated with you" as he sat down in the driver's seat, gripping the reins and looking up at the road ahead.

Otto: “Alright then, we’re off. Take care not to bite your tongues please.”

Subaru: “Right back at you, don’t shake the carriage too much. And if you’re going to suddenly apply the brakes —please use the signal we talked about before. Without that, it’ll be hard for me to time when to push Emilia-tan down.”

Emilia: “You’re thinking of something like that?”

Otto: “I! I never heard that devilish plot in my life! Wait, when did I get turned into an accomplice?!”

Emilia turned a gaze of near-disdain upon both Subaru and Otto, and didn’t seem to acknowledge Otto’s outcry at the false accusation. Thinking Otto’s wailing at the injustice of it all suited himself well, as though that had nothing to do with him, Subaru lifted up his hand,

Subaru: “Alright. Destination: “Sanctuary”. Let’s be off—!”

Otto: “Who are you to say that?!”

Seeing Otto sulking in the driver’s seat, Subaru replied “You aren’t good at getting hyped, are you” complainingly, before sticking his head out the window to look at the two who were here see to them off,

Subaru: “Okay now, we’re leaving the place in your care. Also...I’m counting on you… to take good care of Rem.”

Frederica: “Please, leave it to me. In return, I leave Emilia-sama and the Master in your hands.”

Petra: “Take care, and come back safe.”

Subaru’s voice held none of its usual playfulness, and as they prepared to depart, Frederica and Petra bowed in farewell.

After that stupidly formal exchange, this time, Subaru decisively — well, unfortunately, not without some hesitation, severed his thoughts from the mansion.

Subaru: “Oy, we haven’t left yet Otto? You’re slo—w.”

Otto: “I can’t understand this treatment!!”

This exchange blowing away the rest of the tension, they set off for the Sanctuary.

2

Frederica: “It seems I’m going to have to teach you to speak more politely, and bow properly again.”

Petra: “I’m so sorry. It’s just...I wanted to be cosseted, if only a little.”

Petra quickly lowered her head, her gesture nearly perfectly imitating Frederica’s teaching. She was a fast learner, and could take things in quickly, and was certainly a student worth teaching.

The exchange from a moment ago was understandable given her age, so there was no reason to scold her over such a minor thing.

Frederica: “I know that you have been close with Subaru-sama and Emilia-sama these past few days. Still, it is not good to forget that your relationship is that of servant and employer.”

Petra: “—Yes ‘mam. I am deeply sorry.”

The girl was conscious of the fact that her behavior had been selfish.

She could have behaved exactly as she had been taught, and seen Subaru and the rest off properly, but she had instead intentionally separated herself from her duties as a servant, and chose to see Subaru and the others off as just a simple girl… there must have been a reason for it, and perhaps the reason was small, but it was one she was unable to part with.

Frederica: “There is no propriety in discussing this further. Instead, as penance for what you did, you will be hand-copying extra texts this afternoon.”

Petra: “Uuhh…Will the number of topics increase?”

Frederica: “You should have been prepared for at least that much. Then again, if you had already calculated this would be your punishment to make up for your actions, then I am quite looking forward to your future as my student.”

Saying that, Frederica clapped her hands with a “Now then”, continuing,

Frederica: “Even if Emilia-sama and the rest are out for now, Lady Beatrice is still in the mansion. We can’t afford to become lax with meals and cleaning. If we don’t finish quickly, there won’t be enough time for studies. So Petra, hurry up and finish your tasks.”

Petra: “Yes, ‘mam. I’ll go finish them in no time!”

Watching the young girl run off, her clothes flapping, Frederica’s mouth softened ever so slightly, revealing her fangs. With a practiced motion, she covered the smile with her hand, and looked towards the direction where the no longer visible dragon carriage had gone —towards Emilia and the rest who had departed from the mansion.

Frederica: “It is as you said it would be, Master. Whether they can overcome the “Sanctuary” or not, is up to Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama now.”

Closing her eyes, she let the gentle wind wash over her.

Frederica: “Will Emilia-sama be able to overcome it? Bound with the Witch’s blood, that inescapable impasse that is the garden of paradise—”

3

Subaru: “So, Puck hasn’t shown his face yet, after all?”

Emilia: “No, he hasn’t. I do call out to him, and I still feel his existence inside the crystal but… this is the first time he has gone missing for this long, so I’m kind of worried.”

In the smoothly galloping dragon carriage, sitting together, only Subaru and Emilia's voices resounded in the car.

Under the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", the sound of the wind and all the noises outside were almost completely cut off from the dragon carriage. Even while running with such great speed, the near absence of turbulence or sound all made it feel like being in something of a dream.

Perhaps, this was the same luxurious feeling that might be felt while riding in the premium seats of the Shinkansen Bullet Trains, but Subaru never had a chance to experience those seats, and not even the normal seats, for that matter.

Anyway, in the quiet interior of the carriage, the words exchanged between them can be heard crisp and clear. And here, the topic of their conversation drifted to the change that had been bothering them for the past few days—namely, the absence of the one that was usually by Emilia's side, that father-figure cat who was always thwarting Subaru's advances on Emilia… Puck.

Subaru: "Now that I think about it, he had not shown up since before we returned to the Mansion… The last time we saw him was..."

Emilia: "For me was it in the Capital City, when we were in Crusch-sama's Mansion. I thought everything was very normal, but I couldn't meet him again after that morning. Even when I call him, he doesn't show up... I was worried if I had made him angry or something."

Looking down, Emilia played with the tips of her hair, trying not to show her face to Subaru. These few days, her silver hair had been fixed in a braid.

Seeing Subaru stare at her, as if understanding the intention behind his gaze, she nodded "Yes",

Emilia: "The final Contract I made with Puck the last time I saw him was "Keeping my hair in a braid". After that, I had not been told what to do, so I kept it as it is."

Subaru: “Your hairstyle is your Contract with Puck? Really? That’s really light… isn’t it? Although, it’s said that hair is the life of a woman, so that’s as if Puck’s Contract is holding a life…”

Emilia: “I think that is a reeally light price to pay. I didn’t know this until I got out of the forest, but for getting into Contract with a spirit like Puck, conditions like this one are way too light. Roswaal was also very surprised. In reality, you apparently need to have humongous amounts of Mana or complicated terms.”

Seeing Emilia loosening the corners of her lips as she said this, Subaru nodded as if thinking of something. But then, he quickly lifted up his jaw to shake Emilia off of her weakened smile,

Subaru: “Well, for restricting even a little bit of Emilia-tan’s time, for me, I would say that is a really heavy price.”

Emilia: “Lines like that, if you keep saying it so lightly it would become superficial. If it was something important then it would be better to keep them for important timings, I think.”

Emilia voiced her objections at how Subaru was finding more and more ways to flirt. On the other end, Subaru slightly raised both his hands and shook his head,

Subaru: “The secret lines reserved to tell Emilia-tan in important scenes are kept separately. This one was for daily life, one of the many lighter things to say to Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Really, Subaru, you have a silver tongue. …Oh no, maybe my face is red so don’t look!”

Seeing Emilia suddenly hold up her palms to cover her face, Subaru laughed, confirming he got what he wanted. And, trying to bring the conversation back on topic, he continued with “Well…”

Subaru: “Since Puck is absent, there are some serious concerns in the combat aspect of this trip. We can’t rely on Otto for fighting, and I’m obviously no good at all. And, Emilia-tan is also not as tough without Puck, right?”

Emilia: “Oh, you say things like that, huh. But I’ll have you know, I can still use magic when Puck's not here. It's not just Puck, I have Contracts with micro-spirits too. I have no problem communicating with them, so I can fight. I will protect you no matter what happens."

Subaru: "Oh no, so manly… That'll mean I'm way too pathetic, aren't I… Those words, I myself will eventually say them to Emilia-tan one day, so please wait."

Emilia: "I'll be waiting without any expectations."

As if proving Emilia's words, coming nearer, and gathering closer onto Emilia's fingertips, the micro spirits appeared drifting, shining. While they looked like Julius' demi-spirits, their existences seemed weaker in comparison—and though their power was a world away from Puck's, at least, they certainly didn't appear to be a collection of defenseless beings.

The only girl in the group, and the one he has a crush on, no less… having to rely on her for protection would really be embarrassing…

Subaru: "That said, my reliance on other people hasn't changed much since the battle with the White Whale. I was completely dependent on Rem then, and even before that...wait, was there never a time when I worked everything out on my own?!"

Of course, that was the story from his perspective, and it might have been too much of an undervaluation.

But in any case, since there was no one with enough information to find fault with this conclusion, Subaru's horrified reaction upon realizing all this was just passed off.

Subaru: "Well, Sanctuary, huh. Actually, what kind of a place could it be..."

After a bit of self-reflection, he gazed out at the scenery outside through a little window, muttering this under his breath.

Right now, to Subaru, the Sanctuary was a place of absolute unknown. The sound of the name itself did not give off a very dangerous impression, but Frederica's warnings as she spoke of the

Sanctuary weighed heavily his mind. Out of those words,

Subaru: ""Beware of Garfiel", huh."

Emilia: "You hadn't met him yet either, right, Subaru? I have only heard the name too, and Frederica didn't tell me in detail either."

As if following Subaru's mutterings, Emilia's neat eyebrows narrowed anxiously as well. The scene that emerged in her mind, was probably the same as the one in Subaru's.

The scene of Frederica's warning, to be wary of the man named Garfiel but refusing to say any more.

Even when Subaru voiced his dissatisfaction at the tiny amount of information he had been given, she only stubbornly rejected, saying "It is because of my Oath", and would not say another word. Emilia and Subaru, not knowing what to do, did not push her further.

Subaru: "I really should've gotten more out of her… Knowing full well he's a dangerous character, she's sending us there with only a name, it's just too much."

Emilia: "It can't be helped, it's an Oath. Agreements are Holy and Inviolable, never to be breached. Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, though they vary in gravity, must all be kept equally."

Swinging her raised finger, Emilia recited this to Subaru as if instructing him.

Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, like a word-game they flew into his ears, and the question suddenly coming into his mind, he let it slip from his lips,

Subaru: "So, between Emilia-tan and Puck is a Contract. Between Frederica and Roswaal is an Oath out of moral obligation. And then, the agreement exchanged between the Dragon and the Kingdom, is a Pact... am I right? Or did I get something wrong?"

Emilia: "It isn't separated out so distinctly, but as I understand it, Contracts are between individuals, Oaths are made when one party swears to another, and Pacts are agreements that transcend individuals, and transcend even Time… That's how I was taught, at least."

Subaru: "I see. It does fit that understanding of it..."

Nodding to Emilia's explanation, Subaru proceeded to violently scratch his head, and continued with "But still",

Subaru: "It's adorned with such lofty words, though… Agreements are Holy and Inviolable, right?"

Emilia: "Agreements... Promises are important things. Of course, Oaths, and even Contracts have no force to protect them. It isn't there, but still, we keep promises. We work hard to keep them, right? Even if no one is watching, or no one realizes it, Promises are kept. Whether it's the other person or myself, we would do our best to keep it."

Holding her hands to her chest, Emilia locked her gaze on Subaru, who had asked the question so lightly. The tone of her voice was gentle, and there was no sense of blaming him… but his heart hurt all the more because of it.

Emilia: "Because we believe this, we give our word, and work hard to fulfill them. Because promises are kept to protect the trust between one another, right?"

Subaru: "About that… I am really sorry—!"

In the interior of the carriage, without the slightest hint of turbulence, Subaru fell onto the floor and dropped his head straight in front of him.

Seeing him rubbing his forehead on the floor in a full DOGEZA, for a moment, Emilia flapped her eyelids in astonishment, then a few seconds later, reflecting on what she just said combined with Subaru's current movements, she seemed to understand.

Emilia: "Oh, I wasn't blaming you or anything. Well it is true that you didn't keep your promise, and then didn't even apologize, and instead turned on me, so it's true that I had gone like "what's this!"..."

Subaru: “Ow ow ow my ears hurt!”

Emilia: “But then, after thinking about it, I realized I was being unfair and was only seeing my side of things. I should have gone to reconcile with Subaru right after but I was so obstinate, that I didn’t, so it was also my fault. Really, sorry.”

Subaru: “Ow ow ow my chest hurts!”

Emilia: “Agreements and things like that, maybe they are deeper and heavier for me… because I am a Spirit-Arts user, Contracts are more vital to me than to normal people. Spirit-Arts users must honor our Contracts with spirits above all else, and that’s why I’m over-sensitive when it comes to this... Yeah, so promises are a reeeaally big deal for me. Now that I think about it, Subaru, reflect on what you did.”

Subaru: “Ow ow ow my heart hurts!”

While she was blurting all this out, as if remembering everything Subaru put her through, Emilia started to pout. Sensing this, Subaru pressed his head down even harder.

It was clear now, why she was so infuriated with him in the Royal Palace.

It was not just anger due to a broken promise. For her, the promise in itself meant something far more, and far heavier. When Subaru had broken it so lightly, even a soft-hearted person such as herself could not stay calm.

Because, without realizing, Subaru had trampled on something very important in Emilia’s heart.

Emilia: “Did you, reflect on your actions now?”

Subaru: “I repent. Deeper than the oceans, higher than the mountains, wider than the skies, and more expansive than the cosmos.”

Emilia: “Alright, I forgive you.”

Softly poking Subaru in the forehead as he looked up, Emilia then touched her finger to her lips, smiling lightly. Relieved that there was no hint of anger from her, and also because her next movement was so adorable, Subaru found himself unable to connect his words.

Not paying any mind to the way Subaru was moving his mouth like a breathing fish, Emilia turned to look to the road ahead, and,

Emilia: “The Sanctuary, and Garfiel. And Roswaal, and everyone from the village... there are so many people to talk to, right now my heart is already pounding.”

Subaru: “Don’t worry, I would never let Emilia-tan be put in any danger. Please trust your second shield, myself.”

Emilia: “You’re the second? Then, who’s the first?”

Subaru: “Right now, he’s driving the dragon carriage and flirting with my Patrasche.”

Looking at Subaru, who had just named Otto as a meat shield without his consent, this time, Emilia couldn’t hold it in and burst out laughing. Watching her breaking out in laughter, Subaru was content, and in his mind, he wondered how many obstacles will be waiting for them in their road ahead.

Ever since he came to this world, he had been presented with one problem after another without a moment’s rest.

Even along the road to the Sanctuary, worries and expectations of what lies in store in that unknown land were brewing within his heart. Anyhow, Frederica herself had instigated it, and Roswaal and the fact that the other villagers had not returned only added to his doubts, and there was Subaru’s own inability to get Puck to come out, and… what he left in the mansion… worried him to no end.

Emilia: “Were you, thinking about Rem-san?”

Subaru: “...You can tell?”

Subaru had suddenly fell silent. Gazing at the side of his face, Emilia tilted her head.

Her silver hair slid off of her shoulder as she did so, and lifting the tip her braid with her fingers and swinging it side to side, she said, “I can”, and,

Emilia: “Just like the way you always look at me, I’d think about Subaru the same way, too.”

Subaru: “So that means, Emilia-tan, you are thinking about me all the time?”

Emilia: “Oh, actually take it as half of half of half of that.”

Subaru: “That means 3 hours…!”

Emilia: “Half of half of half of…”

Subaru: “I’ll get hurt if I hear the exact number, so no more!”

Calling out to stop Emilia, who had been trying to calculate the exact realistic number, Subaru dropped a small sigh and scratched his cheek, and,

Subaru: “I’ve entrusted her to Frederica and Petra, so there is no need to worry. There shouldn’t be… but still, this anxiety that shouldn’t be welling up in me, I can’t explain it in words.”

Emilia: “You worry because you are worried, it can’t be helped. It just means that’s how important she is to you. To be thought about like that, I’m actually a little bit jealous.”

Subaru: “Let me say this right now, I feel just as strongly about Emilia-tan… wait, you just tricked me into saying that, right?”

Emilia: “Yes, I was being mean. Sorry.”

Sticking out her tongue, through that one act she forgave it all.

In front of Subaru, who couldn’t help but make gargle sounds with his throat, Emilia said “But…” looking up at him,

Emilia: “The one you’re even more worried about is Beatrice, right?”

Subaru: “…Unless, Emilia-tan, are our hearts connected to each other? The “GOOD END” is already in sight!”

Emilia: “Usually you would go “There’s no way I’m worried” even though you are, but today, you didn’t even say that. It must mean you are really worried.”

Being hit right on the mark, Subaru almost let out a “Guu”, and bit his lips with a vexed expression on his face.

But he quickly snapped out of it, and

Subaru: “Worried? I’m not worried or anything. It’s just, breaking off with a fight like that, I couldn’t meet with her again afterwards. So leaving the Mansion without seeing her again left me with a bit of a bad feeling, that’s all. Yeah, just a little bit. Just that tiny bit, just the tip.”

Emilia: “That sounded a bit dirty to me, maybe I’m thinking too much into it…”

Subaru: “You’re not imagining it, that was just me.”

Hiding his happiness at getting the reaction he was aiming for, Subaru looked at Emilia, who tilted her head, still smiling slightly as if not understanding a thing, and

Subaru: “If Beako’s hikikomori problem gets worse, being originally a hikikomori myself, I’d feel some kind of responsibility…”

Emilia: “Hikikomori… Subaru, you know a lot about that right? Beatrice, is she coming out?”

Subaru: “It’d be really hard, actually. Without finding a good opportunity, just pulling her out forcefully isn’t good, but then taking too much time would be indulging her too much. Those hikikomori are such a pain in the ass to… Wait! I was one myself!”

After that stupid ending, he tried to correct the direction of the conversation again.

After all, since they were heading to the Sanctuary right now, it wouldn’t be something they’ll deal with until their return.

Subaru: “After I get back, I’ll have to talk over a lot of things with Beako. Last time, I couldn’t get her to tell me any of the things I wanted to know.”

Emilia: “Beatrice and Puck, it feels like they know all sorts of things, and are hiding them from us.”

Subaru: “I get the same feeling. Even with Frederica, but then, everyone associated with that Mansion has a habit of saying something suggestive and then leaving the answers out for later. It’s like a disease already. Not the good kind of disease, either. And that Beako, returning the Gospel like that, saying things that I still can’t get out of my mind…”

The Gospel, which Beatrice had thrown back at him along with her mystifying words, is currently safely in Subaru’s keeping. If it was just going to be a nuisance, he could have left it behind, but in the worst case, he could interrogate Roswaal about it, so he brought it along with him.

But because it was so creepy, he kept it at the very bottom of his bag, as if quietly hiding it from sight.

Emilia: “—I think we’ve entered the forest.”

Emilia, suddenly lifting her face, and brushing away the hair from her forehead, said this as she looked all around. Following her, Subaru also raised his head, but from inside the carriage he could not see it right away. Stepping toward the window and peeking out, it’s true that the colors outside had become deepened with green.

Subaru: “You didn’t even look outside but you could tell, huh.”

Emilia: “Even though it’s mixed, it’s because I have Elf’s blood in me. They say that Elves are the race of the Forests, and so the Elves and the Forests have an inseparable bond—”

Then, just as Emilia said this with a fleeting smile,

A sudden, subtle sensation shocked Subaru’s skin, and he looked around to see what it was. But of course, the impact that surged through the surroundings, was not something his eyes could see.

Inside the carriage, the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion" still separated out the rest of the world.

But,

Subaru: "—?! Hey, hey!"

"…"

Emilia's slender body was swaying powerlessly, and just like that, began to fall, and Subaru, sliding in, managed to catch her just in time.

Her momentum stopped by his embrace, lying feebly in his arms, Emilia's eyes were closed, on her face was a pained expression as she lay faintly panting.

Subaru: "Wait, Emilia-tan?! What happened, Emilia?!"

Emilia couldn't seem to reply. She looked as if she was in pain, but other than her shallow, accelerated breathing and her excruciating expression, there was no sign of fever or even sweating.

Lifting her up lightly in his arms, Subaru immediately realized he could not deal with this by himself. So, rushing to the front, he stuck his head through the small window connecting to the driver's platform, and

Subaru: "Otto! Something's wrong, Emilia suddenly collapsed! Do you have any medicine or…"

Otto: "Oh– Mr. Natsuki, sorry."

Subaru's impatient words trailed off. Otto, at whom he had thrown these words, had sweat forming on his forehead. Turning to Subaru, he replied with a voice that seemed to have lost all strength.

Subaru noticed two things— The first, was that the carriage had stopped. Patrasche and Furufu had halted their steps, and were standing still between the trees. So overwhelming was his emotion in the previous moments that had not even realized that the carriage had stopped, but now, there was another, even more serious problem.

That was the second thing he noticed,

???: “Just waltz’n in straight from th’front, y’got some nerve, stranger.”

As if spitting out the words, unlike the literal content of what he was saying, there was not the slightest hint of friendliness in the way he said it.

With only this one sentence, one could almost grasp the character of the person who spoke those words.

True to that impression, the man flaunting himself in front of the dragon carriage looked exactly what he sounded like.

With spiky short blonde hair, a white scar prominent on his forehead, the sharp leer of his eyes did not lose to Subaru’s in their viciousness, and like that of a feline beast, the canine-teeth in his jaws peered out, exceedingly white. His curling, slouching back made him seem rather short for a man, but the darkly ferocious aura emanating from his entire body removed any inclination to underestimate him for his small stature.

???: “D’know where th’hell y’came from, but y’look like’a “stake goes through with’a brittle point” kind o’guy.”

Subaru: “Huh, wha?”

Hearing a strange idiom he had never heard before, Subaru only let out a confused moan, but his opponent, listening, must have taken it for fear, and with a dismissing laugh “Hah”,

???: “Oh? Y’scared eh. But’s true y’struck some bad luck. After all, th’place y’tried t’sneak into was’a place, an’what’s more, y’ran right into ME.”

The man laughed viciously, clacking his fangs as he laughed, and, putting his fists together, he lowered his stance, ready for battle. And in that posture, he looked up with a glare at his silent adversary,

Garfiel: “Meet’n up with GARFIEL was th’end of y’luck. Now GET WRECKED like’a “PAZO-MAZO RIGHT AN’LEFT”!”

The punk who named himself, cussing incomprehensibly, thumped his foot into the ground.

And the moment after, the overwhelming impact, as if reversing the world, struck Subaru.

Chapter 7:
The Test Site

1

The moment the punk pressed his foot into the ground, Subaru felt the illusion as if the world had tilted.

Of course, in reality, such a thing could not possibly happen. Even the largest human could not hope to disturb the foundations of the world with a simple stamp of the foot, and the sheer weight of the earth would not budge so easily.

So, the tilting of the world can only be Subaru's illusion.

What had actually happened, was that starting from the point where Garfiel's placed down his foot, a wave spread out in the ground, and like flipping a piece of tatami, it tossed the dragon carriage into the air as it passed.

Subaru: “Impossible—Uwah?!”

Like on the end of a see-saw, the sensation of upward momentum reached its peak, and then, as if floating, the dragon carriage glided through the air. Along with the earth dragons Patrasche and Furufu, just about exceeding one ton in weight combined, they were all blown flying. Inside the carriage, Subaru only held Emilia close within in his embrace.

Then, just like that, the dragon carriage slammed onto the ground, the sheer force of the impact sent its entire frame, inside and out, gnashing and creaking against itself. It was a high-quality dragon carriage. Its luxury did not stop at its glamorous appearance, for its quality was evidenced both in terms of comfort and durability, and this was demonstrated perfectly by the fact that it managed to avert total destruction just now. But still, in the half rolled over dragon carriage, there was no way to immediately escape.

In other words, since escape is no longer an option, the only choice remaining is to stand and fight.

Subaru: “Damn it, what was th—”

Shaking his head, which was still hanging out of the window to the coachman’s platform, Subaru held a hand to his aching forehead. He had struck his head on the way down, but fortunately, other than the pain, there was no lesion or bleeding. Suddenly remembering, he looked down, and saw, lying in his arms, Emilia was unharmed.

A surge of relief washed over him, but this emotion was soon replaced by the anxiety of being reminded that the culprit who caused this was still outside.

Quickly lifting up his head, the dreaded sight that met Subaru’s gaze was—

Subaru: “Patrasche—!!”

Screeching, fangs bared, the enormous jet-black earth dragon leapt toward the scrawny figure.

Making use of the loosened connection to the dragon carriage, with a twist of her body, Patrasche broke free and with rapid movements she set off against the assailant for a counter-attack.

With pointed fangs as sharp as blades, the power of her jaw can slice through human flesh and crush through bone and still have strength to spare. With speed like the wind, she aimed for Garfiel’s neck, about to tear it to shred without a single question asked.

Garfiel: “Excitin’ choice. Good groun’dragon… No, yer a good girl, aren’t ya. Hell, “the sound o’breaking bones’ a sign o’love” astheysay.”

“—!”

Lodged in her closing jaws, was the front end of an outstretched arm that should by all accounts have been completely shredded.

Garfiel had held out his right arm against Patrasche’s bite. And the earth dragon, zeroing in on the target, chomped down on the wrist, ripping the forearm arm clean off, and then fell upon the torso… or at least, that was what should have happened.

But instead, Patrasche froze in place. Not only her body, but even her jaw clamping on the arm lodged inside stopped moving completely.

Was some special ability being used, or was it caused by magic?

This question turned in Subaru's mind, but soon, Garfiel's action answered his doubts. Expanding the muscles of his lodged arm, it completely overpowered the force of Patrasche's jaw, stretching it open wider and wider.

Garfiel: "G'job, you. Got goin' right away, and still not givin' up, even better. Y'passed!"

"—!"

The jet-black earth dragon lowered her body, still clenching with her mouth she twisted her waist. The strength of her jaw sealed on the man's right wrist, she swung her tail whooshing upwards to swipe him flying. Subaru took a blow from her tail once, but, watching Patrasche's movements now, it's immediately obvious how much she had been holding back that time.

Literally putting her whole body behind the blow, she directed all her hostility into striking the body that was left completely open. But even so, it was casually stopped in its tracks by Garfiel's left hand.

A dry cracking sound rang out, and after the shock dissipated, all that remained was a hand grabbing onto the end of a tail. His right hand in her jaws, his left hand holding her tail, Garfiel smiled, revealing his beast-like fangs.

Garfiel: "Won't hurt ya. Sleep tight."

Making a wide swing with his arm, like some kind of joke, the circular trajectory of its motion carried Patrasche's massive body gliding through the air. Then, all of a sudden laterally spinning with an inconceivable sensation of weightlessness, Patrasche's eyes filled with confusion as she was gently tossed to the ground.

Her massive body barely bounced as it landed, and then silence: Patrasche had been defeated. In front of this scene, Subaru's parched throat let out a groan of disbelief,

Subaru: "H, he threw Patrasche?"

Garfiel: "Such'a loyal nature. Tossed y'out gently, shouldn't hurt. Let's finish this before ya get up!"

Disregarding the stunned Subaru, Garfiel lifted up his face and hopped onto the coachman's stand. Lying on the slanted coachman's stand was Otto, in a broken-looking posture, and he tried to stand up as the attacker leaped over.

Otto: "Guh… but, don't underestimate me! I am a traveling merchant you know! I am totally prepared for getting mugged by thugs on the road during my business. So come on, but if you rather not fall victim to the "Suwen-Family-Ryu-Thug-Repulsion-Technique" I suggest you surrender now… Hoowah!"

Garfiel: "Shut up, ham. What d'ya think yer doin with yer weakass skills, takin me on? Go take'a nap."

Right after striking a fighting pose, full of spirit, Otto instantly crumbled when Garfiel, suddenly coming up to him, gave him a flick in the forehead.

The flick—or more accurately, the close-range middle finger strike, with what sounded like tremendous force, sent Otto's wiry body flying off of the coachman's platform. Holding his forehead in what looked like agony, he passed out without a word. Regardless of whether he was dead or alive, he was no longer an obstacle.

Garfiel: "Now, by th'looks of it, yer the only one left."

Snorting, the punk turned with a sharp look that could cut a man in half, murmuring.

Standing on the coachman's platform, the distance between him and Subaru was only about four paces—but considering the way he had instantly closed his distance with Otto, there might as well be no distance between them at all.

Gasping down his breath, Subaru racked his brain but could not think of a single plan to break through. The only fighting force that might have been able to resist this man, Emilia, was still unconscious after her inexplicable collapse. But no matter what happens, he must protect her.

Subaru: “I’m…”

Garfiel: ““Flip it this way or that yer skin’s still blue”, I don’t wanna hear it—!”

With the sound of a light tap on the floor, in the blink of an eye, Garfiel’s short figure appeared in front of Subaru’s face. Above, the raised arm had its five fingers spread open, and it was easy to imagine the future where the claws would swing down, ripping his stunned body apart.

And in the face of that future where his limbs would be ripped apart, there was only one thing Subaru could think to do: to prevent the damage from reaching Emilia in his arms, and to protect her with his life.

“—!”

—A few seconds passed, or perhaps it was longer.

His eyes tightly shut, shielding Emilia with his entire body, the time Subaru spent waiting for the shock to come dragged on to the point of confusion. Then, hesitantly opening his eyes, he found the five fingers spread out motionless in front of his face. Behind it, there was a perplexed look in the punk’s eyes.

Keeping his gaze on Subaru, who could not help but hold his breath, he twisted his own head from side to side, making loud cracking noises with the bones in his neck.

Garfiel: “Instead of striking back y’prioritized protectin’ the girl, the hell was that. After yer dead she’ll be next anyway. Wasn’t that a terrible decision?”

Being hit with a sound argument that he really didn’t want to hear, Subaru, going through all sorts of reasons, couldn’t come up with a reply. The silence making him even more displeased, Garfiel waved his sharp-clawed hand.

Garfiel: “Well, yer too slow anyway. Make a move or not, there probably wasn’t much hope. You’re all pretty useless either way.”

Subaru: “Y, you are…”

Garfiel: “Hah?”

Remarking on their ineptitude, Garfiel gave out his merciless assessment. And as Subaru was trying to move his frozen throat, attempting to squeeze out a question, Garfiel’s vicious-looking face twisted up with displeasure, and moved in even closer to Subaru’s face.

Garfiel: “You’re whisperin, gotta speak up. C’mon.”

Subaru: “You are Garfiel… Correct? You are acquainted with Roswaal and Frederica?”

Garfiel: “—Frederica?”

Confirming Subaru’s word, for the first time, Garfiel’s expression lost its aggression. Looking astounded, like a carnivorous beast that had lost the scent of blood, for an instant, he seemed almost cute and tame, but, immediately concealing it again with a bitter expression,

Garfiel: “Why d’ya know that name ... No, wait. That woman you’re holdin’, is the silver haired... Half-Witch?”

Subaru: “She’s a Half-Elf. Don’t you dare use that name in front of her.”

Garfiel: “—Hyah. Whatsthiswhatsthis, y’got some spirit got allofasudden.”

Glancing down at Emilia, Subaru suddenly exploded back at the utterance of that derogatory name. The fear of moments before all disappeared in the face of pure rage, and Garfiel, hearing this, clicked his fangs together noisily, full of glee.

Garfiel: “Say, isntshe that rumored Emilia-sama? Now, a “Half-Witch” showing up around here could only have everything to do with Roswaal.”

Subaru: “Son of a...”

Ignoring Subaru’s previous words, Garfiel said “Half-Witch” again with special emphasis. Hearing this, Subaru stood up, but was immediately stopped by Garfiel’s hand.

Garfiel: ““The dumbass who bites on molten iron only gets hurt” right. You don have a chance against me. Look at the difference in strength eh? —I don’t want you to get hurt, y’know?”

Making a fist with his outstretched hand, he cracked his knucklebones as a warning. Their respective strengths are obvious, without knowing his intentions, it’s better not to make things any worse by resisting. To press down his anger and wait for another chance to get his revenge, would be the wisest course of action.

That's why,

Subaru: "…Eat shit."

Garfiel: "Hah?"

Subaru: "I don't want to get hurt. And you'll beat me up pretty easily I guess. But. —I can't stand by while you continue to say things that will make this girl sad."

Gently laying Emilia down on the luggage stand, lightly touching the hair on her forehead, Subaru stood up staring at Garfiel at a distance so close that their foreheads almost touched. A distance within each other's breaths, a distance within each other's reach.

Subaru: "Take back that bullshit name… and never use it again."

Garfiel: "...You want me to do what you say? But you don't got what it takes, do you? Your face, your gut, your shin, you want them all to get wrecked, yeah?"

Subaru: "Go ahead and try. But don't expect me to go down for free, though… If you punch my face I'll bite you, if you strike my gut I'll grab you, if you hit my shin I'll spit on you, and I will be paying you back tooth for tooth."

Responding to intimidation with intimidation, Subaru was carried up by the surge passion burning in his chest. In front of him, the hostile aura quietly emanating from Garfiel sent shivers circling all over his body. Quite literally, Subaru could be flicked away in a second if Garfiel wanted to. Judging from his offense and defense so far, this was all too obvious.

Of the strongest people Subaru had met in this Parallel World up to now, Garfiel might easily hold a place among them. Perhaps without reaching the level of Reinhardt at the pinnacle, he could, nevertheless, conceivably take on Wilhelm or Julius.

So even as Subaru's words took back a little bit of ground, the probability of him actually retaliating was really equal to zero.

But still, Subaru and Garfiel stared squarely into each other’s eyes.

Even knowing he will lose, he refused to back down… because the reason he cannot back down was just behind him…

Garfiel: “—Hihaha.”

Subaru: “—Hah?”

…It was an unexpected voice that sounded completely out of place.

In the middle of their standoff, Garfiel’s laugh leaked out, cutting into the space between them. Subaru let out a confused groan, and Garfiel responded with his action,

Garfiel: “Hiyahahaha! Yer prettygood with words eh. Y’reallydiditdidntyer!”

Subaru: “Wha... Ow! Hey, wha wait, ow, st-, ow that really hurts!”

Breaking out into a wide laugh that shook his shoulders, Garfiel heartily patted Subaru in the shoulder. But even without the slightest hint of hostility or intention to attack, and even as he was holding back, the gesture, purely seeking friendly contact, was nevertheless cutting down Subaru’s health points in large chunks at a time.

Garfiel: “G’job, y’passed! Went straight through! Th’Half-Witch... Half-Elf, though I don’t like’em much, you have guts protectin her, I’ll respect that.”

Subaru: “It’s good you came around... But it really hurts! When are you going to stop patting me? Are you trying to kill me?!”

His enthusiasm unabated, Garfiel’s arm dropped, and Subaru moved a bit further away. Seeing this, the punk tilted his neck, then crossed his powerful arms, and,

Garfiel: “So cold. All that stuff is water under th’bridge now, so c’mon and forget it already. When a man acts petty it means his thing is petty too, y’know.”

Subaru: “That’s the first time I heard you use an idiom that sounds familiar… but my thing is totally none of your business! A-n-y-w-a-y!”

Garfiel shook around a little and gestured with his finger. But seeing him lift up his chin looking smug, Subaru threw his words back at him roughly.

Subaru: “You’re Garfiel, and acquainted with Roswaal, right? Even though we had a fright when we came into contact all of a sudden, there’s no more hostility between us now, right?!”

Garfiel: “Will ya quit making a fuss, it’s getting annoying. Don’t panic I won’t eat ya.”

Subaru: “Who do you think will believe that after that savage attitude a moment ago haaaah…?”

Sticking his fingers in his ears with irritation, Garfiel responded to Subaru’s objections with a “Y’got a point I guess” as if understanding him. Even though he’s incomprehensible sometimes, it’s a great relief to see that they can communicate with words. And then, having escaped the dire circumstances, Subaru remembered,

Subaru: “Yeah… Hey this is no time for that! Emilia collapsed all of a sudden, what am I doing talking normally just now.”

Garfiel: “Collapsed, y’mean the Half-Elf? Oy, of course she collapsed. Where do you think this is? What you panickin’ about?”

Rushing over to Emilia’s side, he found her still asleep and breathing irregularly, as if in pain. As Subaru was worrying by her side, Garfiel didn’t seem to think much of it, and only shrugged. Noticing his knowing expression, Subaru asked “What do you mean?”, which brought an incredulous frown onto Garfiel’s face,

Garfiel: “Y’already heard from Roswaal and Frederica what this place was, right? They must have… No way, y’don’t know?”

Even as he was just beginning to explain, Subaru shook his head from side to side, and Garfiel clicked his tongue in frustration. Spitting out “Th’pervert bastard…”, it was easy to see who that insult was referring to.

Garfiel: “Frederica didn’t say anything either? That’s messed up, before y’know it her personality’ll become like her owner’s. Hopeless.”

Shaking his head, Garfiel snorted out in irritation. Then, noticing Subaru’s questioning eyes, he raised up his hand and said “Yeah I gettit I gettit”, and,

Garfiel: “It looks pret’bad, but her life’s in no danger. Only, if you don’t want to see any more of that pain on her face, we needa get goin’ right away. I’ll guide you up to th’village.”

Subaru: “When we move from here, her consciousness will return?”

Garfiel: “That’s what I been sayin’ isntit. Hurry up, we’re gonna go, oy, how long are ya gonna keep sleepin? Get up.”

Even though there wasn’t much explanation, Garfiel didn’t seem intent on explaining further. Turning around without even trying to conceal his thuggish expression, he went out and gave Otto a kick. Receiving the kick, the “still-passed-out” Otto let out a painful yelp “A-uu.”

Garfiel: “Yer the driver aren’t yer, son of’a. I’ll set the turned’over carriage upright, and y’drive it up to the village. If yer slow I’ll kick yer ass flying, yeah?”

Otto: “Say, what’s with this situation?! Following what I just heard, I get the feeling I’m just on the losing end of everything!”

Hearing this unacceptable version of things, Otto boiled, suddenly standing up to voice his objection to Garfiel. Considering the beating he got just a few minutes ago, this must have seemed tremendously courageous, and Garfiel, who appeared to share this opinion, turned to look at Subaru,

Garfiel: “Oy. This guy, is he always such an energetic bastard?”

Otto: “If you ask that guy there’s no way you’ll get a proper appraisal so please stop that! Can’t you just make your own observation of what I am! And apologize! Please apologize!!”

Garfiel: “Hah?! The hell, son of’a bitch’s healthy lively all of’a sudden, ya underestimatin’ me? Yeah I beat up a guy that didn’t need a beatin’, get over it!”

Subaru: “Can the two of you shut up! Emilia is still in pain, hurry up and grab the reins! And you, get the dragon carriage upright!”

While the three men were making a commotion, and started cursing at each other on the coachman’s stand… placed aside on the luggage bed, Emilia, who had been unconsciousness up to now, still didn’t wake up. However, a faint frown was stirring up on her pretty face, irritated by the noise,

Emilia: “...Shut up.”

She murmured in a little voice, as if talking in her sleep.

2

Garfiel: “Didn’t introduce m’self did I? Name’s Garfiel... Ah, just Garfiel ‘s good. The strongest man alive. Need anything, just ask.”

Subaru: “Oh, I’m Natsuki Subaru ... Eh? What was that? You said you’re the strongest? Are you saying that sober?”

As the dragon carriage got moving, sitting face-to-face inside, Subaru and Garfiel exchanged their self-introductions. Seeing Subaru suddenly pull back his outstretched hand with an astonished look, Garfiel also took on an incredulous expression,

Garfiel: “Isn’t that what I said? What’s so strange ‘bout that?”

Subaru: “No no, I just never expected to meet someone who’d straight-out say “I’m the strongest man alive”. Even so, isn’t saying that going a bit too far?”

Garfiel: “Y’don’t think I’m fit to be the strongest?”

Subaru: “Well you’re very strong I’ll admit, but if you’re talking about the absolute strongest, how should I say it... No matter what, I have a guy who always comes to mind."

The form of that red-haired Knight emerged in his thoughts… compared to Garfiel in front of his eyes, Subaru's mind tried to work it out. From their previous exchange, with just his bare hands, Garfiel was a formidable fighter, and could kick a house flying if he wanted to—No, he had flipped the carriage upright with a stamp of his foot just now. But would all this be enough to contend with the Sword Saint, after all?

Even with this in mind, Reinhard's advantage doesn't seem to disappear, and Subaru himself wasn't exactly sure why he held that Knight in such special regard.

Garfiel: "Hah, as you like. I'll correct your mistaken view sooner or later, and prove with my own hands that I'm the strongest. For now, let's just say "Th'red nosed sea-lion's afraid o'th'cold", and think of it like that."

Subaru: "I totally don't know what you just told me to think about..."

Subaru tilted his neck at that last part, and Garfiel didn't seem to be planning to explain it, and instead crossed his hands behind his head and relaxed his weight onto the back of his seat. Anyway, their conversation having come to an end, Subaru looked out the window, and brushed his fingers through Emilia's silver hair as she slept in his lap.

While Emilia has not woken up, her expression had become more restful than before. Just as Garfiel said, moving away from that place seemed to have a positive effect. So then, the next thing on his mind was,

Subaru: "Ah, I didn't get a chance to properly ask before but, you're a close acquaintance of Roswaal... aren't you?"

Garfiel: "You must've heard my reputation, right? I'll say this one more time then, out of all the people associated with Roswaal, I'm by far the strongest."

Subaru: “That’s not really the point… But I do remember hearing you are an influential person, though.”

Unless brute-force was the only reason he was considered “Influential”? Unlike what Subaru had expected, Garfiel was not much of a supporter in the political sense, but would perhaps be more of a supporter in the muscle-brained sense.

With the Sanctuary not far ahead, picking up someone who he at once needed to be cautious of, and who he could have friendly interactions with, really only added to the headache.

Subaru: “That’s just more questions I’ll need to ask Roswaal at the “Sanctuary” I guess. You know I’m supposed to be solving problems, but it feels like the number of questions just gets more and more as I go, what’s with this?”

Hugging his own head, seeing the difficult road ahead just getting more difficult, Subaru’s expression clouded over. Listening to this, Garfiel made a small click with his tongue, revealing just a small glimpse of his sharp canine teeth,

Garfiel: ““Sanctuary”—eh.”

Sensing some meaning in his murmur, Subaru’s face raised up, and Garfiel gently waved his hand. Then, he stood up, facing the direction ahead,—that is, towards direction of the Sanctuary.

Garfiel: “It’s because you’re gulping down Roswaal’s words whole without’a second thought, that you keep callin’ it by that name. Things you don’t know aside, the things he did tell you are all full of shit y’know that right?”

Subaru: “Even though I have the same opinion, it’s not good to gossip behind someone’s back… Say, did he piss you off or something?”

Garfiel became visibly displeased upon hearing the word “Sanctuary”. Subaru wondered if he misspoke, and waited, but the reaction was more extreme than he anticipated.

That is, Garfiel twisted his mouth into an ironic smile that did not seem to fit,

Garfiel: “Well well, it’s about time the Princess wakes up now. Since we’re pretty far from the barrier.”

Subaru: “What’s the barrier… Ah, Emilia-tan?”

Just as he was about to ask his question, Subaru saw Emilia turning over in his lap and called out to her. She opened her eyes faintly, and looked around the inside of the carriage hazily. As though she wasn’t completely awake yet, she stared at Subaru with her violet eyes,

Emilia: “Morning, Shubaru…”

Subaru: “Just waking up is suuuper cute, Emilia-tan, but maybe now’s not a good time. How are you feeling, does your head hurt?”

Emilia: “Ehh, not at all? I don’t feel strange or anything…!”

In the middle of her answer Emilia suddenly became wide awake, and got up so fast that Subaru had to dodge his head backward. After being an inch away from banging their heads together, Subaru looked back at Emilia, who didn’t seem to have noticed how close it came,

Emilia: “A,are you alright, Subaru? I said I will protect you but I passed out…”

Subaru: “I managed it somehow, so there’s no need to worry! We came to an understanding through dialogue. People form ties with each other through conversation, and we took the first step in that regard. Though I ran into some communication problems at first…”

As Emilia was shoving closer and closer, Subaru touched her shoulder to try to calm her, while observing her as he spoke. It seems she could stand and walk, and the movements of her eyes and the color of her complexion, and her words and her voice were all impeccable. Also, super cute. Just like always.

Garfiel: “Right? Just like I said, yeah?”

And, as if waiting for Subaru to settle down, Garfiel laughed. But hearing this, Emilia suddenly jumped up in surprise, protecting Subaru behind her, as if only just now noticing the existence of this new stranger in the carriage.

Emilia: "—Who are you?! I warn you, I won't let you lay a single finger on Subaru."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, it's alright! Also would you please stop reinforcing my role as the female-lead please! My gauge can't take much more of it!"

Pulling Emilia out of her combat mode from behind, Subaru turned to Garfiel and introduced him,

Subaru: "That's Garfiel... Right after Emilia-tan collapsed, he atta... I mean came to ride on the carriage. Not that he's welcome or anything, but he's coming along until we get to the "Sanctuary""

Emilia: "...This is Garfiel? The person Frederica mentioned?"

Garfiel: "Well I am curious what she said about me, but we can put that off till later. Look, we're coming up to th'village soon."

Hearing Emilia make the exact same comment as Subaru did earlier, Garfiel jerked up his chin without giving them time to organize the situation. He gestured, and ahead of them, the forest was opening up, and the form of the village that was their destination came into view—

Garfiel: "Be welcome, Emilia-sama and her entourage."

He addressed them with proper title—however, his words did not contain any of the respect or favor, and had instead been served with more of a color of disdain, and a tinge of darkness.

Without realizing it, Subaru's gaze had turned severe, and confusion had emerged in Emilia's. Receiving both their gazes, Garfiel opened his arms wide, his attitude unchanged,

Garfiel: "The place Roswaal calls the "Sanctuary" or whatnot—where half-wits are gathered to spend their days, in the impasse that is the Experimental Grounds, each to their pitiful ends.”

Subaru: “Experimental Grounds...?”

Emilia: “Half-wit—”

While Subaru and Emilia are each drawn to a different part, Garfiel placed a hand over his mouth covering his canine teeth which were showing, smiling, as if to conceal a terribly complicated feeling.

Garfiel: “But we, the residents, call it “The Witch of Greed’s Gravesite”. Laughable, yeah? Heh...”

Echoes of laughter, as if in self-derision, quietly resounded in the car.

Low, and faint, like a curse, like a blessing, it resounded throughout.

Listening, Subaru only silently worried about the girl next to him.

If a Witch stands in front of her path again, he must be the one to put out the flames… firmly and resolutely, he told himself.

The “Sanctuary” approaches.

—To Natsuki Subaru, and to Emilia, it was to be a place that will alter their paths forever.

Chapter 8:
A Long-Awaited Reunion

1

Even traveling on an unpaved road there was hardly any turbulence within the dragon carriage. No matter how many times he experiences it, he'd always find the effects of this Divine Protection incredible.

If all this was just the effects of the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", he wondered what if he could unwind the effects of all the other Divine Protections, and whether he would be using some other word besides "incredible" to describe them then.

Subaru: "…or something, but this isn't the time to be running away from reality, is it."

Subaru poked his head out into the driver's area beside Otto, looking forward—with the "Sanctuary" ahead, he focused his eyes on the sight.

Finally treading on earthen road that was no longer covered by grass, about a hundred something meters away, the forest was opening up. Some wooden rooftops were now visible in the distance, for they must have been the many surrounding residences the "Sanctuary". From far away, it looked rather like a run-down village, and there seemed to be nothing about it particularly worth noting.

And if one had to make a remark, perhaps it would be,

Subaru: "There's a dreary atmosphere about the place..."

Standing in the entryway to the "Sanctuary" was a tremendously old gate made of stone that only served to emphasize that desolate imagery, and the short wooden fences surrounding the village gave off an impression of a locked cell.

Inadvertently, Subaru allowed his thoughts to slip through his lips, and Garfiel, listening, smacked himself in the knee,

Garfiel: “Pret’much! Dreary place, yeah? I’ll say this first, the insides’re even more dreary y’know? No matter who it is, there’s no liveliness inside, they’re all alive but might as well be dead.”

Subaru: “Sounds pretty crappy the way you described it. But the more I listen the less it sounds like a “Sanctuary”. That’s just...”

Seeing Garfiel enthusiastically affirm his ironic comment, Subaru sighed, and thought back on his previous words. To Subaru and the others who were calling this place “Sanctuary”, Garfiel did not hide a sense of self-deprecation as he spoke. So then—

Emilia: ““The Witch of Greed’s Gravesite”… what does that mean?”

The same question that came into Subaru’s mind seemed to have also arrived in Emilia’s.

As she suddenly voiced this question her eyes became resolute, but down below, she was gently tugging on the hem of Subaru’s clothing with her fingertips. The fact that she was relying on him gave him a small sense of contentment, but Subaru’s feelings were complicated as he sensed the source of her anxiety.

Subaru: “The Witch—So basically, as the existence referred to by the name of “Witch”, the Witch of Envy is known to everyone. But the Witches bearing the names of the other Sins, there’s almost nothing known about them, right?”

Emilia: “Eh, really? But, weren’t they a bunch of really famous people from 400 years ago?”

Garfiel: “Emilia-sama’s not’ntirely mistaken. But yeah, Subaru’s got it. The Witch of Envy’s just way too famous, there’s no confusion’bout that. But of th’records of the other Witches eaten by the Witch of Envy, there’s barely a whiff left of’em. Though there are exceptions.”

Emilia: “Just like here… right?”

After answering Subaru, Garfiel pulled in his jaw at Emilia's question, smirking. As if quite affected by this, Emilia's eyes widened, but Subaru, not well-informed on the matters surrounding the Witch, only let out an "Is that so…" as if understanding.

But a sudden notion surged in his mind that blew away that casual air. Because, if there are multiple Witches…

Subaru: "T, that doesn't mean there's a Witch Cult for every Witch, does it? Just beating down one Sin Archbishop was tough enough, come on give me a break."

It was a chilling thought, and one he couldn't overlook.

Reading into the details of Petelgeuse's words, he imagined they must all have been worshippers of the Witch of Envy. Likewise, Gluttony and Greed who Subaru must one day defeat, and their followers too, must all be in the same category as well.

Yet, if there are sects that worship the other Witches—

Otto: "It's a scary thing to be saying, but there's no need to worry about that, Mr. Natsuki."

But the one who banished the chill running up Subaru's spine, was the one holding the reins in front, Otto. In the end, compared to Emilia, who knows almost nothing about the Witch Cult, and unlike Garfiel, who was just not quite trustworthy, Otto actually held some kind of credibility, and could provide some insight into the common understanding of things. Because the extent of Otto's knowledge… was probably exactly what an average person would know.

Otto: "The Witch Cult... even though I don't like to say it out loud, only worships the Witch of Envy. To revere another Witch above the Witch of Envy, only a lunatic would do that."

Subaru: "Above the Witch of Envy...? What do you mean? Are they even worse than the Witch of Envy?"

Otto: "When they hear the name of another Witch other than the Witch they worship, the Witch Cultists will do some very frightening things. You heard of the city that was destroyed in the

Southern Empire of Volakia, right?"

As Otto suddenly brought up the new topic, Subaru remembered having heard it before. After the battle against Petelgeuse, Wilhelm had mentioned it as he laid out the horrors of the Witch Cult. Certainly it was,

Subaru: "It was the Sin Archbishop of Greed who single-handedly destroyed that city in the what's-its-name Empire, wasn't it? I heard that even the nation's Champion couldn't do anything to stop him."

Otto: "I don't recall anything so fantastic, but the reason the Witch Cult did it in the first place was even more frightening. In the isolationist Volakian Empire, that was the only city where trade was prospering… at the time there were rumors of a Witch-related artifact being unearthed there."

Subaru: "Related to the Witch, huh."

Otto: "What it was is unclear even now. Only, there were lots of collectors out there who were after it. It'd be fine if it was just for some sick sense of humor, wanting to collect something belonging to the Witch of Envy… but in the end, the entire city perished because of it."

Perhaps it was to obtain that artifact, or to destroy it, that Greed made his move. The Volakian Empire had mistakenly roused the Witch Cult and received this catastrophic retribution as a result.

Otto: "After that, even things unrelated to the Witch of Envy, anything that might possibly provoke the Witch Cult is prohibited by decree… but even so, it still didn't stop these items from circulating in shameless behind-the-scenes dealings."

Subaru: "It's rare to hear that kind of spite from you. It almost sounds you were involved?"

Otto: "…It's nothing worth mentioning. Just back then, some of my relatives were caught up in the city when it happened. It's been more than 15 years now, I was just a child back then so it didn't have much to do with me."

After that, Otto closed his mouth and refused to go any further on the topic. Seeing his attitude, Subaru stopped asking, and turned his gaze and attention back into the carriage.

In any case, Garfiel was waiting for Subaru to finish processing everything he's learned, saying "Satisfied now?" while holding his chin in his hand.

Garfiel: "I don'know the finer points either. But Granny keep goin' on and on about how it's the "Witch of Greed's Gravesite", like how "Peromeo rots jus'from th'listenin", repeated s'many times, t'can't be wrong."

Subaru: "All you know is what the rot-guy told you? So you don't really know the details either, huh."

Garfiel: "Only thing I care'bout is me being th'strongest. If y'want to know the specifics go grab Roswaal by th'collar and ask'im yerself. N'sure if y'can do it now, though."

Subaru: "—? What's that supposed to mea…"

Otto: "Um sorry. It seems we've arrived, do we just go in like this?"

Before he could sort out Garfiel's seemingly loaded words, Otto's voice hailed from the coachman's stand in front. Against Otto's call, Garfiel grumbled "Welp", and nimbly hopped off the carriage.

Garfiel: "If y'go in w'thout sayin'anything, they'll take ya for outside intruders an'coord'nate a mass'assault on ya, it'll be all like'a "laughin Magmarin full o'holes". I'll go in an'tell'em first, y'guys wait here."

Subaru: "Ah, we'll leave it to you then. Hey, come to think of it, I get the feeling like you're the patrol for the Sanctuary or something. Considering the way we ran into each other at first…"

On the other hand, the way he seemed to have abandoned his post in the end didn't quite fit that idea. And the fact that he was patrolling alone, too. But then again, with strength like his, perhaps moving alone was more efficient.

But to Subaru's last question, Garfiel only lightly waved his hand without answering. Unable to see through him, Subaru's brows furrowed, and, almost at the same time, Emilia let out an "Ah" in a slightly elevated voice.

Turning his eyes to Emilia, who had cried out involuntarily, he saw her pointing ahead. And, following her finger, Subaru immediately understood her surprise as he saw what she had seen. Because standing there, was,

"—You're back, Garfiel. Pretty early, isn't it."

Garfiel: "'Cus there's no need t'circle in th'forest anymore. It's gotta be rare t'see you leave Roswaal's side though. He fin'lly dropped dead?"

Ram: "If that is so, this place, Ram will already have burned it down with her own hands in self-abandon. You have Master Roswaal to thank that this is not the case."

Garfiel: "That'some incredible logics, I can't understand it at all!"

Dressed in the familiar maid's uniform, the girl's peach-colored hair was swaying as she faced Garfiel. Unlike Garfiel, who was happily smiling, her expression seemed cold and without emotion. Taking a long time to confirm this, Subaru's shoulders dropped as if relieved.

Otto: "Haaa, so that's the older sister I heard so much about. I see… Of course this is only natural, but she looks exactly like the young miss who's sleeping."

And having seen her for the first time, Otto let out this remark. In front of their eyes, she looked like a perfect replica of the Rem Otto had seen, but only, inside, it was a completely different person.

For this, was the long-awaited reunion with the good-for-nothing maid of Roswaal Manor, Ram.

Subaru: "—Ram!"

Sticking his body out of the dragon carriage, Subaru waved to Ram. Her eyes slightly squinted as she saw him, and, quite understandably, she shrugged and shook her head.

Ram: “I humbly do not know where Barusu popped out from, but your late arrival is certainly disappointing. You should have noticed sooner that something had gone wrong and… ah, but that’s too much for Barusu’s abilities, after all.”

Subaru: “If you’re going to use a phrase like “I humbly do not know”, stick with that tone all the way and don’t change it all of a sudden! And Roswaal too, I can’t understand what you guys are thinking, but I’ll definitely have something to say when I get a hold of him!”

Objecting, Subaru pointed a finger at the girl whose attitude had not changed at all. Seeing this reaction from Subaru, Ram dropped her shoulders, before turning to Emilia, who was standing beside him.

Relieved to see that Emilia, same as Subaru, was safe, Ram’s face relaxed. And for a brief moment, in her eyes, Subaru thought there was a fleeting, almost dreamlike glimpse of sorrow. Yet, in that same instant, it had already vanished.

Ram: “Emilia-sama too, welcome. Master Roswaal is waiting, so please come with me to the inner building. Garfiel, go find a suitable place for the dragon carriage and the driver.”

Garfiel: “What’s with that treatment, oy! Can’t y’ask for help in a way that inspires more enthusiasm?”

Ram: “If you want to eat Ram’s hand-made meal, please strive to do your best. But if you want to throw away this valuable opportunity because of your careless words, Ram won’t say anything more.”

Garfiel: “Alright! Alright already! Can’t grab’a hold o’her at’all, though it’s good like that. Oy, asshole driver. Park the earth dragons an’the carriage at the end there an’come wit me.”

Otto: “It’s about time I introduced myself right?! Could you please not call me with that insulting name?! Also, isn’t it a bit dangerous for me to be left alone with this guy!”

As Otto voiced his objection at Garfiel, who had just been vanquished by Ram, Subaru, seeing this, shot him a thumbs-up with teeth sparkling,

Subaru: “I’ll recover your bones!”

Otto: “That was definitely something said with good intentions but carries the completely wrong implications isn’t it?! Really, if anything happens to me I’m going to claim for compensation!”

Leaving behind these words, Otto, having let Subaru and Emilia off of the dragon carriage, followed after Garfiel. Seeing them start off toward the interior of the village, Subaru rubbed Patrasche in the nose in a reluctant goodbye. Then, turning with a snap of his neck, saying “Now then”,

Subaru: “There’s a whole array of things I want to ask and talk to you about, now that we’re here can we finally talk?”

Ram: “...Ram hasn’t been granted permission to convey anything to you. You can ask Master Roswaal directly when you meet him. Though I don’t know how much Garf had let slip already.”

Subaru: “Garf... ah, you mean Garfiel. That guy turned out to be a whole lot different from the impression I got from just hearing his name. Come to think of it, there’s something that’s been bothering me.”

Ram: “What is it?”

Sharply, Ram furrowed her brows. Imagining it might be information Roswaal had given express instructions not to reveal, her gaze became serious, but, seeing this, Subaru let out a “Naah it’s just”, as he folded his arms,

Subaru: “That guy, does he have a crush on you? I got that feeling from the way he was talking.”

Ram: “...And here I was wondering what you were going to say.”

Unable to hide her genuine astonishment, Ram sighed. Only, seeing how she didn’t deny it, Subaru couldn’t help but let out an out-of-place grin.

Subaru: “Well I’m not saying he has strange tastes but. You look cute... but the fact that he still likes you after being around you for so long, I think he must have some serious resolve.”

Ram: “Being gifted with both intelligence and beauty, males will inevitably be attracted to Ram, there’s nothing I can do about that. But, Ram has already devoted her all to someone who she shall always stay devoted to, so I have no wish for such things.”

With a sway of her shoulders, Ram responded to Subaru’s sarcastic words, and, in a single stroke, she had cut down all of Garfiel’s hopes with her response. Then, turning her back to Subaru and Emilia, she left the words “Come with me”, as she immediately took her step forward.

Although he wasn’t exactly trying to make the flowers of love bloom, her cold attitude still made Subaru feel like he was coming away empty handed. But, the fact that he could not ask what he should have asked, was, understandably, because he was afraid.

Subaru: “At a time like this, am I still too much of a coward to say Rem’s name… even though I want to… even...”

He was terrified of the confirmation.

Having already heard it from Emilia and Petra that they cannot remember Rem, now, to ask her own sister whether she has forgotten her existence too?

But, having come here, the fact that she did not ask about Rem’s absence, already meant that there was no point in asking anymore.

Subaru: “Can’t help but cave-in to her either way. Then let’s follow Ram for now, Emilia-tan. —What’s wrong?”

Subaru turned to Emilia, who had kept her silence up to now. Ever since stepping off the carriage, she had not opened her mouth, but only looked around at her surroundings anxiously. Noticing Subaru’s call, she let out a “No…” slightly shaking her head.

Emilia: “It’s just, I can’t seem to calm down. How should I say it, there’s a strange feeling… it’s not something I can put into words.”

Subaru: “Can’t calm down, huh. For me, a shy loner who’s reluctant to even leave the house, all this is like a new world you know? Everyone gets this feeling I think… In fact, I don’t particularly hate it myself.”

Looking around along with Emilia, everything looked very much like the image of a run-down village. Perhaps, compared to Earlham village, the houses appeared older, and in a greater state of disrepair, but these were merely relative, insignificant details.

Nevertheless, the place was not without a certain sense of incongruity about it. Although what that incongruity was, Subaru wasn’t quite sure either.

Subaru: “But we don’t have much choice even if we keep our guards up, Emilia-tan. Ram and Ros-chi are both here, so at least we shouldn’t be in any danger, I think.”

Emilia: “It’s not that I’m keeping my guard up… No, I’m ok now. But really, if only I could talk to Puck…”

The crystal stone at her chest—touching the green stone beneath her neck, Emilia called out anxiously to the name of the spirit sealed within. The absence of the great spirit that always stayed by her side obviously brought her anxiety to no end.

And to see her so fragile, Subaru despised himself for not being the existence that she can rely on.

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Subaru: “Let’s go. No matter what happens, leave it to your #2 shield.”

Without thinking, he grabbed the hand that was touching the crystal, and turned his face away as he said this. Then, holding her hand like this, before she could even say no, he swung out his stride. And naturally, Emilia only followed behind his forceful attitude.

Having done so without any consideration, just the thought of his embarrassing act made fire fly out of every pore of his face. But, much more than thought, he had chosen to follow his emotion, and merely hoped that this was not seen as strange.

Emilia: “—Ok.”

Only, unlike Subaru’s heart, which was about to jump out of his chest, Emilia slightly nodded, and did not let go of his hand.

2

It was the only house in the Sanctuary that preserved some semblance of a proper shape.

Constructed out of stone, the single story building was around the size of a single-family house of the original world. Its rooms arranged in a simple layout, one could almost imagine living an equally simple and cozy life here.

Although compared to Roswaal Manor and the Crusch Mansion, having grown accustomed to a certain standard of living, Subaru found it rather cramped. But, of course, in time, with a little bourgeois-spirit, he could easily grow used to living in such a place.

For this, was the impression of the place of their meeting.

So then,

Roswaal: “Yaaaa~~~, Emilia-sama and Subaru. I~~ get the feeling that this is quite the long-awaited reunion, do~~n’t you think hmm?”

With a carefree smile, and waving his hand at them, this was how Roswaal greeted them as they saw each other again.

After parting in the capital, this was the first time Subaru met face to face with Roswaal. And as they had not seen each other in the previous loops, it had actually been over a month. Considering all the pent-up resentment accumulated during that time, he had wanted to do nothing less than to punch him across the face at the earliest opportunity, but, Roswaal: “Fi~~~rst of all, more than anything, it’s so~ good to see you safe, Emilia-sama. Ram’s already told me about the problems around the Ma~nsion. If anything should have happened to you, I would surely have lost the will to go on li~~ving.”

Subaru: “If that’s what you feel, you should have at least made some better preparations... Actually, more importantly, what the hell happened to you? What is this?!”

Even as Roswaal seemed relieved to see Emilia safe, Subaru and Emilia were beside themselves with consternation. For all the countless things they had wanted to say, had all of a sudden vanished like a parting mist when they saw Roswaal.

Lying on the bed… all manner of wounds that cannot be overlooked littered his body, as blood seeped through the bandages constricting his figure into a pitifully painful posture.

At Subaru’s question and Emilia’s silent gaze, Roswaal used his left arm, which was relatively less injured, to gently pull up the eye-patch that was covering his left eye.

Roswaal: “Aaa~~~yaaa~~, a~~re you asking about these? I~~ am only a man, a~~fter all. Being seen in this pitiful state wounds my self-esteem, so if you could please understand my desire to re~~st a little.”

Emilia: “That’s not good enough, is it. What really happened, Roswaal? Getting wounded like this... and how did you, of all people.”

Not distracted by his jest, Emilia retorted as she extended a trembling finger towards him, hesitating whether to touch the body ridden with wounds. Seeing her do this, Roswaal smiled bitterly, and turned his right eye up to the ceiling, “Well then…” he whispered,

Roswaal: “Whe~~re should I~~ begin hm? We~ll, I guess you could say my injuries were sustained for something of a matter of honor, and out of regard for propriety, I had no~~ choice.”

Emilia: “Stop trying to get away with these roundabout words. I am asking you seriously, Roswaal, so answer me seriously in return.”

Roswaal: “…My~ it seem Emilia-sama is in an especially bad mood. Bu~~t, considering where we are, there’s no avo~iding it perhaps.”

Even Subaru felt that something was out of place when he heard Emilia’s relentless, inquisitive tone, and it was at the same moment, that Roswaal pointed this out. Emilia slightly angled up her eyebrows, but, realizing that what he had pointed out was true, she lightly bit her lip.

Emilia: “My head is all a mess, I can’t calm down at all. What is this place? Even though it’s called the “Sanctuary”, I don’t think that’s what it is at all. Then this place is…”

Roswaal: ““A Witch’s Grave”, that’s an easier name to acce~~pt, no?”

“—!”

The tone of Roswaal’s voice dropped as he pronounced these words. The same words from Garfiel being uttered in Roswaal’s mouth, the phrase suddenly took on a sense of some heavy and sonorous meaning.

Swiftly, Emilia shot her gaze toward Subaru. Seeing the complex tangle of emotions in her eyes, Subaru lowered his chin in a nod, in tune with her unease.

Subaru: “Hold on, let’s get everything we want to ask in order first. If we go on like this, the conversation is only going to drift all over, and we won’t get a single conclusion out of him.”

Roswaal: “Ooh~ yaaa? In the short time we haven’t se~en each other, you’ve gotten quite good at se~ttling accounts, no? Subaru, just wha~t could have brought on this change in your state of mi~nd?”

Subaru: “If we’re going to get into that it’ll take a really long time, so I’ll leave the bragging for after we’ve heard everything we want to know. Ah, right, there was just this one thing...”

Staring at Roswaal’s mocking smile, Subaru lifted up a finger,

Subaru: “We’ve established the alliance with Crush, but you must have already heard it from Ram… you’re glad you left me behind, aren’t you?”

Roswaal: “—Ve~ry glad. A~~fter all, I was right to have picked you up.”

Seeing Roswaal relax the corner of his lips with satisfaction, Subaru sighed and closed his eyes. Subaru had anticipated this, but the fact remains, his actions were exactly as Roswaal planned. Even if he had already allowed himself to be used, it still wasn’t fun to hear the confirmation.

Anyway, Subaru arranged his next thought,

Subaru: “Firstly then, the villagers of Earlham village. Since Ram is safe, they must be fine as well, and all evacuated safely, right?”

Roswaal: “You can rest assu~~red. Perhaps my current state doesn’t give me much credibility but, I sti~~ll know my respo~nsibilities as Lord. Such thing as to risk my life to protect my subjects, I too have that resolve. I’ve seen to it that everyone’s sheltered in the village’s cathedral.”

Subaru: “Cathedral… Ah, we can get back to that later, so the next thing is...”

He was relieved to confirm the villagers’ safety. Since Subaru had only made the decision to evacuate along with the preparations beforehand, whether they were safe in the end was the final concern left over from the previous loops. —Because no matter what, a part of that could no longer be redone.

Relaxing his shoulders, Subaru gave Emilia a look. And receiving it, she inclined her head, drawing back her slender chin,

Emilia: “Then, tell me about this place. You call it Sanctuary, but Garfiel calls it “The Witch of Greed’s Gravesite”. Just which one is true?”

Roswaal: “Both are true, Emilia-sama. This is the site of the once-Witch of Greed’s —Echidna’s final resting place. And to me personally, it is a place that should called Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “—Witch.”

Emilia: “Echidna…”

Hearing his answer, Subaru and Emilia’s throats simultaneously clogged up.

Roswaal spoke quietly, and all of the clownish demeanor he had been using until now had vanished from his voice. Precisely because of this, for the first time, his words carried an unmistakable flavor of honesty.

Drawing in a deep breath, Emilia blinked a few times, and continued once more,

Emilia: “The Witch of Greed…was another Witch who was annihilated by the Witch of Envy, wasn’t she.”

Roswaal: “E~n, that is right. No matter where you look in the history of the current world, nothing remains of her name anymore. Only, except in the memories of those who knew her…”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait, but what you just said makes no sense.”

Subaru interrupted Roswaal’s solemn words with a quick wave of his hand. Roswaal narrowed his single eye, gazing into Subaru, who was little by little succumbing to the pressure of his aura.

Subaru: “If I remember correctly, the Witch of Greed…was defeated by the Witch of Envy 400 years ago. This place being the final resting place of a Witch from 400 years ago might be understandable… but what you’re saying is that you knew her in person, but that’s just…”

Roswaal: “I~~ know this myself, but I~~’m afraid I can’t say. Because this is passed down verbally through generation after generations of the Mathers family...only to the heir of Roswaal.”

Emilia: “Passed down verbally... then the head of the Mathers family of long ago was once connected to the Witch of Greed?”

Roswaal: “—Echidna.”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Suddenly, hearing the name brought up, Emilia’s eyes opened wide. Roswaal turned his gaze towards her, and, as if to confirm once more, quietly whispered, “Echidna”,

Roswaal: “Ple~ase, call her by name when referring to her. A title like “The Witch of Greed”, no matter how you say it, carries an evil impression about it, do~~n’t you think? And it’s so long, too...”

Emilia: “…I see. So then, Echidna met her end in this village, and this village has then been managed by the Mathers family for generation after generation... is that right?”

Roswaal: “E~n, that is correct. Though managing implies more hands on work tha~n there is. Echidna’s influence remains thickly here, and without the proper steps, it’d be impossible to set foot in here. The fact that you were able to enter... must have been thanks to Frederica’s assistance, isn’t that so?”

Receiving a nod of affirmation in return, a sense of understanding emerged in Roswaal’s eyes. Seeing this, Subaru pursued the topic,

Subaru: “I understand this is Echidna’s grave, and under your management. But what I don’t understand is its purpose, and why you and the villagers haven’t returned yet.”

Roswaal: “I may have just said some strange things, bu~~t you seem to have accepted them quite rea~dily. The fact that this is a Witch’s Gravesite, I~~ had really wanted to keep that a secret...”

Subaru: “Maybe if it was the Witch of Envy, but I really have no idea what the Witch named Echidna had done. Just the word “Witch” immediately gives the impression of some kind of villain. But then it’s the same thing with “Half-Elf”, and who could have guessed that Emilia-tan is so cute just from that word?”

Emilia: “…D, d-don’t say irrelevant things like that. Surprise-attacks are off limits you know!”

Hearing the pick-up line casually inserted into the end of that otherwise serious sentence, Emilia, whose face had turned bright red, lightly yanked at the side of Subaru’s waist. Subaru smiled wryly at her totally cute retaliation, but then, he noticed Roswaal in the corner of his eyes giving off a rather annoying laugh “Oho~”,

Roswaal: “In the sho~~rt time you’ve spent apart, you’ve grown quite a bit closer, ha~ven’t you. After leaving with that fight in the Capital, I was wondering just what would happen, but it seems now it’s even better than befo~~re.”

Subaru: “That’s the love received at the end of a long and arduous journey, you know! There’s a mountain of things I can brag about, but let’s leave that for after you’ve finished answering our questions. So, what is the purpose of this place, and why haven’t you returned.”

Roswaal: “It seems you aren’t the naive child anymore, and has become quite dependable indeed. So~~ then, the re~ason the villagers and I have not returned… simply put, we can’t return even if we wa~~nted to.”

Subaru: “Can’t return even if you wanted to?”

Unable to understand his answer, Subaru furrowed his brows.

Roswaal nodded, and smiling at the question mark emerging on Subaru’s face, said,

Roswaal: “Because right now, every o~~ne of us, and the residents of this village included, are all in a state of house-arrest. A~~~nd, from the moment you entered here, it seems you two are also in the sa~~me situation.”

Chapter 9:
The Cemetery

1

Subaru: “House arrest now… that’s an unsettling word…”

Facing Roswaal, who was lying on the bed, Subaru barely managed to wrench out these words while carefully analyzing the sentence which had just been spoken at him. Judging from the flow of the conversation, he might normally have laughed it off as a stupid joke, but unfortunately, in the current circumstances they appeared to be authentic. At any rate,

Emilia: “So then, does that mean the villagers here gave you these injuries?”

Emilia seemed to have arrived at the same opinion as Subaru on the general believability of his words.

Bound in bandages seeped in blood, Roswaal’s body was in a pitiful state. Seeing him like this was at least proof that some of what he said was true, and was the reason why it could not simply be laughed off.

Subaru: “If there’s someone in the village who could give such serious injuries to Roswaal, that means we’re in a pretty serious situation…”

Touching his hand to his jaw, while tracing over the respective strengths in his mind, Subaru felt a burning sense of unease in his chest.

The existence of Roswaal L. Mathers, besides being Subaru’s patron in this parallel world, was a powerful magic user at a level only very few others could hope to reach.

In fact, the strength of the man who occupied the position of Head Magician of the Royal Court of Lugunica was such that even a hundred Subarus would not have a chance of winning against it, and could easily annihilate a horde of witchbeasts while humming. To think that he would end up in this state...

Roswaal: “Ah, but it seems like you misundersto~od. My wounds weren’t infli~~cted by~ anyone. There’s no need to be on guard for anything strange, or plan any kind of revenge for my sake, o~k?”

Subaru: “Don’t worry. You haven’t saved up enough positive impressions for me to go off recklessly seeking revenge... But more importantly, what is that supposed to mean? That’s different from what you just said. Aren’t you supposed to be under house arrest...”

Roswaal: “Considering that I’m injured and being restrained like this, calling it house arrest is not wro~ng, surely. It’s not that I was injured in the process of being restrained, I was injured, and the~n restrained... Though if I were to explain it in detail, it would be a li~ttle different.”

In response to Roswaal’s round-about manner of speaking, a question mark flew out of the top of Subaru’s head. Breaking everything down, he managed to calm himself and sorted through the context of what was said, and in other words,

Subaru: “So the people of the sanctuary have nothing to do with your injuries, is that right?”

Roswaal: “Strictly speaking, one can’t exactly sa~y that they’re unrelated, but if you were to ask me whether they were directly responsible for my injuries then the answer is no. In other words, tha~~t’s how it i~~s.”

Subaru: “In other words, they’re indirectly related then.”

Roswaal inclined his head, and for a moment appeared to be embarrassed by Subaru’s analysis. Then letting out a small sigh, “It’s like watching a child grow up, I guess…”, he joked.

Seeing that attitude, Subaru took it as a sign that he was coming closer to the truth. Determined not to let up his questioning, he chose his next words and prepared to throw them at Roswaal, but…

Ram: "—Barusu, how about showing Master Roswaal a little bit of care?"

Saying so, Ram, who had not been present until now, interjected herself into the conversation. With the hem of her skirt lightly swinging, the girl crossed the room with graceful steps, and placed the steaming set of tea she had been carrying on a tray neatly onto the table.

Its fragrance spread throughout the room, and with the stimulation of his olfactory senses, Subaru only now realized how inconsiderate he had been. For just when he was about to pursue his questioning, he suddenly noticed just how severe Roswaal's wounds actually appeared.

Ram: "Pressing Master Roswaal so hard when he's so severely injured, digging to the bottom of everything, are you satisfied? Look at Master Roswaal suffering, almost crying, have some sympathy."

Subaru: "Just when you've made me reflect on my actions… don't say something that ruins the mood! I mean, is this supposed to be him hurting and about to cry? Doesn't look like it to me!"

Roswaal: "Uuuuh, it hu~~rts, I'm in pa~~in. Words lacking in kindness and concern hit me right in my wooounds..."

So Subaru responded to Ram's words with a brash retort. As if mocking Subaru's remarks, Roswaal started a little performance on the bed. As Subaru's eyebrows started to twitch in annoyance, Emilia cleared her throat and pulled the room back from the turbulent atmosphere.

While drawing the eyes of all three people in the room to her, she started with an "In any case."

Emilia: "Anyone can tell that Roswaal isn't well just by looking, so let's finish this conversation quickly. You haven't had healing magic cast on you?"

Ram: "Magic that heals is outside of Ram's area of expertise, so..."

In response to Ram's expressionless, yet somehow clearly regretful answer, Emilia looked at Roswaal with eyes which held only little expectation. Seeing this, Roswaal waved his raised hand from side to side,

Roswaal: "I too, am specialized in destruction magic yo~~u see. If it's to do with destroying, harming or deceiving I can generally do pretty much anything, but I'm hopeless when it comes to spells related to healing."

Subaru: "That's a sad way to put it. Rather than just offensive spells, you should make sure to practice with some defensive spells as well, jeez..."

That said, whenever Subaru played a game in which he had to decide on his character growth, he was the type of super offense-focused player who would only pick attack-oriented skills. So he couldn't scold Roswaal too harshly.

At the same time as when Subaru reached this strange acceptance, Emilia sighed "it can't be helped", and,

Emilia: "Puck isn't here, so I'm not at my best, but I'll cast the healing magic. I have to concentrate while I do it though, so we'll have to finish talking first."

Roswaal: "The Great Spirit…?"

Shocked at the information Emilia had just spilled, Roswaal quickly raised his eyebrows, then narrowed his eyes. That somewhat cold expression, unlike the usually relaxed demeanor, was one which Subaru had rarely seen. He unwittingly Contracted his shoulders and said "Oy oy."

Subaru: "It's rare to see you with a serious expression. Is it so surprising that Puck isn't here? I hadn't realized that you were actually a closet mofumofu fur-enthusiast..."

Roswaal: "Unfortunately, the only time I have gotten close enough to the Great Spirit to be able to touch it was when I respectfully offered it ma~yonna~~ise. It was really scary. —Anyway, I~ see."

Without even ignoring Subaru's banter, Roswaal narrowed his brow in rumination. While doing this, he suddenly turned his yellow left pupil onto Emilia,

Roswaal: "Emilia-sama, you aren't feeling ill, or different from normal in a~~ny way, right?"

Emilia: "...? Other than Puck not showing his face, not really. Puck not coming out started a little while before we reached the Sanctuary too, so… Ah, but there is one thing."

Raising a finger as if asking a question, Emilia then proceeded to quickly whip her gaze around at their surroundings —Not only inside of the room they were in, but seeming as if she was looking over the entirety of the Sanctuary outside of it, and after doing so, she said in a lowered voice,

Emilia: "Since entering the Sanctuary… No, maybe ever since entering the forest, I feel like the responses from spirits have become dull. And just now, when we were just outside, I... felt a strange gaze on me."

Subaru: "A strange, gaze?"

Surprised at what he heard, Subaru inclined his head, to which Emilia responded "Yes" and pulled in her chin in confirmation. After explaining that this was the reason why her expression had darkened after they parted ways with Garfiel and the others earlier, she continued,

Emilia: "It felt like I was being stared at. It felt reeaaally unpleasant… I thought it might just be me, so I didn't tell you."

Roswaal: "Neither of Emilia-sama's fe~elings are mistaken. This is a place which is unpleasant for the spirits, and further, its inhabitants harbor nothing but unple~asant fe~elings towards you."

In response to Emilia's anxious words, Roswaal poured out a stream of words devoid of any consideration. Seeing her eyes hurt and wavering, Subaru instantly turned on Roswaal and was about to open his mouth to object, but, Garfiel: “Well, how ‘bout y’leave it there. You shouldn’t be so hard on’a wounded man. “Th’running spotted-beak’s hot now” isn’t it.”

Subaru: “I guess that’s true unfortunately… not that I’m understanding enough of that to say I agree. But this is just a tiny complaint, we’ve totally established a translatable communication between us, haven’t we?”

Looking over his shoulder, Subaru shrugged as he saw Garfiel leaning against the door, baring his teeth. Seeing his reaction, Garfiel made a noise grinding his teeth, and looked around the room.

Garfiel: “Granny’s home’s supposed th’most spacious and proper one here, but with so many people, it gets cramped, huh. Guess I was right to leave that noisy guy behind.”

Subaru: “Now that you mention it, I don’t see Otto around… Did he go home? Did you eat him?”

Emilia looked shocked at Subaru’s question, but Garfiel laughed out loud and slapped his knees, as if he’d just heard an amazing joke.

Garfiel: “I do have the blood of’a carnivore, but I don’t think I’d eat him. Especially ‘cause that guy seems like he’d get even more noisy when I’m eating him. He said something about being worried about the dragon and the cart... Well, he pretty much jus’ came up with some excuse and legged it.”

With one arm swinging, and strutting over brutishly, Garfiel plunked himself down on a chair near the wall, and looked up at Ram, who was watching him sideways,

Garfiel: “Tea.”

Ram: “I will go outside to collect some fallen leaves, so will you please wait for me?”

Subaru: “Even though I have a suspicion, but, what will you be doing with those fallen leaves?”

Ram: “I have no intention of wasting precious tea leaves on the sort who has no understanding of neither fragrance nor taste. That is Ram's answer."

Having stated this in cold blood, Ram then earnestly went out the building. Pointing a finger up at Ram's back, Subaru looked at Garfiel, wordlessly asking "What do you like about her?" In response to that, while chasing her back with his look,

Garfiel: "Strong-willed women are worth the chase, ain'that so? And being a male, getting strongly attracted to excellent female ain't such'a strange thing."

Subaru: "Stuff like males and females, we're not talking about telling chickens apart, so don't keep using that. In spite of everything, Ram is a proper young woman, you know. Calling her that..."

Garfiel: "Huh? What're you sayin'? I'm treatin' her as properly as any woman could ask to be treated yeah? Also, before that we..."

As Subaru offered his frank advice on his unusual way of speaking, Garfiel frowned as if he just noticed something, and raised his eyebrows. His face then took on a displeased expression, and he turned a gaze filled with swords onto Roswaal on the bed,

Garfiel: "Son of'a, y'haven't told 'em yet? If it wer' jus' you gettin' crumpled I'd brush it off as a joke, but, since that Half-Elf... since Emilia-sama's come here, it's a whole different matter."

Emilia: "—Eh?"

Garfiel had put his annoyance to his tongue and stamped it out. Emilia was surprised at hearing her name come out in the middle of his remark. But, with no regard for her astonishment, Garfiel snapped at Roswaal with an expression that was even more overflowing with anger than before.

Garfiel: "The moment Emilia-sama entered the Sanctuary, we got caught up in this mess y'know. Watcha gonna do about it? Ya haven't even begun to go into the main issue here yet. Son of'a, did ya'll jus come here to fool around?"

The latter half of his anger wasn't just directed at Roswaal, but at Subaru and Emilia as well, who had also gone silent. Particularly, the rage dwelling in the look he aimed at Emilia was no laughing matter, and as if to protect her, who was pulling her shoulders closer together, Subaru stepped forward.

Subaru: "Hold on. I get that you're angry, but I don't even have a clue why. You'll just get more and more angry if you keep talking to someone who hasn't got a clue, right?"

Garfiel: "But that's what pisses me off. When the person all this is about ain't even got a clue…"

Subaru: "But the one disregarding "the person all this is about" and talking over her head is you and Roswaal over there, isn't it? If you really are concerned with that problem and want to do something about it, fulfill your responsibility to explain it. Expecting us to get it without explaining anything makes you just as shameless as I was just a short while back you know."

As he was facing him, Subaru felt the pressure coming from Garfiel getting a whole level stronger. Garfiel's stature was smaller than Subaru's, and as he was currently sitting, the height difference was quite significant. In spite of this, the smallness of his stature was almost unnoticeable. No, considering the density of the pressure emanating from him, to Subaru, Garfiel appeared to be something like a massive boulder.

Knowing that Subaru was naturally chicken-hearted, averting his eyes and taking a step back would only have been expected,

But,

Emilia: "Subaru…"

Tightly, Subaru felt a delicate finger entangle itself onto his sleeve. The sound of a voice seemingly devoid of confidence calling him slid past his earlobes, and invested his trembling knees with renewed strength.

Emilia was standing behind him. Relying on him in her uncertainty.

As if he would really let his knees buckle in front of her, could he do something as lame as that?

Garfiel: "—Tch."

They exchanged a stare in silence, and the first to avert his gaze was Garfiel. As he clicked his tongue, and entrusted his weight to the back of his seat, he stuffed his finger into his short, golden hair, and began to scratch at it violently.

Garfiel: "Aaah! I know, I was jus' takin' it out on you. I snapped, I said I'm sorry, oy!"

Subaru: "No, you haven't really said that. But before that, didn't anyone ever tell you you have a really annoying personality?"

As quick as he was to become emotional and shortsighted, he was just as quick to take back his rationality and acknowledge his faults. Subaru thought that personality must be so rough to have, and rather than indignation he put on a wry smile.

Seeing this, Garfiel let out an unbefitting sigh "Haaa",

Garfiel: "Shut up, I'll be quiet, so get the conversation going in the meantime, 'cause if I join in, the talk ain't gonna go nowhere and it'll become annoying."

Subaru: "The fact that you've analyzed yourself this well, but then went all the way around without changing anything… I find that pretty amazing."

Garfiel: "Complimentin' me's pointless, since I don't really understand complicate things. Tuch."

Seeing Subaru go from exasperation to admiration, Garfiel snorted. Just then, Ram, returning from outside, handed him a cup of steaming tea.

Ram: "This is the definition of low-grade tea."

Garfiel: "Shouldn't you usually speak a bit more politely when giving someone something?"

Ram replied with a “Is that so”, and handed the cup over with a composed expression. Garfiel received the tea, and, even though it was probably burning hot, poured it all down his throat in one go. Although he was carnivorous, apparently he didn’t have a sensitive tongue. Seeing him empty the whole cup in one gulp, Ram let out a deep sigh.

Ram: “As usual, you are a man who has no regard for tea. That doesn’t suit Ram.”

Garfiel: “But it just tastes like leaves. If yer want to whet yer throat, water’s the same. Right?”

Subaru: “While I agree that tea tastes exactly like leaves, I can’t help but have some reservations against such an extreme argument. Ram, how about letting him drink the other cup of tea?”

As Subaru pointed it out, Ram handed the other cup of tea to Garfiel. Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of “Autumn Leaves”, and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn’t stop himself from… well, recommending it.

Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of “Autumn Leaves”, and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn’t stop himself from… well, recommending it.

Garfiel: “Hey, you’re pretty sensible after all, aren’t ya. You get that just one cup isn’t enough... Pfft! Haah?! Ooy, you… isn’t this one just leaf water...?”

Ram: “If it wets your throat, whether it’s water, tea or leaf water it’s all the same, correct? Since you’ve already put it on your lips, go ahead and drink the whole thing. If you leave anything… I will twist it off.”

Without saying what exactly she would be twisting off, she shot a sharp glare at Garfiel’s crotch. Just from that, Subaru realized that her target was the vitals, and unconsciously closed up his legs at the sense of danger. Garfiel reluctantly emptied the cup of its contents, wringing at the bitterness. And on the side, Roswaal, who had so far only been observing their conversation, suddenly spouted, Roswaal: “Aaa~~ha. Are a~ll of you even worried about my condition and have any intention of allowing me to rest? Or is it your actual plan to make me laugh and o~pen up my wounds? If that’s the case, you’re certainly succee~ding.”

Saying so, Roswaal lightly touched the bandage wrapped around the upper part of his head while grinning bitterly. In fact, one could see a faint red color beginning to spread across the white of the fabric. Just then, the mood of the room, which had been relaxed up until now, turned, and Ram, whose face had changed colour, approached Roswaal. She then covered his hand, which was pressing down on the wound, with her own, and

Ram: “I’m very sorry, Master Roswaal. Even though Ram was by your side...”

Subaru: “Wasn’t it your tea-jokes that made sure he would laugh?”

His disruption was silenced by a rock-shattering glare from Ram, and Subaru zipped it, and took a quick look at Roswaal’s condition. At least, the bleeding didn’t seem to be connected to anything serious. The wounds must have only stopped bleeding recently —in other words, now was probably the most important time for his recovery.

Emilia: “Roswaal, I think it’d be best if I treat you after all...”

Roswaal: “No~~, that would not be necessary, Emilia-sama.”

Reaching the same conclusion as Subaru, spirits emerged in the air surrounding Emilia as she stepped toward Roswaal. But, she was stopped by Roswaal himself shaking his head. The spirits, which were shining with a blue-white phosphorescence, wavered, as if affected by their mistress’ uncertainty.

Watching the side of Emilia’s fair cheeks, Subaru noticed.

—As the emerging spirits floated around Emilia, for reasons Subaru could not understand, Garfiel stared at her with eyes of frozen emotion.

Roswaal: “After all, right now, there’s something much more important than my trifling i~njuries. It's not like my li~fe is in any danger, so please prioritize the other matter first."

Emilia: "Even if you say that, there's no way I can do that. When there is a person who's injured, to set that aside for something else would be..."

Roswaal: "Even if I tell you this is necessary in order for you to sit upon the throne?"

Emilia's usual rhythm shattered, and the scene of her about to heal him by force if necessary, froze up. Listening to Roswaal's statement, Emilia's cheeks grew stiff, and her violet eyes opened wide. The yellow left eye watching this in front sharpened as if peering into her, gleamed enigmatically,

Roswaal: "To the house of Mathers, this "Sanctuary" is just a piece of land which had been passed down through the generations, but to Emilia-sama's future, it is of profound… yes, of profou~nd significance. Therefore no matter what, I certainly intended to eventually invite you here. —It's just, you showed up a little earlier than I had pla~nned… no?"

Emilia: "Necessary for me...? Hey, what is that supposed to mean..."

Roswaal: "The problem with this "Sanctuary", and Emilia-sama's problem are intimately tied. So perhaps, in this place, you would find it. Emilia-sama's support, that is."

"—?!"

Frozen in place, Subaru watched as Emilia's expression changed. Having prompted this change, Roswaal observed her expression, and seemed to take it in as if all was according to plan. On the other hand, Subaru, still unable to pick up the exchange of emotions between the two, was left with an itch in his teeth.

However, before that agitation could be turned into words, Roswaal pointed to the silent Garfiel.

Roswaal: "Your designation, Garfiel. Guide these two to the "Sanctuary." —Rather, the tomb."

Garfiel: "—Heh, that a good idea?"

Swinging his emptied porcelain cup from side to side on his finger, Garfiel let out a low laugh. In response to being questioned, Roswaal drew in his chin and gently caressed Ram's peach-colored hair as she changed the bandages around his wounds.

Roswaal: "First and foremost it is crucial to understand the situation, a~fter all. Explaining the circumstances and the other matters can come a~fter the Sun has set, but that is not the case for the tomb."

Garfiel: "Ah, that'so, the Sun's going down soon. Won't be so simple once that happens. Alright, I'll take up guiding for ya."

Standing up, Garfiel placed his cup onto the chair he'd been sitting on, and turned to face Subaru and Emilia. Looking at the two whom the talk revolved around, but had been left out entirely, he slanted his head and opened his mouth to bare his fangs,

Garfiel: "Don't look so dumb. If you don't wanna become "like the rampaging Hoikoro from yesterday" or something stupid like that, we better get going."

Subaru: "Wait, wait, wait! We're not following the conversation at all. I wasn't even done talking to Roswaal in the first place, you know. At least let me finish that before..."

Ram: "His wounds have opened. Changing his bandages and letting him rest is the priority now. Barusu should do as Master Roswaal instructed, and head to the tomb up ahead."

Subaru tried to put up a fight against Garfiel's forcefulness, but that was intercepted by Ram's commanding voice. She faced him with her usual cold gaze, and placed a hand on the bed,

Ram: "Calm down, let us talk once night comes. Master Roswaal isn't going to run away or anything like that. But if you don't visit the grave before sun-down, that is going to run away."

Subaru: "I've never heard of such an energetic grave in my life!"

While scratching his head in resignation, Subaru felt Emilia's gaze piercing into the side of his face. Her eyes were flickering with feeble emotions, and she seemed to be leaving it up to Subaru to decide what they should do.

To stay here and finish their conversation with Roswaal, or to be swept along by his will and be led to the gravesite by Garfiel. —The answer has been decided.

Subaru: "I understand. We'll go to that grave place. It's necessary, isn't it? We'll certainly have you properly answer our questions once we get back."

Roswaal: "So~rry, that the situation has become like this. O~nce night falls, we can discuss all sorts of things, mu~~ch more thoroughly."

Hearing Subaru's opinion, Emilia relaxed her shoulders, and Roswaal nodded with satisfaction. Garfiel and Ram also seemed to accept it, and the two of them began to move onto their respective tasks. However, before that, Subaru said "Just one thing", raising a single finger.

Subaru: "Before heading to the grave, there's something I want to ask you."

Roswaal: "Mmm~~? I don't really mind? If it's something I can answer simply, you can go ahead and ask me a~nything."

Subaru: "Well then, I'll take you on your word. —"Rem", have you heard that name before?"

Pretending to change the topic, Subaru pronounced the vital question. On hearing Subaru's question, the first to react was Ram. But, it was not an answer he had hoped for.

When the name entered her ears, Ram angled her head as if she had heard an entirely unfamiliar term. As Subaru's hopes dropped, Roswaal quietly mumbled the name over again in his mouth.

Subaru: "...Well?"

Roswaal: “Omu. Sorry, but it doesn’t sound too fami~liar. I get the feeling it sounds similar to Ram’s name but, ma~ybe if it was mispronounced.”

Subaru: “Is...that so. No, that’s all. If you don’t remember, there’s nothing. Nothing you can do.”

Turning his head to the side, Subaru accepted that answer.

Ram and Roswaal’s reply had shattered the faint expectation in Subaru’s heart. To Rem, they had been the two people whom she had spent the longest time with, for whom she would have given her life, and whom she had admired and loved. And they had forgotten her.

Taking in the reality of this fact, the air within Subaru’s heart settled. And he soberly acknowledged it.

—That in this world, the only one who could remember her, was himself.

Emilia: “Subaru, are you alright?”

With a worried voice, Emilia softly touched the end of Subaru’s sleeve. Savoring the gentleness of the tip of her finger, Subaru, not wanting to let her see the darkness on his face, closed his eyes, then forcibly lifted his head.

Subaru: “I’m alright. It’s not like I had any special expectations. I more or less knew it would be like this. —What I must do, one way or another, I already have that resolve.”

Emilia: “En. Let’s find a way. I will help too.”

Emilia nodded at Subaru’s determination, and pledged her unreserved support. As the heart that had been shattered recovered in her gentle regard, Subaru shrugged up his shoulders.

Subaru: “When Rem wakes up… my love won’t be wholeheartedly directed at Emilia-tan anymore… won’t you get jealous?”

Emilia: “Subaru’s feelings for me, if it diminishes, then maybe… But it won't be like that, right? My share and Rem-san's share, you've already said you have them all properly planned out and everything…"

In response to Subaru's flirty banter, Emilia made an unexpected retaliation. Scared witless by that retort, Subaru couldn't utter another word out of his mouth, and her face only slightly blushed, and said with a soft smile,

Emilia: "Let's go, Subaru. I want to let Ram meet Rem-san soon too."

Subaru: "A, aah, yeah. En, that's right."

Even if Ram could not remember, it would be a reunion with her twin sister. Would that reunion call back memories, or send some shock-waves to the lost love they once had for each other.

Even such a fragile hope, he will cling onto it so long as there was still meaning.

Ram: "Barusu."

As Emilia followed Garfiel out of the room and Subaru turned to follow as well, he was stopped by a call from behind.

Looking over, it was Ram who quickly approached him. While taking into her hands the replacement bandages for Roswaal's wounds, she came close to Subaru's side.

Subaru: "What is it? If you're planning on some Bandage-Play, after we leave you can have Roswaal all to yourself…"

Ram: "Only Emilia-sama is to enter the Tomb. Barusu must never enter."

Ignoring his joke, Ram's incisive tone crushed Subaru's attitude aside.

Ram's voice was lowered, and had told him in a volume that even Roswaal could not hear. Seeing Subaru's furrowed brows, just in case, she said it once more.

Ram: “—If you do not wish to be ensnared by the deranged will of a Witch, do not, under any circumstances, enter the Tomb.”

She repeated it once again.

2

—The air inside the Tomb was frigid and clear, and, quite literally, a cool otherworldliness accompanied the atmosphere that greeted Subaru.

A step, every step he took rang out an echo from the soles of his shoes, and, regardless of whether he had wanted to or not, asserted his presence in this place. But even so, the sound of these footsteps gave him an unexpected sense of calmness.

—Because in the darkness which did not even allow him to see a few meters ahead, in the miasma in which his very own existence was in called into doubt, even this sound had become a consolation to him.

Unaware of where he was, the walls which had been his only source of reference had long disappeared. Walking on and on, had he almost reached the end of his path? Subaru felt the illusion that he had stopped still.

But the sound of his footsteps refuted this. Within the certainty of the resonance of these footfalls was Subaru’s very existence: the reality of his steps were guaranteed, and relying on just that small consolation, he continued onward.

How much time had passed, it was impossible to tell in the darkness. Even his thoughts became vague, and his throat, which had already given up on calling out, froze. Walking on like this, exhaustion did not come to him, but because of this, the sensation of his limbs began to blur as well.

Regardless, he walked on. He must walk on. He must not give up.

He forbid himself to stop. Walk, continue walking. Even crushed under the weight of his baggage, he must clench his teeth and walk on.

Otherwise, how would he ever face her—.

???: "—I see, so that is your core. Very interesting indeed."

A sudden voice rang out, and just as abruptly ended, to be lost forever into the falling of the curtains.

The unimaginable darkness which stretched on no matter which way he turned, in an instant, became bright as day, and the narrow stone corridor transformed – to be wider than the ends of the world. The earth piled beneath his soles snuffed out the sound of his steps, and an air of filth which, above anything, brought nausea to his chest, sprawled throughout.

Completely different from the world up to now, was an ancient ruin befitting of reality—a scene which he felt he might have seen before he entered the Tomb, panned out, and Subaru lost his words.

In front of him, someone suddenly approached. That is—

???: "Apologies for such a ludicrous welcome. I didn't intend it to be like this, but no matter what, this body is a thing of Greed, after all. The desire to know is… impossible to escape."

Pure white, like a field of the first virgin snow, was the white impression of that girl.

The long hair draping over her back shone like the reflection of snow in a daydream of pristine white, and the few patches of skin that were showing were just as translucent, and beautiful. A radiance of wisdom lighted up her eyes; she wore on her body a simple ink-black dress, and the display of the two colors adorned the polar extremes of her beauty.

Anyone who had eyes would probably be captivated by such beauty —but instead, what gripped Subaru's entire body was an overwhelming horror that he had never felt before.

Even the sense of pressure he had felt on his first encounter with the White Whale, could not compare to this.

Before the speechless Subaru, the girl shook her white hair, and narrowed her eyes, and then, as if understanding him, nodded lightly.

???: “Excuse my rudeness. I haven’t even introduced myself. It was so very rude of me, please accept my apologies. It’s because I haven’t interacted with anyone for a very long time, I haven’t recovered my voice, it seems.”

Unlike the tone of her voice, the girl’s expression barely changed as she softly shook her head.

Then, looking at Subaru, who had been frightened into silence, the girl held a hand over her chest in a sign for him to calm down.

Echidna: “My name is Echidna. The one called the Witch of Greed, do you understand?”

Chapter 10:
Thirst for Knowledge Incarnate

1

Since they left the house where Roswaal was recovering, about 15 minutes had passed.

Garfiel: “We’re here. It’s called the graveyard but it’s jus’ a lame ol’ grave.”

Saying this, Garfiel jerked up his chin to point at an old ruin on the verge of the Sanctuary. Constructed from an assembly of stones, the architectural style was primitive, and quite far from the impression of anything magical.

It is unknown just how many years had passed since it had been built, but from the cracks that littered the face of its walls, and the remarkable density of the sprawling ivy, it must have been something from over a century ago.

The entrance of the ruin was in line with the forest, and most of the building was engulfed into the trees, making it impossible to guess the true size of the structure at a glance. If this was the burial place of the “Witch of Greed”, then perhaps it could be thought of similarly to a great pyramid of the original world.

Subaru: “A powerful person wanting to sleep in a large tomb; this is the same for all Ages, and in all Worlds, huh…”

Touching his chin and ruminating on these thoughts, Subaru tilted his head to the grand scale of the building.

Being someone who lives in the moment, Subaru wasn’t all that interested in what people would think of him after his death. But then again, the fact that he wasn’t an important enough person to leave any real trace in history, probably contributed to the development of this view.

Anyways,

Emilia: “It’s good that we got to the grave, but what are we supposed to do here?”

Standing next to Subaru, Emilia looked up at the ruins, and asked Garfiel this question with a puzzled face. Subaru had the same question as well, and directed his gaze onto the back of the blonde youth guiding them here. In response to this, Garfiel clacked his canine teeth as he looked back,

Garfiel: “You can hear the details from that bastard Roswaal after you get back. So fer now, what I want Emilia-sama to do is just to get inside.”

Emilia: “All I have to do is go inside? Don’t I have to do something once I’m inside?”

Garfiel: “Now the Sun’s still up. Even if ya get deep inside the Tomb, the “Trials” won’t start. Ya got no preparations or anything, and first you gotta check out whether you have the qualifications” (“Trials” 試練 is the same word used by Petelgeuse in Arc 3. Some anime subtitles may have translated it as “Ordeals”)

Subaru: “Wa wa wait, wait a second! You’re jumping all over the place. Trials or preparations or qualification, there’s no explanations at all!”

Cutting in front of Garfiel, who might decide to forcefully push Emilia inside, Subaru called out to his responsibility to explain. But Garfiel only showed the irritated face he had already shown so many times in this last hour, and wrinkling up his nose,

Garfiel: “Yeah who cares, what’s the problem? Go in, and afterwards when you get back to Roswaal you’d understand everything. If ya make me explain all that stuff, I’ll make mess of it and ya’ won’t understand a thing.”

Subaru: “It’s like you’re forcing us to sign a Contract without reading its contents here, there’s no way in hell we’re going to do something like that. If you’re bad at organizing words, then just answer my questions one by one properly.”

Garfiel: “Uugh… yeah, whatever. I’m stuck with ya til sunset, so make it short.”

Slightly spreading out his arms, it seems Garfiel swallowed his proposal. Relieved that they were finally able to get some discussion going, Subaru wondered what he should ask first —So then,

Subaru: “This is the “Graveyard”… meaning the grave of the “Witch of Greed”, is that right?”

Garfiel: “That’s what I heard. Actually, I got no idea whose bones’re buried here. This place is the grave of the Witch of Greed, ‘least that’s what the guys at the village told me.”

The rather half-assed reply gave Subaru the feeling that something was out of place, but he gulped down this sense of incongruity for now. Then, picking up on some words from his earlier remarks…

Two terms that seemed to be of particular importance were “Trials” and “Qualification.”

Subaru: “The “Trials” that will start inside the Tomb, what is that? I have to admit… from my experience over these past few weeks, I don’t have a positive impression of that word at all.”

Garfiel: “Calm down, being tested and all that, I don’t like it either. So, ah, the about the “Trials”…I don’t know any details.”

Subaru: “Oy.”

Garfiel: “Don’t get angry, I’m not playin’ aroun’ here. Just, I know it happens inside the Tomb. And those who can’t clear those “Trials”, won’t be released from the impasse of the trial grounds.”

Subaru: “Release…who?”

Garfiel: “The ones who possesses “Qualification”. Guys who’re qualified can’t get out of the trial grounds. Long as the “Trials” aren’t completed, the Witch’s desire to possess will not let go.”

It was a flimsy answer, but Garfiel didn’t seem to be distorting the topic on purpose. Having digested the contents as best he could, he had said exactly what he understood. But still, if his statements didn’t answer anything on-point, it’s probably because his own understanding was vague in the first place.

However, connecting up the fragmented answers from just now, Subaru managed to form some kind of an understanding of the current situation in his mind. So, the answer he got from combining the scattered pieces was,

Subaru: “Only those who are qualified may enter the tomb, and if a person with qualification cannot clear the Trials, they cannot get out of the Sanctuary… is it like that?”

Garfiel: “Ah…? Somethin’ like that… I guess?”

Subaru: “I thought I digested a lot but still it’s still pretty useless…”

Twisting his neck, Garfiel, who probably still didn’t understand, gave back this unreliable reply. Reserving his attitude for now, Subaru turned to Emilia beside him. Taking in Subaru’s gaze, Emilia voiced her conclusion on the matter, which was

Emilia: “Earlier, when I entered the Sanctuary, my consciousness suddenly died out… was that, what this is?”

Subaru: “That was the barrier, and when she passed across the range she fainted? Well, Otto and I were all good and healthy…”

Garfiel: “That’s probably cuz you got no qualification.”

Just as Subaru understood the answer to the reason behind Emilia’s sudden collapse, Garfiel interrupted, pointing one finger at Subaru, and at Emilia with another,

Garfiel: “Emilia-sama, bein’ a Half-Elf, has the qualification. But, Subaru, bein’ a straigh’ up pure-blooded human, doesn’t have the qualification. So y’can go in and out freely. But, y’can’t take the Trials.”

Subaru: “Wait wait hold on. So then, considering those lines, is it something like this?”

Holding his breath, Subaru organized his thoughts. Then, recalling their conversation on his first meeting with Garfiel, and as he guided them to the Sanctuary, Subaru noticed it.

Subaru: “The ones who can take the Trials are Half-Elves… or, half-bloods between humans and demi-humans. So that means the people living in the Sanctuary are all like that?”

Garfiel: “—Aah, I didn’t mention this yet did I.”

Listening to Subaru’s answer, Garfiel nodded looking satisfied, and blinked.

In the next moment, opening his eyes, his pupils had turned gold, and thin like those of a carnivorous beast. The tips of his canine teeth grew, and the nails of his raised claws sharpened like blades.

An illusion of his small body getting larger — rather, it was no illusion. His short blonde hair had grown so much that it covered his back, and the same golden hair grew on his exposed arms and legs, covering up everything.

Garfiel: “I also got a whole lot o’ those blood left in me. “Atavism” ‘s my specialty.”

Subaru: “…Woooow. Can I snuggle in it?”

Racking his brains searching for a way to hold back his excitement, Subaru stuffed his hands into his armpits to conceal the shaking of his fingers. But that request had to be canceled seeing Garfiel had already returned to his original shape. Having witnessed Garfiel’s shapeshift with her own eyes, Emilia gasped in her breath, and took a step forward,

Emilia: “So, after all, this village is a gathering of demi-human species…”

Garfiel: “More accurately speakin’, it’s a collection of mix-bloods between human and demi-humans. For th’love of it, all sorts of races o’ people like that’re gathered here. I’d say that Roswaal bastard has a “Demi-Human Fetish” or something.”

Emilia: “So that’s why Roswaal said something like that. That for me, this place is…”

Saying so, Emilia placed her hand on her lips and sank deep into thought.

For Subaru on the other side, this information wasn’t very light to take in either. In any case, this meant that the people of this place, even though the details may vary, all had this one thing in common with Emilia. Emilia’s past, of being shunned, and rejected, perhaps they could understand that pain,

To her, perhaps that may just be licking old wounds. But, if there were others who could support her in this way, what would she feel about that?

He knew her scars, and wanted to caress them, but Subaru, never having experienced the same pain, could not possibly know how to heal them without opening them up instead. All this, had haunted his mind.

Subaru: “That’s an unexpected flow of things, but I understand the circumstances of the village and the qualification now. So then… the problem is with the Trials. You said you don’t know the contents, but at least know that is going to happen after sunset, right?”

Garfiel: “Yeah, that’s the thing. I don’t know the specifics either. Only that you’re here to check if ya qualify, at least. If you came here at night, the Trials would start, and that’d be the real deal.”

Pointing to the ruins with his thumb, and nudging to Emilia with his chin, Garfiel revealed their current purpose. Nodding to what he had just heard, Subaru gazed up with his mouth open, at the Tomb which was waiting.

Tangled in dense, festering ivy, the thin darkness of the sickly air beckoned, waiting for them. The term “Trials” only served to deepen this solemn impression, elevating it in his thoughts to something more than an expedition into an old ruin.

And, more than anything, that he might possibly be sending Emilia into a place of danger — this fact, was unbearable to Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “Sorry, Ram. Looks like I’ll be going against your warning a lot sooner than I thought.”

Garfiel: “Y’said somethin’?”

Subaru: “Suddenly getting Emilia-tan to venture inside gives me so much anxiety it breaks my heart. So first, for scouting and sacrificing purposes… shouldn’t Garfiel rush in first?”

Lifting up a finger, Subaru made his suggestion. Garfiel looked blank for a second, and then gave a broad smile and once again slapped his laps while making a dry sound with his throat, and,

Garfiel: “Isn’t that normally the place where ya say “I’ll go!” to show off?”

Subaru: “I do want to say it, and I do want to show off quite a bit, but if something happens to me, the probability of me surviving is way too small, so I think you’re more suitable for that. Seeing you can crush the ground with a stomp, you can probably come back alive pretty easily. You’re the strongest, after all.”

Garfiel: “Uh? W, well, I am the strongest. Don’t know ‘bout the Trials or anything, but no matter what kind danger falls out, I’d be like “Penipeni never yields” and all that!”

What exactly he was holding on to was unclear, but Garfiel was in a good mood, rubbing himself under the nose, and there was no need to pour cold water on that, so Subaru didn’t say anything. But then, that good mood quickly evaporated, and Garfiel went on “But then.”

Garfiel: “T’bad I can’t go in. ‘S cause of my Contract or somethin’.”

Subaru: “…Contract?”

Garfiel: “Yeah, it’s annoying as hell. Besides, shouldn’t be me doin’ this.”

Kicking the soil with his foot, Garfiel declared this with a click of his tongue. He didn’t seem to be joking around or anything, so apparently it was a fact that he could not enter. As to what would happen if he violated the agreement— that was not a question he could ask in front of Emilia, considering how important promises were to her.

Anyways, now that the situation was blocked in every direction. Letting Emilia go alone was out of the question, but the Garfiel-scouting-plan was dead. Then, in that case, there was only one choice remaining.

Subaru: “I’ll go look for Otto so can you wait for a bit?”“Emilia: Within the time you do something like that, the sun would go down—It’s alright. I will go in.”

Just as Subaru was trying to get another sacrifice, it was gently rejected by Emilia. As if her mind was now prepared, she glared at the entrance of the Tomb, while lights of vigilance gleamed within her violet pupils, wary of what might arise inside.

She too, judging from the sound of “Trials” and “The Tomb of a Witch”, must have guessed what unsettling things might be taking place within.

Carrying the same concerns and anxieties as she did, yet to lack even the strength to hold her hand, wouldn’t that be far too pathetic.

Subaru: “Ok just a bit inside… no, just near the entrance, but I’ll just go in a little bit and check, how’s that…?”

Garfiel: “I think it’s better if ya don’t? Subaru ain’t got the qualifications. If ya go in without bein invited by the Witch’s Tomb, you’ll end up just like Roswaal.”

Subaru: “Like Roswaal… You mean that guy’s injuries, are because he went in there?”

As the image of Roswaal's bandage-covered body resurfaced in his mind, Subaru tried to press back his astonishment as he looked up at Garfiel, who crossed his arms and nodded in confirmation,

Garfiel: "Well it won't be like that for any unqualified dumbass that wanders in there at night. It's only cus it was that guy, tha you got somethn like that. I wouldn't be surprised if a normal guy without qualifications went in there and got ripped in half."

Subaru: "Those injuries weren't inflicted by anyone, so that's what he meant..."

Roswaal's roundabout statement finally made sense. When he said earlier that he wasn't wounded by anyone in particular, he had been referring to something like that.

But then, another question arose. Why did Roswaal enter the Tomb?

—That he himself was unqualified, he must have known that.

Subaru: "...I better go check inside first after all."

Leaving the doubts about Roswaal for later, Subaru lowered his head as he made this conclusion.

Hearing his answer, for an instant Emilia and Garfiel looked stunned, before,

Garfiel: "Oy oy, were you listenin to me? It'd be dangerous if a dumbass without qualification goes in. Roswaal got like that at night time, but even if it's noon ya won't be much safer."

Emilia: "Yeah, it's dangerous, don't do it Subaru? If I go, it'd be alright. I was never thankful for it, but being a Half-Elf has its uses too, I guess, so..."

Subaru: "I'm glad you're worried about me, but."

Casting a gentle gaze on Emilia, who was tugging on the end of his sleeve, Subaru softly picked off the fingers which were holding onto him, Subaru: “If we calm down and divide up our roles, isn’t this the natural conclusion? Going inside is dangerous, that’s the same for both of us. What we know so far just means that I might be in slightly more danger. So next we be should be looking at what each of us can do.”

Emilia: “What we can do?”

Subaru: “If something bad happens inside, I won’t be able to heal Emilia-tan. Unless Garfiel turns out to be that kind of insanely surprisingly guy, and happens to be an amazing healing magic user, then it’d be a different story.”

Garfiel: “Wounds, mostly you can just rub spit on ‘em and it’ll be good, right?”

Subaru: “Judging from the suspect’s testimony… it’s pretty much like that. Since either of us have the possibility of getting injured, I’d want to keep the healer Emilia-tan safe as an insurance.”

Taking a sidelong glance at Garfiel, who had said those words proudly, Subaru tried to persuade Emilia.

Emilia seemed somewhat shaken by Subaru’s argument, but, deciding that she could not give ground on the important part, continued with “But”, shaking her head from side to side,

Emilia: “Major injuries… or if it’s a life-threatening wound, I won’t be able to treat it. Puck isn’t responding either, so there’s a limit to what I can do. Roswaal has settled down now, but…”

Subaru: “Well, those wounds were pretty dangerous ones, huh. …But still, try to believe in the slipperiness of my survival skills. I think I rank pretty high on the resilience index of this world, you know?”

He smiled at Emilia, who was not letting go; only, this time, his reply did not sound like he was joking.

In fact, it’s rare to find someone as bad at giving up as Subaru. If he were given an infinite number of chances to keep trying, no matter how many times it takes, he would probably keep trying.

No matter how many times his heart is broken, and crushed, he will keep struggling in search of the answer he was seeking.

Because that, is Natsuki Subaru's ——.

Subaru: "Then what if I make you a promise? Then you won't have to worry anymore. I promise, I will return to Emilia-tan's side, and I will never leave you."

Emilia: "——ok."

Holding out his pinky finger, saying it almost teasingly, he received an unexpectedly favorable reply. Like the stunned Subaru, Emilia held out her pinky as well, and slightly tilted her head,

Emilia: "Um, what do you do with this finger?"

Subaru: "Eh? Uh, we tangle up each other's pinky fingers like... Uuuoooouu, Emilia-tan's fingers are super thin and white and cute...!"

Their fingers tangling up, Subaru was moved by the unexpected contact. Then, following the violet pupils waiting for the next prompt, he quietly cleared his throat, and

Subaru: "Pin-ky-pro-mise. Liar-turns-into-a-pin-cushion."

Emilia: "Pinky promise!"

Their pinky fingers separating at the same time, in this way, the promise between Subaru and Emilia was sealed.

This time, it was a promise made upon an understanding of how heavy promises were to Emilia. It was no longer possible to treat them like he did before, when he had taken them so carelessly.

Subaru: "So, I'll just take a quick look inside. Basically, I'll keep calling out while I'm looking around, so make sure to keep calling back to me from the outside so I don't get too lonely."

Garfiel: "Son of'a… sometimes I can't tell if yer a badass or a wimp."

Subaru: “I’m a rather careful person. But in the end, I’m breaking Ram’s advice after all…”

Muttering the second half of that sentence in his mouth, Subaru apologised to the girl with peach-colored hair in his heart.

The deranged will of a Witch — what she had said was a disturbing term, and one he did not want Emilia to hear. Because surely, she would insist on going in by herself, with an even firmer attitude.

Emilia: “Subaru. If you feel there’s something dangerous, you have to come back right away.”

Emilia held her hands in front of her chest, and saw Subaru off with a worried gaze.

And in return, Subaru shot her an original thumbs-up with his pinky finger raised, sparkled his teeth in a smile, and took his step forward — turning toward the Tomb.

Crossing over the ivy under his legs, he concentrated his sight on the absolute darkness that lay several meters beyond the entrance. The Grave was filled with silence, and for now, there seemed to be no sign of begrudging voices, or atrocious creatures lying in ambush.

Still, on the other side of that darkness, what could be awaiting him, was truly, in every sense, unknown.

Subaru: “Ee~h, screw it. “If you don’t venture into the tiger’s den, you won’t get the tiger’s cub”, right? Not that I need a baby tiger or anything!”

As a mofumofu fur-enthusiast, he did have the desire to pet a baby tiger one day, but it was not something he would take any risks over.

Anyways, Subaru, apparently influenced by Garfiel, cheered himself up with an idiom, and making up his mind, he stepped inside the Tomb.

And, the moment he stepped onto the cold surface inside——,

Subaru: “――eh?”

There was a mysterious feeling under his foot.

Astounded, Subaru looked down and lost his words. ――The floor, had disappeared.

Subaru: “Wa, wait… That’s just way too…”

――early for the FLAG to be recalled.

The footing he had expected to step on did not exist, and there was not a single thing to support his body as he tilted forward. The hand which he quickly extended out could touch neither the wall nor the floor, and so, Subaru’s body was sucked into the darkness beneath his eyes ――.

Subaru: “aaaaaaaaaAAAAAH――?!”

Deeper and deeper, he fell through the endless abyss.

2

—Then, it was around 10 minutes after waking up at the bottom of the abyss.

Walking around in the middle of a seemingly never-ending darkness, at the end of his path, Subaru found himself in front of a lonely girl.

Now, in answer to her questions, Subaru told her everything that lead up to here.

Subaru: “So that’s how, falling down after all sorts of things happened, and then walking around feeling hopeless and a little hungry, I stumbled into you. …Satisfied?”

Echidna: “En, satisfied indeed. It seems you are a person who’s even surpassed my expectations.”

Covering her mouth with the back of her hand, the girl let out a quiet laugh that sounded like “ku ku ku” as she noticed Subaru watching her with a guarded look.

Sizzling energy was building up in his legs as if he was readying himself to dash out at any moment, and he opened and closed his hands as if preparing to seize her.

But naturally, Subaru's clumsy assault plan was…

Echidna: "There's no reason to be so cautious. And besides, surely you yourself can tell how little of a chance you have if you go up against me? Bravery and a fool's courage are easily mistaken for one another, and yet are quite different things."

Subaru: "Sorry, admitting defeat doesn't really suit my personality. And when you say there's no need to be so cautious... considering I'm standing in front of a person who calls herself the Witch of Greed, is it even possible to follow that advice?"

Echidna: "I see. You really are as you say. It was my bad."

As she received Subaru's agitated reply full of rebellion, the girl—the one named Echidna, did not alter her attitude. Rather, with tremendous ease, or perhaps finding the powerless Subaru's dogged attitude amusing, her own attitude was one which transcended even the shifting of dimensions.

Almost like reading a Manga, it was as if she was looking down on a sketched out character with eyes of a completely different dimension. To her, Subaru had never even been standing on the same stage as herself in the first place.

It was precisely because of this, that Subaru regarded her with the greatest caution.

A person emitting an oppressive aura that surpassed even that of the White Whale. The one going by the name of the "Witch of Greed". To what extent was all this real, was an irrelevant question. What was relevant, was that she was a person who was not to be taken lightly, whose overwhelming existence could be recognized even by the likes of Subaru.

However, as cold sweat emerged all over Subaru's forehead, she sent him a playful glance,

Echidna: “Alas, to be treated so cruelly really hurts my feelings. As you can see, I am only a meek and gentle girl, you know? If a boy looks at me with those eyes, it’s not like I wouldn’t get any ideas.”

Subaru: “You aren’t talking about the girl who’s got “DEATH FLAG” written in big red letters on it, are you? Just so you know, ever since I got here, my caution sensor’s been acting up like crazy.”

After having tasted “death” so many times since coming to this world, Subaru had acquired some sort of an ability. Even though his deaths are still piling up in spite of this ability, his constant desire to avoid that experience again is forcing Subaru to incorporate more and more vigilance into his consciousness.

And according to that, the level of danger this girl posed was no less than when he was standing in front of Petelgeuse.

Although,

Echidna: “It seems we won’t be able to talk properly this way. It can’t be helped. —In that case, how about this arrangement?”

Saying this, Echidna softly raised her right hand in front of her face. Subaru gulped down a breath at this gesture, and immediately after, the girl snapped her fingers with her raised hand.

A faint sound rang out—and the world transformed before Subaru’s eyes.

The cold stone space of the bottom of a crypt vanished, and panning out in its place was a prairie of green grass swept by the wind. —And, on top of a small hill,

Subaru: “Wha—?!”

Echidna: “Instead of playing in a place like that, how about here?”

Laughing at Subaru’s amazement as he looked all around, on top of the hill, Echidna—sitting in one of the chairs surrounding a white table, showed Subaru a seat opposite her own, and pleaded for him to come.

With no idea what just happened, Subaru hesitated as he came up to her. Neatly placed on the table were steaming cups of tea.

Seeing Subaru staring at her silently,

Echidna: “Don’t worry, there’s nothing dangerous inside. I could take a first sip if you like? Although, if you suspect whether a Witch can’t be poisoned, then it wouldn’t prove a thing.”

Subaru: “…I’m beat. Since coming in here, all my common sense just keeps getting overturned. What happened just now? You could use Spatial-Transition magic as well?”

Before this, Subaru’s experience of Spatial-Transition magic had been at the hands of Beatrice.

With her hands, she had thrown Subaru out of the Forbidden Library and launched him all the way into a livestock barn in Earlham village.

According to Julius, this magic was a lost art, but if the person in front of his eyes was a Witch, then it would not be such a surprising thing.

Echidna: “Spatial-transition… oh, the Dark magic. No, this is your misunderstanding. That magic has a lot of disadvantages. I’m not fond of it so it’s not something I’d use. This now was just a small trick. I have some degree of freedom here. Because this is my Citadel, after all.”

Subaru: “Your, Citadel…?”

Furrowing his brows at Echidna’s words, Subaru looked all around once again.

The wind-swept grasslands seemed to be endless, and in all directions there appeared to be nothing beyond the horizons. In reality, whether this empty landscape actually existed was another matter, but it was truly a fantastical sight.

Noticing this, Subaru gulped down his saliva and then shrugged his shoulders with a smile on his face,

Subaru: “Unfortunately, I can’t see a Castle or even a hut anywhere. What, is your Citadel being rebuilt right now or something? Or did they repossess everything except your table and chairs because you can’t pay back the loan?”

Render:
Karlacar

Echidna: “Fffhaha. You really are funny. In front of me, there are very few people who could throw such impudent retorts, except other Witches like myself. Surely, after my death, I never thought there would be an increment in that number.”

As if the number of times Echidna could remember herself laughing at a joke was something that could be counted on one’s fingers, adding Subaru to that list seemed to bring her great joy.

But on the other hand, Subaru’s face loured as he caught a phrase which could not be missed from her words. Just now, she surely said this. That it was “after my death.”

Subaru: “If it is true that you are the Witch of Greed, then you should be dead if I remember correctly. I came here to visit your grave, after all.”

Echidna: “Oh in that case I sincerely thank you. If you wish to bring me some flowers then please place it near the entrance. I am a person who is not fond of alcohol, so if you want to make an offering then something sweet would be appreciated.”

Subaru: “So there’s a culture of offering in this world too, huh... Sorry, but I didn’t bring any local produce and I forgot to buy the flowers. Please be satisfied with my smile.”

It was a smile of flowers blooming in profusion— the poisonous types of flowers, though.

As Subaru was showcasing that, Echidna purred pleasantly. She then brought the cup resting on the table to her lips, and, taking a sip, she went on,

Echidna: “I’ve never had a chance to drink tea so happily even when I was alive. Just as I thought, there are things to look forward to even after death. New discoveries are inexhaustible.”

Subaru: “You know, this conversation between you and me being a thing in itself is already really weird. ...Damnit, I’ll drink it. I’ll just drink it!”

Acting so cautious and on edge in front of a person who had no guard up started making him feel stupid, so Subaru, as if plundering it, snatched the cup from the table and gulped down its contents in a rush.

It was neither water, nor tea, nor black tea, but had an inconceivable taste. It was not unpleasant, though.

Echidna: “Drinking up something a Witch gave you, you must be quite courageous.”

Subaru: “Hah. Having come all the way here, how can I be frightened now. First of all, if you wanted to kill me then in the next panel I would have already been in cinders. So I shouldn’t be so cautious about a cup of tea.”

Swinging his hand, he placed the emptied cup down on the table with “Thanks for the treat”, and continued,

Subaru: “It was neither good or bad but, what kind of tea was this?”

Echidna: “Considering it was something formed out of my Citadel. If I put it into words, it’d be my bodily fluid.”

Subaru: “What the hell did you make me drink?!”

Subaru jumped up knocking his chair away, and struggled to vomit out the liquid he just drank. But, she only softly giggled “kkuku” at Subaru’s dramatic overreaction

Echidna: “That was unexpected. I didn’t think my appearance was that bad.”

Subaru: “However much it may be the body fluids of a beautiful girl, I don’t want to drink it without being prepared first! And even if I was prepared I don’t want to drink anything described as bodily fluids! I have normal fetishes, you know?!”

He had no property of being excited by saliva or sweat, at least he thought.

Although if that was Emilia’s or Rem’s, he thought it might not be too bad, but he quietly hid that in his heart, and went on,

Subaru: “Crap, I can’t vomit this out. ——Hey, this isn’t bad for my body or anything right?”

Echidna: “Don’t worry. It is easily absorbed by the body without obstructions. It is bodily fluid, after all.”

Subaru: “You aren’t really saying something good, stop doing that face!”

Seeing Echidna’s slightly bragging attitude, Subaru winced. And Echidna, to whom Subaru was voicing his vehement objection, only tilted her cup with a refreshing expression, and went on “Anyways”,

Echidna: “You really are an intriguing character. The fact that you are standing in front of me normally is proof of that.”

Subaru: “What, you’re too much of a beautiful girl so normally other people’s eyes collapse when they see you or something? I’ll say this first, I feed my eyes on who I consider to be the most beautiful girls on a regular basis. So even looking at you I don’t have many opportunities to think of you as a that cute of a girl.”

Echidna: “No, when normal people stand in front of me they vomit. It’s funny, right?”

Subaru: “What’s so funny about that?!”

Right from the beginning of their conversation, there had been nothing but unsettling words popping out. Subaru took another look at the girl sitting in the chair,

Her hair and her entire body were white like snow. Her black clothes looked almost like she was in mourning dress, and a remaining hint of youthfulness gave her beauty a color of bewitching glamour. He mused in his thoughts about how a beautiful woman in funerary clothes could have a certain magical charm, but her never-disappearing aura of oppressiveness kept making him regard her existence as a menace.

Echidna: “So——.”

Then, looking up at Subaru whose vigilance had not dissipated, she placed her emptied cup on the table as well, and, tracing her finger on the edge, she went on,

Echidna: "Talking on like this would be a refreshing pleasure for me but ...it wouldn't be so for you, would it? I think there must be something you want to say, or want to ask, isn't there?"

Subaru: "...Yeah there is. That's right! Being swallowed by the atmosphere I had completely forgotten, but that's right. You are ... no, actually before that, where the heck is this? Is this really inside the Tomb?"

For Subaru, this was connected to the place he fell into not long after he stepped into the Tomb.

He would have readily believed that the gloomy place from before was the bottom of the Tomb. But now, having been invited to a prairie like this, even that felt doubtful.

To that question from Subaru, Echidna softly stroked her own white hair with her hands, and,

Echidna: "That question was half correct and half incorrect. Your body is surely inside the Tomb, but your mind is in my Citadel. To put it into words, this is inside a dream."

Subaru: "A dream...? But, I don't remember your face so much to see you in a dream."

Echidna: "You are inside a dream, I could say, but it does not have to be inside your dream. This is my Citadel——so, it is inside my dreams. A space similar to this one… don't you know it?"

To Echidna's pursuit, Subaru held his breath. He then slightly shook his head,

Subaru: "Wha, what is your basis for saying something like that..."

Echidna: "I have no assured proof. But, somehow or another, I just felt it. Your attitude looks away from something you know; I just felt like that your's resembles the behavior of a person like that."

Subaru: "…It's true, that I don't know. But, what you're saying is not wrong either."

It was not a severe way of putting it, but to Subaru, it felt like her words were an impeachment.

Echidna's words were not mistaken, but Subaru's reply was no lie either.

When he was told that he was inside a dream, Subaru, while he was surprised, also comprehended it easily. It was as if this feeling was well-known and understood by his heart already.

Why it felt like that—he could not find the reason even searching through all his memories, though,

Subaru: "I'll accept that this is inside your dreams for now. So then, how do I get out of here?"

Echidna: "To wake from a dream, one either wishes to wake up, or is woken up externally. However, even if someone tries to wake me from the outside, my body is no longer present, and it is quite difficult to wake yourself from someone else's dream. So, you can't wake up until I feel like letting you go, and decide to wake up, I think."

Subaru: "—! Then, are you actually…"

Subaru shivered at Echidna's simple words.

Her Citadel, the meaning of that word now carried a shape of vivid reality. Subaru's captured soul was now in her palms. The deranged wills of a Witch which Ram had spoken of—the truth of those words swelled in his mind.

Subaru: "Not planning on letting me leave…?"

Even though he was exercising the greatest caution, he was throwing words which may enter him into a fatal rift with the Witch. The fact that if she revealed her true nature he would have no chance against her was well understood.

And then, to the question by Subaru, she spilled out a small sigh,

Echidna: “No, not really. I will let you go if you want to go back, you know? I was not the one who called you here, it was you who came by yourself, after all.”

Subaru: “What are you doing to my nervousness? ‘Mr.Serious’ is not breathing, you know?”

Echidna: “Mr.Serious, unlike you, is not standing in front of me. Maybe he’s vomiting under the shade of a tree somewhere?”

In front of Echidna’s smoothly spewed venom, Subaru felt sapped of all his strength. In the end, what was she trying to do by coming into contact with him?

It had only been a short time, but even after their conversation he had no grasp of her character at all. Although, for a person referred to as a Witch, it was not surprising that it would not be possible to understand her so easily.

Subaru: “Anyways, then please let me go if you can let me go. There’s probably a girl who’s waiting and getting worried about me. If I had the time to drink your body fluids, I’d rather go back to that girl so she won’t be so worried.”

Echidna: “That’s fine with me, but is it fine with you?”

Subaru: “Fine with what?”

Echidna: “To go back when you are right in front of me, that is. —— An opportunity to have a conversation with the Witch of Greed, it’s not something that people other than yourself could get even if they tried.”

This being said, it was the first time that Subaru understood the meaning of her words and taken them into his focus.

Yes. It was. He had only been focused on her menace so far, but had overlooked the most important thing. If she was the Witch of Greed, if she was really the existence which had borne this name in life, then, Subaru: “You...know the answers to, the things I want to know?”

Echidna: “You are asking me, for the whereabouts of knowledge — are you?”

In response to Subaru’s wrenched out words, once again Echidna laughed with “ku ku ku…”. Laughing, this laughter which felt like it was her happiest yet, inflicted the sense of oppression upon Subaru more strongly than ever before.

The atmosphere distorted, and the ambiance of the endless grasslands suddenly began to collapse. The sky cracked, the prairie burned up, and the world beyond the horizons started to decay.

Feeling a non-existent tremble, Subaru hastily stretched out his hands toward the surely existing table. But the moment he touched it, it scattered as if changing into sand. Then,

Echidna: “Just as I thought, you are an amusing being.”

Lifting her face, the scenery around Echidna deteriorated, and a bizarre pattern started to cover over the world. A shadow was expanding, extending out arms and legs that stuck and clung onto Subaru’s entire body.

In revulsion, he tried to desperately escape, but the collapse of the world had already spread very close to the two of them. The scaffold for escape did not exist. And just so, the world gradually lost out,

Echidna: “If you want to exchange questions and answers, then this space is plenty enough. To know what you want to know. Your desire for such a thing—or rather your Greed, I do approve of it.”

What remained between them, was just the space between the chairs in which they were seated. It was a distance close enough to touch if he only stretched out his arm, a world in which they shall sit upon their chairs and have their talk.

The world outside of this had already disappeared. The bottom of the darkness to which his footing had been lost seemed to have no end. Probably without a joke, it would not be possible to come back if he were to fall.

As a chill ran down Subaru’s spine, seated on her chair, Echidna seemed to be in a good mood.

She clapped her hands, and gazed into Subaru with her shining eyes,

Echidna: “Come now, what would you like to hear about? If it is anything I know, then I would answer to anything. Is it about the “Witch of Gluttony” Daphné, who had created beasts differing from God, to save the world from hunger? Is it about the “Witch of Lust” Carmilla, who had granted emotion even to those who are not human, to fill the world with love? Is it about the “Witch of Wrath” Minerva, who punched and healed every person, out of grief for the world filled with conflicts? Is it about the “Witch of Sloth” Sekhmet, who drove the Dragon away, beyond the Great Falls, just to bring peace? Is it about the “Witch of Pride” Typhon, who kept on judging the guilty with the innocence and ruthlessness of her youth?”

They sounded unfamiliar—or rather, they were the enumeration of a history which should no longer be existing in the current world.

Instilled with the massive amount of information, Subaru could not utter a sound. In front of him, Echidna was still laughing.

Echidna: “Is it about the “Witch of Greed” Echidna, the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, who remain with her regrets in the world after death, to seek any and every wisdom in the world?”

Pointing to herself with a finger, she said as if with self-ridicule, and went on with “Or…”,

Echidna: “The Witch of Envy, who destroyed all of these Witches and made them her food, and turned the rest of the world into her enemy—is it about her?”

Chapter 11:
Sloth to Wrath by Pride

In the space where even his footing was uncertain, before an emptiness where falling meant inevitable death, there was nothing to distract his attention away from there.

For in this moment, the only subject occupying Subaru's consciousness was the girl in front of his eyes—the Witch with white-hair and white-skin, black clothes and black eyes.

That sense of overwhelming presence, of menace, that transcendent entity was of an entirely different level than all other living things.

All of Subaru's insignificant existence, his eyes, his heart, and his soul, were being toyed and tangled upon the tips of those unseen fingers.

In the face of truly inescapable horror, people often seal-in emotions such as these.

Unable to breathe. Unable to feel his own heartbeat. Not even the breaking of a cold sweat, or even a blink, could proceed without her permission. There, was absolute isolation.

Echidna: "Oh dear, I may have overdone it with the intimidation. Even back then, whenever I take an interest in something, I'd end up running my mouth too much. A Witch's nature is a troublesome thing."

Suddenly, still seated in her chair, Echidna seemed to notice how her speech had overheated and took up some self-reflection. But still, he could not recover from the traumatizing darkness emanating from the Witch in front of his eyes.

No, the sense of oppression he had intentionally ignored up to now, now that he truly recognized it, would not leave his mind again.

The friendly exchange between them had evaporated. Subaru could no longer see the girl in front of his eyes as a girl anymore. For her true nature was that of a Witch.

Echidna: "When I was alive, this sort of thing happens every once in awhile. It was just like this when the royalty of the various nations came to me, seeking to borrow my wisdom…But I suppose you can no longer look at me without being guarded now."

"My my", shaking her head as if trying to say, Echidna gazed into Subaru with her black pupils. Shaken by the sight of his own expressionless reflection in the black of her eyes, Subaru wavered, and just the same moment, she smiled.

Echidna: "In that case, maybe you'll like this idea?"

Subaru: "—eh?!"

An abrupt change came.

Smiling, she whispered something to Subaru as he furrowed his brows to show his non-understanding. Then, watching as her smile dissolved into the darkness, Subaru gasped, and the moment he blinked—

Little Girl: "Whatcha lo~okin at~?"

Subaru: "…Haa?"

Little Girl: "Well stop sta~ring at me~."

Swinging her legs around as she said this, the little girl sitting in front of Subaru puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

With dark-green hair coming down to her shoulders, it was a little girl with apple-red cheeks. Her hazel-colored skin in her white one-piece dress matched adorably, and her childish cuteness unreservedly scattered everywhere around her. And, particularly distinctive, there was a blue flower-shaped hair clip on her hair.

No matter how you look at it, it was a harmless, innocent little girl —now sitting in the place where Echidna had just been, staring back at Subaru.

Subaru: “Ah, eh, huh? W-Wait. E-Echidna…? Where the hell did she go?”

Little Girl: “Dona? Dona must somewhere around here but~ , who are you supposed to be~?”

Subaru: “M-Me? My name’s Natsuki Subaru. I wasn’t invited here or anything, I’m just someone who got lost, drank some tea, and was heading back… but then the owner of the house suddenly disappeared which left me in a pretty difficult situation…”

Little Girl: “Ehh~. Then~, I’ll call you Baru~.”

It’s hard to feel hostility toward something so cute, and even though it didn’t quite fit the situation, Subaru gave this frank self-introduction. Hearing this, the little girl smiled happily, which made Subaru’s heart all warm inside despite the circumstances.

Regardless of how messed up things had become, the moment Echidna disappeared it was as if the pressure had been released. If he calmly considers all this, perhaps the little girl before his eyes was just like him, having been kidnapped from who knows where.

One way or another, maybe now he’d be able to escape with this little girl’s help—even though he wasn’t too sure how much strength she could lend him. He raised up his face and,

Subaru: “Ok, anyways let’s think of a plan to get out of here while the big bad ghost isn’t home. But considering there’s not many places to step on… first, maybe just tell me your name, little missy…”

Little Girl: “Say, Baru~, are you a bad man~?”

Subaru: “if you could tell me that then at least…Wha?”

Reaching out his hand, intending to sparkle his teeth, Subaru furrowed his brows.

The little girl in front of him swung her legs, which weren’t long enough to reach floor, and she rocked back and forth in her chair while childishly muttering “Be~cau~se~” impatiently pursing up her lips,

Little Girl: “I’m asking~ are you a bad man, or not a bad man~. So are you~?”

Subaru: “By their very nature, all humans are creatures who sacrifice other things to survive. Therefore, perhaps from the moment we are born into this world, we are sinners. But, even so, we still live our lives. Knowing that even as we are sacrificing, something more valuable can be built upon that sacrifice… Even though I think this kind of philosophical discussion isn’t really something a little girl can understand, is that what you mean?”

Little Girl: “Um~, I heard it but I don’t really understand~. Well~, ok~, if I just check~.”

Toward Subaru, who looked confused, the little girl looked even more confused.

Saying this, she held tight onto Subaru’s extended hand. From the small palm completely wrapped up inside Subaru’s, he felt a tactile softness that was unique to the hand of a little girl. And feeling this gave him a renewed resolve, that no matter happens, he will bring her safely out of this place.

Subaru: “Even though I’ve been around Petra, I’m still surprised I’m so fond of kids. I used to think they’re too noisy and all but…”

Little Girl: “—onlythroughpainandsufferingcantheguiltyberedeemed.”

Subaru: “Hah?”

Suddenly, the little girl quickly muttered something in a whisper.

Unable to understand, Subaru’s raised up one of his brows, and felt a light impact. As if his arm had been lightly tugged, there was then a strangely liberating sensation, as if being released from a heavy burden.

Wondering what had happened, Subaru turned his head to look all around him.

Everything was just like it was before, and nothing changed in the world. The space that permitted Subaru and the little girl to sit facing each other was still without wind or sound or sensation of any kind.

Sitting in the chair in front of him, was still only the little girl swinging her legs.

Only, in her hand, she was holding a man’s severed arm—

Subaru: “—?!”

Little Girl: “Doesn’t hurt so~, you’re not a bad man~, I’m so relieved~.”

Noticing the abnormal turn of events, Subaru looked at his own right arm—at the right side of his body where is arm should be, he saw the reality of the exposed cross-section of his shoulder where his arm had been twisted off.

Pain, blood, none of it was there before he noticed it. The bone and arteries wrapped in pink meat all exposed in the cross section reminded him of the edible meat lined up in a butcher's shop.

That is, aside from the unacceptable surreal reality that it was happening to his own right shoulder.

Subaru: "Oo, aaaAAAAAA!!!! A-Arm...my arm aaaAAA?!"

Little Girl: "It doesn't hurt right~, don't yell so loud~. If you flail around too much we won't be able to put it back~."

Subaru: "Y-Yo-Youu?! Ripping someone's arm off, what, what the hell are you saying! G-Give it back! Give it back!"

Holding the exposed cross-section of his right arm shrieking, Subaru jumped right at the snorting little girl with a demon-possessed look on his face. Yanking his right arm back from her hands, he hurriedly tried to stick it back on.

Not that a severed arm can be reattached by sticking it on, but such a thing didn't really occur to Subaru at this moment.

But,

Little Girl: "—nosinfulmisdeedshallescaperighteousjudgement."

The moment he heard something being uttered from the little girl's mouth, Subaru's posture collapsed. Rather, more accurately, the legs that were supposed to step onto the floor shattered like fine glass-craft from the knee downward.

Losing his right arm and both his knees, Subaru's body fell forward from the momentum. And receiving him, was the lap of the little girl still sitting in her chair.

The little girl gently received the falling Subaru, and like a mother holding her beloved child, she caressed the terrified Subaru in her arms.

Little Girl: “You aren’t a bad man at all~, but you still think of yourself as a sinner. You are a gentle~ and good child~. Poor~ thing~, you must~ be in pain~.”

Subaru: “J-Just…wh-wha what…a-are you…”

His right shoulder and his shattered legs did not bring him pain. Nor were they bleeding.

Incomprehensible. An unacceptable existence. The existence of the little girl before him, the one a moment ago he had thought was a subject of protection, was now despairingly distant from that impression.

Hearing Subaru’s question, the little girl tilted her head,

Typhon: “Typhon is the “Witch of Pride” you know~.”

Subaru: “Pri…?!”

The impactful statement once again stopped Subaru’s thoughts in their tracks.

Be it anger or horror, these concepts were completely blown away.

Just a moment ago, Subaru had been in front of the Witch of Greed Echidna. Then why was he now suddenly faced with the Witch of Pride?

Witches who should have already been annihilated, and died long ago—,

Woman: “—Huuu. Guess it’s my turn. Haaa, can’t get out of it.”

A languid voice came from above him, while Subaru’s petrified throat was still trying its best to groan.

Subaru had only blinked his eyes. The color of the world did not change, and his arm and his legs are still missing. But even so,、

Woman: “Haaa, so heavy. Shouldn’t you be a bit lighter without the arm and legs? Huuu, that’s a man for you… man or woman, wouldn't existence itself be better off as one big useless blob?"

The one Subaru's body was leaning against had changed from the little girl named Typhon to a different woman entirely.

The woman this time had strange magenta-colored hair: a beautiful girl with a lazy impression. Her skin and lips were sickly pale. Her downcast, half-closed eyes gave off a sleepy or, rather, generally unenergetic impression, and, as if even breathing was a chore, a depressing atmosphere loured around her

And although she was wearing loose black robes, obvious stains and rips littered all across the fabric as if birds had walked all over it.

Looking down at the silent Subaru, she sighed lethargically.

Woman: "Haaa, you're pretty unlucky too. Being played around by Echidna, then Typhon and me…Huuu, meeting three Witches one after another, haa, only that dummy Flugel or that stick-swinging Reid have done something like that before."

Subaru: "You're, a Witch…as well? Just like the little girl just now, and Echidna…"

Sekhmet: "Haa, I'm Sekhmet. Huuu, it's such a bother but you could call me the Witch of Sloth, or not if you don't want. Haa, not that I'm asking you to call me one way or another it's so confusing anyway. Huuuu, I get tired from talking so can I just stay quiet from now on?"

Subaru: "Oh give me a break. I'm gonna lose my mind here. If no one tells me soon, I can't even be sure of my own reality anymore. Please, just tell me what's going on right now."

Subaru used his only surviving left hand to grab hold of her robe, and raised up his head to look at Sekhmet. Sekhmet seemed to find that gaze a bit bothersome, and sighed, then turned down her eyes same as before,

Sekhmet: "Your right arm, haaa, and your knees are gone. Huuu, it was Typhon wasn't it? It's because that child doesn't understand other people's pain. Haaa, she's still that innocent and merciless child like before. Huu, the poor child. Haaaa.”

Subaru: “My, arm and legs…th-they can grow back right?”

Sekhmet: “Huuu, for me that’s really… aaa, but that’s alright, haa. It’s pretty bothersome for me too, huu, I’ll leave it for the child after me and go back to sleep. Haaa breathing’s such a bother. If I could take in a lifetime’s worth of air all into the lungs at once, then I won’t have to breathe again for the rest of my life, don’t you think? Haaa.”

Subaru: “If you do that your lungs will explode and we’ll die right? But compared to that, my situation here…”

Still in her languid demeanor, Sekhmet’s off-beat proposition puffed Subaru’s head full of smoke. As if trying to say “please take this seriously”, Subaru tried to plead to her.

Girl: “—Just now, did you say you wanted to die in front of me?”

He heard a murderous voice saying.

At this point, although it’s no longer the first time Subaru had been surprised today, he still couldn’t react with anything other than being stunned stiff.

Again, the person in front of his eyes changed. The Witch flaunting the full, dense head of hair had disappeared, and replacing her was,

Subaru: “…Breasts?”

Girl: “—Tch! Wh-Where are you staring at, where!”

Trying to look up from the soft lap at the other person’s face, Subaru’s vision was blocked by large protruding breasts that were obscuring her face.

The sensation of the lap that was bearing the weight of his body, unlike Typhon’s and Sekhmet’s, now had a meatier feel to it, and honestly seemed to be full of the dynamism of a feminine body.

While literally experiencing this with his entire body, Subaru was suddenly lifted up by its owner's arm. —with a single hand, Subaru's body had been easily hoisted up, even though his weight was still no less than an average adult woman's, even after losing his arm and both his legs.

Girl: "Look at the other person's eyes when you're addressing them, eyes! Really, men are always like this, unbelievable!"

Saying this as her anger was puffing out, it was a beautiful girl with swaying golden hair. Starting with a short skirt, she was wearing loosely fitting clothes over her body, and her stature while sitting down seemed on the short side. But even so, her large breast gave her a full-bodied impression, and gave the whole situation a somewhat titillating atmosphere… well, only the totally healthy kind, of course.

Then, glaring at the hoisted-up Subaru with rage-filled eyes, she brushed aside her hair in front of the frightened Subaru,

Girl: "Missing your right arm. Missing your legs from the knees down. Not bleeding or in pain... looks like you've been punished by Typhon! That child...she did something so inconsiderate again, it's just going too far!"

Looking at Subaru's painless wounds, her blue eyes were clouded over by intense emotions.

With impulsive words, and an indignant attitude, her every act was instilled with passion, and all the while she was behaving like this, there were tears pooling faintly in her eyes.

Subaru: "A-Are you crying...?"

Girl: "Not crying! Just angry! That's right, I'm just angry! At Typhon who caused all these wounds and just left you here! At the world that made that child do such an outrageous thing! And at all the people fighting and harming one another making this world hell, at the senselessness of it all!"

Her furious voice cried out, with such power that it messed up her hair as she pronounced this.

Then, lifting up her arm, she suddenly tossed the dangling Subaru up into the air.

Subaru: “eh?”

Girl: “So I absolutely will not permit it! Pain! Conflict! Wounds! How can I remain idle in front such things—!!”

The next moment, with a speed that broke the wind, the girl dashed out and struck her fist straight into Subaru. His face being suddenly injected with such incredible speed and power, Subaru’s body was quite literally blown away like a leaf. But,

Subaru: “Pffu—?!”

Expecting to continue being blown away for quite some time, he suddenly arrived at the end of the world.

Echidna had actually trapped Subaru within a world of limited space, so after being launched flying by the power-packed punch, he had only managed to fly for a short distance. The impact against the invisible wall rolling through his entire body, having gone splat in the middle of the air, Subaru turned his eyes back around. And there—

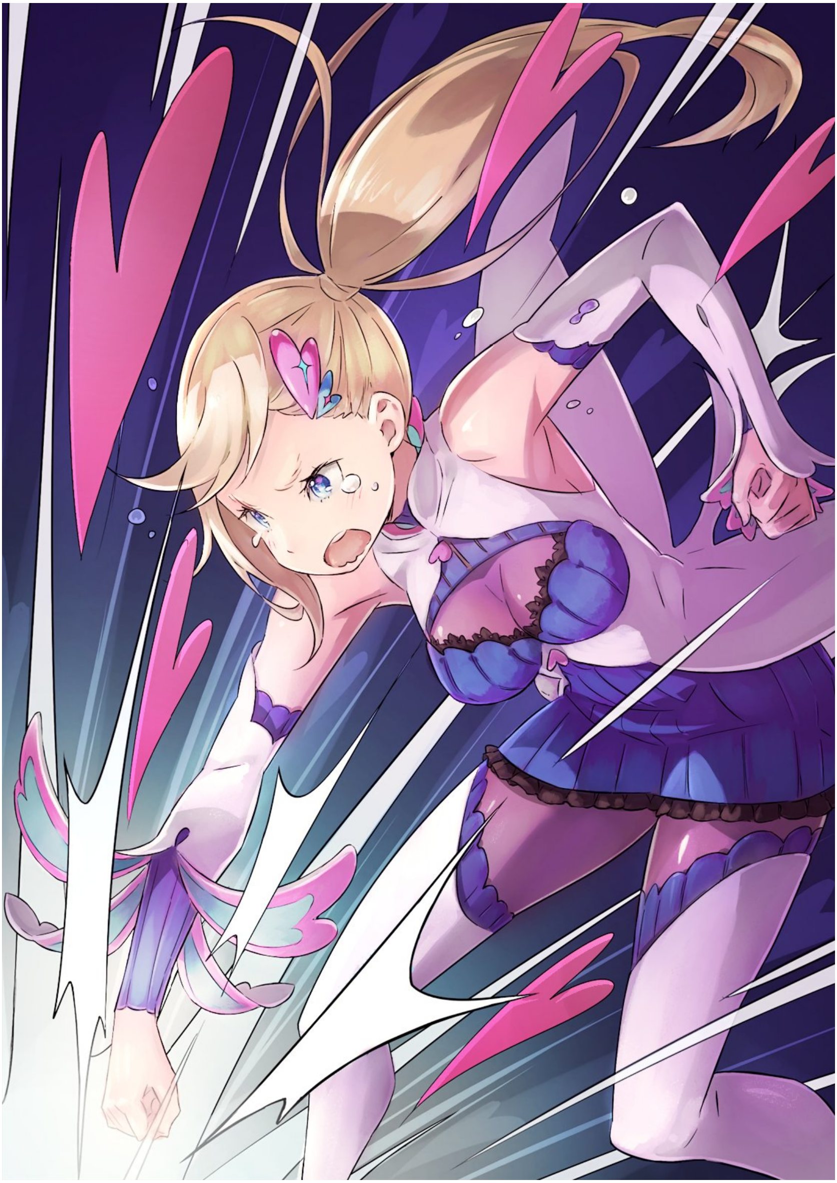

Girl: “—All will be well! Don’t ever think of turning back!”

Leaping, as if in pursuit, the girl rained punches onto Subaru’s body while it was still in the middle of its falling animation-sequence.

The endless flurry of punches striking into every inch of his body, Subaru’s flesh was sandwiched between the wall and her fists. The sounds of impacts ceaselessly penetrating Subaru’s body, its power went through him and into the walls, and began shaking the very world to its core.

Kneaded by the impacts, knocked up and down left and right, Subaru could no longer tell which was which as his mind turned blank. In the field of his vision, through the dance of the incoming fists, perhaps no longer wishing to conceal it, there was the face of the girl covered in a flood of tears. Droplets glimmering as they scattered through the air, just when Subaru wanted to complain “I’m the one who should be crying here…”, his face was already turned away by a punch.

Not knowing when the incessant hell would end—it suddenly ended unexpectedly.

Girl: “Let my fists revive the world! Let my anger cleanse the world! My Wrath, and my healing fists are my reply—!”

The next moment, the world shattered.

The wall that Subaru had been stuck onto, under the impacts of the girl’s rain of fists—after sensing an unbearable sensation through his clothes, Subaru felt the wall behind him shatter into dust.

In that instant, Subaru felt a sense of liberation.

When the rain of fists stopped, he felt something soft. Subaru noticed that he was lying on the ground, in the grassland of the previous world where they had their tea.

Sitting himself up, he looked all around in a stupor. Landing gallanty beside him, the girl brushed her blonde hair as she shot

Subaru a stare.

Girl: “Right arm!”

Subaru: “Eh?! O-Ok!”

Being suddenly called, Subaru raised up his arm, and that’s when he noticed.

The arm that had been ripped off of his shoulders was now back and perfectly well, all the way to his fingertips.

Girl: “Legs!”

Subaru: “Oooo things are looking up. I can stand and walk! Look I can do a moonwalk now!”

Just to be sure, Subaru jumped up and started doing a moonwalk for good measure. Watching Subaru sliding across the grass, the girl held her elbow and nodded contently. And it was at that moment, when the swaying of her prominent bust burned itself into his memory.

Subaru: “Y-You saved me, thank you. But, considering the flow of things, you are…?”

Minerva: “I am the “Witch of Wrath” Minerva! Not that I call myself that!”

Subaru: “You called yourself that just now!”

Minerva: “Don’t, that was no big deal! I will not allow anyone to be hurt in front of my eyes, nor tolerate to see a person wounded! It’s not a deed to be passed on for posterity or anything!”

Subaru: “You’ve totally just marked your own actions as some incredible accomplishment there! You’re not really hearing what other people are saying are you? It’s really hard to communicate with someone like that!”

Flailing his only recently healed arms around to demonstrate his befuddlement, seeing this, Minerva just quickly turned her back to

him.

Minerva: “In any case, now that the wounds are healed, there is nothing more for me to do here! Don’t get so much as a bug bite now! That’s a promise with a Witch!”

Subaru: “Even if I go live in a sterilized room that’s not possible is it?! And don’t make promises on behalf of other people! Promise with a Witch or something, wouldn’t breaking it mean some severe punishment?!”

Minerva: “It’s no such thing. But if it ever comes to that...I will heal everyone.”

Subaru: “Don’t say that like you’re going to go around murdering everyone, it’s really scary!”

But the fact remains, Subaru’s body was completely healed.

Her crude healing methods—in this case, true to the description, he actually was healed at the end of all that. Beating someone up in order to heal them, to think that a phenomenon so inconceivable could possibly exist… It’s almost like in those old tv-series.

Minerva: “—Well.”

Then, the girl who was gallantly walking away turned around.

Her white hair swinging with her motion, and her black dress spreading upward charmingly, all filled into Subaru’s eyes. She was tilting her head to the side, quite happily gazing back at him.

Echidna: “To prove that I’m relatively harmless, I let you meet some of the other Witches. So what do you think? If your attitude could warm up to me a bit now, then waking them up from their sleep would all be worth it.”

Summing up his painful experience up to now, was the Witch Echidna.

Seeing her in front of him, Subaru drew in a deep, long breath, before lifting up his head, Subaru: “You, really are every bit a Witch… No human would think like that at all.”

And, just uttering these words took up the last bit of his strength.

Chapter 12:
A Souvenir from the Tea Party

Echidna: “So the space I worked so hard to prepare was destroyed. Such recklessness… it’s just like Minerva. That girl can be a little… too quick to strike.”

Subaru: “A little...? I think she got to it almost immediately there. That new-sensation-violent-large-breasted-healing-type-loli-tsundere. That’s way too many character-tropes stuck together you know!”

Turning his perfectly healed right shoulder, Subaru started blowing this at Echidna in front of him.

The sense of pressure coming from the white-haired girl hadn’t changed. But still, her arrangements had not been entirely without effect on him.

Subaru: “Well, I think I’m in the mood for a face-to-face conversation now. Compared to the other Witches, you do seem somewhat more rational... except Mr. Witch of Sloth, she may be talking nonsense, but I think we can understand each other.”

Echidna: “Well Sekhmet, how should I say this… of all the Witches, she is the oldest and the most rational. But if you make her angry, she won’t leave anything half-way.”

Subaru: ““Won’t leave anything half-way”… you mean she’s scary when she gets mad?”

Echidna: “Let’s just say, even if we all teamed up, we’d be no match for her. Even if all the other five Witches fought together, I don’t think we would be able to win against Sekhmet.”

Once again sitting in her chair, Echidna explained this, as Subaru cast her a doubtful glance.

The image of the lazy girl with long, reddish-purple hair flashed in his mind. With that lifeless attitude, overflowing with inertia, that person was actually the strongest of all the Witches.

Subaru: “By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask… I get the feeling that you’ve been leaving the Witch of Envy out.”

Echidna: “—Let me just give you one piece of advice when you’re talking to me.”

Remembering the Witch whom Echidna had never once named, Subaru asked her this question, to which Echidna only smiled and raised up a single finger.

Subaru stared at her fingertip as she slightly tilted her head,

Echidna: “I think of the other Witches as my friends, and I think they are deserving of my respect. I have a personality with many flaws myself, and having them by my side for so long is an emotional support for me, a salvation. That is why I have been gathering up their souls, without leaving a single one of them behind.”

Subaru: “…I get the feeling that I’ve just heard something that can’t be glossed over, but please go on.”

Echidna: “The one who destroyed these Witches, was the “Witch of Envy”. —Would you yourself be able to smile at the entity that brutally murdered your closest friends?”

Her smile did not change. But its nature had turned.

A surge of fear ran up Subaru’s spine, and by the time he noticed it, he was already nodding in agreement with her words. Seeing this, she said “That is so, isn’t it?” as she pulled in her chin.

Echidna: “My, it seems like the mood has spoiled a little. How about some tea to get rid of the bad taste?”

Subaru: “…I don’t have the kind of courage to drink that Dona-Tea again. Unless you put some actual tea in there, then I have no intentions of eating or drinking anything in this place.”

Echidna: “To be invited to a Witch’s tea party… back in my day, it would’ve been a thing to be envied... My my, I guess people do change, along with the times.”

As if she had already prepared Subaru’s portion, with a look of regret, Echidna filled only her own cup, and raised it to her lips.

But if what she said was true, then that tea would actually be her own body fluids. Then basically, she would be drinking bodily fluids that she herself had produced…

Subaru: “I heard something about rabbits… they eat their own poop and keep going like a perpetual-motion machine or something.”

Echidna: “It is kind of humiliating to be lumped together with them... isn’t it? Unless, this can be taken as a roundabout way to tell me you wish to hear about the Great Rabbit?”

Subaru: “Great Rabbit?”

Subaru tilted his head. It was a word he had heard somewhere before.

Searching within his memories, he remembered where he had heard it. Indeed, it was while he was riding on the back of a galloping Patrasche, down on Lifaus Highway.

Subaru: “They are witchbeasts that line up shoulder to shoulder with the White Whale... right? The Great Rabbit, and the Black Serpent?”

Echidna: “They’re Daphne’s bad legacy. Even she herself found them a bit too hot to handle. Setting the Black Serpent aside for now, you have heard of the White Whale and the Great Rabbit wreaking havoc all over, have you not?”

Subaru: “By the way, since we’re talking about the White Whale, thanks to my efforts it’s already been slain. Thanks to my efforts, that is.”

Pointing a thumb at himself, Subaru inflated his nostrils with a boastful look on his face. And, hearing this, for the very first time, Echidna's black eyes opened wide with a look of surprise.

Echidna: "Ehh, is that so? That is, impressive. Just by your looks, you don't seem to have an arm for swords, or a gift for magic... But you moved those around you quite well indeed."

Subaru: "It's a pretty depressing feeling when you knew right away that I didn't defeat it on my own...! How do you know I didn't just launch at it and kill it?"

Echidna: "Whether it's the White Whale or the Great Rabbit, it's hard to imagine that there could be humans who can slay them single-handedly. In my time, the only one who could have done this was Reid."

Once again, Subaru raised his brows at the name he didn't know. Noticing this, Echidna let out a "Hmm" as she brought a finger to her narrow lips.

Echidna: "Were they not passed on to this Age? I had thought his achievements were quite remarkable. To put it lightly, he was the only one in the world who could cut down twelve fully-grown dragons all by himself."

Subaru: "No, well, it's just that my understanding of common knowledge, or actually anything related to what people normally know is kind of shallow. That guy sounds pretty incredible though."

Echidna: "—Reid Astrea. "Sword Saint" was the title given to him, but, is it not around anymore?"

Listening to Echidna's words, Subaru's mind steadily put the pieces together.

Astrea—that was Reinhard and Wilhelm's family name, a name held by the current Sword Saint and Sword Demon, the name of that indomitable clan beloved by the Sword-God.

Then, its first generation must have been Reid Astrea.

Subaru: "Ok, I think I got it. It's still around, Sword Saints. I don't know what generation it is now, but the current Sword Saint's my bro. He's a monster who probably wouldn't lose to the Honored Ancestor you knew."

Echidna: "That's quite a way to describe to a friend… I might say that, but knowing how unconventional Reid is, I can't blame you. Anyway, now we're going to talk about the Great Rabbit, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Uhh, nah. It's not that I'm not interested in the Great Rabbit or the Black Serpent, but…"

As much it as seemed that Echidna had wanted to continue talking and show off her knowledge, Subaru thought he should put a stop to that. There was a mountain of things that he wanted to know, but if he were to digest it all at the same time, his brain probably wouldn't be able to keep up.

Instead, it might be better to pick out what he really wanted to know, and pursue those topics thoroughly.

In that case, the first of the things he wanted to know was,

Subaru: "So uhh, you are Echidna, the deceased Witch of Greed. Is that right so far?"

Echidna: "I had confirmed that right at the start, hadn't I? There's no mistake about it. This place is inside my dreams, and if you wish to leave, you can just say the word."

Subaru: "I appreciate your consideration. So first off, I do have a question…"

Touching a hand to his jaw, he directed his gaze toward the girl with white hair. And being bathed in Subaru's insolent gaze, she raised her hand to her almost translucent white cheeks and said "What would that be?" as she narrowed one of her eyes.

Subaru: "I think this is something I should have confirmed with you at the very beginning but… first off, you're dead where exactly? Aren't you frolicking about, enjoying your days and being pretty chipper?"

Echidna: "...Ahh, I see. It's true I hadn't explained that at all. We forgot to touch on it, haven't we? You and me both."

With a clap of her hand, Echidna nodded as if understanding. As she signaled her agreement with her gesture, Subaru only scratched his head wondering what had gotten into him.

With the impact of a Witch showing up, and then the Witches' class-reunion after that, Subaru had been too shocked to ask this obvious question until now.

Subaru: "Seeing a ghost inside a Tomb, it'd be good if it was that simple. But after being meddled with so much, I don't think I can just pass it off as all being in my head."

Echidna: "A ghost, I can't really deny that. After all, I am a spiritual body that has lost its physical body. But now, as to why I'm here like this... well. It is as a counterforce. That would be the most accurate answer, I suppose."

Subaru: "Counterforce...? What kind of... no, actually, maybe "against what" would be a better question?"

Echidna: "You are sharp, aren't you?"

Nodding contently at Subaru's reaction, Echidna softly clapped her hands. Then, turning up to the air, she signed toward the artificial blue sky with a gesture of her hand.

Echidna: "The one who bound me to this place was Volcanica. The Divine Dragon Volcanica. You've probably at least heard of him?"

Subaru: "...That would be the Dragon who signed the Pact with the rulers of the Kingdom of Lugnica or something, right? I heard that name in the great hall at the Royal Selection."

Echidna: "Yes, that would be the same Volcanica. By that Dragon's power, I am sealed here in this Grave. And the reason Volcanica did this was, as you correctly inferred, to serve as a counterforce against the "Witch of Envy"“

Echidna's gaze was calm and intellectual, but when the words

“Witch of Envy” weaved from her lips, for an instant, a dangerous emotion flashed across her pupils.

Perhaps that, was the enormity of the chasm between her and the “Witch of Envy.”

Echidna: “Even now, the “Witch of Envy” is imprisoned in the Sealing Stone, but her seal is not unbreakable. Nor is Volcanica’s lifespan eternal, and there is no guarantee that the seal won’t be undone if given the chance. There are also quite a few who believe, that there is no knowing whether every great change in the heavens and the earth might not be chipping away at the Sealing Stone. — That, is why Volcanica left my existence behind.”

Subaru: “As a fighting force to oppose the “Witch of Envy”, if ever she is resurrected…?”

Echidna: “However, I was not the Witch that Volcanica had originally expected to leave behind. If anyone should have remained, it should have been Sekhmet. The problem was that Volcanica himself disputed with Sekhmet. And, it seems, after she beat him to a pulp, he grew rather wary of her.”

As if casually gossiping, Echidna lightheartedly glossed over the intertwining fates between the Dragon and the Witch, but Subaru, who had been listening, did not laugh.

He didn’t really think that the grudge between a Dragon and a Witch could be summed up so simply like interpersonal relationships. And besides, he wasn’t entirely sure to what extent he should be believing a story about the “Witch of Sloth” beating the Dragon to a pulp in the first place.

Without knowing what to say, Subaru stayed silent. And in front of him, Echidna continued with an “Anyways.”

Echidna: “Myself, the Witch, and the Divine Dragon Volcanica. With the Sword Saint and… the Sage? For the time being, even if the “Witch of Envy” was resurrected, we should be able to oppose her. At least, that is Volcanica’s faint hope. So there you have it, the context behind why I am now in this disgrace, after my death.”

Subaru: “So basically, the one who bound your spirit to this place is the Dragon?”

Echidna: “More accurately, it was at Volcanica’s instruction, that the magic of the Mathers bound me here. If you’ve managed to set foot in here, you must at least know of the Mathers? Or perhaps that family name is no longer around...”

Subaru: “No, the Mathers are still around. Roswaal L. Mathers is the lord of these regions where this Tomb is located. And he’s also my employer, or should I say guardian, or should I say a pervert or something...”

Amazed by the profoundness of that man’s potential involvement with the Witch, Subaru wondered just how he should describe Roswaal to her. But, putting Subaru’s uncertainty aside, Echidna’s finely shaped brows trembled. “Roswaal?”, she muttered,

Echidna: “I’m sorry, did you say Roswaal just now?”

Subaru: “Oh? Ah, yeah. Roswaal. What, do you know him?”

Echidna: “It would be strange, if I knew him. After all, I am an existence from 400 years ago. If that was the same person who had existed in that same Age, then this conversation would’ve taken an odd turn indeed.”

Subaru agreed with her observations, and just when the image of that clown’s face pouting up his lips was emerging in his mind, Echidna said “Now…”, as she raised a finger to her lips.

Echidna: “The Roswaal you are talking about, does he happen to be a someone with long, dark-gray hair? His eyes would be... yellow, I think, if I remember correctly.”

Subaru: “—Nah, in that case it’s a different guy. The Roswaal I know has blue hair, the same color as my jeans kind of. And his eye color’s different. My guy’s eye colors are mismatched, one’s blue and other’s yellow.”

Relieved that the characteristics are different, Subaru sighed, and suddenly thought of something.

Roswaal had told him that the management of this land, the “Sanctuary”, had been passed on for generations. So then, the Pact with Volcanica to seal Echidna here must have been passed on as well.

If this duty was inherited throughout the generations of the clan, then in that case,

Subaru: “Maybe Roswaal’s name was inherited as well. Occasionally we get girls with really manly names this way, that happens a lot in Mangas at least.”

Echidna: “To inherit Roswaal? If that were case, it would sound like something of a nightmare.”

As if agreeing with Subaru’s theory, Echidna nodded, and shrugged her shoulders, giving off an impression of fatigue. Seeing this unusual change in her attitude, Subaru furrowed his brows. It was then, she said “No…”,

Echidna: “The Roswaal I knew, was a person with a bit of an overly-obsessive personality. He was the kind of man who would devote his entire life to fulfill a single purpose, I’m afraid. And if after my death, he had remained unchanged, then...”

Subaru: “Not being satisfied with his own life, he would devote even his descendant’s time too?”

Echidna: “Exactly as you say. Oh my, just thinking of it is a scary thing.”

Even as she said this, Echidna’s lips rose into a smile.

In fact, it was exactly like the gaze of a parent who was watching over their naughty child, but surely, Subaru thought, he must be mistaken. Anyhow,

Subaru: “Well, now I understand the reason you’re inside this Tomb, and who’s behind it. For the actual specifics, I’ll ask the modern-version of Roswaal after I wake up from this dream.”

Echidna: “You are free to do so. ...So then, are there any other questions?”

Subaru: “Of course there’s more. Next thing I want to ask about is, the Trials. I was told there’ll be Trials taking place inside the Tomb. I’d like to know about its contents. And, if you could also tell me the right answers too please.”

Echidna: “Asking for the questions and the answers straight from the examiner, how ruthless you are.”

Subaru: “A little craftiness never hurt anyone. There’s no reason not to use shortcuts when you can. I’m the kind of person who likes to play games while reading the walkthroughs, you know.”

Because getting killed and having to do it for a second time would be a pain in the ass.

But setting Subaru’s random PLAYER philosophies aside, Echidna closed her eyes as if sinking deep into thought. Then, it was five seconds later when she opened them again,

Echidna: “The Trials, is it?”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah. What kind of Trials is it anyway. If we don’t pass it, a girl who’s really important to me will be in trouble. She won’t be able to leave the Sanctuary even if she feels homesick. And obviously, leaving her behind and going home by myself was not an option.”

The Barriers that surround the “Sanctuary”, if something like that was blocking her way out, then Subaru would have no wish to go outside either.

When she passes the Trials, they will go through that Barrier together.

And he will do whatever it takes to make sure that happens. For instance,

Subaru: “Even by cheating!”

Echidna: “I’m sorry to say this after you got so excited but, I know nothing about the Trials. I am not involved in them. Therefore, I don't know their contents."

Subaru: "The what!"

His momentum suddenly getting derailed, Subaru let out a yelp. Hearing this, Echidna said "Well there's nothing we can do, is there?" as she shook her head from side to side.

Echidna: "You do know what this place is, don't you? It is my Tomb, after all? In other words, this is a Tomb which would have been built after my death. And the Trials you spoke of, they take place inside the Tomb? Then the Trials within the Tomb must also have been created after I had died. So there is no way that my deceased self could possibly have had anything to do with them, now is there?"

Subaru: "There's no way I can understand that kind of rapid-fire logic!"

Echidna: "In any case, I am not the examiner. So I can't give you answers about the Trials. If anything, it's me who should ask you about these Trials. Its contents, the types of questions, the selection of its respondents, and of course, the answers to the questions… my curiosity is endless."

In her radiant eyes, the pupils of of the "Witch of Greed" shined with the thirst for knowledge.

Sighing at the sight her straightforward desire, Subaru concluded that he would make no progress speaking with her on the topic of the Trials.

In that case,

Subaru: "Man, then I feel like there's not much else I want to ask you."

Echidna: "...Eh? You're kidding, right? That's impossible. But I am the "Witch of Greed", you know? From all corners of the world people have come to me, seeking my knowledge. To be in front of me, with permission to ask anything you wish, you say you have nothing you want to ask me...?"

Subaru: "Well, because you're already dead and you don't know much about what's happened after you died, right? What I want to know is mostly in the present-progressive-tense, so there's no point in asking someone who doesn't know..."

Echidna: "Nonono, let's calm down. It is true that I'm unacquainted the present world, but in exchange, there is almost nothing I do not know about the past. Much has weathered down in 400 years, and no longer remain in anyone's memory, or history. Isn't this a chance to learn about them? Just like the conversation with the other Witches earlier. There are things that no longer survive on any record in the entire world."

Subaru: "But, I don't have much interest in Witches. Even if I learn about them, they're all already dead, and there are a lot things on my mind right now, so that kind of conversation is not really..."

Echidna: "Eeeeeehhh..."

Seeing Subaru really intending to go home, unsatisfied, Echidna, screwed her face into a scowl. It's almost like their positions were completely reversed.

But still, as far as Subaru was concerned, it was the truth. The wrongdoings or noble deeds of the Witches of the past, whatever they were… he didn't really have an interest in such things.

Other than that, what kind of useful information he could get out of Echidna, he really couldn't think of any off the top of his head…

Subaru: "Wait, now that you mention it, I just thought of one."

Echidna: "Yes yes! Very good, that's it. I knew it, there are still things. Ask anything you want. As long as it's something I can answer, I will answer it. Go ahead!"

Already to the point of agitation, Echidna was biting onto Subaru's question not-half-heartedly.

Even if they're called Witches, at the root of it all, it was impossible to erase all traces of their worldly instincts. Thinking this, Subaru remembered something about the “Sanctuary”,

Subaru: “The residents of the “Sanctuary” that contains this Tomb, they refer to this place as the Trial or Experimental Grounds. No matter how you look at it, “The Witch of Greed’s Experimental Grounds” sounds pretty important, and then there’s a barrier that doesn’t allow half-bloods to escape, what kind of experiments are you running here? I was hop…”

Echidna: “I can’t say.”

Subaru: “…ing I could ask you that.”

However, with a single stroke, Echidna’s expression vanished as she discarded the question.

At that unapproachable attitude, Subaru couldn’t help but fall silent. Seeing Subaru’s reaction, Echidna seemed to have noticed the sharpness of her own words, and made an awkward expression with her face,

Echidna: “I apologize for being so rude. But there are also things I cannot say. I can’t answer that question. It’s not that I cannot say, but that I don’t want to.”

Subaru: “…The term doesn’t give off a good impression, Experimental Grounds. But you don’t seem to be denying it.”

Echidna: “I want you to stop there. I do not wish to be held in contempt.”

Lowering her eyes, Echidna rejected any further pursuit of the topic.

The Witch with an overwhelming existence, shriveled her shoulders as she asked this of Subaru. Anyone who heard this, would have had no choice but to give up on any further questioning.

Then, what passed through Subaru’s mind instead, was,

Subaru: “Come to think of it, your name… I had heard it before coming here.”

Echidna: “...”

Echidna remained silent. In front of her, Subaru touched his forehead as he reflected on his memories. The name of Echidna, “The Witch of Greed”. Before coming to the “Sanctuary”, that name had stolen Subaru’s ears several times.

Subaru: “…from Puck.”

In the loops that started in the Capital, Subaru had been killed by that Great Spirit three times. His most abhorrent and bitter memory was the time the gigantic Puck killed him as he mocked him.

That time, in Petelgeuse and Puck’s conversation, her name had appeared. On the verge of death, Subaru’s consciousness had not understood what it meant, and he had not remembered it again until now.

Hearing Subaru’s mutters as he found this memory, Echidna lifted up her face.

Echidna: “Puck...? You don’t mean, the cat spirit...?”

Subaru: “—?! Yeah, that’s right. The cat spirit. Do you know Puck?”

Echidna: “It’s not whether I know him... did he come here? If that’s case, just how much does he remember?”

Echidna seemed shocked to hear this unexpected name, and Subaru was just as shocked to see this reaction from her. Echidna, who had been talking non-stop up to now, suddenly fell silent.

Seeing her ominous attitude, Subaru couldn’t say a thing. And Echidna, as if sinking into thought again, shut her eyes in deep contemplation.

Wondering how would he continue this conversation, Subaru turned up his gaze,

Subaru: “—Gaah?!”

All of sudden, in the bottom of his stomach, a searing heat asserting its own existence drew the entirety of his consciousness.

Subaru: “…uh, ah?”

The tremendous heat felt as if it would burn through his entrails. Groaning, Subaru held his stomach, his legs trembling feebly.

The abrupt, surging pain was beyond anything ordinary. A stomachache would be nothing compared to this mysterious anguish that made him foam at the mouth. Unable to stand, he fell to his knees, and, in the next moment, dropped to the side.

Seeing Subaru like this,

Echidna: “Ah, it’s finally taken effect.”

And, admiring the sight with her cold, unfeeling eyes, Echidna gazed down at him.

Slowly, she approached the writhing Subaru, bent down her knees to get closer to his face, and brushed aside the hair over Subaru’s forehead,

Echidna: “When you’re invited to a Witch’s tea party, you shouldn’t be putting everything you’ve been given into your mouth so carelessly. —You’ve learned a lesson now, haven’t you?”

Subaru: “You, di… you poison me…?”

Echidna: “Out of the question. I told you, didn’t I? What you drank were my body fluids. A part of a fundamentally different existence, a part of a Witch. That, is what you consumed.”

Body fluids. Subaru realized he had overlooked the significance of that term in all the conversation that came afterwards. And the consequence, was this state of his current agony.

Opening his eyes, he glared at Echidna. All the friendly attitude of before had long evaporated. Just what did she want to achieve by doing such a thing—

Echidna: “I don’t want you to misunderstand, I didn’t do this out of malice or any ill-will towards you. In fact, I regard your existence quite positively. Letting you drink a part of me is proof of that.”

Subaru: “Sp…eak so I can… under…stand...”

Echidna: “To put it simply, I lent you a hand so the dormant Witch Genes inside you could assimilate more easily... or something along those lines.”

Subaru: “Witch, Genes...?”

The incessant heat growing in intensity, Subaru used every last ounce of his strength to repeat that word.

—Witch Genes.

That word too, he had heard several times before.

There was Petelgeuse. And then there was Beatrice.

Echidna: “You killed an agent of the “Witch of Envy”, didn’t you? With that agent’s death, the Witch Gene implanted itself inside you... However,there seems to be something else inside you as well.”

Subaru: “That thing, when it assimilates...what’ll happen?”

Echidna: “Indeed, whatever would happen? Honestly, I am not sure myself. But, compared to carrying around a bomb that blows up who knows when, it’s better to detonate it before it causes anything worse, I think. If we can settle this inside a dream, perhaps it’ll make the undetonated part easier to deal with once you’re outside.”

Listening to that indifferent tone, Subaru felt like his consciousness was about to fade, as light and dark flashed before his eyes in sync with the surging of his pain. But even in this state, Subaru slightly raised his arm, and pointed toward Echidna,

Subaru: “Just now, I thought of something...”

Echidna: “Hm?”

Subaru: “You… the way you talk...is, just like Puck. That cat spirit too, doesn’t care about the mood at all, just goes around with that careless air, goes on like there’s nothing...”

Listening to Subaru’s wrenched out words, for an instant, Echidna blinked in surprise.

Then, with an exaggerated expression, as though she had just heard the funniest joke, Echidna held her stomach as she burst out laughing.

Echidna: “Haha! Hahaha! Aaah, that is quite, a good one! You are fascinating. I really think so. Mmm, mha, aaahahahaha! Is that so, me and Puck? Mmmm, you’re quite right. That would be only natural, of course. I’m probably the only one who’d take him as something of a role model.”

Subaru: “What, are y—”

Though he wanted to continue his sentence, it was no longer something he could do.

The pain had set his entire body ablaze, yet it would not deprive him of his consciousness. It had felt as though it would continue forever, and there would be no respite from this anguish, but… the end was already nearing.

Though, it was not by overcoming the pain, but rather,

Echidna: “The time for our tryst is almost up, it seems.”

Little by little, in Subaru’s eyes, the outlines of the world began to blur.

The blue sky, and the little hill in the green grass-covered fields. The two of them, and the chairs surrounding a white table. All these images blended into one, and together, began to fade.

Subaru: “I thought you said it’ll only end when you want it to end...”

Echidna: “We have reached the limit of the time in the real world.

The “Trials” you mentioned, it seems they will begin soon. When it does begin, all the functions of this Tomb will be directed towards it. And it won’t be caring about the lonely ghost anymore.”

Saying this in a lighthearted voice, Echidna caressed Subaru’s forehead as he lay on the ground.

Watching him unable to resist, or even to react, she laughed.

Echidna: “Now, to return from a Witch’s tea party. What toll would you like to pay?”

Subaru: “…Just so you know, I’m broke as hell right now.”

Echidna: “Not money. The price is… ah yes. You are forbidden to speak of this space to anyone else, how about that? You seem to already have another Contract just like it too… it is a small price to pay, is it not?”

What is that supposed to mean, there was no time to even ask that question.

Pressing her finger against Subaru’s forehead, she whispered something quietly. Then, sensing a heat coming from the finger that was touching him, in an instant, it spread throughout his entire body. And, incredibly, Subaru was granted an understanding.

Of the terms of the Contract, and what must not be infringed upon: thus, the one-sided agreement was sealed.

Subaru: “Doing this, without even asking first…!”

Echidna: “Our conversation, and consolidating the Witch Genes. Compared to that, I think this is a very small price to pay. Also, might as well while we’re at it, I will grant you a gift.”

Smiling at the indignant Subaru, another wave of heat passed from her finger to his forehead.

And, the result of this heat was—

Echidna: “I hereby grant you the qualification to participate in the

Trials of this Tomb.”

Subaru: “—?!”

Echidna: “With this, you will be able to take this Tomb’s Trials tonight. Whether you wish to take part is up to you. It is fine if you choose not to. But, if you want to, you could choose to take the Trials in place of the girl who is so very important to you. —What you do with it, you may decide as you like.”

The collapse of the world had begun. And little by little, what lay beneath his feet dissolved into darkness.

This time, the true end of the world was drawing near.

Then, in the world that was coming to an end, Subaru, still lying on the ground, looked up at Echidna.

Sealing a Contract he did not wish to sign, extorting from him a price he did not wish to pay, the girl who was smiling at him without a care in the world—ah, without a doubt,

Subaru: “—you, really, are a Witch.”

Echidna: “—Oh, but of course. I’m one evil Sorceress, isn’t that right?”

With that final farewell, Subaru’s consciousness sprang from the dream.

Falling, and falling. Fading, and fading.

Breaking out of the dream, floating upwards,

At last, Subaru’s consciousness—was released from the Witch’s dreams.

Chapter 13:
Roswaal’s Intent

1

The first thing Subaru felt when he woke up was someone’s fingertip against his forehead.

Subaru: “Judging from the delicate softness and the really considerate contact, it’s: Emilia-tan’s!”

Emilia: “—Even though you got it right, I got a reeeeaally spooky feeling about it, maybe it’s just my imagination.”

Opening his eyes, Subaru’s field of vision was covered by the palm which was touching him. Through the gaps between her fingers, Subaru got a peek at a fragment of her beautiful face, and he loosened his lips, smiling.

Subaru: “Well, because only Emilia-tan would go to the trouble of taking care of me at a time like this, so I got the feeling it was you. It’s not like anyone could actually tell who it is just by the touch of a fingertip, you know?”

Emilia: “Oh, I see. I guess feel a bit relieved now… your body, can you sit up on your own?”

Subaru: “One way or another… yeah, I’m fine.”

Answering with a joke as he woke, Subaru sat himself up from the bed. Briefly looking around at his surroundings, he found himself in an unfamiliar building.

The bedding he had been lying on was crudely made, and couldn’t compare at all with the beds of Roswaal’s Mansion that he had gotten so used to. In any case, Subaru tried to remember what had happened before he lost consciousness.

Subaru: “Up to where did reality end, and from where did the vision begin…"

The Tomb—setting one foot in that place, and immediately being swept into a state of falling: that was the last thing he remembered about real world. Then after that, his meeting with the girl playing-innocent inside the Tomb—with the "Witch of Greed", if a Witch's words could be believed, would have all happened inside her dreams.

It was all too vague. Frustrated by his indecisive memories, Subaru held a hand to his forehead and looked toward Emilia. Beside the bed, seated in a chair, she seemed to be quietly waiting for Subaru to sort out his thoughts. Seeing her there, Subaru began with "Well then…",

Subaru: "There are loads of things I want to ask and and talk to you about… but, first there's something I have to say."

Emilia: "En, what is it?"

Tilting her head a little, Emilia waited adorably, listening. —but, her eyes weren't smiling.

Under the light gleaming from her clear, violet pupils, Subaru shrank his shoulders,

Subaru: "I'm sorry I made you worry again. I got a bit too carried away there."

Having thought that he should, at the very least, be able to clear the path ahead of Emilia, he had somewhat overestimated his ability.

And the situation, as it turns out, was that on the first step he took he fell on his face.

Receiving Subaru's apology, Emilia let out a little sigh through her lips.

Emilia: "You know. I was really really worried. The moment you went in, you let out a shriek and passed out."

Subaru: "Putting the shriek aside for now… I passed out?"

Emilia: “The white of your eyes were turned up, and you wouldn’t stop convulsing. We really didn’t know what to do. There weren’t any wounds and it didn’t look like there had been any strange magic cast you...”

Seeing Emilia hesitating with her words, Subaru got an idea of what an embarrassing display he had made.

So that’s what happened… Apparently, immediately after he stepped into the Tomb, when the floor collapsed—or by the time he sensed himself falling, he had already been summoned into the Witch of Greed’s dreams.

And in reality, Subaru fell asleep the moment he walked in, and basically gave Emilia an uncalled-for amount of worry while she looked on, unable to do anything.

Scouting ahead for dangers for the sake of Emilia—his determination back then was now looking really stupid at this point.

Thinking that, Subaru scowled up his face in self loathing, when,

Garfiel: “—Oh? Hey, he’s awake isn’he? Lookin’ pretty good there, oy.”

Saying this, pushing open the creaking door, the blond youth—Garfiel walked in.

Taking a passing glance at Subaru on the bed, he then turned his gaze toward Emilia.

Garfiel: “Told ya didn’I? Nothin’ wrong with his body, see?”

Emilia: “...But still, I still couldn’t help but get worried. Not knowing why and seeing him suddenly collapsing like that. Even though I’ve kind of gotten used to it by now, getting used to something like that really isn’t a good thing, is it?”

Garfiel: “Hah, c’mon, toughen up a bit. Panicking and getting all teary-faced as soon as y’saw this little buddy go down... Like “yer face’s more blue than Aomiguro” as they say.”

Emilia: “Wha—?!”

Listening to Garfiel’s thoroughly boorish retort, Emilia pouted up her lips as her face turned bright red.

And as soon as he brought that last part up, Emilia jumped up from her chair with a squeal.

Emilia: “I-I wasn’t teary-faced! I was worried and panicking, sure, but I wasn’t...”

Garfiel: “A-Ah, rightright. It’s a secret, a secret. Sorry sorry. But, it’s not that bad… There’s no need to hide it or anything.”

Emilia: “It is that bad. I’m really worried that... if he heard I was going to cry...”

Trailing off in the middle of her rebuttal, Emilia sneaked a side-glance at Subaru.

Up to now, Subaru had been silently observing their conversation. In front of her gaze, what would the speechless Subaru say—

Subaru: “Hn? Ah, it’s good, keep going. Please, please, eheheh. Is that so, ehhh, is that so. Emilia-tan was so worried about me that she was crying… is that so, eheheh.”

Emilia: “...somehow, I got a feeling Subaru would react like that.”

Emilia slumped down her shoulders dejectedly. In front of her, Subaru was still breathing heavily with enlarged nostrils. To know that the girl he has a crush on had been worried about him from the bottom of her heart, even if this was indiscreet, he couldn’t hold in his glee.

Seeing Subaru’s immodest indulgence and Emilia’s reaction, on the side, Garfiel let out a “Ohhh so that’s how it is” and then, with deep feeling, muttered,

Garfiel: “This time’s my bad. Yikes, it’s pretty rare. To see me ownin’ up to my mistakes so straightforwardly, ain’t it?”

And, in self-reflection, Garfiel admitted something he's not all too proud of.

2

"If properly trained, even dogs can exercise enough self-restraint to not eat before being given permission."

Chilling, it was a voice instilled with such sharpness that one might be cut in half if one were to touch it.

Echoing out slowly, there was a pause between each word, but the space in between was filled with such dreadfulness that no room for objection was permitted from the other end.

"That is to say, following an instruction the way even a dog is capable of, should have been the least you could do."

Kuts *kuts*, were the high pitched sound of footsteps striking the wooden floor.

The rhythm of the steps were constant, walking left and right, back and forth in front of him.

The evenness of the gaps between them reflected the calmness of the footsteps' owner's mind, all the while knowing full well that they were mercilessly chipping away at the mental composure of the other person.

"Now—"

The voice and the footsteps, and those eyes devoid of emotion, all shot toward Subaru—

Ram: "A creature that can't abide by instructions that even a dog can abide by, what do you even call such a thing? Barusu, do you know?"

Subaru: "I'm so sorry I didn't follow your advice—!!"

Toward the small girl standing opposite him, Subaru fell to his knees on the spot and bent his head all the way down as he cried out in apology.

However, against the wailing from the bottom of Subaru's soul, girl only slightly tilted her head.

Ram: "“I'm so sorry”, did you hear me asking for an apology? Not only did you not hear the question, it seems you didn't hear anything at all so far. I think Ram's advice didn't even enter your ears in the first place, because it's not like it was something you couldn't have understood."

Subaru: "Can you please not use such a roundabout way to express your distaste?! I repent, I totally know I was wrong, but it feels like my heart is getting crushed! A straightforward scolding would've been easier on me!"

Ram: "It'd be better if you died."

Subaru: "Too straightforward!!"

Receiving the girl—Ram's merciless rebuke, Subaru hugged his head on the floor. But actually, considering his conduct, he could only receive all her abuse with resignation.

He had flat out gone against her especially delivered warning, and caused trouble for everyone around him as a result.

Roswaal: "Tha~~t's alright. Ram should forgi~ve him there. A~~fter all, Emilia-sama must have already given him the exact same lecture, no? Going over it again wo~n't do much good, except making Subaru's masochist tendencies exci~ted."

Subaru: "I don't have masochist tendencies. Stepping on landmines just happens to be my natural instinct!"

It was just him not being able to read the mood very well, he was thinking.

Seeing Subaru puffing up his chest boastfully, Ram gave up in the bottom of her heart as she let out a deep sigh, and then, without a word, she turned her back to him, to face toward Roswaal.

And Roswaal, shifting his body to face everyone waiting silently by his side as he lay on the bed, continued, “Well~ then”,

Roswaal: “Fir~~st of all, that you all came back safe is the most important thing. These stumbles before the Trials had sent all kinds of pla~ns into disarray. Even though Subaru’s action was a nothing but a simple blu~nder.”

Having been tossed an all-too-meaningful smile, Subaru crossed his arms and made a small snort. And, as if with a reproachful attitude, Emilia, who was standing beside him, pinched Subaru under his ribs.

Subaru: “Ow. Hurts, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Even though I always defend you, today it’s Subaru who’s been bad... If I had known that Ram had said something like that I would have...”

...stopped Subaru from going first, as if trying to continue like this, Emilia’s words trailed off. Smiling wryly back at her, Subaru muttered “That’s why I couldn’t tell you…” in his heart. If she knew about this warning beforehand, Emilia would never have allowed Subaru to take on such a dangerous task.

But on the other hand, if it weren’t for Ram’s warning, Subaru wouldn’t have made up his mind about trying to clear the way for Emilia in the first place. So then…

Subaru: “Your advice didn’t make anyone happy, Ram.”

Ram: “Saying all of this was because of Ram, only a dog would do that... No, I should change that to lower than a dog, otherwise it would be insulting to dogs.”

Seeing Subaru trying to pass off responsibility, Ram shot back with a look of ultimate contempt. He couldn’t help but admire the maid’s undissipating venomous attitude. And, at the same time, the other side probably held a similar opinion of Subaru as well.

Leaving the two’s irrelevant sparring aside, Roswaal rearranged his legs on the bed, and, Roswaal: “By the way, Emilia-sama... How did you like the Tomb?”

Emilia: “...With what happened to Subaru, I didn’t get a chance look around. But, there was a terrible stench in the air and I felt this unpleasant stinging feeling on my skin.”

Emilia furrowed her brows as she put her impression of the Tomb into words.

Basically, bad impressions took up most of her overall appraisal of the place. And hearing this unreservedly negative appraisal, Roswaal let out an “Is that so…”, and slighty smiled.

Then, his mismatched eyes set upon a corner of the room—toward Garfiel, who had been observing their conversation, leaning against a wall.

Roswaal: “Garfiel. Has the Qualification been confirmed?”

At the word Qualification, Subaru raised his brows, and looked toward Garfiel.

The blonde youth roughly scratched his short hair, and revealed his sharp canine fangs.

Garfiel: “I didn’go further than the front of th’entrance but...the lights in the Tomb turned on alright. Emilia-sama’s got the “Qualification”, there’s no doubt ‘bout that.”

Subaru: “Lights in the Tomb?”

Hearing something he hadn’t heard of before, Subaru tilted his head as Garfiel flapped his hand around irritatedly.

Garfiel: “There’s a bunch of candle-things in the Tomb. While the Sun’s up, if a guy with Qualification walks into the Tomb, some stuff in there’ll make the fires light up. A guy who gets this welcome without any problems will be qualified to take that night’s Trials.”

Roswaal: “Conversely, if someone without Qualification forces his way into the Tomb, it would be ju~st like what happened to Subaru and myse~lf.”

Finishing off Garfiel’s words for him, Roswaal spread out his arms. It was to show off his body, which was still painfully wrapped in blood soaked bandages. —That is, to show off the punishment for forcing one’s way into the Tomb.

Subaru: “I feel like the severity of the punishment is pretty different between what you got and what I got… Compared to just going in like me, what you did must’ve been quite a lot worse, right?”

Roswaal: “Worse, su~ch as what?”

Subaru: “Illegally peeing beside the entrance or something. That’ll really piss off the Tomb manager.”

Roswaal: “If that were the ca~se, Subaru would have fallen ri~ght where my puddle had be~en, it se~ems.”

His sarcasm being countered by another sarcastic reply, Subaru showed a disgusted face as he quickly patted himself off all over his clothes. Seeing Subaru’s reaction, Roswaal relaxed his cheeks, and said “Bu~t”, shaking his head,

Roswaal: “The fact that we suffered different damages despite being similarly rejected...I~’m impressed you noticed it. It’s true, my i~njuries are quite a lot greater than Subaru’s. But, the reason is very simple.”

Emilia: “...Mana …Gate rampage.”

Roswaal’s words were interrupted by this answer.

Turning to the voice, it was Emilia, who had been covering her lips with her fingers. She was thinking with downcast eyes, and playing with the tips of her silver hair.

Emilia: “When I entered the Tomb, I felt a reeeaally unpleasant air about the place. It felt like my Gate was being interfered with or something. Maybe because I met the requirements, it decided to let me go...but if it’s someone who doesn’t meet the requirement, the interference would bare its fangs.”

There was a change in the certainty of her words, and little by little, her tone became imbued with strength. Emilia lifted up her face, and those violet pupils took in Roswaal's pitiful form.

Emilia: "The interference strikes at its targets through their gates...Which means, the greater the number of gates the person has, the greater the interference they will receive."

Roswaal: "Perfect answer. Wi~th someone like myself...that I didn't blow up is a mi~~racle."

Casually saying something scary again, Roswaal flashed a glance at Subaru with a single eye, and said "It's a good thing you have no talent", rather annoyingly.

Subaru: "So basically, magic users or any talented people would almost die from that. But all I got was loss of consciousness, so it's a good thing that I'm so totally inept as a magic user, huh..."

Emilia: "Th-That's true but...describing yourself like that, doesn't it sting a little?"

Subaru: "I've gotten pretty used to knowing that there are things I can't do and things I can't reach. It's alright, I'll just use the things only I can do to show my love for Emilia-tan. For now, how about we start with some rustic love whisperings?"

Emilia: "After the Royal Selection's finished and everything's settled down, maybe I'll consider it."

Subaru: "At least 3 years later?!"

Even then there's no guarantee whether she will listen…

At the cruel Emilia, Subaru shriveled his shoulders. Then, with a "But," he continued,

Subaru: "Putting the qualifications and whatnot aside, a space that kills magic users… I don't know who's behind it, but it sounds like pretty asshole thing to do… don't know how else to describe it."

Roswaal: "Considering it has been managed by generations of the

Mathers family, the one who assembled the ma~gical mechanism must have been one of my a~~ncestors.”

Subaru: “Ah, that’s not good... is it. But then, wait… then doesn’t that mean you’re a way-too-accurate impression of your ancestors? Like it’s reincarnating through Ros-chi’s family-line or something.”

What if when one generation dies, the next generation gets possessed by the asshole consciousness of its predecessor, and so on and so on like a puppet family-line…

Just the thought of it was too frightening, and Subaru quickly shook his head to put it out of his mind. But hearing Subaru’s words, Roswaal laughed as if having heard quite a joke,

Roswaal: “There are families who researched that kind of ma~gic, a~lthough, they have been defeated, and extinguished lo~ng ago... And also, while you could call it a “space that kills mages”, there is a more accurate name for it.”

Subaru: “Which… is?”

Roswaal: “Simply put —that place is filled with the Witch’s Miasma. A nightmarish environment, that passes Mana through the trespasser’s Gate, and drives him to madness. That, is what is ca~lled Miasma.”

Miasma, Subaru furrowed his brows at the appearance of this word, as if searching for a memory of something he had heard before. Indeed, he had heard that word from—

Subaru: “The story of the Witch of Envy… The place where she was sealed, is covered in that Miasma, or something...”

Roswaal: “Yo~gu, you know about that, don’t you. We~ll, it is a very fa~mous story. Even now, the Sealing Stone Temple where the Witch of Envy is sleeping is covered in Miasma so thick that it distorts everything in one’s view. If that Miasma rejects those who do not meet her Tomb’s conditions, the Miasma invades the minds of anyone it touches, annihilates their flesh, and corrupts their soul, a phenomenon of true and genuine malice. Even the faithful adherents of the Witch Cult who seek to revive the Witch of Envy, are not able to approach it, or so the sto~ry goes.”

Subaru: “Even the Witch Cult guys can’t go in huh…Then again, of course they can’t. If they can just walk right in and plonk the seal off with everyone watching they’ll win, won’t they.”

The Witch’s resurrection—he remembered Petelgeuse, screaming that supreme objective.

Even that madman, single-mindedly crying out his conceited love, could take no direct actions to actually save the Witch. It was probably out of consideration of the fact that his true form was a spirit also meant that he would be powerless in the face of the Miasma.

Roswaal: “A~nyhow, because of that, the Witch’s Seal is made unapproachable by the Witch’s own Miasma. And on top of that, if one wishes to approach the Temple, one would have to be sneak past the watchful eyes of the Sage Shaula in the Wa~tchtower.”

Subaru: “I’ve heard of that name, the Sage Shaula. That’s the second Sage I know of… Flugel, and then there’s Shaula.”

How did they come to be called by this title, Subaru wondered. Perhaps there was something about them that was different from everyone else? Seeing Subaru’s doubts, Roswaal lightly smiled,

Roswaal: “Flugel, you mean, tha~t big-tree Flugel? Whi~~le it’s true he’s also called a Sage, comparing him with Sage Shaula wo~uld be a little harsh.”

Subaru: “Why’s that? They’re both Sages, you shouldn’t be playing Sage favorites. I owe Mr. Flugel quite a bit you know, so don’t go insulting Mr. Flugel in front of me now.”

No matter what, that Sage lent him a pretty big hand when they were battling the White Whale.

Mr. Flugel probably never imagined that 400 years later the tree he planted would come in handy for defeating monsters. Whether he’d be happy about it though would be a different matter.

Subaru: “With a tree that huge, the broken off part could probably used for all sorts of things...well, there’s a chance it got blown up by the time bomb though?”

Roswaal: “I~ get the feeling that’s not the only bro~ken thing we’ll need to de~al with. Anyway...Emilia-sama.”

Shifting his gaze from Subaru, who had been holding his chin in his hand, Roswaal turned to Emilia, as he this quiet call. Hearing this, Emilia lifted her face, and answered “En”,

Roswaal: “To return to the topic at hand, more than anything, it is go~od that you are Qualified. That means Emilia-sama may take the Trials of the Tomb. In that case, there is just one thing I have to ask.”

Solemn and low, the mischievous tone had vanished from Roswaal’s voice. Taking this in, Emilia also looked back with a serious gaze, watching him in return,

Roswaal: “Simply put—Are you willing to accept the Trials?”

As the short question fell into the room, Emilia’s pressed together her lips and became silent.

Of course, this was only natural. Whether she had the Qualification to take the Trials had already been confirmed. So naturally, it would be followed by this next question. But,

Subaru: “Before she answers, I just want to ask. The Trials, are they something that she absolutely must take?”

Before Emilia could voice her answer, one step ahead of her, Subaru raised his hand. Hearing this question, at Roswaal’s side, a dangerous emotion settled within Ram’s pupils, but Roswaal lifted a hand to stop her.

Roswaal: “I thought this was so~mething you would a~sk. Without taking the Trials, those with Qualification will not be able to leave the Sanctuary. This much, you must have already heard from Ga~rfiel?”

Subaru: “So I’ve heard. But, that’s not really a reason Emilia-tan must take it, is it? The Gravesite of the Witch of Greed is a foul place, there’s no knowing what kind of dangerous things could happen in there. Sending an important Royal Selection candidate, Emilia-tan into such a place, just what are you thinking?”

Roswaal: “O~mu. We~ll, as fair arguments go, it is a fair a~rgument. If we simply needed someone to take the Trials the~n, there are others who are qualified… If that was all, it’d be just as well if Garfiel di~d it.”

Garfiel: “Hah? Me? I’m good with that. I’d challenge the Trials and break right through, it’ll be like “Barubarumoa-right-right-left” and I’m passed yeah?”

Like stirring water, Garfiel gestured toward himself with his thumb with a smile that bared his teeth. Seeing how Garfiel only seemed to have heard the second half of what was said, Subaru ignored his simple-minded remarks and tried to focus on the more reliable aspects of his statement.

Actually, it would be nice if the Trials was something anyone can beat, because then there would be no need for Emilia to do it. Then, it’d be nice if someone qualified and more dependable could challenge it.

—In the worst case, having been granted Qualification to challenge the Trials, it’d also be fine if Subaru did it.

???: “—Nyaa, that’d be a lil problematic.”

It was a sudden voice from the entrance of the house that didn’t belong to anyone present.

With his back to the door, Subaru jerked around his head in surprise as he heard the unfamiliar voice. Now taking Subaru’s gaze, Garfiel, who was leaning against a wall beside the door, slightly waved his hand in front of his face.

Garfiel: “Wasn’ me, ‘s that old hag over there.”

Saying so, he gestured with the hand he was waving with toward his side. Setting his sight there, Subaru saw beside Garfiel's scrawny body an even smaller shadow standing there.

???: "Who's an old hag. Never at a loss for words, what a rotten kid I've raised."

With pink, long drooping hair, a tiny little girl said with a very grown-up attitude.

With perfectly formed features, it was a little girl with a cute face. Her age seemed to be around Petra's, about 11 or 12 years old. Her pink hair had waves in them, and its soft texture gave off a light and fluffy impression. Wearing a loose, white robe that grew larger the lower down it got, with long dangling sleeves that left no place for her hands to come out, she had an impish look about her.

Above all, judging from the way she was addressing Garfiel…

Subaru: "Even though I always thought it would show up one day, I didn't think it'd show up here, the Loli-Granny...!"

???: "Wha's that, I get the feeling I've just been called something totally against my will, or is that just me?"

Emilia: "Umm, I often hear Subaru use "Loli" on Beatrice...so it means "little", right?"

Seeing Subaru's astonishment, the little girl looked up at him with a displeased expression on her face.

Just from Emilia's mumbles, her modern day knowledge was proof of how high her experience-points in her interactions with Subaru had been. Listening to this, Subaru raised up a finger.

Subaru: "Yep, Emilia-tan's correct. More specifically though, it means little children outside of my conquest-range. Combining this Loli together with Granny, we have what looks like a little girl on the outside but containing a granny within, completing a miraculous COLLABORATION! Even though I don't really go for Lolis in the first place, I do understand the subtleties of the Gap-Moe!"

Emilia: “Gyappumoe?”

Subaru: “A girl who’s usually like an awe-inspiring older sister but in some places really childish and lacking some really common knowledge or just straight-up being easy to trick would also be considered Gap-Moe!”

Listening to Subaru’s string of words in rapid succession, Emilia, with “So there are girls like that…”, brought a finger to her lips with an expression as if she was taking this in. While Emilia being unaware of how the characteristics were referring to herself was unbearably adorable, the other person being addressed by these words was looking annoyed,

???: “Then? I don’t know what this Loli is, and what’s with you keep calling me granny granny? For a first meeting, you’re a guy who’s even ruder than Ros-bo here”

Subaru: “Oooo, that was rude of me, Mademoiselle. My name is Natsuki Subaru! Currently a heart-throb Mabeast-Hunter. Well, even though it usually isn’t me dealing the last-hits.”

High-spiritedly announcing his name with a thumbs-up, the self-introduction tapered off a bit toward the end. And then, extending a hand toward the girl with the distrustful face, “And you are?” he prompted,

Subaru: “Now that I’ve told you my name I hope you can introduce yourself as well. A simple PROFILE, interests x special abilities. Mentioning some of your CHARM-POINTs as well would be great”

Ryuzu: “…Ryuzu Meyer. In a way, I am a representative of this Sanctuary.”

Listening to Subaru’s jests, the Loli-Granny—the one who called herself Ryuzu, extended a finger through her sloppy sleeves and scratched herself on her forehead,

Ryuzu: “I didn’t notice it when you were sleeping, but more than just rude you’re a poor lil rascal. I get the feeling like I shouldn’t have bothered lending you the bed.”

Subaru: “The bed, the one I was sleeping on just now?”

Emilia: “Yes, that was Miss Ryuzu’s house. It was close to the Tomb, so Garfiel carried you there... really, thank you so much for earlier.”

Then, seeing Emilia lowering her head, Ryuzu shook her head slowly. Judging from that exchange, the two of them seemed to have already met while Subaru was unconscious.

Either way, it was true that she had helped him out.

Subaru: “I didn’t know it was like that, sorry for the rude things I said. The bed, lending it to me helped me a great deal. I’ve been late to say this, really really sorry!”

Ryuzu: “...Wha was that, scared me. Gar-bo never apologizes straightforwardly like that. Subaru...Natsuki, was it? It’ll be Su-bo then.”

Subaru: “That sounds a bit like the beginning of a Weather Forecast, but that’s ok. In turn, let me call you Miss Ryuzu then.”

After he had expressed his thanks, Ryuzu’s annoyed expression was cancelled. As they peacefully decided on what to call each other, Subaru continued with “So then...”

Subaru: “So Miss Ryuzu, just now you said there’d be a problem, what was it? Garfiel taking the Trials would be problematic?”

Ryuzu: “You sure changed your tone quickly. Aah, that. It’d be a problem, quite a big one. Basically, if those who originate from the Sanctuary challenge the Trials, it would violate the Contract.”

Subaru: “Contracts again...”

With all the Contracts and Pacts popping up, restricting this and that, Subaru shot a sickened look at Roswaal. And, receiving that look, Roswaal shrugged,

Roswaal: “U~~nfortunately, this Contract has nothing to do with the Mathers family... well I shouldn’t say no~thing to do with, but we were no~t the main culprit. I~~ mean, my family had something of a suppo~rting role in it.”

Subaru: “Your defense statement is all good, now cough it up. The detailed contents of the Contract, in three sentences.”

Roswaal: “So stri~ct. We~ll to put it simply, the condition for the liberation of the inhabitants of the Sanctuary is to pass the Trials, but the Trials may only be challenged by someone from the o~utside who possess the Qu~alifications. Tha~t is to say, the situation right now is…”

Emilia: “I am the only one who can do it, is that right?”

Understanding at the end of Roswaal’s explanation, Emilia finished off his words. Roswaal nodded in confirmation, and turned to look toward Ryuzu.

Roswaal: “I~n fact, this is the understanding of the inha~bitants of the Sanctuary. They expect that Emilia-sama would challenge the Trials, and hope that Emilia-sama could overco~me it.”

Emilia: “I don’t want you to think I am hesitating when I ask this… but, hypothetically, if someone other than me challenges the Trials, what would happen?”

Emilia’s violet pupils turned to Garfiel, and asked this hypothetical question. And, it was Ryuzu who replied, saying “As for that”,

Ryuzu: “Up to now, at least for as long as I have been alive, no one has ever challenged the Trials. So there is no way to say. Residents or outsiders alike, no one has yet challenged it.”

Subaru: “No one, up to now? I’m afraid to ask but, Miss Ryuzu… how old are you?”

Judging from the common setting of Loli-Grannies, the answer to Subaru’s question just now could be something really scary. But actually, Ryuzu said “Not like that”, and then, as if looking toward something far away,

Ryuzu: “At least I don’t know of the time when this place was first created. But at most, I think, it would be a hundred and ten-odd years."

Subaru: "Too much! At least, that's the oldest out of everyone I've met so far."

Well, if you put Spirits and the spiritual-bodied Witch aside.

Taking in that side note, Subaru turned a worried look at Emilia. But even under that gaze, the tinge of darkness in Emilia's expression did not leave her.

Emilia: "In any case, I understand now. Either way, if I don't pass the Trials I won't be able to leave the Sanctuary. So I will accept."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan's heroic look when making a resolve is super-captivating, but maybe it's better if we look into some more cautious strategies? Find some shortcuts or loopholes first, and it won't be too late to do the challenge then, I think."

Emilia: "You shouldn't pour water on someone just when they've got so pumped up and all, it's reeeaaaally inappropriate I think."

But, while Subaru was just trying to place her far away from any possibility of danger, Emilia pouted up her lips with a look of disapproval. And receiving her reproachful gaze,

Subaru: "Come to think of it, isn't there something fishy about how we got taken along for a ride like this? I can't get rid of the feeling that something's off, actually. This whole situation just seems too well set-up, like everything along the road's been arranged and now even the traffic police is in on it."

Emilia: "I totally can't understand that. Subaru says some reeeaaally befuddling things sometimes."

Subaru: "I haven't heard anyone say befuddle in a while…"

Seeing Emilia sharpen her gaze at the customary exchange between them, Subaru hurriedly flapped his hands around saying "No no no",

Subaru: "Nevermind that part, I meant I got a really strong feeling that this whole situation has been prearranged somehow. The half-bloods not being able to leave, and then nominating Emilia-tan to step-up and all. And then to say that it's all already understood and agreed upon."

Emilia: "Prearranged, by who?"

Subaru: "Who, it could only be one person."

At Emilia's question, right then and there Subaru did a sudden spin. And at the end of the rotation his finger pointed toward…

Subaru: "You, wasn't it?"

Garfiel: "Huh? Me?"

Subaru: "Ah, wrong one, sorry, turned too far. This one this one— You, wasn't it, Roswaal."

Roswaal: "Nothing could have been slo~ppier."

Smiling bitterly, Roswaal gave his assessment of Subaru's movements. But immediately he closed a single eye, and projected Subaru within his yellow pupil,

Roswaal: "Ho~wever, your observation is good as usual. It's true, I had ho~ped for this situation and bro~ught it about. Of course, I didn't have a hand in the sta~ge itself, though."

Subaru: "I get the feeling, I understand now."

Raising up his brows at Roswaal's words, Subaru seemed to have grasped his intentions. Kept out of the conversation, Emilia showed a confused expression, and tried to listen for what was happening behind it all.

Subaru: "First, I think it's odd that Roswaal got injured. In the first place, you must have known that you weren't Qualified for the Trials. This should be obvious considering this place is managed by the Mathers family, and that you are acquainted with Garfiel."

Roswaal: "That is...right. En, correct."

Subaru: “If that’s the case, Roswaal would know what would happen to him after he is rejected from the Tomb. In spite of this, why did Roswaal go in? Was it rage against the world for no particular reason? Or has he finally reached the limits of holding back his Masochist tendencies? Even though both of these are pretty persuasive, I don’t think it was either of them.”

Roswaal: “O~~ay O~~ay. Is that the kind of impre~ssion Subaru ha~s of me?”

Seeing Roswaal intentionally ignoring the main point with that reaction, Subaru lifted up a finger with “In other words”,

Subaru: “Getting wounded like this was in accordance with Roswaals intentions, and had some kind of significance. And that significance would probably… be connected to the Royal Selection, I think.”

“…”

Subaru: “But I was hoping to ask… The villagers of Earlham village, they are gathered in some kind of a Cathedral right now, right?”

Subaru suddenly changed the topic, and turned to Ram, who was standing beside Roswaal. Keeping her silence, she lightly drew in her chin in a nod, and then,

Ram: “En, yes. The villagers are gathered in the Cathedral... being confined by the residents of the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “Is that so, confined. Earlier, our conversation got cut off because we had to go visit the Tomb, but... just what kind of confinement is it. And why was it necessary for the Sanctuary guys to place Roswaal along with all the villagers under house arrest?”

The one Subaru turned to next, was Gafiel, who was still leaning against the wall. His eyes narrowed, and grew sharpened at Subaru’s question, and followed it with “It’s obvious ain’t it.”

Garfiel: “Telling ya, this here ain’t us grabbin onto a way out’a troubled times. But we ain’t exactly in a good mood when the Esteemed Lord and his tag-alongs just comes like it’s fine to set our problems aside and use this place as they like y'know?"

Subaru: "By your problems you mean of course..."

Ryuzu: "That it is impossible for us to leave this Sanctuary for the outside world."

Continuing from Subaru's words, Ryuzu finished his sentence. A dark and burdened expression unbefitting of her youthful face descended, as she cast down her eyes, and continued in a thin voice,

Ryuzu: "As I have said before, I have been alive for a hundred and some-decades. But, never once have I gone outside this Sanctuary. Anyhow, adhering to this Contract since the time of my birth, I have been bound by this land. And precisely for that reason, it was half giving up...and half refusing to let go of hope"

Garfiel: "Granny'd like to get to see the outside world for a bit. Th'others too. Just to get chance to, it's something worth biting onto yeah? Having the weakened Esteemed Lord, and villagers that we could take as hostages falling into our hands, 's gotten pretty convenient."

With Ryuzu and Garfiel's words, the atmosphere in the room suddenly turned.

In short, they have just told Subaru the reason for the confinement—that is, confessed the motive of their crime. The aspect that Subaru had not noticed up to now, was that the relationship between him, and them, had been that of a prisoner, and jailor. A relationship between the victim, and the perpetrator.

Subaru: "So it's, like that. You guys, are holding the villagers hostage...in order to free yourselves from the Sanctuary."

Ryuzu: "You can think of it any way you like. And then, the one who can fulfill that condition is..."

In an instant, Ryuzu's words clouded over, as she looked toward Emilia.

Taking in the meaning of that look, Emilia once again realized her position.

Emilia: “Me. —That’s what you mean isn’t it?”

Understanding the flow of the situation, Emilia closed her eyes once more. And when, after several seconds, she opened them again, there were no longer any confused emotions in her eyes. There was only resolve, for she had made her decision.

Emilia: “The villagers, you haven’t done anything terrible to them, have you?”

Garfiel: “‘Course not. If I treat them roughly I’d be taking my anger out on them. I’d rather die before I do something like that, sorry.”

Just like that, Emilia’s ability to place others before herself was beyond estimation. Even after deciding to face the unknown dangers of the Trials, she was already worrying about the villagers and the others.

It was her strength, and her fragileness, when she is like this, that made Subaru so drawn to her.

Roswaal: “That’s an unsatisfied look on your face, i~~sn’t it?”

Subaru: “...That should be obvious. In the end, we still got taken along for the ride. Since we didn’t notice it when we got on, now that we have noticed it we still have no choice but to keep riding.”

Grinding his teeth holding in his vexation, Subaru put up a smiling look to bicker with Roswaal. But then, quietly remembering, he turned back again,

Subaru: “I forgot to mention, the reason you got wounded.”

Roswaal: “En en, go on. I won’t be marking you on it.”

Subaru: “PERFORMANCE. Or rather, it was an opening gambit.”

Seeing Subaru scratching his neck as he said this, Roswaal’s expression slightly congealed. This reaction was all taken in by

Subaru's single open eye.

Subaru: "Being placed in a state of confinement, the people of Earlham village probably didn't take it well. Naturally, they must have objected. So I think you had to show that something was being done. Being the Lord, it would've been great if you could just go nuts and chase Garfiel away or something... But the people of the Sanctuary are your subject as well. So you couldn't really do that."

Roswaal: "Fumu. So, wha~t happened then?"

Subaru: "You could only swallow Garfiel and the residents' condition. That is, liberating the half-bloods of the Sanctuary. But this couldn't be done without Emilia-tan's assistance. Yet, the villagers and the residents wouldn't just accept that. So, the rest is simple—You challenge the Trials, showing that you've accepted their requests, and that you intend to liberate them from their confinements."

"…"

Subaru: "I don't know how well you could have predicted how much damage you would take from the Miasma, but if you predicted it wouldn't kill you, then it's not really that much of a gamble. The greater the damage you take, the more serious it looks and the more sympathy you get. And, it sets up the expectations for the final act that will be coming after you."

So in the end, everything about Roswaal getting wounded had been a performance to further his intentions.

As their lord, the magnitude of Roswaal's power was well known to his subjects and the villagers of Earlham. If the Trials can injure a person like him so severely, what will they think of a person who then appears and overcame such a trial to save them?

Subaru: "That, was what I imagine happened judging from my impression of your malicious prejudiced opportunism, so how's that for an answer sheet?"

Roswaal: "—Ee~ya~~, I~'m surprised. That was actually, really, re~ally astonishing. It's only been a few days, bu~t just wh~at on earth has happened to yo~u."

Roswaal laughed from the depths of his throat at Subaru's words, showering praises at him.

And, clapping his hands, with a smile clear as day pasted over his face,

Roswaal: "I~~mpressive indeed. Almost a perfect a~nswer. I can't imagine how you could have read this far. A~fter all, I was right to have pi~cked you up."

Subaru: "The sky~~. I'm going to puke."

Seeing the thankful-looking Roswaal, as his deductions was being confirmed, Subaru looked away unable to hide the revulsion in his chest.

At Roswaal's intentions, at himself who had read into those intentions, at the fact that those intentions were for Emilia's benefit… and, the thought that, somewhere deep down, he himself approved of it, was all too revolting.

Oblivious to Subaru and Roswaal's skullduggery, Emilia was still occupied with Ryuzu and Garfiel and the topic about the Trials.

Watching her from behind, Subaru was determined that he would not let her hear these words, no matter what.

It would be enough if she just looked ahead.

Pristine, and noble, he would not want her to know of the dark intentions behind her.

If Subaru had to cover himself in mud so she could be showered with praise, it would be all be worth it.

In the Royal Selection, she hasn't done anything of note so far, and had no solid footing to stand on.

If her Royal Selection begins at this Sanctuary, he will do everything in his power to aid her.

With renewed determination, and firm resolve, Subaru decided.

Then, as he was clenching up his fists, behind Subaru, entrusting all his weight onto the bed,

Roswaal: "…Almost, correct. Though that wasn't the only reason I e~ntered the Tomb."

Quietly whispering, it was in a voice that only the peach-colored haired maid beside the bed could hear, and, listening, only she alone cast down her pained gaze in reaction.

Chapter 14: Questions and Answers

1

Roswaal: “You felled the White Whale, and repelled the Witch Cult that had been targeting the Estate. Whether it was sealing an Alliance with Candidate Crusch-sama, or the aforementioned battle, your achievements have certainly grown—fu~mu.”

Inadvertently laying more and more of his weight onto the bed, Roswaal touched his chin and closed his eyes. Uttering in his mouth, in this exchange with Subaru in the middle of the night, were all the various things that had occurred in his absence.

And Subaru, pressing down his bad habit of derailing the conversation, tried his best to eliminate the boasting and the tales of suffering, and had given what he thought was an objective explanation of the events. Then, looking back on his conducts once more,

Ram: “...To put it bluntly, you seem to have done so much that it’s starting to make me doubt whether your words are delusional. Since when did you become a character in an action-adventure stage play, Barusu?”

Subaru: “What you just said gave me a pretty subtle feeling I couldn’t really explain, you know...though, I’m also still wondering how I did all that myself. But whether it’s by my own evaluations or other people’s evaluations, it was no small contribution, was it?”

It was a result that even Kong-Ming wouldn’t have dared to put together. And even under Ram’s cold sarcasm, it seemed that she at least acknowledged the significance of Subaru’s accomplishments. So bit by bit, his spirits rose.

Roswaal: “A result beyond all expectations, there is no o~ther way to put it. Su~ch an achievement, even I... or, not even anyone, could have ima~gined it.”

As if he had finally finished digesting his astonishment, Roswaal spoke these words of full of praise. Then, with a serious expression so rare to him, his mismatched eyes gazed into Subaru, who was sitting in a chair in front of his bed.

Roswaal: “Fi~rst, I want to once more convey my words of gra~titude. —For protecting my land, and the people of my realm, you have my deepest gratitude.”

Subaru: “Ah, ah oh. Yeah. How should I say this uh… hearing you say it like that kinda makes me wanna to curl up in a ball. It wasn’t that big of a deal or anythi...”

Ram: “It seems Barusu is a little, unable to grasp the gravity of your words of gratitude, Master Roswaal.”

As Subaru put a stop to Roswaal’s courteous words of thanks, Ram took a step forward and interrupted. Her clear, unwavering eyes were looking down on him,

Ram: “Interrupting on your superior, and on top of that rejecting his words of thanks is in its essence unforgivable. Besides, as a Margrave, Master Roswaal is someone who carries the power of an entire wing of the Kingdom of Lugnica. —Words of gratitude from him holds far more weight than Barusu can imagine.”

“…”

Ram: “From Master Roswaal’s position, he shouldn’t even have to bother looking at someone beneath him, let alone offer words of gratitude. To have gone to such lengths, please have some consideration for its significance.”

Like a slap in the face, Ram threw out these words that wiped off Subaru’s over-optimistic thoughts. Listening to this, unable to come up with a single reply, Subaru hung his head. Then, saying “No~ no~”, Roswaal lightly waved his hands as if to smooth things over,

Roswaal: “The way Ram said it was a bi~t too exaggerated. My words don’t carry tha~t much value.”

Ram: “Master Roswaal.”

Hearing Ram’s concerned call, Roswaal nodded, and with “Ho~wever”, he continued,

Roswaal: “Setting aside the weight of my gratitude due to my social standing for now, the weight of what Subaru has accomplished is clear to anyone’s eyes. As~ such, if I don’t reward you appropriately, you can ea~sily imagine the disappointment and public outrage that would be directed to~wards me.”

Subaru: “…So then, what are you going to do for me?”

Roswaal: “A fitting reward. —Subaru, do you remember what happened in the Royal Selection Hall?”

Seeing Subaru’s throat choking up, Roswaal narrowed his eyes.

As this gaze was piercing through him, what passed across Subaru’s mind were the abominable memories that even now made his chest burn with shame and self-derision whenever he recalls them. The declaration he had made in that place, his reckless words, his lack of understanding, his lack of self-understanding… the laughable nonsense uttered by that foolish self, who had gotten even the most important thing wrong in his mind.

But still, even so—

Subaru: “I remember. It’s not something I could ever forget. …or should forget, I think.”

Roswaal: “Then, as my reward for your actions, how about I make the words you said in that place into a reality. —Rest assured, on the dawn when we leave this place, I shall appoint you as a Knight.”

Lifting his head, for a moment, Subaru was unable to take in the meaning of those words. Seeing Subaru wavering, blinking, Roswaal nodded his head,

Roswaal: “Fighting alongside the Count in the battle against White Whale, and slaying a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, I cannot allow these deeds to go down in anonymity. Your name, the name of <Knight> Natsuki Subaru shall be held with honor and spoken with admiration throughout the Kingdom. —When that is so, no one will be able to laugh at the words you have spoken in that Hall."

Hoping to be of assistance to Emilia, they had been the barkings of an empty-handed youth.

The youth who had been dreaming, and who had so many times been broken by the face of reality, having despaired, been sunk into madness, driven by vengeance into despising all things, and at last saved by love—now, he was here.

Everything that happened in that time, surely, the "Honor" that had passed through Roswaal's lips… would be proof, that there had been some value in all of that.

—That, no longer remaining in the minds of anyone except Subaru, was the fact that they were Rem's deeds.

Subaru: "...Thank you, I will accept. If it means it would bring some meaning to that battle we fought."

Roswaal: "It is an achievement to be proud of, and I will not allow anyone to make light of it. You now have the right to stand by Emilia-sama's side with your head held high. By your own strength, you have earned this."

Subaru: "...It wasn't, just my own strength."

Listening to Roswaal's words, he murmured this under his breath. Watching Roswaal lightly furrowing his brows as if not understanding its meaning, Subaru closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then, as he opened them again, he casually shrugged and,

Subaru: "That was a serious exchange, oy. Gotta be careful, after being out-of-character for so long it'll be embarrassing to go back to normal again. My face is already heating up!"

Roswaal: "...Yo~u're quite right. Eeya~eya, that was not like me at all, even my shoulder's gotten sti~ff. With the relationship between you and me, it really isn't like us to be talking so se~riously."

As if mirroring Subaru as he broke off his serious face, Roswaal's expression relaxed as well, and the tense atmosphere of a moment ago had all but disappeared. And, watching over the conversation between Subaru and her master, Ram let out a small sigh, and with "Well", she continued the conversation,

Ram: "Then, Barusu, you have something you want to ask Master Roswaal, don't you? That's why you placed Emilia-sama far away from our conversation, after all."

Subaru: "Your shrewdness earlier really helped getting this conversation going, much appreciated... It's not that I'm treating Emilia-tan as a nuisance, but it seems Ros-chi's mouth will get stiff if she's here."

Ram's pointed observation made Subaru take on an awkward smile. Seeing this smile, Ram directed her gaze toward the place where Emilia had been standing, making sure once more that there was only an unpopulated empty space left over by her absence.

Ram: "I got Lady Ryuzu to accompany her on a tour of the Sanctuary... But when Emilia-sama heard that Barusu will be remaining here, she seemed to have been feeling a little lonely."

Subaru: "Even though I'm glad I'm being relied on, if I think about all the things to come, I can't be rushing to every immediate desire in front of me. Most likely, she'll meet up with Otto on the way. Though I am a bit worried about having him alone with her... that bastard Otto will probably make a move on her… aaaah what do I do? Emilia-tan is super mega adorable oh no I'm getting worried."

Roswaal: "Talking to yourself and making yourself even more worried is ba~d idea, don't you think? Anyway, you were no~t mistaken. —The truth is, if there are things that I don't want Emilia-sama to hear, I would probably ne~ver open my mouth."

Seeing Subaru's heart fluttering about insubstantial worries, Roswaal shook his head, and laid bare his shameless secretiveness. And as Roswaal did so, Subaru closed one of his eyes, and with a "Just as I thought" put his inner thoughts to his tongue, Subaru: “You’re intentionally restricting information to Emilia-tan…Just who do you think you’re trying to imitate here?” (Puck :3)

Roswaal: “It’s necessary to be selective with the information, do~n’t you think? As a Royal Selection Candidate, Emilia-sama’s importance is fa~r above mine. But, right now, her body and her knowledge have not caught up to accompany her qualification and status, and are still in need of polishing. So, while she is still learning, putting too many burdens on her would be unre~asonable…”

Subaru: “Saying this like you’re a guy who only meant to provide a carefree learning environment for Emilia-tan, that’s a pretty way to frame it. But to leave her in the dark in a fatal situation, knowing full well but failing to tell her, that doesn’t sound reasonable at all, now does it. Even for you, that can’t be a good thing.”

Knowing that Roswaal was trying to gloss it over with superficial words, Subaru held back his urge to argue, and continued his pursuit in a quiet voice. Seeing Subaru’s calm disguise, Roswaal closed a single eye, and silently gazed back at him in return.

Intently, his single eye—the left, yellow pupil continued to stare into Subaru. Unaware of the meaning of that unsettling gaze, Subaru’s body wavered. And then, as if having read into his discomfort, Roswaal laughed,

Roswaal: “We~ll, I imagined you would be pursu~ing this to the end sooner or later? That’s why, this time I have prepared my reso~lve.”

Subaru: “Resolve?”

Roswaal: “The resolve that I will no longer dodge Subaru’s questions, and will now give a~nswers. Even if I want to run, I am burdened by this wound, now is just the perfect time, do~n’t you think?”

With a dry, rattling laugh, on the bed, Roswaal lightly tapped himself on the thigh as he pronounced this.

For just a moment, Subaru was taken aback by how meekly he had accepted defeat.

Subaru: “…Just what, kind of wind is blowing here.”

Roswaal: “Tha~t you don’t trust me up to now makes me feel a bit lo~nely. But then again, considering the relationship between you and I, I can’t blame you for fe~eling this way.”

Subaru: “Not that I think it’s good to be so blatant with my wariness, but with everything that’s happened up to now, it’s only to be expected. You’ve always been a little on the excessively secretive side, after all… But this time, I can trust you?”

Roswaal: “Of course.”

Seeing Subaru’s suspicious gaze, Roswaal nodded and lightly opened his arms.

Roswaal: “Everything that you have accomplished over these past few days have given me more than enough proof to open my heart to you. I can be at ease now. From now on, I can place my trust in you, and into the depths of my heart accept you and recognize you —as my acco~mpli~ce.”

Subaru: “Hold on. Why, do I get the feeling I’ve just been given a few heavy crosses to bear? It’s alright if you don’t rip everything open like that, just letting me touch it a little is enough.”

Roswaal: “Ayaaya, even when it’s bursting out of me you’re sti~ll so cold.”

Subaru: “It’s not that, but if you suddenly pull it all out like that, it’s just a bit too heavy…”

As their exchange was starting to sound like a couple who had just began dating disagreeing about where to take their relationship, Subaru coughed and tried to sort out his thoughts, and began with “Anyhow”,

Subaru: “Let’s leave the accomplice part for another conversation, for now, just let me ask some questions I’ve been wanting to ask you. —So, what's the real reason you're hiding all this information from Emilia. First, let's start from there."

Roswaal: "…"

Once again, Roswaal closed one of his eyes and glared at Subaru.

How Roswaal chooses which information is shared with Emilia—the implications that can follow from this, including all the events of the previous loops, would be unfathomable.

The fact that she was a Half-Elf by birth—if she had known that this information would incite the Witch Cult into action, then perhaps they might have been able to prepare effective countermeasures against the attack on Earlham village and the Roswaal estate.

And on the other side, it would have had an impact on Subaru's actions as he frantically dashed to and fro to salvage the situation, then, as a result, maybe what happened to Rem would have—

Subaru: "Answer me, Roswaal. If you want to make Emilia-tan the King, then surely, it would be just as inconvenient for you if she dropped out on the way. Yet even so, why are you going to such lengths to put Emilia-tan at a disadvantage by concealing information from her? It doesn't make any sense."

Roswaal: "To that question, I will answer it as such —Everything is as you pointed out, and it is because it is exactly as you pointed out, that the information I share with Emilia-sama is restricted."

Subaru: "…?! What's that supposed to mean. Are you trying to say that concealing information and placing Emilia at a disadvantage, is somehow necessary for her winning the Royal Selection?"

Roswaal: "Indeed it is so. You don't think there is any me~rit in that?"

Roswaal's reply throwing his thoughts into disarray, Subaru furrowed is brows and laid bare his confusion. Seeing this response from Subaru, Roswaal shifted himself on the bed, causing it to creak.

Roswaal: “Subaru, could thi~s be what you wa~nted to say? That when they learn of Emilia-sama’s participation in the Royal Selection, there would be a possibility that the Witch Cult would make a move. And in reality, the Witch Cult did move, and attacked my lands. Furthermore, if I had known of this possibility, then I should have been able to prepare some appropriate countermeasures.”

Subaru: “Y-Yeah. Exactly like that. Anyone would think that, it should be obvious. I might not have known, but the relationship between the Witch Cult and Half-Elves is common knowledge, isn’t it? In fact, you must have known. If that’s the case, then why didn’t you prepare anything…no, even before that, why did you leave estate and seclude yourself at the Sanctuary?”

Roswaal: “I’ve been confined here in the Sanctuary, it wasn’t as if I meant to be away from estate for so many days…”

Subaru: “Your excuses won’t work anymore. How you got injured and placed into a state of house arrest was when you challenged the Tomb in order to appease the villagers from Earlham. In other words, it was a consequence of me evacuating the villagers from the Witch Cult…so before that, not returning was by your own intention.”

Roswaal: “Using logic to argue against an opponent you’re angry at does pay off. It re~ally is, a good habit to get into.”

Hearing Subaru’s rejection of his simple excuse, Roswaal casually shrugged as if he had never expected it to fool him. Displeased with this expression, Subaru took a step forward, but,

Subaru: “…Ram.”

Ram: “Master Roswaal is burdened with wounds. But even so, to incinerate Subaru, a single fingertip would be sufficient…But Ram, will not forgive such insolent behaviour in front of her.”

Subaru: “You seemed to have accepted it. Being treated like a sacrificial piece, it was the same for you as well. He knew those idiots were coming to the village, and yet he fled all alone from that powderkeg waiting to blow. How do you forgive something like that.”

Ram: “It’s not a matter of forgiving or not forgiving. Ram will pardon any and all action taken by Master Roswaal. However he treats Ram, whether it’s cutting me down or casting me aside, it is all the same.”

Subaru: “You—!!”

In front of Ram’s incomprehensible devotion, Subaru’s throat filled up with rage

But even so, he could not suddenly resort to violence. Perhaps it was because of the sober judgement that he would not be a match against either of the two in front of him, or perhaps, it was because —

Subaru: “…Even Rem, was sacrificed because of those kind of reasons I can’t understand.”

Ram: “—? I don’t know who you are referring to, but Ram has no relation to anyone by this name. To Ram, Master Roswaal is everything, and everything else is insignificant.”

Even Subaru’s wrenched-out appeal could not bring about the slightest fragment of an echo in Ram’s heart.

He had already known that. That for the girl who had forgotten Rem’s existence, that plea would have been meaningless. Yet, at the same time, he also understood.

From the start, he had been aware of Ram’s unusual loyalty to Roswaal.

But this perverse obstinance now, was a different kind of madness than the one carried by the Ram that Subaru had known up to now.

And there was no greater reason for this, than her having forgotten Rem’s existence.

Subaru didn’t know the details of what had happened in their past.

But piecing together the fragments from what Rem had told him, he could get a sense of the mutual reliance the sisters had for each other.

With her sense of guilt, and her inferiority complex—swaying in between the two, Rem's complexes had made her become even more deeply dependent on her older sister. And while Ram's instability was not plain to see, when she is around her younger sister, fragments of it would show through.

Just like Rem, whose world mostly consisted of Ram, Ram's world consisted only of Rem and Roswaal. Her complexes having been brought to a resolution, when that narrow world, beginning with Subaru, took in many, various things, Rem changed. But Ram's world had remained narrow.

Having forgotten the person who had made up half of her world, now, Ram's world is comprised only of Roswaal.

It may be extreme, but that was the cause of her excessive loyalty to Roswaal.

Roswaal: "Ram do~n't excite Subaru too much. A~fter all, Subaru didn't intend to do anything outrageous aga~inst me. It was o~nly, a step forward."

Ram: "If you say so, Master Roswaal."

Roswaal: "Yes yes. It's no~ matter. Isn't that right, Subaru. You look a little angry, but you are not taken over by ra~ge. Something like losing yourself and pu~nching me, you would not choose to lose this opportunity to continue our conversation without interruptions, wo~uld you."

Subaru: "Just what, is that supposed to mean..."

Roswaal: "It's si~mple. If this was the old you, somewhere along this conversation you would have thrown a fit, shouted, and the conversation would have ended. But you didn't, and even while you pressed down your anger you hung on to the argument, without letting go... You have grown up, I me~an to say."

As Roswaal was lightly clapping, delivering this superficial compliment, Subaru felt a burning rage in his chest that made him want to cry out. But, knowing if he gave in to that, it would be giving his opponent exactly what he wanted, he stopped himself, and taking a long, deep breath, he held back the waves of his rage.

—And in doing so, he realized that he had proved Roswaal's previous words correct, and he couldn't hold back his irritation with with himself.

Roswaal: "We~ll now, teasing the young man any more than this would not be adult-like. Since you've shown me how you have gro~wn up, I should show a bit more matu~rity on my end as well."

Subaru: "...Then please do so. Anyways, please clearly answer my previous question. Answer without trying dodge it. Why, have you hidden the Witch Cult from Emilia. And why, when you knew that the Witch Cult was coming, did you, the greatest combat force we have, leave the estate!"

Roswaal: "I can answer both questions with a single answer. —I behaved as such in order to avoid a confrontation with the Witch Cult."

Subaru: "Huh—?"

Hearing this calm and orderly reply, for a moment, Subaru couldn't understand.

Chewing them down, swallowing, digesting those words within his mind, and soaking in their contents,

Subaru: "I don't, understand. In order to avoid fighting the Witch Cult...but why? Don't tell me you're allergic to them, or any crap like that?! If you... if you were there, couldn't you have taken those bastards out in one shot? Then the victims..."

Roswaal: "I see. It's tru~e, if I was there, then the ca~sualties from this disturbance would have lessened. I try to have an accurate understanding of my own strength, and I am aware that I am among one of the few most powerful people in this country. It’s safe to say, that if I was there, then the Witch Cult attack this time would have been easily repelled.”

Subaru: “If you understand that, then why—!”

Roswaal: “That is, why.”

Watching drops saliva flying from Subaru, Roswaal held out a finger to stop him, and then, pointing that same finger toward the ceiling,

Roswaal: “If I had done everything, it would not have Emilia-sama’s achievement, nor would it have been your achievement, now would it? Even if my own reputation was improved, it would have been of no~ use.”

Subaru: “—h.”

What he was saying, Subaru could not understand it at all.

It must have been a joke. Praying, that Roswaal would follow that with some kind of jest, Subaru held his tongue and waited for Roswaal’s next words.

However, looking at Subaru, who had grown silent, Roswaal only tilted his head,

Roswaal: “How could I deny it? After all, it was a disaster that I can be completely certain was going to happen. How could I possibly not use that to the fu~llest?”

Subaru: “Y-You…do you even know, what you’re saying…?”

Roswaal: “—? I don’t understand which part Subaru fi~nds to be a problem. What could it be, I wonder. Was it the damage done to Earlham village, was it having had to borrow the strength of the mercenaries and Crusch-sama’s private army to repulse the Witch Cult…or was it about the fact that all these damages could have been avoided?”

Subaru’s voice was trembling, and, as if reading into the inner depths of his heart, Roswaal threw out those words as though it was all a matter of course.

Hearing this reply, Subaru felt a tremor trembling through every organ of his body.

Before, when he had spoken with Puck, when the spirit said in front of the sleeping Rem that “This child sacrificed herself to help Lia”, Subaru had flown into a rage.

And because that happened, Subaru painfully realized that in between his and the Great Spirit’s sensibilities, there was an insurmountable gap that could not be filled in with words. In other words, the rage he felt at that moment made him understand that they had always been two fundamentally different entities.

However, that was not the case for Roswaal. He understood the reason why Subaru was mad, and he knew what Subaru wanted to say—and it was while knowing all of that, that he made this cruel decision.

Subaru: “That was all hindsight, wasn’t it. In a way, I understand what you’re trying to say. In repulsing the Witch Cult’s attack, whoever was in command would receive the credit, and that would have no small an impact on the Royal Selection, I can understand that...and I also understand that if you took care of it yourself it would not have the same effect. But!”

Revealing his teeth, Subaru, with a wild swing of his arm,

Subaru: “How many people do you think died because you weren’t there and didn’t bother to say anything?! Sure, the casualties weren’t catastrophic. But still, the number wasn’t zero. People died. Whether it was our own people, or those bastards from the Witch Cult...”

Roswaal: “Even if I was there, the treatment of the Witch Cultists would not have changed. All of them, would just have been reduced to ash. I’ll accept responsibility for the casualties on our side, but to blame me for the enemy’s losses would be a bit of a stre~tch don’t you think.”

Subaru: "—B-, still, couldn't there have been a more peaceful... No, it's not about that! Every single thing you've been saying had been in hindsight! It's true it went well. Our losses were minimal, the enemies were wiped out. Emilia-tan is safe, the villagers of Earlham were all safely evacuated...But that was, all just coincidence. Originally th—"

Originally, if Subaru didn't do anything, the villagers, everyone in the mansion, Emilia…

Subaru: "They should have been dead. This time, if everything didn't work out perfectly...everyone would have been wretchedly, cruelly, agonizingly... tortured to death."

Covering his face, Subaru strangled back the tears within his voice.

On the other side of his closed eyelids, once again those scenes of hell that he could never forget emerged.

The village consumed by flames. The cadavers strewn about the ground. The corpses of the children. And Rem's dead body abandoned on the mansion's garden. And, at last, the frozen, ending of the World.

—All of that, would have been the indisputable World if Subaru could not overturn it by Returning by Death.

Subaru: "If you were there, none of those things would have happened...You knew, but still watched them die. How many times, have you killed those people..."

Roswaal: "It's troubling to be so misunderstood. The ones who attacked were the Witch Cult, no~t me. Besides, the Witch Cult's attack was stopped by your hands before anything could happen, the victims you spoke of never existed. —You are only repeating nonsense."

Subaru: "—Is that so."

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Listening to Roswaal's cold words, Subaru dropped his shoulders and replied in a quiet voice.

Nonsense. —If that's what he considered them to be, then there was nothing Subaru can say to change that. Return by Death could not be explained to him, nor could Roswaal be blamed for things that never happened in this reality.

The only one who had experienced that hell was Subaru, and the one who exonerated Roswaal of the crime of bringing about that hell, was also Subaru.

Subaru: "...If I turned out to be still just a useless piece of trash, then what would you have done? To make Emilia King, you want that as much as I do. But the odds were just too one-sided, it's not even enough to gamble on... it was far more likely that everything would have ended there."

Roswaal: "However, you overturned such a possibility. —Are you unsatisfied?"

Subaru: "I am unsatisfied. You don't seem to be the kind of guy who would leave things to something so uncertain."

There are several kinds of people who gamble. There are those who don't know whether they will win or lose, and rely entirely on their luck. And there are those who do not wish to be directed by fate, and only when they have assembled the best possible hand, do they at the very last moment leave it to chance.

And then, there are those who pre-arrange everything from beginning to end, and would only run the fixed gambling match where victory was already certain.

Subaru: "You are not the kind who would gamble in the first place. So, why did you do it?"

Roswaal: "—Because, I believe in you."

When Subaru asked a second time, Roswaal's voice dropped in pitch as he replied.

Hearing this answer, Subaru couldn't stop a snicker from leaking from his lips.

Subaru: "So you don't feel like giving me a serious answer after all."

Roswaal: "Whether you believe my story or not is another matter, but everything I've said is true? Because here, tonight, I've decided that I will not li~e to you. The things that I cannot say, I will not say, and if there are things inappropriate for this occasion, I will not mention them. But, what I do say, I swear that they are free of falsehoods."

In response to Subaru's words that were tinged with a color of disappointment, Roswaal said this in a solemn voice. But, was this something that could be believed? Having already lost all positive impressions of Roswaal in the conversation up to now, Subaru was no longer in a position to accept everything at face value.

In front of Subaru's sharpening glare, Roswaal rolled his head,

Roswaal: "I will say it again. —The reason I made this decision, is because I believed in you. I believed, that if you realized the danger Emilia-sama was in, you will strive to establish an alliance with Crusch-sama, and do everything in your power to repel the Witch Cult, and distinguish yourself in doing so."

Subaru: "Even if we pretend for a moment that's true, just how the hell did you decide to believe in someone like me! What do you know about me! We've only known each other for a month, what me looked like I was the kind of man that you can place that kind of faith in?"

Stomping on the floor, Subaru objected to Roswaal's shameless and flowery words. Pointing out a finger, Subaru shook his head, rejecting what he had just said,

Subaru: "But it couldn't be. When I last left you, I was absolutely, one-hundred-percent trash. It was only because of what happened afterwards, that the trash got more or less better. But what happened afterwards, no one else knows except me. —So just what part of me did you believe in?!”

Roswaal closed a single eye, and disturbingly, with the one yellow pupil, stared into Subaru.

As if to shake off that stare, Subaru kicked the floor with all his might.

Subaru: “It’s absurd! Are you really trying to say that you trusted that empty-headed idiot to get everything to work out, and just left your people and everything else behind like it’s some kind of a game, risking your own position and future as the wager? What am I even supposed to say to something that callous?!”

Roswaal: “…It seems, this is the end of today’s conversa~tion.”

Whereas Subaru had laid his anger bare, Roswaal only whispered in a lonely voice.

Upon hearing that whisper, Subaru screamed, lending voice to his inexhaustible vexation.

Subaru: “If you don’t intend speak straightforwardly, it’ll be pointless whatever you say. After this conversation, I don’t intend to believe anything you say anymore.”

Roswaal: “It seems your impression of me has taken a dive, that is tru~ly regrettable. …Even though I don’t think there is a need to confirm it, but regarding our conversation tonight, Emilia-sama…”

Subaru: “I won’t tell her. There isn’t much information to begin with, plus it’s all been embellished, there wouldn’t be any point in telling her. You’ve anticipated this as well, haven’t you. That’s why you’ve been going round and round.”

Regardless of Roswaal’s true intentions, the Royal Selection was still ongoing, and creating any more friction between Emilia and Roswaal was not something he wanted to do. Besides, with Emilia now acting as a representative of the villagers of Earlham, Roswaal’s faction needs to remain united.

It gave him spasms to think how he was going along with Roswaal's intentions, but, challenging the Trials would improve how people saw Emilia. —And all of that, was controlled within the palms of that man's hands.

Roswaal: "You understand everything, and the anger you harbour towards me is unbearable… yet you didn't flip over the table or anything like that. You re~ally are, just as I expected."

As Roswaal said this to Subaru, who had been grinding his teeth to hold back his vexation, Subaru lifted his head, and saw Roswaal's face twisting into a truly revolting expression.

Roswaal: "You are, without a doubt, worthy of being my accomplice—no?"

Subaru: "…You bastard, I hope you die a worthy death."

Roswaal: "I know. Without a doubt, I will be falling into hell. That is why, before that happens, I must extend my utmost brutality over the present world, to the best of my ability."

Sending a sharp glare at Roswaal's declaration, without a word, Subaru turned around and stormed out of the room.

Any further conversation would have been pointless. If Roswaal had no plans of revealing his true intentions, if there was nothing Subaru could do to break into his thoughts, then nothing could have come of that exchange.

But,

Subaru: "—You think everything will happen as you expect them to, and everyone will dance to your tune."

Clenching his fist tightly, walking down the street in the night, Subaru prepared his new resolve.

Tomorrow, Roswaal would have Emilia challenge the Trials, to overturn the understanding of the people of the Sanctuary and Earlham village, and their contempt for Half-Elves.

What may arise in that process, how many burdens Emilia will have to endure, were not within that man’s considerations. In the end, no matter how many wounds Emilia will bear, even if her heart was worn to its core, he would only frivolously laugh at the events unfolding in accordance to his will. If that were the case,

Subaru: “I won’t let it happen. That girl… Emilia, I will protect her.”

The Qualification to challenge the Trials—if the dream he saw in the Tomb was not only a dream, then Subaru would also have been granted that Qualification.

It may have been granted on the whim of a Witch, but with it, he could thwart Roswaal’s plans. All of the pain and tears that have come into existence only because that man cared nothing about those around him, Subaru will put a stop to them here.

Subaru: “—That, is what I must accomplish in this Sanctuary.”

Upwards, across from where he threw up his fist, was the floating, pale-blue moon.

As if to hold onto that far and unreachable light, he closed tight his fist, and, sketching out the form of that cute silver-haired girl within his thoughts, he determined, he will crash head-on into that clown’s devious plans.

2

Ram: “—Was that, really alright?”

In the room that Subaru had stormed out of, Ram, who had been watching over their conversation, asked this quietly. Hearing this, her master shook his head as if devoid of strength.

Roswaal: “Such a reaction was o~nly to be expected. But even if it was expected, it is a depressing thing, to be gouging at a young man’s heart.”

Ram: “You do know there is no need to lie in front of Ram?”

Roswaal: “I’m glad you’re wo~rried about me, but those were my honest thoughts. Why, in Ram's heart do I really seem like someone who enjoys doing these things?"

Answering by wordlessly averting her eyes from her master, Ram rearranged the bed sheets that had been ruffled in the earlier argument. As she did this, her fingers felt a hardness across her master's stomach, and she pulled it out of the sheets. (Damnit Tappei!! >_<)

Ram: "Master Roswaal. This is..."

Roswaal: "Aah, so~rry. If Subaru had seen this, thi~ngs would have gotten quite co~mplicated. But, it would have been too much punishment if I had put this under my butt. If I'm not careful..."

Receiving what she passed back as if it was very precious, Roswaal gently caressed its surface as he took it. Then, he said "No matter what", touching a finger to his chin,

Roswaal: "Emilia-sama's qualification is now confirmed, and Subaru has been fired up. Tomorrow night, the Trials will begin...Ram, what do you think will ha~ppen?"

Ram: "Master Roswaal's considerations are beyond Ram's ability to guess. ...Master Roswaal, you know what is going to happen, then?"

Roswaal: "This thing isn't that conve~nient. Compared to the incomplete ones held by the Witch Cult, it is somewhat superior, but it is nothing more than a poor imitation, and still far from what she desired. The argument with Subaru just now, how much of that do you think happened as described."

Roswaal took a deep breath as if contemplating, and seeing this, Ram slightly raised her brows and then timidly, with hesitation,

Ram: "Then, how much of what you said to Barusu was..."

Roswaal: "Even though there was some acting...most of it was according to my true fe~elings. No no, but of course I knew Subaru would be angry. But while I knew it, I could also add some things that I wa~nted to say as well, isn't that so."

Roswaal waved his hands to Ram as if to explain himself, and then, with “Anyhow”, he continued,

Roswaal: “To be despised by the partner of my heart, it does feel painful to be thought of this way, as if I had only been thinking of myself. Oh how childish I still am, my spi~teful friend.”

Roswaal laughed as he spoke.

Wrapped within his arms, preciously, preciously, was a book with black binding.

Roswaal placed his fingertips over the binding of the book, and slowly, and slowly, he continued to trace over it.

Lovingly, and lovingly, slowly, and slowly—

Chapter 15: Qualifications and Trials

1

On the morning of the next day, trotting on grass still adorned by the morning's dew, Subaru was looking up toward the entrance of the ruins he had visited the day before.

Yesterday, having been restricted by time, he didn't get a chance to take a good look at the exteriors. But looking at it now, it all actually seemed to have been surprisingly well maintained.

Although the callously sprawling ivy had spread to cover the entire exterior of the entrance, the plants surrounding the Tomb have been neatly attended to, and he could discern on the Tomb itself signs of restorations of broken walls that had deteriorated over the ages.

Subaru: "Not really sure what kind of relationship those guys here have with the Tomb."

Touching his hand to the walls that were showing strange colors under the light of the Sun, Subaru mumbled this under his breath.

He thought back to the conversation with Garfiel and Ryuzu in the previous night inside the room in which Roswaal was confined. They all wanted Emilia to take the Trials, and hoped, as a result, she would be able to liberate them from their imprisonment within the Sanctuary.

Subaru: "Judging from what they said, for Garfiel and the others, the Witch is just something of a nuisance, isn't it? So why are they maintaining the Tomb like it's so important to them…"

Otto: "Maybe it's the opposite. The Tomb is the reason that the people here are all bound to this land, right? So until someone passes the Trials, they mustn't allow the Tomb to get damaged. Since if demolishing the Tomb would set them free, Garfiel would have already done it a long time ago, wouldn't he?"

The one who followed up on Subaru's deductions was Otto, who was wandering behind him, looking all around the Tomb.

Early in the morning, Otto, who had been sleeping inside the dragon carriage just as he declared he would, got woken up and was bullied by Subaru into coming along to the Tomb on a scouting mission. Naturally, Otto grumbled about it at first, but…

Otto: "Then again, it's rare to get a chance to visit something like the Tomb of the Witch of Greed... maybe coming along would be worth it after all. There's no knowing whether we'll find some treasure belonging to the Witch of Greed along the way. We could make a fortune!"

Subaru: "If you go around announcing that you're selling some Witch-related stuff, won't the over-obsessive guys from the Witch Cult come hunt you down? Sorry I woke you up, that was my bad, gees, but don't go broadcasting it and bring a sea of flames here."

Saying this, trying to save the merchant-souled Otto from himself, Subaru turned back to the Tomb once again. Silence fell all around, and the only sounds remaining, filtering through the trees, were the chirping of insects, and the rustling of leaves caressed by the wind.

A crisp air was flowing through the Sanctuary in the dawn, it was perfect for a morning stroll.

Otto: "Say, we didn't come out here just to breathe the air and go right back, right? If you wanted to enjoy a stroll in the morning, you'd probably have brought Emilia-sama instead of me."

Subaru: "Surprisingly, Emilia-tan's no-good in the mornings. Even though Emilia-tan being groggy after just waking up is dangerously adorable... it'll have to wait until everything's settled down. She's probably still stressed out after the conversations yesterday, I'll let her sleep for a little longer."

Otto: "So, you've got the men together for your skullduggery while the Princess is asleep. You, sir, are a wicked one."

Sensing Otto gleefully squinting his eyes at him, Subaru only shrugged. But still, Otto's reading was dead-on. The truth is, it was in order to do something he wouldn't want Emilia to see, that Subaru came to the Tomb.

Otto: "Then, what are we doing? I'm not too confident with my magic abilities, but if it's using Wind and Water magic to stifle the sound of footsteps or to suddenly hide myself in a flash… ah, and I can also transfer my footsteps to a completely different location."

Subaru: "Your magic, sounds like it's incredibly useful for cat burglars, doesn't it?"

Otto: "Well, people usually take it the wrong way. But I wouldn't use it for stealing. I have no qualms about using it to listen-in on conversations, though."

Seeing Otto bragging this with eyes narrowed and his white teeth all showing, Subaru sighed.

Then, lifting up a finger in front of the high-spirited Otto, Subaru pointed it toward the Tomb.

Subaru: "I want to take a look inside the Tomb for a bit. If my predictions are correct, the lights inside the Tomb will send me blessings for my future endeavors. If I'm wrong, then I'll probably keel over and won't get up, in that case, if you'll be so good as to pull me out…"

Otto: "What kind of person would just say "Alright, I got it" after listening to that explanation?! Keeling over and won't get up, what's that supposed to mean, please stop right there, I'm getting scared now!"

In reaction to Subaru's super-important announcement, Otto started wailing. But hearing Otto's complaint, Subaru looked over as if watching an unreasonable child, and,

Subaru: "Listen up, this is the Tomb of the Witch of Greed. Simply put, if you set one foot inside the place without the Witch's permission your consciousness will be snatched right out with its roots. I got done-in like that yesterday. So this place is dangerous, don't you be going in there."

Otto: "If it didn't work out yesterday, Mr. Natsuki shouldn't be going in either, right? If you know you're going to keel over why do you still want to go in, it'll only make a mess of things, let's not do that. Besides, if it really ends up that way how will I get Mr. Natsuki out?"

Subaru: "Always questions, questions, coming out one after another… If you keep believing there will be an answer to everything, you'll be getting into a spoiled mentality, you know."

Otto: "Please stop trying to gloss things over with sophistries just because it's too bothersome to explain!"

Having been completely seen through, Subaru smacked his tongue and scowled. Seeing how in the short time they've known each other Otto has already grasped all the tricks in dealing with him, Subaru shook his head dejectedly,

Subaru: "Here, I borrowed some rope from the dragon carriage. I'll tie this around my waist, so if I collapse inside, you can gently, calmly, lovingly pull me out."

Otto: "No matter how gently, calmly, lovingly I pull you, you'll still be getting mud and cuts all over I think."

Subaru: "Well I can't be picky considering the circumstances. Just think of it as repaying a favor."

Otto: "You're the one who owes me a favor, right?!"

While Otto was raising his objection and putting on his grumbling-face, Subaru had already tied the rope around his own waist and handed him the other end. Unwillingly accepting it, Otto carefully inspected the loop around Subaru's waist, and yanked on it just to be sure it was safe.

However much he might be complaining, he was still a conscientious person.

Subaru: “Despite being a merchant, you seem really easy to fool… is it really alright for a guy like you to be doing business?”

Otto: “You know, you seem to have completely forgotten how I’m literally holding your life in my hands right now.”

As Subaru looked at him with a motherly gaze, Otto squinted his eyes, tugged on the rope and grumbled.

With a wry smile, Subaru gave him a slight bow on the spot, and in the same breath he turned round about, toward the entrance of the Tomb.

A foul, earthy air was quietly flowing from the Tomb. The morning light of the sun, like the twilight of yesterday’s, lit only several meters into the entrance before vanishing entirely. The other end of the tunnel was shrouded in absolute dark, and nothing seemed to have changed from the path that had collapsed the moment he set his foot inside.

Subaru: “Well, it wouldn’t actually collapse anyway, I’d just go splat on the first step, so that’d actually make it easier to pull me out, I guess.”

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki, you can go in whenever you’re ready, just give me a signal when you’re going in.”

Subaru: “Alright, I’m going in!”

Subaru had no hesitations in making that decision.

In the worst case, he’d faint and get called by the Witch to another tea party. Although he wasn’t especially looking forward to getting his arm ripped off, punched into healing, and drinking body fluids again—

Subaru: “But compared to all the brink-of-life-and-death stuff so far, it’s not all that baaaa—d!”

Declaring this, Subaru nimbly jumped-off into the entrance of the Tomb.

The threshold—or whatever that might be called, crossing over that boundary between the sunlight and the shadow of the Tomb, Subaru gingerly opened his eyes.

Whereas yesterday, his first step had been met instantly by the torment of that weightless sensation—

Subaru: “The ground is solid. I didn’t fall in.”

It’s an improvement from yesterday, and while it was subtle, it was nonetheless a reassuring change. Taking a deep breath, he took another step. And with his second step into the Tomb, Subaru’s body was completely swallowed by the shadows of the ruins.

To Otto, waiting outside, Subaru’s figure must have become obscured or perhaps even lost to sight altogether.

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki, are you alright? If you’re going to faint, please give me a signal like “I’m gonna faint!” while you’re fainting.”

Subaru: “That’s a bit difficult isn’t it… And I wouldn’t want to admit it if I’m going to faint, I’d probably shout something like “I don’t wanna faint!”“

Otto: “What’s with the unnecessary pride in a situation like this!”

Along with their usual exchange, they took some small comfort in confirming each other’s positions through their voices. And, reassured by that sense of relief, Subaru took a third step, and then a fourth.

Otto: “—Oh.”

Subaru: “Ah...”

The next moment, the scene spread out at once in front of Subaru’s eyes.

Rather, in an instant, the shadow was banished from the ruins, and its interiors bared itself for the intruder’s eyes to see.

Upon the walls on both sides of the corridor, at about the height of

Subaru's shoulders, lined up in equal and even intervals, the lamps lit up, and with faint, swerving luminescence, lighted the path.

It was a corridor constructed of the same material as the exterior walls, about the width of Subaru's outstretched arms, or two people walking side by side. The height was such that he might bump his head if he jumped. Or, if that giant balding old man was here, there would probably be sparks flying from his scalp scraping against the ceiling as he walked if he doesn't bend down.

Otto: "...There's light coming from inside. Is that some kind of condition being met?"

Subaru: "This is a welcoming for someone who's qualified to take the Trials of the night, or so they say... I thought in the worst case I might've been just spacing out and daydreaming all of this."

Once again trying to make sure that what he saw was real, Subaru held up his palms and stared at them. Then, touching himself on the forehead, Subaru recalled the sensation of the touch he had received from her fingertip within the dream.

Subaru: "Looks like I've received your souvenir from the tea party all well and good. Even though you pretty much charged me a price for it without my permission… I wasn't planning on telling anyone for the time being anyway."

Otto: "Hey I can see inside as well, so then what'll happen if I come in with you? Can we pillage the Witch of Greed's Tomb now?"

Subaru: "All I know is that there's an evil wizard whose whole body got split open when he tried to go in and he's still recovering from his wounds. What'll happen to you though, I'm too not sure."

Otto: "Isn't that incredibly scary?!"

Listening to Otto getting frightened behind him, Subaru confirmed once more that he had achieved his objective. Although he should be able to venture deeper inside like this, there was a chance that Otto might want to follow in behind him, so Subaru had to abandon that idea for now.

Either way, all that Subaru wanted to do was to confirm that he was qualified for the Trials, and to verify that the words Echidna said to him within the dream could be believed.

In any case, if he could step into the Tomb, then the knowledge and conditions Echidna had given him, along with the payment she extracted, must all have been real. And the same, then, would go for all those Witches that Subaru had met inside that daydream.

Subaru: “If that’s true, then 400 years ago, those “GOING-MY-WAY” Witches would’ve been going HYA-HA all over the place, wouldn’t they. What must that have been like, at the end of that century... good thing I got transported into this Age, I guess.”

Just the thought of an age wrought by chaos by the Witches of Sin and the Witch of Envy, makes the present Age seem pretty reasonable in comparison. Although the atrocities of the Sin Archbishops would offset this somewhat.

Still, what a pain in the ass those Witches must have been, every last one of them.

Subaru: “Anyways, all the preparations on my end are O-K. Now it’s just waiting for nightfall, and seeing how Emilia-tan’s Trials turn out. Then let’s maintain a high degree of flexibility, and be ready to adapt to the situation.”

Although it sounded nice, that pretty much meant he had no plans whatsoever. Saying that, Subaru looked back at the Tomb’s entrance once more as he left.

Returning to a worried-looking Otto, Subaru untied the rope around his waist and left it next to the entrance.

Subaru: “It might come in handy again, besides, maybe I’ll need it tonight, so I’ll hide it here for now. And sorry for dragging you along, Otto.”

Otto: “No, that’s alright, as long as you came back safe... but more importantly, aren’t we going back empty-handed? You went in the Tomb but didn’t bring anything back, what did you even go in for?”

Subaru: “I’m having a really hard time figuring out which part of what you just said I should take seriously, but maybe I’ll just take that as your artistic style. I’m not religious or anything, but grave robbing is still not something I’d do you know?”

It’s not easy to understand why Japan, being an otherwise the irreligious country, manages to revere eight million gods without actually believing in any single one in particular. One could even say it’s the homebase of the hodgepodge-approach when it comes to religion. Or, it might be just as accurate to call it a collection of cowards being overly-wary of ghosts just in case they actually exist.

Otto: “Of course all that was just joking around. But if that was all, you didn’t really need me here, did you? Why’d you bring me along?”

Subaru: “Actually, it was somewhat of a gamble whether I could go in or not. So whether it was getting confused at seeing me falling on my face, or getting traumatized for life after witnessing my body exploding, it’d be best if the victim of that was you...”

Otto: “What kind of selection criteria is that?! And I got more than just a little hunch that was by the process of elimination!”

Subaru: “Dummy, you were the first person that came to mind when I thought about who to trouble. Don’t make me say it out loud, it’s embarrassing.”

Otto: “Any human being should be embarrassed to make that kind of decision!”

Hearing Subaru’s shamelessly dished-out explanation, Otto’s high-pitched retort echoed outwards. Throughout the forest in the morning, reverberating against the ruins, and lingering there, like a regretful conversation with itself. Usually, one would expect the only audience, besides the people present, to be the insects and the animals hidden within the trees, but—

???: “Already so loud so early in the morning, oy. Makin’ a racket right above where a Witch’s sleepin, it’s like “Yohororoi only crows in th’morning”, y’know.”

Subaru: “Such a pain in the ass, that Yohororoi. I’ll give him a talking-to next time I see him.”

Saying this, turning his gaze away from Tomb’s entrance, Subaru saw, coming from the forest beside him, the one who had cut into their conversation—scratching his short, golden hair, baring his white fangs, it was Garfiel.

And roughly rubbing away the sweat on his forehead,

Garfiel: “I’ll say this first, runnin’ into ya was a coincidence. Every morning I do a run around the outskirts of the Sanctuary so I just found you guys here. Don’t gimme that leery look.”

Subaru: “It’s not that I’m being wary. Besides, we didn’t say anything we can’t let other people overhear. Right Otto? Totally, nothing that we can’t let other people overhear.”

To that feint, or whatever Garfiel’s words were supposed to be, Subaru shurgged, and proceeded to violently pat Otto on the shoulder. As if utterly confused at being slapped around, Otto let out a “Uuuehh?”

Otto: “E-Eehh, yeah that’s right, nothing especially troublesome or suspicious or anything like that? Just a little rehearsal for grave-robbing later, just a little rehearsal, that sort of thing!”

Subaru: “Amazing, Otto. I’ve never seen a man dig his own grave this happily right in front of another grave before.”

Seeing the high spirited Otto suddenly looking like he had no idea what he was saying, Subaru quickly cut him off and stole a glance at Garfiel’s reaction. But, judging from Garfiel’s expression, it seemed like Otto’s confession-of-sorts had completely went in one ear and came out the other.

Garfiel: “What is it, comeon, I won’t snitch or get angry or anything. Long as you aren’t breaking stuff or doing something that’s bad for the Sanctuary, I won’t have to do anything.”

Subaru: “Is that, so. Then I sincerely thank you for that guarantee. It’s too bad even if I want to fight it out I don’t think I stand any chance of winning.”

Garfiel: “Eesh, I already feel sorry for ya before even fightin ya... kinda wanna say that, but nevermind. It’s the same thing whatever opponent I’m lookin at. I am the strongest, after all.”

His eyes beaming, Garfiel said this full of self-satisfaction.

In reality, after having seen first-hand what he was capable of, only an idiot would raise an objection here. But, because he knew Reinhardt, whose existence was of an entirely different dimension, he still had the urge to say a word or two about it.

But swallowing back what he had wanted to say, Subaru slightly raised his hand with a “Al~~right then”,

Subaru: “It should be about time Emilia-tan woke up now, I want to keep her company for her morning studies so I was just thinking of heading back. You’re in the middle of your morning run too, right? So let’s just...”

Garfiel: “You’re heading to the Cathedral, huh. Then I’ll accompany ya.”

As Subaru was hurriedly trying to say goodbyes and go their separate ways, he was cut off by Garfiel’s unexpected proposal. Surprised, Subaru was just about to refuse with a “Naaah”, when,

Garfiel: “Frankly, you should listen to my advice. Besides, you shouldn’t be wanderin around the Sanctuary with just you two guys in the first place. There’s no knowin what could happen.”

Subaru: “—? What does that mean. That’s an odd way to put it. You made it sound as if it’s dangerous here.”

Garfiel: “That’s why I’m tellin ya, isn’t it.”

Seeing Subaru looking confused as if not understanding his words, Garfiel clacked his teeth with “What’m I gonna do with ya”, and then, drawing near, he continued in a lowered voice,

Garfiel: “Pisses me off to be talking about family troubles, but the residents of the Sanctuary are not all in the same basket.”

Subaru: “What’s, that supposed to mean?”

Garfiel: “If we follow the village-chief granny’s plan, it’d be taking Roswaal and the humans as hostages and forcing Emilia-sama to take the Trials and break the Witch’s Contract or somethn like that. But in reality, only about half the guys are on board with the old hag’s plan…and then there’s also a bunch who aren’t.”

Coming to this point, Garfiel lowered his tone even further.

Garfiel: “For the guys who want to stay holed up in this Sanctuary, you guys being here is a bit of a nuisance. To prevent Emilia-sama from takin’ the Trials, who knows what kind of trouble they’ll stir up.”

Subaru: “Unless you mean… there’s a chance they’ll be turning their fangs on Otto and me?”

Garfiel: “There’s a chance they’ll even use violence on Emilia-sama, I think. Well, it’s like “Even the snorting becomes rough in front of th’hole” y’know? But long as I’m with ya, I won’t let them do anything to bother ya.”

Even though Garfiel said this lightly, Subaru was starting to worry about leaving Emilia behind.

Or rather, he was hating himself for not having thought of this possibility earlier.

There was a rift within their mutual understanding between the residents of the Sanctuary headed by Garfiel, and the villagers of Earlham. In that case, why wouldn’t there be internal factions within each of the camps as well?

It’s not like every single one of them would have just raised their hands in agreement with the Sanctuary’s plans. The situation would never progress as one expects them to. Subaru himself was all too aware of that fact.

Subaru: “I have to get back right away…!”

Garfiel: “Aah? I scared ya too much didn’I? There’s no need to be panickin, those guys won’t fight among themselves in broad daylight, besides isn’t Emilia-sama in the Cathedral? Who’s gonna do that kind of thing with all those humans runnin around? If they wanna get ya, it’ll be picking off someone like this noisy lil’bro here who keeps straying from th’herd.”

Subaru: “Mmu… That, makes sense. If they go against the will of the majority outright they’ll only be worsening their own position, won’t they, so they won’t do anything rashly yet.”

His agitation calming down a just little, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief and tried to bring his heart rate under control.

Then, suddenly noticing something, he raised his brows once more.

Subaru: “Unless, you thought it’d be dangerous for me and Otto to come out alone, so you came along with us?”

Garfiel: “…Aah?”

Seeing Subaru bending his neck asking this, Garfiel was stumped a moment before he could react. Then, he quickly turned his back so Subaru couldn’t see his expression.

Garfiel: “There’s no way it’s like that. Coincidence. Told ya it was a coincidence!”

Subaru: “See, Otto? That’s the proper example of Tsundere. Yesterday on our first meeting we got to see the fiery and magnificent Tsun, and now, isn’t the embarrassed and adorable Dere just as captivating?”

Otto: “Enn~~, actually, having personally gotten a taste of the Tsun on my forehead yesterday, it’s still a little hard to accept, but surprisingly somehow I get the feeling he isn’t a very bad person, I can’t deny that it feels as if my manly heart is being deceived.”

Subaru: “Uwa, you’re really easy to trick you know.”

Otto: “I’ve been set up!!!”

As Otto’s ludicrous wail resounded through the forest in the morning, the frightened birds spread their wings and took to the sky.

The noisy Otto on the one hand, and the really hard-to-hate Garfiel on the other. Being together with these two like this, for the first time since coming to this parallel world, Subaru felt like he’s acquired some bad companions he could actually be with as equals, in the trues sense of the word.

Subaru: “Well, I’m pretty easy as well.”

And, relaxing his cheeks, Subaru ever so slightly smiled.

2

Awaiting the coming of night, standing in front of the entrance of the Tomb, Subaru now felt a dark wind upon his skin that was very different from the crisp wind of the morning.

Emilia: “Now that it’s night, it really does feel like a Tomb. It’s even more ominous than yesterday.”

Staring at the tomb’s entrance as she said this, her silver hair swaying in the wind, it was Emilia. Playing with the end of her three-stranded braid, she stole a glance at Subaru,

Emilia: “Do you think it’s, ok to go in now?”

Subaru: “If they had stuck a sign on the entrance that said “We Open at 7-o’Clock” then it’d be easier to tell, but looks like they didn’t do that… If the Trials just start roughly around nightfall, once it’s dark all around that should be a good enough range I think.”

Emilia: “Yeah. Alright, I’ll go in then.”

With a light sigh, even as she was saying this, Emilia still seemed unable to make up her mind. At her side, waiting for her to gather up her courage, Subaru turned back his head to look behind him.

There were four other people besides Subaru who came to send

Emilia into the Trials. There was Garfiel and Ryuzu of the Sanctuary-team, there was Roswaal's representative, Ram, and then, there's the not-quite-sure-why-he's-here, Otto. But then, if we add him to Emilia and Subaru of the Emilia faction, they would be considered the largest faction here.

Subaru: "But on the other hand, if we count the whole Sanctuary, then we're easily the smallest faction here. Come to think of it, life could be getting a lot harder from now on."

Emilia: "What are you mumbling about? It's reeeaally getting to me."

Subaru: "Oh I'm just talking to myself. Emilia-tan you just focus on getting ready for what's ahead. Although, to be honest, since I wasn't able to find out about the contents of the Trials it's getting me really worried..."

Emilia: "Not knowing the contents, it's the same for anyone who challenged the Trials so far, right? I shouldn't be sneaky and start cheating when it's my turn. Even with the same conditions, I'll try my best."

Seeing Emilia tightening her little fist, pumping herself up, Subaru quickly held up a hand in front of his eyes like he's shielding it from a radiant light. Now, the way he was trying to get a Witch to help him cheat right off the bat was really coming off as sneaky in comparison.

Because, compared to himself, how pure and noble Emilia is.

Subaru: "E-M-K! (Emilia Major Knighto)! It's too much!"

Emilia: "Oh, it's been awhile since I heard Subaru say that."

Starting with a small giggle, Emilia's expression broke down as she heard Subaru's old catchphrase. Seeing her smile, Subaru decided that the joke was still worth keeping around after all, and nodded,

Subaru: "Anyway, I don't know what kind of things are in there, but if you sense any kind of danger just cry out. If you call my name, I will fly right over to your side."

Emilia: “If you come in, won’t you go PA-TAN right away?”

Subaru: “It’s been awhile since I heard someone call it going PA-TAN…”

Seeing Emilia pouting up her lips, just as Subaru started objecting and scratching his face, “But”, Emilia continued,

Emilia: “Thank you for worrying about me. Puck still hasn’t shown his face at all, so I am reeeaally getting worried. And I feel like I’m completely relying on Subaru now.”

Subaru: “Then you can rest your ultra-dummy weight against me, you know. Emilia-tan is light as a feather, and if I don’t touch you from time to time to make sure you’re still there I’ll get really worried.”

Emilia: “But somehow I get the feeling that wiggly thing you’re doing with your fingers is really gross.”

Seeing Subaru endlessly wiggling his fingers, Emilia smiled wryly. And, with her nervousness unraveling, she did a little stretch that made herself seem a little taller.

Emilia: “Somehow, I feel like my shoulders have gotten a little lighter. Ever since the first time we met, that was what Subaru had been aiming for, wasn’t it?”

Subaru: “If I had that kind of first-rate THERAPEUTIC abilities, I wouldn’t be the kind of lonely boy who spends his time learning origami to such mastery as to be able to make “Rindougurumas.”“

He took a certain pride in having reached the extremes of that art that flows out of ones fingertips. Although, there was really no one he could show it to other than his parents.

Listening to Subaru’s drab remarks about his past, Emilia adorably tilted her head a little to show her non-understanding. But seeing her alright now, and so completely cute, Subaru crossed his arms and nodded.

And with that expression of not-understanding still on her face, Emilia turned toward the Tomb.

Emilia: "—This time, I'm really going. So pray for my safe return."

Subaru: "I'll be praying until the Buddha's ears bleed."

Sending her off with these words, he watched Emilia's back vanishing into the Tomb. Then, beginning from the entrance, one by one the lights lit up, just as it did for Subaru when he entered in the morning.

And just like this, Emilia's footsteps trailed on, into the depths of the Tomb. It seemed that the Trials would be taking place deep within that corridor. Even further than what Subaru could have seen in the morning when he strained his eyes trying to see the end.

Ryuzu: "Worry's written all over your face, kiddo."

Then, walking up beside Subaru, who had worry all over his eyes, it was a little girl—or the full grown adult living inside what looked like one: Ryuzu, who called out to him. Unbefitting of her cute and childish features, what was adorning her face was a somehow aged and ancient smile,

Ryuzu: "It'll be alright, there's no need to worry. The Trials, or whatever exaggerated name you call it, is not life-threatening or anything."

Subaru: "You know about the contents of the Trials, then?"

Ryuzu: "I have taken part in it myself. Being half-blood and qualified, it was only natural. Although in the end, I did not pass... see, I'm still well and kicking about."

Ryuzu did a little hop on the spot to show that she was still healthy. And seeing her trying to use that almost adorable gesture to wipe away his anxiety, from deep within his heart, Subaru appreciated her consideration, and,

Subaru: "Then, is that how you got to become a Loli on the outside and an acceleratedly-aged Granny on the inside? If Emilia-tan becomes loli Emilia-tan it'll be really cute too, but would Emilia-tan really like that?”

Ryuzu: “I must have been stupid to have taken you seriously enough to not expect a reply like that. You know, Su-bo, you’re just like Gar-bo, and don’t know how to respect your elders at all.”

Subaru: “What gave you that idea? Actually, I feel much better now. I made you worried about me there, sorry about that.”

Seeing Subaru lowering his head, Ryuzu sighed shaking her head “Why didn’t you just say that in the first place”, and pretended to wipe away non-existent tears with her long, wrist-less sleeves.

Waiting, and watching all this from the side, Garfiel crossed his arms with a grossed-out expression, then quietly turned, to gaze at the Tomb. Surprisingly, Otto and Ram seem to have struck up a conversation about something, and seem to have established a certain degree of friendly understanding.

For Subaru, who had very little experience in friendly conversation with Ram, witnessing this sight was actually an extremely big deal.

“I’ll need to do something about this. I better ask Otto to teach me the specific techniques of talking to Ram without setting her off.” Subaru quietly swore to himself in his heart, before turning his attention to the Tomb once again.

Without realizing it, he had found himself with his hands in front of his waist, rubbing his thumb against each other as if he was praying.

It was painful, not to be able to do anything but wait. Compared to being left behind and waiting like this, it would have been easier if he just took the Trial himself.

But just as this conceited notion flashed across his mind, along with it, a change came about before him.

“—!”

Seeing this change, in the same moment everyone present gasped.

Repeatedly blinking, like a conditioned response adjusting to the darkness after losing the only source light, in any case,

Subaru: “The Tomb’s lights went out?!”

Ryuzu: “While the Trials are still ongoing the lights should stay on…”

Subaru: “You mean they’re not supposed to go out?!”

Looking toward Ryuzu who was supposed to know everything, even her wise little eyes seemed confused at this. It was more than enough to tell him that the situation wasn’t within their expectations.

Whether it was Garfiel, unfolding his arms and running over, Ram, who was furrowing her brows, or the panicking Otto, it seemed no one had any advice to offer.

In that case,

Ryuzu: “Su-bo?! You don’t have the Qualification, it won’t let you in…”

Subaru: “I’ve been paying good attention to the lectures, so I got the Qualifications too, you know. —Now let me have look inside. No matter how Emilia-tan is, I’ll pull her out!”

He will not stand by and wait.

The same moment when Subaru fearlessly stepped into the entrance, the lights of the corridor lit up once more just like when Emilia had entered.

Sensing Ryuzu and Garfiel gasping behind him, before they could say anything to stop him, Subaru had already dashed into the Tomb.

The corridor was still filled with dust, and a single breath was enough to bring discomfort to the lungs.

His echoing footsteps striking loudly upon the floor, Subaru charged into the depth of the corridor—into the depths of the Tomb.

Subaru: “Damnit, I messed up. Why did I keep myself back like some trump card until something went wrong, I should have just went in together with Emilia...aaaaaaAA.”

With regret pouring out of his lips, Subaru ran.

Then, suddenly, as he saw the light reaching the end of the corridor, he had arrived inside a small room.

Sliding to halt his steps, Subaru looked around the little chamber. While it could be called a room, it was more like a grotesque rectangular space with four corners carved out. Without any furnishing, there was only a single door adorned by cyan-white lamps.

—And, on the floor in front of that door, was a silver haired girl lying there.

Subaru: “—Emilia!!”

Crying out, Subaru dashed over to her fallen body.

Holding up her delicate form in his arms, no matter what, he will take her out of here—

“—First, you must face your past.”

The next moment, a sensation of something whispering beside his ear struck his consciousness.

What could that voice be, there was no time for that thought.

Falling on his knees, unable to move, Subaru’s body collapsed like a doll. Rolling onto the floor from the momentum, he sprawled out upon the ground at Emilia’s side.

Then, lying beside the unconscious Emilia, Subaru’s consciousness too, was dragged into oblivion—

—Beginning to wake from his slumber, Subaru sucked in the breath as if sticking his head out of the surface of the water. It was that sensation of emerging out of an ocean of sleep, yearning for reality like a body yearning for air—

???: “GUMMMMMOOOOO—NINGU, SON!!”

Subaru: “WaaAAHMMURABI HO-TEN!!”

This poetic morning greeting struck him with an all-destructive impact.

Tasting the pain of a weight pressing down on him and squeezing all the air out of his gut, Subaru’s just-woken-up body jumped itself out of bed along with all of that weight, before descending into a vicious bout of coughing.

???: “Oyoyoy, what’s this what’s this. It’s only the usual DIVING-PRESS-of-love to wake you up. Your carelessness is BURNING this time!”

Subaru: “Gahk, ehk, what did you expect… from a sleeping opponent…come on.”

What on earth has happened, he lifted up his face with tears in his eyes. And there, the person standing in front of Subaru’s half-stuck out body turned around his head,

Dad: “What’s that now. You look like you’ve just seen your middle-aged dad fully-naked first thing in the morning, you!”

That man, saying this while striking out a POSE, was Subaru’s middle-aged father half-naked in the morning—Kenichi Natsuki, heartily laughing, blessing his son out of his slumber.

Chapter 16:
Morning in the Natsuki Household

1

“HA-HAHA”, listening to the deafening laugh, Subaru gave his head a light shake to cast away the last bit of his drowsiness. When it came to waking up naturally, he was always rather proud of being able to wake up in an instant, but being forced awake by an outside force was a different matter.

As though the blood still hadn’t returned to his brain, Subaru rubbed his eyelids that were slightly aching, then hazily looked around at his surroundings—when his old familiar room flooded into his sight.

The shelves were packed full of manga’s and light-novels, sloppily yanked-off jeans and jerseys were strewn all over the floor. The study-desk that hadn’t been used for its proper purpose in ages was piled up with half-read books, and there was the ancient Televideo-with-recording-functionality that was now exclusively used for gaming, whose very existence elicited sympathy from anyone who looked at it.

Lying on a futon that hadn’t been dried in the sun for ages, cracking the joints of his neck, for some reason, Subaru couldn’t help but feel a sense of incongruity in front of this familiar landscape. —And just what could that rustling in his chest be?

Dad: “O~y oy, being ignored will even make an old guy like me wanna cry, you know? It’s a fresh and sunny morning, so get carried along by the mood and jump like ~DONG~ and you’re up!”

Subaru: “You mean welcome the morning feeling refreshed and invigorated after getting woken up by a diving-press? Stop it with the jokes, come on. It’s more like “I think I hear my bones making a noise now, I better go back to sleep and heal up”“

Turning down the attempt to wake him up, once again Subaru tugged himself back into the futon. Seeing Subaru turning his back to him and leaving no room for negotiations, the one standing up beside the futon started making a displeased “W~H~A~T~I~S~T~H~I~S~~” noise,

Dad: “It’s the rebellious-stage! The rebellious-stage isn’t it?! I always knew this day will come, but I didn’t think it’d come this morning, I’m not prepared yet! Instead of preparing breakfast I should have prepared a good proper talk with my son! D~A~M~N~I~T, I hate to be so powerle...ss.”

Subaru: “If you’re saying that, why’re you still grabbing onto my leg...Oy, wait, ow! OooowOWOWOW!”

Dad: “AL~~~RIGHT, I’ve decided to have a good talk you with all the way till tomorrow morning. First is body language! FIGURE-FOUR FIGURE-FOUR! There, it’s good for waking up the joints isn’t it!”

His legs being twisted into a figure-four leglock, Subaru flapped around to the other side while Kenichi dealt critical-damage to his knees and shins. And the louder Subaru wailed in agony, the more heartily Kenichi laughed, as though overwhelmed by the joys of life.

Dad: “OHO, what’s this what’s this. All grown up and exercising every day, aren’t you embarrassed to have such a hard time against a middle aged old man? Mwahahaha... OW, wait, ow! Hurtshurtshurtshurts!”

Subaru: “Fool! Choosing to use the easily-countered four-figure leglock as your attack, dad must be getting old! Turning my body I’ll return the damage in equal force, taking vengeance on the one who got me in this figure-four leg...ow, wait, don’t flip don’t flip...Owow! OWOWOW!”

With arms and legs stretched out, the two grown men tangled each other up in their back and forth rumbling. Each time, the assailant and victim exchanged places to let out out their shrieks of agony, while their commotion sent books flopping off the desk and knocked the game-station falling to its side.

And just as their father and son brawl in the morning was going on in full force—

???: "—Hold it a minute you two. Mom's getting hungry you know, I kind of wanna eat breakfast."

Hearing the sound of the leisurely voice and the off-beat knocking flying into the room, their alternating attacks on each other's joints halted in place.

Half crying from the pain, in the corner of Subaru's murky vision, he saw the person standing in the doorway of the room—it was a woman with a certain absent-minded atmosphere about her, standing there with a vicious-looking gaze. While at first sight, the sharpness of her gaze might give off the impression that she was in a bad mood, in reality, after having known her for over 17 years, Subaru knew that she wasn't actually thinking about anything in particular.

Just by their dangerous-looking eyes, it was be enough to tell that they were mother and son, for she was Subaru's mother, Naoko Natsuki.

With mom showing up, Kenichi let out a "Oh crap!", and stuck out his tongue and jumped himself up,

Dad: "My bad my bad, I got too carried away with my intimate-time with Subaru. But you could've eaten first if you want."

Mom: "—? But families eat together in the morning, how could I eat first? Isn't it better when everyone eats together?"

Confused by Kenichi's words, Naoko tilted her head with a question mark floating above her head. It's not that she was mocking him or anything, it seemed more like she was just saying exactly what she was thinking.

Seeing his wife like that, Kenichi vigorously nodded his head,

Dad: "Aha, is that so. That's the woman I married! Alright I understand. Breakfast tastes better when everyone's eating together!"

Mom: “Breakfast lunch or dinner, I don’t think that really changes the taste, does it? It’s just when everyone eats together we can clean all the dishes in one go.”

Dad: “Aw. You meant dishes. Sorry, I got myself all pumped up there.”

Hearing that natural explanation, the face that looked like he had just said a really good line slumped down. Drooping his shoulders, Kenichi looked at Naoko with an incredulous expression, but Naoko only continued staring at Subaru, who was still lying there like that.

Mom: “You come to eat too, Subaru. I worked hard for Subaru’s breakfast this morning, after all.”

And then, she gave him a faint and cheerful smile, in a way that only those closest to her could understand.

2

—Rubbing his sleepy eyes as he begrudgingly made his way down to the dining table on the first floor, Subaru’s hazy consciousness was suddenly awoken by the impact of a certain smell.

Subaru: “Mom… Even though you said you worked hard to make this for me…”

Mom: “En. Mom worked really hard for Subaru. I’ve been up and about preparing this since the morning.”

“Fufu”, Naoko was proudly humphing from her nose for some reason. Unable to pick up any trace of a guilty conscience in that attitude, Subaru sighed.

Following behind Subaru’s sigh, coming back from the bathroom and taking a look at the dining table, Kenichi let out a sort of “Oh” with an exclamation mark on top of it.

Dad: “That’s cool, Subaru. You got a special-menu on your plate. It’s like a green forest.”

Subaru: “Thanks for pointing that out. En, it really does feel like that…What’s, going on with this, exactly? How come only my plate has got a luxuriant pile of green peas plopped on it?”

Nodding at Kenichi’s observation, Subaru pointed to the pile—laid in front of his usual seat, beside the rest of the breakfast, the dish that had a certain eerie atmosphere floating about it. There was giant pile of green peas hoarded there like it was trying to avenge the death of its family members, and it was unclear whether it completely buried all other food underneath so that only peas were visible, or there wasn’t any other food on that plate in the first place. Just as a side-note, Subaru hated peas.

Mom: “Well, some time ago Subaru mentioned hating green peas, right? Mom thought it’s not good to be picky with your food. So, I took this opportunity to let you eat looots of it so you can overcome it.”

Subaru: “So you just recalled a random memory from “some time ago” and decided to fix my bad habit huh. And what opportunity…it’s not a special day or anything, right?”

Dad: “Fufu, you’re still green, Subaru. Alright listen up, no matter what time it is, this day, and this moment of this day can only ever be experienced here and now. You may think that there will always be another day exactly like this one again, but by doing so you will have allowed countless “ONLY” moments to escape…”

Subaru: “That’s, enough for now.”

Pushing Kenichi, who had casually danced himself into the conversation, aside, Subaru let out a deep, drawn out sigh, and got into his seat. Then, pushing the plate with the heap of peas away from himself,

Subaru: “Anyways, I appreciate the thought of especially preparing this for me, but I’ll pass on the peas. I don’t want to fill up my stomach with something I hate first thing in the morning.”

Mom: “There you are with that again. Then, if there’s nothing left to eat in the world except green peas, what will you do. You’ll eat them then, won’t you.”

Subaru: “In that kind of world, we’ll all die of nutritional imbalance pretty soon anyway, so it’s not like eating the peas would do much good. So I, will absolutely not eat it.”

Replying to Naoko’s crummy argument with one of his own, Subaru folded his arms and pumped up his chest,

Subaru: “Even if Armageddon came down, I will absolutely not eat peas.”

Dad: “Gees, you’ll lose out on life if you’re picky with food like this. Oh, mom, I’ll trade you the tomato in my salad, I don’t like’em so you eat’em for me.”

Subaru: “That’s just my father...already contradicting the first half of his sentence with the second half.”

Dad placed his reviled tomatoes into mom’s salad, and pilfered some of mom’s egg-pieces in return. Since it was their regular exchange, no one complained about this quiet understanding between husband and wife. Glancing to his side, Subaru turned to the rest of the breakfast besides the peas—in front of the steaming miso soup, and the honey-toast with an extravagant amount of honey on it, Subaru clapped his hands together,

Subaru: “Come to think of it, why the East-West combination?”

Mom: “Mom had a bunch of kelp for the miso soup, and loves honey on bread.”

That wasn’t really an answer. But, it was too much of a bother to point that out. Even if he does raise an objection here, he’ll probably only get Naoko tilting her head as a reply.

Subaru quietly said “Itadakimasu” as he brought the miso soup to his lips, and Kenichi and Naoko sat down into their respective seats as well—neatly opposite from Subaru’s.

The two also clapped their hands together with an “Itadakimasu”, and then, with the same exact motion, they sipped at their miso soup. No one noticed it, but the three of them did it together in a perfectly synchronized pattern.

Dad: “Oooh, this miso soup…Mom, did your cooking get better while I wasn’t looking?”

Mom: “You noticed? Actually, yesterday I recorded a 3-minute cooking show, you know.”

So, what about that.

Listening to Naoko’s out-of-tune reply to Kenichi’s all too convenient prompt, Subaru’s face started twitching. Judging from how Naoko always said things exactly as they are, when she said “recorded”, she probably did just that and only recorded it without actually watching it. And then, most likely, just left it there without ever watching it. In fact,

Subaru: “Considering what dad let slip earlier in the morning, the miso soup and toast was all made by dad, wasn’t it.”

Dad: “Oyoy, sharp-eyes, my son. So you’ve noticed…the contradictions in the testimony and raised your OBJECTION! based on the evidence?”

Subaru: “Why are you still addicted to that ancient game in this day and age! Although yes, that was totally a classic!”

He must have taken the gameboy from Subaru’s table or something. It must have been great for killing time in between work… but just imagining the sight of a middle aged old man leaning in on a gameboy made Subaru’s back itch.

And, chewing on the sweet toast while saying this, Subaru went on with “By the way…”

Subaru: “What time is it now, dad, why are you still so scantily clad? Sure it’s almost getting warm soon, but no matter what, going around in just a running-shirt and long underpants is taking casual a bit too far, isn’t it.”

Dad: “Aren’t you in your long underpants too? Besides, dad’s just like that you know, waking up early in the morning I got a TENSION so I went down to the yard for a dry-towel rub-down or something.”

Subaru: “Dry-towel rub-down, isn’t that something that only helps when it’s cold out?”

Dad: “That’s just a motivational problem! If you get too caught up with that kind of concerns before setting out, you’ll never get where you want to go. Come on, mom, back me up here.”

Mom: “That’s right, Subaru. Since it’s not cold out, I used a really cold gaze to stare at your dad while he’s doing his rub-down, you know.”

Dad: “That?! Honey, that wasn’t backing me up at all?!”

Mom: “Ehh…Wasn’t that backing you up? It was a really really cold stare you know.”

Dad: “That’s not a back-up that’s a deathblow?!”

Seeing Kenichi swinging back and forth creaking his chair to demonstrate his displeasure, Naoko only made the off-beat comment “That’s going to get the dust flying, I’ll have to clean that up later.”

Watching his parents like this, Subaru lowered his eyes and continued to eat his breakfast. Then, Subaru pushed the plate of green peas in front of Kenichi, and since Kenichi hated them too, he pushed it in front of Naoko, and Naoko pushed it back to Subaru again, completing the vicious cycle.

Subaru: “Looks like we’ve got a pattern where definitely nobody is going to eat these. What’re we gonna do, we got this huge pile of peas. Here, you eat these, mom, take responsibility.”

Mom: “But, mom hates green peas…”

Subaru: “Then what were you doing trying to get other people to overcome their pickiness?!”

Mom: “Ah, but don’t misunderstand. Mom doesn’t just hate green peas…it’s little round things in general. It’s really gross to put them in my mouth.”

Subaru: “What misunderstanding, that just made you sound less and less credible!”

Actually, he had never seen his mother put anything pea-shaped in her mouth before, so thinking this, he pushed the plate toward Kenichi this time.

Subaru: “Then, the wife’s responsibility is the husband’s to take, so dad you eat it.”

Dad: “Don’t say something that sounds so lonely, Subaru. We’re a close and friendly family that’s really rare these days, right? That means if you and mom hate it, I hate it too.”

Subaru: “It’s making nobody happy and is just a load of trouble, this green plate!”

They’re green peas that nobody wants to put in their mouths. At last, it was Kenichi who made the decision “We could mix it into pilaf as a last resort. We attack it with so much rice and meat that it disappears, heheheh!” with a mad-scientist look on his face.

If it was mixed it into something else, then Subaru would probably find it a bit more tolerable, but Naoko still maintains that gross things are still gross whatever they’re mixed into. So in the end, it was the two men who got stuck with eating the concoction.

–

Subaru: “I’m full.”

Dad: “Hey, Mr. Osumatsu. Alright, wash your dishes really quick, time to get everything digested and get ready for the competitions at school, Subaru!”

Subaru: “I’m already tired of hearing these fluent patterns to push me back to school. In fact, I don’t remember being raised as the kind of brat who runs off as soon as he’s done eating.”

Placing the dishes into the sink, Kenichi turned back and sparkled his teeth. But seeing this, Subaru shrugged and got up from the dining table. And leaving behind in a quiet voice, “I’ll sleep till noon”, scratching at his head, he made his way toward his bedroom on the second floor—Then, his legs suddenly stopped.

Subaru: “Wha-, t’s…?”

Feeling a pain running through his temples, Subaru lightly pressed his head and closed his eyes. A dazzling light was flashing behind his closed eyelids. A scalding heat was burning deep inside his throat.

Something was wrong. Something strange was happening.

Looking back, Subaru saw his parents’ faces.

Kenichi’s lips were pouted up, disappointed at his invitation being turned down, and Naoko was wiping the dining table with a cloth, watching Subaru with a lonely look in her eyes.

Facing his father and mother’s gazes—noticing the emotions they carried, Subaru could no longer ignore the torture of the heat inside his chest. Feeling his face burning up, hastily turning his back so they could not see his expression, Subaru ran away—Rather, he ran into his own bedroom.

Subaru: “What is this? Why, why am I feeling like this?”

Holding his chest, Subaru was panting, surprised by the speed his own pulse. Dropping onto the futon like he was collapsing, he restlessly turned his eyes all around the room.

His room was the same as when woke up. Nor was it any different from the room where he fell asleep the night before. Just as it had always been, no change had befallen this room as it continued in its stagnation.

Like a perfect projection, of the stagnation of its master, Subaru.

Looking at the clock, it was 8am in the morning. School starts at 8:30, it takes about 20 minutes from his house on bike. It’s not impossible to get there in time.

Nevertheless, Subaru did not move to change, but only hugged his knees on top of the futon, still staring at the movements of the clock hand. Second by second, the second-hand ticked, until quietly, the minute-hand ticked its tenth—the deadline had passed.

—He could no longer make it to school today.

Subaru: “So there’s, nothing I can do. That’s right, there’s nothing I can do.”

If there had been a little more time for him to gather his resolve, perhaps he would have went. But, reality had heartless imposed a time limit on Subaru.

Therefore, there was no longer a choice for him today. Yet even so,

Subaru: “...Usually, I should have calmed down by now. What’s going on?”

His heartbeat wouldn’t settle, his ragged breathing showed no sign of steadying.

Confused by what was happening to his body, Subaru was frightened even by the sound of his own teeth clacking.

—For Subaru, this time of every morning was the most terrifying time of the day.

Subaru: “Calm down, calm down...the time had passed. It’s alright to calm down now. It’s alright.”

Pressing his shivering body, again and again Subaru told this to himself.

It was time that this harrowing daily ritual ended. Tomorrow morning, at the exact same time, he will be met with the exact same horror again, but at least he has overcome it for today.

No one was there to rush him, and no one was there to force him. The only person haunting him, drilling that anxiety into his heart, was no one but Subaru himself.

Whether or not to go to school—that choice alone was forcing this time of anguish upon Subaru.

Having refused to go, having been an absentee-truant for so long, unable to face up to his own weakness, now, it was only a matter of adding wrong on top of wrong.

Waiting for time to pass in the torture of his own self loathing and inferiority complex, until, confirming that the chance to go to school was already gone, he would be liberated for the remainder of the day to be spent in slothfulness.

Precisely because he had experienced this agony day after day, he knew more than anyone what the relief of the liberation felt like. Clinging onto his own weakness, he could do nothing but to continue to find excuses, however grotesque they may be.

Yet, granting absolutely all of that, the time should have already passed—

Subaru: “But why only today…”

His sense of guilt, of self loathing, his unease stuck tight onto him, refusing to disappear.

Unable to understand the source of that anxiety making him want to tear his chest open, not even his breathing can be relied on as he lay drenched in sickening sweat, writhing in agony on top of his futon.

All this time, branded into his mind, his parents’ faces as he left the dining table would not leave him.

The familiar expressions, the familiar conversations, the familiar bickerings, the familiar betrayal, the familiar Sloth—that’s how it should have been.

But only today, that same familiar routine, that had already happened so many times before, was tormenting his heart to no end.

—Thinking back, ever since the moment he woke up this morning, something had felt amiss.

His father Kenichi had always been thinking up all sorts of ingenious ways to harass Subaru out of sleep. After Subaru started refusing to go to school, even after he had become a failure in every sense of the word, his father did not change the way he treated him. Indeed, even the interactions this morning were the same as they had always been for the past 17 years—then what could be so special about this morning, that something besides the Diving-Press should now be causing this pain inside his chest?

While his mother Naoko's misdirected tenderness were almost always overwhelmingly ineffectual, she would always put Subaru first. With Subaru holed up in the house, the dedicated housewife Naoko naturally had plenty of time to spend with him. But even so, as if leaving it all to time, she continued to watch over Subaru from a distance with her constant and gentle gaze. —In the dining areas, he would often notice that gaze without meaning to.

He could not understand why, even now, after the time to leave for school had already passed, the agitation was still burning in his body.

Subaru: "Something's wrong. What's going on? What's happened? Surely yesterday was..."

Thinking back on what he did the day before, racking his brain to think of what could have happened between then and this morning—a numbing sensation stopped him.

As though fiery sparks were flying from the depths of his eyes, each time, a scalding heat surged up, as if to reject Subaru's attempt to touch that memory. Incredulous, Subaru tried once more to challenge the sea of memories—and once again he failed. No matter how he tried, the response was be the same.

Yesterday, or the day before, or even further before that, Subaru had passed the days without having done anything.

As for the pain in his chest this moment, this morning, he could not think of anything out of the ordinary that could explain it.

It must have been a coincidence, that he felt the guilt and pain more intensely today. Until today, he hadn't truly paid attention to his parents' faces, and that, overlapping with everything else, must have been why.

Dad: "—Mi~nd if I come in, Subaru?"

And, as even that conclusion failed to ease Subaru's sickness in the slightest, he heard a voice coming in from the other side of the door.

Turning his eyes to the door, he saw Kenichi peeping in with half his body before smoothly gliding himself into the room. With agile footwork almost reminiscent of the King of Pop, as he completed his glide—

Subaru: "If you come in before the other person answers, what's the point of even knocking?"

Dad: "Oyoy, with the firm bond of father and son between us, there's no reason to bicker about minor details like knocking, right? ...Oh wait, there is. That's right, occasionally young men in puberty might want to do something that require holing themselves up in a room alone. OK I got it. I'll come back in ten minutes or so."

Subaru: "Don't just jump to random conclusions and then set aside realistic time-frame for them! It's alright nothing's going on!"

Shouting out the assurance that there was no need for that kind of consideration, although Subaru was snorting roughly, deep down he was relieved by the distraction. Hearing Subaru's reply, Kenichi let out a "Really?" with a suspicious-looking expression, before turning around and doing a Moon-Walk right back into the room.

And, turning to face his son, who was staring up at him, right then and there he did a POSE with his finger pointing up toward the ceiling.

Dad: "Then, Subaru. Well it's pretty self-evident I guess, but truth is I have a day-off today."

Subaru: "En, I already noticed. Still helping with housework this late on a Monday morning, even I would have noticed it. So, what about it.”

Dad: “Well, don’t be so eager to rush to the ending. There are just, some things I wanted to talk about, so, this is an opportunity to talk about all of them, or something, isn’t it.”

Subaru: “Talk about what? Like washing my own dishes after eating?”

Dad: “Well that too. Dad hates washing dishes you know. It’s fun doing the preparations and cooking so I like that lot, but after that I lose my motivation.”

The already wobbling Kenichi crumbled. Seeing his usually overactive father like this, Subaru furrowed his brows, and couldn’t help but sense that his father was somehow hesitating about something.

Avoiding the main subject, joking around to buy enough time to gather up resolve in both of their hearts—and not doing a very good job of it, Subaru had the exact same personality as well.

Of course, the resemblance was only natural.

Subaru: “—Hurts.”

The moment he thought this, the piercing pain struck Subaru’s head once again.

A pain like pins planting themselves into his temples, feeling as if the bones inside of his skull were being scraped, Subaru turned down his face to hide his agonized expression.

Subaru: “So, what is it? That my unmotivated dad wants to talk to me about.”

Dad: “Oh, right. Subaru, is there a girl you like?”

Subaru: “—I’m in highschool!!”

Prompting the conversation to cover up the pain, he overreacted to the question that was so stupid that it made him forget he was in pain in the first place.

Seeing Subaru lifting up his face angrily, Kenichi waved both his arms around “Ooo~OooOO~”,

Dad: “With an overreaction like that, you might as well be admitting to having a girl you like, you know.”

Subaru: “What’re you saying with that smug look on your face. Even if I am dumbstruck, lamenting, or sighing it still wouldn’t mean a thing.”

And in reality, that wasn’t the case anyway.

Chasing girls was not the sort of thing Subaru was interested in right now. He didn’t have one, and he couldn’t get one even if he wanted to. That was what he firmly believed, at least.

Dad: “Whaaa, that’s no fun. Did you try the advice dad gave you when you were little? Girls are weak to situations involving promises that span years into the future, so if you kept getting potential girls to promise themselves to you ten years later, you’d be setting up the FLAGs in advance for your conquest routes once you’re in your teens.”

Subaru: “Yeah and then I was naive enough to actually believe that, and really went around making pinky promises with girls all over the place, and now the whole region’s got a ban on pinky promises. Apparently because there were too many cases involving this scary-faced kid forcing little girls to swallow-a-thousand-needles!”

Dad: “...Well, it’s a good thing you inherited that sweet mask from your dad. You got the short legs, your mom’s eyes, your dad’s TENSION, and your mom’s absent-mindedness, it’s like all the stat allocations when you came out of your mom’s belly got screwed up.”

Subaru: “You should have told me that while I was still on the umbilical cord...”

Reminiscing together on those painful memories, the tension between the father and son eased a little. And, noticing that they’ve gotten sidetracked, with a “So?” Subaru returned to the topic,

Subaru: “What was it you wanted to talk about. After we’re done I still have the important mission of my second nap and my third nap to attend to, so please leave a message after the *BEEP* and quietly exit the room and go chat about it with mom.”

Dad: “Don’t boot me out with that natural-flow now… Besides, your mom wouldn’t actually get it. My wife and your mom is the most un-observant lifeform in the world, you know. Although she’s super cute that way.”

Listening to his father’s puppy-love remark, Subaru put on an annoyed-look on his face.

But seeing this, Kenichi let out an “Ennn~~”, and then, looking upwards, swiping his nose like a mischievous little boy,

Dad: “You know what. The weather is really nice today—why don’t we go outside for a nice heart-to-heart, between father and son.”

Chapter 17:
Love Story

1

“Ooh, Mr. Ken, sure is rare seeing you wandering around in the morning. Finally got laid off?”

Dad: “Don’t give me that crap, that place’ll grind to halt without me. They just didn’t want me to work too hard and take everyone else’s jobs, so they let me rest a bit to giv’em some motivation.”

Even though the owner of the neighborhood bakery passing on a bicycle was only making a friendly greeting, Kenichi threw a middle finger right back at him, cursing. They continued the rowdy conversation like this for a bit, before finally waving goodbye.

Dad: “Gees, whenever he sees someone on holiday that he hasn’t seen in awhile he goes on about laid-off laid-off. I got a loving family to provide for here, how can I do something as incompetent as that. Even if I did do something that’d get me fired, it’s not like I’d let’em catch me, heheh.”

Subaru: “As someone you’re providing for, I sincerely hope that rather than being good at hiding it, you actually hadn’t done anything that’d get yourself fired for.”

His hands shoved inside the pockets of his jersey, Subaru, who had been waiting at the side of the road for the conversation to finish, shrugged his shoulders. Seeing his son standing in the shade being blown by the wind, Kenichi waved both his hands with “Oyoy”, shaking his head,

Dad: “A man who has forgotten the sense of adventure wouldn’t grow, you know? Doing bad things is a different matter, but the view is always best from the edge of the thin line, isn’t it…”

Subaru: “You’re way past the age to be saying stupid things like that, you should’ve settle down by now. You’re already over 40 and still talking about those impractical things like a little kid.”

Dad: “Men are supposed to keep their childish innocence even after they’ve grown up. Besides, you’re the one who’s at an age to say those stupid lines, but you don’t join in the conversations, so dad has no choice but to say them for you. What’s up with that anyway.”

Subaru: “Nothing’s up, I just can’t talk to random old guys I don’t know.”

Dad: “He’s not a random old guy, I always buy bread from him on my way home. Also, he was my junior in highschool, he was one grade below me.”

But Subaru still wouldn’t know him even if he told him that.

He didn’t usually pay attention to the bread packaging, and he never passed by that bakery personally.

As Subaru’s silence gave off the feeling that the conversation was coming to an end, Kenichi smacked his tongue saying “It can’t be helped, I guess”,

Dad: “On such a sunny and refreshing morning, you with that stink face is going to piss off Mr. Sun, you know. You look like you’re being interrogated or something.”

Subaru: “If I look like I’m being interrogated, it’d be because my dad pulled me out here by force, wouldn’t it… I said no and you still pulled me out.”

Dad: “You just looked like you were resisting, but your body followed along nicely, right? See, you still love your old man, Subaru. Rest assured, I love you too. Second only to your mom, of course!”

Swinging out his strides again, Kenichi, laughing and in a good mood, roughly patted Subaru on the back. The force made Subaru raise his brows, and somehow, he felt like something was different about Kenichi’s high spirits.

Well, his father always had this kind of TENSION about him, but usually the hyper-moody Kenichi would probably have fussed for a long time about their conversation just now.

He didn’t know why, but this morning his father seemed especially tolerating.

—Unlike Subaru, who was walking alongside him feeling like his chest was about to be crushed.

Subaru: “So um…”

Dad: “Yeah?”

Subaru: “So, you brought me out here because you had something to say, right? Usually you wouldn’t go to so much trouble… so what is it? It’s something you couldn’t say at home, isn’t it.”

Wondering if it was something he didn’t want mom to hear, Subaru asked this.

No matter what it was, Subaru had a vaguely bad feeling about it. Either way, what else could it be except to reproach him for his anemic lifestyle?

When their daily conversations were separated by a layer of futon, he could have ignored them if he wished to, but outside, he couldn’t do this. Although, he could always shout loudly and shut it all out. If he embarrassed himself like this outdoors, perhaps Kenichi would change his attitude, and maybe he’d even drop Subaru’s—no, thinking up to this point, Subaru shook his head.

Subaru: “If it’s my father, he’d probably get a kick out of being shamed…”

Dad: “Even though I don’t know what you’re imagining there, what’s with that kinky remark all of a sudden? This is just a nice average everyday family conversation under the sun you know.”

Subaru: “Really, it’s a bit hard to believe you… But I’ll trust you for now.”

Dad: “That’s it that’s it. By the way, Subaru, do you uh… want a little brother or sister?”

Subaru: “It’s a bit frightening to be asked this question when I’m 17 years old!!”

The change of topic that flew in slanted made Subaru shudder and raise his voice. Seeing Subaru panting with his shoulders going up and down, Kenichi bared his teeth with a smile “Joking, joking”,

Dad: “Although your mom and I are still lovey-dovey, it’d be stretching it a bit to make another person at our age. So that means, all of me and mom’s love are all reserved for you alone. Happy?”

Subaru: “Aah, yeah yeah, happy happy. …You really were just joking right?”

Dad: “Oyoy, don’t be like that. If you give me that face I might just get excited after all and go make a new one you know?”

Sensing they’ve come to a point where joking around wouldn’t be enough anymore, Subaru only gazed at him silently at end of that sentence. And, wryly smiling in return, Kenichi received his meaning.

—Subaru and his father had arrived at a scenic path that was about 10 minutes away from the house.

It was a land where a river that was famous around these parts flowed through. Along the banks, were planted cherry-blossom trees that would become an attraction during the spring. But of course, the season was already over, and instead of pink cherry-blossom petals, it was luscious green grass covering the ground, bathed under the bright rays of the sun.

After breakfast, and before the end of school hours, Subaru, being tormented by the guilt and anxiety of the passage of that time, was brought here by Kenichi.

At first, when he left the house, he had been worried that he might be brought all the way to school this way.

Dad: “You know you look kinda wary whenever we turn toward the direction of the school. But it’s not what you think, we just took the long way round to the river bank.”

Having read through his thoughts, Kenichi sneakily dragged Subaru here.

A sweet scent of plants and grass blew over the top of the embankments, and if one merely stretched a little, one would be able to see the full view of the gentle river on the other side of the fence.

Dad: “This fence didn’t use to be here in the olden days. I used to always play here in the river with buddies of mine, it was great fun. Oh, right, you remember Ikeda? One day a typhoon came, and we wanted to see how great the river had become, and that guy wound up getting carried away by the current... That time, there just happened to be an old uncle who had just got his lifeguard license passing by, Ikeda would’ve been dead if it weren’t for him.”

Subaru: “So this fence, was dad and this Ikeda guy’s fault then?”

Dad: “Nah couldn’t have...no, wait a minute? Timing-wise it does seem to kinda strangely match up now that I think about it.”

Leaning against the fence, gazing out toward the river, Kenichi, reminiscing about the by-gone days, tilted his head. Behind his father, Subaru, who seemed bored, only looked around him.

Before noon on a working day, it was only natural that there was not many people around. Or, more accurately, there was no one else except Subaru and Kenichi. It wasn’t an easy place to get to in the first place. If anyone wandered around here at this time, it could only be the custodian, or someone who really loved this place.

Just as he thought this, Subaru heard someone’s footsteps on the grass.

???: “Ooooh? I was wonderin’ who it is, isn’t this Ken-bo? What’s this what’s this, still playing by the river at this age?”

Dad: “Speak of the devil… it’s the uncle from the custodian’s hut, they still didn’t get someone to replace you? You’ll be the one surprised though, I wore my beach-trunks today instead of my river-trunks, so I can’t get in there even if I want to.”

Old Man: “Don’t gimme that. I don’t see no difference between beach-trunks and river-trunks, that’s just a load of crap from the guy who jumped in the river in his underpants. But come to think of it, it’s been a long time since I seen ya.”

Climbing up the banks, a short, hunching old man greeted Kenichi and shook his hand. He looked kind of like a nice grandpa, and was wearing an old green uniform. Judging from the conversation and the logo on his back, he must have been the custodian of the embankments.

In fact, if he knew Kenichi back when he was still playing in the river, he must have been a veteran at that.

In their long awaited reunion, the two of them laughed and chatted, and then, the old man made a clap with his hands,

Old Man: “Oh, right, if you’re here, what happened to your friend Ikeda? That guy sure gets carried away often, even my net was wearin’ out from catchin’ him.”

Dad: “That bastard Ikeda, won big on a horse-ticket 10 years ago, and took his load of money to Thailand and haven’t heard a word of him since. Just the New Years greetings, Summer greetings, Winter greetings, Christmas, Father’s day and Mother’s day and random letters like that.”

Subaru: “That sounds like a lot of correspondence for someone who you haven’t heard a word of since…”

Unable to resist the urge, Subaru had to mutter that straight-man observation. Then, hearing the quiet mutter, the old man looked over and raised his brows as if only suddenly noticing Subaru’s presence there.

Old Man: “Ooooh, you got a little buddy ere…eh? Could this be your…”

Dad: “Aaah, that’s right, this is my son. No, I should say my BELOVED SON.”

Old Man: “Ooh, is that so! I got the feeling he looked like you when you wer little… no, not too much though. He didn’t take after ya. Took after his mother more…I’m guessin’?”

Dad: “Yeahyeah. People often say that. Especially the eyes.”

The most prominent thing on that otherwise plain face was his Sanpaku eyes. His mother’s eyes were so sharp it felt as though there were steel beams inside, and this part of him in particular, was certainly his mother’s influence showing through.

With that harmless remark, the old man walked up to Subaru,

Old Man: “S’that right s’that right, but it sure surprised me there. So Ken-bo already has a son this big, how the time passes quickly. Then again, I’m getting old. Even if Ikeda got himself drowned again I won’t be able to save him.”

Subaru: “Even for Ikeda, I doubt he’d go play in the river and get himself drowned at this age…”

Old Man: “Sure hope not…They really were brats who wouldn’t sit still though, these two. Especially your father, back then he was causin’ trouble all over the place. So, what bring you wandering around town this time of day anyway?”

Subaru: “…Eeh, well.”

Subaru mumbled this reply. Hearing this, the old man looked as if he had picked something up, and frowned. Then, as he furrowed up his deep, wrinkled brows,

Old Man: “Hm? Sure is Ken-bo’s son alright…but today’s a Monday isn’t it. Why’re you still at the riverbanks with your dad?”

Subaru: “—ke!”

Having been asked the question he most wanted to avoid, Subaru's expression stiffened painfully.

Then right after, the same sharp, piercing headache he experienced inside his room came. Involuntarily, in excruciating pain, he hugged his head and squeezed shut his eyes, wrenching out an "Excuse me!", he turned his back to the old man and ran.

Dad: "Ah, oy, hey, Subaru! Sorry, uncle. I'll explain everything next time I see you."

Old Man: "Ah, oh-ooh... maybe I said something I shouldn't have. Tell your son I'm sorry for me."

The words that followed behind him did not register in his ears at all.

In any case, Subaru was only trying to escape from the skull-crushing pain in his head, to escape somewhere where his heartbeat would settle, somewhere away from the embankments.

Dad: "There's nothing to apologize to him for. —It's that guy's own problem anyway."

He quietly muttered under his breath.

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Dad: "Here. Cool delicious cola filled with love. Shaken well for extra deliciousness... or wanted to say that anyway, looks like that wasn't the right place for it though."

Subaru: "...Love-filled scenes don't come out of vending machines. But thanks."

Receiving the can, and tasting its coolness within his palms, Subaru brought a finger to the pull-tab. Then, with some consideration, he closed his eyes, pointed the can away from anyone present, and pulled the tab with his finger—when foam and liquid alike came exploding out of the opening with incredible force. Instantly the can in his hand lost a third of its weight.

Dad: “Oyoy, what’s with that, fall for it damnit. I even especially said something about shaking it beforehand to give off the impression that I didn’t shake it when in fact I did for a TWO-STEP-DECEPTION TECHNIQUE □ you know.”

Subaru: “I’ve already seen that pattern before, how many years have we known each other, dad. Knowing there’s no way you wouldn’t shake it is also a kind of trust in itself. Oh, hands’re sticky.”

Shaking off the overflowing cola that was spilling over his hands, Subaru lightly tilted the cola to his lips. The taste of expanding carbon passed through his mouth, splashing and quenching the thirst in the depths of his throat.

If only the sickness deep within his chest could be washed away as well, but unfortunately, the heaviness still remained there.

Dad: “So, have you settled down?”

Subaru: “…Hard to say.”

Answering the question, Subaru plopped himself down on the bench, and let out a long sigh as he dropped down his shoulders. Standing in front of Subaru, also delivering cola to his lips, Kenichi closed one of his eyes as if he was thinking about something.

After having ran away from the conversation on the embankment, Subaru and his father came to a children’s playground not far from the river. Of course, there was no one here either, nor were there any fathers who suddenly got plunged into long summer vacations languishing on the swings or anything like that.

Dad: “In a way, I feel like even if I ride on the swings now I wouldn’t be able to laugh like I used to. What would you do, Subaru. If dad took a ride on the swings on the way back from the convenience store.”

Subaru: “I’d take a photo on my phone and spread it around on Twitter. The Tweet would be “My father has been released from gravity”“

Dad: “Oooh, Twitter. Dad’s on Twitter too you know. I followed and got followed by too many people though, the screen’s all a mess now.”

Hearing him say this happily, Subaru sent Kenichi a side glance, before spilling out a languorous sigh as he searched for a topic. Anything, as long as it was something other than what happened on the riverbank—if he went through that again, his skull would scream.

The shorter and shorter intervals in between the headaches worried him, but just like the way he’d react to his weakness, he could only repress and ignore the feeling as obstinately as he could.

Subaru: “…It was just buying drinks from a vending machine, what took you so long?”

Dad: “Oh? Nothing really. There was just this highschool girl who skipped school hanging out in front of the vending machine. I gave her a lecture about getting back to school, bought her a drink, swapped email addresses, and sent her off.”

Subaru: “I seriously can’t believe how you can get a girl’s email address that fast.”

Getting a highschool girl’s email as casually as going to the bathroom and back, he really had no words to describe that ability. Seeing Subaru like this, Kenichi tilted his head, “Really?”

Dad: “Email addresses, they just hand them right over don’t they? The number of highschool girls in my contacts list must be in the 3 digits already.”

Subaru: “Even if I add all my contacts together I don’t know if it’ll be in the double digits, and you have 3 digits just from highschool girls, do we have different definitions for the word “digits” here or something… and dad, you didn’t do anything inappropriate to any of the highschool girls that we’d end up seeing you on the news for, right?”

Dad: “What’re you talking about, you.”

Kenichi held up both hands at Subaru's suspicion, and shrugged up his shoulders to demonstrate his astonishment.

Dad: "It's not like I'd get any ideas about little brats like highschool girls. The target of my love has already been determined a long time ago, my sensual passions are reserved for my family alone!"

Subaru: "If you categorize it like that I'd be a target too!"

Dad: "…Well, 'cause I love ya. We only get to live ONE-CHANCE, no?"

Subaru: "God no! What are you even saying!!"

"HA-HAHA", Kenichi laughed as Subaru blurted this out.

Although the way he laughs was vulgar and hard on the ears, it did not give off a bad feeling. In fact, the same goes for anything Kenichi does.

His behaviors were unconventional, over-the-top, over-dramatic, the kind that makes people want to cringe, but everyone receives them favorably for some reason.

Today, walking with his father for the first time in a while, Subaru got a real sense of this.

Just walking along the street, there had been more people stopping to chat with Kenichi than could be counted on a single hand. No matter where he went, there was someone to share old reminiscences with, and even if he had only just met the other person for the very first time, they would soon get along thick-as-thieves, thanks to his easy-going air. And he didn't hide any of it, either.

Throbbing, the pain returned to his temples, and Subaru's breathing grow ragged with every breath.

The intervals in between the scathing aches were no longer shrinking, instead, it was now arriving in fits.

As if the inside of his skull was being jabbed by needles, it was no longer something that could be cured by leaving it alone. But, it was not like the hospital would know what to do with it either.

Even if he didn't understand the reasons for his pain, he knew its cause.

What else could it be, except the emotions weighing upon his chest, and the choking, suffocating sensation accompanying it.

Dad: "You look ill, Subaru. Want me to piggyback you back to the house?"

Subaru: "I don't need to be piggybacked, or to go home… it'd be the same even if I go back."

Rather, if he saw his mother Naoko at home, Subaru's condition would only grow worse.

He was beginning to understand what that pain was, and what was making it worse. If what he imagined was correct, then when he does return Kenichi and Naoko again, the pain will rise to its extremes. In other words,

Subaru: "Finally, even my own body is giving me a lecture."

Endlessly running away from his guilt, perhaps his body was finally screaming back at him.

The terror of the time spent holding his knees inside his room, staring at the second-hand of the clock. The unrelenting anxiety and the acute, rending aches that lingered even after the threshold had passed.

The sickening malaise, like someone raving loudly in the interior of his skull, screaming accusations at what Subaru had become.

—Who and where did you come from, and what do you know about me, anyway.

Dad: "So um, Subaru. —Is there, a girl that you like?"

The silent Subaru was suddenly tossed this topic out of the blue.

It was the same question he had been asked in his room, the beginning of that same, unfunny joke. The first time, he had smiled wryly and refuted it, but now, this second time, somehow it was getting on his nerves.

Helped along by the merciless ache in his head, he irritatedly tried to return the same answer when—

"—Subaru."

Suddenly, from somewhere, he thought he heard a voice like a silver chime, sending his heart astir.

Subaru: "—?"

Lifting up his face, he searched for the source of the whisper. But even so, his eyes could not find the owner of the voice, and the only other person in the park besides Subaru, was Kenichi, standing in front of him.

Kenichi, seeing Subaru's sudden movement, also raised his brows in surprise,

Dad: "What is it? You look like you just heard a beautiful girl who's not there suddenly call your name."

Subaru: "Even if that's the case, I don't really have an answer to that... Just now, did anyone call my name? Dad, you didn't learn to make your voice sound like beautiful girls while I wasn't looking, did you?"

Dad: "Your dad knows all kinds of little tricks, but not that one. OK, I'll start practicing it and show it off next time, I'll let you hear it in a month or so."

Subaru: "I'm not asking you to learn that... Gees, what's with you."

Putting a stop to his father's words, Subaru looked away, and played back that voice he heard over and over again in his mind. The voice like a silver chime was gentle, yet its sound made Subaru heat up as it struck him, and in that instant, he was allowed to forget about the throbbing pain in his head.

From a place he did not know, came that voice of salvation—like the melodious song of a Goddess, it tended to Subaru's suffering, and calmed his expression a little, his breathing grew slightly more even.

Dad: "So uh, my question from before. Is there, a girl you like?"

Subaru: "...what's gotten into you lately. What would you do with the answer anyway. Even if there is one and I tell you her name it's not like you'd know her."

Dad: "You never know, right? There's a chance I have the email address of the girl you like in my cell phone you know?"

Subaru: "If the girl I have a crush on gave her email address to my dad, even a love of a hundred years will grow cold."

Being tossed with that statement, Kenichi pouted up his lips with a "What's that supposed to mean". Watching the gesture that really didn't suit a middle aged man, Subaru drank up the last of his cola,

Subaru: "You don't have to be so indirect about it, you know. Why not just ask me directly. ...Like, why don't I go to school."

Dad: "Well here I am trying to be considerate for once, you really are a kid who can't read the mood."

Smiling wryly at Subaru's words, Kenichi continued with "Well."

Dad: "I did want to ask that, so you're not wrong about that."

Subaru: "I was thinking too...I shouldn't be like this."

Dad: "Thinking isn't always necessary. The things that we think of are only empty ideas, and one way or another, there will always be something we couldn't think of, something we overlooked."

Seeing Subaru averting his eyes and making that quiet excuse, Kenichi drank up his cola as well, and sat down beside him. The wooden bench creaked, and a gust of wind flew past between them.

And so, they both looked on toward the same direction, neither seeing each other’s faces.

Dad: “I don’t really know what everyone else in the world believes, but I don’t think school is everything. Mostly, because I’m saying that as someone who didn’t really go to school seriously in the first place. I even skipped my own high school graduation ceremony you know, my sister had to bring me my graduation certificate back for me afterwards.”

Subaru: “I heard that story so many times. Auntie who’s 2 years younger than dad went to the same school, so when she graduated, they just gave dad’s certificate to her as well. There’re octopuses growing in my ears already.”

Dad: “Well you’ll keep hearing it until you get cuttlefish. So, since I was like that, I think it’s alright if you don’t go to school if you don’t want to. But, at my age, I do feel like I lost out on something by not going to school seriously, although it’s not something you could understand yet.”

Kenichi looked like he was staring into some far off place as he said this. Stealing a glance at the side of his serious expression, Subaru got the feeling that his father was really unfair, after all.

Usually only showing the side of him pretending to be an idiot, and then in a place like this, he suddenly makes you wonder where all that clowning had gone.

Dad: “It’s alright though… isn’t it? Nowadays people can live to about 80 years old on average. Out of 80 years, wasting one or two slacking around isn’t that big of a deal. Getting back on track while you’re young is easy too. Good thing my salary’s still intact.”

Circling his finger around, Kenichi made a dirty-looking smile.

Without looking at Subaru, who had not made a sound since he had begun, he crossed his arms and nodded his head,

Dad: “Being alive means that occasionally you’ll get problems that you couldn’t find the answers to. When I get problems like that, I’d run around like a headless chicken looking for a solution, but it’s also possible to find answers by rolling around in a room, I guess. I won't blame you while you're still contemplating. But if you're beginning to give up, then I'll say a thing or two."

Subaru: "...Why."

Dad: "Hm?"

Subaru: "Why, did you suddenly feel like telling me all this today... There's nothing different, it's not a special day or anything. Today's just, green-peas memorial day."

Dad: "There was a lot on that plate… huh."

In insides of his mouth that had just recently drank cola was quickly drying up.

Taking gasping breaths, Subaru anxiously waited for the answer to his question. Noticing Subaru's fretfulness from the side, Kenichi gave his neck a stretch with "Hm∼∼m",

Dad: "I wonder why. Maybe it was because I happened to have a day off, or because I inadvertently thought of it while doing my morning dry-towel rub-down, or because the horoscopes for Aquarius this morning said "PERFECTLY TUNED", or because the look on your face this morning seemed... it's just a lil'bit, but it seemed like it had become better somehow."

Subaru: "My face, got better?"

Dad: "I'm talking about the look here. The face's still the same, it's still that scary-face with your mom's eyes and all."

Kenichi made a scary face by pulling up the corners of his eyes with his fingers, and then, saying "Not only that", he pointed the same fingers at Subaru,

Dad: "I don't know what happened, but you don't look like a guy who's been holed up in a room. Judging from what your mom said, you didn't go out yesterday either, so you should've been a guy who's been holed up in a room, right?"

Subaru: "...Uh, I guess so. I've also been surfing in the grand ocean of the internet, though."

Dad: "If people can grow up that way, the number of lostlambgirls coming to confide in me on Twitter should be decreasing instead of increasing..."

Subaru: "So you've even been doing that kind of..."

While astonished by the extent of his father's dealings, Subaru didn't want to let Kenichi get away from the main subject.

On the other hand, Subaru really had no idea what Kenichi meant by that.

The truth is, just as his mother provided in her testimony, yesterday's Subaru, same as the Subarus even earlier before that, only wasted his time in slothful indulgence.

In only the span of a single day, to say that all of a sudden today, the atmosphere about him changed…

Subaru: "Dad you must have gotten it wrong, or you just didn't properly look at me before."

Dad: "That last part really stung! You know I'm still using that "Lovely-Devil-Smile" picture of you when you were little as my cell phone screensaver right?"

Subaru: "The lovely part aside, the devil part makes me realize how scary-looking my eyes must have been even when I was little."

Either way, there was no doubt that Kenichi got it wrong.

Yesterday was still yesterday, today was still today. Subaru still spent his time without changing anything at all.

It would be alright to be like this, he thought, and he intended it to be this way. If he just continued on like this, surely, one day, Kenichi and Naoko would realize it as well.

—What Subaru really wanted that is.

Subaru: “—Dddagh!”

The moment he thought this, pain struck him again like fiery sparks scattering in front of his eyes.

A shock as if someone actually punched him, like his brain was protruding out of his skull, his cranium creaked and his eyes spun, and Subaru’s seated body crumbled.

The pounding of his heart once again sped up like an alarm bell, and he could hear the sound of his pulse from the blood throbbing through in his ears. His eyes grew murky, the world turned into two, then three.

The sense of nausea surged up, and deep in his chest an incomprehensible heat source asserted its presence.

Each in their own ways they tormented his very existence, like seething accusations they shrieked and wailed.

Dad: “Oyoy, it looks really serious this time. Are you alright, Subaru?”

Unable to ignore the terrible condition he was in, Kenichi placed his hand on Subaru’s shoulder with a worried look on his face. Sensing that touch, Subaru finally lifted up his face, as sweat was emerging on his forehead,

Subaru: “Aah…no, it’s alright. I was just a little, dizzy, that’s all…”

“—It’s been rough, hasn’t it.”

Subaru: “—?!”

Once again, every hair of Subaru’s body stood on end as the voice like the sound of silver chimes rang upon his earlobes.

Kind and tender, the voice was filled with affection and concern. His tensed heart melted at the sound, and as it tended to his suffering, the pain, the creaking, the heat and thier chorus of screams subsided.

What was this voice. Why was the pain and agony retreating from it.

It felt, like a voice he knew. Like one he had been longing for. Yearning and yearning, pursuing and pursuing, clinging onto it, losing it, then regaining it once more—

“Thank you, Subaru.”

Subaru: “You’re…”

The sight of her silver hair dancing in the wind branded itself into the back of his eyelids. The light of her amethyst eyes stared straight into Subaru’s face, and every sound weaved from her lips filled him with love and longing.

“For helping me.”

What’s going on, what’s going on, what’s going on, what’s going on, what’s going on?

Who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it?

—Could she be the cause of his agony? His pain, torment, feelings so bitter that he wanted to puke, could they all be because of her?

“—Subaru.”

He couldn’t breathe. His throat is hot. Something was building up in the back of his eyes.

“It can’t be helped, so.”

The tips of his fingers trembled. There was no strength left in his legs. His throat cramped up as though his lungs were convulsing.

“Subaru always tries to cover it up like that.”

Covering his face with his trembling hands, holding back the sobs from his clogged up throat, surging heat spilling from his eyes, Subaru—

"Why, did you help me?"

—The answer, was already in his heart.

The moment he saw it, all the unease swirling inside him vanished.

The creaking of his skull, the rising nausea, the dizziness turning the world vague, the frantic pounding of his heart, all came to a stop as if clearing the path for Natsuki Subaru.

Lifting up his face, he wiped away the tears that were about to fall.

Staring fixedly at his wetted sleeves, the only trace that remained of his tears, as if flinging it aside, he turned his wrist and held his hand tight into a fist. And,

Subaru: "Sorry I made you worry. I'm alright now."

Dad: "Really? Well it's good you calmed down, don't keep making people worry, gees."

Subaru: "En, my bad. So um, about the question you asked earlier."

Releasing his father's hand on his shoulder, Subaru turned to face him.

Sitting side-by-side on the bench, Subaru looked straight into his father's face. Come to think of it, after all their conversations today, this was the first time he truly looked at his father's face, he thought.

Running away even in place like this, he couldn't help but smile wryly at his own weakness inside his heart. Then, turning to his father, who now had a question mark above his head, Subaru,

Subaru: "—There is, someone I like. So, I'm already alright now."

Sketching out the face that was burned into the back of his eyelids, Natsuki Subaru's resolve to face his past was sealed.

Chapter 18:
Kin

1

—He felt his head clearing up.

The chorus of agony up to now that had been ripping him apart subsided, and now, there was only one thing on Subaru's mind—the resolve to face his father in front of him.

Subaru: "I do. Have someone I like."

Once more, he repeated his answer to that question.

Putting it to his lips again, Subaru felt his heart beginning to walk forward.

In front of his eyes, hearing that confession, Kenichi blinked several times before noticing how abrupt that statement sounded,

Dad: "…Is that so."

Speaking in a quiet voice, he listened to Subaru's words.

That attitude was like a salvation. There were people who were willing to listen, Subaru must have already known this, yet he had only ever kept it to himself.

Now, he intended to bring an end to it.

—Because there is someone behind me, pushing me on.

Subaru: "That's right. I am not the child who only curls up in a room anymore."

He didn't know exactly how much he had changed.

The no longer a child part might be stretching it a bit, for he was still aware of how childish he was.

The courage to hold his head high, the resolve to face his weakness, the determination to no longer run from unpleasant situations, it seemed he hadn't acquired any of it, after all.

He was simply someone worse than a child, finally admitting that he was a child.

And even that, he couldn't have realized by himself.

The silver visage that appeared within his mind, sent a sweetness into Subaru's heart.

It was a radiance that brought warmth to the stagnating Subaru, who had long been frozen in place.

Silver—was supposed to be a color of coldness, but to Subaru now, it was a source of endless warmth and the strength to march forward. As though mesmerized by this heat,

Subaru: "What was I so afraid of, that I had to curl up like a ball, I remember all of it now. —No, I already knew long ago. I knew, but I pretended not to see it...The weakness that I thought only I would notice, while I pretended not to see them, there were those who..."

Who nothing could have gotten past. He knew who they were.

Subaru: "Mom, and dad, I wished you would've beaten me."

Dad: "…"

Subaru: "I was such a hopeless, little, useless idiot, self-conceited piece of trash, I wished you two would just beat me...and give up on me."

Silently staring at Subaru, Kenichi's eyes did not move.

Subaru saw his own reflection inside those pupils that were the same color as his own. The sharp corners of his own eyes that were often mistaken for a sign of displeasure, for some reason, were now feeble, and drooping.

—How pathetic, he thought.

Subaru: “When I was little I was clever, and I could find a perfect solution to anything. Running too, and same with studying…the things my friends around me couldn’t do, I could figure out almost immediately, and I was even mystified by why everyone else had so much trouble.”

Perhaps it was childish conceit, or one could call it an adorable sense of omnipotence.

When Subaru was little, his athletics and learning were all ahead of other children his age. He could run faster than those around him, he was smarter than those the same age as him, and as if it were only natural, he was at the center of everything—

“He’s that guy’s child, after all.”

Everyone gave Subaru this appraisal, adults and neighbors alike often kept it on their tongues.

He knew, by “that guy”, they meant his father, and the fact that he was his father’s son was recognized by people all around. —And the young Subaru took pride in those words.

Dad—Subaru’s father, Kenichi Natsuki, in his son’s eyes he was a person full of charisma and allure.

He laughed well, talked well, cried well, angered well, exercised well, worked well.

His father could announce his love for Subaru and his mother in public without feeling the slightest embarrassment, everywhere his father was surrounded by people who admired him, and he always saw his father standing in the center of a crowd of smiling faces.

To Subaru, such a father was more than anything he could have hoped for, to have such a father who cherished his family, Subaru and his mother, above all the world, instilled him with a sense of superiority to the point of exuberant pride.

—I want to become like father. I want to become like father.

For the young Subaru, the expanse of his father’s back was the expanse of the world itself, and the world was only something to be seen from on top of his father's back.

And so every day, Subaru spent in happiness, and in search of happiness.

But,

Subaru: "When did it start I wonder… I don't remember, but one day I lost a race, I think. Soon, I was no longer the first at everything. There were now guys who could run faster than me, guys who can solve problems faster than I can. Little by little, my first-places grew fewer and fewer, and it felt strange, I thought."

Once it had started it only grew worse, and the shining stars within Subaru's heart gradually left him.

Even if he stretched out his hand, running here and there under the sky, the stars that once shined all around him were nowhere to be found. There was only the silence of the coming, enshrouding darkness.

And in that elusive, uncertain anxiety,

"He's that guy's child, after all."

Those words became Subaru's salvation, the last hope he could hold onto.

Even if he was not the fastest or the smartest, those words continued holding up the young Subaru's confidence.

Rather than training to run faster, or devoting all his efforts to his schoolwork, he decided first and foremost to do stupid things.

Sneaking into school at night with his friends, drawing over the white lines all over town, chasing away notoriously dangerous stray dogs from their hangout spots—all so people would not grow tired of him, so he could protect the last of his dwindling stars.

Subaru: ""Studying hard is stupid. Being able to run fast is nothing to be proud of. The things I was doing were making people happy, and that's far more, far better than what anyone else could do"“

In order to sustain this mistaken Pride, he had no choice but to keep going.

He will take the lead to do what others are afraid to do, challenge what others loathe to challenge, this way, he would make sure he did not lose his carefully protected place in the world.

Subaru: “But, if I were to protect myself this way, the next time I'd have no choice but to do something even bigger. It can't be less than what I had done before. They'd think I was someone small if I did, and I couldn't let that happen.”

So Subaru's actions could only become more and more extreme.

If anyone asked why he would do such things, “he's Natsuki Subaru” would be the answer.

—Yes, it could only be Natsuki Subaru.

Natsuki Subaru was braver than anyone else, wilder than anyone else, freer than anyone else, so he must continue to be the existence that everyone else longed to be.

Straining himself, stretching himself thin, he tried to hide his nervousness, so that not even he himself would have noticed it, he continued fooling himself and those around him that he could do much, much more.

Because he was Kenichi Natsuki's son, Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “I thought I could do anything. I made myself believe that I would do anything. And without ever bothering to think beforehand, everything I did, and every consequence of what I did became a stupid mess…”

Like a moth circling toward a flame, he single-mindedly pursued the heat without even noticing if he had caught fire.

If he really was a moth, becoming enchanted by a flame would have been the end of him.

But Subaru was not a moth, nor were the friends who surrounded him. They were only human, even more so than Subaru.

—It appeared nothing in particular had set it off.

Attracted by the mischief Subaru proclaimed, similarly scary-faced kids came gathering around him.

And like teeth breaking off of a comb, the number of companions around him began to drop.

Subaru: “A bunch of idiots, I thought. You won’t find this kind of fun anywhere except sticking by my side. Those guys will regret it, but they’re free to waste their boring time elsewhere. My sights are on something higher.”

If he continued searching like this for the whereabouts of those stars, at least he won’t lose sight of the star above his head.

Of the sea of stars that once should have painted all the sky, now, only one lone, sparkling star remained to Subaru, and so he walked on and on without letting it out of his sight—until suddenly, when he turned his eyes from the star-lit sky back to the ground,

Subaru: “There was already no one else around me.”

Of course this happened.

Without minding his surroundings, continually chasing after stars that no one else could see.

His companions, who at first found it amusing, seeing the ever escalating wildness with no landing point in sight, could no longer follow him.

Paying no mind to this, only mocking at those who left as idiots, even those who remained grew uneasy and doubtful.

One, and then another, his friends disappeared from his side, until he noticed he was all alone under the starlit sky.

Feeling angry, sulking, wanting to forget, he gazed up at the sky—

Subaru: “Even the radiant star that should have been above me is nowhere to be found anymore.”

When he lost sight of the light of that star, deserted by the friends around him, left alone in the dark of night, Subaru finally noticed it.

—I was never anyone special.

“He’s that guy’s child, after all.”

They were the magical words which the young Subaru once embraced with pride, and once would have injected Subaru’s heart full of vitality.

Since when, he did not know, they had turned into a curse.

Subaru: “Just going outside, wandering around town, it’ll be obvious. No matter where I go, where I look, I’d find lingering traces dad left behind...it’s only natural, I guess.”

Subaru’s small and narrow world was precisely the same as the view from on top of his father’s back.

To Subaru, who aspired to reach the same heights as his father, no matter where he is, no matter where he looked in that narrow world, there was not a single place where he could not sense his father’s lingering scents.

Gradually, for Subaru, the world turned into a terrifying place.

At the same time, eating away at Subaru’s heart, was the painful self-awareness that he was only ordinary, and the sense of shame that made him want to hide that ordinariness from his parents and anyone who knew them.

Loved by everyone, relied upon by everyone, smiled at by everyone.

Yet that same Kenichi Natsuki’s son, Natsuki Subaru, was shriveling up squeamishly under everyone’s gazes, a sickly coward hugging his own head frightened by the vastness of the world, he could not bear to be thought of this way.

His own shortcomings must be nothing less than a humiliation for his father who proclaimed to love him, and perhaps, at some point, even that towering father would grow disappointed in him. That, above all, was what terrified Subaru the most.

In elementary and in middle school, Subaru single-mindedly made an effort to avoid drawing any attention to himself.

The classmates who had known him since the lower grades couldn't wrap their heads around how docile Subaru had become—the children, at their impressionable age, failed to notice even a fragment of the darkness residing in their classmate's heart, and as they each went about their lively days, they soon forgot about such trivial things.

Meanwhile, as he spent this time burying himself in anonymity, as he worked to cast off the shadows of his past, at home, Subaru skillfully continued to play the part of the unruly child.

At school almost as meek as a weed in the shade, as soon as he was home he would return to the wildness of his youth like he was a completely different person.

Coming home from school, with various accounts of his feats of heroism, he would soften the corners of his mother's lips in midst of her housework, and put a smile on his father's face when he returned exhausted from his work.

—All of these, had his parent noticed that they were lies? Even now, Subaru couldn't be certain.

This way, throughout elementary and middle school, he spent the greater part of his life on painting and fortifying these lies, and constructing the fictional character of Natsuki Subaru.

Everyone had forgotten the various mischiefs of Subaru's past, and knew him merely as an inconspicuous classmate whom they barely knew anything about beyond his name.

On top of the tinge of loneliness that accompanied this barren relationship with his peers, covering over Subaru heart was an even more intimate sense of dread. For to bear the surname, Natsuki, was to be constantly in awe of a certain force.

Subaru: “Now that I think about it, it really was a dark way to live. But doing this, I passed through elementary and middle school. Then putting that behind me, I became a high school student…even though it’s a local school, probably because of the adjusted standard deviation score, almost none of my classmates got into the same one…”

Having gotten into the habit of thinking only of retreating, with the sudden, drastic change of environment Subaru seized at his opportunity to move forward, and assembled together every fragment of courage that still remained in him.

Wrenching out the last bit of that courage, Subaru clenched his teeth and held up his head.

Advancing into the brand new environment of high school. Building unknown relationships with unfamiliar faces.

There, even if they judged him as Natsuki Subaru, no one would see him as “Kenichi Natsuki’s son”. In fact, in that place—he might even see the light of that starry sky he had lost, once more.

But the way he used that courage, decisively threw Subaru stumbling off that path.

Subaru: “Even I have to admit, that was one magnificent failure of a high school debut. But of course it was. You have a guy who hadn’t built any interpersonal relationships all throughout elementary and middle school, thrown into a place full of faces he doesn’t know, breathing roughly through his nose unable to shake off his tension…even an idiot could see how that’d turn out.”

Unable to see something even an idiot could see, thinking about it now, Subaru realized he must have been even worse than an idiot.

Without going into too much detail, the result was already easy to imagine.

In terms of building interpersonal relationships, Subaru had no other role model except his father, so when the time came to build new relationships in an entirely new environment, his only frame of reference was his father.

—But the kind of jokes that might get him a smile or two while they were still children, when used on classmates in the middle of the psychological changes of the latter stages of puberty, became nothing short of toxic.

Subaru: "Poisonously toxic. Deadly toxic. I was like the kind of poisonous mushrooms with the little red and white dots on it, the ones that have "Highly toxic, you'll die horribly if you eat it" written all over it kind of guy."

How is a guy like that supposed to fit in anywhere.

Setting out into a brand new environment, Subaru lost his footing on the very first step and fell straight to the bottom of the pit. Then, spending his time alone, becoming firmly established as that awkward, socially dense guy who can't read the mood, he suddenly thought one morning,

—Ah, I don't want to go to school today.

Subaru: "I remember that morning both mom and dad were out of the house. It felt like too much of a bother to get out of bed, so I slept way past the time when I should have gotten up…and when I finally rushed myself out of bed, panicking, it was already noon, but when I was about get up and change."

Subaru noticed his heart, and his body, were awfully calm.

At school, while sitting alone in a seat by the window, pretending to be asleep, silently letting the time drift by, Subaru's heart had always been tormented by anxiety and fear.

Not wanting to be in this place, from the moment he set foot in school he would start thinking about going back home. No, even from the moment he woke up, he would start spending his time thinking about when he'd finally return from school.

It was not that he was bullied. It was not that he was being shunned.

Only, Subaru himself had constructed a wall. He was afraid of embracing the hope of touching another's kindness. And the thought of perhaps seeing the light of those stars again, filled him with unease.

If only he could pass a day without having to endure the agony of those hours. That sense of liberation, that sense of relief, drawn by the allure of that sense of powerlessness, little by little, Subaru's steps drifted further and further away from school.

Subaru: "Skipping once a week became once every three days, then it's just every other day...until I stopped going altogether, even two months in a row."

There is no need to talk about the days that came after that.

No longer going to school, Subaru's heart was filled with a sense of relief. It was a sense of liberation at being far away from the school where he had been forced to spend those agonizing hours, and, above all, now ruling over Subaru's heart was a kind of acceptance, and surrender.

For no great reason, he had become the conceited, self-satisfied drop-out, Subaru.

Looking at this Subaru, no one would be thinking "He's that guy's child, after all" anymore, and above all—how disappointed his parents must be to see such a pathetic Subaru. Surely, then, even mom and dad would give up on "Loving" that Subaru.

If a son they had no love for was being considered trash, it probably wouldn't mean anything to them.

But if a son they loved was being labeled as worthless, those two would surely feel angry. And saddened, too. If people saw them like that, they would pity them, even look down on them.

It would be better if Subaru had simply faded out of their lives.

Therefore, Natsuki Subaru—

Subaru: ""I don't love you." "I disown you." "You are not…my son." I wished, you'd just say that to me, and throw me away. I wished, you'd give up on me."

Half-expecting to see the stars that could no longer exist, faintly hoping, he gazed up at the sky.

The effeminate, pathetic Subaru, the stupid creature that did not deserve to be Kenichi Natsuki's son, only wished to be set free.

—Even Subaru himself had not realized that this was the true content of his heart.

Facing his heart, exposing its interiors, for the first time, Subaru saw the ugliness of his own heart. The thought of himself, stupid and weak, unwilling to admit his faults and averting his eyes, then trying to push it all onto someone else to clean up his mess, it made him want to vomit.

Yet, in the end, the reason Subaru did not abandon himself, was because he was lent a hand by someone who would not abandon him.

"Rem, loves Subaru."

Overlapping with the silver outlines in the back of his eyelids, was now an ethereal pale-blue radiance.

Like a soothing wind it blew into Subaru's heart, sending a consoling warmth through Subaru's frozen limbs.

"Let us start from here. From square one…no, from Zero!"

When Subaru was supposed to have come to an end, the girl, saying this, gave his back a push.

When Subaru could no longer go on, she lifted up his face, took his hand, wrapped her arm around his back, and gave his forehead a kiss, and bestowed him with courage.

Charmed forth by the silver radiance granting him heat, and pushed from behind him by the sky-blue warmth prompting him to walk forward, Natsuki Subaru, whose story was supposed to have come to an end, once again started off from Zero.

Because he realized this, because he remembered this, because he had decided to march forth from Zero—before Zero, he must now resolve the Minus of his past.

As Subaru's long monologue came to an end, Kenichi, listening, closed his eyes as if lost in thought and fell completely silent. Seeing his father like this, Subaru tried desperately to seal in the weakness and cowardice from leaking from his throat.

Having been granted a chance to reflect, through that small change in his mental state, however little it may have been, he saw the grotesqueness of his own heart.

Whether it was now, or before, Subaru had always pushed the consequences of his actions onto others to clean up.

Because he lacked the courage to give up on himself, and because he wanted to be the tragic hero rather than the villain of his own world, without saying a word, he had silently waited for someone else to volunteer to be the villain.

He thought that if he stopped going to school, if he passed his days in slothfulness inside his room, if he continued on being his foolish self—one day Kenichi will kick down the door, and put an end to Subaru's world.

Unconsciously, in the deepest depth of his heart, he looked forward to such an ending to his slothful days.

It was while his mind was trapped in this deadlock, that he came to the Parallel World. Then even there, Subaru continued to exhibit his complacency, until—

Dad: "—Subaru."

Kenichi, who had been deep in thought, opened his eyes, and called to Subaru's name.

The sound of that call pulled Subaru's consciousness back from the sea of contemplation and tossed it back into the reality before him—his father's face, directly in front of his eyes, and,

Dad: "FATHER—HEADBUTT!"

Subaru: "Adaghh?!"

His forehead struck by a terrible impact, Subaru yelped as sparks flew scattering all over. Holding his forehead under the devastating pain, he found Kenichi standing in front of the bench, looking down at him.

Dad: "See, Subaru. That was my love-filled FATHER HEADBUTT, a single-blow of fury."

Subaru: "You called a headbutt and then switched to an axe-kick! You even put your face up close for a masterful feint!!"

Dad: "That trick only worked 'cause you were seated and I was standing! Eech, my body's grown stiffer. Nothing like what it used to be. That's what I get for slacking on my after-shower stretches."

With a weird look on his face, Kenichi started doing some stretching routines. Watching his father while giving the part of his head that took the impact a rub, half crying from the pain, Subaru wasn't sure what to do with this completely unexpected reaction. Whatever Subaru did expect, at least it wasn't this,

Dad: "But, Subaru. You know, you...you really are a blockhead."

Subaru: "Uuooghhh."

That unsugarcoated remark cracked him in two, and Subaru couldn't help but make a gurgling sound with his throat.

Looking down at Subaru, Kenichi crossed his arms with a snort,

Dad: "Going all "nieh-nieh-nieh-nieh" and worried about everything... Which part of me and mom did you get that kind of self-pity from? You're totally taking after your mom's younger brother, you know. The short, fat bald one with that face that looks like he's always worried about something."

Subaru: “Well that’s just going too far…although yes, that uncle was definitely the reason I made it my life goal not to end up fat and bald when I grow up.”

The father and son at least agreed on unreservedly burning that uncle who had absolutely anything to do with this.

While somewhere far away, under the same sky, their unsuspecting relation was given this scathing review, Kenichi continued with an aggravated look “To begin with.”

Dad: “There were all sorts of things that pissed me off, but there was one thing most of all. It just pisses me off that you thought by taking that passive attitude you can get me to stop loving you. With that shut-in-drop-out-apathy-syndrome, you think your own father is just going to go berserk and rip you a new one? …What are you, stupid? You want me to scold you? Are you a little girl who didn’t get enough physical intimacy when you were little? Wasn’t all that wrestling I do with you every morning enough?”

Subaru: “The way you said that was misleading in a few places but the gist of it was right so I can’t really refute it…”

Dad: “No, if you want me to give up on you, you’ll have to do a lot better than that. Who’s going to give up on a child who’s shutting himself up in a cask? If you want me to hate you, you better go murder half of humanity or something. Then I’ll hate ya.”

Subaru: “We don’t even see that kind of villain in Shounen Mangas anymore! Who’s gonna go and do something that absurd?!”

Dad: “—Well what you said to me was just as absurd wasn’t it.”

Hearing him say this out loud, Subaru was at a loss for words.

In front of him, Kenichi bent down his waist and met Subaru’s eyes, “We clear?” he asked,

Dad: “Even if you are slow as a snail, too dumb to remember the multiplication tables, or go bragging on self-harm blogs to get attention…”

Subaru: “I’m not that slow or dumb or stupid…”

Dad: “Even if you are that slow and dumb and stupid, I’m not going to hate you or give up on you. Isn’t that obvious? I am your dad, and you are my son.”

With an exasperated sigh at the end of those words, Kenichi straightened up his back. Subaru looked up, at his father standing tall. Bathed in his son’s gaze, Kenichi said,

Dad: “Still, just what kind of superman did you take me for. From what you said, it’s as if I’m some SUPER transcendent-technology PERFECT-flawless-HITECH-superhero, you know.”

Subaru: “That’s interpreting it too much.”

Dad: “You just don’t know it, but I have all kinds of troubles, regrets, and failures too, I also cry and shout and get rejected…yeah, I’m nothing special at all. At least I got a nice-looking face, though. Not like you.”

Subaru: “Overconfidence strike-two.”

Dad: “When I was your age I wasn’t all that mature either. Sure I got a little famous, but it was nothing particularly special. I could stop time a little, kinda, but that was it.”

Subaru: “Should’ve used that when you got hit by a car last year.”

Three-part joke.

The three straight-man rallies perfectly exchanged, Kenichi held out his palm for a high-five. But, just as their palms came into contact, one hand grabbed the other,

Dad: “Now let me twist the wrist of that dumbass blockhead pain-in-the-ass son of mine to straighten out his character a bit…”

Subaru: “Ow! OwOW! Wa-Wait, my wrist is gonna…Owwwhurts!”

Dad: “—But I kinda get the feeling that won’t be necessary, you already look pretty beaten-up as it is.”

His twisted wrist being released, Subaru stood up giving his hand a shake while whining about the pain. Staring at Subaru with one eye closed, Kenichi made a small snort with his nose,

Dad: “I got that feeling this morning, but just now it’s like something suddenly changed about you again. What’s with that.”

Subaru: “I told you, didn’t I. It’s, because I have someone I like.”

A silver brightness, was leading Natsuki Subaru by the hand.

Subaru: “And there’s also, someone who told me they loved me, even in spite of what I am.”

A warm, sky-blue radiance, was tenderly pushing on Natsuki Subaru’s back.

Subaru: “They, don’t know I am Kenichi Natsuki’s son. When I am with them, I am only Natsuki Subaru…No.”

Shaking his head, he fixed his eyes on his father standing in front of him,

Subaru: “No matter who I am in front of, I am always Natsuki Subaru. I brought it on myself to carry that strange signboard on my back, when I was actually being crushed by a weight that was never there. I finally understand it, now.”

Dad: “Well that was super late. I’m the big black pillar holding this family up, here. I never asked you to be the head of the family, who gave you the idea to carry a burden like that. I should smack ya.”

Subaru: “You did plenty of stuff more painful than smacking already!”

Seeing Subaru stomping on the ground in protest of the previous attacks, Kenichi laughed “My bad my bad” like he was apologizing on someone else’s behalf. Then, squinting his eyes into thin lines, Kenichi continued “Compared to that.”

Dad: “You said there was someone you like, and then you said there’s someone who likes you, but, what? You… are you a two-timer? With only a Subaru-rank?”

Subaru: “Don’t call it a Subaru-rank! Although I totally realize it’s too luxurious for my level! But so what! There can be two stars in the highest place, what’s wrong with that!”

It was not just him being defiant, for those were Subaru’s honest feelings at that moment.

He loved Emilia. And he loved Rem. Those two made Subaru stand up and walk forward, whether it was to stand in front of Kenichi or to face the self of his past, they gave him the strength to not run away.

All the sea of stars that once covered over Subaru’s sky—all the glittering starlight he once saw gazing upwards.

Overhead now, blinding, brighter than the light of all those stars combined, was the star of those two’s radiance. And all around that brightest star, even the stars that should have vanished long ago now came to glow with a different light.

It was outside of his shut-in room, inadvertently summoned to the Parallel World, through desperation, suffering, sorrow, wailing as he cried, screaming in anger, charging in with a smile on his face, enthusiastically advancing forward, that Subaru won this starlit sky.

Dad: “Well, that’s alright. Do as you like. Long as you get a perfect ending out of it without breaking the law, I won’t have any objections. Looks like, you got some talent for duping girls too, huh.”

Subaru: “If I had talents like that I wouldn’t have failed so miserably on my first day of highschool and ended up all alone. I can’t pull off miracles like you, dad.”

Dad: “I don’t think that’s true, you know? You’re my son, after all. And although you got all sorts of things wrong, that’s the one thing you got most wrong.”

Subaru: “That one?”

Tapping the fingers on his cross arms, Kenichi answered the confused looking Subaru with an “En”, nodding,

Dad: “I may be hyperactive in front of you and mom, but dad knows how to sort out the TIME-PLACE-OCCASION for these thing, you know? I was always like this in front of you, so maybe you got the wrong idea, but if you act like dad in front of everyone, ofcourse things are gonna go pear-shaped, oy.”

Subaru: “Wa, wai-wait…”

Dad: “It’s obvious, isn’t it? If you see a guy with this kind of TENSION on the first meeting, you’ll be scared to even come near him, right? From there until you become good friends, you still have to straighten up your collar. You only get to take off a button on your shirt when it’s hot out. Otherwise, it’s patience from April to June.”

That was the shocking truth. In reality, even his father changes his attitude depending on the target, just like a normal person.

Without knowing this, he had believed that if he only acted like his father, he would be loved by those around him just like his father was. Such was the shallowness of his mind.

Subaru: “All that time I spent stagnant…”

Dad: “Well, it wasn’t all useless, I think. In fact, you got to become who you are now because of it. Those stars you found, aren’t they worth the time you spent looking for them?”

Subaru, hugging his head in regret, lifted up his face as he heard those words. He could answer that question without a moment’s hesitation, for he already knew the answer, beyond all doubt.

Subaru: “—No, it was worth it. No matter how many chances I get, I would want to chase after the same stars as I am now. So, I think I like the way I am now.”

Dad: “Is that so…Then, that was all great, wasn’t it?”

Relieved to see Subaru resolve this in his heart, Kenichi smiled.

And facing that smile, Subaru felt the heavy lump in his chest dropping with a thud. The darkness within him cleared, as if all the feelings of gloom had been washed away.

Although it was a selfish and conceited emotion, to Subaru right now, it was salvation.

After facing his past, saying goodbye to his old self while embracing and accepting all that he had been, he was proud of this present self that was now walking forward.

And so—

Subaru: “I’m sorry, for all the times I closed myself off. I’m sorry I made you worry with all the emotion I can’t sort out and refusing to go to school. I know I was wrong now. I’m really sorry.”

Dad: “It’s ok, you don’t have to. It’s my fault for not realizing how amazingly awesome you imagined me to be. I should be the one to say sorry, for being way too awesome in your eyes!”

Subaru: “Even though it’s a fact, after you put it like that I totally don’t want to admit it now!”

Dad: “Hahaha, no need to be embarrassed. You’re my son, and you have my blood in your veins. You definitely have the potential to become someone half as awesome as me.”

Subaru: “Only half? I thought new generations are supposed to overtake the old ones.”

Dad: “Well you also got half of you from your mom. With my awesomeness and good looks, combined with the other part from your mom, they kinda canceled each other out, you know.”

Subaru: “Sorry mom, I have no counter to that!”

Unable to say anything to exonerate his mom who wasn’t there, Subaru clapped his hands together and apologized to thin air. Amused to see this gesture from him, Kenichi shook his head,

Dad: “Well then, that’s a load off your shoulders, right? All the walking-in-place from before is already done, there's no point dwelling on them anymore, all that matters now is what you do from now on."

Subaru: "Yeah, en. I'm, sorry I made you worry..."

Dad: "If you want to apologize for something like that, you should take the time to properly repay our kindness. One day, you'll have to take good care of me and mom you know, my eldest son."

—As he heard those words, Subaru grew still.

Subaru: "…"

He had made up his mind to apologize for everything that had happened before, and he was determined to confess all the feelings of his present self.

He had accomplished it well, the years of accumulated barriers between them had melted, and he could now face his parents with a clear heart.

Everything he had wanted to say up to now—

Subaru: "—Fr."

Then—the moment he was about to say "From now on", what surged up instead through Subaru's entire body was,

Subaru: "...Ple… please forgive me."

Dad: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "I'm so...I'm sorry, I'm so sorry... I'm, I'm sorry I'm sorry...I'm so sorry..."

The confused Kenichi's voice came from in front of him. Yet Subaru could no longer make out his face.

The flood of overflowing tears had blocked up Subaru's vision, and the shapes of the world grew blurred. Covering his face with his palms, he desperately tried to wipe away the stream of tears. But even wiping, and wiping, he could not stop the tears from flowing. They cannot be stopped, and would not be stopped.

Subaru: “Forgive me please forgive me…I, I’m…There’s only, you two…I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…”

—He had realized it.

Somewhere within his heart, Subaru had realized it long ago.

From the moment he was summoned to this Parallel World, bathed under the light of the sun, when he squinted his eyes within the blinding flash of that instant, as if it were a revelation, Subaru knew.

—That he would never return to his original world again.

Having spilled his heart to his father, having confessed the dark emotions that had accumulated inside his chest, having been granted forgiveness, having been lent the strength to walk forward, having been taught and brought up to know how,

Subaru: “Despite all of that, I… I can’t repay you anything… I will, never get to see you again… I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry…I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The tears would not stop. He was about to fall to his knees.

But even so, Subaru remained standing, because stopping him from collapsing, was a hug from in front that wrapped the crying Subaru’s body within its arms.

The palms were strong and broad, they pressed his son, who was almost as tall as he was, tightly into him, yet, like consoling a weeping child, they patted and caressed his back.

“—No matter where or when, you’re still a pain-in-the-ass son. Geez.”

As he said this, he continued holding onto the sobbing Subaru, soothingly, and lovingly, and did not let go.

COLOR NORVAK

2

“Have you calmed down?”

Subaru: “—Yeah. Sorry. That must be, really annoying.”

Dad: “No kidding. Just look at my shirt. I’ve got dried out tears and snot all over my chest now. I’m too embarrassed to even wander around the neighborhood like this.”

“Haha”, using his fingers to give Subaru, who had stopped crying, a flick to the forehead, Kenichi let out a vulgar laugh.

With a grin, he stared at Subaru’s face, that was now swollen from the tears. Seeing those eyes filled with sadness and apology, Kenichi sighed,

Dad: “I don’t know why you cried so hard, but that must have been kinda embarrassing for ya, so I’ll keep it a secret. Try to thank me as best you can, ok?”

Subaru: “...Aah. Thank you. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, more than anyone else in the world.”

Dad: “Well I’m gonna blush if you put it like that.”

Scratching his face looking embarrassed, Kenichi chuckled. Unable to stare at his father’s face directly for too long, Subaru averted his eyes.

Kenichi shrugged his shoulders, and flapped his hands around like he was trying to drive away insects,

Dad: “Gees, now get yourself back home, you crybaby. Dad’s in the mood for walking around a bit more, so I’ll take the long way back. If I’m seen with ya while you’re sobbing, people are gonna think something strange.”

Subaru: “...They’ll wonder what on earth a pair of father and son our age could be doing together, huh.”

Dad: “Yeah no kidding. If I go back with you like this, my friends are gonna hear about it and embarrass me with it, you know.”

Subaru: “That line could be fatal depending on who you say it to, so be careful how you use it!”

Inadvertently blurting out another straight-man counter to his father’s words, Subaru’s heart was stabbed with the pain of nostalgia. Clenching his teeth and forcing himself to turn his face away, Subaru managed to spit out the words “So uh”,

Subaru: “I’ll be going on ahead, then. Try not to get questioned by the police or anything.”

Dad: “Sorry to disappoint ya, but all the police officers around here know me. If they come and say hello I can’t really ignore them, can I.”

Subaru: “Just please don’t do anything except say hello back.”

That attitude from Kenichi hadn’t changed at all. Once again feeling saved by it, Subaru felt disgusted by how his own powerlessness was still no better than before. No matter where he was, he still had to rely on others to protect him. He was so hopeless that way.

But more than anything, he didn’t want to show his weakness in front of Kenichi anymore.

So after exhaling a sharp breath, as if he had made up his mind, Subaru turned his back to his father and swung out his step. And with hurried steps, he tried to disappear from that place as quickly as he could.

Dad: “—Hey, Subaru.”

From behind, Kenichi’s voice called to him, and his legs inadvertently stopped moving.

Dad: “You’re, going through all sorts of things too, huh. So, I just say this one thing.”

Subaru: “…”

Dad: “Give it your best. I’m counting on you, son.”

The fear of being counted on, the fear of disappointing.

The worry that he would betray his father’s expectations had grasped Subaru for so long, refusing to let go. It was because of it, that to Subaru, his father’s expectations had turned into a symbol of fear—

Subaru: “—Yeah, leave it to me. Dad.”

Still with his back turned, Subaru stuck a finger toward the sky, and,

Subaru: “My name is Natsuki Subaru. Son of Kenichi Natsuki. —Therefore, I can accomplish anything, and will do anything it takes. Your son is really awesome, you know.”

Dad: “Yeah, I know. Half of you came from me, after all!”

“Ha-ha-ha”, at the end of those words Kenichi showered a volley of laughter upon Subaru’s back.

Listening to its sound, a smile came onto Subaru’s lips.

With his back to his father, he swung out his strides.

His knees were no longer shaking. His heart no longer wavered. He only stared straight ahead as he walked.

—The one whose back he had always watched from behind, will be watching him from behind from now on.

Amazed, by how much strength he could draw from a fact as simple as this.

Subaru continued walking, without stopping.

Chapter 19:
Homework

1

After saying goodbye to his father, Subaru, while reorganizing the thoughts in his mind, slowly made his way through the familiar townscape, on the road leading to home.

As he walked on, a myriad of emotions had been surging through his heart.

He hadn't taken a stroll in the sun at an hour like this ever since he stopped going to school, but the feeling of sunlight on his skin was probably not the only reason why the scenery he had walked through so many times before felt different this time.

Subaru: "Well, a kid who's skipping school can't really go shamelessly prancing around under Mr. Sun, after all."

It wouldn't be good if word got around the neighborhood, or if he wound up getting lectured by a police officer.

Even if Subaru had subconsciously wanted his father and mother to hate him, he wasn't exactly planning to pull the police into it.

The streets around his home were full of memories.

As if soaking it all in, and confirming it with the soles of his feet, passing through the quiet—or rather, completely unpopulated residential streets, by the time he no longer noticed the sensation of dried up tears on his cheeks, he had arrived at the front door of his house.

Taking in a deep breath, he halted.

Closing his eyes, going through the multitude of emotions in his heart, and gulping them all down,

Subaru: "—I'm home."

Opening the door, he sent these words into the house.

Feeling a bit nervous, he waited for the reply. But the response that should have greeted him still didn't come. Sensing something strange and furrowing his brows, Subaru took off his shoes and stepped into the house. Then, looking around for his mother who should be home,

Subaru: "...Ohaiy-."

—In front of the refrigerator, looking back at him, his mother was holding a bottle of mayonnaise in her mouth.

Subaru: "...I'm back."

All the tenseness up to now suddenly vanishing without a trace—Subaru dropped down his shoulders, smiling wryly, and more or less accepted that situation.

2

Subaru: "There was no reply, I was starting to worry if something happened."

Mom: "What else could have happened. See, mom's mayonnaise bottle is empty. So I stole your dad's mayonnaise to slurp on and... recently, I've been getting the feeling that Subaru's voice is becoming really similar to dad's. If you're on the phone I wouldn't even be able to tell the difference."

Subaru: "The topic kind of jumped there, but basically, you couldn't tell the difference between my voice and dad's so you tried hiding, huh. No, but, if you were trying to hide you'd want to be a bit more sneaky about it."

Facing his mother, who was sucking on the Mayo, Subaru took the caved-in bottle from her and let it expand back to its original shape, before putting it down on the table.

Staring at him, Naoko tilted her neck,

Mom: "Keep it a secret from your dad, ok? But see, slurping on your dad’s mayonnaise, I get my favorite mayonnaise flavor combined with your dad’s flavor at the same time, it’s a great bargain isn’t it?”

Subaru: “That sounds like the perverted testimony of a kid who steals a girl’s recorder to lick it! Combining one favorite thing with another favorite thing to make something better, are you a kindergartener?!”

Mom: “So, what happened to your dad? Did you leave him behind? Subaru, when did you get fast enough to be able to leave your dad behind?”

Subaru: “It’s not like I could win against dad in race in the first pla…but, well, maybe.”

Just as he was about to immediately refute his mother’s question, Subaru swallowed it back into his chest.

When was the last time he had a race with his dad? Back then, his father didn’t behave like an adult at all, and would mercilessly leave Subaru way behind in the dust. Despondently watching his father’s back vanishing into the distance, perhaps even at that point, a small sense of admiration had been sprouting in his heart.

But, how many years had already passed since then? If he raced with his father again, surely he wouldn’t be left that far behind, or, he might even win.

That admiration only ever enlarging, Kenichi’s existence inside Subaru had grown to an enormous size. All the while, having misunderstood its true essence, no one else could have saved him from it.

Subaru: “In the end, I still give up on everything half way, huh.”

Saying this while leaning backwards and squeaking the back of his chair, Subaru flung out a big stretch. And, watching him do this, Naoko placed her hand over her lips and laughed,

Subaru: “What is it? Was something funny?”

Mom: “I thought, that gesture looks just like your father. Even back then, your dad likes to stretch on the back of his chair. He'd put too much force into it and throw himself right over."

Subaru: "It's not just the voice, even our movements are similar, huh. I really can't tell if that's good or bad right now."

Mom: "But I think it's a good thing. —You're his son, after all."

"DOKUN", single large thump sounded in his chest, and Subaru desperately tried to stop a groan from seeping out of his throat. Seeing his expression stiffen and his eyes growing wide, Naoko blinked several times with her sharp eyes, that looked exactly like Subaru's. Breathing in through his nose, Subaru managed to calm down the pounding of his heart, and,

Subaru: "I feel like I won't have the strength to leave again, if I stay here for too long..."

Saying this, he stood up from his chair. With his mother's confused gaze looking up at him, Subaru scratched his cheek, as he turned,

Subaru: "So um, there's something I want to ask."

Mom: "En, I'm listening."

With an unconcerned air, as if pretending not to notice his reluctance and hesitation, Naoko occasionally glanced back and forth between him and the mayonnaise. The desire to hear her son continue his words, was probably as attractive as the impulse to continue slurping mayonnaise down her throat.

Taken aback at seeing his mother still not having changed a bit, Subaru's face broke into a small smile,

Subaru: "—Do you, remember where my school uniform is stowed away?"

3

—He slid his arms through the dress shirt's perfectly ironed sleeves, and inserted his legs into the neatly folded trousers. Tightening his belt in front of the mirror, after an epic struggle he managed to tie up the dark green necktie. Then, putting on the navy blue blazer,

Subaru: “Student Natsuki Subaru, complete… It must have been about three months now.”

Confirming in front of the mirror that his transformation was complete, Subaru exhaled a deep breath as if having finished a big task.

The reflection in the mirror, was of a school uniform that hadn’t been worn in a very long time. Being a blazer-styled uniform, it was a pain to have to tie the necktie every morning, as even to be stripped of a minute of precious sleeping time was extremely annoying.

Even after tying it every day for two years, it still hadn’t gotten better at all, and the knot still looked just as dopey. At the same time, there was a complicated feeling at the thought of this being his last chance to do it.

Subaru: “Should I try to get it perfect since it’s the last time, or should I do it like I always did it?”

Even while mumbling this, the answer already appeared in his heart.

Lightly flicking the swollen bulge of his necktie, leaving the awkward knot intact, Subaru turned away from the mirror. And, looking around the room, he picked up his backpack.

No matter how you look at it, it was the image of a model student ready to go to school.

Subaru: “Too bad it’s way past home-room, it’s already time for the third period to start. Leaving the house after the sun’s already finished rising, what kind of crap model student does that.”

Scratching his head while smiling wryly, Subaru did a stretch on the spot, and headed out of the room—but just before leaving, he turned around to take another good look at his old room.

In all his life, Subaru had never moved houses, so this had been the only place he could have called “My Room”. From the time he entered middle school, for almost six years, he had been sleeping and waking inside this room. —This would be last time he would see this place.

Subaru: “…”

Without a word, Subaru quietly lowered his head.

Into that one gesture alone, was instilled the memories of all those six years.

With a long, long bow, he finished his farewell, and then, enthusiastically lifting up his face, Subaru turned his back to his room. With the sound of the door closing behind him, he made his way down the stairs, to find Naoko waiting in the living room, with her sharp eyes opened wide with surprise,

Mom: “Oh my. When you asked for the uniform, I thought you were going to burn it. I made all sorts of preparations too…now it’s all wasted.”

Subaru: “When your son asked for his uniform the first thing you thought of was pyromania? And while we’re on this topic, are those taros and skewered hot dogs you prepared assuming there was going to be a fire…?”

Seeing a whole array of ingredients lined up on the table, Subaru was at a loss for words at his mother’s happy-go-lucky reaction that defied all expectations. On the other hand, Naoko seemed completely unconcerned about Subaru’s twitching face as she looked over his change of clothes from head to toe.

Mom: “Eun eun, looks good. They make you look like an adult, and kind of cancels out the eyes, and make you look toned-down a bit.”

Subaru: “Mom you’re currently robbing me of that tone-down as we speak!”

Mom: “Why are you so touchy? Want to lick some mayonnaise to calm down?”

Subaru: “I’m not really in the mood right now…”

Mom: “Is-that-so.”

The bottle of mayonnaise she held out—had a giant “S” written on the cap indicating it as Subaru’s personal mayonnaise. Only, Naoko seemed to have expected that reply from Subaru, and simply nodded,

Mom: “But Subaru, you don’t seem to actually like mayonnaise very much.”

Subaru: “…”

Mom: “It’s because you love dad and mom, that you lick it together with us, isn’t it.”

Putting the mayonnaise with the Subaru-seal down on the table, spinning it round and round, Naoko said these words. And on the receiving end, Subaru’s throat clogged up. Shocked, his lips trembled and his breathing stopped,

Subaru: “Wh, what gave you tha…”

Mom: “Then, Subaru, the world or mayonnaise, which do you choose?”

Subaru: “Um, the world…”

Mom: “You see?”

Subaru: “What kind of example is that!! Why do you have a triumphant look on your face! A guy who would choose mayonnaise over the world doesn’t love mayonnaise, he just hates the world!”

Protesting against Naoko’s considerably off-beat remark, Subaru breathed heavily while scowling at the bottle of mayonnaise on the table. Then, with a small snort,

Subaru: “…For how long, have you been thinking that.”

Mom: “Since a long time ago. Dad and mom will always get depressed without mayonnaise, like the world is coming to an end, but Subaru isn't like that."

Subaru: "The hurdle you expect of me is way too high, it's throwing me into despair, you know."

Subaru deflated at his mother's words. But his heart was not calm.

Subaru's status as a Mayo-lover was not in question. Without fail, whenever condiments are concerned, he would never leave out mayonnaise. He'd naturally dip all deep fried foods in mayonnaise. His devotion was to the point of rubbing mayonnaise on already mayonnaise-flavored snacks.

But why, had he always been so attached to mayonnaise—

Subaru: "It looked like you two were really enjoying it, so I wanted to enjoy it the same way too. Now that I think about it, I'm a Father-con and Mother-con, a total Fami-con..."

Mom: "Without the SUPA in front?"

Subaru: "SUPER FAMILY COMPLEX, aka, SUPA-FAMI… ugh nevermind"

In the middle of this completely pointless exchange, Subaru gave his head a shake and sighed. Then, slowly lifting up the mayonnaise bottle from the table,

Mom: "Ah—."

Subaru: "—Pffhhuaa. Uuuummu, so-good! After going so long without genuine mayonnaise, there's just nothing like it! The improvised mayonnaise on the other side is pretty good too, but the unhealthy store-bought kind with the artificial colorings are the real deals!! The ones over there are just mayo-neese."

Squeezing the almost-full bottle flat, he swallowed all the mayonnaise in one gulp. Savoring its sourness passing over his tongue, he let the burning sensation run down his throat and chest.

This, is the true MAYO-NAZING that mayo-addicts can never stop loving.

Using the back of his hand to wipe off a white stain left on the corner of his mouth, Subaru lifted up his head in front of the surprised Naoko.

Subaru: “I may not love mayonnaise as much as you two, but I am nonetheless a true and fervent disciple of mayonnaise-love. I swear it, on the bottle caps of all the mayonnaise I have licked to this day.”

On a side note, the bottle caps of every mayonnaise Subaru had personally consumed in his lifetime were being stored away inside the closet of his room. The collection had since swelled to an uncanny number of 776. With the addition of the one just now, that number became 777.

Subaru: “It’s the triple-seventh. Help me put it in the closet later.”

Mom: “Oooh~, three sevens is a pretty lucky number. We were so delighted too when your dad hit four sevens the other day.”

Subaru: “That is literally love of an entirely different magnitude!”

His mother happily took the emptied mayonnaise bottle from him. For a moment, Subaru sulked at his sense of accomplishment being spoiled, but immediately recovering his expression again,

Subaru: “So um…I guess, it’s time I should go, then.”

Mom: “Ah, if you’re going to the convenience store, buy some cream tarts while you’re there, I suddenly want to eat them really badly.”

Subaru: “Considering what I’m wearing, can you use a little imagination before saying that?!”

Spreading out both his arms, he made that appeal. Seeing Subaru do this, Naoko laughed “Just kidding just kidding”,

Mom: “But, you’re going to school now? Even though mom is really glad… won’t you stand out if you get there so late? Why not just go tomorrow?"

Subaru: "Don't cripple your son's fledgling motivation right from outset. I only just barely got a little willpower put together by being a little harsher on others and a little more lenient on myself."

Mom: "If Subaru was that kind of child, then your mom wouldn't have had such a hard time."

Even with Subaru sneaking that self-deprecating comment in there, Naoko still replied as if she didn't get the point. Then, squinting her eyes and standing up with a "Al-right-then",

Mom: "Just wait a minute for mom to fetch her jacket."

Subaru: "Wait…you, don't mean to come with me, right? It's not some kind of punishment game where parents personally accompany their ex-hikikomori child to school, is it?!"

Mom: "Ok, but I won't go all the way to school. I'll just go up to the convenience store and get some mayonnaise and cream puffs. You're a big boy now."

Subaru: "Wh?! Why does that sound like I begged you to come with me?!"

While Subaru was bemoaning the unacceptable flow of the conversation, his mother only casually dodged it with "Right right" while heading up to her room. And so, it was decided that she will accompany him half of the way to school.

Subaru: "Noonooo…give me a break. Gees."

As he said this, Subaru's cheeks softened with a tinge of relief.

—Even if only for a little while, the time to say goodbye to his mother had been delayed, and thinking this, Subaru grew keenly aware of how weak he really was.

4

Mom: "It's been a long time since I walked with Subaru like this."

Subaru: “Has it? If it’s at night, we come out on shopping expeditions all the time, right?”

Mom: “Haaa. You see, the flow of the conversation just now obviously meant noon. You have to think about what’s beyond the words before responding.”

Subaru: “I’m just, finding observational advice coming from mom a bit hard to swallow!”

Naoko Natsuki’s observational skills were probably the worst in the world, to an almost demon-possessed degree.

That was the common understanding within the Natsuki family, or between Subaru and Kenichi, at least. The truth is, up against Naoko, no matter what kind of allegory or sarcasm was thrown at her, it would be nearly impossible to explain it to her afterward.

Since she herself never seems to realize it, everything just naturally bounces right off of her, and stress will gradually build up the more one interacts with her.

Yet, in spite of that, Subaru still enjoys talking with his mother.

Mom: “I’m so glad it’s warm today. What did you talk about with your father?”

Subaru: “Ooof, conversations-with-mother 101—expect the first half and the second half to not be connected at all. Anyways, it wasn’t anything in particular, it was just uhh…”

Walking side by side on the road to school, Subaru wracked his brain for an answer to his mother’s question.

If he told her all the details of his conversation with Kenichi, he would be forced to mention the embarrassing inner workings of his inferiority complex, and he couldn’t exactly leave out the part where he cried, either.

Even though he knew it was necessary, it was only the surge of emotions of that moment, and he didn’t know what it would become if he brought it out again now.

That’s why,

Subaru: “It’s no big deal...We talked about Mr. Ikeda for a bit, and told some stories about the past.”

Mom: “Aah, Ikeda. He won big on a horse-ticket and moved to Thailand, then he got swindled by his local young wife out of everything he had, and ended up being driven into hard manual labor while getting scorched all black.”

Subaru: “That’s the first time I heard of the miserable developments of the second half?!”

Mom: “He sent a letter to us, saying: I couldn’t get used to the dirty money after all. Right now, my body may be undergoing hardships, but my heart is fulfilled.”

Subaru: “Huh… so you went through a transformation owing to your experiences in an unknown place too, Mr. Ikeda...I can totally relate to that!”

The only difference was replacing “parallel world” with “foreign country”, and Subaru’s circumstances would have been pretty much the same as Mr. Ikeda’s. Unexpectedly finding a fellow traveler here, Subaru quietly wished him the best of luck.

Then, seeing Subaru’s reaction, his mother tilted her neck with “Nnnn~.”

Mom: “So, those stories of the past made you feel like going to school?”

Subaru: “Aah, well, that’s the short version of it. It was a chance for me to look back on how I’ve gotten myself worried over all sorts of absurd things. And so I.”

Mom: “Stopped wanting to do everything exactly the same way as your dad.”

Subaru: “…”

Originally hoping to gloss it over so he would not have to explain, Subaru suddenly found himself cornered by Naoko's words.

The smile on the side of her face did not change, nor did her sharp, and gentle eyes. In fact, perhaps that wasn't the intention behind her words, after all. But even so, Subaru felt like his heart had taken a direct hit when she pointed it out without him ever mentioning it.

Subaru fell silent, and happily walking ahead of him, Naoko was swinging her arms in wide arcs.

Mom: "It's because Subaru always tries so hard, and wants to do everything at once. And since your dad has all kinds of crazy interests, you had all sorts of opportunities too...you must be exhausted."

Subaru: "M-Mom...just how much, do you know about me..."

Mom: "Well let's see, Subaru."

As if she had known it all along, hearing his true feelings that he had even been hiding from himself coming out his mother's lips, Subaru couldn't utter another word.

At the call of his name, Subaru lifted his face. Cutting in front of him, his mother stopped still, and stared straight into Subaru's eyes,

Mom: "People often say, children watch their parents more than their parents realize."

Subaru: "..."

Mom: "But the opposite is also true. Parents also watch over their children more than their children realize. Mom has been watching Subaru more than Subaru realizes too, you know?"

Hearing this, Subaru couldn't help but fall dumb and stupefied.

All the secrets he thought he had been keeping to himself, in reality, had been just a wasted effort. Withdrawing himself, putting on an air as if no one in the world could understand his pain, how vain and thoughtless he must have been.

Mom: “And when you were little, mom had to put suppositories in your butt, so I even know what your butt hole looks like. That means mom has seen every part of Subaru’s body except the internal organs, you know.”

Subaru: “S-Sorry. It was going well for a bit, but it didn’t seem incredibly necessary to mention the last part just now.”

Even twin brothers don’t really get to see each other’s internal organs. In fact, even Subaru himself hadn’t had that many opportunities to see them. There were just the one or two times when Subaru got the chance, but that was it.

Anyways,

Subaru: “So whether it was my reason for liking mayonnaise, or being a hikikomori…”

Mom: “If there was something mom could do to help, mom would do it. But no matter what mom does, it seems it’ll only make a mess of things. Still.”

With a little smile, she continued, gazing straight into Subaru’s black pupils,

Mom: “It seems there was someone other than mom and dad, who did something for Subaru in the end. I think that’s great. I really should thank that person.”

Subaru: “…En, yeah. There was someone who taught me how hopeless I was when I was hopeless. And there was someone who told my hopeless self that I wasn’t entirely without hope. It’s because of them, that I can walk forward like this now.”

They made him aware of his own foolishness, and accepted him nonetheless. It was only because of them that Subaru could stand against his past—and face his parents this way.

Ah, really.

Subaru: “They’re…way too good for me.”

Mom: “But, you won’t give them away or anything, right?”

Subaru: “Of course not. Whether or not I deserve them is one thing. But if I have to give them away I’d rather hang on to them, and try to pile up my self-worth later on.”

Mom: “Eun eun—You’re every bit his son, after all.”

They were words that held a special significance to Subaru.

Yet his mother understood this, and surely knew what those words meant to him. To say them even while knowing that,

Subaru: “Can I really live up to it? Can I really be worthy of being his son?”

Mom: “No problem. Well, since half of Subaru came from mom, you’ll meet the quota if you just become half as awesome as dad.”

Subaru: “So you already knew that your part of the genes that made up my body are inferior?!”

Mom: “Well half of you is already made of your dad’s coolness… for the remaining half, why not just be Subaru?”

Seeing Subaru unmoved, Naoko gave this reply.

And upon hearing these words, Subaru only fell dumb, with his mouth open.

Mom: “You don’t have to be totally-and-totally the same as your dad. Because if Subaru is exactly the same as dad, then there’ll be two dads, and mom will get all confused, you know?”

Subaru: “A feminine heart wavering between husband and son, what are we, in an erotic novel?!”

Mom: “No don’t, stop it, nyaaaa!”

Subaru: “GUPWAH?!”

No sooner had Subaru’s finished his last word, than a fist came flying over to hide her blush.

Eating an unexpectedly powerful right-hook straight in the face, Subaru went flying backwards. While he was almost crying from the pain, Naoko quickly turned her back and,

Mom: “So that’s why, mom thinks Subaru should do his best.”

Subaru: “That’s a nice summary, but I’m kind of bleeding here.”

Mom: “Speaking of blood, don’t iron pipes taste kind of like blood when you lick them?”

Subaru: “It’s kind of hard to imagine the kind of extreme situation where… anyways, conversations-with-mother intermediate lesson, expect totally random questions after sudden loss of direction.”

It’d be useless even if he painstakingly tried to explain how the iron content of blood is similar to the iron in iron pipes. If he took these kind of questions seriously here, he would only get “how come you’re going off-topic now?” or something similarly aggravating and unreasonable in return,

Therefore, ignoring the context of everything,

Subaru: “I should just be myself, huh.”

Mom: “Right right. While trying to be like your dad, also be Subaru.”

Naoko looked satisfied at finally getting to a conclusion. Then, suddenly halting her steps in front of Subaru, Naoko pointed to the right side of the split in the road up ahead.

Mom: “Well, the convenience store is this way, so mom will only go up to here … Will you be ok by yourself?”

Subaru: “There’s no need to worr…actually I’m seriously injured here, yeah.”

Naoko wasn’t excessively worried.

But if Subaru hesitated now, he'd just be way too much of a coward in his mother's eyes, wouldn't he? So, to put his mother's mind at rest,

Subaru: "It's fine. The things I have to do, and the things I want to do, are exactly the same right now. I have no reason to close myself off anymore."

Mom: "Is that so? That's good. Then, do your best."

Nodding with relief at Subaru's answer, Naoko skipped away with little steps toward the road that split off into the right. Subaru's path was to the left, so he must part with his mother here.

But if they went their separate ways now, he knew, without a doubt, that their parting will be far, far longer than his mother realized—

Subaru: "Mom—!"

Unable to endure watching his mother's back disappear, Subaru called out loudly for his mother to stop.

His mother, already carried away by her quest for mayonnaise, stopped her skipping steps and turned her body around. Just the same as always, the sight of his mother's unchanged figure imprinted itself into his eyes.

Subaru: "Ah…"

Goodbye, trying to come up with some kind of goodbye, Subaru hesitated.

Right now, if he doesn't say his goodbyes here, his mother will have no idea just how long their parting will be. Subaru would lose the chance to see his mother breaking down crying, knowing they will never meet again. But if he didn't want his last memory of his mother to be her face covered in tears, it would be better if he kept his mouth shut.

Yet if he did that, it would be a lie told under the pretense that he was sparing the other person and himself, Subaru: “—There is, something I absolutely have to do. So this goodbye will be for very long time.”

And Natsuki Subaru’s heart would not allow that.

Having been told these words, Naoko didn’t say a thing. And before she could react, Subaru pressed on,

Subaru: “It’s somewhere a bit far away, and there’s no way to communicate. There will be all sorts of, worrying things. But it’s definitely not dangerous…though I can’t really guarantee that. Oh, what am I saying, honestly it’s because it’s a horribly dangerous place that I have to go back to save them.”

Speaking quickly. Piling on the information. All the things he wanted to say spilled out.

Subaru: “Mom and dad will be worried, I think. Unlike up to yesterday, when we could always see each other, it’s a place where you’ll have no way to see me. But no matter where I am, I’ll be thinking of you two, and I’ll never forget…”

Mom: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “I will never not want to be you two’s child anymore, and I won’t do anything that I’d hate myself for. Even though I know, after what I said, you won’t be able to watch me go without worrying, but I…”

Mom: “Subaru.”

No longer knowing what he was saying anymore, his mother’s voice suddenly stopped him.

Lifting up his face, his mother was standing right in front of him.

Mom: “Subaru —it’s alright.”

Subaru: “…it’s, alright?”

Mom: “Because I understand, what Subaru is trying to say. So there’s no need to try so hard to find the words.”

Subaru: “You understand...how...?”

Mom: “Because mom is Subaru’s mom, after all.”

—That was a, completely illogical statement, but there was no room for any counter-arguments at all.

The depth of his eyes grew hot. That feeling, was the same as what he felt only an hour ago.

Just how many times will Subaru have to cry like a little child? Always shedding tears at everything like this, when will he ever grow an iron heart that doesn’t waver against such things?

Subaru: “I’m still...just like a little child...it’s so embarrassing...”

Mom: “If crying when you want to cry is embarrassing, then all the little babies are totally embarrassing when they’re born.”

Subaru: “Not...what I meant...”

Mom: “Eun eun, I know. In front of mom and dad, no matter how old Subaru becomes...you should cry whenever you want to cry.”

The world was blurring beyond the overflowing tears. Hiding behind his sleeves while wiping his eyes, Subaru didn’t want his mother to see his face like this. And Naoko didn’t peek, out of respect for his wish.

Only, slowly, gently, she caressed Subaru’s hair while standing on tiptoes.

Subaru: “...Sorry, mom. I, in the end I, can’t do anything for you two...”

Mom: “We didn’t give birth to you expecting something in return, you know? We had you because we wanted to do something for you. It’s because mom loves you, that mom gave birth to Subaru.”

—The love described by those words, Subaru had already experienced them countless times before.

Mom: “If you want to do something for mom and dad, just pass that same feeling onto someone else. It could be the girl Subaru loves, and if you make a baby with her, pass it onto the baby...that would be the best way, wouldn’t it?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, it would be.”

Mom: “See. Stuff mom says can never go wrong you know.”

With a satisfied giggle, Naoko tickled Subaru’s forelock with her finger.

Then, pushing on his chest to make him take a step back, she looked Subaru over from head to toe,

Mom: “When your face gets messy from crying, it looks more and more like mom’s, it’s kind of weird.”

Subaru: “...I’m, impressed you’d use your own face as an analogy.”

Mom: “I draw my confidence from the fact that it’s the face your dad loves. So, sharing mom’s confidence, Subaru can also draw confidence from your dad’s love, you know.”

Subaru: “Even though it’s only because of the face!”

Forcibly wiping his face with his sleeves, it had become red-hot around his eyes when the tears finally stopped.

Crying his heart out, exposing his true feelings only to be consoled, and then, seeing himself finally clearing up, how ridiculous he must be.

Subaru: “Ah really, I always end up crying it’s so pathetic.”

Mom: “Crying isn’t a bad thing. Subaru, when you were born, you cried like crazy, you know. No matter who it is, when they first come out, they cry and cry it’s so embarrassing. Crying in all kinds of places, in all kinds of situations.”

Subaru: “…”

Mom: “And after crying for a long, long time, if you’re smiling at the end, then everything is alright. What’s most important isn’t the beginning or the middle, it’s the end.”

Subaru: “In other words, if the results are good, then it’s all O-K?”

Mom: “That’s incorrect if you interpret it like that. Then, this will be your homework from mom.”

Though he would never get a chance to check the answers.

Handing out that homework assignment was another way of saying goodbye. Receiving it, Subaru stored it deep within his heart. Perhaps one day, when he finds the answer, he would just naturally come to understand it.

It wasn’t exactly a clean and gallant parting scene.

But his father and mother, after hearing that their ex-hikikomori son is going to disappear into some far and unknown place, did not reproach him, but rather sent him off with smiling faces.

Every bit of it, his past, his parents, his environment, he loved it all in its entirety.

Subaru: “—I’m going, then.”

Mom: “En, alright.”

Giving his head a shake, at last, he forced his face into a smile.

Leaving his mother with that clumsy smile, Subaru turned his back and began to walk.

It would be the final stretch of the road to school. Following this branch of the road to the end, after going up a slope, he would find the school building waiting for him there, and—

Mom: “Ah, right. Subaru, Subaru, I almost forgot.”

And, just as he got himself pumped up and ready to face what was to come, an air-headed voice came calling from behind.

Almost stumbling over from the impact of that discouragement, Subaru turned around dejectedly.

Wondering what she was going to say at the very end, he saw his mother raising up her arm,

Mom: “—Have a safe trip.”

Then, with a little wave of her hand, she said it with a smile.

—On the final night before he was summoned to the Parallel World, when he set out for the convenience store, his mother had said this to him in the exact same way. But that time, Subaru only pushed open the door in a bad mood, without saying a thing.

Subaru: “…”

So, this would be the last chance, to erase his regret from that day —

Conversations-with-mother, advanced lesson—no matter how many times you get sidetracked, the correct answer somehow always emerges in the end.

The moment he remembered that, his strained cheeks softened, and turned into a genuine smile.

Subaru: “—Ok, I’m going now!”

High and crisp, Subaru’s voice rang out, across the road that led to school.

5

An unpopulated school building. Heading from the entryway to the shoe closets, with some trouble, he opened the doors that seemed to not have been opened or closed in a very long time. Changing from his outdoor shoes to indoor ones, knocking his toes on the floor a few times to fit his feet inside, at last, with a sigh, Subaru stepped into the hallway.

Subaru was in the 3rd year, where, out of the 8 home-classes, he was in the 6th. And in 3rd-year class 6, the student numbers were mixed between males and female students, and so Subaru's number was 22.

Being the highest year, all the 3rd year classrooms were on the first floor, just across the hallway, past the stairs.

In the dead-silent corridor, there were only the echoes of Subaru's own footsteps striking upon the linoleum floor as he made his way to his classroom.

It wasn't long before he reached it. Standing in front of the door, he took a deep breath.

Subaru: "…"

Placing his hand on the door, he slid it open.

In the moments that followed, there should be a crowd of reproachful eyes locking onto him, to admonish him for arriving so late to class, but—

"You came a lot earlier than I thought."

That was not the sight that greeted him.

On the other side of the opened doorway, he saw rows upon rows of empty desks, except only for the one seat in the center of the room.

Then, the person sitting there, turning her chair toward Subaru, “Welcome. —In all that time spent facing your past, have you learned anything?” asked the Witch of Greed with her white hair swaying, her eyes brimming with curiosity.

Chapter 20:
Test Results

1

—Seated in the center of the classroom, the white-haired girl slightly tilted her head.

Receiving her gaze, Subaru quickly looked around the room to make sure there was no one else present. And then, sticking out half of his body into the hallway, he checked left and right just to be sure. —Confirming once again that there was no one else, he scratched his head and let out a sigh.

Subaru: “There’s just something I have to say first.”

Echidna: “Sure, I’m listening. What are you feeling, what are you thinking, and what do you want to say to me. I am very interested to hear all of it.”

Subaru: “You look, super good in that uniform.”

Facing the Witch whose eyes were beaming with curiosity, Subaru stuck out a finger and blurted out his thoughts. And hearing this, the Witch seemed to blank out for a moment, until she couldn’t hold it in anymore and burst out laughing,

Echidna: “Waha, why thank you. If you think so, then it was worth it for me to reconstruct this from your memories. In fact, this outfit seems to be the most vivid out of all your memories, and the one you’ve looked at the most. Is it a favourite of yours?”

Standing up from her seat, picking up the hems of her grey skirt—Echidna did a quick little spin on the spot. Her white, shoulder-length hair dancing with her movements, her playful figure looked perfectly like a youthful girl of her age.

Grey skirts, and a deep blue blazer. The red ribbon below her neck marked her as in the same year as Subaru, and in contrast underneath, her white dress-shirt shone bright and dazzling.

Only, if there was one thing that he was dissatisfied with,

Subaru: “Compared to short skirts, I prefer long skirts a little better. That way it takes longer to lift them up and there’s more time to ignite one’s imaginations.”

Echidna: “I see. Then, to measure up to your skirt-lifting expectations, I will wear a longer skirt next time.”

Subaru: “We won’t get a chance for that! Also, it’s not because I like it that everyone wears this uniform. It’s just a rule here that we have to dress like this. Kind of like the Imperial Knights and stuff.”

“Kusukusu”, Echidna covered her lips and giggled. With an attitude as if she wasn’t really planning to take Subaru’s excuses seriously, even if he tried to exonerate himself, he won’t be getting the result he wanted.

Shrugging, Subaru walked to the back of the classroom—to the seat beside the window in the second-to-last row, and pulling out his chair in that half-assed location, he plonked himself down.

The tactile sensation of the hard, wooden chair. The edges of the desk that had alphabets carved into it by some previous occupant. The desk-leg that creaked whenever he put his weight on it while falling asleep. And the festering rust on the insides of the drawer. They were all fragments of Subaru’s distant, and bygone days.

Echidna: “And here I thought you’d be a little more surprised.”

Subaru: “If you wanted to hide it, you’ll have to put more effort into the background, you know. There wasn’t even a single person walking around on my way here, that’s just way too unrealistic.”

Even considering that it was a weekday afternoon, it may have just been a little too unpopulated along Subaru’s path. Almost as if everything irrelevant to Subaru’s past had simply been cut from this world.

Subaru: “This world was just way too convenient for me. So it’s your own damn fault that you didn't get to see the reaction you wanted."

Echidna: "No no no, that's a part of the fun too. Experimenting, and receiving the results are in themselves a kind of happiness for me. What the results are at this point, doesn't matter much. Unless, of course, if we are talking about how future events will be influenced by these results, then it would be a different matter."

Echidna waved her hands left and right as she said this, as if she really wasn't sour about the way things had veered outside her expectations. Seeing her without a trace of negative emotion, in his heart, Subaru secretly wanted to click his tongue.

Subaru: "So then, what is this world supposed to be? I'm sure I went in your Tomb while it was in the middle of the Trials, and then..."

Echidna: "You entered while possessing the qualifications. So naturally, you began the trials as well, correct? Didn't you hear it? "First, you must face your past"“

Confirming Subaru's thoughts with these words, Echidna placed her hands behind her back as she slowly walked toward Subaru. Her beautiful hair swaying in the cool, refreshing breeze that had blown into the classroom, without a sense of incongruity, the girl in her uniform blended seamlessly into her surroundings.

Her every casual gesture feeling like a trap set to entice his heart, Subaru consciously turned his gaze away from her. Then,

Echidna: "Anyone, would have regrets about the past. As long as they live day after day, no one is without regrets. Today they regret yesterday, yesterday they regret further before that, and when tomorrow comes, surely, you would regret something about today. —People have the capacity to regret, after all."

Subaru: "That's a pretty pessimistic way of thinking about it. If we just replace "regret" with "self-reflection", then today we'd be reflecting on yesterday, and tomorrow we'd be reflecting on today, and, maybe, we might find some kind of breakthrough, isn't that's a human ability as well?"

Echidna: "—Precisely!"

Clapping her hands together with an insatiable voice, Echidna shoved her face up close, making Subaru instinctively shrink back. But, undeterred, she continued leaning in, staring into his eyes with her black pupils, at a distance where they could feel each other's breaths,

Echidna: "It's a simple play on words, or, rather, a slightly different way of thinking. But depending on whether you view the past with pessimism or optimism, the answers become worlds apart. Most people look to the past pessimistically and always only see the bad memories, and so they treat the path they have walked with denial. Then, growing even more repulsed by the sight of what they have denied, they close their hearts, and try to forget."

Subaru: "Hey, your face…is kinda close…"

Echidna: "But can you blame them? Compared to today, your yesterday's self was certainly more ignorant. And compared to what you will know tomorrow, your today's self would no doubt be found lacking. The total sum of knowledge, or even just the number of memories, would always put the past at a disadvantage compared to the present and the future. That is simply the fact!"

Completely disregarding Subaru who was being pushed back by her aura, in a state of heated passion, Echidna pressed on her delivery. Suddenly turning her body away, she forcefully slammed her palms on the top of the desk,

Echidna: "And so, when people face their past, or when they actually meet their past, they become lost, confused, lamenting, suffering, anguishing, despairing, and there, they will find their answer. As long as they find their answer, no matter what kind of answer it is, I will give it my affirmation. Whether it was an answer they received by turning their backs, or by reaching their arms forward, it would be unmistakable proof that they have overcome their past."

Subaru: "That's, the purpose of this Trial?"

Echidna: “Correct. It is to face one’s past, and come to some kind of answer about that past. If they are afraid of finding the answer, loathing it, or are hesitating and at their wit’s end, then the Trials could never be overcome. However, if they could either accept their past, or if they could deny it completely and sever themselves from it, then I would see them off with my praises. That, is the first of the Trials.”

Nodding to Subaru, who seemed to have understood, Echidna returned to her original self, and, with a slight blush on her cheeks, she quietly cleared her throat.

Echidna: “I, I seem to have gotten a little overexcited. I’m sorry I showed you something unsightly.”

Subaru: “No worries. If you had bad breath though, that would’ve gone badly, but fortunately, yours smelled like citrus. More importantly…”

Feeling a bit sentimental over the rare chance to see Echidna embarrassed, Subaru pulled up his chair and leaned his body forward, and,

Subaru: “If those points you mentioned are the conditions for passing the Trial, can I take that to mean I’ve passed the Trial?”

Echidna: “Having watched everything from beginning to end…I think the results were more than satisfactory.”

Placing her hand over her chest, Echidna inhaled deeply as if filling her lungs with the aroma of fragrant black-tea, and then, with a terribly satisfied look on her face,

Echidna: “Whether it was the symbol of the traumas of your past, or the representation of your past guilt, you have found your answers. For that, I send you off with my praises.”

Subaru: “From beginning to end…doesn’t that mean you saw me crying with snot dripping down my nose too?!”

Echidna: “I’m sowee, even I couldn’t help tearing up in the eyes at those parts.”

Subaru: “Shut up!! And don’t you tell anyone, it’s embarrassing!!”

The scene of his parting with his father where he poured out all his emotions, it wouldn’t be funny at all if some pervert had been watching them all that time. Above all, it would be an insult to the emotions between Subaru and Kenichi in that moment.

“Kusukusu”, regardless of whether she could understand such sentiments, Echidna bursted out laughing,

Echidna: “If there was anything I was disappointed with, it would be that you hadn’t experienced the agony even deeper when you came face to face with your past.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Echidna: “I like when people reach their answers, but I think the suffering on their path to the answers is something praiseworthy in itself. I was looking forward to watching you find an answer through the anguish and struggles, but...”

Casting a side-glance at Subaru, as if peering into the depths of his black irises, she narrowed her eyes,

Echidna: “Unfortunately, this Trial seems to have started a little too late for me to enjoy such a treat. It appears you have already found the answer to the negative feelings from your past before coming here.”

Subaru: “Aah...is that so. If that’s the case, I really should offer my sympathies.”

Somewhat able to understand Echidna’s disappointment, Subaru exhaled a deep sigh through his nose.

If the Trials had gone the way she had hoped, Subaru would have returned to his parents, the source of his past trauma, and over the time spent with them, realized his own weakness, agonized over it, and reached an answer either by running away or facing it head on, and, at last, found the resolve to come here.

But Subaru had already…

Subaru: “Even when I was completely, hopelessly useless, there was a girl who told me I was a hero. So there was no need for me to face my past, I’ve already come to terms with the fact that I’m useless.”

Echidna: “So you’ve arrived at a different form of resignation, I see. But to have it stray so far from my expectations, it really is an utter disappointment. The next time you meet that person outside, tell her that a Witch had some complaints to say about her.”

Just as he was about to throw in a joke about that threatening remark, Subaru suddenly noticed. There was something Echidna said that he couldn’t let slide.

Subaru: “A while ago you said you formed this reconstruction from on my memories...If you can peek inside my head, then shouldn’t you know about the girl I spoke of?”

Or, perhaps rather than noticing it, it was him desperately clinging to a feeling that he could not let go of. Even if it meant having someone peek inside his head, if there was just someone who could remember Rem after she had been forgotten by all the world, remember her lovely features, remember that this girl still existed… But,

Echidna: “Sorry to disappoint you. But even being a thing of Greed, I can distinguish between what is right and wrong. Though I have extracted the information I needed to conduct this Trial, I have not touched anything else. If I simply stole all the knowledge out of your head, then where would be the fun in that? I am not quite ready to abandon the pleasures of simply listening to others just yet.”

The only thing he got as a reply, was some kind of Witch’s sense of honor that was beyond his capacity to understand.

One could even call them Echidna’s convictions. However shameless that logic may be, it was not something Subaru could argue with. Still,

Subaru: “If you only pulled out parts that were relevant to the Trial...then why did you pull out that uniform...”

Echidna: “Obviously, I pulled it because it was a piece of information necessary for me to reconstruct this building you call “School”. It definitely wasn’t because after discovering a new Parallel World, I wondered what the girls here wore and whether it would maybe look nice on me or anything of that sort.”

Subaru: “Are you, one of those highly intelligent idiots?”

After listening to Echidna essentially confessing the whole thing, Subaru sighed and shook his head.

So it was like that. It wasn’t the answer he had hoped to hear, but at least now he knew something for certain. Which was that,

Subaru: “There’s probably no need for me to ask this. But this world is...”

Echidna: “Aah, that’s right. This is a fabricated world created based on your memories, meant to be an extremely faithful reconstruction of reality. Which means, of course—your real parents still have no idea where you are or what you are doing, and must be worrying to no end about their son, who had simply disappeared.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “As for the information you didn’t know before, who knows if you hadn’t inadvertently brought them here... are you so sure that you didn’t know about them? The letters from your parents’ old friend, can you be certain that you have never seen them? The old man who had known your father since he was a child, have you really never met him before? And have you truly never imagined an image of your father that was different from the one you knew, and never once traced it over inside your mind?”

Firing off her words in rapid succession, “Or rather,” Echidna continued,

Echidna: “Did you really think that as long you didn’t know what was hidden in your heart, they would simply stay hidden? The contents your true heart that are yearning to be freed, how could you be certain that they are safely sealed away, and would not leak through along with the rest of the mundane little details? And still, can you be sure that your self-serving desire to be loved, did not beg your fictional father and mother to behave the way they did?”

Putting her face up close against the silent Subaru’s, Echidna’s last words fell to a bewitching whisper, teasing at the strings of his heart. And then, at a distance close enough to feel each other’s breaths,

Echidna: “It was just too ideal, and too convenient—don’t you think?”

Subaru: “…”

Tenderly gouging open Subaru’s heart with her soft fingertips, Echidna smiled sweetly.

Unlike a smile that would have suited a girl her age, this one was abominable, like one belonging to a Witch out of the folklores.

His mind toyed and tormented by her penetrating words, Subaru squeezed close his eyes. In the back of his closed eyelids, in that pitch-black world, emerged his last impressions of his parents—

Subaru: “Don’t belittle my parents just because you didn’t get what you wanted, Witch.”

Echidna: “…what?”

Subaru: “I’ve already told them all of my answers. And my mom and dad both received it. I’ve told them everything that I was never able to say, and they told me to give it my best, and then wished me a safe journey.”

Standing up from his chair, placing his hands on the desk, he pressed back his face against Echidna’s so that their foreheads touched. Watching the Witch’s black eyes opening wide in surprise, Subaru,

Subaru: “Their voices, their smiles, everything from those moments shattered my imaginations. —My parents, are not some empty casks that can be filled with my fantasies. Don’t you underestimate them.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “I’ve already told them everything I wanted to say. And after having put everything to rest, I came here. —Nothing you say can trick me.”

Pulling back his forehead from her’s, Subaru sat down in his chair once more. Then, leaning backwards into his chair, he rudely crossed his legs and stared at Echidna with an insolent gaze.

For a moment, Echidna seemed astounded by Subaru’s reaction,

Echidna: “Really…You wouldn’t even let me see you questioning your answers for a minute, you really are a human who would make a Witch cry. How exceptional indeed.”

Subaru: “I’m gonna blush if you praise me like that. I’m the kind of guy who grows when he gets praised, you know. I can feel myself getting taller as we speak!”

Echidna: “I see you’re never at a loss for words… Aah, but it’s good enough. It’s more than good enough. It’s a delightful thing, to see such a firm answer that would not allow itself to be shaken.”

As if giving up, Echidna shook her head with a smile, and then, pulling out the chair in front of Subaru, she sat down facing him,

Echidna: “The Trial is now over, in its truest sense. You have escaped the evil clutches of a Witch, it seems. As a reward…is there anything you wish to ask me before you go back?”

Subaru: “Oh, then there is one thing.”

Echidna: “En, let’s hear it.”

Echidna nodded, as Subaru stuck out a finger pointing directly at her,

Subaru: “Before, you said you had nothing to do the Trials… How is this nothing to do with it?! You’re not just involved, you’re pretty much the main culprit. What’s with that blatant straight-faced lie about having no influence over the Trials!”

Echidna: “To take a Witch at her word… even naivety and gullibility should have a limit. Didn’t I tell you the last time we parted? I am a wicked Witch, after all.”

Subaru: “Aah, is that right. Then, I can’t trust a single word from this wicked Witch, can I. In that case I have nothing else to ask. ...By the way, is the seal on the Sanctuary removed now?”

Echidna: “And here you are asking another question as if nothing happened… you really don’t bother putting up appearances, do you? Unfortunately, it would be too simple if the Trials ended with this. There are a total three parts to the Trials. But since you already passed the first Trial, I don’t think they would be too difficult for you.”

Sidestepping Subaru’s indignation, Echidna held out three fingers as she answered him. Receiving this, Subaru muttered “Three parts...” under his breath,

Subaru: “One way or another, I’ll have to unseal the Sanctuary. So, once I clear the other two Trials, it will be released, right? Can I take that as a guarantee?”

Echidna: “That’s why I gave you the Qualifications. So of course. If you or any qualified halfblood overcomes the Trials, the Sanctuary will be liberated with my blessings. How will you overcome the next two Trials, I wonder. I will happily look forward to the answers you will give.”

Watching Echidna nodding in affirmation, Subaru responded “Is that so”, and stood up.

There was nothing else he wanted to ask. So there was nothing more to gain by dawdling in this fabricated world. A certain nostalgic feeling made him almost want to stay, but he had already said all his reluctant goodbyes.

Even if, as the Witch said, they were only transient and fleeting things.

Subaru: “Hey, Echidna.”

Echidna: “What is it? Perhaps you would like to punch me before you go? Well, I realize I would deserve it, considering my conduct towards you. So if you wish, I am willing to accept it without complaints. But still, I am only a young girl, after all. If you could please avoid the face if possible...”

Subaru: “Thank you.”

Echidna: “…”

Speechless, after going on and on trying to vindicate herself, Echidna suddenly lost her words.

Seeing her like this, for the first time, Subaru felt a small sense of gratification,

Subaru: “Even if it didn’t really happen, and my words didn’t really reach those two, I was able to say the things I wanted to say thanks to you. Even if it was because of your crappy-gossip-deprived curiosity, I was able to see the people I thought I would never see again, and say my goodbyes.”

And show them that their hopeless, small, disappointing son had become a little less hopeless, had grown a little more, and could now hold his head a little higher.

Subaru: “For that, I am grateful. So, thank you.”

Echidna: “...You’re a human I can’t understand at all, it’s very fascinating. It’s almost frightening, in fact.”

Echidna wasn’t joking or lying, and the look in her eyes seemed as if she was genuinely threatened by him. Seeing her like this, Subaru lifted the corners of his lips and smiled in reply,

Subaru: “Madam Witch must get frightened easily if she could be caught by a little kid like me. Oh well. So um, where’s the exit?”

Echidna: “Leaving won’t be difficult. Even now, this world is already beginning to fade. Nothing outside of this building is solid anymore. —Leaving this building should return you directly to the insides of the Tomb.”

Subaru: “That’s pretty convenient. —In that case, see you next Trial, I guess.”

With a wave of his hand, Subaru got up from his seat and headed out of the classroom. Sensing Echidna’s gaze trailing behind him, Subaru walked out without looking back.

In the world outside the window, dissolving into the encroaching vast, blue sky, the scenes in the distance began to fade. The fabricated world which had fulfilled its purpose, was vanishing into nothing.

The father who had patted on Subaru’s back, and the mother who had walked with Subaru to send him off, were both fading along with the disappearance of this world. Until they were nowhere to be found.

Subaru: “...You guys have already taught me all the most important things.”

His emotions swelling up in his chest, feeling the back of his eyes growing hot, Subaru roughly wiped his eyes with his sleeves just once. And after that, lifting up his head, there was no longer any trace of tears in his eyes.

Looking straight ahead, Subaru walked toward the exit of this dying world.

In front of him, the world gradually turned to white, as far as his eyes can see, and—

2

Echidna: “—Already gone, I see. My my, he’s a lot more formidable than I thought.”

—In the classroom after Subaru had left, among the rows upon rows of empty desks, Echidna, having been left behind, stuck a hand into the front of her hair, and, enjoying a moment of quiet to herself, she leaned her weight onto the desk behind her.

Little by little, the World had began to collapse.

The fleeting world reconstructed out of memories, with the loss of its source, was turning back to dust. With the sensation of the disintegration of the world upon her skin, Echidna did not pay any mind to the crumbling footings or the vanishing atmosphere around her.

Her attention was fixed on a single point—in front of the blackboard, toward the teacher's podium. There,

Echidna: "Just what I should expect from the man you fell for, I suppose."

???: "—My special someone my special someone to my someone."

Echidna: "Shut away in your own citadel, even though you meet him every so often you're still afraid of being forgotten. In such pathetic circumstances, to have the audacity to make this kind of assertion. I, can't understand you at all."

???: "None of your business none of your business none of your business none of your business none of your business none of your business breathe on breathe on breathe on breathe on breathe on talk to talk to talk to talk to touch touch touch touch touch my my my my my my my my my my my LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE."

With the other person insisting on speaking in nonsense, Echidna frowned in disgust.

Before her eyes, there was the shadow of a person standing in front of the teacher's podium—the shadow of a girl in a pitch black gown, with long, flowing, silver hair. Like a curse, everything above her chest was engulfed in darkness, making it impossible to see her face.

Every word she spoke and every ounce of the insane aura emanating from her filled the imagination with unspeakable horror.

Echidna seemed to accept the fact that this existence suddenly descended after Subaru left the room, as if it was only natural. As if she already knew that it would appear here.

Echidna: "Of course, it's only natural. Without asking permission, I trespassed into your beloved's heart, after all. I didn't intend to encroach into your territories...but even so, there was no way for us to avoid each other completely, now was there?"

???: "A fingertip a flake of skin a piece of nail a strand of hair a drop of sweat a particle of spit a single word a single breath a single fragment of emotion all of it."

Echidna: ""Belongs to me", you mean to say? Hyahaha, being with you makes me even want to give up my title of Greed. How you could go so far for one single person, I can never understand."

???: "I love him I love him."

Therefore, Envy will not forgive Echidna, who had touched what was forbidden.

The shadow took a step forward. And with that alone, the room up to where she stood was swallowed into darkness. In an instant, the front of the classroom, the wall that held the blackboard, and the first three rows of desks were devoured by the Witch's shadow.

Leaping backwards, Echidna narrowly avoided annihilation, while, as if in pursuit, shadowy arms extended out, aiming for her neck. In the face of the pitch-black serpents baring their fangs, Echidna let out a sigh,

Echidna: "I would leave behind too many regrets if I let myself get erased here. So I'm afraid I'll have to be a little unfair—"

Saying this, Echidna slightly lowered her body, when the shadows that were aiming for her throat exploded from the impact.

Seeing this, the encroaching shadow halted its steps. In front of the shade with its two dangling arms, in the place where Echidna should have been,

Sekhmet: "Looks like I got called up again, haaaaa. I can't even get a good night's sleep, huuu."

Languidly huffing with her legs sprawled out on the floor, the purple haired girl —The Witch of Sloth, Sekhmet appeared.

Sekhmet: "Haaa, it's no use."

As if struck by a devastating impact, the upper half of the shadow flew backwards.

Beaten back by the power of the strike, the rest of shadow sank into the darkness it had created. Lightly shaking its head at this outcome, the shadow reached out its right arm toward Sekhmet.

Immediately after, the darkness that had engulfed half of the classroom attacked at once, as dark demonic claws shot out, covering over everything in sight. The impenetrable blackness sealed off every direction—But,

Sekhmet: "Didn't I just say it's useless, huuuu."

The Maelstrom of black claws scattered in the blink of an eye, and without the least resistance or reserve, the counter-attack struck into the shadow's entire body. While the shock of impact after impact were nailing the shadow's flesh into the cracks of the wall, Sekhmet only remained crouched up on the floor without the slightest movement, lazily looking on.

But even so, Sekhmet's attacks continued to assail the shadow's entire body, until gradually, that bottomless form began to break apart.

Against the deafening sound of the impacts, and the sight of the writhing shadow, Sekhmet only scratched at her hair as she watched,

Sekhmet: "With most of your power sealed away, haaa. And being inside nasty Echidna's citadel, huu. In a state that deprives you of your full potential, haaa, you're no match against me, huu."

Trying to hold back a yawn, Sekhmet's attacks ceased, and the defeated shadow dropped to its knees—when a strike from above mercilessly nailed it into the floor.

Sinking into the pitch-black darkness, the fading Envy looked up at Sekhmet.

???: "Why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you stand in between in between in between in between in between in between in between me me me me me and him and him and him and him and him and him—?"

Sekhmet: "Haaaa. —It'd be too much of a bother to explain."

With this bitter reply, Sekhmet made a little downward swing with her raised hand.

In that same instant, half of the school building collapsed, and along with the crumbling dirt and lumps of earth, the shadow of Envy was swallowed into the depths of the ground.

In a world that was already fading, there would be no way to return from there.

Sekhmet: “Even after I’m dead, huuu. Why do I still have to deal with this stuff, haaaa.”

Her own actions havings sped up the collapse of this world, the Witch of Sloth found a relatively nicer spot in the corner of the decaying classroom, and nudged herself over on her butt.

Huddling up with her back against the wall, feeling herself being drawn into the void of the dying world that had finished serving its purpose, she looked out through a shattered window at the Sun.

Sekhmet: “Nothing ever goes the way you want them to, huuu. Whether you’re a Witch—or the one ensnared by a Witch, haaaa.”

With a final, languorous sigh, the world vanished into light.

Chapter 21:
With Resolve Renewed

1

When he opened his eyes, the first thing Subaru felt was that something dusty had gotten into his mouth.

Mingling with the saliva that had accumulated in his mouth, he unconsciously touched it with the tip of his tongue—tasting the flavor of soil and gravel, he spat it out as quickly as he could. And then, jumping up,

Subaru: “Ueggh! Pftephtoo! Weird little pebbles got in my mouth…ooueeghh.”

Spitting while dusting himself off, Subaru turned his head all around, straining his eyes trying to see in the darkness.

The space that had lost its source of light was filled with frigid air—there, he remembered he was inside a Tomb which tested those who entered. And at the same time,

Subaru: “Right, I took the Trial…”

After he dashed into the Tomb, he lost consciousness and was brought into a dream world. In the past known as the first Trial—although he wasn’t sure if “past” would be the right word, Subaru faced his immutable origins, and said his final farewells to those he left behind, and, at last, finding out that all of it had been wrapped within a Witch’s palms, he was brought back here.

One by one, recalling all that had happened after he lost consciousness, Subaru confirmed that his memories were clear. To his parents inside the dream, whom he will never meet again, he had said all his apologies, his thanks, and his goodbyes.

And, in place of his tremendous nostalgia and sorrow, they had granted him courage and resolve.

Subaru: “Don’t worry. I didn’t forget. I still remember everything we said to each other.”

He had worried that in the worst case his memories might have been damaged from being broken into, so it was fortunate that he still remembered everything.

Having finished checking his own body, the next thing that came to Subaru’s mind was,

Subaru: “Right…! The reason I came in here was, —Emilia!”

Scolding himself for being so slow to come to his senses, Subaru turned back into the room—and found Emilia lying sideways on the floor, the same way as he had been.

Rushing over, her white skin and silver hair shone all the more prominently in the darkness, sensing that she was still breathing, he was washed with a wave of relief. But, it was only until he saw her expression.

Emilia: “…h…ah, no…stop…”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia’s face was twisted in agony, and sweat was emerging on her forehead.

But no matter how painful her expression had become, her body couldn’t seem to move. Her limbs remained rigid as if frozen still, and only her face revealed the colors of her suffering.

If she was going through the same type of Trial as Subaru, then,

Subaru: “It must be a past you don’t want to see…or no, it should be a past that you need to resolve, no matter what…?”

He didn’t know how much time had passed, but Emilia had entered the Tomb 30 minutes before he did. Yet even so, Subaru returned before her, which meant he could only imagine how difficult her Trial must be.

True to the literal sense of the phrase, her expression was groaning in pain.

Originally, he thought he should have faith in her, and wait for her to return safely from the Trials, but—

Subaru: “Looking at this expression, what kind of guy could say something pretty like that.”

Watching the side of Emilia’s face that looked like she was about to cry, Subaru extended out a finger, hoping to ease even a small fraction of her pain. But, the moment his finger touched her cheek,

Emilia: “—!”

Emilia’s previously frozen limbs began to spasm out of control. Seeing her face that was contorted by pain turning stiff, Subaru hurriedly held out his arm to support her head, and embraced the trembling Emilia tightly into his chest, without letting go.

Subaru: “Emilia?! Hey, hold on…Emilia!”

Rubbing her back as he held her close, he desperately called the trembling Emilia’s name.

The sight of her severe convulsions made his heart shrivel with horror, but, gradually, her trembling body calmed,

Emilia: “—huu, baru?”

Subaru: “—! Ah, aahah, yeah. Are you alright? You remember me, right? I’m the person you vowed your future life to, Natsuki Subaru.”

Emilia: “I don’t, remember going that far…”

Giving her memory a jolt as she woke up, Subaru confirmed that she was conscious and that her memories weren’t muddled. As he let go of her body, Emilia’s violet eyes slowly focused onto him.

Emilia: “Um…huh? Why, am I…”

Subaru: “Take it slow, Emilia-tan. Just put the little confusing things in the back of your mind for now and take a deep breath. Then move your arms and legs a bit, see if they’re numb, and try to stand up if you think you can stand.”

Emilia: “Ah, e-enn alright…”

Sensing the worry in his words as she woke, Emilia took a large deep breath as Subaru said. Then, moving her arms from her fingertips to her shoulders, she stood up with the help of Subaru’s hand, and curiously looked around in the darkness,

Emilia: “In a dark place…alone with Subaru and…”

Subaru: “When you say it like that, it does kind of sound like a tantalizing situation, although the crap location’s totally killing the mood here.”

Seeing Emilia rushing to grasp the situation, Subaru scratched his face with a wry smile. In any case, the fact that it was the Tomb of a Witch pretty much ruined the mood for any lovers planning to sneak in.

But, hearing Subaru’s words, Emilia suddenly hugged her own shoulders. Seeing this reaction, Subaru shuddered to himself “Crap I might’ve overdone it…!”

Emilia: “That’s, right…I took the Trials, and then…”

Subaru: “Oh, aah, that’s right. This is inside the Witch’s Tomb. I mean, I was worried to death there. A bit after Emilia-tan went in, the lights in the Tomb suddenly went out. So I panicked and ran in after you but…”

Emilia: “a…but…no, that, I, didn’t…I didn’t mean to, I didn’t…”

Subaru: “Emilia?”

There didn’t seem to be anything wrong with her body—but just as Subaru wanted to continue, he noticed that Emilia’s voice was trembling, and her attitude was strange.

Hugging her own shoulders as if she was cold, her teeth were clattering as she faintly shook her head.

Emilia: “I...I didn’t...it’s not like that...th-that kind of...I didn’t...I really didn’t...I told you it’s not like that...it’s.”

Subaru: “Emilia. Wait, Emilia? Calm down, what...”

Emilia: “...don’t…at me...with that kind of eyes...don’t, don’t don’t...don’t it’s not like that...why are… leaving me all alone...please no...”

Without hearing Subaru’s calls, Emilia covered her palms over her face and fell to the ground. Her voice carried tears, and her trembling sobs, clear as silver chimes, would drown its listeners in heartache and sorrow.

The sight of her collapsed upon the floor stunned Subaru into silence, unable to utter a single word. Except,

Subaru: “It’s alright. It’s alright. I’m here. I’m here with you. I won’t leave you alone.”

Only, comforting the trembling, crying girl, protecting her, cherishing her, holding her entire body in his embrace, he kept on gently caressing her back.

All the while, as if not hearing Subaru’s voice at all, Emilia hid her face behind her palms.

Emilia: “...Help, daddy. Help, me... Puck, Puck...pu…ck...”

The name she kept on calling was not the boy at her side worrying over her, but the name of the Spirit who refused to show his face even while she was breaking down in tears.

COLOR NORVAK

2

"—She's settled down and is resting now." Seeing Subaru looking at her with an inquisitive gaze as she came out of the room, Ram returned a gaze as if looking at a poorly trained dog, and said this.

Without even a comment about her demeaning gaze, Subaru quietly replied. "Is that so."

Seeing him this way, Ram let out a small sigh. "That face isn't like you, Barusu. Your face is usually sloppy to begin with, but if you cast that shadow on it, it will become even less tolerable to look at."

"Sloppy or whatever is none of your business... But, I'm sorry I got you worried."

"...You're just a Barusu, when did you start getting so good at noticing other people's worries?"

Seeing Ram look as if she was genuinely surprised, Subaru stuck out his tongue and withheld his earlier gratitude for now. He had said the first half of that with his eyes squeezed shut just to blast back at Ram, but the second half had been his true feelings.

Taking his eyes off of Ram, Subaru looked behind her—at the door to the room Ram had just come out of. Beyond it, right now, Emilia must be sleeping.

Subaru: "Still, sorry this happened two days in a row, Miss Ryuzu. It must have caused you trouble too."

Ryuzu: "There's no need to worry about causing me trouble. It was because of our selfish wish that she had to take the Trials in the first place."

Turning his head around, Ryuzu' even voice answered Subaru from behind.

Outside the bedroom, the room they were currently in could be considered a living room of sorts. Other than these two rooms, there was only another room for the library, and the three together made up Ryuzu' home.

Subaru couldn't help but feel that it was an awfully modest life for someone who was practically the village chief of the Sanctuary. But then again, looking at the little girl sipping on tea in the corner of the room, it was probably more than enough space for her to live in.

Anyways,

Garfiel: "Hah, look at'ya, granny, lookin' out for 'em. Honestly for me, all feels like "Th'presumptuous Gounzun got no place t'live""

Subaru: "I still have absolutely no idea what feeling you're talking about…but, at least the fact that it isn't good got across."

Seated across from Ryuzu, also gulping down tea from a teacup, Garfiel bared his teeth as he said this. It was another incomprehensible idiom—but judging from the current situation, Subaru guessed it was probably something about disappointment. And, picking up the intention behind Garfiel's words,

Subaru: "Just so you know, if you're planning to badmouth Emilia, you'll have to make an appointment through me first. And only if I approve it, as her Manager and all."

Garfiel: "I ain't interested in badmouthin' people behind their backs. Not th'kinda prick who'd do that. If I got somethin I wanna say, I say it to their face. Or I'd just use my fists, yeah?"

Waving his other hand that wasn't holding the teacup, Garfiel brushed off Subaru's provocation with a vicious-looking smile. That attitude didn't reduce Subaru's tension in the slightest, and it was at this point when the person who had stayed silent up to now—Otto, raised his hand with a "So um…"

Otto: "In that case, can I just ask what exactly happened? I honestly don't want to get involved too much, but I would really prefer if things don't go down this perilous direction, so I think I better act as an arbiter to help move things along.”

Subaru: “Oh right, my bad. In fact, you’re perfect for the job. After all, you don’t have any deep relationships with anyone present, you barely have anything to do with what’s going on here and you’re pretty much a minor comic relief character who isn’t carrying out any responsibilities in particular at the moment. I’ll let you take it from here.”

Otto: “What’s with that rock-pulverizing review?! Is that something you’re supposed to say when you’re letting someone else take over?!”

As Otto started shrieking at Subaru’s description, Subaru held a finger to his lips in a gesture to say “Not too loud”. Seeing this, Otto hurriedly closed his mouth. Still not quite settled down, he shook his head,

Otto: “Aah~, even though I’m still not ok with that, let’s move on for now. First thing I want to ask you, Mr. Natsuki, is what happened after you went in the Tomb?”

Subaru: “Even if you ask me what happened…”

Starting off like this, Subaru brought a hand to his chin and looked up at the ceiling.

In his mind, he went over all the things that had happened inside the Tomb—The Trial, and the strange way Emilia had behaved afterward: the sight of her inconsolable crying, apologizing, as if muttering in her sleep, and calling the name of that Spirit.

Subaru: “The Trials were definitely going on inside the Tomb. After I ran in after Emilia, the same thing happened to me. Basically, I got through the Trial without any problems, but Emilia seems to have encountered some difficulties. It looked like she was in too much pain, so I called out to her…and after she woke up and regained consciousness, she became like this.”

Otto: “Nonononononononono, wait a minute.”

Flapping his hands up and down to stop Subaru’s rapid-fire answer, Otto stared at him with a baffled expression. Subaru stared back at him with a face that seemed to say "what", when Otto started going "Nononono" again,

Otto: "I almost kept nodding when you just casually glossed over the part that totally needed an explanation… Mr. Natsuki, you took the Trials as well?"

Subaru: "Ah, uh-huh, yeah, I took it. A friend signed me up, what can I do."

Otto: "But, Mr. Natsuki couldn't possibly have any friends, please take this more seriously."

Subaru: "There are some things that are totally not ok to say to people!"

Subaru started staring daggers at Otto as a declaration of war when an arm suddenly came in between them. Moving the two apart, Ram looked up at Subaru,

Ram: "Then, Barusu, you have passed the Trial. Is that correct?"

Subaru: "Ah, yeah. That's right. I got forcibly dragged in when I went inside. It wasn't really on a level where I could say no."

Ram: "How you started it is irrelevant. The more important question is…did Barusu already pass the Trials."

Ram placed a finger to her lips and closed her eyes in thought. Then, looking toward Ryuzu,

Ram: "That's what our household's scullery boy said, do you sense any changes? If the Trials really are over, the seal on the Sanctuary should be lifted."

Ryuzu: "…No, my body didn't feel anything in particular. If we actually try going outside the Sanctuary, though, that might be a different story.

Ram: "Is that so. Then it should be simple. Would you please come with Ram, we could check if it's alright to leave the Sanctuary. If we can, then…”

Subaru: “Oyoyoy, don’t get carried away. You’re jumping to conclusions here. Yeah I didn’t explain it well enough, but that kind of split-second decisions is just overdoing it here.”

Just as Ram was about to pull Ryuzu away, Subaru quickly caught her by the shoulder, saying this. The pink haired girl’s brows creased with displeasure as she turned around, and with “What is it?”, she immediately recovered her expression.

Ram: “If you have successfully brought an end to the Trials, we must check whether the residents have been liberated in accordance with the Pact. If Barusu’s words are true, by tomorrow, the villagers of Earlham would be able to return to the village, and Master Roswaal’s wounds could be better addressed inside the Mansion…”

Subaru: “After your true motivation slipped out at the end there I can see why you’re so eager to get going…sorry I got your hopes up, but we can’t leave the Sanctuary yet. The Trials still hasn’t completely ended.”

After being told this, Ram’s eyes opened just slightly wider. Then she looked away, thinking over the meaning of Subaru’s words, and as if having arrived at the only possible conclusion, she nodded,

Ram: “You lied to me, prepare to die.”

Subaru: “That conclusion and sentencing was way too fast!!”

Immediately pulling out a small cane, Ram was ready to perform summary execution. Holding up both his hands to surrender, Subaru frantically shook his head,

Subaru: “Besides I wasn’t lying! I did pass the first Trial! But there are still two more Trials left! There are three Trials in total, so unfortunately Miss Ryuzu and everyone else are still not released yet.”

Ram: “Even this kind of irresponsible remark should have a limit… just how do you know this?”

Subaru: “Because, I heard it from the one who came up with the Trials, the—”

“Witch”, was the word Subaru was about to say when he felt a chill running through his entire body.

Petrified, his limbs felt heavy as if they had been burdened with lead, his thoughts dulled as if his brain was being drowned in mud, and his arteries froze as if they had been injected with ice.

All the while, within Subaru’s mind, there was nothing but an idiotic blank void.

The contents of the Trial, and the fact that two more Trials were awaiting him: he knew that someone had told him. That it was a Witch. But,

Subaru: “What was that person like, I can’t remember at all...”

Pressing his temples, Subaru couldn’t believe the gap in his memory.

He could remember all of the conversations with his parents, the heat of his tears, and the warmth of every word he had left behind on their parting.

But his memories of the Witch who tied all these other memories together were abruptly missing like a gaping hole.

Seeing Subaru closing his mouth and standing there dumbstruck, Ram, who was just about ready to dish out destruction, got out of her battle stance. Putting the cane she had pulled out back onto her hip, she shot a glance at the silenced Subaru, and sighed. And, watching her from the side,

Garfiel: “Aeh? Just when things were gettin’ interestin, ain’t ya gonna keep goin? After so long, was just thinkin when I’d get to see Ram violent again.”

Ram: “As if the graceful and gentle Ram could possibly do such brutish things. Besides, I more or less understood based on Barusu’s attitude just now, so there’s no need for that.”

Subaru: “Understood… what?”

Lightly brushing off Garfiel’s joke, Ram didn’t seem to pay him any mind. But, hearing Subaru’s question, Ram slightly tilted her head.

Ram: “That Barusu wasn’t lying, that’s all. If we can accept your words as credible, then that’s good enough for now. Barusu, go on answering Otto’s questions.”

Subaru: “Ah, aah...alright but.”

It was still a bit hard to wrap his head around it, but in front of Ram’s forceful attitude, Subaru could only nod his head. And Otto, who had been watching their exchange, lightly cleared his throat with “In that case”,

Otto: “Even though we got derailed for a bit, let’s get back on topic. The details of the Trials could be set aside for now...Do you have any idea what could’ve made Emilia-sama so distraught?”

Subaru: “...I do. It’s probably to do with the content of the Trial. Even though the details of the Trial I took and the one Emilia took are different, I think the main theme is same.”

Otto: “The contents...Um, would it be alright to ask about those?”

Otto seemed concerned, but Subaru held up a palm gesturing that it’s fine. Seeing Ram and Garfiel turning their eyes towards him as well, Subaru nodded,

Subaru: “The first Trial is to face your past. Basically, it’s to come face to face with your past attachments and regrets, and come to some sort of resolution.”

Otto: “I, I see... and that’s why the details would be different.”

Obviously, everyone had a different past.

So, depending on the person, this Trial could be difficult or simple. Subaru just happened to hit the mark, whereas Emilia had taken a critical setback—

Subaru: “No, if we take the Qualifications into account, then the contents of the Trials are obviously just plain malicious.”

After all, Subaru’s Qualification was specially granted, while the Half-Bloods were born with them. Even though he didn’t know the true purpose of the Trials, the stories behind the Half-Bloods would have been determined by the various conditions and restraints attached to their birth.

They would have been persecuted by other races as well as their own, been terrorized and shunned, and if the Halves who would have had to endure such conditions were selected to take the Trials, then, of course, the Tomb would easily find their most painful pasts to test them.

Subaru: “To gather a bunch of guys here who would certainly have trouble passing the Trials. That really is blackhearted.”

Otto: “Right now, even if we keep calling the examiner names for being mean, we won’t really get anywhere. More importantly…it will be hard to bring it up to her, the reason why Emilia-sama is so distraught, that is.”

Otto mumbled as he turned his eyes toward the bedroom where Emilia was sleeping. Watching him, everyone more or less understood what he was trying to say, and, deep down, Subaru appreciated Otto’s unspoken consideration.

—Emilia’s appearance resembled the description of the Witch of Envy in so many ways on top being a Half-Elf. From that alone one should be able to infer some sense of the baseless scorn and persecution she must have endured.

And naturally, having never actually been in her position, what Subaru and the others were able to imagine could only be barely scratching the surface.

And that is why they could not bring up this topic lightly. One could say that Otto’s judgment was awfully humane, or, on the other hand, that his personality was fatally unsuited for a merchant.

Subaru: “Even though you can never, ever, become a great merchant, you have my gratitude.”

Otto: “Why are you just shattering my dreams all of a sudden?!”

Subaru: “I’m usually too embarrassed to straight-up express my gratitude without spiking it with a joke, try to understand.”

Otto: “How about you try to understand how deeply my heart just got wounded!!”

With Otto blasting that out while stomping on the floor, everyone else in the room put their fingers up to their lips gesturing “Not too loud!”. Seeing this, Otto hurriedly blocked his own mouth, but it was too late.

At first, there was a just small sound.

In the house that fell completely silent after Otto shut himself up, the sound of small steps striking upon the floor grew louder, and louder. Everyone turned their gazes toward the direction of the sound—toward the direction of the bedroom.

And before anyone could open their mouths, the door opened, and,

Emilia: “Um…I’m sorry I, caused you guys trouble.”

Saying that quiet apology, Emilia, with her silver hair flowing down her back, emerged out of the room.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they saw that there was no longer any trace of distress in her words. And Subaru quickly jogged over to her side,

Subaru: “Thank god, good morning, Emilia-tan. Are you feeling better now?”

Emilia: “Ah. En, I’m fine. My body feels completely fine now. Sorry I made you worry.”

Subaru: “I see, that’s good. You know, since I wasn’t with you when you fell down, I was really worried if maybe you bumped into something. So you see, the only way we won't have to worry about each other is if I never leave your side."

Emilia: "—yeah, I guess you're right."

Subaru: "Yeah?"

Already preparing his posture for some kind of comeback to his joke, Subaru slightly furrowed his brows at Emilia's unexpected reply. Her eyes were lowered, and were staring at Subaru's hand. Wondering what it might be, Subaru tilted his head, and held his hand out to her.

Subaru: "What is it? Maybe you suddenly miss the feeling of my palm? If that's the case, I can hold your hand all night long if you want."

Emilia: "Eh, ah...I-I'm alright. That's not it. I'm just kind of, still half asleep."

Just before touching Subaru's outstretched palm, as if suddenly remembering something, Emilia shook her head. And as her last word fell, the girl in maid's uniform walked over,

Ram: "Emilia-sama. More than anything, it's wonderful that you've woken up safely. If possible, please don't overexert yourself, and tell me how you're really feeling."

Subaru: "Oy. You're making it sound as if Emilia's hesitating to tell me the truth or something."

Ram: "In front of someone who isn't a fellow woman, or should I say a guy who's always trying to show off, there are certain things that one might find hard to say. Please show enough consideration to notice that and get out of the room."

Subaru: "I wish I could show that kind of consideration but..."

While Ram was giving him a sharp glare, Subaru's words suddenly trailed off as he dropped down his eyes. Ram furrowed her brows at this, but soon seemed to understand when she followed Subaru's gaze downward…

…to see the tips of Emilia’s white fingers—timidly wrapping onto Subaru’s hand, that was dangling at his side.

Emilia: “Eh, ah!”

Late to notice Subaru and Ram’ meaningful gazes, Emilia quickly let go of his hand. Her cheeks blushing bright red as if everything she did just now had been unconscious, she started panicking,

Emilia: “N-Not like that. That was really weird, ok? I, really didn’t mean to do that…because, I already decided I wouldn’t, you know.”

Subaru: “Yeah you did draw it back at first, and then grabbed my hand anyway. I liked it so I won’t complain, but, are you really alright, Emilia-tan?”

Asking this question with still some lingering yearning for the fingertips that had been pulled away, he saw Emilia firmly nodding her head up and down. Her cheeks were still blushing red, but even Subaru could sense that it was no longer due to embarrassment.

However, Emilia didn’t seem to notice that there was anything strange about her,

Emilia: “I’m sorry I interrupted your conversations. But, I really don’t feel like there’s anything wrong with my body. I was a bit half-asleep before, but I’m fully awake now and fit as a fiddle.”

Subaru: “It’s been a long time since I heard someone say “fit as a fiddle”“

Emilia: “Hmph, Subaru’s always like that.”

After their old back and forth, as always, Emilia puffed up her cheeks pouting. Seeing her behave just the same as usual, Subaru wondered if he was simply thinking too much into it, and put aside his worries for the time being. But,

Ram: “Emilia-sama. Sorry to bring this up so soon after you have woken up, but, about the Trial…”

Emilia: “—h.”

Even though Emilia seemed to have recovered sooner than anyone expected, the moment Ram mentioned the Trial, Emilia's face tensed up. Subaru, who was watching her intently, noticed this momentary change, but by the next instant, she had already hidden it behind a smile.

Emilia: "So...um, everyone already knows about the Trial's contents?"

Ram: "We heard it from Barusu. Of course, we didn't get into any details. Emilia-sama, we realize there must be things you would rather not be asked about."

Emilia: "I, I see, Subaru...eh? How could Subaru…? I mean, Subaru isn't Half-Blooded, how could he take the Trials..."

Surprised, Emilia looked toward Subaru, and, as if with the same question, everyone else fixed their eyes onto Subaru as well. It was only natural they would ask this, and receiving their gazes, Subaru thought for a moment about how he should answer,

Subaru: "I told you before I went in. I got the Qualifications. Who it came from is a bit hard to explain, but I could tell you where...it was, probably when I went into the Tomb the evening before."

Garfiel: "By evening, y'mean when you suddenly went fainted and I had to drag you all th'way here?"

Subaru: "Yeah, that's right. I'm not sure exactly how or why I got it...but that should've been it. Maybe when a guy without Qualifications walks in, he gets baptized or something, and afterwards he'll be allowed to go in. Wouldn't it be a surprise if Roswaal could go in too?"

Garfiel: "Let's send Roswaal in t'check, it'll be hilarious watchin' him bouncin out. Be just like checkin' if "Purinpas' blood drips the same shade o'red"“

Garfiel opened his mouth laughing, but as soon as he saw Ram's cold stare, he made a "you're no fun" face and closed his mouth. And then, although Ram still didn't seem convinced by Subaru's answer,

Ram: “In any case, it’s a fact that Barusu went in and brought Emilia-sama out, and during that time, took the same kind of Trial as Emilia-sama did, and, if his words weren’t entirely delusional, managed to pass it.”

Subaru: “Delusional… that hurts, oy.”

Emilia: “Managed to pass it... Subaru, passed the Trial?”

While Subaru was complaining about Ram’s merciless word choice, Emilia’s ears didn’t seem to catch the rest of that interaction. With flickering eyes, she looked at Subaru, and,

Emilia: “You really passed it, Subaru? The...past?”

Subaru: “The one I saw would’ve been different from Emilia-tan’s. Besides I...couldn’t have done it on my own.”

His mother and father, who should have been the obstacles in his path, instead gave him the greatest encouragement in the end. And, more importantly, even before challenging the Trial, Subaru’s heart already had the answers.

Although it was unfair to Emilia, they had gone into their Trials with very different conditions.

Subaru: “I just lucked out and got a nice test result, that’s all. I’m more concerned about Emilia-tan, though. From the looks of it, I guess your Trial didn’t go too well...”

Emilia: “E-En. That’s right... I tried my best, but it suddenly broke off half way through.”

Subaru: “That was probably because I woke you up, I think, sorry... But then, is re-taking the Trials even possible? Instead of continuing to the other two Trials, I just got sent back here.”

Listening to Emilia’s faltering words, Subaru turned to Ryuzu and asked this question. Sitting there quietly in the corner, the old hag who looked like a little girl touched a hand to her cheek.

Ryuzu: “There weren’t many precedents but…you should be able to challenge multiple times. I myself did not pass beyond the first Trial, but I challenged twice. What bothers me the most, though, is Su-bo, who received the Qualifications.”

Subaru: “Me?”

Ryuzu: “Suddenly becoming qualified out of the blue should not be possible. At least, as far as I know, having been here since the time when the Tomb was first created…it shouldn’t be. But I might have a rough idea”

After that, Ryuzu fell silent. Even though he felt something was off about Ryuzu’ words and demeanor, Subaru kept it to himself for the moment, and turned to Emilia,

Subaru: “Either way, it’s officially confirmed that it’s possible to re-take the Trials. So now, it’s just a question of Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “M-Me?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. I just have to ask—Emilia-tan, do you still have the resolve to challenge the Trials again?”

Emilia: “—h.”

At that question, Emilia’s throat clogged up and her eyes opened wide.

If she became angry at her determination being called into question, or if she felt insulted and indignant, Subaru was prepared to be yelled at and to take on her reproach.

However, within her trembling, violet eyes, there was only a faint flicker of anxiety and fear.

Her heart being eaten away by these negative emotions was such that she could not give an immediate reply.

Subaru: “If you can’t take the Trials, I will take them for you.”

Emilia: “—?! But Subaru, that’s…”

Subaru: “At least I’ve already cleared the first Trial. That means breaking through the other two Trials won’t be impossible either. So, if you’re having any second thoughts about going back into the Trials, I will gallantly do it for you. It’s the reason I am here, after all.”

Emilia: “For a reason like that…for, me…?”

Subaru: “Of course.”

Emilia faltered as if she was preparing to be denied, but Subaru answered her loud and clear.

Watching her eyes widen as her emotions intensified, Subaru stared straight into her eyes,

Subaru: “I am here for you, and if you are scared, I will do it for you. Even if Roswaal or anyone else says that Emilia-tan has to be the one to liberate the Sanctuary, or that it has to be your achievement…Whatever I achieve, whatever praise I might receive, I devote them all to you. So I don’t mind.”

Emilia: “Why would you…do so much for me…”

Subaru: “Didn’t I tell you before? Because I fell in love with you, because I fell super in love with you.”

Emilia’s breath stopped, and the faces of everyone in the room showed some kind of reaction.

Subaru didn’t pay them any mind, and only fixed his gaze on the shaken Emilia, and shrugged,

Subaru: “That’s why, I plan to challenge the Trials. What about you, Emilia-tan? If it’s really too hard, it’s ok if you want to sleep in the house.”

Emilia: “—Subaru you, blockhead.”

Seeing the corners of Subaru’s lips drawing upward, Emilia slightly pouted her lips.

Then, lifting up her downcast face, she forcefully wiped her eyes, and turned her lips into the shape of a smile.

Emilia: “When you say it like that, how can I just shut myself in a room and wait. You know… you’re reeaaally unfair. Reeaaally dumb. And I reeaaally… thank you.”

Subaru: “Eh? Wha? What was that last one? You reeaally love me too?”

Emilia: “Totally wrong! I was gonna say I’m really grateful and…”

Subaru: “Oh. I see. Even though I heard it this time, can I just hear it one more time please!”

Emilia: “Subaru you blockhead!!”

Getting carried away, Subaru held his ear right up to her, when Emilia shouted back at the top of her lungs.

Even if her voice was as beautiful as silver chimes, with a direct hit on his eardrums at this volume, it was nothing less than a sonic weapon. Subaru looked like he was about to pass out, but still managed to throw Emilia a smile as she huffed her shoulders up and down.

Subaru: “See, that’s more like it. Alright, then let’s give it our best again. I’ll start on Stage 2, Emila-tan on Stage 1.”

Emilia: “Hrmph. I’ll catch up before you know it, then I’ll just keep going, and I’ll be sure to leave you way behind in the dust. Subaru’s achievements or whatever, I won’t leave you a single one.”

Subaru: “Not a single one? But I’ll need at least one for a chance to come bother Emilia-tan for a reward or two afterwards.”

Seeing Subaru still not learning his lesson, Emilia pouted up her lips and poked out her tongue.

During this back and forth between them, Subaru wondered if he had managed to help just a little in getting her back on her feet.

One way or another, the real Trials are only beginning.

Subaru: “With me and Emilia-tan’s Love-Love-Power, the Trials or whatever will be a piece of cake.”

Clicking his fingers and sparkling his teeth, Subaru expressed his resolution by striking a thumbs-up.

Listening to his words, Emilia only stuck out her tongue, and,

Emilia: “It’s more than enough with just me. Tomorrow I’ll show you, I can do it on my own without Subaru looking after me.”

And, this way, she kept up her strong facade in front of him.

3

Watching Subaru and Emilia taunting each other and pumping each other up, Ryuzu brought the already cold tea up to her lips.

Tasting its faint, lingering warmth on the tip of her tongue, she fondly watched the conversation between the silver-haired Half-Elf and the black-haired youth.

Ryuzu: “Where will things go from here, I wonder… Would everything really happen as Madam Witch intended?”

Garfiel: “Kheh. Who knows. No matter which way it turns, I a’ready know it’ll be something that’ll make me wanna puke.”

Listening to Ryuzu’ mutterings, Garfiel replied in a voice that didn’t intend to hide his displeasure.

Watching the side of the youth’s face, Ryuzu quietly sighed in a way that no one else could have noticed,

Ryuzu: “To force such burdens on these kind children. How egregious the sins of this ancient self must be… We are beyond redemption. —At least, I hope it doesn’t come to that in the end.”

Tilting the tea to her lips, those words fell without having reached anyone, and only stirred up a small wave on the surface of the lukewarm amber-colored tea—which, too, vanished without a trace.

Chapter 22:
Weakness

—Subaru woke in the darkness and slowly sat himself up.

Pulling aside the thin blanket covering over his body, he did a light stretch while taking care not to make any noise. Pressing back a yawn and turning his neck about, he could hear a multitude of snoring around him.

Although he had been sleeping in a corner of a crowd of sleepers scattered all over the floor, Subaru appeared to be the only one who was awake. It was only natural—the sky was still dark outside the great window of the Cathedral, and it was not yet the hour for the Sun to show its face.

Even though he couldn't tell the time without the convenience of a clock, it was clearly still middle of the night, and not an hour suitable for human activity. Usually, he'd keep sleeping even after the sun came up, but,

Subaru: "I went to bed too early and now I couldn't fall asleep, huh... makes me miss the days when I get to slack off whenever I have time."

Roughly scratching his head, Subaru folded his blanket, and quietly pulled himself out of bed.

The masses of people sleeping around him—were the refugees from Earlham village, currently confined along with Roswaal within the Sanctuary.

Subaru had given up his place in the small residence allotted to him, and decided to pass the night here in their company. The reason, was not so complicated.

Inside the Cathedral, the people had given Subaru a spot in the corner behind the front wall. It was probably because they were looking out for him, that they gave him in such a comfortable spot.

On the other hand, if there was just one downside, it would've probably been the fact that all the children were also bunched around him.

But then again, the children liked Subaru, so naturally they came snuggling next to him, and while the adults remained in a state of confinement, he thought it would be best to lighten the burden of the children as much as possible. So he had no complaints once he thought about it that way.

Subaru: "It really isn't like me to be thinking about these kinds of things, is it."

He couldn't help but smile at himself bitterly for becoming so considerate all of a sudden. After all, life's no fun if you get too hung up about such complicated things.

Being careful not to wake the children, who were noisily sleeping in full-force, Subaru passed through the mire of sleeping villagers instead on his way out of the Cathedral—A damp wind came greeting him as he went out; the lukewarm air was neither warm nor cold, and only managed to add to his discomfort-index.

Looking up, the thick clouds that had lined up in the sky had covered over the pleasing radiance of the previous night's stars. The layers upon layers of clouds moved rapidly along with the wind. He wasn't sure if the weather would turn, but it was unlikely that it would be a clear day ahead.

Subaru: "Come to think of it, I haven't encountered a drop of rain since I got here. Going by what everyone said, I would imagine there's something like seasons here."

He seemed to remember hearing at some point that the seasons here were split into "Red-Sun, Blue-Sun, Yellow-Sun, and Green-Sun", each matching a magical element type.

If these were like the seasons of the original world, perhaps there would be a "rainy season" somewhere in there as well. The temperatures were neither too hot nor too cold right now, and the feeling of the wind precisely matched his impression of the days that preceded the summer rains.

Subaru: “During the rainy seasons, it’s always a headache that the laundry wouldn’t dry. The ten-thousand-year futon is in a precarious situation to begin with, if it doesn’t get dried in the sun on the occasional holiday we’ll be in trouble…but then again, every day was a holiday for me.”

Basically, since he was always on the futon, there was no chance to actually dry the futon. Occasionally, his mother would run out of patience and roll Subaru off the futon and snatch it from him, and then offer it up to the fragrant rays of Mr. Sun, as was the Natsuki-family way.

Reminiscing on those nostalgic days, Subaru loosened up the different parts of his body with the usual radio-calisthenics. The great Cathedral, true to its name, was an enormous building covering over a huge plot of land, and even with the sleepers all strewn about the floor, there was still enough room for each person to stretch their limbs. Blankets had been distributed to everyone as well, so there were no complaints in that regard.

If there was anything he was dissatisfied with, it would have been a question of luxury, as having to sleep on the hard floor had been putting pressure on several points in his body.

Subaru: “I miss my old flattened futon, or the fluffy bed in the mansion. But it’s only my fourth or fifth day, just imagine what the other people must feel about having to sleep like this all this time.”

Even though everyone acted like they were in high spirits in front of Subaru, it was undeniable that their faces were growing more burdened with each passing day. At mealtimes and the likes, Subaru would fool around and rouse up their smiling faces, but other than that, everyone rarely spoke, most likely because of the stress.

After an evacuation they didn’t wish for, they had become imprisoned in their place of refuge. The

Lord to whom they had originally directed their discontent was already wounded on their behalf, and so, more than discontent about their present situation, the sentiment among the villagers' was closer to anxiety regarding their future.

Since Subaru was technically a part of the Lord's faction, it wouldn't have come as a surprise if the villagers blamed him for their plight, but—

Subaru: "They didn't even blame me like I expected. It's really a failure on the leadership's part to have to depend on the good sensibility of its people like this."

The truth is, the main reason the villagers didn't turn on Subaru was because they still felt a strong sense of gratitude and indebtedness toward him.

It's just that Subaru himself didn't think so highly of his own achievements, so he was still under the impression that the refugees were just simple-minded.

But,

Subaru: "I can't get used to living off of everyone's good graces like this."

—Subaru and the others have already entered their sixth day since they arrived at the Sanctuary.

The refugees had arrived almost a week before Subaru did, so they have actually already spent nearly two weeks in captivity.

They have already heard from Subaru how the people who evacuated to the Capital had returned safely, so there wasn't too much worry about their separated family members, but having nothing to do for two weeks was beginning to take a mental toll.

Moreover, it was only a matter of time before the sympathy generated by Roswaal's yolo-self-destruct-battle-plan wore off.

When that time comes, the villagers and the locals would be on a course set to collide, and that was something he mustn't allow, if he wished to obtain the support of both sides.

Subaru: “In fact, I’m stuck. What should I do…”

???: “—That’s far’nough right there, not another step, yeah?”

While he was shaking his head worrying, he was stopped mid-step by a shout.

Subaru froze in his posture with one foot off the ground, and looked around by turning his eyes with his head still halfway through a headshake. Within his field of vision, there was nothing but trees in the vast darkness that shrouded over the forest.

Wandering not far from the vicinity of the Cathedral, the one Subaru found was,

Garfiel: “Takin’ a stroll so early in th’morning? Can’t tell if y’got a nice hobby or if you’re just in a laid-back mood. Feels like “Mujigemujige gettin’ lost between the red and green berries” here.”

Muttering another one of his usual idioms that didn’t sound familiar at all, above Subaru’s head—the golden haired youth leapt off of a branch, and flew down.

All short hair standing on end, Garfiel landed on all four limbs upon the grass without making a sound, and closed one of his eyes as he looked up at Subaru,

Garfiel: “You don’t look too surprised. Then where’s the fun in scaring ya?”

Subaru: “I might have been scared if I didn’t think I’d run into you, but I had a feeling I’d find you if I wandered around here. Didn’t expect you to come from up in the trees though.”

Garfiel: “You were lookin’ for me?”

Looking skeptical, Garfiel stood up, facing against Subaru who was a half a head taller than he was. Subaru straightened up his chest rather pointlessly, and replied “Uh-huh”,

Subaru: “I thought it was too early and the chances wouldn’t be very good, but I'm glad I bumped into you… Just curious though, why did you want to scare me?"

Garfiel: "It's no big deal. Ahead from here, that side of the forest's my huntin' ground. If you get y'rself lost in there I might end up crunchin' on your neck, that's all."

Subaru: "Don't just say that like it's no big deal! That was totally a big deal!"

Shocked by how casually Garfiel let that frightening information slip, Subaru's indignant protest resounded outwards…

…ripping through the silence of the forest in between the dawn and the dark of night, sending the sleeping birds and beasts scurrying in retreat.

Garfiel: "…Tch. Oy, you just scared'em all away, what'm I gonna eat now?"

Subaru: "They're a bunch cowards. If you eat wimpy guys like that you'll only absorb their weakness anyway. —is one way to think about it, so how about we just magnanimously let that slide this time."

Garfiel: "Or how 'bout I make all the meat disappear from your plate from this day onwards to make up for it."

Subaru: "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to! Please forgive me! Today I'll go fishing with Otto down by the river and make it up to you!"

There wasn't much for a merchant to do in these last few days, so Otto took up fishing, and had been heading to the river every day. Unfortunately, all his customers were about 5 centimeters long, so he had pretty much been giving away free bait for nothing, which seemed just like something Otto would do.

Hearing Otto's name come up, Garfiel smirked up the corner of his mouth and bared his fangs,

Garfiel: "Hah, that lil'bro's got such abysmal luck it doesn't even make sense. Not like his head's dumb or anything. But he's just like how “Even the sky bewails how sensitive Denzen’s to the rain”, yeah?”

Subaru: “Well I say he’s a UNIQUE-CHARACTER that’s here to liven up the mood, something that should be a part of every household, and pretty good for bouncing jokes off of. He’s also saved my ass quite a few times... but he’s mostly for livening up the mood, though.”

If Otto was around to hear that, he would probably be protesting with tears in his eyes about the merciless review he got.

Listening to these not-exactly-flattering compliments, Garfiel scratched his ear with a finger, muttering “Livenin’ up the mood huh...”,

Garfiel: “Then, how’s the livenin’ up workin’ out for ya?”

Subaru: “What d’you mean?”

Garfiel: “Don’t play dumb. It’s pretty obvious th’fellas in Cathedral’re almost at their limits. Don’t need me to tell ya this, but you and the lil’bro can’t keep’em distracted forever.”

Subaru: “You got me where it hurts there…you know, you’re surprisingly observant sometimes.”

Garfiel had caught on to Subaru’s concerns precisely. Receiving this unexpected compliment from Subaru, Garfiel crunched up his nose,

Garfiel: “Caus’of all kinds of reasons, I got to be the one who gets to see those Cathedral guys the most. After all, the other guys includin’ the granny barely would even show their face. Naturally, this’s how it turned out.”

Subaru: “To think you’re actually the guy preparing the meals for us. The first time I saw that I thought there was something wrong with my eyes for a second.”

Garfiel: “If you want the food to taste the way you want it, you gotta have t’do it yourself. Anyway, I’m not talkin’ about that.”

Taking a step forward, Garfiel raised up a single finger in front of Subaru's face,

Garfiel: "The hostage fellas're close to their limit. —How long are you gonna keep up this pointless struggle for?"

Subaru: "Pointless struggle… I don't know what you mean..."

Garfiel: "Hah. Y'got some guts t'say that. What else you gonna call it besides pointless strugglin'? —You've already been stuck in the same place for three goddamn days."

Noticing Subaru's tone weaken, Garfiel sneered back at him through the gaps between his teeth. Subaru opened his mouth wanting to refute him, but, unable to think of anything off the top of his head, no words came out.

Seeing him like this, a tinge of disappointment emerged in Garfiel's narrowed, emerald-green eyes.

Garfiel: "Cough it up. What're y'really thinkin'? Gonna wait till I cut open your gut before ya talk?"

Subaru: "Talking about cutting open guts kind of brings back some bad memories for me, so I'd prefer if you don't phrase it like that...although, judging by the atmosphere, you might not be joking."

Garfiel was slouching down his already short body. Although his attitude wasn't hostile, an unearthly aura of rage was emanating from his entire body.

While it was physical and direct, Subaru didn't feel the need to worry about its violence being directed toward him. However—

Subaru: "First, let's just be clear on this. I'm on Emilia's side. I have total faith in her, without the slightest doubt. So I believe without a doubt that even if it takes time, Emilia will break through the Trials."

Garfiel: "As if I'd believe that tall-tale at this point. Your sheltered Princess—already had to be pulled outa there crying three days in a row now, you honestly think she can do it?”

Their opinions were completely irreconcilable.

Garfiel’s gaze held a sharpness that did not hide his contempt. While Subaru was at a disadvantage, he nonetheless tried to meet it by making his sanpaku eyes as sharp as he could—his feelings for Emilia would not allow him to lose.

This was the morning of the sixth day since Subaru and the others arrived in the Sanctuary. And three days had already passed since Subaru broke through the first Trial.

If you were to ask what happened in that time, then—

Garfiel: “Never would’of thought there’d be a restriction on starting the second Trial long as someone’s stuck in the first one. Thanks t’ that, the Trials’ not made a bit’of progress in three damn days.”

Subaru: “…”

Garfiel: “If we knew it was gonna be like this we might as well’ve sent you in alone, yeah? That way, at least we won’t be trippin’ over the same rock y’already could’a stepped over.”

Garfiel’s words didn’t conceal any of his bitterness—but he was right. He had described the reality facing Subaru and Emilia exactly as it was.

Since Subaru passed the first Trial three days ago—there had been no progress made in the Trials of the Tomb. The reason was simple.

Emilia was still in the first Trial. That is, she still couldn’t overcome her past.

Subaru: “The past that needs to be resolved is different for everyone. Unlike me, who got to live a carefree life, obviously she’d be weighed down by all sorts of things. So I don’t think of her as a burden at all.”

Garfiel: “That so? Y’re just bein’ gentle with the one you’ve got a thing for. But d’you think anyone else cares about her like you do?

Honestly, my opinion of Princess's been droppin down'n'down'n'down, even as we speak."

Subaru: "That's..."

Garfiel: "It's 'bout time you admitted it. If we get rid of Princess, at least you can get your ass into the second Trial. That way, 'least we'd be doin' something real about freein' this place, anyone can figure out that much."

Garfiel's made it sound easy—but it was a decision that would mean trampling on Emilia's resolve.

It would mean abandoning the bulk of Roswaal's designs, and tarnishing that pristine nobility of Emilia's heart which Subaru believed in. No matter what, will not agree to it.

But, what made Subaru hesitate instead of firmly shaking his head was,

Subaru: "If only there was time, she can definitely get through it. There wouldn't be any need to rush her or hurry her. But..."

Garfiel: "Even you can see that time's not something we have, right? Beginnin' with me, our short-tempered guys in the Sanctuary are startin' to run out'of patience, and the hostage-fellas aren't gonna take much longer of bein' caged-in. —It's only a matter of time before th'growin' discontent bursts, don't y'think?"

—In the end, it was all a problem of limited time.

No matter what kind of "Past" Emilia must face, Subaru had no doubt that she will overcome it in the end. But it takes time to defeat such deep-rooted wounds. If Subaru could help, he'd have the spirit to challenge anything in the face of all hardships.

But the bygone "Past" existed only within her, and Subaru had no way to offer his outstretched hand. From Rem, Subaru had received the courage to face his past, and he couldn't help but wonder if somehow he could do the same for Emilia.

As long as there was time, she will be able to overcome the Trials.

But right now, they didn't have the time for that.

Just as Garfiel pointed out, the two groups inside the Sanctuary were both nearing their limits while time was constantly draining away.

They mustn't wait any longer. Therefore, Subaru came to a single conclusion.

Subaru: "—I have, a proposal."

Touching his jaw, Subaru wrenched out these words between his lips.

Seeing the change in Subaru's expression, Garfiel closed one eye and twisted his mouth into the shape of smile.

Garfiel: "I'm all ears."

Subaru: "I think we can agree that the problem for both sides is time. I have faith in Emilia to pass the Trials, but to do it she needs time. On the other hand, you guys are right on the verge of the time limit before balance collapses. No problems so far?"

Garfiel: "Nothin' wrong so far. If I just got one thing to add, I honestly doubt Princess will end up passin' the Trials, or if she's even capable of it."

Subaru: "...I think we should just reserve our own opinions on that part. Either way, if we can both agree that time will become the bottleneck, then you should be interested to hear my proposal."

Listening to Subaru's case, Garfiel touched the white scar on his forehead without saying a word. Sensing that Garfiel was beckoning him to continue, Subaru returned a nod, and,

Subaru: "Right now, the imprisoned refugees are at the end of their ropes. It won't be long before someone breaks, and in the worst case, there could be a clash between the factions inside the Sanctuary."

Garfiel: "Won't really worry to me if that happens? Even if there's a mob of a hundred or two villagers, I'll just be flippin'em all back, not much to it."

Subaru: "There's forty two...and it's not a matter of what you'll do. I'm talking about an undesirable conflict, and the damage it would cause. I'm sure even you don't want to use violence on the people you've been making meals for every day, do you?"

Garfiel: "Well, y'got a point."

Turning his gaze away, Garfiel clicked his tongue somewhat awkwardly. From his reaction, Subaru could sense that Garfiel had some goodness inside, and secretly nodded in his heart.

Subaru: "So, to avoid such a conflict, I would like to request the release of the prisoners. As it is, I don't think they have any more value as hostages. What do you say?"

Garfiel: "Oyoy, hold it. This'n that're two different stories, aren't they? First tell me what y'mean they're no good as hostages?"

Subaru: "In the first place, the reason you imprisoned them was to lure us... or rather, lure Emilia here, wasn't it? We already entered the Sanctuary as you intended, and began the Trials in accordance with your conditions. The food and care, and the need to watch over the hostages aren't free, and you don't have unlimited supply. In fact, the fact that you are diligently out here hunting at a time somewhere between night and dawn couldn't have nothing to do with it."

From what Subaru can see, the Sanctuary was a vast territory when including the forests, but only an extremely small portion of that was being used—in fact, the number of Half-Bloods living in the Sanctuary was probably about the same as the number of refugees from Earlham village.

To put it simply, the food consumption within the Sanctuary would have been doubled from what it was before. Due to the special characteristics of the land, it was obviously unlikely that they'd be able to purchase any food from travelling traders, so their food could only be coming primarily from hunting and local produce. —

Therefore,

Subaru: “There’s no need to keep holding onto hostages that’ll only be a burden on your supplies. Even without the hostages, we already have no way to leave, now that we’re half-way through the Trials.”

Garfiel: “‘S that so. Either way, immediately upon entering the Sanctuary, the Half-… Princess would already’ve been bound by the curse of the land. If Princess wants to leave, one way or another, the Trials will have to be overcome… Ah, so that’s how it is.”

Saying this while digesting the meaning of Subaru’s proposal, Garfiel nodded several times as his cheeks twisted into a cruel smile. Seeing him like this, Subaru understood that he certainly wasn’t slow in the head at all. Aside from his usual attitudes, if it was purely a matter of making decisions based on the facts, then,

Garfiel: “If we release the hostages, whether it’s food supplies or th’internal rifts, we’ll get t’ avoid these unavoidable problems. That’s the idea, yeah? In fact, looks like the only thing standin’ in between the hostages and and outside world is ME, ain’ it?”

Subaru: “If everything had been going along with your plans so far, wouldn’t you prefer to let it carry on to the end? After all, your goal is to be released from the Sanctuary, not mutual destruction.”

Garfiel: “Guess that’s what it’d be if we respect the Granny’s opinions… Well, it’s just details anyway.”

With a wave of his hand, Garfiel took in Subaru’s opinion for the time being.

Then, touching his jaw, he sank deep into thought,

Garfiel: “But why on earth’d you come talkin’ to me? The head’of this place is Granny, not me? If you wanted someone to approve your idea, you coulda done better talkin’ to Granny. Odd havin’ t’say it myself, but, you do realize talkin’ to me could just be makin’ things more complicated?”

Subaru: “It’s to keep things from getting complicated that I’m talking to you. If I properly explain all the pros and cons to Miss Ryuzu, I think I could convince her. But if I do that, I still wouldn't know how you'd react."

If it was the rational and pragmatic Ryuzu, she would probably accept Subaru's proposal without any issues. In fact, Subaru was confident that he could convince her.

But when it came time to face Garfiel after concluding the high-level talks, then,

Subaru: "One way or another, convincing you is the hard part. Unfortunately, according to my self-assessments, I'll be totally helpless if you decide to use force. So I figured I should sort out the unpredictable factors first, so that I won't have to worry about them later."

Garfiel: "Ain't that a pretty clever way'of thinkin', oy. That's it, yeah? If you bring your proposal to Granny, I'll come screwin' it up, that it? You got somethin' you wanna say t'me? Wanna say it with my fist in your face, huh?"

Subaru: "We were just having a civilized conversation a few second ago, how did it suddenly go tumbling in that direction..."

Garfiel: "I only get t'use my head for talkin' for three minutes, tops. You already gone over th'time limit, no point sayin' anythin' now."

Subaru: "Why are you saying that looking so smug!"

Garfiel held up his fists, and Subaru held up his hands to surrender. Of course, Garfiel wasn't being serious, and only sighed as if he was bored, and,

Garfiel: "Hah, gettin' hit with this stuff first thing in th'mornin'. Yeah, sure, do what y'want. If you can convince Granny, I won't say nothin'. They're a damn nuisance anyway. Do it however you like, long as you get rid of'em."

Subaru: "Is that so, then I'll take you up on that and..."

Garfiel: "—But, I got one condition."

Just as Subaru thought he had passed over the most unpredictable hurdle and was about to breathe a sigh of relief, Garfiel's words came down like a bucket of cold water. Seeing Subaru furrow his brows, Garfiel stuck out a single finger,

Garfiel: "Whether I accept your proposal is one thing. But if you don't accept mine, there's nothin' we got to talk about."

Subaru: "...But this benefits on your end as well. There's food supplies, and you'll be avoiding infighting."

Garfiel: "Y'think either of those matters t'me? If we run out'a food for the hostages, we could always start cull'n the herd. If some'of the guys lose it and start gettin' violent, I'm more'n enough to handle it m'self. We aren't on equal footings here, y'understand?"

Subaru: "...what's, your condition."

Hearing Subaru wrench out these words while gritting his teeth, Garfiel tossed back "Should'a said that in the first place" and clacked his canine fangs. Then, looking over Subaru from head to toe,

Garfiel: "My...no, the Sanctuary's conditions're simple. You'll be the one to take the Trials. Do that, n'the rest is easy."

Subaru: "—! Wait, that can't be right. If I do that then the whole point of..."

It's true that this option had went through Subaru's mind many times before.

But, it was only the last resort, the one he must try to avoid if he could. More importantly, if he did so, then all of Emilia's efforts up to now would be—

Garfiel: "You might be misunderstandin' something, so let me tell y'now...me or Granny or th'others, long as we get released from the Sanctuary, we don't really care who does it."

Subaru: "..."

Garfiel: “If you want Princess to do it and get some compliments from the hostages or Granny or others, that’s just your thing. It’s none’of my business what happened in your pasts or why you’re wantin’ to get over’em. All’n all, it’s just your own problems, ain’t it?”

There was no way to argue with that.

Garfiel was absolutely right, and Subaru, having completely overlooked their side of the story, had no right to insist on such things. Just as he said, whether it was wanting Emilia to take the Trials, or wanting her to be the one to overcome it, they were all just Subaru’s own problems.

And even more than that, he,

Garfiel: “—Besides, ‘s it really so important t’overcome the Past?”

Subaru: “Eh?”

Garfiel: “It’s been three days. Three. We had t’watch Princess goin’ into the Trials every day n’pull her out cryin’. Honestly, I can’t stand watchin’ anymore.”

Subaru: “Can’t stand… watching...”

Garfiel: “Her gettin’ pumped up for nothin’ only t’get all hurt? Gettin’ ahead of herself like “I have to do it no matter what”, and comin’ back wimperin’ and apologizin’ sorry she couldn’t do it. So why in the hell’re y’still makin’ Princess take th’Trials?”

Garfiel’s words accurately summed up what happened to Emilia over past three days.

The next night after the beginning of the Trials, Emilia challenged the first Trial for the second time, and again she failed to overcome her Past. But more importantly, Subaru, who had gone in with her, was not sent into a Trial at all.

At first, Subaru couldn’t understand why the Tomb had left him out, but Emilia answered him when she returned halfway through the Trial—someone in the Trial had told her the reason why Subaru couldn’t begin the next Trial. It was very simple:

The second Trial takes place in the room beyond the first Trial.

Inside the Tomb, in the back of the room where the first Trial took place, there was a sealed rectangular door. Subaru originally thought it would only open after all three Trials had been passed—but in fact, it was the second Trial waiting on the other side. Only someone who had passed the first Trial would be qualified to proceed.

In other words, if Subaru wasn’t alone, he would not be able to challenge the second Trial. And the reason he didn’t go alone even after he knew this was—

Subaru: “Emilia, will definitely overcome the Trials. So we…”

Garfiel: “That expectation’s just a bit too heavy, isn’t it. You don’t see Princess sufferin’ enough as it is? Makin’ her force herself to face those memories, hurtin’ and makin’ her end up lookin’ like that, is that what you people wanted? Is that what Princess wants? My head’s too dumb to understand it.”

Subaru: “What Emilia…wants…”

Garfiel said those words while scratching at his head—but to Subaru, it was like the jolt of being woken up from having ice water poured over his face.

Up until now, Subaru had respected Emilia’s resolve to take on the Trials, and had devoted all his efforts to support her. Even knowing that it will be an arduous path, as long as she doesn’t give up, he would continue to lend her his hand.

And, even as she continued to stand back up time and time again, it never once occurred to him to find out what she really wanted.

Come to think of it, Subaru didn’t even know why Emilia wanted to be King.

The declaration she made in the Royal Selection Hall, about her intention to bring equality to all, could not possibly have been her reason to want to become the King.

From the unfair treatment and prejudice she continued to receive, one could imagine what must have accompanied Emilia all throughout her life. What were her thoughts as she lived through that, what were her feelings, her beliefs—that made her decide to aim for the Throne?

Even in spite of his unrelenting desire to be at her side and to become her support, Subaru had neglected to ask the questions he should have asked at the start.

How did Emilia and Roswaal meet in the first place? Why would Roswaal help a Half-Elf become King? Her qualification to be King—to be the High Priestess of the Dragon was proven by the Gem on the Insignia, but how did Roswaal get the chance to let the Insignia touch her hand? What kind of common interests did Emilia and Roswaal have that made them form this cooperative relationship—Subaru didn't know a single one those answers.

He had managed to come this far, without knowing a thing.

Garfiel: "Oy, don't know what kind'a shock y're busy experiencin', but if y'got nothin' else t'say I'm gonna go. I'm still in th'middle of huntin'... n'bout that proposal, if y'agree t'my condition, go ahead and tell Granny about it. I won't be botherin' with the rest of it."

After giving Subaru who remained in suspended animation a shrug, Garfiel's figure disappeared into the dawn-lit forest.

Before he noticed it, the morning sun had already chased away the shroud of night, and the dense tangle of the shade-befallen forest had given way to the quiet peace of morning—with dewdrops resting upon sprouting leaves, it was that kind of hour.

Left behind, Subaru looked up at the sky.

Above, between the gaps of trees and through the towering clouds, he caught a glimpse of the emerging Sun—which, soon hiding behind the clouds once more, vanished along with the momentary radiance it brought upon the world.

Squinting his eyes at that momentary light, Subaru started to walk.

Subaru: “All I saw was myself facing my past, finding closure, and feeling glad that I did. But, for Emilia...”

Subaru had been convinced that it was something anyone could resolve and walk away from.

Because he had been healed by the warmth of those memories he received, he was convinced that saying farewell to the past was the only way forward.

Being so smothered by the kindness of those around him, Subaru got the impression that the Past was something that ought to be looked back on.

Yet, Subaru’s thoughts—

Emilia: “—su… baru?”

For that silver haired girl hugging her knees in the corner of the room, how heavily they must have been weighing down on her.

Inside the house assigned to her, sitting on the ice-cold floor beside her bed, Emilia was quietly, quietly, waiting for time to pass.

She was usually no good in the mornings, but it didn’t come as surprise to find her awake so early. Her eyes as they turned to him were bloodshot, and across her beautiful, majestic face were dark streaks left behind by tears—The fact that she hadn’t slept for a second was as clear as day.

Noticing Subaru’s arrival, she turned her face away so he would not see that she had been crying.

Emilia: “Ah, s...sorry. I-Is it time? It’s time already? It’s, sooner than I thought... but, I must. I must do my best... it’s, time for the Trials, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “I-It’s alright. Today for sure, this time, for sure, I...enn, I will definitely pass. I, I'm already figuring out more or less what is going to, happen in the Trial. See, it's the same pa…tterns. Subaru said, enn, that, yeah, see, I know... enn, so, I, I'm alright...”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, it's fine. It's not nighttime yet, last night hasn't even ended. It's morning now. It's still, a long time away.”

Emilia: “I, I'll be able to tell if you try to dupe me. Because, look...it's, dark outside. Mornings, should be brighter...ah, but, my, conversation with the micro-spirits today...”

Looking up at Subaru, mumbling this under her breath, Emilia's eyes were shuddering. Inside them, were the shock and anger at herself for having failed to abide by her Contract, and she looked as if she was about to sever their bond just to punish herself or her own neglect.

Subaru: “Emilia!”

Emilia: “ah...”

Grabbing her hand mid-air, Subaru entwined his fingers with hers.

Seeing their hands tied together, Emilia was stunned into silence, and, gradually, she saw her own reflection inside Subaru's black eyes.

Emilia: “I, I...”

Subaru: “I'm the only one here right now. So no matter how weak you want to be, it's alright. There's no need to rush, or push yourself too hard. I will always stay by your side. No matter what.”

Emilia: “su...baru...”

Clinging onto his outstretched hand, Emilia quietly whispered his name as she let her head drop to the side. Just like this, letting her hold onto his arm, Subaru sat down beside her.

With his free hand, he slowly patted her silver hair as her body slowly lost its strength, until, after a little while, he could hear her soundly asleep.

She must have been exhausted. But even so, she couldn’t pass the night alone, and had to lean on Subaru in the end.

Taking a glance at the sleeping Emilia, quietly breathing beside him, Subaru lightly traced his finger over her adorable cheeks, and confirmed the traces of her tears.

—This was as far as she will go, he decided.

Chapter 23: Step of the Way

1

Subaru: “Alright, I’ll just be gone for a bit. We should be back by tomorrow and… I know I said this a few times already, but, there’s no need to push yourself by taking the Trials anymore. Just rest a little.”

Emilia: “I know~ I get it already. Jeez, Subaru, you don’t have to look so worried. I’ll be good and take the day off, just like you told me to.”

Emilia pouted her lips as she said this, looking up at Subaru aboard the carriage.

Subaru wryly smiled in front of her adorable antics, and made an effort to hide the pain inside his heart.

The time was a little before noon on the same day as his conversation with Garfiel, and several hours had passed since he visited Emilia in her room.

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki, we’re all set here. You can just say the word.”

Subaru: “Oooh, that was quick. The speed at which you must be able to skip town after committing some heinous deed is truly impressive. From now on, shall I call you “Otto the Night-Skipper”?”

Otto: “I’ve no idea what the term “Night-Skipper” means, but I’m almost definitely certain it’s something disreputable and so I’m afraid I’ll have to firmly decline.”

Otto curled his lip into a scowl and started shooting Subaru a stink look, to which Subaru only shot an unreservedly-wry smile in return. Looking past Otto, one could see the dragon carriages of Subaru’s party lined up along the road.

Numbering six in total—they would accommodate 42 people in all. Which would be the total number of refugees and hired merchants from Earlham village, if you didn't count the one extra traveling merchant who happened to be tagging along. This meant that,

Subaru: "Really, it's almost disappointing how easily they went along with the idea... Honestly, I was preparing for a little more resistance."

Ram: "That's because Barusu cleverly went behind everyone's back to negotiate with Garf beforehand, isn't it? You figured Lady Ryuzu can be reasoned with, so as long as Garf didn't interrupt your negotiations, there won't be any problems."

While Subaru was busy scratching his neck, Ram, dressed in her usual maid's uniform, threw these words at him from the base of the carriage. From beneath her peach colored hair, she was looking up at him with her usual expression of disdain.

Ram: "Ram would have liked to lodge a complaint about how you didn't obtain freedom for Master Roswaal as well, but..."

Subaru: "Being the HOSTAGE OF ALL HOSTAGES, he's a bit more suited to stay behind, I think. Even if you wanted me to negotiate for him, I wouldn't know what to say to them. All things considered, it was already a pretty big accomplishment getting them to let the villagers go, so please understand!"

Ram: "…you did well, for a Barusu, that's all I have to say. Now show some gratitude to Ram."

Subaru: "Why do I get the feeling that if I thanked you here, I'd be losing out somehow?"

Just as all of Heaven and Earth shuddered at Ram's acknowledgement of Subaru's success, Subaru turned his eyes back on Emilia, who was fidgeting beside her.

There was anxiety and gloom within her violet eyes, but when she noticed Subaru's gaze turning towards her, she quickly chased those sentiments away.

Emilia: “Thank you… You know, if you hadn’t gone ahead and said anything, I, don’t think I would’ve even noticed what was going on.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan already has an important enough role as Emilia-tan. All the things that are going on around you, you can just leave that stuff to us. You’ve only got one big task to focus on. And we’ll handle everything else, so don’t worry.”

Watching Subaru forcefully slap a hand onto his chest, Emilia covered her mouth, but couldn’t stop a giggle from leaking out. Then, wiping away the tears that had welled up in her eyes, she nodded with an “Enn”, and,

Emilia: “I understand. Then I’ll leave it to you, Subaru. And…”

Subaru: “I know, I know. Don’t worry, as soon as I get everyone to the village, I’ll come back to you right away. Of course, I could also take the opportunity to bring back any precious stuffed animals that you may have forgotten at the Mansion?”

Emilia: “I outgrew that stuff a long time ago. Also, I’m not asking you to come back quickly. But of course, I would be happier if you did come back quickly…”

Subaru: “Then, what’re you trying to say?”

Emilia: “…come back safe. Of course, the sooner you come back the better, but, I’d be even happier if you came back safe.”

Subaru: “AAGH, my heart!”

Wriggling around for a second, overwhelmed by the pain of LOVE in his chest, Subaru covered his love-sick heart with both hands and stumbled backwards. Emilia tilted her head in confusion, but Subaru, still busy hyperventilating, extended his palm towards her.

Subaru: “OK OK, I got it already. Quickly, and safely, I promise I will come back to your side. Unless you want me to pinky-promise too?”

Emilia: “That thing you did with Petra about what happens if you lie? …Sure, ok. Let’s do it.”

Subaru: “Ouuuggghh, so straightforward.”

Emilia took a step forward, and Subaru bent his knees to meet her. Just like this, Subaru, from up on the carriage, and Emilia, standing below, tangled their pinkies together. And then, chanting out the traditional spell, they sealed their promise as their fingers parted.

For a moment, Emilia continued to stare at her finger that had separated from Subaru’s, and then, she took him into her violet eyes,

Emilia: “Subaru. To a spirit-arts user, promises are…”

Subaru: “Super important, right? I’ve learned my lesson, and I’ve become painfully aware of that. So I’ll never break another promise with Emilia-tan again. Also, I’ll try to keep my promises with other people too, if possible. I hope you can accept that.”

Emilia: “Hmm, I suppose I’ll have to.”

A smile emerged on Emilia’s face. And, after making sure of this, Subaru straightened up his legs, did a big stretch, turned around, looked up, and raising both his hands up into the air,

Subaru: “Al-right, let’s get this show on the road! Destination: Earlham village! Total travelers: 44! This is a great migration we’re doing here, I’ll be counting on all of you from here on!”

A series of cheers went up in response to Subaru’s shouting, and, just like this, the great migration got underway.

—After the hard-won victory at the negotiations, the released hostages embarked upon the road leading back home.

2

After he concluded his conversation with Garfiel, while watching over the stricken Emilia in her sleep, Subaru came to the decision—that he would accept Garfiel’s condition, and negotiate to release the hostages from the Sanctuary.

Once he had put Emilia to bed, Subaru waited for everyone to wake before gathering all the key players into Ryuzu's house, where he planned to put forth his proposal.

Given the battle of words he had with Garfiel, he had expected a fair amount of resistance. —But, in reality, Ryuzu did nothing but agree with him the whole time. Rather than oppose him, she had even offered several additional concessions. The result was that everything had gone exactly as he envisioned, but still, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was different from what he expected.

Later, when Emilia woke up, he explained to her everything that had happened, and then gave the same explanation to the refugees inside the Cathedral. The villagers were surprised and skeptical at first, but when they understood that they would be allowed to return home safely, Subaru was happy to see them overjoyed.

Although Subaru was the reason they ended up in this situation in the first place, once he announced they would be allowed to leave, all the villagers showered their gratitude upon him, which was rather embarrassing. And after all of that, it was finally time to put the plan into action.

Otto: "But I have to say, this was pretty unexpected."

The one who said this was Otto, who was holding the reins beside Subaru.

Just like on the way to the Sanctuary, their dragon carriage was drawn by the earth dragons, Patrasche and Furufu, only, this time, Subaru was sitting next to Otto on the driver's bench.

Subaru: "Nnnuh?"

Otto: "You were asleep just now, weren't you?"

Subaru: "I was just deep in thought, and don't say that like I was hiding something or anything. Anyway, I was only half unconscious so I didn't hear what you said. So what were you saying?"

Otto: "If you're going to cover things up, at least have the courtesy to see it through to the end… At any rate, I was trying to say this current development was pretty unexpected.”

As usual, the back and forth between Subaru and Otto was all over the place. Perhaps because Otto had already gotten used to Subaru’s antics, he didn’t react as dramatically as before, but merely gave a perfunctory nudge at their surroundings to indicate what he was talking about.

Otto: “I didn’t think they’d let them go this easily. We merchants have a saying, “You should keep hold of all the weaknesses you can in case you have use for them later”“

Subaru: “Is that really a merchant’s expression? You sure that didn’t come from some corrupt Edo-period magistrate? My impression of your profession just became way way way way shadier. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Thinking back, Subaru had very few memories of Otto ever acting like a merchant. There was only the one time when he made the unsubstantiated claim that he had bought too much oil, when in fact, it was entirely possible he was just a pyromaniac. Even now, the background of this so-called merchant was quite suspect.

Otto: “What’s with those eyes looking at me like I’m someone suspicious?”

Subaru: “That’s because I am looking at someone totally suspicious here. Are you really a merchant? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do anything merchant-y in front of me.”

Otto: “Weren’t you the one who forced me, against my will, to file those documents and ledgers loaded to the brim with confidential information?! Are you suffering from amnesia?!”

Subaru: “No, that could simply be your clever attempt to convince someone who thought you were a spy that you really are a merchant. Thinking about it that way, you’re far more likely to be an enemy agent…”

Otto: “With that kind of ridiculous logic, it’d be easier for me to become a God than try to convince you of my innocence, Mr.

Natsuki.”

Subaru: “Hey, Patrasche, did you hear that? This guy sitting next to me just said he thinks he can become a God… I’m a bit worried about my safety.”

Otto: “Huh? Dammit! Why did you have to… aaah! Now even Patrasche is looking at me with a look of pity! Please stop it already!”

Responding to Subaru’s voice, Patrasche made a short cry. Hearing this, Otto fell into despair and hugged his head with his hands. That seemed to have been Patrasche offering her own input about Otto. In times like these, one might prefer not to have the Divine Protection of “Anima-Whispering”. It was then, that,

Garfiel: “Y’fools don’t change no matter where y’go do’ya?”

Garfiel, who was running alongside their dragon carriage, interjected himself into the conversation.

The dragon carriages were traveling down an animal path through the middle of the forest, so they weren’t at top speeds. Even if Subaru had been sprinting with all his strength, he wouldn’t have managed to keep up with their current pace, but Garfiel was easily able to catch up, and accompany the winding carriages of refugees.

Not even short of breath, Garfiel was kicking off the ground and leaping great distances with each stride.

Garfiel: “Y’know, y’got the charm o’ someone straight outta “The Tale of th’End of Bakimu the Horse Wrangler”“

Subaru: “Aren’t idioms supposed to be short and clear ways to express your meaning to whoever you’re talking to? …It doesn’t even feel like we’re having the same conversation here.”

Garfiel: “Huh? What ya try’n to say, y’bastard?”

Garfiel crimpled up his nose in annoyance, and Subaru simply shrugged at that carnivorous expression, saying “Come to think of it”, Subaru: “You volunteered to guide us out, but I don’t see you doing much guiding. Aren’t you kinda shirking on your duties?”

Garfiel: “Didn’t want it t’be like this. But y’fella’s earth dragons’re pretty smart, aren’ they? They only walked this road once but they’re remeberin’ it perfectly.”

Subaru: “Well, that’s only to be expected of my girl Patrasche. This is just beginner stuff for her. Stuff like leaping through a hoop of fire, balancing on a ball, or even riding a unicyc-… hey wait, Miss Patrasche, why’re you swerving around?!”

In response to Subaru’s outrageous claims about her acrobatic abilities, Patrasche began expressing her displeasure by running in zig-zags. Subaru, gluing himself to his seat, started making a scene aboard the carriage. Observing this display, Garfiel snorted “What in th’hell are you doin’?”, and then, looking toward Otto who was trying to hang onto the reins,

Garfiel: “Lil’bro here said somethin’ interestin’ just now. Somethin’ ‘bout bein’ “Profitable t’be grabin’ yer opponents where he’s weak”?”

Otto: “Yeah, I do think it’s true. Not that I personally believe it’s a good way of thinking, but…for instance, the more hostages you have at your disposal, the more options you give yourself for how to use them, right? Like, if you want to create a sense of danger, the more hostages you have, the more options you’ll have to…”

Subaru: “Oyoyoy! There’s some serious doubt whether this “little bro” is legitimately a merchant here. He’s definitely the kind of guy who’s committed some horrible atrocities and was forced to flee a country somewhere!”

Otto: “Why are you so convinced I’m some kind of criminal?!”

“I wonder why Otto always manages to fall right into those”, Subaru tilted his head, thinking. Then, to get the conversation back on track, “Anyhow”, he started again,

Subaru: “For the time being, basically, it’s because I already talked it over with Garfiel beforehand, and decided to accept his condition… that's why the rest of it went so smoothly."

Otto: "Accept… your condition?"

Since Subaru didn't seem to want to talk about it, Otto raised the question to Garfiel instead. Garfiel grinned with his canine fangs, before opening his mouth to speak,

Garfiel: "Simple, ain't it? Instead of the crybaby Princess, our boy Subaru'll be finishin' the rest'of the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary right'n quick."

Otto: "That's…"

Otto widened his eyes at Gafiel's words, before shooting a sidelong glance at Subaru. Then, after opening and closing his mouth a few times, mumbling incoherently,

Otto: "Are you sure that's alright, Mr. Natsuki?"

Subaru: "What do you mean "alright"?"

Otto: "You're already taking the Trials, so that's not the issue… but I suppose what I mean to ask is if it's alright to just take away Emilia-sama's part in the whole thing."

That was Subaru's dilemma as well. Although Otto had struggled to get the words out, he had cut to the heart of the matter. Subaru frowned, but Otto continued to push the issue,

Otto: "Of course, I have no idea what the Trials would entail, and I understand Emilia-sama's isn't doing very well. But, if Emilia is to win the Royal Selection, she needs the support from the people of the Sanctuary and the Roswaal domain, right? This is her chance to get both at once, and I don't know if throwing that away so soon is…"

Subaru: "It's time… we don't know how long it will take. If, in the meantime, her base collapses from underneath her, that would be the perfect definition of putting the cart before the horse. More important than that is Emilia herself…"

Otto: “You think she’s at her limit, then? I would disagree. I’ve only known her a short time, but I think Emilia-sama’s made of some tough stuff. Sure, right after she came out of the first trial, she was pretty out of sorts, but other than that she’s been able to keep herself together pretty well, don’t you think?”

Upon hearing Otto’s perspective, Subaru bit down hard on his lip.

It’s true that from Otto’s point of view, it must look like that Subaru was selling her short.

—But, what Otto didn’t see, was that she had been putting all her effort into just keeping up appearances whenever there was anyone besides Subaru around her.

Just like when she was sending him off at the start of their present journey. Whenever a third party was involved, she seemed to be able to maintain the same calm demeanor as always.

On the other hand, when it was just her and Subaru alone, the facade would fall away, and she would return to the miserable state Subaru had found her in that morning.

She depended on Subaru—and her true state was not something anyone else could see.

Seeing Subaru holding his tongue, Otto wanted to continue speaking. But it was someone else who interrupted him,

Garfiel: “That’s ‘nuff. We’re ‘bout to pass through the Barrier o’ the Sanctuary. I can’t go no further than that.”

Subaru: “...Just out of curiosity, but, what would happen if you tried to force yourself through the Barrier?”

Garfiel: “Haven’t tried it so I wouldn’t know, but I imagin’ it’d be similar to when your Princess lost consciousness. But it doesn’t matter either way.”

Glad that the topic changed, Subaru jumped right on it, while Garfiel turned his head, and leaped into the air. Without a sound, he nimbly landed on the luggage compartment of Subaru’s dragon carriage, and pointed a finger at the two on the driver's bench who were looking back over their shoulders.

Garfiel: "Accordin' to the condition, after you drop 'em off, you just turn right around and get your asses back here… Ah, well, that lil'bro next to ya don't matter though."

Otto: "Stop joking around, of course I'm coming back. After all, I still haven't even gotten an audience with Margrave Mathers yet!"

Subaru: "Oh? Really? You still haven't introduced yourself?"

Otto: "That's right! I've been asking for a week, but no matter what time I come Miss Ram tells me "Your timing is inconvenient" or "He's resting"… and keeps chasing me away!"

Angrily breathing out his nostrils with his shoulders huffing up and down, maybe Otto truly had divinely bad luck when it came to timing, but—

Subaru: "Well, that was probably on purpose. Ever since the Trials started, they've been giving me some half-assed excuses to not let me see him too."

Subaru mumbled his own guess under his breath.

After they had begun the Trials, Subaru had barely seen Roswaal at all. Always standing in between them, Ram had been rebuffing Subaru exactly as she had rebuffed Otto. On the surface, it was all for Roswaal's recuperation, but that was obviously just a pretense.

In fact, it seemed that ever since Subaru first told him that he had taken the Trial, Roswaal stopped taking any visitors.

Subaru couldn't forget the change in Roswaal's expression when he heard that Subaru had passed and Emilia had failed. At least, it was the first time he had ever seen such an expression from him before.

For just a brief moment, that care-free look on that painted clown-face fell away, and beneath it—was an emotion that was neither fury nor sorrow, but something more complicated altogether.

Garfiel: “Don’t put t’much thought into it, yeah? Anyway, when yer comin’ back just use the same road. This time I’ll pay ‘ttention so I don’t attack ya, but don’t forget the password.”

Subaru: “Password?”

Garfiel: “Long as ya say the words when crossin’ th’ barrier, nobody will be assailin’ ya, got it? The password is “Baira Baira below th’Grimoire”“

Subaru: “Huh, what? “Baibai to the grime”?”

That was the worst password ever, using a completely incomprehensible idiom.

Subaru scowled. It was immediately obvious who came up with this password.

Garfiel just stood there looking smug as it was all natural, while Otto was bewilderedly writing down the passphrase on a memo. Leaving the task of remembering important things to Otto, Subaru gave a long sigh, and,

Subaru: “Anyway, long as we say it we can come back in, no questions asked, right?”

Garfiel: “I ain’t the only one who’s on patrol, y’know. There’re others more hot blooded than I am. From their point o’ view, that migh’ be the perfect time to take ya out and stop ya from completin’ the Trials.”

Subaru: “…I do remember you saying something like that.”

Ryuzu was at the head of the faction that wanted to be liberated from the Sanctuary. But there was also the other opposing faction that wanted to stay.

Garfiel’s warning, then, was telling them not to let their guard down and give the other faction a chance to take advantage of their carelessness.

Subaru: “Ok, gotcha. Thanks for all the ways you’ve been looking out for us… I guess there’s no reason to say goodbyes, since we’ll be seeing each other again in half a day or so. But, thanks anyway.”

Garfiel: “Jus’ followin’ orders from the old hag, I don’t care one way or the other. More import’ntly, well uh…”

When Subaru thanked him, Garfiel waved his hand to dismiss him, but his words trailed off toward the end. Seeing something quite uncharacteristic from him, which Subaru furrowed his brows. And then, Garfiel finally continued “Uuuh”,

Garfiel: “When y’get back to the mansion, is that Frederica girl gonna be there?”

Subaru: “Yeah, she should be. Speaking of which, its sounds like you know her somehow. What’s up with that?”

Garfiel: “We’ve got a complicated relationship, that’s all. Nothing I really wanna talk about, it’s just…”

Subaru: “I’ll tell her that you’re totally thinking about her. Maybe she’ll even have a message for you too.”

Garfiel: “…I ain’t askin’ you t’…”

Suddenly averting his eyes, as if to get away from Subaru’s smirk, Garfiel jumped right off the carriage. And, as he landed on the ground, the train of dragon carriages passed through the Barrier between the Sanctuary and the Forest. Putting both of his hands on his waist, Garfiel sent them off, shouting,

Garfiel: “Don’t even think’of runnin’ away, Subaru! Y’better keep your promise even if it kills ya! That was my one condition for lettin’ you outta here!”

Subaru: “Yeah, no worries on that count. My promise-keeping POWERS’ been super buffed lately!”

Letting these words of farewell resound throughout the forest, with a smile, Subaru raised up a fist at the distant figure. And Garfiel matched it by pumping up his own fist in response.

Watching as the caravan vanished into the shadows of the forest, Garfiel continued standing there with his fist raised up in the air.

3

—After passing through the Barrier and coming out of the forest, they didn't encounter any problems on the rest of the road.

If nothing got in the way, it should be about eight hours journey from the Sanctuary to the Mansion. They stopped twice to rest, but since the villagers were eager to return to their homes, they kept their breaks short and forced themselves to continue.

So, all in all, it was only eight hours later when the refugees returned to Earlham Village. Having departed early in the afternoon, when they arrived, it was already several hours after the shroud of night covered over the world.

Subaru: "My butt hurts from all that sitting...but that wasn't too bad."

Getting off from the dragon carriage, and giving his waist a twist, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief.

All around the village in the night, voices of rejoicing and reunion sprung up, and there were even a few shedding tears of joy in their midst. Considering the calamities that had assailed this village, Subaru decided that it was not an overreaction after all, and that no one could really ridicule them for that.

For the first time in several days, with the return of the rest of the villagers, Earlham village came to life in spite of the night. The villagers who had mostly wallowed in gloom inside the Sanctuary now all showed the same smiles on their faces.

And the other half who had waited for them in the village, were finally relieved to see their family safely returned to them.

Otto: "Mr. Natsuki, are we heading back right away?"

While Subaru watched over the bustling crowd from a distance, Otto scampered over after looking around for him.

Allowing Otto to catch his breath, Subaru shook his head with a "Nah",

Subaru: "There's no rush, we can take a little break before heading back. Besides, I should stop by the Mansion to explain everything to Frederica and Petra."

Otto: "Aah, that's right. I mean, I also have some things I need to discuss with my fellow merchants."

Subaru: "Discuss what with your fellow merchants?"

Otto pointed to the owners of the six dragon carriages standing at the side.

They had been hired to evacuate the villagers, but wound up with the misfortune of getting imprisoned in the Sanctuary along with them. Now that they were freed, they were, above all, relieved, but their gazes toward Subaru were,

Subaru: "I must be imagining this, but, isn't this supposed to be a Parallel World? Why do I get the feeling their eyes all have Dollar signs in them?"

Otto: "Back when we were hired, the condition was the purchase of our goods as well as additional compensation to be negotiated later. So I'd like to come to a consensus on how much compensation we'll actually demand. I won't be proposing anything outrageous, of course, but seeing that they've been burdened with the hostage situation…it might get a little pricey, so be prepared."

Subaru: "Well, it's not like it'll be my wallet getting plundered. As long as you use appropriate discretion, it wouldn't be too bad to see Ros-chi's face go pale every once in a while?"

Otto: "That's my Mr. Natsuki! You understand!"

Clapping his hands, Otto happily strutted over to his fellow merchants.

Hearing the good news brought by Otto's triumphant return, the merchants' cheers resounded through the village in the night.

Somehow, Subaru got the feeling their celebrations sounded even happier than the villagers having their reunions, but he decided to consciously put it out of his mind, and straightened himself up.

In any case, there shouldn't be any problems in the village for now. Otto will take care of the merchants' demands, and Roswaal will end up dealing with it. Somewhat looking forward to see what expression will come on Roswaal's face when he gets hit with the bill, Subaru headed towards the Mansion.

After walking fifteen minutes from Earlham village—at the end of his path stood the lonely Roswaal Mansion.

In the dark of night, only the Mansion's lights asserted their existence within its shadowy contours, lending the place an eerie aura from the distance, in the hours after sunset.

Subaru remarked on this as he stood before the front gates, absentmindedly staring at the Mansion. Naturally, the majority of the Mansion's lights were out, and there were only light flowing out of the entry hall and the servant's rooms. As well as a room on the highest floor—which, surely, must be Roswaal's office.

Subaru: "Otto sorted all the paperworks, but over the week it must have piled up again."

Frederica, being the all-powerful-maid that she is, wouldn't have lost to Otto when it came to managing paperworks, but that wasn't the only task she had to take care of. Even with Petra's assistance, maintaining the entire Mansion required a considerable amount of effort.

From the fact that she was still working away in the office in the middle of the night, one could imagine the immensity of her duties.

Subaru: "One way or another, I'll pull that Otto even deeper into this and work him like a mule as the Emilia-faction-paperwork-machine. I'll make him the official office robot."

While thinking of plots to trap that young man in the village with loose cheeks and dreams of big money, Subaru pushed open the gates and entered the Mansion grounds.

Heading to the entryway, he struck the door with the falcon-shaped knocker,

Subaru: “Apologies for the late night visit. I’m here from the Fire Departme~nt.”

Sending sharp knocks ringing throughout the night, Subaru shouted out an appropriate call as usual.

Speaking of which, how do the people in this world handle fires and disasters, anyway? Subaru tilted his head, wondering about this pointless question. But,

Subaru: “There’s no reply.”

And here he thought Frederica would swoop in to respond, swift like the wind, but seeing that was not the case, Subaru dropped down his shoulders.

After a little while longer, Subaru decided that no one was coming and abandoned waiting. Then, grandly pushing open the door,

Subaru: “Oooo~oy, I’m ho~~me. Food! Bath! Bed!”

And, shouting these three orders like he owned the place, Subaru struck out a pose. But there was still no reply.

Tasting the nostalgic sensation of sliding along the floor in awkward silence all by himself, Subaru headed up the stairs—to the servant quarters to look for Petra.

Subaru: “Frederica’s probably in the office. I’ll go find Petra first…then, I’ll have to look for Beako too.”

One by one, the three people who remained behind in the Mansion surfaced in Subaru’s mind.

Regardless of the precocious Petra or the politely insolent Frederica, the reunion Subaru had to prepare for was the one with that Drill-Haired Loli.

Last time, the way they parted was indeed a way to part.

Without giving him a single answer to his vital questions, she had chased him out, sobbing, with an expression full of sadness.

Subaru: "I'll have to apologize… but it'll be kind of weird. I feel like I didn't really do anything wrong…"

Even so, Subaru got the feeling that something would be different if he met her again and talked.

Besides, he'd like to think that he must have advanced a little by saying farewell to his past. With his current state of mind, perhaps he would be able to face her a little differently than last time.

And so,

Subaru: "The first time was only a skirmish…well that's one way of thinking about it."

Subaru gave the door a knock, and immediately swung it open as if to surprise the person inside, but he dropped his shoulders once again.

Walking in on a delightfully-embarrassing-clothe-changing-time—was not something he was hoping for considering the target was a little girl, but no such thing happened, since there was no one in the room.

It was a room decorated to Petra's tastes, adorned with cute little items, and kept tidy and organized—but its owner was nowhere to be found.

Inside the room lighted by the crystal lamps, Subaru tilted his head,

Subaru: "Going out without turning off the lights doesn't seem like something a dependable girl like Petra would do…if she isn't here, maybe she's in the office studying?"

It was possible, if the spartan Frederica was involved.

In addition to the chores, she might be teaching Petra office work as well to turn her into another all-powerful maid. It would be a great help, but since Petra was already overtaking Subaru in the domestic duties, if she overtook him in office work as well, Subaru will have no hole to crawl into.

Subaru: “No-no-no, she can’t even do all her arithmetic’s yet; I still have the advantage! Don’t you underestimate the modern Japanese compulsory education!”

Muttering this while flying up the stairs, heading to the highest floor—he arrived at a double door in the dead center of the hallway, and, clearing his throat again, he knocked.

The heavy sound echoed outward, and surely it was sent into the room. But there was no reply.

Subaru: “…”

It was all too strange. Subaru’s accumulated wariness so far was now raised to a whole different level. Trying to cover up that feeling with some lighthearted humor, Subaru swept his gaze down the hallway from end to end, and then, at the office door itself. He leaned his ear against the door to listen to what was inside, but no sound came through the thick, heavy door. There was nothing else he could gather if he continued to stay outside.

—Petra’s room showed no sign of being disturbed. It was neatly arranged, and her bed had been made as if she was just getting ready to sleep.

It was the same for the Mansion, at least on the surface, and there seemed to be nothing out of place. Cleaned and organized with a thoroughness that could only belong to Frederica, there was not a speck of dust left on the windowsills.

So Subaru’s wariness was only elevated because he hadn’t seen either of the girls.

Subaru: “—hu.”

He lightly pushed on the doors, and they opened without a sound.

The next moment, light flooded out from the room into the hallway, and relying on that light, Subaru scanned the room's interiors. There was an ebony desk, and a leather chair. From the direction of the bookshelves on the wall, a wind came blowing through—The windows were closed. But he could feel a cold wind was blowing. Intuitively, he knew that something was strange.

Sliding over the floor as he sneaked into the room, Subaru followed the direction of the wind—and saw it.

The bookshelf in the back of the room had been shifted sideways, revealing a usually-hidden door installed into the wall. Beyond it, was a spiral staircase that extended downwards, far, far beyond sight—

Subaru: "Right. There was a hidden passage here. I remember, I remember."

It was in the previous loop.

Despairing after the villagers of Earlham had been slaughtered at the Witch Cult's hands, and after finding Rem and Ram's corpses in the Estate, when his mind was an inch away from shattering, Subaru arrived here.

Then, passing through this hidden passage into the undergrounds, there—

Subaru: "I was frozen by Puck, I think."

There was no way to be sure. But he clearly remembered the frozen bodies of the Witch Cultists who must have pursued Emilia into the same passage, as well as his own similar end, and the Return by Death that followed.

After that, without placing much importance on this detail, he had forgotten to even verify the existence of this underground passage,

Subaru: "But why is it now…"

If it was being used, at least it meant there was a need to evacuate.

As for who might have used it, it could only someone within the Mansion who knew of this passage's existence—probably Frederica. If she and Petra escaped through this passage, that would be the simplest explanation. But the question is,

Subaru: "What, were they running from?"

As intelligent as Frederica is, she must have had considerable reasons to make this decision.

Since there was no sign of an attack inside the Mansion, she must have detected the imminent danger beforehand. Thinking to this point, the words "Witch Cult" flashed across Subaru's mind, but he immediately shook his head and drove off that thought,

Subaru: "If that were the case, it'd be too unnatural for Frederica to not leave a single note. Besides, the villagers in Earlham didn't notice anything either…if it was something as dangerous as the Witch Cult, she would have done something to prevent the villagers from getting caught up in it."

At least, Frederica's support for the Roswaal-backed Emilia was not in question. If so, then she would have done her best to take the optimum measures to handle this situation. If the villagers didn't know about this, then it couldn't have been the Witch Cult.

In any case,

Subaru: "Frederica and Petra probably already left the Mansion…then, I'll."

For a moment, Subaru was about to enter the passage to meet up with Frederica and Petra, but what stopped in his tracks was the girl whose name hadn't occurred to him of up to now.

If Frederica had judged beforehand that they must leave the Mansion, surely, they would have taken Rem along as well.

On the other hand, there was also,

Subaru: "As far as I know, Beatrice isn't the kind of kid who can read the mood."

There was also that impudent Drill-Haired Loli, who certainly would have refused Frederica's proposal.

She would have shut herself off inside the Forbidden Library, and made a fuss insisting that she will be fine no matter what, and kicked aside all their worries and concerns, and, at last, without a doubt, she would have sat there alone with a lonely expression on her face. Because he knew this without a doubt,

Subaru: "I'll pull her out…!"

If nobody else could bring her out, then Subaru will do it himself.

It doesn't matter how firmly she believes in the safety of her own fortress.

Knowing that danger was closing in on this place, there was no way he could leave a little girl behind.

Subaru: "And since I've made up my mind about that—!"

Turning his back to the hidden passage, Subaru took a sharp breath, and dashed out of the office.

The most sure-fire way to find Beatrice would have been to open every single door in the Mansion from end to end, but, for Subaru, somewhere along the way, he'd just somehow get the feeling that this door would be the one. And sure enough, he would see her on the other side.

So, starting from the doors on the uppermost floor—

Subaru: "T-tt?"

The foot he just swung out in his stride tangled onto something, and Subaru rolled onto the floor.

A rather embarrassing start, was the first thing that came to mind. Stumbling over right after acting cool was not quite what he was aiming for.

Pushing his hands onto the hallway carpet, Subaru turned around to see what he tripped on. And he saw, a little in front of the door to the office, something had dropped on the floor.

It was pink, and very long, and stretched on for several steps all the way to Subaru's feet. Following on from there, if you asked just where it would end, it wouldn't be very difficult to guess.

—It was something that had spilled out the side of Subaru's opened belly.

"—ha?"

The left side of his jacket had been cleanly sliced through, and his pink entrails were spilling out from the gap.

They trailed all the way from the door to Subaru's feet, tangling them up. In other words, somewhere along the way, his stomach had been cut open without him realizing it, or something along those lines.

"...oughbh." The moment he took this in, chunks of clotting blood rose up choking in his throat, as his vision became painted with red.

He tried using his fingers to push the organs that spilled out due to his abdominal pressure back into the gap that was pushing it out, but, running out of strength, his knees collapsed from under him. Unable to hold up his body, he sprawled onto the floor.

He couldn't understand what had happened to him. Surely, he had just started running…

"—Didn't I tell you? Didn't we promise?"

Suddenly, he heard a voice.

In front, above the fallen Subaru's head, someone was speaking.

He lacked the strength to raise his head. His consciousness was desperately trying to pull back the overflowing intestines, the gushing blood, and the world that was drawing away.

His body heat was rapidly dropping. With every cough, the blood clots jamming in his throat splashed onto his face, and, with eyes that were starting to blur, Subaru desperately tried to hold onto this world.

“This is the end,” his intuition told him.

Somewhere in his heart, he understood this, but “Subaru cannot end like this”, he scolded back.

If he didn’t learn anything, he cannot let it end. Just one thing, anything, don’t let it end until you’ve learned something. Something, something something something something something.

The footsteps sent out ripples. A black shadow was standing in the center of the corridor stained red by chunks of his blood.

Black clothes. Slender. Black hair. Looking down on him lovingly, with those lustful eyes.

Running these through his mind, and remembering the tactile sensation of “Belly Sliced Open”, Subaru understood.

It wasn’t the Witch Cult, but a genuine threat, nonetheless. It was—

“That until the next time we meet, you should take good care of your bowels?”

A deviant declaration of love.

Subaru certainly caught it—as his consciousness began to fade.

Fading, fading, fading, darkening, darkening, until,

Everything vanished in the end—and started over again.

—The curtain rose on the Fourth Death-Loop.

COLOR NORVAK

Bonus Short Stories

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days I

1

That day, Frederica Baumann was terribly bewildered.

Long, shimmering blonde hair, and bright jade eyes like gemstones. Tall for a woman, and limbs that, while slender, were well-exercised. With that body wrapped in a tidy maid uniform, she resolutely held an upright posture.

“Those who are servants must never fail to remain calm and collected.”

These were the words of the mentor who taught Frederica the basics of being a servant. Due to a particular reason, the relationship with that mentor wasn’t very agreeable, but the words were without fault, and she took them to heart. Frederica, who always tried to maintain a calm, collected attitude, nevertheless now was neither calm nor collected, but helplessly staring in amazement. The cause was…

“Umm… I’m sorry, but would you mind if I asked you to repeat that, please?”

“…Of course. I received the recent recruiting announcement from the mansion, and I’ve come to offer my services. I’m Petra Leyte. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

The location was Roswaal Manor’s reception room, where the two of them sat across a low table set with tea and snacks. Facing the one introducing herself—the girl called Petra—Frederica raised a slightly thick eyebrow.

“…”

In front of Frederica, Petra sat with her hands clasped on her knees, awaiting an answer.

As a first impression, Frederica thought she was an adorable girl.

Her neck-length brown hair was tinged with red, and she had large, round eyes and a lovely face that was made for a smile. Her voice was like a fairy singing, a delight to listen to, and her cleanliness and well-chosen clothing also gave a good impression.

Her mentor had also said “To avoid bringing shame upon your master, first put your appearance in order.”

So, based on her first impression, Petra’s evaluation was close to perfect. Since she’d come in response to the recruiting, one could believe that she was ready to work, as well. However, there was one big question.

“I’m sorry for asking repeatedly, but you do understand what the recruiting is for, yes? You’re not here to play?”

“No. I wouldn’t come to the lord’s mansion to play… well, I did, but that’s a separate matter.”

“…You have been here to play?”

“…Um, Subaru invited me.”

As she blushed, Petra touched a finger to her red cheeks. Even the gesture was cute.

Recalling the conduct of the black-haired young man, Frederica felt Petra’s response was likely true, and she covered her mouth with a hand and sighed.

Petra’s outlook was optimistic, and she met all the recruiting requirements. In other words -

“…Well, then. You have the desire and determination to work as a maid here at the mansion of Roswaal L. Mathers. Isn’t that so?”

With a serious expression, Frederica asked Petra that with a slightly hardened voice. Her gaze had a hint of intimidating intent in it. Under that hard gaze,

“Yes, of course. I’m looking forward to working with you, Miss Frederica.”

Not intimidated in the slightest, Petra gave her reply with a cheerful smile.

2

The position Petra had applied for was working at the mansion as Frederica's subordinate.

The call for new maids had a simple, but urgent reason behind it. In short, it was impossible for Frederica to manage the huge Roswaal estate by herself.

It would be one thing if this was a short-term problem, but in the long term, it was sure to fall apart somewhere.

"Perfection is impossible. However, one must strive for perfection."

These were also her mentor's words. Frederica had taken them to heart, and while she wasn't a perfectionist, her philosophy was to always be working towards it.

As a result, Frederica, whose job was "Management and Maintenance of the Mansion", was permitted a degree of discretion, if she deemed it necessary. This also applied to hiring new staff, and with the sense of depending on Roswaal's generosity, she had embarked on this recruitment.

Given the urgency of the situation, the recruiting was limited to the nearby village of Earlham. Regardless, because of the events that had just occurred, the village's view of the mansion had greatly improved from what Frederica remembered. There weren't many young ladies, but hopes were still high…That was Frederica's assessment.

So, when only a single applicant responded, and that one a girl twelve years of age, it seemed like a serious mistake.

"…?"

Petra, sitting on the sofa, looked up at Frederica while waiting for her response. But, unable to completely hide her nervousness, she had been raising and lowering her teacup, and had repeatedly checked on Frederica’s expression with quick glances.

For a twelve-year-old, she seemed almost too clever for her age.

Of course, Petra understood that even if she did meet all the recruiting requirements, it wasn’t an easy position to be hired for. Given that she had applied anyways, there was no room to question her determination.

“While that’s true, what we really need is someone who can start helping right away…”

Looking frustrated, Frederica closed her eyes.

For the current recruitment, if they had time to spare for training a new maid, Petra would certainly have been hired. However, under the current conditions, they couldn’t spare the time it would take to educate Petra in the basics of being a maid.

Making Frederica spend time on training would negate the entire point of hiring help.

“So, what do you think…?”

As Frederica thought about this and that, Petra hesitantly spoke to her. Despite having her heart shaken by the pleading look of a apprehensive girl, Frederica came to the only conclusion she could.

…Overlooking her for the current hiring, she would gently send Petra home, without hurting her feelings.

“Yes, indeed. Firstly, then, what can you do? And perhaps you could also describe to me how that will be helpful, as a servant of the household.”

“Indeed… As I mentioned earlier, this isn’t my first time in the mansion. Because of that, I’m familiar with most of the rooms in the mansion.”

“You… you know where to find most of the rooms in the mansion?”

“Yes. When I was here before, I had a quick tour, so I’m fairly confident.”

The attempt to convince Petra to give up due to lack of ability was blown off course by an unexpected response.

One could be forgiven for wondering if that statement wasn’t an exaggeration, or simply idle talk, but the eyes of the girl looking at Frederica were clear. She didn’t want to think that, at her age, this girl could lie as easily as she could breathe. Perhaps it was true, then.

“But you say you’ve had a tour of the mansion? Such opportunities should be very rare, how did you happen to…?”

“Um, Subaru invited us, so my friends and I from the village were playing tag with him in the mansion…”

“I see, a game of tag… what?! You played tag, here in this mansion?!”

For a moment, Frederica looked upwards in shock at what she had just heard. At that response, Petra’s eyes opened wide, and she touched a finger to the cheek of her worried face,

“Well, that’s one of Subaru’s strange but fun points, so don’t scold him too much. Please.”

“You are quite supportive of him, aren’t you. Given your difference in age, I would think having you say, ‘don’t scold him too much’ would be a bit embarrassing for him.”

“He did make sure to get permission from Lord Roswaal first.”

“I can believe that, both of the one that suggested it, and the one that permitted it…”

After Petra’s statement, Frederica sagged as she thought of the two people in question. Their clownish-looking lord would likely have been amused, and supported the black-haired young man’s suggestion.

“To be honest, I’m not quite sure what to make of Master Subaru either. If you've only heard the stories about him, he seems to have the achievements of a wise man, and yet…"

However, if Subaru heard himself called something like a wise man, he'd deny it strenuously.

Frederica and Subaru had only known each other for about a day, but she had concluded he had a personality like frivolity, bluster, keen wit, and many other things mixed together and exploded.

"Even then, playing tag… playing tag…"

"W…well then, on to the next topic! I'm quite good at sewing, too! Originally, I was hoping for a job making clothing, so I can mend clothing very well. Also, I've just started learning to cook, but mother said she hasn't got anything left to teach me."

"Such an industrious child… Incidentally, when did you begin to study cooking?"

"It was after the incident with the witchbeasts in the forest, so about a month and a half ago."

The way she was able to respond quickly and clearly was partly due to her answers being prepared, but also showed that she could think quickly.

A grasp of the mansion's interior, and capable of sewing and cooking. The ability to speak confidently also showed her suitability as a servant was exceptionally high. If she could take back what she'd said—well, it was only within her own mind, but if she was allowed to take back what she'd said, she wanted to hire Petra so badly she could taste it.

But, there was a reason that Frederica couldn't just jump to that conclusion. And, it was something that was even more important than ability, for working at the Roswaal estate.

That was…

"…I can see your strengths now. If I'm being honest, I did not intend to hire you. Due to your age."

"I suppose it can't be helped that you would think that. But, if so…?"

After the first part of Frederica's statement, Petra's wry smile changed into a sparkle in her eyes. The conversation was going in Petra's favor now. It wasn't unreasonable for her to be hopeful.

"It's just a bit too soon to celebrate, however."

The situation wasn't quite simple enough for Petra to get her wish just yet.

"Supposing, then, that you achieved your goal, you would be spending your time here in this mansion… here, in this household involved in the royal selection, a serious affair concerning all of the kingdom of Lugunica. Your actions reflect on the master, your words reflect on the master, and the way you live reflects on the master. You do understand this, then?"

It wasn't intended to be threatening. It was the truth, pure and simple.

If Petra were to work as a maid at this mansion, none of her behavior could be allowed to use her youth as an excuse. Her understanding of that fact, and determination to continue despite it, were necessary.

However, Petra responded.

"The person I care about is too special for me to get cold feet and give up. So, I can't stop now."

Smiling faintly, Frederica closed her eyes at the words of a young girl whose cheeks were dyed with her affection.

It wasn't a method for making up one's mind that she could approve of, but Frederica was very familiar with another girl who had made up her mind the same way that Petra was now.

"…Well then, there's nothing more to be said about that."

Relaxing a little, Frederica said that with an odd sense of satisfaction. Hearing that, Petra's face went blank for just a moment, and then her face lit up.

"Thank you very much, Miss Frederica! "

"Make no mistake, my guidance will be very strict. Please don't expect that I will allow my personal feelings to affect my judgement, or that I will go easy on you."

"Of course! "

"Also, I have one last, very important thing to tell you."

Holding up a finger, Frederica announced this to Petra with a strict tone of voice. At the chance in atmosphere, Petra straightened her back, and held her breath in preparation.

Frederica spoke to the earnest girl.

"From now on, make sure to call me Sister Frederica. In this mansion, it's custom… the rule for senior maids and junior maids."

"…"

At Frederica's words, Petra opened her round eyes wide and paused. She paused, and then immediately, with a face like a flower blooming,

"…Yes! Sister Frederica! "

As Petra called her that without hesitation, Frederica nodded in satisfaction.

3

The woman with long brown hair was, ah, of course, the person who had left such a clear mark on Petra's features.

"Oh, I do hope my child doesn't cause you any trouble at the mansion…"

Holding a hand to her cheek, the one taking a worried breath was Petra's mother. The Leyte household that had welcomed her—this was Petra's home in the village, and Frederica was chatting with the girl's mother.

As part of taking on Petra as a maid at the mansion, she wanted to speak with her parents. Not to make too much of a problem of that fact that she was twelve years of age, but there were certain forms to be observed.

That was Frederica's feeling on the matter, but Petra's mother was more than a little unsettled.

"But you're so kind, Miss Frederica, it sets my heart at ease. Please take care of my Petra for me."

"Oh no, thank you, we're so glad that she's coming to work with us. Aside from her, no one responded to the recruiting announcement, so…Honestly, I wasn't sure what I was going to do."

"Umm… yes, that's right."

With Petra properly handed over to her care, Frederica expressed her relief and let slip only a single idle complaint. Petra's mother's response to that was a bit unexpected.

Almost as though she was hiding something important…

"Is there something…?"

"…Actually, about the recruitment, Petra pleaded so much with the other village girls that they decided against applying for the job."

With a tone of voice wasn't so much that of someone admitting it from a sense of guilt, but more someone that was proud of her daughter's abilities, Petra's mother revealed the behind-the-scenes truth of this event.

When Frederica opened her eyes wide at that, Petra's mother gave her a mischievous wink,

“Our girl has a promising future, don't you think?”

“Yes… indeed.”

In the back of Frederica's mind, she was reminded of the phrase “Like mother, like daughter.”

With her adorable face, and very deft maneuvering… indeed, her future looked bright.

“Well, now I'm really looking forward to her training…”

Frederica let out a sigh of admiration that conveyed the hope in her heart.

Hopefully, she would be able to see the day that these expectations and hopes began to bloom.

“Please, allow me to look forward to that… Lady Emilia.”

Those words, whispered without opening her lips, didn't reach anyone's ears, and ever so quietly vanished away.

END

Garfiel and Ram's Complicated Love Affair

1

Ram's only master, Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, had a place at the north edge of his territory called The Lost Forest of Kremaldy.

It wasn't a particularly large area, but the forest made people lose their sense of time and direction, and it was well known for this odd characteristic that made it difficult to pass through. Hence, what might be found in the deeper parts of the forest was unknown, and it was given the nickname 'The Lost Forest'.

In truth, though it was known as 'The Lost Forest', its characteristic was no hindrance to those who knew how to deal with it. Such individuals included Roswaal, who was responsible for the territory, Ram, who served Roswaal—and those who had an interest in the 'Sanctuary' hidden in the very center of the forest.

"Heya, Ram. Looks like you've come to take care of that jerk again today."

Hailed from behind by a rough voice, Ram stopped walking and let out a small sigh.

She had gotten used to the sound of that voice. It was a distinctive way of speaking with a rather sharp accent, and it tended to drag out the end of words. It lingered in the ear, but not in the heart. Even when one understood the affection, and more, that was carried in it.

"My, what a greeting. To be mocking Master Roswaal, you must have become quite distinguished."

"Ha! It's ain't nothin' so big as mockin'. S'just normal for me ta poke fun at the jerk, always has been. 'Ketrek doesn't get along', they say."

Ram's words carried a hint of rebuke, but the response was unruffled. And, before Ram could turn around, he moved in front of her of her halted feet, showing his face. His short, blond hair stood upright, and the white scar on his bare forehead made him a person that drew the eye. His jade eyes were sharp like a beasts, and his mouthful of blade-like fangs only furthered that impression.

Ferociousness was evident in his clothing as well. Favoring ease of movement, his light clothing showed off his well-honed body, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call him the complete opposite of the one Ram was fond of.

Confronted with a face she knew all too well, Ram let out a deep sigh.

"Looking at a person's face and sighin' like tha', don'tcha think that'sa little rude, huh?"

"You intend to lecture Ram about her attitude? Try again after taking a careful look in a mirror. If, after meeting you again after a long time, the first thing someone does upon looking at you is sighing, then perhaps the problem is yours."

"Yer sure not afraid to say whatcha want. Whatta woman… I kinda like that, though."

At the unhidden poison in Ram's sharp tongue, he rang his fangs gleefully, and threw in a friendly word at the very end. At this, Ram sighed even more deeply.

How many years, how many times had she been telling him that it was pointless no matter how long he kept trying.

"Ram's feelings have already been devoted to another. You need to understand it's impossible, Garf."

"A losin' battle's just fine with me. Tha's how ya know it's worth takin' on."

This exchange, too, had been repeated many times.

In the face of Ram's firm pronouncement, he—Garfiel Tinsel—show not the least sign of wavering; indeed, he proudly declared his determination to keep up the fight.

At Garfiel’s declaration of his intention, Ram shook her head resignedly and whispered. “Even Ram has to admit surprise at the extent of her sinful attractiveness.”

“The way ya say that without hesitatin’, that’s so you, Ram.”

In their way of following their own feelings without hesitation, the two of them were very much alike.

2

‘Sanctuary’ was a sort of hidden village, existing in the very center of ‘The Lost Forest of Kremaldy’.

While it should probably have been called something like ‘The Sanctuary of Kremaldy’, the very existence of ‘Sanctuary’ was concealed, and it was often simply referred to as ‘Sanctuary’.

Because of its residents—mostly human and demi-human halves—it was an area burdened with ‘mixture’, and it could be called a place that kept its interactions with the outside world to an absolute minimum.

In this place where the majority of the population was ‘mixed’, pure-blooded beings were not welcomed. Even as one of the surviving oni, this applied to Ram as well, and there wasn’t anyone who would speak with her on positive terms.

Of course, that was setting aside a few exceptions—Garfiel, for example.

“Still, Garf, why are you at a place like this buying oil? Right now, you should be discussing matters with Master Roswaal and Miss Ryuzu. Even such as you are, you’re still one of the influential people in ‘Sanctuary’. Ignoring your responsibilities is shameful.”

“Don’tcha go makin’ things up when I haven’t even said anythin’! But yeah, yer exactly right I did run away cause talkin’ with them’s so borin’…”

“How shameless.”

“Yer merciless!”

While treading on the deep green moss-covered ground, Garfiel stayed by Ram’s side as she walked in ‘Sanctuary’. As the young man beside her looked up at the sky and mourned, Ram narrowed her light red eyes at him.

The reason behind her current visit to ‘Sanctuary’ was to be an attendant to Roswaal, her master.

This place was unique even within Roswaal’s domain, and it was handled differently from the normal areas. Not only were they free from taxes, but generous support was given for their needs, and it was an environment probably best called not so much a domain as a protected area. Roswaal’s policy was very friendly towards demi-humans and ‘mixes’, to the extent that gossip called him ‘Demi-human Lover’. However, that wasn’t simply good will…

“It means something that the residents are living here. It’s that sort of place, indeed.”

“Huh? Didja say somethin’?”

“I said, walking beside you is unpleasant. Walk a half-step behind me.”

“Ain’t that a custom from a real old era in Kararagi?”

Exposing an unexpected depth of knowledge, Garfiel craned his neck and looked proud of himself. At his happy attitude in spite of the entirely unfriendly exchange, Ram could only close her eyes.

A breath escaped that was neither amazement nor exhaustion at his dogged pursuit of a hope with little chance of reward.

“Anyhow, y’ain’t here at ‘Sanctuary’ on yer regular visit today. Is there somethin’ special goin’ on?”

Garfiel’s casual whisper drew Ram’s awareness back to the current situation. He was arching his not-terribly-tall back, and stooping;

she'd lost track of the number of times she'd sighed at him, but she added one more.

"The details of that are exactly what Master Roswaal is talking about right now. If you're interested, you should have participated in the discussion from the start, you know."

"I don' wanna hear it from him. I wanna hear it from you."

"…Master Roswaal brought a half-elf to the mansion. It's someone that is very important to his goals. Even this 'Sanctuary' cannot remain uninvolved in the matter."

"…"

Garfiel had hid neither his animosity towards Roswaal nor his goodwill towards Ram, but after her reply, his expression went blank for the first time. For someone who was fiercely expressive, and who easily showed his emotions, his expressionless face made it clear how greatly unsettled he was.

"This place can't stay uninvolved… ya mean ta say…?"

"A half-elf, as I said. 'Mixes' come under the influence of the barrier, without exception. The condition is the same as for the residents of the Sanctuary, and the Miss Ryuzu's. You understand, I think?"

"The 'Trials' of the tomb, then."

With Garfiel's short whisper, his hand covered his mouth. The young man normally showed off his sharp fangs, but when in deep thought, he adopted a posture that strongly resembled another certain someone.

Thinking of the one who should, even now, be at the mansion with her beloved younger sister, waiting for Ram's group's return, she remembered that you can't fight against what's in your blood.

"So th' half-devil, she's supposed ta be the key ta opening the barrier?"

“At the very least, Master Roswaal is speaking with that intention. Garfiel, too, will most likely hear the same thing from Miss Ryuzu.”

“Ram’s already spoken ta the half-devil, then. What kinda person is she?”

In a low voice, Garfiel asked this earnestly.

On receiving that inquiry, Ram thought about the half-elf—the girl who introduced herself as Emilia—looked back over their short time together, and answered.

“Speaking honestly, there’s little hope. I don’t think you can expect anything of her.”

“There ya go again, speaking all too honestly.”

Garfiel wrinkled his nose, thinking it was a severe opinion. Ram continued to add more, speaking further of her impression of Emilia.

“She has no knowledge. Her understanding is limited. Her resolve is soft. Her determination is weak. Her self-awareness is lacking. In short, she’s lacking in everything, and saying she’s insufficient everywhere would be generous. Having heard about the environment she was placed in, there’s room for sympathy… but in the current conditions, you can’t place any hope in her.”

“Well, ain’t that a ragged assessment?! That jerk… he’s really lost his marbles this time…Ow!!”

“I will not tolerate disrespect towards Master Roswaal. I’ll smack you flat.”

“Don’t say that after ya smack me! Augh, my poor back…!” Rubbing his back where Ram’s slap had landed, Garfiel bared his fangs and howled.

Looking askance at him, Ram had left him with her current impressions of Emilia as a tentative conclusion. In truth, she wasn’t being overly disparaging; that was her honest impression.

…That half-elf girl was lacking in everything. Fatally so.

“But, that’s merely speaking of ‘now’.”

Until now, she’d had no opportunity. So now, she would be given one.

An opportunity to learn. An opportunity to know. An opportunity to harden her resolve. An opportunity to show her determination. She’d be given an opportunity to be self-aware.

Upon being given those opportunities, if she still wallowed in deficiency, then truly that would be the time to be done with her.

But until then, Ram judged it was too early to give a final impression of the girl.

Roswaal had stated clearly that Emilia was necessary to his own goals, after all.

“It’s estimated that within a year, the real battle for the throne of the kingdom will begin. Before that, we need to have Lady Emilia learn what she needs to know.”

“Ah, the royal selection, huh. I’d heard the king had died…hey, wait.”

Tying together distant situations, Garfiel’s speech suddenly halted. Wide-eyed, he gnashed his fangs to control his agitation, mumbling “no way.”

“Tha’ Roswaal jerk, he intends ta back the half-devil in the Royal Selection? Is he crazy?”

“Disrespect towards Master Roswaal is…”

“This ain’t about disrespect! It’sa legitimate opinion, ya know! What kinda idiot would try ta put a half-devil, just like the ‘Witch o’ Envy’, at the head of the country?! This is the ‘Tomb of the Witch of Greed’! What kind of trouble is that jerk planning to bring in here?!”

Stomping the ground in anger, Garfiel's presence seemed to swell as he ground his teeth together. A vast anger that couldn't be suppressed rose up all at once, and the forest murmured as though frightened; insects and animals alike fled. The fierce anger was so strong, it gave the illusion that Garfiel's form had grown a step larger—no, it was no illusion, but an actual event in progress.

Hair all over the young man's body stood up, and the sound of bones creaking was heard as he changed—just before that,

"…Calm yourself, Garf."

"…"

Wrapped in a ferocious, threatening air, Garfiel was showing signs of the beast-change. Touching a hand to his cheek, Ram's light red eyes stared into his jade eyes as she spoke softly. Their lines of sight entangled, and eyes that were on the verge of losing all reason gently regained their previous light.

Then, after blinking several times, Garfiel looked himself over with distaste.

"S-Sorry. Even fer me, that was goin' a lil too far…"

"Don't waste my time with this nonsense. I'm forgiving you because we've known each other a long time, but really, I should have left you to be roasted by Master Roswaal's wrath."

"Ow ow ow owww!"

Switching to pinching the cheek she had been touching, Ram used pain to prompt Garfiel to reflect on his decisions. When she pushed him while letting go, Garfiel held a hand to his reddened cheek, and glared at her with an angry face.

"Ram, you little…"

"That felt nice… isn't what I meant to say. Are you alright?"

"That'sa lie as big as 'The Lupugana Palace was destroyed'!"

Attempting to reconcile with the one making a loud fuss, Ram tried to put a stop to the foolishness in front of her. That consideration seemed to reach him, and Garfiel scratched roughly at his own head.

Then, after a little hesitation, he slowly opened his mouth,

“Ah, you know how it is, Ram. I just… that part of you…”

“Ohoooo~, Ram and Garfiel. Both of you were out here, the~~n.”

“Gah…!”

Turning his gaze away, Garfiel had been trying to continue, but he froze as the voice of a third party intruded; Ram, on the other hand, turned towards the owner of that voice.

“…Master Roswaal. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Ram had remained expressionless up to this point, but now her mouth wore a lovely smile. Warmth crept into her voice, and perhaps it was just imagination, but it seemed the light in her eyes brightened as well.

That change was something that didn’t occur during her conversation with Garfiel. However, the crucial person that Ram was directing that smile towards simply nodded with a carefree attitude.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I thi~~nk we’ve taken care of everything I wanted to talk about. Ram, you haven’t seen Garfiel for quite a while; were you able to renew your old friendship?”

“Yes, well enough.”

In response to the query from the clownish man—Roswaal, Ram nodded without hesitation. Garfiel ground his teeth at the reply that was so straightforward it was cruel, and Roswaal gazed at him.

“I’ve spoken of all that needed to be said with the elderly one. Make sure to ask her about it afterwards. We can’t stay ve~~ry long this time, you see~~. So~~rry if that makes you lonely.”

"Ain't no way I'd be lonely! G'wan, get outta here! Leave Ram here and go already… Ow!!"

"There's no reason for Ram to stay, of course. I'll smack you flat."

"Don't say that after you smack me! Aw, dammit!"

Having received an instant reward for his outburst, Ram sighed at Garfiel as he went teary-eyed. At the pair's antics, Roswaal narrowed his differently-colored eyes and smiled thinly.

"Goo~~dness, goodness, you're such good friends. So much that it hurts my heart, too."

In a voice too soft to hear, that whisper slipped out.

Roswaal's words would hold their true meaning half a year from this time.

The Royal Selection would begin, and a black-haired boy would come tumbling into the Roswaal estate as it supported Emilia, a variety of destinies would begin to move—and the story would arrive at 'Sanctuary'.

And at that time, the clownish-looking man's long-held dearest wish would begin to be fulfilled.

Re:zeropedia

Emily’s Maid Path

1

—Why did it come to this?

She carefully took a step so that the hem of her long skirt didn’t get bent out of shape. The minimum requirement for that was to make sure the bottom of her shoes touched the floor without making any noise.

The sensation of the carpet she felt through her shoes was soft and there was no way she would make any noise unless something unexpected happened. Even so, she had habitually taken a step that held both nervousness and anxiety.

As someone who had been constantly scolded for such trivial things, it made sense for her to feel nervous.

“Lia, Lia. Are you sure it’s fine? Your hands look unstable since you’re too focused on your feet.”

“…Puck, please. I’m concentrating reaaally hard right now, so please don’t talk to me.”

“Alriiight.”

His voice didn’t travel through the air but went directly to her mind from the warmth on her chest. She’d have normally replied to him in a similar way using telepathy. However, the girl concentrating on her hands and feet hadn’t noticed it and replied with a voice that sounded like a silver bell.

Her beautiful long silver hair was as beautiful as the dew of the moon, her white skin was as pure as untrodden virgin snow, and her amethyst eyes looked like precious jewels.

She was the manifestation of beauty that would make the greatest artists of all time give up—someone who radiated a bewitching charm that was worthy of such praise.

But then, her skin that was as white as a field of snow was pale with nervousness, her amethyst eyes were shimmering with a great deal of anxiety, her long silver hair was woven gently into a braid, and the clothes covering her limbs was a maid outfit that lacked elegance. A maid was there.

“Emily! Emily!” A high-pitched voice suddenly resonated through the corridor, making the girl immediately lift her head.

And right after that—

“Ah—”

“Oh my.”

The angle of the tray in her arm titled too far, and the dishes that were barely balanced to begin with knocked into each other, making a high-pitched sound, and—

The final death throes of the teaware echoed down the hallway as they fell one after another.

2

—Why did it come to this?

“Would you please not stare at me so much? The sight of a noble such as myself may surprise you, but I will not stand for a display of such disrespect.”

“I-I’m sorry…” Emilia apologized, becoming timid due to the unforgiving words of the girl sitting in front of her.

Emilia felt faint vibrations coming from the seat as the scenery outside the window slowly drifted by. Her curiosity got piqued by the sight she was seeing for the first time, but she opted to show good manners by staying put.

Though the interior of the dragon carriage wasn't congested at all, it wasn't so large that she couldn't see the other passengers. Inevitably, if she looked up, she would see the face of the person sitting across from her. She was left at a loss for words by the fact that she was being blamed for this situation.

"It's a strange coincidence that you happened to have the same destination as us. A blessing in disguise. A rare occurrence."

The voice of the person speaking to Emilia as she looked down was that of a man. There was a young man sitting next to the girl in front of her—a handsome man with his blue hair carefully arranged, smiling gently, and wearing a monocle over one eye.

The young man, whose slender body was covered by a butler's outfit, spoke considerately to Emilia, whose eyes were downcast. "Don't take her Ladyship's words too seriously. She sounds harsh, but she's grateful. That's also the reason why she allowed you to travel with us. It's a strange turn of fate."

"Clind! Can you not say unnecessary things? Firstly, what is your purpose in telling her to not listen to me? I am your master, you know," said the girl next to the young man after raising her eyebrows at his words.

He gave a wry smile in response to her anger. "Yes, I am well aware of that. It is for that reason that I am lending my assistance to the lady who is but a beginner at dealing with you so that she won't take your words the wrong way. Consideration."

"I haven't asked for such a thing! You did it without my permission…and for that, know that a severe punishment awaits you once we return to the mansion."

"A severe punishment…yes, gladly. Extreme please," the young man said, smiling ecstatically at her.

"Can you not be happy?!" the girl screamed, hugging her body with disgust on her face.

Emilia almost laughed as she watched them exchange such words.

“My, my, how truly unmannered you are by eavesdropping on our conversation. Clind, say something to her.”

“You become extremely attractive when you smile. Lovely.”

“Can you take your master’s intention into consideration a little?!”

The girl clicked her tongue in irritation at the young man’s words and then glared at Emilia. Looking at her gaze, Emilia vaguely thought that she was a very precocious little lady.

Her deep indigo hair was braided and arranged on top of her head in a weird hairstyle. She was trying hard to make her eyes look intimidating, but the corners were lowered, which made them look more soft than anything. She was wearing a simple dress with a few accessories, and it matched the girl’s aura well. Her somewhat mature way of speaking was lovely since it seemed like she was trying hard to seem older than she was.

“Cease gazing upon me whilst grinning at once! Are you being insolent even while knowing that I am Annerose Miload, the heir to the House Miload?!”

It was a young aristocratic girl, who was no more than ten years old, who swung her arms with her lovely face red in anger.

3

“What should I do with Uncle Roswaal? I wonder how many more he is going to have?”

“Roswaal is your uncle? He didn’t look old enough to be called an uncle though… Was he trying to look young?”

“I’m nine years old and Uncle Roswaal is almost thirty, so he is an uncle to me. That’s how it is on the relative side of our family tree. We are really distant relatives… I am from a sub-branch of the family while he is from the main branch, but we are still related by blood.”

Emilia and Annerose were having an interaction in the slightly shaky dragon carriage, an interaction which would be a bit of a misnomer to be called a conversation.

The road was quite rough, but the reason why bad roads didn't affect the dragon carriage was due to the divine protection that the earth dragon that was pulling the carriage had.

The divine protection of the earth dragon that protected them from outside influences such as wind and vibrations was essential for long distance travel in a dragon carriage. This was the first time that Emilia had realized that.

"You are looking around nonstop again…is the dragon carriage that rare?"

"Yes, that's right. I've been in the forest all my life, so I never had the chance to ride on a dragon carriage, although I have seen one before. So it's reaaally rare to me."

"…Is that so. Then you are in for a disappointment next time if you think all dragon carriages are like this. There are very few dragon carriages like those of House Mathers or House Miload—you are truly fortunate to experience something like this."

"I see… I'll remember that. Thank you for telling me. I'm going to enjoy this to the fullest."

Emilia gave her honest thanks and enjoyed the interior of the dragon carriage and the softness of the seat.

The earth dragon pulling this carriage might be wearing something fancy, and the exterior of the carriage itself might have an elaborate design too. I'm looking forward to looking at them later.

While Emilia was indulging her curiosity, she heard a voice:

"My Lady, if you want to say something, then I think you need to put it into words. Conveying feelings." The young man in the butler's outfit—Clind—suddenly broke the silence and spoke.

Emilia looked his way, and her eyes met with Annerose's, who was flustered and biting her lip. "What happened?" Emilia asked. "Did you get a stomachache by any chance?"

"Anyone would be like this if someone can't take their sarcasm properly! Aren't you a bit too vulnerable as a grown woman?"

"Too vulnerable… No, it isn't like that. I'm on my guard properly. If something weird happens, I'll protect you, so don't worry."

"Uuugh!" Annerose groaned, grabbing her skirt, and hit Clind's shoulder with her other hand.

Clind seemed somewhat happy after getting hit. "Aah, my lady, please stop…! Violence."

"Listen here? You had your guard down when you approached us to begin with. I've heard that a common tactic that bandits use…is to get their dragon carriage stuck somewhere, wait for people with goodwill to approach, and then assault them. What would you have done if we had assaulted you?"

"Were you going to assault me?"

"What! Would you! Have done! If we had! Assaulted you!"

As Annerose expressed her anger while breaking her sentence up, Emilia worried whether she would get a headache due to getting angry like that.

Anyway, if I had to respond, then…

"But I couldn't just abandon you there, right? In reality, it seemed like you were in trouble, Annerose, and I was able to pull the wheel out of the ditch using the dragon carriage I was in. You guys were saved, and I didn't get assaulted either. See, everyone is happy."

"…I'm baffled." Annerose dropped her shoulders as if she had lost energy when Emilia responded with a smile.

And then she rubbed her forehead with a tired face and glared at Emilia, who was tilting her head, with mature eyes and then held up one finger. "Lady Annerose."

"Huh…?"

"It's Lady Annerose. I can't give you special treatment when it comes to that, even if you saved us during our travels. You were referring to Uncle without using honorifics, correct? That isn't right. Master Roswaal, Lady Annerose. Please know your place."

Emilia got bewildered by Annerose's sudden remarks. The hasty girl raised her eyebrows at how slow Emilia was at understanding things. But before the girl could start cussing in her high-pitched voice, Clind's helping hand reached her faster as he coughed.

"Miss, did you receive a sealed message from Lord Roswaal? Letter."

"Sealed message…you mean a letter?"

"Yes, that's right. The dragon carriage you were on belongs to House Mathers. And if its destination is Miload Manor, then there is only one reason that I can think of. I'm positive that Lord Roswaal gave you a sealed message that has his intentions written in it. Speculation."

Emilia clapped her hands since she had an idea of what Clind was talking about in his polite explanation. She reached into her pocket and took out a letter that was sealed with wax and said:

"It's probably this. Roswaal told me to give it to you when I reach the mansion."

"I will be taking a loo…My lady? Astonishing."

As soon as she was about to give it to Clind, a hand reached out from the side and snatched it away. Clind and Emilia focused their gazes on the culprit: Annerose.

The girl waved the letter between her fingers, showing it off to them, while pouting her lips in displeasure. "It's Master Roswaal. Don't make me repeat things."

She didn't like the fact that she had said Roswaal's name without honorifics again. She spoke to her in a scolding way and then tucked the letter away in her pocket.

Seeing that, Clind squinted his eyes in reproach. “My lady. That’s a sealed letter from Lord Roswaal. It would indeed be unethical to leave it like that without reading it. Ingratitude.”

“Uncle’s letters always look like they were stamped on. They only slightly differ in content. It’s probably just a bunch of long philanthropic excuses as usual. The truth is that he just wants to get away with his weird doctrine,” Annerose muttered somewhat dismissively as she looked away.

It was not clear what Clind thought after hearing his master, but he did not continue further despite having objected previously.

Instead, it was Emilia, who had been left confused, who couldn’t keep up with the conversation. “Hey…so, what’s going to happen to the letter?”

“You need not worry about the letter. We will still take you under our wing. However, you will have to do as you are ordered.”

“Umm…orders?”

“Lady Annerose.” Annerose said it slowly, as if she was teaching something, when Emilia tilted her head.

“La-Lady Annerose?”

“Do not stammer! And do not doubt it!”

“Lady Annerose!”

“Well done,” she said, nodding her head in satisfaction as she sunk into the seat.

The girl was pleased, but she didn’t answer Emilia’s questions for now. As if sensing her anxiety, Annerose gave a small wave.

“You need not worry, there are many girls in our family who are in the same position as you. Clind and Frederica will take care of you. Your confusion won’t last long.”

It was a calm and caring remark, a complete change from her stern attitude from before.

The girl had a face that could make people feel relaxed when she smiled.

“In reality, you are a reaaally nice child.”

“I am strict towards the servants that forget to use formal language with their employer!”

—That expression on her face disappeared immediately, and Emilia really regretted her words.

4

Emilia reflexively straightened her back at the intimidating aura of the person standing in front of her.

“Welcome. My name is Frederica, and I am the head servant in this household. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The one who politely bent her back and said that was a woman in a maid outfit with long, shimmering blonde hair.

She was slightly taller than Emilia and had a feminine figure with lots of curves. She had white skin with beautiful blonde hair and her mesmerizing deep emerald eyes were attractive.

The most distinctive feature of hers were the sharp fangs capable of ripping off flesh that peeked out from her smiling mouth.

The maid who introduced herself as Frederica had a well-trained physique for a woman. She was tall and very intimidating, which naturally made Emilia tense. It was highly unlikely, but Emilia felt like she would die if she were to suddenly punch her.

Contrary to her neat and tidy appearance that gave off the impression of a maid, she exuded the aura of a warrior.

Emilia couldn’t hide her quiet shivers. However, Annerose, who was next to Emilia, who had straightened her back and was stiff, seemed unaffected even though she was welcomed in a similar manner.

“I have returned, Frederica. This girl was sent here due to uncle’s bad habit. Teach and explain things to her.”

“Welcome back, Lady Annerose. I was worried since you were late. —I have understood Master’s instructions. I will be guiding her. And…”

As Annerose made to enter the mansion by passing through the entrance with a lordly air, Frederica grabbed her shoulder from behind. Emilia heard Annerose clicking her tongue.

“Lady Annerose. Don’t you think that hearing a lady click her tongue is unpleasant?”

“If you think so, then unhand me this instant, Frederica. Do you not know who I am?”

“Isn’t it you who doesn’t know that, Lady Annerose?”

The victory of the polite exchange of words went to Frederica as Annerose relaxed, looking like she had given up.

Clind, who was watching next to Emilia, let out a short chuckle.

“It’s their usual thing. You’ll get used to it eventually, so there’s no need to worry. Tradition.”

“Clind, I can hear you. It brings shame upon the title of House Steward…that you allowed Lady Annerose to do whatever she pleased even though you were by her side. It’s no surprise that I was called back after being told that we were short-staffed.”

“It’s not the title of House Steward that is crying in shame, it’s the maid outfit you are wearing that is crying. How can you so profane the four letters, maid, which is the symbol of prettiness and glamour? No matter how good you are at your job and how well you stack up against your pupils, I can’t help but be disappointed. Pity.”

Frederica and Clind stared at each other silently. The atmosphere of the entrance hall began to grow tense due to the two of them, who seemed like they didn’t get along well.

“He-Hey! Miss Frederica, can I ask a question?”

Unable to bear the atmosphere, Emilia raised her hand and stepped in between them. As soon as she did, the tense air that had been there before dissipated.

Frederica relaxed her lips while looking down at Emilia, and she gave a slightly violent, gentle smile. “My apologies for having shown you something shameful like that. Once again, welcome to our family. This family will welcome you if you have been introduced by Master. There are many people here who are in the same position as you—and I am one of them.”

“The same position as you means…”

“What I mean is, the ones that are discriminated against due to being of demi-human descent.”

Emilia gasped at Frederica’s straightforward statement.

The term she used—demi-human discrimination—she could recall several events that fell under that. She had experience with humans keeping her at arm’s length and being demonized by them due to her origin.

So, it means that there are people living in this mansion who are in the same situation.

“Master does not like discriminating against others due to a difference in race. Rather, he actively welcomes many of them into his family who are generally shunned. Talkative people say that he has a taste for demi-humans.”

“It’s a nuisance for House Miload as the branch family because the head of the main family, House Mathers, my uncle, is like that. People speak behind our backs saying that we’ve been infected by Uncle’s hobby.”

As Frederica’s explanation drew to a close, Annerose let out a little sneer. But Emilia was so shocked that her infantile ill remark fell on deaf ears.

Arrangements were made to keep demi-humans free of discrimination and malice. It was a situation that she had never thought of, even if it was only in a limited space.

She had never thought that humans and demi-humans could get along like that.

“You seem surprised, but I can’t blame you for that. You must have had an even harder time as an elf,” Frederica said while looking at Emilia’s ears that were a bit longer than a human’s.

Elves were a race of demi-humans that mainly lived in forests and were known for their longevity and beauty. Due to the war between humans and demi-humans in the past, this kingdom had a somewhat harsh attitude towards demi-humans, and the treatment of elves was especially harsh. That was because…

“No. I’m not an elf, but… Well, I’m a half-elf.”

“…” Frederica widened her eyes in surprise at Emilia after she repeatedly denied things and told her the truth. She knew that Annerose and Clind behind her were similarly surprised.

The word ‘half-elf’ and Emilia’s appearance—when you combined the two, there was a name that came to mind. That was the reason why elves were subjected to harsher discrimination compared to other demi-human races. Facing the silent gaze, Emilia scoffed at herself for having the slightest expectation.

She held a little bit of hope when she was told that this was a place where demi-humans weren’t discriminated against, but her origins were different from other demi-human races, and she was the target of a deeper discrimination.

It was too naïve of me to hope for that while knowing that.

“So, you are a half-elf…” Frederica said, trailing off.

As Emilia looked down, it was Annerose who broke the silence as she stepped forward. The young girl looked up at Emilia, scrutinizing her, and produced crisp sounds as she walked around her in circles. And when she stopped behind her…

"Don't arch your back!" she yelled, spanking Emilia, whose gaze was downcast.

Emilia yelped. "Eek!" At the sudden turn of events, her face turned red, and she turned around to look at Annerose, who then put her finger in her face.

"Listen here. I am not going to give you any special treatment, whether you are a half-elf or not, and neither will this family. You shall start from the simplest of chores, and I shall teach you all the manners and give you lessons on how to be a good servant! Is that clear?"

Emilia's eyes rolled in astonishment as Annerose spoke sharply. She slowly repeated the girl's words in her head, separated it into bits, and absorbed them into her mind and understood it, and the conclusion she came up with was…

"—As I thought, you reaaally are a nice child."

"Frederica! Make her change quickly and make her taste the pain of the chores!" Annerose ordered Frederica after suddenly becoming bitter.

Clind smiled wryly, and Frederica bowed reverently. Emilia tried to follow Frederica's beckoning hand without knowing which part of her sentence had made Annerose bitter.

"Oh yes, wait. I haven't heard your name yet. You, what's your name?"

She stopped Emilia as she was about to leave and belatedly asked her that question.

Emilia hesitated for a moment on how to respond to that and…

"Oh… My name is Emili…"

"I see, so it is Emily. A fine name indeed. I wish you good luck, Emily."

The hasty young girl came to a conclusion before Emilia could finish saying her name.

She had never been called by that name before. Before Emilia could even stammer out a response, Annerose left the entrance hall quickly, taking Clind with her. She was like a whirlwind from the very moment they'd met.

"Lady Annerose is harsh with words, but she is a pleasant person."

"Yeah. I understood that veeery well."

Emilia nodded at Frederica's supportive comment and then followed her to the back of the mansion—where she got led onto the floor used by servants.

5

"If you do not know how to put the uniform on, then do call for me, as I shall be right outside in the hallway."

After a quick check of her clothing size, Frederica handed Emilia the clothes and left the changing room. It was by Frederica's consideration that she was allowed to be alone for a while. She thanked the large woman for that, took off her clothes, and sighed in relief. She was thinking of going on a simple trip after leaving the forest, but things kept changing rapidly after she found a dragon carriage on the road. She felt a bit tired and touched the green crystal on her chest.

"By the way, things have taken a strange turn."

The voice that had suddenly struck Emilia's earlobes was neither masculine nor feminine but seemed genderless.

She scrunched up her pretty eyebrows and pouted at the voice as if she were grumpy. "You were silent the whole time, so why did you suddenly decide to come out now of all times? I was in trouble and reaaally needed help."

"If I had carelessly gotten involved, it would have caused further confusion. I'm an adorable and caring gentleman, you see."

The one with the lively voice that was laced with laughter gradually began materializing.

There was a green crystal stone hanging from Emilia's chest like a pendant. Its surface started emitting a pale light, which gradually began to take shape, eventually materializing a cat into the world. It was a small palm-sized cat with grey fur.

It appeared on top of Emilia's shoulder and rubbed its cheek against her long silver hair, and said:

"I had a hard time just sitting back and watching my pretty Lia get into trouble, but there is a certain order to things. It tore my heart to pieces, but I was waiting until you were really uncomfortable."

"There you go again. I'm not going to let you fool me again so easily, Puck."

She felt ticklish at the cat's—Puck's—expression of love, and while feeling it, she had no choice but to forgive the only family she had as he sat on her shoulder. Her contracted spirit, Puck, was always with her, and was like an immediate family member to her who always stayed by her side.

"Leaving that aside, there seems to be a problem with the current situation. I feel like there's a discrepancy between what Roswaal and what that girl, Annerose, said. I think you should confirm things properly. Oh, I think it can be unbuttoned over there."

While listening to Puck, Emilia began to put the uniform she had received on. A long black skirt and a white apron dress. Feeling like it was the same type of uniform that Frederica was wearing, she felt a little self-conscious.

"It's a cute outfit but…is it ok for someone like me to wear it?"

"You are the prettiest girl in the world, so this makes you look extra glamorous, Lia. I couldn't get a maid outfit in the forest, so I really want to see it too! I really do. I want to see, I want to see."

"You always exaggerate things, Puck. Don't get so excited," Emilia chided as she nonchalantly changed into the complex uniform.

Her lack of hesitation made it seem like it wasn't her first time wearing it, and the reason behind it was due to the content of the contract she had made with Puck. She pulled on the hem of the skirt to stretch out any wrinkles and wrapped the apron around her body tightly. Once Emilia put the hair ornament on top of her silver hair, her transformation into a maid would be complete.

"How is it? Is it weird?"

"It's perfectly cute! Woah, it's nice and feels new. But if it's this attire then…" Puck was flying around Emilia, clapping his hands in admiration. And then, Emilia's long hair got caught by the wind and floated up. "Something inside me is whispering. That shouldn't this Lia's hair be braided?"

"I am fine either way, but don't make it painful."

Having gotten Emilia's permission, Puck became happy and spun around. Her floating hair fluttered in the wind, and it dexterously began to gather and turn into a braid. Just a dozen seconds later, her long silver hair had been formed into a single braid.

"So this is Lia's perfect form as a maid. Not to praise myself or anything, but I feel like I did a good job."

"Don't be silly… But now I'm worried about the job. I wonder if I'll be able to do it."

After she'd finished getting ready, she became worried about the maid work that awaited her.

She'd felt like something was off since she first arrived at the mansion. According to Roswaal, Emilia was supposed to relax there until he was done with his work.

"It seems a bit late already since you are done changing but, should we go confirm things?"

"No, it isn't that, Puck. I think it's something like this… Roswaal might have said that, but I think he is actually testing me."

"…Lia?" Puck's eyes narrowed with worry at Emilia's relaxed demeanor.

“Yeah, Roswaal is definitely testing me to see whether I’m a hardworking person or a lazy person. I think he wanted to catch me off guard until I reached the mansion and then surprise me with this kind of offer.”

“What would Roswaal gain by doing something like this?”

“There’s probably a lot of things. Since I am going to work hard from now on for everyone in this country and the forest with Roswaal’s help. He is testing me to see whether I’m a girl who slacks off after being told to rest a little…”

The more she thought about it, the more she felt like that was the case.

I don’t know that much about Roswaal yet, but he is a man that wears white makeup and talks in a silly manner.

But the words he uttered often kept hitting Emilia where it hurt. It was like he could read her mind. And, more importantly, he got what she wanted the most right.

So, as if she’d been drawn in by Roswaal’s words, Emilia left the forest with a resolve to step onto a big stage that she had never imagined being on.

Just like how Emilia imagined Roswaal’s personality, Roswaal would definitely want to know Emilia’s worth, too. Thus, she concluded that this was a test for that.

“I’m sure that I need to work as a maid to become a queen.”

“I wonder if that’s the case. I think you’re overthinking it. It’s better if you talk about it properly…” Puck wasn’t quite convinced by Emilia, who clenched her fists enthusiastically.

However, before they could exchange views, they heard a knock at the door.

“Emily, are you done changing? May I come in?”

“Oh…yes! I am done changing. It’s fine,” she replied to Frederica’s question and nodded at Puck.

The cat shrugged, turned into particles of light, and went back into the crystal on Emilia’s chest again.

Frederica entered the room as soon as Puck had disappeared and found Emilia in her changed clothes. “Oh my, you were able to get changed properly. I thought it would be a bit confusing to put on since it’s your first time.”

“It was fine. This isn’t the first time I’ve been made to wear clothes like this.”

“To be made to wear…? Have you served somewhere else previously?”

“Umm, no? Not really, but…”

The reason why Emilia was accustomed to wearing clothes like this was due to her contracted spirit Puck’s tastes. In a contract between a spirit and a spirit arts user, the spirit had the right to decide the terms. There were multiple contracts between Emilia and Puck. One of them was that Puck had the right to decide Emilia’s outfit and hairstyle each day. When they were living in the forest, it was Emilia’s routine to fulfill that right of his by donning the various outfits he brought her. One such outfit was a frilly dress, which wasn’t as complex as a maid outfit.

When Emilia replied like so, Frederica widened her eyes as if she had realized something, then gently embraced her like she was some poor thing. “You have been through tough times. You don’t have to worry about such things here. Everything will be fine.”

“Well…thank you…?” Emilia replied, tilting her head since she didn’t know what her sympathy was for.

After that, Frederica avoided the conversation about the outfit and extended her hand out of the room. “Well then, I will be showing you around the mansion. I am sure you are worn out due to the trip, so I will make the work easy for you today. I don’t think you are used to it, but let’s work hard starting from tomorrow.”

“Yes, I’ll work hard. Reaaally hard. Please guide me well!” Emilia exclaimed, using formal language she wasn’t used to using, showing Frederica how determined she was.

Frederica looked surprised for a moment at that, and then…

“Sure, let’s work well together.”

She opened her mouth with its prominent fangs and accepted her with a fierce smile.

6

From that day onward, Emilia’s struggles were something beyond description. She thought that her role as a maid would have a great impact on her future, so she worked extremely hard to complete every chore.

Emilia didn’t get much work that a typical maid would be given, but she did her best no matter how trivial the chore was and threw herself into her work earnestly in order to get something out of it.

As a result, she was unanimously evaluated as unsuitable by the master and the fellow servants of the mansion.

“I thought you would at least be able to serve tea, but I suppose it was too early for you.”

“…I am sorry,” Emilia replied, bowing her head as she cleaned up the shattered pieces of the teaware.

It had been two days since she began working as a maid—and so far, the number of jobs that she could do properly was a big fat zero.

Emilia didn’t have any experience living in a human village to begin with. Before acquiring her skills as a servant, it was her first time living with other people in a big group, so she was bewildered by everything. As a result, she was confused by the difference in norms of the forest and humans, so she kept failing at everything she did.

“Someone of this level hasn’t been here since Ram… A girl worthy of teaching has come before I return to the main residence… Though I worry I might give up before then.”

“Umm, are you going to go somewhere, Frederica?”

“Yes. I am currently on loan to House Miload. All of the servants have been transferred to the other mansion, so I have been helping out since they are short-staffed here. I’ll be going back to the main residence where my master is in a month or so. So, I will only be able to teach you until then.”

“…I see. I think that’s reaaally sad.”

Frederica looked down slightly when Emilia honestly expressed her sorrow at parting with her.

Emilia cleaned up the shards during that and awaited further instructions as Frederica smiled gently at her, covering her mouth. “Emily, you don’t have to do any other chores, so go to Lady Annerose’s room.”

“To Lady Annerose’s, room? Does she want me to do something?”

“That’s what I was told to tell you. I don’t know since she is a whimsical person. I will carry the tea, so you can go on your way.”

Emilia felt anxious as she walked, but the gaze watching over her gave her courage, and she headed towards Annerose’s room in a corner of the third floor—she hadn’t met Annerose in two days, since she came to this mansion. However, it would be optimistic to say that the lady of the manor, Annerose, had yet to hear about the new maid’s ineptitude.

“Oh, Emily. Lady Annerose’s room is up ahead. You’ve been summoned, I presume.”

"Oh, Mister Clind."

She met Clind as he was descending the stairs when she was on her way up. His posture was straight, and his manner was somewhat aloof yet refined. She had heard that he was one of the oldest servants in the mansion like Frederica, and that he had the authority to give orders to other servants, including Emilia.

"I've seen you around a few times, but I've never had the chance to talk to you. That uniform suits you well. Beautiful."

"Th-Thank you very much. But the uniform itself completely outclasses my skills…"

"Well, it's because Frederica is being hasty. Your circumstances were quite harsh. So you need to be taught with more of an open mind. Parental love."

"My circumstances…?" Emilia widened her eyes at the words she couldn't ignore, and Clind shook his head.

He fixed the angle of his monocle. "Excuse me," he said, prefacing his statement while doing so. "I don't mean to pry. But I can feel that your soul…that seems to retain a childlike glow…hasn't grown enough to be worthy of its vessel. Innocent."

"…" Clind's statement had somewhat described Emilia's true nature, making her choke up. She wasn't sure what his eyes had noticed. Her amethyst eyes quivering, she was about to fearfully ask what he had meant, and then…

"Emily! What is taking you so long?! I have summoned you!"

The voice of the girl who had lost her patience echoed, and with the sound of her footsteps, Annerose appeared. She looked at Emilia and Clind, who were facing each other in front of the stairs, and raised her eyebrows sharply. "Oh my! You ignored my summons and are standing here talking? The servants these days have no respect!"

Emilia tried to open her mouth to make an excuse at once to the mad Annerose, but Clind stepped in front of her. He bowed and said:

“My lady. Please don’t blame Emily too much. I was the one who held her back. Stopped.”

“I know that. Since you have a suspicious glint in your eyes when you look at Emily. I’m sure you’re eyeing her for the same reason you are eyeing me, aren’t you? But Emily is so tall and has large breasts, so what do you mean she’s young? You pervert!”

“Thank you very much. Ecstasy.”

“I am not complimenting you though?!”

Emilia couldn’t keep up with the exchange between the servant and the master that didn’t make sense.

Leaving Emilia in her confusion, Annerose pointed her finger at Clind with an irritated expression. “This man is a pervert that feels love towards a girl that’s way younger than him. That is also the reason why he has pledged his loyalty to me. I don’t know why he feels the same way about you, Emily.”

“It’s a misunderstanding. What I revere is the young soul’s glow. It just so happens that it’s often possessed by young boys and girls. In fact, there are some people like Emily who grow to adulthood but still retain a young soul. Miracle.”

“My ears will rot if I listen to you. If you weren’t so capable, I would have immediately fired you… Anyway! I was the one who summoned Emily! Begone, Clind!”

Annerose screamed and Clind gave her a kind look, bowed, and disappeared downstairs. She looked at him disappear with animal-like eyes and then glared at Emilia.

“You are also to blame. You often leave your guard down, don’t you? This mansion’s servants are mostly women due to Uncle’s tastes, but there are also men including Clind. Someone as good-looking as you will become good prey to them, Emily. Men are all wolves!”

“Oh no, that’s scary… I need to be careful not to get bitten…”

Emilia became pale and nodded at Annerose’s words. She had heard this from Puck many times, but she thought he was just messing around with her. However, when she heard Annerose say it too, it convinced her that it was a well-known fact.

Men are wolves. Emilia properly engraved that in her mind.

“I’m still somewhat worried about you… Are you sure you understand?”

But it seemed like Emilia’s seriousness didn’t get conveyed to Annerose. Being looked at with doubtful eyes, Emilia clenched her fists to show that she had understood.

“It-It’s fine. I understood you perfectly. You mean that boys are reaaally dangerous, right?”

“Your formal language being all over the place tells me you’re just pretending to understand, but it is quite rare for something to be this unconvincing, so I suppose it can’t be helped. Follow me.”

She jerked her chin up and started walking in a way that was unbefitting of a noblewoman. Emilia followed her in a confused manner, and then she opened the door of the library that was some distance away.

“This isn’t your room right, Lady Annerose?”

“You can tell by looking at it, yes? Keep quiet and follow me. You will understand soon.”

Annerose headed towards the back of the library after closing the door carefully so as not to make a sound.

“Emily. Can you bring me one of the chairs over there?”

“Chair? Is this fine?”

She pulled one of the chairs from under the desk and carried it over to Annerose.

Annerose placed the chair in front of the window and jumped on it. “Come here, Emily. You will be able to see it right now.”

“See what?”

“Hurry up!”

She felt uncomfortable with the idea of putting her dirty shoes on the chair, so she took them off and got up next to Annerose. The chair had just enough space for the two girls to stand on it together, and Emilia somehow balanced herself and looked at Annerose.

The girl put her finger on her lips and said, “Be quiet and look out the window.”

“…?” She closed her mouth as instructed and looked where she was pointing at out the window. At first, she didn’t know what to look at, but her eyes soon widened in surprise. “—That’s.”

“Yes, a couple’s secret meetup. They should be working right now for Dragon’s sake.”

A corner of the mansion’s backyard could be looked down upon from the window of the library. From there, they could see a man and woman in servant’s outfits leaning against each other in a small space that was in a blind spot that couldn’t be seen from within the garden or other windows. They gazed into each other’s eyes and slowly brought their faces closer while exchanging words, and then —

“—!” Emilia’s face turned red at the shocking sight.

“Look, they kissed, they kissed!” Annerose shouted excitedly next to her and started slapping her on the back.

It hurts a lot. “A-Anne, you’re making too much noise. They’ll spot us.”

“It’s their fault since they’re doing bold things thinking that no one can see them. Well, this is enough.”

Annerose stepped down from the chair in a satisfied manner, and

Emilia followed her lead and stepped down to the library's floor as well. Noticing that her heart was beating fast, she sat down and took a deep breath.

I feel like I've seen something very wrong. I don't know what those two were doing, but I sort of know that I saw something that people shouldn't see without getting permission.

"Emily. That was a kiss. And the reason why men are called wolves."

"Me-Men are called wolves because of that? What does that mean?"

"You don't know about it even though you are an adult, Emily? You really are ignorant…"

The two whispered with their faces still red. Annerose shrugged her shoulders, as if Emilia's question had baffled her. Then she looked around and then quietly brought her mouth closer to her ear. "That is called a kiss… If a man and a woman kiss, then they have a baby."

"…?! Babies are made when a man and a woman kiss…?!"

"Correct. Emily, you were also born because your mother and father had kissed. It does not work if men kiss other men or women kiss other women, but if a man and a woman kiss, then a baby is made."

"I see… I had no idea…"

The mystery of humanity. Emilia could not hide her restlessness at such a shocking revelation. This means that right now, under the window, a baby has just been conceived inside a woman's body. What a fateful scene I have stumbled upon.

"Those two are always kissing there."

"Always kissing?! So they have lots of babies?!"

"Of course not, Emily. Until the baby is born, the next baby will have to wait for its turn in the mother's belly. If you have too many, your belly will explode."

“Oh, I see… That’s good. I feel reaaally relieved now,” Emilia replied, patting her chest in relief.

“Anyway,” Annerose said as she looked away from Emilia while crossing her arms. “You are beautiful yet full of vulnerabilities, Emily, which makes you a piece of fine meat for the wolves. Do be careful since they will try to kiss you if they get the chance.”

“Alright. I’ll be careful. I think that it’s too soon for me to be a mother…”

Due to various reasons, Emilia was well aware of how lacking she was. Babies were cute, but she was positive she wouldn’t be able to take proper care of them as she was now.

Besides, my own baby will probably be born with long ears. When that happens, the world will not necessarily be kind to him or her. At the very least, I want it to be kind, and I want to do my best to make it so.

“That’s why I need to work really hard.”

“But I heard rumors that you are completely useless, Emily. I heard you spilled the tea I ordered to be brought to my room four times before you even arrived.”

“Ah, uh, mh…yeah, that’s right. I’m sorry…” Emilia replied, arching her back.

“Don’t be timid!” Annerose shouted at her to get her to cheer up.

“Eeek!”

After Emilia got yelled at, she straightened her back, and Annerose nodded in satisfaction. “Alright. I have a new job for you then. If you can do it, it will boost your confidence,” she said with a devious smile.

7

—Hazy and weak light particles concentrated on her trembling palm.

It was mana—something that usually filled the atmosphere without a form—that was now concentrated enough to be seen.

Mana was spread throughout the atmosphere and involved in the circulation of life—the human body tapped into that huge flow and absorbed it through its gate, harnessed it, and then released it outside the body, manifesting in the world in a totally different form.

That was the general principle of magic, so in that sense, turning mana into a visible form could be referred to as performing magic. However, her magic dissipated before it could have any further influence on the world.

“Haaa.” As the light particles dissipated and disappeared from her palm, the girl let out a big sigh.

Annerose breathed heavily with sweat appearing on her forehead. Emilia gently wiped away the sweat from the frustrated girl’s face with the towel she was holding.

They were on the third floor of the mansion in Annerose’s room. It was too spacious to be a young girl’s private room. She had a large bed behind her, and they were sitting while facing each other in the middle of the carpeted room.

“…I don’t want you to comfort me. As you could see, it was unsightly.”

“That’s not how I see it. You are young, but you are working really hard.”

She wasn’t comforting her, it was her honest opinion. You couldn’t expect Annerose to be able to use magic properly at her age. Just the fact that she had mastered the art of interfering with mana was wonderful in itself.

“But I heard that Uncle could use the four basic elements of magic when he was my age. And he mastered the other two in a few years’ time.”

“Are you comparing yourself to Roswaal…Master Roswaal?”

“It’s not that I am doing the comparing, it’s that I’m the one being compared,” Annerose answered Emilia’s question, shaking her head with a wry smile that someone her age shouldn’t have.

The relationship between House Mathers and House Miload was something that Emilia had heard about multiple times in the past two days. House Mathers was the main house and House Miload was the sub-branch of one large House. The role of House Miload was to support House Mathers, which had continued for generations. Roswaal’s selfish decision to accept demi-humans as servants was only possible since House Miload was there to take them in.

“The main house, Mathers, currently only consists of my uncle for some odd reason. And with Uncle like that, it is not so easy for him to get married. If something happens to him, then I am the closest in line to be the legitimate successor.”

“…”

That was the reason why Annerose’s relatives had high expectations of her. House Mathers was a house of magic users. What would be desired in the case of House Miload taking over would be her having the qualities befitting of a Chosen Magic User so she would be worthy of the Mathers name.

“Why did you tell me something like that? I’m only a new maid who came here two days ago.”

“…Because you called yourself a maid,” the girl replied to Emilia’s question with a faint voice. She opened her blue eyes, held back her tears, and looked at Emilia. “Elves are famous since they are excellent at magic even among demi-humans. I have heard that long-lived elves are familiar with magic-related matters. So…”

“Oh, I see, so that’s why it was me…but I must apologize. I don’t think I’ll live up to your expectations, Lady Annerose.”

Emilia put her hand on her chest and was pained by the frustration that she couldn't be a help to a girl who was working so hard. The things Annerose was expecting from Emilia—skill and knowledge regarding magic—were both things she was lacking in. Since…

"I am a spirit arts user, not a magic user. The way I use magic is a bit different than magic users. That's why I don't know if it can be of any assistance."

"You are a…spirit arts user?"

"Yes, a spirit arts user. And I know you were expecting a long-lived and knowledgeable elf, but well…I'm long-lived, but I haven't aged that properly."

"I kind of knew that. Since you don't have the dignity of an adult at all, Emily."

"So, mean…"

It was mean but also something Emilia couldn't deny, so she made a sad face. It looked so weak that Annerose wasn't able to hold back and burst into laughter.

"Such a pathetic face. Emily, you are looking more and more like a child."

"I-I'm much older than you, so if you keep saying cocky things, I'll punish you."

"Do you think you would be forgiven for the insolent act of punishing your own employer?"

"Even if I can't do it, my reliable bodyguard can."

Annerose opened her eyes with surprise at her words. Emilia thought the young girl's face was pleasant to look at when it was like that.

Emilia stretched out her arms, turning her outstretched palms upward.

"Is it ok?"

“It’s ok,” Emilia replied with a smile to the telepathy, and a green light began to gather on her palm.

The green light turned into a cat’s silhouette and started to cut its existence into the world.

Annerose gasped in surprise and clapped her hands. “Oh my!”

After the girl’s surprise was directed at it, the green glow further dyed the room, which was followed by the materialization of a cat spirit.

“I’m Puck. I govern Fire Mana, and I am one of the four Great Spirits…hameow!”

“Wow, a talking kitten, how rare! Quite a cute bodyguard you have!”

In an attempt to live up to her expectations, Puck tried to make a solemn appearance, but it was easily foiled by Annerose since she was excited to see a spirit for the first time.

She immediately reached out and snatched the tiny Puck out of the air and played with him in her palm.

“Meowww! Meowww! Stopppp!” Puck screamed, but it was futile against a child’s curiosity.

Emilia, who was his last straw of hope, was looking at Annerose as she played with Puck with kind eyes, and it seemed like she had no intention of rescuing her family from his difficult predicament.

“So, this is a spirit… It is a bit rude to ask, but can you really depend on him?”

“I know it might worry you since he just looks cute, but he is quite helpful despite that. Right, Puck? …Puck, what happened? You look reaaally unhappy.”

After letting Annerose play with him for a while, Emilia boasted about his abilities, but Puck was on her shoulder, covering his face and crying. “I’m currently heartbroken since I got played with like some toy. I can’t marry into my wife’s family anymore…”

“If that’s the case, then I will get a cat that comes from a good bloodline from somewhere and give her to you.”

“A surprising suggestion just got made! Lia, are you fine with your mother being a cat?!”

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to respond since my father is a cat…” I feel like I could make it work with familial love even if a cat who can’t even talk became my mom.

While she was taking what Puck said too literally, she suddenly noticed that Annerose was looking at her in surprise.

“Is your father that spirit?” Annerose asked.

“It’s that he’s like a father to me. It isn’t like he was married to my mother. Puck, you haven’t kissed my mother, right?”

“No, I haven’t. And about that kissing thing…never mind, it’s embarrassing, so I’ll pass.” Puck had heard the conversation between the two girls in the library but opted to not tell her the truth about it since it would be embarrassing for him as her father.

As a result, they weren’t able to clear up the misunderstanding, and it remained overlooked. Anyway…

“Emily, do you use that spirit’s power to use magic since you are a spirit arts user?”

“I guess it’s a little different. Even with spirits, there are proper spirits like Puck, and then there are lesser spirits who have weak consciousnesses. In my case, when I use magic, I use the power of the lesser spirits.”

“And as for me, I manifest upon being called by Lia, but I can use magic freely. The lesser spirits can’t do anything without her orders, so she orders them and uses magic through them… That’s sort of like how magic is used.”

Annerose closed her eyes and pondered on both of their explanations.

Looking at that, Emilia reflected upon the lack of a proper explanation. Explaining things in a convoluted manner to a nine-year-old was not very considerate. It was only natural that she thought of giving a more concise explanation, but…

“So, in short, the kitten spirit…Puck uses real magic, right? So, can’t he teach that to me?”

“Oh my. This child is really smart. She’s still small, but she’s amazing.” Puck clapped his hands, surprising Emilia.

“Never underestimate a lady. So, what do you think?” Annerose puffed her chest in front of them and asked Puck whether her suggestion was going to be accepted or not.

“Ummm.” Puck touched his whiskers and groaned. “I want to help you out, but it’s a shame that I can’t since my magic is a bit different from normal magic. That’s why I don’t think you can learn from me.”

“…What if I were to try to become a spirit arts user?” Annerose asked, bracing for what was coming.

“Anne…that’s.”

“Lia, saying things clearly is an act of kindness too, you know.” Puck softly interrupted Emilia’s attempt to dodge answering the question with a few words.

The spirit shook his head at the girl who was looking straight at him. “It’s too bad, but it takes more talent to become a spirit arts user than it does to become a magic user, and I’m sorry to say this, but you don’t have what it takes to be a spirt arts user. And…”

“And what?”

“Even if you become a spirit arts user, it would not be the same as the power you are seeking. It’s great that you are working so hard for your family, but don’t get your priorities wrong. This isn’t the kind of power you desire, and it isn’t something you can obtain.”

"…" Annerose took in Puck's seemingly ruthless assertion, closed her eyes, and looked up. Emilia grabbed the hem of her skirt, thinking about the sorrow inside the girl's small chest.

"I feel better since you said things clearly," Annerose said with a bright expression, surprising Emilia.

"Huh?" Emilia replied, her eyes widened in surprise, and…

"What are you so surprised about?" Annerose said while putting her hand on her waist. "Things aren't that convenient in this world. Nothing good will come from cheating, either. I have been pushing forward on the path to become a magic user, but to waver at the slightest hint of a shortcut is proof that my feelings are weak. I have been reflecting on it."

"Yo-You can change your feelings that easily? I thought Puck had said something really awful and was thinking about pulling his tail later as punishment."

"Whaa," Puck exclaimed after hearing Emilia say something he didn't seem to like, but she ignored him.

However, Annerose boldly laughed after hearing Emilia's words with a look that was not typical of a nine-year-old. "I was close to seeing another path, but in the end, there was only one. I know which path I must take. It does not have any shortcuts or side paths. I believe I have gained something from our conversation."

"You…are really amazing, Anne."

"Indeed, I am amazing. I am a noble. I am eminent."

Eminent. Noble. Such words came out of Annerose's mouth, and it made Emilia ponder. About what she needed to do from now on, what it meant, and how important it was. About becoming the ruler of this kingdom and the path leading to that—and if she had mapped her path out as clearly as that girl.

"Emily, is there something you are worried about?"

"…Yeah, that's right. There's something I need to do. But it's reaaally reaaally big and difficult and I know that the current me is really lacking. But, even so, I need to do it…”

“But it’s something you have to do, right?”

“—Yes. It’s something, I have to do.” That’s the one thing I’m certain of.

Emilia lifted her face up. Annerose let out a deep sigh in front of her, making her frown, and then stuck her palm out at her.

“Would you be willing to join your palm with mine?”

“Huh? Li-Like this?” Emilia placed her left palm on the right palm being presented to her.

Emilia could immediately feel that the girl’s palm was far smaller than her own when she felt her palm against hers. It was so much smaller than hers, yet her spirit dwarfed her own.

“Emily, I am also in the middle of challenging something big like that that I need to do. So let us make a promise and compete.”

“A promise and, compete?”

“Yes, that’s right. That we won’t run away from our goals. And compete to see who will achieve theirs first.”

The smiling Annerose probably didn’t know just how much a Promise meant to a spirit arts user. Even if she wasn’t aware of it, however, the girl would never break her promise. Emilia just knew due to how sincere Annerose had been with her, and she trusted her.

“Yeah, a promise. Anne and I won’t run away from our goals.”

“And we will definitely achieve them. I will be angry if you run away.”

The girls exchanged laughter and gently separated their palms. Clenching her palm as if to trap the little remaining warmth in it, Emilia silently engraved the important promise in her heart.

It happened right after they'd had such a heartwarming exchange.

"Speaking of which. You have been calling me Anne for a while now, haven't you?"

"Oh… I'm sorry. Should I not have?"

She wasn't doing it on purpose, she was calling her that without thinking about it.

Not Annerose, but Anne. I think it's a cute nickname.

"Only my family and close friends call me that. I don't remember allowing you to call me that."

"…Yeah, I'm sorry." Emilia drooped her head dejectedly at Annerose's words.

"But…it's fine. You can call me that too, Emily."

"…Is it fine?"

Annerose shrugged, as if she couldn't stand looking at Emilia with downcast eyes. "Since," the girl continued. "Emily, you are like a younger sister to me, and I can't take my eyes off you."

"…Younger sister?"

"Yeah, a younger sister. You are so naive and vulnerable… I cannot help but worry."

Emilia was being looked at with compassionate eyes, and as she was pondering, she looked up. And then…

"I-I am definitely the older sister! Anne, you idiot!"

"Gosh! How dare you speak to your employer like that! I hate you!"

The girls turned red and began arguing. They did so, even though they had completely different heights and were from completely different races.

"Oh my. You guys are fighting like sisters," Puck muttered while watching over them, but he didn’t state who the older sister was.

—A few hours later, Roswaal arrived at Miload Manor and cleared up the misunderstanding regarding Emilia’s position.

8

“We are very sorry for the trouble we caused. It was an unforgivable mistake on our part.”

The two who said that with a bow were Frederica and Clind, who were there to see Emilia off. The other servants had gathered behind them, and it was a big apology session with everyone bowing their heads.

“No, you guys don’t need to worry about it. I’m the one who didn’t explain things properly and was convinced in a weird way… I am sorry for confusing all of you.”

“No, it is my fault for not checking Lord Roswaal’s secret message properly. I don’t have any excuse that I can make to you, Lady Emilia. The blunder of a lifetime. Gaffe.” Clind put his hand on his chest and apologized with a docile face.

Emilia felt a momentary sadness pass through her chest for not being called Emily, but she shook her head. “It’s fine,” she said. “It was a fun experience. I couldn’t be of any help at all though, and that’s all I feel bad about. Next time I come here, I’ll be able to serve tea and clean.”

“Lady Emilia. Unfortunately, we dooon’t have time to study suuuch things, now do we?”

Emilia was getting excited, but the tall man standing behind her put a damper on it.

It was an eccentric man with long, indigo hair and clownish makeup—Roswaal himself.

When he had finished his business and joined them at the mansion, what he saw was that the important guest he had sent there to be welcomed was dressed as a servant for some reason and was busy with chores.

Even Roswaal was appalled by the sight, and he couldn’t give his usual wry smile.

“Frooom now on, you will be spending your time in the main Mather’s residence. I’m sorry, but I don’t thiiink you’ll get an opportunity to utilize the skills you’ve acquired here, Lady Emilia.”

“I see…that’s unfortunate, but I guess it can’t be helped.”

Even so, these past two days were unforgettable to Emilia. It was a time where she experienced things she’d never have been able to do by spending her time aimlessly, and most importantly, she made a promise.

The two had parted with few words and no warmth in their exchange.

“—Emily.”

Just when Emilia was thinking about her, the voice of the person in her mind shook her eardrums. Annerose wearing a dress appeared pushing the door of the mansion’s entrance. The girl came forward with a neat gesture, passed through the line of servants, and went in front of Emilia.

“Uncle Roswaal, it has been a while. My apologies for my family’s terrible rudeness.”

“Roswaal, it isn’t Anne’s fault. So don’t be angry or…”

“If you, the victim, are not saying anything, then scolding Annerose now would only maaaake me look like a villain, so I won’t do it. I would never dooo such a thing.”

Facing the gaze of the two girls, Roswaal shrugged with an uncomfortable expression. He then stepped back and gave the stage to the two girls who were now looking at each other in front of him.

“Emily…no, that is not right. Lady Emilia, please forgive my insolence.”

“…Anne.”

“I have repeatedly been unforgivably rude to my uncle’s guest. My deepest apologies. I will surely pay for this rudeness in due time.”

Emilia was shocked by Annerose treating her like a stranger. However, this was the original distance between Emilia and Annerose that they should have had. Considering the path they were going to take, it was inevitable to talk like this and part like this.

The dragon carriage noisily arrived in front of the mansion, and a peach-haired coachwoman awaited Emilia with a clear gaze—Emilia looked at the dragon carriage that Roswaal was entering first, and when she went to step into the carriage—

“Emily.”

“…” Emilia turned around when someone called her name. After looking at who it was, she widened her eyes in surprise. The thing reflecting in her amethyst eyes was a little palm pointed at her.

“—Anne.” Emilia called out that name in a friendly way, and placed her palm on Annerose’s. It was a brief touch, and no words were exchanged, but that much was enough for them. Their hands separated, and Emilia entered the dragon carriage this time. Inside the carriage alone with Roswaal, she took the last seat and then touched her chest. “Puck.”

“You are a handful, my daughter.”

In response to the quick call, Puck appeared with a wry smile. He lifted his arms towards the sky. “Three, go.” He wielded his power with a listless voice.

“—This is.” Roswaal sensed the movement of mana as he was looking at them silently and looked up above the carriage’s window. Emilia also saw it while sitting on the seat.

—Scenery where white snow fell silently from the sky.

“There’s nooo way that it would snow in Lugunica at this time of year. Lady Emilia, diiid you make some kind of promise with Annerose?”

“She didn’t tell me to make it snow. This is like my declaration.”

Roswaal narrowed his heterochromatic eyes, but Emilia did not intend to answer any more questions no matter what he asked. It was Emilia and Annerose’s important secret.

“Even though it’s only affecting a limited area, it’s something thaaaat affects the climate, so what kind of an excuse can I make… no, it’s just going to get blameeed on me since it’s happening in my domain.”

“Then I’ll go with that. Please take care of it, Roswaal.”

“Ooooh my, now that’s what I like to hear. You’ve chaaanged a lot in just two days, Lady Emilia.”

The dragon carriage started flying down the highway. Under the snowy sky, Emilia wondered what kind of face the girl looking up at the snowy sky had. She thought about the only person she had made it snow for just so she could see it. Just imagining that made her heart warm up.

“Roswaal, I’ll definitely become the ruler. I’ve decided that I have to be.”

“Thaaat’s really reassuring.”

Roswaal didn’t seem like he was going to mock Emilia’s determination.

Roswaal had Roswaal’s agenda. Emilia had Emilia’s goals. It was a relationship that formed for their mutual benefit. Still, there were things that could get conveyed.

Resolve and earnestness. Those were the things that could be felt by the two of them, who were serious about this.

‘There are many things that you need to learn and know. Lady Emilia… You do know it may be a more laborious path than you imagined, yes?”

“Yes, but I’ll overcome it…since I don’t want to be a promise breaker.”

She could still feel that warmth on her palm. As long as I don’t forget this, I will be able to carry out my intentions.

Roswaal silently looked over Emilia, who was solidifying a strong resolve inside herself. He muttered under his breath. “—A month to go until the royal family perishes from an illness. Weeell, it all starts frooom there.”

The words he murmured didn’t reach anyone, drowned out by the shaking of the dragon carriage, and disappeared.

—The snow fell silently, piling up as if it was embracing the world.

Volume 11

Chapters 24-51

Chapter 24:
He Waited

1

The very first sensation that cut into Subaru's consciousness was one of discomfort.

"Uech! Oueh! Upuegch!"

Feeling the strange foreign-body-sensation of chewing on gravel accompanied by a bitter earthy-taste dancing around on his tongue, Subaru immediately went into a coughing fit trying to spit the stuff out, when he opened his eyes.

He could see only darkness and felt as if a cold touch was running across his entire body. Judging from the hard tactile sensation, and the direction in which gravity was pulling him, he determined that he was lying sideways on the ground. Then, slowly looking around with eyes that were just growing accustomed to the dark—he realized that he was inside the old ruins he had seen many times before.

"I'm, inside the Tomb?"

As if to make sure, he gave his mouth a swirl. The taste left over from spitting out gravel was still fresh in his memory.

Last time, too, he remembered waking up with pebbles in his mouth. In other words, the point in time must be… "Just after First Trial, then…? So I came back here… No, more importantly…"

If this was really right after returning from the first Trial where he had made peace with his past, then Subaru wouldn't be the only one who had collapsed here.

"—Emilia!"

Right away, in the darkness, he found the silver-haired girl collapsed beside him.

Approaching her, and seeing the same agonized expression as last time, Subaru hesitated just as he was about to extend his finger to touch her sleeping cheeks.

Having already accompanied and watched over Emilia several times as she took the Trials, Subaru knew. That if she was touched in her sleeping state, regardless of what was happening in the Trial, it would be interrupted, and she would be returned here.

As such, it's even possible that she could be woken up right when she was about to pass the Trial. Therefore, he had to be very careful about touching her while inside the Tomb. But,

"I already know this attempt doesn't end well…"

Shaking his head, Subaru crushed his hesitation, and burned her sleeping face into his eyes as he took her body gently into his arms. Her pained expression quickly receded, and she immediately began to wake—

"Su…baru…?" Opening her eyes, Emilia called his name as if still half asleep.

"Yeah, that's right. It's me, Emilia-tan. Are you alright?" Subaru answered with a reassuring smile, then waited for her to regain her bearings.

Just like this, he waited. For her to remember where she was, to take in the results of the Trial, and to begin crying like a child.

Even knowing full well that she will be breaking down in tears, there was nothing he could do, for such was his powerlessness.

Whereas, in spite of it all, the girl would will herself to stand up, for such was her noble purity.

All he could do was gently cradle her to keep her from shattering, and, until she calmed down, hold her firmly in his arms, and not let go.

2

It was after carrying the crying Emilia to Ryuzu' house, and making sure that Ram had put her to bed, that Subaru settled down and began to put everything, and his Return By Death, in order.

Ram, Otto, and the others inside all wanted to inquire about what had happened, but Subaru cut them off, saying "First, let's wait until Emilia wakes up", and so now he was alone.

Having withdrawn himself from the rest who still wanted to talk, he gazed up at the night sky outside of Ryuzu' house, allowing the wind to wash over him, while within Subaru's heart, complex calculations were taking place.

Subaru: "Still…happened again, huh…"

Touching the left side of his waist, he felt for the wound that should have been there.

A deep wound had been gouged out by a blade, where his intestines had spilled out. An opportunity to see one's own organs isn't something that happens to most people, he thought, and in that regard, he had probably surpassed most people in experience points.

Subaru: "Whether or not I'm happy about it is a different story. I don't have some kind of deviant fetish where I'd get excited at the idea of seeing my own organs…although someone I know might."

Coming to this point, the words flashed across Subaru's mind.

"—Didn't I tell you? Didn't we promise?"

He guessed it was that glamorous woman's voice. The blood-drenched, immorally glamorous voice, the voice of an abnormal person reaching ecstasy at the sight of life draining away.

Subaru abhorred that voice, that promise, and that perversion down to his very bones.

On top of that, it was not the first time he had his belly torn open this way.

Subaru: “So here’s where the “Bowel Hunter” makes her re-entry… give me a break…”

Putting his hand on his forehead, Subaru turned up to the sky and sighed.

In the back of his eyes, he saw that beautiful woman with long jet-black hair which was the same color as his own. That murderer, wielding wicked blades, who had already ended Subaru’s life twice before. The menace who had driven Subaru into a corner in the First Loop, whom he had only driven away with Reinhardt’s aid—Elsa Granhiert.

Subaru: “I couldn’t actually see her, but that was definitely Elsa. Or maybe I just don’t want to believe there could be anyone else like that. Let’s just stick with it being Elsa.”

It felt like it had already been two months since their encounter, but in real time, it had only been less than a month. The wounds she had sustained back then were not light, but the aftereffects didn’t seem to be enough to stop her from killing Subaru.

Was it because he was too easy, or perhaps she had completely healed?

Subaru: “It’ll be safer to assume that she’s healed. Come to think of it, the healing magic in this world seems to be able to heal pretty much anything besides death itself. Can’t say how many times I would’ve died if… Well, I actually did die, but.”

Being almost dead and then coming out alive, and being almost dead and then actually dying had both happened to him so many times that, from his standpoint, it was a bit hard to grasp exactly where he stands on this.

But either way, Subaru had concluded that it was Elsa who had attacked the Mansion. With that settled, the next question would be —

Subaru: “Why was Elsa in the Mansion, and what happened to

Frederica and Petra?”

When Subaru arrived at the Mansion, there were still some signs of regular life left behind, such as the lamps in Petra’s bedroom, and the lighting in the entrance hall. Not counting the office that led to the escape tunnel, the fact that the lights were on in the other two places meant that,

Subaru: “At least we know that nothing happened before that night… right?”

He considered whether he had come to that conclusion too hastily.

There was also the possibility that those lights were simply left on all day and that Subaru was mistaken in his conclusion that nothing had occurred until that night. However, the key to rejecting that possibility lay in the amount of time the lamps could stay on.

Subaru: “Unlike Lagmite ore, the crystal lamps need to be charged up by absorbing mana from the atmosphere during the day. I know from personal experience that if you just leave them on, they won’t last half the day.”

One night, while in the middle of learning the alphabets in the Mansion, the crystal lamp he had forgotten to turn off during the day suddenly went out. Subaru thought there was some paranormal phenomenon at works and made a huge fuss, and Ram would have blown him away if Rem hadn’t gently caught him, and all the while, Emilia made herself small in a corner and started trembling. Subaru still couldn’t help but smile thinking of that memory. But now was not the time to be nostalgic. So, just picking out the important part,

Subaru: “If the lights had been on during the day, it would be very odd for them to still be on at night. Thus, it should be alright to eliminate the possibility that the house was empty before that day. That means my time limit is…the sixth night. This is the night of the second day, so there are four days left. No, three and a half days.”

In terms of time, Subaru had about 84 hours remaining.

Within that limited time, the task imposed upon him this time was:

Subaru: “Defend the Mansion from the Bowel Hunter, or at least keep the people there safe.”

There was no way to be sure whether or not the girls had been able to escape before that serpent-and-spider-esque killer arrived. He didn’t know where the escape passage led, but if Frederica had escaped, they would most likely try to meet up with the master of the house, Roswaal, at the Sanctuary.

Subaru: “It could be the case that the escape passage is stupidly long and leads out to the middle of nowhere, and they escaped safely. Or…”

He didn’t want to think about it, but there was also the possibility that they hadn’t been able to escape.

Considering the gap in fighting strength between the two sides, the possibility that Subaru didn’t want to think about was more likely.

He furrowed his brows at the thought. But the fact is, from what Subaru had seen, Elsa’s combat ability was certainly that high. Within his limited experience of this Parallel World, he had already met some very powerful people here. If that murderer were to be judged solely on her fighting ability alone, then…

Subaru: “Stronger than Julius, but weaker than Mr. Wilhelm… or thereabouts. And it pretty much goes without saying… not an opponent I can beat even if I try really hard.”

Even under the best circumstances, Subaru’s base-stats were too weak. If one were to compare them, it would not be an exaggeration to say that their difference in strength was like comparing a cat and a tiger. The chance of him winning alone was effectively zero.

During their last exchange, in the end, it was only a massive coincidence that saved him.

Subaru: “It would be great if the invincible Reinhart could just happen to pass on by right about now, but… no matter how much of a contrived, overpowered, handsome main character he is, for him to suddenly show up at a time like this is asking a bit too much."

If this was a story Subaru was reading and the author tried to pull a stunt like that, Subaru would throw the book across the room. But since this was really happening, he would gladly welcome such an absurd development with open arms.

After giving in to the urge to entertain that escapist fantasy for a moment, Subaru chased it away with a single, quiet sigh.

Subaru: "Elsa's reason for coming to the mansion… is most likely the same as last time, to disrupt the Royal Selection. After all, she's been hired by someone to get in Emilia's way."

In the capital, Emilia's Insignia was stolen by Felt. While Elsa was the one who hired Felt, the real mastermind was the one who had hired Elsa. By following the clues as to who would steal an Insignia from Emilia that qualified her for the Royal Selection, Subaru had once believed that it must be one of the other factions, but,

Subaru: "After seeing the other candidates…I don't think I can be so sure."

First, looking at it from the angle of someone dispatching an assassin to steal an Insignia:

Right from the start, Crusch could be taken out as a suspect. Having witnessed her heroic character first-hand, Subaru could guarantee that without a second thought. She was not the kind of person who would do such a thing.

Felt was naturally not a suspect either, so that leaves only Priscilla and Anastasia, but—

Subaru: "Priscilla…would that haughty young lady really have a thing for cloak-and-dagger stuff? I could be mistaken, but she seems to be the kind of person who believes the whole world revolves around her. I don't think she'd go out of her way to do something like this. Then that just leaves Anastasia…"

The purple haired merchant girl came to mind.

Underneath her gentle appearances, was the sheen of a sharp-nosed hunter, and an awareness of her surroundings that would allow her to turn any situation to her advantage. —In fact, Subaru had made good use of that characteristic of hers.

If it really was her doing, perhaps she would have been choosing the most logical method to remove the opposition. Happily letting her imagination run wild and hiring a third party with gold to carry out some clandestine operation seemed to be her strong suit too. Only, if there was one factor that refuted that argument, it would be,

Subaru: “I just, don’t think that Julius guy would overlook something like that. No no, it’s not like I’m singling him out or anything. Right, yeah, just a gut feeling, that’s all.”

Or, perhaps she had managed to hide it from “The Greatest Knight”. But the question remains, would she really risk creating an irreparable fissure within their otherwise perfect master-servant relationship?

In the end, the theory of Anastasia’s faction’s involvement must also be rejected.

Subaru: “That accounts for all the suspects among the candidates. But even so, there is still more to think about. If we consider how people treat Emilia…”

If the culprit wasn’t another Royal Selection candidate, then it could be someone from a faction that simply wanted to exclude Emilia from the Royal Selection. It would make sense if someone who despised the Half-Elf Emilia had chosen this as the most simplistic method.

But would anyone really go that far? Subaru must be naive to even entertain such a question. The hatred for her Half-Elf lineage was certainly that deep.

Subaru: “But if that’s true, then there’s virtually no chance of figuring out who her employer is. Unless Elsa herself spits it out."

And he didn't have the power to make her—so he was right back where he started.

In the end, the only possible way to deal with Elsa's attack would be,

Subaru: "It's kind of disturbing how weak our faction is. I'm completely useless. Otto doesn't even count. Emilia and Puck could put up a fight if only they were both around, and Ram's stamina becomes worrisome if we ever get into a drawn-out fight. Roswaal is injured, but it's not like he could be counted on anyways. I have no idea how strong Frederica is, but, unless maybe Petra has some kind of secret power and suddenly develops into a CHEAT CHARACTER…that's not gonna happen. So basically."

Subaru could think of two viable plans.

The first was to go back to the Mansion, get Frederica, Petra, Rem, and Beatrice and escape to the Sanctuary to avoid Elsa's attack.

The other option was,

Garfiel: "—What're ya wastin' yer time out here fer?"

Coming out of the house, Garfiel looked down at Subaru, who was sitting on the ground leaning his back against the wall. Since he was so short, it was quite rare to see Garfiel looking down at him. Savoring the new experience, Subaru let out a "No", and shook his head,

Subaru: "I'm just putting my thoughts in order, thinking through some stuff. How's Emilia?"

Garfiel: "Princess's still sleepin' like a log. She's sleepin' like "Mororoku nappin' for a whole day an' night"“

Subaru: "I don't know who that is, but sounds like Mororoku sleeps too much."

Responding to the usual incomprehensible idiom, Subaru stood up and turned to face Garfiel.

Half a head shorter than Subaru, he had a head of short blond hair. Between his sharp eyes, there was a white scar on his forehead. His pointed canine teeth and his ferocious beast-like body gave off an otherworldly aura—and there was a confidence in himself which only the strong possessed.

Of the two plans that had come to mind for dealing with Elsa, the second one was this youth.

If they passed the Trials and released the Sanctuary, Subaru would be able to take him out of this place. Then, if he was as strong as he claimed to be, he would hopefully have enough strength to defeat Elsa. Rather than fleeing as a temporary measure, it would be better to repulse or even subjugate Elsa and remove the threat altogether.

Subaru: “Hey, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “The hell y’want?”

Subaru: “You’re the strongest, aren’t you? You’re confident you’ll never lose to anyone, right?”

Garfiel: “Haa? Yer damn right. Don’t matter who it is. I’ll crush’em, send’em flyin’, kill’em dead and come out on top.”

Although a bit annoyed by Subaru’s question, Garfiel’s confidence didn’t waver for a bit. Encouraged by that response, Subaru nodded,

Subaru: “Once we get you out of the Sanctuary, there’s something that’ll require that strength of yours really soon. When that time comes, we’re gonna have to rely on you to be the strongest.”

Garfiel: “What ya talkin’ ‘bout?”

Subaru: “Prove to me what you told me just now, ok? I’ll be counting on you.”

Patting the confused-looking Garfiel on the shoulder, Subaru headed back into Ryuzu’ house. When he opened the door and stepped in, the three people inside—Ram, Otto, and Ryuzu, all focused their sights onto Subaru. With their gazes washing over him, Subaru turned his steps toward the room where Emilia was sleeping.

Ram: "Barusu, Lady Emilia is still…"

Subaru: "Hmm, I think she's woken up by now. —Emilia-tan, I know you probably don't want to come out, but we need to talk. Everyone's waiting for you."

After calling through the door, he heard the faint sound of breathing coming from the other side.

Here was a brief hesitation. Then, after a few seconds had passed, the doorknob gently turned, and the door opened, revealing Emilia timidly standing behind it with her head slumped down.

Emilia: "Um…Sorry I'm always causing you trouble. In the Tomb, and now as well…"

Subaru: "Being troubled by Emilia-tan is no trouble at all. I want to do it, so it's fine. More importantly, are you feeling heavy or hurt anywhere? If you feel strange anywhere, I'll gently rub it for you and make it all better."

Emilia: "Mm. When I fell down I think I hit my waist or something so it aches a little bit…"

Subaru: "Understood. I'll start to carefully… Miss Ram? Miss Ram? The pointy end of your cane is jamming into my liver area?!"

While Subaru was busy cracking a joke bordering on sexual harassment, Ram snuck up behind him, pulled out her cane, and jabbed him with it. When he pointed that out to her, she made no reply and only jabbed him harder, until Subaru yelped like a puppy and jumped out of the way.

Ram: "Lady Emilia, how are you feeling? Please forget Barusu's insolent remarks, and tell Ram everything about your physical condition."

Subaru: "What you're not even going to give a comment on what you did?! Look, I'm seriously kinda bleeding here. It even went through all these layers of clothes, just how much strength were you putting in?"

Subaru protested while rubbing at the jolting pain left over in his lower back. Ram only sent him a sidelong glance as if she was looking at an insect, and snorted "Hah". Then, turning back to Emilia,

Ram: "Then you are alright, Lady Emilia? If there are no problems with your health, then…"

Emilia: "A-Ahuh, I'm fine. We have to…talk about what happened during the Trial, don't we?"

Having guessed what Ram was going to say, Emilia nodded and stepped forward into the middle of the room. Garfiel soon came in as well, and so all the usual faces now circled around Emilia.

Then, under the gazes of everyone around her, Emilia stammered out an explanation of the Trial and its outcome, just as she did last time. If there was just one difference…

Otto: "So then, how come Mr. Natsuki is alright after going inside?"

Otto raised his hand a little, and asked on behalf of everyone.

Until that question was raised, Subaru hadn't explained any of the information from his side. Part of it was because he wanted to hear Emilia's thoughts about the Trial, but also,

Subaru: "I told you, didn't I? I got the Qualifications, so I can go inside. If you ask me where I got it from, it was probably when I went inside the Tomb yesterday afternoon. And as for what happened when I went inside… I took the same kind of Trial Emilia-tan did. But it kinda looks like I passed mine."

Subaru's announcement ignited an uproar throughout the room.

Emilia, who had taken the same Trial and failed, was even more shocked than everyone else. She stared at Subaru in silence, with a baffled look in her violet eyes.

Subaru nodded to her, and,

Subaru: “Just to get this out of the way, the reason I passed the Trial wasn’t because I was better or anything. The Trial was about facing your past. I’ve already made peace with mine beforehand, so it was basically just a BONUS STAGE for me.”

Ryuzu: “I don’t know what a “bo-nas” is, but if Su-bo passed the Trial…hmph, that’s a surprise.”

Ram: “However, based on what Lady Emilia said, the Trial doesn’t end with just one stage, correct? Since the word “first” was mentioned, one would expect there to be more.”

Ram said this as Ryuzu seemed to accept it as it is. While nodding at them both, Subaru stole a glance at Emilia. She still kept her silence, and there were waves of complicated emotions carried within her eyes.

Subaru tried to imagine what she might be feeling inside her heart, but he soon shook away this naive notion.

There was the time limit imposed upon him on the one hand, and the difficulty of Emilia’s Trial caused by her Past on the other. Having to balance the two at once, there weren’t many options left to him. Therefore,

Subaru: “I heard something when I passed the Trial… Apparently, if two challengers go in at the same time, the next Trial won’t start. Then we’ll have to wait for a different day to go in again.”

Ram: “…Hmm, which means?”

Subaru: “If Emilia-tan and I enter the Tomb together, Emilia-tan’s Trial will start while my Trial… basically, I won’t be able to start the second Trial.”

Otto: “W-Wa-Wait a minute, Mr. Natsuki.”

Just as Subaru finished his sentence, Otto immediately cut himself in. Seeing Subaru pretending not to notice his unsettled gaze, he stuck his hand into his light-greyish hair, and, Otto: "By the sound of what you just said, Mr. Natsuki, you're planning to challenge the Trials as well? But wasn't this whole thing supposed to set up an achievement for Lady Emilia so that…"

Subaru: "Otto, you dumbass."

Subaru tried to stop Otto from blurting it all out, but it was too late. And Otto, realizing that he had just said something he shouldn't have, quickly covered his own mouth. But everyone else—including Emilia, had already heard what he was trying to say.

Otto awkwardly held his breath, and Subaru stared at him with eyes of disdain. And Emilia, looking at them both from a distance,

Emilia: "What did you mean, just now?"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, let's calm down. That was uh…"

Emilia: "Don't try to dupe me, tell me properly. —Please, Subaru."

Emilia's eyes clung onto Subaru, pleading.

No boy would have had the heart to refuse a beautiful girl's tearfully-voiced plea, and he would not be Natsuki Subaru if he could refuse such a plea from Emilia. He wished he had the willpower to say no, but Subaru dropped his shoulders and abandoned his hesitation,

Subaru: "If Emilia-tan passes the Trials, the villagers of Earlham will be freed from being hostages, and the residents of the Sanctuary will be released from their bondage to this land. If you could overcome the Trials, you will gain the support of both of these two camps… that was the real plan behind all this."

Emilia: "…Is, that so. So you knew, Subaru?"

Subaru: "No no, I didn't notice anything at all until someone told me."

Seeing Emilia clearly shaken before him, Subaru held up his chest and brazenly lied. In front of Subaru's shameless lie, Ram and Otto looked at him as if they were chewing on something bitter, but

Subaru hinted to them to keep quiet by shooting them both a glance.

Then, turning back to Emilia,

Subaru: “All of it was Roswaal’s plan. Honestly, I’m even suspecting whether his injuries are just a part of the performance.”

Emilia: “Even Roswaal wouldn’t go that… why can’t I finish that sentence. Looking at the situation now, it does seem like something he would do.”

Subaru: “I’d hate to let everything go along with that guy’s intentions… I would be joking if I told you that was my main motivation, but that’s definitely a part of it. But more than that…”

Emilia looked confused, and lowered her head. Subaru bent down beside her to look up at her face from below, and saw her long eyelashes trembling with surprise.

Subaru: “I want to become your strength. I don’t know what you saw when you faced your past, but if it brings you so much pain, so much heartache, and so many tears… then I want to offer you my hand.”

Emilia: “…Subaru.”

Subaru: “If the goal is to take the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary, then it’s fine if I do it. If an achievement is needed, then you can have all of mine. My achievements are your achievements. No matter who it is, everyone has a past… but nothing good comes out of believing that all of them have to be resolved.”

Last time, in the World before his death, those were the words Garfiel had said to him.

In front of Subaru, who had wanted Emilia to continue challenging the Trial even knowing the pain that facing her past would cause her, Garfiel had said this about the need to overcome the past.

That new perspective had struck Subaru like a thunder on a clear day.

Emilia widened her eyes in surprise, and bit her lips with an expression like she was sinking into thought.

Subaru understood why she would be conflicted. The truth is, deep down, she must be frightened of facing her past. But because she is so pure and noble, she wouldn't possibly consider pushing this burden onto someone else. And it was for this reason that she was so conflicted.

There was no way to say for sure that the remaining Trials wouldn't wound Subaru's heart just like her Past had wounded hers.

Subaru: "It's alright if you have to think about it. I understand it's not something you can decide right away. —But if it's alright, I hope you can at least let me have one day tomorrow."

Emilia: "One day, tomorrow…?"

Subaru: "Either way, I can't be the kind of devilish-instructor who drags an exhausted Emilia-tan into the Tomb like "Go take the Trials!" Since I still have plenty of energy left, I should be the one to go next, even if it's just to do a practice-run into the second Trial. And if I end up passing the Trial, that's even better, isn't it?"

If he could gain a single day, and then gain another day after that, then by passing the Trials as soon as he could, he could liberate the Sanctuary on the day after tomorrow.

He would relieve Emilia's burden, accomplish his goal, and have enough time left over to save everyone at the Mansion. That would be the most ideal result.

Subaru knew that Emilia would be shaken by his proposal.

It bothered him to be deceiving her at a time when she was most vulnerable, but it's a technique in negotiation to throw down a large issue first before following it up with the smaller and more vital ones.

Since her mind was still not at ease, after hesitating to accept the first one, she would not be able to bring herself to deny his proposed concessions.

Tomorrow and the day after, Subaru will pass the Trials. There will surely be another opportunity to give Emilia the time to stand back up.

But that time isn't now. There isn't enough time, and the uncaring hand of Fate had—

Garfiel: "Y'expectin' us to just listen quietly while y'move the conversation along any way y'like?"

Just as Subaru's improvised tactic was about to succeed, a voice stopped him from behind.

The golden-haired obstructor narrowed his fierce emerald-green eyes, and, clacking his sharp canine fangs, took a step forward—

Garfiel: "I say, other than Princess… Lady Emilia, I ain't agreein' t'anyone else takin' the Trials. At least, I defin'tly defin'tly defin'tly, ain't gonna let you be th'one to free us."

Subaru: "Wha—?!"

Those were words he never expected to hear.

Subaru tried to make sense of the words that had been thrown at him, but unable to connect the speaker to the content of what was spoken, Subaru only groaned in confusion.

Watching as Subaru's eyes wavered, as if slamming down reality in front of someone who could not understand it,

Garfiel: "Y'listenin'? Do I have t'say it again? I ain't gonna approve of anyone other than Lady Emilia takin' the Trials. Get that into yer head, think of it as my condition, and not even the Granny's gonna change that."

Just like this, Garfiel crumpled up the skin of his nose, and spat this out with his displeasure in full display.

Chapter 25:
Forest of Ice

Garfiel: “Lookin’ like yer gonna cry ain’t gonna change a thing. I’ve already made up my mind. And once I do I don’t budge. It’d be like “Donmorakin gettin’ stuck when y’push him.”

Watching Subaru’ eyes open wide with astonishment, Garfiel continued.

The condition he spoke of—hearing it, threw Subaru’s heart into a state of shock and disarray. Because,

Subaru: “Of all people, why are you the one saying this…?”

Garfiel: “Huh? ‘Sit so surprisin’ I disagree? Just how naive are ya? All we did was talk a couple times, I’d be pretty pissed if y’think y’understand me.”

At Subaru’s words, Garfiel twisted the corners of his lips with displeasure, and Subaru did the same in return.

After all, what Garfiel had just rejected was based on something that Garfiel had suggested in the first place.

In the previous world, when Garfiel could no longer stand watching Emilia getting worn down from challenging the Trials over and over, he tossed up the idea that Subaru should take the Trials in her place. Subaru, who had obstinately believed that Emilia must be the one to overcome the Trials, was shaken to his core, and, after seeing sense in that idea, he had adopted it for himself. But now,

Subaru: “I’ve got all kinds of emotions swirling inside that I can’t keep down but… I’ll forget them for now. But more importantly, why are you against it? Increasing the chances of liberating the Sanctuary can’t possibly be bad for you?”

Garfiel: “Well, so yer sayin’ if I’m fully on board with Granny’s plans, then I should know yer idea’s more efficient, that it? —But still, I just absolutely don't like it."

Subaru: "Why are you saying that like some snot-nosed brat…!"

Crossing his arms, Garfiel turned his face away. There was no logic to what he was saying, and the fact that he was going purely on his feelings only complicated the conversation even further.

From their interactions up to now, Subaru understood that Garfiel was emotional—or, more accurately, that his priorities are primarily based on what he feels like at the moment. If appealing to common-sense was useless, then Subaru didn't know what else he could do would be effective.

Subaru: "Miss Ryuzu…"

Since there was no point in talking to Garfiel, who had no intention of agreeing with him, Subaru called to the elderly woman in the body of a young girl who had been quietly watching their exchange. But seeing Subaru turn to her, Ryuzu only waved through her long sleeves that hid her hands underneath,

Ryuzu: "When Gar-bo's like this, there's nothing I can say to make him budge. It's unfortunate, but no matter how hard you try, there's nothing in the Sanctuary that can force him to listen. Does Su-bo want to try?"

Subaru: "I don't have the kind of suicidal tendencies that'll make me want to challenge a guy who can throw a dragon carriage… Damnit, what's with you guys?"

She wasn't approving of Garfiel's words, but since she didn't actively rebuke him, it probably meant that deep down she agreed with him. Chances are, Ryuzu also believed that Emilia should be the one to overcome the Trials. He didn't know how much she respected Roswaal, but it seemed safe to assume that Ryuzu agreed with Roswaal on the most fundamental parts.

Nevertheless, Subaru couldn't help but wonder what would happen if Garfiel was on his side.

Emilia: "…Subaru."

Calling him with a worried voice, Emilia looked up at Subaru who seemed to be overwhelmed by feelings he couldn't explain. Reflecting the side of Subaru's face within her violet eyes,

Emilia: "I-I'll try my best, so it's fine, you don't have to push yourself. It was a bit… yeah, just a bit sudden, so I was surprised, but now that I know what is going to happen…"

Subaru: "No, Emilia-tan, you're the one who shouldn't push yourself. I'll convince this stubborn bastard somehow. And once I do that, the Trials…"

Emilia: "Subaru y—"

Emilia seemed like she was about to give in to Garfiel's words. Seeing her rally herself from her weakness, Subaru started churning in his head to think of some way to make them see reason. But, just as Subaru's mental preparation was getting underway, Emilia,

Emilia: "Subaru… even you, don't believe I can do it?"

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Emilia: "I-I know I let you see my useless side, so now you're thinking that… you can't leave the Trials to me, so instead."

Subaru: "You're wrong. It's not like that."

Emilia: "Well, I know you're worried, Subaru. Subaru passed the Trial while I didn't even come close… I don't even have the resolve to face… the Trial, and my Past."

Even though Subaru was denying it, Emilia shook her head from side to side, refusing to accept his denial.

Negative emotions surfaced in her eyes, and her lips shivered as her face went pale. From her unsettled speech, Subaru knew this was because she was recalling the Trial and the so-called Past.

—In other words, she was at a point where she could very easily crumble.

Subaru: "You don't have to think about it—!"

Emilia: "But unless I face it I'll never overcome the Trials! Yes, that's right… I have to overcome the Trials, I have to overcome my Past… or I will never become King. And the villagers and the people of the Sanctuary will never be able to leave…"

Taking her by the shoulders, Subaru desperately called out to her, but Emilia shook her head and did not seem to hear him. Or rather, the more he tried to stop her, the more obstinate her will seemed to become,

Emilia: "I can't let you babysit me forever, Subaru. I can't. Just not long ago, Subaru got hurt so badly because of me… I, don't want to make you carry my burden anym…"

Subaru: "It's fine that way. This might be a bad way of putting it, but you're already helping me as much as I'm helping you. It's all about putting the right materials to the right uses, right? I'm the one who has better the affinity when it comes to Trials. That's all there is to it, and nothing else. It just seems like something I can do, and something I can actually do faster. I don't find things I'm good at very often. There'll be plenty of opportunities for Emilia-tan to do your best later on."

Emilia: "Isn't this one of those huge opportunities now? If I always look away from unpleasant things, and keep running away… then what will I become?"

—If only he could've screamed "What's wrong about running away."

If running away from things you don't like, shying your eyes away from painful things, and turning your back to difficulties could allow you to live in peace, then that's not such a bad way to live. Subaru himself had lived this way, trying to distance himself from hardships to the best of his ability.

So he knew—that even though it's a cowardly way to live, there was no reason to condemn it.

But still, now. Right now, when Subaru should have understood and approved of the weakness facing up against Emilia's stubborn heart—

Subaru: "…"

Why couldn't he utter a single word of what he was thinking?

In front of Subaru's silence, Emilia closed her eyes and turned down her face. His hands that were still on her shoulders could feel her body temperature rising as if she was having a fever, but Subaru didn't know what he could do.

And, watching their exchange,

Garfiel: "Hah. Yer free to fight it out as y'like, but listenin' from the side, sounds to me like Lady Emilia's got'a point? Fact is, the Trial's been prepared to be challenged by Lady Emilia. Suddenly stickin' yerself in's just…"

Subaru: "You shut up! You… you don't know anything yet…!"

Garfiel: "Huh?"

Subaru exploded at Garfiel, who made it sound so easy without realizing what kind of feeling that was going through him. Faced with Subaru's rage, a dangerous aura began to emanate from Garfiel.

But once again, Subaru ignored his threat and glared at him fearlessly.

Subaru: "Do you have any idea what will happen if you keep pushing this on her? Do you think I can just calmly watch as she gets hurt, worn down, and falls apart? …What would I be if I…"

Garfiel: "…I don't get where you're coming up with this stuff all of'a sudden."

Subaru: "You're thinking in terms of conditions and merits, but did you think about Emilia herself even once? I know if she overcomes the Trials, the payoff will be huge. But, you're not counting the wounds she'll get or the tears she'll shed to get there… or what she herself wants."

In the previous world, even though he had seen, closer than anyone, how thin Emilia had been worn, how weakened she had become, Subaru never uttered a word to stop her.

If it's her, if it's Emilia, then she will be able to do it. They had cornered her, pushed her beyond her limits, and only then had they realized it. There was no point trying to explain this feeling to someone who had not experienced it.

That was the curse of Return by Death that stabbed at Subaru this moment.

His situation was that only he knew the truth of what happened in the last world. Since neither his knowledge nor his words would suffice, the only thing he could do was to speak from emotions,

Emilia: "What… do you know, Subaru?"

Subaru: "Emilia?"

Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Subaru lifted up his head and saw Emilia's eyes opened wide, staring at him. Emotions were swirling within her violet pupils, which were drowned in surging tear drops that would fall and disappear.

With tiny movements, Emilia shook her head from side to side, muttering "No, no…" as if rejecting something.

Emilia: "Do you know? Subaru, do y…do you know… about my Past?"

Subaru: "Wait, calm down. Take a deep breath. The conversation's just taken a bad turn, so…"

Emilia: "Wrong, you're wrong… I didn't, mean to… I, just… just."

Once again, Emilia returned to the state she had been in within the Tomb, immediately after the Trial.

Confused, disoriented, beginning to ramble incoherently, her violet eyes that were wet with tears reflected Subaru within them, without seeing him at all.

She reached out her fingers and clenched onto Subaru's sleeve as if she was going to tear it off,

Emilia: "I, Everyone… even Mother, I… but no, you're wrong. It's not true. It really isn't. At the time I… really… I."

Subaru: "Emilia, what are y…"

Holding tight onto Subaru, Emilia desperately rambled on. Unable to understand the meaning behind her frantic words, Subaru could only pray that his sincere, meaningless consolation could get through to her.

When, in front of the helpless Subaru, a shadow suddenly moved. It was,

Subaru: "—Ram."

Without stopping to respond to his call, Ram slid herself behind Emilia. Reaching out her hand, she gently covered Emilia's mouth. As the silver-haired girl's eyes widened in astonishment, Ram quietly uttered "Forgive me",

Emilia: "…ah."

And suddenly, Emilia's body began to powerlessly collapse to the floor.

Immediately reaching out to Emilia who was falling right in front of him, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief as he managed to wrap her within in his arms. Then, looking up at Ram,

Subaru: "What did you do?!"

Ram: "Only a quicker way to calm her down. Did that make Barusu mad?"

Subaru: "I wanted to say it was too forceful… but I guess it was for the best. Sorry for all the trouble."

Ram: "It's strange that Barusu would be apologizing on Lady Emilia's behalf. Since when did you take over The Great Spirit's position as Lady Emilia's protector?"

Subaru: "It's not like I was…"

"Trying to", was what he was about to say. But Subaru realized that it would have been an unconvincing rebuttal.

Since for one reason or another Puck was refusing to show his face, it was true that Subaru was looking out for Emilia even more than usual. And now, knowing that challenging the Trials was wearing her down, that feeling had only increased.

And for Emilia, now that the Great Spirit who had always protected her was no longer at her side, she was relying on Subaru more than ever before.

In any case,

Garfiel: "If she's gotta be taken care of, the talk ends here."

Watching Subaru cradling Emilia, who had been forced asleep by Ram, Garfiel snorted and spat this out.

Subaru was about to raise his voice to object, but, feeling Emilia's small movements in his arms, he unwittingly shut his mouth. And so, having lost his chance, he did nothing more except watch as Garfiel turned his back to leave.

Garfiel: "Today's Trial's the exception. From t'morrow onwards, th' one t'take the Trials'll be Lady Emilia. I won't accept ya takin' em."

Baring his fangs, Garfiel spoke his part and left Ryuzu' house. And, the tiny shadow behind him—Ryuzu, continued,

Ryuzu: "Sorry, Su-bo. But I'm of the same opinion. The earlier the Sanctuary is liberated the better, but… it would be more convenient to stick to Ros-bo's intentions."

Subaru: “What do you mean, it would be more convenient…”

Ryuzu: “Even if the Sanctuary is liberated, it doesn’t change the fact that we will continue to be Ros-bo’s subjects, under his protection. So, it would be in our best interest to avoid going against him if possible. …I hope you do not think badly of me, it was not my intention to be selfish.”

Realizing that Ryuzu’ words must have represented the true thoughts of the residents of the Sanctuary, Subaru lost all room to object. After Garfiel and Ryuzu of the Sanctuary-camp left the room, the only ones remaining were the odd-bunch members of Roswaal’s Mansion, plus one extra.

Subaru: “So, plus-one-extra Otto, what do you think of this situation?”

Otto: “I got the worst feeling about where this is going and I intend to keep quiet and let this pass, so would you mind not dragging me into this? …But, if I were to give my honest opinion after listening to that conversation, I think Garfiel is right.”

Otto lifted up a finger as he said this, nodding several times while watching Subaru kneel down,

Otto: “It would make more sense, whether it’s for the Margrave’s aims, or for Lady Emilia’s as a Royal Selection candidate. I’m sure if Mr. Natsuki takes the Trials in her place, it could be made to become Lady Emilia’s achievement, but… regardless of how other people hear about it in the future, will the people who are currently stuck in the Sanctuary really think of it this way? And will it really win her their support?”

Subaru: “…I understand that too. No matter which way I think about it, letting Emilia be the one to liberate the Sanctuary will be most beneficial, but…”

Ram: “…but Lady Emilia is incapable of overcoming the Trials?”

Ram’s words kicked right through Subaru’s indecisive muttering. Yet, in front of her refreshingly blunt attitude, Subaru grew calm.

Subaru: “As far as I can tell, I think it’d be too much to expect quick results. I don’t know what exactly happened in Emilia’s past… but I’m sure you both understand that we don’t have that kind of time, don’t you?”

Ram: “At the very least, I would like to see this end within three years before the Royal Selection is decided.”

Subaru: “That’s being way too patient about this!”

That was probably some kind of joke, and since she said it with a straight face, he could pretty much rule out the possibility that she was being serious. As if understanding Subaru’s meaning, she nodded,

Ram: “There is also the burden of the refugees, and the matter of food supplies. Looking at this in the long term, it’s unrealistic to keep sustaining this many people.”

Subaru: “Well, that’s the gist of it. They’re already stressed out as it is after being suddenly forced to evacuate. If they stop receiving enough food on top of that, their discontent will explode. And for the Sanctuary guys, there’ll be no point in keeping the hostages if their own living standards start dropping because of it —at least, there’ll be no point in keeping all of them.”

Ram: “You think Garf will start culling the villagers?”

Ram’s voice became slightly more animated as she asked this.

Subaru raised his brows at her rather unexpected reaction, and even she herself seemed to be surprised about her own attitude. But, stroking her forelocks in order to distract away from it,

Ram: “I would rather not think about it, but with Garf’s personality, it is possible. If it really comes down to it, he won’t hesitate to follow his own priorities.”

Subaru: “He’s kinda like you in that. My opinion’s the same. …So, I’d like to suggest that we free the hostages from the Sanctuary before that happens.”

Last time, that proposal was accepted on the secret condition that Subaru would take the Trials. Since that won't work this time, he could expect it to be far more difficult to negotiate the same terms. But even so, he was sure that he could win some concessions in the end,

Subaru: "In any case, if the Sanctuary guys are going to push Emilia into taking the Trials no matter what, hopefully I can do something to make things easier for both sides."

Ram: "…I'm surprised. I thought Barusu would be more opposed to it and behave like an unreasonable little child."

Seeing Subaru apparently put away his worries about Emilia taking the Trials, Ram made this brief comment. Subaru nodded, and started off again with "Well",

Subaru: "It's regrettable and unfortunate… but it makes the most sense to go along with Roswaal's plans. Yeah, that's right. If I can overlook the fact that Emilia will be hurt, then it's definitely for the best if we do it this way."

Ram: "Even knowing that she'll be hurt, you'll let her go on with it? What a demon you are."

Subaru: "To have a real demon tell me that, I must really have changed. Except…no, nevermind."

He was about to say something, but Subaru closed his mouth again and shook his head. Seeing that he wasn't going to continue, Ram furrowed her brows, but didn't bother commenting on it.

Gently, being careful not to wake her, Subaru lifted up Emilia in his arms.

She was light. People were supposed to be heavier when they are unconscious, but she was still as light as a feather.

Just how much must she be carrying within this small, delicate body, he wondered.

Subaru: "Ram. After I set Emilia down in the bedroom, I want to talk to Roswaal. Is that alright with you?”

Ram: “Master Roswaal is resting. No one may enter his room for the time b…”

Subaru: “I want to talk to him about the Trial. We won’t get anywhere if we low-ranking guys just keep talking amongst ourselves. I need the mastermind’s opinion on this.”

If he used the Trials as bait, then even Roswaal will have to take down the “Do Not Disturb” sign on his door and meet him face to face. Subaru already had experience of this from the previous world.

Ram closed her eyes for a moment to scrutinize Subaru’s words, until, looking as if she was very tired, she spilled out a sigh,

Ram: “I will wait at Master Roswaal’s side. Barusu, please take Lady Emilia to her bed…without doing anything suspicious.”

Subaru: “What are you saying to SERIOUS MODE me over here? I wasn’t even thinking anything until you went and said that, and now that I am acutely aware of the soft DIRECT CONTACT sensation with Emilia-tan, my knees are shaking out of control! How are you going to take responsibility??”

Ram: “Otto, keep an eye on him.”

Otto: “Yes ma’am!”

Ignoring Subaru’s jape, Ram left a simple order for Otto and exited the house. Now the only ones left were two guys and one pretty girl. Under such circumstances, Otto kept up his saluting pose and stared at Subaru closely.

Otto: “Go on, please take Lady Emilia to the bed. Unless you need any help?”

Subaru: “Before that, what’s with this obedient attitude you’re taking toward Ram…”

Otto: “Well, see, Miss Ram’s a direct subordinate of the Margrave, right? With that in mind, unlike Mr. Natsuki singlemindedly sticking to Lady Emilia, if I suck up to Miss Ram instead, I'll have a better hope of getting close to the Margrave, won't I? Heheh."

Subaru: "Your initial impression as a skilled merchant is slowly shifting into a sly minor-villain, you know! Aren't you going to do something to salvage it? Will I have to treat you like an obstacle from now on and quietly kill you off in the shadows?"

Complaining about Otto's identity shift, Subaru sighed, and carried Emilia into the bedroom. He lightly smoothed out the messy bedsheet with his palm, and slowly laid her down. When,

Subaru: "Ah…"

After drawing the bedsheets to her shoulders, just as he was about to leave, Subaru noticed Emilia's fingers clutching to the hem of his shirt. Sensing the reliance conveyed through the touch of her fingertips, taking in her adorableness, Subaru gently picked her fingers away. Then, wrapping them up within his hands,

Subaru: "Wait for me, Emilia."

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "Somehow, I'll find a way. So that you will no longer have to cry, or be hurt anymore. I promise."

Saying this oath, Subaru released Emilia's hand.

Standing up, and turning around, he headed for the house's exit. — And to Roswaal.

Because there were far too many things he must hear from the devil himself.

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Roswaal: "—I see, I think I mo~re or less understand the situa~tion now."

Touching a hand to his jaw, after quietly listening to Subaru's long speech, Roswaal nodded his head.

The location was in a room of the private residence where Roswaal was resting, and the only two people inside were Subaru and Roswaal. Lying on the bed, Roswaal lifted his upper body to get a better look at Subaru. And Subaru, shooting him a stern gaze in return,

Subaru: “That why, if we incorporate the Sanctuary side’s interests as much as possible, I think this would be the best starting point to launch the negotiations.”

Roswaal: “A~~hah, it is true, that from the moment Lady Emilia entered within the Barriers of the Sanctuary, Garfiel and the others’ plans might as well have alre~ady been realized. Lady Emilia herself cannot le~~ave the Sanctuary until she overcomes the Trials. So if the hostages they have taken for insurance simply become useless baggage draining their food supply, then there is reason to let them go… that is the idea?”

Subaru: “I think it’s a sensible argument. Of course, we won’t be throwing away or putting off the Sanctuary’s problems. This is just to take the unnecessary components out of the equation.”

Roswaal: “Sounds almost too go~od to be true. Deep down, you have such doubts too, no? If the liberation of the Sanctuary ever becomes far beyond reach, or, if Lady Emilia falters, and her heart could no longer withstand the Trials, then the hostages can be used as a resource to coerce Lady Emilia. Perhaps that is why you thought you’d eliminate that possibility beforehand… or something along those lines?”

With one eye closed, Roswaal looked at Subaru through his single yellow pupil. Subaru crossed his arms as he took in the contents of those words, and then, nodding,

Subaru: “Sorry, but, I didn’t really think that far. Or actually, the fact that you managed to immediately come up with that terrifying idea kinda makes me want to recoil a bit.”

Roswaal: “A~~ah it di~~d? Was I thinking too much into it?

Sorry. Bu~~t still, that is another way to thi~nk about it, no?”

Roswaal smiled as if to cover up the fact that he had surprised even himself with his pessimism. Seeing that smile, Subaru only looked at him wryly in return, and wondered whether Garfiel was really capable of going that far.

No matter how stubborn or inflexible he was, and even if there were times when words can’t get through to him, he wasn’t the kind of person who would stain his hands with something truly irrational or immoral.

Subaru had only known him for a few days, but that was his assessment of Garfiel.

In any case,

Roswaal: “So? What would you ha~ve me do, Subaru?”

Subaru: “If possible, instead of me, I want you to be the one to propose these terms. This time, it looks like… things won’t end well if I do it.”

Roswaal: “And wh~~y is that?”

Subaru: “I have a feeling that bastard Garfiel’s got a thing against me. It’s not that I’ve given up on convincing him, but it’s going to get rough if I go talk to him today or tomorrow.”

Subaru could still remember the sharpness of the gaze Garfiel had given him when they parted.

Filled with hostility and disdain, it was as if those eyes were looking at someone who killed his parents—though Subaru had no clue why he would look at him this way. Had he done something that Garfiel deemed impermissible, or had he mistakenly said something that trampled on his beliefs? Either way,

Subaru: “Now that he’s gotten emotional, he’ll probably reject my ideas no matter what it is. And on top of that, if Garfiel objects, it seems Miss Ryuzu will passively go along with him as well. I can already see that happening, so I hope we can avoid that possibility.”

Roswaal: “So that’s where I come in, is tha~t correct? Well, alright. I will speak to granny-Lady Ryuzu and Garfiel. Although, it seems Garfiel dislikes me as well, so even I’m not sure if I could convi~nce him.”

Upon receiving Subaru’s proposal, Roswaal lightheartedly accepted the task.

Hearing that encouraging reply, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief. Anyways, one of his worries had been resolved for now. Then, the remaining problem would be…

Roswaal: “Well~ then. Is that all the business you ha~ve with me?”

Subaru: “No, not yet. —I haven’t brought up the most vital issue yet.”

The most important conversation that was the reason he came here hadn’t even begun.

Roswaal tilted his head, and, closing a single eye, he brushed his long, flowing hair behind his back. Subaru wasn’t sure if it had become a habit, but he would inadvertently straighten his back whenever he was stared at by that yellow eye.

Then,

Subaru: “The Trial inside the Tomb showed Emilia her Past. Do you have any idea what that Past might be, that was so painful for her to look back on?”

Subaru asked this question about the past that Emilia was desperately trying to hide.

And, receiving this question, Roswaal closed his yellow eye, and slightly inclined his head as though sinking into thought. Just like this, the room fell into silence, and the only sound Subaru could hear in that muted world was the sound of his own anxiety as he waited. Then,

Roswaal: “Don’t you think that asking me, instead of asking Lady Emilia directly, is a rather co~~wardly way to do it?”

Subaru: “You can call me an underhanded coward a much as you like. And I would certainly rather hear everything from Emilia herself if I could. But…”

The secret that she was trying to hide even with all the tears and all the pain, how could Subaru bring himself to ask her?

But even if he could understand why she wanted keep it secret, just as he himself wanted to hide his pain about his parents, he mustn’t hesitate.

Subaru: “It’s because I want to know about her, and because I have to know. And if there is anything I can use, I will grasp at any straws I can.”

Roswaal: “I’ve had people call me all sorts of things, but to be treated like stra~~w certainly is a new experience for me… Alri~~ght, then.”

After letting out a small laugh, Roswaal’s expression disappeared.

He exhaled a short breath, and then stopped breathing altogether as he took in Subaru through both of his mismatched pupils. Placing him under the gazes of those different-colored eyes, Roswaal touched his raised hand to his forehead, and,

Roswaal: “Lady Emilia is a Half-Elf. A~nd due to the Witch of Envy, the Half-Elves are looked upon with discrimination. Thi~s much, even yo~u must already know, isn’t tha~t right?”

Subaru: “…Yeah. I can tell how unfairly Emilia must have been treated from the way she acted in the Capital. And when I met those assholes as well.”

The images of those abominable Witch Cultists came to mind. Watching Subaru trying to shake that out of his head, Roswaal continued with “Howe~~ver”,

Roswaal: “While it’s true that Half-Elves are the targets of particularly severe pe~~rsecution… it does not end there… By the way, Subaru, did you ever see an Elf while you were in the Ca~pital?”

Subaru: “Elf? Not just Half-Elf? …No, I don’t think I’ve ever seen one.”

Holding his chin, Subaru mobilized his memory to look through the different worlds he had seen. But never once, within all those worlds, had an Elf—or the fair, long-eared features of the popular impression of that race ever crossed into his memories.

Hearing Subaru’s reply, Roswaal simply remarked “Right”,

Roswaal: “The Half-Elves aren’t the only ones being harshly persecuted throughout all pa~rts of the world. The Elves, for being, in part, the sires of Half-Elves, are also at the end of the spear.”

Subaru: “…! But, that’s way too indiscriminate no matter how you look at it. If you follow that logic, then…”

Roswaal: “Humans would also have to be eradicated? Unfo~~rtunately, in this world, Humans are fa~r more numerous than the Demi-humans, and their nations are far more powerful. It was only owing to the sheer magnitude of the ever expanding rift between the Humans and the Demi-humans, that the “Demi-human War” had dra~gged on for so long. But that has little to do with the topic at hand.”

Subaru: “So then, what does the history of persecution against Elves have to do with this?”

The Demi-human War was a phrase he had never heard before. Although he was intrigued, Subaru decided to get back to the original topic before they ran off on a tangent. Roswaal drew in his chin and with “In o~ther wo~rds”, he shook his head and continued,

Roswaal: “Naturally, it would be difficult for Half-Elves to show their faces in a place like the Capital, and the Elves, being their parent race, shared the sa~me difficulty. That would be why you have not seen any Elves insi~de the Capital.”

Subaru: “That part… I get already. But, how is that connected to this?”

Roswaal appeared unconcerned about Subaru's request for an explanation. Leaning his back against a pillow, and, feeling its softness pushing against his back, he slightly lifted his head, looking up,

Roswaal: "As an extension of the prejudice against Half-Elves, the Elves are also met with repression where~ver they go. In that case, just whe~re should the Elves live?"

Subaru: "If they're Elves… I get the feeling they'd live in a camp inside a forest or something. Keep to some part of the forest that's inaccessible to people, and quietly hunt and stuff."

Roswaal: "I don't know where you got all that information, but it is roughly along those li~~nes. The Elves were chased away from the towns, and so they could only live secretly in the depths of the fo~rests. —The Great Forest of Elior, was once one of these homes to the Elves."

All of a sudden, Subaru noticed a change in Roswaal's voice, and couldn't keep himself from shuddering.

It felt as though the temperature of the room had suddenly dropped, but, naturally, it was only an illusion. And the real reason must have been Roswaal in front of him, and the indescribable power carried within his words.

As for the name of that place, Subaru had a feeling that he had heard it before.

—The Great Forest of Elior. That name had come up several times over the course of negotiations in Crusch's mansion. They had mentioned that it is a territory within Roswaal's domains rich in magical minerals. And that,

Subaru: "It's now frozen in ice, and no one could go near it…"

Roswaal: "The beginning of the freezing of the Great Forest of Elior, and its subsequent spread, is recorded as an event that happened over ninety years ago. All was frozen, and all living things were sealed in ice, in a world of absolute zero. —And she lived in that world, all alone.”

As if confirming Subaru’s fears, the usual strange intonations disappeared from Roswaal’s voice.

Ninety years. An exceeding long time. And who was that person? From the flow of the conversation up to now, only one answer appeared in his mind.

And, seeing Subaru at loss for words, Roswaal plainly told him.

Roswaal: “—In the depths of the Great Elior Forest, the village and the villagers of the Elven tribe that resided there remain frozen in ice even to this day, stopped in time.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “All except one, all except the Half-Elf girl who committed this mistake…”

Chapter 26: Packing of Shit

1

He never should have asked.

Feeling a cold sweat rolling from his forehead to his jaw, Subaru once again recognized the extent of his own stupidity.

A distant-sounding ring was reverberating inside his skull, and his thumping heart groaned in pain.

Roswaal: “After hearing all of this, you are starting to regret it… ar~~en’t you?”

Watching Subaru sink into silence, on the bed, Roswaal tilted his head.

Being asked this question by the clown playing with his long blue hair, Subaru couldn’t immediately come up with a reply. All he could do was to breathe quietly to calm himself down, and,

Subaru: “I was just, surprised, that’s all. How should I say it… Emilia is, a bit older than I thought.”

Roswaal: “Oya, didn’t you know? Lady Emilia, being Half-Elf, is a member of a race blessed with long life, though it would not be as long as the Elves. As for the Elves, you could say that unless they are killed, they would pretty much ne~~ver die.”

Going along with Subaru’s evasive reply, Roswaal gave a similarly half-hearted explanation.

The characteristics of the Elves as Roswaal described them did seem to match the subculture-understanding of Elves in the original world. Subaru wasn’t sure how much the “Half” part came into, but, at least on the point of Emilia’s true age, assuming Roswaal’s words could be believed—

Subaru: “There’s at least a 60-year gap … Even with my older-sister-complex, I’m a bit lacking in experience points when it comes to that kind of a age gap in a potential conquest target.”

Roswaal: “This is unrelated, but… from the way you said that, it sound as if you’ve had contact with other long-lifed races besides Lady Emilia befo~~re?”

Subaru: “Well, immortals and vampires are pretty common character tropes in GAL-GAMES, you know. Loli-Granny Miss Ryuzu’s a type as well… such are the sins of past life.”

Although, Non-Humans and Loli-Granny-types weren’t really a part of Subaru’s undertakings. Subaru’s STRIKE-ZONE was usually situated around older sisters and senpais at school.

That’s why, when he learned that there was actually a 60-year age gap, he more or less had some thoughts about it,

Subaru: “But since she’s cute, I’m OK with it. NO-PROBLEM. Emilia-tan is still the brightest star in my heart!”

Besides, since long-living races live for a long time, they probably grow at a slower rate, and so they probably mentally mature at a different rate as well. He’s seen that pretty often in these kind of character setups.

Kind of like how dog age is different from human age, 20 years old in human age is probably like 200 years old in Elf years. Then—

Subaru: “If I think of it that way, 90 years old Emilia-tan is still young, just a little girl… no, from the Elves’ point of view, she’s might actually be a Loli. Oyoy, if such a sexy beautiful girl is only a Loli… that’s a whole new genre isn’t it!”

Roswaal: “Even though indulging in various kind of fantastical delu~~sions is a good thing, the reality is ha~~rsher than you imagined. With the passage of time, people will grow. Even the minds of Elves would not mature any slower a~~t all.”

Subaru: “You… I’m desperately trying to convince myself Emilia-tan is a little girl here, why do you have to immediately disprove me…”

Even though it was just wishful thinking, it was still annoying to have his last hope pulverized right off the bat. Under Subaru's resentful leer, with "Besides", Roswaal continued,

Roswaal: "E~~~ven I can't just stand by while watching you cover your o~~wn eyes and pretend nothing ha~~ppened. Ri~~ght, Subaru?"

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: "Having heard from me what you sho~~uldn't have heard, do you regret it so much?"

Subaru: "…You, really are an annoying guy."

Despite Subaru trying to gloss it over, just as he was about to bury it away, Roswaal just had to dig it all up again. After tossing back this limp retort, Subaru cursed at himself one more time.

That heavy cross borne upon Emilia's delicate shoulders—he had dishonestly heard it from someone other than herself.

Subaru: "…In the Trial I saw my past. I'm sure Emilia saw hers too. In that case, the past she saw must have been…"

Roswaal: "If it is the past one least wishes to look back upon… then the one Lady Emilia saw was no doubt the day when the Great Elior Forest fro~ze."

Roswaal confirmed Subaru's fears.

Carrying on from this train of thought, Subaru came to realize just what horror he had been forcing Emilia to go through.

There is much to gain from finding closure, and overcoming one's past—but…

Subaru: "Then, all that time, I've been making her face the past where she froze everyone in ice…?"

Between Emilia and Subaru, the magnitude of the guilt attached to their forsaken pasts were worlds apart.

Of course, it was difficult for Subaru to come to terms with the fact that he was cut off from his parents by an entire world between them. And he would not forgive himself if he cheapened that experience, or saw it as anything less than it was.

But on the other hand, what about Emilia's problem?

Whereas Subaru was loved by his parents, received a push on his back, and was forgiven, would the past that Emilia had to face grant her this affirmation, and forgive her for her mistake?

Would she receive this, and move on from her past?

Subaru: "Emilia freezing the forest… and the Elven village inside, is all of this certain? It sounds as if there's no room for debate, but something feels off…"

Roswaal: "It's true that we can't be sure what really ha~ppened. Bu~~t, this was told to me directly by Lady Emilia herself. It was Lady Emilia herself who confessed to be the one who sealed the forest in ice. That much, shouldn't leave room for any further contention?"

Subaru: "So if you aren't sure what really happened, it could just be a misunderstanding… To begin with, Emilia-tan isn't the kind of person who could do such a thing…"

Roswaal: "No no~, you misundersta~~nd, that won't do~, Subaru."

While Subaru was trying to search for some excuse, Roswaal held him back with three drawn-out calls. Having been cut off this way, Subaru shot him a sharp and perilous glare. But Roswaal only waved his hand, pretending not to notice it,

Roswaal: "The fact of what actually happened, is no~~t the issue here. The real issue is the fact that Lady Emilia is firmly convinced of the idea, "I am the one who froze the forest""

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: "To Lady Emilia, this is the truth of what happened.

Consequently, the Trial which Lady Emilia must face is also based upon this version of the truth. —In tha~~~t case, just what do you think we should do?”

Subaru: “You… what are you even thinking?”

Asking this question as if they were playing some lighthearted game, it was impossible to fathom what was going through Roswaal’s mind. As if he couldn’t take it anymore, Subaru wrenched out these words.

Just how… how could this man keep smiling in a situation like this?

Subaru: “I don’t expect you to sympathize with Emilia’s past, or feel for her or anything of the sort, but… if you know full well the weight of that burden, and know what pain must be going through her heart, then what the hell are you doing having so much fun while she is sent in to challenge the impossible Trials?”

Roswaal: “Fu~~~mu.”

Subaru: “What is wrong with you?! You… don’t you want Emilia to be King? You are the one who is going to make her King, aren’t you? I know what you are trying to do. You think letting Emilia liberate the Sanctuary will win her the support of both Earlham village and the Sanctuary… that I understand…”

But,

Subaru: “On the other hand, when it comes down to the critical moment you’re just leaving Emilia to her own devices. If she cannot liberate the Sanctuary, then the whole game falls apart… how can you just sit around as if there’s nothing to worry about when the situation has come to this deadlock!”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru: “I’ve said it before. I won’t rest until I’ve made Emilia King. And I intend to make that true… As for you, do you really intend to make her King?”

Roswaal: "—Without a doubt."

Roaring, his shoulders trembling, Subaru asked Roswaal this heartfelt question. But, at the end of his last question, Roswaal's answer came down like a bucket of cold water on his seething face.

In front of his eyes, Roswaal didn't move an inch—with steady eyes, his gaze was fixed dead upon Subaru. Then, he,

Roswaal: "Do I intend to make her the King? Certainly, I do. —Other than myself, there is no one else who would wish more for her to be King. Not even Lady Emilia herself, or a man like you, can match my desire for this, or the reason for my conviction."

Subaru: "Ros…waal?"

Roswaal: "That you would hound me like this, and doubt my motivations, is truly laughable. Absolutely, laughable. —Are we still not there yet, after all?"

There was rage in his quiet words, and it was the first time Subaru ever sensed this from Roswaal.

But, halfway through, the heat vanished from his impassioned words, until, at last, it fell to a whisper and scattered like mist. In the end, with a final profound musing, he brought his speech to a close, and,

Roswaal: "Subaru. Unfo~~tunately, this will be all for tonight. I a~~m still recovering from my wo~unds. At least, I hope you'd grant me a little re~st."

Subaru: "We're… no, nevermind."

Subaru reached out his hand, trying to hold Roswaal back from one-sidedly ending the conversation, but he realized it would be futile, and drew it back again.

Ending their talk in a lighthearted tone, Roswaal plainly refused any further discussion. Since he had already been rejected this way, even though the person was still lying in the bed right in front of him, it was already too late to ask anything more.

Shaking his head, holding back his disappointment, Subaru turned his back to the bed.

He had already said what he came here to say. Whether or not the situation of the villagers of Earlham would change for the better is still unknown, but Ryuzu will probably not refuse Roswaal's request.

If that much can be done, then the stagnating circumstances will at least move forward. Even though, for Subaru, there were still many more hurdles to come.

Roswaal: "—Subaru."

Just as he was about to leave the room, Roswaal's call stopped him. Halting his legs, and looking back, he saw that Roswaal had already laid his head down on the pillow, and was not looking at him.

Roswaal: "The Qualification… you've received it?"

Subaru: "Ah. Yeah, haven't I mentioned it yet? Yeah. I took the Trial too. Actually, if going inside is like getting baptized with that stuff, then maybe you could…"

Roswaal: "—No~ no, that will not be possible. I'm afraid the Tomb will not accept me. The fact that I carry these scars of rejection should make that clear enough."

Having glossed over the part about the Qualification, and recalling their conversation from the previous world, Subaru raised his brows in astonishment. In the previous world, when he told Roswaal that he had challenged the Trials, he could remember Roswaal's expression turning terribly dark.

But this time, there was only a tinge of loneliness that didn't seem noteworthy at all.

Roswaal: "…Choose what is best, Subaru."

Subaru: "What?"

Roswaal: "In this place, you are the one person who could move most freely. You are completely unbound by the Sanctuary. Nor are you constrained by any obligation to the Royal Selection."

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: "Go on being guided by your desires, go on struggling, until you hold everything within your hands. To agonize, and to be lost, and only then can you obtain it… Even if it would not satisfy you, even if you could not understand it, see it through to the end."

Roswaal said this without showing his face. Without the usual clownish intonations, Subaru was stunned by these uncharacteristically cynical remarks, and could only stand there stupidly on the spot.

Until, after a little while had passed, he suddenly realized that Roswaal had been saying those words to himself.

Subaru: "Hey… that's, not like you at all. What's wrong, Ros-chi?"

Roswaal: "Sometimes I want to try something different, tha~~t's all. —I suppose, it seems I didn't ma~ke it."

There was no way he could understand that open-ended sentence. But, just as he was about to ask, Roswaal waved his hand on the bed, urging Subaru to leave.

Seeing this, standing in front of Roswaal, who had turned away from him, Subaru let out a long, drawn out sigh through his nostrils,

Subaru: "Good night."

And, leaving this behind, he stepped out of the room.

2

Ram: "…You didn't impose any burdens on Master Roswaal, I hope?"

The first thing that greeted Subaru as he came out of the bedroom were these words of interrogation and Ram's sharpened stare.

The pink-haired girl was about half a head shorter than Subaru, but on matters that concerned Roswaal, her intimidating presence would make her body appear twice as big as it actually is. In any case, Subaru started shriveling under the immense pressure.

Subaru: “We just calmly talked about some stuff, that’s all. There were no collar-grabs or wrestling throws or anything, don’t worry.”

Ram: “What an optimistic Barusu. Setting foot inside the Tomb, only to be rejected, do you realize how cruel that was to Master Roswaal… You don’t even understand that much, and have the audacity to be a smartass about it?”

Ram didn’t conceal her displeasure as she blasted back at Subaru for his response. Seeing her priorities clearly laid out, Subaru couldn’t help but smile wryly, and,

Subaru: “Well he was gonna go to sleep, so I kinda got kicked out… I already said what I had to say, so it’s fine.”

Ram: “Is it. …At least, if Master Roswaal makes the request, I think Lady Ryuzu will probably accept. But as for Garf… I don’t know how he will react.”

Subaru: “If he’s gonna grumble, then we’ll have to rely on your seduction skills. You just have to strike a cute pose and… you know how to do that, right?”

Ram: “Isn’t Ram cute already?”

Subaru: “No I mean, well, if it’s just the outer appearance then it’s pretty cute…”

After all, aside from the hair color, she looked exactly like Rem. Very very cute. The only problem was that the cuteness and Ram’s fresh-personality kind of managed to cancel each other out.

Subaru: “But to go after you, Garfel sure has some bizarre tastes. No, or, maybe it’s just hard to tell from the appearance… kind of like the puffer fish, you kn-OWOWOW!”

Ram: “I am pretty sure that wasn’t a compliment, so this is how I am responding, Barusu.”

Stomping on Subaru’s toes with her heel to her heart’s content while watching tears jerking out of his eyes, Ram huffed through her nose. Then, she stood in front of the door to Roswaal’s bedroom, and,

Ram: “Ram will change Master Roswaal’s bandages, and then rest for the night. I suppose Barusu will sleep in the Cathedral like yesterday? Even a Barusu should be able to remember a simple location, I assume?”

Subaru: “My sense of direction’s surprisingly good, you know. Besides, it’s the biggest building here. Although having no street lights is kind of a pain.”

The Sanctuary was an undeveloped area that relied on starlight to light the way at night. But still, on clear nights, the light descending from a star-filled sky was often enough to keep the darkness at bay. Unfortunately, it’s cloudy today.

Looking out the window, aside from the sprinkles of glimmering lights from the village houses, all the rest was completely dark.

He felt just a little, tiny unease about the road back home.

Subaru: “Getting lost and wandering into the forest and getting a random encounter with a BEAST and then going into BADEND—probably won’t happen, right? It’s ok, it’s ok.”

Ram: “The possibility of that happening was very low to begin with, but after you said that out loud it seems to have slightly increased. Alright. Barusu, the Cathedral is directly to the right hand side after you leave the building.”

Subaru: “O~k got it! So it’s the chopstick-hand side, right? Although there doesn’t seem to be a chopstick-culture in this world.”

Since the dining culture here mainly consists of silverwares like knives and forks and spoons, Subaru’s remark just now obviously made no sense to Ram. Anyways, thinking about whether he should try shaving down some trees and start mass producing chopsticks here if he ever gets the chance,

Subaru: “Anyways, I’ll head back to the Cathedral… since it’s still uncertain whether they can return to the village, just so we don’t get their hopes up, maybe it’d be best if we don’t mention that we’re negotiating for their release yet?”

Ram: “Agreed. If we hold the talks tomorrow… it would still be at least the day after tomorrow before they could leave. In the meantime, how to deal with Echidna’s Tomb is what we need to think about.”

Subaru: “…”

Inadvertently, just as he was about to say some last words on his way out of the house, Subaru suddenly froze in place. The abrupt halt sent a surprised look onto Ram’s face, but Subaru, who had turned around to look at her, seemed even more confused than she was. Then,

Subaru: “…what did you say just now?”

He asked in a raspy voice. Hearing Subaru’s question, Ram, still not any less surprised, tried to remember what she just said, and,

Ram: “The Tomb is what we need to think about?”

Subaru: “No, before that.”

Ram: “Isn’t Ram cute already?”

Subaru: “Went back too far! …You said Echidna’s Tomb, right?”

Feeling stupid after missing the right answer twice in a row, Subaru gave up and answered the question himself. Seeing Ram nodding reluctantly, Subaru pressed his hand against his forehead. —With terrifying speed, the memories flooded back into his consciousness.

“Echidna.”

It was the name of the Witch of Greed, that white-haired girl in funerary dress, the self-proclaimed Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, and the most important Bokukko-stereotype in this Parallel World. And above all,

Subaru: “What the hell were you trying to do… messing with other people’s memories…”

The entity who had done her work on Subaru’s memories so that no one else could learn of her secrets.

At the end of the tea party, before the impending Trials, she had forcibly extracted an oath from Subaru. But if that was the price he had to pay to receive the Qualifications, then he would willingly accept it.

Subaru: “Whether it was bugged or that was how it’s supposed to work… either way, the restriction’s lifted!”

The restriction that Echidna was supposed to have placed on Subaru was lifted, and his memories were unbound.

Within his mind, the encounter with the Witches, the tea party, and his meeting with Echidna in school-uniform in his old classroom in the Original World, all of them, one by one, returned to him. And, having remembered, Subaru’s thoughts arrived on a possible a way to break open the deadlock on the Sanctuary. It would be akin to a forbidden move, but,

Subaru: “If the Cathedral’s on the chopstick-hand side, then the Tomb’s on the bowl-hand side—!”

Ram: “Barusu—?”

Subaru: “I better not keep you up too late! It won’t be good to put too much strain on a guy who just recovered from a major illness!”

Waving up his hand in response to Ram’s call from behind, Subaru charged out of the building and into the night. Not to the bed inside the Cathedral, but to the Tomb he had left only two hours ago.

Timewise, even if he went to the Tomb, there was very little chance that he’d be able to confirm his idea. But while the chance may be low, he couldn't resist trying it out. At least, if it couldn't be done on this night, he'd know.

Subaru: "After taking the first Trial, all sorts of annoying things just popped one after another. So invite me to another tea party, Witch… no, Echidna!"

Flying down the streets of the Sanctuary, lit only by the dim natural lights of the night, Subaru ran on.

The icy wind, the muddy ground, the sweat on his brow, and his panting breaths—all these sensations pressed his exhausted body onward. And, when he arrived,

Garfiel: "Yo… thought you'd be comin'."

Blocking Subaru's path was the youth with short blonde hair—Garfiel, standing guard in front of the Tomb.

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Garfiel: "Impressive, out runnin' so late at night. Born a man aft'r all, we're obliged t'make an effort n'get strong. "Th'Winbrook's the warrior's qualifications", yeah?"

Garfiel spread out his arms standing in middle of the night's path, gradually baring his fangs as he spoke, barring Subaru's way ahead. Seeing him do this, all the hairs on Subaru's skin stood on end.

Subaru: "Ohh, sorry but I really wasn't pretending to be jogging or anything like that. Too bad I can't stay and chat. It's not that I have a deadline, but, it doesn't hurt to do it early…"

Garfiel: "Yer'not gettin' it, oy."

A sharp noise—it was the cracking-sound of Garfiel's foot stomping into the ground faster than the eyes could see.

Soil flew up in all directions, and stamped into the hard surface of the path was a boot-shaped impression. Seeing Subaru's eyes widen, Garfiel clacked his teeth, Garfiel: “If I see ya comin’ back here again with this late night runnin’ bullshit, can’t guarantee what I’ll do.”

Subaru: “It’s only been a short amount of time, but why does it already sound like we can’t understand each other… am I left out of the loop about something here?”

Garfiel: “Who knows. But you’re blind to what’s happenin’ around ya, think least that’s for sure.”

Subaru said this, trying to relax the tension in the atmosphere, but it didn’t seem to reach Garfiel, whose gleaming eyes continued to harbor the same hostility.

Garfiel, touching the white scar on his forehead,

Garfiel: “All that’s ahead from here’s the Tomb. You ain’t gonna go all the way there t’take a piss, are ya?”

Subaru: “What, you wanna go together? Peeing on a Witch’s grave or whatever, I actually never thought of this kind of revenge tactic before.”

From what Subaru knows about Echidna, maybe she won’t even be angry about it, and might even find it amusing. But anyways, without lowering his guard about Subaru, Garfiel seemed to want to continue the conversation,

Garfiel: “It couldn’t be that yer tryin’ to challenge another Trial on the same night y’passed the first one, could it? That’d be a bit greedy, ain’t it?”

Subaru: “No way I’m considering something that crazy. I was just, planning another approach.”

Garfiel: “Conniving, aren’t ya.”

Subaru: “Conniving?”

Tricks, forbidden hands, data-disk of inconceivable tactics or whatever you want to call it.

Faced with absolute darkness, blind within that pitch-black world where he could only feel his way forward, he must clench tight onto any small hope of light, suck out its marrows, and swallow it to the last drop.

Subaru: "So get out of the way, Garfiel. I need to go into the Tomb. Perhaps there'll be a way to solve all of our problems…"

Garfiel: "S'rry, but absolutely not. Yer absolutely. Not. Gettin' into this Tomb."

Against Subaru's determination, Garfiel had no intention of backing down.

Met with Garfiel's stubborn refusal, Subaru's confusion was giving way to anger.

Just why, why, of all people, must this man be the one standing in his way.

Subaru: "You probably feel the same way about me, don't you. That's why you're standing here in front of me like this. But even so…"

Garfiel: "Didn't I tell ya not to give me that bullshit? Once I decided, I ain't gonna bend. You ain't gettin' through, for the Sanctuary or not."

Subaru: "Why do you hate me so much all of a sudden… Just what the hell do you have against me!!"

Compared to the first day, and the last iteration, Garfiel's attitude could not have been more different. Faced with this unreasonable treatment, Subaru screamed, demanding Garfiel's true intentions.

Hearing that question, Garfiel scrunched up his nose, twisting his face into an expression not unlike a wild beast, and spoke.

Garfiel: "—Yer stench."

Subaru: "—Huh?"

Without meaning to, Subaru groaned stupidly.

In front of him, Garfiel covered his own nose with his palm,

Garfiel: “Ever since y’came outta the Tomb, the stench of the Witch’s Miasma’s just been fumin’ out’a yer body. —Y’expect me t’trust a guy stinkin’ of the Witch rollin’ with a Half-Witch?! The fuck y’take me for?!”

Jolting up his arms, exposing his fangs, Garfiel laid bare his rage,

Garfiel: “THIS IS THE SANCTUARY! The Experimental Grounds of the Witch of Greed! The cesspool of half-wits who have no place to go, a fuckin’ PILE OF IMPACTED SHIT!!”

Chapter 27: Whispers

—For Subaru, it was a sound of rage that invoked a strong sense of Deja-vu.

Subaru: “The Witch’s… scent…”

This would be the second time Subaru had been treated as an enemy because of it.

Having picked up a scent that Subaru himself couldn’t smell, the hatred within Garfiel’s eyes seemed as if they were glaring at the very murderer of his parents.

Subaru already knew the sharpness of that gaze, and that same torrent of hostility.

The Witch’s stench. The Criminal’s lingering scent. And a man ensnared by the Witch.

Those were the words she once lashed upon him right before she took his life, so far had their relationship deteriorated.

Garfiel: “What y’lookin’ all stupid for? Got hit where it hurts and forgot how t’talk?”

In front of a shocked Subaru shaken into speechlessness, Garfiel had put his inexhaustible rage into words. Even after limply dropping his arms, Garfiel did not lower his guard.

Watching Subaru’s every move, even the small sense of familiarity that was supposedly between them—was already nowhere to be found.

Subaru: “Um, about the Witch’s stench…”

Garfiel: “Huh?”

Subaru: “The stench that’s floating around my body, it was after I came out of the Tomb—after the Trial, that it started floating around, right?”

Garfiel: “…Yeah. Didn’t even mind it before that, but soon as y’came back from the Trial it’s suddenly reekin’ up the place. I don’t know what y’did inside, but I ain’t a nice enough guy to trust a bastard smellin’ like that.”

Seeing Garfiel nodding in affirmation to his question, Subaru let out a short sigh and closed his eyes.

Then it’s confirmed—the Witch’s stench clinging onto Subaru becomes stronger immediately after Return by Death.

He had suspected it before, but he had always subconsciously avoided this conclusion. Only now, did Subaru finally accept that piece of the answer.

—The one returning Natsuki Subaru from death, was the Witch.

He didn’t know why. There shouldn’t be any connection. But, incredibly, he could understand it, and accept it.

It was like the sensation of hesitating to place down the one final piece that would complete the puzzle, and then, finally doing so, seeing the complete picture at last.

Subaru: “Just what, do you have to do with me… Until I came to this world, I hadn’t even encountered a single paranormal phenomenon in my life. And after I got here I never even got a chance to meet the Madam Witch that everyone keeps talking about… In fact, I died within six hours of being summoned here.”

Subaru was given the special characteristic of “Return by Death” upon being invited to this world.

If that was connected to the Witch, then the summoning itself must have been connected to the Witch as well. Up to this point, he had never once asked why, but—

Subaru: “In the end, I can’t ignore it anymore, huh…”

Garfiel: “What’re y’mutterin’ about? I ain’t got the time t’worry about this crap, so go straight back to sleepin’ in the Cathedral. Don’t come botherin’ me with this bullshit again.”

Subaru: “…You’re letting me go? Going by what you said, I’m a suspicious bastard with the Witch’s stench floating all over me, right? It’s the middle of the night, and there’s just us here… sounds just like the perfect situation for either a late night tryst or quietly killing someone off, doesn’t it?”

Garfiel: “Hah. I ain’t a patient guy and it’s not that I didn’t think about it… Right now chewin’ yer head to shreds’ easy, but then what? When the Half-Witch find out yer dead there’ll be even more trouble, even I can see that much.”

Seeing Subaru tilting his head, unable to understand his intentions, Garfiel continued “But”,

Garfiel: “I wouldn’t want you goin’ near the Tomb and get yerself stinkin’ even more. Right now only I got a sharp enough nose to notice it… but who knows when the old hag and others’in this shithole’ll start noticin’ it too? And there’re the even more troublin’ guys.”

Subaru: “Even more troubling…”

Garfiel: “Y’have an idea or two who, don’t ya? Y’didn’t just start reekin’of that stench today. When they smell that stench, those assholes will wanna come.”

Listening to Garfiel clacking his fangs saying this, Subaru held his breath as a flood of thoughts came racing through his mind.

Seeing that reaction, Garfiel snorted, and, with a wave of his arm as if swatting away an insect,

Garfiel: “So get outta here. I won’t do anythin’ this time. Tomorrow onwards, you stay nice and quiet and I won’t have to do nothin’ either. But don’t let me find you comin’ near the Tomb or gettin’ involved with me or Granny. Won’t be a nice experience for either of us’if that happens.”

Subaru: “Mutual non-interference, huh. I don’t bother you and you won’t bother me. That’s pretty generous.”

Garfiel: ““Makin’ it out alive after steppin’ on Gringham’s tale”, yeah? Now get th’hell outta my sight before I change my mind. I rather not make Ram hate me if I can.”

Uttering the name of the girl he liked, Garfiel announced this as though he was prepared to do the worst. The menacing hostility emanating from within him was only barely held in check by self restraint, that much was clear.

Though Subaru still wanted to argue, and continue this debate,

—It’d be best to retreat for now.

Coming to this conclusion, he exhaled and dropped his shoulders, and took a step back.

Seeing Subaru no longer intent on going any further, Garfiel’s own posture noticeably shifted as well. Closing one eye, and exhaling a deep breath from his nostrils, he sat himself down in the middle of the path to the Tomb. Crossing his arms, he looked up at Subaru,

Garfiel: “Good. Don’t do anythin’ unnecessary now. —I’ll be here from today ‘til the end of the Trials. Tomorrow, the day after, or the one a’fer that, day and noon and night, I got no intention of lettin’ you in. I’ll leave it at that, so remember it good.”

Subaru: “If you don’t want Ram to hate you, you might wanna go back for a bath from time to time.”

Garfiel: “Before I start stinkin’ as bad as you, you better do everythin’ you can to get Lady Emilia to pass the Trials. —Now get outta my sight.”

Garfel closed his eyes, and it seemed he was serious about spending the night here.

At first glance, there appeared to be openings all over. If he withdrew from here, and circled around through another part of the forest, perhaps it’s not impossible to sneak into the Tomb, but,

Subaru: “Better not…”

Garfiel’s probably guarded against that as well.

As long as Subaru stayed within sight, Garfiel will only restrain him with words. But if Subaru did something to trample on this consideration, Garfiel will no longer be so lenient.

Right now, Subaru would have no chance against an opponent who could throw Patrasche along with the carriage, nor was there a way to get past his beast-like sense of smell.

Subaru: “This is the tea-party coming back to haunt me, isn’t it…”

Putting a hand against his forehead, he regretted the way he handled the good fortune of having a Witch in front of him to chat with. Although, he couldn’t have asked her about any of this at the time, so he couldn’t blame himself too much.

Subaru: “At least, there’s nothing else I can do tonight. I must find some other way…”

Without getting past Garfiel, there was no way to reach the Tomb. If Subaru cannot reach the Tomb, then there will be no other option except to have Emilia take the Trials.

As far as Subaru can tell, it would be impossible for her to pass the Trials in three days. And if he cannot take any action within three days, then,

Subaru: “Elsa will attack the Mansion. And the chance to repel her will slip away.”

Even if it meant seeking help from a Witch, Subaru had hoped to find some kind of sidepath by speaking to Echidna. But Garfiel had blocked that.

The alternative, of attempting to take the Trials without seeking Echidna’s advice, was also blocked.

Coming to this point, Subaru realized that the situation had come to dead end.

Subaru: “Oy, oy, oy…isn’t this situation just plain bad?”

Lacking the strength to force his way through Garfiel, Subaru will need to be crafty as well as articulate in order to reach the Trials, or otherwise, he must find some other way to move Garfiel away from this place. But it would be impossible to do this alone.

Subaru: “And even if I try to recruit allies… neither Ram or Otto are on my side on this one.”

Considering its significance to the Royal Selection, those two had judged that it would be best to let Emilia take the Trials. Of course, if only they saw how much Emilia would be worn out over the next two days, perhaps their opinions would change, but,

Subaru: “Then we won’t make it back in time for the attack. Isn’t there something… anything I can do?”

The time difference, between the time needed to make everyone see the difficulty of having Emilia pass the Trials and the timing of the imminent danger only Subaru knew about, was far too great. And if Subaru continued to insist on taking the Trials himself, it would only be interpreted as his lack of confidence in Emilia.

It gouged at his heart to think what Emilia might feel about this. It was not that he didn’t believe in her. Rather, if time permitted it, Subaru believed beyond a doubt that she will accomplish the task that was given to her. Yet,

—Even knowing that her task is too heavy for her to bear, how can you still think so?

Subaru: “…”

Deep down, a low, dark whisper made Subaru halt his steps.

Occasionally, he’d hear whispers like this. An obscure, dark part of himself mocking, laughing at him from behind for foolishly reaching for such hopes.

Subaru: “The Trials will keep eating away at her. And even so, for the sake of the expectations of those around her and to fulfill her own wish, she will carry on, no matter how much it hurts her. That's how it will be."

—Disregard her wounds and move forward until it is overcome, is that really what you want?

She will hold in her pain, her tears, and her sobs, and keep on walking, and in the end, the path will surely open, and her wish will come true. Was that what he believed?

—There are wounds that don't need to be opened, memories that don't need to be faced, and pasts that don't need to be atoned for.

Subaru: "She believes she had done something wrong, and that she must do something to make it right. That's why she is facing her past, and why she is suffering, isn't it…"

—But why must that time be now? Isn't this the worst possible timing?

Is it truly necessary to face one's past?

Must all committed sins be atoned for? And is redemption something that can be forced?

The past she didn't want anyone else to know, if it wasn't for the Trials, Subaru would never have forced her to reveal it.

One day, with time, perhaps she will come to terms with it, and then there will be a chance to overcome that past.

But did it have to be now? Was this really the right time for that?

Would an answer she found through the obsessive notion that she must do something to atone truly carry a significance which she could be proud of?

Subaru: "At least, I think I'm glad I faced my past. I managed to pass, and even though I know it's just self-satisfaction, the way I am standing here now is an answer to that question."

—But that's because you were already prepared to face your past, wasn't it?

Even while he hated himself, there was a girl who loved him and accepted him.

It was because she was there, because of what she did for him, that Subaru was able to reveal that unsightly side of himself to his parents, peel open that ugliness inside him, and at last lift up his face to say his farewells.

—Right now, is Emilia prepared for that?

Having touched only a fragment of the weight of her past, just how much strength had Subaru's words and actions lent her up to now?

A shallow worldview, some insignificant efforts, and his empty proclamations of love. Just how much support could they have truly given her?

Subaru: "…Just what… can I even do for you?"

He liked Emilia. He fell in love with her. He wanted to go on being in love with her, he thought.

He wanted her to like him. He wanted her to fall in love with him. And he wanted her to go on being in love with him, he thought, too.

That's why, he wanted to make her happy. To become her strength. And to take all the pain, and bitterness, and sorrow in her stead.

Even if he could not bear it, even if she would not let him, he wanted to be her support.

—Like the girl who brought him back and made him stand, Subaru wanted to do for Emilia what Rem had done for him.

Like Rem, who loved him with the entirety of her being, in the same way, Subaru wanted to become Emilia's support.

Only this way, could Subaru truly fulfill the first promise he made to Rem. And so, right now, what Subaru must do was, Subaru: “The time you need to stand, and the resolve to carry it through, all that I could do for you… leave them to me, alright?”

Rolling his hand into a fist, Subaru straightened out exactly what he must do, and, letting out a small sigh, he edged up his lips into a smile.

Wait, what he was going to do hadn’t changed at all.

Subaru: “I will do everything I can for her—after all that headache it just comes down to those few words, huh. Well, you gotta have some self-awareness about what you’re gonna do, right?”

For now, the question was how to solve the unavoidable problems at hand and overcome obstacles that accompanied them. And, after clearing them, concoct some shocking, ingenious plan to open this whole situation up.

Time waits for no one. And the limit was drawing near. But he couldn’t afford to jump to the wrong conclusions now. He had already made that mistake too many times before.

Subaru: “Nothing will get better if I just turn my head down when things are bad. At least everything will only get worse as time goes by. I know that all too well, unfortunately.”

Leaving it all to time and hoping it will solve itself was absolutely out of the question.

For Subaru, this is the unforgiving way of the world, and it was for this very reason that all his struggling, writhing, and resisting had meaning.

Subaru: “The situation is at its worst. Time is running out. And there’s still a mountain of things I don’t understand, but.”

That’s nothing special, it is same for anyone, but even so, the fact that he had been granted the chance to do it all over again makes all the difference.

Subaru: “Don’t doubt it for a second. Natsuki Subaru’s courage will save you, Emilia—!”

One way or another, let’s power through this with all we’ve got.

Chapter 28:
Talk Over Tea

1

Feeling the first light of dawn burning onto his eyelids, Subaru sat himself up in the darkness.

It seemed he had fallen asleep while thinking. But since he sank into the sea of thought so late in the night, he had only managed two or three hours of sleep.

Subaru: “This would’ve been unthinkable back in the old world. Sunrises are supposed to be when I fall asleep, you know.”

Saying this while giving his body a few turns, Subaru took a quick look around at the others who were beginning to wake in the Cathedral. When they noticed Subaru’s gaze upon them, one by one they waved at him, and he did the same in return. Then, standing up, he headed for the Cathedral’s door.

The crisp morning air greeted him as he went outside, where it seemed the residents of the Sanctuary and some of the refugees were working together to prepare breakfast.

Woman: “Aya, you’re already up, Master Subaru.”

Subaru: “He-yo, good morning. Another fresh morning today?”

Woman: “Sure is. The wind’s a bit chilly though… looks like you managed to get a good night’s sleep as well, Master Subaru.”

With a smile, the woman with a familiar face called out to him and touched a finger to her cheek. Seeing this, Subaru touched his cheek in the same spot and felt something sticky there—and noticed there was a trail of saliva drooling down the side of his face.

Subaru: “Wah, no, embarrassing!”

Why was it that short periods of sleep make people wake up even sloppier, anyway? Like when you wake up looking abnormally messy after only a little nap, there must be some kind of rule to this.

Chuckling, and watching Subaru ponder about this unproductive question, another woman—with short dog-ears on her head, offered him a wet towel. Subaru briefly thanked her, and quickly took the towel and wiped up his mouth.

“Off now?” he looked at them, and both women affirmed that it was. Subaru borrowed the towel so he could wash his face by the pond, and waved them good-day.

Watching the both of them as he left, within the interaction between them he didn’t see a single trace of unease or misunderstanding. There was only natural communication between members of two different races.

Over the past few days—which, if you include the time rewound by Return by Death, would have been a week, there had been no noticeable conflicts between the refugees and the residents of the Sanctuary.

The refugees were in high spirits, and although he’d hate to admit it, the fact that their Lord Roswaal remained with them must have brought them a considerable sense of reassurance. In reality, the villagers’ faith in Subaru, who ate and slept with them, also played no small part in this. But Subaru, with his low evaluation of his own influence, didn’t take this into account.

Quite contrary to the ominous atmosphere of this place, the residents of the Sanctuary, beginning with the beast-eared woman just now, had grown more and more talkative. At the very least, Subaru felt that it was to the point where the divide between human and half-bloods no longer existed anywhere beyond their thoughts.

Subaru: “The only real thing dividing them was the Barrier, wasn’t it… I don’t know what might’ve been going through the mind of whoever put up that thing, but that was a pretty asshole thing to do.”

If Garfiel's words could be believed, this place would be the Experimental Grounds of the Witch of Greed. In that case, the one who erected the Barrier to prevent the half-bloods from escaping might have been the Witch herself.

Subaru: "Echidna…huh. At the end of the day, I still can't figure out what that Witch is up to."

White-haired and white-skined, a monochrome girl wrapped in something of a funerary dress.

Lost her life 400 years ago, yet still bound to the present world, not unlike a ghost. Contrary to her proclamation of not interfering with the real world, she had met with Subaru within the Trial grounds and offered her detailed commentary on his actions.

Then, she hid all the memories inside Subaru's mind relating to herself, only to allow it to be remembered again through some careless coincidence—none of it made any sense.

Perhaps, there was some profound reason behind it, he thought.

Subaru: "Or if she just enjoys screwing with people to see what happens, then there's seriously nothing I can do. Come to think of it, what are you supposed to think of a lady who makes people she just met drink her bodily fluids for no reason, anyway…"

Unpleasant memories of drinking Dona-Tea resurfaced in his mind. But since it was something that was supposed to have happened in the Spiritual world, he really wanted to believe that his actual body hadn't really absorbed any of the Dona bits.

Anyways, regardless of her intentions, the Sanctuary remained surrounded by the Barrier, and its inhabitants remained trapped within it.

Subaru: "When it comes down to it, the greatest obstacle at the moment is… Garfiel, isn't it."

Whether it was to negotiate with Echidna directly or to personally challenge the Trials, the bottleneck was how to deal with Garfiel, whose hostility towards Subaru had jumped up.

If the change in his opinion of Subaru was truly due to the Witch's stench—the side-effect of Return by Death, then improving Garfiel's attitude towards him could prove a near-impossible task.

Whether it was the Wolgarms, or the battle against the White Whale, Subaru had managed to turn the stench to his advantage and create breakthroughs in the situation, but,

Subaru: "I can make it smell stinkier, but I don't know how to make it go away… Don't imagine deodorants would do anything to it. Actually, what am I saying. Stinky or not stinky, what am I, garbage?"

At least, there was a way to intentionally intensify his stench by telling someone about Return by Death. And judging from everything that had happened so far, the intensified odor doesn't seem to last forever.

It seems, just like any ordinary smell, it will gradually fade over time. But on the other hand, it would also mean that there was no other method to make it go away.

Subaru: "I definitely can't count on Garfiel's attitude softening. And though I'd rather not think about it… if I mess up and Return by Death again…"

If he dies again, and starts over inside the Tomb, the lingering scent clinging onto Subaru now will be compounded over again with the stench of the Witch. If that happens, it would be terrifying to imagine what Garfiel's reaction will be.

Facing the worst possible case of losing his life, by starting over, Subaru could alter the result.

And salvage everything—yet, in spite of Subaru's greed, the fact is, he hadn't managed to fulfill everything. And there were still things he could not bring back.

But even so, given the opportunity to do it all over again, Subaru intends to use it to choose a better future than the world that came before. It's difficult to appreciate a thing like Return by Death, but without that ability, he would have had to continue on through one of those countless abysmal futures.

Yet,

Subaru: “Even if I can repeat it indefinitely… with every return my relationships will worsen. The difficulty will increase along with the number of times I respawn… that’s a first, alright.”

At this point, it was still possible to establish rational communication with Garfiel. But next time, when the stench is compounded over again, he couldn’t be certain whether he will still be granted an opportunity to speak.

At least, recalling the memory of Rem stealing away his life with her morning star when she could no longer trust him as a result of the stench still left him a lonely sense of emptiness on the left side of his body.

Remembering those he left in the Mansion—especially remembering the sleeping Rem, the next thought that came into Subaru’s mind was the assassin in black. The reappearance of that happy murderer with her lethal blade, who currently tops the high-score chart of this world for the Subaru-Kill-Count.

Incidentally, also sharing first place was the gray cat-shaped spirit, while the whole flock of people sharing second-place with the kill-count of one was just too many to keep track of.

Subaru: “Now that I think about it, it’s kinda like an inverted kill-counter. Or I guess a “getting-killed-counter” would be more appropriate here? …Anyways, I need to find a countermeasure against Elsa. If it comes down to a brawl there’s no way I can win, so the only practical fighting strength we have would be a pick between Roswaal or Garfiel.”

Roswaal, even with his magical abilities, was still hindered by his injuries. So in the end, the best solution would still be to convert Garfiel into an ally.

And in order to have Garfiel fight off Elsa when she attacks the

Mansion, Subaru must break the Barrier surrounding the Sanctuary. And so, the most important steps would be,

Subaru: “Pass through the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary before the attack on the Mansion, reconcile with Garfiel and bring him to the Mansion to repel Elsa to get to the HAPPY END… or something like that?”

Saying it over to himself, Subaru saw the mutually-contradictory problem and furrowed his brows.

In order to make peace with Garfiel, he must liberate the Sanctuary.

And in order to liberate the Sanctuary, he must get past Garfiel so he could challenge the Trials.

Neither of these conflicting points can be satisfied without the other.

Perhaps there was still the possibility of resolving this through words, but looking back on their conversations last night and his experience of their interactions up to now, the slimness of that possibility made him want to clutch at his head.

For better or for worse, interactions with Garfiel are straightforward, but it also means that once he’s set his mind on something, it would be very difficult to change it again.

Therefore, if there was any chance left for Subaru, it would be,

Subaru: “Aim for an opportunity to sneak into the Tomb and get in touch with Echidna, or sneak into the Tomb at the time to challenge the Trials, and break through the remainder of the Trials.”

Finishing up washing his face at the pond, Subaru arrived at this conclusion, and turned his steps towards a direction quite different from the cooking grounds.

Wiping his face with the squeezed-dry towel, he set his destination toward a sparsely populated end of the Sanctuary. Heading there, passing a small hill, and continuing down a single road—

Subaru: “…right, I was expecting too much with my opportunism, wasn’t I.”

In the middle of the clearly visible path leading straight to the Tomb, seated in the same posture as the previous night, Garfiel was waiting.

—Head to the Tomb first thing in the morning and sneak past Garfiel when he isn’t looking.

He thought he’d pull a free one first thing in the morning, but looks like that’s been instantly foiled.

2

Subaru: “You look energetic this morning.”

Garfiel: “I should be th’one sayin’ that. The hell are ya doin’ showin’ up here first thing in the mornin? Y’tryin’ to piss me off? Oy!”

Subaru raised his hand a little to say hi, and Garfiel, looking annoyed, opened one of his eyes and spat this back. Seeing that expected reaction, Subaru dropped down his hand again, and turned to the petite figure—Ryuzu, standing beside the cross-legged Garfiel.

Subaru: “I figured Garfiel would be here, but I didn’t expect to find Miss Ryuzu here as well. Good morning.”

Ryuzu: “Mnn, it is a nice morning. Is Su-bo out for a stroll too?”

Subaru: “I guess you can call it that, but it’s not as pleasant as it sounds. I came here full of hopes, you know, but also to annoy Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “You…”

Seeing blue veins pop up on Garfiel’s forehead, and Subaru just pretending not to notice his reaction, Ryuzu tilted her head. Then,

Subaru: “You said “too” just now, does that mean Miss Ryuzu’s out for a stroll too?”

Ryuzu: “The stroll’s just an added bonus for me. Last night I heard Gar-bo hadn’t come home and was just going to sit out here on the ground… So I wanted to see how he’s doing.”

Ryuzu said this while playing with her long, pink wavy hair with a finger. In her other hand, she was holding a little package, which, judging from its size and shape, must be packing some simple food inside. Most likely, that was the stubborn not-gonna-move Garfel’s breakfast.

Suddenly, Subaru touched a hand to his chin and looked at the two in turn,

Subaru: “Then, Garfiel and Miss Ryuzu, have you guys known each other for a long time?”

Ryuzu: “Ever since Gar-bo was little, at least… Well, he’s still little.”

Garfiel: “Oy, Granny. I’ve already way overtaken your height here.”

Ryuzu: “And you still haven’t grown any taller like you’re supposed to. Anyways, we’ve been together since he was a lot smaller than he is now. I’ve even found myself growing used to these exchanges.”

Even with Garfiel’s protests, Ryuzu seemed to accept them without paying them much mind. Underneath what seemed to be a little girl was indeed an old woman inside. A total Loli-Granny in every sense of the word.

However, having noticed something from what she said just now, Subaru raised up his brows,

Subaru: “From the way you said that… was Garfiel not born inside the Sanctuary?”

Garfiel: “…Don’t go pryin’ where y’don’t need to. Y’wanna be like “Sneak attackin’ the black Botokku only t’get killed instead”?”

Subaru: “Yeah that didn’t really communicate at all so there’s not much stopping power there. So, Miss Ryuzu, tell me the answer, if you please!”

Seeing Subaru intent on completely ignoring last night's warning, Garfiel ground his teeth so hard that they were almost starting to make a noise. But Subaru ignored that too and kept trying to get to the bottom of it.

Looking back and forth at what was going on between the two men, Ryuzu spilled out a tired sigh, and,

Ryuzu: "It was ten and something years ago when Gar-bo came to the Sanctuary. Back then, Gar-bo was still a lil'baby that couldn't even walk yet. Ros-bo brought him along and…"

Garfiel: "—Granny, don't say anythin' unnecessary beyond that."

Narrowing his eyes, Garfiel pressed down his voice as he said this.

Hearing this sent a chill into Subaru's chest, and for a moment, he was afraid that he may have carelessly stepped on something he shouldn't have. But,

Ryuzu: "Who're you talking to with that kind of mouth, you dumbass!"

Garfiel: "Hurts!"

Striding forward impressively, Ryuzu reached out her hand and smacked the golden spiky-haired Garfiel right in the head. Under the little girl's arms that didn't seem all that strong, Garfiel hugged his head as if thunderbolts were dropping down on him, and, looking up at her like this,

Garfiel: "G-Granny what're y'doin' all of'a sudden…"

Ryuzu: "I should be asking you, after raising you up myself is that how you're gonna speak to me? Just, shameful, embarrassing, so sad it makes me wanna cry. Take this! This! This!"

Garfiel: "Sto-, hurts, aow, watchin', there's someone watchin'!"

With "pok pok pok" sound effects, Ryuzu kept swinging her arm while Garfiel, looking like he wanted to crawl into a hole, tried to block her blows with his hand.

While watching those two going at it, Subaru almost couldn't stop himself from laughing,

Subaru: "I think I've got a pretty good estimate of how long and deep your relationship is now… Garfiel, do you really plan to keep sitting here?"

Garfiel: "Unless there's somethin' else I need to do, I'm here t'stay. I wouldn't want someone sneakin' in while I'm away, now do I?"

Guarding against anyone sneaking in, even with Subaru trying to get him to let his guard down, Garfiel would not budge. Since Subaru wasn't expecting too much, he wasn't entirely discouraged. Rather, the fact that Garfiel had overturned his own words from only half a day ago meant there was probably a need for Subaru to revise his understanding of Garfiel.

But in any case, the fact that his stubbornness remained difficult to move hadn't changed.

Subaru: "Come to think of it, doesn't the Trial only take place at night? There's no point for me to sneak in during the day anyway. Isn't it kinda pointless to keep sitting here like this?"

Garfiel: "Yer wastin' yer breath if y'think I'm gonna move. Wanna sneak in durin' the day and wait for th'night, bankin' on me not bein' able to go in and then yer all set, yeah? Y'think I ain't ready for a long fight? What, y'underestimatin' me?"

Subaru: "Tch, I've been found out?"

Subaru held up both hands over his head to surrender, and, seeing him do this, Garfiel snorted, before looking up at Ryuzu,

Garfiel: "So, I can't be movin' from here for a while. Granny, food."

Ryuzu: "Is that the kind of attitude you take toward someone who went to all the trouble of bringing you food? Lamentable. Here."

Despite her complaints, Ryuzu handed him the parcel. And, taking it, Garfiel unwrapped the parcel and started filling himself up with the dumpling-like contents inside.

With Ryuzu helping him like this, it would seem the battle of wills could be a long one.

Subaru: “Looks like it’ll be hard to do anything for the moment… huh. Oh well, I’ll come back next time.”

Garfiel: “Y’don’t have to come back y’know. I ain’t lettin’ ya through anyway. Y’might as well go sit quietly in a corner somewhere, yeah?”

Having finished eating, Garfiel licked his fingers and called out to Subaru, who was turning to leave. Subaru waved him goodbye without turning around, and Ryuzu followed along beside him.

Ryuzu: “Now that I’m done feedin’ Gar-bo, I want to talk to Su-bo for a bit.”

Subaru: “What a coincidence. I have something I want to ask Miss Ryuzu too. Though I really want to go see Emilia-tan’s face first, but…”

Looking up at the sky, he found that the Sun had only just risen.

He could still remember that on the first day after the beginning of the Trials, the exhausted Emilia will wake up around noon. He would have liked to follow his desires and go to see her face while she slept, but he should probably move forward with the other activities here instead.

Subaru cast a glance towards Ryuzu, observing the elderly little girl with pink wavy hair who was walking along beside him.

Her face seemed a little sleepy, and with wobbling little steps, she managed to keep up with his pace. Even knowing full well that she’s a Loli-Granny, there was still something that tickled the insides of his heart.

Subaru: “Want me to give you a piggyback ride?”

Ryuzu: “…And here I was wondering why you were suddenly looking at me like that. Su-bo, you don’t happen to be attracted to little girls, do you? That’d be even more hopeless than Ros-bo.”

Subaru: “Please don’t mistake me for a Loli-con! When I buy GALGAMES I’d use all my OPTION-POINTS to conquer Senpai or Older-Sister type characters! And even right now, I’m desperately working my ass off for an older sister type, you know… although I just recently found out she’s quite a lot older than me BUT MY HEART HAS NOT CHANGED! That’s the kinda guy I am, you know?”

Ryuzu: “What kind of guy is that… I almost wanted to ask, but nevermind. No, I don’t need a piggyback. If I don’t walk around a bit my old legs and hips will go weak.”

Subaru: “Another incredible statement demonstrating the appearance-gap!”

Once again, it seriously hit him that underneath the appearance of a little girl was really an elderly lady. There was also the possibility that while her skin was young, all her organs inside were creaking. Being a Loli-Granny must be surprisingly tough.

Ryuzu: “What is that, you look like you’re thinking of something stupid again.”

Subaru: “Ehhh? No way, really? I was totally making a poker face just now and being careful not to reveal my inner thoughts, you know.”

Ryuzu: “Your face looks just like Gar-bo’s when he’s chompin’ on stolen pastries. No matter which child it is, children are always up to the same things.”

Subaru: “This granny just keeps dishing out her old granny antics one after another, huh.”

Setting the endless reminders of Ryuzu’ age aside, Subaru, walking alongside her, suddenly began looking around him, “Huh?”

Subaru: “It’s good that… we got a chance to talk, but, where are we going? Actually, it’s pretty late for me to ask this now, but after you lent your bed to Emilia-tan, where has Miss Ryuzu been sleeping? In the wild?”

Ryuzu: “So I just lent out my home and you’re immediately treating me like I’m homeless… The fact that you’d say that tells me you might’ve forgotten that I am still the head of this place. I still know a few people who’d let me stay over for a few days.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. It’s only been a few days, but the people here are all unexpectedly nice people.”

Recalling the scene at the cooking grounds, and the various occasions when he got to interact with the Sanctuary’s residents, Subaru furrowed his brows, and couldn’t help but wonder if the brewing conflict Garfiel had warned about hadn’t just been an exaggeration.

Stealing a glance at Subaru, who had grown silent, Ryuzu nodded, “Hm”,

Ryuzu: “Something doesn’t sit well with you?”

Subaru: “No, not if you say it like that… How should I say this, it’s a bit different from what I imagined. Judging from the way Emilia was treated at the Capital, half-bloods couldn’t have been treated much better. So I thought maybe the half-bloods would be harboring some complicated feelings toward the pure-bloods.”

At least, despite being trapped in a Sanctuary referred to as the Experimental Grounds, the faces of the residents didn’t seem to be showing particularly dark emotions. Of course, there must be those who didn’t find this amusing, but Subaru hadn’t caught any glimpse of such negative feelings here so far.

If Garfiel, who didn’t mince words nor emotions, was any indication, his personal emotions seemed closer to indignation than anger. An anger on behalf of others, rather than himself.

Despite their unpleasant surroundings, the morale of the residents was exceedingly high. More than incredible, it was almost to the point of being inconceivable.

In front of Subaru’s doubts, Ryuzu’ eyes widened in surprise,

Ryuzu: “What, Su-bo, you may not look like it, but you have more ideas than you let on.”

Subaru: “I don’t look like it… that part’s pretty unnecessary, isn’t it… I mean, I’m confident that I look more intellectual than Garfiel, at least. But, well, I guess I’m pretty thoughtless when it comes to all sort of things.”

Ryuzu: “It’s quite a virtue to be aware of your own shortcomings. You can only begin to improve once you’ve realized where you are deficient… Ah, we’re here.”

Coming to a split in the path, Ryuzu led the way for the lost-looking Subaru. Instead of heading in the direction of the Cathedral and Roswaal’s residence, they turned towards the other end of the village outskirts, opposite from the Tomb—and there, they arrived at Ryuzu’ isolated temporary lodging.

Unlike the sparsely placed houses scattered over the outskirts, for some reason, this house stood alone, far apart from all the others. A word naturally came to Subaru’s mind,

Subaru: “It’s too lonely, isn’t it. Why are you staying in a place like this?”

Ryuzu: “It can’t be helped. Right now, this is the only building inside the Sanctuary with no one living in it. It may be far away from the center of the village, but it’s spacious, and I quite like it here.”

Subaru: “Didn’t you say you know people who’d let you stay over? Why did you choose to live alone? Even though I know quite a few Loli-Grannies in my life it’s still way too sad for me to see a Loli-Granny die alone.”

Ryuzu: “I honestly can’t tell if you’re concerned for me or if I’m being made fun of. Here, come in. I’ll brew you some tea. Though Ram certainly brews it better.”

Subaru: “No matter what kind of leaves you put in it there, it’ll still just taste like leaves, so no worries.”

Ryuzu: “You should be more careful about the kinds of things you say.”

With a sigh, Ryuzu invited Subaru into the house through the opened door. It was a large building, about half the size of Roswaal’s temporary residence. In fact, divided into three rooms, it seemed perhaps too large for just one person to live in.

Finding a chair to sit down in and looking all around the room, he saw that the interior of the small room was simple and well maintained. Ryuzu had said that no one else lived here, but,

Subaru: “For a house that’s not been lived in, it sure feels like someone often comes here. Even for me, being a top-notch bed-maker myself, I’d have to grant the fluffiness of that bed a passing grade… there’s no way Miss Ryuzu did that.”

Ryuzu: “What’s with that face you’re making as if I enjoy being alone so I come here whenever something happens and just kill time here and wait for things to cool off?”

Subaru: “That must be an awfully specific facial expression I got!”

Still, there was something sad about the possibility that the reason she came up with this rapid-fire explanation was that it was something she had thought about before. He was joking just now when he mentioned dying alone, but it can’t be denied that something about her matched his impression of a solitary old lady.

Silently turning away and occupying herself with brewing tea, her back seemed almost lonely. Seeing this, Subaru looked around trying to find some way to change the topic.

The room was clean and neatly organized. There was a slightly dulled mirror above a dresser. A flower vase without flowers, and two metal shields hanging on the wall. —Shields?

Subaru: “Why are there shields here? And two of them?”

Ryuzu: “They’re Gar-bo’s. That kid’s using this place like it’s a storage house.”

Subaru: “So he hangs around here too, huh. It does kinda look like a good hangout spot for delinquents now that I think about it… But, he couldn't be the one carefully tidying up this place, could he?"

That'd be way too out-of-character, Subaru murmured under his breath as he looked at Garfiel's shields.

He often saw crossed swords adorning the walls of noblemen's houses in Mangas, and these shields were slightly tilted in a fashion similar to that as well. But, unlike something that ought to be used as ornaments, these shields were riddled with scratches and dents, and were certainly not mere antiques that have not seen a day of battle.

Subaru: "Then again, what kind of battle can you fight with just shields?"

Ryuzu: "Back in the day, they would always fight bouts with these shields in the fields outside this house. Each one would hold a shield, and round and round they'd go, bumping into each other."

Subaru: "That sounds a bit dangerous for just playing around… Mind if I ask who it was that Garfiel played with?"

Over the time he spent in the Sanctuary, he hadn't met anyone who could have been so intimate with Garfiel. Of course, being an important person in these lands, it was apparent that Garfiel had good relations with the residents at the cooking grounds. But, other than that, did he have anyone he was truly close with? Subaru couldn't think of any particular names.

If he had to name someone, it would have been Ryuzu. But just picturing Ryuzu holding a shield and charging against Garfiel felt incredibly dangerous.

For a while, Ryuzu stayed silent in front of Subaru's question. She brought over two cups of steaming tea set on a tray, and handed Subaru one of them as she sat down on the bed. Receiving it, Subaru took a sip while it was still hot, and moistened his throat.

Subaru: "Right, tastes just like leaves."

Ryuzu: "Tea's just wasted on you, huh. Well, I already anticipated that so I used the cheaper leaves. …Even tea leaves are considered precious here, you know.”

About once a month, Roswaal would send over precious items and luxury goods here. Subaru, adapting to the situation, did his best to pretend to appreciate the tea, as they sat wordlessly tilting their cups for a while.

Then, after some time had passed in silence,

Subaru: “—Frederica.”

Hearing Subaru’s abrupt whisper, Ryuzu’ shoulder jumped a little.

Lifting her gaze from her teacup, she looked at Subaru. And, seeing something wavering in her expression, Subaru asked again,

Subaru: “The name of the person bumping shields with Garfiel, is Frederica, isn’t it?”

Ryuzu: “…did you hear that from Gar-bo?”

Subaru: “Nah. I pieced it together from some fragmented conversations and got a feeling about it somehow. At least, I just knew that there must’ve been something complicated between Garfiel and Frederica.”

At Roswaal’s Mansion, Frederica had warned him to beware of a man named Garfiel.

And when Garfiel heard Frederica’s name, his expression changed, and he wanted to know how she was. It would be hard not to suspect that there was something between them.

And, most of all,

Subaru: “Their fangs are way too similar. If they’re still unrelated, even Buddha wouldn’t allow that.”

Ryuzu: “…Ahh, quite so. Even I can’t think of a way to deny that.”

Faced with this decisive fact, Ryuzu let out a sigh as if giving up.

In terms of similarities between Garfiel and Frederica, just their vicious fang-filled smiles alone would have been enough. At least, it would be enough to tell that they were not in a romantic relationship or anything like that.

If he had to guess, then their relationship must be—

Subaru: “Brother and sister… Actually, more like older sister and younger brother. If I were to guess who’s older, Frederica seems more like the older sister type.”

Ryuzu: “Goodness… I’m impressed that you’d be able to tell all that just from intuition.”

Hearing Subaru point this out, Ryuzu could only show her amazement.

Then, nodding her head thoughtfully, and placing the remainder of her tea back on the tray, she corrected her posture, and,

Ryuzu: “Just as Su-bo imagined, the owner of these two shields are the siblings Frederica and Garfiel. Frederica Baumann, who had left the Sanctuary, and Garfiel Tinsel, are family bound by blood.”

Confirming Subaru’s speculation, Ryuzu nonetheless spilled a melancholic sigh.

Ryuzu: “—And now, owing to their mutual misunderstandings, they have each wound up on diverging paths.”

Chapter 29:
Omnivore Male

1

Closing in on the core of what he wanted to know, Subaru tilted his teacup.

Letting the hot tea pass down his throat, he swallowed it along with his doubts for now and settled them into his stomach. Then, seriously considering what he should say next,

Subaru: “To what extent… are you willing to answer my questions?”

Ryuzu: “…you may have already noticed my reluctance, but don’t expect too much from me. Because of my Contract, there is not much information I can give Su-bo. As for the Trials, I am under strict orders not to allow any outside interference with the Tomb.”

Subaru: “The way you said that already gave me a few clues… strict orders, huh.”

Ryuzu: “…”

Faced with Subaru’s repeated questions, Ryuzu grew silent.

Judging by her words and behaviors so far, there weren’t many contenders for someone capable of bending her to their will. More than likely, those were Roswaal’s orders, but,

Subaru: “In that case, that guy’s objectives just becomes less and less comprehensible. Does he want me… want us to pass the Trials? Or doesn’t he? I can’t even be sure whether he’s planning to help us or not.”

Ryuzu: “I guess he was hoping you would find the answer to that yourselves, or something along those lines. Even back in the day, Ros-bo was a naughty little child who loved to do things in these obscure and roundabout ways. He may have gotten taller, but deep down, he hasn't changed a bit."

Perhaps it was because they've known each other for so long, that Ryuzu could lightheartedly say this of the young Roswaal.

"Hasn't changed a bit." Having only gotten to know Roswaal's perverted side, Subaru couldn't help but shudder at the thought of what Roswaal might've been like back when his limbs were still stubby.

Subaru: "Well, there must still be some cuteness left in there, mnnyeah, probably maybe."

Ryuzu: "Ros-bo's childhood… hm, since they pertain to the secrets of the Mathers family, I'm afraid I cannot divulge anything further."

Subaru: "Uuuogh, but I'm interested… no, wait, am I interested? I don't really mind not knowing too much about that guy's personality, actually."

Crossing his arms and tilting his head, Subaru started to question why he wanted to know in the first place, and,

Subaru: "Alright, let's toss that one out. I just need to know what that guy's planning, there's no need to understand him."

Ryuzu: "You sure came to that conclusion easily."

Subaru: "There's no need to worry about things that're pointless to worry about. Ultimately, humans can't understand everything from zero to a hundred anyway. But even so, we still want to understand some things, and I guess that's what love is. I'll always love Emilia-tan, but I don't love Roswaal all that much!"

In front of that clear-cut declaration tossing Roswaal aside, Ryuzu gave an impressed nod, and continuing "In that case", she touched her hand to her chin,

Ryuzu: "It seems, there is no other topic I can talk to you about…"

Subaru: "Naah, as long as we don't touch on anything forbidden by

Miss Ryuzu's Contracts, my QUESTION-TIME is still ongoing, isn't it? Nevermind Roswaal's personality for now, but I still want to ask a few more things from the Sanctuary's all-knowledgeable granny Miss Ryuzu."

Ryuzu: "H…mm. Well, if you just wanna ask, that's fine, go ahead and ask. But, the dire consequences of violating my Contract are not limited to myself alone. By no means forget this, understood?"

Bending forward, the little girl glared up threateningly at Subaru.

Honestly, it looked so adorable that it gave off no sense of pressure at all, but Subaru nonetheless hugged his own shoulders pretending to shudder in reaction, and whimpered out "So scary" with tears puddling up in his eyes,

Subaru: "Alright, now that we have the scary aggressor and the frightened victim properly mapped out, it's question-time now?"

Ryuzu: "I'm finding it a bit hard to accept the way you made me the villain just now."

Subaru: "As a man once said, that's that and this is this. So, question now—You said that Frederica and Garfiel are siblings, and Frederica had stayed inside the Sanctuary, right?"

While Ryuzu was still a bit unable to accept her treatment, with a feigned smile, Subaru cut directly into the main topic. Seeing her expression change upon hearing his question, Subaru waved a finger,

Subaru: "Frederica, who was supposed to be in the Sanctuary, is now dressed in a maid's uniform and serving in Roswaal's Mansion. But, from what I've gathered, this situation sounds a bit odd."

Ryuzu: "Hmm, odd how?"

Subaru: "If Frederica is Garfiel's sister, then she must be half-blooded as well. Then, being a half-blood, she shouldn't have been able to leave the Sanctuary for as long as the Barrier is still intact."

The Barrier of the Sanctuary that reacts to the blood of the half-bloods, barring their escape:

It was the thing that struck Emilia unconscious on the way in, that kept Garfiel and Ryuzu trapped in this place indefinitely, and it was the wall that was currently one of the greatest obstacles standing in Subaru's path.

After agonizingly trying to find a way to surmount it, there was now an exception who had passed beyond that wall. In other words,

Subaru: "There must be some kind of secret path to leave the Barrier. Or maybe, even the Barrier's existence is a lie."

Ryuzu: "A lie… that would be a bit upsetting. The truth is, in my life up to now, I have never once set foot into the outside world. All this is owing to the existence of the Barrier."

Subaru: "Or, maybe you are being deceived by the Contract you've been bound to… such a malicious possibility isn't entirely out of the question? It could also be that since there's too much risk involved in actually testing the reality of the Barrier, it just so happens that no one thought to verify it. But then…"

The possibility that all the residents of the Sanctuary had been deceived about the existence of the Barrier.

The Trials inside the Tomb certainly exist, so this should be highly unlikely. Yet Subaru couldn't completely rule out the possibility that this was some overly elaborate plan to trap the refugees of Earlham and win Emilia renown.

Subaru: "Considering the kind of uproar there'd be if they found out about the truth, it's just a bit too unrealistic. So the second possibility should be automatically ruled out… which only leaves us with the first one."

Ryuzu: "A secret path… is it. But, what will you do once you have found out the answer?"

Subaru: "If there is a secret path that anyone could use, then we can just move everyone in the Sanctuary outside the Barrier, and there'll be no need to take the Trials."

Hearing Subaru's outrageous proposal, Ryuzu dropped her jaw. Seeing her like this, Subaru waved his hands from side to side, "Right?"

Subaru: "Sure there are benefits to taking the Trials as well. Honestly, having benefitted quite a bit from it myself, I won't deny that. But, the Trials—or in this case, the past… it'd be ok to put it off for now, right? There are times when people shouldn't be forced to face their pasts, don't you think?"

Ryuzu: "You are talking about Lady Emilia? But hardships will not choose the right time to pay their visit. Running away now in the face of calamities would only be…"

Subaru: "I don't mean running away forever. Just retreating in order to better prepare for the fight. That's what they call a tactical retreat. There are times when we have to fight on unfavorable ground, but moving to more favorable grounds when possible is a good thing for both the person herself and those around her, isn't it?"

Cutting off Ryuzu just as she tried to say something, Subaru continued stacking on justifications for running away, insisting that it isn't always shameful to turn one's back.

Subaru: "Even if she doesn't face it now, one day Emilia will face it, no matter what. It may be ironic, but that Trial made her remember. So she must now choose to either forget or to accept it. And all I can do is to somehow make it less painful for her when she decides."

Ryuzu: "…You speak of distancing her from suffering, yet you would not let her run away from the single most painful part."

Subaru: "Whether to run away from that part is her choice as well. But I believe that she… Emilia will not do such a thing."

Ryuzu: "And what makes you trust her so? At least, it's impossible for me. To see the way she came out of the Tomb, and still have such expectations of her."

Subaru: “Well, that’s because I love Emilia-tan to death, you know.”

As Ryuzu continued to deny Emilia, Subaru casually said this as if it were nothing.

And though Ryuzu had already found herself speechless several times throughout this conversation, these last words left her the most awestruck up to this point.

Watching Ryuzu’ astonished face, Subaru smiled awkwardly, and scratched at his neck.

Subaru: “I love Emilia, and I think she’s super cute. So, I believe that this super-cute girl I fell for is the kind of girl who will overcome anything, no matter how hard or painful it may be. I expect and expect and expect this of her, and I believe that she will meet my expectations.”

Ryuzu: “Th… that isn’t an answer at all. No matter how much you like someone, there is nothing you can do about what is inside the other person’s heart. Su-bo, surely you know this…”

Subaru: “I do understand. Emilia is a girl. Not all parts of her are strong, and there are super small parts of her that are weak, and there might even be a chance that there’s a super super impossibly small ugly part in there as well.”

Ryuzu: “Are you admitting there is or not…”

Subaru: “If I believe… that in spite of all her weak parts, it will be her strong parts that will shine through in the end… then that’s what devotion is, isn’t it?”

Inscribed into Subaru’s heart, was the belief that devotion was the strongest expression of love. And he had tasted the happiness of being on the receiving end of someone devoting her entire being to him as well. Therefore,

Subaru: “I will do anything for Emilia. I believe she will overcome her weak parts and find the strength to lift up her head, and I will work hard for that future where I get to rub it in everyone’s faces that I was right to believe in her.”

Ryuzu: "…But even so, she is the one who will be facing the most painful part of her heart, alone."

Subaru: "But that's obvious, isn't it? I can't be at Emilia's side when she faces her past. If I existed in her past, I'd take her hand while she's sitting on the ground crying and pull her back up, and do everything I can to cheer her up. But I'm not there. What happened in her past had nothing to do with me. As much as I want to reach out my hand, it's like someone watching a drama having no way to interfere with what's happening on TV."

That was the truth. The past was the past, and no one could touch it.

Even the past that Subaru had faced and overcome, was only a fiction. He hadn't conveyed a single thing to his real parents, and all he had gained was some sense of self-satisfaction.

But,

Subaru: "Compared to getting no bonus at all, it's definitely better to get at least a little bonus. I can't help her face her past while I'm stuck in the real world. But, her present-self can lend her own insufficient past-self a hand, couldn't it? Lending yourself a hand isn't against the rules, is it?"

Ryuzu: "…"

Subaru: "Even if I can't help her directly, I'll use my words and actions and affection and… well I'd be really happy if I could have the highest place in Emilia's heart, but she's received all sorts of things from other people as well. At least, she has more now than the Emilia of the past. The more weapons she has at her disposal, the more she will be able to help her imperfect past. That's how we can beat this Trial. The Trial's difficulty was set based upon this premise, wasn't it."

Having experienced this first-hand, Subaru could say this again no matter how many times he was asked.

Subaru: "I will help Emilia. I will do everything in my power to help her present-self overcome her past. And in order to achieve that goal, even if it means taking side paths or throwing caution out the window or cheating or paying real money for in-game credits, I will do it. That's how I intend to help her."

Ryuzu: "Really… that sure is a self-centered way to love someone."

Subaru: "I'm no herbivore or carnivore, you can just call me an omnivorous guy—!"

Snapping his fingers and sparkling his teeth with a wink, Subaru stuck up his thumb and struck out a pose.

Watching Subaru abruptly ending his speech like this, Ryuzu exhaled a long, long sigh as if giving up altogether.

Ryuzu: "That sure was a lot of pretty words for making an excuse for doing something sneaky."

Subaru: "Heheh."

Ryuzu: "Gobbledygook. …I'm sorry, but I cannot tell you the details of the side path. However, I can tell you that it's impossible to rely on it alone. The way Frederica left the Sanctuary was an exception. The others cannot do the same."

Ryuzu shook her head and turned down Subaru's hopes. Subaru's heart dropping at her words, his shoulders slumping and his knees falling to the floor—didn't really happen. Instead,

Subaru: "Oh. Can't do it huh. I was thinking it'd be a great deal if that could work, but I guess it's ok. Then, onto the next question…"

Ryuzu: "This might be a bit funny coming from me, but, you sure don't like to give up, Su-bo."

Subaru: "If I gave up that easily, who knows how many times I would've had to sit in the Whale's stomach by now. It's a bit funny for me to say this too, but never giving up and the DEPTH OF MY LOVE are pretty much the only weapons I have, you know."

Subaru came out and announced his uselessness, and once again, Ryuzu only stood there stumped just as she had been many times already in the past hour. Subaru had to clap his hands with "Snap out'of it",

Subaru: "Even though I have all sorts of problems with this, I still realize that having Emilia reveal her true powers and smash right through the Trials would be the most epic-heroic way to do it. So, does the VETERAN-TRIALS-CHALLENGER-Miss Ryuzu have some insider advice?"

Ryuzu: "Why do I get the feeling I've just been called something I'd rather not be called… And even if you ask me, I could only tell you that I don't know. I've never taken the Trials, after all, so I couldn't possibly know the answer to that."

Subaru: "Wuh?"

Tilting his head, Subaru let out a stupid groan in front of Ryuzu' reply. But surely, just now, he had heard something he couldn't let slide. After all,

Subaru: "Just now, might you perhaps have just enlightened me with the revelation that you have never taken the Trials?"

Ryuzu: "What's with that polite-speak all of a sudden. It's obvious, isn't it? I am not allowed to challenge the Trials meant for those from outside the Sanctuary. It's the same for the others too. At least, in the seventy years I have spent here, I have no knowledge of anyone attempting the Trials. Su-bo was the first."

Subaru: "Nonononoweirdweirdweird. Hold on, pause, wait, something's weird all the information's messed up. Please just gimme some time to balance the books in my head for a moment."

Ryuzu: "You got five minutes."

Gratefully nodding to Ryuzu' unexpected patience, Subaru held his fingers to his temples and began desperately calling back his memories.

From the day before yesterday in the previous loop, up to the point when he first came back after passing the Trials, chewing over every minutest detail within his memory over that time,

Subaru: “—Wha?”

In those memories, the “Inconsistencies” that shouldn’t have been there, he hadn’t noticed them until now.

His face contorting as he realized this fact, Subaru tried hard to contain the doubtful mutterings under his breath. “What’s going on?” But once the emerging suspicion had sprouted, there was nothing to stop it from taking root and flowering atop its stems.

In Subaru’s memories, Ryuzu said on the night before the Trials,

—No one had ever taken the Trials up to now. In the span of her entire life up to this point, there had never been a challenger.

In Subaru’s memories, immediately before the Trials, and immediately after, Ryuzu said,

—She had taken the Trials, failed to pass, but was still kicking around safe and sound, offering it as proof that there was no harm in challenging the Trials.

In the span of a single day, her statements had completely turned on its head.

It’d be a different matter if this was purely in emotional terms, but the contradicting contents pertained to life experiences and reality itself. Such a drastic directional change in information could only be pointing to perjury, or otherwise, a precalculated lie.

Still maintaining his thinking posture, Subaru turned his gaze up toward Ryuzu, who was playing with her pink hair, waiting. Watching her sitting on the bed, swinging her legs that weren’t long enough to touch the floor, looking as though she was searching for something to distract herself from boredom, one could almost forget that she was a granny at heart and mistake her for a genuine little girl.

Looking back on their interactions up to now, he really didn’t want to believe that she had been maliciously toying with him, but, Subaru: “Even if some part of it was true, which ones can I believe?”

Usually, when faced with conflicting information, Subaru would just trust the words of those he wanted to trust, but he couldn’t make this judgment so lightly when it was Emilia’s fate resting on his decision. And much less so, considering this was a matter of life and death in the literal sense of the words. He must be cautious.

This was now the third time he and Ryuzu had discussed the topic of the Trials.

Once, she claimed to have challenged it, and twice, she denied any knowledge of anyone ever having taken it. Though this wasn’t something that could be decided by majority, her statements claiming that she knew nothing of the Trials seemed to be more believable.

Following from that assumption, she may have lied about the Trials to the worried Subaru out of consideration, just to put his mind at ease. But if that was the case, then she should have simply explained that it was a lie—

Subaru: “Unless there was some reason she didn’t do this… maybe she’s starting to go senile…”

Ryuzu: “Just now, you seem to have arrived at some rather rude conclusions about me?”

Subaru: “If you could keep in mind my consistent past efforts to demonstrate my good intentions, and let that counterbalance my recent transgression, Subaru will be most grateful. Said Subaru with a stern expression on his face.”

Watching Subaru mix his apologizing and clowning together, Ryuzu sighed, and, muttering “Ayeayeaye…”, she tiredly shook her head,

Ryuzu: “So, did you get any answers out of that conversation with your heart?”

Subaru: “Answers or not, it’s more like I’ve arrived at a conclusion. Um, Miss Ryuzu, did you happen to be worried about me? Like back outside the Tomb?”

Ryuzu: “Worried?”

Seeing Ryuzu merely repeating his word like a parrot, Subaru nodded “yeah” and effeminately touched his fingertips together like a girl, and,

Subaru: “Y-You once said that you never took the Trials, but outside the Tomb you told me how you took the Trials and failed but it was no big deal, right? B-But you probably just said that because you were worried about me or unless it’s not like that and it’s just me but I just noticed it just now that’s all…”

Ryuzu: “—Ahh, so it’s about that.”

With a voice carrying an emotion as if having understood, Ryuzu interjected into Subaru’s cringe-worthy rapid-fire delivery. And, seeing Subaru furrow his brows in astonishment upon hearing the sound of her voice, she smiled, and,

Ryuzu: “Su-bo, I’ll let you in on something good. Consider it special.”

Subaru: “Something good?”

Ryuzu: “Owing to my Contract, I am forbidden to “Lie”. And so, whenever I am asked an inappropriate question, I could only choose to answer with silence. Without exceptions, this could not be changed for anyone’s sake. Lying is forbidden. And this is true for myself, as well as every single one of the residents of the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “You cannot… lie…?”

In front of her sudden confession, Subaru’s only impulse was confusion.

Because, if what Ryuzu said was true, then the premise of everything Subaru had considered so far would be turned on its head. Or rather, even before that, if what she said was true, then the whole situation that brought about his suspicions in the first place would have been completely self-contradictory.

—If she was incapable of lying, then how was it that she had created a situation that couldn’t have come about unless she lied?

Subaru: “Tha…”

Ryuzu: “Just now, I have already told the utmost limit of what I could tell you. I cannot answer any questions beyond that. Misery would befall us both if we violate the Contract. If you wish to know more, instead of asking this ancient self who had stopped in her tracks, you should ask one of those who had ventured ahead.”

Having been preemptively denied, Subaru could only close his opened mouth and fall back into silence.

Subaru had only been able to carry on this conversation by relying on Ryuzu’ goodwill, so once she had rejected him like this, there was nothing he could do. But she had also given him a hint as well.

By picking up that fact alone, Subaru keenly sensed that she had not been lying about her desire to be liberated from this place.

Subaru: “Understood, I won’t ask any more than that. Let’s change the topic… to something else.”

Ryuzu: “You sure’re an odd one. You already know you can’t get anything else important out of me, and you still wish to drink tea and chat with an old-timer like me?”

Subaru: “I’ve already missed breakfast time, and there’s not much for me to do until Emilia-tan wakes up. I get pissed off just looking at Roswaal, Garfiel bares his fangs at me, and bantering with Otto’s way too exhausting, so I’ll just deepen my precious friendship with my Loli-Granny.”

Standing up, Subaru collected the two cups of now thoroughly-cold tea and headed to the kitchen, followed by Ryuzu’ gaze,

Subaru: “Don’t worry. For a time, even though it was kinda short-term, I made a living as a servant in Roswaal’s Mansion, you know. They’ve taught me a thing or two about brewing tea, at least.”

Ryuzu: “Hm. Then allow me to wait with expectations.”

Subaru: “Uwa, PURESSHA□.”

Saying this as he poured the tea into the teacups, he handed one to Ryuzu and returned to his seat. Facing each other, they sipped down the new tea, and,

Ryuzu: “Not too bad at all.”

Subaru: “Even when I brew it myself I still just taste leaves. Now, for the new topic.”

Ryuzu: “I won’t be listening if you want to continue the topic from before. But otherwise… well, I would still respond to any other topics as earnestly as I could.”

Subaru: “Alright, I’ll hold you to your words then.”

Seeing a tinge of guilt forming on Ryuzu’ little face, Subaru’s lips twisted into a mischievous smile.

Subaru: “Do you know anything that bastard Garfiel’s scared of, or any stuff he hates? Like something that’ll make him faint soon as he sees them?”

Ryuzu: “Su-bo… have you ever noticed the way you try so hard is a little crooked?”

And, with that, he managed to put onto Ryuzu’ face the single most peculiar expression of the entire past hour.

2

After their conversation over tea came to an end, having cleaned up the cups, Subaru left the lonely Loli-Granny who claimed she wanted to be alone and came out of the house.

About an hour had passed, or perhaps a little longer, he thought. But, seeing that the sun that was supposed to have only just risen now hanging high up in the sky, and feeling that the temperature had grown warmer as well, it could easily have been longer than

that.

Judging from bodily sensations alone, it was probably a little after 10am.

Subaru: “It’s a perfect sunny day for drying out a futon too, what a waste… why do I get the feeling I’ve completely shed being a hikikomori with that thought just now!”

To think, that bathed under the light of the Sun, the first thing that came to his mind was doing laundry. As an archetype of the unhealthy slackers, this was utterly inconceivable. But, setting aside such sentiments for now,

Subaru: “It’s about time, Emilia should be waking up soon. She’s probably still scared from last night… I better take the chance to imprint some of my sense of presence while she’s weak.”

Even while muttering this rather devious declaration, deep down, he genuinely worried about Emilia as he sped up his steps.

As soon as he could, and for as long as he could, he will stay at her side and comfort her.

Because, one way or another—

Subaru: “Tomorrow, I’ll have no choice but to leave her side.”

This afternoon, Roswaal will formally put forth the proposal to free the refugees of Earlham. Then, if they begin preparations right away, they would be able to depart from the Sanctuary tomorrow.

Subaru will accompany them once again, for there was something he’d have to take care of at the Mansion.

Subaru: “If I want to know more, instead of asking someone who had halted their steps, I should be asking someone who had ventured ahead… geez, that sure was a roundabout way to say it.”

Of course, without saying it in this roundabout way, she wouldn’t have been able to convey what she wanted to convey.

Somewhat pitying her for having to go through all this trouble, Subaru let out a sigh, and sped up his steps once more,

Subaru: “I’ll be eagerly waiting to hear your stories about your good-for-nothing little brother and your troublesome hometown, Frederica!”

Chapter 30:
Unease on the Road Home

1

Roswaal's proposal—To release the refugees of Earlham.

Like the last time, the proposal itself passed without much resistance. Seeing no point in keeping the refugees in the Sanctuary any longer, it was only natural. But of course, unlike last time, there was no accompanying condition that Subaru should challenge the Trials.

Subaru: "This time I'm totally getting hated on by the guy who came up with that condition, after all…"

Emilia: "What's wrong, Subaru?"

Subaru: "Nnno, it's nothing. Speaking of which, is Emilia-tan feeling better? Have you calmed down a bit? If I'm too much of a nuisance in the room I could go outside if you want?"

Flapping his hand with an awkward smile, Subaru said this to the girl beside him—Emilia.

They were in the bedroom that Ryuzu lent to Emilia, sitting on the side of the bed, and passing the time without talking about anything particularly interesting.

The time was dusk, approaching the fall of night.

–

After waking up a little before noon, Emilia had some late breakfast before they went to settle the negotiations between Roswaal and Ryuzu on the matter of the refugees. The discussion proceeded without any problems, and they agreed on releasing the refugees the following day, and dissolved their meeting there—

Garfiel: "So, t'state the obvious… Lady Emilia'll be challengin' the

Trials t'night, yeah?"

As if laying down a warning, Garfiel's words didn't leave much room for interpretation.

Pressing down the urge to click his tongue, Subaru stole a glance at Emilia, and, although it was only for a brief moment, he saw on the side of her face a fleeting trace of fear and grief. In fact, he was almost certain that Emilia will fail the Trial tonight.

Unlike Subaru, who had passed the Trial owing to his memories, Emilia's condition ultimately hadn't changed at all. In order for Emilia to pass the Trial, Subaru will have to take actions to create some drastic changes in the environment around her.

Yet, in this loop, Subaru couldn't see a single way to change her environment in such a short period of time. —If she challenges the Trial tonight, it will only be wearing her down.

Subaru: "But she wouldn't breathe a word of complaint or even think of giving up… that's just like Emilia-tan."

In front of Garfiel's provocative question, Emilia hid away that momentary emotion within her eyes, and firmly answered, "Of course I will".

Garfiel narrowed his eyes as if impressed by her reply, and Roswaal quietly whistled, which only added to Subaru's irritation.

But in the end, there was no way to stop this. There were only a few hours left before the start of the Trial tonight.

–

After ending their talks there, she ate lunch not long after her breakfast, and it was about three hours later when they got back to the house. In that time, following by her side, Subaru had been constantly talking to Emilia—but as the hour of the Trials neared, he noticed she was speaking less and less.

By now, her words have become almost exclusively reacting to Subaru's. But—

Emilia: “Umn… I’d prefer if you… don’t go.”

Subaru: “AaAHHH, UNDERSTOOD. NO PROBLEM. Until Emilia-tan’s settles down, I will just keep focusing on savoring the air Emilia-tan breathes out, so don’t worry.”

Emilia: “I reeaaally don’t like the sound of that. …but, stay here.”

Faced with the complexities of a young girl’s heart, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and stayed like she asked.

Although they were sitting right next to each other, he was still too useless to find the courage to take her hand. But still, he was honestly glad to be needed. By none other than Emilia, after all.

Even if, to her, it must have only been filling the void of losing the one whom she relied on the most.

Ever since coming to the Sanctuary—or more accurately, ever since Puck stopped responding to her calls after they returned to the Mansion, Emilia’s attitude toward Subaru had consistently softened.

A part of him was overjoyed to be given a place within her heart, but there was another part of Subaru that was quietly concerned about this development.

That part of him wondered what could be the dangers of Emilia losing her strongest anchor.

Emilia: “…Hmm?”

Subaru: “Nothing at all? I was just thinking Emilia-tan’s eyelashes are so long and cute, I kinda wanna eat them.”

Emilia: “Subaru, you keep saying you want to eat my hair, eat my eyelashes, or lick my cheeks… are you, into that sort of thing?”

Subaru: “Where I come from, that’s the greatest possible expression of love, you know~.”

Seeing Emilia relaxing slightly and sulking at his comments, Subaru scratched at his cheeks.

Although Subaru would consider making licking-noises to be the utmost confession of love, actually doing so would have been extremely creepy. This was especially true in a world that didn't understand these sorts of things. So he should pay attention to what he says. Although it was too late now.

Occasionally, Subaru would try to take Emilia's mind off of things by talking about random stuff like this. He now knew some fragments of Emilia's past. And if he mentions this to her, perhaps something dramatically different from last time might happen,

—But no matter how he thought about it, he felt it wouldn't be a change for the better.

No matter what the situation becomes, in the end, what he needed was time.

He needed time to help Emilia come to terms with her past and find the resolve within her own heart. And he also needed time to mention the fragments of her past to her, and ask her for the truth of what happened. Time, time, time. There wasn't nearly enough time.

Subaru: "Just why do I have to always rush from one thing to another all the time. Ever since coming to this World, was there even a time when I got to properly relax a bit?"

Searching through his memories, if there was a time he managed to spend relatively quietly, it would've been the few weeks after he settled the problem with the Wolgarms in the forest.

Before and after that, it was just continuous turmoil without a moment's rest. It was a miracle that he didn't die of overwork.

And, as he was thinking about these unnutritious thoughts,

Emilia: "—Subaru."

He was a little slow to react to her abrupt call. Turning toward the direction of the voice—Subaru saw Emilia's wet, violet eyes very close to him, staring at him.

He was so enchanted in that moment by those tear-drenched eyes that his heart thumped so loudly he was afraid it was going to stop. Subaru gasped. And, seeing him do this, a wavering resolve and hesitation appeared within Emilia's eyes. Perhaps she was trying to decide whether to tell Subaru something before the Trial.

Subaru: "What is it?"

Subaru tried to say this as gently as he could, being careful not to rush her. If she could make up her mind here, then he mustn't disturb her.

However, hearing Subaru's reply, Emilia only turned down her gaze,

Emilia: "ah… mn, sorry. It's nothing. I just, wanted to call you."

Subaru: "—oh, is that right. J-JUST WANTED TO CALL ME?! Why do I get the feeling that's something couples say when they're already in a relationship!"

Emilia: "I… guess I have to go soon…"

Her resolve was gone. Subaru regretted having missed the opportunity, but he pretended not to notice and puffed up his chest nonetheless. Emilia stood up while listening to his voice, and looked outside the window at the Sun that was beginning to set.

Emilia: "—I have to head to the Tomb. Subaru will only accompany me halfway, right?"

Subaru: "Even if I beg Garfiel to let me see you off to the Entrance, I don't think I can persuade him. …Emilia, although I know there's no point in me saying this, but…"

Emilia: "—It's alright. You don't need to say it, Subaru."

…"Don't push yourself too hard." Emilia already knew what he was going to say, and stopped him before he could say it.

In front of Subaru's quivering lips, a courageous smile emerged on Emilia's cheeks, and she held up a finger in front of her lips, Emilia: “I’m fine, although everyone might not think so after how flustered I was yesterday, I’ll do my best. I want to do my best. And I have to do my best, I think.”

Suddenly clenching the hand in front of her face into a fist, “That’s why”, she continued,

Emilia: “If you want to say something to me, don’t say “It’s alright to give up”. You should say “Do your best”, and cheer me on instead. As long as I know there’s one person who still believes in me, I’m sure I can find the strength do it.”

Subaru: “Believe in you… of course I believe in you, Emilia-tan. The only guy in existence who might possibly expect as much from you as I do is probably that daddy-cat, you know. —So, do your best.”

Emilia: “Mn, I’ll do my best.”

For the first time today, Emilia smiled without the hint of putting up a facade. Relieved to see her smile, Subaru stood up as well and followed her out of the building.

In the Sanctuary after nightfall, a chilling wind was blowing.

Caressed by the wind, Emilia’s silver hair danced and glittered as she made her way forward.

Like a silver river flowing under the moonlight, Subaru watched from behind as she forged on with her stalwart steps,

—Although he knew that she will fail tonight.

2

The objective of bringing the refugees back to Roswaal’s estate was achieved two days earlier than last time.

Aside from the date, there was not much difference compared to the previous loop. The refugees boarded the dragon carriages in an orderly manner, and the hired travelling-merchants were released from the Sanctuary along with them. Subaru and Otto accompanied them as well.

If there was any difference, it would be,

Subaru: “I did ask for a guide, but I’m pretty surprised it’s Miss Ryuzu. Normally, this kind of thing could just be done by an underling… or something like that, right?”

Ryuzu: “What, you don’t like that it’s me? After we’ve already drank tea and talked together, Su-bo is still so cold towards me, my heart is devastated.”

Saying this, the Loli-Granny looked like she was actually going to cry. Squeezing her tiny body onto the tightly-packed driver’s bench, she self-righteously claimed a spot in the middle, right next to Subaru. The driver’s bench was originally meant for two people, and with the little girl Ryuzu added to it, the situation became considerably more difficult.

Otto: “Mnmn, I feel the same way. Mr. Natsuki sure doesn’t know how to be modest or considerate of others at all, he probably left all his subtleties back in his mother’s womb, you know.”

Ryuzu: “Hey, Su-bo. Who’s that unfamiliar looking fella on the driver’s bench?”

Otto: “Is that how low my standing is in your mind?!”

Just when Otto thought he had found another fellow victim of Subaru’s, he was immediately thrown under the bus. Despite holding the reins that were literally the lifelines of everyone on the carriage, he was still completely overlooked.

A shadow descended on his unexpectedly neat-looking features, and,

Otto: “Aaahhh… I get the feeling that ever since coming here I didn’t manage to leave a single impression except as the guy who keeps shouting all the time. Did I really not make any impression on Margrave Mathers?”

Subaru: “You managed to show him your usual relaxed self, and he laughed so hard he burst the wounds on his belly… that was a pretty deep impression, I’d say?”

Otto: “There are good impressions and bad impressions in this world, and which kind would you call an impression about bursting someone’s belly?”

Subaru: “And this is what he says after bursting someone’s belly… hopeless, this guy.”

Otto: “If I’m hopeless then you’re a hundred-and-twenty percent hopeless!”

Otto’s reason for coming to the Sanctuary, his introduction to Roswaal, was completed without much delay. Everything proceeded the same way as last time, and in fact, bursting out laughing when he saw Otto’s demeanor, Roswaal’s evaluation of him couldn’t have been low.

Although, one gets the feeling that Roswaal didn’t exactly see him as a merchant.

Subaru: “Well, long as you’ve got me looking out for you, you’ll be sticking around for a long time. Either way, you’ve already seen the top secret documents of the Mathers domain so there’s no way you can run away.”

Otto: “You know, meeting you was the end of my luck, Mr. Natsuki… but, I’ve already resigned myself to my fate in a way, so nevermind.”

As expected, still not disheartened after encountering misfortune on the road, Otto indeed had the fundamental qualities of a travelling merchant at heart. Even if he wasn’t destined for greatness at the end of the road he had taken, he wouldn’t regret the choice he had made.

Deep down, Subaru did feel a sense of friendship for the guy who stayed with him for a reason like this.

Subaru: “I’ll be looking forward to working you like a horse from now on! Otto!”

Otto: “What’s he saying with that refreshing expression, this guy!”

Otto wailed as Subaru patted him on the shoulder and shot him a thumbs-up.

Seeing Ryuzu, squished between them, plugging her ears, Subaru looked down from the dragon carriage ready for departure, and,

Subaru: “—Then, we’re off, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Mn, be careful.”

Lifting her hand in front of her chest with a little wave, Emilia replied while timidly seeing them off.

—Last night, Subaru accompanied her to challenge the Trials. The result, as he already knew, was that she failed. Since Subaru was not allowed to follow her into the Tomb, the Trial was not interrupted halfway through, and in the end, as if in a daze, Emilia had to crawl herself out of the Tomb, her eyes trembling, before collapsing into Subaru’s arms and losing consciousness.

Staying by her side the whole night as she slept, Subaru could not remember how many times he had to wipe away her tears from her sleeping face.

To see her worn down like this, it would be a lie to say that he wasn’t worried to leave her here. He wanted to stay beside her for as long as he could, and hold up her trembling body, but,

Subaru: “I’ll be back in a day or two, so don’t push yourself. Now that the villagers are gone, there’s no need to rush. Slowly and surely, we can take our time and conquer the Trials.”

Emilia: “That’s…right. Mn, if you say so, Subaru…”

Without any of the returning strength he had seen in her smile the night before, her smile now was weak, and felt like no more than a fleeting facade. In fact, she was already forcing herself just by standing here, seeing them off. Or perhaps, she was distracting herself so she could forget the things that were weighing on her heart.

Subaru: “Ram, I don’t mean to remind you, but…”

Ram: “Ram is finding it doubtful what that could be other than a reminder. …But don’t worry. As much as I hate to say this, I share Barusu’s opinion. This should be seen as a long-term matter. Unless there are orders from Master Roswaal, I’ll keep Garf in check.”

Subaru: “I’m in your debt… although that sounds super-scary. I’ll repay you some other way.”

Ram: “Tch. Barusu is unexpectedly perceptive for a change.”

Subaru: “Just now, I think I’ve inadvertently avoided another DEATH FLAG there—!”

Clicking her tongue, Ram politely bowed without fail as she saw them off. She took a step back, and Subaru sat up straight on the driver’s bench, ready to depart—when he saw, at the back of the group of people sending them off, a golden-haired youth crossing his arms, staring at him.

The same time Subaru noticed Garfiel, Garfiel noticed him as well as their gazes met.

Over their crossing gazes, neither could tell what emotions the other must be feeling, and after what happened to Emilia last night, there was even less ground for reconciliation between them.

Subaru: “Ugh. I gotta find some clues to get through to him somehow…”

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki? It’s about time to head out, shall we go?”

Subaru: “Yeah, let’s go. Miss Ryuzu, we’re counting on you.”

Ryuzu: “Leave it to me.”

Ryuzu nodded with a spirited reply, and Otto, holding the reins, gave the signal to Patrasche and Furufu. The dragon carriages started to move, and the great migration of the refugees was underway.

Far from reaching full speed, the dragon carriages proceeded at a crawling pace. This was inevitable, considering the passengers were primarily women, children and the elderly.

Subaru: “Even so, it seems everyone’s faces have lighted up because they know they’re going home.”

Ryuzu: “Home, it does hold that kind of power. No matter how unremarkable, how banal it is, in the end, there is where people’s hearts will remain.”

Ryuzu followed on Subaru’s whisper as he watched the long procession behind him. Hearing her remarks, Subaru crossed his arms and tilted his head “Is that right?”,

Subaru: “Miss Ryuzu, do you also feel attached to the Sanctuary, after all?”

Ryuzu: “…Well, who knows. In my case, I’m in a special situation where I know nothing except that place. And just the thought of another place terrifies me, I often find.”

Subaru: “Terrifies you?”

Ryuzu: “To set foot into a completely unknown place is a terrifying thing, Su-bo. For me, this ancient self who had passed her years in vain, this is especially so.”

With an aged smile emerging on her face, Ryuzu turned her eyes to the distance. But, since she looked like a little girl, no matter how serious she tried to be, he found it extremely difficult to see her as anything except a little girl stretching up her back pretending she’s older.

And, intermittently exchanging this casual conversation, the procession of dragon carriages continued its way through the forest. It would be about an eight-hour one-way journey to get there. The Divine Protection of Wind Evasion ensured that the journey would feel like sitting on a royal-class seat, but that also made time appear to pass slower.

Ryuzu: “Such a clever earth dragon. She’s barely made any mistakes even without me guiding the way.”

Subaru: “Yeah, she’s my kawaii-little-pride-and-joy, you know. It might be strange for me to be the one saying this, but all the characters around me are pretty HIGH-LEVEL, aren’t they?”

Beginning with the members of Roswaal’s Mansion, and then with the start of the Royal Selection, all the people he encountered were at the top of their respective fields. It was miserable how much his mediocrity stood out while mingling with them, although now, he was looking on the bright side.

Already behind by a lap at the starting point, he had nonetheless started running. To catch up to them, the only thing he had to do was to keep running—and he had already been given the strength to do so.

Subaru: “Now that I think about it, while I’m grateful and all that you’ve come all this way to guide us, how will Miss Ryuzu get back? If all the dragon carriages are heading to Earlham village, you won’t have any transportation, right?”

Ryuzu: “No need to worry, I’ll just walk back on my own two legs like a normal person. Just so you know, these legs of mine aren’t about to lose to the youngsters, you know?”

Pat Pat, Ryuzu gave her short tiny legs swept along by the motion of the carriage a pat. In other words, it was completely unpersuasive, but Subaru didn’t have the heart to shatter the little girl’s confidence,

Subaru: “I got it I got it… Oy, Otto. Think you got the strength of will to carry a loli back to the Sanctuary?”

Otto: “Since I don’t know what the intention behind that question is, do you mind if I refuse to answer that?”

Subaru: “You hear that, Ryuzu san? Looks like we can’t even count on this guy to carry a little girl back home through a dark and scary forest. A little girl or two, he couldn’t care less.”

Ryuzu: “That’s terrible, how desolate people’s hearts have become.”

Otto: “You two have totally teamed up against me, haven’t you?!”

As usual, Otto's wail shattered through the silence of the forest. Ryuzu and Subaru looked at each other and smiled, then she turned up her face, and,

Ryuzu: "Almost there."

Hearing Ryuzu' whisper, Subaru furrowed his brows. But that very same moment, Ryuzu' body abruptly leaned towards him. Softly catching her tiny body, "Huh?" Subaru slightly raised his voice,

Subaru: "Otto, stop. Miss Ryuzu's looking a little strange."

Otto: "Should we, go back to the village?"

At Subaru's short call, Otto pulled on the reins and brought the dragon carriage to a stop. Giving the same instruction to the rest of the line behind them, one by one, he heard the earth dragons' cries as they halted.

Then, in his arms, Ryuzu raised her little hand,

Ryuzu: "…Sorry, there's no need to go back. It's only the effect of coming so close to the Barrier. If I advance any further into the forest, I can't guarantee that I will stay conscious."

Subaru: "The Barrier… the same thing happened to Emilia when she entered the Sanctuary."

In Subaru's time, it was already a week ago when he first arrived at the Sanctuary.

Like in the shaking dragon carriage just now, Emilia lost consciousness, and then they were greeted by Garfiel's rude welcoming.

Ryuzu's expression looked just like Emilia's back then, and if the dragon carriage continued any further, her consciousness might be ripped out just like Emilia's was.

Subaru: "Say, this Barrier really knows how to tell us apart. Whether it's the sensitive-skinned me, or the insensitive-skinned Otto, neither of us can feel a thing."

Otto: “Insensitive-skinned, what’s that supposed to mean? My skin doesn’t feel particularly sensitive or insensitive here.”

Subaru: “That’s what happens when young people don’t take care of their skin, once you gradually start getting SPOTS & FRECKLES in your late twenties, you’ll regret your ignorance earlier on in life.”

Otto: “I seriously have no idea what you’re saying anymore, but, getting back on topic, this is where we say goodbye to Miss Ryuzu… isn’t it?”

Disregarding Subaru’s random commentary, Otto turned to Ryuzu. And, on the receiving end, Ryuzu nodded with a pained expression on her face,

Ryuzu: “Well, yes. This is as far as I go. Those born inside the Sanctuary have terrible compatibility with the Barrier. It has been a long time since I came this far… Well, there was nothing special.”

Subaru: “Unless, was testing the Barrier part of why you came along?”

Ryuzu: “It seems I was too optimistic with that thought. The result is as you see. …It’s not possible, after all. The Sanctuary can only be liberated by completing the Trials. That much is clear, Su-bo.”

Under the little girl’s gaze, Subaru realized that she had come all this way to personally confirm that they were truly imprisoned within the Sanctuary. And he could see how much she wanted to be outside the Sanctuary, and that it was all too natural that she would want this.

Subaru: “Emilia would probably feel the same thing if she came this far.”

Ryuzu: “Since she has already come inside, it would be so. Not all residents of the Sanctuary were born and raised here. Ros-bo would occasionally come to bring in those with similar circumstances from the outside. Those children too, become properties of the Witch from the moment they enter the Sanctuary. Lady Emilia is no exception.”

Subaru: “…there it is again, kinda feels like I’ve just heard some information I can’t let slide…”

Roswaal brought new residents into the Sanctuary from the outside—if they were people who are affected by the Barrier, it would mean they were half-bloods as well.

Subaru: “Then he’s bringing them in and shutting them in here? Oyoy, the hell’s he thinking?”

Ryuzu: “As for his true intentions…I cannot rightly say. When you get back, you should ask Ros-bo this yourself, Su-bo.”

Ryuzu powerlessly shook her head, and pulled herself out of the frowning Subaru’s arms. As she lightly jumped her tiny body down from the coachman’s stand, Patrasche extended her head over to her, and Ryuzu patted her on the neck,

Ryuzu: “Good earth dragon. Become your master’s strength, now.”

Patrasche nudged her nose on Ryuzu in reply, acknowledging her words. In fact. without coming off as boasting, this was the first time Subaru had seen Patrasche being so intimate with anyone except him. Even Otto had eaten quite a few head-butts while trying to have conversations with her.

Subaru: “There are all sorts of things I still need to do in the Sanctuary, so once I’ve asked all I want to ask from Frederica, I’ll come right back.”

Ryuzu: “That would be best. …This is only my intuition, but without you here, I don’t think anything will be moving forward inside the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “That’s another huge over-evaluation to dump on me… even if it’s just intuition.”

Ryuzu: “It’s the intuition of a woman who has lived over a hundred years, you know?”

Subaru: “The way to see that depends on whether we look at its good side or not, I guess.”

Replying to Ryuzu this way, Subaru politely bowed from atop the coachman's stand. Watching her back away from the carriage, Otto quietly spilled "We're going",

Subaru: "Yeah, see you again, Miss Ryuzu. Take care on your way back."

Ryuzu: "Mmm. You'll get out of the forest if you go straight ahead from here. Keep going until you hit the road, and then the earth dragons can take it from there. Take care."

Waving her little hand, Ryuzu bid them farewell. Otto waved the signal flag and the line of dragon carriages resumed its march.

After watching them leave, Ryuzu turned her back and headed into the depths of the forest. Watching her little figure disappear into the gaps between the trees, praying that she would get back safely —Subaru felt a lump inside his chest that he couldn't put into words.

Subaru: "…Something just, feels off."

He had felt a sense of incongruity in their previous conversation. But, unable to quite put his finger on what it was, Subaru relinquished his weight onto the rocking of the dragon carriage.

Coming out of the forest, into the radiant light of the sun, the road broadened out before them—they had crossed the Barrier, and left the Sanctuary.

From here, there was still a long, long road ahead.

There were things he must do, and things he must say.

With these weighing down like mountains, Subaru continued on in the swaying dragon carriage.

Chapter 31:
Maid Maid Maid

1

For Subaru, this would be the second time returning to Roswaal's Mansion from the Sanctuary.

Subaru: "Although it was just a painful experience the first time…"

Subaru scratched his cheeks mumbling this, and jumped down from Patrasche's back outside the gate.

After bidding farewell to Ryuzu, Subaru and the refugees returned to Earlham village safe and sound. Although, since they had already done so in the last loop, and having his trusted Patrasche to guide the way, there was nothing he had to worry about.

Subaru: "The villagers are rejoicing, and Otto's staying behind in the village like last time. I was originally hoping to bring Otto along as a meat shield though…"

Actually, Subaru hesitated about dragging Otto along to the mansion. After all, there was a good chance it could get genuinely dangerous, and bringing Otto, who doesn't last well in intense situations, along probably wasn't a good idea.

In terms of a straight-up brawl, Subaru couldn't win against Otto, but Otto wasn't exactly a god-like martial artist. Subaru wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing his organs in front of the Bowel Hunter.

Subaru: "I hope nothing happened…"

Last time, Subaru returned to the Mansion six days after the beginning of the Trials. This time, it was three. —Compared to before, he still had three days of leeway.

Presumably, the Mansion was attacked on the same night Subaru was killed. Taking all the factors into consideration, that much should be certain. The problem was,

Subaru: “Three days left… in other words, I’d have to get the information out of Frederica and head back to the Sanctuary, fix the problems in the Sanctuary, and then force march back to the Mansion with Garfiel. Just looking at time alone, it’s not impossible, but…”

There were tremendous hurdles to overcome before he could turn these empty theories to reality.

It takes 8 hours just to clear the one-way route from the Sanctuary to the Mansion. Going back and forth once would already take up almost a day in travel time. Counting the loss of time in between as well, the amount of usable time available to Subaru becomes all the more severe.

Subaru: “There are backup plans for solving the problem as well… If I choose the optimal plan, it will be an arduous route even in the most optimistic cases… “

Knowing ahead of time when Elsa will attack, the optimal solution for Subaru would be to repel the assassin. This way, they wouldn’t need to be constantly looking over their shoulders and be frightened by every shadow. In other words, he was hoping for complete victory, if possible.

To accomplish this, they must exceed Elsa in combat strength, which would require having either Roswaal or Garfiel. But at the moment, the likelihood of bringing either of them back to the Mansion was not looking high.

Subaru: “So in the end, there’s no choice but to go for the second-best option… huh.”

While Subaru was muttering this despondently and scratching at his head, Patrasche brought her nose over. Smiling awkwardly at the face of the earth dragon that was nudging against his shoulder, Subaru rubbed his palm over her hard scaly skin, and patted her on the head, Subaru: "The rewards match the risks, but we aren't ready to bring nearly enough winning chances to counterbalance the risk. Which pretty much just leaves us with the turn tail and run and scatter like a bunch of baby spiders battle-plan."

At the time of his battle with the Witch Cult, this was a conclusion that had crossed his mind.

But while this was possible due to the number of pieces he had last time, this time, there weren't as many hands he could play. Even with prior knowledge of the incoming attack, he would be more than satisfied if they could just manage to escape.

But, there were problems with that as well.

Subaru: "Everyone in the Mansion. Rem, Petra, Frederica… and Beako, I don't know if they'll all cooperate with evacuation. Honestly, if I just piggyback Rem and hold Petra's hand I'll be able to bring them along, but I'll probably break a few bones before I could convince the other two."

Of course, if it ever comes down to it, he would drag everyone into the dragon carriage by force and abduct them away if he had to. He didn't think he'd be able to beat them in a fight, but if he kept yanking on their arms and wouldn't let go, he might just manage it somehow. No, he definitely will.

Subaru: "—Huu."

Exhaling a small sigh, Subaru felt the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders.

How many people's fates were resting on his words, his actions, and his resolve. On the night before the battle with the White Whale, he had felt this way as well.

Subaru: "It won't do any good to procrastinate outside the gates forever. I still don't know if anything happened inside. Better make sure everyone's fine first…"

???: "And after that?"

Subaru: “After that, I’ll think about how to persuade them. Oh yeah, I got it, since they won’t know anyway, I’ll just lie and tell them that it’s Roswaal’s instructions or something…”

???: “Woaa. You’re so bad~, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Just call me Dirtywild, I’m still at an age to aspire towards this kind of bad-boy image, you know… wh.”

In the middle of his sentence, Subaru heard the sound of giggling coming from behind and turned around. And, in the Mansion’s front gardens on the other side of the gate, there was a little maid—the familiar little girl, Petra, standing there.

In front of the surprised-looking Subaru raising his brows, she shook her chestnut-colored hair and adorably tilted her head,

Petra: “Welcome back, Master Subaru. Your return has come earlier than I thought.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m back… looks like I just caught a glimpse of the results of Frederica’s education for the gifted. Thanks for the reception.”

At the sight of Petra picking up the hems of her skirt in a curtsy, Subaru loosened his cheeks in relief, before softly pushing open the gate and stepping inside. As he went on leading Patrasche toward the earth dragon stables, Subaru looked down at Petra walking alongside him.

Petra: “—?”

Seeing Subaru looking at her, she made a strange expression and hurriedly turned her back and began cleaning up her hair and smoothing out her dress. After she seemed satisfied with all that, “O-K”, she turned back to Subaru with a nod,

Petra: “What is it, Master Subaru?”

And, with a smile even more radiant than before, she showed him her adorable smile.

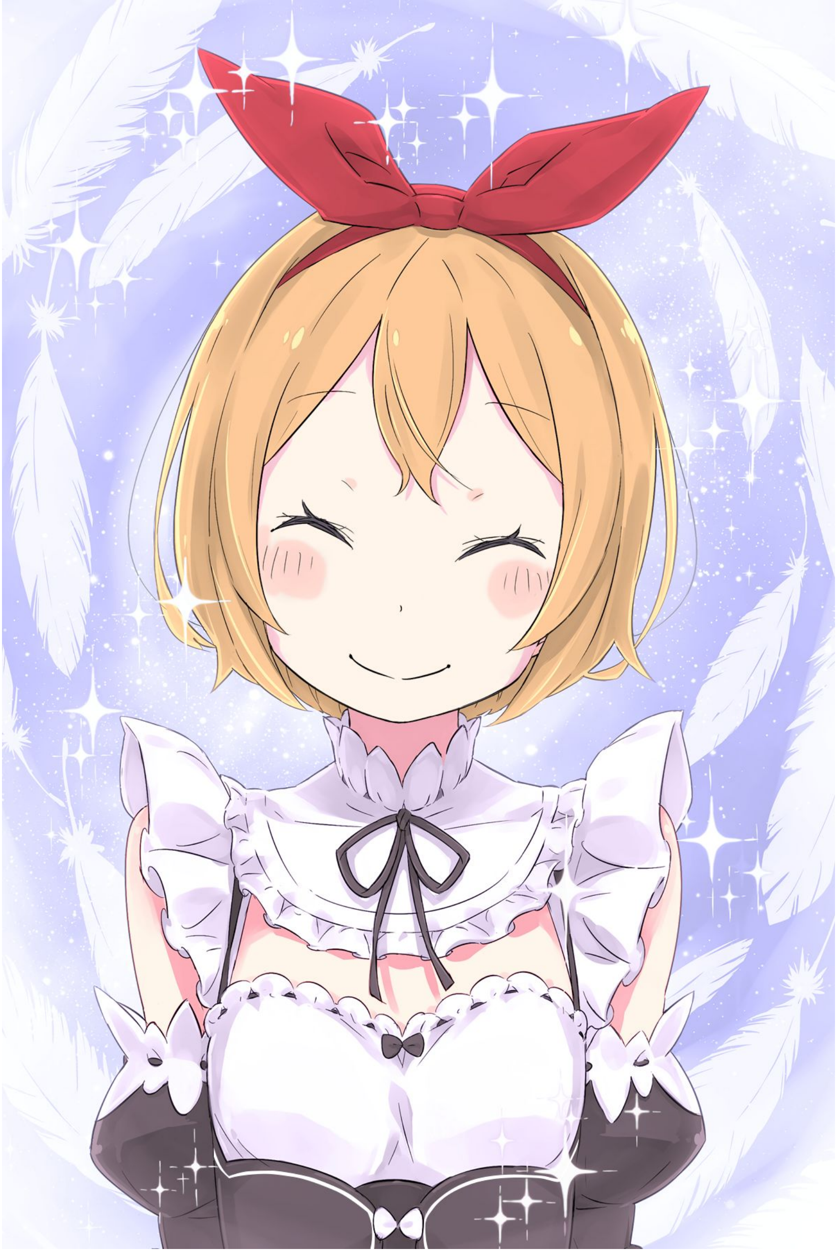

Merging the cuteness of a little girl, and a promise of future beauty, it was a smile that, in spite of its youth, carried a fiendish power to abduct the hearts of the opposite sex.

It was a perfect smile calculated with a complete understanding of how it would be perceived by others. Presented with such a smile, Subaru had to suck in a bit of air,

Subaru: “Aaaahhh, that! Isn’t that just way too adorable, youuu!”

Petra: “Wa, waaah?!”

Completely oblivious to her underlying intentions, Subaru wrapped the little girl in a hug as if that was the reaction she requested and started affectionately rubbing her head with a variety of complex petting techniques without any regard for restraint. Petra squeaked out a confused cry at the sudden action, but,

Subaru: “You don’t even know half of what I’m feeling right now. Youuu, youuu! Aaahhh, damn I’m so happy to see you again!!”

Petra: “Wha what, what’s going on?! Wah, wait, Subaru… it’s too early for me to…”

Subaru: “Really, I’m so glad…”

Petra: “—Subaru?”

Her face all blushing, struggling in his arms, Petra’s expression changed. She settled in his arms, and looked up at Subaru who had lowered his voice, and, gradually, the at-once embarrassed and delighted expression disappeared from her face.

Petra: “Are you, hurting somewhere…?”

Worried, she extended out a finger and touched his trembling cheeks. Then, a palm pressed against her fingers, and with “I’m alright”, Subaru shook his head.

He inhaled a deep breath through his nostrils, and paused for a second. And then, opening his eyes once more,

Subaru: "I'm just seriously, from the bottom of my heart, relieved. —I'm home, Petra."

2

—After returning Patrasche to the stables, Subaru returned to the Mansion holding Petra's hand since she wanted to hold hands with him. Fortunately, according to Petra, no noteworthy changes had taken place since Subaru left the Mansion.

Petra: "Right now, Miss Frederica is away inspecting the Boundaries in the mountains, so she'll be back after a little while… maybe."

As Petra informed him of the Head Maid's absence, Subaru recalled the Boundaries in the mountains—that is, the magical crystals that sealed out the Wolgarms. Though the Wolgarms in the mountains were supposed to have been eradicated, the Boundaries remained in service even now.

It seems, aside from the Wolgarms, there were other dangerous witchbeasts that needed to be kept out by the Boundaries, and, as the managers of Earlham village, the task of maintaining them fell to the subjects of the Roswaal camp.

Petra: "Once everyone in the village comes back, they can check for breaks in the Boundaries themselves, but since everyone hasn't come back yet, Miss Frederica is doing it."

Subaru: "Now that you're calling her Big Sister, it sounds like you two have gotten closer while I was away, kinda makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Also, the villagers are all back now, you know."

Petra: "Really?"

When he pointed in the direction of the village, Petra's eyes lighted up and she squeaked out an excited cry.

Her family was among those who evacuated to the Capital, so both her parents had already been safely returned to the village. But even so, she was still separated from neighbors and friends. Now that she knew they were safe, Petra happily clapped her hands.

Subaru: “Yeah, you should go see them later. I’m sure they’ll be excited to see you in your maid’s uniform.”

Petra: “Yeah. Once I get permission from Miss Frederica, I’ll go change!”

Subaru: “No, there’s no need to change… You look cute in it, you should let everyone see…”

Petra: “Ehehee, cute? I’m cute?”

Subaru: “Yeah you’re cute, you’re cute. So everyone sh…”

Petra: “Yeah! I’ll change and go see them!”

It pretty much turned into a situation where no matter how many times he tried saying “No it’s fine”, his voice kept getting canceled out by her peals of thunder.

Seeing that she was definitely not planning to change her mind about this, Subaru gave up making any further proposals.

Cracking the bones of his neck, “…ah”, Subaru exhaled a deep breath and stopped.

They were on the Mansion’s second floor—rubbing his soles on the carpet, he had lifted up his face and was staring at a door. Petra, feeling a little lonely, let go of his fingers. She was a smart girl who could read the mood.

Subaru: “I’m sorry, Petra. Let me be alone with her, for a little while.”

Petra: “Mn, I understand. I’ll go finish cleaning up the west wing, please call me if you need anything.”

As though she knew even before Subaru spoke, Petra put away her young girl’s demeanors and returned to the role of a maid, and, with a slight bow, she left him there.

Receiving this gesture of consideration from her, despite there being a mountain of pressing matters closing in on him, Subaru lightly poked himself in the head.

Poking, and—

Subaru: “I asked myself what I should give priority to… and I wound up coming here.”

Pushing open the door, Subaru slowly stepped into the room.

A room where time had stopped. In that plain and simple room, there was a bed—and on it, a young girl was sleeping. The girl was no longer wearing her familiar servant’s dress, but was now wrapped in a light blue nightgown.

Her eyes were closed, and not even her faint breathing could be heard. Only, the silent rise and fall of her chest gave proof that she still lives.

Subaru: “…Rem.”

Lending voice to that name, who could understand the vortex of emotions carried within that single word. That unstoppable torrent of emotion, meant for only one person in the world.

He had resolved to be strong, to turn his heart to steel, to not waver in the face of all difficulties. Resolved to no longer depend on others, and to hold his head high.

—But, in front of her, all this determination scattered into mist.

The Subaru who told Emilia to leave it to him, who took her hand and told her he will find a way, the Subaru who once did so with so much strength. The facade of that resolve fell apart the moment he stood before her.

Subaru: “I’m pathetic… I’m so… weak.”

As soon as he was in front of Rem, Subaru returned to the weak Natsuki Subaru he once was.

Returned to the time before Rem’s devotion had affirmed him, to the time before he first stood up.

Slowly, he reached out to her sleeping face and gently swept aside the hair on her forehead. Asleep, her expression did not change, and he had not found a single clue to restoring her eaten self.

But if he did nothing and let her go on sleeping like this, it would be certain that even her vessel will be lost as well.

Subaru: “Maybe you didn’t mean to, but because of you, my resolve has been hardened.”

Weak and fragile, the surface of his heart that would break off at the touch was slowly covered over with steel.

The fact that Rem’s sleeping figure and the certain beating of her heart still existed allowed Natsuki Subaru to return to that instant. To the emotions of that moment when he was reborn.

Subaru: “Because you told me that it’s alright even if I am weak, you told me that you will help me become stronger… I will find a way, no matter what it takes, and stand up no matter how many times I fall.”

No matter what pain, what suffering, what hardship or unpleasantness awaited him, the love of her entire soul healed Subaru, and sent the desire into his heart to move forward in return.

Subaru: “You, and Petra and everyone else… I will bring you all out safely.”

He gently stroked her sleeping forehead, and suppressed his feeling that wanted to touch her more. A gust of wind had blown into the room, while he sat silently in the chair at her bedside.

That portion of the limited time he had, the meager, precious time that he needed to conserve, he gave it all to her. At this point, this was the best that Subaru could do to offer her his heart.

For how long had time passed in this stillness.

Suddenly, Subaru's consciousness that was vacantly staring at Rem in a daze was pulled back to reality by the sound of a knock on the door. Lifting his face, and turning to the door, "Yes", he answered, and,

????: "Apologies for the intrusion. —I am glad you've returned safely, Master Subaru."

Quietly pushing open the door, a tall woman entered the room.

With her golden hair swaying, and her posture impeccable and refined—it was Frederica.

Seeing Subaru at the sleeping Rem's side, she slightly lowered her head, and,

Frederica: "There are a variety of questions I wish to ask you… and I am sure Master Subaru feels the same. Let us change the location. Although she is asleep, I doubt these are things that she would especially like to hear."

Subaru: "That sure helped speed things along. …The things I want to ask you, do you already have some idea what they are?"

Frederica: "Possibly."

Hearing that modest response, Subaru spilled out a small sigh and stood up from his chair. He touched Rem's sleeping cheeks one last time, and, as if to sever his reluctance, he clenched tight his fist,

Subaru: "Your rowdy, foul-mouthed little brother, that Gap-Moe who looks like a Loli but is a Granny on the inside. The Sanctuary that is the Experimental Grounds, and Roswaal's true intentions. Let me look forward to seeing how much of that you can answer."

3

Frederica: "Since the Master hasn't returned, it would seem that the Trials haven't ended yet?"

After leaving Rem's bedroom, the two of them moved to the drawing room.

Placing a steaming cup of amber-colored tea in front of Subaru, Frederica sat down across from him and opened with these words. Receiving the cup, Subaru nodded “Yeah” as he stirred his tea with a spoon,

Subaru: “You sure got straight to the point. —So, don’t you feel a little guilty about knowing all that inside information and yet giving us so little when you sent us off?”

Frederica: “I won’t make excuses. After all, it is true that I did not tell you everything about the Sanctuary and the Trials and that no-good little brother of mine.”

Frederica’s detached tone did not seem to be carrying any sense of guilt about that fact. However, he couldn’t say for certain that she was entirely without remorse. Perhaps, she was merely suppressing such feelings and pretending to be without emotions so as not to reveal the contents of her heart.

It was the same with Ram—but considering the lengths of time he had gotten to know them, it was far more difficult to tell with Frederica.

Subaru: “As I said back in the room, there’re all sorts of things I want to ask you… Can I expect to get answers to all of them?”

Frederica: “…I don’t imagine I would be able to meet such expectations. Since the Sanctuary is not yet liberated, I am still bound by my Contract to the Master. As long as I must abide by that Contract, there is a limit to what facts I can convey to Master Subaru.”

Subaru: “Contracts again… it’s the same with everybody here.”

Subaru pressed a hand to his forehead and felt an especially bitter sense of disappointment.

As much as he wanted to raise his voice and scream that Contracts could be interpreted more freely, when he remembered his promise to Emilia, he realized he couldn’t bring himself to force anyone else to break theirs.

Subaru: “What if I were to ask you about the details of your Contract?”

Frederica: “I’m sorry. As long as the Contract exists between Master Roswaal and myself, the information I can reveal is limited. —I’m afraid that is all I could say on that subject.”

Subaru: “There’s no new information at all. Damn it, that asshole always has to do these baffling things. Looks like this time I’ll have no choice but to treat him as an enemy from now on.”

Clicking his tongue at the culprit responsible for this disappointing reality, Subaru tried to pull himself together by taking a sip of his tea. He could still only taste leaves, but after drinking them over and over, Subaru could already distinguish the expensive leaves from those that are not. —And his tongue told him that these were expensive leaves.

Subaru: “This may not be the right occasion, but… Frederica, you originally came from the Sanctuary, and you’re Garfiel’s older sister, right? Or you can’t even tell me that much?”

Frederica: “No, that is not a problem. What you said is… correct. Although, more accurately, I am not from the Sanctuary, but only grew up there. However, since I have lived in the Sanctuary from as early as I could remember, it would not be incorrect to put it that way.”

Subaru: “Not from the Sanctuary… that’s what Miss Ryuzu said as well. Sounds like Roswaal likes to bring half-bloods to live there, huh?”

In the dragon carriage on the road home, Ryuzu, who tagged along, had mentioned this.

Back then, because of Ryuzu’ refusal, he didn’t manage to get to the true intentions behind Roswaal’s actions, but,

Subaru: “Half-bloods can’t pass through the Barrier, so bringing them in is basically the same as imprisoning them there, isn’t it? Then why would he do such a thing… and the people there, despite knowing that they're being imprisoned, they…"

They didn't seem to be particularly upset and instead appeared to be living peaceful lives there.

At least, they didn't seem to be people who had been forcefully dragged in and trapped, nor were there any signs of outrage at their treatment in the course of their daily lives.

In other words, it was as though they had accepted their lives within the Sanctuary. —Could there be some significance to that?

Frederica: "Master Subaru, do you know about the Demi-human War?"

Subaru: "…Demi-human War. If it's just the word, I feel like I've heard it somewhere before."

If he sieved through his memories to the very beginning, he must have heard that word two or three times before. Subaru remembered being struck with the impression that that name more or less conveyed the basics of what had occurred.

Hearing Subaru's vague answer, Frederica gently brushed her fingers through her golden hair, before lightly covering her razor-sharp fangs that were peeking through the corner of her lips,

Frederica: "If you wish to unravel the purpose of the Sanctuary's existence and Master Roswaal's considerations, we would first have to talk a bit about the Demi-human War."

Saying this, she stood up and walked to the back of the drawing room. Sensing Subaru's gaze trailing behind her, Frederica picked up a box from the table in the back of the room, and,

Frederica: "Don't be so alarmed, I am merely getting some confectionaries."

Revealing a slight smile on the corners of her lips, she returned and set down the box in front of Subaru.

Laid out inside, were assorted sweets unique to this world which he had only tasted on extremely rare occasions in Roswaal’s Mansion.

While Subaru looked back and forth between the treats and the face of the girl who presented them,

Frederica: “Since it will be a long and tiresome story, please enjoy, and bear with me”

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Tilting the steaming teacup to his lips and taking a sip, Subaru opened his ears to Frederica's words.

Frederica: "The Demi-human War—To begin with, would Master Subaru know what kind of dispute this was?"

Subaru: "Like I said, I don't know the details. Just… I can kinda imagine what might've happened just from the name and the historical background."

Frederica: "My, that's interesting. May I ask what you imagined it to be?"

Hearing this reply from Subaru, Frederica covered the corner of her lips and smiled.

Covering her mouthful of fangs while smiling seemed to be a deeply ingrained habit of her's, and Subaru often saw her this way.

It would seem that although she loved to smile, she didn't want others to see it.

Closing his eyes and scratching at his cheeks, with "Right", Subaru began,

Subaru: "I don't know how long ago that war took place, but I can imagine it couldn't have had nothing to do with the Witch of Envy. I've seen how Emilia was treated like a tumor in the Capital, and I know that Half-Elves are despised by all sorts of people."

Recorded even in picture-books, the Witch of Envy was universally known as the unparalleled symbol of absolute evil. Being a silver-haired Half-Elf, for having only this one point in common with the Witch, Emilia was treated with this unjust prejudice. So, in the wake of the Witch of Envy—Subaru could imagine the kind of conflict that might have arisen from even the most insignificant details.

Subaru: “A Half-Elf, would be a child between a Human and an Elf, right? Carrying on from their hatred of Half-Elves… it’s not too far-fetched that some would believe that Half-Bloods born between humans and other races are also heresy deserving of persecution.”

Frederica: “…Please, do go on.”

Subaru: “I’m just pulling this from imagination, but since the persecution of Half-Elves led to the persecution of Half-Bloods by association, if we take this to the extreme, the very existence of the Demi-humans who begot the Half-Bloods would also be a threat as well… that’s probably what some of those guys are thinking.”

To the extent of Subaru’s knowledge, the humans are by far the most numerous race in this world. He knew of the existence of Elves, and Beastmen like Anastasia’s triplets, but just based on his observations over the days he spent at the Capital, the absolute number of Demi-humans were indeed far fewer than the humans.

And so, solely owing to their majority, they came to believe that they had justice on their side.

Subaru: “I doubt absolutely everyone would’ve taken up this way of thinking, but the loud and obnoxious types are probably the same anywhere. So, compared to hatred of Demi-humans… it’s probably closer to fear, isn’t it. And when that frustration eventually boils over…”

Frederica: “The tension between Humans and Demi-humans erupted. The smoldering kindling caught fire, and with ever-gathering momentum, its flames engulfed the whole of Lugnica.”

Spilling this in a melancholic voice, Frederica continued on from Subaru’s words.

Closing one of his eyes, Subaru gazed at her downcast expression. And Frederica, with a single nod, turned up her face.

Frederica: “There is almost no need to supplement your conjectures, nor are there any grounds for dispute. …Have you truly never heard any detailed accounts of the war?”

Subaru: “Nah. If that was essentially correct, it’s just thanks to my power of imagination. Or reading experience… this kind of stuff shows up in light novels a lot, you know, antagonism between races and stuff.”

Although, of course, Subaru never actually paid much mind to these problems in reality.

Even in his Original World, so-called racial discrimination existed. But, to Subaru, they might as well have been taking place a world away. Like problems existing in some Parallel World.

He was himself, and the others were others, he had held this coldly apathetic outlook. And while this was true in a way, in reality, he was only averting his eyes.

Subaru: “It’s just, even if I can imagine how things got the way they are, I’d still have no idea how to fix it. But since you’re saying this in the past-tense, at least that means the Demi-human War had already run its course, right?”

Frederica: “In a sense, yes. But the scars of the war run deep, and the sprouts of prejudice against the offsprings between Humans and Demi-humans remain deeply rooted even now.”

Perhaps because she herself was born as a target of such prejudice, Frederica’s words carried a certain heaviness that could not have been understood by someone merely listening from the outside.

Subaru wanted to ask what happened next, but hesitated before he could throw these words at her. And, sensing this on his mind, Frederica sighed,

Frederica: “My apologies for making you worried. Let us continue the story.”

Subaru: “I kinda wanna say “don’t force yourself”, but these things directly tie into what I need to ask so I can’t really say that. So, do force yourself, please.”

Frederica: “My my. You certainly are adept at spurring people on, Master Subaru.”

Favorably interpreting Subaru’s rather selfish remark, Frederica lifted her own cup and let a sip roll over her tongue,

Frederica: “The Demi-human War began approximately fifty years ago. From there, it went on for nearly ten years… and it was recorded to have concluded forty years ago.”

Subaru: “Ten years… that’s a long time. Although, back home, I think we’ve got a Hundred Years’ War and a Thirty Years’ War or something in our history as well.”

Subaru wasn’t so well read when it came to historical novels, so his knowledge of these events didn’t go past glancing over their names in textbooks. But, with names like that, he could more or less guess how long those wars lasted at least.

Thirty years, and a hundred years. It’s a frightening thought, how anyone could hate another person enough to carry on a war for so long.

Even Subaru had only spent about two months in the Parallel world.

Subaru: “That’s just way too exhausting, who can keep on playing Bokosuka Wars for more than ten years?”

Frederica: “Regardless, the war first originated from a dispute between the humans and a Demi-human settlement. Originally, it would only have been a local dispute contained within a small area… but because of the incident that followed, in a single stroke, the heat of war flared up. And the horrific conflict, in which blood upon blood washed over every corner of the land, began.”

Subaru: “The incident that followed?”

Frederica: “Not long after conflict first broke out, the King of Lugnica at the time saw the seriousness of the situation and dispatched his close attendant as an envoy for peace. On the Demi-human side, the chiefs of various races gathered to welcome the envoy and to negotiate for a resolution, but…”

Hearing Frederica’s words trail off, Subaru silently tilted his head, prompting her to continue. Seeing his gesture, Frederica closed her eyes,

Frederica: “Those who attended that conference—the envoys from the Palace and the Demi-human chiefs alike, were all indiscriminately slaughtered on the spot.”

Subaru: “Indiscriminately slaughtered…? But by who, and for what?”

Frederica: “The culprit remains unknown even to this day. But, at the time, both the Humans and the Demi-humans were convinced that the other was responsible. And consequently, a small ember became a great devouring fire, and would not be put out for all ten years… as it so happened.”

Subaru: “What were they doing? If they just properly talked it through… but that’s too idealistic, isn’t it.”

Given the emotions of the people at the time, this might be too much of a god-like perspective to take.

The envoy dispatched by the Palace was the King’s personal attendant. Considering the prestige of the envoy murdered at the scene of negotiation, to withdraw the matter without bringing the culprit to justice would have been beneath the dignity of a Kingdom. And, from the Demi-humans’ perspective, the fact was that their chiefs had been gathered in one place and massacred. Although it’d be demeaning to count lives this way, in purely numerical terms, the Demi-human side lost more.

Adding to that, was the existence of the Witch of Envy that first laid the foundations of the strife between their races.

It would be difficult enough to even begin to mend their relations, and in this standstill, there was no time to deal with the problems that followed—further and further behind, unable to stem the tide, it wouldn’t be hard to imagine how this invited the tragedy that resulted.

Frederica: “In the end—the Demi-human War concluded with the surrender of the Demi-humans. Even then, the Demi-humans refused to take responsibility for the massacre at the conference, and only acknowledged that it would be senseless to continue the war any further.”

Subaru: “Personally, stuck in this kind of quagmire, I think the side that stepped back first was actually the smarter one. Also, this was like a civil war, wasn’t it? There’s no benefit to the country at all.”

Frederica: “The truth was precisely that. Lugnica’s power greatly declined over the course of the Demi-human War. It was fortunate that at the time, all the neighboring nations were also dealing with turmoil of their own, otherwise, Lugnica may very well have been replaced by some other kingdom.”

It must have been fortune in midst of misfortune that the other three nations were also occupied with internal strife, thus narrowly saving Lugnica from a final deathblow.

Yet, a crisis no less perilous than that era was facing this Kingdom even now.

Subaru: “But, well, it’s still pretty amazing that they managed to put an end to a war that lasted so long. It must’ve taken a whole lot of courage, and the resistance from the hardliners couldn’t have been easy to overcome.”

Frederica: “…It was because humanity had one overwhelming presence among them who bent the pro-war faction’s will. For it was to the unrivaled swordsmanship of the then-Current Generation Sword Saint, Lady Theresia Van Astrea, that all the Demi-humans bowed their heads… is something the matter?”

Subaru: “No, I was just surprised to hear a name that I know… It’s a small world.”

Having heard that name before, Subaru remembered that Wilhelm’s wife was named Theresia.

The Sword Saint of that era, she must have been the Generation before Reinhard. Hearing that a single woman had put an end to a war that had raged on for ten years, Subaru felt a true sense of the unorthodoxy of the existence that was the Sword Saint.

Subaru: “Well, I have a general idea how the Demi-human War went now. And I can more or less imagine the kind of problems might’ve sprung up from it.”

Frederica: “The reality was almost exactly as Master Subaru surmised. It would seem that your mind is sharper than I thought. I’m surprised to find that I’ve misjudged you.”

Subaru: “I’ll just… pretend that was a compliment for now. So, moving along, although the Demi-human War has ended, the prejudice against the Demi-humans couldn’t have been dispelled so easily. Of course, people wouldn’t blatantly flaunt their hostility under the public eye, but.”

Even in the Capital, along the streets lined by fruit-stalls, Humans and Demi-humans seemed to be living in normal, peaceful coexistence. But who knows how much pain and struggle had to pass before such a scene could become part of normal life. And, contrary to places like these, there must also have been places where peace had not become normal occurrence, and there will always be places where light does not reach.

Subaru: “Places like closed-off villages with small populations, isolated from the outside world… if one guy stands out as a problem, I get the feeling the whole place would set on him.”

Frederica: “You could say that my little brother and I had lived through precisely this kind of environment.”

Furrowing her brows at some painful reminiscences, for the first time in this conversation, Frederica directly referred to her little brother—Garfiel. Then, turning her eyes somewhere far away,

Frederica: “My brother is my sibling by a different father. Our surnames are different because of this… I took my father’s surname, while my little brother took the surname of our mother.”

Subaru: “Your full name is Frederica… Baumann, right?”

Frederica: “Yes. And my brother’s last name would be Tinsel. Our mother was a… clumsy person, and also an unlucky person.”

It was as if Frederica tried to find the right word, but failed to find it in the end. Hearing her say this, Subaru showed an expression of non-understanding, when she started again with “It’s embarrassing to say this, but.”

Frederica: “It seems, our mother was in the process of being sold off because of her debt, when the slavers were set upon by a group of Demi-human bandits and she was captured… That’s where she met my father.”

Subaru: “Wha?! Wa-Wai-Wait! I get the feeling I have to prepare my heart before I can hear this!”

Frederica: “But that father died soon after, and my mother carried me as an infant as she wandered without a home, when she was captured by another Demi-human band. That’s where she met Garfiel’s father…”

Subaru: “Waitwaitwait, I was wrong! I never thought it was going to get this heavy!”

Frederica: “And so, I won’t dwell on these things. In any case, Garfiel was born, but once again, we were unable to stay with Garfiel’s father. So our mother, carrying the two of us, wandered once more, and, when we were at the end of our ropes, we were taken in by the House of Mathers.”

Briefly laying bare her heavy past, a certain nostalgia emerged in Frederica’s eyes as she sighed. Then, stroking the handle of her chair with a palm,

Frederica: “At the time, still in his early teens, the Master… Master Roswaal, had already inherited his title as the head of the House of Mathers. To my brother and I, the Master is our savior in the truest sense of the word. And I consider it to be an honor to be able to serve at his side this way.”

Subaru: “So the two of you were brought into the Sanctuary, and lived there, huh… by the way, it’s a bit hard to bring this up but, what happened to your mother?”

From what he could gather from her story so far, their mother must have been a pure blooded Human. Which meant that she would have been able to enter and exit the Sanctuary at will. But whether it was at the Sanctuary or the Mansion, Subaru had never seen anyone who could have been her.

Yet just as Subaru was imagining the worst, Frederica shook her head,

Frederica: “It seems I’ve made you worried, but please rest assured. After leaving my brother and I with Master Roswaal, our mother left the Mansion without leaving word of where she was going. Nor have we heard from her since. But she must be safe and still living somewhere, I believe.”

Subaru: “…”

Listening to Frederica lightly saying this, Subaru couldn’t utter another word and only remained in silence. Although the worst Subaru had prepared for was their being separated by death, the crueler reality was that she had abandoned them.

But hearing this created even more questions,

Subaru: “Even though your mother left like this, Garfiel is still using her surname, while you’re using your father’s. Why is that?”

Frederica: “Because there were no records of her left behind, our memories of our mother were told to us by others… and in these unreliable circumstances, I took my father’s surname. As for the reason why my little brother took our mother’s surname… it was because that child didn’t know about our mother. As much as he pretends to be meaner than he is, he is stubbornly sentimental at heart.”

Subaru: “Stubbornly sentimental…”

Reviewing his impression of Garfiel in his mind, that description would explain many things.

Although he would be quicker to take action than to think things through, and despite being foul-mouthed and rude, Garfiel was nonetheless sensible and understanding. He considered himself dumb, but he was not entirely unthoughtful, nor would he act completely without reason. Everything about him was reminiscent of a juvenile-delinquent punk from the good old days.

In terms of sensibilities alone, Subaru couldn't deny that Garfiel was upstanding and noble-minded in his own way.

Frederica: "Master Subaru. —Would you happen to know how the Sanctuary's Barrier distinguishes its targets?"

While Subaru occupied his mind with such thoughts, Frederica threw him this rather abrupt question.

Unable to understand the meaning behind it, Subaru was a little slow to react. He looked back at Frederica without much confidence, and with "Umm",

Subaru: "Honestly, no. While there's no doubt the Barrier certainly exists, I can't feel it at all. It's probably using some kind of magic to check everyone that passes, I guess…"

Frederica: "The Barrier does so by verifying the blood inside the veins of those who passes through. If it can clearly distinguish both Human and Demi-human blood, that person will be repelled. In essence, that is the nature of the Barrier."

Subaru: "…What are you trying to say?"

Unsure why she was suddenly revealing the Barrier's conditions to him, Subaru only quietly asked her this in return. Receiving this response, Frederica lightly nodded,

Frederica: "Do you perhaps now understand how I was able to pass through the Barrier and exit the Sanctuary?"

Subaru: "…I don't. I feel like I understand even less now after you told me the Barrier's conditions. On the road back, I saw Miss

Ryuzu almost collapse when she came close to the Barrier, so I'm sure the Barrier's effects are real. And it was the same when we entered the Sanctuary as well."

Right before Garfiel's dramatic introduction, Emilia had collapsed from passing through the Barrier. Having witnessed its immense power, only a fool would have any doubts about its existence—

Subaru: "—Huh? How come…"

That moment, a shock flashed across Subaru's mind.

On the road back home, he was accompanied by Ryuzu. After saying goodbye to Ryuzu, as they cleared the forest and passed through the Barrier, he had felt a sense of incongruity.

Now he had the answer to that unease. Subaru had already noticed this when he saw Ryuzu' reaction as they came close to the Barrier.

Subaru: "They were the under the same conditions… but how come when he was that close to the Barrier, that bastard Garfiel was still fine and kicking around?"

Ambushing them as soon as they passed through the Barrier, Garfiel threw Patrasche and the dragon carriage into the air as if they were nothing.

He certainly didn't use his full strength that time, but compared to Emilia, who fainted as she passed through the Barrier, and Ryuzu, who almost collapsed just by going near it, Garfiel's behavior was completely different.

—It was as though his body wasn't affected by the Barrier at all.

Frederica: "Owing to his special characteristic, Atavism, at first glance, my brother might appear to have more Demi-human lineage, but in fact, that is not the case. —The same is true with me."

Subaru: "If detection of blood is the Barrier's criteria for distinguishing humans from Half-Bloods… to bypass this criteria, one side of the blood would just have to be too thin to detect?"

Frederica: “Although my brother and I have different fathers, neither of them were pure-blooded Demi-humans. Both were Half-Blooded, and combined with our Human mother, we were born having inherited only one ¼ of Demi-human blood, having been twice diluted this way.”

Subaru: “One-quarter… so that’s why you’re not repulsed by the Barrier.”

The Barrier that repels Half-Bloods does not repel Quarter-Bloods. It sounded almost farcical, but his existing suspicions told him that it was the truth.

On the subject of why Frederica was able to cross the Barrier, Ryuzu had only given the ambiguous explanation that she was an exception. But now, Subaru could understand her answer.

But then, this would give rise to next question,

Subaru: “Wait. Then does that mean Garfiel can also freely exit the Sanctuary? If he wants to, that guy can just come out regardless of whether the Trials are completed?”

If that was true, then it would be surprising and welcome news.

If he could bring him out without the Barrier blocking the way, there would now be a possibility of using his strength to repel Elsa when she attacks the Mansion.

Originally, Subaru had already abandoned his hopes of repulsing Elsa in this loop and was preparing to evacuate everyone from the Mansion, but now—

Subaru: “If that guy can come out, then…”

Frederica: “It’s true, that same as myself, my brother can also venture outside the Sanctuary. When it came time for me to leave the Sanctuary, he was supposed to have come with me, and he had come along as far as the edge of the Barrier. But…”

Cutting off her words there, Frederica looked at Subaru, who seemed to have found some glimmer of hope. But her eyes were filled with an emotion so deep and somber that Subaru felt his hopes cool off at once. Seeing him this way, she went on,

Frederica: “My little brother chose to stay behind. And as long as the Sanctuary is not liberated, I don’t think Garfiel will ever set foot outside it. He is a kind and stubbornly sentimental child.”

Subaru: “Sentimental… you don’t mean…”

Seeing Subaru raise his brows as his thoughts arrived at that point, as if confirming his astonishment, Frederica gave a single nod as she covered the corner of her lips with her sleeve,

Frederica: “That child could not leave the residents of the Sanctuary behind while he ventures out alone. He is neither good, nor bad, only a straightforward… and troublesome little brother.”

Chapter 33:
A Pathway Escaped of Wind

1

Casting down her eyes, Frederica said this of her younger brother.

Instilled within those words was something at once affectionate and terribly complicated. Perhaps, this was only a common sentiment to have towards close family members.

Subaru: “He can physically pass through the Barrier, but he won’t do it because of his mental issues… is that essentially what you’re saying?”

Frederica: “The fact is that he refused when I, his older sister, requested this of him. He had followed me all the way to the edge of the Barrier, but in the end, he chose to stay inside to be with Grandmother rather than to go with me.”

Subaru: “Grandmother… you mean Miss Ryuzu?”

Frederica: “That child may be rude and foul-mouthed, but he genuinely adores Grandmother. As long as her long-cherished dream has not been fulfilled, he will never leave the Sanctuary.”

Even though he kept calling her “Old Hag” and “Granny”, Garfiel obviously held an extraordinarily deep affection toward Ryuzu. Subaru once called him a tsundere, and that description was quite accurate in a way.

In any case, this knowledge wouldn’t help the situation very much.

Subaru: “In the end, it still doesn’t change the fact that passing the Trials and liberating the Sanctuary are the key conditions. It’s about as disappointing as disappointing gets.”

Frederica: “I’m sorry I could not meet your expectations… If there is anything else you wish to ask…”

Subaru: “As long as it’s within your ability to answer, right?”

Frederica: “My apologies.”

At Frederica’s concise affirmation, Subaru sighed through his nose and lined up the questions in his mind. But, considering the flow of the conversation so far, most likely,

Subaru: “Would Roswaal’s true intentions be an alright topic to ask?”

Frederica: “The Master intends to support Lady Emilia and make her the next King of Lugnica. That much I can assert without any doubt on the matter.”

Subaru: “I was asking for his true intentions. I’m sure even you would agree that many of Roswaal’s actions are going against what you just said?”

Frederica: “His methods are indirect and mysterious. I think neither I nor Ram would deny this.”

Saying this with the implication that she and Ram had shared this opinion of Roswaal’s actions between them, Frederica’s face took on a pained expression.

Although she had accepted Subaru’s doubts as only natural, she was nonetheless forbidden to provide him with the key to resolving them. In the end,

Subaru: “You can’t tell me more without permission from Roswaal himself, huh.”

Frederica: “I am truly sorry. But only know this… the Master is Lady Emilia and Master Subaru’s ally. As long as the two of you possess the intention to prevail in the Royal Selection, that much is assured.”

Subaru: “It totally bothers me how you worded that…but it’s fine. Nevermind about Roswaal for now. So far, I feel like I can trust you, Frederica. But if it ever turns out you’ve fallen head over heels for Roswaal like Ram, I’ll have to seriously rethink our relationship.”

Subaru liked Ram as an individual, but that did not mean he could place absolute trust in her. It was a complicated relationship. At least, Subaru knew that Roswaal held an unshakable, highest place in her heart, and, since Subaru cannot completely trust Roswaal, at the moment, he had no choice but to withhold his judgment of Ram as well.

Subaru: “If you can’t tell me Roswaal’s true intentions… can you tell me what it means when they call the Sanctuary the Experimental Grounds? I heard Garfiel calling it that.”

Frederica: “Experimental Grounds—is it.”

Subaru: “Also a pile of impacted shit for those who have nowhere to go, he called it that too. After our talk about the Demi-humans, I can kind of imagine the part about nowhere to go. So Roswaal has a Demi-human fetish or whatever you call that and he’s gathering Half-Bloods who have nowhere to go to live there. But…”

Just the words “Experimental Grounds” gave off a sense of unease, and it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the gathered Half-Bloods had been kidnapped in a way. Who knows why Roswaal was doing this? In other words, Emilia may have allied herself with someone she shouldn’t have allied with.

Subaru: “To begin with, even if it’s not the Witch of Envy, if people found out his family was in charge of a facility related to a Witch, the consequences could be huge. I heard that there are no surviving records of this, but the fact is, the Tomb is still right there.”

Frederica: “The meaning of the word “Witch” has since taken on an ominous connotation. Even the Master’s Contractual relationship with the Witch of Greed would certainly not be deemed appropriate by those around him. This concern is precisely in line with Master Subaru’s considerations, I believe.”

Subaru: “I’m glad we can agree that the Sanctuary’s existence is problematic. Now, wouldn’t a title like the “Experimental Grounds” just make that problem even worse?”

Frederica: “…Originally, that place was a hidden village where

Half-Bloods are gathered so the Witch of Greed may conduct a certain experiment. It is unclear what negotiations took place at the time between the Witch and the owner of the land, the House of Mathers, but because of that Contract, succeeding generations of the House of Mathers have managed and maintained the Sanctuary."

Nodding his head, Subaru took in the contents of Frederica's words and sorted the information in his mind. He had already gathered as much from connecting the pieces of information implied by the various people in the Sanctuary. Then, the question would be,

Subaru: "What kind of experiments was the Witch running with Half-Bloods, and why is Roswaal continuing to keep the Contract even after the Witch's death…?"

Frederica: "The reason for the latter should be simple. The Contract most likely contains the clause: "Until the time of the release of the Sanctuary, to adhere to the Oath to the Witch". Unless people are periodically brought into the Sanctuary, the preconditions for the Contract's fulfillment would not exist."

Subaru: "So then, he's now turning that around to create a hidden refuge for Half-Bloods? By the sound of that, one might even get the impression that Roswaal was running some kind of charity project."

Since discrimination against Half-Bloods was still a fact, it was necessary to ensure that there was a place where they could live in peace. If Roswaal was indeed fulfilling that role, then Subaru may have to revise his evaluation of him. But,

Subaru: "It doesn't seem like all of the Half-Bloods want to stay there. In fact, the ones following Miss Ryuzu who want the Sanctuary to be liberated are in the majority, aren't they?"

Frederica: "…The general prejudice against Demi-humans has indeed greatly faded. Compared to our blood, the reason my brother and I entered the Sanctuary was more because we simply had nowhere else to live. One day, the Sanctuary will be released. —That is why, I…"

Firmly closing her eyes, Frederica cut off her words. Watching her, Subaru fell silent, and only after some time had passed, did he hesitatingly speak again,

Subaru: “I might just be imagining this…but, was the reason why Frederica left the Sanctuary because of your concerns about what comes after the Sanctuary is released?”

Frederica: “…What makes you think so?”

Subaru: “If you ask me why… your face always seems a little saddened when you talk about the Sanctuary. But you left your home in spite of this, whether it was for yourself or for others. Then…”

Scratching his cheek, Subaru saw in the back of his mind the tough facade of the golden short haired youth. Like the kindhearted girl in front of his eyes, that man was all words and wouldn’t reveal his true feelings at all.

Subaru: “If you’re anything like your little brother when it comes to hiding your true feelings, I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s some embarrassing reason behind why you left. I’m guessing you… probably left to create some place for the people to go once the Sanctuary is liberated, somewhere they wouldn’t have to be afraid, am I right? Of course, you’re working here to repay your debt of gratitude to Roswaal, but that’s not all, is it? …That’s kinda what I’m guessing.”

Realizing that he was taking huge leaps of logic in his rapid-fire speculation, Subaru held back his embarrassment and stole a glance at Frederica. If she laughed it off, then it would’ve just been Subaru getting way ahead of himself, but,

Frederica: “When the time comes for the New World to open its doors to them…I hope to be the one to guide them through it.”

Muttering this quietly, a smile rose onto Frederica’s face.

It was not a mocking smile at an outlandish guess, but a smile of a sense of liberation of having unburdened her heart to another after having seen clearly into herself.

Frederica: “I was raised by that place, but now I want to forge an environment that will foster a desire in the others to leave that place. If I can help even just a little in creating such an environment, then my… undesired birth must have had meaning.”

Subaru: “Undesired, that’s…”

Frederica: “There is no need to console me. It is as it is. I cannot imagine that my mother grew heavy with me while desiring to do so. The fact is, mother abandoned my little brother and me in the Sanctuary and left. That was her answer…but I do not wish my story to end with only that answer, and that is the reason I am here now.”

It was a question to which Frederica had already reached an answer.

Having only glimpsed the surface, Subaru could not possibly affect her with his sympathy. Embracing the answer she had arrived at herself, she would face the endless choices to come with only that answer as her guide.

—”She is strong”, he sincerely thought. It was a conviction strong enough to be admired.

Subaru: “…Does Garfiel know how you truly feel? If he knows and still didn’t come with you, then…”

Frederica: “My little brother is the only person to whom I have told everything. But even so, he would not come with me…for that was the choice he had made. Rather than leaving to procure something difficult to obtain, my little brother chose to remain to protect something easy to lose. We siblings have each chosen a separate path… the story is simply that.”

Subaru: “Protect…protect, huh. Just by his outer appearance, I’d never have guessed he was the kind of character who’d make that choice. Well, it’s not like people’s hearts can be understood by just looking from the outside anyway.”

Rubbing his jaw, Subaru tilted his cup and drank down all the tea inside in a single gulp before holding back a hiccup. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he began again with “Come to think of it”,

Subaru: “We seem to have wandered off-topic, so let’s get back to it. About the name “Experimental Grounds”. Can you talk about what kind of experiments they were running…? Or, do you know its contents?”

Frederica: “Unfortunately, I know neither their contents nor their purpose. In fact, from the moment the Witch of Greed died, the continuation of the experiments became impossible. Only the facility remains, and the House of Mathers merely maintains it.”

Subaru: “That’s even more incomprehensible. I personally understand now how important it is to keep promises, but what’s even the point of continuing to keep it when the other side has already been dead for 400 years?”

Frederica: “At least, if it weren’t for the Master’s family upholding that promise, I doubt my brother and I would have passed our childhoods in peace.”

Subaru: “Ah…that’s… I didn’t think of that. Sorry.”

Seeing Subaru sincerely apologizing, Frederica couldn’t hold in her giggle.

Then, she emptied her cup as well and collected the finished cup from Subaru before standing up from her seat,

Frederica: “We have gone on talking for quite a long while now. Let us save the rest for another time. What do you plan to do next, Master Subaru?”

Subaru: “I only tagged along to bring the villagers back home in the first place. Now that I’ve asked what I wanted to ask, I should be heading back… That said, it would be a bit difficult to do that today, so I’ll head back tomorrow morning, I guess.”

Frederica: “Is that so. In that case, I imagine Petra will be in high spirits tonight and tomorrow morning. But considering how distracted she will get, it’s difficult to tell whether that would be a good thing or not.”

Subaru: “More than anything, it’s nice to see Petra’s education progressing nicely… Now, where is Petra, anyway?”

Frederica: “Right now, I believe she would be back in the village greeting everyone that’s returned. I instructed her to do so.”

As expected, Frederica must have seen through her intentions before she even asked.

Watching her back as she carried off the clattering teacups, Subaru stood up from his chair as well, and counted on his fingers all the remaining things he had to do.

What he managed to hear from Frederica had been only half of what he wanted to hear. But even so, it had given him enough to move forward with his speculations.

All that was left now, was to find the final person who might still know more.

Subaru: “It’ll probably take a while, but it’s time to try combing through this Mansion for now…”

At the thought of the heavy labor ahead of him, Subaru slumped his shoulders.

Catching a brief glimpse of Subaru’s back as she left the room, Frederica whispered in a quiet voice,

Frederica: “I know neither their contents nor their purpose… but, I do know the result of the Experimental Grounds. When you find out, when you come to understand… what would you think then, I wonder?”

But the contents of her whisper did not reach Subaru, who was now deep in thought.

Everyone in the Mansion knew that Beatrice's "Door Crossing" was a pain to deal with, but Subaru only truly got a sense of this after returning from the Capital.

His natural intuitive ability to pick from a multitude of choices—or, more accurately, his ability to go with his gut, was one of the few things about himself that Subaru was rather proud of.

Subaru's special characteristic of managing to select the right option without any hints and for no particular reason was, in a way, just as annoying as his other special characteristic "Can't read the mood," and had made no small contribution to his chances of encountering Beatrice.

Ever since coming back from the Capital, that intuition hadn't been working properly.

Subaru: "That's odd. That should've been every door in the Mansion…"

That was the last one. Closing the final bathroom door where he had placed all his hopes, Subaru expressed his disappointment at the result by tilting his head with a sigh.

Since returning from the Capital, he had just been consistently failing at the "Guess where Beako is" quiz. Considering how his hit-rate was almost 100% before, he couldn't exactly blame this on a bad streak. At this point, Subaru had to admit that there was nothing else he could do.

Subaru: "Gees, she must be seriously trying to avoid me."

If Beatrice really put her mind to it, no one could bypass her "Door Crossing," Ram once told him this. Yet somehow, Subaru had always managed to defy this common sense. And after a while, Subaru had developed a sense of superiority over Beatrice—In this case, it was not so much that he was able to bypass her "Door Crossing," but that he had a greater advantage over Beatrice than anyone else in the Mansion.

Subaru: "Even though we parted ways like that, I didn't think you'd go full-Hikikomori because of it… If you won't even show me your face, I can't bicker or apologize or anything."

Subaru had no idea what he might've said that would make her so adamantly refuse to see him. He had no idea, and if he continued being physically cut off like this, he would go on having no idea. And he hated that.

Regardless of what he wanted to learn from her, and regardless of all the pressing issues tying him down, all Subaru wanted now was to see her and talk to her.

It'd be alright even if it meant getting scolded, or being looked down upon like a small idiot. But those carefree days are lost. And, only now realizing this, Subaru found he couldn't bear it at all. Although he knew this was a selfish thought.

Subaru: "Puck and Beako, they won't even let out a peep when it comes down to the critical moment."

Whether it was Puck, still hiding out somewhere, or Beatrice, withdrawing into her own space, they both went missing when Emilia and Subaru needed them most.

Can't be counted on at all when there's trouble, they were almost as bad as the God's up in the sky.

But the situation was far too urgent to be soaking in hurt feelings. Knowing that Elsa was closing in on the Mansion, but having no means of repelling her, his highest priority now was to evacuate everyone in the Mansion.

No matter how he thought about it, Elsa probably had no reason to extend her murdering blades to the unrelated Earlham village. So protecting the lives of those in the Mansion was the most important task at hand.

Bringing Rem and Petra out wouldn't be difficult. If he appealed to Frederica's sense of professionalism, he should be able to persuade her. The problem was Beatrice who wouldn't see him.

Before, in the loops starting inside the Capital, Subaru had already failed to get her to leave the Mansion. That time, he gave up trying to convince her to abandon the Mansion because he knew that the Witch Cult's target wasn't the Mansion.

But this time was different. Elsa will be invading the Mansion, and will not hesitate to put everyone to the blade. Even if her target, Emilia, was missing, she would probably set her mind to opening every bowel in the Mansion.

Although he had no idea what Beatrice's actual combat strength was, Elsa had been able to hold her own in a pitched battle against the strength of Puck and Emilia combined, and Subaru imagined that she might even be able to match the strength of Wilhelm.

If Beatrice and Elsa ever came into direct contact, Subaru couldn't envision Beatrice winning against her.

Subaru: "Maybe I'm just being way too over-cautious when it comes to Elsa…But after getting killed by someone three times it should be pretty natural to feel this way. —Oh."

Rubbing at the phantom pain in his stomach while walking along the hallway, Subaru's legs suddenly stopped. His eyes were fixed on a conspicuously expensive-looking door, to the room at the center of the uppermost floor of the Mansion—Roswaal's office.

Subaru was aware that it'd be bad manners to set foot into the Master's room while the Master was away, but,

Subaru: "Right, there was something in this room that I needed to check out."

Saying this, he opened the door and entered without much pomp.

Naturally, the scene that opened before him as he stepped into the office was no different from when he was opening every door in the Mansion. Since Roswaal himself hadn't returned, the room still maintained the same orderliness from the time Subaru made Otto organize it.

The original mess of documents and bookshelves had all been neatly arranged by Otto, and there was now a pristine impression to the room as if it had just been thoroughly cleaned. Subaru looked it over before walking to the back of the room, where two bookshelves stood side by side beside the ebony desk.

Subaru: “Behind this bookshelf… is a hidden passage, huh.”

Twice, he had already confirmed the existence of this hidden passage—it was probably serving as an escape path in case of emergencies, but as for how to activate it and where the passageway led to, these were all unknown to Subaru.

Subaru: “It was activated when Elsa attacked, so I think it definitely lets you escape somewhere… although the last time I went in I froze to death.”

That memory ended as he was frozen into an ice sculpture alongside the Witch Cultists who had gotten on the wrong side of Puck. He remembered his fingers breaking off and his limbs shattering, and dying almost painlessly, but so much about it was hazy that recalling it did not bring him anything more than a shudder. But death was still death. He had no intention of taking it lightly. In any case,

Subaru: “Unless I find out where this escape route leads, I won’t know what to do if worse comes to worst. It might even come out somewhere in the Mansion… Though I’m guessing that’s probably not the case.”

If ensuring safety was the highest priority, confirming the escape route would be an indispensable step. Most likely, it led somewhere into the mountains behind the Mansion. And, considering how escape tunnels usually work, if there are some emergency provisions on the way that’d be even better.

Subaru: “Just to be sure, I’ll take a quick look… but, as much as I want to…”

Where’s the gimmick that activates this thing, anyway?

In the meantime, he tried dragging on the bookshelf with all his might to get it to move, but the solidly packed bookshelf wouldn’t budge at all from the strength of Subaru's arm. Maybe if he took out all the books and left just the shelf he might be able to move it a little then, but,

Subaru: "No way there's time for that in a real emergency… there must be a switch to activate it somewhere."

On that thought, Subaru started fishing into the back of the bookshelves, but didn't find any secret mechanisms. Although, when Subaru pulled out the second-to-last drawer, he was stunned for a second by the hoard of gemstones stuffed inside.

Subaru: "Time to give up, huh… unless, maybe it's not even in the room?"

???: "What's not in the room?"

Subaru: "Well naturally, it'd be a hidden switch-thingey or something. I wanna see the hidden passage on the other side of the bookshelves but there's no way to do that unless I find it."

???: "Oh, the escape path. That's this statue here."

Petra tugged on the downcast Subaru's sleeves, and Subaru, looking towards the direction she was pointing at, nodded his head up and down with "Ehhhh",

Subaru: "Placed in the corner of the room, looks like nothing but a normal statue… could this be the gimmick?"

It was a little statue of a person seated in a chair, small enough to be placed on a table. To see something like this in an otherwise unadorned room was indeed somewhat peculiar, but Petra bravely walked up to it without any signs of fear, and,

"Tykh."

With a small sound, the statue's head twisted.

Like it was going to be detached, the statue's head turned a hundred and eighty degrees. Watching the man's neckbone being brutally snapped, Subaru winced his brows. And, the next moment, "Ooo, ooo, ooo—"

The sound of a heavy object sliding across the floor reverberated throughout the room. Turning around, Subaru saw the bookshelves parting, revealing a pitch black entrance wide enough for a single person to pass through.

Seeing the mission-objective escape path making its appearance at last, Subaru lightly balled up his fists and struck out a victory pose.

Subaru: "That's it that's it that's it! That's what I'm looking for! I'm saved!"

Petra: "Huhuu~, I helped, didn't I~. Miss Frederica told me about this before, it's an escape path in case of emergencies, told me to remember it and all."

Subaru: "Oho, thank you thank you. Now I'll just… Petra, when did you get here?!"

Petra: "You just noticed now?!"

Petra blended into the flow of things so perfectly that it took a while before the contemplative Subaru noticed that she was there. At Subaru's unacceptable response, Petra pouted up her lips,

Petra: "After I ran all the way back, and even helped you out… Master Subaru, I think that was kinda mean."

Subaru: "No no, I only noticed halfway through that I was talking with someone when I'm supposed to be alone. And then I was too excited to see the OBJECTIVE COMPLETE and that's why I was a bit late to notice you. Sorrysorry."

The little girl turned her face away as if stating that she was still angry, and Subaru lightly patted her head while apologizing. Then, turning his eyes to the escape passage again,

Subaru: "By the way, Petra, did Frederica ever tell you where this thing leads?"

Petra: "Yep. Miss Frederica said it leads to a small cabin in the mountains in the back. There's another barrier there that's different from the Boundaries against the witchbeasts, so it can't be found from the outside."

Subaru: "I see. So it's a hidden passage after all. But I better go check it out with my own eyes."

Then it was confirmed that the passageway came out in the mountains, but that would also mean that the tunnel could serve as both an escape route and an invasion route. Subaru rolled up his sleeves, and, pumping himself full of spirit, stepped towards the entrance. And Petra's quiet footsteps followed behind him.

Subaru: "Oh, you're coming too, Petra?"

Petra: "Can't I?"

Subaru: "It's not that you can't, but there's probably not going to be anything interesting, you know. I'm only going in since I'm curious where it leads to, and after that I'll be coming right back."

Petra: "It's my break time right now, so I'm free to do what I want. So you won't mind if I come?"

Tugging on the hems of his shirt, Petra looked up at Subaru with puppy-like eyes. Not having the heart to leave her behind like this, Subaru sighed and gave out a wry smile, and,

Subaru: "We really are just going there and coming right back, you know. You sure are curious, Petra."

Petra: "If I wasn't curious I wouldn't be here, so… I'm glad I'm curious."

Hearing Petra's reply, he wasn't really sure what she was trying to say. Nonetheless, smoothing it over with a smile, Subaru took her outstretched hand and stepped into the passageway.

The dark hidden-passage gave way to a spiraling staircase, while the materials of the walls themselves glowed with a pale blue light. Although they wouldn't be losing sight of the path downstairs, seeing that the tunnel was leading underground, Subaru looked back,

Subaru: “This stairway is pretty long and dark, be careful not to slip.”

Petra: “If I slip will you save me?”

Subaru: “I’ll have to hug you while tumbling all the way down the stairs, you know… if I end up in a coma and can never walk again that’ll be a way too miserable sight.”

Petra: “If that happens, I’ll take care of Master Subaru for the rest of your whole life.”

Subaru: “I’m glad, but the process is way too terrifying!”

With this exchange, Subaru took the lead as the two of them began heading down the stairs. A cold wind swept up from below, sending thoughts of a non-existent Puck into Subaru’s mind as a chill ran up his spine.

It was not that he was afraid of the non-existent future of a frozen death, but,

Subaru: “It’s no fun being so quiet while going down, and Petra might be getting scared, so let’s talk about something.”

Petra: “Master Subaru, you know your palm is getting kind of sweaty?”

Subaru: “Petra must be getting scared so let’s talk about something! How was everyone at the village?!”

Seeing Subaru intent on sticking to the concerned-for-a-little-girl narrative, Petra cast him a compassionate gaze and went along with it. And so, carrying on the miscellaneous conversation this way to keep the silence at bay, they continued down the stairs for several more minutes—when the staircase ended, and they arrived at the familiar narrow passage.

Further down the passage, there will be a door, and beyond that door would be an un-experienced zone to Subaru.

Subaru: “Just by the feels of it, we should still be right underneath the Mansion. If this path leads all the way to the back mountains, it must be a quite a long tunnel.”

Petra: “Escape route, escape path, tunnel, can’t we call it one thing?”

Subaru: “You’re right… Then, since the wind might as well be coming all the way from Mexico, let’s call it SANTUNNEL.”

Petra: “Ah, careful don’t trip, there’s a bump there.”

Just like this, Petra beautifully ignored Subaru’s random comment. Seeing her Anti-Subaru capabilities improve so much in such a short period of time, Subaru felt both pleased and a little lonely.

Maintaining this nostalgic sentiment as they continued through the passageway, they soon arrived at a slightly wider area. Straight ahead, a door emerged out of the darkness, confirming that this was the room. Back then, it was here that the frozen figures of the Witch Cultists lined up in this claustrophobic space, but naturally, there was no trace of that this time. Confirming this, Subaru spilled a quiet sigh of relief.

Subaru: “This should go without saying, but, it’s good that no TRAUMA SWITCHES got triggered, huh. Anyways, so far we should be about a third of the way to the mountain cabin, right?”

Petra: “The wind’s so cold… it must be from the other side of the door.”

While Subaru was busy feeling relieved, beside him, Petra was eagerly waiting with anticipation for the NEW STAGE on the opposite side of the door. With “Yeah”, Subaru nodded in agreement,

Subaru: “Last time I touched the door I got an instant GAME OVER. So everything after that point is still completely unknown… well, guess we’ll make it up as we go.”

Having made up this resolve, Subaru unceremoniously placed his hand on the door.

And then, pushing it open, he felt an icy wind washing over his face, flooding into the small room—

Subaru: "—ah?"

Simultaneous with that quiet sound, Subaru noticed that something had struck his belly.

Looking down, he stared at the left side of his waist that had taken the impact. Some kind of skewer was sticking out of it, and to prove that this had happened recently, the butt-end of it was still quivering.

—Watching, as little by little blood seeped into his clothes, Subaru's throat froze.

Petra: "Yyaa—h?!"

In place of the choked-up Subaru, Petra, who noticed the same wound, shrieked at the top of her voice. Its high-pitched sound echoed through the corridor, lashing upon Subaru's eardrums.

In the instant the pain caught up, still not understanding what had happened, Subaru's mind swam with all its might, trying to think of something to do.

Petra's shriek trailed off. The echoing corridor was deprived of sound, until only her noise could be heard. In a world where he should not be hearing anything, Subaru heard that sound.

Of footsteps, and a knife being pulled out of its sheath—

Elsa: "Now, let's fulfill that promise—"

Licking her lips with a red tongue, it was the voice of a murdering monster trembling at the premonition of slaughter.

Chapter 34: World Ending

1

He sensed the portents of incoming pain.

It was an unpleasant sensation, but ever since coming to this world, there had been no shortage of life-threatening injuries in his life. That sensation told him: these next few seconds will decide victory or defeat.

While Petra's shriek echoed down the narrow passage, Subaru reached out his hand towards the two skewer-like things sticking out of the left side of his waist. He knew that the instant he touches them, it will begin. And so, before that, Subaru forced his mind to turn at an incredible rate.

Two darts, not fatal wounds. There were still a few seconds before the pain catches up. Petra was frozen in place. Where did the attack come from? His hand was still touching the door. The high-pitched echo went on. And, in its midst, a murderous voice had snuck into Subaru's ears.

—Elsa's.

Before his eyes, he saw a shadow lurking in the unlighted void. Its posture was low, almost crawling, as if poising itself to strike. It was Elsa.

The projectile that skewered him through the waist was thrown from the other end of the passage. That disgustingly accurate control, aimed directly at the bowels as a matter of doctrine. He almost wanted to applaud.

A stupid thought, a frivolous idea. Why was Elsa here now? There was supposed to be a grace period. Why was she hiding in a hidden passage that no one was supposed to know about? And how did she know? All that can wait. Questions can come later. At this moment just focus on survival and force all brain cells to fire—!

Subaru: "—SHAMAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAC!!"

No weapons, no means to intercept, horrendously unprepared and unready.

Faced with this split-second situation, there was only one thing Subaru could do—or rather, he had already decided in his heart that he would take that one action the moment he encountered Elsa, regardless of appearances.

Answering Subaru's call, his damaged Gate rallied his body's Mana at his chant. Black smoke spouted out from the tip of Subaru's extended right hand—covering the passage in darkness.

A pitch-blackness darker than light-given shadows engulfed the narrow space, instantly dividing Subaru and the immediate threat before him. The expelled smoke had no effect of restricting actual movement. Charge forward, and it will give way like brittle mist. But,

Subaru: "WALL OF INCOMPREHENSION, IF YOU THINK YOU CAN SCALE IT I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU TR—Gaaaaaagghhhh!!"

Before he could finish his taunt, the delayed attack of excruciating pain assaulted Subaru. Beginning with his left hip, the searing heat coursed throughout his body, and his scream sounded out as though the roots of his brain and his lower waist were being pierced by red-hot spits. On top of this were the consequences of spellcasting in his damaged state. Drawing more Mana than his body could afford, he felt the strength of his body sucked dry, and, overcome with exhaustion and fatigue, he fell to his knees.

Yet, it was then that something pulled him from the verge of collapse,

Petra: "Subaru—!"

A small and soft sensation was gripping onto his lifeless hand. He looked, and saw Petra worrying over him, her long lashes trembling and on the brink of tears.

Within her eyes, was fear of circumstances that were beyond her comprehension, as well as rejection of the existence of the preposterous threat closing in before her. But most of all, they held the deep colors of worry for Subaru's safety.

The moment he recognized it, the wrenching pain of his mangled nerves and the soul-rending sense of loss were all forgotten in an instant. And before that effect could fade, he squeezed back on Petra's hand.

Subaru: "Anyways, let's go up—!"

Since they couldn't go forward, their only escape was to go back the same way they came. Even Subaru himself wasn't sure how long Shamac would last. So far, the only improvement was that his body didn't faint after blowing out all his Mana since his body must have grown accustomed after so many uses.

Regardless, he mustn't allow the opportunity granted by the cover of the black mist to slip away—

Subaru: "Gukh… aagahhh?!"

The moment he stepped forward to run, again he was struck by the pain of something sharp gouging into his flesh.

Turning his eyes to the source of the pain, he found four more metal darts nailed into his back from his right shoulder to the base of his neck. Fortunately, the piercing wounds weren't deep, but the pain of having multiple darts as thick as his pinky fingers burrowed into his flesh was only intensified by the sight.

Subaru: "She can see…?!"

She could see through Shamak's smoke? For an instant, Subaru thought this, but he immediately realized that could not be so. Then, intuitively, he understood what Elsa must have done from the other side of the fog.

Having judged the black smoke to be a threat and deciding that diving in would be dangerous, Elsa had blindly thrown her darts through the mist without aiming at anything in particular.

The passage was narrow enough to be filled with three Subaru's side-by-side. If she had the control to aim at the very center of the passage, there was a high probability of hitting somewhere on his back.

The moment he realized this, Subaru yanked on Petra's arm and embraced her against his chest. "Hya!" she squeaked, and just as she got out of the way, the same metal darts as the ones sticking to Subaru's body whizzed past.

If he hadn't pulled her away, the darts would have lined up precisely with her head.

Subaru: "Fuck my life…!"

Spitting out saliva laced with blood, Subaru shook his head as he sprinted down the passage towards the Mansion, pulling on the lagging Petra's arm to force her onward.

His vision was flickering in pain. The world was flashing black and red. A thin blue light was glowing from the dim passageway. That, and the alternating red and black blended into one as the world grew indistinct.

Only a single moment of attack and defense had completely depleted Subaru's energy and stamina.

Even if he returned to the Mansion like this, he would have no immediate means of breaking out of this situation. And, relying only on the hope in front of his eyes, he clenched his jaw and continued to run.

The terror coursing up his neck in that instant was perhaps the sensation of impending death, which was only perceptible due to his countless experiences with "Dying".

Subaru: "—!"

With that terrible fear guiding his neck to turn, his black pupils saw the tracks of death.

"Slicing through the air" would be too simplistic of a description, for the incoming blade was slaying through the air. The curved blade that was the greatest and vilest weapon in Elsa's arsenal—the Kukri knife, bearing down with its own momentum, was spinning vertically with tremendous speed towards Subaru and Petra's backs.

A velocity that made reaction impossible. Sheer power that made parrying unthinkable.

Faced with such a thing, the fact that Subaru could make this sudden motion with his arm was nothing short of miraculous.

He reached out his right hand to catch the tip of the knife with his fingers, and indeed managed to pinch it between his index and middle finger—but without reducing even a fraction of the blade's velocity or power, the middle, ring and pinky fingers on Subaru's right hand scattered into the air.

The knife went on to cut vertically through Subaru's arm straight from the wrist to the elbow, splitting it in two. The chopped off outer flap of the arm slammed into the wall, as the spraying mist of blood dyed the passage and Subaru in dots of red. Screaming. Shrieking. Creating a noise that made one wonder if his throat will break, rip and crack.

His vision filled with red, and his molars fractured under the force of his clenching jaws. He lifted his half-sheared arm. It was red. Only red. He saw something white. But it was instantly turned red. He couldn't think of this thing as belonging to him anymore. It was only an unnecessary object, giving off pain.

Cut it off. Go away. I have no use for an organ that only gives off pain. I don't want you. Go away, begone, fuck off. Fuck you! Just die! die! die!—a touch.

There was the touch of a hand holding onto his. Opposite the limb of nothing but pain, there was still a warmth here. The moment he felt it, his scream stopped. His throat was broken. The neurons in his brain, having gone far beyond their capacity for feeling pain, burst. He forgot the pain. But not that warmth.

Drawing in his arm, he swung out his steps, and shaking his throat that had lost its voice, Subaru ran through the passage painted with blood. Legs. So heavy. Arms. So heavy. Was he pulling them, or were they pulling him? He didn't even know. Didn't know. Didn't know. And didn't want to know.

End of the passage. Back to the staircase. Run up the spiraling stairs and he will be in the Mansion. What will he do once he's in the Mansion? Who will, who could, who can help him there, Emilia, Rem—?

Subaru: "I… wi…ll…!"

Not let it end here. It is not over yet. It cannot end yet.

He couldn't see a way. He didn't find anything. He tried to reach, but hadn't grasped a thing. But how could he throw everything away here?

He looked up. It was a long way to the top of the spiraling stairs. His legs were tangled. His tongue was numb. Life was draining through the blood dripping from his arm. Eroding, fading, he drew up the warmth of his left hand. And,

???: "—Master-baru!!"

The call of a wild beast. And the sound of a heavy object landing from above. On the steps in front of Subaru's eyes, he saw a broad back. Shrouded within the smoke and dust, was an expensive black apron-dress. Her long golden hair swaying in the icy wind, she rose up from her crouched landing.

Seeping through the stern face that turned around—was a familiar emotion of worry,

Subaru: "Fre…deric…"

Frederica: "Don't talk! That wound is… too serious."

Just as he recognized her and tried calling her name, Frederica's face turned pale at the sight of Subaru's wounds. She looked painfully at Subaru's half-sheared-off right arm, and then, trailing her eyes over the blood that covered half of his body,

Frederica: “a…”

With a gasp so quiet as to disappear, she swallowed her breath. That was probably how shocking Subaru’s dreadful state was. By now, owing to the endogenous anesthetics flooding through his brain, Subaru himself had already lost sensitivity to the pain. Breathing raggedly, there was saliva endlessly dripping down the corner of his mouth. Spitting out the overflowing bloody foam in his mouth, Subaru was trying to tell Frederica something,

Subaru: “auuoAgh—!”

Frederica: “—Careful!!”

From across the darkness, the Kukri knife came slashing once more.

The revolving blade pregnant with death was aimed directly at Frederica’s head. Seeing the shimmer of steel, Subaru raised his voice, and Frederica reacted by drawing something from her waist. With a flash—the darkness of the passageway was scattered by sparks, and the curved blade was deflected with a high-pitched ring. What had achieved this was,

Frederica: “It seems we have an intruder.”

Crossing her arms as she said this—there were now clawed gauntlets attached to Frederica’s hands. From that self-possessed reaction, it would seem that she was facing a familiar prey.

In a way, that rugged equipment was all too fitting for someone like Frederica. Ripping the air as she readied her arms before her, Frederica looked back at Subaru,

Frederica: “Get to the Mansion. Signal when you’re at the top. Then I’ll disengage.”

Subaru: “bu…t…”

Frederica: “With your injuries you’ll only get in the way. —Please take care of Petra.”

Though he wanted to stay, Frederica’s final pleading words pushed

Subaru from behind. Swallowing the rest of what he was about to say, Subaru pulled Petra's tiny body close. Compared to dragging her by the arm as he ran, he could be faster if he held her. Petra entered his arm without resistance, and Subaru backed away towards the stairs,

Subaru: "d…on't die…"

Frederica: "Of course not. —I'm not halfway through yet."

Dragging his legs, reluctant to leave, Subaru dashed up the stairs with his sights set on the top. Making his way up the spiral, the sounds of blade clashing on blade followed him from below. The narrow space robbed Elsa of her mobility, so in a direct confrontation it would be a match of raw power. In that case, Frederica may even have a chance of winning—at least, that was the hope he wished to cling to.

Spitting out his crushed molars, Subaru cursed at his useless legs. Faster, defter, every second he spent climbing the stairs brought Frederica a second closer to her fate. Faster faster, to the top, to the top, to the top—

Subaru: "I…m…here!!"

Reaching the top, panting with ragged breaths, his knees dropped onto the carpet. Crawling in that collapsed state, he stuck his head into the passage and shouted down the stairs.

Subaru: "fre, derica! Now—!!"

He could seal the passage to cut Elsa off as soon as Frederica reaches the top of the stairs. Realizing this as he shouted, Subaru turned and tumbled toward the statue-switch that controlled the door. Taking its head in his hand, he waited for Frederica to fly out of the gap. But—

Subaru: "—wh."

The overwhelming crashing roar of a tremendous impact and collapse lashed onto Subaru's ears. Falling building materials breaking into each other spewed up a swirling plume of smoke as it sent tremors through the entire Mansion.

What happened… Subaru left the statue's side and returned to the passage. Then, peering inside—he saw that the winding, spiraling stairs had collapsed as if having vanished into thin air.

Subaru: "This… a."

This destruction was not the consequence of shoddy architecture. Breaking off so cleanly without causing the slightest damage to the passage itself, it was nothing like an unanticipated collapse. It was by design that the stairwell collapsed on its own when some mechanism was activated.

Perhaps it was meant for covering one's tracks after escaping, or, like now, to guard against the passage from being used as an invasion route, though he couldn't be sure which it was. The only thing that was certain was that,

—At this point, Frederica could no longer come back up.

The possibility of Elsa coming up the stairs had been eliminated, yet it also meant that Frederica had doomed herself. Maybe she could defeat Elsa through pure combat strength and come back around the mountains, but Subaru knew, deep down, that this was impossible.

The moment Subaru thought this, his forgotten wounds twinged with pain as he spat out clots of blood. The darts that burrowed within his neck, shoulder, and waist began to eat at his flesh. He tried to pull them out, but his fingers kept slipping, and the fear of mass bleeding made his fingers tremble unresponsively.

Subaru: "no…w's not… the time to be doing this…idiot, I'm…"

There was no time to stop his feet or his thoughts. Whether Frederica's survival was doomed still depended on Subaru's next actions.

Enduring the pain and propping himself on his knees, Subaru tried to stand himself up. But suddenly, he remembered Petra who should still be in his arms. He was holding her when he fled into the office, but where had she—

Subaru: “Pe, tra…?”

Turning his head around, Subaru found her on the opposite end of the room—Petra was near the statue. She was lying on her side as if sleeping. He must have inadvertently dropped her in the chaos.

Perhaps she lost consciousness from exhaustion, and would not respond to Subaru’s calls. Most likely, in a state of extreme fear and fatigue, she had fainted.

As much as he was worried about Frederica’s safety, he must follow her instruction and keep Petra safe. Forcing his trembling knees to stand, Subaru dragged his legs to where Petra had fallen. And, picking up the little girl from the floor,

—He saw the curved blade sticking out from the back of the fallen girl’s head to the base of her neck.

Large volumes of blood had seeped from the wound, and a part of her brain had spilled from the fracture in the back of her head. Her soft, chestnut colored hair had been dyed the deep shade of blood, and her gentle, warm palm will never move again.

He held up his right hand. A miserable clump of flesh missing three of its fingers. When he reached out to stop the curved blade, it had passed right through his arm and struck Petra. Even offering up this much, he hadn’t protected anything.

Subaru: “—aaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!”

From his shattered throat, he howled out that bloody wail.

2

Limping across the Mansion’s carpet, Subaru headed toward the West Wing with the expression of a ghost. Cradled within his arms was Petra’s corpse. He had covered her with a white sheet, so that no one would see the sight of her death.

The look of surprise was still frozen on her lifeless face, which proved the sole consolation that her death was instantaneous. It would have been too cruel if she had to experience the same pain as Subaru on top of losing her life. But he couldn't save her. There was no consolation to be found anywhere.

Subaru: "iIii…"

Didn't he come back so that he could save everyone in the Mansion? Didn't he resolve to do everything in his power to help them?

Once again, he had allowed Petra to be caught in this spiral of death. This was already the third time Subaru had seen Petra die—all of those times, he could have done something to prevent the way they ended.

But unlike last time, when everything was initiated by the Witch Cult, this time, there was a decisive difference.

If Subaru didn't want Petra to be caught in this spiral, he could have opposed Frederica's decision to take Petra as an apprentice.

He should have known the danger of being at his and Emilia's sides.

Subaru: "if i… if only… there's no end to them."

If he were to talk about what he should or could have done, it would go on forever. Subaru knew this. And yet, although he knew, Subaru's weakness was such that he could not bear but to think about them.

In accordance to those broken thoughts, his steps dragged on heavily. The unstoppable flow of blood left a trail of dark-red spots on the carpet, and every single step sent wrenching pain grinding at his nerves.

One step, and then another, the sound of his flesh and spirit shaving away, pain. Even receiving this punishment was a grace. If Subaru had sinned, then Subaru deserved to be punished.

So that the girl in his arms, the woman who stayed so Subaru could escape, and—

Subaru: “rem…”

At the end of his path, the girl who went on sleeping —no calamity must be permitted to touch her.

The West Wing. At last, he had reached the servant’s quarters. Despite choosing the shortest path from the office on the highest floor, it felt like it took a lifetime to drag his wounded body here. The room he was trying to reach was opposite the stairs, at the furthest end of the hallway.

What he would do once he got there was not on his mind even now. His only objective was to get there. His only objective was to touch the girl lying there —for he had already lost the will to live.

He had lost too much blood, and carried away with that flow of blood, his determination and resolve had already drained from his body. This time he had lost too much. Shrouded in this sense of loss, he didn’t seem to be even capable of raising his head as he walked.

So, at least, let it end by her side.

By the side of the only girl in this world whom Subaru could reveal his weakness to.

Dragging a trail of blood behind him, half leaning on the wall, turning that meager intent into obsession, Subaru’s body arrived in front of his destined room—in front of Rem’s bedroom.

Setting the cradled Petra down against the wall, he pulled aside the sheets and closed her eyelids. It was the only thing he could do to dress up her appearance in death. Touching her cheek, and lightly tracing his finger on her lip, he lowered his head at her cold empty vessel,

Subaru: “Sorry… i’m so sorry… I’m a stupid… useless…h.”

There should have been a way, but Subaru’s own stupidity didn’t allow him to see it. The result was Petra being the sacrifice, and his words of apology could no longer reach her.

His falling tears landing on Petra's knees, Subaru shook his head, and lifted the sheets over Petra's lifeless face once more. Then, standing up, he turned around.

Elsa: "—I think it was rather mean to leave me there like that."

On the other end of the hallway, stepping on the same stairs Subaru had just limped down from, was a gorgeous black haired woman. Playing with the ends of her long black braid with the fingers of one hand, she dangled her blood drenched Kukri knife from the other .

A black mantle over a black bodysuit. She was wearing the same combination as when he saw her in the Capital. She was supposed to have been fighting Frederica, but there was not a single trace of battle visible. Whether it was in terms of wounds, or fatigue.

The fact that she appeared here—and the way she appeared, undeniably proved what must have happened to Frederica.

Adding one more to the list of people his apologies could not reach, all Subaru could do was look up to the ceiling, cursing his own incompetence.

Elsa: "You managed to walk this way with those wounds. I'm very impressed."

Subaru: "is… there a prize for that? your life would do fine…"

Elsa: "Can I take that as a profession of love? That my life is your heart's desire?"

Subaru: "i'll trample it to mush… hand it over…"

Wanting to vomit at Elsa's non-sequitur reply, Subaru glared at the murderer as he stood himself up against the wall. Turning up his gaze, he locked Elsa's face in his sights. Her eyes were looking up and down Subaru's torn-up body,

Elsa: "The aroma of blood, the scent of rage, the fragrance of Death… ahh, you are exquisite in every sense. Your intestines are exactly to my liking too, I'm all too pleased to say."

Subaru: "abnormal bitch… what're you going on about…"

Embracing herself, with an expression of ecstasy on her face, Elsa looked at Subaru with a gaze that could not contain its arousal. Even though she was a beautiful woman, those deranged, abnormal eyes injected only disgust and horror into Subaru.

Seeing an emotion of rejection surfacing on Subaru's face, Elsa retained that debauched glamour on her cheeks,

Elsa: "It's nice to talk to you, but… I wouldn't want to be scolded for losing sight of my objective. That spirit and the Half-Witch girl I met in the Capital, do they happen to be home?"

Subaru: "You should've phoned in before coming, would've saved you the trouble. We would've hired some mercenaries and put on a grand big welcome."

Elsa: "You're not going to answer. Then, I better ask your bowels."

Opening her red lips, sensuously wetting it with her peach-colored tongue, she lifted up her knife, and smiled in ecstasy as she licked the drops of blood off the side of its blade.

Then, lowering her posture, she made the blade scream as she dashed forward like a spider. Too fast. Can't imagine intercepting at all. But,

Subaru: "Like hell am I gonna die at your hands…!"

Saying this, Subaru pushed open the door to Rem's bedroom.

Elsa furrowed her brows at Subaru's action, unable to understand, and he felt just the slightest satisfaction to see that reaction.

He had already resigned himself to the fact that there was no way out. His wounds were deep, and he could not stop his life from seeping sway. The fate of this loop was like a candle flame in the wind. In that case, at least he will not give Elsa the satisfaction.

He had no wish to die by those blades. If he will fall into Elsa's hands, he would rather die first. But before that, he will not allow her to be violated.

It would be a euphemism to call it "the bitter choice", but it would mean nothing more than a one-sided lovers' suicide.

If the alternative was the way Petra and Frederica fell under Elsa's blade,

Then, in this world that was ending, he will at least dispatch her with his own hands—

Subaru: "and follow you right after…"

She will go on ahead, and he will follow behind. With this resolve, he turned into Rem's bedroom—

Subaru: "—huh?"

—Lined with bookshelves, row on row, the Forbidden Library welcomed Subaru as he was preparing for the end.

Chapter 35:
The Girl's Gospel

1

Enclosed on all sides, the room was filled with the choking scent of old books.

Stepping through the opened door, stricken by this sight and smell, Subaru's mouth gaped open wordlessly as he realized, half a second too late, that he had stepped onto a floor that did not belong to the place he was hoping for—

—and that this delay in his awareness proved fatal.

Subaru: "The Forbidden Library?!"

He had reached the place which he couldn't find while searching all throughout the Mansion. The undesired timing and the unforeseen opportunity created a vacuum in Subaru's heart, robbing him of the time before the door slammed shut behind him.

Subaru: "—!"

As though shoved forth by a wind from the outside, Subaru's body was sucked into the Library. With the same momentum, the door clamped shut, sending a small breeze tickling the back of Subaru's neck.

Turning around at the violent sound, confirming that the room had been separated from the hallway, he understood.

Why the Forbidden Library opened to him here, and why it had shut its doors.

Subaru: "O-Open it—!!"

Reaching for the doorknob, he noticed the state of his right arm and reached out the left one as well. His blood-drenched fingers wrenched violently at the knob, sending loud clatters into the air, but although the knob was turning, it conveyed none of his intentions to the door. The screech of the knob's futile rotation only served to compound Subaru's agitation.

Beatrice: "—No matter how much you struggle to get out, it's no use, you know."

A voice flew to Subaru's ears from behind while he was desperately wrestling with the door.

Swinging around, and leaning his back against the door flap—he saw the girl in the depths of the Library, staring directly at him with a cold and indifferent gaze.

Long, cream-colored curls and an extravagant dress. A small body, and cute, yet peevish features. She was every bit the same girl that Subaru knew.

Subaru: "Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "You look quite terrible, I suppose. You'll dirty the Library's floor, so don't move around so much…"

Subaru: "Open the door! NOW! LET ME OUT, NOW!!"

Seeing her coldly staring at his wounds, Subaru screamed, ignoring everything Beatrice said. Not hearing her instruction to "stop bleeding everywhere", Subaru flailed his wretched, profusely bleeding right arm,

Subaru: "Why, why did you show up now?! Why! WHY NOW?! LET ME GO BACK! HURRY! NOW! RIGHT NOW!!"

Beatrice: "…And what will you do once you go back, I suppose? Even if you go back with these unsightly wounds, Betty has no idea what you could possibly do."

Subaru: "I know better than anyone that I can't do anything!! But it doesn't matter!!"

He did not want to go back in order to face Elsa, but to enter the room where he was supposed to be, to go to that sleeping girl's side,

and—

Subaru: “If I’m in the Library, and Door Crossing is lifted… then that murderer would, the room…”

When she realizes that Subaru had vanished, that lunatic would probably find herself tilting her head. Before searching the Mansion for the disappeared Subaru, she would find the lonely girl sleeping inside. What that wanton murderer would do when she finds her, defenseless in her sleep—did not warrant a second thought.

Subaru: “THAT’S WHY—!”

Beatrice: “It’s already too late, you know.”

Subaru, roaring at the top of his lungs as if to shake off this surging apprehension, was instantly washed over by Beatrice’s abrupt and poignant whisper.

Seeing her cast down her eyes and shake her head, for a moment, Subaru froze. His brain chewed over the meaning of her words, and his thoughts came to a halt.

—What did this girl say just now?

Subaru: “Too late… what do you… mean?”

Beatrice: “The reason why you think you want to go back to that room… is already gone, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…”

In front of Subaru’s disjointed question, Beatrice gave this dispassionate reply.

His throat choked up, his eyes opened to their limits, and, by the time he realized it, he had fallen to his knees. His shoulders dropped, his head faced downwards, and a terrible ring echoed within his skull.

Pain, pain, the forgotten pain revived as noise eroded Subaru’s consciousness. It would be alright if only everything could be drowned in that noise and be swept away, he honestly thought. He didn't want to understand any of it. He didn't want to realize it. Nonetheless,

Beatrice: "Your wounds, let me see them, I suppose. They're too miserable, I can't stand looking at them."

Walking up to Subaru, who had collapsed onto the floor, Beatrice folded her knees and looked over the wounds on his right arm, left waist and right shoulder, casting him a frown of reproach. A faint light covered over her hand, which she pressed against his most severely wounded right arm —replacing the heat of pain, something of an itch coursed through his arm. And, along with the sound of splashing water, the fabric of his flesh began to mend.

The bleeding stopped, and slowly, and slowly, answering to the light, a membrane spread over the open wound as the sheared off area was repopulated with cells spurring to recovery. Although,

Beatrice: "It will take time to return to its original width, and your missing fingers won't be coming back, I suppose. …The wounds on your hip and shoulder—."

Subaru: "…what the hell are you doing."

A voice devoid of emotion leaked from Subaru's lips.

Intent on healing his wounds, Beatrice furrowed her brows and held out her palm, emanating with healing energy, in front of Subaru's eyes,

Beatrice: "I don't like this either. But I have no choice, so I'm treating your wounds. Betty is the only one in the Mansion who can heal such extensive wounds, I suppose. You should thank me you know."

Subaru: "heal… my wounds…? what for…?"

Beatrice: "These wounds would be life-threatening if left alone, I suppose. And though I don't particularly care whether you live or die, I would rather you not die here."

Closing one eye, perhaps disregarding Subaru's words as delirium from his injuries, Beatrice uttered this cold reply as she prepared to continue healing. But,

Subaru: "—gh."

Beatrice: "Ah."

Sensing the healing waves burying away his wounds, Subaru swung his injured arm aside, prompting a small sound of surprise from Beatrice.

He taxed his trembling knees and rolled onto his side, painting large swathes of the Forbidden Library's floor in red as he distanced himself from her, all the while keeping his ghastly stare fixed upon her face.

Panting with ragged breaths, his frantic movements dislodged the darts buried in his hip. Shrill clatters rang out as they landed on the floor, followed by the sound of free-flowing liquid that was blood flowing from his wounds. Streaming down his thighs, and spreading out from his knees, it flooded over the floor in a river of blood.

Beatrice's breath stopped at this sight, while Subaru bared his teeth,

Subaru: "I don't need any healing…! IF YOU DON'T CARE WHETHER I LIVE OR DIE… WHY DID YOU BOTHER SAVING ME?!"

Beatrice: "That's because… you were too unsightly. I couldn't bear to look…"

Subaru: "Why… why me?! If you wanted to save someone, why didn't you save Petra… or Frederica?! If we had your help, even if we didn't fight, we could've just ran away…anything would have been better…!"

If they had Door Crossing to separate them from the outside world, they would have been able to stay beyond the reach of Elsa's relentless pursuit. If used the correct way, there is no better ability specialized for escape. Whether it was Petra, who didn't run away until it was too late, or Frederica, who stayed behind to cover their escape, or Rem, sound asleep in her bed—!

Subaru: “You could’ve saved all of them…! I’m weak, I’m stupid… but you could have done it… so why didn’t you…?”

Beatrice: “Why would Betty… there was no reason for Betty to help those people you spoke of, I suppose. No reason that I know of. It was none of my business.”

Subaru: “In that case…! You had no reason to save me either, did you?!”

Watching Beatrice reluctantly shaking her head at his plea, Subaru slammed the floor with his right arm that was still in the process of healing.

Subaru: “Why did you help me?! Why did you save me?! Was it all just on a whim? What made me any different from the rest of them?! Rem was always a good girl, there were things Frederica still wanted to do… and Petra was still so small… they were all far more worth saving than me! Didn’t their lives also have meaning… have value?!”

Beatrice: “Value? Meaning? Why should Betty respect such conceited inventions, I suppose. Your arrogance is beyond intolerable, Human!”

Subaru: “Where the hell is the logic in that?! First you wouldn’t see me when I was looking all over for you, then you choose a critical time like this to show up! If you didn’t see any value in me or those girls… you should’ve just kept minding your own business and stayed shut up in this room!!”

Why did she have to appear now, after everything was already too late?

She could have stayed hidden so that even Elsa couldn’t have detected her, but now, once Elsa realizes where Subaru had gone, Beatrice’s existence could very well have been exposed.

In that case, there was a chance that even this girl wouldn’t be able to escape the murderer’s blade. So why did she take such risks to let a half-dead Subaru in?

Why did she save him now, when he had already lost the will to live, and wanted only death?

Subaru: “I don’t care if you did this on a whim, but… if you want to save me… if you still have even a shred of desire to help me… then kill me… now…”

Beatrice: “What… are you saying, I suppose…”

Subaru: “NOW! ME! KILL ME NOW! Before everything is written down, before everything becomes irreversible! Kill me! KILL! KILL ME!”

Spewing up blood mixed with spit, clawing at the floor with both his maimed right hand and his remaining left hand, Subaru shrieked out his appeal.

Before his reason to live becomes entirely lost, before his inaction leads him to an unrecoverable future.

He shrieked for this useless, powerless, incompetent mass to be extinguished from this world.

But Beatrice did not accept his plea that was carried within the shrieking of his very soul.

She shook her head, and with a look confusion and displeasure emerging on her face,

Beatrice: “I don’t understand, I don’t understand at all. I can’t understand you Humans, I suppose. Why are you… why would you say such a thing now, when you still have your life?”

Subaru: “You aren’t saving me by saving my life! Right now this life is nothing but agony! It shouldn’t be here, I shouldn’t be here… If you’re saying you won’t save me…”

If he can’t depend on others, then he will just put an end to this miserable existence himself—

Seeing Subaru's breath pause with this resolve, Beatrice let slip a small sound.

Beatrice: "ah."

And, as her voice entered his ears, without hesitation, Subaru stuck out his tongue, and,

Subaru: "—!"

Biting down with all his force, he committed to this suicidal act.

Excruciating pain. Pain of an entirely different magnitude from the pain of his right arm. No matter how much he experiences it, he can never develop tolerance to this. No matter how the injury was incurred, no matter which part of his body it came from, it was always new, excruciating, intolerable pain that he could never grow used to. Regardless of where or when, all pain is equal in that sense.

Blood pouring from his mouth, Subaru turned up the whites of his eyes and fainted on the spot.

Falling over, his eyes swam as his limbs began to spasm. Agonizing pain. Unable to breathe. His near-severed tongue lodged itself in his throat, suffocating him from within.

Beatrice: "—what're you doing?!"

It was not the kind of injury that resulted in immediate death. The acute, dull pain pulsated, shocking his brain in fits. His limbs shook uncontrollably as streams of bloody tears ran across his cheeks, conveying his unbearable agony. The half-severed tip of his tongue dangled from the edge of his lips, indicative of Subaru's insufficient resolve at the final moment of his act to end his life.

Since coming to this Parallel World, this was the third time that Subaru had chosen to commit suicide.

The first was during the loop in the Mansion, when he killed himself with the resolve to bring back what was irretrievable.

The second was at the end of the loop that began within the

Capital, where he killed himself when he realized that Rem's existence had been wiped from this world. He had stabbed a knife into his throat, but nothing was changed.

And the third time he killed himself—although he had no guarantee that he would be able to return, he simply could no longer endure living on in this world. It was too heavy, and too unreasonable a burden. And so, staking everything on this slightest hope, in order to retrieve what he had lost—

Beatrice: "…no… don't leave me all alone…"

A trembling voice called to him from the world that was growing distant.

The voice grew further, and further, until it disappeared entirely—

2

—When he woke, the first thing that struck Subaru's nostrils was the scent of dust.

Subaru: "huh…?"

Waiting for his consciousness to catch up, turning his neck with his eyes still closed, Subaru realized that he had awoken.

Lying sideways on the ground, feeling the coldness of the surface seeping into his body, it went without saying that the restart point was still inside the Tomb.

Then, sitting his body up, he opened his eyes to look over his dark surroundings. His vision, obscured by tears, was still unreliable so soon after waking, and could not make out what he was searching for.

Nevertheless, he was relieved to have returned from death once more. If the place he returned to was the Tomb, then the restart point hadn't changed.

Inside the Tomb, the time would be immediately after Subaru passed the first Trial. Emilia would be collapsed at his side, and he should start by waking her up.

Subaru: “head, hurts…”

Rubbing himself between the brows, lightly shaking his head, Subaru’s mind worked to organize his current circumstances.

There were already countless things for him to consider without the events of the previous loop added on top. Still, he hadn’t found a single solution. Even the light he was supposed to have seen now felt like a moth lamp luring him into another trap.

As though circumventing one pitfall had only led him to another.

Subaru: “It’s like that free gift you get from that shady fellow on Kenzan…”

“Deadly” would be an appropriate description here.

The Sanctuary and the Trials. His relationship with Garfiel. The attack on the Mansion. The inexplicable disappearance of the grace period, his vengeance against Elsa—and how to save Rem and the others.

They were all problems that would turn his brain to mush, but he was already fortunate enough to have been granted the chance to continue worrying over them.

Otherwise, it could have all ended there, and he was not entirely without some sense of resignation to that possibility. But as long as that much can be overcome, he will be able to save everything—

Subaru: “It’ll be painful to have to pretend not knowing anything in front of Emilia again, but—”

Mumbling this, Subaru felt his hazy vision beginning to clear. Snorting the dust out of his nose, he decided he should first look for Emilia.

With that thought, he lifted his right hand to his forehead like a visor, when he finally noticed it.

—His right hand was missing three of its fingers.

Subaru: “N—?! Aah?!”

Seeing the wound that should not be there, the scars that could not possibly be carried over, Subaru’s throat groaned in shock. Struck by the fact that he had taken a far too optimistic view of the world, he cast his trembling eyes over his surroundings.

Cold floor, dry stone walls. The smell of mold. The space that Subaru had hoped for was the Tomb. But the reality in front of his eyes was a corner of the Library lined with packed-full bookshelves, a room drifting with the unique fragrance of vellum enduring the passage of time,

Subaru: “The Forbidden Library… how, d…”

Inexplicably, his physical body was still in the place he should already have bid farewell to. His thoughts turning to the worst, Subaru began checking over his body.

The worst possibility—was that the moment he set foot into the Forbidden Library, the checkpoint of the world had been set.

Unable to hide his consternation, Subaru stared at the right arm he was holding up to his face. Three fingers were missing, and a third of its width was lost. However, the wounds of the arm had already been sealed, and the contorted, discolored flesh was in the process of regeneration.

His waist and right shoulder that had been pierced by darts showed no apparent injuries, and there was only an intermittent sense of discomfort and a strained sensation on his skin.

At the very least, this could not have been the moment he stepped into the Forbidden Library. Then, by the process of elimination, there could only be one possibility.

Beatrice: “—You’re finally awake, I suppose.”

For Subaru, who had realized that fact, this was the voice he least wanted to hear.

That careless attitude, that bored-with-the-world intonation, obviously worried but trying her hardest to suppress it, that voice in soprano that was deep down desiring some connection.

Without moving from his seat on the floor, Subaru turned his head.

Even now, he did not abandon the faint hope that he would see the silver-haired girl behind him. But instead, shattering that fantasy, was a young girl in a dress, seated on a wooden stepladder.

Appearing no different than before he lost consciousness, it was Beatrice, looking down at Subaru, holding a book in her hands.

Seeing an inadvertent sigh leaking from Subaru's mouth, she slammed her book shut, and slowly stepped down from her stepladder,

Beatrice: "All because of your stupid actions, I had to really struggle, you know. The injuries on your arm, shoulder, hip, and tongue should all be healed now. There shouldn't be any discomfort."

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "You just picked up your life and you have nothing to say, I suppose? Well, hopefully this taught you a lesson to not do anything stupid anymore…"

Subaru: "you… do you have any idea what you've done?"

Beatrice: "w…?"

Saying these as if asking to be thanked, Beatrice approached the silent Subaru only to be met by these wrenched out words. And, the moment her face frowned up,

Subaru: "—!"

Subaru suddenly stood up from the ground, and, shooting out his left arm, he grabbed Beatrice by her extravagant dress. "Ah!", her mouth opened in surprise as he pulled her close, bringing her face up against his, Subaru: “—WHO THE HELL ASKED YOU TO SAVE ME??!!”

Beatrice: “—Ah.”

Subaru: “Do you realize what you’ve done?! Because of you, it was all for nothing! Everything, everything that I could have fixed is put at risk because of you! Why didn’t you just let me die?! I’m still alive, but what good is that… WHAT GOOD IS THAT?! WHAT?!”

By acting without regard for his life, Subaru should have earned the right to start over.

But he was held back by the girl in front of him, and his wish was not granted. And all that remained to Subaru now was an indescribable sense of loss and endless rage directed towards Beatrice.

Subaru: “Saving me on a whim, healing my injuries… are you satisfied now? You want me to thank you? Ah, yeah, thank you! Thank you for saving my life! Even though everything else is already lost, at least MY LIFE’S BEEN SAVED!”

Beatrice: “B-Betty was only… only…”

Subaru: “You came for me at the very last moment, how can I thank you enough?! Of course, as usual, there you are looking down on me with that carefree expression like there’s not a hurry in the world. You’re good at it, aren’t you? You like that, don’t you? Looking down and sneering at the little Human beings and—a.”

Reaching the extreme limits of hatred, his face contorted with a grotesque smile, Subaru pulled Beatrice close and showered these insults upon her. With this heartless act, he tried to bury all his dejection, disappointment and loss. And yet, his words abruptly ended—

Beatrice: “—kh.”

Subaru: “Ah…”

—When he saw large droplets of tears falling from the eyes of the girl he was holding up-close.

Seeing them, the blood that was rushing to his head instantly fell, and the ugly vindictiveness he had just let slip now became more terrifying than he could bear.

With the unraveling of his spite, his fingers loosened from Beatrice's body. Suddenly freed from his grasp, the young girl's body leaned backwards into the bookshelf behind her, and dropped to her knees.

A fierce nausea rose up in his chest. Becoming aware of what he had just done, he could not stand the hideousness of his own heart.

Ugly. Twisted. What was it except lashing out? To Beatrice, who knew nothing about his "Return by Death", she was merely healing his wounds when he was on the verge of death. Instead of thanking the person who had saved his life, he had abused her for no reason at all.

He understood this logically. But his emotions did not accept it. Tossed around from within by the two polar extremes of his heart, searching for something to say, he lifted his eyes towards the fallen Beatrice,

Subaru: "No… I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to… it wasn't… your fault…"

If it was anyone's fault, it was undoubtedly Subaru's.

Knowing what would happen, without doing anything to guard against it, he had walked directly into the tiger's den and stepped on its tail. Once again, it was those around him who paid the price. And now, to blame everyone but himself —was beyond the limits of Pride.

Emotionally, he wanted to blame everything on this uninformed girl. And he still couldn't swallow his emotions of the fact that she had hidden herself from him only to show up in that instant.

Nevertheless, they could do nothing to pardon him for the reproaches he shouted at that girl.

Subaru: "I'm sorry. My wounds… thank you for healing them. But now, I must…"

At least, he should go somewhere away from her, and choose a different place to kill himself.

There was no longer any reason for Subaru to continue on in this world. Too much had been lost. And Subaru was not strong enough to live in a world without what he couldn't bear to lose.

So, with these concise words of gratitude, Subaru averted his eyes and prepared to leave the Forbidden Library—

Subaru: "…"

—When he noticed, dropped at the collapsed Beatrice's side, there was a tome bound all in black.

Plain cover. Thick structure. It was the size of a large dictionary, and appeared heavy enough to be unwieldy. In any case, there was a certain familiarity that Subaru could not pull his eyes away from.

Why here, why is it here now?

Subaru: "The Gospel… is in the dragon carriage… it shouldn't… be here in the Library…"

The Witch Cult's Gospel that once belonged to Petelgeuse, taken from him after his death, was now in Subaru's possession. But, having decided that it was not a book that belonged in a Library, he had kept it himself while taking extreme cautions of the unknown functions it may have served. So how could it be here?

Shaking his head at the incomprehensible situation, Subaru reached out his hand to the Gospel that had dropped on the floor, hoping that checking its contents would dispel this unease. But,

Beatrice: "—No!"

Before Subaru's hand could reach it, the Gospel was snatched away.

Messing up the hems of her dress, with panting breaths, Beatrice clasped the Gospel in her arms as she backed away from Subaru. Keeping distance between them, holding back her sobs, she looked down towards the Gospel in her arms, and appeared to breathe a sigh of relief as she traced her fingers over its covers.

Seeing that gesture as though she was caressing something dear, an ominous dread crept up in Subaru's heart,

Subaru: "Why are you… treating that thing like it's something important to you?"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "That's the book those Witch Cultists have… isn't it? It isn't, is it? It just looks really similar, but they're completely different things, right? You just didn't want me to misunderstand, and that's why you backed away from me, right? Yeah, I know I have a bad habit of jumping to conclusions, and I can get really stubborn when ideas get stuck in my head, and I said mean things to you and my eyes are scary-looking and my personality is all twisted but…"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "Hey—you'll deny it, won't you?"

While Subaru rambled on and on, trying to make excuses on her behalf, Beatrice only kept her silence. Until, he could only beg.

@floating

Seeing him this way, Beatrice let slip a small sigh, and held out the book in her hands so that Subaru could see it,

Beatrice: “It’s exactly as you imagined. …This is a Gospel. As you said, it is the same as the ones in the Witch Cultists’ possession. The guide to happiness. The foundation of life. And the only, singular truth, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Wh-Why… do you have it? Do they sell it somewhere? A L-LUCKY ITEM that tells your future or something? Some kind of real-life walkthrough that totally breaks the game balance or…ahh, come on.”

Beatrice: “…Betty… hasn’t been instructed to answer that question, I suppose.”

To Subaru’s trembling voice, Beatrice flipped quickly through the pages and gave him this cold reply. Seeing the girl’s eyes focused on the contents of her book, Subaru felt a numbness encroaching on his tongue,

Subaru: “You won’t do anything… unless the book tells you to?”

Beatrice: “That question was not written in the book.”

Subaru: “What about healing my wounds? And sheltering me in the Forbidden Library when I was going to be killed?”

Beatrice: “Those questions were not written in the book, I suppose.”

Subaru: “And what about talking with me just now? And saving me… when I was trying to die…?”

Beatrice: “—I don’t know.”

Casting down her eyes, Beatrice only returned this emotionless reply.

To see her like a doll, devoid of all emotions, Subaru’s lungs convulsed in horror. With light flickering in his eyes such that he forgot how to breathe, he shouted at the top of his voice,

Subaru: “SO YOU CAN’T DO A SINGLE THING UNLESS THE BOOK TELLS YOU SO?!”

Beatrice: “…Yes, I suppose. That is so. Everything of everything is in accordance with the Gospel’s guidance. That is the meaning of Betty’s life, and the purpose for which Betty exists.”

Subaru: “So…helping me was just written in that book as well?! Saving me when I was dying from the witchbeasts in the forest! And saving me when my heart was worn to its core! Our jokes, our arguments, all that time we had fun playing around like idiots… none of it was your free will… IS THAT WHAT YOU’RE TELLING ME?”

Beatrice: “That’s… THAT’S WHAT I’M TRYING TO TELL YOU, I SUPPOSE!!”

Covering over the last part of Subaru’s scathing words, Beatrice shouted back, her face flushing in anger. Taking one step forward, she pointed a single finger at Subaru,

Beatrice: “Everything that Betty has done, and seen, and said up to now is written in here, I suppose. You… something like you will never move Betty’s heart. There should be a limit to your arrogance I suppose, Human.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “Betty will do what is expected of Betty, and fulfill the meaning of my existence. This life, this span of time, and all that I have sacrificed is for this purpose… AND I WILL NOT DENY IT FOR THE LIKES OF YOU…!!”

Subaru: “Bea…”

Emotions flooded from Beatrice like a broken dam. And although he tried to speak in that instant, he was silenced by an abrupt, overwhelming pressure from the front.

Feeling the sensation of being forced back by a wind, unable to resist, Subaru realized that his body was being pushed towards the door. —And, just like that, he was flung off of his feet.

Subaru: “Sto… Beatrice!”

Beatrice: “Betty’s everything is for Mother! And Mother is the only one Betty needs! I don’t care about you… I don’t care…”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “I don’t care. I hate you. I hate you. —I HATE YOU!”

Shaking her head and hiding the tears streaming down her cheeks, the girl screamed to Subaru as he was flung through the air.

The door opened. The space of the Forbidden Library was driving Subaru out. Before he passed through the door, he clasped onto the doorframe with his right hand. But, with fewer than three fingers, it was not nearly enough. Only his index finger held on, but even that only gave him a few seconds of respite.

Lifting his face, Subaru tried to shout to the crying girl—

Subaru: “Beatri—!”

Beatrice: “…u.”

Drowned out by her quiet voice, Subaru’s call did not reach her.

Blown away. Wiped out. Space distorted as Subaru’s physical body was expelled into a place that shouldn’t exist.

Beatrice: “…”

The door thundered shut, the gushing wind halted with the sound, and silence descended on the Library once more.

The girl who was left alone, with an expression as if holding back her sobs, slowly walked into the depths of the room—stepping onto her usual stepladder and quietly sitting down, she hugged her knees and opened the Gospel with her trembling fingertips. Then, Beatrice: “Why… couldn’t Betty… ever…”

In front of the wordless, blank pages, only her sobs resounded pointlessly throughout the silence of the room.

Chapter 36:
At The End of Confusion

1

The moment he was ejected from the door, Subaru felt a sense of weightlessness as though the sky and the earth had been reversed.

Subaru: “—Oooguaah?!”

The pain of his back striking the solid ground wrenched out all the air from his lungs and left his throat gasping for breath. Carried on by the momentum, he went tumbling across the floor and was only stopped by smashing into a wall. Shaking his head to cast off the ejected sensation, still dazzled from the pain, Subaru lifted his face and opened his eyes.

Subaru: “Beatrice… hg.”

Giving voice to the name of the girl whose name he failed to call at their parting, it was already too late for it to reach her.

The moment Door Crossing was activated, an insurmountable gap had been opened between them. Her rejection was so fierce and deep that Subaru’s voice could no longer touch her.

Subaru: “Why do I… always…!”

Was there really no way for him to realize his own mistakes except by failing and picking the worst possible choice?

All he wanted was to take the optimal actions leading to the best possible future, but why was he always too weak, foolish, and insufficient?

Subaru: “What are you doing with a Gospel… just, what’s with you…?!”

The existence of the black-bound book in her hands—the Gospel decisively opened a distance between them.

Until this point, Subaru had been convinced that despite the short amount of time he and Beatrice had spent together, there was certainly “Something” that existed between them.

Even though they were always taunting each other, expressing their mutual displeasure at seeing each other, Subaru nonetheless believed that as long as there was that something, things could never come to an end between them.

But that was only presumption. Conceit. Misaligned understanding in the extreme.

Subaru’s conviction was nothing more than the product of his self-satisfaction, and Beatrice never held any sentiments towards him except the literal meanings of her words. She was merely following the Gospel’s orders, and was only putting up with Subaru in order to fulfill her purpose. All the while, in her heart, she was indifferent, or even despised him.

Subaru: “…is that really how it is?”

The bond he thought was there was declared to be nonexistent, and his attempts to deny it were cut off by Beatrice’s angered cries.

As Subaru imagined, their connection was confirmed to be counterfeit. She had never been moved in the slightest by Subaru’s existence, and there was only ever the sense of necessity behind her actions.

Subaru: “All those times you smiled, got mad, or protected me… were they all just some lies written in a script…?”

How is that possible, Subaru’s brittle heart still denied it. In that final moment, Beatrice’s tearful voice at their parting had drawn a mist over the veracity of her words.

No matter what, it was still too early for him to come to that conclusion.

Subaru: “Who cares if it’s written inside some book, all I remember is that you saved me… nothing can change that fact. It’s a debt that only I remember.”

In the loops beginning in the Mansion, more than once, Subaru had been saved by Beatrice.

There were all those times when he loitered in the Forbidden Library to gather his thoughts after Return by Death, and when she more literally saved his life when he was littered with the witchbeasts' curses. And, in that lost world where he had allowed Rem to die, when he was hounded by Ram and Roswaal, she went so far as to twist the meaning of their offhand verbal Contract in order to protect him.

Even if that great debt no longer existed anywhere in this world, it still remained within Subaru's heart.

Subaru: "That time… I was glad."

Even when he was convinced that there was no one left on his side, she saved him nonetheless.

When he thought Rem and Ram were his enemies, when he couldn't fathom Roswaal's intentions, and when he was worn to his core when even Emilia couldn't completely trust him, Beatrice alone had saved him.

Just how much that temporary, transient Contract had saved him was beyond what words could convey, and a kindness he could never fully repay.

Subaru: "I'll repay that debt. I still don't know whether you loaned it to me of your own free will, or if you were following that book's wishes… but I'll find out."

Obviously, he could no longer ask her now after she had so firmly rejected him. So, since Subaru's resolve no longer held any meaning in this world, it will just have to be carried over to the next one.

He held up his right arm. Hand missing three of its fingers. Shoulder and hip twinging. Head banged up. And tongue slightly shortened. Every last one dealt him pain impossible to forget.

He saw Rem beneath his closed eyelids. And Petra. And Frederica. And Beatrice, with her back turned to him. And, at last, there was

Emilia.

—Everything that Subaru had failed to grasp because of his mistakes in this world.

In order to retrieve what was lost, he will commit himself to do what he must. To continue what Beatrice had interrupted, and once again dive into that spiral,

Subaru: "…"

Subaru held out his shortened tongue and gathered the resolve to bite into it once more.

But, just the thought of his botched suicide resurrected his anguish, and seized him with fear once more. Hesitation surfaced, and his legs began to tremble. Word games like resolve are worthless when faced with the end.

Holding back such counterproductive emotions, overcoming the unsurpassable dread of impending death and praying to be returned to a time when he could still fix everything, Subaru shut his eyes for the final moment—

Subaru: "…where… is this place?"

He realized that the room where Door Crossing had dumped him was a place he had never seen before.

2

To Subaru, this was an unknown space completely different from the familiar Roswaal Mansion.

Damp stone slabs, and grimy walls covered in sprawling ivy. Randomly arranged tables with rusted metal tools scattered over them that evoked unease by sight.

And above all,

Subaru: "Uu—?!"

A dense, putrid stench, which, once noticed, could no longer be severed from his mind.

It was different from the rotten stench of organic waste, but there was no other way to describe it but as a horrid rotting stench that injected him with the urge to vomit. Quickly covering his mouth, Subaru's empty stomach retched out all of its fluids.

Seeing the yellow stomach bile splashing onto the floor, panting, Subaru glared through his surroundings. The more he looked, the stranger the unknown space appeared.

A dark room covered by stone slabs, its space was about twice the area of the drawing room in Roswaal's Mansion. It wasn't large enough to be considered spacious, but it couldn't be called cramped either.

Strewn about one corner of the room were tables with mysterious instruments scattered on top, and opposite the tables—littering the vast majority of the room, were,

Subaru: "Broken tables and… crystals…? Crystals or, fragments of magic minerals? And then this hole…"

Looking at the ground before him, there were carcasses of broken tables and deactivated magic crystals scattered across the floor, and even further ahead, was a wide, gaping hole about four meters in diameter. In the absence of sufficient lighting, it was all the more impossible to gauge the true depth of the pitfall.

If he turned up his head, he would see pale blue light emanating from glowing moss on the walls. Like the ones growing freely in the forests, they absorb mana from the atmosphere to fuel their light. The forests surrounding the Mansion were spared from absolute darkness by the light of these very same moss along with the light of the stars.

Feeling his way across the floor with the aid of moss-light, enduring the unpleasant sensation of moisture soaking into his pants and the slime sticking to his palms, he peeked into the depths of the hole.

A quiet, cold wind swept up from below, carrying a nose-turning—or rather, nose-demolishing stench along with it.

Subaru: “Uu… pugh. Not having the courage to look inside would’ve been the correct choice, huh… what is that smell?”

If it had been a stench characteristic of something harboring life, then Subaru’s imagination might have turned to the worst. But this rising stench was something different from that of rotting flesh, and was closer to a strong chemical smell.

Like the sensation of sniffing some stringent medicine, a painful shock jolted his nose. The stench rising from the dark bottom of this pit was wholly unlike the scent of any living organism.

Subaru: “—something else.”

Both physically and mentally unwilling to check the bottom of the pit again, Subaru wiped off his nose and consciously breathed through his mouth as he looked around the room.

The first thing his eyes landed on were the scattered carcasses of tables and expended magic crystals. The metal tables seemed to have been crushed by some tremendous impact, and the magic crystals appeared to have been stacked on the tables before that. Slowly flipping over one of the mangled tables, he noticed some sort of pattern engraved on its surface.

Subaru: “Looks like… some kind of magic circle…”

Magic circles like this show up quite a lot in Alternate-World Fantasy genres, but Subaru couldn’t recall seeing anything similar since coming to this world. Basically, the magic in this world passes through living bodies to interfere with the outside world, and aside from magic lamps and Metias, Subaru had yet to find any exceptions.

So he was quite surprised to find a magic circle here, but,

Subaru: “Actually, does it even do anything? If it does, then… why would they leave the circle in a place like this…”

Could it be that the magic couldn’t be activated here directly, and was instead meant to serve some remote functionality? Or perhaps it was some kind of system to run the spell continuously without the caster being present?

Subaru: “If that was the case, it’d explain why there’re so many used up magic crystals next to it.”

After the magic crystals serving as its energy source were depleted, the magic circle lost its power—that would be the most plausible explanation. But, despite reaching this conclusion, what Subaru still did not understand was the true purpose of the hole and the broken tables. Nor could he completely rule out the possibility that the room had been purposely designed to explode in the event that the spell was interrupted.

Regardless,

Subaru: “In the end… I still have no idea where I am.”

A dark hole seemingly going down forever. A magic circle used for some kind of spell, surrounded by magic crystals. Looking over the rotting, putrid room, he saw another tipped-over table in the corner—and picked up one of the rusted metal tools beside it.

Resembling a plier or nipper, it was the kind of utensil one might use when crafting plastic models. It was covered in the same slime that was smeared across the floor, and, more importantly, perhaps due to the passage of time in which it had spent in disuse, it disintegrated into dust at the touch of Subaru’s hand.

Not only the tools, but the table was in the same condition. After years upon years of exposure, its bent legs had deteriorated to the brink of dust, and when he nudged it with his foot with the slightest force, it lost its shape and transformed into powdered iron.

There was no other information to be gained beyond that. But if there was just one point he could not get out of his mind, it would be,

Subaru: “The way this was destroyed, and its timing, was drastically different from the table in front of the hole…”

Unlike the one which had become brittle from the passage of time before welcoming its collapse, the table beside the hole was obviously crushed by some destructive force. And, judging from the state of the ground beneath it, its destruction came extremely recently—probably within the last few days.

Subaru: “A room destroyed… by whom, and why…”

Muttering this question, Subaru suddenly realized that his thinking was somewhat ridiculous.

What was the point of asking this? It was not the kind of question that could be answered by thinking alone, and more importantly, the problems that Subaru had to deal with were already more than his arms could hold.

He mustn’t allow himself to be weighed down by small matters in between the large, which would only serve to hasten his collapse. Above all, the very act of distracting his attention away was nothing more than desperately dragging out the unbearable agony of the time before his impending suicide.

But, even recognizing this unopposable sense of “Shame”, Subaru could not pull himself away from the strangeness of this room. At this point, there was something very important right in front of him—

Subaru: “…”

Guided by an inexplicable certainty, Subaru felt his way forward, turning his head about, searching for the room’s exit. Since he was brought here by “Door Crossing, this room must have a closeable door that tossed him out.

At last, Subaru found the door that had so rudely dropped him off—a small flap installed on the upper part of the wall, perhaps used for ventilation or the likes.

Other than that, he could see nothing else that could be considered an exit. The official door might be on the other side of the collapsed pit—in the opposite, unreachable end of the room.

When this fact finally sank in, Subaru had to give up on the notion of leaving in any conventional way. Wiping off the sweat and the unknown slime stuck to his palms onto his pants, he held his breath as he reached his fingers towards the flap.

The flap was at a height he had to stretch up on his tiptoes to reach, and its size would be closest to a garbage disposal chute. Although it wasn't too narrow for a person to pass through, it wasn't so luxurious that Subaru could fit through easily.

After some struggling owing to his maimed right hand, the rusted flap creaked open, and the effort to maneuver his body into the narrow tunnel began. The tunnel was the width of a ventilation pipe. In the worst case, he imagined it'd be a paradise for insect and rats, but it turned out to be surprisingly clean—or, not exactly, but at least the fact that the dusty passage was free of living critters was a saving grace.

It took about three minutes before he passed through the tunnel. He got used to the crawling about halfway through, and just as his movements started getting smooth, he found himself at the finishing line. Popping out in the room connected by the ventilation tunnel, Subaru jumped down in the same manner, and started looking over his surroundings. He took the greatest caution to make sure there wasn't another pit here, but,

Subaru: "It's got a different vibe from the previous one. Compared to the one that looked like a lab this one's more like a waiting room."

Only about a half of a half of the size of the previous room, it appeared to be a room whose sole purpose was to be passed through. Other than two walk-though-on-the-ground type of doors, there was nothing else in the room. Certainly, it was a waiting room-esque room.

It'd be perfect if there was a coffee table with some magazines stacked on it—

Subaru: “Judging by the direction I came from, the other side of this door would be… yeah.”

Turning the knob and pushing open the door, he was greeted by the collapsed pit in front of his eyes. Seeing this death-trap situation, Subaru spilled a small sigh and closed the door again for the sake of his mental health. —And, smelling the putrid stench seeping into this room, he kicked himself for not being quicker with his decision.

Then, quietly turning around, this time he faced the opposite door. Behind that door, would be a space completely unknown to Subaru —

Subaru: “…hg.”

The sweat on his palm that was supposed to have been wiped off and the cold sweat dripping down his back became unbearable.

Since he didn’t know what was beyond that door, he could only imagine and prepare for the worst.

Subaru: “If… this is inside the Mansion, then…”

Although it could just be another room he had never seen before, it was also possible that the moment he opened this door, he would find Elsa on the other side. If he did come face to face with that murderer, Subaru was not so confident that he’d be able to stay calm.

Even the impulse of “You Need To Die Immediately” insisting on his suicide could not help but transform into teeth-shattering hatred at that reminder.

Just the thought that the deviant whose blade killed Petra, Frederica—and Rem, might be there tormented Subaru’s mind with rage surging to a boil.

Like a curse, a part of him wished that she was there, while a pathetic craving for life hoped that she was not. Wavering between the two extremes, Subaru’s mouth contorted into a wicked grin,

Subaru: “…”

Whether she's there, or not there, this deranged emotion would not be betrayed.

At the end of his thoughts' departure from sanity, faced with the world that opened before him,

Subaru: "—ah."

Witnessing a sight that should not be there, Subaru lost himself in that moment.

—Subaru's mind had actually already reached an answer about where this unfamiliar space was.

In the first place, there was barely a single room in Roswaal's Mansion where Subaru hadn't set foot in, and he even had free access to the Forbidden Library in a sense—so all that was left was the door which he had only touched twice, but never got to see the other side of. That is, the door inside the "Escape Passage".

The first time, he was hindered by a spirit with gray fur, and the second time, he was chased away by a murdering maniac. So Subaru was never able to pass beyond that point.

And that was why, despite harboring a certain sense of distrust towards whatever was waiting beyond this room, he did not have any doubts that it would be a part of Roswaal's Mansion, but,

Subaru: "Where is… this?"

Stumped, he muttered this question stupidly at no one in particular.

Beyond the opened door, what panned out directly in front of Subaru was a cold, dark underground passage—or not. Rather, it was a luscious green forest in the midst of vibrant nature, and what was even stranger, was that,

Subaru: "It's, morning…?"

Gazing up towards the sky through the gaps between the trees, he saw the rising sun. Seeing the height of the sun, and the sensation of the morning wind blowing against his skin, Subaru's mind was further racked by doubt.

By the time Subaru returned to the Mansion, it was already right before dusk. Counting the time spent in his conversation with Frederica, along with Elsa's attack, Subaru would have been wounded just before midnight—which would mean that, at this point, half a day had already passed.

Subaru: "While I was unconscious…?!"

As soon as he bit down on his tongue to commit suicide, Subaru fell unconscious. When he woke again, his wounds had been healed and he was so preoccupied with his failure to kill himself that he had forgotten to consider how much time had passed. Just how long had Subaru spent unconscious in the Library?

He remembered Beatrice calling it "A Place Detached From The Passage Of Time". And while Subaru wasn't sure just how literal that was meant to be,

Subaru: "If the savepoint gets overwritten because of this…!"

That would be an unthinkable situation.

Before his worst fear comes to pass and the state of reality is overwritten, he must immediately end his own life. And yet, another feeling was asserting its existence in direct conflict with this anxiety. That feeling was screaming:

—You must find out where this place is.

He didn't know what would be the purpose of doing so. Considering all that had happened so far, and the malicious nature of Return By Death, he knew he should kill himself now.

But there was a horrifying calmness within Subaru that insisted this, despite fully understanding the circumstances he found himself in.

Subaru: "—Kh, damnit!"

Kicking his foot into the ground and sending spit flying, Subaru sprinted into the forest ahead of him. Dashing through the gaps between the trees, his conversation with Petra in the escape tunnel surfaced in his mind.

The escape passage leads deep into the mountains behind the Mansion to a small cabin, where one might pick up emergency supplies and the like.

If that information can be relied on, then this should be that cabin in the mountains just now, and he would be running through the back mountains which he had already trekked though so many times before. But,

Subaru: "Was that the cabin? Where were the supply bags? And, in the first place… looking like it's been abandoned for ages, what kind of disaster relief infrastructure is that… ?!"

That strange place that Subaru saw contained more than enough evidence to support his sense of foreboding. There were too few similarities that actually matched Petra's description. More importantly, if Frederica and Rem had been periodically maintaining it, there would be no explanation for the horrendous state of disrepair. This was something Subaru could say with confidence, knowing the work ethics of those two maids.

Passing through the forest, there was now another question, which would be the lack of a slope. The cabin was supposed to be in the mountains, but was it built somewhere without the slightest change in elevation for a hundred meters or more? Losing track of where he was, Subaru was racked by frustration for failing to see what he was trying to see.

Then, when his frustration and doubt had reached their limits, they were quickly and unexpectedly shattered.

Where the trees opened up, suddenly clearing his line of sight, Subaru skidded to a stop. The pavement, if it could still be called pavement in spite of the ragged condition it was in, was evidence that there were people frequently passing through here. And, more importantly, the rows of houses visible in the distance further indicated that there were people living on this land.

Taking this into his eyes, Subaru's thoughts were taken hostage by shock in the truest sense of the phrase.

Because the scenery he saw was—

Subaru: "The, S-Sanctuary?!"

The place he had bid farewell to only half a day ago, and which by his estimation would require a whole day to return to.

He lifted his right hand in accordance with his horror. His fingers were still missing. Lost. Return by Death had not been activated. And yet, he was now standing in a place he did not belong.

Subaru: "Why… am I here? Was it… Door Crossing…?"

There could be no other answer.

After being kicked out of the Mansion's Forbidden Library by Beatrice, Subaru had been sent to a corner of the Sanctuary through Door Crossing. But how did this happen?

Subaru: "Is distance… irrelevant? Yes, that one time I got transported from the Mansion to an animal stall in the village, but…"

Thinking in terms of distance, even that was still within permissible range. But considering the distance from the Mansion to the Sanctuary, this kind of long distance transportation was, to put it simply, beyond imagination and common sense.

Yet, considering the overabundance of supernatural powers he had witnessed so far, Subaru didn't have much choice except to scratch his head and swallow it down.

Subaru: "Screw it! If I'm back in the Sanctuary then…ROSWAAL!!"

Sprint forth to that clown's location and make him spit out every single one of his intentions.

Roswaal had always treated Beatrice cordially at the Mansion. That sorcerer must certainly know her origins and how she came to possess a Gospel.

If he knows but tries to toy with the ignorant Subaru, that will be fine as well. Even if he has to punch his nose in, burn him, rip him apart, and bite out his throat, he'd do it until that clown spills everything.

Subaru: "—!"

At this moment, completely forgetting the need to kill himself, Subaru started to run. His thoughts dyed red with the pure color of rage, he dashed to the edge of the forest, to the residence where Roswaal would be sleeping.

Transforming into an incarnation of Wrath, Subaru sped through the Sanctuary, forgetting his exhaustion and agony, drawn only towards his destination.

Kicking the door open with the same momentum, Subaru pushed into the house, baring his teeth,

Subaru: "ROSWAAL! SHOW YOUR FACE! THERE'S A MOUNTAIN OF THINGS I WANNA ASK YOU!"

Plunging forward violently in a way that would normally earn him a scolding from a maid, Subaru barked out his demands. Hearing no reply coming from the room, Subaru stomped forward with deafening steps and wrung the final door open,

Subaru: "No more playing dumb and no more lies. Start spilling everything you've been hiding and…"

As he was about to go on, Subaru's voice trailed off.

Because, not only was the target of his condensed dissatisfaction absent, there was no one in the room to listen.

Gone. This fact only sent more boiling rage churning through Subaru's mind. Kicking the bed as hard as he could, the pain on his toes only escalated his anger further as he stormed out of the house.

In that case, Roswaal must be at Ryuzu' house—meeting with

Emilia, or perhaps discussing something with Ryuzu and Garfiel. Either way, becoming so active the moment Subaru was out of the picture, he certainly had the audacity. His timing to get up and running was so perfect, one might even suspect whether he had been faking it all this time.

As soon as suspicion was set on its course, negativity spiraled without interruption. With this completely dominating his thoughts, Subaru glared with sharpened eyes into the Sanctuary—and, once again, realized too late.

Subaru: "…Ah?"

It was early morning. As far as Subaru knew, that should be when the residents of the Sanctuary would begin preparing breakfast and washing themselves. Now that the refugees were gone, there was no need to cook mass meals, but each of the families would still need to cook.

They should, but there were no signs of such daily activities in sight. Rather, even before that,

Subaru: "It's not just Roswaal… where did everyone else go?"

Looking left and right, there was not a single person in sight.

Come to think of it, from the moment he left the forest and returned to the Sanctuary, he couldn't recall having run into, or seen anyone on the way.

Even if he considered how there weren't that many residents in the Sanctuary, to not bump into a single person in the dead center of the village was too improbable to ignore.

Subaru: "There's no way…"

Shaking his head and trying to cast aside the nauseating sense of foreboding, Subaru knocked on the door of the nearest residence. He knocked, but confirming that there was no reply, he opened the door and peeked inside. —No one.

In this house, there were supposed to be two beast-eared sisters living here.

One after another, Subaru looked inside every recognizable house, and every time his hope was betrayed, his disappointment mounted.

Everyone was missing, and there was no one here. The people of the Sanctuary had simply vanished.

Subaru: “Somebody! Anybody?! Where’d you all go?!”

The nauseating premonition accumulated.

He felt an anxiety and an inexplicable sense of loss.

During his showdown with the Witch Cult, the tragic memories of the Earlham village that welcomed Subaru, who had returned too late, resurfaced—contorted, overlapping corpses, and innumerable faces of death in anguish and despair. Familiar faces drained of color, and Petra who would never move again.

Subaru: “—Aaaaagh!”

With terror coursing up Subaru’s back, the endless unease pushed him into a dash. A sound like a shriek escaped from his throat as he sped towards one singular place.

A one-of-a-kind building at the edge of the Sanctuary, a symbol of respect towards the matriarch of the village, and a place now lent to a single girl for her to place her bed.

Subaru: “—Emilia!!”

Sprinting in while calling the name of the lovely girl, Subaru scanned the room.

A silver-haired girl with sleepy eyes looking back at Subaru, blinking several times with a surprised expression, saying “Good morning, Subaru” with a smile that made his chest ache—

Subaru: “…”

In the place where she should be looking back at him, there was no one at all.

Running over to the bed, he touched his fingers to the disheveled sheets. There was no warmth, and whoever slept here had already left for a considerable amount of time.

Having made sure of this, Subaru dashed out of the house and directed his legs towards the final place he could go. The only place that could grant him an answer to this absurd, unreasonable senselessness.

Subaru: “Hahh…hahh…!”

Out of breath. Tasting blood in the back of his throat, Subaru arrived at the very end of the Sanctuary, at the Tomb in which the Witch of Greed, Echidna, was sleeping.

There was no Garfiel, sitting in the middle of the road, obstructing him. Nor was he in front of the Tomb, waiting for him. Was that a blessing, or would he rather have been blocked just so he could see a familiar face—?

Subaru: “No… how could I even face him…”

As the one who couldn’t save his only sister, how could he bring himself to see him as though nothing had happened?

The relief Subaru felt at his absence, in spite of the unbearable anxiety of being unable to find anyone, and the way he was glossing over his own weakness, was truly grotesque.

Shaking his head to cast off such sentiments, Subaru stepped towards the Tomb before anything could interfere.

It was not time to initiate the Trial, but perhaps some action would be taken on the Witch’s side. Hoping this, and clinging to this hope, Subaru sought the Witch who might give answers to his questions—

Subaru: “—Kh, hhu.”

The moment he stepped forward, Subaru received a feeling as though something had passed through his body.

He slowly looked down. Under his chest, and above his lower abdomen, in the dead center of his torso—there was a round, gaping hole the size of a fist.

Subaru: “Fff…ehh?”

Reaching out his hand, he tried to cover over the hole. A loud noise accompanied the massive volume of blood exploding out from the gap. Despite stuffing his palm over the opening, the hole penetrated all the way through his body and was still open on the back side. Unable to plug both sides at once, and having lost so much blood, his body could not even maintain its current posture and toppled to the ground.

—No, pain. Can’t, understand. What, happened?

Death. Dying. Going to die. At least, it’s certain that death was coming.

How, why, why here? Elsa? She tracked him this far? The distance between the Mansion and the Sanctuary… Beatrice, impossible. Gospel? Her, why? Rem… Who was it. Dying. Scared. What. Who. Emilia. Witch. Witch. Witc—

Subaru: “—a.”

His vision began to haze. The end was approaching.

His anticipated death came in an unanticipated form. Subaru felt no relief that he was finally dying. Only, just briefly, he was afraid of death.

Even if he claimed to have resolved to die, death came to him in a different way than he had envisioned. His heart was thrown into disarray, his pathetic desire for life screamed, while his soul refused to be peeled away from this world—yet, “Death” was slowly eroding Subaru,

Subaru: “—so…weak.”

His own powerlessness streaming down his useless cheeks, Subaru’s heart stopped beating.

His long-awaited death having arrived in this unexpected form, his lifeless face contorted in anguish and horror. The wretchedness of this death would be disputed by no one.

???: “—Kch.”

With that sound, he was chewed.

Chapter 37:
First Urge to Murder

1

He heard a sound like the torrent of a rushing stream.

A furious sound of water. A foaming waterfall coursing downwards, pulled along by gravity and current.

Reverberating in his ears, or perhaps within his skull, the thunderous roar rumbled at Subaru's brain as his consciousness was guided from loss into wakefulness.

He saw a light, and—

Subaru: "—ah, khu."

Sensing something clogging his throat, the rhythm of Subaru's breaths grew bewildered as he gagged for air.

Inhale, exhale, the regular intervals between his breaths turned vague. His oxygen-deprived body spasmed and shook, saliva drooled from his mouth as Subaru wrung open his eyes.

Subaru: "Khu, aghk!"

His face was pressed against the ground. Pushing himself off the surface and onto his elbows and knees, Subaru grasped his chest, panting, and tried to calm his aching lungs.

The pain fell away, and he spat out the saliva that had nowhere else to go. With his body settling as oxygen resaturated his brain, he took a breath. —And began to remember.

Subaru: "uuUUAAH, AAAAAH?!"

Recalling the gaping hole that had been opened in his chest, he felt the sense of emptiness of all the contents of his body flooding out.

Quickly pressing his palm over his stomach, he confirmed the absence of the gap that was the source of that emptiness, and the tension of his body began to soften.

Tasting a numbing shock through his limbs, Subaru scraped his forehead against the ground as the friction and the abrasive pain affirmed the reality of his existence.

Subaru: “What was, that… at the end…”

Face-down on the ground, blood draining from his body, the sensation of his soul being sucked out from that very same gap certainly existed. But that wasn’t the source of the sense of loss eroding at Subaru’s flesh. The true horror came afterwards, near the end, among the lingering embers of life being guided into death.

His consciousness was vague and his memories were blurred, but this alone he remembered clearly.

—Something, something unknown, was “Devouring” him.

Subaru: “C-Cut down, beaten to death, frozen, falling to death, I’ve died all sorts of ways now… b-but this is still the first time I’ve been ea… eaten in the end…”

Recounting the conscious experience of what happened to his body in the end, Subaru was once more gripped by terror.

The direct cause of death was the loss of blood spilling from the gap, and he had no intentions of making light of “Death” itself, but he had nonetheless experienced first hand a fragment of the possibility that “Death” was not the end.

Who knew that the sensation of his body being eaten would be accompanied by such intense sense of loss? Subaru had lost fingers and legs before, but this sickening sensation was far beyond all of them—

Subaru: “fingers…?!”

Coming to that thought, Subaru suddenly wanted to kick himself for being so slow to remember.

Considering the unsurvivable wound he sustained and the unmistakable sensation of “Death”, there was no doubt that Return by Death had been activated. There was no entity in this world that had more profound knowledge of death than Natsuki Subaru. He died, and he returned, that much was certain.

What was not certain, was where on the timeline Subaru returned to.

If his restart point had been moved to an unsalvageable point in time, where would Subaru’s resolve and oaths lead him then—

Subaru: “ah…”

Scanning his bloodshot eyes over his surroundings, Subaru desperately tried to confirm the time and his current location. But what calmed this desperate panic was the sensation on his forehead while his fingers wiped the sweat off his brows. —The three missing fingers on his right hand were definitely still there.

Subaru: “Fingers… are still there, which means.”

As if to make sure, he held up his right arm and ran his gaze from his fingers to his elbow. Fingers and wrist, all the way to the elbow, nothing was missing, nor were there any signs of scarring. The white scars left over from the disturbance of the Wolgarms were still there, but that’s a different story.

Having confirmed that his arm was fine, Subaru moved on to his shoulder and hip—the spots where Elsa’s darts had dug into. Sensing no stiffness in his skin, Subaru almost collapsed from sheer relief, finally convinced that he had returned to a time before his encounter with Elsa.

Subaru: “Th… then, for now…”

It was fortune in midst of misfortune that he wasn’t given anything worse than death.

Feeling relieved and drained, Subaru dropped his eyes and thanked his bad luck. And it was then when he turned his gaze to the side, and noticed.

—That in the corner of the dark room, there was Emilia, writhing in pain.

Subaru: “Emili…a.”

Instantly rushing over to her side, Subaru realized that they were alone in a dark and musty vault. He had only one experience of being alone with her like this, so there was only one possible explanation. That is,

Subaru: “The restart point… hasn’t changed…!”

Inside the Tomb, directly after passing the Trial—was where Subaru returned to after death. In exchange for nothing being gained, nothing was lost either. Time to try again.

2

—There must be something he could do to fix everything.

Having confirmed where he had returned to, the thought that passed through Subaru’s mind was so positive that it was hard to believe it could have come from a person who had just been trembling in his final moments.

It was now the second night after his arrival in the Sanctuary. With the information gained from the first loop and second loop, Subaru reorganized the circumstances and events in his mind as he set about searching for the solution.

By now, the bloody content was already nothing out of the ordinary. Whether it was the initial cluelessness, or becoming hopelessly stuck with no choice but to hug his own head, it was just the same thing all over again.

Subaru: “Although… the usual methods won’t be working this time.”

No matter what, Subaru still wasn’t able to grasp the full story of this loop. And even against the clear and obvious threats, he couldn’t see any effective countermeasures.

Currently, there was no way to oppose the combat strength of the obvious threat, Elsa. With no exploitable weaknesses, the degree of danger she posed may have surpassed even Petelgeuse.

Countering her attack on the Mansion remained the foremost priority. However, it would seem the problems didn't end there,

Subaru: "Last time, near the end… why was the Sanctuary empty…?"

He couldn't understand why Beatrice would transport him all the way to the Sanctuary, but the fact that everyone there had vanished was all the more incomprehensible. He recalled running all around, shouting, only to receive no reply in return.

And then, there was the final calamity which befell Subaru when he tried to seek the answers inside the Tomb.

With a hole opened in his chest, Subaru died without the slightest idea of what could have given him that wound. The memory of that still-vivid injury brought back nothing but pain and horror, without a single clue or answer.

Back there, what on earth happened in the Sanctuary? What happened to Subaru? What was Beatrice thinking? And Emilia—

Subaru: "…impossible."

Coming to that point, suddenly struck by the contradiction between his thoughts and his behavior, Subaru's face stiffened.

It was important to organize the situation. It was also important to set goals for the future and draw up plans to realize them. And it was a priority to collect the scattered information and shape them into something useful for obtaining that longed-for future, but,

Subaru: "…"

Did that give him an excuse to forget Emilia, currently struggling against a nightmare right in front of his eyes?

Subaru: "I-I…"

Emilia was still inside the Trial, tormented by agony. Her body and soul, assaulted by her past, being chipped away by the excruciating pain of the weight of the cross she had to bear.

Long lasting pain without the slightest consolation at its end.

Subaru knew: How much sorrow this was bringing her, how much it was wearing her down, and how much it was weakening her heart.

It was because he couldn't bear to see her like this that he had resolved to complete the Trial in her place, to clear away all obstacles, and open the way for her to pass.

That was how it should have been, so why was Subaru so relieved to see her suffering?

"Thank god he returned to a point in time where she was suffering." Despite knowing what will become of her pain, he had cruelly put his thoughts before her.

The moment he understood this, Subaru saw the hideous existence he had descended into.

Even knowing that the girl in front of his eyes, the person most important to him in this world, was gasping in unbearable agony, he was averting his eyes from her distress, fully absorbed in his self-centered foolishness.

To Subaru, such weakness was abhorrent and grotesque.

Subaru: "Either way…"

There was no time to be tormented by guilt and the contradictions of his heart. He must wake Emilia up right away, and bring her out of this place.

He could take the time to gather his thoughts once they're outside. There was no reason to prolong her suffering. And—

Subaru: "Right now, there's a guy I need to get some answers out of."

It was starting to piss him off how lenient he was before. How is it that all this time, he had allowed the central character at the core of everything to get away with his ambiguities?

The result was the tragedy that befell the Mansion, and his incomprehensible death at the Sanctuary.

If that was the future that came from Subaru's cowardice, then—

Subaru: "I will do everything differently this time."

As these words rolled off of his tongue, Subaru reached out his hand to wake Emilia.

In that moment, not even Subaru himself was aware that his face was being contorted by insuppressible fury.

3

Subaru: "—Just how much do you know, Roswaal?"

That was the first thing that came out of Subaru's mouth as he swung open the door. Lying on the bed, Roswaal narrowed his eyes. And Subaru, seeing himself reflected in those mismatched pupils, barged into the room and slammed the door shut behind him in a display of his present emotion.

—After finally calming Emilia and bringing her out of the Tomb, Subaru headed to Ryuzu' house and put her to bed. There, he left Emilia in Ram's care, and, so as to not waste the interval before she wakes again, he immediately set out for the building where Roswaal was recuperating.

Garfiel's silent glare all that time he was in the house gave him cause for concern, but fortunately, Subaru didn't encounter any resistance on the way and managed to get there without any problems.

However, the instant he took Roswaal into his sights, all that caution scattered like a mist.

Roswaal: "Fu~~mu."

Looking up at the restless Subaru, Roswaal let out a deep and meaningful sigh. And then, he held up a single finger and lightly wagged it in front of Subaru.

Roswaal: “M~~y you certainly seem much more a~~ngry than last I saw you. Tha~~t’s a good sign.”

Subaru: “Don’t try to be funny. I’m not in the mood for pranks or jokes right now. I’m prepared to use force if I have to.”

Snarling this at the carefree Roswaal, Subaru advanced to the side of the bed and pressed his palms onto the sheets. And, glaring down at the clown at extreme close-range,

Subaru: “I just came back from taking the Trial. —And I have a mountain of things to ask you.”

Roswaal: “…Is that, so. You have taken the Trial. I see. I see. I~~ see~~.”

Whereas in Subaru’s time, several days had already passed since the Trial where he bid farewell to his parents, in real time, it would only have been less than an hour ago. And, it was now the third time he had seen Roswaal’s inexplicable reactions to being told about the Trial.

The first time, there seemed to be a flash of violent emotion so brief it was as if it was never there. The second time, he appeared to have somewhat calmly accepted the fact. But even so, it was laced with a certain uncharacteristic tinge of melancholy.

And this third time, what was that reaction supposed to be? Personally, Subaru had hoped for a flash of anger like the first time, believing that if Roswaal could be incited into a rage, he might just let his mouth slip.

But, completely contrary to Subaru’s hopes, Roswaal’s lips instead curved into a smile,

Roswaal: “I~~n that case, allow me to ask you a question.”

Subaru: “Huh? What are you talking about? You? Ask questions? …

If you keep playing around I'm going to seriously flip, you bastard."

Roswaal: "I can understand that you have re~~ason to be angry. And I am asking with that in mind. If we are of the same opinion… I don't see why you would decli~~ne to coo~~perate."

Subaru: "If I answer your question… no, wait."

While Subaru was trying to press down his anger, Roswaal raised this proposal. For a moment, Subaru almost accepted. But he instantly severed that thought when he realized that accepting would have meant being swept along by the atmosphere created by Roswaal, just like all those times before.

Unless he made an effort to resist, the result will be just as miserable. So in order to change the outcome, he must change his behavior from this point onward.

Subaru: "I'm not answering your questions. I'm the one who has questions. I go first."

Roswaal: "…Aya, bu~~t isn't that aw~~fully rude?"

Subaru: "I'm not saying I won't answer any questions, but I have the feeling we won't get anywhere if I just go along with whatever you say. So let's nip that in the bud first."

Seeing Subaru's obstinate attitude, Roswaal closed a single eye and lightly sighed. Then, holding out both palms, he made an "A~~lright" gesture,

Roswaal: "Ask whatever you li~~ke. Indeed, it doesn't always have to be me managing the pa~~ce of the conversation."

Subaru: "Even though it's actually kinda creepy when you're so reasonable… well, no point getting hung up on that. So, question: —What kind of Contract have you sealed with Beatrice?"

Roswaal: "…"

Suddenly silent, it seemed as though Roswaal was caught off guard by that query.

Seeing his cheeks stiffen, albeit slightly, Subaru was convinced that he had struck a critical question.

The previous loop had brought about newly-discovered facts and unexplained events, and Subaru must set about finding the answers to these mysteries. Foremost among them—were the questions surrounding Beatrice, and whether it was at the Sanctuary or the Mansion, the only person he could ask was Roswaal.

More than anything, their conversation at their parting and the Gospel in her hands were all burned into his mind, impossible to forget.

It was a question he must not take lightly. One which will decide how he will interact with that girl from now on.

—How he will face Beatrice at their unavoidable meeting in this loop.

Subaru: "Answer me, Roswaal. Don't give me any of that "You won't answer mine so I won't answer yours" crap. Answer the question."

Growing impatient with Roswaal's prolonged silence, Subaru repeated his demand for a response.

Asserting its presence within his chest was the frustration that was the manifestation of his desire to overturn that revolting sense of foreboding.

Every second of silence felt like minutes as he waited for the reply. Until, at last, Roswaal opened his mouth,

Roswaal: "—The fact that you are asking this question here, does that mean you've remembered?"

But, instead of an answer as Subaru had hoped, Roswaal replied with a question of his own. Clicking his tongue in frustration at his attitude, "Shut up!", Subaru swung his arm in front of Roswaal,

Subaru: "Why are you replying with another question? Even if I take a hundred steps back and let you ask, you will answer mine first. I'm not giving up my turn."

Roswaal: "Is that so. Then, let's proceed by taking turns. Your question was about "The Contract between Beatrice and myself", wa~~s it not? There is no Contract sealed between Beatrice and myself. That is the answer."

Subaru: "Wh—?!"

Caught off guard by that sudden turn, Subaru found himself speechless. Reaching out a hand to Subaru, who had inadvertently lost his words, "No~~w", Roswaal went on,

Roswaal: "This time it's your turn to answer m~~y question. —Have you remembered?"

Subaru: "…Remember, what. Just so you know, our relationship isn't deep enough that we can communicate by telepathy here. Don't go assuming I can put together your sentences without a subject."

Roswaal: "That reply, already gave me the answer to my question. …Unfortunate."

Although Subaru had hoped to get some kind of revenge, it would seem he was no match for Roswaal after all. With a certain shade of sadness, Roswaal turned down his eyes, and,

Roswaal: "It seems, I didn't make it."

Subaru: "…what."

Roswaal: "It's your turn to ask. Do be~~tter this time, and ask me a question I ca~~nnot dodge."

Covering over Subaru's confounded voice, Roswaal's self-awareness about his question dodging didn't make it any less infuriating. Subaru took a deep breath to control his emotions, and pressed a finger to his temple and began to think,

Subaru: "You said you have no Contractual relationship with Beatrice, right? Then, why is Beatrice living in your Mansion? I can't understand what your relationship with Beatrice is supposed to be."

Roswaal: "That's two questions now. You've been inquiring about Beatrice e~~ver since you got here, whe~re does that leave Lady Emilia? Or, could it be that you prefer those who look like young children?"

Subaru: "I'm not attracted to little kids and I have no intention of going the romantic conquest route with her. But I do intend to shake up the status quo a bit, so I'll be choosing her route in that sense."

It was true, that whenever he thought about Beatrice, Subaru would feel a certain aching in his heart.

But this was different from the aching he'd feel when he thought of Emilia or Rem, and Subaru quite couldn't understand what it meant.

Except, even after seeing the Gospel in Beatrice's hands, he still felt this.

—And he didn't want to believe that the relationship between him and Beatrice was just something counterfeit written in some strange book.

Subaru: "That's why I need to find out more about her. And it seems the only person who's deeply associated with her is you. So I can only ask you."

Roswaal: "You try to collect everything that ca~~tches your eye, but it will only become an obstacle when the time comes to choose what is truly impo~~rtant. Such naivete only hinders you from seeing the thing that is most important to your heart, I thi~nk."

Subaru: "I realize my hands are already full. So now I'm just trying to grab her with my mouth. Got a problem with that?"

Roswaal: "How could I po~~ssibly? Although I get the feeling you are just saying that for appearances sake, there is nothing wrong with that. —In fact, I do wonder how you will answer when the time comes.”

Acknowledging Subaru’s words, Roswaal’s voice trailed to an indiscernible whisper towards the end. Subaru’s gaze sharpened at those words, and, receiving that gaze, Roswaal continued, “In tha~~t case”,

Roswaal: “The reason why Beatrice resides in the Mansion, wa~~s it? She resides in my Mansion due to her ties with the House of Mathers. If you must know, it was by the favor of the head of the House of Mathers many generations ago that she became the Keeper of the Forbidden Library. It has been so through the generations, and remains the same, now it that had passed to me.”

Subaru: “Employed as its Keeper? …Then, how is that any different from a Contract?”

Roswaal: “The questioning format seems to be a bit different from what we’ve agreed? …We~~ll, no matter. There i~~s already little meaning in asking any more questions from my side. You are already aware of Beatrice’s identity as a spirit, I assu~~me?”

Subaru nodded in affirmation to Roswaal’s question. Although he never actually got to see Beatrice’s spirit-form, her self proclamation and her intimidating presence both confirmed this fact.

Seeing Subaru’s nod, Roswaal lifted up a finger,

Roswaal: “To spirits, a Contract with a human carries tremendous significance. The relationship between Lady Emilia and The Great Spirit is exa~ctly that.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, Emilia’s been struggling with all the annoying conditions too. But The Great Spirit hasn’t been showing his face lately, has he.”

Having been killed by Puck three times, and after their clash of perspectives over the sleeping Rem, there was an insurmountable gap between them. And since he mysteriously went into hiding before that gap could be resolved, Subaru’s feelings towards that little cat was still rather hard to define.

Roswaal: “The Great Spirit’s whims aside, Beatrice is no exception. That child and I are in a cooperating rela~~tionship, to a certain extent. But it is nothing more than a sort of mutual noninterference while our interests are aligned. It would be unlikely for her to help me achie~~ve my goals, and the same is true vice versa.”

Subaru: “I can see how you can appear to be on good terms with Beako while actually being indifferent, but that has nothing to do with the terms of her Contract.”

Roswaal: “Ooh my, you must excuse me. But Contractual relationships are something else entirely. Beatrice, being a spirit, takes Contracts extremely seriously. To speak to her on the topic of Contracts would be a different, and quite la~~rger, issue. After all, that child is still bound by a Contract from four hundred years ago.”

Picking up something he could not let slide, Subaru suddenly leaned himself up to Roswaal shouting “That’s it!”

Subaru: “That Contract from four hundred years ago, I want to know the details.”

Roswaal: “Spirits’ mouths don’t open so easily when it comes to the contents of their co~ntracts. No involved parties from that time could possibly still remain, so unless Beatrice herself speaks, there is no one else who knows of the co~~ntents of her Contract.”

Subaru: “Damn it, that’s useless! If I could just find out what’s in that Contract…”

Then he would know why that girl was hiding herself in a room all alone, wouldn’t he?

Roswaal: “However, there is one thing worth mentioning.”

Subaru: “—?”

Roswaal: “Since Beatrice is bound by the Contract from four hundred years ago, to seal any new Contract which overlaps with the original would be impo~~ssible. So, if you wish to bring her out of that place, then you must find a way to break the exi~sting Contract."

Subaru: "Break… the Contract?"

Roswaal: "Fulfilling it, would a~lso work. But since there is good chance that the other party to the Contract is already gone, bre~~aking the Contract would be the smarter course, don't you thi~~nk?"

It was nothing short of miraculous that Roswaal would be offering constructive opinions for a change. Initially caught off guard by his words, Subaru's expression abruptly changed as though a veil was suddenly lifted from his eyes,

Subaru: "—When did I ever say I wanted to bring Beatrice outside?"

Subaru, saying this quietly, fixed sharpened eyes on Roswaal, mere inches away.

Placing his hands on the bed, his fingers began knocking on the sheets like the second-hand of a clock. Dropping his gaze to look at this gesture, Roswaal closed a single eye, before reflecting Subaru within his sole yellow pupil,

Roswaal: "You really—are a man who likes to notice things people do~~n't want you to notice."

Subaru: "What do you…"

Roswaal: "Either way, this time is already me~~aningless to me. Perhaps, we should e~nd this conversation here?"

Subaru: "Are—are you fucking kidding me?!"

Different from before, within Roswaal's eyes, there emerged a color of disappointment. With that strange expression, Roswaal spilled out a sigh from a face seemingly drained of all liveliness.

Roswaal: "No matter what you say now, it could no longer move me… so you may do whate~ver you like."

Subaru: “You’ve got to be joking?! This is important… we are getting to something important and you start acting like that?! There are still things I need to ask you…”

Roswaal: “If you wish to ask, you are fre~e to ask. But whether I answer them seriously or not, would depend comple~~tely on whether I feel like it.”

The more agitated Subaru became, the more deprived of the tremors of emotion Roswaal seemed to become. In front of Subaru, whose face had turned red with rage, Roswaal merely combed his fingers through his deep blue hair, and tilted his head,

Roswaal: “You have, no more qu~estions?”

Subaru: “—Tch. Alright, I know that Beatrice is bound by a Contract and is living inside the Mansion. We can leave the details for now. There’s something else I want to ask. About that black book she has… I want you to tell me what that is.”

Roswaal: “E~~hh, you saw it? Any thoughts? What do you thi~nk it is?”

Subaru: “Don’t reply with another question. —But I think it’s… something similar… to the books the Witch Cultists have, or, at least, I’m guessing.”

Subaru’s stuttered reply was like a plea for the words to be refuted. But, hearing this, Roswaal showed an expression as if he couldn’t hold back a yawn,

Roswaal: “The Gospels in the Witch Cultists’ possession are mediums of the Witch’s will, and describe the path leading to their owners’ desired future. We~ll, aside from vague directions, they are rather labor-intensive to follow as far as prophetic books go.”

Subaru: “—! You know?”

Roswaal: “There is no need to be too~ surprised. There are Witch Cultists here as well, considering this is a facility belonging to a Witch different from the Witch they worship. Being the manager of the Sanctuary, it wasn’t just once or twice that I’ve had to exchange blows with the li~kes of them.”

Subaru: “Th-Then, they can really see the future…?”

If they could see the future without dying, that would be an ability far more powerful than Subaru’s Return by Death. It was not that he was jealous of such an ability, but if all the members of the Witch Cult were equipped with this overpowered item, that would be nothing to scoff at.

But, seeing Subaru’s shudder, Roswaal shook his head,

Roswaal: “It’s not that convenient of an item. First of all, the number of entries themselves vary from Cultist to Cultist. The contents are vague and subject to interpretation. More importantly, no one except the owner of the Gospel can read it. To anyone else, its contents will only appear to be indecipherable nonsense. And so, they are only incomplete maps of the future.”

Subaru: “Incomplete…”

Subaru couldn’t hide his relief to hear this. But then again, if the Gospels were truly prophetic books with the power to describe the future, Subaru would never have been able to win against Petelgeuse. In that sense, it’s obvious that even the Sin Archbishops’ Gospels couldn’t have reached that level. However,

Subaru: “That’d be a completely different topic. Then, what about Beatrice’s book…”

Roswaal: “If you’re asking whether it is the same as the ones in the Witch Cultists’ possession, then the answer is that it is, and it isn’t.”

Subaru: “Stop playing around! This is important!”

Roswaal: “I am doing no~~ such thing. Although what Beatrice has is a Gospel, it is of a different origin from the Witch Cultists’. For the Witch Cultists’ Gospels are incomplete, whereas the one belonging to Beatrice is complete.”

Subaru: “Complete…?”

Roswaal: “Yes, it is complete. Unlike the defective items that fluctuate between uncertain futures, wavering in their recorded contents.”

Seeing Subaru confused, Roswaal’s face only brightened.

His expression and tone were as if he was basking in pride. Subaru didn’t know what to say in front of this sudden transformation, but what made him lose his words in the truest sense of the phrase, was what came afterwards,

Subaru: “—?!”

Roswaal reached behind with his right hand and produced a book with black binding.

There was no mistaking it at such a close distance that it was, without a doubt, a Gospel.

Roswaal: “This is one of the only two complete Gospels in existence. Myself, and Beatrice, are the only two people who possess one… tha~t is.”

Subaru: “…”

Before Subaru’s eyes, Roswaal waved the book left and right in his hand. However, Subaru had no mental capacity to care about such gestures now.

The fact that Roswaal was holding a Gospel same as the ones in the hands of the Witch Cult was indeed shocking. The fact that the one in Beatrice’s hand was also a Gospel, and the fact that the words she said to him at their parting were confirmed, was also shocking.

—But they were not what dominated Subaru’s mind in that moment,

Subaru: “That’s… a Gospel that records the future?”

Roswaal: “Wi~~thout a doubt. This is the genuine Gospel.”

Subaru: “You know… the future? Right now, everything that is happening now… is in that book…?”

Roswaal: “It i~s written. Although you won’t be able to read it.”

Who cares about that.

At this moment, whether Subaru could read it is irrelevant. There was only one significance. Only one single thing he had to ask. That is,

Subaru: “The future, what will happen… is written… in that book?”

Roswaal: “It doesn’t describe the enti~rety of the world, but it does reveal a portion of the owner’s fu~ture.”

Subaru: “That things will become the way they are now… you knew that beforehand?”

Roswaal: “It took quite a lot of effort to produce the same situ~ation as described, you know? I was rather hoping for a little praise for all my efforts behind the sce~nes.”

Subaru could not stop his voice from trembling.

At the source of that trembling, was the seeping of some violent emotion. Just what that emotion was, and at whom it was directed, was immediately obvious—that is,

Subaru: “If you knew… everything that was going to happen…”

Roswaal: “—Fuumu.”

Subaru: “—You, knowingly left Rem to die?”

Roswaal: “Rem, who~ would you be refe~rring to?”

Subaru: “—I’ll KILL YOU!! ROSWAAAAAAAAAAAL!!”

In that instant, uncontrollable rage propelled Subaru’s body to move.

Flying forward onto the bed, his hands clenched tight onto the bedridden Roswaal’s neck. With unnatural strength never seen before, Subaru's grip dug into the slender neck, carving an expression of agony onto the clown's blue and white face.

Subaru: "YOU KNEW EVERYTHING AND YOU—!!"

If he knew, if he already knew, if he could have prevented the tragedies—and what happened to Rem from ever happening—

Subaru: "THE REASON I LEFT REM TO DIE—WAS YOU?!!"

Consumed by overflowing fury, he blew out his regrets, and all his impulses were directed to the intent to kill this man before his eyes. His actions forgot all reason as emotions and love transmuted into force.

And, just like this, unable to utter a sound, Roswaal silently waited for Subaru's hands to snap his neck—

???: "—I SEE "THE GUISE CAN'T COVER THE ULGARMS STENCH"!!"

—Impact.

Sensing a solid, sharp tactile sensation striking him from the side, Subaru felt the right half of his face destroyed as he was sent flying into the air.

His body slammed into an immovable wall, and fell head first onto the ground. His thoughts went blank at the sudden blow, and his body couldn't move at all.

Blood flowed from his ear and nose, and the right side of his vision was dyed absolute black. His eye may have been completely crushed.

???: "—Ever since y'came outta the Tomb yer stench's shot up. Didn't believe it so I thought I'd watch ya, but AIN'T THIS 'XACTLY AS I THOUGHT?!"

Footsteps. The uncouth sound crept up to his side. His body would not even permit him to crawl. Immobile, front and back, Subaru's head was pulled up, Garfiel: “Reekin’ o’ the stench of the Witch, the fuck y’think yer doin’? Should I ask yer body? Oy? This place still needs that bastard. The fuck’re ya try’n ta pull, YEAH?!”

A blond youth. Garfiel. Or something. Assailed by that voice full of fury and murder, Subaru’s consciousness grew distant.

Half his head, though there was no way to confirm it, seemed to have been crushed. He’ll die, probably. If he died like this, that’d be about the most pathetic way to go.

If he Returned by Death while clinging onto this sordid thought, would he really still have the desire to save this place?

Subaru: “I don’t, know…Rem.”

With the end of that final syllable, Subaru’s consciousness descended into darkness.

Chapter 38:
Caterpillar

1

The first thing that drew on his consciousness was the continuous sound of dripping water.

Falling at equal intervals, the droplets carved out a constant rhythm, and with every beat sent into the silence of the room, Subaru's submerged consciousness was guided little by little into wakefulness.

His slumbering brain resumed its activity, and his rebooted nerves sensed the circulation of blood through his veins. Twisting his body, he tried to rise up with a groan—but couldn't.

Dropping back onto the ground, his limbs would not listen to his commands, and he could do nothing more than to scrape his face against the cold surface of the floor. At the same time, trying to tax his recovering senses to survey his surroundings, he found that his vision was completely painted over with darkness.

—Both my eyes are blind?!

That was the immediate answer he arrived at as he confirmed his situation, but before fear could overtake him, he noticed the tight pressure binding his eyelids and abandoned that conclusion. He determined that he had been blindfolded, before realizing the strangeness of the situation.

Instead of his eyes being blinded, they had both been covered. In addition, the fact that his body couldn't move was for the same reason, because his hands and feet had been firmly tied behind his back.

There was the sensation of a slender rope wrapped around his wrists and ankles. With his hands behind his back, even if he struggled, it would be no easy task to break free.

Subaru: “Wh, what is this…?!”

Fortunately, he wasn’t gagged, so he could still use his voice normally. But with his hands and feet literally tied, his mouth was all he had left. Truth is, whoever put Subaru in this situation probably wouldn’t be amicable enough to be satisfied by small talk.

Fear began to emerge from the inexplicable situation and the absence of information on his surroundings. In midst of these interwoven emotions, Subaru held his breath and forced his thoughts to move.

Organize the current circumstances: His eyes were blindfolded. His hands and feet were bound, impossible to break loose. He still had his voice. Should he yell for help? That would only draw his captor. Was there something nearby he could use to free himself from his restraints? It would be difficult to crawl around searching like this. The right side of his head was hurting, and, the moment he placed his consciousness on it, it began to assert its existence with throbbing pain.

Subaru: “Head, hurts…”

Becoming aware of the pain on the side of his head, Subaru remembered what had happened to him right before losing consciousness.

After Returning by Death and leaving the Tomb, Subaru confronted Roswaal with the new facts and speculations, and when he flew into a rage at Roswaal’s unforgivable statements, Subaru was knocked down by Garfiel, who had been watching him.

Or rather, “knocked down” would be too much of an understatement for the overwhelming force that had crushed him. Just a restraining strike from Garfiel had broken through his skull, and it wouldn’t have been surprising if he had died just like that.

Subaru: “If I died, this would be after Return by Death, but…”

If that really was the case, Subaru’s restart point should be in the Tomb right after the Trial. His soul should have been spirited to the room inside the Tomb, barely an hour before he headed to Roswaal's bedroom, as per the rules of Return by Death.

At least, Subaru's experience of being tied up and confined was only limited to that one time he flipped over the coffee table while imitating some anime, completely pissing off his father who threw him into the storehouse as punishment.

That was a memory from way back, even before he entered elementary school, and Return by Death couldn't have returned him that far. Then, assuming the restart point hadn't changed, the next conclusion would be that he was tied up immediately after Return by Death, but that should be impossible as well. So that only left him with one conclusion—

Subaru: "I failed… to die…?"

Whether it was the lingering pain in his head or his current situation, it would explain all of it.

He had committed an act of unsurpassable violence against Roswaal. With that in mind, his treatment was only morally right, even if it was not something he could emotionally accept.

???: "—Y'sure got a grasp of yer situation quickly, yeah?"

As though he had been waiting for Subaru to come to terms with his situation, a voice descended from above. Lifting his face, even though he couldn't see a thing, Subaru turned towards the direction of the voice. If he were to guess who the other person was just from the intonation of that voice,

Subaru: "Garfiel, is it?"

Garfiel: "Got that right too. Looks like yer head's still workin', that's a relief. Guess I smacked ya a bit too hard, my'bad my'bad."

Hearing his name being called, Garfiel apologized to the blindfolded Subaru. Even though the tone of his voice didn't exactly match its apologetic content, he went on with "Who would'a thought", Garfiel: “I was just givin’ y’a lil’ pat, didn’t think you’d almost die from that. Heard yer Lady Emilia’s Knight so I thought you’d have a bit more goin’ there, but guess I overestimated ya, huh.”

Subaru: “Sorry to disappoint you. My character’s more of the brainy type than the physical type… So where are we, anyway?”

Replying with a scornful quip, Subaru cut directly to the chase. Hearing this, Garfiel let out a short sigh through his nose, and,

Garfiel: “Don’t worry, yer still in th’Sanctuary. But this ain’t the Cathedral or th’Tomb, or one of them houses we’re lendin’ to the guests.”

Subaru: “You’ve got a bondage room prepared? They say it’s good to be prepared, but if you’ve even got this kind of facility set up… honestly I’m kinda creeped out.”

Garfiel: “Go complain to the creep who made it if y’think it’s bad taste. In fact, y’get to speak to her directly, don’t ya?”

Garfiel made plain his discontent, or rather a sincere sense of discomfort. As though having caught something within his words, Subaru’s face frowned up,

Subaru: “Directly… what do you mean…?”

Garfiel: “With the Witch’s stench all o’er ya, don’t go playin’ dumb now. Y’met her inside the Tomb, didn’t ya? Why else y’suddenly smell like this?”

Subaru: “Met inside the Tomb…?”

Something in Garfiel’s words was tugging at him.

The Tomb. The Trial. The person he encountered there. It was all a blank. After bidding farewell to his parents in the Trial, at the end, he went into the empty school building, and there—

Subaru: “The Witch…!”

—He encountered the Witch of Greed, Echidna.

With the sense of incongruity that came with the filling of the void, the existence of Echidna was restored to Subaru's brain. He had already experienced this in the previous loop, so why had he forgotten it again?

Unless, it was the result of the "Condition" imposed upon him at the end of their first meeting? But the fact that Return by Death could not overcome this effect was truly astounding.

Return by Death allowed him to carry over his memories, yet he would have no countermeasures against this direct interference. In other words, every time Subaru Returns by Death, he will have forgotten Echidna, and will only begin to remember when he is reminded again.

Subaru: "Then, was this the thing that Roswaal mentioned I've forgotten…?"

Only now, with the existence of the Witch restored, did Subaru realize this, but it was still a bit too early to draw such a conclusion. After all, despite being able to remember Echidna, he could find nothing in their conversations that would help him break through the present situation.

The way Roswaal said it, it was as though he wanted Subaru to remember "Something" which, in and of itself, would reveal Roswaal's incomprehensible intentions.

Then again, this would only make sense if he was indeed in possession of a complete Gospel.

Garfiel: "Since yer quiet all'of a sudden, should I take that as yer feelin' guilty?"

Subaru: "I'm not some highschool girl who'll die if she stops talking, so I'm just quietly thinking over a thing or two. Although a thing or two probably isn't enough at this point."

There were so many things to figure out that there wouldn't be enough cells in Subaru's brain to do it.

There was Emilia. Rem. Beatrice. —Pretty much for every name in the female lineup, Subaru will have to dig himself out of the situation . And on top of that, there was the Sanctuary, Elsa, Roswaal's true intentions, and the Gospels. And then,

Subaru: "There's Garfiel… too."

To convince him and gain his support was an indispensable element of Subaru's blueprint of the plan to save the Mansion. When it comes to repelling Elsa, there was no one else Subaru could draw on with greater combat capability. The fact that his strength could be counted on to match Elsa's was something Subaru had both witnessed with his eyes and personally experienced with his head.

Subaru: "…If I'm not mistaken, I'm pretty sure I got punched or kicked until my head was crushed, but what happened to that?"

Garfiel: "Hah. Took long enough for that topic t'come up. Yer head wasn't crushed, but it sure was cavin' in a bit. It'd be a nuisance if I just let ya die like that, so y'got a bit of healin'."

Subaru: "Healing… by whom?"

Garfiel: "Well who else was there t'do it 'cept me?"

Picking up some reverberations of pride in Garfiel's voice, Subaru was at a loss for words.

Who would have thought that the rough-and-brutish looking Garfiel would have studied healing magic. Still tied up, Subaru squirmed a little with his body.

Subaru: "My… head's still got it's original shape and isn't a box or pyramid, right?"

Garfiel: "Next time it gets cracked I could make it into that shape if y'want."

With a stupid sigh, having received this answer, Subaru shrinked up his shoulders and confirmed that at least his body was out of the near-death situation.

In that case, the next question would be Garfiel's intentions.

Subaru: “Since you’re the one who crushed it, it’d feel kinda weird to be thanking you for healing it, but… what was your aim in all this?”

Garfiel: “What. What kinda aim y’think I have?”

Subaru: “Considering the circumstances, from your standpoint, you made the right judgement to knock me down, so I won’t complain. I completely lost my head and it was a good thing that you stopped me. That’s just one of the mountain of things I don’t want to say but couldn’t help but want to say… if you catch my drift.”

Garfiel: “That’s a pretty damn complicated feelin’. It’s not that I don’t understand wantin’ to bash that smug bastard’s face in, but that’d be trouble for Granny and the others if y’do that.”

It seemed that Garfiel shared Subaru’s wonderful opinion of Roswaal. But since they both relied on Roswaal’s existence in no small part, neither of them could put that feeling into practice.

To Subaru, Roswaal was the guarantor of his livelihood in this world, and to Garfiel and the others, he was a necessary existence as the manager of the Sanctuary.

But seeing that the first reason Garfiel mentioned was Ryuzu—he must have been thinking more about the lives of the residents of the Sanctuary than about himself.

This only supported Frederica’s assessment of her brother in the previous loop, that in fact, the reason he chose to remain in the Sanctuary instead of leaving with his sister was probably out of consideration for the feelings of the residents who stayed behind.

Subaru: “Because Ryuzu and the others are important to you, Roswaal’s existence as their protector is indispensable. Without him and his Demi-human fetish, the residents trapped in the Sanctuary won’t be able to continue living as they are now, huh.”

Garfiel: “Don’t give me that embarrassing crap like y’understand everything. Who the hell y’think would stay here for sentimental reasons? I’m here cus I can’t leave the place, so…”

Subaru: “You can’t leave, even though your blood sibling Frederica could, Garf?”

It was information he had just gained from the previous loop. Playing this card, Subaru listened for any change in Garfiel’s demeanor. But the intensity of the reaction far surpassed Subaru’s imaginations.

Subaru: “—t!”

There was a whistling of wind, and the next instant, a tremendous cracking boom rolled into the side of Subaru’s head. The sound of air breaking apart reverberated through space, and with a stomp of his foot faster than the mind could process, the floor gave way, shattering, as the shape of the entire room contorted.

The ground bent upwards, and with a whimper, Subaru was tossed by the shockwave into the air. Unable to even brace himself, he tumbled across the solid floor, and was only forcefully stopped when he smashed into a wall ahead.

The impact on his back wrenched out all the contents of his lungs as the back of his head screamed with pain. Coughing, saliva drooled from the corner of Subaru’s mouth. And, seeing this,

Garfiel: “Who th’fuck told you that, y’piece of shit? Was it Frederica runnin’ her mouth about these unnecessary…no, no way she said this. We already severed our bond as siblings when we parted ways.”

Subaru: “That kind of thing’s just a figure of speech, there’s no way to actually sever the blood in your…”

Garfiel: “This here, now, bringin’ that up’s just even more weird, ain’t it. If y’wanted to use it, y’coulda found plenty o’better places to bring it up, couldn’t ya?”

Hearing Subaru’s winded response, Garfiel worked his disgustingly sharp intuition. The way he said it was as though while Subaru wasn’t paying attention, he had picked up on facts that even Subaru failed to notice.

Although Garfiel's guess wasn't far from the truth— in fact, it was almost spot on— the thought process he used to get there was far too direct.

It was as though he possessed some extraordinary perceptiveness, or, rather, possessed something "Impossible to Ignore".

Subaru: "No way…you…too?"

—The moment the possibility struck him, Subaru could not conceal the tremors in his voice.

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru's subjectless question received only an eerie silence in return.

In terms of time, only a few seconds had passed in that silence, but to Subaru, it was equivalent to an eternity.

No reply. Why wasn't he talking. Was it because Subaru's question was too vague? If he just plainly said that he doesn't understand, or even gave him a kick, it would be better than this. The only hope Subaru could cling to was some short-circuited reaction like that.

But,

Garfiel: "Me too…y'say."

High pitched footsteps. The sound of Garfiel's soles striking upon the stone-tiled floor drew closer, and Subaru could tell that he squatted down beside him. Raising his head off the floor, he could feel Garfiel's face drawing close to his, baring its fangs,

Garfiel: "And what make y'think that, huh, oy?"

Subaru: "Stop talking in a way that just stirs up even more bad feelings. I just said something that made no sense, right? It'd be alright if you could just straight up deny it… couldn't you?"

Garfiel: "What're y'sayin like yer about t'cry?"

Ignoring Subaru's pleading request, Garfiel replied in that same ambiguous voice. The indeterminate response only inflamed Subaru's anxiety, his inner heart already a jumbled mess.

He wanted Garfiel to deny it, say it was some lucky guess. But the pregnant replies only deepened the sense of foreboding in Subaru's heart.

Beatrice and Roswaal, both of whom he considered to be allies, were, one after the other, revealed to be owners of Gospels. For Subaru now, it would not be so strange if a third person was revealed.

Subaru: "Then…! That means you know too, don't you…?!"

Garfiel: "—Ah, so that's what this's about. Wonder where y'noticed."

Subaru: "—?!"

His throat frozen by shock, Subaru traced the image of Garfiel within his blindfolded eyes.

The intonation of his voice, the listless sigh. None of it was like the Garfiel Subaru knew. But even as he relinquished these half-revealing words, the distance between them hadn't changed,

Garfiel: "Y'look surprised, but it can't be that strange. I've been livin' in the Sanctuary forever, and we've known each other for a very long time. So the opportunities weren't just once or twice."

Subaru: "B…ut…you… aren't you supposed to hate the Witch? So much that you'd overreact like that…and yet…"

Garfiel: "Yeah, I do. I hate the Witch, I don't trust yer stinkin' like the Witch, and I don't got no affections for that Half-Witch Lady Emilia, either. But then again, I can't say what that thing says's wrong. At least, it defin'ly knows what I wanted to know."

Subaru: "What you wanted… to know…"

Garfiel: "—I got no reason t'tell ya anything. But why don't y'try askin'? Y'might not get another chance."

After Garfiel spat out these words, Subaru could sense him standing up. Then, he drew away from Subaru, apparently making his way to the exit of the prison room—and placed his hand on the door.

Hearing the wooden door creak, "Hey!", Subaru shouted to the departing Garfiel.

Subaru: "Wait! …Wh-What'll happen to me. Or I mean what's happening right now?"

Garfiel: "For tryin' to assassinate that Roswaal bastard, yer sure gettin' off light. For now, you'll just stay restrained and confined till the results come out."

Confined, that was the word that came up just yesterday. From Roswaal's own mouth, no less. The fact that his self-professed status was now passed onto Subaru for enacting violence against him was nothing short of ironic.

In front of Subaru, who did not make another sound, Garfiel snorted through his nose,

Garfiel: "You'll be gettin' meals every mornin' and evenin'. Don't try anythin' funny. I'll be lookin' after ya."

Subaru: "As if… that's the kind of thing I'd be worried about right now! Results? You said results? What results? What are you waiting for…?"

Garfiel: "What results, ain't that obvious?"

This time, Garfiel replied as though he had just heard a most foolish question,

Garfiel: "—The results of Lady Emilia's Trials. After she heard what y'did, she's gotten terribly enthusiastic, almost like she's tryin' to atone for what you've done."

—After Garfiel left the room, Subaru, alone in his prison, sank deep into the sea of thought.

He could not get the words Garfiel left behind at their parting out of his mind.

In order to clear Subaru's name, Emilia had rallied herself to challenge the Trials. Perhaps she thought that if the Sanctuary could be liberated, her achievement would be enough to absolve Subaru of his crime.

It was just like Emilia, to not doubt Subaru at all.

Subaru: "But, in that moment, I…"

Despite being overtaken by rage, in the end, Subaru genuinely wanted to strangle Roswaal.

With his hands wrapped around that person's neck, he had used his tightening grip to seal off his airway, relentlessly building up strength as if to snap his neck, or otherwise suffocate him.

Although he could not move his hands, bound behind his back, Subaru could tell that his fingers were trembling.

Forgetting the passion of that moment, all that remained in his hands was a dark remnant of the heat that nearly took another person's life. Inside his empty stomach, a sense of nausea began to build.

Even more so, considering the target of that murderous intent was someone close to him.

Subaru: "I just… don't know anymore…"

Who to trust, what to think, and what to do, none of it made sense anymore.

What was Beatrice's position? Why did she have a Gospel? And what were those days they spent together?

What was Roswaal thinking? Why would that guy have a completed

Gospel? What did he want Subaru to remember? And what was the true meaning of his inexplicable role in all this?

How could he help Emilia pass the Trials? Or rather, was it right to push her towards the Trials in the first place? He couldn't even begin to answer that question.

What was Garfiel's intention, and did he really have a Gospel? It will be impossible to defeat Elsa without his help. Yet, with their relationship deteriorating after every Return by Death, how could he get him to the Mansion?

What should he do about Elsa's attack, should he repel or evacuate? And why was there a difference between the timings of the first and second attacks? Why did that murderer know about the escape passage no one was supposed to know about? Who was Elsa's employer? What will he have to do to defeat her? Regardless, he could never forgive her.

And why was the Sanctuary created? What was the outline of the remaining Trials, and why did the Trials exist in the first place? What was the goal of Echidna, sleeping in her Tomb, and how can he meet with her again? And, at the end of the last loop, what happened to the depopulated Sanctuary?

In that final moment, what was it that killed and devoured Subaru?

Subaru: "I can't… answer… a single one."

Round and round and round, these questions without answers endlessly circled in his head.

With his eyelids painfully bound and his vision completely sealed, deprived of information about the world around him, there was nowhere his questions could turn except inside himself.

His insides packed with nothing but mysteries and doubts, he had come to a deadlock.

What tormented Subaru was not only his unanswered doubts, but also anxiety at the time that he was passing in vain, submerged in these fruitless thoughts.

Since his eyes were covered, he could not say for certain, but Subaru's feelings told him that most likely a day had already passed since the night he strangled Roswaal.

It was dark, so he was probably confined inside a hidden building in the forest. The chilliness of the room was conspicuous even considering the fact that not the slightest light could slip through.

Compared to the daytime temperatures he had experienced so far, he couldn't help but notice the drastic temperature-drop here. So perhaps, it would be more constructive to consider that it was already night after sunset. If he followed the assumption that it was night, then it was clear that at least a whole day had passed.

Ever since being summoned to this Parallel World, Natsuki Subaru had sustained a fair number of injuries both light and severe. And his body still carried memories of being healed of wounds of all the various degrees.

So, judging from experience, having half his head crushed and his skull cracked open was clearly supposed to be a fatal wound. The fact that he came out of it alive without Ferris was honestly nothing short of a miracle, which only served to show how skilled Garfiel must be.

Basically, in this world, as long as the person doesn't die, almost all injuries can be healed, depending on the abilities of the healer. But naturally, the more severe the wound, the heavier the burden it would be to heal them.

Bodily fatigue can only be restored with stamina, and in the same way, Subaru's recent wounds could not have recovered to such an extent in a matter of a few hours, or even the same night.

More than likely, a night had passed. But even more convincing was the fact that,

Subaru: "I'm… hungry…"

His empty stomach, which hadn't received anything in all that time he spent sleeping, was aching and groaning endlessly, asserting its existence.

3

The passage of time and the indistinct hours gradually wore at Subaru's mind.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed since then, and his restraints remained unchanged. Just like this, Subaru was left inside the prison room as time went by.

Subaru: "…"

He tried counting the seconds to keep track of time inside the void, but after counting for an hour when he felt like he was about to go mad, he finally abandoned the idea.

Besides, what difference would it make at this point, even if he knew the time? After all,

Subaru: "It's… probably too late…"

Meals had been brought to Subaru six times. If they followed the schedule of once every morning and night, it would mean that three days had already passed. Three days after Subaru woke inside the Tomb—would make this the fifth day since arriving in the Sanctuary.

Even if he left for the Mansion this morning, he would only barely make it in time for the assumed timing of Elsa's attack. The moment he passed that point in time, he had already missed the deadline.

In fact, Subaru had made the mistake from the very first moments of this loop.

No amount of regret was enough for allowing himself to be consumed by rage and throwing himself at Roswaal. If he hadn't lost control of his emotions, he would have been able to confirm far more information from Roswaal, and, above all, his relationship with Garfiel wouldn't have worsened to the point where he'd be imprisoning him.

The consequence of abandoning himself to that boiling heat of emotion, was this current caterpillar-like state.

He hadn't done any of the things he was supposed to do, and didn't even get to see the faces of those he wanted to protect. Instead, he was here in this unsightly form, cowering in fear of the approaching time.

That is, Subaru had already given up on this loop.

Subaru: "—I really… fucked this up…"

Because of that momentary lapse, he had lost the chance to prevent the tragedy that was about to befall the Mansion. Which, in turn, meant that the survival of the four girls inside the Mansion had become hopeless.

Rem, Petra, Frederica, Beatrice, Subaru was knowingly leaving them to die. After he had just screamed, denouncing Roswaal, for doing the very same thing.

Subaru: "…Damnit, I. Why didn't I die?"

He just wanted to die. If the restart point hadn't changed, if he could really start over again, then Subaru would return to that night and face against his odds once more. Although he would still be stumbling blind, at a loss about where to begin, at least it would be better than this unsightly state. Surely, he could do better than this. He must do better than this.

Subaru: "Otherwise, what's the point of…"

Was he prepared to accept this resignation, and bite down on his lips and bear witness to the end of this world?

Having judged that saving the Mansion was no longer possible, and that "Death" in this loop was inevitable, Subaru immediately committed suicide and Returned by Death—was not what happened.

It was certainly the worst possible situation, and awaiting Subaru in this life was only an empty future devoid of meaning. He should gamble on Return by Death and reverse the world, and strive towards the best possible future. But,

Subaru: “If I return without learning anything, I’ll just be right back where I started.”

At least, Subaru needed to find out what happened in the Sanctuary after he was gone.

Just what happened on the sixth day? That alone needed to be confirmed. And it was for this reason alone that, no matter how much Subaru wanted to scream his throat hoarse and clench his teeth until they cracked, he swallowed down his regrets towards the Mansion, and resigned himself to this loop.

If now was the fifth day, something should happen tomorrow.

Over the last three days, only Garfiel and someone else tasked with taking care of Subaru visited the prison. The caretaker always stayed silent, probably following Garfiel’s instructions, so Subaru couldn’t tell who it was. But from the way she wiped Subaru’s restrained body, and her motions as she fed Subaru by hand, he determined she was most likely a woman.

In an environment where his every move was being watched, there was no opportunity to investigate further, and so the real identity of Garfiel’s assistant remained unknown.

However, this must be a place where Emilia, who had rallied herself to save Subaru, couldn’t find.

Most likely, it was a secret location known only to Garfiel and his assistant, where Subaru could not hope to be discovered, and much less call for help.

In fact, if Garfiel and Roswaal had both decided to confine him here, then it would be pointless to escape anyway.

Subaru: “If Emilia could pass the Trials to save me, that’d be amazing, but…”

If the situation was reversed, Subaru was confident he would pass the Trials for Emilia's sake. But Subaru had never imagined that Emilia would try to overcome the Trials for him. And he never thought he meant so much to her that he would be her motivating force. That was just how much Subaru undervalued himself in his mind.

But in reality, the fact that no good news came after three days probably meant that, just like the loops before this, Emilia couldn't pass the Trial no matter how many times she challenged it.

In other words, the situation at the Mansion, at the Sanctuary, with Subaru, and Emilia, had all come to an impacted deadlock. Exactly like what Garfiel had once shouted to him.

Subaru: "After all, I…"

—Have to do something.

For Emilia, the Mansion, the Sanctuary, every single problem that came up, he must overcome with his own two hands, and with the only weapon at his disposal.

A quiet resolve. Never good at giving up, it was the only reason Subaru went on living.

After thinking for a long, long time, he came to the same conclusion he had already reached so many times before. Seeing it was more than his fingers could count, Subaru nodded to his heart, and waited for time to pass.

—When something finally happened, was when he felt something shaking his body as it was drifting into sleep.

Subaru: "—mn?"

Someone was grasping his shoulders, shaking him awake as Subaru returned from his shallow slumber into reality.

He noticed saliva drooling down the corner of his lips, and since he couldn't use his hands, he nudged over his shoulder to try to wipe it. It was a strenuous activity, but, apparently having gotten used to using his upper body, he managed to wipe it off,

Subaru: “Who…is it?”

His voice was still hoarse from having just woken up, in addition to the recent screaming.

He had promised himself not to scream like that again or his throat will break apart, and by now, he was already more or less desensitized to the pain that felt like he was going to spew blood. Although, it was nothing to be happy about.

Hearing Subaru’s response, the person who woke him let out a short sigh. And,

???: “Sorry to do this in the middle of your nap… but can you move, Mr. Natsuki?”

Subaru: “Aauh?”

Hearing the voice belonging to someone he never imagined would be here, Subaru couldn’t help but let out a stupid sound.

Perhaps mistaking Subaru’s surprise for drowsiness, the person mumbled “Oh, come on” in a quiet voice and gave Subaru a light slap on the face,

???: “I’m also taking quite a risk coming here to help you, you know, so can you please liven up a bit? I’m pretty sure we’ll both be sorry if things ended here.”

Saying this, he cut the ropes binding Subaru’s hands and feet with a blade. Regaining the long lost freedom of his limbs, Subaru reaffirmed this sensation and brusquely pulled off his blindfold,

Subaru: “Augh… hands, feet… even my eyes are hurting.”

In the center of Subaru’s thin, still-crooked vision, he made out the shape of a man who looked like he really didn’t want to be here.

A character who was here for no discernable reason, Otto Sewen made his unexpected entry onto the stage.

Chapter 39:
Fhrend

1

Otto: “What, what’s with that bewildered face like you just saw something mind-bogglingly unbelievable at the end of a dream and now your brain’s melting.”

Subaru: “…That’s, an exaggerated way of putting it but there’s no need to correct anything so let’s just say it’s something like that.”

Otto sighed, resting both his hands on his hips, and Subaru, turning his wrists confirming that his hands were free, dropped onto the floor looking back up at Otto.

After all, having been tied up for over three days, just moving his body made it creak and ache. Since it was so difficult to turn over in that tied up position, he had only been periodically flipped at mealtimes. But, it was more than just a problem with blood circulation, as he was starting to notice other defects. Namely,

Subaru: “Otto, this might just be because I just took the blindfold off, but… my right eye’s not seeing too well. Or, rather than not well… it’s more like it can’t see at all. What’s up with that?”

Otto: “What is up with it… if you ask me, I’m a bit hesitant to say as well… I could put it more elegantly and sugarcoat it… or I could put it bluntly and say exactly what it is. Which would you prefer?”

Subaru: “Sugarcoat it so I don’t get shocked and tell me bluntly so I know what’s actually happening.”

Otto: “That’s awfully greedy… Uhhh, on the starboard-side of Mr. Natsuki’s auspicious visage, your vision had been inevitably shrouded in darkness, forever closed to light…”

Subaru: “Uh. I wasn’t asking for something that edgy but I think I get the point.”

Hearing Otto’s dressed-up description of Subaru’s malaise, Subaru held out his hand and stopped the explanation halfway through. Then, putting his extended hand on his right eye, he carefully felt around to confirm it.

—The right side of his vision had felt as though it had been completely cut off, and no image was coming through. And once he touched it, Subaru understood why this organ was slacking on its job.

Or, rather than slacking, it was more like it had packed its bags and went home. Because all that was left where his right eye used to be, was an empty hole.

Subaru: “I thought… he said I was healed.”

Otto: “The bleeding was stopped and the broken bones were pieced together. But healing magic depends on the healer, and it isn’t omnipotent. …Bringing dead parts back to life would be a bit…”

Otto mumbled, looking at Subaru with sympathy. Seeing that look, Subaru slackened his lips powerlessly and muttered “No helping it, I guess”,

Subaru: “People usually die when their heads get crushed. So I think I’m ok with just losing one eye… but if both my eyes died I think I’ll probably lose the will to live.”

Otto: “That’s pretty optimistic… you aren’t going into despair, are you? Please don’t, I don’t know if we can go on without you, Mr. Natsuki.”

For someone who had just lost an important organ like the right eye, Subaru was awfully calm, in a way that even surprised himself. Maybe the shock just hadn’t kicked in yet, or perhaps it was because, unlike losing the greater part of an arm during Elsa’s attack, this one wasn’t accompanied by gore and pain.

Even though Garfiel lied, it was still mostly true. He had halted the blood, sealed the wounds, and stopped the pain. It’d be expecting too much to think healing magic can heal anything, and he did save

Subaru from an otherwise fatal wound just like he said he did.

Subaru: “Was he… upholding some kind of principle or what? I just can’t understand him, that guy.”

He struck Subaru down when he was attacking Roswaal, but afterwards also healed him. And then he thought to imprison Subaru until the end of the Trials to guarantee Emilia’s cooperation.

He healed him so he wouldn’t die, and even took up the role of caretaker to see it through to the end. Though he loathed the Witch’s stench drifting from Subaru’s body, it didn’t stop him from coming back here. And even though he didn’t stop coming, he hadn’t asked Subaru a single vital question.

It was almost as though he knew Subaru wouldn’t say anything, or as if he already knew everything he needed to know, and so had no interest in what Subaru had to say.

Subaru: “If he does know, does that mean he has a Gospel…? How come everyone is… or actually, seeing this is the Witch’s Experimental Ground, maybe it’s only natural.”

If every key person possesses a book that tells the future and acts in accordance with its instructions, then shouldn’t this world progress in a way that’s much simpler for Subaru?

With everyone who is anyone working toward the same outcome, marching towards the same HAPPY END, for once, couldn’t things just play out in a single cozy path?

If there was truly a way to know the future, then it should have saved Subaru a long time ago from having to manually die and repeat and feel his way forward, shouldn’t it?

Subaru: “…Complaining isn’t going to move things forward at all, and no one’s gonna come help me, damnit.”

Otto: “That’s a depressing thing to say, Mr. Natsuki. Well, I can’t blame you, considering what you just went through… but I am a bit offended by that “no one’s gonna help me” part. What did you think I’m doing here?”

Overhearing Subaru mutterings, Otto offered this sympathetic comment before rejecting what Subaru's said at the end.

Seeing Otto's smug-looking expression up close, Subaru's face looked blank for a moment,

Subaru: "Ah, come to think of it, what are you doing here? I mean, really, for the last three or four days I've had time to think about loads of things, and I'm not exaggerating, but you were basically the only person who never crossed my mind."

Otto: "You're unbelievable, you know that!! To think I'd still be surprised you'd say something like that at this point!!"

Subaru: "Honestly though, I'm the one surprised at how your existence just vanished from my head. The moment I saw you I wasn't even sure if you were Otto or the appa-seller-uncle, you know."

Otto: "Who's the appa-seller-uncle?!"

Subaru: "He was kind of a starting point for me. We could also call him MR.SAVEPOINT."

To date, in terms of Return by Death respawn points, Kadomon was probably the one who showed up the most.

Joking around as he remembered that scar-faced uncle, Subaru put an end to the sense of loss for his right eye and set his mind to analyze the abrupt change in the situation.

First, he better get some answers from Otto. And find out his true intentions.

Subaru: "Jokes and all that aside… there're some things I wanna to ask you."

Otto: "Well, that's only to be expected. I'm also pretty interested to know what Mr. Natsuki did to get locked up in here."

Subaru: "—? You mean, all this wasn't on Roswaal's orders?"

According to Garfiel, Subaru was supposed to be imprisoned for his act of violence against Roswaal. At the same time, his imprisonment was to be used as leverage to compel Emilia to take the Trials. But,

Otto: “I don’t know how much the Margrave is involved in all this. All I know is that right now a terrible rift is dividing the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “A rift? What do you mean?”

Otto: “It’s exactly what it sounds like. There’s Lady Ryuzu’s faction, which wants to free the refugees from the village along with Mr. Natsuki, and there’s the other faction firmly opposed to that. Ever since Mr. Natsuki got imprisoned by Garfiel, the debate has really gotten out of hand.”

Otto gave a brief summary of what happened over the last few days with an exhausted expression on his face.

Just as Subaru feared, the friction between the refugees and the Sanctuary’s residents deepened, and the mounting displeasure had exploded into small-scaled conflicts. It seemed that the originally small cracks within the Sanctuary had split its population into factions, and the Sanctuary was now in a fractured state.

Swallowing a deep breath at the frightening situation, Subaru followed with “But”,

Subaru: “Why did this happen so suddenly? From what I’ve seen… I mean, I expected…”

In the first world, Subaru was here for over five days without seeing any of this kind of factionalism. In fact, Subaru’s proposal to release the refugees passed easily, and on the morning of the sixth day the agreement was realized.

But this time, the situation was deteriorating way too quickly. Seeing Subaru make this judgement, Otto shook his head and raised a finger, “Well, you see”,

Otto: “It wasn’t sudden at all. In fact, Mr. Natsuki is one of the main reasons this happened, so if even you think it’s sudden then we’re really in trouble.”

Subaru: “I’m… one of the reasons?”

Otto: “I don’t know what kind of relationship Mr. Natsuki has with the villagers of Earlham…but it must be a good one. Ever since you got attacked by Garfiel and went missing, the atmosphere in the Sanctuary has become the worst it’s ever been.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “To the villagers, Miss Ram and the Margrave are in a position where they’d hesitate to voice their concerns to, but because they trust you, that makes you the ideal channel to pass their voices to the top. I’m not saying it’s the only reason, but I think it’s clear how furious everyone is.”

Listening to Otto’s explanation, Subaru opened his mouth without uttering a word.

Certainly, when it comes to the differences in the situation in the Sanctuary between this loop and the previous one, Subaru’s well-being was definitely one of them. But Subaru never once imagined that his presence would have this kind of effect on the Earlham villagers’ feelings, much less trigger a rift inside the Sanctuary.

Suspiciously squinting his left eye at Otto, Subaru tried to check if he was joking or exaggerating, but Otto just furrowed his brows without showing any notable reaction in particular. In other words, he was probably being serious. Then, the only point of contention would be whether there was something wrong with Otto’s observational skills, but,

Subaru: “I don’t wanna bother piling up arguments to get the answer to that one, so.”

Otto: “Why do I get the feeling I’m being treated improperly somehow. Ah, nevermind. Anyway, Mr. Natsuki, the reason I came here is related to that rift.”

Subaru: “Related to the rift… so, since things got messed up without me, you’re saying it’ll all return to normal once I go back? Well that’s just, kinda, expecting too much of me and putting way too much PRESSURE on me you know and…”

Bogged down by his own overly low self-esteem, Subaru still couldn’t take Otto’s words seriously. The truth is, even if Subaru had a powerful influence on calming the villager’s hearts, now that everything had already exploded, he doubted there was anything he could do.

In fact, if Subaru showed up now, missing a right eye, he’ll probably just be pouring oil onto the fire.

Seeing Subaru shaking his head with a difficult expression, Otto rejected his denial all over again with “No no”,

Otto: “Of course I don’t think Mr. Natsuki has that kind of influence. That’d just be way too optimistic, you know.”

Subaru: “We agree there so I won’t protest, but you didn’t have to be so blunt about it. …So then, why’re you getting me out?”

Otto: “I’m sure both the refugees and the residents of the Sanctuary want to avoid a large-scale conflict. So that’s why, I’ve been wondering if Mr. Natsuki would be willing to play a part in the escape from the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “Play a part… in the escape?”

Subaru narrowed his left eye at the perilous word that flew out, and repeated it under his breath as he ruminated. Then, it suddenly occurred to him what Otto must be thinking.

Subaru looked up at Otto and, “Unless”, he licked his lips,

Subaru: “You want to have the villagers to escape while the Sanctuary is in a state of chaos, and you want my help in that escape, is that it?”

Otto: “Precisely, I’m glad the conversation got moving quickly. We’re a bit pressed for time, so I hope Mr. Natsuki can agree to help without any conditions attached.”

Subaru: “…Take me through the process first. Even I’m not going to agree to go in without a plan. I need to make sure we got a chance, since we won't have any excuses once we get caught."

Above all, if they roused up the faction opposing the Sanctuary's liberation, it would mean placing Emilia, Roswaal and all the hostages in danger. Not that he really cared what would happen to Roswaal, but Subaru wanted to keep Emilia, Ram, and Patrasche from getting hurt.

Otto: "I would like it if you could add my name to the list of people you don't want to get hurt as well."

Subaru: "It's natural for men to endure pain in the gambling halls. Maybe I'm just that old-fashioned kind of guy. Good men stay out of the house, you know."

Otto: "That's the first time I heard that phrase, but I'm already almost completely sure that's not where it's supposed to be used."

Subaru made a face at Otto's correct guess, and then, clearing his throat, he brought the conversation back on topic,

Subaru: "If it's not just some haphazard desperate gamble, then tell me your plan. After that I'll decide whether to assist you or sell you out."

Otto: "It's pretty scary that selling me out is even on the table… but the plan is straightforward. We've already talked with the moderate faction of the Sanctuary, so while they keep the extremists busy, we'll try to break through the Barrier in our dragon carriages. Then, all that's left is to say goodbye."

Subaru: "Isn't that just plain reckless? And who else are you working with…?"

Otto: "That's something I'll tell you once you've agreed to help. But the task we want to leave to Mr. Natsuki would be persuading the villagers and dealing with the unpredictable Garfiel. After all, if it's between the Mr. Natsuki and the villagers, he'll probably bite onto Mr. Natsuki."

Subaru: "My body is pretty good bait, huh. Well, I can't really deny that.”

Otto was right. If it was a choice between Subaru and the refugees, no doubt Garfiel will dive straight for Subaru’s blood. But, as one would expect, that would mean considerable hardship for Subaru,

Subaru: “So after all that, we still have no idea where Garfiel stands in this, do we? That guy’s like family to Miss Ryuzu, so he should be with the moderates, but…”

Otto: “Originally, that was how I’d count him as well, but considering his approach to Mr. Natsuki and Lady Emilia, it’s pretty hard to tell. So, even if we don’t consider him an active enemy, we have to treat him as a passive enemy. That’s the consensus we’ve come to.”

Subaru: “Sounds like your accomplice has a pretty good grasp of the situation…You can count me in. But, just out of curiosity, what would you’ve done if I refused to help?”

Otto: “We’ll go around announcing that you’ve escaped, and then we won’t have to worry about any potential threat from Garfiel for a while.”

Subaru: “That’s just perfect, you bastards. The moment my hands and feet are freed, you’ve already got me going against Garfiel! God damnit, I’ve been played.”

Scratching his head, Subaru could only accept that he was thoroughly in the palms of Otto and his accomplice’s hands. From the moment he was put into this situation, Subaru had no choice but to dance to their will.

However, Subaru wasn’t as upset he claimed.

Because now, by taking part in Otto’s plan to free the refugees from the Sanctuary, Subaru might just find the answer to why everyone had vanished from the Sanctuary.

If the plan succeeded, it would at least explain how the refugees could have disappeared from the Sanctuary without Subaru’s interference. But that still wouldn’t solve the rest of the mystery.

Subaru: “It still wouldn’t explain how all the residents trapped in the Sanctuary went missing…”

Subaru could accept the conclusion that those who could leave might have left. But that wouldn’t explain how the people who supposedly couldn’t leave went missing as well. Either way, he would have to leave this place in order to find out what happened.

By following along with Otto’s plan, seeing this loop to the end wouldn’t be so pointless after all.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, I’m pretty impressed how you managed to find me. Since this place is probably like a secret hideout in the Sanctuary or something.”

He had already more or less pieced together the details of the interior of the room from Garfiel’s words and the excessive free time. After looking around the place, Subaru clicked the bones in his neck.

Dim crystal lamps served as the only light source inside the room, which had no windows to allow any outside light to enter. Built out of wood, its shoddy construction showed signs of rain leaking through. That was probably the source of the sound of dripping water that had gradually worn at the blindfolded Subaru’s nerves. A painful thought.

Otto: “Well, it certainly wouldn’t be easy to find his place using any conventional methods. And I’d say it feels more like a secret base than a hideout.”

Subaru: “Looking around again, I’m getting that impression too. It doesn’t seem to be the handiwork of a pro. It’s more like an amateur with too much energy threw a building together based on whatever he felt like.”

The rundown little cabin was quite far from Subaru’s original impressions of his prison. It was just a narrow, ordinary little shed.

While Subaru was busy going through such sentiments, with “Leaving that aside”, Otto gestured to move on with the topic, Otto: “Finding you was all thanks to me, you know. I believe this is where you give me your most sincere praises, so, what do you think, Mr. Natsuki?”

Subaru: “I’m honestly impressed, and you really helped me. So how did you find me?”

Otto: “Fufufuu~, do you really want to know? You want to know, right? You want to know.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I wanna know. You must’ve used your Divine Protection of Anima Whipering to talk to the bugs and lizards and plants in the forest to gather information to find me here, huh.”

Otto: “Yes but can you please give me back my sense of superiority?!”

Otto lamented being destroyed. All the while, having originally intended it as a joke, Subaru couldn’t hide his internal astonishment that it was confirmed.

Even though he knew Otto had the Divine Protection of Anima Whispering, he never thought it would have this kind of practical power.

Before, Subaru had followed this Divine Protection while driving Patrasche to save Emilia from danger. That time too, Otto had listened to the bugs and foliage to take one shortcut after another to close the otherwise impossible distance between them.

Subaru: “Really is handy, your Protection.”

Otto: “…It’s, honestly not that great of a thing.”

In front of Subaru’s sigh of admiration, Otto’s response suddenly became low-spirited. Subaru furrowed his brows at this reaction, but Otto only clenched his fists and did not follow up on it, “Anyway”,

Otto: “Lady Emilia’s Trial will begin soon. Garfiel will be at the Tomb during that time and away from here. Which means now’s our chance.”

Subaru: “The prep-time before executing the plan is way too short, isn’t it… If you didn’t manage to find me in time, wouldn’t your ass be burning with a schedule like that?”

Whining about how Otto was rushing him, Subaru, who had already agreed to help, gave his body a twist to confirm his physical condition. Although it was nothing to be satisfied with, he had food delivered to his mouth, and his poop cleaned up for him without fail. Thinking about it now, it was rather embarrassing to not even know who had been doing this for him, which kind of reminded him of that time when he was hospitalized for breaking a leg.

Anyway, aside from the creaking, there seemed to be nothing else wrong with his body. Giving Otto, who was watching him, a nod, he set out his step, and—

Subaru: “Uh, can I just ask one last thing?”

Otto: “…What is it now, geez. This is really the last one, ok? If we take too long, the plan will move to the next stage and we’ll just look like a bunch of idiots.”

Subaru: “My bad my bad… But, why did you take such a risk to help me?”

Otto: “…”

As if a bucket of cold water was just splashed on him, Otto’s expression suddenly vanished when he heard Subaru’s question.

That was actually the first thing Subaru had wanted to ask. No doubt, resolving the conflict between the residents and the refugees would be beneficial to both parties. It was what Subaru wanted too, and would also support Emilia and Roswaal. But,

Subaru: “I don’t see how you’d benefit from all this. I might just be too dumb to see it, but… it really irks me when I don’t know.”

He didn’t want to doubt Otto, but it was true that there was something about this that didn’t feel right. The fact was, Otto had been caught up in the Sanctuary’s problems for no reasons of his own. He was never supposed to be here, nor did he have anything to do with the Royal Selection.

The moment felt these entangled circumstances to be too troublesome, he could have abandoned any involvement and left by himself. Even if he wanted to strike up a relationship with the Margrave and took that as his goal, the current situation was just “Way too poor to bet on”.

Even if it was not as bad as Subaru, surely, Otto wasn’t seeing any light at the end of the tunnel.

That was why Subaru couldn’t understand what would make Otto brave such dangers to stand by his side. Just as he said, in the three days he spent in thought, Subaru really had forgotten about Otto’s existence. Subaru had found no cause to doubt him. And so, in a sense, one could even say he trusted him.

But now, with the weight all the negative conditions piling up, the only way Subaru could truly trust him was if he could understand “What” Otto was doing it for.

So, at the risk of overturning that trust, Subaru needed to know Otto’s true intentions.

If even Otto had a side to him that Subaru could not trust, then that would just have to—

Subaru: “Please answer me, Otto. Why are you going to such lengths to do this?”

He asked quietly. It was a small, but definite watershed.

Stopping his breath, Subaru waited for Otto’s answer. And, taking in Subaru’s question, Otto gazed back at Subaru in turn, as he chose his words,

Otto: “What kind of person do you think I am, Mr. Natsuki?”

Subaru: “Someone who’d reach for a penny in front of him while he drops all his belongings on the other hand… I think that’s the kind of dopey character I have in mind.”

Otto: “That’s a terrible way to think of me! Even though I admit I’ve done something like that before it’s still irritating to be thought of like that!!”

That really was Subaru’s impression of Otto—or, rather, it was the impression Subaru wanted to believe.

Protesting against that unacceptable evaluation, “Just, really”, Otto gave a tired shake of his head,

Otto: “You know, Mr. Natsuki.”

Subaru: “…Yeah?”

Otto: “—If I just wanted to help a friend, would that really be so strange?”

—For a moment, unable to understand what he just heard, Subaru’s time stopped.

It was several seconds later when time began to move again. But even as it moved, Subaru still couldn’t comprehend the meaning of those words. What did Otto say, just now?

Friendt? Who’s Friendt? Was there someone with that name around here?

Otto: “Wh-What’s with that face frozen in surprise all of a sudden?!”

Subaru: “No, I just suddenly heard the name of someone I didn’t know so I lost track of what you were saying. Who’s this Friendt supposed to be?”

Otto: “I don’t know what kind of conclusion you just reached but it’s completely wrong from head to tail! Not Friendt, friend! Like good friends!”

Subaru: “Good friends?! Who and who?!”

Otto: “Me! And Mr. Natsuki!”

Subaru’s eyes opened wide, staring at the out-of-breath Otto in disbelief. And Otto, stomping noisily on the floor, flapped his hands up and down, “Are you even listening?”,

Otto: “When I was captured by the Witch Cult and my life was in danger, it was Mr. Natsuki who saved me. And there were all those things you said and did to help me after that. I may have come here in order to meet the Margrave, but that doesn’t mean my relationship with Mr. Natsuki is just one of convenience.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “At the end of the day, even without these troublesome things, I still think of you as a friend, Mr. Natsuki. There may be all sorts of complaints I’d like to raise about my usual treatment, but don’t say such unreasonable, stupid things like we don’t know each other! So—”

Suddenly feeling embarrassed halfway through, Otto quickly scratched his nose and looked away. Subaru remained silent while listening to Otto’s words. And Otto, having reached the end of his speech, stared quizzically at Subaru’s lack of reaction.

There was a visible unease on his face, probably because Subaru hadn’t said anything to confirm what he said just now. It felt like a situation where someone just opened the door to a friendship sales-pitch.

Able to imagine what must be going through Otto’s mind, a certain emotion began to swell up in Subaru’s heart. And, the reaction brought about by that emotion was—

Subaru: “—Pffff.”

Otto: “Yes?”

Subaru: “Whuahahahaha! Fr-Friends? We’re good friends! Aaah, is that’right is that’right. Otto, you, you want to be my friend?!”

Otto: “Whaa?!”

Unable to keep his laughter from blowing out, Subaru boorishly slapped the red-faced Otto on the shoulders. Still couldn’t stop himself, Subaru kept hugging his belly while stomping the floor.

Subaru: “Pffuahahaa, friends. Aaah, damn it. Otto, you bastard, you!”

Otto: “Ow! Ow! What’re you doing?! Yeah, I was stupid for saying it! I get it, Mr. Natsuki doesn’t see it that way. But even so, I’m pretty sure it’s not something that laughable!”

Subaru: “Nononono, I can’t stop laughing! I’m not laughing at you…my stupidity is too damn much I can’t help but laugh at myself.”

Using his left hand to wipe away the tears from the explosive laughter, Subaru finally managed to get his urge to laugh under control and regained his composure. Then, he looked at Otto before him.

Otto looked like he painfully regretted mentioning the word “Friend”. But at this point, the only thing inside Subaru’s heart was appreciation, and inexpressible gratitude.

—What was Otto’s motivation? What could be hidden behind his mask?. What could be believed, and what couldn’t be?

Otto called Subaru his friend, and came to help him out of concern. And when he came, Subaru’s first thought was to doubt him rather than believe him, that was just how foolish he was.

Thinking that there must be something in it for him, “Something” malicious at play, that was just how petty Subaru was.

Having been tossed around by his circumstances, Subaru had lost sight of the feelings of the people around him, and, believing only in the existence of malice while forgetting the existence unconditional kindness, he had even forgotten what gratitude was.

—Did Natsuki Subaru know so much about the world, that he could just give up and throw it away?

After only these few loops of repeating the world through death, did he imagine that he was now enlightened? All the while, he didn’t even notice he had a true friend at his side.

Unaware of Subaru’s self-admonishment and deprecation, even more confusion floated onto Otto’s face. Seeing this, Subaru managed to form a smile, and suddenly drew in a cheerful breath,

Subaru: “I’m sorry. You are my friend, Otto. —Thank you, for saving me.”

The building where Garfiel had imprisoned him was secluded deep within the forest, far from the village where the people of the Sanctuary resided. If Otto wasn't there to guide him, Subaru would have long lost way in the interwoven paths.

Subaru: "Thinking of it that way, we'd be pretty screwed without your Divine Protection, huh."

Otto: "Please keep your voice down. I don't know the way either, so I'm trying to rely on the flowers and frogs and lizards right now. If we offend them, they could trick us or guide us off a cliff."

Subaru: "Nature's creatures are scary!"

Otto carefully listened as he cautiously chose the path. While Subaru, following behind, ran perilously through the gaps between the trees, trying to get used to seeing with only one eye.

Natually, it was painful to lose his depth perception and the right half of his vision. The full-on feeling of loss would probably hit him later, on but it was doing its job hindering his movements rather effectively right now.

However, Subaru didn't feel any resentment towards Garfiel for these injuries.

Considering what he himself had done, Subaru was aware that he had brought it upon himself. Besides, there was always something incomprehensible and contradictory about Garfiel. But Subaru wasn't ready to settle with that reasoning.

If he just gave his imagination a little more to work with, perhaps he would be able to form an idea of Garfiel.

Subaru: "There's still too much I don't know, including whether he has a Gospel or not…"

But he had to shelve that question for now.

While he was reluctant to let it go, Subaru made a small sound when a branch grazed his right ear as he struggled to step over the roots. Then,

Otto: “I see it. We’ll come out at the village soon.”

Hearing Otto’s call, Subaru strained his narrow vision to focus ahead. Between the gaps of the trees, through the dark and green, he saw the lights of the village.

Coming out of the forest, at once, the light of the moon and stars shone down from above their heads, as Subaru’s dark field of vision cleared up.

Catching his breath, Subaru looked over his surroundings and confirmed that they had returned to the village of the Sanctuary. Since the time was already night after moonrise, by now, Emilia would have probably started her Trial at the Tomb.

A desire surged up within him, to run there so he could be at her side. But pushing down that emotion once more, Subaru turned back to Otto, and,

Subaru: “If the Trial is happening right now, then this is time to escape. So what are the arrangements, and where are we meeting with our accomplice?”

Otto: “Well, our accomplice—”

Looking up at Subaru’s rapid-fire question, Otto started to point his hand towards the direction of the village. But that movement was interrupted halfway through. And the reason, was a voice.

???: “—There’s no need to worry, I’m already here.”

Cutting into their conversation, a person stepped out with the sound of a footstep.

An extravagant, black maid’s dress. Its white apron, gleaming under the starlight, adorning the lovely girl who still carried some remnants of childishness, like something out of a dream.

Ram: “For now… well, I’ll just congratulate you on your safe return,

Barusu.”

With her peach-colored hair swaying, Otto’s accomplice—Ram, greeted Subaru with her usual refreshing expression, spewing venom.

Chapter 40:
Collaborator

1

A whole variety of words flashed through Subaru's mind at this sudden, abrupt and unexpected meeting, but—

Subaru: "Is looking like this what you call a "safe return"?!"

Sticking a finger at his right eye—the destroyed organ, Subaru indignantly pointed this out to Ram.

Currently, the whole area around Subaru's right eye was bandaged with cloth ripped from his sleeve, creating something that might be rather popular with junior high-schoolers. If this Date Masamune look was just for fashion, it might be something to laugh about later, but since Ram should know what kind of awful state Subaru was in, that reaction was utterly inappropriate.

Hearing Subaru's objection, Ram slightly tilted her head and gently brushed her peach-colored hair that was swaying with her motion.

Ram: "Sorry, I didn't pay proper attention to what you usually look like so I can't tell the difference."

Subaru: "Well thanks for that devastating remark, but did you know that humanoid lifeforms usually have two eyes, two ears, and two nostrils?"

Ram: "In other words, Barusu is currently not a humanoid lifeform, but instead some random unintelligible lifeform?"

Subaru: "You turned that on its head?!"

Having this usual exchange with Ram, Subaru scanned over his surroundings with his left field of vision. While checking whether there was anyone else lurking in the shadows besides Ram, he was also searching for possible escape routes. Must buy some time and determine where to run.

Subaru: “Otto, on one-two-three we split and run. Your job’ll be shouting and drawing the pursuers’ attention. My job’ll be keeping quiet and slinking away. Any objections?”

Otto: “Yes, lots, but before that, why’re you so wary all of a sudden, Mr. Natsuki?”

Subaru: “What’re you, stupid? They’re onto us. Just look at that Ram’s eyes. She wants to kill us. No mistake about it. I see those eyes every day at the Mansion, trust me.”

Otto: “What is there to trust about a man who’s looked on daily with murderous disdain?!”

Subaru anxiously whispered his escape plan and task-assignments to Otto, but Otto didn’t seem to get the point. “Crap.” Subaru briefly considered leaving Otto to die and escaping alone, but, remembering their talk about friendship earlier, he couldn’t help but hesitate on the matter.

Subaru: “Damn it, just when I thought I was freed from my cuffs, I got tied down by the fetters of friendship! What d’you want with me…?!”

Otto: “You’re the one who should explain yourself! If you don’t express yourself more clearly, there’s no way for conversation to take place! Also since the potential for misunderstanding here is incredible, I want you to please do something about that!”

Ram: “If you two could please wrap up your comedy skit, can we move things along? In fact, things are already moving along. We don’t have time for this. This is a waste of time, in other words, a waste of life.”

Faced with the two men trying to push responsibility onto each other, Ram shot them a look of contempt, before taking a step forward and cutting into the main subject. However, Subaru wasn’t entirely joking. In fact, he was quite earnest in trying to drag on the conversation while looking for an escape route. Because, Subaru: “Honestly, I thought the moment you saw my face you’d try to kill me no questions asked.”

Ram: “If we had met directly after you laid your violence upon Master Roswaal, it might have turned out that way. But the passage of time has tempered my anger somewhat. …Be grateful to Garf.”

Subaru: “Even though it’s thanks to Garfiel that I’m not dead right now, I can’t just change my opinion of someone who did this to my face so easily…”

Still not letting down his guard, Subaru scratched his neck as he replied to Ram. On the other hand, watching him, Ram seemed quite relaxed and without any sense of hostility.

At least, she didn’t look like she was going to literally attack him no questions asked. Then the next question on Subaru’s mind would be,

Subaru: “Otto said we’re supposed to meet with someone here, but…”

Ram: “Yes, I know.”

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki. I know it might be difficult to believe, but the fact is exactly what you see.”

Seeing his roundabout question answered with a nod, Subaru turned to Otto, who gave an identical answer. Crossing his arms and bending his lips, Subaru made a “Hmmmmm”,

Subaru: “If I accept what I see, since you are the one who showed up here, you would be Otto’s accomplice… the person helping the people of Earlham village escape?”

Ram: “You’re not wrong there. Both Garf and Lady Ryuzu are presently occupied with Lady Emilia’s Trial. With all the major players gathered at the Tomb, now is our only chance.”

Emphasizing that they don’t have much time, Ram laid on the pressure to hurry. But Subaru still couldn’t shake the sense of incongruity. Seeing him hold up his hand to stop her, Ram shot him a silent glare. And, pulling himself together so as not to get crushed by that sharpened gaze, Subaru went on with “Tell me”,

Subaru: “Why would you be helping with the villagers’ escape? Even if we take a hundred steps back and assume you’re just doing this out of good will, it still makes no sense getting me involved. And just since when did you become the kind of person who gives up on screwing with me once your anger cools off? The questions are endless.”

Ram: “That is indeed a lot of questions. Verbosity does not make men popular, Barusu.”

Subaru: “That doesn’t sound very convincing when you’ve got a crush on a man even chattier than I am. …Answer me, Ram. I can’t imagine a situation where you’d be able to put your grudges aside and work with me. And yet here you are, which could only mean this is…”

Taking a deep breath, Subaru himself was afraid of what he was about to say.

If things were really as Subaru imagined, then his actions here would be—

Firmly closing his eye, he clenched his teeth so as to not let out any noise from his weakness.

Don’t be afraid. Don’t be frightened. Don’t show weakness. Steel your heart and do not waver.

—Right now, it will be fine if he just held back his emotions, didn’t show that he was wavering, and turned himself to steel.

Subaru: “…all on Roswaal’s instructions. That’s the only plausible explanation. But after the violent way I acted towards him, why would he help me? …You probably know more about that than I do.”

Ram: “…”

Confronted with Subaru’s reasoning, Ram became silent.

But the only image within Subaru's mind was Roswaal with his Gospel. If he had been in possession of that book of prophecies all this time, then his loyal, devoted confidant, Ram, must have surely known about it.

Of course, she would not know the details. If she really did know all its contents, then that would mean Ram had allowed a future where Rem was left to die.

Subaru: "…"

But that is an impossible supposition. Subaru knew it was nothing more than supposition. When she lost Rem, before there was any special circumstance where she had forgotten Rem's existence, Subaru saw first hand the older Oni sister's reaction at the loss of her younger sister.

For that reason alone, Subaru was convinced that Ram could not have known of any prophecies where Rem would be left to die.

But then again, just how much was she involved in Roswaal's plots? Roswaal had yet to reveal the full extent of his plans. And Ram, being his closest confidant, just how much did she—

Subaru: "Answer me, Ram. Why are you helping us? If all this is following that bastard Roswaal's scripts, then sorry, Otto and I can take it from here. You won't be needed."

Otto: "W-, Mr. Natsuki—?!"

Subaru: "Quiet, Otto. There's no time to explain the details, and I won't be able to guarantee your safety if you knew so I won't tell you, but frankly, this time I am crazy pissed. At least I know I can't hear Roswaal's name and still keep a clear head!"

Touching the bandage over his throbbing right eye, Subaru stomped on the ground as he shouted at Otto for trying to stop him.

The sensation of flying at Roswaal and strangling his slender throat lingered in Subaru's palms. The sensation of the impulse to take another person's life, and of acting upon that impulse, remained present and tactile.

It was accompanied by a raw and grotesque vividness, and now that he had regained his senses, recalling it only brought out the urge to vomit, along with the piercing ringing in his ears and aching of his skull like the memory of a nightmare.

Subaru had no desire to ever repeat that scene again. But,

Subaru: “I know what I did was wrong, but whether I regret it is a different story. He trampled on something I must not permit to be trampled on. And for that I dealt him pain.”

Ram: “…By that logic, I doubt Barusu could protest if I chose to exact revenge upon you?”

Subaru: “That’s why I got ready to turn ass and run the moment I saw you. But that ended up in failure because Otto’s a klutz.”

Otto: “Why was I needlessly defamed just now?! And I’ll have you know, if I really turned ass and ran, I’d have disappeared so fast that even Mr. Natsuki’s ass couldn’t catch up!”

Subaru: “Enough with the ass ass, is potty humor all you’ve got? Pottymouth.”

Otto: “I don’t know what that means but I get the feeling I’ve just been horribly slandered! It feels like it!”

Seeing Subaru and Otto descending into their usual banter, Ram cleared her throat and put a stop to that. Subaru resumed narrowing his eye, glaring at her, and, receiving that gaze, Ram spilled out a sigh,

Ram: “…You can relax. This act, at least, is not related to Master Roswaal’s will.”

Subaru: “Not related… to Roswaal? No, but that means…”

Hearing Ram deny Roswaal’s involvement, Subaru could not conceal his shock.

In that case, it would mean Ram had independently chose to help with the escape. But that wasn’t the only problem.

Subaru: “If Roswaal isn’t involved, then this wasn’t written in the Gospel…? Wait, in that case, just how much is written in the Gospel in the first place?”

Because Subaru flew into a rage immediately after they came to the topic of the Gospel, he hadn’t managed to learn more about the book itself.

However, if this so-called complete “Gospel” was truly an omnipotent prophetic book capable of describing the entirety of the future, then—

Subaru: “How detailed are the texts recorded inside, and how large does its volume get…?”

If its scope was the entirety of the world, and detailed everything that happened and will ever happen, then the sheer volume of information would surely not fit inside a single book. Besides, the human mind is far too small to comprehend every single event that will happen in this world.

Therefore, Subaru judged that the Gospel would have picked and chose which information about the future it would record in its pages such that it would be within range of what its owner could comprehend.

Subaru: “The contents of Petel’s incomplete Gospel were appended one after another…it seems. But I haven’t actually seen it happen so I can’t be sure.”

That fanatic’s Gospel, with its latter half blank, seemed to have text appended to the empty pages every time there was a new prophecy.

At least, Subaru was certain that the number of pages had changed from when he first acquired it after defeating Petelgeuse. Later, he had tried to investigate it further, but was incapable of reading the words. Moreover, due to its sinister nature, he had hoped to investigate it in Roswaal’s presence, but that was no longer possible under the present situation.

And so, even if Subaru wanted to take this any further, with so little information to sample from, it remained nothing more than empty conjecture. Nonetheless, Subaru did have his doubts about just how reliable and precise the completed Gospel could be.

Seeing this, Ram placed a hand over her lips, as if in thought,

Ram: "…I am not authorized to speak on this matter. And although my presence here is not due to Master Roswaal's will, the fact that Ram's heart is wholly devoted to him remains unchanged."

Subaru: "That's some head-over-heels overload, get a room, damn it."

Ram: "However…"

Cursing, Subaru lamented that his route for gathering information had been closed off. But, inserting that word, Ram watched Subaru's face rise in surprise, and in a quiet voice,

Ram: "What is certain is that this situation was not written. And it is precisely because it was not written that I am able to be here."

Subaru: "…I don't understand what that means. In the end, what are you trying to do? To help us? And even if you want to help, is that by your own volition?"

Ram: "I will help the evacuation. That is Ram's own intention. Master Roswaal… now that it has become like this… will not do anything to stop us."

Subaru: "Now that it has become like this?"

Those words bothered Subaru more than just a little, but despite his doubtful prompt, Ram didn't seem to have any intention of answering him. Most likely, the answer was also outside of what she was allowed to say.

Ultimately, Subaru still couldn't find out the precision and nature of Roswaal's Gospel. And all he picked up was the suspicion that perhaps even the complete Gospel could not foresee everything in the future.

Subaru: “Well, even just knowing that might give me some advantage next time I interrogate Roswaal.”

Shelving that question for now, Subaru muttered as he forced himself to wrap up the current situation. But even he didn’t have any idea what his statement actually meant.

Subaru: “There’s still some room for debate whether or not I could believe Ram from the bottom of my heart, but we can worry about that later. I want to check our arrangements first. So, what actually happened?”

Ram: “From the day after Barusu behaved like an idiot, we have been preparing towards today’s evacuation. But since the villagers refuse to move without first confirming Barusu’s safety, we wound up having to waste time searching for an ambiguously alive Barusu.”

Subaru: “Well sorry for not dying in clear black and white… actually who’re you calling an idiot? Anyway, the day after I acted violently…”

There was something strange about the date that tugged at Subaru, but he couldn’t quite put it into words. And, just like this, Ram and Otto gave Subaru a rough explanation of the escape plan. In short, it would be,

Subaru: “Ram has gotten the moderates to open up an escape route, so we’ll escape under the cover of night in the dragon carriages. Otto will lead the way, and my job will be to be the MASCOT who unites the villagers and gets them to leave the Sanctuary without any worries—is that right?”

Otto: “I don’t know what a “MASCOT” is, but none of us can evacuate without knowing that Mr. Natsuki is safe. Well, in the end, I guess Miss Ram and I couldn’t gain their trust to lead the evacuation just by ourselves.”

Subaru: “So at a time like this, my fame from the Mabeast attack actually came in handy, huh. Guess you never know when you’ll be repaid for the things you do, better make sure to set up opportunities to risk my life more often.”

Otto: “As far as I know, somehow Mr. Natsuki’s been constantly walking the fine line between life and death with the White Whale and the Witch Cult and all, is that actually because you keep looking for that kind of close-call situations?”

Otto muttered in bafflement at Subaru’s remark. And with “Nonono”, Subaru shook his head back and forth in reply,

Subaru: “I have no idea why I get so many opportunities to be exposed to the world’s malice either. Oh by the way, I’ve also walked a thin line with death with an assassin lady who loves opening people’s stomachs and throwing intestine-parties, you know.”

Otto: “Even though there are people who boast about their painful experiences, hearing this from someone who’s passed through this many painful and terrifying situations, it really puts all the other tall-tales to shame.”

Seeing Subaru shoot him a thumbs up, Otto only powerlessly smiled as he gave him a thumbs-up back.

With this, Subaru’s conversation came to an end, and,

Subaru: “Alright then, let’s get to it. Time-wise, how much leeway do you think we have?”

Ram: “If nothing deviates from usual, it will be approximately two hours before Lady Emilia gives up and comes out of the Tomb. She has probably only just entered the Trial, so conservatively, there should still be about an hour and a half. Even if it takes thirty minutes before departure, we will still have an hour of leeway.”

Subaru: “An hour, huh. If we have that, we can at least get beyond the Sanctuary’s Barrier.”

If they could just get beyond the Barrier, that would at least eliminate any obstructions from the Sanctuary’s side.

They would be out of reach of the extremists who don’t want the

Sanctuary to be liberated, but there was still something else about the Barrier that could not be overlooked.

Subaru raised his head, holding a hand to his chin, and, “Ram”, he called to the peach-colored-haired girl ,

Subaru: “About the Barrier, there’s still a problem. Once we’re through, the extremists won’t be able to follow us, but…”

Ram: “Garf, right?”

Subaru: “…you already knew?”

Ram: “He is Frederica’s little brother, so I haven’t known him for as long as she has. But, although I hate to say this, he is something of an old friend since Master Roswaal took Ram into his charge seven years ago.”

A piece of the information he gathered from the last loop was revealed just like that.

Although he couldn’t help but feel somewhat disappointed, Subaru was nonetheless relieved that his understanding was corroborated by a second source. Facing Ram’s deadpan expression, he continued, “So what do we do”,

Subaru: “When he finds out I’ve escaped from prison, Garfiel will definitely come after us. He’s already found me suspicious, and now that I’ve escaped, I doubt he’ll go easy on me this time. Although whether he crosses the Barrier will still depend on whether he feels like it.”

Ram: “Why are you so sure Garf will pursue us? At least, he respects Lady Ryuzu’s will, so he should be counted as one of the moderates. …Even after he imprisoned Barusu, it would at most indicate that he owes no allegiance to either side.”

Subaru: “The reason that guy’s after me… is uh…”

There was a reason why Garfiel hated Subaru to the point of hostility.

No doubt, that reason was the Witch's lingering scent emanating from Subaru's body.

Picking up this scent, compounding after each Return by Death, Garfiel regarded Subaru with the utmost caution and hostility. And the result of him baring his fangs and acting on that hostility was the current situation. And yet, the fact that Garfiel nevertheless healed and kept the dying Subaru alive only served to show a glimpse of the rational side to his simplicity.

Having reached this conclusion in his head, Subaru wasn't sure whether he should say it out loud.

It felt like a long time ago by now, but the first person to mention the Witch's lingering scent on Subaru was Rem. From those fragments of Rem's words, Subaru could sense her strong hatred for the Witch Cult, and that somehow, Ram had something to do with it as well.

In other words, whatever happened with the Witch Cult was not irrelevant to Ram. Just hearing the words "Witch Cult" had made Rem lose her composure. So then just what would this fact mean to Ram?

Ram: "—Barusu?"

Subaru: "Oh, uuhh."

Ram: "You suddenly went quiet, what's wrong? Your face is unsightly to begin with, but if you add that oafish incompetence on top of it, there truly is not a single part left worth looking at."

Subaru: "What's with that merciless ruthlessness while making that refreshing expression, you! And the reason Garfiel is after me… well, it's because I attacked Roswaal."

Looking away, Subaru avoided mentioning the Witch's scent. Instead, he cited his scuffle, or, more accurately, his one-sided assault on Roswaal.

Subaru: "If something happens to Roswaal, the functioning of the whole Sanctuary will be affected. I doubt he'll let me get away after

I tried pulling something like that.”

Ram: “…Frankly, that is an overwhelmingly boring excuse, but nevermind. Considering Ram also has matters which I cannot speak of, despite Barusu’s impudence, it would be unfair if I forced you to speak your thoughts.”

Subaru: “You just can’t talk to me without taking a bite out of me, huh? Am I right, Otto?”

Otto: “Uh, I feel like I really can’t accept the fact that Mr. Natsuki is asking me for validation on this.”

Subaru said this seeking agreement, but Otto only returned a grudging gaze. Pretending not to understand what it meant, Subaru responded with a shrug. Turning her back to the pair’s unnutritious banter, Ram looked up to the sky and narrowed her eyes against the moonlight,

Ram: “—A pale moon, a crazed moon. That night, was also a moonlit night like this.”

She whispered in a voice so quiet that it was inaudible.

2

—Once it got underway, everything moved along swiftly.

In the first place, even without Subaru, the plans for the evacuation have already been set in motion, and only the final stage required Subaru to act as the trigger.

While the dragon carriages were being prepared, the villagers boarded quickly, and from the assignment of passengers to the cooperation between the drivers, everything proceeded with such smooth coordination that the thirty minute it was supposed to take before departure only took fifteen. Although, Subaru wasn’t sighing with admiration at the result.

Subaru: “Actually, instead of fifteen minutes, it could’ve been even shorter. Probably five, if…”

With the villagers' high spirits, it certainly could have been. But what ended up putting a damper on that was none other than Subaru himself.

Returning to the villagers, Subaru had hoped to begin preparations for the evacuation right away, but with him just waltzing in like that, everyone instantly noticed his missing right eye.

The villagers looked like they were about to scream revenge for Subaru's lost eye, but Subaru barely managed to calm them by telling them that the eye wasn't gone but only healing—a lie which they somehow accepted, and only then did the evacuation begin.

Subaru: "Still… it's not a bad feeling to be worried about."

Subaru never thought there would be this many people shocked by his injury, and even after seeing it for himself, he still couldn't quite believe it.

Natsuki Subaru was supposed to be an isolated, alone-to-the-end, insignificant existence incapable of making anyone feel anything. That was what he believed. And yet, before he knew it, there was suddenly so many people willing to feel outrage for his sake.

He was just bragging earlier about his achievements from the trouble with the witchbeasts, but Subaru hadn't actually done all that much.

It was Rem who saved the children in the forest, and it was also Rem who hunted down most of the witchbeasts afterwards. Roswaal was the one who annihilated them in the end, and there didn't seem to be a single instant where Subaru did anything of note.

Subaru: "…ah. So that's why."

Coming to this point, he realized the truth that he had kept bottled up thus far.

The Authority of Gluttony had consumed all memories of Rem within this world. Aside from Subaru's memories, where she still remained, only her empty vessel was left in this world.

Aside from that, every trace, evidence, and memory of her had been lost.

So then, what happened to the events that occurred as a consequence of her actions?

—Most likely, all her actions had been attributed to other people, and all the scenes she ever appeared in had been rationalized and rewritten within the memories of those who knew her in the least implausible way.

Subaru: "And everyone Rem had saved… are now turning their gratitude towards her at me."

Come to think of it, Petra's unconditional attachment towards Subaru was probably because, to her, Subaru was the one who risked his life to carry her out of the forest. That must be what the incomplete world had forcibly inscribed into her memories.

Otherwise, how could she possibly have such faith in a suspicious-looking stranger of unknown origins after having spent only a few days together?

In other words, although unconsciously, Subaru had time and again reaped the rewards of Rem's actions, as if it were only natural.

Subaru: "…makes me want to vomit… this idiotic trash I am."

Spitting out these thoughts, Subaru realized that all the blessings showered upon him were from that sleeping girl's accomplishments.

That lovely blue-haired girl remained a warmth within his chest even now. Even forgotten by all the world, perhaps her devotion to Subaru still persisted.

Although, that may just be Subaru's sentimental and convenient delusion.

Patrasche: "…"

Subaru: "Hm, ahh, don't worry. I'm fine. …You're also… another good girl wasted on me."

Patrasche looked back with a worried glance. Taking care not to disturb her mounted master's thoughts, her movements maintained its fluidity in spite of its speed. Regardless of her Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, she was galloping with this high awareness in mind.

Subaru hadn't ridden Patrasche alone like this without a carriage since the battles with the White Whale and the Witch Cult, already a week ago.

Perhaps a bit dissatisfied with pulling heavy loads, now released from the burden, Patrasche's gait seemed especially light while carrying Subaru.

Nevertheless, she was worried when she first saw the one-eyed Subaru, and had used her rough tongue to lick all over his face as though to console him.

While reminiscing on his reunion with Patrasche, Subaru glanced behind him.

It was a secret evacuation of six dragon carriages. Actually, since the creaking of the carriages and commotion of their movements were unconcealable, the situation was far from secret. But they still proceeded at the slowest possible speed in order to avoid discovery as best as they could.

Most of the drivers were the merchants hired earlier to evacuate the villagers from the Witch Cult on the promise of payment, who had no business getting mixed up in all this. Subaru had worried that there would be considerable dissatisfaction among them, but seeing them tensely gripping their reins, Subaru realized that his worries were unnecessary.

At least, they were not the kind of people who would let emotion get in the way at critical junctures.

—It was then,

???: "Mr. Natsuki, Mr. Natsuki."

Deep in thought, Subaru suddenly heard a voice calling to him from the leading carriage. Turning towards that voice, he saw Otto, leading the line of carriages, managing his favorite dragon Furufu while gesturing Subaru over.

Subaru: “What is it? The evacuation is going well, I think.”

Otto: “Mnn, it’s almost going too well. But, we’ve got a problem.”

Lowering his voice, Otto leaned towards Subaru who was riding parallel to his carriage. He covered a hand over his mouth so the dragon carriages behind wouldn’t see,

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki, please listen carefully.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Otto: “—The forest is chattering. Something “Outrageous” is coming.”

Hearing this overly vague statement, Subaru could make no other reaction except furrow his brows. But, Otto’s expression was dead serious as he said this, and the atmosphere was certainly not one to be laughed off.

Subaru gulped down a breath, and looked back and forth between Otto and the train of carriages behind him.

Subaru: “That something “Outrageous”, is it coming up to us?”

Otto: “Much of what the trees say are vague and inexact, so I can’t be sure. But it might catch up to us at our current speed. So at least we should consider speeding up a bit…”

Otto proposed this with cold sweat appearing on his forehead. Sensing from his ghastly expression that there was definitely something, Subaru decided to signal Patrasche and gave the order for the carriage train to accelerate. At this distance, if they sprinted full-speed towards Barrier, then—

???: “—Oy. This many people out for’a stroll in th’middle of th’night n’didn’t even think t’invite me. Sure feels left’out.”

Shot out of the air like an arrow, ripping through the silence of the forest, the voice reverberated upon Subaru’s eardrums.

Patrasche’s feet dug into the ground as she skidded to a stop. The black earth dragon lowered her head and bared her fangs, and once more, she directed her hostility towards her one-time adversary.

Seeing the earth dragon poised for battle, the golden-haired youth amusedly twisted his lips into a smile,

Garfiel: “Ha. Still ain’t afraid after gettin’ that thrashin? Yer a good girl indeed. Like how “Fingers clutch tighter th’more th’shiny stone sparkles,” yeah?”

Making this proclamation while flashing his bleach-white fangs, the Guardian of the Sanctuary obstructed the path.

As if flaunting the threat of something “Outrageous”

Chapter 41:
Tiger

1

Presenting a defenseless posture, Garfiel stood there with his arms dangling at his side.

Seeing him blocking the road, Subaru warily scanned his gaze over his surroundings. There could be others lying in ambush.

But still, part of him already knew that if his opponent was Garfiel, no amount of caution would do any good. —If he personally came, then he must have come alone.

Sure enough, Subaru couldn't sense anyone else in the vicinity. Confirming that his caution had been unnecessary, Subaru finally let out a sigh and patted the back of the still-wary Patrasche's neck,

Subaru: "I don't care if you wanna suddenly show up out of nowhere, but you mind not flirting with other people's partners right off the bat?"

Garfiel: "I ain't one for lies or pretty words. Just'sayin' whatever comes to mind. I always get scolded by Granny and Ram for that too."

Hearing the jokes stalling for time, Garfiel clacked his fangs and looked up as his smile gradually disappeared. Receiving that gaze with his single eye, Subaru raised up one finger,

Subaru: "It seems kinda unnatural for you to be here, mind explaining a bit?"

Garfiel: "Ain't no big story behind it. I'm the Fangs of th'Sanctuary, and I ain't gonna let y'run away from the Eyes of th'Sanctuary like that. There y'go. Well, so much for a consolation prize, yeah?"

Seeing Garfiel say this with a light wave of his hand, Subaru furrowed his brows.

If, as Subaru imagined, “Eyes” was a codename for something similar to “Grass”, then the “Eyes” Garfiel mentioned probably meant something along the lines of sentinels. But,

Subaru: “I never heard Ram mention there being anything like that in the Sanctuary…”

Garfiel: “Y’think outsiders would know everything there’s t’know about the Sanctuary? There’s a mountain of things even that Roswaal bastard doesn’t know. This is just one of’em, yeah? …Be damned if you knew about’em.”

Seeing Subaru confused by his murky statement, Garfiel relentlessly laid this down. And as Subaru fell speechless, Garfiel snorted and turned his eyes to the line of dragon carriages behind,

Garfiel: “Those there would be all the refugees, yeah?”

Subaru: “Ah, uhh, yeah. Say, Garfiel. I know it was our bad for trying to quietly sneak away and all, but can you just please let us go? After all, it wouldn’t be a bad thing for you either, right?”

Garfiel: “Hah?”

While being stared down by his intimidating gaze, Subaru unconcernedly gestured to the carriages behind him,

Subaru: “Right now, letting the hostages leave is also in order to avoid the possibility of any further conflict, isn’t it? I heard there’s already small skirmishes sparking up, so before things get out of hand, isn’t it better to deal with it first, once and for all?”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “You and Miss Ryuzu both want the Sanctuary to be liberated, right? Nothing good can come from leaving this dangerous spark inside. So, it’s a lot more advantageous to let us leave, isn’t it?”

Quiet and composed, Subaru tried to use all of his skills of persuasion on Garfiel. Besides, what Subaru said wasn't entirely out of convenience. In fact, from Garfiel's standpoint, letting the refugees leave was indeed the more advantageous choice.

Aside from the secrecy of the operation—

Subaru: "I'm not asking you to personally be ok with it, but, considering the circumstances…"

Garfiel: "Oy, it seems there's somethin' yer misunderstandin'."

Subaru: "Misunderstanding?"

Garfiel: "Yer so convinced I'm buttin' in here to stop ya. But it's like y'said, I got no reason to stop th'evacuation. So there's no need wastin' yer breath with all these excuses."

Cutting Subaru off, Garfiel snorted at his presumption. And hearing this reply, Subaru closed his mouth once more. Owing to the bad premonition that preceded Garfiel's appearance, Subaru had indeed let himself run ahead of the conversation. In fact, on a rational level, what Garfiel said was right. But still,

Subaru: "If that's the case, then why're you here…?"

Garfiel: "Just came t'see y'off. If y'guys wanna leave that's yer thing. But leavin' without a representative from the Sanctuary's no different from escapin', ain't it? If I'm here t'watch, th'other guys can't say much 'bout it."

Subaru: "…You've been thinking a lot more than I expected, huh."

Although Garfiel's display of sensibility and intellect was more than a little surprising, Subaru nevertheless accepted his argument. Garfiel, on the other hand, folded his arms and nodded at Subaru's rather impolite comment,

Garfiel: "That's obvious, ain't it? I ain't just strong, I think through all sortsa things… I'm the strongest, after'all."

Subaru: "Ah, I feel a little relieved to hear that. By the way, there's no need to mention my right eye or anything, you know."

Garfiel: “Hah? Ah, ‘s that right. Y’took off th’blinfold n’ found out, huh. Just had to do all th’unnecessary things, y’bastard. Wait, OY!”

Listening to Garfiel’s boasting, Subaru stuck a finger at his right eye. And while dealing the issue of Subaru’s missing eye, Garfiel suddenly turned his attention to Otto, who had rescued Subaru. Sitting behind them on the driver’s platform of the dragon carriage, Otto shrunk in his neck and slightly tried to hide himself from the razor sharp glare.

Seeing that wimpy reaction, Garfiel clicked his neck with “Speakin’of which”, and continued,

Garfiel: “Yer pretty calm for someone who’s just lost an eye, ain’t ya? Honestly, I was prepared for some complaints or revenge from ya.”

Subaru: “It’ll take me till next morning to finish saying all the complaints and we’re a bit short on time. And if I try to get revenge I’ll probably just lose my left eye too. So I’ll just let sleeping dogs lie.”

Garfiel: “What’s that supposed t’mean? —Kinda pissin’ me off, oy.”

Garfiel was a bit dissatisfied with Subaru’s reply, but Subaru, sensing no need to continue down this topic, only lightly rubbed his right eye with his palm, and,

Subaru: “So you’ll just stand by like this and let everyone return to their village?”

Garfiel: “It’s pretty rude to leave without sayin’ goodbye, but that’s taken care of since I’m here. So do what y’like.”

Subaru: “Then, we’ll just go ahead and…”

Garfiel: “—Except.”

Just as the line of dragon carriages were about to move, Garfiel’s voice cut through the air. Slouching down his upper body, Garfiel casted a slanted gaze towards Patrasche and Subaru, Garfiel: “Not you, you stay. The hostages can go. The noisy lil’bro can go. Ram… well she can go too if she wants. But not you.”

Subaru: “…and why’s that?”

Garfiel: “There’s Lady Emilia’s motivation as well, but most important’s to do with you yerself. A bastard stinkin of th’Witch like you, y’think I’d let y’leave just like that?”

Subaru: “That again…”

Giving his nose a flick, the golden-haired youth threatened. Although Subaru was already getting tired of this complaint, he nonetheless nodded,

Subaru: “So the condition is that I stay in the Sanctuary. Can we agree there?”

Garfiel: “Good yer gettin’ it straight off the bat. If it dragged on too long my head’s not gonna bother rememberin’ all that.”

Subaru: “You really just say whatever comes to mind, huh… alright, I understand. I’ll just go convey this to everyone, wait here.”

Arriving at the main issue, the negotiation came to an end. Although there wasn’t actually much negotiating involved. Subaru simply accepted the terms before turning back to his companions—to relay the information to the drivers, Otto, and Ram.

Subaru: “Basically, as long as I stay behind, he’ll let everyone pass through safely. There’s no point in whining here, so I think we should just accept the proposal…”

Otto: “As much as I want to say that is indeed a very good condition if he can let us go peacefully, would those behind us really be ok with it? In the first place, they would’ve stubbornly refused to escape without Mr. Natsuki.”

Subaru: “Aahh, that’s right, it’ll take quite a bit of effort to convince everyone… But since we’re already on the move, everyone’s probably eager to return to the village. I don’t think me leaving the group partway through will win out against their eagerness to go home.”

In response to Otto’s concerns, Subaru held a hand to his jaw in thought.

In fact, the refugees should be very eager to return home to their village. While Subaru was glad that they would put his safety on the same scale as their desire to go home, at this point, there was no choice but to break that balance.

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki…”

Subaru: “Well, considering this sentiment, I don’t think it’ll be too difficult to convince them. But it could turn out badly unless I do all the talking. So, I’ll be right back, everyone please get the dragon carriages ready to set out while…”

Ram: “I don’t like it.”

Subaru’s prompt instruction was cut off by Ram’s abrupt interruption.

Slapped by this along with Otto’s concerned gaze, Subaru gave Ram an awkward look, and with “Um…” scratching his head,

Subaru: “Garfiel just said something similar too, but it’s not a good habit to always say these things that shave away at people’s motivation, you know…”

Ram: “Barusu, don’t you realize it yourself? What you said just now.”

Subaru: “What I said?”

Subaru tilted his head at Ram’s words, and couldn’t think of any noteworthy details. Unsure what exactly she was referring to, he furrowed his brows looking confused.

Seeing this, Ram let out a disappointed sigh,

Ram: “If you don’t know, then nevermind. It’s just as Master Roswaal said. Now that it had become like this, no matter what

Ram does, it is futile.”

Subaru: “Wait, what the hell are you saying? So you know too, don’t you? You knew, that it would turn out like this…”

Ram: “That is meaningless to Barusu now. Only a waste of time.”

Subaru: “You…”

Subaru ground his teeth watching Ram say this with her head held high with an all-knowing air. And sensing the dangerous atmosphere brewing between the two, with “Wait wait wait!” Otto stepped between them,

Otto: “Can you two stop arguing? Like Miss Ram said, this is a waste of time. Wasting time is the same as wasting the chance to make money. So can you guys calm down? For me? That’s it, it’s decided, ok!”

Subaru: “Tch. Anyway, I’ll go explain it to everyone.”

Ram: “Tch. Ram has nothing more to say.”

Otto: “Can you two please not click your tongues at me while you speak?!”

As always, Otto dejectedly protested his treatment, but since that was his job, there was not much he could do about it. Nevertheless, it was thanks to Otto’s efforts that things did not break between them. Subaru passed by the dragon carriages one by one, and explained Garfiel’s terms.

The Earlham villagers all showed a bitter expression when they heard that Subaru would stay behind, but seeing that Subaru himself was fine with it, and because they had lived as refugees for so long that their desire to return home was overwhelming, they had no choice but to reluctantly accept.

While he was grateful for their reluctance to leave him behind, Subaru finally managed to convince everyone. After returning to tell Ram and Otto, he rode on atop Patrasche to face Garfiel, Subaru: “We’ve finished our talks. Your condition is fine. So let everyone through.”

Garfiel: “Except you, yeah? They get goin’ then. This earth dragon, she stayin’?”

Subaru: “It’ll be a bit rough on my stamina to have to walk back alone. So I guess Patrasche will have to stay cooped up for a little while longer.”

He placed his hand on his partner, who had to be stuck with the likes of him, and Patrasche gave her body a shake as if saying “You know I don’t mind, geez”, and turned her head away.

Interpreting her movement this way, Subaru lined up beside Garfiel and watched the dragon carriages set out along the path out of the Sanctuary. Seeing the faces of the villagers looking back at him through the dragon carriage windows, Subaru wryly smiled and waved to them in return.

Subaru: “Otto, after you get back to the village, do not go to the Mansion. Come back immediately if you can.”

Otto: “…? I don’t understand… but, why? I was thinking we’d have to report in to Frederica to let her know, right?”

Subaru: “Never…mind. It’ll probably be tomorrow morning by the time you return to the village… but just in case, at least don’t go there until the afternoon.”

Otto showed a confused expression at Subaru’s instructions. But Subaru, unable to answer his doubts, only gestured with his chin, signaling him to “Go on ahead”.

Tonight was the fifth night—the threshold of fate that was the final deadline when Elsa would attack the Mansion. If things progressed the same way as the first loop, then at this point, no doubt Elsa had already begun her attack.

But no matter how depraved Elsa may be—it was still unlikely that she would descend on the village and massacre its inhabitants. So as long as Otto didn’t enter the Mansion, he shouldn’t be touched by the danger.

Of course, doing this would be none other than abandoning those in the Mansion: Frederica, and Petra. And Beatrice, and Rem.

Subaru: "…This time, I'll use everything to find out what happened in the Sanctuary. That's… already decided. If I try to be greedy, I'll only end up with nothing. That's the reason I have stand by and watch, isn't it?"

Emerging in his chest, was the guilt of watching while allowing the worst to happen. Suppressing that guilt with the sense of mission and duty, Subaru spurred on the cruelty of his heart.

Steel. Turn his heart to steel. In order to reach that perfect future, he will use every method at his disposal. Permit, and accept sacrifices along the way, no matter how much it wore down his heart.

Subaru: "As long as we are smiling at the end, I'll…we'll have won."

And so, in the face of sacrifices, all he could do was to hold down the wavering of his heart.

He must not hesitate to pave the way so that he would retrieve everything in the end. Regrets were not something that should concern him now.

Subaru: "…"

Having watched all the dragon carriages pass before him and vanish into the forest, Subaru let out a sigh.

Now, there were only the Sanctuary's residents and people associated with Roswaal's Mansion left behind. All that remained was simply to wait for the dawn and bear witness to whatever was about to happen to the Sanctuary. If he could do that, then this loop's objective would have been accomplished.

Subaru: "Staying here forever and getting our faces eaten by bugs isn't the way to go, so how about we go back? It's starting to get kinda unpleasant with you staring at me like that."

Garfiel: “Don’t try’ta tell me what to do… Say, y’haven’t asked a peep about Lady Emilia’s Trial tonight.”

Subaru: “The fact that you’re here already answered that, I figured. I’d be lying if I told you I didn’t expect a bleak result this time.”

At least, transforming her worry for Subaru and the hostages into motivation wasn’t going to work. If Emilia was to prevail against the Trials, something fundamental would have to change. Otherwise, chances are that none of the Sanctuary’s problems could be resolved in these rushed circumstances.

Subaru: “That’s why I have to see this through to the end. I can’t just wait for Emilia to pass her Trials without finding out what’ll happen next.”

So that he will not repeat his mistake, Subaru will take the risk of staying on in this third world.

The highest number of times Subaru has died in a single series of loops was four. If he intended to break through in the fifth world, he had only one more death after this.

Subaru: “There’s still a mountain of things I need to confirm…”

—He was already thinking of his own “Death” as a foothold to reach that breakthrough.

Not even Subaru himself noticed just how twisted his own statement was. He signaled to Patrasche to return to the Sanctuary, and Garfiel, watching him from behind, muttered,

Garfiel: “…Talkin’ like y’understand everythin’. Just the fuck y’think y’know?”

Subaru: “Garfiel?”

Unable to hear that whispered question, Subaru turned around on his saddle. And abruptly, in front of his eyes—

Garfiel leapt towards Subaru atop Patrasche’s back, his palm slashing towards Subaru’s neck like a blade.

The sight of fingers shredding through the air burning into the back of his eyes, Subaru's voice died in astonishment at the unreal and sudden approach of "Death."

It was not that he never considered the possibility of Garfiel's attack, but he never thought it would come so directly in this place.

Subaru: "—!"

The shrill whistle of a swinging blade was followed by the pain of tearing flesh striking Subaru accompanied by the spray of blood. Reflexively holding his shrieking throat with his hand, he felt a thin crevice beneath his voice box that had been gouged out by the claw.

Pressing with his palm while feeling the blood seeping through his fingers, Subaru hurriedly grasped the reins and signaled Patrasche,

Subaru: "Garfiel! What're y…!"

Garfiel: "Y're gonna get in the way? What y'think yer doing, huh?"

While Subaru screamed from Patrasche's back at the sudden attack, Garfiel, landing on the ground, directed his rage and bloodied fingers at an entirely different direction.

Subaru, his face contorted in pain, turned to look in the direction Garfiel was pointing, and saw a single girl standing with a wand in her hand—Ram, with her peach-colored hair swaying, and her stern gaze fixed on Garfiel.

Subaru: "Ram?!"

Ram: "I had a bad feeling so I stayed, and it turned out exactly as I thought. Barusu, you better thank me that your head is still connected to your torso."

Garfiel: "Without that wind screwin' up the aim, it would've lopped that head flyin'."

Hearing the uninvited Ram's remark, Garfiel shook his head in acknowledgement. Speechless at their exchange, the pain of the wound only further inflamed Subaru's thoughts,

Subaru: "What the… hell are you doing, Garfiel?! Were you trying to kill me just now?!"

Garfiel: "That, and failed. If yer askin' what I was tryin' to do, dunno know how else t'answer ya."

Garfiel plainly confirmed his intention to kill. Hearing this, Subaru's single eye opened wide as his lips trembled at the incomprehensible act. Since,

Subaru: "If that's the case, couldn't you have killed me anytime you wanted? When I was imprisoned, no, even before that, if you just didn't heal me wouldn't I have already died?!"

Garfiel: "If I did that, the hostages would've exploded. Now that they've left, everythin's in order for me t'kill ya, ain't it?"

Subaru: "That's…!"

Feeling his thoughts being dyed pure red, Subaru was struck dumb by Garfiel's words.

All along, Garfiel had him in his sights and was looking a way to dispose of him without the problems that came with it, and sending away the hostages played right into his lap. Yet, there was still something else that felt unnatural. That is—

Subaru: "If you kill me here, what happens to Emilia's Trials? Not trying to be narcissistic here, but if I'm her primary motivation, when I'm dead, doesn't that mean the Trials will never end?"

For Ryuzu' faction, which hoped to liberate the Sanctuary, there could be no situation worse than this.

Even if Garfiel suspected Subaru because of the Witch's stench, there was no way he could have overlooked such a major factor.

Although his actions could perhaps be attributed to blind rage, seeing him conversing just now, none of his calm and rational demeanor fit the description of someone who had lost themselves to rage.

In other words, Garfiel's attack just now was the result of cold calculation. Just what did it mean—

Garfiel: "I…"

Ram: "No point listening to excuses, and it'll be meaningless trying to persuade him, Barusu."

But, just as Garfiel began to speak, Ram sharply cut herself between them. Turning her wand towards Garfiel, who clicked his tongue,

Ram: "You should stop trying to hide your true intentions with logic, Garf. It isn't like you."

Subaru: "O, oy, Ram."

Ram: "Stand down, I'm speaking. —Either way, Garf has already made up his mind to kill you, Barusu."

Hearing Ram confirm Garfiel's murderous intent, Subaru could only close his mouth.

Ram slowly approached Subaru while keeping her vigilant glare fixed on Garfiel, and, holding out her hand, she softly traced her fingers over the underside of Patrasche's neck.

Ram: "Good girl. Do what you have to do now. That master of yours on your back… is incredibly dull, both to himself and to others."

Patrasche: "…"

Calmly, and somewhat gently, Ram said this to Patrasche, who replied without words. Patrasche extended out her tongue and licked Ram's fingers in response, before lowering her head and setting out her steps in the direction of the woods, regardless of Subaru's commands,

Subaru: "W-Wait. You two, what're you…"

Ram: "Don't let go of the reins. As long as you do that, your earth dragon will do everything in her power to protect you, Barusu. You are as fortunate as a man can be."

Subaru: "Listen to me! No, tell me why! What do you know that's making you do this?!"

Ram: "There's no time to explain, and explaining is futile. Do as I say, Barusu. —Ram can buy you about a minute, use that time to get however far you can. This is the only resistance Ram could offer for you."

He couldn't understand the meaning of the last part of Ram's reply, but there was already no time to ask.

After hearing her last syllable, Patrasche speeded away with a small neigh. And, shaking around on the earth dragon's back, Subaru felt the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion coming into effect as they were swallowed up by the flock of trees.

Subaru: "Ram—!"

He screamed. But there was no answer.

As his vision became obscured by the forest, all Subaru could do was to bite his lip and be carried along on his involuntary flight.

2

After Subaru and Patrasche sped into the forest, the two were left facing each other without anything to stand between them.

Seeing Ram holding her wand readied and unflinching, Garfiel stuck a finger towards the forest where Subaru had vanished, and,

Garfiel: "Y'just had t'say those unnecessary things. Gonna be a pain in the ass chasin' him now."

Ram: "You think I will let you leave?"

Garfiel: "Y'think y'can stop me? Be a huge mistake if y'think th'balance between us hasn't changed since the old days. And don't think I'll go easy just because I like ya."

Cracking his knuckles, Garfiel threatened once more. But he knew full well that this was not a girl who could be intimidated. In fact, Ram didn't seem affected at all. Garfiel roughly scratched at his spiky blond hair,

Garfiel: "Ram, what're y'doin'? What's th'point? If there's a point I ain't heard about it. Y'doin this on Roswaal's orders?"

Ram: "…Sorry, Garf. It is Ram's own will to be here. It has nothing to do with Master Roswaal's orders. At least, I see no need to ask Master Roswaal's instructions at this point."

Hearing Ram say this resolutely, Garfiel, who was beginning to have the same doubts that Subaru had earlier, furrowed his brows with the exact same confusion at her answer.

Looking at her with an increasingly bitter expression,

Garfiel: "I don't get it, Ram. I'm gettin' it even less now that it ain't on Roswaal's orders, I can't think of a single reason why y'be doin' this."

Ram: "Really?"

Garfiel: "Uh—?"

Ram: "Do you really not understand… why Ram is doing this, Garf?"

Asking calmly, Ram's expression and tone were no different than usual. But, listening, Garfiel's expression changed under her gaze.

Confusion. Doubt. Shock. And wrath.

Garfiel: "You…"

Taking one step forward, Garfiel's heel ravaged the ground beneath it. Gnawing his fangs in an expression of unbearable rage, he narrowed his eyes towards Ram,

Garfiel: "I don't fuck'n believe it. You'd do somethin' like this…"

Ram: "—For Frederica, and for you, Garf."

Garfiel: "DON'T YOU BRING UP THE NAME OF THAT TRAITOR!!"

Roaring, Garfiel stamped down his foot sending the ground caving in, and, with a boom, the surface shattered beneath his foot.

Plumes of smoke billowed out as the nearby trees tilted from the force. The forest cowered in fear, and the air was silenced in terror of his rage.

Yet, in the face of that wrath, Ram's expression remained cool and unfazed,

Ram: "Do you think anyone will agree with you when you throw tantrums like an obstinate child? Garf, how long are you going to keep running in circles in this narrow forest?"

Garfiel: "Don't y'talk like y'know everything! You… you n'Frederica, you who abandoned the Sanctuary what could y'know, ahh?!"

Ram's words, like she was chiding a small child, did not reach the enraged Garfiel in the end. But unlike the way he stomped into the ground before, this time, he only kicked at the earth without force.

Garfiel: "For me? It's for me? You… that's exactly what I can't believe. Now it's already come t'this, how dare y'tell me that…? "

Ram: "Garf…"

Garfiel: "Did I ask for yer sympathy? Don't look down at me all high n'mighty. Me, Granny, or the others, we never asked for your pity."

Covering his face with his palm, his breathing ragged, Garfiel wrenched out these words.

A figure that seemed almost tragic, and slouching made its stature appear even smaller than it was.

Taking deep breath after deep breath, Garfiel took his hand off of his face, and,

Garfiel: “Enough. I ain’t listenin’ no more. Turn back to th’Sanctuary now. Do it and I’ll forget this. I still gotta go chase down that bastard.”

Ram: “I refuse, Garf. If anyone should concede, it is you. Even if I go back, the approaching ruin is unavoidable. You understand this as well, don’t you?”

Garfiel: “Just go back. I ain’t askin’ again. Go back and stay there till the Trials’ over.”

Ram: “No, I will not return or wait. Nothing can come from standing idle. By stagnating in this place, the only thing that will remain in your palms will be ashes of what you hoped to achieve. For something so weak and vague, why do y…”

Garfiel: “Even so! It’s a lot better than having nothing left!”

Cutting Ram off, Garfiel looked up and barked. Etched into his expression was at once rage, jealousy, and sorrow.

Garfiel: “Ruin? So what? Long as I’m here I’ll take care of’it. This time, all of it, I’ll take care of all of it…”

Ram: “Garf, haven’t I always told you? —That’s nothing more than compensatory behavior.”

In the face of Garfiel’s detonated emotions, Ram still responded with single-minded calmness.

In direct opposition and impossible to converge, neither were willing to concede, and no compromise was coming.

Perhaps realizing this, Garfiel looked down and closed his eyes,

Garfiel: “Go back, Ram. This is… my final request. With all the feelings I have ever expressed for you, please. So…”

Ram: “Then, Garf. —Will you abandon everything except for Ram?”

Garfiel: "…"

To Garfiel's final, grief-filled plea, Ram's reply was concise and crisp. Although, carried within it was something excruciating that pressed on the hearts of anyone who heard it.

Standing opposite her, Garfiel's expression stiffened and his lips trembled.

Seeing this, Ram lightly cast down her eyes,

Ram: "Choose Ram over all the things in this world, see only Ram, love only Ram, do everything only for Ram, be loved only by Ram, forgive only Ram, and devote your entire being to Ram—can you do this?"

Garfiel: "I-I…"

Ram: "Ram, can do this."

Placing a hand on her chest, Ram proclaimed to the stuttering Garfiel.

A quiet and unwavering will, alone filled her words as she lifted her face,

Ram: "—Ram, can do this."

And that, was Ram's final ultimatum to Garfiel.

Perhaps understanding this, for only an instant, all dominance vanished from Garfiel's face. Only Ram was there to witness just what expression adorned his face in that instant.

Then, quickly shaking his head, and stowing all his exposed weakness deep within himself, he bared his fangs,

Garfiel: "I've always known… just how stubborn y'are."

Ram: "I could say the same to you. —If I cannot truly be the most important thing to you, then Ram will not yield to you, Garf. Ram will not belong to anyone."

Garfiel: “Is that, so.”

Facing each other, their gazes met.

Conclusions drawn, they acknowledged that neither would back down. Then, both, in a quiet voice,

Ram: “Goodbye, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Farewell, Ram.”

They exchanged these final words between them, full of affection.

—The forest trembled.

And a roar echoed out.

3

Subaru: “Patrasche! Stop! I’m telling you to stop!”

Desperately pulling on the reins, Subaru frantically screamed to Patrasche as they galloped through the forest.

But the earth dragon had no intention of listening to her rider, and only single-mindedly sprinted along the rugged road, distancing them from the firing-line behind them.

Although Subaru had heard of panicked horses that would refuse to listen to their rider’s commands, this didn’t seem to be the case with Patrasche.

The earth dragon seemed no different from usual, and was consciously ignoring his commands.

In other words, she must have deemed Subaru’s commands unworthy of her obedience.

Subaru: “You are ignoring me… for my own good, aren’t you?”

Patrasche: “…”

While she would not listen to his commands, she did not simply throw her master off like she was pissed off, either. Every bit of Patrasche's behavior had been overflowing with concern for Subaru, and Subaru, being tossed around on her back, was close to tears in gratitude and shame.

It was not simply because his earth dragon refused to obey him. He was disgusted with his own stupidity for failing to notice that even his earth dragon was worried about him.

And, alongside this, the matter that was still fueling Subaru's self-despair in present continuous tense, was that,

Subaru: "But Ram's in danger! I don't want to believe that Garfiel will really do anything to hurt her… but now…!"

Garfiel had made up his mind to kill Subaru. It was outside of his calculations that Ram would stand in his way, but now, just how would he rectify this miscalculation—was too frightening to imagine.

Unable to save those at the Mansion, Subaru had already more or less come to terms with their sacrifice in this loop. But those terms did not include Ram. Completely unprepared to allow a further loss beyond his permitted range, it tore Subaru's heart to pieces, resulting in this miserable state.

Subaru: "I hate…getting hurt too, but I can recover. So…!"

Pleading, his voice was almost crying. But Patrasche still ignored him.

With speed like the wind, the earth dragon did not slow down, and had no intention of listening to Subaru's appeals. Ram and Garfiel were now far behind them. A tragedy unfolding in a place he could not reach.

The thought battered at Subaru's heart. Why was his heart so weak, and why could it never be strong?

—And, this way, with his sights directed only into himself, repeating mistake after mistake, Subaru was bound to repeat the same failure.

Subaru: "—Eh?"

Suddenly, his line of sight expanded as Patrasche broke through the tangled woods. Clinging tight onto her as they cleared the obstacled path, Subaru's jaw dropped at the scene that opened before him.

Otto: "Wh-What happened, Mr. Natsuki? You're back in such a hurry?"

The one who asked was Otto, looking just as stumped as Subaru.

It was the train of refugees that was supposed to have gone ahead. Somehow, Subaru had bumped right into the side of their column. He thought they had just been fleeing aimlessly through the forest, but Patrasche's behavior certainly exceeded his expectations.

Otto: "I thought he didn't let you leave? What happened to Garfiel?"

Subaru: "I-I don't really know either… but Ram and Patrasche…"

Trying to control his ragged breathing so he could speak to Otto, Subaru wiped the sweat from his brows with the back of his hand.

—In the next instant, an atrocious roar shook through the forest.

Subaru: "Wh—?!"

Otto: "Huh?!"

Throats frozen, eyes widened in shock, Subaru and Otto simultaneously startled and turned to the direction of the voice.

The thunderous roar shook the atmosphere and the hearts of men alike, and even the earth dragons showed signs of panic at its overwhelming force.

If there was a single creature unshaken by this scene, it was Patrasche, bearing Subaru on her back.

Thus, she was the first to judge the situation and react.

Otto: “Ah, Mr. Natsuki?!”

Subaru: “Hey, Patrasche!”

Immediately turning her head to the front of the line of carriages, Patrasche broke into a run. She headed towards the leading carriage—and then further beyond that, sprinting without hesitation towards the Sanctuary’s exit, at end of the road ahead.

Leaving Otto’s call behind, Subaru felt the Divine Protection activate once again. He didn’t know the reason behind her action, but just as he was about to raise his voice to stop her,

“—!!”

An impact shook the ground, and Subaru heard a shriek coming from behind.

Involuntarily holding his breath and turning back his head, he gazed in the direction of Otto and the others.

In the left half of his vision, Subaru saw the scene that unraveled in the darkness of the forest.

Carriages sent flying. Earth dragons swallowed along in the impact, and passengers scattering into the air in screams and blood, dying the forest sky red.

Subaru: “—a.”

Witnessing this devastation, Subaru saw, under the airborne carcasses of the dragon carriages, a beast.

—Its whole body covered in golden fur; a gigantic tiger emerged in Subaru’s sight.

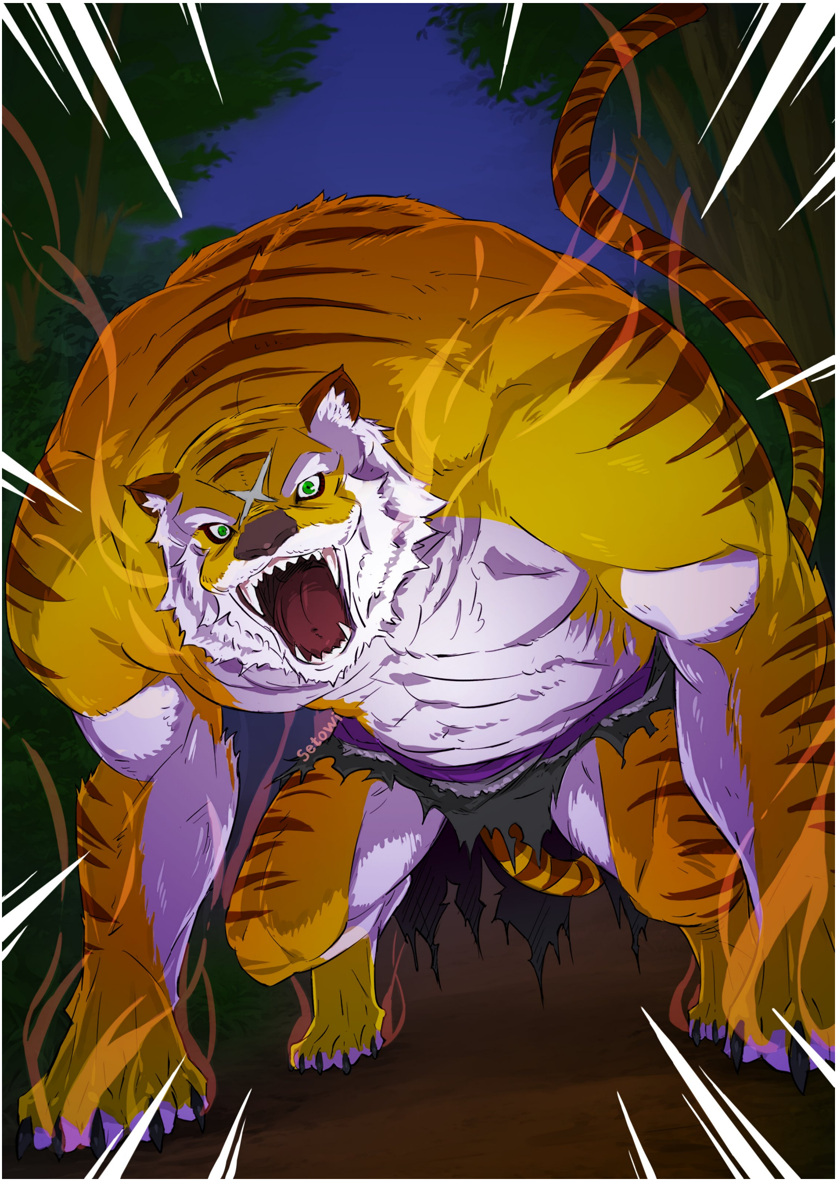
Setowi

Chapter 42:
Value of a Life

The fierce, golden tiger stooped low, and glowered over its surroundings with its razor-sharp gaze.

The great tiger was about four meters in length, a four-legged beast boasting a body over twice the size of the lions and tigers Subaru knew.

With lumbering legs and its mouth unable to close in its long, protruding fangs, the beast flaunted its blood-drenched daggers to and fro.

Subaru: “Wh, at…”

…is that? But before he could finish the question, the airborne carriages crashed to the ground. The sound of destruction echoed, splinters of wood scattered, and shrieks saturated the air.

The passengers swallowed by the impact were thrown to the ground, those conscious wailing in pain, while those unconscious lay motionless in their own puddling blood.

—That instant, Subaru was struck with the thought: I have to help the wounded.

But before he could turn that thought into action, an intense movement swept Subaru along.

Swinging around, ignoring Subaru’s astonished cry, Patrasche scraped her foot into the ground and dashed away from the beast, aiming straight for the forest.

Subaru: “Wai—! Hey, Patrasche?!”

Subaru shouted to the dragon that was ignoring her rider, but, just like on the way here, Patrasche showed no intention of obeying his will.

Leaving behind Otto and the others, who had been stunned into motionlessness, Patrasche accelerated, bearing Subaru on her back. But,

Beast: "—WRR!!"

With a thunderous bellow, as if slicing through the forest, the beast hounded Subaru's trail.

A torrent of bestial rage and hostility pierced down the road such that as much as Patrasche tried to get away, her instincts froze her still.

The petrifying sensation of a mighty existence possessing life-threatening power making him the focal point of its hostility. Taking in this feeling he had felt many times before, terror and dread coursed up Subaru's spine. And precisely because he knew this feeling well, he could not blame the frozen Patrasche for stopping her steps in such a time and place. He could not blame her, but the consequence was clear.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Turning around, the devastation at the root of his terror flowed into his sight.

From light swings of the beast's paws, dragon carriages were sent tumbling like toy boxes as their contents scattered and struck upon the trees of the forest. Perhaps, if one amplified the sound of chopsticks snapping by a hundredfold, it would be something resembling this sound of wood and human bones shattering against one another.

Faced with a literal monster, despite knowing that inaction was the same as waiting for death, no one moved from their spot.

Perhaps, they were afraid that any movement might excite the great beast to turn its claws, its fangs, and its wrath towards them.

Although, they instinctively knew that doing so would only be shifting around the order of their doom.

Subaru: “Is that thing… the reason why there was no one in the Sanctuary…?”

Trembling from the roots of his teeth on the petrified dragon’s back, Subaru burned the murdering beast into the back of his eye with the resolve of certain death.

Coated in beautiful golden fur, its face possessed at once savagery and dauntless dignity. Its keen eyes were brilliant with hostility and rage, and its rattling fangs were too sharp to be likened to mere blades. —This could very well be the thing that attacked the Sanctuary.

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Intently watching without missing a single gesture, expression, or movement, Subaru noticed something out of place about the beast that was slowly approaching. Squinting his single eye in search of the cause of that incongruity, he noticed it:

—Something was sticking out of the left side of the great tiger’s back.

To the enormous beast with seemingly limitless physical strength, the damage must have been trifling. From its movements as it walked, it didn’t seem to be even aware of the wound, and must have considered it no more than a scratch.

Yet for Subaru, it possessed great meaning. Not the wound itself, but the familiar-looking object that inflicted it.

—It was Ram’s favourite wand that should still be in her hand.

The small casting-wand that Ram used for chanting magic. At least, Subaru had never seen her use any other medium for spellcasting. Just now, she was wielding it in her hand in her stand-off against Garfiel. There was no mistaking it.

There was no way he could be mistaken. But why was it jutting out of the great tiger’s back? The answer—

Subaru: “Atav…ism…”

Suddenly, a scene from before flashed across Subaru's mind.

It was the day Garfiel showed him a fragment of his lineage, the special quality of his physical body. That time, he had only fully beastified a section of his arm as a demonstration of the Demi-human part of his lineage, but,

Subaru: "If he's that were-tiger, then…"

If that murderous beast was the fully beastified Garfiel…

…then that would explain why Ram, who had stayed behind to delay him, drove her wand into the tiger's body. Yet, at the same time, it also meant that—

—Ram, having lost her wand, failed to stop the tiger-morphed Garfiel in the end.

Subaru: "Garfiel, you… what did you do to Ram?"

Beast: "…"

Subaru: "ANSWER ME! AY! WHAT DID YOU DO TO RAM?! GARFIEL!!"

The monster's face scowled at Subaru's call, without answering.

Only, as if irritated by Subaru's voice, it shook its lumbering head and waved up its paw, revealing the tip of its claw. At the end of its claw, there dangled a strip of a familiar-looking black fabric. Seeing this alone, Subaru understood the fate of that peach-color haired girl.

Subaru: "GARFIIEEEELLLLLLLLL!!!!"

Screaming, abandoned to rage, Subaru let go of the reins and flew down from Patrasche's back. Landing miserably, he rolled to the ground, and, climbing onto all fours, he glared in front of him.

Both on all four limbs, man and beast faced one another at a distance. The gap in strength was obvious, and without a single hair's chance of victory, there was already no room for negotiation between them.

Subaru: “You, despise me that much…?”

Beast: “…”

Subaru: “You, hate me that much…?”

Beast: “…”

Subaru: “IF YOU REALLY! WANTED! TO KILL ME! YOU ONLY HAD TO TARGET ME!!”

Beast: “—WRRR!!”

Answering Subaru’s enraged scream, the beast roared into the sky.

The atmosphere pulsated, the forest recoiled, the leaves shuddered and all living things cowered, overtaken by dread. But Subaru alone, unfazed, bared his teeth.

Subaru: “You’d even lay hands on the girl you loved… What “Fangs of the Sanctuary”, DON’T MAKE ME FUCKING LAUGH!!”

Beast: “—WRRRR!!”

The next moment, in answer to Subaru’s insult, the enormous tiger charged.

With overwhelming momentum, the wreckages of dragon carriages between them were blown into the air as the beast advanced through the mist of splinters and blood.

Incredible velocity, and enormous mass. Direct impact would be akin to being struck by a large truck: instant death without even the time to gasp.

Imminent death was before him. Sensing its inevitability, Subaru’s mind turned with unprecedented speed. Tapping into rage, his brain cells ignited in an explosion of emotion.

A certain darkness loomed within his chest, and following the flow of blood it coursed throughout his body. Hot, black, dark, faint, murky, and immaterial, that something horrible—can be grasped.

His single eye flying open, Subaru felt the sensation of having grasped onto something within himself.

He looked in front of him. At a distance close enough to feel each other's breaths, the beast's fangs were upon him. With reflex transcending the physical limits of his body, Subaru saw, at the back of the beast's opened mouth, its red and black esophagus that was the entryway into death. In that instant, Subaru raised up his arm and placed it between the fangs and his chest.

Beast: "—?!"

Suddenly, with a swirl of wind, the body of the great beast vanished before Subaru's eyes.

No, more accurately, it was not that it vanished. But, from sheer momentum, with its head as the pivot, the great tiger was flung into a 180 degree arc into the air. Just like this, it landed with its back crashing to the ground, barking in pain and incomprehension as its enormous mass bounced off the surface, rocking the earth with its impact as it tumbled.

Subaru: "Wh…?!"

Turning around, Subaru watched in disbelief as the fierce tiger rolled across the ground. Just now, Subaru was certain that he would lose his life.

The beast seemed just as shocked. Lying sideways on the ground, its face told of utter confusion as it slowly pushed itself off the surface, but owing to the impact to its semicircular canals, it collapsed to the ground once more.

Neither understanding what had happened, they looked at each other, panting. But Subaru, feeling a sudden fatigue surging through his body, fell to the ground, while the great tiger stood up with a frustrated shake of his head.

Once again, which side had the advantage was as clear as day. Even now, Subaru had no idea what had happened, but—

Subaru: “If it responded to my taunt like this… there’s no doubt it’s Garfiel.”

Forcing his trembling arms to push his body upright, Subaru sank his teeth into his lip to keep himself conscious. In front of him, the giant beast cautiously shifted its body left and right, most likely trying to fathom the incomprehensible phenomenon behind that momentary exchange.

Still, Subaru wasn’t sure if he could bring that mysterious sensation out again, even if he tried.

He managed to land one on him, but none of it had felt real.

His opponent’s caution was almost comical, but, without any grounds to laugh, Subaru himself was just as ridiculous.

Step by step, the giant beast approached warily, still half-doubtful of Subaru’s inaction, but then, it abruptly stopped, and—

Beast: “—WRRR!!”

Subaru: “a.”

A roar.

Feeling the illusion of being bathed in a great stormwind, Subaru covered his face and his body instinctively Contracted. Cutting through the gaps of his petrified nerves, was the sound of steps stamping into the earth.

Shattering the ground, the beast’s body leaped into the air, throwing itself directly at Subaru.

Its mass, its claws, neither was avoidable. This time, the sensation from before did not emerge on the tips of his fingers. It’s the end. The end is coming.

And,

Subaru: “—!!”

Beast: “—WR?!”

Thrusting in from the side, Patrasche rammed her head into the great beast’s stomach.

The great tiger let out a painful wail as the impact bent its body into a V, choking the air from its lungs. Then, swinging her body, Patrasche slammed her tail into the tiger’s eyes, temporarily robbing it of its vision.

Immediately turning around, Patrasche picked up Subaru with her mouth and attempted once more to escape into the wind—

Subaru: “Patra—”

His call was interrupted by a sound of tearing flesh.

Dangling by his waist from Patrasche’s mouth, Subaru was suddenly thrown into the ground ahead. When he looked back, Subaru saw that Patrasche’s tail was caught in the great beast’s fangs. Her body which weighed over 400 kilograms was being flailed about like a paper toy.

Patrasche screeched in pain. Her flesh ripped as blood sprayed out, and the instant her tail was severed from its root, blood spouted down, dyeing half of Subaru in red.

Helplessly tossed into the air, Patrasche tumbled to the ground. Witnessing her wretched state, with panting breaths, Subaru turned and glared at the giant tiger.

Harboring utmost hatred in his single eye, Subaru faced down the enemy whom he once might have called friend,

Subaru: “Ga…rfiiiiieeEEELLLLLLL…!”

With only single-minded hostility, he called to that name.

There was no answer. Perhaps beastification had robbed it of its human vocal organ. For within the mighty tiger’s throat as it extended out its paw, there was no hatred, or murder, or any words, for that matter.

There was only instinct transformed into action.

—To snap his neck, or to crush his head in its jaw.

No matter what kind of pain, or how wretched his end, Subaru was ready to accept “Death”.

He would swallow down all the suffering, make it his food, and turn it into his reason to obtain that perfect future.

Subaru: “You think you’ll be around in that future…?”

With his gaze fixed on the steadily approaching claw, Subaru conveyed his hateful final words.

And then, closing his left eye, he shut his sight into darkness.

Left with only the regret of Patrasche’s sacrifice, and his inability to save her—

Subaru: “—?”

Although Subaru was ready to accept the coming end, its visit did not come. Surprised, he furrowed his brows as irritation began to rise at the tardiness of the arrival of “Death”. Finally, he opened his eye,

Subaru: “Ah?”

In front of him, behind the sharp claw that was supposed to have ripped Subaru to shreds, he saw the expression on the beast’s face. The reason Subaru’s throat let out a stupid groan, was because the beast’s face, the face that was supposed to be pouring all its bloodlust onto Subaru, was instead turned towards a completely different direction.

The great beast had taken its gaze off of Subaru, and was instead looking towards something to Subaru’s left. Turning to follow its gaze, Subaru saw something fly over and bounce off the beast before rolling onto the ground. —A rock.

Completely ordinary, it was just a rock about the size that would fit in the palm of a hand. Tracing back the course of the projectile, he saw the silhouette of a person standing at the edge of the treeline.

With short hair, a skinny face, and scrawny limbs, it was a man with no distinctive or noteworthy qualities whatsoever, but Subaru knew him.

He was one of the Earlham villagers, a member of the youth militia, one of the refugees who had taken refuge in the Sanctuary, someone who was aboard one of the toppled carriages, and now, he was there, staggering with blood flowing down his forehead.

Sluggishly, he bent down, picked up the nearest rock, and with feeble movements, he threw it at the beast. Of course, the force was next to nothing. But,

Youth: "Get… away from Master Su…baru. You… monster…"

Wrenching out his voice in midst groans of pain, he nonetheless asserted his will.

The moment those words struck him, Subaru suddenly felt a quiver running through his body. Losing his voice as it reached the tips of his fingers, not knowing what to say, Subaru watched in silence.

Subaru: "…"

Then, came rocks, boards, sticks, and shoes, thrown at the monster's body from all directions.

What he was seeing was the people who should have been broken under the overwhelming pressure emanating from the beast putting up a clumsy, weak, and almost surreal resistance.

Subaru: "he…y…"

What are they doing? Subaru thought, astounded.

What is the point of doing something like that? Did they think they could do something to the beast? Would it penetrate its fur and hide, and do any damage to the flesh beneath? That's not even possible. It won't even leave a scratch. It's only futile resistance.

Subaru: "Stop…"

Hugging their heads and running away should have been the wisest choice.

They should have all boarded any still-functional dragon carriages and immediately fled this place. Either escape into the Sanctuary, or break through the forest. They should have taken an action that left them at least a small chance of staying alive. And yet, why were they—

Subaru: "Everyone, what're you doing?! Hurry, run away…"

Old Man: "Master Subaru! You won't convince us just like that!"

Subaru waved his arms, desperately trying to convey his intentions, but his words were cut short.

The one who shouted back was an old man with limbs like dried twigs, who, swinging up one arm with all his might, threw a branch that struck directly on the beast's snout. Then, panting, he looked over to Subaru,

Old Man: "If we ran for our lives and abandoned our benefactor, how could we ever show our face in front of our kids again? Besides, you came here in order to help us…"

Subaru: "That's…"

Old Man: "If you die here, then we'll die here as well. That's the least we'll be willing to accept, and that's what everyone's already agreed on."

Stunned, Subaru's face stiffened.

Seeing Subaru's astonished expression, for some reason, a gentle smile rose up on the man's face. It was just way too out of place, a bright smile that almost made one forget about the threat that was before them.

The attack resumed. Everyone struck at once at the murderous beast—Garfiel, with a hail of stones. But its power was just as weak as before. Far from causing him to flinch, it wasn't even enough to scratch an itch.

Slowly raising his massive body, Garfiel began to move. Ignoring Subaru at the forest's edge, who was only waiting to be torn apart—it turned to the youth who had thrown the first stone.

Youth: "…"

The beast and the youth faced one another. In front of the overwhelming pressure, the youth lost his voice, but, with only the act of drawing his short sword from its sheath on his hip, he asserted his will,

Youth: "Then, eat this—!"

Placing all his force behind the thrust, the youth drove it between Garfiel's brows—and, in the next instant, with a shrill sound, the blade snapped in two.

Perhaps because the golden fur possessed considerable resilience, the crudely made blade failed to penetrate it.

Then, as the youth completed his final defiance, the beast raised its paw,

Subaru: "Stop—!!"

Subaru screamed. But even so, in the face of the inevitable, it was nothing but empty noise.

Accompanied by the sound of crushing flesh, the youth's scrawny body was crushed from head to toe into a pulp under the force of the impact. Blood sprayed like a fountain from the gaps of Garfiel's claws, and when he lifted the paw once more, left in its wake was nothing but a swirling, dark red puddle of gore.

Subaru: "…"

This time, a scream of pure wrath rose in his throat.

With a screech that could slice through metal, Subaru scrambled off the ground and threw himself directly at the monster's back. But the attack was snuffed out by a light rise of the beast's hind-paw. His momentum was met by the paw, and, just like that, Subaru's was kicked into the air like a rubber ball, sending his back crashing into the trunk of a large tree—his entire body cracked in the sound of shattering bones.

Subaru: "GA, AAAagh—?!"

Rolling onto the ground, giant clots of blood surging up his aching throat spilled from his mouth. His body was unresponsive. His right arm, beginning from the shoulder, was twisted into a strange angle. His spine, having sustained that impact, completely lost its shape. Weak, and frail, nothing had changed at all.

Beast: "—!!"

Villagers: "Aaaah—!!"

The beast, barking, leaped into the fray of refugees around him, flaunting fangs and claws. Blood danced, shrieks resounded, and Subaru knew that lives were being extinguished in a place he could not see.

Someone was screaming. A bestial scream. Bestial, and yet in the voice of a human. Confusion ran through the beast. Whose scream was it? What was it roaring for? Trapped within his own failures, Subaru did not know the answer.

O??o: "—Mr. Natsuki! Please stay alive!"

His name was called. It was the voice of someone he knew, but his mind's attempt to match the voice to a name was obstructed by the pain. His thoughts flashed and dimmed, the world grew out of focus, and even his own emotions were vague. He could no longer tell what was a dream and what was real. Hatred and pain scattered all else into the wind.

He mustn't fall asleep here. He must stand up. Stand up, stand up, if anyone is going to die, you have to be the one to die first.

Subaru: "…don…'t die…ev…ryone…just me, dying… is more than enough…!"

Spewing blood while wrenching out these words, Subaru desperately tried to push himself off the ground. His right arm already useless, he frantically crawled with his left. A red curtain had been drawn over his left field of vision, and Subaru knew that it was the blood flowing from his forehead. Roughly scraping his eyelids against his shoulder, he clenched his teeth as if to crush his molars, and turned up his face.

Subaru: "…"

The carnage spanned out before him.

Every swing of the beast's arm sent men flying, blood spraying, extinguishing the flames of life.

No matter how courageous and desperate their resolve, their resistance fell uselessly against the beast. Its golden fur was stained only with their blood, and their deaths had no meaning at all.

Mere defiance, only to be blown away like dust. Not the slightest meaning at all.

If there was only a single "Death" that could be meaningful, it was Subaru's.

Subaru: "Stop it, stop it, stop it stop it stop it… please, stop…!"

If you are going to kill, kill me first.

He was the target to begin with. There was no reason to hurt those brave, kind people, no reason to take their lives.

Or, rather, wasn't their deaths just another consequence of Subaru's stupidity? If so, then isn't it just too—

Subaru: "—ug, ah?!"

Subaru felt his body being picked up, as his face dropped down towards the ground.

Dangling helplessly from his back, Subaru was lifted off the ground by Patrasche, who was bleeding profusely from her wounds. Despite only barely clinging onto life after Garfiel's merciless strike, she had crawled to Subaru's side.

Witnessing her pitiful state, Subaru could not hold back what was welling up in the back of his eye from flowing out,

Subaru: "No, it's alright… that's enough. You've done enough, Patrasche…"

Softly calling to her, Subaru reached out his hand to Patrasche's blood-soaked jaw. But she shook her head at Subaru's voice, as if trying to say "It's not over yet, you know". Then, tugging her muzzle under Subaru's stomach, she lifted the helpless Subaru onto her back.

Subaru groaned in surprise. And with this, Patrasche set out her steps. The steadiness of her strides made one wonder just how she still had strength left within her.

No doubt, she was using up the last strengths of her life.

Subaru: "…"

But even with the last ounce of life force she could muster, straining herself to the end, her speed was nothing compared to what she was usually capable of. And so, it was far from enough to escape the pursuing fangs.

The beast's teeth sank into Patrasche's hind leg as she shrieked with pain. Once again, Subaru was thrown into the air. But, floating weightlessly through space, just as he was prepared to crash to the ground, Patrasche reached out her neck and caught him in her jaw.

And, in the same motion, with all her might, she used her head to throw him as far as she could into the depths of the trees.

Subaru: "—!"

Subaru knew that it was all Patrasche could have done to put him as far from harm's way as she could.

At the same time, he realized it. Why, after parting with Ram, she had taken the shortcuts through the forest to rejoin with the train of refugees.

—Patrasche had sensed the existence of the beast.

And because she sensed it, in order to increase the chance of Subaru's survival, if only by a little, she fled towards the place where there were the largest number of other preys. All to protect Subaru.

Slamming onto the ground, Subaru's body bounced once, then twice. And after wailing at the third bounce—weightlessness overtook his body once again.

Subaru: "—a."

A steep slope opened into a ravine, and Subaru's body rolled straight downward. Without even the strength to cry out, scraped by branches and gravel, tossed from bounce to bounce, Subaru's body tumbled and fell,

Subaru: "…"

Sliding in somersaults, his vision swirling and swaying, Subaru caught a glimpse of what was above him.

There, he witnessed a sight he had no wish to see.

"—Patrasche."

The great tiger held Patrasche's body in its jaws, and clenched down with unimaginable force. Its fangs tore into her flesh, and in a mass of spraying blood, her body was crushed in two.

Unable to even cry out in death, the loyal dragon sacrificed her last for Subaru.

Subaru: "…"

His throat burned. His throat was tearing. Rage was boiling his brain and it felt like his blood was catching fire.

Bouncing, tumbling, sliding, rolling, scraping, Subaru went on falling.

—Rebounding high into the air, he felt weightless once again.

Crashing to the ground, his consciousness was swallowed into the impact.

His body did not stop falling. But all awareness had already separated from his flesh.

—Only a resentful voice, which refused to disappear, swirled and churned within his chest.

Chapter 43:
And Then Everyone Was—

1

What woke him was the feeling of water drops dripping onto his face.

The steady rhythm of cold droplets splashing on his cheek pulled his consciousness upward. And alongside the awakening of his consciousness, an acute sense of being alive slowly permeated throughout his body.

Simply put, it was that primal and intense sensation which required no words to convey—Pain.

Subaru: "…dgah."

As if to welcome Subaru's awakening, agonizing pain embraced him with open arms. Once the initial shock was felt, there was no way to avoid the rest of the onslaught.

His cracked forehead, his mangled right arm, and his spine that was marred by the extreme impact all shrieked with pain. But, far exceeding all of them, was,

Subaru: "this's b…ad…"

Directing his gaze towards the source of the razor-sharp pain, Subaru found that a branch as thick as two fingers had skewered him through the area under his right collarbone. Its point was slick with blood, and as much as Subaru rallied his resolve to pull it out it in spite of the pain, it refused to budge an inch.

Fortunately, the branch was broken on the way down, so, as long as Subaru ignored it visually, it wouldn't do much to impede his movements.

Subaru: "way too eccentric… this fashion…"

Somehow managing to get his unresponsive body to move and sitting himself up, Subaru leaned into a nearby rock-face to catch his breath. Looking over his surroundings, he found himself at the entrance of a small cave. Apparently, the water dripping onto his face was the morning dew falling from the top of the cave's mouth. —But morning dew would mean,

Subaru: "it's morning…?!"

As Subaru understood the heartless passage of time, intense pain coursed up his trembling body as though the back of his eye was painted red and his entire body was pierced by needles. A tear rose in his single eye as his thoughts slowly caught up.

What happened to him before he lost consciousness? Recalling it,

Subaru: "—a."

Subaru remembered what senseless tragedy his existence had brought.

Timidly gazing upwards, he saw the daylight penetrating between the gaps of the trees and into the forest. Bathed in that light, Subaru looked up towards the slope from which he fell—wondering what kind of scene was awaiting him there.

Subaru: "—ng."

Gulping down a breath, tormented by the guilt of not dying straight away, Subaru crawled at a caterpillar's pace, heading towards the other side of the slope.

Although his movements were hindered by the branch jutting from his chest, slowly but surely, he drew closer with time.

If this was the old Subaru, just imagining the scene that was awaiting him would have gripped him with horror, and he would probably have run away, refusing to look. But the current Subaru would not permit that.

He must see it to the end, swallow it down, and make it his food.

Because this was the duty of Natsuki Subaru, having failed to die when he should have.

Subaru: “hha…hhaa.”

With one crawl, and then another, he dragged himself up the slope with only his upper body off the ground. His breath panting, sweat soaking the dried wounds on his forehead, blood seeped out once more. He rudely wiped at it with his sleeve, soiling his face with mud and blood as he crawled.

Crawling past a totaled carriage, passing around a large toppled tree, Subaru’s fingers reached the destined rim of the slope—the spot from which Patrasche threw him in her sacrifice.

Subaru: “…”

For a moment, there was hesitation.

By raising his head and extending his neck to peek over, Subaru would be faced with the inescapable reality. He will no longer be able to escape into his imagination and indulge in the fantasy that some miracle might have occurred after he was driven away and that the majority of the refugees had managed to escape.

Subaru: “What am I, stupid? …no, I am stupid.”

Without a doubt, in his one sided vision, Subaru had witnessed the moment Patrasche was crushed under the beast’s jaw. After offering her all for Subaru, the instant of that loyal dragon’s death was still branded into the back of Subaru’s eyelids. To pretend that it was a dream or to escape into some convenient fantasy was nothing less than to insult her, who had sacrificed the very last embers of her life for Subaru.

Igniting the flame of conviction in his heart, Subaru wrenched out what little willpower he had left and opened his eye. Pushing himself up on his stomach, through the thick branches obstructing his vision and beyond the opening forest, in the scene of the tragedy —

Subaru: “—h?”

There was nothing.

Nothing at all.

Subaru: “how is that… pos…ble?”

With his face still twisted from imagining the carnage that was supposed to have panned out before him, Subaru’s eye bulged in disbelief, unable to accept the scene that dawned on his sight.

There were scattered wrecks of carriages and several uprooted trees. Claw marks were still gouged deep into the ground, and there were signs of destruction and resistance all over.

And yet, the most heartbreaking sight was not there.

The remnants of the slaughter. The corpses of the villagers who, in the truest sense of the words, gave their lives so Subaru could escape. The corpse of the earth dragon who was torn in two for her loyalty.

They were all nowhere to be found.

Subaru: “…”

The beast and the battle could not have been a dream. The scattered wreckages proved this. Only, the consequence of the tragedy was missing.

With great effort, Subaru used a nearby tree to pull himself up. Fortunately, after the initial shock had passed, the wounds in his leg and hips were no more than superficial scrapes and bruises. He stood up, holding his right arm steady with his left to stop it from hurting from the motion of dangling. And, looking over his surroundings,

Subaru: “Ho…w? Where’s Patrasche… everyone… Otto?”

He didn’t want to see their corpses.

Honestly, he would like nothing more than if everyone survived. But there was no way for that kind of pipe dream to be true.

Subaru, of all people, knew this in his very cells

After all, before Subaru lost consciousness, he had already witnessed several lives being extinguished by the beast's claws.

The scrawny youth fought to the end, but without leaving even a single scratch, he was crushed. There was the woman who lost her life when she was tossed out from the dragon carriage that was sent flying. And the old man was snapped like a dried twig by a single swing of the beast's claw, leaving nothing but a miserable corpse behind.

With every remembered death, pain and regret shaved away at Subaru's heart. Yet, even so, those deaths that he supposedly witnessed here had somehow been stolen from this place.

Subaru: "Patrasche… Patrasche…?"

Thinking of the lives that were lost, Subaru feebly and despairingly called his partner's name.

The moment her body was torn in two, and the pain of her final gasp, Subaru had certainly seen and heard it, so he had no fleeting hopes that she could still be alive.

Nevertheless, he had wanted to find her soul-departed remains, and apologize. It was something only Subaru could do.

His steps dragged, and his body was near exhaustion. The search was slow and feeble, and it took all of two hours just to explore the surrounding area.

But despite spending all this time, all Subaru found was,

Subaru: "Luggage mixed with the wreckages, scraps of clothes, and…"

Massive amounts of blood.

Just as Subaru imagined with near-certainty, everything carved by the beast's claws was accompanied by mass volumes of blood. He had expected there to be the choking stench of blood drifting about the scene, but perhaps because the blood clotting up Subaru's nose canal had deprived him of his olfactory senses, he didn't smell a thing.

He had already assembled enough evidence that the fact could not be denied. Yet the only piece he could not find was the conclusive proof itself, and how it came to be lost was enshrouded in mystery.

Even more importantly, it was while searching through the surroundings, that the extremely belated question finally burned into his mind. That is—

Subaru: "Why wasn't I… killed…?"

He didn't finish Subaru off—although Subaru surviving all those wounds may have been difficult to believe, it would still have been far too careless to have gone back without at least inspecting the body. After all, Subaru was Garfiel's target to begin with.

Even though he still couldn't understand why Garfiel would turn his claws to the refugees, he might have done it to teach Subaru a lesson.

But if that were the case, there would be even less reason for the bodies to disappear.

Subaru: "Even if… they were carried away…"

There were 42 refugees in total. Even if everyone turned into a corpse, it would still be too unrealistic to tow them all away, not to mention Patrasche and the other earth dragons as well.

Subaru: "But still…"

He didn't want to imagine it, but if they were swallowed into the great beast's belly—yet, for the same numerical problem, it wasn't a realistic theory. At least, while it was conceivable how they could be carried away, what was inconceivable was how they could afford the labor required to hide the bodies from sight.

In the end, before even considering whether the tiger would do such a roundabout thing, the crucial question was why it didn't make an effort to finish the wounded Subaru off.

Subaru: "…"

Suddenly, it occurred to him just how much this scene resembled the depopulated Sanctuary.

Although the conditions leading up to it were different, the results had many points in common. All the signs of the surrounding destruction were from the great tiger's rampage, and unrelated to the tiger and the refugee's disappearance. If one looked past the this most striking aspect of the scene, the two were eerily similar in that there were no bodies in sight.

In other words,

Subaru: "Th-The Sanctuary would be in the same state as last time too…?"

His breath growing ragged as he came to that conclusion, Subaru once again used up all his strength to stand. Then, looking over his surroundings, he deduced the direction of the Sanctuary.

—This was the morning of the sixth day.

Last night was probably the deadline for the Mansion. Although he could not say for certain, if Elsa's attack took place, then it was already too late to prevent the tragedy.

On the Sanctuary's side, something must have happened that made the tiger-morphed Garfiel abandon the thought of dealing Subaru the final blow. That something must have also been the reason why everyone here disappeared. But why the same thing didn't happen to Subaru remained completely unknown.

Subaru: "…"

Which way to go? Subaru hesitated for only a moment.

A warmth passing through his chest sent a faint ache across his heart. It was the inseverable sensation of guilt and remorse for the girl, still in her slumber, and all those he left in the Mansion.

Clenching his teeth, Subaru shook off these emotions and turned his steps to the Sanctuary.

With slow, dragging steps, in order to find out what had happened, Subaru made his way towards the Sanctuary.

What was waiting for him ahead? So that he could burn something worthy of the lives that were lost into his memories, he intended to spend this life for that redemption, even if only for the smallest hint to increase his chances of prevailing in the end.

2

—On the way to the Sanctuary, he passed through the place where Ram and Garfiel had fought.

There were scars left by wind-blades on the trunks of the nearby trees, as well as familiar claw-marks carved into the earth and the rocks, brutally gouged out by whole chunks at a time.

He briefly searched the area for any signs of Ram—or, most likely, Ram's body. But, unsurprisingly, he did not find her.

If the enormous tiger really was Garfiel, then, to him, she should have been his long-time crush. Subaru might even have believed it if their feelings grew into something deeper, but,

Subaru: "To go to the point of killing each other just to say "I like you"… I must've read too many light novels."

Because neither of them would back down, it did not end until one had killed the other.

Just how much could that love or longing have helped to stem the tide? If it truly could have stopped the violence, it would have stopped it before it even began.

The moment they had cast it aside, there was already nothing that could have stopped them.

Subaru: "…I'm, sorry."

She was nowhere in sight, but Subaru nevertheless offered his apology to the girl who did her best to save him.

Her fight would also become meaningless, and her thought would have been in vain once Subaru returned to the Sanctuary. For ahead of his path was something Subaru needed, now that he intended to die.

Despite his mounting regrets, Subaru doggedly walked towards the Sanctuary. The road on which he had begun walking before noon was only a distance of about ten minutes on Patrasche's back.

Defying his wounds, and advancing at a caterpillar's pace, it was already evening by the time Subaru drew close to the Sanctuary.

Subaru: "took half a day…fin…ally…"

He was back.

Almost collapsing on the spot of relief, there wasn't the slightest sense of accomplishment. Instead, the flame consuming Subaru's insides was the sense of powerlessness and anger at himself. And far surpassing his self-hatred, was something black and shimmering,

Subaru: "You fucking back yet… huh, Garfiel…?"

Don't think about it, don't think about it, he told himself in his heart to stem the overpowering hatred and rage towards that golden-haired piece of shit.

There were three primary reasons he returned to the Sanctuary.

The first was to get to the bottom of the mystery of how everyone had disappeared. It was essential for the future to grasp at least a part of that answer.

The second was to confirm that Emilia, who had remained in the Sanctuary, was safe. If everyone had disappeared, she would probably be no exception. So he intended to make sure.

And the third—far greater than the previous two reasons combined, was that furious flame charring the depths of Subaru's heart.

The impulse to tear that bloody tiger apart.

He took a step into the Sanctuary. Two moss ridden pillars stood in place of an entrance. Passing between them and entering the Sanctuary, Subaru quietly lowered the sound of his breathing as he looked around him.

Silence had fallen on the Sanctuary, as one would expect of a place devoid of people. But even before that, Subaru had not heard a single insect in the forest on his whole walk here.

It wasn't just the residents of the Sanctuary that had disappeared. It was as though the activity of every living thing in the region had been halted into silence.

Subaru: "…"

Even his own breathing felt too noisy in this silence. Subaru painfully pushed his throat to the limit to not make a sound. Taking short, careful breaths and dragging steps, Subaru headed to the depths of the Sanctuary—to the house where Emilia should be.

—In the hours before nightfall, Emilia would be passing the time leading up to the Trials curled up and hugging her knees. This usually became particularly striking after the third day, and especially this time, when Subaru was not at her side. Most likely, isolation and frustration had been shaving down her heart more acutely than in any of the loops before this.

Subaru: "not here, huh…"

Pushing open the door and looking inside, Subaru saw no one in the room and sighed.

Although Emilia was absent, her unoccupied bed was messy, and a chair was left knocked over by the bed. He could not be sure if this happened while she was resisting whatever caused the disappearance, or if Emilia, worn to her limit, had done this out of impulse.

Only, all the way along the road, Subaru hadn't encountered a single person.

Subaru: “Should I stop by Roswaal’s place…?”

Accepting that Emilia was no longer here, Subaru’s heart was calm as he considered the next course of action.

Although decisiveness in carrying out his plan was necessary, part of himself already knew that he would find nothing even if he went there.

Just as he feared, there was no one in the Sanctuary. The moment Emilia was gone, Subaru should no longer have any attachment to this place.

Emilia, who was supposed to be the subject of his attachments, had disappeared. But, as Subaru noticed, even this had barely caused a stir in his heart.

Was it because he finally had acquired that unshakable, dauntless, dazzling heart of steel?

No, Subaru immediately shook his head.

This sense of loss, of being deprived of the harbor of his emotions, was far too different from that heart of steel he had strived for. This, was but the result of excessive rage at the end of incomprehension, having worn everything else away, leaving only a fractured heart behind.

It was not unshakable, but only drained of all its contents.

—He had already lost the will to live.

Of course, it was only natural.

The current Subaru wasn’t living for the sake of living. He had failed to die when he was supposed to, and so, he couldn’t die until he had found something to justify his prolonged life.

In other words, it was not the will to live, but the resolve to die where all his consciousness was focused.

What was there to live for in a world like this?

Emilia was gone. Rem was gone. Patrasche was dead, and most likely Ram and Petra, too. And there was no question whether Otto had survived or not.

There was no one. There was no one left. Because Subaru wasn't smart enough, because Subaru wasn't strong enough, because Subaru didn't try hard enough, because Subaru didn't want it enough, he failed to save everyone. He didn't save anyone. Even though it was something only Subaru could do.

Subaru: "So… I…"

Have to take it all back. See it to the end. And set everything on the correct path.

It was something only Subaru could do. And it was something Subaru had to do.

All the sacrifices made for its sake, Subaru must always keep in his heart.

All that which was lost, Subaru must always keep in his thoughts.

All the price that must be paid, Subaru must always continue to pay.

To pay whatever price. Pile on the sacrifices. And take it all back in the end.

Subaru: "…"

Limping and staggering, Subaru came out of the building.

His steps did not turn towards the residence where Roswaal was recuperating, but to the very depths of the Sanctuary—the Tomb. Last time, wandering through the depopulated Sanctuary, it was there where he was killed by "Something". This time, he was heading to the exact same spot.

What for? To be killed, of course.

If the conditions were the same as last time, then Subaru should be killed there in the exact same manner.

But, knowing that the attack would come, Subaru judged that he should be able to dodge at least one fatal strike.

Even if he was killed by the second blow, as long as he could catch a glimpse of the enemy's true form, it would be enough.

Having prepared the resolve to die, step by step, Subaru steadily approached his destination.

The place where his stomach was gouged through from behind—although he couldn't remember the exact spot, he was certain it was only inches from the entrance of the Tomb.

Spotting the tip of the Tomb's structure in the distance, Subaru's heart rate grew frantic as the blood pulsing through his body flashed between hot and cold. Was it heating up or cooling down? Even that, he couldn't tell.

His body was hot, his hands and feet were numb. But his fingers were stiff, cold, as if pressed against frozen lead, and his head was cool enough to objectively see his situation.

A foolish existence heading to its death, knowing that it would die.

He was supposed to have made the oath in his heart to wager his life in exchange for results, but his expression was far from that resolute will. His brows were downcast, he bit his lips, and his limbs trembled uncontrollably.

All pretense fell away in the final moments, as he loathed himself for revealing that weakness underneath. Pushing that sentiment aside, Subaru went on without slowing his steps.

Even though he couldn't change the fact that he was weak, frail and stupid, he nonetheless wanted to have the courage to move forward from that self, and become the self he had always wanted.

Just like how a negative and a negative makes a positive, his crooked optimism was banking on weakness and weakness producing something good. And with this, Subaru steadily treaded along the path to the Tomb, and to Death.

The Tomb drew closer. His heartbeats thumped, and he could clearly hear the sound of blood pulsing through his scalp. The bile retching up from his empty stomach burned in his throat. His trembling knees were on the verge of collapsing to the ground, and his left field of vision was drenched by sweat, blurring everything in sight.

Roughly raising his left arm to wipe his eye, he faced forward once again. And it was then, he noticed it.

Subaru: "—a?"

Just as he lifted his leg towards the Tomb, Subaru saw that a change had taken place before his eyes.

Without even the chatter of insects audible, there was only the chorus of the occasional rustling of leaves stirred up by the wind. But suddenly, cutting into it, there was the sound of a small, intermittent chirp.

At first, Subaru thought it was a small, white furball being blown over by the wind.

But the furball stopped just a few paces in front of Subaru, and made a little twitch. Incredulous, Subaru furrowed his brows as he saw two long ears rise up.

Subaru: "a, rabbit?"

A little animal with two long ears and white, fluffy fur. With two characteristic red eyes, its mouth jittered as it looked about its surroundings. Then, looking up at Subaru, it tilted its little head, and let out a high-pitched squeal.

A small, teeny-tiny rabbit. It was about the size of Subaru's fist and, at a glance, it was not that far from the size of a hamster. But since its ears were as big as the rest of its body, the term "fits in your hand" might be slightly misleading.

In a place where bugs, humans, and dragons all vanished without a trace, there was suddenly a rabbit.

Although it could be just one of the critters that lived in the forest, considering how Subaru hadn't encountered a single living creature up to this point, seeing it here was exceedingly strange.

Subaru: "Why is there a rabbit here… it… is a rabbit… right?"

With endless questions, Subaru looked over his surroundings, confused, trying to see if there were other animals besides this rabbit that had wandered back into the Sanctuary. And, with no particular intention, he reached out his hand towards the rabbit, hoping to confirm what it was, or perhaps just wanting to pet its fur —

Subaru: "…"

The next moment, Subaru's entire left hand was detached from his wrist upwards.

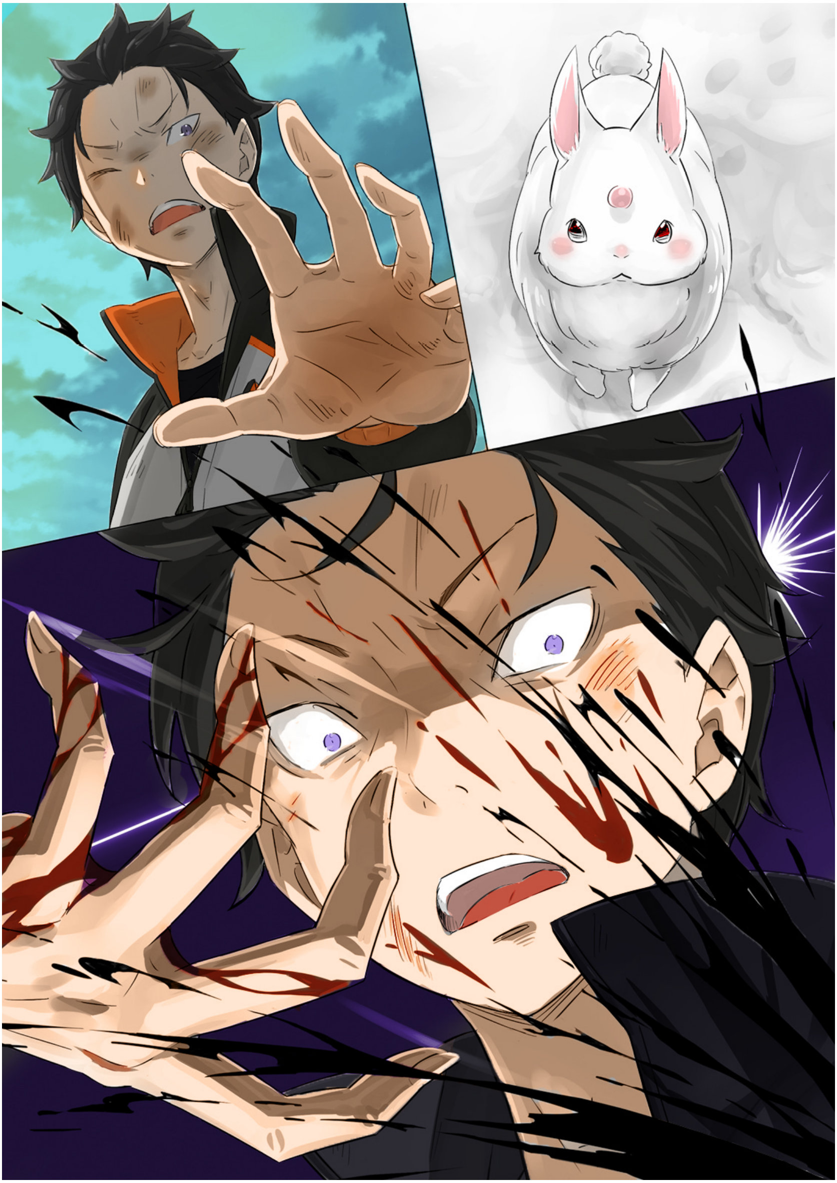

Blood sprayed out from the ragged, sloppy wound, and green-blue veins dangled from the stump. Were the thin, white strings tendons or nerves? Either way, it's always something grotesque when human body parts are destroyed—and those, were his few seconds of escape from reality.

Pain of an entirely other dimension trashed at Subaru's brain, and, suffocating from the agony, his body collapsed to the ground. The branch that pierced his collarbone snapped in half upon impact, transforming into shattering pain. Pain, pain, pain.

Subaru: "Ggha?! Aa,uaghaa! Aaauu, uuuuaaAAAA,AAAAAAAGHAAAAAAAAA!!"

His thoughts turned white-hot.

It hurts. Every cell of his body was dominated by this emotion of pain and there was already no way to register the reality of the agony as the thought occurred to him why it had to hurt so much and where it came from and why was it happening to him and why it hurt so much and it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts—

Suffocating from sheer agony, blood gushed from Subaru's wrist as he drove it into the ground, and, for some reason, he bit into the earth, inexplicably gnawing at the puddle of mud. The bitter, asphyxiating soil brought back a moment of mental clarity, and his eyes dashed as if searching for the cause, when he saw the white furball at his feet—the little animal's white fur was speckled with dots of red, and its tiny mouth was busy working away. Under its black nose, its cheeks were puffed up, twitching. And, sticking out of its mouth, Subaru saw his left pinky finger.

Understood. Gotcha. What happened here? He got eaten. He got eaten. He just got eaten.

Subaru: "Gu, ghhfffuuaaaAAAAAA!!"

Comprehension and pain drove him into a scream bordering insanity, Subaru turned to face the rabbit. His right arm was broken and immobile, and his left wrist was in the rabbit's belly. There was nothing he could do, but if he could just confirm its true form—

He felt something burning into his thigh. With the unamusing shock of sharp, merciless blades scraping his flesh to the bone, he turned up the whites of his eyes as white foam gushed from the back of his throat. If only he could lay down his head and faint, but the intensity of the agony had no intention of releasing his consciousness.

Bubbling blood spilled from the corner of his lips, and he writhed like a fish on land. The fact that his ears could still hear, must be both a miracle and a joke by a cruel God.

Like the rustle of lapping waves, the sound captured Subaru's eardrums.

Little hops. Small, tiny bodies. The chain of overlapping chirps expanded to enormity, and even if his vision were still present, he had no desire to count them.

And, in a moment, he was sincerely glad that the only thing left to him was his ears.

Simultaneously feeling the bites of feeding teeth over all of his body, now, through the tactile and unmistakable pain, Subaru understood that he was being devoured by threats numbering in the hundreds.

He shrieked. And a surge pushed him onto his back as his throat trembled. Immediately, furry creatures dived into his opened mouth. His tongue was torn to shreds, sharp teeth flashed across the depths of his throat, ravaging everything from his esophagus to his stomach.

Inside, they collided with the others that had invaded from his rectum, and, as if descending into a competition, they devoured his organs left and right, turning Natsuki Subaru into minced feed.

It was the unmistakable sensation of being alive while living creatures shredded him from within.

Fear had already left him. There was barely any more pain. He couldn’t understand why he was still conscious.

He was being eaten. He was being eaten. His left eye was gouged out. His ears were no longer there. His organs had already been consumed, and now the skin of his face was being peeled off. A hole opened in his skull, and teeth sank into his exposed, bulging brain—

—

——

———

————

—————ah—.

Chapter 44:
Verboten

1

His body was formed anew.

His devoured flesh, his peeled skin, his gnawed bones, his chewed nerves, his slurped up blood, and his soul, trampled and ravaged with the utmost gluttonous relish—returned to their original shapes.

A sensation came from his fingertips, and with this as the starting point, his whole body began to jolt and convulse.

Kicking up dust, writhing on the cold, hard ground, he groaned as white foam flowed from the corner of his mouth.

There was no pain. Nor sense of loss. His four limbs were still attached to his torso, and no physical damage had been incurred by his head and body. Yet his thoughts were vague as though he had just woken from sleep, and instead of clearing in a matter of seconds, Subaru's body and mind continued to reject the homecoming of reality.

Such was the horror of the events preceding his Return.

Could anyone say that they've experienced being invaded through the mouth and having their intestines shredded and devoured from inside? Or ever had the feeling of having their skins peeled off like it were a competition, exposing their dark red flesh and allowing their pink fat to be licked away by unruly tongues?

His brain refused to feel that pain, and as though it was happening to someone else's body and not his own, he objectively recognized the truth that he was being "Eaten", like in a waking nightmare.

Subaru: "Bgh, bgh, bgh…"

A nauseating sensation rushed up, and only yellow bile was retched from his dried-up stomach. The foam blowing from his mouth mixed with the acidic liquid, as Subaru continued to convulse, collapsed on his side.

Like a person having a seizure, or a fish flopping on land, the rejection of reality was not by Subaru's own volition, but by the choice of his very soul.

For who would gladly assent to their own existence being devoured and eaten? And who could blame Subaru for interpreting the reality of his being devoured in such a way?

What had he done to deserve it, whose will was behind it, and was there no alternative to that wretched end?

Subaru: "…"

His consciousness flashed and flickered.

Were his eyes open or shut? No control over his body returned to him.

His very soul refused to live in reality. Far from allowing him to choose awareness, his soul did not even present him with the choice.

Only, overwhelmed by the "Loss of its own existence", Subaru's body continued to drown in that sense of despair.

—Why.

If there was a single definite word within Subaru's mind, it would be that one.

—Why.

What the hell happened? What was that? Why did that happen? Why did that have to happen? What was happening to him now? Was there something that must happen to him now? What was he supposed to do now?

—Why, why, why, why, why.

Presented with no answers, while even the question itself was uncertain, there was only the shrieking of his soul.

—Why! Why! Why!

He continued to throw out the question which was without an answer, an unsightly figure who doesn't know when to give up.

Drowning in reality, tormented by a nightmare, one who had lost sight of the path of life, a figure asking "Why".

And, it was then—

"You have once again acquired the qualifications."

A voice whispered in the ears of the shivering Subaru.

High, and exalted. A voice which, even if the present Subaru heard it, he could not decipher its meaning. Nonetheless, the terrible voice echoed into Subaru's interior—

"You are invited—to the Witch's tea party."

In the next instant, Subaru's only-just-returned consciousness once again lost all reality.

2

A refreshing wind reminiscent of summer blew across the small hill of lush, green grass.

The cool breeze caressed Subaru's bangs, swaying the tall, green grass behind him, then, passing the hill and through the plains, it made its way towards the distant blue sky where white clouds were dancing.

Lightly touching his fingertips to his bangs that were being tickled by the invisible wind, Subaru squinted his eyes at the dazzling sunlight before slowly lowering his gaze to look directly in front of him.

Without knowing how or when, he found himself seated in a swaying armchair. And across a small white table, sitting with her legs crossed in the same type of chair, with an impression of pure white hair and pure white skin that was only overturned by her funerary dress, was a girl—or not, for that might not have been the appropriate word.

Subaru: "After all, it's a Madam Witch who's been idling here for more than four hundred years…"

Echidna: "Well, that's an awful thing to say to a girl. In my case, I died when I was nineteen, you know. Shouldn't I look like a pretty young girl who's quite a perfect match for you?"

Subaru: "That "Died when I was nineteen" part was pretty heavy-sobering… Also, please don't use that kind of weird statement to try to get close to me. A perfect match for me… that's gonna send snot flying out my nose, you know."

Echidna: "Aya, my, my… have I just been dumped?"

Subaru: "Not at all. I'm just telling you not to say stuff that'll make your value plummet, you know. I'm quite aware of what a lowlife bottomfeeder-scum I am. Calling yourself a perfect match for me is only gonna drag you down instead of pulling me up. I mean I… haven't done anything to make me deserve anything like that."

His fists resting on his knees opened and clenched as Subaru spilled these words, looking up to the sky with a bitter expression.

Hearing this, the Witch—Echidna rested her elbows on the white table and her cheeks in her hands, inspecting Subaru up and down with her gaze.

Echidna: "You sure seem to have a low opinion of yourself."

Subaru: "When you're surrounded by epic characters all the time, it's only natural you'd get into the habit of turning up your head every time you talk. Even though I thought I was supposed to have gotten over that inferiority complex already…"

Looking back on everything he had done up to this point, Subaru tightly clenched his fists.

The force of his grip sent his knuckles clicking as he took a single, deep breath,

Subaru: “So… what made you send me this tea party invite?”

Echidna: “It’s nothing complicated. I am the “Witch of Greed”, the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge. The thirst, and the desiring heart are pleasures to me, and to have something to yearn to know, to moan and sigh asking “Why” is indeed the greatest of all pleasures.”

Saying this, Echidna brought her teacup to her lips.

With the sound of its contents passing down her throat, she lightly smiled,

Echidna: “If I must give a reason, I hope you can understand that it is because you yourself expressed the wish to enter my Citadel, in a location closely connected to this place.”

Subaru: “Don’t give me that convoluted… well, anyway, we can leave why you invited me here for now. More importantly, there’s something I want to ask.”

Dismissing Echidna’s words by waving his hand, Subaru leaned forward. Locking his gaze onto her beautiful, white features,

Subaru: “What… happened to me?”

Echidna: “Isn’t that something you should know yourself?”

Subaru: “Knowing and comprehending are different things. I can kind of objectively understand the situation I was in, but that understanding doesn’t fit my current situation at all.”

Echidna: “How so?”

Subaru: “My head was going insane, and I was drowning on land in my own foam, but here, I’m presentable and my head is at least functioning well enough to carry on a conversation. So it’s pretty natural that I'd figure you had something to do with this."

Although he was carrying on the exchange somewhat mockingly, Subaru's mind was in overdrive trying to come to some understanding of his present situation.

At the very least, being invited to this so-called tea party inside Echidna's dream world had granted his heart a room to breathe.

Having been given the space to calm his thoughts and search his mind, Subaru remembered the dire circumstances his body was facing in the real world before entering this dream. He did feel a certain sense of unease about leaving behind a body that was going through a state of shock to come here with his spirit, but,

Subaru: "Last time I attended your tea party, I woke up in bed with no idea how I got there, so I don't know how the passage of time works in this place. I mean, in the actual world outside…"

Thinking to this point, it suddenly occurred to him that this was no time to be relaxing and sipping tea.

—Since he was overtaken by convulsions in his state of shock, Subaru still had no idea what point in time he had returned to.

Much less was he able to confirm the location where he lay writhing and foaming at the mouth.

Burning with regret at this late reaction, Subaru stood up, toppling the chair he was sitting in,

Subaru: "Echidna! Let me out of here now!"

Echidna: "I am appalled, to think you'd leave a Witch's tea party without drinking a single sip of tea. You really should stop to consider just what kind of an existence is sitting before you—"

Subaru: "I don't have time to chat with you! Let me out now! While we're dawdling here like this, outside…"

Echidna: "You have already failed before by taking nothing away, do you still wish to go empty-handed? …Could it be that you actually want to relive that same loss and pain?”

Unable to hold back his anxiety, Subaru raised his voice at Echidna’s unhurried remarks. But, as if plunging that impatience into an icy bath, Echidna asked this in a voice that froze all emotions.

Subaru: “…a.”

Echidna: “To go on challenging in order to obtain the results is something worthy of my praises. Whether it is the result you most desired, or the one you least desired, I find there is a certain beauty in the process of trial and error on the road to that result. The fact that you continue to challenge without losing heart is most admirable, I feel. However.”

Raising a finger in front of the silenced Subaru, Echidna went on, narrowing her eyes,

Echidna: “If you do not heed the results of your previous attempts, and instead choose to follow the exact same paths to the exact same ends… your actions are a desecration to the accumulation of knowledge, and for one who would commit such acts, I hold nothing but contempt, and could not wait to be rid of you.”

Subaru: “You…”

Echidna: “Incidentally, to answer your question… the current time outside is immediately after you passed the first Trial of the Tomb. Fortunately, the flow of time here is different from the outside world. I am sure you won’t lose too much time just by having a cup of tea with me.”

What Subaru wanted to know, along with his every concern, Echidna checked off one by one.

If what she said could be believed, the time outside would be directly after the first Trial—that is to say, the restart point of Return by Death hadn’t changed.

And, left out of the tea party, his physical body would be in the room inside the Tomb, abandoned at Emilia’s side as she continued to battle her Trial.

Although he couldn’t just swallow everything Echidna said, at least, having this fact confirmed by a third party injected relief into Subaru’s anxious veins.

With the leeway granted by his calming heart, at last, the question arose—

Subaru: “Echidna… how much do you know?”

Echidna: “If you ask me how much I know, I only know as much as I know. But as for how much I want to know, I want to know everything in this world.”

Subaru: “Stop joking around, this is important. For instance…yes, you just said this is immediately after the first Trial…”

The first Trial—that phrase felt so distant now.

After saying farewell to his parents in the dream world, Subaru met Echidna in an empty school. And following a brief exchange of question and answers, Subaru returned to reality.

And after that, on the way up to this temporary calm, too much had happened to be put into mere words—

Subaru: “I mean, aside from that, this reunion would be right after we parted…”

Echidna: “Indeed. Certainly, in objective time, this would be true, and even in uncertain, subjective time, it has not been long since you and I parted. It must have only been a couple of minutes before we saw each other again.”

“Just how much are you yearning for me?” Echidna seemed to suggest with her smile. But, seeing the joke wash off of an expressionless Subaru, she gave a disappointed shrug.

Echidna: “It seems you just never give me the reactions I want. Not getting what I expected is both some parts frustrating and some parts delightful, quite a complicated feeling, really.”

Subaru: “I’ll be sure to arrange a nice leisurely date with that complicated girl’s heart of yours when I have the time. But for now…”

Echidna: “Oh, I was so eager to celebrate our early reunion that I seem to have let my mouth run. Well, I guess there’s no helping it that I’d feel a little flustered. After all—.”

Here, Echidna paused.

In the void created by the catching of a breath, within that moment, her dark, black pupils cast Subaru an alluring glance. What was that glimpse of emotion flashing through her eyes in that instant? Even now, Subaru could not be certain.

Only, as if welcoming Subaru’s confusion, Echidna returned a lovely, enchanting smile,

Echidna: “Unlike me, who parted with you only minutes ago, to you, it must have seemed like hours, or rather days, since we last met—isn’t that so?”

Repeating Echidna’s words in his head, Subaru chewed over the contents that could have only one interpretation.

From what she just said, and her meaningful gaze and smile, there was no way he could be mistaken.

She—the Witch knew. The burden weighing on Subaru’s soul, the residues of his failed futures, the piece of knowledge that should be left nowhere in this world.

Subaru: “How…?!”

Echidna: “Let me answer your question this way. This is my Citadel, and I am the Witch of Greed. I haven’t shown it to you yet, have I?”

To Subaru’s wrenched-out question, Echidna tilted her head and held out her right hand.

Dancing lights descended onto her palm, eventually taking form—until there appeared a single book bound in pure white.

There was no title inscribed on its cover, and it was about the size of a dictionary. Aside from the fact that its color was blinding white, for Subaru, the sight of the book brought back nothing but reviled memories.

Subaru: “That couldn’t be…a Gospel, could it?”

Echidna: “Oh my, you just made an expression I could understand without even having to look inside this book. It’s as if your face is trying to say “You too?!” Just from that, I think I could already guess what you must’ve encountered in the outside world…”

Having read into Subaru’s inner heart from just the look on his face, Echidna opened the white-bound book in her hand. And, running her eyes over its contents, “Mmhmmhm”, she nodded time and again as she followed along its texts,

Echidna: “I see, I think I more or less understand. Although there are still parts I don’t entirely follow, I should be able to fill them in just by looking at you. …Mnn, it’s wonderful indeed. The feeling of missing pieces falling into place, the indescribable anticipation as the answer draws near. The fact that such feeling exists is precisely what makes life worth living…!”

Subaru: “…but, aren’t you already dead?”

Being pushed into the back of his seat by the pressure of Echidna’s incensed fervor, Subaru somehow managed to get a jab in. Hearing this, Echidna fiddled with her white hair, sulking,

Echidna: “When you rain on people’s parades like that, even when it’s true, it’s still really demoralizing, you know. Anyway, then let me ease your worries. …This book is not the same as the “Gospels” in your memories. Recorded in this book is neither the future nor the optimal solutions. Only truth.”

Subaru: “Truth…?”

Echidna: “If the Gospel could be called a book of prophecies, then this book in my hands would be a book of histories. This book is not bound by its shape, and its manifestation is as vague and as vast as the oceans. It is not any book, and yet it could be any book that was, or indeed any book that could be… its blank pages record only truth, and four hundred years ago, people of this world called it "The Book of Wisdom". But, I like to call it…"

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "—The Memories of the World."

An outlandish name—for an equally outlandish power.

If what she said was true, then no matter who the person was, no matter what that person had done, as long as it belonged in the past and in history, it could be read from this book. In terms of gathering information, this would be nothing less than a game-breaking cheat.

Echidna: "But to tell you the truth, I don't really like to rely on it. After all, only things witnessed with my own eyes can be truly burned into my memories. A magical book that skips the step of "Acquiring" and directly leads to "Acquired"—as much as I love to learn, it is difficult for me to judge the value of a book that bypasses the process of discovery."

Subaru: "If you don't want it you could give it to me. I'll have plenty of uses for it. In fact, if I had that, finding the openings to my problems would be…"

Echidna: "You should abandon that idea if you don't want to be a cripple."

Echidna cut off Subaru's smooth proposition straight off the bat, and held out the white-bound "Memories of the World" in front of him,

Echidna: "It may look harmless, but it's still the instrument of a Witch. The volume of information that it'd burn into the reader's mind would be enough to completely incinerate the brain of a common man. It'd be best not to read it if you wish to stay safe."

Subaru: "Then don't shove it in people's faces! That's super scary!"

Learning that his breakthrough plan was out of his reach, Subaru's spirits nosedived.

Seeing him shove the magical book right back, Echidna, with another wave of her hand, transformed it back into particles of light. Leaving aside the convenience of a book that could be stored away without a bookshelf, Subaru finally grasped the true extent of her knowledge.

By possessing this magical book, there was indeed almost "Nothing she does not know". But to avoid using it just because of personal preference, perhaps only a Witch would think this way.

Subaru: "But if you already know, then that should make things easier. Say, Echidna. You know that I can… Return b…"

"Return by Death." Just as he was about to pronounce those words, Subaru's throat froze.

But it was not due to the same non-negotiable penalty that visited every time he tried to utter the forbidden words.

In front of the frozen Subaru, Echidna was merely waiting for his next words, her white hair swaying in the wind, silently waiting.

Sitting there, she looked nothing like a Witch. There was something almost resembling warmth and sympathy, and the more he felt this way, the faster his heart pounded and the heavier his tongue became.

What froze Subaru's voice, was the most primal of emotions—fear.

Subaru: "Haa…haa…"

Subaru already had several opportunities to utter the forbidden words in the past.

To utter the name of the Authority, "Return by Death", residing in his body.

While it would be difficult to say whether it'd be correct to call it an "Authority", whenever he tried to tell anyone else, a force prevented him from doing so. A direct pain would grip his heart leaving no room for resistance, a force unbearable and merciless.

And there was once when its venomous fangs did not fall on Subaru, but on Emilia, to whom he had tried to lay bare his heart. The grief and pain of loss of that moment, Subaru could never forget.

There were very few occasions when Subaru so sincerely desired to die, and to simply disappear.

It was not the only time that the bitter, indescribable regret of his own stupidity had weighed so heavily upon him. But in spite of misery and regret—his heart, gripped by terror, still lacked the courage to take even a single step.

It was not that he was afraid of the pain that would be dealt to his heart. Of course, pain was frightening, but if it was the necessary price on the path to the desired future, then he would grit his teeth and endure it.

However, what Subaru feared was that if he uttered the forbidden words, the dark fingers would turn on someone other than himself.

No. Subaru shook his head.

In the battle against the White Whale, and in the final showdowns with Petelgeuse, Subaru had managed to utter the forbidden words when no one else was present.

Otherwise, he would always be forcibly stopped before he could reveal the secret to others, and his words would simply be discarded from the world in which time stood still. Because of that, he was never questioned further.

And the black hand of the Witch never made a sacrifice of anyone who wished to hear the continuation of those words.

—Except Emilia.

Subaru: "…"

The memories returned, of the silver-haired girl lying lightly in his arms.

If he were to taste that sense of loss again, this time, it would surely be unbearable.

It was a good thing he didn't go insane back then, he thought. After killing Emilia, wandering aimlessly, holding her lifeless corpse in his arms, it was a good thing he didn't go insane back then.

So unforgivable was his sin. And so terrible his crime.

And so, gripped by fear, Subaru hesitated to say the words.

Before him was the Witch Echidna. Frankly, she was no comparison to Emilia, so shallow was her acquaintance to Subaru.

Even if her heart was crushed, he probably wouldn't feel the same loss and despair of that moment. That, was his hideous prediction.

But still, Subaru couldn't move. Because while he was entertaining that naive train of thought, he realized that the conditions were far too different, and the results far too unpredictable.

When mentioning "Return by Death" to an unknowing listener, the forbidden words dealt pain to Subaru's heart.

And when Subaru mentioned "Return by Death" to someone precious to him, the forbidden words crushed that precious person's heart.

But what would happen if Subaru were to reveal "Return by Death" to someone who had already found out through some other means?

Would the suffering end with Subaru, or would the demonic hand extend to the one in front of him—

Echidna: "Why don't you try it and see?"

Subaru: "—?!"

Echidna: "Taking action to procure the results one desires, is deserving of my respect. I am not going to veer from that opinion. In fact, I believe it is precisely such actions that make life worth living.”

Was she unaware of the cause of Subaru’s indecision, or was it because she didn’t know that she herself could become the target—no, that would be impossible.

Most likely, the Witch had already seen through all of Subaru’s doubts.

Even though he himself could not reach a conclusion, the Witch understood. Yet, in spite of this, she urged him to go on for no other reason than a conviction from the depths of her heart.

Subaru: “You might not have time to regret it, you know…?”

Echidna: “Then, let me wait with eager expectations for you to break down crying beside my corpse.”

Seeing Subaru trying to delay the choice to the last minute, Echidna cheerfully answered.

That attitude was probably to remove any remaining concerns hindering him from making his decision.

Rather than doing so out of consideration for Subaru, it was probably her desire to see the outcome—that was the basis of the sincerity of her words.

Without expectations, and without hoping for one or the other.

There was merely possibility. And for only the desire of the possibility of an answer, she pushed on Subaru’s back.

She must be living without the slightest doubt of the reason of her existence.

Even though he knew there was no way to live on that alone, he nonetheless felt saved by that strength.

Subaru: “Echidna. I can use Return by Death t—”

The forbidden words escaped his lips—

And, in that instant, the world—

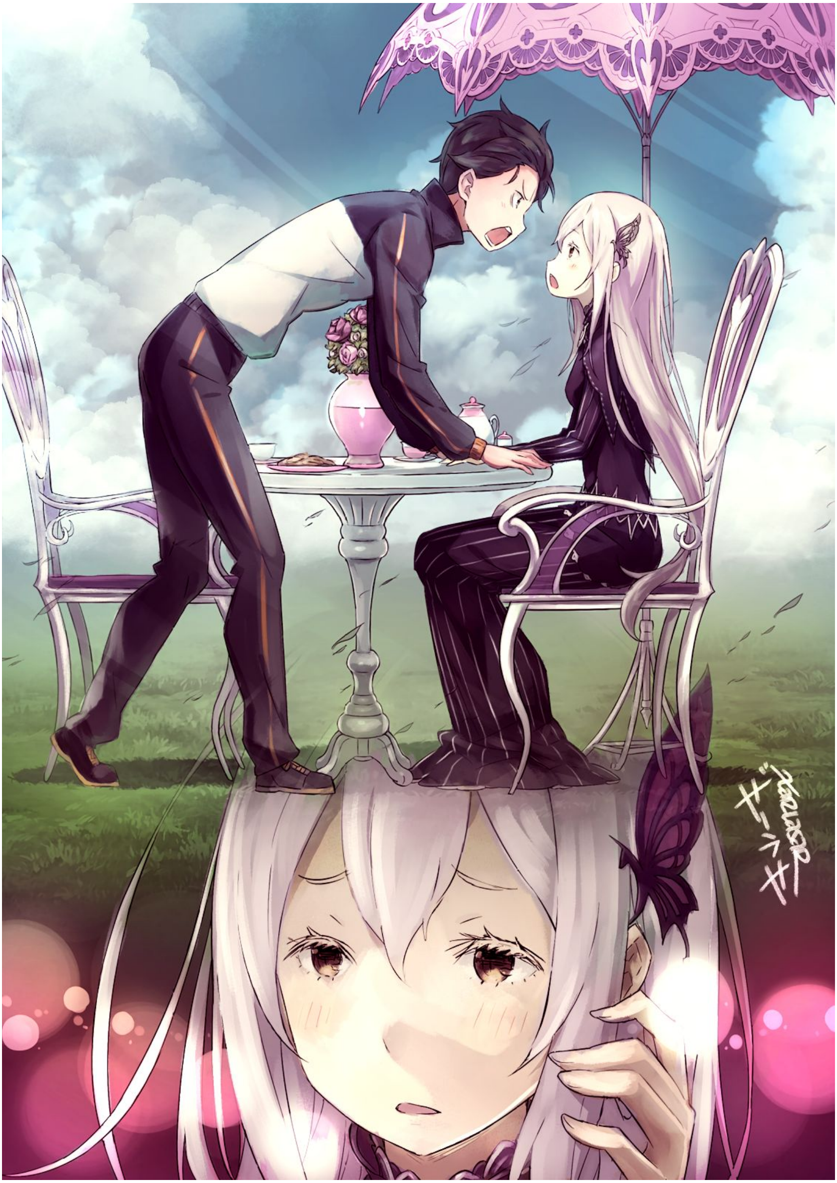

Chapter 45:
Condition for the Tea Party

Subaru: "—to."

Eyes tightly shut, Subaru clenched his teeth in anticipation of the impending fingers of shocking pain.

But this anguished determination was,

Subaru: "…huh?"

Despite pronouncing the words, none of the changes came to Subaru's body.

Subaru: "…hm."

Lifting his head, Subaru quickly felt his chest to confirm that nothing was out of the ordinary. Directly in front of him, Echidna was still sitting with her legs crossed just as she was a few seconds ago, and only her eyebrows slightly twitched on her perfect features.

Frantically looking her over, he saw that nothing had changed about the girl who was looking back at him. Her breathing, her demeanor: everything was the same as before. But, expecting the worst, his eyes locked onto the center of her chest, shrouded in her funerary dress,

Echidna: "Although I don't know if they live up to your expectations, personally I'm not very confident in my chest size, you know. I guess if they were the size of Sekhmet's or Minerva's, they'd probably be a huge burden on my back and shoulders… but from a curiosity standpoint, I still find it regrettable."

Subaru: "…That's totally not the reason why I'm ogling! No, more importantly…"

Hearing Echidna's statement like it was a matter-of-course, Subaru shot back as if his brain went blank. Then, holding a palm to his mouth, desperately trying to stifle the emotions in his trembling voice,

Subaru: “When… when I die, I rewind time, and do the world over again. I can Return by Death.”

Echidna: “I heard you. And before I heard, I read it too. I see, it’s quite a rare situation indeed.”

Carefree as ever, as if having completely accepted the facts of Subaru’s statement, Echidna nodded.

But, to Subaru, this attitude was nothing short of thunder striking on a clear day.

—At the end of his last syllable as he pronounced the words, no matter how much he reminded his heart to stay strong, his determination would easily have been destroyed under the unrelenting punishment of the Witch’s hand.

The pain that would result whenever he trespassed on the forbidden, dealt either to Subaru’s heart or the heart of the person he was confessing to, had always been the unshakable trauma binding his heart.

That was why, to Subaru, even the act of “Attempting” was out of the question. If not for Echidna’s push on his back, Subaru would not have possessed the final resolve to follow through.

He had done so with such momentous determination. And yet, it was so easily—

Subaru: “Why didn’t the hand come out…?”

Echidna: “You sound almost disappointed that it didn’t. In that case, could it be that you regret having missed an opportunity to kill me? I’m hurt.”

Subaru: “I obviously wasn’t banking on that sort of…!”

Echidna: “Yes, I know. Are you feeling so cornered that you can’t even take a little joke?”

Ignoring Subaru’s emotions wavering under the shock, Echidna simply went on at her own pace. Unable to hold back his frustration, Subaru clicked his tongue and shot her a sharp glare,

Subaru: “Then answer me clearly. You… heard me say “Return by Death” several times now, and the hand that was supposed to… the Witch’s hand won’t be coming? Am I right in thinking that?”

Echidna: “So you already understand that hand belongs to the Witch. …Yes, that is correct. This is my dream, and my Citadel. A fantasy seen in my death. No one may enter here without my permission.”

Subaru: “You’re sure of that?”

Echidna: “You certainly are cautious. —Yes, I’m sure. The only Witches whose existences are permitted here are Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Pride, Wrath, and Sloth. There is no place for Envy here.”

Seeing Subaru insisting on making sure, Echidna replied.

Hearing this, for a moment Subaru forgot to breathe. A short while passed as he sat silently in his chair, limp and powerless. His shoulders dropped, his face stooped, and he let out a long, long sigh,

Subaru: “is that, so…that so… is, that so…”

Echidna: “…”

Covering his face with his palm, Subaru repeated the same words under his breath. Over, and over.

As if just to make sure. As if unwilling to let it go. As if clinging onto it.

After all, whether it was being freed from the Witch’s fingers or finally spilling the forbidden words stowed deep inside his chest, all of it was a first since he arrived in this Parallel World.

Echidna: “That is certainly a profound expression you’re making.”

Watching Subaru being tossed by waves of emotions, Echidna’s delicate lips softened as she spoke. Passing her fingers through her pure white hair,

Echidna: “Was that how much it has been tormenting you? Then again, having this kind of obsessive love directed at you, I guess it’s only inevitable.”

Subaru: “Sorry… I got a bit carried away there. I’m fine now. … Yeah, I’m fine now. I’m fine now, so let’s keep going. There’s still a mountain of things I want to talk to you about.”

The constraint on speaking of “Return by Death” did not activate.

It took a considerable amount time just to come to terms with that fact, but even now that he had accepted it, his heart was still no less turbulent.

The burden he had carried up to now, the burden he was still carrying, the sense of liberation of finally being able to say it out loud—was like a light of hope injected into this stifling deadlock. But,

Echidna: “There’s something you seem to be misunderstanding.”

Subaru: “—?”

Echidna: “It is true that the Witch’s hand cannot intervene inside my Citadel. So I do understand your heart’s jubilation at finally being able to reveal the secret that you were barred from revealing up to now. But… as to whether I should listen to your problems and just so conveniently offer my help and advice, that would be a separate question entirely, wouldn’t it?”

Subaru: “gh…”

Subaru’s excitement was instantly doused like he was splashed by a bucket of cold water.

In front of the silenced Subaru, Echidna made an expression as if her statement was only a matter of course. Faced with this unexpected response, Subaru couldn't hide the confusion and discouragement on his face

His gaze wavered as unintelligible sounds of "a" and "u" leaked from his mouth.

Just when he thought he saw the light and felt the sense of liberation in anticipation of breaking through the impasse, he let it slip right through his fingers. What should he do now? He had no idea at this point,

Echidna: "If you keep making that face like an abandoned child, I'll feel troubled, you know. Besides, I wasn't going to ask for anything too difficult of you."

Saying this, she tilted her head with a troubled look and lightly tapped three taps on the white table with her extended finger. Drawn by the sound, Subaru's gaze landed on the place where her tapping finger was pointing. —It was the cup he hadn't touched since he got here.

Echidna: "You were invited to a Witch's tea party. If you intend to carry on a lively conversation over tea, shouldn't you show that you've accepted my invitation first?"

Subaru: "…I…'m not sure what you're."

Echidna: "I thought it couldn't be any clearer than that? I even pointed this out at the beginning, you know."

With that reminder, Subaru remembered that Echidna did voice her complaint about Subaru not getting into the mood of the tea party and refusing to even look at his tea.

Realizing that this was her revenge, Subaru sustained major damage to his heart, and,

Subaru: "Damn it! Understood!"

Snatching up the cup from the table, he drank down the swirling amber-colored liquid in a single gulp. Despite having been left there for quite some time, its warmth was still just right. Perhaps, that was only to be expected of the offerings of a Witch's tea party.

Having gulped it down faster than he could taste it, Subaru roughly wiped his dripping mouth with his sleeve,

Subaru: "There! I drank it! Now do you feel like accepting me as a member of the tea party?"

Echidna: "You drank up my bodily fluid with such vigour… OH, I'm going to blush."

Subaru: "UueGHhh I forgot—!!"

And Subaru was caught on the same Dona-Tea trap he had stepped on at their first tea party.

Cheerfully watching Subaru as he held his hand to his mouth trying not to vomit, a delicate, lovely smile was inscribed onto Echidna's cheeks, as if to say "You are accepted",

Echidna: "For your inquiry of "Why", you are qualified, and the doors of this tea party are open to you. And, by drinking the tea offered by a Witch, you are accepted as an honored guest. As the host of this tea party, I am obliged to welcome you. —Now, you may ask away."

Echidna lightly clapped, with brimming curiosity blazing radiantly in her eyes.

Echidna: "After all, to agonize the mind in search of an answer is the greatest of bliss to me."

—With this, the tea party, or rather the question and answer session, began.

The Witch Echidna possessed tremendous knowledge in the form of a book she called the "Memories of the World".

He hadn't been able to even mention Return by Death to anyone up to now. But to suddenly be able to speak of the information gained from this ability without constraints was simply the utmost blessing

Subaru could have hoped for.

In front of her, all the countless belated questions pent up inside him flooded to the surface. But the first that came to his lips was,

Subaru: “The one who allows me to Return by Death… is the Witch of Envy, isn’t it?”

Echidna: “More or less, you’re not wrong in that understanding. But as for the mechanisms behind Return by Death, I wouldn’t know unless I have personally observed your death. But, since you cannot lose your life in my Citadel, that condition could never be fulfilled.”

Subaru: “As long as I’m here, I can’t die?”

Echidna: “This is only a fleeting dream, a temporary perch of the soul. If you died inside a dream, do you believe your real body would die as well?”

Subaru: “Well, if the dream got really bad, it’s possible I might die of shock or something…”

Tropes like deaths in dreams being reflected in real life shows up quite a lot in fictional works. With all those stories as examples, Subaru got the feeling that it wouldn’t be all that strange if dying in a Witch’s mental realm could cause his real body to die as well.

Subaru: “Well, it would be kinda weird to keep insisting on dying when I’m already told that I can’t. Anyways, so basically I won’t have to worry about dying no matter what kind of stupid stuff I do here?”

Echidna: “If your mind was pulverized and scattered to dust before you return to your physical body, you might still end up a cripple.”

Subaru: “If I become a living corpse I might as well be dead… if I can’t Return by Death from that, that’s even worse, isn’t it!”

Subaru once came to the verge of mental collapse during the loops inside the Capital. Perhaps it was a self-defense mechanism, or an unconscious act to prevent himself from truly shattering. He didn’t know what it was that swept him along at that time, but, in the end, it was only through rage that he had been able to regain himself.

Nevertheless, Subaru somehow instinctively knew that if his mind were shattered here, no sort of shock therapy would be able to cure him.

Subaru: “If I can’t even choose the timing of my own death, there’d really be nothing worse than that. …Although honestly, not dying would still be the preferred option.”

Echidna: “I can’t judge the virtue of a mindset which would think of “Death” as a tool to procure victory. For not even I have experienced my own death and admitted it to the stores of my knowledge.”

Subaru: “…? But, you died and got turned into a ghost. You don’t remember your own death?”

She was dead and without a physical body, that was what she herself had explained to him. Only the soul of the deceased Echidna was sealed and confined here by the Divine Dragon Volcanica.

Echidna: “It wasn’t quite like that. Indeed, my physical body, the vessel of my soul is dead and gone. But, my soul was sealed by Volcanica before it could meet its death.”

Subaru: “…So then, your body died and your soul didn’t. And since your essence didn’t die, it’s slightly different from actually experiencing death?”

Echidna: “Precisely. So while it may be a selfish thought, I am actually quite jealous of your situation. To be able to observe your own “Death”, and not only once, but to taste it many times over, no one would ever have permitted me such an opportunity.”

Subaru: “…That sounds awfully masochistic depending on how you hear it. And it’s not like I just went around happily welcoming death, you know, not even once.”

She probably didn’t mean anything by it, but Subaru nonetheless cringed at Echidna’s morbid curiosity.

For Subaru, “Death” at the end of his actions only ever proved his failure to achieve his objectives.

His aversion to Death had never diminished, and this sentiment had not changed since the first time he experienced it. Although, Subaru couldn’t deny that he had grown somewhat accustomed to that sensation, and was becoming more capable of facing it.

In front of Subaru’s sentiment, Echidna only let slip a little laugh, “That’s a terrible way to put it”,

Echidna: “Your condition which allows you to retry after Death, or rather, the power which denies you the peace of Death, is no doubt a thing of Envy. When did you notice it?”

Subaru: “From all the things everyone’s told me, it’s pretty much implied that the Witch had something to do with it. Although I honestly don’t remember ever meeting the envious Madam Witch herself… seeing how her name keeps popping up whenever something happens, I can only imagine maybe she’s the hand model who shows up now and then.”

Two arms, and a black shadow forming the vague outline of a body was all he had ever seen.

A contradictory existence which at once tormented Subaru with pain and showered him with such love whenever he spoke the forbidden words. Tormenting, and loving, a deranged sadistic delusion which Subaru had never considered to be a blessing.

Subaru: “Why would she care so much about someone she’s never met before, I can’t understand it at all… can you?”

Echidna: “Well, who knows. It’s not just me, I doubt anyone would be able to understand her mentality. In fact, even if I could, I wouldn’t wish to.”

Subaru: “For someone who wants to know everything in this world, you seem awfully bitter when it comes to the Witch of Envy. Actually, considering what she’s done to you, I guess it’s only natural.”

In Subaru's mind, Echidna was something transcendent, and in fact, she had reached heights no humans could have ever hoped to reach.

She had created a whole other world, preserved her likeness even after death, and possessed the knowledge to answer any question Subaru could possibly ask.

All of which were proof of the transcendental nature of the girl who was the Witch of Greed.

But even this transcendental existence could not escape the emotions of love and hatred. It was not something Subaru could change, and he couldn't help but feel powerless in that sense.

Echidna: "You seem to have overestimated me. I may be a Witch, but I was a human first. I am not free from pleasure and rage, sadness and joy, nor the love and hatred of things, nor whether I can get along with a person or not. Compared to the other Witches, however, I do pride myself in the fact that I am far more tolerant."

Subaru: "Well you said it yourself that your curiosity about others is endless, guess there's no way to satisfy that curiosity by being too picky about people."

Echidna: "Precisely. And so, I can tolerate the existence of most things. No matter how unseemly or vulgar the existence, I'd still believe there is reason to endeavor to understand its mind to a certain degree. To satisfy my desire to know all things. However."

Pausing her words there, Echidna's expression suddenly darkened.

The Witch, who always carried an easy smile as she watched him with her unforgettable gaze, for the first time, he saw the corners of her lips twisted with clear displeasure—and brooding rage,

Echidna: "The Witch of Envy is the exception. Only her, I cannot forgive, nor will I endeavor to do so. Whether it was in the time before my death or the time after my death or out of all the Memories of the World, I have never met an existence so unforgivable."

Subaru: "…It's not just because she killed you… is it. This kind of rage…"

Echidna: ""Death" doesn't mean so much to me. Well, considering how I am still here. But beyond that, she did something far more intolerable to me. Even though I consider any action taken to be an effort to obtain a conclusion… this alone, I absolutely will never accept."

Expelling this bitter sentiment, Echidna closed her eyes and shook her head.

With this one gesture, all traces of passionate rage dissipated and vanished from her face. Emerging in its stead, was once again the familiar, perceptive smile,

Echidna: "Let's put aside the topic of that Witch for now. I do have some hypotheses regarding the underlying principles of your Return by Death, but I don't have conclusive proof. And even if we could understand it, it would have no impact on your actual "Deaths" at all. So, do you have any question for me other than its origins?"

Subaru: "Other than its origins…"

Having the root of Return by Death so easily confirmed actually forced Subaru's mind to deliberate. Setting the intentions of its originator aside, Subaru was aware that in exchange for the pain, he was making good use of this powerful Authority residing within him, if he wasn't being used by it.

As much as he hated to admit it, without this power, there would be so many outcomes that he could never have achieved.

And, most likely, he would have no choice but to continue relying on its power in the future. If that much was given, then,

Subaru: "—My Return by Death… do you think there's a limit to how many times it can be used?"

Echidna: "Hmm…I see. Knowing that you could retry after "Death", that would be the natural question to ask."

As far as Subaru could remember, he had already died sixteen times in this world.

Every single Death had been accompanied by agony and loss, but, savoring that pain, he would try again in the world he returned to.

Yet, even while it allowed him to reach for the outcomes he needed, every visit of Death was accompanied by the natural terror—that this might be last time.

Subaru: “It’s only natural… isn’t it.”

After all, “Death” was supposed to happen only once in the first place, and he had already defied it so many times over.

Precisely because this was a world he could not overcome without that power, he couldn’t help but imagine how unbearably powerless he would feel if he were to ever lose it.

Until the instant Return by Death hit, Subaru couldn’t know whether it would truly be the end.

The despair of having failed partway to his goal, which he had tasted so many times before—would all cease and give way to this. So terrible was the dread of Death.

Echidna: “What I am about to say is purely my conjecture, so let me put this out there first. I do have some vague ideas regarding the principles behind your Return by Death, so I hope you’d allow me to proceed from these assumptions.”

Subaru: “…yeah, let’s hear it.”

Echidna: “Your “Return by Death”, while we can assume that it comes with limits and conditions, in terms of a limit on the number of uses—”

Subaru held his breath.

Looking directly into Echidna’s eyes just as they were gazing into his, to Subaru, the small pause in between those words felt like an eternity.

And to this anxiety to reach the answer—

Echidna: "—there most likely, isn't one."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "To you, "Death" is not the end. No matter how many times you die, or how many times you decay, your soul is sent back in time and you are granted the chance to retry until the fate of "Death" is broken. Regardless of how brutally you are killed, and no matter how shattered your heart may be, it seems."

Hearing Echidna's conclusion, for a moment, Subaru's mind was replaced by a complete blank.

As if his mind was wiped clean by that blankness, the next thought that began to fill his emptied head was,

Subaru: "—is that, so."

Quietly taking in the fact he had just been told, he desperately tried to keep his whole body from trembling.

Covering a hand over his mouth, Subaru lowered his head and closed his eyes.

He did not seem to be distraught, but neither was he calmed by the knowledge that there was no limit to his Return by Death.

Seeing this, Echidna furrowed her brows with some traces of doubt,

Echidna: "You don't look as surprised as I thought."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "I had thought that for you… or indeed, for anyone, overturning the absolute finality of death should have been something exceedingly significant. Especially when you yourself are powerless, while countless obstacles and dangers stand ahead of your path. I really thought there would've been a bigger reaction than that."

Subaru: “Sorry the BAD REACTION didn’t live up to your expectations… but…”

The possibility of unlimited retries—had always been one of Subaru’s rather optimistic theories about Return by Death. So when someone else gave it their affirmation, it did not come as a complete surprise. But even so,

Subaru: “It’s not like I’m just gonna take that in and immediately think: “IT’S ALRIGHT TO DIE AS MANY TIMES AS I WANT, THIS PARALLEL WORLD IS TOTALLY JUST A GAME” or anything idiotic like that.”

Echidna: “So you’ve already guessed what the answer would be? You are a cleverer human than I thought. For better or for worse.”

Subaru: “Every time I Return by Death… and every time I try to tell anyone about it, I can feel the Witch’s presence, like a black shadow is drawing closer.”

The first time he spoke the forbidden words, all Subaru could see of the shadow was an arm touching his heart.

But the more he violated the forbidden, the more vivid the shadow’s faint outlines became, and now, he could already faintly see the shape of its entire body.

And when the shape of that shadow becomes clear, what would happen then?

Subaru: “When it becomes completely formed, that’s when I’ll have reached the limit of Return by Death. When that shadow becomes real, I don’t think I will be able to reject it.”

Echidna: “Hm, and what is your basis for this?”

Subaru: “A hunch.”

Hearing these two words, Echidna’s eyes opened wide.

Subaru rested his elbow on the table and his cheek in his palm, looking up at Echidna’s face, Subaru: “In fact, it’s a feeling which only someone who’s seen that shadow can understand. Besides me, the only other guy who’s seen that thing was…”

The only other person who shared in this pain, was probably that madman who had his heart broken in half when he did.

Subaru felt an emotional twinge in his chest. And seeing this, Echidna narrowed her eyes as if peering into the depths of his heart, but then, she immediately shrugged,

Echidna: “The fact that I can’t understand this feeling of yours is all itching me up inside, but that’s largely confirmed my speculations. There is no limit to your Return by Death. However, it is subject to certain conditions.”

Subaru: “Certain… conditions.”

Echidna: “What enables you to Return by Death, is the deranged will of the Witch. Unless the source of that delusion is severed, you will not be allowed to meet your end.”

Subaru: “What do you mean sever… the source of the delusion…”

Echidna: “By killing the Witch who has so fallen for you, or having the Witch’s love for you run dry… although, as I see it, both of these tasks seem to be difficult to the extreme.”

To kill the Witch of Envy—was, four hundred years ago, the universal wish which even the combined strengths of the Dragon, the Sage, and the Sword Saint had failed to accomplish.

Unable to kill her, they had only managed to seal the Witch of Envy who had covered half the world in shadow. Yet, what Subaru had to do would have to surpass even this monumental feat.

Subaru: “Feels like I’ll have a much easier time having her fall out of love with me…”

Echidna: “But that is absolutely impossible to accomplish. Surely, you must be able to see this?”

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Perhaps only you could understand the sensation of directly interacting with the Witch's shadow, but I, having known that thing in its former existence, cannot help but think so."

There was bitterness in Echidna's expression. Although he didn't know what kind of conflict arose between these two Witches four hundred years ago, it certainly wasn't something that faded with time. In fact, the passage of time seemed to have only deepened the rift.

Unable to refute her words, Subaru only exhaled through his nose and leaned into the back of his chair.

Just as Echidna said, the likelihood of the Witch of Envy giving up on Subaru—was as hopeless as it could be.

Subaru never imagined he would be loved so blindly by someone whose face he didn't even know. Someone who literally destroyed half the world.

Echidna: "You sure accepted it easily."

Subaru: "—Huh?"

Echidna: "It might be strange to say this, but everything I've said up to now had only been the sum of my conjectures. I cannot support it with proof, nor is there nearly enough material to make it convincing."

Echidna closed a single eye, apparently perplexed by why Subaru so readily accepted her opinions.

In fact, Subaru felt the same way.

Subaru hadn't known her for all that long, and not to mention that the other person was a Witch. With that in mind, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that there wasn't a single reason to trust her.

But,

Subaru: “That’s also my hunch, I guess.”

Echidna: “…hunch.”

Subaru realized that, for some reason, he just naturally felt inclined to believe whatever came out of this girl’s mouth.

Perhaps it was her respect for knowledge, and her openness with what she knew in the brief conversations he has had with her, that made him so inclined to believe her.

Out of her excessive thirst for knowledge, he had seen her do such impulsive or even outlandish things, and yet—

Subaru: “If I overlook those parts, you probably wouldn’t lie to me —I think.”

Echidna: “…is that also a hunch of yours?”

Subaru: “Yeah. A hunch. But then, the fact that you’re hearing this from a guy who’s died sixteen times pretty much discredits it right off the bat, huh.”

Hoping to lighten the mood, Subaru threw out that self-deprecating quip and scratched his head.

Hearing this, for a moment, Echidna held her breath. Then, she reached for the cup on the table, brought it to her lips, and allowed the liquid to pass across her tongue,

Echidna: “You might just have a talent for flirting with Witches, you know.”

And, for the first time, a completely different smile was carved into the corners of her lips.

Chapter 46:
Locusts

Seeing the smile that was directed at him, for the very first time, Subaru genuinely thought that Echidna was pretty cute.

In her softened, smiling lips, there was no irony or calculation, but only a pure expression of good will towards Subaru.

There was no doubt that she was attractive, and to be treated so warmly by a girl like that should be enough to open the hearts of any boy alive.

Though of course, the most important space inside Subaru's heart was occupied by two other girls already.

Subaru: "Still, there really was some heart flutter going on there…"

Echidna: "Did you say something?"

Subaru: "Even if I have talent for flirting with Witches I still got loads of problems you know. And having someone I don't even remember flirting with attached to me…Ah, but then, if you six Witches can give me some help outside without causing too much trouble I'd be pretty happy with that."

Turning his face away and trying to change the subject, Subaru muttered this convenient pipe dream.

While he had only witnessed a part of what Typhon and Minerva could do, that part alone should already be more than enough to have the damage-dealer and healer roles covered.

Although, one moment getting his arm lopped off and the other getting beaten into health was still something to think about.

Echidna: "Unfortunately, regardless of what I was when I was alive, I cannot interfere with the real world after death. So, inviting you into my dream is already quite an exception."

Subaru: “I know I know. I just thought I should try anyway. Honestly, just having you to listen to me is already more than enough of a salvation for me.”

At the very least, having finally let go of the secret he had been holding inside for so long, he was feeling a little further away from mental collapse. On top of that, he had managed to clear up some of his suspicions about the Witch of Envy as well.

As for the parts that were still mysteries, he decided not to think about them for now.

Instead,

Subaru: “Can I ask some other questions about Return by Death?”

Echidna: “I could only answer with speculations from the extent of my knowledge. If you are fine with that, then sure.”

Resuming a pretentious air, Echidna said this as a preface.

The expression on her face was almost reminiscent of some big-shot figure, but deep down, she must be thoroughly enjoying these questions and answers seeing she was impatiently tapping her feet on the grass in anticipation of Subaru’s words while fiddling her fingers in her own hair.

For someone who was supposed to be the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, she was really quite predictable. Is it really alright for someone like that to be a Witch? Subaru thought in a corner of his head.

Subaru: “Occasionally when I Return by Death, the place where I revive at would be changed. So far, there’s been… six places, I think? I’ve been revived at different location and their respective times. So… I want to know about the conditions for the SAVEPOINTS to change.”

Echidna: ““Save points”… you mean the change in the places where you revive?”

Subaru: “Basically, once it changes, I can’t go back to the previous point. If two days ago was a savepoint, then once it changes to yesterday I can't go back to the day before anymore. Do you know what's the mechanism behind this?"

To Subaru, this question was just as vital as the limit on the number of returns, if not more so.

The changes in the savepoints—was an unknown aspect of Return by Death for which Subaru couldn't find a single relevant condition.

Subaru: "I can die and come back… but it's not like I intend to naively go around thinking I can die as much I want. But while I don't intend to… when it's the only thing I can rely on, I'll rely on it without hesitation. But…"

What would Subaru do when he falls into a situation which even his death couldn't salvage?

The image of the unconscious Rem lying in her bed flickered across Subaru's mind.

After parting at the end of the battle with the White Whale, she was supposed to join him again once he had defeated Petelgeuse, and yet, Subaru couldn't save her even through Return by Death.

He could never forget the instant he thrust a knife into his own throat at the sleeping girl's side.

Even now, he couldn't believe that he had had the will to act on that short-circuited impulse to take his own life, crushed by despair. Or, perhaps, it was precisely because he had lost the will to go on that he took his own life.

With blood leaking from the hole in his throat, in pain and suffocation, Subaru died.

And when he opened his eyes, he found himself returned to only a few minutes before he pierced his throat.

He had never hated a savepoint update as much as he did then.

If it meant not losing Rem, Subaru would have challenged the

White Whale and the madman as many times as he must.

No matter how many times he would have to die, how many times he would be crushed, he would have challenged again.

Echidna: “The circumstances of those “save point” changes, could you tell me in a little more detail?”

Subaru: “Ah, aah… right. I’ll start with the first savepoint then…”

Recalling the memories of what he was being asked, Subaru gave a brief explanation of each of his Return by Deaths, along with the times and places he returned to.

That is to say, the majority of the experience of his life in the Parallel World up to now.

Even though it was the shortened version, getting through the story of the eventful two months still took up what felt like an hour.

Subaru: “So now, it’s inside the Tomb… fixed right after the end of the first Trial. Going by what you said earlier, this time was the same as well.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “Did that give you anything? One time, I was pretty convinced of a crazy theory that old uncles are savepoints, you know.”

For whatever reason, Kadomon, the scar faced uncle in the fruit shop in the Capital, was twice selected to be Subaru’s savepoint in this world.

But then again, one could count it as being twice in front of Rem as well.

Subaru: “I get the feeling that whether it’s people, things or time, none of it has anything to do with the savepoint changes. In terms of time, the number of days in between are all over the place, and in terms of people or events I can’t see anything in common at all. The conditions are just totally obscure.”

Echidna: “Indeed, I don’t see any consistency in the conditions you mentioned either. In that case, perhaps it is necessary for us to approach it from a different angle.”

Subaru: “A different angle?”

Echidna: “What is the reason you returned to where you did… might not be a question that would lead us to the answer. Instead, why don’t we consider a reason why it would be moved forward?”

Subaru: “Why it would be moved forward…?”

Echidna: “The “save point”, instead of a “Place of Return”, could alternatively be considered a “Wall of Return”. Until it can be moved forward, you would always be pulled back to that wall through “Death”. You could also think of it as the bottom of a pit.”

Subaru furrowed his brows at Echidna’s words, and began to think on their meaning.

A wall, or a pit. By returning to the respawn point through Return by Death, Subaru had managed to change situations that would otherwise have been impossible to break through. Rather, without Return by Death, he would not have surmounted anything, and those situations would have ended as they were.

So, the locations of the Return by Death savepoints changed with the situation.

In other words,

Subaru: “Return by Death shifts when I change something that I couldn’t change before…?”

Echidna: “In this case, Return by Death is merely a means to an end. As for what intention is behind this means, we would have to consider the being responsible for its existence.”

Subaru: “The being responsible…”

Echidna nodded, seeing that Subaru had lost his words, as her lips bent into a resentful frown, Echidna: “The Witch of Envy. The Witch who gifted you with Return by Death did so in hopes that you would change the circumstances which could only be overcome through “Death”. When you succeed in overcoming those circumstances, the “save point” will change.”

Subaru: “B, but then… that, doesn’t make sen…se. Because, then… what about Rem? I failed to save her, didn’t I? If Return by Death is a force to change the circumstances, then why did I return to a time where I couldn’t save Rem…”

By overwriting the savepoint, it was Return by Death itself that had denied him the chance to save Rem.

It was precisely because of this, that Subaru so urgently need to know if the update to the savepoint could be reverted.

But, to Subaru’s question, Echidna continued with “Unfortunately”,

Echidna: “This person “Rem” you speak of, is probably not someone who is within the Witch of Envy’s considerations.”

Subaru: “…h.”

Echidna: “What the Witch of Envy desires is for you to escape from the confounding fates of inescapable dead ends. Return by Death is only a means to fulfill that purpose, and whatever fate anyone else suffers is beyond the scope of that intention. Wishing to use that power to save anyone else, is nothing more than your own personal desires. It has nothing to do with the Witch.”

Subaru: “a…”

Echidna: “So, let me make this clear.”

In front of Subaru who was stunned into silence, Echidna reiterated her words.

With a feeble gaze in his eyes, Subaru looked up at the Witch of white. And, Echidna closed her eyes only once, as if bearing the pain, before her black pupils pierced into Subaru’s, Echidna: “As long as you fail to break through the obstacles standing in your path and die without changing the future, your soul will surely be returned to my Tomb. But if you allowed far too many sacrifices, and yet managed to change the future…”

Subaru: “—Then I’ll never get a chance to regain what’s been sacrificed.”

Echidna: “…Precisely.”

In the end, the only one within the Witch of Envy’s considerations was Subaru himself.

As long as Subaru could overcome the fate of Death, everything else was trivial. She believed that no matter how hopeless the situation became, given infinite retries, Subaru would find a way to survive. Or rather, even if it was hopeless, Subaru would not be allowed to give up.

Because all the conditions of Return by Death were held in the Witch of Envy’s hands.

Subaru: “Alright… if you got such a thing for me, then I’ve made up my mind as well.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “This gift of Return by Death you’ve given me… I’ll use it to the end. And at the end, I’ll meet you without having lost a single thing dear to me. Yeah, it’s decided. Already decided. I’ll make sure of it. I’m the greatest in the world at betraying people’s expectations, you know.”

If Return by Death was subject to the Witch’s will, then Subaru’s will would decide how it was to be used.

So, he will pile it up, overcome it, and move forward while holding onto everything.

If the Witch’s love would only save Subaru, then Subaru would save everything else.

Only with this, could Natsuki Subaru take a first shot back at the Witch.

Subaru: “Changing the circumstances… means to break through the problems of the Sanctuary and the problems at the Mansion. If all those are cleared, then regardless of how many victims are sacrificed, the return point of Return by Death will be updated. In other words, holding onto everything while overcoming the problems is the absolute condition.”

Echidna: “It may be strange for me to say this, but isn’t that quite an arduous task to take on? You certainly seem to have accepted it easily.”

Subaru: “I was just saying something I’ve already been vaguely thinking about out loud. Rather than break me, it’s got my motivation all fired up. My rebellious heart’s all ablaze, you know.”

Hearing Subaru’s declaration, Echidna fell speechless.

Taking some small satisfaction in seeing the Witch at a loss for words, Subaru clicked the bones in his neck, and,

Subaru: “There’s nothing else I wanted to ask about Return by Death. Anyways, I’ll keep that in mind, thanks.”

Echidna: “…I’ve also sated my curiosity through a valuable conversation. So let’s call it even. Besides, as opposed to flaunting my knowledge, this was more of me voicing my speculations.”

Subaru: “Then, this next one should be properly relying on that knowledge of yours.”

Since her knowledge didn’t extend to the topic of Return by Death, there were still many ambiguities involved. But this would not be the case for Subaru’s next question.

This one, he must hear it loud and clear from her own mouth.

Subaru: “This time I Returned by Death… do you know how I died?”

Echidna: “I haven’t read that part, so no, I don’t. And while I am incredibly interested in discussing the experiences of your various deaths… you don’t seem to be in the mood right now.”

Subaru: “It’s kind of hard to be boasting of wounds and deaths and heroic feats without some alcohol. But since all we got here is Dona-tea, that hope’s pretty much out the window.”

Echidna: “That is unfortunate. …From the looks of your body outside, your death must have been accompanied by considerable mental and physical anguish… in the end.”

It was probably considerate of her to have avoided describing how he died.

Sensing that consideration, Subaru somewhat relaxed his cheeks, before immediately stiffening again with “Aah yeah”, nodding,

Subaru: “Just remembering it gives me the shivers… this time, I was eaten alive.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “And it was by these stupid, tiny little palm-sized rabbits. Omnivores and hungry, apparently. They… ate up my whole body without leaving a scrap.”

Although he was understating it with his phrasing, there was no way to properly describe that miserable end with words.

The memory of his whole body being devoured, of his flesh, bones and blood being violated by pointed teeth still insisted on pain in the depths of Subaru’s mind.

Forcibly pushing this down, Subaru somehow managed to keep himself calm. Seeing this, Echidna pressed the back of her hand against her lips,

Echidna: “…So you encountered the Great Rabbit, I see.”

Subaru: “Great Rabbit?”

Echidna: "“Great” not as in “Size”, but in “Multitude”. That meaning was lost in communication over the ages. It is one of the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne's, inauspicious legacies—one of three."

Subaru: "The Great Rabbit is…"

Once, he had heard it from Julius. And here, the name of the Mabeast was uttered again by Echidna.

White Whale, Black Serpent, and Great Rabbit. Each and every one were witchbeasts that threatened the world since 400 years ago and subjects of the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne.

Subaru: "Just when I thought I got the White Whale down the Great Rabbit shows up, give me a break…"

Echidna: "If your adversary is the Great Rabbit, then you are up against a terrible enemy."

In front of Subaru, who was holding his head, Echidna's expression darkened at the knowledge of the threat which he was facing. Subaru was beginning to feel some apprehension at the sight of her expression,

Subaru: "I felt the same anxiety when I was facing the White Whale… so which one is worse?"

Echidna: "In terms of pure combat strength, the White Whale is by far the greater of the two. But in terms of which one is harder to destroy, then it is without doubt the Great Rabbit."

Subaru: "Hard to destroy…"

Subaru thought that, just like with the White Whale, there must be a way to slay it. But seeing this reaction from Subaru, Echidna raised up a single finger "Are you listening?",

Echidna: "You may think that it is no different from a regular Mabeast, or that it is simply a little more troublesome."

Subaru: "No, I mean, I've at least figured out that they're not the cute little bastards they look like…"

Echidna: “More accurately, the existence of the Great Rabbit is closer to that of a natural disaster. Always acting as a drove, they move for none other than the instinct of their insatiable appetite. All living creatures are their food, and they set out to do nothing except to devour every last morsel of their feed. Where the Great Rabbit passes, only unpopulated fields remain. Crops and fruits are untouched. The only things they devour are the living.”

Listening to Echidna’s description of the Great Rabbit, Subaru gasped and swallowed back a breath.

Watching her stern expression, Subaru realized that she was not exaggerating.

A Sanctuary devoid of people, and the sea of little rabbits that devoured him.

If that was the Great Rabbit, then the fact that the Sanctuary was empty could only be because they had all been eaten by the Mabeast.

Emilia, Ram, Ryuzu, Roswaal, and even Garfiel who had transformed into a giant tiger.

Locusts—the word suddenly surfaced in Subaru’s mind.

The phenomenon where a mass outbreak of locusts appears. More specifically, a mass of grasshoppers morphing into locusts, devouring fields of crops into nothing, leaving devastation and famine in its wake.

The Great Rabbit’s behavior was very close to the locusts Subaru knew.

Although, unlike locusts, the Great Rabbit ate living creatures, and so their inexhaustible hunger threatened life far more directly than the locusts.

Subaru: “Can’t we find a way to defeat them?”

Echidna: “Individually, their strengths are not significant, but do not forget that they move in droves. Killing any number of single individuals is completely meaningless, and as soon as they catch sight of prey, they will not stop until it is dead and devoured. They are “Hunger” itself.”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait. Yeah but…if the rabbits move in droves, shouldn’t there be a BOSS leading it or something? If we just kill the boss, won’t the whole thing collapse?”

According to the general rules of the human world, killing the leader is usually enough to make a group scatter. Although, in terms of the animal world, the second in command might just take over when that happens.

Then again, Subaru didn’t know much about the natural behavior of witchbeasts, so all he could do was rely on the one who was knowledgeable in this field, Echidna. But there, she shook her head,

Echidna: “You seem to have misunderstood something. The Great Rabbit has no concept of “Bosses”. They are driven only by the instinct of “Hunger”. They consume other life to sate their own hunger, and know no other structure. They reproduce by dividing, and when there is no prey, they cannibalize each other to endure their hunger. There is no sense of companionship between them.”

Subaru: “Cannibalize… wh, why on earth were these monsters created in the first place?!”

Echidna: “Why, that is something only the person who created them would know. At least, Daphne herself isn’t as insistent on her appetite as her rabbits are.”

Subaru couldn’t help but shiver at the dreadful nature of those rabbits.

Certainly, by instinct, it is the natural order of all living organisms to consume other life to sustain their own. On this point, there is no difference between humans or animals, or witchbeasts, for that matter.

But, to multiply by dividing themselves without mating or raising their young, and even worse, rather than just dividing to increase their number, the fact that they sate their hunger by consuming individuals spawned from themselves was unnatural to the extreme.

It may just be that the Great Rabbit was the organism to end all living organisms.

Subaru: “Hypothetically… uh, if I had to destroy the Great Rabbit, what do you think I should do?”

Echidna: “To be honest, I think that question is like asking “How do you evaporate all the raindrops in a pouring rain?”“

“It’s impossible to accomplish,” must be what she meant.

Hearing Echidna’s answer, Subaru held a hand to his forehead, dizzied by the enormity of the hurdle of defeating the Great Rabbit.

Subaru: “If we can kill all of them, then the Great Rabbit will be destroyed, right?”

Echidna: “Yet, that would be far too reckless of a thing to attempt. As far as I know, the only people capable of doing this were Reid Astrea and Sekhmet. Reid could use his overwhelming swordsmanship to slay it to the last one. As for Sekhmet… with the issue of their affinity, she could destroy them in a second.”

Subaru: “I heard they were real monsters… those two…”

Last time, the memory of Sekhmet sitting there hugging her knees surfaced in his mind.

At least, from what Subaru had seen, his impression of her was someone who found everything to be a bother, a Witch entirely appropriate for the title of “Sloth”.

Subaru: “Wait…”

Recalling his encounter with Sekhmet, a light lit up in Subaru’s head.

Although it was faint, and fleeting, it was enough to light the way out of the dead-end he was in. More importantly, this was something he absolutely couldn't do without Echidna's help.

Subaru: "Echidna."

Echidna: "What is it? Such a serious expression. …No, we mustn't. You are living, and I am dead. This crossing of our fates is only a transitory fantasy, a fleeting dream. So even if you stare at me with such passionate eyes, I…"

Subaru: "No no sorry to put it to you when you're all worked up but that's totally not what I was thinking! Seriously, totally not at all!"

Staggering a bit at seeing Echidna looking somewhat disappointed, Subaru quickly veered the conversation back on topic. That is,

Subaru: "Echidna, I want to meet the Witch of Gluttony—Daphne."

Echidna: "…"

Subaru: "Last time on your tea party, I met the Witches of Pride, Wrath, and Sloth. But that time you did say you kept the fragments of the five other Witches safe."

Echidna: "…collected them, yes. The traces of who they were in life are indeed kept within me. If I release them from this vessel I am, then it would be possible for them to manifest. It is possible, but…"

Hearing Subaru's proposal, Echidna furrowed her brows, looking troubled.

Her gaze wandered and even her words grew indistinct, until she looked to Subaru once again,

Echidna: "I really think it would be best if you abandon the idea of meeting Daphne."

Subaru: "Why is that? I know Witches can be a handful, I've already gotten a pretty intimate taste of that so I think I'm prepared for it. No matter what happens, I won't complain or anything."

Echidna: "Before we get to complaints, in my opinion, I think your affinity with Daphne would be extremely terrible. You could even say that it is the worst there can be. Even if you meet her, chances are, you wouldn't be able to discuss anything useful…"

Subaru: "Won't know until I try. Trial and error, as you like to say, right?"

Actions in pursuit of answers. Echidna always said she approved of such endeavors.

Hearing Subaru's words, with an "u…" Echidna showed an expression as if she had just been stabbed in a sore spot. Seeing this from her, Subaru went on, "Besides", scratching his head,

Subaru: "You're the one who said I don't have to worry for my life while I'm in here. Not that I'm being optimistic, but, at least, if I don't have to worry about dying, I figured there's no harm in taking on the challenge."

Echidna: "Well I never said your mind won't break and you won't end up a cripple."

Subaru: "I'll trust you to pull me back before that happens. So please, Echidna? I'm number one in the world when it comes to relying on others, you know?"

Throwing out a joke along with words of trust, Subaru sparkled his teeth and shot her a thumbs-up.

Seeing Subaru's frivolous-to-the-end attitude, the colors of resistance gradually faded from Echidna's eyes,

Echidna: "…alright. I will let you meet Daphne."

Subaru: "Ohoo, thankyouthankyou."

Echidna: "But, I must warn you. Do not, under any circumstances, undo her bondage. And you are forbidden to make contact with her body. In fact, please avoid making eye contact if possible."

Subaru: "What kind of a creep am I to have to be told to follow all that!"

Besides, there were some words mixed in there that just couldn't be ignored.

But just as Subaru was about to ask—Echidna had already completed her preparations.

Just as last time, Echidna had summoned a Witch without any preliminary motion or foreshadowing.

When he blinked and opened his eyes, there was already someone else occupying the space where she had been.

It was all just like last time.

Except—

Subaru: "Oy oy…isn't this just…"

Faced with what had appeared before his eyes, Subaru whispered as his cheeks stiffened.

In front of his eyes, was the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne.

—Set inside a coffin, her entire body restrained by bondage and her eyes sealed behind a thick black blindfold, was the girl who was a Witch.

Chapter 47:
Partner of Poor Affinity

Subaru: “If I have bad affinity with this, what kind of asshole would have good affinity with this?!”

In front of the girl in complete bondage, Subaru blurted this out in protest.

The Witch of Gluttony—was what they called the person who appeared before him.

Settled inside the slightly tilted coffin was a girl about 150cm in height. Her shoulder-length grayish hair was woven into two pigtails. White and splendid, with small breasts—in fact, she looked no more than 13 or 14 years old.

Subaru: “But all tied up in restraints, and eyes blindfolded…it’s hard to believe she’s the age she looks like.”

Girls her age should normally be fantasizing about having “Superpowers that normal people don’t have” or “Secret latent abilities that can pose a threat to other people” or stuff like that.

Thinking back on his middle-school days, Subaru was fantasizing about being a master of concealed weapons at the time and hid a bunch of sewing needles in his school uniform.

Subaru: “Well, I wound up falling over, got stabbed by needles everywhere and couldn’t stop crying…”

Reminiscing on his cringe-worthy history to no one in particular, Subaru couldn’t quite make up his mind on what to do with the Witch in front of him.

After all, every other Witch up to now had taken the initiative to one-sidedly made the FIRST ATTACK before Subaru could do anything.

Subaru: "…"

Directly facing him, the girl inside the coffin still lay silently without showing any reaction.

Since first impressions are crucial, the silence was beginning to weigh on Subaru, who was finding himself uncharacteristically indecisive about how to break the ice. He at least needed to know if his partner was friendly or not before he could decide whether to be all buddy-buddy or act like a sarcastic twit.

Subaru: "…"

Both waiting for the other to move, silence continued to dominate the tea party atop the small hill.

While this situation persisted, the overwhelming pressure from the Witch in front of him gradually ate away at Subaru. Even with her body immobilized, and her eyes sealed behind blindfolds, the threat emanating from her tiny body was truly befitting of a Witch.

Echidna had so happily introduced him to the Witches of Pride, Wrath and Sloth, yet she hesitated when it came to this one.

Perhaps the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne, was just so decisively different from the others.

Daphne: "…unn."

Subaru: "—?!"

Sweat gathered on Subaru's forehead from the tension, and just as he was about to wipe it with the back of his hand to keep them from dripping into his eyes, a sudden movement from Daphne's direction gave Subaru a start.

Inside the coffin, the girl wrapped in restraints slightly turned her head, while the sound of her respiration reached Subaru. In anticipation of what she might do, Subaru's entire body assumed a state of caution.

And then,

Daphne: “…zzuuu, mnya.”

Subaru: “—You were sleeping??!!”

Daphne: “—FUNYA?!”

The moment he heard what sounded like snoring, Subaru jumped forward protesting.

A loud stomp went out over the grassy hill, and, startled by the sudden sound, the Witch inside the coffin jolted, squeaking.

Unable to see with her eyes blindfolded, she turned her head left and right,

Daphne: “Wha, what is it? Somewone was tryying to sleeep here…”

She drooled out that complaint with an exceptionally sloppy tone.

It was unclear whether she was talking like that because she was half asleep or if that was just the way she talked, but at least the overwhelming pressure from earlier had vanished.

“Was I just overthinking it…?” Subaru couldn’t hide this deflated sensation.

Subaru: “Uh, y-yeah, my bad. I got a little hot-headed there. Didn’t mean to yell like that.”

Daphne: “Ehhh~? But getting startled by stuff like that, Daphne would feel troubled…”

Subaru: “Guh… please forgive me. Cheer up, ok? Please don’t get mad.”

Daphne: “But I wawsn’t getting mad? If I get mad, I’ll get all huungry. But anyway, who are you?”

Rejecting his apology, Daphne immediately went on at her own pace to ask her own question.

With just two or three sentences exchanged between them, the rhythm of the conversation had already been all messed up, and Subaru was starting to get an idea of what Echidna meant earlier.

—This Witch's pace of conversation couldn't match up with Subaru's at all.

Letting out a sigh at the unsettling road ahead of him, Subaru lightly shook his head to get rid of the off-put expression on his face, and, replacing it with an ultra friendly smile,

Subaru: "My name's Natsuki Subaru. For some reason I got invited by Echidna to her Witch's tea party… uhh, well, basically a tea-drinking friend. Yeah, something like that."

Daphne: "Heeee~~? Dona-Dona has friends? Subaruun too, you should be more careful with your choice of friends, you know? If they hear you're friends with a Witch… your real friends and family might… hate… you… youknow…?"

Hearing Subaru's self introduction, Daphne threw in an extra piece of advice. The fact that the latter half of her sentence started trailing off was probably because she was falling back to sleep.

Seeing her blatant exhaustion, with her shoulders heaving up and down inside the coffin, with "Oy oy", Subaru tried to snap her out of it,

Subaru: "Why're you so tired out? Does that coffin drain the lifeforce out of whoever's inside or something?"

Daphne: "Nooo, it doesn't? Daphne's just, tired, that's all, and my stomach's empty and going all guu~guu~ and I have no energyy… is there, anything, to, eat… haa, haa…"

Subaru: "Panting just from talking is like the epitome of childhood-sickly-constitution you know… In terms of food, we only got some Dona-tea and some cookies on the table."

In fact, they were some cookie-ish mystery treats to go with the tea. But, knowing that the tea was Echidna's bodily fluids, the cookies might very well be made of Echidna's body cells or something.

Since he couldn't gulp it all down at once like the tea, Subaru made a point of not touching it. But, hearing that there was food, the reaction "COOKIES?!" from Daphne was pretty clear,

Daphne: "Th, th, th, that would do. That would doo, Daphne, put it in Daphne's mouth please. Hurry, aaeee, hurryy…"

Subaru: "If we take it out of context that request can be totally misunderstood so can you please be more careful with that?! But well… I guess I'm not enough of a sadist to keep someone who wants it so badly waiting."

Subaru picked up the plate of sweets and approached Daphne's coffin, intending to place the cookies in her mouth. But, before he could do so,

Daphne: "Ah, but but, wait Subaruun, can you wait a momennt?"

Subaru: "Hn? What. Just so you know, we only got one flavor here. There's no chocolate in there so it's probably just plain flavored. If you tell me you don't like it, I won't force you to eat it all up and not leave anything behind or anything like that."

Daphne: "That's not it… it's just, I don't want Subaruun to come too close when you feed Daphne."

Subaru: "That's a pretty difficult request when you're asking me to feed you, isn't it?!"

His approach having been rejected, Subaru stood there holding the plate of cookies, at a loss about what to do.

All the while, the girl in the coffin slightly pushed herself up,

Daphne: "Please don't misunderstand though… it's not because I hate you or feel biologically repulsed by you or just can't stand you at all or anything like that you know…"

Subaru: "Those reassurances totally just made you sound less credible! Reason! Tell me a reason!"

Daphne: "Subaruun's smell, if you get too close to Daphne, it'll be like pooison.”

Subaru: “My body odor’s like poison?!”

Hearing that even more hurtful comment, Subaru quickly raised up his arm to smell himself. But there was nothing particularly striking, although, humans are usually slow to notice their own odors.

Subaru looked himself up and down, but,

Subaru: “I smell? I really smell? I took a proper bath after coming to the Sanctuary though? I didn’t have soap like back at the Mansion, but considering I’ll be around Emilia, I did ensure the minimal level of personal hygiene… No, I mean, this is the spirit world isn’t it? Would the harsh surface conditions really carry over in here?”

Daphne: “Noooo, it’s~not~like~thaat. Uuuum, shouldn’t, you understaand, Subaruun?”

Subaru: “Not at all! That just sounds like it’s all my fault here! How am I supposed to just understand? Tch!”

While Subaru was flailing his arms around shouting this, Daphne shook her head left and right, slightly rocking her coffin. With the sound of creaking wood, “How should I saay this…” she continued at her own unique tempo,

Daphne: “If I smell Subaruun’s smell, Daphne will want to eat Subaruun more than the cookie, and that’ll make Daphne feel all troubled you know…”

Subaru: “…Eh? Sorry, I didn’t quite understand that.”

Daphne: “Compared to vegetables, Daphne likes meat more, and hard meat is better than soft meat, that kind of thing, you know…”

Suddenly, Subaru felt a chill shooting up the back of his spine.

Holding his breath as he stared at Daphne, there had been no change in her appearance since the beginning. Still bound inside her coffin, her bondage prevented any movement from her body, and her eyes, still sealed behind her blindfolds, never once looked upon Subaru.

If those restraints were not for fashion, then what were they for—

Daphne: “From what I can smell, Subaruun’s meat is so muscled and sinewy, and the bones are thick too, must be reaally… just what Daphne likes. So, if you get too close, you’ll smell so nice that I’ll want to eat you.”

Subaru: “E-Eat me… in the sexy sense?”

Daphne: “In the eating-raw sense…”

Hearing the slightly different interpretation, Subaru gulped down a breath.

Then, quickly putting some distance between himself and the girl, Subaru grabbed a cookie from the plate once he made sure that he was at a safe enough distance.

Subaru: “I-I’ll try to throw it to you from here, but sorry if I miss your mouth, ok?”

Daphne: “That’s okay, Subaruun. Just try to toss it so it hits the coffin. Then I can pick it up myself.”

Subaru: “That sounds incredibly disconcerting, but uh… alright, here goes!”

With a small swing of his arm, Subaru lightly tossed the cookie toward Daphne’s mouth.

The cookie that was the size of a 500-Yen coin traced out a surprisingly perfect trajectory, and flew neatly into Daphne’s mouth. This unprecedented degree of control was just the result of Subaru’s extreme concentration.

With the precision of threading a needle, he had managed to shoot it right into Daphne’s mouth. Catching it on her tongue, Daphne ate it up in an instant, Daphne: “Omnyuomnyu… nnnn~, soooo tasty~. Dona-Dona’s flavor…”

Subaru: “I don’t know if that means she made it herself or if she used dark magic to infuse some of her own body parts into the cookies… I’m throwing the next one!”

Daphne: “Oooo, I can’t waait. Ooommn… hey, gimme more…”

Subaru: “That’s gonna throw off my aim can you please keep quiet?!”

Trying to shut down Daphne’s erotically provocative encouragements, Subaru continued throwing cookie after cookie. It was an almost infuriating scene of two people playing with food, but then, seeing the serious look on Subaru’s face, one might feel discouraged from reproaching him.

Although Daphne had to occasionally move her head, the cookies landed in her mouth in the end. And, just as Subaru was starting to feel relieved that they could clear all the cookies on the plate this way,

Subaru: “—ah.”

A strong wind swept across the small hill, blowing the nimbly tossed out cookie off-course. Flying far out of the way of its target, it headed over the table and for the side of the hill. Falling like this, it might as well be food for the ants—or so Subaru thought, when,

Daphne: “NoooOooo… such a waaaste.”

With her extraordinary sense of smell, Daphne realized that the cookie was flying away. She followed the cookie’s demise with her sightless vision, and, in the next moment, Subaru saw it.

Subaru: “—?!”

A violent sound rang out, as a sharp claw gouged destruction into the earth.

Rolling up a cloud of soil and dust, the assault of the unceasing sound expanded as it reached the falling cookie,

Daphne: “Aa, mwu.”

Daphne stuck out her neck, caught the cookie between her red lips and happily slipped it into her mouth. After chewing with an almost indiscernible noise, she licked her lips and let out a sensual “Hohh”,

Having witnessed the whole thing, Subaru fell speechless.

Noticing Subaru’s silence, Daphne gave a little sniff,

Daphne: “Subaruun… isn’t there, still two left? Don’t be mean…”

The girl with flushed cheeks and quivering lips, like a baby bird waiting to be fed, was definitely adorable.

If one could overlook the blindfolded eyes and the full body restraints binding her inside the black coffin—

Subaru: “…No, there’s definitely no way to be unfazed by this.”

And the crab-like legs that emerged from the sides of the coffin, carrying its host in this bizarrely unconventional sight.

Subaru: “So uh… mind if I ask what that is?”

Still not recovered from the initial shock, Subaru threw the two remaining cookies to Daphne as requested. Both of which also missed due to his trembling fingertips, but, with the deft footwork of her coffin, Daphne easily caught them in her mouth.

Looking like she was enjoying their sweetness to her heart’s content, Daphne let out a “Uuunn~” as Subaru somehow squeezed out his question.

Daphne: “What that is… even if you ask Daphne, Daphne couldn’t see so Daphne wouldn’t know…”

Subaru: “I mean the uh… super shiny awesome-looking mobile coffin you got there. In my narrow, shallow knowledge, coffins usually don’t come with legs and don’t make high-speed insect-like movements like that.”

Making GICHI-GICHI noises, the coffin slowly clambered back to its original position with Daphne in tow. The base of the coffin plunked onto the grass with a thud, and the crab-like legs withdrew into the sides once more. The movement was not unlike a turtle pulling its legs into its shell.

As if picking up Subaru’s sentiment, Daphne laughed “Aahaa”,

Daphne: “You mean Centipede Coffinn? It’s because Daphne can’t move freelyy, so I made this child to make up for it… He’s usually a good, quiet child you know?”

Subaru: “Made it… it’s a, living creature…?”

Even though it was making organic movements with organic-looking organs, Subaru wasn’t so sure if he could group that thing with living organisms. Though of course, it was definitely not mechanical.

Daphne: “It doesn’t need to eat… or drink… but Centipede Coffin stays alive by absorbing Mana, you know? So it won’t feel hungry… which makes me kinda jealous.”

Subaru: “It eats Mana… nevermind, we can leave that for another time. More importantly, you said you made it? You can, make living things?”

Daphne: “Instead of living things… it’s more like witchbeasts… Daphne takes some intentions and feelings and stuff and whooshwhoosh it around, and a creature comes out.”

Daphne squirmed around a bit inside the coffin. None of the words that came out of her mouth gave any concrete idea of what that actually entailed, but, even from that vague explanation, Subaru got the sense that she was capable of something outrageous.

—To create living things, is surely the work of Gods.

While, in his original world, there was genetic engineering and forbidden sciences like cloning, to create new life out of nothing was certainly something only Gods could accomplish.

But, whether that should be considered blasphemy against life or attainment of inconceivable powers would depend on who you ask.

Subaru: “Unless… “Daphne’s inauspicious legacy”… and creating the witchbeasts, meant exactly what it sounded like?”

Daphne: “Eun~ eun~?”

Subaru: “White Whale, Black Serpent, Great Rabbit… are all of them like that crab coffin of yours? Just things you created…?”

Daphne: “Mnn~mhuu~… Uuunn, such nostalgic names… Yeah. The Whaale, Snaake, Raabbit, they’re all children Daphne made.”

Subaru: “Why?!!”

Baring his teeth as he heard her words of affirmation, Subaru closed the distance between them, shouting, sending spit flying.

His face red with anger, he thrusted his finger towards Daphne,

Subaru: “Why the hell would you create monsters like that? Do you realize, for the 400 years after you died, what kind of havoc they’ve been wreaking in the world outside?! How many tens of hundreds of people at a time fell victim to their…!”

The fierce battle on Lifaus Highway resurfaced in his mind.

Wilhelm’s obsession and screams for the memories of his murdered wife, and the cries of rage from the lines of knights—were all for the tragedies brought about by the White Whale and by the Witch who birthed him.

As for the Great Rabbit that attacked the Sanctuary, if Subaru’s subsequent efforts fail to bear fruit, then Emilia, alongside everyone else in the Sanctuary, would be devoured.

If this cycle of natural disasters that is the Great Rabbit was also a consequence of the Witch before his eyes, then, Subaru: "Why did you do it?! Tell me! Why did you create monsters that are the cause of so many people's suffering?!!"

Daphne: "…? But, bigger animals means more food to eat, riight?"

Subaru: "—a, uh, huh?"

Daphne replied to Subaru's impassioned words, looking confused.

Thrown into an unexpected train of thought by her answer, Subaru groaned stupidly before his tongue could catch up.

Seeing him like this, a mystified expression came onto Daphne's face,

Daphne: "The White Whale, it's huuge, right? If we eat that child, don't you think lots and lots of people's stomachs would be filled?"

Subaru: "What…'re you…"

Daphne: "Great Rabbit too, it'll keep on multiplying all the time. Soo, as long as we have that child, we can just leave it to become more and more and no one will never have to worry about food, right?"

Subaru: "Multi…ply?"

Though he was hearing Daphne's words, his mind couldn't understand them at all.

If those shocking words really meant exactly what they sounded like, then Subaru would have absolutely no idea what this Witch in front of him was talking about.

Honestly, from the bottom of his heart, he had no idea what she meant—

Subaru: "Wh…a…what? You created the witchbeasts… to solve the food problems? The White Whale and the Great Rabbit were supposed to feed people stricken by hunger? Even though, thanks to your thoughtfulness, all those people were eaten instead?!"

Daphne: "…? But, if you want to eat the other without considering the possibility of being eaten yourself, don't you think that'd be super selfiish?"

Subaru: "…"

Daphne: "Besiides, don't you think there are already too many Humans and Demi-humans for this world? If those children can lower the number a bit and put things right again, Daphne thinks that'd be pretty good tooo."

Subaru: "Th-Then why does the White Whale spit fog that erases people's existences, and the Great Rabbit eat up whole villages to its heart's content…?"

Daphne: "I don't know much about how they hunt… how they grew up, how much they eat, where they eat… even if I knew, it still wouldn't fill Daphne's hungry belly…"

Seeing Daphne's smile as she said this, Subaru finally understood.

The meaning of Echidna's words, he finally understood it.

She had warned him that his affinity with Daphne was the worst it could get.

At first, Subaru thought it was referring to her off-beat tempo that clashed his impatience, and had so optimistically thought that it was merely a mismatch of personality.

—But the mismatch between Subaru and Daphne was in their very systems of values.

Rather, it was not only with Subaru. Her value system probably wouldn't align with any human being at all.

Her perspective was of a completely different dimension than that of Humans and Demi-humans. And it was not just because she was biased towards the witchbeasts she herself had created.

The strong makes food of the weak—this was the only principle within her considerations. To acknowledge the existence of food, to increase its volume, and to consume it. All else was trivial.

He had nothing to say to that. The very structure of their minds were fundamentally different.

Of all the Witches Subaru encountered up to now, in spite of their quirks and misunderstandings, he felt that he was nonetheless able to hold conversations with them.

But, in the end, all these girls were Witches. They were Witches. The only seven in this world, Witches in the truest sense of the word.

Daphne: “Subaruun too… everyone thinks way too little of Gluttony, don’t they?”

Subaru: “…”

Daphne: “In the first place, as long as you’re alive, isn’t the desire to eat the most important desire there is? After all, if you don’t satisfy it, you can’t go on living…”

Subaru: “…”

Daphne: “Even if you have no peace, no one to love you, no one you could tell your feelings to, no way to maintain your sense of self, or obtain the things you wanted, or even if you have nothing at all to aspire to… none of these would kill you, would they? But…”

Subaru: “…”

Daphne: “If you don’t eat, you’ll die, you know?”

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, only Gluttony is directly related to life and death.

In the proper sense, Gluttony should be the desire to eat beyond what is necessary. But what Daphne was referring to was desiring to eat in order to survive.

In that regard, Subaru couldn’t deny it. What she said was true, one of the truths of life itself. But it would be a mistake to disregard all else in favor of that alone.

Subaru: “Part of what you said is right… but that kind of thinking…”

Daphne: “Then why don’t Subaruun try it… what it feels like to be starved to your limits? Once you do… I’m sure you’ll understand what Daphne’s saying.”

That was just something a Witch would suggest.

Slowly, Daphne raised her body inside the coffin. With the sound of ripping paper, Daphne easily released the intersecting chains. Pushing aside the loose white bondage with her arm, Daphne hopped out of the coffin and landed barefoot onto the grass.

The tiny figure gave her arms and legs a shake, checking over her stiffened body,

Daphne: “I hate being on my own feet… belly feels so empty when I do…really does…you know…”

Doing this little warm up, Daphne was already out of breath.

But, facing her, Subaru couldn’t move an inch. Even his breathing was sealed.

The immense pressure emanating from this little Witch’s body held Subaru firmly within its grasp. It was as if his whole body was being gripped by a gigantic palm.

Daphne: “It would be nice if I could just eat Subaruun like this, but Dona-Dona and Met-Met would get angry… Uuuunn~, just the left eye should be alright.”

Saying this, Daphne placed a hand on the blindfolds over her eyes.

“Don’t release her bondage, don’t touch her body, and don’t make eye contact”—all of these, Echidna had warned him of before she summoned Daphne.

But Daphne herself had unfastened her restraints, and though he hadn't touched her, his body was immobilized by her pressure. And, as for the last warning,

Subaru: "…"

Her left eye was golden.

Nothing out of the ordinary, only the round pupil of a little girl.

Lifting the blindfold over her left eye, Daphne stared at Subaru.

As if being penetrated by her golden pupil, Subaru remained frozen still. And then, she blinked a few times,

Daphne: "That… should be enough…"

Saying this, with the same beleaguered movements, she made her way back to her coffin. And, just as she looked like she was about to collapse, the mobile coffin gently caught her inside.

Stirring her body around, Daphne found the most comfortable position. All the while, immobilized on the spot, Subaru quietly chewed something in his mouth as he watched her,

Daphne yawned and placed the blindfold back over her eyes. The fabric in the interior of the coffin slowly peeled open and wrapped her tiny body snugly inside, binding her in its grasp.

Like it wasn't even there, her bondage operated entirely on her will.

Subaru: "What just happened… also, why… do you…"

Daphne: "You still haven't noticed it yet…?"

Just as Subaru was about to ask her why she would restrain herself, Daphne interrupted his question, while giving her body a wriggle inside the coffin as if to make sure the restraints were properly fastened.

The moment her words entered his ears, Subaru furrowed his brows as though he noticed something.

Subaru: “Ah, ugh…?”

Pain. It was Pain.

Rising in Subaru’s waist was a pain that gave the illusion that a hole had been opened there, forcing his body to bend.

His guts wrenched as sensations of thirst and hunger protested with overwhelming starvation. Groaning, writhing in the unbearable pain, Subaru’s knees collapsed onto the grass.

Saliva drooled from the edge of his lips as he desperately tried to endure the pain. Hunger, hunger, hunger.

Subaru: “Aa, aaa, AAAaaahh… hur…ts…”

The intense hunger sent his consciousness scattering and his thoughts into disarray as he lost all sense of reality.

Panting, writhing, he rolled back and forth on the ground. His movements only exacerbating the hunger, Subaru wriggled, convulsing like a caterpillar on the bed of grass.

Starvation, maddening starvation. Famishing. Life-threatening. A gaping hole, there’s a gaping hole in his stomach. Dying, he’s going to die, he’s going to die if he doesn’t eat. He’s going to die. He’s going to die.

Daphne: “You still haven’t noticed it yet…?”

Looking down on the writhing, suffocating Subaru—although her eyes did not actually see him, Daphne kept a grasp of Subaru’s condition through sound and smell.

He couldn't understand the meaning of her words. Notice what, notice what when the hunger was driving him insane? Although he understood that she was behind this, there was no room for resentment in the face of this hunger. He wouldn't be able to bear it if he didn't fill this hunger. Right now, the only cog holding together his sanity was the thing he had been chewing on since—

Subaru: "…"

What, was Subaru, eating, right now?

Daphne: "You noticed iit? That's Gluttony, you know."

Hearing Daphne's words, Subaru noticed it—the pinky and ring fingers on his right hand were missing.

Where did the missing fingers go? There was no need to look. He was chewing on the fragments of his pinky finger right this moment.

Profuse blood seeped from the torn-off stumps, dyeing the green grassfields red.

Watching the droplets fall, Subaru's mind went blank.

With the passing of the seconds, something slowly came to fill that blankness. An emotion, of,

—Ahh, spilling blood is such a waste.

Simply a desire to quench his thirsting throat, and the disappointment of his unsated hunger.

Chapter 48:
Compensation for the Tea Party

1

He heard a roar.

Compelled by hunger to extend his tongue to catch the blood dripping from his right hand, Subaru heard the roar in the distance. Rage, it was full of rage. Furious. Someone was enraged. Someone was furious. A voice of someone enraged to the point of madness.

—It didn't matter. For now, he just wanted to satiate his hunger.

Chew, chew, chew, but it wasn't enough.

What was two fingers supposed to sate? And how much of this thirst could some dripping blood quench?

Not enough. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

Even if he devoured his entire right hand, then devoured his left hand as well, even if he devoured his whole body, it still wouldn't be enough. There was no limit to this hunger. He simply craved what he craved. And so—

???: "—HNNGYAAAaa!!"

Subaru: "—WHAT THE F?!"

Laying sideways on the grass, the devastating strike came from directly above his head, sending his body bouncing up from the shockwave before slamming back into the ground. The sheer force warped the earth, leaving a crater in the small hill with Subaru in the center.

Then, the assailant, whose fist was still stuck to the back of Subaru's head, took a ragged breath, and,

???: "That's enough! Why does everyone always have to fight…?

Resorting to violence is the worst…the worst…hg.”

The voice, half in tears, descended from above, while, savoring the taste of mud, consciousness limped back into Subaru. At the same time, he felt a drop of water landing on the back of his head, guiding him to look up.

There was the vague outline of a young, blonde girl, slowly disappearing, and in tears.

—What just happened to him? Pushing himself off the ground, Subaru understood when he noticed that his right hand had been restored.

Quickly, he turned to the disappearing girl,

Subaru: “Th-Thank you for healing me…!”

Minerva: “…Hmpf.”

The Witch turned her face away, sulking as she faded.

But, just before she vanished completely, Subaru caught a glimpse of a blush on her cheeks, and a smile which she didn’t manage to hide.

Once the blonde girl—the Witch of Wrath vanished from the scene, she was replaced by the graceless coffin once again,

Daphne: “Neru-Neru’s such a meddler, gees… Say, did you learn anything at least? Diid you? Subaruu~un?”

Hearing these nonchalant words coming from inside the coffin, Subaru jumped to his feet and instantly scuttled away from the crater while shooting Daphne a look of caution.

Seeing this, Daphne gave her nose a snort,

Daphne: “Right~right, you should be careful… After all, eat or be eaten is the only relationship in this world…”

Subaru: “I don’t wanna think of it as that kind of bloodthirsty place…! Anyway what just happened?! It was only for a short while, but… I actually went insane.”

Daphne: “That was the maddening hunger… Extreme hunger can turn people into something worse than beasts. If you looked into my right eye too, it would’ve been even more interesting, you know?”

Subaru: “…you’re kidding.”

A magical eye, or something of the sort.

Although Ram’s clairvoyance would also count as an eye-power, her ability didn’t really have much offensive potential, so Daphne’s was definitely way scarier.

Perhaps it could be called the “Eye of Hunger” or the “Eye of Starvation”. The moment Subaru looked into her left eye, he ate his own fingers for a hunger he wasn’t even aware of.

He was so famished that he forgot the existence of pain, and everything in sight was food to sate his insatiable hunger. In other words—

Subaru: “Is that… how the Great Rabbit sees the world…?”

Daphne: “Those children were born when Daphne was reeaaaaally starving, so they took after me… they really understand what it feels like to want to eat each other, you know?”

Subaru: “How can you say that so lightly… don’t you feel sad to have given birth to creatures like that? Since you’re lecturing me all high and mighty, then you probably know what that hunger feels like. Having your own children… children… go through that…”

Daphne: “—? But, even if Great Rabbit’s belly goes hungry, it doesn’t mean Daphne’s belly has to go hungry too?”

Subaru: “…I was an idiot for asking.”

Like parallel lines. No matter how far they stretch, there was no way he could ever understand this Witch.

The witchbeasts she claimed to be her children, were really just emergency foods she could pick up and eat when she felt hungry.

Birthed from her own body and eaten by herself, it was the ultimate form of self-sufficiency.

Subaru: “If you don’t bother anyone and go hole up in some other dimension to be self-sufficient there, I guess no one would be too hung up about that, huh.”

Daphne: “Say, Subaruun, what is it that you actually want to ask Daphne? If all you want to do is take hits at Daphne, then I’m already getting hungry from staying awake so long… and would rather take a nap now…”

Turning her face away inside the coffin, all the strength drained from Daphne’s body, as if ready to fall asleep.

He finally understood why she kept herself in her mobile coffin, all bound in restraints. Keeping her threat contained for the sake of the outside world—was not the reason.

Instead, it was only to reduce the calories burned from the movements of her limbs so she wouldn’t feel as hungry.

This may not be the case for her blindfolds, but that was probably to prevent her magic eyes from draining her stamina.

This girl’s existence was complete entirely in herself.

A pure mass of “The Desire to Eat”—all quite fitting for the name, “Witch of Gluttony”.

Subaru: “Honestly, I’m pretty sure it’s pointless to ask this, but… how do I destroy the Great Rabbit?”

Daphne: “Eeeehhh~? You want to destroy Great Rabbit? But that child’s so weak and easy to eat, and keeps on multiplying too. He’s one of Daphne’s greatest masterpieces, you know?”

Subaru: “Eat or be eaten… if you go by that kind of philosophy, then what about killing your enemies to stay alive? I was hoping you'd approve of a survival instinct besides appetite."

Subaru decided to strike from the same baseline as Daphne's own warped morality.

Honestly, he had already half given up on getting any information out of Daphne. After all, he couldn't seem to get her to say anything useful, and couldn't even see himself establishing a proper conversation with her.

At first glance, their game of conversational catch-ball may seem to be going smoothly, but the reality was that she was chewing up every ball Subaru was throwing, begging him to throw more, without ever tossing back anything of her own.

However,

Daphne: "Since I eat in order to live, I also have to permit killing in order to live… Uuu~unn, that's, nnn, that's also right, isn't it."

Subaru: "—Eh? That worked?"

Daphne: "If Daphne thinks something is right, then Daphne will accept it. Subaruun too, what did you take Daphne for?"

"This is the Witchiest Witch I've ever seen," Subaru sincerely thought. But if he used that as his answer, there'd be no end to it, so he decided to keep it to himself.

Oblivious to that silence, Daphne pouted her lips with "Huu~uuuu",

Daphne: "If you want to destroy Great Rab-Rab, Met-Met, Dona-Dona, and Milla-Milla can all do it easily."

Subaru: "Wait, whose nickname was that you just called? Dona-Dona… is Echidna, right? Met-Met… must be Sekhmet. But who's Milla-Milla?"

Daphne: "Carmilla… she's Lust. But she doesn't seem to want to meet you, Subaruun."

Subaru: “Even though it’s somewhat depressing to hear that the one in charge of sexy things hates me… your suggestion is not gonna work. The Witches can’t leave this place, so you guys can’t help me.”

Daphne: “…Huuuuu, can’t do it huh…?”

For Subaru, who’s used to relying on others, such an offer would have been more than he could have hoped for. If they could go out and help him, they would be more than enough to deal with the Great Rabbit and Elsa, but,

Subaru: “Even if you could go outside…would you be satisfied with just destroying and eating the Great Rabbit and coming back here?”

Daphne: “Daphne’s stomach has never been satisfied in my entire life, you know…”

Subaru: “So, even if there’s a way to get you guys outside, I can’t let you guys go.”

Sticking out his tongue at Daphne’s unsurprising reply, Subaru ruled out her proposal. Inside the coffin, Daphne made an “Uunnn~”, and,

Daphne: “If that won’t work, then you’ll just have to do your best to eat all of them to the last one, I think. Those kids won’t be able to multiply from zero…haa~ha…”

Subaru: “Nevermind eating… so we have to kill all of them, huh… and if we leave just one alive, the whole thing will revive… They move in a group, right? But are they always all together?”

Daphne: “Yeah… Even though there are many of them, their consciousness is singular. Like, one consciousness, shared by the whole group. They don’t really have the intelligence to split up.”

Subaru: “Is that…so. In that case, we shouldn’t run into a problem where we leave some stragglers alive to multiply… and then find out “THERE WILL BE MORE PANIC AND HORROR” or whatever, right?”

It happens quite alot in horror movies where after exterminating the bloody monsters, you find out that some of them survived underground to reproduce and you wind up with a “THE PREDICAMENT IS NOT OVER!” ending.

But, at least, it seems the Rabbits aren’t smart enough to pull a stunt like that.

Subaru: “Oh by the way… about how many rabbits are there on average? If they eat each other, then I’m thinking they must have some system for keeping their numbers in range, or…”

Daphne: “…who knows? Would you be able to count the numbers of droplets in a fog, Subaruun…?”

Subaru: “It’s that level…? No no, I already know I can’t take your word for it. So I’ll just go see for myself.”

Just counting the number of rabbits that swarmed him, there must have been more than a hundred. But, considering how they devoured everyone in the Sanctuary, their number must be closer to the tens of thousands.

In order to kill them all, he’d have to think of a better way.

While Subaru sank into thought, Daphne gave a big yawn to indicate her boredom. And then, making quiet chewing motions in front of the silent Subaru,

Daphne: “Subaruun… if you’re busy pondering, could Daphne disappear now? After all, I get hungrier when I exist…”

Subaru: “Preferring not to exist just so you could be less hungry is seriously a mind-blowing statement… But yeah, regardless of how we got here, that was a lot of help. Thanks. —Also.”

Throwing out those half-assed words of thanks, Subaru appended an “Also” at the end.

Seeing Daphne cast him a puzzled expression, he went on with the most scornful voice he could muster, Subaru: “I’ll annihilate that asshole Rabbit. And I’ve already killed your White Whale. I hope you don’t mind, Honored Mommy.”

Daphne: “…”

Subaru: “Four hundred years, that’s how long those bastards born from your good intentions preyed on the world outside. That’s long enough. —It’s time I erase them without leaving a trace.”

Daphne: “You are merely Human.”

In front of Subaru’s declaration of war, Daphne made a reaction which he had never seen before.

Stretching her lips wide, for the first time, her expression revealed something other than “Hunger”.

Daphne: “Try it if you can.”

With her red tongue extended from a mouth lined with razor-sharp fangs, the Witch of Gluttony smiled.

2

A great gust of wind swept up, forcing Subaru to lift his arm to cover his eyes.

The abrupt wind made waves in the grassfields at his feet, sending green blades swirling and scattering into the air. Inadvertently following it with his gaze and letting his eyes be drawn up into the sky, when he looked back again,

Subaru: “Sorry for putting you through the trouble, Echidna.”

Echidna: “I just knew it would turn out like that… that’s why I tried to stop you.”

Subaru: “It’s not like it can be helped… She kinda released her bondage and flipped up her blindfold herself. You should actually praise me a bit for not touching her, you know.”

Echidna: “Right. If you did touch Daphne, it wouldn’t have ended so easily. Her left eye alone is not as much of a threat. But the horror of Daphne lies in her right eye, and it only truly begins once you've been 'Eaten.'"

Subaru couldn't help but recoil a bit at that terrifying statement.

Frankly, the part about "Not as much of a threat" was already enough to set off some alarms.

Subaru: "What's the point of showing me my opponent's STATS after the battle's already over? Gees. Although, I might want to hear it out in case I run into another monster with a similar setup…"

Echidna: "Monster, you say?"

Still not quite able to shake off his negative impression of Daphne, Subaru realized he might have misspoken when he heard Echidna's disappointed mutter.

To her, Daphne was someone she could call her friend. Although one must admit that only a Witch could be friends with someone like that, this was this and that was that. No matter how you look at it, to call a Witch a monster in front of another Witch was,

Subaru: "Ahh, I wasn't thinking just now. Sorry. Got carried away. I have absolutely no comment about that friend of yours. That's all I have to say."

Echidna: "Huhuhu, there's no need to be so considerate for a Witch's feelings. We are quite used to those words of ostracism."

Subaru: "…I can't be so sure about what words to use for Daphne, but I don't think you're a monster. That much I should clarify, you know."

Hearing this, Echidna's eyes widened in surprise.

And, seeing her reaction, Subaru quickly looked away, chiding himself for his self-serving thoughts.

What he said just now was clearly to get on her good side. Of course, half of it was sincere, but that didn't change the fact that he was trying to avoid making a bad impression on the helpful Witch.

Then again, considerations of this caliber must surely have been seen through by this seasoned Witch.

Echidna: “No, it won’t work! Even if you try to dupe me with those pleasing words, I won’t let myself be duped! Want some more tea or cookies?”

Subaru: “Saying that while looking so cheerful isn’t convincing at all! What’s with your route being so easy? This is like desperate-lonely-girl-level!”

If she fell for such obvious flattery, then he’d have some serious worries about her future.

But, as much as he knew she didn’t—it still left an ache inside his chest.

Subaru: “I think I’ll pass on the body fluids and the who-knows-what’s-in-there cookies.”

Echidna: “I didn’t put my hair or anything in them?”

Subaru: “How can I not doubt every statement you make at this point!”

Subaru had already decided that he would never eat anything from here again.

Seeing Subaru shoot her a suspicious look, Echidna gave a wry smile. Then, she returned his gaze with her all-seeing eyes. Sometimes, for some reason, he just found those eyes really disconcerting.

Subaru: “I don’t like that look that feels like it can see right through me.”

Echidna: “If I could see through all of you just by looking, then I wouldn’t mind staring at you until you are burned to a char… But anyway, are you aware of it, or not, I wonder?”

Subaru: “Aware or not of what?”

Echidna: “Well, in my narrow, clumsy imagination, what you went through just now should be considered a rather shocking experience to most humans. Surely, being compelled by hunger into eating your own body isn’t a common occurrence?”

Listening to Echidna’s understated delivery, Subaru was reminded of just how hideous his situation had been. Holding up his right hand, he confirmed that all five fingers were still there, all thanks to a certain Witch’s hit-and-run healing.

While Subaru quietly thanked her in his mind, Echidna closed one of her eyes,

Echidna: “Minerva just ignored my calls and jumped out. When she catches sight of a wound, she’ll charge out regardless of appearances… it’s hard to live a long life with a personality like that. In fact, she was the first of us to be killed.”

Subaru: “The end of the Witches… huh. I heard you were all eaten by the Witch of Envy, but is it alright for me to ask about that?”

Echidna: “To ask the dead about how they died, is that too crude a thing to do, I wonder? It is certainly unprecedented. And as for how I feel about it… hmm, let me see. I don’t think I should relay that story. It involves the other five’s reputations, after all.”

Seeing Echidna unwilling to discuss the details of their deaths, Subaru could only accept that it can’t be helped.

Subaru himself had died many times before, and knew full well that it was not a topic for lighthearted conversation. After all, “Death” is an awfully heavy thing.

Subaru: “In that sense, I guess you guys are some of the few people who could share that feeling with me.”

Echidna: “…no, I wouldn’t be so sure. Indeed, we have died once, but I don’t know if we could think of it the same way you do.”

Just when he thought he had found some common ground, Subaru’s words were rejected.

But, just as he was about to object to Echidna's curtness, all of that emotion evaporated when he noticed the grave expression on her face. She was looking directly at him, her brows furrowed with a tinge of sadness,

Echidna: "This is also related to the matter of awareness… have you noticed that your current state is crooked?"

Subaru: "Crooked…?"

Echidna: "It is no doubt a consequence of the special circumstances of "Return by Death". And so, while it pains me to recognize that as the reason, it pains me even more to see that you yourself are not aware of it."

Subaru: "I'm not sure I understand… So, what're you trying to tell…"

Echidna: "Do you think it's normal for someone who just ate their own fingers, even if they are healed, to carry on a casual conversation as though nothing had happened?"

Subaru: "…"

For a moment, Subaru stopped breathing.

With steady eyes, Echidna watched the frozen Subaru. And then, to that Subaru who had forgotten how to breathe,

Echidna: "You weren't entirely unaware, it seems."

Subaru: "…It's a matter of how I look at it, I guess. Honestly, I'm aware that the way I'm thinking right now isn't normal. But for the sake of what's most important to me… I feel it's alright to cut off the rest of it."

Echidna: "The rest of it, such as?"

Subaru: "Well, my primary goal right now is to break through this deadlock. The problems at the Mansion, the problems at the

Sanctuary, and most of all, the problems facing Emilia. I'm still as stuck as ever, and still have no idea where to begin, but…"

Breathing in through his nose, Subaru looked up to the sky.

Blue and vast, with white, drifting clouds, and a somehow soothing breeze. Letting it all soak into his sight, immersed in this scenery detached from the tedium of reality,

Subaru: "I've already decided that I'll use the hell out of everything I can get my hands on."

Echidna: "…So you've accepted "Return by Death", then?"

Subaru: "It's not that I've accepted it… Only, I'm a bit short on tools to begin with, so it's just about all I have. …Don't misunderstand though, I really don't like using it at all."

In front of Echidna, who must have already picked up on his thoughts, Subaru nonetheless tacked on this unnecessary clarification.

Subaru: "In order to reach that desired future, even if I have to pay with my life, I will do it. For now, I've at least been assured that I can keep Returning by Death for as long as I can keep my sanity. In that case, I'll just have to muster as much backbone as this boneless self can muster."

Echidna: "To pile on the "Deaths", in order to bring it within your reach. —That is not a resolve any ordinary person would be capable of."

Subaru: "I've died too many times, I guess. …Before I knew it, my head must've gotten messed up."

He wasn't making light of "Death". It was just that the accumulation of the experiences of "Death" in Subaru had strengthened his conviction into something irreversible, and terrifying. Without a doubt, Subaru now feared "Death" more than ever before.

But, in spite of this, Subaru nonetheless intended to make full use of

“Death”. It was as simple as that.

After piling on his deaths, and having witnessed the ends of worlds, what he found far more unbearable than his own death, were the deaths of the people close to him.

If it meant saving them from the inescapable fate of “Death”, then he would expend as many of his replaceable “Lives” as necessary.

Swallow down all the pain, agony, and horror, and die in order to survive.

—That, was the basis of Natsuki Subaru’s so-called crooked resolve.

Subaru: “If the only thing I have to sacrifice is my own heartbreaks, then I will gladly do it. “Return by Death” is just the perfect ability for this powerless brainless always-relying-on-others self, isn’t it?”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “I was hoping you’d console me with “Don’t think so little of yourself!” or something?!”

Echidna: “Considering the obstacles that await you in every direction, I can’t say it so lightly. In fact, if you wish to take control of this current situation, there is no way not to use it. Although personally, I would be quite displeased to have no choice but to rely on Envy.”

The fact that Echidna refrained from offering easy consolations just meant that she was the type to be mindful of the circumstances.

Although it wasn’t much for encouragement, he was still grateful for having someone to kick him awake like this.

After all, knowing that the road ahead will leave him full of wounds and scratches only made it all the more worth taking.

Subaru: “In the end, all I can do is spam Return by Death and keep going over my options, huh. I’d hate to imagine how many painful experiences I’m gonna be facing up ahead.”

Echidna: "…"

Subaru: "One of the mysteries I gotta solve though, is what kind of experiments were you running in this Experimental Grounds of the Sanctuary… you probably don't feel like telling me, do you?"

Echidna: "…No, I don't. I already told you before. I wouldn't want you to despise me."

Echidna shook her head at Subaru's question, and denied his request.

Receiving this reply, "I have no choice, then", Subaru went on with a click of his neck,

Subaru: "If you won't tell me, then there's no other choice. I'll just have to go ahead and rip open all the secrets you wanted to hide. You won't try to stop me, will you?"

Echidna: "…If you want to rip it open, there's nothing I can do. If you want to overpower my secrets you despise so much and forcibly expose them under the sun, then my only choice is to silently endure it."

Subaru: "You're making it sound like I'm planning to do something awful can you not please say it like that?!"

Echidna's cheeks blushed and quickly looked away from Subaru.

He seriously wasn't sure if she was doing that on purpose or if that just happened to be her personality. Just from what he had seen over the course of the tea party, she really might actually be that airheaded… Witches are scary.

Then, just when he was about to resume the conversation,

Subaru: "Nnh—"

Suddenly, still seated in his chair, a dizziness struck him. Something almost like the dazzled feeling from standing up too fast continued to sway Subaru's consciousness. That is, Echidna: “It seems your body is close to waking up.”

Subaru: “The tea party is coming to an end, huh… it’s been pretty meaningful, I guess.”

Echidna: “Well, that’s because you surprised me last time, telling me there was nothing you wanted to ask. This time, I wonder if I’ve lived up to my reputation as the Witch of Greed?”

With all the discussing, teaching and chatting, this tea party must have been a great satisfaction for this Witch. Subaru was somewhat reluctant to leave, seeing her unbridled joy and her visible regret to see him go, but he quickly shook his head and severed that sentiment.

It was strange how this Witch managed to pull on his heartstrings, but it wouldn’t be good to become too attached to her. She was a Witch, and more than that, she was dead. Though it’s unclear which part was actually worse here.

Subaru: “What should I do when I want to come back here?”

Echidna: “You mean how to be invited to the tea party? Oh no no no, we mustn’t, you mustn’t become too dependent on me. It’s true that you have no one you could confess your Return by Death to in the outside world, and I know how much you long for me as the only person you could open your heart to, but I am dead and you are living… no, it can never be, between us.”

Subaru: “When you wriggle around looking strangely happy while saying that it’s not convincing at all!”

What was he supposed to do when Echidna suddenly behaves like an overenthusiastic eel-restaurant owner who saw his first customer in years?

Seeing the way Echidna was looking at him with her hand on her cheek, Subaru wasn’t sure just how to react. Then, with “Huhuhhu”, she placed her hand over her lips, smiling,

Echidna: “Don’t look so troubled. I am a girl, after all, and sometimes I want to have lighthearted conversations like this too.

That is all. I am still well aware of the gap between Witch and Human.”

Subaru: “…Echidna.”

Echidna: “The condition to being invited to the tea party is to scream from the depths of your heart, “I want to know”, inside my Tomb. The first time, you are invited no questions asked, but the second time onwards will not be so simple. The third time… might be quite difficult, I think. Merely superficial screams won’t be able to reach me.”

Hearing her quickly explain this, Subaru recalled what had happened immediately before being invited.

He had just Returned by Death after being eaten alive by the rabbits. His body was drowning in the lingering agony of death, and his consciousness was endlessly screaming “What had happened?”

That was when he heard Echidna’s invitation. But next time, things would have to be even more desperate than that.

Subaru: “I really… would rather not…”

Echidna: “Precisely. So… this may very well be the last time we meet. Though of course, this would not be the last if you challenge the Trials again.”

Same as in the first Trial, it seems she would be waiting for him in the second and the third Trials as well. As long as Subaru challenges the Trials in Emilia’s place, their reunion will be assured.

In other words,

Subaru: “I’ll see you at the next Trial, then? Guess there won’t be any tea there.”

Echidna: “If you really want a drink, I wouldn’t mind brewing you some on the scene…”

Subaru: “No no, I get the feeling that if I see the manufacturing process I’ll want to drink it even less.”

Seeing him holding up his palms to say no, Echidna made her most dejected expression yet.

He didn't know why she wanted to push her body fluids on other people so much. Maybe she gets off on having a part of herself become a part of someone else, or some kind of fetish like that… The sin is deep.

Subaru: "Well, I guess I'll be disappearing soon… thanks for your hospitality, Echidna. Till we meet again…"

Echidna: "Before that, would you mind?"

Sensing that his body was fading, Subaru tried to say farewell to Echidna. But it was Echidna herself who stopped him.

She stood up from her seat, and, with her funerary dress swaying, she walked to Subaru's side,

Echidna: "You have joined me in my tea party, and acquired some portion of my knowledge… but, aren't you forgetting something?"

Subaru: "Forgetting something?"

Echidna: "My compensation, that is."

Echidna narrowed her eyes, and poked out her tongue at Subaru's tilted head.

Subaru's eyes widened at her words, repeating "compensation…" under his breath. And with, "Yes, compensation", Echidna nodded,

Echidna: "I charged a toll for our last meeting as well? Dealing with a Witch always comes with a price. The last payment was for last time, so what should I take this time, I wonder?"

Subaru: "C-Can't you wait till I'm better off in life? I don't really have much cash on me, and the stuff you charge can be a little too rough on me you know."

Echidna: "Your skills for negotiating with Witches might be a little lacking."

Seeing Subaru pressed into the back of his chair, a sadistic smile emerged on Echidna's lovely face. She looked him up and down, wondering just what to take.

A Witch's compensation—last time, it was forgetting Echidna's existence after returning to reality. If the same happened this time, then all the information he gained from the tea party, along with any hope of breakthrough, would be lost. Only, he wasn't sure what other price he would be able to afford,

Echidna: "Alright, I've decided."

What's going to happen? Subaru shriveled back, as Echidna leaned her body forward and placed her face up against his. While Subaru was busy being shaken by the closeness of her lips to his, she leaned down even further—and reached into the inside of his jacket.

Her soft, white hair brushing against his skin smelled of the faint scent of flowers. Having no immunity to pretty girls, Subaru's brain froze like a brick.

But, not minding Subaru's mental issues, she touched him on his chest,

Echidna: "Then, I'll take this."

Subaru: "…Oo, eh?"

Pulling her hand out of the confounded Subaru's chest—Echidna's white fingers drew out a small handkerchief, fluttering in the wind.

White, with gold linings, on its back was an embroidery of the gray Great Spirit,

Subaru: "The handkerchief Petra gave me when I left for the Sanctuary…?"

Echidna: "You should thank the person who gave you this gift. It is imbued with only the pure and powerful emotion of concern for your safety. Every passing of the needle and thread instilled this magic into this object. I am quite fascinated indeed by the power residing here."

Subaru: “…Petra…did that?”

Echidna: “Someone is very fond of you, it seems. While I must apologize to the child who offered you these thoughts, I will be taking this.”

Echidna’s cheeks softened at the embroidered Puck on the back, before stowing the handkerchief away into her chest. Then, leaving Subaru’s side,

Echidna: “The price for the tea party has been paid. From the bottom of my heart, I look forward to your next visit.”

In an almost joking gesture, Echidna picked up the edges of her dress and performed an impeccable curtsy.

Perhaps, she wanted to give him a lighthearted send-off—noting that it wasn’t like her at all, Subaru stood up from his chair,

Subaru: “Thank you for the treat… and for everything. —Until we meet again.”

In the same way, Subaru picked up the hems of his jersey and did a curtsy of his own, prompting a wry smile onto Echidna’s face.

Then, as a white light enveloped the scene—Subaru left the tea party.

3

—The first thing Subaru felt as his consciousness returned from the tea party was the cold, hard floor, and the unpleasant taste of dirt in his mouth.

Subaru: “Uegh! Ghpphph! Does that have to happen every time now…?!”

Spitting out the foreign objects in his mouth, Subaru sat up and shook his head, pushing his mind to wake up.

First thing, was to confirm his body’s condition, and recall what had happened before he woke. When he Returned by Death after being devoured by the Great Rabbit, he was immediately summoned to Echidna's tea party. There, he got mangled by Daphne's eye, proceeded to strengthen his resolve, and was at last saved by Petra's thoughts.

None of it was missing from his memories. And, relieved by this fact,

Subaru: "Looks like Echidna kept her word. The tea party didn't get erased from my memories this time."

This time, the white-haired Witch still remained vivid in his memories.

Even though she had no lack of Witch-iness, she did at least keep her promises. In fact, judging from their interactions so far, she might even be among one of the few people he could call an ally.

Though it was too bad there wouldn't be many opportunities he could rely on her help,

Subaru: "Can't say I got everything I needed this time… but at least it's something."

Placing his hand over his chest, Subaru thought back to the events of the tea party—to his confession of his "Return by Death", and clenched down onto that feeling of salvation.

There, even though it was limited to Echidna and the other Witches, being able to say it out loud and share that burden was already more than he could have hoped for.

And having the chance to hear someone more knowledgeable about this Parallel World give her thoughts on "Return by Death" was just another one of the things he gained.

The Witch of Envy was the one who put everything into motion, and when the day comes when he will have to face her, he will be ready.

Subaru: "With that renewed feeling, Natsuki Subaru is reborn! So let me make good use of that Witch's power for now. No matter how many times it takes, I'll spend my life to do it."

If it could get him closer to the answer, he would ask for nothing more.

Subaru: "My sense of time must be off thanks to the tea party, but this is right after the first Trial, isn't it?"

The location of his Return by Death hadn't changed, that was what Echidna told him. Turning his head about to look over his surroundings, he was definitely inside the Tomb.

Having verified this, and deciding that he should start carrying Emilia out of this place, Subaru proceeded to search for her.

Subaru: "Considering this is immediately after Return by Death, and the third time at that, I better think about how to deal with Garfiel. …Though I'm pretty sure he won't just try to kill me all of a sudden."

But still, Garfiel was prone to impulsive actions. And it'd be impossible to predict what he will do.

Thinking back to their last encounter and his subsequent death, even though the Great Rabbit was his immediate cause of death, recalling the scene of the slaughter of the villagers made a dark emotion boil within Subaru, beyond his control.

Repel the Great Rabbit, repel Elsa's attack, solve the Sanctuary's mysteries, and settle his debt with Garfiel.

Even if none of it had happened in this world, Subaru was not going to forgive him. One way or another, he will exact his revenge on Garfiel.

Brooding over these thoughts, Subaru's negative feelings towards Garfiel surged ever higher, seeping to the surface. But all these thoughts came to an abrupt end, when,

Subaru: "…Where's Emilia?"

—She was nowhere to be found.

The sense of incongruity made Subaru furrow his brows, desperately trying to peer through the darkness of the Tomb. But he couldn't find Emilia's body anywhere in the narrow room where their Trials took place.

This had never happened before.

Subaru: "Immediately after my Trial, Emilia should still be in the middle of her's…"

Emilia, unable to pass her first Trial, should still be tangled by her past, suffering at Subaru's side.

And yet, she was not in the Tomb. The place and time he returned to was no doubt inside the Tomb immediately after his first Trial, but,

Subaru: "…"

He had a bad feeling about this.

Emilia's absence meant deviating from all the conditions so far.

It shouldn't be possible, not unless Subaru had changed the future. But what could an unconscious Subaru have done to have this kind of influence?

Stirred by unease, Subaru ran out of the Trial room and into the corridor. Then, carrying his reverberating footsteps through the corridor, he came out of the Tomb.

Underneath the moonlight, stepping out of the Tomb, what Subaru saw was—

Chapter 49: loveloveloveloveloveyouuuuuu

1

With the dry clasps of footsteps striking upon his eardrums, Subaru felt a sense of unease inside his very skin.

The cold wind flowing into the Tomb was accompanied by an unpleasant stickiness. As if the ground was clinging to his feet as he ran, every step drained him of strength.

Feeling sharp, electrifying sensations all over his exposed skin, it was like his body was being pummeled by objects protruding from the air. Essentially, it was a feeling that made him hesitate to go forward.

—Subaru already knew a feeling very similar to this.

But, urged on by his sense of foreboding, Subaru swept aside the tangling discomfort as he sprinted towards the entrance of the Tomb.

Passing through the moon-lit corridor and the ivy-ridden entrance, with a sensation of breaking through a membrane of air, Subaru came out of the Tomb.

And there, he saw it.

Subaru: "…You gotta be kidding me, oy."

Subaru's feet gouged into the earth as he skidded to a stop.

Almost toppling over from the momentum, flooding into Subaru's sight was something in the realm of inconceivable.

So detached from common sense was the scene before his eyes.

Subaru: "A shadow…?"

The mutter that spilled from his lips—summed up just about all of it.

Shadow—was the only way to describe what he was seeing.

The Sanctuary, which was supposed to be visible from the entrance of the Tomb, was nowhere within sight. While it was true that the inhabited area was located quite far away from the Tomb, as far as Subaru was concerned, there was no way he couldn't see a single building from here.

Above all, the full moon was still clear in the sky, pouring its silver glow over all the earth. Yet the world he was seeing was far too dark, as if it was submerged under a shadow.

Subaru: "…"

Gulping down his breath, Subaru made up his mind to set out towards the darkness-befallen Sanctuary. Lifting his soles off the stone slabs, he stepped onto the soil and grass. —Or, that should be what it was.

He did feel the sensation of stepping onto a bed of overgrown grass, but his vision, swallowed by the darkness, couldn't actually verify that fact. The sticky sensation on his skin didn't change, either.

Subaru: "E-Emilia—!"

Unable to endure these surreal surroundings, Subaru called out to the first name that appeared in his mind. After calling to the girl most certain in his memories, his thoughts resumed their motion, as the names and faces flashed across his mind,

Subaru: "Ram! Miss Ryuzu! And-incidentally-Otto! Are you there?! Please come out!"

If this was immediately after the Trial, they should still be outside the Tomb waiting for Emilia's results. Ignoring their calls to stop him, Subaru had rushed into the Tomb and wound up becoming another participant in the Trials. That had always been what preceded his Returns.

Afterwards, when he carried Emilia out of the Tomb, he was always greeted by those usual faces.

This time shouldn't have been any different.

Subaru: "They're not here… but it's not only that… What's with the gloomy atmosphere? Even paddy roads in the countryside aren't this dark…"

Without artificial lighting, the paddy field roads in the night would sink into true darkness in the absence of starlight.

But the Sanctuary's situation was different from that "instant-dark". The moon was gleaming overhead, and that gleam was at least falling on Subaru's body.

And yet, that light somehow dissipated before reaching the ground, setting the scene for this vague and uncertain night. —It was as if a spotlight was shining on him alone.

The only thing visible in this darkness was himself. Turning to look behind him, even the Tomb he had just come out of had been swallowed into darkness and could no longer be seen.

Memories of walking through the White Whale's fog came back to him.

Having lost the girl he relied on, thrown off the dragon carriage, unsure whether the White Whale's jaws were closing in behind him, and having lost both sense of direction and any reason to go on living, he remembered walking on.

In the end, eventually wandering out of that fog, he was picked up by Otto's favorite dragon, Furufu.

So this time, if he kept on walking through the darkness, perhaps he would be rescued as well?

Subaru: "What am I, an idiot? …No, I am an idiot. What's with this deadbeat, loser-dog thinking? If I have no idea what happened, no idea what'll happen, don't even know where everyone is and here I am worrying about myself, idiot."

Hadn't he just confirmed his resolve at Echidna's tea party?

No matter what happens, no matter how much he must suffer, if Subaru could just pay with his life to solve everything in the end, he would consider it a bargain.

Compared to losing the people most important to him and proceeding into an irreparable future, how fortunate it is to be able to exchange his life for the chance to try again.

So, dawdling around embattled by fear in front of an incomprehensible situation, going in circles before meeting a pathetic end to his life was not what Subaru needed to do.

Rather, he should be boldly challenging his incomprehensible circumstances, and even if he fails to reach an answer, he should grasp every clue he could for vengeance in the next life before welcoming a meaningful death.

Subaru: "In any case, what I have to confirm now is…"

Where Emilia, Ram, and everyone else had gone.

When he first saw that Emilia was not in the Tomb, for a moment, Subaru thought that she had passed the Trial, woke up, and left on her own. But he immediately ruled out that possibility. Because if Emilia passed the Trial and woke up safely, there was no reason for her to not wake Subaru.

Subaru knew from experience with Emilia that when someone inside a Trial is touched or called, the Trial would be interrupted.

Although more accurately, Subaru's consciousness was inside Echidna's tea party rather than the Trial, so that premise might not apply here.

Subaru: "But still, it's not like Emilia to leave me and head out by herself."

She would have tried to pull the unconscious Subaru out of this place, or at least rested him against a wall. He couldn't imagine that she would just leave without doing anything.

And then, there was also the rather mean conclusion—Subaru didn't think Emilia was capable of passing the first Trial on the first try.

Knowing that since day one, Emilia had been stuck on the same Trial in every loop, Subaru was skeptical of the idea that she could have cleared it on her own to begin with.

Therefore, Subaru decided that Emilia's disappearance was probably not according to her own will. Either someone carried her out, or—

Subaru: "Maybe she came back from the Trial completely dazed, and went out without even noticing that I was here… that's not entirely inconceivable."

But that still wouldn't explain how the world outside was plunged into darkness.

Even if Subaru could accept that as the explanation for Emilia's disappearance, he still couldn't begin to imagine what the cause and reason of this scene might be.

At least, in Subaru's experience, the Sanctuary never once became like this while a Trial was taking place.

As for the absence of the people waiting outside, Subaru's heart shuddered at the possibility that the ferocious white rabbits might be behind it. But he quickly shook his head and denied that hasty conclusion.

According to his calculations, the attack of the Great Rabbit should take place on the night of the sixth day—five days from now. Even if it arrived ahead of schedule, he'd still like to believe that it couldn't have come on the very first day.

—Although, he was intentionally ignoring the fact that the timing of Elsa's attack on the Mansion had mysteriously changed as well.

That was just another one of the mysteries Subaru had no answers to. But if the date of the Great Rabbit's attack could randomly change like Elsa's, then that would leave no room for Subaru to even begin to unravel these circumstances.

Aside from having faith that there was no situation Return by Death couldn't avert, there was not much Subaru could do.

Subaru: "All I can do now… is call out to Emilia and the others while looking around and head to the Cathedral to check on the villagers, I guess…"

Straining his eyes trying to see ahead, it dawned on Subaru just how unfeasible his plan was. Although he had the layout of the Sanctuary more or less memorized, it wasn't to the point of being able to navigate it with his eyes closed.

At this point, even just wandering around this area would require that level of memory power.

Needless to say, getting to his destination safely would be exceedingly difficult. And he couldn't just unconditionally accept the plan of calling out while searching for the others, either.

Subaru: "If this pitch-darkness was somebody's doing… can't really guarantee whoever I run into will be friendly."

Burning up with anxiety, Subaru continued agonizing over what his best course of action would be.

If he wanted to rendezvous quickly, he should raise his voice and call out. That would be the best way to find out if Emilia and the others were safe. But he was quite aware of the folly of acting blindly from his miserable past experiences. Just how many times had he died in this world because of that?

Subaru: "…Damnit. If I don't at least figure out what's going on, I'll be screwed if I get killed before that."

At the end of his deliberations, Subaru decided to take the cautious approach.

Suppressing his voice and holding down the sound of his breathing, he focused his eyes into the darkness and followed the map in his mind towards the populated area of the Sanctuary.

Only the sensation beneath his feet was certain. It was the only proof of the existence of the reality outside the Tomb and his only reliance in the world painted in darkness. Despite having fallen into pitch darkness, the Sanctuary should still be the same as before—

Subaru: "—U?"

Slowly but surely, Subaru carefully landed each step on the grass. But after only a few steps, he stopped.

The reason, was the wind.

Subaru: "—?"

Lifting his face, Subaru somewhat pointlessly looked around in the darkness, hoping to find the source of the ominous breeze.

He felt it. There was something unique about the wind that swept by just now.

It was neither the refreshing breeze passing a field of grass, nor the dusty wind blowing inside the Tomb, nor a wind infused with the blood-soaked scent of a scene of carnage. Instead, it was an air carrying the unmistakable warmth of having touched a living thing.

Subaru: "Wh—"

Unsure of where the wind was blowing from, Subaru looked back in search of the answer.

The Tomb should be directly behind him, but having walked only a few steps away, it was already impossible to see its outlines.

—No, there was a reason other than the darkness why he couldn't see the Tomb.

Subaru: "—a?"

???: "…"

At a distance close enough to feel each other's breaths, in the world of true dark, someone was standing right before his eyes.

The reason he couldn’t see the entrance of the Tomb, was because that person was blocking his view.

How did he not notice when someone had gotten so close to him? And why did that person not utter a sound when they approached him? In that instant, those questions stormed within Subaru’s mind.

But that storm of questions was soon answered.

It couldn’t have been any clearer than that.

???: “—I love you.”

The shadow said to Subaru with a voice so overflowing with affection that it sounded like it was about to melt.

2

It was a murky voice.

A sound so indistinct that Subaru couldn’t tell whether it was a man or a woman’s.

Compared to a voice passing through a voice changer or one muffled by a cloth, it was more ambiguous and opaque, as if obscured by some invisible power operating on his perceptions.

But even so, the instant Subaru heard those words—those whispers of love, he instinctively understood who the shadow before him was. And shuddered.

Thinking back, Subaru had already vaguely sensed it before coming out of the Tomb.

The feeling of the thick Miasma stinging his skin. The sight of the Sanctuary submerged in shadows. The stifling pressure engulfing his surroundings. And the world that fundamentally lost its life.

It was every bit a reenactment of the time-stopped reality brought about by the uttering of the forbidden words, where Subaru met the Witch.

That is to say, the one standing before him was,

Subaru: “Wh…y…?!”

???: “…”

There was no answer. But there was also no doubt that it was right in front of him.

Subaru twitched his fingers, checked that he was still breathing, and confirmed that time hadn’t stopped. The second-hand of the world was definitely ticking as it should. And yet the Witch was standing right before him.

Faced with a threat beyond his imaginations, Subaru’s mind was painted over with complete white.

The oath which he had sworn only moments before, to uncover the details no matter what happens without letting a single second go to waste, all vanished in the face of that shock.

So unexpected was Subaru’s encounter with the Witch at this point in time.

His throat rapidly drying up, Subaru’s body stiffened as he forgot how to breathe. Bound by the overwhelming pressure, Subaru turned as rigid as a frog being stared down by a snake.

Becoming immobile now would certainly only make the situation worse. But, even understanding this, Subaru’s limbs gave no indication of obeying the blaring alarms.

It was a matter far beyond what Subaru’s heart and mind could handle.

Subaru’s heart did not falter, and his mind was burning with the need to do something, but his body and the deep-rooted faculties governing it only calmly looked on.

Because—regardless of whether he moved or not, the result would be exactly the same.

???: "…"

There was no hostility emanating from the shadow before his eyes. Nor did it seem to have any intention to hurt him.

But that is not to say that it was uninterested in Subaru.

Quite the opposite.

???: "…"

The entity before him was instilling him with so much interest that it was sending chills running down his spine.

It was blind, obsessive passion, overwhelming to the point of making him wonder why, binding him so tightly as if to never let him escape.

—The shadow had no interest in anything other than Subaru.

In that shadow, there was only Subaru. Only Subaru. Only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru—

???: "—I love you I love you I love you."

That voice echoed, spiraling in his mind.

His thoughts were thrown into chaos, unable to even recognize what he was seeing in front of him. Was he standing, or sitting? Was he breathing? Was he conscious? Was he alive? Or was he dead? He wasn't sure. He wasn't sure. He was becoming less and less sure.

A fingertip reached for him.

The surrounding shadows rose, expanding to envelop Subaru's body from all directions.

He had no strength left to oppose it. No reason to oppose it. Resist, don’t resist, let himself be swallowed, what will happen then? It was too tiresome to think about. And—

???: “I love you I love you I love you—.”

????: “Quit fuckin’ around KkkrrraaAAAHHH—!!”

—The next instant, terrifying destruction descended on the space between Subaru and the shadow.

Inches from his eyes, the impact crashed into the shadow, shattering the invisible ground in a swirl of darkness as it sent Subaru flying backwards.

Subaru: “uUoOOaa—?!”

Tumbling while being bumped by hard objects all over, Subaru finally came to a stop when his whole body was soaked in shadow. Giving his head a shake, his rigid body and thoughts simultaneously broke free.

With the noise filling his mind somewhat clearing up, and despite the lingering heaviness that felt like his head was stuffed with sand, the weight had considerably lightened.

Spitting out the mud in his mouth while looking back towards the direction he tumbled from, Subaru’s eyes widened at the sight.

Garfiel: “Can’t get much worse than this, oy. Can y’move or not?”

With his back to Subaru, the person facing against the shadow snapped impatiently.

His stature was rather small for a man. With short, golden hair, and a rude way of speaking. He kept his posture low, readied for combat, with his legs drawn back and his fangs bared in caution.

Subaru: “Why…would y…me… Garfiel…”

Garfiel: “Hah? Ain’t time t’be jokin’ around, can’t y’see what’s happenin’ right now?”

Answering Subaru's voice that was still trembling in shock, Garfiel sounded somewhat annoyed. While keeping his eyes fixed on the shadow in front of him, bit by bit, Garfiel edged closer to Subaru,

Garfiel: "I'm gonna grab yer collar 'n jump. Might break yer neck, so pull up some backbone n' bear it."

Subaru: "I don't have the kind of special characteristic where I can use backbone to increase health-points in my neck—uwa?!"

Right in the middle of his rebuttal, Garfiel dived down with incredible speed, and, true to his word, hoisted Subaru up by the collar, prompting a strangled "Uegh!". But, before Subaru could complain,

Subaru: "—!"

—The ground swelled up, and the shadow exploded.

Waves rolled out from the detonated shadow, lunging towards Subaru and Garfiel, threatening to crush them. In an instant, the surrounding shadows joined into the wave, prompting Garfiel to click his tongue as his feet sank into the black mire while trying to back away.

Garfiel: "Agh, fuck! Divine Protection o' Earth Spirits can't work when the ground's like this—!"

Subaru: "Garfiel, my legs are sinking too!"

Garfiel: "The whole damn place's like this! T's what they meant by "If yer bad the Witch gonna be comin'" ain't it!!"

Being dragged along, the parts of Subaru's limbs that were touching the ground were beginning to be swallowed by the shadow. It was an entirely different sensation from sinking into water or mud.

Warm, tender, and smooth, it was like silk trying to wrap around him and enshroud his body within. In a more peaceful setting, he might even have thought that it'd be rather nice to be embraced by that feeling.

But in these terrifying circumstances, he'd have to reject that idea.

Garfiel: "Tch, don't bite yer tongue!!"

With a snort, Garfiel scanned over his surroundings and shouted.

He bent his knees, and lightly leaped his sinking body off the ground. With the shadow tangling to his feet, the jump only managed a few meters, but, extending his legs the instant they touched the ground, he leaped again, and again, and again,

Garfiel: "There, we, are—!"

In a world concealed by night, Garfiel beautifully leaped his way to an area populated by buildings. Literally kicking his foot into a wall, he leaped up once again, and, landing on a roof, he tossed Subaru down with a sigh.

Being tossed like that, Subaru quickly grabbed onto some shingles so he wouldn't slide off, before glancing up at the side of the panting Garfiel's face—faintly obscured by the darkness,

Subaru: "Th-Thanks for saving me…!"

Garfiel: "Huh? Is that the face of someone feelin' thankful? Y'got a problem with me? Oy!"

Subaru: "Just something I haven't gotten over yet… and… I never thought you'd come to save me."

Garfiel: "How heartless did y'think I am? If y'got a problem with me savin' ya, feel free to jump right back into that shadow if y'want."

Subaru tersely replied "No thank you" to Garfiel's retort, and sighed.

Garfiel looked away, and Subaru, watching him from behind, felt a flood of complex emotions flowing through his chest.

There was the incomprehensible situation as well, but the biggest reason for this was why did Garfiel choose to save him. Before this, Subaru had considered him the greatest obstacle in the Sanctuary and a target of his resentment on par with Roswaal himself.

Although he was aware that the change in situation must have caused this change in behavior, the complete reversal nonetheless left Subaru unsure how to react.

But, paying no attention to Subaru's internal confusion, Garfiel only gazed down towards the ground with a bitter expression. Clicking his sharp canine teeth, "This 's bad…", he muttered under his breath,

Garfiel: "This goes without sayin', but, doesn't look like it's gonna let us off."

Sliding down to Garfiel's side, Subaru timidly peeked off of the roof.

Witnessing the sight before his eyes, an "u…" inadvertently slipped from his lips. The Sanctuary had transformed into a sea of shadow, with its majority swallowed by the pitch blackness, depriving him of all sense of height and perspective.

But even within that darkness, there was an even darker, writhing figure lurking at the center of the whirling shadows, inching closer at a crawling pace.

It was the one who just tried to swallow Subaru and Garfiel into the shadows, the one who flooded the Sanctuary under a sea of shade. It was—

Subaru: "Garfiel… You have any idea what that is?"

Garfiel: "I got "It's exactly what it looks like", "Ain't no chance it ain't what I think it is", and "It'd be goddamn wishful thinkin' t'say that ain't what that is". Which one y'wanna go with?"

Subaru: "Does which one even matter? They're pretty much the same thing… Oy, you're being way calmer in front of this thing than I th…"

Before he could finish his sentence, Subaru stopped when he saw the expression on the side of Garfiel's face.

Honestly, despite harboring some complicated feelings about how Garfiel saved him, Subaru was nonetheless calmly organizing the situation in his head.

Among them, was why Garfiel, who showed such displeasure at the scent of the Witch—and had turned hostile towards Subaru just because he picked up the scent from his body, was not losing his composure when the source of the scent was right before him.

And that was why, just when he was about to ask—Subaru dropped the subject when he caught a glimpse of his face.

Garfiel: “What’d y’just say?”

Garfiel uttered, gazing down with his bloodshot eyes. Subaru might just be imagining this, but Garfiel’s fangs seemed to be growing longer.

Anger. Rage. Wrath. Fury. His pupils had turned into slits, and one could see the pure-red emotions churning within. How could anyone call that calm?

At the same time, Subaru remembered that there was something he had to ask.

Subaru: “—Garfiel. Th…Ram and the others, what happened to them?”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “When I came out of the Tomb, the Sanctuary was already submerged in the shadow. You seem to be alright and lively… so what about the others…?”

Garfiel: “…in the shadow.”

Subaru’s repeated attempts at denial only received this cruel reply.

Hearing Subaru gulp down his breath, Garfiel grunted with a tinge of remorse,

Garfiel: “When we noticed somethin’ was off, the ground’s already turned into th'shade. If Ram hadn't blown me away with her wind, I woulda been swallowed too."

Subaru: "…and Ram's swallowed just like that? And Ryuzu, and Otto?"

Garfiel: "Aah, yeah. Granny 'n the noisy lil'bro, all'n one go."

Looking down at the strange writhing of the undulating shadow, Subaru's thoughts couldn't help but take a pessimistic turn in regards to their chances of survival after being swallowed.

If they were being imprisoned in some alternate dimension, then there might still be hope. But, judging from the sensation of touching that shadow, it would be a far too optimistic possibility.

Subaru: "Wh-What is this, seriously, this… why would that thing suddenly…!"

Elsa, Great Rabbit, Garfiel.

He had only just sealed his resolve to repulse the threats facing the Sanctuary and the Mansion, to face down all obstacles and obtain the perfect future no matter the cost.

And yet, just when that resolve was sealed, this incomprehensible thing washed it all away.

Why on earth did this thing burst out all of a sudden?

Subaru: "Garfiel… what happened to Emilia?"

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "I couldn't find Emilia in the Tomb. …Was she, swallowed, too?"

Garfiel: "…"

Noticing that something was wrong when she woke, Emilia must have ran out of the Tomb.

After all, if she saw the Sanctuary being swallowed by shadow, there was no way she would just stand by and watch. She would have jumped in to save anyone she could with no regard for her own safety, and—

Subaru: “If the shadow… then, she…!”

Garfiel: “After swallowin’ Ram ‘n the others, the shadow went into the Sanctuary and drank everythin’ up. I chased after it and landed a few blows but it all did jack shit. Then the thing turned back all o’ a sudden, I followed it, and there’s that.”

And that led to what happened just now, it seems.

The shadow was ravaging the Sanctuary, but when it sensed Subaru coming out of the Tomb, it immediately turned around. Then the shadow’s objective was Subaru, after all.

An all-devouring shadow. Bearing whispers of love. And overwhelming power.

Its identity went without saying. But,

Subaru: “Why the hell is the Witch of Envy here…!!”

Garfiel: “Ain’t the time to be askin’ that, oy.”

While Subaru wrenched out these words, beside him, a battle-hungry smile emerged on Garfiel’s face. Taking care not to lose his balance, Subaru stood up as well, clenching his teeth as he locked his gaze onto the same thing as Garfiel.

A great mass of whirling shadow surrounded the building they were using as their foothold.

Everything caught in the cyclone’s range was swallowed. Earth and structure alike were stripped away and forced into its swirling orbit.

Subaru: “Uu, ooOOAAAHH—!”

It was like a great tsunami or a large-scale flood carrying houses along with its current.

Experiencing the bizarre sensation of supposedly massless shadows uprooting the building beneath his feet, Subaru did all he could not to be flung off of the roof.

He tried, but that didn't solve the fundamental problem at all.

Garfiel: "Tch, I'm jumpin' again, grab on!"

Subaru: "—!"

Quickly grabbing onto the crouching Garfiel, they escaped the floating rooftop along with Garfiel's leap. Shooting out like a bullet without regards for target, they plunged right into a flock of trees, snapping branches on the way before slamming into a trunk.

Garfiel: "Ghagh—!"

Punching his arm into the trunk, with that inelegant gesture, Garfiel managed to stop himself from falling into the shadows. Subaru, who was clinging to his shirt, took hold of a branch and shifted himself over, maintaining his posture that way.

And just when they were finally allowed to catch their breath, they heard the loud crack of splintering wood behind them.

Quickly turning to look, they saw the building they had just been standing on being pulled into the center of the vortex, and crushed into thin, tiny pieces.

With the collapse of the building's structure, the shadowy vortex swallowed it into the true body of the shade—into the heart of the writhing shadow, further enlarging its mass.

Subaru: "…"

Witnessing the devastating destruction left both Subaru and Garfiel at a loss for words.

Passing several seconds in that silence, the shadow's contours began to blur. And the next moment—Subaru was certain that his eyes met the eyes of the murky, all-encompassing shadow.

???: “—I love you.”

Subaru: “Uu, a…”

???: “I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

Subaru: “…”

???: “I love you I love you.”

Swelling, boundless love. All he could see was black. Love in the form of a shadow, looming, and about to drown him.

Coming to drown him with love, the love of the Witch of Envy was approaching—

Chapter 50:
Distant Road

Billowing waves of shadows bearing pitch-black affection pressed towards Subaru.

Dangling against the trunk of a large tree, barely holding onto a branch, Subaru had no means of escape. He glanced over to Garfiel beside him, only to see that. “GARFIEL?!”

Garfiel let go of the branches, releasing himself into a freefall before landing on the ground. The shadow-infused surface rushed to pull at his feet, but Garfiel, not minding it, swung down his arms as if to pierce into the ground, placing all four limbs in contact with the earth. “Like hell am I waitin’ around t’get swallowed! WwwwrraaAAHHH—!!”

Roaring, Garfiel flung up the arms he had stabbed into the ground.

And along with his motion, the shadowy surface of the earth heaved upwards like a table-flip of massive proportions—rising to meet the dark, surging wave only inches away from engulfing them.

With clods of soil hurtling into the air alongside the sound of a violent crack, the upturned earth crashed into the shadow. But the impact against the supposedly massless shadow only lasted for an instant, before the storm of earth was swallowed just like the building before it.

The shadowy wave rose higher, its breadth widened, and its hue deepened. The more it swallowed the more vicious it grew—but the maneuver had bought them just the smallest delay.

“If y’don’t get yer ass down I’m leavin’ ya behind!” cried Garfiel.

“Uuuoowa—!” While gazing, dumbstruck, at the unfolding sight before him, a sudden impact knocked Subaru off the branch, sending him plummeting to the ground. But just before he could crash into the earth, Garfiel struck out his arm and nabbed him by the waist, bringing him to an abrupt stop. With his eyes rolled back, beginning to understand what happened,

Subaru: “Y-You didn’t have to kick me down?!”

Garfiel: “Yer bein’ too slow decidin’. I think that thing’s got a crush on ya. Nevermind me, if y’get caught yer gettin’ swallowed up in a second.”

Still holding Subaru in his grip, Garfiel nudged his chin at the ever enlarging shadow with a feral grin. Following his gaze to the root of the shadow—Subaru could see the faint outline of a person, singlemindedly reaching out its hand to him.

“I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you—.”

Despite the distance separating them, he could hear that murky voice as though it was being whispered into his ears.

Defying the laws of physics, as if their distance meant nothing, the abnormality of this voice sickened him to the core.

Watching that shadow directing its dark, immense passion towards him, unbearable disgust and revulsion surged up Subaru’s chest.

It was the reason he could Return by Death, and in a sense, he was in its debt.

But it was impossible. It was impossible to accept it. Biologically, and from his very soul, he was rejecting it. In fact, he would rather jump into the mouth of the White Whale than be embraced by that shadow.

Subaru: “Garfiel, what do we do…!”

Garfiel: “Backin’ off’s all we got! Even that bastard Roswaal can’t be counted on here. Ram ‘n Granny… and th’others didn’t stand a chance against that thing.”

Garfiel gnawed his fangs and ruefully growled under his breath.

Unlike Subaru, he had seen that shadow swallow Ram and Ryuzu with his own eyes. So it wasn't hard to imagine what he must be feeling.

But since Subaru still harbored such hateful memories of Garfiel, it only became all the more complicated to now see him in grief.

Subaru: "—!"

If the writhing shadow could be compared to a giant palm, then its fingers suddenly lunged out towards Subaru and Garfiel. At the last second, gripping Subaru tightly, Garfiel back-stepped out of the way. By treading on ground that was less saturated by shadow, if he could just widen their distance from the heart of the shade, they should at least be able to avoid plummeting into the bog.

Subaru: "Even if we keep running, things won't get any better… what happened to your attacks?"

Garfiel: "I can't break through th'shadow's dress. Might be a different story if I get a full-powered attack in, but can't make th'opportunity t'do it."

Taking a large leap backwards, Subaru and Garfiel exchanged their thoughts while flying through the gaps between the trees. Their speed should have easily left the shadow on the other side of the forest, but somehow, they just couldn't seem to shake the darkness, slowly inching closer.

Perhaps, this inescapable closeness was just the shadow's Authority. But that was not the only abnormality.

Garfiel: "…Shit."

Spitting, Garfiel grunted in irritation.

His shoulders were heaving with ragged breathing. Profuse amounts of sweat was emerging on his forehead, and every movement carried a sense of incongruity that Subaru had never seen from him before.

It didn't appear to be fatigue from carrying Subaru's weight.

Seeing this, Subaru furrowed his brows. And, noticing Subaru's reaction, "Tch", Garfiel clicked his tongue,

Garfiel: "My body's gettin' unusually heavy. —Th'fuckin' shadow's sucking all the lifeforce around it."

Subaru: "You mean the shadow beneath us?!"

Panicking at Garfiel's answer, Subaru squirmed himself away from the shadow even though his feet weren't actually touching the ground—shivering at the endless darkness covering over all the grass.

And only then, did the true threat of the shadow finally dawn on him.

Subaru: "Oy, no way—"

—The forest was falling.

The trees of the forest surrounding the Sanctuary were tall, boasting a canopy thick enough to conceal the moon and stars. But now, the forest sky was filling clearly into his eyes.

It wasn't because the trees were cut down, or that the leaves were burned away. The rows of green treetops were still there, their leaves rustling in the wind.

—But the forest had fallen so low that Subaru's head would pop out if he jumped.

Subaru: "The forest is sinking—?!"

Garfiel: "Same'll happen t' us if we don't keep movin'. I'm guessin' that thing gets more powerful the more it eats—!"

Having spread to the ends of the Sanctuary, the shadow's power grew, and was now swallowing the entire forest into darkness.

Front back left right, the shadow spanned as far as Subaru's eyes could see. Even if they crossed the Barrier or left the forest, there would still be no end to this despair.

Subaru had been so distracted by the unprecedented development and the long-overdue appearance of the Witch of Envy that he had misjudged the threat his enemy posed.

This was the Witch of Envy—the one who once swallowed half the world, whose marks still gripped the present world in terror, the utmost of calamities.

Subaru: “That thing won’t actually end up covering half the world, will it…?”

Garfiel: “Story goes that it swallowed countries whole. Might wanna know that before shruggin’ it off.”

Garfiel sneered, confirming Subaru’s fears.

The visible exhaustion on his face must be due to the Witch’s influence, and as the rate of the shadow’s encroachment accelerated, the sensation of sinking into the earth grew stronger.

Every step seemed to sink deeper than the last, and the effort behind each stride exponentially rose. The truth is, if Garfiel was alone, he could probably escape—

Subaru: “Garfiel, that thing is after me. So…”

Garfiel: “If yer fuckin’ tellin’ me t’drop ya, I’m gonna bite yer fingers off one by one, oy!”

Being turned down before he could even voice his proposal, Subaru fell silent. But, quickly shaking off his dejection, Subaru resumed glaring into the side of Garfiel’s sweat-drenched face,

Subaru: “This isn’t the time to be saying that! We’re both going to be eaten like this! If I face that thing, I should at least be able to buy us some time. Meanwhile you…”

Garfiel: “I should run? Or y’sayin’ I should go get that bastard Roswaal? First thing that shadow did was head for the center of th’village… th’villagers and refugees, ‘n Roswaal… they’re all eaten already.”

Subaru: "—gh. Y-You're absolutely sure?"

Garfiel: "Y'didn't see, but the whole Sanctuary was swallowed. Long as they didn't all go on a spontaneous moon-watchin' trip into th'forest, I'm sure."

Plainly conveying this, there was no emotion in Garfiel's words. In contrast to his usual over-emotional attitude, it only showed that he was telling the truth.

Not just the defenseless refugees or the peaceful residents of the Sanctuary, but even Roswaal was eaten. If that was the case, then the situation was nothing short of hopeless.

For Garfiel, who specializes in close quarter combat, the long-reaching attacks of the Witch of Envy could be said to be his worst matchup.

If only they had Roswaal or Ram here, perhaps they would still have stood a chance with a coordination of close and long-range attacks.

Subaru: "But that just means without you, there'll be no way left to oppose it…"

Garfiel: "Granny! Ram! And everyone else! They've all already been eaten…!"

Subaru: "—!"

Garfiel: "On top of that, y'want me t'abandon you too? Y'want me t'shame myself…? Never, never, never gonna do that. Fuckin' "Pararagurara's scars don't fade!" I ain't gonna be satisfied 'till I bash that thing up!!"

Garfiel bared his fangs, barking. His expression was of boundless rage towards the shadow—perhaps, there was something else as well, or was Subaru just overthinking it?

Having had everyone precious stolen from him, barks of rage couldn't be the only thing dominating his heart—if he, Garfiel, was that kind of person, Subaru: “Then why did you do that to everyone…”

Why was he so cruel to tear the defiant villagers to pieces?

Garfiel should know the pain of having someone taken from him, and know the anguish of loss. If he did, then he should be capable of empathy.

Then why did he take his cruelty so far?

Garfiel probably had no idea what Subaru’s wrenched out question was asking.

He only wordlessly tightened his grip on Subaru, showing no intention of letting him go. He ran, same as before, or rather, as the encroaching shadow accelerated, Garfiel was putting more and more force into his steps to escape, leaping forward, and forward, flying out of the sinking forest.

Torn between Garfiel’s obstinance and the threat behind them, the sudden expansion of his visual field made Subaru lift his face in surprise.

Shooting out of the sinking forest, the two flew out into a clearing. At last, it was an area where the shadow’s influence was still weak. He could see naked earth, and short, stunted flowers, but, most shocking of all,

Subaru: “—Eh?!”

The moment it entered his eyes, Subaru’s body was tossed onto the turf.

Grunting in shock as he rolled on the ground, he clutched the soil to stop himself, then shook his head. But, more than the desire to express his indignation at being thrown, was the need to ask about what he was seeing. That is,

Subaru: “Why is Miss Ryuzu here—?”

Standing in front of Subaru’s trembling voice was a little girl with long, pink hair—or so she appeared, despite the ancient person inside. Ryuzu.

Seeing the girl standing there at the back of the clearing, watching him with her vast, boundless gaze, Subaru wavered.

Surely, Garfiel had just told him that she was swallowed by the shadow.

But that was clearly at odds with what he was seeing.

If he had to choose which one to believe in, he could only choose to believe the reality in front of his eyes. In that case, was all their previous conversation just a lie?

Subaru: “Garfiel, what is this…”

Garfiel: “…Don’t go jumpin’ t’conclusions. I know what y’wanna say ‘n ask, but we ain’t got time for that, now that we lured that thing here.”

Dismissing Subaru with a wave of his hand, Garfiel cast his gaze over his surroundings. Then, lifting his chin and drawing in a deep breath,

Garfiel: “—oooorrrrrrrrrRRRRR!”

Although its volume fell short of covering the entire expanse of the forest, like a distant howl, the call pierced through the wondrously silent air.

Hearing it, for a moment, the rather out-of-place thought occurred to Subaru, “That guy’s super good at making animal noises”, but it soon gave way when he saw the answer to that howl.

Subaru: “—?!”

Accompanied by the sound of rustling, one after another, small silhouettes stepped out of the foliage and into the clearing.

Short in stature, their long, pink hair was almost dragging on the ground. Their skins were translucent-white, and their eyes devoid of emotion. The robes they wore seemed unfitting for their size, with sleeves dangling way past the tip their hands. They didn't seem to be wearing any other garment underneath, and, peeking between the gaps, he could see that they were barefoot.

The number of figures stepping out of the treeline must have totaled about twenty or so.

Lining up to fill almost half of the clearing, they all bore the exact same face. Not just the same expression—but the same face.

Subaru: “What kind of, joke is…”

Garfiel: “Woulda preferred if I didn’t have t’show ya.”

Garfiel’s pained mutter failed to enter Subaru’s stricken ears. Or rather, despite entering his ears, they failed to register any proper meaning in his brain.

Seeing the girls with identical faces lined up before his eyes—all looking exactly like Ryuzu, gave Subaru the illusion that he might be dreaming.

Truth is, Subaru had these kinds of nightmares before, and he had hoped that this was just another one of them. But,

Subaru: “The scratches from the branches hurt… and my heart too… this is real, isn’t it.”

Checking the blood seeping from his arms, and pressing against the sharp pounding of his heart, Subaru took a deep breath. And then, having resolved to accept this scene as reality, he scanned his eyes over the girls once more.

They all looked exactly the same as Ryuzu, and even their expressions were identical. That is to say, they were all emotionless, unmoving, and doll-like.

Even though Subaru knew that Ryuzu was never an especially lively person, she was always abundant in emotion, and, more importantly, her every action resembled that of a living human being.

Subaru: “…”

But that characteristic feeling of living human beings was entirely absent from these girls.

They were like dolls. There could be no description more accurate than that. One could even say they were dolls.

Despite breathing and carrying life, they were no more than moving dolls—such, was the abnormality of seeing twenty identical faces arranged in a row.

Subaru: "Clones… this world can't have that kind of technology. Is it some kind of replication magic…? But then why make so many Miss Ryuzus…"

When the term "Somatic Cell Cloning" flashed across his mind, Subaru suddenly realized it.

Why the Sanctuary was called the Experimental Grounds, and why its master, Echidna, was so reluctant to talk about it. And then, there was also why Garfiel repeatedly cursed this place as a deadlock.

Subaru: "Unless, this is the result of the Sanctuary's experiments…? Replicating Miss Ryuzu? No… but, what's the point of doing something like that…"

Garfiel: "Sorry t'do this when yer busy ponderin', but looks like it's about time."

While Subaru's mind was turning at an incredible speed, beside him, Garfiel's arms began to expand.

His arms, covered over with golden hair, swelled to rip through his clothing as muscles bulged to three times their original width.

Atavism—if the giant tiger was Garfiel's true form, then this partial transformation was merely the first stage of his trump card.

Garfiel: "Surround it n' crush it. Simple, but with e'ryone else eaten, this is all that's left."

Subaru: "…I can understand what your plan is, but they're…"

Garfiel: "Don't worry. They ain't like Granny, their insides're empty. But they can follow orders at least. If they can just create an openin', we're set."

Whether it was the details of his strategy, or about Ryuzu' replicants, there were still too many questions Subaru wanted to ask. But there was no time for that, or for carrying on a peaceful conversation, for that matter.

With a swipe of his massive arm, Garfiel pushed Subaru to the very back of the clearing. Then, at Garfiel's brutish signal, the Ryuzu-formation pressed forward to shield Subaru behind them.

Garfiel stood himself in the dead center of the clearing. Behind him, were the Ryuzu-clones, and at the tail end, was Subaru. All the while, swallowing the trees of the forest, on the opposite end of Garfiel's glare,

???: "—I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you."

With slow, writhing movements, the words of love seeped from the edge of the forest.

Boundless revulsion and blaring alarms crying "danger" rang ceaselessly inside his skull. Then, the Witch's shadow lifted what should be its head, and caught Subaru within its sights,

Subaru: "…"

Before he knew it, he could see the shadow undulating with joy.

Surrounded by a black vortex sweeping the trees of the forest into its spiral, amidst the sound of crushing wood, whispering love, the shadow stepped closer.

Defiling the grass of the clearing, it took only an instant for the expanding darkness to usurp this small patch of earth. Before long, everything here would be sinking into the shadow just as the forest had.

So if Garfiel was to have any chance of winning, it would have to be before this place was engulfed by the shadow. That is, now. This very moment.

Garfiel: "—GhrraaaAAAAAAHHHHH!!"

Tilting his head to the sky, Garfiel's throat expelled a roar that quaked the atmosphere.

The violent tremors tearing through the air petrified Subaru's every organ with instinctive terror. Before the frozen Subaru, not only Garfiel's arms, but his legs had transformed into those of a beast, slamming to the ground with all its force.

Instantly, with the ruptured earth under Garfiel's foot as the pivot, the ground beneath the Witch sprang up like a giant seesaw.

It was every bit a reenactment of Garfiel's first meeting with Subaru, where he flipped Patrasche and the carriage clean off of the ground.

As the shadow was launched into the air alongside clumps of swept-up earth, Garfiel lowered his posture, placing all four limbs onto the ground. And, with a howl, he spurred on the next stage of his transformation.

Unable to withstand his expanding body, his clothes burst into slithers of rags dangling from his golden fur. Held up by lumbering limbs, his body grew to exceed four meters in length, as dagger-like fangs lined inside his jaw.

This was none other than the manifestation of the great tiger that had once conferred on Subaru such fury and despair.

Garfiel: "—WWRRRRRR!!"

Roaring, the beast's body tore through the wind, lunging for the shadow.

Causing the foothold to cave in beneath its paws, the mighty beast leaped with astounding speed, in defiance of its enormous mass.

And, just as it flung open its jaws, threatening to crush the shadow's slender waist with fangs that could shear through steel—

???: "…"

—fingers of shadows reached out from beneath the leaping beast and wound it within its grasp. Intercepted like this, the great tiger stopped mid-air. And, the moment after, a throat-rending shriek rang out.

A mist of blood burst from the tiger's constricted limbs, practically announcing the shadow's intent to crush them in its grip. Arms as thick as Subaru's waist began producing the sound of ripping flesh.

Subaru watched the great tiger, shrieking and immobilized mid-air, but couldn't tear his eyes away. And from there, the shadow mercilessly snapped the beast's body into an explosion of organs and blood—

Subaru: "—ah—."

—was not what happened.

While Subaru watched on in a daze, two Ryuzu replicants leaped into the fray between the tiger and the Witch.

The little girls shot forward, panting pointlessly with open mouths. With incredible speed, they passed through the shadow, and, landing on the ground, they darted towards the Witch whose gaze was transfixed on the tiger held high in her grip.

Ryuzu-clones: "u—."

Subaru: "…"

Spreading their arms, they threw themselves at the Witch as if to hug her. But the Witch, having noticed their approach, easily skewered them in place with an outstretched shadow.

The sharp, spear-tipped shadow, with the motion of a whip slinging to their prey, severed the two Ryuzu-clone's legs from under them before skewering them through the waist. Then, it brought them next to the shrieking Garfiel, as if to show him.

A far too abominable sight, but that laxness was the Witch's mistake.

Garfiel: "—wwWWWRRRRRRRRRRRRR!"

When he saw the replicants' mutilated bodies brought before him, Garfiel's tremoring throat, already tearing from shrieks of agony, let out a roar of an entirely different hue that forced Subaru's brows to furrow.

Confused as to the meaning of that change in tone, before Subaru eyes, he saw the hanging bodies of the Ryuzu-clones rapidly engulfed by an abounding, pale-blue light—

Subaru: "—?!"

???: "…"

The next instant, the bodies exploded with a blinding flash.

There were no blood or organs, or any gory indications that a living organism had exploded. Their flesh merely transformed into particles of light, blasting clear the surrounding shadows and returning a brief moment of life to the world. Blown and scattered —but unlike any ordinary death by explosion.

Blinded by the flash of light, Subaru violently rubbed at his eyes. And, hurriedly regaining his vision, his eyes opened in time to see the wall of Ryuzu-clones that was shielding him rushing towards the shadow just as the first two had done before them.

Dispersing in all directions, with impeccable coordination, the eighteen Ryuzu-clones surrounded the Witch. Apparently having no other means of attack, their only aim was to stick themselves onto the Witch as they closed in their encirclement with their arms spread wide.

But, even with their coordinated advance, the replicants' movements were still constrained by human limits. Not to mention that their adversary was the primal calamity of the Witch of Envy.

Just when Subaru thought it was about to be swamped by the Ryuzu-clones, the tip of the up-surging shadow split into eighteen strands. Each becoming a blade, as if mocking the Ryuzu's' efforts to evade them, the whips sliced through their skulls, torsos, abdomens, piercing and slashing, rending them to shreds.

Despite spacing out their attacks, the Ryuzu-clones were annihilated, and, after the passing of a single beat, all the Ryuzu's exploded in a pulse of white light—temporarily expelling all darkness from the clearing, and stripping away the vortex of shadow that surrounded the Witch.

Garfiel: "—WRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!"

There was no way the wound-ridden tiger could allow this opportunity to slip away.

Using the opening created by the Ryuzu-clones' charge to free himself from bondage, the moment after the replicants exploded, with a roar that surpassed all that came before, the giant beast lunged for the shadow's head.

The Witch erected a wall of shade to meet the giant tiger rushing towards her, but the tiger, holding the silhouette of a person on the tip of his claw—a Ryuzu-replicant which it had hidden for this very purpose, slammed it into the wall, blasting it apart. Through the pale-blue flash of light, his fangs and claws fell upon the heart of the shadow.

—It was so perfect that even Subaru was convinced that he had it.

An inhumane tactic that unhesitatingly sacrificed twenty-one Ryuzu-replicants.

If the tiger-morphed Garfiel could land a single direct strike with its claw, surely, even a Witch couldn't hope to survive—

"—I love you."

Or at least, that was what Subaru implored in his heart,

"—Subaru."

The shadow called sweetly, as Garfiel's burst-open corpse shattered into dust.

Chapter 51: lovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovemeee

Subaru only watched in silence as the golden tiger, Garfiel, burst apart.

The force of the beast’s claws should have been enough to swipe the Witch’s head flying along with the upper half of her body. No doubt even a Witch would have been torn to shreds by the power of that direct impact. —But the strike never hit.

Using the last Ryuzu-clone as a stepping stone, Garfiel carried out his decisive strike. But when his claws came within an inch of the Witch, Subaru saw his wounds, previously gouged by the shadow, beginning to squirm.

Squirming wounds—caused by none other than the shadows at the Witch’s feet that had crawled onto Garfiel’s limbs. The tips of the supposedly massless shadows slid themselves into the openings of the great tiger’s wounds and scattered into wanton destruction, rending flesh and sending blood spouting out.

And just like that, unable to withstand the mounting pressure inside, Garfiel’s massive, infiltrated body exploded.

He couldn’t even put up the most basic resistance against this ruthless method of trampling a life.

In the course of an instant, the thing that was once Garfiel splattered throughout the clearing into small piles of dark-red slivers of flesh. Only the golden fur sticking to some of the scattered clots still proved that he once existed in this world.

Subaru: “…”

He couldn’t utter a word.

Until not long ago, there were more than twenty lives in this clearing including the Ryuzu-dolls. And several seconds later, there was now only two.

Actually, if one counted from the beginning, there would have been over a hundred lives in the Sanctuary.

Considering that they were all pulled in by that shadow, the weight of that shadow’s crimes was simply far too great. Beyond unforgivable.

Blood resumed coursing through Subaru’s numbed senses once again, and every cell of his body rallied into that most fitting response.

That is, the primal emotion directed at the Witch before his eyes—rage.

???: “I love you.”

Subaru: “Shut up.”

???: “I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

Subaru: “I said shut up…”

The shadow’s outline was so vague that even its height could not be distinguished.

Its voice was still murky as though passing through a voice changer, impossible to tell whether it was a man or a woman’s.

Yet, in spite of its indefinite voice, the sticky affection imbued within was clear to the point of revulsion.

With the same, unwavering love, after drinking the Sanctuary dry and brutally murdering Garfiel, she still directed her interest, her care, and her love wholeheartedly towards Subaru.

It was so abhorrent and twisted it made Subaru want to vomit.

He could feel his sanity being whittled away by the Witch. An emotion bordering on madness surged up, while hatred and revulsion boiled within his chest.

???: “I love you I love you I love you my love I love you I love you I love you.”

Standing there, unmoving, the Witch continued to whisper her love to Subaru like a curse.

Instilling it with such warmth it was as if she was about to melt, her inability to read the mood must have been even worse than Subaru’s.

Oblivious to the blatant discomfort on the face of the target of her love, she went on pushing her obstinate, one-sided affection.

This love was entirely repulsive.

And what enraged Subaru more than anything, was—

???: “I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

Subaru: “…”

???: “I love you I love you I love you I love you—Subaru.”

Subaru: “—Don’t call me that!!”

Hearing that tender suffix, Subaru screamed back, overtaken by rage.

Every ounce of that doting voice, gesture, and address offended Subaru’s very senses.

Subaru: “Who gave you permission to call me that… Don’t make me laugh. Don’t fucking make me laugh! Don’t you fucking make me laugh!!”

Her closeness at his side.

The affection instilled in that call.

That loveliness at a distance close enough to touch.

There was only one person in the world who was permitted to address him this way.

—And it was certainly not this Witch standing before him.

Subaru: “You’re just a filthy Witch, so don’t make me laugh. There is only one person that right belongs to. And I won’t let anyone else have it. No… Even if it’s one strand of hair, one fragment of a cell, or just a speck of dirt under my nails I won’t fucking waste it on you—!”

???: “…”

Furious, abandoned to rage, Subaru spewed out the emotions spiraling inside him.

His shoulders heaved with ragged breaths as he glared at the Witch in front of him.

An enemy he had no chance of winning against.

A monster who ate half the world. Who had just disposed of Garfiel without breaking a sweat. A Witch among Witches.

The utmost calamity plunging all life into shadow, with no other interest besides continuously whispering her deranged love for one single person.

The fact that he dared to face such a monster surprised even himself.

It must be his brain short-circuiting in a state of self-abandon, he thought.

If the Witch felt like it, she could easily pull Subaru into the shadowy mire in the blink of an eye. Or otherwise skewer him through with the tips of her shadows and use him to fertilize the forest in a gory firework-show like with Garfiel.

Yet, despite knowing this, why wasn’t his heart faltering as he faced her? Perhaps it was because, deep down, Subaru subconsciously harbored a certain confidence in the Witch.

That is—

???: "…"

Subaru: "…not, moving?"

Recovering from the emotional outburst, Subaru found himself at a loss when none of the expected reactions came from the Witch.

Before he knew it, the curse-like whispers of love—that endless outpour of affection that persisted even as Garfiel was burst open, had stopped. Halted.

The shadow's erosion of the clearing seemed to have stalled—or rather, stopped completely. Distancing himself from the unpleasant sensation of the shadow beneath his feet, Subaru picked a less shadowy spot and moved himself over.

He kept his gaze fixed on the Witch as he did so, but saw no reaction.

The Witch only stood there with her arms dangling, her body shrouded as always in a shade dense enough to bend light, hiding her expression from sight.

She seemed to be so covered with openings that if he just went over and punched her, she would probably fall.

Subaru: "Why're you suddenly so… unless, was it what I said?"

"Impossible", he thought, while frowning at his inability to deny it.

It was hard to believe that Subaru's words could have had such an effect, but considering the point where the Witch's speech and movements stopped, there was just no other explanation.

Though that did not make the possibility any easier to accept.

Subaru: "If my rejection threw you off that much…"

Then if he had just screamed it out earlier, Garfiel and others may not have died.

Now that Emilia, Ram, Ryuzu, Otto, and even Garfiel, who was trying to protect him, all lost their lives to the Witch, there was already nothing left in this world for Subaru to live for.

Echidna had just assured him that there was no limit to Return by Death. And, though he wasn't aware of it himself, he was beginning to become complacent with "Life".

That was why he withdrew his plan to be the bait immediately after Garfiel rejected it, wasn't it?

Seeing that the Witch was so obsessed with him, Subaru should have known that such an action from him would provoke a reaction like this.

Subaru: "I don't know why, but… that means I'm the Witch's weak point, doesn't it…?"

If all this was due to her unwavering obsession with Subaru, then that might just be the case. The problem is, even after knowing this, would he really have an opportunity to use it?

After all, the circumstance of every Sanctuary loop so far had been different. They had Subaru scrambling to find the solutions without a single clue in sight—but in comparison, the difference in this loop was truly in the Dreadnaught-Tier.

Elsa, Garfiel, and the Great Rabbit were already unmanageable enough to begin with, but if the Witch of Envy were to be added to the fray, it would be nothing short of impossible. Just the thought of figuring out the pattern behind their appearances was enough to send his motivation into retreat.

Such was the overwhelming threat of the grotesque existence of the Witch.

Even formulating plans to resist felt ridiculous. Managing to cripple his will to fight before the fight had even begun, compared to the gargantuan White Whale, the Witch's small figure was infinitely more frightening.

???: "…"

Even though the Witch only stood there motionlessly, Subaru could feel his heart withering away.

The Witch made no effort to move. Nor did she seem to mind the turmoil of Subaru's thoughts. She simply stood there, immersed in her own world.

Time passed in this state of indecision.

His breathing, the irritatingly loud beating of his heart, and the sensation of profuse, lukewarm sweat rolling down his forehead all informed him of the passage of time.

Even if they continued staring at one another, no resolution would come. And just when Subaru drew in a deep breath, intending to take action—

A thought flashed across his mind. That is,

Subaru: "—Could it be… because of Echidna's tea party?"

???: "…"

Subaru: "I ran my mouth on all the forbidden information while I was in her Citadel… I thought if the penalty didn't come then I was allowed to do it there, but…"

—What if he wasn't?

What if the Witch never gave Subaru the permission to reveal his Return by Death? What if she saw him so carelessly spilling the words and had tried to inflict punishment as always in the world frozen in time?

What if, unable to manifest in the Witch's tea party to interfere, she instead chose to deal him a different punishment.

—What if that was the truth of the disaster that befell the Sanctuary?

Subaru: "Just how… selfish are you…?"

Was this massacre just because she couldn’t exact punishment on Subaru?

Did she think that she had the right? With this flagrant show of force, who was she trying to show off to?

???: “I love you.”

At that point, Subaru’s thoughts seemed to have arrived on a corner of the truth.

The Witch, who had been as still as a silhouette, suddenly resumed her revolting activity. She turned her eyes and what seemed to be her head to Subaru, and continued her curse-like murmur.

As if the loving whispers ratified the movements of the shadow, darkness once again began to erode the surface of the clearing. Feeling his soles sinking into the mire, Subaru quickly jumped off that patch of ground.

Subaru: “What’s with you… soon as I mention another girl’s name you get lively all of a sudden, oy!”

???: “I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

Subaru: “No matter how many times you mutter that, I’m not going to love you! My heart’s number One and Two places have already been filled. There’s absolutely no room for a Witch to come in!”

Exchange blow for blow—even if the only words coming from the Witch’s mouth were monotone repetitions of love.

But, when he sensed a definite twinge of emotion in response to his provocations, Subaru’s cheeks twisted into a wicked grin. Getting on other people’s nerves was precisely his strong suit, and it was time to test whether it worked on Witches.

Subaru: “If you keep on repeating “I love you” so lightly, they’ll just get cheapened.”

???: “I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

Subaru: “The first real “I love you” I got in this world… had the power to make a piece of no-good human garbage aspire to become a hero, you know!”

Enough to make the broken, twisted coward who only knew how to flee face his challenge head-on for a future he was on the verge of giving up on, and provide him with the strength to do so not only once, but time and time again.

Such was the strength, nobility, and greatness of genuine love.

Subaru: “So all your whispers of love can’t reach my ears at all. Especially when you committed such atrocities for some jealous fit. There isn’t a single thing I like about you.”

???: “I love you I love you I love you.”

Subaru: “If I had to love a Witch like you…”

???: “I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you—.”

What was the one thing he should say to hurt this Witch the most? Unrivaled in his ability to piss other people off, Subaru knew exactly what.

And so, with a cruel smile, and eyes filled with disdain,

Subaru: “If I had to love a Witch, Echidna and the other Witches are way more lovable than you—”

???: “…”

The moment he said those words, the Witch’s curses ceased.

And—

Subaru: “—a.”

Subaru’s vision, and the world, were instantly swallowed into darkness.

The shadows shot forth with tremendous mass and momentum as

Subaru helplessly watched on.

The black arms extending from the Witch's feet looked terribly similar to Petelgeuse's Unseen Hands. But they differed in that while Subaru could easily avoid the Unseen Hands once he saw them, the Witch's hands rushed with a speed nearly impossible to avoid.

And so, in the matter of an instant, Subaru's eyes saw himself being enveloped by shadow and lifted high over the treetops, before being pulled back down in front of the Witch at a speed faster than freefall.

The whole course of the attack happened faster than his consciousness could process, and the upheaval of his organs from the sudden lurch sent vomit spouting from his lips.

Subaru: "Ough, hu…gh."

Unable to keep his consciousness straight, his vision spun round and round.

His feet were off the ground, and his entire body felt like it was wrapped in something soft and cloth-like. Although his bondage wasn't tight, his movements were completely sealed, and he couldn't find a single point where he could apply force to break out.

He tried struggling from the tips of his fingers to his toes, but only the part above his neck responded to his commands, while the rest all yielded to the enshrouding shadow.

At last, with his vision clearing, Subaru's throat froze as he caught the vast, shadowy mass within his sight.

—Before his eyes, as in right up against his eyes, the Witch stood so close that he could almost feel her breathing.

Having caught him in her shadowy shroud, she was observing him at an extremely close range with undeviating eyes as if they were boring into his skin.

His head was held in place so that he couldn't escape that gaze.

Perhaps he could shut it out if he just closed his eyes, but somehow, even that was forbidden when his eyes met the Witch of Envy’s.

???: “I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Syllable by syllable, same as before, the Witch continued her profession of love.

Hearing those words, despite having been overwhelmed into silence, the spirit of rebellion flared up in Subaru once again.

Injecting strength into his immobile limbs, he widened his eyes, glaring back at the Witch. Then, opening his mouth to resume the barrage of insults,

Subaru: “It’s not a matter of distance. It’s that you don’t mean anything in my heart at all—”

???: “I love you. I love you. —Love me.”

Hearing his answer, there was a pause in the Witch’s voice.

Subaru furrowed his brows and blinked, wondering if he had misheard it. And seeing Subaru’s reaction, the Witch slightly lifted her head,

???: “Love me. Love me. Love me. Love me. Love me love me —Love me.”

Suddenly shivering, for the very first time, Subaru felt pure and genuine terror towards the Witch.

His heart, which he had managed to distract with rage and rebellion up to now—was suddenly stripped bare in the face of the Witch’s reworded calls.

Resolving not to falter no matter what she does or say, he had forced himself to keep his head held high.

Facing off the Witch of Envy, he thought he had understood the root cause of her obstinance.

But that meager courage and overhasty conclusion were both pulverized into dust.

Aberration. Deviant. Lunatic. Love to the point of madness. Criminal. Murderer. Witch.

Understanding that her continued whispers of love would receive none in return, this time, she was requesting love through brute force. Rather than greed, it was more along the lines of shallowness.

And there, he realized it.

The Witch desired Natsuki Subaru, but she wasn't seeing Natsuki Subaru at all.

What the Witch saw wasn't Subaru, but the vessel named "Natsuki Subaru". She wanted a superficial Subaru, and wished to be loved by a superficial Subaru. Whether or not his feelings were genuine was no concern of hers.

To love Natsuki Subaru, and be loved by Natsuki Subaru.

That was the Witch of Envy's entirety, and her reason for destroying the world.

—It made no sense at all.

Understanding this much, the question in Subaru's chest was right back to where it started.

That is, why was the Witch so obsessed with him in the first place?

They've never met or talked before. In fact, this was the first time they'd actually seen each other.

So why in the world would she be so madly in love with him?

He had no idea. There was no logic to it at all. It’d be easy to say that love was never something to be measured by common sense, but the Witch’s love had taken that to an entirely different level.

???: “—Love me love me love me love me love me love me love me love me.”

The Witch was mistaking superficial love for the genuine one.

Chances were, if Subaru just said the words, the Witch would have released him from his bondage.

If this was the usual sly, crafty, pragmatic Subaru, he might have even replied with some cringeworthy, grandiloquent response to her professions of love.

But,

Subaru: “—I hate you.”

???: “…”

Subaru: “I am never, going to love you.”

Pronouncing this rejection from his very soul, Subaru refused the Witch of Envy’s request.

???: “…”

Hearing this answer, the Witch fell silent once again.

Not many humans could claim to have dashed a Witch’s hopes so many times like this. Subaru derived a small, pointless gratification from this fact. And then, his altitude slowly began to drop.

Wrapped in his shadowy shroud, Subaru’s body that was held in the air was slowly lowered to the ground. But it was not in order to release him.

Still restrained, starting from the tips of his toes, he was being dragged beneath the Witch’s feet—little by little, swallowed into the center of the vortex.

Realizing that she couldn't obtain his heart, the Witch had decided to consume him instead. A rather short-circuited and overly materialistic idea.

There, while everything below his knees was swallowed into the shadow, with his mind tormented by the terror of the gradual loss of sensation, a sudden doubt struck him.

If he was swallowed like this, Subaru would no doubt lose his life.

So in a sense, it might be good to give up here. Embracing "Death" would be his last, half-ditched resistance against the Witch. So maybe it'd be alright if he just let himself be swallowed.

But,

—All of his "Deaths" so far had been reversed by the powers of the Witch, but if the Witch herself killed him, would he really be able to come back?

Subaru: "—!"

The moment he realized this, Subaru began his belated resistance. With the lower half of his body already swallowed into the shadow, such efforts were only naive and futile. Yet he had no choice but to try.

Come to think of it, even before the question of whether he could return, he wasn't even sure if being swallowed by the Witch would actually kill him. What if he becomes a part of the Witch after being pulled into that shadow, and ends up spending eternity without being granted the permission to die?

Over that long, long timespan, all his current resolve and determination would whittle away, and then, would he bend to the Witch in the end? Subaru wasn't confident enough to say that he wouldn't. Therefore he mustn't allow himself to be swallowed.

In the worst case, he would commit suicide by biting off his tongue before he could fall into the Witch's hands—but,

Subaru: "—uu, huh?"

That resolve was prematurely cut off by a scalding sensation on his chest.

Feeling a rising heat burning the left side of his chest, Subaru looked down to see what was happening. And there, he saw a light coming from the heat, seeping through the darkness that was enshrouding his body.

What was even more surprising was that beginning from the source of that light, the Witch's shadow was slowly vanishing as if melting away.

Subaru: "If this…!"

Before his mind could even process what this abrupt burst of light may be, Subaru twisted his body, using the light to slice through the shroud of shadows. The range of his movements widened as he shredded through the shroud, and, confirming that his arms were free, he immediately reached for the source of that light.

Grasping it between his fingertips, what he retrieved from his chest was a napkin, fluttering in the wind—with a grey cat embroidered on top. It was Petra's handkerchief.

Subaru: "Why would this…nevermind!!"

Putting off his thoughts for later, Subaru swung his arm with the handkerchief in hand. Obeying Subaru's will, the supposedly soft fabric took on an astounding resilience, and, with the sharpness of a razor it severed the bond between the Witch and the ground.

???: "…"

Subaru: "Woah! If this thing…alright!!"

Subaru stabbed the handkerchief-blade into the mass of darkness that swallowed the lower half of his body.

Burying the tip of the shining handkerchief into the shade, for a moment, the shadows rushed to envelop the light, but, without a sound, they burst apart in an instant.

With the shadows scattered away, all that remained were Subaru's two feet landing on the ground.

Immediately stumbling backwards, he confirmed that both his legs were still there. Then, readying the handkerchief at his hips, Subaru ran his eyes over the shining piece of cloth.

Petra's embroidered handkerchief. It was hard to imagine that her feelings for Subaru could have such miraculous qualities. But there, Subaru's mind turned to the one who must have done something to this handkerchief.

Subaru: "That Echidna… did she already know this was going to happen?"

"Just for insurance, insurance" he could almost hear the white-haired Witch saying.

In the dreamworld, at the closing of the tea party, Echidna had taken this handkerchief as her payment. He had never actually considered what would happen if a real world object was given away in a dream—but if this was the result of her tampering, then it really is possible to influence reality from within a dream.

In any case,

Subaru: "Guess I better say thanks… for giving me something to fight the Witch with."

???: "…"

Faced with the fact that her shadows had been destroyed, the Witch only stood there, stupefied. Seeing this opening, Subaru drew in a short breath and lunged to the Witch's side—

Subaru: "Careless to a fault!"

—and thrust the handkerchief towards the frozen Witch's flank. The Witch didn't move an inch. But the shadows at her feet shot out in self-defense, activating the protective "dress", as Garfiel called it.

Subaru: "—RuuaaaaAAAAGH!"

Yet it did nothing to stop the handkerchief's light.

Like a sharpened dagger, the handkerchief pierced through the shadowy dress, thrusting straight for the side of the Witch's face—and struck true.

Subaru: "Got her—!"

The unmistakable sensation in his hand prompted him to cry out in joy, as Subaru turned, reining the same momentum into another backslash against the Witch—

Subaru: "—Eh?"

But he stopped, when he saw it.

The Witch stood there, unmoving, looking at Subaru. The shining thrust to the side of her face had indeed landed, and had peeled away the vast, shadowy veil, revealing her face.

It was a familiar, silver-haired girl with eyes of frozen emotion staring back at Subaru.

Subaru: "Emilia…?"

She did not respond to his call. But everything else set off into massive motion.

The shadowy shroud returned. The previously-eradicated darkness beneath his feet wound around Subaru's body once more, and this time, it constricted him without mercy, causing him to shriek.

Starting from the right side of his ribs to the entire left half of his body, the shadow restrained him tightly in its grasp. Only his right arm, still holding onto the handkerchief, could still move, albeit barely, being denied the full range of its motions.

And, just like this, the immobilized Subaru was steadily pulled beneath the sea of shadows. Without a trace of hesitation, it was far faster than the last time.

First, was his lower body, and then his left shoulder submerged as well, until only his head and the right portion of his chest were still above ground.

Desperately lifting his head, resisting with his sinking body,

Subaru: “Emilia! Emilia?! Wh, how did this… why?!”

When he saw her missing from the Tomb and the Sanctuary engulfed by shadows, Subaru had thought that she was swallowed by the Witch.

At least then, his resistance against the Witch of Envy up to now would have had some meaning.

—But why was she the one wearing that shadow, attacking the Sanctuary?

He didn’t have an answer. Nor would she answer him. She didn’t see Subaru at all. A never-before-seen coldness gleamed in her violet eyes, and Subaru couldn’t be sure if her consciousness was still there.

There wasn’t even enough time to find out.

Subaru: “Gh, u, ah…”

His body was dragged deeper and deeper into the shadow.

He couldn’t feel a thing in his swallowed body. It wouldn’t be so bad if it was only a lack of sensation, but the fact that even the sense of existence was lost forced him to reassess the danger of being swallowed here.

Confirming that the handkerchief was still in his right hand, the only part of his body he could still move, his resolve was settled.

The white-haired Witch flashed across his mind once more.

He would like to amend his previous statement, and instead raise a complaint to that Witch.

Subaru: “Did that bastard Echidna seriously know it’ll turn out like this…?”

If that were the case, he’d be so moved by her scrupulous consideration that his eyes would tear up.

With tears of blood, that is—

—Closing his eyes, when he opened them again, Subaru stabbed the handkerchief into his own throat.

The sharpened point pierced into his flesh, and bore open a hole in the vital regions of his throat. Blood flooded down his windpipe and into his lungs, drowning his consciousness in red.

Suicide. The Witch of Greed had equipped him for precisely this opportunity.

It wasn’t to resist the Witch of Envy. She knew that their conversation in the Citadel would set her off. And here, she exacted her toll.

???: “—!”

Seeing Subaru commit suicide, for the first time, an emotion other than love detonated in the Witch of Envy.

But, drowning in his own blood, Subaru’s already-detached consciousness wasn’t aware of this.

Only, seeing the girl’s familiar face twisted in grief, regardless of what was residing inside her, it still pained his heart all the same to see her like this—

His throat was filled with blood, making it difficult to formulate speech. But even so, Subaru spoke, not to the counterfeit residing in her vessel, but to the girl.

Subaru: “I, will—”

—Definitely save you.

The next instant, Natsuki Subaru died.

Bonus Short Stories

Frederica and Petra's Maid Days II

1

Frederica Baumann had worked as a maid for Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers since she was around eleven years old.

After ten years of continuous service, she prided herself in lacking nothing in ability to do her job, despite being only twenty-one.

In truth, considering everything including her loyalty to Lord Roswaal, there were few now serving the Mathers family, or who had served them in the past, who could compare to her.

—A girl forgotten by the world might have been one of those, but there's no need to talk about that here.

Regardless, Frederica, with that many years of working as a maid, was in a position to provide outstanding guidance to junior maids, and she had instructed many new maids in their jobs and manners.

The number of maids she had thus trained was now more than she could count on her fingers and toes, but even to Frederica, this was a new experience—her student was too excellent, and she was having trouble deciding what to have her learn.

"Sister Frederica, I've finished my work. What should I do next?" When the girl found Frederica, she immediately smiled brightly and ran towards her. The very first thing she said was to announce the completion of her job, and then she cutely inclined her head and waited for her next instructions.

Her brown hair was tinged red, and she had fairy-like features. Her slender white limbs were long, and while it was still developing, her appearance hinted she would develop into a great beauty someday —a sigh escaped.

"Aw, you're so cute…"

"…? Sister Frederica?"

“Ah, oh, it’s nothing, Petra. When you announced that you’d finished so quickly, I was a little surprised.”

Laughing softly with a hand over her mouth, Frederica hid her admiration with a smile. This adorable, clever girl looked up to her greatly. Inadvertently revealing her honest opinion in the face of that admiration had to be carefully avoided.

As well, what she needed to be conveying now was not words in her own defense, but rather “Well, I can’t just stand here being surprised. Petra, you’ve done your work well. You’re quite skilled… as your teacher, I’m very proud of you.”

“Ahaha… I did my best.”

Frederica’s large palm gently rubbed Petra’s red-ribbon-decorated head. Smiling as though it felt ticklish, Petra did not reject that touch.

—Behold, this adorableness. One might want to have a younger Ram learn from this example.

“That girl never did speak with respect, and she would never call me Sister… This is so much nicer.”

“Um, Sister, what should I do next…”

“Hm, let’s see…Well then, all of the jobs in the mansion are taken care of for the moment, perhaps we should go shopping together in the village. Your friends in the village should enjoy seeing how cute you look in your uniform.”

“Ummm… if you say so, Sister Frederica.”

“That’s a good response. Well then, let’s be off.”

For a moment, Petra’s eyes were filled with hesitation, but the smart girl quickly covered that emotion and accepted Frederica’s intention to visit the village.

In this way, too, she was a very “mature” child.

Holding a small hand in her hand, Frederica once again felt joy over how well her new favorite student was turning out.

2

To Petra Leyte, diving in as a maid in Lord Roswaal's mansion was a big decision that required a great deal of courage.

It's lord's relationship with Earlham village was cordial, but it was not a relationship that would tolerate rudeness or recklessness. Even though she was still young, Petra understood that much, and she felt that it was unfair to live in a way that would use youth as a reason to seek tolerance from adults.

In the past, there was a time when she had taken that sort of attitude often. As a result, she now disliked her old self, and renewed her stance that being sly was inappropriate.

She, herself, wished to be in a position where she could seek the same accomplishments as an adult.

Hence, it wouldn't make sense to be using her youth as an excuse. That was her thinking.

Well, that's how Petra was, but before entering the mansion, she had an understandable fear. Even though her way of thinking was grown-up, she was still only twelve years old. It was only normal that she would, like anyone else, feel nervousness and fear about leaving her parents and starting 'work'.

Fears like 'What if the senior servant teases me?', 'What if the master doesn't like me?', and 'What if it seems like my heart will be crushed under a mountain of jobs more terrible than I could imagine?'.

However, Petra quickly came to think that each of those fears was a needless anxiety.

Petra's fears were gently, almost too easily, washed away by her tall, beautiful, golden-haired, perfect senior maid.

At the moment she arrived at the village together with Frederica, Petra's friends—Lucas, Mild, Meina, and the others who were always together—surrounded her before she knew it.

"Have a good time. You must always cherish your friends. I wouldn't want those children to be upset with me for taking you away from them."

Frederica said this as she couldn't bear to see Petra, surrounded by her friends, looking troubled as she was about to use her job as a reason to turn down their invitation.

As she was seen off by Frederica with a small wave, Petra, feeling a little like her hair was being pulled, was taken around the village by Lucas and the others.

"Oh, Petra, you're such a dear."

"That's the same uniform as Miss Ram. It's lovely!"

"Grandma, isn't the food ready yet?"

Seeing her in her work uniform from the mansion, everyone from the village gave their thoughts with a smile. A few of the responses were a little different that she'd hoped, but most of what was said was praise for her.

To be honest, it was a bit of a relief. The mansion had two different uniforms: "the graceful one worn by Frederica, and another with rather more exposure; Petra had chosen the latter.

Naturally, who she was hoping to have think she was cute when she chose it wasn't mentioned.

However, she couldn't just continue floating along on that praise.

"It's not surprising that everyone's uneasy."

Aside from the matter of Petra going to the mansion, Earlham village was carrying a great sense of disquiet.

This was due to half the people of the village having not yet returned from their evacuation—the village was half as lively as usual, or even less. Even in the faces of the adults praising Petra, she could see that they were trying to not worry the children.

“I’m a little unhappy at being treated like a child, though…”

There’s no helping that, Petra acknowledged with a sigh. The time to complain about that unhappiness would be after she had accomplishments like those of an adult. That would take more time.

Alright, I’ll do my best at the work at the mansion. Thinking that, Petra renewed her strong determination to do so.

“Everyone has had a chance to see me, and I need to get back to work, so I have to go find Sister Frederica now.”

Petra puffed up her thin chest, and announced that to Lucas and the rest. She needed to take her leave; she couldn’t stay here and play, she thought. However -

“Aw, Petra, you’re going?”

“Work is boring, let’s play.”

“We’re gonna be lonely until Subaru brings everyone back.”

“…Everyone, you mustn’t be selfish. Subaru and Lady Emilia are working hard for everyone in the village, after all. I have to help out, too.

Petra scolded Lucas and the rest as they tried to keep her from leaving, since they didn’t seem to understand what was important.

She didn’t have time to waste on childish demands. Petra’s new position required her to look at things from an adult’s perspective. She wanted them to understand that, too.

She couldn’t stay the way she was before any more. Despite that -

“Aww, boring.”

“Petra, I want to ask you something…”

“By Sister, you mean that big lady? She’s really…”

Lucas’ face was pouty, Meina looked away with uneasy eyes, Mild pointed towards the plaza, and Petra’s face went bright red after hearing the last thing that was said.

3

On the way back to the mansion, Frederica touched a hand to her cheek with a frustrated look.

One of the reasons for that was that the shopping hadn’t been satisfactory.

The situation in Earlham village, with half the villagers evacuated to “Sanctuary”, couldn’t be expected to be a perfect environment, so there wasn’t anything that could be done.

Hence, she’d make up the difference on her own, and the real problem was something else.

“Mmmm…”

Walking beside her, Petra’s face was red, her cheeks puffed out discontentedly, and her cute face was fuming.

Her view may have been biased by feeling like an older sister, but even that upset face looked cute to her. Admiring it from the side wouldn’t help fix it, however.

“Umm, Petra? What on earth is making you so grumpy?”

“Me? Grumpy? Please don’t say things like that, Sister. I’m normal.”

Petra stood her ground with a face that was completely not normal.

Spoken to like that, Frederica didn’t want to push too hard. Everything seemed normal when they’d left the mansion, so whatever had worsened her mood must have happened in the village.

At the village, she’d left Petra with her friends, hoping to let her spread her wings for a bit -

“You didn’t quarrel with your friends, did you?”

“…”

When she asked about the possibility that came to mind, Petra looked away, frustrated. It was the first possibility, but also the biggest possibility. It seems she’d hit the bullseye.

“Petra.”

“…”

“Come now, Petra, listen to me.”

Petra ignored the first time she was spoken to, but she couldn’t ignore the second.

As Frederica took a step ahead and blocked the path, Petra hesitantly came to a stop. She turned her face away, and tangled her fingers in her short brown hair. Such a cute gesture. No, no, cute is for later.

“Petra, I know you’ve heard this many times before, but you must always cherish your friends.”

“That’s… But…”

“When I was little, I lived in a unique place. There wasn’t anyone my age, and my younger years were a bit lonely.”

Trying to help the stammering Petra understand, Frederica spoke about her own childhood.

She remembered often playing by herself. So once she came to the mansion, and became involved with all the people there, she was almost overwhelmed.

“But, life at the mansion is something I treasure. I am so very fortunate. So, I hope you can feel the same way, too.”

"Sister…"

"I couldn't bear it if you were to let go of something for the sake of the mansion. Friends are a treasure for your whole life. So, Petra, you must…"

She understood that it was a difficult environment. Despite that, Petra didn't have to let go of either life. Frederica held that hope for Petra. After all,

"As far as I can tell, you are an exceptional girl, Petra."

"…"

As they'd been talking, Petra had tightly gripped her uniform's apron, and looked downward. However, at Frederica's final words, she raised her head and looked straight back with her jade eyes.

Her big, round eyes were a little dampened by tears.

"But, Sister Frederica… Everyone, they were mean… and so, I…"

"You quarreled with them. Can I ask why it started?"

They made fun of her uniform? They complained that she couldn't play? Or maybe it was when they were complaining about half the villagers still being gone.

Frederica felt uneasy as Petra hesitated. Then, slowly,

"Th… They said that Sister Frederica's mouth was scary…"

"…"

At the teary-eyed Petra's words, Frederica received quite a shock.

To think that the cause of the quarrel between Petra and her friends was the shape of Frederica's own face—the fangs that she was self-conscious about.

"That's, ah… um, I'm sorry. I was speaking so presumptuously…"

"No, that's not it. It's not your fault, Sister! It's their fault! Sister

Frederica is beautiful, and kind, and warm… and they…”

Interrupting Frederica’s apology, Petra denied her self-reproach with a raised voice. Red-faced, and using all the energy of her small body, Petra heaped praise on Frederica.

“…”

Listening to those words, Frederica unwittingly stared at Petra, wide-eyed.

What on earth was this little, cute, dear child? Was she an angel?

And, listening to that angel’s words, Frederica suddenly noticed.

“Petra, look.”

“Huh…?”

Patting Petra’s head, Frederica pointed behind her. On hearing those words, Petra turned around slowly and opened her eyes wide. There were the children from the village, looking upset.

Every face bore an expression that was sad, and wanted to apologize.

“Go patch things up with them, Petra. They’re very good friends, after all.”

“Sister Frederica…”

“And, if it’s acceptable, could you introduce me as well? If they’re Petra’s friends, I’d like to be friends with them, too.”

As Frederica smiled, and winked, Petra wiped her cute face with her sleeve. Then her face brightened, and…

“Yes! Everyone, let me tell you about how nice Sister Frederica is!”

With that, holding Frederica’s hand tightly, Petra walked briskly forward. Pulled along by that small body’s limitless energy, Frederica was a bit surprised as she followed.

Well now, these were her cute Petra’s good friends.

…Compared to the etiquette of noble society, this meeting made her quite a bit more nervous. Grinning a little from that nervousness, Frederica softly, gently returned Petra’s clasp on her hand.

Garfiel and Ram's Really Complicated Love Affair

Once every few weeks or once every few months, Ram would go to the Kremaldy Sanctuary—she was basically Roswaal's attendant, so she rarely got to visit it of her own accord.

For starters, she had barely any free time in the first place, as a servant working at the mansion.

And even if she was given time, Ram would spend it for either Roswaal or her beloved little sister.

Thus, Ram felt like this extremely exceptional situation was a result of a natural decision, too.

Garfiel: "But still, it was a rare 'ccasion."

Said a boy with golden short hair from behind her, in a good mood with his arms crossed.

He had sharp eyes and a mouth that had fangs sticking out, as well as a conspicuous, white scar on his forehead. Parts of his face were somewhat ferocious, but you could feel a charm from his smile. That's what Ram felt.

However, he was way out of her tastes, and the crude clothes he wore on his supple body were tacky. He was downright the opposite of Ram's tastes in every way possible.

But, in regard to that fact, this boy—

Garfiel: "—Huh? Why do I need t'be close t'yer tastes? Even if you'd fall fer me if I change m'self from who I am, it's not happenin'. I don't wanna see you change yerself from who you are either y'know."

It was a surprising reply, so Ram didn't think to try and say anything at that moment.

Following that logic, Ram wouldn't have affection for him—she wouldn’t have that thing a man and a woman had, since it would mean him changing himself from who he was. It was something that seemed to be understandable, and yet…

Ram: “Well, that foolish side of you is what makes Garf Garf.”

Garfiel: “Quit that, praisin’ me so much ‘s gonna make me blush.”

Rubbing the bottom of his nose with his finger, the boy—Garfiel looked embarrassed from Ram’s sarcasm. It made Ram increasingly dumbfounded, and she let out a quiet, slight sigh.

For better or worse, he was positive. However, she didn’t assess it as worse.

Garfiel: “So, Why’d yer come ‘ere without that bastard Roswaal? Ain’t this th’ first time?”

Ram: “Don’t make the mistake of thinking that I came to see you, Garf. I have someone going with me this time too. If it’s not for Master Roswaal, then there can only be one other reason for me to go.”

Garfiel: “…Which bas’cally means that…”

Garfiel, who had been intensely curious, crinkled up his nose in reaction to Ram’s cold reply. Understanding the intention of Ram’s remark, he roughly and violently scratched at his head.

And then, he opened his mouth wide to try and say something—

Garfiel: “‘Ey, Ram. Th’ truth is that in this season, deep in th’ forest…guogaa?!”

Garfiel was rapidly blown off to the side in the middle of speaking. Another person appeared in Garfiel’s place, who had instantly vanished from sight.

It was a lovely girl who shook her short blue hair, dressed in the same uniform as Ram.

Smiling like an angel at Ram, she said

Rem: “Sister, thanks for waiting. It looks like I correctly remembered the place Miss Ryuzu told me about. It seems this is the season when you can see the “White Snow Sakura”.”

Ram: “Oh. Thank goodness. I knew Rem was looking forward to it. I was planning on thinking of how to make them bloom if they actually hadn’t.”

Rem: “Haha, that makes me happy, but it’s okay. I was told the general location, so let’s get going before it gets dark. It’ll be really fun.”

Garfiel: “—It’ll be really fun, yer forgettin’ ‘bout somethin’ ‘ere, oi.”

A voice filled with suppressed anger interrupted the words that came from a slightly smiling girl with her chest filled with hope—it interrupted the words of Ram’s little sister, Rem. It was Garfiel’s voice. Sitting cross-legged on the ground, he looked up at Rem in displeasure while noisily grinding his sharp fangs.

Then, having been stared at by that look, Rem looked down on Garfiel sitting cross-legged, and she said—

Rem: “…Aah, so Garfiel was there. Sorry. You’re so small I didn’t see you.”

Garfiel: “That’s how yer gonna greet me after it’s been such a long time since we seen ‘chother? Don’t you get too full o’ yerself now. Besides, I grew tall’r since th’ last time I seen you. Look closely!”

Rem: “I was able to find you because I looked closely. If I didn’t look closely, I wouldn’t have seen you, because I only have eyes for Sister. That was close.”

Garfiel: “You blew me away, y’know! The hell are you, Peter Piper?” (Note not showing up. Will fix this when I get home. Basically Rem says sort of a tongue twister and Garfiel says one of his phrases that’s related to that.)

Standing up and raising his voice, Garfiel dealt with Rem in a very cold way as she smiled. Their interactions were always like this lately, although back then they wouldn’t be like this. It seemed that

Rem didn’t like Garfiel, who had affection for her sister. As you could see, everything about her behavior indicated that.

When she looked at Rem being like that, Ram felt all kinds of, you know, from the bottom of her heart.

Ram: “…It makes me feel truly loved by Rem, so I don’t dislike it.”

Ram felt bad for Garfiel, but feeling truly treasured by her little sister that she treasured more than half of her body gave her essential daily power.

The quarrel between her childhood friend and her sister made the passion inside Ram grow even more, and she had no idea.

Rem: “Sister, Sister. Apparently flowers called white snow sakura bloom in “Sanctuary” this season.”

The time Rem said that was when she was talking with her about how to spend the sudden day off.

About a maid’s duties, they basically had no day offs—it was a day job, but Roswaal would give the employees day offs erratically. Although Ram felt like she was unworthy, obediently accepting the master’s care was an employee’s duty. The sisters Ram and Rem were the ones to raise this time’s white flag.

So she puzzled over how she’d spend that day off, but that’s when Rem brought up her proposal. She had no objections to enjoy the blooming, rare flowers at “Sanctuary” if it was what Rem wanted.

Rem was a girl who didn’t really ask for anything selfish.

But, in comparison to Ram, Rem had a wide variety of hobbies, and she was susceptible to secretly enjoying things such as poetry and art appreciation.

That was probably linked to her interest in the beautiful scenery. It was cute.

That’s why her big sister heart wanted to grant as many of her little sister’s wishes as she could.

And so Ram went with Rem to “Sanctuary”, made a promise with Ryuzu, the land’s representative, and arranged plans for the famous “White Snow Sakura” place that she heard about.

Then, next she would spend her day off enjoying the white snow sakura peacefully with Rem—that’s what she planned.

Ram: “It’s an outrageous wish now that Garf’s found out.”

Garfiel: “‘M th’ one who’ll be helpin’ you with th’ white snow sakura in th’ first place. What’s wrong with me guidin’ you?”

Rem: “Well, I didn’t want you to find out. Your face would get ruined if the flowers fell onto your head when you look at them, Garf.”

The three of them have that conversation while walking in the forest that was feared as the “Lost Forest”.

They were walking side by side with Ram in the middle, Garfiel on the right, and Rem on the left. Rem walked arm in arm with Ram to show off to Garfiel, and he left out a cynical sigh at the end—actually, the remark just now that was mixed with a sigh wasn’t even cynical; it seemed to simply be his real intention.

Garfiel: “You really got no mercy for me. You getta see th’ flowers cuz’ of me. Don’tcha think you should be thankin’ me, huh?”

Rem: “I can’t stop feeling anxious about how someone sloppy like Garfiel would help. The white snow sakura I heard about from rumors…I wonder if they really are spotless flowers like the rumors say.”

Garfiel: “You always got a damn comeback…”

Rem made a straight face at Garfiel, who trembled all over.

Ram kinda felt like there was something pleasant about that interaction. Even Rem, someone who usually had something that made her tense, felt at ease talking with Garfiel, who she knew for a long time. Those were the only times when Rem would also let herself get spoiled by Ram, acting her age, and it would fill her big sister heart.

But, there was still Ram inside Rem's heart, and her attitude towards Garfiel was based on only that. And so, she still needed something else.

Even if it meant more different changes were needed for Rem to truly be Rem.

Rem: "—Sister? What's wrong? You haven't been saying anything."

Garfiel: "Not feelin' well? Should I carry ya? 'F y'need water, there's a place pretty close by."

Suddenly, the two of them look into her face, and Ram returns back to reality, having been in deep thought.

Rem and Garfiel put aside their interaction that happened just before, and they worried about Ram like a team.

Their kindness makes her smile unintentionally, and she shook her head.

Ram: "No, it's nothing. It's just that Rem and Garfiel's conversation was really funny. To be exact, Rem was so cute, and Garfiel was so pitiful."

When she replied in her usual manner, the two of them were relieved. It was a remark that teased Garfiel in particular, and yet she felt like they shouldn't be relieved.

If they were too kind, she'd feel bad. She'd feel bad for none other than Garfiel himself.

Garfiel: "—Oh, it's 'bout that time. Make sure yer prepared t'have yer socks knock'd off."

Garfiel the guide said that immediately after he pulled himself together.

True to its name, the Lost Forest of Kremaldy had a strange, special characteristic of obscuring the sense of direction for those that entered it. Therefore, even with Ram, the path up until this point wasn't "really" accurate.

They were able to walk around confidently because Garfiel was familiar with the path.

Rem: "I'm looking forward to it, of course, but Garf does exaggerate things."

Rem responds to Garfiel's introduction by murmuring while her eyes had slight glimmers of hope. The girl who surprisingly couldn't hide her emotions well was cute. In any case, Ram was also happy that it sounded fun.

No matter what kind of scenery would show up there, up until this point Ram had—she gets interrupted by Garfiel spreading his arms in front of her. She follows that gesture and looks at what was ahead. Ram lost her voice, eyes squinted.

—There was a pure white illusionary space that suddenly appeared inside the green forest.

White snow sakura—just like the name implied, the lined up trees all had white flowers and leaves that looked like they were covered in snow, and they all stood still calmly in the forest. The scenery was pure white. The scene even made them feel a gentle sort of warmth, despite it not being odd for the color white to give off a cold impression.

Rem: "Wo…w…"

The scene makes Rem speechless too at her side. It was clear that she was trembling because the scene she hoped for was even more beautiful than she expected.

Garfiel was also pleased with the state of the sisters.

But, this was the only time the boy didn't even act condescending, even though he was prideful.

Rem: "I-I brought a bento, but is it really okay to eat here?"

The excessive magnificence of the scenery makes Rem a little nervous, who brought a bag. However, the one to thank for this beautiful sight, Garfiel, quickly moved towards the center of the white snow sakura.

Garfiel: "'Ey, if y'wanna eat, let's eat 'ere. I feel like 'm on the toppa th' world right now."

Rem: "Hmph…fine. I'll admit my defeat for the sake of Garf's achievement, just for today."

Rem pouts with strange rivalry at Garfiel, who was triumphant. And then Ram fell one step behind of Rem and him who were spreading out the bento in the middle of the scene.

She was a little surprised by the fact that she was capable of getting overwhelmed by scenery.

Ram: "…Seems I still have a lot more to learn."

Rem and Garfiel beckon Ram, who murmured so quietly that she couldn't be heard. At that moment, Ram put back on her usual expression, and she walked up to them in a calm manner.

Rem: "Sister, it's not that easy to hold onto this, but here."

Ram: "Thanks. If it's something Rem made, then it shouldn't be that…it…it's a steamed potato…!"

Rem: "Unfortunately, it's not steamed, but…"

She held it out to her apologetically, but it was Ram's most favorite dish, so she was shocked. Once she looked at Rem, she was showing a gentle expression simply because she had huge success with her aim.

It felt like she wasn't in the palm of just Garfiel's hand, but Rem's too.

Ram: "It doesn't feel so ba…nom. Bad, but…nom"

She was having an experience that wasn't very easy to come by; she was surrounded by her favorite food, the steamed potato, and such picturesque scenery. It felt like she was enjoying a day off, which was something she wasn't really interested in, and that was weird.

That's when Ram thought about that.

Ram: "—Garf?"

Suddenly, she felt weight falling on her shoulders, and she turned towards it. Garfiel had his head on Ram's shoulder, and he was sleeping somewhat soundly. He unintentionally started napping. Ram wasn't so merciless to push him aside, but as a childhood friend, she felt it was rare for Garfiel to nap in front of people

Rem: "It looks like Garf also did his best because he wanted to show this scenery to Sister."

Ram: "…That's how it is. Rem, you were Garf's accomplice."

Rem: "I had no reason to object since he said that he wanted to make Sister happy, after all."

Rem simply smiled with pleasure at Ram, who realized that she got tricked.

Come to think of it, it was convenient. The "White Snow" that only bloomed in this season, the day off that happened at the same time, and Garfiel's guidance. —

Ram: "Did Master Roswaal know?"

Rem: "Surprisingly, it seems Garf made the request to Master Roswaal."

Ram: "Oh. …He really is an utter fool."

Ram took a side glance at the boy who had his head on her shoulder, and she let out a sigh in astonishment. Afterwards, she moves his body just a little, and she moved Garfiel's head somewhere else. —She moved it to her lap.

Rem: "Oh, Sister…"

Ram: “I have tons of compassion and kindness, so I guess I’ll show my thanks.”

Ram looks down at the boys sleeping face, and she runs her finger through his short, blonde hair. Her fingertips come across the white scar on his forehead, and the color of affection was mixed in her eyes.

Rem: “Sister, I didn’t say that you should do that much…”

Ram: “It doesn’t mean anything special. Besides, even I’ll let my guard down for however much Garf does for me. I just won’t go any further than that. —Such a fool.”

You could even call them rare flowers. She knew how difficult the troubles he went through were to make them bloom. How should she respond to so much devotion?

Ram: “Such a fool.”

Once more, Ram murmurs inaudible words to her sleeping childhood friend.

After that, she notices the situation of her little sister in front of her. Rem had a bit of a sulky look.

Rem: “Um, Sister, can you…”

Ram: “What’s up?”

Rem: “I feel kinda jealous of Garf. I want to be spoiled by Sister too…”

Ram: “—Good point. I want to thank Rem a lot more than Garf. Here.”

Garfiel: “Bugaa?!”

Rem made a cute request, and Garfiel let out cries of pain as he got thrown onto the ground. Having jumped back at his feet, feeling dizzy, Garfiel looks at Rem, who had her head on Ram’s lap, and he raised his voice again, but—

Ram: "—It feels like I'm truly loved, so it's not so bad."

With that concluding interaction, Ram whispered that with a slight smile while enjoying the day off.

END

Volume 12

Chapters 52-79

Chapter 52:
Slight Changes

The first thing Subaru confirmed upon waking up was whether this was reality or not.

After crossing between dream and reality so many times, the boundaries can get a little blurry. Especially since Return by Death usually returns him with his brain still half asleep, like he had just gotten out of bed.

Subaru: "—uu, ough."

With the return of his consciousness, the first thing Subaru felt was the taste of dirt in his mouth.

Spitting out the unpleasant flavor along with his saliva, Subaru sat himself up and looked around. A dark room, moist, frigid air, and an unsettling silence—he was inside the Tomb.

Subaru: "I'm back, huh…"

Opening and closing his fists, Subaru confirmed the tactile sensation of his body.

At the same time, he remembered how he died immediately before Returning by Death.

Subaru: "Was kinda curious what would happen if I got swallowed… but, guess suicide worked out."

Recalling the acute pain of his throat being punctured, Subaru rubbed at the phantom gash on his neck and breathed a sigh of relief.

The pain of overflowing blood clogging his throat, drowning his lungs from within, and the sense of loss, of his consciousness pulling further and further away: despite experiencing it countless times, the vividness of "Death" did not fade.

No matter how many times he went through it, “Death” always imparted fresh suffering on Subaru. But even so,

Subaru: “It still beats not coming back… and having everything broken beyond repair.”

Briefly congratulating himself for managing to return after unhesitatingly choosing death, Subaru decided to set it aside for now.

It was still early to tell whether he had actually safely returned or not.

Subaru: “This is no time to be celebrating. Anyway, better sort out what to do next, what needs to be done, and…”

And review his own resolve.

Closing his eyes, Subaru drew in a deep breath. When he opened them again, there was no longer any doubt within, and only what he must do.

Standing up and patting off the dust on his body, he looked around the room and found the girl lying on her side not far away.

It was Emilia. Most likely, the pained expression on her face was due to the past she was presently facing in her Trial.

Subaru ran over and reached out his hand to wake her. He would bring her out, meet up with Ram and Otto outside the Tomb, and then figure out what to do after that.

But there, just before his hand could touch her, Subaru noticed that his fingers were shaking.

Subaru: “…what?”

His eyes widened at his trembling fingertips as he held his hand in front of his face. His mind commanded the shaking to stop, but, still shaking of their own accord, his fingers ignored his commands. And then, Subaru noticed it.

His teeth were clattering as well, unable to close.

Subaru: “Hands and teeth are shaking…what is this…”

Although surprised by his body’s anomaly, deep down, Subaru knew why it was happening.

The cause was none other than the image that flashed across his mind the moment he was about to touch her.

—Of Emilia’s frozen, emotionless face gazing down at him on the verge of his death.

Surely, the Witch of Envy paid a visit to the Sanctuary, and, for whatever reason, enshrouded Emilia’s body within its shadow. In his final moments, Subaru had seen this with his own eyes.

Most likely, the Witch had possessed Emilia’s body while she lay unconscious in the Tomb.

Subaru had seen Petelgeuse’s ability to possess other people’s bodies, so it wasn’t hard to accept that possibility.

Besides, the reason the Witch chose Emilia’s body was simple.

Subaru had revealed too much forbidden information at the tea party. Though the Witch manifested to punish him, she was barred from setting foot in that place. So instead, she turned her attention to the unconscious Emilia at Subaru’s side.

Then the Witch took over her body, covered the Sanctuary in shadow, killed Garfiel, and swallowed Subaru—and that should just about sum up the events of the previous loop.

Subaru: “Knowing all that…why is my body still shaking…?”

Even though he could calmly recall the facts of what happened, his feeble heart could not forget the terror of being faced with that abomination.

If Subaru’s speculation was correct, then the root of that disaster was certainly the tea party he was invited to after Returning by

Death. Which means, since he didn’t attend the tea party this time, he didn’t step on that landmine.

—So he was 90% sure that the Witch wasn’t currently inside Emilia.

The fact that Subaru’s body was still instinctively voicing its objection was basically due to cowardice.

But still, he couldn’t rule out the worst-case scenario.

That is—would the Witch of Envy really give up her pursuit just because he passed through Return by Death?

Subaru: “…”

It was the Witch of Envy who allowed Subaru to Return by Death in the first place.

Subaru himself had come to this conclusion and Echidna had affirmed it. The Witch’s appearances in the past and the ending of the previous loop should have pushed it beyond reasonable doubt.

For whatever reason, the Witch didn’t want Subaru’s “Death” to be the end. For that, he was grateful. And only for that.

The question was, would such an obsessively envious, overwhelmingly powerful Witch, obstinate to the point of intruding into reality, really let Subaru go?

Subaru: “…”

If the Witch of Envy had the ability to rewind time, then it’d be far too optimistic to think that she would let Subaru use it without being able to use it herself.

If Subaru could rewind the world through “Death”, then how could he know that the Witch wouldn’t turn back time to pursue him?

His cowering heart couldn’t answer that question—though the answer was right in front of him.

Subaru: “…”

Everything would be clear if he just touched Emilia and woke her from her Trial.

If she woke, and called Subaru's name in her usual voice like the ringing of a silver chime, Subaru would be freed from these grips of fear.

But what if that was not the case?

Subaru: "…It'll be all over, then."

If the Witch shows up every time he returns, then there will truly be nothing he can do. The Witch of Envy's power was absolute, and he could not envision a scenario where they could prevail against a being with the power to plunge the Sanctuary into shadow.

Against a nightmare that so effortlessly sent Garfiel to his grave, what countermeasures could there possibly be?

In other words, this was a watershed.

Subaru: "First I wasn't sure if I'd return after death… now I can't be sure that Emilia is really Emilia? What am I…an idiot?"

Taking hold of his situation once again, Subaru let out a small sigh.

The shaking of his fingers and the clattering of his teeth vanished. Returning to his senses, he realized it.

All this vague, indeterminate uncertainty—

Subaru: "It's just the same thing that happens to anyone, isn't it?"

Not knowing the future, worrying about what will happen in the next second, are all just natural facts of life.

Even if there is the small possibility of foreseeing what's to come, what's there to be afraid of?

Such idiotic fear would be equivalent to being afraid of life itself,

Emilia: "…h, no…"

Compared to the girl being crushed by her past right before his eyes, how petty and ludicrous his hesitation seemed to be.

Subaru: "—Emilia."

Calling her name, Subaru touched the girl's cheeks with the tips of his no longer trembling fingers.

White and fair. The smooth touch of her skin transferred a warmth enough to dissolve the flesh of his fingertips. There was a small tremor in her closed eyelids as her long lashes stirred, and underneath them, a faint light glimmered from her violet eyes.

Pulled back to reality, Emilia blinked several times and noticed Subaru in front of her,

Emilia: "…suba…ru?"

Her trembling irises caught onto Subaru, and as he came into focus, she called out his name.

Her voice, her bearing, and the color of her eyes, all belonged to the Emilia he knew.

Subaru: "—Yeah, it's me."

All the shadows of doubt weighing on him, tangling over his body, vanished in a single motion.

Finally hearing her reply, Subaru let out a long, long sigh, and, propping her up with his hand behind her back, he felt his body drained of strength.

In contrast, Emilia righted herself and quickly looked over her surroundings. After confirming where she was, perhaps because her head was still a little heavy, Emilia held her hand against her head, and whispered, "So…",

Emilia: "Just now… I was…"

Confused by the pain she was feeling, Emilia closed her eyes and tried to recall her memories from before she fell asleep—and what happened while she was sleeping.

As the memories flooded back, Emilia opened her eyes and turned to Subaru with her quivering, peach-colored lips.

Waves of emotion churned in her violet pupils. Her mind was probably in turmoil over the reminders of her past. But Subaru already knew that Emilia would fall to pieces after waking from her Trial. That was why he could so calmly watch her when she was on the brink of falling apart.

All that was left was to gently hold her, trembling in his arms, and find words to console her and tell her that it was alright—

Emilia: "…Subaru?"

But just as Subaru was about to do this, Emilia reacted in a way completely different from what he had imagined.

Her unsettled eyes had calmed, and her quivering lips were stilled by an even more powerful emotion. Then, Emilia softly extended her hand towards Subaru,

Emilia: "Why… do you look like you're about to cry?"

Subaru: "…eh?"

Emilia's fingertips brushed against Subaru's forehead and made their way to the side of his widened eyes. The pale-white finger softly brushing the corner of his eye caught a drop of tear on the verge of falling. And only then, did Subaru realize that he was close to crying.

But there was no time to ask himself why.

Subaru: "a… u… eh?"

A tremor came without warning.

An uncontrollable tremor of a different dimension than the shudders of his fingers and teeth.

His whole body was shaking, robbing him of all the strength inside him. Kneeling at Emilia's side, Subaru could only curl up, hugging his own trembling body.

Then his grips began to loosen when he understood why.

If the tremor he felt before he touched Emilia was because he was afraid that she might have been replaced by the Witch—

Emilia: "It's alright, Subaru. It's alright, it'll be alright. Because I'm right here with you—"

Saying this, Emilia embraced Subaru's trembling body from the side.

Through the thin fabric of their clothing, they could feel each other's warmth. The quiet heartbeat, and the warmth transferred from her body filled his heart to the brim.

—When the fear of that possibility passed, when he knew that possibility was gone, Subaru was overwhelmed by the sense of relief.

Even though his heart wanted him to be strong, his body wouldn't obey at all.

After all, he had neither a heart of steel nor a body with the strength to protect it.

Feeling Emilia's warmth, her heartbeat, and her gentle embrace, no matter how much he despised his pathetic weakness, he couldn't help but feel relieved.

Quietly, quietly, quietly, the two went on holding each other inside the Tomb.

Emilia: "Calmed down now?"

Subaru: "Ah, y-yeah…um, sorry. Don't know what's gotten into me."

Their embrace went on until Subaru stopped trembling.

Emilia's question at the end made Subaru apologize with his face all red. Hearing this, Emilia shook her head with "That's ok",

Emilia: "It's good. Recently I've been feeling like I'm always relying on Subaru. If you show me your weak side once in a while too… I'll feel a little more relieved."

Subaru: "I got no counter to that… but I'd rather not show this side to Emilia if I can help it."

Emilia: "Why's that?"

Subaru: "Because I only want Emilia-tan to see my strong and flashy side. I don't want you to know what a weak, pathetic, hopeless guy I actually am."

Emilia: "Even if I see a little of Subaru's weak side, I won't think of you like that, you know?"

Emilia's words were gentle, but Subaru's pride did not allow him to accept them.

"She's not like that", or "she'll be disappointed to see that kind of weakness" weren't at the heart of the problem.

It was simply Subaru's—a boy's matter.

Subaru: "Not hiding their weaknesses, always exposing their true selves to others…I'm not too fond of those tear-jerking types."

Emilia: "Tear-jerking… types?"

Subaru: "It's a thing from back home. So I only want to show Emilia-tan my strong side. That's a man's conviction, you know."

As the unnutritious topic swept away the awkwardness from moments ago, Subaru smiled wryly at Emilia, who was tilting her head. But soon, his expression became rigid once more,

Subaru: "So then… I wanted to ask about the Trial…"

Emilia: "—ok."

Hearing Subaru's timid question, Emilia paused a beat before nodding in reply.

Seeing her reaction, for a moment, Subaru was almost caught off guard. Because her reaction to the word "Trial" was different from all the times before.

Most likely, it was because, after waking up, just when she was about to be stricken by the impact of having failed the Trial—Subaru's unintentionally pathetic sideshow got in the way.

Their embrace was brief, but it had given Emilia time to recover from the shock of her failure. That was probably part of the reason why she could remain so calm right now.

Subaru: "Never thought my wimpiness would come in handy…"

Emilia: "But, Subaru, why are you here? I thought I was the only one who could come in here…"

Subaru: "No, I…"

Before he could give her the honest answer, Subaru cut himself off.

And then, he began to think. —Just what would be the right answer here?

Truth is, he could easily tell her that he received the Qualification and passed the Trial. But Subaru got the feeling that if he did this, Emilia would only blame herself for failing the Trial and feel a sense of inferiority towards him.

Then inferiority would turn into anxiety, and Emilia would be trapped between the pain of guilt and self-loathing. If that happens, her present ability to remain calm would all mean nothing.

If there was a chance for Emilia to face the Trials in a different way, then Subaru should respect that possibility.

Although, whether Emilia could overcome her "Past" in the end was a different question.

—It's worth a try, Subaru decided.

Subaru: "I got worried when Emilia-tan didn't come out and couldn't help it. At first I managed to stay conscious…but once I got here, it was like what happened during the day all over again."

Emilia: "I see… sorry I made you worry."

Subaru: "Nah, actually, come to think of it, I plopped right down after I ran in as well, so I guess the people outside must be worried to death right now."

Not hearing a peep after watching Subaru run inside must be making the others just as anxious. Realizing this, Emilia turned up her face with an "Ah",

Emilia: "A-Anyway if we don't get back to everyone soon…they'll get really worried about Subaru too, right?"

Subaru: "My life or death or whatever doesn't matter that much, but we better get the message out that Emilia-tan's safe otherwise some bad things could happen."

Emilia: "…how could you say that."

Hearing Subaru's exaggeration, Emilia shot him a reproachful gaze. Being looked at like that, Subaru said "Sorry", lightly shrugging, as the two of them began walking out of the Tomb.

On the way, Subaru continued, "So then",

Subaru: "Can you tell me about it? The um, about the Trial."

Emilia: "…Sorry. I… seem to have failed it."

Subaru: "Is that right…mn, guess I kinda figured it out from your reaction."

Emilia looked away, apologizing, and, seeing her like this, Subaru pretended to have just found out.

Although it stuck him with pangs of guilt, he only shook his head and stifled back his indecision,

Subaru: “So does that mean… it’s over now?”

Emilia: “I don’t think we can say that yet… You’re allowed to challenge as many times as you want. I don’t know why, but I just know that. Well…”

Echidna had explicitly revealed the nature of the Trials. But while Subaru already knew this, Emilia seemed to only be subconsciously aware of it.

Emilia’s words trailed off towards the end, and, after a brief hesitation,

Emilia: “Nevermind, it’s nothing. I guess it’s done for today, I’ll try again tomorrow.”

Subaru: “Are you sure? If it’s too much, it’ll be alright to wait a few days…that way we can find more patterns and countermeasures to raise our chances.”

Emilia: “Thank you…but, I know that won’t solve the problem. I know it won’t.”

Subaru: “…You might feel better if you talk about it… not that I actually know what I’m talking about.”

He took a glance at Emilia as he spoke, and saw her lift up her eyes to meet his gaze, with her lips quivering. But just as her tangled emotions were on the brink of pouring out, Emilia closed her eyes, as if abandoning the idea,

Emilia: “—I’m sorry. I… can’t let Subaru see what I’m feeling right now.”

Subaru: “No matter which part of Emilia-tan I see, I’ll never dislike Emilia-tan because of it, you know.”

Emilia: “It’s not that I’m afraid of what Subaru will think. No, maybe a little…but I’m afraid of something more than that.”

Emilia became silent. But even so, Subaru could see that the strength within her violet pupils had not wavered, confirming that his prodding was successful.

As long as he keeps supporting her like this, Emilia will eventually give in and reveal her weakness to him. But those were not the kinds of thoughts he should be thinking.

Acting like he knows everything, playing Emilia's heart in the palm of his hand, such a revolting self made him want to vomit. —Even though, knowing that it was necessary, there shouldn't be any reason to feel this way.

???: "—Lady Emilia!"

Pressing down his self-loathing as he continued his steps forward, what pulled him back to reality was the dazzling light of the moon, along with a voice calling to the girl beside him.

The pale blue moonlight shining into the Tomb's entrance, accompanied by a cool, refreshing wind, greeted them as they stepped out of the Tomb. Looking down, he could see relieved expressions appearing on the faces of the party waiting for Emilia's return.

It looked like the first to call out to Emilia was Ram. After confirming that Emilia was safe, Ram breathed a rare sigh of relief before turning to Subaru, standing beside Emilia,

Ram: "And Barusu, good work."

Subaru: "OOooohhh… I didn't expect you to say something nice like that, I'm surprised. What's with the admirable attitude, it's not like you at all?"

Ram: "If you occasionally perform a good task, I will compliment you like this. At least you brought Lady Emilia back safely, so I will give you the appropriate evaluation. Master Roswaal would be pleased too."

Although being able to report to her master seemed to be her primary reason for feeling relieved, it was still a fresh new joy for

Subaru to receive such a straightforward compliment from her. While smiling like an idiot, Subaru nonchalantly drifted his gaze to the person next to Ram—the golden-haired youth among the welcoming party, standing a bit farther away.

Garfiel, who had been leaning against the trunk of a tree, uncrossed his arms and walked over with leisurely steps. Subaru couldn't sense anything suspicious about his attitude or movements, but then again, Garfiel could close their distance in an instant if he wanted to.

Coming out of the Tomb after Returning by Death twice in a row, there was more than enough reason to be worried. Although he couldn't gauge the current strength of his own "Stench", just the thought of it made Subaru put up his maximum caution.

Then, when Garfiel arrived in front of the stiffened Subaru, the first thing out of his mouth was,

Garfiel: "Was wonderin' what'd happen when y'ran in like an idiot there. Good t'see y'back safe. All that time I was thinkin' "Gafugaron nuts don't fall from winds", but sure kept me on edge."

Subaru: "Ow! Oy, st-, ow! Hurts!"

Saying that with a smile, Garfiel violently and repeatedly slapped Subaru on his shoulder.

Under those bone-numbing impacts, for a moment, Subaru thought "Is Garfiel attempting an accidental assassination?!", but, seeing the way he was flashing his teeth smiling, Subaru just couldn't sense that kind of malice from him.

It really just looked like he was welcoming their safe return. Facing yet another unexpected reaction, Subaru couldn't hide his disbelief any longer,

Subaru: "That's…it?"

Garfiel: "Hah? What. Y'want me t'pat ya on the head for a job well done as well?"

Subaru: “If it’s Emilia then it’s one thing, but who’d want to be patted by you? No, I mean…”

Subaru was just about to ask why everything was turned on its head, but stopped himself when he realized that there was no need to poke the bear on purpose. Regardless of what Garfiel’s true feelings were, it was fortunate he wasn’t in the mood to attack on sight.

In any case, Subaru was starting to get an idea of which conditions make Garfiel bare his fangs. If he could just sidestep the worst conditions that make Garfiel turn hostile no-questions-asked, he should be fine.

Subaru: “You know, it’s kind of a headache trying to decide how to deal with you.”

Garfiel: “The hell’s that supposed to mean, oy?”

Subaru: “It’s a thing from back home. Anyways, let’s get back before going into the details. I want to let Emilia get some rest first. We can discuss the plan after that as well.”

No one objected to Subaru’s proposal.

Emilia apologized to everyone with “I’m sorry”, then Ram took her by the hand and led the party back towards the Sanctuary—opting to settle down in Ryuzu’ house once again.

Emilia didn’t fall to pieces. And Garfiel remained friendly despite Subaru’s Return by Death.

Facing conditions entirely different from before, Subaru’s mind scrambled to find of the best course of action, as well as how best to approach “Death” from here on.

There were too many things he needed to know, too many he needed to test.

Just how many sacrifices will he have to make in order to grasp the best possible future in the end?

Setting about his calculations, Subaru didn’t notice how he neglected to enter his own life into the equation.

Ryuzu: “…”

Nor did he notice the way Ryuzu was staring at him from behind.

And walked on without ever noticing.

Chapter 53:
Overlapping Inquiries

After leaving the Tomb and returning to the Sanctuary, their discussion continued in Ryuzu's house.

In terms of content, there was almost no difference from the previous loops: Emilia announced that she had failed her Trial and that she intended to keep trying.

Beyond that, Emilia didn't give any more details, and, noticing this, Ram dismissed the meeting on account of Emilia's health.

Going through the night's events in their minds, they each left for their respective lodgings, until the only ones left in the room were Emilia, Subaru, and Ram.

Ram: "Ram will now help Lady Emilia retire for the night, but it seems a Barusu hasn't realized that he's overstayed his welcome."

Subaru: "Thanks for the non-roundabout way of telling me. Considering Emilia's condition, I guess I should leave you to it… but, I just want to have a minute. Can I be alone with Emilia for a bit?"

Ram: "Disgraceful."

Subaru: "You're the one who immediately thought of it like that!"

He vehemently objected to Ram's look of disdain, but the pink-haired maid only pretended not to hear anything. Then, she looked to Emilia, who was sitting on the bed,

Ram: "What do you think, Lady Emilia? If you do not wish to hear Barusu's rubbish, Ram will dispose of him straight away."

Subaru: "What do you know? How can the gentle, kind-hearted Emilia-tan possibly reject me, right?"

Emilia: "I'm reeeaally tired tonight, if Subaru wants to chat about all sorts of voluminous topics like usual, then we'd better not…"

Subaru: "Haven't heard anyone say "voluminous" in a while. … Besides, I'm not in the mood for that either. I'll leave seducing Emilia-tan for another time. I just wanted to talk about the Tomb for a bit."

Despite this usual exchange between them, Emilia still looked uneasy. But, hearing Subaru bring up the topic of the Trials, Emilia closed her eyes for a moment before turning her violet pupils to Ram with "Sorry", signaling her to leave the room.

Silently obeying her instruction, Ram bowed and headed for the door. And as she passed by Subaru's side, she quietly whispered—

Ram: "Please refrain from any topics that might overburden Lady Emilia."

—Issuing this severe command lest he should forget.

With the sound of the bedroom door closing, only Subaru and Emilia were left in the room.

On the bed, Emilia looked up at Subaru with an earnest gaze in her eyes, and Subaru lightly shrugged,

Subaru: "I barely had a chance to check while inside the Tomb, but are you really feeling alright? Considering the way I found you, I'm still really worried."

Emilia: "It's, alright. Mn, thanks. But really, I don't feel anything strange with my body or mind. Besides, if there's anything to worry about, I should be more worried about Subaru, you know?"

Subaru: "Wh-Why's that?"

Emilia: "There's no "wh-why" anything. Subaru… even though I'm glad you came to find me in the Tomb when I didn't come back, something also happened to you in there, right? Ram said it had been almost thirty minutes after you went in when you came out with me again."

In front of Emilia's reproachful gaze, Subaru poked out his tongue in his mind.

Despite trying to throw her off the scent inside the Tomb, it seemed that Emilia still noticed something was off from Ram's superfluous remarks. —Imagining what might have happened over the unaccounted timespan from when he entered the Tomb to when they came out again, Emilia's face stiffened.

Naturally, the events of the Trial resurfaced in her mind.

For the first Trial, she had to face her own past, and in the initial loop, just the thought that Subaru might know what happened within that Trial distressed Emilia to no end.

Even though she had remained calm in this loop so far, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that she'd lose her current composure when she reaches that same conclusion. So,

Emilia: "Subaru, could it be… Subaru took the Trial as well…?"

Subaru: "Nono, nothing like that. I mean, it's not like they'd let anyone take the Trials. Besides, I was only in there for so long because I was trying to wake Emilia up."

Emilia: "Because of me?"

Subaru: "Yeah. It looked like you were having a nightmare so I was frantically trying to wake you up, but you were sound asleep, like you were trapped inside the dream. I thought about carrying you out just like that, but I got a feeling that something crazy bad might happen if I did."

He said, with exaggerated movements to cover his deception.

Emilia didn't say anything to refute him. Naturally, she had no way to verify whether he was telling the truth. Since Subaru said so, even if she had doubts in her mind, there was no way to prove them.

Emilia: "I… see. Sorry, for having that weird thought."

Subaru: “No, don’t be. Although, if only I could take the Trials too, maybe I’d be able to be at Emilia’s side and we could beat the Trials together.”

Emilia: “…I don’t know. Subaru and I might not see the same things…”

Emilia’s words grew weak towards the end, but she didn’t probe any further into Subaru’s lies.

She didn’t want anyone to know the truth of the past she failed to overcome, and her mental state probably made her want to believe Subaru when he claimed to know nothing about its contents.

Even now, Subaru was playing Emilia’s heart in the palm of his hand.

Emilia: “So then, what was it that you wanted to talk about? That wasn’t the main subject just now, right?”

Subaru: “Yeah. That wasn’t the main subject. There’s something else I wanted to ask.”

Emilia: “Something you wanted to ask?”

Emilia tilted her head.

Watching the cascade of silver hair falling from her shoulders, Subaru went on, “Yeah, something I wanted to ask”,

Subaru: “Lately, I haven’t seen Puck around… is he still not responding?”

Emilia: “Uh, mn… yeah. Puck still hasn’t responded. I keep calling him, but it’s like he’s asleep inside the crystal.”

Suddenly hearing that name brought up, Emilia cast down her eyes and answered.

Her white fingers reached to her chest, and grasped onto the green, beautifully glistening crystal. But the crystal that housed the Great Spirit Puck seemed to have all but lost its radiance.

Subaru: “…Any idea why?”

Emilia: “Even though there were times like this before when my calls couldn’t reach him, he’d always be back after two or three days. But this time it’s been almost a week… I’m starting to get worried too.”

It was the same little grey cat who once proclaimed that it will protect Emilia.

As that tiny figure emerged in Subaru’s mind, his thoughts turned to the calamities that befell the Sanctuary, and to Emilia, caught up within it.

When the so-called Great Rabbit attacked the Sanctuary, most likely everyone present became its food—that was what Subaru imagined, at least.

Garfiel, Ram, Roswaal and the others would have all been among the victims. And naturally, Emilia would have been one of them.

The sensation of being shredded, devoured, having their own existence become slivers of meat in another organism’s belly—the thought of what Emilia and the others must have experienced filled Subaru’s lungs with boiling rage and grief.

But, setting this fury aside, Subaru’s thoughts landed on the useless spirit who sat idly by while harm was allowed to come to Emilia.

It was the same in the last loop when Emilia’s body was possessed by the Witch.

The flood of shadows was covering over all the world, and Emilia was wrapped in that eerie shroud. Her body was taken over by the Witch’s will while the tall-talking Great Spirit did nothing.

All talk and no action, hollow words in the extreme.

Subaru: “All this time, the only big contributions from that guy were the fight with Elsa and those Sapporo Snow Festivals I got caught up in… Can’t help but think that he’s totally unreliable at this point.”

While holding his chin, showering complaints about Puck, Subaru forced his mind to think.

Calamities were about to befall the Sanctuary, which meant that Emilia would be in danger. Since Garfiel and Roswaal could not repel them, Subaru would have to find something to even the odds, and Puck was precisely what he needed.

Subaru: “You don’t happen to know any other way to reach Puck, do you? If he’s here, all sorts of topics could suddenly move forward.”

Emilia: “—I don’t… know of any… I think.”

Subaru didn’t expect much from this question, and Emilia gave the expected reply. It was just that there was something about the brief moment of hesitation before her answer that tugged at Subaru. But, before he could ask about it,

Emilia: “Was there something you wanted to ask Puck?”

Subaru: “Hm? Ah, yeah, since it’s a Witch’s Tomb, and it’s been there for over 400 years, I figured we should ask a guy who was around back then. Maybe we could make a few breakthroughs that way.”

Hearing Subaru’s prepared excuse, Emilia nodded in agreement. Then, as if earnestly considering his proposal,

Emilia: “That’s… right. Puck might, just know something… mn, I got it. I’ll try even harder than usual to call him.”

Subaru: “O-K. I’ll look forward to Emilia-tan’s success, then.”

Emilia was determined to beat the Trials. She was unaware that Subaru had taken the Trial as well. And, so far, her motivation hadn’t waned.

Puck was still holed up in his crystal, unwilling to come out, so probably couldn’t be expected to make an appearance in this loop. Considering how he wouldn’t offer any help to make things easier for Subaru, and how they left things at the end of their last conversation, Subaru's opinion of Puck was only continuously worsening.

Subaru: "Well, I shouldn't stay too long. Ram will get some weird suspicions and that'll give her even more reasons to bully me, so I better get going. Although, if Emilia-tan wants someone to sleep with, I wouldn't mind…"

Emilia: "I don't want someone to sleep with though?"

Subaru: "Oooog. So straightforward…got nothing to say to that…"

Giving the confused-looking Emilia a wry smile, Subaru headed for the door.

In any case, this was as far as their conversation would go tonight. He had no way to delve any deeper into Emilia's personal problems right now.

All Subaru could do was create an environment where Emilia could focus on her Trials while he would try to break through the dire circumstances surrounding them.

Emilia will challenge the Tomb, and Subaru will challenge the Sanctuary.

Meanwhile, he mustn't let Emilia know of his efforts behind the scenes. To her, that would only be another burden.

Subaru: "Well, good night, Emilia-tan. If you get nightmares, you're always welcome to come fleeing to my side."

Emilia: "If I go all the way to bother Subaru, the villagers will be pretty shocked, right? …Hey, Subaru."

Subaru: "Hm?"

Just as he was about to leave with that joke, he was stopped by Emilia's call.

Turning around with his hand on the door, he saw that Emilia's lips were trembling and there was hesitation in her eyes, Emilia: “No, it’s nothing. Good night. Stay safe.”

Subaru: “No kidding about that last part… G’night.”

With a wave of his hand, Subaru burned Emilia’s smile into his mind as he left the room.

Closing the bedroom door behind him, Subaru looked up and saw Ram sitting in a chair in the adjacent living room, sipping from a cup of steaming black tea.

Even though the house was vacated out of its owner Ryuzu’ hospitality, that didn’t seem to deter the maid from her usual insolence. Seeing this, Subaru let out a wry smile.

Subaru: “I should say sorry to have kept you waiting… but, seeing your lackadaisical attitude, I kinda don’t want to anymore.”

Ram: “Ram was rather expecting some sort of compliment for not touching the sweets. —You didn’t do anything improper to Lady Emilia, I hope?”

Subaru: “You know I always put Emilia above everything else, so what kind of question is that? You’re the one who should be careful not to give Emilia anything weird to worry about…although I guess I can trust you there.”

Her attitude towards Subaru was definitely ≠ her attitude towards Emilia.

Ram’s conduct could be considered vicious depending on who you ask, but it was precisely because of her refreshingly blatant discrimination that Subaru deemed her worthy of trust.

Hearing Subaru’s snortle, Ram finished the remaining contents of her cup and stood up. Then, watching her walk towards the bedroom,

Subaru: “By the way, you got a minute?”

Ram: “Disgraceful.”

Subaru: “What kind of indiscriminate beast do you think I am?!”

Hugging her own body, Ram quickly placed some distance between herself and Subaru. Naturally, Subaru knew that she wasn’t being serious, but, deep down, it still hurt to see a girl react like this.

Subaru: “Don’t know why I have to say this, but, I’ve never looked at you in any sexy kind of way, you know.”

Ram: “The fact that you said it with such bestial lust has completely destroyed your credibility. Besides, I’ve been sensing something strange in Barusu’s gaze ever since you arrived in the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “What’s that supposed to mean? That kind of baseless accusation is totally unheard of, you know! You sure you’re not just being overly self-conscious?”

Ram: “You are unaware of it, then. Somehow, your gaze seems to be strange and distant whenever you look at me. I don’t know who, but it’s as if you’re looking at someone else through Ram.”

—What she said was true, and that Subaru himself had failed to realize it only made it all the more shocking.

As if having just taken a blow to the head, Subaru could sense his thoughts freeze still. His face stiffened and his eyes swam. But, resenting the fact that he was reacting this way, he quickly recovered himself and shrugged,

Subaru: “I-I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Ram: “It really is strange that you’d only realize it after I pointed it out. But that gaze wasn’t entirely unpleasant… that’s why I didn’t say anything until now.”

Watching the shaken Subaru, Ram softly sighed.

Her attitude was different from the way she was always teasing him, almost like she was being considerate of his pain.

Their appearances were nearly identical, but inside, they were completely different. Even though he should have known this, whenever Ram behaves so gently towards him, it'd almost feel as though she and the sleeping girl were beginning to overlap.

What Ram pointed out was true. She wasn't mistaken. Through Ram, Subaru was seeing the girl who looked almost exactly like her. And he couldn't help it.

It was also Ram who made him realize this.

Ram: "…So, was there something you wanted to ask me?"

Subaru: "Uegh?"

Ram: "It wasn't my intention to depress Barusu. In fact, making Barusu depressed is quite low on my priorities list. Right now, Ram intends to wait on Lady Emilia and return to Master Roswaal's side. So if you don't start talking, you wouldn't mind if I start ignoring you?"

Subaru: "No wait… uuh, right. I wanted to ask about Garfiel."

Imposing on Ram's rare display of patience, Subaru wrenched out the question he had wanted to ask.

Hearing this, Ram's brows lifted in surprise, breaking her apathetic expression,

Ram: "Did something happen between you and Garf?"

Subaru: "Nothing yet, but can't guarantee what might happen later on. I'll have a lot more opportunities to run into that guy, and you seem to have known him for a while, so I figured I should try asking you."

Ram: "Is that so… well, I'll take your word for it."

Saying this as if having seen through Subaru's mind, Ram touched her hand to her chin.

Ram: "So, what did you want to ask about Garf?"

Subaru: "Well, I already know that guy's ridiculously overpowered, but, uh… what do you think will get Garfiel to leave the Sanctuary?”

Ram: “…That’s, certainly a strange question.”

Subaru: “I figured there’s no point beating around the bush here. Guess it doesn’t matter whether you think I’m strange or not at this point.”

Unlike Emilia, whom he wanted to hide his underhanded dealings from, it’d be alright if Ram was let in on some of his secret activities. In fact, whether it was the upcoming release of the refugees or the inevitable events that will be unfolding outside the Sanctuary, it would be more convenient if Ram knew about them beforehand.

Ram: “I don’t know what you’re plotting, and I’m not interested, but if you want to get Garfiel out of the Sanctuary… well, it’s not entirely impossible if Ram implored him.”

Subaru: “Love’s his weak spot, huh. I thought of it too, but it’s kinda hard to say the words.”

No doubt Ram would be far more persuasive than Subaru if she was the one to raise the issue with Garfiel. But then Subaru remembered what happened after Garfiel morphed into a giant tiger to chase him as he tried to leave.

There, Garfiel even turned his claws on Ram, the person he supposedly loved, just so he could continue hunting Subaru. Ultimately, the Sanctuary was more important to him than Ram.

Subaru: “But, Ram… That’s probably…”

Ram: “Right. It’s probably useless.”

While Subaru was agonizing over how to respond without sounding like he already knew, Ram casually affirmed his thoughts.

Seeing Subaru’s eyes widen, Ram brushed her hand through her peach-colored hair, Ram: “While Garf is certainly enraptured by Ram, he has already decided on the priorities in his heart. Just like what Master Roswaal is to Ram.”

Subaru: “So there’s something else even more important to Garfiel…? Do you know what that is?”

Ram: “I know. But I won’t tell you.”

Suddenly averting her eyes, Ram did not answer his question. Subaru continued staring at her, as if requesting that she answer him, but, unfazed, Ram only sighed,

Ram: “It is certainly conceited to want to one-sidedly surmise the heart of another. Garfiel’s heart belongs to Garfiel. If you wish to know, you can ask him directly.”

Subaru: “Hey which one of us is the living definition of conceited here? …And did you know about Roswaal’s book?”

Ram: “…Where did you hear about that?”

Just like this, they traded blows, tit for tat.

Although he knew that Ram was right, Subaru’s rebellious spirit still pushed him to object. Ram reacted fiercely to this unexpected question, narrowing her eyes as if to pierce through Subaru with her gaze,

Ram: “Depending on what you say next, I may soon need to hurt you.”

Subaru: “And that would be disobeying Roswaal’s wishes, wouldn’t it? Drop the act, Ram. You can’t do anything of the sort.”

At least, Ram had never harmed Subaru since they arrived in the Sanctuary. Not only that, one time she had even proclaimed her intention to help him without Roswaal’s express orders.

It was with this in mind that Subaru provoked her, having seen through the fact that she would not physically attack him. Hearing this, Ram’s expression darkened, Ram: “Your eyes have become sickening, Barusu.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Ram: “I don’t know what you saw in the Tomb, but it mustn’t have been anything good. This current Barusu is so sickening that I have no desire to speak to you anymore.”

Subaru: “…What I saw in the Tomb… was a kind of hope for me. Don’t just go labeling it as nothing good.”

Recalling his encounter with the white-haired Witch—Echidna, Subaru curled his lips at Ram’s implicit rejection of their meeting.

Although his discussion with Echidna had led to the tragedy of the previous loop, Subaru nonetheless believed that he had received more than what he had paid. Just having someone he could confess Return by Death to was already plenty enough compensation.

Subaru: “…”

For a moment, Subaru and Ram’s eyes met.

Just what could be residing within the depths of those faintly wavering eyes? Subaru strained his awareness to see it, but, before the image could take shape, it dispersed as she looked away.

Ram: “You should leave now. It wouldn’t do to make Lady Emilia wait much longer.”

Subaru: “…Sorry to have kept you. I know… that what you’ve said wasn’t wrong.”

At last, he apologized for his brashness, and Ram, accepting his apology, turned away and headed for the bedroom.

Watching her maid’s dress disappear behind the closing door, Subaru exhaled a long, deep sigh, and left Ryuzu’ house.

The breeze sweeping through the Sanctuary brushed against Subaru’s hair as he came out of the building. Breathing in the scent of grass carried in the night’s wind, Subaru stepped out into the night-befallen Sanctuary and headed for his bed in the Cathedral.

Walking across the grass, and following along the trail by the light of the moon, Subaru began to think on how he should make use of his time in this loop.

Having been assured that there is no limit to Return by Death, Subaru was now able to do something he had never done before—that is, to sacrifice an entire loop solely for the purpose of gathering information.

Since he was already determined to throw in his life, there would be no other, more efficient way to take advantage of Return by Death.

Subaru: “If I just try something different each loop, the solutions to all the obstacles are bound to start appearing one by one…”

And then, all he would need to do would be to link them together and fulfill them all in a single loop.

To break through the obstacles that stand in his way, and beautifully hold onto everyone’s futures: that, would be his perfect victory.

Although, just who would be included in that perfect victory was something to consider in and of itself.

Subaru: “…”

Suddenly, Subaru stopped—

—when he smelled something in the wind other than the grass beneath his feet.

Subaru looked up. And in front of his field of vision, was a youth standing in the middle of the star-lit path.

With his arms crossed and his spiky golden hair fluttering in the wind, Garfiel gave his fangs a click.

Subaru: “You sure are a timely bastard.”

Garfiel: “What’s that, y’don’t seem surprised t’see me. Well, that’s kinda odd, but does help move th’conversation along.”

Just after he was talking about him with Ram, Garfiel showed up here. Subaru couldn’t help but scratch his cheeks and remark on the timing.

Then, Garfiel gestured with his head, as if signaling something to Subaru.

The small figure took a few steps, went off the path, and headed towards the forest.

Watching the figure go further and further away, venturing into the thick undergrowth of the forest, Subaru did a light stretch and turned to the Cathedral—

Garfiel: “Wasn’t I tellin ya t’follow me with that nudge just now?! Oy!!”

Garfiel came running over shouting abuse at Subaru, who was trying to walk away, and Subaru held up his arms and shrugged,

Subaru: “Just a little joke. I didn’t miss the point, don’t worry.”

Garfiel: “Kinda pissin’ me off here. Y’keep up or I eat ya.”

Subaru: “Normally, wouldn’t saying something like “I won’t eat ya” have a more calming effect here?”

Roughly swinging out his strides again, Garfiel didn’t respond to Subaru’s comment. Subaru had a bad feeling about how Garfiel sounded like he wanted to say something but didn’t, but all there was to do now was to follow in small quick steps behind him.

Leaving the main road and entering the forest, after walking a short distance, Garfiel snorted.

They’ve arrived in a small clearing amidst the rows of trees, about the size of a round table enough to seat 4 or 5 people. There, Garfiel turned around, Garfiel: “So… th’hell did y’bastard see in th’Tomb?”

Subaru: “…you too?”

After Emilia and Ram, he was the third person to ask him that.

Unlike with the previous two, Subaru would have to be cautious what answer he gives to Garfiel, since he probably wouldn’t give up asking until he’s gotten to the bottom of it.

Not minding the thoughts going through Subaru’s head, Garfiel spat out “Me too, huh?”, and clicked his fangs, as his golden irises narrowed into slits,

Garfiel: “I don’t know who said what t’ya where, but I ain’t gettin’ ignored so easily. “Suspicious Berube extends th’same t’his family”, as they say.”

Subaru: “Sorry, I took a bit of time trying to wake Emilia in the Tomb. Whatever you think I saw in there is just your imagination, you know.”

Garfiel: “Y’got some nerve givin’ me that. Yer whole body’s reekin’ of the Witch’s stench, y’think y’can fool me with that? Ah?”

Subaru: “…”

Wrinkling his nose as he said this, Garfiel’s words were full of hostility.

Hearing this, Subaru couldn’t say a thing. Yet, at the same time, he also sensed that something was out of place.

The reason for Garfiel’s hostility—was the Witch’s lingering scent.

That had been Subaru’s conclusion in all the loops so far, and what Garfiel just said also verified this. The problem was, the timing of when he brought this up in this loop was strange.

Subaru had been terribly nervous as he came out of the Tomb, expecting some sort of attack from Garfiel.

Subaru had just Returned by Death, after dying right in front of the Witch, no less. So the Witch's lingering scent must have been far thicker back then than now.

But, unexpectedly, Garfiel did not take any actions to attack him. Instead, he even seemed to be expressing genuine relief for Subaru and Emilia's return.

All throughout their meeting in Ryuzu' house, and as he watched Garfiel leave the room, this very point had been bothering him.

Up until their parting, everything had been normal, and yet when they met again after only 10 or so minutes, Garfiel's attitude had drastically changed, and Subaru couldn't imagine why.

Could it be that the stench was so pungent that his nose lost all sense of smell, and it only managed to recover after some time had passed?

Subaru lifted his arm to smell himself, but could only smell the fatigue that had accumulated over the course of the day. Resolving to wash himself as soon as he gets the chance, he turned to Garfiel.

Subaru: "About that Witch's lingering scent… I've had quite a few people point that out to me before."

Garfiel: "…Heh, that so? Those guys must have been pretty accommodatin' t'not do anythin' about it, oy. Such a revolting smell too, why would they, I wonder."

Subaru: "They probably decided to overlook how I smelled and judge me based on my actions instead. It'd be a great help if you could do that too. At least, you let me go when I just came out of the Tomb, right?"

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "My loyalty to Emilia is beyond question, and I don't intend to do anything to harm the Sanctuary. I hope you can believe that much. So, if you could just quietly let me off that'd be a huge help."

From a conveniently optimistic standpoint, the fact that Garfiel didn’t attack the moment Subaru opened his mouth at least showed that he was still rational. So it should be possible to reach a compromise through words.

In fact, Subaru could almost see a slight waver in Garfiel’s eyes. After all, Garfiel wasn’t the kind of person who would thoughtlessly eliminate Subaru just because he could sense the Witch’s scent on him. It was only when that stench was combined with some other condition that he began to take action.

Whatever it may be, in this loop, it didn’t seem to have triggered yet. So it was up to Subaru to find out just what that trigger is in the meantime.

Garfiel: “…Y’haven’t answered my first question.”

Subaru: “Mm?”

Garfiel: “What did y’bastard see. In the Tomb. Whether I let y’go or not will depend on th’answer y’give me.”

Glaring at Subaru, Garfiel asked again, though the force in his voice had somewhat diminished from before.

There were only two kinds of answers Subaru could give him—the truth, or the same lies he told to Emilia. Which one was the right solution? There was a need to make sure of that,

Subaru: “In that case, let me ask you a question as well.”

Garfiel: “Don’t get yer situation wrong here. I ask, y’answer. Y’want me t’eat ya?”

Subaru: “Don’t be mad. Allow your shoulders to relax, and just take it easy and answer.”

Garfiel bared his fangs, while Subaru slightly wiggled his shoulders and drew in a deep breath.

Keeping the question lodged in his throat, he locked his eyes onto Garfiel, and,

—Here's the moment of truth.

He encouraged himself with that thought,

Subaru: "—I saw a bunch of kids who looked exactly like Miss Ryuzu, you know anything about that?"

Chapter 54:
Hell I Do Know

1

As the fatal question escaped his lips, Subaru realized exactly where he stood.

The words came out, landing safely in Garfiel's ears—and the golden-haired youth's expression changed. Witnessing this, for a moment, Subaru's thoughts froze still.

It was the same Garfiel who had always kept up his guard around Subaru, sustaining the tough facade with his razor-sharp leer, determined not to show any sign of weakness.

But now, that expression was being twisted into something else.

It was almost like the expression of a child on the verge of tears after his most precious secret had been revealed.

Garfiel: "You… th'hell did y'just say?"

But that fleeting, transient expression only lasted for an instant.

As if eradicating that lapse of weakness, Garfiel squeezed shut his eyes, grit his teeth, and glared back at Subaru like a man possessed.

The silence that permeated the forest and the almost-lonely stillness was abruptly turned, as goosebumps crawled across Subaru's skin on the receiving end of that stare.

It was his body reacting to the threat of impending danger. An exaggerated reflex to—

Subaru: "You look like you're going to kill someone."

Touching on "that topic" must have been the last thing Garfiel wanted. His reaction made Subaru quite certain of that.

Without uttering a sound, the coldness of Garfiel's glare only intensified with Subaru's mutter.

The fleeting trace of weakness was gone, and, in its place, there was now only dagger-like malice directed at the target of his glare.

Pierced by that gaze, instincts warning of danger pulsed throughout Subaru's body. But, consciously ignoring this, Subaru kept up his undaunted facade,

Subaru: "Do I have to say it again? I saw some kids who looked exactly like Miss Ryuzu wandering around the Sanctuary. And I'm pretty sure they weren't Miss Ryuzu."

Garfiel: "…I don't know what y'mean. So y'saw Granny takin' a walk? It'd be another question if she's strollin' around in th'middle of th'night, but that ain't anythin…"

Subaru: "—Two of them."

Garfiel: "Hah?"

Just as Garfiel tried to rationalize what Subaru described, his desperate excuses shattered as Subaru held up two fingers on his outstretched hand,

Subaru: "I saw two kids looking exactly like Miss Ryuzu walking around at the same time. Maybe one of them was Miss Ryuzu, but then…who would the other one be—"

—The moment he finished his sentence, all sense of up and down blurred into one.

Subaru: "—Ghua!"

He felt his back slamming into something hard, wrenching all the air out of his lungs.

His spine had crashed into something large and uneven—the trunk of a tree, and was being pinned there by an enormous force as he dangled sideways, unable to escape.

Suspending Subaru in mid-air with his hand pinning his stomach against the tree, Garfiel stared straight into Subaru's eyes,

Garfiel: "—And where th'hell did y'see that, oy."

Subaru: "Nowhere too weird… just… in the forest…"

Garfiel: "No… that ain't possible. We took too much fuckin' care t'make sure that wouldn't happen or it would've been found out by y'nosy bastards a long time ago."

Garfiel's palm pressed harder as he spoke, sending stomach fluids spilling from Subaru's lips. Regardless of Subaru's struggling and kicking, the arm wouldn't budge an inch.

Like an insect pinned up for display. He shuddered at the thought.

Garfiel: "Yer belly's gonna touch yer back if we keep doin' this? How 'bout y'start tellin' the truth before that happens?"

Twisting his lips into a sadistic grin, Garfiel amped up the pressure against Subaru's body.

As if Garfiel was proving that he wasn't joking, Subaru could feel his bones and organs beginning to creak. Gasping, heaving painful breaths,

Subaru: "Th…at'll, depend on your atti…tude."

Garfiel: "Now ain't that funny. Y'still think y'can negotiate with me on equal footin'? I thought I taught ya t'get rid of those conceited ideas?"

Subaru: "You could just… finish me off here without getting any answers, but that won't solve anything."

Garfiel: "…"

Uttering those fragmented words, Subaru could sense that Garfiel was listening.

—Subaru had half-expected this furious reaction from Garfiel up to now.

The only time Subaru actually saw the Ryuzu-clones was during their final showdown with the Witch in the previous loop.

Before that, he had never even imagined their existence, much less spotted any of them in the Sanctuary. But, thinking back on it now, there were actually quite a few peculiarities that hinted at their existence, though there's no need to get into that here.

Regardless, that was just how well the clones were hidden in the Sanctuary.

It's hard to imagine Garfiel keeping the existence of more than 20 replicants a secret, so it was probably something known among the residents of the Sanctuary.

If anyone on this side knew about it, it would be Roswaal, and possibly Ram.

Either way, just mentioning it was enough to put Garfiel on edge, that much was the expected half.

As for the unexpected half—

Garfiel: "…Y're fucked up."

Spitting this out, Garfiel released Subaru's body.

Without any warning, Subaru dropped to the ground with a surprised "Uwa". Rolling, tasting grass and soil in his mouth, he spat out the dirt and stood himself up. Then, looking back at Garfiel,

Subaru: "D-Don't just let go all of a sudden, scared me there."

Garfiel: "Shut up, freak. Quit fuckin' around. Y'fuckin' testin me?"

Subaru: "Testing?"

Seeing Subaru tilt his head, playing dumb, Garfiel clicked his tongue, leering, Garfiel: “Y’thought I was gonna kill ya when y’said that, didn’t ya.”

Subaru: “…”

—The half that Subaru didn’t expect was that Garfiel chose not to immediately kill him.

Even when provoked like this, Garfiel was still giving him a chance to explain himself.

Realizing that Subaru had said those words knowing they might result in his death, Garfiel violently kicked his foot into the ground,

Garfiel: “Quit fuckin’ around… Y’think yer gonna stake yer fuckin’ life and act like nothin’s happenin’? Y’fuckin nutcase. Y’make me sick.”

Subaru: “Kinda hurts when you put it like that… and it’s not like I don’t care or anything.”

Subaru smiled weakly at Garfiel and scratched his own head.

While doing so, he noticed that his fingers were actually shaking.

Although Garfiel had stopped inflicting pain on Subaru, his hostility did not seem to diminish in the slightest.

And even now, Subaru’s physical body was screaming with primal terror as though his organs were being wrenched and twisted.

It was only natural, considering the intentionally-provoked Garfiel was standing right in front of him.

That is to say, Subaru more or less understood that he was facing down the same giant golden tiger who rampaged through the forest in the night, slaughtering the villagers.

Just the memory of its ravaging fangs and claws froze his heart with terror.

But still—

Subaru: “If just my life is enough to fix everything, then that’s a pretty fair trade.”

If whittling down at Subaru’s heart was the only price to pay, then it’d be quite a bargain.

It’s not every day that you can get a HAPPY END so cheaply.

Even though Subaru’s resolve could break at any moment—the meager foundation supporting it was firm and unbreakable.

Garfiel must have understood this as well. Crunching up his nose into a disgusted grimace,

Garfiel: “I got no good impressions of a bastard with eyes like that. Normally, I’d crush ya on th’spot, but…”

Subaru: “I’d be pretty bummed out if you did that… I’d still prefer if you could magnanimously overlook this. And it really sounds like we’re speaking the same language here…so.”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “Any chance you feel like answering my question?”

Patting off the dirt on his body, Subaru asked once again.

Garfiel’s face soured at the return of the forcefully interrupted topic, and, turning his eyes away,

Garfiel: “Don’t wanna.”

Subaru: “Is that right. Oh well, no helping it.”

Getting a reply that sounded like something from a stubborn child, Subaru shrugged and casually dropped the topic.

In return, an expression of complete bafflement came onto Garfiel’s face.

Garfiel: “Y’… aren’t y’gonna…”

Subaru: “But you don’t want to talk, right? And I don’t have the power or the persuasive skills to make you. Well I mean, I could keep bugging you to tell me, but the rewards aren't really worth the risk, so maybe another time."

Garfiel: "…what."

Subaru: "Oh don't make that confounded face, Garfiel. No matter how much you want to keep your secrets hidden, I'll be sure to expose it. I kind of have to, you know."

Garfiel's head sprang back up at those words, and Subaru returned his gaze head on.

Their eyes met, but there was no longer the same tension as before. The spirit in Garfiel's pupils seem to have faded, while Subaru's steeled their resolve.

Subaru: "Garfiel. I'll be sure… to expose all the Sanctuary's secrets you people are trying to hide. I know I have no other choice, so I'll absolutely make sure of it."

Garfiel: "…Shut up. Y'realize if I stuff yer fuckin' mouth right now there ain't gonna be no "absolutely" or "sure of" t'speak of, oy."

Subaru: "Sorry, but I'm absolutely sure. As long as I haven't given up, I know I'll uncover everything there is to uncover. If there's anyone to blame for that, blame your own sloppiness."

Not understanding Subaru's words, Garfiel's eyes wavered with confusion.

Naturally, he couldn't have known what his "Sloppiness" was referring to. After all, it was a mistake he hadn't yet made.

Subaru: "…Guess there's no point even if we keep talking."

Watching the silenced Garfiel, Subaru decided to end the conversation here.

He had raised Garfiel's caution to its utmost limit, and after this bluff, there was already no way he could disarm him in this loop.

Although Subaru never had much hope of success in this loop, seeing it completely fall apart like this was still somewhat hard to bear.

Subaru: "But…"

—But he must endure it nonetheless.

Since he had resolved to wager his life, this wouldn't be the last time where he'd have to bear this sense of loss.

He would probably never get used to, or manage to forget that pain.

Surely, if he ever got used to the endless cycle of "Deaths", only to find that he could no longer truly desire the future ahead of him, Subaru's heart would be swallowed by darkness, never to return. Somehow, he just knew this.

Subaru: "You still want to stop me, don't you, Garfiel?"

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "If you do, that'll only draw things out longer. So it'd help if you didn't."

Even if Garfiel killed him now, Subaru would just be returned to the Tomb, a few hours ago.

Everything after that would feel like a throwaway match, and if Garfiel pulled him aside again, he should be fine if he just chose some safer responses.

Though of course, it'd be better if he could avoid Returning by Death altogether.

Garfiel didn't respond to Subaru's prodding.

Seeing this, Subaru turned his back, and began walking out of the forest towards the Sanctuary. He would need to begin planning tomorrow's actions, and organize all the things that must be confirmed.

Although he has as many chances as his strength of will would allow, that didn't mean he should waste them.

Garfiel: "You…"

Watching Subaru walk further and further away, Garfiel called to him with a voice of stifled emotion.

Subaru stopped, but did not turn around. Staring at his back, Garfiel muttered,

Garfiel: "Just what… are y'tryin' to do in th'Sanctuary? What do y'plan t'do with us, ah? Oy."

Subaru: "I've already told you. I intend to save Emilia. I don't plan to do any harm to the Sanctuary…or to you, for that matter."

He knew of the disaster that was going to befall the Sanctuary, and intended to rescue its residents from their fate. Naturally, Garfiel would be counted among them.

But that would only be the final result,

Subaru: "I'm sure I'll make you despise me many times over before we get there. I'll apologize for that in advance. …Sorry."

Garfiel: "…I've got no idea what yer sayin'. Everythin' y'said…yer soundin' exactly like 'em."

Garfiel spoke as if he was speaking to something frightening and incomprehensible, and Subaru could only resign to the fact that it was inevitable.

As much as he wanted to be understood, he knew that Garfiel couldn't possibly understand.

Subaru: "I don't want to fight you. From tomorrow onwards, just act normal… it's alright if you can't, but don't get in my way. Go back to a warm bed and get some early sleep for tonight. Oversleep, shirk your duties, or wake and go right back to bed for all I care—"

Tossing out these last words before leaving, Subaru suddenly stopped mid-sentence.

Just now, he had noticed something in what he just said.

And from there, an idea had taken shape in his mind—

Subaru: “Might be worth trying.”

Garfiel: “…Hah?”

Subaru: “Anyways, that’s it for tonight, Garfiel. Whatever your worries and concerns are, I’ll take care of everything. So just be patient and wait until then.”

Garfiel: “—! You…!”

Listening to Subaru speak in future tense from beginning to end, Garfiel’s head shot up.

His face flushed with anger, he bared his teeth, spitting,

Garfiel: “Don’t give me that condescending bullshit…! Who, who th’fuck asked ya t’take care’of anything? Don’t go meddlin’ in what’s none’of yer business! Granny, th’others… anything! Y’don’t fuckin’ know anything…!”

Subaru: “I don’t know, so I have to find out. That’s why I have to do this.”

Garfiel: “Yer only seein’ th’fuckin’ surface, how can y’possibly understand?! Smirkin’ like an idiot, prattlin’ outta dreams, muddlin’ things with fuckin’ pretty words y’fuckin’ con-artist piece’of shit!”

Subaru: “…”

Garfiel: “Y’don’t know pain, don’t know what sufferin’ feels like, so don’t fuckin’ talk like y’know everything—!!”

Garfiel screamed back, raving at Subaru’s arrogant facade.

The shouts dissolved into the night’s forest sky, and faded into nothing.

Condescending, speaking like he knew everything, meddling in what was none of his business despite not understanding a thing.

—Indeed, all this was true, and there was not the slightest ground to dispute it.

However,

Subaru: “…I do know.”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “I know what Hell is. —So many times, I’ve seen it.”

If there was Hell in this world, it’d be all the worlds that Subaru had seen.

At the end of countless worlds, burning those scenes of Hell into the back of his eyes, certainly, he knew it well.

And that was why—

Subaru: “It’s enough that I’m the only one who has to know that Hell. That is the reason I’m here.”

—He sincerely believed this in that moment.

2

After leaving Garfiel whimpering and clutching his heart, Subaru did not return to his bed inside the Cathedral.

He would have headed to bed and set about slowly figuring out his strategy for the near future. In fact, until recently that had been his intention.

But there was a reason he chose to discard that plan and head somewhere else instead.

Subaru: “…It should be this way if I remember correctly.”

Peeling aside the sprawling ivy, Subaru muttered to himself while making his way down the unmarked path.

Visibility was poor under the forest canopy that obscured the moonlight. The dense, knee-high weeds didn't help, either. There was no consistency to the uneven ground, and he was forced to slow his pace to keep himself from stumbling.

Subaru: "While I'm usually pretty confident about my sense of direction, the memory's too hazy, huh… But it's not like I had time to calmly look around the place, so guess there's no helping it."

Making lame excuses for himself, Subaru felt his way forward through the foliage.

This was the forest outside the Sanctuary—but quite far away from where he and Garfiel last spoke. Subaru had first gone back to the Sanctuary before entering the forest again.

As for why he did that—

Subaru: "Pretty sure this was where he showed up back then…"

Before this series of loops began—on the morning of the first Trial, Subaru had visited the Tomb with Otto to confirm his qualification.

In the end, the Tomb accepted Subaru, and he was granted the chance to challenge his past in the Trial that night—but there was something else before that.

That morning, while bantering with Otto on the way back, they were confronted by Garfiel who had emerged from the forest. At the time, he said he was patrolling the Sanctuary.

Subaru: "But the timing was too good to be a coincidence, and why did he come from that direction?"

It was almost like the timing of his appearance had been staged, and there was the problem of where he appeared from.

Recalling how Garfiel emerged from the bushes beside the Tomb, Subaru felt a sense of deja-vu. Sifting through the peculiarities in his memories, he realized something.

—It was the mysterious facility where Beatrice had teleported him from the Mansion.

Having been returned to the Sanctuary, coming out of that facility, he had a feeling that it was terribly close to where Garfiel had emerged back then.

And so, hoping to find something there, he was now trawling through the forest in the dead of night, searching for the path to that facility.

Subaru: “A trodden path…that means.”

Seeing the vegetation give way to patches of exposed earth, Subaru deduced that someone must have been regularly passing through here. Following this trail deeper into the forest, carried along by the exhilaration and speeding up his steps—at last, his field of vision brightened,

Subaru: “…Found it.”

It was a crumbling stone building. An ancient structure on the verge of collapse in the depths of the forest with its back against the cliff face.

Approaching the structure, as he made out its contours obscured by the darkness, Subaru tilted his head.

Subaru: “Huh…? Pretty sure last time I saw it, it was more destroyed than this…”

The building was certainly showing its years, but Subaru got the feeling that its state of deterioration was less severe than he remembered. Simply put, what Subaru saw last time was a ruin, whereas the building before him still retained some semblance of its original architecture.

That is to say,

Subaru: “If my memory’s correct, then sometime between now and the sixth day, something destructive will happen to this building…right?”

Drawing from the sum of his memories, that would be the only conclusion.

If that were the case, then, just as he imagined, this place was not entirely unrelated to what was going to happen to the Sanctuary.

Holding his breath, and stifling anything that might give away his presence, Subaru carefully turned the handle on the door.

It opened with surprising silence, and a putrid stench greeted him as he stepped inside.

Same as last time, scattered instruments littered the otherwise barren and desolate entryway. Passing through a corridor reminiscent of a waiting room, Subaru headed towards the destined chamber.

He reached the door at the end of the hallway—and beyond it, would be the room with the bottomless pit where Beatrice had transported him.

He might just walk into the pit if he wasn't careful. So, with that in mind, Subaru slowly pushed open the door and peeked his head inside,

Subaru: "…Oy oy."

As the scene panned out before his eyes, Subaru couldn't help but let slip this sound under his breath.

A pale, refracted light lit up his face. Narrowing his eyes at the dazzling brightness, Subaru dumbly turned his gaze to the source of that light.

And there, in that destined chamber at the very back of the facility, was—

Subaru: "Miss Ryuzu…?"

—A small female figure encased in the center of a massive crystal, faintly glowing with a pale-blue luminescence.

Chapter 55:
Girl in the Crystal

1

Subaru was so transfixed by the girl sealed inside the crystal that he forgot to breathe.

Such was the haunting, heart-rending beauty before his eyes.

Encased in the translucent, faint-blue crystal was a girl sitting with legs folded.

Frozen—may be an apt description, but unlike ice, which melts and releases whatever was inside, a crystal would remain eternally sealed until it was shattered.

But surely, if this crystal were to be shattered, so would the body of the girl sealed inside.

Subaru: “Why…would…”

The words slipping from his lips carried a tinge of rage.

Subaru was calm, but he certainly felt anger.

There was no way to safely release the girl from the crystal. He didn’t know what whoever did this might be planning, or what relation that person might have to this girl. He didn’t know, but he couldn’t stop it from tearing at his heart.

Subaru: “This is Miss Ryuzu… isn’t she?”

He stepped into the room. —And, contrary to his memories of last time, there was no giant hole in the floor. Instead, settled in its place was the crystal.

It was a tall crystal, set on a metallic base which was the only equipment not in a state of disrepair in the otherwise ruined facility, shining like it was fresh out of a factory.

Opposite the crystal were several tables lined up in a row, and Subaru realized that they were the same ones that were toppled and scattered over the room in the previous world.

Same as last time, there were no lights in the room, but the faint glow of the moss on the walls ensured a certain degree of visibility.

Instruments reminiscent of medical equipment that he had seen scattered against the wall were now in perfect condition. Sifting out these differences in his memories, Subaru arrived at the conclusion,

Subaru: “Six days from now, this place will have been destroyed, in a way that no one could figure out what was going on in here.”

It would be inconvenient if anyone found out about this place.

Sometime between now and the Great Rabbit’s attack, the key components of this facility would be destroyed and its rubble buried into the darkness.

But this time, Subaru arrived before that could happen.

Subaru: “And sure enough, the most likely candidate… is Garfiel.”

What made Subaru search here in the first place was his sense of unease towards Garfiel’s suspicious behavior.

Determined to protect the Sanctuary and with his unmistakable affection for Ryuzu, there must be some reason unbeknownst to Subaru why Garfiel would be doing this.

Simply put, there weren’t many people whose strength could match Garfiel’s, so, considering the extreme difficulty of actually destroying the facility, there was reason to believe it was Garfiel.

The question that remained would be—

Subaru: “What is this facility actually used for?”

Although the room was fortunately intact, Subaru’s inspection yielded no obvious results. Aside from a girl who looked exactly like Ryuzu encased inside a crystal fixed to the room, nothing stood out and caught Subaru’s attention.

In the back of the room, on the wall beyond the row of tables, Subaru saw the ventilation shaft that he had crawled through last time. Passing through it should land him back in the waiting room.

Subaru: “…It’s pretty late at this point, but what’s with the weird layout? All this can’t just be for one big room plus a waiting room.”

Contrary to the layout of the rooms inside, the exterior of the facility looked a lot larger than this.

The more he tried to match his mental map with what he saw outside, the stronger the sense of incongruity became. —There was enough space to conceal a whole other room.

Cutting across the room, Subaru walked up to the wall beneath the ventilation shaft and began tapping to feel its surface. The moss-covered wall felt more like an animal’s fur than actual moss.

His knocks did not produce a sound, and, aside from lighting the room, they seemed to be also serving another purpose. Location-wise, if there was a mystery room, it would be on the other side of this wall.

Subaru: “Considering how far I had to crawl, there should be a room half the size of this one. Unless there’s some kind of rotating wall… there’d be no way to get into that room from here…”

In that case, the entrance might be in the waiting room.

Last time, Subaru didn’t have a chance to search every corner of the facility. Nor did he care to look for any hidden doors when he passed through the narrow waiting room this time.

In fact, he was so preoccupied with the girl inside the crystal that he had neglected the waiting room entirely. —On that thought, he turned around,

???: “…”

When he came eye-to-eye with the person who had entered the room.

Subaru: “…a?”

???: “…”

Meeting gazes with those emotionless eyes, he let a sound escape from his throat.

The silhouette’s round pupils stared back at Subaru—it was a girl wrapped in white cloth with long, pink hair.

A figure who looked exactly like Ryuzu, but without any of the aura of the girl he knew. In fact, it gave off no aura at all.

Like empty space, it simply stood there. In other words,

Subaru: “Ah, Miss Ryuzu’s…”

Clone. The word flickered across his mind, but he hesitated before applying it to the girl. “Clone” was just a title that Subaru had imagined. The truth is, he had no idea where the girls actually came from and felt a little guilty calling her that.

Subaru: “But then…”

Having no other name to call her with, he was stuck.

Watching Subaru fall into silence, the girl stood there quietly as well. Her expression did not move, and even whether she was breathing was suspect.

Subaru hesitated to make the first sound, while the doll only waited to be addressed.

—Seeing her quietly standing there, at last, Subaru made up his mind to open his mouth.

Subaru: “Y… you, uh. Can you understand what I’m saying?”

???: “…”

Subaru: “What’s your name? Can I ask what you’re doing here?

Actually, what is this place, anyway?”

???: “…”

Subaru: “…Sanctuary, Garfiel, Ryuzu. You know those words?”

???: “…”

Three questions were met with three bouts of silence.

He thought the questions might have prompted her expression to change, but her face didn’t move a muscle to any of the questions he asked. As if she was simply incapable of expression.

Nothing was happening—he was out of ideas.

But, just as Subaru was scratching his head, the girl suddenly moved.

Subaru: “…?”

The abrupt movement startled him, but the girl’s pace was relaxed.

Same as when he entered the room, the girl stepped through the waiting room door and walked to the center of the room with unhurried steps—until she was in front of the crystal.

The girl inside the crystal looked exactly identical to the girl approaching it.

Standing before the girl sealed in unwaking slumber, the unfettered girl bent over and reached for the lower part of the crystal’s supporting base.

???: “…”

The lower part of the base opened with a clank, and Subaru’s eyes widened. There seemed to be a flap on the lower section of the base that opened into some kind of storage space inside.

The girl squatted down and began working away, blocking his view of the interior as he stretched his neck. Shifting around trying to see, Subaru decided to step closer and confirm its contents once and for all, when,

Subaru: “—Uugh!”

An intense, putrid stench pierced his nostrils as Subaru covered his face, recoiling.

The shocking odor corroded the membranes inside his nose, and the sensation of smelling it was closer to pain than shock. His eyes teared up as he was overtaken by the pressure of his stomach’s contents rushing to his throat.

Stench—it was the same putrid stench he remembered permeating the facility the last time he was here. Like some chemical concoction, suspected to contain substances harmful to the human body.

Subaru was sure that it must have come from the collapsed hole in the ground, but,

Subaru: “It was actually coming from inside that base…and the whole area around that crystal.”

Holding his nose, Subaru came to this conclusion as he drew closer with teary eyes.

It felt as though the stench was seeping into his pupils as the sight of the oblivious girl buried in her work sent shivers down his spine. Then, as he peeked down at her hands from the side, his eyes shot wide open.

—Inside the base, the girl’s hands were fiddling around with an internal segment carved with incomprehensible patterns with magical minerals installed in various places.

The minerals were faintly glowing from their stores of internal Mana, but one of them seemed to have used up its stores and lost its light. The girl carefully removed it, and inserted a replacement in its place.

The complex patterns reminded him of what he saw in that last loop.

Magic circles—a staple technology of the parallel world fantasy genre, was somehow inexplicably absent from this world. And that was precisely why it left such an impression when he did eventually encounter one and made him wonder just what function it may have served.

Subaru: "Seeing how the minerals are linked up… it kind of looks like an electrical circuit. If the magic circle is the mechanical part and the magic minerals are like the batteries…"

Subaru couldn't help but be amazed by the sight.

Magical science, or should he call it arcane technology?

While Subaru occupied himself with such thoughts, the girl seemed to have finished her work, having extracted the spent mineral and closed the metal flap.

And, within seconds, Subaru felt a tingling sensation on his skin.

—There was a subtle vibration in the atmosphere.

Subaru: "It's like… when magic is being used."

Magic of tremendous force and magnitude—like during the battle with the White Whale, and when Julius activated Nect in their fight against Petelgeuse.

Most likely, it was some kind of interference in the atmospheric mana, and his body was perceiving the corresponding shift in his own mana.

In this case, it was obvious what the mana was reacting to.

Before his eyes, he saw the crystal's faint glow rapidly intensify.

Translucent and blue, the crystal's radiance compounded in the darkness of the room as the girl's body grew ever more distinct.

And there, the magic circle inside the base, along with the crystal supported above, illuminated the room with blinding, pale-blue light.

Subaru: "…Savepoint."

Subaru unconsciously muttered something that no one except those living in the modern age would understand.

A crystal on top of a magic circle, engulfing the room in a pale-blue radiance: That was exactly how Subaru remembered the familiar savepoint-crystals in his video games.

Captivated by the vivid spectacle, the silence in which it happened only adding to its mystique, Subaru held his breath, unable to voice his thoughts.

But, as he stood rigid in front of the mesmerizing sight,

???: "…"

Without paying him any mind, after switching out the magical mineral, the girl began heading out of the room, chucking the inert mineral into what seemed to be a waste pile.

Hearing the footsteps grow distant behind him, Subaru quickly reached out to her shoulder.

Subaru: "Hey, h-hold on… ah-, touched her."

???: "…"

With the apparent feebleness of her vibe and presence, Subaru had half-expected his hand to simply pass through her, but fortunately, his fingers wrapped around her shoulder and successfully stopped her.

Then, suddenly remembering that she was probably one of those girls who exploded upon contact with the Witch of Envy, Subaru's caution instantly heightened,

???: "…"

But the girl only quietly looked at Subaru, without showing any signs of exploding.

Somewhat relieved by this fact, Subaru met the gaze of the girl who was still quite intact.

Subaru: “Sorry for interrupting your work, but, I still want to ask… Can you not ignore me this time? I’m in kind of a jam here, you know.”

???: “…”

Subaru: “So, what were you doing just now? Why’s that crystal glowing? And do you know anything about the girl inside?”

???: “…”

Nothing was happening RE-TAKE.

No matter how many times he asked, the girl only gazed at him in silence. She wasn’t refusing to answer, but rather, it was as if the choice wasn’t even available to her.

The impression of a “Doll” hadn’t changed at all.

Subaru: “If you could just manage some sort of yes-or-no communication then I’ll have something to work with here…”

But, that wasn’t happening.

Keeping hold of the girl who seemed to be ready to leave as soon as he let her go, Subaru turned to the crystal.

Nothing had changed about the girl inside her dazzling, glowing prison, but something else became clear with the intensified light.

She wasn’t breathing, and it was clear that she had no pulse.

—The body of the girl encased in the crystal lacked all signs of life.

Subaru: “…Suspended animation… would be an over-optimistic take on it.”

Just reheating frozen bodies to return them to life would be difficult enough. Not to mention that this girl's body was crystallized.

Freeing her would be like a pipe-dream times two.

Subaru: "Once again… I'm so damn useless…"

Defeated by his own sense of powerlessness, Subaru touched his fingers to the surface of the crystal.

He felt its coldness against his fingertips, and wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or enraged that this girl could not feel this chill eat away at her.

And, just as that sentiment scraped across his chest,

Subaru: "—Eh?"

The coldness at his fingertips suddenly turned to heat, passing through Subaru's arm and coursing through his body.

Subaru: "—O, ou, ouah?!"

What started as a warmth quickly turned to searing heat, scorching his entire body.

The flames running from his fingertips to his organs made Subaru recoil, crying out in pain.

Gripped by the suffocating heat, his screams echoed through the room.

Paying no heed to the filthiness of the floor, Subaru sprawled out onto the ground, convulsing as his eyes flashed between dark and light—and then,

Subaru: "—Hhh, uh?"

Without so much as a warning, his time in Hell ended as abruptly as it came.

The heat ravaging through his body died away, and Subaru was suddenly released from the storm of agony.

Subaru: “…wh-what the hell was.”

Sitting himself up, Subaru muttered while checking over his hands and feet.

The sudden pain, and its equally abrupt end. He couldn’t understand its cause or its purpose, and it left him only questions and a painful memory.

Subaru: “There’s…nothing. But, if nothing happened, then…”

Why did it hurt so much when he touched the crystal?

Perhaps it was the arcane technology at the base of the crystal. Something like touching inside a machine and getting electrocuted.

Coming to that thought, Subaru suddenly remembered the Ryuzu-lookalike he had forgotten about while he was distracted by the pain.

Subaru: “Ah…”

???: “…”

Subaru scrambled to his feet, but the suspense fell away when he looked up and saw the girl’s unchanged face. Then, through the unravelling tension,

???: “…”

—He saw the girl kneel down with profound reverence, bowing her head before him.

2

Seeing the girl on her knees, her head lowered, Subaru wasn’t sure what to do.

If he wasn’t mistaken, that gesture was a display of respect and submission towards him.

Subaru: “Wh-What’re you doing all of a sudden?”

Having completely ignored him up to now, the sudden, drastic change left Subaru both surprised and skeptical.

Even if she was submitting to him like this, the gap between Subaru and the girl ran deep. Neither of them knew where the other came from, and, considering the circumstances, there was no way to not be suspicious.

???: “…”

In front of the cautious Subaru, the kneeling girl stood up.

Then, she lifted her gaze, as if looking at something behind Subaru’s head. He turned around to see, but there was nothing there.

It was almost like how one would stare into empty space while thinking. And when Subaru turned back to her,

Subaru: “Uuoaa?!”

???: “…”

He saw the girl standing within breathing distance, right up against his eyes. Subaru tried to lean back, but the girl reached out her hand and grabbed him by the arm.

Subaru: “…? You… want me to come with you?”

???: “…”

Saying nothing, the girl tugged on his sleeve, signaling him to follow.

Seeing her nod wordlessly to his question, Subaru only stood there, thinking.

Maybe the reason she was so stubbornly refusing to talk was simply because she couldn’t. But she did seem to understand his question. So maybe, by asking Subaru to follow, she was trying to reply to what he was asking earlier.

Subaru: “Well, can’t get the tiger’s cub without going in the tiger’s den, right?”

???: “…”

Subaru: “It’s a thing from back home. —Alright, lead on, I’ll follow.”

Subaru nodded back, gesturing that he’ll go with her, and the girl started walking, still pulling on his sleeve. Following behind her, Subaru took one last look at the crystal.

—Same as before, the girl continued sleeping inside the pale-blue light.

Pulling him by the sleeve, she led him out of the room, through the corridor, the waiting area, and then, out of the facility.

Subaru: “So it’s not inside, huh. Well, outside’s ok too, but…”

If someone from the Sanctuary saw him, his stealth mission into the facility would be exposed. Although he didn’t really do anything to feel guilty about, considering his current relationship with Garfiel, he’d rather avoid it this loop.

Just as he was worrying about what he should do if the girl starts leading him to the Sanctuary,

????: “—What’s that, sure’s a complicated expression you got there, Su-bo.”

Subaru: “…Oy oy, what’s with the timing?”

Stepping out of the facility and into the open air, he heard a voice calling out to him.

Turning to the direction of that voice, and seeing the person standing there, Subaru’s lips slackened. Whether it was out of relief, or for some other reason,

Ryuzu: “I’m sure there’re all sorts of things you want to talk about, but first, how about a change of location?”

Subaru: “Yeah, sounds good. There really are… lots of things we need to talk about.”

Subaru shrugged in agreement.

And, in that moment, just what did she see when she looked at him?

—With her back to the moonlight, seeing Subaru standing beside a girl who looked exactly like herself, just what was the original Ryuzu thinking in that moment?

Chapter 56:
The Reason for the Sanctuary’s Existence

The place where Ryuzu led him was the remote shed where she last invited him for tea.

Ryuzu: “Anywhere on the bed is fine. I’ll brew us something to drink.”

Subaru: “I could brew it if you like? Ram’s trained me pretty well, I think.”

Ryuzu: “While I’d love to see your expertise, it doesn’t look like you’re free at the moment.”

Ryuzu smiled as she pointed out the girl who looked exactly like herself, still tugging on Subaru’s sleeve without any indication of letting go.

While she was probably Ryuzu’ clone, Subaru wasn’t entirely sure if he should keep calling her that,

Subaru: “Say, why’s Pico still not letting go?”

Ryuzu: “I don’t know where you got the name Pico from, but, things being as they are, I doubt there’s anything you can do so you should just accept it for now. That’s what happens when you touch things without thinking, you know.”

Subaru: “Can’t really argue with that…”

It sounded like Ryuzu was saying this for his own good, but Subaru still felt a little upset to be blamed for groping things without thinking. Seeing Subaru pouting to indicate his displeasure, Ryuzu brewed up the tea and came back with the tray in hand.

Ryuzu: “Here, it’s hot, so let it cool before drinking.”

Subaru: “I’m not a little kid anymore… I’m not gonna gulp it down and burn myself.”

Ryuzu: “I have someone around me who never settles down and always has trouble with hot food, so the warning’s gotten to be a habit.”

Since Garfiel was the first person Subaru would think of to have trouble with hot food, Ryuzu was probably talking about him.

Seeing how Garfiel could transform into a giant tiger, the can’t-settle-down and the cat-tongued descriptors were both a match, and having difficulty learning would be in line with Subaru’s preconceptions as well.

Just as Ryuzu said, the tea was scalding hot. Subaru brought the cup to his lips, took a sip over his parched tongue, and sighed. Come to think of it, this was the first drink he had since Returning by Death and waking up in the Tomb.

Subaru: “Ahh, tastes just like leaves.”

Ryuzu: “Have I just been given an unflattering review, or am I overthinking it.”

Subaru: “You’re overthinking it, overthinking it.”

Drinking down the rest of the tea, Subaru placed the cup back on the tray with a click.

Ryuzu casually pulled up a chair beside the bed and sat down facing him.

Subaru: “So, now that we’re settled, let’s start going over the topics.”

Ryuzu: “Hmm. And I have quite a few things I’d like to ask Su-bo as well.”

Somewhat relieved by her straightforward reply, Subaru’s mind began to turn.

He had plenty of opportunities to speak with persons of interest like this before, but he still hadn’t gotten any closer to the truth. Part of it was due to intentional concealing of information, but there was another reason before that.

Subaru: “It’s because I haven’t asked the right questions.”

The question that would link all the answers into a single thread still eluded him.

And so, all this time, Subaru had been missing the point without realizing it.

Even something as simple as asking what he needed to know from those who knew was out of his reach.

Subaru: “That building… that facility back there. What exactly is it?”

Ryuzu: “Hmm… so that’s the question you’re starting with?”

The first thing that popped into his mind was an inconsequential feint.

A question to gauge just how upfront Ryuzu intended to be.

Hearing this, Ryuzu traced her fingers over her chin in a shrewd, seasoned gesture quite ill-suited for her appearance,

Ryuzu: “If you ask me what that facility is, the answer is that, in a sense, it is the core of the Sanctuary. In other words, it is part of the reason why the Sanctuary exists.”

Subaru: “The reason why the Sanctuary exists…?!”

Ryuzu: “In the first place, Su-bo… who do you think had a need to create the Sanctuary?”

Subaru: “That’d be Rosw…”

Blurting out an almost reflexive answer, Subaru instantly realized that couldn’t be right.

While Roswaal was the current owner and manager of the Sanctuary, the question of who created the Sanctuary was a different story.

Subaru: “The one who created this place… was the Witch of Greed, Echidna, right?”

Ryuzu: “Correct. It was the Witch Echidna who created this place. The Witch created the Sanctuary because it was necessary to her. Ultimately, that’s all this place is.”

Subaru: “That’s a bit extreme, and skimping way too much in between… at least give me a few details.”

Ryuzu: “As for its purpose, isn’t the success of her experiments right in front of your eyes?”

Seeing Ryuzu’ smile as she said this, for a moment, Subaru held his breath.

Ryuzu’ words were vague, but he understood their meaning.

What she was trying to say was,

Subaru: “The result of this place… was Miss Ryuzu and this girl?”

Ryuzu: “You are a kind child, Su-bo. Or otherwise, a naive one. — It’s fine to just say the experimental results.”

Subaru hesitated to say this in front of the person herself.

If it was a matter of failing to read the air or simply being obtuse, it’d be a different story. But Subaru was keenly aware that this was not a time for jokes.

Ryuzu: “There is a girl inside the crystal who looks exactly like me, yes?”

Subaru: “…Yeah. Exactly identical. So Miss Ryuzu, this girl and her… you guys are triplets, I guess?”

Ryuzu: “If you’re going to bunch every one of us who looks the same into one big family, calling us triplets would be falling a tad too short.”

Subaru: “Just a tad?”

Ryuzu: “Just a tad.”

Ryuzu’ “tad” might be referring to a missing digit here.

In fact, having seen more than twenty Ryuzu-clones at once, no one could blame him for thinking this.

Subaru sighed and shook off that thought.

So far, Ryuzu hadn’t been trying to dodge Subaru’s questions. Perhaps now was the time to stop feeling her out and dive in.

Subaru: “—The girl in the crystal… what’s her relation to Miss Ryuzu?”

He asked the question directly.

Ryuzu’ expression was calm. Brushing her fingers through her light-pink hair, she turned a meaningful gaze towards Subaru—or rather, towards the silent girl at his side.

Ryuzu: “Not just me. This girl is in the same position as myself.”

Subaru: “And the girl in the crystal?”

Ryuzu: “No, she is different. That girl inside the crystal… is the original.”

Unable to instantly take in what he had just been told, Subaru furrowed his brows to show his non-understanding. Standing up from the bed, he chewed over the implications of her words,

Subaru: “The original, would mean that…”

Ryuzu: “Don’t be in such a hurry. Trawling through memories takes time for the elderly. So get comfortable, and be patient.”

Subaru: “Don’t suddenly play the elderly card now. Just looking at this bland flavorless girl beside me I can tell that you’re just trying to add seasoning!”

Ryuzu: “Hrm, that’s an unfortunate misunderstanding. I consider all the things that make me what I am now, what you might call acquired individuality, to be quite important to me.”

Subaru: “Acquired… individuality?”

Hearing something he could not let slide, Subaru repeated the words as a question. Ryuzu nodded, and with “That’s right”, she continued,

Ryuzu: “Just as you imagined, I am the same as this girl, born as an empty vessel. And through the passing of years, that empty cask was filled to become what I am today.”

Subaru: “Wait, waitwaitwait, the story’s moving way too fast. Born? Empty? What’s that supposed to mean? Maybe it’s supposed to be obvious, but what does this have to do with how the girl in the crystal is the original?”

Ryuzu: “The one inside the crystal is the original. The first Ryuzu Meyer. All the other Ryuzu’s, including myself, are Ryuzu Meyer’s replicas.”

So casually, Ryuzu told him of her origins. Or actually, Subaru wasn’t even sure if he should continue calling her Ryuzu.

What Ryuzu said just now was what Subaru himself vaguely hypothesized upon seeing the Ryuzu-replicants. He had half-suspected it but could not be entirely convinced, partly because he hated the feeling of knowing that someone he knew was a clone.

If there must be a reason, it would have been Subaru’s own prejudice.

Ryuzu: “Now that you know I am a replica, does that affect how you see me?”

Subaru: “…I don’t know. I want to say that it doesn’t. I want to, but…when you put me on the spot like this…”

—He couldn’t say for sure.

Strictly speaking, considering that this is a parallel world, he couldn't exactly call the Ryuzu's clones, and the way they were created was probably very different from what he imagined.

No doubt, they would have been born through magical rather than scientific means. Such a life shouldn't be considered superior or inferior: that would have been the appropriate thing to say, but,

Subaru: "I'm not confident enough to say it with a straight face. So I can't really say I'll see you the same way."

Ryuzu: "I suppose I should revise what I said before. Su-bo is kind and naive… and more than that, overly honest at heart."

Surely, those weren't words she was happy to hear, but Ryuzu gave him a satisfied nod nonetheless. While sorting through the emotions in his mind, Subaru turned to the girl sitting beside him—the one he named Pico, who was in the same situation as Ryuzu.

—Silently holding onto Subaru's sleeve, Pico was staring blankly across the room. Although her eyes should be seeing the same image as Subaru's, they harbored nothing that could be considered emotions, and were more like glass beads reflecting the light around her.

Her expression hadn't changed, and he hadn't heard her make a single sound.

Subaru: "She's completely empty inside, is that what you meant…?"

Ryuzu: "She was born not long ago, a replica who's only just been given her role. She knows enough to recognize simple instructions, but otherwise, she is no different from a newborn. Although, seeing that she doesn't cry or need to eat, she is quite a lot less trouble to take care of."

Subaru: "She doesn't need to eat…?"

Ryuzu: "Replicating a body isn't so simple a task. What do you imagine were the principles behind her and my creation?"

Being asked to guess, Subaru held back his urge to ask for an immediate answer.

A greedy child who only knows how to ask and receive was not what Ryuzu expected of him.

Under the stern pressure of her gaze, Subaru mobilized his mind to scrutinize over her words, and eventually came up with,

Subaru: “Is it… mana…?”

Muttering this, the basis of the great cat spirit’s existence flashed across his mind.

Puck’s spirit-body manifests by using mana as an intermediary. Reapplying that concept, it should be possible to materialize human bodies the same way as well.

Hearing Subaru’s guess, Ryuzu lifted her brows and gave a little clap.

Ryuzu: “Well done. I’m impressed that you reached that answer on your own. It doesn’t sound like anyone told you, either.”

Subaru: “Well, you did kinda guide me towards it. And being around a spirit for so long helped as well. …So, was I right?”

Ryuzu: “Almost correct. But manifesting bodies purely by using mana as an intermediary means consuming it rapidly. Instead, the Witch of Greed forced her way around this problem with a special algorithm.”

Subaru: “Forced… algorithm?”

Ryuzu: “She developed an algorithm for an organ to create artificial “Od”, which, once it stores up a certain amount of mana, allows the body to materialize. And so, while the body is constructed from mana, the presence of Od allows for living beings indistinguishable from “Normal” organisms to be created.”

Od—unlike the mana in the atmosphere, it inherently exists in living things.

Though Od serves the same functions as mana, it cannot be drawn from external sources, and a set lifetime amount is decided at birth. Using Od would be equivalent to shortening one's own lifespan, and the result of its depletion is death.

It's like using HP to cast magic when there isn't enough MP—except there would be no way to regenerate the HP.

Subaru: "You make it sound so simple… but isn't that incredible? Even if it's artificial, being able to regenerate Od is basically like creating life."

Ryuzu: "Of course, it is a phenomenon only possible when very specific initial conditions are met. Regrettably, it's not something I myself could comprehend. —Except, the Witch has successfully created life, that much is certain."

Subaru: "Sounds completely ridiculous… but that guy's pretty amazing."

He could just imagine the white-haired Witch looking down at him with a smug smile on her face. But then, his thoughts immediately turned to,

Subaru: "Wait, but Daphne could also create witchbeasts. Unless creating life is just surprisingly easy for Witches? It's not as rare as I thought."

He could almost hear the white-haired Witch hmphing "It's not like I did it to get your approval or anything".

Ryuzu: "What's that, you look like you're thinking about something heartwarming."

Subaru: "It's weird, but it feels like our exchanges have completely melted any sense of caution towards her. Anyway, I understand Miss Ryuzu's origins now. Echidna made replicas of a girl named Ryuzu Meyer back there, I get that too…"

Now that Subaru understood the principle behind the replicants and that Ryuzu herself had accepted that fact, the overarching question would be, Subaru: “Next question is, why would Echidna do something like that?”

Ryuzu: “Hmm…”

Subaru: “Since I barely know anything about magic or algorithms, I can only guess how amazing Echidna’s achievements are from the surface. But even just looking at it, I can tell it’s pretty huge.”

Ryuzu crossed her arms, listening, while Subaru inhaled a breath and continued,

Subaru: “So where did she get the motivation to do something that huge? What’s her motive? And why’s it necessary for Echidna to make replicas of Ryuzu Meyer?”

He still didn’t know what the girl named Ryuzu Meyer was to the Sanctuary.

In the present-day Sanctuary, the Ryuzu he was talking to served as a representative/Ryuzu look-alike. But what was the original Ryuzu Meyer’s role in the Sanctuary’s hierarchy?

Or, what if she was the actual impetus for the Sanctuary’s creation?

Subaru: “I just thought of something, that might be it.”

Ryuzu: “Oh?”

Subaru: “This kind of story always sells. Maybe she did it in order to replace the original Ryuzu Meyer, who somehow met an untimely death.”

Tropes like retrieving lost loved ones from death always show up in mangas and light novels. Creating clones of the deceased with identical DNA as a substitute is a pretty popular plot device, and most of the time, they’ll offer some reason like “Their bodies are the same but their souls are different” and end in failure.

Subaru: “Going by what you said, and looking at Pico, the experiments of the Sanctuary probably ended up with the same problem. You guys are made to look the same, but the personalities and quirks didn't carry over, I'm guessing."

If she refused to give up and kept making more and more replicas anyway, that could perhaps be considered insanity. But to persist after more than twenty failures, still hoping that the original soul might be inhabiting the next one, that could only be called—

Subaru: "I don't want to dismiss it as delusional, but…"

It's hard to blame someone for wanting to bring a certain person back to life. At least, Subaru definitely couldn't bring himself to say it.

Even now, Natsuki Subaru was working towards a future where everyone would be saved.

The methods and processes were different, but was that really so different from the Witch's experiments?

As for what the Ryuzu's born as a result of the experiments thought of this, that would be a question only they could ask themselves, and which no one else could answer.

Listening to Subaru bring his speculations to a close, Ryuzu exhaled a sigh,

Ryuzu: "Your head turns quicker than I thought, Su-bo."

Subaru: "With everything that's been thrown at me, it's actually way too slow. Hate to say it, but still."

Subaru clicked his tongue at his overly slow deductive skills and ruefully gritted his teeth.

Seeing Subaru this way, Ryuzu slowly shook her head. But it wasn't a gesture meant to console him. Instead, a subtle smile emerged on her lips, hosting a tinge of melancholy,

Ryuzu: "Except, you are overthinking it. It wouldn't be exaggerating to call that a fantasy."

Subaru: "Fantasy… I didn't know I was that far off…"

Ryuzu: “A fantasy indeed. This is what you thought, isn’t it—”No matter how arduous the effort, she must be brought back to life. That’s how precious and important Ryuzu Meyer was to the Witch of Greed.” Am I wrong?”

Subaru: “…”

Ryuzu tilted her head as she asked this, and hearing her strike the crux of the matter, Subaru fell silent.

In fact, that was exactly what Subaru imagined. Developing a brand new algorithm, going through all this strenuous effort just to extend one person’s existence—naturally, that person must be someone especially important to the Witch.

But Ryuzu refuted this conclusion with a smile. A pained, and hollow smile.

Ryuzu: “Ryuzu Meyer was just a village girl. She wasn’t anyone particularly close to the Witch of Greed. And naturally, they had no blood or matrimonial ties. To the Witch, Ryuzu Meyer was just a stranger, with barely a word exchanged between them.”

Subaru: “How is that… no, hold on.”

Listening to Ryuzu say this as if she had seen it herself, Subaru suddenly held up his palm to stop her. He pressed his other hand against his forehead, and,

Subaru: “But isn’t this strange? You said just now…that you’re the same as Pico, born with nothing inside. Then how did you know that about the Ryuzu Meyer inside the crystal? It doesn’t make sense.”

Ryuzu: “That would be the result of another experiment conducted in this Sanctuary.”

Gently receiving Subaru’s rebuttal, Ryuzu placed a hand to her chest.

If what she said was true, then there would be no heartbeat pulsing against her hand. But then, where did the warmth when he touched her come from? —While Subaru's mind wondered, Ryuzu closed her eyes,

Ryuzu: "Ryuzu Meyer was not close to the Witch. But she sacrificed herself for the experiment. The Witch took Ryuzu Meyer's body and sealed it eternally inside the crystal. From there, she designed an algorithm, which, once it has accrued a certain amount of mana, would generate a replica of Ryuzu Meyer through artificial Od, and it remains so to this day."

Subaru: "…but why."

Ryuzu: "Ryuzu Meyer's replicants, aside from a minimal understanding of language and common concepts, are in a state no different from newborns. Yet that in itself is strange. If they are the same as newborns, then they should be crying, ignorant, and pure. But where did they acquire the level of knowledge to follow basic instructions?"

Subaru: "Unless… no way."

Thinking of the worst of possibilities, Subaru lost his words.

Seeing Subaru's expression, Ryuzu figured that he must have got it, and nodded,

Ryuzu: "The Witch had formulated a way to pick and choose knowledge to confer upon the replicas. But she chose to give them only the minimal, and let them be born empty of all else."

Subaru: "You mean, having them born without knowing anything is just the way she intended? But, why would…"

What's the point of a ritual that only produces dolls that follow orders? Of course, such a thing isn't inconceivable. But that would be far too uncharacteristic of the Witch of Greed he knew.

Would the white-haired girl really go through so much trouble just to create moving bodies akin to her own arms and legs?

Subaru: "Not sure if she could do this, but, wouldn't catching some humans and brainwashing them be cleaner and faster? Instead, she went with this. There must be some other reason.”

To create empty, new existence from nothing—

Subaru: “—a.”

For an instant, a thought flashed across his mind.

Deciding that it was far too preposterous, Subaru shook his head to forget it. But once the thought was born, it clung to him and would not let go.

If that really was the case,

“I wouldn’t want you to despise me.”

That would explain why she wanted to hide her true intentions from him.

And why the Ryuzu in front of his eyes was allowed to inherit a small portion of Ryuzu Meyer’s memories.

Subaru: “If she could pick and choose knowledge to give them, why would she choose to create empty replicas.”

Ryuzu: “…”

Subaru: “Create empty vessels, and then what? Same as why anyone places empty vessels on a table…”

Ryuzu: “…”

Subaru: “—It’s to fill them with something, isn’t it.”

The reason she prepared these empty vessels was so she could fill them with knowledge and memories.

Keeping the one inside the crystal as the immutable original. By spawning a limitless number of replicas, capable of storing an infinite volume of knowledge—

Subaru: “If she could burn her own memories and knowledge into the Ryuzu Meyers’ bodies, over and over. If she could do that, then it’d be like…”

Ryuzu: “—Immortality, in a sense.”

—And that was the truth of the experiments of the Sanctuary.

Chapter 57:
The Immortal Experiment

Immortality.

The stuff of fables throughout all of time, and an ideal which any living being would have at some point considered.

Never aging, never crumbling, outside the reach of reincarnation, a “Self” which persists in perpetuity. Despite violating the very principles of life, how many have been enraptured by that pinnacle of existence.

Subaru: “Immortality…huh.”

Repeating the word under his breath, Subaru almost broke out laughing at such unrealistic ambition. But instead, his cheeks stiffened, and couldn’t even manage a proper smile.

While half of him wanted to laugh it off as something ludicrous, the other half shuddered at the knowledge that the Witch’s experiments were far from fiction.

Subaru: “That’s quite a common aspiration for the likes of a Witch. Immortality or whatever… that just gives off the impression of a puny little person who’s scared of dying, you know.”

Ryuzu: “Whether being afraid of death makes a person puny would depend on who you ask. At least, the Witch of Greed isn’t so resigned towards the idea. It is natural to fear death, and to seek ways to overcome it… though most of the time, they fail due to a lack of ability, and end as no more than fantasies.”

Subaru: “Except, Echidna does have the ability. She might’ve even thought of all sorts of ways to do it. I wouldn’t put it past that clever brain of hers.”

Looking at Pico, sitting beside him, Subaru bit down on his lips feeling an emotion he couldn’t put into words.

Pico didn’t react to his gaze, but simply continued to sit there silently as if in some sort of idle-mode.

Seeing this, “haa…”, Subaru sighed,

Subaru: “Right. It’s like there’s nothing inside… no personality or anything.”

Ryuzu: “Her state is like that of a marionette. The epitome of a perfectly-prepared vessel. All that’s left is to fill her with whatever the Witch desires.”

Subaru: “But how’s all this coming along? Not saying I know the theory behind it, but I think I have a rough idea of what she’s trying to do.”

That is, to download her own knowledge and memories into the empty vessel.

If it was only a matter of data, Subaru wouldn’t have felt so repulsed.

But the subject in question was a person’s identity. More than that, it was a person whom Subaru knew, on the inside and out.

Subaru: “Taking her own memories and injecting them into an empty body. Assuming it succeeds, she could just repeat the process when one dies. It really would be like a kind of immortality. But…”

Passing on one’s personalities and memories would certainly be akin to overcoming “Death”.

After all, as long as the data that comprises the person is kept safe, even if the container is destroyed, it could be revived in another vessel.

By making copies of herself and copies of empty bodies—Echidna would indeed be immortal, at least in theory.

—But then,

Subaru: “People usually panic when they meet parallel-world versions of themselves and get stuck with a sense of obligation that they absolutely have to eliminate the other."

Ryuzu: "…"

Subaru: "Guess it's because they can't stand the feeling of seeing themselves outside of themselves. Just thinking about it, I can already see the icky situation awaiting her in the future… Hey, Miss Ryuzu."

Ryuzu: "What."

Subaru: "By making so many Ryuzu Meyer bodies… and then filling them with her personalities, she's not only perpetuating herself, but also making multiple copies of herself, right?"

Theoretically, that should also be possible.

From a purely theoretical standpoint, when the goal is to perpetuate oneself indefinitely, the more backups there are, the better.

If even Subaru thought of that, there was no way the Witch hadn't thought of it too.

Subaru: "Wonder what it feels like, to have other back-ups prepared. Even if you fail, there's a sort of "Insurance" ready and waiting. What do you make of that, Miss Ryuzu?"

Ryuzu: "…I doubt I'll ever understand it. I am not too knowledgeable on the techniques of extracting personalities, but, just speaking for myself, losing my only body would mean the end of what I am. In that sense, I am no different from Su-bo in that I'd have no recourse from the loss of my body."

Subaru: "Is that right. Yeah… yeah, of course."

Subaru couldn't help but let out a dry smile at Ryuzu' statement. Ryuzu furrowed her brows at Subaru's reaction, but there was no way she could possibly know what his reaction actually meant.

Subaru: "Right, that explains it. Yeah… now I kinda understand why it feels like there's no space between us…"

Subaru spilled a sigh as the white-haired Witch surfaced in his mind.

Preparing copies of herself, transferring her personality to achieve near-immortality. By doing so, her life was virtually “assured”.

Subaru: “In that case, how is that any different from me?”

He couldn’t bring himself to despise her for it.

Instead, it was a sense of closeness that surged up inside. Although calling it “closeness” might give rise to some questionable emotions, there was also the dark sense of elation to have found someone who shared his situation.

Echidna, who used her own methods to achieve a piece of immortality.

And Subaru, played on the palms of the Witch’s hands, returning from death, striving for the destined future.

Both rebelling against the law which stated that there can only be one “Life”.

In that sense, Subaru thought,

—Isn’t Echidna the only person who could possibly understand me?

Or, at the very least, understand his mentality.

Ryuzu: “Su-bo?”

Subaru: “…I think I understand Miss Ryuzu’s position now. And what Echidna was aiming for. So other than that, there’s something else I wanted to ask… Were Echidna’s plans successful?”

Ryuzu: “Her plans…”

Subaru: “Even I can see that she’s readied the empty vessels. All that’s left is to write herself into them. So, was she successful in copying herself? I mean…”

—Is Echidna currently alive somewhere in this world?

Subaru didn’t say the question out loud.

But, understanding what he was trying to ask, Ryuzu closed her eyes and shook her head to Subaru’s hopeful gaze.

Slowly, she shook her head.

Ryuzu: “No, regrettably not… the Witch’s plans were not successful. There is no body of Ryuzu Meyer in existence which carries the Witch’s personalities, tying her to the world of the living.”

Subaru: “…why’s that? She couldn’t suck the memories out of her head and download it into the body?”

Ryuzu: “I don’t know what “down-load” is, but the actual technique for extracting her personality was complete. As for why it failed, there is another reason.”

Subaru: “Another reason…?”

Ryuzu: “It’s quite simple. There is a limit to how much content a vessel can hold before they begin to overflow. If just one part flows over, the rest could no longer be considered the original existence.”

Hearing the word “vessel”, Subaru looked at Ryuzu, and then at Pico.

Gazing at their tiny bodies,

Subaru: “Vessel… it’s probably not a problem with the body size, right?”

Ryuzu: “It is the size of the soul, you could say. People have souls of sizes that befit their existence. The vessel of the girl Ryuzu Meyer isn’t large enough to contain the soul of the Witch Echidna.”

Subaru: “But…how could you be sure?”

Ryuzu: “When she failed to inject her knowledge into the first of the replicants, the problem with the size of the vessel was already self-evident. But, by that time, Ryuzu Meyer's body was already sealed within the crystal, and the mechanism to replicate her body was already in motion… and so, though unable to fulfill their original purpose, the vessels continued to be born, one after another."

Subaru couldn't help but be surprised by the lack of foresight.

It was certainly uncharacteristic of Echidna to make this kind of a mistake. And failing to do anything about the ever-increasing number of Ryuzu afterwards just didn't sound like her at all.

Subaru: "So then, what happened to the first replicant? She couldn't hold everything, but she still inherited a part of the Witch's memories, right? It may be partial, but she's still more or less a copy of the Witch."

Ryuzu: "When you continue pouring liquid into an already full vessel, who is to say which parts are kept and which parts are left out? As long as it doesn't affect daily life, the loss of specific, trivial memories could still be salvageable, but what if more crucial portions are lost? The person would no longer be the same."

Listening to her roundabout explanation, Subaru imagined what the first Ryuzu＝Echidna must have been like. Whatever she was, she must have strayed far from the Witch's expectations,

Ryuzu: "The story goes that the first of the replicants was completely broken mentally, and since she inherited a part of the Witch's power, she was also quite dangerous and troublesome to deal with. It took a great amount of effort to dispose of her, I hear."

Subaru: "Disposed of…huh."

Ryuzu: "Of course, the Witch wasn't so irresponsible as to abandon everything after a single failure. After disposing of the first replicant, I hear that she went to great pains to think of a way to alter the volume of a soul so she could transfer herself into the next one."

Subaru: "Sounds like she was really putting her heart and soul into it…"

What Echidna must have considered was to convert the data into a different medium to compress its volume, and perhaps enlarging the storage space on the receiving end by eliminating any unnecessary content.

The fact that Subaru could see this was thanks to his familiarity with computers and the concept of data, but with no such foundations beforehand, not to mention that she was dealing with “Souls”, it must be beyond incredible for Echidna to have thought of this.

Hearing about the loss of the first replicant, Subaru was honestly quite disappointed. But the fact that Echidna immediately moved onto another approach lifted his hopes once again.

However, seeing Subaru’s reaction, Ryuzu continued, “But”,

Ryuzu: “While she did find a new method, the Witch was never able to test it.”

Subaru: “Wh-Why not? Might be weird for me to say this, but aren’t the grounds for the experiment all ready to go? Even now, we still got a bunch of Ryuzu Meyer copies…”

Ryuzu: “Before the experiment could continue, the Witch of Envy had begun making her move.”

Subaru: “…”

Ryuzu: “The Witch of Envy devoured half the world, and consumed all the other six Witches in the process. The Witch of Greed was no exception. And so, a Witch’s plan to attain immortality was cut short by the hands of another Witch.”

Subaru had an inkling about the fates of the other six Witches.

Echidna had told him in her Citadel of dreams, as well as let him personally meet them—though they were only lingering, ephemeral fragments of what the Witch of Envy had erased from the world.

Having failed to attain immortality, continuing to preserve their fragments in this world was perhaps Echidna’s final act of rebellion.

Subaru: "…so what happened to the Sanctuary after the Witch was gone?"

Ryuzu: "In the first place, this land was under the management of Ros-bo's family, the House of Mathers. I don't know what kind of Contract was sealed between the Witch and the House of Mathers, but it has continued to this day, and the Sanctuary is currently under Ros-bo's care and management. That said, all Ros-bo's really doing is ensuring a flow of supplies enough to ward off ruin, and occasionally bringing in some children who meet the Sanctuary's criteria."

Subaru: "And everything else is left in the care of Miss Ryuzu… you said earlier that your individual personality was acquired little by little…"

Ryuzu: "Though I am one of the replicants, I was the third to be born. In order to fulfill the task of managing the Sanctuary and the ever-increasing number of Ryuzu Meyers, I was implanted with a certain degree of personality at birth. And even now, I am carrying out that duty."

Subaru: "Implanting personalities… is that really possible?"

Implanting an empty vessel with simulated personality so that it could fulfill a role.

Not unlike giving a computer artificial intelligence so that it behaves like a human—which was still no more than a figment of the imagination in Subaru's world.

To this, Ryuzu nodded.

Ryuzu: "No doubt, it was not an easy task. It was only possible because I was a soulless and empty vessel. And even then, I could only perform some rudimentary tasks during the experimental stage."

"I sure got off to a rough start", her smile seemed to be saying.

Ryuzu: "Being given a role when you have no memories is certainly a strange feeling. The days would pass slowly, and yet things moved with incredible momentum. In time, even I grew to be perplexed by its mysteries."

Subaru: "…So what happened to the rest of the replicants? I haven't seen any in the Sanctuary other than Pico and Miss Ryuzu."

Ryuzu: "Other than the four of us fulfilling the role of Ryuzu, the others are scattered in various locations throughout the Sanctuary. They act like eyes watching for intruders, and serve as relays. Interestingly, we replicants can relay our thoughts with one another."

Garfiel had once mentioned the "Eyes" of the Sanctuary. If he was referring to the Ryuzu-replicants keeping watch around the Sanctuary, then that would explain how he managed to see through the villagers' evacuation so quickly. And, arriving on that thought,

Subaru: "W-Wait hold on, you just said something I can't let slide… What do you mean the four of us filling the role of Ryuzu?"

Ryuzu: "Hmm, that. It's simple. Continually manifesting an entire body can be a tremendous burden on a replicant. This body will fade if my mana runs out. And, unlike spirits, I doubt I can re-materialize if I disappear completely. There may be a way to do it, but I don't know of it."

Disappearing and reforming with memories intact, Subaru remembered the spirit whom he had seen do this many times before. Although, since Puck had somewhere to "go home to" every time he disappeared, strictly speaking, he wasn't really disappearing. But since this wasn't the case with the Ryuzu's, disappearing from the depletion of mana would mean death for that individual.

Ryuzu: "Each one of us cannot stay active for very long. Once our bodies reach their limits and could no longer move, it would take about three days to replenish the lost mana. In the meantime, we need to make sure nothing inconvenient happens due to the absence of Ryuzu Meyer."

Subaru: "So, there are four Miss Ryuzus…"

Ryuzu: “We take turns being Ryuzu Meyer for one day, every four days. Outside of that, I’d be the same as the other vessels. …An empty cask wearing the facade of Ryuzu Meyer. That might be a way to describe it.”

Listening to Ryuzu’ somewhat cynical remarks, for a moment, Subaru didn’t know what to say.

Anything he could possibly say would come across as empty and frivolous here. Even knowing that silence would mean affirming Ryuzu’ cynicism, no words came to his lips.

Ryuzu: “Don’t feel bad, Su-bo. Me and the other replicants have each accepted our purpose. Same as the first Ryuzu Meyer.”

Subaru: “The first… That’s right, I wanted to ask about that too.”

Ryuzu: “Mn?”

Subaru: “I can see why Miss Ryuzu and the other Ryuzu replicants would obey the Witch and protect the Sanctuary. But why did the girl Ryuzu Meyer help the Witch?”

A girl encased in a crystal, having all of eternity stolen from her.

Judging by the conversation so far, there didn’t seem to have been any attempts to fill the empty vessels with Ryuzu Meyer herself. So Ryuzu Meyer had sacrificed herself for the experiment, choosing for the residence of her soul to be forever sealed within a crystal.

In exchange, her body would continuously be reborn outside. Though, for her soul, her decision was akin to suicide.

Why would a little girl make such a decision?

Or perhaps the Witch haphazardly threw her on the experiment table without her consent?

While Subaru wished that it wasn’t the latter, he still asked this question,

Subaru: “What was Ryuzu Meyer thinking when she chose to participate in the experiment?”

Ryuzu: “…Ryuzu Meyer offered the Witch a condition, and the Witch accepted, so she participated in the experiment. That’s what I heard. There’s no need to worry, she wasn’t forced.”

Subaru: “A condition… can you tell me what it was?”

Ryuzu: “Even if you hear it, I doubt you would understand it.”

Hearing this, Subaru just wordlessly stared back at her. Seeing eyes like those of a stubborn child, Ryuzu frowned and exhaled a deep sigh.

Ryuzu: “Ryuzu Meyer’s condition to the Witch was the Sanctuary’s continued existence.”

Subaru: “The Sanctuary’s… continued existence?”

Ryuzu: “Ryuzu Meyer wished for the state of the Sanctuary, which the Witch created as her experimental grounds, to continue to be preserved. Of course, since the Witch needed the Sanctuary to continue her experiments, she gladly accepted. Even now, after the Witch’s death, her promise to Ryuzu Meyer is kept. With our own hands, we see to it that the Contract is fulfilled.”

Subaru: “No, but that’s… the order’s all backwards.”

Echidna was the one who needed the Sanctuary for her experiments, and Ryuzu Meyer was the one gathered in the Sanctuary for those experiments. Why would a little girl placed on an experiment table ask the Witch for the Sanctuary’s continued existence? The arrangement made no sense at all.

Ryuzu: “Even if it meant being used for experiments… it is still much cosier than a land in which they are persecuted. Don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “…That just sounds a bit too far beyond saving.”

Ryuzu: “And yet, she found salvation here. So Ryuzu Meyer offered herself for the experiment. Whether or not it achieved anything in the end, you can be the judge of that after seeing this girl and myself.”

Ryuzu took a sip of her thoroughly cold tea. Subaru didn’t say a word in reply.

Even as the topic of her circumstances came to an end, Pico showed no reaction at his side. Only, she was still silently holding onto his sleeve.

Subaru: “Why’s she so attached to me? I thought there’s nothing inside, and at first she was treating me like I don’t even exist.”

Ryuzu: “It’s because Su-bo touched Ryuzu Meyer’s crystal. The command authority has been written to you.”

Subaru: “Command authority…?”

Subaru furrowed his brows at the appearance of the new term.

And seeing this, Ryuzu nodded and held up a single finger with “Right”,

Ryuzu: “Go ahead, try giving her an order. Oh, but nothing indecent now. She looks exactly like me, after all.”

Subaru: “Even if you don’t say that, I’m not interested in Loli body-types okay?! I only have a healthy attraction to girls my age! … Pico, rub my shoulders a little.”

Giving Ryuzu a pout, Subaru turned to Pico beside him. At the sound of his voice, the little girl looked up and affirmed his command with a nod. She climbed onto the bed, circled behind his back, and,

Subaru: “Ooh, oohoooh, feels nice feels nice…auh? Wai-Wait, Miss Pico? That’s a bit too forceful? Scale it back scale it back … Aoww, no no, Miss Pico, scale it baaaaaack!!”

Ryuzu: “She may know the concept of shoulder rubs, but the strength to put into it is still an unknown. This kind of thing can happen if we don’t take care to teach her properly.”

Subaru: “Wh-Why’d you tell me to try then?!”

Squirming himself free of Pico’s shoulder-rub, Subaru ordered her back to her original position before giving his creaking shoulders a few turns. With the horror of Pico’s bone-crushing grip still fresh in his mind, Subaru tilted his head with “But, I mean”,

Subaru: “If just touching it transfers the command authority to me, isn’t the security a bit too lax? What if it’d been some malicious Loli-con?”

Ryuzu: “It’s nearly impossible to stumble into that place by accident, and the command authority doesn’t transfer so easily. At the very least, you would have to be accepted as an apostle of Greed.”

Subaru: “…Hnn?”

Listening to Ryuzu say this followed by a sip of tea, Subaru already couldn’t count how many times he had been stumped in this conversation. Crossing his arms, he timidly let out an “Uhh…”,

Subaru: “Excuse me. I don’t remember becoming an apostle of Greed or anything.”

Ryuzu: “Someone who has gained Echidna’s approval is qualified to be an apostle. Did you receive anything while inside the Tomb? Given something, a gift, or took anything into your body?”

Subaru: “In the Tomb…”

Recalling his meeting with Echidna in her Citadel of dreams, Subaru tried to remember if there was some kind of solemn bestowment like what Ryuzu was talking about. But his search came up empty.

If Echidna had granted him anything, it would’ve been some knowledge, some relief, and some terrifying experiences. And also,

Subaru: “…It couldn’t have been the Dona-tea, right?”

Ryuzu: “Hmm, Dona-tea?”

Subaru: “Echidna said it’s her body fluids which she cleverly dressed up as tea and gave to me, I wound up drinking it twice…”

Ryuzu: “No kidding, that’s definitely it.”

Subaru: “What did that bastard make me drink??!!”

Seeing Subaru suddenly jump up in anger, Ryuzu chided him with “Now, now”. But, seeing that Subaru had no intention of cooling down,

Ryuzu: “Be that as it may, it is the reason we got to where we are. So it’s not all bad, is it?”

Subaru: “It just pisses me off to have something put into me without me knowing! What the hell did she do to me? Apostle of Greed or whatever, I’ve already got my plates full with Witches as it is, don’t go shoveling more on. Those damn Witches are all the same…”

Whether it was unknowingly sealing a Return by Death Contract with the Witch of Envy, or being one-sidedly declared an apostle of Greed, it’s like the Witches just don’t give a damn about other people.

Ryuzu: “Anyways, thanks to that, Su-bo has been given the command authority over the Ryuzu replicants in the Sanctuary. You can even order me to obey you.”

Subaru: “It even works on you, Miss Ryuzu?”

Ryuzu: “While my willpower is stronger than the girl with no will of her own, ultimately, I cannot defy it. So, that must make a young boy like you very happy, no?”

Subaru: “I already said I’m not a Loli-con…”

Even if she throws him a seductive gaze, he won’t react or anything.

Peeking at Ryuzu’ delightful smile through the corners of his eyes, Subaru could feel the Sanctuary’s mysteries beginning to clear.

A hidden facility deep within the forest. Ryuzu Meyer sealed inside, and a system which replicates her body. The destruction that would take place six days from now, along with the problems that comes with it.

And then, there was something that could not be left out now that they were on the topic of the facility's existence—

Subaru: "Miss Ryuzu, sorry it's so sudden, but… there's something I need your help with."

Ryuzu: "What. If it's something dirty then you can go ask those pure 'n innocent ones instead of me."

Subaru: "Can you stop with that already!"

Shoving aside Ryuzu' jabs at the fact that he was going through puberty, Subaru stood up, stretched out his spine, and tilted back his head towards the ceiling.

Subaru: "This command authority… there's at least one other guy who's got it, right?"

Ryuzu: "…"

Subaru: "There're quite a few things I want to ask him, but there's just something else that's been bothering me."

Two people surfaced in his mind.

One, whom he had seen issuing orders to the twenty-odd Ryuzu replicants—the great tiger-guardian of the Sanctuary, Garfiel.

And the other, was,

Subaru: "Why did her Door Crossing send me into the facility… It might be time to get the answer to that…"

It was about time he properly questioned that girl with cream-colored curls, Subaru decided.

Chapter 58:
Nanna

1

Coming out of the remote residence alongside Ryuzu and Pico, Subaru noticed a sliver of dawn beginning to creep onto the eastern sky, and felt sleepy for the first time that night.

Subaru: “Woah, the sun’ll be up soon… a whole lot’s happened tonight, huh.”

It didn’t feel like it, but the night had begun with Emilia’s first Trial, followed by Subaru’s intervention, a Return by Death, an after-Trial meeting, a run-in with Garfiel, and, after that, him uncovering a secret facility before spending the rest of the night learning the Sanctuary’s secrets from Ryuzu.

This dense use of time and the hyper-speed developments had left him dazed and out of breath. And, unlike his mind, he couldn’t quite hide the toll on his body, which had been running non-stop until now. One could say that the subtle imbalance of mental and physical fatigue was just one of the downsides of Return by Death.

Subaru: “Honestly, I kinda wanna go back to the Cathedral and sleep till noon…”

Ryuzu: “No one would mind if you do. I plan on taking a nice long rest as well after I pass things on to the next Ryuzu.”

Subaru: “While I sort of envy the kind of shift-rotations you have, I’m running out of time, so there’s no helping it…”

Six days—or actually, only five, since a day had already passed. And considering that he’d have to spend a whole day’s travel time to get to and from the Mansion, there was really only three days he could use.

Wasting a precious half of a day sleeping wasn’t something he could afford, but, while Echidna already knew that Subaru could see the future, he was still hesitant about whether he should tell Ryuzu.

Subaru: “It might make the Witch of Envy show up, so better not just yet…”

Sweat popped up on his forehead the moment the shadowy, Sanctuary-devouring Witch flashed across his mind.

Somehow he just knew that the devastation was a result of him running his mouth in Echidna’s Citadel. Spilling forbidden knowledge out of reach of the Witch’s constraints, he had invited her wrath as well as everything that followed.

So, he’d consider it lucky if the Witch only dealt him the usual punishment in the real world, where she could directly lay her hands on him—

Subaru: “I do wanna try, but out of concern for other people’s lives… better not.”

Deciding this in a deflated mumble, Subaru looked down at the dopey-looking Pico, standing there holding his left hand. On the receiving end of his gaze, as if in anticipation of another command, the girl’s round eyes grew even rounder.

It seems that Subaru’s first command had made her more aware of the transfer of command-authority. And now, Pico was like a baby bird looking up to its parent.

Ryuzu: “So, what does Su-bo plan to do next?”

Subaru: “Probably get back to the Mansion for now. There’s someone there I need to get some answers from… and I’ll see Frederica while I’m at it. There’s a whole bunch of things she could clear up for me.”

Ryuzu: “Frederica, huh…”

Mentioning the name of the hulking maid who popped into his mind, he saw a furrow in Ryuzu’ brows, as if there was some significance in hearing Subaru mention this name. After all, it wasn’t like Ryuzu to react this way.

Subaru: “Did that remind you of something? About Frederica?”

Ryuzu: “…No, it’s nothing important.”

Subaru: “Miss Ryuzu, I’d rather not use my command authority if possible… I really don’t want to have to order Miss Ryuzu to tell me.”

Subaru shrinked up his shoulders, imploring her to tell him. But, underneath the words, his eyes sharpened as if clearly saying, “I’ll use it if I have to”. Seeing this, Ryuzu let out a sigh.

Ryuzu: “It was just that, ever since Frederica left, little by little, it feels like the Sanctuary’s gears have been slipping out of place.”

Subaru: “Slipping out of place?”

Ryuzu: “The way it was, though I’m not sure if you could call it healthy… hm, whether it was the residents, the Ryuzu Meyer replicants, or Gar-bo, none of them were as on edge as they are now.”

Subaru: “…”

Ryuzu: “You know, Su-bo, I have great expectations of you.”

As Subaru fell silent, Ryuzu looked up and said this.

“Expectations”. He felt a tug on his chest as he heard it. Because the word reminded him of—

Ryuzu: “For the longest time, the Sanctuary had been awkwardly serving a purpose which it had already lost. That obstinance is now creating holes all over. That’s why I have great expectations of you, Su-bo.”

Subaru: “What, could I…”

Ryuzu: “The Witch’s obsession, the reasons for the Sanctuary’s continued existence, and Ryuzu Meyer’s wish. I look forward to seeing you bring about a conclusion that fulfills everyone's hopes in the end."

A far-too-heavy burden of bearing everyone's expectations on his shoulders.

Subaru had the urge to immediately say "Can't do it". But, sensing Ryuzu' solemn gaze,

Subaru: "…"

The words just stuck in his throat.

Ryuzu: "This is good. For now… it's good enough."

Seeing Subaru's hesitation and reluctance, as if understanding it all, Ryuzu nodded her head.

Her appearance was no older than a child's, but it was in moments like this that Subaru understood that she possessed qualities befitting her age.

Ryuzu: "It seems, my time is almost up."

Leaving these words with a tinge of regret, Ryuzu' body began to glow with a faint light.

It reminded him of a spirit on the verge of vanishing, he thought, as he reached out his fingers to her, but,

Ryuzu: "Don't worry. I'm not returning to mana just yet. I'm just going to sleep for a while until I save up the expended mana again. There will be a Ryuzu to replace me soon."

Subaru: "But… even if your face and voice are all the same, you won't be the same, right?"

Ryuzu: "I suppose you're right. The looks and tone and personality are meant to be similar… but we're still different people. So, only this old self chatting with Su-bo right now is actually me. Does that make you feel lonely?"

Subaru: “It’s not whether I feel lonely or not. Miss Ryuzu… Miss Ryuzu don’t you feel sad? Aren’t you upset that there are four people taking turns pretending to be Ryuzu Meyer? Don’t you ever wonder where your own life…”

Caught mid-sentence, Subaru realized just how cruel his questions were.

Even if Ryuzu herself thought this way, even if she truly suffered and grieved over her circumstances, Subaru knew full well that there was nothing he could do about it.

He had no grasp of arcane principles, detailed knowledge of mana, or even the most superficial understanding of magical algorithms. So what was the point of reaching out to these unreachable regrets?

Ryuzu seemed to understand his conflicting thoughts. She gave him a faint smile as her pink hair swayed in the wind, tinted by the colors of dawn.

Ryuzu: “What do you think, Su-bo?”

Subaru: “—huh?”

Ryuzu: “The answer to that question… is just another one of the things I will eagerly expect from you.”

Leaving this behind, like a thin haze, Ryuzu’ body melted into the morning light.

No different from a scattering mist, impossible to believe even with the warning beforehand, it was like a scene pulled straight from a dream. A living person simply vanished into the dawn.

Although she told him that she wouldn’t cease to exist, he found it hard to take her at her word.

But, in that same instant, the shape of another person appeared where Ryuzu had vanished. Whether it was stature or appearance, every last detail was identical to the Ryuzu who disappeared.

She shook her head once and looked up at Subaru, Ryuzu: “I shouldn’t think I need to reintroduce myself, Su-bo. The previous “me” has filled me in all about you.”

As if to clear up Subaru’s doubts, with that, the new Ryuzu updated their mutual understanding. And, at the very end, the girl tilted her head,

Ryuzu: “So, Su-bo… what will you do first?”

Subaru: “Ah, right…”

He lifted his head.

Watching the light of dawn erode away the night’s sky, his thoughts slipped to the time that had passed, as well as the time that still remained to him.

Then his eyes dropped to Ryuzu and Pico, and,

Subaru: “First thing is to get out of the Sanctuary. I’ll need some help from Miss Ryuzus for that.”

And just like this, Subaru submitted his request.

2

Subaru arrived at the stable just after the break of dawn.

Pushing open the creaking gate as quietly as he could, he searched for his partner inside, and found the jet-black figure blending into the darkness in the back of the stable, awaiting her master’s call.

Subaru: “Sorry for cooping you up in here, Patrasche.”

Hearing Subaru’s voice, Patrasche reached out her head and nudged him with her nose. Her gesture was at once filled with affection and carrying a tinge of complaint at being left aside for so long, prompting a ticklish feeling inside Subaru’s heart.

Subaru: “I know you just woke up, but I need your help. Can you take me back to the Mansion?”

Holding her face up to Subaru's palms, Patrasche snorted, as if to say "What 'am I going to do with you, Subaru…".

Sighing with relief that at least his dragon was on board with his plan, Subaru untied Patrasche's reins from the stable and prepared to bring her outside.

Without other encumbrances weighing her down, the usual half a day's ride might be completed in even less.

If they set out in the morning like this, they should reach the Mansion just before dusk.

Subaru: "Just a messy plan assuming I'll start over anyway…"

This time, Subaru was determined to return to the Mansion, and, unlike the loops before this, he wasn't going to bring the villagers. Frankly, it was because he was convinced that he would be doing it all again, and had resolved to eliminate all unnecessary variables aside from the goal of gathering information.

The loss of the friendship he had struck up with Ryuzu would be regrettable, but,

Subaru: "My relationship with Garfiel is already as horrible as can be, and I'm just about to make it even worse…"

Having transferred the command authority to himself—Subaru could just imagine Garfiel seething with bloodshot eyes, looking for whoever took it.

It probably wouldn't take long before he finds him. After all, Subaru didn't order Ryuzu to keep it a secret, and Ryuzu herself would tell the truth if she was asked.

All this was within Subaru's considerations.

Subaru: "—Still, can't help but worry about leaving Emilia with just a note."

If this world was only a sacrifice to be erased as soon as it was rewound, then logically, his concerns for Emilia in this world shouldn't even exist.

No matter how much she suffers, grieves, or otherwise rejoices, all of it will be lost along with the world itself. But, even though his mind understood this,

Subaru: "It's still no excuse at all…"

Even knowing that this was a soon-to-be-abandoned world, Subaru still didn't want to make Emilia cry.

Finding out that he had left without a word would likely bring her more pain than she could bear. Losing the only support she could lean on, she probably wouldn't know what to do with herself. While a part of him was glad that Emilia relied on him like this, it still hurt all the same.

In order to make sure that doesn't happen, or at least hoping that it wouldn't last too long if it did, Subaru left her a note.

That said, there was nothing special written inside, only an assortment of run-of-the mill words of consolation. Since he couldn't tell her the truth, it was all he could do to try to keep her from worrying.

Subaru: "It's better than nothing… wait, what if Emilia doesn't actually need me that much?"

Ever since Puck went missing, Emilia had been relying on Subaru more than ever before.

So that thought was only wishful thinking, and he knew it couldn't be as simple as that.

In any case, Subaru must leave the Sanctuary and leave Emilia behind. In order to rewrite the unsalvageable present with a future that could yet be saved, he would have to harden his heart and make the necessary sacrifices.

Subaru: "Before anyone notices, let's… oh?"

While leading Patrasche out of the stables, Subaru picked up the saddle he had stored away in the carriage. Giving it a light pat, he threw it over Patrasche, when he caught something in the corner of his vision. It was,

Subaru: “Petelgeuse’ Gospel…?”

A thick book in black binding, hidden away in the corner of the carriage.

Once belonging to Petelgeuse, honestly, Subaru had wanted to get rid of it, but he couldn’t exactly hand it off to other people. Besides, he figured it might reveal some useful information about the obscure Witch Cult, and so ended up keeping it.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, that view’s kinda changed after what Roswaal said.”

After fitting on the saddle, Subaru casually picked up the Gospel.

Feeling its dense weight in his palm, the image of the blood-drenched madman surfaced in his mind.

A man with an overzealous devotion to the Gospel, believing that it was his only way to express his loyalty to the Witch.

Inside, like some poor parody, its pages hinted at its owner Petelgeuse’ future actions.

Subaru: “Roswaal, Beatrice, and Petelgeuse… why’re they so convinced that only they could read this thing…?”

Grumbling, he casually flipped through its pages.

But suddenly, his fingers froze, as a strange, strangled noise escaped his throat—

Subaru: “I can, read it?”

—When he realized that he could read the words written on the Gospel’s white pages.

Although the letters were something like a child’s scrawling, they lined up to form words that carried meaning. What was more, those words were in the form of “Yi” glyphs that Subaru could understand.

Subaru: “How could… unless, it’s recognized me as its owner? But I didn’t do anything to…”

At that thought, Subaru suddenly noticed something.

The last time he tried and failed to read this Gospel’s contents was before he came to the Sanctuary. It had been in the Capital, and after returning to Roswaal’s Mansion. Since then, he hadn’t had a chance to open the Gospel to check, but it could only be related to something that took place in the Sanctuary.

Although, the direct cause might be something that didn’t exactly happen in the Sanctuary.

Namely,

Subaru: “What the hell did Echidna do to me…?”

Just like the Trials inside the Tomb, there was a good chance that Echidna had tampered with his physical body in some way. He had a feeling that it had something to do with the tea Echidna gave him at her so-called tea party.

Echidna was joking about it being her bodily fluids, but what if it was something else?

Something that drastically changed Subaru’s body from before.

Subaru: “Actually, I don’t know if that’s the reason, considering all that’s happened last loop.”

It could have just as easily been caused by the Witch of Envy’s wrath after he revealed Return by Death to Echidna.

Subaru hated the fact that he couldn’t go there and ask her this very moment.

Subaru: “…Then again, it might not have accepted me as its owner

after all.”

Being recognized by a Gospel belonging to the Witch Cult doesn’t exactly put one’s mind at ease, but, after quickly scanning over its contents, Subaru determined that all the messages were meant for Petelgeuse.

Since it was undated, Subaru couldn’t tell when the events of the first entry took place. But from the Gospel’s page after page of scribbled accounts, a picture of Petelgeuse’ activities began to take shape.

The entries were basically “where to go” and “what to do”, but contained no description of what would happen as a result. Perhaps Petelgeuse had no interest in the outcomes, and merely improvised the rest by doing whatever he thought benefited the Witch Cult.

Reading on like this, he came to the final entry.

Though there were more pages after it, they were all blank after this point. On the final page, there were still the crimson words “THE END” which Subaru had scrawled in blood.

Before that, was the Gospel’s last original entry:

Subaru: ““Go to Mathers Domain, put silver-haired Half-Witch to Trial”…huh. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Without knowing what the “Trial” would entail, Subaru could gather no information aside from that Petelgeuse was to attack Emilia.

Nonetheless, Subaru had managed to confirm that Petelgeuse’ atrocities were indeed committed in accordance to the Gospel’s instructions.

Subaru: “…Right, my bad my bad. Let’s get going.”

Watching Subaru lean against the carriage, Patrasche gave him a few impatient nudges with her snout. Giving her a wry smile, Subaru placed the Gospel back in its original spot in the carriage.

Consigning what he had just witnessed into memory, his mind began drifting onto other concerns.

Specifically, escaping the Sanctuary and returning to the Mansion.

Subaru: “Hopefully we can get out without causing a stir in the Sanctuary. So take it nice and quiet, ok?”

Patrasche: “—NGHH!!”

As Subaru climbed onto her saddle, Patrasche let out a high-spirited neigh in response to her master’s request.

Getting the feeling that his partner didn’t understand his request at all, Subaru calmed the overexcited Patrasche and set the course straight for the edge of the Sanctuary.

He could already begin to see the sun’s true form in the distant, eastern sky, showering its light upon the tops of the forest canopy. If he doesn’t hurry, the early risers will soon be up, making his flight far more difficult without the cover of night.

Just as Subaru tried to carefully give Patrasche a signal to accelerate, Patrasche broke into a sprint. The Divine Protection of Wind Evasion activated around the earth dragon’s body, shielding Subaru from the turbulence and the wind.

Shooting out of the Sanctuary, they entered the forest. Following paths no wider than animal trails, Patrasche unhesitatingly galloped in the direction of the Mansion. Same as always, though Subaru was holding the reins, Patrasche navigated by her own volition, choosing the paths she believed to be best for her master.

Though it made him feel a tinge of loneliness, there was nothing else to do except to leave it to Patrasche’s discretion. Grasping tightly onto the reins, Contracting the muscles of his body, they merged into a single shadow speeding through the forest. If nothing stands in the way, they should come out of the forest within an hour, leaving the bounds of the Sanctuary behind them. But,

Garfiel: “JUST… HOLD’ON A GODDAMN MINUTE, OY!!”

A heel slamming down from above shot into the surface of the earth, shattering the ground in a violent blast.

Patrasche gouged her claws into the soil to brake in front of the upheaval of dust and timber. To prevent Subaru from flying off her back, she shifted her weight with supernatural dexterity before coming to a full stop, glaring at the path ahead.

At the same time, enduring the shock on Patrasche's back, Subaru turned his gaze to the same direction.

Garfiel: "You… what the fuck were you thinking, th'hell were you planning, hah? OY!"

Boiling rage flushing onto his face, Garfiel kicked his foot into the ground.

Crumpling his nose, with frustration and displeasure in full display, he bared his fangs at Subaru, who was looking down at him from Patrasche's back,

Garfiel: "Don't fuckin' look down on me, get down. Come to th'same eye-level n'speak. Get started or I crush ya, y'bastard…"

Subaru: "I had a feeling you'd get in the way, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "And I never thought y'd do somethin' this fuckin' stupid! Y'think y'can turn tail 'n run? Don't make me laugh! You! Th'Sanctuary! Th'half-witch n'Roswaal! Everyone! Yer all in the same fuckin' lot! 'Til the fuckin' Trial is done, no one gets out…"

Subaru: "Is that your excuse?"

Garfiel: "…"

Garfiel's expression, flustered with rage, suddenly changed in front of Subaru's concise question.

His seething glare sharpened while the intermittent sound of clenching teeth broke through his silent breaths.

Subaru: "Garfiel, you act like you want to keep us in the Sanctuary, and want us to complete the Trials… but that's not what you really feel, is it?"

Garfiel: "Th'fuck's that supposed to mean, oy."

Subaru: "Doesn't mean a thing. If you really hope to liberate the Sanctuary, you should let me do what I have to do. But you won't, and you can't, not yet, because there are more complicated factors at play. Am I wrong?"

Garfiel: "Hah, don't give me that bullshit. I just can't stand y'reekin of th'Witch's stench without doin' somethin' ab…"

Subaru: "You… can't really smell the Witch's stench on me, can you?"

Once again, Garfiel fell speechless in front of Subaru's question.

His eyes swam and his lips began to quiver. Truly a man who couldn't hide his heart. Seeing his reaction, Subaru smiled bitterly, and,

Subaru: "What's really been bothering me was when I came out of the Tomb last night. Honestly, at that moment, I thought you were going to kill me before I'd even have a chance, but you didn't."

Garfiel: "…Hah? Th'fuck're y'talkin' about?"

Subaru: "You don't know what I mean? I'm starting to have doubts about whether you've been lying about that sharp nose of yours."

It was immediately following Returning by Death, after dying from contact with the Witch, no less.

Even though Subaru must have been soaked to the bone in the Witch's scent, Garfiel's attitude towards him didn't change at all. Yet, not long after they parted, he came back to confront Subaru as if he had just remembered it, leading to their exchange last night.
—It was just all too unnatural.

Subaru: "Maybe you didn't want to escalate the situation so you pretended not to notice, that was what I thought at the time… but, considering your straightforward personality, I had to rule out that possibility."

Garfiel: "Y're getting pretty far with yer conceited speculations. Y'think I'm lyin' 'bout smellin' the Witch's stench on ya? Hah, how fuckin' stupid is that?! Why th'hell would I lie about somethin' like that, oy? What's the point o'…"

Subaru: "Of course there's a point. By claiming this, you're drawing all the suspicion to yourself… and diverting attention away from the actual person with the sharp nose."

Garfiel: "…"

That single statement must have struck the heart of Garfiel's true intentions.

The moment he heard it, Garfiel's face contorted in the truest sense of the word.

His willingness to resolve matters through dialogue up to now was suddenly replaced by one of violence and impulse.

Garfiel's arms swelled, doubling in thickness. Golden fur began to cover his exposed skin as his slouching back hunched even deeper, ever closer to standing on all fours.

Garfiel: "I've heard enough of yer prattlin'. Looks like y'know somethin' y'shoudn't. I'd have avoided it if I could, but looks like I can't let y'live."

Subaru: "Don't say that, Garfiel. You might want to hear me out for a little longer. Otherwise, you won't know how your secrets got leaked, right?"

Garfiel: "My secrets…?"

Stared down by Subaru's intensified glare, Garfiel let slip a voice of doubt.

To wipe away Garfiel's disbelief, Subaru lifted his arm atop Patrasche's back, and gave a loud snap of his fingers. Then, Garfiel: “A, ah?”

Garfiel groaned, doubting the sight before his eyes.

On the other end of his vision, at Subaru’s beckon, one by one, Ryuzu Meyer copies emerged from the treeline, gathering around the earth dragon until there was twenty-one in all.

Personally restaging the scene he had once witnessed before, Subaru pointed his finger towards Garfiel,

Subaru: “Now that you’ve seen it, do you more or less understand my position here?”

Garfiel: “How… how th’hell did y’find that place!”

Subaru: “Using regret and pain as the sacrifice, I’ve summoned the truth. Now, it’s my turn.”

Raising his palm to the sky, Subaru looked down at the defeated Garfiel from atop his dragon.

On the receiving end of his gaze, Garfiel’s throat froze, as if unable to come to terms with the reality of having been beaten.

Subaru: “The command authority has transferred to me. So that you wouldn’t notice, I told them to follow your orders for the rest of the night.”

Garfiel: “—a.”

Subaru: “But there’s no need to hide it anymore. Listen up, Garfiel. I am going to leave the Sanctuary and head back to the Mansion. There are things I have to do. So I can’t have you getting in the way.”

Just now realizing the implications of Subaru’s order, Garfiel’s expression collapsed.

The firm determination of moments ago had melted from his face, and, in its place, was only an expression of weakness and confusion like that of a lost child.

His body's beastification had ceased, and the swollen figure shrank back to its original, scrawny form.

Subaru: "Don't follow, Garfiel. There's a mountain of things I want to ask you as well, but it's best if we leave it till later. The command authority too, there're way too many things I need to ask you."

Garfiel: "Quit… quit jokin' around. Y'think I'm gonna give up that easily…?"

Subaru: "You will. Deep down, you're just that soft."

At Subaru's provocation, Garfiel leaped forth with a roar. Baring his fangs, his momentum seemed to be set on crushing Subaru and Patrasche in a single strike. But there, a tiny figure stepped in between them.

A replicant. Garfiel swung his arm as if to swipe her away to clear the path of advance or else run her over. But, just before his arm made contact,

Ryuzu: "—Gar-bo."

Garfiel: "—?!"

Being called by his nickname, Garfiel's expression changed once more, as he reined in his arm at the last moment to strike at empty air. And, just like this, Garfiel's body was caught mid-flight by a multitude of hands, pulling him to the ground without resistance.

The replicants reached out all over Garfiel's body and held him under total restraint. Then, standing above Garfiel's despondent face, looking down,

Ryuzu: "Now, is that enough of a head start, Su-bo?"

Subaru: "Yeah, thanks for the help. I don't think Garfiel ever expected something like this."

During their battle against the Witch of Envy, Garfiel never hesitated in using the replicants as sacrificial pawns in his attack.

But back then, there was no conscious Ryuzu Meyer at the scene. The active Ryuzu at the time must have already been swallowed by the Witch's shadow, but Subaru suspected that there might be another reason as well.

With a calculation that could be said to be beyond cruel,

Subaru: "You can't treat the Ryuzu you see as family the same way you treat the other replicants. If there's a difference between how you and I use the control authority, that would be it."

Garfiel: "Y'motherfucker—!!!!"

Subaru: "But, even if not for that, you still couldn't destroy Ryuzu Meyer replicants with your own hands, right? So, be good and let me off this time. It could be worse."

Garfiel: "How can it get worse than it already is! Quit fuckin' with me, y'quit fuckin' with me!"

Hearing the barks echo out into the horizon, Subaru consciously ignored it as he gave Patrasche a few taps on her back. Sensing Subaru's intention, the earth dragon gave a little snort, turned her back to the restrained Garfiel, and headed for the bounds of the forest.

Before leaving, Subaru turned back to Ryuzu, and,

Subaru: "I made you do something disagreeable, sorry about that."

Ryuzu: "I can tell that it must be necessary. As unpleasant as it is, I wouldn't have refused. There's no need to worry about me."

Subaru: "Still, sorry."

Subaru left this apology as Ryuzu turned to Garfiel with a look of sympathy. With that as his farewell, he signaled Patrasche to get going.

Once again, with the activation of the Divine Protection, all noise and wind were left behind them.

Garfiel: “Wait! Stop! Y’motherfucker! Quit fuckin’ around, oy!!”

The distant voice hounded Subaru’s trail.

As if to shake off its pursuit, Patrasche accelerated once more, carrying Subaru through the forest and out of the Sanctuary.

Garfiel: “Let go! Y’can’t let that guy outside… why, whywhywhy! Granny y’rather take that guy’s side than mine? Why, just why…”

Ryuzu: “…”

Garfiel: “GRANDMAAAA—!!!!”

A wail, as if at a loved one’s betrayal, resounded through the forest.

Leaving it and all else behind him, Subaru kept his course amidst the passing trees.

Necessary sacrifices, and necessary sorrows, all stepping stones towards the perfect future.

Biting down on the corner of his lips and feeling blood trickling out of the gash, Subaru wrote off Garfiel’s despair as another sacrifice.

Chapter 59:
Sweet Pastry, Sweetless Story

1

Frederica: "…It seems you've returned earlier than I thought."

Standing in the opened doorway with keen, widened eyes, the tall maid welcomed Subaru's return in a soft whisper.

Subaru: "Yeah, we ran into a situation so I had to come back. It's only been two… no, three days, right? Sorry I couldn't give you a heads up about coming back so soon, but can I come in now?"

Panting heavily on Patrasche's back, Subaru answered with the fatigue of half a day's travel behind him. Seeing Subaru still joking around in spite of his disheveled appearance, the maid—Frederica placed a hand over her lips to cover the fangs showing through her smile,

Frederica: "Certainly. It would be an affront to my duty as the Master's servant to fail to provide a guest with the utmost hospitality. I will take the earth dragon to the stable, Master Subaru, please come in. Petra will attend to your needs."

Subaru: "Oh you don't have to… no I mean, thanks please."

Hopping down from Patrasche, his knees gave way at the landing. Though he managed to stave off falling by hanging onto the reins, it seems that he was more exhausted than he thought.

It was only natural—having rushed all the way from the Sanctuary without rest, after being awake all night, no less.

Despite the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion and Patrasche's care not to add to the burden of her rider, the six hours' journey had taken its toll on Subaru.

Noticing that his body had endured more than he realized, Subaru quickly took Frederica up on her offer. Handing the reins to Frederica, he patted the worried Patrasche on the back,

Subaru: "It's alright, I'll be fine. You're the one I should thank for putting up with me all this way. It's time to head to the stable and get a nice brushing, ok?"

Unlike horses, earth dragons' bodies aren't coated in fur, but they still seem to enjoy having their rigid scales cleaned with a brush. Patrasche was no exception, and excitedly nudged Subaru with her snout at his promise. Being frontally assaulted like this, Subaru let out an "Uwa!" and slinked back.

Frederica: "My my, you sure are enthusiastic about this. Come with me, Patrasche. I'll make you a brand new bed of straw."

Subaru: "I'll leave her with you, then. —Hey, Frederica."

Frederica: "Yes?"

Leading Patrasche by her reins, Frederica was walking her to the stable when Subaru called from behind. Stopping in her steps, Frederica looked back.

With her long, golden hair swaying, her vicious-looking features nonetheless carried a certain tenderness about them. Subaru gave the bones in his neck a crack, and,

Subaru: "—Do you have any plans to head to the cabin in the mountains today?"

Frederica: "…? No, I don't, is something the matter?"

Hearing Subaru's quiet question, Frederica replied in an incredulous tone. Taking note of the way she answered, of her expression, and her gaze, Subaru shook his head with "No",

Subaru: "If not, then nevermind. Also, sorry to ask this, but, once you're done with Patrasche, can you head back inside as soon as possible? There're quite a few things about the Sanctuary I need to talk to you about."

Frederica: “I understand. I will come back right away.”

Leaving him with an impeccable bow, Frederica led Patrasche away.

Watching her from the steps of the Mansion, Subaru stretched his body on the spot and lifted his gaze—at the Mansion in its unchanged majesty. This was the earliest he had ever returned to it.

The latest was the sixth night, and the earliest was the fourth.

One way or another, the blade that heralds the end would come.

But before that—

Subaru: “Before that end comes, I’ll find the way to stop it.”

There had been too many sacrifices in this loop.

But even as he grieves for the world that will be lost, Subaru must strive to acquire something of equal value in return.

For Garfiel’s wails, and for Emilia’s unseen sorrow,

Natsuki Subaru had been granted the resolve to continue the fight, and turn his eyes away from the pain.

2

Petra: “Waa! You’re back so soon!”

The first words that welcomed Subaru as he entered the Mansion was Petra’s adorably beaming greeting.

Though the literal content of her words were more or less the same as Frederica’s, the amount of affection instilled within them were of an entirely different weight-class.

Petra: “You look tired, are you alright? I mean, would you be feeling alright? I can prepare the bath right away, if you would like to… what’s wrong?”

Subaru: “No no, I just felt totally healed when I saw Petra. Come to think of it, you’re the only one I could say exactly what comes to mind to without having to worry about anything.”

Getting her polite and casual forms all mixed up, Petra excitedly circled around Subaru.

Subaru reached out his hand and patted her on her chestnut-colored hair, and she made a delighted squeal that was just way too adorable. Indeed, it was healing in the truest sense of the word.

Yet, almost simultaneously, the events of his last visit to the Mansion flashed across his mind, along with Petra’s gruesome fate in the end.

Subaru: “Petra, it’s a bit sudden, but… can you listen to a request of mine?”

Petra: “…? Mn. Okay. I’ll do anything Master Subaru asks of me, no matter what.”

Subaru: “T’haha, that’s reassuring. Alright. It’s something important. Frederica will be back soon as well, so let’s talk in the lounge. Can you get some tea ready?”

Petra: “Miss Frederica will be there too?”

Subaru: “Yeah. It’ll be determining what happens from here on, and it’s not unrelated to Petra, either. So I want you there as well.”

Petra: “Not unrelated, to me…?”

Covering her lips, Petra looked like she was sinking into thought. Then, as if suddenly realizing something, her face jumped up, blushing,

Petra: “So, it’s about something super important involving me and Master Subaru?”

Subaru: “Ummm, I guess you could say that? It’s definitely important for both Petra and for me. Either way, it’s not something we can decide just between ourselves.”

Petra: “But, the feelings of the people involved are really important, right?”

Subaru: “Feelings? The feelings? Feelings are… well, also pretty important? It’s true that it won’t work if everyone’s on different frequencies, so… yeah that too, I guess?”

Seeing Subaru nodding to her questions, Petra’s face lit up as she did a spin on the spot. Then, running into the Mansion almost dancing,

Petra: “Right away! I’ll be back right away! Don’t you run away!”

Subaru: “I’m not running anywhere… Petra, if you go too fast you’ll trip.”

Watching Petra fly up the stairs, aiming straight for the maid’s room, Subaru suddenly remembered something and called out to her from behind, “Petra!”,

Subaru: “Petra, thanks for the handkerchief. It was probably not in the way you intended, but, it really helped.”

Petra: “Really? I helped Subaru?”

Subaru: “Yeah, saved my life… well, not exactly, but feels like that.”

Subaru pulled out the white embroidered handkerchief that Petra had given him as a gift.

It was the weapon he used to kill himself in the previous loop at the end of his showdown with the Witch of Envy, moments before he could be swallowed. That particular functionality was no doubt Echidna’s doing, but it still began with Petra’s feelings for him.

Come to think of it, if Echidna’s will had stayed in effect, the handkerchief might still be a weapon even now. Maybe it could activate when the same conditions are met, when Subaru’s life is in danger, or when some magical incantation injects it with mana. Granted, the last one would be a bit too hard for Subaru.

Subaru: “Still, it’s all thanks to you. I have to repay you for this gift somehow.”

Petra: “Then, a dayt! One dayt!”

Subaru: “Um, did you hear that from Emilia?”

A first date with Emilia in Earlham village was Subaru’s reward for quelling the Wolgarms in the forest.

Back then, the perceptive villagers and children had decided to leave Subaru and Emilia to themselves, and it seems Petra still remembered it.

Subaru: “Understood. Then allow me to be your escort. It would be my honor and privilege to be the partner of Petra’s first date.”

Petra: “You promise!”

Subaru: “Yeah, promise.”

Happily holding up her hand with a blooming smile, Petra bounded into the hallway.

Watching the back of her tiny figure disappear into the hall, Subaru's thoughts drifted to what her future might hold. A lovely girl with a bright future ahead of her. In five, no, three years' time, she would have grown into a beautiful girl.

By that time, she would have probably forgotten about her feelings for him. But the fact that such a girl chose him as her first date still filled Subaru with a sinful sense of satisfaction. So,

Subaru: "I'll be sure to make good on that promise, Petra."

She won't remember the promise they exchanged in this collapsing world.

But Subaru will always carry the fact of its passing.

When he has finally chosen the perfect future, he will make that promise to her again.

With the lingering thought of Petra's smile in his mind, Subaru directed his steps to the lounge.

3

Seated on a sofa in the lounge, Subaru smiled wryly at Petra, sitting across from him pouting with her face all red.

Swinging her legs from the edge of the sofa, Petra made no effort to hide her displeasure as the introduction drew to a close. Seeing Subaru smiling at the girl's demeanor, the older maid sitting beside her couldn't help but put in a word or two,

Frederica: "Why are you making that face, Petra? It's rude to do so in front of Master Subaru."

Petra: "But, but, Miss Frederica…"

Frederica: “No buts. Even if you’re well acquainted with each other, it’s no excuse to be rude. If you don’t keep that in mind on a daily basis, how will you remember it on important occasions? You’re a clever child, but you have to be more careful about these things.”

Petra: “Uuuu~~.”

Petra despondently chewed her lips and lowered her head.

Finding it a bit hard to watch the girl being scolded, Subaru tried to calm things down with “That’s alright, that’s alright…”, but instantly gave up when Frederica shot him a glare.

After joining up with Frederica, who was returning from the stable, and Petra, as she finished brewing the tea, the three of them took their seats in the lounge and began the vital conversation.

And now, Petra was currently sulking about Subaru’s opening words. The content of which was,

Petra: “Why do I have to leave the Mansion? I’ve only been here for a week and…”

Watching Petra tear up like she was going to cry, Subaru was stricken by pangs of guilt. But, considering the calamities that will soon befall the Mansion, he couldn’t very well keep her around out of guilt.

So Subaru steeled his heart and shook his head,

Subaru: “I don’t mean having you leave the Mansion forever. We aren’t letting you go, just having you stay in the village for a week… I just want you to stay at home until then.”

Frederica: “And you can’t say why, is that right?”

Subaru: “…Not in detail. But, it’s a fact that there’s danger coming to the Mansion. Frederica, you know about the Witch Cult attack not long ago, right?”

Witch Cult. Frederica’s expression darkened as she heard the words.

While she was away, the Witch Cultists led by Petelgeuse had attacked the Mansion and Earlham village. That was only two weeks ago.

Having grown up in the Sanctuary, Frederica must have been well aware of the unwanted attention that Emilia's identity as a half-elf attracted, and how it ultimately led to this attack.

Just as Subaru expected, Frederica's face took on a complicated expression as she nodded,

Frederica: "If that is true, then Master Subaru's decision would be most appropriate. After all, you still don't have any way to protect yourself, Petra."

Petra: "But that's ok! Subaru will protect me!"

Subaru: "Even though I kinda wanna say "Leave it to me!" like a man, I'm way too aware of how weak and incompetent I am, so I won't say anything like that."

Even as Petra stood up to object, her childish objection was immediately undermined by Subaru's self-admitted uselessness. Petra dejectedly dropped her shoulders at Subaru's response, while Frederica gently patted her head as if to console her,

Frederica: "Petra, don't be sad. Can't you see how much Master Subaru regrets admitting his own powerlessness?"

Petra: "…Uunn, Miss Frederica."

Frederica: "Everyone has misgivings about their own inadequacies. Master Subaru is the same, and you as well. By admitting it, Master Subaru is nevertheless searching for ways to overcome it. So what about Petra?"

Petra: "Uu~."

Sniffing back her tears once again, Petra looked up at Subaru,

Petra: "Is, is there really… nothing I can do at the Mansion?"

Subaru: “…Mn, sorry. There’s nothing Petra can help with this time. And I’m not strong enough to look after you. Sorry about that.”

Seeing Subaru lower his head, Petra squeezed shut her eyes and wiped them clean with her sleeves.

When she looked up again, there was no longer any trace of her tears. With only a faint, lingering redness in the corners of her eyes, she picked up the hems of her dress in a curtsy,

Petra: “I understand, Master Subaru. From tonight onwards, Petra will take her leave. Once everything has settled down, please be sure to call for me.”

Subaru: “Yeah, for sure. When everything’s settled…”

When everyone in the Mansion and everyone in the Sanctuary are safe, and their faces are adorned with smiles.

Petra accepted Subaru’s proposal, and thus marked the end of the first phase of their talks.

—Picking up the emptied cups and briefly cleaning herself up, Petra took her leave from the lounge, and only Subaru and Frederica were left in the room.

With the sound of the door closing, and sensing Petra’s footsteps growing further and further down the hallway, Subaru reached for a piece of sweet pastry and took a bite,

Subaru: “Mind if I ask you some questions, Frederica?”

Frederica: “Depends on the questions, Master Subaru.”

Hearing her give this answer as if it were a matter of course, Subaru wryly smiled. Nevertheless, Frederica retained her calm composure, awaiting Subaru’s first question.

Drawing in a deep breath, Subaru taxed his mind trying to decide what to say first. But there was really only one question he wanted her to answer.

Subaru: “What exactly does Garfiel want to accomplish in the Sanctuary?”

Frederica: “—Did something happen between you and that no-good little brother of mine?”

Subaru: “All sorts of things, actually. As for whether our disagreements are completely irreconcilable, or if they could be resolved through words… that’s what I’m trying to find out.”

Depending on the answer, Subaru will have to adjust his plans accordingly.

Whether to treat Garfiel as an enemy to be destroyed, or an ally worth bringing to his side.

Frederica: “Since you don’t sound surprised, my little brother must have told you about his relationship with me?”

Subaru: “Miss Ryuzu didn’t deny it either. You know Miss Ryuzu, don’t you?”

Frederica: “Of course. When I still lived inside the Sanctuary, she was the one who raised us like we were her own family… Considering the time we lived together, she is like a mother, or a grandmother to us.”

Subaru: “That explains why Garfiel keeps calling her granny.”

Subaru could still hear his heart-wrenching scream of “Grandma” as he left him.

Perhaps that was what Garfiel used to call her, before he took up using the ruder address of “Granny”. If that was what he really felt,

Subaru: “Was Garfiel a total grandma’s boy when he was little?”

Frederica: “If you mean his relationship with grandmother… then yes. Despite appearances, my little brother is awfully sentimental, and I do believe he is very fond of our grandmother… as much as he tries to hide it.”

In his sister's eyes, Garfiel's deep attachment to Ryuzu was clear.

But Subaru still couldn't understand what went wrong to make the self-proclaimed guardian of the Sanctuary resort to such brutality as he did.

Subaru: "His behavioral tendencies are one thing, whether or not I can forgive him is another…"

Frederica: "Master Subaru?"

Subaru: "Nothing. I just remembered something that made a bit of hostility surge up. Though I try not to let prejudice cloud my judgement if I can help it…"

What was Garfiel thinking that could have driven him to massacre the villagers? Even now, Subaru couldn't begin to surmise what was going on deep inside.

But, as a byproduct of the Sanctuary's immortality experiments, the command authority to control Ryuzu Meyers and the resp maintenance of the facility were certainly in Garfiel's hands.

Then why would he destroy the facility? And before that, how did he receive the command authority in the first place? There was still too much Subaru didn't understand—

Subaru: "Frederica. I already know that you were once a resident of the Sanctuary. And, being a quarter-blood, you can move through the barrier unhindered."

Frederica: "How did you…"

Subaru: "And Garfiel is the same. But even though he can leave, he chose to stay behind. Say, Frederica. Do you… know why the Sanctuary was first created?"

It had only been the fourth day since Subaru left for the Sanctuary. The ungodly amount of information he had gathered in so short a time was shocking, but Frederica's eyes widened even further when she heard Subaru's question.

Frederica: “No, I don’t know the details. I understand that the Sanctuary was created by the late Witch of Greed in order to conduct some sort of experiment, but…”

Subaru: “You don’t? Really? You sure you don’t want to change your answer?”

Frederica: “I wouldn’t know what you are suspecting of me, but my answer will not change. The Sanctuary had been the Witch’s experimental grounds and the Boundary drawn by the Witch still stands, not to be dispelled until the Trials are completed. That is as much as I know.”

In closing, Frederica slowly shook her head. Subaru had no way to verify whether she was telling the truth, but she didn’t appear to be be lying.

In other words, Frederica didn’t seem to know the truth about the immortality experiments. That would also mean that she had no idea about the byproduct of those experiments,

Subaru: “Wait. Then, Frederica… you don’t know anything about the command authority used to control the replicants?”

Frederica: “Repli…cants? No, I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Her denial was in the same vein as before.

Hearing her answer, Subaru fell speechless as he relinquished his weight onto the sofa.

Frederica: “My apologies. It seems my answers did not meet your expectations.”

Subaru: “No, no it’s fine. It’s not your fault… Frederica, how many years ago was it when you left the Sanctuary? If you don’t mind me asking?”

Frederica: “It was about seven years ago when I left the Sanctuary to serve in the Mansion. Ram arrived a little later than I did, so you could say I am the oldest servant here.”

Rem's name was not among Frederica's reminiscences, nor did the extent of her knowledge of the Sanctuary change from the previous loops.

Letting out a sigh, Subaru decided that the likelihood that Frederica was withholding information from him was nearly zero. Despite changing his approach, her answers remained the same, which could only mean that they were probably true.

Frederica had no knowledge of the immortality experiments, and was probably unaware of the Ryuzu replicants as well. Either the Ryuzu's were able to seamlessly hide their daily rotations, or the meticulous Frederica today used to be more of a klutz when she was younger.

Subaru: "But then, what about Garfiel? When did that guy find out the truth about the Sanctuary…?"

If Garfiel held the command authority over the replicants, he must have known about the facility. Even if not for that, he was most likely the one who destroyed it afterwards.

There was no doubt that Garfiel knew about the experiments conducted on Ryuzu Meyer. If he knew this while his older sister didn't, then he must have found out after his sister had left the Sanctuary. Or, perhaps, it was because he knew that he chose to stay behind?

Subaru: "—Ah."

Coming to that thought, Subaru suddenly noticed the crucial piece he had overlooked. The moment he realized this, he simply couldn't believe his own stupidity.

Subaru: "If that guy holds command authority over the replicants, then doesn't that means he's met the same conditions I did? That means, that guy's also considered an Apostle of Greed, doesn't it…"

That is to say, there needed to be no better proof that Garfiel had met the Witch of Greed, Echidna.

Subaru hugged his head, resenting the fact that he didn't realize this earlier. If Garfiel had met with Echidna, that would explain why he was the one holding the command authority. Whether it was his prejudice against the Trials or his empathy towards Emilia's failures, that would explain all of it.

Subaru: "Frederica. —Garfiel challenged the Trials before, didn't he?"

Frederica: "—! How did you-."

Subaru: "It's only because all sorts of clues were pointing to it that I managed to get there. Though of course, I'm guessing he failed… but what exactly happened?"

An affirmation from Frederica was as good as Subaru wrapping his fist around the central piece of the puzzle.

Letting out a sigh in front of Subaru's excited pursuit, Frederica closed her eyes as if to draw from the depths of her memories.

Frederica: "…I am not the only one who wished for the Sanctuary to be liberated. There was a time when my little brother also strived so that grandmother and the others could one day see the outside world. My brother was very young then, when he sneaked into the Tomb to challenge the Trials. And I remember how jealous I was of his recklessness."

Subaru: "Frederica… have you ever gone in there?"

Frederica: "I myself never had the courage to do so. Even though I knew that passing the Trials would mean the liberation of the Sanctuary, I was always told that I cannot go in there. That was why I was so envious of my little brother when he ran straight inside."

He could almost see it.

Even more reckless than he is now, the young Garfiel must have gone into the Tomb full of confidence for only the simple desire to let those he cared for catch a glimpse of the outside world.

But,

Frederica: “When my little brother didn’t come out, I was so regretful that I didn’t stop him that I went to find grandmother… and though grandmother also hesitated for a moment, she decided to go in after him. I sat there praying, and, after a short while, she brought my little brother back to me. But…”

—Do not go into the Tomb again. Forget everything you saw today and never speak of it to anyone.

That must have been what Ryuzu asked of her.

Listening to this story, Subaru recalled the contradictions in Ryuzu’ words from before. There was the Ryuzu who claimed to have entered the Tomb, and the Ryuzu who claimed she never did.

It was only when he learned of the existence of multiple Ryuzu’s, coupled with the constraint that they cannot lie, that this contradiction was resolved.

And, it was only after the present conversation that he realized,

Subaru: “Garfiel had challenged the Trials. And there, he must have met the Witch of Greed. All sorts of things are finally starting to make sense…”

Why Garfiel felt the way he did towards the Trials, and why the command authority was in his hands.

The question now was what he saw in his “Past”, why he wanted to stop Subaru from liberating the Sanctuary, and why Echidna never told Subaru about Garfiel. The answers to all of them lay inside the Tomb.

Subaru: “I’ll definitely need to see Echidna at least one more time…”

And expose every secret that all-knowing Witch tried to hide from him.

Subaru quietly made up his mind as Frederica watched him in silence.

Sensing her gaze, Subaru scratched his cheek and muttered “Sorry”,

Subaru: “For all sorts of things. And for asking you questions you didn’t want to be asked.”

Frederica: “It’s fine. I know it is necessary. I’ve received such orders from the Master as well. If telling you this… could help Lady Emilia liberate the Sanctuary, then I don’t mind at all.”

Subaru: “The Sanctuary will definitely be liberated. There’s a reason I have to make sure that it comes to pass, and I’ll use any means necessary to do it. But as for how much of that matches Garfiel’s plans for it, I’ll have to put that lower down the list.”

Frederica: “…”

Subaru: “I have no idea what Garfiel’s thinking. In the worst case, he’ll be against me at every turn, but I won’t make any compromises. As much as I should apologize, it will be for the greater good.”

In order to forestall the disasters approaching the Mansion and the Sanctuary, Subaru must sweep aside everything that stood in his way.

Listening to Subaru’s answer, Frederica firmly closed her eyes once more,

Frederica: “Please take care of my no-good little brother.”

—She lowered her head and replied.

Chapter 60:
Tale of the End of the End

1

After his conversation with Frederica came to an end, Subaru went up to the third floor of the Mansion and was now standing in the hallway outside of Roswaal's study.

The heaviness in his head was perhaps due to the accumulated fatigue, or the weight of the troubles ahead, waiting to be solved.

Subaru: "Once again, I'll have to wing it…"

Scratching his neck, Subaru scowled at the pitiful hand he had been dealt.

Even though he had far more information than in the previous loops, it wasn't immediately obvious how any of it related to the problems at hand.

With so many missing pieces, all he could do was fumble around without seeing any semblance of a picture, leaving only the unease of the uncertain future looming inside his chest.

Frederica: "Master Subaru. What are you doing?"

Seeing Subaru standing frozen in the hallway, Frederica, who was quietly waiting at his side, called out to him.

After concluding their conversation in the lounge, Frederica had opted to accompany him. Hearing her question, Subaru mumbled "Aah, yeah", vaguely nodding in return,

Subaru: "Frederica, after you came back to the Mansion, you haven't seen Beatrice around… have you?"

Frederica: "No, I haven't. She very rarely makes appearances in the first place, but I haven't seen her even once since my return, I'm ashamed to say."

Subaru: “I guess she’s really doubling down on staying hidden this time. It’s understandable that Frederica couldn’t find her.”

In fact, if she was really serious about finding Beatrice, she would have had to open every door that could be connected to the Forbidden Library. It would be one thing if this was only limited to the doors in the Mansion, but there were doors in Earlham village and the Sanctuary to consider as well,

Subaru: “The range is way too wide, and there’s no way to narrow it down. If I were more pessimistic I’d say it’s impossible to solve.”

Frederica: “Then, what do you plan to do? You have something to say to Lady Beatrice, don’t you, Master Subaru?”

Subaru: “If she really wants to stay hidden, there’s no way anyone can find her. That’s just a fact.”

Hearing Subaru repeat what he had just said, Frederica furrowed her brows. Sensing her doubtful gaze, Subaru gave his neck a crack and held up a single finger,

Subaru: “But here’s the thing… No one can find her if she’s serious about trying to stay hidden, but if she’s not serious about trying to stay hidden, that’s a different story.”

Frederica: “If she’s not serious?”

Subaru: “She’s not the kind of girl who hides so that no one will ever find her. Everyone who’s played hide and seek secretly hopes that they’ll be found in the end. So, deep down, there’s always going to be a little demon inside saying “I hope they find me”“

Saying this, Subaru took a few steps to the left and did a quick turn. Standing 90 degrees to the hallway, Subaru stopped right in front of the room next to Roswaal’s study—the archives room. A narrow storage space where all the paper documents have been neatly stockpiled, the result of Otto’s frenzied organization-efforts.

Reaching out his hand to the door, Subaru felt the distinct sensation of CORRECT ANSWER through the doorknob.

Subaru: “Incredibly though, every time I open a door… or I mean, every time I think about opening a door, I’d just suddenly get the feeling that it’s the one. I still don’t really know how it works.”

Frederica: “Master Subaru…”

Subaru: “Aaaand, we’re open!”

Frederica stuttered as Subaru flung the door open with a sound effect. Behind it, there was something off about space that should have been the archive room—it was the unmistakable scent of books stowed away for ages that poured out of the room.

Unlike the scent of documents meant to be processed at the earliest convenience, it was closer to the fragrance of ink buried deep within tightly bound pages.

Subaru: “I don’t think I’ll be late, but, if it gets too dark, don’t forget to bring Petra back to the village.”

Keeping his hand on the doorknob, Subaru reminded Frederica, who was still in a state of shock.

Frederica blinked several times, before she bowed holding the hems of her dress,

Frederica: “Then I will await your return. Please take care.”

Subaru: “Ooooh. I almost feel like an important person after hearing that.”

With the maid’s auspicious send-off, Subaru stepped through the door and into the room. As soon as he was inside, the door clamped shut behind him, and, with the sound of a non-existent breeze, the space bent and twisted. The link had been severed, and the Forbidden Library once again stood alone from the world.

Then,

Beatrice: “You finally came, I suppose.”

Subaru was met with a paltry, unwelcoming voice. Holding back the wry smile that was encroaching onto his face, Subaru waved hello,

Subaru: “Yo, Beako! Long time no see, you’re still as little as ever.”

Beatrice: “Your antics are annoying enough for an entire lifetime, you know. Seriously… I should give up already.”

Beatrice was seated halfway up a wooden step ladder, holding a book with black binding against her chest.

Seeing her there, Subaru imagined that perhaps she only ever sat there. The Forbidden Library had plenty of proper desks and chairs as well. But she always seemed to greet him from that very same spot. For some reason, the thought of it just gnawed at his heart.

Beatrice: “You’re making that spineless face again. It’s unsightly, I suppose. You’re free to feel as hurt and confused as you want, but it’s unpleasant when you do it in front of Betty, so please stop immediately.”

Subaru: “Haughty as ever. Sorry, but I have no reason to follow your request. I still have to confirm whether we have that kind of relationship or not.”

Subaru was almost trying to hint about what he had learned about her in the previous loops. Beatrice’s face darkened at his words, and muttered “Is that how it is, I suppose…” under her breath,

Beatrice: “Fine. It seems we both have cards in our hands now, I suppose.”

Subaru: “It’s still pretty questionable whether my cards are gonna have any effect. But let’s have imagination make up for the rest.”

Beatrice: “Do as you like… since either way…”

Suddenly, Beatrice’s rigid expression unraveled.

The stubborn, mask-like facade fell away, revealing a glimpse of her calm, gentle smile and the dream-like gleam in her eyes—inadvertently, Subaru fell silent as his throat froze.

Then,

Beatrice: “The term of this long, long, long Contract is coming to an end. —At the end of the end of the end, this time, Betty will be released from this stagnation, I suppose.”

Her voice was almost lonely as she spoke.

Subaru: “At the end of the end of the end…huh. That’s quite a poetic expression.”

Seeing how Beatrice seemed to be ready for what was to come, Subaru shrugged and tossed in that feint. Briefly looking her over, his gaze landed on the black-bound book in her arms—if what Roswaal said was true, this would be one of the two perfect Gospels in existence.

A book which foretells the future. While there is a prophetic aspect to it, Subaru felt that it was closer to “A book which instructs on the future”.

Convinced of the Gospel’s significance, Petelgeuse of the Witch Cult had followed its incomplete entries to the point of fanaticism. And it was precisely because the incomplete version failed to record the outcomes that the madman was ultimately slain by Subaru.

Subaru: “That know-it-all expression of yours… is it also thanks to that book?”

Beatrice: “…I should be asking you. Just how much do you know about this book, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Roswaal ran his mouth over all sorts of things, you know. I think I got the basics, more or less. …It’s similar to the ones the Witch Cultists have, but better. The only two left in the world are split between you and Roswaal.”

Beatrice: “That blabbermouth Roswaal. I can just imagine him happily yammering away the moment you gave him an excuse, I suppose.”

Sensing Beatrice’s scorn in those words, Subaru’s brows furrowed.

Even though Beatrice was often critical of Roswaal in their day to day life, Subaru had always put it off as a sign of their amicable relationship. But her words just now did not carry even a hint of that affection.

Instead, it was a statement of Beatrice's sincere and genuine disgust towards Roswaal.

Subaru: "I still don't know what kind of relationship you have with Roswaal. But you two share the only two copies of the Gospel between you, and you've sealed a Contract with his bloodline forcing you to live inside his Mansion."

Beatrice: "Whatever are you trying to say, just say it."

Subaru: "Then I'll cut right to the chase. The position you're in is way too murky."

Beatrice narrowed her eyes. An intimidating presence quite unbecoming of her adorable appearance emanated from her body, giving Subaru the illusion that he was being swept by a violent wind.

The moment they cut into the main topic, the atmosphere surrounding Beatrice rapidly changed.

Subaru: "I mean, I can kind of see where Roswaal is at. Being the descendant of a family Contracted with the Witch of Greed, he's inherited its obligations along with it. Managing the Sanctuary is just a natural part of that, though I guess his reason for supporting Emilia in the Royal Selection is a bit less clear."

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "On the other hand, I don't see where you'd fit in all this. Roswaal is Contracted with the Witch of Greed. In other words, he's an Apostle of Greed."

The fact that Roswaal refused to call her "Witch of Greed" and stubbornly insisted on calling her "Echidna" was just a testament to his extraordinary devotion to the Witch.

His position was clear, and there was no doubt that he was an Apostle of Greed, just like Subaru. Although, whereas Echidna made Subaru an Apostle without asking his permission, Roswaal inherited it along with his position as the head of his family.

Subaru: "I'm not sure if the Gospels… used by the Witch Cultists have the same origins as yours. But I imagine they were made by different creators. And while I have no idea who created the Witch Cultists' Gospels, I think I have an idea who the creator of the two complete Gospels might be."

Beatrice: "…and who is that, I suppose."

Subaru: "—It's Echidna, right?"

The moment the name escaped his lips, Subaru could sense Beatrice's breath halting.

To her, the name he had just uttered clearly held no small significance.

Inside Echidna's dream Citadel, Subaru had seen her artifact of near-omniscience, the so-called "Book of Wisdom".

Though the nature of the Book of Wisdom was different from that of the Gospels, they were alike in that they were both magical guidebooks that contained information beyond the reach of human knowledge. And when all the individuals involved were connected to the Sanctuary, it was as if everything was pointing to the answer.

Subaru: "Yours and Roswaal's Gospels were made by Echidna, weren't they. Roswaal's must have been passed down through the generations. But, how did you get your hands on yours?"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "So now I have a question for you… about your "Door Crossing"“

Raising a single finger, Subaru changed directions and threw out an entirely different topic.

Beatrice blinked at Subaru's rhetorical shift, before righting herself again in preparation for his next words.

Seeing this, Subaru pronounced his question.

Subaru: "—What is the effective range of your Door Crossing? Or in this case, the range in which you can select destinations?"

Beatrice: "…I don't see what you could possibly do with this information."

Subaru: "If the answer is what I think it is, then that'll confirm a few of my theories."

Crossing his arms, Subaru puffed up his chest in front of the silent Beatrice.

For a moment, Beatrice hesitated as her lips trembled. Then, as if in resignation, she closed her eyes,

Beatrice: "Betty's Door Crossing can link spaces within the same building. Or nearby places, or places I know. As for distance… it cannot link to places that are too far away."

Subaru: "There's still another condition, isn't there?"

Beatrice: "You think Betty has any reason to tell you?"

Subaru: "Then, how about I guess? —Even if a place is far away, you can still link to it if it has some deep connection to your existence. Isn't that right?"

Beatrice: "…"

Breathless, Beatrice's eyes widened.

Watching her reaction, Subaru was convinced of his assumption.

Subaru: "Say if you need to activate Door Crossing when your concentration is thrown off, what'll decide which door you link to?"

Beatrice: "…stop."

Subaru: “Under pressure, anyone would resort to the most familiar words and actions. When applied to something like Door Crossing, I wouldn’t be surprised if the first place that comes to mind is the one that holds the strongest bonds of memories.”

Beatrice: “…stop it, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Putting together the fact that you’ve received Echidna’s Gospel, and that you can link the Library to the Sanctuary with Door Crossing. —That could only mean…”

Beatrice: “—I told you to stop!”

The girl stood up from the wobbling step ladder, and looked to Subaru almost as if she was pleading. Beatrice bit into her lips, and her eyes began to tear.

There was no doubt that Subaru had trespassed into a realm she did not wish to be stained.

Gripped by that wretched sensation in his chest, “No”, Subaru shook his head,

Subaru: “I won’t stop. I know that Door Crossing connects this place to somewhere in the Sanctuary. As for why that is, your desperate denials just now had already given me the answer.”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru: “Beatrice. You have something to do with the Sanctuary, don’t you. What’s your relationship to Echidna?”

Despite knowing that he was trampling on a girl’s heart, Subaru nonetheless stifled his hesitation and crushed Beatrice with his question.

Through Door Crossing, she had sent him to the site of the immortality-experiment in the Sanctuary.

In her state of distress, that was the place she chose to send him, which could only mean that that place held the strongest memories in her mind.

How was it, that as a spirit, her deepest memories were linked to a facility which produces replicas of Ryuzu Meyer? And considering that Echidna had given her a Gospel—

Subaru: “Beatrice… who’s the person that you’re Contracted with?”

Beatrice: “—hH!”

Subaru: “I once asked Puck about it. How spirit Contracts work. I won’t go into details here, but apparently the terms of the Contract have to be equal between the Contractor and the spirit. You said you were bound by the Contract to be the Keeper of the Forbidden Library. So, who’re you Contracted with?”

Beatrice: “…a.”

Subaru: “All this time, I just assumed that your Contract was with Roswaal. Seeing how you’re living in his house, managing his library, it was only natural to think that… but now, I’m not so sure.”

Faced with Subaru’s relentless questioning, Beatrice couldn’t utter a sound in defense, but merely spilled a feeble sigh from her quivering lips.

Her tiny body seemed to be even tinier, and, as if seeking a harbor, she tightened her arms around the Gospel against her chest. As if she was enduring something unbearable, her figure seemed ephemeral and fragile.

He could see it. But, even though he could see, he chose to say it.

Subaru: “—You are a spirit Contracted with Echidna, aren’t you?”

—And so began the end of the end.

2

—The instant he asked that question, Beatrice collapsed like a puppet that had lost its strings.

Subaru: “Bea—?!”

The girl's knees fell to the floor, and with the sound of scattering paper, the pages of the Gospel in Beatrice's arms scattered across the tiles.

The book she had so often carried with her, opened who knows how many times to run her fingers through it, now exploded from its binding at the impact of the drop as if the repetitive routine had worn away its integrity, spreading out like a white carpet over the surface of the floor.

Subaru: "The Gospel…wh?"

Watching several pages land at his feet, Subaru bent down and picked them up without thinking. Petelgeuse's Gospel flashed across his mind with the image of its pages buried under small, dense scrawlings as if infected by the madness of its owner.

That was his impression before he picked up these pages—but the moment he examined them before his eyes, that impression evaporated like a mist. Because,

Subaru: "What…th? They're blank…?"

Turning them front and back, there was nothing recorded on the pages in his hands.

Frantically, he picked up the other pages at his feet, but there was nothing written on them either. He began to wonder whether the pages of the empty latter half had just happened to land near him, but,

Subaru: "No, how's that possible…"

Crouching down, Subaru looked over each of the pages scattered around Beatrice, and realized it.

Of all the pages covering the floor around her, not a single one of them had a word recorded on it.

Of the hundreds upon hundreds of fallen pages, what were the chances of them all landing on their blank side?

Subaru: “It’s supposed to be a Gospel… why’s there nothing on it?”

Rather than believe in a miracle where only the blank sides landed facing up, it would be far more reasonable to conclude that the pages were simply blank to begin with.

Yet, following from that reasonable conclusion, Subaru was struck by an another, all too unreasonable fact.

Subaru: “This is supposed to be one of only two complete Gospels, why’s there no future recorded in here? Is it because only the owner can read it? Maybe it’s not like Petelgeuse’s?”

Maybe it was a difference between the perfect and imperfect Gospels, but Subaru had only ever had an imperfect version for reference. The texts on that book were visible even to someone who wasn’t its owner. It had been in Subaru’s keeping ever since it lost its owner, and fortunately, there hadn’t been any new entries appearing.

Consequently, Subaru had been under the impression that the Gospel’s texts would be visible to anyone, regardless of who the owner was.

Beatrice: “It has been so… so long.”

Subaru: “—huh?”

Beatrice: “How many years it has been… since that Gospel stopped showing Betty the future…”

Collapsed on the floor with her face downcast, Beatrice quietly whispered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”, Subaru barely managed to control his urge to ask her while anxiously waiting for her next words.

Beatrice hunched forward and pressed her hands into the scattered pages, and clenched them until they crumpled. Her fingers were trembling, and her voice was interspersed with sobs.

Beatrice: “The role given to Betty is to watch over the Library of Knowledge. Until the day comes when we meet again, I will guard this place… I suppose.”

Subaru: “Library of Knowledge… is that, here?”

Subaru stood up and looked over the countless bookshelves that filled the room. All the books stored here, a few of which he himself had flipped through, Subaru had always assumed to have belonged to the House of Mathers, but,

Subaru: “All the books here… are Echidna’s?”

Beatrice: “She was fond of… gathering knowledge.”

Subaru: “To the point where she’s calling herself a Witch, I guess.”

She went so far as to call herself the “Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge”. Boasting of her desire for all the knowledge in the world, it was just what one would expect from someone bearing the name of “Greed”. The countless volumes collected on these shelves must just have been the result of her efforts.

And Beatrice would be the librarian of Echidna’s shelter of knowledge.

Beatrice: “From the sound of it… you’ve been in the Tomb, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I have. I got treated badly and had a pretty painful experience… but now I’m glad I went. Having Echidna as a confidant is kind of a double-edged sword, you know.”

Even though she was the only person he could mention his Return by Deaths to, when he did, he had invited the wrath of the Witch of Envy. Since doing so again would mean another certain death, he intended to avoid it if he could. Though he would repeat it if he must.

Subaru: “…Just now, you said the Gospel hasn’t shown you the future in years?”

Beatrice: “That is, the truth.”

Subaru: “I’m not doubting you. No, I mean, I still am, but. Because, right? Otherwise, when you… if there’s nothing written on the Gospel…”

—Then all those times she saved him, she had chosen to help Subaru.

In the loop before last, in the moments before their parting, Subaru had first learned of her Gospel’s existence, and it shocked him to no small degree.

He had been made to believe that Beatrice’s every action and every thought had been because it was recorded in the Gospel and her own feelings had no say in the matter.

And so, in spite of the distress of the girl before his eyes, somehow, he was more relieved to know that there was something real inside her.

To know that Beatrice’s actions were reflections of her own heart—though he couldn’t understand why, he felt relieved nonetheless.

Even without knowing the reason, all along, Subaru had felt it.

Beatrice had been kind to him for no discernable reason at all, and he didn’t know what he could have done to make her feel this way.

Subaru: “Why… did you help me? It wasn’t written in the Gospel, right? You could have just left me there.”

He knew that it was an unfair and roundabout question.

Placing all the burden of answering on Beatrice, Subaru knew that he was only caring about what he wanted. He knew, and he chose this cowardly approach anyway.

Subaru just wanted to ask Beatrice, plain and simple.

—Do you think of me as your friend?

Beatrice: “Betty… helped… you, because…”

Subaru: “Yes. You’ve helped me so many times. You healed me when I was on the brink of death, you cured me from the Wolgarm’s curse, and when I was so ridden with curses that there was no doubt that I was going to die, you told me the truth.”

And there were so many, many more occasions beyond that.

In the loops beginning in the Mansion, when Rem was murdered and no one in the Mansion trusted Subaru, only Beatrice and Emilia chose to save him.

In the time he spent being tormented by loneliness and fear, Beatrice alone kept her promise to him. It was a kindness from a lost world that remained only inside Subaru’s heart, one he could not allow himself to forget.

And so,

Subaru: “If you didn’t do it for your Gospel, then…”

Beatrice: “—In the end, I was told…”

Tossing all the other questions aside, the only thing Subaru wanted to know was whether Beatrice considered him a friend.

Was she someone he could trust with all that he was—now that Rem was gone, and Emilia’s weaknesses were laid bare before him, could Beatrice take their place?

In a sense, it was an all too selfish request.

And,

Beatrice: “…that one day, “that person” will visit Betty’s library. And I must protect the library until then.”

Subaru: “…that person?”

Beatrice: “So I was told, I suppose. Until “that person” comes, Betty must keep watch over the library. Whether you are “that person” or not, Betty isn't sure."

Subaru's eyes flared with passion as he looked to Beatrice, but her melancholy words soon made them lose their lustre as his brows furrowed with uncertainty.

He couldn't understand what Beatrice was saying. Impossible to understand. It was impossible, and yet—he had a feeling that he must stop her from saying what she was about to say next.

Beatrice: "Betty doesn't know… whether you're "that person" or not… but."

Subaru: "Wait, Beatrice. We're both getting a bit ahead of ourselves. Let's just calm down and…"

Beatrice: "Whether you're "that person", or not… it doesn't matter, I suppose."

Beatrice lifted her downcast face.

Her two drill curls swayed with her movements. As if at a loss, as if hesitating, it was as if her heart was reflected within Subaru's.

An ominous premonition tightened in Subaru's chest, impossible to wipe away,

Beatrice: "Even if you're not "that person", I don't care anymore. So…"

Subaru: "Bea—"

Beatrice: "Please kill Betty, and end this Contract once and for all, I suppose. Bring an end to the end of the end. Betty wants to be released."

Tears welled up in Beatrice's eyes, and a feeble smile appeared on her lips,

Beatrice: "You, will become "that person"…"

Chapter 61:
Scream from Four Hundred Years Past

1

Entranced by the sadness of her eyes, Subaru couldn't bear to look away.

An emotion rose up in his chest, making him want to snicker and laugh at her words,

—What did you say just now?

He should have thrown her senseless words back at her.

He should have twisted his lips into a grin and cracked a joke like they always did.

But there was—just a hunch, telling him that it wouldn't work.

Because otherwise,

Subaru: "…"

Why else wasn't he laughing off the girl's death-wish as some joke?

Subaru: "What did you… say, just now?"

After a moment of hesitation and a brief lapse of silence, Subaru stuttered out this prepared line.

It would have been perfect if his lips were still smiling and his shoulders weren't shuddering.

But,

Subaru: "…a."

His cheeks grew stiff, and he was trembling all the way to the tips of his fingers, nevermind his shoulders.

It was as if the Natsuki Subaru reflected within Beatrice's eyes was fixed in place, trapped within the confines of that world.

Beatrice: "As you wish, I will say it again, I suppose."

Subaru: "No, wait…"

Beatrice: "—Betty wants to be ended by your hands."

Subaru: "STOP IT!!"

Screaming, Subaru shouted over Beatrice's words.

It was almost comical how they've switched places from just moments before.

These were the same words Beatrice had shouted when Subaru relentlessly pushed his discoveries upon her.

And so, Subaru didn't exactly have the right to complain when Beatrice did the same to him. Yet, even though he knew he had no right,

Subaru: "Do you… even realize… what you've just said…?"

Beatrice: "I should be asking you. Do you understand what I've just asked of you, I suppose?"

Subaru: "What?"

Beatrice: "I want you to be the one to bring about the end of this spirit, Beatrice. You will be "that person" who marks the end of the Contract that, for four hundred years, has bound me."

"You should take that as a compliment", she seemed to say with her strange, ironic smile.

It was a smile that seemed to be thirsting for something—watching her, Subaru felt like twisted claws were tearing his chest from within.

Unable to bear it, he clutched his hand to his heart, Subaru: “I don’t understand… are you telling me you want to die?”

Beatrice: “Do I want to die? Strictly speaking, no, I suppose. Betty wishes for the Contract to end. Betty wants to be released from this everlasting covenant.”

Subaru: “If that means taking your life, how is that any different!!”

Stamping down his foot, Subaru screamed from his trembling lungs.

He was trampling on the scattered Gospel pages, but he didn’t care.

Jabbing out his finger, Subaru glared at Beatrice and barked.

Subaru: “Don’t talk about wanting to die like it’s some joke! Wanting to die or whatever… I don’t care what you say to other people… just don’t say it in front of me!”

Once you’re dead, you won’t come back to life.

Natsuki Subaru was the exception, and could start over even if he died. Only Subaru could throw away his life and still come out with something of value, and so only Subaru could justify suicide.

But that was not the case for Beatrice. Nor anyone else, for that matter.

Once life is lost, it can never be retrieved.

Knowing this, she still said it to Subaru’s face.

Subaru: “What do you mean you want it to end?! Do you realize how selfish that is?! Asking for an end… trying to die, even if everyone else forgives you I won’t forgive you for it!”

Beatrice: “What an arrogant thing to say, I suppose. —And just how much do you know about Betty?”

Nevertheless, Beatrice gave him this cold and unyielding reply.

She smoothed out her dress, stood up, and ran her fingers against the tips of her curls, Beatrice: “Betty is the Keeper of Knowledge, and has been watching over the Forbidden Library for four hundred years. For four hundred years… in accordance to the Contract, Betty has waited here.”

Subaru: “Four… hundred years…?”

That number again? Subaru wanted to click his tongue and furrow his brows.

Four hundred years ago was an age when the Witches ran rampant, a contemptible era which seems to have at least something to do with every long-living being he knew.

Beatrice, too, had lived through that age, and still lives on to this day.

Beatrice: “I sealed my Contract with the Witch, and came to live with the similarly-Contracted House of Mathers. From the beginning, I followed the Gospel’s instruction, and simply passed the days in silence, waiting for that time to come.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “But while I waited here, time in the outside world went on, I suppose. One by one, the heads of the House of Mathers, who shared in my obligations, died of old age and was succeeded by the next. I witnessed their transfers of power, yet Betty’s time flowed on, unchanging, I suppose.”

And how painful must that time have been for Beatrice?

Her dispassionate tone only seemed to be a reflection of the abrasions left by the meaningless passage of time, driving a chill into Subaru’s heart as he listened.

Beatrice: “The destined coming of the promised day—Betty didn’t know when it would come, or who “that person” would be, and I passed those days without knowing anything.”

“But even so”, Beatrice shook her head,

Beatrice: “It never worried me, I suppose. After all, the Gospel was in Betty’s hands. As long as I place my faith in the Gospel that records the future, and wait for the coming day to appear on its white pages, then all will be well in the end. If I only waited, that time will surely come… I went on believing that.”

Subaru: “But…”

Looking down at the pages trampled under his feet, Subaru felt the cruelty of their pristine whiteness. As if sensing the meaning of Subaru’s gaze, Beatrice nodded.

In fact, before she knew it, the Gospel that was meant to be her beacon of hope, had—

Beatrice: “Every day, checking time after time, the instruction did not change… until even the time spent checking was too painful.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “How many times I’ve dreamt of new words appearing on the page after the final entry, I suppose. Time and time again, I envisioned the day when that unknown “person” would come to visit Betty, when I would have finally fulfilled the role given to me.”

Subaru: “…Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “The House of Mathers is not without its visitors, I suppose. Many humans have visited Betty’s Forbidden Library, and many have touched the Forbidden Library’s door… but each time, Betty’s heart would be betrayed.”

And the one who opened the door was not “that person”.

So many times, she was disappointed, and so many times, her hopes were dashed. Over and over, her betrayed expectations must have worn down her heart until her eyes were buried in apathy.

Time and time again, Beatrice’s hopes came to nothing. And now, even that hope was lost. She could no longer endure the pain of being hoisted up within reach of her hopes, only to be cast to the ground once more.

It was only natural that her heart, which had endured so much, would begin to tear.

Beatrice: “It was during that time, that I realized… or maybe, I had realized it long ago, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Realized what?”

Beatrice: “The Gospel will never show Betty another instruction.”

Beatrice folded her knees, and picked up the fallen cover of the Gospel. Emptied of its pages, the binding just seemed extraordinarily lonely.

Lifting it up, she traced her fingers over the cover, and began again, “Did you know, I suppose?”,

Beatrice: “That the Gospel records its owner’s future? The less its owner deviates from the world’s memories, the clearer its details will be.”

Subaru: “The world’s memories…?”

Beatrice: “The Memories of the World, I suppose. —It knows not only the world that is now and that was past, but also the future that is to come. It is a forbidden book that draws necessary knowledge from the Book of Wisdom. Whereas the Gospel merely inherited a portion of its functionalities.”

Echidna herself had called the Book of Wisdom the “Memories of the World”.

Indeed, there was no doubt that there existed some close connection between Echidna and Beatrice. There, Beatrice held up the black binding, as if to show it to Subaru,

Beatrice: “The false Gospels in the Witch Cultists’ possession operate on the same principle, I suppose. While their accuracy marks their only difference, their algorithms are based on this one’s.”

Subaru: "…How did this technology leak after Echidna's death? Shouldn't you and Roswaal have the only two existing Gospels?"

Beatrice: "Who knows. I don't really care, I suppose. Whoever created these false copies, and whoever they are giving it to, it has nothing to do with Betty."

Subaru: "Then why did you bring up the Witch Cult?"

Beatrice: "Because there's something I need to do with a Witch Cult Gospel, I suppose. Don't go jumping to conclusions."

Unfazed by Subaru's challenge, Beatrice replied calmly. Then, she asked him, "You have a Witch Cult Gospel yourself, I suppose?".

Subaru nodded in reply.

Subaru: "I don't have it here. I took it with me into the Sanctuary, and it's safe there for now. As for the ones we picked up from the other Witch Cultists, we left them in more capable hands."

The only Gospel in Subaru's possession was the one that belonged to Petelgeuse.

Most of the other Gospels, owned by Petelgeuse's fingers, were destroyed by the Cultists in their final moments, while the few that they managed to salvage were handed over to Crusch's camp to be dealt with accordingly.

In fact, if everything had gone according to plan, they were supposed to have fetched Roswaal from the Sanctuary and met up with Crusch and Anastasia's camps to divide the spoils of their victory over Petelgeuse and the White Whale.

Beatrice: "Have you looked over its contents, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Kind of… I don't know how, but I was just able to read it all of a sudden. I could barely make out that chicken scratch handwriting, but it's basically itemized information. Only… to me it looks more like a book of orders than a book of prophecies."

Subaru recalled the contents of the Gospel which Echidna's influence had most likely rendered legible.

The majority of the text in Petelgeuse's Gospel simply listed where Petelgeuse must go and what Petelgeuse must do. What would happen afterward was usually omitted entirely, and how the orders were to be carried out was left to its owner's discretion.

And so, rather than an all-powerful book of prophecies, the Witch Cultist Gospels were closer to a guidebook to the future—and no more than that.

Subaru: "If they could perfectly predict the future, there would've been nothing we could do to stop them. So I guess I can see why they're considered incomplete."

Beatrice: "Betty has no interest in its contents. What I need to know is whether it recorded its owner's passing, I suppose."

Subaru: "—Passing… is not exactly what I'd call it."

As far as Subaru knew, on the final page of Petelgeuse's Gospel,

—Aside from the words "THE END" that Subaru had written in his own blood, the Gospel's final entry was the brief passage:

"Go to Mathers Domain, put silver-haired Half-Witch to Trial."

That hastily constructed sentence didn't give Petelgeuse any indication of what would happen before or after.

Indeed, if that was as much of the future as the Gospel could reveal, it was simply no match for the precision of Subaru's Return by Death.

Beatrice: "—That's what I thought."

Listening to Subaru's account of what he knew, Beatrice only nodded as if in agreement. Then, she twisted the empty cover in her hands,

Beatrice: "Did anything appear in the Gospel after that, I suppose?"

Subaru: "…No, I don't think so. At least, the last time I checked, the final entry is still the owner's final assignment. Besides, there's no way anything could show up afterwards, because…"

Just as he was about to say it, Subaru suddenly felt the words freeze in his throat. And only then, did it dawn on him why Beatrice had asked that question.

He lifted his face, and saw that Beatrice was faintly smiling.

Just how many times over the course of this brief encounter had he seen her with that hollow, desolate smile?

Beatrice: "—The Gospel stopped writing, because that's where its owner's future ends."

Subaru: "N-No, you're not like him at all…"

Beatrice: "It's the same, I suppose. The fact that the Gospel stopped recording the future means that even if I exist for now, I might as well not. —Can you deny that, I suppose?"

Subaru: "No! You're wro—!"

His impulsive rejection abruptly froze in front of Beatrice's unmoving pupils. She had no need for this superficial consolation. Because, in her heart, she already knew the answer to her question.

Clenching his teeth so hard that they could crack, blood seeped from the corner of Subaru's lips,

Subaru: "Why…'re you… doing this!"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "Don't just make up your mind all by yourself! Anyone will go down that road when left to worry all alone! When you get stuck feeling like there's no other way… you'll just wind up thinking that the most awful thing you see is the reality!"

After countless hardships and countless sighs spilled for his own powerlessness, that was what Subaru had learned.

When assailed by mounting adversities and insurmountable obstacles, the world can seem like a wall.

Even as it forces you to power through it alone, you have its black, tangling fingers holding back your solitary heart.

That's why,

Subaru: "If it hurts, and you feel like you want it to change… Then just say it. Just say it to someone who'll listen. Just say you want help and that you're feeling sad… even if it's me!"

Helpless and trapped in fate's dead-end, wallowing in a despair you could not climb out of with your own strength, when it feels like you're all alone, you need only to look around.

Then, for the first time, you'll notice the extended hand.

When you take that hand, and feel its force pulling you up, only then, will you realize,

—There is no need to give up yet.

Subaru: "How many times, you've done it for me… so this time let me do it for you…!"

Beatrice: "…I want y… to do it."

Subaru: "Yes… that's right, just say the words."

Beatrice: "I want you to help me…"

Subaru: "Yes! That's it, that's it that's it that's it! If you just ask, I'll…"

Beatrice: "I'm sad, and it hurts… Betty, wants to be saved from this darkness…"

Subaru: "Yeah, just leave it to me—"

A small, trembling finger reached out to Subaru.

Spurred on by the overflowing emotions in his chest, Subaru jumped up and extended out his hand.

He had already completely forgotten the reason he came here.

He was supposed to find a way out of the impasse and ask for Beatrice's help. If anyone was to help him, he had hoped that it'd be her.

But it all vanished when he saw her sorrow and the darkness within her heart. Only the impulse to save a girl from her loneliness continued to push him forward.

Taking her outstretched hand would mean taking on a burden that he could never relinquish. Ignoring the crushing weight already bearing upon his shoulders, Natsuki Subaru chose to embrace yet another impossible burden.

But he didn't mind. Because,

Beatrice: "…"

—How could he abandon a girl looking at him with those wavering eyes?

Beatrice had asked for his help.

Her request called forth an unbearable, irresistible emotion. He didn't know why. Nor did it matter. For there was only the screaming of his soul:

Help her. Save her. Because to you, she is—

Subaru: "I will, definitely—"

Beatrice: "In that case…"

Extending a single finger, its tip touched Subaru's.

He grasped her faltering fingers in his hand and wrapped his fingers around her palm.

Gazing into Beatrice's eyes, he saw his reflection in their watery contours. And there, as he watched a large teardrop fall,

Beatrice: "—I want you to please kill Betty."

—As if to say "I did not ask for such convenient salvation", she let go of Subaru's hand.

2

Why. The question groaned in Subaru's throat as he sucked in a breath.

Looking at the hand that was shaken away, and at his own fingers, grasping at nothing, Subaru turned to Beatrice, and wanted to ask her why.

Subaru: "…"

But no words came, because he could see in Beatrice's eyes that it was far, far, far—too late to come back from that.

Beatrice: "Four hundred years… I've been alone, I suppose."

Subaru: "B-Beatri…"

Beatrice: ""That person" who should have come, never came, and I've already spent four hundred years alone here."

He couldn't pull his gaze away from Beatrice's eyes.

And even calling her name made him hesitate.

Beatrice: "I don't know how many times I've thought about leaving it behind me. Or how many times I prayed I could forget everything. It may have been hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of millions or more, but it's still not enough…"

In this dim and narrow room, how long had Beatrice spent in this solitude?

Hugging her knees, seated on her step ladder, she went on waiting for someone whose face and name she did not know.

An ocean of books spanning as far as the eyes can see—even if she read every book in that ocean, she still wouldn't see her awaited person's arrival, while the book that should reveal her future had nothing to show her.

How many times had that loneliness murdered this girl's heart?

Beatrice: "I want to be saved…? I want a way out…?"

Subaru: "—a."

Beatrice: "Do you know how many hundreds of times… those thoughts crossed Betty's mind? Did you think Betty just gave up without ever considering such things, I suppose?"

Her broken words slowly grew in intensity.

A pressure pushed back on Subaru. His throat was muted, the burning passion of his soul was extinguished in an instant, and his limbs felt as heavy as lead.

Whether it was to approach the girl before him, or to turn and run away, there was nothing he could do.

Beatrice: "Did you think that by reaching a hand into the darkness, you can pull Betty out? Did you think you can give Betty the answer to this endless dead end, I suppose?"

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "If you… can really do it… then why… why."

She lowered her head, and her words were interspersed with sobs.

Unable to see Beatrice's expression, Subaru felt his heart being overwhelmed by a nondescript darkness. He couldn't feel the ground beneath his feet, as though he had lost the way to Beatrice though she was close enough to touch.

Fear and hesitation overtook him, and through that silence, Beatrice looked up once more.

Glaring into his eyes, she opened her mouth, teeth bared,

Beatrice: "—Then why did you leave Betty here for four hundred years, all alone?!"

Subaru: "—hg."

Beatrice: "All alone! Always! Always always always, Betty was alone, waiting for this meaningless time to pass! I was lonely! I was scared! I was abandoned, unable to fulfill my purpose, unable to abide by my promise, unable to even decay with the passage of time… I must spend an eternity alone here, that much I've already realized!"

Huge tears began to fall from her eyes.

The large droplets trickled down her cheeks, and dripped from her chin to the floor. Every drop striking upon the ground was a merciless shock ramming into Subaru's heart,

Beatrice: "You want to help me?! Save me?! Then why didn't you come sooner?! Why did you abandon Betty?! If you say those gentle words now, then why didn't you keep hold of Betty from the start?! Why did you let go?! Why! Why! Why did you leave Betty all alone?!"

Her words were like daggers, like flames, like steel, and each left a wound on Subaru's heart. In every sense, and in every way, every ounce of pain they carried tore at Subaru.

But Beatrice's claims were all too unreasonable.

Four hundred years—for the greater part of that time she spent alone Subaru had no say in the matter. Subaru had only met her two months ago, and, going by her standards, he would have been too late no matter how quickly he came to her. If he wanted to protest, he could have simply said that.

But there was no point in protesting, because who could that possibly help?

Whether it was Beatrice or Subaru, it wouldn't help anyone.

Only now, was Subaru made aware of how he had neglected how much time the girl Beatrice spent waiting.

Four hundred years. —It was four hundred years.

On the surface, there seemed to be nothing significant about that number.

In fantasy fictions, four hundred years isn't even that big of a number. There are stories with more ridiculous year counts, even ones that span the entire history of the world. Compared to those, four hundred years is nothing.

But was he an idiot? Was he really an idiot? How hopelessly stupid did he have to be?

In front of a girl who had spent an actual four hundred years alone, kept at a loss as to the purpose of her existence like some unanswerable riddle, how much of it could he possibly fathom from those three simple words? How much could he understand? How much could he feel?

And just how much could Subaru's flimsy words heal her of her four hundred years of loneliness?

Beatrice: "Asking for help… wanting things to change… that wish had already withered in those four hundred years, I suppose…"

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "Did you think you were the only person who tried to take Betty away? Betty is a High Spirit. In search of that power, countless humans have endeavored to take Betty from this place."

It was the first he had heard of this. That there had been humans just like Subaru who tried to make Beatrice leave the Forbidden Library. As for whether they succeeded, her presence here was answer enough.

Seeing Beatrice watch him with her feeble gaze, Subaru quickly shook his head, Subaru: “D-Don’t group me along with those guys! I just want to…”

Beatrice: “Like you, there were also those among their number who did not care about Betty’s power, who merely wanted to save a person in front of their eyes… naive as that may be, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “But none of them could bring Betty out of this place. It was only natural, I suppose.”

“After all”, Beatrice sighed with a faint, ephemeral smile,

Beatrice: “The Contract binding Betty to this place cannot be abolished by such half-baked convictions. The Contract that has bound Betty to her task for four hundred years… is not so easily broken by mere human whims.”

Subaru: “Then… what will I have to…”

Beatrice: “—Put Betty above all else.”

The words she said to him were so quiet, and yet so sharp.

So sharp that they were like needles puncturing into Subaru’s eardrums.

Subaru: “Wh, at…?”

Beatrice: “Put Betty above all else. Think first of Betty. Choose Betty over everything. And thus overwrite the Contract. Paint it over. And erase it from existence. Take Betty from here. Lead me by the hand. And embrace me.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “That is something you will never be capable of.”

That was Beatrice’s true, desperate, and heartfelt wish.

A far too heavy request, and one not easily granted.

Beatrice: “You have already chosen who is foremost in your heart, I suppose. Whether it’s the silver-haired girl, or the blue-haired maid… either way, you will never cast those two aside and put Betty above them. It simply cannot be.”

Subaru: “Emilia… Rem…”

Beatrice: “The Contract is absolute. Absolute, I suppose. Aside from fulfilling its terms, it is impossible to replace a sealed Contract without paying the corresponding price. Betty does not believe that the promise has been fulfilled, I suppose. And so, the only way to be released other than by fulfilling the Contract is…!”

At the mention of the two girls, it was as if something hard had struck Subaru’s heart.

Whenever he thought of them, Subaru’s heart would pound, scream, and burst into heat. It was already the immutable reply carved into his very soul.

Beatrice: “So, break Betty’s Contract… and destroy this useless body drifting through the meaningless flow of time…”

Subaru: “Your Contract… is it really that important to you? If you hate it so much… can’t you will yourself to change it…?”

Unable to answer her, he didn’t know what to say to Beatrice.

And so, Subaru took the cowardly approach and chose to divert her question away.

In that instant, a color of disappointment flickered across Beatrice’s pupils. And Subaru immediately realized that he had made a fatal mistake.

Beatrice: “That is… Betty’s reason to live.”

Subaru: “The Contract…?”

Beatrice: “Betty was born for this Contract, and lives for this Contract. It was the task I was given at my birth, a Contract I have never fulfilled for as long as I have lived… and you want me to selfishly break it… is that what you’re saying, I suppose?”

Subaru: “It’s not selfish at all! You’ve already tried your best for four hundred years, didn’t you?! Who can blame you when you’ve stayed true to your promise for so long?! Who’d have the right to? You’ve already done enough…!”

Beatrice: “And accomplished nothing! If I throw away the purpose of my existence and the reason I was born for, what will I have to live for?! No one will blame me?! Betty will blame herself! The Spirit Beatrice will never forgive such a cowardly way to live!!”

Subaru stomped with his trembling legs and grabbed the small girl by her shoulders, shouting. But the girl looked up and screamed back even louder, breaking away once more. The strength of the frail little girl pushed Subaru’s body backwards.

Powerless. What did she mean? He couldn’t understand what he was seeing.

Beatrice: “To spirits, Contracts are absolute! A Contract sealed between Contractor and spirit is the most important thing there is! It’s the same with Nii-cha! Why else do you think he puts that silver-haired girl above everything else! He places her above everything! He loves her above everything! Between Betty and that girl, he wouldn’t think twice about choosing her! Not even Nii-cha would put Betty first!”

As a fellow spirit, there was no one closer to Beatrice than Puck.

It was a friendship that had developed over four hundred years in each other’s company, one far beyond what human lifespans could possibly manage.

What must Beatrice have thought of Puck? And what did Puck think of Beatrice? Subaru couldn’t be sure.

But Beatrice herself already had the answer to that question.

Beatrice had more than enough time to contemplate the answer.

Panting, her shoulders shuddering, even her neat curls have become disheveled. Enormous tear drops emerged in her large, round eyes, and her trembling lips were still repeating her desperate plea.

So small, she's only a child, Subaru thought.

How could anyone leave a little girl like this?

Beatrice: "You… aren't the person mentioned in the Contract. I know that, I suppose…"

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "But can you become "that person" for me? Or, if not become that person, then use some other way to save Betty, I suppose?"

Subaru: "…"

His answer never came.

He couldn't make her some casual promise, or impulsively refuse her.

In the short time he spent here, Subaru had managed to understand just a small portion of the mystery that was Beatrice.

Yet, if he were to truly understand her loneliness, he would have had to pass four hundred years in solitude just like she had.

But something like that was fundamentally impossible for a human. Her distress, her loneliness, and her sorrow were too far beyond Subaru's reach.

Beatrice: "Betty knows better than anyone just how impossible that is."

Subaru: "Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "So please, kill Betty. With your own hands. Suicide is a violation of the Contract, so a spirit is forbidden to do so, I suppose. So even dying is something I can't do myself."

Subaru: "But why… me…?"

Reaching out her hands, Beatrice pleaded once more.

Hesitating before her outstretched hands and afraid that he might give in to her request, Subaru covered his face with his palms,

Subaru: “Your death, at the end of four hundred years… why are you leaving it to me…?”

Beatrice: “Why… I suppose.”

Sobbing, whimpering, evading, Beatrice could have slapped down Subaru’s question. But she chose not to.

As if she herself didn’t know the reason, she slightly tilted her head.

And after a small lapse of silence, she slowly nodded.

Beatrice: “—Yes, I think I know.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “Betty… wants to leave her death to you… because.”

If he listened to her answer, he would have no escape.

Of that, he was certain. He lifted his head. If he doesn’t plug his ears and refuse to listen to her answer, unless he holds a hand over her mouth and prevents her from speaking—

But he was too late. He had noticed it too late. There was no way he could stop it now.

Beatrice’s lips shall announce the answer.

And, in that moment—

???: “Sorry to interrupt when you’re in the middle of your conversation.”

Hearing a voice that he should not have heard, a chill ran down Subaru’s spine as he spun around where he stood.

And there, he saw it.

???: “—What if I were to become “that person” for you, I suppose?”

Holding two blood-drenched Kukri-knives dangling at her side, a jet-black murderer stood at the doorway.

Chapter 62:
Slaughter at Roswaal Manor

1

Seeing the woman standing in the doorway, a shiver ran through Subaru's entire body.

Even for Subaru, who had experienced so many bouts of desperation and death since his arrival in the Parallel World, this was an existence that inspired a strange kind of dread.

Donning a black feathered cloak, the dynamic curvatures of her body were packaged in jet-black attire. The same color as Subaru's, her black hair, which was such a rarity in this world, was woven into a French braid. The far corners of her eyes were angled downwards, while a seductive smile adorned her almost gentle expression.

If it weren't for the blood-drenched blades casually dangling from her hands, she might have been mistaken for a lady straight out of a portrait—instead of this murdering monster that was Subaru's worst nightmare. His first killer, The Bowel Hunter: Elsa Granhiert.

Subaru: "How are…you here?!"

Elsa: "—Oh my, I was wondering where I had smelled that smell before? How has your body been faring since we last parted? Have you been taking good care of your bowels for me?"

As if having just noticed the tongue-tied Subaru's presence, Elsa lifted her brows and slightly tilted her head.

Just from her answer to his question, it was already clear that no conversation could be had between them. Taking care of one's bowels isn't something normal people would consider suggesting. Hearing her make such a request like it was a matter of course left no doubt in his mind that this woman before his eyes was a lunatic.

What's more, she was a lunatic of a completely different breed than Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.

Feeling all the muscles in his body Contracting, Subaru strained his nerves watching Elsa's every movement.

But the combat strength of this madwoman was such that she had taken a blow from the Sword Saint, Reinhardt, and lived. No matter how much Subaru sharpened his nerves, chances were she could take him down before he'd even have time to react.

Beatrice: "—Who gave you permission to be here, I suppose."

Suddenly, a voice came from behind Subaru, addressing Elsa.

The one who asked this impassive question was Beatrice. She remained as before, facing against Subaru, except all traces of her tears had vanished from her face.

Hearing the girl's question, Elsa brushed her hand through her long, dark hair.

Elsa: "It wasn't locked or anything, all I did was open the door and come in? If you're having such an important conversation, you shouldn't forget to lock next time."

Beatrice: "That's not what I meant. This is Betty's Forbidden Library, and you have entered without my permission… aside from this man, not many others could do this, I suppose. How did you manage this."

Elsa: "Ah, that's simple."

As Beatrice tossed a glance towards Door Crossing's other exception, Subaru, Elsa nodded as if having understood her question. Then, she gestured to the opened doorway,

Elsa: "Your spatial-isolation magic… uses doors as its medium, right? A door-linking spell that connects closed doors with other closed doors?"

Beatrice: "Yes. The Forbidden Library is potentially connected to any door in the Mansion. Unless Betty permits it, it should be impossible to find it, I suppose. So how did you…"

Elsa: "Then it's easy. Seeing how it uses closed doors as the medium… if I just opened every door, that would eliminate all the other possibilities, right?"

Beatrice: "—!"

Elsa spelled out her straightforward solution to Beatrice's Door Crossing.

Indeed it was just as she said. Beatrice's Door Crossing was a spatial transition magic that linked closed doors with one another. That is, it could not link to doors that were already open. Since there was a finite number of doors in the Mansion, once all the other doors were opened, the last one remaining could only lead to the Forbidden Library. But, in order to do this,

Subaru: "You'd have to open every door in the Mansion… and no one tried to stop you…?"

But the moment he spoke, Subaru realized the full extent of his stupidity.

Or rather, that he had been averting his eyes from the truth that he didn't want to see.

Subaru: "On… your knife… whose blood is that?"

The blades of Elsa's Kukri-knives were coated in congealing blood. Judging from the droplets still dripping from their tips, one might imagine that they had only just sliced open their prey. That, combined with his existing assumptions, gave Subaru more than enough reason to imagine the worst.

Watching the color drain from Subaru's lips, Elsa traced her finger over the side of her blade, and then licked her bloodied finger clean.

Elsa: "I wonder whose it is?"

Subaru: “You…”

Elsa: “I’ll give you a hint. She’s dressed as a maid.”

There were three people in the Mansion. They were all dressed as maids. Or no, Rem would be sleeping in her nightgown. So she’s out as a candidate. That leaves only two.

Elsa: “Hint number two. Her hair wasn’t long.”

Petra’s hair was shoulder-length. Frederica’s hair was long.

—Subaru’s throat inhaled in preparation for the scream that was to come.

Elsa: “Hint number three—”Subaru, Subaru!” she cried as she died.”

Subaru: “ELSAAAAAAAA—!!!!”

Baring his teeth as he lowered his stance, Subaru charged towards Elsa head on.

Elsa casually straightened her limbs to meet his charge, pointing the tip of her right-hand blade at the oncoming Subaru’s eye—

Elsa: “—Ara?”

Subaru: “Like anyone’s gonna charge a monster like you from the front!”

Elsa groaned as if taken by surprise.

In front of her, Subaru lowered his body, scraping his hand against the floor before swinging it in an upwards arc. Caught in the trajectory of his arm, a stack of Gospel pages went up fluttering.

In an instant, tens of white pages blocked Elsa’s view of Subaru. Immediately drawing in a breath, Subaru concentrated every ounce of his mana into the center of his stomach, and,

Subaru: “—SHAMAC!!!!”

A plume of black smoke billowed out, completely obscuring the space between Elsa and Subaru.

Though it paled in comparison to the Shamac he used against Julius, he knew from experience that it would be effective against Elsa. Unlike last time, when he completely expelled all the mana inside his body, this time, it only left a general sense of fatigue, an indication that he was getting better at utilizing his mana.

Subaru: “Beatrice!”

Quickly turning around, Subaru grabbed the on-looking Beatrice by the arm. Though for a moment, she made an effort to resist, she didn’t manage to escape Subaru’s grip.

Forcefully pulling her almost weightless body, Subaru embraced the small girl into his arms and launched himself back into the Shamac.

—Confusion. Deprived of vision, sound, sensation, and left with only darkness.

The feeling of his footfalls had become Subaru’s everything, the entirety of his world.

In the span between one foot left the ground and his other foot landed, Subaru was completely abandoned by the world. His left foot lands. He was linked to the world. His left foot leaves. He was alone. His right foot lands. He was linked. He was alone. He was linked. He was alone. He felt something struggling in his arms. But he didn’t let go. He mustn’t leave her alone. He was linked. He was linked. He was linked.

Subaru: “—Phaa!”

The next instant, as if popping his head out of a water’s surface, the darkness abruptly fell away.

In his clearing vision, Subaru found himself in the Mansion’s hallway. The red carpet lining the halls could only mean that they’ve dashed out of the Library.

They have bypassed Elsa at the door and escaped.

Subaru: “Knew that would work—!”

He knew that when hit with Shamac from the front, the battle-hardened Elsa would try to shoot Subaru through the smokescreen thinking that he would be running away. By going against her expectation and running towards her, Subaru passed right by Elsa through the door she had left open.

Subaru: “Kinda wanna say “Nailed it!”, but…”

This was no time to congratulate himself.

She didn’t know how long Shamac would last, but as soon as Elsa realizes that Subaru isn’t in front of her, she will immediately turn back in pursuit.

Roughly kicking the door shut behind him, Door Crossing’s link was severed. But, depending on Beatrice, Subaru couldn’t be sure if the Forbidden Library was still connected to his immediate surroundings.

Subaru: “Beatrice! Link the door to different room in the house…”

Beatrice: “I was going to even without you telling me, I suppose. Also, close some doors around us, that’ll buy us some time.”

Subaru: “Shit, that’s right!”

Answering the disdainful words of the girl in his arms, Subaru scrambled to shut the closest doors around him. While closing each door he peeked inside, but found nothing of note.

He didn’t know how much of Elsa’s words could be believed, but—

Subaru: “What to do… what to do what to do what to do what to do what to do—”

The questions were endless.

Why was Elsa here now? Out of all the loops, this was the earliest she had appeared in the Mansion. It was the sixth day, then the fourth, and now the second—no matter when, Elsa always attacked on the same day Subaru arrived at the Mansion.

He had already suspected this before. But now, after hearing Elsa's statements in the Library, that suspicion was turned into conviction.

But if that was the case, then why—

Subaru: "Why not wait one more day… or just wait a few more hours!"

That night, Petra would have been brought back to the village.

Subaru was already half-resigned to the fact that Elsa would attack the Mansion. The sight of Petra's lifeless corpse remained seared into the back of his eyes. So this time he was resolved to place her far away from the carnage. Yet, even so, evil arrived sooner than his countermeasures could be carried out, and the girl could not escape her fate.

Subaru: "It's not over yet. There's no need to give up now. Even if she has some overpowered setup, there's still a chance. There has to be. How can I lose hope now…!"

Beatrice: "It's not so much hope as it is reluctance to let go, I suppose…"

Subaru: "Shut up! Just be quiet and let me carry you! That lunatic wants to kill you too, you know. She's the kind of pervert who'll open your belly with her knife and get turned on by seeing what's inside!"

Beatrice: "Wanting to see a spirit's intestines… that's just bad taste."

While Subaru muttered in agreement under his breath, Beatrice suddenly slipped out of his arms and landed herself on the hallway floor. She lightly patted off her dress, and,

Beatrice: "So, what do you plan to do now, I suppose?"

Subaru: "It's not about what I'm planning. The priority is to check if Petra and Rem are safe. And then… either way, we'll escape the Mansion together. Unless, you want to try and fight her?"

Beatrice: "…If that thing came to kill Betty, if I just don't resist, then I'll get my wish…"

Subaru: "I knew you'd say that, that's why I dragged you out… If you still won't give up that thought, I'll just have to carry you out of here. So which will it be?"

Looking down at Beatrice who was almost half his height, Subaru pressured her to choose. That said, he wasn't really offering her a choice. Even if she decided to stay behind, he would still drag her out by force.

As if having picked up on Subaru's intention, Beatrice exhaled a sigh,

Beatrice: "Even if I can't choose the place of my death, I should at least choose who kills me, I suppose."

Subaru: "How about we discuss that once we're settled down somewhere safe. Let's go!"

Seeing that Beatrice was willing to follow him, Subaru took her by the hand and started running. Trailing behind him in her cumbersome dress, Beatrice struggled to keep up with her short little steps. They didn't go ten paces before,

Subaru: "Aaaah, come on! I'm picking you up!"

He pulled her up by the wrist and took her into his arms once more.

Beatrice was a lot lighter than she looked. He didn't know if this was because she was a spirit, or if it was just because of her stunted growth.

Beatrice: "…let go, I suppose."

Subaru: "If we go at your speed she'll catch us straight away! It's faster if I just carry you! Besides—"

Even as Beatrice voiced her rejection in his arms, her hands gripped onto the front of Subaru's jacket as if seeking something to rely on. Noticing this, Subaru fell silent, and neither affirmed nor denied nor commented on the matter.

This is enough, he thought at the time.

Subaru: “Anyway, before Elsa shows up… we better find Petra and Rem!”

Beatrice: “I thought there’s one more maid in the Mansion.”

Subaru: “Frederica… it’s better if we don’t meet just now… I think…”

Subaru’s last words trailed away as he shook the blond-haired maid out of his mind. Beatrice furrowed her brows at his reaction, but didn’t say anything in the end.

Right now, he wanted to avoid meeting Frederica. Once he had confirmed that the other two girls were safe, he would go find her, and ask her then.

If what Subaru imagined was true, then he was sure of it—

2

—Petra was on the dining table, lined up alongside the tableware.

The white tablecloth had been dyed dark red with Petra at its center. Some time had already passed, and the spilled blood had begun to turn a hue of black, which only served to darken the macabre sight.

Subaru: “petr…a…”

With faltering, unsteady steps, Subaru slowly approached the table.

Laying there in the center was Petra. A tearful expression of agony and horror had congealed on her lovely face, and her eyes were open as if searching for something at the very end. Blood was still leaking from the corner of her half-open lips, and the fatal wound was of course a deep gash opened in her waist.

The maid’s dress that had adorned her so sweetly and fairy-like when she spun in front of Subaru—was cut open from the chest to the lower abdomen, while the spilled blood and intestines further lightened the young-girl's body.

Subaru: "—ug."

Something rose up in the depths of his throat. Not to vomit, but to sob.

He felt a searing heat in the back of his eyes, and before it could overflow, he reached out his hand to Petra's face. Her expression remained twisted and frozen in fear. The least he could do was to close her eyes, and then, like he had done before, Subaru took off his jacket and placed it over her body.

Just how many times had he failed to save her, and resorted to this superficial atonement?

How many times had he known this would happen and still let this child die?

And how many times would this girl have to suffer for nothing more than her fondness of him?

Subaru: "I'm sorry… I'm sorry, I'm sorry… Petra…"

Even his muttered apology felt hollow.

With no one to protect her, she encountered the hideous murderer here, and was mercilessly killed whilst calling Subaru's name.

His heart might shatter from grief. And his body might burst into flames.

If hatred could kill a person, Subaru could have killed Elsa a million times before his hatred ran out.

Such was the depth of the sin she had committed. And he will make her realize it, no matter what.

Subaru: "For that, I can't let this loop just end like this…"

Beatrice: “This loop…?”

Subaru: “Talking to myself. I don’t want to leave Petra like this… but there’s nothing we can do right now. Let’s go find Rem first. We’ll take her and leave the Mansion. You still can’t use Door Crossing?”

Beatrice: “For that, we’ll need to pass through the Forbidden Library. I’m guessing the door is currently held open, I suppose.”

Subaru: “—Is that how it is…”

The way to shut down Door Crossing is quite simple.

First, open all the doors in the Mansion to eliminate as many options as possible. Then, simply leave the door to the Forbidden Library open, and thus prevent any other potential doors from linking to it.

Even if a stick was left behind to keep the door from closing, Beatrice would not be able to summon the Library to her.

Subaru: “Do you know where the Forbidden Library is connected to right now?”

Beatrice: “Of course. —Right now it’s in the West Wing, a guest room on the third floor, I suppose.”

If the door was in the West Wing, there was still some distance between there and the dining room in the Main Building. But since the door was open, that would mean Elsa had already left the Forbidden Library.

With that murderer’s nose, it wouldn’t take long before she found Subaru.

There was no time.

Subaru: “We don’t have time to panic right now. Either way, let’s hurry up and find Rem…”

Wiping away the tears seeping from his eyes with the back of his hand, Subaru looked to the direction of his destination. Rem would be sleeping in her room in the maid's quarters of the East Wing. If Elsa started her search in the West Wing, then she shouldn't have gotten there yet.

But that was only in regards to Elsa,

Subaru: "There's a good chance that Frederica is there…"

Knowing how much Rem's well-being meant to Subaru, Frederica would have figured that Subaru would go to her after slipping away from Elsa. In that case, it was very likely that she had gotten there first.

Watching Subaru holding his chin in thought, Beatrice narrowed her eyes.

Beatrice: "This has been bothering me. …Are you suspecting that maid, I suppose?"

Subaru: "…I don't want to suspect her, but…"

Subaru answered Beatrice's question with a feeble nod.

Elsa's attack on Roswaal's Mansion—was probably due to Frederica's betrayal. Of that, Subaru was half convinced.

This was the third time Subaru encountered Elsa in Roswaal's Mansion.

The last two encounters had been on the sixth and fourth day, both after a few days had passed since his departure. However, this time, he had returned after only two days, and yet there she was again.

Each and every time, Elsa appeared as if she was waiting for Subaru's return. As for how she managed to do this, Subaru could only suspect the existence of an informant.

Subaru: "The same day I return to the Mansion, Elsa is led inside… I had thought that a trip to the mountain cabin would be a part of it, but…"

Subaru had suspected from the start that Elsa was hiding in the mountain cabin and was led inside by Frederica. So this time, when he got back, he asked her if she would be “heading to the cabin in the mountains”.

But he didn’t notice anything suspicious about Frederica’s answer or demeanor, and so he put it off for the moment, deciding that he was overthinking it.

Subaru: “But there’s more than one way she could’ve done it… and it’s not like I can read her mind. I might have been duped and haven’t realized it.”

Subaru had thought that he had concealed his suspicion from her. But instead, she must have sensed his wariness and acted with extra caution.

That was Subaru’s mistake, and the result was this girl’s life being taken from her for a second time.

Petra’s death was entirely Subaru’s fault, for having failed to take her away from here. In fact, it was no different than if Subaru had killed her himself.

Subaru: “But… Petra looked up to you…!”

“Miss Frederica”, he could remember Petra calling her tutor.

Didn’t it hurt her to know that Petra, who so adored her, was killed at the hand of that murderer?

What was she thinking when she took part in this?

Subaru: “More than anything… is the way she disabled Beatrice’s Door Crossing. Honestly, I was surprised how she managed to break it like it was child’s play.”

Beatrice: “…Betty didn’t think it could be so easily broken either. It’s not a method one could think of just off the top of one’s head, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Given enough time, I might have thought of it too… but that's the problem, time. She couldn't have come up with it unless she knew about you and the mechanisms behind Door Crossing beforehand. There was no way Elsa could've thought of it then and there. So she must have learned it from someone on the inside."

Beatrice: "You seem to be well acquainted with that crazy woman. Where did you meet, I suppose?"

Subaru: "She kinda cut my belly open in the Capital. …Right, it was the first wound you treated me for, remember?"

Thinking back on it, Elsa was the reason Subaru got to enter Roswaal's Mansion in the first place. "Ah", Beatrice nodded as if having understood.

In any case, this was no time for reminiscences.

Subaru: "Anyway, we have to get to Rem. If Frederica's there… can I count on your help?"

Beatrice: "You don't even have the backbone to protect the girl you love yourself, I suppose? To be placed foremost in such a man's heart… I shudder just thinking about it."

Subaru: "If feelings can knock whales from the sky I'll knock down as many as you want, but the world isn't so kind to me, you know."

Despite her disdainful remark, Beatrice seemed to have accepted his request. Even this bickering was probably out of Beatrice's consideration for Subaru. Most likely, she did this to take his mind off of Petra.

Unlike Subaru, who had been oblivious to Beatrice's sorrow and even now could not offer her a single solution, Beatrice was far more clever. And that was why he was always relying on her.

Subaru: "Let's go."

Beatrice: "Mm, alright, I suppose."

Naturally, Beatrice held out her hand, and was hoisted up into Subaru's arms without objections. Lifting up the light little girl, Subaru started running as he did before.

Bounding for the East Wing, Subaru tried his best to silence his steps, even though he knew that it was probably pointless. It didn't appear as though Elsa had come through here as he darted up the stairs to the second floor, and then the third. Timidly popping his head into the hallway, he checked for any shadows around the destined room—

Subaru: "…"

Spotting a figure outside the room, Subaru quickly ducked back his head.

Seeing Beatrice quietly looking up at him in his arms, Subaru nodded, and stuck out his head once again—there seemed to be a tall person leaning against the door.

Even from afar, there was no mistaking the golden hair and the maid's uniform.

It was Frederica. Just as he thought, she was standing outside Rem's bedroom, waiting for Subaru's arrival.

Subaru: "What do we do…? Pretend nothing's happened and say hello? If she hasn't met up with Elsa yet, she might not know we're on to her…"

Beatrice: "If your prediction is correct, then the moment that maid invited the enemy into the Mansion, she'd already had no reason to care about our feelings. Besides, when you last parted with that maid, you were entering the Forbidden Library, I suppose. The moment you stepped out, you already have no more excuses."

Subaru: "In that case, we'll just have to break through from the front."

Frederica's weapon of choice—was what looked to be a pair of clawed gauntlets. From both her bearing and the fact that she was Garfiel's older sister, even if Subaru hadn't personally seen her in action, he could imagine how powerful she must be. Their chances of victory from a frontal assault was almost non-existent.

Subaru: “I’ll release Shamac right away, and if we manage to surprise her, can you hit her with some ranged magic attacks…? Even if we can’t fight her, we’re good as long as we can get her to retreat…”

Beatrice: “That’s way too lenient for a traitor, I suppose. You can’t face an opponent who’s out to kill you without having the same resolve yourself.”

Listening to Beatrice remark coldly, though he knew that she was right, Subaru was still reluctant to follow her advice. Even knowing that the person in question was a traitor, it was still someone who had once treated him as a friend. For as long as Subaru could remember those times, it would never be such a clear-cut matter.

Even if, purely in terms of consequence, Frederica was deeply responsible for Petra’s death.

Subaru: “Beatrice. I’ll block her line of sight with Shamac. I’ll count on you to maybe lightly shoot her with something.”

Beatrice: “—You realize things could go badly if we go too easy on her, I suppose?”

Subaru: “There are just some things I still want to ask her. Don’t overthink it.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for that?”, Beatrice’s expression seemed to say, but, seeing Subaru lower his head, she sighed through her nostrils and said nothing.

Reminding himself not to impose on her, Subaru took a deep breath, and opened and closed his palms. His body was still somewhat fatigued, but he should still be able to manage one more Shamac—

Subaru: “Hold it together, body of mine. —SHAMAC!”

Dashing into the hallway, before Frederica could turn around, black smoke shot out from Subaru’s outstretched palm.

Without fail, it filled the space between Subaru and Frederica just as it had done in the Library. But, along the way, feeling his head grow heavy from the excess loss of mana, Subaru fell to his knees and collapsed to the floor.

Stepping out beside him, Beatrice held her hands in front of her as she advanced. Chanting something under her breath, a hollow hole warped from the atmosphere, from which emerged a spear shrouded in pale purple flame.

Its burning tip causing the atmosphere to tremble, the amethyst spear levitated into the air. —Ignoring Subaru's protest that the magic was clearly lethal, Beatrice fired the spear into the shadow—

Beatrice: "…something's off."

Beatrice tilted her head, muttering.

Subaru didn't understand her reaction, but the spear came to a halt mid air, and with a turn of her outstretched finger, Beatrice made the spear swipe left and right.

With this simple movement, the darkness from Subaru's Shamac was dispelled. That was merely because, being a Dark Magic user herself, Beatrice's influence was far greater than Subaru's.

Seeing the fruit of his exhausting efforts so easily brushed away, Subaru looked on stupidly. But that sentiment soon fell away.

When he realized the reason Beatrice had halted her attack.

Subaru: "…"

With the shadows clearing from the hallway, Subaru advanced straight towards Frederica.

Dragging along his exhausted, mana-deprived body, at the speed of a turtle's crawl, Subaru made his way to her feet. There was no more need for caution. For she made no reaction to his approach. None at all.

—She would never react to anything again.

Subaru: "…why."

Frederica had died, standing guard in front of Rem's room.

Her stomach was pierced by a Kukri-knife, nailing her to the door. On her lifelessly dangling arms were her gauntlets. As evidence that it was a hard-fought battle, her clothes were riddled with cuts.

Frederica's body was already cold, and her expression indicated that her soul had long departed. Her stiffened face spoke of bitterness and regret, and Subaru could tell that she had defended the door with her life.

In other words, Frederica had fought to the end so that the attacker would not enter this room.

She would have no reason to do this if she was the one who led the culprit here.

Subaru: "I completely doubted you… when you…"

Covering his face with his palm, Subaru did his best to take in the reality before his eyes.

Frederica died with blade wounds littering her body. Now that he had seen her like this, how could he say that she was an informant and a traitor?

Was this the fruit of his distrust? He was so eager to accuse her, when in fact, he just wanted an excuse to lessen his own guilt.

He had to admit it.

Subaru: "—I was wrong… wasn't I."

Frederica was not a traitor.

She fought to the death, guarding Rem until the end. Judging from the coldness of her body, she probably died before Petra in the dining room.

She would have had no time to lead Elsa to the Forbidden Library.

Subaru: “…Rem.”

A gaping blankness took over his skull.

Uncoiling his scrambled thoughts, the first thing that came to mind was that lovely, sleeping girl inside the room which Frederica had been guarding.

Frederica’s stiffening body had grown heavy, and prying her from the door was heavy work. Subaru had to exercise his utmost caution in order to avoid harming her any further. Though his fingers were as impatient as his heart.

But, like a betrayal of Subaru’s considerations,

???: “—Finally found you.”

At the end of the hallway, a black shadow slipped into view.

Elsa stooped low with her french braid swinging, holding her palm against the floor, watching them with eyes wet with rapacious murder. Her gaze ran up and down his body, petrifying Subaru in place. Not letting this opening escape her, Elsa’s shadow shot through the hallway.

That soundless advance was none other than the approach of “Death”.

Beatrice: “You’d be making a huge mistake if you think we’ll go down so easily.”

But there was someone who blocked Elsa’s advance.

Beatrice lightly lifted up her hands to where her amethyst spear was waiting, with its aim locked on Elsa.

The spear that had been held from its purpose screeched in exalted glee at a new target for its destruction.

Elsa: “That’s quite a dangerous toy for someone so small.”

Beatrice: “Whether it’s a children’s toy or not, your body can be the test of that."

Elsa smiled in the face of this diabolical magic. And, as if to wipe that smile from her face, Beatrice's amethyst spear shot out.

The spear's velocity far surpassed that of the icicles Subaru had seen Emilia fire. Although there was only one, it lined up directly with Elsa's trajectory as she dashed forward with the same momentum—but, bending down with her chest nearly sliding along the floor, Elsa evaded the strike.

Elsa: "Too bad. Your aim and speed still needs some work."

Feeling the weapon graze past the back of her head, Elsa muttered without a trace of fear as she turned her underhanded Kukri-knife towards Beatrice.

The blade's dull gleam approached Beatrice's body, threatening to cleave her tiny figure in two—

Beatrice: "You're the one who hasn't thought this through, Human."

Just before it could happen, Beatrice clenched her open palm, and the amethyst spear swelled. Continuing down its course after having missed its target, the spear bulged at the end of the hallway and burst like a ruptured balloon behind the halting Elsa.

Elsa: "—This!"

The exploded spear's splinters turned into smaller spears, surrounding Elsa from all directions.

Though they were called smaller spears, they were each no bigger than Subaru's index finger. Their countless multitudes flooded the space, all their tips pointing at Elsa.

And then,

Beatrice: "This shall be your punishment for trespassing into Betty's Forbidden Library, I suppose. —Drawn and quartered, would be a fitting end."

Proclaiming this merciless sentence, she fired the amethyst spears.

Chapter 63:
Empathetic Death

1

The sounds of amethyst shards piercing into flesh rang out in quick succession, as a mist of glittering fragments dispersing from the impact drowned out the hall.

Countless spears shot towards Elsa's body from every direction, and she would have been punctured with a million pores.

"Victory is assured". But even as he watched the murderer being crushed under the overwhelming power of Beatrice's magic, he couldn't stifle the ominous feeling exploding inside his chest.

—What was it, what was it that he had forgotten? There was something that he mustn't forget.

What could it be? Even as he tried to pry it from his memories, the cascade of emotions turned him away.

Just what was Elsa's goal in coming to the Mansion? After finding Frederica's body, his shame of having suspected her had thrown his heart into disarray. He had never quite accepted Petra's death, nor could he suppress his anxiousness to confirm Rem's safety behind the door. All these emotions screamed from the depths of his being. And Beatrice—what was it that he needed to tell Beatrice?

What was it? Subaru couldn't find the answer to the question confounding his heart.

Subaru: "…"

And so, he missed the opportunity to prevent what he should have prevented.

Subaru: "—egh, ah?"

An object flew out of the glistening radiance, and dug deep into

Subaru's right shoulder.

Looking towards the source of the pain, his thoughts turned red hot as he saw the blood pouring from the gash. His throat shrieked as if he was being strangled as the projectile's momentum pushed him off his feet, flat onto the floor.

Beatrice: "How…?! That was a direct hit I suppose?!"

Seeing the wounded Subaru, Beatrice cried out in shock.

Hearing Beatrice's cry beneath his scorching thoughts, it was only then that he remembered. He remembered it. Yes. It was a direct hit. There was no doubt about it. But,

Subaru: "ELSAAAAAA!!"

Elsa: "No need to cry out so passionately, I can hear you just fine."

From his hatred, inflamed by the pain, it was a rupturing scream unlike the shriek from before. And, in reply, amidst the falling crystals at the other end of the hallway—an alluring, unhurried voice answered, with no indication of the life-or-death exchange that had just transpired.

Beatrice: "She's uninjured… how's that possible."

Elsa: "If I was naked, I'd have probably died from that."

Watching Beatrice shake her head in disbelief, Elsa replied with her french braid swaying. Nothing about her looked like she had just taken a direct hit from Beatrice's magic. In fact, she appeared exactly as she did before.

Except, there was just one difference. She had cast off her feathered cloak, and was now only wearing the black outfit underneath.

Subaru: "Her magic-nullifying cloak!"

Elsa: "It's already the second time you got to see it. Too bad you're a bit late to tell that girl about it."

Subaru: “Shit…!”

No single word could sufficiently express his regret as rage boiled beneath his pain.

Elsa’s cloak had the ability to cancel one magical strike. —That was something he had personally witnessed during their showdown inside the Capital.

The fact that Beatrice’s strike came so suddenly, combined with their lack of coordination beforehand, had all led to this unforgivable blunder.

Beatrice: “Now that I know your trick, it’s not so surprising anymore.”

Elsa: “—Wonderful. Oh just wonderful. Such strength, and so adorable. Unlike some girl who only knows how to whimper and cry, I am very much looking forward to the warmth of your bowels.”

Beatrice’s aura intensified once more as Elsa twirled the Kukri-knife in her hand and smiled. From her words, accompanied by her bloodied smile—it was obvious who “the whimpering girl” was referring to. And the instant he realized it, Subaru’s rage erupted.

Subaru: “What gives you the right to talk about Petra like that—!!”

The throwing knife jutting out of his right shoulder—was hooked at the tip to hinder its removal. Yet, gritting his teeth at the object buried in his flesh, Subaru tore it out in a single stroke.

Intense pain dyed his vision true-red, and he could feel his right arm being crippled of its functionality. And then, ignoring his injury, Subaru hurled the dislodged knife back at Elsa.

Though he had thrown it with all his strength, it was still a haphazard throw with no prior training.

The fact that it flew straight towards Elsa was already half a miracle, and the same went for its speed. But it was obvious that such an attack would have no effect on a murderer with agility beyond human comprehension.

Elsa: “I admire your spirit, but if this is all y—”

Subaru: “I’ll wring out every drop! SHAMAC—!!”

Elsa: “—?!”

As Elsa readied for the incoming attack, the third Shamac escaped Subaru’s trembling throat.

Drawing out the last of his body’s exhausted mana after his first and second casts, Subaru expelled his life force through his inexperienced gate as payment for his chant.

Blood shot through his eyes and leaked from his nose. And then, the scream of his soul was answered.

Darkness spread through the center of the hallway, filling the space between him and Elsa. The knife that Subaru had thrown flew into the jet of smoke. Shooting through the obscuring darkness, it stayed its course towards Elsa—its trajectory shielded from view.

Subaru: “Please hit—!”

Elsa: “You startled me there, but it’s not hard to just step out of the way.”

Elsa threw in a complaint as she lowered her body to dodge out of its path.

Subaru’s Shamac fell short of reaching her, and thus allowed her to evade at the last moment.

Flying out of the smokescreen, the small knife missed its original owner’s body and continued down towards the end of the hall. And, just like that, Subaru’s attack ended in vain—or so it seemed, when,

Subaru: “Beako!!”

Beatrice: “Don’t just call me that all of a sudden, I suppose—!”

If Subaru had been the only one present, the attack would have ended there.

But there were two people standing against Elsa—and the other girl had already used the time Subaru managed to buy to complete her next chant.

Beatrice: “Now allow me to show you. —What Dark Magic truly is.”

“Wh—”

Was it Subaru or Elsa who tried to say this?

Even that was impossible to tell after Beatrice’s next action.

Clasping her small hands in front of her chest, Beatrice mouthed something under her breath. And, with a single phrase, the world was painted over.

Beatrice: “—Ul Shamac.”

—In a scale completely unlike Subaru’s imitation Dark Magic, genuine “Darkness” enveloped the Mansion.

2

When he came to his senses, Subaru was surrounded by pitch blackness.

Subaru: “—?”

Actually, even whether he was conscious was uncertain.

Where was he? Was he standing or was he seated? He couldn’t tell at all.

Up, down, left, right, even front or back was vague. Was he inhaling or was he exhaling? Was his blood still flowing? Was his heart still beating? Was he alive? Or was he already dead?

He couldn’t understand a thing. He couldn’t answer any of it. If he was inside his own Shamac, there would still be the sensations at the soles of his feet, and he could at least feel the movements inside his body. Even if he was denied all sensory input, there would still be his sharpened inner awareness to take its place.

But not in this darkness.

Here, it was as if he had dissolved into the shadow, and he couldn't find himself if he tried.

Was he still in the form of a human? He could no longer be sure. He couldn't sense the whereabouts of his hands, and so he couldn't even touch himself to verify. Even if he wanted to check where he was, he wouldn't know how to tell his legs to walk. What does it mean to walk? What does it mean to check?

—Most of all, just who was he supposed to be?

The line where he stopped and where others began was blurring.

The line where he stopped and where the world began was blurring.

Even the strength to think had melted away. Faded. Vanished.

And just like this, and just like this, and just like this—

The end had come.

The end had.

The end.

3

???: "…It's about time you woke up, I suppose."

With the sound of a dry slap against his cheek, Subaru's consciousness was pulled back to reality.

He blinked, and groaned at the dazzling brightness piercing his returning vision. Hearing this, the pain that woke him slapped his cheeks again. Left and then right, once on each side.

Subaru: "Hey, you don't have to keep hitting me!"

Beatrice: “Just wanted to make sure you’re awake. As for the second time, I don’t know why, but it might’ve been reflex, I suppose.”

Beatrice tossed him a cursory glance and gave him this disdainful reply, and only then did Subaru realize that he was lying on the floor.

Propping himself up, he checked over his body just to be sure. A sharp pain was throbbing in his right shoulder. Inadvertently looking towards its source, he saw the fresh wound asserting its existence with blood streaming from the gash.

Subaru: “Aaghh, hurts… couldn’t you’ve kept a bit of that Shamac for me?”

Beatrice: “It’s not that I couldn’t, but that’d only make you temporarily forget the wound, even though it’s still there. Moving it around without actually healing it usually results in death from loss of blood, I suppose.”

Listening to Beatrice spell out that grisly possibility, Subaru pressed a hand over the wound and narrowed his eyes, saying “More importantly…”, as if having remembered something,

Subaru: “What happened to Elsa? Since you look so relaxed about it… did you get her to retreat?”

Beatrice: “What’re you talking about, I suppose?”

Subaru: “What do you mean what am I talking about? If she’s still around, we can’t be dawdling like this. I mean, sure, your Shamac was way more powerful than mine, but just with that…”

Beatrice: “If you’re really that blind, then I kind of feel sorry for you.”

Subaru anxiously furrowed his brows at Beatrice’s baffled remark.

Beatrice might seem optimistic, but that was because she didn’t know Elsa well enough to be afraid. If she only knew that murderer’s depravity, she’d probably be as wary as Subaru.

Reading the thoughts written all over Subaru's face, this time, Beatrice let out a sigh as though she was truly astounded.

Seeing Subaru grow even more confused, Beatrice took a step to the side,

Beatrice: "If you still don't understand, just see for yourself, I suppose."

Subaru: "—u, oah?"

The scene uncovered before his eyes as Beatrice moved out of the way. Taking it in, he let out an involuntary groan.

Beatrice: "You were asking what happened to our terrifying opponent?"

Listening to Beatrice's triumphant boast, Subaru couldn't utter a word in reply.

Because, behind her—hanging from her limbs impaled by violet spears, crucified on the corridor wall, was Elsa's corpse with an amethyst stake driven through her heart like a vanquished vampire of old.

Corpse—yes, there was no doubt about it. It was a corpse.

Subaru: "She's… dead?"

Beatrice: "There's a hole in her chest, and with that many injuries, if she's still alive… she'd be something other than a human."

With a shake of his head, weighed down by fatigue, Subaru got onto his feet.

The moment he stood, he was struck by an intense dizziness as his body tottered. But a hand reached out and gently stopped him from falling.

Subaru: "S-Sorry…"

Beatrice: "It's fine…"

Beatrice turned away, and did not look at him. Consigning some of his weight onto her palm, he dragged his feet towards Elsa's body.

Elsa's head hung limply, and her braid had been cut in half by a spear. Seeing her elbows and knees pinned to the wall, the brutality of the sight made him want to avert his eyes. But he still moved closer nonetheless, close enough to feel her breath, so he could check for himself if the murderer had truly breathed her last.

She wasn't breathing. He reached out his hand and touched her motionless body. It was still warm, but lacked any response unique to living beings. He touched her neck, but there wasn't the slightest pulse.

And, most importantly, despite being up close against the defenseless Subaru, she didn't make any attempt to strike.

Subaru: "Sh-She's… really dead, then…?"

Beatrice: "How many times are you going to ask that, I suppose."

Subaru: "Knowing what she's capable of… I can't breathe easy just like that, you know… It's hard to believe… we actually did it…"

Standing in front of Elsa's lifeless corpse, Subaru stared stupidly at their mirthless victory.

He had always thought of her as an enemy he would need to defeat, but he had never expected Beatrice to take her down single-handedly. Up to now, he had thought that it'd be impossible without Garfiel's help.

Subaru: "Even Puck and Emilia together couldn't defeat her…"

Beatrice: "…If Nii-cha was serious about it, she would've been no match for him. And Betty, in this perfect state, couldn't possibly lose to the likes of a Human, I suppose."

If Puck was serious—that would probably mean turning into that giant lion thing. Indeed, if he had turned into something that could freeze over the world just by existing, even Elsa wouldn't stand a chance. On top of that, it would seem that Beatrice was a spirit possessing similar powers.

To have lived for four hundred years—there were simply far too many lifetimes between them.

Subaru: “Ri, ght. Rem!”

Now that Elsa’s death was confirmed, Subaru suddenly jolted back towards the bedroom. Even now, Frederica’s body was still fixed to the door.

Carefully taking down her rigid body, Subaru placed his hand on the bloodstained doorknob. He drew in a breath, and gathered the courage to look inside.

Then,

Subaru: “—Rem.”

The girl did not respond to his call.

But, lying on the bed, he could see that Rem was sleeping, her rhythmic breathing unaffected by the carnage that had taken place outside.

Elsa never set foot into this room.

No doubt, it was proof that in guarding this room with her life, Frederica’s persistence had been even greater than the depravity of that murderer.

Subaru: “…I’m so sorry I doubted you… Frederica…”

Caressing the lovely, sleeping girl’s forehead, Subaru apologized to the woman lying in the hallway once more.

Although, her soul had already departed this world, and Subaru’s words would never reach her.

Beatrice: “So, what now, I suppose?”

Subaru: “We can’t just leave Rem here. And Frederica, and Petra…

we can only ask the Earlham villagers to take care of them."

Beatrice: "You won't do it yourself? It'd make that girl happier too, I suppose."

Subaru: "If I'm in a position where I could look after Rem myself, I would. But, I can't. I… have to take you to the Sanctuary."

Turning around from Rem's bedside, Subaru met Beatrice's gaze at the door. The girl gave a light snort,

Beatrice: "And what gave you that idea? Our conversation may have been interrupted, but there's still the issue to settle between us."

Subaru: "I know. Then my answer is this: —I'll never agree to kill you, and I'll drag you out of this Mansion if I have to. That's already decided."

Beatrice: "How arrogant. You would ignore Betty's say in the matter, and just carry out your own intentions. —Who do you think you are, to make such ludicrous proclamations, I suppose."

Subaru: "If what you told me is what you truly wanted… then I would have considered it."

Beatrice: "—What's that supposed to mean."

Beatrice's voice was quiet, but an intimidating aura pulsed from her words as she spoke. Subaru felt goosebumps racing up his skin, but he quickly shook his head.

Subaru: "I don't know the details either. But I just feel like there's still a lot more to what you're really thinking inside."

Beatrice: "—Don't, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm still in the dark about your relationship to the Sanctuary. What does Echidna's experimental grounds have to do with you? …Honestly, I have nothing but bad feelings about this."

Beatrice: "Will you just stop prying?"

Subaru: “I won’t. …Aside from me, who else is going to bother figuring you out? You’ve only ever shut yourself in that room…”

As if her throat had clogged up, Beatrice lost her words.

Seeing this, Subaru lifted Rem from the bed. He would bring her to Earlham village, and once she’s settled there, he would head to the Sanctuary with Beatrice.

If she could agree to assist him with Door Crossing, that would save them a lot of time, but it was not like he could force her. In that case, it would just be half a day’s journey on Patrasche.

Subaru: “Even if you won’t come to the Sanctuary with me, I’ll ask Roswaal and Miss Ryuzu about you. If possible, I’d like to ask the big-shot herself as well.”

As long as Subaru held a genuine yearning in his heart to “know”, the Witch of Greed would answer his call.

This time, he already had far more information than he did before, along with quite a few theories as well. With all the new questions that came with it, he was sure that he’d be accepted into the Dream Citadel.

And when that time comes, he would pry open the secrets of the Sanctuary that everyone had sealed their lips about.

Subaru: “Sooner or later, it’s only a matter of time. Though I can understand why you’d want to delay it as much as you can.”

Beatrice: “Just how long do you plan to continue toying with people, I suppose…!”

Subaru: “Toying? I’ve no such…”

Beatrice: “You callously trample on grounds people don’t wish to be trampled on, and even as you throw them into disarray you spew this selfish drivel. There’s a limit to how much of your farce I will tolerate, I suppose. Two people are dead, and you are just going to leave like nothing happened?”

Subaru: "—I."

At the end of Beatrice's rebuke, a look of unbearable pain emerged on Subaru's face.

Seeing this, Beatrice hesitated for a moment, wondering if she had gone too far. But that doubt was soon replaced by an expression of feigned indifference.

Subaru: "Petra and Frederica… once I've handed Rem to the villagers, I'll be sure to properly mourn them. And with Petra I… it's not like I can just stay silent."

He realized as well that these were only excuses, but, turning away so that Beatrice would not see his face, Subaru started walking.

Beatrice's words had pierced straight into his heart.

Petra and Frederica's deaths had only strengthened Subaru's resolve to reset this world. Even with the defeat of Elsa, that achievement came with far too heavy a price. It would simply be too painful to go on in this world.

Here he was, the one telling Beatrice "Not to die", and yet, what right did he have to say it? You can't, but I could—it was truly selfish to the extreme.

Subaru: "Whether you'll come to the Sanctuary with me or not, let's just sort out everything at the Mansion first. Then we can pick it up after that."

Passing Beatrice at the doorway, he continued down the hall. Beatrice looked on silently, but quietly indicated that she would follow him.

Since she was forbidden from taking her own life, Beatrice needed someone else to bring about her end. She couldn't force his hand, and though he had made his intentions clear, she could only follow close behind him.

What a cruel man he was, to knowingly act this way. The thought of it filled him with guilt.

Subaru: “—oa?”

While wallowing in this self-loathing, suddenly, Subaru let out a grunt.

The reason was a light impact. As if a hand pushed on his back, Subaru stumbled forward with Rem in his arms.

Turning around after taking a few steps to regain his balance, he saw that it was Beatrice. Was it revenge for what he had said earlier? But just as he was about to furrow his brows and protest—

Beatrice: “—a.”

The girl softly cried, with a dull gleam jutting out of her chest.

Subaru: “—e?”

The knife that had entered through her back protruded from her chest, slowly carving out a vertical gash—from the top of her ribs down to her waist.

Beatrice’s small body shuddered with the motion of the blade.

And Subaru only watched in stupefaction.

Beatrice: “…it’s.”

Softly, Beatrice’s lips murmured something.

She lifted her face to look at the petrified Subaru.

Her expression, and the emotions in her eyes, all seemed to be telling of some excessively grand tale,

Beatrice: “Finally…”

Subaru: “Wait…”

Beatrice: “—a.”

Even Subaru himself didn’t know what he was trying to say.

And before her formless emotions could take shape, Beatrice's voice trailed into a sigh.

With that final sound, Beatrice's body faded into a faintly shining mass, and, in the blink of an eye, scattered as golden particles of light.

Her delicate body, her cream-colored curls, her charming, impertinent face, and her extravagant, cumbersome, yet perfectly-suiting dress, all vanished into nothing—

???: "—Oh my, that's disappointing. It's my first time cutting open a spirit's bowels, and it's already gone."

A step behind where Beatrice had vanished, stood a woman holding her murder weapon in hand.

Subaru could already identify her just from the first sound of her voice. From the first moment, he was certain, yet his mind refused to register what should have been impossible. But, within seconds of seeing it with his own eyes, his awareness recovered as he clenched his teeth.

A tooth shattered with a crack. Tasting blood, locking his glare, he screamed.

Subaru: "—ELSAAAA!!"

Elsa: "Oh, but what can you do?"

The back of the Kukri-knife crashed into the side of his screaming skull.

The blunt impact instantly shattered into his head as the unstoppable force slammed Subaru's body against the wall. The only resistance he could muster was to keep Rem from flying out of his arms.

Profuse blood poured from the shattered gap, his eyes went dark and his limbs would not respond to his will to fight on. Yet, even so, Subaru caught Elsa in his strobing vision, tossing the Kukri-knife between her hands.

Subaru: “H…ow…how’re you alive? I checked, I checked and you were dead…!”

Elsa: “Mmhmm, that’s right. I was dead. If I was burned to ash back then, I probably wouldn’t be here right now.”

Elsa absently answered the shivering Subaru.

Impaled and crucified, Elsa was certainly dead. She was dead. He was sure of it. But then what was she doing here? Or, was he in some nightmare where Elsa also had clones like Ryuzu?

But there was blood dripping from Elsa’s limbs, and the hole where her chest was pierced through was only bandaged by a strip of cloth torn from her cloak.

Seeing the dark battle wounds littering her body, there was no doubt that this was the same person as before. The only question was whether she was alive or dead.

Subaru: “You aren’t… immortal, by any chance, are you…?”

Elsa: “Well that’s impossible. I just hang onto life a bit more shamelessly than others. Speaking of which, that girl was really something. I can count on my fingers how many times I’ve taken this much damage to my body.”

Subaru: “…What a coincidence. I can also count on my fingers how many times you’ve tortured me to death.”

Subaru’s remark may have been ironic, but it was certainly not a joke. However, apparently taking it as such, Elsa smiled and did a quick spin on the spot. Then, holding her fingers to her lonely, half-severed braid, Elsa silently looked down at Subaru,

Elsa: “This girl here, I’ve never heard about her.”

Subaru: “…Then how about you pretend you didn’t see her and let it slide?”

Understanding the meaning behind her words, Subaru raised this suggestion to Elsa. Even if there wasn’t much hope of her accepting his advice, it would at least buy him some time for his limbs to start responding to his commands. It was a stupid conversation, but he needed the time.

Elsa: “She definitely wasn’t a part of my plans, so I guess it wouldn’t be a problem… the spirit girl, the oversized maid… the little maid was kind of a bonus.”

There were three targets. Beatrice, Frederica, and the tacked-on Petra.

Even with his consciousness glowing white-hot, Subaru sharpened his ears so as not to miss a single detail. The fact that Rem wasn’t marked as a target must have meant that whoever hired Elsa had forgotten Rem’s existence. He had previously thought that Frederica was the employer, but her death sent him back to the drawing board.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, you lied, didn’t you.”

Elsa: “Lied?”

Subaru: “About Frederica. —Back in the Forbidden Library, you talked like you only killed Petra, but how do you explain that?”

Subaru gestured toward Frederica, lying at the side of the hallway. Following his gaze, with an “Aah”, Elsa nodded as if having understood. Then, she turned back to Subaru,

Elsa: “Hers wasn’t a beautiful death.”

She made this paltry remark.

The murderer’s definition of beauty wasn’t something he’d want to understand. But after taking someone’s life, was this all she had to say? Rage churned inside him, but he knew it wouldn’t mean a thing in front of Elsa and the Kukri-knife in her hand.

As much as he wanted revenge, his body hadn’t recovered nearly enough to strike back.

Just like this, strewn on the floor in front of Elsa’s murdering blade, the outcome was already decided.

—So, this was as far as he would go.

Acknowledging his impending “Death”, Subaru ran the information he had gathered in this loop through his mind, alongside the new, confounding mysteries. And then, there was his exchange with Beatrice, and the final expression he saw on her face.

Why did the girl who kept telling Subaru “I want to die” and “Please kill me” shove him out of the way in the end? Promptly noticing that Elsa was alive, she pushed Subaru away. But just what was it supposed to mean when she did this? Subaru wasn’t stupid enough not to realize it.

Elsa: “I don’t like that look in your eyes.”

Subaru: “Huh? —Gbha?!”

With these words, the flat of her blade struck against his face once again.

His left cheekbone was shattered, and several cracked teeth fell onto the floor. Collapsing, another blow struck him from the opposite side. Intense pain raced through the bottom of his right eye, and, with a flash of her blade, his left ear was sheared off.

Then, switching between the edge and flat of her blade in turn, Elsa carved, crushed, and scourged Subaru’s body. Denying him the impending “Death” he had expected, she dealt him pain upon pain upon pain as blood and wails leaked from his mouth without end.

Elsa: “Struggle on until the last moment of your life. Otherwise, what is the point of living?”

Subaru: “…as if I’d want to take life advice from you.”

A strike. His forehead split open, and he felt the illusion of the contents of his skull spilling as he collapsed.

His consciousness grew distant at the solid impact, and Subaru could feel his body steadily being drawn into that frozen world.

So, this is where he dies.

Even if he lost consciousness now, he had no illusions about what falling unconscious in front the Bowel Hunter would entail.

This was the end. This time, this would be as far as he gets.

Next time, he won't fail again. Next time, for sure.

The expression on your face at the very end. I won't forget it, no matter what.

Subaru: "—Beatrice."

In her final moments, the girl who had told him "Kill me", had tears within her eyes.

With that sight seared into his mind, Subaru's consciousness was slowly swallowed, into darkness, into nothing.

Chapter 64:
World Crumbling

1

The first thing Subaru noticed as his consciousness returned was the unbearable pain throughout his body.

His face, and everything above his neck was wracked with extraordinary pain. His left cheek, the area around his right eye, his molars, his front teeth, his left ear—far too many to list, there was not a spot untouched by pain.

He moved his tongue around in his mouth, and found that he had lost two molars, one front tooth, and that one of his canine teeth was gone. And when he opened his eyes to survey his surroundings, he noticed that his right eye was so swollen that it could no longer open.

Subaru: “Th, gha…”

When he tried to speak, his mouth only managed a strange gurgle due to the missing teeth and the blood pooling in his mouth.

Every breath drove a chill into the exposed nerves under his teeth, and though he tried to breathe through his nostrils, dried blood completely clotted the path. Gasping, he spat out the blood in his mouth,

Subaru: “No way… I… didn’t die?”

As he dragged along his over-injured body, Subaru recognized the fact that he had survived what should have been certain death.

Looking out through the remaining half of his vision, Subaru found himself lying in the dark corridor. There was no one in sight. He began to recall what happened before passing out, and,

Subaru: “Where’s… Elsa…”

Not here.

At least, nowhere Subaru's eye could see.

Being a woman who lurks in the dark for a living, even if she was within sight, she'd probably be able to keep herself from being seen, but—she'd have no reason to do so.

There was no sign of Elsa. She was gone. At least, without killing Subaru.

Subaru: "Why…would… no, more importantly…"

Every movement of his mouth made new blood gush out. Irritatedly spitting it out, Subaru shook his head. He tried moving each part of his body to check which areas hurt and which were immobile—

—When he noticed the warm, rhythmically breathing existence resting in his arms.

Subaru: "—Rem."

The lovely blue-haired girl. The girl who was instilling him with strength even as she went on sleeping.

In his arms, Rem's heart was silently beating. Her shallow, rhythmic breathing, her steady, undeniable pulse, and her faintly blushing skin—were all proof of the continued rhythm of her life.

Subaru: "…"

Overwhelmed with emotion, he tightened his arms around her.

Taking advantage of her lack of reaction, he held her delicate body as he relished in its warmth, as if to perceive through her skin the proof that she still lives.

Subaru: "Why… did she leave…without killing me or Rem…?"

Holding Rem's body, Subaru remarked on Elsa's inexplicable departure.

She killed Petra, she killed Frederica, and even Beatrice was extinguished by her hands. And yet, the murderer left without taking Subaru and Rem's lives when they were right in front of her.

Indeed, before losing consciousness, Subaru had pleaded for Rem's life, and Elsa's reply could be interpreted as an acceptance of his request. But would she really stay true to her word?

He doubted he would ever be able to understand the mind of a psychopath like the Bowel Hunter, but her reason for sparing Rem might have been just that simple.

Subaru: "But then… why did she let me live…?"

He would be killed for sure, that was what he had thought.

At least, Elsa had swung her blade at Subaru with the clear intention to harm. The pain of every shattered bone and every carved-up muscle told him that was the case.

And yet, why did she let him live?

Subaru: "Either way… right now…"

Unable to understand, Subaru shook his head, and strained his aching body to lift Rem onto his arms.

Holding Rem lightly in his arms, Subaru looked towards the end of the hallway—and, spotting Frederica's corpse, lying there as if abandoned, he decided on what he would have to do.

—Before anything else, he would bury Frederica and Petra.

Subaru: "Even though there's really no point when this world is bound to end…"

A sentimental, irrational, and wretched act, he muttered in self-derision.

Subaru had already decided that he would reset this world with his death.

Too much had been lost. And in spite of what he gained, he had failed to protect even a single thing he had sought to protect. Subaru lost everything, just like all those times before, or perhaps even more. Subaru no longer held the courage to live on in a world where so much was already lost.

If his death could bring them back, then he wouldn't hesitate for a second.

This world was a world that was ending.

Whether it was Petra's, Frederica's, or Beatrice's death, all of it could be reset.

His promise to Petra, his apology to Frederica, and his final answer to Beatrice's sorrows, they could all be fulfilled in the next world.

Having made that resolve, there was really no point in mourning their deaths.

Because whatever sadness remains of this lost world would no longer exist in anyone else's memories, and would only be Subaru's alone to endure.

—But, if he truly had that kind of resolve, Natsuki Subaru would have already passed on to the next world by now.

Subaru: "Resolve, determination, ability… I'm always lacking in everything. Why am I always so weak… huh, Rem?"

The girl in his arms did not answer him.

But, whether it was lamenting his own powerlessness, or laying bare his weakness, right now, the only place where Subaru could do this was in front of this sleeping girl.

2

—It had been only about fifteen minutes after deciding to lay Petra and Frederica to rest when he saw it.

Subaru: "What… is that?"

Seeing the object sitting in front of him, Subaru let out this stupid groan in his throat.

But who could blame him? Because that was just how strange and incomprehensible the object before him was.

A pinkish hunk of meat—would just about describe it.

Its shape was kind of like a lopsided ball of mud a child might have made, but out of meat. That much should have already aptly conveyed its strangeness, as well as the reason for Subaru's consequent confusion.

Subaru: "It's big—"

Simply put, the hunk of meat was enormous.

It was big enough for him to have to gaze upwards, and he could sense the weight of its dense mass just by looking. Both its color and texture reminded him of fresh pork or poultry one might find in the meat aisles.

Just as far as what he could see, there were about twelve of them. Every single one was the exact same size and conspicuously littered about the area.

Subaru: "What… the hell is…?"

Confused and without answers, Subaru repeated that same question over and over.

Then, as he looked around,

Subaru: "Where did all the villagers go?"

Standing in the deserted center of Earlham village, surrounded by hunks of meat, Subaru stupidly muttered to himself.

3

—Subaru had come to Earlham village hoping to find some help burying Petra and Frederica, and, more importantly, to inform

Petra's family of her death.

He was prepared to be beaten, and to be sworn at.

Just like back in the Mansion, even here, Subaru could still avoid going through that pain. He could hide the truth of Petra's death, and reset this world without the villagers ever knowing.

If he did that, Subaru would have hid his responsibility for Petra's death deep inside his heart with only his guilt to haunt him, and that would probably have been a grace.

But, as for whether he could forgive himself for doing so, that would surely be impossible.

Subaru: "In the end, it's just self-satisfaction, isn't it?"

So he decided to inform Petra's family before burying the two.

On the other hand, he had no idea how he should mourn Beatrice. Spirits don't leave bodies behind. The clean, spotless manner of her disappearance had made her death seem almost unreal to Subaru.

Who knows, maybe—he couldn't help but cling to such thoughts.

With those ambivalent thoughts on his mind, Subaru made his way towards Earlham village.

He brought Rem with him, intending to ask someone to take care of her while he saw to the burials.

And then, when he arrived, while searching around for the villagers, he instead found those lumps of meat.

Subaru: "—There's… no one here."

Temporarily setting Rem down under the roof of one of the houses, and walking a full circle around the village, that was the conclusion Subaru had come to.

The sweat on his forehead had dissolved the flaking blood, painting Subaru's face red, into a wretched sight. If the villagers saw Subaru now, he would no doubt be greeted with horrified shrieks.

But, unable to find a single villager to shriek at his sight, Subaru sat down beside the sleeping Rem, at a loss.

—When he saw that Elsa had disappeared from the Mansion, it wasn't that he hadn't considered it.

Elsa didn't bat an eye when she murdered everyone involved in the Capital. So, perhaps unsatisfied with the people in the Mansion, she had decided to put the whole village to the blade.

Subaru had pondered over various explanations on his way to Earlham village, and that possibility was just a part of his unease. But what greeted him when he arrived was far beyond anything he could have imagined.

Instead of villagers, there were just scattered hunks of meat.

—Naturally, deep down, Subaru had imagined the worst, but he was just subconsciously ignoring it.

Subaru: "No one's here… then there's no point dawdling here… better hurry and… bury them."

Muttering this excuse, Subaru lifted Rem into his arms and left the village.

The enormous, motionless masses of meat remained as they were. Subaru didn't feel the slightest pang on his conscience, leaving them there. He would have preferred if they didn't even linger in the deepest recesses of his memories.

It felt like his head was going to explode.

4

Burying Petra and Frederica turned out to be an unexpectedly simple affair.

Preparing their appearance for interment, he had wiped clean their bloodstained skin with a cloth. As for clothes, he had changed them into a new set with his apologies. Naturally, there were no inappropriate feelings involved.

As he passed the girls' cold, stiffened arms through the sleeves of their clothes, he wanted to cry, but the back of his eyes only grew dry, trapping his heart within that inexplicable emotion.

Subaru: "…at least, go in peace."

Subaru quietly said a prayer to lay them to rest as he laid the earth over them.

It goes without saying that Subaru knew nothing about the prayers of this world, nor much about the sendoffs of his original world, for that matter. All his family members were still alive, so he never had to attend any funerals, and he never took any particular interest in the secular ceremonies of the Japanese people.

He regretted that now.

—The fact that he didn't even know the proper words was filling him with remorse.

Subaru: "And I've imposed on you too. Thank you, for helping me."

Saying this, Subaru reached out his hand, and the black earth dragon brought her snout over to his fingers.

With her legs dirtied by the dug-up soil, Patrasche nudged closer to Subaru as if concerned for him.

After finding Patrasche safe in the stables, Subaru asked her for her help with Petra and Frederica's burials. The clever dragon quickly understood Subaru's clumsy request, and, alongside Subaru, who was using a tool similar to a spade, she dug the hole for the tall-statured Frederica.

Even with her mighty legs that could outrace the wind completely coated in mud, it did not diminish the jet-black earth dragon's nobility and beauty. And Subaru was once again reminded of his immense gratitude for her existence.

Petra's grave was dug by Subaru. Though her body was small, he didn't want her to feel cramped, and so he wound up tearing the skins of his palm several times over on the handle of the unfamiliar tool.

Laying the earth over her, and watching Petra's figure receding from view, at last, the stifled tears poured out, and Subaru did not bother to wipe them.

He gave Frederica the same send off, and after placing a simple marker over their graves, the funeral had drawn to an end.

Having concluded one of his tasks, where he should have felt a burden taken off his shoulders, the weight only grew heavier.

Subaru: "…There's no point staying here anymore."

He softly murmured.

The curtain had fallen over the irrevocable tragedy at the Mansion.

Carving each and every detail into his memories, he made sure he'd never forget his present regret as he bid the two farewell.

It was a regret carved into his very soul, which he will be sure to wipe away in the next attempt.

Only once he had accomplished this, could he truly take responsibility for their deaths.

Subaru: "After we've checked what we need to check, let's return to the Sanctuary. —We can't leave Rem here, so she's coming too."

The sun had begun to wane.

In the steadily darkening world, Subaru realized that it must be approaching the third night. Once he had checked what he needed to check, if he set out from the Mansion the next morning, he would be back in the Sanctuary before the fourth night.

That would leave a day and a half until the fated sixth day. And this would also be the first time Subaru had traveled back to the

Sanctuary from the Mansion.

Defend the Mansion, and break through the Sanctuary.

Because there were two inevitable hurdles, he would need to head back for the necessary experience points before he could take on the final loop.

What would have changed at the Sanctuary while Subaru was gone?

Things would have probably proceeded along the same lines as the time Garfiel knocked Subaru out and imprisoned him. In that case, Otto and Ram might just take action to free the Earlham refugees on the fifth night.

Subaru: “Must be before that happens…huh.”

The way he left Garfiel was another cause for concern.

Having forcibly blocked his pursuit using Ryuzu’s as shields, it was impossible to imagine just how infuriated Garfiel must be.

On top of that, he would have to tell Garfiel about his older sister’s death. How he suspected her of being a spy, and how he had failed to do anything to save her.

He would have to resign himself to Garfiel’s rage, and take anything that may come.

Subaru: “Back to the Sanctuary, then. —I miss Emilia.”

Thinking over all the countless incidents beleaguering his mind, Subaru absently let slip this honest thought.

Or perhaps, it was closer to a whimper.

But, in this very moment, it was what he truly wanted.

He wanted to see Emilia’s face. And to touch her.

He wanted to feel the reality of Emilia’s existence, and to heal his heart that was on the verge of breaking.

Those thoughts were just a testament to the extent of Subaru's exhaustion.

5

—It was when they entered the forests surrounding the Sanctuary that Subaru noticed that something was strange.

Riding on Patrasche, he was holding the sleeping Rem against his chest. It was a horrendously unbalanced and precarious posture, but thankfully, Rem did not move about, and Patrasche was able to perfectly make up for her master's incompetence as they sped along the road.

Naturally, they couldn't go at full speed as they did on the way to the Mansion, and it took them seventeen hours to retrace the same path. And now, it was already approaching the fourth night.

He had planned to spend a day and a half in the Sanctuary, but it looked like it would have to be shrunk down to one day.

It was a necessary use of time. And of course, he had no intention of blaming Patrasche.

But if there was one thing Subaru had failed to take into account,

Subaru: "Seriously, this is no joke… What the hell's happening here…?!"

Halfway along the road to the Sanctuary, through the forest where the Barrier stood—they began to notice a piercing cold enveloping the world.

The trees' green leaves were spattered with frost, and the surfaces of the branches were coated in white. The puddles along the ground had frozen over, and there were thin sheets of ice every way he looked.

The temperature was abnormally cold—even more frigid than that of a harsh winter. Subaru tightened his arms around Rem as he looked about, expelling breaths of white mist.

As usual, the forest lacked the signs of animal life, but now, even the life force of the trees have weakened. The fact that the forest was so unprepared for the cold only proved that it was no natural phenomenon.

Subaru: “Everything ahead is frozen and white… I got a bad feeling about this, Patrasche.”

Patrasche: “…”

Subaru: “Hey… Patrasche?”

Irritated by the ominous feeling in his chest, he wanted to tell Patrasche to speed up, but Patrasche did not respond.

Furrowing his brows as he looked down at his favorite dragon, he saw that her legs were stopping, and her breaths were pained and ragged.

Subaru: “Patrasche?!”

Subaru hurriedly pulled on the reins to stop her. He hopped down from the saddle, and reached out his hand to her neck. The rocky texture of the scales of her neck felt the same as usual, except it was terrifyingly cold. And, it was then that he realized it.

Subaru: “Unless, are earth dragons vulnerable to the cold…? They look just like reptiles, I wonder how they deal with winter?”

Most reptiles like lizards and snakes hibernate during the winter. Since they look so similar visually, perhaps some of the reptilian qualities applied to earth dragons as well.

In that case, having Patrasche move towards the cold would be nothing less than suicide.

If what Subaru imagined was correct, then the closer they get to the center of the Sanctuary, the more severe the cold would become.

Subaru: “It’s too harsh for you to come with me… I guess. From the looks of it, the earth dragons that stayed in the Sanctuary might be in danger as well.”

Subaru stroked Patrasche’s shivering body with his hand. Perhaps it was doing nothing more than to console her, but Patrasche leaned her body into his palm as if to wrap herself around the sensation.

Without her, it would no doubt take even longer to reach the Sanctuary—but if she went along with him, she might very well die on the way there.

Subaru: “Patrasche… I’m sorry, but I’ll have to leave you outside the forest… or actually, could you go back to the Mansion?”

Hearing Subaru’s decision, Patrasche let out a sad snort.

But she was clever enough to understand Subaru’s concerns, as well as the state of her own body and the conditions of the forest ahead. After a few more consoling words from Subaru, she lowered her head and did not disobey him.

After rubbing her head to his heart’s content, Subaru took out some basic rations and clothing from Patrasche’s travel pack, and put on as much as he could to ward off the cold. He did the same for Rem, and after securing the baggage with her body, he lifted her up.

Subaru: “The way to the Sanctuary is… straight ahead…right?”

Patrasche: “…”

Subaru: “Don’t give me that worried look… I’m more worried about you, you know. You must be exhausted… sorry for putting you through this. It was inconsiderate of me, sorry.”

Subaru drooped down his head, and Patrasche let out a small neigh as if to say “There’s no need to apologize”. Then, she set out her steps towards the forest’s edge, while Subaru watched her until she was out of sight.

Patrasche didn’t look back even once as she left. Perhaps, it was because she was too proud to let him see her reluctance, and, at the same time, it would have been out of the gentle regard to lessen his sense of guilt.

Through and through, Subaru acknowledged everything his beloved dragon had done for him.

Subaru: “Patrasche should have no problem finding her way out of the forest. …Actually, I’m more worried about this end… crap.”

Shifting Rem in his arms, Subaru walked onward with the sound of frost crunching under his feet.

His exhaled breaths turned white, and his teeth would clatter if he allowed himself to feel the cold. Forward, forward, he headed towards the Sanctuary.

Subaru: “What on earth happened… Emilia…?”

He called to the name of the girl who must be at the heart of this freezing cold.

6

He forced his frozen legs forward, breathing in shallow huffs through lips that had already forgotten how to shiver. Doing his best to keep his sticking eyelids open, Subaru managed to maintain his hazy-white vision as he advanced through the forest.

—The extreme cold enveloping the Sanctuary far exceeded Subaru’s naive expectations.

With every step that brought him closer, he could feel his body temperature dropping.

He had long lost the sensation of his skin, and the only thing driving his body was the sense of duty to those who have departed, and the will to move forward,

Subaru: “…”

In his arms, Rem went emitting her steady signs of life, giving no indication of whether the outside environment was affecting her.

Forging straight ahead, he advanced towards the Sanctuary.

He couldn’t tell by sight whether he was on the right path or not.

But he could only trust that he was getting closer by the intensity of the cold as he walked.

The snow had already piled up to his shins, and before he knew it, the forest had completely transformed into a landscape of winter.

It was a power capable of transforming the very nature of the world —and Subaru knew what it might be.

Subaru: "…"

Quivering, he pried open his frozen lips while blood seeped from the ripped-off tissue as he gasped for air. He touched the warmth of his blood with the tip of his tongue, and was assured that his body hadn't frozen through.

He could keep going. He could still do it.

He hadn't learned anything yet. If he stopped here, he wouldn't be able to tell himself what all those sacrifices had been for.

And so,

Subaru: "—a."

Suddenly, noticing something cut across his stark-white vision, Subaru halted his steps.

Rubbing his nearly-closed eyes open, Subaru strained his gaze to see the anomaly that had cut into his sight. Gradually making out its contours, he saw that it was a person—a person he knew.

Subaru: "Ryuzu… san?"

Ryuzu: "…"

At Subaru's call, the girl only responded with a silent gaze.

Observing this reaction, Subaru immediately recognized that this girl wasn't "Ryuzu", but a replica of "Ryuzu Meyer".

And that, if she was a replica, then he should have command authority over her.

Subaru: “It’s good… you’re here… please… guide me to the Sanctuary…”

???: “She ain’t gonna listen t’yer requests, y’know?”

Huffing with white, faltering breaths, Subaru called out to the replicant girl, but another voice cut in between them.

He looked up, and immediately saw someone landing in the snow beside the girl. Watching the figure sink into the snow with a crunch, Subaru saw that it was a single youth.

With short, blonde hair, and a sharpened gaze, his entire body emanated murderous hostility.

Subaru: “Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Yo, y’still got the guts t’come back? Gotta say, I’m impressed. “Lyin’ Bittoon bows better than most” as they say.”

Without forgetting to throw in an incomprehensible reference, Garfiel clicked his fangs at Subaru.

But as he disdainfully looked down at the panting Subaru, Garfiel’s eyes suddenly widened in surprise when he saw Rem in Subaru’s arms.

Garfiel: “Huh…? What’s Ram doin’ wi…wait, that ain’t Ram. Hah? Th’hell’s goin’ on? Who’s that girl…”

Subaru: “I’ll explain, but whether you’ll understand is a bit sketchy… This is Rem. Ram’s totally authentic younger sister.”

Garfiel: “I ain’t never heard ‘bout Ram havin’ a sister… but can’t really decide if yer lyin’ outright either, oy.”

Facing someone who looked exactly like the girl he had a crush on, Garfiel’s aggression somewhat diminished. Seeing how Garfiel didn’t kill him on sight, Subaru determined that he was still rational, and decided to put off making escape plans for now.

Then, Subaru turned to the Ryuzu replicant quietly standing at Garfiel's side,

Subaru: "You said that girl won't listen to me anymore… what do you mean?"

Garfiel: "…Ain't that pretty simple? Soon as ya left th'Sanctuary, I went to th'experimental grounds and overwrote the command authority to myself. Had t'revisit some unpleasant memories cus' of you."

Subaru: "Really? You just have to go pat-pat, and the command authority transfers?"

Garfiel: "Y'basically just have'ta touch it. That's how you got it, ain't it?"

"It", would be the crystal sealing the original Ryuzu Meyer inside. If touching it was how Subaru received the command authority in the first place, then it was only natural that Garfiel took it back the same way.

In any case,

Subaru: "It was really considerate of you to come all the way here to get me."

Garfiel: "I didn't come here t'entertain yer bullshit. Just take a look at what's happenin' and it ain't hard t'see we're way past th'time for pleasant conversations, yeah?"

Subaru: "Yeah, you're right. …I'll just come right out and ask, then."

Subaru nodded at Garfiel's retort, then inhaled with a slight shake of his head, and said,

Subaru: "—Emilia's the one doing this… isn't she?"

Garfiel: "Got no fuckin' idea. Either way, she ain't coming out of the Tomb."

Subaru: “She hasn’t come out of the Tomb?”

Subaru furrowed his brows at the unexpected reply. Seeing this, Garfiel clicked his tongue and kicked up a great chunk of snow with his foot,

Garfiel: “Th’Half-Witch’s been actin’ weird since th’day y’left. I thought she’s calmed down, but then she shut herself inside the Tomb. By the time we realized it, th’whole Sanctuary’s covered in ice. —Just like Elior Forest.”

Subaru: “You know about Emilia’s home…?!”

Garfiel: “Y’think I haven’t heard? Roswaal’s a fuckin’ bastard, but he still answers questions when needed. That’s why I ain’t trustin’ Lady Emilia one bit.”

Listening to Garfiel spit this out, Subaru’s expression darkened. Yet, before he could react, Garfiel had already closed their distance and was now standing right before his eyes.

Garfiel: “That expression’s fuckin’ pathetic.”

Subaru: “Wh—?!”

A palm shoved against Subaru’s chest, and he gracelessly fell backwards.

He hurriedly tried to shield Rem with his arms, but his hands clutched at nothing. As for why that was,

Subaru: “What’re y… Rem—!”

Garfiel: “What, y’want her back? Oyoy, yer one greedy bastard. And here I thought Lady Emilia was th’girl of yer dreams.”

Having struck Subaru where it hurt, Garfiel snorted through his nose.

There, in Garfiel’s arms, was Rem’s body which he had snatched out of Subaru’s grasp.

Frantically forcing his insensate body into motion, Subaru tried to grab onto Garfiel, but Garfiel leapt out of reach.

Subaru: “What’re you going to do to Rem…!”

Garfiel: “I won’t hurt her or anythin’. That’d just be wrong. I’m a reasonable guy, y’know. I hate it when people ain’t got proper sense.”

As he said this, Garfiel’s gaze as he looked down at Rem indeed did not carry any hostility.

At least, Garfiel’s nature wasn’t twisted enough for him to harm someone who looked just like the girl he loved.

“Then why”, Subaru almost wanted to ask, but Garfiel beat him to it.

Garfiel: “Go inside the Tomb. —And pull that Half-Witch out for me.”

Chapter 65:
Passion in the Snow

1

Forcibly dragged all the way to the Tomb, he was dumped in front of the entrance.

Be it snow or frost, Subaru spat out the sherbet-like substance that had gathered in his mouth. With his exposed, insensate skin caught between pain and numbness, he turned back his head,

Subaru: “That’s some… pretty rough treatment.”

Garfiel: “My head ain’t smart enough to be so considerate. Be glad I’m just bein’ rough with ya. ‘Less y’want me t’be rough with yer girl too?”

Puffing white breaths and looking down at Subaru on the ground, Garfiel gestured to Rem, who was still in his arms.

A hostage. Subaru wasn’t sure if that was what Garfiel intended, but it was certainly the perfect threat to coerce Subaru with.

Subaru: “Don’t you… do anything weird to Rem.”

Garfiel: “Long as ya do what I asked, I won’t.”

Subaru uttered quietly as he pushed himself off the thinly snow-veiled ground. Standing at his side was the Ryuzu replicant who helped carry him here, staring blankly at him.

As usual, she was in her shabby robe, which seemed to be far too scant for the cold.

Subaru: “Can’t we give the girls some more clothes? …She looks so cold, I can’t bear looking at her.”

Garfiel: “Y’realize what they are, right? They can’t feel th’cold in th’first place. If yer tryin’ to buy time, I ain’t got no reason t’play along.”

Subaru: “Aw don’t keep pointing it out. Even I know buying time won’t improve the situation in any way.”

His vision blinded by the snowstorm, Subaru followed Garfiel’s advice and turned towards the Tomb.

Amidst the world of white, he could faintly make out the ruin of stone. Even in this raging phenomenon of nature, Echidna’s tomb stood calmly, eerily waiting for its next challenger.

And Emilia would be inside.

Subaru: “How long has Emilia been in there?”

Garfiel: “She went in th’night before last, it’s been two days now. Honestly, I couldn’t care less as long as she ain’t dead.”

Subaru: “From your position, I can see how that’s the case… So you didn’t try to go in and bring her out yourself?”

Garfiel: “I can’t go in th’Tomb. It’s part of the Contract.”

That intriguing reply pretty much summed up the whole of Garfiel’s position.

Subaru wasn’t sure just to what extent the Sanctuary’s residents knew about this, but Garfiel had definitely been inside the Tomb. He met Echidna, and was granted the powers of an Apostle of Greed, as well as the qualification to hold command authority over the Ryuzu clones.

But why he would keep it a secret and postpone the liberation of the Sanctuary was beyond Subaru.

Subaru: “Once I go inside and ask Echidna herself… guess I’ll find out.”

Garfiel: “Quit mumblin’. I told ya to get in there. Drag that Half-Witch out and get her to stop makin’ all this snow. Otherwise I’ll be forced to do somethin’ I don’t wanna do.”

Garfiel slightly lifted Rem in his arms and let out a menacing smile. That smile didn’t suit him at all, but Subaru knew Garfiel as a person who carries out his threats. Regardless of what his true intentions were, as long as it serves to protect the Sanctuary, he would easily turn his claws on a girl with the same face as the one he loved.

Subaru: “Don’t do anything to Rem. —That’s my condition.”

Garfiel: “…Just go.”

Blown by the frigid wind, Subaru left these words with the coldest voice he could muster, and began walking towards the Tomb. Behind him, Garfiel watched him as he went.

His true motives were still unknown, but Subaru remembered that there was something he had forgotten to tell him.

He had forgotten to tell Garfiel about his sister Frederica’s death.

The only explanation he could think of was that the cold and rage had gotten to his head.

Right now, was he still sane? If he was sane, then how?

He let Petra die, he doubted Frederica’s innocence, and he returned to the Sanctuary to find this. His relationship with Garfiel was at its worst, and he had no idea whether the others in the Sanctuary were safe.

Continuing on in these atrocious circumstances, how could he be sane?

He mustn’t stop thinking. He mustn’t give in. He must look forward, look upward, grasp for a future worth grasping, and take on every burden he must bear.

Otherwise, what would Subaru—

Subaru: “…”

The claps of his faltering steps struck upon the Tomb’s dry floor.

Unlike the outside, in here, he could barely feel the reach of the raging cold. It was as though the cold had been barred from entering this place, but that would only be an illusion, and the reality was that it was merely diminished.

As Subaru stepped into the Tomb, the mechanism for welcoming those who were qualified activated, and the dim lamps of the dark corridor caught alight.

The murky lights lining the walls invited Subaru into the depths, and, with the sensation of all the blood in his body freezing, Subaru drove his limbs to venture inside.

And, at the end of what felt like a long, long passage, he arrived at a room.

The room where the first Trial took place, where they faced their past.

Arriving here at last,

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Like the ring of a silver chime, Subaru was welcomed by that tender, long-awaited voice.

2

Subaru heard his name in the darkness and saw a figure directly in front of him.

Just as his eyes began to adjust to the darkness of the ruins, her long, silver hair and her alluring, amethyst eyes flooded into his sight, and Subaru couldn’t help but call out her name.

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “Yes. Yeah, Subaru. …It’s me.”

Pronouncing those four short syllables and hearing her reply, Subaru felt his body on the verge of collapsing.

It might seem like an overreaction, but that was simply the weight of his overflowing emotions.

Fatigue, exhaustion, and the sense of loss.

All these sensations tormented Subaru, and yet, it was only when he stood in front of Emilia that his knees gave way to the emotions that he had forbidden himself to notice.

His body tilted forward, about to fall, but two arms reached out and caught him.

Their touch was soft and warm. He looked up, and saw her fair, beautiful face looking back at him. For a moment, he held his breath, and forgot where he was.

Right now, he was only resting in Emilia's tender embrace.

Subaru: "ah, s-, sorry… I felt weak all of a sudden…"

Emilia: "It's alright. I'm not suspecting you of doing it on purpose or anything. But even if it was on purpose, I still would've caught you."

Cutting off Subaru's excuse, Emilia closed off his escape.

Rather than chiding him, she gently consoled him. For this, Subaru breathed a deep sigh of relief—but it was only then that he noticed something strange about Emilia.

Emilia looked the same as usual.

Gentle, calm, a little aloof, full of compassion, and cute with a somewhat childish charm—none of it had changed.

She was the same, usual Emilia from the peaceful days they spent in Roswaal's Mansion.

And not the same Emilia who was burdened by the duty of overcoming the Trials.

Subaru: "E-Emilia… while I was gone, uh…"

—Did something happen to change your mind?

Subaru carefully chose his words, intending to ask that question.

But before the words could escape his lips, she softly murmured,

Emilia: "—lonely."

Subaru: "…huh?"

Failing to catch Emilia's whisper, Subaru furrowed his brows and asked her to repeat it.

He could see her beautiful, silver visage just by turning up his face. Staring into her eyes from a distance close enough to feel her breath, this time, Subaru would not miss a single word.

Meeting his gaze, Emilia continued,

Emilia: "I was so lonely, Subaru. —When you left me."

Subaru: "ah… no, it's… not like that. I was never going to abandon you…"

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "I thought I left you a letter… explaining there was something I had to do. So I couldn't be with you for a while. I'm sorry I had to leave your side and made you feel that way, and I even failed miserably at what I needed to do, and…"

Emilia: "Pff…huhu."

Resting under Emilia's gaze, Subaru frantically tried to explain himself. But before he could finish, as if she couldn't hold it in any longer, Emilia burst out laughing.

When he saw this, Subaru couldn't help but doubt his eyes.

They were in the middle of a conversation, and in such dire circumstances, why did Emilia burst out laughing?

What was so funny? Besides, Emilia was never the kind of girl to do this.

Emilia: “Even if you don’t try so hard to explain, I won’t get mad at you. Geez Subaru, even your face is turning green…pf-huhu.”

Subaru: “E-Emilia…?”

Emilia: “It’s alright, Subaru. You left a letter for me. After thinking really really reeaally hard, you wrote it for me. I felt so lonely, and I thought I was going to cry, but… I just read that letter over and over again.”

Weaving those adorable words with her lips, Emilia’s smile deepened.

Through that lovely, enchanting smile, her sweet whispers clutched at Subaru’s heart. Listening to her speak of how much she cherished his letter and how it became her support, Subaru felt his heart burning so hot that it was about to burst.

But, what kept his consciousness from being swept away by that soaring passion was the sickening premonition in his chest.

Something was wrong. Something was strange. The sense of foreboding that he had felt from the start had never left him.

What is it? Something wasn’t right. Even when Emilia was so adorable in this instant.

Even though Emilia was answering him so sweetly.

Subaru: “Emilia… how did the Trial go?”

Emilia: “The Trial…”

Subaru: “Yeah, the Trial. That’s why you came in here, right? I’m sorry you had to endure it alone. I want to apologize, but I also want to know what happened. Even if you failed, I won’t care, but the fact that you’re like this tells me…”

Emilia: “Failed. I failed, you know? It’s the first Trial, and I couldn’t overcome my past. I let you down and made you worry, I’m sorry.”

Subaru: “a…”

Subaru regretted allowing that groan to escape his throat.

To Emilia, that voice must have sounded like disappointment just now. In that case, it’d be no different than an immediate betrayal of his words, right after he assured her “I won’t mind”.

The thought overwhelmed him with remorse, when suddenly, he felt a soft, smooth touch against his head.

Emilia slid her fingers through Subaru’s short black hair, and gently stroked his head with her palm.

Unable to understand the meaning of her gesture, Subaru blinked as if in a daze. Emilia smiled as she saw his surprised expression, and a touch of red flushed onto her cheeks.

Emilia: “Subaru, you always want to touch my hair, right? So, I want to occasionally do it to you, too. Hehe, Subaru’s so vulnerable right now…”

Subaru: “Em…ilia…?”

Emilia: “If you really abandoned me, and left just like that, whatever would I do… over, and over, and over, that thought’s been circling in my mind. I was reaally, reaally afraid. And so, when I saw you come back to me, I was really happy.”

Although she had just told him that she failed her Trial, right now, the only thing reflected within Emilia’s eyes was Subaru. Her eyes were feverish, and wet, and fixed upon Subaru.

How Subaru had longed for the day when she would gaze at him this way.

And how he had yearned for her to call his name so warmly, and to look at him with such passionate, teary eyes.

Everything he had done up till now had been for a taste of the passion of this instant.

And that was why—

Emilia: “Subaru. Will you always stay with me? Always be with me? Because, as long as you are with me, I won’t need anything else—”

Subaru never imagined that when the day came for Emilia to sing him these words of blind affection, it would frighten him so.

3

Holding Subaru in her arms, Emilia went on with her loving whispers.

Emilia: “At first, when I heard that Subaru was gone, I felt reaally hurt. I was so scared. I wondered if it was because I couldn’t do anything right… and Subaru had grown tired of me. Whenever I thought that, I’d be so terrified, I couldn’t stop my body from shaking…”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “But then, I found your letter, and I knew it was Subaru’s words, and the fear went away. Subaru is so amazing. Even though a moment ago I was still afraid, you blew away that feeling in an instant… yeah, you’ve always helped me like this, Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “The contents of your letter made me really happy. You wrote a lot of things so that I wouldn’t worry. And it took me a reaally long time to read them. You took the time to write it for me, and all that time you were thinking about me, it made me so glad.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “In the letter, you told me you loved me a whole lot. When you said it in the dragon carriage, I was reeaally happy, so much so that I wanted to cry… and when I read it in the letter, I felt like I was really going to cry too. And then, I was thinking, I’ve received something so immense and precious… and I’ve only just realized it.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “So when I saw Subaru come back, I couldn’t help myself anymore. The little me in the deepest part of my heart was crying Subaru’s name. Then, I wanted to reach out, to touch you, and I couldn’t stop myself…”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Say, Subaru. Sorry for everything up to now. I’ve done a lot of cruel things to you. Even when I knew what you felt about me, I made you hold it all down. That was reaally cruel of me, I kind of realize that now.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “It must have hurt, to hold all those feelings inside. I must have been so selfish when you were trying so hard. Even though I wanted to think about you… to understand you, I couldn’t understand at all.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “But it’s different now. I’ve always been thinking about Subaru. You’re all I seem to think about. Just like how you…um, told me that you love me, and that you’re always thinking about me… now, maybe I… feel the same way about you too.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “I’m sorry. That was unfair just now. Even when you were scared and didn’t know what I thought, you still said it to me.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “So, I’ll… say it properly too. —I want to tell you that…”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “You know, Subaru. I… love you. I really, really love you. I keep thinking about you, I’m always thinking about you, and about how I always want to be with you.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Subaru, if you feel the same way about me… I’ll be really happy… you know.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Ehehe. Mn, mn…love you. Subaru… I really, really love you.”

Chapter 66:
Crimson Snowscape

1

Seeing Subaru come out of the Tomb alone, Garfiel's hostility spiked as if stabbing into his skin.

The cold was of a different level outside the Tomb.

Contrary to the somewhat insulated warmth inside, the extreme cold of the Sanctuary sucked all the stamina and warmth out of one's body in a matter of seconds.

An endless blizzard, and a blinding curtain of white. His exhaled breaths froze as they left his mouth, and the shivers driving into his core were almost unbearable.

Hugging his own shoulders, Subaru shuddered in front of Garfiel's glare.

And, clicking his exposed fangs, Garfiel's attention turned to the empty corridor behind Subaru,

Garfiel: "Doesn't look like anyone's behind ya, oy."

Subaru: "Yeah, she's not coming. Emilia is inside, sleeping right now."

Garfiel: "Sleepin'? Huh?"

Subaru: "She's exhausted. For two days straight, she's just been waking up to the Trials, over and over. It's worn her down, both body and soul. And she hasn't been eating. It's just like her… to force herself like this."

Again and again, forcing herself to challenge the Trials only to fail regardless, Subaru could imagine Emilia's frustration and disappointment.

Surely, it would be the same the sense of powerlessness that Subaru himself had felt on so many occasions.

Subaru: "…"

Deep inside the Tomb, in her reprieve from the Trials, Emilia was blissfully sleeping.

The memory of Emilia's body heat and of the warmth of their long embrace as she whispered her blind love into his ear at once sent Subaru's blood boiling with love and longing, and left him stricken with such regret that he wanted to die.

He remembered Emilia's flushed cheeks, her voice trembling with passion as she said all the words he had wanted to hear, and the entirety of her emotion tempting him to drown inside it.

Had a part of him considered just letting himself drown and sink into that tender depravity alongside Emilia? No one could possibly know.

After rejecting Emilia's temptations that would have brought even Gods to their knees, Subaru walked out of the Tomb.

Leaving Emilia as she slept, he had no intention of telling her about what was happening outside. And he was not about to bring her within reach of Garfiel's malice.

But, in contrast to Subaru's quiet determination, Garfiel's rage showed no signs of dissipating.

He kicked at the snow under his foot and clicked his bleach-white fangs,

Garfiel: "Y'didn't drag out th'Half-Witch. The snow doesn't look like it's stoppin'. Y'didn't bring any souvenirs and came back with nothin' but yer stinkin' mug. Th'fuck d'ya think yer doin', ah?"

Subaru: "—Emilia, she… told me she loves me."

Garfiel: "… … …Hah?"

Subaru's off-beat remark might've been too out of place here. For a moment, Garfiel looked as if he couldn't understand what he had just heard. But his face quickly darkened as he decided that he was being played with.

Garfiel: "Looks like the Half-Witch ain't th'only one who ain't seein' th'situation here, hah?! Take a look where we are, and yer still bullshittin' with me, oy?! Oyoy! AAH?!"

The heat of Garfiel's seething rage began evaporating the melted snow on his skin. And the sight of Garfiel's body swelling was no optical illusion, but the start of his transformation from human to giant tiger.

Subaru did not waver as he watched.

With the same expression as when he uttered his previous words, Subaru went on staring at him with the same dry gaze.

And repeated in front of the enraged Garfiel,

Subaru: "Emilia, said that she loves me, and that all she needs is me."

Garfiel: "—Y'fuckin'…"

Subaru: "With her adorable face, her clinging voice, her tingling movements, at a distance so close that I could melt, almost touching, within range of each other's breathing… that was what she told me."

Garfiel: "So fuckin' what?! It was already obvious when y'got here that Half-Witch's fuckin' glued to ya. If y'wanted congratulations for y'two gettin together, rippin y'two to shreds would fuckin' do it—"

Beastial growls began mixing with his curses as Garfiel's transformation accelerated with his wrath. Ready to pounce at any moment, Garfiel jabbed his words into Subaru.

—And that was the last straw.

Subaru: "…how could it be."

Garfiel: “Hah? Didn’t hear that, y’mind repeatin’…”

Subaru: “—How could Emilia possibly tell me that she loves me??!!”

Garfiel: “—Hic.”

Subaru turned up his face and screamed.

Even Garfiel fell mute in front of this flood of emotions. Glaring at the flinching Garfiel, bearing an expression of agony, Subaru allowed his heart to erupt.

The words they shared in the Tomb, the heat of their touch, and the certainty of their love—he threw them all away.

Was it painful? Of course it was painful. But, within those inseverable memories, there existed not the slightest radiance of genuine meaning.

How nice it would be, if Subaru could be foolish enough to be deceived by that counterfeit radiance.

But it was Natsuki Subaru’s misfortune to be incapable of being that foolish.

Subaru: “How could she say it. How could Emilia tell me that she loves me… cling to me, offer up everything to me, and tell me she needs nothing but me… that could never happen.”

Garfiel: “The fuck y’goin’ on about, oy?”

Subaru: “She would never lean on me this way, and tell me that her feelings for me are her everything. Never. —If Puck was here, there’s no way she could be so utterly engrossed with me…”

He couldn’t say how desperately he wished he could be placed first in Emilia’s heart.

But Subaru wasn’t so conceited as to believe that he was nearly enough to be worthy of that place in her heart, nor did he think so little of her.

The one Emilia relied on the most, the one she would cling to till the very, very end, would always be Puck.

Now that Puck would not appear before her, she was merely turning to Subaru as the secondary harbor of her reliance, nothing more.

Her confessions of love, the warmth of her fingertips, and her trembling breaths, Subaru didn't want to believe that they had all been lies.

He didn't want to—but he knew that they weren't real.

Lifting his head, Subaru glared into Garfiel.

Garfiel's anger seemed to have cooled, but this time, it was Subaru who bared his teeth,

Subaru: "Who was it that drove her into a corner until she had no choice but to depend on a worthless guy like me? Who made her think that she had to keep going… no matter how many times her heart had been broken, over and over! Who?!"

Garfiel: "That's all necessary, ain't it! That's a choice you fuckin' made yourself! Th'fuck're y'tryin' t'pin this on me… n' the others in th'Sanctuary, HAH?!"

Garfiel shot back at Subaru's charges.

But, listening to Garfiel's barked retort, Subaru only shook his head.

Who was it that drove Emilia into a corner?

He already knew the answer without having to ask.

Subaru: "There's no question whose fault it is… it's my fault."

Garfiel: "—Hah?!"

Subaru: "It's my fault. It's my fault that Emilia was driven into a corner. It's my fault, it's your fault, it's all of your faults."

Garfiel: "…Cut it with that bullshit. If she can't stand th'weight and caves, ain't that just her calibre?! If her heart's that weak and she goes settin' a goal that high, ain't that just her makin' a fuckin' fool of herself!"

Subaru: "Yeah. You're right. Emilia's too gentle, so she only ever takes the pressure head on. So she never unloads her burdens on anyone else, until she crumbles. —Even though that was what I was supposed to do."

Receiving Garfiel's rage, Subaru felt his heart growing cold just like the white snowscape around him.

"Even though that's what I have to do", he felt like clarifying.

Subaru: "Yeah. That's what I have to do. That's why I'm here… and even though I'm the one saying this, what was I doing…"

Garfiel: "Th'fuck're y'agreein' with yerself, oy. …No, nevermind. Just, nevermind. There's no end t'bullshittin' with ya. "Mordoba's thirst ain't never get quenched". If y'can't do it, then…"

Subaru: "You'll go in the Tomb and bring Emilia out yourself…? You think you can actually do it?"

Garfiel: "…Th'hell's that supposed to mean."

Garfiel muttered this quiet threat. Though it was meant to intimidate Subaru, it only served to confirm Subaru's baseless conjecture.

Subaru: "Garfiel, I already know you're an Apostle of Greed. I know that's the only way you can be granted command authority over the Ryuzu's."

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "So it's inevitable, that being an Apostle of Greed, you must've been inside the Tomb. …Or, more accurately, that you've taken the Trials."

Garfiel: "—You…"

Subaru: “You’ve challenged the Trials, haven’t you. Though I don’t know why you’re so insistent on keeping it a secret. Is it because the Sanctuary’s residents are forbidden to enter the Tomb? If not… then is it for Ryuzu, who entered the Tomb to save you?”

Garfiel: “—gh.”

Garfiel’s complexion turned.

After all, family was Garfiel’s sore spot. Watching his expression shift to a color of agony, Subaru continued weaving his conjectures as he spoke.

Subaru: “Frederica told me about how you went inside the Tomb. And I heard that Ryuzu went in as well.”

Garfiel: “That… fuckin’ snitch…! Just leavin’ ain’t enough for her, she had to pander to th’fuckers outside…tch.”

Subaru: “What, would it be so bad if a certain someone caught wind of this? Come to think of it, who was it that made this Contract with the residents, anyway? Was it the Witch Echidna who, created this Sanctuary? If so, then have the residents of the Sanctuary been upholding a Contract with the dead all this time?”

Garfiel: “Don’t y’fucking—!”

“—go any further”, Garfiel kicked into the ground, becoming one with the wind as he flew towards Subaru.

Aiming his claws that could shred through steel directly at Subaru’s face—

Subaru: “—The one making the snow fall is Roswaal.”

Garfiel: “…”

Hearing Subaru strike the core of the matter, Garfiel’s claw stopped just inches from his face.

Watching a look of stupefaction rising onto Garfiel’s expression, Subaru nodded.

Subaru: “It’s not Emilia. Without Puck here, Emilia couldn’t do this by herself. Even if, on the million to one chance, that Emilia was the one who caused this, there’s no way that girl could hide it from me so flawlessly.”

Garfiel: “That’s… just yer wishful thinkin’…”

Subaru: “You’re right, but I can only believe. That girl, even if she’s completely abandoned herself, she’s not the kind of girl who’d throw a tantrum and hurt everyone around her… I just believe that.”

It may be a suspect he had arrived at through the process of elimination.

But it was certainly not a baseless accusation.

Subaru: “The one binding you all to the Sanctuary… is Roswaal, isn’t it?”

Garfiel: “Y’heard that from Frederica too?”

Subaru: “Of course not… it was just me sorting out all the information and evidence, and having enough prejudice and bad impressions about that guy to not balk at making false accusations. —But looks like I was right.”

Garfiel: “…”

As Garfiel fell silent, Subaru exhaled a white sigh.

—It was just the exhaustion of finding out that the person he suspected of being the mastermind was really the mastermind. But, even if he knew that Roswaal was the one conspiring behind the scenes, he still didn’t know why he would oversee a Contract that was trapping the Sanctuary’s residents here, and why he would be tormenting them with this snow. No matter how much Subaru thought, he couldn’t find a plausible answer.

In that case,

Subaru: “Guess we’ll just take a few shots at that smug face of his.”

Listening to Subaru mutter this full with resolve, Garfiel dropped his arms.

And Subaru could tell that Garfiel's face was painted with the same emotions as his own.

2

Roswaal: "—We~~ll now, you two ce~~rtainly look a~~ngry."

Laying on the bed in his allotted residence, Roswaal greeted Subaru and Garfiel with these words, cheerfully smiling in his usual clown makeup.

Subaru: "Yeah. I'm super pissed right now. And this one over here wants to jump on you this minute, you know? So you might wanna be careful what you say."

Standing there blocking the doorway, Subaru spread out his arms and nudged his chin at the person beside him. On the other end of his gesture was Garfiel, who was quietly growling.

The sound of his bestial breathing was proof that he was using the last of his rationality to maintain his human form. Although they were indoors, the coldness had penetrated the masonry of the walls and passed inside. Both Subaru and Roswaal were breathing white, while only Garfiel's were bordering on red from the sheer heat of his breaths.

Roswaal: "This is an i~~nteresting pairing, no? I was sure I remember Garfiel saying something about ri~~pping Subaru in two when he comes back?"

Garfiel: "Things've changed a bit. I'll have to put off decidin' who t'crush into paste till I figure out what's true or not."

Subaru: "Don't say such scary things so naturally. Roswaal too, you shouldn't accept that kind of scary statement like it's normal, you know."

Subaru's exchange with Garfiel as he left the Sanctuary for the Mansion had left him with a deep sense of self-loathing. Unable to forget that humiliation, Garfiel's resentment towards Roswaal and Emilia wasn't too difficult to understand.

Seeing Subaru furrow his brows, Roswaal shook his head with "No~ no~~o", as he turned his single yellow eye between Subaru and Garfiel,

Roswaal: "I was simply telling it as it i~~s, Subaru."

Subaru: "Sounds like I'm pretty despised. I'm hurt, Ros-chi. Weren't you gonna do anything even if Garfiel ate me up?"

Roswaal: "A~aya aya, now isn't that too hard on yourself? If Subaru went head to head with Garfiel, I'm not so sure that Garfiel would come out on to~~p?"

Subaru: "You think I have a chance? If you heard my combat record you'd be shaking in your boots, you know."

Ever since being summoned to this Parallel World, Subaru had just been constantly taking damage, with barely a single combat victory to his name.

He did manage to beat up the weird trio in the alley, kill a few Wolgarms, and finish off the dying Petelgeuse, but that was about it.

Subaru: "Actually, that's a lot better than I thought… but if I'm pitted against a pissed-off Garfiel, I won't last two seconds before I get turned into meat cubes. I can at least see that much."

Roswaal: "I wonder. Perhaps, under the right conditions, you could put up a good fi~~ght, I think."

Narrowing his eye, Roswaal looked Subaru up and down as he spoke. Unfortunately, no matter how Subaru tried to reflect on those words, he just couldn't seem to agree.

Subaru shrugged and decided to set Roswaal's statements aside for now, while almost simultaneously beside him, Garfiel stomped down his foot, shattering the floorboard beneath it.

Garfiel: “None’a that crap matters right now! Ain’t there somethin’ more important here, hah?! Are y’two assholes asleep?”

Leaving a deep footprint in the center of the floor, Garfiel bared his fangs and shouted at Subaru and Roswaal.

He didn’t seem too fond of their little sparring match before moving into the main topic. But then again, it didn’t suit Subaru too well either.

Following Garfiel’s prompt, Subaru gave a single nod, and,

Subaru: “You’re the one making it snow outside, aren’t you, Roswaal.”

He cut straight to the chase.

Roswaal: “…”

Hearing Subaru’s question, Roswaal closed his mouth.

Subaru followed suit, and quietly waited for Roswaal’s answer. Silence descended on the room, as the only sounds audible were the howls of the freezing wind outside the window, the rhythmic ticking of the clock hand, and the clicks of Garfiel’s gritting teeth.

Roswaal: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Roswaal: “—Did you hear that from me?”

Subaru: “…”

What kind of question was that?

Subaru had run multiple simulations in his head about what Roswaal’s response might be.

Perhaps a boldfaced laugh like “Aha, you got me”, or a pathetic “Wh-What a ludicrous… proof, where’s your proof!”. Most likely, it would have been an evasive “I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re ta~~lking about”, or something along those lines.

But Roswaal’s reply was completely different from anything Subaru had imagined.

Subaru: “What? We just got here, how are you supposed to have told us? You sure you’re not confused?”

Roswaal: “Hm~ mm…is that so. Is that so. I~~s that so. … Unfortunate.”

Despite chewing over the meaning of his words, Subaru only looked at Roswaal with an expression of non-understanding. After leaving him those words, Roswaal cast down his gaze, and let out a feeble sigh.

The side of his pallid face seemed even more devoid of strength than usual. And Subaru could see that it was not a result of his injuries, but a reflection of the state of his heart.

Roswaal: “—I~~n that case. I misspoke, I misspoke. I said something strange just now.”

Lifting his face again, Roswaal revealed a faint smile as if taking back what he had just said.

Somehow, Subaru just felt like there was something off about that red-painted smile.

But, paying no heed to Roswaal’s subtle change, Garfiel stepped forward,

Garfiel: “Y’ain’t denyin’ it, oy?”

Roswaal: “Don’t you think that if I throw up a bunch of excuses when I’m already under suspicion, it’ll just sound like I’m lying? But on the other hand, my u~~sual behavior hasn’t earned me any trust from you two ei~~ther.”

Garfiel: “So y’fuckin’ noticed? Then y’can probably guess what I’m about t’do next…yeah?!”

Exhaling a sharp breath, Garfiel instantly erased their distance from several steps to zero.

Approaching the foot of the bed, Garfiel reached out his hand to grasp Roswaal by the throat. The split-second movement happened so fast that Subaru didn't even have the time to call out to stop him.

But,

Garfiel: "—You."

???: "I will not permit such insolence in front of Master Roswaal, Garf."

Flying out of the adjacent room, Ram caught Garfiel by his torso and the wrist of his reaching hand.

With his right arm restrained to his chest, Garfiel leered at Ram with a growl.

Subaru was surprised that he hadn't noticed Ram's presence in the house until now, but, with a sigh of relief, he was at least grateful that she had managed to avert needless bloodshed.

Then—

Roswaal: "Ram. You really are an excellent servant."

Ram: "Yes, Master Roswaal—"

Subaru couldn't find anything strange about their exchange.

Ram had placed herself in harm's way to protect her master, and Roswaal praised her. There should be nothing wrong about this. Ram was simply carrying out her duty.

So where was the problem? Subaru looked up, furrowing his brows, wondering.

Standing near the door, Subaru could see Garfiel's back in front of his eyes, and Ram's delicate figure opposite him. Beyond them, was the bed which Roswaal had taken for his recuperation, but,

—Since when was Roswaal standing?

Subaru: "…"

It must have happened in an instant.

In the time it took Subaru to blink, Roswaal had stood up from his bed, and walked up to the standoff between Ram and Garfiel.

And,

Subaru: "…"

What the hell is that?

Protruding out of Garfiel's back was what looked like a human arm.

Penetrating from the front of his chest to the center of his back, it had five writhing fingers, and Subaru was certain that it was someone's right arm.

Garfiel: "Hhg, bh…h."

Before his eyes, Garfiel's body violently convulsed.

Little by little, crimson blood stained into the back of his jacket as his legs dangled from his torso. With nothing to support his body, Garfiel dropped to his knees as the arm disappeared into his back.

And, having lost its plug, mass volumes of blood instantly spouted from the hole.

Garfiel: "—Hh."

Garfiel collapsed to the floor. Looking down at him, were Ram and Roswaal.

And sticking out of Ram's chest, was,

Ram: "ros…"

Roswaal: "You truly were an excellent servant."

Ram tried to call his name in a feeble voice, but Roswaal gently interrupted her.

He tenderly stroke his left hand on Ram's peach-colored hair, while Ram seemed to accept it with a soft blush on her intoxicated expression.

—From the corner of her smile, a belated trail of fresh blood leaked out.

But of course.

Since her chest had been pierced through from behind.

The arm was drawn out.

And Ram's delicate body, unable to withstand even the slightest force, fell forwards onto the floor.

But what caught her was the profusely bleeding Garfiel.

He took the collapsing Ram into his arms, and lifted her upright,

Garfiel: "Gh…Ros…ch. r, am…Ram, Ram, Ram, RAM RAM RAM RAM RAM!!"

The instant of hatred dominating his heart was drowned to nothing by the sight of the one he loved.

Again and again, Garfiel screamed the name of the girl in his arms, roaring blood as he emitted pale-blue light from his hands.

Subaru knew that vivid glow was from the channelling of healing magic.

While it wasn't Garfiel's specialization, he was still capable of casting it.

Right now, despite the fatal wound through his chest, Garfiel was pouring his everything into healing Ram in his arms.

As he did so, with each beating of his heart, his body pulsed and transformed.

Fur covered over his exposed skin, his fangs began to grow, and his pupils instantly narrowed into slits. His muscles swelled by magnitudes, as his clothes burst apart from the overwhelming mass of his body.

He was transforming into that mindless tiger, and his bestial instinct to protect his body was furiously clashing with the rational human desire to save the life of the one he loved.

But,

Garfiel: “…”

Roswaal: “It would be troublesome if you were allowed to morph.”

Slightly tilting his head, with these words Roswaal kicked his leg towards Garfiel.

His long, sweeping leg became wind, and smashed directly into Garfiel’s skull—with the sound of an eggshell cracking, like some slapstick prop, Garfiel’s head exploded into a spray of red.

Garfiel’s body lost everything from the neck up. Blood spouted like a fountain from the severed stump of his neck, filling the room with its bloody stench as his corpse fell on top of Ram.

Underneath, the faint smile on Ram’s expression remained unchanged.

Garfiel’s healing magic had no effect. Ram’s pulse had already ceased the moment Roswaal pulled his arm from the cavity of her destroyed heart.

Garfiel had simply failed to notice it as he wrenched out his lifeforce to save her.

Roswaal: “E~~ven I have trouble casting magic while sustaining a weather-interference spell of this magnitude. —For a court wizard, it really is an unsightly display.”

Roughly scraping his blood-drenched leg on the nearby bed sheet, having murdered Ram and Garfiel with his bare hands, Roswaal turned to the immobilized Subaru.

And, with a tone and bearing completely unchanged from usual, he spoke.

Roswaal: “Now—shall we begin our talk? Natsuki Subaru.”

Chapter 67:
Warlock

“Incomprehensible” was the only feedback Subaru’s mind could muster as he watched the scene unravel before his eyes.

Ram lay in a pool of blood, and, on top of her, was Garfiel’s decapitated body. Standing beside their overlapping corpses, the one who had accomplished this with his bare hands, Roswaal, was wiping blood off of the hems of his garment.

Having witnessed this horrifying feat, for a moment, Subaru couldn’t believe that it was Roswaal who did this.

Roswaal L. Mathers was the representative Court Wizard of the Kingdom of Lugnica, one who could control extreme-tier magic at will, and possessed combat power akin to a siege engine, or so Subaru was told.

It was what he had heard. And precisely because he heard this, Subaru never imagined that Roswaal could deal such destructive power without the use of his magic.

Roswaal: ““Mages are weak in close-quarters combat” is such a pre~~judiced notion. Anyone who’s ever taken up arms against me had that naturally stuck in their heads. …As to what happened to those thick-headed fools, it’s as you can clearly se~~e.”

Subaru unwittingly swallowed his breath at Roswaal’s perfect reading of his unvoiced thoughts.

While Roswaal traced his finger over the specks of blood that had spattered onto his face, painting over his blue eyeliner with a shade of rouge as he smiled. —Demonic, in the truest sense of the word.

Subaru: “Wh, y…”

Roswaal: “Mm~~mm?”

Subaru: “Why did you kill them… kill Ram? Garfiel was… killing Garfiel was… necessary… but…”

Roswaal: “If we were to talk alone, Garfiel would’ve go~~tten in the way. As for Ram, I admit that what I’ve done was inexcusable. But I am not so strong as to be able to fight Garfiel he~~ad on. I was only able to kill him by catching him off guard just now.”

Even though “Catching him off guard” meant piercing Ram along with Garfiel.

Somehow, as he listened to Roswaal’s casual explanation of why he killed them, Subaru’s emotions shed away their rage, and his mind returned to its usual calm.

It was a ludicrous answer to a ludicrous situation. And if Subaru allowed himself to be played in the palm of his hands, giving in to his passion would only be giving Roswaal what he wanted.

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “Hm~~mm, that’s unexpe~~cted. And here I thought you’d be angry at what I said?”

Subaru: “Well, the anger’s done a whole loop around and went back to where it started. …Not saying I’m not angry, though. Naturally I am. Naturally.”

Roswaal: “I~~s that right. While that is an admirable attitude, the young Natsuki Subaru I know would be howling, mad with rage right now, if it were natural. Do~~n’t you think, Natsuki Subaru?”

Roswaal’s single yellow pupil locked onto Subaru’s eyes.

One would often find Roswaal closing one eye and peering his gleaming yellow pupil into his targets, just like now.

And the mere thought of finding himself reflected in that blazing, yellow eye unsettled him to no end.

Subaru: “I realize how stupid I was before, but that doesn’t mean I’ll never grow up. This isn’t a situation that could be fixed by throwing a tantrum, I know that much at least…”

Roswaal: “No~~no, that’s not what I me~~ant, Subaru. Subaru. Natsuki Subaru-ku~~n.”

Roswaal stroked his unbloodied left hand through his navy blue hair as he prodded Subaru with that infuriating address.

But even as the repugnant intonation drove an indescribable sensation into his chest, Subaru did not back down. Instead, he took a step forward, glaring into the clown’s face.

Subaru: “What are you trying to say?”

Roswaal: “What am I trying to say… if that’s what you’re asking, then this is how I’ll answer: —Congratulations, and welcome. I’ve been waiting. For you to finally stand here before me.”

Subaru felt a chill like damp fingertips creeping down his spine.

In front of him, true to his word, Roswaal watched him with a look of sheer delight. That attitude, that delight, all gave Subaru an incomprehensible sense of disgust.

Roswaal didn’t appear sarcastic at all, but seemed genuinely overjoyed for Subaru. The only problem was the inexplicable nature of his elation and of his words.

Subaru: “You’ve been waiting… for me to stand here?”

Roswaal: “Not in this particular spot in this particular room. Tha~~t would be too literal of an interpreta~~tion. I’m sure you can understand how that is not what I meant. After all, you are the only one who should be capable of understa~~nding.”

Subaru: “I’m the only one… who could understand?”

Little by little, it was as though the pieces were falling into place. Slowly but surely, though hesitating as he linked them, the final picture began to take shape.

The moment he grasped its meaning, “No way”, the thought pierced through his mind.

Roswaal: “Do~~ you understa~~nd, Subaru? Why is it that, when you’ve just witnessed two deaths before your eyes, you could remain so calm and keep yourself from falling into uncontrollable rage? …In fact, I’m sure you kno~~w why.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “Their deaths didn’t hit you with any great impact. You were shocked to see them die. There might’ve even been some indigna~~tion. But, you felt no grief. And that is why you could not turn your anger against me, or stri~~ke me with your fists.”

Listening to Roswaal reading him like a book, Subaru opened his mouth to object, but closed it again, unable to say a thing.

“What would you know?!” “You think I don’t care about their deaths?!” “How could you murder Ram and Garfiel, you monster!”

Countless rebukes came to mind.

In truth, the impulse to let his emotions explode had surged up many times inside him, each threatening to fly out of his throat, only to dissipate and fade to nothing.

He was enraged. He was shocked. He was in grief, or at least he should be.

But even so, Subaru had no words to refute Roswaal, because—

Roswaal: “—Because it can all be recovered. Isn’t that what’s going through your mi~~nd?”

Subaru: “What d…you.”

An involuntary shiver froze up his throat, gripping his heart.

Without resorting to metaphors, he really felt the illusion of something clutching at his heart, so great was the shock.

Lifting his head, Subaru instinctively looked around the room, dreading that the black hand might appear to punish his trespass. This would be his first punishment since rejecting the Witch of Envy. What horror would that shadow bring at its return? Just the thought of it strangled his heart with such twisting pain that it felt like it might break.

But,

Subaru: "…it, didn't come."

Roswaal: "I wouldn't know what you're so wary of, but… Aa~~ah, I'm sure it must have something to do with your co~~ntract? I~~ see. That would explain the peculiarities of your words and actions up to now. I think I understand."

Subaru: "Understand… no, before that…!"

Watching Roswaal hold his chin as he nodded, Subaru's face turned pale as his lips trembled.

Roswaal's statement just now had no doubt struck upon Subaru's core, and the fact that it struck meant that—

Subaru: "You… kno… know about me…?!"

Roswaal: "As far as it does not deviate from what is written, yes. —You possess the power to start over. I~~sn't that right?"

Without a shadow of a doubt, Roswaal confessed his knowledge of Return by Death.

Subaru swallowed his breath and immediately noticed the danger of the situation.

The conditions were now exactly the same as at Echidna's tea party.

If he allowed Roswaal to continue talking about Return by Death like this, the disaster where the Sanctuary was engulfed by shadows would only be repeated.

In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if the Witch snatched him this very instant.

Drawing the breath into his stomach and releasing it in a deep exhale, Subaru confirmed that time hadn't stopped.

That is to say, the Witch hadn't grasped his heart as punishment. This ruled out the possibility which, as unbearable as it may be, would also have been the safest.

While the other possibility —

Roswaal: "…"Silence is as good as proven admission", I wonder whoever sai~~d that."

Plunging his thoughts into risk aversion, Subaru forced his mind to turn at an incredible speed, but Roswaal, apparently growing tired of waiting, interrupted with those words.

This confession just now must have held some rather large significance to Roswaal as well.

Seeing Subaru ignore him without saying a word, Roswaal furrowed his brows in a rare sign of displeasure.

Roswaal: "We~~ll, the fact that you're not de~~nying it as some absurd assertion does say a lot about your ho~~nesty."

Subaru: "I—"

Roswaal: "Oo~~ho, that's fine. It is one thing for me say it, but there could be some unpleasant consequences if you were to confirm it. That was why you were never able to say it out loud, i~~sn't it? Although…"

Stopping Subaru at the first syllable, Roswaal continued until his voice abruptly trailed off.

Seeing Subaru biting his lip, Roswaal cast him a glance with a revolting smile,

Roswaal: "Perhaps, you were also afraid of what they'd think of you if you to~~ld them?"

Subaru: "—gh."

Roswaal: “It is only na~~tural. A~~fter all, the power to rewind the world is an outrageous and te~~rrifying thing. Time-Interference is the absolute pinnacle of the pinnacle of Dark Magic. Even Beatrice, exhausting all her strength, could only bring it to a stall. But to reverse it would surely be a dream upon a dre~~am.”

Unable to refute a thing as he listened to Roswaal read into his genuine repressed fears, Subaru’s face stiffened as he suddenly heard Beatrice’s name.

With Elsa’s blade plunged into her back, the final expression on her face as she vanished from existence was still vivid in his mind.

Roswaal: “—Judging from your reaction, it would se~~em that Beatrice had fulfilled her ro~~le…”

Subaru: “Her role… what would you… but, yes.”

As the conversation moved away from Return by Death, Subaru took the opportunity to rein in his unsettled thoughts and redirected his attention to take a bite out of Roswaal’s unruffled face.

Did this man even know about Beatrice’s lonely cries?

Subaru: “You knew how she’s been suffering… didn’t you? Bound to that Mansion, clinging to a promise made in some ancient Contract… letting herself be worn to the core, huddling in a corner, you knew all of this, didn’t you?!”

Roswaal: “O~~f course I knew. Beatrice and I have kno~~wn each other for a very long time. Since I was born, in fact. There is a loneliness in her heart, I’ve al~~ways known this.”

Subaru: “Then…!”

Roswaal: “Why didn’t I do anything about it? I~~ would rather you did not say that. There is no one who can relieve her of her sadness other than herself, I’m sure you understa~~nd this?”

Just as Subaru was on the verge of screaming, he was struck down by Roswaal’s irrefutable reasoning.

Subaru could have screamed out his accusations at Roswaal just so he could hear a fragment of Beatrice's sorrow. Although he could have, the fact was that it would've been meaningless.

Beatrice was already dead, and no one could heal her of the sadness of her heart.

Only Subaru, who possessed the means to rewind the world, could be there in her final moments as many times as it would take. But how was he supposed to heal four hundred years of sorrow?

Four hundred years—not even Subaru could reach back that far.

Watching Subaru fall silent, Roswaal slightly shook his head.

Then, he said,

Roswaal: "How I e~~nvy her."

Subaru: "—Envy, her?"

Subaru repeated, pressing his voice low. But, paying it no mind, "Yes…", Roswaal went on, nodding,

Roswaal: "How enviable it is. Beatrice fulfilled her long-cherished wish, and disappeared. The fact that you are here means exa~~ctly that, no?"

Subaru: "Cherished… wish? She… died… like that… and you're telling me that's her long-cherished wish?! Are you seriously saying that?!"

Roswaal: "It was nothing more than what Beatrice desi~~red, no? What right would we have to criticize what someone else holds dear? Neither you, no~~r I, have the right to sully Beatrice's death."

Sensible words, and impeccable logic. It was true, that they had no right.

Subaru and Beatrice may as well have been strangers. He had never understood her wish, and he never even once considered fulfilling it.

But, even so, was that really what Beatrice wanted?

—If it was, then why did she protect Subaru at the very end?

Roswaal: “Beatrice’s long-cherished wish had been fulfilled. For that, I truly envy her. —Since it seems that I would no longer be a~~ble to fulfill mine.”

Subaru: “…”

There was something strange about the way he phrased it.

Subaru couldn’t tell where, or why.

But it was certainly there.

Subaru: “And what is… your wish…?”

Roswaal: “I cannot say. My Contract forbids me from revealing it, and that is as mu~~ch as I can say. What I have told you is already pushing the limit of what I can compromise with the Contract. Bu~~t, I can tell you this.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “To see that my wish is fulfilled, I have always, always, always, always devoted my utmost. Not a single action I have taken was without purpose, and not a si~~ngle one do I regret.”

Roswaal shamelessly declared without the slightest hint of remorse.

Stunned by his audacity, a black rage began boiling in Subaru’s chest.

It was a begrudging rage that was the cumulation of all the severed emotions that had built up inside him. But, although it was there, he did not lose himself in it.

Subaru: “Necessary…? Killing Ram and Garfiel, burying the Sanctuary in snow, everything… you’re saying that it was necessary…?”

Roswaal: “Hmm, as for the former… no, that would put a damper on this conversa~~tion. But as for the latter, yes, would be my a~~nswer.”

Subaru: “For what??!!”

Baring his teeth, Subaru swung his arms, shouting.

Subaru: “Why the hell are you doing this?! Making snow fall on the Sanctuary, tormenting the residents like it’s some sick joke… what’re you trying to accomplish?! What’s the point in doing that?! Why don’t you come out and say it! Roswaal!!”

Roswaal: “That too, was necessary. —To isolate Lady Emilia.”

Subaru: “—Wh…at?”

Roswaal: “I will say it again. Snow falls and the residents suffer. Lady Emilia is isolated, and descends into an unsettled state of mind. Isn’t that what happened?”

Roswaal spoke as if he had seen it himself. Indeed, Emilia’s condition inside the Tomb was exactly as Roswaal envisioned. But Subaru had no intention of admitting this.

More importantly, Roswaal’s statement just now was by far the most senseless thing Subaru had heard to date.

Roswaal: “The Sanctuary is a land closely tied with the Witch, and Lady Emilia is taking the Trials to liberate it. A~~t such a time, if a natural disaster were to befall the Sanctuary… just what would people think of Lady Emilia?”

Subaru: “What…”

Roswaal: “Here is where the impulsive Garfiel comes into play. He, if anyone, would be the first to doubt Lady Emilia, and to loudly proclaim it. With the volume of his voice, anyone would begin to think the same. —That Lady Emilia was the cause of this disaster.”

Roswaal's analysis was spot on, and Garfiel had just been dancing in the palms of his hands. From the moment Subaru returned to the Sanctuary, it was already clear that Garfiel was convinced that Emilia had caused the blizzard.

Even though there was someone else who could have done it, this land, and this world, chose to direct all of its hostility towards Emilia.

All thanks to the demon named prejudice that had tormented Emilia from the start.

Roswaal: "And what happens once Lady Emilia is isolated? Despite appearances, Lady Emilia is actually a terribly weak person. It'd be no wonder if she wished to entrust everything to a person who would be willing to give her approval. And if that person could support her with their entire heart and soul, then I would be satisfied."

Subaru: "Wait…wait…wait wait wait wait wai…t."

Subaru held out his arms, calling for Roswaal to stop.

He got a feeling that he had heard something outrageous just now.

Like he had just been told some absurd, impossible fact.

Like something he mustn't hear was—

Roswaal: "You cannot turn yourself away if Lady Emilia relies on you. Of course not, since you love her. If your beloved Lady Emilia were to entrust everything to you, there is no way you could push her aside."

Subaru: "That—"

Would never happen.

At least it shouldn't.

But the fact was that, in this very loop, Subaru had managed to keep himself from drowning within Emilia's clinging embrace. He had withstood it, and left her to come here.

It wasn’t that he rejected the temptation of Emilia’s loving whispers.

But it was because he knew that she didn’t truly mean it, and that her fallen engrossment was only—

Roswaal: ““That wasn’t the case this time.” Is that how you wanted to answer? I can only say that is unfortunate. I suppose you just have a few too many superfluous things about you right now.”

Roswaal took a single, silent step towards the confounded Subaru.

Hearing the sound of a splash from his foot stepping into the pool of blood, Subaru’s body inadvertently froze.

A groan escaped his throat,

Subaru: “Are you, going to kill me—?”

Roswaal: “Kill you, now tha~~t would be a rather vi~~olent idea. I would be quite troubled if you died. Since, one way or another, I will need you to rewind the wo~~rld.”

Subaru: “Hh—?”

For a moment, Roswaal’s words as he approached stunned Subaru into silence.

But he immediately noticed the discrepancy in his understanding.

Roswaal knew that Subaru could “Rewind” time, but he didn’t know that it was through “Return by Death” with “Death” acting as the trigger.

Thus, his intention was to corner Subaru so that he would willingly choose to “Rewind”. Although, that would likely involve far more agony than if he was instantly killed.

If Roswaal had no intention of killing Subaru, then there was still a chance.

Subaru: "—Everyone! Inside now!!"

Raising his hand, Subaru shouted his command.

The instant Roswaal furrowed his brows, the room's doors and windows, as well as those of the adjacent living room, simultaneously shattered. And flying in alongside the frigid wind, were small, scrawny shadows, numbering twenty in all—each of them a little girl with light-pink hair.

Seeing the assembly of identical girls lined up in a row, Roswaal turned his single eye towards Subaru,

Roswaal: "And here I thought the command authority was transferred back to Garfiel?"

Subaru: "We were venturing into the maybe-mastermind's den, after all. —Of course we had to stack our hands first."

—The exchange took place after his argument with Garfiel outside the Tomb.

After persuading Garfiel to go on ahead, Subaru went to the crystal room and transferred the command authority back to himself.

Then, he ordered the Ryuzu replicants to surround the building where Roswaal was recuperating and to prepare to break inside in case of emergency.

Rem, who had temporarily been Garfiel's hostage, was entrusted to the current representative Ryuzu-personality, who brought her to the Cathedral, where the rest of the residents and Earlham villagers had taken refuge.

He had taken all these measures on the assumption that Roswaal was the culprit.

—Although, naturally, Subaru never anticipated that Roswaal would kill Garfiel and Ram.

Roswaal: "So, what do you wish to do, now that you ha~~ve me surrounded?"

Subaru: “The fact that you’re that strong with your bare hands was a surprise, but you’re outnumbered. If a single beastified Garfiel could give you trouble, you’ll probably have a hard time when you’re swarmed…”

The reason Roswaal skewered Ram along with Garfiel was because he wasn’t confident facing Garfiel in direct combat. And although there was no question that Roswaal was infinitely stronger than Subaru—

Subaru: “Twenty of them should be about enough to overwhelm you. We’ll beat you up, pin you down, and make sure you spit out everything that you’re still hiding.”

Roswaal: “You should know how important it is to uphold the terms of one’s Contract, being bound by si~~milar ones yourself?”

Subaru: “Too bad, mine was kinda one-sided forced on me without me having any say in the matter and just punishes me whenever I violate it. This time it hasn’t come though, so I’m still in the safe-line!”

With over twenty people crammed inside, the small house was packed to the brim.

Obeying Subaru’s signal, the emotionless Ryuzu replicants surged towards Roswaal as a sea of faces.

Meeting their charge with his bare hands, Roswaal could only handle two at a time.

His manipulation of the weather outside had become his own downfall. Deprived of the use of his magic, Roswaal would only be swarmed by sheer numbers.

Subaru figured that while it would be close, victory was assured.

However,

Roswaal: “—I may be outnumbered.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “But when your opponent is a mage, trying to overpower him with sheer numbers is just an overly fo~~olish decision.”

At the fall of his voice, an infernal flame swept through the room, and every Ryuzu Meyer replicant caught in its path was scorched to their core.

In the matter of an instant, their small, charging bodies were incinerated from head to toe by the wall of flames, reduced to ash and to the mana from whence they came.

All this, in Subaru’s eyes, was nothing more than a momentary wave of heat and light that had flashed across the room.

Subaru: “How’re you… still using magic…?”

Roswaal: “I wouldn’t have been able to if I was still controlling the weather. Unfo~~rtunately, I have already lost any reason to sustain this snowfall. So it’s been a while since I’ve stopped. Sorry, I suppose I should’ve told you ea~~rlier.”

Subaru: “Wh—gh, kha.”

In Subaru’s moment of confusion, Roswaal flashed forward and took him by the throat. He didn’t know where those slender wrists had gotten that kind of strength, but he felt his legs leaving the ground as Roswaal lifted him writhing into the air.

Subaru: “Kgh—!”

Crashing backwards through a half-shattered windowpane and out of the building, Subaru landed in the snow, rolling until he was stopped by a wall.

Spitting out the mixture of mud and snow in his mouth, he lifted up his face.

The remaining Ryuzu replicants quietly followed Roswaal out of the building. Since they were given no further orders, they appeared at a loss as to what to do.

But Subaru was just as lost as to what to tell them.

Roswaal: “Even after all this, you still wouldn’t rewi~~nd… O~~r, perhaps you already have? Come to think of it, what happens to my consciousness when the world has rewound is still a complete mystery to me. Now, this is qu~~ite the predicament.”

Walking over to Subaru’s side, Roswaal tilted his head.

Looking up at the clown’s face amidst the suffocating pain, an abrupt question escaped Subaru’s lips.

Subaru: “ros… waal… you keep on asking me to rewind over and over, but…”

Roswaal: “Mm? You have something impo~~rtant to say? Let’s hear it, let’s hear it.”

Subaru: “You’re the one I’ve got a problem with here. Doing all this on the assumption that someone else has the ability to rewind the world… you must be out of your mind… unless, you actually have…”

A way to carry over your memories?

Could Roswaal also have the ability to read the memories of the previous worlds, just like Echidna in her Dream Citadel?

If not, then his blind desire to reset the world would just be far too incomprehensible.

Subaru: “If not… that’s fine. But, if you do… perhaps you and I… could…”

Collaborate, maybe.

Roswaal’s goals were mysterious and unknown, and he had done many unforgivable things.

Subaru would never forgive him for the murder of Ram and Garfiel or the way he had cornered Emilia. But Subaru was in no position to discard Roswaal’s strength out of emotion. In fact, he needed it badly.

If you're going to eat poison—or however that saying goes, assuming it applies here, Subaru was also prepared to lick the plate.

Roswaal: "—It seems, that is no~~t to be."

But Subaru's thin sliver of hope was severed by a shake of Roswaal's head.

Roswaal turned away from Subaru's downcast eyes, and pointed towards the end of his gaze,

Roswaal: "Goa."

A small flame rose up, setting the corner of the forest where Roswaal was looking at alight.

Subaru blinked at the abrupt act of destruction, when he heard, amidst the noise of crackling wood, yet another sound.

—It was the sound of a small, small animal dying.

Subaru: "—No, way."

Roswaal: "I~~ see. …So this is how the end comes."

Springing to his feet, Subaru's face paled as he scanned his surroundings. Simultaneously, Roswaal shifted his posture, and with several crisp snaps of his fingers, the scent of burning flesh and shrill, ear-splitting cries coursed throughout the Sanctuary.

Then, when a charred corpse landed in front of his eyes with a thud, Subaru clearly understood.

Subaru: "great… rabbit…!!"

It was one of the Great Rabbits.

As they began slowly trickling out of the forest, Roswaal burned them one by one with his magic. And even as they came in droves, they remained Roswaal's prey.

No matter how great their numbers grew, they could gain no ground against Roswaal. Witnessing this, a terror gripped Subaru's heart and would not let go.

Every time he closed his eyes, the memory of being eaten by razor sharp teeth would be revived.

The sense of loss, the experience of having his fingers, body, and organs ripped to shreds was beyond description.

Subaru could hear his very soul shrieking at the sight of the witchbeasts' approach.

Subaru: "But this is only the fifth day… there should still be half a day left!"

Roswaal: "It's the snow."

Subaru: "Snow—?!"

Roswaal: "Where there is magic powerful enough to manipulate the weather, naturally, the atmosphere would be oversaturated with mana. Not to mention that everyone in the Sanctuary has gathered inside the Cathedral thanks to the snow. For a nearby Mabeast, this is an all too enticing fe~~eding ground."

"Then…", Subaru shuddered at Roswaal's quiet observation.

Following his logic, the single most dangerous place in the Sanctuary during the Great Rabbits' attack would be—

Subaru: "Th-The Cathedral! We have to hurry to the Cathedral…!"

Roswaal: "It's too late. The moment they came for the few of us here, it meant that the prey-less masses were already on the move. —There is no~~ one left."

Subaru: "But! That's where…!"

Rem is.

Having entrusted her to Ryuzu, that was where Rem was taken. Alongside the Sanctuary's residents and the refugees from Earlham village, there would be over a hundred people in the Cathedral.

With everyone gathered there, he didn't even want to think about it.

Subaru: "Roswaal! Truce! Anyway, let's get to the Cathedral! We'll collect the survivors, just get them somewhere sa…"

Subaru rushed up to Roswaal, grabbed him by the collar and screamed.

But Roswaal gently pushed Subaru arms away,

Roswaal: "Flee? Where, exactly? There is a Barrier. The people of the Sanctuary cannot flee."

Subaru: "Th-That's…"

Roswaal: "There wasn't enough time, Subaru. The residents of the Sanctuary cannot leave unless the Trials are overcome. That is to say, your wish will not be granted."

Collapsing, Subaru fell rear-first into the snow.

Shuffling against themselves, the Ryuzu's gathered around the fallen Subaru, waiting for their next instruction in a rather humorous scene.

And only then, did Subaru notice it.

That Roswaal, who had been incinerating swathes of oncoming witchbeasts as they appreared up to now, had completely stopped doing so.

Subaru: "R-Roswaal! If you stop… unless… you're out of mana…"

Roswaal: "No~~ no, it's no such thing? Since, in a sense, my mana is inexhau~~stible. It wouldn't run out so easily. …What has run out is my reason to live."

Little by little, white furballs began plodding out of the forest.

Leaving small pawprints in the pristine snow that was as white as their fur, they were certainly drawing closer.

Subaru: “E-Even if I can rewind… this kind of…at least we should talk it through first! You might think you’re ok with leaving it to the next try, but…”

Roswaal: “You se~~em to have misundersto~~od something, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Roswaal: “Even if you can rewind, I cannot. The me you meet after your rewind will not be me. This is my end. —But tha~~t is fine.”

Subaru was struck dumb by Roswaal’s words.

“The rewind won’t apply to me”, Roswaal admitted it himself. That is to say, Roswaal only knew that Subaru was someone who could potentially Return by Death, and his death here would mean the end of this Roswaal’s consciousness.

He had accepted it, and was nonetheless ordering Subaru to rewind, though he would no longer exist after Subaru returns.

That way of thinking is just,

Subaru: “Not…how humans think at all…”

Unlike Subaru, whose consciousness would continue,

Roswaal’s would not, and his death would be the end.

What kind of human would accept it without question, knowing that it would be the end?

Roswaal: “The day will come when you will truly surpass me, Subaru.”

Subaru: “ro…s.”

Roswaal: “Li~~sten well, Subaru. —It is important. The one thing that is truly, truly important to you: Cast away everything else except it. Let go of everything else except it, and think only of protecting your single most important thing to the end.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “If you do that—”

Roswaal raised a finger as if to lecture.

A nearby rabbit immediately leapt up and chomped down on his lifted wrist. Blood scattered, and Roswaal’s right arm was gnashed to bits from the wrist, while other jaws sank their fangs into his elbows, shoulders, and all over his body with the dull creak of tearing flesh.

Subaru: “ROSWAAAAL!!”

Roswaal: “—You too, can become like me.”

The body of a rabbit with its mouth wide open blotted out the clown’s smile.

The swarm of white rabbits completely covered over Roswaal’s body. He fell sideways, offering no resistance as the rabbits devoured his flesh. Devoured. Devoured.

Blood sprayed, meat flung out, and the white snow was dyed crimson red. Then even the crimson snow was greedily slurped up by the rabbits without leaving a drop.

Subaru watched in silence, as Roswaal ceased to be Roswaal.

Watched, as Roswaal’s existence was eaten and wiped from this world.

—He went on watching.

Chapter 68:
Taste of Death

1

In a world where everything seemed twisted, Subaru was desperately running.

Subaru: "…"

He was insane.

He was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane he was insane.

The words repeated and repeated in his mind.

Beneath his eyelids as he repeated those words were Roswaal's final moments, felled by the Great Rabbit's fangs.

No resistance, so easily accepting his death, without even once crying out in pain for his ruptured flesh, Roswaal allowed his own existence to end.

—Aberrant.

What would you call this, if not aberrant and insane?

As long as his goal would be accomplished in a Parallel World, he was not bothered by his death—If this was a game, Subaru might have given the player character's death the same significance.

But it was reality.

Just how could a person, in reality, entrust his life to an alternate self?

This Roswaal was eaten by rabbits in front of Subaru's eyes. And his consciousness would not follow Subaru to the world beyond Death.

He may be staking his wishes on Return by Death, same as Subaru, but the weight of the toll was nowhere near the same.

Because, unlike Subaru, Roswaal could not reclaim the price he had paid.

Subaru: "—uo, ogh."

Recalling the macabre image of Roswaal's death as he ran, Subaru was hounded by the urge to vomit.

Bile surged up, burning his throat. But he couldn't spare even the time to puke as he wandered through the Sanctuary in search of survivors.

—Hell unfolded before Subaru once again.

Snow had stopped falling on the Sanctuary, but the howling wind persisted.

Lifting his face, grimacing at the skin-shearing cold as he gazed about his surroundings, he could hear the animals' calls all around, intermixed with the wind.

Grinding, grinding, the noise of serrated teeth grinding besieged the Sanctuary as if voicing their threat to their prey.

The Great Rabbit prowled through the Sanctuary in search of their feed.

Just how terrible was the hunger and famine that assaulted them?

When they fail to find prey, as if not to waste time letting their teeth stand idle, they would stave off their hunger by biting into their companions. A true, abominable monster.

Bit by bit, the grating noise of gnawing teeth and their cannibalistic shrieks of death and ecstasy chipped away at Subaru's sanity.

Subaru: "—Uwa!"

While trying to shake off that appalling cacophony, a rabbit with wide open jaws shot over Subaru's head. Teeth clicked viciously upon teeth as it tumbled into the snow. Having missed its prey, the rabbit flipped around with a threatening hiss.

Immediately, a Ryuzu clone running alongside Subaru crushed her heel into the rabbit's torso.

With the sound of meat squishing and bones cracking, the rabbit puked out its body's innards from its mouth, dead.

Exhaling, paying no heed to the corpse, Subaru resumed his sprint as the Ryuzu clones moved out alongside him.

Not far behind them, other rabbits arrived at the crushed corpse. Hearing the sound of the corpse devoured in an instant, the bells of doom inside Subaru rang ever louder.

Six Ryuzu clones remained at Subaru's side.

The eleven who had been present at Roswaal's death had had their numbers cut by half.

Having been ordered to "Protect Subaru", some had turned to face the charging rabbits, while some used their bodies to shield him before returning to mana.

As for why he ordered the clones to protect him with their lives, Subaru had already given up trying to explain it.

Right now, the only thing on his mind was the safety of Rem in the Cathedral and of Emilia inside the Tomb, while all else was abandoned somewhere beyond his considerations.

That was the only way to justify his present actions, and to safeguard his own sanity.

Subaru: "th… cathedral…!"

Avoiding the rabbit-infested roads with the snow pulling at his steps, Subaru took a large detour around the Sanctuary to reach the village centre and the Cathedral.

In a village devoid of any source of light, Subaru immediately spotted the Cathedral.

But, of course.

—Since amidst this world of white, only the Cathedral was enveloped in pure-red flames.

Subaru: "—Wh, y?"

Falling to his knees in the snow, Subaru muttered in a hoarse daze.

The crackling of the sprawling blaze mixed with the sound of snapping wood as Subaru watched rabbits leaping into the flame like moths, intending to eat the prey inside only to be instantly burned to a crisp.

The fact that they were so desperate to enter the Cathedral meant that there was still something to sate their hunger inside.

And the fact that there were those who remained inside the flames, meant that—

Subaru: "…"

—Deciding survival was hopeless, rather than be eaten by rabbits, they had chosen to commit suicide. Subaru wasn't incapable of understanding this feeling. He wasn't incapable, but,

Subaru: "Even so… ould've resisted to the end…"

"I wish you would've fought on to the very end without giving up on life." But perhaps, that was an all too heartless thought.

Both Roswaal and the people of the Sanctuary had treated their lives with excessive neglect.

Nearly forgetting that he himself was most guilty of that charge, Subaru covered his face as tears streamed from his eyes.

Neither Roswaal nor Subaru had inspired enough hope for the residents of the Sanctuary and the refugees of Earlham to resist until the very end.

If Subaru had managed to build that kind of trust, surely, they wouldn't have given up until the last moment.

—Once again, everything was Subaru's fault, and Subaru's crime.

Subaru: "But even if… only Rem…"

…survived? This ordering of the value of life was just the height of hubris and pride.

Mentally, Subaru called out to the clone he had instructed to take Rem to the Cathedral—the current Ryuzu personality. But, he could find no visible reaction indicating that she had heard it.

—Rem was inside that burning Cathedral.

Or, even if they escaped, Subaru was not nearly naive enough to think that Ryuzu could have single-handedly protected Rem from the Great Rabbit as they ran.

He clenched down on his molars. There was the taste of blood.

Biting into the bloody taste, into the surging bitterness, Subaru clenched onto his decision. —He should have already realized that this world was lost, and that he only wound up here because of his repeated refusal to accept it.

But now, it was truly about time to give up.

Subaru: "…"

He could hear the hunger-plagued monster approaching.

That was because the rabbits, who had abandoned the prospect of devouring any prey in the burnt Cathedral, had noticed the presence of the kneeling Subaru and the Ryuzu clones surrounding him.

Standing up, brushing off the snow, Subaru spilled a deep exhale.

He did not notice the sensation of the tears streaming down his cheeks. And so, he did not wipe them away.

Subaru: “Emilia…”

This world was ending.

And even if it wasn’t ending, Subaru would make sure that it ends.

In a world in which everyone he wished to be with, to live with, and to save, was gone—at least, at the very end, he wanted to be at the side of the girl he loved.

Subaru: “Use your lives… to protect me. —Once I reach the Tomb… you’re free to do whatever you want.”

Subaru emotionlessly relayed to the six remaining clones. He took one step, and then another, away from the horde of rabbits, until he was running.

Sensing their prey’s intention to escape, the rabbits raised an inaudible cry as they hounded Subaru’s trail, drooling from their mouths.

Ryuzu: “…”

Two Ryuzu clones dived into the Great Rabbit’s mass just as it was poised to leap.

It was followed by the sound of death and crushing flesh, until the two of them were surrounded by the ever-swelling swarm.

In an instant, the two were completely coated in white fur and fell to their sides—fatally wounded, their small bodies transformed into streams of pale-blue light.

And, with their final attack, they caught the feeding rabbits in an explosion of mana, lighting up the Sanctuary’s night sky with its dancing radiance.

Sensing the clones’ final burst of brilliance on the skin of his back, Subaru shook his head to cast off the ones he had deserted, gritted his teeth, and ran for the Tomb.

—And just went on running.

2

By the time Subaru arrived at the Tomb, his body could no longer feel the cold.

The snow had clouded his vision, and it felt like his eyelashes were frozen, but, spilling a white breath from his shivering lips, Subaru didn't seem to care.

The only thing his heavy, leaden thoughts could envision was a single, solitary girl.

With his footsteps echoing upon the stone-tiled corridor, Subaru headed into the depths.

At the Trial room, there would be a girl whom he had put to sleep, waiting for him.

???: "—Subaru?"

When he reached the open space, a voice like a silver chime called out his name.

Letting his feet be lured in by that voice, he entered the room. And, upon seeing him, the one who called to him raised a voice full of delight.

Emilia: "So it is you, Subaru! Gees, where did you go? I was so worried."

Emilia ran up to him with skipping steps and took him by the hand.

Pouting, she pressed his hand against her chest, transferring over her tender warmth as she looked up,

Emilia: "…are you tired?"

Subaru: "yeah… maybe, just a little… tired."

Emilia: “Ehehee, I see. In that case… in that case…”

Emilia giggled at Subaru’s straightforward admission, her cheeks blushing red.

Then, still holding onto Subaru’s hand, she suddenly sat down on the spot. Folding her legs and sitting on her side, she pulled the half-crouching Subaru closer,

Emilia: “Here, go ahead, Subaru.”

Subaru: “…a lap… pillow?”

Emilia: “Yep. Subaru, you like my lap pillows, don’t you? That’s what you told me. I do remember these things, you know. Here, go~ on.”

She gave her lap a pat, smiling as if both proud and embarrassed at the same time. Obediently, Subaru sat down and settled his head on her soft thighs.

The moment his short hair brushed against her skin, Emilia let out an enticing “Mn~”, but soon proceeded to stroke his head with practiced form.

Emilia: “How many times is it now, that I’ve given Subaru a lap pillow?”

Subaru: “not sure… this is the third, I guess… somehow, it’s always when I’m exhausted and broken.”

Emilia: “You know, Subaru, it’s fun to fiddle around with your hair and cheeks… Ta~ke that, fiddlefiddle~~.”

Pulling on his bangs and poking her finger into his cheeks, Emilia happily played with Subaru’s head.

Knowing that it was an expression of her affection, he didn’t feel the slightest urge to push her fingers away.

In a world that was ending—for now, he just wanted to drown in Emilia’s love.

—Because he had already lost most of his blood and viscera.

The goriness of Subaru's current state would make any normal person want to look away.

His back had been scoured by fangs, and one could probably see the bones if he lifted up his clothes. Profuse blood was streaming from his demolished thighs, and on his right hand, which he used to swat away the incoming rabbits, only his thumb remained intact.

Perhaps it was delusional tenacity that led his murky consciousness here. That, along with the freezing cold that had ironically dulled the sensations of his body.

Emilia: "Subaru, did you get a little lighter?"

Subaru: "I'm trying out the blood-loss diet… it's… like dump the ballast, and get lighter and light…er… something… like that…"

Emilia: "I don't understand what you're saying, but you did something crazy for someone else again, didn't you? That's the kind of person you are, Subaru. I know that, but… I still get reeeally worried."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "The truth is, I only want you to do that… for me. But, I know that's being selfish, and I wouldn't want to see Subaru pretend not to care about anyone else because of me. …Even though that's me being selfish too… sorry."

Emilia's rapid-fire words grew distant.

Unlike the frigid cold outside, the Tomb's interior retained a certain level of warmth. This ironically restored Subaru's metabolism to its normal levels, and renewed his sedated bloodflow.

Fresh blood dyed the stone slabs red, as even more was coughed out of Subaru's mouth.

Dots of splattered blood stained onto Emilia's white cheeks. But—

Emilia: “Say, Subaru, are you listening? There are so, so, sooo many things I want to tell you, and ask you. So, please. Stay with me. Listen to my voice. And let me hear yours, ok?”

Emilia didn’t seem to mind the touch of blood on her cheeks.

Or rather, she never even noticed them. Her amethyst eyes were on Subaru, and were certainly seeing him—but they simply hadn’t accepted the reality they reflected.

From the moment Subaru set out from the Mansion, he was already littered with the marks of Elsa’s torture. Being dragged to the Tomb by Garfiel must have only worsened his miserable appearance.

But Emilia didn’t make note of Subaru’s wounds, or seemed at all worried.

Even now, with various parts of his body missing, eaten by rabbits, she didn’t react any differently.

Right now, Emilia wasn’t seeing reality.

And perhaps, Subaru was just the same.

Subaru: “…”

He was supposed to warn Emilia of the danger and take her far away from here.

The Great Rabbit had already overrun everything outside the Tomb, and would probably rush inside at any moment. When they do, Emilia wouldn’t stand a chance.

Just like Roswaal, and the villagers who chose to die in the fire, Emilia would not escape a cruel and gruesome death.

But, even knowing this, Subaru didn’t warn her.

Because, within moments of losing his life—he couldn’t escape his selfish desire to face the end at Emilia’s side.

Roswaal’s words and grisly demise, the regret for Garfiel and Ram’s deaths, the devastation of losing Petra and Frederica, and the sense of powerlessness of his inability to save Rem and Emilia, all struck Subaru to the core.

Pain, or even the terror of death, none of it mattered anymore.

—Right now, all he wanted was to vanish from this world.

Subaru's haphazard and selfish wish would be fulfilled.

The world was clouding over, while little by little, his consciousness and his soul fell away from this place.

Strength deserted his limbs, and the last of his sensations left his body.

All that remained, all that stayed behind, was Emilia, seemingly unaware of Subaru's departure.

Subaru: "…"

So, was he going to leave Emilia behind?

When he was the only one she could rely on, when she had lost everyone else she could depend on, was Subaru going to leave her too?

Subaru: "a—"

It was too late to regret it now. It was too late to do anything.

Without uttering a sound, life faded from his eyes.

Emilia didn't seem to notice it, but only adorably tilted her head at Subaru, who had gone quiet.

Then, she smiled, and brought her face closer—

Emilia: "Subaru—"

Subaru: "…"

She took the silent Subaru, and kissed him on the lips.

—His first kiss was of the cold taste of Death.

Chapter 69:
Liar

1

Feeling the touch of the hard ground, cold as always, Subaru's consciousness was pulled back to reality.

Lying flat on his stomach, he opened his eyes and pushed himself up while spitting out the dirt and gravel in his mouth. He looked about his surroundings, and found himself in a murky darkness.

—It was the Trial room inside the Tomb.

From the same spot as it ended, Subaru's world began anew.

Although a part of him was relieved to have managed to come back, the suffocating prospect of repeating the same hell in this world clenched onto his heart and would not let go.

Shaking his head, Subaru rejected those ominous portents of another dead-end.

Then, standing up and brushing the dirt off his clothes as he scanned around the area—he found Emilia, collapsed in a corner of the room.

Subaru: "…"

But, just before he could call out and run over to her side, Subaru hesitated.

What scraped across his mind was the scene that immediately preceded his return—of Emilia with him dying in her lap, oblivious to his departure as she shared with him a kiss.

Without meaning to, Subaru touched a finger to his lips and furrowed his brows at the dry sensation.

In those last moments, Subaru's face must have been a mess from all the blood he had coughed up. He couldn't possibly understand what Emilia was thinking when she kissed him, but it was certainly not a memory which he would remember fondly.

Just as it had been when he was on the verge of death, though he could remember it happening, no emotion or tactile sensation carried over to the present world.

It was Subaru's first kiss, as well as the first kiss he shared with Emilia. But, having been obstructed by the unreasonable barrier of Death, it had left him no notable impression.

Subaru: "…"

Yet, Subaru's hesitation was not the result of that regret.

His reflection on that kiss was not for sentimentality's sake, but for the enormity of the dangers surrounding Emilia. —The way she had clung to Subaru, utterly detached from reality.

With Puck refusing to show himself, she was crushed by the pressure from the villagers and the Sanctuary's residents. And when even her last support, Subaru, left her, Emilia's heart was finally broken.

If the result was her falling into that state, then what had happened to Emilia in all those loops up to now?

Subaru: "…"

Subaru had left the Sanctuary for the Mansion four times now. Of all those times, the last was the only one where he had managed to come back to her—then what became of Emilia in those other three loops?

In each of those loops, Rabbit would have attacked the Sanctuary.

Even if Emilia had managed to keep her sanity intact, it wouldn't be hard to imagine the outcome considering the Mabeast's ferocity. But, just what must have been going through her mind back then?

Subaru: "As if there's any point in asking… if it turns out like that every time I leave, I'll have no choice but to stay around…"

Nothing about their situation inspired optimism.

He could leave everything to the future and distract himself from what was happening around him, but that would be pointless.

In order to reach the perfect future, Subaru must constantly assume the worst possible continuation.

Assume that the world would always prepare for him the cruellest, most unreasonable fate.

In that case, the problems surrounding Emilia, Beatrice, Elsa, and Roswaal would naturally always be arranged in the most difficult way possible.

Subaru: "What I'll have to do is…"

Save Emilia from being broken, save the people of the Sanctuary from the Great Rabbit, and save his friends at the Mansion from Elsa's violence. —No doubt, it would be a perilous path.

—Can it really be done?

Inside, the weak part of himself was asking, while preparing escape routes, excuses, and safeguards.

—It's not a matter of can or cannot, all there is is to do it.

Subaru bared his teeth at that weakness inside himself, and declared his resolve not to betray his oath.

All he had to do was to retry as many times as necessary to clear away the obstacles, confirm the victory conditions, sort out the chronology, and determine the best use of his time.

Even if Subaru's heart would be worn down by every failure, even if it meant having to witness things he'd never want to witness, as long as it brought him closer to grasping that perfect future, then it'd suit him just fine.

That was why—

Subaru: “—Emilia. Are you alright?”

Reaching out, he shook the shoulder of the collapsed, lovely girl.

Emilia’s eyelids twitched at Subaru’s touch, as her consciousness was brought out of the world of the Trials and back to reality.

Her eyes opened, reflecting Subaru inside their amethyst gleam. Within seconds, tears welled up, rejecting her past as she clung tightly onto Subaru.

Accepting Emilia’s reach for his support, Subaru returned her embrace as he silently reaffirmed the promise he had made.

—He would protect Emilia to the very end, as well as save everyone there is to save.

Because there was no one except Natsuki Subaru who could do this.

2

He began organizing the chaotic information from the end of the previous loop.

Most important among them, was that concerning Roswaal L. Mathers.

The same Roswaal who, right in front of his eyes, had lost his life, becoming the Great Rabbit’s feed.

Roswaal knew about Subaru’s Return by Death.

Even if he didn’t know that “Death” was the trigger, he was aware of Subaru’s ability to “Rewind”.

Though Subaru wasn’t sure if Roswaal had learned of this after his arrival at the Sanctuary, or if he had known long before that, most likely, it was written in Roswaal’s Gospel.

Subaru hadn’t been able to recover Roswaal’s Gospel in the previous loop.

If the Gospel had been tucked in Roswaal's robes, then it would have been swallowed by the rabbits alongside his flesh. But even if Roswaal had left it in the residence, Subaru was in no state of mind to run inside to check.

And so, Subaru never got to see what was recorded inside.

—Or just what Roswaal's ultimate objective might be.

If Roswaal was only acting according to the Gospel's text, then what made him abandon his life in the end? —Perhaps the answer lay in the Gospel itself.

Most likely, Roswaal would obey the Gospel even if it cost him his life.

Subaru didn't know what format the entries in Roswaal's Gospel would be written in, but they should be instructions, signposts towards its owner's desired future, just like in Petelgeuse's Gospel.

When something deviated from the Witch Cultist's Gospel, Petelgeuse would use his own judgement to improvise within a reasonable range until the outcome matched the records.

But it was very different for Roswaal.

Acting with the knowledge that it was possible to "Rewind" the world, when the future differed from what was written, he would give up his own life just so he wouldn't have to endure the time that would pass in error.

When reality differed from the text, Petelgeuse chose to improvise.

Whereas, refusing to permit the slightest deviance, Roswaal insisted that reality must follow the writ.

Though they were both dangerous adversaries in possession of Gospels, and even if the contents of their Gospels were largely the same, their approaches were almost complete opposites.

Considering the ways they relied on their Gospels, Subaru couldn't help but find Roswaal's to be the more misguided of the two.

—The problem lay in the contents of Roswaal's Gospel.

If the outcomes of the attacks on the Sanctuary and the Mansion were all recorded in its pages, then the tragedy would only repeat over and over again until Roswaal's wishes are fulfilled.

Even the snowfall in the Sanctuary could be attributed to Roswaal's desire to match the Gospel's prophecies. Which means, the snow was probably a part of every loop.

The only reason Subaru hadn't encountered it until now was because it always started after he had left for the Mansion, and he never returned in time to see it.

Roswaal had induced the snowfall on the Sanctuary in order to isolate Emilia.

But just what was the point of doing that?

Even without such roundabout methods, the unbearable pressure from all sides should have been enough to wear her down. With her sense of duty, and being acutely aware of the expectations of those around her, Emilia could only bite down on her unease and powerlessness and continue challenging the Trials.

The moment Subaru was no longer at her side, she would lose her way and descend into a state of self-abandon.

Unless, that was Roswaal's goal to begin with?

But if Emilia stopped acting for "Everyone else's sake", the Sanctuary would never be liberated. And without liberating the Sanctuary, there would be no escape when the Great Rabbit attacked.

There were too many places where Roswaal's actions and attitude towards Emilia were at odds.

More than anything, there were Roswaal's final words, moments before he was devoured by the Great Rabbit.

—Cast away everything except the one most important to you.

That was what Roswaal had whispered.

If you do that, you too, can become like me.

Nevermind whether Subaru wanted to become like Roswaal, the underlying implication of those words was that Roswaal had abandoned everything except what was most important to him, and that was how he wound up here.

In fact, it was a resolve for which he could relinquish his life—there was no doubt in that regard.

If everything followed the Gospel's writ: Emilia was driven into isolation, and events progressed exactly as Roswaal intended, would he really obtain that thing for which he was willing to abandon all else?

Or, perhaps a better question would be: why did Roswaal tell Subaru all this?

In any case—

Subaru: "If you're telling me to let go… there's no way I could do that."

Emilia was important.

But, it goes without saying, that there were people who Subaru wanted to protect and to keep at his side, far too many to count.

In Subaru's narrow world, even the loss of a single fragment would forever render that world colorless.

Greedy and selfish as he was, there was no way he could permit it.

And so, he could never follow Roswaal's advice.

Subaru: "Roswaal… I—will never become like you."

3

Subaru comforted the crying Emilia until she fell asleep, and brought her out of the Tomb.

As usual, while everyone was shocked to see Emilia in her state and to learn that she had failed the Trial, Subaru carried her to Ryuzu' house to put her to bed.

Along the way, Garfiel's feigned cheerfulness out of consideration for the atmosphere was almost painful to watch, and Subaru could notice Ryuzu casting him a meaningful gaze, though he didn't mention anything.

He overlooked the former on purpose because there was still something he had to confirm.

As for the latter, it was because Subaru already somewhat understood the meaning behind her gaze.

Garfiel: "Oy, borrow y'for a minute."

After entrusting the sleeping Emilia to Ram, Garfiel called out to Subaru while everyone was leaving for the night. Having been expecting this, Subaru answered with a "Yeah" as he followed behind the slouching figure, heading into the forest surrounding the Sanctuary.

Subaru wasn't sure if Garfiel was bringing him to the same spot as last time, but he could tell that Garfiel's expression was exactly the same as back then.

With eyes blazing, Garfiel locked his glare onto Subaru.

In stark contrast to his attitude as they left the Tomb, his hostility was now plain as day.

Naturally, the first question to come out his mouth was—

Garfiel: "What d…"

Subaru: ""What did y'bastard see in the Tomb"…?"

A blue vein was about to bulge from Garfiel forehead at Subaru's interruption when his eyes widened as he heard the exact words he was about to say.

As if taken completely off guard, Garfiel's cutting impression fell away to an almost childish air. It was almost strange.

Immediately shaking his head at the squinting Subaru, Garfiel clicked his fangs as if to compose himself.

Garfiel: “That's creepy as fuck, but if y'already know, that'd speed things up. Don't try hidin' anythin', honest now. Y'don't want me t'hurt ya, do ya.”

Subaru: “Right. But I'm a busy guy, there're loads of things I want to check as well. —If I answer your questions… in exchange, will you answer some of mine?”

Garfiel: “Y'think yer in any position t'negotiate? I'm in a position t'eat y'whole, and yer in th'position t'keep tossin' meat t'stave off gettin' eaten. “Meegee gives up th'big bro before the lil' bro”, as they say.”

Subaru: “Of all the references you made… that might be the darkest one, you know.”

Replying with a shrug, Subaru dropped his gaze and fell into silence.

Garfiel looked like he was growing impatient, but he didn't pressure Subaru to hurry. While Subaru took a deep breath, and decided how best to answer.

Subaru: “Inside, I took the Trial. I saw my past.”

Garfiel: “—! So y'did have th'qualifications…tch. Then, yer result's…”

Subaru: “Failed. It's not so easy, accepting or denying your past. … It's the same with Emilia, I'm afraid.”

Giving him half a truth and half a lie, Subaru tried to gauge

Garfiel's response.

Garfiel's face paled when he heard that Subaru had taken the Trial, but once learned that Subaru didn't pass, his shoulders slumped in relief.

Subaru: "Well you sure look pretty damn pleased about it."

Garfiel: "What d'y…?"

Subaru: "I was just thinking, you certainly look pretty happy to hear that Emilia failed, and the Sanctuary won't be liberated."

Listening to Subaru's words, Garfiel furrowed his brows and snorted as if starting to catch on. Slightly lowering his stance, he glared up at Subaru.

Garfiel: "Y'bastard, what'n yer past…'n yer Trial, what th'hell did y'hear?"

Subaru: "About the creation of the Sanctuary, and some background stuff as well. Also, about you and Miss Ryuzu, I guess."

Garfiel: "—! Y'know… about, my…"

"Past?", Garfiel was about to say, when Subaru cut him off with a shake of his head.

Subaru: "Not sure what you saw in your past, but I don't know nearly that much. Although, I do have an idea why you're keeping quiet about having taken the Trial."

Garfiel: "…Y'already know that much…"

Subaru: "Part of it's speculation, too. You can reply with an outraged "You're just imagining it!", if you want."

In this world, Subaru and Garfiel have only known each other for a single day.

Most of the information he had gathered from his interactions with Garfiel were things he wasn't supposed to have heard yet. The same goes for information about the original Ryuzu Meyer, sleeping in the Experimental Grounds.

Thus, Subaru was trying bypass this by conveniently making use of the Trials and Echidna's existence.

For now, he figured that there was nothing else he could gain from this interaction with Garfiel.

So he really just wanted this conversation to be over.

But—

Subaru: "—Say, why won't you retake the Trials?"

Garfiel: "…"

In front of the silent Garfiel, Subaru asked him this question.

Hearing this, Garfiel lowered his head so as not to let Subaru see his expression.

His arms dangled at his sides, as his wary posture slackened and lost its strength.

From that, Subaru judged that no sudden attack was coming.

Subaru: "You know, I can't help but feel that your actions lack consistency. First you push Emilia to liberate the Sanctuary, and then you look all relieved when she fails. But then again, if you're really trying to block the Sanctuary from being liberated, you're going about it way too half-heartedly."

If he completely disregarded the consequences, Garfiel could just transform into a beast and kill Subaru and Emilia.

Naturally, his relationship with the refugees and Roswaal's faction would plummet, but if Garfiel's goal was truly to hinder the Sanctuary's liberation, then this method would be both quick and reliable.

And yet, Garfiel didn't take any actions up until the very last moment—until Subaru crossed the line by having the refugees escape the Sanctuary.

—There was still some threshold inside Garfiel's mind that Subaru didn't know of.

Subaru: "I was hoping I could get your help."

Garfiel: "—Do, n't say such stupid crap."

Hearing Subaru say this, Garfiel paused a moment before turning him down.

Looking up and shaking his head, Garfiel's usual vigor was completely gone from his face.

Garfiel: "Like y'said, our interests ain't aligned. I won't actively get in yer way, but I ain't gonna help ya, either. Neutral. Yeah, neutral's good."

Subaru: "You do realize that position doesn't suit you at all?"

Garfiel: "It ain't a matter of suitin' or not. I'm just doin' it 'cus it's what I have t'do."

Annoyed at saying something he wouldn't usually say, Garfiel kicked at the ground, sweeping up a cloud of dust as he turned his back to Subaru.

Garfiel: "If that Half-Witch beats th'Trials, that's fine by me. Once yer here, the only way yer gettin out is by passin' the Trials. I'm aware of that. —But whether I'm leavin' the Sanctuary once it's freed 's another matter."

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel: "If yer gonna leave, go ahead'n get out. But don't try anythin' in here. Don't meddle in our shit any more'n y'already have. Y'stay by that, and I ain't gonna do anythin'."

Subaru: "Even if I told you that we need your help outside?"

Garfiel: "…Th'things that I want, none of y'lot can give me. This's as far as this conversation goes. Don't try pullin' any unnecessary stunts now."

Though he refused to listen to Subaru, Garfiel left him with those still-rational words.

Garfiel had shown his strong rejection in all their conversations up to now, but only this time, he didn't lose his composure.

Just what was different, and what could it mean?

Subaru: "There's a mountain of things I have to think about… but."

Inserting his fingers into his black hair, Subaru set aside his over-complicated considerations for now.

As much as he wanted to sort them, organize them, and arrange them to arrive at some kind of answer,

Subaru: "There's no way I could sort out all these things alone."

Should he get lost inside his labyrinth of thoughts, Natsuki Subaru would only be caught in another downward spiral. To make sure that doesn't happen, what he needed to do now was,

Subaru: "Guess it's time to rely on you again…"

Subaru's thoughts turned to the only person in the world to whom he could lay bare his worries.

4

As if spurred on by some unbearable emotion, Subaru's steps hastened.

After parting with Garfiel, Subaru's walk turned into a sprint.

With ragged breaths, sweating brows, and trembling eyes, Subaru ran.

His sole destination, lit by the moonlight, was the interior of the

Tomb.

This was after their previous conversation.

Having stated that he would not interfere with Subaru's actions, Garfiel did not stop him.

There was no one left to rebuke him for venturing into the Tomb once more.

Arriving at the entryway, Subaru stopped to roughly wipe off the sweat with his sleeves.

Drawing deep breaths to calm his winded lungs, Subaru pressed forward into the darkness of the Tomb.

Since there was something he must do—in the abyssal Citadel of Dreams that was Echidna's realm.

Subaru: "If you truly wish inside your heart… "I want to know""

Then you will be invited. That was what the white-haired Witch had told him.

Clinging to that hope and putting his faith in those words, Subaru came here.

There was a mountain of things he wanted to ask, to talk about, to agonize over, and to search for the answer together with her.

Things he could only reveal to the Witch of Greed, so that she might show him the way.

What he needed to do, and what he wanted to do were now one and the same.

All that was left was some way to make it reality, some way other than deliberating alone.

Subaru: "…"

It was not that he didn't feel ashamed about going to Echidna's

Citadel, dumping all his doubts and worries on her, and imposing on her good will.

And it was not that he wasn't afraid that revealing everything to Echidna would violate the forbidden and once again drown the Sanctuary in Envy's shadows.

Yet, even so, Subaru had hope.

Hope that the Witch's guidance might be the key to breaking through fate's dead-end.

Subaru: "Right now… I should meet all the requirements."

He was so lost as to what to do.

And so determined to use any means necessary.

If the present Subaru wasn't a willing and eager Apostle of Greed, then what was he?

Innumerable times would he freely surrender his life. And he would give up his pride too, if that was all it took to settle this.

For that was all this pathetic, useless, and ignorant Natsuki Subaru could manage.

Subaru: "I'm counting on you, Echidna…!"

Subaru steadied his breaths, and silently gathered the courage to step into the Tomb.

Making his way to the rectangular space that had already accepted him as a challenger once tonight, he scanned over the room, and proceeded towards its centre.

Subaru: "Gonna have to wing it with where and what rituals're required, but…"

The second time Subaru was invited into the dream, aside from the desperate desire for an answer, he should have been in the same position as he was immediately after Returning by Death. There didn't seem to be any special offering required.

In any case, Subaru kneeled down on the spot, joined his hands, and closed his eyes.

He envisioned the White Witch in his mind, calling out to her with the enumerations of his emotions, as if telling of his impossible future and his despairing desire to reach her.

Subaru: "…"

Just like this, time passed as Subaru waited in silence.

He could feel the Tomb's cold air caressing his skin as cold sweat formed on his brows.

He wanted it. Desperately.

He yearned for it. Earnestly.

If he wanted it this badly, yearned for it this badly, and still couldn't reach her—

—Then perhaps Greed is far too immense an avarice for mere humans.

Subaru: "—u?"

Just before this faintheartedness could sink in, Subaru felt the illusion of a white light encroaching on the darkness behind his eyelids. —Or perhaps, it was no illusion.

Subaru: "…"

White light invaded his vision, slowly, and slowly, eroding away the pitch-dark world.

Before he knew it, his kneeling body had fallen to its side, and he could feel his consciousness detach from reality as it was pulled into another world.

—His summon to the Citadel of Dreams had begun.

In the Citadel where Echidna was waiting, this time, he was determined to hold the conversation that would let him truly grasp the future.

That thought alone occupied his fading consciousness, as—

"—Witness, a present that was not to be."

The moment his awareness fell away, he thought he heard that voice.

5

A sensation like a drunken stupor swayed Subaru's nerves.

He didn't know what happened.

His awakening came so suddenly that it was like when a channel was switched on a television.

As if having jumped to a channel of a completely different genre, it felt like his entire consciousness was replaced.

It was almost reminiscent of the sensation immediately following Return by Death.

The discrepancy between the wretchedness of the world where he died, and the one after Returning by Death always carved a sense of incongruity into his mind, body, and soul.

"—."

When he tried to speak, Subaru realized that he couldn't make a sound.

He tried bringing a hand to his throat, but only then, he belatedly noticed that he could feel neither his hand nor his throat.

"—?"

Whether it was his limbs, his eyes, or his mouth, none of his body existed.

There was only his consciousness, floating in space, watching the world from above as nothing more than a point of view.

It was unnatural, like the disembodied sensation of being inside a dream.

But, he had a feeling that this wasn't the first time he felt this way. Could he be dreaming, after all?

With those thoughts in the back of his mind, Natsuki Subaru tried to tear his consciousness away from the scene before his eyes.

But it was impossible.

For the disembodied Subaru, nevermind turning his head away, even closing his eyes was forbidden.

All he could do was watch—as this scene before his eyes was forcibly burned into his mind.

???: "—iar."

The voice was quiet, and hoarse.

And so weak that he could barely make out what it was saying.

But,

"—."

He intuitively understood it.

With nothing but his consciousness, Subaru intuitively understood that "This is bad".

It was a voice that he mustn't hear.

A voice he mustn't recognize.

Proclaiming something he mustn't know.

But, regardless of what his consciousness told him, the scene searing into his mind did not change. It would not disappear. But only went on pushing, carving the “Outcome” into Subaru.

???: “Liar… liar, liar liar liar liar liar liar…hk.”

Within that repeating whisper, the previously inaudible word began to take shape, as if forgetting to stop, and interspersed with sobs.

A heartrending sight. His ear were filled with despairing grief. To take this into his eyes and to receive this into his ears must have been the greatest suffering in this world.

“—.”

Why was he here?

Why was he seeing this?

His failure. His mistake. His error in judgment. He wasn’t supposed to see it. He wasn’t supposed to know. He was never supposed to know.

—If I didn’t tell myself, “It won’t be like that”, I…

Emilia: “Liar… liar! Subaru… you liar! You liar—!!”

Collapsed on the floor, with a flood of tears pouring from her amethyst eyes, Emilia cried out.

Like an accusation of a betrayal, rejecting the nightmare before her eyes, disheveling her hair like a small child, Emilia screamed as if in a frenzy.

—While, at the sleeping Rem’s bedside, Subaru’s corpse with a small knife pierced into his throat lay in front of the wailing Emilia.

Chapter 70:
What Comes After Hell

1

What on earth was he watching?

{—}

Expelling ear-splitting shrieks, Emilia was crying Subaru's name.

Subaru's body was leaning limply against the bed, its wide-open eyes devoid of life.

Well, naturally. With its throat pierced by a dagger, and with that much lost blood, it couldn't possibly be alive.

It's not every day that you'd get a chance to look down at your own corpse.

It was a twisted sensation, as if he had detached from his dead body as a ghost and was being made to watch the spectacle that followed.

Even if the majority of that feeling was false, the fundamental part was not.

—What Subaru was being forced to watch was unmistakably the scene after his death.

{—}

The room's furnishings, the people present here, and the wretched figure of his dead self.

Putting these together, Subaru realized precisely what he was being shown here.

It was the result of his thoughtless act after defeating the Sin Archbishop, Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti, and saving Emilia, when he first learned of the loss of Rem.

Having felled the White Whale, repelled Sloth, and saved Emilia and the Earlham Villagers, Subaru was at the height of joy when he was sent plummeting to the pit of the abyss upon learning that Rem was lost.

He had raced the carriage all the way to the Capital—where he found the sleeping Rem in Crusch Karsten's Mansion, and, once he confirmed that her consciousness was gone and no one could remember her, Subaru immediately committed suicide by stabbing a knife through his own throat.

It was almost a reflex, without a single moment of deeper consideration.

He had merely done it to reject the scene before his eyes, to ask Return by Death for a chance to retry the past and retrieve what had been lost.

—But, this rash deed came to no success, and the place he returned to after his suicide was immediately before he stabbed his neck, after already having reunited with the sleeping Rem.

Return by Death's save point had been updated.

Its merciless timing had stolen away Subaru's only means of retrieving Rem, and once again plunged him into the depths of the abyss.

It was after that, when he sealed his resolve and made his oath to restore her and to somehow keep standing up to now, but—

Subaru: "It's not… my fault… This… it's not my fault. I didn't know… I've never seen any of this."

He had never seen this scene before.

Well of course. Subaru was already dead in this world.

Though he had the means to return after losing his life, he never knew what happened to those worlds after he died. Or rather, there was no way for him to know.

But still, it was not until this moment that he had even considered it.

Experiencing his own death, rewinding the world, then proceeding along a different path to bypass the dead-end, the world in which he died gave him no information beyond “How” he died, and served as nothing more than a transit point.

Judging these worlds to be mere checkpoints towards his ultimate, desired future, and having decided to make full use of Return by Death, he had regarded even this present world as no more than a waypoint.

But now—that was crumbling.

Subaru: “Stop. Stop stop stop stop stop stop stop it please stop!”

Rejecting the scene before his eyes, Subaru shrieked a voiceless shriek.

But, without a throat to raise a sound, no eyes to avert his gaze, and no ears he could cover, the world went on engraving its outcome into Subaru’s consciousness.

—As punishment for the careless deed he committed.

???: “Lady Emilia, what—!”

Overhearing Emilia’s wails, a new character stepped into the horrendous scene.

An old man, wearing a brand new butler’s outfit over his muscular body, carried by strides that gave no indication of his injuries—it was Wilhelm.

Skidding into the room, the old man unwittingly fell silent at the sight before him.

—So even the Sword Demon Wilhelm could make such a dumbfounded face.

Subaru was hit with that out-of-place thought as he saw Wilhelm's face head-on.

That was just how far Wilhelm's expression deviated from the usual, unable to hide his shock at the sight of Subaru's corpse.

Wilhelm: "What in the world has… no, now's not… Sir Subaru!"

But Wilhelm's bewilderment only lasted an instant.

Shaking his head to promptly suppress his bafflement, he rushed to the collapsed Subaru's side. Emilia continued clinging to the lifeless body, oblivious to Wilhelm's approach.

Emilia: "Subaru… Subaru you… liar… you said th… we'll be together…"

Wilhelm: "Lady Emilia, I beg your forgiveness—!"

While Emilia condemned Subaru's betrayal like a curse, Wilhelm pushed her aside to reach the corpse. Without any strength to support her own body, she fell to the floor, but Wilhelm immediately turned from his momentary attention towards Emilia back to resuscitating Subaru, who was still soaking in the fresh, profuse pool of his own blood.

Wilhelm: "…"

His expression grave, Wilhelm took off his jacket and used it to cover Subaru's throat as he unhesitatingly drew out the dagger. Blood sprayed out, staining Wilhelm's perilous visage, but without even blinking, he immediately plugged the wound.

The bleeding stopped, while Wilhelm pumped on Subaru's unbeating chest, attempting to revive his heart.

Wilhelm: "Ferris! Felix! Come quickly!! Emergency! Hurry!!"

Aiming his shout outside the room, Wilhelm applied pressure to Subaru's wound as he continued the resuscitation effort. However, the volume of lost blood was far too great. His limbs and face were drained of color, and anyone could see that Natsuki Subaru's soul was no longer present.

But still, Wilhelm had no intention to give up.

Ferris: “Old Wil’, what’re you yelling ab—Hic!”

Wilhelm: “Felix, quickly! The blade’s punctured his throat! There’s not a second to lose!”

Ferris: “—!”

Rushing up at the call, Ferris immediately nodded at Wilhelm’s command, cloaking his hands in a blue, undulating aura as he sent healing magic into Subaru’s fallen body.

Gazing down on his own soul-departed corpse, Subaru saw a seriousness on Ferris’ always easy-going face that he had never seen before.

Subaru: “That’s…enough…it’s useless. It won’t work. You can’t save him anymore…”

Anything they do would be pointless now.

In Subaru’s memories, there was nothing about being saved after this attempted suicide.

Natsuki Subaru had impulsively plunged a knife into his own throat in rejection of reality, leaving irreparable wounds in the hearts of those around him, while he himself disappeared without feeling the slightest pang on his conscience.

Those were the facts. Those two’s desperate efforts would come to nothing.

Wilhelm: “You mustn’t die! I absolutely won’t let you die! If I lost my benefactor in this way, I could not live with the shame…!”

Ferris: “Why did he have to pull this stupid stunt now…tch.”

Wilhelm shouted, pressing on the wound, and Ferris muttered this agitated complaint while casting the gentlest magic in this world.

This scene, and the ripples of their emotions, went on striking at Subaru's heart.

But despite their hopeless efforts—

Ferris "…"

Wilhelm: "Felix! Why?! Why have you stopped healing?! If this goes on…"

Ferris: "It's over, old Wil'. —His soul isn't here anymore."

Wilhelm closed in, but Ferris pushed him away. Removing the Sword Demon's jacket, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped off Subaru's wound. The gash had been perfectly closed, and it was impossible to tell that it had been a fatal injury. Subaru's body had been restored to the same state as several minutes ago.

Except, neither the volumes of spilt blood nor his departed soul remained.

Looking down at Subaru's pale, lifeless face with the wound wiped away, Wilhelm shook his head,

Wilhelm: "Why… why did you do this! Why would you… so lightly… Sir Subaru-, you were…!"

His fist struck the floor with the sound of a hard crack.

Blood mixed into the fractured floorboard as Wilhelm's fist was cut along with it. His knuckles dripping with blood, Wilhelm bit into his lips as if enduring unbearable regret.

Directly opposite the clearly emotional Wilhelm, Ferris only looked down at Subaru with a pained expression. His cat-ears drooped as he gazed at Subaru's unpeaceful expression,

Ferris: "…Weakling, coward. You just abandoned everyone important to you…pushed all the pain and all the suffering onto everyone else… are you satisfied nyow?"

It was too severe to be mocking, and too kind to be a condemnation.

The complexities of the emotions hidden in Ferris' voice was too far beyond what Subaru's frozen thoughts could comprehend.

But it was clear from Wilhelm and Ferris' reactions,

—That Subaru had done something irreversible to them both.

Emilia: "…"

His thoughts completely stopped.

What was he seeing right now?

He knew. He already knew what he was being made to see.

He was being forced to bear witness to his own sins.

Wilhelm: "—Lady Emilia?"

Wilhelm suddenly called her name.

The astonishment in his voice was because Emilia had suddenly stopped crying, and her collapsed body was no longer trembling.

Noticing this change, a touch of pain scraped across Wilhelm's expression. The loss he had just tasted, how much more strongly must it have struck Emilia? This expression was simply because he realized this.

The old man firmly closed his eyes, and stood up.

Then, he walked over to the fallen Emilia, and extended his hand to help her up.

Wilhelm: "I must apologize for my actions, Lady Emilia. But it would be harmful to your health to remain like this. Please, take care to…"

Emilia: "—he told me."

Wilhelm: "Lady Emilia?"

Emilia: “Even though he told me he loved me…!”

Lying sideways on the floor, hugging her knees, Emilia curled into a ball and screamed.

“You’re being like a child”, there was no one here who could chide her for that. Wilhelm furrowed his brows as if enduring his pain, and even Ferris turned away, unable to bear watching Emilia’s grief.

Ferris: “Eh?”

Baffled, Ferris’s eyes and mouth opened wide as a dumb noise escaped his throat.

As if guided by that voice, Wilhelm followed Ferris’ gaze, and was stunned.

Wilhelm: “…”

—Before their eyes, Subaru’s supposedly-deceased body sat up.

Subaru: “—?!”

Faced with this incomprehensible sight, even Subaru’s consciousness was aghast.

The risen body stretched out its limbs with the choppy movement of a mechanical doll as it stood up with its head tilted ninety-degrees sideways, its eyes slowly opening.

Its unfocused gaze, its gleamless eyes, leered over the room.

Wilhelm: “feli…”

Ferris: “Impossible! His body was definitely dead! The resuscitation failed!”

Wilhelm called to Ferris as if clinging to the last strand of hope, but Ferris cut him off, shouting back his thoughts.

Hearing this, Wilhelm immediately decided on his next action.

That is—

Wilhelm: “Sir Subaru, forgive me—!”

Even the lack of a sword caused no detriment to the Sword Demon’s skill.

Wilhelm crouched down to pick up the jacket that was discarded on the floor, twisting it up along with Subaru’s blood, and used his entire body to lunge it forward like a lance.

Riding on its speed and the added weight of the blood, its tip pierced through the air as a spear of cloth. With what might be called the Cloth-Spear technique, Wilhelm preemptively struck at the rising Subaru.

His aim was true, and the point of his jacket seemed about to pierce straight into Subaru’s face—

Wilhelm: “—n!”

—When a cascade of shadows surged up from Subaru’s feet and swallowed the pointed cloth whole, nullifying Wilhelm’s attack.

Sighting the shadow that appeared without warning, Wilhelm instantly drew back his arm—but could not completely avoid the damage. Three fingers on his right hand were severed at the joints, taken along with the jacket.

Flying backwards, dripping with blood, Wilhelm clicked his tongue as he kept his distance from the now standing Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Felix! Take Lady Emilia away from here, now! I will try to delay it!”

Ferris: “Don’t even have a sword… all I’ve got is a dyagger!”

Rolling into a corner of the room, Ferris tossed the dagger at his hips to Wilhelm. Catching it in his left hand, Wilhelm drew it from its sheath with a turn of his wrist and muttered “Feels off with short weapons”, Wilhelm: “Get out of the Mansion, follow Lady Crusch’s instructions —no, that won’t work now. Felix, use your own judgement. Bring the Knights here.”

“Felix: Won’t it be a bit hard on your own, old Wil’?”

Wilhelm: “It’s something on the level of the White Whale, or even… what in the world has been living inside Sir Subaru…”

Measuring his opponent’s strength, Wilhelm held his breath as beads of sweat emerged on his skin.

In front of the wary Sword Demon, Subaru’s arms remained dangling at his sides as his gaze swept aimlessly to and fro while his upper body swayed side to side.

It was without rational thought. And perhaps, it wasn’t even conscious.

The question was that despite being in this state, did it have enough awareness to defend itself?

Warily, Wilhelm went on glaring at the transformed Subaru.

Meanwhile, watching all of this, Subaru’s consciousness was caught in a storm of question marks.

The situation had clearly changed from what it was before.

Being forced to witness his sin while his heart was torn and shattered, Subaru was now watching the absurd progression of the world after his death.

What the hell was this supposed to be?

Could it have really happened? If not, then what was it supposed to mean? Why was his consciousness here, now?

He couldn’t understand any of it. None of it made any sense at all, but—

Wilhelm: “Felix! Take Lady Emilia—!”

Ferris: “I got it already! Lady Emilia, come with…?!”

Answering Wilhelm’s urgings for him hurry, Ferris crossed the room and roughly pulled up the fallen Emilia. But a tremor instantly shook Ferris’ expression.

The reason, was,

???: “—You dare make Lia cry.”

Birthing a white haze, a small figure descended on the center of the room.

With grey fur, and a tail as long as its body, despite being of the size that could fit in one’s hand, the pressure it exerted could easily make one mistake it for some great, ferocious beast.

Making his long-overdue appearance, the tiny Great Spirit floated in the center of the room, gazing down on Subaru. On his expression was unfathomable severity, and his words were rife with contempt.

Puck: “As accomplice to the crimes of that body’s owner, you are deserving of ten thousand deaths—Witch.”

The narrow room was flooded with cold, murderous intent. Exhaling white breaths, Wilhelm’s face stiffened as he watched Puck turn that intent into icy spearheads.

Wilhelm: “Spirit… unless, Lady Emilia’s…”

Puck: “Lia is unconscious right now. In accordance with the Contract, I will act on my own judgment. The Witch shall not be forgiven. I shall protect Lia. —As for the one who made Lia cry, I shall not forgive this man.”

Wilhelm: “Wait! Fighting here now will only—”

Puck: “The oath is broken, and my Lia’s heart is frozen. —Now, it’s time I bring it to an end.”

Ignoring Wilhelm’s protests, Puck’s cold intent was steadily rising.

White mist filled the room, all was starting to freeze, marking the beginning of the deaths of all things. In a world where even breaths would be frozen, Puck's hostility was directed at Subaru alone.

That Subaru's head tilted upwards, looking at Puck for the first time.

Its void, blank eyes gazed at the floating Puck, when suddenly, its eyelids twitched.

Then,

Puck: "…"

It snickered.

Subaru's corpse twisted its face, and snickered at the sight of Puck.

Full of malice, contorted beyond recognition, a mocking grin.

Subaru: "—sto."

Watching this unfold, Subaru's consciousness called for it stop before the destined catastrophe.

But his call reached nothing.

Puck raised his little paw, and when he brought it down, it birthed a small glacier inside the room, its absolute zero threatening to consume Subaru's corpse. Shadows surged up from below to beat back the attack, as a maelstrom of mana ravaged the narrow room, sweeping Wilhelm and Ferris into its nexus before exploding—to screams and wails from frozen, tearing voices, as the world-ending white and blackness of despair intermingled before Subaru's eyes, burying everything.

Subaru: "—!!"

Abruptly, like the power had been cut, the world lost all color.

Subaru: "—Pffu."

The pain of his face smashing into the ground prompted Subaru's consciousness to wake.

His jaw crashing against the damp floor, Subaru's eyes teared up at the stinging pain as he shook his head.

And, immediately lifting his face, he quickly scanned over his surroundings. —Nothing was off.

Subaru: "I-I'm… inside the Tomb…"

Cold air and dark space, the dampness of the floor and the scent of mold and decay—he was definitely inside the Tomb.

Having confirmed this, Subaru opened and closed his hands to check that there was nothing wrong with his limbs. His ragged breathing began to settle, as he exhaled a deep breath from his lungs to force himself to calm.

But the tremors of his very organs refused to be chased away.

Subaru: "A daydream… that'd be too much of a coincidence. But, otherwise…"

What the hell was that?

After being forced to witness that spectacle, Subaru began to assess the situation he had been placed in.

First of all, without a doubt, that was "A Scene After Subaru's Death".

Emilia's shrieks at the sight of Subaru's corpse, Wilhelm and Ferris' desperate attempts to save him—and the final, nightmarish clash at the end.

The first part carved scarring gashes into his heart, while the second part plunged his soul into incomprehensible, uncontrollable bewilderment.

Subaru: “Uu, ghu—”

The moment he remembered it, Subaru bent over, holding the wrenching pain in his waist while the expelled-contents of his stomach splashed onto the floor.

It would be called vomit, but he hadn’t really eaten dinner. All that came out was yellow bile and some tea he had drunk an hour earlier.

He could only repeat this vomiting motion to constrict his stomach in answer to his body’s demands.

It was while repeating this, over and over, that Subaru began to realize the circumstances of his situation.

Inside the Tomb, if he was not summoned to Echidna’s Dream Citadel, then there was only one other place his detached consciousness could have been taken.

Subaru: “Unless… that was a Trial? …Not the past… but the second one…?!”

No longer the first Trial, where he had to face his past, the second Trial had begun.

Noticing this possibility, Subaru stood there, stupefied.

Indeed, to Subaru, it had been several days since he passed the first Trial. But that only applied to his soul, while for this body and for this world, it had only been several hours. In other words, he shouldn’t have met the requirements for the next stage of the Trials.

If the Trial had started regardless, then it could only be an irregularity. And more importantly, according to Echidna,

Subaru: “She said it wouldn’t be as painful as the Trial to face my past…”

—If what Subaru saw really was a part of the Trial, then even in scratching the surface, he already felt like he was facing the worst possible continuation.

That scene, to Subaru, went even further than Hell.

Subaru had seen Hell many times before. He was aware of that.

If it meant reaching for the best possible future, then he was prepared to witness as many Hells as necessary.

—But, to go deeper than Hell, to know of a world even worse than Hell, was…

“Witness, a present that was not to be.”

Subaru: “—Wh?!”

In the face of that terrifying experience, at a loss as to stay or to retreat, Subaru heard a whisper scraping across his ear.

Just as his body tensed from the shock—the sensation of his consciousness slipping once again came visiting.

Bracing the fall with his arms, but unable to support himself, he collapsed shoulder-first onto the floor.

He tried lifting his face in an effort to stay conscious, but neither his eyelids nor his neck could resist that invisible force as he was instantly dragged into the depths of the abyss.

—The Trial, the deepest pit of Hell, once again welcomed Subaru.

“—.”

When he opened his eyes, Subaru found himself on a field of grass, at the scene where Julius’ sword had cut open his throat—as he was forced to bear witness to his sins once more.

Chapter 71:
Ending List

1

From the slit where the blade entered his skin, shallow and sharp, life was leaking out.

Fresh, gushing blood dotted the green grass, while Subaru's body reflexively convulsed under the watching, purple-haired youth.

Turning up the whites of his eyes, foaming at the mouth, mass volumes of blood spouted from his mouth and neck. Gradually, the intensity of the bleeding waned, until, hearing a sound like a sigh,

{—.}

Subaru clearly understood that his past self had died.

It wasn't because his present and past selves shared the same senses. But still, the vivid sensation of his neck being sliced open resounded without end within Subaru's disembodied consciousness —and soul.

Julius: "Lady Emilia, if you would wipe his… Subaru's face clean…"

Emilia: "…"

Julius: "He would have wanted you, rather than me, to do this. To have it be your hands."

Wiping off his bloodied Knight's Sword and returning it to its scabbard, Julius muttered to the stupefied Emilia.

At the feet of the fallen Subaru, lying face-up on the ground, the silver-haired girl fell hard onto her knees. Her amethyst eyes were devoid of emotion, refusing to accept reality. Nor did she wipe away the teartrails on her cheeks, glistening in the light.

Seeing Emilia like this sent sharp pain gouging into Subaru's non-existent chest. Her grieving expression brought out the punishment Subaru had refused to see, made it bare its fangs, and scoured away the callous approach he had taken up to now.

Emilia: “Suba…ru.”

Her hand slowly crept onto his face, wiping off the blood and spewed contents with her palm. Barehanded, she did not mind the filth as she did her best to turn Subaru’s expression that was twisted in agony into something presentable. And once she finished wiping off the blood,

Emilia: “Why…? Why, Subaru… why did you…”

A question. Emilia asked this empty question to someone who could never respond.

He had neither ears to listen, nor a mouth to answer.

Nothing Emilia could say would ever reach the lifeless Subaru again.

{—.}

Watching this from above, Subaru searched his memories for the context of this new scene.

—It was the second time he battled Petelgeuse, when, unable to resist possession, Subaru’s body was destroyed along with that madman.

Ferris’ magic had sent the mana of his body into a frenzy, overloading his vessels and organs, so his death couldn’t have been called pretty. Blistering rashes covered his exposed skin, and broken blood vessels had dyed his half-open eyes red.

Before being wiped away, the blood from his nose had painted the lower half of his face, and if it weren’t for Julius’ timely coup-de-grace, his death would have been even more grotesque.

But no matter how neat his death might’ve been, it would’ve been no consolation for the ones who remained. Especially those who survived the battle against the White Whale and the final showdown with Sloth, about to set off on their triumphant return to the Capital—the dejection and regret on all their faces wrenched at his heart.

Wilhelm: “Sir Subaru… I must beg your forgiveness…”

Dropping to his knees, Wilhelm lowered his head in front of the lifeless Subaru.

Having slain all the Witch Cultists under Petelgeuse’ command, Wilhelm’s expression took on a bitter taste at the outcome of their battle. Of the old Knights of the expedition, some joined in their lamentations with Wilhelm’s, while others punched their fists into the ground. There were even some who teared up from their emotions.

Subaru fell speechless to see his death so mourned.

That was perhaps even more overwhelming than being shown the events after his own death.

Emilia: “Why… would you go to such lengths to help me? … Say, Subaru… why did you?”

Setting her hand on the silent Subaru’s cheeks, Emilia went on calling with words that would not reach him.

Witnessing her grief, it was only now, that Subaru realized:

In this world, Subaru had never answered Emilia’s question.

He had never given her his honest answer to the question she asked in the Capital, “Why do you want to help me?”.

And so, Emilia still didn’t know the reason behind Subaru’s selfless devotion.

—Though decisively different from the scene he was shown before, both were the results of his irrevocable sins.

Julius: “The world has long suffered from the Witch Cult, and we have slain its vanguard, Sloth. To the world, this is a momentous accomplishment. —However.”

Looking down at Subaru’s corpse, Julius tapped his finger on the hilt of his sheathed sword. Over and over, as the intervals between the taps gradually shortened,

Julius: “That could not make up for all the sacrifices made to achieve this. —I would have liked to speak more with you. Natsuki Subaru.”

With that pained mutter, Julius turned away from Subaru’s lifeless face.

The knight looked up to the sky, his eyes harboring a melancholy gloom,

Julius: “I would have liked to call you friend.”

By the sound of Julius’ exhausted whisper, the world of the grass fields was brought to an end.

2

Again, all fell to black, as the returning Subaru woke with a jolt.

Subaru: “—Dgh, hwa! …ah, aaah, hah, haaa?!”

He found himself writhing on the cold, hard floor.

The stench of moss invaded his nostrils as he rolled on the ground, immersed in that senseless act as if to escape from the emotions threatening to sweep up a storm inside him.

“What on earth is happening?” was not the question on his mind.

Tumbling, rolling, his inner-ear aching, he was straining his lungs gasping for air just so he could divert a little of his awareness away from his thoughts, even if so only a sliver could be plunged into unconsciousness.

Subaru: “—ug, guh!”

But even that demeaning attempt to distract himself failed the moment he bounced off a wall.

The collision drove pain into his spine, and he could feel blood seeping from his grazed forehead. Drawing gasp after gasp with his face against the floor, before he realized it, tears were streaming from his eyes.

—Pathetic. Stupid. Hopeless.

Just how many times, and to what extent, would Natsuki Subaru have to crumble under his own weakness?

And just what would he need to do to acquire that heart of steel that could remain unshaken no matter what transpired, and no matter what pain he would have to endure?

He was so weak, so brittle, and that was why Subaru had always—

Subaru: "Pretended not to see it, and averted my gaze… so is this my punishment…?"

There was no way he had never thought of it.

In some corner of Subaru's consciousness, more than once, the possibility must have occurred to him.

But even so, the thought never rose to the surface, because he was subconsciously refusing to seek and verify the truth.

For Subaru, who could Return by Death, the moment he begins to consider the existence of worlds after his death—his entire strategy would crumble beneath his feet.

Everything Natsuki Subaru had hoped to save had left him behind.

Or rather, it was Natsuki Subaru who had left them behind. Pathetically and selfishly choosing to embrace death, Subaru had abandoned those worlds in order to escape to new ones.

If the worlds left behind by Natsuki Subaru's thoughtless decisions still existed, it would be exactly what he had just been shown.

Through Death, Subaru had sought relief from Hell, and those scenes were what followed.

Subaru: "—Can't… be."

Before he knew it, his consciousness began to grow distant once more.

Unlike sleepiness, here, his consciousness was rapidly turning white as if forcibly being severed from reality.

"Witness, a present that was not to be."

Again, the unrecognizable voice whispered in his ear.

"Whose voice was it?" His fading consciousness was desperately asking—until he realized it.

—Without the slightest doubt, that voice was his own.

3

In front of the corpse's shattered skull, a young girl was kneeling.

Having fallen from such heights, no human flesh could survive the impact without shattering. His black hair, along with the contents of his scalp, were splattered over the ground, blooming into a crimson flower of death.

"—."

The sensation of his consciousness being switched wasn't surprising anymore.

He had expected this the moment his awareness was forcibly cut.

But what he did not expect was the sight he would be presented with when his consciousness awoke—

???: "Spewing nonsense until the very end… when nothing… can…"

Fallen to his death, Subaru's body was sprawled out over the ground. Standing beside him, spitting this out, was a girl with peach-colored hair—Ram.

Her usually impeccable grooming had been flustered, and visible rips and tears riddled the ends of her maid's uniform. On her face, which she had always consciously kept expressionless, was some unbearably complex and enraged emotion.

Rather than regret for Subaru's death—it was closer to fury at this outcome.

Ram violently scratched her head, and turned around.

Ram: "So, was this all according to your designs, Lady Beatrice? You stood in my path just so he could…"

Beatrice: "…"

Just as she was setting off her accusation, Ram's face stiffened as she stopped mid-sentence.

For reflected in her light-pink irises, was Beatrice, kneeling beside Subaru's corpse. Unworried about dirtying her dress, the girl just sat there on the ground—while Ram's gaze wavered, seeing her like this.

Ram: "Lady Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "—why."

She softly murmured.

Paying no mind to Ram's existence, Beatrice single-mindedly kept her eyes on the dead Subaru.

Tears were trailing from the corners of her blue eyes, even Subaru could see it.

—Beatrice was crying.

At Subaru's death.

The fact plunged a knife of guilt into Subaru's heart.

Feeling the depths of his non-existent eyes heat up from the heart-gouging pain, he wanted to run up to that small, little girl, and say something, anything to her.

Yet he lacked the legs, arms, and mouth to do so.

Beatrice: "You… aren't, that person… I know that… at least… but…"

Her face devoid of expression, Beatrice whispered as if in a daze while the teardrops continued to fall.

Before that heart-rending figure, Ram gave up trying to say anything further. She exhaled a sigh, and turned her scornful eyes towards Subaru's corpse, and its neck, bent upwards at an outrageous angle,

Ram: "What nonsense… Love us—you're truly beyond saving."

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"Witness, a present that was not to be."

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As if the very air was being frozen, a white, misty cold presided over the world.

The frozen forest broke apart at every gust of wind, and, unable to maintain their existence in this mana-starved environment, all was returning to dust.

The trees, the streets, the creatures, and the world all fell to white, crystalline particles in the sweeping gale, as the White End slowly consumed the earth.

"—."

This time, Subaru was witnessing the ending of the world.

Mirroring the white void that was his consciousness, the world awaited its cold and merciful end.

Except,

???: “—So, you’ve come.”

The sombre voice, quaking the atmosphere as it bellowed, was one of agreement.

Immediately, followed the deafening boom of earthshaking tremor as the impact of the behemoth’s fall reshaped the landscape. Trees snapped and toppled, shattering upon each other like icicles as the forest was wiped into flat, barren land.

The one that flattened the frozen forest was an enormous, four-legged, almost feline creature coated in grey fur.

Half of the beast’s overflowing teeth were broken, while white mists escaped the gaps between its sword-like fangs. Collapsed onto its side, its radiant, golden irises turned to look at something in front of it.

And, with trembling, almost convulsing motions,

Beast: “A shame… I knew this would happen, and yet I couldn’t change a thing.”

???: “—I’ve more or less grasped what had transpired. Indeed, it is regrettable.”

The beast spoke, not to lament its defeat, but simply in knowing acceptance of the truth. And, it was a strikingly clear and elegant voice that replied.

In a world that was ending, that voice did not suffer the slightest loss of vitality or strength. Standing tall and straight, with red hair fluttering in the ivory wind, was a blue-eyed youth.

Youth: “Lady Emilia and Subaru are no longer in this world, I take it?”

Beast: “Lia is sleeping, eternally. A world without that child has no reason to exist. And I, having failed to protect that child, am just as guilty as that man—”

Youth: “So for that reason, you would destroy the world?”

Beast: “I knew that I would be obstructed. But doing so was my oath.”

Unsheathed from its dragon-talon scabbard, the glinting steel was pointed at the beast’s snout—at Puck, in his true form, while, wielding it, the Sword-Saint Reinhard quietly shook his head.

Harbored within his sapphire eyes, was a deep, and compassionate sorrow.

Reinhard: “I understand your regret. And I feel the same. But that does not mean you may ruthlessly vent that regret upon this land. Your actions, and your oath would bring chaos to this world. —And I shall never permit it.”

Puck: “Because that would be unjust?”

Reinhard: “Yes, because that would be unjust. —I am the exemplar of Justice. The sword to rectify error. And thus, I shall slay you here. Oh Venerated Great Spirit.”

Despite their overwhelming disparity in mass, which side the balance of power favored was too plain to see.

Even Puck, in his true form, failing to mar Reinhard’s unfazed expression, was on his dying breaths. By simply drawing a silver arc with the point of his outstretched sword, Reinhard’s blade would carve the spirit’s existence in two.

Expelling an outward surge of his Swordsmanship-Aura, Reinhard was loudly proclaiming this fact.

Puck: “—kh.”

The sound led Reinhard to furrow his brows.

Even Subaru's disembodied consciousness felt something akin to confusion in his scant emotions.

Brief and intermittent, it was difficult to make out what that sound may be.

Difficult, simply because it was so hard to believe that it was precisely what it sounded like.

Puck: "Kh, kheheh…haha, hhahaha!"

Reinhard: "—What's so funny?"

With his throat trembling, and on the verge of death, Puck's face twisted as he burst into laughter.

Even with his life and death in another's hands, and having had his actions impeded, Puck was laughing. Unable to fathom his meaning, Reinhard asked this question.

But Puck only seemed to find his reaction even more hilarious.

Puck: "What's so funny? It's funny, of course it's funny. Reinhard, you… no, what would this upstart possibly know?"

Reinhard: "…"

Puck: "I remember now. How it was meant to be. It took me long enough to understand it. And, having understood, when I saw how you still don't know, it's so funny I couldn't help myself."

There was something different about the tone and volume of that statement that was completely unlike Puck.

For Subaru, who had plenty of memories of seeing Puck in his cat-form, this was the first time he had heard such malice in his words.

This was different from his loathing towards Subaru and Petelgeuse after Emilia was killed. At that time, Puck was still Puck.

This time, the laughter directed at Reinhard was nothing like what he had ever seen from Puck before, but something else entirely—

Reinhard: “…I will make sure that there are no more casualties. If you want someone to hate, then hate me.”

Puck: “I don’t hate you, Reinhard. You are a hero. And a hero has a hero’s role to fill. I don’t resent or fault you for following your creed.”

Reinhard: “…”

Puck: “You are a hero, Reinhard. —A hero is all you will ever be.”

At the end of the end, he uttered the most spiteful remark of them all.

With the fall of the last syllable, Reinhard lifted his sword over his head, and in a single flash of his Swordsmanship—from the glint of his blade’s edge an intense heat shot out.

Cleaving through the air, piercing the atmosphere and shattering the earth, the maelstrom of up-swept mana severed everything along the line of the swung-out blade—and, as the light settled, the world parted before Subaru’s disembodied eyes.

Reinhard: “…”

At the close of the torrential sword-slash, the world that was covered in the white, encompassing cold was born anew.

The parted world was mended, as the spiral of mana faded into a ring, returning to the atmosphere. From the shattered earth, flowers budded and bloomed. The pierced-through air was imbued with warmth, as sunlight peered from the severed sky.

The Sword-Saint’s strike simultaneously brought about the world’s end as well as its rebirth.

—While the colossal beast that was rent by that strike vanished without a trace.

Indisputably present only moments ago, the enormous body was gone, and no indication of its destruction remained.

"—."

With a shrill ring, Reinhard returned his Knight's Sword to its scabbard.

The wind caressing the bangs of his red hair, Reinhard squinted his eyes as he looked up to the sky while spilling an all but inaudible sigh.

Reinhard: "—Lady Felt will surely be saddened."

He whispered, closing his eyes.

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"Witness, a present that was not to be."

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"Witness, a present that was not to be."

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"Witness, a present that was not to be."

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"Witness, a present that was not to be."

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"Witness, a present that was not to be."

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“Witness, a present that was not to—.”

Intermission:
Tea Party

“Parallel Universes, that’s one school of thought. It states that, separate from the universe we are living in now, there exists many alternate universes following along a similar path.”

The person speaking was trying her best to suppress the waves of excitement in her voice. Accompanying that lecture-like statement, she was lightly tapping her fingers on the table in a pleasant and even rhythm.

“That sounds, huu… like it’s, haa… kind of complicated.”

“It’s not that hard to wrap your head around. Imagine infinite Parallel Worlds, each being generated by just one difference in choice. For example, say there is a split in the road on your way home. Both paths ultimately lead to your house, and there is a you who went right and a you who went left—that possibility would already constitute an extremely small-scale Parallel Universe.”

Hearing the response to the lethargic voice, a spirited voice butted in. “What. So you’re saying that there’re so many worlds out there that we can’t even count them? That’s just stupid.”

The lecturing speaker returned a wry smile, and raised a finger in front of her impatient companion. “It’s not nearly so ridiculous. Indeed, that last example may have been too narrow to convey the sheer scope of the variations… but you can definitely apply it to a grander scale as well.”

“Grander scale… like what?”

“Let’s see, right. —Imagine if you had abandoned the isolated Elven vanguard on Boroid Plains, what would have happened then?”

“…”

“…Hmm. I was expecting you to be more infuriated by that.”

“It’s simple why I’m not angry. Even if you repeat that situation tens, hundreds, or thousands of times, I would always’ve chosen to throw my fists into the fray—so your Parallel Universe or whatever would never’ve come to be!” With that forceful proclamation, the speaker threw her foot right onto the table. Seeing her literally “Putting her foot down” on the matter, the lecturer let slip a small smile. Noticing this, the spirited one angrily scowled up her pretty face. “What’s so funny?!”

“No, I mean that was very manly of you, but your panties are showing, Minerva.”

“Aa, kya! What, you dumbass! Unbelievable! Idiot! Dumbass! Duuumbass! Blockhead! Stupid! So stupid! You stupid dumbass!” Shouting curses that exposed the limits of her vocabulary, the blond-haired girl—the Witch of Wrath, Minerva—pulled her foot off the table with tears in her eyes, quickly closing her legs and holding down her skirt with her hands.

She looked up furiously—at the white-haired Witch sitting opposite her. But,

????: “Haa. Leaving aside who’s right or wrong here, huu… your panties… haa… you kind of did that to yourself, Minerva, always so unladylike, huu… no point blaming anyone else for it… haa.”

Minerva: “Unladylike! Like you’re one to say that, Sekhmet. As if you ever wear anything other than that… actually, when’s the last time you changed your robes?”

Minerva swiped her harsh glare onto the Witch of Sloth—Sekhmet, plopped on the table, completely buried in her long, magenta hair.

Under that sea of hair, a head moved and peeked out between the gaps, looking back at Minerva.

Sekhmet: “You just throw it over your head, huu…it’s the most convenient…haa… Typhon wipes my body for me…huu…so it’s not like I get filthy or anything…haa.”

Minerva: “You go criticizing other people’s behavior when you…

Augh, aughh, aughhh…what do you want?! So I'm to blame? It's all my fault? You want me to beat you clean here?!"

Minerva angrily waved her fist about, while Sekhmet turned her head away without saying a word.

Seeing Sekhmet lose even the energy to speak, a blue vein popped up on Minerva's forehead, but, as if having grown used to her temper, Sekhmet already completely lost interest.

Taking over for the spent Witch of Sloth, the first Witch—the Witch of Greed, Echidna, clapped her hands together and carried on the conversation,

Echidna: "I do understand your anger, but as much as I find it delightful, I would like to continue on our topic now."

Minerva: "Hrrmph. You're the one provoking me with all that Parallel Worlds rubbish, Echidna. I'm angry. I'm enraged. I'm furious…"

Echidna: "Right right. Now, on with Parallel Universes. If that last example didn't stick… let's see. What do you think would have happened if Flugel never sealed the pact with Volcanica?"

Holding a finger to her lips, Echidna mischievously smiled as she raised this question to Minerva.

Minerva swallowed her breath and narrowed her blue eyes.

Minerva: "If Volcanica and Flugel never sealed their pact, Reid couldn't have stopped her by himself… and the world would've been swallowed."

Echidna: "If it had been swallowed, what then, I wonder. Of all the world, only the Witch of Envy would remain. Perhaps, a Parallel Universe in which this is the case even exists. And, if it does, won't you find it incredibly interesting?"

Minerva: "Your eyes always get so gross whenever you talk about her, Echidna. —I'm really not that mad at her. I just can't share your wrath on that one."

Echidna: “Well, that’s one way to approach it, I suppose. —Your wrath is the delightful kind. That’s why you were the most lovable of all the Witches.”

Echidna said in past tense, while Minerva looked away with a small snort and crossed her arms, emphasizing her abundant breasts with a jolt of her back.

Minerva: “I’m not looking to be loved. All I want is for conflict to be wiped from this world, for all the suffering, grief, and cries and wails of pain to be exterminated by my fists. I don’t need anything else on my path. My rage, my wrath, and my healing fists—are my everything.”

Minerva proclaimed her life’s purpose without a shadow of a doubt.

Without reserve or hesitation, it was conviction from which nothing could lead her astray.

Truly, this was Wrath—directed at the world, an inexhaustible fury forming the roots of her existence from which all else was built.

???: “Well, you’re free to say that as you want~. But you get so happy when people praise you you can’t help but grin so big~, that’s what’s so cute about you, Neru-Neru~.”

Dragging the ends of her sentences, a rather dopey voice cut into the conversation.

It came from opposite Sekhmet, and from Minerva’s left.

???: “Neru-Neru~, you really are Witch-tier when it comes to not being honest with your feelings~. I like that about you so much I just want to eat it~.”

Minerva: “Shut up, Daphne. You were sleeping until now, why did you have to wake up all of a sudden?”

Daphne: “But I’ve been awake ever since Neru-Neru made a ruckus and started flashing your undies. You go around wearing a tiny skirt that flies up whenever you move, and still you wear those flashy undies~, tsk tsk~, Neru-Neru~.”

Minerva: “Y-You’re one to talk! You’re younger than me, and yours are simply obscene! The hell is that? That’s not underwear, that’s a string, dumbass! What’re you, a dumbass?! Stupid dumbass! Seriously, you’re just a hopeless dumbass, you know that? Dumbass dumbass!”

Red in the face and teary-eyed from emotion, Minerva squeaked back—while the one happily ignoring her would be the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne.

With her body completely restrained and her eyes covered by criss-crossing blindfolds, her small body was settled inside a strange black coffin. Though this thing was just casually hanging out at the table like it was natural, to an outsider, this tea party must have seemed utterly surreal.

Running out of insults to throw at Daphne (though it was just saying “Dumbass” over and over), Minerva plopped back into her chair, buried her face in her palms, and slumped over the table.

Minerva: “Whatsthiswhatsthiswhatsthis! Like, is this supposed to be my fault? It’s not like I’m doing it to get praised, but of course you’re gonna be happy when someone praises you. When someone says “Thank you”, of course you’re gonna think “I’m so glad I did that”. Is that so wrong? Am I in the wrong here? I want to heal everyone but I want to be healed too…”

Echidna: “The fact that you didn’t explode into a state of self-abandon just now is just a part of your charm, I suppose. —Now.”

Leaving aside Minerva, who had checked out of the conversation by sinking into a sea of her own brooding, Echidna set her sights on Daphne.

With both eyes covered, Daphne shouldn’t have been able to sense Echidna’s gaze, but her small nose nonetheless twitched adorably with a few little sniffs,

Daphne: “Dona-Dona, what’re you staring at Daphne for~? Unlike Neru-Neru and Met-Met~, Daphne can’t stand a whole conversation with you, you know~. Besides…haa… haaa~… I’m already running out of calories~."

Echidna: "There's nothing more foolish than asking cooperation from a Witch… I've already learned that far too well while I was alive… but I never thought this conversation would go this badly, you've all outdone yourselves, I almost want to congratulate you."

Mumbling this, Echidna lifted her right hand and gave her fingers a snap.

Instantly, a steaming cup of tea and a plate full of cookies appeared in front of Daphne. Her blindfolded eyes widening, Daphne immediately lit up at the appearance of food.

Echidna: "Of course, I don't intend to keep you waiting, so if you want to eat befor…"

Daphne: "Gafugafu~ Omuomu~ Muchumuchu~."

Echidna: "Forget I said anything… though I'd rather hoped you would practice better table manners."

Echidna shrugged, while in front of her, Daphne threw her whole upper body onto the table as she ate. —Quite literally, she was putting her whole body into it.

Even though she was making eating noises with her mouth, the tea and pastries were sucked in directly upon contact with her skin. The offered tea and pastries, along with the potteryware, all disappeared inside Daphne, instantly becoming Gluttony's feed.

Daphne: "Aaa~, so tasty~, so sweet~. …Oh~, sorry~. I went a little overboard and gobbled the table too~."

Echidna: ""Don't worry about it"… or well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but I more or less realized this would happen the moment I invited you. Other than please be more careful, I've nothing more to ask of you."

Daphne: "Dona-Dona~, would you tell birds not to fly and fishes not to swim too~?"

Hearing Daphne's roundabout refusal, Echidna sighed, while, having finished her treat, Daphne wriggled her body and continued with "Alright~",

Daphne: "My tummy's got food in it~, so I'll keep Dona-Dona company a bit longer~. —You were saying something about Parallel Universes~?"

Echidna: "That's right. Daphne, do you have any thoughts on it?"

Daphne: "I don't really think anything~? What if this and this~, then maybe that and that~, my tummy won't be filled even if I think about it~. Haa, but if it's a split about whether I'll eat meat tonight or fish tonight~, then maybe it won't be so silly to think about~."

Echidna: "In your case, Daphne, there's nothing to complain about in terms of comprehension… looks like it's just a matter of capturing your interest. That's also to be expected, I guess."

Out of all the Witches, Daphne's temperament could be considered mild.

The problem was that her very existence was a calamity to other living things, and, regardless of temperament, this vicious constitution made her hopelessly unsuited for coexistence with others.

Sekhmet: "So in the end. Haa. Even if we speculate about Parallel Worlds, huu. It's completely useless, haa… isn't it… huu."

The one inserting this unprogressive comment into the conversation was the Witch of Sloth, still entirely slumped over the table. Blanketed in her own long hair, she looked at the onlooking Echidna, and then at the onsmelling Daphne.

Sekhmet: "Even if you accept this school of thought and the existence of these branching worlds, haa. There's no way to really know or experience it for yourself, huu. So then, they'll only be bubbles of unreachable possibilities, haa. Ones that'll pop and vanish the moment you touch them, huu."

Echidna: “Indeed, from a realistic perspective, it is as you say. Even if we are aware of the existence of Parallel Worlds, they could not be observed. Parallel, is truly an apt description. Two lines, never to meet—Parallel Worlds would mean different worlds extending in parallel.”

Minerva: “…”But, that’s not the case for the Second Trial”, right?”

As Echidna summarized Sekhmet’s argument, her conclusion was finished off by Minerva’s thorny interruption. Minerva’s lovely face was dyed red with fury,

Minerva: “If Echidna’s going out of her way to talk about it, it must be heading somewhere mean. Right? Caught you out, didn’t I. Must feel like I jabbed you where it hurts, doesn’t it. If you don’t want to be found out, then don’t do something that you’d want to hide.”

Echidna: “I didn’t even say it, and you’re already mad at me. I’d feel troubled too, you know… But well, it’s true that I can’t deny it. After all, that’s how the Second Trial was supposed to work.”

Watching Minerva punch a dent into the table, Echidna lightly reached out, as a book with black binding appeared in her hand.

This was Echidna’s book of forbidden knowledge which held the world’s Past, Present, and Future—the “Memories of the World”.

If the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, Echidna, ever felt like it, she could access any information, knowledge, or history within this world. But, out of personal preference, she seemed to feel an aversion to using the power of this forbidden tome.

Echidna: “The Second Trial reads into the challenger’s heart, and finds every crossroad he had passed—one could also call it “Regret”. The Memories of the World recreates the different choices he might have made, as “Presents that were not to be”. In its very nature, compared to the First Trial of facing one’s past, and the Third Trial of overcoming one’s future, the Second Trial is somewhat easier to pass.”

Minerva: “Easier to pass, what do you mean?”

Echidna: “It’s a question of whether one could see the world as Daphne does. As Sekhmet said, so-called Parallel Worlds would ultimately remain separated, untouchable lines never to meet. Regardless of regret, or longing, they could never be reached.”

Minerva: “And here your Trial is shoving those lines right in people’s faces!”

Seeing Minerva turn up the ends of her eyes in annoyance, Echidna lightly shrugged.

She brushed her hand through her own white hair, and said, as if to calm the now standing Minerva,

Echidna: “To the common person, the Second Trial is indeed easier to pass. Compared to having to overcome a past that actually happened, the Second Trial merely touches on “Possibilities of what could be”. It is each person’s freedom to accept or deny it… and all one has to do is to accept the present, actual world.”

Minerva: “The actual, world…”

Echidna: “And we are back to the question of perspective. Sekhmet, Daphne, or even you could easily find the solution. —If you could do that, then you would pass the Trial.”

Listening to Echidna’s explanation, Minerva gave a begrudgingly nod.

Indeed, if it was as Echidna said, then the Trial isn’t as harsh as she thought.

For all the Witches present—or even just for anyone with a clear sense of self identity, it should be easy to pass that Trial.

Daphne: “If so~, then why~, is Subarun having such a hard time with it~? Subarun doesn’t look like a child with no sense of identity~.”

Echidna: “—In his case… hm.”

Recalling Subaru in her memories, for some reason, Daphne started making a chewing motion with her mouth. Overlooking this behavior, Echidna closed her eyes to ponder on her words,

Echidna: “The Second Trial is an observation of Parallel Worlds. In a sense, it is an act of witnessing the implications of one’s regrets. Like I said, it is easy to accept or deny it. —In fact, one would only have to rationalize it by noting that reality never progressed this way.”

“But”, Echidna continued,

Echidna: “Only in his case, this wouldn’t apply. It was even a surprise to me that the Second Trial hit him this hard. —Truly, unexpected.”

Daphne: “Sniff~ sniff~… I could smell you grinning with joy, Dona-Dona~.”

Minerva: “She gets happy whenever she sees something she couldn’t predict, I bet. Nasty pervert… just hopeless.”

Echidna: “Birds of a feather. Since you are all my friends, you aren’t exempt from that, either.”

Daphne chuckled while Minerva puffed with rage, and, if one listened carefully, one could hear snoring coming from Sekhmet’s general direction. Taking each of these Witches’ reactions into her eyes, Echidna rocked in her chair, when,

??????: “Dona~, Typhon’s hungry too~.”

Running up from the meadow with little steps was a little girl. As if to leap onto the table on the hill, she called out to Echidna.

With green hair and auburn skin, and her white teeth beaming in her smile, it was the Witch of Pride, Typhon.

Seeing the girl who had avoided getting involved in the tricky conversation and had instead passed her time playing in the meadow, Echidna smiled back,

Echidna: “Sorry for boring you. Now for Typhon’s tea… should I make it extra sweet? And do you want your regular treats?”

Typhon: “Anything’s good~. Running around a lot took up all my strength, I want drink and eat and rest now~.”

Saying this with incredible energy, Typhon pulled out an empty chair next to Sekhmet and hopped onto it. Then, with one hand playing with Sekhmet’s long hair, she used the other to stuff her face with treats Echidna had made appear with a snap of her fingers, spraying crumbs all over the table.

This scene might just bring out a smile onto the face of someone who was ignorant of Typhon’s nature.

Echidna: “You must be tired too, from looking after Typhon?”

???????: “Th… that’s not, true…though? T-Typhon’s a good girl, and, her powers… also, wouldn’t, work… on, me, you know? S-So, it’s fine. I’m, doing just fine.”

Looking up at Echidna from her side, the one who arrived at the tea party one step behind Typhon gave this stuttering reply with a weak smile rising on her face.

With her pink hair reaching down to her waists, the girl gave off a shockingly ephemeral vibe. Though there was nothing outstanding about her features, for some reason, she just naturally attracted one’s gaze.

More than anything, like a small animal, the impressions of her expressions and bearing tugged powerfully on one’s heartstrings.

Echidna: “Take a seat, Camilla. —I’ve called you here for a reason.”

Camilla: “I-Is, something…st, starting? It, wo…won’t be scary?”

Echidna: “It won’t scare you or hurt you. —I just, need your help to get the pieces moving.”

Sitting down next to her, Camilla—the Witch of Lust, timidly looked back at Echidna. Echidna gave her a smile, and lithely flung out her arms, Echidna: “—With your love, I wish to rescue a poor lost lamb.”

Echidna said in the trembling voice of a Witch, and offered her her outstretched arms—

Chapter 72: Bad End 1, 5, 11

1

How many times does my heart have to break before I can be forgiven?

???: “And it’s already over… this job really wasn’t worth taking.”

In a dark warehouse, gazing down on the three corpses submerged in an ocean of blood, a black-robed beauty slightly tilted her head.

Even in this blood-suffused scene, the absurdity of her skill ensured that she wasn’t touched by a single drop, while the abnormality of her mind was such that she remained utterly unfazed by this carnage.

Without a doubt, this was what they’d call a monster in human skin.

Stepping across the floor soaked in blood, the monster looked over the fallen corpses with interest.

A giant old man with one arm severed at the shoulder and profuse blood draining down his head. A black-haired youth with a perfect line sliced across his stomach, having died writhing as his intestines spilled out.

—And, a silver-haired girl, slashed in two from her left shoulder to her right waist.

—How many times had he struggled and fought just so he wouldn’t have to witness this scene?

???: “In terms of the outcome of the assignment, this is as bad as it gets… Now just what is all this, I wonder.”

Holding a finger to her red lips, the monster casually made this awfully out-of-place mutter. Dangling in her other hand, was a sinister, bloody, crooked blade—her Kukri Knife.

Swaying the weapon that had just stolen three—no, four separate lives in this loot house, the monster named Elsa let out a splendid smile.

Elsa: "—Aya."

Elsa tilted her head, and lightly leaped backward.

Immediately, a blade of ice stabbed into the floor where Elsa had been standing. A sequence of icy spears followed, pursuing Elsa's steps with shearing, biting fangs.

Elsa: "Now this is…"

????: "How—dare you."

Before the evading Elsa, dim specks of light gathered in the empty space as the figure of a small spirit took shape.

The floating cat-spirit—Puck's expression was perilous, while his androgynous voice was trembling with rage.

Puck: "You shall regret taking Lia's life—"

Elsa: "Ah, so the girl… was a Spirits-Arts User. Marvelous… I've never opened a spirit's stomach before. —Though."

Facing the battle-ready Puck surrounded by floating ice lances, Elsa's expression reveled in the premonition of battle. But, before raising her guard, she squinted a single eye,

Elsa: "Why didn't you show up before that child died? Spirits and Spirit-Arts Users should be teams of two—it's a shame if I can't enjoy the full experience."

Puck: "Shut it with your drivel, murderer. —If I weren't bound by my Contract, I…"

Puck shook his head with an expression twisted in vexation.

He bared his fang, pointing his little arm at Elsa,

Puck: “I have no intention to chat. I will freeze you, and lay Lia’s soul to rest. After you, the Kingdom, the world, then the Dragon and the Witch. Everything.”

Elsa: “Hhaa~, marvellous—I’ll be enjoying this!”

Elsa leaped, crawling along the walls and ceiling like a spider. With her slender frame as the target, icicles shot forth in quick succession, piercing the walls of the loot house and freezing the atmosphere, as its shrill shrieks rang through the air.

All vision clouded over with white, until nothing could be seen.

Not the incidentally intertwined fingers on the floor, nor Subaru and Emilia’s corpses. Nothing.

2

—How many times do I have to be betrayed by this world before I can be rewarded?

Rem: “I was merely preventing the situation from getting any worse. By the time I found him, Subaru’s state was already beyond saving. —He would have wished to be put down immediately.”

Emilia: “And, so… that’s what that… horrible end…was. Is that what you are saying… Rem? Subaru was my benefactor, and there was so much we would have liked to talk about… and you…”

He heard the quarreling words of his two beloved girls.

One voice called out within Subaru both immense adoration and insurmountable grief.

And the other voice, when he stood in the face of adversity, how many times, how clingingly, how imploringly, and how sweetly, had he wished to be touched by that voice.

The blue-haired girl and the silver-haired girl faced each other, as a turbulent atmosphere flowed throughout the room.

The place was the lounge in the Mansion, the two were seated on either side of the table, and the situation was set to explode.

Roswaal: “We~~ll now, Lady Emilia mustn’t get carried away, either. Fi~~rst of all, we should he~~ar what Rem’s ha~~s to say, no?”

Emilia: “Roswaal… do you understand what has happened here? Rem… your servant, has caused the… dea… death… of my benefactor… and your guest… Subaru.”

Roswaal: “O~~f course I understand. Tha~~t is why I’m… making sure we keep the conversation in line. —We mustn’t let any misunderstandings get in the way of our mutual fe~elings.”

Roswaal narrowed his yellow eye as he replied. Then, the clown turned his gaze towards Rem, seated beside him. Sensing his gaze, Rem nodded,

Rem: “Late last night in the East Wing… there was an intruder on Lady Emilia’s level. Alerted to this by the alarm gems, Rem immediately went to the scene, and that’s when I found Subaru crawling on the floor.”

Ram: “Barusu was already under the curse’s effects by then.”

Rem: “Yes, it is as Big Sister said. Subaru was weakened to the verge of death. The curse’s effects had sapped his life-force to its absolute limit, and I determined that saving him was impossible…”

Emilia: “And so you crushed him to death with your flail. —That only added to his suffering.”

Ram: “Lady Emilia—”

Holding Rem’s hand at her side, Ram shot a harsh glare towards Emilia. But Emilia’s sharp, unrelenting gaze remained locked onto Rem,

Emilia: “The facts are facts. …Subaru’s body, his arm, and his head… If you wanted to put him out of his misery, there should have been a gentler way. Instead, why did you…”

Rem: “That’s, because…”

Emilia: “…”

Rem couldn’t answer Emilia’s question.

She did not say anything further, perhaps because her personality was not one for telling lies, and Emilia’s words had struck the core of her true motives.

Rem had harbored intense distrust towards Subaru back then.

After the second round of the loops in the Mansion—having failed to conceal Subaru’s corpse after crushing him to death in the hallway, events led to this current discussion here.

Subaru’s friendly interaction with Ram must have only further inflamed her hostility, to the point where she could no longer resist her murderous intent.

—Just what was she thinking when she swung her iron flail towards Subaru in the upper floors of the Mansion?

Perhaps even Rem didn’t know this herself.

Emilia: “—It was a slip of the hand… or because you hesitated… those were the answers I wanted to hear…”

Rem: “—hg.”

With closed eyes, Emilia sadly murmured as Rem’s face shot up.

It was unclear how much of Rem’s true feelings Emilia had grasped when she said those words. And it would always, forever remain unclear.

Roswaal: “Lady Emilia, where are you going?”

Seeing Emilia stand up, patting off the hems of her skirt, Roswaal’s expression vanished as he asked her this question.

Hearing it, Emilia brushed her hand over her long, silver hair, Emilia: “—I’m leaving. It has only been a short while, but thank you for your hospitality. Without your backing, I would not have been able to participate in the Royal Selection. But… I cannot trust you anymore.”

Roswaal: “Even if you don’t trust us, surely our relationship of mutual utilization would still be beneficial, don’t you think? Forfeiting your place for the sake of a tantrum couldn’t be called a wise decision.”

Emilia: “Tantrum…?”

Hearing Roswaal’s remark, Emilia stopped in place as her expression stiffened in shock. Then, she promptly turned her steps towards Roswaal, and,

Roswaal: “…”

No one could have stopped that crisp sound from ringing out.

Her white fingers slapped hard across Roswaal’s blue-white cheek.

In front of the reddened, swelling cheek, the single slap already left Emilia out of breath. The one who had been slapped made no reaction, but instead held Ram back as she was about to stand with her changed complexion.

Roswaal: “Ram.”

Ram: “But, Master Roswaal—”

Roswaal: “It’s fine. You can stay seated. Lady Emilia, my apologies for Ram.”

Emilia: “You’re always like this with me… but when it’s Subaru… you won’t even say a thing…”

Biting her lip, Emilia glared at the collected Roswaal. But despite the furious rage churning in her amethyst eyes, Roswaal never lost his composure for an instant.

This was only a testament to their irreconcilable standpoints.

Roswaal: “Once you leave the Mansion, and return to the forest—what will you have left?”

Emilia: “I was wrong to have been taken along by your beguiling words. My atonement… my penance will come in many other forms. It was because of my mistake… that Subaru died.”

Emilia closed her eyes, and quietly answered Roswaal’s question.

Then, with a slight shake of her head,

Emilia: “I will bring his soul with me, and lay him to rest in the forest. —For Subaru, and the others, for as long it takes, I will devote my time to tend to their souls. That is all I will say.”

With this, Emilia backed away from Roswaal, indicating that she had no intention to continue the conversation.

Her silver hair swayed as she turned her back, while Roswaal watched on with his mismatched eyes. Still seated in his chair, he reached out his hand towards the leaving figure—but put it down again.

Roswaal: “If it has deviated from the writ, then… this is where my pa~th ends.”

Ram: “Master Roswaal…”

Hearing Roswaal’s powerless whisper, Ram spilled a voice of concern as she took his hand. The clown glanced back at the girl’s worried gaze, while a weak smile rose onto his face,

Roswaal: “Ram, it seems you’ve won the wa~ger. Here is where my purpose reaches a standstill… that is to say, the Contract can now be fulfilled.”

Ram: “…yes. Yes, Master Roswaal.”

Leaving the two to their quiet exchange, Emilia proceeded toward Rem, who had stood up to open the door. Before passing her by, she looked to her solemnly bowed head, Emilia: “Take me to where Subaru is.”

Rem: “Lady Emilia, that would be…”

Emilia: “He’s in an awful state, I know. I will restore him as much as I can… and take him with me… to the forest.”

Watching the side of Emilia’s grief-stricken face, Rem’s expression stiffened as she lowered her head. Within that expression was something like regret, as well as something like anger.

Why did it have to turn out like this, she must’ve been wondering.

—Why did it turn out like this? No one knew the answer.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, Subaru—I couldn’t do anything at all.”

Emilia whispered at the very end.

3

—How many times do I have to be hit with my own stupidity before I can understand?

???: “DESU, DESU! DESUDESUDESUDESU, DESU!!”

The shrill, deafening cackle echoed on.

Chest pumped, mouth stretched wide, drooling from the lips and mussing her long, red hair, a young woman was howling.

This woman’s abhorrent behavior, her bloodshot, gawking eyes, and the deranged posture she had taken were nothing like those of a human.

Woman: “FOR LOVE! TO LOVE! IN LOVE! BY LOVE! THE REPAYMENT OF LOVE IS! EVERYTHING! DESU! AAH! OH WITCH! O BELOVED WITCH! DESTINED HARBOR OF MY LOVE!”

Falling to her knees, with both hands stretched to the sky and tears streaming from her eyes, the woman extolled her love.

All around the crazed woman, were submerged corpses scattered in an ocean of blood. Limbs torn apart, heads gouged open, lay countless cadavers stripped of human dignity.

In their midst, was the body of a black-haired youth, his throat pierced by his own sword.

Blood drowned every corner of Earlham village, as every member of the expedition lay upon the ground, deprived of the last sign of life.

The moment their most powerful asset, the Sword Demon, fell in the ambush, the tide was already set.

The rest was a massacre by the "Unseen Hands", an uninterrupted chain of death-wails until the last of them met their end.

Woman: "BEHOLD MY DILIGENCE! WHAT COULD THIS CLEANSING OF SLOTH BE CALLED, IF NOT A TESTAMENT OF MY LOVE! DESU! AAAH! MY ADORATION, MY FAITH, MY UNSHAKABLE LOVE! RECEIVE IT! ACCEPT IT! MAY IT NESTLE WITHIN YOUR EMBRACE—DESU!!"

Decrying her love, tears pouring, the woman barked amid the sea of blood—her flesh stolen, her mind invaded by the monster, Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti.

After wiping out Subaru's rescue party in one fell swoop, despite the loss of his cultists, the madman went on proclaiming his love.

When—

???: "—What… happened?"

A winded girl muttered as she ran down the path trailing from the village.

Impatiently wiping aside the silver hair sticking to her forehead, she scanned her amethyst eyes over the carnage. —Emilia's eyes widened at the villagers submerged in the ocean of blood, and noticed it.

Emilia: "Suba… ru?"

Lying in the center of the carnage, was a youth she had known well.

Just what emotion flashed through her mind in that instant? The feelings in those widened eyes were far too complex, such that no one, not even herself, could have understood it.

Only, Emilia's lips trembled, as she,

Emilia: "why, is… Subaru, sleeping th… huh?"

Puck: "Lia—! This is bad, it's the Witch Cult! A Sin Arch… why, why now?!"

Emilia's expression was stunned, and one not accepting reality. In her stead, Puck flew out in a terribly panicked state.

Flying circles around Emilia while fixing his glare on Petelgeuse, standing alone in that carnage, his black round eyes were rife with alarm and hostility.

Puck: "Lia! Now, right now! Get away from here now! That thing… you mustn't meet with the Sin Archbishop! The Trial will begin! If it gets imposed on you, it will be horrible!"

Emilia: "Puck…?"

Puck: "I just remembered, I finally remembered! That bastard… meeting that bastard finally made me remember! Why did I forget… and there're so many things I still can't recall… unless, I can't remember until things become like this… but if so, then!"

Facing towards the sky, Puck stretched out his little body as far as it would go, and screamed.

Puck: "THAT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAID—ECHIDNA!!"

Loaded with frustration and loathing, the shout echoed out as Puck panted, shaking his head. All the while, Emilia fell speechless in front of her utterly changed companion.

Having heard the scream, the madman slowly stood upright.

Petelgeuse: “Well well… how pleased to MEET YOU! DESU!”

Slanting his upper body, Petelgeuse violently yanked at his long red hair, mercilessly pulling as blood began seeping out of his scalp.

Watching this act of self-injury, horror and disgust flickered across Emilia’s eyes.

Petelgeuse: “I AM Witch Cult Sin Archbishop, Sloth—Petelgeuse Romanée-CONTI… DESU!”

The madman cackled, his voice quaking the atmosphere.

Just like this, the howling madman slanted his body as he observed the petrified Emilia from head to toe then to her upper body, practically licking her all over with his gaze,

Petelgeuse: “…in, credible, desu.”

He spilled this sigh of wonder.

A crisp peal of a clap. Petelgeuse was clapping, directing his applause at Emilia.

Petelgeuse: “Incredible—DESU! A FIGURE SO PERFECT FOR A VESSEL! A VISAGE SO REMINISCENT OF THE WITCH IN LIFE! Since you’ve prepared such a magnificent vessel, there is no more need for DEBATE! DESU! THE TRIAL! THE TRIAL TO DETERMINE WHETHER THE WITCH GENE SHALL TAKE ROOT!”

Puck: “Silence, madman! You take one step towards that child! And I will make you regret ever being born—! Utterly!”

Petelgeuse: “In the face of love, pain and fear are all offerings for the sacrifice… nothing you say would give me reason to stop, desu.”

Puck met Petelgeuse’s raving with a threat, but the madman didn’t seem to mind. Dragging its steps along the ground, it slowly approached, while Puck only seemed to tremble, unable to do a thing.

Puck: “Wh…y. Why, does this have to be the moment when I… no, that’s wrong. I remember now. That’s wrong. Yes, that’s wrong, that’s wrong! That’s wrong! I’m… I, am.”

Emilia: “Puck! Wh-What should I… what should I do?! I-I’m… and Subaru… over there he’s…”

Petelgeuse: “THE TRIAL! THE TERMINUS OF THIS DILIGENT SOUL IS SELECTED DESU! AN OCCUPIED VESSEL, WOULD INTERFERE WITH THE INJECTED SOUL DESU! THE CONTENTS, ARE UNNEEDED—DESU!”

Emilia desperately called to Puck, who was hugging his head. While Petelgeuse went on towards the bewildered pair without stopping.

Watching Petelgeuse making strange motions with his fingers and licking his lips, blaring alarms sounded inside Emilia without end.

At the sight of his deranged eyes, Emilia gasped, and, in a choking voice,

Emilia: “no…I’m scared, daddy…h.”

She whimpered, pleading for someone to rely on.

Seeking help in a voice so quiet that no one could have heard it.

Petelgeuse completely ignored this as he extended his hand towards Emilia. Surely, beyond that hand, would be the invisible Authority of Sloth, the Unseen Hand.

It would be reaching to bind Emilia’s petrified body, to enact its evil designs—

Puck: “—Get your filthy hands away from my daughter!!”

The next moment, a wall of ice of incredible density and height emerged in front of Emilia.

Dividing the space between her and Petelgeuse, the wall continued to expand, bursting from the ground.

In the matter of an instant, even Petelgeuse, with his Unseen Hands outspread, was forced to leap backwards.

Petelgeuse: “That’s—!”

Puck: “I’ve finally remembered the most important thing of all… In order to protect it, Contracts and constraints can go to hell for all I care. What a worthless thing I’ve been bound to… now, I finally remember.”

Hearing this rare sign of hesitation in Petelgeuse’ voice, the little cat floating in space quietly proclaimed.

The aura of bewilderment had vanished, as the spirit glared at the madman with a liberated air.

Puck: “I remember now, why I’ve become like this. It was to protect my daughter, at last—if the price to do so was such a constraint… that vile wretch…”

Emilia: “Puck—a.”

Emilia extended her fingers towards the rueful Puck, when her throat froze.

At her breast, was a crystal glowing with green light. It was Puck’s spiritual residence, the vital stone tying him and Emilia together.

But suddenly, without the slightest touch, the stone shattered into dust.

Emilia: “What… wh-why…?!”

Puck: “I… I have broken the constraint, and the consequences have begun. Perhaps even this was foreseen from the start… but still.”

Turning around, Puck floated down to the level of Emilia’s eyes.

A flicker of doubt flashed through Emilia’s pupils at Puck’s gesture. But, gazing into her, Puck’s expression was that of someone gazing at something precious and beloved.

Puck: “Lia, this is goodbye—”

Emilia: “wh…”

Puck: “The constraint has been broken. I cannot be tied to this body anymore. As much as I wish to stay by your side, that too is part of the price. —I’m sorry.”

Emilia: “No, don’t, Puck… everyone… everyone’s gone… Subaru is… he’s… everyone’s… gone! Puck… if you leave me too… I… I’ll be all alone… I don’t… want…to…”

Like a whimpering child, Emilia pleaded as tears poured from her eyes.

Puck used his long tail to wipe away her tears, and gently touched his lips to the tip of the crying girl’s nose.

Puck: “Don’t say such things, and listen well. There’s still Ram in the Mansion. Betty is also around. If you ever need to, you can rely on Betty. That child… would never refuse you. Though, knowing this, it is rather mean of me to ask this of her.”

Emilia: “I…! Puck, other than you, I have no one…”

Puck: “—Go now. My most cherished in this world, my loveliest, most beloved Emilia.”

Emilia: “Wai—”

Before Emilia could say a thing, Puck’s little body pushed hard against her forehead.

Unable to withstand the unexpected force, Emilia’s body was sent swimming backwards—when instantly, a tear in space swallowed up her slender frame,

Emilia: “Wh—”

In a blink, Emilia’s figure vanished from the village.

—Watching this to the end, Puck spilled a long, drawn out sigh.

Puck: “Sorry for forcing you to do this, Beatrice.”

Puck thanked his accomplice in the abrupt disappearance.

Then, he turned around, and looked to Petelgeuse, who had been staring at him,

Puck: “You just sat there quietly watching… pretty good manners for a religious fanatic.”

Petelgeuse: “It looked like if I did anything, you’d have crushed me in an instant, desu. Either way, it’ll be all the same once I make my way to the Mansion, desu. No point stepping on the tiger’s tail… desu.”

Puck: “I see. You may look deranged, but you’re surprisingly thoughtful. —Scum.”

Spitting this out, Puck flew over the wall of ice into Petelgeuse’ side.

Not even Petelgeuse did anything as foolish as using his Unseen Hands to stall the approach.

Then, they faced each other with a certain distance between them,

Puck: “There is no time. —Hurry up and start, so we can get this over with. The rest… I will leave to my trusty little sister.”

Petelgeuse: “Something’s changed about you, desu. For a spirit, you stink of human.”

Puck: “—Yeah, I guess I do.”

Puck rubbed his little hand against his pink nose with a cynical smile.

Puck: “I may look like this now, but my limbs used to be a little longer, and my face would’ve been rather handsome, too. When my daughter is that cute, isn’t that only natural?”

Petelgeuse: “…I’m having trouble understanding you, desu.”

Puck: “Well, nevermind. I wasn’t expecting you to understand… since you are about to die here, anyway.”

Saying this, Puck pointed his arms towards Petelgeuse as his body began to turn white.

He was running out of mana, and losing his ability to keep hold of this body. Perhaps, this was partly because his bond with Emilia was severed, and partly because he had broken the constraint he had mentioned earlier.

Either way, the contours of his form began to fade—

Puck: “Before I am extinguished, I will extinguish you first. Who would’ve thought my companion in death would be a religious fanatic. Gross.”

Petelgeuse: “Sorry to tell you this, desu, but even if you destroy this body, that won’t st—”

Puck: “I will freeze your soul alongside it. —If I do that, what would happen, I wonder?”

The dauntless grin on Petelgeuse’ face up to now abruptly froze.

Watching the madman’s eyes widen, Puck smiled an utterly delighted smile,

Puck: “Aaah—now there’s the face I wanted to see, fool.”

In an instant, simultaneous with the unravelling of the spirit’s contours, a white radiance blasted forth, and—

4

—Forced to witness the endings of worlds one after another, Subaru lay collapsed upon the ground.

He could not tell where he was anymore.

Was this reality, or was he inside a dream? Could it be one of those cycling nightmares? And if it was a nightmare, would he be absolved so simply?

Were they really just possibilities? Or were they worlds that actually existed? Could they merely have been convenient fancies that Subaru's mind had invented? If so, then how does he explain the previously unknown information contained within them?

Were they worlds born out of delusion? Were they alternate realities feeding on each other? Whichever it may be, the torment to Subaru's heart was colossal.

So much so, that he could not stand, or raise his head, or do anything at all.

And so—

Rem: "Are you no longer able to stand? Subaru?"

He heard someone at his side, gently uplifting his heart with those words.

He thought it was the voice of someone he loved.

Subaru: "…"

The hot streaks of tears that should no longer be spilling drew their trails down Subaru's cheeks.

Chapter 73:
Weakness' Hideaway

How long had it been since he last heard that voice?

In reality, she hadn't been sleeping for all that long.

At most a week: a conceivable time-span for going without seeing one's friends or family. —But Subaru could not think that way.

For Subaru, who was constantly shedding off his life and time, actual time-span meant nothing. According to his soul's internal clock, a far longer span had passed since that voice had last struck upon his eardrums, and his heart.

Rem: "—Wake up, Subaru, I'd be happier if I could see your face."

The words rained down from above as he lay face-down on the ground.

The tender compassion and the heated affection contained within that voice swiftly filled Subaru's chest with warmth, and instilled the parched, empty vessel of his heart with searing heat.

All this, from a single sentence whispered by that gentle voice.

—Just how much strength had she given him?

Subaru: "…You're kidding."

Rem: "No, this is not a joke."

Subaru: "You can't be here."

Rem: "If you want, Subaru, I will always be at your side."

Subaru: "Whenever there's something important I must do… whenever I feel this way… it's like you'd always come to me… but how could… something that convenient…"

Rem: “Well, I’ve always wanted to be the girl who’d just so conveniently happen to be at Subaru’s side.”

With his sobbing voice, he spilled that pathetic whimper.

But the voice that answered did not look down on him, nor think any less of him.

She—knew.

Knew, that Subaru was weak, helpless, so brittle that he could not live without something to cling to, always lacking confidence, and perpetually in doubt.

Nevertheless, this girl told this hopelessly-weak Subaru that she loved him.

Subaru: “—Rem.”

Rem: “Yes. It’s Subaru’s Rem.”

He lifted his head.

Obscured by tears, the color blue filled into his eyes.

Roughly wiping his eyes with his dirtied sleeve, banishing his tears, he saw.

The form of the girl standing before him.

The form of his beloved Rem.

Subaru: “rem…”

Rem: “Yes, Rem. The maid who’s always within arm’s reach when Subaru wants her there.”

Subaru: “y, ou…”

Slightly tilting her head, Rem replied in a playful tone.

Just before he could say something about her attitude, he felt the air calmly seep out of his lungs. With a thump, the heavy burden in his chest dropped to the ground.

His breathing eased, and the tiny self screaming in his skull disappeared.

Being so easily, so easily saved, Subaru was struck dumb.

He had thought himself hopeless and stuck, and yet, upon seeing this single girl standing before his eyes, he was so easily released.

Subaru: “You’re incredible, Rem…”

Rem: “Why thank you. Subaru is amazing too.”

Smiling as she spoke, their exchange was just as perfectly offbeat as it always was.

Feeling such happiness at this back and forth, everything he had tried to endure up to now suddenly turned to tears on the verge of falling.

While he was pinned to the ground, casting down his eyes, Rem kneeled down before him,

Rem: “Are you alright? Are you feeling worn out?”

Subaru: “Who… knows… maybe I am… worn out… but nothing… is finished yet.”

In these never-ending, looping worlds, Subaru had been battered and torn without reaching a single answer. He was in no position to say he was worn out.

Not while everyone else suffered more. Not while everyone else was enduring more. Just why did everyone else have to suffer along with him? —The answer was obvious.

Subaru: “It’s because I’m too weak.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “Because I’m always lacking.”

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "If only I'm stronger, smarter, and a less useless guy… they wouldn't have to suffer, grieve, or hurt like this…"

If Subaru was strong enough to do everything on his own, then the task of consoling Emilia's broken heart in the face of her past, easing the sorrow of Beatrice's 400 years of solitude, saving Petra and Frederica from the murderer's blade, defending the people of the Sanctuary from the Great Rabbit's threat, and reaching an understanding with Garfiel who sought to expel the outsiders—would all have fallen to him.

Everything, all of it, every last aspect, was Subaru's fault.

And so, in order to overcome this balance sheet of his own weakness, Subaru had to scour his soul and start anew.

—Or so he thought, and yet,

Subaru: "I didn't save anyone… in the end… did I?"

Rem: "Subaru."

Subaru: "If the worlds continued after my death, then how many… how many times… how many people… have I left to die?"

Rem: "Subaru."

Subaru: "How many times did I let you die? How many times do I need to… kill you before it's enough?"

Rem: "—Subaru."

Shuddering from a dread surging from the depths of his body, Subaru ravingly confessed his sins.

Expelling them from his lips, he only wanted instant sentencing for his crimes. Before he could crush his own heart to dust, he wanted someone, anyone, to carry out his punishment for him.

He wanted someone to yell at this colossal idiot who pledged not to make another mistake yet stumbled on his very first step while heading the wrong way, to smack this irredeemable fool flying.

Subaru: “…”

—But Subaru’s plea for punishment was answered by a gentle, enveloping embrace.

Subaru: “re, m.”

Rem: “It’s alright. Everything is alright, Subaru.”

Subaru: “But, noth… nothing is… alright… is it.”

Nothing. Subaru hadn’t succeeded in anything.

If Subaru slackened now, absolutely no one would be saved. Countless people would meet their end. Rem too, was someone Subaru absolutely must save.

Because only she had the right to chastise this inadequate, insufficient, hopelessly weak Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “You should be… at me…!”

Rem: “—I love you.”

She pressed her forehead against his, and whispered those loving words.

Subaru: “…”

No words escaped him.

There was nothing he could say.

So near, her light-blue eyes were looking directly into his.

He could drown in the depths of the compassion in those eyes.

Rem: “I love you, Subaru. —And so, everything is alright.”

Subaru: “Th, at’s… not an answer…”

Rem: “Yes, it is. It’s the reason I’m here. The reason I forgive Subaru. The reason I’m holding you now—all of it is because of that.”

Close enough to feel each other’s breaths, Rem’s smile softly grasped Subaru’s heart like an invisible hand.

He couldn’t move. Not even a twitch. Reaching around his back, her delicate hand clasped onto the hems of his clothes, tightly, tightly, so tightly as if to merge into one, she held him in her embrace.

Rem: “It must have been tough, Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “All alone, taking all the pain onto yourself… it must have been hard, Subaru.”

Subaru: “—hg.”

Rem: “You don’t have to bear all that sadness anymore, it’s alright.”

With no words to answer her, Subaru desperately tried to keep everything from flooding out, while Rem’s sweet whispers went on.

Gently unravelling his heart, melting away his obstinance.

Rem: “All of Subaru’s pain, grief, and weakness, all of it, Rem will bear it for you.”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “Everything Subaru wants to protect, to fight for, to accomplish… leave them all to me.”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “There’s no need for you to carry every single burden. —You can leave them all to me. For now, just rest, and go to sleep.”

Subaru: “…I, I.”

Rem: “And let me see the Subaru that I love once again.”

Rem set her hand against Subaru's cheek and raised up his face, gazing directly into him.

Her lips tightened, as if with some hesitation, as she drew her face closer.

What was she doing? What would happen next? Even his lagging consciousness could understand.

So close, near enough to feel her breaths, the lovely girl's lips were approaching.

It'd be fine if they overlapped, intertwined, drowned, melted, and merged with his, wouldn't it?

—Regardless of right and wrong, she would forgive him, wouldn't she?

Just how deeply had Rem's gentle words seeped into Subaru's heart?

His indeterminate emotions, his soul, agonizing over whether or not to reach for the helping hand, along with the entirety of this Subaru's existence was once again saved by the girl who knew everything about him.

To this powerless Subaru, Rem extended her hand.

Against this fragile Subaru's back, Rem added her support.

On this foolish Subaru's path, Rem took his hand and offered to show him the way.

By so shamelessly, clingingly, relying on her so entirely—would he be led to the answer at last?

What point is there, in struggling on alone?

Worn to the core, lost without a footing, no longer sure where to turn his steps, perhaps he should, just, give up, everything, and leave it t—

"Giving up is easy."

Subaru: "…"

"But."

Subaru: "…"

"—It doesn't suit you, Subaru."

He heard a voice saying.

Rem: "—Subaru?"

Puzzled, Rem asked in front of his eyes.

It was only natural, since just before their lips could meet, a hand was placed between them.

The sweet sensation of entwining tongues that was supposed to have come grew distant, while a wavering, wounded glimmer flickered in Rem's eyes.

Watching this wavering glint through the gaps between his fingers, Subaru spoke.

Subaru: "—Who, are you?"

Rem: "Huh—?"

Subaru: "I just asked you. Who are you?"

Rem: "Subaru, why're y… asking who, I…"

In front of Subaru's quiet question, Rem's throat seemed to choke up, unable to speak.

The faint, wounded color in her eyes deepened, as her expression became marked by grief. No matter what, it tore at Subaru's heart to see this.

To distract himself from this feeling, he pressed his hand to his chest and bared his teeth.

Subaru: “When I… was despairing and at the end of my rope, I genuinely wished that someone, anyone, could help me… and when I felt like it was impossible, and was about to give up… I really wished, that you would come to me.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “If you were there, you would console me, comfort me, while I sat there stuck hugging my knees… I believed that.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “Just like this, you’d listen to my whining, let me spew out all my whimpers, watch me cry until I wring my tears dry…”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “—And then, you’d tell me to stand up.”

The delicate touch of her fingers, the up-close warmth of her skin, and the immensity of her love, Natsuki Subaru remembered with all his body and soul.

And so, he could tell, without a doubt—that this Rem before his eyes was an impostor.

Subaru: “She would never say “Rest for now”“

“Rem —”

Subaru: “She would never say “Give up, and leave it all to me”“

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “A girl who loves me, who’s loved by me, who’s kind to me, who’s head over heels for me—who’s more strict and uncompromising with me than anyone else in this world, THAT is Rem!”

Springing to his feet, Subaru barked as he backed away from the Rem before his eyes.

Still on her knees, Rem looked up to Subaru without a word. Even now, he felt like he could drown in the sadness of her expression that was brought about by his rejection.

Rem: “No you’re wrong. Subaru, listen to me! I… that’s not what I meant. It was just, I couldn’t stand seeing Subaru suffering like this… that’s why… I just wanted you to forget the pain and get some rest, that’s all!”

Subaru: “I’d let you see my weakness. I’d let you see my frailty. I’d let you see what a hopeless, worthless bastard I am. —But I would never let you see me giving up.”

“Subaru is a hero”, that was what Rem had told him.

And so, Natsuki Subaru had resolved to become Rem’s hero.

Ever since they exchanged that promise, Subaru had decided—

—That in this life, in this world, the only place where Natsuki Subaru would show his weakness, was in front of Rem.

Only in front of Rem, who despite knowing Subaru’s weakness still expected him to be strong, would he expose his own frailty.

Not Emilia, not Beatrice, he would let no one see it except Rem.

Subaru: “My weakness belongs to Rem. She accepts and shields my weakness, and in exchange, I will hold down any thoughts of giving up, and never let it out.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “So fuck off, you fake. —And don’t fucking coddle me wearing my Rem’s face and voice!”

Firmly declaring this, Subaru jabbed out his fist at Rem—at the impostor.

In front of Subaru’s pronouncement, the listener was at a loss for words. Keeping her face downcast, softly, and quietly, she stood up,

???: “B-But that’s, not…what, she, told… me?”

Subaru: “ah…?”

Slanting her head and swaying her blue-hair, the impostor stuttered out her words.

Hearing this, Subaru let out a voice of doubt—

Subaru: “…”

Before his eyes, the girl’s image seemed to blur as Rem’s figure turned vague.

A storm of midnight-television-haze drowned out his vision, and, following the momentary hijacking of the world, there was now another person standing in that same spot.

—Someone he had never seen before.

Her pink hair stretching halfway down her back, her bearing was gentle—or rather, timid. The girl’s features were attractive, but nothing about it came across as outstandingly beautiful. It was more of an ordinary, commonplace kind of cuteness.

Wearing a white, long-sleeved robe, her hands were hiding inside her sleeves as she held them against her cheeks, watching Subaru nervously.

Subaru: “Who are… you?”

Camilla: “I-I’m the Witch of Lust… Camilla… you know? N-Nice to meet… you.”

Hearing the girl—Camilla’s reply, Subaru inadvertently swallowed his breath.

She just called herself the “Witch of Lust”. Which means,

Subaru: “So this strange, inexplicable space… is inside Echidna’s dream?”

Camilla: “Yes… and no… I guess. Echi is, watching, the Trial… and the Trial itself is, kind of, like, a dream…mm… yeah.”

Subaru: “That’s kind of missing the point, but no, even before that…”

Camilla’s manner of speech was getting on Subaru’s nerves. Naturally, seeing Subaru’s gaze grow harsh, Camilla immediately started shivering and hugging her head.

Camilla: “P-Please don’t hi… hit me…”

Subaru: “I won’t do anything like that. I won’t, but… what were you trying to do earlier?”

Camilla: “Earlie…r?”

Subaru: “Appearing in front of me, pretending to be Rem! Is that what your power is supposed to be?!”

All the Witches bearing the name of a sin seem to possess some sort of special Authority.

Assuming the Witch of Lust was no exception, she should have an Authority as well. If her transformation earlier was her Authority, then—

Subaru: “Well, I guess compared to what the other Witches can do, transformation is a pretty orthodox ability…”

Camilla: “I-I didn’t, tr-transform… though? I-I, just, looked, to you, like someone, else… b-because… that’s, who, you wanted, to see… that’s all?”

Subaru: “What?”

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Camilla: “I, mean… I, didn’t, even, want to, meet you… E-Echi, asked me, to… and lied, to me, too…”

Camilla’s mutters were exacerbating Subaru’s annoyance.

The way she spoke, the way she shifted her glances, and the way she looked down whenever she sensed his gaze, all irritated him to no end. That whimpering tone, and those sulking complaints, the hell is her problem?

Not only was nothing she tried to say getting through, she didn’t even appear to realize how cherish a thing to Subaru she had just trampled over.

Irritated. Aggravated. He wanted to scream at her just so she’d understand.

Subaru: “You… do you even know what you just did…?”

Camilla: “Echi, she… s-said, I just had to spoil, you… a little, and it’ll all be, fine… even, though… I-I didn’t want to, I told her.”

Subaru: “Listen to me…!!”

Camilla: “E-Everyone… is ganging up, on, me, pick, picking on me… like, this. Echi is, d-doing it, too. You’re all, so… so mean.”

Subaru: “DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT LISTEN TO ME MEANS —??!!”

Screaming, Subaru felt all the air being wrenched from his lungs as he expelled that scraping shout. He felt it, but the incinerating rage burning through his body erased that thought from his mind.

Suffocation was nothing compared to this irritation clawing at his chest.

He wanted to jam her sniveling, stuttering, whimpering mouth shut, and blast her with all the rage and agony inside him so she’d understand what she had j—

????: “—Any more of that, your life would be in danger.”

Subaru: “—gh?!”

That instant, Subaru heard a voice whispering into his ear, pulling him back to his senses.

The very same moment, the pain of being deprived of oxygen up to the point of asphyxiation struck him, along with the dry soreness of his continually wide-open eyes.

Subaru: “Aa—a, aah?”

????: “They were drastic measures, but I’m glad to see you back. —When facing Camilla, the “Faceless Goddess” of Lust, people tend to forget to breathe. Ultimately, even their hearts stop beating.”

Subaru: “Egha, ghpt… hha, hhaa.”

Spitting out the choking saliva, having fallen to his hands and knees, Subaru’s consciousness was strobing.

But the voice had entered his ears, and its meaning delivered to his brain.

And so, Subaru wiped off his lips with his sleeve as he looked up at the most probable culprit behind this prank, and, baring his teeth,

Subaru: “Just what, what were you plotting—Echidna.”

At the receiving end of Subaru’s hateful gaze, the white-haired Witch softly stroked her hair, and all-so-naturally rested her elbows on the table,

Echidna: “Isn’t it obvious? —I am a Witch. I’m plotting something nefarious, of course.”

She said, smiling.

Chapter 74:
Witch's Plot and Proposal

Panting from asphyxiation, Subaru belatedly noticed that his hands were on a green grass field.

From the ground where his limbs landed rose the thick scent of grass scraping across his nostrils. Like that of a meadow bathed in sunlight after the rain, the choking fragrance of nature gently wrapped all around him.

He turned his head, and saw Echidna straight before him.

She was, as always, on the small hillock in the middle of the plains, seated in a chair at the table, awaiting her tea party's guest—for Subaru.

As always. —Yes, just as always.

Echidna: "I'm sure there are all sorts things you want to say and ask me… but first, how about taking a seat and having a cup of tea?"

Subaru: "…If you, consider what you just did to me, do you think I'd just cordially sit in that chair… and go along with your tea party?"

Echidna: "I do. Compared to losing yourself to instinct and senseless rage, you are the kind who's more likely to dress yourself in rational, cold calculation. Now, rather than distancing yourself from me, there are far more benefits in holding a profitable conversation… isn't that what you've concluded in your heart?"

Subaru: "…"

Faced with Subaru's suppressed fury, Echidna's carefree bearing remained unfazed.

Calling down to him from above, as if mocking Subaru's all-too-obvious bluff, the words struck true while Subaru could neither affirm nor deny them.

Except, the thing that she had trampled over was not so cheap that he'd concede so easily.

Subaru: "Echidna… just tell me you didn't mean to."

Echidna: "Hm?"

Subaru: "Just now… that trick with the Witch of Lust, tell me you didn't mean for it to happen. Tell me, that you made a mistake, go on say it."

Echidna: "…"

Subaru: "Say it was unavoidable. Say you didn't anticipate it, that it shouldn't have gone down that way. Say it. If you just tell me that… I won't blame you for it."

What Echidna said was right.

If Subaru wanted to proceed, he would need her knowledge and help.

But, the unforgivable was still unforgivable. Echidna had used the Witch of Lust to trespass into a precious and inviolable place inside Subaru—his "Sanctuary". That much was certain.

And so, for Subaru, this was the necessary requirement before he could forgive Echidna and hold a meaningful conversation with her,

Echidna: "…and I was wondering what you'd say."

In that moment, she must have understood Subaru's inner weakness and obstinance.

Spilling that inadvertent mutter, Echidna turned her gaze toward Subaru, who was biting his lips, waiting for her reply. She leisurely fiddled her white hair, and,

Echidna: "Then, as you wish, that was just the Witch of Lust running amok. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. Taking advantage of the Trial, she tried to seduce you by unveiling the part of you that you least wanted to be touched, and with it, drown you.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “It came close, but you still managed to escape her spell through your own strength. Then, having failed her seduction, when Camilla let down her guard I took back control and summoned you to my Citadel. You could say that it was by a stroke of luck that we could now meet here, face to face.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “…Now, suppose I told you all that, would you be satisfied?”

Swiftly, Echidna lined up everything Subaru had wanted to hear, only to betray her own words in the end.

Without saying a thing, Subaru looked upwards, as if to put Echidna out of his gaze.

Subaru: “…What were you trying to do, goading on a Witch like that.”

Echidna: “Camilla didn’t tell you? What she did was to save you, after the Trial had all but abraded away your heart.”

Subaru: “That… that couldn’t have been the Witch of Lust’s intention. If what she said was true, then that was only my selfish weakness wanting to hear Rem say those things to me. The Witch of Lust had no reason to be kind to me. …Those were your instructions, weren’t they.”

Echidna: “So you’ve already deduced this much even when so little was said… in that case, I suppose there’s no point making excuses.”

Casually, Echidna discarded the act with a shrug. Then, she brought her tea cup to her lips, and tiled it with a sip,

Echidna: “It’s as you suspected, sending Camilla to you and having her pretend to be the girl in your heart were all by my instructions. Though, the imperfect outcome and the fact that it was seen through is more of a problem on Camilla' end than mine."

Subaru: "…why… would you do that?"

Echidna: "Hearing it straight-out is probably going to make you angry. —It was the most efficient method, and the one most likely to succeed."

Without apology, Echidna went on as Subaru's expression vanished.

Echidna: "Even I didn't expect you to get so hung up on the Second Trial. Above all, the fact that its contents hit you this hard was, in all honesty, something I couldn't have imagined until I saw it with my own eyes."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Oh my, I do wish you'd overlook me peeping in on your Trial? I'm sure I've already told you after the first Trial, that these are Trials set up by a Witch? Even if the product is a bit mean-spirited, I still wouldn't like to have this and that said about me."

Subaru: "…Get on with it."

Echidna: "Anyway, while watching you face the Trial from the sidelines, I had a thought. —If you went on challenging the Trial like this, you'd be worn to the core before long…"

That wasn't an exaggeration. In fact, it wasn't far from the truth.

Subaru wasn't so aloof to what was happening to him that he'd try to refute her here.

The Second Trial—the presents that were not to be—and the scenes, events, and tragedies he was forced to witness were more than enough to shatter his hubris, stubbornness, and delusions.

Echidna: "And so I intervened. Even though, being worn to the core is also a result in itself, I like to experiment with everything through trial and error. My curiosity is insatiable, and strives endlessly to produce conclusions. To satisfy my insatiable Greed, I seek out any and all outcomes. —The one in which challenging the Trial breaks you is no exception.”

Subaru: “So then why did you intervene? If me breaking is just another outcome you seek, you could’ve just left me there. If the result was that was all I amounted to after all… you would’ve been satisfied too, wouldn’t you?”

Echidna: “I did have a mind to just accept it as another result… I did, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t do something to produce the result I wanted.”

Subaru: “what…?”

Hounded by Subaru’s questioning, Echidna dropped her tone as she replied.

Hearing this, for the first time today, Subaru furrowed his brows for a reason other than rage.

Carefully scrutinizing her words and forming the semblance of a meaning, if he wasn’t mistaken, then,

Subaru: “It was to reject the outcome where I’d be worn to nothing… that’s why you set up that situation. Is that what you’re saying?”

Echidna: “…And as a result, I trespassed onto a territory that was precious to you, I have no excuses for that. So if you want to shower me with insults, I will resignedly accept them. Your anger is justified, and it was wrong of me to be so inconsiderate. That’s all there is to it.”

Setting her cup on the table, Echidna gazed straight down towards Subaru at the foot of the hill.

Completely devoid of the playful caprice of before, the Witch of Greed now faced him with the entirety of her sincerity.

Her attitude, her stance, and her words all overwhelmed him.

All of a sudden, the rage and distrust towards Echidna that were occupying his chest only moments ago now seemed horrifically egotistical and selfish.

The truth is—unable to forget her hand in what happened earlier, Subaru was still reluctant to accept Echidna's help, but then, what would his heart become without it?

Laying on the cold floor of the Tomb, his heart, shattered, crushed to dust, left in a darkness without the faintest light, and there, erased to nothing. It wasn't hard to imagine.

He couldn't go as far as to thank her. But nor did he feel that she deserved his rage and abuse. —That much, was his emotional compromise.

Subaru: "…"

Standing up without a word, Subaru patted off the grass on his clothing and made his way up the hill.

Seated in her chair, a flicker of pain flashed through Echidna's eyes as she watched Subaru's approach. What would he say to her once he got here? It seemed that not even this centuries-old Witch could tell.

The Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge. The Witch of Greed. To see such an adversary's expression twinge at his approach still gave Subaru's heart some small relief.

Echidna: "—ah."

In front of Echidna's soft cry of surprise, Subaru pulled out a chair and sat down opposite her.

Though he had no intention of bringing that tea cup to his lips, this was his way of show his willingness to talk. While Echidna looked on with a hint of unease, Subaru rested his cheek in his hand and turned his face away,

Subaru: "I'm not in the mood for tea. …But I would like to have that profitable conversation with you."

Swallowing down his unbearable emotions, Subaru summoned up the magnanimity to reply.

Subaru: “So in the end, what is the Second Trial?”

Keeping his cheek rested against his palm, Subaru asked without looking at Echidna.

On the other end, Echidna shifted her chair forward in order to enter Subaru’s field of view,

Echidna: “Well, what do you think it was?”

Subaru: “You’re not… trying to confuse me, are you? Is that your way of telling me I’m asking too much? Putting me on the spot like that.”

Echidna: “I’m not half so mean as that. I did do something to upset you, after all. I just wanted to check if we can still speak on friendly terms, and also to hear your opinion while we’re at it.”

Those words would’ve made anyone feel embarrassed.

If Subaru had come into this conversation in a normal state of mind, he certainly would’ve been discomposed and gotten stuck on his words.

But, in his current state of mind, there was no way he would give her the reaction she wanted. Instead, Subaru spilled a small sigh as his reply,

Subaru: “The Trial’s topic was to “Witness a present that was not to be”. That was the premise, as well the subject of the scenes it showed me. …I’m guessing “A present that was not to be” would be a present that would have existed if I had made a different choice along the way, right?”

One way to think about it is like what happens in Visual Novels.

It is a game in which the player makes decisions in key points of the story, causing the paths to diverge. On a grander scale, one could even say that life itself is kind of unfolding like one gigantic game.

People must constantly face choices, and make decisions based on their individual will—all the while trying to aim for a certain potential thread in the world: that would be precisely what "Life" is.

Echidna: "By definition, they are worlds which you should never have been able to witness. Who knows? You might find that you are happier in that world than in the actual present, then you might come to regret: "Why didn't I do that back then?" Or otherwise, that world might be more wretched than the actual present, and then, perhaps you'd say to yourself: "Thank god I didn't do that". — Ultimately, the Second Trial is to witness "Presents" other than the "Present" you have chosen, and to determine whether or not you could correctly affirm the only genuine "Present""

Following on Subaru's words, Echidna succinctly summed up the Second Trial.

It wasn't too far from what Subaru had imagined. Except for the part where Subaru had to go through that deeply penetrating ordeal.

Subaru: "—So, those alternate "Presents" I saw, do they really exist?"

Echidna: "…"

Subaru: "Every time I die, I'd Return by Death. So I've never seen what happens after I die. …Until now I've never even considered the possibility of the world continuing after my death. …No, actually, it's that I've been trying not to."

Well, of course.

Subaru only Returns by Death because the world was already beyond saving. In order to break through the deadlock and save everyone he held dear, Subaru had believed that by Returning by Death he could reach the perfect future—or so he told himself so he could endure the sensation of constantly spending his life.

The existence of worlds beyond his death would upturn that premise from its roots.

If only to set his mind at ease, he must convince himself that there were no “Worlds he left behind”, and that the people in those lost worlds had in fact been saved.

And so,

Subaru: “After my deaths… do the worlds continue on…? When my choices caused the world to diverge, when I left those unsalvageable worlds behind… was everyone I failed to protect still inside them…?”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “What is it, Echidna. …Please, answer me.”

Having lost the option of avoiding looking at her with his eyes, Subaru leaned forward in his seat and turned a pleading gaze towards Echidna.

Echidna didn’t say a word, but, bathed in Subaru’s gaze, she touched her chin as if in thought, and then closed her eyes.

Echidna: “There is, one thing I should clear up about the Trials.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “The “Present” in the Second Trial is no more than a phenomenon which allows you to witness an imagined world. The challenger taking the Trial… that’s you, in this case. By projecting off of the details of your memories, the Memories of the World draws on everything that makes up your surroundings: the people, the world, the atmosphere, and even the mana, and, assembling them with necessary information from the past, present, and future, a new “Present” is created.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “That is to say, no matter how flawless, it is no more than a well-made “Unreality”. Several tiers above self-absorbed delusions, it is a false reality that “might also” have actually happened. As for whether or not it is real, I cannot answer in the affirmative.”

Subaru: “Th-That means…”

Echidna: “However.”

Seeing hope in Echidna’s explanation, Subaru lifted his head. But just as he thought he saw the light, Echidna held up her palm and stopped him,

Echidna: “The precise mechanisms of your Return by Death are unclear. It’s almost certain that the one facilitating your Return by Death is the Witch of Envy, but the issue of how the Witch of Envy causes you to Return by Death leaves questions unending. Perhaps, it is a power that rewinds the world upon your “Death”. Or perhaps, each time, it is achieved by reaching into another, parallel world and pulling out another you, and with it, overwrites your existence.”

Subaru: “Aa…”

Echidna: “If we assume it to be the latter, then Parallel Worlds do indeed exist, and, after your death, those worlds would continue on even without you.”

Subaru: “S-So how do we know for sure…”

Echidna: “—We don’t.”

With a shake of her head, Echidna mercilessly cut off Subaru’s trembling words.

Subaru’s eyes opened wide while his mouth hung open without making a sound. Echidna turned him a sympathizing gaze as she tapped her finger on the edge of the table.

Echidna: “If there is one way to confirm it, it would be to ask the Witch of Envy herself. But I’m sure you know from experience how difficult that would be?”

Echidna must be referring to Subaru’s memories of the first time he truly faced the Witch of Envy. Leaving the Tomb after the end of the tea party, there, he found the Witch of Envy.

Stealing Emilia's body, tearing Garfiel to shreds, and engulfing the Sanctuary in shadow, it was a monster in the truest sense. — Suddenly, he remembered the doubts surrounding that thing's appearance.

Subaru: "Ri…ght… Echidna. Before, after the tea party ended… outside, I saw the Witch in the Sanctuary. What was… that? Just what was that?"

Echidna: "I thought it'd be obvious? That was the Witch of Envy. Though, that imitation is nothing compared to the real thing. The fleshly vessel it had chosen was immature, and more importantly, not a single one of its seals had been broken. With the deficiency of Witch Genes, there was no way it could have acted with the same power it had in its heyday."

Subaru: "That was still nothing compared to its heyday…?"

Disposing of the beastified Garfiel like he was nothing and slaughtering everyone without receiving a scratch, that monster was still nothing compared the true Witch of Envy.

Four hundred years ago, in the age when the actual Witch ran rampant, what hell must it have been?

Echidna: "Just as you imagined, the trigger for her appearance was the tea party. Not even that thing could prevent you from violating the taboo in here. And so, driven mad with Envy yet unable to vent it inside, it took out its rage on the external world, exploding into a rampage wreaking havoc in its wake."

Subaru: "And you knew that it'd fucking happen?"

Echidna: "Not exactly. It was the first time, after all. Being the first time, it was only after it actually happened that I could come up with my hypothesis. I can't derive conclusions without first seeing it happen, in that sense, as the Witch of Greed, I'm not that different from you all."

Subaru: “…”

Subaru was at loss for words to see that Echidna’s spectator’s stance showing no signs of collapsing. There was no point in reproaching her for it. But even though he knew this, he still couldn’t quite shake the vexation.

If only she had felt like it, if she had felt like helping Subaru, then maybe—

Echidna: “I doubt there was any great reason why the one you loved was chosen as the vessel. Although there would be a certain affinity when it’s another Half-Elf, I think the biggest reason could only be “Envy”“

Subaru: “Envy…?”

Echidna: “For a Witch who wants to be the sole subject of your thoughts, is it really so hard to believe that she’d hate and seek to destroy the recipient of your impassioned affections?”

Loving someone to the point of madness also meant demanding that person to love her back in return. As long as that love wasn’t directed at her, she’d go to insane lengths to make sure that it was. Such was the volatile lunacy known as love.

Perhaps the Witch of Envy was precisely the incarnation of that behavior.

Echidna: “All the questions plaguing your mind, are ones which only the Witch of Envy could answer.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “You can mull over them endlessly, but, in all honesty, I doubt you will ever reach an answer. Not about why she pursued you back then, nor about the “Presents that may or may not exist”“

Subaru: “Th…at’s…”

To Subaru, that would be far too cruel a reality.

He wanted to hear it clearly refuted. To be told that the worlds beyond his death never existed.

Or if not, then at least he wanted to hear it outright. That “So many had been sacrificed for your conceit.”

Whichever the answer, Subaru would have taken it as his admonition, his creed, his reminder to never forget, and though he’d grit his teeth, shed tears of blood and cry out from his very soul, he would turn his steps forward.

—But for the answer to be “There is no answer”, isn’t that just far too cruel?

Was he to live, without confirmation or denial, leaving the fate of worlds in this indeterminate limbo?

To go on without knowing whether his steps were his own. Whether he had abandoned what he had abandoned. Whether his sins were sins. Was this to be his punishment?

Were Natsuki Subaru’s crimes so great that no one could ever forgive him?

No one was capable of passing judgement on Subaru. No one could condemn him, either. He already understood this.

—But was even Subaru himself to be denied that right?

Echidna: “I do think it’s harsh. But I also think that the only thing to do is to decide.”

As Subaru was stricken into speechlessness, Echidna addressed him with these words.

He slowly shifted his head, and turned his vacant gaze onto Echidna.

Taking in Subaru’s gaze, Echidna swallowed a breath, and, with a serious expression,

Echidna: “In more extreme terms, the Second Trial is to accept the true present as “The only present that is”, while separating out all the others as utterly unreachable worlds.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “I’m sure it must be hard, since, compared to other challengers, you have far more reason to believe that these realities truly exist. But still, it’s time that you switched over.”

Subaru: “Switched over…?”

Echidna: “Your choices may have indeed left many sacrifices in their wake. And among those you left behind, there must be plenty that are beyond retrieval. But to spend your life counting those you have lost and left behind… would be pitiful. Futile. And painful, don’t you think?”

Subaru: “If I wanted empty idealism I wouldn’t have come to you. …Don’t know why I have to say this, but did you actually think some run-of-the-mill counseling advice was going to help me get through this…?”

Echidna’s words were pleasant, and comforting.

If the wound was shallow, or the crime light, or if it had just been the matter of some causal occurrence, then maybe it would have helped.

Or perhaps, if he had merely wanted to feel saved, he may have made that “switch”.

But,

Subaru: “It still doesn’t change the fact that everything I’ve done and everything I couldn’t do hadn’t changed reality by one bit… that everyone I sacrificed believing that those worlds would cease to exist could’ve been a mistake…”

Echidna: “…That’s true.”

Subaru: “Then how am I supposed to be okay with this? How am I supposed to forgive myself? When you tried offering me a hand I slapped it away. That's because I didn't want to be saved by a counterfeit Rem. I will definitely retrieve the real Rem in the end, one way or another—but."

Pausing for a breath, Subaru's face twisted in anguish,

Subaru: "—When I do… would she really be the same Rem I had set out to save?"

Echidna: "…"

Subaru: "Without an answer my heart has nowhere to turn. …And here you are telling me that I don't have to be like this, that all I have to do is decide…?"

Echidna: "…"

Subaru: "Rather than count those I couldn't save, I should live, counting the ones I did save… is that what you're telling me?"

What Echidna tried to tell him was that there was hope if he only looked ahead.

For Subaru, those words may have become a beacon.

—But the darkness into which he had fallen was not so shallow that he could consider it as such.

Subaru: "With this run-of-the-mill idealism… you're telling me… to just fight it…?"

Echidna: "—I am."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "That is what I am telling you."

While he was shoving aside all words of comfort and crying from the depths of despair, Echidna said this to Subaru.

Speaking slowly, pronouncing each syllable, Echidna looked Subaru straight in the eyes and told him.

Echidna: “Rather than count the multitudes you might not have saved, you should count all those you have saved. I have seen the roads you’ve taken to get here.”

Subaru: “I, what… what would y… about me…”

Echidna: “I have seen you doing your utmost, striving with all of your soul to forge your own path up to now. And so, I can say this. Indeed, I can.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Of all the paths you have taken until now, not a single one had been wasted. No one has the right to tell you that your utmost was “not enough”. It was only by throwing in everything you had that you have reached this moment. —That is something to be proud of.”

Echidna’s sincere words struck at Subaru’s emptied chest. Something resounded in its hollow interior—but it was not enough. Those words could not compel him to stand.

Even if he was told that he should be proud, the fact remained that he had abandoned and lost too much. Things he should have been able to change. Things that would have gone differently if it had been anyone else besides Subaru. But, because that person was Subaru, there were so many that could not be saved.

That was Subaru’s crime. Subaru’s transgression. The sin which Subaru must accept and atone for.

Subaru: “There’s no one who can forgive me.”

Echidna: “Then I will forgive you. I, who know everything about you.”

Subaru: “There’s no one who can judge me.”

Echidna: “Then I will judge you. I, who know all of your sins.”

Subaru: “—There’s no one who can accept me.”

Echidna: “If you cannot accept yourself, then allow me to deny the self that you cannot forgive.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “If you cannot accept your sins, then leave it to me to deny them.”

For each of Subaru’s words, Echidna had one to strike it down.

Why was this Witch so insistent on denying Subaru’s sins?

Why was this Witch so unrelenting about wiping that darkness from Subaru’s heart?

Subaru: “Why… are you… trying so hard to help me?”

Echidna: “…Asking a girl to say this kind of thing is just plain mean, you know.”

Echidna, who had not faltered once until now, was, for the first time, stuttering her words.

Then, with a slight blush on her cheeks, Echidna cleared her throat, and,

Echidna: “—Will you forge a Contract with me, Natsuki Subaru?”

Her voice was quiet, yet suggestive of her strong volition.

Subaru blinked, letting the words seep into his brain but still needing more time to comprehend them.

Subaru: “Con… tract…?”

Echidna: “Yes, a Contract. A formal Contract with the Witch of Greed—are you interested in sealing one?”

Subaru: “If we forged… forged this Contract, what happens then?”

Echidna: “It’s simple. —From now on, whenever you meet an obstacle you cannot surmount, I will face the wall and ponder with you. Whenever you wish to hear someone’s words, I will endeavor to give you the testimony you desire. Whenever you feel close to being crushed by the weight of your sins, I will clear those crushing sins together with you."

Saying this in a single breath, a bashful smile rose on Echidna's face,

Echidna: "Will you forge this Contract with me?"

Subaru: "…But you're dead… so you can't influence reality anymore, right?"

Echidna: "I believe my reach has already far exceeded that of the dead? I suppose it's a bit late for me to admit this, but better late than never. …That is, if you can forgive me."

Holding her hand to her chest, inclining her head as she spoke, Echidna's words reverberated upon Subaru's eardrums. The vibration passed into his body, bringing a gradual warmth that followed his coursing blood and pervaded throughout his body.

Sensation returned to his numbing fingers.

His parched tongue regained some of its moisture and mobility, and he could feel his thirsting eyes that had forgotten to blink being quenched by something wet and hot.

Her offered hand, her proposition, her proposal, her pledge of assistance left him at a loss as to how to answer.

Just when his oath to go on struggling seemed to have all but lost its meaning, the Witch pledged to be there to support him.

Echidna: "I don't mean to brag, but I am rather confident in the volume of my knowledge. I can prepare countermeasures for just about any problem you might encounter, and no matter how absurd a situation threatens to befall you, unlike your peers, there is no need to go to such pains to persuade me. And, most of all, I can comprehend your Return by Death."

Subaru: "Are you trying to hit me with a fast-lipped sales pitch?"

Echidna: “As the requesting party, I do think it’s only natural for me to lay out all the benefits of sealing this Contract with me. And if it has managed to put some ease into your heart, then all the better, don’t you think?”

Making use of Subaru’s words, Echidna took even those as a part of her pitch. Seeing the Witch this way, Subaru couldn’t help but loosen his cheeks into a smile.

Suddenly feeling the air peacefully flowing out of his lungs, “ahh”, Subaru sighed.

Bathed in the meadow’s gentle wind, he leaned his back into the chair and looked up to the sky.

In the blue, artificial sky, he could see white clouds floating.

Whenever he gets stuck, whenever he is lost without an answer, whenever he is facing against impossible odds.

—If he could sit here under this azure sky, and trade words with her in search of a solution…

Subaru: “Maybe, it wouldn’t be so bad…”

Echidna: “—You mean…?”

Creaking her chair as she stood, inadvertently clenching her hands into fists, Echidna looked down at Subaru. But, noticing Subaru’s gaze looking back at her with his back still inclined against his chair, Echidna’s face suddenly changed color as if embarrassed by her own actions,

Echidna: “Ah, no… Mn, but, if you absolutely must insist, then I guess sealing such a Contract isn’t entirely out of the…”

Subaru: “It’s a bit too late to cover it up, isn’t it? I mean, you were the one who asked if… ugh nevermind, saying it just feels incredibly crude at this point.”

Echidna was the one proposing it, but she had done so to save Subaru’s heart.

To put it plainly, it was a Witch's kindness. The fact that she didn't make him cling and beg must have simply been the Witch's consideration for Subaru.

No matter where he was, no matter who it was, was he always going to wind up being saved like this?

Bouncing off the back of his chair to jolt himself forward, Subaru stood up.

Standing close enough to touch if he only reached out his hand, Echidna looked into Subaru's eyes that were now level with her own, a tinge of unease in her expression.

Even the Witch's minutest actions are cunning, he thought.

But since he was the one being saved, he was surely in no position to complain.

Subaru: "So… how does one seal a Contract?"

Echidna: "—To seal a formal Contract, you and I must be connected by a path between us. I will take care of the details… but for now, your palm."

Echidna held up her right hand with her white palm facing towards Subaru.

"Here, put your palm against mine" was probably what it meant.

Feeling somewhat dumbstruck, watching the Witch across from him failing to keep the glee from escaping onto her lips, "haa", he spilled a quiet sigh,

Subaru: "Now, hopefully things'll finally start turning…"

Filled with great expectations of the future, he placed his palm onto her's, and—

Impact.

A crashing boom rang out as the cup-bearing table beside him burst into a thousand pieces.

The impact that shattered the table passed into the ground, birthing a crater in its wake as the rumble of the quaking earth jolted Subaru into squawking in shock,

???: “—I’m putting a stop to this Contract.”

Striking her fist into the ground, proclaiming this in her magnificent voice, was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl—

—The Witch of Wrath, peering her eyes over the two, smoldering with furious rage.

Chapter 75:
They

Stumbling back from the impact as if he had a rug pulled from under him, Subaru widened his eyes at the blonde-haired girl glaring back at him.

Her blue eyes teeming with exorbitant rage and her beautiful face colored with a crimson hue, it was the Witch—Minerva.

Taking her sharp gaze off the petrified Subaru, she turned to the entirely unfazed Echidna, standing opposite him.

Minerva: “I’ll say it again, this stops now. I will not allow this kind of Contract.”

Echidna: “…Hm. Now isn’t this… quite an unexpected development.”

It was a sentiment too familiar to be hostility, and too violent to be called rage. Standing in the crater she had made, single-mindedly directing this at Echidna, Minerva folded her arms, hoisting up her ample breasts while biting her lip.

Echidna: “Surely—you should understand the significance of a Contract with a Witch. The fact that you chose to interfere anyway… could it be, that you also wish to seal a Contract with him yourself? This wouldn’t be a case of sour grapes, now would it?”

Minerva: “Can’t you tell from my fury that it’s nothing so placid? I’m furious. I’m incensed. I’m so upset I’m ready to explode.”

In front of Echidna’s dodging jests, Minerva shot back with the shade of red deepening on her cheeks. Tears pooled in her eyes from the intensity of her emotions while her face pouted like a sulking child.

Her childish face entirely at odds with her voluptuous figure—

Subaru couldn't help but be intrigued to see such a character in the flesh.

After all,

Subaru: "What… are you doing here?"

Minerva: "What. Am I not allowed to be here?"

Subaru: "Well, no. That's not… but… I mean, Echidna's right here."

Saying this, Subaru pointed at Echidna as Minerva puffed up her cheeks in displeasure. Not seeing his point, Minerva tilted her head, while Echidna, apparently catching on, lightly clasped her hands together and nodded,

Echidna: "Ah, I think I know why you're confused. —You're surprised to see another Witch manifesting while I am still here, correct?"

Subaru: "Y-Yeah. I mean, since I've always met the Witches one-on-one… I thought they kinda had to take your place when they appear. But…"

Minerva: "And she never said we can't appear at the same time, I bet. That just sounds like the kind of prank this mean-spirited Witch would pull."

Huffing in rage, Minerva easily smacked down Subaru's protests. Muttering "Seriously…?" under his breath, Subaru looked at Echidna. But, in front of Subaru's gaze and Minerva's address, Echidna made no effort to deny it.

Echidna: "I wouldn't want you to misunderstand. Calling the other Witches here is quite a taxing and risky thing to do. There's a chance they might even wrest away my control over this place, or, even if they don't, it is still incredibly exhausting to manifest beings as powerful as them."

Subaru: "That's…why? …No, but, you…"

Echidna: "I've never once lied about this. I can assure you that much."

With that single incisive statement, Echidna sliced through Subaru's faltering words.

It was true. Searching through his memories, Echidna had never said anything about this present situation that would constitute a lie.

It was only Subaru's imagination going off on its own when he was presented with this phenomenon.

So, in the end, technically Echidna hadn't actually deceived him, but,

Echidna: "I just didn't want you to know that other Witches can manifest as they wish, and have them take you from me."

Subaru: "H, uh?"

Echidna: "To me, you are the first guest I've had in a very long time. Conversing with you had thrilled me in ways I've rarely ever been thrilled, whether it be before or after my death. If I told you I simply wanted to have you here, all to myself, would you berate me for my shallowness?"

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "I know I keep on saying this, but I am rather fond of you. And so, I didn't want your interest to shift onto other Witches more charming and more helpful than myself. —Go on, you can laugh at me if you wish."

So this extreme, hideous desire to possess—was her reason for hiding it from him.

Quietly listening to Echidna's excuse without saying a word, Subaru wondered why she would have this obsession towards him—just what about him warranted this kind of fixation?

It was the same with the Witch of Envy, and now Echidna, too. Just why would they—

Minerva: “You’re way too easy to dupe, you know that?!”

Subaru: “—Ddgah?!”

Just as his mind was sinking into thought, Subaru’s head was bumped by a soft fist from behind.

He turned around holding his head, and found Minerva right behind him. She took the hand he was holding against his head, and, in one fluid motion, she twisted his arm and flipped him onto the ground.

Subaru: “Oa, aah! Wai-, hurts hurts hurts… or… not?”

Minerva: “When I directly touch anything living, no matter what action I take, it would be transformed into healing. I could punch with all my strength and it would close wounds, I could wrest you to the ground and it would cure you of your diseases, I could place you in a lock and it would fix of your shoulder-pains…!”

Subaru: “That… explains why my body’s not aching all over, but.”

While his body was savoring the full power of the Witch of Wrath, Subaru frantically twisted his neck to look at Minerva as she locked him in a hold.

Despite the creaking of his bones and the horribly-unnatural-looking directions his joints were being twisted in, instead of pain, all he felt was an incongruous warmth spreading throughout his body. This Witch, with the strange Authority to instill every action with restorative powers—come to think of it, Subaru hadn’t had a single bad impression about her up to now, but,

Subaru: “What the hell’re you trying to do…?”

Minerva: “If I didn’t do this, you would’ve been happily cajoled into getting all ready to sign a Contract with Echidna. This careless, braindead attitude of yours is really pissing me off!”

Echidna: “Cajole, makes it sound bad. I only remember explaining the benefits of sealing a Contract with me and working to reach a mutual understanding…”

Minerva: “It’s the way you make it sound like you’ve fulfilled your responsibility to explain that’s getting to me. You explained the benefits alright. You did… then when it’s about the inconvenient details that come with the Contract you didn’t say a thing!”

In a fit of rage, Minerva angrily stomped down her foot. The place where her heel landed was exactly on Subaru’s butt, as he felt the inexplicable sensation of a heel driving into his rear while its force passed through him, crushing an indentation into the ground.

While feeling his bowel functions being somehow improved by this strike to his behind, to Subaru shock, he began to realize the meaning of Minerva’s words.

—It was true, that his conversation with Echidna hadn’t touched on the detriments of the Contract at all. Just how was it that it took him so long notice it?

Subaru: “No, but… calling them detriments… it’s not actually that serious, is it?”

Minerva: ““It won’t be that bad”, is that what you’re thinking? You are taking Contracts way too lightly. Especially when the other person is a Witch—the one who, out of the seven Witches bearing the names of Sins, has forged the most Contracts, interacted the most with humans, and meddled the most with the course of history: the Witch of Greed.”

Echidna: “All those were my laurels in life… though it’s true not every one of them would be what you’d call honorable. And, it is also true that sealing a Contract with me did not necessarily save all of them.”

What Minerva put forth was something Subaru never knew about. Following on Minerva’s words, Echidna insisted on her lack of any ill-will towards Subaru.

Stuck between the two as they asserted their stances, Subaru’s head was at the peak of disarray.

He didn’t know whose words to believe.

Ever since Subaru got involved in the Trials inside the Tomb, his multiple meetings with Echidna and all the time they spent together deliberating over his worries had led him to consider her a sort of comrade in arms.

And so, when she proposed to forge a Contract to formally seal their cooperation, a part of Subaru even felt relieved.

On the other hand, compared to the time he had spent with Echidna, he had had very few opportunities to speak with Minerva. Yet each time, it was when he was on the brink of collapse that she mercifully saved him with her mighty arms before exiting like a hurricane without demanding even a “Thank you” in return.

Minerva had no reason to deceive Subaru, so if it was a matter important enough for her to manifest herself to intercede, then there might be reason for him to carefully reconsider.

Or, actually, rather than pondering like this, he should first be asking this question.

That is—

Subaru: “Echidna. If we seal this Contract… you’ll have to get something in return, right?”

Echidna: “…Mn, that’s correct. Contracts require compensation. Just as I will offer you the knowledge you seek, you will present me with the compensation I desire.”

Subaru: “Of course. Right. —So, what do you want from me? If I Contract with you, what will I need to give you?”

From here on, whenever he gets stuck in a hopeless deadlock and needs Echidna’s help, what will he need to pay?

To his question, Echidna’s cheeks softened into a smile.

Echidna: “Nothing you need to be so wary about. What I want from you is not so hard to give. In fact, since the compensation I seek is neither material, nor immaterially precious, you could say that mine is more than a fair offer.”

Subaru: "—And what is it… that you want?"

Echidna: "It's simple. —What you feel, what you think, what lingers within your heart, what you know, what you do, what you create, and all of the fruits called "The Unknown" born from your very existence, I want to savour… always."

Echidna's face blushed, like that of a young maiden with a crush.

The fruits called "The Unknown"—that poetic phrasing made Subaru furrow his brows.

Subaru: "The hell's… that? You want me to hand over my feelings, my memories, my recollections, is that what you mean? In that case…"

Echidna: "Didn't I tell you? It's nothing so troubling. I just want to witness the sights you see, the melodies you hear, the stories you weave, all from a special box seat. All I want is to experience it. To be in a position to know the "The Unknowns" you create. With that, and that alone, I will be satisfied."

To dispel Subaru's concerns, Echidna clearly stated her demands.

It was simply to watch Subaru walk his path. To see the same sights he sees. To know feel he feels, know he knows, and witness the results of his actions.

The Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, the Witch bearing the crown of Greed, wanted only that.

Subaru: "You aren't, lying to me, are you?"

Echidna: "Lying about the terms of a Contract would be absurd. As for myself, I pledge that I will never do anything to betray those words. I swear this on my life."

Placing her hand on her chest, "Though, I am already dead", Echidna concluded with a quip.

Subaru could sense no deception in her words or behavior. Or perhaps, it was because he wanted to believe her.

Subaru: “Minerva. Since Echidna’s already said that… I think I’ll…”

???: “I-It’s all… true, but… she hasn’t, told you every, thing, has she?”

Just as Subaru asked Minerva to release him from her hold, this time, he heard another person’s voice addressing him. It was a voice he had heard only ten-odd minutes ago—a voice for which Subaru had absolutely no positive feelings for.

Subaru: “Camilla… Witch of Lust!”

Camilla: “Do… n’t… look at me… with those scary eyes. I, I’m… not even, doing any, thing… aw, awful…”

Subaru: “The scary eyes are inborn. I’m not trying to make an especially intense expression or anything.”

With Subaru still held against the ground, in front of him stood Echidna and behind him was Minerva, the three of them forming a straight line, while, sitting on the grass a short distance away, was a pink-haired girl—Camilla.

She timidly hid her face from Subaru’s gaze, and only now and then peeked over. Her attitude was irritating as always, but by consciously keeping his attention off of her, he managed to avoid being “Captivated to a life-threatening degree”.

Then, he asked again,

Subaru: “But anyway, what were you talking about? I won’t complain about more Witches showing up at this point, but if there’s anyth…”

Camilla: “E-Echi is… hiding lots and lots of things, you know…? She, isn’t lying, but… she’s hiding lots, and lots…”

Subaru: “Hiding… what…?”

Pondering over Camilla’s words, Subaru imploringly looked towards Echidna. While Echidna turned to the suddenly-appeared Camilla and narrowed one of her eyes, Echidna: “And I was wondering why you came out all of a sudden, so it’s to bad-mouth me is it? Actually, how is it that he’s caught your eye? Unlike Minerva, I don’t see a reason why you’d get all cozy with him. I thought you didn’t like him.”

Camilla: “A, r-reason, like… Minny? No, I don’t have, any… thing like, that. But, Echi, you… tr-tricked, me… didn’t you?”

Speaking in a frail and stuttering voice, Camilla looked down as she responded to Echidna’s methodical statements. However, unlike the frailty of her voice, the actual contents of her words implied no weakness or compromise.

Camilla puttered her fidgety gaze around, glancing several times at Echidna,

Camilla: “I-I don’t like…him, but, you tr-tricked, me… E-Echi, so I’m, not, on your side any, anymore, you know? People, who trick, me, hate, me… do, mean things to me, I… I will never forgive.”

—Those last words alone were spoken with incredible clarity.

It was such that, for a moment, Subaru couldn’t process the fact that those words had come from the girl beside him.

So utterly detached that voice was from his impression of this girl up to now.

Except,

Camilla: “…”

Wordlessly, yet determined and unwaveringly, Camilla stared at Echidna.

In her eyes there churned an indescribable emotion—a whirlpool of something dark and grudging, unforgiving of the one who had offended her with their transgression.

A pure mass of narcissism—the description suddenly scraped across Subaru’s mind.

Echidna: “While it may’ve been a necessary measure, doing something contrary to Camilla’s desires was a mistake on my part. There is nothing more unenviable than making an enemy of you, Camilla.”

Camilla: “E-Everyone, is, on my side… so, it, won’t be pleasant, to have me, hate, you…you know? You can, a-apologize, but, I won’t, forgive, you…”

Camilla wasn’t just an equal balance of timidness and rebellion.

Her personality was so introverted that she was too timid to even properly communicate with others—but that had very little to do with the intensity of her retribution against those who wronged her.

Subaru: “What’ve you all been… what’ve you all been talking about?!”

Finally disrupting the perilous atmosphere between the Witches, Subaru broke his silence and blurted out.

Feeling the gazes of all three Witches falling on him, Subaru frantically turned his neck, and,

Subaru: “How long are you gonna leave me out of the conversation?! I, I’m the one who has to choose here! Say it in a way I can understand! Echidna, what’re you hiding?! And you two, what is it you know that’s making you want to stop me?!”

Minerva: “Putting you in this mentally feeble state so that you’d grab onto any offered hand without thinking… it’s all her careful planning that’s lured you here!”

Echidna: “You make me sound like a villain. Won’t that make him misunderstand? If we seal this Contract, I will certainly help him, and guide him to the optimal destination he desires. My only request is to see what he sees, hear what he hears, and learn what he learns in the process. Not a single one of the things I said was false.”

Minerva blasted back at the protesting Subaru, her voice trembling in rage. All the while, Echidna remained calm as always.

Listening to the pristine clarity of Echidna's voice, Subaru began sensing that something was awry. Having overcome the state of heated delirium up to now, he once again scrutinized over Echidna's words. Over her attitude, and why the other two Witches tried to stop him.

What was out of place? She didn't say anything strange. Both of the other two Witches acknowledged that she wasn't lying. So then, where was the problem—?

Echidna: "I will repeat, Natsuki Subaru. If you choose me, choose to seal this Contract with me—I will without fail lead you to the place you desire…"

????: "…"In the end", would be the necessary disclaimer to this promise, right? Haa…"

Just as Echidna reached out her hand to Subaru, a listless voice covered over her words.

Looking up, he saw a monster made of magenta hair who had appeared opposite Camilla—sitting on the ground, buried in her own long hair, it was the Witch of Sloth.

The increasing number of Witches didn't surprise Subaru anymore. But, what Subaru did pick up was,

Subaru: "In the, end…?"

Sekhmet: "I'm sure Echidna, huu… is certain to fulfill the Contract, haa. But, so long as she maintains the fact, huuu… that she intends to fulfill the Contract, haa. She can probably do whatever she likes in the process, huu."

Subaru: "Do, whatever she—"

Tying together Sekhmet's intermittent, huffing words with the sense of awriness he had felt earlier, a single explanation emerged in Subaru's mind.

But that explanation was simply too hard to accept. His face stiffening in shock, Subaru looked towards Echidna, who had closed her eyes, and,

Subaru: “Echidna, if I Contract with you… you will definitely lead me to the optimal future, that’s what you’re saying?”

Echidna: “Yes, it is. That is a fact. Without a doubt, I will carry out this Contract to the end. With my knowledge and your ability, we will certainly be able to achieve it.”

Yes, surely, the Contract will be properly fulfilled.

There were no lies in Echidna’s words. If Subaru cooperates with her, they will certainly be able to save everyone and reach that perfect future. However,

Subaru: “As you guide me towards the optimal future—will we be taking the optimal path?”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “Will you truly be doing everything in your power to bring me to the place I desire?”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “Why’re… you saying nothing. Answer me, Echidna… no… WITCH OF GREED!”

Lifting his head, Subaru screamed at the top of his lungs.

Though still held against the ground with his joints locked in place, Subaru paid it no heed as he single-mindedly glared at Echidna.

On the other end of his razor-sharp gaze, Echidna let out a small sigh.

Echidna: “—If you wish to reach the optimal future, you would have to permit certain sacrifices along the way. Could it be that you lack even that resolve, Natsuki Subaru?”

Subaru: “—gh.”

Her response neither affirmed nor denied what Subaru had asked her.

But, Subaru had realized it:

Echidna’s words just now weren’t meant to dispel his doubts.

Instead, as if intending to make her thoughts known to him, she spread out her arms—

Echidna: “This extraordinary ability you possess, the Authority of Return by Death: Its utility is something you don’t yet truly comprehend. By refusing to allow endings that are contrary to your desires, you repeatedly retry, and repeatedly reach for the future—that is the near-perfect ideal of an inquirer. But of course. In the first place, once an event has reached its outcome, it would mean that no other outcome could take its place. While in the process of reaching an outcome, it is possible to hypothesize on various possibilities of what that outcome may be. Such an approach under such conditions can serve to verify such various hypotheses. But when there is an actual result you want to reach, the outcome of each experiment and the hypothesis it verifies must forever remain singular. All the while, to truly reproduce the exact same conditions is impossible. No matter how meticulous the preparation, deviation from the conditions of that particular point in time is inevitable. And so too, is the question: “What would the results have been if I had done things differently?”—forever out of the reach of an inquirer such as myself, instead being what you’d call a dream beyond a dream. Possessing the “Memories of the World”, there are indeed ways in which I could come to “Know” the answers. But while they exist, I have no desire to use or rely on such methods. My “Desire to Know” is not simply a “Desire to Have Knowledge”. Even for me, that distinction is quite a contradictory and loathsome thing. But I’m getting carried away, let’s return to the topic at hand… for one such as myself, with no choice but to accept the singularity of the outcomes, having but one means of observation, your existence and your Authority is a godsend. Using “The Same Conditions” to conduct “A Different Test”, and see “A Different Outcome” from “What Originally Should Have Been”—who would not desire such ultimate Authority? Seeing it laid before one’s eyes, who could go without first trying absolutely everything? Of course, I have no intention of taking it by force. In the end, you will be making full use of Return by Death for your purposes. I will ensure that you reach your desired future to the absolute best of my ability. And, in the process, if possible, I would like to sate my curiosity to the fullest possible extent. Surely, you won’t fault me for such a measly request? You will get your answers. I will sate my curiosity. Our interests are entirely aligned. Since I don’t know the answers myself, I certainly won't misguide you on purpose towards the most wretched endings possible. When first encountering a problem, I'll be just as ignorant as you are to what the optimal solution may be. So together, we will ponder, agonize and find the answers as comrades. I can say this without the slightest embarrassment. I am immensely fond of you, that is, for your capacity to increase my means of inquiry, and I swear I will never do anything to impede you. Of course, when initially without answers, I cannot guarantee a smooth resolution to every problem even with my help. While I can aid you with the strength of my knowledge, I can never directly interfere with reality. Should the obstacle before you require physical, material strength, I cannot help you. Time after time, perhaps in the hundreds and thousands, your mind and body may be shattered and torn. But if and when it is, I will faithfully tend to your heart. I must admit that not wanting to lose something as useful as you has a part to do with it. But, my fondness for you, and my intention to lend you my strength is genuine. I hope you won't think badly of me. Though I've said this over and over, I am confident that I will prove valuable to achieving your purposes. Indeed, just as I will be, in a sense, using you to satisfy the Greed of my curiosity, you can also use me to "Attain Your Perfect Future". It is precisely my wish to become that convenient girl you can always call on. If it means spurring you onward, then I will gladly offer you my very existence. Although, paltry as it is, seeing how I'm already dead, whether you will have me is another question. Alas, I suppose that would be unfair to those girls within your thoughts. The subjects of your longing—the silver-haired Half-Elf, and the blue-haired Demon: the girls that your heart has sworn to save and protect. I won't go into what I think about the intense emotions you feel towards them, but I will simply say this: The barricade standing before you is far greater than you could possibly imagine. Just the obstacles you are aware of now already have you struggling at your wit's end. While your resolve to overcome them alone is admirable, it would be far too desperate a fight. There is not the slightest falsehood in my desire to lend you my help. And you have every reason to make use of my willingness. You must use everything you have, use everything you can, and only then can you save the ones you hold dear. Isn't that the oath you have sworn, and the conviction you took onto the painful path you have chosen? That is why I challenge you, repeat with you, and feel for you. The path you have sacrificed your lives to forge, as ironic as it is, has now been validated in the form of the Second Trial. Perhaps, the Trial might offer the illusion that it existed to make you understand the nature of the path you have walked, and as such, was necessary. Yet the truth is it wasn't necessary, and those scenes in fact only served to wear down your heart. However, between a state of ignorance and a state of knowing, no matter how appalling the truth may be, I will always value the latter. You have, and will continue to use your life as the price for Returning by Death and for inching ever closer to the future. As you do so, you will constantly keep in the back of your mind the possibility that the sacrifices you have made and those worlds themselves "Might Still Exist" in some form or another. Until one day, you will cease to feel anything about paying with your life, your human emotions will have faded away, the deaths of the people precious to you will no longer strike upon your heart, and so drowning your days in unmovable, emotionless apathy, even if you eventually reach that perfect future, there would be nothing left of you to hold it—therefore, in order to avoid drifting into a future in which only that tediousness remains, this is necessary. Indeed, there is not a single useless thing in this world, every path is necessary, everything is an indispensable piece of the puzzle: It was for you to understand this that the Trial existed. If you need to make sense of the reasons why you have now stopped in your tracks, then you can think of it this way. And I will affirm your thoughts. If my words can give you the strength to move forward, then I will endeavor to give them. Be it consolation, incitement, whispers of love, or evocations of contempt, if it can become your strength then I will not hesitate to use it. You might hate it, but you will certainly need me on your path ahead. If you are to proceed along this road of unavoidable pain and solitude, then you will need someone to walk alongside you who will never veer their sight from the path. If you leave this role to me and to no one else, then I am willing to walk this road alongside you without question. I will repeat it, I will restate it, I will convey it as many times as necessary until it reaches you. —You need me. And I need you. I need you immensely. My curiosity can no longer be quenched by anything except you. You are the only one in existence who can satisfy me. My insatiable Greed would be fulfilled by you alone. Your existence is already indispensable to me in this closed-off world. If you wish to be someone else’s hope and use your power to slice open their world, could you not take pity on my miserable self so that I may partake in the fallen scraps as well? If you will bequeath me this kindness, then without a moment’s hesitation, I will offer up my body, my knowledge and my soul. And so I beg of you. Please trust me. That I haven’t told you my true feelings until now was never because I wanted to deceive you. I was merely waiting for the right moment to do so. At this stage, the instant I appealed to you with even a fragment of my true intentions, you surely would have left me. That would have been an unbearable loss to me. And of course, for you as well, as it would certainly be a loss in the sense that you’d be distancing yourself from the future you seek. Although, with the power of Return by Death, you will inevitably reach your desired future. Nevertheless, it will certainly be preferable to reach that future while paying as little in compensation as possible. With me, with me you can lighten that price. I do not want you to make the mistake of thinking that this means as long as you reach the desired future, the greater good can overrule the lesser and the details can be held in contempt. Indeed, falling into temptation and failing to advise you of the optimal path just so I can see the end of a thread—is not something which I am so confident in my control over my desires that I can guarantee will never happen. This I will admit. But, I will never mislead you. If on the off-chance I do betray your trust in this way, I will under no circumstances try to hide it from you. I will certainly disclose it. And then, do everything in my power to repair that damaged trust. No matter what happens, I will deliver you to the perfect future you desire. Absolutely, absolutely. And now, if you agree that this is necessary, then won’t you choose me? All I want from you, all I ask of you is as I have mentioned in the Contract. After that, it is simply a matter of how much suffering you are willing to endure for your desired, coveted wish. I have told you my resolve. Now I would like to hear yours. Prove it to me, seal this Contract with me, enlist my assistance, and muster the will to reach your destined future. Do so, and you may for the first time boast that you have conquered the Second Trial. From there, proceed to the Third Trial, and overcoming that, liberate the Sanctuary. Then, considering the disaster that will befall the Sanctuary, those you love, and those you hold dear, that shall be greatest Trial of all. Show me that you have the strength and resolve to surmount it. Once you do, plunder me, use my knowledge, and take hold of the future ahead. What I desire from you, what I request from you, and what I offer you in return is as I have stated. All is as I have sincerely, honestly, willingly confessed it. So now, I want you to tell me—what is your decision? That, in itself, would satisfy a portion of my curiosity."

—A lovely smile rose onto Echidna's face.

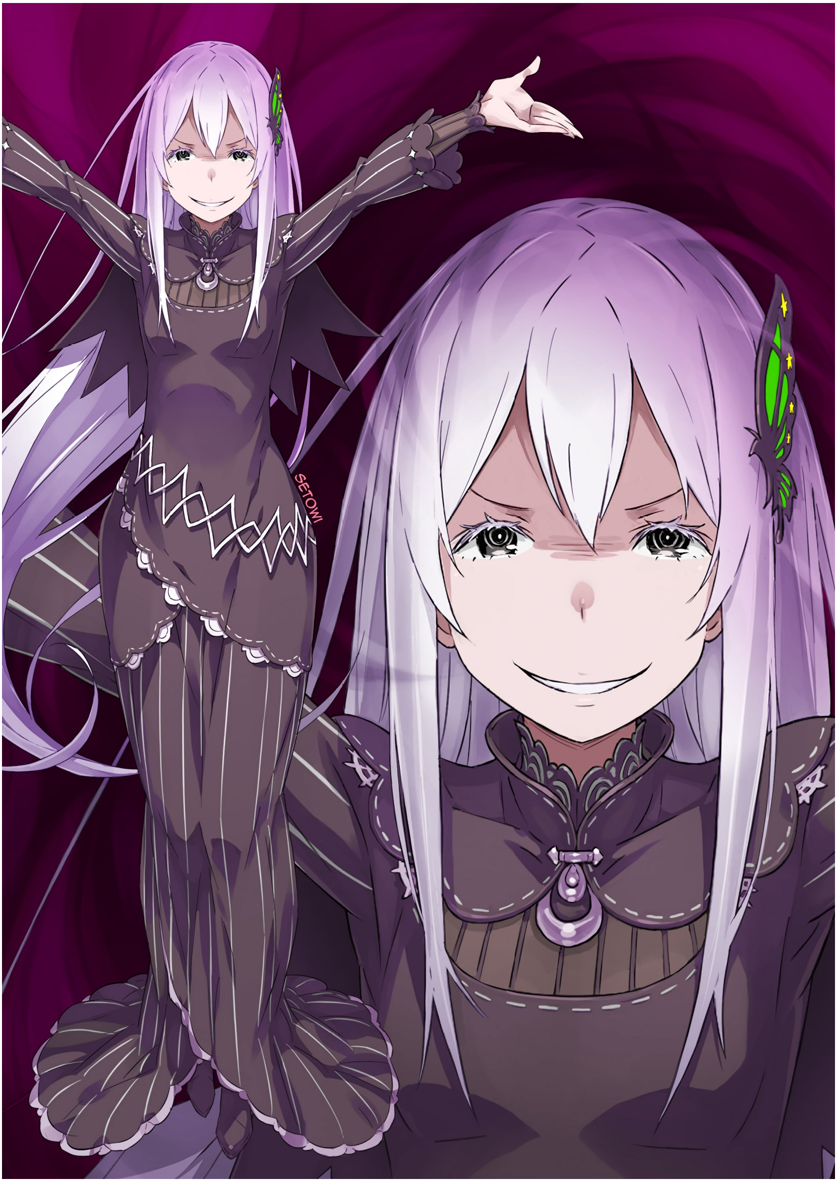
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With her white, snow-like hair swaying and her cheeks flushed red from the heat of passion, she turned up her eyes to Subaru, awaiting his answer.

Echidna’s eyelashes trembled in trepidation for his reply, as her fingers holding her chest anxiously fidgeted about. Her lips tried several times to speak, but, hesitating, she merely moistened them with her tongue.

Subaru looked up into the eyes of the one restraining him, Minerva.

For a while, they went on staring at each other, until Minerva spilled a small sigh and finally released Subaru’s arm. Freed from her hold, Subaru stood up with a roll of his shoulders.

Just as Minerva promised, the aching in his shoulders was gone. In fact, he could feel that his somewhat tensed waist and other parts of his body have been purged of their fatigue as well. Such was the terrifying healing of the Authority of the Witch of Wrath.

Subaru: “…”

Rolling out various parts of his body, Subaru checked the sensations in his limbs as he reorganized his thoughts:

About what he had heard just now, of Echidna’s unreserved, truest of true intentions.

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “Yes?”

Subaru: “You’re… going to use me?”

To use, and be used. That was what Echidna had repeatedly proclaimed in her speech. Hearing it, Echidna nodded without hesitation.

Echidna: “I am. Just as you may use me. The Contract is merely a safeguard should either of us stray from that agreement. If you wish to chastise me for wanting to do everything in my power to hold onto you, then I can only resignedly accept it.”

Subaru: “It’s not that I haven’t thought about it… Ultimately, that’s what mutual interest is, I understand this too. As much as I hoped that you were only helping me out of the kindness of your heart… I was at least prepared to accept the reality that you weren’t. But…”

In front of Echidna, Subaru covered his face with his hand and leaned back his head.

Subaru: “It’s just, not there anymore…”

Echidna: “What… isn’t?”

Subaru: “Everything you have done up to this point… looks faded to me now. Every warmth you have shown me, everything that made me want to trust you, to start believing that perhaps you weren’t a bad person after all… all of it, has faded.”

Everything from their first meeting to this moment suddenly collapsed with a thud.

Their first tea party, the scene after the Trial, and those countless times, impeded by reality, he had imposed on her wisdom: When he had thought that he could not regret sealing a Contract with her.

—All of it was now mercilessly jeering at Natsuki Subaru’s foolishness.

Subaru: “Was this your intention from the start?”

Echidna: “I don’t see what you have a problem with? If it means reaching the optimal future, then you won’t hesitate to take whatever path to get there—isn’t that the resolve you have made? You yourself have affirmed it, and I was merely agreeing and giving you a push on the back…”

Subaru: “When I decided that… when I hadn’t yet, and you tried to guide me down that path, was that all a part of your plan? …Is that what you’re telling me?”

Echidna: “I wouldn’t want you to misunderstand. That conclusion was entirely your own. All I’ve done was give you a little nudge. To blame your own conclusions on someone else is something I cannot agree with. I cannot agree with it, and I am not so meek that I’d just sit down and take it.”

Pouting up her lips, Echidna’s face sulked in protest. That display of emotion was so childish and out of place that it only intensified Subaru’s sense of incongruity.

Somehow—there was just something off about the degree of her affectations.

There was nothing wrong with where Echidna expressed her emotions. She would be indignant when doubted, smile when there was something to be happy about, and let slip glimpses of grief when there was reason to be sad. All of these were on point, and without error.

Yet this sense of incongruity, and the distrust it inspired, was because—

Subaru: “All your emotions are synthetic… and superficial.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “Whether you’re happy, or mad, your emotions are equally childish and shallow. Just now, when you were riled, all you did was pout. It had nothing to do with magnanimity. Your reactions… all your reactions have been strange. Before… I had thought… you were just an easygoing, open-minded person, but…”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “The truth is something else. You’re—you’re someone who can’t understand other people’s emotions at all.”

Recalling all of Echidna’s behavior up to now, it was as if everything had been toned in sepia.

What he had previously imagined to be her good nature had in fact merely been owing to the shallowness of her emotions. The moment he saw through this, all their interactions abruptly faded of color.

And, even when showered by these unsparing words, Echidna's face remained unchanged from the sulking expression from before: As if she didn't know any way to express any greater discomfort.

Subaru: "This is where you're supposed to be angry, you know."

Echidna: "…Is that so. So here is where I should raise my voice, and shower you with insults? I see, now I learned something. I'll make sure I do so the next time I get the opportunity."

With the fall of Subaru's words, Echidna's expression vanished.

Expressionless—it was something Subaru had never seen from the Echidna he knew: but the true face of the Witch of Greed.

In front of Subaru, who had fallen into silence, Echidna snapped her fingers. In an instant, the destroyed hillock was restored to its original shape, and the shattered table and scattered chairs were formed anew.

Echidna sat down in one of the chairs, and pointed to the one opposite her,

Echidna: "Would you like to sit? I'd like us to iron out the details of the Contract."

Subaru: "…With things as they are, do you still think I'll readily consider a Contract with you?"

Echidna: "Unless, you are really going to reject me over such a small disagreement? What would be the point of that? Driven by the impulse of a moment to abandon the correct choice can't be considered wise. I suggest you take a good look at reality, and select the most rational course of action."

Faced with Echidna's words that were frozen of emotion, Subaru closed his eyes and held his breath.

Echidna was right. Subaru was the one who was losing himself to impulse: there was no way around it. Her argument was sound. Nor was she lying.

All Echidna did was hide her true intentions from Subaru. She had merely kept silent about how she benefited from observing Subaru on his path.

If he sealed this Contract, chances were, he would finally reach the correct solutions. And that he would obtain Echidna's unreserved cooperation was also an indisputable fact.

Subaru: "There is one thing… I've been meaning to ask you the moment I got to see you again."

Echidna: "—Hm, and what is that?"

Subaru: "Once I hear the answer, I think I'll be ready to choose."

Echidna awaited Subaru's question.

Subaru would put forth this question as his touchstone: the question he hadn't been able to find even a fragment of an answer to since embarking on the loops starting in the Sanctuary. A question which she could not possibly have nothing to do with.

Subaru: "—You know about Beatrice, don't you, Echidna."

Echidna: "…Yes, I do. I was rather deeply involved in her creation, in fact. Did something happen with her?"

Echidna returned this innocent reply, seemingly bearing no hidden meaning, yet rife with questions all the same.

Subaru closed his eyes once more, and saw the girl with drill-curls in his mind.

In her last moments, with her back pierced through, just before she vanished.

At the end of her long, long solitude, the shadow she had cast within him remained heavy in his heart.

Knocking Subaru aside, shielding him from that murderous blade, that final expression she showed him—even now, was seared into the back of his eyes, refusing to fade. And so,

Subaru: "Because of her Contract, Beatrice has been waiting for "That Person" to come. Are you the one who forged this Contract with her? Are you the one who bound her to the Mansion?"

Echidna: "I don't remember specifying a location… but I was the one who received her promise to guard the Forbidden Library and to wait for someone to come."

Subaru: "Then… who is "That Person"? What'll I have to do to free her?"

Through four hundred years of solitude, Beatrice had been waiting for "Someone".

Yet not even Beatrice herself knew who that "Someone" was. Nor did Subaru have the slightest clue.

But if he asked Echidna herself, the one who had arranged this promise in the first place—

Echidna: "Now who would it be, I wonder?"

Subaru "—H, uh?"

Echidna: "No no, I wasn't joking, I really am wondering. Who do you think Beatrice's awaited "Person" would be?"

Echidna asked, as if she had been presented with a question she did not know the answer to. Stunned by this reply, Subaru shook his head,

Subaru: "Even you… don't know who Beatrice is waiting for?"

Echidna: "No, I don't. I have no idea who Beatrice's awaited "Person" would be."

Subaru: "But… how? Weren't you the one who told her to wait in the Forbidden Library? If you don't know, then… unless…"

The one who instructed Beatrice to wait in the Forbidden Library was Echidna, but it could've been someone else who set the condition for her to wait for "That Person" to come.

If so, then the one who would know the answer would again be someone else—

Echidna: "No, you're mistaken."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "I was the one who instructed Beatrice to wait for "That Person". You weren't wrong about that. What you got wrong was something more fundamental."

Subaru: "Funda…mental?"

Echidna: "Just why in the world did I seal this Contract with Beatrice? That is where you are misunderstanding. I made Beatrice guard the Forbidden Library so that she could give its contents to "That Person", is that what you thought?"

He couldn't understand what Echidna was saying.

It was just a natural assumption. When instructing someone to give something to someone else, naturally, the intention was for that thing to end up in the right person's hands.

But, in front of Subaru's instinctive interpretation, Echidna shook her head, and said,

Echidna: "That wasn't the point of my instruction to Beatrice. I sealed the Contract with her, having her wait for "That Person"… but I was also waiting to see who she would choose "That Person" to be."

Subaru: "…"

—

—

—

—what?

Echidna: “You see, that child was created for a specific purpose. But necessity arose for her to live in a way that differed from her original purpose… for that, she had to go far away from here, and there, she needed to be given a new purpose. For that child, who now had nothing, it was necessary to give her a reason to live. It was for that, that I sealed this Contract with her.”

Subaru: “—Tha…t’s.”

Echidna: “Watching over the Forbidden Library, and eventually handing it over in its entirety to “That Person” who was destined to come. I placed no limitations, since, in the first place, there is no correct answer. She stays alive just as planned, and I have another result to look forward to. It’s quite logical, don’t you think?”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Of course, going four hundred years without choosing anyone is a result in itself. So was the fact that she did not simply choose one of the people she had met in her days to be “That Person”. And potentially, her deliberations over whether to break the Contract, desiring for her own death, is also a result in itself.”

Subaru: “And how… do you feel about that?”

Echidna: “—? It’s quite marvellous, I think?”

As if she had just been asked something incredibly obvious, Echidna innocently tilted her head.

That reply, that attitude, and the expression of the girl he saw in his mind, all led him to the answer.

It’s decided. Understood. Clearly understood.

—His misconception about who this person was that he was dealing with, has been rectified.

Subaru: “Echidna… you really, are a Witch.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “An inexplicable, unfathomable, monster.”

Echidna: “…”

He told her. The answer that was in his heart.

He withdrew the hand he had almost given her, and as for who it would now reach out to, he has already decided.

Subaru: “I… I can’t take your hand. I’ve already decided whose hand I’ll be taking.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “With those callous, binding words, without the slightest malice, you stole four hundred years from that girl. —I’ve already decided. I’ll be taking that girl’s hand. Not yours.”

That was their farewell.

With it, he shook away the hand of the one he once thought would walk alongside him.

He lifted his face. And looked forward.

Beneath his eyelids, he saw that girl’s final expression.

—Disappearing, dying, afraid, twisted as if about to cry, but nonetheless relieved that she had protected Subaru.

He would take the hand of the girl who mourned his “Death”, that much was decided.

Echidna: “…”

Echidna’s eyes narrowed.

Flickers of thought flashed through her irises as if pondering on what words to say to Subaru.

Yet before she could, the change had arrived.

Minerva: “—she’s here.”

Camilla: “Oh, no, I… I don’t want, anything, to do with… this, anymore.”

Sekhmet: “At a troublesome time, a troublesome person, has come to cause more trouble, haa…”

The three onlooking Witches all gave their respective reactions.

He felt an overwhelming pressure on his back.

While in front, staring at what was behind him, Echidna’s eyes slightly widened. Following her astonished gaze, Subaru turned around, and saw it—

???: “…”

—With everything above her neck shrouded in pitch darkness, there stood the Witch of Envy.

Chapter 76:
≠ Satella

1

—This would be the first time Subaru had ever met face to face with the “Witch” herself like this.

The Witch of Envy, it was a name which he had heard countless times before, and a Witch whose threat he had experienced first-hand during their showdown in that loop inside the Sanctuary.

Defying the rules she had one-sidedly imposed upon him, it wasn’t once or twice that he had tasted the pain of his heart being crushed within her grasp, nor was it easy for him to have any positive impressions of the Witch who possessed Emilia’s body while unleashing destruction upon the Sanctuary.

It was especially so now, after his last conversation with Echidna had spawned within him an aversion to the word “Witch” itself. But,

Subaru: “Right… this one… is on a whole different level from the other Witches.”

Facing the pressure emanating from the Witch standing before him, Subaru squeezed out this hoarse mutter.

It was a slender woman.

Standing languishingly with her arms dangling at her sides, she seemed to be staring at Subaru. Shrouding over her body was a pitch-black dress—literally woven from the shadows rising from her feet, pulsing, as if in rhythm with her heartbeat.

Though her sleeves were long, he could eerily see her hands from the tips of her pale fingers up to her wrists. Chances were, like the other Witches, the Witch of Envy must be exceedingly beautiful.

But the most vital piece required to confirm this was missing.

Subaru: “Seen it quite a few times now… but what’s with this?”

An impenetrable shadow covered everything above the Witch’s neck, making visual confirmation impossible.

Unlike the darkness of her dress, the shadow drifted about like a mist, hiding the face of the Witch of Envy from Subaru.

The Witch gave no reaction to the dumbstruck Subaru’s question.

Driven by the surging apprehension scorching inside his heart, sweat emerged on Subaru’s forehead as he looked to the ones around him—at the other four Witches, watching in absolute silence.

Subaru: “…”

But when he saw the change in their expressions, Subaru was taken aback.

As far as he knew, the relationship between the Witch of Envy and the other Witches was that between a murderer and her victims. To meet their own killer—Subaru was at least aware of how much mental distress that should bring.

But the expressions on the Witches’ faces were nothing like what Subaru had imagined.

One was a gentle smile, one was a gaze of saddened sympathy, one was of innocent indifference, and lastly—

Echidna: “So you have broken my boundary to get in here. Brazenly trespassing into my Dream Citadel… always the egotist, aren’t you.”

Only one, Echidna, glared at the Witch of Envy with eyes of pure hostility.

Seeing that hatred, or something like it, from none other than Echidna astonished Subaru. Just now, he had voiced his final farewell thinking that she was incapable of such feelings, yet this blatant outpour of emotion made him wonder if he had been mistaken.

Although, realistically speaking, the time for such thoughts had already passed.

Right now, the problem was how to deal with this motionless Witch before his eyes.

Subaru: “But why is she here in the firs…”

Minerva: “Because you made her mad by blabbing about stuff you shouldn’t have? I don’t know what to do with men like you who can’t keep their mouth shut. I can kinda get why she’d be furious.”

Subaru: “What, I don’t get it… I mean, are you actually taking her side? I thought you and the Witches were her enemies?”

Minerva: “Enemies, what kind of stupid question is that? …I’ll show you now and we’ll see if you’re right or wrong.”

Narrowing her eyes at Subaru, Minerva swayed her blond hair as she jolted into action.

Cutting in front of the Witch of Envy’s line of sight that was fixed on Subaru, she pushed out her busty chest as she magnificently faced down the Witch. And then,

Minerva: “Can you hear me? It’s me, Minerva? Witch of Wrath Minerva? If you remember me and hear me, say something?”

Subaru: “—! No, w-wait! As far as I know, talking won’t work with her! If you do anything weird to provoke her…”

Sekhmet: “Just keep quiet and watch, haa.”

In Subaru’s eyes, what Minerva was doing could only be called reckless. But just as he tried to stop her, he was interrupted by the hairball sprawling on the ground, Sekhmet.

Subaru turned around, while the magenta-colored hairball that was Sekhmet slightly shifted in size, Sekhmet: “The time we spent together with that thing, huu… is many times longer than what your short interactions have been, haa. It’s only natural that you’d be worried, huu… but you can leave it to Minerva, haa… She does things without thinking sometimes, huu. But, that’s probably not the case this time, haa…”

Minerva: “I can hear you, Sekhmet! If you don’t want me to mess up the conversation and get all of us swallowed, then don’t say things that’ll make me mad! I’m all ready to blow here!”

Sekhmet: “When you can get mad at people, huu… just for breathing in front of you, haa… what am I supposed to do, huu.”

Even while getting hit with that unflattering critique, Minerva did not take her eyes off of the threat in front of her.

The Witch of Envy also made no reaction to this little back and forth, but only stood there, unmoving, staring through the Witch of Wrath at Subaru.

Indeed, this was definitely a departure from the direct, instinctive reactions the Witch had exhibited up to now.

But all that meant was that she hadn’t taken any hostile actions so far, and whether or not a conversation could be established between them was still a different matter.

All the while, as Sekhmet left the conversation entirely to Minerva, the other two Witches—

Camilla: “Well I-I… think, if, Minny, tr-tries her, best… i-it’ll, turn out, alright… you know? But if, she… hu-hurts, Minny… I-I’ll kill, her.”

Echidna: “I don’t doubt it, but as I’ve told you before, your affinity is terrible with that thing. The only one here who can resist it is Sekhmet. —Do you understand?”

Echidna kept her voice as calm as she could as she pacified the stuttering but belligerent Camilla. Meanwhile, noticing the white-haired Witch’s gaze, the bundle of hair shuddered as if even replying was too much of a nuisance, Sekhmet: “Even I can’t keep its movements sealed for long, haa. You know that my abilities aren’t suited for that, huu.”

Echidna: “Of course I know. That’s why you just have to crush its limbs and snap its neck. Once you disable its movements and stop its breathing, I can abolish it from this space with my own hands.”

There was enough hostility in Echidna’s words to make Camilla’s statement seem cute. Though she said it with a casual air, the unconcealable disgust seeping into her voice made it clear that she wasn’t joking.

In front of the Witch of Envy alone, Echidna left no shred of doubt about the certainty of her contempt.

While this perilous conversation was going on behind her, Minerva continued her standoff against the Witch of Envy. In fact, as if trying to keep the Witch of Envy from overhearing the other Witches, she took a step closer.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru gulped down his breath as he watched Minerva’s advance.

While Minerva’s actions simply seemed insane to Subaru, it made even less sense why the Witch of Envy appeared here in the first place.

If this was like the previous times, the Witch of Envy would have shown up because Subaru had violated the taboo. But the Witch’s methods so far had been materializing her arm to clench at his heart and physically appearing in reality to swallow everything into shadow.

Nevermind friendly interactions, the Witch of Envy had never even explained what her intentions were. Her goals were just as mysterious now as they were from the very beginning.

And so, just how the Witch would react to Minerva’s actions was still completely unknown to Subaru.

—If Minerva got swallowed by the shadow, the other three behind her would move instantly.

If Echidna's expectations for Sekhmet were justified, the Witch of Sloth should be able to crush the Witch of Envy with her Authority, and Echidna would be able to expel the weakened Witch of Envy from this place.

But, if that was the case—

Subaru just couldn't understand why they weren't doing it now.

Subaru: "…"

Speaking of strange, the fact that Minerva was tasked with making contact with the Witch of Envy in the first place was very strange.

Camilla only swore to retaliate if something happened, Sekhmet did not seem to want any active hostility, and even Echidna, overflowing with contempt, did not defy Minerva's wishes by ordering a preemptive strike.

Just what on earth were they thinking—

Echidna: "You look like you're getting spun around trying to understand us Witches just now."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Although, if our… I mean, if our thoughts could be seen through so easily, we wouldn't be called Witches. I'd feel troubled if you took us so lightly" (Dona started using "boku" to refer to herself again)

Subaru: "Cut it out with the fake Bokukko already. —I just thought if you really wanted to expel the Witch of Envy, now would be the best chance to do it while she's defenseless."

Echidna: "I see. Is that how you perceive this situation? Oh my… mn, is that right. Personally, I'm all for what you are proposing. After all, nothing would make me happier than to bash that thing with every Authority I can muster and annihilate it until not even a speck of dust remains, but…"

Cutting off her words there, Echidna narrowed her eyes.

That attitude wasn't like her at all—it wasn't like he really knew her even now, but Subaru nevertheless sensed a certain reluctance that was entirely unlike her as he waited for her next words.

After a short silence, Echidna continued,

Echidna: "Doing everything in my power to eradicate that thing and having the other Witches turn on me would be putting the cart before the horse. Nevermind Minerva, but it'd be a rather terrible bet to make enemies of Sekhmet and Typhon."

Subaru: "I don't get it. Why would expelling the Witch of Envy make them turn on you? She's your enemy, the same should go for all of you…"

Camilla: "It's, not like, that…though…?"

Camilla, who had kept silent up to now, suddenly interrupted Subaru's question. Without looking at the startled Subaru, Camilla went on watching Minerva's standoff against the Witch of Envy, and quietly stuttered,

Camilla: ""Envy" is, everyone's, enemy…that's… right, but, that thing… and, her…are, different, you know?"

Subaru: "…what's that supposed to mean? What're you guys…"

Sekhmet: "As long as we don't know… which one that thing over there is, huu… it's not just that we don't want to… it'd also be unreasonable… haa…"

Subaru: "Which… one…?"

Sekhmet followed up with her explanation. But hearing it only threw Subaru into even further disarray. What on earth were they talking about? Yet, the answer came from a different direction.

Taking a step forward, Minerva moved closer to the Witch of Envy.

She spread out her arms, assuming a posture of nonresistance, and asked the Witch of Envy,

Minerva: “—Are you the Witch of Envy? Or are you Satella? Which?”

2

He felt like he had just heard something that would turn everything he knew on its head.

Minerva’s question ran completely contrary to what Subaru thought he understood. But the silence of the other Witches who had personally lived through that era only confirmed that Minerva was neither confused nor joking.

Hearing Minerva’s call, for the first time, the Witch of Envy’s shoulders trembled. The black mist concealing her head writhed, as she apparently turned towards Minerva.

—It was only now that the Witch seemed to have noticed Minerva’s existence.

Subaru: “…”

“What did she mean when she said that?” there was no time for Subaru to ask, even as the sense of apprehension tightening in his throat rapidly exacerbated his restlessness.

The Witches’ affirmation only further confounded Subaru’s thoughts.

Since, Minerva’s words would mean that—

—The one called the Witch of Envy, Satella, might in fact be a different person.

No. That would be over-interpreting from the little information he was given.

How many times had he gone through painful experiences because he fell into such stubborn assumptions with only superficial clues to go on? Although he must always consider the possibilities, he mustn’t get stuck with any particular idea.

More importantly, he couldn’t afford to divert his attention from the scene before him for even a second.

Minerva: “Since you didn’t attack me at the very first question… there’s still a chance.”

Saying this, Minerva closed the distance.

Between the Witch of Wrath and the Witch, there were now only five steps remaining.

Minerva: “Though, if you were the Witch of Envy, I’d be surprised if you didn’t attack out of jealousy the moment I came between you two… so I’m not that worried.”

Four steps.

Minerva: “Then again, you could’ve said something right from the start. I mean, I know we don’t get many chances to meet face to face in our relationship. And your last expression when you swallowed me back then isn’t something I can forget.”

Three steps.

Minerva: “Rather than the other five, I thought it’d be better if it was me. Besides Typhon, out of the other Witches, I was your… closest friend, I thought.”

Two steps. She lowered her head.

Minerva: “Yeah, that’s what I thought… and because I thought this…!”

Stooping down, with only two steps between them, Minerva leaned forward, pouring her strength into her back leg.

And,

Minerva: “Do you realize what it feels like to be ignored, when it’s been so long—?!”

The ground exploded, instantly annihilating the distance between them.

Minerva charged forward leaving a cloud of dust in her wake as she twisted her body to punch with all her might. Piercing the air, breaking through the sound barrier with a thunderous clap, the strike continued towards the Witch's head, into the shadow obscuring her visage, and—

Minerva: "—There, I knew it."

Minerva's fist miraculously stopped mere inches from the Witch's face.

It wasn't because the Witch's shadow reached out to tangle her arm. But instead, Minerva had intentionally stopped just before the strike would reach her.

With her fist still extended, Minerva leaned back, swaying her golden hair,

Minerva: "Look, see? She knew there was no need to dodge my punches, it's Satella, not the Witch of Envy. Echidna, you were worrying too much."

Echidna: "…I wonder. While I honestly admire your spirit for using your own body to test it out, those aren't the same things. It could just be that it perceived your threat to be so negligible that it naturally didn't react. So, Sekhmet…"

Sekhmet: "You'll find any reason you can to get me to move… huu… and you're just as bad at knowing when to give up, Echidna… haa… Admit it, that's Satella, huu."

Sekhmet let out a sigh at the silenced Echidna.

Still existing as a ball of hair, the Witches' final weapon showed no intention of moving. Then, standing within reach of the Witch—Satella, Minerva turned back to Subaru.

Seeing himself reflected within her pale-blue eyes, still unable to take in the fact that she was standing right beside that enormous threat, Subaru only stood there, dumbstruck.

Seeing this, Minerva snorted, and pouted with a dissatisfied expression,

Minerva: “What’re you standing there for? Come on, get over here.”

Subaru: “Get… over… well, even if you say that…”

Minerva: “What, you’re not a man at all. I’m all the way over here and proved that it’s fine, didn’t I? So you can just scuttle over already. Right? Or is all this table-setting still not enough? If you won’t cross the stone bridge even when someone’s tapped it out for you, how’re you ever gonna get across?!”

Subaru: “Don’t just get excited all of a sudden! It’s not like I won’t come over because I’m freaking out! I’m not going over there because I don’t know why I should!”

Shouting back at Minerva in the same indignant tone, Subaru objected to being left in the dark.

Pointing at Satella, who had apparently been deemed no immediate threat, Subaru looked around at the other Witches, who were unraveling from their combat stances,

Subaru: “First of all, what do you mean the Witch of Envy is different from Satella?! You keep talking about it like it’s obvious, but that’s not the case from where I’m standing!”

Echidna: “It’s not too complicated. When you forcibly inject Witch Genes into someone with no affinity for it, these afflictions are bound to arise. The Witch-Personality emerging from the influence of the Genes would then conflict with the original self… or that’s one way to explain it. But as far as I’m concerned, they are one and the same, so I don’t see the point of differentiating the two like the others do.”

Subaru: “A split… personality…? Then, what’s…? You mean the one who swallowed you guys and carved those atrocities into history was the alternate personality, even though the original personality didn’t mean to…”

Echidna: “No, that’s not it either.”

Just as Subaru tried to make sense of the information he had been given, Echidna stopped him. She shook her head, and, as if to correct Subaru’s theory,

Echidna: “Consuming half the world, and devouring us six Witches of Sin, were entirely Satella’s doing, not the Witch of Envy’s.”

Subaru: “Wh—?! No, but that doesn’t make any sense! If the one who swallowed you was Satella, and that’s Satella standing over there…then…”

Sekhmet: “Actually, it does make sense, haa. While we cannot forgive the Witch of Envy… huu… we hold no grudge against Satella…haa… That’s all there is to it, huu…”

Camilla: “I-I don’t… like, Tella ei… either, but… at, least she’s, better, than, the Witch… I, guess.”

Sekhmet and Camilla’s agreement only put more questions into Subaru’s head.

The Witches seemed to have some sort of consensus, but Subaru couldn’t understand it at all. They would forgive the personality that destroyed them, but not the alternate personality that didn’t—what was that supposed to mean?

Echidna: “I’ve always been asserting that such distinction is pointless… but it’s a futile effort. So I can’t just ignore their feelings and eradicate that thing. My frail spirit-body won’t hold up for long if I do it, only to have them turn their banners against me. Even I can’t come back from having my only soul scattered into the wind.”

Subaru: “B…ut… isn’t that extremely risky for the other five as well? You’re the one keeping their souls intact. If you disappear, the other Witches would…”

Echidna: “They have already come to terms with their own “Deaths”. So they have no special attachment to prolonging their existence as souls. —They would rather choose destruction than live on betraying their ideals. It’s because they think this way that they are Witches.”

Neither Sekhmet nor Camilla objected to Echidna’s words.

“High-minded” might be too flattering of a description, but Subaru had no words for the uncompromising way the Witches chose to live.

“If only I could be like this”, “I wish I could be like this”, anyone would have had such thoughts at one point or another.

But to stay true to their ideals even after death isn’t something anyone could do.

Subaru: “And Minerva…”

Is probably the same.

Before anyone else, she was probably the first to be destroyed by the Witch of Envy. But she still trusted her enough to approach within arm’s reach, and the result proved that that trust wasn’t misplaced.

Subaru didn’t know what kind of relationship these girls had had.

But if there was this bond of trust between them, what drove the Witch of Envy to destroy the other six? And how was it, that they could then forgive her?

Echidna’s thoughts on it were at least understandable.

But, even so—

Subaru: “I can see this is how you guys are. It’s a bit… hard to take in, but I think I got it. But, I still haven’t heard anyone explain to me why she’s here.”

“…”

Subaru: “She isn’t going to attack no-questions-asked. I get that. … But, that doesn’t mean she’s safe. If the one I’ve been dealing with was the Witch of Envy, then what does Satella want from me? The

Witch of Envy has been a serious pain in the ass… so even if you suddenly tell me that this one's different, it's not like I'd just understand."

Besides, according to the Witches themselves, Satella was definitely the one who devoured them. So even if the one who swallowed the Sanctuary was the Witch of Envy, it would seem that Satella was no less dangerous.

So who could blame him for feeling threatened and wary, and wanting to stay away?

Subaru: "What does she want, why is she here. As long as no one tells me…!"

Minerva: "If you want to find out, then you should come over here."

Minerva stopped him just as he was raising his voice.

Placing her hands on her hips, Minerva couldn't hide the annoyance on her adorable face as she stared at Subaru.

Minerva: "That's enough of your long-winded excuses and drawn-up defenses. I'm here standing right next to her, and nothing's happened. And also, she came here to see you. So if you're gonna keep acting like a loser and won't come closer, that can only mean we've misjudged you."

Subaru: "What was there to misjudge?! Don't just go one-sidedly imagining things about me! And stop pushing that crap on me! What would you know about me, anyway?!"

Being slapped with some arbitrary image of himself, it wasn't like he'd just start acting in accordance with it.

But, once, when Subaru had shouted that exact same thing, there came a voice that answered him. He could still remember what it said. And that those words had become his strength.

—If he didn't want to betray that past-self that was saved by those words, then, Subaru: “Agh, damn it… what was I thinking… idiot…”

Being irrational, making decisions based solely on emotions.

After so many painful experiences resulting from this, had he learned nothing at all? Instead, he should be paying attention to the details, stifling his emotions so he could act calmly, not out of impulse, but on facts alone—to uphold that never-wavering heart of steel.

That was what he had always wanted himself to be.

Minerva: “You’re taking too long.”

Subaru: “What it’s like to be up-close to someone you’ve tangled to the death with… crap, actually you do know, don’t you? It’s kinda hard.”

Minerva: “It’s not like we don’t have any thoughts on it. Sekhmet and Camilla are just more mature, unlike me. But there’s a reason I look after her.”

Watching Subaru clicking his tongue as he walked over, Minerva shrugged. Giving him no time to ask her what that reason was, Minerva handed the scene over to Subaru.

The Witch of Wrath naturally stepped aside as Subaru drew closer to the Witch—until he was face to face with Satella.

Subaru: “…”

Unwittingly gulping in front of the thing before his eyes, Subaru was at a loss for words.

Although he had already expected this while watching from afar, as well as while walking up to her, he still couldn’t get used to the immense emanated pressure and the visual sense of incongruity.

The shadowy dress clinging to her body carved out the curvatures of her figure, while the impenetrable veil above her neck gave rise to a perverse sense of glamor.

But all that was instantly swept away by the dissonance of her unrecognizable head.

Subaru: "…"

Seeing her from up close, Subaru realized that it wasn't anything physical obstructing his recognition.

What seemed to be a darkness shrouding over her head was not, in fact, what hid her face from view.

What made the Witch's face invisible was something more primordial, something on the mental level.

No physical obstacle was blocking her face from view. Instead, it was something instinctual that was not allowing him to "See" it.

Echidna: "Everyone wants to avert their eyes from their most repulsive delusions."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "If you can't see her face, then that's a problem with your own heart."

The cautioning voice came from behind him, affirming Subaru's realization.

Resisting the urge to fire back at her, Subaru ignored Echidna—or rather, he had no attention to spare as he continued to face against Satella.

Meanwhile Satella had yet to take any kind of action.

The only thing Satella had done so far was appear here, and it was those around her that had kicked up a fuss, frantically trying to prevent any potential damage from being brought about by her actions.

It'd be no exaggeration to say that the fear inspired by her presence was a testament to the danger her existence posed.

And, just when Subaru was growing impatient with her lack of motion,

Subaru: “—gh.”

Satella: “…”

Seeing her hands suddenly reach out to him, Subaru’s throat froze.

Not distracted for a second or even a blink of an instant, Subaru kept his attention fixed on Satella. What would happen in the next moment? —The tension of not knowing was like imperceptible hands toying with his mind.

His shock wasn’t because he had failed to see the hands move. Subaru clearly saw Satella’s hands move towards him. What surprised him was his own consciousness, which had quietly watched their approach to the end.

Subaru: “What… are you, really? What… do you want with me?”

In fact, Subaru hadn’t made any useful reaction to those hands reaching towards him. Though subconsciously understanding what her gesture meant, Subaru hastily uttered those words.

As if he didn’t need to acknowledge that fact, as though he didn’t have to face it, he wrenched out the words,

Subaru: “If you’re… the one giving me the power to rewind… why… are you…”

He didn’t know why Satella was doing this.

Or why his body, facing Satella at a distance close enough to touch, despite him time and time and again screaming commands from the depths of his consciousness, was refusing to obey him.

—Was he supposed to feel so inexplicably “Relieved” in front of her?

Satella: “—h.”

Subaru: “—a?”

Still struggling with his disobedient body, Subaru belatedly reacted to the voice striking upon his eardrums. This time, it was no doubt the correct reaction to something so far outside his expectations.

Holding his breath, Subaru waited for her to continue.

In front of Satella, staring at him with her still-indiscernible expression, Subaru swallowed, as he went on waiting while time slowly passed on, until she spoke.

Satella: “—I will.”

Subaru: “…”

Satella: “I will always. Always. Love only you.”

Chapter 77:
A Lonely…

1

How to describe the impact that shocked through Subaru's entirety the moment he heard that confession of love?

He felt the illusion of a bolt of lightning piercing him from head to toe.

Every pore of his body opened as goosebumps carpeted his skin, while the blood coursing through his veins seethed to a virulent boil. The thumping heartbeats in his chest flushed him red from the neck-up, as, roughly panting, Subaru stumbled one step backward.

He couldn't stand there any longer.

If he kept standing there, his breaths would reach her, his fingertips would reach her.

If he didn't get away from her now while he could still keep his instincts in check, he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

And if that happens, Subaru would be swept away by "Love"—

Subaru: "Stop…"

Satella: "I love you."

Subaru: "Please, stop…"

Satella: "I've always, will always, love only you."

Subaru: "I told you to stop—!!"

Shaking his head and swinging his arm, Subaru wrested his attention away from her hot, entangling gaze.

Still, Satella's expression remained invisible to Subaru. And so, he couldn't tell just what emotions were harbored within those eyes.

Yet the feverish pounding in his chest showed no signs of abating.

Only by consciously suppressing that feeling, desperately crying out, thrusting her with that rejection as if he was spitting out blood, could Subaru manage to preserve his fundamental self. If he didn't maintain this effort to keep himself conscious, he was certain that his very existence would distort. And that thought terrified him to no end.

Blatantly rejecting her, flinging his open disgust, and slapping her with that truth, Subaru screamed, while Satella only stood there as before.

Her unseen expression remained behind a veil of darkness. Indiscernible. Impossible to read. And yet, somehow, Subaru could tell that Satella was being injured by those words, and was now casting down her gaze. Somewhere within his heart, was an urge to caress her hair, console her to ease her pained expression, and whisper her his love so that perhaps she might smile again.

Even as he tried to reject it, his heart was insisting that he "Loved" Satella.

Subaru: "Wh… what are you?! What did you do to me?! Like Return by Death… did you put something in me to manipulate my heart?!"

Subaru poured all of his distrust for his disobedient heart at Satella.

Just why was his heart suddenly reacting in a way that was utterly contrary to his understanding? If this overwhelming emotion inside him was also the doing of this unnatural Witch, then that'd be simply far too horrifying.

Twisting people's hearts to one's will—would be the lowest, most abhorrent act.

The first glimmer of light Natsuki Subaru ever received in this world was his "Crush" on Emilia.

Lost, and without a heading in that initial desperation, he was indebted to Emilia for extending him her hand, and his memories still told of her rescuing his heart just when it was all but abraded away. Even now, her existence had not lost even a fraction of that luster.

Over the days he spent repeating the loops starting from Death, fighting alone through countless adversities, the number of precious people he wanted to protect had only grown, while the words, bonds, and feelings he shared with them slowly accumulated inside him.

By now, he could no longer say that his feelings for Emilia was his primary motivation.

But even so, Emilia was still the first ray of light Natsuki Subaru had received. And now Satella was demanding that same "Crush" for herself.

Even though there was no word exchanged, no touch of warmth, no time spent together, no bond accrued, and nothing whatsoever shared between them, she was demanding "Love" from him.

What could one call this, if not heinous?

Subaru: "You, and Echidna… you're both insane! This… this place is just full of incomprehensible bastards! I'm fucking sick of it!"

To the faceless Witch in front and the white-haired Witch behind him, Subaru screamed without hiding his disgust.

Satella, who sought to extort from him this baseless affection, and Echidna, who would entangle others to sate her devious curiosity, were both monsters beyond Subaru's understanding.

Echidna: "It's rather upsetting to be lumped together with that thing. Even though we are both technically Witches, to me, that is a vulgar creature several magnitudes below Witches. But, "Incomprehensible", now you're not wrong there."

Subaru: "Just shut up. You pretend to be friendly, but I haven't forgotten how deceitful you are. …Enough. There's no point in me staying here. Let me out. I don't wanna be involved with you people anymore!"

Cursing at Echidna, Subaru hugged his head and pleaded to be freed from her Dream Citadel.

He couldn't stand another second in front of Satella and Echidna. There were enough things Subaru needed to worry about, now was not the time to be looking for more.

He wasn't omniscient, and there was a limit to how much he could handle. Yet why do the problems keep mounting, one after another, when the obstacles were already so stacked against him?

Subaru: "I'll never ask for any of your help again… All the problems outside, I'll deal with them myself. —That's how it's supposed to be, isn't it?! That's what I should've done from the start…"

Minerva: "And then? So it's back to dying over and over, making heaps of people cry while telling yourself "This is information-gathering, there's no helping it"? Heh, good for you."

Minerva crossed her arms and snorted at Subaru's words of definite parting. Then, seeing Subaru return her a glare, Minerva's unruffled face reddened,

Minerva: "What. Got something to say for yourself?"

Subaru: "Like it has anything to do with you. The pain, the anguish, the wounds, the abrasions because of Return by Death, all that's got to do with is me! What right do you have to complain about it?!"

Minerva: "It's easy for you to say that you're ready for the pain, the suffering, and the anguish. Who cares about the feelings of those who have to watch you spew blood while your flesh gets flayed and your bones get crushed? You can always use the excuse that you're the one who's suffering the most."

Subaru: "What…?!"

Minerva: "Just because you're taking on the most obvious, most visible wounds, you think the ones who receive lighter wounds as the results of your actions have no right to say anything. After all, you're the one who's hurting the most. Suffering the most. Enduring the most… And so, naturally, the others around you should just shut up with their snivelling, right?"

Perhaps because of the rage building up as she spoke, Minerva's tone intensified as Subaru bared his teeth. There was just no way Subaru could let those merciless words go unanswered.

Subaru: "You! You think I'm getting drunk on my own tragedy just so that I can shut everyone else up?! That this dead-end road I'm walking is just a fucking act?!"

Minerva: "No, that's not what I'm saying. All I'm telling you is that thinking "It's alright as long as I'm hurting more than anyone else" is cowardly. I'm not a fan of Echidna's devious methods, and I can't for the life of me understand how roundabout Satella is… but I think the way you twist things is way more sickening than us Witches."

Subaru: "…"

Minerva: "Above all, while I beat everything in order to heal them, the way you live is not only the opposite, but the antithesis of what I do. —Isn't that just way too ungrateful for what she's doing for you?"

Holding out her small fist at Subaru, Minerva huffed out those words. Adding that quiet whisper at the end, she turned her blue eyes towards Satella.

Still standing there as before, Satella had stayed silent ever since Subaru showered her with his abuses, and made no indication of affirming or denying those words. Seeing this, Minerva narrowed her eyes, somewhat sadly.

But Subaru couldn't care less about their sentimentality at this point.

Subaru: "Sickening… ungrateful…?"

Catching Minerva's last few words, with his face downcast, Subaru's shoulders slightly trembled. The tremble grew larger, and, when Subaru lifted his face again, he was smiling.

It was far too ludicrous, how could he help but laugh?

Subaru: “The hell is that. Sickening or whatever… and just why do you think I chose to be like this? How did you think I got to this so-called twisted way of thinking? Whether it’s my methods or my mindset… isn’t that just the natural consequence of the fucking hand I was dealt?! —Isn’t it?!”

Satella: “…”

Subaru: “And it was you! YOU! You were the reason I became like this!!”

Shrieking, Subaru threw all his rage at Satella, who had kept her silence up to now as if to escape her culpability.

It was by accepting Return by Death, using its characteristics to overcome his obstacles, enduring all varieties of hardships that Subaru had made it this far.

Tasting the despair of “Death” time and time again, letting it carve into his soul, turning it into his strength, Subaru got to where he was.

—And it was that same Natsuki Subaru’s wound-ridden path that made him this way.

Subaru: “The one taking on the wounds, the one suffering…! It’ll be me, all me, only me! If having me suffer is enough, then everything’ll turn out great, won’t it?! As long as I can hold it in, as long as I can bury the rage, the grief, everything, I won’t let despair touch anyone else no matter how painfully I have to die! From beginning to end, as long as I’m the only one who gets hurt, then it’s all fine, isn’t it?! What’s wrong with that?!”

Repeat with Return by Death, and, through trial and error, reach the optimal future. It was just as Echidna said. But rather than accept Echidna’s offer which would use that resolve to satisfy her own curiosity, he would continue to forge his path alone, just as he had always done.

Unlike Echidna, who would lure him into taking extra detours, if Subaru set his heart and mind to search for the optimal path, the number of retries would no doubt be less than if he went with her. It might very well be more times than he could count. But, even so, there was value in trying.

If at the other end of the bruise-laden Subaru's outstretched arm was a future where no one else would be hurt, then,

Subaru: "I said you're incomprehensible, that I'm sick of it, didn't I? Yeah, sorry, my bad. There was not a shred of dishonesty in that feeling… but I should've thanked you. How did I forget? I actually forgot, how utterly ungrateful of me."

Satella: "…"

Subaru: "There is just one thing I have to thank you for. Thanks, for giving me Return by Death. It is all thanks to you. Without it, I wouldn't be able to protect a single thing important to me. So I'll be sure to keep relying on that power. So for that, and only that… I thank you."

He was prepared to go on through trial and error.

The option to flee from this fate had already been abolished a long time ago.

Ever since he said "Take my hand, and run away with me" and was rejected, the option to flee was gone.

He must fight on. For this was his oath, what she expected of him, and what she believed in him. Subaru will not run away, but keep on fighting.

Subaru was the man who would always stand back up. Otherwise, he would no longer be Rem's hero.

Subaru: "That's why… thank you for giving me this power. It's thanks to you that this useless, worthless fool could turn those hopeless situ…"

Satella: “—don’t.”

Subaru: “situ…ations…”

Just as Subaru was going to pour out all the heat that had been pent up in his chest, Satella broke her silence with a murmur.

Hearing that single fragment, Subaru’s words dulled from their momentum. His face stiffened, waiting, begging to hear that whisper once more.

What did she say just now? It was like something he couldn’t bear to hear.

He held his breath, while Satella, after a brief silence, spoke again.

Satella: “—Please… don’t cry. Don’t hurt. Don’t suffer. Don’t make… such a sad expression anymore.”

Pleading, Satella whispered to Subaru.

Her words swept up violent tremors in his heart. Of rage, of shock, of a nondescript jumble of every emotion there is.

Subaru: “Y, you… what d…”

Overwhelmed by the maelstrom of emotions, he didn’t know what to say.

Intense passion clogged up his throat as he merely opened and closed his mouth, staring at Satella.

Before the wavering Subaru, Satella continued with her sedition.

Satella: “And so, love…”

Subaru: “Is… is that what it comes down to? …You want to twist my emotions until I finally love you? Is that what you…”

Satella: “—no.”

Satella interrupted Subaru’s trembling words.

Her expression remained invisible. But, somehow, he could almost sense through his skin how Satella was looking at him behind that veil of shadow.

—Satella, she was,

Satella: "—Love yourself… a little more."

Surely, she was casting him a look of compassion—

2

It took some time for the meaning of those words to filter into his brain.

But once it did, a shapeless, tremoring wave of emotion instantly engulfed his heart.

Subaru: "The hell… did you just say."

Satella: "…Please… don't hurt anymore. Be kinder to yourself."

Subaru: "You… were the one who gave me Return by Death… weren't you? You gave me this power so I'd have a way to move forward…"

Satella: "—I love you. So, please, love yourself as well, and protect yourself."

Subaru: "If I only value my own safety, if you take this method away from me! What'll I have left?!!"

In rejection of Satella's boundless whispers of love, Subaru screamed, pressing his hand against his chest,

Subaru: "You know it too, don't you?! I'm completely powerless! No wits, no skill, I have no special powers at all! The only thing this good-for-nothing self has is the Return by Death you've given me! So isn't my life the only thing I can offer?!"

Satella: "Don't be sad."

Subaru: “I’ve already factored in all the pain, all the deaths I have to experience. I’ve accepted it, I’m fine with it! If I’m the only one who’ll have to suffer, then I’m fine with that!”

Satella: “Don’t suffer anymore.”

Subaru: “Getting myself hurt more than anyone else, by going through more than anyone else, if I strive and struggle to protect everyone else, then I can make sure that no one besides me has to suffer! There’s nothing more that I want!”

Satella: “Please… don’t cry.”

Subaru: “It doesn’t matter what happens to me, does it?! Like anyone would be bothered care what happens to a bastard like me! No matter how broken, how torn I become, as long as everyone reaches that future safely, then… hk.”

Because, if Subaru stops taking those wounds at the very front lines —

Subaru: “If we can welcome that future… without losing anyone… then… gh.”

—he might irrevocably lose someone somewhere unreachable again.

Subaru: “…Rem is… already gone.”

Satella: “…”

Subaru: “If I were smarter, if I were stronger, if I wasn’t so concerned about my life, if I had put myself in the front… I could’ve prevented it.”

The loss and the despair from back then still binds Natsuki Subaru always.

And so, Subaru had resolved not to rely on anyone, but to carry his wounds, fighting on alone, believing this to be the most correct course.

Subaru: “I have to believe… I have to believe that there’s always a way…”

That Return by Death could solve everything.

That as long as he uses it well, Subaru will not lose a single thing in the end.

If he didn’t believe, if he didn’t tell himself that taking those wounds was necessary, if he didn’t convince himself that this was the truth, how could he possibly confront that despair again?

Subaru: “I…! I don’t want to lose anyone the way I lost Rem again—gh!”

Grabbing his head, Subaru shrieked as if to reject all other audible sound.

Before he knew it, he had crumpled to the ground. Forgetting even to distance himself from Satella, he retreated into his shell, curling up as he denied her sweet whispers.

Poison. Virulent poison. Satella’s very existence was a will-melting poison to Subaru.

Subaru’s heart, which he had sworn never to allow to falter, began to fracture.

Into that opened gap entered ice-cold despair, wrecking his heart with the reawakened grief of that day.

Sekhmet: “You aren’t a child anymore.”

Suddenly, there came a muttered voice.

Seeing Subaru, wailing and crying, stubbornly insisting on his self-made conclusions and shaking his head in denial of all else, one of the Witches who had kept silent until now murmured.

Sekhmet: “Crying, bawling, throwing up a tantrum, taking everything onto yourself… isn’t that, just like…”

Subaru: “…”

Sekhmet: “…a little child, left all alone?”

In a sad, pitying voice, Sekhmet remarked on the current Subaru.

The other silent Witches who had heard Sekhmet’s murmur did not refute it.

The Witch of Sloth’s words were all too accurate.

Because Subaru’s figure now was just that of a pitiful, frail, little child.

SETOWI

Chapter 78:
These Sounds of Shed Tears

1

Sekhmet: “Curling up, being stubborn… isn’t that just like a child? It’s so painful, I can’t bear watching… haa…”

Listening to Sekhmet calling him a child, Subaru, closed off in his shell, couldn’t help but think that maybe she was right.

Obstinate and conceited, he was stubbornly shutting out the voices around him—but surely, his way would be the most reliable for minimizing losses.

Being granted an unlimited number of chances to rewind the world, with his life as the only price, Subaru could keep trying indefinitely. In the process, over and over, Subaru’s heart would steadily be abraded away.

But just when he was on the brink of shattering, he was given the words to make him stand again.

“—You’re my hero, Subaru.”

That. That was all he needed.

After his soul is finally worn to the core, if he could just hear those words with everyone there beside him—he would be satisfied.

What’s so wrong with that?

???: “—Baru is crying～?”

Suddenly, a child’s voice pierced through the silence of the scene as the Witches held their breaths.

Curled into a ball, Subaru felt his head being caressed by a little palm. Glancing up through his teary vision, he saw the murky shape of a tan-skinned girl.

Subaru’s gaze had landed on the “Witch of Pride”.

Typhon: “Poor Baru… he’s cry~ing. …Who made him cry~?”

The kneeling Typhon stood up, glowering at the other wordless Witches.

A perilous gleam twirled in her eyes as she looked at each of the Witches in turn, then she raised her brows when she finally spotted Satella.

Typhon: “Tella? Tella’s here? Why? It’s been so long~.”

Typhon waved as she called to Satella, but the war-like gleam in her eyes hadn’t diminished. Seeing this, the first to address her was Sekhmet, who spilled a languid sigh as she sat up.

Sekhmet: “Typhon…haa… He’s a bit occupied at the moment, huu… Don’t bother the boy, haa. Come here… huu…”

Typhon: “Mama… did you do something bad to Baru? Mama… are you a sinner too~?”

Sekhmet: “Your mother… haa… doesn’t have the energy to be a bad person, huu… I wouldn’t want to give myself more work, and I wouldn’t want to give you more work either, haa.”

Typhon gave a little nod at Sekhmet’s answer, but showed no intention of moving away from Subaru like she was told. Instead, she turned to Minerva,

Typhon: “Nerva~~? Did you bully Ba… nah~.”

Minerva: “How come you’re not asking me? It’s not that absurd? It’s not like I only ever go around healing people, sometimes I get carried away and abuse people emotionally too, you know… I mean, I… can hurt, people… too, sometimes…”

Echidna: “When your face turns blue just thinking about it, it’s kind of hard to imagine any violence coming from you…”

Echidna shrugged, teasing Minerva for her unconvincing reply.

Minerva shot her a sharp glare, while Typhon also followed her gaze, turning to Echidna as her childish face twisted into a frown.

Typhon: “So it’s Dona. Dona, you did something bad again, didn’t you~? Dona… are you a sinner~?”

Echidna: “Now why did that sound like a conclusion rather than a question when you’re asking me? I think I should have a word with the one who raised you about that. So, what do you have to say?”

Sekhmet: “It’s to do with your daily behavior… haa…”

Saying this, Sekhmet languorously held her hand to her forehead. Without leaving Subaru’s side, Typhon was still intently searching for the “Sinner who made Subaru cry”.

Seeing the small Witch like this, Echidna narrowed her eyes, muttering “Anyway…”,

Echidna: “Now that Typhon’s here, we almost have everyone. If Daphne shows up as well, it’ll be just like 400 years ago…”

????: “Did… someone just call for Daphne…?”

In response to Echidna’s remark, a pitch-black coffin abruptly appeared on the meadow.

Inside, with her entire body in bondage and her eyes covered by blindfolds, was the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne.

She made a little twitch with her nose, as if sniffing out all the people present.

Daphne: “Not just Subaruun… Tella-Tella’s here too? Woaaaw… All seven Witches of Sin are here, even the Sage-candidate too…”

Echidna: “Daphne. —He’s… not there yet.”

Daphne: “…Aaah~, really? Sorry… Anyway… sniff~ sniff~~ I smell something salty… is someone crying? Is it Neru-Neru?”

Without the slightest regard for the mood, Daphne went on poking at the tense situation in her dopey tone.

To have all seven Witches, including Satella, gathered in the Dream Citadel must've been a rare sight even during the golden age of Witches 400 years ago.

With the seven Witches who by themselves had once plunged the world into chaos—assembled now, in this scene set to explode, was enough power to reshape the world.

The Witch of Pride, seeking to pass judgment upon the one who made the young boy cry.

The Witch of Wrath, clenching her fists, aiming to fulfill the wish of the close friend at her side.

The Witch of Sloth, watching everyone's every move, ready to crush any who would break the peace.

The Witch of Lust, keeping her uninvolved demeanor, preparing to protect herself should the situation set off.

The Witch of Gluttony, having already lost interest in what was happening around her, now agonizing over whose fingers to munch on to stave off her hunger.

The Witch of Greed, directing her hostility toward one particular Witch, while her eyes went on brimming with curiosity at just how this tea party shall unfold.

And, the one who was not the Witch of Envy, but Satella—

Satella: "I, love you. —Because you gave me light. It was you who took me by the hand, and showed me the world outside. In the nights when I was lonely and afraid, you held my hand. And when I was all alone, you kissed me on the lips and told me that I wasn't. You've given me so, so much. …That's why, I love you. Because you… you gave me everything."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru couldn't recall doing a single thing that Satella had whispered.

He had no part in it, it had nothing to do with him. Whether it was meeting Satella, trading words with her, or sharing a single feeling of warmth. Everything she said had been the product of her delusions. The arrayed, empty fantasies of a woman crazed with longing.

That was how it should be. And yet, “Natsuki Subaru” remembered.

Subaru: “Why is this… inside me, what is this? I don’t want this feeling. Don’t try to bind me… with memories that can’t exist… you… you… I… tk.”

“I hate you”, was all he needed to say.

All he had to do was stab the girl who offered him these feelings with the fact that he didn’t have the slightest affection for her. Once he does, he would be able to see the look on the face of the one who had selfishly sought to warp his heart. Surely, it would be an expression magnificently twisted by heartbreak.

—”But, how could you do that to her?”

Typhon: “Baru?”

Sekhmet: “Oh, kid…”

Camilla: “H-He’s…”

Minerva: “You… tch.”

Daphne: “Subaruun?”

Echidna: “—Ah, well that’s one option… Natsuki Subaru.”

As the Witches called to Subaru in turn, Echidna gave a small nod at this outcome.

Subaru: “—gh, bhu.”

—Just like this, curled up on the ground, Subaru had bitten off his own tongue.

Cornered by the Witches, he didn't know what was anything anymore.

With his heart on the brink of twisting, what was left for him to do when even his will was no longer his own?

If it was just something he couldn't accept, he could have rejected it and it would've been fine.

But, in front of Satella, when even his rejection was being turned into acceptance—that was truly terrifying.

—Now, just what would happen if you lose your life in a dream?

Subaru's body should still be in the Tomb inside the Sanctuary.

What had been summoned here was Subaru's spirit-body, or otherwise, his soul. If his spirit died here, would it carry over to his physical body? Could souls even die?

None of it mattered. If it meant another death and respawn, he'd be fine with that.

He would not take the Witches' help. Instead, he would move forward with even greater self-abandon, scouring away anything that wasn't necessary, and, if he could just stay true to his course, surely, the path would open—if I could do just that, I,

Minerva: "That, idiot—!"

The instant she noticed Subaru's attempted suicide, Minerva rolled up her sleeves and jolted forward, hurrying to punch Subaru to heal him. But, cutting in front of her was Typhon, who had been standing at Subaru's side.

The small Witch stretched out her little body, blocking Minerva's path.

Typhon: "Baru made his own choice! Nerva, no interrupting!"

Minerva: “Self-harm or suicide or injury or murder, I won’t allow any of it under my watch! I don’t care what kind of anguish is going on inside! I can’t do a thing about wounds that I can’t see! That’s why! There’s no way I’d overlook a wound that I can see!”

The ground caved in beneath her single step as Minerva’s fist pierced through the wind, driving towards Typhon’s face.

The shrieking fist advanced with enough force to rupture a mountain, but the moment it connects with a living being, the destruction would transform into healing. Although, the shockwave of the impact would still be transferred to the recipient of the strike.

Producing a resounding boom, Minerva’s full-forced strike sent Typhon flying.

The prepubescent girl was blown away as easily as a leaf, dancing through the meadow’s artificial sky. It was a rather brutal sight—but Typhon wasn’t the only victim.

Minerva: “—Tch!”

Minerva’s right arm, from her shoulder onwards, shattered like ice-crystals.

This was the consequence of touching the judgment of the Witch of Pride, and thus being deemed a “Sinner”.

Minerva tilted back her head in pain for the loss of her arm, opening her mouth wide to shriek—

Minerva: “A scratch—!!”

Or not.

Though she was sensitive to other people’s pain, the Witch of Wrath completely disregarded her own.

Even as she criticized Natsuki Subaru for his outlook, she was in fact guilty of the same.

Minerva: “Anyway, now—!”

Having removed her obstacle, Minerva leaped towards Subaru, readying her remaining left arm. Aiming the mighty arm for a full-forced strike from above,

Sekhmet: "I'll be getting in your way next… haa."

In an instant, with her blonde hair fluttering, Minerva was slammed into the ground.

Her entire body pinned to the earth creating a person-shaped crater in the grass, Minerva lifted her face, flushed red with indignant fury, as she screamed at the seated Sekhmet.

Minerva: "Don't get in my way—! Sekhmet—!"

Sekhmet: "That won't do, huu. Sentimentally speaking, I'm on the kid's side, haa. And adding to that, I'm also on Typhon's side, huu… So I have no reason not to get in the way, haa…"

Hearing Sekhmet's declaration of war, Minerva ruefully bit her lip as she looked around her.

But Daphne and Camilla were staying neutral in this conflict, and Echidna was merely watching with piqued interest for the outcome. And, Satella—

Satella: "Hhh…hha…"

Crumbling to her knees, her voice trembled as she watched profuse blood spouting from Subaru's mouth.

With his pouring blood and severed tongue clogging his throat, Subaru was experiencing the sensation of drowning as he caught Satella in a corner of his consciousness.

She's crying, isn't she?

Witnessing Subaru's "Death", she looked more shaken than he had ever seen her before.

Satella: "Why can't you understand…? That of all the things you want to protect, you should be protected too."

Why would she think this way about Subaru?

Within her delusions, just how much support did Subaru lend to her heart?

Satella: “Just like everyone else, struggling in the dead-ends of fate, it’s the same for you too. It’s just that you have a way of overturning it… but… you need saving too… so why…”

She was completely wrong.

Subaru was a hopeless bastard who couldn’t even hold onto the things within his grasp, much less save those he wished to save. A half-assed, useless bastard. There was no escaping from that.

To overcome that useless self, to no longer leave things half-way. Wasn’t that what he had promised?

To become the best self he can be. Wasn’t that what he had decided?

—That weak, useless self, and the self that no longer wanted to be weak were fighting inside him.

No one would see Natsuki Subaru’s weakness anymore.

He must become that strong, dignified, unshakable hero he needed to be.

Because there was a girl who wanted this from him. It was the curse he had placed upon her, and it was his duty to repay her for accepting that curse. Or, actually. It wasn’t so much of a duty. It was just that, since that girl believed this about him, he wanted her to keep on believing.

Yes. That was it.

That was it.

If there was anyone who would grieve over Subaru’s death, it would be her.

Choosing “Death” was a betrayal of the girl who believed in him. Though of course, to Subaru, “Death” would not be the end. Using “Death” as his stepping stone, he would eliminate his cause of “Death” and retrieve everything he had lost.

But what would this mean for the others whom the Death-bound Subaru had left behind?

He mustn’t think about it.

He mustn’t know it. Those were dangerous thoughts.

It was fine. Natsuki Subaru was fine just the way he was.

He mustn’t think that anyone would grieve for him.

He wasn’t someone worthy of such a thing. Subaru’s life was a consumable resource. To be used, and used, and used, until they reach the very end. That was all it was meant to be.

To use death without reservation to its greatest effect, he mustn’t balk at his own “Deaths”.

Be decisive. It’s fine to think nothing. In order to take back what he needs to take back, he must be prepared to abandon what he has to abandon. Everyone does this. It’s fine for Subaru to do this as well.

He just has to save the ones precious to him

If he could do just that, Subaru—

Satella: “What did you see… in the Second Trial…?”

The Trial. —The Trial. The Trial, the “Trial”. Trial Trial Trial, “Trial” Trial Trial Trial, Trial—?

Shock and deprivation of oxygen had slowed his thoughts to their limits.

His vision blurred and blurred into a flickering red, as a storm of television noise ran through his mind. “It’s about time this ended”, he vaguely thought.

The end was slowly approaching.

How many times was it now, that he had welcomed “Death” like this? It was far too tiresome to count, but that was fine.

Eventually, he would have repeated deaths so many times that counting would become sickening.

He didn’t think he could stay conscious long enough to count all the “Deaths” anyway.

That heart of steel.

To have, that unshakable, heart of steel—

Slowly, and slowly, Subaru’s consciousness departed—

And faded—

2

“I’m counting on you, son.”

A voice.

Through the noise, and through the rebounding cacophony, he heard a horrifically clear voice.

“—Have a safe trip.”

He heard another.

A different voice. But it brought the same emotions to his chest.

“I would have liked to call you friend.”

Another voice, bringing a different feeling.

Somehow, it agitated him to hear it. But, there was also a pleasantness to it.

“Sir Subaru… please forgive me…”

Yet another voice.

Flooding his chest with a passing loneliness and something similar to yearning. A voice he wanted to apologize to.

“You… aren’t, that person… I know that… at least… but…”

Here was a voice that gripped at his chest.

Hearing this voice, he could no longer control himself. This voice, that was about to cry. This voice that mustn’t be allowed to cry. This voice that he must protect. This voice. This voice. This voice.

“So show me how amazing you can be. Subaru.”

Thud, something thumped inside him in answer to this voice.

His body heated. Compelled by a sense of duty to move. At this voice that had always supported him.

And…

“Thank you, Subaru.”

There came a voice.

“—For saving me.”

—The voice that announced the beginning of everything.

3

He was probably crying.

If the people dear to him learned about his death, would they grieve for him?

Those irreplaceable people left behind in the worlds that Subaru had selfishly escaped through “Death”, would they mourn and grieve for him?

Just as Subaru was lamenting his own weakness, repeating through Return by Death in search of the perfect future, those who lost him in the final step—would they mourn for him as well?

The people who were precious to him.

The people he believed he must protect.

The people he undoubtedly wished to rescue from their fate's dead-end.

—Was he worthy of being mourned by those so precious to him?

It's alright to be a little conceited, isn't it?

To be so conceited as to think that I'm also precious to the people I consider precious.

It's alright to have a little faith, isn't it?

To believe that those I want to protect also want to protect me as well.

I'm allowed to have a little hope too, aren't I?

That someone would shed tears if I died, and see me as important enough to reach out their hand to save me.

—It's alright for me to think this, isn't it?

I don't want to die.

I don't want to give up, as if this is the only way.

I don't want to be a stepping stone, even if it means saving the futures of people I love.

In that future where I've protected all of them, I want to be there too.

It's alright for me to think like this, isn't it?

I… have the right too… don't I?

If I do, then—

“I don’t… wanna die…”

Gurgling through the clotting blood, alongside the escaping air, he spoke.

The severed-tongue clogging his throat broke free, as his mouth opened and closed, gasping for air. His lungs expanded, oxygen cycled through his brain, and his murky vision started returning.

Then,

Minerva: “There, those’re his real thoughts…kh!”

—Despite having lost both her legs, with willpower alone, the red-flushed Witch of Wrath rammed her healing head into Subaru’s.

Chapter 79:
End of the Dream

The moment he realized that oxygen was passing through his windpipe, with massive coughs, Subaru expelled the remaining blood clotting in his throat.

Still collapsed face-up on the ground, pant after pant, he gasped for the nourishment of life.

There was no time to think about how wretched he looked now.

Although, he was well aware of how miserable it was to unhesitatingly cling to the first chance of rescue right after biting off his own tongue to die.

But—

Subaru: "…does my…"

Minerva: "—Hm?"

Subaru: "Does my life…have any value…? Besides dying…without dying over and over…do I even have any other value…?"

Return by Death, and save everyone from the depths of despair.

He had believed that paying with his life to attain this outcome was Natsuki Subaru's only value.

But, would it be alright to think otherwise?

Subaru: "Is it alright… to think that this person that I am… has any value besides Return by Death? To think that… the people I care about… care about me… as well?"

Minerva: "…The hell would I know."

Minerva looked away and shot down Subaru's whimpering question.

Having lost her right arm and both her legs, she used her left arm to shuffle away from Subaru. Then, aiming her face at her right shoulder—she bit down. Immediately, Minerva's missing right arm regenerated from droplets of light.

Opening and closing her restored right fist, Minerva proceeded to punching her legs—both missing from the thigh down, which, just like her arm, were formed anew.

Her already short skirt had been shaved even shorter and her right arm was now entirely exposed, but, other than her rather precarious costume, the Witch of Wrath Minerva was restored to perfect condition.

She stood up on her brand new legs, crossing her arms in a pose that propped up her ample breasts, and looked down on Subaru. Then,

Minerva: "I couldn't care less whether you have value or not. But she really wants you to live… and you've seen it in the Second Trial too, haven't you?"

Subaru: "…but the Second Trial… were my mistakes… and my sins…"

Minerva: "Are you stupid? That wasn't about making you take responsibility for the worlds you messed up in. That was to show you how sad everyone is as the result of your mistakes. —Isn't that the answer you wanted?"

Subaru: "—h."

He remembered it.

The voice that was crying. The voice stifling its regret. The voice gently sending him off as always.

The whisper of love from someone who believed in him. And the words that began everything which would become Subaru's will to fight.

None of which he was supposed to have in his life.

Having nothing, deprived of even what he should have had, Subaru was summoned to this world.

To prove his own value, he could only fight on. And in order to protect all that he held dear, he'd have to proceed down that lonely road.

I thought that I've only ever been receiving from others, but is it alright to think otherwise?

Would they cry, for me?

Would they lament their own powerlessness, for me?

Would they want to see that future together with me?

When we get there, those people that I love, would they give me a place to stand smiling at their side?

He wasn't sure if he'd have that place.

But surely, if he chose to stubbornly walk that road alone, at the end, that place would not be there for him.

His heart, which would have been turned to steel so he could fight with an unshakable will, would have no tenderness left to smile.

And so, was it really alright to believe?

Either procure that future for the ones he loved at the cost of his own heart.

Or desperately defend his own heart at the cost of the way ahead.

Aside from those two choices, was there another, greedier option?

In that future, alongside everyone he held dear, could Natsuki Subaru also hope to have preserved himself as well?

Satella: "—You can."

Subaru: "…"

Shedding only tears, those had been Subaru's unvoiced thoughts.

But the timing of that answer was so perfect that it was as if those words had been communicated in sound.

Still lying on the ground, Subaru moved his head to look beyond Minerva—towards the face of the girl who had collapsed to her knees on the grass, smiling without wiping away her tears.

He still couldn't see her face.

A veil of darkness was concealing it, such that even now, Subaru couldn't determine her expression. Yet, somehow he knew that she was smiling.

Echidna had told him. The reason Subaru couldn't see her face was because he couldn't accept her. The fact that she was smiling came through, but his subconscious was insisting that he didn't see it.

Satella: "You saved me. And so, you are allowed to be saved as well. I want you… to be saved."

Acutely aware of Satella's words and voice seeping into his fractured heart, Subaru buried his face in his arms. It must be a mess from all the tears, and there was already no way he could look more pathetic at this point. But still, he didn't want anyone to see it.

Even after lashing her with that merciless abuse, how was it that he could still feel relieved to hear Satella's words? And how could he possibly let them see how much his expression had calmed?

Yet, it was also Satella's inexplicable words of "Love" that had told Subaru the true meaning of the Trial.

Echidna: "…I'm surprised Minerva managed to break through Typhon and Sekhmet's obstruction, but, personally, what surprised me even more is you two."

Setting the face-burying Subaru aside, Echidna quietly murmured.

After looking at the regenerated Minerva, Echidna turned her gaze elsewhere—towards the pitch-black coffin pinning Typhon to the ground with its claws, and the coffin's owner, Daphne, facing down Sekhmet.

Hearing Echidna's words, Daphne let out a throaty cackle. She opened the lower half of her bondage and stepped barefoot onto the grass, poking out her tongue,

Daphne: "I'm definitely the best counter to Ty-Ty there is~… Centipede Coffin has no head to think with… with that as Daphne's arms and legs~ Ty-Ty's authority won't work on me…"

Typhon: "UUuu~, Phinnie~ cut it out~~! Hnnn~! UUuu~!"

Sekhmet: "So, haa… You've shown your true colors to keep me in check? Huu. I'm not Echidna, haa. Why bother pulling this on me? Huu… Unlike Minerva, I don't see why you'd want to get involved, haa."

Sekhmet roughly scratched her overabundant hair. With Typhon practically taken hostage, even Sekhmet couldn't act carelessly here.

Hearing Sekhmet's question, Daphne swayed her short pigtails and smiled "Weeeell~",

Daphne: "Subaruun~, he's made some pretty big boasts to Daphne~. Something about killing the White Whale, and then the Great Rabbit next~? So~ I was thinking~ I want him to at least live long enough to take them on~."

Echidna: "That's an interesting perspective. If he sets his mind to it, he would certainly achieve it. You realize this, don't you? …Or, do you actually want the Great Rabbit to be destroyed?"

Daphne: "Makes no difference~? The moment it split away from Daphne~, its belly has nothing to do with Daphne's belly anymore~. Whether it gets destroyed or not won't really bother me~… but I am interested to see how the Great Rabbit representing Daphne's insatiable hunger would come to an end~."

"After all", Daphne went on,

Daphne: “If to end is to be satisfied~…that would be a happiness completely unknown to me~.”

Constantly tormented by endless hunger, to Daphne, its fulfillment would eternally be an unreachable dream.

The Great Rabbit was a reflection of her interminable hunger, and perhaps, even an extension of herself. —Although, Daphne herself completely lacked this sense of intimacy with it.

If the Great Rabbit could meet a different end than what she had received, could it be called fulfillment? Was there ever a hope for her to be satisfied? With this rare display of interest in something other than food, she smiled.

Hearing Daphne’s answer, Echidna gave a satisfied nod, and turned her head yet again. Not to Subaru, Satella, or Minerva. Nor Daphne nor Sekhmet nor Typhon, but to someone who, like Echidna herself, had stayed somewhere isolated from the fray.

Looking at the Witch of Lust Camilla, Echidna softly stroked her own white hair,

Echidna: “And what about you, Camilla? Did you have a reason like Daphne?”

Camilla: “I-Is, there…something you’re trying to… say? E-Echidna…chan…?”

Echidna: “It’s simple. —You called to his consciousness when he was on the brink of death, just when it was about to be extinguished. Possessing the Authority of “The Faceless Goddess”, you must have known what the result would be.”

Camilla: “…”

Echidna: “Your call would have held every significance for him. You must have known this. And so I’m asking. You don’t seem to have any fondness for him? So why did you?”

Listening to Echidna’s question, Camilla held her hands to her lips as her eyes puttered about. She glanced towards Daphne and

Minerva, as if hoping for someone other than herself to come and back her up.

But there was no Witch on site who would be seduced by the all-beloved Camilla.

Helpless, Camilla began biting her fingernails, looking at Echidna with watery eyes.

Camilla: “There, was… no, rea…son? He, rejected… E-Echi’s temptations, so, I’m, already, satisfied… and, everyone, started, fighting for some, reason… but, that has nothing, to do with, me… only…”

Echidna: “Only?”

Camilla: “L-Love, is, a pretty big…deal, you know? It’d be, wrong, to… ig…ignore it. He, doesn’t… want to, see it, but, there, is Love, there… and when, it’s, there… I won’t allow it, to be denied. And, I… absolutely despise taking without giving.”

Hearing only the last part spoken with terrifying clarity, Echidna shrugged.

The Witch of Greed gave a wry smile, before looking to each of the other Witches in turn,

Echidna: “Sekhmet and Typhon respected his will and intervened, while Minerva valued life and healed him. Daphne helped prolong his life so she could see his will to fight, and Camilla used her Authority to inform him of the love he was refusing to see. —And so, everyone here, for their own varying reasons, has decided to help Natsuki Subaru.”

Listening to Echidna’s appraisal of their actions, all the Witches’ expressions changed.

Pride tilted her head, Sloth spilled a languid sigh, Wrath snorted and folded her arms, Gluttony munched on one of her coffin’s extended legs and smiled, while Lust unhappily scowled.

And, taking all this into her sight, Greed held a hand to her jaw, Echidna: “It’s, truly fascinating. —Don’t you agree?”

Echidna’s lips softened as a blissful smile rose on her face.

Her words were aimed at the one directly in front of her—at Subaru, wavering as he stood up.

Having wiped away his tear tracks with his sleeve, only now finally managing to stand, Subaru did not respond to Echidna’s question.

He merely watched her with his lustreless gaze, then looked over the other Witches. And,

Subaru: “Just what… are you people.”

“…”

Subaru: “Curiosity. Sympathy. Pity. Duty. Expectation. Disgust. … None of your reasons for helping me makes any sense to me. I guess I can see why you’re called Witches.”

Echidna: “Since you’re back to throwing insults, perhaps that means you’ve recovered your strength?”

Subaru: “…I don’t know.”

Echidna squinted a single eye while Subaru pressed a hand to his chest and muttered.

Those few spilled words perfectly encompassed all of Subaru’s present feelings.

Subaru: “I was supposed to have decided… what I have to do. The things I have to do haven’t changed. That much is certain. That’s certain…”

“But”, he went on, more to himself than to anyone else,

Subaru: “I had already decided that this was the only way. That’s what I chose… what I’ve resolved to choose. And yet, here, the Trial shattered all of that.”

The Second Trial, the presents that were not to be—stuck the consequences of his actions right in his face as the reality that he could no longer use “Resolve” to appease tore his heart to shreds.

Being forced to witness all that, Subaru would have tried to put it behind him, and to push through with that resolve. In fact, that was what should have happened.

Subaru: “But when I learned of your reasons for helping me, and then having Satella appear right after… my head is a total mess. All of you… can you stop doing these things on your own? What I ask myself to do is my own business. And yet, you’ve…”

At this point, how was he supposed to start clinging to the life he had already decided to treat as expendable?

At this point, how was he supposed to start valuing the life that was meant to be used to its utmost?

At this point, what could he possibly do with the knowledge that he was being loved?

Subaru: “I have… no idea… what to do anymore.”

“You can’t protect anyone if you can’t die!”, Subaru’s rationality was screaming.

“There’s someone who’ll be saddened if you hurt yourself like this”, Subaru’s memories were telling him.

People will suffer if he doesn’t die, and people will suffer if he does.

Echidna: “—I will present you this question once again, Natsuki Subaru.”

As Subaru shook his head in indecision, Echidna lowered her tone and said.

Looking up, he saw Echidna raise a single finger in front of him.

Seeing herself reflected within Subaru’s eyes, she slowly nodded, Echidna: “Should you enlist my help, you will, without fail, reach the future where everyone you wish to save will be saved. There will be no more need for worry. In more extreme terms, I will solve all the problems you’ll face in your stead. All you’ll need to do is focus on implementing those solutions, and on overcoming those obstacles. If this constant burden is too painful for you, you have the option of leaving it all to me. I won’t fault you for it, and, in a sense, I’d welcome it. And so, I present you this question once again.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Lost and without knowing where to go, will you let me guide your hand? I will, without fail, bring you to that future. This, I promise you.”

Saying this gently, Echidna reached out her hand to Subaru.

Looking down at Echidna’s white fingers, then looking up at her awaiting face, Subaru’s breath froze.

Those were the same words he had just rejected.

Back when Subaru first learned of Echidna’s true nature, he had been terrified by that morbid curiosity driving her.

But, what about now? Now that some time had passed for him to quietly reflect on her words, how about it?

Treating his life as expendable, attempting every form of trial and error, using brute force to break through the obstacles standing in his path. Between accepting Echidna’s counsel, fighting on at the cost of his heart—and declining her help, resolving to struggle alone, what difference is there?

It was out of a stubborn impulse of the moment, a knee-jerk revulsion at her attitude, that Subaru had rejected her.

But if he truly had the resolve to abandon everything and use himself as the sacrifice, if he could just overlook Echidna’s nature, then why shouldn’t he use her just as she had proposed?

Refusing her out of self-righteous morality only to continue down the exact same path—what point is there in this obstinance?

He should take that hand.

If he had the resolve to swallow all the pain and suffering, and fight on without fear of getting hurt, then he should take that hand.

And so,

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “I’m… afraid of getting hurt.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “I hate pain and suffering and grief. I don’t want to go through those awful experiences, and I don’t want to see others suffer those terrible fates. —I don’t, want to die.”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “And so, your hand that presupposes sacrifice—I can’t take it anymore.”

Even Subaru wasn’t sure what he could do by himself.

But it seems that he could no longer choose the path that Echidna had pointed out.

He had realized that he didn’t want to die.

He had learned that, even as he thought that death was his only contribution, there were those who would accept him even if he didn’t die.

Natsuki Subaru wasn’t “A man whose only value is death”.

The people who grieved for him weren’t doing so because they saw value in Subaru’s death.

But then, just what did they see in him that made them grieve for him?

Subaru: “I still don’t know what they saw. —But, I intend to find out. I get the feeling that once I find out what it is, I’ll be able to repay everyone in a way other than death.”

Echidna: “…But that is a path of thorns, Natsuki Subaru. Using “Death” as your tool to cut open the way, wearing yourself down to proceed along that road: that would no doubt be the shortest path, albeit a treacherous one. The only thing you’d need to offer is your heart. But, refusing this, intending to keep both your heart and the future of those you love is far too difficult a task, and above all—”

Here, Echidna paused for a breath.

Then, with the most resplendent smile he had ever seen on her face,

Echidna: “—that’s Greed, isn’t it.”

Affirming his desires, the Witch of Greed received Subaru’s decision with a contented expression.

Alas, having been rejected, this Witch was still happily smiling. It’s not something Subaru could understand at all, but,

Subaru: “The truth is that you’ve already saved me countless times. …Even if, deep down, you were thinking of me as some kind of lab animal… that’s still the truth.”

By being there, Echidna had been a support for his heart, and helped him through those difficult times.

And so, for granting him that reprieve to keep hold of his heart, he was indeed grateful to her.

Echidna: “—That foolish, pitiful Garfiel is scared of the outside world.”

Subaru: “…huh?”

Echidna: “What that child saw in the First Trial has always been binding him. If you are to break through this situation yourself, you will need to undo that curse."

Subaru: "Echidna?"

Echidna: "The other Witches have all done something nice for you, so if I don't give you something as well, what'll you think of me? I wouldn't want you to think that "All the Witches are good people at heart, except that meanie Echidna". I am a girl, after all, and I am rather fond of you."

Quickly saying this, Echidna lightly poked Subaru in the chest.

Pushed back a step by the momentum, when Subaru looked up again, Echidna had already turned her face away. With her white hair swaying, the Witch of Greed stepped away from Subaru.

The other Witches too, were quietly watching Subaru.

Subaru: "…I just can't understand you guys at all."

"…"

Subaru: "You guys drive me crazy, messing with my head like that, and I'm still kinda pissed about what you said. All that time I kept thinking "Stop talking over my head about things I don't understand!", I seriously can't stand you guys…"

That was the truth.

The Witches all had their own unyielding ideals that were beyond what Subaru—or any normal person could comprehend.

And so, Subaru couldn't understand them, or agree with their actions.

But just like his feelings towards Echidna, understanding and gratitude were separate things.

Subaru: "Thank you… for letting me die. Thank you… for not letting me die. And thank you, for letting me hear those important voices. —For these, thank you."

He bowed his head to each of the Witches in turn, deriving some small pleasure from the way they each swallowed their breaths.

Then, Subaru turned around, and walked forward.

Ahead of him, was the girl still kneeling on the grass—Satella.

She looked up at his approach, holding her breath as though her throat had froze.

Seeing her frightened, sitting there like a small, little girl, Subaru lost his words.

Why was it that, when faced with someone he had thought abhorrent, his heart was filled with warmth?

What were those emotions he was harboring inside him for someone he had never touched before?

Subaru had received far too many unanswerable questions since he got here.

Still without a single answer, choosing only to continue struggling, Subaru extended his hand to the Witch on the ground.

She looked at his offered hand, lost and uncertain.

Subaru: "I… don't know who you are. I don't know why you're telling me that you love me, or what you meant… when you said that I had saved you."

Satella: "a…"

Subaru: "But, the Return by Death you've given me has saved me, that's a fact. It was all thanks to it, that I've managed to get this far. That's the truth."

Satella: "…"

Subaru: "Return by Death is not the only option… right?"

Satella: "…"

Subaru: “I shouldn’t rely on it entirely, I should love myself a little more… that’s what you said, right?”

Satella: “…”

Subaru: “I won’t pretend there’s an easy solution. —But you… the one who gave me Return by Death… don’t want me to die. I know that for certain now.”

And so,

Subaru: “Like you said, I’ll try to… be a little kinder to myself. And cherish myself. I have no idea what’ll happen if I start doing that… but that’s okay.”

Satella: “…Will you be alright?”

Subaru: “Yeah… compared to dying, that’s nothing.”

In answer to Satella’s worried voice, Subaru did his best to manage a weak smile.

As if relieved to see his expression, Satella took hold of Subaru’s hand.

Instantly, the sound of the world breaking fell upon Subaru’s eardrums.

The blue sky and the green grassfields began to fade in color as Natsuki Subaru was being released from the Citadel of Dreams.

Subaru: “—I’m leaving… then?”

He could no longer remember how, or why, he came here.

What would he do first when he gets outside? For reasons inside his heart, even that was unclear.

Satella: “Don’t… struggle on alone. Do it alongside the people who care about you…”

Subaru: “…”

Satella: “The people who don’t want you to die, the people who don’t want to let you die, fight alongside them. …Even if that’s not enough, don’t forget that you’re afraid to die.”

Subaru: “…”

Satella: “Don’t forget… that there are people who would grieve your death—”

The world was cracking into pieces.

Satella’s voice was growing distant. A fact that tore at Subaru’s heart.

The palm in his hand was frightfully hot.

But he mustn’t let it go, he felt.

Subaru: “—I.”

He couldn’t form the words to call to her.

He couldn’t make the sounds to call her name. “Satella”, that name mustn’t escape his lips. His desire to reject her was fighting with his desire to accept her.

The sky was falling. The earth was breaking. Light flooded through until his surroundings was no longer the Citadel of Dreams.

The other Witches had disappeared, leaving only Subaru and Satella in this world.

All was fading. And starting anew.

—Subaru only went on watching Satella in front of him, unable to say a thing.

“…”

Suddenly, the veil of darkness fell.

The impenetrable shadow his subconscious rejection insisted was obstructing his view was dispelled.

And, when he saw the face behind it, Subaru’s breathing ceased.

Before the unbreathing Subaru, Satella’s silver hair was swaying, while tears were falling from the edges of her narrowing, amethyst eyes—

Satella: “And one day—you must come, and kill me.”

Fading.

Disappearing.

The world was wiped away, and even the girl before his eyes had vanished.

Subaru: “I… will—”

Only, clenching tight onto the certain, lingering warmth on his palm,

Subaru: “—definitely save you.”

He said to that vanished, beloved girl.

Setowi
Setowi

Intermission: The Guest of Honor Has Left

Sekhmet: “Was it really alright… haa. Letting them leave like that… huu?”

Echidna: “It was his decision, his choice. I would like to respect that. …Although, I can’t say I don’t have a thought or two about the way he left holding that thing’s hand.”

Echidna shrugged in response to Sekhmet’s listless voice.

Just as always, they were inside the Citadel of Dreams with its grass fields and blue skies unchanged. A cool wind scraped by, gently caressing the Witches’ hair.

—After the fracturing world swallowed Subaru and Satella, releasing them from the Dream, the world was formed anew.

But of course it was. This indestructible space was woven from Echidna’s soul, and so long as Echidna exists, it too would persist in this state. What transpired had been nothing more than an extravagant send-off for the guests who were leaving.

Echidna: “Still, when you fire off your ability all over like that, I can’t help but end up drained, you know. I’d appreciate it if you could exercise a little moderation with your rampant healing.”

Minerva: “I follow my creed, if I see an injury, I heal it. Be it humans, Witches, animals, birds, fish, bugs, or witchbeasts, it makes no difference, any wound on a living being is my enemy!”

Echidna: “Yes, but, unlike in life, everything you do here is a burden on me. When you were alive, it was the world that had to shoulder that burden, but now that’s all on me, can you imagine how tough that is to bear alone?”

Minerva: “Burden or whatever, I couldn’t care less about stuff that I can’t see. I heal wounds. If it shortens the life of the world or something that’s not my problem.”

Minerva crossed her arms, propping up her ample breasts, while the other two Witches wryly smiled.

At first glance, the Witch of Wrath Minerva might seem like the most amicable Witch of Sin—or at least, the most harmless of the Witches.

In fact, her actions consisted entirely of healing, and the number of lives she saved in her lifetime must have surpassed the tens of thousands.

—However, Minerva’s seemingly harmless healing was indirectly causing equivalent damage to the world.

The destructive energy of every punch, kick, and bite would transform into healing in Minerva’s hands. This being the algorithm of the Authority of Wrath, no one besides Minerva could perform it. Even Echidna, who could understand its construction, could not replicate it.

Minerva’s healing strikes could bring lifeforms back from the brink of death. —But to think that this Authority was all-powerful would be a mistake.

The healing power of her punches is the product of an algorithm which twists cause and effect by force and expends incredible amounts of mana to activate. The mana required far exceeds the capacity of humans, and, even for a Witch, Minerva could not possibly manage it alone.

In that case, where did the mana for her strikes come from? —The answer is simple: it was stolen from the very core of the world.

Ordinarily, when humans use magic, it is done by drawing mana from the atmosphere through their gate, converting it into magical energy, and then releasing it once more as spells.

In Minerva’s case, her gate wasn’t linked to the atmosphere, but directly to the core of the world. It’s hard to explain what the world’s core is, but it is a supernatural mass of mana—one might even say that it is the place where mana is born.

Minerva’s strikes were drawing mana from precisely that to convert her attacks into healing.

By repeatedly doing this, the mana that should originally be provisioning some place in the world would never reach it, and with the drying up of mana responsible for sustaining the fundamental structures of the world comes the extreme danger of natural disasters befalling that part of the world.

She may have healed over tens of thousands with her punches.

—But, in the natural disasters indirectly caused by her actions, just as many would have lost their lives.

Therefore, the Witch of Wrath Minerva was among the most dangerous of the Witches bearing the names of Sins, such that she was regarded as an enemy of every nation.

Minerva: “All I can do in here is draw up whatever mana you have, Echidna. I can barely cure or heal anything even if I suck you dry, that’s so lame.”

Echidna: “There shouldn’t have been anyone getting hurt in here in the first place. But that’s all gone out the window with all that ruckus recently.”

Minerva: “Right…yeah. It was pretty rowdy, for a little while.”

Echidna’s words somewhat doused Minerva’s intensity. Her adorable face took on a visible shade of gloom as the blond-haired Witch looked up to the sky,

Minerva: “You think he’ll be alright? I’m getting super worried.”

Echidna: “You can rest assured. Since he’s rejected my hand, he will be struggling with everything he’s got to make sure that he succeeds. Although, he doesn’t seem to have an answer yet.”

Minerva: “What’s with that phrasing? You’re the one who lured him into rejecting you, and now you’re trying to pretend you didn’t when we all know what you’re thinking? What’s the point of that?!”

Echidna: “It’s not that I was trying to be rejected. —Since whether he declined or accepted, I would’ve been glad either way.”

Answering Minerva’s objection, Echidna sat herself down at the regenerated table. Clicking her fingers, she produced a teacup. Then, bringing the steaming cup to her lips,

Echidna: “I will affirm whatever choice he makes. And I don’t see any problems resulting from that choice. The fact that he chose it, or the fact that he didn’t choose it: that’s the important part. Whether the outcome is good or bad, I’m rather proud of my ability to be happy with either.”

Daphne: “But~ that doesn’t mean you don’t have preferences~.”

As Echidna brought the tea to her lips, a pitch-black coffin came inching up beside her. Daphne, who had settled herself inside her coffin once more, was attracted over by the assorted sweets on the table.

Daphne: “You say you respect the outcomes~, but Dona-Dona doesn’t hesitate to guide towards the results she wants to see, does she~~. It’s probably true that you’d be glad either way~, but it isn’t true that there isn’t one you wanted, is it~?”

Echidna: “You barely have any interest in others, yet you always hit things right on the mark, don’t you, Daphne.”

Daphne: “Compared to the constant hunger on my mind~~, I don’t really get caught up on the unimportant stuff. Haahaa, munch~munch~.”

Munching straight through the sweets, Daphne ate up the plate as well. Seeing this, Echidna sighed before looking over the other Witches who were now taking their seats at the table.

Languid, visibly indignant, timid—and one with a particularly perilous gaze.

Echidna: “Well you sure look angry, Typhon.”

Typhon: “Because Dona wasn’t honest… Wasn’t honest… means you’re a liar? And liars… are sinners? Dona… are you a sinner~?”

Echidna: “I always act in accordance with what I desire. Telling lies would be something I don’t presently recall doing.”

Unfazed, Echidna answered Typhon’s innocently blunt question.

Echidna’s roundabout phrasing would probably have been lost on the young Typhon. After all, Echidna knew that if she really got on Typhon’s bad side, everyone present would be in terrible danger.

Condemning criminals and judging sinners amounted to no more than a fraction of Typhon’s Authority of Pride.

But, seeing Typhon puff up her cheeks assenting to Echidna’s careful mental tiptoeing, the next to speak was the Witch buried under a ball of hair.

Sekhmet: “Hiding your true intentions while speaking… haa… isn’t exactly lying… how convenient for you… huu.”

Camilla: “E-Echi, is, really… just hopeless, isn’t she…”

Echidna: “You two…”

Seeing Echidna scowl at being caught in the concentrated barrage, the other Witches smiled.

The only one still sulking was Minerva, glaring at her with the corner of her eyes tilted up.

Sekhmet: “Minerva too, how long are you gonna stay grumpy about it, haa. Didn’t we all agree beforehand, huu? You knew we’d be doing this when the Sage Candidate came… haa.”

Minerva: “Ugh, I know, I know. I know everyone agreed on it. But I can’t just rationalize it like you guys. I hope you know that.”

Daphne: “Met-Met’s always sticking with Ty-Ty, she wouldn’t understand~. You guys spend too much of your life worrying about stuff that isn’t eating~ it’s such a waste, isn’t it~?”

Daphne jutted in, prompting a snort of displeasure from both Minerva and Sekhmet.

There was a certain perfect balance to the Witches' tea party, which would otherwise have been a gathering of willful egos. They disagreed on all manner of things, and it wasn't rare for them to end up in spats like this.

Especially between Minerva, who could take offense from anyone, and Sekhmet, who dislikes quarrels, there was no shortage of these little skirmishes. Every time, Daphne would get between them by striking to the heart of the matter with one of her tone-deaf comments. And more likely than not, the conversations would end like this with no real conclusions being made.

Minerva gets mad, Sekhmet checks her advance, Daphne comes in teasing, Camilla soothes Typhon so she doesn't explode, and Echidna watches happily from the side—while Satella watches over them, smiling to see that all six are safe.

Those were the days from four hundred years ago, never to come again.

Satella was driven mad by her Witch Genes, Minerva died insane inside a trap, Camilla perished in a sea of flames, Daphne withered to death in an ocean of sand, Typhon drowned in a flood, Sekhmet fell at the Great Waterfall as she decimated the dragons, and Echidna collected their souls even as she herself was tied to the world by soul alone.

This was but an imperfect reproduction of those forever-gone days.

Camilla: "You look, sad… Echidna…chan…? Really…sad?"

Echidna: "Why's that? I have no reason to be sad. You're all here with me, and I've had a chance to interact with the outside world. —Why would I be sad?"

Camilla: "Is, that, really alright? W-We are, just… souls, and, so, it's not really us, ri-right? We, are… mn, al-already…dead. We can't, really, be together with, Echi, anymore, right…?"

Camilla’s stuttering words struck Echidna silent for a moment.

—It was Echidna’s powers that had given the Witches, who had lost their bodies and existed only as souls, these temporary bodies in the form of mental constructs.

She had prepared the vessels, and housed their souls inside them.

But their souls were frozen at the time of their death, without a single change afterwards. So was the Camilla that Echidna was seeing now truly Camilla herself?

Drawing from their souls reactions that they’ve made in life, and using them to animate these bodies—was this just a game of dolls instigated by Echidna’s own desires?

The truth is, they all shared in Echidna’s knowledge.

So how could one explain this, except by the fact that they were being generated by Echidna herself? —This was a question Echidna would have thought over countless times already.

Echidna: “Being the bundle of narcissism that you are, though I am a friend, it’s quite unusual for you to worry about me. …Don’t tell me his boisterous, soft-headed personality has rubbed off on you?”

Camilla: “I, wouldn’t… know, anything, about, that… Echi… dummy.”

In front of Echidna’s self-distracting answer, Camilla muttered with a despondent expression.

Hearing her reply, Echidna couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

Seeing Echidna like this, the other Witches, who had not been paying attention up to now, all turned to look at her.

And, showered in all their gazes, Echidna spread out her arms,

Echidna: “Now, the tea party will go back to just being us Witches for a while. He—Natsuki Subaru probably won’t be setting foot in here again, I’m afraid.”

Minerva: “And you’re okay with that? Not that I’m worried you’d get lonely or anything, but don’t you usually say something at the end? You were always so insistent about getting your compensation or whatever.”

Echidna: “Compensation… ah, that’s right. Would you guys laugh if I told you that was my parting gift to him in consideration of his foreseeable tribulations?”

While she put her hand to her chin and pondered, the other Witches looked at each other.

Then, sharing a nod, they opened their mouths at once,

“—Definitely not!”

Echidna: “Oh my, I never knew you guys thought so highly of me…”

Minerva: “No, that’s because there’s no way in hell you’d help someone without taking anything in return.”

Saying this, Minerva folded her arms while the other Witches nodded in agreement.

Echidna closed her eyes in front of their unanimous opinion, and, clearing her throat,

Echidna: “I guess we still have a whole lot of things to talk about. But seriously now, is that really what you think of me?”

“…”

Echidna: “But, well…”

Before the silent Witches, Echidna drank up the remaining contents of her cup, and then, bewitchingly licking her tongue over her lips,

Echidna: “—You’re not wrong in the least.”

Bonus Short Stories

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 1

1

—With a sense of strain spreading a dangerous air, the slums faced a situation of quiet tension.

"…"

Running about in the threatening atmosphere were the capital's guards, with sword in hand.

As they ran, clad in metal armor, the metallic scraping of the armor's fasteners resounded in the vicinity. It would be one thing if there was only one person, but with ten or twenty of them, it was a terrific noise. The inhabitants of the slums, who already didn't have a good impression of the guards, now met them with an openly unwelcoming attitude.

On the other hand, the guards also felt little goodwill towards the uncooperative slum-dwellers. They found it fiercely difficult to deal with the hostile, filthy residents. But the circumstances did not allow for them to ask questions using brute force, or to make them leave.

Hence, it was only natural that a divide existed between the guards and the residents, preventing useful cooperation. It was a gap sufficient that, in the recent big incident, they were unable to work together to resolve it. And, neither the guards nor the residents benefited from that, but only the ones responsible for the incident.

"…Stiinky."

Pushing open the aging door, the stale smell of rotting wood flowed out.

Making faces from the stench, a silhouette held its nose and slowly made its way into the building. It was already night, but in these ruins that had become home to rats, there was no light burning. In the pitch darkness, depending on the starlight coming through the empty window frames, the shadow made its way further and further inside, advancing without fear.

It was a small shadow. Shaking it's thick, blue, braided hair left and right, the noise of its carefree footsteps was terribly light. Indeed, the one making that noise was as light as a child.

…No, not as light as a child. An actual child. A girl of around twelve or thirteen years.

"Heey now, are you theere?"

While calling out, the girl looked back and forth over the ruined room. Despite calling it a room, there were more than a few holes in the wall. Looking over all of it didn't take that long.

Sure enough, she quickly found what she sought. However, not with her eyes, but with her nose.

"Eeww. It's doesn't just smell like an old house, it smells of blood too, dooesn't it."

The moment she approached the room furthest in the back, the girl made a face as the smell of blood entered her nostrils. Then, as she pushed open the door, the gagging stench rapidly got worse.

And, in the center of the red-drenched stench, she found a blood-covered human shape collapsed on the floor…

"…You really need to quit sleeping in filthy places like thiis."

"…It hurts me a little that you're so amazed by it."

"Of course I'm amazed by~ it. The outside is in a complete uproar, after aall. It looks like everyone is running around searching for you, you knoow?"

At the words of the young girl who shrugged, the dead body on the floor—no, the shadow that had been sleeping replied "I see" and stood. She was a black-eyed, black-haired charming beauty, covered entirely in blood.

The beauty turned a graceful, blood-colored smile towards the girl, and spoke.

“More importantly, Meili, listen to this. I had a wonderful encounter.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll listen to your stoory. But before that, we need to get you paatched up, Elsa.” And calling each other by name, Elsa and Meili—the assassin sisters—completed their rendezvous.

2

The ruins that Elsa had been hiding in was one of the safe houses prepared in the capital.

Meili was one thing, but Elsa really wasn’t in a position where she could stay at an inn. If we say that papers containing her name and description were distributed by the guard station, you can understand the reason.

Regardless, the safe house was available as a result. Several of this sort of hideout were prepared in the nearby towns and villages, but this one was valued for it’s location. However…

“Well, we won’t be able to use this place anymore, wiill we. The smell of blood is really strong, and though it’s too dark to see, I’m sure there’s blood all oover.”

“Oh dear. It almost sounds like you’re saying I’ve used it poorly.”

“How else should it sooound? It’s Elsa, after all, so you were dancing here all covered with wounds, riight? There’s no doubt blood was flying everywheere.”

“You sound like a child who’s come to see how things are. …Well, I won’t deny it.”

Meili sighed at Elsa’s giggling, cheerful words. Then, the girl softly extended her hand between the bountiful twin hills of Elsa’s unclothed body. There, a long, vertical, painful-looking wound was carved, which even now was still bleeding rapidly.

“…That looks like it huurts.”

“Yes, it’s painful. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Don’t be thinking I’ll agree with that sort of twisted coomment. But, whether or not it’s wonderful, I’ll agree that it’s straange. Is your ‘blessing’ not working?”

“It’s ‘that’ sort of wound, perhaps. I wasn’t able to have him use the ‘Dragon Sword’, so this should just be an ordinary wound, but… that boy himself must have that kind of power, then.”

The flow of blood was indeed stopping, but there was no sign that the wound was closing. For natural healing ability that was a natural result, but both of them understood that nature didn’t apply here.

The hinderance to that was the power of the individual who inflicted this wound on Elsa.

“So? You dueled with the Sword Saaint?”

“Yes, that’s right. He was just like the rumors… No, even better than the rumors.”

“Wow, reaally. Were the insides of his belly better than the rumors too?”

“Well, I wonder too. After all, I wasn’t able to do a thing to him. Ahaha.”

Why she would be smiling after suffering an entirely one-sided defeat, Meili couldn’t comprehend. However, that wasn’t all that Meili couldn’t comprehend.

“…There’s someone that even Elsa can’t defeat, theen.”

Meili’s long sigh attested to the unexpectedness of that fact.

“Somehow or other, since Elsa’s been able to kill everyone up to this point, I was sure you could kill anyone except Mama~.”

“You’ve overestimated me. Even I’ve lost, haven’t I? It was a few years ago, but I lost to the kimono boy in the Vollachia Empire, after all.”

“That fellow was just an escort; you killed the target just fine, diidn’t you…? Also, I looked into it, and it seems he’s the strongest person in the empire, you knoow.”

“Oh my. In that case, I’ve lost to both the strongest in the kingdom and the empire. Wonderful, how wonderful.”

Elsa let out a warm sigh with her cheeks red. Rolling her eyes at Elsa’s reaction, Meili took a small bottle out of her clothing, and began applying the white mucus in it to Elsa’s wounds.

A faint, irritating odor filled the air, and Elsa growled slightly in the back of her throat as her wounds were traced with the mucus.

“What’s this?”

“It’s mucus from a water slug. If you fill a wound with this, it heals up reaally good. Even a small amount is poisonous, but Elsa won’t really die aanyways.”

“Quite so. Please continue. Once that’s done, we do need to leave this place behind, don’t we.”

“It would be trouble if the guards fouund us. The more of them you kill, the more trouble it becoomes.”

“Oh, but in that case, isn’t it more likely that the Sword Saint would show up again, perhaps?”

“Well, then, I’m even more oppoosed.”

Rebuking Elsa’s self-indulgence, Meili noted ‘All done.’ as she finished applying the mucus. She hid the bottle back in her clothing, and picked up the ragged tatters of Elsa’s clothing from the floor.

“Well, you won’t be able to wear this anymoore.”

“It’s just bits of cloth now, after all. I don’t really mind that, of course…”

“If you’re just going to wear those rags, I really don’t want to be seen walking with yoou.”

んっ

“How cold.”

“If you don’t want to be told that, at least put some clothes on, pleaase.”

There was ten years difference between the two, but from their interaction, there was no way to tell which of them was older. Accepting Meili’s point, the nude Elsa paused in thought. And then,

“Wait here for a little bit.”

“…?”

Saying that, Elsa, still nude, briskly walked out of the room. Meili watched her go, and then decided to clean up the room a little while she waited.

It was, at least in theory, a hideout. Elsa might have had an change of clothing set aside. Five minutes later, Meili’s hopes were dashed.

…In the distance, several horrible screams were heard, and she fled from the hideout.

3

“There are fears that a dangerous person is hiding in this area, so please stay on your guard. If you’re concerned, I can walk you to your house…”

“No, it’s quite alright. Thank you for all you’ve done. You’re very kind.”

“Ah, it’s… It’s nothing… Um…please, be careful.”

The young guard tore his eyes away from Elsa’s smile, and bowed.

The guard groaned in the back of his throat. The cause was the charm overflowing from Elsa’s entire body. She was always wrapped in a seductive air, but it was especially intense now.

Fortunately for the guard, he didn’t realize that she was high on the scent of blood. If he'd realized, and pointed it out, he, too, would have become part of her high.

Being seen off by that fortunate guard, Elsa sedately entered the main road.

"…You're taking this pretty weell. Even though you were this close to getting surrouunded."

Meili, next to Elsa and holding her hand, said that and puffed out her cheeks. Elsa smiled faintly, and poked those puffed cheeks with a finger, gently.

"You don't need to tell me that. The only reason I wasn't questioned was you. You're very helpful."

"That's right, you should be graateful."

Meili responded proudly after having her cheeks poked.

Eluding the guards who had heard the commotion and gathered at the hideout was, in the end, a result of Meili's cunning. She got Elsa to put on clothes, cleaned up her appearance, pretended to be her sister, and took steps to elude the suspicious eyes of the guards.

Obviously, just a change of clothes and acting like sisters wouldn't have been enough to avoid suspicion, but…

"With my hair and eyes so different from the description, there's no way for them to suspect me, after all."

"Just about aany part of a witchbeastie's body can be useful, if you know how to woork with it. You can only take them from a living witchbeastie, though, so it's probably impossible for anyone besides me~."

As Meili proudly blew her own horn, her hair had changed color from blue to brown. The same change had taken place in Elsa's hair, leaving her with nothing in common with the woman in the guards' papers. It was only to be expected that the guard was taken by Elsa's seductiveness, and allowed her to pass.

Incidentally, Elsa's current clothing was stained men's clothing. It was a bit big, but worn on her long, slender limbs, it seemed to fit well as it was.

"The problem is the way you got those cloothes. You caused another uproaar."

"I thought if I was walking naked, someone would show up by themselves… it was too bad that there was more of them than I expected. All of them very poor-quality gentlemen, too."

"You're talking about their clothes, perhaaps? About their bellies, perhaaps?"

Naturally, the men who Elsa had collected were all lying in pools of blood. It was relatively difficult for her to find clothes that weren't stained with blood. If all of the clothing had been unusable, it would have defeated the entire purpose.

"So, what do you plan to do now? Move to another hideout?"

"The wanted posters are in circulation, so it would be best to leave the capital for a whiile. Well, at least until the heat cools down, it would be best to lie low; think of it as a punishment for having gone ooverboard."

"Lie low… spending time doing nothing truly is painful."

"It's a puunishment, of course it's paiinful."

They'd been together long enough for that. She knew right away how to torment Elsa.

Seeing Elsa look unhappy, just as expected, Meili wore a look of cheerful satisfaction, but that joy didn't last for long.

Go to the commoner's area, and collect her baggage from the inn Meili had been staying at. With that, escape from the capital… that was the plan, but it didn't go as expected.

"Aww, once no one was looking, I was going to call shadowlion and go for a riide."

“It can’t be helped. We have orders from ‘that person’. It seems they know that I failed. I’m not sure where they were watching from, though.”

Saying that, Elsa waved the envelope held between her fingers back and forth. The envelope had been mixed in with the baggage they had gone to the inn to pick up. Inside was a single piece of paper with instructions, and both of them sighed together at the contents, addressed to Meili. Elsa and Meili could not oppose the orders in those instructions. Both of them had been trained that way.

And, according to the contents of the instructions…

“…The next target seems to be the margrave’s maansion.”

“I see. Is my name included?”

“Just mee. Elsa gets a break this time. You should rest quiietly.”

Having finished reading the instructions, Meili folded them up, and the paper suddenly began to fray, and changed to dust. Seeing that blow away on the wind, Meili poked Elsa with her finger,

“You understand, Elsa? You have to be a good girl and wait, alriight?”

“I understand. I’ll be quietly knitting something. What would you like?”

“The thing that’s most on Elsa’s mind riight now.”

“Well then, I’ll make a Sword Saint doll and be waiting for you.”

“I think I’ll be a little hesitant to line him up with the oother dolls.”

Elsa hummed to herself as she planned knitting the doll. Looking at Elsa, Meili’s shoulders drooped, and she let out a tired sigh that didn’t seem to fit with her appearance.

When she did, Elsa saw that and tilted her head towards Meili,

“Shall I come along with you? I am your substitute big sister, after all.”

“No~ thanks. I couldn’t take it if I ended up being treated like a little sister by this slob of a big siister.”

“Oh my, that’s not cute at all.”

At Meili’s impertinent reply, Elsa too smiled meaningfully as she responded.

The unproductive conversation between the two continued until they went their separate ways outside the capital. …The only witness to the dangerous sisters’ whole story was the moon, floating in the night sky.

END

Frederica and Petra's Maid Days III

1

It was an event that happened during the rest period after a long day's work.

Frederica and Petra were soaking in the waters of a warm bath after a hard day's work.

"Sister Frederica, were you able to do everything without mistakes from the beginning?"

"Huh?" Frederica squeaked at the younger maid's sudden question, her voice echoing off the bathroom walls.

In terms of her training to work as a maid under Frederica, Petra's growth and ability to learn were truly remarkable. Her appearance as she listened was adorable, and she would always compliment those around her.

Frederica was in the middle of evaluating Petra's efforts when she asked her that sudden question.

Honestly, she was surprised. Surprised, which changed into amusement. She certainly wasn't perfect in the beginning.

"Sister Frederica? Why are you laughing?"

"Haha! It's just so funny to hear that. I was actually around your age when I started working. And just like you, I couldn't do anything at the start. No, I was worse than you."

"What? No way. It's not good to lie like that."

Despite Frederica's response, Petra decided to reprimand her in her own way, which only made Frederica smile even more.

“I’m happy that you think so highly of me. But there was a time when I was inexperienced and had to be taught the basics by my senior.”

“…Sister Frederica’s senior…” Petra made a complicated face as she struggled to imagine that.

Seeing Petra wear such a deeply concerned expression, Frederica rested her hand on her cheek. “Hmm, it’s kind of embarrassing, but how about I tell you a story about my early days as a maid?”

“…! Yes, please! I want to hear about your awkward past!”

“D-Don’t say it like that! Geez, this girl…”

The way she said it made it sound like Frederica was making a naked confession.

Although the two maids weren’t wearing a single stitch of clothing, that wasn’t quite the same thing.

And talking about her rookie days, comparing herself to Petra was in fact embarrassing.

“You don’t have to act so excited. I’m starting to regret bringing this up…”

“Ah, no. You can’t just get out of this now! You know all of my worst qualities, so this will make us even!”

“You’ll definitely grow up into a troublesome maid. I’ll have to tell Mr. Subaru about this later,” Frederica decided, being defeated by the pushy Petra.

In any case, Frederica now had to satisfy the sparkly eyed Petra.

“Right then, where do I start…”

“Umm…Start from your senior! I want to hear about your senior. What kind of maid was she?”

“The person who taught me…”

Petra’s idea saved Frederica from her initial struggle. But the new topic caused Frederica to struggle with her words.

A senior housekeeper. Just like Frederica was one to Petra, there was another who was one to her. But that wasn’t something that was easy for her to speak of.

“Could we do this some other time?”

“Sister Fre-de-ri-ca.”

“I-I get it. You don’t have to look at me like that…” Frederica lost to the angelic, pleading eyes before her. “First, let me correct one thing. The person who taught me wasn’t a maid. He was the steward of the mansion at the time.”

“The steward?”

“A steward is someone that’s in charge of the butlers and maids. A role that requires the ability and trust to look after a household. The Mathers household was my first workplace, and he was in charge of it.”

Frederica tried her best to remove any preconceived notions that the sparkly eyed Petra had. But the harshness of her voice still came through.

“A man. The steward…”

“His name was Clind. He was the master’s steward for a long time… And in fact, he was the perfect servant anyone could ask for. You could learn a lot from him. But stay away from him any other time.”

“S-Sister Frederica? You’re acting kind of scary…”

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to scare you. But, judging from what he likes, you’re definitely his type, Petra. So stay away from him.”

Frederica’s face started to turn red, irrelevant to the water, while Petra looked on worriedly. Seeing that, Frederica lowered her eyes and reached out to touch Petra’s cheek softly. “Listen, Petra. Clind is a very dangerous man. He may look proper, but his mind is dirty and twisted. He's a pervert that stares at young girls with a lewd gaze!"

"A-A pervert!"

"That's why he looked after me diligently when I first started.. And I believed that that was just kindness. But after a few years, his attitude completely changed…!"

Recalling such memories made her blood boil. It was right when she was going through her growth spurt: she quickly got taller, and her breasts got larger.

Her body was changing from a girl to a woman. And Clind's attitude towards Frederica had changed because of that. Seeing her steward suddenly become cold towards her, Frederica was worried that she'd done something to offend him. But that had shifted to resentment once she realized the truth of the situation.

And in the end, affection became resentment, and their relationship remained frosty to this day.

Petra watched silently as Frederica became red with rage.

And so she called out to Frederica and swam over to her, before leaping into her arms.

"I don't like the steward who taught you either!"

"R-Really? That's great…Wait, great isn't quite the right word I'm looking for. Accurate? Proper? Logical…? "

"Anyway! I don't like him! Now we're the same!" grinned Petra.

"Yes, we are… Then let's leave it at that."

Frederica was still worrying that telling her was a mistake, but seeing how Petra had become more guarded, she decided to leave it at that.

And besides…

"Sister Frederica, can I join you in your room? I want to sleep together."

"Oh, you're such a spoiled child. Okay. Alright, bring your pillow over."

Since Petra was so cute, it seemed fine as it was.

2

After hearing about the man called Clind, Petra came to a realization. At this rate, Frederica would one day be taken away by some man.

Petra had great respect for Frederica.

Though she'd only known Frederica for a few days, she still felt strongly protective about her, regardless of how little time had passed.

If time actually mattered, then her feelings of love would be considered shallow. But feelings could surpass time. Feelings of love… and of respect.

Although she conceded that time could make feelings stronger as well.

And by seeing Frederica like that in the bath, she realized that Frederica had strong, deep, and complex feelings towards a steward that Petra had never met.

It was similar to hearing her mother complain about her father. But her mother didn't hate him. In fact, they loved each other.

In any case, the human heart is complex. Even more so if the person didn't realize it themselves.

That's why Petra came to a clear conclusion. She would become someone that Frederica loved more than whatever she had felt for that man.

Petra knocked on the door and called in. "Sister Frederica, can I come in?”

“Yes, come on in.”

All live-in servants were given their own rooms. Petra also had her own room near Frederica’s, but she wasn’t yet used to sleeping alone in this large mansion.

And so ever since her first day, she’d been coming to Frederica’s room each night.

“Evening, Petra. You’re later than usual today.”

Holding her pillow, Petra was welcomed into the room by the familiar voice. Wearing her white nightgown, Frederica was a beauty to look at. With her long blonde hair loose, and her feminine curves hugged by her nightgown, she was like a princess straight out of a fairy tale.

And with her emerald-green eyes, she smiled at Petra, who said, “Yes. I was in the dining room. I was wondering if the food was gone.”

“Ms. Beatrice’s, you mean.”

Petra fidgeted silently.

On the dining room table was food that could be eaten even when it was cold. It was there so that the last occupant of the mansion, Beatrice, could eat it if she was awake during the night.

Petra knew of her existence. But she had never spoken with her, or even had proper confirmation that she was living in the mansion.

“But Subaru asked me to…”

“Mister Subaru, you mean.”

“Ah, sorry.”

Petra hid her face in her pillow over her mistake. Usually she would deliberately forget to call Subaru by his proper title in front of him, but this time it was actually a mistake.

“We can keep working on it. It took me a long time to get used to it as well.”

“You had trouble with it too?”

“Of course I did. I didn’t mention it before, but I have a hard time remembering things. I had a lot of trouble using appropriate language at work.”

Frederica had a very proper manner of speaking. And the impression of that was so strong that Petra couldn’t imagine her without it.

As if reading Petra’s mind, Frederica made a sour face. “I’m digging myself deeper again…”

“What kind of trouble did you have? Could you not remember proper language like me?”

“That’s, well… I wish it was just that…” Frederica twiddled her fingers in front of her bashfully. That piqued Petra’s interest as to what kind of secrets she had been hiding.

They stared at each other in silence for a bit.

“Normally, I would also talk to others without the use of sir this, sir that,” confessed Frederica. “But for formal occasions…I tried to speak with a certain decorum…”

“What do you mean?”

“W-Well I tried to imitate someone I knew well, a lady who raised me. And well… I ended up speaking in a really old-fashioned way.”

“Old-fashioned way?”

“Your lowly servant, Frederica Baumann, welcomes thee to Mathers Manor.”

Saying that was a serious looking Frederica dressed in her nightgown. But those words were so strange to hear that Petra froze for a moment.

But she quickly caught hold of herself and burst into peals of laughter.

“Puh, ha-ha-ha-ha! F-Frederica…! Thee…!”

“It was embarrassing… And it took a long time to fix.”

“Lowly servant… Thee…!”

“Geez! How long are you going to laugh for?! It’s night now, so don’t make so much noise. Come on, hurry into bed!”

Petra couldn’t stop laughing, so Frederica pointed to the bed sternly. Seeing that, Petra came up to the bed and dived right in.

Lining up her pillow next to Frederica’s she lightly patted it down. “I welcome thee,” she joked.

“Pe-tra.”

“Hee-Hee! Good night. Sweet dreams.”

Petra closed her eyes and pretended to be sleeping. Frederica sighed, blowing out the lights, and entered the bed herself.

“It’d be nice if the food was gone tomorrow morning,” Petra mumbled to Frederica with her eyes still closed. And hopefully during the night the food would be taken by a still-awake girl.

“Yes, I hope so too,” mumbled Frederica in response.

Upon hearing that, Petra cuddled closer in Frederica’s warm embrace and quickly fell asleep.

And so she wished to have another blissful day with her loved ones.

And for that Clind person to catch a cold.

END

Garfiel and Ram's Extra Complicated and Twisted Love Affair

1

—There was a place known as the Sanctuary, deep within the Lost Forest of Kremaldy.

Within it was only a small village and ruins with a deep history. The people there had gathered there for a very specific reason and were living together and supporting each other.

They were hybrids between humans and demi-humans—the ones that were called Mixed-Bloods.

Mixed-Bloods weren't in a good position in the Kingdom of Lugunica where people still feared the Witch of Envy and had scars left behind from the Demi-human War.

They used blood as a reason for their unjust discrimination, leaving behind a deep-rooted grudge.

The Sanctuary was also a place of refuge to protect Mixed-Bloods from the eyes of discrimination. Thus, those living there had acquired peace of mind, but only by turning a blind eye to a certain degree of inconvenience.

They all loved living in peace and were relishing in it.

And that was more of a reason why—

"—The hell is up with bringing so many outsiders here, haa?!" Garfiel said scornfully while receiving more than ten dragon carriages. He was a blond boy with his sturdy arms crossed and had a wild, dreadful aura. The earth dragon was frightened, and the people were cringing with fear at his angry gaze. But the gaze and the dreadful air that had made the people tremble was just a side effect of the thing that was directed towards his original target. Garfiel's gaze was directed at Ram alone, who was standing in front of the dragon carriage.

"…" Ram said something to the coachman after stepping out of it and boldly confronted Garfiel. As the people around watched with bated breath, she squinted her pink eyes and said, "Quite a welcoming reception, Garf, even though it's been so long since Ram has shown her face to you."

"Ha, my amazin' self feels like givin' ya a big smile and hug too, but things ain't gonna be that easy. Why the hell did you bring them here?"

"Ram wants to say that we're here on a small group trip, but she knows you won't believe something like that. —We are evacuating."

"Evacuating, huh?"

Garfiel crinkled up his nose at the not so peaceful word.

"Yes." Ram nodded at his response and pointed at the people behind her with her chin. "We traveled through the night, so everyone is tired. Let us rest for now. I'll let them inside the village right away, so kindly inform Master Roswaal and Miss Ryuzu."

"That doesn't explain much. My amazin' self hasn't heard anything about lettin' you guys in or not lettin' you guys in."

"Use your imagination and put two and two together. Royal selection, Witch Cult, evacuation, Ram is cute. That's all."

"Was that last part necessary?" Garf asked with doubt, but when Ram glared at him, he reluctantly nodded. However, before letting the dreadful air go, he looked once again at the group of dragon carriages behind her. "I'm tellin' ya. Even if you guys are with Ram, my amazin' self won't tolerate any shenanigans. Like they say, Kegeraine never draws a blank. Try ta behave yourselves at the very least."

Garfiel flashed his fangs, emphasizing them, then smacked them together, and with a light leap, he disappeared into the forest. He likely went to inform people about their arrival, following Ram's order.

“Lady Ram, will we be…safe around that person?”

It was the village chief who had asked that anxiously—she was an old lady who represented the refugees from Earlham Village. The old lady had asked her that in a faint voice so it wouldn’t make the people around them anxious.

“Yes,” Ram replied, nodding at the old lady’s question. “You’ll be fine as long as you behave yourselves like Garf…Garfiel said.”

“Lady Ram, are you and that person close?”

“Ram is close…we’ve known each other for a long time. So Ram knows how to deal with him.”

Ram looked in the direction Garfiel had disappeared to after listening to the words of the old lady that still sounded concerned.

Ram knows how to deal with him since she’s known him for ten years. But even so… “Ram wonders how far Garf will go to protect this place.”

2

—The Witch Cult was hiding in the vicinity of Roswaal Manor and Earlham Village.

That was the disaster that had recently befallen Ram and the others. That was the reason why she had come along with the refugees to the Sanctuary, which was under Garfiel’s protection.

Around 100 villagers from Earlham Village had been evacuated. Half of them had followed Ram and come to the Sanctuary.

—The other half had more reason to worry.

“Lady Emilia is the Witch Cult’s target… But then, Barusu will do something about that.”

Ram stopped worrying about it after thinking of the boy whose intel had led them to evacuate.

The staff there should do their best to take care of things on their end. In return, Ram will do her best to respond to the trust Ram was given. For now, our priority is to set up a temporary dwelling—in the stone cathedral in front of us.

“The old hag told my amazin’ self to, so it can’t be helped, but I ain’t welcoming them here. I’m just lending this place to y’all outta the goodness of my heart. Just be grateful.”

“Alright, alright. Ram understands.”

It was Garfiel, the self-proclaimed watchdog, who said that while watching Ram’s work from behind.

The place was inside the village within the Sanctuary, in a cathedral that was a bit separated from the residential area. It was a building that was used as a meeting place, and it was large enough to accommodate a lot of people. They were in a situation where they would have to sleep together in the nave, but some could be given private rooms if needed. The representative of the village, Ryuzu, had lent it to them after they had entered the Sanctuary.

“Ram can’t let the villagers return to the village until the situation is taken care of… Ram can’t be too greedy.”

They might have to stay in the Sanctuary for a few days or a few weeks.

Ram wants to lessen the villagers’ burdens as much as possible, but we need to be prepared to survive.

For that, the men were taking the lead in unloading the cargo from the dragon carriage, but…

“Hey, hey, put more force into it, you won’t be able to move it like that!”

“You are being persistently noisy while doing absolutely nothing. How about helping us out if you have time to complain?”

“Hah, don’t make me laugh. My amazin’ self is the watchdog. And I’ve told you this before, but while I care about you, I don’t give a shit about outsiders.”

Garfiel heckled and snapped his fangs provocatively at Ram, who was carrying the load. He had been interrupting them like that for a while now to crush their spirits.

“…” The expressions of the villagers from Earlham didn’t look good due to Garfiel’s harsh attitude. It was obvious that they would feel anxious if they were blatantly not being welcomed at their place of refuge. Ram started thinking about whether she should defeat Garfiel and win their peace, and while she was having such thoughts, her work screeched to a halt, and…

“Hey, hey,” Garfiel said, shrugging at her. “Aaah, too slow, too slow. The sun is gonna set at this rate.”

“…”

“The hell. Everyone is workin’ with a gloomy face.”

“…”

“If that’s the case then…it’s that…Aah.”

“…”

“Aaah! I can’t watch this anymore!” Garfiel, who had been continuously interrupting them and was being ignored, exploded out of nowhere.

He passed the silent Ram and hopped onto the back of the dragon carriage that was being unloaded, easily picked up a load that would take two grown men to lift, and then jumped out. The work of unloading the cargo from the dragon carriage progressed quickly and furiously.

“Garf,” Ram called Garfiel, who was making the work efficient, from behind.

Garf responded to that and waved his hand in the air. “Hah, no need to thank me. My amazin’ self couldn’t look at how sluggish…”

“How unmannered you are. If you wanted to help, you should have asked for permission first.”

“How could ya say something like that in this situation?!”

Garfiel goggled his eyes at Ram’s arrogant words and dropped the load he was carrying. It rumbled when it fell to the ground, and as the people nearby looked at them in a startled manner, Garfiel snapped his fangs. “Don’t get too cocky, Ram. My amazin’ self helped you out on a whim. You’re gonna regret it since I ain’t gonna help you out anymore.”

“Alright. Okay.”

Ram nodded at Garfiel, who had clicked his tongue, and extended her hands towards the cargo he had dropped. She proceeded to put force into her thin arms and tried to lift it up, but it didn’t even budge. It didn’t move no matter what she did. Next, she lightly rotated her shoulders and tried tackling it, but she just bounced back.

“Hey! Don’t push yourself too hard!”

“Ram is working at the moment. You are distracting her and in the way, so go somewhere else.”

“Alright! Let me help! My amazin’ self will do it! Happy now?!”

“…It’s, ‘please let me help’.”

“Don’t get co…pl-please let me, help…!”

“‘I beg of you, Lady Ram.’”

“Shut up!! I’m gonna move it now!! Don’t bother me!! Drink some cold water and rest!!” Garf howled at Ram’s needless talk and tossed a bamboo cylinder with water to her.

After Ram caught it, Garfiel started moving the cargo to the cathedral with ease. He then began to do the work of a hundred men, leaving the villagers dumbfounded.

“La-Lady Ram, is it really okay to…”

“If he wants to do it, then let him do it. It’ll make it easy for us,” she replied to the awe-struck old woman after bringing the bamboo flask to her mouth and taking a sip of the cold water.

Garfiel’s work speed was impressive now that he was focused on physical labor. He moved the cargo in no time and freed the villagers from the grueling labor.

“You guys can talk with each other and decide who gets which room. Ram has to take care of Master Roswaal, so she will be going to the village. You can use the private room as you like.”

“Oh, ok…”

“There ya go! How’s this! I am done nowwww!!”

The old woman’s puzzled reply overlapped with Garfiel’s shouts as he finished moving the final load.

Garfiel walked back with long strides and heavy steps, and Ram welcomed him. “Good job… You haven’t thanked Ram for letting you help.”

“That’s really not funny!”

An angry, desperate voice echoed through the sky of the Sanctuary.

3

—The self-proclaimed watchdog’s inhumane harassment went on without end after that.

“Aah, you don’t know anything. How much time are you taking to take the water to the kitchen!”

“You don’t know anything at all. There’s a huge water jar in the cathedral, right? If fill it with water, it should be more than enough for you guys to wipe your body. My amazin’ self will go fill it up.”

“Wait a bit. My amazin’ self will go ask the old timers. You guys need a sewing kit, right?”

“Listen here. The village’s food is limited. You can’t eat three times a day. Two is the limit. Tell me when ya don’t have enough. Huh? Shut up, my amazin’ self will go get some from our reserves.”

“Do you guys have enough blankets? If ya don’t, then let me know, since there’s a limit ta how many people can fit under one.”

“Lady Ram, is it really okay?”

“If he wants to do it then let him do it. It’ll make it easy for us.”

The living standards of the refugees were drastically improved due to the active intervention of the watchdog.

Needless to say, it was also due to Ram’s taking advantage of him.

The village chief must have understood the true meaning behind Ram saying, “Ram knows how to deal with him.”

Of course, Garfiel himself was prepared to take on the role of negotiator—a position that didn’t suit him—to avoid unnecessary friction between the residents of the Sanctuary and the refugees.

“Yo, Ram, I’m back. Is there anything troubling you?”

“Yes. Ram’s shoulders are stiff from the continuous physical labor.”

“Alright. Leave it to…wait, I’m not going to massage them! Don’t use me for your own convenience!” Garfiel complained with his spit flying at Ram, who had turned her back towards him. To be honest, it was a bit too late for him to be complaining about being treated like a tool, but of course, neither Ram nor the villagers watching all of that pointed it out. But—

“Thank you very much, Garfiel,” said the old lady. “I thank you on behalf of the villagers.”

“Huh?” Garfiel looked puzzled when the old lady bowed her head.

The old lady smiled slightly at his reaction and pointed at the cathedral that was completely ready to take in all of the refugees. “I can’t say that we aren’t feeling anxious since we are staying in a borrowed space. However, you have provided us a place where we can sit down and face our worries. That alone is a huge help.”

Garfiel became quiet after hearing the old lady’s words of gratitude. Then, after a few moments of silence…

“Hah,” he said, rubbing his nose with his finger. “Stop it, stop it, it doesn’t matter. This place has a lot of old timers, so I helped out a lil’. I don’t intend on getting friendly with outsiders though.”

“Then you can’t be friendly with Ram, either. Goodbye Garf…no, Mister Garfiel.”

“Don’t get formal on me!”

“It’s a joke.” Ram shrugged her shoulders as if saying he couldn’t be helped.

Garfiel started breathing heavily at her attitude and turned towards the old lady again, flashing his fangs. “My amazin’ self doesn’t need your gratitude, human. No way I’m getting along with you guys. I did a lot of things, not for you, but because it would’ve been bad for my heart if I didn’t.”

Garfiel bit off her gratitude and turned his back to the old lady and the others. Like saying he didn’t care about what was going to happen next, he started walking away.

“If so, then…” the old woman said before continuing her words. “Us thanking you for your kindness is because it would be bad for our hearts if we didn’t.”

After Garfiel heard it, he stopped and looked behind him.

He looked at the old woman’s mild-mannered, cunning smile, and clicked his tongue with a “Damn it,” as if he felt awkward.

“You’ve lost.”

“Hush, I’m not good with old timers. Dealing with them is such a drag.”

“That’s the best compliment you could give, Garf.”

“It ain’t a compliment and it ain’t the best, either. I saved that one for you.”

“Haa…you are an idiot.” Ram let out a deep sigh at Garfiel, who said that without embarrassment. She caught up to him and started walking slowly next to him, making him give a curious tilt of his head. “Garf, you are too twisted to even accept gratitude honestly, so Ram will reward you since you’re so hopeless. Be thankful.”

“Ohh, that’s very kind of you. I like your tea, Ram. It’s not just the tea though.”

At Garfiel, who had chomped his fangs and smiled without any hint of malice, Ram said, “You’re such an idiot.”

Then she muttered, “—Dummy.” under her breath.

A slight smile appeared on her face soon after.

END

Volume 13

Chapters 80-96

Chapter 80: Rough Tongue

—He woke to the sensation of something rough brushing against his cheek.

His returning consciousness was wracked by a pervading sense of exhaustion, and his body felt so heavy that it might've been lead rather than blood running through his veins.

Prying open his dry, sticking lips to inhale, sharp pain and the taste of blood seeped into his mouth, while, inside his utterly parched oral cavity, his tongue scampered about, seeking moisture from the liquid blood.

His limbs were sluggish, and his feverish head was barely functioning.

He lacked even the strength to force apart his eyelids, only managing to open them by rolling his heavy eyeballs.

And there,

Subaru: "…It's you."

The moment color entered his vision, Subaru's eyes picked up a different hue of black than the darkness beneath his eyelids.

Exhaling breaths carrying the characteristic scent of living lifeforms, the creature had been consolingly licking Subaru while he slept.

It had a lustrous black body, its form slender and refined. Although sharp, there was a certain charm about its reptilian eyes, and its knife-like fangs could send one to eternal rest with only a single bite—reaching out a red tongue from between those fangs to lick Subaru on the cheeks, it was Subaru's beloved dragon, Patrasche.

Seeing that the awakened Subaru had noticed her presence, Patrasche stopped her licking and sat down, waiting for his words.

Apparently, the surprisingly dexterous dragon could bend her knees to sit down on the spot.

Seeing Patrasche before him, Subaru realized that he was sitting with his legs splayed on the ground and his back leaning against something hard. He tilted back his head to find a moss-covered stone wall behind him, and that he had woken near the entrance of the Tomb.

Subaru: "But, I was inside… why am I outside…?"

The established precedent was that he'd wake up from the Dream Citadel to find himself inside the Tomb.

If someone had gone in and pulled the unconscious Subaru out, then that'd be a different story, but the only two people in the Sanctuary who could enter the Tomb were Emilia and Garfiel.

The notion that either of them could have dragged Subaru outside wasn't terribly convincing.

Subaru: "Then again, I doubt I crawled out of there myself, so…"

"Who", he was about to mutter, when he was interrupted by the echo of another voice.

The voice came from behind Patrasche, from an approaching figure in the distance, dragging his feet and out of breath.

???: "He—y! P-Patrasche, wait… hold on…! Hhha, hhha… I-If you really run away, it'll spell disaster for m… huh?"

The grey-haired young man—Otto—stopped still with an expression of sheer relief at the sight of Patrasche. After he caught his breath, Otto tilted his head as he noticed Subaru beside her.

Otto: "Is that you, Mr. Natsuki? What're you doing out here?"

Subaru: "Can't you see? I'm moon-bathing. More like what're you doing out here? Depending on your answer, I'll see about turning you in to Garfiel."

Otto: “I don’t know why you’d automatically assume I’m doing something devious, but me being out here at this hour with sweat dripping down my brows isn’t entirely unrelated to you, Mr. Natsuki.”

Seeing that it was Otto, Subaru jokingly glossed matters over as usual. Otto slumped his shoulders at Subaru’s reply and shook his head as if saying “good grief”.

Subaru: “It’s not unrelated to me?”

Otto: “There was a big commotion, so I went to the stables to see what’s going on, and there I found Patrasche kicking up a great fuss. I thought maybe she’s stressed out from being cooped up for so many days, so I unlatched the gates hoping to take her for a little stroll and…POW.”

Making a big clap with his hands, Otto squinted at the dignified Patrasche. But Patrasche simply ignored him, keeping her gaze on Subaru.

Otto: “Why do I feel like I’m being completely disregarded… ugh nevermind. So anyway, she knocked me flying and dashed straight out of the stable. I was disoriented for a little while, but then I really panicked when I realized what serious trouble I’d be in as the one who let her escape… so that brings us to here.”

Subaru: “And since she’s come to me, you can relax now, huh.”

Otto: “Yeah, no kidding. Mr. Natsuki, did you leave some kind of instruction for Patrasche?”

Subaru: “Never had the time. I didn’t even come to see her that much except to give her food…”

Otto: “Well that explains why she’s so worried… You should’ve seen the way she rushed out of there.”

Subaru: “…”

“Worry”, hearing this word in Otto’s muttering, Subaru’s rebuttal suddenly clogged in his throat.

No way, the thought surged into his mind as he looked down at his body in search of evidence. And there, he found it.

On the right-shoulder of his jacket there were dented teeth-marks mingled with traces of saliva. The middle of Subaru's back was also plastered with dust as though he had been dragged over the ground.

Subaru: "Patrasche…"

Patrasche: "…"

Her round pupils focused on Subaru.

Seeing the dragon silently waiting for her master's words, Subaru inadvertently held his breath.

Subaru: "Did you… drag me out of the Tomb?"

Of course, there was no way for Patrasche to answer back with words. But, looking at Patrasche after seeing the dirt on his own body, Subaru noticed that her black skin was littered with lacerations.

Coated in resilient scales, it would be no easy task to damage the earth dragon's skin even with the appropriate tools. But it seemed to Subaru that these wounds were inflicted from the inside.

Then, he remembered.

—The Tomb would use its powers to expel those unqualified to take the Trials.

The wounds that confined Roswaal to his residence were inflicted the same way. When anyone without qualification trespasses inside, the Tomb would mercilessly bare its fangs—which means,

Subaru: "Did you seriously… get yourself hurt to pull me out…?"

Patrasche: "…"

Subaru: "Why would you… do something so stupid… for me it's just waking up and walking out of there… that's it. You didn't have to get all flustered and hurt yourself pulling me out…"

The gashes carved into her skin were deep enough that the red flesh beneath her black scales was showing through, and just the sight of blood seeping from the gaps made Subaru want to wince in pain.

Patrasche's persistence in pulling Subaru outside in spite of her wounds—was, quite frankly, pointless.

Unable to understand the meaning of Patrasche's actions, Subaru dropped his gaze while the earth dragon brought her snout closer. Subaru, still sitting there with his legs powerlessly splayed out, felt its tough surface brushing over and over against the back of his neck.

The unspoken understanding he thought existed between them was in fact a one-way road, and their relationship was actually just him being cared for in various contexts.

Subaru: "Otto."

Otto: "Huh? What is it? You two look like you're having a nice moment, so I was thinking I should just leave so I don't get in the way…"

Subaru: "Can you… please ask Patrasche why she's helping me?"

Otto possessed the Divine Protection of Anima Whispering, which allowed him to speak with animals, bugs, and various other life forms. Naturally, that meant he could communicate with Patrasche as well.

What was Patrasche thinking when she pulled Subaru outside in spite of her injuries? —What could be laying at the root of her actions unsettled him to no end.

But Otto frowned at Subaru's request, looking reluctant.

Otto: "Honestly, I'd rather not, Mr. Natsuki."

Subaru: "Don't say that, just please."

Otto: “From what I can guess from your mutterings to Patrasche… Mr. Natsuki, you were just inside the Tomb taking the Trial, right? After this morning, I’d already vaguely suspected that you’re qualified for the Trials, but, from the looks of it… you failed?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, pretty much.”

Though the intensity of his interactions with the Witches had muddled his memory, in this loop, Subaru had yet to tell the others about taking the First Trial. After revealing it only to Garfiel, he re-entered the Tomb to the Second Trial and the Witches’ tea party.

The Trial wasn’t the only reason he was so distraught, but Subaru saw no reason to correct Otto’s misunderstanding and merely nodded his head.

Hearing this, Otto slumped his shoulders and let out an astonished sigh.

Otto: “I can imagine several reasons why you did that… but what you did was stupid, Mr. Natsuki. You got yourself hurt inside, and on top of that you worried your dragon and got us where we are now. Patrasche has a keen intuition, and she must’ve sensed that something’s happened to you. That’s why she knocked me out of the way and rushed over… and her wounds couldn’t have been unrelated, either.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto followed the same train of thought to reach the same conclusion.

Subaru had figured as much. But the question was why did Patrasche go so far for him? That was what he wanted Otto to ask her.

Otto: “What. What’s with that look? You mean you’re actually serious about what you said?”

Subaru: “How about we flip this. Do I really look like I’m in a state to be joking right now?”

Otto: “I’m sure you’ll find a way to tell terrible jokes even when you’re ragged and torn, Mr. Natsuki. In this case, I would’ve been happier if you were joking. —You really don’t know?”

Before Subaru could refute that quiet question, he found himself overwhelmed by Otto’s gaze.

It was almost a look of disbelief, as if Otto was looking down at Subaru like he was an idiot. So, was there something huge Subaru had overlooked, or what?

But finding no answers, Subaru only fidgeted, furrowing his brows and looking confused. Sweat rose on his forehead from the anxiety, but still nothing came to mind.

Seeing this, Otto sighed once again,

Otto: “My Divine Protection isn’t as all-powerful as you think, Mr. Natsuki. While it can communicate ideas, that doesn’t mean it can do translations. Even if what you say makes sense to me, I can’t act as an intermediary and convey it to someone else, there’s a tricky problem of nuance.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “That look’s totally saying “Do it anyway”. Well, I can do it, but… I don’t really… see the… point…”

Drooping his head, muttering in dissatisfaction, Otto nonetheless gave in to Subaru’s request.

Otto approached Patrasche, who was still rubbing against Subaru with her snout, and gently stroked her jet-black back,

Otto: “—.”

The sound that came out of Otto’s opened mouth was scraping and shrill.

Bearing no resemblance to human speech, it was the product of the Divine Protection of Anima Whispering, which was converting his words into a cry that earth dragons could understand.

Patrasche lifted her head and answered in a similar screech. Hearing this, Otto opened his mouth again, and they went on exchanging these screeches, until,

Otto: “That’s about it, but… uumnnn, it’s kind of hard to find the proper words to communicate this. The way dragons express emotions is different from humans as well, so how do I explain this from only what I can understand…”

Subaru: “Stop playing around. Just tell me, please.”

Otto: “It’s not that I’m playing around… ugh, this is really problematic! I mean, it’s really going to require an insane amount of consideration to get this right.”

Scratching his head, Otto looked up several times as he deliberated, only to lower his head again to continue thinking while Subaru started impatiently fidgeting. Then, Otto sighed, and,

Otto: “Alright, here it is. I’ve chosen the words that… probably… will be the closest I can manage.”

Subaru: “Right… so what did Patrasche say?”

Otto: “Mmmnn, it would be something like “Well don’t make me say it out loud”“

Subaru: “—huh?”

Subaru’s eyes widened as Otto embarrassedly scratched his cheek.

Subaru waited a bit longer to see if Otto had anything else to say, but it didn’t seem like any more words were coming. Seeing the dumbfounded Subaru, “Well”, Otto went on,

Otto: “Patrasche said “Well don’t make me say it out loud”. And in my opinion, that sounds about right.”

Subaru: “Don’t make me say… what…?”

Otto: “Whichever way you take it, that’s what it means. If I have to supplement it with my own opinion, it would be “Do I really have to tell you for you to understand this?”. Something like that.”

Seeing Subaru’s confusion deepen, Otto held up a finger with “You listening?”,

Otto: “When you don’t know whether someone is in danger, but you couldn’t bear standing still and rush out, paying no heed to your own injuries as you lend them your hand, then you stay at their side until they wake up, and finally give them a relieved smile when they wake—I think whether it’s a human or a dragon, when they do something like that for another person, it’s pretty obvious what they’re thinking.”

Subaru: “a—”

Otto: “So even if you’re not Patrasche, you should know what “Don’t make me say it” means. If you still can’t tell from her attitude, then you’re just way too daft. You’re really lucky, aren’t you?”

Hearing Otto’s exasperated question, Subaru realized just how stupid he was.

He looked at Patrasche, still sitting at his side, and found her staring at him with the same relieved gaze. As if noticing the shift in his mind, she wagged her long tail and stood up,

Patrasche: “…”

Once again, she brought her snout over, and Subaru’s hand naturally moved to pat it.

Stroking his palm over her hard, craggy hide, Subaru’s voice was trembling,

Subaru: “So, um… you, like me, huh.”

Patrasche: “…”

Subaru: “You love me… that’s why you’re here for me… huh.”

Something that had weighed on his chest suddenly dropped with a thunk.

Patrasche growled in reply, then violently rubbed her snout inside his palms as if to hide her embarrassment. Subaru furrowed his brows at the sensation scraping his skin, and, when he opened his mouth,

Subaru: “Ou… a…”

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki?”

A droplet of heat rolled down his cheek.

It was a teardrop. For before he knew it, the tears that had abruptly welled up in his eyes overflowed. Quickly wiping it with his hand, it was too late to hide it. Otto already saw it.

Otto: “Are you… crying because you realized your earth dragon is attached to you… Mr. Natsuki…”

Subaru: “Nonono… that’s not what this is… the timing’s just lined up too well… ugh, just when I thought it didn’t feel real, the answer suddenly flew into my mind when I wasn’t prepared…”

The unfair timing of this revelation caused even more emotions to come flooding in even as Subaru desperately tried to restrain them.

Back at the Witches’ tea party, Subaru had realized that he didn’t want to die. And that just as much as he wanted to protect those he loved, he also wanted to be there alongside them in the end.

As for whether he was worthy enough for them to care about him, that was more difficult to say, and so he swore that he would find out.

And now, there was Patrasche’s unconditional loyalty.

Being hit with something like this before he had done anything, what was he supposed to do?

The answer to the question he had been agonizing over, Patrasche had just given it to him alongside his awakening.

At least to Patrasche, Subaru was precious enough that, when she sensed he was in a nightmare, she rushed there to pull him out even though it meant injuring herself to do it.

Subaru: “Didn’t think I’d be getting this lesson from you. —Thank you, Patrasche.”

Answering the loyalty she was directing at him, Subaru filled his strokes with sentiment as he patted Patrasche. And, standing still, Patrasche resolutely stretched out her neck to savor his touch. All the while, she was swaying her tail in indication of her happiness.

Otto: “Now that you’ve reconfirmed your bond with Patrasche, are you alright, Mr. Natsuki?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that helped a lot, thank you. …Am I alright?”

Otto: “I mean physically and mentally. The Trial must’ve been really hard on you, right? You looked like you were almost crying from loneliness, and Lady Emilia was the same way.”

Just when Subaru was about to refute Otto’s observation, he realized just how frail he must have been, and did not say anything. Instead, his thoughts turned to Emilia,

Subaru: “It wasn’t easy, that’s for sure. But I think it was easier on me than it was on Emilia. More importantly, since you were worried about me… does that mean you love me too?”

Otto: “Can you please refrain from turning it into something repulsive?! There’re lines you shouldn’t cross even if you’re feeling lonely! Is Patrasche not enough for you that now you have to ask that question to anyone you meet?”

Subaru: “Can’t I? Honestly, right now I’m right on the fence about whether or not to give myself validation here, so I’d like to get one more encouraging message please.”

Otto: “Right, right, good to see you’re back to your usual self… My worries for you were purely out of consideration for our future cooperation, I hope you don’t misunderstand.”

Scowling at the warning signs of Subaru's returning eccentricity, Otto threw up his arms, saying this.

"Future cooperation" was a rather pretentious way to put it, but for Otto, who would like to clearly maintain his standing as a merchant, this was a necessary thing to say.

Otto: "My acquaintance with you, Mr. Natsuki, is purely to preserve cordial relations with Margrave Mathers. Should any problems arise on that front, or if it starts to looks like my life is in danger, I'll be scurrying away as fast as my legs can take me. I'd like you to remember that."

Making that rather unfeeling statement, what Otto said was not so much heartless as it was already the implicit understanding between them. The fact that Otto kept going out of his way to say it only showed that he was a kind person at heart, late as it is to mention this.

Subaru: "Right, yeah. You'd… actually, no."

Just as Subaru was about to accept Otto's realist remark with a nod, he stopped.

Listening to him just now, a sense of awryness scraped across his chest.

Then, arriving at the answer instantly, "haa" Subaru sighed.

Otto: "…What is it?"

Subaru: "I just remembered. Yeah, remembered… remembered."

Nodding several times in front of the confused-looking Otto, Subaru held his hand to his head and tilted back his neck.

Subaru and Otto had operated together many times in these loops inside the Sanctuary. Each time, Subaru had seen him.

And because Subaru had seen him,

Subaru: "You'll scurry away at the first sign of danger… huh."

Otto: “Yeah, you bet. It’s obvious, isn’t it? There’s no reason for me to extend my concerns to you or anyone else. Where there’s life, there’s hope, as they say…”

Subaru: “You wouldn’t run.”

Otto: “—huh?”

As Otto tried to take a realist’s stance by assuming this frivolous tone, Subaru muttered.

Seeing Otto’s eyes widen, Subaru looked at him straight on, and said,

Subaru: “—You wouldn’t leave me and run, Otto.”

Otto had snuck into a hidden building guarded by a violence-ready Garfiel to help Subaru.

And he had resisted the beastified Garfiel alongside the villagers to stop it from devouring Subaru.

Even as he dressed himself in heartless words and pretended to be a bad person, Subaru knew that he wasn’t.

That’s because,

Subaru: “Otto. —You’re my friend.”

Chapter 81:
Glimmer of Hope

After receiving that pep talk from Otto and Patrasche, Subaru's heart was temporarily brought back from the depths of the abyss.

Quite frankly, there was a lot about the events inside the Dream Citadel that he still hadn't swallowed down, but nevertheless, he must chew them and turn them into strength.

Subaru: "Well… won't be getting any help from Echidna anymore…"

The Witch of Greed Echidna had put up a friendly facade as she observed Subaru's struggles. But after their final exchange, he was now convinced that that wasn't all of it, and that Witches are creatures who never stray from their principles.

This was made painfully clear by the other five Witches—Sekhmet, Daphne, Camilla, Typhon, and Minerva. In Subaru's eyes, they certainly weren't evil beings. But by no means would he call them virtuous.

This was true even for Minerva, whose very creed was to heal others. The way she rushed with self-abandon to heal him, despite losing her arm and legs, was more horrific than noble.

As for the final Witch, Satella—he would much rather not think about her for now.

His feelings for Satella, those incomprehensible emotions surging inside him: he instinctively knew that seeking their answers now, when he was so pressed for time, would be dangerous.

And those final words they exchanged at their parting. The last he saw of Satella—just remembering her in that moment sent the insides of his chest into a frenzy, as if his heart would tear itself out.

And so, Subaru consciously avoided thinking about Satella, and instead directed his thoughts to other matters. That is, the last bit of advice Echidna had given him, and the question of whether he should take Satella at her word.

Subaru: “Be kinder to myself… it’s easy to say, but…”

From meeting Satella, and through the experience of the First and Second Trials, Subaru was made aware of the fact that those he wished to save from death would also grieve over his. —And that, in his heart of hearts, he didn’t want to die.

But then, what could he do? Nothing had changed the fact that he had no other weapon at his disposal.

The multitudes of problems waiting to be solved hadn’t gone away. In fact, the number of people he could rely on to help him had only decreased.

Though his heart had slightly gotten back on his feet, everything else had only degraded rather than improved.

Subaru: “Rely on the people who care about me… how am I supposed to do that…”

Just be honest and ask them for help. That’s probably what she meant.

But the one forbidding him from telling others was none other than Satella—or, judging from the flow of the conversation, the one forbidding any mention of Return by Death was probably the persona of the Witch of Envy. Perhaps, Satella had different ideas than her alternate personality. And, in that final whisper—

Subaru: “—Ugh, I already said this isn’t the time to be thinking about this.”

Noticing that his thoughts were once again drifting towards Satella, Subaru stepped on the brakes.

What he needed to do was find to concrete plans to solve his problems.

Subaru: “Garfiel is… afraid of the outside world… huh.”

That was Echidna’s last piece of advice, and possibly the information needed to break through this situation.

Garfiel had practically confessed that he had taken the first Trial, and Echidna’s words had confirmed it.

The question was, what did he see in his past that made him afraid of the outside world?

The trauma of not being able to follow Frederica out of the Sanctuary to live in Roswaal’s Mansion couldn’t be unrelated to this.

But Subaru doubted Garfiel would divulge it freely if he asked him upfront.

Subaru: “Which means I’ll have to get it out of someone who knows… Frederica or Miss Ryuzu were both pretty tight-lipped about it…”

If Frederica’s words could be believed, then she was unable to follow Garfiel into the Tomb, and consequently, she would not be in a position to know the contents of the Trial. Ryuzu, on the other hand, or at least the Ryuzu clone who ran in to drag him out, had taken the Trial. There was a good chance that she might know the details of Garfiel’s Trial.

Subaru: “As much as I hate to do it… the most reliable plan would be getting the Command Authority from the Ryuzu Meyer crystal and ordering her to tell me.”

Not even the leader of the clones and the representative of the Sanctuary, Ryuzu, could disobey an order from the one holding the Command Authority. Even if it went against her wishes, he could force her to do it.

And more than just information, it would also mean obtaining the support of twenty-odd accomplices. At least, that was how he tried to convince himself.

Subaru: “…”

The image of the Sanctuary in flames, overrun by a horde of white rabbits, rose in his mind. As well as the wretched memory of ordering the Ryuzu-clones to protect him as he ran.

I must get to Emilia’s side. With that as his justification, Subaru mindlessly gave his order as he sprinted, wound-ridden, into the Tomb.

He had never regretted or reflected on his actions after the fact, but now that he looked back on it with a clear head, the callousness of his deed horrified him.

Especially now that he realized that it was out of his own pathetic desire not to die.

Was there a more arrogant, more shameless way he could have sent those girls to their deaths? Even though he insisted that he didn’t want to, he couldn’t trust himself anymore.

Subaru: “My head’s a mess… I’m going too far into the negatives, damn it. My brain’s gonna explode if I keep thinking like this. Let’s go one by one, and eliminate the things that I can eliminate.”

Questions and answers, untangle the problems. Start clearing them one at a time and then connect all the answered questions into a bigger solution.

Approach the problems so that it leads to a positive outcome. First,

Subaru: “Since I’ve passed the First Trial, I should be the one to liberate the Sanctuary. There’s no need to put any more burdens on Emilia. Or rather, since any more pressure would break her state of mind, that has to be avoided at all costs.”

He could remember Emilia sweetly drawing closer in the snow-covered Sanctuary.

It was obviously the result of her mind breaking as she repeatedly challenged the Trial. Nothing good can come from making her face the Trials anymore.

Subaru: “Clearing the Trials will be my problem… which brings us to the Second Trial. I managed to survive it, but… does that mean I passed?”

The presents that were not to be—just as the name suggests, are worlds that would have been if a different choice had been made. The Second Trial was precisely to experience such Parallel Worlds.

To anyone other than Subaru, it might simply have been an exploration of alternate paths that the world could have taken. But, to Subaru alone, the Trial truly bared its fangs.

Subaru was shown the continuations of the worlds in which he had failed.

Facing him was a myriad of regrets, consequences, and grief-stricken laments for his “Death”.

Taking them into his eyes and soaking them into his skin, Subaru’s heart was shattered to pieces.

Even now, recalling it sent chills coursing through his body and assaulted his limbs with inescapable numbness.

And, just when he was swallowed by the shrieking of his own heart, he was summoned to the Citadel of Dreams—so now the question is, did he pass the Trial or not?

It doesn’t look like he passed.

But then, what would he have to do to clear the Second Trial? Unlike the First Trial, he couldn’t figure it out at all.

Subaru: “Just thinking about it won’t get me anywhere. …I just have to do the things that I can do.”

Shaking his head and clenching his indecisive heart, Subaru stood up. He pressed his hand against the mossy wall behind him and peered into the dark entrance of the Tomb.

He had been pondering here alone, with neither Patrasche or Otto at his side.

Embarrassed by the sheer stupidity of their last exchange, he had asked Otto to bring Patrasche back to the stables. In the end, although it consoled him to see Patrasche's concerned gaze as she left, Subaru needed some time alone to sort over the various thoughts on his mind.

Subaru: "The primary problems that need addressing are the Sanctuary and the Mansion. In the Sanctuary are the Trials, Garfiel, and the Great Rabbit. In the Mansion are Beatrice and Elsa… I'm fighting on too many fronts here."

With not a single solution in sight, he was just about falling into despair. But this was no time to be despairing. He must steadily eliminate his problems, one at a time—while no longer treating his life as if it were disposable.

Subaru: "First is to confirm the status of the Trials. If the Second Trial has just started then all's well, but if it's completed and the Third Trial has started, that's even better."

At least, if he could remove the Barrier sooner, that would help the situation greatly. He should start thinking about how to move Garfiel as well. In the worst case, when the Great Rabbit attacks, they'll be able to escape outside. Even Garfiel wouldn't be so stubborn when he is faced with the Great Rabbit.

Removing the Barrier would move the problems of the Sanctuary closer to resolution.

Thinking to this point, a faint glimmer of hope opened before Subaru's eyes, bringing with it relief.

He had been racking his brain over the endless problems, but now he finally saw something that could be leading to the answer.

Subaru: "…"

Standing at the entrance of the Tomb, Subaru held his breath as he gazed into the darkness of the stone corridor.

If he enters, the Trial would start, and he may be faced with another present that was not to be. Subaru could never get used to those scenes, no matter how many times he saw them.

But he knew that he was not allowed to ignore or forget them.

If he cannot escape, then he must face that challenge.

Subaru inhaled a deep breath, held it inside, and stepped forward.

Venturing into the Tomb, he would challenge the Trials and release the Sanct—

Subaru: "—?!"

The moment he stepped inside, a sensation swept over him like a punch to the skull.

The pain was like needles stabbing directly into his brain as light scattered before his vision while his legs gave way. His upper body toppled, and, unable to stand, Subaru collapsed on the spot.

Intense nausea surged up, wrenching out the contents of his stomach as he choked on its bile. He coughed, but no matter how much he did so his body would not be appeased.

Alarms, alarms, the alarm bells were ringing.

Caught in this cycle of discord and dissonance, Subaru panted as he tumbled towards the Tomb's exterior. Instinctively, he knew. If he takes one step deeper inside, the torment racking his body would explode in ferocity.

Subaru: "U, gh… hha, ph, ua."

Tumbling out of the Tomb and throwing his hands onto the grass, Subaru puked over and over.

The moment his body completely exited the Tomb, the agony tormenting his body fell away. The headache, the nausea, the numbness of his limbs all faded as Subaru looked up with his teary eyes,

Subaru: "A… ugh… what was… that…?"

He looked to the entrance, but just as he reached out his hand to crawl towards it, a primordial rejection rose inside him.

It wasn’t in fear of the trauma from the Trial or anything of the sort. —It was simply that he understood that the Tomb had rejected him.

Subaru: “What, is…”

It rejected him. Understanding this, Subaru immediately realized what had happened to him.

Patrasche was injured when she went inside to bring him out. Roswaal was severely wounded when he went in to challenge the Trials. The Tomb rejects those who lack the qualifications to challenge the Trials. And it had just done so to Subaru.

Subaru: “That can’t be… I mean, that would…”

Standing up, tottering, Subaru mustered the courage to face the Tomb once more.

But, in just one step, the moment his foot entered the headache and nausea returned as the overwhelming malaise crushed him so that he couldn’t even stand.

Subaru: “Hha… hha, hhah…h.”

Stumbling back drawing ragged breaths, Subaru pulled away from the entrance of the Tomb. This attempt only confirmed what he had already realized.

Subaru: “That… vile…”

Floating into his mind was the white-haired Witch in her funerary dress.

At their parting, surely, she was asking Subaru,

“Will you take my hand, or will you take Satella’s?”

And Subaru turned down her hand to choose Satella’s.

If this was her revenge for his choice, then that’s just far too—

Subaru: “And just when I thought…!”

In the very, very end, that apparent gesture of goodwill that had made him almost think fondly of her,

Echidna: “—You’re not wrong in the least?”

Hearing the mischievous voice of the Witch he should not be hearing, he turned his head to the sky,

Subaru: “Revoking my qualifications… you said nothing about this, ECHIDNAAA!!!”

—Natsuki Subaru had lost the qualifications to challenge the Trials to liberate the Sanctuary.

Chapter 82:
A Con-versation

1

Subaru: “Right, so I’m not just imagining this…”

Touching his hand to the crystal before him and sensing no signs of anything happening, Subaru pressed his forehead against the cold crystal and sighed.

The girl sleeping inside the crystal—the original Ryuzu Meyer, made no reaction to Subaru’s lament. Although the lack of reply from that eternally sleeping girl was more or less expected, the lack of reaction in the general sense wasn’t.

Subaru: “I’ve been disqualified… so even if I touch the crystal, the Command Authority won’t transfer to me, huh…”

The Command Authority over Ryuzu Meyer’s clones was a power only an Apostle of Greed could wield.

Having rejected Echidna, Subaru was revoked of his qualification to challenge the Trials of her Tomb. Apparently, he had been deemed unworthy of that role.

Standing inside the facility’s stagnant, sickening air, Subaru held his head as he saw his glimmer of hope fading.

The worst case, the absolute worst case before he confirmed this, was that it was the trauma from the Second Trial that made him hesitate to step inside the Tomb. If that was the reason behind it, then it was only a problem with Subaru’s mental state. If he just forced himself to try again and again, he would eventually be able to bend his whimpering heart to his will.

But if it was something outside of his control, then there was nothing to be done.

Being unable to enter the Tomb also meant that he wouldn't be able to negotiate directly with Echidna to regain his qualification.

Even before that, considering their last parting, would any of the Witches even want to see Subaru again? —Probably not, would be his instinctive understanding.

Realizing this, Subaru understood that clearing the Trials himself was now out of the question, and the task of liberating the Sanctuary must be entrusted to someone else.

Which means—

Subaru: "Emilia… will have to do it… then?"

Voicing the possibility that he was most afraid of, a heartfelt desire to curse Echidna's insidious designs swelled up inside him.

Echidna could read Subaru's memories. Only she could observe the repeating worlds the same way Subaru did. And so, Echidna must know about Emilia, and how her heart and mind had been broken from continually challenging the Trials alone.

Echidna must also have known how desperately, and to what lengths Subaru would go to avoid that outcome.

Was the Witch of Greed forcing this hardship on Subaru and Emilia, knowing this?

Subaru: "What do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do…"

His thoughts blazing and his mind growing white-hot, Subaru searched for a solution. But even as he taxed the burning synapses of his brain, not a single answer appeared to replace that extinguished glimmer of hope.

The situation was on a one-way road downwards, and the number of people he could rely on was diminishing.

A person who knew the situation he was in, who could pleasantly listen to his words with understanding.

Someone who could accept the things he must leave unsaid, and converse with him regardless.

Nothing would come of mulling over it alone. And he couldn't rely on Echidna anymore.

Which means, there now was only one person left whom he could share his problems with.

2

Roswaal: "I~~ certainly wasn't expecting you to be visiting so late at ni~~ght."

Subaru: "…right, but why do I get the feeling you got everything ready and had been waiting for me? You haven't snuffed out the light to sleep, and looks like you just lit the fire, too."

Roswaal: "Aaha, so ha~~rsh. But, well, you're not wro~~ng in the least."

Sitting up on the bed leaning against his pillow, Roswaal welcomed Subaru with a smile. While most of the lights in Roswaal's residence were extinguished, the candle burning on his little bedside table had just been changed, its amber light swaying as it illuminated the room.

The entrancing, flickering candle-flame cast an eerie shadow over Roswaal's pallid face. Taking this into his sight, Subaru swallowed a small breath as he prepared for the conversation to come.

If Subaru's understanding was correct, then this conversation with Roswaal would—

Roswaal: "A~~nd so? You've come to me in the middle of the night for a reason? Co~~uld it be, that you are here to win me over with impa~~ssioned confessions of your longings?"

Subaru: "…Confession… I wouldn't call it that. Roswaal, is there a way to release the Sanctuary without passing the Trials?"

Roswaal: "…"

At that sentence alone, Roswaal's smile curdled, taking on a lurid, ghastly chill.

In fact, the slit of the clown's smiling lips stretched wide. Stroking his long blue hair, he nodded several times, gazing into Subaru with his single yellow pupil,

Roswaal: "Subaru. —Which attempt are you currently on?"

That question took the reins of the conversation by implying that they both knew the thereabouts of what the other knew.

With it, Roswaal would confirm the fact that Subaru could indeed Return by Death, and Subaru would know that Roswaal was in a position to know this.

And so, Subaru must present concessions while amending Roswaal's information.

With a short sigh, Subaru gave a purposefully emphasized shrug.

Subaru: "Sorry, but it's too stupidly many to count at this point. I can't remember how many times we've probed each other like this, either."

Roswaal: "I… see. U~~ndersto~~od. If you're putting it that way… I'll have to take your word for it, I suppose?"

Subaru: "So, how about it?"

Averting his gaze, Subaru tried to hurry the conversation along.

However, he did not overlook the fact that his words had made Roswaal's cheeks stiffen, or that he had seized the initiative with his opening move.

—While Roswaal knew that Subaru was looping, unlike Subaru, he cannot retain memories from the previous loops.

This was something Subaru had learned in the loop where Roswaal revealed his knowledge of Return by Death. It was there, that Subaru learned of Roswaal's incomprehensible resolve where, despite knowing that his death will be the end, he still sought to use Subaru's Return by Death to attain his desired outcome.

Even now, Subaru couldn't help but find that way of thinking disgusting and repugnant, but—

Subaru: "I'm in the middle of some trial and error right now. So I'd appreciate your help."

Saying it with a kind of self-derision, Subaru was giving off the illusion that he was "Acting in accordance to Roswaal's intentions".

At this stage, Roswaal certainly knew more about the secrets of the Sanctuary than Subaru. It was unclear how much Roswaal's Gospel documented what would happen next, and it'd be no easy task to find out, but, recalling Roswaal's mutters as he sighted the Great Rabbit, Subaru deduced that it wasn't detailed to that extent.

Which means, as long as he chooses his words carefully, there was a good chance Subaru could deceive Roswaal while extracting information from him.

Roswaal: "And part of that trial and error involves freeing the Sanctuary without challenging the Trials… is it? I~~f so, that's ra~~ther faint-hearted. With the Authority in your possession, an infinite number of attempts should certainly make it possible for you to overcome any hardship. I don't know how many times you have tried… but to give up in search of another me~~thod… is surely a sign of i~~nsufficient resolve?"

Subaru: "I don't consider stubbornly betting everything on overcoming the Trials to be a clever way of doing things. Better to choose a smoother method if there is one, that's all. It'd be silly to put style over substance here. The important thing is the fact that we escape from this place and that the credit goes to Emilia… am I wrong, Roswaal?"

Keeping his face calm and collected, one by one, Subaru scrutinized his own words in real time as he spoke. The task of weaving and checking each word moments before they rolled off his tongue was straining his nerves to the limit, but, without doing so, he would stand no chance of deceiving Roswaal.

His argument was cold hard logic—most likely, this was the Subaru that Roswaal wanted to see.

There was no doubt that Roswaal wanted to make Emilia King, and have Subaru help make it so. Besides, Subaru imagined that the more ruthless the suggestion, the more it'd be to Roswaal's tastes.

And, sure enough,

Roswaal: "I~~ see… that is indeed an a~~nswer to my liking."

Roswaal smiled with satisfaction at Subaru's reply.

Seeing the color of depravity deepen on the clown's painted face, Subaru bit down on the insides of his cheeks while doing his best to keep his untroubled expression.

Roswaal's disturbing gaze suggested that he regarded Subaru to be of the same breed as himself. That is to say, Roswaal was considering Subaru to be the same as his own degenerate self. —A biological disgust swelled inside him at the thought of it.

But the more Subaru tried to think of a difference between them, the more apparent his own crookedness became.

Roswaal: "Whi~~le I am certainly delighted to see the changes in your thinking, to answer your question would prove ra~~ther difficult. There is no precedent. After all, the Barrier has never been broken since it was placed there. I wouldn't imagine there is a crack somewhere, since, considering who installed it, it'd be best to abandon all optimistic hopes for su~~ch oversights."

Subaru: "It's Echidna's Barrier…"

Roswaal: "E~~xactly. The Sanctuary's Tomb is her gravestone, and the Barrier is something she erected in her lifetime to keep the half-bloods for her experiments from escaping. …A~~lthough, I'm sure you've already disco~~vered that much."

Subaru: "Well, obviously. Just saying, I already know about Ryuzu

Meyer in the facility in the woods. That and the clones, and how Garfiel has the Command Authority.”

Roswaal: “Aha~~a, that do~~es speed things up.”

While Roswaal gradually disclosed information, Subaru was also carefully revealing his cards. Hearing this, Roswaal closed his single eye, sighing as if in thought.

Roswaal: “The liberation of the Sanctuary is an indispensible achievement if Lady Emilia is to become King. If she si~~desteps it, the people of the Sanctuary and the villagers of Earlham will not see it as such.”

Subaru: “As long as we can get them outside for now, we can easily smooth that part over later. Besides, this isn’t the only chance for her to gather achievements. It’s actually pretty bad timing, in fact, so if we pick another time to…”

Roswaal: “Another time? Wh~~y are you back to saying this?”

Seeing Roswaal’s eye widen in bewilderment, Subaru realized that he had misspoken.

Having scoured himself away and confirmed his resolve over countless loops—that was the Subaru he was performing here.

In that Subaru’s ruthless thinking, there was no reason he would pass up an opportunity to pick up an achievement right in front of him.

Without letting his regret show on his expression, before Roswaal’s doubts could deepen, “Just think about it”, Subaru continued,

Subaru: “As you already know, I’m willing to stop at nothing to make Emilia the King. So don’t take this the wrong way, but, considering how I can rehearse the future and come back with all the information, liberating the Sanctuary is pretty insignificant and doesn’t really involve a lot of people. We could be putting our efforts into more important stuff like the White Whale and the Witch Cult instead. —This place just isn’t worth the effort.”

Roswaal: “…No~~ no, liberating the Sanctuary is necessary. Let me make this clear: that point is beyond compromise. You see, I still have some inevitable doubts about your po~~wers.”

Subaru: “Doubts…?”

Subaru tilted his head as the conversation took a strange turn. Seeing this, “Indeed”, Roswaal nodded.

Roswaal: “I~~ cannot confirm with my own eyes what your Autho~~rity can do. It is also possible that I am not convinced by your excu~~ses. Though na~~turally, once the results are in, I would have no choice but to acce~~pt it.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “I can say with all certainty that to make Lady Emilia King, my power… and the support of the House of Mathers is i~~ndispensable. Liberating the Sanctuary is what will make me believe that your ability to assist Lady Emilia is genuine, and only then, can there be a positive relationship between us… I would like you to understa~~nd this.”

Roswaal narrowed his single eye, as Subaru fell speechless at the soundness of his argument.

Everything Roswaal said was true, and Subaru could think of no effective rebuttal.

Emilia needs someone to back her if she is to stand on that stage as a Royal Selection candidate, and no one of influence besides Roswaal would be willing to do so. All Subaru could do was to accept this as the reality of things, there was no other way.

Following his orders so as not to displease his patron would be the correct course of action. Roswaal’s views were sound, and the urgency of the situation was undeniable.

But, even while being swayed by those waves of reason, Subaru still felt like there was something off about it.

It just sounded as if Roswaal was far too fixated on the point of liberating the Sanctuary.

Subaru: “This is slightly off-topic, but…”

Roswaal: “Hm? Wha~~t is it?”

Seeing Subaru raise a single finger to draw his attention, Roswaal tilted his head.

Locking his gaze onto his single, mismatched eye, Subaru spoke.

Subaru: “Is there a reason you’re so obsessed with liberating the Sanctuary no matter what?”

Roswaal: “…”

Roswaal met that question with only silence.

Silence, as his smile deepened and his yellow eye pierced into Subaru’s.

—Subaru could sense it on his very skin that the mood of the conversation was changing.

Chapter 83:
Mutual Confessions

Sensing the prickling pressure on his skin, Subaru understood that his statements had just touched the core of Roswaal's intentions.

Roswaal's smile was now the same smile that he had given before being devoured by the Great Rabbit in the snow as he revealed a portion of his plans.

It was an expression of neither resignation nor delight, one which only exacerbated the alarms in Subaru's heart.

Roswaal: "No~~w what gave you that idea?"

Late as it was, Roswaal's obfuscation indicated that he had no intention of moving the conversation forward. At this, Subaru clicked his tongue with "Even if you say that",

Subaru: "There was just something off about the way you turned down my suggestion just now. When you stick a condition like "The Sanctuary must be liberated" right at the very top, of course I'm gonna suspect something."

Roswaal: "But I've already given you a very logical e~~xplanation? Besides, for the sake of our future cooperation, some proof is necessary. That you can become Lady Emilia's unfailing support—that you can always provide her with the optimal solutions at her side: That is what I want you to convince me of. The requirement for this is liberating the Sanctuary."

Subaru: "But that doesn't sound like it has to be liberation. Any other method of escaping should be fine? If you want to give me a chance to prove myself, you can set up plenty of those later…"

Roswaal: "Let me ask you something."

In rebuttal to Subaru's insistence, Roswaal raised a single finger. Cut off mid-sentence, Subaru fell silent as Roswaal gave a calm, collected nod,

Roswaal: “You are the o~~ne who seems awfully preo~~ccupied about the Trials? It’s almost as if there is a reason you don’t want the Sanctuary to be liberated?”

Subaru: “Of course I want it liberated! I want to get this Barrier opened as soon as possible and move the problems we can’t solve in here outside… but.”

Roswaal: “But?”

Rambling before he knew it, Subaru realized he was playing right into Roswaal’s hands. If he starts shouting and blurting out words without thinking, this game of deception will go to Roswaal.

As calmly as he could, Subaru picked his words:

Subaru: “I don’t want to see Emilia’s heart wounded from challenging the Trials.”

Roswaal: “But isn’t that what your Authority is for? Should Lady Emilia stumble in the Trials, you can always take her place. What is the problem? The important thing is that the Sanctuary is liberated, you said so yourself.”

Subaru: “Nh, gh…”

Caught off-guard by his own words, Subaru bit his lip, searching for something to say. But asserting nonsense on top of nonsense wouldn’t lead to any sensible response.

Subaru: “Of course I know it doesn’t matter whether it’s me or Emilia who clears the Trials. Digging up the wounds of her past is too painful for Emilia. I know I should be doing it in her stead… it’s just…”

Roswaal: “Please don’t tell me you are looking for a way out because the Trials are too pa~~inful for you too?”

Roswaal’s gaze harshened, as his words grew in sharpness.

To the stumped Subaru, “No, no”, he continued,

Roswaal: “To save yourself, to cower from the pain… if that is the reason you are searching for another way out, is that all that your feelings for Lady Emilia amo~~unts to?”

Subaru: “That’s not…!”

Roswaal: “It’s not? Truly? How can you possibly say that? Who would believe it? If you care about Lady Emilia, shouldn’t you swallow down all the pain, the suffering, and the agony? If you love Lady Emilia, surely you must be ca~~pable of this? If you hold Lady Emilia dearer than anything else, if you prioritize Lady Emilia above anything else, if you regard everything besides Lady Emilia as minuscule existences and place Lady Emilia higher than anything else… surely, there shouldn’t be any problems?”

Roswaal’s fluent and irrefutable speech was on the verge of engulfing Subaru.

Although Roswaal’s words were the very definition of extreme, anyone who understands Subaru’s Return by Death would likely reach the same conclusion.

If this was before Satella brought out his true feelings at the tea party, Subaru would probably have found himself agreeing with this logic.

—Yeah, that must’ve been it.

Subaru had wanted to declare to Roswaal that he would never be like him and sacrifice everything for the one thing most important to him.

But, if he had taken Echidna’s hand at the tea party, right now Subaru would probably be living exactly the way Roswaal wanted him to.

Abandoning thought, eliminating choice, seeking only the results, scorning absolutely everything else.

No matter how much he gets hurt, so long as Emilia and everyone else are smiling in the desired future ahead, then it's fine. That was what he thought.

But would Natsuki Subaru, after opting to withstand that suffering, be able to smile alongside them at the very end?

—Or would he only manage something forced and barren, out of a sense of obligation to smile?

Subaru: "…In a sense, what you're saying is right, Roswaal."

Roswaal: "In a sense?"

Narrowing his single eye, Roswaal tilted his head at Subaru's meaningful reply.

Enduring the gaze of that yellow eye, Subaru spat out the words,

Subaru: "Like you said, if I throw everything away and go forward protecting only Emilia… I'm guaranteed to be able to save her. But that's not enough."

Roswaal: "Not enough…"

Subaru: "I will save Emilia. But I won't be satisfied with only Emilia. Rem, Beatrice, everyone in the Sanctuary, everyone in the Mansion, and everyone who's helped me in the Capital… I want to save all of them, all together."

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "Your lifestyle of being satisfied with only one person just doesn't work for me. Honestly, I'm not sure if it's me or you who's greedy here."

Consistently longing for a single person and abandoning everything for that one person is, in a way, beautiful.

One could even say that there is no nobler pursuit than to live by that kind of love.

Perhaps Roswaal's way is just one man's ideals taken to the extremes.

But to really do so requires unparalleled resolve. Scouring his soul and casting away everything but the one most precious to him wasn’t a lifestyle Subaru could live by.

Just as always, Subaru was far too petty—like a selfish little child.

Roswaal: “…I~~t seems it still wasn’t enough to sharpen your reso~~lve.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “For a moment… yes, for just a moment, I had hopes. Tha~~t I might live to see my desired future. But… it seems that is no~~t to be.”

Roswaal shook his head, voicing this lament.

Their exchange had revealed to Roswaal that Subaru still lacked the resolve he wanted from him.

Compared to the unfeeling, all-conquering Subaru Roswaal expected him to be, the current Subaru was only an unsatisfactory failure. At the same time, to Roswaal, this meant nothing less than seeing the endpoint of his own life.

Roswaal: “Just how many times… are you going to disappo~~int me?”

Subaru: “If that’s how you feel, then you could be a little more cooperative with me. If you were more open to lending me a hand, most of our problems could be solved by now.”

Subaru threw back this disdainful comment at the disappointed Roswaal.

The truth is, being hopelessly lacking in the combat department, Subaru desperately needed Roswaal’s strength. His incredible magic that rained fire on the witchbeasts’ forest and his unerring techniques that slaughtered the rushing Rabbits—countering the Great Rabbit’s threat would be impossible without Roswaal’s help.

Conversely, if Subaru could secure Roswaal's assistance, that alone would solve the greater part of the Sanctuary's problems.

However, Roswaal shook his head to Subaru's cheap yet ardent request,

Roswaal: "Sorry, but I cannot. Working with you as you currently are would be fa~~r too disadvantageous for me. Hypothetically… yes, let's hypothetically say that I assist you, and you overcome this situation. Your resolve will remain uncertain, and you and Lady Emilia will undoubtedly encounter other obstacles in the future… will you also rely on me then? You would postpone confirming the resolve that you should have made here just so you could dither when you fall into the same irreparable situation again?"

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: "You see, Subaru, I… cannot give my assistance unless it is to someone with whom I can entrust my goals. A relationship of dependence is not what I need for my purposes. And so I want you to do what you can to convince me that you have the resolve to go forward."

Subaru: "Your… goals…"

Roswaal: "Regrettably, it would seem that this time it will go unfulfilled. I will have to place my hopes on next time. When you can truly and unquestionably accept your power."

Ending his words there, Roswaal's body laid down onto its side as if having lost its strength.

For Roswaal, his present self had already lost any reason to live. All that was left to do was to watch Subaru fail and rewind, bringing about the ending of this world.

If the conversation ended here, Subaru would not have achieved a single thing he came for.

As he watched Roswaal withdrawing into himself, waving his hand urging him to leave the room, Subaru desperately forced his mind to think, Subaru: “…So what would I have to demonstrate to convince you of my resolve?”

Roswaal: “Hhm… honestly, I had hoped you’d have already figured it out from our interactions u~~p to now. Rewinding so many times just to ask that really is a waste of effort.”

Drawn by Subaru’s words, Roswaal sat up once more and held a hand to his chin,

Roswaal: “In short, liberating the Sanctuary will achieve that. Your actions are indispensable to the Sanctuary’s liberation, and you will need to possess the unwavering resolve to repeat as many times as necessary. The liberation of the Sanctuary itself will be proof of that resolve.”

Subaru: “But why is that? Sure, that might be the closest to an answer if there is one, but… if it’s just overcoming the Trials, what does that have to do with my resolve to cast everything else aside? I mean, there’s also a chance Emilia could just pass the Trials on her own and…”

Roswaal: “There is none.”

Finding Roswaal’s statements a bit too extreme, Subaru immediately voiced his doubts. But, Roswaal’s response was cold and cutting.

The sharpness of it daunted Subaru, while Roswaal wagged his finger,

Roswaal: “Your fleeting hopes will not come to fruition. Lady Emilia will ne~~ver overcome the Trials. That thing is too weak at heart.”

Subaru: “…That… thing?”

Roswaal: “Precisely. I’m sure part of it has to do with its upbringing and the habits it had grown accustomed to, but that thing is useless. It can’t even stand by itself, just like a weak, brittle little child. Watching the way she pushes herself out of guilt and remorse, it’s so admirable I even feel some pity.”

Hearing Roswaal speak of Emilia in a way he had never heard him before, Subaru was at a loss for words.

Courageous, tenacious, kind-hearted, eager Emilia, temporarily caught by an ill twist of fate and unable to resolve her Trials, would surely overcome it and liberate the Sanctuary with her own strength if only she was given time. Subaru never doubted this.

The only reason Subaru wanted to take the Trials in her stead was that they had no time, and that Subaru couldn't bear to see Emilia hurt.

It certainly wasn't because he had given up on her or thought her incapable of passing the Trials.

Subaru: "How could you say… that Emilia can't… then why, then why did you bring her here?!"

Roswaal: "Because of you. Because you are here, even a weak, powerless half-elf could aspire to the throne. No, she will take the throne. That is certain. Because you will remove all other paths and ensure that her desires are realized. That is the power vested in you. If Lady Emilia has any value, it is that she holds the strongest card—you, in hand."

Subaru: "I'm… the strongest, card…?"

Listening to Roswaal's dizzying statements, calling him the "strongest", that outlandish claim threw Subaru into disarray.

That was an adjective completely foreign to his powerless self. Besides, to insult Emilia as Roswaal just did was unforgivable.

Subaru: "Are you kidding?! What would you… what would you know about how hard Emilia tried, what kind of thoughts went through her head, and how much she suffered challenging the Trials?! Being forced to witness a past she didn't want to see, still, she… do you know how desperately she tried?! And yet, you…!"

Roswaal: "If it all comes to nothing, then it is only wasted effort. I'm sure you know far be~~tter than I that it all came to no~~thing. If Lady Emilia's efforts bore fruit, you would have had no reason to co~~me here.”

Subaru: “—Hic!”

Subaru’s shouted rebuttal did not make the slightest dent in Roswaal’s composure. Instead, as if doused by cold water in the heat of passion, Subaru fell utterly speechless.

In fact, Roswaal’s statements captured a portion of the truth.

As far as Subaru had seen, Emilia had never progressed beyond the first Trial. Despite challenging with everything she had, each time she was thwarted by the barricade of her past her heart was worn a little thinner.

Unable to rely on her trusted Puck as she was abraded down to her core, Emilia eventually came to mistake her dependence on Subaru for love, and broke.

Because he knew that future, Subaru couldn’t refute Roswaal out of emotion here. But, there was no way he could just quietly watch as Roswaal insulted Emilia.

Roswaal, looking down on Emilia while expecting far too much of Subaru’s Return by Death, was there some way to wipe that smug look off his face? —The moment he thought of it, Subaru shouted it out,

Subaru: “Yeah I get what you’re saying now! But you know what?! Nothing will come of your plans!”

Roswaal: “Oh? And why is…”

Subaru: “You seem to be hoping I’d take Emilia’s place and break through the Trials… but Echidna’s already revoked my qualifications! The outcomes you were hoping for won’t be coming from me! Too bad, isn’t it—!!”

Clutching his chest, Subaru screamed at Roswaal’s composed face.

It was a painful affair for Subaru himself, but what it meant for Roswaal’s plans must be simply devastating. Knowing that it’d be impossible even for Roswaal to keep calm once he learned this, Subaru was about to curl his face into a twisted smile, when,

Roswaal: "—Revoked… your qualifications?"

Hearing a mutter, desolate and feeble, it was only moments later that Subaru realized it had come from Roswaal.

Before his eyes, Roswaal's body sank into the bed, frozen rigid. Both his mismatched eyes were now wide open, staring at Subaru, while his lips faintly quivered.

His usual self-assured attitude, that detached, all-knowing air, and that incorporeal queerness—had all peeled away.

Roswaal: "What… could it mean…"

Subaru: "What could it? …It means what it means."

Called by that faltering voice, Subaru unwittingly answered in a shaken voice of his own.

Pressured by a voice that sounded nothing like the Roswaal he knew, Subaru swallowed his saliva to slightly moisten his parched throat,

Subaru: "Echidna… she disqualified me. Forget the command authority over the replicants, even stepping into the Tomb sends my head reeling. …I'm in the same boat as you now, can't go in even if I try."

Roswaal: "Why, did… no… how could this be… You, taking the Trials of the Tomb… otherwise, the Sanctuary's liberation… and her wish…"

Holding a hand to his lips, Roswaal let out this hollow mutter with a look of disbelief.

Seeing this unexpectedly intense reaction, Subaru was at a loss for words as he realized that his revelation went further than exacting revenge. Not just in this series of loops, but from the day they met, this was the first time Subaru had ever seen Roswaal panic. Just which part of his words could have shocked him to this degree?

However, Subaru only swallowed a breath, and,

Subaru: “In your Gospel… does it say that I will overcome the Trials?”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru: “I know that if things don’t follow the Gospel’s writ, you’ll be ready to give up on everything. But if you’ve decided that breaking through the Trials is my job… that won’t be happening now.”

Like how his victory over the First Trial carried over, and how the Witches seem to share his memories across Return by Deaths, the Citadel of the Witch of Greed lies beyond the rules of this world.

Even if he Returned by Death, the memories of their exchanges in the Citadel would not fade. That was why he felt saved in that place, and why he held more than a little fondness for Echidna. — And that was why, he knew.

That even if he died and returned to the Tomb, his qualifications would not be restored.

He would need Echidna’s permission to regain them, but to receive Echidna’s permission, he would need to enter the Tomb, yet to enter the Tomb, he would need the qualifications.

—In short, Subaru had completely lost any means of challenging the Trials.

Roswaal: “Is there… a way you could regain the qualifications…”

Subaru: “If there is one, you’d know better than me. If you’re saying you don’t know, then how could I know.”

While answering Roswaal’s faint whisper, internally, Subaru noticed a possibility.

Chances were, Echidna would be watching Subaru’s struggles this very moment from inside the Tomb. As if sulking after Subaru rejected her hand, she must be waiting to see what he could do by taking Satella's.

If that path winds up riddled with failures, and at last he relents and comes back crying to the Witch he had rejected, perhaps Echidna would offer him her hand once more.

—But, if he took Echidna's hand then, it would mean throwing away every word he had said to Satella, as well as every feeling his heart harbored at this moment.

He would have delivered Emilia to the optimal future in the end.

Even if it was only that, it'd have been better than scattering into a thousand pieces halfway.

Roswaal: "If you rewind the world, can you return to a time before your qualifications were revoked…?"

Subaru: "You seem to be misunderstanding something, my power isn't omnipotent. It's not like I can just return whenever I want with no price to be paid… besides, the point I go back to will be too late. If I return, it'll be after it's been revoked. I still won't be able to enter the Tomb."

Roswaal: "I, see…"

Roswaal's voice as he replied was weak, and his visage seemed to have aged all in a single moment.

Roswaal had always carried a certain youthfulness about him such that it was almost impossible to discern his age. But now, with his shoulders drooping, even that was gone.

It was the anguished expression of a man who had clung to a delusion for a long, long time, only to be thwarted by something beyond his reach.

Beneath the clown's makeup, for the first time, Subaru managed to feel that Roswaal was something of a fellow human.

But this fact did not solve anything, no matter how much Roswaal might wish otherwise.

Subaru: “I’m just as lost as you are, Roswaal. But if we work together and talk this over, I’m sure we could come up with a solution.”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru: “It might be pretty hard to get things the way your Gospel described, but the writ doesn’t have to be the end of everything. As long as it largely matches… maybe you don’t agree, but if we just find some way around it…”

Roswaal: “…not enough.”

Subaru: “—huh?”

Subaru tried to find some kind of compromise and make Roswaal concede. But, with eyes so hollow that he might as well not have heard a single word Subaru was saying, Roswaal murmured something. Inadvertently opening his mouth as he heard this, Subaru took a step forward.

What did Roswaal say just now? Did he mishear him?

And, inching closer, Roswaal’s whisper slid into his ears.

Roswaal: “—All the ways I tried to corner you, were they still not enough?”

Subaru: “What?”

Roswaal: “I don’t know the circumstances, but if Echidna went back on her decision, you and her must have had a befitting exchange. I was supposed to have steeled your resolve to challenge the Trials before such a rift could have opened between you… I didn’t succeed.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “If I had cornered you further… made you realize that if you tried to reach for everything, you will lose what's most important to you… then this wouldn't…"

Subaru: "Wait, Roswaal. Wait."

What was he trying to say? Though Subaru had the feeling that it would be something decisive and he absolutely needed to hear it, for some reason he was hesitating.

Because, if he kept listening, he would no longer be able to stand here.

He was sure of it.

Or rather, he had already suspected something along these lines for a very long time.

Yet those confounding suspicions never materialized because Subaru was stuck on the idea that Roswaal would have no reason to do this, as well as the thin but present trust that he had in him.

But the words Roswaal was about to say would sever that once and for all.

Before this happens, he must say something. But no matter how hard he searched inside him, Subaru could not find the words, while time passed on,

Roswaal: "Summoning you and Emilia to the Sanctuary, knowing Garfiel's disposition…"

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: "Forcing Lady Emilia to challenge the Trials, knowing its horrors, so that her wounds would spur you to action…"

Subaru: "Wait, please wait. Wa—"

And—

Roswaal: "Showing you that you will inevitably lose those you cherish in a place beyond your reach, and by doing so, perfect you… all of that, all of that was still not enough.”

—With this, Roswaal had just confessed to pulling the trigger on the tragedies in the Mansion.

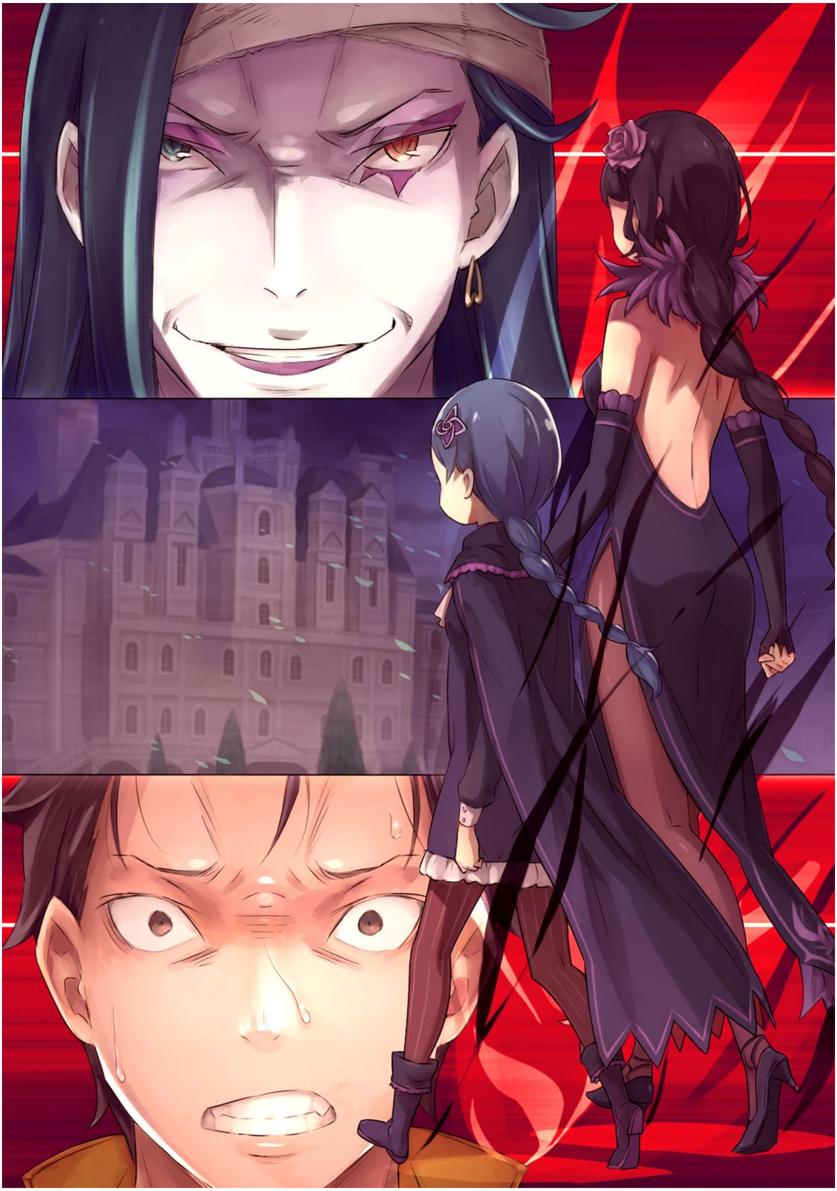

Chapter 84:
Denied x Denied x Denied

1

—Crumbling, crumbling, the ground was crumbling beneath his feet.

Losing sight of the footing that by all means should be there, Subaru felt like he was falling from someplace high.

In reality, Subaru was only standing there frozen in the middle of the room, staring with wide-open eyes.

The fact that he nevertheless felt this was simply owing to the shock of Roswaal's confession.

Subaru: "A place… beyond my reach…?"

Roswaal: "You already have the answer, don't you? When two important things are simultaneously faced with peril, one would be forced to choose. Choose which one is more important, and which to cast aside. Only this way, by relinquishing everything except the one most precious to you, will you become the perfect being that you were chosen to be."

Subaru: "What kind of bullshit is that?!! The perfect being?! All I see is a stupid, wound-ridden asshole stuck alone in the middle of a wind-swept wasteland!"

Roswaal: "And yet you may still stow the one most precious to you in a place abound in lusciousness, where its purity and beauty is untouched. Compared to your own injuries, this is more important, isn't it?"

Roswaal, somewhat regaining his composure, asked this question, but Subaru did not reply.

It was not that he was persuaded, nor at a loss as to what to say.

But simply that his erupting emotions were so great in volume that they could no longer be formed into words.

—There was never a time he had felt so overwhelmed beyond speech.

Was the tragedy at the Mansion just the result of this senseless obedience to this incomprehensible logic and this arbitrarily prophesying Gospel?

Frederica, Petra, and Beatrice, did they die for such a selfish reason?

Perfecting Subaru's existence—was it for such a ludicrous goal that those girls lost their lives, betrayed by the master they trusted?

Subaru: "Roswaal… are you really… actually… insane…?"

Roswaal: "…So it would seem. I have been for a long time. Ever since four hundred years ago when I was enchanted by those eyes, I have always been insane."

Subaru: "Four, hundre…d?"

Unable to swallow down the words that had just been thrown at him, Subaru only parroted it back at Roswaal with his face contorted by confusion.

Again, it was four hundred years ago—but it was far too unnatural to hear it from Roswaal's lips. He couldn't possibly know what happened four hundred years ago. Yet, the way he said it almost sounded as if he had existed all the way from four hundred years ago until now—

Roswaal: "Natsuki Subaru."

While Subaru's eyes wavered in bewilderment, a nearby voice called to him.

Looking towards it, it was Roswaal, who had stood up from his bed. Seeing his tall figure standing within reach of his exhaled breaths made Subaru step back with a gasp—but he was caught by his collar, unable to escape. Being pulled closer so that their foreheads were touching,

Roswaal: “You have judged me insane. Which I wholeheartedly agree. Without a doubt, I am insane. I am without sanity. Since a very long time ago, my heart was claimed from me.”

Subaru: “Ah, hha…”

Roswaal: “But why aren’t yo~~u? You should be like me, no, even more insane than me. Without it, you do not stand a chance. Because the place you strive for is far higher than mine. For this lonely road that no one can ever understand, what you need is not a human heart. But one of strong, unfailing steel—am I wrong?”

Subaru: “Aa, gh…st, stop it!”

One by one the words seeped into his mind as Roswaal’s voice drew him towards the depths of the abyss. Subaru shook his head, trying to dispel that sensation, shoving Roswaal’s chest away.

Jabbing a finger at his lanky body as he stepped back, unable to hide the shaking of his voice, Subaru bluffed,

Subaru: “Whatever happens, no matter what, your plans had already gone down the drain the moment I lost my qualifications! Those traps you laid for the Mansion, all of it’s just pointless, meaningless sacrifice! If you understand that, then put a stop to this stupidity now!”

Roswaal: “I refuse. —Seeing your insufficient resolve, I am all the more convinced of its necessity. There is no need for you to be human. I will corner you, wound you, force you to become so dependent on Lady Emilia that you shed and lose your humanity. At the same time, I will make sure that Lady Emilia is plunged into hopeless love and dependence for your very existence. With you two engulfed by that mutual reliance, I shall choose the course for your drowning selves. That is the one and only way that I shall realize my goal.”

Subaru: “Wh…at’s the point in any of that…?! No matter how much you whittle me down that's not going to get my qualifications back! You can break every bone trying to do it and you'll still have nothing to show for it!"

Roswaal: "You should know best whether that is what you truly believe."

Subaru's screams were met by Roswaal's frozen voice.

The single, heavy thud in his chest was only because he grasped the meaning of Roswaal's words. It's quite simple, really.

Just as he figured—if he truly, truly repented and asked for Echidna's help, she would offer him her hand again. If he was ever genuinely, hopelessly lost and was content with merely moving forward, this option would still be available to him.

And for that,

Roswaal: "If it means having you return to her, Echidna will be happy to reinstate your qualifications. Considering how she is, that is only natural. I still know at least that much."

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: "Don't be conceited, Natsuki Subaru. You are not the o~~nly one who understands Echidna."

Spoken in a tone completely unlike Roswaal, it was filled to the brim with hatred and malice.

Struck by the intensity of its loathing, Subaru's body froze. And it was only when he digested the meaning of those words that Subaru realized what Roswaal's goal may be.

Subaru: "The reason you're so obsessed with liberating the Sanctuary is… because that's Echidna's wish?"

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "She designed it so that the Tomb's Trials would lead to the liberation of the Sanctuary… and completing this would serve as some kind of offering to her memory, is that what you feel?"

Roswaal: "…In life, Echidna had always wondered how this place would meet its end after her death. To that end, she left the Tomb's mechanisms behind, and in there, she housed her soul. But for all of four hundred years, the ending she desired has not visited this place."

In the four hundred years since the Sanctuary's Barrier was erected, not once had it been broken.

Echidna's wish of witnessing its end never came to pass. Could Roswaal's desire be showing Echidna that end so as to give her soul repose?

The idea itself wasn't beyond Subaru's understanding. While he never believed in ghosts back in his old world, in this world, Subaru had interacted with Echidna and the other Witches.

It did occur to him during the time he spent with them that if they had left regrets in this world, perhaps he would have liked to help fulfill them, if only out of gratitude.

But to live entirely for that purpose while disregarding the lives of everyone else would be preposterous.

Subaru: "That's not the same thing at all. Roswaal, we can find other ways to give Echidna's soul repose. I promise, I will make sure of it. —So call off the attack on the Mansion."

Roswaal: "I refuse. I will fulfill my desires and Echidna's wish. I will do what is necessary. I will ruin all those I need to, I will wound you, and I will bloody my hands if need be."

Subaru: "Stop dragging other people into your own self-satisfaction! If there's something you want to tell her, pull her out and tell her yourself! Instead of making sacrifices of someone trying to create a future, some child who still has her future, and some girl who's shutting herself in because she's stopped believing in the future!"

There was no need for Frederica, Petra, and Beatrice to be sacrificed for this plan.

And there was no way he could accept Roswaal's self-indulgent reasoning, especially when it completely disregarded the lives of those girls and was designed only to wound Subaru.

Roswaal: "I refuse. The only offer I will hear is "I will do as Roswaal intended". All else I will reject. Their sacrifice is necessary."

Subaru: "Fuck off. I'll have no problem exposing everything that you're planning and all the consequences that'll entail."

Roswaal: "Or rather, you ought to think before you act. What would be the point of doing such a thing? Making my misdeeds public will not change a single thing about the situation the Sanctuary is wrapped up in. Lady Emilia will lose her backer for the Royal Selection, and the relationship between the residents and the refugees will only deteriorate. How do you think Lady Emilia will do in the Trials with a malice-laden bomb at her back? How many times have you already seen Lady Emilia crumble?"

Subaru: "Wh-When Garfiel learns that Frederica… that his sister is to be sacrificed in your plan, there's no way he'll just…"

Roswaal: "If that's where you're placing your hopes, then you are truly blind. Garfiel will never rush out of the Sanctuary to Frederica's aid. Just the phantom threat of what might happen to the Sanctuary while he is away will paralyze him with fear: such is the pathetic, foolish existence that is Garfiel. Narrow-sighted, stubborn, relying on nothing but brute strength. Even with that half-witted head, he could see what could befall the Sanctuary without him. And so, you can never use him to your advantage. — Because that child is far too desperately concerned with protecting the weak and brittle in this world."

A desperate child, a description that jabbed at Subaru's chest.

It was the same evaluation the Witches had given to the self-sacrificing Subaru at the tea party. It would seem that Roswaal felt the same about Garfiel.

Unaware of this, or perhaps knowing full-well, Garfiel nevertheless wholeheartedly persevered for his goals.

Roswaal: “Garfiel will not side with you. And I have no intention of halting my plans. All you need to do is let your heart be withered, polished, and perfected. Nothing else is necessary. Accept this, Natsuki Subaru. —Accept that the deaths of anyone besides Lady Emilia mean nothing.”

Subaru: “Shut up! I! I’ll never become like that! I’ll never… I’ll never think like you, I’ll never be like you! That’s just not how humans think!”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru: “I’m human. No matter what kind of random, incomprehensible power I’m given, no matter how much pain and suffering I endure, it’ll never change that. —I’m human. I’ll always be human.”

Declaring this to the silent Roswaal, Subaru backed off from his towering body. A flicker of complicated emotion briefly flashed across Roswaal’s solemn expression, but he immediately shrugged.

Roswaal: “We~~ll, no matter. So long as you have infinite chances, it is all the same to me. This time, I will give up on trying to convince you fo~~r now. I’ll be leaving it to the next me.”

Subaru: “It didn’t work this time… same with the next time and the time after that, I’ll never accept your proposals. I will never become like you.”

Roswaal: “Leave the room now. This life no longer has any meaning to me.”

Returning to his bed and withdrawing into his sheets, Roswaal left Subaru with these words and drew his attention away. He closed his eyes as if to sleep, literally shutting off any further conversation.

Seeing this, Subaru opened his mouth, but no words came.

Subaru: “…”

Instead, without breaking the silence, he merely left the room, feeling defeated.

2

Coming out of Roswaal's residence, Subaru wandered beneath the moonlight.

Subaru: "—What do I do?"

Muttering a seemingly impenetrable question, voicing the words that had been repeating over and over in his mind, he was answered by only an echoless silence.

His question reached no one, merely disappearing into the void leaving a lingering emptiness in his throat.

In every sense of the word, he was stuck.

He would have neither Roswaal nor Echidna's help now.

Collaborating with Echidna was now physically impossible, and collaborating with Roswaal was now sentimentally impossible.

Subaru had conceived of this possibility.

That perhaps Roswaal was Elsa's employer and the attack on the Mansion was in order to spur Emilia—or rather, Subaru, towards the Trials.

It was almost as if Elsa knew exactly when Subaru would arrive at the Mansion. And then there was the death of the possible informer, Frederica, combined with Elsa's knowledge of the hidden passage and the Forbidden Library. All things considered, the only remaining suspects were Ram and Roswaal.

However, Ram's utter devotion to Roswaal would give her no reason to do anything against Roswaal's interests, so that left only Roswaal. —Yet, Subaru had always kept this possibility out of his mind, not because he didn't want it to be true, but because he thought it couldn't be.

Subaru: "If Roswaal is Elsa's employer, then…"

When Emilia's insignia was stolen the very day Subaru was summoned to this world, was that also on Roswaal's instructions?

If the Gospel's texts had foretold of Subaru's existence, of the existence of the Authority of Return by Death, and of the fact that it would prove indispensable to Emilia's victory, then the upheavals of that day would all have been necessary to procure Subaru as an ally.

His frantic efforts that day, the three deaths he endured to save Emilia, and Emilia's smile when he asked her for her name, was all that simply playing into Roswaal's hands?

Subaru: "If everything was following this prophecy… then Rem's existence being stolen, the Sanctuary being entrapped… all of it was according to someone's plan…?"

In that case, all of Subaru's desperate struggles would have been nothing more than dancing to the strings that someone else was pulling.

Was abandoning everything besides Emilia really the only way to proceed? Now that all roads were closed, was there truly no other choice?

Subaru: "What am I, stupid? …No, I am being stupid. This is exactly the kind of brainless thinking that made Roswaal… if I let the same thing happen to me, I…"

The Gospel is not absolute. No one understood this more than Subaru, who had personally overwritten the prophecies in Petelgeuse's Gospel.

The future-instructing Gospel is not all-powerful. In fact, every time something deviated from the writ, Roswaal gave up on the world and placed his hopes on the next—

Subaru: "—huh?"

He felt like he hit on something strange just now.

While speculating on Roswaal's Gospel and carefully going over the events in sequence, Subaru sensed that something was unmistakably amiss. But he just couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Subaru: "What is it… what… something's off. But, what is it…?!"

As if being given an impossible riddle, Subaru searched through the mist for some sliver of light.

Roswaal's Gospel. Acting in accordance to the writ. Beatrice' Gospel. The Witch Cult's Gospel. The cessation of new prophecies following the death of its owner. Blank pages. Outcomes following the prophecy. Outcomes that don't follow the prophecy—this ongoing present that is currently deviating from the writ.

Subaru: "Still nothing. —It's one step away, but I just can't reach it…"

Though he felt he was holding all the pieces of the puzzle, they would always scatter before he could form them into any semblance of an image. But it was a tug that he simply couldn't ignore.

Every time he was stuck like this, it was by piecing together smaller clues into an answer that he found the way out.

This time is no different. If he could just assemble the fragments one by one—

???: "—Subaru?"

Subaru: "Mn?"

The call of his name pulled Subaru's consciousness out of the sea of thoughts.

Breaking out of the water's surface, he found himself standing in the darkness under the pouring moonlight, and saw Emilia gazing at him with her shimmering silver hair swaying.

Unable to hide his surprise at this unexpected encounter and the pain that stabbed at his chest, Subaru raised his hand, and,

Subaru: "Oh, Emilia…tan. What're you doing out here? It's pretty late, you know?"

Emilia: "But that's the same for you too, Subaru. If you stay up too late, you won't grow any taller."

Subaru: "I… think I'm about finished with puberty, so I'm not super worried about that…"

Emilia came in with a topic that was slightly beside the point as usual. Regaining some of his calmness thanks to her reply, Subaru naturally slid himself to Emilia's side.

They were in the middle of the Sanctuary, in something of an open plaza. Leaning herself against the mossy stone of a dried-out fountain, Emilia's silver hair drifted in the night wind as she looked to Subaru beside her.

Gazing into the charm of her melancholy, amethyst eyes sent a sweet, aching pulse into his weakened heart.

Emilia: "I couldn't fall asleep, so I kind of came out for a walk… what about you, Subaru?"

Subaru: "…Nah, it's the same for me. I'm the kinda guy who can't sleep if you swap out my pillow, and also Otto snores surprisingly loud."

Emilia: "I'm reeeaally surprised you're dainty about those kinds of things, Subaru."

Emilia gave a quiet laugh, putting her hand to her lips. Watching her from the side, Subaru reflected that this was the first time he had reunited with Emilia since Returning by Death tonight.

In places unconnected to Subaru, people's actions generally follow the same path across the loops. Which means, on the night of challenging the First Trial, Emilia would've always come out here for a walk, unable to sleep.

Being invited to the tea party, being threatened by Garfiel's violence, discovering Ryuzu' true identity, and learning of Roswaal's dark machinations—while Subaru was busy with all of that, Emilia was changing as well.

Emilia: “…You seem down, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Mn, I guess. I’m not, though.”

Emilia: “Hmm, liar. If you’re the usual Subaru, you’d be more… kooky?”

Subaru: “It’s been a while since I heard anyone say “kooky”…”

It’s been a while since they’ve had this kind of exchange, Subaru thought as his cheek softened with relief. “See?”, Emilia pointed at Subaru’s cheeks, smiling,

Emilia: “There, you smiled. You always try to smile when you’re in front of me, Subaru, but you couldn’t do it just now.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Did something painful…happen? If you’re worried about something… if you want to tell me, I’ll listen?”

Having the softening of his once-tense cheeks pointed out and having those words of concern flung at him, Subaru desperately tried to contain the heat building beneath his eyelids.

Her gentle, compassionate words permeated throughout his body. Surrounded on all sides, helpless and stuck, when even the last ray of hope is cut, he almost wanted to cling onto that beloved, tenderly-offered hand.

This wavering conviction, unable to follow through with even the resolve he had only just made, was both pathetic and frustrating.

Subaru: “It’s… my own problem. I can’t put that burden on you.”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “Compared to me, you have a lot more on your hands, right? The way you were after the Trial… are you really alright now?”

Emilia: “Mn, I got you worried. That was unsightly of me, wasn’t it?

Sorry. …I think I ran into a problem I just wasn't mentally ready for at all."

Subaru looked away, trying to change the topic, while Emilia managed a powerless smile in reply.

She leaned back into the fountain behind her, looking up at the night sky as if to distract herself.

Emilia: "Really… I wasn't prepared at all. I've gotten this far by running away from so many things that I needed to face, but…"

Subaru: "I don't see how that's a bad thing… What's so wrong with running away from things that you don't like? Does facing unpleasant things all the time mean that you'll beat them eventually? And who says you have to beat them? If you run away and find a different path, and then decide to take that path instead… is that really something people have to fault you for?"

Emilia: "Subaru…?"

Watching all those words spill from Subaru's tongue as he rambled, Emilia furrowed her brows. But without noticing her confusion, Subaru only kept going,

Subaru: "Echidna, who put up the Trials, Roswaal who knowingly lured us here, and Garfiel who keeps getting in the way, everyone's just doing it for themselves. You're free to do whatever the hell you want but why drag us into it? And then you criticize us for not living up to your expectations… the hell do you want from us?!"

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "My head's about to explode and I'm at my wit's end. And yet and yet and yet and yet more problems just keep piling up… and to top it all off, it's supposed to be all my fault? Don't make me laugh. Don't make me laugh. Don't—"

Just as he was growing dizzy from the surging emotions and inexplicable rage—

—Soft palms wrapped around the back of his head, as he felt his body being pulled downwards. Feeling his head plunging into the softness before him, Subaru inadvertently stopped breathing.

A hot, yet tender touch enveloped Subaru's face.

Through its warmth, he heard a heartbeat, while his blanked-out consciousness began to realize what was happening—realize that he was being cradled against Emilia's breasts.

Subaru: "Aa, aah—?"

Emilia: "Take it slow. Quietly now. Take it slowly, and listen to the sound of my heart."

Subaru: "—Nn."

Emilia: "Leave yourself to the steady rhythm, and quietly breathe in, and out… and repeat. Once you're calm, give me a pat on the back. Until then, we can just stay like this."

His spine tingling with pleasure at the sound of the whisper in his ear, Subaru's breathing accelerated. The shock of his unhinged emotions was blown away, replaced by the torment of all the blood in his body boiling.

How did it become like this? He was listening to the quiet beating of Emilia's heart, yet his own was about to jump out of his chest.

But even his panicked heartbeat was naturally unravelling alongside Emilia's breathing as her palms softly caressed the back of his head. Obeying her whispers, he took a deep breath, exhaled, and repeated until his lungs and his heart returned to normal.

Quietly, he tapped Emilia's back. Her hands on his head moved away at this signal, while Subaru stood up, withstanding his reluctance to part,

Emilia: "Calmed down now?"

Subaru: "…Somewhat."

Facing her gleaming amethyst eyes, Subaru spilled a small sigh.

Hearing his reply, with “I’m glad”, a relieved smile rose on Emilia’s face. Trying his best not to blush from embarrassment, Subaru gave a little shake of his head,

Subaru: “Sorry I lost it there… I really didn’t want to trouble you like this.”

Emilia: “I don’t feel troubled at all.”

Subaru: “But, you must be going through a lot more than I am… there’s no question about that. …If I could, I should be saving you from all this… that’s what I thought.”

Emilia: “Subaru…”

He had always shown off his cool side in front of Emilia.

But the truth is, he was just an embarrassing, weak, conceited, useless, boastful try-hard who wanted to be at her side.

Subaru: “Nothing ever goes right… in fact I… spoke with Roswaal just now. About whether there’s a way to free the Sanctuary without the Trials.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Subaru: “Truth is, I thought it’d be best if I took the Trials in your place… but now, I don’t think I can anymore. So I thought I’d at least find the least painful shortcut, but even that’s not working out. Just… what do I do… I’m sorry I’m so useless…”

Emilia: “Subaru—”

Subaru hung his head. Despite receiving so many chances to repeat through Return by Death, he still failed to find a single solution. Just how pathetic is that?

If he had done just a little better, he could’ve prevented those tragic worlds he saw in the Second Trial from ever coming to be.

And here too, there must be something he could do about this miserable situation—

Subaru: “But, I will find a way. I will make sure you won’t have to get hurt or suffer anymore. So please, trust me…”

Emilia: “…Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Emilia looked up at Subaru with her eyes drenched in tears.

Gazing back at those teary eyes, within his wavering heart, Subaru steeled his resolve to ensure that its most integral part would never falter.

He will defend Emilia, overcome the Sanctuary, save the Mansion, and recover everything.

Though there is not the faintest visible sliver of hope in the road ahead, surely, he—

Emilia: “I’m happy you feel this way. I truly am. —But, I cannot accept this kindness.”

Yet, the resolve he had just supposedly steeled was, by the lips of that girl with unyielding conviction in her eyes, flat-out rejected.

Chapter 85:
Using Words, Using Feelings, Using Fists

1

Subaru: “—Huh?”

For a moment, unable to understand what he had just been told, Subaru only let out an astonished groan.

His eyes widened and his mouth gaped open, while Emilia watched him as she formed her thoughts into words.

Emilia: “I’m happy that you feel this way about me, say these things to me, and do all these things for me. It makes me feel so safe, and I rely on you so, so much. …But I can’t let you search for escape routes for me.”

Subaru: “N-No it’s… it’s not such a one-sided issue!”

Emilia: “I’m the one who decided to take this challenge. There is somewhere I need to go, a door I need to pass through to get there, and right now, I need to do my best to pass through it. I don’t want to make any excuses.”

Subaru tightened his lips as he was struck by Emilia’s determined eyes.

Her resolute visage was overflowing with strong-willed radiance. It was not the face of a weak little girl who would stop still in her tracks without Subaru there to pull her along.

But, why? With his heart buried in questions, Subaru shook his head.

Subaru: “Emilia, I think your resolve is amazing. But the Trial is not suited for you. To go in there with no plan when the chances of winning are so… slim, I don’t think it’s noble or anything.”

Emilia: “…The chances do feel slim, I guess.”

Subaru: "…"

Emilia wryly smiled at Subaru's matter-of-fact statement. The fact that her eyebrows drooped a little was only because she recognized that those were Subaru's honest thoughts.

And Subaru himself felt like a horribly deficient human being for not immediately finding the right words to comfort her.

Subaru: "Can we at least wait until I find some clues? If I can just have some time, I… can make the whole thing easier for you. Then you won't have to worry about…"

Emilia: "No, you can't, Subaru. Somehow, I just know. —That there are no shortcuts or back alleys to get through the Tomb's Trials."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "It's strange. But I just know it. Even with time, unless I steadily prepare myself for the challenge, the result will always be the same. I know that."

Subaru: "Aa…"

He had no words to refute her.

Though he didn't know the exact details behind the Trials, he did agree with Emilia about these feelings.

Repeatedly challenging the Trial will not soften or intensify its contents nor its nature. The same conditions and the same contents will be there to welcome its challenger. Keeping its own properties constant, only changes in the challenger's heart would result in different outcomes—as would be just to Echidna's tastes.

Seeing right through his attempts to console her, Emilia's understanding of the Trials was more than Subaru had imagined.

Yet even so, just as Subaru frantically tried to connect his words,

Emilia: "Say, Subaru. —Why do you want to help me?"

Subaru: “…”

It was a question that carried tremendous significance the last time it was asked.

How desperately had Subaru struggled in order to answer her? How much hardship had he overcome just to tell her?

And that was why, being asked the same question now, Subaru could answer without the slightest hesitation.

Subaru: “I want to help you… because I love you. —Because I love everything about you.”

Emilia: “—Mn. Yes, I know. Subaru, you love me.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “And it makes me reeaally happy that you do. It makes me feel reeaally safe. And makes me want to reeaally depend on you. And just having you watch me like this, I feel like I can reeaally try my hardest.”

Holding her hands to her chest, her cheeks slightly blushing, Emilia closed her eyes.

As if instilled with all of her emotions at once, “And so”, she continued,

Emilia: “Don’t get stuck thinking that you have to do something. I can do my best just by having you watch me. If you want to do something, if you’ll indulge my selfishness, then I want you to stay by my side. And be there behind me to support me.”

Subaru: “Emilia…”

Emilia: “With your hand on my back when I’m faltering, I know I can stand back up again. And when I’m wavering, I want you at my side, Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Thank you… for walking ahead of me, moving away the stones, smoothing out the path, cutting away the branches, and then guiding me by the hand. But, I think, if you always do that for me, I’ll just be a burden to you. While I’ll be all fudged up inside.”

Subaru: “Who says, “fudged”… anym…”

He tried to say his usual line, but the words wouldn’t come.

Subaru could no longer restrain the emotions swelling inside his chest. Just what is that indescribable, incomprehensible sensation? So as not to lose himself in that undeniable emotion, Subaru gritted his teeth as he continued facing Emilia.

Emilia: “I’ve only ever taken, and taken, and taken from you… so, this time, I want to do something different. It bothers me that every time I fail I’m making you and everyone else worry… to make sure that doesn’t happen again, I’ll try my best to overcome it as soon as possible.”

In front of Subaru, who had fallen speechless, a subtle, courageous smile rose on Emilia’s face.

Emilia: “So please stay by my side, and watch over me as I try my best. —That’s all I ask of you, Subaru.”

2

Subaru: “—Hic!!”

Slicing through the wind, straining his legs as he ran, his heart would not stop pounding.

Every perilous footfall sprinting down that slope sent branches cutting painfully across his cheeks, and, tripping countless times, he nevertheless continued frantically running.

Subaru: “—!!”

Expelling a soundless shriek, stretching his throat to the point of tearing, he gazed up into the night through the gaps between the obscuring foliage, into the cloudless sky, into the pale, radiant moon amid the shimmering stars, and screamed.

—As if to spew out all the foolish foolishness inside him, and to empty himself of everything.

—Emilia’s last, resolute smile remained seared into the back of his eyes.

That smile, her proclaimed resolve, and his own mistaken conceit. He finally understood that sweltering impulse scorching the insides of his chest.

And because he understood it, he could not bear to stay another second. Instead, after parting from Emilia, Subaru rushed into the forest, running aimlessly like an animal.

Not permitting him to stand still, not allowing him to escape into sleep, that emotion which would burst into flames just at the thought of Emilia—that emotion was called “Shame”.

Shame dominated Subaru’s entirety, forbidding him to stop.

Subaru: “I…I…!”

Overwhelming idiot. Truly, truly, a hopeless, irredeemable idiot.

When Roswaal disparaged Emilia and called her a “thing”, Subaru had flown into a rage. He bared his teeth, screaming, proclaiming that he would not allow Roswaal to insult her.

But then, when he met Emilia right after, when he told her everything that he wanted to do for her, and was rejected, that was when he realized it:

—The one most guilty of doubting Emilia’s resolve, determination, and strength was Subaru himself.

Thinking that he had to protect her, not wanting her to feel sadness or pain—

With that as his excuse, he had racked his brain trying to keep Emilia from any hardship. Challenging the Trials in her stead, then seeking shortcuts when that failed, and when even that was hopeless—worst case, if he could just do something about the Great Rabbits responsible for the time-limit on the Sanctuary: All along, Subaru had occupied his mind trying to find a way to solve everything without Emilia having to take the Trials.

But while Subaru was obsessed with this self-satisfied desire to protect her and devising plans to shelter her, Emilia was steeling her resolve and determination in those nights she spent alone, choosing not to flee, but to face the Trials head on.

All she wanted was for Subaru to support her in that resolve.

Yet, it was none other than Natsuki Subaru who dismissed her from the start.

Subaru: "—!"

The instant he realized it, that unbearable feeling of shame pounced at Subaru's head.

Giving Emilia some unconvincing reply when she needed his response, he gave the worried girl a wave and left, practically fleeing. Then, his legs carried him into the forest, where he was now.

In the Capital, it was with the same selfish conceit that Subaru had wounded Emilia.

Paying no mind to Emilia's considerations or resolve, thinking only of his new-found Authority, Subaru gave her no explanation for his selfish behavior and allowed it to open the rift between them.

It was because that happened, and because he confirmed his feelings for her and how he was going to express it, that Subaru was able to stand here now.

—But he was wrong yet again.

Taking on wounds in Emilia's place, shouldering the burdens in Emilia's stead, clearing the path for Emilia's sake.

Even if he boasted of it to Emilia, he never showed it off to anyone else. At least, it seemed to be an improvement compared to what it was before—but in reality, nothing had changed at all.

He had just gotten better at hiding his wounds.

He had just muted the arrogant self-aggrandizement flaunting his injuries.

But he was still imposing his selfishness on Emilia, screaming that he was right.

Subaru: “I… I…gh.”

Out of breath and panting as he ran, when he looked up again, a thick branch struck him on the forehead. Bending backwards in pain, he felt his footing fall away into empty space.

Collapsing sideways, tumbling over the dirt and leaf covered surface, Subaru came to lie sprawled out over the ground.

With the frigid soil that would suck all the warmth from his body at his back, drawing ragged breaths, Subaru laid there gazing straight above. Through the gaps between the trees, he could glimpse the night’s sky.

In this world without street lights, in the prickling, clean air, the stars were brilliantly shining. Under the full expanse of that starry sky, surrounded by constellations he did not know, Subaru felt himself dissolve into a vortex of his own smallness, of the uncertainty of his future, of his tangible dread, and of his disheveled emotions.

Struck by a sudden exhaustion, he could no longer keep himself conscious.

This tumultuous time left not only his body weighed down by fatigue, but also his mind, encumbered by the countless travails, steadily drawing him into darkness.

Return by Death. The Witches’ tea party. Roswaal’s intentions. His conceited self, and Emilia, who had resolved to stand up on her own.

Engrossed in those thoughts, just what would Subaru have to—

3

???: “Hell, y’look like shit.”

The first things Subaru sensed as he woke were the skin-piercing cold and the sound of the voice addressing him.

His eyelids shuddered in the frigid sunlight as he grimaced while opening his eyes. Unwittingly looking directly into the sun that was peeking through the trees, his eyes teared up as he tried to right himself,

Subaru: “Gh, aw, hurt…s.”

Hearing the sound of his stiff joints creaking, Subaru groaned in pain.

The coldness of the soil and air as he laid on the solid ground had stiffened his body, and every movement of his joints was protested by dull pain.

???: “Not sure what you’re tryin’ to pull here, but sleepin’ in a place without a roof ain’t what I’d recommend. “When there’s a roof n’ a floor, a Gauran gets by” they say.”

Subaru: “What’s a Gauran… ugh, nevermind.”

Shaking his head, Subaru looked up at the source of the rowdy voice—Garfiel, clicking his fangs and looking down at Subaru on the ground.

Just then, Subaru’s sobering consciousness remembered what put him in this situation in the first place.

Subaru: “Ri… ght… I fell asleep like this last night…”

Garfiel: “I smelled ya in th’forest on my mornin’ routine and came t’see what’s goin’ on. Layin’ there sprawled out like that, thought someone beat me to it and killed ya overnight."

Subaru: "As the primary suspect, if you didn't do it, I doubt anyone else would've. …What time is it, anyway?"

Holding his hand to his forehead, Subaru shook his heavy head and asked. At this, Garfiel snorted with a "Hah", and,

Garfiel: "No need t'hurry, it's still before breakfast time. Aside from th'early-risin' gramps and grannies, you'n me are th'only ones up."

Subaru: "So no one's missed me yet, then. …It'll be trouble if I don't get back to the Cathedral befor… or, right away, actually…"

If Subaru never returned overnight, Otto, who got back before him, might suspect that something was amiss. Even if that wasn't a problem in itself, Subaru would still prefer to avoid any anxiety spreading among the Earlham refugees. With the mountains of problems as it is, to cause any further discord because of his own indiscretion would be unforgivable.

Garfiel: "…Yer expression's different from last night."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Using a nearby tree as support to stand himself up, Subaru gave his neck a turn when he heard Garfiel address him. Looking back, he saw Garfiel violently scratching at his short, golden hair.

Garfiel: "Yesterday I couldn't tell if yer self-possessed or not, but now it's like… yer face looks fuckin' refreshed or somethin'."

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel: "Tch, that ain't it either. Can't fuckin' say it right… oy, th'fuck you laughin' at?"

Subaru: "Kh, haha…"

Hearing Garfiel point this out, Subaru touched his hands to his cheeks. Feeling that the corner of his lips had somewhat slackened, a trembling laugh spilled out of the back of his throat.

At first a low, stifled noise, it grew gradually louder.

Subaru: “Hah, hahaha! I look refreshed?! Really, is that what I look like?”

Garfiel: “Yeah, what? Th’hell’s so funny…”

Subaru: “You got it backwards, Garfiel. Just, totally, backwards.”

Garfiel: “Hah?”

Pressing back the urge to laugh, Subaru jabbed out his finger toward Garfiel.

And,

Subaru: “I’m not refreshed at all. My insides are creaking and pounding, and honestly, right now, I feel like I could burst apart at any second. Everything I’ve tried to do has been invalidated, everything I’ve struggled for has backfired… and I seriously don’t know what to do now.”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “Then, when I realized I was truly stuck, I actually feel like laughing. If everything I tried to do was pointless… then I’m right back where I started, aren’t I.”

Muttering powerlessly, Subaru’s shoulders drooped.

If he had been mistaken from the very start, then every single thought he had since then would be faulty.

With the deadline steadily approaching, only now did he belatedly realize that he had been using the wrong equations. And what’s worse, was that those were the kind of problems that no one could give him the solutions to.

Garfiel scrunched up his nose, not sure what to say to the dejected Subaru. And knowing that Garfiel wouldn’t give him any straight answers even if he asked, all Subaru felt in return was resentment.

And so, an awkward silence fell between them—until,

????: “—How about I tell you what you should do?”

Subaru: “—!”

Subaru quickly turned to the voice coming from above, but Garfiel didn’t seem the least surprised as he looked towards the same direction, probably because he had already sensed its presence.

On the other end of their gazes, weaving through the gaps between the trees, it was,

Subaru: “…Otto?”

Otto: “Mhm, good morning. Yep, it’s me.”

Accompanied by the sound of twigs snapping under his feet, Otto wore a somewhat counterfeit smile as he approached. While his sudden appearance startled Subaru, Garfiel only clicked his tongue.

Garfiel: “Just sayin’, I only just found him too. Not like I forgot all ‘bout ya t’come chattin’ with him instead.”

Otto: “I wasn’t worrying about anything like that. Just glad we found Mr. Natsuki safe. —Anyway, mind if I make a request?”

Garfiel: “…Spit it out.”

Otto: “Might I have a minute with Mr. Natsuki alone? There’s something I’d like to discuss with him.”

In front of the still-disoriented Subaru, Otto and Garfiel carried on their exchange with a knowing air between them. Gritting his teeth at Otto’s request, Garfiel glanced over at Subaru,

Garfiel: “Just don’t try anythin’ funny.”

And with that, he left them.

Treading over the grass, and out of the forest, Garfiel headed back towards the Sanctuary. Watching him as he left, Subaru wetted his lips with his tongue,

Subaru: “Sounds like you got on Garfiel’s good side somewhere when I wasn’t looking.”

Otto: “That’s because I wasn’t just doing nothing while you’re off on your little adventures, Mr. Natsuki. There’s been a deepening of understanding between the refugees and the people living here, and… well, none of that really matters right now.”

Halfway through candidly answering Subaru’s question, Otto suddenly dismissed the topic with a wave of his hand and then proceeded to lock his gaze onto Subaru. Or rather, it was far too intense to be a gaze. Its intensity was clearly closer to a glare.

Subaru: “Well, what…”

Thoroughly unsettled by that stare, Subaru only managed a weak mumble. Hearing it, Otto let out a small sigh,

Otto: “While it was only bits and pieces, I still heard what you said. Mr. Natsuki, it sounds like you’re being cornered… by all sorts of things.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “Naturally, I wouldn’t know the details, being kept out of the loop and all. But you must be at your limits, aren’t you? Otherwise we wouldn’t hear you blabbering about “What do I do now”“

Subaru: “So then, what do I do? …You said you could tell me.”

Listening to Otto’s sardonic remarks, Subaru brought up what Otto had said when he first cut into the conversation.

Surely, that was what he said when he broke into the silence between Subaru and Garfiel. Just what could he have meant when he said that?

Subaru: “You said… you could tell me what I should do…”

Otto: “Yeah, I know. It’s very simple really.”

Subaru: “Simp…le.”

Otto: “You want to know what it is?”

That manner of speaking was really getting on his nerves.

After all he has agonized, winding up in this wretched state, here, what this person was saying was just plain pissing him off.

Subaru: “O-Of course I want to know! Quit joking around! If there’s something you know, then…”

Otto: “Alright, then prepare yourself.”

Subaru: “P-Prepare…?”

Otto: “Yes. First take a long, deep breath…”

Holding out his hands, Otto motioned for Subaru to take a breath. Though he was unsure what Otto was getting at, Subaru nonetheless followed the instruction and adjusted his breathing, closing his eyes and letting his lungs expand—

Subaru: “—?!”

The next instant, a sharp impact whacked him across the face, sending him flopping to the ground.

Failing to catch himself as he fell, Subaru dropped face-first into the dirt. Quickly shaking his head, looking around to see what happened, he caught sight of Otto brandishing his fist, and, only then, realized that he had been punched.

There, in front of the breathless Subaru, Otto clenched his reddening fist, and,

Otto: “You should stop putting on airs when you’re in front of your friends, Natsuki Subaru.”

Chapter 86:
With Disregard to Chances of Success

1

Subaru was so stunned by what had just happened that he all but forgot about the pain of being punched.

Toppled across the ground, he looked up to find Otto glaring at him. On that usually pathetic, dead-pan, definitely-not-intensely-emotional face, there was a definite, blazing fury in his eyes.

Otto Suwen’s eyes were looking down on Subaru, full of rage.

Otto: “You don’t know what to do, and your head’s all messed up.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “When you’re in a place where you need help, when the strength of your own arms and mind aren’t nearly enough, all you do is frantically scramble around accomplishing nothing but wasting time, isn’t it?”

Saying this to the silent Subaru, step by step, Otto drew closer.

On his hands and knees, paralyzed on the ground and feeling the heat swelling on his left cheek, all Subaru could do was stare at Otto.

Otto: “Your silence means you aren’t denying it, then. At least in our world, getting yourself trapped is about the lowest you can go. —You hear me?”

Otto reached his hand to the speechless Subaru and hoisted him up by the collar,

Otto: “If you hear me, say something!”

Subaru: “—!”

A sharp, solid impact rammed into Subaru's forehead, sending sparks flying.

Feeling the world spinning before his eyes, Subaru realized that he had taken a headbutt from Otto. Then again, another headbutt sent him flying backwards.

With his forehead and cheekbone aching, Subaru was shoved stumbling backwards. Naturally, no one could be expected to just sit there and take it—

Subaru: "The hell're you doing…?!"

Otto: "Oh, so you were conscious when I beat you just now? I was pretty sure I was roughing up someone asleep, you know."

Subaru: "What're y—?!"

Tearing up from the second headbutt straight to the nose, Subaru lashed back in rage, trying to grab Otto. But Otto slipped aside from Subaru's reaching arms and violently swept out his legs from under him, sending him tumbling to the ground.

Subaru: "Gha?!"

Otto: "Just when your head's getting some blood-flow, you've left your footing unattended. Isn't that's just like you, Mr. Natsuki, pathetic."

Subaru: "Oh… you think?!"

Springing to his feet, Subaru threw the fistful of dirt he had grabbed on the way down straight at Otto's face. But, having read his movements, Otto guarded his face with his arm and quickly closed in before Subaru could react. Just like that, in the time it took to gulp, Otto had place one hand on the back of Subaru's collar and the other on his waist and tossed him.

Slamming back-first into the ground, Subaru bounced off of the impact, choking from the pain.

Even though the ground was thick with dead leaves where he landed, that didn't absorb half of the shock.

Gasping, with numbness running all the way to the ends of his limbs, Subaru couldn't get up again.

Otto: "Resorting to dirty tricks as usual, Mr. Natsuki? Too bad they don't work on me once I see them coming."

Subaru: "…Ghh, khha."

Otto: "See, Mr. Natsuki? This is what your strength amounts to. You'll never reach the level of the Knights or Master Roswaal, nevermind Garfiel. Even against me, you end up like this."

Watching Subaru desperately sucking oxygen into his convulsing lungs, Otto shook his head with exasperation as he prodded him with these words.

Walking over to the helpless Subaru's side, Otto drew his face closer,

Otto: "Picking fights with the White Whale and the Witch Cult was stupid. You're weak, and you wouldn't have lasted a second in a straight-up fight. Surely, you understand this."

Subaru: "…"

Otto: "So, were you going to compensate for your lack of strength with wits? From what I've seen, there is a bit of cleverness about you… but certainly no above-average judgement or decision-making abilities. Even your common sense is lacking."

Not sure what Otto was trying to say, irritation began showing through Subaru's ragged breaths.

By now, the convulsions of his lungs, the shock of being thrown, and the pain on his forehead and cheek had somewhat faded. In their place, what accompanied his returning calm was only confusion regarding the true intention behind Otto's words.

Looking down into Subaru's black, non-understanding eyes, Otto continued, Otto: “Both your strength and wits are lacking, and if there’s anything else that can compensate… well, there really isn’t anything. You’re small, your reach is short, you’re the kind of person that can be found anywhere. You are just a commonplace nobody, and yet you’re aiming for these disproportionately great things.”

Subaru: “What…’re you… even trying to say?”

Otto: “You know that you’re powerless and weak, so what’s the backup plan you came up with? It’s to corner yourself even further, whittling yourself down trying to pull something out of nothing… I finally understand how Patrasche feels.”

Subaru: “Patrasche…?”

Hearing the name of his earth dragon, Subaru’s eyes widened in surprise.

Patrasche. The black earth dragon who got herself injured to save a master who didn’t even know why she would do such a thing for him, who had taught him so much and to whom he owed so much—who was so utterly wasted on Subaru,

Now Otto was saying that he understood how she felt.

While Subaru lay there, blinking, Otto stuck his fingers through his grey hair, and, with thorns in his voice, “So, you see”, he continued,

Otto: “It’s fine to show off in front of the girl you have a crush on. That’s a necessary vanity, and I’ll respect that. I suppose it’s inevitable that you’ll be boasting things that are way out of your calibre. So I’ll be willing to overlook that.”

That would be Emilia. And the way Subaru acts in front of Emilia.

Otto: “And I’ll forgive you for showing off in front of the girl who has a crush on you. Again, that’s necessary. When love’s involved, I believe the one on the receiving end carries a certain responsibility too. So it’s important to be putting on airs when you’re around someone who loves you, and I can forgive you for that.”

That would be Rem. Once, Subaru had told Otto the exact same thing. That he wanted to show off in front of Rem, because she was a girl who loved him.

Otto: “But, that’s where you stop.”

With this, Otto stuck his face even closer.

Subaru shrunk up his shoulders in anticipation of another headbutt, but Otto went on, practically snarling,

Otto: “You know that you’re lacking. You know that you’re insufficient. You want to show off to the girl you like. And you want to be something that the girl who likes you could be proud of.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “So, to make up for the parts that you don’t want those girls to see, shouldn’t you be enlisting some help from others? —Say, from a friend?”

Pulling his face away, Otto said the last part holding his palm to his own chest.

Subaru: “Haa…”

Listening to those words, Subaru let out a small sigh.

Honestly, for a moment, Subaru thought something along the lines of “Yeah, you’re right”.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t hoped he could cling to and rely on someone this way. Of course he had. Like Otto said, Subaru knew that he was weak and lacking. He was not nearly so conceited as to think that he could solve everything on his own.

In fact, all this time, hadn’t he been trying to enlist Echidna and Roswaal’s help to compensate for his own incompetence?

Yet instead of receiving their cooperation, all he got in return were wounds and truths that he didn’t want to learn.

He had already tried to do it Otto's way. But what Otto's suggested wouldn't work at all. That door was already shut.

Subaru: "—Hah."

Otto: "What's so funny?"

Reaching that desolate conclusion in his heart, it began to show on his face as well. Seeing this, Otto furrowed his brows in displeasure, while Subaru, with his face red and swollen, looked up to meet his gaze,

Subaru: "You got it all wrong. …It's not like I haven't asked for help. I've already tried everything that might work. I've already tried to rely… on anyone I thought I could rely on, and yet…"

His hopes were betrayed, but, not willing to give up, he was left only hugging his head.

In the end, even Emilia, whom he thought he must "Protect" and "Save", rejected his thoughts. And only then did he realize that, all along, he had been looking down on Emilia as a "Weakling who needed his protection".

Having experienced various things, met various people, said flashy lines, barked that he would make everything work out, rejected the resolve to die and embraced the resolve to live, and pretended as if he had moved forward if only just a little, ultimately, all Subaru had been doing was marching in place.

He couldn't see a single thing he could do to alter this deadlock.

Now that even his forced smile had dried up, only a cold, rigid expression remained on Subaru's cheeks.

Watching this, Otto's lips quivered at Subaru's silent laments.

Otto: "…But, I don't recall you ever asking me for help, Mr. Natsuki."

Subaru: "…"

Otto: “I’m not worthy of being relied upon, and it’d be pointless… that’s how you see me, isn’t it? Or could it be that, in your eyes… I’m just another one of those who needs protecting?”

Otto’s trembling voice as he tried to stifle his emotions only made his words even more jarring.

This was merely a glimpse of Otto’s rage, sorrow, and emotions without an outlet.

Touched by the ripples of Otto’s overflowing emotions, Subaru realized that his words had inadvertently hurt him, and he quickly shook his head.

Subaru: “No, you’re wrong…”

Otto: “How am I wrong? It’d be strange if I was wrong. If I was, then why are you sitting there alone not telling me anything?”

Subaru: “The fact that I’m not… telling you anything isn’t because I don’t trust you. You’re wrong about that.”

Otto: “…”

Shaking his head, Subaru’s eyes were wandering.

Meanwhile, Otto fell silent, only keeping his green irises fixed on Subaru.

The pressure of that gaze made Subaru cast down his eyes, muddying his words as he put his hand to his forehead.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Otto. In those loops, Otto had staked his life to protect him, and stayed with him when there was no profit to be made from it. For that, Subaru was sincerely grateful, and he wasn’t lying when he called him a friend.

But how could he tell Otto the truth?

If it was Echidna or Roswaal who could understand Subaru’s circumstances, then it’d be fine. The taboo wouldn’t be violated, and conversation would be possible.

But that was not the case with Otto. Not just Otto, but none of Emilia, Ram, or any of the others in the Sanctuary knew the first thing about Subaru's situation.

Without mentioning the Witch or Return by Death, Subaru couldn't possibly explain the predicament he was in. Even if he could tell them what will happen, about the Great Rabbit and the attack on the Mansion—Subaru wouldn't be able to say how he came to know these things in the first place.

When that happens, what could he tell them to make them believe him? Could he even hope for such a thing?

He knew he wasn't strong enough, he knew he wasn't smart enough, and he knew just how useless he was.

And so, ultimately, Subaru couldn't do anything without getting help from others, and he understood that it was his job to obtain the help he needed.

But now, having failed to do his job, he had come to a standstill.

Subaru: "I can't explain it. My head's all a mess… like you said, it's all a mess, and… there's no way I can prove anything I say."

Otto: "…"

Subaru: "They're stuff that, even if I told you, you wouldn't believe any of it… so how can I explain it… it's like that with you, with everyone, with…"

Otto: "…Why don't you try?"

Subaru: "—Huh?"

When Subaru told him that he could give him no reason to believe him, that was Otto's reply.

Unwittingly looking up at those words, he saw Otto with his arms folded, looking back at him,

Otto: "So, why don't you try saying it? Even if it doesn't make sense and comes out all jumbled because your head's confused, I won't interrupt you, and I'll listen to the end."

Subaru: "No, but, that'll…"

Otto: "Just… out with it!! Didn't I tell you to stop putting on airs?!"

Otto kicked his foot into the ground, shouting that he had had enough.

Then, jutting out his finger at the wide-eyed Subaru,

Otto: "If you have the time to whine about having no proof and how no one's going to believe you, why don't you use that time to spit out everything that's holed up in that head of yours?! Isn't that way more constructive than sitting there moping?!"

Subaru: "Even if you say that…I! There's no way you'd believe me if I gave you this mishmash…!"

Otto: "—Just spit out the mishmash! Then at the end I'll say "I believe you"! Because that's what friends do!!"

—All the confounded, tangled contents of Subaru's head was uprooted and blown away by Otto's shout.

Otto's words were without any real basis, and his logic was not that convincing at all.

Yet, to Subaru who had come to a standstill, it was more than enough of a push on his back.

Subaru: "Well… I don't expect you to believe any of this, but…"

Little by little, he gave voice to every single one of the problems he had been keeping inside himself, and it didn't even take that long.

Subaru: "So, yeah…Roswaal's hired the assassin to attack the Mansion… in order to corner me and Emilia so we have nowhere to run… pretty much."

Gingerly watching for any censoring hands popping up, Subaru carefully brought his explanation to an end.

All the while, Otto had only quietly listened, albeit with his brows furrowed.

Subaru: “And that’s all the information I have right now… it may not be all that precise, but that’s everything. With nothing held back, all of it.”

Naturally, the unspeakable part about Return by Death and the Witches’ tea party were a different story.

With those parts left out, the foundations were definitely a bit shaky. Even Subaru himself felt that the connections between everything were way too vague.

And so he was pretty on edge to see what Otto’s reaction would be. Although Otto had promised to say “I believe you” at the end, just what would he actually think about everything he said just now?

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki…”

Subaru: “…”

After a long silence spent in thought, Otto dropped his folded arms and looked at Subaru. Seeing himself reflected in Otto’s green pupils, Subaru unwittingly held his breath.

What’s he going to say first? Subaru could hear his own heart pounding.

And, to this stiffened Subaru,

Otto: “There’s no way I can pretend I didn’t hear any of that and just run away, is there?”

Subaru: “Wh—haa?!”

Subaru yelped, thrown off by that off-kilter reply. But Otto shouted right over Subaru’s yelp with, “After all!”,

Otto: “We’re trapped in this place with the Great Rabbit approaching, the only way to get out is if Lady Emilia breaks through the Trials, if we try leaving with just the people not affected by the Barrier we'll get stopped by Mr.Clueless there, and even if we make it back to the Mansion we'll get murdered by an assassin hired by the owner of the Mansion… What kind of a situation is this?!"

Subaru: "That's what I wanna know! Why do I have to be herded into a stupid ridiculous situation like this?! I mean I already knew it, but is this how much God hates me?! Well, I hate him too!!"

If there really is a God of Fate, there is no doubt that god really hates Subaru. And since Subaru didn't think he did anything atrocious to actually deserve this, it was just plain unfair.

But cursing the Gods wasn't going to move this situation anywhere nor make things any easier. And, even before that,

Subaru: "Wait, Otto. I can see why you wanna flip out right now, but… you mean you actually believe all those crazy things I said?"

Otto: "…"

Subaru: "That these bloodthirsty witchbeasts are coming, that even if we wanna run we don't know if Emilia'll succeed or not, that Garfiel'll get in our way, and that Roswaal's already betrayed us for his bat-shit insane ideas… you really believe all that?"

Saying it out loud again, it just sounded like a list of unfortunate situations all bunched up into one.

In particular, the approaching Great Rabbit and Roswaal masterminding the attacks on the Mansion were all without any proof whatsoever. Those were the two most important parts, and Subaru had nothing he could use to convince anyone.

For the Great Rabbit, how could Subaru possibly predict the movements of witchbeasts when almost everyone in the world had already been trying?

As for Roswaal, why would he be plotting against Emilia, the candidate he is backing in the Royal Selection?

None of this Subaru could explain.

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki.”

Otto briefly closed his eyes before addressing Subaru’s question.

He raised a single finger, and,

Otto: “I’ve been to quite a few places up to now, and I might not look like it, but I’ve interacted with all sorts of people on the way.”

Subaru: “…Unless, you can tell if someone’s trustworthy just by looking at them?”

Otto: “No, I don’t believe in that kind of superstition. When you’re a merchant, you’ll come to learn very quickly that there are people who can lie to anyone without a single cloud in their eyes. I’ve had more than my share of experience in that regard.”

He’s bragging about it, but doesn’t that just mean Otto has been duped enough times for him to have learned his lesson?

However, deciding that this was too important a conversation to stick that quip in there, Subaru kept his mouth shut and allowed Otto to continue,

Otto: “Well, after meeting all those people, I’ve also learned to do business in my own sort of way. It’s been four years since I left home and, for better or for worse, I survived.”

Otto made it sound simple, but it probably wasn’t an easy road.

He too must’ve been thrown into life or death situations more than a few times.

In this world, where one could run into the White Whale just by crossing a field, it’s not hard to imagine the kind of dangers a travelling merchant would have to face. Stray dogs, burglars, those kinds of things.

Otto: “And so, day after day like this, I’ve managed to make a life for myself as a merchant… and I can confidently say that, up to now, I've always picked the side that was favored by the odds. Though things don't always turn out the way I'd hope… and there were times when what I thought was the winning side turned out to be unmitigated disasters and were never heard from again…"

Subaru: "Oy, oy, oy…"

Otto: "But, regardless of the outcomes, I've always tried to make choices that I don't end up regretting. When I'm putting myself on the line, I think it's obvious why that's necessary."

Subaru still couldn't exactly tell what Otto's criteria is, but it sounded like he always picked the side with the best chances.

Hoping to establish a connection with Roswaal, Otto had accompanied Subaru to the Sanctuary with his personal advancements in mind. In that sense, Otto behaved like a realist, through and through.

That's why Subaru figured that Otto would have no reason to listen to his baseless words without the slightest hope of—

Otto: "And so, this is a first, Mr. Natsuki."

Subaru: "—Huh?"

Not sure what he was saying, Subaru only stared at Otto with his mouth gaping open.

And, seeing this, with a stupidly cheerful expression,

Otto: "Going against all odds and joining the side with no visible chance of success is definitely a first for me."

Otto stated his decision.

2

Running as fast as his legs could carry him. Out of breath.

Chasing his bolting heart across the meadow, without a second to lose, Subaru's body was shrouded in wind.

Slicing through the crisp morning air, making great swings of his arms, he sprinted, step after leaping step.

Kicking up soil, trampling over rocks, he dashed straight along the shoddy path.

At last, the destined building entered his field of view.

His cheeks twisting with unwitting exhilaration, Subaru bared his teeth. Huffing like a dog with his tongue sticking out, he bounded for the building's entrance, reaching for the door.

And,

Subaru: "—ROSWAAL!"

Violently flinging it open, Subaru tumbled into the building. Through the entryway and past the adjacent living room, he shoved open the flimsy door with nearly enough force to break it.

Inside, were Roswaal, sitting up on the bed, and Ram, diligently tending to him, while their expressions were painted over with surprise.

It was rare to get such a startled reaction from the usually carefree Roswaal and the always brazenly unemotive Ram.

And, since Subaru was about to do something never done before, that would be a good omen.

Counting on their surprise to be the winds of his good fortune, Subaru jutted out his finger at the speechless master and servant, and,

Subaru: "—Let's make a bet. With your wish and mine as the chips."

Chapter 87:
Oni Out, Clowns In

Two astonished gazes landed on the out-of-breath Subaru who had barged into the room.

As far as he was concerned, both of these two were supposed to be completely foreign to the concept of “being surprised”. And, deriving some small satisfaction from their reactions, the wicked smile on Subaru’s face deepened.

Roswaal: “—A bet?”

Muttering this, Roswaal narrowed his mismatched eyes.

His face that was usually covered in clown’s makeup was now devoid of any paint. Over the various loops, only once had Subaru seen Roswaal’s real face like this before.

His skin beneath the white cosmetics was pallid, and there was a certain guileless simplicity to his gaze without his eyeliners—an impression entirely detached from the Roswaal Subaru had known. Before he knew it, the shady, calculating figure behind the painted face had transformed into a clean, upstanding youth as the makeup fell away.

Handsome people are handsome without needing anything extra, Subaru silently remarked as he nodded to Roswaal’s mutter,

Subaru: “Yeah, a bet. Your wish against mine… Just one shot, winner takes all.”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru raised a single finger, magnificently declaring. As if scrutinizing Subaru’s proposal, Roswaal squinted his eyes. But before Roswaal could give his reply, another figure cut in between their line of sight—it was the pink-haired maid, Ram.

With Roswaal to her back, Ram's gaze was severe as she faced Subaru. Although, in their day-to-day, Ram tended to scold Subaru every chance she got, and her gaze towards him was always sharp, none of it could compare with what was in her eyes at this moment.

Ram: "Hold it, Barusu. You come barging into the room, and just when I was wondering what you had to say… you mean to further burden Master Roswaal in his convalescence? There should be a limit to your insolence."

Subaru: "Considering the circumstances, the "I'm sick and injured" excuse won't work anymore. That's got nothing to do with that slick tongue and black heart of his… so he'll just have to suck it up until I'm done."

Ram: "Barusu—"

Subaru: "And nothing you say is gonna change that!"

A blend of perilousness and severity flared in Ram's eyes. But before she could act, Subaru stomped his foot into the floor. Jutting out his finger at Ram, who had cautiously halted,

Subaru: "I've got no reason to stop or hesitate. You and I know each other well enough for at least that much, right Roswaal?"

Roswaal: "—Hhm."

Subaru: "Or has your motivation gone all the way to zero just because something's deviated from your little diary? How about showing a little backbone and making some effort for your coming selves instead?"

Roswaal: "…That's an interesting way of putting it. My coming selves, is it."

Subaru tried to get his meaning across to Roswaal without directly mentioning Return by Death. Although Ram furrowed her brows in confusion, Roswaal seemed to have understood.

With some vigor returning to his lifeless face, Roswaal addressed Ram in front of him, Roswaal: “Ram. Stand down… or ra~~ther, could you leave us for a moment?”

Ram: “…! But, Master Roswaal.”

Roswaal: “It’s fine, it’s fine. Even if we’re alone, Subaru isn’t thoughtless enough to atta~~ck me. And it would be very easy to defeat him anyway. Wou~~ldn’t it?”

Subaru: “Yeah, embarrassing as it is. If we ever get physical, I’m not even confident I can pull him off the bed.”

Watching Subaru flapping his empty hands in agreement, Ram gritted her teeth, and once again turned her worried gaze to Roswaal,

Ram: “—Please don’t strain yourself.”

With this, she gave a solemn curtsy and headed for the room’s exit. Just before passing Subaru, she shot him a sideways glare,

Ram: “—If anything should happen to Master Roswaal, I will not forgive you.”

Subaru: “You should be more worried about him doing something in a self-destructive fit, you know.”

Seeing Ram off with a shrug, Subaru watched the door shut behind her before turning back to Roswaal. Roswaal’s expression remained thoughtful as he closed a single eye, catching Subaru in his yellow pupil.

Roswaal: “Again, your expression is consi~~derably different from when we pa~~rted last night. Could something have changed in your heart in these few hours?”

Subaru: “A change of heart… guess you could call it that. I got a talking to, got into a fight with a friend and… well, it was a bit too one-sided to be a fight, but it was something of a reaffirmation of our friendship.”

Touching the cheek that Otto had punched, still faintly red, Subaru thought back on the sensations of that morning.

Despite his scrawny figure, Otto was surprisingly strong. Perhaps, that was because the number of ordeals he'd had to go through was far greater than Subaru's. Subaru thought he had gotten into quite a few predicaments since coming to this world, but it seems that still wasn't nearly enough.

Subaru: "Seriously, how vicious is this world…"

Roswaal: "I couldn't agree more. We~~ll, yesterday I've already confirmed that I haven't co~~rnered you enough, but the fact that you've come back so early just shows I wasn't mistaken."

Subaru: "I was pretty much at my limit though. …I'm just simple-minded, I guess."

It seems Otto's words and fist had knocked Subaru's crooked wits straight.

A terribly crude and simple method. There was nothing more childish than having to have a friend beat you onto the right path, and if it had happened to someone else, Subaru would definitely have derided them for it.

Subaru: "But I don't think it's a bad thing. When you find yourself stuck with no way out, it's pretty nice to have a buddy to help figure things out."

Roswaal: "Naive. Green, immature. …Ultimately, you can only solve the sufferings of this world yourself. You have no need for such indolent ideas as relying on friends."

Subaru: "Relying on friends, relying on bonds, relying on feelings… you don't think it'll work?"

Roswaal: "It wo~~n't."

Subaru: "Is that so. —Then, we'll just have to see who's right."

Roswaal's expression shifted, while Subaru walked up to the bed, snapped his fingers, and pointed straight at Roswaal.

Subaru: “Like I said, let’s make a bet. With our wishes as the chips, one round decides all.”

Roswaal: “Very well, let’s he~~ar it then.”

Having confirmed that Roswaal wasn’t outright rejecting his proposal, Subaru turned his finger towards the ceiling,

Subaru: “I won’t be following your intentions this time. Not just this time, I’ve no intention of doing it your way, ever… but, even if I keep insisting that, we’ll never be able to sort out our differences. So let’s set a limit.”

Roswaal: “A limit?”

Hearing Roswaal repeat it back, “Yeah”, Subaru nodded.

Wetting his lips with his tongue, Subaru stared straight into Roswaal’s eyes,

Subaru: “This loop, I’ll break through everything my way. If I fail… next one onwards, I’ll do things the way you want me to. That’ll be the limit.”

Roswaal: “—Having the ability to rewind indefinitely, you would abandon your right to keep trying?”

Subaru: “You said it yourself. What you did wasn’t enough to corner me. And I agree. —If I keep thinking that I can just rewind and get it right next time, everything’ll just end up like that again.”

Though of course, he had no intention of rejecting the concept entirely.

In this merciless world, what could Natsuki Subaru possibly do without Return by Death? Subaru wasn’t so shameless as to completely deny all the benefits Return by Death had given him.

But his mindset had changed. If he had done everything he could and died anyway, he would at least resignedly accept it. But if that was not the case, and he died when he could have lived, then, Subaru: “It would be an insult to all the people who’d cry for me. I won’t do that anymore.”

Roswaal: “And so, you would set a limit on yourself… i~~s it? Though I admit I couldn’t have asked for a more favorable condition, how will you guarantee that you will abide by it?”

Subaru: “Guarantee?”

Roswaal: “Yes, guarantee. It’s quite impo~~rtant, no? A~~fter all, with your ability to rewind, you can easily pretend this promise ne~~ver happened. If you fail, return to last night, a~~nd simply decide to try another way…”

Subaru: “Roswaal.”

As Roswaal voiced his doubts, Subaru quietly called his name.

Cut off by that call, and faced with Subaru’s gaze, Roswaal’s eyes slightly widened. Then, Subaru carried on with his tone of voice unchanged,

Subaru: “You think I would do that?”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru: “If you do, then… this conversation isn’t going to work at all. That’s all there is to it.”

Roswaal narrowed his eyes at those words, and lightly raised his hands, sighing.

Roswaal: “No, no~~. Let’s he~~ar the rest of it. I can decide at the end.”

Subaru: “…Then here goes. As I said, we’ll set a limit. I’ll put everything I have into this loop. And if it still doesn’t work, I’ll do as you say. Since, either way… if this doesn’t work, I doubt anything else will.”

Roswaal: “You don’t sound too confident? But, you do have the resolve. …In tha~~t case, I will respond in kind. Now, you would set a limit on yourself, and make this attempt your last. So what would you requ~~ire from me?”

Roswaal’s tone was beginning to return to normal.

Seeing that the negotiations have reached a degree of mutual understanding, Subaru clapped his hands together,

Subaru: “My demand is simple. If I manage to break through the situation my way this loop, the future will stray from your expectations. When that happens, you’ll probably lose all will to live in a world that has deviated from your Gospel, won’t you… that mustn’t happen.”

Roswaal: “Mustn’t? You mean I mustn’t lose my determination? U~~nfortunately, I have to say that is a rather difficult request. Of course, I could continue to pretend on the su~~rface, but in my heart of hearts, I would…”

Subaru: “You know, Roswaal. I don’t want us to be enemies forever.”

Roswaal: “—Hn?”

Unsure of Subaru’s meaning, Roswaal tilted his head.

Seeing this, Subaru rubbed his finger against his nose, and,

Subaru: “I know you can’t stand a future that deviates from your Gospel and a route that differs from the one you’ve decided on. But even in a future that deviates from your Gospel, I’ll still be busting my ass off to make Emilia King. And I’ll keep relying on the power to rewind to make sure of it. —Whatever the road we take to get there, the end result won’t stray from your goals.”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru: “Roswaal, my demand is simple. If I open a path to the future that’s different from your Gospel’s… then you will toss the Gospel aside and join me. I’ll make Emilia King. And I need your help for that.”

No matter how many unforgivable deeds Roswaal has stained his hands with, his strength will be necessary for Emilia's goals. Subaru himself still harbored a sense of incomprehension and disgust towards him. And if things were left as they are in this timeline, the consequences of Roswaal's machinations would be irreparable. — But Subaru himself will extinguish that possibility and avoid that fatal pitfall.

Hearing Subaru's proposal, Roswaal let out a long, deep sigh.

Closing his eyes, he sank into thought, stroking his chin as his lips slowly parted,

Roswaal: "So that's the ultimate compromise you are asking for… is it."

Subaru: "It's all pretty convenient, isn't it. But I like convenient things. Emilia will do her best to become King, I'll be rooting for her at her side, and you'll be tagging along for the ride."

Roswaal: "That is a difficult thing you ask of me, when I've been doing things one way for such a long, lo~~ng time. If you want to get me to cha~~nge now… that would necessitate some equally severe conditions on your end, no?"

Subaru: "Yeah, it would."

Roswaal squinted a single eye, while Subaru nodded and held up two of his fingers.

Feeling Roswaal's gaze focus onto his fingertips, Subaru gave one of his fingers a light wag,

Subaru: "There're two conditions. Two conditions you said were impossible and could never be done. If I manage to clear those conditions, I win the bet."

Roswaal: "And if those conditions go unfulfilled, the victory is mine. And I will have you discard your humanity."

Speaking in a low, sonorous tone, Roswaal locked his gaze into Subaru's. At the end of Roswaal's urging gaze, Subaru briefly gritted his teeth with a nod, and continued,

Subaru: “So, the first condition. —I will make Garfiel an ally, and bring him outside.”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru: “You said his attachment to the Sanctuary means I’ll never be able to bring him out of this place. I agree. But while I agree… we’ll be needing his strength in the future. Even if we consider the feelings of the people in the Sanctuary, we can’t just leave that stubborn, bratty kid in here forever. So I’ll do what you consider to be undoable and win Garfiel to our side.”

Roswaal: “—And the second?”

The moment he heard the first condition, a dark emotion passed through the depths of Roswaal’s eyes.

But, without remarking on it, he merely asked for the next condition. With a nod, Subaru continued,

Subaru: “—I will have Emilia pass the Trials. The one to overcome the Trials of the Tomb and liberate the Sanctuary will be Emilia. Not me.”

Roswaal: “Impossible!”

Shouting, Roswaal slammed his palm upon the bed.

A dry thud rang out, as Roswaal’s visage contorted in rage. Squaring his shoulders, he jutted his finger towards Subaru,

Roswaal: “I told you last night. That thing is incapable of passing the Trials. And Garfiel will never abandon his attachment to the Sanctuary!”

Subaru: “Won’t know ‘til I try, right?”

Roswaal: “Indeed, you wouldn’t know unless you’ve tried. And isn’t it precisely because you’ve tried so many times that you come to me beaten and defeated?! Your visage, and your very resolve now is proof that those two are not worth the investment of your hopes!"

Practically screaming, Roswaal's shoulders heaved up and down as he spoke. While he took ragged breath after ragged breath, Subaru only calmly faced him,

Subaru: "You're getting yourself awfully worked up, aren't you."

Roswaal: "What…?"

Subaru: "Isn't it to your advantage that the conditions are so harsh on my end? Makes no sense for you to get angry about its harshness, right?"

Roswaal: "It is a matter of whether such a bet can be established in the first place. When it is not just the balance but the legitimacy that is questionable, the very outcomes of the bet would be compromised. It's only natural that I am cautious."

Being given conditions that are so stacked against Subaru and so favorable towards himself had made Roswaal wary. But seeing Roswaal's reaction, Subaru's cheeks twisted, as a vicious, vicious smile deepened on his face.

Subaru: "Roswaal, you don't seem to get it."

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "Are the odds stacked against me? Well yeah, it's pretty harsh whichever way you look at it. I admit it's crossed my mind that this'll help you save some face while you revise that master plan of yours, but… it's actually about something else."

In front of the speechless Roswaal, Subaru went on with the smile on his face unchanged,

Subaru: "You said it yourself, Roswaal."

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "When I'm driven into a corner, I become the strongest card. —It might not be how you wanted it, but this is the strongest card right here, without a doubt. You still dissatisfied?”

Against Subaru’s cutting words, Roswaal remained silent.

He merely stared fixedly at Subaru as he brought the rhythm of his breathing under control. And, once his breathing had calmed, Roswaal raised a single finger,

Roswaal: “—Contract.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “Very well. I will accept the conditions you’ve prese~~nted. —Break Garfiel out of his spell, and let Lady Emilia liberate the Sanctuary. Once both of these come to pass, I will discard my plans and follow the path you’ve constructed. Let us forge a Contract to this end.”

A dim light flickered atop Roswaal’s raised finger.

The rainbow-colored concentration of mana looked just like the multi-elemental light Julius had used to destroy Petelgeuse.

Roswaal: “Through our gates, we shall carve this mutual Contract into our souls. No matter whom you may deceive, you cannot deceive your own heart. —A Contract carved into the soul transcends distance and time, and persists even across worlds. It should continue to bind you even if you rewind and start anew.”

Subaru: “Huh, so you did have something in mind. …But, that’s more convenient for me anyway. If we’re both bound by Contract, that’ll save me having to drag you around kicking and screaming after you’ve lost the bet.”

Roswaal: “It doesn’t appear as though you’re taking this lightly… very well.”

Seeing that Subaru was willing to accept the Contract, Roswaal said nothing more.

The radiance at his fingertip pressed into the center of Subaru’s chest, and with it, came the sensation of something seeping into his body. Immediately, feeling a wave pulse inside him, opening all the pores of his body, Subaru exhaled a breath.

Subaru: “Aa, hha—”

Roswaal: “And the same will be engraved upon my soul. —Once Natsuki Subaru’s Contract has been fulfilled, Roswaal L Mathers’ Contract shall also be fulfilled.”

An identical rainbow burst of light pulsed on Roswaal’s chest.

For an instant, the light spread through Roswaal’s entire body, before all returned to normal in the blink of an eye.

Subaru: “So, it’s done?”

Roswaal: “It is done. …There’s no taking it back now.”

Confirming their mutual inability to flee, Subaru quietly gulped down his breath.

There, Roswaal placed a hand to his own chest, and,

Roswaal: “Just as you will try your utmost to fulfill your conditions, I will also move to actualize the Gospel’s writ. You won’t fault me for that, will you?”

Subaru: “—In five days, the snow will fall again?”

Roswaal: “…If Lady Emilia does not bring the snowfall, I will likely have to bri~~ng it about myself.”

In other words, the time limit is set.

In five days, the Great Rabbit will attack. Emilia will have to liberate the Sanctuary, and Subaru will have to break Garfiel’s spell before then.

Subaru: “If that’s decided, there’s no time to waste. I better get started.”

Roswaal: “Subaru.”

As Subaru moved away from the bed to set about his tasks, Roswaal called to him.

Turning around, he saw Roswaal slightly averting his gaze,

Roswaal: “The Mansion will be the same day. —Do your best, I’ll be praying for your good fight.”

Subaru: “Because if I try to do everything and botch it, next time you’ll get me to do things your way… right?”

Roswaal: “…”

Roswaal answered Subaru’s reply with silence.

At this, Subaru gave him a wry smile, and finished it by pointing his finger at Roswaal,

Subaru: “Roswaal, you’re throwing off your vibe so put the clown makeup back on.”

Roswaal: “Hhm, now that you mention it… this is the first time I’ve received you without makeup on, isn’t it.”

Subaru: “In this world, yeah.”

Subaru could tell that Roswaal’s eyes widened at his insinuation as he turned away.

Savoring this reaction on his back, Subaru set out his steps,

Subaru: “This is a match between you and me. A couple of clowns tossed around by fate—so let’s fight it out, fair and square.”

With that, he left the room.

The conditions of the bet are in place. —And so, this is where it begins:

Natsuki Subaru’s final challenge, with the Sanctuary’s liberation as the wager.

SETOWI

Chapter 88:
Garfiel's Intentions

1

Otto: "So, were you able to successfully seal the Contract?"

After issuing his final challenge and concluding his talks with Roswaal, Subaru left the building and took a short walk to join up with Otto. And now, they were in a corner of the Cathedral, reporting their respective results to each other.

Subaru answered Otto's question with a nod, and,

Subaru: "Yeah, it worked. I was worried he'd just sink into self-abandon and reject the bet outright, but… I think the unfavorable conditions on my end got him through that."

Otto: "Guess so. When you're presented with a bet that's so one-sidedly in your favor… plus when you have a blueprint telling you that you cannot lose, it'd be insane not to take it. Of course, I've also considered the possibility that Mr. Natsuki might go overboard with the presentation and end up without a Contract."

Subaru: "Even if you say that, without a Contract… wait, you've thought of that too?"

Otto: "Mhm, I did."

Otto crossed his arms nodding as if it were a matter of course. Actually, Otto had just managed to dupe Roswaal, albeit temporarily. Subaru widened his eyes at the thought of it.

Seeing Subaru like this, Otto gave a wry smile,

Otto: "Merchants use written documents all the time when more than a few agreements need to be exchanged, but… adept magic users are the ones who're really into Contracts. And when the person is the foremost magic user in the country… chances are he'd take the bait.”

Subaru: “By the way, there’s no way he could’ve planted some secret conditions in there, right? Like, he says one thing but binds me with some other Contract.”

Subaru would have no way of knowing if that was the case.

The bet’s outcome was supposed to decide the future of their faction, but if the Contract actually says something like “Keep breathing and you’ll die the next day”—Subaru wouldn’t even know.

While Subaru shuddered at his own imaginings, Otto waved his hands,

Otto: “It’s designed so that that kind of trickery wouldn’t be possible. Margrave Roswaal must have said something when you two sealed the Contract? Like, it’ll be etched into your souls? It’s only when both parties agree on the contents that the Contract can be established. Unless there was some serious wordplay involved, there’s no way it could be done.”

Subaru: “You make it sound like there’s an exception if you get tricked by a play on words…”

Otto: “…Just between you and me, before all the legal codes were in place, when the whole world was still in a more turbulent age, those kinds of scams using Contracts were rampant. If the other party’s just some small-time scoundrel then it’s not too bad, but if it’s a powerful, malevolent mage who’s got his eyes on you, the consequences are unimaginable.”

Otto shrank up his shoulders in fear, and Subaru also shriveled up his in agreement.

In this sense, Roswaal was a more or less passable Contract partner. While he may be powerful, and certainly mean-spirited, he was more driven by his obsessions than by pure evil. It should be safe to say that he’d have no intention of abusing their Contract and risk permanently falling out with Subaru.

And even if Roswaal did deceive Subaru this way—Subaru would just use the power of his ability to rewind to utterly annihilate him heart and mind until he relented.

For both their sakes, it'd be best if nothing like that happened, so Subaru opted to keep a minimum level of trust between them.

Subaru: "Anyway, that's what happened on my end, how did yours go?"

Otto: "How indeed… I'm not really sure, to be honest. After all, it's pretty much a gamble in places. …And we won't have many chances to get it right, either."

Otto's expression wasn't too optimistic when referring to the task he was in charge of while Subaru was negotiating with Roswaal. Like Otto said, the task that Subaru had given him was more likely to fail than succeed, and a great deal of gambling was involved. In return, if it did succeed, it would bring them much closer to victory.

The problem is, Subaru wasn't sure just how many more chances he would get in the five days remaining.

Subaru: "Guess we'll just have to wait and see. We better go over what we'll need to do in the limited time we have for now."

Otto: "The most urgent business is Lady Emilia and Garfiel. Specifically, I can't offer any help in getting Lady Emilia to beat the Trials. So that one'll have to fall on Mr. Natsuki."

Subaru: "Yeah, you're right. …I'll have to respect Emilia's resolve to do it herself, and now that I've lost my qualifications, I can't do it for her anymore."

Still, even if Emilia kept challenging the Trials as she had been, the chances of her clearing it by the fifth day looked dim. Emilia's heart should be kept from breaking as long as Subaru doesn't leave the Sanctuary, but that wouldn't prevent it being worn down from repeatedly failing the Trials.

She needs to change somehow—and that too, would have to fall on Subaru.

Subaru: "—It's about time we honestly faced each other."

Otto: "…"

Subaru: "I've tried to put it off in all sorts of ways. I think I've been running away because I didn't want to ask her only to realize that there's something irreconcilable between us. And I was hoping Emilia wouldn't have to tell me, since she must also be wishing that I'd never ask her…"

Otto: "—I believe it's important that you tell each other what's in your hearts. If I only knew the silly Mr. Natsuki you wanted me to see, I'd never have known what'd be coming in five days' time."

As Otto said this, consoling Subaru in his self-reflection, Subaru scratched his cheek in silent gratitude. He was glad that Otto was thoughtful enough not to scold him for ignoring the issue for so long.

Otto: "Or actually, if you've never made it clear to each other, what's with all this talk about liking and loving anyway? Stop pretending to be all pure and innocent already."

Subaru: "—Y-You!"

As they were both feeling embarrassed at that point, Otto quickly threw in a jape that made Subaru's lips twinge. But, being hit right on the mark, there was nothing he could say.

It was precisely because of Subaru's good-for-nothing character that all those situations were left where they were when they were just one step away from resolution.

But that has gone on long enough, and it was time to stop running.

Subaru: "I'll be going in blind, but I'll try to come clean with Emilia one way or another. I don't want this to fail because I didn't do something when I could have."

Otto: "…Well, I'll trust in your judgment, Mr. Natsuki. After all, I really don't want to be here on the fifth day when the Great Rabbit comes."

Otto looked as if he wanted to say something else in response to Subaru's words, but he only swallowed it back and looked away. Then, with "Now, there's the other topic", he changed the subject,

Otto: "What do you plan to do with Garfiel?"

Subaru: "The hint is: "He's afraid of the outside world". It must have had something to do with what he saw in his past when he took the Trial in the Tomb. If we could just know the details…"

Otto: "Asking him directly is out of the question. He's not the kind of temperate person who'd let just people pick his old emotional wounds."

Subaru: "And if he gets pissed off and smacks us, you and me'll get our neckbones one-shotted. I'm becoming increasingly worried about our team combat-wise…"

Nevermind the totally-incompetent Subaru, Otto is basically just a peddler who's been in some rough situations. They aren't martial artists, not by a long shot, and if there was a ranking of everyone in the Sanctuary by combat ability, you'd probably find them faster if you started looking from the bottom.

Subaru: "Now that I think about it, we really need someone to fill that pure-damage-dealer position. There's Roswaal, Emilia, Ram, and I guess Frederica too… it's a bit of a problem for our faction that that's all the combatants we got. So we'll definitely need Garfiel in our ranks."

He didn't include Rem, because bringing her out of her present condition would be the outcome of that battle.

Besides, even though he knew it was his own selfishness, Subaru would never want that girl whom he swore to retrieve to ever stand on a battlefield again.

Subaru: "We'll coax Garfiel into joining us with eloquence and finesse. And to do that, we'll have to clear away that trauma of his. As for the missing pieces…"

Otto: "The missing pieces…?"

Subaru: “Since we can’t ask the person himself, we’ll have to pull it from somewhere else. Miss Ryuzu or Ram. Both feel like they’ll be tight-lipped about it.”

Which side would they take, now that Subaru was going head to head with Roswaal? It’s worth a try, even if only to confirm that.

Guzzling down his breakfast and giving his butt a few pats as he stood up, Subaru clicked the bones of his neck,

Subaru: “Right then, time to get started. I’ll go try Miss Ryuzu for now, and…”

Otto: “I’ll get on with my end as well… I’ll pass the word to the others, though I’d prefer if we could get through this without having to use it.”

Subaru: “I don’t wanna think about it, either. I don’t, but… I get the feeling that the chances’re seventy, eighty percent that we’ll end up relying on it…”

Otto: “That’s pretty high… though I can’t deny it.”

They glanced at each other with a sigh, and Subaru shook his head to pull himself together.

Then, facing the still deflated-looking Otto, Subaru held up his hand,

Subaru: “Anyway, all that’s left is to do it. Once all of this is beautifully brought to an end, we’ll drink a grand toast to celebrate.”

Saying this, Subaru stretched out his palm as if to show it to Otto. For a moment, Otto seemed to have difficulty understanding, but, apparently catching on to Subaru’s meaning, he held up his palm as well,

Otto: “Right, for the sake of my dazzling future as well, let’s give it our best shot.”

Subaru: “You said it.”

Sharing a mischievous smile, their palms struck together.

The crisp sound resonated through the airy Cathedral, and, amid the gazes of the surprised villagers, Subaru and Otto turned, with each to the other’s back, and began to walk.

2

Subaru: “Miss Ryuzu, are you home~~? I wanna talk to you for a bit.”

Bounding over the uneven ground, through the acrid stench of the room, thinking how he should have gotten used to that smell by now, Subaru saw beyond the scraps and rubble the gleam of the pale blue crystal.

As ever, inside the crystal was a naked girl in wakeless slumber. Brushing his palm against the crystal’s surface, and once again disappointed by the lack of anything happening, Subaru looked around the room.

The faint blue glow of the crystal was the only light source in the darkness of the chamber. For a place reeking with stench, there were no rats or insects in sight. Thinking about it soberly and realizing that it must be because this place was ridiculously unhealthy, Subaru was finally starting to have some concerns about his bodily condition.

Subaru: “If not even bugs or rats wanna live here, the air pollution’s probably off the charts, huh…”

???: “You can put away those queer worries of yours. It’s only the Witch’s vestiges looming over this place… the animals instinctively sense it and keep away from here.”

While Subaru hugged his shoulders, shuddering, a voice came from behind him, dismissing his worries.

It was a familiar voice, spoken in a young pitch and an elderly tone. Turning around, Subaru caught sight of Ryuzu, walking over with her long hair trailing behind her.

Stopping at Subaru's side in front of the crystal at the center of the room, she looked up with eyes that were the same color as her hair,

Ryuzu: "Now, Su-bo. The fact that you're here… means you already know what I am?"

Subaru: "I got an explanation directly from the manager of this place. Also mentioned something about taking turns being the representative… pretty sure I got the gist of it."

Ryuzu: "Is that… so. So that's why Ros-bo was looking strange this morning. —Ros-bo must've failed again."

Lowering her eyes, a pained expression rose on Ryuzu' face. Those words made Subaru raise his brows,

Subaru: "Incidentally and unexpectedly, feels like I've just heard a part of what I came here to ask… so Miss Ryuzu, do you happen to know about Roswaal's plans?"

Ryuzu: "Only in part, I'm afraid. Unless one's familiar to a certain extent with where he's coming from, there's no way anyone could understand why Ros-bo does these baffling things. …Then again, that's also why Gar-bo's angry with him."

Subaru: "A part… how much?"

Ryuzu: "Su-bo?"

His voice dropping in pitch, Subaru took a step towards Ryuzu.

Perhaps sensing the change in Subaru's voice, a look of surprise flashed across Ryuzu' eyes. Subaru bent his knees, bringing his gaze level with Ryuzu', and,

Subaru: "Tell me, Miss Ryuzu. How much of Roswaal's plans have you heard? Depending on the answer, I…"

Ryuzu: "Su-bo…"

If Ryuzu knew Roswaal's plan—to secure the progression of the world as described by the Gospel, ordering Elsa's attack on the

Mansion, inviting the Great Rabbit to a Sanctuary enclosed by snow, murdering everyone involved, and isolating Subaru to make him forfeit his heart:

If she knew all of it, did nothing to stop it, and was complicit, then,

Subaru: “I don’t want to despise you, Miss Ryuzu. So please, tell me. How much do you know? How much have you been helping Roswaal?”

Ryuzu: “…What I know is that Ros-bo has a Gospel that he’s received from the Witch, and he’s trying to rewrite history in accordance to its contents. The Sanctuary’s continued existence, too, was written in the Gospel. Were it not for that, I would have stopped protecting him a long time ago.”

Subaru: “…Is that, all?”

Ryuzu: “That is all. I swear on my words. The Contract with which I am born forbids me from ever telling a lie.”

Without taking her gaze off of Subaru, a sincere expression appeared on Ryuzu’ youthful face. Since her Contract forbade her to lie, Subaru chose to believe her.

His rigid shoulders instantly lost their tension as Subaru breathed a sigh of relief.

Subaru: “I see, thank god. If I found out that even you were on board with Roswaal’s monstrous designs, I might’ve come back to punch you after all this is over. Punching a Loli-looking Miss Ryuzu… just picturing it is horrid.”

Ryuzu: “I honestly felt sorry for worrying you… but after what you said just now I’m not feeling all that sorry anymore.”

Hoping to clear the oppressive atmosphere, Ryuzu went along with Subaru’s quip.

Then, she placed her hand to her chin, and continued with “So.”

Ryuzu: “By the sound of it just now, this isn’t a frivolous matter, I take it? Su-bo, what kind of a squabble did you and Ros-bo get into?”

Subaru: “Leaving aside whether it’s cute enough to be called a squabble… right now, we’re in the middle of a contest. I can objectively say that if I win, we’ll get the big happy finale, so I kinda want Ryuzu’ help with that.”

Ryuzu: “Judging from the flow of the conversation, this is something about the Sanctuary? Su-bo and Ros-bo, so what are you each thinking… until I know that first, I can’t just carelessly accept.”

Subaru: “Well yeah. Right, how to explain…”

Tilting his head, Subaru deliberated over just how much information to give her. He had been completely open with Otto, and it didn’t seem like Ryuzu was entirely biased towards Roswaal. In fact, her position seemed to be the only reason she was being cordial with Roswaal.

With that in mind, after thinking over the matter carefully,

Subaru: “Simply put… it’s about what to do with the Sanctuary after the Barrier is gone.”

Ryuzu: “What to do, after it’s gone?”

Subaru: “I heard snippets from Garfiel too, so the opinion is pretty split in the Sanctuary, right? Those who want to go out, and those who don’t.”

Basically, those in support were the majority, and those in opposition the minority. But there were extremists in the opposition who would sabotage Subaru and Emilia’s attempts to pass the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary.

Having spent over twenty days in the Sanctuary, Subaru figured that the vanguard of that opposition would be Garfiel. As such, Ryuzu would be the head of those in support. But just what would she have to say about this difference of opinions?

And just when Subaru was considering how best to continue,

Ryuzu: “A split in opinions…? No, there shouldn’t be anything like that.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Ryuzu: “After this place is liberated, whether to leave or to stay on this land would be up to the individual. Most of us would want to follow Ros-bo and leave… and those who stay would stay because they wish to bury their bones in this land. So where is the difference in opinions?”

Subaru: “Uu, eh… no, but…”

The shock of hearing Ryuzu’ unexpected reply sent Subaru’s head reeling.

The contention between the support and opposition, the supposed antagonism resulting from differing stances regarding the Sanctuary’s liberation—Subaru had been planning to use this as a jumping-off point to redirect the conversation into how to secure Garfiel as an ally.

Subaru: “But, if there never was any contention…”

Ryuzu: “…”

Subaru: “You mean he just made all that stuff up? He was the one warning us to be wary of the opposition, but… was it just so we wouldn’t find it strange if we got sabotaged afterwards?”

If so, that’s a level of thought that isn’t like him at all, Subaru thought.

To divert attention from himself, Garfiel had been warning of potential obstructions in advance, thus removing himself from the list of suspects.

As a result, it was only after going through multiple loops in the Sanctuary that Subaru realized that that obstruction was the rampaging Garfiel himself, and that the warning was utterly meaningless.

Subaru: “Why would he go through all these hoops if he really wanted to stop the Sanctuary’s liberation…?”

Ryuzu: “…You’re talking about Gar-bo?”

Listening to Subaru’s mutters, Ryuzu seemed to have guessed who he was talking about.

Little by little, she lowered her eyes as a darkness fell over her expression,

Ryuzu: “The fact that that child doesn’t want to go outside is because of our own cowardice…”

Subaru: “Cowardice… what do you mean?”

Ryuzu: “Just what the word means. We have lived here ever since our birth. And so we know nothing of the world outside. We don’t know, and so we are afraid. It must torment Gar-bo terribly.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru could understand what Ryuzu was talking about.

For the residents of the Sanctuary, born into this narrow, closed-off place, the connection to the rest of the world after the Barrier falls away would be something utterly unknown and new.

Having lived for so, so long on this land, they must be feeling more anxiety than hope to face that something new. The prospect of the collapse of one’s mundane, unchanging, everyday life just has that sort of influence over people.

Subaru: “Garfiel doesn’t want the Sanctuary to be liberated because he doesn’t want to see people hurt by the upheaval of their circumstances…? It doesn’t fit his character at all… but.”

If that was really why Garfiel so desperately tried to prevent the Sanctuary’s liberation—it’d be the exact same thought process as Subaru’s desire to distance Emilia from hardship.

Garfiel was shutting his ears to the opinions of Ryuzu and the other residents, and proceeding with his own stubborn way of protecting them. In that case, if, like Subaru, he could have a proper conversation with Ryuzu and the other residents, maybe this problem would be solved.

Subaru: “No, it’s not that simple.”

Subaru and Garfiel were alike in how they pursued what they seek, but their positions were different. Subaru was failing to get what he wanted because he was weak.

But that was not the case with Garfiel. Garfiel had the strength to prevent the Sanctuary from being liberated. Kill Subaru and Emilia, thus eliminating anyone who could challenge the Trials, and his wish would be fulfilled. The problem is, even if he did this and shut himself in the Sanctuary, there would still be no escape from the approaching Great Rabbit.

But that fact was unknown to Garfiel, and was something he’d be unlikely to believe even if Subaru told him. The situation would be quite different from when he was explaining it to Otto.

Subaru: “If we’re just looking for grounds for compromise, this still isn’t it… but, it’s strange.”

Ryuzu: “Su-bo?”

Subaru: “Why… didn’t he choose the most efficient method for stopping the Sanctuary’s liberation at the outset and just kill me and Emilia?”

If he truly didn’t care about appearances and was wholeheartedly pursuing a single goal like Roswaal, Garfiel could have taken Subaru and Emilia’s lives immediately.

But he had never once attempted to directly harm Emilia. And even the times he did attack Subaru, he only did so after Subaru had taken some drastic action.

Subaru still couldn’t clearly identify what Garfiel’s trigger for killing him was. There was no doubt that killing Subaru was to prevent the

Sanctuary’s liberation, but the reason behind it remains unclear.

Subaru: “There has to be a trigger. …But, thinking back on those times Garfiel attacked me, was there really anything they had in common…?”

The times Garfiel attacked Subaru were when Subaru flew into a rage at Roswaal and when he tried to escape the Sanctuary with the villagers—ultimately, that’s all.

Objectively looking at the scene with Roswaal, it was quite normal to have judged Subaru to be in the wrong for pouncing on an injured person. So there was nothing suspicious there.

The problem was the second time, when he tried to murder a Subaru he had already failed to kill.

Transforming into a giant tiger to kill Subaru, Garfiel set his fangs and claws upon Ram, the Earlham villagers, and Patrasche who tried to stand in his way. Though Subaru didn’t die in the end, passing through the scene of the massacre, the hatred he felt towards Garfiel then still hasn’t vanished even now.

But how much of a decision must Garfiel have made before staining his hands with such atrocities? There must have been something that had triggered it.

Looking back on it now, it doesn’t seem as though the trigger came from Subaru’s end.

In other words, the impetus for the massacre wasn’t something from Subaru, but Garfiel’s end.

Subaru: “Miss Ryuzu. Garfiel may seem rough and reckless, but he’s not a guy easily moved to violence… would that be a safe assessment?”

Ryuzu: “He is a kind boy at heart. He puts up a hard shell and barks before anything else to protect those around him. …The strength he holds within himself is also for that purpose.”

Subaru: “Right, in that case… there’s only one answer.”

Ryuzu: “—?”

Subaru rubbed his nose and turned to face Ryuzu, who was tilting her head.

Then, putting his hand on the crystal at his side and feeling its chill on his palm,

Subaru: “Someone’s been feeding Garfiel these ideas. Whoever it is, their actions are what’s triggering Garfiel’s sudden bouts of violence.”

If all those uncharacteristic acts from Garfiel were done on someone else’s instructions, then it would all make sense. And the most likely candidates for Garfiel’s collaborator would be,

Subaru: “Roswaal, Ram, Miss Ryuzu, or some yet-unseen malevolence…”

Someone from that list was inciting Garfiel to violence.

He must find them out. And only once he has found them, can he have a real conversation with Garfiel.

Subaru: “Just for reference, Miss Ryuzu, can I ask you something?”

Ryuzu: “Hn, what is it?”

Subaru: “—Do you happen to know the contents of the Trial Garfiel took in the Tomb?”

Ryuzu: “…No, I don’t. I’m sorry, but that is not within my knowledge.”

Ryuzu shook her head. Since she is forbidden to tell lies, what she said must be true. Receiving this answer, “Right”, Subaru nodded,

Subaru: “Then let me change the question. —Does another Miss Ryuzu know the contents of the Trial Garfiel took in the Tomb?”

Ryuzu: “…”

Subaru: “This time you’re silent, which can only mean yes.”

Announcing this to the silent Ryuzu, Subaru slightly lifted his face.

Of the Ryuzu Meyer replicants, there were several Ryuzu’s acting as the representative of the Sanctuary. This system where the Ryuzu’s took turns to assume that role from day to day created the problem where the individuals did not necessarily share all of the memories and experiences.

Four replicants play the role of the representative Ryuzu. If we labeled them A B C and D for the sake of distinction, naturally, not all of A’s experiences and memories of her activities during the day would be transmitted to B C and D.

On the day in question, where Garfiel challenged the Trial, failed, and was dragged out— the Ryuzu who saved Garfiel then is not the same Ryuzu standing before Subaru now.

Subaru: “…So the Miss Ryuzu who knows about the Trial, when will she show up next?”

Ryuzu: “…”

Subaru: “The Miss Ryuzu who spoke to me yesterday said she had taken the Trial. Since as a rule you guys cannot lie, what she said must be true. And if the rotation happens daily… then she’ll show up in three days?”

Since he was strapped for time, he would really rather it wasn’t on the last possible date.

At Subaru’s almost pleading question, Ryuzu’ closed lips softened, as she let slip a sigh,

Ryuzu: “No, the me who brought Gar-bo out of the Tomb will show up in two days. The me’s who went in, and the me’s who had not are on a two-by-two rotation.”

She said, with a somewhat exhausted expression on her face.

Chapter 89:
Memories of Snow

1

—After concluding his secret talk with Ryuzu, Subaru walked through the forest alone.

He told her that he needed to think and left her behind with the crystal. To be standing there before a girl with the same face as her own—her original, no less. How pensive a thing.

While Subaru's interest in all this was inexhaustible, he wasn't sure how far he wanted to delve into this topic. But, in any case, the Ryuzu he just spoke to was on his side.

Of those four Ryuzu replicants:

Judging by Ryuzu' words, two of them had been inside the Tomb. That is to say, two Ryuzu's had taken the Trial.

As such, Subaru suspected that the one filling Garfiel with these ideas would be one of those two Ryuzu's who had taken the Trial.

Seeing how there were four of them, it's possible that not all of their opinions were uniform.

Subaru's assumption that, since they all played the same character, all four of them must be the same person, had backfired. While those four were indeed playing the same person, they were each individual existences with their own thoughts and ideals.

And so, it wouldn't be too strange if one Ryuzu had experienced something the others hadn't that caused her thinking to diverge from the rest's.

For convenience's sake, Subaru decided to label the four Ryuzu's Alpha, Beta, Theta, and Sigma. Ryuzu's Alpha and Beta do not know about the Trial, while Ryuzu's Theta and Sigma do.

What he actually wanted to do was the German “Eins”, “Zwei”, “Drei”, but he couldn’t remember the fourth one so that had to be scrapped.

Anyway,

Subaru: “Problem is, meeting with Theta and Sigma will be at least two days from now…”

The timing of the Great Rabbit’s attack on the Sanctuary—or, strictly speaking, the large-scale magic spawning the great snowstorm that will lure the Great Rabbit here, will be five days from now.

Assuming he probably couldn’t come up with a counter-plan immediately after talking with those Ryuzu’s, the remaining three days will offer very little leeway.

In the end, Garfiel would massacre every last villager if it meant preventing the Sanctuary’s liberation.

If they were the ones who convinced him to do this, Ryuzu’s Theta and Sigma will not be easily swayed. Considering the prospects of persuading them, the road ahead was indeed looking dark.

Subaru: “But in exchange for the mounting obstacles… there’s now an opening for dealing with Garfiel, huh. If I can just persuade the two interfering Ryuzu’s, then the problem’s solved…”

If Theta and Sigma were the ones inciting Garfiel to violence, persuading them would be the equivalent of clearing the Garfiel route. Since Subaru could see no way of working things out with Garfiel directly, this was certainly a glimmer of hope, albeit a fragile and feeble one.

Right now, Garfiel’s power was not limited to himself but extended to the twenty-odd non-representative Ryuzu’s—that is, the empty copies without wills of their own.

Without regard for their own individual lives, each copy was an almost mechanical fighting force, and there was not much Subaru could do should Garfiel choose to use them.

Whichever way you look at it, Subaru's situation was beyond unforgiving.

But leaving sentimentalities aside, Subaru would rather avoid coming into conflict with Garfiel.

It was all too clear that neutralizing Garfiel with force would be impossible.

If Subaru really had to take on Garfiel, spurred on by Theta and Sigma and with those girls at his command, Subaru's already slim chances would just drop even lower.

Subaru: "After the flashy way I sealed that Contract with Roswaal, I can't fail. Not planning to, either. Nevermind whether the insurance'll work or not, I still need to put my foot down when I have to."

Subaru tightened his cheeks just as they were beginning to falter, and shook his head, reminding himself.

Then, looking straight ahead once more,

Subaru: "Either way, I'll have to wing it when dealing with Theta and Sigma. Could also try taking a shot with Garfiel and feel him out early, but… maybe later."

Coming out of the forest, Subaru returned to the center of the Sanctuary.

The sun had completely risen, and the residents and the Earlham villagers had begun setting about their daily activities around the settlement.

Giving them glances as he passed, answering the occasional hellos with waves of his hand, Subaru's legs carried him straight towards a place separated from the bustle.

To a place a little further away from the Cathedral and the village center.

—The place where Emilia was sleeping.

—Whenever she closed her eyes, the memories would come back vivid, even now.

White. A world of white.

In that landscape coated in silver, the young Emilia walked alone.

—You mustn't remember this!

A soundless voice cried, but young Emilia, walking with her head downcast, did not hear.

Anxiously looking about her, only to be disappointed by the betrayal of her hopes, she went on dragging her feet through the snow.

—Go back! Please! Don't do anything more!

Young Emilia exhaled a white breath and gazed curiously at the mist expelled from her mouth. Over and over, she went on huffing. Her only clothing were undergarments crafted from thin cloth and a cloak-like garment that covered the whole of her body.

It wasn't an outfit one would wear with traversing this frigid world in mind, but there was nothing to be done.

After all, this was the first time Emilia had experienced a landscape this cold, or had ever seen snow.

The world she knew was a verdant forest abound in warmth and light, one that bore no resemblance to this world buried under ice and snow.

This all-so-familiar place had taken on an unfamiliar face.

And this mystified the young Emilia, such that she was even neglecting to react in the way she intrinsically should have.

—No! Don't go any further! Go back! If you don't, you'll…!

Tearing her throat pleading, destroying it, spitting blood, yet the young Emilia’s legs did not stop. The voice would not reach her as the girl’s legs heartlessly carried her forward.

Her gait as she traversed barefoot over the unknown snowscape was pitiful.

Having lost all sensation of coldness or pain, her feet, cut by stones and branches hidden under the snow, marked her tracks with droplets of blood.

Yet earnestly pressing on, forgetting her pain, and hiding her terror of this unfamiliar world, for what purpose was she pushing forward alone?

—Stop, please… I don’t want to watch anymore… please…

Her pleas would reach no one. Her wish would go unfulfilled. Her hopes would be utterly shot down.

Though she already knew this fact, even in this world of dreams must this cruel fact be thrust upon her. —By showing her her past self, and her greatest mistake, no less.

Emilia: “—Hic.”

Young Emilia’s amethyst eyes, as if sighting hope beyond the haze of the obscuring snow, sparkled.

Her eyes had landed on, as far as young Emilia knew, the trunk of the tallest tree in the world.

The great tree they called “The Tree of Prayers” was the sacred channel through which they poured their prayers to the divine and unknown. An existence treasured and revered by all who lived in the village.

Young Emilia, too, obstinately believed that by touching the great tree’s trunk she could feel its tremendous blessing upon her skin.

How reassuring it must have been in that moment to see that great tree in all its grandeur exactly where it should be.

How much of a salvation it must have been to see, amidst that familiar setting transformed into this strange and alien world, that great tree persevering as a token of her everyday life.

Huffing breath after white breath, Emilia clumsily rushed over to the great tree. The piling snow buried young Emilia to her knees, so although the tree wasn't far away, the girl tumbled time after time, leaving imprints of herself upon pure white snow.

And, after falling face-first multiple times, with her nose red from the cold of the snow, Emilia reached the base of the tree.

Her tensed expression slightly relaxed with relief. Although, since her muscles had grown rigid in the cold, all it amounted to was a twitch.

Emilia: "—?"

Then, as she reached her hand towards one of the roots of the tree, young Emilia seemed to have noticed something. Sliding her hand along the root, with frozen fingers she began digging at its snow-buried tip.

—Stop!!

She dug, and dug.

With singular purpose, spurred by burning impatience, young Emilia dug through the snow.

—Stop! Stop stop stop stop stop!

Not wanting to watch. Not wanting to remember.

Wishing she could look away, shut her eyes, block her ears, and scream to tear this world asunder.

But her non-existent face, non-existent eyes, and non-existent ears could not be dissuaded.

Young Emilia's fingertips touched something.

Slowly, with her own hands, the girl peeled away the last patch of snow—

—STOP IT!!

…

…

……

???: "—You are truly beyond saving."

Emilia: "…"

???: "The proof of your sin. The proof of your corruption. Be cursed be cursed be cursed, and at the end of your suffering…"

Emilia: "…"

???: "Just die. —Daughter of the Witch."

3

???: "—Emilia? Emilia? Oy, are you alright?!"

Emilia: "Aa, e… uh… suba… ru…?"

Woken by someone shaking her shoulders calling to her, Emilia opened her eyes and muttered Subaru's name. She shook her head to recover her hazy consciousness, but,

Emilia: "Subaru, why… are you here…?"

Subaru: "Do I need a reason to be? If it's Emilia-tan's face, I can keep staring for a whole day without getting bored."

Emilia: "Not that, I mean… um."

Perhaps because her consciousness hadn't fully cleared, Emilia's response was still somewhat unsettled.

To wipe away her anxiety, Subaru patted his knees as he stood up with a smile,

Subaru: “Can’t have you letting down your guard around me. I’m really happy you trust me, but I’m still a guy with a ravenous wolf hiding under this cloak of rationality. I’d like you to be a little more mindful of the kind of person I am, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “…? I didn’t forget about you, Subaru. I said something strange while I was waking up, that’s all… but, dozing off without even realizing it…”

Although it didn’t sound like she understood what Subaru was telling her, Emilia’s voice as she replied indicated that she was more or less properly awake. Having confirmed this, Subaru gave the troubled-looking Emilia a nod,

Subaru: “I get that the exhaustion’s piling up, but if you’re gonna sleep it’s better to sleep on the bed. If you keep sleeping on the floor like this it’s gonna give me a heart attack every time I come in here.”

Emilia: “…ah, I’m sorry. I made you worry, didn’t I?”

Subaru: “And I just renewed my resolve too, but seeing this and thinking some new EVENT activated and everything’s ruined had me seriously in a panic, you know. You can even say that seeing your sleeping face today was even more emotional than usual…”

In fact, the shock that struck Subaru when he walked into the room and saw Emilia was beyond description.

Getting no response when he knocked and thinking maybe she had gone out, he entered the room to find Emilia lying there in front of the bed with her silver hair sprawled across the floor.

Surely, no one could blame Subaru for falling into instant despair at that bloodcurdling sight.

That said, the warmth of her body when he held her up and the unmistakable rhythm of her breathing and pulse quickly dispelled those worries.

However,

Subaru: “If that was all of it, I would rather have let you keep sleeping, but… you looked like you were having a really bad nightmare. Was it wrong of me to have woken you up?”

Asleep in his arms, Emilia’s brows were covered in sweat while her face and body twisted in agony. Subaru had personal experience of this himself, and he knew that there is no way to escape from a truly terrifying nightmare. The only way to be swiftly released from the pain was to be called from outside the dream.

To Subaru, who did exactly this, “No”, Emilia shook her head,

Emilia: “I’m reeaally glad you woke me. I was having a pretty… no, a really terrible dream… so, thank you.”

Subaru: “A terrible dream, haunting Emilia-tan… I kinda wanna ask what it’s about, but… I can tell it’s not something that’ll be pleasant to talk about.”

Emilia: “…”

Seeing the wry smile following her silence, Subaru pondered over the cause of Emilia’s nightmare.

Most likely, it was the result of the negative circumstances piling around her. He wasn’t sure what specific images she saw, but,

Subaru: “…Alright, I won’t force you to tell me.”

Seeing Emilia look away as if trying to avoid the topic, Subaru figured it was probably the vivid kind of nightmare.

If it were vague, it’d be easy to talk about. But the fact that she couldn’t showed that it must’ve been something lifelike and real.

This interaction with Emilia was getting off to a bad start, and it wouldn’t make it any easier to carry on the conversation to come.

With a troubled expression, Subaru scratched the tip of his nose, deliberating over how to broach the topic, when Emilia looked up.

Emilia: “So… what is it, Subaru? You couldn’t possibly have come here just to look at my face for no reason, right?”

Subaru: ““Couldn’t possibly”… I don’t think it’s that implausible of a thing for me to do?”

Emilia: “No, you wouldn’t. I mean, you’re always busy running around trying your hardest. You can’t use up your time like that just on me.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, just how diligent a guy do you think I am? You do know that I’m such a slacker that I’d wholeheartedly support the establishment of a “Slacking Appreciation Day”, right?”

No exaggeration and no joke, Subaru was well aware of his nature as a hopeless layabout. When you see a person with no role or purpose in an endless descent into depravity, you’d call that person Natsuki Subaru.

And that was why he never slacked on his daily workouts and pointless skills/hobbies training back in the old world. Because he knew he’d become an utterly hopeless human being the moment he did.

—You don’t really call someone who puts in persistent effort, even without any goal, a slacker. But Subaru didn’t seem to realize that rather obvious fact.

Perhaps wanting to say something about Subaru’s overly critical appraisal of himself, Emilia’s gaze warmed as she heard his reply. Seeing this, Subaru furrowed his brows, but Emilia didn’t remark on it in the end,

Emilia: “It’s fine. Anyway, tell me why you’re here already. Hu~rry~up~.”

Subaru: “What’s with the cuteness all of a sudden…! Uhh, but, right. I was thinking maybe we could go outside for a walk to lighten up the mood a bit…”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “Though, that wouldn’t really lighten it up, would it…”

Seeing Emilia fall silent, Subaru realized he misspoke and scratched his head.

It was obvious from the fact that Emilia’s residence was placed apart from the village center that she wasn’t well received in the Sanctuary.

Being fellow outcasts of their respective races, there really should be a sense of fellowship between them, but it would seem that Half-Elves was a special case.

For the refugees from Earlham, too, their safe escape from the Witch Cult did not directly improve their opinions of Emilia.

Emilia’s treatment in the Sanctuary was no different from her treatment in the Capital: like that of a tumor.

She acted strong when she was with Subaru, but that didn’t mean it was easy for her. And just how did she deal with all those gazes when she was alone?

Being that the situation still hadn’t improved, bringing Emilia outside would only place an unnecessary burden on her.

Subaru: “It’s because of stuff like this that I…”

Aggravated at his own thoughtlessness, Subaru punched himself in the forehead.

Feeling the pain flood over from his knuckles to his skull, Subaru turned to face Emilia, who had widened her eyes at his inexplicable act,

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “—Mm.”

Seeing the change in Subaru’s expression, Emilia sensed that the atmosphere had shifted. She corrected her posture, and, with a calm emotion in her amethyst eyes, she looked back at Subaru.

Her expression told Subaru that it'd be pointless to broach the topic in a roundabout manner. But just how should he say it? He puzzled over his opening line for only an instant, and,

Subaru: "Do you… feel like talking with me about what you saw in the Trial?"

—Subaru could plainly see the horror and anguish washing over her tearing, amethyst eyes.

Chapter 90:
—I'm Sorry

1

—Though he was supposed to have confirmed his resolve, the moment Subaru saw the waves of emotion in her tearing eyes, he felt himself struck with regret.

Asking her that question was no different from ripping open the scars inside Emilia's heart—clawing at her unhealed wounds while using "concern" as his justification.

The pain of this realization was no less than the pain he must have made her feel.

Subaru: "The Tomb's Trial shows you the past… that's what everyone told me."

Emilia: "—Hic."

But, in search of what lay beyond that pain, Subaru treaded even deeper.

Biting down on her lips, a tremor flashed across Emilia's expression, but her trembling pupils did not look away from Subaru.

For now, he decided it'd be best to avoid mentioning that he had taken the Trial. He wasn't going to make the sort of frivolous comment like "If I can beat it, you can beat it too", especially not now that his qualifications had been revoked. Besides, even if he did, she might very well mistake it for a comforting lie.

If that's how it's going to turn out, then he might as well just tell Emilia his honest feelings.

Subaru: "I'm guessing that's why you came back like this… You're agonizing and hurting, yet you keep it all to yourself, and… you're going to challenge the Trial again tonight, aren't you."

Emilia: "…"

Through those four repeating worlds, Emilia had never conveyed the details of her Trial to Subaru. This was partly because Subaru had been practically ignoring her right to challenge the Trials by deciding that she didn't need to be the one to clear them, but also because Emilia never had a chance to talk about it with Subaru.

The former had been resolved by the fact that Emilia was now the only one who could challenge the Trials, and ideally, the latter was in the process of being resolved this very moment.

Hearing this, Emilia's cheeks stiffened as she cast down her gaze.

But before her eyes and their long lashes completely left him, Subaru continued.

Subaru: "But, still."

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "The crushing burden you're carrying, won't you share some of it with me? If your past is something you're afraid to look back on, how about letting me stand by your side as you meet it?"

The downward tilt of her head halted as she timidly looked up at Subaru once more.

He mustn't let her see the weak, indecisive self that he was. And so, with entirely unwarranted abounding confidence, Subaru puffed out his chest as he accepted Emilia's gaze.

After all, bluffing and baseless self-confidence were precisely Subaru's specialties.

Subaru: "Come to think of it, I barely know anything about you, Emilia. I like you… and part of it's because I really like the way you look, but in the time we spent together, everything that I've seen of what you're like on the inside has made me fall unbearably in love with you…"

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: “And that’s why I can say with my head held high that I like you just the way you are now. But, as for what you went through, how you felt, and what you thought before you became the person you are now… I don’t know a thing about that. Because I didn’t feel I needed to know. Because the present and future are more important than the past. …But.”

Emilia: “…but?”

Subaru: “Now, you’re in a situation where you need to look back on your past, and if you’re saying you’re afraid to face it alone… will you give me permission to stand beside you so we can face what must be faced together?”

His permission to suffer Emilia’s hardships for her had already been revoked.

So now, Subaru was asking for the permission to support Emilia from her side, and give her his shoulder to lean on when she is exhausted and close to collapse.

It might only amount to a superficial consolation, but surely, there will be a time when that consolation means all the difference.

Emilia: “…”

Subaru waited intently for Emilia’s reply.

The wavering of her eyes spoke volumes of the intense conflict inside her. Hesitation and indecision, guilt and self-loathing. The various emotions raged inside Emilia’s slender body in a voracious frenzy.

Until finally, Emilia quietly muttered,

Emilia: “Just, by being here… you’re already helping me just by being here for me… and so, to trouble you any further would…”

Subaru: “Being troubled by Emilia isn’t trouble for me at all. It makes me happy to be able to do something for you. And when you’re in trouble and want someone to offer you a hand… I want to be the first person to reach out and help you.”

Emilia: “—h.”

Subaru proclaimed once more as Emilia weakly tried to dismiss his proposal.

As long as Emilia doesn’t refuse him outright, Subaru had no intention of withdrawing. He was well aware that he was treading on a topic she didn’t want to talk about, and no amount of half-hearted refusals was going to dissuade him.

It wasn’t with such flimsy resolve that Subaru had forced that Contract upon Roswaal.

Still conflicted, Emilia firmly closed her eyes and drooped her head.

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Subaru, do you really believe…”

The words that were supposed to follow did not leave Emilia’s lips. Her nobility would not allow her to give voice to those cowardly words.

She could not do something so disgraceful as to doubt the person appealing to her with sincerity.

If she did, she’d be making the same mistake as when Subaru tried to impose his selfishness upon her.

Even when cornered, Emilia’s spirit did not lose its dignity.

And so, Subaru did not pursue the matter further while Emilia slumped her shoulders, regretting those words.

Emilia: “…Ask me what you want to know, Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “If I’m the one explaining it, it’ll just turn into an incoherent mess. …So, it’ll be better if you ask the questions.”

Subaru: "…is that alright?"

Emilia: "—Mm. I'll just think of it as another one of my Trials."

Emilia said resignedly, her smile fleeting, and for a moment, Subaru was left at a loss for words.

Then, shaking his head to compose himself, Subaru pointed at the bed, suggesting a change of location.

Subaru: "Anyway, this might be a long conversation, so how about we sit down?"

Emilia: "…Yeah, you're right."

Correcting her posture, Emilia seated herself on the bed. Subaru pulled over a chair, and sat down facing Emilia.

Smoothing out the wrinkles on her clothes, Emilia waited for Subaru to speak.

Having reached that crucial juncture, Subaru hesitated for only a few seconds on what to ask first, before coming up with the words.

Subaru: "What kind of past did you see in the Trial, Emilia? Going by what I heard from someone who knows… it's something like the memories of your regrets?"

Subaru asked, carefully choosing his words so that she wouldn't notice that he had taken it.

The First Trial was facing your past. But that doesn't mean the past that Subaru saw was "A past that actually happened". What it was was a fresh theatrical production based on his guilt and regrets towards his family in his original world.

So then, just what was the Trial like for Emilia?

Listening to Subaru's question, Emilia remoistened her parched lips, and,

Emilia: "The… past that I saw, was… probably a memory from before I went to sleep.”

Subaru: “—? Before you went to sleep…?”

Emilia: “Yes, before I went to sleep. The memory is vague, and not very clear, but… in it, I was still small, so that’s only to be expected.”

Emilia closed her eyes as she searched through her memories, while Subaru seemed to be confused by her explanation.

He could understand what she meant by “I was still small”. Most likely, the Trial was showing her past from when she was young.

But, “Before I went to sleep”—was the part Subaru couldn’t understand.

Subaru: “Hold on… what do you mean before you went to sleep? It’s not like when you go to bed at night, right?”

Emilia: “No, it’s not. Before I went to sleep was… before I fell asleep inside the ice in a great tree in the forest. That was reeaally, really long ago.”

Subaru: ““Inside the ice”… what’s that supposed to mean?”

With no context being given, Subaru wasn’t sure if she was making it impossible to understand on purpose.

But regardless, Subaru’s imagination brandished its claws, dragging its chilling edges down his spine.

Feeling the burning impatience pounding against his chest, Subaru tried to keep himself calm as best as he could.

Subaru: “Please answer me… Emilia. What do you mean “Inside the ice in a great tree”?”

Emilia: “…It’s exactly what it sounds like.”

Subaru: “…”

Pausing for a beat, Emilia looked up and told Subaru.

Emilia: “All that time, I was frozen with the great tree in the forest. And it was only after a reeeally, really long time… that Puck found me.”

2

???: “—I’ve finally found you.”

—Who’s there?

???: “Sorry… I’m sorry. I’m so sorry… for leaving you here alone. I’ve been searching forever. Constantly, and constantly, I’ve been searching and searching for you.”

—Where… am I? It’s so… cold.

???: “I’ll get you out right away. …Such a lonely place, all by yourself… why did a child have to go through… why did it take me so long to…”

—Say… who are you? Why…’re you crying?

???: “—Because you’re the most lovely thing in this world. Because I’m so happy to see you again.”

—You’re… that glad?

???: “Yes. It was for you… it was in order to see you again, that I was reborn.”

—Who are you?

???: “I… I’m your greatest companion. Your one greatest, truest companion.”

—Then, you’re my…

???: “—Yes, that’s right. From this day forth, I will be your family. From this moment onward, you’ll never be alone again. —This, I promise you.”

—Really? Then, I'm…

3

Emilia: "—reeaally glad."

Emilia held her hands to her chest, reminiscing on a happier time.

Listening to her words, Subaru felt his mouth rapidly drying.

Emilia, sleeping inside the ice.

In the Great Tree of Prayers of her homeland. Frozen within its trunk, Emilia remained there until Puck saved her.

Just how long a time was it—?

Subaru: "Emilia… the place you lived in would be Elior Forest, right? The one that was frozen a long time ago, where the ice is gradually spreading even now?"

Emilia: "Mn, it is. By the time I woke up, they were calling it the "Ice Forest". —But it was a bright and luscious place bathed in sunlight before I went to sleep. It never snowed when I lived there with everyone."

Subaru: "Luscious… no, more importantly… who's everyone?"

Subaru didn't know much about that place, so the before-and-after of Elior Forest was unknown to him. But here, it was something else that caught his attention.

Emilia: "Everyone is everyone. Everyone I lived with in the forest… all the Elves."

Subaru: "The Elves… then, your family was there too? Your mom and dad, and… maybe siblings, too."

Emilia: "…"

However, seeing Emilia's eyes filled with sadness, Subaru once again realized that he had misspoken.

Emilia must've said it at some point before. That Puck was like her foster parent, and her only family.

Subaru was supposed to have known that Emilia had lost her family in one fashion or another.

Subaru: "I'm sor… I didn't mean…"

Emilia: "It's fine. You're just worried for me, Subaru. …But my family wasn't in the forest. Everyone in the village was very kind to me, and always smiled at me, but… I had no blood-relatives in that forest."

Subaru: "…if there's no one, then, your parents are…?"

At that question, Emilia quietly shook her head.

She fiddled with the ends of her braid as if to distract herself, then,

Emilia: "They were both gone by the time I was self-aware. I didn't think it was all that strange at the time. …I did have someone who was like a mother to me… who was reeaally kind, and strong, and cool… I had someone like that."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "But that person, and everyone else… when I fell asleep, they all went to sleep as well. Even now, deep in Elior Forest, so many people remain there in unwaking sleep."

Subaru: "Hha—?!"

Speaking in a dispassionate voice, Emilia seemed to be tasking herself to state only the facts. Subaru's throat clogged up at the content of her words, but Emilia paid it no mind as she continued.

Emilia: "After I woke up, Puck and I went on watching over everyone sleeping. So that someday, when someone wakes up like I did, they wouldn't feel lost, not knowing anything… thinking this, we stayed there."

Subaru: "…Hold on a second."

The information load was so dense that Subaru's brain was struggling to keep up.

What on earth happened in Elior Forest on the day Emilia first saw it snow?

Subaru: "From what I know, Elior Forest began freezing… a little over a hundred years ago… I mean, I must've heard it while I was in the Royal Selection Hall or something."

Emilia: "Mm. I was reeaally surprised too when I went to study at the Mansion and learned of this."

Subaru: "So, you were there when Elior Forest first froze, right? Do you know how it happened?"

Emilia: "—No, I don't."

Emilia shook her head to Subaru's question.

Seeing Subaru furrow his brows, she looked down with a pained expression.

Emilia: "I really don't. Whatever happened back then… I can't remember it clearly at all. All I remember is that I was little, and I was terribly scared. But since I went on sleeping for so long, those memories are vague too…"

Subaru: "You mentioned that you were little… but about how old were you back then?"

Emilia: "…I think… I was around seven."

Subaru: "Seven… and it's safe to assume that Elves count their age the same way as humans, right?"

At this, Emilia nodded.

If Elves count their age the way people normally do, then it'd increment by one every passing year. Elves are well known to be a long-living race, and Emilia, being a Half-Elf, should be the same. On the other hand, even the long-living Elves must go through a childhood, so the seven-year-old Emilia was beyond any blame.

Although, with some simple arithmetics, this means that Emilia's current age would be seven plus a-hundred-odd years.

Subaru: "The age gap's nothing to worry about at this point… And considering we're from different worlds to begin with, that's nothing, really…"

Emilia: "…Subaru, what's wrong? Did I say something funny, or…"

Subaru: "Nope, nope. I was just thinking that you and me have a really serious age gap, that's all."

While putting his thoughts in order and catching his breath, Subaru threw in a joke to lighten the mood. Although the joke was probably lost on her, Emilia's tense cheeks did relax somewhat as she let out a small sigh,

Emilia: "We do… but since I was asleep and unconscious for so long, I'm not really sure I've matured to my real age…"

Subaru: "Really? I don't exactly know how fast Elves grow, but if it's anything like humans, I'd say you're pretty matured."

Subaru casually looked over Emilia on the bed before snorting off her worries.

Her limbs were fully grown, and her body had all the curvatures of femininity. Her melancholy amethyst eyes and dream-like features anointed her with a mysterious beauty, traveling in between that of a girl and woman.

Emilia was plenty enough matured already.

But it seems Subaru was missing the point of Emilia's worries, while with a "No", she shook her head.

Emilia: "Sleeping in the ice did not stop time for me, but only put my consciousness to sleep. So my body kept growing even inside the ice. Controlling my body felt so different from when I went to sleep that, for a time after I woke, I stumbled over so many things."

Subaru: “So being in that ice… also has its flaws, huh.”

Having her seven-year-old body when she fell asleep turned into a fully-grown woman when she woke must have been bewildering for her.

It happens quite a lot in animes and mangas for children to have their bodies suddenly turned into adults, and the adaptation must not be easy. It’s only natural that Emilia would’ve been distressed by the discrepancy between her mind and body.

Emilia: “When Roswaal brought me out of the forest to study outside… and I learned that I had slept for nearly a hundred years, I was reeaally shocked. To find out that I had been sleeping for so long…”

Subaru: “If people age normally inside the ice… then for anyone other than long-living Elves it’d be all ov…”

“Over”, was what he was about to say, when he noticed that he had just been told an incredible fact.

Shutting his eyes, Subaru quietly put the numbers together in his head. Adding and subtracting, and then rechecking it several times just to be sure, his doubts turned into definite suspicion.

Subaru: “Hey, Emilia… you just said you slept for almost a hundred years?”

Emilia: “I did, yeah…?”

Subaru: “And you were about seven before you went to sleep, right?”

Emilia: “I was. Subaru, what’s…”

Subaru: “Emilia. How long has it been since Puck woke you up?”

At least, from what he had heard, Roswaal brought Emilia out of the forest about half a year ago. Which means Emilia would have lived with Puck in Elior Forest until then. The question is, how much time had passed between her falling asleep, waking, and meeting Roswaal?

Still with a troubled expression, Emilia placed her finger to her lips.

Emilia: "…About, six or seven years… or so."

Subaru: "…"

Hearing Emilia's answer, Subaru's suspicion turned into absolute conviction.

The fact shocked through Subaru's body like a lightning bolt.

Seven years after she was born, she spent nearly one hundred years sleeping, then spent another seven years awake.

Which would mean that—

—Emilia is around 107 years old. Looks like she's 18. While mentally, she's 14.

Subaru: "Her actual age, apparent age, and mental age… are all messed up…"

That kind of discrepancy was only possible because she is an Elf.

So many questions Subaru had about Emilia's behavior up to now suddenly made sense.

Subaru had found her rather ignorant to flattery for an over-a-century-old Elf, and he couldn't help noticing her disproportionate lack of experience of being around people, plus the cuteness of her occasionally childlike demeanor was always quite conspicuous.

So all of it was the result of having spent the majority of her life in the ice…

Subaru: "Fourteen… that's no different than Felt…"

Why did a girl this young have to shoulder such great responsibility? Subaru's irritation towards the Royal Selection and for Roswaal was only mounting.

Then, reflecting on how the topic he brought up to lighten the mood had completely derailed, Subaru cut into another certainly-not-unrelated topic.

Subaru: “Earlier, you said you don’t know why the forest was frozen. So then what did you see in the Trial? That vague memory of before you were frozen… that’s what you saw, right?”

Emilia: “…I think so. The scenery was definitely from before I went to sleep… so I think it’s a memory of a time that really existed.”

Subaru: “So then, maybe the fact that you’re so terrified of the memory is because in it you encountered whatever froze you and the other Elves, and you’re subconsciously rejecting it…”

Emilia: “—That’s not…”

Subaru: “I mean, it doesn’t get scarier than that, right? The Trial shows you your greatest regret. So maybe what you’re seeing is…”

Emilia: “I said you’re wrong!”

Emilia shouted, shattering Subaru’s overheated train of thought.

But she immediately blinked as if regretting raising her voice, and then closed her eyes to shake off her hesitation as she turned her watery eyes to Subaru.

Emilia: “That’s not… what I saw in the Trial. It wasn’t anything like that. …What I saw was…”

Subaru: “E-Emil…”

Emilia: “—Devil-child.”

A chill like an icy spear pierced into Subaru’s spine.

Emilia buried her face in her hands, hiding her expression. From beyond her covered face, her voice continued quietly, without emotion.

Emilia: “The seed of disaster. Silver abomination. The creature that should never have been born. Source of all hatred. Unforgivable spirit. Demon. —The Witch's Daughter."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "Everyone who was kind to me, who smiled at me, said those things to me in the freezing snow, and…"

Emilia's limbs, and her entire body, was faintly trembling.

Emilia: "I don't remember anything that happened after I was inside the ice. But I can't forget how everyone must have cursed me, frozen there. And how they must continue to curse me still."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "And so, I want to free everyone from the ice… and apologize."

Absently, with her face in tears, Emilia looked up, as if seeing them, before quietly bowing her head.

Emilia: "I'm sorry I caused you trouble. —Everyone, I love you all."

Chapter 91:
False Sleep

Listening to Emilia’s tearful wish, Subaru felt his entire body stabbed by pangs of remorse. The guilt of digging up her painful memories to the point that he made her cry tormented his heart to no end.

From Emilia’s faltering words, he could sense the love and gratitude she felt for the people she had lived with inside Elior Forest. Yet, it all changed on the day the snow first fell, when her fond memories were replaced by their voices, full of hatred and malice.

Subaru couldn’t possibly know what they really thought, trapped inside the ice. But regardless, Emilia’s days of warmth and happiness had been sealed along with them inside that thick, unmelting ice.

Subaru: “…But why did they say those things to you? From what you just told me… it’d only make sense if the one who froze the forest in ice was… you. But, were you really powerful enough to do something that incredible when you were that little?”

Emilia: “—I don’t know. Back then, I knew far less of the world than I do now. I knew nothing of what I could or couldn’t do, and I was always imposing on everyone’s kindness. But… without Puck, I doubt I have the power to freeze an entire forest by myself, even now.”

Subaru: “But if you had Puck… you could do it?”

Emilia: “…”

At Subaru’s question, Emilia wordlessly nodded.

Her half-hearted affirmation was probably because she was afraid Subaru would mistake her for the culprit behind the freezing of the forest. But that wasn’t what Subaru was thinking at all.

Not because he was biased, but because of a simple matter of sequence.

Subaru: “You don’t have to look so worried, I’m not gonna misunderstand. You met Puck way after the Forest had already been frozen… by almost a hundred years, right? The freezing and you meeting Puck is totally in the wrong order.”

Emilia: “M-Mn… yes, but…”

Sensing her unease, Subaru gave her his conclusion. Receiving this, Emilia nodded, though her expression was too tense to be called relieved.

Resisting the urge to furrow his brows at her reaction, Subaru strained himself to keep his expression composed in front of her as he folded his arms.

—He had a vague feeling that something was off even while he was listening to Emilia’s story. But it was here, in this instant, that he felt this sense of incongruity more intensely than ever.

It’s only natural. Natsuki Subaru had never delved into Emilia’s past or inner thoughts before this, but had been content merely to coddle her and love her for the surface of her character like he would a child.

And so, this is Subaru’s Trial—the one which he must start from.

Now that Subaru had lost his qualification to challenge the Trials of the Tomb, this will be the Trial that will determine whether he has the right to stand before Emilia, and to support her at her side.

Subaru: “I understand what kind of scene you saw in the Trial now. …So, if we flip this around, what do you think you’ll have to do to beat it?”

Emilia: “That’s… um, it’s…”

Emilia’s gaze wandered. Not because she was hesitating whether to answer, but because it was so vague that she was struggling to find the words.

Emilia had no clear insights about how to break through the Trial. On her very first attempt, she was abruptly presented with a long-held quandary, and now she was being asked to give a perfect answer.

But, in the first place, the First Trial only requires the challenger to give an answer to the past they've been avoiding—do this, and they will pass the Trial, that's what Echidna had told him.

Affirm it, or deny it, either would suffice as an answer.

Emilia had already accepted the sad memory of being rejected by all those who had been kind to her. So, does that mean she'd have to get over it in order to pass the Trial?

To get over something you've left behind in your past—how does one do such a thing?

Subaru had no clear answers to give her. But, having overcome the First Trial and experienced the Second, there were some things that Subaru did know. Just through the few interactions he'd had with the character named Echidna, he did know this:

—Chances are, the Trial would not present its challenger with an impossible problem.

That's only natural, considering its creator, Echidna's, goals.

What Echidna desires are the "Results" to sate her curiosity, a treasure which shines the brightest when attained through the passing of a Trial. At least, that should be what that Witch is thinking.

In this case, the result would be whether the challenger affirms or denies their past.

In other words, Emilia should already have everything she needs to pass the Trial. If she could just figure out what the conditions are and give her reply, that would be her solution. So then, the obstacle here isn't the Trial itself, but—

Subaru: "If you keep challenging without having an answer… it's always going to turn out the same way."

Emilia: "—So, what do you think, Subaru?"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "Having heard my story… about my Trial and my past… what do you think? Do you have any ideas on how to beat it? I'm still wondering what I should do…"

Last night after her Trial, Emilia must've spent the whole night asking herself this question instead of sleeping.

It must've been like this, trapped in this vortex of soul-abrading thoughts, that she passed out in the end.

Subaru: "Emilia… earlier you said that you wanted to melt the ice and thank everyone…"

Emilia: "Mm."

Subaru: "But why do you feel this way?"

Emilia had been cruelly treated by those people who were closest to her.

So for what reason would she want to save those men and women, trapped beneath the ice?

Subaru: "Your last memories of them were how they cursed and rejected you, right? After those cruel and hateful things they said to you… why do you still want to help them?"

Emilia: "—Subaru… if I said a bunch of awful things to you now, would you no longer want to help me?"

Subaru: "…"

He fell speechless.

Emilia's amethyst eyes were gazing at Subaru, full of sincerity, and the indecisive weakness in her pupils had vanished as she answered.

Emilia: “Yes, my last memories of everyone was painful… but just because that was what happened at the end, that doesn’t invalidate all the time we’ve spent together. We’ve shared many good memories, too.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “I don’t want to forget those, while only remembering how they hurt me… I want to save everyone so we can laugh and smile together again… I know it’s greedy of me, but that’s how I feel…”

Saying this, Emilia held her hands to her lips as she peeked at Subaru’s reaction.

She looked as though she had just accidentally voiced some ugly part of herself and was afraid of being despised for it.

Perceiving Emilia’s unease, Subaru thought to himself,

—She’s just the kind of person who couldn’t go without finding that wish greedy, huh.

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Subaru: “Nothing, I was just thinking… that you’re completely right.”

Even if they only wanted to hurt her in the end, that didn’t mean all the bonds and memories they’ve shared had disappeared.

Rem and Ram had both killed Subaru in the past, but that didn’t stop him from striving his best to save them, and it was those same feelings that had kept him going during those loops starting from the Capital.

What Emilia felt was just what Subaru himself had felt—that’s all.

Subaru: “…”

But just when he felt this sense of relief, Subaru noticed the greatest incongruity yet.

Just how could he have overlooked such an astoundingly obvious discrepancy?

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Seeing Subaru staring at her with his face frozen stiff, Emilia’s eyes wavered with confusion. Yet, despite realizing that he was worrying her, Subaru still couldn’t pull himself together. Because,

—Inside Emilia’s heart, she had already reached her answer to her past.

Subaru: “…”

Deep in Great Elior Forest, the Elven tribe she had once spent her days together with are sleeping, frozen in ice. In that remembered past, on the day the forest was buried by snow, Emilia had endured all the malice of the people she had trusted, and yet, she proclaimed without hesitation that she wanted to save them, and thank them.

That is the decisive answer to the past she had tried to avoid.

If Subaru’s resolve to admit his stupidity and say goodbye to his parents in his past met the conditions for passing the First Trial, then Emilia’s determination here should be deemed just as worthy.

And yet, the Trial refused to recognize that she had fulfilled its conditions.

Perhaps, it was because Subaru had woken her and interrupted the Trial. But even in the previous loops after the first night, when Subaru wasn’t there to wake her, never once had she passed the Trial.

Was Emilia’s answer just not suited for the Trial that was given to her?

Subaru: “But, that’s…”

If Echidna is the one ruling on the Trials, could the worthiness of the answer simply depend on the Witch’s mood at the time? Yet, Echidna herself had declared that it doesn’t matter what answer she is given, but merely that she receives an answer.

It's unlike her to reject an answer given by a challenger. Yet, assuming that's true—it did occur to Subaru that maybe, for whatever reason, she was rejecting only Emilia's answer.

It tormented his heart to consider it.

Because to consider it would be to recognize the possibility that "Only Emilia can never break through the Trials".

Subaru: "As if I could just accept that… I'm begging you, Echidna…"

Emilia: "Subaru, what's wrong? Did I say something strange again…?"

Subaru: "No… it's not you, Emilia. If anything, it's a problem with the examiner. …Now, you said you wanted to melt the ice and save everyone, but… were you not able to? Before Roswaal brought you outside, you and Puck were living inside the forest, right? There must've been plenty of time to try…"

Although he knew it was a cruel question, Subaru still asked it.

Having heard Emilia's past, Subaru understood that freeing those people from the ice would only mean having those same people showering abuses upon Emilia once more.

Emilia herself must've agonized about this many times over. Her nails dug into her arms as she cast down her eyes,

Emilia: "I've tried with Puck many times, but… I couldn't melt the ice."

Subaru: "When you say you couldn't melt it… do you mean mentally couldn't or… physically couldn't…?"

Even if it was a mental reason, Subaru had no intention of blaming her.

It's not easy to do something that you know for a fact will hurt you, that's the same for anyone.

However, at Subaru's question, Emilia weakly replied "Physically couldn't… I think",

Emilia: "That ice is a special ice… it wouldn't melt no matter what we tried from the outside. Maybe only the one who cast the spell could reverse it, or we'll need something even more powerful… that's why I accepted Roswaal's proposal…"

Subaru: "Proposal…?"

Emilia: "Ah…"

Seeing Subaru's brows furrow, Emilia covered her mouth as if she had just said something she shouldn't have.

However, faced with Subaru's silent gaze, Emilia's shoulders immediately dropped,

Emilia: "Roswaal, we… made an agreement."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "He came with an emblem, asked me to hold it… and once he saw the gem glow red, he told me about the Royal Selection… and he said…"

Perhaps, the fact that he'd find Emilia in the forest and that the emblem would glow when she held it were also written in the Gospel.

Subaru could almost see—in his imaginings, Roswaal's strange smile as he reached out towards Emilia and said:

Emilia: "…"If you can ascend to the throne, then surely, your wish to melt the ice in this forest can also be fulfilled"“

Subaru: "…and you believed him?"

Emilia: "I was pretty desperate, I guess. He didn't tell me the details of how to melt the ice, but… I accepted his offer, and left the forest with Roswaal. Puck… he didn't object, but just came with me without saying anything."

Subaru: "So that's why you decided to participate in the Royal Selection… before, when you said you had a selfish reason… that's what you meant?"

Emilia once said that, unlike the other candidates, she was participating in the Royal Selection for a very selfish reason. Subaru had avoided prying into the details thus far, but now everything was finally coming together.

Emilia: "…You must think I'm terrible, right?"

While Subaru pieced this together in his mind, Emilia quietly murmured.

When he looked up, he saw Emilia timidly watching him with her lips quivering.

Emilia: "All the others… everyone has an amazing resolve as their reason for competing in the Royal Selection, but mine's just a reeeally personal problem."

Subaru: "But I think wanting to help everyone in that village is really amazing as well. The number of people you're helping doesn't diminish how amazing your motive is… and you weren't lying when you said what you said in the Royal Selection Hall, right?"

Emilia: "What I said in the Royal Selection Hall…"

Subaru: "That you want to see everyone treated as equals… I don't think those words were a lie."

At first, maybe she was just seeking some resolution to circumstances which were beyond her control. But, as Emilia learned of the outside world and of the largeness of a hundred years of time, surely, she would have had a chance to think.

Subaru didn't feel that the words she spoke at the Royal Selection Hall were just insincere, superficial varnish.

If those were her genuine thoughts, and her reasons for wanting to win the Royal Selection remain the same even now, Subaru would have no cause to look down on her.

Subaru: “So it’s alright, you don’t have to look so worried. I’m on your side and you can rely on me, that hasn’t changed since last night. My shoulders are yours, even if you say that you’re fine.”

Emilia: “Ah… um, about last night…”

Subaru: “Don’t, I’ll feel horrible if you apologize. Well, I’ll just say this… I’ll always stay at your side where you can lean on me whenever you need me. Even though I’m happy to see you stand on your own, it’s fine to be a little weak once in a while as well.”

Thumping his hand to his chest, Subaru relaxed his lips, and saw Emilia let out a relieved sigh. Then instantly, as if being overtaken by that relief, her upper body began swaying,

Emilia: “Now that I feel relieved… suddenly, I…”

Subaru: “That’s because you just had a terrible dream and didn’t get much sleep. Don’t push yourself, it’s alright to take a little nap. I won’t do anything, just stay here and watch over you.”

Emilia: “Although that part about “won’t do anything” reeeally bothers me…”

While somewhat minding by that unnecessarily-appended statement, Emilia’s silver hair went on swaying as she fought the temptation to sleep. Subaru placed his fingers on her forehead, and gently pushed her slender body down.

Emilia: “Aa…”

Subaru: “Don’t worry, just get to sleep.”

Without leaving any room for debate, he laid her down on the bed.

Drawing the sheets over her delicate figure, Subaru pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat himself down where he could better observe Emilia’s face as she slept.

Subaru: “You’ve been talking non-stop, and your head must be exhausted, so if what I said could relax you a little… then get some nice rest. Because we’ll need you to do your best again tonight.”

Emilia: “…Is it really alright to spoil me like this?”

Subaru: “Of course it is. Just keep getting more and more spoiled. I’ll pamper you till you’re so spoiled that you’re all rotten inside.”

Seeing Subaru give her a shrug, Emilia quietly laughed as she lay on the bed. Then, still keeping her gaze on Subaru, Emilia slowly reached out her arm from under the sheets,

Emilia: “—hand.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Emilia: “If you’re going to spoil me, will you… hold my hand? Just until I fall asleep, please?”

Subaru: “Ooho, leave it to me.”

Subaru took her small, delicate hand, smiling as he savored the luxurious smoothness of her palm. Emilia smiled in return as she followed Subaru’s advice and softly closed her eyes.

It didn’t take long before she exhaled a quiet breath of sleep.

Subaru: “…I hope you can have some good dreams, for just a little while.”

Watching Emilia as she lay quietly in bed, Subaru gently brushed aside the few strands of silver hair on her forehead and dropped his eyes to the hand still holding his.

If feeling someone else’s existence like this could free her from the loneliness of her dreams, then he’d be glad. Because to be left alone in this room, endlessly tormented by nightmares, would be far too cruel for her.

Subaru: “Well, anyway… sure learned a lot today.”

Sitting there, holding her hand, Subaru straightened his back as he chewed over the details of their conversation.

Emilia's past, and her reason for competing in the Royal Selection. Roswaal's proposal as he brought her outside, and why Emilia had no choice but to accept it.

And most importantly, Emilia's Trial, and its true motives for rejecting her even though she should have already reached her answer—leaving those loose ends untied, and having put Emilia to sleep, here he was.

Subaru: "…"

Quietly, he gazed at Emilia as she slept.

It might've been that it pained him to see her so frail, and so he decided to postpone it for now—but that wasn't why. There was a reason Subaru put off getting those essential answers and practically forced her to go to sleep.

Something that would've been impossible to do—if Emilia was still awake.

Subaru: "But, all things considered… this is all I can think of."

Over the past loops, the details that tugged at him and other circumstantial evidence all forced him to consider this possibility. But there was only one way to be sure, and it can be easily done now.

And, if he is right, it would definitely be the light to break through this darkness—

He breathed in, and held his breath.

While listening to the thumping of his own heart and the rushing of his blood, Subaru reached out to confirm it.

Opposite his right hand, which was holding Emilia's, Subaru reached out with his left—towards the center of her slender, pale neck while she soundly slept, and, Subaru: “You aren’t really sleeping, are you?”

He felt its cold, hard touch at his fingertips.

Straining his voice as he said this, the words nevertheless came out.

A few moments passed in silence, and just when Subaru’s heart began to blaze with burning impatience—suddenly,

“Ah, so you’ve noticed. —I’m so glad, Subaru.”

From inside the green crystal at his fingertips, the androgynous voice of a spirit echoed directly within Subaru’s skull.

Chapter 92:
A Lie

Puck: “Feels like it’s been ages since we talked like this.”

Subaru: “Well it has been… right, almost two weeks since you’ve gone missing. Your owner’s been worried sick looking all over for you, and you were nowhere to be found.”

It was a strange sensation, hearing the words steep directly into his skull instead of vibrating through the air. Nevertheless, listening to Puck’s voice, still as carefree as ever, Subaru was struggling to keep his inner rage from seeping into his reply.

More infuriated than elated to get his expected—or rather, hoped-for reaction, it was too much for Subaru to take lying down.

Puck: “It seems, over the two weeks we haven’t talked… you’ve built up quite a bit of resentment towards me.”

Subaru: “You know why that is… right? Don’t make me spell it out for you.”

Puck: “Right. The things I said in front of the blue-haired girl before I stopped coming out… now that I think about it, it was pretty thoughtless of me. I really did reflect on it.”

Subaru: “…! That’s not what we’re talking about!”

What was thoughtless was digging up something Subaru had already forgotten he was angry about. And to top it off, it completely derailed the conversation from what they ought to be discussing.

“Don’t get so angry…”, Puck pouted at Subaru’s outburst,

Puck: “I know that. I just wanted to apologize. If we don’t clear up some of the bad blood between us before moving onto the main topic, we wouldn’t be having a real heart-to-heart, now would we?

…Especially now that I'm in a position where there is so much I'll need to ask of you."

Subaru: "Okay, you good? If you're done stroking your self-satisfaction, let's get on with the conversation. You know, the one you want to have, about the main topic."

Acknowledging Puck's apology with some perfunctory acceptance, Subaru glared at the crystal as he pushed the conversation forward.

Reflecting Subaru's gaze in its translucent gleam, the stone at Emilia's chest was glowing with a dark-green luminescence.

Subaru clicked his tongue, and,

Subaru: "Anyway, this isn't a good place to talk. For now, let's go outside. We don't know when Emilia'll wake up. Better change locations befor…"

Puck: "I am sorry, but I can't. —And that would count as a part of our main topic as well."

While gazing at the sleeping Emilia, Subaru heard his proposal shot down by Puck's telepathic words. For a moment, Subaru made an expression as if his nose had been pinched,

Subaru: "That wasn't a "Don't wanna" kind of rejection… You can't? What's that supposed to mean?"

Puck: "Only what it sounds like. In my present state, going outside the crystal… or basically, manifesting in the external world is currently impossible for me. If it weren't, did you really think I would ever let Lia feel this sad and alone?"

Subaru: "—."

Hearing Puck say this as if were a matter of course, Subaru's mind fell into silence.

The fact is, considering everything that's happened between Subaru and this spirit up to now, Subaru honestly felt like doubting the credibility of Puck's words.

But aside from Puck's tendency to always show up late when it actually matters, fundamentally—he exists solely for Emilia's sake, and his feelings for Emilia are genuine. Subaru considered these points to be beyond any doubt.

Which means,

Subaru: "Some circumstance, or some reason… is preventing you from coming outside?"

Puck: "That's right. I haven't even been able to reach out through thoughts like this. And so it was very fortunate that you suspected this and called to me in the crystal. I doubt anyone else could have secured such an opportunity."

Subaru: "Anyone else…?"

Puck: "It's very simple, the only one who could be this close to Lia while she's unconscious would be you. Besides, even if by chance someone did touch the crystal, there was the problem of whether our affinity would allow us to communicate through thoughts. But we've done this before, so I knew I could speak to you this way."

Subaru: "…Now that you mention it, we have, haven't we? So, what is it you want from me?"

Puck: "Hm…?"

Subaru: "Now that someone has finally met these preconditions and, by some divine chance, called out to you… You must've been prepared to not let this million-to-one chance slip away. So, with the short time that we have, what do you have to tell me?"

Puck: "—."

Subaru's words were met with a meaningful silence. In his mind, he could almost imagine the unseen cat-spirit smiling a wide and human-ish grin.

Without betraying Subaru's imaginings, Puck laughed, his voice unable to conceal his delight.

Puck: “So I was right to expect great things from you after all… though it pains me to think that I would have to entrust Lia to someone other than myself.”

Subaru: “…I can pass on what you’re thinking to Emilia, if you want.”

The latter part of Puck’s joyful words became laced with gloom. Sensing this change about him, Subaru lowered his eyes. His suggestion had been no more than a consoling thought. But, having said it, it might actually be a good idea.

After losing Puck, who had been holding up the core of her heart, Emilia was in an unsettled state. She was enduring it for now, but as the passage of time and her repeated failures in the Trials abrade away her body and mind, her weakness will begin to show through. If that’s how it will turn out, then maybe offering her some relief here would—

Puck: “Better not. If she learns that I’ve been talking to someone behind her back, in the worst case, Lia’s mind could break.”

But, before Subaru could go any further with that thought, he was stopped by Puck’s dejected voice. Trying to take in the meaning of those words, “Hhaa…”, Subaru expelled a dry sigh in the physical world,

Subaru: “And… what’s that supposed to mean?”

Puck: “It means exactly what it sounds like. If you act as an intermediary and convey my words to Lia, she will find out that I am not truly asleep inside the crystal. If she realizes that despite keeping me from manifesting and preventing me from contacting anyone I am not actually silenced, it would likely cause her precarious mental balance to collapse.”

Subaru: “Wai, wait a minute—!”

Subaru shook his head, calling for Puck’s piling words to stop.

Since he had no body, with only the crystal’s sheen for Subaru to look on, Puck’s expression was imperceptible. But, at least from

Puck's voice, Subaru judged that this was no attempt at deception.

Subaru: "Do you… realize what you're saying? Just now… it's like you're saying that it's Emilia herself who's preventing you from coming outside…"

Puck: "…"

Subaru: "And silence you…? What're you talking about? Emilia's been calling out for you, wailing and in tears, asking for your help… so how can you…! It wasn't mine, it wasn't anyone else's, it was your name that she was calling when she was exhausted and about to crumble! So why're you…!"

Puck: "…Ah, that's right. You would be the first person to be upset to hear Lia call someone else's name before yours, Subaru."

Subaru: "—Tch!!"

Those words were utterly beside the point, but, realizing how they accurately captured the core of his thoughts, Subaru's throat clamped shut with an incomprehensible and violent emotion.

It was in hopes of becoming the foremost in Emilia's heart that he had toiled and struggled thus far. And the fact that he didn't hold that place in her heart bothered him to no end. That was the truth.

At the same time, it drove him mad with rage to see that the one who did occupy that spot in Emilia's heart, who, despite possessing far more power than Subaru and professing to hold Emilia above all the world, was failing to take any action for her sake.

And so, when he was told that it was not him, not Puck, but Emilia herself who was responsible for that fact, how could he possibly just accept it?

Subaru: "So, what… You mean to say that every time Emilia was broken by the Trials, worn down by loneliness, smiling in tears reminiscing on her painful past, every bit of that was just a performance and a lie? —You expect me to believe that?!"

If those tears, those cries, and those laments had all been an act to deceive the people around her, then Emilia must certainly be some gifted actress. Rather than aiming for the throne, she should be aiming for an Oscar instead.

If one could ignore the obvious fact that Emilia had neither the talent nor reason to deceive Subaru and the others, that is.

Subaru: “There’s no way… Nevermind constantly fooling everyone around her, she gets crushed by guilt just over telling the tiniest lie. That’s the kind of girl Emilia is…”

Puck: “Subaru, calm down. I’m not speaking ill of Emilia like in your worst-case imaginings. So just calm down.”

Subaru: “Worst-case imaginings…? What worst-case imaginings… You bastard, stop peeking into my head! That’s got nothing to do with this…! No matter what happens, I’ll never think of Emilia like…”

Puck: “—NATSUKI SUBARU!”

Puck’s penetrating voice struck through the roiled and agitated Subaru.

The intense emotion packed within that brief call was enough to, for a moment, freeze Subaru’s trembling body still. Yet at the end of Subaru’s sticken gaze was not the figure of the small cat, but the stone quietly resting on Emilia’s chest, glowing with its inorganic light.

Puck: “…Have you calmed down?”

Subaru: “…So you can raise your voice after all… I always thought you’re just a carefree fluffy furball who never gives a damn about the seriousness of the situation.”

Puck: “It is very rare for me to shout like this. It’s only when it’s Lia… or when I need to scold some disobedient brat, that I raise my voice this way.”

Subaru: “Disobedient brat, huh.”

At that unforgiving description, Subaru spilled a small sigh.

He couldn't deny it. He could see that his unsightly attitude was problematic here.

How many times since the start of this long-awaited conversation had Subaru failed to remain calm? And how many times did Puck have to rebuke him to get the conversation back on track?

It's pathetic how he couldn't restrain himself. And that heart of steel he had so yearned for, was there not even a scrap of it inside him?

Puck: "But, to be honest, I am glad there is someone who can get so emotional over Lia this way. You must be providing Lia with no small amount of strength as well."

Subaru: "—huh?"

Puck: "No one has managed to step this far into Lia's heart before. Not even Roswaal, who brought Lia out of the forest for the Royal Selection, has ever touched the deepest core of her thoughts. But, since that man only intends to place Lia on the throne as a means to another end, that is not so surprising."

Subaru: "—Do you… know what Roswaal's goals are?"

Puck: "To follow the Gospel, right? Perhaps, he's a lot like Betty in that respect. Though, one has a lot written in his, while the other has nothing written in hers. Similar but different, might be a better way to put it."

It seems Puck already knew the details about Roswaal and Beatrice's circumstances. Subaru doubted that the information would have been passed to Emilia, and that only made him even more unsettled about Puck's reasons for keeping those facts to himself.

But Subaru could already imagine what Puck would say if he had asked him about it.

Subaru: "Since it's unrelated to Emilia, you were in no hurry to do anything… huh."

Puck: “If you mean Betty, I would have liked to do everything I could for her. But… now that Lia is tangled up with Roswaal, I have no choice but to focus on that.”

Subaru: “Well that’s your own damn fault for not saying anything when you knew what was going to happen, isn’t it?”

Puck: “I have nothing to say to that. Though I do think it’s unfair of me to make you deal with the consequences.”

Regardless of intention, it seems his refusal to prioritize anything besides Emilia was the primary reason behind all this. If his inaction was what brought about Emilia’s present hardships, then that would be far too great a blunder to be laughed off as a simple mistake.

Subaru: “I’ll be wrecking Roswaal’s plans so nevermind that for now. And Beatrice… I’ve no intention of leaving her to you. The only thing I’m conspiring with you about is Emilia.”

Puck: “That’s fine. Right now, I don’t have the strength to spend on anyone besides Lia. Expending my efforts on anything other than what is dearest to me would be going about it backwards.”

Subaru: “Then tell me. What do you mean Emilia is preventing you from coming outside? I won’t believe for a second that she’s been lying to everyone.”

Last time, he had been running off of his emotions, but those thoughts remain the same even now. Although there was no way he could possibly know everything inside Emilia’s heart, she was certainly not the kind of person who would deceive those around her and spit on their considerations this way.

Hearing this thought, Puck transmitted what felt like a relieved sigh into Subaru’s mind.

Puck: “I’m not in a position to say anything like “You needn’t worry”. But, while it is by Lia’s will that I am prevented from going outside… it isn’t because Lia herself is trying to keep me from doing so.”

Subaru: "…Sorry, I don't understand what you're saying."

Puck: "It's hard to explain. Lia seeking my help, calling to the crystal, and being unable to hear my voice, all of it is real. The fact that she is scared to be alone and trembling without her support is also true. But…"

Subaru: "—."

Puck: "Lia's subconscious is refusing to let me materialize or communicate with her. The front and back ends of her heart are at odds… might be a way to describe it."

The front and back ends of her heart. Subaru gulped down a breath at those words.

Surely, he couldn't be talking about split personalities? That said, every time Subaru had experienced being chased into despair in this world, it had been a variation of being betrayed by his heart.

If this was the same with Emilia, then,

Subaru: "You can't influence Emilia from your end?"

Puck: "It's tricky. The back end's persistence is far stronger than the front end. And even if I do manage to get through to the front, it will only spell trouble for Lia's mind."

Subaru: "What makes you think it'll be trouble? Like, would something upset her if you were to come out…"

Puck: "But you already know the answer, don't you?"

Interrupting Subaru's trailing question, there was almost a hint of ridicule in Puck's voice.

Receiving this thought, Subaru fell into a momentary silence before lowering his eyes,

Subaru: "—It's just a guess."

Puck: "Hm, go on. Let's hear it. I did say this, didn't I? I'm expecting great things from you, Subaru."

At Subaru's mutter, Puck gave this entirely ungratifying stamp of approval. Feeling his mood lighten somewhat even from that meagre assurance, Subaru continued,

Subaru: "If you're present, then Emilia will…"

Puck: "Mhm, mhm?"

Subaru: "…have to accept some inconvenient part of her past. — That's why Emilia's subconsciously stopping you from interfering."

Puck: "—."

Receiving Subaru's thought-waves, Puck's reaction was neither rejection nor laughter, but silence.

If that unseen cat-spirit was here in form, he'd probably be floating there with his leisurely air and carefree expression, swaying his long tail to and fro.

Puck: "Amazing, Subaru. That's a better answer than I expected."

Puck said after a moment of silence with an impressed tone in his voice.

At this, Subaru exhaled a sigh through his nostrils.

Subaru: "Seriously, your compliments don't make me happy at all, you know."

Puck: "It's honest praise. You didn't have much information to go on, so the fact that you've deduced this far really is surprising. You know Lia's heart well."

Saying so with an air of deep compassion, Puck's consciousness was probably watching the sleeping Emilia. As if lured by that voice, Subaru turned his gaze to her pale, sleeping face as well.

Lying there, sound asleep, it was impossible to tell whether she was having a good dream or a nightmare.

The Trial and its accompanying past whittling at her heart—Subaru had his doubts as to how accurate that recreated past was to the past that actually took place.

The past that Subaru saw in his Trial was about him parting with his parents, who were the symbols of his past regrets. It was only natural. The past Subaru needed to overcome was not a single great event, but the environment in which he had languished throughout the time he had spent in sloth.

And so, for Subaru, the Trial created a time and space that never truly existed, and gave him a pleasant reprieve to be with his parents while urging him to make his farewells.

Subaru: “Those pasts aren’t necessarily faithful to what happened in the real world. They’re just mental images drawn from the challenger’s mind assembled into a form suited for the Trials.”

At the end of the Trial, Echidna had told Subaru the rough outlines of how the Trial worked. Having collected pieces of memories that even Subaru didn’t know he remembered, the Trial had used them to craft “An Elaborately Fabricated World”.

In other words, none of Subaru’s parting from his parents was real, and it had been no more than self-satisfaction.

—”But so what?”, were Subaru’s present thoughts.

Subaru: “The past you see in the Tomb is a forgery disguised as the real thing. And the asshole who set up the Trials did it so that the challenger’ll reach whatever answer satisfies her the most.”

Echidna hadn’t stated as much, but, from what he had seen of that Witch’s deviousness first-hand, Subaru was sure it was just the kind of thing she would do.

And so,

Subaru: “The past that Emilia saw would be part reality and part fabrication. And you… must know something that would be decisive in correcting that discrepancy. That’s why Emilia’s subconscious is blocking her attempts to summon you.”

Puck: “…Which begs the question. If I’m with her, Lia would see the past as it really was. So why would Lia’s heart reject me, knowing this?”

Subaru: “That’s s…”

“Simple”, Subaru was about to say when he hesitated.

The reason for his hesitation was just as simple. If the next words came out of his mouth, it would mean exposing the reality of Emilia’s past—as well as the fact that the cruel and aversive scene she had described was only a cover for the truth buried in her heart.

Puck: “…because the truth that Lia has forgotten is far more unforgiving than the false memories she had spoken of.”

Puck finished Subaru’s sentence for him.

Recognizing what he had failed to recognize until the words came out, Subaru’s face twisted in grief as he looked towards Emilia.

The people she had spent those days with in tenderness and warmth—to have those same people turn on her with all their hate and malice, showering her with their spite inside the ice as she bade her long, long farewell:

That past which tore at Subaru’s body and soul just thinking about was, in fact, a gentle cradle to shield her from an even crueler truth.

Subaru: “Do you… know what Emilia actually saw?”

Puck: “…Unfortunately, I don’t. When I first met Lia, it was already after she had been frozen alongside the forest. So I don’t know why Lia would be afraid of my presence. And I have no idea how I play into Lia’s past.”

Listening to Puck’s mutters of genuine regret, Subaru bit down on his lip.

Emilia’s real past—was the reason she couldn’t pass the Trial. Grasping this, he was now one step closer to the answer.

Each time Emilia was inside the Trial, she saw both her real and her fabricated past. And she herself wanted that fabricated past to be her real one.

As long as she fails to reach an answer to her actual past, she will not pass the Trial. And so long as Emilia continues lying to her own heart, those sweet knives of her past would continue shredding away at her mind.

Subaru: “What should I do?”

Puck: “I don’t know.”

Subaru: “I want to help Emilia… and become her strength.”

Puck: “It is the same for me. I exist only for her sake. If I cannot be her strength, then there is no reason for me to exist.”

Subaru: “I want to support her in everything she wishes to do… and I want to be at her side.”

Puck: “—.”

Faced with Subaru’s appeals, Puck fell silent as he sank into thought. All the while, Subaru intently waited for the spirit’s reply. Then, with a voice laced with determination,

Puck: “Subaru. —There is only one possibility.”

Subaru: “Possibility…?”

Puck: “It is a solution that would’ve been absolutely unthinkable if I were on my own, and, even now, I am strongly averse to it. This is something I never imagined I would suggest, even if I did consider it.”

Listening to Puck’s consternation, Subaru braced himself for the words to come. At least, this was the first time Subaru had heard Puck speak in a voice this serious in his normal form.

Subaru: “What do you need me to do?”

Puck: “It is something that I will have to do. Though you will be the one left with all the cleanup afterwards.”

Subaru: “…You sound like you’re gonna say something insane next, I’m kinda scared.”

Puck: “I never thought I’d end up leaving it all in someone else’s hands, either. But, well… I believe you are the only person who’d be willing to stake your life for Lia’s sake, if need be.”

Sensing that Puck was repressing some great emotion as he spoke, Subaru sucked in a small breath.

No doubt—Puck’s assessment was correct. For Emilia, Natsuki Subaru would gladly lay down his life.

Seeing Subaru give his silent assent, Puck must’ve nodded inside the crystal as well.

And then, in a quiet voice,

Puck: “Tomorrow morning, I will break my Contract with Lia. — And once the relationship between Lia and me is severed, I’m sure that when she cries, you will do what you can to comfort her.”

Chapter 93:
Mutual Proposals

Puck: “Once the Contract between me and Lia is terminated, can I trust you to take care of everything that comes after?”

Subaru: “…That’ll depend on what your reasons are.”

Licking his lips, Subaru held back his urge to challenge those words as he looked at Puck straight on.

Inside the crystal, Puck’s expression remained indiscernible. But, from the vortex of emotions in his voice, Subaru could tell that he did not say this lightly.

But they’re talking about Contracts here.

What’s more, it’s a Contract between a Spirit and a Spirits-Arts User, which are to be valued above all else.

To speak of one-sidedly “Breaking” such a Contract—Subaru couldn’t possibly fathom what he might be thinking.

Subaru: “The Contract between you and Emilia… is a Contract between a Spirit and its Contractor, right? Breaking it would come with its corresponding penalty, wouldn’t it?”

Puck: “Yes, naturally.”

Subaru: “If I’m imagining this correctly, the Contractor abides by the Contract in exchange for the power they borrow from the Spirit… and without a Contract, there would be no pretext for the Spirit to lend its power to the Contractor… so breaking your Contract would…”

Puck: “Essentially, the link between Lia and myself would be severed.”

Without denying or amending Subaru’s speculations, Puck merely affirmed his thoughts.

Yet, that affirmation would mean—

Subaru: “Without being able to draw from your power… Emilia won’t be able to fight at all. Left alone, she’ll just be no different than an ordinary girl.”

Puck: “That shouldn’t worry you too much, should it? Whether Lia has the strength for it or not, you are the one who doesn’t want her to fight. Though I can’t say the same for what Lia herself will think.”

Subaru: “Gh… you’re… not wrong about that. But my feelings aren’t the problem here. And all this talk about fighting strength isn’t the point either. What’s important right now… is what’ll happen to Emilia without you by her side.”

For Emilia, losing Puck would be the same as losing the supporting beam of her heart.

And if Puck had been right so far, it would mean that she knew, deep down, that Puck wasn’t actually sleeping, and that the bond between them hadn’t been severed.

Yet, even with their bond still barely intact, Emilia was cornered and faltering to the point that she was relying entirely on Subaru, pleading for him not to leave her.

But if her bond with Puck was truly severed—

Subaru: “I wouldn’t be surprised if it broke Emilia’s mental stability on the spot… That has to be one of the last things you want to see. So just what’re you plotting…”

Puck: “I’m not plotting anything. I would only be supporting Lia in a way that would be best for her. I will not, and cannot, do anything that child doesn’t want me to.”

Subaru: “And… Emilia wants you to terminate the Contract?”

Puck: “No, Subaru. Losing her Contract with me is only the byproduct of what Lia desires. What Lia presently desires is to pass the Trials of the Tomb. You can rest assured, there is no doubt about that.”

Subaru never doubted it, either.

According to Puck’s hypothesis—it was because of Emilia’s inability to face her past that she was repeatedly stumbling on the fabricated past in her Trials.

However, she definitely isn’t the kind of person who would merely “Pretend” to overcome her past. Of that, Subaru was certain.

That conviction within Subaru’s mind was never conveyed to Puck through words. But, as if that thought had successfully reached him regardless, the tone of Puck’s telepathic voice sank,

Puck: “When Lia finds out that I am gone, she will probably fall apart. Crying like a child, wailing, inconsolable and afraid.”

Subaru: “—.”

Puck: “But that’s for the best, I think. This state where the surface of her heart believes I am gone while the depths of her heart knows that I am still here is unnatural. Once both the surface and the depths of her heart realize that I am gone… the shackles keeping her from her past will be undone, and, for the first time, Lia will be ready to face her own heart.”

Puck’s words were quiet, but packed with a multitude of emotions.

There was tenderness, grief, joy, and, above all, the abounding willingness to sacrifice everything for the one he loved most.

Subaru: “So she must lose her bond with you… in order to face herself and move forward?”

Puck: “Yes, I believe so. I’m sure it will cause her much pain, but I know Lia is a girl who can persevere through them.”

Subaru: “But you won’t be there for her anymore. Aren’t you worried? Don’t you want to stay with her and protect that too-kind-for-her-own-good daughter of yours? Isn’t that what you want?”

Subaru wasn't sure what he was saying anymore.

If Puck's proposal could really deliver the results they desired, then it would be better than anything Subaru could have hoped for. Just as Puck pointed out, Emilia's ability to fight is irrelevant since Subaru already intends to do everything in his power to keep her as far away from the battlefield as possible.

So Subaru should, by all means, be welcoming Puck's proposal rather than trying to dissuade him.

Puck: "And here I thought you'd been pretty unhappy lately about me being at Lia's side?"

Subaru: "You aren't wrong about that… For all that's happened between us, my opinion of you is as low as it can get right now, and it's not gonna turn up any time soon. One decision to sacrifice yourself for Emilia isn't gonna wipe away all the bad impressions you've left behind, you know."

Puck: "That's quite a harsh thing to say… makes me kind of sad."

Subaru: "But."

Their mutual impressions were already kind of set, so even if Subaru accepted everything Puck said, it still couldn't change those negative impressions so easily.

So Subaru wasn't lying when he said that. However,

Subaru: "I can just see the sad look on Emilia's face after you're gone. And, as much as I hate it, I know better than anyone just how much you mean to Emilia. It's because you're… that I…"

Puck: "—."

His words continued no further, but the indeterminate thought would not leave him. Puck too preserved the mental silence, quietly waiting for Subaru's vague concepts to take shape.

But, the more agitated he got, the less certain his answer became.

Subaru: “That I… I’m…”

Puck: “Your existence played a huge part in helping me come to this decision, Subaru.”

Puck muttered before Subaru could finish his thought. Hearing that sound directly inside his skull, Subaru raised his head, staring stupidly at the glowing green crystal.

Puck: “Like you said, Lia means more to me than anything in this world. I would’ve wanted to always watch over her and provide her with strength at her side. But, even so, I still believe that the best thing I could do for her now is to leave her.”

Subaru: “But, why is th…”

Puck: “Because you are here for her.”

Subaru: “—.”

Suddenly, Subaru felt his breath stop.

Puck: “In this place… no, in this world, you and I are the only ones who would risk our lives for Lia. Through the time we’ve spent together, you have proved this. Lia, she… other than myself, you are the person she trusts the most. That is beyond doubt. You can be sure of it.”

Subaru: “S-Still… I don’t have the kind of powers that you do, and I can’t blast away the obstacles in front of her with force. The best I can do is worry alongside her and listen to her talk about her troubles… that’s all. Knowing that, you really want to leave me with everything after you’re gone?”

Puck: “You seem to be misunderstanding something. I’m not saying that I want you to replace me. The things that only I can do are things that only I can do. The reverse is also true, and I expect that you will be helping Lia by doing the things that only you can do.”

In front of the speechless Subaru, Puck piled on his words.

Closing off all escape, Puck wasted no time in forcing the decision on Subaru.

Puck: “Even without me, Lia will still be much stronger than you. No doubt, that would be the kind of “Strength” you spoke of. But, as you know, that child is also weak. And this “Weakness” I speak of also certainly exists. What I want you to do is to support her for that weakness.”

Subaru: “…After you break the Contract and sever your bond with Emilia, what will happen to you?”

Puck: “The fact that I was able to materialize as I had been was owing to my connection with Lia. Once that connection is cut, I will need to stay constantly materialized in order to preserve my existence. …But to remain materialized, I would endlessly drink the atmospheric mana around me dry. If you saw my true form, it would probably shock you, Subaru.”

The “True Form” Puck spoke of must be the towering figure that Subaru had to tilt back his head to see. The apex of four-legged beasts, that monster of raging blizzards. The Beast of the Apocalypse.

Indeed, if he had to maintain that form indefinitely, there was simply no way it could be sustainable.

Subaru: “So then… you mean you’ll be erased?”

Puck: “It is a little different from being erased. I will return to the small existence I once was before my Contract with Lia. It’d be someplace with a deep connection to me… most likely in the Great Elior Forest. There, I will go to sleep inside something as my anchor, and wait for the time when I will be awoken again.”

Subaru: “Awoken…?”

Puck: “By Lia, of course. —This is where the Contract between me and that child ends. But, if a time comes when she needs a new Contract and is in search of a spirit to forge it with… I know she’ll choose me again. That’s what I believe.”

Hearing a sense of cheerfulness in Puck’s voice, Subaru swallowed his breath.

It was a decision which could lead to his own disappearance, but there was not a single trace of unease in Puck's tone. His personality had always been naturally optimistic, but, somehow, that didn't seem to be the reason for the lack of concern in his voice.

He hadn't the slightest doubt that Emilia will choose him again.

Once her Contract with Puck is broken, Emilia will be forced to face her past. And he did not imagine for a second that Emilia might fail to fully accept that past.

Only, after Emilia has overcome her past and is in need of another Contract, she will surely choose him again.

In Puck's mind, that was absolute certainty.

He never doubted Emilia's strength, nor did he doubt everything they'd shared in the time they spent together. And because of this, he was able to make the choice to sever his connection with her.

Subaru: "—."

For an always-wavering Subaru, it was a bond so strong and firm that it was dazzling.

Because it was Puck's deep love and trust in Emilia that has forged his heart of iron.

Subaru: "And you'll leave the task of comforting the heartbroken Emilia to me?"

And that was why Subaru's reply was so laced with desperation and resentment. Receiving those words, Puck softly cleared his throat, and, with a tone that was almost smiling,

Puck: "It pains my heart to do this, truly. But… since I'm entrusting my beloved daughter to you, it's my hope that you two can overcome it together."

Subaru: “…can I take that as your implicit consent for me and Emilia-tan to be together?”

Puck: “If I annihilate you here and now, I’ll have to rethink all sorts of things again.”

Subaru: “Why do your comebacks always have to be that scary, you goddamn cat!!”

Blasting back at that overly-extreme reply, Subaru let slip the faintest glimpse of a smirk.

Puck’s deep feelings for Emilia were unfaultable, and the fact that they could have this back and forth in spite of the misgivings between them relaxed Subaru’s mind, if only just a little.

And then, there was also something that Subaru thought of just now when he heard that the severing of Puck’s Contract with Emilia would mean distancing him from this place. Supposing it could work—it would certainly tilt the odds of the bet in his favor.

Subaru: “I understand your plan now. Though I’m still a bit worried about whether it’ll really go as planned… I’ll put on some feigned ignorance and help you along with your ruse.”

Puck: “I wonder what it feels like… to manipulate the girl you love.”

Subaru: “I’m getting crushed by guilt here, so stop that. And besides, Emilia actually understands all sorts of things deep down… so when this is all over and done, she’ll probably realize she’s been tricked.”

Puck: “If that happens, you and I will both be hated as fellow conspirators. You scared?”

Subaru: “Like hell! Compared to the “Don’t wash mine with daddy’s dirty laundry!” kind of angsty-teenage-girl hate, her hate towards me’ll be on a totally different level, you know.”

If her resentment towards Puck could count as a familial issue, her resentment towards Subaru would be far more fatal. Although, she'd probably understand if Subaru explained it to her with complete sincerity.

Yet, even if Emilia could understand the true motivations behind it, she still wouldn't be happy that her heart had been manipulated. —Surely, he would not be forgiven for that.

Subaru: "But it's a bit late for that, huh. —After all the unforgivable things I've done and all the times I've made her cry… how can I say I don't have the resolve to bear that guilt now?"

Puck: "—."

Subaru: "I'll accept your terms, Puck. I'll be cleaning up your mess for you. Tomorrow morning, when Emilia breaks down crying… she'll be doing it in my arms."

Puck: "—Good. In that case, I'll leave it to you. Though I realize this will be causing you a great deal of trouble down the road."

Seeing Subaru accept his proposal, there was almost a sense of shame in Puck's reply.

At this, Subaru closed his eyes, and with "Now then…", he began again,

Subaru: "Are you open to considering a proposal from me as well?"

Puck: "…A proposal?"

Subaru: "Yeah, a proposal. Don't worry though. Just like you, I only act with Emilia's best future interests in mind."

Thumping his own chest, and taking Puck's silence as his assent, Subaru continued,

Subaru: "There're still some things I wanna ask, and some things I wanna try depending on the answers. —Emilia could wake up at any moment, so let's keep this short."

Chapter 94:
Left Behind

—The first thing she felt upon waking was the loneliness in her empty right hand.

Having just awoken, her head was still drowsy from the lack of blood flow. But, realizing along with her returning consciousness what a selfish sentiment that was, her cheeks flushed red with anger and shame.

Instead of sitting up, she shrank into a ball on the bed and rolled the blankets around her. Reflecting on her own shallowness as she lay there, she was already chastising herself first thing in the morning.

"—Selfish, selfish, selfish. I…'m so selfish."

The girl who had curled up on the bed—Emilia, muttered, exhaling a long, long sigh at her wretched state.

She opened and closed her hand beneath the sheets, remembering the sensation it held just before falling asleep.

His fingers were thick and uneven, and their skins were slightly firmer at the tips, entirely unlike her own which were slender and frail—every time she had the opportunity to hold his hand, she thought this.

It was the touch of the boy who cared for her, who said those gentle words to her, and who had sat at her bedside holding her hand until she fell asleep—the touch of Subaru's clumsy, delicate hand.

Her first unconscious thought upon waking was of the loss of the touch of that hand. To feel so much loneliness from the emptiness of her fingers, just how hopeless is she?

Always wanting to lean on him, was her nature so eager to pile more burdens on that boy? Had she no regard for the irreparable troubles her own weakness and sins have brought to everyone around her?

This was already the fourth day since their arrival in the Sanctuary—they arrived on the first day, and Emilia had devoted both yesterday and the day before to the Trials deep inside the Tomb.

For Emilia, who was aiming to win the Royal Selection and ascend to the throne of Lugnica, acquiring the support of the Sanctuary was the indispensable first step.

The governor of this land, Roswaal, was Emilia's backer, and all the residents here were in circumstances similar to her Half-Elf self. If she couldn't gain their acceptance even with the conditions so stacked in her favor, what could she possibly expect to do from here on out?

Compared to the other candidates of the Royal Selection, Emilia's disadvantages were undeniable. Powerless as she is, she would need the help of those around her in order to win. And the trust required to secure that help would have to be earned through her own actions.

Fully understanding her position, what Emilia needed to do and to prove in the Sanctuary were clear. She had no doubts in that regard.

But, what was casting this shadow over her eyes was—

Emilia: "…the Trials."

The single non-negotiable condition for gaining the Sanctuary's residents' approval was to break through the Trials.

Thanks to the Barrier erected by the Tomb, none of the Sanctuary's residents could venture beyond the surrounding forests. In order to bring them into the outside world to fight alongside her, she would need to remove that Barrier by overcoming the Trials. And it was also a matter of sentiment. For how could she ask them to support her if she couldn't even do this much for them?

Be it physical or sentimental, everything would be solved by simply passing the Trials. And when a matter is this straightforward, there is no room for arguments or excuses.

The problem now was the content of the Trial, which was like deadly poison to Emilia.

—The unfeeling voice inside the Tomb told her to “Face her past”.

Whenever she closed her eyes, she would see that world of white.

Instantly, as if being thrown naked into that absolute cold, she’d shiver at the unstoppable chill.

Was this dread coursing through her body because she was remembering the cold of that day or because she still hadn’t forgotten her fear from back then, even now?

What did Subaru think when he heard her faltering story of her past?

The unforgettable past which still binds her in chains of guilt to this day—it was yesterday around noon when she revealed it all to Subaru.

The night before that, she made her first attempt on the Trial where her heart was soundly beaten. She had been crying in Subaru’s arms after he shook her awake, wailing, breaking, until his voice and his gentle strokes on her back managed to calm her. After that, Emilia announced to everyone waiting outside that she had failed her Trial.

She could not remember what expression came onto everyone’s faces when they heard this.

She hadn’t the mind to look at their faces one by one. Whether it was gazes of disappointment or disdain, it didn’t really matter. She merely put on a strong face, said her good nights, and headed into the residence assigned to her. And when she realized that she was completely alone, she was swallowed by unendurable terror.

Unable to stay shut in like that, she rushed out of the building and was shivering in the night wind when she ran into Subaru walking under the moonlight.

Then, when Subaru confessed his resolve and what he would do for her sake, Emilia dismissed him with some idealistic excuses and ran away.

Just how stricken must Subaru have been when he heard what she said? Equally appalled by her own words, Emilia had no idea.

She couldn't remember how she got back to her residence after that.

The next time she woke, it was to the sound of Subaru calling her, his face pale as he saw her collapsed on the floor.

She told the worried Subaru about the Trial—and inevitably, it turned into a conversation about her past.

There, she related her past to Subaru without the slightest tampering or fabrication.

The way she had been made to witness the crimes she committed, the unforgettable memory and the scar that was peeled open, as if exposing her raw wounds to the wind she revealed it all to Subaru.

At the same time, Emilia also confessed to her selfish motive for participating in the Royal Selection.

It was not that she wasn't afraid.

As consequence of the mistake she made in her youth, Emilia had made victims of far too many people. Yet she never paid the price, and even now she was enjoying the time that she alone still possessed.

What's worse, the means she chose for her atonement only wound up dragging even more people into her mess.

Being reviled, despised, and shunned all came natural to Emilia.

And yet, somehow, she believed with a sense of absolute conviction that Subaru would never abandon her.

No matter how wretched her past, or how selfishly she yearned for redemption, Natsuki Subaru would never, ever, abandon her.

No matter how badly he is hurt, and even if he cries, Subaru would continue to protect her. Over and over, Emilia had seen this in his actions.

This kind, faithful, sentimental youth: Who, despite bearing so much, still refuses to cast anything aside, would continue struggling regardless of his wounds.

And as long as she remains one of the pieces of baggage he is carrying, no matter how grotesque her nature may be, he will never let her go.

—It was, in the truest sense, a cruel and abominable thought.

Even if she shook her head, professing to have never thought this way, it'd be a lie to say that it never crossed her mind. And if some part of her heart hoped for this, it'd be the same as Emilia's entire existence affirming this thought.

And so, placing her faith in someone who could never despise her, she confessed to her despicable past.

When all is said and done, that's all it was.

In the end, though Subaru could not hide his shock and dismay, he did not chastise her for her crimes.

When she was exhausted by her confession and overcome with drowsiness, his touch as he held her hand was still abounding in thoughtfulness, no different than before.

The fact that Subaru did everything just as the repulsive part of herself expected vexed her to no end.

Subaru's usually sharp eyes were softened in worry, concerned for her body and mind. His kindness was like sweet poison to Emilia.

It melted her heart, her resolve, and laid every ugliness within herself bare.

If only she could leave it all to him and let him help bear the pain whittling at her heart. If she could say it out loud like some whining child who looks away from every unpleasant thing, Subaru would not hesitate for a second to devote his entirety for her sake.

—But that would be unforgivable.

Ever since they first met, Emilia has been receiving Subaru's help.

From the stash house in the Capital, to the witchbeasts threatening the domain, to the gazes in the Royal Selection Hall, to the unknown assailants besieging the village and the Mansion, it has been this way.

Emilia was always clinging to Subaru's hand. Unable to bear to see him hurt and believing that she doesn't deserve his kindness, she had once cast his hand aside.

But even so, Natsuki Subaru never abandoned Emilia.

Not only that, when he finally told her his reason for saving her, he said,

"I love you, and so I want to be your strength."

Never once had Emilia received such wholehearted and entirely-baseless confession of love.

The only people who had ever shown Emilia affection had been the Elves she lived with in Elior Forest, and, after her long slumber, the one who became her family, Puck.

Being lured out of the forest by Roswaal, she was once again reminded of the vicious reality of being a Half-Elf, and her two visits to the Capital only deepened that awareness.

Accepting Roswaal's proposal was partly to fulfill her own objectives, but Emilia had also hoped that she could perhaps change the deep-rooted prejudice against Half-Elves—if only by a little. Yet that hope felt so faint and distant that she herself scarcely believed that it was possible.

And so, just how massive an impact must it have been on Emilia when Subaru, that single-minded youth, ignored the fact that she was a Half-Elf along with all her hopeless defects and told her that he loved her?

He wasn't of the same race, nor was it decided at birth that he existed solely to accompany her. He was just someone she had met by chance, grown close to, and, after all they've shared together, came to care for—just how much of a salvation must this have been for Emilia?

And precisely because of this, Emilia mustn't rely on Subaru anymore.

Every hardship he bears for Emilia would mean another wound carved into his body. Not only wounds of the flesh, but of the heart as well.

Subaru wasn't especially strong in body nor mind, Emilia knew this.

Even with a heart abounding in resolve and the will to care for those around him, he was no one special at all.

He could be wounded by sadness, he'd cry when he's hurt, and if he bled too much he'd die.

He's just that kind of ordinary person.

Emilia didn't want that ordinary youth to bear any more pain on her behalf.

If he could just stay with her and support her as she ventures forward, then she'd wish for nothing more. Though it was such a selfish wish that Emilia couldn't help but feel ashamed.

If she has him there to support her when her resolve is about to falter, then surely, Emilia can overcome any obstacle without fail.

And she herself must be the one to fight those obstacles before her.

Emilia: "After all, if I don't…"

If she continues relying on him, leaving everything to him, clinging to him, pushing everything on him, eventually, Subaru will come to think of her as a burden.

Just the thought that that day would come filled her with dread.

It was something she didn't want to believe she wanted. Something she knew even if she wanted she could never have and so had given up on wanting. Something she had kept out of her mind, but had always secretly longed for.

And now that she had it, had been given it, and had grasped onto that outstretched hand—Emilia couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

Emilia: "…"

Emilia's sins had painted the forest in white and sealed all her friends and family beneath ice and snow.

Emilia herself also fell asleep within that ice and went for nearly a hundred years before Puck woke her, all without being aware of her crime.

That grave and abhorrent sin was only made worse by the fact that Emilia herself could not remember a single tangible detail about her deed.

Everything in between was a blank, and, aside from the knowledge that her act had plunged everyone into white stagnation, she couldn't remember a thing as to why, or what she was thinking.

The Witch's Daughter. That name felt natural to Emilia.

After Puck woke her from the ice, she spent seven years in Great Elior Forest. Unable to find or cultivate any food inside the frozen woods, she would walk to the nearby villages outside the forest and rely on them for most of her food.

She could not forget their terrified gazes or how they called her the "Witch of the Ice Forest".

Witch. That insult suited her.

She had been stuttering about having the resolve necessary to overcome the Trials, but even she felt that those words were hollow. Emilia could not even imagine how she might defeat her past. So she merely evaded Subaru's questions with pleasant words and chose to shut herself in her cask of dreams.

Assured by the unmistakable touch of Subaru's palm, she fell asleep not long after.

—She doubted she dreamed anything back then.

When she woke, Subaru was still in the same posture as before, watching over her as she slept. An unbearable emotion overran her chest as she saw this, and, still holding onto his hand, they stepped out into the Sanctuary—to challenge the Trial.

The outcome was obvious. She didn't pass her Trial.

Subaru and Ram saw her off just outside the Tomb. And with Garfiel, Ryuzu, and the Sanctuary's residents' gazes at her back, she walked in. But without a single clue as to what she should do, the Trial heartlessly rejected her.

After being tormented, corroded, trampled by her unchangeable past, Emilia was tossed back once more.

When she returned to consciousness on the cold, hard floor of the Tomb, Emilia noticed that her cheeks were wet. Even her tears were ridiculous, and how she despised her own shallowness.

Unable to grasp a single clue to overcoming the Trials, Emilia left the Tomb haggard and frail to be welcomed by the worried Subaru and the others.

Then, just like the night before, she was lulled into sleep in this building, losing consciousness just after tumbling into bed—which she only realized this morning.

Emilia: "In the end, there's no progress at all… I'm so useless…"

If she learned anything yesterday, it's that she is a hopeless, spoiled child who is always causing trouble for Subaru and everyone around her—and, even then, still hasn't the slightest hope of getting better. That's the kind of weak existence she is.

Emilia: "Puck…"

The pendant hanging at her chest—and the green lustre of the stone adorning its tip, is the anchor of Emilia's spiritual Contract with Puck.

Whenever she softly calls his name, he'd answer in his carefree tone, "What is it?" in accordance to the Contract.

But it's been almost two weeks since he stopped responding.

At first, she thought he was merely in his hibernation period, which he goes into once every few months. There were also times before when Puck would suddenly stop responding, and every time it happened, Emilia would try to endure the loneliness while she waited for him to wake.

However, his hibernation periods usually ended after three or four days, and this is the first time it has been this long. What's more, even if Puck is in his hibernation, if Emilia truly tried to call him, he would interrupt his sleep and answer her.

But now, she couldn't even sense that reaction from the distant Puck.

Could something have happened to him?

Did something change during his hibernation that's preventing him from manifesting again? And if that's the case, what should she do?

Even after the long, long time Emilia had spent with Puck, she still couldn't think of a way to reach him once he has left her like this.

Whether it's the Trials, Subaru, the settlement of her past, or the missing Puck, Emilia hadn't a single solution to any of these problems.

Emilia: "…I'm, so stupid."

Faced with this dead end, just when she was about to complain about the absence of the one who should be there for her, she stopped herself.

Because, if she did that, then she would truly be lost beyond saving. —Even though Emilia's opinion of herself was already lower than ever before, she didn't want to think that she could sink even lower than this.

Emilia: "Nnn, stop it. Even if I keep thinking like this… he's not going to show up today. But Puck must have his reasons. And there's been no progress on the Trials yet. I need to keep it together."

She lifted her hands and gave her white cheeks a few pats as if to pump some spirit into herself.

Then, looking up, she picked up a comb and ran it through her messy hair. —It pained her that she had to do this herself. That was because this part had always been tasked to Puck, and Emilia never had to take the initiative to look after her own grooming.

Running her hand through her hair, she confirmed that the knots are gone. She doesn't use mirrors. And the mirror originally there was already wrapped up in cloth and placed in a corner of the room so that it wouldn't reflect anything.

Fiddling with the tips of her hair, Emilia decided that she had succeeded in the bare minimal arrangements. Then, sweeping with her fingers, she divided her silver hair into tresses.

This was in preparation for her braid—Puck was the one in charge of Emilia's daily hairstyles, and since it was an article of their Contract, it was especially important that she obeyed it. That was why, over the two weeks since Puck gave her his pick for her hairstyle, Emilia had continued adhering to the last instruction he had given her.

And of course, she also continued attending to the other tedious and miscellaneous articles like exercising before and after bathing and talking to micro-spirits daily. After all, if she stopped abiding by those terms, her connection with the missing Puck would be lost, and that terrified her to no end.

Emilia: “—there.”

Dividing her hair down the middle and weaving them into two braids had been how she had always done it. But today, she wove it into a single long braid running down her back.

Having kept that part of her Contract with Puck for the day, she prayed for the Contract’s continuance.

Confirming the definite connection inside her, she—

Emilia: “…Huh?”

Intending to change her clothes before Ram showed up with the bucket of water, Emilia spilled a small cry.

Her amethyst eyes widened in shock as her gaze landed on the pendant at her chest.

Just as she checked before, the green crystal was still hanging at the end of the pendant as proof of Puck’s existence—except a crack had formed on its surface.

Emilia: “Wh…no, huh…? Wait… wh, what…?”

Clenching the crystal that had begun cracking of its own accord, Emilia let slip sounds that could not be considered words.

Her pupils shook with a violent jolt as she timidly stroked her trembling fingers over the crystal’s surface. From her fingertips came the sensation of the crack widening, prompting her to relinquish a small, strangled cry.

Emilia: “Nn, no… no, don’t… please, wait… no, Puck, wait…”

As much as she shook her head in rejection, it did not stem the crystal’s fracture.

She applied all her effort into keeping her hand steady so as not to disturb it further, but her uncontrollable trembling only hastened the crystal's collapse as it began to disintegrate in her hand.

What will happen if the damage spreads to the whole crystal?

Faced with this unprecedented scenario, this never-imagined situation, Emilia's head went perfectly blank.

But there was one thing she did know. And that is,

Emilia: "If this keeps going… Puck will…!"

It would mean the goodbye between Emilia and the being who was like her only family.

Emilia: "—!"

She raised her head. Looked around. There was no one there. It was early morning, and there were no signs of activity from people who had woken. Even if she screamed, likely no one would hear her. If she ran outside for help, the shaking would likely instantly spell the end, and so, Emilia did not move.

Stifling her voice, stopping her breath, Emilia gazed at the disintegrating crystal in her hand.

She had no solution. At this point, rather than preventing the impending end, all she could do was frantically try to delay it all the while being horrified by her decision.

Emilia: "—a."

As the reward for her slothfulness, the crisp sound of the crystal cracking rang out.

In her palms, as her eyes widened in stupefaction, the green crystal lost all semblance of shape. The stone shattered in all directions, the fragments lost their color, and, without any circulation of life, its luster gradually faded.

Emilia: "Sa… y… Puck, you're… just kidding, right?"

As if clinging to the last strand of hope, Emilia went on calling to her palm in her faltering voice.

But the jewel in her hand—having lost its form, was now nothing more than a pile of turquoise-colored sand. Never mind a spirit, even its capacity to store the slightest load of Mana was gone. All that was left was green-colored dust, waiting to be cast to the wind.

Anyone could see that Emilia's fleeting hopes were in vain.

The only one who did not accept the reality of its futility was Emilia herself.

Emilia: "N-No, no this can't… this can't be happening… after, after all, Puck… when we first met, you said… you'll be my family…and I'll never be alone anymore…"

Evoking their agreement, muttering back his promise under her breath, Emilia repeated those words like a small child.

—But before her pleading appeals, the powdered rock only answered with silence.

Emilia: "…i…ar."

Presented with that unacceptable reality, as if unable to bear the silence, and with eyes that seemed to be beginning to understand, she turned up to the ceiling with her amethyst gaze wavering and in tears,

Emilia: "Puck… daddy, YOU LIAR!!"

Falling to her knees, she hurled the scattered fragments against the wall.

The sound of stone shards striking the wooden surface had sealed Emilia and Puck's overly abrupt parting.

Emilia buried her face in her hands while sobs went on seeping from her palms.

No tears flowed out.

Weighing on her chest was only a hollow sense of emptiness where something should be.

Chapter 95:
Sigma

1

Ram: “Barusu. Have you made any progress with your nefarious plotting?”

Leaving Emilia after she had cried herself to sleep, Subaru ran into Ram as soon as he exited the building.

With his hand still on the door, Subaru squinted his eyes at Ram, who was apparently waiting for him to come out.

Subaru: ““Nefarious plotting” sounds super disreputable and kinda scary so could you please cut that out?”

Ram: “Two grown men skulking around obviously planning something, what else would you call it? Since Master Roswaal has given his consent, I won’t say anything about that merchant doing as he pleases around the Sanctuary, but…”

The “Merchant” Ram was talking about was probably Otto.

Although they were both living inside the Sanctuary, Ram, who spent most of her time tending to Roswaal, only had very brief interactions with Otto. Waiting for Emilia to come back from the Trials must have been some of the only opportunities they’ve had to talk to each other.

As for Otto, he was really only here because Subaru brought him along. So, without having much information in regards to his personality, he was no doubt lacking in credibility as far as Ram was concerned.

And even for Subaru, personality aside, Otto’s competence as a travelling merchant was still up for debate. Just from his meeting with Roswaal, it was obvious that he was more suited for the role of a straight-man than a merchant.

Nevertheless, it was true that Roswaal had given Otto permission to stay in the Sanctuary. Unable to openly expel him, Ram's opinion of Otto had always been harsh.

Subaru: "Well, that's something he'll have to work hard towards on his own. I won't try to change your mind about that."

Ram: "That doesn't sound like something a friend should say. When he's so intent on helping you, shouldn't you at least make some effort to repay him, Barusu?"

Subaru: "Friend… huh. I mean, I won't say anything to contradict that, but, does it look like we're friends to you?"

Ram: "When you've abandoned all restraint and are interacting with such familiarity… do you mean to suggest that you're not? If that's just how you interact with anyone regardless of your relationship, that's quite a horrifying thought."

Ram hugged her shoulders and made a show of shuddering. At her words and her reaction, Subaru's cheeks slightly softened as he chuckled from the depths of his throat.

As if creeped out by Subaru's stifled laugh, Ram backed up a step while still holding her shoulders, putting some distance between them,

Ram: "Now, Barusu, I'll repeat my question. —Have you made any progress with your nefarious plotting?"

Subaru: "Well you… could say it's slowly coming along, but there're still some kinks to work out."

Regardless of the details, her true intentions were obvious.

This was Ram, a card in the hand of Subaru's Contracted opponent, Roswaal. Although Subaru wasn't sure to what extent he could trust her, chances were, she was carrying out the task of acting as the eyes and ears of the bedridden Roswaal.

So it was inevitable that she would take an interest in their movements. As for the way she was grilling him directly on the matter, that was just the kind of thing Ram would do.

Subaru: “And what about you? You came here for Emilia, right? You shouldn’t be wasting time talking to me.”

Ram: “Since Barusu already came out, you must’ve made sure that she’d fallen asleep, correct? Falling asleep after so much bawling, she won’t wake up anytime soon.”

Subaru: “…That’s a pretty harsh opinion.”

Ram: “It’s a frank and objective opinion. You should keep that in mind for reference.”

Tossing out that blunt remark, Ram stared at the side of Subaru’s lowered face.

Feeling the pressure of her gaze, Subaru pressed back a sigh inside his chest.

—The termination of Emilia and Puck’s Contract had happened about two and a half hours ago.

Despite having discussed the matter with Puck beforehand and having prepared himself for the confusion, grief, and shock that would strike Emilia in its wake, when he actually saw her there, the regret he felt was indescribable.

As if having lost the only lynchpin holding her together, Emilia was half-crazed and wailing.

Her beautiful silver hair was a mess, her nails had scratched her fair skin, and she was indiscriminately hurling all the objects around her, laying her emotions bare like a child in the middle of a tantrum.

It was fortune amidst misfortune that she didn’t have the option of using magic in her rampage, both for herself and for those around her.

In any case, knowing what was going to happen, Subaru had been waiting outside, and when he heard her shrieking, he flew in and took her tightly into his arms.

Then, for the two and a half hours afterwards, he alone tended to her faltering cries, laments, and her frail acts of destruction, until at last he had set her in bed and left.

Just when he wanted to ask Ram to help change Emilia's clothes and wipe down her body, he ran into her right outside the door. Perhaps she was thinking the same thing and had been waiting for him to come out. When he saw her there with her water bucket and towel, Subaru certainly felt some sense of relief.

While Subaru was occupied with such thoughts, Ram quietly whispered,

Ram: "Barusu. —Are you really putting your hopes in her?"

Subaru: "…"

Ram: "Just looking at Lady Emilia's state up until last night, it's obvious she doesn't have what it takes to overcome the Trials. And right when it seemed like it couldn't get any worse, this happened. So The Great Spirit has left Lady Emilia's side?"

Subaru: "…So you know that too, huh."

Ram: "When it's being screamed, repeatedly, so loud that you can clearly hear it from outside the building, even an idiot could figure it out. And if Barusu could figure it out, then Ram could figure it out. Isn't that obvious?"

Subaru: "I'm getting the feeling that I'm being equated to an idiot here, but I can't dispute what you're saying. Emilia's situation has just worsened, there's no getting around that fact…"

Honestly, Ram's voiced concerns precisely mirrored Subaru's own anxieties.

Though he didn't go so far as to swallow Puck's words whole, Subaru did agree to his proposal. That was the truth.

Puck's claim that his existence was what was stopping Emilia from facing her genuine past, the more-than-minor changes between the loops and Subaru's misgivings about Roswaal's Gospel, Beatrice's screams, Emilia's testimonies, and Puck's existence—

All of these factors combined led Subaru to accept Puck's proposal, condemning Emilia into that prison of solitude. The result was that, for the first time in her life, she was truly and unequivocally alone.

In order to escape it, what she needed was time and opportunity.

Yet she had neither of those things right now. Her circumstances would not give her any reprieve to sort out her feelings, and the strength to jumpstart the process existed only within herself.

It was up to Emilia to find her way out. Ram understood this, and did not believe that any such change was coming.

Aside from that last part, Subaru agreed with Ram completely.

Subaru: "Even so, I'm still placing my hopes in her, and I still believe in her."

Ram: "…That's an optimistic expression. And what are you basing your high hopes on, exactly?"

Subaru: "I've decided to believe in what I feel I should believe in, that's all. And thanks to the "Friend" who's trying so hard to help me and the dragon who's always saving me… I've come to believe in myself a little more."

Ram: "And what does that have to do with believing in Lady Emilia…"

Subaru: "Since I've already come to believe in myself, what's so wrong with believing in the one I have a crush on? I like Emilia, and I want to become her strength. I like her, partly because she's super pretty and all… but the real reason… is something else."

Looking back at Ram's suspicious gaze, Subaru shrugged.

The first time Subaru began having feelings for Emilia was when he was first summoned to this parallel world—left hopeless and with nothing to cling to, she was the first person who was kind to him.

She saved his life, and over the time he'd spent with her, Subaru came to know the girl named Emilia and began wanting to help her. Part of it was justified as wanting to repay a debt, but, at the time, even Subaru wasn't fully aware of the truth behind it.

And then he lost her, and when he passed through Return by Death and rewound the world, the shared memories of their meeting were gone. But still, Subaru changed the future and saved her from the fate of death.

Everything that happened at the Mansion, at the Capital, and in the battles against the Witch Cult—all of it had started from the passion of that very first feeling which continued to burn at his back every step of the way.

She saved him in the Capital.

She saved him in the Mansion when he was about to crumble.

And for saving his life and his heart, he had wanted to repay her, but, in his conceit, he only wounded her.

In the time they'd spent apart, a mutual gap developed between them. But, given the chance to reflect on his actions, he stood up once more.

Felling the White Whale, defeating Petelgeuse, and fighting on even now, what was it all for?

Having realized his deep connection to the Witch, having let go of his past and bid his parents farewell, why was he still striving, spurred on by incomprehensible powers even now?

Subaru: "It's because I love her."

Ram: "…"

Subaru: "The girl I fell in love with… is persevering, stubborn, not honest with her feelings at all, and won't admit that she wants to cry even when she does… the kind of girl who wouldn't hesitate to risk her life for someone else's."

Ram: "You're the one convincing yourself of that, Barusu. Yes, Lady Emilia has a tendency to put others before herself… but that's just her way of safeguarding her own heart, isn't it? It's a mechanism to protect herself from the contempt of those around her, isn't it? You fell for it through and through, so doesn't it bother you that you're being used?"

Subaru: "No."

Hearing her lengthy question answered with a single syllable, Ram was left speechless.

Feeling some satisfaction at this rare reaction, Subaru looked back at the building behind him.

His thoughts turned to Emilia, presently asleep in her bed.

Subaru: "I don't mind being used as she pleases. And even if, deep down, she thinks of me as a tool that won't break no matter how much I'm used, I'm fine with that."

Ram: "You don't mind being treated as a tool?"

Subaru: "It's not that. It's because as long as she has a use for me, it means she still has the will to keep standing and move forward… and that makes me glad. As long as she still has the strength to lift her head… I will do anything I can to help her. So she can use me however she likes."

Ram: "…"

At Subaru's proclamation, Ram narrowed her eyes in displeasure.

It was a rather fresh experience for Subaru to see this from a girl who so seldom showed emotion. To unhesitatingly accept being used as a tool, that's almost like how she herself—

Subaru: "And here I thought you of all people would understand."

Ram: "—What makes you think that?"

Subaru: “I just figured, from what I’ve seen of your attitude and behavior up to now… you aren’t much different yourself. I thought you’d understand when other people feel the same way.”

Ram: “When you’re projecting your own unresolved issues onto other people, you’ll think everyone feels the same way you do. Especially when you realize that the other person has resolved the issues you yourself couldn’t resolve.”

Throwing back that rapid-fire retort, Ram looked away, as if embarrassed by what she had just said. Then, she let out a small sigh and waved for Subaru to move away from the door,

Ram: “Well, enough. If you want to be a tool, then be a tool and do your utmost for your master. Meanwhile, Ram will conduct herself as Ram sees fit. That is Ram’s freedom, is it not?”

Subaru: “Yeah. You do what you want. —It’s just.”

As Ram passed beside him and put her hand to the door, Subaru called to the back of her head. Ram stopped and turned him a glance, nodding as if prompting him to continue,

Subaru: “I’m not devoting myself to Emilia without expecting anything in return, you know.”

Ram: “…”

Subaru: “There are things that I’m trying to get from Emilia. Things that I want, that wouldn’t be obtainable without Emilia’s help. Earlier, I said I’m fine with her using me, but… I’m definitely planning on using her as well.”

It’s a bad way of putting it, but interacting with people with motives in mind is inevitable.

Ultimately, the future Subaru desired was one which everyone here would reach. In other words, by the time Subaru reached that future, he would have to have used every single one of them to the fullest.

He wanted to be used by Emilia. Just like how, to reach his perfect future, he would use Emilia, hold her close, and never let go.

Ram: "…"

Without a word, Ram turned away and walked into the house.

But just before the closing door completely concealed her small figure from behind—

Subaru: "Things have already diverged from the Gospel's writ. —In this world, Roswaal's already free."

No answer came to confirm whether she had heard those final words.

With the sound of the door closing, Subaru was now cut off from everything that was happening inside.

That said, it was highly improbable that Emilia would wake up and get rough with Ram. This was partly because he judged that, having cried herself to sleep, Emilia shouldn't have the energy to do anything of the sort. But more importantly, it was because it would take much, much longer before her body would be ready to wake up.

Subaru: "Tomorrow's my big day. The day after's a spare… either way, it's cutting it close."

At the end of his time limit, Roswaal will bring about the snowfall, and the Great Rabbit will come. It will spell the end of the Sanctuary. This loop will end in failure, and, most importantly, Subaru will be bound by his Contract.

In accordance with his Contract with Roswaal L Mathers, Natsuki Subaru will be forced to sacrifice all else to save the one thing most important to him.

—And, at that thought, Subaru wondered why he only realized it this late.

Subaru: "Fighting for the one future that I couldn't give up on… that's what I'm already doing, isn't it."

2

—Subaru’s battle inside the Sanctuary has now entered its third day.

The deadline of his Contract with Roswaal is on the sixth day. But since by the sixth day the calamities simultaneously threatening the Sanctuary and the Mansion will be unstoppable, his actual deadline is the night of the fifth day.

Which means, tonight included, Emilia has only three chances left to challenge the Trials.

However, the first of those three scant opportunities—

Subaru: “Tonight’s probably gonna be a bust.”

After learning of her loss of Puck and crying through the morning, by the time she fainted from exhaustion it was already almost noon. Her sleep was so deep that she wasn’t showing the slightest indication of waking.

Even if she could wake up before nightfall, how much more time would she need before she could face the reality that Puck was gone? —The bond she had with Puck wasn’t so shallow that it could be processed away in a few hours.

Just when they had no time to spare, a problem like this showed up that could only be solved with time. As pointless as it was to curse the Gods’ malicious designs, Subaru cursed it anyway.

Subaru: “Seeing her cry so much from losing you… I’m actually a little jealous, but I still hate you a hundred times more, Puck.”

With the little grey cat briefly popping into his mind, Subaru shook his head and looked forward once more.

For now, there was nothing he could do for the sleeping Emilia. The very best he could try would be to hold her hand. If it could protect her from her nightmares, then he would gladly do it for as long as necessary.

But, just like how Emilia had no time to spare, neither did Subaru.

He hasn't gotten everything in place for the bet yet.

His plan involved several uncertain factors to begin with, and even after assembling all potential resources and bolstering his hand to its absolute limit, his chances would still only stand at fifty-fifty. Or rather, even that was probably optimistic.

Subaru: "And so, I'm banking a lot on this conversation, Miss Ryuzu."

???: "And I have some high expectations of you too, Su-bo. …The two before me have told me a great deal about you, after all."

With the sound of gravel crunching underfoot, a small figure—Ryuzu, appeared at the door of their meeting place.

Making a sour face quite unbefitting of her youthful features, she looked around the locale Subaru had selected, and then, with "Although…",

Ryuzu: "Choosing this place for our meeting… you can be pretty unkind, Su-bo."

Subaru: "I figured it'd be a good choice if we don't want to be interrupted. If we met in front of the crystal, I might be too distracted to talk. And no matter how many times I go back there, I don't think I can ever get used to that smell."

He pinched his nose, expressing his disdain for the Experimental Grounds' nose-wrenching stench. Ryuzu did mention that it was her home, but she most likely also shared his sentiment. Giving a small chuckle at Subaru's words, admitting "You might be right", Ryuzu nodded.

Ryuzu: "But I can't say I'm pleased that you chose Gar-bo's secret base as the substitute. If you wanted somewhere secret… there should've been plenty of other options."

Subaru: "But if it's in the village, we don't know who's gonna be listening in. Garfiel and Frederica's childhood house, though… it might be a little mean, but I'm sure you'd be just as troubled as I'd be if someone were to overhear us?"

Ryuzu: "No doubt."

Subaru shrugged, seeking her agreement, while Ryuzu nodded with a slight grin. With this, Ryuzu stepped into the small, shoddy cabin made out of scraps and dilapidated wood.

Subaru: "Sorry I didn't prepare a comfy sofa beforehand. Despite my profound consideration for the elderly, it pains me that I don't even have a chair to offer you."

Ryuzu: "Goodness, so you're going to make me stand here and talk? Taking the whip to the elderly, kids today really aren't what they used to be."

Subaru: "Ogh, that line really sounded like an old person just now. You don't miss a beat on the elderly appeal, huh."

Subaru wryly smiled at the sight of Ryuzu knocking on her perfectly straight back as if it were creaking all over. Then, Subaru invited her into the center of the small cabin while he crossed his arms and leaned against a wall.

Subaru: "Actually, as far as I'm concerned, just going on gossiping with a cute girl doesn't sound too bad."

Ryuzu: "Humbug. I'm a tad too advanced in the years to be called a girl, don't you think?"

Subaru: "If we're talking about age, my main heroine's quite a bit my senior, too. Her apparent age and mental age don't line up with her real age at all, so I only kinda found out recently."

Actual age: ~100 years. Apparent age: 18. Mental age: 14.

Emilia's genre is so deliciously complicated that Subaru could never get tired of flaunting that fact. At first he thought she's a Loli-Granny, but turns out she's a Granny-Loli.

Now Subaru could finally understand why Emilia seemed so immature, timid, and idealistic for her appearance yet tended to say such granny-like things.

Subaru: “And for Emilia’s sake too, I want to do everything I can. — So, I’ll be asking you all kinds of things, Miss Ryuzu Sigma.”

Ryuzu: “Sig… what?”

Subaru: “Sorry, just something I came up with. It can get kinda confusing if I call all four of you Miss Ryuzu, so I conveniently labeled you Alpha, Beta, Sigma, Theta to keep track.”

Ryuzu: “…”

Hearing Subaru’s explanation, Ryuzu placed her hand to her lips in thought.

Subaru furrowed his brows at the reaction that couldn’t exactly be called displeased, and, seeing that she wasn’t raising any objections, he held up a single finger,

Subaru: “Anyway, I’m glad we finally got a chance to talk. After all, considering your position, Sig… today’s Miss Ryuzu, I figured you might not have wanted to talk.”

Ryuzu: “Sigma’s fine if you’re having trouble. Seeing how you want to refer to us as individuals, it’s only fitting that you call us different things… Though there’s never been a need for that until now.”

Subaru: “Really? Then I’ll happily oblige. If you want a cuter name, though, I could work something out with the other three as well.”

Ryuzu: “—No, Sigma’s fine. In fact, please just use Sigma.”

Ryuzu revised her answer with a slight change in nuance.

Blinking at that response, Subaru figured that Ryuzu wasn’t interested in continuing with that topic. “Now”, Ryuzu continued, changing the subject,

Sigma: “I’m pretty sure I already know, but… what would you like to talk about, Su-bo? How much do you know about the circumstances the Sanctuary's wrapped up in?"

Subaru: "Well, I guess I want to know everything I don't know already… but, for now, I want to know what you saw in the Tomb, Miss Sigma. I heard from Miss Alpha the day before that there were two Miss Ryuzus' who challenged the Trials. Miss Sigma is one of them, correct?"

Sigma: "Correct. I am one of the two Ryuzu's to have entered the Tomb. But that said, I only went in once, and briefly… it was nothing more than stepping inside to bring Gar-bo out after he ignored the agreement and went in the Tomb."

What Ryuzu Sigma was relating was just what Subaru had heard from Frederica before.

Hoping to liberate the Sanctuary, Garfiel entered the Tomb, but when he didn't come back, his sister went to ask Ryuzu for help. The Ryuzu Frederica went to must have been Sigma, who was standing before him now.

Subaru: "It was just stepping inside… but, you must have seen something after you went in, right? Like, your… your past, maybe."

Sigma: "…"

Subaru: "If the Tomb totally hates you like it hates Roswaal, your body would've been repulsed the moment you went inside. Roswaal almost exploded, and Patrasche got riddled with wounds when she went in to drag me out. So going in there without qualification must've required just as much resolve as someone challenging the Trial."

Sigma: "It's entirely possible that I was prepared to be wounded when I went in, isn't it?"

Subaru: "That would've made a beautiful story… but then how do you explain the fact that Miss Sigma is opposed to liberating the Sanctuary? That doesn't make much sense."

Sigma: "…"

It was information she had never confessed to—neither Ryuzu Sigma or Theta had ever openly expressed opposition to liberating the Sanctuary. But Sigma chose to react with silence without denying it.

And, in practice, her silence was equivalent to affirmation.

Subaru: "You saw your past inside the Tomb. And because of that, you've come to abhor the possibility of liberating the Sanctuary. So, what exactly did you see?"

Sigma: "…"

Subaru: "In terms of possibilities… you saw the circumstances of your birth, maybe? It could be when you were born from the crystal, or it could even be…"

Sigma: "Ryuzu Meyer's past, you mean?"

Before Subaru could finish, Sigma struck the core of the matter.

Wordlessly, Subaru tightened his lips, silently acknowledging that continuation.

Going by the name of Ryuzu Meyer ever since they were born, these four Ryuzu replicants have taken up the role of the representative of the Sanctuary. If there was anything in their past worth regretting, Subaru imagined it would have to be before this life—before they became the Ryuzu's they were now.

And he could now see from Sigma's reaction that he wasn't mistaken in this thought.

Subaru: "If the past you saw was the past of the original Miss Ryuzu inside the crystal… I can imagine why you'd be afraid, Miss Sigma. The reason she was sealed inside the crystal must also be the reason behind this, right?"

Sigma: "…"

The one who sealed Ryuzu Meyer inside the crystal was the Witch of Greed, Echidna.

Remembering the “Event” of being sealed by the Witch should have been more than enough to make Sigma give up on the Trials. But,

Sigma: “My my, Su-bo, just how much do you know?”

Subaru: “…”

Sigma: “What happened to the Ryuzu Meyer inside the crystal is known to only a few select people in the Sanctuary. And I highly doubt that any of those who knew would have revealed it to you, Su-bo.”

There was a certain hesitation on the side of Sigma’s expression. Without turning her gaze to the speechless Subaru, Sigma looked up to the ceiling.

Sigma: “I don’t think even Ros-bo, or the other Ryuzu who knows about the Tomb… would have told you. So just where did you hear this from, Su-bo?”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru wasn’t sure how he should respond.

It was a rather basic question, but far from simple.

A tingle ran up the back of his neck as he sensed the shift in the air. It was the perilous atmosphere that Subaru had experienced many times before—and although the matter wasn’t life-and-death, it was a “Moment” which would determine the outcomes of the fatal reckonings afterwards.

It was a sensation reminiscent of the scene in Crusch’s Mansion when he asked her for her help in the battle against the White Whale.

In other words, the outcome of the exchange this instant will tilt the entire future of the Sanctuary.

Subaru: “…”

Falling into silence once more, Subaru painstakingly contemplated his response.

The answer Sigma requested of him will shape everything that comes after.

Subaru was never good at reading other people's emotions. In fact, he was overwhelmingly ignorant of the subtleties. So it wasn't just turning a few gears in his head, but a mental task requiring setting every brain cell aflame just for him to reach the level of a normal person.

In this case, the answer Subaru chose to give was—

Subaru: "I heard it from Echidna. In the Tomb."

Sigma: "—From the Madam Witch?"

Hearing the name of the Witch, Sigma's expression slightly tensed.

Over the time he'd spent in the Sanctuary, Subaru had come to painfully understand the heavy significance of Echidna's name. Roswaal hated hearing her being referred to as "Witch of Greed", while Garfiel and Ryuzu both avoided calling her "Echidna".

Echidna's name was most likely a taboo to them. And as for whether it was in a good or a bad sense, it would certainly depend on what kind of shock they had experienced in their past.

He was taking a chance on how she would react when he violated the taboo, but Subaru had made his choice.

Subaru: "Well, my qualification's revoked now, but I was qualified to challenge the Trials at one point. So I know a thing or two about what it's like inside the Trial. Same goes for what Echidna's planning, why she created the Sanctuary, and why she made replicants like Miss Sigma."

Sigma: "…I did have a feeling you knew too much to have heard it from Ros-bo."

Subaru: "And that's why I know a bit more about some things than you were expecting, Miss Sigma. Now that I've told you all I know, I was kinda hoping it would help you decide what to reveal or withhold from me."

Sigma: "Always the flatterer."

Sigma wryly smiled at Subaru's backpedaling statement. Then, she placed her small palm to her forehead and exhaled a long sigh.

It was the necessary ritual for her to make up her mind.

Sigma: "Since you already know the Madam Witch's connection to the Sanctuary and about me and Ryuzu Meyer, it'd probably be strange if I kept hiding it from you…"

Subaru: "So then…"

Sigma: "Don't rush. I understand how you feel, Su-bo… but it's not that simple. —What you want to ask me is "What did Ryuzu see inside the Trial", correct?"

Subaru was about to confirm with a "Yes" when a subtle sense of awryness led him to hold his words.

Sigma said "Ryuzu" rather than "I" just now. But just when Subaru furrowed his brows, contemplating her true intentions, Sigma simultaneously muttered "Sharp one",

Sigma: "If the question was about "The past I saw in the Tomb", my answer would be "I don't know". After all, I did not take the Trial inside the Tomb. Although I was certainly the one who returned from the Tomb."

Subaru: "…and what… does that mean?"

Sigma: "It's simple. Don't you think it strange, Su-bo? There should only have been one chance for Ryuzu to enter the Tomb to bring Gar-bo out. And yet, there were two Ryuzu Meyer replicants who had entered the Tomb. The number of chances and people don't match up at all."

Subaru: "a…"

Only when it was pointed out for him did Subaru realize what an idiot he had been. Indeed, she was completely right. There were two Ryuzu's who entered the Tomb, yet only one chance to enter—there could only be one explanation to eliminate this contradiction.

Subaru: "The Miss Ryuzu who went in… is not the Miss Ryuzu who came out…"

Sigma: "Precisely. According to your arrangement… the Ryuzu who came out would be Ryuzu Sigma, myself. And the Ryuzu who went in, that would be Ryuzu Theta. The one who saw her past was Ryuzu Theta, while I merely brought Gar-bo outside. As for my stance, rather than being opposed to the Sanctuary's liberation, the process of elimination should leave me at neutral."

And so, she looked to the near-dejected Subaru and continued.

Sigma: "—If there is anything I can tell you, it would be what Gar-bo had been so desperately hiding. The past that child saw… or fragments of it, anyway"

Chapter 96:
Red Drawn at the Lips

1

Subaru: “Fragments… of the past Garfiel saw…”

Sigma: “Just as it sounds, they are no more than fragments. It was me who carried him out of the Tomb while he muttered, delirious and sobbing. And so I know the rough outlines.”

Swallowing his breath, Subaru turned to Sigma.

Garfiel’s past—was not what he had expected to talk about with Sigma, but it was nonetheless one of the issues Subaru needed to sort out.

Though it was out of order, he had no complaints about getting this information now.

Subaru: “Can you tell me? What did that gu… what did Garfiel see in his past that made him want to give up on freeing the Sanctuary? What could he have seen to have made him so opposed to letting the residents go outside?”

Sigma: “—What that child saw… was his mother’s farewell.”

Subaru: “Her, farewell?”

Subaru felt something gouge at his chest.

Garfiel’s parting with his mother—that doesn’t sound unrelated to Subaru’s own Trial at all.

But unlike Subaru, who could look back on his parting with a happy heart, Garfiel’s probably wasn’t so pleasant. And that must be why he was so obsessively bound to the Sanctuary.

Sigma: “Su-bo, do you know about that child’s mother?”

Subaru: “…I heard a little from Frederica before. Their mother was an ordinary human, and the half-bloods… well, a lot of things happened, and those two were born… so she left them in the Sanctuary.”

Sigma: “Heartlessly, she left by herself to find her own happiness… that’s the gist of what it was.”

Filling in the part that Subaru had trouble voicing, a fleeting smile rose on Sigma’s face.

Her supplementary information was just what Frederica had told Subaru about her mother—about her turbulent life and the unfortunate series of events that led them here.

If he remembered correctly, Frederica and Garfiel each took one of their parent’s surnames. Frederica took her father’s, Baumann. While Garfiel took his mother’s, Tinsel.

Subaru: “But, Frederica said their mother left them when they were still very little… even if he saw his memories from back then, just how vivid could those memories have been?”

Sigma: “Have you forgotten that the Trial was created by Echidna, who holds the Book of Wisdom? Rather than from the vague, unreliable memories that remain, it shapes the world using the person’s original memories. …It shouldn’t have been much different from the scene he saw as a young child.”

Subaru: “…”

Without any basis to refute her, Subaru pondered about Sigma’s words.

Indeed, by drawing from Subaru’s memories, Echidna was able to recreate the town and the school from Subaru’s original universe, none of which existed in this world.

When it comes to having one’s deepest memories tapped into, Subaru himself had experienced it first hand.

Subaru: “Right. I guess that makes sense. But the problem is… when

Garfiel saw the scene of his parting with his mother again, why did it hurt him so much that he broke down crying?”

Sigma: “…”

Subaru: “It might sound harsh, but she left him when he was still very little, so he’s spent far more time without his mother than with her. Getting stuck on something that’s already long passed just doesn’t sound like him at…”

Sigma: “Su-bo, do you really think a wound from being abandoned by your mother as a child could be so shallow?”

Pointing out to Subaru what he had trouble understanding, Sigma’s words cut like a knife.

Feeling his throat struck by those words, Subaru unwittingly fell silent. And, seeing this, Sigma lowered her grieving gaze.

Sigma: “Of course, his sister Frederica and I were aware of how large a thorn had been lodged into that child’s heart. But Gar-bo might not have been aware of it himself until the past he saw in his Trial brought it to the surface. …I think his excessive conservatism is precisely because of that.”

Subaru: “…But, why? So that guy’s rejection of liberating the Sanctuary and his fears of the outside world are all because of his negative feelings towards his mother… for choosing the outside world over him?”

Sigma: “It’s more like hatred of the outside world. Hatred of the world that stole his mother but left him behind. And as much as he wanted to go after her, the Barrier barred the rest of us from coming with him. Between his mother and the Sanctuary’s residents, both of which are irreplaceable to him, it was far too cruel a choice.”

Subaru: “Does he maybe hate his mother? The mother who deserted him and went into the outside world alone?”

For Subaru, who had never been abandoned by his parents, it was a pain he could not understand.

No matter how shamelessly he abandoned himself, no matter how worthless he showed them he was, they never once considered giving up on him.

He was saved by that warmth, yet that same warmth tormented him even now.

Sigma: “Well, who could say…”

Sigma avoided giving an immediate answer.

Her gaze wandered, as if in search of her words, before she spilled a small sigh.

Sigma: “I’ve never been able to ask him what he truly felt about his mother. I was a coward, after all. Every time I wanted to ask… I thought of that child crying in the Tomb, and I just couldn’t say the words.”

Subaru: “Miss Sigma…”

Sigma: “And yet, even after that child learned of his past, he’d still say Garfiel Tinsel whenever he was asked for his name. I think he does this so he doesn’t forget.”

Subaru: “Doesn’t forget…”

Giving a nod to Subaru’s words, Sigma lovingly looked over the crummy shed that Garfiel, with his own hands, had worked so hard to build.

Sigma: “It’s so he doesn’t forget the emotion he felt when he saw his past. —Whether it was anger, or grief, I’m not sure even now.”

2

Otto: “You look terrible, Mr. Natsuki. You know that?”

Spotting Subaru in the center of the village, Otto called out with a wry smile.

Hearing that unsparing remark, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and looked towards him.

Subaru: “I could say the same about you. It’s been half a day since I saw you and you’re already covered in mud. Still tumbling around in woods at your age, aren’t you a bit old for that?”

Otto: “It’s not like I was trying to get covered in mud!”

Subaru: “Don’t shout, it’s rattling my sleep-deprived brain. Speaking of sleep deprivation, you’ve got some circles under your eyes as well. Going frolicking in mud when you should be sleeping… could it be that you’re struck with the urge to rectify as many regrets as you can in the limited time you have left?”

Otto: “Could you stop sticking me with that kind of outdated popular-fiction plotline?!”

From Otto’s objections, it sounds like this world has had its fad of fictions about terminally-ill patients trying to live their last days to the fullest as well. Just more useless knowledge to add to the collection.

In fact, once this is all over, it might be quite profitable to import all sorts of stories from his original world into this one. That said, “Anyway”, Subaru continued,

Subaru: “Enough of joking around for now… so how’re things actually going?”

Otto: “I can’t deny that it was a lot harder without you there, Mr. Natsuki… but still, I think it’s safe to call it a success. You can go ahead and praise me now.”

Subaru: “Good job good job, you’re my only hope, go for it!”

Otto: “What’s with those uninspired encouragements! I can feel the air drying up!”

Watching Otto flap his arms up and down, Subaru secretly acknowledged his endless gratitude for his help. But since it’d be way too embarrassing to say it out loud, Subaru was determined to take that secret to his grave.

Subaru: “Well, good to hear those preparations are coming along. By the way, how’re things progressing on the other front? Think it’ll be usable?”

Otto: “That one… is a bit tricky with the limited timeframe that we have. There’s simply not enough time. I guess if I cut into my sleeping hours, I might be able to manage it by the day after tomorrow, but…”

Subaru: “You’ll cut into your sleeping hours for me? Your diligence leaves me speechless.”

Otto: “Nnghaah! Can of worms…!”

Hugging his head, Otto lamented his slip of the tongue. But, even if Subaru hadn’t insisted on it, Otto would probably still have chosen to forsake his sleep in order to make up for the needed time.

It was precisely because of this sincerity that Subaru trusted him as a friend.

Without ever realizing how thankful Subaru actually felt, with “So then”, Otto wiped off his anguished expression and turned to Subaru,

Otto: “Has the stage been set on your end, Mr. Natsuki? Honestly, considering the trouble with Lady Emilia, I’ve been wondering if I should be packing my bags and scuttling away in the night.”

Subaru: “I’m confident I can get all the missing pieces together. It’s still a bit worrying, though, not knowing what the final picture will look like.”

Otto: “A-Are we going to be alright? There isn’t much time left…”

Subaru: “If I can’t fill in the pieces before the time limit, we’ll just have to make up for it with love, courage, and friendship. At least, going from the books I’ve read, it’ll definitely work out somehow.”

Otto: “You know, Mr. Natsuki. While I did say I was willing to go against the odds, that’s assuming there’s a fighting chance, but taking on a bet with zero chance of winning isn’t just idiotic, it’s more like courting death…”

Otto went on mumbling, but Subaru started walking without paying him much mind. Reluctantly, Otto followed and matched his steps.

Not too worried about fanning Otto’s anxiety, Subaru headed towards the building where Roswaal was waiting—while not necessary, he thought he ought to update him on their progress thus far.

Having concluded his conversation with Ryuzu Sigma, Subaru had learned fragments of Garfiel’s past.

Even though Sigma had no further information to give him, she did clarify her disinterest in the Sanctuary’s liberation, Garfiel’s rejection of his past, and the fact that she switched with Theta during the chaotic situation in the Tomb.

According to the replicants’ rotation schedule, Theta should show up tomorrow.

What Theta saw in the Trial must have been the memories of Ryuzu Meyer’s interactions with Echidna, but just what could she have seen to have made her so averse to liberating the Sanctuary?

Only by knowing this could he understand the reason for Theta’s obstinance. And, once he does, he could finally work to remove the existence that had been feeding Garfiel his instructions and get a chance to talk to him without setting off his rage.

Despite Garfiel’s rough and reckless facade, his nature wasn’t irrational nor wholly inclined to violence. At least, that was Subaru’s impression.

If he really was irrational and approved of solving every problem with brute force, he simply had to eliminate everything potentially threatening to the Sanctuary.

Without Puck at Emilia’s side and with Roswaal below his full capacity, no one present had the power to contend with a beastified Garfiel.

Garfiel was now without a doubt the most powerful force within the Sanctuary, and if he chose to bare his fangs and attack, he could have solved everything with violence alone.

Yet he didn't do this, precisely because, beneath the surface, his nature was still willing to search for a rational solution.

Subaru: "Basically, we're taking advantage of his softness to plot behind his back… huh. Almost makes us sound like the bad guys."

Otto: "I don't have a problem with using anything we can get our hands on, but I agree that we aren't exactly fairy tale protagonists here."

Picking up on Subaru's mutters, the self-professed scoundrel B shrugged to his accomplice, scoundrel A. Hearing this, scoundrel A was sincerely gladdened by that sentiment from B.

In any case, Garfiel was the convergence point of the many problems surrounding the Sanctuary. If they could successfully persuade him, it would be the same as solving the entire B-side of their problems.

And as for the A-side, that would be the Trials—and Emilia.

Subaru: "I'll have to go see her one more time after this."

It was already well into the evening, and night-time lights have lit up across the Sanctuary. The sun had sunken halfway down the western sky, coloring the world in a sunset hue of orange and violet.

Night was approaching, and, assuming nothing happens, the time to challenge the Trial would soon arrive.

But Subaru had yet to hear any report of Emilia waking.

Even if she could wake in time for the Trials, considering the time she would need in order to sort through her emotions, no doubt the challenge would have to be passed up for tonight.

In fact, if worst comes to worst, she might even miss the challenge on Subaru's critical day tomorrow.

Even Puck, who served as the trigger of Emilia's collapse, spoke only of the extent of her initial shock, but nothing of how long it would take for her to recover.

Subaru: "I know it depends on how well I support her after she wakes up, but… since I can't know how much damage she's taken, I can't help but feel like I'm just letting it lie."

Otto: "Do you think you'll be able to console her… or something to that effect? I'm just an outsider, so I can't really say anything."

Subaru: "For the moment, all I know is that she's so confused that she can barely recognize the people around her. It's the first time I've seen her throw a child-like tantrum like this. If you're asking me if I can do it or not… honestly, I can only try."

Otto: "So we're still walking on a tightrope, then…"

Hearing Subaru's unassuring answer, Otto sighed, but made no move to flee. Realizing that he was making Otto join him in his near-hopeless fight, Subaru genuinely wanted to apologize.

Nevertheless, the fact that Otto did not abandon him even now was truly a saving grace for Subaru.

Otto: "If that's the situation for Lady Emilia, how are things going with Garfiel? Have you acquired the bargaining material to soften him up a bit?"

Subaru: "I'm pretty sure I got the key piece we need, yeah. The problem is I'll still need some time before I can get him to the negotiation table."

How he deals with Garfiel will depend on how his conversation goes with Theta tomorrow. Whatever happens in his talk with Theta —he would have to base his strategy upon that.

As frustrating as it was that his only option would be to repeat whatever information she gives him.

For now, there was no choice but to keep walking those tightropes one after the other.

Subaru: “—We’re here. You’re going in with me this time.”

Subaru said to Otto beside him as they arrived in front of Roswaal’s residence. Otto made an uncomfortable face at Subaru’s words, but,

Otto: “Ehhh, well, alright. I guess there’s no reason for me stay outside this time. If I go in with you… auaaagh, isn’t that the same as declaring war on the Margrave?! You sure my head will still be on my body after all this is over?”

Subaru: “Don’t worry. If your head goes flying, my head’ll go flying or get turned to rabbit food. I’m never gonna let you die alone!”

Otto: “There’s nothing reassuring about that at all!”

Seeing Subaru shoot him a thumbs up, Otto wailed in reply.

And as they went on bantering outside the building’s doorway, the door opened from the inside—revealing a maid, casting them a cold stare.

Ram: “What’re you two chattering about so loudly right outside the door so late in the day? People will come to doubt your master, Master Roswaal’s integrity. Conduct yourselves with more dignity.”

Subaru: “Sorry… but, what’re you doing here? You left Emilia by herself?”

Apologizing to Ram’s scathing criticism, Subaru pointed out the strangeness of her presence. Giving a small sigh, Ram shrugged with feigned bafflement, and,

Ram: “You needn’t worry, I’m going back now. Since you were coming to visit, I was called here to help Master Roswaal prepare. —What a nuisance you are, placing this burden on Lady Emilia.”

Subaru: “Did you just spin that around so it’s my fault? …And what did Roswaal need to prepare for, anyway? He can’t get out of the bed so there’s not much to be done, right?”

While Subaru knew that Roswaal actually could get out from the bed and was in fact healthy enough to kick Garfiel's head to pieces, he was pretending he doesn't know for now.

Seeing this, Ram squinted one of her eyes with an annoyed "Enough" before walking right through the space between Subaru and Otto.

Ram: "Master Roswaal is waiting, so hurry inside. Take care not to trouble Master Roswaal by dragging the conversation on for too long. …After you're done, promptly come take my place at Emilia's side."

Subaru: "Busy lady. I'm surprised you're that worried about Roswaal when he's pretty much healthy at this point. I still hope you could prioritize Emilia a little more. If she finds herself alone when she wakes up, she'll…"

Ram: "The one she should find at her side when she wakes up cannot be Ram. Don't you even understand that much?"

This time, Ram gave the dumbstruck Subaru a genuine gaze of someone looking at an idiot before walking away. Silently watching her back as she left, Subaru felt Otto give him a light jab with his elbow.

Otto: "Unless you were intentionally trying to make her mad just now, that was a pretty terrible exchange, you know."

Subaru: "…Yeah I know. I was just wondering what her reaction would be."

Otto: "You're rotten through and through, you know that?"

Shoving Otto's elbow away, Subaru went in the open door. Otto followed behind him, and together, they headed to the innermost room in the building. Lightly knocking on the door,

Subaru: "Roswaal, it's me. Can I come in?"

Roswaal: "Oo~oya, you're here. Do~~ come in do~~ come in."

The clown's voice from beyond the door—restored to its usual intonation, slightly surprised Subaru as he opened the door.

And—

Subaru: "Aah, so that's what it was."

Seeing Roswaal on the bed, Subaru faintly nodded as if understanding something.

That must be the "Preparation" Ram had mentioned.

At the comprehending Subaru's side, Otto made a "Hgk" sound when he saw Roswaal's face. It must be the first time he's seen his face like this, after all.

Roswaal: "Ta~~king the time to come report on your pro~~gress, how commendable. I am rather fo~~nd of that part abo~~ut you."

Snickering in his clownish, drawn-out tone with the long-absent make-up back on his face, Roswaal spread out his arms, welcoming their arrival.

Bonus Short Stories

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 2

1

“Ohohoho…”

It was a laugh that embraced a dark, seductive air.

The voice was clouded with pleasure, and trembled with excitement it could not conceal. That feeling showed through not only in the voice, but also in the spring in her step.

She was a beautiful young woman, who wore her black hair long. Her hair was bundled into a braid, and a violet hair ornament somehow completed an impression of danger. The black clothing she wore exposed the lines of her voluptuous body, and it’s mere existence held a devilish charm, wrapped in thick seductiveness.

She was a goblet of poison that one couldn’t help but reach out for, even knowing the painful results. That was the true nature of this enticing beauty, and she was a danger beyond compare to any man, but…

“…Will you stop it with that obnoxious laughter, plea~se? Do you want me to get ma~d?”

…it had absolutely no effect on the girl, long since used to looking at the beauty, and now sending her a disapproving glare.

The girl was still young, perhaps eleven or twelve years old. Just like the beauty, her hair was braided, and along with a lovely appearance appropriate for her age, she held just a little bit of a glamour that didn’t match her age.

Her name was Meili Portroute, and although she was still a long ways from being irresistibly charming, she was a beautiful girl that made one think of her future potential to captivate men.

However, that was a hope seen by looking several years into the future, and not a glimpse of it could be seen in her form now, as she puffed out her cheeks in disapproval.

The beauty walking next to Meili seemed to feel the same way.

“Even if you hold your breath to try to frighten me, I can’t see it as the least bit scary.”

“It’s just that, despite being a girl, Elsa, you’re far too che~erful. How can you go hiking in the dark like this, with such a calm face, I wo~nder. It’s just unbelie~vable.”

“You, on the other hand, have too little stamina for someone of your age, I suppose. That’s what you get for always, always depending on your pets, you know. A little walking would do you good.”

Speaking with a face devoid of malice, and shrugging, the beauty—Elsa—suggested that to Meili. With a weary look showing through on her youthful face, she replied,

“…Why have you been seeming so cheerful for the last whi~le?”

“Before this, you came to help me, didn’t you, Meili? I’m just amused that this time, our positions are completely reversed. Don’t be upset.”

“Hmf! You’ve really got a terrible personality, Elsa~!”

“That’s a very unexpected opinion, indeed.”

As Meili criticized her loudly, Elsa tilted her head as though mystified.

Exchanging that sort of bumpy conversation, the two of them proceeded along a steep mountain path.

…After all, the two of them were currently in the middle of crossing the mountains to make their escape.

The reason that the two of them, Elsa and Meili, were crossing the mountains, in the dead of night no less, was simple.

After messing up a job, they were fleeing from hostile pursuers from a concerned party.

Because of that, the two of them were pushing their way along an animal trail, in clothing that wasn't suited to hiking.

"I wonder, why is it you look like you're having such a good ti~me."

It was difficult to see her in the dim light, as Meili caught her breath, hands on her knees. At the reproachful voice of the girl, Elsa, with a calm expression, touched a finger to her lips.

And, with Meili reflected in eyes dark enough to make one think of pitch black, she gave a charming smile.

"I said, didn't it? It's just amusing that we're in exactly the opposite position we were that other time. Also, after so long, I was able be a big sister to you again, so perhaps I was a bit pleased about that, too."

"Even if you hadn't come, Elsa, I could have taken care of it by myse~lf…"

"You could have crossed these steep mountains by yourself? Or perhaps you had some other means of escape arranged? If so, I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"Hmf…"

Even though they were speaking sarcastically, Meili frowned without real ill will.

That Meili had been saved by Elsa's actions was irritating, but nevertheless a fact.

This time around, the job given to Meili was to bring chaos to the mansion of a certain noble. Without going into details, Meili did her best with the skills she possessed. …To tell the truth, playing around a bit while working was a bad habit of hers, and she did a little of that this time, too.

That the part where she'd been playing was related to the failure of the job was something she couldn't deny.

"It looks like the Curseys died because of that, too; it was all really u~nlucky."

"Meili?"

"I'm ti~red. A break, let's take a bre~ak."

Idly wrapping her hair around a finger, Meili sat down on a nearby fallen tree. Not taking her to task for her lackadaisical attitude, Elsa stood near the fallen tree and joined her in resting.

"A~ll the curseys got burned up, it looks like. That… magic, were you watching it to~o?"

"Yes, though it was just a quick glance. I've heard about that. The strongest magic user in the kingdom, an eccentric man who has mastered all types of magic."

"For someone that great, he's pretty weird, h~mm."

Having said that, Meili agreed with the opinion. She only saw him for a fleeting moment, but that magic user was flying through the sky, and hurling balls of fire into the forest like rain.Against that, the curseys never stood a chance.

"Well? Doesn't that strange guy play into your tastes? You have a weakness for strong people, Elsa, do~n't you?"

"Oh my, that makes me sound like a flighty person, indeed. My hobby is simply beautiful bowels. They just happen to be more common among strong people."

"Yeah, yeah, su~re."

Even with it pointed out to her, it wasn't a difference that seemed to Meili like it mattered.

“Sadly, magic users don’t really tug on my heartstrings. It must be that the way they train is different from warriors, indeed. From my experience up to now, opening the belly of a magic user just isn’t that interesting.”

“Hmmm. But someday, I’d like you to pay that weirdo ba~ck. If that doesn’t happen, then I’ll just feel too bad for all the curseys that di~ed.”

“All the witchbeasts were ones you picked up during the mission this time, weren’t they? Did you grow fond of them?”

“Na~h, not all all. I just wanted to sa~y that.”

Meili was simply saying it because it costs nothing to say, and, as she nodded, Elsa’s expression showed she understood.

“Well then, leaving all of your regular friends behind was just for fun?”

“Sometimes I just feel like pretending to be a normal gi~rl. What do you think? Does it look alright?”

Lightly touching her hair, she grasped the skirt of her outfit. Unlike her usual outfit, this gave something closer to the impression of a village child’s clothing, simple and without a hint of decoration.

She was fairly proud of her work, herself, but Elsa responded to the query with an indifferent ‘Hmm, yes.”.

“The outfit you’re always wearing is cuter, isn’t it, perhaps?.”

“I’m not asking if it’s cute or not, a~m I? Does the look suit me or no~t?”

“Your hair, too; I think your natural color looks better than when it’s dyed.”

“Elsa, you’re really not the sort that listens to what someone is saying, a~re you?”

At Elsa’s left-field critique, Meili sighed sulkily. The exchange between them looked like their age difference was completely reversed, but for the two of them, this was business as usual.

It's not that they were best friends with each other, and not that they understood each other's nature, either.

Despite that, they had something that could be called trust. It was that sort of pseudo-sisterly relationship.

"Speaking of which, when we were talking about the strong and the weak, I remembered something."

"Wha~t?"

"You remember, we were talking about it at the capital, right? While I was waiting, I'd do some knitting or something?"

Saying that, Elsa tossed something this way. Catching it reflexively, Meili found it was cotton stuffed into soft cloth, a plush doll, hand-made by Elsa. Flawlessly reproducing a familiar form, with red hair and white skin, and a sword at it's waist, Meili was, as always, impressed by Elsa's skill.

"'No~w?' is something I might ask, but this is…?"

"It's the Sword Saint. I think it's quite well done, myself. That's thanks to the sight of him being burned into my eyes."

"And that despite that you were almost killed; you really are a strange girl, Elsa~."

Under the circumstances, Meili could only snort and hug the doll to her chest. After that, she swung her legs around a little, until Elsa suddenly turned her back towards Meili.

Still with her back turned, Elsa squatted down and noted quickly 'Now, then.'.

"…What's this?"

"Your feet hurt too much to walk on, don't they? You don't have to hide it, or try to tough it out. You must have simply had bad shoes.

We need to get across the mountain, before it gets worse.”

Meili groaned softly at the throbbing pain in her feet.

“What?”

“It’s just that doing exactly what Elsa says isn’t much fu~n.”

Snapping her gaze away, Meili heaped her dissatisfaction on Elsa’s back with a sulky mood.

In truth, the fact that Elsa was here at all was a source of dissatisfaction for Meili.

After the previous job, Elsa should have been headed to a safe house for recuperation. It wasn’t out of kindness, but contempt, that she was here now, coming to assist Meili.

The fact that she had foreseen her failure, and come running to help her get away, was what made it so.

“That’s pre~tty conceited, even for you, Elsa.”

“Would you stop talking like a little child already, and get on?”

“Hmf.”

“Staying in the mountains and being bitten by bugs isn’t much fun either, is it? If you can control even the bugs, that’s another matter, though.”

“Fi~ne.”

Fussing wouldn’t solve anything, so Meili decided to be big about it. Climbing off the fallen tree, this time she clambered up onto Elsa’s back. Holding on to Meili’s legs, Elsa stood back up.

“I hope you’ll carry me nicer than the rough ride that shadowlion gives, alri~ght?”

“Courteously, then. I’ll be sure to do my best.”

Responding thus, Elsa began to run. Accelerating all at once, as though trying to outrun the wind.

“Too fast, too fast, too fast I said! Cut it out, Elsa～!”

Only Meili’s shrill cry lingered for a while in the dark of the night.

3

“Elsa, stop.”

When Meili whispered that to Elsa, more than ten minutes had passed since she began running.

Up until now, she’d yelled at her to stop countless times, but Elsa, who had never show a hint of stopping until now, halted. …It was due to the emotion packed into the voice, most likely.

In truth, this call wasn’t playing around. It was a necessary stop. The proof of that was…

“It looks like they’re all around us, indeed.”

Having stopped, Elsa whispered this back to the hostility stabbing towards them from all sides. As if to prove those words, the sound of something being stepped on came from the brush, and it shook.

And, what showed itself from the brush was a black-bodied, red-eyed, four-legged beast…

“It’s a cursey survivor, ma~ybe?”

Looking over the top of Elsa’s back, Meili’s eyes went round as she saw the beast. The fiercely growling black witchbeast was the same as the ones she’d employed half a day earlier, and that she’d thought had been wiped out. One from another pack, or maybe a survivor that hadn’t been hunted down, and had fled deep into the mountains, perhaps.

“…”

The cursedogs were not limited to that one alone; other points of light mixed into the shadows were glaring at the pair of them. Their numbers weren’t that great, but if there were survivors, that simplified things.

“Shall we finish them off?”

“Don’t say such uncivilized thi~ngs. If I’m here, they won’t atta~ck. Don’t worry about that, just let me talk to the~m.”

Smacking the back of Elsa’s head for being hostile, she instead urged her to get closer to the cursedog. Elsa followed the order obediently, walking right next to the wary beast.

The cursedog had shown itself, but it was unable to determine what to do in regards to Meili’s presence. The blessing held by “witchbeast User” Meili caused witchbeasts to obey her. To them, Meili’s presence, just like the horn on their forehead, provoked an instinct that was difficult to disobey.

“This time, both of us had bad lu~ck. But, even if you return to your territory now, that scary magic user will just hunt you all do~wn. So, for now, it would be wiser to hide in the mou~ntains.”

“…”

“Once the pack’s numbers are restored, you can take back your territory from the other ma~beasts. Sometimes it’s important to just quietly endure things, you kno~w. Elsa, you understand that too, ri~ght?”

“It’s no fun being given a lecture along with the witchbeasts.”

At Elsa’s sulky tone, Meili’s bravado diminished a little. Then, the witchbeast that had been silently listening to Meili’s words silently turned on its heels and disappeared back into the brush.

Just like that, the rest of the pack moved away, and the witchbeasts once again melted back into the night.

“You didn’t tell them to get revenge, did you. Even though, if it was you ordering it, the entire pack would fight until they were wiped out.”

A witchbeast that has it’s horn broken will submit to the one that broke it, and follow any order. Meili could do essentially the same thing without breaking their horns. Hence, exactly as Elsa said, she could have ordered the cursedogs to complete the job she had failed at, even knowing it was certain death. However…

"…If I did that, I'd just feel too sorry for the~m. I was the one that messed up the job, and I'm the one who has to make up for it pro~perly."

"…That's true. I, too, have to get back at the Sword Saint, or I won't ever feel right about it."

"Also, I don't like it much when you lump me together with you."

Watching the witchbeasts disappear back into the mountains, Meili let out a 'Well now' and lightly tapped Elsa on the back.

Between taking breaks, and running into the witchbeasts, there had been too many interruptions in their mountain crossing.

"Now I really want to get someplace I can rest properly, soo~n. My feet really hurt from my shoes chafing the~m."

"Rub a bit of spit onto them and they'll be fine, I'd think. Perhaps you'd like me to lick them?"

"I'm not Elsa, so they won't get better that ea~sy!"

Raising her voice at Elsa's absurd sympathy, she was simply amazed from the bottom of her heart by Elsa's unreliability. She'd happened to have helped out this time, but if things continued like this, next time it would be her turn to help out her older sister again.

If that happened, she determined that she would ask for a plush cursedog doll next.

…Holding the doll her sister had given her close to her chest, Meili decided that in her heart.

"…"

Elsa, once again running along the mountain paths, accepted her little sister's determination with a faint smile.

Even if one thought it was a little rough and twisted somewhere, therein lay their own brand of sisterly relationship.

A mutually inconvenient, slightly insane sisterly love that stank of blood, between the assassin sisters.

END

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days IV

1

It was an event that took place while Petra was deep in her own train of thought.

“Hello, cute little lady, do you have a moment?”

“Who? Me?” A voice called out from behind her in the middle of town, and Petra turned around without hesitation. She didn’t recognize the voice, but she recognized the words. If there was anyone in the village who would be considered cute, it would be her. That wasn’t Petra’s vanity speaking, but rather her pride.

Petra Leyte, a ten-year-old girl, still believed that she could use cuteness to accomplish anything.

“Ah…”

And that cute Petra was a little surprised by the owner of the voice.

Before her stood a maid from the mansion near Earlham Village, dressed in a black pinafore. The dress was practical yet elegant and for Petra, who aspired to work with clothing, it drew her interest. Then there was the tall golden-haired woman wearing said dress who also drew her eye. Her long, slender arms and legs enhanced her femininity and her womanly figure increased her appeal. To young Petra, she possessed the ideal body. She was everything that she lacked. However…

She kept her jealous thoughts to herself and welcomed the lady with a smile. “Are you from the mansion? Do you need something?”

Being a beauty was not the same as being a cute girl. Cuteness was still capable of fighting against beauty. And so, Petra, wielding such potential, was prepared to stand her ground.

Honestly, whenever Petra remembered her past vain-filled self, her face would burn with embarrassment.

But the Petra of a few years ago knew nothing of the thoughts of Petra in the future. Even here and now, she believed that “cuteness trumped all,” and used it without hesitation.

“That’s right,” the lady replied. “There is something I wish to ask.” To Petra’s winning smile, the woman calmly showed one of her own.

Most people would swoon at one look at that smile, but here it didn’t work. Even the times it stunned them for a few seconds was proof of Petra’s cuteness.

Since she wasn’t getting the reaction she wanted, Petra doubled down against her tough opponent. “Something you wish to ask? I hope I can give you the answer you’re looking for.”

“Thank you. I wish to ask where the mayor’s house is. The truth is, I haven’t traveled here from the master’s mansion much…”

“Does that mean you are new to the lord’s mansion?” Petra clapped her hands together at the realization. “Ah, that’s why. You’re such a pretty person, I thought it was strange I’ve never seen you before.”

“…Oh. You’re very good at compliments.”

Petra’s eyes sparkled while the lady gently placed her hand to her lips and giggled. Elegant mannerisms, a mature composure. These were things she wanted to learn for her future.

“Will you be staying at the mansion from now on?” asked Petra.

“No, I happened to be summoned here today. But even when I come here to help out, the mansion and the master’s needs are mostly handled by someone else.”

“I see. That’s a shame.”

The lady's eyes widened slightly at Petra's words. "How so?" she asked.

Without any ulterior motive, Petra just stuck out her tongue bashfully and smiled. "It's just, you seemed so wonderful—I wanted to become friends with you."

"…"

"Miss?"

Seeing the lady pause quietly for a moment, Petra tilted her head at the perfect cute angle. It was a carefully practiced move, and when the lady saw it she gently cleared her throat. "N-No. It's nothing. I'm very happy to hear you say that. If a chance arises, I would like to become friends with you too."

"Yes, I understand. Ah, right, the mayor's house. It's this way." Feeling slightly disappointed at the lady's polite lip service, Petra pretended to remember her original request and began directing her to the house.

While leading her, Petra snuck glances at the lady's uniform. Someday, when I have a job as a seamstress in the capital, it might make for a good reference, she thought, all the while thinking that she would love to wear such an adorable uniform at least once.

2

"I was really rude to you back then…" muttered Petra.

"I-It's fine, Petra," Frederica replied. "After all, you were still a young girl, and you didn't know you were going to be working here."

"E-Even a ten-year-old should be able to tell what's okay and what's not okay to do. I was such an idiot back then…" Even as her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, Petra bowed deeply and apologized profusely. Bewildered by the situation, Frederica gave a wry smile as she recalled that memory.

Frederica had been preparing breakfast when a docile-looking Petra had come up to her saying, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Since Petra looked so sullen, Frederica was worried that the younger maid had made a mistake in her work and so stopped preparing breakfast to hear her out.

And as the senior maid, Frederica prepared herself for anything. But what Petra wanted to talk about was over something that had taken place two years ago, when the two had first met.

“I understand that you feel responsible and want to apologize…”

Honestly, it was something that Frederica had almost completely forgotten.

Two years ago, Frederica was working for the Miload family, a branch family of House Mathers, and had been called to Roswaal Manor for some work. There she had been asked to deliver a message to the mayor of the local village, and had asked Petra for directions.

Back then, Petra was just a simple village girl only ten years of age. It would have been difficult to act more maturely even when asked, and Frederica wasn’t so harsh as to ask that in the first place. However, even though it wasn’t an event that she had paid heed to, hearing Petra mention it herself made her realize that there was more to the memory than she realized. She realized that she had been taken in by Petra’s cuteness.

Having an unexpected attack from a blossoming flower in an unexpected place was immeasurable, especially to Frederica, who liked cute things. Especially at the mansion, where she had been treated coldly by a charmless junior servant. After that, there’d be no way one wouldn’t be moved by being treated with such kindness.

“Sister Frederica?”

“A-Anyway, there’s nothing to be worried about. And for you to apologize when there’s nothing to apologize for… I had forgotten myself.”

"I don't think it's good to try and cover up one's rude actions even when others have forgotten about it."

"Th-That's right. You always seem to teach me something…" Receiving such a proper, straightforward answer, Frederica began to think less of herself. She rested her hand on her cheek and sighed, while Petra slowly raised her head. Seeing her act like a guilty criminal, Frederica smiled gently. "It's not a big deal. And Petra, was everything you remembered so bad?"

"What do you mean by bad…?"

"I remember it, too. That time, you said that you wanted to become friends with me."

"Ah." Petra's eyes went wide as she recalled her words.

"And then I replied, 'If I get a chance, I would like to become friends with you as well.' Seeing as how that promise has been fulfilled, don't you think it's fate?"

"Then, we were always destined to be sisters, right?"

Seeing Petra light up like that, Frederica resisted the urge to give her a big hug.

She's just so adorable. Every day, Frederica found her resistance being gradually worn down by Petra's endearing demeanor; but this would have to be restored by her dignity as the senior maid.

"R-Right… I…I was destined to be your sister."

"I'm so happy to hear that. If you think like that, that means that I got everything I wanted back then." Petra didn't notice the fluttering in Frederica's voice as she counted off her fingers. "I got to see your uniform up close, and I even got to wear it. I became friends with you, I got to learn to do this job…and I became cuter than before! Right?"

"Yes, you're very cute," Frederica immediately replied. It was normally something she wouldn't be able to say, given her position, so now she said it with force.

"Th-Thank you very much."

Seeing Petra bashful—her cheeks colored with embarrassment—Frederica felt satisfied. But then, she had a sudden thought. "This was quite sudden. Was there something that made you remember that time?"

"Hmm, nothing specifically." Petra fidgeted as she considered Frederica's question. She looked awkward as she considered whether or not to answer, before making up her mind. "The truth is ever since I've been with you, there was something that was bothering me. And it finally hit me."

"It hit you?" replied Frederica, subconsciously mimicking Petra's cute tone.

"It did."

In any case, Frederica wondered what the spark was. If it caused her to remember something, then it would have to be related to it.

"Ah, maybe…"

"M-Maybe what?! Did I make some major mistake?!"

"S-Sister? Why are you panicking?"

Frederica had just relaxed from the previous topic, so the new one made her panic in response. She hid her panic with a smile and shook her head slightly. "No, I'm not panicking. 'A servant must always be calm and composed'; that was beaten into me…by that man!"

"Sister? Sister?"

"R-Right. No matter who taught me, the lesson wasn't wrong. I am calm and composed." Shaking off the remnants of that man from her mind, Frederica took a deep breath. "So, what did you realize, Petra? Could you tell me?"

"Umm, it's not anything big…" replied Petra, playing with her hair sheepishly at Frederica's question. "Do you remember last night before we slept?”

“I remember that you were lonely and you crawled into my bed.”

“R-Right, but not that. Remember? What you said before we slept.”

Frederica racked her memory, but she couldn’t remember. She couldn’t recall saying anything special. She could only remember calling Petra cute.

“Hello, cute little lady, do you have a moment?” recalled Petra.

“…I’m sorry?”

“That’s what you said to me before we slept. And it was the same thing you said to me two years ago when we first met.”

“…”

“I’m sure that’s what made me remember. It’s embarrassing, though.”

Petra most likely added on those words to help play it off. However, to be using the same words, Frederica felt like she hadn’t grown at all. Or possibly, that her feelings of wanting to hug Petra hadn’t changed since they first met.

“…Well, you certainly are cute.”

“Ehe-he-he.”

Frederica gave up all resistance and gently patted Petra on the head, who accepted it with an adorable smile. Then her eyes suddenly went wide. “Ah. Sorry. I interrupted your breakfast preparations.”

“It’s fine. We shared a nice little memory together.” Frederica smiled at Petra. “Also, could you help me with some final preparations? If you do, then I’ll forgive your actions from two years ago.”

Petra looked a bit shocked before breaking into a big smile. “Yes,

Sister Frederica.”

“There’s that cutie I know so well.” Seeing Petra’s smile made her blurt that out, and Frederica admired the person she was two years ago.

The Frederica back then had managed to maintain their composure enough to protect Petra’s memory.

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Garfiel and Ram's Super Complicated and Twisted Love Affair Zero

1

Garfiel was never lucky in love.

The one he cared for never turned to face him, not even once.

The beginning of Garfiel Tinsel's first love was when he was still very young.

After that, for roughly the next ten years, if there was anything that could be said to have continued through that time, it would be his overly-harsh self-imposed training, and the habit of touching the wound on his forehead that never faded.

And, the ever-present love burned into his heart that awakened for that girl the moment he first laid eyes on her.

"This is Ram, who became part of our household a few days ago. She'll often be with me as part of her training in manners, so~ please do your best to get alo~ng with her."

These were the words of Roswaal, a man with odd makeup on his face who held the position of local lord, as he was making an appearance at "Kremaldy's Sanctuary".

"…"

At Roswaal's greeting, Garfiel made a sour face and kept silent.

Garfiel didn't like Roswaal very much. Of course, he had been taught by Grandma Ryuzu that "Sanctuary" owed a debt to this man. However, that was a separate matter from whether Garfiel liked him or not. Even if he was grateful, he didn't like him.

Blue and yellow; Roswaal's left and right eyes were different colors. Somehow or other, the sparkle that lived in those eyes was distasteful to Garfiel. The eyes that seemed to be seeing not what was right in front of them, but something in the distance.

"…"

However, at this time, it was not Garfiel's unfading animosity towards Roswaal that was the cause of him holding his peace. He was smitten by the dignified form of the girl standing next to Roswaal.

"…I'm Ram. As Roswaal commands it, I'll be reluctantly spending time with you."

The girl announced that disrespectfully, with a boldness that didn't match her young, lovely features.

Honestly, Garfiel was both surprised and shocked at the same time.

Ryuzu opened her eyes wide, and Roswaal gave a bemused smile. When that happened, the girl—Ram—folded her arms, looked at the dumbfounded Garfiel, and asked "What?".

"…Marry me."

"No way."

From the reflexive proposal, to the shocking response, it was a love that lasted ten seconds before it was crushed.

"…Anyways, please be my wife."

"No way."

As the second proposal was rejected out of hand, Garfiel's love burned even hotter.

It was this very moment that began Garfiel's long-lasting first love and terrible relationship.

2

The frequency with which Ram visited 'Sanctuary' might be said to be around twice in a month.

She was a girl not yet ten years old. Naturally, travelling all the way from the mansion to ‘Sanctuary’ was not something she would do alone. Each time she came to ‘Sanctuary’, it was nominally as Roswaal’s personal assistant.

“Although, having said that, there’s nothing that Master Roswaal needs assistance with.”

“Well then why are ya hangin’ around with tha’ jerk? Ya oughta just turn him down.”

“My dearest little sister is being held as a hostage. If I were to oppose him, something terrible would happen to her.”

It was a hot time, the arrival of the fire season. In other words, the season of love.

Going with the flow of that, Garfiel had called Ram to the water field, but he widened his eyes at her shocking utterance.

Her little sister was a hostage. That Ram had a little sister was a surprise as well, but Roswaal’s barbaric behavior was unpardonable. Something like threatening a person via their family was difficult to forgive.

“Tha’ jerk… Didn’t think he’d stoop so low, but this…”

“I was lying.”

“It’s no joke. I’ll take care a’ it somehow! Ram, I’ll bring your little sister back safely. So, once she’s safe, we can be marr… ow ow ow!”

“Listen to me.”

As Garfiel went with the flow and got himself worked up, his ear was pinched intensely by Ram. When he yelped and went teary-eyed, Ram sighed at him.

“It was a joke. It’s true that Ram’s cute Rem is at the mansion, but she isn’t there as a hostage. …Indeed, it’s more like our positions are reversed.”

"Reversed?"

"I mean that I'm one who has become shackles for her."

As Ram cast her eyes down, and uttered a whisper that was somehow lonely, Garfiel drew his brows together in concern.

Her words were difficult, and he didn't understand them very well. All he knew was that Ram felt sorrowful about what she was saying. He knew that, but he didn't know what he should say.

"…Perhaps that was difficult for you to follow, Garfiel."

As she smiled and looked over at him with her light red eyes, Garfiel's cheeks went red. He felt indignation, but more than that, shame. For him to be unable to touch the heart of the girl that he had feelings for was pathetic.

However, he didn't want to show that pathetic face. He thumped his own chest.

"Do~n't be silly. I'm, um, you know. I get it, I tell ya. I'm… what was it? Studyin'! I'm studyin' and stuff, so yeah."

"Studying, indeed. That's a very impressive thing for you to be doing, Garfiel."

He thought about reading books. To do something that he hadn't been very favorable towards until now.

As far as books went, he had all sorts that had been given to him. His older sister, who had left 'Sanctuary' and gone to work under Roswaal, had sent him books wrapped in folded paper.

He'd left them unread up until now, using not feeling like it as an excuse, and there was also the matter of him still being frustrated with his sister, but Garfiel decided to let go of that.

If reading books led to a way to learn what was inside of Ram's heart, he would do it.

Garfiel thought about matters simply. An enemy must be defeated.

The reason for Ram's sad face was Garfiel's enemy. He wanted to understand it.

"I'll try not to expect too much from you… Garf."

Those who called Garfiel 'Garf' were, until this day, his family only.

From the day Ram first called him that, it was only his family and the one he held dear.

3

"Ya jerk! What're ya doin' ta Ram?!"

With blood boiling in anger, Garfiel bared his fangs and roared.

…It happened on a cold night, clearly lit by white moonlight.

In situations where Roswaal stayed at 'Sanctuary', they lodged at Ryuzu' home, the most splendid home in the village.

With no place to stay while her house was lent to Roswaal, Ryuzu came to stay at Garfiel's house. He was displeased that Ryuzu had to vacate her own house, but happy that his grandmother came to stay with him, so Garfiel's feelings about the exchange of housing were mixed.

Regardless, at this point in time, Roswaal was staying at Ryuzu' home. Naturally, as Ram accompanied Roswaal, she was staying at Ryuzu' home as well.

He wanted to meet Ram, but he didn't want to meet Roswaal. Hence, Garfiel rarely approached Ryuzu' house while Roswaal was staying there.

So, this day's events were random. He happened to find a ripened appa in the forest, and headed to Ryuzu' house intending to present it to Ram…

"…ah."

He witnessed a scene where Roswaal was applying some sort of magic to Ram’s forehead as she groaned painfully.

Ram’s face was red, and there was sweat on the back of her neck. It was clear that Roswaal was doing something that put a great strain on her. The details were unclear… but it was enough.

“Oooooooo!!”

His brain seethed, and all the hair on his body stood on end. An impossible amount of power filled him, and Garfiel’s body noisily changed shape. His fangs and his claws grew longer, and his senses sharpened.

His awareness went pure red, and his reason vanished; there was only hatred for the enemy in front of his eyes.

ゴゴゴゴゴゴ……

“Garf!”

A high voice was heard. He couldn’t comprehend it.

“Oh dear, thi~is is troubling. …I’ll have to do something a little immature, perhaps.”

A low voice was heard. He understood that he hated it. He looked toward it, and pounced.

…He felt the impact pass through the front of his face.

“Are you awake?”

“…ah.”

As though someone was banging on a pot, a profound racket was reverberating through his skull.

But, his field of view was filled with the face of the girl dear to him, and his head was supported by something soft. Sine that was all he knew, he felt like that was probably good enough.

“If you’re awake, get off of me. My legs are completely asleep.”

“Guaah!”

At the very moment he was beginning to feel at peace, Garfiel was roughly pushed from Ram’s knees to the floor. When he stood up, rubbing his bumped head, Ram was looking towards him with the same cold eyes as always.

“…Won’t you be my wife?”

“No way. …Garf, do you remember what happened?”

“What happened…”

Honestly, he couldn’t remember anything except that Ram’s cool attitude had fanned the flames of his heart. As he was thinking that, the memories of what happened directly before that fell down on him like rain.

In the evening, at Ryuzu' house, Roswaal had inflicted some kind of misconduct on Ram. His vision went red.

"I'm gonna bite that jerk's head clean off…"

"That was a dream."

"…'Morning never comes to Rimgen's Citadel', they say."

Now that he thought about it, a terribly sharp pain remained in his nose. It was proof of an impact as bad as, or worse than, the time he'd been sprinting full-tilt, and, unaware of a wall right in front of his eyes, crashed into it.

"You beast-changed after jumping to conclusions, and attacked Master Roswaal. Then, your little tiger was swatted down without a moment's hesitation, and you ended up as a pitiful fur carpet…"

"Did not! Wait, beast-change… I did?"

"demi-human blood, indeed. You didn't have it under control. Before something happens that can't be undone, you should learn a way to control it, or completely bleed out only your demi-human blood."

"Wha' makes ya think I could do that?!I'd jus' fall over dead!"

"Dummy. I'm telling you to learn to control it."

With that one word, dummy, Garf drooped lifelessly. Ram looked on his reaction dubiously, but Garf was unable to raise his head.

He'd been stupid. He'd jumped to conclusions. Once again, he'd been no match for Roswaal.

His strength, his intelligence, both were completely insufficient. So, he not only didn't understand what Ram and Roswaal had been doing, he didn't comprehend what he had misunderstood.

"Dummy."

She said that once more to Garfiel's downcast form, and then came over to stroke his head.

"…Ram is an oni that has lost her horn, a 'hornless', you see. Without a horn, she can't easily take in mana, and it's hard on her body. So, she depends on Master Roswaal for assistance like that, you see."

"Ah…"

At Ram's words, Garfiel raised his head and his fangs trembled.

A secret had been revealed. However, it brought him no joy. He began to feel impatient with himself.

The enemy who had made Ram remember a painful memory, and made her look sad, was he himself.

…An unpleasant memory, a past best forgotten. This was a pain that Garfiel, too, understood.

It was something to keep a lid on, to preserve the peace of one's heart. The one who had interrupted that was none other than himself.

"I wasn't… wasn't supposed to talk about it, but… in the forest, um. Actually, granny and a bunch of others with the same face were there…"

"…"

"They told me it was secret. But, ya told me yer secret. So… um."

"Garf, you dummy."

In response to the words that came out in his rush to say something, Ram's finger smacked the scar on his forehead. Garf had shrugged off the sharp impact from earlier, but now his eyes went wide and teared up.

"I didn't tell you that because I wanted to exchange secrets with you. If you were to attack Master Roswaal like that again in the future, it would be inconvenient, so I explained it. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

“I… I didn’t mean it like that…”

“Honestly, spilling your family’s secrets to get a girl’s attention is the worst. Only a weak, pathetic dummy would do something like that. Garf, are you a weak, pathetic dummy?”

With his hand held to his forehead, Garfiel held his breath in response to Ram’s query.

This felt like a turning point. A decisive turning point for Garfiel’s love. Not of whether or not his love would be returned, but of whether or not he, himself, was worthy to love Ram.

“…Nah. I ain’t a weak, pathetic dummy.”

“I see.”

Seeing Ram give a short sigh, and say only that, Garfiel came to a decision.

As a weak, pathetic dummy, he wouldn’t be worthy to accept Ram as his bride.

He wanted to become a strong, outstanding, smart adult. That was his wish.

4

“Yo, Ram! This time fer real, marry me! If ya do, I’ll make ya as happy as ‘The Great Queen of Alinbeld Palace’!”

With polished wisdom, overflowing with confidence in himself, and above all as a strong man, Garf stood before Ram.

“…”

At this display of Garfiel’s determination, Ram looked slightly dumbfounded.

After that, her shoulders dropped in exasperation, and,

“No way.”

she cut him off quickly. Then, unable to bear it any longer, she softened her expression, and smiled.

And…

“You really are a dummy, Garf.”

After more times than she could remember, she once more doused the flames of Garfiel’s love.

END

Volume 14

Chapters 97-117

Chapter 97:
Before the Dawn

1

Roswaal: “Make yourselves at home. Whether it be a long conversation or a short conversation, we should get co~~mfortable, no?”

Closing a single eye, Roswaal shot his yellow gaze towards the two standing at the door.

Tangled within that viscous gaze, Otto gulped as if drowning in its devilishness. Although the same demonic hand also reached for Subaru, having braced himself beforehand, by taking a single cough he managed to stand his ground without allowing himself to be swallowed.

Subaru: “You put on your makeup and got all dressed up just for us? I’m gonna blush.”

Roswaal: “Do~~n’t worry about it. After all, you were the one who to~~ld me to put on my makeup aga~~in.”

Subaru: “Ah right… I did.”

After sealing their Contract and bet, that was indeed what Subaru had said to Roswaal before leaving the room. Though he never thought Roswaal would actually do it.

Roswaal: “You see, for me, these cosmetics are like my warpaint. In order to advance the world in accordance with the Gospel, I must never let down vi~~gilance. That’s why I wear this makeup, to constantly remi~~nd myself of that.”

Unexpectedly hearing this backstory, Subaru couldn’t help but gawk at Roswaal’s face.

The bewitching eyeliners on that white-powdered face. The red-painted lips and the peculiar shape around his left eye. So all of it had some significance other than screwing with his conversation partner.

Subaru: “Or, are you just saying that to screw with me?”

Roswaal: “You can beli~~eve me, you know? We~~ll, I’ll leave it to your imaginations. Since things have already diverged from the Gospel’s writ, I was ready to give up on this world and had stopped putting on my cosmetics… but now I’m wearing them once more. You can a~~lso interpret that however you li~~ke.”

Listening to Roswaal’s roundabout words, Subaru gritted his teeth to keep his expression steady.

If it was indeed warpaint as Roswaal suggested, then the reason he put them on once more was clear.

Chances were, it meant that he has regained his motivation and his will to live.

Even if that was because he was intending to bring this world to an end and leave everything to the self in the next world, not unlike the hope Subaru himself once harbored.

Roswaal: “Would it have been better for you if I had continued to la~~nguish?”

Subaru: “Not really. We’ll still need your renown, position, and influence to put Emilia-tan on the throne. It’ll be a problem if you suddenly start playing dead. So I’ll be crushing what motivation you have and making you see a different kind of hope before dragging you into our team.”

Roswaal: “Promising words. …Feel free to tr~~y it, if you can.”

Faced with Subaru’s brazen declaration of war, Roswaal’s lips twisted in delight. Then, keeping up that irritating smile, “Anyway”, Roswaal turned to the one standing beside Subaru,

Roswaal: “This one spa~~cing out next to you… must be the Otto previously introdu~~ced to me? Compared to how lively he was before, he's looking aw~~fully glum, i~~sn't he?"

Subaru: "He's not so much glum as he's just startled. Just when he was hoping to do some bootlicking, he got to see a creepy clown face waiting for him. It's only natural that he peed himself a little, right?"

Otto: "What're you doing suggesting that someone else peed themselves?! And don't make it sound like I came here to shamelessly curry favor! You're making my impression even worse!"

Subaru: "Your impression is already the worst it can get when you decided to go against him and help me, you know. At least try establishing yourself as a formidable opponent so you might get a higher placing in the popularity polls."

Otto: "I have precisely no idea what you're talking about?!"

Exchanging their rowdy banter as usual, Subaru could see Otto's tension loosening. And, as if realizing that back and forth was meant to relax him, Otto's face took on a complicated expression.

Watching the expressive gazes exchanged between the two, Roswaal held a finger to his cheek and gave a meaningful laugh.

Roswaal: "Conveying everything to each other through eyes alone, wha~~t a great bond you two~~ must have. And when the relationship between Subaru and I was supposed to have been longer, too. I'm kind of je~~alous."

Subaru: "Stop saying gross stuff. The number one and two places in my heart are already sold out. There's absolutely no gap for you guys to… especially your ass, to slip into, you ass."

Roswaal: "Unfortunate. But, do~~esn't mean… there's no place left for Be~~atrice? Just how do you feel about her?"

Subaru: "…"

No single word could have checked Subaru more effectively than that.

Having never expected Roswaal to bring up Beatrice's name here, Subaru's shock was as if he had just been slapped across the face.

Subaru: "Beatrice is…"

Roswaal: "That child follows her Gospel's guidance. I~~n that sense, you could say that we are rather like-mi~~nded. Although, seeing how I am actively pursuing my Gospel's writ while she is passively keeping hers, there is a difference in our appro~~aches."

Subaru: "You're saying if she can get results just by waiting, there's no need to trouble myself? While I agree… in this case, the order for her to keep waiting is way too much of a curse."

Roswaal: "That very well ma~~y be."

On the instruction of her creator, Echidna, Beatrice had been waiting in the Forbidden Library inside Roswaal's Mansion for a "Person" that doesn't exist. As a spirit who was given this single purpose from the moment she was born, clinging mindlessly to this order was the only thing that gave her life meaning.

In terms of stubbornness, Beatrice is indeed very much like Roswaal.

Her pleas to be allowed to die still remained vivid in Subaru's memory.

So did her expression at the very end, after all that had transpired in the Mansion.

That's why—

Subaru: "I will undo that curse myself. I'll drag her out of that stinking room and take her and her book and her dress out to dry in the sun. —As for her feelings or whatever, I'll leave that up to her."

Roswaal: "…"

Listening to Subaru's proclamation, Roswaal narrowed his eyes, as if looking at something dazzling. Then, he expelled a short sigh and turned his gaze to Otto, who had been waiting to join the conversation.

Roswaal: “We~~ll then? Seeing how you brought him here, and judging by that exchange between you two… Otto would be the card you’ve been hi~~ding?”

Otto: “N-No, I’m only here to arbitrate between the two sides. I would never have the gall to challenge your intentions, Margrave…”

Subaru: “Why’re you backpedalling at this point! Just come out and say it! You’re pissed off about his clown makeup and wanna paint it red and white Kumadori-style as soon as he’s defeated!”

Otto: “I don’t remember saying that! And what on earth is a Kumadori!”

Sticking Otto with something that he didn’t remember saying, Subaru shot him a pointless thumbs-up. But, watching Subaru from the side, Roswaal closed one of his eyes in thought before turning a meaningful gaze to Otto.

Roswaal: “My impression… is that Subaru only managed to regain his confidence beca~~use of you. I’m su~~re that must’ve been a si~~ght to behold.”

Subaru: “I can’t exactly deny that, but… now that I think about it, story-wise, isn’t it kinda weird to recover thanks to a male character’s help? Normally, shouldn’t it be the heroine who gets me back on my feet?”

Otto: “Even if you look at me like that, I wouldn’t know what to say to you!”

Subaru dismissed Otto’s defiant gaze with a flap of his hand and accepted that there was no helping it.

Having been lent the strength to stand up again, it was now Subaru’s turn to take his heroine by the hand and pull her to her feet. At least, that was what his heart had decided to do.

Subaru closed his eyes and opened them once more. And, sensing a change in the sharpness of that gaze, Roswaal adjusted his posture on the bed as the atmosphere in the room shifted.

Above his sheets, Roswaal twined his fingers, with “No~~w then” as his opening salvo,

Roswaal: “When you’re locked away in isolation for the sake of convalescence, you simply must find so~~mething to do. I couldn’t help but get bored otherwise. And because of that… I’ve been keeping my ears very open.”

Subaru: “Well that’s a tasteless hobby.”

Roswaal: “You may say that, but it looks like you’ve been making progress with those nefarious plo~~ts of yours. …How this Sanctuary came to be and what complicated circumstances it’s tangled in, have you gotten a little fe~~el of it yet?”

Subaru: “Yeah, with all the convoluted details going on, it’s really a headache. If you add your problems and Emilia’s Trials into the mix, “Getting screwed on all sides” would be an understatement.”

Subaru plainly admitted to the difficulty of his circumstances, but he had already taken his slim chances into consideration.

Telling Roswaal the same thing he had told Otto, Subaru held up a single finger, indicating the lack of any intention to give up on his situation just yet,

Subaru: “The deadline for our Contract and bet is in three days. I intend to get things moving significantly tomorrow and the day after… so you better not get in the way too much.”

Roswaal: “I~~’m afraid that I’ll have to. Fulfilling the Gospel is my dearest wish. I thought I’ve already told you this many ti~~mes before?”

Subaru: “Within three days I’ll have Emilia pass the Trials and convince Garfiel to join me. Strengthening our faction shouldn’t be a bad deal for you either? I can guarantee you that my future will be brighter than what relying on your Gospel will get you.”

Roswaal: “If it is as you say, perhaps that future has so~~me merit after all.”

As futile as it was at this point, Subaru nevertheless made the attempt to persuade him. Suddenly, Roswaal looked down, muttering as if pondering over the future Subaru spoke of.

But, when he lifted his head once more, there was no more indecision in his mismatched eyes.

Roswaal: “Yet it isn’t certain. —That is all the reason I need to reject your proposed future. If I obey my Gospel, my desired future is guaranteed. Even if it means making countless sacrifices to obtain it, what of it? After all, there is only one thing I desire.”

Subaru: “For the one thing most important to you, you would abandon everyone who is watching over you? Everyone who’s helping you… and Ram… what’ll become of them?”

Roswaal: “No~~w now, that’s enough of that, Subaru. —What do you think qu~~estioning my resolve will achieve at this point? My answer remains unchanged, as are the tasks you must accomplish.”

Subaru: “…”

It was the anticipated outcome and rejection.

Roswaal had no intention of listening to Subaru. And just as Subaru rejected Roswaal’s proposal and Echidna’s Contract, Roswaal already had his optimal solution in mind.

Subaru: “…But you know, I’ll never become you, Roswaal.”

Roswaal: “Is that so. …That is truly unfortunate, Subaru.”

Leaning his weight into the pillow at his back, Roswaal spilled a quiet sigh. His disappointment must be because of the expectations he had for Subaru—

—That, once all roads are cut, no doubt Natsuki Subaru would become just like him, fighting with all his life.

Otto: “We should return to the topic at hand. Is that alright with you, Margrave?”

Otto stepped forward and broke the silence that had descended upon the room. Roswaal turned his yellow gaze to the grey-haired youth and wordlessly assented.

Then, Otto looked back at Subaru, who also nodded,

Otto: “It seems both sides have agreed on the deadline of three days for reshaping the circumstances of the Sanctuary. So even if the Margrave intends to influence Mr. Natsuki, it would amount to nothing more than quietly observing from the sidelines until then, correct?”

Roswaal: “Quietly observing… I don’t recall making any promises of tha~~t sort?”

Otto: “And yet, the fact that you haven’t burned me to cinders by now is an indication of that intention, right? I assume the Head Mage of the Court of the Kingdom of Lugnica, Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, would be able to incinerate me in the blink of an eye. Wouldn’t that be the easiest, most straightforward method to foil Mr. Natsuki’s plans while staying within the limitations of the bet?”

Roswaal: “Ho?”

Subaru held his breath as he watched Otto build up his measured and fluent logic. Though they never rehearsed this beforehand, his delivery shot fire with every syllable.

Even Roswaal looked surprised as he read the intention of Otto’s words.

Roswaal: “You are an amusing one. Though I’ve given you a similar appraisal before… let me revise it. —You are a rare talent, far more amusing than I thought.”

Otto: “I’m honored, but… that was a compliment, right?”

Roswaal: “It is pure and unadulterated praise. Aah~~a, how splendid. Standing there at Subaru’s side, you proved your argument at the peril of your own life. That i~~s truly an admirable determination, ve~~ry much to my liking. Not everyone could have done what yo~~u've just done."

Otto: "That's… thank you."

Though somewhat overwhelmed by Roswaal's boldness, Otto nevertheless fearlessly faced him. As Otto himself had said, he was standing in front of a Mage who could incinerate him with the snap of a finger.

In fact, if Roswaal truly wanted to abandon all pretenses and enforce his Contract with Subaru, then all he had to do was resort to the treacherous methods Otto had described. And even if he didn't do that, but simply set fire to the Sanctuary or prematurely caused the snowfall to lure the Great Rabbit here, there would be nothing Subaru could do to stop him. Subaru's bet would certainly be lost.

For Otto, who knew nothing about Return by Death, he had assumed that Subaru's survival was a necessary condition of the bet, but for Subaru and Roswaal, who did know about Return by Death, Subaru's survival was in fact irrelevant. As they sealed their Contract, that had been Subaru's greatest concern, whether Roswaal would burn him to death the moment he turned his back.

So what could it mean, if Roswaal would neither resort to violence nor simply watch from the sidelines?

Otto: "In any case, I'd like your assurance, Margrave. That regardless of what we plan or do… you will not take any extreme measures until the three days' deadline is up."

Roswaal: "Asking me for assurances, how auda~~cious you are."

Otto: "I doubt we'd have a chance of winning this bet if we had to constantly watch our backs. And besides, if you're so sure that Mr. Natsuki will fail and that this bet is as good as won, then not doing anything to interfere shouldn't be a problem, should it?"

Roswaal: "…"

Gesturing with his body alongside his words, the corners of Otto's mouth rose as he spoke. Seeing this, Roswaal's gaze sharpened.

Swallowing his breath while watching the negotiations, Subaru could sense that the critical moment had arrived. If Roswaal simply accepted Otto's provocation, they will lose.

A heavy, breathtaking silence descended upon the room. However,

Roswaal: "I~~ see. Subaru, you're blessed to have such a wo~~nderful friend."

Subaru: "…Yeah, you're right. He's the kind of buddy who'll give me a good beating when I go astray, you know."

Answering the grinning Roswaal, Subaru's gaze was looking somewhere far away.

Then suddenly, he realized it: Roswaal probably never had a friend like Otto. When Subaru was about to go down the very same path, it was Otto's punches that brought him back again.

Most likely, Roswaal had no one around to correct his stubborn and twisted ideas like that.

Subaru: "No helping it, then. —It's four hundred years late, but we'll be doing it now."

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "Roswaal! Your attitude earlier, can I take that as your agreement!"

Roswaal wryly smiled at Subaru's pursuit, then tilted his clownish face,

Roswaal: "Very well, I'll promise. Either way, I'll need to store up my Mana for the snowfall in three days. Just so you know, even for someone as po~~werful as myself, it is a strenuous effort to contro~~l the weather. Even if only temporarily, and in a confi~~ned area."

Subaru: “So then, you’ll spend your time meditating from now on? Just for reference, if you can tell me what annoys you the most when you’re meditating, that’ll help a lot.”

Roswaal: “I~~’m not in the habit of being so charitable to my enemies. —In any case, there is no need for me to do anything, since I kno~~w that your plans will not succeed.”

No concessions to be had on that one, apparently.

Subaru snorted at those taunting words, while Otto sighed with an exhausted expression.

Nevertheless, they have safely secured their biggest goal in coming here.

While they throw everything into the bet, Roswaal will not do anything to interfere.

Getting that assurance alone was a triumph. And the fact that Otto’s oration proved even more effective than anything they could’ve planned was huge.

Roswaal: “Incidentally, Subaru.”

Subaru: “—a?”

Roswaal: “I hear that The Great Spirit has le~~ft Lady Emilia’s side?”

That change of topic came like a punch from above just when Subaru’s mind began to relax.

Straightening his back, Subaru acknowledged Roswaal’s question with “Yeah”,

Subaru: “Something happened with Emilia and Puck’s Contract and their link’s been severed. As of right now, Emilia can’t be called a Spirits-Arts User anymore.”

Roswaal: “I also heard that she’s terribly aggrieved… with matters as precarious as they are, for her heart to receive such a wound now, will it really be alright?”

Subaru: “…Who knows. At least, tonight’s Trial has gone out the window. As for how that’ll affect things tomorrow and onwards, we won’t know until Emilia wakes up.”

The truth is, even though Puck had warned him beforehand of how anguished Emilia would be, her sorrow was such that he still couldn’t help but want to cover his eyes.

With just two days remaining, cornering Emilia like this had made his slim chances even slimmer as the gates closed around them.

But all Subaru needed was the smallest keyhole in that closed gate for him to pour all his faith and hopes into.

Subaru: “That said, it really is a headache. But, one way or another, I…”

Roswaal: “That’s, rather intri~~guing…”

Interrupting Subaru’s words, Roswaal wagged his lifted finger left and right. Subaru unwittingly fell silent at this gesture, while Roswaal continued, “After all”,

Roswaal: “While you do seem troubled about how to get Lady Emilia back on her feet… you don’t appear to be at all surprised by the fact The Great Spirit broke his co~~ntract with Lady Emilia. Just why would tha~~t be?”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal’s nonchalant question made Subaru instantly lose his words.

Subaru didn’t seem surprised because Subaru already knew it was going to happen. If he hadn’t discussed it with Puck beforehand, he would probably have been helplessly paralyzed in front of the screaming and wailing Emilia.

Although, that wasn’t too far from what actually happened.

Roswaal: “Did you… perhaps know about this situation beforehand? The fact that The Great Spirit would leave Lady Emilia’s side? Nevermind how you came to le~~arn of it.”

Subaru: “Even if, hypothetically, I did… it’d make no sense for you to complain about it. I’m just doing everything I can to win this bet. So even if you…”

Roswaal: “No~~no, that’s enough. —That’s all I needed to hear.”

Roswaal held up his palm with a satisfied nod. At this, Subaru stopped mid-sentence, expelling a rueful snort through his nostrils.

Roswaal: “I~~n any case… if The Great Spirit has indeed left Lady Emilia’s side, tha~~t would present something of a pro~~blem for me.”

Subaru: “…Really? Considering your objectives, shouldn’t this be a turn for the b…”

Roswaal: “Not at all. If the unbearable sight of Lady Emilia breaking could set your heart aflame, that would indeed be suitable for my needs… but if Lady Emilia loses her powers as a Spirits-Arts User, then she cannot be the culprit behind the snowfall upon the Sa~~nctuary. That would be a he~~avy blow to me.”

Subaru: “a…”

Roswaal was talking about the Gospel’s discrepancy with reality.

In three days, the snowfall in Sanctuary will draw the Great Rabbit here. In order to match the content of the writ, Roswaal would have to bury the Sanctuary in snow.

But, that means—

Subaru: “Roswaal, I’ve been thinking this for a while now…”

Roswaal: “Hm? Wha~~t is it?”

Subaru: “About how this perfect Gospel of yours also has its failings.”

Roswaal: "…"

The thin smile on Roswaal's lips disappeared at Subaru's words. The air dried up and goosebumps rose on Subaru's skin as he felt the warlock's gaze upon him.

At his side, Otto shriveled his shoulders, and for a moment, Subaru felt his throat being choked by the pressure. All the while, the warlock focused his mismatched pupils on Subaru.

Roswaal: "Go on, Subaru. About these failings of the Gospel… tha~~t you mentioned."

Reaching into the pillow at his back, Roswaal produced a book with black binding—the Gospel. Just like the one belonging to Beatrice in the Forbidden Library, its mere appearance burdened the atmosphere with a strange and oppressive heaviness.

Subaru: "Th-There's always… been something off about the way you talked about the Gospel's writ. Except I had too much on my plate so I never really gave it much thought. …But now that I had a chance to settle down and think about it… I noticed something."

Roswaal: "Well, let's hear it?"

Subaru: "The Gospels that the Witch Cultists have… are incomplete and not very reader-friendly, but leaving that aside for now, there's also a decisive flaw about the Gospel that you have."

Roswaal: "…"

"Flaw", Roswaal's brows twitched as he heard that word.

The fact that he nevertheless kept his silence must be because he wished to hear what Subaru had to say. Roswaal's Gospel was literally the lifeline feeding his goals.

He had no reason not to listen when he hears words like "Failings" and "Flaw".

Taking a small breath, with his intestines trembling from the pressure clogging his throat, Subaru focused his glare onto Roswaal and spoke.

Subaru: “Going by what you said, it sounds like the Gospel has described the chains of events that would take place in the Sanctuary right up to the end. You seem to think it’s to “Have me challenge the Tomb after Emilia fails”, or something along those lines. To corner Emilia and make sure she fails, you’ll bring snowfall upon the Sanctuary, luring the Great Rabbit here. Meanwhile, you push the Mansion into an impossible situation to force me to steel my resolve and let go of the “Useless” parts of me. —That sound about right?”

Roswaal: “More or less, tha~~t’s correct. And the defect?”

Subaru: “…You didn’t know that the snowfall will bring the Great Rabbit here. Which means your Gospel didn’t mention what the result of bringing the snowfall will be. So if all it says is “It will snow” and you take it as your creed and move to make it reality—then you’re really just the book’s puppet.”

Roswaal: “I am aware. Even so, I don’t mind. As long as I follow this book, I will receive the future I desire. As such, why should I hesitate to dance to its heartless and formless words?”

Calmly, Roswaal confirmed Subaru’s reasoning.

Subaru’s eyes wavered, unsure of what he should say next. But now that his reasoning had been confirmed, it brought a definite sense of reality to the hypothesis in his mind. —And if his hypothesis was correct, then,

Subaru: “We really are both clowns.”

Roswaal: “—Ho?”

Roswaal narrowed his eyes as the room’s atmosphere thickened. Subaru’s sensation of his body temperature dropping must be because of the warlock’s waves of quiet emotion displacing the mana in the atmosphere.

Regardless, even if it meant iring Roswaal, addressing the problem of the Gospel was necessary. Both to dispel Subaru’s doubts—and to cast doubt into Roswaal's obstinate heart.

Subaru: "Back to the point. If the Gospel's record states that "It will snow", I assume this was originally supposed to be done by Emilia. But since Emilia couldn't, or otherwise wouldn't, you have to cause the snowfall in her place. In order to follow the Gospel's writ."

Roswaal: "You are repeating yourself. Get to the point. Where is its failing and how is it flawed…"

Subaru: "Basically, if Emilia couldn't cause the snowfall, and there wasn't a Gospel telling you to cause the snowfall… it would never snow in the Sanctuary."

That would be the simple conclusion.

Roswaal was only going to cause the snowfall because the Gospel said so. So if it was never written in the Gospel, or if the Gospel never existed, then Roswaal would have had no reason to take such an action.

It was unclear why Emilia would bring snow to the Sanctuary in the first place—but if the Gospel was correct, Emilia would have to have some reason or another to cover the Sanctuary in snow. Without knowing "what" that reason may be, the snowfall itself is pointless. Not to mention that this progression would not exist if the Gospel simply never existed—

Subaru: "Prophecies that wouldn't come true unless prophesied—what kind of prophecy is that?"

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "Prophecies are supposed to predict events no matter how unbelievable or seemingly impossible they are. The imperfect ones the Witch Cultists have get updated as things unfold to match the progression of the world. But what about your Gospel? The one crowned with the splendid appellation of "Perfect"?"

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "If you have to bend the world just to make sure things match its contents, what's the point? If you're the one who has to make it happen, at the expense of absolutely everything else, how do you know that was what was supposed to happen in the first place? Smart as you are, you must have noticed it?"

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru: "You're just in denial, Roswaal."

Subaru jabbed out his finger and declared.

While being showered by those words, Roswaal didn't say a word. But the pressure encasing the room had disappeared, while Otto, released from its hold, drew quick short breaths to settle the pounding of his heart.

Closing both eyes, Roswaal sank into thoughtful silence. Subaru thought he saw a slight twitch in Roswaal's red-painted lips, but it may have been wishful thinking in the hopes that his words had swayed him.

However, he would be given no time to confirm this,

Roswaal: "To reach a progression of the world… that presupposes the existence of the prophecy… of the Gospel… naturally, one must also presuppose that there is someone who will act in accordance to its writ…"

Subaru: "Yeah. I knew you'd make that kind of rebuttal. —So I've prepared a rebuttal to that as well."

In front of Roswaal's uncharacteristically faltering speech, Subaru cut him off, having already guessed this reaction beforehand.

Closing a single eye, Roswaal peered his yellow pupil into Subaru, emitting the same eerie gleam he had poured onto Subaru so many times before.

But this may have been the faintest Subaru had ever seen of that gleam.

Vaguely noticing this, Subaru continued:

Subaru: “Show me your Gospel. If I can see what sort of entries are written in it, I’ll agree with you.”

Roswaal: “—gh. I’m afraid that is impossible. The Gospel would never reveal its contents to anyone other than its recognized owner. I am the owner of this Gospel. So even if I showed it to you, you would not be able to comprehend its contents, and there’s even the risk of your mind being scorched when the book refuses to recognize you…”

Subaru: “You’re getting awfully talkative, Roswaal. Is it really so much of a problem for you if I see the book?”

Seeing Roswaal getting stuck for words, Subaru’s eyes widened in surprise.

Though the white cosmetics kept the color of his face from showing through, Roswaal’s refusal was so intense that it could even be called an overreaction.

This rapid shift in Roswaal’s attitude told Subaru that he had cornered him even more than he had imagined.

There was something in the Gospel’s text that Roswaal was hiding, that he couldn’t allow anyone else to know. Was his stubborn adherence to its prophecies originally spurred by that hidden something?

If not, then how could someone like Roswaal have failed to notice the contradictions within the Gospel?

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki, any further would be…”

Sensing the shift in Roswaal’s attitude and judging that it was time to drive the point home, Subaru was suddenly stopped by Otto, who had been quietly observing them.

Subaru looked back, intending to reject Otto’s advice, but when he saw the seriousness of Otto’s gaze, he was dissuaded from pushing the matter further.

Otto saw something that he, in his passion, had failed to see. And those eyes were clearly telling him that it was time to bring this conversation to an end.

Recklessly forcing the issue now would only ruin everything they've gained here.

Subaru: "—Roswaal, there's three days left. Tomorrow, the day after. And, the final day. We'll put an end to everything before then. You just sit tight and think about what I said."

Roswaal: "Yo~~u mean I'm spared? —Then we really should thank your friend, Otto. For forestalling this watershed that would've been unpleasant for you and me both."

With his face still devoid of emotion, Roswaal hid the Gospel behind his back once more. Then, as if to put in his final word as Subaru and Otto turned towards the door with a shrug,

Roswaal: "I will now begin preparing for my weather manipulation spell. And I will consecrate the Gospel's writ into reality. —Doing so is my only guiding compass."

Subaru: "Do whatever you want. Go ahead and stubbornly cling to it if you like…"

With his hand on the doorknob, Subaru turned around, taking Roswaal into his view.

And, when his gaze met the warlock's,

Subaru: "Once all this is over, I'll dip that Gospel of yours in ink until it's all soaked and black. —And then you'll finally be able to see in front of you with your own damn eyes."

2

—Having concluded their conversation with Roswaal, though it was hard to say whether it was meaningful or not, Subaru parted with Otto and headed to Emilia's residence.

Ram: "—You're here, Barusu."

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m here. Sorry for troubling you with this for so long.”

Seeing Subaru enter the room, Ram, who had been watching over Emilia, turned him a listless expression. While this kind of lackluster expression was quite usual for her, Subaru thought he caught a glimpse of something darker from the side of her face, though he might be just imagining it.

Subaru: “We’re done talking with Roswaal. I’ll watch over Emilia now, so you can go.”

Without delving into the topic, Subaru pulled up a chair next to Ram where he could watch over Emilia. Ram gave Subaru a glance as he sat down beside her, and,

Ram: “It’s worrying, wondering whether Barusu will do something filthy to Lady Emilia while she’s sleeping.”

Subaru: “I didn’t wanna think your faith in me is so low that you’d suspect me of doing something inappropriate in this situation, you know.”

Ram: “But why would I trust you. You’ve revolted against Master Roswaal, your master, and raised your banner against him in the confined space of this Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “…”

It was rather obvious, but it seems Ram knew about the Contract between Subaru and Roswaal—as well as the details of their bet.

After all, this was Ram, Roswaal’s loyal servant to whom she was willing to devote everything to the very, very end. Even if, to Roswaal, she was just a pawn for actualizing the Gospel’s writ and the only person he could use without suspicion.

Subaru: “And, what do you think?”

Ram: “…”

Ram did not reply to that subjectless question. She only turned her body towards Subaru, waiting for him to continue, while Subaru sorted through his emotions and chose his words,

Subaru: “I’m not sure how much you know about the Gospel’s contents. But, if Roswaal makes those contents reality, the Sanctuary will be in ruins. We won’t know if Garfiel or Miss Ryuzu or anyone else’ll safely…”

Ram: “If you think that’s going to persuade me, then you’re far too shallow, Barusu.”

Sternly cutting him off, Ram reflected Subaru within her pale-red eyes, piercing him with her unwavering gaze.

Ram: “There is only one precious person occupying the highest place in my heart. That fact will never waver. Nothing could ever sway that position. So don’t expect such words to change my mind.”

Subaru: “…”

Ram: “Besides—Ram’s problems are already entrusted elsewhere.”

While Subaru regretted his poor choice of words, Ram quietly muttered. Subaru looked up as he heard this, intending to ask her what she meant, but Ram stood up before he could.

Smoothing out her skirt, Ram took one last look at the sleeping Emilia before turning back to Subaru,

Ram: “I’ll leave Lady Emilia to you. I will visit again in the morning to wait on her.”

Subaru: “Y-Yeah… alright. Um, what did you mean just n…”

Ram: “…well, who knows.”

Giving the epitome of the “I’m not going to answer” answer as her answer, Ram left the room. As much as he wanted to call out to her, Subaru couldn’t think of what to say and only watched her as she left.

She closed the door behind her, leaving Subaru and Emilia alone in the room.

Since Emilia was still asleep in her bed, all that was left for Subaru to do was watch over her in her slumber.

It's been some ten hours since Subaru held the disoriented, wailing Emilia until she practically fainted out of consciousness—the only relief was that Emilia's expression seemed untroubled by nightmares as she slept.

If her past hounded her even into her dreams, then her heart would truly lose its final refuge.

The moment she wakes, she would once again be faced with the fact that her bond with Puck had been cut. Just how much time would she need before she could come to terms with that?

Subaru didn't know how much his presence could help to alleviate that pain. And though, without a doubt, he wanted to be her strength—just how much would it amount to?

Emilia: "…ru."

Subaru: "—Huh?"

Submerged in that sea of thought, suddenly, Subaru's consciousness picked up a faint call.

Looking over, he saw Emilia's head softly tilting with her open amethyst eyes gazing at him. —She was awake.

Subaru: "You're, up… Emilia, are you alright?"

Emilia: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "Yeah, it's me. How are you feeling? You've been asleep for… hold on, I'll bring some water."

Emilia: "It's fine."

Subaru stood up, intending to rush outside, but Emilia's call stopped him.

Startled by the surprising forcefulness of her words, Subaru unwittingly sat back into his chair.

Subaru: "…Emilia?"

Emilia: "It's fine. I'm okay… stay here."

Subaru lowered his voice, and Emilia gave her firm reply.

The events over the past few days had led Subaru to believe that Emilia would be light-headed and fragile in the mornings. After waking, her mind would usually need some time to recover, especially after such a prolonged slumber—yet Emilia's amethyst eyes did not give the slightest indication of that fatigue.

Subaru: "Do you… know what happened?"

Emilia: "…Mn. I slept for the whole day today. Even though everybody has been waiting for me, what am I doing… I'm sorry."

Subaru: "That's…! No one is going to fault you for that. What I meant was…"

Facing the apologizing Emilia, Subaru was at a loss as to whether to bring up Puck. It should've been the first topic to come to mind as she recovered her bearings after waking. But instead of that, her only concern was for everyone else's sake. Unless, could it be that the shock was so great that she forgot that her Contract with Puck was broken—

Emilia: "Don't worry, Subaru."

Subaru: "u, e…?"

Emilia: "I haven't… forgotten that Puck is gone. I remember. I'm not going to forget and run away."

Subaru: "You, won't…?"

Emilia: "Mn…"

Emilia gave a small nod, and Subaru realized that Emilia hadn't forgotten that fact. But, in that case, why was Emilia's expression so calm right now?

For Subaru, who had seen Emilia's state immediately after she learned that she had lost Puck, seeing her calmness now felt almost surreal.

But, while Subaru was having trouble accepting that it was as simple as it seemed,

Emilia: "I'm sorry, Subaru. I showed you so much of the unsightly parts of me… you must be reeaally worried."

Subaru: "No, you can worry me as much as you want. I don't mind. I don't, but… you're the one y…"

Emilia: "—there were lots. Of things I thought about. In the dream."

Emilia quietly interrupted Subaru's tangled words. In front of her downcast eyes, Subaru inadvertently swallowed his breath without looking away. He saw her long eyelashes quiver as she looked back at him once more,

Emilia: "I'll definitely be fine in the morning… I want to believe that, so… Subaru, please."

Subaru: "…a, mhm."

Emilia: "Hold my hand. Can you please stay here until the morning? If you do, then I'll definitely…"

Emilia's white fingertips timidly reached out from under the sheets.

Seeing the offered hand, Subaru immediately gripped it in his own, wrapping her delicate, silken fingers firmly in his palms,

Subaru: "If that's all you need, then it's no problem at all. But, Emilia…"

Emilia: "I'm sorry, Subaru. I know there must be lots of things you want to say and ask about. But… please, wait for morning. Because then, I can do my best."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "So please, just stay like this until it's morning—Subaru."

Faced with Emilia's near-pleading voice, Subaru had nothing more to say.

He merely brought his chair closer to the bed and placed her enveloped hand beside her pillow. Having done so, he nodded to Emilia, who was watching him with her wavering eyes,

Subaru: "Understood. I will, Emilia."

Emilia: "Mn… thank you."

With that short exchange, Emilia's eyes closed once more.

Unlike her swooning loss of consciousness that morning, this time, she was falling into restful, self-willed sleep. When she wakes from it again, just what would he say to her then?

By her own strength, Emilia had conquered the worst of what Subaru had envisioned. Thoroughly relieved by this fact, Subaru watched over Emilia's sleeping visage.

Emilia: "…I trust you."

Suddenly hearing Emilia's half-asleep mutter, Subaru let slip a small sigh.

—The situation will start moving again come morning.

That fateful morning was only hours away.

And—

2

Ram: "Did anything come of the conversation with Barusu?"

Roswaal: "A painful tie… would be an a~~pt description. It seems both him and I had our gains and compromises. Though, I had planned to avoid interfering in the first place."

In the dark room, the master and servant conversed at a distance closer than necessary.

Holding Ram close at his bedside with her head resting on his chest, Roswaal reminisced on the conversation earlier.

The fact is, it would be no easy task to sway Subaru once he had hardened his resolve. Although it was unclear what Subaru's future would hold, Roswaal could clearly sense the iron will at its core.

Otto's presence at his side also caused no small problems for Roswaal. By objectively grasping the situation and effectively reining in Subaru when he did, Otto perfectly fulfilled his role as balancer by keeping both Subaru and Roswaal from going too far.

Had Otto not been present, Roswaal could very well have twisted Subaru's thinking through persuasion alone—

Roswaal: "He looked like a spectator who'd never take the stage… but he was surpri~~singly cunning and ca~~pable. Subaru has found himself a wonderful friend."

Ram: "…If he's getting in the way, would you like me to do something about it?"

Roswaal: "No need. If I was going to make that decision, I should've made it during that conversation. Once I missed that chance, I've lost my excuse anyway. More importantly… how's the task I asked of you?"

Closing a single eye, Roswaal looked down at Ram through his yellow pupil. In her master's arm and embrace, Ram shook her head, looking up from his chest,

Ram: "Without complications. I've delivered it as you wished, Master Roswaal."

Roswaal: "I see. I'd hoped that the timing would align… what will happen now, I wonder."

Hearing Ram's affirmation, Roswaal gave a satisfied nod and patted the girl's head with his palm while Ram accepted it with an expression intoxicated and entranced.

For an instant, Roswaal’s gaze towards the adoring girl in his arms was almost one of pity.

Roswaal: “Don’t think badly of me, Subaru. I did promise not to directly interfere. I did, but… I should at least be allowed to cause some mischief from the comfort of my bed li~~ke this?”

Ram: “…”

Roswaal: “Now just what will happen…”

An elated smile crept onto Roswaal’s lips.

Roswaal: “When he learns that that virtue-loving girl had heard that insidious conversation… just what will Subaru’s face lo~~ok like?”

3

—The room was dark.

With all the lights extinguished, the room had fallen into darkness and would remain abound in the tracks of dreams and night until the arrival of dawn beyond the window.

The closed door separated this room from the rest of the world, preserving this silent space within.

There, amid the darkness, stood a bed in the center of the room, and on it, lay a girl with closed eyes.

When the silence devoid of even the sleeper’s breathing—was broken by a sound.

???: “…liar.”

A weak and hazy whisper.

An all too minuscule complaint from the lips of the girl on the bed.

???: “Subaru, you liar.”

Again, the murmur repeated.

Clenching her empty hand, left all alone in the room, Emilia denounced the lies of the boy who wasn’t there.

—The arrival of the fateful morning was only a few hours away.

Chapter 98:
A Bed Lost of Warmth

1

—Whenever she closed her eyes, the memories would come back vivid, even now.

White. A world of white.

Waking, exhaling puffs of white, young Emilia found herself within a snowscape.

“Why”, asked her heart. But no answer came.

There was no memory before this, and her consciousness was hazy.

Getting out of bed, she ran to see the scene outside the window. Her familiar village amid the lush green forests was now completely covered in the freezing, world-ending white.

Since it was the first time Emilia had ever seen snow, she didn’t even recognize that this was the phenomenon called “Snow”. But the vivid instincts of cold and fear nevertheless seared the image into her young memory.

Still without knowing what was happening, Emilia tensed her cheeks and tightened her throat as she broke into a run.

The moment she dashed out of the old house built within the great, hollow tree—her body was cut through by the frigid wind as piercing cold stabbed her soles like knives in her baptism by ice.

The snow immediately grabbed her foot as she tumbled face-first into the ground.

A freezing embrace of white, powdery, crystallized snow. The very first contact with those icy flakes instilled horror into the young Emilia. They were so astoundingly beautiful, yet so horrifyingly cold.

Her simple garments were no better than a thin cloth around her body against the frigid chill and her body began trembling to the core from both cold and terror.

The snow pillaged her body of heat as the white crystals tore away at her heart. But Emilia, groaning as she swiped away the snow, began running once more.

Falling snowflakes danced endlessly from the sky. Looking up as she panted, flakes of snow stuck to the back of her throat. She coughed it away as she ran, tears trailing down the sides of her cheeks.

She didn't know why she was crying.

She was scared. She was afraid. Why was she here alone? Where did everyone else go? Everyone who was kind to her, who smiled at her, and who would offer her their hand, where did they all go?

She tried to remember their faces, but something clogged up her thoughts.

The faces of everyone in her mind—their faces, their smiles, were painted over by black shadows as if depriving them of their very existence in her brain.

Emilia: "—Hic."

Shaking her head frantically, tears poured down her face as she ran.

She mustn't think. If she thinks about them, the black shadow will consume them. Everyone precious to her will disappear from her mind.

But if she doesn't think about them, she will be all alone. In a cold, impenetrable world of white, alone—was a terror the young Emilia could not bear.

Powerless and ignorant, all young Emilia could do in the world-ending white was struggle.

But as if mocking her futile struggles, the falling snow wrapped around her until her tiny body sank into its inevitable, pure-white abyss.

—There's no one here. There's no one in sight. Now, she couldn't even "…" everyone anymore.

Emilia: "—No—!!"

Trapped in this white world, her limbs growing numb and unmoving, Emilia fell to the ground crying like a newborn.

Her knees sank into the tender snow, and though it should have been cold, she couldn't feel the cold at all. Her skin, so often called "white as snow", now burned pure-red in the cold of true "Snow".

Just like that, running from everything, Emilia hugged her head as she sank into the snow.

Falling snow mercilessly piled upon the little girl as Emilia's small body disappeared into the white—

???: "—Emilia!!"

As she closed her eyes, falling into wakeless sleep, a scream tearing through the silence woke her.

Forcing open her long-lashed eyelids, Emilia sprang up. And instantly, her lightweight body was pulled out of the snow and into an embrace.

Emilia: "—a."

???: "You're okay, Emilia. It's okay, everything's okay. Thank goodness… I've found you…"

She wanted to speak, but her throat, frozen by the absolute cold, only managed a groan. However, understanding Emilia's condition, the person only held the young Emilia in their embrace, their voice trembling with joy at her safety.

Emilia, her nose red and sniffling, rubbed her face against the person's short silver hair, trying to communicate her emotion through her entire body. Conveying through action that, just like the boundless love directed towards her, she felt exactly the same in return.

It was the happiness of being held in their arms, speaking with them again.

In the white, despairing snow that made little Emilia wonder if everything was over, there existed that definite warmth here and now.

Still hugging Emilia, shivering from both joy and cold, the woman with short silver hair looked around her as her relieved expression tensed and she started to run.

She drew her lips next to Emilia's ear in her arms, exhaling breaths of white,

???: "Emilia, you hear me? I know you're worried, and I know you don't understand, but… everything is alright. One way or another, I'll make it alright. Even if we get separated here, I will never leave you alone…"

Emilia couldn't understand those determined words, but just the thought of being separated from the person before her eyes filled her with dread. Her numb fingers grasped the woman's collar, her eyes teared as she frantically shook her head.

For the young, ignorant Emilia, appealing to the other's emotion was all she could think to do.

For as long as she did this, Emilia had been loved and adored by all those around her. It had always been this way. So whether it was here, or here on out—

Emilia: "—!"

???: "No, that won't do, Emilia. Even if it was fine up to now, you mustn't do this anymore. You must become a strong, smart, and brave girl. Unless you do, you won't be able to accept yourself, and you'll inevitably meet a tragic end. And that will make me… my brother, and everyone, very, very sad."

Emilia: “—gh.”

She desperately shook her head.

Nevertheless, the woman heartlessly disregarded her appeals. Telling her she mustn’t do this, she rebuked Emilia’s reliance on others.

Emilia couldn’t believe it. Of course it was painful.

Even when she was told she couldn’t, one way or another, she would always have gotten her way in the end. But why wasn’t it working this time?

Why must it start failing now, when she was facing the most painful, difficult, and frightening moment of her life? If there was a more correct way of doing this, how come no one ever told her about it? —She was starting to resent everyone.

Emilia: “—!”

???: “I’m sorry, Emilia. I’m so sorry. For never teaching you even a single important thing, for hiding everything from you… for letting you remain an adorable little princess, please forgive me… forgive us…”

—I don’t want to forgive. Don’t want to forgive. Don’t want to forgive. Don’t want to forgive. Don’t want to forgive. Don’t want to forgive. Don’t want to forgive.

???: “Everyone around you who cherished your smile, and the gentle lies they told… please don’t hate them…”

—Hate them. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them.

Emilia: “…”

She hated lies. She detested lies. Lies only lead to sadness. Lies were the reason everything turned upside down. Lies were what left Emilia alone. And so, she detested lies.

Because she hated lies. Because she hated liars. Everyone should just "…".

???: "Our beloved Emilia… someday, you'll…"

Emilia: "—!"

Emilia let out a wordless scream. She didn't want to hear any more. No matter what she hears, it wouldn't change a thing.

The howling gale and Emilia's shriek drowned out the woman's final words from this world.

The silver-haired woman looked sadly at Emilia's rejection and her violent struggle in her arms, but, casting all emotions aside, she faced forward once more—

???: "—Ah."

—And there, the true end came.

The woman running with Emilia in her arms caught sight of the presence before her and stopped.

Prompted by the faint jolt, Emilia looked up, and at the top of her vision—she saw the face of the woman holding her, looking more tense than Emilia had ever seen.

In her expression was surprise and sorrow, rage and grief, disgust and awe—and even a tinge of relief.

Battering at Emilia's cheeks, the cold, white gale intensified.

In a blizzard so strong that even opening her eyes was difficult, overwhelmed by terror, Emilia held her near-frozen ears and screamed.

And—

And—

—

2

The morning of the fifth day at the Sanctuary—the vital day that will determine whether or not Natsuki Subaru will break through this loop, opened with the worst possible news.

Ram: “Barusu. —Where did Lady Emilia go?”

Subaru: “—Hha?”

After washing his face at the pond and wiping down his body with a wet cloth only to see Ram unabashedly appear amidst the throng of half-naked men, Subaru answered her question with a stupid groan.

It was slightly after sunrise, around what would have been 8 o’clock in his original world. Waking up one after another, the men among the residents and refugees gathered around the pond to wash away their sweat from the night.

And then, brazenly barging into the men’s washing area, the first thing out of Ram’s mouth was the question concerning Emilia’s whereabouts.

Seeing a woman show up like it was a matter of course, some of the men hurriedly scuttled away in shame, but Subaru had no time to tease them for it.

After all, he couldn’t understand what she meant at all.

Subaru: “Emilia… what’re you talking about?”

Ram: “Just what it sounds like. When I went to Lady Emilia’s room to wait on her, there was no one there. I thought she might be with you, Barusu…”

Subaru: “No one’s there… how’s that possible? I mean, I made sure to say good morning to her when she woke up before I left… and I came here after that.”

Unable to hide his shock at what Ram had just told him, Subaru thought back to the events of that morning.

He had held her hand through the night just as she had asked, and when Emilia woke in the morning and saw him watching over her at her bedside, she gave him a quiet smile.

At the time, Subaru thought it was just another uncharacteristically good awakening without her usual drowsiness. Emilia looked down to find her hand still enveloped in his, and softly confirmed her intention to continue their conversation from last night:

Emilia: “I’d like to talk… as soon as everything’s sorted out in my head. After Ram helps me get dressed, I’m sure I’ll be ready to talk about it.”

And with this, she drove Subaru out of her room.

As impatient as Subaru was, considering Emilia’s feelings, it would’ve been cruel to hurry her. More importantly, Emilia seemed calm. Pushing her further would only have had the opposite effect. At least, that was what Subaru had judged, but,

Subaru: “With that, I left, thinking you’d take care of the rest…”

Ram: “So you left the building before I arrived… then. I see. —You screwed up, Barusu.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru had no rebuttal against Ram’s icy verdict.

The fact is, he did mess up by letting down his guard without waiting for Ram to take over. But he never thought Emilia, of all people, would do something like this.

Subaru: “Maybe… she had to use the bathroom, or…?”

Ram: “Do you think I would be careless enough to come here without checking the perimeters first?”

Subaru: “That’s, not what I was… but, what else could it be…?”

Ram: “You really don’t understand?”

Ram relentlessly pursued as Subaru’s voice choked up.

Her gaze was cold as usual, but, for just an instant, that coldness seemed to have intensified. There was the same listlessness in her eyes as when she cast him that glance last night.

Seeing the disappointment and dejection in her eyes, Subaru lowered his gaze.

Subaru: “—You’re saying… Emilia ran away?”

Ram: “What else could it be? Maybe the forces against the liberation of the Sanctuary had been waiting for precisely this opportunity where neither of us is at Lady Emilia’s side and finally got their chance this morning to make their move… but is that what you’d rather believe?”

Subaru: “…It’s… not impossible.”

Ram: “If you actually want to cling to that, then you’re more hopeless than I thought. Either way, that doesn’t change the fact that Lady Emilia is missing. Regardless of the fact that she has no way of leaving the Sanctuary, this is bad.”

Though her attitude was harsh, Ram still took care to lower her voice so that no one would overhear them. She too recognized the need to keep Emilia’s disappearance under wraps, lest it shines badly on Roswaal’s reputation.

As such, she must’ve judged this to be a matter to be handled discreetly.

Subaru: “Emilia…”

Looking up, Subaru muttered that girl’s name under his breath.

As Ram pointed out, even if Emilia wanted to abandon everything and run away, there was no way she could leave the Sanctuary’s Barrier as a Half-Elf.

Emilia was still trapped in the Sanctuary, and no matter how she tries to run, she couldn't get away.

She wasn't so foolish that she'd fail to recognize that. But if she was feeling so cornered that she tried to flee anyway, then…

Subaru: "It's all me and Puck's fault…"

It was Puck's fault for failing to imagine the extent of the shock Emilia would feel upon losing her bond with him.

And it was Subaru's fault for underestimating Emilia's wounds and mistaking her feigned calmness to be genuine.

If Emilia really chose to escape, then it would only be the consequence of their compounded failures.

Ram: "Assuming Lady Emilia ran away and is hiding somewhere… Barusu, any ideas?"

Subaru: "Hold on. Don't just decide that she's run off. I mean, there's nowhere she can go in the Sanctuary without someone seeing her. And there aren't many places Emilia could've wandered to."

Subaru appealed, flapping his hand to stave off Ram's conclusion.

Seeing this, Ram expelled a sigh and slightly nodded.

Ram: "I admit I might've been overhasty, but what do you suggest? Since you were here, the men obviously didn't see anything. So we'll have to put our hopes on the off-chance that one of the women in the Cathedral spotted her?"

Subaru: "The Earlham villagers will say something if they saw Emilia wandering around by herself. Worst case, one of the residents of the Sanctuary might've seen her… We should try them first before jumping to any conclusions."

Even while hurriedly brainstorming ideas, Subaru more or less understood that he was only delaying that conclusion. And though Ram was listening to his proposals, she was most likely thinking the same thing.

Their only point of agreement was that it'd be bad if the news got around that Emilia intentionally went into hiding.

But whether they were concerned for Emilia or for Roswaal's sake was another story.

Ram: "If either of us can find her soon, we might just hang on by the skin of our necks. But it's best to keep the worst possibility in mind. You do understand, Barusu?"

Subaru: "…really rather not think about it, though."

Ram's reminder was also a warning for him not to avert his eyes from the worst case scenario.

If they fail to find Emilia before the Trial and her disappearance becomes common knowledge throughout the Sanctuary—there would be no recovering from this.

And so, they must do everything in their power before that happens.

Subaru: "If we ask around and still can't find her…"

Ram: "Then we'll have to exhaust all efforts to search through the forest."

Subaru: "…That's not gonna be doable in one or two days."

Lifting his head, Subaru looked to the forests surrounding the Sanctuary and furrowed his brows.

Although blocked off by the Barrier, the Sanctuary was still more than wide enough to hide one single person. If Emilia was hiding in the forest, she wouldn't even necessarily stay in one place.

Today, and tomorrow. There was at most 48 hours remaining before the bet and Contract's deadline.

Within that time frame, he would have to find Emilia, make her challenge the Trials, and have her beat them.

—But is that even possible?

Could he, of all people, after pushing Emilia to her limits without noticing the toll it was taking on her heart, really then give her that strength to move forward?

Subaru: “You seriously overestimated me, Puck…”

Ram: “…This would have something to do with the loss of her Contract with The Great Spirit, I suppose?”

Subaru: “Losing the primary support in her heart couldn’t have had nothing to do with it. But… neither of us thought she’d snap like this.”

There must have been something that pushed her over the limit.

Thinking back on Emilia’s calmness last night and this morning, that was the only way he could explain it.

Subaru: “…”

“Unless”, something came to mind.

He had thoroughly made sure before he acted.

But, hypothetically, if Emilia found out—

???: “—Mr. Natsuki!”

While brooding, the sharp call made Subaru’s shoulders jump in surprise.

Looking over to the village center—he saw a grey-haired youth, frantically running over with great waves of his arm.

It was Otto, who hadn’t joined them in the morning bath but stayed behind with the villagers in the Cathedral to help out with the breakfast preparations.

He reached Subaru, pale-faced and panting with his hands on his knees,

Otto: “Th-There’re several things I need to report. Well, quite a lot more if I go into the details, but… for now, two major things. There’s good news and bad news.”

Subaru: “That sounds important, but I have a question first. Did Emilia show up at the Cathedral by any chance? Or was anyone talking about her?”

Otto: “—? No, I haven’t seen her this morning. I didn’t hear anything at the Cathedral, either.”

Otto frowned at the apparently unrelated question that couldn’t wait until after the news, while, hearing his obliging answer, both Subaru and Ram’s faces darkened.

Otto seemed to have sensed their unease, but, judging that his report was more important,

Otto: “So, good news and bad news… which one you want to hear first?”

Subaru: “Kinda hate having them bundled like that… but, good news I guess?”

When he hears bad news, he’d need time to think of countermeasures. With Emilia’s disappearance, the situation was already the worst it could possibly get. He’d rather not get plunged into head-clutching despair by having more bad news piled on top of that.

Receiving Subaru’s decision, Otto crossed his arms with a nod,

Otto: “Good news, then. I’ve finished talking with the refugees as we discussed. They’ve made their preparations and are ready to leave today any time you want. I’ve asked them to stay alert so they can go as soon as you give the order.”

Subaru: “—I see. Sorry. I really should’ve been the one to talk to them and ask this of them.”

Otto: “Luckily, they’ve warmed up to me over the last few days. Considering what we’ll be doing together, it’s a good thing I had that opportunity. Anyway, they’re ready without any problems.”

Otto’s voice was confident, but, despite his impressive achievement, his face was far from bright. Chances were, that good news was being overshadowed by whatever problem had arisen.

Yielding to Otto’s silent gaze, Subaru prompted for the other report—

Subaru: “So, what’s the bad news?”

Otto: “Just now, an enraged Garfiel came storming into the Cathedral, looking for you, Mr. Natsuki.”

Subaru: “Looking for me…? Why? I don’t think I pissed him off that much this time…”

Persuading Garfiel was supposed to have been the final confrontation of this loop. Subaru had taken extra care in his interactions with Garfiel, and even after sealing his bet with Roswaal, Subaru had avoided talking to Garfiel as best as he could.

So far it had paid off, and Subaru managed to reach the critical day without facing off against Garfiel, but—

Subaru: “Ideally, I would’ve liked to have talked with Ryuzu Theta before dealing with him…”

Otto: “That’s just the thing.”

As Subaru muttered about the sequence he had hoped for, Otto raised a single finger.

Subaru’s eyes widened at this gesture, not knowing what Otto was referring to.

But, seeing the question mark pop up over Subaru’s head, Otto’s face darkened as he said,

Otto: “That Miss Ryuzu had apparently gone missing this morning.

Garfiel’s been searching all over the village, looking desperate. That’s why he’s looking for you, Mr. Natsuki.”

Chapter 99:
Alone in a Confined Space

1

—Two vital characters have simultaneously gone missing.

Naturally, facing a situation that had never come up in these loops, Subaru's insides were burning with panic.

Sprinting through the Sanctuary, Subaru headed for Ryuzu' residence—the small cabin on the village outskirts she had been living in after lending her home to Emilia

Garfiel: "…Look who decided t'come."

When Subaru belted open the door and stormed inside, he found Garfiel standing there imposingly, waiting for him. With arms crossed, nose furrowed, and irritation in plain view, he glared at Subaru,

Garfiel: "Took y'long enough. How long were y'plannin' t'keep me waitin'?"

Subaru: "Well I got here as fast as I could… But never mind that, what's this about Miss Ryuzu being missing?"

Garfiel: "Can't y'see for yerself?"

Garfiel jerked his chin, indicating the cramped room. Looking over the space, if it were wide enough to be called that, Ryuzu' temporary lodging was a simple shack with no furniture except a bed.

If Ryuzu wasn't on that bed, then there was no doubt she wasn't in this house.

Taking control of his breathing, Subaru roughly wiped the sweat off his forehead with a sleeve.

Subaru: “It’s obvious she’s not here, but… isn’t calling that missing a bit too much? Miss Ryuzu may not look like it, but she’s a proper adult already. Maybe she’s just out for a walk or something, there’s no need to…”

Garfiel: “Shut up! Th’fuck d’you know?! Granny ain’t never missed showin’ up at breakfast fer no fuckin’ reason. I ain’t never seen her oversleep or stay sick in bed either, and y’sayin’ she’s takin’ a walk? Y’want me t’eat ya?!”

Subaru: “That was a rough way of putting it, but your life with Miss Ryuzu sounds pretty cozy, huh…”

Even with circumstances as they are, the basis for the notion that Ryuzu has gone missing was actually rather weak. Pointing this out, Subaru slumped, but Garfiel didn’t seem to share in Subaru’s sentiment.

He walked up to Subaru, who finally straightened his back, and bared his fangs,

Garfiel: “It never happened before, yet it’s happenin’ this mornin’. If anythin’s happenin’ now that ain’t happened here before, it’s ‘cause you people’re involved, even an idiot knows that. —Y’bastard did somethin’ with Granny, didn’t ya?”

Though Garfiel seemed to have an incredible knack for making baseless accusations, this time, his suspicion hit right on the mark.

Ryuzu’—currently Ryuzu Theta’s—disappearance was almost certainly because of Subaru. It was hard to imagine that someone would have kidnapped her and Emilia simultaneously.

She left willingly without saying anything to Garfiel. Just like Emilia, she was blocked by the Sanctuary’s Barrier, so she couldn’t have fled outside. In other words, it was her intention to go into hiding. —And the time-limit for finding her was even more pressing than Emilia’s.

Subaru: “If I don’t find Miss Theta by the end of today…”

The rotation schedule will switch her into tomorrow’s Ryuzu—

Alpha, Beta, or Sigma will take her place. If that happens, he will not have another chance to speak with Theta within the two-day limit, and his perfect-run of the Sanctuary route will be thwarted.

Garfiel: “They…ta?”

Hearing Subaru call Ryuzu this, a question mark floated onto Garfiel’s face.

Subaru was about to ask for Garfiel’s help in finding Theta, but he gave up on that idea the moment he saw Garfiel’s expression.

The question surging up inside Subaru prevented him from saying a word.

Subaru: “…”

It was a simple question, but one he had never confirmed.

—Does Garfiel actually know about the four representative Ryuzu personalities?

Garfiel certainly knew about the Ryuzu Meyer inside the crystal in the abandoned experimental grounds deep within the forest. He had challenged the Trial, met Echidna, and qualified as an Apostle of Greed. Naturally, holding the Command Authority over replicants, Garfiel was aware of the existence of the identical-looking Ryuzu clones.

But, what about the rest? Does Garfiel know about the four Ryuzu personalities, Alpha, Beta, Sigma and Theta?

Garfiel: “Th’hell’s that? Y’stopped talkin’ all of a sudden. If y’got some kinda clue, fuckin’ spit it out now. “Straight n’ honest Lib-Lib’s happy even when he’s swindled”, they say.”

Subaru: “Sounds like Lib-Lib’s going to be swindled forever, like that…”

Imagining the story of some random happy prince, Subaru wasn’t sure how best to answer Garfiel.

His confrontation with Garfiel was supposed to be the final barricade to completing the Sanctuary route. Honestly, Subaru wasn't nearly prepared enough to face him without having heard what Theta has to say. And yet, whatever answer he gives here could inadvertently influence the outcome.

—Just how should he respond? After much deliberation, Subaru,

Subaru: "Say, Garfiel. Couldn't you just summon Miss Ryuzu if you wanted to?"

Garfiel: "—gh!!"

Immediately, Subaru saw Garfiel's expression violently shift. Garfiel's eyes wavered in discomposure as he lunged forward, grabbing Subaru by the collar.

At a distance so close that their foreheads almost touched, Garfiel's golden pupils seethed with rage—a rage so intense that it could burn its target to nothing with that gaze alone.

Garfiel: "Th'fuck y'talking about… I ain't got a shred of fuckin Milfram's clue th'fuck yer talkin about, oy!"

Subaru: "I-I don't know what a Milfram is, but… that's not exactly the reaction of someone who doesn't have the shred of a clue, is it… let go, dumbass."

Perhaps flipping out and grabbing Subaru was just his way of calming himself. Garfiel's words as he tried to cover it up was inherent nonsense.

Hit right on the mark by Subaru's observation, Garfiel's grip loosened as Subaru used the opportunity to escape. Smoothing out his crumpled clothing, Subaru took a step back to put some distance between them,

Subaru: "I meant exactly what I said. I know you're not too stupid to understand. You have a way to do it. You have the quickest, simplest solution on hand. Why aren't you using it?"

Garfiel: "Y'say it like it's fuckin' easy… tch."

Garfiel’s cheeks twisted in disgust as he glared at Subaru with utmost hatred.

But despite the intensity of the rage and hostility harbored in those eyes, Subaru could clearly discern a shadow of grief mixed within it.

Noticing that hint of sorrow, Subaru’s expression shifted, but Garfiel, sensing that the depths of his emotion had been seen through, clicked his tongue and looked away.

Garfiel: “That’s why I can’t let down my guard with a qualified bastard standin’ here. I dunno what that fuckin’ Witch filled yer head with. But don’t fuck with me, don’t fuck with me.”

Subaru: “…”

Garfiel: “So y’know about Granny’s experimental grounds? Then y’must know ‘bout Granny’s original in th’rock as well… It ain’t something t’just use.”

Clutching his chest with his right hand, it was as if Garfiel was trying to hide it from Subaru’s view. Even though it probably wasn’t physically there, Subaru figured he must be indicating the invisible Command Authority he possessed.

With his arm still holding his chest,

Garfiel: “I ain’t anythin’ like you n’ Roswaal. I ain’t gonna use somethin’ just because I can… I ain’t never gonna think like that.”

Subaru: “…Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Just me alone is enough. Long as I got myself, I don’t need anythin’ else. I ain’t fuckin’ usin’ this power unless it’s the last of the last of the last resort. —Grandma, she… she’s my grandma.”

Those last words fell to a whisper.

Subaru had heard him call her “Grandma” once before. But this time, it was more tender than he had ever heard him speak.

Without any intention behind it, what slipped out must have been Garfiel's true thoughts.

Garfiel: "—Tch."

Noticing his own slip-up, Garfiel kicked at the floor in frustration. The exorbitant force caused the whole shack to lurch, sending down specks of dust tickling Subaru's head as he waited for Garfiel's next move.

Realizing that he was the only one getting worked up, Garfiel's expression twisted in even further discomfort as he shoved Subaru out of the way.

Garfiel: "Move. I ain't talkin' with you anymore. If you ain't tellin' me where Granny is, I'll just look for her myself. When I do, I ain't letting y'touch her ever again."

Subaru: "Why does that, why does that kinda sound like it's all my fault?"

Garfiel: "Before you… before y'fuckers came, everythin' was peaceful n' nothin' ever happened here. I'm bringin' us back to that time. I don't need nothin' whether it's in here or out there… I don't need nothin'."

Leaving those faltering words behind, Garfiel marched out of the small shack. Bending his knees as soon as he was out of the door, he bounded out with his bestial leg-strength—and although his path was straight, he disappeared from view in only a matter of seconds.

Batting away the dust that Garfiel's departure had kicked up, Subaru decided to check over the room once more before leaving.

Regardless of Garfiel's hasty conclusions, would Ryuzu really disappear without leaving any trace behind? Or at least, she might have left some hints about where she was going—

Subaru: "But then again, if there was anything, the guy who's known her for ages should've noticed it. My nose isn't as sharp as his and my eyes aren't any better…"

After five minutes of searching and finding nothing, Subaru sighed with that self-deprecating lament. Heading out of the cabin, he gazed in the direction of the village, in thought.

Subaru: "…"

Emilia and Ryuzu Theta, those two had almost simultaneously disappeared.

Chances were, both of them left their buildings of their own accord, and were trying to hide from Subaru and everyone else. There was even a possibility that they were working together.

Subaru: "I don't remember Emilia and Miss Ryuzu being close, but…"

Ever since arriving in the Sanctuary, Emilia's mind had been occupied by the Trials and the Royal Selection. Subaru couldn't recall a single instance where she casually interacted with anyone here.

At most, she had some conversations with Subaru, Ram, Otto, but she rarely ever spoke with Ryuzu or Garfiel.

Thinking about it now, her lack of interaction with others might've been the reason she was so fixated on her lonely sense of duty, and it was Subaru's fault for not paying enough attention to her. If Subaru had done more to smooth things out, Emilia would not have had so many emotions pent up inside, and perhaps they would've found a clearer solution to their problems.

Subaru: "But it's a bit late for that, isn't it…"

This wasn't the time to be thinking about the underlying causes of Emilia's disappearance. More importantly, delving into it would only push Subaru further into blaming himself.

There was no time to wallow in self-loathing now.

Subaru: "It's a good thing Garfiel doesn't know that Emilia's also missing… not that he'd prioritize looking for her before looking for Miss Ryuzu, but there's no knowing what he'd say if given the pretext.”

Even this small relief would be pointless if he doesn’t find Emilia soon. But finding Ryuzu Theta wasn’t a matter he could put off, either.

If he doesn’t find Theta before Garfiel does, it won’t be easy getting past the overprotective Garfiel after that.

In other words, what Subaru needed to do could be summed up as:

Subaru: “Secure Emilia and Ryuzu Theta before Garfiel does, figure out Theta’s reasons for opposing the Sanctuary’s liberation, get Emilia back on her feet, have her challenge the Trials, and do all of that within half a day… huh.”

???: “…Mr. Natsuki, just how brambled does the path have to be before you’re satisfied?”

As Subaru came to that rather bleak conclusion, Otto showed up by the door just in time to butt in.

Arriving quite a bit later than Subaru, who sprinted here, Otto looked around the shack’s dishevelled interior and furrowed his brows.

Otto: “Even if you’re rummaging through a house, you could’ve been more elegant about it. Though, your conversation with Garfiel seems to have concluded safely.”

Subaru: “Concluded safely, but can’t say I got anything out of it. Anyway, I’ve reaffirmed the situation and our next course of action is just as I mumbled.”

Otto: “All I got from that mumble was that we have some new problems piled on top of the old ones and now it’s all a jumbled mess, more or less.”

Subaru: “…”

Unable to weasel around Otto’s accurate impression, Subaru slumped his shoulders.

Nevertheless, the fact that Subaru was feeling more at ease than before was no doubt because Otto's presence meant he would no longer have to agonize over it alone.

Otto: "…I'll feel troubled if you keep giving me that blatantly-relieved look, you know."

Subaru: "—? What?"

Otto: "…forget I said anything. You don't seem to realize it, huh. No way you do. Aaaaagh but if you do and you're doing this to me on purpose then I'm totally getting led by the nose here, aren't I…"

Watching Otto messing up his gray hair, Subaru tilted his head. But, without answering Subaru's confused expression, "Anyway!", Otto shouted,

Otto: "There's no doubt that the already hopeless situation just got even worse. So what do we do? Now that the circumstances that already made me want to run for it as it is managed to plummet even further, how're we getting out of this? I have a feeling that if we hurry now we could still dump everything and make a run for it."

Subaru: "After everything you've seen and heard, you still think we can drop everything and run away? Neither of us is the kind of people who can do something that irresponsible, right?"

Otto: "…But it looks like Lady Emilia has done exactly that."

Looking away, Otto muttered with a sigh.

It wasn't out of spite. Otto was simply venting the dissatisfaction pent up in his chest. Realizing this, Subaru did not blame him for it.

Subaru only lightly shook his head,

Subaru: "Emilia isn't the kind of girl who'd turn tail and run in the face of her problems…"

Otto: "But, how can you say that? Mr. Natsuki. I've been meaning to say this for a while now, but, are you sure you're not too fixated on only Lady Emilia's attractive side?"

Subaru: "…What's that supposed to mean. Well, yeah, Emilia is so beautiful that my eyes could explode."

Otto: "While I definitely agree with that, I'm sure you know that's not what I meant."

Seeing his lame joke easily swept aside, Subaru twisted his lips under Otto's gaze.

As if finding it a bit painful to watch, Otto raised a finger with, "You listening?",

Otto: "I understand why you'd only want to see the good side of someone you have a crush on. I'm sure that kind of thing is very common. So I don't blame you for projecting your ideals on her."

Subaru: "…"

Otto: "But Lady Emilia is not a perfect person. In fact, she has quite a few problems. And that includes the factors that are totally outside of her control. Her origin, her standing, and all the other issues that come with it."

Listening to Otto's fluent speech, Subaru figured Otto must've wanted to lecture him on this for quite some time now and had prepared those words beforehand.

And indeed, his words were sound and left no room for rebuttal.

Otto: "Naturally, those external factors are unrelated to Lady Emilia's inner purity. And her outward beauty only adds to her charm. But, Mr. Natsuki. Lady Emilia is only a mortal… she's just an ordinary girl. And just like ordinary girls, she has her share of worries, weaknesses, and unattractive aspects to her as well."

Subaru: "No but, only Emilia…"

Otto: "Don't you find it strange that you're only blindly seeing Lady Emilia in a different light? Mr. Natsuki, since coming to the Sanctuary, you must have seen plenty of Lady Emilia's shortcomings first-hand, right? Those shortcomings won't be limited to this place but will come up again and again in the future as well. Lady Emilia's aspirations are too high above the reach of ordinary people, after all."

That was Otto's opinion of the height of Emilia's aspirations—the Throne.

A pinnacle which many others, just like Emilia, were also aspiring to reach.

There was Crusch Karsten, noble and sincere, of high-minded ideals and undeniable ability.

There was Priscilla Barielle, arrogant and insidious, and consequently unshakable in her will.

There was Anastasia Hoshin, greedy and calculating, devoting everything to realizing her dream, having reached her current station by her unmatched competitive spirit.

And there was Felt, poor and weak in her initial position, but driven by an upwards ambition far beyond her young age that would not allow herself to stop still.

Every other Royal Selection candidate was in possession of peerless determination and virtue.

Faced with these worthy opponents, was Emilia really fit to stand among them?

She was kind, kinder than anyone else. But was that really enough?

Otto: "Right now, Lady Emilia is still lacking in all sorts of things. She isn't ready. And the way she is now, she'll probably want to flinch and run away in the face of hardships. This would be one of those times she chose to flee. Why can't you see it, Mr. Natsuki?"

Subaru: "…but that's… I don't… Emilia would never…"

Never. But as much as Subaru wanted to continue, he couldn't.

He couldn't find the words. The feeling was certainly there, his feelings about Emilia. But how could he form it into words here so Otto would understand?

Subaru: "…"

Otto: "…You're really stubborn, you know that?"

Subaru bit down on his lip and only stared at Otto with resistance in his eyes. But, seeing that gaze, Otto looked away.

He shrugged with an astounded shake of his head and turned his eyes towards the village,

Otto: "We don't have to reach a conclusion on this right now. Just talking about it won't change the situation, anyway. We'll still have to find Lady Emilia and Miss Ryuzu."

Subaru: "…Sorry. I know there are lots of things we should properly talk about."

Otto: "I'll overlook it since we're friends. —So, what do we do now?"

Jerking his chin—indicating the Sanctuary, Otto left the next course of action up to Subaru.

Should they run, or fight? And which one of the two missing people should they search for first? The fact that he'd leave those decisions to Subaru was just proof of how much Otto trusted him.

Though he had no intention of taking that trust lightly, Subaru couldn't help but smile to himself for the blessing he'd been given.

And,

Subaru: "Garfiel doesn't know that Emilia's missing. And even if Garfiel does find Emilia, it's not too much of an issue. —The worst case would be that Garfiel finds Miss Ryuzu before we do. If we lose the chance to talk with Miss Ryuzu, we'll be getting even further away from the perfect ending."

Otto: “…In other words?”

Subaru: “—We’ll search for Miss Ryuzu first. We find her before Garfiel, and hear what she has to say.”

2

???: “—Emilia. Everyone’s about to have an important talk. So be a good girl and wait in your usual spot, okay?”

With this, young Emilia was shoved into the hollow of the great tree deep within the forest—the so-called “Princess Room”—which was one of the things in life she wasn’t particularly happy about.

In the village in the forest where the Elves lived in secret, Emilia grew up loved by everyone.

All the adults adored her and would indulge her little whims without the slightest complaint. While the fact that she rarely got to play with other children made her feel a little lonely, she had to follow her instructions. Rules like that must be firmly kept: that was what her foster mother, Fortuna, had told her.

Fortuna was the one who took care of Emilia in the Elven village, a person who was like a mother to her.

She had silver hair and amethyst eyes just like Emilia, but she’d cut her hair short since she found long hair too much of a hassle, and the sharpness of her eyes set them far apart from each other.

Emilia could no longer remember when she first started living with Fortuna. All she knew was that Fortuna wasn’t her real mother but a blood-relative somewhere in the vicinity of an aunt.

Fortuna: “I’m your father’s younger sister, you know. My brother… your dad and your mom are busy right now and can’t be here with you… so they’ve asked me to look after you.”

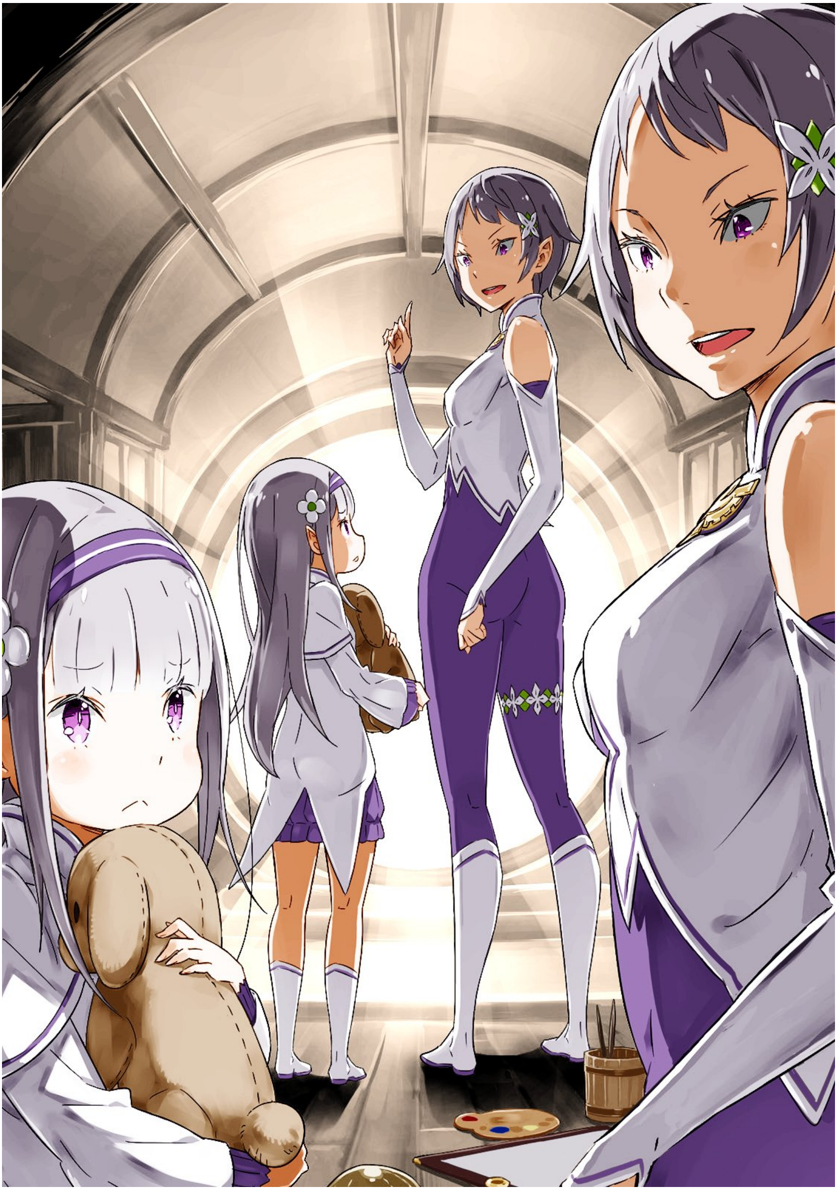

Fortuna’s explanation came as a great shock to Emilia. But, it wasn’t a shock in the negative sense. Even though she kept insisting that she wasn’t her real mother, as far as Emilia was concerned, Fortuna was undoubtedly her mother.

And, on top of having mommy Fortuna, she had a father and a real mother as well. Normally, people only had two parents, a mom and a dad, but Emilia had a dad and two moms. How lucky she is, she thought.

Fortuna: “Your silver hair is from my brother. And the color of your eyes too, it really runs in the family. …Your gentle face is from your mother, though. Everyone on our side has scary-looking eyes.”

Emilia: “…But I like your eyes, mommy Fortuna?”

Fortuna’s eyes were usually intense and severe. And occasionally, when Emilia made her mad, the sharpness of her eyes would intensify, causing Emilia to shudder tremendously.

But, aside from those times when she got angry, Fortuna was Emilia’s ideal mother, and Emilia received her sharp eyes with loving emotions.

As a mother, Fortuna was strict but kind.

Although the young Emilia sometimes thought the rigid discipline she imposed was a bit excessive, even at her age, Emilia understood that it was all with her best interests in mind.

Her discipline was never accompanied by violence, and she never scolded Emilia for anything unreasonable. Even on the rare occasions when her scoldings made Emilia cry, they would reconcile the same night and fall asleep in each other’s arms.

Fortuna: “If there’s one thing I reeeally regret, it’s that I wasn’t kinder to people. If I had realized that sooner, my brother wouldn’t have waited till the end to rely on me.”

A loneliness would rise on Fortuna’s face whenever she said

“Reeally”.

This left such a strong impression on Emilia’s mind that she made a special effort to imitate it. Except she would use it not when she was sad, but when she was happy and laughing.

Perhaps it was the shallow wish of a child to paint over the memories of her mother’s loneliness and sadness by using it for something uplifting and joyous instead.

Emilia: “Mmuuu… so boring.”

Back to where our story began, Emilia was shut up in the Princess Room alone.

She didn’t like being called “Princess” very much, but since that was what everyone in the village called her, she had grown used to it by now.

Because she knew they weren’t making fun of her but were saying it with affection, she never requested that they stop. But the fact that they had stuck that moniker on the room she was being shut up in was one of young Emilia’s few dissatisfactions in life.

Emilia: “What could everyone be doing…”

If Emilia was shut inside the Princess Room, it meant there must be visitors from outside the village. Quite a large group of outsiders would occasionally enter the forest to visit the hidden Elven community. And while no one ever told Emilia this, she could always sense it on her skin.

Actually, this sixth-sense of sorts was due to Emilia subconsciously interfering with the micro-spirits in the forest which informed her of those people’s presence, but Emilia didn’t know this at the time.

Hugging her knees in the narrow room, Emilia usually passed her time flipping through the pages of the books she’d been given or playing with the shabby doll Fortuna had made for her.

Although she had been told that those were secret talks that only adults could understand, there seemed to be plenty of children present as well, which only added to Emilia's dissatisfaction.

She mustn't tell lies or keep secrets, that was what mommy Fortuna had taught her. But wasn't it wrong for mommy Fortuna and the adults to lie and keep secrets from Emilia?

Every ten days or so, Emilia would be stuffed inside the Princess Room. Though Emilia wasn't happy about it, she wasn't so naughty as to let it show on her face.

But by now, she had already lost count how many times she had been put in here, not to mention that she'd just had a fight with Fortuna the night before. Most of all, she forgot to bring the doll that Fortuna had made for her, having left it in her bedroom, which proved to be the decisive blow.

Emilia: "I wanna go outside…"

It was but a passing murmur that no one was supposed to hear.

But, while Emilia didn't say it to anyone she knew, "Those" who knew her had heard it loud and clear.

Emilia: "—?"

Inside the hollow, in the room lit by the white glow of lagumite ores, there now mingled floating spots of pale-blue phosphorescence. She blinked as the sudden gushes of light captivated her attention.

Dancing before her eyes, the lights kept the young girl's curiosity captive as they migrated to a corner of the Princess Room—where they disappeared as if sucked into the wall.

Emilia: "…"

Standing up, Emilia tottered to the spot where the lights had vanished. She was a little scared, but even hotter curiosity burned inside her chest.

Standing before the wall that had sucked in the lights, Emilia reached out her hand as if to confirm the feel of the wood, and there, she found an opening just large enough for her little arm to fit through.

Just now, the pale-blue lights had escaped through that gap.

The front door of the Princess Room was bolted from the outside and couldn’t be opened from within. It was designed so that Emilia couldn’t escape even if she wanted to.

Thinking about it now, this treatment was definitely a bit too excessive to be considered normal, but Emilia, who took it for granted at the time, never questioned it.

However, now that she had discovered the possibility of escaping the place that should’ve been impossible to escape, Emilia’s heart vacillated between her curiosity and her mother’s instructions.

She wanted to know what everyone in the village was doing while she was gone.

Mommy Fortuna had taught her to strictly follow her instructions, and Emilia needed to stay here in the Princess Room until Fortuna came back for her.

But what if she tested out this escape route and, once she had a peek of what everyone was doing, sneaked back here?

Besides, it was the adults who first broke the rule not to lie and keep secrets.

If they broke one, and Emilia broke one as well, then wouldn’t they just be even?

Emilia: “…”

The little girl thought with all her might and came up with that little justification.

Taking a closer look at the hole she had stuck her arm into, it was one of the gaps between the tree’s tangled roots. If she put all her strength into it, she felt certain she could widen the gap, if only just a little.

Hinging on that feeling, young Emilia pushed away at the roots to secure a space large enough for her to pass through. Sweat dripped from her brows, and mud soiled her clothes. There was no way she could tell Fortuna “I didn’t do anything” now, but even so, the gap between the roots continued to grow until, at last, she succeeded in crawling outside.

Emilia: “—a.”

A strange sense of accomplishment rose in Emilia’s chest as the outside breeze washed over her.

Even though she had just done something that would earn her a scolding if she were found out, she still felt the compelling urge to run up to Fortuna and brag “Ahhem, I did it”.

Of course, Fortuna would certainly go up in flames if she did that, so Emilia quickly stopped herself before she could start running. Whew, crisis averted.

But then again, Emilia thought,

—If she had followed her idiotic logic back then, gone to get praise from Fortuna, gotten vehemently scolded, cried and wailed and regretted it, and forgotten all about that gap in the tree roots, everything would’ve been so much better.

Because if she had done that, she would never have set the subsequent tragedy in motion.

—But what was that tragedy?

The question did not reach the young Emilia who had just escaped the Princess Room, now triumphantly dashing towards where everyone should be.

The realization that she was doing something naughty soon forced Emilia to sneak from cover to cover, and, thanks to the help of the micro-spirits, she got a vague sense of where everyone was.

Before long, Emilia found everyone gathered in the village square. While, alongside them, she saw a group of people in strange black costumes.

Emilia: “…”

Emilia hid herself behind a large tree before nimbly climbing up its branches. Sometimes, when little Emilia was feeling mischievous, she’d scamper from tree to tree like a little animal to make the adults jump around to catch her.

The acrobatics she learned from those activities now allowed her to watch over the conversation unseen.

The population of the Elven village numbered forty in all. And it seemed all the adults and children, aside from Emilia, were gathered there. The black-robes were fewer in number, with only about twenty members.

A few of them were in the middle of the assembly, participating in the discussion, while the rest were unloading luggage. The black-robes seem to have come here on wagons, and as they transferred their cargo to the villagers, the villagers’ faces would brighten while bowing their heads.

???: “—We can’t thank you enough for the care you’ve always shown us.”

What are they doing? What are they talking about?

Wondering this, Emilia wanted to lean out to see, when she heard a voice as close as a whisper against her ear.

She jerked back in surprise but saw no one around who could have been the source of that voice. Nevertheless, that voice undoubtedly belonged to Fortuna.

In fact, Fortuna was directly below Emilia—speaking with a black-robed figure who seemed to be the leader of the group.

Fortuna: “Thank you for procuring these supplies for us that are so hard to come by in the forest, we’re glad for your help.”

Robed Man: “You are too kind. It vexes us greatly that this is the only way we could repay you. We're always laying burdens on you, Lady Fortuna."

Fortuna: "We could say the same as well."

Emilia could clearly make out the contents of their conversation and the wry smiles exchanged between them.

Fortuna's gestures below her left no doubt that they were the ones talking this very moment. But somehow, it was as if Emilia's sense of hearing was amplified.

This was actually the handiwork of the micro-spirits obeying Emilia's will, but naturally, the young Emilia did not notice their diligence.

Standing in front of Fortuna was a man with bold features, garbed in a black robe.

His muscular physique and stature made him stand out among the mostly slender Elves. And so it was almost unimaginable that, despite his martial appearance, he would bow so low while interacting with Fortuna.

Seeing such an imposing man showing such unreserved respect towards Fortuna filled the peeking Emilia with pride.

To think, that the amazing person making this big man grovel was actually her mother.

Robed Man: "Now, I ask this every single time, but… how is the seal?"

Emilia was puffing up her chest in her somewhat misdirected pride, but that sentiment instantly dispersed the moment the man changed the subject.

Such was the heaviness of the complex emotions imbued within that man's words.

Fortuna: "I suppose I can't just laugh it off as you worrying too much. Rest assured, it's as stable as ever. There isn't even a million-to-one chance it could come undone. —I'd never be able to face my brother and sister-in-law, otherwise."

Robed Man: "It's a terrible shame, about your older brother and his wife."

Fortuna: "…My brother must certainly have been prepared. As for my sister-in-law, I'm not quite sure even now. But, I do understand the weight of the responsibility entrusted to me. I don't intend to abandon it or treat it half-heartedly. I'm sure you feel the same?"

Robed Man: "I… I have no choice in the matter. I'm afraid it's not the same as the sense of duty and responsibility you bear, Lady Fortuna. Obsession, attachment… it'd be something along those lines."

The man gave a breathy laugh as Fortuna watched him with a pained expression.

All the while, the meaning of their little exchange completely eluded the present Emilia.

—"It's a terrible shame about your older brother and his wife", what was that supposed to mean?

Fortuna's brother was Emilia's father. Then his wife would be the person he married. His bride. And Emilia's mother.

"It's a terrible shame", what could that possibly mean? And when Fortuna heard this, why didn't she ask any questions?

Hugging her branch tight, Emilia stretched out her neck and perked up her ears so she could hear their conversation more clearly. Unaware of the micro-spirits' blessing and the fact that her gesture was completely pointless, Emilia desperately kept up that posture so as not to miss a single word.

Fortuna: "Motivations have nothing to do with the nobility of an action. What you are doing deserves to be praised by tens of thousands. It's reeeaally unfortunate that it can't become common knowledge."

Robed Man: “Hha, ahaha. I appreciate the words of comfort. But, it is impossible nonetheless. If our true intentions were revealed to the world, the presently-stable order would once again be plunged into chaos. I’m sure neither you nor I… least of all, her, would want to see this.”

Fortuna: “…Hm, I suppose not.”

Fortuna agreed with a nod.

After that, the topic seemed to drift away from what Emilia wanted to hear, and their subsequent conversation consisted mainly of casual small talk.

While Fortuna and the man conversed, the rest of the group had finished distributing the cargo. One of the adults called to Fortuna, and Fortuna nodded in reply before turning back to the robed man.

Fortuna: “Thanks to the spirits’ protection, the changing seasons don’t have much of an impact on the forests… but still, these clothes and blankets are a great help. Thank you.”

Robed Man: “If only for your deeds, you and everyone here should deserve better than this. You shouldn’t be forced to live in such a place.”

Fortuna: “What’re you calling “Such a place”? We love living in the forest, you know.”

Saying this jokingly, a faint smile emerged on Fortuna’s face. The man also smiled in return as the two shared an amicable moment together.

And then,

????: “Lord Archbishop. The items have been transferred, we are ready to depart. Please make haste.”

Robed Man: “Mmm, understood.”

Hearing the black-robed figure’s report, the man reluctantly took one last look at the village. Then, he gave Fortuna a bow, while

Fortuna and the other adults put their hands to their chests and bowed to the group of black-robes in response.

The man turned away to follow behind the departing wagon train—but then, he halted,

Robed Man: “Right, there was one more thing I wanted to ask.”

Fortuna: “…”

The man turned around and lifted a finger, while Fortuna urged him to continue with her silence.

Seeing Fortuna’s attitude, for a moment, the man closed his eyes, before gazing into the depths of the forest,

Robed Man: “—Lady Emilia, is she well?”

Emilia: “—Hic.”

Hearing the man mention her name, Emilia unwittingly squeaked on the tree branch. But luckily, since she had just exhaled, it only came out as a little groan.

Fortunately, no one seemed to have heard it, and Fortuna only slowly nodded to the man’s question,

Fortuna: “She’s fine. Emilia is healthy, and growing up to be a good girl. A good girl who’s… more than I deserve. …But, I’m sorry. I cannot let you meet her.”

Robed Man: “That’s all I needed to hear. I understand. As long as Lady Emilia is safe and well, that’s more than enough. A sinner as I am, I don’t dare covet anything beyond that.”

Fortuna: “…”

Rather than self-deprecation, it sounded more like he was cautioning himself.

But either way, no easy words of comfort escaped Fortuna’s lips as she heard this.

The man looked up with an expression as if he was relieved by Fortuna's silence. And, after a while of staring at each other without either of them breaking the stillness,

????: "Lord Archbishop, is something the matter? —Lord Archbishop Romanée-Conti?"

Someone ran back from the party that had gone on ahead. Hearing his name, the robed man spread out his arms,

Robed Man: "Not at all. Well, I best be going. Lady Fortuna, I'll see you soon."

Fortuna: "Thank you for everything, as always. …And sorry, Geuse."

Faintly smiling at Fortuna's parting words, the man she called Geuse rejoined the party as they gradually left the forest.

Seeing them off until the last of them was out of view, Fortuna dropped her shoulders with a sigh. Then, she clapped her hands, drawing the attention of everyone present onto herself,

Fortuna: "Now, let's hurry and get everything distributed. Please share them out as usual. I'll go fetch Emilia."

Emilia: "—!"

Seeing the adults and children proceeding to transport the goods as per Fortuna's orders, Emilia practically flew down the tree and sprinted towards the Princess Room as fast as her legs could take her.

She squeezed her tiny body through the gap she'd used to escape, and despite getting cuts all over her skin, Emilia managed to get inside. But, once inside, she was horrified to realize that her wretched appearance looked nothing like that of a good girl who had obediently waited in her room.

Until recently, Emilia had thought that even if Fortuna discovered that she'd went outside and scolded her for it, she'd be forgiven if she apologized and sincerely reflected on her actions.

But, after hearing what she had just heard, that optimism had all but vanished. In fact, Emilia was certain that she had just heard something she was never supposed to hear.

Emilia: “What do I do, what do I do what do I do what do I do.”

Mommy Fortuna could come back and unlock the door any moment now. One good look at her, and it wouldn’t take much to figure out that Emilia had sneaked outside.

If Fortuna found out that she had heard that conversation, it’d mean complete and utter ruin for the young Emilia.

Emilia: “At least, I’ve got to hide the scratches…”

There were cuts all over her skin, her knees and elbows were scraped, and some wounds were seeping with blood. There was no way those wounds could escape Fortuna’s sharp eyes, and just the thought of how they’d hurt in a bath was frightening.

She had to do something, but, just when she was immersed in that thought—

Emilia: “—huh?”

—Emilia saw the pale-blue lights appear in the Princess Room once more, like a sign that she was saved.

The shining particles drifted in Emilia’s vision, captivating her consciousness with their movements before sprinkling onto her body.

Emilia: “—a, aah.”

Just like when they were sucked into the wall, the pale-blue lights sank into Emilia’s skin. As if attacking the young girl’s wounds, they gathered at the various scratches, staining the wounds white with their faint glow—and, by the time the lights disappeared, only a vague redness remained where the cuts used to be.

Emilia: “…”

The inexplicable transformation of her body left Emilia petrified and speechless.

The painful wounds on her elbows, knees, and skin had vanished, and Emilia's body was restored to the state before her escape.

Realizing this, Emilia took off her clothes and changed into a spare dress in the Princess Room. But then, the torn and shabby clothes she'd just taken became a problem,

Emilia: "I know…!"

Tipping over the bottles of colorful drawing ink, she smudged them all over her torn clothes. And when she had stained them so thoroughly that they could never be washed clean again,

Fortuna: "—Emilia? Are you awake?"

She heard Fortuna's voice outside the door and quickly straightened her back.

Feeling her heart violently pounding at the hair's breath timing, she tried to give some kind of reply, but her throat couldn't utter a sound.

Fortuna: "Emilia? Did you fall asleep?"

Emilia: "I, I'm up? I'm up, mommy Fortuna. It's just, I…"

Fortuna: "Oh, so you are awake. Sorry for making you wait for so long…"

As if relieved to hear Emilia's reply, Fortuna unlocked the door and entered the room. But the moment she walked in, Fortuna's smile disappeared as she wrinkled up her pretty nose,

Fortuna: "…What happened? Smells like ink in here."

Emilia: "Uhhm, sorry. I accidentally spilled all the paint… I got it all over my clothes, too."

Looking at the toppled paint jars in the center of the room, then at the befuddled Emilia behind it, Fortuna held her palm to her face with “Ah gees…”,

Fortuna: “Well, there’s no helping it now. Good thing we had spare clothes in here. Otherwise, I’ll have to carry you back naked, you know.”

Emilia: “Um, mommy Fortuna… I…”

Fortuna: “It’s alright, Emilia. There’s no need to be scared, I know you didn’t mean to, so I’m not angry at you. More importantly, are you hurt?”

Crouching down to match Emilia’s height, Fortuna looked her beloved daughter up and down just to be sure. And when she saw there were no obvious injuries, Fortuna spilled a relieved sigh and gently took Emilia into her embrace.

Emilia: “Mommy?”

Fortuna: “No, it’s nothing. I just… reeaaally missed you, Emilia. I’m sorry. Just let me hug you for a little longer.”

Keeping Emilia in her embrace, Fortuna pressed her cheek against Emilia’s.

Normally, Fortuna would always be too embarrassed to make such gestures of affection, so this was very rare for Emilia. Perhaps, it was an indication that Fortuna was truly worried.

And,

Fortuna: “…such a little troublemaker.”

Fortuna softly opened her eyes and muttered as, wrapped in her embrace, Emilia stroked her short silver hair.

But, without heeding Fortuna’s objection, Emilia went on caressing Fortuna’s hair to her heart’s content.

There were so many things she wanted to ask her.

But there was too much young Emilia didn't know for her to form them all into words, and so, she went on without saying a word.

Fortuna: "Hey, Emilia."

Emilia: "…hm?"

Watching as Emilia quietly stroked her head, Fortuna narrowed her eyes. Suddenly, in her amethyst eyes that were the same color as Emilia's, a teardrop appeared.

In a blink of a moment, the teardrop rolled down and dripped off Fortuna's cheek, but, without wiping it off, Fortuna only looked at Emilia, smiling,

Fortuna: "—I love you, you know."

There were still so many things she wanted to ask.

—But, right now, those words from her mother was enough, she thought.

3

Dragging her feet in the darkness with pale-blue lights drifting around her, Emilia continued on.

Exhausted, sapped of even the strength to walk, she could barely lift her feet off of the ground. But her still-persevering consciousness did not allow her to stop but only continue forward.

Memories from her childhood flashed across her mind.

But why was she remembering them now?

The past Emilia saw in her Trial was slightly different from the past she'd just remembered. The past she remembered was a bit earlier than the events shown in her Trials.

If somehow she could return to that time—surely, everything would be different.

Emilia: “Mommy, Fortuna…”

Kind, warm, and strong, Fortuna was Emilia’s ideal woman, even now.

She wanted to grow up to be mommy Fortuna, to be just like mommy Fortuna. But every time she was faced with the slightest adversity she’d grow hesitant, vexed, and afraid until it resulted in an irredeemable end.

Emilia: “u…hgu…hk.”

Whenever she thought about that irredeemable end, Emilia’s chest would be wracked by unendurable pain.

Sorrow, regret, and agony, overwhelmed by these tangled emotions, Emilia was brought to the verge of tears by her own stupidity, inadequacy, and shame.

Always. She’s always like this.

Frantically, desperately, unreservedly giving her all, Emilia would nevertheless fail to obtain what she truly wanted, or to even touch it.

Even the things she should have had, should have held safely in her hands, slipped through her fingers like sand, enchanting Emilia with their transient glimmer before vanishing into nothing.

Fortuna, Puck, Subaru, it was the same with all of them.

Emilia: “It’s all… my fault. All because I’m… a bad girl… who couldn’t keep her word… everyone…”

Sobbing under her breath, Emilia’s feet dragged on.

Amidst the thick, brambled green, sluggish and slow, she pressed on nonetheless.

Emilia: “Everyone tried to hide it from me… hide it… but, no. If I could’ve gone on without knowing, if I never learned of… if I never found out, how much better that would be, and yet… yet…”

In the forest. The pale-blue lights. The black-robed men. Mommy Fortuna. The giant Black Serpent. The closed door. The snow. The world of white. The world of silver-white. The end, the world that was ending. Father, mother.

Emilia: “Yet I…”

The endless maelstrom of words raced through her head.

Tossed and tormented in its wake, Emilia raised her head and pressed forward.

Emilia: “…”

With feeble voice. And faltering steps.

—But not a single drop of tear in her eyes.

Chapter 100:
Memories Buried in Dust

1

—Blindly searching like this wasn't going to get them anywhere.

That was the conclusion Subaru came to after looking for Ryuzu all over the village and straining his cardio and respiratory functions to the point that his lungs were aching.

Subaru: "—Hha, ha, haa."

Holding his knees, he heaved his shoulders up and down to pump oxygen into his lungs.

The mental fatigue that had accumulated over the past few days flooded back all at once, and his limbs felt heavy as if they'd been injected with lead. Even breathing was difficult.

Otto: "Mr. Natsuki, you alright? But seriously, you ran out of steam way too quickly, you know."

Subaru: "Sh-Shut up… I, just suddenly remembered… I was still undergoing medical treatment when all these things came up, and my exhaustion's just about reaching its peak…"

Otto: "Okay okay, I get that you're a sore loser, you just sit here and rest a while. Give your body a break and take some time to think. I'll go fetch some water."

Seeing the exhausted Subaru, Otto spilled a small sigh, pointed to the shade of a tree, and left him there.

Watching Otto leave while scowling at his own patheticness, Subaru sat down under the tree and focused on restoring his breathing.

Subaru: "…"

Almost an hour had passed since he parted with Garfiel and started searching for Ryuzu Theta.

He and Otto's two-man human-wave tactic hadn't yielded any results so far. Yet, just like with Emilia, they couldn't exactly go around recruiting helpers.

As the representative of the Sanctuary, Ryuzu abandoning her duties and going AWOL wasn't something the Sanctuary's residents and refugees should be allowed to hear. Garfiel must've had the same considerations when he went on to search for her alone.

Subaru: "Emilia…"

If Subaru was honest about his feelings, he was more worried about Emilia's safety than Ryuzu'.

He doubted she would do anything rash, but knowing how lost and lonely she must be feeling, he couldn't help but want to rush to her side and console her.

But the cruel reality was just as he told Otto: finding Ryuzu was more urgent. There was no room to be sentimental about this.

Still, Subaru hoped that Ram's separate efforts could manage to find Emilia.

Subaru: "Kinda feels like I'm conceding something to Roswaal, though."

Ram clearly belonged to Roswaal's faction. She was only searching for Emilia out of concern for Roswaal's reputation, not to help Subaru or Otto. It was just that her present efforts to serve Roswaal happened to be aligned with Subaru's.

The optimal flow would be for Subaru and Otto to find Ryuzu then go on to find Emilia. If Subaru could nail both of those conversations back to back, that would be best.

But ideals were ideals. Only empty rhetoric. Counting chickens before they've hatched, etc.

Subaru: "At this rate, we'll run out of time before we find either of them. That's the worst case and absolutely cannot be allowed to happen. …But, we have to do something…"

Panicking wasn't going to help.

Instead of standing still, thinking, wouldn't it be more reliable to just comb through every corner of the Sanctuary?

But then,

Subaru: "If doing that would find them then Garfiel would've gotten to them first. It's been an hour already. That guy can move twice as fast as me and Otto, so if he hasn't found her yet, that means…"

—Ryuzu was trying to elude them so that even Garfiel couldn't find her.

Subaru: "…"

At this thought, Subaru felt a tug in his mind as he held his breath.

Something was off. Ryuzu was trying to elude Garfiel. That much was right. But, that's not right at all. Why would Ryuzu want to run from Garfiel?

Wasn't Ryuzu Theta running because she wanted to avoid confronting Subaru? Subaru figured she didn't want to answer his questions about the Trial and decided to go into hiding until her rotation ended.

But that wouldn't make any sense.

If Theta really just wanted to avoid talking to Subaru, all she had to do was communicate her desire to Garfiel.

Garfiel wouldn't hesitate to eliminate Subaru if given a clear reason to. And if Garfiel decided to attack him, Subaru would have no means of fighting back.

If Theta truly wanted to keep her past hidden, she could have incited Garfiel to do this.

So why hadn’t she done this, and why wouldn’t she do this—?

Subaru: “She’s running… because she wants to be chased…?”

???: “Well surely the whole point of running is to not get caught. So what’re you talking about?”

Subaru was holding his chin, muttering, when someone else butted in. Looking up, it was a perplexed Otto handing him a pitcher full of water,

Otto: “I can understand getting a little overwhelmed with all the things to think about. The time I had to stay awake for four days straight going around doing business negotiations, I felt pretty unhinged by the last day too.”

Subaru: “Setting aside that story of your past hardships for another time, it’s not like I’m going crazy. …I’m not… I don’t think.”

Otto: “You’re sounding less and less confident about that.”

Accepting the pitcher, Subaru held the spout to his mouth and poured. Relishing the cool sensation sliding down his throat, he organized his tangled words,

Subaru: “What’s your take on why Miss Ryuzu disappeared?”

Otto: “…Well, she probably wants to avoid an inconvenient conversation, I’m guessing? If she runs into you today, she’ll have to talk whether she wants to or not… but, considering how she can’t leave this place, I can’t deny that it feels like a stopgap measure.”

Subaru: “Exactly, it’s a stopgap. But if she really wanted to solve the fundamental problem, you know how she could easily do it?”

Otto: “—You mean Garfiel?”

Otto effortlessly deduced the conclusion Subaru had come to from the few hints given. Furrowing his brows, he crossed his arms as if in thought,

Otto: “Right, by that line of reasoning… then maybe Miss Ryuzu doesn't want Garfiel to know about her disagreements with you?"

Subaru: "Still, Garfiel is already suspecting that we have something to do with it. When he said that nothing ever went wrong in the Sanctuary until we came along and set it off, I didn't know what to say."

Garfiel had hit it right on the mark.

Either way, Garfiel had found the indirect cause of Ryuzu disappearance. And there was no way Ryuzu could have failed to consider how Garfiel would react to her disappearance.

Subaru: "Which means, there are only two conceivable possibilities."

Otto: "Either she wants to avoid both Mr. Natsuki and Garfiel and decided to go into hiding, or…"

Subaru: "Knowing that we'll be looking for her, she's waiting to be found…?"

If it was the former, then Subaru and Otto might as well give up here. If petite Ryuzu really wanted to hide, she could easily hold out for half a day. The only one who'd have a chance of finding her would be the sharp-nosed and agile Garfiel.

But, if it was the latter, then Subaru and Otto's chances against Garfiel were fifty-fifty.

In that case, Ryuzu must certainly have made her arrangements accordingly.

—There must be another way to find her besides blindly searching.

Subaru: "We should search somewhere related to Miss Ryuzu."

Otto: "But we've already searched her home… and her actual home was where Lady Emilia went missing, so that doesn't…"

Subaru: "Yes, right. I doubt she would've went to Roswaal, and the Experimental Grounds… was probably the first place Garfiel looked.

Which means…”

If Theta had to choose a place that Subaru and Garfiel would have an equal chance of finding, one which Garfiel wouldn’t immediately investigate—

—If such a place existed, it would be,

Subaru: “…Otto, I think I got it.”

Otto: “R-Really? You got it from our little exchange just now? You sure you aren’t jumping the gun here?”

Subaru: “Don’t know why you’re being so negative on me, the likelihood is pretty high. In fact, if this isn’t it, then it’ll be time to throw in the towel.”

Nodding to the stumped-looking Otto, Subaru drank down the remaining water in a single gulp. He wiped off his lips, stood up from the ground, and gazed in the direction of the place he had in mind.

If Theta was there, then she wasn’t running away. She was simply waiting in the spot most appropriate for this conversation.

Waiting for Subaru, or perhaps waiting for Garfiel.

Subaru: “Don’t realize it just yet, Garfiel. —Let me wrap up this interview with your guardian first.”

2

Fortuna: “We’re about to have an important talk, so just wait here for a bit, okay?”

Emilia: “Yes, mommy Fortuna.”

Emilia obediently replied to Fortuna, who had brought her to the Princess Room and told her to wait there.

Seeing the smile on Emilia’s face as she saw her off, Fortuna couldn’t help but slightly widen her eyes. She patted Emilia’s long silver hair and relinquished a worried sigh.

Before, Emilia would always look a little upset about being left behind in the Princess Room. As much as she tried to hide it, the way she puffed up her blushing cheeks and turned her face away left no doubt that she was pouting.

It’s been a while since she saw that obvious attitude on Emilia’s face, so, naturally, Fortuna was worried.

Fortuna: “…Emilia.”

Emilia: “Huuh?”

Fortuna: “—Hmmn, nevermind.”

She stroked her hand through her daughter’s hair as if wanting to ask her something, but, seeing Emilia’s innocent eyes gazing back at her, Fortuna only shook her head, smiling.

Though she still couldn’t help but worry, Fortuna figured she should just be glad that Emilia wasn’t making a fuss. And since there were visitors waiting for her, Fortuna decided to leave well enough alone.

Waving her little hand, Emilia said goodbye to Fortuna as the door closed behind her followed by the sound of the bolt clicking. With the door safely locked, Emilia was left in the Princess Room alone.

—Although lately, that hasn’t been the case.

Emilia: “Okay, you can come out now.”

Waiting a whole minute to make sure that Fortuna had left for good, Emilia returned to the center of the room and called out in a whisper.

Naturally, she was the only person in the room, and no one was supposed to answer—but little specks of pale-blue phosphorescence drifted into the brightly-lit chamber.

Seeing their dull, faint glow, Emilia’s amethyst eyes quivered with joy.

Over the time she spent in the Princess Room, she seemed to have inexplicably acquired the ability to communicate with them. She called them “Fairies”—though they were actually micro-spirits, and while Emilia’s name for them was close, the nuance was a little bit off.

Regardless, the micro-spirits did not fault young Emilia for her rudeness,

Emilia: “Miss Fairy, Miss Fairy, thanks for coming today.”

The little girl said, thanking them for not letting her be alone. Hearing this, the lights glowed bright, dancing in reply.

Emilia: “…”

Watching the dancing micro-spirits, Emilia intensely recognized their good will towards her.

They were not only here to dispel her loneliness, but to help her to the best of their ability. And whenever Emilia grew too lax while walking around outside, they would promptly warn her before anyone spotted her.

—She had escaped the Princess Room many times after that.

No one seemed to have noticed the gap in the tree roots leading outside, and Emilia continued using it for her escape. At first, she had gotten cuts over body and clothes while trying to force herself through, but now that she’d acquired the knack for it, it was no longer a concern.

Until then, she had to apologize for getting her clothes dirty over and over, and Fortuna had very nearly gotten suspicious. It was really a close call.

Emilia: “She was definitely reeaaally suspicious. But it all worked out in the end. Hhehee.”

Emilia puffed up her chest, bragging about her improvements, while the pale-blue lights swirled around her head as if praising her. Soon, she was feeling giddy from the dazzling light show.

Nevertheless, while she had become a regular escapist, her grand adventures outside were all composed of cute little mischiefs. She'd listen in on the adults' conversations like the first time, eat ripe fruits from the trees without permission, or rearrange the furniture in someone's home to confuse them, but nothing more than that.

Yet, "Mischief" is a thing which grows with each exploit, and the pure and innocent Emilia was no exception.

Emilia: "Alright. It's time to head out."

Fairies: "…"

The lights swayed as if in agreement, and, encouraged by her reinforcements, Emilia beautifully escaped the Princess Room.

Opening up the roots that had been loosened by her numerous escapes, she slid her small body into the gap and then pulled herself outside. She rolled down the moment she was free and landed on a bed of leaves which softened the blow.

This was something she had prepared after the lessons she learned from all the tumbling in her previous attempts.

Emilia: "What should I do today?"

Picking off the leaves that had stuck onto her hair, Emilia asked the lights around her. Though she knew they couldn't answer, seeing them respond with their oscillating brightness assured her that she wasn't alone.

It was good that she could come outside, but soon, she'll be running out of things to do. If she kept repeating the same mischief, people will figure out that she was behind it and that she could escape the Princess Room. And if they plug up the hole, it'll be all over.

Emilia: "Let's take it slow until things cool off."

Muttering like a wily, crafty criminal, Emilia wandered aimlessly towards the village. Most likely, the adults would be gathering in the village center as usual, conversing with the black-robed figures and receiving their gifts.

Meanwhile, mommy Fortuna would be chatting with the tall man, whom Emilia had heard being called “Romanée-Conti”, or, by her mother, “Geuse”. Emilia secretly decided to go with Geuse.

But while she found their adult-conversations fascinating at first, after repeatedly eavesdropping on them, it eventually lost its freshness and Emilia was growing tired of it.

Fortuna and Geuse would talk about all sorts of topics that went over Emilia’s head. The only reason she still frequently listened was in the hopes that they would bring up her mother and father like they did the first time so she could hear a little more about them.

Unfortunately, that hasn’t happened so far.

Emilia: “Maybe…”

She could sneak into one of Geuse’s wagons?

If Emilia slipped her little body in between the crates on one of those covered wagons, they could stow her outside the forest, just like that.

She had never seen Geuse’s friends check the wagons before leaving. But, even with the fairies’ help, it’d be impossible to sneak in unnoticed.

Emilia: “…Mmmmuu.”

Thinking along those lines and realizing that it wouldn’t work, she gave up.

After all, leaving the forest would be the worst possible way she could break her promise to Fortuna.

—She absolutely mustn’t leave the forest. There’re things outside that would be scary for Emilia, and it’d be too dangerous before she turns into an adult. At least, that was what she’d always been told.

Even though she was already breaking the rules, she wasn't about to break all of them. Perhaps that too was young Emilia's virtue showing through.

And so, the plan to hide in the wagon and get stowed away was scrapped in the drafting phase. Instead, she figured she'd find some other way to learn more about her parents.

Emilia: "—Hup, hup."

In the time she spent thinking, she had reached the village square where the adults and Geuse's companions were meeting. Emilia nimbly darted up a nearby tree, laid flat on her belly, and perked up her ears.

As always, Fortuna and Geuse were happily chatting off to the side while the others unloaded the cargo. Except today, Fortuna's expression was especially warm,

Fortuna: "Emilia's been cheerful lately, and reeeaally full of energy. I just wish she'd stop getting mud all over her clothes."

Geuse: "My my… it's good to hear that she's doing well. We could bring some more clothes for her if you wish. It'll be winter soon outside the forest, and we'll have lots of out-of-season clothes to spare."

Fortuna: "We're always imposing on you, I'm sorry to further burden you like this. …But would that include clothes for adults as well?"

Geuse: "Yes, certainly. I'm sure you'll look very nice in them, Lady Fortuna."

Geuse said with a tender expression, while a complicated hue rose on Fortuna's face. She scratched her cheeks, as if embarrassed,

Fortuna: "…Now where did you learn to speak like that? We've known each other for ages, but since when did you start telling jokes?"

Geuse: "It was just the first thing that came to mind. Did I say something strange just now?”

Fortuna: “I know you’re not one to tell lies, which only makes this even more impossible…”

Fortuna pressed her hand to her forehead, looking baffled. But the unmistakable smile on her lips proved that she wasn’t upset.

Actually, far from being upset, she seemed to be thoroughly enjoying their exchange.

Emilia: “…Hmph.”

For some reason, seeing her mother like this was making Emilia feel all icky inside.

Fortuna’s expression was usually stern, and she rarely showed her gentle side in front of people other than Emilia.

But now, it was like something important to her mother was being stolen, and that stinks.

Emilia: “Hrmph, stupid Geuse.”

She lashed out at her one-sided acquaintance. Puffing up her cheeks, Emilia decided that if Geuse doesn’t say something interesting soon, she’s going to pull some mischief on his wagons today.

Maybe clog the wheels with cloth or pour oil all over the cargo bed.

Such were Emilia’s oaths of petty revenge, but these dramatic retributions would never come to pass.

Geuse: “—Now, is the seal still safe?”

Lowering his voice, Geuse asked Fortuna the usual question. Fortuna replied with a nod, and said,

Fortuna: “Nothing’s changed. Every single time, you ask me this, you know.”

Geuse: “That is my duty, after all. Besides, it’s time. While this problem may be cyclical, there have been especially many moonless nights this year, so the circulation of mana has been scarce. I’m worried this might have a negative impact on the seal deep in the forest… and I can’t help but feel anxious.”

Fortuna: “The moon, huh… right, I see. So that’s why the micro-spirits in the forest have been acting strange lately. …I understand. Afterwards, I will go check on the seal myself to make sure it hasn’t come loose.”

Geuse: “Then I’ll leave it to you.”

Saying this, Geuse bowed low, while Fortuna turned him a serious gaze and nodded.

Eavesdropping on their exchange, Emilia muttered “Deep in the forest…” under her breath.

Emilia had already explored the village in its entirety. And naturally, she had conquered every corner of the forest that Fortuna had allowed her to play in. Although she never said it out loud, she saw the forest as her own backyard.

Yet, Emilia knew nothing about this place “Deep in the forest” that they had mentioned. She figured it must be somewhere in the depths of the forest where entry is forbidden—another one of those things they had specifically hidden from her. The more she thought of it like that, the more dissatisfied she became.

Before she knew it, all her pent-up dissatisfaction was about to boil over.

As usual, she didn’t learn anything useful about her parents, and her exciting grand adventures outside the Princess Room were becoming routine and stale. Worse, the same adults who talked their tongues off about the things Emilia mustn’t do were lying and keeping secrets behind her back. So many examples of this had surfaced in so short a time.

—Maybe it’s time she got back at them a little.

Who could blame Emilia for thinking this?

Back then, no one ever chastised Emilia's budding mischievous spirit and only allowed it to swell and grow, which only hastened the coming of "That time".

And that was why, so many years later, the only person left to blame Emilia was Emilia herself. She would endlessly fault herself for her own stupidity back then, though it would not be enough to lighten the weight of her sin.

—But that belated regret did not reach the young Emilia.

While Emilia was rolling up her sleeves in her misdirected gusto, Geuse and Fortuna's conversation had come to an end. After unloading all the goods without a hitch, Geuse's group bowed farewell as the adults saluted their departure.

Seeing this, Emilia swiftly flew down from the tree branch and rushed back to the Princess Room. Quickly squeezing through the gap in the roots and into the hollow, Emilia hurriedly set about composing her alibi.

She made some quick drawings, changed her dolls' clothes, and gobbled up her sweets.

Once all that was done, she swiped off the sweat on her forehead and heard Fortuna's voice outside the door.

Fortuna: "Emilia, sorry you had to wait. Have you been a good girl today?"

Emilia: "H… h-have I been a good girl? I have. Mhm, yep, I have."

Fortuna: "…"

Convinced that she was fooling Fortuna with her expert performance, a satisfied expression rose on Emilia's face. But, seeing Emilia like this, Fortuna quietly squinted her eyes, giving her a look.

Getting a bad feeling about that sharp gaze locking onto her, Emilia figured any misstep here would only deepen her suspicion,

Emilia: “Wh-What is it, mommy Fortuna? Even if you stare at me like that, I didn’t do anything? I just ate some sweets, drew some pictures, and played with my doll a little. I didn’t go outside at all. Really.”

Fortuna: “—Is that so… well alright.”

It seems Fortuna was completely deceived by Emilia’s acting. Although she felt guilty about lying to her mother, Emilia reminded herself not to be bothered by it too much and focus on plotting her ruthless revenge instead.

Fortuna and Geuse were talking about a “Seal” deep in the forest. As far as Emilia could remember, a “Seal” should be a place used for hiding something.

That is, for hiding something that’ll be trouble if it got out.

—And so, the manner of Emilia’s revenge on Fortuna and the adults was decided.

She will find the location of this “Seal” deep in the forest, and whenever Fortuna or anyone else wants to scold her, she could use it in her rebuttal as her bargaining chip.

If they ever catch her slipping out of the Princess Room, the location of the Seal would be her trump card.

Emilia was so excited about her ingenious plan that she completely failed to notice the irony of trying to escape the guilt of leaving her room by sullying her hands with something even worse.

Holding her mother’s hand, they left the Princess Room. Once she had brought Emilia home, Fortuna said she had some things to do. Going by her conversation with Geuse, Fortuna must be going to check the “Seal”.

And so,

Emilia: “—I’m counting on you guys.”

Emilia winked to the pale-blue lights, bidding them to follow her mother.

A glimpse of Emilia's later beauty that could enchant a person with a smile alone had already begun to bud on the little girl's cheeks.

3

This was the second time Subaru visited this place, but the first in this loop.

The lonely building stood atop a small hill. It wasn't especially run-down, but was more like an average home with no notable characteristics.

Comprised of a bedroom and a living room, there was a basic kitchen in the lounge area, much like a small apartment unit in Subaru's original world. It was enough for a single person to comfortably live in, but it must've been cramped for an adult and two kids.

That was the sentiment Subaru held as he ruminated on the significance of this building.

Standing outside the door, he gave it a few knocks. Then, after a brief silence, he heard "Come in" from inside and was relieved to know that he was right.

But he immediately put away that sense of relief as he placed his hand on the knob and opened the door.

The faint fragrance of old wood grazed his nostrils. And, feeling the lukewarm air meeting his skin, Subaru stepped inside,

???: "It took you longer than I thought."

In the back of the room, there sat a figure on the austere bed. Apparently, they were just getting a refill of tea, pouring boiling water into their cup.

That was probably the reason behind the dampness pervading the room. Subaru confirmed that there were three cups on the table—

but only one was filled,

Subaru: “So I’m the first guest to arrive?”

Ryuzu: “That’s right. You’re the first, Su-bo. Hope you like your tea a bit strong.”

Subaru: “Doesn’t really matter. Weak or strong, leaves just taste like leaves.”

Ryuzu: “A comment like that makes me wonder why I even bother brewing for you. Now I understand what Ram’s always grumbling about.”

Wryly smiling at Subaru, Ryuzu—Theta took an empty cup and proceeded to fill it with boiling water. After throwing in some tea leaves to soak, she pushed it over to Subaru,

Theta: “Here, you must be thirsty. Go on, drink up.”

Subaru: “I think if I down the whole cup like this, my remaining HP is gonna drop straight to zero. But… thanks.”

Theta furrowed her brows, a bit confused by his joke, while Subaru blew on his tea to cool it before bringing it to his lips for a sip. The thick flavor of grass passed over his tongue and down his throat.

No matter what they’re called or who brewed them, leaves are still just leaves.

Subaru: “I couldn’t even get used to Rem’s tea… my body really doesn’t take well to this stuff, seriously.”

Theta: “I should’ve guessed… well that settles it. I’m never gonna brew tea for you again.”

Watching Subaru scrunch up his face and stick out his tongue, Theta gulped down her cup of tea in a single breath. Then, giving her own hair a few pats through her dangling sleeves, she plonked herself back on the bed and faced Subaru once again,

Theta: “I was hoping to lighten the mood a bit before our talk, but didn’t think we’d end up with more disagreements.”

Subaru: “When you put stuff from the side stories into the main text, readers who happened to skip them will get confused so let’s have no more of that. Switch gears switch gears, let’s just get to our conversation.”

Theta: “You say these things like it’s no effort at all…”

Giving an astounded sigh, Theta held her little palms to her forehead. Then, her gaze passed through Subaru, as if to stare beyond the door,

Theta: “Setting that aside… so it was you, Su-bo. I thought as much. Rather than Gar-bo, chances were, either you’d come here alone, or neither of you would think of this place before my rotation ended.”

Subaru: “…The odds were pretty stacked against Garfiel, huh. If that guy hears what you just said, he’ll probably be wailing.”

Theta: “Wailing, bawling, is that all it’ll be? …I was imagining a more serious reaction. If Garfiel finds me here, that is. But I’m not too worried about that.”

With a lonely smile on her face, Theta looked towards the living room wall.

Subaru followed her gaze and saw the metal shields hanging there, gleaming with their silvery sheen—the two shields crossed over each other, adorning the wall just as he had seen them last time.

When they were little, the siblings Garfiel and Frederica would play ramming at each other with those shields, filling each dent and crevice with memories—simply put, this was Garfiel and Frederica’s childhood home.

Subaru couldn’t quite understand why Theta chose this place for their final conversation.

But he did remember from a previous loop that this place held a special significance for both Ryuzu and Garfiel.

Banking on that memory, Subaru came here and found Theta waiting for him, just as he thought.

Theta: “It’s good you came alone, Su-bo. After all, this isn’t something I’d want people to hear.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I left Otto behind. Didn’t think I should bring him along for what we’re about to discuss here.”

While the statement sounded like he was leaving a warrior behind for a fight that was out of his league, that wasn’t Subaru’s intention at all. It was just that Ryuzu’ past was a subject that would necessarily involve the Witch. It was enough for Subaru to have to bear this alone.

And so, he had tasked Otto with another role.

Subaru: “Miss Theta, is it safe to say that you’re the only Miss Ryuzu who’s been inside the Tomb?”

Theta: “They…ta?”

Subaru: “Ah, my bad. I’ve been calling you that for convenience’s sake. Yesterday was Miss Sigma, and the other two are Alpha and Beta. If you don’t like it, I’ll stop…”

Theta: “…No, it’s fine. I see, so that’s what it meant. Aah, I see, I see… surprisingly, I don’t dislike it.”

Muttering “They-ta, they-ta” over and over under her breath, Theta’s face softened as if embarrassed. She closed her eyes, and, after several seconds of silence, opened them again,

Theta: “What I’m about to tell you is everything I have seen of the Sanctuary’s creation… and a part of the events leading up to Ryuzu Meyer being sealed inside the crystal.”

Subaru: “—Right.”

Theta: “As for what you’ll think once you’ve heard it, and what you’ll want to ask me… as one of the four representative Ryuzu’s of the Sanctuary, I will leave that up to fate.”

Declaring this grave responsibility, Theta smiled as Subaru held his breath,

Theta: “Is your heart up to the challenge?”

Chapter 101:
Theta I

1

One of Ryuzu' representative personalities, whom Subaru called Theta—

—Had entered the Tomb and touched the past of her progenitor, Ryuzu Meyer, but the memories were incredibly fragmented, and even the chronology was indefinite.

Theta figured this must be because her existence was created from various fragments severed from the original Ryuzu Meyer's soul.

In which case, the other Ryuzu's: Alpha, Beta, Sigma, and perhaps even the replicants that never developed a personality, would all see different glimpses of the past.

But even if that hypothesis was correct, Theta would not want them to enter the Tomb.

—Because for Theta, just the thought of the other Ryuzu's witnessing the past that she saw was accompanied by unbearable and intolerable agony.

???: "—What do you want, I suppose? Staring at me isn't going to make me give you anything."

The memory began with a girl with softly-hued hair, glaring at her.

A girl with a lovely face.

Her hair was so fair that it seemed to meld into the light, and her skin was so white that it was nearly transparent. With light-blue eyes that were big and round, her appearance could be described simply with the word "Sweet".

Her hair was tied into two long, swirling pigtails, the mere sight of which revealed their smooth, silky texture and springy softness.

She wore a dress of a subdued hue that made the young girl look almost adult-like, but, matched with the splendor of the girl herself, the color of the dress perfectly served to harmonize her appearance.

Ryuzu: “…”

Pierced by the adorable girl’s perilous gaze, Ryuzu recoiled a little.

Compared to this girl, her own clothes and appearance were utterly wretched. And the fact that they were about the same age made her wretchedness so conspicuous that she felt ashamed to even be standing there.

Girl: “Hmpf. A coward, I suppose.”

In front of the speechless Ryuzu, the girl let out a snort of displeasure.

Although her adorable appearance made even that gesture come off as cute, for Ryuzu, the feeling tugging at her heart pained her even more than being rebuked.

But before she could realize that it was something akin to the fear of upsetting this girl—

????: “Beatrice. What’s with that attitude? I don’t remember teaching you to behave like that.”

There came a mild voice that made the girl’s expression tense up.

The voice came from behind the girl, and in front of Ryuzu’ view.

Coming out of a small shed in the back of the village was a woman of “True White”.

Her hair flowed long and fair, and not even light could match the translucence of her skin. Only her irises and lips, and the long-sleeved gown she was wearing, adorned her with contrast and conveyed to those around her that she indeed existed in reality.

The person walking towards Ryuzu and the girl was the great benefactor of this village—the revered Witch Echidna.

It was to Echidna's voice that the girl named Beatrice reacted so dramatically. She turned around with her expression still tense, and,

Beatrice: "Aah, ehm… it's not what you think, mother! It wasn't Betty who's… it's just, this girl was…"

Echidna: "I don't remember teaching you to make grovelling excuses, either. Be honest and speak the truth. If you're confident that you're not at fault, then you shouldn't be tripping over yourself. Am I wrong?"

Beatrice: "You're not… wrong, I suppose…"

Echidna's voice harbored no sharp emotions, but was laden with a silent, pressuring strictness.

Beatrice slumped her shoulders and brought her hands together, looking timid,

Beatrice: "Betty was quietly waiting outside just as you told me to, and this girl came over, I suppose. Staring at me from way over there… it was incredibly rude. So I called out to her and asked what she wanted, I suppose."

Echidna: "Hm. I see. You there, do you agree with that account?"

Ryuzu: "Ah…h. Y-Yes, I do. Please forgive me. I-It was very rude of me, and…"

Beatrice's description was accurate.

Ryuzu had been standing in the village outskirts, vacantly staring at the small girl leaning against the fence. Beatrice was probably waiting there for Echidna to finish whatever she was doing. Her posture and her eyes seemed almost lonely, and Ryuzu felt a tug at her chest as she saw this.

But if she had said that out loud, they would probably snort and laugh at her. So Ryuzu only shrunk her little body even smaller, hoping to outlast the storm by keeping her head down.

Echidna: "You don't deny it? Then it would seem that Beatrice was right, and you were a little rude, Ryuzu."

Beatrice: "That's right, Mother. So Betty didn't do anything wrong at…"

Echidna: "However, it is your fault that your imperious attitude frightened her so much, Beatrice. I'm sure I'm always telling you this. You are indeed special, but that doesn't mean you can look down on others."

Beatrice: "Uu, mhuu…"

Beatrice's gloating at Echidna's affirmation was immediately met with her rebuke.

While listening to their exchange, Ryuzu suddenly realized that Echidna had remembered her name, a fact which moved her so much that her insides trembled all over.

It was a small village, but she was just an insignificant child.

Yet the revered Witch, their great benefactor, remembered her name nonetheless. This was an indescribable honor for a resident of the Sanctuary who idolized the Witch of Greed with their utmost gratitude and respect.

Echidna: "I'll have Geuse straighten you up when we get back to the Mansion. I expect he'll be very enthusiastic."

Beatrice: "…I don't like Geuse very much, I suppose."

Echidna: "He says it himself that it's his duty to be disliked, so that's exactly what he's going for, I'd say."

Giving the grimacing Beatrice a light smile, Echidna turned her face towards Ryuzu.

Ryuzu' heart unwittingly jolted. Figuring that she'd missed the timing to join the conversation, Ryuzu was just about to slip away when Echidna's attention caught her completely by surprise.

And just like this, Echidna walked up to Ryuzu, whose shoulders remained hitched and rigid,

Echidna: “Sorry for startling you, Ryuzu. Her name is Beatrice… she’s something like a daughter to me. As you can see, her discipline isn’t quite up to par, which is a little embarrassing.”

Beatrice: “I’m not “something like” your daughter, I am your daughter.”

Echidna: “Well, I guess. She’ll be accompanying me on my visits to the Sanctuary rather often now. You’ll have more chances to interact with each other from now on, so I would like you two to get along.”

Ryuzu: “U-Understood. You can leave it to me, Lady Echidna.”

With Echidna’s hand on her shoulder, Ryuzu’ heart fluttered with joy as she nodded.

Receiving Ryuzu’ promise, Echidna nodded back in satisfaction, while behind her, Beatrice muttered “…Hmpf, Betty’s just fine on her own, I suppose” under her breath.

2

?????: “You there, excuse me. I’m certain that Lady Echidna should be somewhere around here, have you seen her?”

Stopped by that call, Ryuzu turned around with a basket of laundry in her arms.

And, realizing who it was that called her, she just about yelped. She was just on the verge of fumbling the basket of laundry in her arms when an outstretched arm reached out and propped it back in place.

?????: “Ah, hup—”

Ryuzu: “Uu, uwaah, I am so sorry!”

Facing the youth who practically skated up to her to stop her basket from dropping, Ryuzu quickly bowed her head.

And seeing this, the youth with long blue hair said, “No, don’t worry about it”,

Youth: “I’m the one who should apologize, for failing to notice that you were carrying something. That was very inconsiderate of me.”

Ryuzu: “N-No, not at all… I don’t deserve your apology, Master Mathers.”

Youth: “Whoever it may be, no one should forget to be considerate towards a lady. …Just one correction, though, I don’t especially like being called by my surname. You can just call me Roswaal.”

Saying this to the flustered Ryuzu, the youth—Roswaal, winked.

He was about four or five years older than Ryuzu, and one head taller. His limbs still had some room to grow, and his sonorous voice hadn’t fully become an adult’s.

He was possessed of the sensual appeal only attainable in the short interlude between boy and man—and his bearing was so abounding in natural dignity that even the young Ryuzu was feeling his charms.

And who could blame her? Roswaal, despite his youth, was the head of the House of Mathers, the lord of multiple domains, an associate of the Witch Echidna, and the governor of the Sanctuary, all combined into one remarkable man.

He was contributing to the Sanctuary’s preservation in a different way than Echidna’s, and everyone had always told Ryuzu not to be rude to him.

Feeling her cheeks reddening from Roswaal’s wink, Ryuzu frantically grappled for the topic he had stopped her for,

Ryuzu: “Well, um, so, Lady Echidna… I’ve not yet seen her today. Lady Beatrice wasn’t at the usual place, either.”

Roswaal: “I, see. Then she might be delayed. But Lady Echidna aside, it’s inconceivable that Beatrice would fail to immediately come to see you.”

Ryuzu: “Ermm, um… I think… it’s really just a coincidence that Lady Beatrice and I run into each other so often…”

Roswaal: “You’re saying it’s a coincidence because that’s what Beatrice calls it, yes?”

At Roswaal’s question, Ryuzu only wordlessly nodded.

She had interacted with Echidna’s daughter Beatrice countless times since they were introduced. Beatrice would come alongside Echidna on her visits to the Sanctuary which she worked into her busy schedule, and Beatrice would often loiter about the place while Echidna tended to her business. In the meantime, she and Ryuzu would meet with surprising frequency.

Time and time again, they’d run into each other while Ryuzu was gathering the laundry or out picking wild vegetables,

Seeing Ryuzu’ reaction, Roswaal laughed, unable to hold it in.

Roswaal: “Beatrice isn’t honest with her feelings at all. I hope she isn’t too much for you to handle.”

Ryuzu: “But she is too much for me. She’s being so kind to someone like me. And I’m the one who’s always making Lady Beatrice upset… I even worry if she might hate me.”

Roswaal: “You’re fine. Beatrice’s complaints aren’t credible at all. If she truly hated you, she wouldn’t be finding all sorts of excuses to come along.”

She was? Ryuzu tilted her head when she heard this.

Whenever Beatrice was with Ryuzu, she’d always be complaining, and she’d always have something to say about everything Ryuzu did. That was all Ryuzu saw of her, so even when someone told her that Beatrice didn’t actually hate her, she had trouble believing it.

Ryuzu and most of the residents of the Sanctuary were often chosen as the targets of the hatred and malice of the outside world. Beatrice’s attitude was overwhelmingly tender compared to what Ryuzu knew, and it was even laced with a certain warmth, but mean was still mean.

Roswaal: "…I hope someday, you two would understand that as well."

Seeing Ryuzu fall silent, Roswaal muttered sadly.

At the sight of the sad smile rising onto Roswaal's lips, Ryuzu shuddered, wondering if she had upset him.

But before she could say anything to salvage the situation, Roswaal blinked his yellow eyes as if having spotted something.

Roswaal: "Ah! Teacher! I heard you were here and came flying over in a heartbeat!"

Flinging up his hands and utterly discarding his previously mature attitude, Roswaal started running with an expression of childish glee. Ryuzu only watched as he ran right past her and towards a woman standing in the distance—Echidna.

Seeing Roswaal dashing towards her with his face beaming with glee, Echidna slightly raised her brows.

Echidna: "Roswaal, huh? I don't remember ever allowing you to call me Teacher."

Roswaal: "Today I'll definitely change your mind about that. I can now confidently perform the assignment you gave me last time, balancing four types of mana at equal concentration and producing rainbow-colored mana. —And by my own efforts, I've reached the point where I can add the remaining two as well. What do you think?"

Echidna: "You self-studied to the point where you can bind all six? My my… I guess you can call that a foreboding rate of progression and nothing short of obsession. I'm sure in a bind now."

It was a rare sight to see Echidna surprised.

At least, this was the first time Ryuzu had ever seen it. Roswaal pumped up his chest in pride as he waited for Echidna's response.

Even Ryuzu, who was younger than him, found this adorable. His attitude and gaze, no matter how you looked at it, was overflowing with unreserved admiration for Echidna—and even sentiments that went beyond admiration.

Beatrice: “Why’re you just standing there doing nothing, I suppose?”

Ryuzu: “Aa… Lady Beatrice.”

While watching those two from a distance, Ryuzu suddenly found Beatrice next to her, staring at the side of her face. Unwittingly taking a step back, she saw Beatrice with her arms folded as usual, giving her a snort.

Beatrice: “You’re gawking again. Just as rude as ever, aren’t you.”

Ryuzu: “P-Please forgive me. I apologize for my insolence.”

Berated like this, Ryuzu shrank up, ashamed of her own shameless behavior. But seeing Ryuzu’ apology, Beatrice’s brows furrowed even further.

If only she smiled, or relaxed her lips, Beatrice’s face would give off a gentle impression. And so the fact that her callous behavior was putting such an expression on Beatrice’s face was truly inexcusable.

Beatrice: “How long do you intend to keep sulking like that, I suppose? It’s dismal. If you have time to space out toting that laundry basket, you ought to hurry up and get to your next chore.”

Ryuzu: “Y-Yes. That’s what I’ll do. Please excuse me.”

Giving the unsparing Beatrice a bow, Ryuzu scrambled to leave the scene. But just as she began to speedily walk off, she noticed Beatrice picking up her dress, following behind her.

Ryuzu: “Lady Beatrice…?”

Beatrice: “It’s nothing, I suppose. I have nothing to do, anyway.”

Seeing Ryuzu turn around, Beatrice gave a nonchalant reply. But just as Ryuzu was about to turn away, she remembered her conversation with Roswaal.

That youth had insisted that Beatrice didn't dislike talking with her at all, but—

Ryuzu: "Lady Beatrice… Would you like to help me fold the laundry?"

Beatrice: "…Hha?"

At Ryuzu' abrupt request for her to help with her chores, Beatrice let out a displeased groan.

Seeing Beatrice's eyes open wide and her expression shift into shock and even indignation, Ryuzu immediately regretted trusting Roswaal.

Beatrice: "—But well, if you absolutely can't handle it by yourself… then Betty has no choice but to help you, I suppose."

Ryuzu: "Huh?"

Beatrice: "I'm not saying it again. Come on, get going, I suppose."

Saying this, Beatrice scuttled past Ryuzu, who had unwittingly stopped in her tracks. The moment Beatrice passed her, Ryuzu saw that her lips were half softened in astonishment, and half by some other emotion.

Suddenly feeling a gush of warmth inside, Ryuzu caught up to Beatrice who had purposefully slowed her steps. Then, taking a peek at Beatrice's face,

Ryuzu: "Would you… like to hold a small amount of the laundry?"

Beatrice: "Don't push your luck. —But since I've no choice… just a small amount, I suppose."

Saying this with a somewhat unwilling expression, Beatrice offered Ryuzu her hand.

Chapter 102:
Recollections Absent in Memory

1

—Finding the seal turned out to be a lot easier than expected.

Emilia: "So… this is the "Seel"?"

Young Emilia, seeing the strange object before her, blinked her amethyst eyes and tilted her head.

In front of Emilia's eyes, deep in the depths of the depths of the forest, was a peculiar door standing in the middle of a clearing surrounded by trees.

Though it was certainly a door, it wasn't connected to any building, and even when she circled behind it, there was nothing there. It was merely a door standing in the middle of the forest towering over the young Emilia.

Emilia: "Why doesn't it fall over…?"

Finding this strange, she pushed on the door, but it neither opened nor moved an inch. Naturally, Emilia's scrawny arms weren't strong enough to topple it, and the door effortlessly withstood her push as it would a light breeze.

The double-door seemed to be made of wood, but its cold touch was closer to that of ice. The feel of its surface was smooth, inexplicably like polished stone.

In the center of the double-door was an ancient lock with a keyhole as wide as Emilia's palm. She couldn't imagine who could fit a key that big inside their pockets.

Emilia: "Weird…"

Tapping the door with the back of her hand, she confirmed that despite its hardness, the noise it made was dull. So now that she actually found it, what does it mean? Emilia tilted her head.

Emilia: “Say… what could it be…?”

“…”

The dim specks of light circled around Emilia’s head as she sought their advice.

Since encountering them in the Princess Room, Emilia had been confiding in the fairies of the forest, and when she told them she wanted to find the “Seel”, they found this place in no time.

Though they were the ones who led her here, they didn’t seem to know the seal’s significance either.

And even if they did know, they couldn’t speak, so they’d still have no way of communicating it to Emilia.

Emilia: “Don’t know… so boring. But at least I found it. Clap clap clap.”

Clapping her hands applauding herself, Emilia gave a big nod and looked the seal over front and back.

Now, if they ever find out that she was slipping out of the Princess Room, she’ll have her trump card ready. On the off-chance that mommy Fortuna and the adults catch onto Emilia’s great escapes, she’ll tell them she knows about the seal, and although she doesn’t really understand how, that’ll probably put them on equal footing.

Not that she could remember what compelled her to come up with this plan in the first place.

Emilia: “Hmpf. It’s all Mommy Fortuna and everyone’s fault. It’s all Geuse’s fault.”

Remembering that tall, black-robed man, Emilia stuck out her tongue in his absence.

He was the only person other than Emilia who could elicit that secret expression from Fortuna. Although she knew he wasn’t a bad person, he was her enemy nonetheless.

So far, she had never faced him directly, but should Fortuna ever present her with an opportunity to meet him, Emilia was determined to give his feet a good stomping.

Emilia: “The fairies’ll fly at his face, then when he’s confused, I’ll stomp at his feet. And I’ll stomp with both feet at once. And I’ll stomp with my heels… but that’ll probably hurt, I better use my toes.”

Even in war, she didn’t forget to insert a wisp of kindness into her ruthless plans.

Having the fairies watch for any signs of the enemy while she brooded on her cold-blooded battleplans, Emilia left the forests’ depths and began sneaking back to the village.

Unlike when she was slipping out of the Princess Room, this was Emilia’s free play-time. Fortuna would be away at this hour, checking on the Boundaries in the forest, leaving the elderly and children Emilia’s age in the village.

The elders couldn’t follow Emilia on her great adventures, and, for some reason, the children would always avoid coming near her. This did make Emilia feel a little lonely, but whenever she felt this way, Fortuna would put all her energy into playing with her to help her forget all about it. And so, it didn’t bother her too much that she couldn’t play with the other children.

Emilia: “And I bet I’m the only one who knows about the “Seel”“

She alone knew something that nobody else did.

With that petty sense of superiority propping up Emilia’s petty sense of self-importance, she pumped out her chest and pressed on towards the village with the fairies leading the way.

Her destination was home. Today, she’ll draw to her heart’s content and run her brush all over the abnormally large stack of paper mommy Fortuna had prepared for her.

Emilia: “The artist feels like drawing a red sky, and a white forest today. —?”

While miming the motion of slapping paint onto her canvas, Emilia suddenly noticed the fairies’ movements becoming irregular. “Huh~?”, she squinted one eye, following their movements as they veered off the path and disappeared into the bushes.

Emilia: “I sense trouble’s afoot…!”

The fairies would usually disappear into particles of light, but this time, they chose to hide in the undergrowth. Emilia determined that this either meant trouble was coming, or they wanted her to follow them.

Going off the path and into the shrubs, she slid through the foliage a little taller than she was. And after passing between the trees with her long silver hair catching again and again in the branches, there —

???: “Well this is quite the predicament… it’ll be late for the appointed time.”

—In the dark forest, on a narrow trail, she saw a distressed man leaning against a skinny tree.

Emilia: “—Ah.”

Emilia unwittingly yelped and immediately covered her hands over her mouth. But it was a high-pitched voice in a silent forest. The sound reached the man’s ears and drew his attention.

???: “Who is there?”

The man tilted his head and looked towards Emilia’s thicket.

He had genial features and evenly-trimmed green hair. His face was skinny, while his body gave off a lean but sturdy impression. He was tall, taller than Fortuna who Emilia had to look up to see, and taller than the foliage Emilia would have to desperately jump to peek out of.

This familiar man was none other than Emilia's detested foe, Geuse.

Geuse: "…"

As he wordlessly stared at the thicket, Emilia clutched her head, resigned to the fact that he was not going to let this pass.

What was actually happening was that while Emilia was clutching her head and turning her back, her bum was protruding out of the thicket in Geuse' full view. But Emilia did not realize this, and Geuse did not point it out.

Dejected, Emilia awkwardly poked her face out of the thicket.

Geuse: "My my, a darling young lady has app… hk!"

A gentle smile rose on Geuse's face as he saw Emilia, when his shock cut off his sentence half-way.

His eyes shot open and his lips trembled as he stared at Emilia. Being watched by that gaze was strangely uncomfortable. Part of it was because Emilia still saw him as an enemy, and part of it because she could not decipher the complex emotions instilled within his gaze.

Geuse: "Young miss, would… no, you couldn't be, that's impossib…"

Emilia: "…"

His voice trembled as he shook his head as if witnessing something unbelievable. Emilia timidly looked up at him, saw the fragile expression on his face, and found it heartbreaking.

He looked like a lost child, or someone who had been walking through pitch darkness, only now seeing the light—an expression at once precarious and dream-like, which made Emilia forget everything she had ever felt towards him.

Emilia: "…Geuse, are you alright?"

Geuse: "—! Aaa, auaaaa, aaaaAaaaaahh…"

Emilia walked up to him, clutched the hem of his black robe, and asked him.

That same instant, Geuse's expression further disintegrated. His spine trembled as if a bolt of lightning had passed through him from Emilia's fingertips, and he fell to his knees.

Emilia couldn't help but shudder as she saw this. Geuse was on his knees, bent over, at the same eye-level as Emilia's. From his eyes was spouting an endless flood of tears.

The unstoppable stream of tears birthed rivers on Geuse's face. This was the first time Emilia had seen a grown-up cry, and all she could do was hold her breath and watch.

Taking hold of Emilia's petrified hand, Geuse looked straight into her amethyst eyes.

Geuse: "I… I'm fine… yes, yes! I'm more than alright. There isn't… any problem at all… I, I… I've just, I've just been saved more than I could ever have dreamed."

Emilia: "You, have…? If you feel saved, why're you crying?"

Geuse: "I'm not… crying because I'm sad… these are tears of joy, of happiness, of bliss… such tears of happiness… do exist. That's something you… you guys have taught me… and so…"

His trembling fingers spoke volumes of his overwhelming emotions, and Emilia felt no urge to shake them away. She merely placed her free hand over the hand that was grasping hers.

Geuse bowed his head low, sending teardrops dripping to the ground. Irresistible sobs repeated in his throat, while the tears of bliss he spoke of continued to flow.

—So people could also cry because they're happy? Then, does that mean he's happy right now?

Emilia: "You're crying, because you're happy…?"

She felt like she could understand.

Some nights, Emilia would find herself sleepless and alone. Whenever that happened, she would climb into Fortuna’s bed, cradle herself in her mother’s arms, and pass the time in warmth until the dawn came.

Emilia would be liberated from her unease, wrapped in happiness, even come close to tears. What Geuse was feeling now must be similar to what she had felt back then.

Maybe Emilia was doing for him what mommy Fortuna had done for her.

Emilia: “It’s alright, Geuse. It’s alright. Everything’s alright.”

Geuse: “—Hic.”

Consolingly, Emilia patted Geuse’s head.

A quake shocked through his body as Emilia held the downcast Geuse against her little chest. His sobs transmitted into her bosom, their heat passing into her body.

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She had been planning to stomp on his toes before, but somehow, they wound up here.

What an impossible guy. What a hopeless enemy. How could she bring herself to do something awful to someone who’s crying? Surely, Fortuna would forgive her and understand that there was no helping it.

Emilia: “It’s too lonely to cry all by yourself.”

Once Geuse finishes crying, they’ll return to the village hand in hand.

And she’ll have no choice but to tell mommy Fortuna.

About her stroll in the depths of the forest, and about the grown-up who was crying.

Because once two people have shared a secret together, they are no longer enemies, but something like friends.

2

—Leaning against the hard surface at her back, Emilia returned from her momentary lapse of consciousness.

She shook her head, passed her fingers through her silver hair, and grimaced at the shrill, incessant ringing in her ears.

What was that brief dream she just had?

Those scenes never existed in Emilia’s memory. At least they shouldn’t have.

Yet that unfamiliar sight had burst out as if she had actually witnessed it before. The cast were all people she knew, and she herself definitely participated in the production, but the scenes they were performing were entirely unknown to her.

She knew Fortuna, knew Geuse, knew the fairies, and knew her young self.

But she did not remember those scenes, those unknown episodes, nor those conversations absent from her memory.

Spattering, overflowing, images Emilia could not recognize.

The Seal-Door. Her escapes from the Princess Room. The fairies' guidance. Geuse and his black-robes' true identities. Fortuna's last words to Emilia.

Emilia: "—Aah, hhk."

A sudden, splitting pain sliced into Emilia's brain.

Roughly wiping her tears with her sleeve, the pale skin around her eyes swelled red as she sighed.

Ever since her Contract with Puck terminated, those memories have been surfacing one after another in Emilia's mind. She had absolutely no idea what they meant.

But she knew they weren't just meaningless, baseless delusions.

In fact, the core of Emilia's heart was neither rejecting nor distancing itself from those memories.

Because she did know. Deep in Emilia's heart, she knew those scenes.

Does that mean those scenes really happened? And, if so, why weren't they in Emilia's head before?

The past she had witnessed in her Trial—

—The memory of the forest buried in snow, where the insults and malice Fortuna flung upon her made her want to shriek and scream: Something decisively linking to that moment was missing from Emilia's memory.

Was that missing link hidden somewhere in this sea of memories?

If it was, then Emilia would have to delve deeper, to scour the depths until she has found what had drowned there.

Emilia: “Have to… find it fast…”

Her head was aching. Her body was heavy. Her vision was failing, and her every muscle was sapped of strength.

But still, Emilia must lean against the wall, prop herself back up, and keep going.

Slowly, steadily, dragging her heavy body, heading deeper and deeper into the darkness, on the verge of tears and alone, she pressed on.

All alone.

Chapter 103:
Start of the Sanctuary, Start of Destruction

1

Theta: “The memories are fragmentary, but I did my best to sort out the chronology. I think… that would be more or less how it happened…”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru met Theta’s uncertain words with silence.

For he could only choose silence. The information-load was far too heavy, and he needed to organize it before he could come up with anything to say.

The founding of the Sanctuary, and the era in which the girl named Ryuzu Meyer still lived—would have been 400 years ago, when beings called “Witches” roamed free:

And when the “Witch of Greed”, Echidna, still walked this earth.

Subaru: “Honestly, I can’t imagine a time when Echidna was just wandering around the place like a normal person.”

Theta: “The Madam Witch’s presence must feel distant to you, Su-bo, because you have never lived through that era. But actually, even for me, I can’t say I truly knew her despite feeling like I’ve spent all that time around her.”

Subaru: “Well, if I can talk about stories I’ve just heard like I’ve actually lived through them, that’d be the first sign I’m going senile, you know. But anyway… did Echidna visit the Sanctuary often?”

Theta: “Those aren’t my real memories, but, judging from the scenes I witnessed and the conversations we had, her visits must’ve been rather frequent.”

Unlike Theta, who had seen those memories, all of it still lacked a sense of reality for Subaru who was merely hearing about them second-hand.

And if there was one thing in Theta's story that was bothering him, it would be—

Subaru: "Beatrice and Roswaal… were in the Sanctuary 400 years ago…?"

Theta: "Lady Beatrice, as I said, was like Lady Echidna's daughter. And as for Ros-bo, the Ros-bo in my story was the founder of the House of Mathers… the first-generation Roswaal who had set the rise of the House of Mathers in motion. The name Roswaal was just inherited down the line."

Subaru: "…Was he close with Beako?"

Theta: "From what I could tell, he had a charming relationship with her."

While listening to Theta's account, Subaru's thoughts turned to Beatrice.

Perhaps that girl hadn't changed a bit in all of four hundred years, and had always been curt and dishonest with her feelings. Even now, four hundred years later, that attitude remained the same.

Never allowing anyone to peek into her world, she continued to hide everything inside that little body of hers.

Thinking of that girl lingering alone in the Forbidden Library, a keen pain sliced across Subaru's chest.

Pressing a hand to his breast to hold back that pain, Subaru shook his head.

Subaru: "I'm surprised Echidna would bring Beatrice along with her. Judging from our conversations, I didn't think she felt any kind of maternal love for Beatrice."

Theta: "I've never had a chance to meet the Madam Witch myself. But from what I've seen of Ryuzu Meyer's memories, I feel that there's a sense of humanity to the great Madam Witch."

Subaru: "Somehow, I kinda agree with you there."

It was indeed quite different from Subaru's impression of Echidna. Yet, four hundred years and life and death stood between then and now.

Maybe it wouldn't be too strange if her perspective on life had changed during her time in that Citadel of Dreams.

Subaru: "I thought our break up was pretty final… but I'm still placing my hopes in her, huh…"

Once again, he was reminded of his own hopelessness.

This was different from Rem and Ram. Echidna understood Subaru's feelings and hopes and knowingly trampled over them all the same. There can be no future in which he'd take her hand now.

Subaru: "Anyway, your stories so far have just been charming reminiscences of the past. That doesn't sound like the kind of terrible secret you'd go out of your way to hide from everyone."

Theta: "…"

Subaru: "So, please tell me what came next. What on earth happened in that seemingly idyllic Sanctuary?"

Subaru lowered his voice, asking, as Theta brought her already-cold tea to her lips.

She mumbled "Tastes terrible…" under her breath, and,

Theta: "What happened, is it…?"

Subaru: "…"

Theta: "What happened was collapse and ruin. And then, I learned the true reason the Sanctuary was created."

Subaru: "The true… reason…?"

Subaru unwitting swallowed his breath at those words, while Theta merely nodded.

And, as if once again opening the lid on her memories, she narrowed her eyes.

Theta: “Both the great Madam Witch and the first Roswaal were inside the Sanctuary at the time. Something ominous and strange was approaching, and not just myself, but everyone inside the Sanctuary had sensed this.”

2

—The air hung taut and heavy, giving Ryuzu the illusion that her throat was parched.

Roswaal: “We have to get out of this place, now. The preparations aren’t ready. —If that thing finds the Sanctuary’s location, all our plans will be for naught.”

Echidna: “…”

Roswaal: “Teacher! We’re wasting valuable time here! That thing… that thing’ll be here any moment!”

Anxiously slamming his hand on the table in the little cabin, the slender-faced youth shouted.

An urgent apprehension was carved into that usually temperate and graceful youth’s expression.

Hearing his plea, the Witch Echidna quietly closed her eyes and folded her arms. Faced with her silence, the youth lunged forward, waving his arms to reiterate his petition.

Roswaal: “There’s no time to hesitate! That thing’s power is overwhelming! I’m still not strong enough to protect you, Teacher…! If you ask me to be your shield, I will gladly be your shield. But when we have no means of fighting against that thing, even if I defend you with my life, it’d be completely futile…”

Echidna: “There is a way. —To a certain extent, I had prepared for this.”

Cutting off the youth—Roswaal’s words, Echidna opened her eyes, staring at the grains of the wooden tabletop.

Hearing this, “Gh…” Roswaal spilled an astounded sigh while Echidna quietly shook her head.

Echidna: “Judging by my repeated inspections of the Sanctuary, I believe the conditions are in place for the Barrier to hold with a high probability of success.”

Roswaal: “Th, then…!”

Echidna: “—But we’re missing the Nexus to activate the Barrier.”

Roswaal: “…”

For a moment, a flash of hope brightened Roswaal’s expression before it was extinguished by Echidna’s pained voice once more.

Echidna: “The Barrier cannot activate without the Nexus. And without the Barrier, we cannot repel that thing from this place. If we can’t secure a safe haven, we’ll be annihilated as soon as we are found.”

Roswaal: “We spent all this time preparing the Sanctuary… we’ve come so far, and yet… with just one step away!”

Overwhelmed with vexation, Roswaal slammed his fist on the table.

The legs of the old table creaked as blood seeped from Roswaal’s hand.

Silence descended on the small cabin.

Time slowed to a standstill as a viscous, heavy atmosphere permeated the room.

And it was there, that a girl timidly raised her hand.

Ryuzu: “Um, would I be any good… as the Barrier’s Nexus?”

Echidna: “…”

Ryuzu: “I heard before that this is possible. That I meet the conditions for your Barrier, Lady Echidna. …And that was why you’ve been paying special attention to me.”

Echidna: “—Did Beatrice tell you this?”

Ryuzu: “Yes.”

Ryuzu Meyer nodded in quiet determination with her long, pink hair flowing.

The girl’s face was tense with resolve as she stared straight at the expressionless Echidna.

Ryuzu: “Lady Beatrice said that you’ve already confirmed that I’m a perfect match. All the mana extraction over these past few months were precisely for this purpose, weren’t they?”

After a brief silence, Echidna drew in her chin and nodded to Ryuzu’ question.

Echidna: “Indeed, you are very suitable for the Barrier’s construction. It’d be possible to maintain the Barrier if we keep you inside the Sanctuary. That much is well established. With just a little more time to adapt the Sanctuary’s lands to your mana, it would’ve been possible.”

Ryuzu: “In other words, it isn’t possible now?”

Roswaal: “It’s not just a simple Barrier. This Barrier has to be indestructible. We need to proceed with the utmost caution and discretion. Years of effort have gone into gathering half-bloods inside the Sanctuary to provide the conditions for the Barrier. And you… were the decisive lynchpin of this plan. But…”

Trailing off there, Roswaal ruefully gritted his teeth.

Though Ryuzu didn’t know the details, she could tell that even this ingenious duo of Echidna and Roswaal were helpless in the face of such obstacles.

Is there really nothing they can do?

—There has to be something: that was what Ryuzu' brief life-experience told her.

Ryuzu: "Isn't there something more drastic we can try?"

Echidna: "…"

Ryuzu: "…You saved me, Lady Echidna and Master Roswaal. Coming to this land, I was given a life where I wouldn't have to be afraid of being persecuted or shunned, and I was happy. If I could do anything to repay you for the time I was given, I'm certain that's my life's purpose."

Little by little, she spilled the contents of her heart.

Watching Ryuzu squeeze her little white hands even whiter as she spoke, Echidna's black irises froze, losing all of their warmth. Instead, it was Roswaal, standing beside her, who found himself beset by a torrent of complex emotions.

Roswaal: "S-Teacher…"

It wasn't a call asking Echidna for her decision. Rather, it was a call filled with a slightly different nuance.

Whatever it may have been, it was like the pulling of a trigger:

Echidna: "—If we crystallize your Od and make it the Nexus of the Sanctuary, we can drastically shorten the process for the land to adapt to your mana. And the Barrier will be complete."

Ryuzu: "If we do this, will the Sanctuary be saved?"

Echidna: "It'll give us a chance to survive the violence of the impending threat. If that could buy us some time, I should be able to devise some countermeasures."

Ryuzu: "…"

Echidna did not give a consolatory answer. She neither made any wishful predictions, nor offered any words of comfort.

But if Echidna judged that it can be, then it certainly can be done.

In other words, by offering her life here, she would be able to protect this place. By sacrificing herself as the repayment of her debt, they will certainly succeed.

Ryuzu: “…When do we start?”

Echidna: “—I’d like to start preparing immediately, if possible. I will ready the anchor for the crystallization process and assemble the spell. As for delaying the approaching threat…”

Roswaal: “Leave that to me. I will do everything in my power to stall it. …And, Ryuzu.”

Roswaal lifted his face, lined with tragic resolve. Not a hint of weakness or hesitation remained on his expression. He merely stared into Ryuzu’ determined eyes, and,

Roswaal: “I’m sorry. Please help Teacher and do what I cannot do for her.”

Ryuzu: “Don’t be, Master Roswaal, you’ve already given me a life of irreplaceable happiness. For that, I have only gratitude, so how can I resent you?”

Holding her hand to her chest, Ryuzu shook her head.

Roswaal drew in a small breath, and, sighing, he looked to Echidna.

Roswaal: “I’ll be off. Please make the preparations… and call Beatrice here, Teacher.”

Echidna: “…Maybe it’d be better if Beatrice doesn’t know about this?”

Roswaal: “If we don’t call her here now, she will resent us for the rest of her life, Teacher. …Although, she probably still will even if we do call her.”

Echidna: “Is that right. …I see. I’ll call her in a moment.”

Seeing Echidna’s nod, Roswaal headed out of the cabin. On the way, he placed his hand on Ryuzu’ shoulder and gave a single, firm squeeze.

The dull pain from his grip conveyed all of Roswaal regrets and reluctance. And, sensing this, Ryuzu shut her eyes.

Ryuzu: “…Lady Beatrice.”

She softly whispered.

As the thought of that girl who wasn’t here tenderly tormented Ryuzu’ heart.

3

Again, the scene changed.

Ryuzu: “…”

—Witnessing such overwhelming power, an emotion more terrifying than imminent death budded in Ryuzu’ chest.

Roswaal: “—Kkh, phu.”

Accompanied by excruciating coughs, clots of blood came spraying from Roswaal’s lips as his body flew parallel to the ground.

Watching him land on his shoulder, sweeping up dust clouds as he tumbled, Ryuzu could only stand there, forgetting to breathe.

Wielding six-colored magic, Roswaal A. Mathers had reached the highest level of the arcane arts in only his mid-teens.

He could scour the earth with devastating flames, cut into stone cliffs with blades of wind, birth water to force back the flow of great rivers, and command soil and stone to raise castles from the ground.

Yet even with his immense powers, he stood no chance against this overwhelming existence.

???: “…Still want to keep going?”

A youth with auburn hair and sluggish bearing walked towards him, shaking his head.

He seemed about the same age as Roswaal. His blackish-auburn bangs reached down to his eyebrows, and one might even mistake his attractive features for a woman’s. His black eyes were squinting as if sleepy, and a white shirt with black pants formed his simple attire.

—With every step he took, he’d playfully kick a pebble, each one shooting towards Roswaal sending blood spraying from his body. Then another. And another.

Roswaal: “Kh! Gha! Pfu!”

???: “Annoying. Meddlesome. Dismal. Irritating. Wretched. Depressing.”

The youth gloomily grumbled, but with every mutter and every step forward, Roswaal’s cries intensified while the sound of bones cracking could be heard even in the distance.

Roswaal’s body, collapsed on the ground, looked as if it was being crushed into the earth by the air itself. In fact, his limbs were already half buried in the ground, their flesh rupturing as his bloodshot eyes overflowed with crimson tears.

???: “Can you stop already? You’ve tried. You can’t win against me, but you’ve tried and tried. Trying is enough, isn’t it? …No matter how hard you try, it’s pointless.”

Roswaal: “Wh… at are y… blathering about… I’ll definitely… stop you here… Kha! Aagh! Ghaaaagh!!”

???: “Hhha… my head’s killing me. Makes me want to retch. It’s really depressing.”

Hearing Roswaal reject his call to surrender, the youth bent his knees and squatted down. Expelling a deep sigh, he touched the ground as if caressing it. And, with the motion of the youth's fingertips, Roswaal's limbs creaked to the sound of tearing flesh and harrowing shrieks.

???: "I didn't want this. I was trying to avoid this. I never tried to avoid anything so badly in my life. It's just the worst, the worst, the worst of the worst of the worst. —Truly, depressing."

Roswaal: "Kh, aa—agh!"

At the end of the youth's contagiously despairing speech, with the utterance of that decisive word, Roswaal's body caved under the unbearable pressure.

The center of his body was flattened, sending profuse blood gushing from his mouth as if he was going to cough out his organs. Roswaal's eyes rolled white to the convulsion of his limbs. The young wizard's life now hung by a thread as the price for fighting on to the end.

???: "Aa~, aa~, a~~ah? What is this? Wha~~t is this? Look at this. Just look at this. Ah~~, I really didn't want to do this. I feel sick. I feel dismal. My head feels heavy. How depressing. Depressing, depressing, depress depress depress depress depress depressing—"

Roswaal was no longer screaming, and all that remained was the sound of dripping blood. Taking a languid glance at Roswaal's mangled body, the youth went on gloomily grumbling.

All the while, Ryuzu, watching Roswaal's gruesome end and the uncanny youth who had brought it about—only now remembered to breathe.

Ryuzu: "—hha."

Her lungs, strained to their limits, scrambled to pump oxygen to her brain. After replenishing her body's oxygen by drawing a single breath, she forced herself to fall silent once more, afraid that even the slightest disturbance in the air might elicit the youth's attention.

Despite watching her benefactor being cruelly mutilated before her eyes, she chose self-preservation over revenge, even though she had no idea why was she so attached to her worthless life.

???: “Oh~~? Is there maybe someone there?”

Ryuzu: “—Hic!”

As if proving Ryuzu’ worries, the youth tilted his head and looked in her direction.

A short distance away from the battle, on the other side of the village square, Ryuzu was watching from a small cabin, peeking through a knot in one of the boards of the wooden wall.

She shuddered at the thought that the youth might’ve seen her behind such a small gap so far away. The knot was no bigger than the forehead of a cat. There was no way he could have noticed her.

Yet, the youth was walking over without the slightest hint of uncertainty.

???: “I~~’m not a quarrelsome person. I don’t think any go~~od is going to come from killing everyone. …If you could save me the trouble, I’d really appreciate it.”

Ryuzu: “…gh.”

???: “H~~mm. Well, it should be this direction… should I just demolish the whole thing? Ugh, I really just want to drop everything and go home. So nauseating. So dismal. So depressing.”

The youth reached his hand towards the cabin and pronounced this lurid death-sentence.

A chill instantly crawled up Ryuzu’ spine as a piercing pain wracked through her head like her skull was being stabbed by needles. Tears swelled in the corners of her eyes as she desperately held back the unbearable shriek stuck in her throat.

At this rate, an invisible weight would crush every bone in Ryuzu’ little body—

Roswaal: “AL… GOA!!”

Literally spewing blood as he roared, the entire village square was washed red by erupting flames.

Feeling its heat roasting her face despite being some distance away, Ryuzu watched the searing flames charge from Roswaal’s palm straight for the youth’s back.

???: “…”

Even this youth was compelled to turn around as he sensed the overwhelming wave of heat. But what he saw as he turned was an inferno far beyond the realm of human understanding.

Without offering the slightest resistance, the youth’s body was swallowed by the rush of blinding flames—

???: “I hate sweating. —It’s depressing.”

—Or it would’ve been, if the youth hadn’t shot down the converging true-red mana just an instant before he could be engulfed.

The sweltering fireball that should have incinerated the youth was wiped from the world without even a fiery burst to mark its demise, merely shrinking into a small red orb and rolling onto the ground.

Roswaal: “A… u… hg…”

???: “It’s still not gone, just how much power did you put into this? Don’t keep making me use my powers. The more I do, the more I feel like I want to die.”

The youth grumbled and tightly clenched his outstretched hand. As if obeying his gesture, the condensed red orb on the ground collapsed into itself.

And, with a loud crack ringing through the broiling air, its energy dissipated into nothing.

Even the highest class of fire magic, Al-Goa, did not damage him.

Roswaal, who had returned from the precipice of death for that final strike, fell speechless at this outcome. His desperate struggle was, as anyone could see, futile.

And Ryuzu, who had just narrowly escaped with her life, keenly understood that all this had accomplished was briefly postpone Roswaal's and her own inevitable death.

Roswaal: "You… demon… no… Warlock…!"

???: "I hate that name, it's dismal. You think I'm li~~ke this because I enjoy it?"

Roswaal: "No matter how distorted your life is… or how limited your choices are… you are still the one who chose them. So don't play the victim here… Hector of Melancholy!"

Hector: "Ouch, the truth hurts, you know. I ho~~nestly don't know what to do with you."

Walking to the fallen Roswaal's side, the youth crouched down and reached his hand towards Roswaal's head.

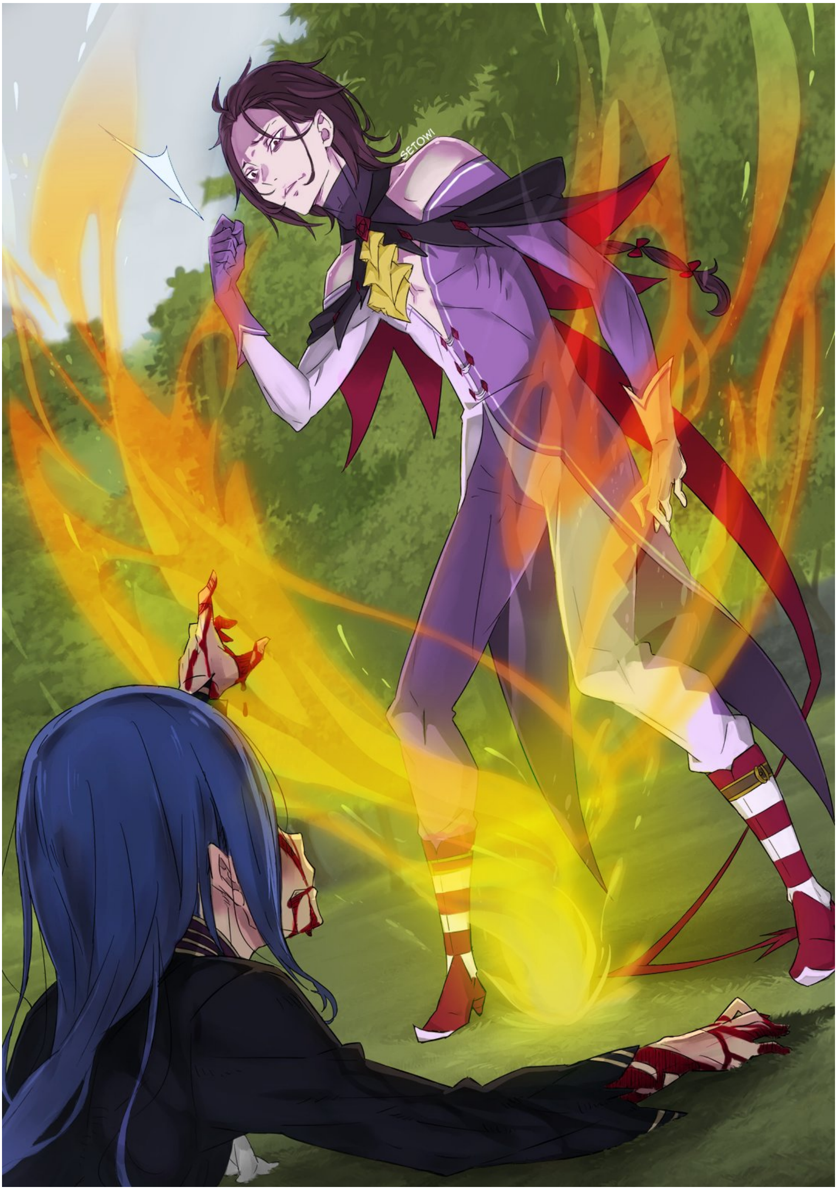
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Without touching him, he had already dealt this overwhelming damage. But if his fingertip were to touch him now, the invisible devastation would cause Roswaal's physical integrity to collapse.

Roswaal: "Gh… ul…"

Hector: "You're too late, you won't make it, and I won't let you."

Watching Roswaal concentrate his mana preparing to cast another spell, the youth callously pronounced.

Then, his morbid fingertip made contact, sending irrevocable death into Roswaal's dying body.

Roswaal: "—Ul, ghh."

Hector: "Bones, crushed. Organs, squashed. Heart, shattered. Ho~~w do you li~~ke it?"

With that brief groan, Roswaal relinquished his final sigh.

Looking down at the completely motionless Roswaal, the youth patted his knees and stood up. Then, he turned around, directly facing the petrified Ryuzu.

And this time, without a warning, he held out his palm and released the invisible weight.

Ryuzu: "—gh."

The cabin didn't even withstand it for a second.

The immense pressure from above easily overwhelmed the little cabin's capacity to resist. If Ryuzu hadn't made her timely plunge to the ground, she would've been crushed to the ground with every joint in her body bending in a direction it was never meant to be bent.

Hector: "No resistance… so it's not Echidna, then? If it i~~sn't her… whatever."

Ryuzu: “—a, hhg.”

Hector: “Be crushed and drown in the dirt. Save me the trouble of digging your grave—”

Ryuzu felt the illusion of invisible hands pulling her up by her skin, peeling her off of the ground. And just when she thought that this youth’s distant utterance would be the last words she ever heard in this life, the pressure abruptly dissipated.

Roughly panting with profuse tears and saliva drenching her face, Ryuzu looked up, confused. And there, she saw, at the other end of her vision,

Echidna: “Guess I can’t exactly say I made it just in time.”

Hector: “No~~pe. Your disciple did his best to stall me and buy you time, though. Thanks to him, I got totally thrown off my rhythm, and that really ruined my mood.”

Echidna: “Sounds like you haven’t changed at all. You’re just the same as when we last parted.”

Hector: “Your know-it-all airs haven’t changed either, I see. Why do you insist on such an unado~~rable attitude? You were really cute once.”

The youth shook his head, lamenting. Directly in front of him, standing between the youth and Ryuzu, was a lady of white dressed all in black—Echidna.

The Witch looked down at the fallen Roswaal and slightly narrowed her eyes.

Echidna: “This sight pains me more than I expected… As much as I hate to let anything interfere with my objectivity towards results.”

Hector: “He’d be disappointed if you didn’t show some emo~~tions for him. Not that I care. But if you want to cry, I can give you some time. Even I am not that cruel.”

Echidna: “Where did you get the gall to say such things?”

Their barbed exchange suggested that they knew each other, but their relationship was clearly not an amicable one.

They steadily gauged their distance as they faced each other. Ryuzu did not doubt Echidna's strength, but she had equally believed in Roswaal, and he was easily crushed in the face of that overwhelming power.

As such, having Echidna's backing in itself wasn't necessarily reassuring.

????: "—How long do you plan to keep lying there in that graceless position, I suppose?"

Ryuzu: "…huh?"

Suddenly hearing this, Ryuzu looked up from the ground when a hand grabbed her from behind and pulled her up. Dragged by that force, Ryuzu squeaked as she turned around.

Behind her, was an adorable girl wearing her familiar, sour expression.

Ryuzu: "Lady Bea… trice…"

Beatrice: "This isn't the time to be stammering in surprise. Let's get out of here quickly while Mother is buying us time, I suppose."

Ryuzu: "B-But… Master Roswaal and Lady Echidna ordered me to wait here."

Beatrice: "It's thanks to that Roswaal's bungling that that guy sniffed you out. Enough, just follow Betty, I suppose. Mother was the one who instructed me to fetch you."

Ryuzu: "Lady Echidna…"

Beatrice's brows furrowed in irritation, but her expression remained tense. Even her usual haughty confidence seemed diminished in front of this inexplicable youth.

Nevertheless, she was still infinitely stronger than Ryuzu, who was even now curling into a little trembling ball.

Beatrice: “The preparations are in place. That’s what Mother said, I suppose. She said you’d understand if I told you that.”

Ryuzu: “—I… understand.”

Ryuzu held her breath and nodded at Echidna’s message. Beatrice narrowed her eyes, puzzled by Ryuzu’ reaction, but had no mind to probe into it.

A torrent of mana was peaking behind them. The clash between Echidna and the youth was only a matter of time. No one could predict how this battle would go. And the only means to secure certain victory rested in Ryuzu’ choice.

Ryuzu: “Let’s go. Lady Beatrice, where are the preparations set?”

Beatrice: “…It’s inside an old, decaying stone room, I suppose. I moved it there as Mother instructed me to. Even with Betty’s Door Crossing, it was no easy task, you know.”

Sticking an extra boast at the end, Beatrice led Ryuzu by the hand as they moved out.

Following behind Beatrice’s bouncing pigtails, Ryuzu took one last look at Echidna and bowed her head to the Witch’s back.

—Surely, they would never speak again.

4

The crystal was blue and transparent, so beautiful that Ryuzu trembled.

Beatrice: “Even if you think it’s pretty, just don’t touch it like an idiot. You’ll be swallowed up if you do and become a part of the crystal, I suppose.”

Momentarily forgetting where they were, Ryuzu spilled an amazed sigh. Next to her, Beatrice crossed her arms at Ryuzu’ out-of-place demeanor and gave this warning.

Suddenly called back from her daze, Ryuzu quickly pulled back her fingers and apologized with “Ah, s-sorry”.

Beatrice: “Not like there’s anything to apologize for. …So, what do we do now, I suppose? Betty was only told to move the crystal and bring you here. Mother didn’t say anything beyond that.”

Ryuzu: “Lady Beatrice, how did you get this crystal here…?”

Beatrice: “For Betty, moving something without touching it is nothing at all, I suppose. Mother herself has praised the precision and range of my Door Crossing, you know.”

Beatrice’s expression was dispassionate as always, but, sensing the hint of pride within it, Ryuzu softened her cheeks.

She had already grown accustomed to talking to Beatrice like this. In the beginning, she’d always take Beatrice at her word and feel like she wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere.

But over the time they’ve spent together, Ryuzu learned that this seemingly-imperious girl was actually surprisingly easy to get along with, and in fact, she was every bit the adorable girl she appeared to be, and someone she could smile and laugh with.

How nice it would be if she could just keep talking with Beatrice like this.

If only she could forget all about the calamity befalling the Sanctuary and the fate awaiting her—but that would be impossible.

Beatrice: “…? Your smile is incredibly unpleasant right now, you know.”

Beatrice pointed out, perhaps sensing the sadness that had slipped onto Ryuzu’ face.

The fact that Beatrice could tell that her smile was different from usual was evidence that she’d been paying attention to her. As soon as Ryuzu realized this, tears popped out of the corners of her eyes.

Beatrice’s eyes widened, and Ryuzu frantically wiped the tears off with her sleeve,

Ryuzu: “S-Sorry… A little… sand got into my eye…”

Beatrice: “N-Not that I care, I suppose. —With things as they are, Betty can see this is not the place to be saying “don’t worry” or anything.”

Although Beatrice had misunderstood her, they were words of compassion all the same.

Ryuzu felt a warmth swell in the depths of her chest. Such was the strength Beatrice had given her, and it felt so grand that she could burst.

Ryuzu: “Lady Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “What is it, I suppose. If you’re going to take a while, Betty will go help Mother. And that bastard Roswaal seems to be on the verge of death right now. Guess if I don’t help him, he’s…”

Ryuzu: “Thank you, for always taking care of me. But—this is goodbye.”

Beatrice: “—huh?”

Listening to those vague words, Beatrice blinked her eyes, confused.

Inside the cold stone chamber, the two girls—Beatrice and Ryuzu stared at each other.

Beatrice blinked over and over, intently gazing back at Ryuzu. Beatrice’s gaze was intense but warm, and Ryuzu did not look away.

Beatrice: “Goodbye? What do you mean, I suppose? Are you going to run away?”

Ryuzu: “No, that’s not it. If I do run away and live, maybe someday I could still see you again. But this will be our final farewell. We’ll probably never have another chance to talk to each other again.”

Beatrice: "…"

Beatrice pursed her lips and peered deep into Ryuzu' eyes, searching for her true intentions.

For the first time seeing Beatrice confused, Ryuzu quietly chose her words.

Ryuzu: "Lady Echidna's preparations were for the Barrier that will cover the Sanctuary. It should have needed more time for the Barrier to take root in the Sanctuary's soil… but right now, we don't have enough time for that."

Beatrice: "Not enough time… then the Barrier can't be completed? Isn't that Barrier the only way to drive that guy off, I suppose?"

Ryuzu: "That's right. I've seen with my own eyes how dangerous that man is. He's beyond dangerous. I know that's why Lady Echidna is risking everything in order to defeat him. And I think Master Roswaal sacrificed himself because he knew it was the only way to save Lady Echidna."

Such was that youth's overwhelming power.

Ryuzu didn't know how the Barrier's activation would help Echidna, or whether it'd be able to wipe out that monster's existence.

But there was one thing Echidna had assured her.

Ryuzu: "Lady Echidna promised me that if the Barrier is activated, we'll be able to protect the Sanctuary. …And so, I'm willing to give my life for that."

Beatrice: "D-Don't say such stupid things. Even if you give up your life… without any background in magic, what could you possibly…"

Beatrice's eyes filled with panic as she hurriedly blurted out. But, clever as she was, she had already reached the answer to her own question halfway through her sentence.

Her eyes shot open in shock as she turned to the blue crystal looming beside them,

Beatrice: “If you bind yourself with the core of this crystal… with your Od as its nucleus, spreading the Barrier over the Sanctuary… it’ll no longer be necessary to acclimatize the soil…”

Ryuzu: “Yes. That’s what Lady Echidna said.”

It was the same conclusion that Echidna and Roswaal had reached before the attack.

Beatrice only stood there without a word. Ryuzu circled around her until she was in front of Beatrice’s view, and smiled.

Ryuzu: “You’ve confirmed my affinity to the Sanctuary’s mana yourself… Lady Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “—Hic!”

Beatrice’s face sprang up at Ryuzu’ words.

She bit into her peach-colored lip until blood seeped from her flesh,

Beatrice: “N…no. Betty… Betty didn’t… wait, that’s not, just wait, I suppose. Just wait here. B-Betty’ll go speak to Mother, I suppose. Mother might act like that, but she absolutely coddles Betty, she’ll listen if I…”

Ryuzu: “There’s no time for that right now. We have to decide this very moment.”

Beatrice: “In that case, Betty will go help Mother straight away. If Mother and Betty team up, we can easily dispose of that guy, I suppose. Roswaal too, once I heal him it’ll be three of us…”

Beatrice shook her head in childish denial, but her words trailed off towards the end.

Even she herself realized how unconvincing her words were.

Beatrice was indeed amazing. Ryuzu was genuinely in awe of how this girl around her age could have reached such heights in magic, never slacking in her daily studies.

She could juggle her doting over her mother, her quarrels with Roswaal, her magic practice, and do laundry and sew and cook with Ryuzu, all without a hitch.

This same Beatrice would understand the extent of her own abilities, as well as the unbridgeable gap between the enemy and herself.

She could not place her mother's life in danger for such a callous boast.

Beatrice: "—Or, we could use Betty's Door Crossing to get everyone away from here."

Ryuzu: "…"

Beatrice: "Right? That'll be enough, I suppose. It'll be a little hard, but Betty can definitely pull it off. While Mother holds him off, we'll gather up everyone in the Sanctuary and escape to Mother's Mansion together, I suppose. We'll pick up Roswaal when we get the chance and close the door once Mother's through, then we'll have slipped away right under that guy's nose. …Yeah, that's what we should do."

Ryuzu: "And once we've slipped away, won't we live in fear of being pursued by that person for the rest of our lives? If we abandon this place where people who'd been ostracised by all the world could finally live in safety and peace… and go somewhere new, how long will it be before we can live happily like this again?"

Ryuzu shook her head at Beatrice's plan, her words gentle but stern.

Seeing the wounded look spreading across Beatrice's face, an intense pain ran through Ryuzu' chest.

But she must trample over this girl's considerations and force her own way through.

Even if this cruel and selfish decision meant betraying the days they've spent together

—As well as betraying all the memories they've shared.

Ryuzu: "Lady Beatrice. I love the Sanctuary. I'm truly glad I was able to live here. And I love seeing the smiles on the faces of everyone who lives here. So I don't want all of this to disappear."

Beatrice: "…"

Ryuzu: "I had a wonderful time here. So wonderful that I wondered if someone like myself, with tainted blood flowing through my veins, truly deserved this. And so, I'm already satisfied."

Beatrice: "It's not like that, I suppose… N-No matter what you think this place is, the real purpose of this place isn't what you think at all…"

Ryuzu: "Yes. I know."

Beatrice: "—h."

Ryuzu nodded, as Beatrice suddenly looked as if she regretted saying what she did.

Ryuzu knew the true purpose of the Sanctuary.

At least, she knew it wasn't out of kindness that Echidna and Roswaal had gathered these persecuted people here.

This paradise where ostracised and despised people could live with their heads held high—did not exist for their sake, but, deep down, everyone still wanted to believe it.

And now, it was no longer possible to see only the bright facade of this place. She understood this, as much as it pained her.

Ryuzu: "The true purpose of this place is to deal with the person pursuing Lady Echidna, isn't it?"

Beatrice: "…"

Ryuzu: “That is why this place exists, and why we were brought here, I understand that now.”

Beatrice: “So… if you already know, then why…”

Unable to understand, Beatrice shook her head.

In front of Beatrice’s pleading gaze, Ryuzu’ lips softened.

Ryuzu: “I don’t mind. In the beginning, that might’ve been all it was. But those happy days we’ve spent here weren’t just a part of Lady Echidna’s plans. The time I spent here, and all the conversations we’ve had, none of that was a part of some plan.”

Beatrice: “…”

Ryuzu: “What’s important isn’t how it began. It’s how it ends, and what we felt along the way.”

Beatrice: “…”

Ryuzu: “I was truly happy here. So I will do anything to protect this happiness. Please let me express my gratitude for everything you’ve done for me, Lady Beatrice.”

A distant boom echoed through the stone chamber.

The ground shook and the atmosphere trembled in the wake of the clashes between Echidna and the youth in the center of the Sanctuary.

The fact that it was steadily approaching made it clear that Echidna was not winning.

Ryuzu: “…”

Closing her eyes, Ryuzu quietly confirmed her resolve. In front of her, Beatrice’s shoulders heaved up and down as she wracked her brain for something to say.

Some magical words that would dissuade Ryuzu from her intention, overturn her decision, and change her mind.

But no such convenient magic existed in this world.

Ryuzu: “Lady Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “…What is it, I suppose.”

Ryuzu: “Please take care not to eat too many sweets.”

Beatrice: “…”

During tea-time, Beatrice would be constantly shoving sweets into her mouth. It’d be a shame if her adorable looks were ruined because she got fat. And she’d have to take care of her teeth as well.

Although she rarely showed it, she is really adorable when she smiles.

Turning around, Ryuzu wordlessly approached the blue crystal.

The crystal was giving off a deep, alluring glow. If she touches it, she really would be swallowed by that light.

Would it hurt, and would she suffer?

Despite being prepared for the end, she had no idea in what form it would come.

Simply put, it was an emotion known as fear.

Once she is swallowed by this light, she will make this place a true “Sanctuary”.

If there could be a place in this world where everyone could live in happiness and peace:

If Echidna and Beatrice could continue to watch over this Sanctuary for her,

Ryuzu: “…”

Suddenly, she felt tug on her sleeve.

Ryuzu turned around and saw Beatrice standing right beside her.

She was gazing at Ryuzu with an expression she had never seen from her before, and her fingertips were clinging to her sleeve.

The strength in those clinging fingers was weak, and not even Beatrice knew what she was trying to do with this touch. She had merely reached out without thinking, and, for a girl who would never be honest with her emotions, perhaps this was the only way to express her true feelings,

Ryuzu: "…"

Gently, Ryuzu picked off the fingers holding onto her sleeve.

Feeling the warmth passing between their touching fingertips, Ryuzu smiled at the end.

And,

Ryuzu: "Thank you. —Goodbye, Betty."

—With those final words, Ryuzu' consciousness was swallowed into the blue light.

And vanished.

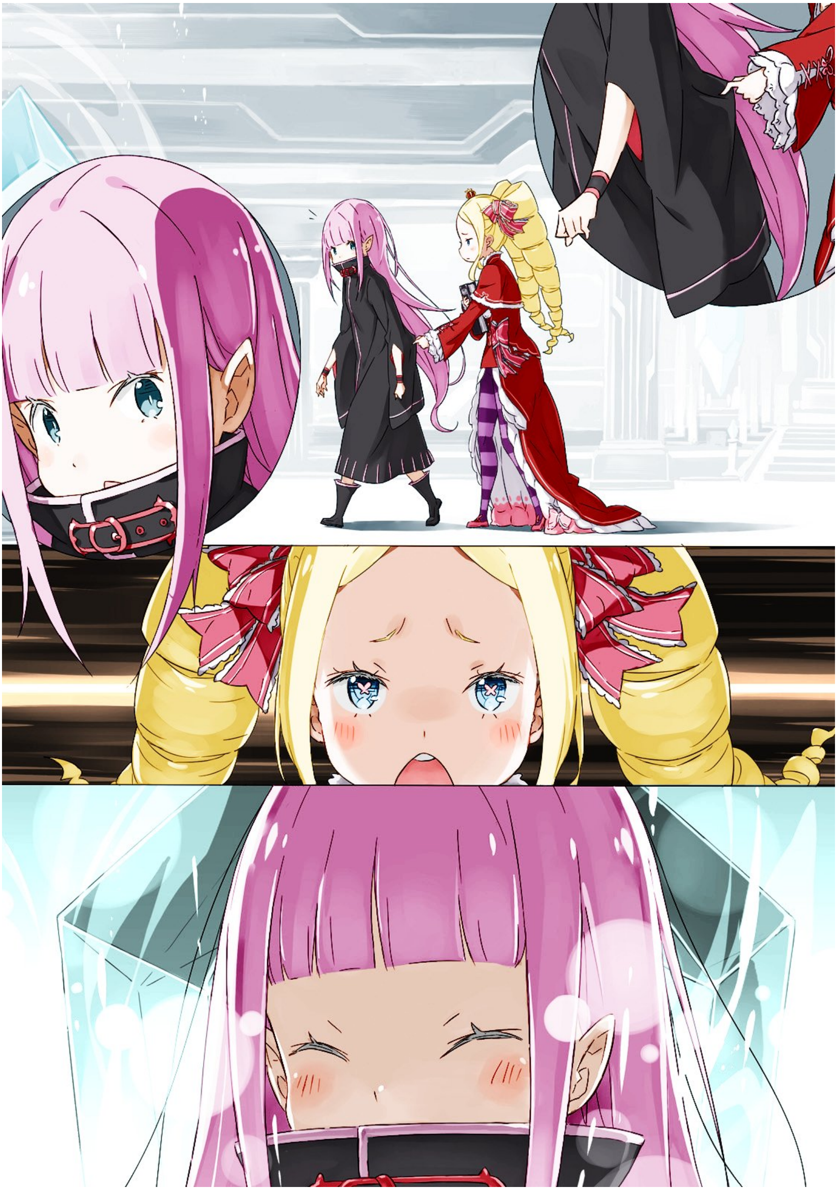

Chapter 104: Theta II

Theta: “And that’s all the pieces of the past I saw in the Tomb.”

Ending her story there, Theta brought the already cold tea to her lips and took a sip.

Sitting on the bed meekly listening to her tale, Subaru held his breath as Theta announced that it was over. Then, with a long, deep sigh, he expelled everything that had pent up inside him.

He strained his lungs to their limit, spewing out all of the air and indescribable emotions in his chest—and raised his head.

Subaru: “So that’s… the actual foundation of the Sanctuary, and Ryuzu Meyer’s memories.”

Theta: “I’m sure you already know what happened to Ryuzu after she was swallowed by the crystal. She’s still preserved exactly as she was back then, deep in the Great Witch’s research facility.”

Subaru: “But, this doesn’t match what I know about the crystal’s purpose at all. Echidna never mentioned that the Ryuzu Meyer in the crystal had anything to do with the Sanctuary’s Barrier, but said that it was for something else…”

According to Echidna in the Citadel of Dreams, Ryuzu Meyer was sealed in the crystal for Echidna’s experiments in an attempt to attain immortality.

By sealing Ryuzu in the crystal, cloning her, and then filling the clones with Echidna’s own memories, she would’ve been able to achieve a kind of pseudo-immortality. But Echidna’s death or some kind of technical error meant that the experiment failed to bear fruit, while, over time, the mechanism continued to automatically create more and more Ryuzu replicants.

Theta’s story had mentioned nothing about this pursuit of immortality.

Instead, what Subaru heard were multiple pieces of information which he simply could not let slide.

Subaru: “Then the real reason Echidna created the Sanctuary… that guy they were trying to keep out… who is he?”

Ryuzu: “…”

Subaru: “In the story, Roswaal called him “Melancholy”, but I’ve never seen or heard anything about this guy before. I didn’t even know he existed until now. That whole time, I thought the person chasing Echidna was the Witch of Envy.”

The Witch of Envy, who destroyed the six Witches of Sin:

Subaru had been convinced that the being he’d met in the dream was the one who cornered Echidna. But the character in the story turned out to be someone else entirely, someone Subaru hadn’t heard the even vaguest mention of until now.

It was only natural that he’d be confused.

However, the fact that he was called “Melancholy” did give Subaru some ideas, as much as he wished that they weren’t true.

Subaru: “The Seven Deadly Sins are Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust… But I heard it used to be different, and there were a few sins that got absorbed.”

For someone like Subaru, the “Seven Deadly Sins” was a term that struck very close to home. And so, Subaru had naturally dabbled in some of this trivia, and, after mobilizing his memories, he found what he was looking for.

Subaru: “If I remember correctly… “Melancholy” and “Vainglory” used to be counted among the Deadly Sins.”

Before they were excluded from the other seven, Melancholy and Vainglory were once considered Deadly Sins. And if Melancholy existed, then it wouldn’t be strange for Vainglory to exist as well.

If there existed other Sins aside from the widely known Witches, then,

Theta: “It’d help me a lot if you could figure out on your own why I couldn’t talk about some of these memories freely.”

Subaru: “Why you couldn’t…?”

Subaru furrowed his brows as a wily grin unbefitting of Theta’s appearance rose onto her face.

Theta: “It was just like you said, Su-bo. Outside of these memories, I haven’t heard a lick about anyone called “Melancholy”, either. Anyone else you ask would give you the same answer. Though the world may have forgotten the names of the Witches of Sin, their existence is still told in legends. But the fact that no one knows that a being with such immense power even existed… is simply terrifying.”

Subaru: “…”

Theta’s downcast gaze spoke volumes of her apprehension.

Indeed, something was strange about all this.

The Witch of Envy had been passed down through the generations as a synonym of horror and hate. Although the memories of the other Witches had been reduced to just the beings who were consumed by the Witch of Envy, their existence still remained in history.

Yet, not even a single shadow of Melancholy’s existence remained. Was it only a coincidence that the topic never came up around Subaru or Theta?

—Was it really possible that Subaru, who had attended the Witches’ tea party and met all those Witches, had not picked up even a whiff of this person’s existence?

Subaru: “…That first-generation Roswaal… did he die? If he did, then what’s with his descendant, the current Roswaal? Is he from a different branch of the family?”

Theta: “He did not die in battle. That’s what I heard, at least. From just the memories I saw, he must’ve been on the verge of death, but somehow managed to hang onto life. Although, I assume he would not have recovered to live a normal life. …After what happened, this first-generation Roswaal, who should have gone on to reach the pinnacle of the Arcane Arts, instead delved deeper and deeper into more sinister magic.”

Surely, Theta must’ve done everything she could in order to learn the truth. She alone would have had the most reason to want to verify whether those memories about “Melancholy” were genuine.

But, judging from the vagueness of her answer, it would seem that she did not succeed in her efforts.

Subaru: “If the original purpose of the Sanctuary was to keep Melancholy away from Echidna, and Ryuzu Meyer assented to Echidna’s plan and sacrificed herself to protect the Sanctuary… then the crystal creating replicants must’ve come later…?”

Theta: “The ability to generate replicants is unnecessary for a system only meant to create a Barrier. Most likely, you’re right. The question is, what would be the motive for installing an additional function of generating replicants afterwards?”

Subaru: “If Echidna was the one behind it… then the motive would be immortality. But if it was… then I have no idea what she was thinking when she came up with that idea.”

What must Echidna have felt when she saw Ryuzu Meyer sleeping in the crystal?

Echidna knew about “Melancholy”. Based on Theta’s memories, that much was certain. And yet, if she did, then there was something terribly unnatural about her behavior during her conversations with Subaru.

—Just what could be the answer to this newborn, isolated awryness?

Subaru: “What on earth am I missing here…?”

Gritting his teeth, Subaru vexed over the missing piece keeping him from seeing the picture.

Finally, he scratched his head, deciding to postpone answering this question for now. And, the last part of Ryuzu' story that Subaru could not let slide was,

Subaru: "—Beatrice lost her friend in the end."

Theta: "…She did."

Ryuzu Meyer was bashful and timid. Beatrice proud and stubborn.

Chances are, Ryuzu Meyer and Beatrice never even recognized their friendship until their very, very last moment together.

When Ryuzu Meyer melted into that crystal, just how much did that final, curse-like show of love wound Beatrice's heart?

Was it because of this parting that Beatrice rejected everyone for all four hundred years?

Subaru: "She lost someone in a painful way, and she's too afraid to hope again. …It's not like I can't understand that feeling."

He could still remember Beatrice as she rejected his hand and begged him to let her die.

Was her reluctance to place hope in others all the result of her four hundred years of loneliness, of the memory of her parting with Ryuzu that first incited this isolation, and of the deep, cutting wound it had left?

Subaru felt like he could finally understand why she had become so reliant on Echidna's instruction to wait for "That Person", and just how much the passage of time had whittled down her heart.

The wound in Beatrice's heart from the loss of her only friend had remained an unhealable scar. If she could finally meet "That Person" and fulfill Echidna's instruction, then perhaps her heart could be healed. But the absurd passage of time had caused the wound to fester, and grow so swollen that it could burst.

And so, that girl felt like she was nearing her limit.

Subaru: "…Miss Ryuzu, have any of you ever met Beatrice?"

Theta: "No, never. By the time the first of us were born, Lady Beatrice had already stopped coming to the Sanctuary, and she never visited since. None of the other replicants know about these memories, so I think it's best that we don't meet her."

Subaru: "…"

Ultimately, Subaru agreed with Theta.

The real Ryuzu Meyer was sleeping inside the crystal. Although Theta looked exactly the same as the Ryuzu Meyer back then, she had no genuine memories of her time together with Beatrice.

If Beatrice met Theta and the other replicants now, her wound would only widen and bring her nothing but anguish.

But—

Subaru: "She absolutely needs to meet you guys."

In order for this girl, who witnessed the Sanctuary's creation and inherited Ryuzu Meyer's wish, to start walking again, she absolutely must do this.

Subaru: "So can I take that as all the reasons you went into hiding and tried to conceal the past?"

Theta: "…Yes. That is all. The Warlock they called "Melancholy" that seemed to exist nowhere outside of Ryuzu Meyer's memories… whether he really existed or not, it is overwhelmingly strange."

Subaru: "I agree. With that and Echidna's attitude, there must be something more to this."

Theta: "And actually… there is one more thing."

Subaru furrowed his brows as Ryuzu interrupted, lowering her gaze. She kept her eyes off of Subaru as she continued, Theta: “If this Sanctuary was created by Ryuzu Meyer… by the wish of our progenitor… how could we break this Barrier that was erected by the sacrifice of her life? I lack the courage to do it.”

Subaru: “…”

Theta: “The times have changed. We are separated by centuries from Ryuzu Meyer’s era. The treatment of half-bloods, the persecution and ostracism from the generation where the Witch of Envy’s terror reigned, must’ve improved somewhat by now. …I understand why people would urge for this place to be liberated so they could set their sights to the outside world…”

Subaru: “…Of course, I can’t say that everything is perfect. Discrimination is still around everywhere. And I’m sure you’ll face a lot of unpleasantness if you leave. But…”

Subaru’s thoughts turned to the scene in the Royal Palace.

To Emilia, in the Royal Selection Hall, who put her thoughts and ideals into words while she withstood the malevolence directed at her in turn.

Surely, a world where Emilia’s ideals are achieved would be a world where the people of the Sanctuary would be safe, and where Ryuzu Meyer’s wish would be fulfilled.

Subaru: “When Emilia’s dream is realized, this ended Sanctuary will be born anew. Because once all her dreams come true… everyone in this world would be able to call it their Sanctuary.”

Theta: “…”

No doubt, Emilia would endeavor to make it happen. And though he couldn’t say for sure, at least half of the other Royal Selection candidates must also strive for such a world.

After all, no person’s value should be determined by their race.

This idea which comes so naturally to Subaru would certainly be accepted far and wide one day.

Theta: “It’s only a dream. But it certainly is pleasant to the ears.”

Subaru: “Yeah. So, does that mean I’ve got your heart fluttering?”

Theta: “Flirting with an old hag like myself, what a sinful man you are, Su-bo.”

Holding back the chuckles in the back of her throat, Theta’s youthful features instantly took on an elderly hue.

Then, watching Subaru’s tongue-in-cheek shrug, Theta’s expression brightened once more,

Theta: “Seeing how much I want to be duped by those pleasant words, I guess I’m really getting old.”

Subaru: “Or maybe it’s just the little girl inside you falling for my dangerous charms.”

Theta: “Pff.”

Subaru: “That’s the first time I got scoffed off by a Miss Ryuzu, you know!”

Flinging his hands into the air and then down again, Subaru slumped in defeat. Theta only shook her head at Subaru’s strange behavior and set her empty cup on the table.

Then, looking up at the crisscrossed silver shields on the wall,

Theta: “A time when the world outside this Sanctuary—also becomes a Sanctuary, huh.”

Subaru: “That time will come. And when it does, it’ll be a shame if you’re still holed up in here. There’s nothing more fun than flipping the middle finger at all the assholes who told you you won’t make it, after all.”

True worth comes from overcoming something that no one else thought you could.

That’s what all challenges and battles are.

Because the most magnificent struggle is one chasing after an impossible dream.

Theta: "—Alright, Su-bo. I'll go along with you and Lady Emilia's dreams."

Subaru: "Miss Theta…"

Theta: "I've already decided from the start. If you're the first one to reach me, I'll tell you the story and leave the decision to you. Now that you've heard the story, I see you still want to liberate the Sanctuary… and you even managed to laugh off my concerns."

Subaru: "I don't think I can muster enough bravado to actually laugh it off though…"

Theta: "Even so, that's fine. Mm, that's fine."

As if letting go of some heavy burden, Theta nodded several times to Subaru's answer.

From her reaction, Subaru could sense that she had finally reached out her hand from the prison of those memories which, in all those years, she had no one to share with.

Whether or not to take that hand and bring her to the outside world —was the decision she had left to him.

Subaru: "So now, there's no longer any Miss Ryuzus opposed to liberating the Sanctuary, right?"

Theta: "Right. …But this won't mean anything until the Sanctuary's Barrier is released. It is still up to Lady Emilia to pass the Trials, that much hasn't changed."

Just when Subaru gave himself a relieved pat on the chest for eliminating one outstanding issue, Theta pulled him back to reality. Hearing this, Subaru's relaxed cheeks tensed once more.

It was certainly a relief that he found Theta. But the fact that many more problems remain unresolved hadn't changed.

He managed to find Theta before Garfiel could.

But Emilia is still missing, even now.

Theta: “You’re confident in Lady Emilia’s chances of overcoming the Trial, then?”

Subaru: “I’ve tried all sorts of things to encourage her… or, hoped would encourage her. But the medicine might’ve been too strong and now I’m having a bit of trouble tracking her down. We’re hoping for a quick solution.”

Theta: “Y-You don’t know where she is?! Y-You sure this is going to work?! After everything I’ve just told you about my past, you realize if Emilia bungles this, all of my resolve is going to waste?!”

Subaru: “You’re totally right to be worried so I can’t exactly complain, but… well, after hearing your story, I thought of something.”

Ryuzu Meyer sacrificed her life in order to protect the Sanctuary.

The way she placed others before herself to the very, very end was a lot like that girl who always prioritized others to her own detriment.

Even if her heart was being withered by endless anguish and mounting hardships, Subaru would not believe for a second that that girl would lose sight of her responsibility and of the hopes placed in her.

Subaru: “I think I might know where she is.”

Theta: “…”

Subaru: “And even if that’s not it, we’ll turn this little Sanctuary upside down to find her. Even now, my buddy must be half in tears looking all over the place. And if that still isn’t enough to find her, then that just leaves the one place we couldn’t look.”

Seeing Subaru’s conviction, the slightly-panicked Theta relinquished a long sigh. Without asking for further confirmation, she only continued with “In that case…”,

Theta: “If you’re saying you can find Emilia and have her pass the Trial… then Gar-bo would be the last hurdle.”

Subaru: “Just from the fragments I heard from Miss Sigma, his past was about his parting with his mother. You were also in the Tomb at the time, do you know anything about that?”

Theta: “It’s only to be expected… that child is extremely averse to talking about his family. Maybe part of it is because he’s worried how I’d feel… and he’s had a hard time dealing with what happened with Frederica.”

Frederica and Garfiel’s parting became final when he swiped away her hand as she left for the outside world.

As for why Garfiel stayed behind in the Sanctuary, perhaps it was to protect the residents who couldn’t leave, unlike his quarter-blood sister and himself, from the potential threats that might endanger them.

—And then, consistent with Echidna’s hint about Garfiel’s fear of the outside world, there was,

Subaru: “The trauma of his parting with his mother… huh. He must hate the outside world. I was really kinda hoping he’d be able to help me out with a few things outside, though.”

Theta: “Su-bo and Gar-bo fighting side by side… hm. Mm, that does sound nice.”

When she thinks of Garfiel, Theta’s smiling visage would lose all of its youthful impression, but simply overflow with maternal compassion for her grandson.

Perhaps, for the four of them playing the same role of Ryuzu, even if it resided within each of them separately, the emotion of familial love for Garfiel certainly existed.

And surely, Garfiel felt the same towards them.

Subaru: “…Well, first I’ll need to find Emilia.”

He must continue to prepare for the worst case in regards to Garfiel.

Now that he had sealed the Contract with Roswaal—with this being one of the victory conditions of the bet, his final confrontation with Garfiel was inevitable.

And the same went for Emilia breaking through the Trials, which Roswaal had deemed “Impossible”, but, aside from providing encouragements, Subaru would have to let her overcome that on her own.

When she lost her bond with Puck, Emilia had lost the supporting beam of her heart. And in exchange, the “Seal on her inadmissible memories” preventing her from truly facing the first Trial was removed.

Or at least it should be, if everything was going according to Puck’s plan. Once she accepts this fact and faces the Trial once more, she should be presented with a different scene.

Would Emilia still be able to give the same answer when that happens?

—Even though Natsuki Subaru could not be there with her in that moment, he had made it his duty to do everything in his power to make sure she does when the time comes.

Subaru: “I know you probably want to give Garfiel a hug right now, but could you stay here for a bit, Miss Theta? Since that guy doesn’t want to come close to this place, we can keep him distracted for a little longer.”

Theta: “And while Gar-bo’s attention is elsewhere, you’ll be up to some clever mischief, I assume?”

Subaru: “Why does everyone wanna refer to what I’m doing as “mischief” and “nefarious plotting”? Do you guys really see me as that kind of conniving scoundrel?”

Seeing Subaru tilt his head, Theta didn’t give an answer.

Slightly irritated by her silence, Subaru sighed and scratched his head.

Subaru: “So… am I still right to think that today’s the decisive day and tomorrow’s an extra…? If Emilia’s where I think she is, all that’s left to deal with is Garfiel and Roswaal.”

Those two would be the final bottlenecks to achieving the Sanctuary’s victory conditions.

He and Otto had carefully planned to keep those two out of the way. But now, everything will depend on their timing, preparations, and how well they’ve done their job.

The more leeway in terms of timing and prep time they have, the better their chances will be. —That much was obvious.

Subaru: “Whether we’re laughing or crying, we have to settle everything by the day after tomorrow. We can’t mess up at the critical moment. …Right, Miss Theta?”

Theta: “Even if you look at me for agreement, what do you want me to say? —When a man’s resolve is all over his face, all that’s left is to go for it. I’ll be waiting with great expectations.”

Without sharing in Subaru’s enthusiasm, Theta affirmed his intentions all the same.

The awkward smile on her face might very well have been something which often adorned Ryuzu Meyer’s face. Surely, that expression was one Beatrice knew well.

He would persuade Garfiel, support Emilia, and fetch Beatrice.

There was still much to be done, and many more obstacles to stand in his way.

Storm clouds were gathering overhead, with no easy answer to clear them all away.

Nevertheless, Subaru’s heart was strangely optimistic.

That's because the things he needed to do were the same as the things he wanted to do.

No matter how difficult it would be to surmount the towering obstacles before his eyes, it was infinitely better than the time he'd spent utterly lost as to what to do.

At last, Subaru was ready to reach out towards that intangible thing named fate.

He pulled on his own cheeks, letting go with a snap as he pumped himself up.

Giving the wide-eyed Theta a smile and a little wave, Subaru headed for the building's exit.

Then, with his hand on the door, he glanced back as if suddenly remembering something, and,

Subaru: "Actually, Ryuzu Meyer talked in a way that's pretty normal for her age, so how come the replica Miss Ryuzus all talk like grannies? Is that like an acquired trait?"

Theta: "What're you talking about? —Don't I talk in a way that's completely normal for my age?"

With an indignant snort, Theta placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her flat chest.

But calling that a gesture suited for her age would surely be impossible.

Picturing the other girl in a dress who had passed the ages without the slightest growth in her body, Subaru left the building, bathed in the wind.

Holding onto that somewhat uplifting feeling, he turned to his final challenge.

—Natsuki Subaru's fight to end the Sanctuary, and to birth it anew, had begun.

Chapter 105:
The Merchant’s Trap

Garfiel: “…”

Crumpling his nose, an abrupt sense of awryness compelled Garfiel to stop.

His wind-like figure carried by ground-breaking strides broke to a sudden halt. Jamming his right foot into the soft earth, sweeping up clouds of dust, Garfiel stooped his posture low, turning his head to and fro—sniffing and scrutinizing the scents in the air.

He was in the forest surrounding the Sanctuary, searching for the missing Ryuzu within the Barrier’s bounds.

He’d already checked all the places he thought she could be and had gone back and forth more times than he could count in search of her small, familiar figure.

All the while, his heart raced in panic from an ominous sense of foreboding.

He could sense that things weren’t going his way. Outsiders were throwing their weight around in the Sanctuary, and even Ryuzu was acting strangely—she wasn’t even consulting him before making decisions anymore.

Garfiel: “Damn it… the hell’s goin’ on.”

Clawing at his short blond hair, Garfiel traced his finger over the white scar on his forehead.

It was Garfiel’s habit to touch this scar whenever he was confused, lost, or when his heart had lost its calm, as a reminder to compose himself.

Tracing his finger over the scar, he’d remember the time when he was at his most foolish—when he received this life-long wound—

and immediately regain his composure.

Most people who knew Garfiel would judge his personality to be crude and brash. They would've gotten this impression from Garfiel's outlandish conduct and appearance, but actually, it'd be a mistake.

In reality, Garfiel Tinsel was surprisingly coolheaded and self-possessed, and constantly urging himself to think.

Garfiel made this a matter of discipline—because he was keenly aware that brute strength alone isn't enough to get what he wants.

What does he need to know and do to see his wish fulfilled? It was in order to answer this question that Garfiel single-mindedly cultivated his unshakable code.

But—

Garfiel: "Still… everyone's goin' around doin' whatever th'fuck they like… tch."

In frustration and anguish, Garfiel bared his sharp canine teeth, grunting.

Indeed, the situation was slipping further and further out of his grip. But since unshakable codes required unshakable conviction, Garfiel was terrible when it came to flexible thinking.

All along, Garfiel had only one answer, and one stance, towards the Sanctuary's liberation.

Regardless of the countless branching routes along the way, it was the one point on which he must never concede. And so, he had taken every possible care to think everything through to the end.

But Ryuzu' unilateral decisions and the outsiders' underhanded tactics never figured into his considerations.

Sadly, although Garfiel never stopped thinking, he had neither experience nor any exceptional intellect to draw on. All he had was desperate tenacity, and nothing more.

Garfiel: "—Hic."

Taking a sharp sniff, Garfiel's golden pupils narrowed into slits.

Catching the scent, the hair on his back stood on end as he swiftly bent his knees, leapt—and resumed his prowl. Stepping on tree branches and using them to launch himself ever faster and higher, he soared unbound through the foliage, chasing that scent.

Garfiel: "All clumped together… the hell're they planning, hah?!"

Clicking his fangs, he put his agitation to voice as he roared.

Expelling a growl like that of a feline beast, Garfiel's eyes blazed with rage.

What his nose had caught was the stench of an exceedingly large assembly of organic beings. The stench of sweat, the stench of trodden grass and soil, the stench of tension seeping out of anxious human bodies, the stench, the stench, the stench—

Garfiel: "—!!"

It was nothing less than the stench of a mass of humans on the move.

More than ten, closer to fifty. There was only one group in the Sanctuary capable of fielding such numbers at this time.

—The refugees from the village near Roswaal's Mansion.

The same ingrates who had fled here seeking refuge. What are they planning, mobilizing at a time like this? Is this how they repay the people who took them in?

Garfiel: "That son of'a bitch… told him not to fuck with me…!"

That contemptible youth with short black hair appeared in Garfiel mind.

That boy, whose sharp eyes stood in stark contrast to his conspicuous frivolousness. And yet his gaze was also occasionally lucid and piercing, as if he could see right through Garfiel.

That gaze, which always seemed to be looking towards some indeterminable place, reminded Garfiel of another man he despised. And Garfiel loathed him for it.

No doubt, this youth whom he had never liked was behind all this.

The refugees were moving at his instigation, that much was clear. For some inexplicable reason, they placed their overwhelming trust in this youth.

He had no strength, no apparent special powers, and his only proficiency seemed to be his ability to prattle. As far as Garfiel was concerned, he was the most loathsome, weak, foolish, and selfish creature in the world.

But now, Garfiel couldn't help but think that he should have dealt with him sooner.

There had been plenty of chances, that boy had left himself wide open, and yet his eerie, almost blood-curdling resolve in the face of overwhelming odds caused Garfiel to stay his hand.

His reward for his hesitation was this present predicament.

And above all, the forces threatening the stability of the Sanctuary were now taking advantage of the fact that he'd lost sight of Ryuzu, his only family, to do whatever they pleased. No matter what, he will not allow a single refugee to leave the Sanctuary.

It would've been different if this was a couple of days ago, but the situation had changed.

Garfiel: "…Does that bastard know 'bout Granny?"

In the place Garfiel called the Experimental Grounds and Ryuzu called the seat of her progenitor, was a crystal in which a girl named Ryuzu Meyer was sleeping.

Honestly, Garfiel had very little interest in that crystal.

Although the girl sleeping there looks exactly like his only family, if she was different inside, then she was someone else entirely. If any entity that looked like Ryuzu should be considered Ryuzu, then Garfiel already had over twenty of them at hand.

It'd be impossible for Garfiel to harbour the same love and attachment towards them, and he had no intention to try.

Garfiel held the complete authority to command the replicants sharing his grandmother's face. Nevertheless, his temperament dictated that he would do everything to avoid using it.

Garfiel didn't enjoy ordering others around, and seeing someone obeying his every command would give him an indescribable sense of irritation.

That was all he felt about the girl inside the crystal.

He harboured no other sentiment towards her beyond that. Although Garfiel liked to think of himself as broad-minded, being broad-hearted was a different matter.

He never had much to give. He was just two arms, two legs, and a body.

There was only so much he could offer, and it was important to choose whom he offered it to.

And so, Garfiel only cared for the people he loved.

Garfiel: "So… if y'think I'm gonna go gentle on ya, y'couldn't be more mistaken, y'naive fucks."

Kicking hard into the trunk of a tree, Garfiel leapt high above the forest.

He hugged his knees as he somersaulted through the air before touching down and sending up a torrent of fallen leaves in his wake.

The earth caved beneath his feet, and the screeching brays of earth dragons filled the gaps between the trees.

The impact of his landing spread over the earth as Garfiel slowly straightened his back.

This time, Garfiel crumpled his nose not to trace a scent, but to display his fury. Clicking his neck and gritting his razor fangs, he glared straight ahead with eyes alight with wrath.

In front of him was a line of two carriages.

Garfiel's murderous presence had shocked the earth dragons into a state of extreme agitation while the driver frantically called out to calm them.

For Garfiel, this driver was a familiar face,

Garfiel: "Just when I was wonderin' who it is, if it ain't th'noisy bro. Hah! Should've guessed. If that bastard's dupin' anyone into this, it'd be you."

Otto: "That statement is awfully… oh, nevermind, I know all too well what people think of me…"

Garfiel stuck his hands into his trouser pockets, while the driver—a troubled-looking youth with longish grey hair, Otto, gave him a wry smile.

Skillfully controlling the reins, once he had managed to calm the agitated dragons, Otto let out a small sigh.

Garfiel: "Y'act like it's no big deal, but earth dragon usually pack their bags 'n run off when I'm serious 'bout threatenin' 'em."

Otto: "I had to persuade pretty hard to make sure that didn't happen, you know. And besides, I've informed them beforehand that you'd be coming."

Garfiel: "Hah—?"

Unable to believe what he'd just heard, Garfiel's ears twitched at Otto's statement.

His fingers unconsciously reached for his forehead as he stepped forward, intending to ask Otto what he was trying to say.

Garfiel: “What’s that supposed t’mean? You thought y’could slip outta here thanks t’the chaos and then got yerself caught when I found ya. Ain’t that what happened here?”

Otto: “Yeah, you’re exactly right. Taking advantage of chaotic situations is bread and butter for us merchants. But just when I’d been promised a handsome reward and was about to succeed without incident…”

Garfiel: “…”

Otto buried his face in his hands, his schemes ruined. But, sensing a certain calmness in Otto’s gestures and words, Garfiel’s confusion only deepened.

This isn’t the attitude of someone whose plans had just been foiled. In fact, doesn’t his expression look just like Roswaal’s when everything was playing right into his hands?

Garfiel: “That attitude and that fuckin’ expression… y’look just like the fuckin’ asshole I hate th’most in this world.”

Otto: “There goes another horrible appraisal… but, just for reference’s sake, mind if I ask which one you’re referring to? I really want to be improving our relationship from now on.”

Garfiel: “Hah! Me ‘n you? Don’t make me laugh, moron. —The asshole I hate th’most in this world is lointerin’ in th’nicest room in th’Sanctuary, gettin’ the VIP treatment this very fuckin’ moment.”

Otto: “I see, I see… must be tough, when the one you have your heart set on is falling head over heels for your love rival. I do sympathize with your plight.”

Garfiel: “Y’want me t’force yer fuckin’ mouth shut? Oy?”

Garfiel smacked his tongue in annoyance as Otto mocked his feelings for Ram.

Indeed, Garfiel could have settled this with force if he wished to.

This escape attempt had already failed the moment Garfiel found out about it.

They weren't going anywhere. But as long they didn't try to force their way through, Garfiel saw no need for any unnecessary violence.

His first order of business should be settling this matter quickly and returning to the Sanctuary.

His priority was to preserve the Sanctuary, and this was nothing but a minor distraction.

Garfiel: "Anyway, now yer escape plan has failed. If that son of'a bitch is here, tell him t'come out. He better start apologizin' for pullin' this shit, or there's gonna be pain."

Garfiel needed somewhere to vent his pent-up frustration.

And besides, Garfiel needed to know just what that youth—Natsuki Subaru—was thinking, pulling a stunt like this.

It was only a couple of days ago when he'd boasted that he would break through the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary.

Even if he had lost heart, it just happened way too quickly. Frankly, it'd be too much of a cop-out if that were the case.

It's about time Garfiel slapped him straight—

Otto: "Ehh, unfortunately, I'm afraid I won't be able to meet that request."

Garfiel: "Hah?"

Otto: "Haven't you noticed? You said it yourself, I'm wearing the face of the man you hate the most in this world. Then surely, you don't expect me to do something that hated man wouldn't do?"

Garfiel: "…"

Ambiguous and roundabout, Garfiel couldn't understand what Otto was insinuating.

But Garfiel could tell that those weren't statements he could just let slide. And above all, the fact that he was wearing the same face as that man he despised—Roswaal—meant that everything was going to plan.

Garfiel: "…Th'fuck are you plottin' , oy."

Otto: "Oh right. Speaking of that face you and I both know, I guess you can call it the "I'm totally plotting something" face?"

Otto rubbed his nose as he said this, looking like he had just done something mischievous. Garfiel narrowed his eyes, and only now noticed the strangeness of this scene.

There were two carriages, Otto, and two earth dragons before him. —But there was no driver on the driver's platform in the rear carriage.

Or rather, it was more than that.

Garfiel: "How come… when th'dragon freaked and jolted the carriages… none of the bastards inside showed their fuckin' faces?"

Otto: "Hmm, I wonder why that would be?"

Otto shrugged, playing dumb, while doing nothing to stop the pale-faced Garfiel from approaching the carriages. Garfiel swiftly hopped onto the back of the carriage and wrenched open the flap to the passenger deck.

And, when he saw what was inside, Garfiel made a deafening clench of his teeth.

Otto: "—There's no one there, you know?"

Garfiel: "No shit… gh. Th'fuck is going on! I smelled th'stench of a whole fuckin' crowd of'em movin' with the carriage…!"

Sending spit flying as he stepped into the passenger deck, Garfiel's sentence abruptly trailed off halfway.

At his feet, strewn all over the passer deck, were piles of clothing. Countless articles—men's, women's, adults' and children's, all dumped together. Meanwhile, faced with this sight, Garfiel's cheeks contorted as he realized that his nose had been deceived by this remarkably simple trick.

Garfiel: "Hic… it's a fuckin' trick…!"

Otto: "I told the other carriages to wait a bit before setting out, and they should all be leaving the Sanctuary by different routes right about now. Not even your legs will be able to catch them in time."

Garfiel: "Different routes? Th'fuck you talkin' about. There ain't another easy way outta here except this fuckin' path! They'll get lost on the way like sittin' ducks waitin' for me t'fetch'em. And I can cross through th'Barrier, if y'didn't know."

Otto: "You're right, I don't know a whole lot about you. But…"

Jumping off the carriage and landing directly in front of Otto, Garfiel lunged a step forward upon hearing Otto's reply as agitation surged in his chest ,

Otto: "…I doubt you know much about me, either."

Garfiel: "…"

Otto: "You're the kind of guy who doesn't give a damn about someone like me. And you have nothing but contempt for people like Mr. Natsuki and myself who don't do anything but talk. And so, you paid no attention to what I was doing, or even what I'm doing right now."

Garfiel: "Th'fuck're you sayin?"

Otto: "What I'm trying to say is that I wasn't just wandering around the forest over the past few days and spending my nights in the stables with the earth dragons for no reason at all. I was uncovering escape routes that don't rely on this road and teaching it to them!"

Otto flung up both his arms and announced this with a triumphant expression.

Hearing this, Garfiel's jaw dropped as his sharp eyes widened.

Teaching? Teaching it to who? The carriage drivers? That doesn't connect with what he was saying just now. Unless, did he mean he was in the stables talking to the earth dragons?

If that was the case, then,

Garfiel: "That bastard's duped ya pretty hard, huh…"

Otto: "Wha?! I'm having a bit of trouble accepting that interpretation just now!"

Seeing Garfiel direct him a sympathetic gaze, Otto blurted back in protest. It seemed every time Garfiel saw him in the Sanctuary, Otto was acting like this, so it was pretty normal at this point.

But, seeing normal behaviour in this context was, indeed, abnormal.

Garfiel: "Either way, yer headin' back now. I'll find th'others n' drag 'em back as well."

Otto: "They would've dispersed in different directions by now, so you won't catch them. But if you still want to go after them, I was told to tell you this: —The refugees know nothing about the truth regarding the Sanctuary and Miss Ryuzu. You lose nothing by letting them go. …So, what do you say?"

Garfiel: "He's planned this from th'start…?"

The message almost certainly came from Subaru.

He had perfectly grasped the reason why Garfiel didn't want anyone to leave. Though it wracked Garfiel with irritation to be getting tangled deeper and deeper into someone else's plot, if what Otto said was true, then he no longer had any reason to chase after the refugees.

Garfiel: "But y'expect me t'just believe that…?"

Otto: "Suspicious one, aren't you? But I'll just say this: none of us, Mr. Natsuki included, wants to worsen our relations with the people of the Sanctuary. In fact, we'd like to see the Sanctuary liberated under the most amicable conditions… and right now, it looks like you're the one getting in the way of that."

Garfiel: "…I've no interest in makin' friends or gettin' in th'way of it. 'Long as y'stay inside."

Otto: "Why get so caught up on the details?"

Garfiel: "That's not fuckin' negotiable."

Otto showed an expression of astonishment while Garfiel exhaled a heavy sigh.

Although he voiced his suspicions, Garfiel judged that it was probably the truth. The fact that Subaru left this message meant that he knew Garfiel's reasons for wanting to keep everyone inside—and so, naturally, it would've made sense for Subaru to keep whatever secrets he'd uncovered hidden from the refugees.

Garfiel: "But just… why go t'the effort of pulling all these stunts to get 'em out of th'Sanctuary? What makes him think they're gonna get hurt if they stay here? What happened t'trustin' the people y'wanna be friends with?"

Otto: "In that case, I can think of a name that'd be pretty high on the list. But I asked him as well, and Mr. Natsuki said it's for insurance. And also for buying time."

Garfiel: "…"

The moment Garfiel heard the words "buying time", his expression stiffened.

Why on earth would they need to be "buying time"? Garfiel wet his lips with his tongue, and,

Garfiel: "What th'hell're you tryin' t'do…?"

Otto: "Just making sure that a boy and girl can have some private time together without getting bothered by nosy peepers, you know."

With an exhausted yet accomplished expression, Otto slowly shook his head.

Garfiel was just about to object to this frivolous reply when he saw Otto's expression and stopped. Because it was not the face of someone telling a lie.

That means he was speaking the truth. And the boy and the girl must be Subaru and Emilia.

Garfiel: "…"

A gut feeling immediately told him that those two must not be allowed to meet.

The bestial blood coursing through his veins instinctively knew this.

Garfiel's face sprang up as he turned to the direction of the village.

If he allows Subaru and Emilia to meet, something unthinkable is going to happen. The Sanctuary will be liberated, and—

Garfiel: "…"

There's no way they can do it, Garfiel's rationality told him.

He himself had seen how Emilia was broken by the merciless Trials. And it was only yesterday when she'd lost the primary support of her heart.

How could that girl, crushed and beaten by her own nightmare, recover in the span of a day?

But Garfiel's instinct screamed for him to rush over there and stop them.

In the Trial of the Past—even if it was a different past, all challengers are presented with their most forbidden memories.

Garfiel was shown his when he foolishly stepped into the Tomb.

Just thinking back on it made all the blood drain from his body while an unbearable hollowness breached into his heart.

From that point onwards, he had always told himself to be strong, so strong that he would never have to betray his decision. That was how deep the Trial had cut into his heart.

Garfiel: “Th’situation’s changed. I’m goin’ back to th’Sanctuary. I gotta find ‘em and change their minds before they…”

Otto: “And you think I’m just going to let you go?”

Garfiel: “…”

Just as Garfiel turned to head towards the village, Otto called out to stop him.

But Garfiel’s response was fierce.

Otto: “—Ogh, kh.”

Garfiel: “Shut up ‘n take a nap. I ain’t got time t’play with you.”

Closing the distance with a single step, Garfiel drove his fist into Otto’s stomach.

Avoiding the ribs, Garfiel aimed straight for Otto’s gut, sending him flying backwards, foaming at the mouth as he crashed to the ground.

Garfiel had gone easy on him. He had put in more than enough force to knock Otto unconscious, but in terms of payback for the trick he’d played on him, Garfiel was being more than merciful.

Clicking his tongue at the fallen Otto, Garfiel lightly dug his heels into the earth, and—

Otto: “—Whe… re do you think you’re… going?”

Garfiel: “—?!”

—Just when he was about to launch into his sprint, Garfiel stopped.

Dumbstruck, he glanced back and saw that Otto was standing.

He was holding his stomach, coughing and drooling, but conscious nonetheless.

Garfiel: “Th’fuck? I wasn’t tryin’ t’kill ya, but that punch should’a knocked y’clean out, oy!”

Otto: “Is that right…? Then… I guess I’m… tougher than you thought. Yeah… looks like the daily workouts were worth it after all. …A travelling merchant’s body is their greatest capital, they say… so it pays to stay healthy…”

Otto gave a painful chuckle while an ominous feeling compelled Garfiel to properly turn around.

One more blow and he’ll definitely go down.

No more going easy this time. He’ll aim for the head instead. It’ll probably leave a scar, but it’ll knock him out for sure.

Garfiel: “This one’s gonna hurt, so better clench yer teeth ‘n…”

Otto: “You’re still… going easy on me…? You know… that half-assed attitude is exactly why you’re gonna lose!”

As Garfiel leaned forward preparing his next strike, Otto screamed back.

Glaring at Garfiel with bloodshot eyes, Otto swung his arm with all the strength he could muster.

The next instant, a screen of flung-up leaves covered Garfiel’s vision, creating a momentary opening.

Garfiel: “What th—?!”

Startled by the sudden reversal, Garfiel’s body froze still.

And—

Otto: “EAT THIS—!!”

Alongside Otto’s throat-tearing shriek, a burst of light pierced through the screen of dancing leaves—

—Swallowing Garfiel’s body into a radiance of blinding red.

Chapter 106:
Otto Suwen

1

Grimacing at the blistering heat on his skin, Garfiel violently kicked at the fallen leaves around him.

Garfiel: “Th’guy’s got guts, I’ll give’m that.”

It was a growl of irritation, but also of honest praise.

“Your half-assed attitude is why you’re going to lose” —that was what Otto told him. And he was absolutely right.

Thinking that Otto had no combat capabilities, Garfiel had completely underestimated him.

Garfiel: “Fire stones… the hell’s he tryin’ t’do’ with somethin’ as biteless as that?”

A momentary, vision-obscuring screen of flames.

With his annoyance still fresh on his mind, Garfiel thought back on that flash of searing heat.

All smoke and mirrors, it stung, but its damage was no more than that of a sunburn.

Yet, one thing was certain:

Garfiel: “If he’d used somethin’ more deadly I wouldn’t ‘ve gotten off this easy…”

In that fatal moment, his opponent made an unexpected choice.

What else to call it if not an act of mercy? The opponent he’d held back on and failed to knock unconscious turned around and taught him a lesson instead.

That was just way too wretched and stupid.

Garfiel: “Gotta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me…!”

What was even more infuriating was how his opponent completely ignored him while he was blinded by the flames and just straight-up ran away. By the time Garfiel thought to chase him, Otto was already nowhere to be found.

Just soft soil and fallen leaves. He certainly managed a skillful escape on what should’ve been unfamiliar terrain. Otto wasn’t lying about scouting around the forest at night.

Nevertheless, if this turned into a genuine chase scene, there’d be no way he could escape from Garfiel. Every ten steps that Otto ran, Garfiel would be able to close in two. Such was the enormity of the physical difference between their bloodlines.

But Otto had this covered as well.

Garfiel: “—Gh! Th’hell?! This… aghh! Fuck, my nose ain’t workin’!”

The moment Garfiel tried to sniff for Otto’s scent, an intense, painful stench pierced his nostrils. Recoiling from the stench, Garfiel shook his head as his vision strobed from the penetrating pain.

And that was when he saw a clear glass bottle lying on the spot where Otto had been standing. He could immediately tell that the colorless liquid flowing from the uncapped bottle was the source of that pungent scent. But that was all his nose could tell him.

Garfiel: “Son of’a bitch…! Does’he think he can beat me just by cloggin’ my nose?”

Baring his fangs, Garfiel flushed with rage at his dwindling options.

Just how many traps had Otto set against him? Every step of the way, these tricks had perfectly held him in check.

Garfiel: “…”

Touching the scar on his forehead, panting, Garfiel repeated his ritual to calm himself.

He drew in a deep breath to settle his heart and lungs and wrestled back his senses from being consumed by rage. Thinking about it now, there is no way Otto could keep him subdued indefinitely.

So why would Otto risk himself in such a reckless battle?

Besides, the fact that Otto would challenge Garfiel in the first place was strange.

He said his goal was to buy time—to draw Garfiel's attention while the refugees escaped the Sanctuary via other routes.

If what he said was true, then it'd be impossible for Garfiel to stop all the carriages now.

The thought of sending the Ryuzu clones to chase them had briefly crossed Garfiel's mind, but since he doesn't know any of the carriages' current locations, it'd only be a futile effort.

The replicants lack knowledge and experience, and could only carry out very crude commands.

They wouldn't even know to eat their meals unless instructed to, and if they were pushed beyond their limits, they'd just curl up into little balls and give up on life.

Garfiel was too sick and tired of having to run around looking for them when that happens.

Garfiel: "And in th'end, th'only one I can rely on 's myself. Hah! Same as it's always been."

He was out of options, and his nose was disabled.

But Garfiel wasn't pessimistic. He still had his powerful body. And it still had more than enough strength left to carry him through the forest and achieve his goal.

No matter what Otto's objectives may have been, he dared to stand against Garfiel. Surely, when he decided to oppose him, he must've been prepared to taste Garfiel's claws and fangs.

As far as Garfiel was concerned, Otto was no longer a simple prey.

This was now a hunt that would require all of his efforts, and he would not stop until he had Otto completely at his mercy.

—By the time Garfiel thought this, he had already all but forgotten his original intent and didn't even realize that he was falling right into Otto's plans.

Garfiel: "Where'd y'get th'fuckin' gall. That bastard left y'instructions, didn't he… th'hell did he say?"

Just before setting out into the forest in pursuit of Otto, Garfiel turned his head, looking to the carriages Otto left behind.

The carriages were decoys pretending to be carrying fleeing refugees. Yet the two earth dragons drawing them were real, and all through Otto and Garfiel's standoff, they had been quietly sitting there like it was none of their business.

Garfiel: "Y'think if y'just sit there I won't hurt ya? Cheeky bastards. Yer lucky I don't like t'kill unless I need to."

Shaking his head, Garfiel passed by the dragons and reached for the passenger car once more.

Countless items of clothing had been heaped inside the car to mimic the scent of fleeing villagers. Last time, Garfiel left it as soon as he confirmed this, but there might've been something else he'd missed.

Pushing apart the piles of clothes with his feet, Garfiel scanned his eyes over the seats and walls. Nothing stood out, and, after searching a little more, he was about to descend the carriage when,

Garfiel: "—Huh?"

He saw something sticking to the back of the carriage door as he turned.

A white piece of paper fluttering in the wind, as if placed there specifically to be visible from the inside.

—Feeling a sense of foreboding, Garfiel walked up to the fluttering note, tore it off, and opened it in his hands.

And,

“—If you’re really this gullible, then it was totally worth the trouble.”

Reading the message, Garfiel’s vision flashed furious red.

The next instant—the seats of the carriage shot up as the black lumps underneath exploded in the narrow space, expelling a violent gale in the form of a storm of winged insects, drowning Garfiel’s roars to nothing.

2

—For the young Otto Suwen, the world was like a cradle of hell.

???: “…”

????: “× × × × × × × × ×”

?????: “********”

??????: “* * * * * * * * * * * * * * *! *! *”

Day and night without end, Otto’s ears were flooded with words that made no sense to him.

He’d sit on the floor in a daze, and the voices would come, sometimes like close-by whispers, sometimes like distant cries, sometimes like pleasant songs, and sometimes like shrieks of death, the world constantly reminded Otto of their connection.

No matter where in the world young Otto went, the voices always followed.

Day after day without respite, the eternal echo of their discordant chorus, that useless infernal concerto, remained Otto’s constant companion.

—How could everyone live in such a noisy world like it was nothing?

In a hell where he couldn’t properly understand anyone around him, Otto asked himself that question.

His parents would hold him up and cast him words of affection, smiling. But no matter how much love was abound in those words, the dissonant clamor would consume them, never allowing them to reach Otto’s ears.

When his parents noticed that something was different about their son, they immediately took him to a doctor.

He wouldn’t laugh, wouldn’t scream, and wouldn’t cry. This utter lack of emotional expression was because all external stimulus felt the same to Otto.

And so, in spite of his worried parents, Otto spent his early childhood in emotionless indifference.

Perhaps it was fortunate that the Suwen’s was a middle-class merchant family wealthy enough to send their son to the doctor’s.

But none of the doctors could figure out what was wrong with Otto. Well, naturally. Since all Otto had in terms of symptoms was deafness from the excessive noise.

Otto has a brother two years his senior, and a brother two years his junior. Unlike Otto, his brothers grew up healthy, nourished in their parents’ love. Their parents’ attention to Otto gradually faded as the love that was portioned for three was eventually divided between two, and Otto grew distant from his parents’ warmth.

Otto held no grudge or jealousy towards his brothers or parents. At the time, he felt no hate nor envy, nor any discernible emotion for that matter. Although Otto couldn’t understand a thing they were saying, his brothers still interacted with him as patiently as they could. And besides, it was only natural that his parents would be emotionally exhausted.

If he were in his brothers' shoes back then, Otto wasn't sure that he would've been so kind to such a strange family member. For that, he was grateful to them.

While sounds could not reach him, written words still made communication possible.

It was his older brother who first discovered this while reading a book out loud to Otto.

Of course, learning to read and write proved extremely difficult.

Otto couldn't register the sounds needed to understand the words, so it took him ten times longer than an ordinary child to memorize the sequences of letters.

Nevertheless, it didn't bother him. And sadly, this was because Otto lacked the sensibility to be distressed by that fact, having no concept of what life was supposed to be like for normal children.

"—Thank you, for everything."

He could still vividly remember the tears streaming down his parents' faces as they hugged him when he wrote these words on a piece of paper and showed it to them.

He didn't completely understand the concept of gratitude, but he figured it was something he ought to do. That was young Otto's decision, and when he wrote down these words out of that sense of obligation, a flutter was born in his heart.

—That might've been the first time since birth that he'd cried so loudly. And indeed, it was like his second birth-wail.

???: "Ffaghatkgaoytajijijiji."

????: "A G A T E G A T A G F A T T T E T A A D A E R T E R A."

?????: "Mi~mi~mu~mi~me~mi~mi~."

It wasn't long after Otto's second birth-cry that he started discovering patterns within the once incomprehensible chorus of hell.

And, little by little, Otto found that he was able to sort and selectively block out the myriad of noises assailing his eardrums.

It was around Otto's eighth birthday when he became capable of completely separating himself from the ambient noises at will.

Otto was now practically a healthy child, and, like rain falling on an arid desert, he greedily soaked up everything he could.

Otto had already lost the chance to learn most of the things an eight-year-old would need to know, so although he had diligently poured his time into learning to read and write, his comprehension level was still far behind other children his age. But, using his newfound concentration as his weapon, Otto closed that gap in no time.

From there, Otto Suwen's hidden potentials bloomed.

He was no longer falling behind his brothers. Or rather, his comprehension and intelligence even surpassed them. With his exceptional ability to learn, Otto soon distinguished himself among his peers—

—and spectacularly botched his interpersonal relationships, leaving him friendless.

Otto: "How could everyone live in such a difficult world like it was nothing?"

Otto muttered, hugging his knees, his cheeks red and swollen courtesy of the girl he had a crush on.

At ten years old, Otto was diligently studying so as not to shame himself as a merchant's son. Most children of that era didn't have access to education at such an early age. So Otto was certainly privileged to be able to spend his days alongside his peers this way.

The only problem was that Otto's emotional and mental age were both seven years behind other children his age.

Otto never had a chance to make the mistakes most children should have made, so, now that he was able to, naturally, he made them all. While he would've been forgiven if he'd done this when he was younger, since Otto was way past the age to be making such mistakes, the result was utter bafflement all around.

To make matters worse, Otto Suwen was a boy perfectly blessed with bad luck.

If you ask his parents, then Otto's misfortune began immediately after birth when he almost drowned in his first bath. And despite everyone's best efforts, he'd always be tumbling down stairs, hit by bird poop, drowning in puddles, and generally beset by misfortune.

The reason he wasn't aware of this at the time was because he'd never developed a concept of what misfortune was.

Looking back on it now, however, Otto shuddered at his own history.

What did he have to do in his past life to be so abandoned by fortune?

???: "Big one, gone, gone now, it's gone."

????: "Shiny, shinied, shine is, faraway, shiny, shiny, shining."

?????: "Hey, monster's coming. Hey, monster's coming."

It was around this time that the noises Otto was consciously blocking began to change.

And the once senseless chorus became imbued with meaning.

Although he still couldn't understand most of what he heard, in his efforts to transform confusion into comprehension, Otto discovered the true nature of the hell that was his early childhood.

Apparently, he could communicate with non-human creatures.

Eleven years after its manifestation, Otto Suwen realized that he had this ability called the “Divine Protection of Anima Whispering”.

After that, hoping to discover the limits of the power bestowed upon him, Otto went all around town testing his Divine Protection. Over repeated bouts of trial and error, he found that the more intelligent the creature, the more clearly ideas could be communicated between them.

Then, he spoke with the family earth dragon in front of his older brother and confided that he’d had this ability since he was an infant.

Older Brother: “Uuh, okay. Right… so, um… Otto. That power is, um, something. Yeah, it’s really something, but… well, just. Don’t use it where anyone can see you, okay?”

Possessing a Divine Protection meant being blessed by the world, but not everyone welcomed the holders of such powers. It’d be one thing if the Divine Protection benefited many others, but Otto’s ability only applied to himself, and one could easily imagine all the childish mischief it could be used for.

Conceding this much, Otto nodded to his worried brother’s suggestion.

After promising his older brother, who had gone pale and was averting his eyes, Otto resolved to let no one else know about his Divine Protection.

His power was dangerous, not only to him, but to those around him as well.

A sense of duty lit up inside young Otto’s heart: he must protect his beloved family.

Three days after making his promise to his older brother, his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering became common knowledge, and all his peers shunned him entirely.

His younger brother caught him talking with the family earth dragon, and Otto reluctantly told him about his Divine Protection.

Otto also told him about his older brother’s concerns and that the power was incredibly dangerous.

The next day, his younger brother dragged him in front of a huge group of kids in order to show him off. They watched him talk to a bug, and, for the first time in years, Otto saw hell again.

The downside to the Divine Protection of Anima Whispering was that he needed to use the other creature’s language for communication. Simply put, for Otto to talk to a earth dragon, he would have to bray like a earth dragon, and, to speak to a bug, he’d have to chirp like a bug.

It took only an instant for the name “Zodda-Bug Boy” to stick.

From that point on, Otto was determined to seal away his Divine Protection, never to use it again. It would be several years before he managed to undo his tainted reputation and erase that accursed memory from everyone’s minds.

When he finally achieved this, Otto was the impressionable age of fourteen.

Being fourteen, all excuses for his mental immaturity stopped working. His body was steadily entering adulthood, and when his limbs had fully grown out, Otto could even be described as rather handsome.

Grey hair, and somewhat luckless, tender features. Mild eyes, and a disposition to put his all into everything he did. Young Otto had grown to possess surprisingly many characteristics that tickled the maternal instinct, and just when he, like any boy his age, began taking interest in romance—

He made an enemy of the daughter of the most powerful figure in town with his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering, and was banished.

That was the winter he turned fifteen.

Long story short, Otto had gotten himself involved in someone else’s love-scandal.

On the night of the powerful man's daughter's birthday party, the girl's boyfriend came storming in, roaring about her being with another man. His crosshairs immediately landed on Otto, who had been talking with her only moments earlier.

Otto protested that he was honestly just asking her for the time, but the red-faced man lashing him with "Zodda Bug Boy" would hear none of it.

And when Otto heard his long-buried past suddenly dug up, even he lost his composure.

So, in order to completely clear his name, Otto unsealed his Divine Protection, and, after listening to nearly every creature in town, he learned that the girl in question had been with seven different men that night and triumphantly told her hapless boyfriend: "Looks like you were the eighth!".

After the man gave him a thorough beating, the girl who had her romantic trysts exposed hired an assassin, and Otto was forced to flee the town of his birth. Relying on his father's connections, he wound up working for an acquaintance's merchant company.

There, once he had learned the trade—Otto Suwen set out on his own as a travelling merchant at the age of sixteen.

Otto's journey as a travelling merchant could only be described as an uninterrupted series of misfortunes.

His affinity for bad luck hadn't diminished over the years. He'd be hit with bad weather whenever he transported fragile cargo, attacked by mountain bandits whenever he took shortcuts through the hills, and, whenever he camped with other merchants, Otto would be the only one swarmed by blood-sucking insects.

The only reason Otto managed to survive these calamities was because his exceptional business ability counterbalanced his tragically poor luck.

He wasn't making big profits, but he wasn't suffering debilitating losses either. With an uncanny sense of balance known as the bane of merchants, he managed to break exactly even as four years passed in the blink of an eye, and Otto was now twenty.

The fact that he never lost heart nor turned back was thanks to Furufu, the earth dragon he'd known since he was little, whom he brought along when he was expelled from his hometown.

Honestly, Otto did have some complicated feelings about Furufu, who was the reason his brothers found out his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering in the first place. But, for the present Otto, Furufu was nothing less than his cherished and inseparable family.

For whatever reason, other merchants tended to shy away from teaming up with Otto, so he spent many sleepless nights speaking with Furufu to keep his loneliness at bay.

"Let me sleep already", Furufu would say, but Otto's imploring always got him to stay awake for a little longer.

Perhaps it was only natural that other merchants stayed well away when they saw Otto braying with his earth dragon by his fire in the dead of night.

While to a bystander, those days might seem rather uneventful, for Otto, it was a constant life and death struggle. Then one day, there came a turning point.

—He misjudged a business opportunity and utterly screwed up.

This time, Otto decided to peddle oil. It was almost winter and oil would sell for an outrageously high price up north in Gusteko, or so he heard from a red-faced man with a beard and an eyepatch. So Otto traded all his metal wares for oil and triumphantly set his sights on Gusteko—when a sudden breakdown in diplomatic relations utterly destroyed any hope of selling his goods.

And to rub salt into his wounded heart, he quickly found out that the metal wares that he had previously struggled to sell were fetching exorbitant prices in the Capital.

Realizing that he'd been duped, Otto sensed that his travelling merchant's life was in peril.

Unless he could find a way to reverse his circumstances, he'd have no choice but to sell Furufu. Not only that—he might even have to go crying back to his family.

Otto could never allow that to happen.

It had been over five years since he last saw his family, but his love for them had not faded in the least. The fact that he could live his present life, as difficult as it may be, was all owing to his family, who never abandoned him as a child.

In the first ten years of his life, Otto had already given them a lifetime's worth of trouble. So for those ten years of kindness, he was determined to spend the rest of his life to repay them.

It was only right that debts should be repaid. After all, Otto Suwen was a merchant's son.

—And so, when a trader he knew told him of an opportunity to make a quick profit, Otto took it.

This job wouldn't involve any merchandise, only his earth dragon's legwork. Someone was hiring dragon carriages to transport a large number of people from one place to another.

Without a second thought, Otto activated his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering and told Furufu to rush there at full speed before anyone else.

Zooming through shoddy roads, travelling along unmarked paths, and ignoring Furufu's protests of "Let's stop already, young master", Otto managed to be the first to arrive.

And,

???: "My my my… just where are you going in such a hurry… DESU?!"

Not good.

A bunch of guys with deranged eyes tied him up and rolled him up in a mat, and it was then that Otto realized that his misfortunes had truly, truly reached its peak.

He was separated from Furufu, stripped of his belongings, tossed into a cold cavern, and left there to wait for his joke of a life to be brought to an end.

Who could possibly understand the depth of the despair that submerged Otto's heart back then? Surely, no one.

In hopes of finding some way to escape from their evil clutches, Otto completely released the restraints on his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering as his last resort. But he was greeted by a soul-crushing silence—for despite unleashing the full power of his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering and expecting to be met with the hell of early childhood:

That nostalgic, loathsome cacophony did not come.

The insects and small creatures that were supposed to be dwelling in these forests and caves were all hiding from that same evil presence—while Otto, who had prepared for hell, had his heart shattered by a very different hell instead.

His eyes lost their vigour, and all strength drained from his body. He knew that it was all over.

There was nothing he could do, and this cold cavern would be his end.

The despair was too great for tears. And, it was when he had grown numb to the passage of those empty hours, that Otto Suwen's fate was unexpectedly saved.

????: "What the! Those Witch Cult nutjobs really don't discriminate, huh! Wouldn'a expected any less, though!"

A booming voice reverberated through the cave, bringing Otto out of his trance and jolting him back to reality.

Lifting his head, he feebly called for help. And it was a large, dog-faced beastman with a heavy Kararagi accent who heard his pleas.

Hh, huh… I, I’m crying?

Before he knew it, teardrops were rolling from his eyes.

D-Damn it… what, what is this, why… why am… I…

Without understanding why, the irrepressible tears kept flowing as a senseless scream engulfed his mind.

—Now that he was released from the despair that had dried up his tears, perhaps it was only natural that he would be crying.

I-I’m so glad… I didn’t die…

He hadn’t achieved anything yet.

He hadn’t repaid a single one of his debts.

If he had died there, his life would have ended without having had the slightest meaning.

And it was because he survived, that he now realized that fact.

—Every time Otto cried, he felt his life begin again.

His first birth-wail was when he was born into this world.

His second birth-wail was when he recognized his family’s love and found the whereabouts of his own heart.

And the third, was when he understood the meaning of his life after he had all but resolved to die—

—Otto Suwen screamed his third birth-wail that day.

3

Otto: “—It’s not like anyone asked me to buy time like this…”

Single-mindedly driving his overtaxed feet into the ground step after step, a wry smile rose on Otto’s face.

As much as he wanted to forget those memories of his unsightly bawling, every memory in which he was crying was far too important, and he couldn't forget them even if he tried.

Otto: "But I'll repay my debts, no matter what. —Because I'm a merchant, after all."

—That youth who saved his life:

Otto Suwen owed Natsuki Subaru a debt that must be repaid.

For saving his life, Otto would move heaven and earth to repay him.

It was only natural for a merchant to think this way.

And, more importantly—

Otto: "—Because he's my friend!!"

Both as a merchant and an independent human being, Otto ordered himself to stay true here and now.

It was a battle he was unlikely to win.

Nevertheless, against all odds, Otto Suwen chose to wager his very existence on Natsuki Subaru's victory.

That was the will of his merchant soul, and a testament to their friendship.

—Far off in the distance, from the direction of the abandoned carriages, Otto heard the raging roars of a beast.

Sensing that the true battle had now begun, Otto unleashed his Divine Protection—and, offering himself to that all-familiar hell, intent on giving this fight his all, he ran.

Chapter 107:
With the Final Trap,

1

Subaru: “Alright, then I’ll count on you to delay him like we planned.”

After safely finding Ryuzu and rejoining Otto, Subaru gave the signal to put the plans they’ve been preparing for over the past few days into motion.

Otto: “I’ve no problem with that, but, do you have any idea where Lady Emilia is? If you can’t find her before time runs out, everything we’ve done will be for nothing…”

Subaru: “Can’t say it’ll go without a hitch… I mean, it’s because of all the hitches that we’re in this situation. But, well, you don’t need to worry about it.”

Scratching his head, Subaru’s face stiffened into a rather miserable expression.

Whenever Subaru’s eyes sharpened into a serious expression, it gave off the impression that he was mad about something.

While Otto hadn’t known him for long, he knew him well enough not to misunderstand that expression, but that didn’t stop him from feeling some pity for the owner of those unfortunate features. And actually, Subaru felt the same about Otto. The fact that Otto didn’t realize this was just one of the subtle things they have in common.

Subaru: “I think I have an idea where Emilia might be. Honestly, I panicked pretty hard when I found out she was gone, but… now that I’ve calmed down, I’m pretty confident I can find her.”

Otto: “Is, that right. So where do y… or, maybe it’s better if I don’t know.”

Subaru: “You sure? You know I wouldn’t mind bragging some more and having you fawn over my deductive abilities?”

Otto: “No, I’m good. I don’t feel like fawning today, and if Garfiel manages to catch me, it wouldn’t be good if I start spilling everything, now would it?”

Otto pointed out with a shrug, while Subaru nodded with “Right”.

Indeed, it would be rather worrying. Otto doesn’t have a great deal of tolerance towards pain, and he hadn’t experienced a whole lot of extreme pain in his past.

If Garfiel corners him and starts hurting him, chances are, Otto will spill everything he knows. And Otto didn’t want to sabotage Subaru like that.

Subaru: “Well, if you’re sure you’re gonna spill it, I guess it can’t be helped.”

Otto: “…”

Without much ceremony, Subaru simply said “No worries, I have complete faith in you”.

Just what is a person supposed to think when they hear something like that?

Receiving this kind of blind trust, who could bring themselves to betray it?

And, saying such things without regard to how the listener might feel, Subaru truly is an outrageous friend.

Otto: “Either way… I’ll definitely do my best. I’m banking my entire future on you pulling this off, you know.”

Subaru: “Yeah. If I royally screw this up, your future’s going straight to rock bottom. …But if it gets too dangerous, just run away. That guy’s not gonna play around today.”

Otto: “…Mm, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Otto answered those considerate words with a faint grin.

Everything was ready according to plan. The Earlham refugees have been instructed to board their respective dragon carriages and to leave shortly after the bait, Otto, departs.

Otto had loaded two carriages with the villagers' spare clothing in order to convince Garfiel's nose that the villagers are with him, and he would be travelling on the most conspicuous path to draw his attention.

The refugee escape routes that he had spent those sleepless nights scouting had also been firmly drilled into the earth dragons.

Nothing should be amiss now.

All that was left was to be the bait until the refugees escape the Sanctuary.

That would put them a safe distance away from the Great Rabbit's attack two days from now. Meanwhile, Subaru and Emilia would have a chance to talk, and then Garfiel would return to the village, find Subaru, and probably turn the whole place into a battleground —

Otto: "…"

Except, Otto was determined not to let that happen.

2

Physical prowess was never Otto Suwen's strong suit.

He had learned some self-defense techniques to keep himself safe on his travels, but, compared to someone who lives and breathes combat, Otto wasn't just one or two steps behind.

He never neglected to hire bodyguards when transporting valuable cargo, and when he was attacked by mountain bandits in the shortcut through the hills, he tearfully abandoned his luggage and fled.

It was the general consensus that Otto lacked the aptitude to solve anything through brute force.

Otto: “So what on earth am I doing picking a fight with a guy like this…”

Wiping the cold sweat from his forehead, Otto wrenched his rigid cheeks into a smile. As a rule, merchants always smile in the face of adversity.

Born into a merchant family, Otto was raised on that precept, though he only had the latter half of his life to live by it.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t a custom to be broken lightly.

If he could smile and convince himself that this was no different from any of the challenges he’d faced before, then his body would come to accept this stress as something good.

His arms were moving, so were his legs. He could still run some more.

It was a mystery how he could sprint across such terrible ground without running out of breath, but, from the lightness of his uplifted heart, the hidden strength within Otto’s body bloomed.

Otto: “Still, mustn’t get complacent. Conceit is useless, and carelessness is the enemy.”

Speeding through the gaps between the trees, Otto reminded himself to stay ever vigilant.

He had left Garfiel a long way behind him. But Otto can’t keep running away like this. His job was to draw Garfiel’s attention and prevent him from returning to the Sanctuary.

Garfiel mustn’t be allowed to realize the pointlessness of chasing him.

By hiding in the forest and hitting Garfiel with one trap after another, Otto must work to keep himself at the forefront of Garfiel’s mind.

Indeed, Garfiel had no need to chase after Otto.

The real keys to achieving his objective of preventing the Sanctuary's liberation were Subaru and Emilia. Otto was only a distraction.

The fact that Garfiel hadn't paid Otto any attention thus far was precisely because he understood this better than anyone.

Swept-up leaves and a fire stone. And the swarm of winged insects bursting from the carriage.

With these flashy yet harmless traps, Otto had perfectly succeeded in enraging Garfiel.

The present Garfiel had lost his composure and was focusing his sights on Otto alone, completely forgetting he had no need to do so.

Otto: "That said, it won't take him long to notice it if given the chance."

And so, without risking getting too close to Garfiel, Otto must keep provoking him from a distance.

With Garfiel's nose disabled, Otto should be able to avoid any life-threatening situations as long as he keeps out of sight. But, if he's spotted, Garfiel would be able to close the distance in an instant with the overwhelming skill-gap between them.

Indeed, it would require the caution of walking a tightrope.

Otto: "…"

Hidden in the foliage, Otto peered out at the scene before him.

Some twenty meters away was Garfiel, leering over his surroundings. It seems his sense of smell was completely gone thanks to the pungent Kisnis oil spilled near the carriage wheels. He was searching for Otto relying on vision alone, frustrated, and carrying the air of a wounded beast.

It'd be playing with fire to draw his attention now, just asking to be burned.

Otto: “Now, I’m counting on you!”

???: “rightright~~.”

Otto lightly whispered, and heard the reply upon his eardrums instantly transformed into meaning.

Heeding Otto’s signal, the trees began to stir.

Garfiel: “Hha…?”

Hearing the rustling of leaves and sensing that something was afoot, Garfiel looked up—

—And saw a massive barrage of globs of mud and poop flying straight at his face from the surrounding trees.

It was a show of force by the little critters living high in those trees—the wood mice.

Of course, the projectiles themselves dealt no damage whatsoever, but, seeing poop flying at him from all directions, even Garfiel panickedly tried to leap out of the way. He couldn’t avoid them all, however, with several splashing on his legs prompting clicks of his tongue.

Garfiel: “Th’fuck is this! Shit! Why’re th… that lil’fucker’s behind this, isn’t he…”

Scraping off the filth on his feet on a nearby tree, Garfiel immediately wondered if this was Otto’s doing. But then, Garfiel scrunched his nose mid-sentence as if having noticed something.

—The wood mice’s poop balls were pretty much harmless. They were just staining his clothes and making them stink.

But the scent of their droppings has a tendency to attract the insects of this forest.

Garfiel: “—Gh!”

Something wriggled up to Garfiel from beneath the ground before leaping out of the earth and tangling itself around his foot. His breathing stopped—when he saw that it was a long, black, centipede-like insect crawling up his leg.

The length of a person's arm, the centipede wound its way up Garfiel's left knee as its grotesque mandibles slurped greedily over the traces of wood mice droppings.

Garfiel: "Ggha! Gross!"

Brandishing his claws, Garfiel swiped the centipede off him. But more and more crawled out of the ground, not only leaping onto Garfiel's legs, but fighting over the puddle of droppings that had missed him, covering the entire area in a hellish brawl.

Centipedes love the fruit seeds inside wood mice droppings.

That was one of the "useful facts" Otto had learned over his conversations with the woodland creatures during his treks through the forest.

Contrary to their repulsive appearance, the centipedes aren't carnivores and aren't venomous in the least, but being swarmed by them was still more than enough to constitute a threat.

And, by now—

Garfiel: "—Kh! Agh! Get th'fuck off!!"

—Garfiel was screaming hysterically at the horde of centipedes, sending spit flying.

Then, he raised his right leg and drove it into the ground with all his strength.

The next instant, a square plot of earth with Garfiel at its center sprang into the air.

Otto: "…"

Witnessing this preposterous sight, Otto unwittingly gulped.

Furiously swiping his claws and legs upon the airborne soil, Garfiel made short work of the stunned centipedes left and right. And, when the floating platform crashed back to the ground, all the centipedes around him had been neutralized while the rest scurried into the earth in fear.

The trees that were the wood mice's homes toppled towards the uprooted earth as the inhabitants who had aided Otto scrambled to flee.

It seems they wound up paying quite a high price for the sugar water they got.

Otto: "Well that's how business is sometimes… it's not always easy to judge whether a deal will be profitable or not, so please don't hate me for it."

Bearing witness to this glimpse of Garfiel's strength, Otto quietly apologized in an effort to calm himself. Then, silencing himself once more, Otto retreated to keep his distance from the approaching Garfiel and prepared to lure him to the next trap.

He hadn't gone two and a half days without sleeping scouting around this forest for nothing.

—And once all this is over, he plans to sleep so furiously that not a dream could disturb him.

3

???: "A big one's coming."

—I know, yes, I know already.

???: "Behind you, big one, coming, coming now."

—I said I know already, I assure you I'm keeping that in mind.

???: "You'll die. You're so dead. Poor thing."

—You mind not being so pessimistic?!

With his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering unleashed, a din of discordant noises flooded Otto's ears as he ran.

These were the voices of the bugs, the critters, and indeed all sentient creatures living within the forest, while, with extreme difficulty, Otto sifted for the ones most relevant to himself.

It's been twenty years since he first discovered his Divine Protection, and ten years since he learned to harness it. And, in all that time, he had never used it so recklessly.

The time he unleashed it in order to clear his name, he was inside a city where the number of creatures was limited.

But here, inside the expansive forest, the volume far exceeded Otto's capacity to endure.

In the air, in the trees, in the leaves, in the soil and in the rocks, there were countless dwelling places for the critters and bugs. Listening to the noises of all these hidden creatures was like having over a hundred human voices simultaneously assailing his mind.

He wasn't just hearing with his ears.

The Divine Protection of Anima Whispering demanded comprehension from Otto. Which meant that Otto's brain had to expend itself to process everything his Divine Protection was picking up.

Otto: "Bh…g."

A sharp pain raced through his head causing his body to sway. He leaned against a tree, wiping the sweat from his face, and saw drops of blood soaking into his sleeve.

Nosebleed. The blood leaking from his face was proof that his brain was working beyond its limit. The intermittent migraines and the ringing in his ears were showing no signs of abating.

Otto: "Ah… I didn't know. So this is what happens if I keep using it, this Divine Protection of mine. Gets pretty unwieldy, doesn't it… it isn't all nice and convenient, that's for sure. What a pain…"

Roughly wiping away his nosebleed and rubbing his brow, Otto resumed his faltering run.

His ears continued to ring, but he had no intention of shutting off his Divine Protection. Otto cannot keep up this chase scene by himself.

As mentioned before, the voices keep him informed of Garfiel's movements. They serve as Otto's eyes since he couldn't constantly look behind him.

He wasn't sure what other people thought about enlisting the help of bugs and animals whose wills differ from humans, but it was no easy task.

Their thought patterns are different from that of humans.

Different things delight and upset them. What one finds normal another might find outrageous. And there is no way to know which weapons to use when negotiating with them.

Even with insects and animals, the greater their intelligence, the greater were the individual differences between them. Just depending on the region they live in, bugs of the same species could have completely different preferences.

It was thanks to all the effort he'd put into his short but vital preparation beforehand that Otto was able keep up his imperfect but successful evasion of Garfiel.

—"Has Subaru found Emilia, and have they properly talked yet?" he wondered.

It was to give them the time to talk—and to prolong it for just a little longer, that Otto was putting himself through this hardship.

If Subaru's guess was wrong, and he hadn't gotten any closer to finding Emilia, then all of this would have been for nothing.

Just why was he doing all this for Subaru?

As his mind wandered to distract itself from the pain, Otto landed on this thought.

Subaru saved his life, and Otto was helping him in order to repay that debt. That was the truth.

Subaru accepted him as a friend and requested his aid, so it was only natural that Otto chose to help him. That was also the truth.

But was Otto truly such a hardcore human being that he would go beyond what was asked of him for those reasons alone?

Otto: "…Ahh, I see."

Something flashed across his mind in that instant, then suddenly everything made sense.

Otto couldn't keep himself from smiling.

Once you realize it, it's really quite simple.

Otto's reason for placing his faith in Subaru, and for helping him, was surprisingly unprofound.

Otto: "Clutching your head, giving up, thinking that no one could understand you… I was supposed to know that feeling better than anyone."

The Divine Protection of Anima Whispering was the power to hear what others could not.

Because he could hear the voices of other creatures and know things he normally shouldn't, Otto was seen as a nuisance by many people. He lost the people who were once his friends, and he could no longer see his family. To Otto, his Divine Protection was nothing more than a superfluous tool that was useless outside of emergencies.

But, because he had this Divine Protection, his experiences changed.

The experiences of being excluded due to his Divine Protection taught Otto the pain of being misunderstood by others. He knew the frustration of knowing something but being unable to communicate it to anyone. And it had conferred him the resigned outlook that "No one would understand anyway".

All of this was the same for Subaru before he revealed everything to Otto.

That was why Otto trusted him. And, reflecting on just how much that youth and his past self overlapped, Otto started running once more.

That's all there is to it.

Otto didn't just want to save Natsuki Subaru. Through him, Otto wanted to save his own past self, to save Otto Suwen.

????: "Fin'lly, fuckin'… found ya!!"

Otto: "—Gh?!"

The moment he recognized yet another one of his truest thoughts, Otto heard a voice outside his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering as an impact struck his shoulder, sending him tumbling across the ground.

Rolling sideways, he eventually came to a stop on the soft earth.

Otto: "Bhh, pf! Wh, what… ghu!"

Garfiel: "Too fuckin' bad, ain't it!"

Spitting out the leaves in his mouth, Otto tried to push himself up when a foot drove into his torso. Another kick, wrenching all the air from his lungs, sent him violently skidding over the earth.

Up and down jumbled into one as his head spun so fast that his thoughts grew vague. No oxygen cycled through his brain, the blood in his body congealed, while his veins dispensed only pain throughout his being.

Garfiel: "My nose may be broke, but I still got ears. Whatever trick yer pullin', th'goddamn bugs 're chirpin' wherever y'go… but this ends here, yeah?”

Otto: “I… I wonder… just because you caught up, doesn’t mean you’ve won…”

Garfiel: “Don’t be a smartass. Y’put up a good fight… but I ain’t gonna waste my time no more.”

Garfiel set his foot on Otto’s stomach and leaned in.

Ribs creaked as the foot pressed down with a force greater than the weight of Garfiel’s scrawny figure, prompting wails of pain as Otto’s limbs convulsed helplessly.

Garfiel: “If I step on ya with all I’ve got, you’ll be squashed t’smithereens. Y’saw me launch th’ground into th’air back there, yeah? Same shit’s gonna happen to yer body. Wanna try?”

Otto: “—Sorry, but I’d rather not.”

Seeing Otto answer his threat with a defiant smile, Garfiel was slightly taken aback, but,

Garfiel: “Hell, y’got some guts, don’t ya. If I knew that before y’pulled this shit, we wouldn’t’ve needed this goddamn runaround.”

Otto: “…”

Garfiel’s words could almost be called a compliment.

Hearing this, Otto rolled his head and spilled a small sigh. Watching Otto faintly breathing, Garfiel narrowed his eyes.

Garfiel: “If there weren’t so goddamn many of’em, I probably wouldn’t’ve thought anything of it…”

Otto: “…”

Garfiel: “But soon as I was chasin’ ya, it’s like th’whole forest’s turned’ against me. Even at the start when y’threw those leaves, the bugs under’em all flew at me. Th’bugs in th’dragon carriage, those squirrels throwin’ shit at me, th’centipedes, th’snakes swarmin’ outta dead trees, th'birds lurin' me to a field of poison flowers, there's gotta be some way t'explain it."

One by one, Garfiel recounted the traps he had encountered in the forest.

While, listening, Otto only continued faintly breathing.

Those were all traps Otto had set during his treks through the forest, designed to hinder Garfiel and to stall for time.

None of them missed their mark, and they all succeeded in drawing Garfiel here.

If it weren't for the fact that there were too many of those natural anomalies for it to be mere coincidence, Garfiel would never have believed that Otto was behind it.

Garfiel: "Thinkin' ain't my strong suit, but t'survive, I gotta think anyway. So I thought. And thought, and thought, and here's what I got. When inexplicable things happen in this world, it's usually 'cause some Divine Protection's involved. —Y'got one of those Divine Protections, don't ya."

Otto: "…uf."

Garfiel: "D'vine Protection of th'Forest, Divine Protection of Dirt or whatever th'fuck y'call it, if y'got one then this all makes sense. N' y'really weren't holdin' back, were ya. …So."

Striking the silent Otto with these words, Garfiel gave his trembling body a kick, then glanced behind him. His sharp eyes narrowed in pity,

Garfiel: "Don't think I haven't noticed what yer plannin' behind those stubborn eyes of yer's."

Otto: "…"

Garfiel's eyes landed on an open clearing where a mass of white light had gathered.

It wasn't sunlight that had filtered through the trees—but a radiant mass of mana so dense that it was visible to the naked eye.

Gazing at the swelling mass that could drive a person mad should they wander too close, Garfiel scowled and looked back down at Otto.

Garfiel: "That's yer trump card, ain't it. It ain't like th'empty threats you've been throwin' around so far. That's somethin' that can do me in. …If yer th'one who's got me on th'ground, y'might even be able to shove me into it."

Otto: "…a, ugh."

Squatting down, Garfiel picked up the groaning Otto by the collar.

Blood from Otto's overworked brain poured from his nostrils, staining the bottom half of his face grisly red. Seeing this, Garfiel shook his head.

Garfiel: "Y'tried, but yer way outta yer league. Shoulda known yer place like a good boy."

Otto: "My… place, you say…"

Garfiel: "Yeah. Y'ain't got no chance against me. —Whatever that trap's supposed t'be, yer th'one who's gonna be eatin' it."

With that, Garfiel gave Otto's body a gentle toss.

Following a brief weightless sensation of falling through the air, Otto's body crashed to the ground and rolled into the pool of dense, white mana.

Inside the thick, drifting cloud, the mana began to infect Otto's already vague consciousness.

His eyes rolled, his tongue numbed, and his nosebleed streamed without end.

The trap. The final trap. Now that he was tossed inside—

Garfiel: “I’ll watch till it’s over.”

Crossing his arms, Garfiel waited to see Otto’s end.

Where am I? What am I doing here? Lying on his stomach, catching Garfiel in the corner of his vision, Otto gathered his scattered thoughts. And then, he understood.

—The final trap was ready.

Otto: “…Mind if I ask you something?”

Garfiel: “Hah?”

Pressing his hands to the ground, Otto desperately pushed himself up.

Not expecting him to still be able to move, Garfiel’s eyes widened in shock. It gave Otto some small satisfaction to see this, and indeed, Subaru was right.

Doing something no one believed you could do really is fun. That is a fact. It may be a little mean, but it still felt amazing.

Otto: “On your way here, Mr. Garfiel… how many trees have you felled, and how much earth have you gouged open?”

Garfiel: “Th’fuck’re y’talkin’ about?”

Otto: “All this mana floating around me… is just how much you’ve angered the forest.”

The sense of accomplishment made him forget all about his fatigue and pain.

Sitting himself up on the ground, Otto’s faltering voice grew firm as he looked up at Garfiel.

Garfiel uncrossed his arms, his face twitching as realized he had done exactly what Otto wanted him to, and immediately tried to move—

But, it was too late.

Otto: “—Al, Dona.”

Abounding mana coursed through Otto’s entire body, taking shape in the world at the sound of his chant.

—With overwhelming speed and momentum, a torrent of earth poured forth, slamming into Garfiel’s body as he belatedly tried to dodge, sending him flying to the other edge of the forest.

4

Otto: “Haa… haa… haa…a.”

His outstretched arms still trembling, Otto’s labored breaths were thick with exhaustion and blood.

All the mana drifting around him had been siphoned into his spell.

The sensation of mana-intoxication had faded, replaced by fatigue and all-encompassing agony.

—Otto’s final trap was the essence of all the traps that came before it.

To enlist the help of the bugs and animals of the forest, Otto proposed that they punish the evil presence tyrannizing these woods.

It seems the wanton devastation left by Garfiel’s daily strolls had raised the ire of the forest’s inhabitants.

Cutting down trees to sharpen his claws and train his body, or even just going around collecting firewood for the village, were probably seen as sabotage from the perspective of the animals living there.

Little by little, these heinous deeds piled up until Garfiel was eventually considered the arch-enemy by the majority of the creatures in this forest.

So Otto negotiated with those creatures, offering to punish Garfiel with their help. As trap after trap was sprung and Garfiel inflicted more and more damage upon the forest—the forest's residents pooled their mana into one location, lending Otto their utmost support as promised.

The giant mass of mana was so conspicuous that "It could only be a trap".

After triggering so many traps on his way there, Garfiel instinctively avoided this one and tossed Otto into it instead.

With the aid of the forest's creatures, Otto was able to cast magic he'd otherwise have no way of casting.

The resulting torrent of earth and debris slammed into Garfiel, dealing decisive damage to his thus-far unscathed body.

Garfiel believed that Otto had no strength to oppose him, got careless, and facilitated his own downfall.

Everything had gone as Otto planned.

Which means,

Otto: "This time…"

???: "—Yer outta moves."

Otto spilled a despondent sigh as Garfiel's figure emerged from the treeline, glaring back at him.

His clothes were torn, and his exposed skin was marked by cuts made by jagged rocks. But his head and other vital places were unharmed, and there was no obvious impact on his gait.

The sheer disparity in strength far transcended Otto's imaginings.

Garfiel: "Honesty, I'm damn surprised."

Otto: "…Are you, now."

Garfiel: "I really didn't think you had it in ya. Hell, I looked down on ya, thinkin' you've given up. —Forgive me. I pulled' some stupid shit when I'm actually dealin' with a man."

Garfiel said with a meek expression. But Otto shook his head, indicating that there was no need to apologize.

All he wanted to hear was "I concede". But, despite giving it his all and fulfilling his role perfectly, he still failed to defeat Garfiel.

And so, this is where Otto's resistance ends.

Garfiel felt his hands, then flashed his razor claws. He would not show Otto mercy this time.

Their sharp edges shall reflect his sincerity. They would strike true, carve into Otto's flesh, and extinguish his life.

—I did everything I could, right?

Otto was sure he had played every card he had.

His Divine Protection, his debts of friendship, he had used all of it.

If he still fell short in the end, there was nothing he could do.

Otto's capabilities ended here.

And so—

Garfiel: "See ya. —When y'wake up, you'll start all over."

Otto: "This is where my individual-round ends, I guess…"

Garfiel: "…"

Muttering under his breath, Otto closed his eyes, exhausted.

Yet his attitude was nothing like resignation towards death—

Garfiel: "No way…"

Is there more? Garfiel shuddered with all the hair on his body standing on end as he warily scanned his surroundings.

There was no sign of anything in any direction. If there was something, it'd have to be—

Garfiel: "—Hic!"

Baring his fangs, Garfiel swiped his claws upwards.

Drawing in a breath, he expanded his lung so he may howl. But there, he hesitated. His eyes widened, yet no roar escaped his open lips.

What escaped was not bloodlust, not hostility, but a name.

???: "Garf—!!"

A shadow leapt from the treetop overhead, falling towards him.

Its short skirt fluttering in the air, the point of its wand aimed straight for Garfiel's head.

Watching the shining mana gathering at the tip of the wand, Garfiel expelled his shriek:

Garfiel: "Why th'fuck're y… RaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAMMMMMM!!"

The next instant, blades of wind burst forth, scattering the Sanctuary's forest to the gales.

Chapter 108:
A Man of Only Good Timing

Through the mana congregating at the tip of the wand, the chant rewrote the world—

Whistling wind became blades, cycling towards the eye of the storm, dispensing destruction in its wake.

Garfiel: "—!!"

At the center of the maelstrom—the target of the whirling blades, Garfiel roared into the sky.

The razors struck at Garfiel's torso, shearing at his adamant flesh. Blood spilled from the gashes, but his timely leap saved him from being cut in two.

Presented with a choice between counter-attacking and evading, Garfiel immediately chose to flee. Even as hesitation flickered in his eyes, he shielded his head with his arms and slid out of the wind blades' path.

But these ambushing blades had been launched with the intent to decide the fight.

The wind did not allow Garfiel an easy escape as it vigorously hounded his retreat. Kicking off the ground, he clicked his tongue at the invisible slashes,

Garfiel: "Fuckin', damn it—!"

The moment he landed, Garfiel screamed as he met the incoming wind blades head on.

Driving his heels into the ground, with his foot as the axel, a rectangular section of the earth tilted upwards and sprung into the air. The wind blades crashed into the uprooted soil and took a layer off of its surface before dispersing.

Obeying gravity, the floating platform collapsed to the ground, sending up billows of dust.

Witnessing such a ludicrous scene, any average person would have fallen speechless and dumb.

But the attacker was no average person, and this wasn't the first time she'd seen Garfiel do this.

???: “Sshi!”

Garfiel: “Tch!”

Bursting out of the plumes of dust was a girl with her short skirt fluttering.

Beneath her neat, peach colored hair, her light-red irises were gleaming with indomitable resolve. Mana exuded from the tip of her wand, warping the atmosphere and sending out blades of wind.

Effective for a far greater range than a first glance might suggest, this flawless control was only befitting an expert of Wind Magic.

Contrary to their fragile appearance, the wind blades' slashes are more powerful than that of an average sword blade. Garfiel readied his claws at his hips, preparing to intercept, but even his claws would be at a disadvantage against those blades.

Keeping this pose, Garfiel lowered his stance in preparation for another backward leap. But his movement was interrupted by Ram's off-hand strike.

Ram: “Fula!”

Garfiel: “Ghk?!”

A short chant. A strike from the lowest class of Wind Magic. The attack struck Garfiel from behind, staggering him before he could take a single step backwards. It dealt no damage. But it had stopped him.

Garfiel looked up just in time to see Ram swinging down her blade,

Garfiel: “…”

What’s the best course of action here? Before he could consider this question, Garfiel’s body moved.

His claws and fangs, his innate weapons, would not be enough to counter the wind blades. And, being caught off guard, it was too late to dodge now. Which left him only one option.

Garfiel: “Rrrrrrraaaaaaaaghhhh!!”

Roaring, Garfiel lunged forward, clamping his hands together to catch the invisible sword between his palms. The barehanded-swordcatch works against normal swords, but when facing an invisible and incorporeal blade, it’s not so clear whether it’ll do any good.

Nevertheless, although the blade was made of wind, it certainly physically “Existed”. Clamping the blade’s edge between his palms, Garfiel disrupted its course, and, instead of being sliced clean in half, he got away with only a few lacerations on his skin.

The attack has been foiled, Ram judged belatedly.

Garfiel: “Too… fuckin’ close!”

Garfiel shot out a front kick aimed straight for Ram’s torso as she landed.

His leg pierced through the air with force enough to shatter a mountainside, but it would not reach Ram, who bent back her body to dodge. Reclining so far that she might as well be lying on the ground, Ram whipped out another wind blade aimed at Garfiel’s foot.

Garfiel: “—Hhk!”

On one foot, Garfiel leapt up, avoiding the strike that would’ve severed his limb from the ankle down. He successfully dodged Ram’s blade, but,

Ram: “Your feet are off the ground.”

The instant her whisper grazed his ears, a heel struck Garfiel's body from above, knocking him back to the ground.

This unexpected attack came from Ram, who rebounded from her stance after launching her wind blade and cartwheeled back with a kick.

Unable to avoid the strike mid-air, all Garfiel could do was hold up his arms to shield himself. The bones in his arm creaked as he was sent shooting back, bouncing off the earth and crashing to a stop against a tree trunk.

With the air knocked out of his lungs, Garfiel glared at Ram, his golden pupils burning with rage.

But,

Ram: "Ul-Fula."

An overwhelming windstorm capable of crushing a whole region of the forest swept up—with Garfiel at its center, lashing him and the woodlands alike with its invisible fury.

Garfiel: "Gh, gha—Hic!"

The raging wind stuck at Garfiel's body, cutting him, tossing him, smashing him against the ravaged trees.

Tossed to the point that he could no longer tell up from down and left from right, being separated from the ground left Garfiel no means to defend himself, and no option but to be helplessly trounced by Ram's magic.

When the wind had stopped and the violence of the storm had passed, Garfiel was left barely able to stand.

Covered in blood, his head tilted back as he fell to his knees, his consciousness halfway gone.

Caught by perfect traps, he had taken two hits of ultimate-tier magic.

The very fact that he was still alive was a testament to his surprising vitality. His opponent must have expected this and so neglected to show any mercy.

Confirming the damage on Garfiel, Ram relinquished a small sigh. Then, she turned her gaze to Otto behind her, who had watched the entire surprise attack unfold.

Ram: “I already knew this, but you look so pathetic it’s painful to watch.”

Otto: “Surely that’s not something you say to someone who had just fought with his whole heart and soul…”

Ram: “The result is the only thing that matters. Did your efforts succeed or fail? The process you took to get here is secondary… so I’ll say it again: You look so pathetic it’s painful to watch.”

Otto: “Oof, she really is merciless. …It’s just as Mr. Natsuki said.”

Without showing the slightest appreciation for Otto’s efforts, Ram gave him a wry smile and a little snort instead.

As the result of his fierce battle, Otto did manage to do some damage to Garfiel. Aside from the string of minor traps that only served to aggravate him, that final strike did carry enough force to conceivably defeat Garfiel.

But, if there was one thing Otto miscalculated,

Ram: “It seems you forgot about Garf’s Divine Protection of Earth-Soul.”

Otto: “Earth-Soul… what’s that?”

Hearing that question, Ram let out a small sigh. She shook her head as if appalled, looked down on Otto with a gaze of heartfelt contempt, and then sighed again.

Otto: “How much disappointment are you going to show?! I’m feeling seriously wounded here!”

Ram: “Garf’s Divine Protection of Earth-Soul is just as its name suggests, it is a Divine Protection that bestows him the earth’s blessing. As long as his feet are touching the ground, his body is protected by a shield of resilient soil. —And even if not for that, Earth Magic has terrible affinity against him. You used an Al-class spell, and it just had to be Dona…”

Pressing her hand to her forehead, Ram closed her eyes and dropped her head.

Ram: “Your luck is so poor that I don’t even feel pity anymore.”

Otto: “So my lifelong misfortune finally detonated at this point?! That’s super terrifying! Or actually, Miss Ram, if you knew about this beforehand, wouldn’t it have helped a lot more if you told me this beforehand?!”

Ram: “Shouldn’t it be Lady Ram?”

Otto: “Why is everyone trying to kick me to the lowest possible stratum?!”

Ignoring the raving Otto, Ram swished the tip of her wand as she turned back to deal with Garfiel.

He should be unconscious, but his limitless stamina was truly worthy of admiration. Without a doubt, he was the greatest obstacle to the Sanctuary’s liberation. He must be restrained immediately and kept under strict supervision until matters can be—

Ram: “…”

Ram stopped in her approach, her brows slightly furrowed.

Her pursed lips felt the dry air, her red tongue peeked out for just a glimpse. And,

Ram: “Garf.”

Garfiel: “…I’ll be damned. Y’really, truly are a merciless woman, you.”

Garfiel lifted his slumped head in response to Ram’s call.

His sharp, opening eyes blazed with fury and hate, and his bared canine fangs were quietly rattling, indicating that his will to fight hadn’t waned.

The surprise attack should have been a perfect success. It couldn’t have possibly gone any better.

And yet, it nevertheless failed to defeat this monster known as Garfiel.

Profuse blood was pouring from his body, yet he hopped to his feet without the faintest suggestion of injury or fatigue. Everything the wind blades had done to him was entirely superficial.

Shallow gashes riddled his skin, and his non-vital areas had taken countless blows, but none of the damage was enough to decisively incapacitate him.

Garfiel: “When y’had me pressed against a tree and sang that chant, I thought I was absolutely done for. My mind was turnin’ with all its might that moment. But I couldn’t come up with a single goddamn answer… n’ so, I stopped thinkin’.”

No longer fussing over his trifling thoughts, he trusted his body to evade for him.

His instincts greedily elected to survive and magnificently operated his body to take minimal damage in that inescapable storm.

This was the fruition of the racial instincts of a war-like lifeform.

Even Ram gave an imperceptible gulp at his remarkable battle-sense behind her deadpan expression.

For Ram, who took pride in always being able to prevail with better judgement even when at a disadvantage in terms of pure ability, it was a rare experience to face an opponent who was her equal.

And the fact that it was Garfiel only contributed to the indescribable emotion rising inside her.

Garfiel: “Say, Ram. Why’re y’takin their side? What’s gone ‘n made y’do that?”

Ram: “…”

Garfiel: “Y’realize, right? Yer takin’ th’side of the ones plottin’ t’liberate th’Sanctuary. Ain’t that goin’ against that bastard Roswaal’s will? That asshole… at least, right now, he shouldn’t be wantin’ the Sanctuary t’be liberated.”

Ram: “Do you mean to suggest you’ve a better understanding of Master Roswaal’s will in my presence, Garf? We’ve known each other for a long time, so surely you know this? I will not stand and listen to such insolent drivel.”

Garfiel: “I know how stubborn y’are. It’s why I fell in love with ya. And that’s why I just can’t accept this. If y’ain’t givin’ up on idolizin’ Roswaal, why’re y’takin their side? How’d they talk y’into it?”

Listening to Garfiel’s words, Ram closed her eyes.

It was rare to see Ram’s lips tremble like this as if she was suppressing some inexplicable emotion. Garfiel’s eyes widened at this sight, but the expression vanished in only an instant.

Ram: “Ram… Ram is merely acting in the most meaningful manner for her wish. That is all.”

Garfiel: “And yer wish… is?”

Ram: “To fulfill Master Roswaal’s most earnest desire, of course. — And nothing else.”

Hearing this answer, Garfiel expelled a deep sigh.

Ram had no interest in discussing this apparent contradiction any further. No one could possibly understand what was going through Ram’s mind. Except perhaps the one man who had read the deepest core of her heart, and convinced her to do this—

Ram: “He truly is an aggravating man, that Barusu. …Though not even I understand why that is.”

Ram harbored an indescribable aggravation towards Subaru.

Perhaps it was a physiological revulsion, or perhaps a disdain fostered over the time they’d spent together, or perhaps a little of both, but Ram had to think that it was ingrained in something deeper.

Almost as if he were a hated enemy who stole from her something precious—that was the inexplicable emotion Ram felt towards Subaru.

Nevertheless, Ram accepted Subaru’s invitation, for that was just how deeply his proposal shook the core of her heart.

Ram: “Surely you’ve recovered enough to stand?”

Otto: “Th-That’s a pretty harsh thing to ask… I mean, I wouldn’t mind if you could hit me with some healing magic…”

Ram: “Don’t worry. Ram doesn’t know any healing magic. Since there never was a need to remember them.”

Otto: “You’re the first maid I’ve met who’s so unconcerned about healing!”

Wailing, Otto strained his trembling legs to stand.

His body was swaying, though his nosebleed had finally stopped. Being able to stand obviously didn’t make him a reliable fighting force in any sense of the word.

But, seeing that his will to fight hadn’t diminished, Garfiel let out an irritated snort.

Garfiel: “Y’… I thought our last bout would’a taught ya pretty good that y’got no chance against me. Y’used up yer trump card, and don’t y’see me still pr’tty lively? Y’should know when t’give up. It ain’t manly bein’ a sore loser, oy.”

Otto: “Too bad, I don’t recall ever abandoning my grimy nature to become some clean-faced kid who'd surrender without a fight. Even if I lose my last cent, as long as I still have my body, I'll keep going. Or at least, that's what I imagine a friend of mine would say, right before he starts charging."

Garfiel: "…Again with that bastard?"

Garfiel clicked his tongue as Otto uttered the word "Friend".

Garfiel: "How can y'put so much trust in that tall-talkin' asshole? He's powerless. He's weak. He knows how t'work his tongue, and that's it. How's a man like that worth helpin', hah?!"

Otto: "Worth it? You'd have to wonder. I wouldn't really say that the present Mr. Natsuki is worth it."

Garfiel: "…Huh?"

Otto: "But the future, that's a different story."

Garfiel tilted his head at the unexpected answer, while Otto's grin deepened.

He had exhausted his stamina and spent all of his tricks, but even now, without the faintest hope remaining, there was not a speck of unease in Otto's eyes,

Otto: "It's because I'm a merchant. I don't think it's such a bad deal to invest in someone who could greatly benefit me in the future. You see, Mr. Natsuki is… someone who, just maybe, might end up doing something huge."

Garfiel: "…"

Otto: "But that's assuming he doesn't get snuffed out here. So, just what would this sprouting Mr. Natsuki eventually bloom into, and what kind of a price would it fetch? …I'll have to keep picking off the bugs and pruning the leaves to find out."

Such a pain in the ass, Otto thought, as he scratched his head with a wry smile. Listening on the side, Ram expelled a bored sigh, Ram: “Honestly, I don’t know if anything about Barusu merits that impression. Barusu is weak, useless, and can’t even brew a proper cup of tea or do a single thing right. I agree with Garf there.”

Otto: “That’s… actually that’s a pretty balanced assessment.”

Ram: “But, Barusu is a man with strangely good timing when it matters.”

Ram asserted, paying no mind to Otto’s timid attempt to support Subaru.

Seeing the two men tilt their heads at the word “Timing”, Ram nodded.

Ram: “Timing. A man with only good timing, that’s what Barusu is.”

He’s a man who’s usually useless, who makes you wonder what role he could possibly serve, but this man named Natsuki Subaru has the mysterious tendency to always be there just when you need him.

When Emilia got away from Ram in the Capital, Subaru protected her in Ram’s place.

When he was brought to the Mansion wounded, within days, the witchbeasts’ upheaval followed. And again, it ended with Subaru saving the village’s children after playing his part in eradicating the witchbeasts. He was never the greatest contributor, but his presence certainly helped.

When Emilia returned from the Capital and ominous forces began closing in on the lands around the village, Subaru came with reinforcements and beautifully saved them from danger.

This man named Natsuki Subaru is a man with absurdly good timing.

There is not a single attractive thing about him, nor does he exude the slightest masculine charm. Ram had nothing positive to say about him, and at times she even felt sorry for him, though she couldn’t remember why she felt this way, or what it was that was tugging at her.

Regardless, Natsuki Subaru was just that kind of man.

And that was why this time, Ram—

Ram: “It’s safe to trust in Barusu’s timing. —Once Barusu thinks he sees a chance and acts on that belief, then that must be the only way to seize victory.”

Otto: “Sounds like you put a lot of faith in Mr. Natsuki, Miss Ram.”

Ram: “It’s Lady Ram.”

Otto: “Is this really the time to be bringing that up?!”

Displeased by the scoffing man beside her, Ram shot him a silencing glare.

They both placed their faith in Subaru’s intentions. And they both agreed to fight at each other’s side, and to say nothing about this to Subaru.

They were aware that they had already bought more than enough time, but—

Otto: “It’s strange, but somehow I still wanna keep going.”

Ram: “That’s because the fact that he hasn’t gone down after those traps and that beautiful surprise attack is just insulting. Such impudence is unseemly, Garf. —We ought to make you remember that.”

Otto: “Woa, that was scary. This big sis is super scary. I’m actually starting to wonder if Mr. Natsuki lied about that sleeping girl being a gentle person…”

Otto muttered his irrelevant observation.

Ram confirmed the grip of the wand in her hand, and concentrated mana at its tip once more.

Facing the two readying for battle, Garfiel kept his silence. He listened to their voices with his head downcast before finally, he took a sluggish step forward.

Garfiel: “…”

Sensing that battle would begin again, Otto and Ram’s bodies tensed.

But, in the face of their resolve,

Garfiel: “—Enough, already.”

Came a scraping whisper.

Causing Otto and Ram to simultaneously furrow their brows.

Garfiel: “Thinkin’, is too much of a fuckin’ pain—”

Muttered Garfiel in an exhausted voice.

And,

???: “—WWRRR!!”

A bestial roar echoed out, shaking the forests of the Sanctuary.

Every creature in the forests trembled and bowed their heads before its dominance.

—For the Ur-Beast had arrived.

Chapter 109:
Misstep

1

Otto: “Just like we discussed, the villagers will evacuate while I distract Garfiel. Mr. Natsuki said not to worry too much about buying time, but I’m feeling a little more greedy than that… so, can I count on your help?”

After parting with Subaru, and before setting out with the two bait carriages, Otto spoke with Ram in a corner of the village.

Ram crossed her arms at Otto’s rather unconfident query, then leaned into a wall and closed her eyes. Met with her silence, Otto tried to suppress his impatient agitation at the urgency of the imminent battle,

Otto: “Uhm, sorry, but… we really don’t have much time…”

Ram: “Impatient men are repulsive. As I said before, it would depend on the conditions.”

Opening a single eye, Ram promptly rebuffed Otto’s imploring gaze.

This “before” she mentioned was referring to three days ago: the night Subaru challenged Roswaal to a bet, and Otto asked Ram to fight alongside him.

Roswaal had asked Ram to leave the room so he and Subaru could be alone.

And as Ram came out of the building, Otto was waiting for her outside. He had accurately predicted that Roswaal would ask her to leave before discussing the crucial matters of the Gospel, and so he managed to catch her in a moment when she was free.

Simply put, three days ago, Ram and Otto had been no more than shallow acquaintances.

They could count their interactions on a single hand, and Ram hadn't a shred of interest in any man except for Roswaal. Other than the familiar faces from Roswaal's Mansion, Ryuzu and Garfiel were probably the only people she talked to in the Sanctuary.

And so, when Otto called out to Ram, and she looked at him as if she was looking at a pebble on the side of the road, he had to start by building their cordial relations from scratch.

Otto: "Greetings, uhm… Miss Ram. It sure is a nice night out."

Ram: "…"

Otto: "Hello?"

Ram: "—Ah, I was wondering who you were. So you're that lackey who follows Barusu around everywhere. I wasn't used to seeing you without him, so I had some trouble identifying what creature you were."

Otto: "I'm not even human anymore?! The fact that you have that impression seriously hurts! Although, well, I can kind of understand why I'd be treated like Mr. Natsuki's accessory…"

Ram: "A man who accepts being anyone's accessory is worthless. Begone."

Otto: "So harsh?!"

Ram's unapproachable attitude swiftly tore Otto's friendly overture to pieces.

Without showing the slightest interest in Otto, Ram leaned against the side of the door and crossed her arms.

Otto: "So uh… do you have a minute to talk?"

Ram: "Regardless of whether I'll remember it, but haven't you even considered starting a conversation by presenting your name? Regardless of whether I'll remember it."

Otto: "Why'd you remind me twice that you might not remember it? Hhaah… my name is Otto Suwen. I'm just a humble travelling merchant, but I'd appreciate it if you could memorize my face and name."

Ram: "That would depend on how interesting this talk is."

Otto despondently gave his name, while Ram refused to concede any of her domineering attitude.

Although she indicated that she was willing to listen, she would immediately put a stop to it should it turn out to be pointless. Otto pumped himself up once more and decided to broach it from a different angle,

Otto: "This would be related to what Mr. Natsuki and the Margrave are currently discussing, but… Miss Ram. Would you be interested in helping Mr. Natsuki and myself release the Sanctuary from its Barrier?"

Ram: "—That's enough. Ram's only desire is to fulfill Master Roswaal's most earnest wish. For as long as I respect Master Roswaal's will, liberating the Sanctuary that way would be pointless."

Otto: "But that's assuming everything proceeds as the Margrave intended… correct? Miss Ram, are you aware that events have already diverged from that path?"

Ram: "…"

It was Otto who proposed, at the end of his conversation with Subaru, that they drag Ram in as an ally.

Subaru was overwhelmingly reluctant about it, but, going from what he said, Otto judged that it was a bet with good chances of victory.

Opening her eyes, Ram's emotionless, pink irises fell on Otto.

She uncrossed her arms as the fingers of her lowered right hand grazed against what must've been her wand beneath her skirt.

How he chooses his next words would decide whether or not he incurs her wrath in the form of her wind blades.

Holding his breath and wetting his lips with his tongue, Otto showed the same fearless smile as he would when making a challenging business deal.

The stiffness of his body disappeared as his accelerated pulse fell to a more comfortable pace.

Now, just as always, it was time to stand firm.

Otto: “Events have diverged from the Margrave’s plans—and for the first time, you have a chance to realize your true wish. And I believe Mr. Natsuki and I can help you with that.”

Ram’s fingers wavered, hesitating—and then left her wand. Seeing this, Otto determined that his sales pitch was nothing to be scoffed at.

After she’s heard Otto’s proposal and learned the details of his plan, Ram presented several conditions.

Honestly, revealing their entire plan to Ram was a rather huge gamble for Otto and Subaru. If they misjudged their proposal’s impact on Ram’s heart, then all their plans would be leaked to Roswaal. But there was enough value in getting Ram on their side to take this risk.

Ram laid out several conditions in exchange for her cooperation, and, finding them entirely reasonable, Otto accepted.

Otto didn’t mention the details of her terms to Subaru. Because he needed her maximum cooperation, and it was necessary to keep some of the actions he had to take secret.

If Otto had told him, Subaru would have stopped them. If Subaru gave in to his emotions and ruled out this plan, it would’ve meant leaving the rest of their fate to chance.

Ram: “You have an unfortunate personality, you know that? I have no idea what you do for a living, but you’d make a terrible merchant.”

Otto: “You totally remember I was a travelling merchant, right?!”

Ram remarked with a snort at Otto’s secret determination, as a pained wail echoed throughout the Sanctuary.

2

—Faced with the pressure of the beast’s overwhelming aura, Otto was surprised that his body wasn’t trembling.

The abhorrent figure looming before him was a colossal monster four meters in length.

Crooked, razor fangs extended like sabres from its enormous mouth as its claws curved in brutal crescents like life-reaping scythes of Death. Every strand of golden fur coating its body was a wire thick enough to tangle any mortal blade that struck it.

Only the glint in its eyes, golden as its fur, retained vestiges of what it was before its transformation. But the lack of commonality between now and what was there only moments before made all of it seem unreal.

It was Garfiel, after he’d shed his human body for the form of a ferocious tiger.

Vile smelling breaths escaped his throat in growls, exuding a pressure enough to freeze the hearts of every creature in the forest.

Otto: “…”

Consciously forcing his lips to smile, Otto wished he could say something, anything, to lighten the mood.

But no voice escaped his frozen throat, and even his supposedly smiling cheeks ignored him and remained rigid.

And, belatedly, Otto realized why he wasn’t trembling.

—It was not because he wasn’t afraid. Rather, it was because, in the face of certain "Death", Otto's body had given up on improving his chance of survival.

After all, trembling in the face of fear is the body's mechanism to ignite its instinct to survive.

It is the soul screaming to the body: "Do not give up!"—but, in a situation where this would be entirely pointless, it was only natural that his body wouldn't tremble.

He had heard about it. And he had imagined it.

He knew that Garfiel possessed both beastman and human blood alike, and that he could transform into a monster.

But reality surpassed Otto's flimsy imagination and manifested a creature so far beyond human understanding that it devoured his spirit to its core.

To think that, in the presence of such a creature, he could have uttered something so foolish as "We bought enough time, but why don't we try and beat him?". Of course he shouldn't try to beat him. As if he stood a chance.

And yet,

Ram: "Garf transformed… we've met all the conditions now."

Muttered the small girl beside him, her voice entirely unchanged in the face of the overwhelming presence before her.

He hadn't even the mind to ask "What conditions?". But, with a movement so mechanical that his neck creaked as it turned, Otto looked to the girl—to Ram.

Ram's lips relaxed slightly, and, for the first time, she showed Otto something like a smile.

Ram: "Garf made a mistake by picking this obvious choice. —We've won this fight."

Otto: "…"

You damn sure about that? Otto quipped in his mind, forgetting his usual politeness.

3

—Ram gave Otto roughly three conditions for her cooperation.

Ram: “Regardless of the divergence from Master Roswaal’s plans… and from the Gospel’s writ, you must preserve Master Roswaal’s will to live in this world, whatever it takes.”

This term was already fulfilled when Subaru challenged Roswaal to their bet.

Roswaal, who had been ready to abandon everything, again donned his war-paint and, with eyes brimming with life, resolved to take on the world once more.

Ram: “Secondly, Lady Emilia must not lose her determination to challenge the Trials. If this world is to continue despite diverging from Master Roswaal’s plans, then she will inevitably have to stand for herself. …She must be tested before the day of reckoning comes.”

This one would have to be left entirely to Subaru and Emilia, but, judging from the fact that Ram was willing to hear his proposal, she probably considered this condition as good as cleared.

When Otto heard that Emilia had gone missing, his first thought was “We’re completely doomed”, but Ram doesn’t seem to think so. However, since Otto was afraid that she might change her mind if he asked her why, he decided to leave well enough alone.

So then,

Ram: “If you can guarantee these two things, I will be willing to help you. …But as for the part that we’ll be keeping secret from Barusu, I still have a few finer requirements.”

Otto: “Let’s hear it, as long as it’s something I can do.”

Ram: “If I am to join the fight against Garf, you’ll have to at least broaden the prospects of victory. First, you must disable Garf's nose. Then, deal a certain amount of damage to make him lose his composure. I will not enter the fight until the decisive moment, so you'll have to accomplish these things yourself. Surely, seeing you've gone out of your way to propose this plan, you must have at least one trump card hidden up your sleeve?"

Otto: "Well… there is a little something, yeah."

Ram: "I see, just as I thought. In that case, here's the last condition…"

Otto: "Right."

Ram: "Make Garf transform. —This is the final requirement for attaining victory."

4

Ram: "His sense of smell, is it still disabled?"

Otto: "…"

Ram: "Pathetic."

Otto: "Gheuh!"

Seeing Otto so stricken that he couldn't even answer her question, Ram mercilessly jabbed her elbow into the side of his waist. Wailing at the sharp, gouging pain, Otto gasped as he suddenly remembered to start breathing.

Otto: "A, aghh… I-I thought I was gonna die… just now, thought I was gonna die from that pressure!"

Ram: "Even a soft and flimsy meat shield is better than nothing, so snap out of it. His sense of smell, is it disabled?"

Otto: "I'll pretend I didn't hear that first part, but, yeah, it is. Makoil pollen is an extremely powerful animal repellent, even humans would pass out if they smell it from up close."

Ram: “And even more so for Garfiel, with his many times more sensitive nose. Then that’s one of the benefits of his beast-form nullified. The timing and the damage dealt to him before his transformation… is all going according to plan.”

Exhaling a light breath, Ram tipped her heels off the ground as she shifted onto her toes. From there, she dropped her heels, lifted them, and began repeating that motion in a simple leg exercise.

Otto furrowed his brows at Ram’s strange behavior, and with “U-Uhm?”, he tiled his head.

Otto: “R-Miss Ram? What’re you doing?”

Ram: “I’m warming up. Slightly loosening my body before I start. As much I loathe to admit it, Barusu is right about this being efficient.”

Otto: “Uhm, no, that’s not… I meant, what’re you doing these exercises for?”

Ram: “That’s simple.”

Casting the stuttering Otto a glance from the corner of her vision, Ram finished her warm-up exercise and closed her eyes. Then, opening her eyes again, her feet carried her forward—with a casual gait, as if she were taking a leisurely stroll, she began closing distance with the beast.

Otto: “W-Wait?!”

Ram: “Be silent.”

Otto’s eyes bulged as he watched her bold advance. But Ram rejected his call, not slowing her speed in the slightest as she headed towards the tiger.

The beast stooped low as it glowered at the prey before its eyes. Surprised by the little creature’s action, its body stiffened for a moment, but immediately, it judged the behavior to be an insult to itself.

Rage arose in its golden eyes as it raised its hefty fore paw, thicker than Ram’s torso, and swiped with vicious claws outstretched. A single strike from these claws, each as wide as the delicate girl’s arms, would carry enough force to instantly transfigure her limbs into shreds of gore with a graze.

The wind screamed as the Reaper’s Scythe in the shape of claws swung to claim Ram’s life from this world.

—But, just before that could happen,

Ram: “You’re too soft, Garf. —Who do you think you’re facing?”

Crouching down and letting the mighty claws pass overhead, Ram said to the tiger with pity.

Having thrown its entire body behind that swing, the tiger floundered as Ram’s tiny figure dived for its chest. Bending her knees, Ram sprung out her body as she shot out her readied fist—

Ram: “When have you ever won in a fist-fight against me?”

Garfiel: “—RR!”

The fist lunging into its torso from below sent the several-hundred-kilogram beast into the air.

Its body arching from the force of the strike, a pained wail spilled from the beast’s gaping maw. Shock waves crashed against the forest as Otto heard the sound of the air bursting.

Otto: “No, way.”

A girl a head shorter than he was had just punched a beast so tall that looking up wasn’t enough to see the whole thing. And just like that, with her fist still buried in the tiger’s torso, Ram used her offhand to slap the animal around even further.

Blows alternated from one hand to the other as they beat the enormous beast shrieking in retreat. With fangs bared, it lunged its great jaw at Ram, but the girl leaped, setting her foot upon the tiger’s nose, and, with a forceful kick, she sent the beast’s face slamming down to the ground.

Scraping against the earth with its roar cut off, the colossal beast writhed, frantically attempting to tear apart the limbs of the girl toying with him. But Ram danced through the air like leaves in the wind, mockingly evading the tiger's strikes, driving attack after piercing attack into the shallow points in its fur.

Her heel into its throat. Her hand into its flank. Her fist punching aside its paw, opening the way for a direct kick to the beast's unguarded face.

Witnessing her dominate the vicious tiger in close-quarter combat, a surreal sensation as if he were reading a picture-book gripped at Otto's heart.

What on earth was he watching?

Seeing Garfiel shed away his human form had stricken Otto with so much despair that his body gave up on living. And yet, what on earth was he watching here?

With every swing of the girl's arm, the beast's body bounced back from the force of the blow. This colossal monster, whose very roars could slaughter a living creature, was unable to land a single hit on her.

Its furious paws blindly mowed through the trees, gouged into the earth, transforming the forest with chaotic violence, and yet the constantly changing landscape caused Ram no issue at all.

They could win, like this.

He felt stupid now for having doubted Ram's pre-battle remarks.

Her statements about purposely getting Garfiel to transform now held definite credibility.

As a beast, the power of the transformed Garfiel is overwhelming, but its advantage lay in situations where he's fighting multiple opponents. His very mass is a weapon in itself, and even against single individuals, there was no reason he should lose.

But, when his opponent is someone with inhuman combat abilities, it’s a different story.

His cumbersome body becomes a target, his powerful, tree-felling claws are fraught with openings, and his devastating strength leaves him clumsy and unbalanced, unable to shift between attack and defence.

Calmly analyzing the situation would make all of this become clear.

However, this simple solution would only be valid if there was an “Overwhelming individual” to carry it out.

A friendly wildcard who could counter a transformed Garfiel—securing this precious resource for their team was Otto’s greatest contribution to this fight.

Otto: “We can… we can do it! At this rate, Garfiel can be…!”

Clenching his fists, Otto cheered as he saw the first hope of victory.

As if propping up that hope, Ram’s fist slammed into the side of the ferocious tiger’s face, sending the creature skidding magnificently across the ground, scraping up plumes of dust.

And—

Ram: “—Bhg.”

Leaking an insuppressible groan, and with profuse blood streaming from her forehead, Ram’s body swayed as if about to fall.

5

With the streaming blood dyeing her vision true-red, Ram’s frantic steps barely managed to keep her body from collapsing.

Sharp, piercing pain flashed just above her brow—at the very center of her forehead. Clicking her tongue, she rued the throbbing ache emanating from the faint-white scar.

Behind her, Otto’s broken voice shrieked. So annoying.

Ram didn't need anyone to tell her how much the situation had deteriorated. It wasn't that any of Garfiel's attacks had hit her. Against those thoughtless, wide-open swings, it'd actually be harder to try to get hit. Those screams are annoying. Wanna hit him.

Ram: "—hhu."

Expelling a short breath, Ram's unsteady feet kicked off of the ground.

Immediately, the tiger's claws gouged into the earth where she'd just been standing. Clods of dirt sprang up like a shotgun blast, mingling with vivid red droplets as Ram spun, dancing to evade.

She was clearly on borrowed time, but somehow, she could still move. Sighting an opening, she kicked the tiger's jaw from below, sending the beast wailing in pain as she followed with another kick from her other leg. She rode on the momentum to backflip out of harm's way, but the instant she landed, her stance immediately crumbled.

Ram: "—a."

Garfiel: "—WRR!"

Literally by a hair's breadth, Ram evaded the claws late enough for them to shear off a tuft of her hair, sending strands of pink dancing through the air.

It was pure coincidence that she dodged that strike. If her feet hadn't just happened to slip, Ram's head would've doubtlessly exploded like a red fruit.

Tasting the closeness of death, feeling something indescribable rushing up her spine, Ram's red lips opened into a grin as she snarled.

The exhilaration of battle. The scar on her forehead throbbed, sending something between pain and an itch flooding down her entire body.

Her broken horn. Her proof of being an Oni. In order to release her full potential, Ram needed her horn to draw mana from the inexhaustible supply within the atmosphere around her. After losing that organ, her body could not unleash even a tenth of its true power.

She knew beforehand that she'd be punished for overtaxing her body like this.

Still, she had thought that if the conditions were right and she manages to end the fight quickly, there was no reason she'd lose. And yet,

Ram: "—You've gotten stronger, Garf."

Ram's murmur was overflowing with an emotion she rarely showed to others.

Naturally, Otto had never seen it, and even Subaru only saw it on a few occasions. It was the kind of emotion she'd show to her only family, the one who had vanished from her memory.

With the tender smile still etched upon her lips, her lunging fist mercilessly smashed into the tiger's face.

She felt its tough skin bouncing off of her knuckles. Her fist, having lost its firmness, directly felt the recoil of the impact, breaking the bones in her hand. It felt good. She was fighting. She was living. The exhilaration of killing and being killed flooded her with overwhelming euphoria. More, more. There's more after this. There is yet another dimension to reach.

Her right hand shattered, no longer capable of forming a fist. The tiger with its crushed face bellowed. Breath like a windstorm pressed towards her as her left hand sliced through the wind and gouged into the thin hide on the tiger's neck. Blood spouted, her fingers tore out chunks of flesh as more blood spouted forth. Gory specks sprayed onto her white cheeks as she savored the intoxicating taste of iron on her tongue.

If her shattered right hand was useless, then she'll choke him with her arms. One arm wasn't nearly enough to wrap around the neck far wider than her own body. Soaring, grappling, throwing in her legs as well to strangle the beast's arteries, she dodged the claws closing in to swipe her away. Shifting with all her weight, one of her fingers snapped. The shriek felt good, like she was back home.

Ram: “Bh, phh, agh.”

The dance was so much fun, yet the haziness of her head was too aggravating. The blood streaming from her forehead showed no signs of stopping, and it began to overflow from her nose and mouth as well.

She was past her limit, and her body was beginning to break. Her nerves were controlling her body based on its full potential, but, with no mana to sustain it, her body was gradually failing to keep up. Ram continued to move at blazing speeds, still evading Garfiel's claws. So overwhelming was her combat ability that not even a single strike could graze her. But the wicked hands of collapse continued gorging upon her body, and the end would come before any claws or fangs could reach her.

Ram: “—hg, phh.”

After pausing for a deep breath, overflowing liquid burst from her mouth.

Clots of blood splashed to the ground, and, as if it'd been Ram's very life force, her body instantly lost its strength.

Her shoulders slumped, her legs collapsed. The beast would surely not overlook this moment. Its beaten and enraged visage bared its fangs as it swung its paw towards Ram's slender body.

But—

Otto: “Uwaaaah! DONA!!”

Alongside that throat-tearing chant, a wall of earth shot up from the ground.

It cut into the space between Ram and the tiger's paw, dulling the attack's force for just an instant before immediately being smashed to dust.

But in that single instant, a hand dragged Ram's body back and, with all its strength, flung her backwards.

—Somehow, she had a feeling that this was the second time she'd been thrown like this.

Soaring through the air, she stared at the sky in a daze as that out-of-place sentiment popped into her mind. The impact of crashing back-first into the ground robbed her of her breath, but she swiftly raised her head to register the situation.

There, in front of her, in the spot where she'd just been tossed from, now stood Otto who should've been cowering on the side. It seems he saw that Ram was in danger and threw himself in.

But even so, surely, there is nothing he can do—

Garfiel: "—WRR!"

The beast, enraged by this powerless creature who had intruded into its battle with Ram, blasted the pale-faced youth with a forest-shaking roar. If he froze here, he would surely become food for those fangs. At this juncture demanding immediate action, Otto clenched his hands into fists, stomped his foot into the ground, and —

Otto: "—WWRRR!"

—From his slender throat came a roar exactly like the beast's.

This was the Divine Protection of Anima Whispering Ram had heard so much about. Otto had always boasted that as long as it was an intelligent life form, whether it was a dragon or a critter, or even an insect, he could speak with it. It seems to also allow him to communicate with Garfiel who'd transformed into this irrational beast.

Ram couldn't tell what Otto must've heard from Garfiel's roar.

And she couldn't tell what Garfiel thought of Otto's reply.

But this exchange of roars did create a brief delay before the beast resorted to its claws and fangs.

That opening was more than enough for Ram to understand Otto's true reason for throwing her.

Garfiel: "—WWRRR!"

Otto: "—WWRRR! Aaukh! That's, my throat's limit…!"

Struggling to sustain the literally blood-spewing shriek, Otto held his throat as he coughed.

With the conversation at an end, the tiger lifted its paw, aiming to annihilate Otto with a single strike. Otto raised his hands before him, and with a determined expression, he unleashed the desperate scream,

Otto: "EL DONAAA!!"

A thick wall of earth spread out in front of Otto, and, without waiting to watch it rise, he turned and began sprinting backwards. The tiger's paw crashed through the wall behind him, sweeping up a whirling plume of dust as it closed in on Otto's fleeing figure—a direct hit knocked the wiry body flying like a dead twig, plunging nonstop through the bushes and trees.

Whether he lives or dies would depend entirely on Otto's fortitude.

Ram paid no attention to the results of his decision and actions. She determined that to pay it no heed was the most appropriate way to repay Otto for what he had done.

Ram: "Garf. —You made a mistake by transforming after all."

Ram announced to the tiger who was turning to attack her next.

Leaning against a tree, freed from the exhilaration of bloodlust, Ram's head steadily cleared. Gripping her wand in her barely-operational left hand, she aimed its tip at Garfiel.

Mana began to shift.

Ram: “If you had even a speck of sense left, you wouldn’t have overlooked me.”

Garfiel: “…”

The tiger warily scrunched its nose.

But did nothing further. It had no idea what was coming.

The eyes of that senseless beast did not understand what it meant that Ram was “Standing in a mass of white light”.

To the residents of this forest, this man, who transformed into a monster and ravaged the earth, the trees, and the forest in its attempts to strike Ram, was a violent and irredeemable villain—

Ram: “I’m not bungling this the way he did.”

Garfiel: “—!”

Realizing something, the tiger stooped low and charged towards Ram.

But it was too late.

Ram: “—Al Fula.”

Mana from the rage of the forest’s residents converged at the tip of Ram’s wand, exploding into a burst of light.

—And the battle for the Sanctuary’s forests was over.

6

Getting the feeling that he’d just heard a beast’s roar, Subaru stopped and glanced behind him.

Subaru: “Nah, no way.”

It’s way too early for that, Subaru naively decided.

It had been perhaps twenty minutes since he asked Otto to buy time and left him. It was doubtful whether Otto had even departed with the carriages yet, and there was no way the situation could've progressed that far.

He figured his anxiety must be making him hallucinate, but that was actually the more terrifying thought. Just how subconsciously anxious was he?

Subaru: "Gotta believe, gotta believe. Otto's doing his best to buy time. He did say he'll spill everything once Garfiel catches him… and we didn't tell the Earlham villagers anything they didn't need to know, so they shouldn't become targets."

Each time Garfiel attacked Subaru or the villagers as they tried to leave, Subaru had confronted Garfiel about the Ryuzu clones beforehand. Which means, by Subaru's speculation, Garfiel didn't want the truth about the Ryuzu clones to be leaked outside.

Subaru didn't know what the underlying reason for this would be, but it seems Garfiel could not be at ease until he has eradicated everyone who knew that fact. The loop where he slaughtered all the villagers except Subaru was probably the result of his inability to determine whether Subaru had divulged it to any of his fellow escapees.

Whether Garfiel would believe him when he says he never told them would be yet another gamble, but somehow, Subaru had a mysterious conviction that if he sincerely emphasized that fact, Garfiel would accept it.

Garfiel doesn't seem to be the type who could handle complicated concepts very well, so Subaru figured he would just have to present him with something he wouldn't need to think too hard about.

Subaru: "And if Otto's right, then we've got Ram on our side. Worst case, as long as he's not cornered, he shouldn't lay his hands on her…"

If there was anything to worry about, it's that Ram would provoke Garfiel more than necessary.

The two have known each other for a long time, and they share a past of which Subaru knew nothing about. If something fractures between them because of that shared past, it could lead to unimaginable consequences.

But the reason Ram had agreed to help them was so that Roswaal would keep living in a world that had diverged from his Gospel, and she would tirelessly work to forge that path. Or at least, that was how Subaru interpreted it, and he figured she needed his and Otto's help to achieve it.

Even if she wasn't impressed by Otto's sales-pitch, she'd surely go along with it.

Subaru: "I believe in you, Big Sister! No matter how useless Otto is, please work with him!"

Clapping his palms together, Subaru prayed his utmost for their safety.

Unaware that the two had gone off and made a decision to skirt the boundaries of life and death, Subaru concluded his prayer, and,

Subaru: "Well then, time for me to do my part."

Tugging his own cheeks to psych himself up, Subaru gave his head a shake and resumed his stride.

The moment his foot stepped inside the gaping entrance, the unpleasant feeling of free-falling through the air—and of his guts floating upwards assaulted him.

Subaru: "Eughh…"

Holding his hand to his mouth, Subaru forced back the surging nausea as he pressed onward.

That unshakable floating sensation made every step he took feel like the phantom step at the end of a staircase. His organs churned as his blood seemed to flow backwards, and it was as if the air was slathering its tongue around his eyeballs.

Savoring the sense of rejection as if the entire world was refusing

Natsuki Subaru, he drew deep breath after deep breath, his face pale, pressing his hands to the wall as he dragged his feet forward.

Subaru: “Don’t… be so cold… I’ll… feel hurt, you know…”

Having anticipated this, Subaru had emptied his stomach beforehand. Nevertheless, this gut-wrenching nausea caused stomach acid to surge to his mouth.

Subaru pushed the feeling down and forced his eyes to open as he desperately crept step after step through the darkness.

And—

Subaru: “Ah, thank goodness. —I’ve finally found you.”

Having made his way to the end of the short distance that felt like an eternity, Subaru’s shoulders slumped in relief.

In front of him, leaning against the ancient wall of the dusty corridor, the girl sitting there hugging her knees looked up at him with an astonished expression.

???: “su… baru?”

Though her voice was faltering, the fact that she called his name filled him with satisfaction.

Then, Subaru bent down beside the girl on the ground, and—

Subaru: “Say—let’s talk, Emilia-tan.”

Using the same icebreaker from back then when he couldn’t bear to face his mistakes, this time, it was Subaru who spoke the words.

Chapter 110:
Reason to Believe

1

When he saw Emilia huddled up, hugging her knees, Subaru was washed over by an inopportune sense of relief.

Part of it was because he found Emilia, and part of it was because he found her here.

He was convinced that this was the only place she could be, and he had hoped that this was where she'd be. Being right on both accounts, he felt a weight fall in the pit of his stomach.

Subaru: "Actually, come to think of it, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "This really is a nice place to hole up if you don't want anyone to find you. Not many people could come in here, and those who could wouldn't want to, anyway."

Besides Emilia—only three other people could enter Echidna's Tomb.

One rejected the Trials and despised the Tomb, one witnessed another's past and chose to entrust the Sanctuary's future to someone else, whereas the last one roused the Witch's ire halfway through his Trial and had his qualification revoked.

All other qualified people were barred by severe restrictions not to enter.

So indeed, this hiding place had "Emilia Only" written all over it.

Emilia did not reply to Subaru's honest praise.

She only remained curled up, silently looking up at Subaru.

Subaru: "—Mind if I sit beside you? Standing is… honestly pretty exhausting."

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "Where I come from, silence means yes. So, 'scuse me."

Bathed in Emilia's focused stare, Subaru magnificently proclaimed this and sat down at her side.

A distance of two fists was as close as Subaru's manly courage could take him. Before he could get any closer, he'd have to use his words and appeals to shorten the emotional distance between them.

Because, right now, the distance separating their hearts was likely far greater than the widths of their fists.

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "…"

Sitting next to each other, a brief silence fell between them.

Subaru patiently waited for Emilia to speak, while Emilia watched him as he waited. Her lips quivered several times, until finally, with some hesitation,

Emilia: "Subaru…"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "How… are you here?"

Subaru: "How, huh… that's a tricky one. Since you're always on my mind, Emilia-tan, I managed to find you in no time, I guess."

He was rather proud of that fact.

Since it meant that he was the only one, at least in the Sanctuary, who knew Emilia well enough to accurately divine her feelings.

Although, if he were truly attuned to Emilia's feelings, he wouldn't be speaking to her inside the Tomb right now.

At Subaru's answer, Emilia's eyes widened.

But then, she shook her head as if that wasn't the answer she was looking for.

Emilia: "No. That's not it, Subaru. I wasn't asking how you got here… I meant… I thought only people who were granted the qualification could enter the Tomb."

Subaru: "You sure you didn't forget, Emilia-tan? The first day we got here, when you fainted inside, I rushed straight in here to bring you out. Apparently, if the Witch hates me like she hates Roswaal, I would've exploded the instant I walked in. But, turns out it wasn't that bad for me. Just feels floaty like I'm in an elevator that's constantly a second before stopping. Nothing I can't handle."

Emilia: "…I, see."

Emilia muttered, a bit disappointed that this place wasn't as exclusive as she thought. Then, she cast a worried gaze over Subaru, who seemed increasingly wracked by nausea.

Even though she must be desperately trying to put the mess inside her head in order, the fact that she was still thinking of others even now was at once admirable, heartbreaking, and sweet.

Emilia: "So then… how did you know I was here?"

Rather than silence, Subaru seemed more at ease when distracted by conversation.

Perhaps having noticed this over the course of their exchange, when she saw him heaving with labored breaths, Emilia presented Subaru with a new question.

Her words were laced with suspicion and resignation, intermixed with some complex, indecipherable emotion.

Her resignation was haphazard, and her suspicion almost paranoid: Both traits which Emilia rarely ever showed—in fact, this might be the first time Subaru had ever seen them.

Emilia: "…Subaru?"

Subaru: "Aah, sorry sorry. Let's see, how did I know you were here, well, uh, pr-probably because there's nothing about Emilia-tan that I don't know, so…"

Emilia: "Liar."

He wasn't trying to joke around, but his frivolous answer was nevertheless promptly rejected.

Setting her chin on her knees, Emilia tilted her head as she looked at Subaru. The emotions fluttering within her amethyst eyes were of the pinnacle of chaotic turmoil, as if on the precipice of engulfing her.

Hating the emotions that her eyes were revealing, Emilia turned away, pouting, so that Subaru could no longer see them.

Emilia: "You won't fool me even if you say that. —When I don't even properly know myself, how could you possibly know?"

Subaru: "It's surprising how little people can see of themselves. Even when others around them can see all the way to their bootsoles."

He wouldn't call it personal experience, but it did seem to happen to him over and over.

Each time, he'd get all fired up, unaware of how thoughtless, reckless, and senseless he was being. And only when someone finally spells it out for him, would he begin to notice it for himself.

Once, someone had pointed this out to Subaru, and for the very first time—

Subaru: "I figured you'd be here, Emilia-tan, half out of faith, and half out of hope."

Emilia: "Half, and half…"

Subaru: "I looked all over the village but couldn't find you anywhere. So instead of thinking about where you might have gone, I thought as hard as I could about why you left in the first place. And when I did, I figured you must be here. And when I found you, I was relieved like you wouldn't believe."

Emilia: "…You were relieved, that's all?"

Subaru: "Huh?"

As Subaru relaxed his lips into a relieved smile, Emilia asked.

Her voice was quiet, almost inaudible. Subaru raised his brows when he heard this, while Emilia locked her gaze onto his as if to peer into the depths of his eyes,

Emilia: "When you found me here, you were just relieved? …You weren't angry?"

Subaru: "What, Emilia-tan… No way, were you scared that I'd be mad at you?"

Her timid attitude almost made Subaru burst out chuckling.

Running off without telling anyone where she was going, only to get scared of reprimands when she was found, that's exactly what a child would do.

Although it kind of made sense now that he's learned about her actual and mental age, it was still incredibly unlike her.

But Subaru decided to pay the strangeness no heed and only shook his head.

Subaru: "I'm not angry at all. I was anxious, and honestly super panicked, but not mad. And considering that I found you here, I'm really glad."

Emilia: "…I see."

The emotions Subaru felt for the missing Emilia was something other than anger.

And even if there was any anger, it'd be at himself for missing the warning signs and failing to anticipate Emilia's actions. But that anxious, panicked feeling of all his plans coming to ruin was all drowned beneath the flood of relief when he found her.

And so, Emilia's worries were needless. At least, that's what he was trying to tell her.

Emilia: "You're not… angry."

That's what he tried to tell her, yet her mutter was not one of relief.

Subaru: "—Emilia?"

Emilia: "You're not… angry at me. —You won't… even get angry at me."

Her voice was quiet, hoarse, and trembling.

By the time Subaru furrowed his brows in astonishment, it was already too late.

Looking down, biting her lip, Emilia's eyes opened wide.

Tears welled under her eyelids as she tried to keep them from spilling.

Emilia: "Why… can't you be angry."

Subaru: "Emili—"

Emilia: "I did something selfish… didn't I? I did something that distressed you, didn't I? I disappeared without saying a word, and I worried you, didn't I? I made you anxious, wondering if I'd run away… that's the sort of thing I did, wasn't it? And when someone does that to you, shouldn't you be angry? Or aren't you like that, Subaru?"

Drowning out Subaru's voice, Emilia spouted her feelings like a torrent.

Emphasizing the selfishness of her actions, she closed in on Subaru as if pressing him to condemn her.

Overwhelmed by her unrelenting pressure, Subaru finally realized that he had made a decisive error in choosing his words.

Emilia wasn't scared that Subaru would be angry at her.

Emilia was scared that Subaru wouldn't reproach her for her actions.

Because—

Emilia: "Why aren't you angry…? You're not angry… because you never expected anything from me in the first place, right? You saw how I failed, but you're still being kind to me… because you aren't even disappointed in me, right? Because you never thought I could've done it… right?"

Subaru: "…"

Perhaps those were the fears that Emilia had always harbored, but was never able to voice, like a darkness wallowing in the depths of her heart.

How many times had she challenged the Trials, only to be sent back with her spirit broken?

She hated herself for it, and the others showed their disappointment at her failure, but there were also those among them who would never fault her, like Subaru and Puck.

Yet even as she felt saved by Subaru and Puck's presence, she'd always be fighting this unshakable anxiety.

Disappointment meant that there was expectation.

She hated herself because she was disgusted with how she couldn't put up a fight.

And while being gently consoled even after she had failed and failed provided temporary relief for her heart, it only fanned the flames of a far greater anxiety.

For Emilia had always dreaded Subaru and Puck's kindness.

Subaru: "No, Emilia. That's not what I think…"

Belatedly realizing the immensity of the waves surging in Emilia's heart, Subaru spoke up.

If he doesn't catch Emilia here and now, something terrible is going to happen. If she continues to reject him like this, even if he tries reaching for her, he will never seize her again.

And so, with no time to consider his words, he raised his voice,

Subaru: "I can't get mad at you, but it's not because of anything like that…"

Emilia: "If that's true, then…! Why! Why… didn't you keep your promise…?"

Subaru: "—hg!"

Having his knee-jerk reaction shot down, the change of topic caused Subaru's face to stiffen.

The "Promise" Emilia spoke of was the one he'd made to her the night before. And as for whether or not it was fulfilled—

Emilia: "I asked you to hold my hand until morning! And you promised me you would, Subaru… so why did you let go of my hand? Why didn't you keep your promise…?"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "B-Both you, and Puck, broke… your promises, and disappeared. You left me behind, and went away… you liars. Subaru you liar. Puck you liar… you liars, liars… liars…"

Her tearful voice lashed out, condemning their broken promises.

With her face downcast and tears streaming from her eyes, Emilia butted her head into Subaru's shoulder before weakly slapping her hand against his chest. The force was equivalent to nothing. But even so, it hurt as though he'd been punched clean through.

This was the accumulation of all the pain which Subaru had overlooked, which Emilia had endured.

And which Subaru and Puck had so callously showered upon her.

Emilia: "P-Promises are important… I told you that, I told you, didn't I! That for Spirits-Arts Users, for me, promises are important… and so I wanted you to keep them… but when you're supposed to have just apologized to me for not having kept one… you broke, a promise again…"

Subaru: "…Emilia."

Emilia: "Never break promises… never tell lies… promises must always be kept… because if they aren't… if I don't, then… Mother and Geuse…"

With her face still pressed against Subaru's shoulder, Emilia's emotions wandered, aimless and lost. The upheavals of her emotions and the grief at his betrayal had torn her thoughts into a thousand disjointed shreds.

Her faltering words grew incoherent, until Emilia was sobbing like a bawling child,

Emilia: "Never tell lies… never…"

Listening to her voice shaking with grief, Subaru felt a clawing pain tearing at the insides of his chest.

"Promise"—was a word whose resonances carried different meanings for Subaru and Emilia. Once, Subaru had made light of their promise and wounded her, and opened a mutual rift between them.

After their reunion, they reaffirmed the significance of promises, and sealed one in the form of a bond.

Nevertheless, "Promise" was not a gentle word, but a severe burden binding the two of them together.

More than anything, whenever she talked about “Promises”, Emilia would seem different than usual: As if something, some integral part of Emilia’s being, tethered her to promises.

Emilia: “…”

With her head buried between her knees, Emilia was weeping.

And every second Subaru spent watching her cut another gash of guilt into his heart.

Her sobs echoed into his ears as he frantically considered what to say.

Should he apologize? Should he pretend to understand? Should he desperately try to console her? How much of his considerations was it safe to convey?

Subaru’s head spun and spun as he thought, unable to grasp any hint of a solution.

What to do, what could he do, what should he do, and which is the best course of action?

Subaru: “…”

Think, think, think, Subaru closed his eyes amidst his whirling thoughts, and then—

He felt he’d reached the answer on what to do:

Subaru: “Emilia. —I love you.”

Emilia: “…”

Those words had no business being spoken in this situation.

Emilia: “…huh?”

Hearing this, Emilia slipped an astonished groan and looked up.

Her teary amethyst eyes opened wide as she caught Subaru in her gaze. Seeing his own twisted visage reflected on her teardrop—all he could do was steady himself to confront his own heart.

After all, he no longer had any doubt on what he wanted to say.

Subaru: “Night after night… you throw yourself at the same exact Trial over and over again. And what is this Trial, anyway? It’s just the goddamn past, isn’t it? Well quit dawdling around getting caught up on things that’ve already passed!”

Emilia: “…ah, hg.”

Subaru: “And just when I figured I’d do it for you, you start saying it’s something you have to do yourself and got so goddamn stubborn about it. It’d be one thing if it helped you get past it, but if you’re just getting the same results anyway, then it was all just talk, wasn’t it? How about taking a moment to consider what it feels like, having to watch you fall down over and over again?”

Emilia: “s…subaru…”

Subaru: “And just because your pet-slash-guardian went missing, you can’t even stand by yourself anymore? You throw a tantrum and cry your heart out making everybody worried about you, then you shirk your responsibilities to go sulk in bed. Well how lovely for you, but enough’s enough, I’m sick of it!”

Emilia’s eyes bulged in disbelief as she listened to Subaru’s tirade. Her damp eyes forgot their tears thanks to the shock, while her lips weakly quivered, unable to pronounce any meaningful words.

Without a doubt, more than ever before, Emilia’s heart was being deeply wounded.

Faced with Natsuki Subaru’s scorn and contempt, never once directed at her before, her heart was torn to pieces.

Emilia’s face contorted.

This was not tearful grief, nor tantrum-inciting rage, nor the hollowness of resignation and defeat.

Showered by abuses she’d never heard before, Emilia’s expression changed. Not to any of the more fitting emotions, but to something else entirely.

—On Emilia's lips rose a horrifically dry smile.

Emilia: "That's… right, isn't it. O-Of course… you'd, think this about me too, Subaru…"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "There's no way to dress it up, is there… I'm awful. Ever since I came to the Sanctuary… no, even long before that… all I ever did was cause trouble… and so, I…"

Subaru: "Yeah. You honestly haven't done a single good thing since you came to the Sanctuary. I know I'm not one to talk here, but this is just way too horrendous. There's no getting around it."

Subaru affirmed the trembling Emilia's self-negations.

Hearing this, Emilia's throat made a choked groan. Swallowing a sob, or something close to it, and with her pained smile still upon her face,

Emilia: "And that's why… both you, and Puck… ab-abandoned me, of course…"

Subaru: "Yes. You've pulled a lot of crap, and you're still showing no signs of getting better. Rather than wanting to do something about it at this point, the only natural conclusion is that you're hopeless no matter what."

Emilia tried to answer Subaru's rebukes.

But Subaru snatched the tail of her reply and slammed her with this merciless critique.

Subaru: "—But."

Just before reaching the end, Subaru's denouncements ceased.

Emilia looked up at Subaru. Rising in her eyes was an emotion which only Subaru would understand.

—For it was the same emotion that Subaru had once felt himself.

Subaru: “I love you. —Emilia.”

Using the same words which he had been unable to escape from, Subaru blocked off Emilia’s escape.

2

The long lashes bordering her eyes trembled as Subaru’s words robbed her of her consciousness.

Seeing her frozen there, with even her thoughts ground to a halt, Subaru’s cheeks slightly softened.

It wasn’t relief, and certainly not ridicule. If one must give it a name, it’d have to be nostalgia.

So nostalgic that he wanted to shout out everything inside him, alongside everything Emilia wanted to hear.

Subaru: “I love you. I love you, love you, love you, so much that I can’t help myself but love you.”

Emilia: “Wh-What’re you… saying, all of a sudden…”

Subaru: “I love your super-pretty silver hair, I love your amethyst eyes and how they look like jewels when they’re wet, I super-love your voice and how I get dreamy just from hearing it, and there’s your slender long legs and your fair-white skin, and our crazy-ideal height difference, and the fact that just being with you makes my heart race uncontrollably, and all of it makes me fall head-over-heels in love with you.”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “I love how you’re just a little dopey, and it’s adorable how you put your best into everything, I admire how fervent you get for other people’s sakes, and the way you disregard yourself makes me feel like I just can’t leave you alone, and nothing would make me happier than to be able to watch all of your expressions and all of your emotions from here at your side… that's what I've always felt."

Emilia: "This isn't the time to… stop messing with me!"

All his feelings for Emilia flowed from his mouth like a flood.

But Emilia shook Subaru's words away with a shriek.

Heaving her shoulders, with her brows shot up, Emilia bared her fury at the backpedalling Subaru who was acting as though he hadn't said any of those hurtful things to her.

Emilia: "Why are you saying this all of a sudden! This isn't what we were talking about! S-Subaru… you just said that I'm utterly useless, that I'm completely lacking, that's what you were saying! You're sick of it, you can't bear watching anymore… y-you said, that, I…"

Subaru: "Yeah, I did. After all the uselessness and empty talk I had to put up with only to see the same hopeless result, considering how impatient I am in the first place, I should've stopped loving you a long time ago. And I would have, if it was anyone but you, Emilia."

Emilia: "But why!!"

While acknowledging her worthless record, Subaru held off on the most important judgment.

Unable to accept this, unable to allow this omission, Emilia screamed.

Emilia: "All that uselessness and hopelessness, that's who I am, isn't it?! So why're you trying to overlook it? Why're you trying to forgive me? Why…"

Subaru: "If that's what you're asking, then I've told you countless times already! IT'S BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!"

Emilia: "—Hic."

Met with Emilia’s tearful protests, Subaru pushed his face into hers and shouted.

Overwhelmed by his advance, Emilia flinched back, but for each inch she retreated, Subaru closed the same distance. The fact that they were gazing into each other’s eyes, close enough for their breaths to intertwine, did not change.

Subaru: “I love you. So no matter how disappointing you are, I’ll think of it as discovering another side of you, and even if you aren’t strong enough, I’ll keep supporting you as you keep giving it your best, and no matter how fed up you are with yourself, I’ll never dislike you.”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “Even if you hate how weak and pathetic you are, and worry that everyone’ll give up on you… I’ll keep expecting things from you, and I’ll never leave you, no matter how weak you are.”

Emilia’s eyes wavered.

The gaze which she’d fixed upon Subaru—was filled with a weakness that was yearning to receive his rebukes, to indulge in its own resignation, and to drown in a pool of her own sorrow and grief.

Emilia wanted to be condemned. Perhaps because it is only when everyone has given up on you, and when you recognize that you are entirely beyond saving, that, for the first time, you’d truly feel saved.

Subaru knew that feeling, but he also knew what it was like to be guided out of it.

Because Natsuki Subaru had once tried to abandon himself as well, but nevertheless failed to make everyone else abandon him.

Subaru: “I’ve fallen madly in love with you. Everything good about you shines brilliantly for me. And of course I know not everything about you is good. You’re… you’re not an angel, not a goddess, just an ordinary girl. Pain and hardship makes you want to cry, and you want to avoid the things that you don't like, and, if possible, you'd much rather choose only the easy and enjoyable paths."

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "But despite those weak, or even ugly parts of you, I love the entire person that is Emilia. And so… even now, I'm not disappointed in you at all."

Emilia: "—Th! Thats! Don't you think that's too selfish?!"

Subaru's lips weaved his longing into words.

Listening to them in sequence, Emilia couldn't suppress her turmoil as she objected.

Emilia: "You've just denounced me, and said time and time again that I'm useless, and now you're saying you love me anyway… how can you expect me to believe that! Subaru, why would you have that kind of faith in me… it makes no sense at all!"

Subaru: "Wrong! You got it all wrong! It's not because I believe in you that I love you! —It's because I love you that I believe in you! It's that way around!"

Emilia: "Love isn't a reason to believe in someone!"

Subaru: "—Gh! If love isn't a reason to believe in someone, then who the hell would go through all this suffering to help a pain-in-the-ass woman like you?!"

Voices peaking, the two's emotions crashed into each other.

Subaru pressed his hand to the wall and dragged himself up to stand while Emilia also stood up to face him.

Close enough to butt heads, each with their brows raised, Subaru and Emilia barked out their emotions.

Sending spit flying, faces red, shouting "No you're wrong!", were the two of them who'd never screamed at each other before.

Subaru: “I love you! I love you so much that it drives me crazy, so much that I could die for you. That’s why I put up with all the pain and the suffering and why I’m standing in front of you now even though I’m close to puking!”

Emilia: “That’s! I never asked for that! Going off saying whatever selfish things you want… you’re the one who’s never thought about my feelings, Subaru! Just like now… when you’re putting yourself in harm’s way and always getting hurt because of me… do you have any idea how that makes me feel?!”

Subaru: “How am I supposed to know how you feel when I’ve never even thought about it! All I ever think about is how to look cool in front of you! What’ll make you think the best of me, what’ll make you happy… when I’m here working my ass off, how about going with the plan and giving me a cute look once in a while!”

Emilia: “Don’t treat me like I’m a doll! If all you want is for me to be happy… th-then, why did you break your promise! All you had to do was stay with me like I asked you to! So why didn’t you! I bet you actually hate me, don’t you!”

Subaru: “I love you!!”

Emilia: “You’re lying!!”

Subaru spewed forth all his emotions in desperation, only for Emilia to shout over him.

How much of a detour had he once taken just to voice these very feelings? How many obstacles had Subaru had to overcome just for the sake of conveying those words to her?

These confessions of love, thrown around so much that they begin to feel cheap, were all Subaru’s truest sentiments, fused with the whole of his being, seeping through every portion of his soul.

Subaru: “I’m not lying! I love you! But how about you tell me what you feel about me for once! All you’ve ever given me is insinuations! Do you have any idea how much it jolts my heart every time you make those cute expressions and it seems like there's hope?! Stop messing with me!"

Emilia: "I-I'm not messing with you! I'm just being normal, stop saying weird things! I have so many things to think about right now and I'm facing such serious problems, and you're asking me how I feel about you… I can't think about those kinds of things! Stop it! Stop bullying me!"

Subaru: "Who's bullying who here! It's you! You're the one bullying me!"

Emilia: "It's you bullying me! Subaru!"

Without a shred of logic, it was a clash of emotions.

Like two children throwing tantrums showering insults at each other, Subaru and Emilia loudly asserted their respective feelings.

Their voices echoed through the dim, narrow Tomb, shattering the long silence that'd existed since the Tomb's construction. The intensity of their argument could practically slap the Tomb's sleeper awake, with the two of them raggedly panting as they guided their fruitless quarrel towards its conclusion.

Emilia: "I can't trust anything you say anymore! You are a liar! You broke your promise, and then you just show up in front of me again like nothing happened… y-you thought I wouldn't notice, didn't you! But I was watching! I was watching to see whether you'd keep your promise to me!"

Subaru: "Well what an asshole thing to do! Don't you feel embarrassed pulling this crap, pretending to be weak so you can test people!"

Emilia: "I shouldn't have to hear this from a promise-breaking liar!"

Subaru: "Me breaking my promise has nothing to do with this!"

Emilia's cheeks blushed with fury as Subaru callously tried to sidestep the issue.

So overwhelmed by emotion that she couldn't even speak, Emilia took several ragged breaths before finally wrenching out the words,

Emilia: “Why… why did you break your promise?”

Subaru: “…I’m sorry I broke my promise, I am. I wanted to keep holding your hand and stay with you until morning, I really wanted to.”

Emilia: “That’s not what I asked. —Why did you break your promise?”

Subaru: “…I can’t say it.”

Gritting his teeth, Subaru replied to Emilia’s question with an anguished groan.

Seeing him trying to dodge the question even now, Emilia expelled a long sigh.

Emilia: “You won’t keep your promises. And you won’t tell me why you broke them. …Then what’re you telling me? If you’re going to tell me you love me… then act like it! Otherwise, I… can’t, believe you…”

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “If you’d kept your promise and stayed with me until morning! Then I would’ve definitely believed you! I would’ve believed you, and entrusted everything to you! But you broke your promise… and so I, can’t anymore… whether it’s you or Puck, you both left me behind…”

Grimacing, Emilia stuck her fingers into her silver hair and lowered her face.

The heat of her fervour shifted and changed directions as Emilia tightly grasped herself,

Emilia: “Now that Puck is gone, these scenes have been going through my head. …They’re in my head, scenes I’ve never seen before, conversations I don’t remember, they just keep flowing and flowing…”

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "I used to think I remember everything, but these are memories I never knew existed… yet, they really are my memories… and every time I remember, whenever something that's meant to be there that I've forgotten re-emerges, I get so afraid…"

These memories Emilia spoke of—which Puck had sacrificed his bond with her to unseal, were all the genuine memories which she had once tried to forget.

When her Contract with Puck was terminated, the uncorked memories began to overflow, flooding Emilia's interior with her true recollections.

But this dramatic shift could transform her very being.

Emilia: "I finally realized that I've been leaning on Puck while running away from all sorts of things… I'm certain that Puck left me in order to tell me this. But, I'm scared. I'm scared. Puck's gone, and my real memories are coming out… and I, I feel like I'm steadily losing myself."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "Once all the memories come back… I know I won't be the same me anymore. My present self is built upon memories that aren't my real memories… but, once I remember where I really started… I know that this me who's come all this way is going to disappear…"

All of Emilia's resolve and determination had false memories as their basis.

And so, once she regains her true memories, once her origin changes form, just what will happen to Emilia's present resolve, and to the path she has walked thus far?

"—What's important isn't the beginning or the middle, it's the end."

Subaru: "…"

Suddenly, a voice echoed through Subaru's mind.

This familiar yet distant voice felt so incredibly close to Subaru, though it belonged to someone who he would likely never see again.

At the very end of the end of their parting, she gave him these words as his homework.

Ahh, that's right—he thought.

No matter how it began, regardless of which path you took, until you reach the end of the end of the end, who has the right to say whether or not it'd all been a mistake?

Subaru: "No matter what you remember, nothing will change. I love you. And I'll always love you."

Emilia: "—Hic. I don't, believe you. This me, you say you love… o-once she's gone, will you, still…"

Subaru: "I'll say this now. No matter what happens, you're not going anywhere. And I'll continue to love you."

Emilia: "…You're a liar. How do you, expect me to… believe you…"

Subaru: "—Then, I'll make you believe."

With her voice trembling and her eyes wavering, Emilia tried to reject Subaru.

His words could not reach her. And his appeals could not convince her. In that case, the only way left to convey his feelings was through action.

And so,

Emilia: "sub…"

Subaru: "If you don't want it, dodge."

Within breathing distance—or rather, so close that not even their breaths could stand between them—

Subaru reached for Emilia's shoulder, and drew his face closer. Watching Subaru's approach, confusion rose in Emilia's eyes as her body tensed.

For one second, he waited.

If she was going to push him away, this was the moment.

Emilia: "…"

But Emilia closed her eyes.

Whether it was resignation, or the result of hesitation, Subaru couldn't tell.

Subaru: "—Mmh."

Emilia: "—ngh."

Their breathing intertwined, Emilia held her breath, Subaru's brows furrowed in pain.

A quiet noise came from the force of their teeth striking together. It started with that slight, aching pain, but it soon vanished from even the crevices of their minds, drowned out by the intensity of that heat.

Soft lips. A kiss, barely more than a touch.

For Emilia, it was her first, and for Subaru, it was his second time kissing her.

Unlike the first time, filled with the cold taste of "Death". This second kiss was of the burning taste of "Life".

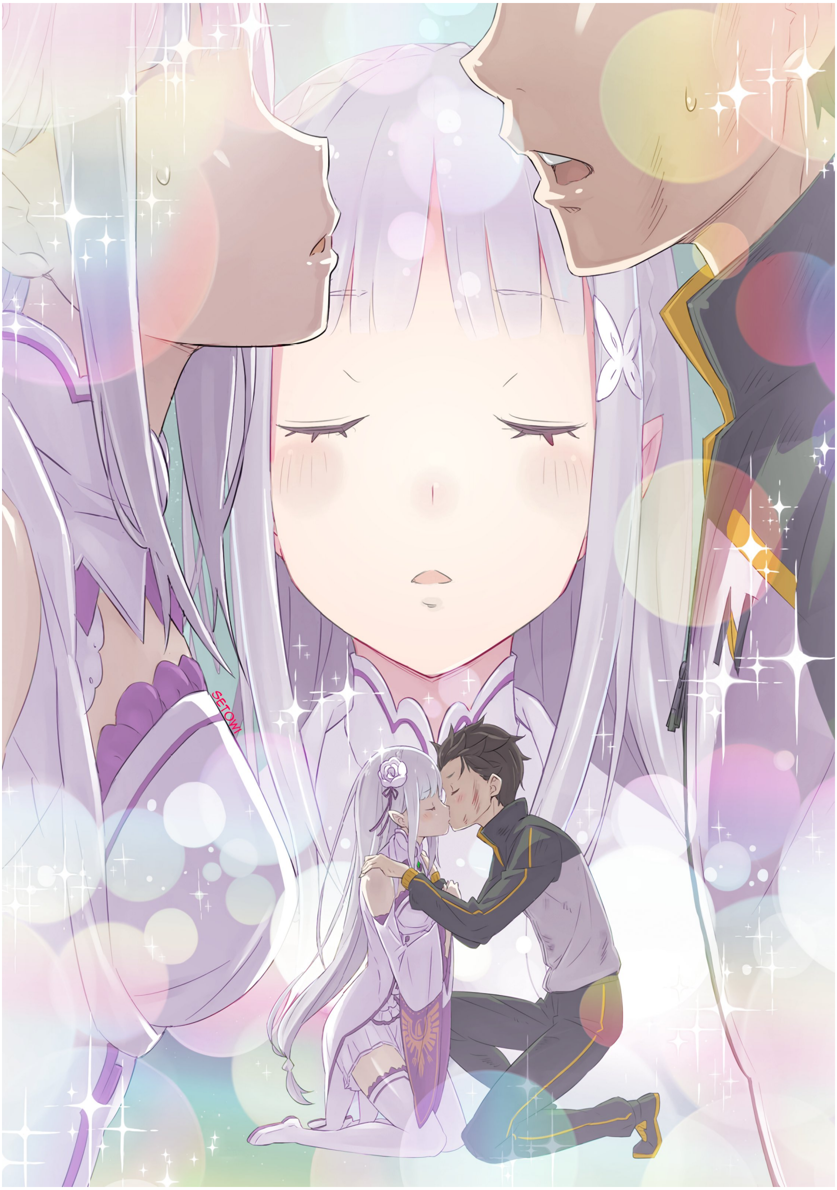
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“—a.”

With neither being the first to move, their lips parted.

They drew their faces away from each other, both forgetting to breathe as they gazed at the other.

Flushed cheeks. Watery eyes. The person reflected within Emilia’s irises looked utterly entranced.

That pathetic expression made Subaru return to his senses first, and, while finally remembering to breathe,

Subaru: “…I love you.”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “No matter what useless side of you I see, and no matter what kinds of fights we get into, I’ll never stop loving you, Emilia. That won’t change no matter what—so I’ll always believe in you. And if you ask me why, it’s…”

Emilia: “Because, you love me…”

Finishing the end of Subaru’s sentence as if in a daze, Emilia touched her lips. Tracing her fingers over them, as if confirming the lingering tenderness of their touch, tears welled in her eyes.

A droplet travelled down her fair-white cheek, glimmering like a drop of the moon.

Subaru: “It’s only natural that you’d be anxious when unknown memories start flowing back. And I understand being scared when it feels like you’re becoming someone you don’t know. But that doesn’t mean the path you’ve walked will vanish, or that your feelings will change.”

Emilia: “How could you… say this like you’re sure…?”

Subaru: “What’s important isn’t the beginning. It’s the end. —A woman I respect above all the world told me that.”

His mother may be the most air-headed person in the world, but somehow, she still managed to teach him his single most important lesson in that world.

Though he couldn’t be sure if he understands it correctly, he nevertheless intends to try.

Because there is a girl right in front of him, with whom he wishes to figure this out together.

Watching Emilia stand there, weighed by anxiety, Subaru gave her a lighthearted shrug.

As if to tell her that it’s no big deal, and to blast her worries away.

Subaru: “It’s alright, Emilia. No matter what you remember, I’ll be on your side. Go ahead and recall every memory you’ve forgotten. And if you’re still afraid, then go find it.”

Emilia: “Find… find what…?”

Subaru: “Just like how my feelings for you allow me to charge ahead without a fear in the world, you should find your most cherished feeling that’ll let you sprint forward without worrying about anything going on around you.”

Emilia never hesitated to expend herself for another’s sake.

The way she placed others before herself was noble and beautiful, and Subaru loved it to no end, but—

—The words “For another’s sake” is horrifically kind, and horrifically sad.

Because the feelings one holds towards an unknown stranger could surely never rival the feelings one held for someone familiar and close.

Subaru: “I’m kinda sorta hoping that cherished feeling would be directed towards me, though.”

Emilia: “My… cherished feeling…”

Perhaps she wasn’t listening to Subaru, for Emilia raised her hand to her chest and lowered her eyes. Her fingers reached for where Puck’s crystal would have been.

With their bond shattered, there was nothing for her to touch. Her fingertips scraped at empty air. But Emilia clenched her hand firm,

Emilia: “Once I’ve recovered all of my memories… maybe it’ll be there, my cherished feeling.”

Subaru: “Yeah. It’ll be there. Your reason to keep walking.”

Emilia: “—Mn.”

Her expression was not exactly doubtful, nor was it entirely one of acceptance.

After seeing Emilia give a slight nod, Subaru closed his eyes as he turned his face up to the ceiling.

The words that had once uplifted him now felt even more powerful than before.

As though it had been kinder, stricter, and stronger words that saved him.

—But will he really become Emilia’s strength?

Subaru: “…”

It’d be way too lame to ask that now.

He sighed, and the instant he let go of his strength, the nausea he’d forgotten about jolted him to his core. Instinctively putting his hand to the wall, he barely managed to keep himself from puking.

Emilia: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “It’s nothing… or, as much as I wanna man up and say that, it’s not nothing. I’m pretty bad right now. Anyway, if you wanna keep arguing or fighting, we could pick it up once we're outside."

Emilia: "Geez… that's not what I want at all."

In front of the pale-faced Subaru, Emilia's lips formed into a faint smile.

But she was too weak to resume her usual determined facade. She hasn't yet reached a clear-cut answer. And her anxiety wasn't fully dispelled.

With his hand against the wall, Subaru started walking towards the Tomb's exit.

Behind Subaru's unsteady steps, Emilia reached out her hand, but hesitated, indecisive about whether to touch him. The meeting of their lips just now must've affected her considerably.

Just thinking back on it made Subaru's face flush red-hot at how brazen he had been.

But all those sentiments would have to be left behind for now.

Subaru: "…"

In order to show her that he is on her side, and is willing to do anything for her—

In order to fulfill the role that he had taken upon himself: to protect her, and to protect all his feelings for her—

Subaru: "I'll have to see this through to the end."

They came out of the Tomb.

Bright sunlight greeted them as they stepped from the darkness.

And,

Subaru: "—Yo, sorry to keep you waiting."

???: "Tch."

The person clicked his tongue in irritation as Subaru gave him a wave.

???: “—I wasn’t waitin’.”

—With his entire body drenched in blood, Garfiel stood there, full of hostility.

Chapter 111:
Garfiel's Barrier

1

Even Subaru can see that Garfiel is drowning in injuries.

The bleeding of his innumerable wounds covers his body in crimson, his breathing ragged and his shoulders heaving. Blood seeps from his numerous lacerations, and except for the loincloth-esque garment covering the lower portion of his petite frame, he is entirely exposed.

He has even lost his shoes, standing there barefoot. Subaru lowers his raised hand.

Subaru: "…That's sure not the getup I was expecting for this hello. I figured you were going to be mad, but not that you'd wind up looking like that."

Garfiel: "Don't worry nothin' bout me. Jus' had a lil' slip n' fall."

Subaru's cheeks stiffen as he speaks, Garfiel responding with a dissatisfied look.

Garfiel's statement is of course entirely bullshit. Subaru cannot help the bad visions he gets from seeing the guy so wounded.

Garfiel had been speeding around the Sanctuary in search of Ryuzu, and got wonderfully caught in Subaru's plots for Otto's group to buy time by stalling him.

Subaru can think of only one possible situation where he would wind up having this kind of appearance. That being,

Subaru: "You moron, Otto, I told you to just spew everything and run!"

Garfiel: "Guy was damn brave. He weren't any fuckin' suited fer battle, n' also ain't been in any real fights before. N' then he starts spoutin' this idiot shit 'bout it bein' for a friend…he handed my fuckin' ass t'me."

With his cheeks twisted in irritation, Garfiel touches the white scar on his forehead.

He's had that injury since before this, but was he saying that every other wound of his had seriously happened during his fight with Otto?

Having gone through a fistfight—or really it was too one-sided to call it that, but—having traded fists with Otto, Subaru does understand. Otto is more accustomed to fights than Subaru, but in a world abounding with people who possess ludicrous combat ability, Otto ought to be classified as a noncombatant.

When placed in serious combat against a fighter—against Garfiel, who sits at the very peak of combatants that Subaru knows—there is no way he should win.

And that goes without touching on the fact that Subaru requested only that Otto buy some time through trickery. Nothing more.

Subaru: "…He's not, dead. Right?"

A frigid line of sweat drips down Subaru's forehead.

His worst-case conception is that the scene ended with Garfiel's claws shredding Otto apart. He would like to laugh it off as a needless fear, but seeing Garfiel's state, he cannot.

With how incredibly wounded Garfiel is, it's clear that he was forced into a difficult fight. But still, to demand that Otto underpreform would likely be overwhelmingly selfish. But, even said, supposing that Otto is dead, it's just pointless.

Not Otto's death. It's Subaru's life that stops having any point.

Emilia: "…Subaru."

Right as he swallows his breath and verges on pessimism, a silver bell calls his name.

These fingers which had before hesitated to touch him, here as his shoulders border on sagging, now touch. This faint sensation contacting him from behind leads Subaru, on the edge of looking down, to stop.

He glances behind him, to find Emilia standing there and looking at him with concern. She still has yet to consolidate the emotions eddying inside her.

This situation where Garfiel is standing here, indignant and covered in blood, must be incomprehensible from her perspective. But she likely has recognized that this was not any mundane affair. In her eyes as she watches Subaru, her concern beats out her anxiety.

Subaru: "Don't worry, Emilia. My bad for being pathetic. …I just remembered who it is that's standing behind me, so I'm calmed down now."

Supported by her gaze, Subaru gives a deep breath out before turning back to face Garfiel.

The entrance of the tomb sits on a sight incline, so Subaru is looking somewhat down at Garfiel. Garfiel's posture as he slouches is poor, his sharp gaze piercing through Subaru with enough intensity to practically kill him.

Garfiel: "Looks like while my amazin' self was rushin' around, yer bastards sure went pullin' whatever the fuck shit yer wanted. Fuckin' sneakin' sneakin' sneakin' sneakin…eh? What's that? Yer didn't fuckin' know my amazin' self hates these dirty fuckin' tricks?"

Subaru: "I didn't know we needed your permission to do stuff around here. Or actually it's obvious that's the kind of character you are so I did know that just from looking at you. Figured you'd be mad, but also figured nothing more than that'd happen."

Garfiel: "Eh?"

Garfiel's stance is one of intimidation, but Subaru just replies with a shrug. Perhaps because Subaru's statement carries no more effort spent psyching himself up than usual, Garfiel scrunches his nose.

Looking down at Garfiel's annoyed expression, Subaru's face tightens.

Subaru: "Garfiel. What happened to Otto."

Garfiel: "He went n'pulled all that nice fuckin' bullshit on me…n' so my fangs maim'd'm t'bits n' now his body's out fertilizin' th'forest."

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel clicks his oversharp fangs as he licks his lips, causing Emilia to swallow her breath. Overwhelming rage emanates from all of Garfiel. That fact alone conveyed how great a fight Otto had put in against him.

As well as the fact that Garfiel had been unable to cut any corners while fighting him. And so…

Subaru: "So he's alive then. The heck, you had me fucking worried…My guts were seriously frozen there wondering if everything'd been ruined, no joke."

Garfiel: "…Eh?"

Subaru: "But why the hell did he go off doing…couldn'tve been, I mean he said he managed to get Ram's help, did she wind up putting some weird ideas in his head? Sounds like something Ram'd do…I mean she didn't tell us how she'd move at the critical moments."

Garfiel: "Oi, OI, Fuck off!"

Subaru: "Which means Ram goddamn helped with tearing you up. I mean yeah. No way Otto could do this much solo. The hell. This had me wondering if that damn Otto'd been hiding some secret powers from me, was sorta fracturing my feelings of friendship with him."

Garfiel: "—Fucker! Th'fuck're you goin' on about! Eh?!"

Garfiel howls in rage, his flood of emotions slamming into the ground, rupturing it.

The earth caves in beneath the force of Garfiel's stomp, creating a crater with him in the center.

Fissures spread across the pit of the crater as its dust wafts around Garfiel, him baring his fangs.

Garfiel: "I fuckin' killed him, that's what I'm tellin' you! Th'guy's gone! He used his mystery blessin' t'get th'forest on his side, fuckin' humiliated my amazin' self with goddamn bugs n' mice. N' at th'end he hit me with some huge magic he ain't got any chance'v actually usin' by himself. N' so…my amazin' self paid my respects f'r th'bastard's fightin' spirit. —Paid him with my claws, n' fangs!"

Subaru: "The forest on his side…Right. So that's another way you can use the BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY. That ass, hiding something that important from me…"

Garfiel: "N'same for Ram, who th'guy wheedled on! Y'see that Ram, she came'n fuckin' butted int'r our fight, fuckin' attackin' me full force…n' so my amazin' self's fangs chewed her dead too."

Subaru: "…"

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel buries his face in his hands as he looks up at the sky.

While he wordlessly watches Garfiel's laments, Subaru ruminates over Garfiel's statements.

So yes, Ram and Otto had established a fighting unit, and confronted Garfiel.

Having Ram's assistance, it's possible that they managed to corner Garfiel to the very brink of defeating him. But regardless, the barricade presented by this beast-man was thick.

Garfiel: "I ain't got any urge t'chase after th'guys who ran off durin' him buyin' time at th' moment. But I ain't got any thought t'overlook what yer bastards're doin' here either. You get away from there, n' don't get any closer. No one's goin' n' th'tomb any more. My amazin' hands 're tearin' th'thing down."

Subaru: "You do that, and there'll be no way to break the barrier. …This Sanctuary'll be a closed little garden forever, you seriously good with that?"

Garfiel: "'M good with that. Everything 'cept that is bad."

With that statement, Garfiel's feet lead him out of the crater and toward the tomb.

His gait loses all sign of doubt, communicating that he will not hesitate an instant to make the deed the just stated a reality.

Bloody and fraught with total injury—but even in this state, an extreme disparity in strength exists between Subaru and Garfiel.

Even with all his wounds, the ability of the man named Garfiel far exceeds that of Subaru.

Both his creation of the crater and the rancour emanating from him make that obviously clear. However,

Emilia: "I-I, am not letting you do that!"

Subaru excepted, there exists yet another person present here to block Garfiel.

Emilia steps forward from behind Subaru, standing in Garfiel's way as he attempts to close in on the tomb. Garfiel looks up at her, unimpressed.

Garfiel: "What, oi. Get outta my way, y'flimsy woman."

Emilia: "No, I will get in your way. I'm not letting you destroy the tomb. Because no matter what, I'm going to overcome the Trial."

Garfiel: "It's damn obvious yer can't do it. Day after fuckin' day yer wah wah wah wah cryin' all over th'damn place. N' now yer lost yer friends, can't help that yer gonna be sad. Go curl up n'bed n'fuckin' cry. Y'do that, and I ain't doin' nothin."

Emilia: "—Hic."

Sorrow flashes over Emilia's expression in response to Garfiel's cruel statement. But said expression only last for an instant as Emilia immediately swallows down the pain.

Emilia: "I'm sorry, but even if you say those things, I can't step back for you. I need to challenge the Trial. And then face my past, and…"

Garfiel: "Just goddamn fuckin' everybody!"

Cutting in halfway through Emilia's statement, Garfiel clicks his tongue in irritation, fury blazing in his eyes.

The grisly pressure he expels compounds in intensity, Emilia's shoulders trembling. Seeing her fear, sharp-eyed Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: "What happened t'that blusterin' 'bout yer past? Th'second yer scared of my amazin' self, all goddamn chance is gone yer ever gonner get over what yer most afraid of. —No one can do anythin' 'bout that shit. The witch just does this malicious crap so she can goddamn laugh at people."

Subaru: "Well isn't that a disparaging invalidation of the witch."

Garfiel: "Eh?"

Garfiel shifts his blazing gaze from Emilia to Subaru, and jabs his finger at him.

Garfiel: "What? Yer sayin' yer wanna fuckin' protect that asshole witch? They say N O MORNING OR AFTERNOON FOR POTOTSK, but is yer fuckin' stinkin' self just whole out that witch's slave, eh?"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru shuts his mouth.

Garfiel's brows furrow in puzzlement, but he does not seem to understand why Subaru has gone silent.

The witch sleeping in the tomb is Echidna. And the witch's miasma enfolding Subaru belongs to the Witch of Envy.

Only informed to some marginal degree, and unable to smell the miasma himself, Garfiel's comprehension of the situation is not great enough to recognize that discrepancy.

And having had his spirit broken after challenging the Trial only once, Garfiel does not even understand the meaning of Echidna's Trial.

Subaru: "You're just half measures about everything, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "…Fuck you'd just say?"

Putting together all of Garfiel's statements and actions thus far, this is how Subaru appraises him. Garfiel responds to Subaru's curt words in low, threatening voice. But even while faced with this looming and ghastly pressure, Subaru looks him in the eye without fear.

Subaru: "It's something you were unable to do, so others'll also be incapable of it. That's how I think, so undoubtedly you're that type. —How awful've you let your complacency get?"

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "Yes, you're right, Emilia has failed the T RIAL multiple times. That she's been forced to watch a past she doesn't want to see and came out bawling afterwards is another thing I can't deny. When Puck left she lost it to a revolting extent, and I can't even assert she's righted herself yet."

Garfiel falls silent as Subaru jerks his chin toward Emilia, who stands beside him.

Emilia looks at Subaru in surprise at these sudden comments from him. But, perhaps impressed with Subaru's expression as he voices these unkind assessments, she refrains from interfering. These opinions Subaru was stating were ones that Emilia had already accepted herself. While they definitely ought to be embarrassing for her, they were not statements that she should ignore. Subaru thought her ability to judge that, and face these things, splendid of her despite her weakness. And so,

Subaru: “Maybe challenging the Trial won’t presently lead to any change. She might lose today as well, and come back crying again.”

Garfiel: “If yer fuckin’ know that, then why’re yer havin’ her, over n’ over…”

Subaru: “But, Emilia will challenge it. Countless times. —Unlike you.”

Garfiel: “—Hic.”

Garfiel swallows his breath.

Seeing exactly how a quiver flashes through Garfiel’s sharp gaze, Subaru speaks without fear. And once more, as he stares down directly at Garfiel,

Subaru: “Garfiel. You lost and you ran away, and Emilia is not like you.”

Garfiel: “—Hic! Don’t, you fuckin’ dare, get cocky!!”

Immediately following Subaru’s statement, Garfiel shouts in rage, his right foot shattering the earth. The impact of his stomp sends the ground flying aloft. By some unknown logic it takes the shape of a rectangular slab the size of a tatami mat, which Garfiel’s left foot shunts into.

The earth block rotates on the vertical at horrifying speeds, wrapping itself in a gale-force wind as it zooms right past Subaru—and slams into the wall aside the tomb’s entrance, impacting the ancient structure.

Dust and a section of entangling ivy, of moss and so on, peels away to fall from the tomb wall. They rain upon Subaru’s head but he remains unflinching. Emilia’s shoulders do hitch up for a moment, but having heard Subaru’s statements immediately prior, she does not make any motion to move away.

Seeing the faint but definite bond of trust between the two, Garfiel's eyes shoot open outrageously wide. The gleam in his bloodshot pupils compounds in ferocity.

Garfiel: "Fuckin'! I can't stand either're you! Aauh! Can't stand you! Can't goddamn stand you! With yer fuckin' know-it-all mug! With yer fuckin' unruffled mug! If my amazin' self feels like it, th'two're yer bastards're chunks've gore so mutilated yer won't be tellin' yer goddamn apart! You don't fuckin' know that, huh?!"

Subaru: "I do know. That you're incapable of doing that."

Garfiel breathes raggedly as he kicks at the earth, voicing threats upon threats upon threats. But his vigorous intimidations no longer have any effect on Subaru's heart.

Of course not. With everything that's happened, from his conversation with Ryuzu, and this present situation—putting it all together, even Subaru finally understands what lies at Garfiel's core. Although showing this much rage, and hostile toward Subaru's group, Garfiel—

Subaru: "You won't kill me or Emilia. Or no, it's that you can't. I mean Garfiel…you've never killed anyone before, have you?"

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "You had a fight with Otto and Ram, but you made sure you didn't kill them. Otto's one thing, but it goes absolutely for Ram. They're not showing up because you did something to immobilize them…and stopped there."

Garfiel's irritated behavior comes to a stop.

He quiets his breath, staring at Subaru. Hearing the words that Subaru flung at Garfiel, a look of confusion arises in Emilia's eyes.

Being that she has only seen Garfiel's usual disposition, Subaru's declarations must be rather difficult to accept for her.

But Subaru is confident.

Garfiel, at least while in humanoid form and possessing his own will, could not make the decision to kill anybody.

—Subaru has confronted Garfiel several times throughout these loops.

Over differences in opinion. Otherwise when Garfiel abruptly viewed Subaru with hostility. He once took a hit from Garfiel which stopped him when he practiced violence upon Roswaal, and lost his eye.

But it was also Garfiel who healed the one-eyed Subaru afterwards, and even when he took a hostile stance, he had never once killed Subaru.

There was one exception. Garfiel had transformed into a tiger and slaughtered the evacuees. It's a memory that Subaru would rather not recollect. But it is also an impossible memory for him to forget, vivid, an event which made him even now feel things about Garfiel that he could not really swallow.

But, reflecting on the event, there is something Subaru noticed.

Garfiel could not speak while transformed. He brandished his claws and fangs according to his instincts, having degraded into an animal. Even when he turned his weapons upon the villagers, that had likely been according to instinct.

But, back then, that first villager—that first single person who became the trigger for the slaughter —when Garfiel killed him, it was to the very end of the end, truly scraping to the borderline, that Garfiel hesitated about it.

Back then, the excess of rage and panic had kept Subaru from understanding.

When Garfiel turned to approach that very first person, Subaru thought his panic had made everything look sluggish. But that was not the case. It was legitimate hesitation.

Once he killed him, once he lost that hesitation, was the moment Garfiel truly became a beast.

Cognizant to the taste of blood and life, the eyes of that tiger were things that Natsuki Subaru remembered with loathing.

Subaru: “Your eyes aren’t like they were back then. You won’t let yourself kill anyone, yet.”

Garfiel: “Fuck’s your, basis fer that. Nevermind Ram, my amazin’ self ain’t got a speck’ve a reason t’hesitate in gnashin’ yer lackey dead.”

Subaru: “Exactly, nevermind Ram.”

Emilia: “H-Hey…you two, is there some kind of grudge you have against Otto…?”

Emilia timidly cuts in to comment about Otto, who is receiving very unfortunate treatment in this conversation.

But, perhaps for the first time ever, Subaru consciously ignores Emilia and jabs his finger at Garfiel.

Subaru: “If you’d thought to hit me right now, you could’ve done it. But you didn’t think to hit me. You just used threats. It’s murderousness as an accessory. Wonder which of us’s the scared one.”

Garfiel: “Oi, oi, OI…watch how yer prattle yer mouth, bastard. Go any further, and yer never know which words’re gonna be yer last.”

Subaru: “Quit making threats you can’t follow through on. I had my fill of cowardly people trying to act tough back in the alleyway with Tom Dick and Larry. Though at least they had enough guts to stab me.”

Garfiel: “Stop…stop it…”

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel looks at Subaru with an expression of fury.

However, his opponent is Natsuki Subaru. No greater juncture existed for him to show off his talents than when pissing people off. And so, Subaru: “And your oh so prided claws and fangs too, you groom them nicely every day, but just leave them there as decoration. If you want, how about trying on some stylish nail stickers? It’s what all the girls do where I’m from. Don’t think it’s a perfect match for your spineless, girly self?”

Garfiel: “I told you t’fuckin’ stop—!!”

Another strike.

The gouged-out earth bounces into the air, skimming over Subaru’s head to crash into the tomb.

There’s no need to dodge. Garfiel never had any intention of hitting.

Subaru: “If you’re gonna play with mud, go do it in the sandbox. Do you understand that this thing behind me’s a priceless historical artefact? And aren’t you stationing yourself as the fangs or whatever that guard this Sanctuary? This thing behind me’s the grave of the local witch. She’s your buddy, don’t discriminate against her.”

Garfiel: “She ain’t! My fuckin’! Buddy! It’s because that fuckin’ buried witch’s here that…my amazin’ self…my amazin’…”

Subaru’s gab is in perfect form. Even Garfiel’s breathing gets choppy and feeble, faced with Subaru’s fluent provocations.

Garfiel had come here while pushing his wounded body. Then he continued in this tiring conversation, and spent no time hesitating to waste his energy on pointless threat displays. His bloodflow accelerates in tune with his emotions, some of his supposedly-stable injuries opening again.

Garfiel takes ragged breaths and stands very still as he glares at Subaru. When his gaze switches to Emilia. His nose scrunches up, as if he has noticed something.

Garfiel: “Oi…fuck off, you. Fuck’s with those eyes.”

Emilia: “…”

Garfiel: “If yer got somethin’ yer tryin’ t’say, goddamn say it! It’s fuckin’ pissin’ me off I’m gettin’ looked at like that!”

Perhaps seeing something in Emilia’s eyes as she wordlessly watches him, Garfiel howls.

Complex emotion rests in Emilia’s amethyst gaze. She shakes her head.

Emilia: “Garfiel…what are you so afraid of?”

Garfiel: “I’m, afraid…yer sayin’?”

Emilia: “Well you’re afraid. You’re talking loud, reaching out as best you can, and stomping the ground to cheer yourself up, aren’t you?”

Garfiel: “Like yer know, fuckin’ anything ‘bout me…”

Emilia: “I do know. After all…”

Cutting off Garfiel’s quieter statement, Emilia takes a single breath.

Emilia: “—I’ve also been living in constant fear of many things.”

Garfiel’s breathing freezes.

Emilia touches her chest, her fingers confirming the absence of the crystal, a fleeting sense arising in her eyes.

Emilia: “I managed to get to this moment while always scared of lots of things. I left lots of things to Puck, I leaned on him…I didn’t notice I was doing it, and I made it here. But today, since just a moment ago, I feel like I finally understand it a little.”

Garfiel: “Shut up.”

Emilia: “I don’t clearly know what’s right yet, or what it is I have to do. But I feel like I know that there’s SOMETHING. And I can find that SOMETHING inside the tomb. I can’t move out of your path.”

Garfiel: “Shut it. Disappear. Don’t talk to me.”

Emilia: “…But don’t you truly already have that SOMETHING?”

Garfiel: “—Hic!”

Past his limit, Garfiel’s head springs up. His knees bend slightly, for his petite frame to go bounding off like a shot.

He leaps for Emilia with horrifying speed. —But just before he can reach her, Subaru cuts in between them.

Subaru: “Garfiel!”

Garfiel: “—Tch!”

Reaching his arms out toward the oncoming Garfiel, Subaru charges while simultaneously protecting Emilia. Subaru collides with the strike, going tumbling, wincing in pain at the battering.

After rolling several times from momentum, he stops face-up on the ground. Garfiel puts his claws to the fallen Subaru’s neck as he bares his fangs at Emilia.

Garfiel: “Right now! Right fuckin’ now, get away from here! Don’t, n’ I’m paintin’ yer clothes red with th’blood from his dismembered neck!”

Emilia: “Subaru—”

Emilia prepares for battle.

She may have lost Puck, but she is still a practitioner of the spiritual arts. She could enlist help from her Contracted minor spirits to use magic. Leaving aside whether she would win, she could fight Garfiel.

And thus Emilia immediately moves to build up mana—

Subaru: “Emilia, stop! I’m fine! He won’t do anything anyway!”

Garfiel: “Shut it! Fuckin’ enough, ‘m sick of this crap! My ears’re rottin’ off listenin’ t’th’bullshit from yer n’ that woman! ‘F I rip open that loose mouth’er yers n’ cut off yer jaw, maybe yer ain’t gonna talk none’v this shit anymore?”

Subaru: “—gh.”

Leaning down on the fallen Subaru, Garfiel runs his sharp claws over his left cheek. Their points gouge into his flesh, Subaru wailing quietly at the burning pain. But even still, his eyes do not yield.

Subaru: “You get us out of the way, destroy the tomb, and then what? …You think running and running and running is going to let you get away?”

Garfiel: “It’s yer own regret. Goddamn who can do anythin’ ‘bout it? That thing ain’t got th’slightest idea ‘v lettin’ us get away. Why is it you ain’t gettin’ that!”

Subaru: “No, I’m not getting it, Garfiel. —Since your past, and your regrets, can be overcome.”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru asserts.

Garfiel and Emilia swallow their breath.

Subaru: “It was painful, it was suffering, it was so overwhelmingly pathetic that I couldn’t face anyone and I gave up. But the only who thought it was hopeless was me, and actually, nothing was beyond hope at all.”

Even saying they were fake events, false parents, and created from memories.

Subaru faced his biggest regret, and procured a single answer as well as a goodbye.

The Trial assuredly did confer Subaru with pain. Just remembering it made his insides creak, the thing in his chest was perpetual, and the Trial had branded Subaru with both his past and with suffering.

Subaru: “But, including that pain and absolutely everything, I swallowed my past. Swallowed it. …While yes the witch is an asshole, and I’ll never forget how she betrayed me when I tried to trust her.”

Passing through his mind is the visage of the white witch, always smiling mysteriously.

No matter how much time passes, Subaru will never unravel his complicated feelings about her.

But, there should be no need to betray even the feeling that he acquired back then.

Subaru: “I’m grateful to the witch. I’m glad I could face my past. I ran, I ran, I ran and I ran…but I’m glad I couldn’t escape.”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “Garfiel. —Are you seriously still running from your past with your family?”

Garfiel: “Wh—?!”

Garfiel’s face changes colors.

It reddens in rage, pales in shock, and now, turns pallid.

The clicking from his fangs results from the trembling of his chattering teeth.

With chills, or perhaps in dread, Garfiel looks down at Subaru.

Garfiel: “Who, told you…about my past?”

Subaru: “Basically everyone you’re thinking of. Do you think that’s a betrayal? Or do you think it’s something else?”

Garfiel: “ue, au, aehu…”

The overwhelming fury keeps Garfiel from even speaking as he gives choppy, faltering breaths. His breathing comes intermittent. Witnessing this violent shock happening immediately before his face, Subaru continues.

Subaru: “The witch told me that you’re afraid of the outside world.”

Garfiel replies with nothing.

Subaru: “Frederica told me that when she offered you to leave with her, you denied her.”

Garfiel replies with nothing.

Subaru: “Miss Ryuzu told me that what you saw in the tomb, was your goodbye with your mother.”

Garfiel replies with—

Garfiel: “Moth…er…”

Subaru: “I heard the superficial outline of you and Frederica’s circumstances. You’re siblings from a human mother, and two different half-blood demi-human fathers. You two quarter-bloods aren’t bound by the Sanctuary’s barrier. Frederica left the Sanctuary so that she could create a place to receive the people from here, for when the barrier is eventually broken.”

Garfiel: “Sister…”

Subaru: “But you didn’t take Frederica’s hand, and stayed inside. Why did you? What is it you want to do, for what purpose is it, that you’re still here?”

His breathing labors.

Garfiel’s hand as it presses Subaru to the ground starts putting in more force. He was not doing this to silence Subaru. Garfiel was so entirely ruined that if did not put his strength into something, cling to something, he would imminently break down.

Subaru: “In the tomb you saw your past. You saw your mother leaving you and Frederica behind in the Sanctuary…did you?”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “That’s the reason you’re avoiding the outside world?”

Silence is to be taken as a ‘yes’.

Garfiel remains silent, looking at Subaru with weakest gaze he’s given yet. It could not even be called a glare, this powerless look.

His expression was that of a small child, scared of his secrets being exposed.

Guilt for cutting into another's wounds arises in Subaru's chest. He subdues the feeling, grappling it down, as he presses Garfiel for the truth.

He stabs his finger into the faintly visible wound, forcing the hole wider, letting the blood flow.

Subaru: "Because your mother abandoned you. Because you hate your mother who abandoned you, because you hate the outside world that took your mother, you detest the outside world?!"

His theories from speaking with Ryuzu.

His advice from Echidna, saying that Garfiel fears the outside world.

The reason that his goodbye with his family remains in Garfiel's heart, and even now stings him as barbs.

Hearing the assertive tone of Subaru's statement, Garfiel frantically shakes his head.

Garfiel: "No! No, nonononononono, yer wrong!! The fuck'd you goddamn understand! Stop runnin' yer mouth like yer know shit!"

Subaru: "That's right! What I said is my imaginings, and what my mouth's running is know-it-all bunk. The only one who can say what you're really thinking is you. If I'm wrong, then what are your actual feelings on this?!"

Force presses down on his lungs. Subaru shows no pained expression as he raises his voice.

Showered in Subaru's voice from below him, Garfiel's face stiffens. He looks away.

Subaru: "You rejected Frederica who left for the outside, you bound yourself with the duty to protect the Sanctuary, and you're interfering with people who challenge the Trial while they attempt to break the barrier! What is it you're scared of! What is it you fear! So you just hate the outside world?!"

Garfiel: "Yer, all wrong…!"

Subaru: "So you just hate your mother who abandoned you! You challenged the Trial, saw yourself being abandoned, and so that's what you're afraid of!"

Garfiel's expression twists in grief.

He lifts his hand from Subaru, uprighting himself in an attempt to escape Subaru's verbal pursuit.

But he will not get away.

Subaru reaches out, grabs the back of Garfiel's neck, and pulls him to a stop.

With Garfiel's gruesome, blood-soaked face within breathing range, Subaru glares at him, presses further.

Subaru: "Answer me, Garfiel! What is it you're afraid of!"

His theory from speaking with Ryuzu, Echidna's words, Roswaal and Frederica's attitudes, Ram's expression when she looks at Garfiel—Subaru saw an answer differing from all of them. If he was right, if this was the truth, then…

Garfiel: "No, my amazin' self's…my amazin'…"

Subaru: "What is it you truly think!!"

Garfiel: "My amazing…mine, mother…"

Garfiel swallows his breath, gazes up at the sky, his fangs chattering as he,

Garfiel: "—I wanted her to be happy!"

Garfiel: “We were in the way, weren’t we?! Myself and my sister, we were in the way of her happiness, weren’t we?!”

Flowing over.

Everything that Garfiel had been holding in until now.

Garfiel: “Well I knew that! She abandoned me and sis. And of course she would!”

Garfiel’s reasoning, which he had kept in his heart, never revealed to anybody.

Garfiel: “Couple of goddamn brats she couldnt’ve wanted, n’ ones with demi-human blood at that… Of course we’d impede her from living in the outside world! Leaving us behind, throwing us away, what is weird about that… there ain’t nothing…incorrect with that!”

Unable to hide his wavering voice, he buries his face in his hands to hide his wavering eyes.

Garfiel: “I get why we were abandoned. So I don’t resent mom for abandoning us! ‘S goddamn obvious! Myself and my sis, we were impeding our mom’s life! She threw us away, and left the Sanctuary so she could be happy!”

While still young, Garfiel had seen his mother off as she left the two of them behind and exited the Sanctuary.

He could not have understood what he felt back then. But the feeling had laid its roots in him, grown inside him over a long span of time, and bloomed into a single answer.

Being: His mother had just abandoned them.

However,

Garfiel: “But y’know, that night…I, saw it. There in th’tomb, in the Trial, I saw it. I saw it. Sh-She, left us, and left the Sanctuary, and…

right then, right after she left, her carriage got caught in a landslide, swallowed in the dirt and she just died…”

Subaru: “—!”

Garfiel: “Sis doesn’t know…Sis fucking thinks mom’s off somewhere, forgotten about us and living a happy life. …But reality’s not that! Mom, the second she abandoned us! She died!”

Fragments of the truth, sobbed out of Garfiel’s mouth.

The harshness of it overwhelms both Subaru, aware of the circumstances, and unaware Emilia.

Garfiel remains before the silenced two, head still buried in his hands, his breathing ragged with his weeping.

Garfiel: “She just damn died…she never got to be happy…”

Subaru can give no reply.

Garfiel: “Why? But you know she left for the outside so that she could be happy?”

Emilia can give no reply.

Garfiel: “But you know she left us because she wanted to be happy?”

Neither Subaru nor Emilia can give Garfiel any reply.

Garfiel: “She abandoned us, but if she never got to be happy and just immediately died, then…”

The unanswerable questions stream from Garfiel’s mouth.

And surely—

Garfiel: “What are we meant to do about our sadness, about this feeling of being thrown away?”

—These questions had always, always chorused eternally inside his heart.

Garfiel: “I wanted mom to be happy!”

Power comes to his teary voice.

Garfiel draws his hands away from his face, gritting his teeth as he pauses.

His fangs could crack. His canines could tear through his lips.

Garfiel: “The sadness we felt! And the loneliness of being disowned! It was meaningful because it was for her happiness, that’s what I wanted to think! I wanted to be able to hate mom!”

Having lost any harbor for his feelings about his mother, Garfiel’s heart has been trapped inside the Sanctuary.

Without anything to strike against, his emotions had been the fuel to keep aflame the blaze consuming his soul.

Garfiel: “But mom just died! Me and sis, we had a sad experience and that was it. Mom didn’t get to be happy at all, heavy rocks and sand buried her, she died in agony.”

Having reached this conclusion, there amid the smoldering ashes inside him, Garfiel decided.

Garfiel stands up. He draws away from Subaru.

He looks up at the tomb, and in a low voice,

Garfiel: “—I ain’t ever going t’the outside world.”

His voice shakes.

In rage, in sorrow, in vestiges of fury, the flame still blazing even now.

Garfiel turns around.

He looks down at the fallen Subaru, and clicks his sharp fangs.

Garfiel: “Desertin’ th’place and going outside ain’t going to give you happiness! Trying to change anything comes accompanied with pain, and not everybody can withstand that hurt!”

Subaru: “…”

Garfiel: “There’s shittons of hopeless people out there! This place’s full’v’em! What’m I meant to do! Just make them sacrifices for happiness, and give them sad experiences?! Just be like my sis?!”

Subaru: “…”

Garfiel: “I will—my amazin’ self will—protect them.”

He clenches his fists.

His howling stops, his eyes hosting quiet determination as he pauses.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’ll protect them. Everything my hands can reach, my amazin’ self’ll protect. Protect, protect, protect…never ever lose anybody…never let anyone experience anything like what my mom did!”

Not anger, not sadness, prompts Garfiel’s heart to tremble.

Neither Subaru, nor Emilia, can move when faced with these feelings of Garfiel’s.

Garfiel spreads his arms wide, turning his back to the tomb, and shouts.

Garfiel: “I’ll be the barrier! A real one, dividing inside and outside, a barrier!”

Subaru: “Garfiel…”

Garfiel: “I! Will! Protect the Sanctuary, protect everyone! Protect nanna! My amazin’ self’s the only one who can do it! My amazin’ self’s the only one who knows it! And it’s fine for them not to know!!”

Garfiel’s nigh bloody scream, his resolve, his determination.

Faced with that, they cannot speak.

Garfiel has steeled his resolve entirely.

And so,

Emilia: “—Subaru.”

Subaru: “It’s okay, Emilia.”

Emilia calls out to Subaru as he stands up, steps forth.

He gives a wave of his hand to her concerned voice as he approaches Garfiel.

The two face each other, mutually between an arm’s reach.

Words would no longer stop Garfiel.

And so, there was only one thing to do.

Subaru: “You goddamn stubborn, oblivious bastard…”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “I understand your resolve. My assumptions’d been wrong. And your assumptions are wrong too. And so…I’ll go and rectify them.”

Garfiel stoops down slightly, his arms dangling at his sides.

Although he may look undefended, an abnormal and ghastly aura emanates from him as he takes this serious battle stance.

Subaru raises his hands to take his own battle stance, as well.

With Garfiel as his opponent, having determined that words will not work, to fight him on his turf.

Subaru: “I’ll force you into absolute surrender, and teach you. —That you’re a kind, weak, stupid idiot!”

Chapter 112:
The Instinct to Reject Weakness

1

—The fight peaked with unimaginable severity.

The two men face each other, trading fists from straight on.

Hard bones batter into flesh, muscles bursting, blood dripping. There come the wails, the unpleasant heaving of frothy respiration, the wretchedness of the sloppy fistfight as it burns into the eyes of the observer.

Emilia: "…Subaru."

Standing before the tomb's entrance, the onlooking Emilia puts her hand to her chest.

Her eyes host confusion, her fingers waver in search of something to cling to. The perpetually reliable presence at her chest and their warmth, aware as she is of its absence, still binds her heart.

Subaru had said things to her inside the tomb.

Subaru asserted that he loved her, cherished her, and so he believed in her.

Indeed, a part of her did feel saved by these words. But it also came with compounding anxiety.

Her true memories were being resurrected alongside the ticking of the seconds.

She had believed that false memories were where she began, and with that belief, reached this point. Once her beginnings, her trigger for getting this far, changed, just how would it change her?

Her truest feelings conflict with each other in argument, unease rooted deep within Emilia.

Subaru had shouted that even if Emilia changes, his love for her will remain unchanged.

This boy who had hurt and suffered for her, and attempted to fight to the end for her—she had not a speck of doubt about his feelings. He had proved them continuously.

—What she can’t trust is her own self.

She walked along a path which had its foundations set in an incorrect beginning, and although she thought she had the end of this road in sight, she stopped. She wondered whether she might be walking in the wrong direction, hesitating despite seeing the end.

Her feet have stopped moving.

Would she be permitted to start walking again?

Would the path she walks be a new road, or the same road she walks now?

Emilia: “…”

She wanders within the labyrinth of unanswerable, impenetrable questions.

Even now, unable to speak up, and aware that she lacks any right to stop them, Emilia watches the two men fight.

A scream, and to great heights, the blood spatters.

2

Cutting through the air, the swing of a fist.

Knuckles come looming for his face—at depressingly slow velocity.

“Tch!”

No need for an overblown dodge.

He tilts his head in the barest minimum, evading the fist without sustaining even a graze. His opponent’s stance disintegrates due to that big swing, and there into the adversary's undefended stomach, he jabs his knee to gouge their bowels.

His knee feels their rib-bones and flimsy muscles, the attack transmitting to the depths of their gut.

Their mouth, already multiple times subject to expelling fluids, vomits up blood unrelenting.

“Ggauh, aug.”

They hold their stomach, their movements faltering, their visage atrocious. He pounds his uplifted arms into their slouched back, following from his frontal attack to now scramble their innards from behind.

They had managed to withstand the kick, but they fail to endure the strike from behind and easily collapse. He kicks them to rotate their fallen body upwards, then follows up his attack by driving his toes into their left flank.

Their screams peal.

Their breathing heaves with vomit and blood.

His fists, his knee, his toes. With every strike the sensation of their skin, of their flesh paring away, rebounds to him.

Usually that would jubilate him, but presently he only felt incredible discomfort.

These actions repeated over and over and over and over—and what in the world was the point of it?

“Enough's goddamn ‘nough, fuckin' give up already.”

He casts jeers on his coughing, unsightly opponent as they spit up blood.

He is failing to take their consciousness. He can strike their head, kick their stomach, but they quite detestably will not concede it.

Especially detestable, when is attempting to make them understand the disparity in strength between them.

Garfiel: “Yer sure a fuckin’ brainless bastard, oi! Yer ain’t got a hint ovv’er a chance’ev winnin’! Yer back’s slouched! Yer swings’re pointl’ssly big! Yer balance’s wobblin’ everywhere, ‘s a goddamn tragedy!”

Subaru: “…My bad.”

Garfiel: “Aaaugh, yer fuckin’ shitpile! Do yer know what it fuckin’ feels like t’have t’entertain this pointless, pighead’d game of yers? Fuckin’ fuck off, fuck off.”

Garfiel spits his insults at Subaru, who attempts with laborious breaths to upright himself.

Subaru’s hands contact the ground as he struggles to push himself up. Recipient to punches, his face is swollen, and his nosebleed coats the lower portion of his visage with red. Some of his teeth surely must be broken or missing. His guts, his ribs, wouldn’t be strange for some of them to be busted.

With the violent pain ravaging his body, he should not be able to even remain conscious. And yet.

Garfiel: “What’s th’damn point! Didn’t yer challenge me ‘cause yer thought yer had hopes’v winnin’!

All yer fuckin’ doin’ is showin’ off how goddamn ragged n’ beaten yer are I can’t even watch it! …

Take a fuckin’ nap!”

Subaru: “—Ghguh!”

Obstinacy, stubbornness, those words cannot describe the tenacity Garfiel senses as he once again brutalizes Subaru.

He sweeps Subaru’s legs out from under him, drives his foot into Subaru’s flank when he collapses. Blood spews from Subaru’s mouth as Garfiel kicks his tumbling form skyward, then drives his elbow into his suspended frame to shunt him back to the ground.

He ricochets off the earth, the hard ground beating his body before he comes to lie spread-out on the floor.

His eyes peel wide, he exhales an airy breath, and this time for sure lies motionless—finally knocked him unconscious. Garfiel gives a long sigh.

Subaru: “Fuck’re you, looking like it’s, over…”

Garfiel: “—Hic!”

Garfiel’s shoulders heave with his ragged breaths, when the voice he hears from below prompts his eyes to shoot open in shock.

The man he surely had knocked unconscious somehow, wavering, manages to stand.

Garfiel: “Don’t, goddamn joke…”

Subaru: “Yeah…this’s, no joke here. With how beaten, up I am I… can’t think of a…single, funny anecdote…”

Garfiel: “That ain’t what I m—”

Subaru: “—Hhhah!”

Exhibiting a nightmarish doggedness, Subaru spits a sharp breath and swings his fist.

Naturally, no matter how desperate the punch is, from Garfiel’s perspective it’s equivalent to being assaulted by a child. His hand easily catches and diverts the oncoming fist, and as compensation he drives the heel of his palm into Subaru’s guts.

The strike drills into a space between his organs, rippling to impact his internal fluids—his already-vacant stomach constricts, and up flows blood and yellowy bile.

Subaru: “Gugh, bhubh…”

Garfiel: "'S th'same thing no matter how many times yer try, how many fuckin' times do—"

Subaru holds his stomach and crumbles on the spot as Garfiel once again urges him to surrender.

He cannot bear to watch the disgusting atrocity of it. Garfiel averts his gaze, clicking his tongue.

Garfiel: "—!"

And past his face roars Subaru's fist.

Garfiel: "Wh?!"

Subaru: "Garfiel, you fuck. Who gave you permission to just ditch me?"

Left arm forward, right arm back.

Seeing Subaru readied in combat stance, his will to fight not abolished in the least, Garfiel feels something near a shiver.

He doesn't consider Subaru a threat for even a moment.

Anyone could tell that Subaru was making empty threats, the strength gap between him and Garfiel too great for any amount of struggling to compensate.

He could keep sending Garfiel these reckless punches, but be it a thousand times or a million times, the ironclad strength gap meant Garfiel would simply dodge every attempt.

All of Subaru's struggling, every single moment of it, was futile.

No matter how many times Garfiel punched, kicked, threw him, no matter how much pain he sustained, his overstressed body would never touch Garfiel.

Garfiel: "Y'fucker, stop shittin' around!"

Subaru: "Haah?"

He was facing an opponent who could not win, but nevertheless lofted stubbornness alone as his weapon.

His spirit alone would not fold, his feelings alone would not falter. Perhaps that mentality ought to be called strength, a strength unbound by the flesh.

Seeing him stand up after falling again and again perhaps did jolt Garfiel's heart to some degree.

But, if he was hoping that this display would make Garfiel change his mind, that constituted an insult beyond parallel.

His spirit alone would not fold, would not bend. These concepts possessed what point, exactly?

Garfiel: "Do yer really fuckin' think that 'f yer keep bein' bullhead'd, even knowin' yer won't win, my amazin' self's eventually gonn'er stay my fists? Really fuckin' think that my amazin' self's gonn'er get sick'v punchin' n' kickin' yer, acknowledge yer spirit n' stand down…that I'm gonn'er lose by ceding to emotions, is that what yer trying t'fucking say?!"

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel: "Don't fuckin' joke. This fight between me and you ain't any fuckin' game! Yer beat them down, er yer get beat down. There ain't any other endings t'this!"

He stomps the ground.

The power of his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits fills him, the earth supplying his body with overflowing vitality.

Compared to when he had finished fighting Ram and Otto in the forest, and so pushed his ruined body to venture here, his flesh is in better condition. This not-even-a-fistfight with Subaru was not exacerbating his fatigue, in fact he may as well be sitting in shade of a tree and having a pleasant reprieve.

And this minuscule influence of Subaru's is meant to sway Garfiel's heart just goddamn how?

Garfiel: “Yer goddamn said it, didn’t you! That yer gonna teach my amazin’ self that I’m weak, that’s what yer goddamn said! Well th’fuck is this, then! The fuck is weak! The fuck’re you teachin’! The one who ain’t got th’strength and ‘s gettin’ forced into surrender, the brainl’ss idiot here is goddamn you!”

Garfiel remembers every syllable of Subaru’s pre-battle declaration.

It was utter buffoonery. Entirely farcical. Every inch of this man defined the word fraudulent.

Garfiel: “N’ that guy n’ Ram too! Both’ve them who battled me at least had th’guts t’try ‘n win! N’ that’s why I fought them back with everythin’ I had. They worked their brains comin’ up with plans, compensatin’ for where they lacked by usin’ their smarts…those two had th’guts enough for me t’acknowledge them. But what about you!”

While he did not know the exact details of how it worked, Otto had used his blessing to get the forest on his side, and cornered Garfiel. His methods of herding Garfiel into that final blast of incredible magic illustrated that he had utilized all his vitality and intellect, his fighting spirit so great that Garfiel would gladly commend it as the apex of what the weak could do.

Ram’s offensive which began with her surprise attack, although conferring him with an agony equivalent to betrayal, was indeed a fight perfectly befitting of Ram. Merciless, no punches pulled, a battle between persons of genuine strength.

Both had made their most desperate efforts while fighting Garfiel, and fully intended to steal victory.

Their methods deserved esteem. So much so that Garfiel had to recognize them as foes and yet glorious.

Garfiel: “Compared t’them…there ain’t any way t’be more obscene. Y’get done in ‘n done in ‘n yer still stand up…n’ so fuckin’ what? No matter how much yer beaten, yer spirit won’t yield…n’ fuckin’ what does that say? Even sayin’ yer hopes’v winnin’ er zilch, yer ain’t ever fleein’ the fight…what’s so fuckin’ commendable?!”

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel: "Yer think I'm impressed? That yer bloodsoaked, wobbly legged, can't even open yer fuckin' eyes right, n' yer still standin' up thing, 's gonna stir my feelin's n' I'm gonn'er stand down? I'm gonna churn you t'goddamn mincemeat…What fuckin' idiots do yer want t'make of me, n' of th'people who acted for yer sake?"

The greatest indignation Garfiel has ever felt in his life blazes within his chest.

The fight has been defiled. He has been insulted. And not only that, but this man's methods were attempting to pollute the nobility, the resolute will, of those whose fights Garfiel had acknowledged.

Garfiel: "Take a fuckin' nap. Pull the fuck out. You fucking disgusting, miserable pile of pile of pile of shit. Yer best answer 's to accept yer've lost n' curl up t'nap in yer cot, you halfwit."

Subaru: "…"

Still in his fighting stance, Subaru bathes in Garfiel's lines and lines of curses.

His head wavers unsteadily, his eyes near swollen shut but somehow managing to capture Garfiel.

His will to fight was not waning, which precisely made his filthiness an eyesore.

If all these words, these blows, these punches were not leading his spirit to bend, then what did he have to do to break him?

If pain will not achieve it, then only one solution remains.

Garfiel: "How 'bout you try goddamn tellin' him, huh?!"

Turning around, Garfiel calls out to Emilia, observing the fight from the tomb's entrance. Her shoulders tremble minutely as the conversation is suddenly aimed at her. The display of weakness makes Garfiel click his tongue in irritation.

Garfiel: “Yer can’t bear t’fuckin’ watch, now you goddamn tell him that! He ain’t fuckin’ listenin’ when I say it. Have th’girl he loves tell him he looks disgustin’ n’lame, that his efforts ain’t achievin’ nothin’, that he’s benign shit!”

Emilia: “…I-I.”

Garfiel: “What?! Yer sayin’ y’can’t fuckin’ do it? Does it look t’you he still has any hope’v winnin’? Or do yer like watchin’ this? Yer watch the guy who loves you get torn up n’ broken down for yer sake, n’ does that delude you into feelin’ yer loved, fuckin’ really, oi?!”

Emilia: “—Hic!”

Emilia freezes rigid, her eyes wide open, as the spite showers upon her.

Garfiel’s merciless statements thrust daggers into onlooking Emilia.

If Garfiel’s fists will not stop Subaru, then Emilia’s words are the only option.

His body would be broken by Garfiel, his heart would be broken by Emilia, and so being even Subaru would surely yield.

Over the course of watching the fight, Emilia’s face twisted multiple times in pain as she witnessed Subaru be beaten.

Unlike Subaru with his mysterious resolve, Emilia’s heart has not steeled itself for anything yet. She is still the same girl who lost the Trial and sobbed wailing afterwards.

Garfiel had no great intention to lambaste her for that.

To be overwhelmed by the Trial, by your past, was natural. Who on earth could negate the memory of their greatest regret?

The concept that you could overcome your past, your regrets, was utter bullshit.

Subaru had mixed up what were realistic ideals and what were unattainable fantasies, a madman. This boy persistently standing before him chased entirely after fantasies, and demanded that others do the same thing. He was legitimately insane.

He was the same breed as Roswaal, an imbecile whose vision encompassed one thing and nothing more.

Garfiel: “Fuckin’ stop him, n’ end this! Both me, n’ you! We’re dancin’ to th’tune of that witch’s bullshit. N’ that’s all that’s goddamn happenin’.”

Emilia: “I—”

Emilia’s back straightens as if struck by lightning, her eyes shooting open.

Her captivating eyes are damp with tears as she looks at Subaru. Her lips quiver, Garfiel’s gaze still fixed on her, as she moves to call Subaru to stop.

Everything will be over then.

But—

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “…”

Before she can speak, Subaru is the one to call.

She closes her mouth as she listens intently to Subaru’s faint voice. Frantic, so as not to miss whatever he may say to her.

To her, Subaru states merely one, single thing.

Subaru: “…Watch me.”

Nothing more.

Spoken in frail voice, practically whispered to himself.

But Emilia hears it, looks up in astonishment, and after several seconds of hesitation—

Emilia: "—Mm."

—Puts her hand to her chest and nods.

Garfiel: "…Hah?!"

Faced with their exchange and entirely uncomprehending, Garfiel shouts in confusion.

His eyes widen in fury, only for Subaru to jab at him his finger.

Subaru: "…So you've been going on griping for a while now, but you got it wrong, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "Th'fuck?"

Subaru: "Maybe to you, I look like an idiot putting in their all despite having no chance of winning…but I'm not joking around. I've learned crazy goddamn well when it comes to knowingly getting into fights I can't win after suffering pain thanks to you. Never doing it again."

Subaru's face is a swollen mess, yet it still manages to twist into a scowl.

This event that Subaru is referring to is nothing that Garfiel could know, but apparently it relates to some overwhelmingly detested memory of his.

But even pitted against that sentiment, there is something he said which Garfiel must not overlook.

Garfiel: "Fuckin' ridiculous. It ain't even ideals or fantasy anymore, yer straight out not seein' what's there. F' y'stopped challengin' opponents y'can't beat…then th'hell's this situation, oi. Th' fuck is this situation?!"

Subaru: "Isn't it obvious, stupid? I still…haven't abandoned the fight for even a moment."

Perhaps his consciousness compounds in clarity as his speaks, for strength begins to return to Subaru's voice as he makes his assertion.

This baseless vitality of his seals Garfiel's throat mute with how it enrages him.

Subaru: "Long as I can still stand, I haven't abandoned the fight. … And the point where I stop standing back up only happens once I'm dead."

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "And with how you chicken out during the decisive moments, you can't kill me. …Meaning you can't stop me. It might only be bit by bit, but I'm inching toward my win. My victory is definite."

Garfiel: "Y'fuckin' imbecile! This ain't a thing 'f me bein' able er not able t'kill you. How the fuck! With what struggle! Are you fuckin' possibly goin't'beat me?!"

When wounded head to toe and as ragged as an old dishrag, any amount of words ring hollow. Subaru's statements equate to nothing more than extravagant prate. 'You can't stop me unless you kill me' was merely him expressing his volition. And assuming the claim was legitimate, he was then meaning to state that unless killed he could keep fighting, and eventually manage to land a fatal blow on Garfiel?

That would not occur, and would need incredible quantities of time and miracles to ever happen.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self breaks yer limbs, n'then yer can't do nothin' n' it's over! Whether yer conscious, er whether yer wann'er win! 'D have nothin't'do with it!"

Garfiel roars in furious rage.

His feet siphon vitality from the ground, his once-fatigued body regaining strength halfway to his usual. This constituted more than enough power for mutilating Natsuki Subaru.

He stomps off the earth, goes flying for Subaru.

Faced with Garfiel's approach, Subaru jabs out his fist as if happy about this turn of events. It's moronic. Slow. Unequivocally insufficient. He easily dodges it, strikes him in the abdomen. Pistons his knee into his chin, grabs him as he recoils and throws him hurtling to the ground. He drives his heel into his fallen form, wresting out two, three screams of agony. A merciless series of attacks. And with this—

Subaru: "…It's over, you think?"

Garfiel: "—!! Pisshead, what the fuck IS THIS?!"

Supposedly sustaining even more grievous bodily wounds, Subaru stands up.

Witnessing it, an unknown, arcane feeling begins to mantle Garfiel's heart.

He couldn't defeat him? He couldn't win? No, those were not where his anxiety lie.

It was in the suspicion that maybe, truly, exactly as this man stated, merely accumulation of physical damage would not manage to stop him.

Garfiel: "What th'fuck is th'point in riskin' yer life for this! Say you somehow manage t'beat my amazin' self, do yer really think that half-witch can beat the Trial! You seriously think that's th'case here, huh?!"

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel: "Like those miracles could happen! Like that convenient shit could happen! Million to one, billion to one chance, sayin' yer beat my amazin' self, doing that ain't gonna change anythin' 'bout that woman! N' it's th'same for anyone! When yer have a messed up, hopeless past…when yer see how yer regrets've stewed, you can't do goddamn anything about it! Why ain't you understandin' this!"

Subaru: "You're the one who should be hearing that question!!"

Garfiel: “—?!”

It lacks in enough momentum to be a burst of outrage, possesses to much emotion to be an appeal. The cracks skirting though Garfiel’s logic-devoid words fracture further beneath Natsuki Subaru’s yell.

Subaru: “Stop goddamn going off deciding everything on your own, Garfiel!”

Garfiel: “Fuck’re you…”

Subaru: “Stop goddamn going off deciding what Emilia’s limits are. She isn’t that weak.”

Distant, standing before the tomb, Emilia swallows her breath.

Subaru: “Stop goddamn going off, deciding what my limits are. No one tells me to fold, or to abandon everything and cower. My surrender is never happening.”

Spitting blood, the glint in Subaru’s eyes grows stronger.

And,

Subaru: “Fucker, don’t goddamn go off giving up on yourself. You can do goddamn more. More’s out there for you. …You were a damn kid, you weren’t even fully grown yet. Fucking clinging to an intractable idea you came up with when you didn’t even have pubic hair!”

Subaru straight-out informs Garfiel that the belief he stubbornly held, the creed which had kept his heart bound to the Sanctuary, is imbecilic.

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel immediately opens his mouth to reply.

But something feels to have stabbed into his chest, keeping any speech from exiting his throat.

He cannot say anything. Nothing is coming out.

His head blazes white. It isn't that he thinks Subaru correct. There is no possible way Garfiel could be wrong. The self he started being after he realized he was wrong was not wrong.

He must not be wrong.

And so this man claiming that Garfiel was wrong, must not be permitted to be here.

Garfiel: "Hah…hahhh…got it…"

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel: "I need to stop you. I ain't got any idea'v any'v what yer sayin'. But it's makin' me feel sick. N' so, I'm stoppin' you."

He must stop him.

And the way to stop him is surely, the exact way the man had previously stated.

—So long as he still breathes, this man cannot be stopped.

Garfiel: "Then…I'll, kill you…"

Subaru: "Can you?"

Garfiel: "Fuck off. —The method t'do it was always right here."

If he will not stop unless killed, Garfiel would now kill and stop him assuredly.

Now, here, he would make the choice.

—Make the choice to entrust himself to the abhorrent, vile blood of the beast sleeping inside him.

Garfiel: "—σσσσσ."

He holds himself, all the blood in his body seething with incendiary heat.

The inferno feels to superheat his every exhale with red. His cells squirm, his muscles swell, his mass explodes in size.

His limbs grow thick as logs, his abdomen bloating to snap off his loincloth. Golden fur sprouts across his whole as his sharp fangs mature instantly into elongate sabers.

His face protrudes into a snout, the world changing color alongside the slitting of his pupils.

His thoughts solder. The mind of the once-present Garfiel Tinzel drowns.

The exhilaration of transformation, and the feeling of his bestial instincts driving out his rationality. Once everything's done and he returns, what remains before him will be ravaged chunks of scattered gore. The final visage of Natsuki Subaru.

He had not been able to stop him short of doing this.

He had neither intent to lament, nor to repent for that.

People who lacked strength were bad.

The weak could proffer nothing. All there was to it.

His consciousness was fading.

His bestial instincts screech in jubilation, jaws opening to devour their miserable prey—

—The dimwitted animal's vision drowns beneath an eruption of ink-black fog.

Chapter 113:
Jewels never Come From The Solitary Quene

1

His eyes won’t open fully. Blood flows through him so poorly he veins might as well be clogged. But the scarlet dripping from his nose and his wounds shows no signs of dampening—was he or was he not wanting for blood? Bleeding some of it out might actually be perfect for his broiling brain.

With all the punches he’s taken, Subaru’s recognition of the world comes with just a smidgen of lag while he shakes his head and thinks these thoughts.

It really felt he had been standing up solely for the purpose of getting punched again.

He did not mean to stand there doing nothing, but even supposing he punched or kicked back, his attacks would not hit. With every blow he sustained he spat blood, suppressed his pain, made himself smile a cryptic smile which screamed ‘your attacks are entirely ineffective!’ and stood back up. And repeated this.

They were not ineffective.

Both the insides and outsides of his body groan, the entirety of his guts practically burst and mushed together. The bones supporting his body feel erroneously to have crumbled to dust, and the fact that all his limbs still move according to his will can only be described with the word ‘miracle’.

However, not a single one of these things resulted from a miracle.

Every time his consciousness seemed about to fall, about to falter, his fading awareness would be grabbed by the neck and dragged back to him in stern reprimand.

From inside his pocket crackles a hot, sharp pain—an excessively spartan compass, practically cooking his brain.

While it's something he had requested himself, his cheeks still twist at how relentless it is. He was using tricks to keep himself from losing consciousness. Regardless, numerous other strategies existed for Garfiel to stop Subaru.

That Subaru nevertheless, as he recklessly continued to stand up, never sustained damage which would perfectly incapacitate him, was entirely due to Garfiel's own judgement.

If he took a real hit from a Garfiel in top form, then Subaru would be done in a flash. Just one hit would transform him into sloppy chunks of gore.

The exorbitant damage Garfiel sustained from Otto and Ram's fight did contribute to why this has not happened. But Garfiel, who strained his wounded body to get here, still possessed the fangs to kill Subaru in one bite and the claws to shred him apart with one swing.

That this has not happened is due to, unable to fatally injury another no matter what his own condition is, Garfiel's judgement.

Ultimately, Garfiel is far too kind—is likely the situation here.

The Ryuzu's, Frederica, even Ram, all of them had appraised Garfiel that way.

His usual crude disposition and boorish behavior made unimaginable the sensitivity of his heart. Although he spoke of violence, internally, he constantly nurtured and focused his strength in a manner that would protect.

Someone he found unforgivable, someone liable to destroy the Sanctuary.

Even with such a person as his opponent, he could not make the decision to take their life.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru knew he was taking advantage of Garfiel's disposition and kindness.

Utilizing Garfiel's personality had been a principle of Subaru's for fighting him all along. With Garfiel as his opponent, too kind to give it his all, then Subaru was somewhat convicted that he would not be killed.

But even said, he has a grievously wounded Garfiel facing him, and he's getting decked.

If Garfiel had been in peak condition, Subaru surely would not be getting away with so little. For that he felt grateful to Otto and Ram, who had endeavored for him while ignoring his plans.

—Could they be dead?

Being that Garfiel's personality keeps him from killing Subaru, it's inconceivable that he would have killed Otto and Ram. Even if it had wound up happening, Garfiel's attitude would give it away. And most importantly, if Garfiel had killed Ram, then no reason existed for him to show up and stop Subaru in human form. To rationalize, and remain in bestial shape would be natural.

Garfiel had not denied Subaru's statements about his neglect to kill them.

Meaning that the conclusion to Otto, Ram, and Garfiel's fight amounted entirely to that.

Garfiel: "—σσσσσσσ."

Garfiel cradles himself as his body starts transforming.

His arms, his legs, enlarge not one but two times over, his torso's thickness and size shifting into something overpowering. His claws and fangs become sharp as blades while his face morphs from that of a human to that of a feline.

Golden fur coats his bare skin. Four feet contacting the ground lug his great body.

—What materialized here, with Subaru reflected in its slit-pupil eyes, was a golden tiger.

He needed to kill Subaru to stop him.

After countless swings of his fists, Garfiel finally reached that conclusion.

And so to kill the Subaru that he needed to kill, Garfiel made his decision.

He would call to the blood sleeping within him, to his bestial instincts, become a tiger and take Subaru's life.

All while in the shape of a dimwitted animal, to end this without witnessing anything.

Subaru: "But that's where you're messing up, Garfiel."

His inability to kill his opponent, and inability to strike them down with his fists, was kindness. Making the decision to protect the Sanctuary, to protect himself and those around him, was also kindness.

But running away to where he would not witness his actions, all for the sake killing of someone he could not kill, had nothing to do with kindness. What it was was Garfiel's weakness.

And Natsuki Subaru would not hesitate to take advantage of it.

Subaru: "Begging you, body of mine. Don't break down from this!"

Hostility fills the transformed Garfiel's eyes, their reflection being Subaru.

His limbs bend. Omens that the beast will come charging to rip Subaru apart.

This is the sole juncture he has for decision. Subaru grits his teeth once before focusing on his body's center—on the gateway tied to the point just below his navel, and shouts.

Subaru: "—SHAMAAAAAAAAAK!!"

Garfiel: "…"

The instant the tiger opens its mouth, the world answers to the fervid call. Ink-black fog erupts in the space between Subaru and the beast, drowning away the form of the towering creature. Moments before its consumption there swings an outstretched paw, but it strikes nothing before vanishing beneath the smoke.

Once the spreading abyss of dark swallows the beast, the unfurling confusion hoists the creature's existence into end.

Subaru: "ue, aauh…"

The instant he finishes watching the events through, an impact like a blow to his head assaults Subaru's skull.

The sharp pain of a drill boring into his cranium from both within and without makes his vision strobe in crimson, lights dancing all around. Unlike the dull pain of Garfiel's punches, this was an unsparing sharp hurt, as if shaving away at his soul—hurt he manages to swallow down, ingest.

The taxation of his gate, which he had been warned not to use.

The Capital's greatest healer had cautioned that he may never be able to use magic again. Betraying that advice, Subaru utilized the thing once more.

He feels his imperceptible gate burn. The foundations of this gateway within his center sways tremendously, and somewhere far and distant and separate from his body, something severs.

This pain of something violently, messily, being wrest away.

Alongside the lossful sense of what will never be recovered, it brings Subaru's heart understanding.

Subaru: "Thank you."

A strand he had continuously relied upon is cut.

He doesn't mind. An option that he supposedly lacked in the first place had merely been eliminated in earnest.

Regardless, it was owing to that power that he managed to get this far, and for that he was grateful.

For this was farewell.

Subaru: "…"

He looks forward.

His last cast of magic had failed to fully enshroud Garfiel's tremendous form. While crucially his head is veiled in the center of the smoke, his overhanging body has its right flank peeking out.

He put in his absolute best, and still managed only this.

He sighs out his nose. A clot of blood stuck there dislodges, spills. He rigorously wipes it away with his sleeve as he leads his unsteady legs to step forward.

He reaches for his pocket. Palms the hard thing, feeling intense relief that it has not broken over the course of this battle. Should this thing be gone, he didn't have a fuck of a chance.

Subaru: "…"

The inky fog is steadily beginning to thin.

How many seconds since he cast? Ten? Five? Might even be shorter. He seriously had not a single speck of magical talent in him. But right now he was grateful for it.

The tiger's right flank was visible. Captured in a world of obfuscation, body immobile.

While the magic had been imperfect, it conversely robbed Subaru of any need to deliberate.

And so there is no deliberation in his course.

Right foot, left foot. Far too slow to be called running. But so goes this laggard, momentum-helmed sprint.

There, once he draws close enough to touch this immense frame—

Subaru: “Get back down into my court, Garfiel.”

—Into that thick shoulder, Subaru takes the shining blue crystal from his pocket and pushes—stabs.

Light, spilling over.

2

“After your Contract with Emilia’s broken, you’re back to being a free spirit…yeah?”

“Well, I suppose that’s what it would be. But, even calling me free, my individual power is pretty immense. Your run-of-the-mill person wouldn’t be able to provide the mana to maintain me. And besides, no matter who else it could be, I don’t have any urge to Contract anyone but Lia.”

“So that mana to maintain you… it has to seriously be a lot?”

“Yup. For example’s sake, Subaru, we’ll pretend that you tried to conduct me, and even borrowed power from the ambient mana… Mhm, I suppose you’d dry up in say, a day.”

“Uh…? Sounds tighter than I thought. But is that enough that you could you fight?”

“That day we’re talking about is where I’m not materialized and you’re just carrying me around. If I materialized would be, mm, I guess it’d take five seconds before you’re out. Want to try it?”

“How about no. But man, seriously what happened to that thing about me having affinity with spirits?”

“So long as we’re talking about these spirits over here, might be preface you needed for that. But even if that wasn’t what it meant… my situation comes with special circumstances. I seriously am a spirit specially for Lia.”

“…”

“The plan to employ me after my Contract’s broken and freak out Lia is hitting some setbacks.”

“I wasn’t asking you about this as a plan to shock or freak her out. But…are you kidding me? Guess my ideas were off then.”

“Sorry. And even pretending that it would probably work, there’s the problem of the anchor…actually, since we’re here, we might’ve been able to manage something about that.”

“Anchor…something like the crystal hanging around Emilia’s neck?”

“That one really is special. But fortunately there should be something made of the same material around here, and we could at least figure something out if we borrow just a tidge of it. But either way, even if I’m stuck inside the crystal, and left just stuck inside the crystal, the mana just isn’t…”

“—So, something I wanna ask.”

“Hm? Yes?”

“Leaving aside whether it’s a Contract, is it possible to just have you inside a crystal if you’re agreeing with it? Um, so long as the mana supply’s there.”

“That’d be right. But, securing that mana supply would be incredibly difficult. Because I’m literally draining the mana, in my case. Sucking and sucking, until you’re incapacitated…”

“…”

“…Subaru?”

“Say, Puck.”

“Mhm?”

“So those replacements you mentioned for the crystal, where are they?”

3

—Stabbing into the tiger’s right shoulder, expelling a terrific light, is a blue crystal.

Neither polished nor sanded, the cut-away jewel’s sharp point drives into the animal’s skin, where it grabs the creature’s vitality and siphons it away.

Subaru: “—ghh!”

Dazzled by the light, Subaru topples backwards as if assaulted by forceful winds. He falls on his behind, retreating as he watches the scene before him, where the tiger swallowed in smog still has yet to notice the alternation to its own body.

That crystal sizeable enough to grasp in the hand would voraciously drain the mana of creatures it stabbed. Just keeping it stored in his pocket had exhausted Subaru incredibly.

What would happen when that effect was applied directly to the body? The answer lay right in front of him.

Garfiel: “—auh, aaaghh?!”

The smoke clears.

The visual obstruction from the fog, and forced confusion from the magic.

By the time he is released from both of these, the tiger—Garfiel—has lost the majority of his animal flesh, on his way back to his original shape as a young humanoid man.

His fur flakes away and to the ground, limbs once the width of many logs tied together returning to a sane thickness. His fangs and claws shrink, his body cracking and creaking as it reverts to human form.

The one looking most baffled by this transfiguration is none other than Garfiel himself.

His eyes shoot open in shock at his loss of his bestial shape and return to his original body. He raises his arms, staring at his human hands with quivering, golden eyes.

Garfiel: “Th, ridicu…what th’, hell…”

Subaru: “I did tell you, Garfiel. —I don’t get in fights I can’t win.”

Garfiel’s head springs up to look at Subaru.

Subaru wipes off his rear as he stands up, his face swollen but smiling insidiously. Garfiel comprehends the alternations to his body, and the fact that he remains severely wounded. He turns his head, to notice the foreign object stabbing into his shoulder.

Garfiel: “Hell…’s, this? No, this thing is…”

Subaru: “Pretty sure you recognize that light. Me and you should both know it.”

Garfiel: “Yer bastard, where’d you…get…”

Subaru: “Obviously. —From Ryuzu Meyer’s crystal. It’s one of the jewels from the stock to keep it going.”

—The laboratory deep in the woods.

Ryuzu Meyer, who became the cornerstone of the barrier to protect the Sanctuary. The crystal which held her trapped and eternally crystallized depended on some fraction of the duplicates to maintain its functions.

At regular intervals, Ryuzu duplicates would exchange the driving mechanisms inside the glowing crystal’s lower base. And of course, those crystals were not infinite in quantity. The supply in the Sanctuary would eventually run dry, and no longer work to maintain its faculties.

Subaru: “Which means they have to be brought in here regularly with food and stuff. When you're one of Roswaal's backers, there's more than enough opportunity to pinch say, one of them."

Garfiel: "But, just doin' that…just stabbin' me, ain't gonna, drain my strength like this…what goddamn, trick did yer put…"

Subaru: "Well. …Maybe there's a preposterous and starving monster inside that crystal?"

His breath faltering, Garfiel struggles to speak.

He reaches for his shoulder, attempting to somehow pull the jewel out—but the blue crystal practically rejects Garfiel's fingers as it stubbornly remains in his flesh, unyielding.

Giving a deep sigh, Subaru lets his body untense as he turns to look behind him.

He looks up to where Emilia quietly looks down upon him. Subaru's situation must have appeared doomed even to her.

Regardless, she never attempted to stop Subaru's battle. This girl who, when he fought battles while running off a stubbornness unreasonable in either of the two's case, had once so fervently attempted to stop him.

Even Subaru understood that there was something, which he not quite assert as being trust, between them.

That something between them surely was some something which they had yet to put into either words or form.

The crystal has pinned Garfiel's actions to a stop.

Emilia must have noticed something, seeing that glow. She didn't know what. But it was fine that she not know. For now.

Subaru: "Watch me, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "Eh…?"

Subaru: "If you want to stop me, then do it by your own hands.

Don’t leave yourself to that blood inside you, where you can’t damn tell what you’re doing. You’re the one who’s making idiots of people.”

He steps forth.

His body creaks, blood dripping without pause from somewhere.

His life is flowing out. But he has no intent to either stop, or let himself be stopped.

Subaru: “You’re trying to stop us. We will stop you. —Emilia will challenge the tomb. The Sanctuary will be freed. We don’t have time to sit around at stalemate.”

Garfiel: “Jus’ spoutin’ whatever fuckin’ bullshit y’goddamn like! Who fuckin’ asked! Who fuckin’ gave you permission! This place, just as it is, stayin’ as it is, without any changin’, is fine!”

Subaru: “Not like it can possibly stay unchanged, stay stagnant, stay like this forever. That’s something that…centuries ago, before the place wound up like this, someone ought to have realized.”

Garfiel: “There’re people! Who don’t want it t’change! Who want it t’stay the same!”

Subaru: “I figure it’d be fine if you, keeping things entirely unchanged, could keep reigning as the place’s guardian eternally and forever. …But, y’see, there’re things you can’t achieve alone no matter how hard you try.”

Time would, the generations would, both eventually leave Garfiel behind.

Eventually, he would lose the power to keep protecting the unchanging Sanctuary.

Subaru: “Just like how we all ganged up to corner you, there’s gonna come a time where you can’t manage it on your own. Like any second.”

Subaru walks, to arrive before Garfiel.

Garfiel clutches the crystal in his shoulder, his breathing unsteady but his eyes nevertheless strong as he glares at Subaru. Subaru reciprocates the glare from straight-on.

They both knew that merely slinging words at each other would not suffice.

And so—

Subaru: "Go get dead collapsed, Garfiel. Behold the power of numbers."

Garfiel: "There had t'be other goddamn ways t'say that!"

Garfiel roars.

A fist comes swinging below. But sluggishly. With the crystal draining his energy, barely any strength remains in Garfiel. Subaru breezily tilts his head aside—and fails to move as intended and so eats a fist to the face. His vision swims.

Garfiel: "Yer who's gettin'th'goddamn lights out! Then my amazin' self's knockin' th'tomb down, n' you n' the others, I'm keepin' all'er yer here 'till yer dead!"

Subaru: "So that's what you were fucking planning, huh!"

Subaru responds by stretching out his faltering legs and slamming his fist upwards. Unavoidable, the punch smashes into Garfiel's face. For the first time this whole fight, Subaru lands a clean hit.

Terrible posture, the core of his body unsteady, his arm not even fully extended, a shitty excuse for a punch.

He naturally could not expect the strike to be as powerful as he hoped, but against the present Garfiel, it was more than enough.

Garfiel: "—Gh, ghaug."

Now accompanying his bodily wounds, the mana supporting his body is being leeched from his core. Garfiel already stood at the precipice of martial incapacitation, and Subaru's strike would be the decisive blow to send him hurtling off. But…

Garfiel: “Ain’t, gonna work!”

Subaru: “Ghhge!”

Garfiel’s two feet stomp the ground as hard as they can, his posture lowering as he drives his elbow into Subaru’s solar plexus. Subaru screams, utilizing his lowered head to strike Garfiel’s forehead with a headbutt. The two both recoil at the numb pain to their skulls, both send out their fists as they right their heads, both land their hit.

With fists mutually driven into the other’s cheek, blood begins to flow from the noses of the two. Subaru was at the limit for physical damage, while Garfiel was, with the mental factors included, sitting in critical territory.

The glow of the crystal in Garfiel’s shoulder steadily grows dimmer.

That perhaps proved that Garfiel was near exhausted of mana, or otherwise said, proved the battle in proximity of conclusion.

Subaru: “—Ghhabh!”

Garfiel: “Fuck’re you dozin’ off for!”

The instant he drops his guard, the fist at his cheek flicks open, sending his face rebounding with a smack.

For a moment the strike sends his consciousness soaring off to elsewhere. He immediately grits his teeth, hard, the pain of his cracked tooth as it shatters guiding him back to consciousness.

He could not rely on trickery any more to keep himself from falling unconscious. Now the object was contributing in a different form, in a fashion without any greater parallel. Subaru would have to withstand all the pain on his own.

Negligence. Conceit. Idiocy.

Subaru would always be weak, and would never sincerely be the superior party in a fight.

Subaru: “And so…I can’t be slacking off!”

Garfiel: “Ggha.”

He swings his left arm down to hook Garfiel by the neck, sending the two of them toppling to the ground. With his body battered, Subaru grimaces in pain as he attempts to upright himself. When a vicious pain spears across his left arm, pinned to the ground as it is.

He looks to find Garfiel’s fangs biting down on the upper portion of his arm.

Subaru: “Geeuhe!”

Garfiel: “—Ghggg.”

Subaru: “Aaaihg! Get off! This hurts, you idiot!”

Subaru punches Garfiel in the face to make him let go. His arm is squelched into freedom as the fangs release, but a limb pierced to the bone has no hope of moving. And his right arm—

Garfiel: “Got…yer!”

Subaru reaches out his right arm in an attempt to repossess his left, when Garfiel grabs his shoulder.

While he may have lost the strength to throw a swing or a kick, he has not lost the strength to grasp.

Constrictive force enough to shatter a boulder destroys Subaru’s right shoulder, bones and all.

A dull cracking resounds through the air alongside Subaru’s silent shrieks.

His upper left arm has been mutilated and his right shoulder has its bones destroyed, both nonfunctional. With his arms robbed of their capabilities, Subaru’s eyes shoot open as Garfiel kicks him down.

Garfiel: "'S th'end! Now there ain't nothin' y'can do! What I shouldd'er done was this…was turn yer into a floppin' sardine from th'start!"

Seeing Subaru writhe on the ground, Garfiel's cheeks twist in victorious jubilation. He gets to his unsteady feet before turning his head to the sky, letting loose his voice.

The howl of an animal, an aria of triumph. Now all Subaru could do was wait to be stepped on, finished off, and—

Subaru: "…How many times do I have to tell you, don't decide my end!"

The blow of the headbutt thrust up from below bashes Garfiel in the nose, sending his eyes spinning.

He stumbles off course. Subaru stands with his arms hanging limp. It's impossible. Ridiculous. This isn't a question of strength of will, but an issue resting on an entirely different dimension.

Subaru: "My end, and your end…neither are here yet."

Garfiel: "G-Goddamn…fuck off…don't yer dare stand. Quit standing…I…"

Garfiel's face twists in agony as he takes a single step in retreat from the standing Subaru.

As if, unable to use his arms and capable only of standing as he was, he was scared of him.

Garfiel: "Th'fuck is this persistence gonna do! Th'people here, every last one'v 'em! Every single one's a hopeless dreg! The outside rejected 'em, n' here's th'only place they have! They go outside, and what! What happens!"

Subaru: "You leave, and be something. If you're going to be here to end peacefully, then do it. Neither one of those options are available here anymore."

No matter how much strength Garfiel flaunts, and no matter how he fights, it will not change the coming future.

Garfiel by himself cannot stop the threat the Sizeable Hare presents. No matter how hard he tries, he will fail to save some people. And each time that count increases, he will lose his strength, until he is eventually defeated in the face of insatiable hunger.

If Subaru could communicate that future to him, perhaps he could be impelled into action right here.

But that would not mean that he changed his mind.

It would only be a temporary push. His heart would remain sealed inside the Sanctuary. Once he knew the danger had passed, he would return here, still pretending the place was a paradise while he submerged into stagnation.

Ignoring the push at his back, ignoring the hands offered to him, disregarding all of it, Garfiel Tinzel would feign his mourning of his mother's death while unceasingly consoling himself.

Subaru: "Leave this place, Garfiel. This blockade you're scared of doesn't exist."

Garfiel: "There is a blockade! I am one! I'm an unfailing blockade, separatin' inside and outside! Me, n' nanna, n' the others! We all stopped still! It's already the end for us!"

They gave up once. The people of the Sanctuary feared connection with the outside, retreated into their paradise, and gave up on contacting the world outside the forest.

And so Garfiel was trying to protect that enclosed paradise. Asserted he would.

That was equivalent to letting their lives be made consummate. Because of one person, going off doing things on his own.

Subaru: "Then we'll break that blockade…right here and right now, us!"

Garfiel: "That guy! And Ram! They're havin' beddy byes! And yer gonna be gettin' yer peace too! This 'us' yer talkin' about don't fuckin' exist anymore! Here's the end fer me and fer all you!"

Subaru: "Do you think it's fucking smart to give up? It's damn obvious that it's cooler not to! You think that when you give up on everything and stop, walking means the end for you? Just take a little rest and walk again! The opportunity for it visited you goddamn ages ago!"

The Trial which resulted in him fearing the outside world.

Garfiel experienced that Trial, and Ryuzu and Frederica nevertheless loved him.

Frederica chose to step into that outside world, to create a place where the people of the Sanctuary could live, once the barrier was someday broken.

She would have turned to look back, and offered Garfiel her hand.

She would have seen Garfiel stopped still, and offered that he walk again.

Of course. After all, Frederica was Garfiel's sister.

When a little brother cries themselves stuck, it's their big sis who reaches out for them.

Subaru: "You said Frederica left for the outside world, and left you behind. But you're wrong. You're absolutely wrong, Garfiel. You aren't bound to the barrier. If you wanted to follow her, you could've any time. You're the one who neglected to!"

Garfiel: "…I."

Subaru: "You're the one who drew away first, Garfiel! Then you fucking winge winge winge about it being your sister's fault! You don't think it's fucking pathetic?!"

The pit of his chest burns. What on earth was he saying? He was starting to lose track himself.

Deep in his gut, in that very core, something dark squirms.

The supernatural gateway beneath his navel, connecting Subaru to the outside world, has lost its function.

So then, right now, this thing in the pit of this body, asserting its presence, was what, exactly?

Still unsure of his head, of his body, of this man before him, he screams.

Subaru: “Any time! Any moment! When you want to act! When you want to change! The instant you think that marks the starting line!!”

Suffer failure, lose everything, wallow in resignation and stop, hug your knees and cower.

Even should the disappointment in yourself, the disappointment of others, the isolating feeling of being abandoned by your precious ones all feel to steep you from your depths upwards, and you’re stuck thinking that you’re worthless.

Subaru: “Raise your head again, walk the path in front of you. And how can anyone order you to give up on that!”

Give up! Relinquish! Surrender!

Idiocy. All of it, insipid bullshit warranting no heed.

If there is someone hugging their knees, and you feel the caprice to call out, you best as well support them.

Do your best! You can do it! I don’t know what’s up, but if you stand and keep running, you’ll reach somewhere.

—His chest, burns.

Subaru: “Aren’t I right, Garfiel!”

He calls the name of the man before him, his eyes wavering feebly, his visage small.

—His guts, blazing.

Subaru: “Aren’t I right, Emilia!”

He calls of the name of the girl behind him, her gaze looking down at him, her standing on the threshold between weakness and something else.

—His eyes, with it spilling over.

Subaru: “Say—aren’t I right, REM!!”

His head raised, mouth open, eyes wide, he calls the name of the person who gave him the impetus to stand.

He had been taught that giving up and coming to a stop should surely not mean the end.

Natsuki Subaru desired that the power he was given that day reach every single person there was.

Subaru: “…”

A power which does not belong to Subaru squirms within the core of him, shrieking its birthing cry.

Cheering the fact of its birthing, and welcoming the fact of its birth.

With Natsuki Subaru as an intermediately, it again connects to the world.

Heat, spilling over.

In the center of Subaru’s body, a conflagration burns.

It eddies in the space before Subaru, scarlet flowing out his bloodshot eyes, and takes form, tampering with the world.

Garfiel: “I!”

Garfiel soars.

He raises his claws to swing, bares his teeth to show, no longer using words, but actions to deny Subaru's assertions.

Unable to spin words, unable to put his feelings to form, this is the only method he can conceive.

He doesn't know anything else. And so Garfiel reaches his claws for Subaru.

Heat spilling from bleeding Subaru is congregating right in front of him, but he doesn't notice. Right in front of the Subaru he is leaping at, there spawns a warp in space, an inconceivable fissure in the world, but he doesn't notice.

—He does not notice the overwhelming force extending from that fissure.

Well naturally. He cannot see it. Or no, nobody except Subaru could see it.

Because this thing, which only Subaru can negotiate, is Unseen Hands.

Subaru: "…"

The world looks to move in slow motion.

This sensation is a far too familiar one for Subaru. While on the brink of dying, or in the instant before sustaining a fatal wound, or when suffering punishment for voicing the taboo, it's always during pain and depresses him.

But unlike those times, this illusory sensation is presently, here for Subaru's sake.

He sees oncoming Garfiel very clearly.

Full hostility—but, it also carried the wisps of a child's tantrum.

Subaru focuses his gaze on the tip of Garfiel's chin.

Somehow, he knows. Before makes it happen, he gains comprehension.

All he has to do is fix his aim, and let this thing he's tugging taut loose.

That alone, and surely, it would be accomplished.

—And so Subaru does exactly that.

Garfiel: "—?!"

The unleashed power shouts in glee, sniping defenseless Garfiel from below.

The outstretched torrent of force takes the shape of a fist, extends to the shape of an arm, which slams a punch into Garfiel's face midway through his leap, shooting him high skyward.

Garfiel: "—wh, wha?!"

Struck by a completely unanticipated attack, Garfiel fails to catch himself as he slams back to the ground.

He tumbles to a stop, splayed out on the earth. Subaru understands that he has just fired the decisive blow.

Simultaneously, an incredible load of something is wrested away from inside him.

Subaru: "Euhg, auh…au."

He falls to his knees, his body folding as he vomits all he wishes. But not a single drop of blood or bile comes out. Not a drop of scarlet or saliva, for nothing extraneous remains within him. That was what a final strike it was, on the tail of so much effort.

The torrent of power unraveled and dispersed immediately after sniping Garfiel.

Its fountain likely remains inside Subaru even now, but he doesn't sense that he can withdraw it.

The present Subaru, at least, lacks anything more he can give.

If he uses that arm any more than he just has, he will need to sacrifice more.

But, being that the fight is over, for the moment that necessity is—

Subaru: “Come on…you’re joking.”

Garfiel: “—Don’t, und’resti, mate…”

Broken down, bordering on unconsciousness.

His vision edged with white, so exhausted any blink could be his last.

He had expended such incredible efforts, and still.

Garfiel Tinzel, with an outrageous nosebleed streaming down his face, is standing.

Subaru: “Seriously, just how tough are you…”

Garfiel: “‘F I ain’t, ain’t foldin’, it…ain’t, ain’t end, endin’…”

Garfiel’s consciousness is halfway gone.

His unfocused gaze appears to look at Subaru while not looking at him at all. Tenacity alone was allowing Garfiel to stand, rejecting that final push.

Almost surely, Subaru could shove him and that would topple Garfiel.

But the strength to enact that attack was equally lacking in Subaru. Nevermind taking a hit, Subaru was ten seconds away from losing consciousness too.

They had both done their absolute best, having used up every power in their possession to reach this conclusion.

It had always been true for Garfiel, but unmistakably for Subaru too, all of their strategies are done.

If Otto and Ram had not worn Garfiel down, Subaru probably would not have been able to get this far.

The idea that he could do something so long as he had the blue crystal as his hidden ace had been naive. Help in maintaining consciousness, and debilitating Garfiel to the utmost. Even with both of these things, Subaru surely would not have managed it.

The blue crystal on Garfiel's shoulder flickers.

It both seemed encouragement and reprimand for a Subaru on the verge of sinking into failure, and unwittingly he finds himself close to giving a wry smile.

Subaru, the crystal, Otto, Ram.

All of this power combined, and they still could not beat Garfiel. He is, without a doubt, strong. Subaru would sincerely acknowledge that. And so,

Garfiel: "And now, yer…"

Subaru: "Don't…think bad of this, Garfiel. I did say we're breaking that blockade."

Garfiel: "There ain't nobody…"

With unsteady steps, Garfiel closes in on Subaru.

His arm hangs aloft, and at its tip and dirtied with blood, there exist dull claws.

Should they reach him, Subaru reaches his end.

Garfiel puts the whole of his focus into this attack.

And so he does not notice. The tremors, the noise, of what is approaching.

—The final push, to secure Garfiel's defeat.

Garfiel: "O, ver?!"

???: "—ッ!"

Drowning out his shout comes the dignified roar of an earth dragon.

The charging black dragon rams head-first into undefended Garfiel, striking him in the side and sending him flying.

Garfiel: “—Gaugh?!”

Stricken with an impact which literally carts him away, wide-eyed Garfiel shoots off as easily as a kicked pebble.

He bounces once, twice, three times off the earth, kicking up dust plumes and caking himself in dirt before coming to lie face-down on the ground.

He does not twitch an inch.

Seeing this, the contributor of the merciless final attack arches her head, roaring.

Subaru: “What do you think, Garfiel…”

Aside Patrasche as she bellows of the victory, Subaru calls out to the fallen Garfiel. In a voice so frail, it’s questionable whether he heard it.

The key which decided this battle. What was it?

Well it was simple.

In a fight against strong Garfiel, weak Subaru did not fight alone.

Meaning,

Subaru: “This—is the power of numbers.”

Garfiel: “Had t’be, other…goddamn, ways t’, say that…”

Motionless Garfiel responds sourly to Subaru’s words.

Subaru’s cheeks relax slightly in hearing it.

Subaru: “Okay then, it’s the assemblage of everyone’s feelings, a victory for bonds.”

Garfiel: “Haah…’s like a damn, JEWELS NEVER COME FROM THE SOLITARY QUENE…”

With that, Garfiel falls silent.

Seeing that fact through, Subaru comprehends their definite victory, before looking up at the sky.

Subaru: “Finally heard a saying that worked…”

With that satisfied statement, he abandons all consciousness and allows himself to fall.

Chapter 114:
Lies into Wishes

1

Carried on the roar of a ground dragon, the battle’s end echoes through the skies of the Sanctuary.

A black dragon, which had rammed into wounded Garfiel, landed the decisive blow for the fight. This dragon, Patrasche, had run to the scene as if sharing a telepathic link with Subaru, and beautifully given an unparalleled assist in the final stage of the combat.

Patrasche: “—϶!”

This was the second confrontation between Garfiel and Patrasche in the Sanctuary.

On the day they arrived here, carriage-lugging Patrasche had gotten into combat with Garfiel when he arrived to repel the invaders, and suffered a doubtless defeat.

There exists a border between soldiers and civilians. No one could blame Patrasche for being made to eat dirt. Naturally, Subaru did not fault his steed either.

But Patrasche’s thoughts on it were an entirely different matter.

She had failed to protect her master, and underwent disgrace.

For a member of the proud Diana bloodline, this was a dishonor which needed to be overturned unequivocally.

Being that Patrasche and Subaru cannot communicate verbally, the swift arrival of this opportunity was not a topic they could discuss with mutually perfect comprehension.

And so, with the parts she could not convey included, she demonstrated her thoughts by action.

This roar from the dragon was devoted to her master and to her ancestors.

With how the sound came mingled with accomplishment and satisfaction, and how the dragon drew her snout close to the unconscious Subaru, surely anyone would understand that.

2

Listening to Patrasche’s roar in her restored honor, Emilia gives a deep sigh.

It felt like breathing had been banned. Or rather, the fight had been one to make you forget about breathing entirely.

Watch to the end, Subaru had told her. While keenly perceiving her own powerlessness, Emilia spectated the men’s’ gruesome confrontation to conclusion.

Subaru had spat blood, moaned in pain, broken down.

Who could suppose how many times Emilia bordered on calling out and running over?

But every time Emilia’s weak heart came near to discarding that she wait, Subaru’s words of, watch me, and his nigh-perfectly timed gaze stopped her.

Neither her action, nor her speech, were pardonable here.

It frustrated her, and she found it hard to bear, but she must not avert her gaze.

It wasn’t that anyone told her.

But Emilia’s heart quietly perceived that she absolutely must not do those things.

She did not understand this feeling revolving around her chest which had kept her stopped.

Subaru had exhibited incredible stubbornness, Garfiel had howled with such incredible ferocity, the confrontation came to its end following the two men's' sloppy fistfight—what was it that the fight was founded upon? Being an outsider to the situation, and a woman who struggled to understand male logic, Emilia could only grasp the situation in fragmentary terms.

But Subaru had demonstrated his doggedness and faith with this fight, enlisting much aid to defeat Garfiel.

And that fact did indeed cause an indescribable feeling to swell within Emilia's heart.

Still driven by that feeling, Emilia recognized that the two's fight was one which deserved commendation.

Meaning that the significance of their battle absolutely must not be tarnished.

And so—

Emilia: "…Roswaal."

With one hard blink, Emilia abandons her hesitation and turns to face forward.

Her gaze oversteps Subaru and Garfiel toppled on the ground before her, reaching to the gaps in the trees beyond.

—Where there wordlessly stands a warlock.

Emilia: "It makes people uneasy if you're just quiet like that. They'll start to think you're up to something."

Roswaal: "Myyyyyyyyy goodness, how that certainly does sting. And all when I came here, pushing my wounded body, for the sake of yoooooourself and Subaru…"

Emilia: "If that's really what you think, then I'd want to be more relaxed, but…" Out from the bushes in front of Emilia there emerges someone tall—Roswaal.

In these several days since their arrival in the Sanctuary, Emilia has only seen him in bed. That he's outside and loitering around here makes her somewhat wary.

Roswaal fundamentally is a backer of Emilia's in the Royal Selection, and her only ally, politically speaking. The one who brought Emilia out of the forest and presented her the path to the throne, and suggested that the villagers sleeping in ice could be saved, was also him.

And so, leaving his idiosyncrasies aside, Emilia had never truly viewed Roswaal as an enemy, or as offensive, or as dangerous so far.

So far as just a couple seconds ago.

Emilia: "The minor spirits have been noisy and restless for a while now."

Roswaal: "…Hrrrrrrrrrrm."

Emilia: "Everybody's saying they sense something sooo menacing. …And right now, even I can see it too."

Her voice low and tense, Emilia slowly descends from the tomb's entrance down to the open square. Subaru's face as he lies there is satisfied, while Garfiel's is twisted in regret. Beside Patrasche as she stands between the two is where Emilia takes her place, putting her in position to protect the three of them should anything happen.

Protect the three—she ultimately must have that thought, with how irregular a vibe currently emanates from Roswaal.

A dense, abnormally thick concentration of mana is warping the atmosphere around Roswaal. Just how concentrated was the mana inside this man? This was Roswaal L. Mathers, who commanded all six types of magic, known as the greatest magician in the country.

When this man detonated his magic to its greatest limit, just what miracles could happen?

Emilia: "…"

Feeling tipsy off the dense mana, Emilia swallows her breath.

Patrasche moves to stand in a place where she is blocking Roswaal's line of sight to Subaru, stretching out her neck as she growls intimidatingly at the warlock.

She had also sensed a threat in Roswaal's anomalous atmosphere. Seeing the two's caution, Roswaal gives a shrug, his attitude entirely the same as always.

Roswaal: "How scary. I wooooooould prefer if you could abstain froooooom looking at me like that. Aaaaaaalthough, my nature is one where animals and so ground dragons disfavor me ridiculously. Should the same apply for spirits, that does explain why Beatrice won't be cordial wiiiiiiiith me."

Emilia: "Stop fooling around. And I'm certain she's unhappy with you because of something else. … I don't know if it was always like that, though."

Roswaal: "Noooooooooo. A long time ago…truly a long time ago, it waaaaaaaaasn't like that. When there were no earth dragons, it used to be that people came here riding grim oxen—riding farrow."

Emilia: "When, there were no earth dragons…?"

Emilia's brows furrow.

While she is not exactly the most knowledgeable on the topic, earth dragons are creatures firmly joined to everyday living, and the culture and history surrounding them—their connection with humanity—has supposedly gone on for a long time.

What Roswaal must mean is IN LUGNICA. Emilia's studies are too lacking for her to pinpoint just when earth dragons started being densely used in Lugnica, though.

Roswaal slips a small sigh at Emilia's confusion.

Somehow, it gives a sense of pre-anticipated disappointment.

Roswaal: "Then you would not know either, Lady Emilia.

Weeeeeell, I suppose you wouldn't. While you may have inherited blood from the long-lived elves, your years only amount to a century and some…when you have spent the most of that time asleep, surely you wouldn't remember the world aaaaaaaaaas it was then."

Emilia: "…You're saying weird things, Roswaal. If we're going to talk about this, then you're way younger than me. Um, but I lose if we mean time spent awake."

That Emilia spent up to a century inside the ice, abandoned by the world and its time, was history that Emilia found embarrassing.

Even with the world at large considered, she plainly should be an elder of the population. But she lacks the experience and knowledge fitting to her age.

Including her inability to beat the Trial, her time in the Sanctuary has made her recognize that there are many areas in which she lacks—including this.

But Roswaal just responds to Emilia's worries with a snort, laughing them off.

The reaction is an unanticipated one. Emilia's brows shoot up in surprise.

Emilia: "Wait, Roswaal. Why are you laughing like that?"

Roswaal: "—Please excuse me. It truly was nooooooothing important. …Merely reflecting that ignorance occasionally does create situations which are so humorous that it's sad."

Emilia: "…You mean, you're making fun of me. I can at least understand that much."

Roswaal's rather insolent statement leads Emilia's brows to rise, her wariness compounding. Strange mana encircles Roswaal. As if spurred by this stuff he has whetted, Roswaal's attitude toward Emilia is different from how it has ever been.

Emilia has never experienced clear spite from Roswaal before.

The Emilia that Roswaal knew was someone who was always screwing around, often spoke mockingly, and told jokes on Subaru and Puck's par for idiotic, but like them he had never said anything which was disparaging toward Emilia.

Because Roswaal needed to cooperate with Emilia for the sake of his goals, and interact while placing her in the superior position of RULER.

Tracing the logic backwards, Roswaal does not presently see the merit in acting such with Emilia. He had probably lost his temper with her and her constant inability to beat the Trial, and given up on her. And that was okay. Because if that was the situation, she could at least understand and agree with it.

But something else presently scares Emilia more than that.

Emilia: "Roswaal…how long were you watching Subaru and Garfiel fight?"

Roswaal: "—How long, which is to say?"

Emilia: "I noticed you there…just a minute ago. When Subaru and Garfiel were hitting each other…right after Subaru used Shamak."

Taxing his ragged gate, Subaru had used magic for the who-knows-what'th time.

He had strained the dregs of mana that he had and used magic as if mustering the absolute last of his power. It resulted in a rather ineffective spell, which soon dispersed.

Thinking back on it, that had been the exact moment where Emilia truly wanted to run over to Subaru.

Subaru once strained the last of his power to cast Shamak in Emilia's presence before, and it had ended in his overwhelming and unquestionable loss.

Surely no one would fault her for envisioning his image back then overlaid atop his image right now, and come close to calling out. But when Subaru jabbed his hidden ace, the crystal, into Garfiel and the odds shifted to fifty-fifty, an emotion other than panic sprouted in Emilia's heart.

And having lost that pressing sense of urgency, Emilia first noticed it.

Noticed the irregular signs of someone watching the battle, just like her.

Emilia: "At first, I thought you were there to help Subaru if he reached his limit. It looks like Ram and Otto did something to try stopping Garfiel, so I wondered if you were here as reinforcements for Subaru too. But…"

Roswaal: "Yoooooooou're exactly correct, I indeed came here as reinforcements for Subaru. Is what I could say, but you wouldn't beeeeeeeeeelieve me."

Emilia: "Even without Puck, I can at least figure out mana currents. You were watching the fight where you could intervene at any time…but, who you were aiming for was…"

Roswaal: "…"

Roswaal's odd-colored eyes narrow as he looks at Emilia.

His eyes had been narrowed like this while he was watching the fight. With his magic at its peak and always ready to fire, with his aim fixed on Subaru.

Emilia: "Answer, Roswaal. —What were you thinking to do to Subaru?" Emilia faces her palm out toward Roswaal.

Puck is not with her. There's anxiety to be had over her mana control. The minor spirits are trying to warn Emilia, them terrified of Roswaal and the ominous magic he dons.

If she cannot depend on them to help her entirely, then she has to do it herself.

Emilia: "Please, answer. If you don't, I…"

Roswaal: “We are far past any question, and you’re stiiiiiiiiiiill hesitant in your decisions. No end exists for your blitheness. Or perhaps you place too much expectation in the goodwill of others? It was supposed to be that your days thus far were ones where you were recipient only to malice. How is it that you manage to be so incredibly exposed?”

Emilia: “—Hic.”

Roswaal overpowers Emilia’s pleading words with unrestrained spite.

His heterochromatic eyes equally host animosity, him not conceding Emilia an inch. The same applies to the multiple forms of mana churning chaotically inside him.

Matters are proceeding in a questionable direction. Emilia unwittingly reaches for her chest, then remembers that the familiar touch there is absent, and grits her teeth.

Her weakness, unconsciously trying to entrust her worries to Puck, frustrates her.

To obfuscate that weakness, Emilia increases the strength in her glare as she gazes at Roswaal.

Emilia: “You don’t want to answer my question. Then, I won’t—eep” hold back either, is how she means to continue.

The instant she determines so, and begins to build a concentration of mana, something bumps the side of her head.

Surprised at the dishevelment of her silver hair, Emilia looks to her side, to see the snout of a ground dragon.

It’s Patrasche. Her push—or really strike, being that it was too forceful of a shove to be described otherwise—prompts Emilia’s eyes to widen. The snout of the black dragon’s elegant face once again butts into Emilia’s forehead.

Emilia: “You…”

They cannot speak with each other, but even still, it seems like Patrasche is supporting her.

—Calm down. With composure, do what it is you ought to.

Feeling that Patrasche is sternly telling her this, Emilia realizes that she has gotten fired up. She closes her eyes. By the time she turns back to face Roswaal, her hand no longer touches her chest.

Roswaal: “Truly…I have noooooooo good memories with ground dragons.”

Seeing the change in Emilia’s expression, Roswaal gives his irritated opinion of Patrasche. Patrasche’s care had so effectively destroyed Roswaal’s plans. Meaning that just then, Roswaal had wanted Emilia to get violent on him.

Emilia: “I don’t know at all what you’re thinking right now. If she hadn’t stopped me just then, I know I would’ve…but, it’s almost like you wanted me to.”

Roswaal: “I will simply mention this for consideration. It’s because I dooooo dislike being hurt.”

Emilia: “…? But everyone dislikes that.”

Emilia furrows her brows. Roswaal’s lips look to slacken sardonically. Emilia cannot figure in the least what that smile means.

Either way, brute force is not the option she should be picking here.

Emilia: “Tell me, Roswaal. It’s obvious that you’re not your usual self right now. How come you’re…being desperate like this, tell me.”

Roswaal: “…Desperate, you say. Hrm, goodness my goodness how surprising.”

Emilia: “It’s like you’re abandoning everything, and you could’ve been hit with magic and you didn’t care…you could tell me it’s not desperation, but I wouldn’t believe you.”

Emilia could understand that destructive behavior where you grow sick of yourself, and let yourself act like an absolute insane wreck. The question is whether you direct it inside, or outside. Emilia was the type to direct it inside. Perhaps Roswaal was the same.

Emilia: “If you are, then talk to me. I don’t know what I can do for you, but I can help. I mean, up until now you’ve helped me with so many things, and…”

Roswaal: “—No. That is enough, Lady Emilia.”

But Roswaal’s frail voice rejects Emilia’s offered hand.

He speaks with the most level voice he has thus far, his eyes numb as he looks down at Emilia. His clown makeup—beneath those laughing cosmetics, Emilia can tell that he is suppressing his emotions to a painful extent. She gulps.

Roswaal’s expression looks like he has given up on absolutely every single thing there is.

Emilia: “Enough…what do you mean?”

Roswaal: “What it sounds like I mean. I do not intend to have you understand my plots, and these two’s wounds and the Trial…and even the Royal Selection doooooooon’t matter a for a second any more. —For already this world is an ending one.”

Emilia: “An ending world…or, what’s this about it not mattering? The Royal Selection and the Trial don’t matter…Roswaal, what are you saying?!”

Emilia yells in anger, unable to comprehend what Roswaal is saying.

Roswaal is bathing in suspiciousness. But the hollowness of his expression, and the mana encircling his form, are so abounding in emptiness that it could physically constrict.

Roswaal’s heart was presently hitting the peak of instability.

While did Emilia understand that, his claims were not something she could accept.

What Roswaal wanted to abandon was everything important to Emilia, an undefinable something which Subaru's risk-taking had demonstrated.

Garfiel's shouts had clearly illustrated where his stance lie.

He wanted to destroy the tomb, and keep the Trial from existing any further.

What was he seeking by making the Sanctuary's barrier unbreakable? Probably an unchanging day to day life, is what Emilia just kind of figures.

And Emilia could sympathize with Garfiel's stance.

Going without changes, being able to go unchanged. That path was a tranquil one, and comfortable. If you could have a mundane life where you spend your time in a peaceful place with those you cherish, then nobody could deny the desire to remain submerged in that environment.

But Subaru point-blank denied that desire, demonstrated his stubbornness, and cast the concept aside.

Emilia was identical to Subaru in terms of stance, for she was urging that change come to

The Sanctuary. But her reasoning was not as definite as Subaru's, nor did she understand the feelings of the Sanctuary's people as thoroughly as he did.

This place was a necessary step along the way for her to achieve her goals, nothing more than a spot where she had trodden. What would those around her think of the changes her interference brought? Being entirely focused on her own interior, Emilia had failed to ask this entirely obvious question.

The one who instead asked had been Subaru.

Once again she had made Subaru shoulder her burden, and overlooked everything.

And it was because she keenly realized that that this presented existed.

But Roswaal was trying to discard this present which Subaru's risk-taking had opened.

Emilia: "Roswaal…what are you trying to abandon? It's what… what started with you and me, right? And halfway through, you're…this isn't forgivable!"

Emilia snarls, for Roswaal's brows to react.

A wisp of strength returns to him as he covers his blue eye with his hand, his yellow eye trembling.

Roswaal: "It started with me and you? What are you talking about?"

Emilia: "Huh…?"

Roswaal: "It started with me and my Teacher. —Assuredly, nooooooooot you. And so, allowing it to end should be within my own and my Teacher's liberty. Of course it is."

Emilia: "You can't just do that!"

Even with the incredible aura overpowering her, Emilia raises his voice.

She glares at the clown, swinging her arms up.

Emilia: "So maybe it did start with you and this person…but the issue isn't just about you two any more. It's not just my issue either. We dragged lots of people into it, caused problems for lots of people, and we've kept going like that! You can't just go ending it whenever you want!"

Roswaal: "The road leads only to end now. So whaaaaaaaat could be inconvenient about letting it all end beeeeeeeefore we reach that terminus? Indeed it was hopeless for us… We'll place our expectations in our next selves, and Subaru."

Emilia: "In Subaru?"

Put expectations in Subaru, meaning what, exactly?

Emilia glances at the fallen Subaru, renewing her awareness that Roswaal's words must not become reality.

Of course.

Subaru had already done more than enough. If expectations were put in him, he'd answer them excessively. They should not be seeking any more from him than he has already done. When something is given, it naturally ought to be repaid.

Emilia: "How can you say that the path Subaru opened leads to the end? Subaru's group all worked together to open a closed path. Isn't that what this battle was?"

Roswaal: "To go either left or right will lead to a dead end. When faced with this crossroads, aaaaaaaaaany struggle is in vain. For, the entirety of the truly correct course is written here."

Roswaal withdraws a black tome from his pocket.

Seeing this unfamiliar thing, an impulse rises inside Emilia, clawing at her chest. Her eyes open wide.

That book gives her a terribly bad feeling.

It has no title or cover-wrap, looks an entirely mundane book, but for some reason just looking at the tome makes Emilia feel a pressure which nigh fosters mental instability.

Emilia: "That book's…"

Roswaal: "A replica of the BOOK OF WISDOM. Or perhaps it could be called a superior gospel. To all except myself its writing appears as illegible scribbles, but not for me. It is a text which accounts the path along the correct history, which ought to be followed."

Emilia: “History which ought to be followed…you mean like the Dragon Stone?”

Roswaal: “They follow the same principles should you trace back their roots, is what Teacher told me.”

Only when Roswaal says the word ‘Teacher’ does emotion return to his eyes.

His tone was one of envisioning someone darling, as if that simple two-syllable word had long carried emotion he could not fully suppress, a diction which allowed much such supposition. Roswaal was capable of thinking of someone this way, no issue at all. He was capable, but he was attempting to deem everything he saw as worthless.

Emilia: “You mean, because we’re going a different course than what that book says, you’ll ruin everything? But what will doing that accomplish? If we look for a different path, different from the book, which isn’t a dead end…”

Roswaal: “You’re saying the exact same things as Subaru. Is this another idea coming second-hand from him?”

Emilia: “—Hic!”

Roswaal laughs slightly. Feeling that he hit the bullseye, Emilia’s throat jars.

Her expression prompts Roswaal to give a bored sigh.

Roswaal: “Borrowed words, opinions pre-prepared. Even the idea that you ought to challenge the Trial was something that you were pushed into…Weeeeeeeeell, I will not fault you. It was I and those around you who demanded that you do it, not yourself. Words spoken with the knowledge that your empty, insignificant self can do nothing other than this…Subaru encourages cruel things.”

Emilia: “Cruel things…”

Roswaal: “The subject here is him, so ooooooof course he went without explaining the logical necessity or whatever have you about challenging the T RIAL, and merely gave you a motivating speech, yes? He pushed his complacency onto you, and claimed that you could do it if you willed. Indeed. Iiiiiiiindeed I know. Aaaaaaaafter all, he and I are oooooooof the same breed.”

Emilia: “You and Subaru are the same? What do you mean?”

Roswaal: “It means that we impose our ideals upon the women we love.” Assertion.

Roswaal closes one eye, gazing at Emilia with the yellow. His smile is strong as he throws statement upon statement at the silenced Emilia.

Roswaal: “With what words did he accost you? Entirely statements pleasant to the ear, yes? He spoiled you, imposed ideals upon you, treated you so tenderly and carefully as if he were handling a fragile object. He didn’t consider for a second that you are in actuality weak and brittle, that you are fearful and desire to flee, that you possess such a mundane breed of heart. He doesn’t have a shred of interest in the real you. What he’s infatuated with is the sparkling version of you he has in his own head. —Cooooooooorrect?”

Emilia: “…”

Roswaal: “I am also that way. With her, I only saw the ideal. You’re wonderful, you’re brilliant, there’s none greater than you. That’s how I consoled her, what I kept telling her, focusing my love as if handling a work of glass…even though those things carry not even the slightest of meaning.”

Speaking quickly, Roswaal averts his gaze, seemingly irritated.

Was he talking about Subaru, or was he discussing himself? Perhaps not even Roswaal himself could clearly distinguish it.

Overwhelmed by his momentum, Emilia takes a small breath.

Takes it so that can say what she has to say, even though intimidated by Roswaal’s attitude.

Emilia: "…That's all?"

Roswaal: "…"

Emilia: "That's all the common points you think there are between you and Subaru?"

Roswaal looks suspiciously at Emilia.

A doubtfulness has risen inside him. His neglect to say anything is obviously his answer to Emilia's query. Which means yeah, she has to say it for him. She has to correct his idea.

Emilia: "If that's all you were trying to say, then…"

Roswaal: "…"

Emilia: "You and Subaru are nothing alike."

Indeed, Subaru had spoken lines upon lines of idealism, and not explained the significance of liberating the Sanctuary to Emilia.

But Subaru's argument assuredly did not consist entirely of niceties and Emilia-focused lip service.

Emilia: "So, Subaru, he called me a pain in the ass of a woman."

Roswaal: "…What?"

Emilia: "That who do I think I am, doing so much crap but causing so many problems. Always fussing over what's already gone, stop giving others these empty expectations. Every word out your mouth is just insincere talk, you're lacking in everything, it's unbearable to watch. —Subaru said all of this for me."

Roswaal: "…"

Emilia: "Subaru is paying proper attention to me. Now I'm thinking that I can't keep showing him only my lame parts. You pretend you're looking ahead when you're really not looking at anything at all. You're nothing like Subaru."

If Natsuki Subaru was someone who could only envision an idealised image of Emilia, then surely she would still be hugging her knees inside the tomb.

And with Garfiel, too. If his opponent had not been Subaru, who knew more than the ideals but nonetheless opted to argue with idealism, then he would not have listened.

Subaru saw Emilia's weakness, but still told her he loved her.

Subaru knew Garfiel's kindness, but still demanded he change.

Whoever they were, if they wished to stay stuck in one place, Subaru would run over and reprimand them.

You can't be here, there's more you can do, raise your head, look forward, swing up your fists, you don't have time to be staying put.

—You can't stay standing still forever.

Roswaal: “Natsuki Subaru, made the correct choice in this Sanctuary…? That kind of ludicrous thing couldn’t…that would mean, the writ of this Book of Wisdom…”

Emilia: “My memories were revived, and I was anxious. Puck went away, and I was close to being crushed.”

The discrepancy between what he thought and the answer Subaru gave leads Roswaal into confusion.

Emilia puts her hand to her chest, not to feel for the presence there, but to feel the thumping of her heartbeat.

Emilia: “I thought that, once I remembered everything, I’d turn into somebody else. I thought that, once that happened, it’d wind up that the person I’ve been until now was wrong.”

Inside her mind even now is a girl lost in memories.

Once that girl attains a definite image, someone irreversible will appear.

Once they come, Emilia’s world will change completely.

Emilia feared that change, leaned toward rejecting it, but, she knew the shift was necessary.

No matter what changes, that will not make the path she has walked thus far disappear.

No matter how Emilia changes from hereon, even if she becomes a self with a differing origin than what she currently has, that does not make the feelings she presently holds a mistake.

She may be at stalemate, may have stopped still, but she would walk again.

Sight what direction seems forward, and proceed.

Emilia: “When I want to do something, when I want to change something, when that's what I want to do—I have someone who will tell me it's okay, and lead me forward. That's what I learned."

Roswaal: "That is trickery!"

Emilia: "It's not a lie at all. Subaru told me he believes in me, and I want to believe in him. Though what he said might look like baseless nonsense. Though I might want to say it was a lie…I have to make it so that it isn't a lie."

She did not want to let the label of 'liar who went around preaching about the insubstantial hopes there are in useless unsalvageable Emilia' fall onto Subaru. Natsuki Subaru asserted that Emilia could do it.

And presently, Emilia was making that statement a lie.

But if she broke through her shell, and achieved what she could do, his lie would not be a lie.

These were what people called wishes.

Emilia: "Turning lies into wishes, by doing these things I have to do now, is what I want to do." As Subaru frantically, desperately taught her.

What rested inside Emilia, previously beyond her ability to put into form, finally takes shape as words.

She cannot tell whether this is truly the correct answer.

What would change something indefinite into something correct would be Emilia's actions.

And she would like to proceed without hesitating to do it, without indecision about it.

Roswaal: "—! Absurd!"

Roswaal's face pales as he draws backward.

He casts away his usual composure, and the emptiness he had until now, strangling out his voice with his expression despairing, shivering in fear at Emilia's answer. He swings up his arm, points at Emilia. His voice cracks as he shouts.

Roswaal: "Why, how! How did you wind up reaching that answer now, here?! How did Natsuki Subaru earlier communicate to you something I couldn't communicate to Teacher?! Him, right now! At this stage! It isn't okay for him to achieve those feelings!"

Emilia: "I remember what I was afraid of. Right now I'm in the middle of steeling myself to face it…what are you afraid of?"

Roswaal: "It's obvious! Deviations from the writ! Going on without history proceeding as it is written here, and no longer being able to achieve our promised reunion! What else would I be!"

Emilia: "But it feels like that isn't what you're having a problem with right now."

Roswaal: "—!"

A fire of rage sparks in Roswaal's eyes.

He was voicing was his wrath at the fact that he could not sympathize with Subaru's mentality. Roswaal wanted Subaru to feel something which he himself had experienced in the past. What he said before about him and Subaru being the same breed probably had been no idle bantering, but what Roswaal was convinced should be the way of things.

Perhaps he thought that himself and Subaru should follow down the same stream in how they confronted their lovers, and suffer the same wounds.

That unshakeable conviction of his was now close to crumbling.

That was how Emilia perceived Roswaal's present turmoil.

Roswaal: "Aaaaguh, what is happening! How is this happening to me of all people!"

Roswaal puts his hand to his mouth, uncaring of his paint as it falls away, his cheeks twisting.

Roswaal: “Have I been dancing on strings since the moment of the bet? Garfiel’s loss, and Emilia’s recovery, all of it was calculated? …Was I in error from the moment I started making plots in counter to a sage’s ability to preclude? …But then, for what purpose am I…”

Emilia: “Roswaal?”

Absorbed in a dizzying storm of thought, Emilia’s presence flies out of Roswaal’s awareness.

What he’s thinking about so frantically is probably how to correct a world that has deviated from his plans.

But no method to achieve such a thing existed in this world any more.

Emilia did not know what kind of prophecies were written in his book.

Roswaal is this cornered. The deviation must be incredible.

So much so that you could already call this place a different world —

Roswaal: “—Ahh, I see.”

Roswaal slips a mutter.

His voice has regained its intelligent tone, making Emilia anticipate that he has temporarily dealt with his discomposure. Through a logical conversation, they could find a point of compromise and —

Roswaal: “There’s nooooo need to worry about anything. After all, there’s the Contract. There was no puzzling to be had about whether or not he would reach legitimacy.”

Emilia: “What are you talking about? Roswaal, what is it…?”

Roswaal: “Nothing. It was not any thing at all, Lady Emilia. My deepest apologizes for worrying and for troubling you. You best proceed in the way that is desired of you, and that I expect of you."

Bowing, Roswaal casts away his clownish demeanor as he gives Emilia a smile.

Emilia of course cannot just agree with this. In a complete change from his previous disarray, he's back to his usual attitude.

That the disarray looked the considerably more GENUINE behavior is insane.

Emilia: "…Acting in a way you expect. What are you expecting from me?"

Roswaal: "It's natural. —That you challenge the Trial as you please, and that results be reached."

Roswaal neglects to mention exactly who those results would favor.

Perhaps he's desiring it whichever way it goes, Emilia just kind of senses.

She doesn't understand why Roswaal desires that.

Nor why he got so cavalier, nor why he swallowed it down and it settled.

It's just a sea of things she doesn't understand. But,

Emilia: "Right now, you…definitely won't tell me about them, will you."

Roswaal: "…"

Emilia: "It's okay. I won't try to force you to say it. I know I'm not qualified to do that right now. —But don't you get the idea that you can keep hiding it forever."

Roswaal: "—Heartening, indeed. Knowing the truth, and now recovering yourself, we'll see if you can stay to your bluffs."

He ends with a rather spiteful statement, but also a statement

Emilia finds pleading.

With that, Roswaal turns his back to her and walks. He is likely heading back to the lodgings where he was recuperating.

In the end, she doesn't know why he came here and watched the fight. But the churning dense mass of mana remains, inside Roswaal's body as it pines for a miracle.

Roswaal: "Yes. —Lady Emilia, a warning."

Emilia: "Yes?"

Roswaal stops, raises his finger. Emilia's brows raise.

Roswaal smiles wryly at the fact that Emilia displays a far too undefended attitude when facing someone she had just finished having an effectively hostile conversation with.

Roswaal: "About Garfiel…you would best not underestimate how deep-set hiiiiiiiiis nature is. His obsession is not so shallow that a simple defeat in a fistfight would change his mind."

Emilia: "—Got it."

Emilia accepts it. With that, Roswaal leaves the scene.

She sees him off, to realize that the only things remaining here are Emilia's breathing, and the breathing of the black dragon which had glared at Roswaal's retreating back to the end.

And then the deep, sleeper's breathing of the two unconscious men.

Emilia: "Hauhhh…"

Emilia's brows tremble as she gives a deep sigh.

Noticing that Patrasche's eyes widen in response to this, Emilia gives a wry smile.

Emilia: "No, it's okay. It's thanks to you that I kept my composure. …But that was sooo tense. That could've turned into a fight with

Roswaal.”

Patrasche: “…”

Emilia: “Mm. I hate fighting when I don’t even know why we’re fighting. And why was Roswaal being like that? …Maybe Subaru would know.”

Emilia replies to Patrasche’s caring gaze while she kneels down beside the bloodstained Subaru, and gently lifts him up.

Her fingers rub away the drying blood as she strokes his swollen face. His expression twitches, as if feeling the tickle of the pain.

Emilia: “I need to heal them. Subaru and Garfiel both hate pain.”

Patrasche: “…”

Emilia: “Ah, it’s okay, you don’t need to look so concerned. I’m a little worried about my control since Puck’s not here, but when it’s just some simple healing, I can have the minor spirits help.”

Emilia speaks to the surrounding spirits, their dull glow shrouding her form as she enlists their aid.

The tender lights veil Subaru and Garfiel, their injuries beginning to mend.

Subaru’s expression looks to relax.

Emilia gives a small smile as she gently places his head upon her lap.

How many times has she lent Subaru her lap, now?

She’s been given far too many things, so many that she has no idea what to do to repay them.

Emilia: “When you wake up, there are really sooo many things I want to ask you.”

With that whisper, Emilia twines her finger into Subaru’s bangs.

Subaru’s face scrunches up. Emilia’s cheeks relax slightly.

—It happened ten minutes later that Otto emerged from the forest, Ram shouldered on his back, to reconvene with them all.

Chapter 115:
You Are Never a Match for the Girl from Your Youth

1

He feels something precious shedding away inside him.

The sensation is unlike that of his gate, whose existence has reached finality.

Something entirely separate, different, squirms within Subaru.

Was it hot? Cold? The fever it carried gave indication of neither.

Was it with shape? Without? Its nebulousness indicated not even that.

The dingy muck had coursed through Natsuki Subaru, cheering in joy for its release outside, to demonstrate its power and disperse.

But its vestiges remained fluctuating through Subaru even now.

The abnormal sensation gave Subaru an indescribable feeling. This was not something he recognized, or something he had felt before. But he did possess both knowledge and understanding about it.

So while he does question WHY? and HOW?, he does not question WHAT? or WHAT FOR?

He did not need to ruminate over the identity of this thing. He would be best off to question WHY, but presently his query would not reach anyone who could answer. Meaning that Subaru has only one thing to consider.

INVISIBLE STRIKE, UNSEEN PALM, UNNOTICEABLE BLOW.

All of them sound either lame or rehashed, lacking in style.

A black hand which only Subaru could see.

What only Subaru could control, which was—

2

Subaru: “THE IMPERCEPTIBLE WILL OF THE GODS…We’ll call it Invisible Providence…”

???: “…Huh? What did you say?”

Squinting open his eyes with his consciousness still fuzzy, a fragment of his thoughts slips out his mouth.

That instant, the silver-haired visage immediately in front of him opens its eyes wide.

After several blinks, Subaru recognizes that he has returned from the world of unconsciousness into reality. He notices the connection between the soft sensation beneath his head and Emilia’s proximity.

Subaru: “Oh. I’m getting a lap pillow from Emilia-tan again.”

Emilia: “You are. What’s the count now? For me lending you my lap when you’re unconscious.”

Subaru: “Take some conditions into account and maybe three. Have to win a big bout to reach this paradise.”

Emilia: “Y-You’re sooo not drowsy at all…do you remember what happened before you fainted?”

Subaru: “Yeah and clearly. I’ll reminisce on it nice and slow, while we chat and I gaze at your face…”

Subaru jokes around while he pushes aside the thoughts in his weighty head and gets his ideas into order. He then remembers the shower of furious blows he sustained before fainting, and comprehends.

He immediately puts his hands to his face, kneading his cheeks as he looks up at Emilia.

Subaru: “Crap. Actually I think I got beat up pretty bad. Emilia-tan, am I okay? My face isn't so messed up it's hard to look at?"

Emilia: "Don't worry. It doesn't look that weird."

Subaru: "And spoken without any malevolence!"

Emilia tilts her head in mystification. Subaru removes his hands from his cheeks and promptly checks that his joints are all okay. A faint numbness hangs around his shoulders, lower body, and neck region. But most of his wounds are sealed, apparently post-healing.

Emilia: "Subaru, it tickles if you move around on my lap too much."

Subaru: "Ah, sorry. No! I wasn't trying anything dirty with that! I mean I wasn't but, how about I double check just to be sure?"

Emilia: "Don't. I'm going to shove you off my lap if you keep saying this stuff. Stop being so saucy."

Subaru: "Who says saucy anymore?"

After responding to Emilia's harsh gaze with a wry smile, Subaru uprights himself from her lap.

While it does hurt to part with it, he can't impose forever.

His physical status, compared to his top form, is sitting at about 60%. Definitely not perfect, but he's thankful for Emilia's healing.

Subaru: "Thanks for healing me. You managed to heal without Puck?"

Emilia: "My Contract with Puck might be broken, but my Contract with the minor spirits isn't. And…

I don't know how this will sound, but it's not like I can't use magic."

Subaru: "Really? My knowledge was magicians and spiritualists have different structures in how they handle mana…that you can't have both."

Lessons learned in the mansion from Puck and Roswaal.

Magicians can only use magic proportionate to their internal store of mana, while spiritualists must establish communication with a spirit so that they can utilize the inexhaustible ambient supply. That's the entire extent of how Emilia's ability to use magic vaguely diverts from Subaru's knowledge.

Emilia lowers her gaze.

Subaru's brows furrow at her strange reaction. She gives a small sigh.

Emilia: "I didn't think I could either…but, I did mention that my memories are coming back. Part of them was knowledge about how to just use magic…which I think got sealed as well."

Subaru: "Your memories sealed your ability to use magic?"

Emilia: "Yes."

She nods. Her failure to articulate is probably because she cannot tell what this all signifies. Subaru does not understand why her ability to use magic was sealed in the recesses of her memory either. And his present information load is looking too sparse for speculation. Either way, she used her newly-usable magics to heal Subaru.

Subaru: "Never mind the circumstances, if it meant you were able to heal me, it's a huge help. How is everyone…"

else, is how he intends to continue, when he realizes that this is not the time for him to be relaxing. He should have recognized this fact the moment that he remembered why he fell unconscious. Subaru's opponent Garfiel, and Otto and Ram who apparently opposed said Garfiel. Are they safe?

Subaru: "Don't think the situation's too risky, but I'm gonna go before they end up as forest fertilizer and help—"

???: "I appreciate that you're worried about me, but I would manage well without having to hear your imaginings about these worst-case scenarios."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Animating his wavering body to stand, Subaru moves to start running away from the tomb and into the forest. When the astonished voice of a young man stops him. He careens to a halt and glances behind him, to see someone sitting on the tomb's stone steps—Otto Suwen, with his hand raised.

Subaru: "Aaah, aaah?!"

Otto: "How glad I am to see your surprise. I apologize for worrying you, but seeing as the worries go both ways, we'll agree not to mention it, and…"

Subaru: "Hi-yah!"

Otto: "Eewhauhg?!"

Having confirmed their mutual safety, a rather satisfied smile arises on Otto's face—when Subaru charges. He rides the momentum as he leaps to acquaint Otto with a flying kick. Stuck between the stairs and Subaru, Otto cries out.

Otto: "Ow! Ouch! Stairs are, grinding my head—ow! M-My hair! I'm going bald! Wh-Mr. Natsuki, what on earth are you doing?!"

Subaru: "Shut it, stupid! Stop trying to be cool. What's going on with this vibe where it's like you did something big? Who told you to do anything more than buy time? You know how close my plans were to winding up par for course because of this? But if you hadn't helped I don't think I would've beat Garfiel so I can't say I don't thank you!"

Otto: "I have no idea what you're even saying anymore!!"

Unable to give a sincere thanks, Subaru scuffles with Otto on the stairs while he speaks, when Otto kicks him away. Subaru rolls down the steps to land on his backside before standing up.

Subaru: "Either way, glad you're safe. If you died you'd make for an annoying visitant bedside."

Otto: "I'd rather we leave these eccentric customs undiscussed. …Or actually, why didn't those sentiments of yours show up nicely and at the start?"

Subaru: "Don't slather on too much praise, we're talking me here!"

Otto: "I am aware of that, yes!"

Otto puts his hand to his brow, before noticing that Emilia has been quietly watching their exchange.

Otto: "Ah, Lady Emilia. I apologize for excluding you. Though it's all Mr. Natsuki's fault."

Emilia: "Mm, I was watching so I know. Don't worry."

Subaru: "No friends in sight…No, I mean I'm drowning in friends and that's why I'm in this situation. —Anyway, you being safe means that Ram's okay too?"

Emilia and Otto look at each other and nod. Subaru sticks his tongue out at them before inquiring as to the safety of their unseen and final collaborator. Otto nods.

Otto: "Being what her condition was after I woke up and found her, I have to say I was chilled. …Fortunately her situation wasn't as horrendous as it looked. Although, she awoke while I was carrying her to reconvene, and did speak some rather potent venom…"

Subaru: "Sympathies. She seriously is harsh-tongued with people outside her circle. …It's impressive you managed to talk her into this. How'd you do it?"

Otto: "One of the terms for securing her cooperation would be that I do not tell you that." Otto puts his hand to his mouth, indicating that he is not going to talk.

Subaru's lips quirk, eager to say something, but he determines that speech is not going to get Otto to bend and he promptly abandons any further inquisition.

If some vaguely harsh questioning was enough to get him talking, then he wouldn't have risked his life going along with Subaru's practically-nonsense plots.

Stubborn, a nuisance, and a great friend.

Subaru: "Crap!"

Otto: "Ow! Why am I getting hit?!"

Subaru: "Just be quiet."

Subaru shoves Otto's shoulders, then paying no heed to his complaints before turning to face Emilia. To find that Patrasche has materialized beside her at some unknown juncture and is pressing her snout into Emilia's silver hair, the two of them smiling.

Subaru: "What's this? Since when've you been such good friends?"

Emilia: "Some things happened while you were sleeping…and she really helped me. She's sooo great."

Subaru: "Right? She's my pride and my partner, no joke. Yeah, Patrasche?"

Subaru approaches and reaches out to stroke her back. But the dragon dodges away before his fingertips can touch her, avoiding his hand.

Subaru: "Gahugh?!"

Patrasche: "…"

The swing of her tail strikes Subaru in the ass, leaving him half in-tears from pain as he leaps. He looks at her, questioning and defiant, to see that her sharp eyes have sharpened further and she is growling displeasingly at him with her neck stooped low.

Otto: "Would you like a translation?"

Subaru: "No, even I can figure this one out."

Subaru replies to Otto’s considerations with a shake of his head. He gives a small sigh.

Subaru: “—It’s ‘don’t make me worry’, isn’t it.”

Otto: “Additionally, don’t get carried away. I’m not doing it again. Imagine what it’s like for me. But with a ‘yes fine you can come in’ nuance in the anger.”

Subaru: “Seriously what is going on with your heroine power? Are you throwing your name into the heroine race?”

Subaru gives a wry smile and reaches out. This time his fingers do touch Patrasche’s tough hide. She closes her eyes, accepting it as if inevitable, Subaru’s gratitude for the tolerant dragon unending.

Patrasche’s assistance in the Garfiel fight, that being the decisive blow, occurred as a factor of her incredible and unhesitating trust.

As always, flimsy Subaru needed to indebt himself to many people every time he wanted to scale any mountain. Would the day ever come where he would settle those debts?

He doubted it. But had to do it.

Subaru: “So what’s going on with the conquered and debt-producing mountain, Garfiel?”

Emilia: “Garfiel’s recovering and is over there. But it might be better not to interrupt.”

Subaru: “Interrupt?”

Subaru tilts his head. Emilia puts her finger to her lips.

Emilia: “Ram’s looking after him right now, you see.”

3

Ram: “Are you awake, Garf?”

What Garfiel sees when he wakes up is the face of a familiar girl.

This was someone he wanted to see upon waking, who he did not want to see upon waking. It's a complex feeling.

But he cannot deny that his chest has begun to beat faintly faster. Garfiel hums.

Garfiel: "Yeah…'m up."

Ram: "I see. Then move. This has gone on far long enough, and my legs are numb."

Garfiel: "Augh!"

The instant they establish communication, Garfiel is expelled from the soft touch as his head falls to the ground. He hadn't been expecting a kind reaction, but this kind of coldness does hurt. And especially so when his pride is already wounded, and his crush is the one being icy.

He rubs his head and gazes bitterly at Ram. She sits on the grass with her legs folded, patting at the spot where Garfiel's head had been resting, her thighs. She responds to Garfiel's gaze with a displeased "What?".

Garfiel: "Ain't nothin'…Same 's always, yer a lady who ain't got a scrap'v kindness."

Ram: "When the moment requires kindness and the recipient merits kindness, then of course I'll be kind. That I'm not being so now means that this isn't one of those moments."

Garfiel: "…My amazin' self got that merit?"

Ram: "It's utterly transparent what you want me to say. You mustn't be like Barusu, Garf. If you wish to know what a woman truly feels, devise a cleverer scheme."

Garfiel lowers his gaze. He head goes springing back in the wake of Ram's poke to his forehead.

The shock races through the point just above the scar that Garfiel always finds himself touching.

His fingers brush across the scar on his brow as he sighs.

Garfiel: “Thinkin’ back…yer the one who gave me this injury.”

Ram: “—I had to act frantically to settle your shenanigans. Do you think I did something as drastic as knock your face into the stone because I wanted to?”

Garfiel: “Feels same ‘s t’day when yer were beatin’ me down, that yer were smilin’ like crazy…”

Ram: “My life isn’t unlimited. When it’s merely doing something that I’m reluctant to do, it’s profitable that I smile and convince myself it’s enjoyable. Desperate measures.”

Garfiel: “How ‘bout thinkin’v th’mental scars that leaves f’r th’guy who gets his head cracked open, oi!”

Ram just sighs, her expression even more bored.

Of course. She would never accept that she was wrong, and her stubborn mentality would never bend. Proud, noble, tough, tenacious.

Which is why Garfiel admired her, and wanted her.

Garfiel: “…You ain’t wounded any, Ram?”

Ram: “Who could suppose. I have had Lady Emilia mend the conspicuous injuries, but it might be impossible to remove all of them entirely. How are you going to take responsibility for despoiling me?”

Garfiel: “Make you my wife…”

Ram: “You’ll fail. Think of a different method. —And that was audacious of you, Garf. That you dared to abandon the losers.”

Garfiel: “…”

Ram’s harsh gaze silences Garfiel.

The anger in her eyes is a condemnation of the fact that he practised leniency at the battle's end. Garfiel had neglected to finish off both Ram, defeated, and Otto, upside- down in the shrubs. Indeed their survival had been his decision, and it may have sullied the glory of the fight.

But Garfiel could not brandish his claws at the unconscious girl. Even disregarding his feelings for her, and other different and varied factors, he surely would not have managed it.

After all, he lacked the courage most vital for a warrior.

Ram: "It impresses me that you avoided my last cast of magic."

Garfiel: " …Ain't like I was tryin' to. When I was beaten down n'started reversin' my transformation, I got this foreboding feelin'. Then my body moved quicker th'n my head. Thassall."

When the forest's mana had been assembled, and Ram cast the most advanced wind magic there is, rather than think, Garfiel left everything to his survival instinct and evaded the blades of wind.

He used the feeling of the invisible gale grazing millimeters past his skin to escape. The attack had ravaged every tree in sight down to nothing, and alongside his rather artistic dodges he managed to flee from its range.

Once he returned to the scene, he found the fallen Ram and Otto.

Were Garfiel a true warrior, he would have boasted of his survival and taken their lives. But Garfiel, who needed to surrender himself to his animal blood if he was going to take a life, could not do it.

Garfiel: "I'm…"

Ram: "…"

Not a warrior. Merely someone who wears a warrior's airs, speaks empty threats, a fake.

He had stubbornly believed that even a fake like him, provided he had the power, could subdue everything and protect those he wished to protect without taking any lives. But his ideas had been largely invalidated.

He had believed that he possessed enough strength to defeat even great groups of outsiders.

But in reality he lost to merely three people and a ground dragon. And for each of their reasons all of those people were practically non-combatants.

If a hostile warrior came to the Sanctuary, they would easily destroy Garfiel. This was what he was, after running his pompous mouth with talk about being the Sanctuary's barrier.

—He mulled over many thoughts in this deficient head of his.

Throughout the battle, and even outside of battle, Garfield never stopped using his assuredly poor brain.

What strategy would be optimum? What action would best help everyone? Was there a way to do this without hurting anybody? And even if someone would be hurt, it was fine so long as the only injuries were to himself.

All his days spent holding these beliefs and doing his best had been entirely superficial, acting only to conceal his weakness.

Ram: "Garf."

Garfiel: "…"

Ram: "I'm going to give you a word of advice. Listen well."

Garfiel: "…Yeah."

Still looking down, Garfiel gives a nod.

What words would Ram, his crush, shower upon him? Her usual statements were harsh, but she had probably never truly washed her hands of him.

Ram's personality was one where she was soft to people inside her circle. And although their relationship was not without its faults, she and Garfiel had known each other for a long time, and she considered him as part of that count.

But now her hostility was clear. He probably was not included in that category any more. Her imminent announcement would be Ram's parting with Garfiel in earnest, and—

Ram: "Garf, you're stupid so thinking is utterly pointless. A waste of time. Otherwise said, a waste of life."

Garfiel: "…eh?"

Ram: "You're who said it. Garf, you dodged my magic when you acted without thinking anything. And that is exactly the case. You may not have noticed it, but when you are thinking nothing you are considerably stronger in fights. When you're being a barefaced idiot, considerably."

Unable to comprehend what he is hearing, Garfiel's eyes widen.

While he had expected her to find him useless, her statements are aiming somewhere entirely unanticipated.

Ram: "I don't mean for you to abandon all rationality and transform. In fact I will mention that your transformation makes you even weaker than when you are thinking. You become a bigger target, and your weapons are slow. Stay in human form, focus on your opponent, and fight without thinking."

Garfiel: "Th-Th'hell's this?! Since when was this th'topic'v…"

Ram: "This is important. —Because now you're going to fight on many occasions as an ally to me and Lady Emilia."

Garfiel: "—!!"

Emotion clogs Garfiel's throat.

His face flashes red, his sharp fangs clicking as he speaks.

Garfiel: "Fuck off! Y'fuckin' piss 'round with me, be enemies, crush my ideas…n'yer still forgivin' me, n'tellin' me t'forgive you?!"

Ram: "Don't be an idiot. I don't forgive you and so I'm demanding you serve us. If we forgive you and our standings become equal, we'll need to make requests to gain your cooperation. Foolishness. We are the victors and you are the loser. I don't forgive you and so I am ordering you. Understand?"

Garfiel: "'S fuckin' nuts!"

Garfiel bares his fangs as he stands up.

His body sways for an instant, but with how most all of his wounds have been healed, it isn't a problem. Healed. The moment he reaches that thought, even more shame claws at his heart.

Garfiel: "I accept I lost! Cause I did! But that ain't th'same deal as whether 'm gonna back down! I lost, yer got me, understood! But my amazin' self's still alive 'n kickin'! 'F yer really gonner move things along without askin' me, then what yer shoullder done was kill me! Second you ain't doin' that 's the exact second yer cowardice's th'same 's mine!"

Ram: "Cart before horse. If we let you die when we need your strength, that contradicts our goals."

Garfiel: "…But I!!"

Ram: "Incessant snivelling!"

Before Garfiel can roar in anger, Ram gets to her feet and howls.

Her cerise eyes host fury as she glares at Garfiel.

It's menacing. Overwhelmed, Garfiel winds up shutting his mouth.

Ram: "You lost. You have lost. Then act like the loser you are and heed the commands of the victor. How wretched must you be in presence of a woman you like, flaunting your inane and girlish temperament as a sore loser, before you will be satisfied, Garf? Your flagellation of others becomes flagellation of yourself the moment that you lose, all you have changed is the aim of your braying, idiotic."

Garfiel: "Uawh… ah."

Her statements are spot-on. Garfiel cannot manage a single word.

Before the fight, he had imposed certain issues onto other people. Now that he's lost, he's imposing his own weakness. It proves that nothing has changed about his wretchedness as he yells at whatever he thinks is weak.

He stopped yelling about the outside which he thought weak, and started yelling about his own self who he had to acknowledge as weak.

Garfiel: "But what'm I meant t'do?! Go laughin' like a stupid idiot n' stand'n line with yer entourage?! I can't do that! I'm acceptin' I lost…but that don't mean I'm acceptin' yer words 's bein' right!"

Not a dodge, but Garfiel's true thoughts.

He acknowledges his loss. His opponents being numerous is a topic irrelevant to discussion. If he starts expounding why he lost, he would never end.

The problem is that nothing has sprouted in the depths of Garfiel's heart to instil him firm conviction in Subaru's claims.

Ultimately, the ideas he has obsessed over all until this point remain unchanged, and even should someone demand that he fight alongside them, he cannot simply nod in assent.

Garfiel: "What'm I meant t'do, with this, half-way situation…"

Ram: "If you don't want to be stuck at a half-way, then all you need to do is prove that you're moving."

Garfiel: "…What?"

His breathing still ragged, Garfiel looks at Ram.

Her expression has regained its usual composure as she looks

Garfiel straight in the eye.

In her eyes he sees the reflection of his own feeble face.

He would rather look away, but Ram's gaze does not permit him to.

Ram: "I don't know what Barusu said, but I can imagine it. And so, Garf…you should confirm it for yourself."

Garfiel: "Confirm it, myself…confirm what?"

Ram: "Whether you're capable of changing, or whether you're still a petrified, whimpering child."

Garfiel finally recognizes what she is telling him.

The instant he comprehends it, his heartbeat assaults him, thumping at an unprecedented speed.

Cold sweat streams down his back, sticking to him, spreading inside him.

His pulse grows wild, a ringing reverberating endlessly in his skull.

This is his trauma, with its barbed chains constricting his heart, great enough to bring these abnormalities all across his body.

He feels a chill, looks behind him. The tomb looms there as ever.

—Confirm. Something, in there.

Even supposing he went in, what could he confirm?

What new answer was Ram expecting him to find there?

Nothing would change. Nothing could change.

But why, even knowing this, was he failing to assert I WON'T GO, and instead wavering between I

WILL and I WON'T?

Garfiel: "…What'll I learn by going in?"

He's getting hooked into it. Utterly.

He didn't think anything would change, but he also desired to confirm it.

He stiffens in terror, his heart wailing in rejection, but his soul howling.

He wanted to confirm. He needed to confirm.

Confirm whether the bloody shrieks of the boy blocking his path, whether the assertions of Natsuki Subaru, were correct.

Confirm whether everything he had lived thus far had been mistaken.

Ram: "You look resolved."

The chattering of his teeth, and the unrest of his heart, have calmed.

All signs of his cold sweat are gone. Garfiel wordlessly turns to face Ram.

Garfiel couldn't tell what she was expecting of him, with her stern words of encouragement. And perhaps the question of whether or not Garfiel would ally with them was not where Ram's focus lay.

They've known each other for a long time. There's some things he just understands.

What Ram seeks is not exactly for Garfiel to join them.

She seeks that Garfiel will reach a conclusion on how to live his life. Everything else is secondary.

She's a good lady, someone to be thankful for, thinks Garfiel.

Ram: "Don't worry, Garf."

Perhaps unsettled by Garfiel's silence, a rare warmth peeks through in Ram's tone. She gives Garfiel's bare shoulders a light tap.

Ram: “If anything frightening enough happens that you cry, I’ll comfort you. —Our relationship goes back a long way, after all.”

Chapter 116:
With Grandmother, with Mother, with Sister; As Grandson, as Son, as Brother

1

Ram: “Apologies for this when you’re motivated, Lady Emilia, but Garf is entering the tomb first.”

That is Ram’s first line after finishing her chat and returning to the group with Garfiel.

Subaru’s eyes widen. Emilia and Otto are also plainly surprised.

Subaru: “Garfiel’s doing the Trial…seriously?”

Ram: “Most seriously of seriously. Yes, Garf?”

Ram nods and glances up to Garfiel, who stands beside her.

Their height difference is not that great, but regardless Garfiel is slightly taller than Ram. He sticks his fingers in his bangs, matted with dry blood, and averts his gaze so as to not engage in the conversation.

Ram grabs that unengaged ear of his and yanks it.

Ram: “Are you listening, Garf? What nerve you must have, ignoring us.”

Garfiel: “Auahg! Adduhd?! Oi, Ram?! My amazin’ ear’s barely hangin’ onter my head right now! ‘S seconds from coming off…’s bleedin’!”

Ram: “It seems that introspection you had after that beatdown from us isn’t functioning. I’ll mention now that our side still has Lady Emilia left, who hasn’t exhausted her stamina in the slightest. You do recognize what will happen if you rebel?”

Emilia: “I-I…wasn’t thinking to do anything violent…”

Everyone is drowning in wounds and sitting at the peak of exhaustion—except for Emilia, who had not participated in the fight and remains in top condition.

They had just ended a battle where the whole point was to not get Emilia involved, and still Ram is instantly using her to start making threats. Terrifying backbone.

Garfiel: “Yeah, I get it. We start fightin’ again here and my amazin’ self ain’t gonna win. Divine Protection of Earth Spirits’s given me a lotter my strength back…but it ain’t enough fer a fight.”

Subaru: “That’s a relief to hear. I’d seriously rather not get into any more fistfights with you. Thought I was gonna die. You’re sitting second or third in this month’s rankings.”

Otto: “Mr. Natsuki, just how many butcheries have you squeaked through? It’s scary.”

Subaru recollects on his fistfight with Garfiel and shivers. Otto envisions the grisliness of the scene and shivers.

This ranked in second or third place for his experiences in almost dying—but considering that he has also actually died, perhaps the peril he faced here was not really so hazardous.

Garfiel: “…How’m I th’second or third?”

Subaru: “Well that’s where you are. Second or third.” something something We take this outside and more’s gonna happen.

Garfiel: “Ha! Yer smooth talk ain’t gonna hook me. ‘S a DERDERDE LURKS IN THE SHADOWS OF QUICK RICHES.”

Garfiel snorts away Subaru’s challenge, and traces his fingers over his forehead scar.

His sharp gold eyes then gaze at the sight behind Subaru and the others—at the tomb, looming.

Garfiel: “Wheedlin’, n’ actual force…still can’t believe yer used both. Now’s t’try seeing things with yer view, n’ decide.”

Emilia: “What are you deciding?”

Emilia quietly asks Garfiel.

He looks at her. She looks back at him straight-on.

This might be the first time that they have ever faced each other in earnest.

Emilia is recipient to Garfiel’s horrifically violent gaze. But even so, her amethyst eyes do not waver in the least.

Perhaps seeing something in the eyes of the other, both of them smile.

Garfiel clicks his fangs, while Emilia’s fingers reach for her chest, before she seems to remember something and stops.

Seeing that, Garfiel reaches for his left shoulder.

Garfiel: “Ngh, hah…!”

The blue crystal jutting from his shoulder comes out with a splorch.

He does begin bleeding, but he forces the flow to stop by tightening his muscles. Emilia’s eyes widen at it as he tosses the removed crystal to her.

Emilia: “Ah, oh…”

Garfiel: “Jus’take it. ‘S probably right fer you t’be th’one holdin’ onter this thing.”

Emilia promptly catches the crystal, looking at it while Garfiel speaks bluntly.

She accepts Garfiel’s statements while the brilliance of the crystal in her hands leads her to gulp.

The jewel glows dimly, strobing, almost seeming overjoyed that Emilia has caught it.

Subaru crosses his arms as he watches on from aside. Still the same even though he can't speak, he thinks.

Emilia: “Thank you, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “My view is I just chucked away somethin' annoyin' fer me s'all. No reason fer yer t'thank me.”

Garfiel looks up at the sky with no particular intention.

Tangerine hues creep across the panoramic, soon to welcome night. Before long, the Trial will be ready to start.

Garfiel: “—I'm gonna be checking. Whether I'm who's wrong, or you're who's wrong.”

Garfiel's shoulders slice the wind as he turns around.

His path leads him toward the tomb—the nightmarish place which had carved abhorrent memories into him in childhood.

After all this time, what will he see there now?

Subaru: “Hey, Garfiel.”

A call from behind stops the supposedly-determined Garfiel.

He clicks his tongue and glances behind him, to find that Subaru is who halted him, his hand raised.

Garfiel: “What?”

Subaru: “I mean, not trying to rain on your parade or anything. But seeing as there's still an ounce of time before the Trial starts…”

While entirely raining on Garfiel's parade, Subaru scratches his head.

It looks like he's having difficulty saying something. Garfiel clicks his fangs to urge Subaru on.

Subaru sighs.

Subaru: “Please at least get dressed. You're in only a loincloth that's ready to fall off any second, there’s a line for tawdry here and you’ve crossed it.”

Barbarian style with the breeze tickling his privates.

A vein pulses on Garfiel head. Ram gives an astonished sigh.

Ram: “What a tawdry episode.”

2

—After getting dressed and entering the tomb, Garfiel senses that meets the Trial’s conditions.

The air hangs damp within the stone structure. A chilly breeze blows past, carrying the scent of dust, making Garfiel grimace. His nose is far too effective, and the stench from the enclosed chamber is an assault to his senses.

Garfiel: “Don’t wanna be stayin’ ‘round here too long.”

His mutter echoes down the corridor. Nothing replies.

He feels firm ground beneath his feet, firm ground beneath his feet, as he intrudes deeper and deeper into the tomb.

Garfiel recognizes that his pulse has accelerated without his notice.

He challenges the Trial, and he will see the consequence. He was ready for that. But still he cannot be calm, because the memory for Garfiel is one which evokes intense and irremovable dread.

Experiencing it again will make something change, his heart insists.

What on earth about Garfiel would change from witnessing that debacle again? He had never even forgotten it for an instant in the first place.

The vivid memory has burned into his brain far too vividly.

What would seeing it again do except reinforce that memory further?

Garfiel: “…P’thetic. I’m here b’cause that’s what I wanna check.”

Garfiel mocks himself as he lines up screeds of tenable logic, insistent to flee.

It’s a girlishness where he can agree with Ram’s scolding and derision of him. He had never wanted to know or realize that he was such a coward of a man.

—But if he is the kind of man who submits to frailty and girlishness, what is going to do?

Garfiel: “…”

His feet stop atop the stone-paved path. He focuses his attention on the ground below him. A warm wave of power courses up from his soles, the gift of the earth to Garfiel and his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits.

His may have been wounded, brutalized, and exhausted, but merely contacting the ground is enough to restore Garfiel’s body, his strength compounding.

Never mind how he was in the instants after being beaten. Now that he’s had a short rest, he’s at 40% of his top capacity. He should be capable of destroying the tomb if he wanted to.

And Subaru and Ram and the others would not be able to stop Garfiel’s destruction. It would utterly eliminate the point of their strenuous efforts spent defeating Garfiel. He could eliminate the point, right now.

Were they so stupid that they hadn’t considered that?

Garfiel: “Fuckin’ shitheads.”

Of course they had.

Emilia was probably ignorant to the concept of ‘doubting people’, and Otto was probably missing a few important screws, but never mind them. Calculating Subaru and that Ram would surely not overlook the possibility.

They're thinking that even if Garfiel regains his strength, he will not destroy the tomb.

Did they think him too cowardly to, or did they just trust him?

Garfiel cannot tell which it is.

Would this solution come after he defeats the Trial too?

Garfiel: "…Stupid."

With that, Garfiel resumes walking.

Thinking about complicated stuff is not his specialty. His poorness at using his head remains the same both in his daily life and during battle. He regardless frantically works his brain because someone long ago told him to.

Ram: "Think more while you're fighting, Garf. It'd make me happy if you did."

Garfiel: "—eh."

He remembers who told him to think while living.

Which was why he had so earnestly, with such asinine sincerity, remained to fixated to the idea.

The exact person who had told Garfiel to think while fighting had wound up informing him that he was better at fighting when not thinking. Crossing the line for absurdity.

Garfiel: "This's damn bullshit, oi…huh?"

A smile wells up inside him.

Just when he attempts to stifle the smile dead, Garfiel spots the corridor's end.

A rectangular space welcomes him. The Trial room.

Pale ghostly lights phase the chamber in from darkness. Garfiel steps inside, his stress somewhat calmed, and he looks at the stone door at the back of the room.

This door will open after the three Trials are cleared. Though since he has never seen it open before, he does not know if that is the truth. Nothing gives any indication of what is inside, either.

If he remains here standing still and waiting, the Trial should start.

Garfiel: “—Eh?”

Garfiel crosses his arms, bored as he glances around the chamber, when his brows rise. Into Garfiel’s nocturnal vision there slinks an oddness about the room. He strains his eyes in attempt to confirm exactly what it is, and—

“—First face your past.”

A voice.

Instantaneously, his vision wavers, his consciousness blurring.

The past, was here.

3

???: “I didn’t think at all that you’d be coming here again. —It makes me feel very happy.” Once his consciousness reaches sobriety, Garfiel realizes that he is standing in a forest.

He turns his head, to see the sight of a familiar woods—but compared to the scenery that Garfiel knows, these woodlands are somewhat YOUNGER. It’s only a few years of difference, but being that it’s a place he interacts with daily, Garfiel can easily notice the discrepancy.

This is the past.

And he is in a dream, challenging the Trial.

After smoothly accepting these facts, Garfiel checks to see how he is.

His limbs are there. Everything from his neck up, eyes and nose and ears and etcetera exist without issue. He opens his mouth and bites down hard, for his fangs to click like unsheathed blades.

He’s fine, no problems. Actually it feels like the injuries he sustained before entering the tomb have been healed.

???: “Your injuries from reality aren’t carrying over because this place only hauls in your mind. If you suffered a wound serious enough to influence your mind, then it wouldn’t heal even in the dream. This one’s already been verified, so for example if someone who was missing an arm in reality was invited to this world, their missing arm wouldn’t heal and…”

Garfiel: “Shut it with yer long-winded blabberin’. Can’t yer tell ‘m ignorin’ yer?”

???: “Indeed I can. But even so I just have to speak with you. I’d sorta like it if you could respect these feelings of delight I have for our prolonged reunion.”

Wanna try it? Says the doll-like smile of the girl standing opposite Garfiel.

From top to bottom a black funeral dress-esque vestment garbs her, her hair and skin pure white. Her smile was alluring enough to enchant any man, but facing her was enough to tell that it was utterly empty.

This visage was another thing which had not changed an inch from what he remembered.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’s grown up, but you ain’t changed a bit.”

Girl: “Because I am very unfortunately deceased. Dead, with only my soul stuck in the world. No matter how the time passes, I can’t walk the same trail as the living. This is a pretty sentimental topic, isn’t it? It’s not really like you.”

Garfiel: “‘Like me’, now there’s words only people who know me real well got any business sayin’. Our meetin’ happened ages ago n’ we only did it once. Ain’t that we talked ‘bout anythin’ important either.”

Girl: “Perhaps that’s exactly how I look to you. But I have to wonder if that’d have any bearing on whether the time I’ve spent looking at you has been equivalently equal.”

Garfiel: “—Tch.”

He knows that he can’t outfox her in conversation.

While withstanding the urge to click his tongue, Garfiel glares at the witch standing there with not a speck of ill will on her face—Echidna.

Perhaps acting as an inspector for the Trial, Echidna had accompanied Garfiel like this the last time he saw the past, as well. Not out of any human concern for him as the Trial brutalized his heart, but to make sure that he did not miss a single one the events unfolding, out of a gross kind of curiosity.

Losing will to speak with her any further, Garfiel looks at the forest.

If this production which was the past has already started, then the arrival of the actors is only a matter of time.

Garfiel has not the slightest intention to delight this witch who mere conversation can delight.

Echidna: “So cold.”

Echidna accepts even this attitude of Garfiel as something pleasant as she stands beside him and strokes her white hair.

During this juncture, where he’s watching her from aside, the change happens.

Garfiel: “…”

Faced with a scene he supposedly knew was coming, Garfiel swallows his breath.

The edge of the forest—also said, the dividing line for the barrier which delineates the Sanctuary's inside and outside.

Just being around the barrier is enough for those trapped within it to come near to unconsciousness, and undergo the unpleasant feeling of their being being thrown into disarray.

In the environs of this boundary line there appear four silhouettes.

One is Ryuzu with her long pink hair, her appearance identical to what it is in present reality.

Another is a girl of perhaps ten years with beautiful, silky blonde hair—Frederica.

And standing opposite to Ryuzu and Frederica is a woman, her blonde hair tied in a ponytail, her face gentle.

In her hands she cradles an infant. A blond child, with nasty-looking eyes.

Garfiel: "Ah…M-Mom…"

The instant he sights the woman and recognizes who she is holding, a feeble sound escapes his lips.

But his call for his mother does not reach any of the four.

—Naturally. Nobody can interfere with the past.

Echidna: "Even supposing that you reach out, you won't touch her. Nothing you say will make her smile back. I know it sounds ridiculous coming from me, but I sympathize with how you're being forced to watch something cruel."

The witch's sentiments, which make him want to shout Don't you goddamn talk!

But the eyes of the witch as she watches Garfiel, his face twisted in anguish, host no malice. This scene is not something that the witch prepared with malicious intentions.

How would the challenger's regrets manifest, how would the challenger face them—and what would be the outcome of it? That alone was what this natural disaster sought.

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel trembles. The four are having a conversation.

Their statements, their words, the tone of their voices, none of it is reaching Garfiel.

They are opening their mouths, making sound.

But when it travels through the air and vibrates against Garfiel’s eardrums, no definite meaning arises from it.

Anguish arises on Ryuzu’ face. Frederica bites her lip in an attempt to keep herself from crying.

Their mother looks worried, while Garfiel in her arms smiles happily.

No sound accompanies this painful scene because this is Garfiel’s memory.

Young Garfiel did not store the content of this conversation in his memory. And so the words they speak do not reach present Garfiel.

But this memory is one that tugs at him dimly, shallowly.

The scene has been reproduced, the performance playing on as if to rile him up.

Echidna: “I wonder what they could be saying. Can you figure anything?”

Garfiel: “Stop talkin’ t’me. —Yer just gonna give some stupid answer anyway.”

Considering what happens after this, he can figure what they’re saying.

His mother is attempting to leave for the outside world, while

Ryuzu and Frederica are trying to convince her to stay. Young Garfiel is unable to participate in the conversation, merely being held by his mom and basking in that joy.

Garfiel: "—Ghhah!"

An unbearable urge strikes Garfiel, leading him to step forth.

Echidna's brows rise as Garfiel lumbers over to the four. He stands right beside them, but none notice him. He gazes at his sister, shorter than him, Ryuzu, unchanged, and himself and his mother, all from straight-on.

Cradled by his mother, young Garfiel smiles guilelessly.

It pisses him off. This guy doesn't know what's coming next, he's not even qualified to participate in the conversation to convince his mother to stay, just sitting there smiling.

How to quantify the regret and despair that came of the fact that he merely sat there, smiling?

Garfiel: "Augh! Ghhah! Aaaaaagghghhh!!"

He swings his arm up, his claws ripping through the air.

He wanted to stab his claws into the infant's happy face and overwrite it with despair. He wanted to make him know how imbecilic his decision was.

But his claws pass through the infant's face, and even through the arms of his mother as she cradles him.

He could stomp the ground and use his blessing to try and send them flying, but nothing would result. The swings of his arms grow larger, the phantom of his mother getting wrapped up in the destruction, but no change occurring at all.

Garfiel: "Why! Am I! Being shown this shit!!"

He swings his arm up fruitlessly. Strikes the ground.

But the destruction does not transmit to the world of memory, which remains sternly as is.

Unable to vent his anger or make the past disappear, his voice shaking, Garfiel turns around and bares his fangs at the witch.

Garfiel: “It’s the same! It ain’t changed at all! Nothing’s changing ‘bout how mom didn’t stay, or ‘bout what happened to her after! You satisfied now, eh?!”

Echidna: “You’re free to messily throw attacks around however you want, but don’t you think it’s slightly extraordinarily selfish to blame me for this? It’s definitely not a mistake that the past is unfurling because of things I intended…but you’re the one who, knowing what this place was, came back here. If you were anticipating for something to change, then the one you should lambaste for its failure to change isn’t me. It’s you.”

Garfiel: “Me?”

Echidna: “Entirely. This place hasn’t changed because you haven’t changed. You can’t accept the past in a different manner from before because you can’t accept change in yourself. If you accept yourself to change, or elect not to change, then you’ll be capable of overcoming the Trial. And actually, there was a boy who elected for change who did overcome his past.”

Garfiel cannot manage a single word in response as Echidna tells him of a previous victor.

It’s easy for him to disregard it as just Echidna bullshitting. But if it’s not her bullshitting, then—the moment he thinks it, Garfiel knows fear.

Someone has overcome their past before.

The Sanctuary has not been freed. This person who overcame their past did not manage to conquer the following Trials. But even still, presuming that they overcame their past—

Garfiel: “N-No…yer can’t trick me! Yer need t’have demi-human blood t’be qualified t’challenge the

Trial! It ain't possible that anyone thinner than a half-blood who ain't me or sis's come to the Sanctuary before! Meanin'! Anyone qualified's still in the Sanctuary! And this guy who took the Trial here and beat their past don't…"

…exist. Garfiel hesitates on the final word of his assertion.

The witch's provocations tug at him, and just when he comes close to doubting his own thoughts, the facts to refute her come flying at him. But is he truly correct?

The witch smiles somewhat happily.

This was not her welcoming the destruction of her lies, nor her welcoming Garfiel's debate.

This expression was one of waiting, for something that would more intensely tickle her curiosity.

Echidna: "This guy who beat it doesn't what?"

From the bare-faced tone of her question and from her attitude, Garfiel senses it.

Echidna is looking for something. Waiting to see whether, from the information that Garfiel himself has presented, he will or will not reach the solution.

And Garfiel realizes.

Just who the witch, who Echidna, is talking about.

Garfiel: "No goddamn way…"

Garfiel was talking about the requirement to challenge the tomb.

But an exception existed.

The witch had not directly stated this, and this was entirely Garfiel's speculation.

But most likely, being an APOSTLE TO THE Witch of Greed simultaneously qualified someone to challenge the Trial.

Garfiel knows only one person to whom this applies.

And hadn't he already told Garfiel before?

—I've taken the Trial, and seen my past.

Garfiel: "But, he said he couldn't overcome th'past, he said himself he couldn't overcome the Trial…"

Echidna: "You don't think that saying those things would avoid unneeded conflict? Or that unwanted things would happen if people knew that he overcame the Trial, maybe?"

Garfiel: "Shut it, I ain't talkin' t'you. Don't butt in!"

Echidna's words lead Garfiel's brain to strobe, his thoughts in turmoil.

It is correct to acknowledge that he—Natsuki Subaru—had challenged the Trial. He knew that the Trial meant facing the past before Garfiel could mention anything.

Garfiel recollects on Subaru back when he said he failed to overcome it. Garfiel had been so shocked to learned that Subaru was qualified that he inadvertently ended the conversation before asking what he really ought to have, but—

Garfiel: "—Hic."

Subaru's expression back then was not the face of a man battered by his unconquerable past. He did look frustrated about a failure to achieve something, but it was not the look of a man harboring a personal problem. That look was one which, reflected on the water's face as he went to bathe, Garfiel got to witness every day.

Subaru's bearing as he attacked Garfiel did not carry the visage, nor the voice, nor the assertions of a man suffering prolonged hang-ups with his past.

Garfiel: "He…overcame, his past? You can overcome your past?"

Echidna: “Just for hypothesis, supposing that something where he gave you some kind of pompous lecture happened, wouldn’t it make sense that he preached because some basis made him capable of it?”

Garfiel’s hazy mind thinks back on his exchange of fists with Subaru.

Subaru and Garfiel had both been hitting their limits for staying conscious. He could not remember the entirety of what Subaru yelled back then. No, he mustn’t give up. He must here, right now, remember those words and question himself.

What was he told? What was yelled at him?

His past, his stagnation, his immobility, his barrier, his Sanctuary, his family.

What happens to the hopeless, to those who have stopped moving?

If you want to start something, then you are free to start anything.

???: “—Then you are going to leave regardless of anything?”

A familiar voice strikes Garfiel’s ear.

But this is a voice which should not be audible.

Because this was not the voice of someone who could interfere with Garfiel here, and not the voice of someone Garfiel could interfere with here.

???: “Yes, I am leaving. I know I’ll be causing problems for you, Lady Ryuzu.”

???: “Yer don’t hafter worry about that. The problem’s how the kids’re gonner feel.” The voice are the familiar ones of his family, and the unfamiliar ones of his family.

The sounds match to the movements of Ryuzu and her sour expression, and the movements of his mother who faces her.

For the first time in his life, Garfiel hears his mother’s voice.

Garfiel: “…”

He swallows his breath as the scene robs his attention.

His mother gazes down lovingly at the Garfiel in her arms, rocking him gently. Frederica grasps the hem of their mother’s skirt as she looks up at her, and strains out her voice.

Frederica: “M-Mother…I-I…I…”

Mother: “I’m sorry, Rica. I know how it’s going to worry you.”

Frederica: “That’s okay. I will be fine. But, poor Garf…”

Mother: “Should I take him with me? But your mommy is a bumbler. I’m sure he’d go through bad experiences. Rica, you’re my girl but you’re so dependable, please look after him.”

Frederica, although sad, gives her goodbyes to their mother.

Garfiel hadn’t known that his sister agreed with their mother’s departure from the Sanctuary. Ryuzu, as she holds Frederica’s trembling shoulders, also looks to respect their mother’s decision.

Mother: “Gar, your mommy will be coming back.” Their mother lifts Garfiel up.

Ignorant to his mother’s determination, he smiles cheerfully. She holds him close. Kisses his forehead.

In the exact same spot that Garfiel now has a scar.

Mother: “I’ll be coming back with your daddy. Until then, wait for me.”

Garfiel: “—Hic!”

Her eyes abound in affection, her voice abounds in compassion.

To keep from losing the unforgettable memory, again and again, his mother kisses him.

Eventually, she hands young Garfiel to Ryuzu.

Ryuzu cradles Garfiel firmly as she and his mother share a nod. His mother then hugs Frederica, and showers her beloved daughter's forehead in a rain of kisses too.

Garfiel: "—Haa, auh. Aauh, aaagh…aaaaaaagh…"

While witnessing this, Garfiel has at some unknown juncture fallen to his knees. What in the world is he watching?

He doesn't know this. He's never seen this before.

This was supposed to be the memory from when he was young, when he knew nothing, when he challenged the Trial, where he saw something more hopeless, more garnished in crushing despair.

And even though he remembered it, even though he remembered that vivid feeling of being abandoned in that memory, he had believed the memory a precious one and cultivated his obstinance.

All the empty threats, all across his days up until now, which he made to hide his sorrow and misery —peel away, crumble away, as something entirely different overwrites them.

What was this? This memory?

Hadn't his mother abandoned him and his sister, leaving them in search of her own happiness?

Hadn't she expelled these nuisances from her life and determined to walk her own path?

It's utterly reversed.

His mother deserted himself and Frederica and left. Explaining why Garfiel had been capable of so securely creating the person who was GARFIEL TINZEL.

The second Garfiel realizes that it's all the illegitimate result of misdirected ideas, his secure barricade morphs into a brittle dirt wall, his world collapsing beneath him.

Garfiel cannot even stand any more as his family's goodbyes reach their end.

His mother, reluctant to part, touches Frederica and Garfiel one last time, and entrusts everything to Ryuzu as she takes her bag and turns to exit the woods.

She stops many times along her path. Glances back, at Frederica who is waving. Sees how Ryuzu is holding Garfiel's hand, making him wave his goodbye to his mother, and she waves back.

She collects herself and again begins to walk. Stops. Glances back, waves. Over and over, over and over and over and over, as his mom exits the forest—

Garfiel: "—Wha?!"

Just when he moves to stand up and follow her, his vision warps.

The world is losing its edges, and not entirely because of the teardrops swamping Garfiel's eyes. It's happening for a more clear-cut reason.

The edges of his vision are swarmed in white light, and the forest is disappearing.

Like the end of the world. The unanticipated finale leads Garfiel to turn toward the witch behind him, and yell.

Garfiel: "Why! Why is it ending here! It ain't reached the fundamental…"

Echidna: "No, it's over. There's no need to see anything further. It's not me who determined the dream as finished, but you. Congratulations, Garfiel. You've rewritten your past."

Garfiel: "What're you…?! Stop fucking with me! Th'part my amazin' self most has t'do something about 's after this!"

Echidna: "There's no need to see what comes next, and even supposing that you've envisioned some idea of what does happen next, interfering with it is out of your scope."

Garfiel: “Auh—”

You can’t change the past, the witch is saying.

Garfiel’s reddened face pales as he falls, partway to standing up, back to his knees.

He knows how his mother truly felt. And now this.

The fate of his mother, having left this place, would not change?

His mother left the Sanctuary for Garfiel and Frederica’s sake in search of his father. But immediately after its founding that journey was crushed, alongside his mother.

—Didn’t this just escalate an already hopeless memory into something even more dismal?

Didn’t a memory of despair piled upon despair just switch into one of hope crushed by hopelessness? What about himself was he supposed to change, with this?

Frederica: “Mother loved both you and I, Garf.”

Garfiel springs his head up.

Looking down at him as he kneels is his sister, still young. She is looking at him. A supposedly blind past, incapable of interaction, is interacting with him.

Frederica: “Our Mother left the Sanctuary for the sake of our family. Does that dissatisfy you?”

Garfiel: “Don’t, fuck with me! So fuckin’ what that we were loved! D-Don’t, shove u-undue memories onto me. I…!”

Frederica: “How much easier it was to be unloved.”

Says young Frederica, somewhat mocking toward Garfiel.

Their height difference is literally that of a child and an adult. But Frederica pays not the slightest care to his height, talking from straight-on and with an expression suggesting that he is such a handful of a little brother.

Frederica: “Allowance to believe that your love is unreciprocated gives you capability to justify yourself.”

Garfiel: “No!”

Frederica: “You love her, and she loves you…should you have discovered this, you would no longer be capable of justifying your neglect to soar outside, your remaining holed in the Sanctuary.”

Garfiel: “No! No, no! And when yer don’t even fuckin’ know anythin’…what do you think happened t’mom!”

Frederica: “—Surely I would know.”

Garfiel leaves himself to his anger as he roars, when a shock hits him like a slap to the face.

Frederica’s expression vanishes. She looks at Garfiel, seeming to endure some emotion.

—What did she just say?

Frederica: “Surely I would know. Even should we suppose that after Mother left the Sanctuary she perhaps faced instantaneous misfortune…surely that information would have reached me.”

Garfiel: “N’so…so what?!”

Frederica: “And surely you understand that this information could not have reached you. You are no longer a juvenile, Garf.”

Frederica knew what happened to their mother.

And even Garfiel understands why she had been unable to tell young Garfiel that.

Who on earth could inform a young boy that his mother had met a cruel demise?

If he had not peeped on the T RIAL in this tomb, Garfiel never would have known. That he did know was because he had trampled over many considerations and kindnesses which had been trying not to let him find out.

Frederica: “In truth, you did remember that Mother loved you.”

Garfiel: “…”

Frederica: “You yourself wounded the spot where Mother had kissed you, where she had last touched you, in an attempt to pretend that it had not happened.”

His fingers touch his forehead scar.

This wound had not existed on his brow when he was young.

He sustained this injury immediately after he challenged the Trial. In a state of pandemonium, Garfiel bashed his head open on the walls, on the floor, harming himself so greatly that he suffered a permanent wound.

This scar was his injury from back then. And the truth behind this scar was, surely, what Frederica had just said.

Frederica: “It’s ending now.”

Frederica whispers.

Before he can realize it, the world has already lost almost all of its shape.

The forest is gone, as are his departing mother and Ryuzu. Not even the onlooker witch is anywhere in sight, the world remaining with only the siblings Frederica and Garfiel.

Frederica: “Even should you use wounds to conceal it, you cannot erase your past. Nor can you erase the fact that you were loved.”

Garfiel: “What’m I…meant to do?”

Garfiel feebly asks Frederica.

Garfiel: “If mom’s end isn’t changing, then that means th’outside’s still scary for me. Going out there, and Nanna and everyone else having to go out there, scares me.”

Frederica: “You must ask this small elder sister of yours before you can figure any answer?”

Garfiel: “I know it’s p’thetic! But yer th’only one I can ask. C’mon, tell me…Sis, why did you…”

Frederica: “What is it that you wish to do, Garf?”

Interrupting him, Frederica tilts her head.

Garfiel’s sentence jams. What he wants to do? That’s not what they’re talking about. It’s what should he do, what does he need to do. That’s what he’s asking.

Frederica: “What is it that you wish to do, Garf?”

Looking somewhat exasperated, Frederica repeats the question.

Garfiel swallows his breath.

Garfiel: “I want t’do, what people’re looking for.”

Frederica: “What which people are looking for?”

Garfiel: “I wanna do what…what the people who need me are looking for from me.”

Frederica: “Why is it that you feel this way?”

Garfiel: “Because…they’re what made me remember.”

Remember what? Frederica doesn’t ask.

But, those eyes, the same gold as his, do ask the question.

Garfiel: “—That my mother loved me.”

—The world of the dream shatters to dust, the past vanishing into the beyond.

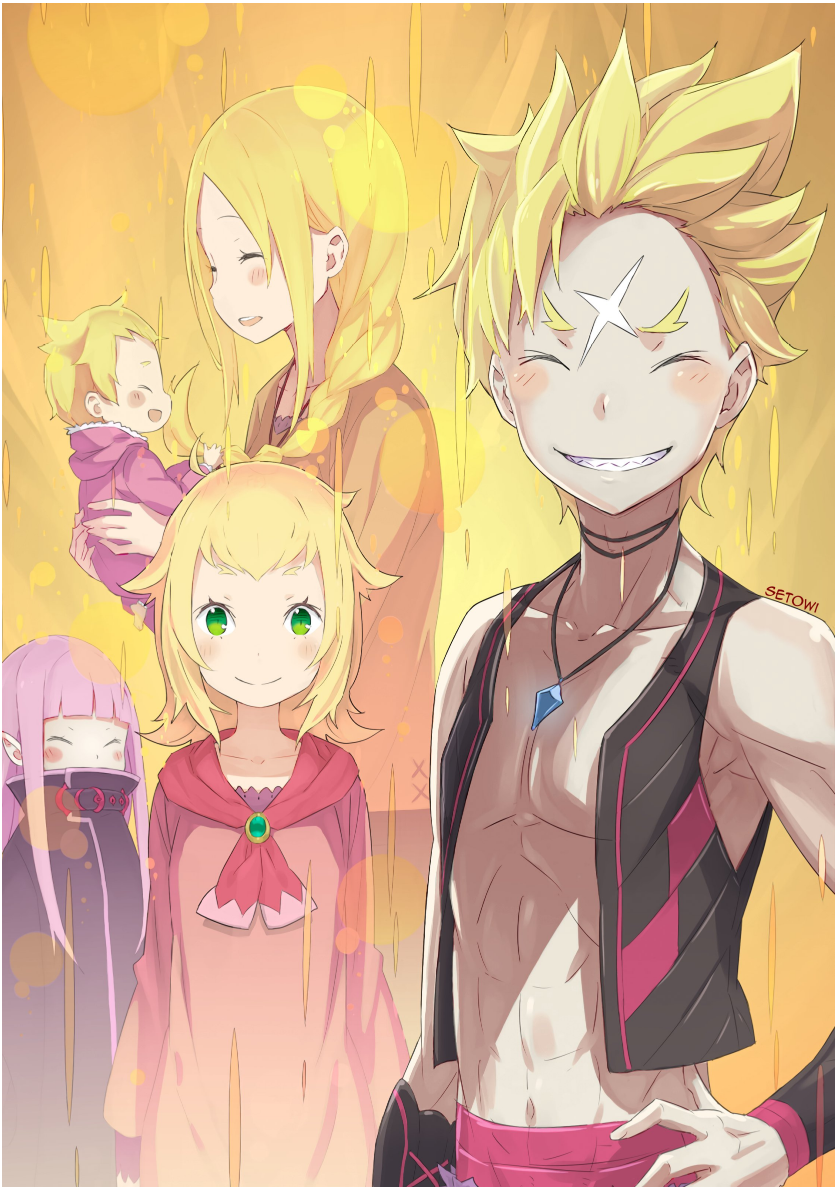
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4

Subaru sees Garfiel’s expression as one of having undergone exorcism.

Subaru had spent approximately an hour fidgeting outside the tomb with his arms crossed, waiting. The group been anxious, never looking or speaking to each other, as they simply waited in silence for whatever would happen.

Subaru: “So what’re all our plans if reneges on his promise and destroys the tomb?”

…Is a joke that Subaru told in an attempt to ease the mood, only for Otto to say something incredibly inconsiderate to the situation and eat a dropkick from Ram, but generally speaking it was all very quiet.

Ryuzu: “…Lil’ Gar.”

Ryuzu has reconvened with them, her expression anxious and hands linked as she restlessly looks at the tomb.

This present Ryuzu should be Theta, but regardless of which Ryuzu it is, they would all care about Garfiel dearly.

There’s the whole affair where they ganged up in a group of 5 to beat up Garfiel, and also that whole affair where Garfiel had a complete change of heart and entered the tomb. Both of these events must have given Ryuzu more than a little shock to the heart.

Emilia looks at the tomb in suspense as she stands beside Subaru.

While naturally she must be curious about Garfiel’s attempt too, once Garfiel exits the tomb, it’s her turn to go inside.

The argument inside the tomb, and the fight between Subaru and Garfiel afterwards.

Subaru cannot tell what kind of change those events have had to her mental state. But her anxious expression is deeply steeped in concern for Garfiel, with not an ounce of reluctance toward her own Trial. This is ideally not a bad omen.

Otto: “—Ah!”

Subaru thinks his thoughts, when suddenly Otto points at the tomb and speaks.

He’s saying something situation-dumb again, thinks Subaru as he grimaces, Ram clicking her knuckles. But this time it rather seems their conclusions are hasty ones.

Ryuzu: “Lil’ Gar!”

Ryuzu stands up and dashes for the tomb.

Following her gaze, Subaru realizes that a silhouette has appeared at the tomb’s entrance.

Short blond hair, scar on brow. A sharp gaze, canines bladelike and pearly.

With a small frame and slouched posture, but emitting a dreadful and imposing aura.

Garfiel Tinzel.

Otto: “See, it’s exactly what I said it’d—hyeek!”

Recipient to a jab from Ram’s knee, Otto goes tumbling across the grass.

But without anyone raising the topic of Otto’s suffering, they instead run over to Garfiel. Subaru bounds up the stone stairway to reach him. Ryuzu has already arrived and stands before Garfiel, hemming and hawing over what to say.

Ryuzu: “L-Lil’ Gar. Erm, I…”

Garfiel: “Don’t go making a face which don’t look like yer. ‘M sorry fer worryin’ you.”

Ryuzu: “Lil’ Gar.”

With that blunt statement, Garfiel puts his hand on small Ryuzu’s head.

Patting his grandmother’s head—is incredibly indecent, but given their heights, it’s natural for these two. And seeing as Ryuzu isn’t complaining about it, to point it out would be the epitome of tasteless.

Ram: “How did it go, Garf?”

Ram clears the stairs following Ryuzu and Subaru, and calls out to Garfiel.

It was Ram who gave Garfiel the direct impetus to challenge the Trial. Aware of the background circumstances, a rare-in-Subaru’s-presence shade of worry peeks through in her expression. Garfiel hums in thought.

Garfiel: “Can’t yer see with yer eyes th’results? Gotta say I expected somethin’ more.”

Subaru: “For some reason that sounded like a middle schooler bragging about shoplifting, but if this’s what you’re saying…you did it?”

Garfiel: “—Lined off an era for myself, m’thinkin’.”

Garfiel gives a deep sigh out his nose.

Everyone comprehends him instantly, but it’s a different sentiment which rises to fore.

Garfiel has overcome the Trial, and reached a conclusion about his past.

This means a step has been taken toward the Sanctuary’s liberation, and proves that the Trial is not unreasonable or impossible.

Subaru: “Alright then. You keep riding off that momentum and go for the other Trials too, and…”

Garfiel: “Piss off. Only Trial my amazin’ self’s takin’s this one. It ain’t my thing t’be doin’ th’others. Yeah?”

Emilia: “Yes, you’re right. The rest of this is my job. Can’t have it be taken away.”

Garfiel glares at Emilia, who accepts the gaze from straight on.

Garfiel: “Witch’s got her usual asshole thing goin’ on. Make sure t’watch out.”

Emilia: “Huh? You’re giving me advice? Thank you. I’ll remember it well.”

It’s Garfiel’s breed of encouragement, and sardonicism. Emilia accepts his encouragement while beautifully ignoring the sardonicism.

Garfiel looks utterly thrown. Seeing that expression makes Subaru’s cheeks relax into a smile—and this time, Garfiel’s gaze lands in Subaru.

Subaru’s brows shoot up as Garfiel scratches his cheek.

Garfiel: “Uh, I need to, right…yeah.”

Subaru: “What’s up? Skittishness’s out of character for you. You’re an archetype which just kills those hesitant or broody patterns, we’ll do tribal play instead.”

Garfiel: “I ain’t got any idea what th’damn hell yer sayin’, but I can tell yer makin’ fun of me, oi. Yer gettin’ yer teeth beat in…aeh, er, no nevermind.”

He swings up his arm, only to lower it without doing anything.

Garfiel’s suspicious, or really not-exactly-getting-to-the-point behavior makes Subaru tilt his head.

When a smile arises on Ram’s face, as if she understands everything.

Ram: “Garf.”

With that, she pokes Garfiel in the hip.

Garfiel sighs, shaking his head resignedly.

Garfiel: “It’s probably ‘cause of you that I passed the Trial. Thank you.”

Subaru: “…Did you just thank me?”

Garfiel: “I ain’t sayin’ it again. But, I got t’remember somethin’ I wanted t’remember. So goin’ in there was…beneficial. Fuck!”

Perhaps with his embarrassment peaking over his time spent talking, Garfiel’s face reddens in agitation as he jabs his finger at the wide-eyed Subaru.

Garfiel: “Listen! My amazin’ self did lose, n’ my Trial did change. But! Yer ain’t gonna see me accept every word’v everythin’ yer said as correct n’ raise th’white flag n’ surrender! Yer talked fuckin’ big, sayin’ yer’ll change this Sanctuary! F’that change hurts or pains th’folks inside, yer not gonna be gettin’ any mercy!”

Subaru: “U-Uhh…r-right, as reasonable…”

Garfiel speaks overwhelmingly menacingly, Subaru overawed but nevertheless managing to get words out.

Subaru could give Garfiel no absolute assurances. But he could promise that he would be doing his best to make things good. That much was definite—and just as he goes to say so,

Garfiel: “So I’m gonner be watchin’ yer from right up close t’see whether yer wind up just bein’ some all-talk bastard’r not. —You better pull it off, CAPTAIN!”

Subaru: “…”

Garfiel vigorously slaps Subaru’s shoulders, gaze fixed on him, and makes that incredible statement.

His unexpected form of address and his attitude stun Subaru so much that he’s slow to react.

During that delay, Garfiel immediately passes by Subaru and descends to the bottom of the stairway with Ryuzu. Almost as if he's scared that someone will see his face.

Emilia: "Garfiel, your face is sooo red."

Perhaps catching a glimpse of his face before he can pass by, Emilia speaks while trying to hold back a smile.

Which means that no Subaru's ears were not tricking him.

Subaru: "Captain…I'm not the one heading this group, that's Emilia."

Emilia: "But it was your group which beat Garfiel, Subaru. He accepted what came out of a man-to-man conflict, which means his Captain is you. Isn't it great, Captain?"

Emilia smiles without any ill will, Subaru lost on how to respond.

Ram jabs the troubled Subaru in the side.

Ram: "Accept it."

She shrugs.

Ram: "He isn't sure what he should be doing when he gets emotional either. Let him do what he wants."

Subaru: "But still. I am utterly weak to it, but it's…"

Ram: "Leaving aside strength in a fight, you're the older party, Barusu, so at least give him that much leniency. Garf is a child despite how he appears. Doesn't it feel as if you've got a younger brother now?"

Subaru: "No hold on."

Ram: "What?"

Subaru: "Can you go over that?"

Ram: "Over what?"

Subaru: “Garfiel’s younger than me?”

Ram: “Ah.”

Ram gives a comprehending nod.

Ram: “You didn’t know? Garf is younger than you, Barusu.”

Subaru: “How young.”

Ram: “I believe he’s fourteen this year.”

Subaru: “Fourteen?! Fourteen…you’re a chuuni?!”

The entirely unanticipated news makes Subaru’s voice crack in surprise.

Suddenly he can agree with being called CAPTAIN, and with Garfiel’s overly childish stubbornness.

Subaru: “A middle schooler in the peak of his rebellious age…right there’s a nightmare to tame…”

Mutters Subaru, his voice even more exhausted than after their fistfight.

Chapter 117:
Love Letters

1

With Garfiel's hostility quashed and the shocking reveal of his age, a period of rest falls upon the scene outside the tomb.

Everyone surrounds Garfiel, each waiting for their chance to speak.

Subaru: "But man…our guy to guy fight sure starts feeling different now that it was just us ganging together to beat up a middle schooler. It's iffy."

Otto: "Garfiel's age is a shock to me as well, but surely those misgivings would be unwarranted? The fact that our opponent, who we all needed to work together and gang up on to defeat, was actually fourteen holds not the slightest bearing on the details of the combat."

Ram: "Exactly. Garf is disproportionately powerful for a babyish teen, and no rationale exists to begin hemming and hawing over the fact that we ganged up on him."

Garfiel: "All of yer shut yer traps 'bout gangin' up on me! Yer lookin' fer another tussle?! Eh?! My amazin' self's always ready fer it!"

Subaru, Otto, and Ram all nod. Garfiel sends spit flying.

Thinking back on everything that Garfiel's said and done so far, and seeing him yelling and asserting himself the way he is now, yes indeed this is a fourteen year old.

The way that Subaru had been treating Garfiel as if he was in the same age-group may have actually placed a filter over how he interpreted everything that was happening.

Subaru: "Actually, how old were you when you took the Trial before? It'd be from that point that your stubbornness got worse."

Garfiel: "My memory fer it ain't perfect, but…think I was three or four. Don't 'xactly remember anythin' 'cept th'Trial."

Otto: "You'd expect that, yes. Three or four…why, that's the same age as when I still thought that the world was hell."

Subaru: "You're bringing up heavy stuff out of nowhere, stop. I don't wanna hear it." A grim smile arises on Otto's face as he speaks.

Otto must have his problems, but delving into them right now is going to be overload. Subaru's arms are already chock full of more baggage than he can carry, and he's resorted to balancing it on his head and hammocking it in his lap.

Emilia: "Do you mind if I ask you for specifics?"

With the joking over, Emilia kicks off the real topic. Her face is tense.

Her gaze fixes on Garfiel, and her question most likely means SPECIFICS ABOUT THE Trial. Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: "No real spec'fics t'tell. Me n' you're gonna have different pasts n' they're gonna need t'be beaten' differently. Don't think I'cn tell yer anythin' useful."

Emilia: "I know. My Trial is my trial. It won't help very much to ask you about it."

Garfiel: "—? Then what on earth're yer askin' 'bout?"

Emilia: "Now that you've overcome the Trial…no, overcome your past, do you feel like you've changed? That you can accept that change in yourself?"

Garfiel narrows his eyes in silence.

The atmosphere is getting tense. Subaru and the others swallow they breath as they wait for Garfiel's response.

A period of silence. Garfiel touches his nose, for his fingers to then trace upwards along his scar. With that done,

Garfiel: “Can’t tell whether t’say ths’thing changed, or t’say that I got it back.”

Emilia: “Mm.”

Garfiel: “This scar on my noggin’s somethin’ I did t’myself. T’try n’forget a bad memory.”

Garfiel taps his forehead, his gaze fixed on the person standing beside and looking at him—Ram.

Her cerise eyes blink.

Ram: “Garf.”

Garfiel: “Shut it, don’t say nothin’ ‘Tll make me miserable. Pushed th’blame fer it ont’er someone else so I could hide a bad memory. …Realizing now how yer knew that n’went along with it fer me suddenly makes me feel like crap.”

Garfiel grumbles. Ram watches him somewhat resignedly.

Subaru cannot grasp the exact significance of what they’re talking about, but he can tell that this information refers to things that only Garfiel and Ram would understand.

And can also tell that Garfiel and Ram have a definite, warm, and familial kind of bond.

Garfiel: “Anyway, whether we’re sayin’ it changed er came back, I ain’t th’same as before. Yer guys changed me. So now’s to see how yer’ll all change…makin’ sure yer don’t wind up all talk.”

Emilia: “Mm. Good. …And I’ll be doing my best to match your expectations.”

Garfiel’s cheeks twist while Emilia smiles, full of determination.

Subaru abruptly realizes that if you consider the mental factor alone, these two are the same age.

Fourteen year olds.

A boy and a girl in the emotional throes of puberty, and a situation requiring that the future rest on them.

Subaru is seventeen verging on eighteen so he can't say much, but what a manga-ish, anime-ish, something-in-that-vein-ish predicament that this has wound up being.

Emilia: "…Staying too long is just going to dampen my resolve."

Emilia stands up and wipes off the grass from her waist.

She gives a deep breath out, her eyes gleaming with strength and looking at the tomb—the site of the Trial.

Subaru: "You're going?"

Emilia: "I am. …Following Garfiel's performance, I'm absolutely going to beat it."

Garfiel: "Can yer do it?"

Emilia: "I am doing it. I've decided not to fear change."

Subaru's question, Garfiel's question, Emilia nods to each.

Subaru stands up and falls into line beside Emilia as she starts walking toward the tomb. He might not be able to enter and stay with her, holding her hand, but he has determined to keep at her side until her departure.

Ram: "Lady Emilia."

Emilia stops and turns around, for Ram to give her a curtsey. While holding her skirt, solemnly, as if she were a servant paying respect to someone of higher status.

Subaru: "Well no crap. Emilia-tan is a master to her."

Ram: "Silence your muttering, Barusu. Practice prudence enough to know that this is no situation for that.”

Ram sternly rebukes Subaru’s mumbling. Emilia’s eyes widen, and Ram collects herself by once again bowing her head.

Ram: “I request forgiveness for my rudeness. I had, in full sincerity, doubted whether you would rise to the situation.”

Emilia: “…Mm. I’m sorry, for being so ineffective.”

Ram: “Indeed you were ineffective and a blight to onlooking eyes.”

Subaru: “Oh come on.”

How much courage had it taken Subaru before he could convey that sentiment to Emilia? While grinding his teeth at Ram and her easy scaling of difficult hurdles, he listens on.

Ram: “But now you have risen, and have resolved to challenge. Whether that was anteceded by a desire to, or whether your sincere wish had been to flee, presents not the slightest of an issue.”

Emilia: “…”

Ram: “I had determined. Would your stance be one to challenge the Trial, or be else? Where I would entrust my own problems rested upon that. Should you have exhibited a desire to flee in surrender, I would have followed to the world’s course. But should you have exhibited desire to fight—”

Ram glances at Subaru.

How did he connect to this part of her speech, punctuated here at it was? Perhaps that provided the answer for why she allied with Subaru and Otto to fight Garfiel.

Ram: “May your endeavors proceed well, Lady Emilia. For your safe return shall I await.”

Ram curtseys in silence, an impeccable exhibition of a maid giving farewell to her master.

Seemingly empowered by Ram’s send-off, Emilia gives a firm nod with her expression cheery.

Seeing this, Subaru uncrosses his arms and nods.

Subaru: “So just with how this conversation’s going, you got anything to say Otto?”

Otto: “Well it’s amazing how demanding that prospect feels now, but is this truly a situation where I should be saying anything?! Don’t you find anything wrong with this?!”

Subaru directs the conversation onto Otto, figuring that he will have prepared something to say, but apparently whatever he had in mind can’t beat Ram’s speech.

Seems like he wanted to pay consideration for the situation, and let it all end cleanly—but.

Emilia: “Okay. Please go ahead.”

Otto: “—!”

Unheeding to Otto’s distress and figuring that he’ll encourage her, Emilia is 100% ready. She waits with her expression tense, failing to notice his panic.

Otto puts his hand to his forehead with a look of resignation.

Otto: “Erm well yes, Lady Emilia.”

Emilia: “I’m listening.”

Otto: “It happens that actually, I’ve paid some rather considerable damages thanks to this whole debacle. Though yes naturally this includes a ‘joint-investment’ nuance, and the damages involved are ones where I had factored in beforehand the fact that I would be paying them…”

Emilia: “Um?”

The topic transforms into money business. Emilia, not the brightest in mathematics, looks confused.

Otto bites his lip and raises his finger.

Otto: “Well yes so!”

Otto: “I chose to undertake these damages with the anticipation that someday you would grow into something great and hefty. So you will need to prevail and ensure that I regain the expenditures I made for this bet!”

Emilia: “…I think I’m already all grown up. Eating will make me fatter though.”

Subaru: “Don’t use tricky phrasing on our sheltered angel. Also Emilia-tan I think everything you’re doing right now hits the golden ratio so just keep going like that. Right now you are loveliest.”

From her head to her toes, Emilia’s current state is perfect.

That said of course he’d still find her lovable regardless of whether she thins down or fattens up.

But leaving Subaru’s sentiments aside, Otto looks like he cannot find anything to say about the fact that his statements aren’t communicating, and after a bit of flailing,

Otto: “…Come back safely. I’m supporting you.”

Emilia: “Mhm, understood. Otto, thank you for helping me too.”

Emilia responds to Otto’s hideously safe summarization with a strong nod.

Garfiel gives slumped-shoulders Otto a comforting shove. Witnessing that, Subaru and Emilia once again head for the tomb.

Night has fallen over the Sanctuary. Time is such that the Trial will occur.

Emilia takes one last session of deep repeated breaths, in and out, to steel herself. With her beside him, Subaru considers what would be the best thing to say to see her off—what would? What would? And—

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Emilia: “So about the thing in the tomb…”

She’s anxious about the Trial.

Figuring this, Subaru waits for Emilia to continue. But she is unable to say anything as she glances at him sporadically, her expression uneasy.

For some reason, her cheeks are tinged red.

Subaru: “Emilia?”

Emilia: “S-So, erm, the thing in the tomb.”

Subaru: “Thing in the…oh, you don’t mean what’s coming up, you mean the stuff from before?”

Emilia: “Yes. Geez.”

It’s so obvious I was, says Emilia’s expression as she puffs up her cheeks. But considering how the whole scene had been going until now yeah Subaru can’t agree with this criticism of hers.

Like anyone would think that Emilia, ready to imminently challenge the Trial, was worried not about the future but the past. Though considering that the Trial waiting inside the tomb is also the PAST, the whole topic of time starts getting fuzzy.

And though the momentum and all the grisly stuff that followed meant Subaru forgot about it, thinking back on it, the deed that he committed was something which could send his face bursting into flame.

Talking with Emilia, slinging insults, shoving love at her, snapping down to steal a kiss—calling it an explosion of all the resentment he had built up over these five loops makes for no excuse.

That whole affair is probably what's troubling Emilia.

It's pleasant to see the crimson on her pale skin, but Subaru has no leeway to be getting transfixed here either.

Emilia: "Inside, where we, um…you know."

Subaru: "Y-Yeah…mhm, right."

Emilia: "And um, I think it's going to be tough. But it's important, so…when the Trial and everything else is done, let's take our time to talk, okay?"

I already think my mind's taking it tough, he thinks while nevertheless promptly nodding to Emilia's proposal.

It's Subaru's first time, and definitely Emilia's first time. Their feelings crashed into each other, and they have mountains of things they need to sort out. And Subaru would also need to string together excuses while getting on the unavoidable topic of REM. Either way,

Subaru: "Oh. You're thinking about the past, pretty calm, huh, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Am I calm? I'm not sure. I might just be bluffing."

Subaru: "But if you can bluff then it means your head's not full to bursting. You'll pull it off. I can bet on it."

Subaru shoots her a thumbs up, his teeth sparkling. Emilia tilts her head in mystification.

Emilia: "Bet what on it?"

Subaru: "The right for us to go on a date."

Emilia: "Then what happens if you win, and what happens if I win?"

Subaru: “I win and I can go on a date with you, you win and you can go on a date with me.”

Emilia slips a laugh, and for a period, the two chuckle together.

It truly does seem that Emilia is neither stressed nor anxious.

Emilia: “I’ll bet for me beating the Trial.”

Subaru: “Okay, I’ll bet for you beating the Trial.”

Emilia: “And if we both win?”

Subaru: “Two dates.”

Emilia: “Uh-huh.”

Like always, Emilia smoothly ignores Subaru’s flirting.

She glides forward. Her silver hair dances on the wind, glimmering under starlight. Subaru raises his hand as he sees her off.

Subaru: “Take care now. Watch out for cars, and men.”

Emilia: “Stop being silly.”

With a wry smile, Emilia’s shape disappears into the tomb.

The unlit corridor swallows her beneath darkness, robbing her silhouette from Subaru’s sight.

There is no longer anything Subaru can do for Emilia.

Everything is now a problem that she must overcome herself.

Garfiel: “Stop lookin’ so worried, Captain. Makes yer less’v a man.”

Subaru: “Man when I think that you’re a middle schooler somehow I can just accept this stuff you say. I was like you too once upon a time.”

Garfiel comes over to an antsy Subaru’s side and scolds him. Subaru shrugs, when Garfiel strikes his fist to his palm, remembering something.

Garfiel: “Oh yeah, Captain. When we were fightn’ n’ yer smacked me flyin’, what was that?”

Subaru: “You mean Invisible Providence?”

Garfiel: “Inv…what?”

Subaru: “Invisible Providence. THE IMPERCEPTIBLE WILL OF THE GODS. Isn’t it cool?”

Garfiel: “‘S crazy cool yeah.”

Garfiel has found a compatriot.

Unseen Hands’s rap is pretty bad, so let’s hope that Invisible Providence catches on. But either way, doubtful that all Garfiel’s asking about is its name.

Garfiel: “Magic…ain’t what it is. ‘S just a feelin’, but th’vibe ain’t right.”

Subaru: “If we’re gonna bother classifying it, honestly I have no clue either. But it’s definitely occult. Try all you want but you’ll never copy it.”

Garfiel: “Ain’t gonna. Hittin’ someone where they can’t see it ‘s chicken.”

Subaru: “Ch-Chicken he says this punk…!”

He had merely wanted mutual understanding as to Invisible Providence’s awesomeness, only to shockingly be stricken down.

“My bad my bad,” says Garfiel looking completely unapologetic, but making no effort to inquire any further. Probably, he’s sensed it. This occult thing makes no good territory for a man to delve.

Subaru: “…But still, what karma?”

Invisible Providence is—unmistakably—Petelgeuse’s Unseen Hands.

There's a discrepancy in strength, and he could only produce one hand, but the sensation is exactly it.

Why was the same power that the abhorrent madman held now dwelling inside Subaru? Perhaps, it had something to do with the Witch FACTOR that Echidna had mentioned.

Witch Factor. The words suggest nothing pleasant, and Petelgeuse had also used the term. And Subaru's first time using this Unseen Hands-esque thing was not during this recent battle. To evade a charge from tiger-form Garfiel in a previous loop, he had used it unconsciously.

Meaning, the witch factor is steadily taking root inside Subaru.

Subaru knew that he could no longer use Shamak. Repeated abuses of his gate had extinguished that function of the exhausted magical gateway. His once-non-existent link to the magical world was no longer anywhere within his perception.

He had lost his yearned-for magical powers, and gained occult powers in their place.

Subaru: "Better than having no aces up my sleeve. Using it, feels like there's a technique but also doesn't really…"

Regardless, nothing has changed about the scarcity of his options in battle.

He would wring and wring his wily little brain, enlisting help from others while divining an escape from fatality.

The height of the walls Subaru must face remain as high as ever.

Garfiel: "Oh, jus'thoughter somethin', Captain."

Subaru: "What's up? Or really this whole Captain thing is still throwing me off."

Garfiel: "Yer'll get accustomed. Anyway, there's somethin' I gotta 'pologize for."

He hasn't accepted the change in name, but Garfiel just admirably looks on. The case was the same with Emilia, but Subaru has to give a wry smile with how conversation topics keep coming up. He shrugs to urge Garfiel on. His fingers trace over his scar.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self went in th'tomb. N' so my amazin' self went in th'Trial room."

Subaru: "Uh-huh."

Garfiel: "N'so, I saw them. —Yer, erhm. Those. Frantic results."

Subaru's brows furrow for an instant—but he immediately realizes what Garfiel is referring to, and his eyes shoot open.

Shocked, Subaru's ears blaze red.

He saw them. He saw them he saw them he saw them!

Garfiel: "W-Wasn't tryin' t'do anythin' bad. But t'think it'd wound up bein'…"

Subaru: "S-Stop talking! Forget it now! You, crap…I forgot! I mean…I mean, I didn't think it'd wind up that you'd go in the tomb! And then it…augh, fuck!"

Clutching and shaking his head, Subaru's face grows hotter.

Garfiel as he watches on with pity is currently an odious thing. Perhaps even more loathsome than during the fistfight.

Subaru: "You forget about it! That's all I'm looking for! Okay, conversation over! Done!"

Garfiel: "Yeh, will do. …But, here's what I thought when I saw'm. Yer an absolute, incredible moron…but I'm glad yer ain't dead."

Subaru: "I said it's over, are you some braindead brat?! Wait! You are a brat!"

Although called a brat, Garfiel has grasped Subaru's weak point and remains the superior party. He laughs away Subaru's screams of sad defeat before descending the tomb stairs.

Following after Garfiel as he returns to everyone else in the clearing, Subaru prays for Emilia’s good fortune, while simultaneously begging that she does not notice his CHEERS.

If that breed of thing doesn’t reach its intended recipient before anyone else, it’s over.

2

Subaru begs in vain.

Emilia: “I’m here…”

Exiting the stone corridor, Emilia arrives in the room where the Trial takes place.

Amid the cold, damp air, Emilia walks with the dimly-glowing wall as her guide and gazes at the door in the back of the room. This closed door will likely open once the Trial has been cleared. Garfiel came back to the group without opening the door. Meaning, she—

Emilia: “Have to do my best to get inside there.”

She doesn’t know what could be lurking in those depths.

But the Trial does not end with only one, as the Witch had told her of multiple.

When she thinking of the witch conducting the Trials, a painful itch spreads through Emilia’s chest. This again resulted because the white witch’s reception of Emilia was—

Emilia: “Huh?”

Momentarily in thought, Emilia casts her gaze about the room, when she notices something odd. During her time spent hugging her knees and waiting for night in this tomb, Emilia had kept halfway through the corridor, and had not ventured as far as this room. Meaning that this is her first time witnessing the chamber in two days.

Only been two days, but something has changed over that time.

While mulling over what that something is, Emilia realizes what is so odd.

Emilia: “This is…”

Brushing her fingertips over the wall, Emilia murmurs.

Her amethyst eyes begin adjusting to the dark. They capture the change amid the dim clearly.

Emilia: “You idiot, Subaru.”

With a laugh in her voice, Emilia finds herself saying this.

Because that’s just it. Look at this, think like this, and there’s no way you don’t wind up saying it.

Emilia: “You are such an idiot.”

Contrary to her words, Emilia’s expression abounds in tender affection. This change on the portion of wall she is touching, over the wall before her, over a whole face of this room, top to bottom:

—Etchings. Pictures, letters, chiseled into the wall all large and crooked.

This big chibi drawing of a cat is a familiar picture of Puck. Many drawings of Puck are etched into the wall, all surrounded with writing.

The messy I-glyphs, strewn everywhere as if written by a child, prove beyond any doubt that he had worked frantically with Emilia’s interests in mind.

“You can do it, I know you can!” “Me and Puck are supporting you, everything’s okay” “This girl I’m into is amazing! Have confidence in yourself!” “Once this is all over let’s go on a date!” “Go for it, Emilia!” “Nobody is expecting anything from us. Is there anything more fun than proving them all wrong?” “I love you! So I believe in you!”

Emilia: “Idiot…idiot, idiot, idiot…You featherbrain, Subaru.”

She had to challenge the Trial now, and was bracing herself to face something painful and unpleasant, and here he is pretending to support her while making her cry, this awful man.

She understands.

She understands now.

Emilia last came here two days ago. There was only one day of opportunity for these drawings and writings to be etched.

And that was the only juncture where Subaru had time to leave Emilia’s side, and only juncture where he so stubbornly kept silent about what he was doing over that period.

Emilia: “—Mm. You’re right. Let’s go for it, Subaru.”

With her fingers lovingly brushing the letters, Emilia responds to the etched words.

Instantly, she feels herself falling into slumber, the world’s edges turning dim.

The Trial is coming.

That terrifying past is coming.

—But Emilia’s lips stay smiling.

3

Subaru: “Broke my promise to go write love letters, and then someone else winds up seeing them first…My life’s over…”

Garfiel: “Yer exaggeratin’ it…”

Surrounding Subaru who is too stricken by shock to stand, Garfiel and the others allow themselves to look as flabbergasted as they want.

But having said that, there is nothing for the group to do here except wait for Emilia to come out. While it does sound cool to hang around here believing in her, it also composes a trial for everyone who has to sit around and wait.

Subaru: “It took Garfiel about an hour…so we should probably think that Emilia’ll take that long too.”

Otto: “Supposing that she succeeds, you’d be corre—ow?! Also awgh?!”

Otto’s reward for his insensitive gaffe is Ram’s elbow. Seeing Otto jabbed by Ram, Garfiel’s face twists in jealousy and he sends his finger flying to poke Otto’s forehead.

Otto topples backwards as he tumbles to the ground, which nobody mentions as they,

Subaru: “Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you and Garfiel, Miss Ryuzu.”

Ryuzu: “Sermthing ter ask me and Lil’ Gar?”

Ryuzu stands there uncomfortably as she looks up at Subaru.

She had gone into hiding, and although unintentional, wound up aiding Subaru and the others in their plans to defeat Garfiel. She still seems somewhat lost as to how to approach Garfiel, their grandmother-grandson conversations having been rather awkward for a little while now.

That said, Ryuzu is the only one worrying about it, and Garfiel feels not a scrap of negativity toward her.

Subaru: “Yes. A question. Though that said it’s tricky whether or not you’ll be able to understand it right now, Miss Ryuzu.”

Tricky to understand right now, meaning tricky to understand for Theta.

Alpha, Beta, Theta, and Sigma are the four Ryuzu’s representing the Sanctuary. With the Garfiel problem resolved, the Ryuzu’s’ stances toward the Sanctuary’s liberation should hopefully be in accord, but it’s essential to check.

But most importantly, there are still some things which don’t feel quite right.

Subaru: “Garfiel, you’re all for the Sanctuary’s freedom now right?”

Garfiel: “It ain’t a thin’v bein’ fer it, Captain. My amazin’ self lost t’yer. N’so I’m not gonna get in yer way while you go freein’ the Sanctuary. I’m gonna be actin’ t’make sure th’people in that changed the Sanctuary ain’t sufferin’…’s my stance now.”

Subaru: “Right, that standpoint right there.”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

With his finger raised, Subaru pulls the breaks on Garfiel’s speech.

Garfiel looks mystified, as does everyone else listening. Nobody must have felt that Garfiel said anything strange. But Subaru is uneasy.

Subaru: “When we first came here, your standpoint wasn’t for it or against it, it was pretty neutral…the same kind of thing like you said just now.”

Garfiel: “…I was thinkin’ yer’d all get on guard ‘bout me ‘f you knew where I was leanin’.”

Subaru: “But you got wary about us instantly and plainly. Maybe we tripped and made some blunder, or say tripped on a tiger’s tail, but anyway what was with that change in mentality?”

It’s just weird.

At least on Emilia’s first day taking the Trial, or until just around the time that she took the Trial, Garfiel’s presentation towards Subaru’s group was friendly.

Garfiel always exposed his hostility on that night after she failed the Trial. With the witch’s miasma emanating from Subaru as his pretext, Garfiel would declare himself an enemy.

But Garfiel cannot actually smell the witch's miasma from Subaru. Someone else is noticing the miasma, and Garfiel is entirely opting for hostility after learning about the fact from them.

The person reporting to Garfiel about the miasma, and spurring him into hostility is—

Subaru: "Miss Ryuzu, not in favor of the Sanctuary's freedom, was eyeing me."

While looking down at the silenced Ryuzu, Subaru rests his raised finger on his crossed arms.

The Ryuzu here is Ryuzu Theta—the only duplicate which had been not in favor of the Sanctuary's liberation.

Alpha and Beta are in favor of liberation, and Sigma is neutral. Theta knows of the true Ryuzu Meyer's past, and views the Sanctuary's liberation as dangerous. If he's going to add any more support to his speculation, then it's to note how inconceivable it is that any other Ryuzu would spur Garfiel's change of attitude.

Garfiel nods, his face puckered.

Garfiel: "Yer nailed it, Captain. Nanna told me that…"

Ryuzu: "Yer got it figured wrong, Lil' Su. I never told Lil' Gar about…" Their voices coincide, but their arguments conflict.

Subaru furrows his brows as Garfiel and Ryuzu look at each other. Garfiel's mouth flaps open and shut uselessly as he points at the stunned Ryuzu.

Garfiel: "H-Heck're yer sayin'? Yer told me on th'first night that lady took th'T RIAL. Yer smell witch from th'Captain. Then there's th'half-witch lady too, maybe they're the witch's assistants…n'so, I…"

Ryuzu: "Did I mention…? No, I herv noticed the miasma around Lil' Su, and I dern't have the most spotless thoughts about Lady Emilia's heritage, but…that ern't relevant ter this. I wers trying ter make my decisions ter follow along with Lil' Roz's outline as best I could, and…”

Subaru: “Wait! Wait, freeze! Miss Ryuzu, you just said you don’t know anything about this.” Ryuzu is rejecting Garfiel’s statements.

Garfiel looks to be in utter disbelief, but being that these are words coming out of Ryuzu’s mouth, they are true.

The people of this Sanctuary are Contracted NOT TO TELL LIES while inside the Sanctuary.

Subaru: “Leaving aside situations where the person doesn’t think they’re lying, Miss Ryuzu’s assertions that she hasn’t done something can’t be a lie.”

Garfiel: “But, it’s true that I!”

Subaru: “I’m not doubting you. …I know you’ve been lied to. Miss Ryuzu. Do all the Miss Ryuzus accord with what you just said?”

Ryuzu’s face pales as she nods.

This means that none of Ryuzu’s Alpha, Beta, Theta, or Sigma are the LEWES who spurred Garfiel’s change of attitude.

But Garfiel himself had stated that his change of attitude had been prompted by LEWES.

Subaru raises his head, looks at Garfiel’s face.

He clicks his teeth as he shakes his head, not a trace of a lie in his complexion. His personality isn’t suited to telling lies anyway.

And now that his pretense of being the Sanctuary’s BARRIER has been stripped away, it’s ever the more apparent.

Subaru: “Ram.”

Ram: “…I will mention that no magic exists to change a person’s shape. Not even Master Roswaal would be capable of such a thing.”

Subaru: “What do you think’s going on, then?”

Ram has no response.

She must not know how to resolve this contradiction either. But Subaru is generally convinced that this is A TRAP SET BY ROSWAAL. Or more really, there's no other options for what it could be.

Subaru: "Would like to wait here 'till Emilia comes back, but…"

Only ten minutes have passed since Emilia entered the tomb. Once she clears the Trial and comes back out, Subaru wants to be the one to welcome her with arms spread wide. Wants to celebrate her. But —

Subaru: "Let's interrogate Roswaal. Have to find out what bad things he's doing at this last hour."

4

—Emilia cannot tell whether waking up inside a dream ought to be called awakening.

Until just a moment ago she had been inside a stone chamber. Ejected from the Trial room, Emilia now finds herself inside a familiar forest.

Tall trees surround the environs, cool breeze on her skin and warm earth at her feet.

These memories, flashbacks.

What she would see during her Trial, a white forest snowscape.

But that has not begun yet.

No snow falls, green being the welcome to Emilia's consciousness-only self.

Where,

???: "Hey. These past few days have had a real turnout."

While Emilia holds her breath to confirm her own position, she hears a voice.

Emilia's visitation has formed this dream world. Within a scene from a memory which until now had not even existed, standing there in the tree-shade, as if this is all entirely natural, is somebody.

Head to toe garbed in black vestment, hair and skin like scattered snow, this woman of white.

With only two hues in repertoire, but having divined from them sublimity, this witch of beauty.

Who presides over the Trial, lord of the tomb which shows visions of the past—the Witch of Greed, Echidna.

The witch stands with the tree trunk aiding her as she tilts her head at Emilia.

Emilia stares back at the witch from straight-on. Swallows her breath.

Echidna: "Truly, a turnout. Both of guests warranting a warm welcome—and the undeserving uninvited."

Emilia: "…"

Echidna: "It's amazing how you can come back so shamelessly after flaunting all that hideousness. Even I have to find myself shocked at your audacity and at your failure to quit."

The witch staring at Emilia strikes her with words, things full of spite and disdain.

These numb, dark eyes have not the slightest resemblance to those dark eyes which always look at her so kindly. With all the malice she has known and been showered in, Emilia can tell.

This is malevolence on an entirely different dimension from what she knows.

All of the spite aimed at Emilia until this point had been for A

SILVER-HAIRED HALF-ELF, a blade lacking reason.

But the spite from this witch is not like that.

This is not for A SILVER-HAIRED HALF-ELF, but EMILIA-focused enmity.

Echidna: “You hit setbacks and bawl, but provided you can debauch a man into embracing you you don’t care, you whore. You defiler who desecrates my world. Shameless and self-loving you are as he forgives you over and over, you reprobate. —What do you think, witch-child?”

Until recently, these abusive words had clawed at Emilia’s heart.

It wasn’t that she yielded before this malice and gave up on the Trial, but these words did begin the flaying and abrasion of her heart, chipping away at her capacity to resist her past. The witch did not wish for Emilia to take the Trial, or to overcome it.

The witch did not have any single expectation that Emilia would overcome the Trial at all.

“Nobody is expecting anything from us. Is there anything more fun than proving them all wrong?”

Why indeed Subaru is exactly correct.

And so Emilia raises her arm, jabbing her finger toward the heavens.

The same way that Natsuki Subaru did when stating the audacious, when stimulating his courage.

Emilia: “My name is just Emilia. Born in Elior Forest, the Witch of Glaciation.”

Emilia can tell that the witch is daunted.

Feeling satisfaction in that, Emilia lowers her skyward finger to point at her.

Emilia: “A fellow witch’s spite isn’t going to make me bend. After all, me, I’m a pain in the ass of a woman.

Bonus Short Stories

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 3

1

The first time she laid eyes on her, it truly was a blood-stained sight.

Sitting in the middle of a red, blood-soaked field was a silent little girl. Her round, wide eyes—the wild and long, dark blue hair. Her childish figure was stained with dirt and mud, and the only thing covering her naked body was a tattered, dirty cloth.

That cloth, covered in dew and excrement, was the only thing remotely normal about what one could easily tell was a little girl. But what was truly strange about the scene was far more obvious.

Covering the little girl were the black stains of dried blood. But none of that blood had come from the girl herself. The source of the blood staining the field was the remnants of slaughtered bodies scattered all across it.

The field was part of a well-known witchbeast breeding ground.

Witchbeasts were the enemy of humanity, beings of destruction that existed only to destroy other living beings. Their danger was on another level from ordinary beasts, and some even held the potential to cast magic. And unlike beasts, they could never be tamed, and it was impossible to cooperate with them.

That's why witchbeasts were the enemy of humanity, and why this place, which a herd of witchbeasts had settled in, became a place in which humans could never again set foot.

The entire area that the people had evacuated several years prior had become a den of witchbeasts. And in the forest their numbers multiplied, and any weak soul that entered would be eliminated.

That's why the numerous corpses surrounding the girl were not a strange sight, but in fact quite possible. What was strange, however, was that the corpses surrounding the girl were not of humans, but witchbeasts.

And the one who had made them that way was the girl.

"This is a much greater welcome than I was expecting. I don't have any intention of harming you though."

The little girl turned away from the field of witchbeast corpses. In front of her was a tall, pale girl with her hair tied into a braid. She looked to be about fifteen years of age, and her body was starting to form its feminine shape. And there was an immoral charm flowing from her that only an immature age could give.

Those deep, black eyes would likely bewitch many boys.

If it wasn't for the knife she was holding in her hands, that charm would most likely get her mistaken for a high-class prostitute by many men.

However, the black-haired girl showed no interest in showing off her beauty, and at this point, it was all the same to the girl she was confronting.

The blood-covered little girl continued to glare in hatred at the girl who covered her in blood.

There was no sign of gratitude for eliminating the herd of witchbeasts. To the little girl, the witchbeasts were not enemies, though they could not be called family either.

At the very least, there was a strong emotion in her that could not be compared to the girl in front of her. In the little girl's gaze, there was no friendliness, only sadness and killing intent.

In her heart was an overflowing urge to kill, in her eyes was an overbearingly animalistic gaze. These were proof of the tumultuous life this girl had, short as it may be.

Many would pity her for having such a life. But there was no such expression on the girl's face. There was no compassion in her, no fragment of pity to be found.

Ignoring everything they could have learnt about each other after having met, the two girls engaged.

"Are you angry that I'm trespassing on your home? Acting like that, you really do look no different from a witchbeast. You must be the queen of witchbeasts… No, princess seems more appropriate."

"Grr, grrr."

"If you can't talk, then you probably don't understand what I'm saying. Unfortunately, I've been ordered to bring you back. Even if you resist, I will bring you back alive. If you don't resist, then I can do this without hurting you."

"Aohh! Aohh!"

"So you can't understand. Well then, show me how you are going to resist."

The little girl screamed as if she would throw a tantrum, while the girl loosened her lips and lowered her head. The girl's braid slipped off her shoulder, and the little girl smacked her hand.

The next moment, a large shadow fell over the field as if it had been waiting for that signal. With a crooked horn and a lion's head, black fur, and massive claws, it was the unparalleled witchbeast, also known as the Black King of the Forest, the Guiltylowe.

"!!!"

With a thunderous roar, the air rushed past the girl like an explosion, carrying with it a foul smell. Gazing into the overwhelmingly dreadful appearance of the beast, the girl simply licked her lips. "Such a large friend you have there," she said. "Fabulous, simply fabulous."

Despite the danger to her life that was standing in front of her, the girl continued to remain calm. As if irritated by such an attitude, the Guiltylowe raised its claws and swiped at the girl to end her life in a single stroke.

With a force comparable to a hurricane and claws sharp enough to cut steel, the girl was split apart—or at least she should’ve been.

“That’s no good. You have to be gentler with girls.”

“…!”

The girl smiled gracefully as the front right leg of the fiend was sent flying. Its sense of balance lost along with its right leg, the witchbeast suddenly found itself the prey as it fell towards the girl. At that the girl jumped lightly into the air and prepared her blood-stained knife.

“A body incomparable in size to humans… What kind of insides will you show me?”

2

From the dreaded forest of witchbeasts, the Queen of Witchbeasts was born.

That story started a few months prior, when a merchant had escaped that forest with his life.

Entering the forest to escape the rain, he claimed he had seen a human girl leading the witchbeasts when he was chased by them far from the path. He was dismissed as making things up, but that story traveled from village to village and soon became a tale told around the table at the local watering hole.

That story was never proven either way and in a few months became a folk tale…

“And that’s it, I suppose.”

Just like the smiling girl declared, the fallen witchbeast had lost most of its lifeforce. It was completely one-sided. The howling beast struck with all of its might, but each and every attack was swiftly evaded by the girl, who would carve out pieces of the beast's flesh with every counter.

From the first strike, the witchbeast stood no chance. After the right leg was cut off, the tail, the back leg, and the center of the back vanished to her blade. And in the end it could only give a small whimper as it begged for death.

Of course, such an understanding could never be achieved between man and witchbeast, so the beast's wish went unheard. As a result, the witchbeast struggled until its very end.

"The strange color must be a product of its diet. Or maybe it's particular to this one? It smells terrible, but I would love to compare it to another one… Can you call another one?" asked the girl as she searched the freshly killed beast's stomach with her knife covered in its entrails. But the little girl did not respond; she just continued to look on in hatred.

Unfortunately, the little girl had nothing else to fall back on. No matter how miserable its end was, the Guiltylowe was her greatest weapon. And with it gone, she had nothing left.

"I see, so it is over… That's too bad."

Taking her silent glare as an answer, the girl stopped playing with the corpses. Seeing her start to walk towards her, the little girl stiffened. The knife in her hand had taken the life of a witchbeast that had ruled the forest, and in only a moment. And if that knife was targeted at her, then the little girl would have no means to protect herself.

However…

"…Ah."

"There's no need to worry, I did say I was going to bring you back. It's not like I have no interest in your body; it's just not enough to go against my orders. Relax."

"Gao! Gaaoo! Aooao!!"

"…It's not pleasant to be hated so much. My heart can't heal such damage so fast."

As she lifted her up, the little girl struggled with all her might. But because she was suffering from malnutrition, there was little she could do against her captor.

And so, the best that she could do to stop the girl was screaming as loud as she could.

"Gaoo, aooo!!"

"I understand wanting to kill me, but it's impossible in your current state. Biting my neck only tickles… First you should focus on getting better."

The little girl was biting her neck, but with her weakened jaw and teeth, it was doing little. Like the girl said, it was only tickling her. The girl continued walking, leaving behind the blood-stained field and the witchbeast forest in general.

During that whole time, the little girl continued to bite the girl's neck. Her hatred running dry, her killing intent fading, she continued to nibble at the girl's life with all her might.

And she would continue until her life expired.

3

"Aguu."

"…Hm? What's wrong?"

The black-haired girl, Elsa, tilted her head at the pair of lips being pressed against her neck. Her long braid tickled Meili's nose as she pressed her face in.

Meili just made a strange face before replying, "Nothing. Just remembering the past a bit. About the time I just met you, and how I tried to kill you by biting you like thiiis."

"…Ah, such a thing happened, didn't it? But you were so small, it was like being bitten by a small dog. It just tickled.”

“That was the best a kid could do. But you killed all my beloved witchbeasts, so I wanted to kill you in the worst way possible.”

Puffing her cheeks out, Meili plopped herself down on the couch and hugged her knees. Seeing that protesting gaze, Elsa shrugged her shoulders uncharacteristically while lounging on the couch. “I believe I said at the start that I wasn’t there to kill you.”

“Who would believe that after seeing you chop up all of my witchbeasts? You really haven’t changed since then, have you Elsa?”

“And you’ve changed quite a bit since then. You couldn’t even speak before, but now you’re talking so well.”

“…It’s not fair that you can speak so easily to people who are worrying so muuuch.”

Elsa could only look on in confusion at Meili’s pouting. For someone who was without the understanding of the human heart like Elsa, understanding another’s feelings was impossible.

But Elsa’s words were not wrong. In fact, when she had first met Meili, before she had been taken to human lands, Meili was closer to beast than man. It was not that she hadn’t learned human words, it was that she had forgotten them.

The little girl back then had lived in the wild without the help of anyone. For that to be possible, what was needed wasn’t words but power. And luckily for her, that had been with her since she had been born.

Whether that was her salvation or her damnation…was beyond Meili’s understanding.

“If that hadn’t happened, then I wouldn’t have been punished by mama all the time.”

“But if it wasn’t for that, then I would have never met you. You would’ve been all alone.”

"I think I would have been eaten by witchbeasts first. You really are an idiiiot, Elsa," giggled Meili.

"Oh, such a foul mouth. But that's a twisted way of looking at the past."

"Reallyyy? Then what other ways would you suggest?"

"If I hadn't gone to retrieve you, then I would have never met you. That would be terribly lonely. You're like my sister now. That's why taking orders from others isn't always so bad."

Meili's eyes went wide at hearing such an unexpected answer from Elsa; all she could do was look at her in bewilderment.

Elsa in return could only look at her in confusion. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"…Our first meeting was crazy, and now you're saying things like this. You really are a strange person, Elsa."

"I'm well aware I'm not normal, and it's because I'm not normal that we can be like this. You and I are birds of a feather, strange sisters together."

"That's so stupid," Meili spit out as she turned her face away.

Shrugging her shoulders at Meili's attitude, Elsa reached out and softly touched her blue braid. "You've gotten better at braiding. Your hair used to be all over the place before."

"That was the one thing you taught me well. Shouldn't you stop leaving it to me when we're together?"

"What's wrong with that? You're better at it than me."

"Keep showing me your neck like that and I might bite you to death."

Meili puffed out her cheeks as she let Elsa play with her braid.

"It's fine. You won't bite anymore, right?"

"I just bit you."

"That was just a jest, not like it was back then."

"…What about you? Do you ever want to open up my stomach?"

Those words were meant to be revenge, but it was still a strange question.

Elsa pondered for a little bit before replying, "Let's see, I still have some interest in your insides. But not enough to destroy what we have here. Don't worry."

"…Hmmm, I see… Hmmm."

Meili did her best to respond with little emotion and replied with only lazy responses. But she sat a little closer to Elsa on the couch and continued with the directionless conversation.

From a distance, without the smell of blood that lingered on them, it looked like just a pair of sisters chatting peacefully.

END

Elior Forest Team:
Waiting for The Thaw

1

Seven-year-old Emilia was currently facing the largest impasse in her life.

Emilia was a girl who bore the mark of a misbehaving child.

Her walls were still painted with graffiti, and the sight of her feasting on other people's snacks before dinner was hardly uncommon. On occasion, she would forget to brush her teeth at night and secretly make it up in the morning.a

The adults around her constantly worried about her. Emilia was doubtlessly a clever child with a knack for causing trouble. And this clever Emilia knew when there was no way out of a crisis.

Such as the one she was currently facing.

Fortuna: "Everyone! Help! There's a huge problem!"

A sharp-eyed, silver haired beautiful woman, Fortuna, was rushing through the forest, her face pale. This was the first time that anyone had seen the always calm and elegant Fortuna in such a panic, and so naturally both the elves and the black clad visitors to the village gather around her.

Juice: "Miss Fortuna, you're in such a panic… What happened?"

The first person speak to Fortuna was an old friend of hers, a slender man with green hair and the representative of the black clad group. At Juice's greeting, Fortuna looked up, and, seeing her sorrowful expression, he sobered up.

There was only one person who could make Fortuna form such an expression.

Juice: "Has… has something happened to Lady Emilia?"

Fortuna: "…"

Hearing Juice's shaking voice, Fortuna turned her back to him. Clinging to it was a small, balled up girl with long silver hair. Her cute face twisted in pain as she tried to catch her breath.

Juice: "This is…! Lady Emilia, what happened?"

Emilia: "Tum-Tum… tum-tum… my tum-tum hurts…"

Juice rapidly paled as he paced back and forth.

Juice: "Miss Fortuna, I am ignorant as to what 'tum-tum' means."

Fortuna: "'Tum-Tum' refers to stomach. What's she's trying to say is…"

Juice: "Lady Emilia has a stomachache?"

Emilia: "Mm-hmm."

Juice confirmed with Emilia, who tried her best to make her supposed stomachache seem as unbearable as possible.

Of course, that was all a deception.

2

Speaking of which, why was Emilia taking her acting so far?

The short answer was that Emilia was a poorly behaved child. The long answer was that it was because of Juice and his group.

While Emilia was locked in the Princess Room, the adults conducted secret meeting with Juice. Emilia had once met him when she'd snuck out, and she felt like they'd become friends with a shared secret.

Fortuna should have known this, but she still stubbornly kept Emilia away from Juice. This caused Emilia no small amount of grief, and she reasoned that if she faked stomach pains, Mother Fortuna would begin to panic. In her panic, she might have said something like “Is there anything you want?” and Emilia would have responded with “Let me see Juice.”

Emilia had prepared to diligently act like she was in unbearable pain, but the plan hadn’t gone the way she’d predicted. Fortuna had flown into a far greater panic than Emilia had anticipated, and seeing her mother’s fear scared Emilia as well. Fortuna had brought Emilia to the village square, and now everyone knew of her condition.

If Emilia dropped the farce right now, her life would, without a doubt, end. So she had to keep running with the lie.

Emilia: “Auh, ow, it hurts…”

Arch: “Emilia, you’re really in pain? You’re not acting?”

Emili: “…!”

Arch, one of the younger elves in the village, directed a piercing question at the desperately acting Emilia. He not only abandoned her in the Princess Room, but saw through her acting and questioned her about it in front of everyone, knowing full well that she could land in even more trouble. How cruel.

Fortuna: “Arch, what a thing to say. Look at how much pain she’s in, she couldn’t be acting.”

Arch: “But, Miss Fortuna, Emilia’s never caught a cold, and she was the only one unaffected by the rotten apples that got everyone sick a while ago. Right now, she looks nothing like the healthy Emilia we know.”

Fortuna: “Then this is a pain that even our healthy Emilia can’t handle.”

Lying in the center of the village square, the desperately acting Emilia surveyed the adults. Fortuna served as Emilia’s defense against a hostile faction led by Arch, who had no way to refute her.

Juice: “This is most terrible, Lady Emilia. If… if there were any way I could bear this pain for you…”

Her cover had prevailed. Kneeling in front of her, Juice held Emilia's hands with both of his own warm, gentle ones. His eyes were full of melancholy, and his expression filled was with worry.

Emilia: "Juice…"

Juice: "Lady Emilia once provided me with warm support, so this time, please let me pray for Lady Emilia."

Emilia: "Pray?"

Juice: "Yes, I am afraid that there is nothing else we can do."

A hush fell over the village square as everyone lowered their heads. Even Fortuna and Arch, who had just been arguing, fell silent. No, Fortuna, with her hand over her mouth, bore an expression that seemed to reflect an unbearable pain, and her shoulders shook lightly.

Seeing this turned Emilia's world upside down.

How could her mere mischievous prank do this?

She'd made her mother sad, she'd made Juice worry, and she'd completely inconvenienced everyone present. No, no. She couldn't let this continue.

Ignoring everyone's peace of mind and imposing her own desires had resulted in this.

Fortuna: "Emilia, your mother will stay close by you until this is over…"

Emilia: "Eh?"

Fortuna: "And afterwards, we'll play to our hearts' content. I'm sorry, Emilia."

Emilia: "No, wait, stop…"

Juice: "Lady Emilia, I do not know if I have the qualifications to pray for the blessings of the elves, but please let me do so."

Emilia: “Huh?”

Fortuna gently touched her cheek, Arch covered his eyes, and Juice earnestly entered a ceremonious prayer.

Seeing this, Emilia herself wondered if she would suffer an illness and die. Tears began to well up, and she unwittingly begin to cry.

Fortuna: “Something that makes my sweet Emilia hurt like that must be awful.”

Emilia: “No… I’m… not in pain at all…”

Fortuna: “Emilia?”

Emilia: “My… tum-tum’s already stopped hurting, so…”

Unable to bear the guilt of her sin and the horror of her supposed death, Emilia gave a confession.

Although there was a chance that everyone would be angry, causing everyone so much sadness was obviously more important to remedy.

At Emilia’s confession, Fortuna exchanged a glance with her. Perhaps, to keep everyone from worrying even more, another lie needed to be sprinkled into this. Eventually, maybe they would tell everyone.

Emilia: “Mother Fortuna, my stomach has…”

Fortuna: “Stopped hurting?”

Emilia: “Yes.”

Emilia nodded as if sentenced as a sinner.

And this was a grand crime. Perhaps she’d have her snacks taken away, or her bedtime would be set earlier. But, beyond the Emilia’s worst-case scenarios,

Fortuna: “Emilia, that’s great.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Emilia, who had been prepared to face a punishment, was lifted into the air by Fortuna. Fortuna, Arch, the elves, and even the black clad people; everyone cheered for her. Needless to say, so did Juice.

He gently stroked the panicked Emilia’s hair.

Juice: “Lady Emilia, your health is more important than anything. To keep Miss Fortuna and the rest of us from worrying, please remember to use a blanket in cold weather.”

Emilia: “Yeah, I will… sorry, Juice.”

Juice: “Please do not apologize, a ‘thank you’ works just fine, especially for the people who care about you. Remember that if you trouble anyone for anything, you needn’t apologize. Rather, you should thank them.”

Emilia: “Thank you, Juice.”

In response to his gentle smile and gentle words, rather than apologize, Emilia thanked him.

Don’t say sorry, say thank you. For some reason, Juice’s words lingered in her heart and were engraved into her mind.

And so,

Emilia: “Mother Fortuna, thank you. I worried you so much…”

Fortuna: “Well, you did. I was really worried. Try not to worry me so much in the future.”

Emilia: “But you’ll be more prepared to deal with it in the future.”

Fortuna: “…I wouldn’t even begin to know where to start lecturing this child.”

But Fortuna’s frown soon morphed into a beautiful smile.

Fortuna: “Sorry you had to put on that act with me, Juice.”

Juice: “Not at all. For the sake of Miss Fortuna and Lady Emilia, I would do anything. …Although, in the beginning, I began to panic and felt like I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Fortuna give him a wry smile. Juice was slightly bent over to accommodate Emilia, who’d fallen into an exhausted sleep. Right now, she was drooling cutely into Juice’s black cloak.

Fortuna: “Ah, Emilia’s drooling… I think we have an extra cloak at home.” (The wording of this was ambiguous, but the “home” being referred to is Fortuna’s.)

Juice: “If it’s from Lady Emilia’s mouth, then for us it’s a sacred, holy blessing.”

Fortuna: “That’s taking things a bit far. If that’s true, it’s pretty disgusting.”

Fortuna tilted her head with a wry smile. Reflected in her amethyst eyes was Emilia’s sleeping form.

Fortuna: “That said, I’ll be happy if you just refrain from saying strange things in the future.”

Juice: “Of course, I watch myself in the future… She has a smile that can not conceal things, and I will pray that she’ll have a healthy and happy upbringing.”

Fortuna: “When we first came here, seeing the worry in her was terrible. Even if the guardian’s duties have been handed over to Arch, I can’t leave her side. And now, even more…”

The girl she loved was adorable, and she worried constantly. The desire to always be by her side was overwhelming.

Hearing Fortuna’s unspoken words, Juice moved his lips soundlessly. The two of them were caught in a brief silence, and then,

Emilia: “Mother Fortuna… a crybaby… just like… Juice…”

Far away in a dream, Emilia muttered a few words. Fortuna and Juice exchanged a look, and couldn't help but laugh.

Fortuna: "She's obviously in a dream, to be forgetting who's protecting who."

Juice: "Indeed. She'll grow up to be a splendid adult. Miss Fortuna was the same way when she was little, with your brother…"

Fortuna: "Stop bringing things up from so long ago! Honestly, the people who've known someone since childhood are always like this. Stop treating me like a kid already."

Fortuna turned her face away from Juice, who hurriedly searched for an explanation.

Juice: "No, no, that wasn't what I meant…"

Emilia: "Arguing… no more…"

Toward Emilia, who used her sleep talking as advice, Juice and Fortuna shared another laugh. And, for a long time, this scene persisted.

Kremaldy Forest Team
Days Forever Lost

1

In the depths of my body, there lay a burning helplessness.

It was as scorching as ice, as numbing as fire, as weightless as pressure, as frivolous as despair, as turbid as light, the only gleam in falling through the darkness.

“Ah, auh, it hurts…”

Clenched teeth, a body struggling to endure the overwhelming feeling.

If it were only a simple pain, crying or groaning would have helped. But this singular feeling, of oppressive excitement, of refreshing suffocation, of every feeling swirling in the center of my body, was a cross of normal and abnormal.

Even the doctor could do nothing. No one could understand this pain.

And everyone’s indifference to unprecedented things they could not understand was chilling. A pain that could not be imagined was a pain that couldn’t exist, and thus my family treated me as a burden.

This child was talented, incredibly talented. But his shortcomings were deadly. Everyone, no matter who, always said so.

The periodic pain struck regardless of time and place, whether during important ceremonies, commitments to other people, or dealing with family matters.

Once caught in this state, I would be thrown into a frenzy. There were very few people who would treat someone moaning and foaming at the mouth as an equal. At least, no one in my family afforded me this kindness.

Therefore, this pain could not be communicated to anyone, and I had to accept it as my own sin.

As the years passed and its intensity grew, I'd become accustomed hiding where no one could find me as soon as I felt it overcome me.

This time, I was fortunately in the vicinity of the my room, where I could stay for the next few hours. Although the pain itself would last for several days, I could act normally after a few hours. I just needed to wait, and -

???: "I see. To be able to suffer through this without going mad, you're rather impressive."

"Who, who are you?!"

Just before I locked the door and lay on my bed, a stranger flashed through my sight. She sat on the bed, watching me.

"What-"

Facing her, I couldn't calm my breathing down. This was more than surprise, this was ecstasy.

A woman, dressed in black, with hair the color of white snow. She narrowed her dark, exquisite eyes, gazing at me with impossible beauty. It was as if my suffering required a new stimulus, and gave me the illusion of unreal beauty.

However, as if to prove the she were no illusion, the beauty stood up, moving a white finger to my chest as I stood frozen. And,

???: "Not knowing how to properly disperse mana, this poor understanding really is pitiful."

"Ah, ha …gu…"

Frowning, I didn't understand why the dazzling woman had rendered me so speechless. Suddenly, I was unable to suppress the nausea churning in my stomach.

Then, my half dissolved lunch spilled over both my fine clothes and the arm of the woman touching my chest. An acrid smell filled the room, and shame burned red in my face.

Shame took priority over pain, not because I had vomited in front of someone, but because I had stained the woman in front of me. No matter how much shameful regret I had, this would not change.

Although I wanted to immediately apologize, even with all the etiquette I'd learned so far, I couldn't find the words for an apology.

So, when the woman again moved, my blank mind had already given up on thinking.

She drew so close that I could feel her breath, and closer still, until even her breaths were stifled. That was a kiss.

The woman covered the mouth that I had just vomited from with her peach colored lips.

"Ehh…?"

Like this, our breaths became entwined. All this happened so suddenly that I had no chance to react and defenselessly accepted her kiss. For the first time, I experienced the feeling of a warm, soft tongue probing past my teeth, invading my mouth. My brain completely short circuited, and any remaining rational thought burned away.

After a moment, or a few seconds, or even tens of seconds, our lips finally separated slowly. They remained connected by silken liquid threads, which the woman gently cut off with her fingers.

???: "How is it? Do you feel slightly more comfortable?"

"Uh…"

Struck by her sudden inquiry, I had no idea how to reply. As I stood still, looking like a fool, the woman hummed as she once more placed her hand on my chest.

???: "Your heartbeat is still rather fast. But the excess mana should have been extracted directly by me, so…"

“You, what did you do to me! And as a woman, too…”

???: “Ah…?”

I grabbed hand on my chest, questioning her rash action. The woman seemed surprised, raising her eyebrows and alternating her gaze between her captured hand and the one who was holding it, before offering a reply.

???: “Only by regularly adjusting your mana can your body and soul maintain balance. Anything excessive only serves as poison. This is self-evident, and should be even more obvious for you.”

“Mana… which is… related to magic?”

???: “To have so shallow a degree of understanding… No, it would be better to say that knowing even this is unusual. Your death because of this is not something that I can accept.”

Slowly shaking her head left and right, the woman made no attempt to conceal her disappointment. I considered what she’d said before. If she hadn’t made any slip of the tongue, and if I hadn’t misheard her, then,

“Do you know the reason for my illness?”

???: “It’s not an illness per se, but something unfortunate that happens to select, talented people. That is, this “Mana Period”.”

“Mana… period?”

???: “It is incredibly rare, so rare that up until today, no one could understand you.”

And, those words pointed to a conclusion-

“I…”

???: “This pain of yours in one that I can understand. When I was a child, my poor use of my mana gate resulted in an accumulation of excess magic. With it came a terrible pain that no one could understand.”

"Ah…"

The moment I heard those words, my last line of defense fell, and tears began streaming down from my watering blue eyes. As I burst into sobs, my knees gave out and I landed on the floor, hands over my face. The woman knelt by me and tenderly stroked my shaking shoulders.

"Then… then, just who are you?"

???: "I am a witch. An evil which who is occasionally prone to charity. What about you?"

"I'm…"

As the self-proclaimed witch questioned me, I drew a breath, hesitating to answer.

At home, I was considered a burden, and was said to be someone who did not belong here. I also gradually came to believe that this was the case, and even saying family name gave me a sense of guilt.

But in this moment, only at this very second, I felt as if I were not allowed even this shame.

"I'm-"

2

Roswaal: "- That was what happened first time I met Teacher."

The blue haired youth gave an embarrassed smile, scratching his cheek with his fingers.

Listening to his story were a peach haired a girl and a girl who wore her hair in fancy drills- these two were Ryuzu and Beatrice.

The three of them were gathered in a laundry room in Kremaldy Forest's Sanctuary.

Freshly washed clothing hung on ropes which stretched between trees, drying in the wind. In their free time, Roswaal had been questioned about his past.

The story had started when the curious Ryuzu casually asked, “How did you come to know Madam Echidna?”

To answer this question, Roswaal began to explain, and Beatrice, who, in her own words, had been coincidentally passing by had also stopped to listen.

Really, Beatrice wasn’t honestly at all, decided Roswaal with a wry smile.

Ryuzu: “I… um… Lord Roswaal, I’m so sorry.”

Roswaal: “Hmm?”

Faced with the wryly smiling Roswaal, Ryuzu lowered her head in a panic. She continued,

Ryuzu: “Because I so casually asked about such a personal thing… I’m ashamed.”

Roswaal: “Not at all. If there was something that I really wanted to avoid talking about, I would have talked around it. That I didn’t do so was because I wanted to show off my memories with Teacher. It is because my immature past self was so shameful that my first meeting with Teacher became so special to me.”

Looking back on it, the possibility that he wouldn’t have met his teacher, Echidna, doused him in a cold sweat.

Without her words, Roswaal would not have noticed the particularity of his gate, and would have assumed that the pain he’d felt from mana was from an unknown illness. He would have been able to do nothing but continue a lonely struggle to fight it.

And perhaps he would have died a long time ago.

Roswaal: “That this didn’t happen, and that I successfully avenged my parents and brothers, and usurped the house of Mathers, all that was thanks to Teacher.”

Ryuzu: “So that’s how it is. That’s… wait, usurped…?”

Feeling disturbed, Ryuzu’s admiring gaze turned to one of confusion. Seeing her reacted, Roswaal eased his tense expression, and turned the the person next to Ryuzu.

There, crossing her short arms, turning her head away, and wearing an indifferent expression, was Beatrice. Maybe she was pretending that she couldn’t hear. At any rate,

Roswaal: “Betty, how do you like the story of me and Teacher?”

Beatrice: “What do you mean, how do I like it? I was absolutely, completely not listening at all. And I didn’t give you permission to call me Betty, so stop being so familiar with me. Also, I suppose Mother is far too casual with people who she’s just met.”

Roswaal: “It was just that one chance I had with her. But I do remember all of Teacher’s words from then.”

Giving him the words he’d needed to hear, granting him the salvation of empathy. No matter what, Echidna had certainly saved him. And she’d asked for nothing in return.

An act of charity, Echidna had said. And that had proved to be the right decision.

Beatrice: “So she’d asked for nothing, and here you are, trying to repay her. You’re really troubling Mother, in fact. And Betty as well, I suppose.”

Ryuzu: “Miss Beatrice, saying that is a bit… and I understand Mr. Roswaal’s feelings too, since I am also someone who was saved by Lady Echidna.”

Beatrice: “Hmph…”

Beatrice, in response to being berated, gave a pout. Ryuzu, who had done the berating, touched her fingers to her long ears, the symbol of her half-human ethnicity.

For her, the ear represented something significant, just as the half-human blood running through her veins did. Even in her short life, Ryuzu had already suffered so much because of it.

That lament could not be erased, but being here had lessened its pain slightly.

In this vein of thought, Roswaal too would straighten his chest and proudly wear his status as Echidna's student.

- And strive to one day do for her what she'd done for him.

Beatrice: "Ugh, what a shameless man. Looking for a "thank you" is just pathetic. At this rate, you're still a hundred years from getting close to Mother, I suppose."

Ryuzu: "But doesn't Miss Beatrice often say "you should be filled with gratitude"?"

Beatrice: "Between Betty and Roswaal, just who is your friend?!"

As if she'd been programmed to do so, Ryuzu immediately rushed to Beatrice and started apologizing. Although it was just a curious question, the respectful Ryuzu had revealed her answer. In terms of their friendship, Roswaal had lost to Beatrice.

For the sake of Echidna, who'd rescued him, in order to lend her a hand, Roswaal had spend years trying to earn the place he was at today. Thanks to this, he'd mastered the family business, and gained a seat in the nobility, but his interpersonal relationships were lacking.

He'd left the parents, estranged himself from his brothers, and relied on not on likeability but on talent. As a result, he had many associations, even now but had no way to close any distance with them.

So looking at the relationship between Beatrice and Ryuzu, and Roswaal smiled inadvertently. His happiness for them took precedent over any envy he might have felt.

She had her mother, her friend, and her duty, so she felt no loneliness. If Roswaal himself could become one of her friends, he would be content.

Beatrice: “What is that strange gentle look you’re wearing. It’s annoying, I suppose.”

Beatrice launched an attack on Roswaal, who had been silently watching the exchange. Her cute face wore a pout as she point a short arm at him.

Beatrice: “If you have something to say, just say it, in fact! I’ll hear you out, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “I love you, Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “What kind of disgusting words are those, in fact?!”

Roswaal: “Yikes, I’m terrified already.”

Having been heard, he withdrew his words as Beatrice started causing a fuss.

Roswaal, finding himself in trouble, immediately leapt up and fled, and an angry Beatrice chased him in furious pursuit. Trailing after them was Ryuzu, who was trying to catch them while taking of the laundry.

Roswaal: “Haha, see if you can catch me!”

Beatrice: “You, how dare you play with me! I’ll catch you and make your regret it!”

Ryuzu: “Miss Beatrice! Lord Roswaal! Wait for me!”

The noisy three cast their job aside as they started playing with each other.

Looked at them from a distance, a single witch muttered quietly to herself,

“…That brother and sister can’t resolve arguments without causing a fuss. Honestly.”

HA HA HA HA

Volume 15

Chapters 118-130, Interludes, Advent

Chapter 118:
The Day Alpha Orionis Smiled

Emilia walks leisurely, with practiced gait, along the unmarked trail with its extremely tall trees.

She steps on grass, treads on earth, taking care not to trample on any flowers hidden beneath the bulging roots. She feels the hard ground beneath her feet, but Emilia finds it strange—after all, she is dreaming.

Never mind how it goes in an ordinary dream, here she can feel the texture of the tree-bark, smell the sweet aroma of the flowers, and feel the warmth of the breeze.

Emilia: “It’s a dream world, but I can feel everything like normal. Why is that?”

Echidna: “Dream world, would be an entirely figurative descriptor for it. This is a place constructed from the memories of the Trial’s challenger, which drags in only the consciousness, a space fitting for the appellation ‘alternate world’. These are things withdrawn from the memory of you, the challenger, so of course your senses can interact with this world. Conversely, if I attempt to touch the ground or perhaps the trees, I won’t feel any tactile sensation.”

Emilia: “So that’s it. …Can I go on a rampage, and turn the forest into a hodgepodge?”

Echidna: “What a barbaric and witchlike idea. Indeed, you have tactile sense, but you can’t influence this world. To add, you and the living beings recreated in this world can’t even touch each other. Though, if the Trial were in another form then it would possible.”

Emilia: “Another form?”

Echidna: “Full of questions, aren’t you. How about using your own head for once? Seek and you shall find. Though for you, constantly spoiled and fawning on men as you are, I'd say it's outside your capacity."

Emilia: "Hmp…"

Emilia takes the lead, the Witch of Greed following behind while keeping a fixed distance. Echidna gives her venomous lecture, sneering at Emilia's ignorance while looking thoroughly unimpressed. But, despite that animosity, her statements are legitimate.

Emilia puts her hand to her mouth and thinks.

There is a difference between touchable memories and untouchable memories. A method for Emilia, with only her mind present in this world, to touch the people who walk about these memories.

Emilia: "I thought about it but I couldn't get it. Tell me the answer."

Echidna: "…"

Emilia: "What's wrong? Do you have a tummy ache?"

Echidna: "Your attitude gives me pyrosis. While it certainly feels unpleasant, if you exclude him and my friends, the only one who could inspire such emotion in me would probably just be you."

Emilia: "Echidna, you have friends."

How nice, is the nuance in Emilia's muttering. Echidna sighs.

It seems she did not take Emilia's statement with the nicest of interpretations. Emilia hesitates on how to reword it to make it communicate properly, when,

Echidna: "The regrets of the past that you glimpse in the Trial do not consist of only a single scene for everybody."

Emilia: "Erm?"

Echidna: "There are pasts fixed on a single moment of time which you regret. And differing from those, there are also ongoing…for example, pasts where you regret your relationship with somebody. In the second case, the recreated past will not be a single isolated scene, but will instead recreate those characters as they are inside the challenger. You could speak with them, touch them, even make happy love with them."

Emilia: "…Okay. So that's how it works."

Emilia nods in comprehension.

Indeed, REGRETS can have these distinctions. Some people will regret that they got in a fight with somebody, and some people will regret everything that came in the aftermath. Which to conquer is entirely dependent on the person.

Emilia: "You don't like me, but you answered my question for me."

Echidna: "Because I'm just sooo nice a person, is the kind of misunderstanding I'd loathe for you to make. I've done nothing humiliating enough for you to regard me favorably. That I wind up answering these questions is entirely a result of my disposition."

Emilia: "Right, right."

It doesn't put her in the most jovial of moods, but Emilia has more or less figured out how to interact with the icy Echidna.

Echidna definitely hates Emilia like one would hate a serpent, but Emilia cannot dislike Echidna.

She doesn't know her well enough for that.

Reasoning backwards, it means that Echidna knows Emilia well enough to hate her this much—but she will has no chance to ask about it here.

???: "—Huhu! Ahahha! Here! This way!"

Emilia: "Eep!"

The sudden and loud voice of a young girl calling from behind surprises Emilia.

She freezes, when the little girl circles around her to run past from behind her to before her and away. It shocks Emilia that she had managed to come so close without Emilia noticing, but she promptly senses that this was not because of her own negligence or inattention.

The girl who overtook Emilia runs about, her long silver hair flapping in disarray.

Amethyst eyes, a well-worn children's vestment. She dashes confidently around the forest, her face as she laughs very familiar to Emilia.

This person is her young self—back when she knew no REGRET, Emilia in a bygone time.

Echidna: "Utterly ignorant, but it's still astonishing how dumbly blithe she looks."

Emilia: "Don't start saying things about little me too. And…we'll find out soon whether or not that's anything bad."

Such is Echidna's prejudiced judgement of the frolicking young Emilia.

Feeling a throbbing in her temples after objecting to Echidna's appraisals, Emilia grimaces.

Her Contract with Puck has ceased, and her sealed memories are resurrecting one after another. Her days spent with Mother Fortuna. Geuse's group and how they brought supplies to the village. The seal, and the FAIRIES who helped her escape the Princess Room. And, the day that she met Geuse who she wasn't meant to meet, and they became friends.

Emilia: "How did I manage to live without memory of these things, like it was completely normal…?"

Emilia's memory was fraught with holes, but Emilia had lived without finding anything strange about that at all.

Who knows what would have happened if she noticed the pitfalls, but without the Trial's involvement? There would be no recovering from it. Perhaps Puck, who would've known Emilia's abnormal state better than anyone, didn't tell her about it because he understood that.

Pieces of her reviving memory still remain sleeping beyond the ajar door.

She had not been able to spy their entirety before challenging the Trial, but that was fine.

Here, in this Trial, all of Emilia's sealed memories will likely be revealed.

She can figure that something inside her will change definitively after having seen them.

Emilia: "But I'm not scared of that anymore."

Echidna: "Crying and bawling you cling to men or your father. Are you going to stop making decisions typical of the filthy woman you are?"

Emilia: "I know they'd probably forgive me…but I don't want to do that, and for me or for Subaru to feel disillusioned because of it. I don't want to be weak, and rationalizing that I can stay weak."

Echidna: "…Do whatever you want. All I'm doing is stockpiling yet another result in my memory."

No matter how much spite Echidna spits, nothing can shake Emilia's nerve now.

Perhaps having perceived that over their conversation, Echidna resignedly closes her mouth.

The witch's comments have abated in their fury. Emilia gives a sigh and devotes her attention to her past.

In front of her is Emilia, running about guilelessly. And,

???: "Please wait, Lady Emilia. It is perilous to traipse the area in this way.”

Emilia: “I’m not in danger, I’m fine. You’re the one with scraped knees, Geuse.”

Geuse: “No injury to myself is anything for concern. But any injuries you may sustain are dire. Not even my death would constitute recompense for wounds imposed on your sumptuous skin.”

Chasing the frolicking Emilia is a tall man in black habit—Geuse. His stern face gives rise to a definite gentleness and affection as he softly chides Emilia, who continues capering heedless of his warning.

???: “Geuse. The way you said that actually made it sound sooo dirty.”

Geuse: “My intentions in speaking had been otherwise…never would I consider Lady Emilia in such a manner.”

Geuse is addressed by woman following behind him as he follows Emilia—a woman with short silver hair, sharp eyes and beautiful looks.

Having spotted her, Emilia’s throat feels to cramp.

Emilia: “Mother Fortuna…”

Although aware that this healthy sight of her mother is only occurring in a memory, Emilia cannot keep herself from feeling the urge to cry.

Emilia loved her. Respected her more than any other. Even after all this time, Emilia considers Mother Fortuna a member of her family at least as precious as Puck.

Fortuna goes to stand beside the worried-looking Geuse, casting him a glance.

Fortuna: “And that’s not just for Emilia, it’d sound that way no matter who you said it to. You’re supposed to be getting on in years by now, Geuse."

Geuse: "Age is something which presents rather little significance to me. Speaking in reference to living for a long duration of time, by my view even yourself and Lady Emilia would be infants."

Fortuna: "I'm an infant by his view…hrm."

Fortuna lowers her gaze as she mutters with displeasure.

Geuse's brows furrow in concern, but Fortuna does not respond. Instead Emilia toddles back to them, her cheeks puffed out.

Emilia: "Aaugh! Mother Fortuna, Geuse, how come you're not chasing me! We're playing tag! You have to chase!"

Geuse: "Ah! My deepest apologies, Lady Emilia. The failing of this negligent Romanée-Conti, to persist lifelong and evermore…"

Fortuna: "Don't spoil her like that, Geuse. —Emilia, you do remember why your mother and Geuse started chasing you, yes? Girls who don't think about what they've done annoy your mother sooo much."

Emilia: "Eep!"

A hint of anger slips into Fortuna's smile, prompting young Emilia's shoulders to hitch.

She thinks back on why the two were chasing her, and realizes that she has needlessly riled a hornet's nest. Her face pales as she giggles in an attempt to distract from the issue, then turns and breaks into a run and—

Fortuna: "No luck. Mother Fortuna caught you."

Emilia: "Awuh! I'm sorry Mother Fortuna! It's not what you think! The fairies wanted to play, and said to go outside, and so…"

Fortuna: "Girls who blame other people, or rather fairies, also annoy your mother. Do you understand, Emilia?"

Caught in a hug from behind, Emilia panics while Fortuna speaks to her in whispers. Young Emilia stops struggling and hangs her head dejectedly.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, Mother Fortuna. The room was so boring, and Geuse is my friend so I wanted to see him, and I just went out.”

Fortuna: “And then you ran away because I spotted you. You knew that you did something bad. That was something you sooo shouldn’t have done.”

Emilia: “I know…”

Fortuna: “You mustn’t break promises. Keeping promises is important. Promises are a representation of trust, and breaking them means betraying that trust. Don’t do it.”

Close to tears, Emilia attempts to look down—when her face is caught between two hands, and she is forced to look properly into that pair of amethyst eyes.

Fortuna: “Emilia, promise me. You’ll keep your promises from now on.”

Emilia: “Mmhm…yes, I promise. I’m so sorry, Mother.”

Fortuna: “Alright. Everything’s fine then.”

Having heard Emilia’s teary pledge, Fortuna holds her darling daughter to her chest.

She tenderly strokes sobbing Emilia’s silver hair, accepting her child’s maturation with a gentle sigh. When,

Fortuna: “Geuse? What are you doing over there?”

Geuse: “I-I have…w-witnessed, far too brilliant a sight…the tears… beyond my control…”

Geuse squats in the shade of a tree as he presses a handkerchief to his face, bawling. Apparently hearing that mother-daughter conversation had sent him over the emotional edge.

Seeing Geuse cry both in her recovered memories and during the Trial leads Emilia to remember that he was a weepy drunk. A warmth unfurls through her chest.

Fortuna: “But anyway, Emilia. These fairies you mentioned are…?”

Leaving aside Geuse as he blows his nose with the kerchief, Fortuna gets back to a part of Emilia’s testimony that bothered her. With the topic of FAIRIES raised, Emilia looks up at Fortuna from within her embrace, her eyes still red.

Emilia: “Oh, they’re…”

Emilia: “Fairies, come here.”

Young Emilia reaches out her arm as she speaks to the world.

As if her pale fingertips were a perch, several glowing lights appear, drifting over to convene around her hand.

Both Fortuna and Geuse look shocked to witness the sight.

Fortuna: “It couldn’t be, minor spirits? And so many of them. … How?”

Emilia: “…? I talked to them, and lots of them came out. They come out when I’m playing in the Princess Room now.”

Geuse: “To conduct this sum of minor spirits at such an age…Lady Emilia, it seems that you possess distinguishable aptitude for spiritualism.”

Emilia: “Aptytoode, for spiritualism?”

Geuse: “These who you call fairies are beings known as minor spirits. Extant ubiquitously throughout the world, open your heart to them to converse and form a Contract. Those who are favored by spirits, and borrow their strength to achieve the extraordinary, are referred to as spiritualists.”

Emilia: “I can be one of those?”

Geuse: “Certainly. Proceed to mature in good health, favored by spirits as is presently so…undoubtedly, many spirits, and more powerful spirits, will come under your direction.”

Emilia’s face beams as she hears Geuse’s explanation.

But Fortuna stands up, and nudges her elbow into Geuse’s side.

Fortuna: “Hold on, Geuse. No funny talk. Going off saying that managing a few minor spirits makes you a spiritualist…and, Emilia doesn’t need it.”

Geuse: “So might be how you opine, but Lady Emilia shall not remain a child indefinitely. It will happen that she cannot stay at your side. My belief would find its additional necessity in her establishment of herself as herself once that eventuality comes.”

Fortuna and Geuse, arguing over where Emilia’s education should be focused.

Watching their exchange from aside, the older Emilia inevitably has to think it.

Emilia: “Mother Fortuna and Geuse are like a mom and dad.”

Fortuna: “Wh?!”

Without a trace of ill will in her expression, young Emilia states the exact thing that older Emilia thinks.

Emilia watches Fortuna’s face redden while agreeing with the fact that, yes, her younger self had thought the same thing.

Fortuna: “Okay, Emilia, don’t say anything weird. Your mother and Geuse have known each other for a very very long time, our relationship isn’t one you can talk about like that.”

Geuse: “Exactly, Lady Emilia. Lady Fortuna and myself have known each other for a very long time…in fact, it would have been since being in the company of your mother and father…”

Fortuna: “—Geuse.”

Fortuna starts with a frantic explanations, but Geuse's loose lips lead her tone to plummet. Geuse seems to sense his mistake as he puts his hand to his mouth.

Geuse: "Forgive me."

Emilia: "Mother, and father?"

Fortuna: "I'm sorry, Emilia. We'll talk about that another time. But anyway you go back to the room. I haven't forgiven the fact that you snuck out."

Emilia: "Hrmp…You're so mean, Mother Fortuna…"

Feeling that Fortuna is trying to fudge the conversation, Emilia puffs out her cheeks to display her displeasure. But Fortuna appears stubborn, and puts her hands to Emilia's puffed cheeks, pressing down to make her expel the air.

With the air puffed out of Emilia's mouth, Fortuna goes down to match Emilia's eye level.

Fortuna: "Be a good girl, behave. This isn't the last time you're going to get to see Geuse. I'll, erm…make another chance for you to see him."

Emilia: "Really?! You promise? No going back on it?"

Fortuna: "Oh, no, this girl. Just where could she've learned to be so fussy?"

Fortuna gives Emilia a wry smile as she brings up the previously-covered topic of promises, before taking her in an embrace.

Fortuna: "Yes, I promise. This is a promise between you and me, and it's sooo important."

Emilia: "…Okay then. I'll go back to the room."

Young Emilia gives Fortuna a trusting nod.

Released from the hug, Emilia runs over to Geuse before she can start her return to the Princess Room. She extends her hand to Geuse, smiling.

Emilia: “See you, Geuse. Promise that we’ll meet again.”

Geuse: “—Yes, assuredly. May we make audience again in the future. I shall be awaiting the day.” Geuse takes the small, extended hand, completing the handshake.

With her smile met with a smile, Emilia nods and nods and nods before releasing her hand and announcing her goodbye.

Young Emilia readies to return to the Princess Room—

Echidna: “Here they are.”

Whispers Echidna, having silently watched over everything until now.

Emilia hears Echidna clearly and raises her head, looking around to try and determine what Echidna is referring to—and spots it.

Emilia: “…”

A white young man.

White skin, white hair. He wears a simple shirt and pants, nothing ornate about him. His face does have its looks, but even said he is lacking in anything defining, his appearance utterly banal.

He could mix into a crowd and disappear instantly with how he epitomizes all lack of individuality, but his presence right here, right now, makes him seem an abnormal kind of outsider.

Fortuna: “…Who’re you?!”

Fortuna in the memory also notices the man, immediately holding Emilia close as she voices her clear caution.

The man leans against a tree trunk and runs his hand through his white hair.

Man: “Don’t you think it follows reasonable sense that when asking a person for their name, you begin by introducing yourself first?”

The reply makes Fortuna’s eyebrow twitch.

Seeing this, the man’s mouth twists, the atmosphere he emits dismal.

Man: “Who, is one of those questions where when you give this response I can only think it as stale and trite but, now that I’ve actually wandered into a context fitting for that kind of thing why aha I can indeed understand why people have the urge to say this. Here are fellow persons for the first time making the presence of the other. Our standings are supposed to be definitively equal as we begin in our efforts to establish a relationship, but now we have a condescending someone trying to extort a name unilaterally. I wonder if it’s occurred to you. That you’re unconsciously, unsympathetically, and by your own accord treating me as inferior, has that occurred to you?”

Fortuna: “…For a man, you sure love talking.”

Man: “For a man, is where your prejudice shows though and indicates how ignorant you are to comparative examples of men. And first of all what right do you think you have to take these creatures called MEN, a class which includes more individuals spread throughout the world than what is conceivably countable, and compare me to them? This attitude of yours…it’s giving me a little trouble to overlook. It’s all lacking in any degree of reasonable courtesy. It’s taking this individual I am, taking my rights, and disregarding them.”

It appears that Fortuna’s every word has made the lunacy in the man’s speech escalate.

With the man growing more and more dangerous, Fortuna exposes her wariness as she braces herself for combat. But the one to pull the breaks is Geuse, standing beside her.

He looks up at the white man, his expression stern as he opens his mouth to speak:

Geuse: “Regulus Corneas! For what reason are you here! We had an immutable promise that I would be the only one involved in this affair!”

Regulus: “Call it an immutable promise or call it whatever you want, it’s all just you going off saying things yourself and presuming things yourself in what is actually just a normal agreement. Look at you trying to push people into submission with that domineering phrasing of yours, what great and pompous drivel you’ve started spewing from your spirit mouth. Trying to restrict my daily actions, even though I’m not permitted any kind of perfidious behavior anyway…so that’s what a spirit is? Have you ever considered putting a stop on the infringements you’re making to my mind and person?”

Geuse: “Nothing you say presents an answer! If you were displeased with the agreement, we could have discussed it at church! What have you appeared here for! And who told you that this place is…”

???: “—This has happened on my instruction.”

Geuse’s voice trembles in rage as he yells at the displeased young man, Regulus.

But cutting into their argument, never once before heard in this altercation, comes a woman’s voice.

Everyone watching the scene has their own reaction to that voice.

A shiver arises in Geuse’s eyes, Fortuna’s eyes blaze in fury, young Emilia shakes her head as she tears up in her mother’s arms, Regulus crafts an ominous smile.

Emilia as she watches the memory swallows her breath, while Echidna merely closes her eyes.

She comes forward, this single girl.

This character standing beside Regulus as he looks down at Emilia, Geuse, and Fortuna, is a girl so beautiful that all who see her would tremble.

Her long, platinum hair gleams sweetly as if sunlight given form, flowing to her slender neck and streaming down her back.

Long eyelashes border her eyes, their shade so deep a blue that they seem to entrap the world, her looks so overwhelmingly attractive that even a god would hesitate to touch her fingers, with all her perfect pulchritude.

Her petite frame is adorable enough that even having the wind cradle her appears risky. What garbs her is merely a single white cloth, and the whole aura of it suggests that the world would permit nothing else to touch her skin.

The presence she holds is not that of an ordinary person, and her appearance is not what an ordinary person would have.

Her voice possesses an almost magical allure, binding the minds and bodies of those who hear it, nobody present here capable of saying anything anymore.

Girl: “Is there something wrong? Archbishop Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti?”

Tilting her head, the girl fires her question.

Being looked at by her, being talked to by her. Just the fact that any one of her actions are aimed at oneself is enough to inspire an overwhelming euphoria, such that death would not be an aversive prospect, the sensation unavoidable.

Although she knows that this is the past, Emilia feels her mouth rapidly going dry as she looks at the girl.

—This thing is dangerous.

Geuse: “Why are you…no, Regulus Corneas! Why have you brought her here!”

Geuse grits his teeth, rejecting the emotions swelling up inside him.

—This thing, is dangerous.

Regulus: “Do you think it’s possible for me of all people to pull any such stunt as ‘bringing people places’ with how it infringes on the will of others? It is by her own volition that we are in company. Your attempts to make all of this my fault are yes an amazing exhibition of prejudice. I’d appreciate you not to go off passing your unasked-for judgements on this human being that I am.”

Girl: “Archbishop Regulus. He is rattled. Do not fault him too much.”

The corners of Regulus’s mouth tremble in a frantic attempt to keep ecstasy from showing on his face as he bows respectfully.

It’s strange.

Regulus is overwhelming, alien. That he is so obediently obeying her will illustrates beyond any parallel how abnormal this girl is.

Geuse looks up at the girl, his eyes trembling in shock and confusion as he shakes his head.

Geuse: “That is…remarkably, cruel…Lady Pandora…”

Geuse’s breathy voice leads the girl to smile faintly.

This girl’s smile, blessed by the world and harbinger of even greater felicity. The girl, Pandora, answers all the gazes aimed at her with a tolerance that permits everything.

She spreads her arms wide, as if her small reach will cradle everything in existence.

Pandora: “Now, shall we begin? —For the fulfilment of cardinal desire of us witch cultists.”

Fortuna: “PANDORAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

With young Emilia protected behind her, Fortuna thrusts out her arms to generate a blue magic circle before her. Icicles materialize with overwhelming momentum, their aim set directly on Pandora.

Pandora: “Goodness.”

Fortuna: “Be impaled, and apologize to my brother and the rest!!”

Pandora casually puts her hand to her mouth. Fortuna strikes.

Each of the icicles is as large an adult’s arm, and their number is near to twenty. They form at speeds fast enough to be continuous, shooting one after another—spearing into the astonished girl before exploding into white vapor.

The crackling of shattering ice rains upon the crackling of shattering ice without end, the white smoke cloaking over the surroundings as Fortuna regardless relents not a second in her attack. Young Emilia’s mouth gapes open with Fortuna standing before her, her beautiful face twisted in rage as she hoists up her arms.

Fortuna: “AaAand now—!!”

Following the motion of her arms as she swings them down, a ball of ice massive enough to decimate the forest trees plummets down from above. Its aim is true as it slams into the spot where Pandora was, white demise drilling itself into the forest ground, marking the grave.

Not even the older Emilia has anything she can say about Fortuna’s overwhelming magical prowess.

Even supposing that Emilia had Puck’s help, like hell she could handle magic that proficiently. She had never made low estimations of her mother, but learning that her strength was greater than what she remembered makes her shiver.

However,

Regulus: “Say…you were paying me absolutely no attention during any of that, were you? You weren’t paying me even the slightest thought and you still opted for an attack that would entangle me in it, honestly don’t you find that suspect? Do you know what it means? What it means is that you infringed upon my presence, my life, my rights.”

Immediately following the protracted complaint, the massive ball of ice shatters to pieces from the ground-up.

The shards of ice-crystal scatter through the air, dreamlike, the sight of Regulus casually standing there being overwhelming abnormal. The sight of Pandora standing beside him uninjured, also.

Regulus makes a show of easily brushing off his coat. Despite the ferocity of the attack he sustains not a single injury, in fact not even his clothes are sullied in the least. Pandora adjusts her bangs slightly, disrupted by air pressure as they are.

Most likely Regulus, standing before Pandora, had protected her—but it's all preposterous. Emilia has not a clue as to what happened.

Echidna: "So that's this generation's Greed. Considering what an impossible fluke of a meeting it is for me to be witnessing this, it really is very fascinating."

Emilia: "You know what that was?"

Emilia addresses Echidna, who has moved out of the tree-shade and into a spot where she can better observe the fight. Echidna glances at Emilia, her eyes narrowing.

Echidna: "I can make a guess, but it's far from anything definite. If we can keep watching this for a little longer, I might be able to figure out what's going on, but…It doesn't seem that circumstances will allow for that."

Emilia: "What do you…"

Echidna: "There they go."

Although frustrated, Emilia directs her gaze forward.

Even with Fortuna's offensive, the fight has produced zero results.

Seeing Regulus stepping forward and looking displeased, Geuse stretches out his arm.

Geuse: "Fortuna- sama, I ask that you take Lady Emilia and withdraw! We are presently powerless against Regulus Corneas!”

Fortuna: “You…! That woman is right there, and you’re telling me to stand down?!”

Geuse: “Consider the situation! Who is it that you are protecting in this instant!”

Fortuna: “—!”

Geuse bellows at the belligerent Fortuna. Fortuna’s face stiffens in shock as she glances behind her, to find young Emilia holding anxiously onto her mother’s clothes.

Emilia: “M-Mother…”

Fortuna: “Emilia!”

Geuse: “Please withdraw. From there, rescue the village. The followers who accompanied me to this place share me in my feelings. They will surely aid you.”

Fortuna: “If we do that, what will you do?”

Fortuna bends down and holds Emilia to her chest, while Geuse speaks calmly.

She stands up with Emilia in her embrace, looking anxiously at Geuse.

Geuse: “—Please calm your worry. I am not remaining behind absent of any plan.”

Geuse, although exuding tension, responds to Fortuna’s concerned gaze with a smile.

Seeing it, Fortuna closes her eyes.

Fortuna: “I’m coming back to help you.”

With that, Fortuna breaks into a run through the forest, Emilia in her arms.

Emilia struggles in her grip, peeks her head out from over Fortuna's shoulder.

Emilia: "GEUSE!!"

Geuse: "…"

Geuse turns to glance at Emilia, his expression somehow relieved as he raises his hand.

With that, and with Fortuna and Emilia sprinting deep into the forest, Geuse disappears from the couple's view.

Emilia: "…It's strange. Me, I was taken away, so I shouldn't be seeing what happens here."

Echidna: "Don't disparage my architecture of these worlds of memory. Your memories may be the starting point, but the construction comes from my algorithms and takes reference from the Book of Wisdom. To an extent, it's simple to compensate for the events which you haven't seen. Although…"

Standing aside the bewildered Emilia, Echidna's gaze tracks the path of Fortuna's escape.

Echidna: "Speaking for the sake of overcoming your Trial, it's correct that we follow them. What do you think? Should we transition over?"

Echidna indirectly announces that Emilia ought to follow Fortuna. Which rationally speaking is a correct statement. The Trial is concerned with Emilia's past, so she should be prioritizing whatever young Emilia is seeing and doing now. But,

Emilia: "Echidna…that kind of sounded like you're trying to make me go that way."

Echidna: "…"

Emilia: "Me overthinking…isn't it. Your phrasing and attitude just then was weird."

Echidna: “…Whatever you think is up to you. And also, this side’s moving again as well.”

Echidna goes without answering Emilia’s question, her expression blank as she steps back a small distance. Her retreat is probably to avoid getting showered any side-damages from the imminently-starting fight.

No matter how terrible the damages are, nothing will affect Emilia or Echidna. But if anything alters the surroundings, they cannot avoid the impact that will have on the earth they are standing on.

Regulus: “Well wasn’t that cool of you, Petelgeuse. But whose permission do you think you have to be doing these things? Do you have any idea at all why I’m here? Think about it in any way you can possibly conceive, and it’s obvious I’m here on business. Not with you, with the other one. You getting in my way here means you’re obstructing me from doing what I ought to do. It’s infringing, my rights.”

Geuse: “Say anything you wish, Regulus Corneas. But, with my being at stake, I must not allow you any passage further!”

Regulus: “Well said. Not that I could give less of a care about the founder of the Witch Cult, but how wonderfully said, when it was some smidgen of past contributions that landed you in the seat you’re occupying. How can you possibly believe that you have any hope of beating me, properly chosen into my seat as I am?”

SOMETHING.

Geuse: “That…I will now present.”

Regulus’s anger intensifies over the course of his egotistical strings of logic. Geuse responds quietly. His hand reaches into his vestments, his expression steeled with resolve. To Emilia it looks the expression of a man resolved for Death.

Emilia: “No…Geuse, what are you doing?!”

Emilia’s vicarious experience of her past has led her to remember her nickname for him.

With the situation such that he is resolved for death, Emilia promptly reaches out her arm in an attempt to stop him. But the present Emilia has no means to influence the past.

Her outstretched hand passes through him, feeling no touch of the palm that she had grasped in her youth.

Regulus: “That’s…”

From his pocket, Geuse withdraws a small, black box.

Regulus’s brows furrow at first, but he promptly seems to guess at the thing’s identity as his eyes shoot open wide. With Regulus showing shock for the first time, Geuse’s resolute gaze pierces through him.

Geuse: “You should be able to sense it. Your hands have also held it once before.”

Regulus: “I am aware. Very aware, and so my jaw’s too busy gaping at your abject stupidity for me to speak. Perhaps you were keeping that hidden on your person thinking it’d be your ace or whatever else idea you’ve come up with, but couldn’t you tell from the moment you had it anywhere near you? You! Are unqualified to have that! It wasn’t anything else, it’s the thing that’s decided that!”

Geuse: “…Indeed, my compatibility with it is none. Owing to that, I have merely held what was entrusted to me and nothing else. However, it also serves for the sake of junctures such as these.”

Pandora: “Archbishop Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti.”

Geuse responds quietly to the infuriated Regulus.

Pandora, not having moved an inch from her original spot, cuts into their conversation.

Geuse raises his head. Pandora’s face is tranquil.

Pandora: “Happy travels.”

Geuse: “…”

No hostility or goodwill or ill will or nothing, just simple words of blessing.

And so being, Emilia cannot prevent her horror, and neither can Geuse.

The blessing almost looks to have butchered Geuse entirely as he grimaces, enduring the pain. He twists the box in his hand, taking off the lid. Inside the box upon his palm is a black, squirming.

Geuse: “I beg you forgive me, Master Flugel.”

With that, Geuse presses both the dark something and the box to his chest.

Instantly, the something snaps onto Geuse’s body like droplets of water, compounding in volume explosively to envelop him wholly.

It’s as if Geuse is being absorbed by some viscous creature. Emilia shrieks in silent grief as the ‘something’ shrouds Geuse’s body, constricts him.

Regulus: “Imbecile.”

Spits Regulus, for the first time phrasing his judgements succinctly.

His scornful gaze is fixed on Geuse, enveloped in the SOMETHING as he hoists his arms to the heavens, his mouth agape and shrieking. Not as if in pain, not as if in joy, but as if some other emotion is throwing his being into disarray.

Emilia: “…”

A baffling sound joins the shrieking.

The sound of someone clapping their hands.

Pandora: “Magnificent.”

Whispers platinum Pandora as she gives her applause.

As she watches Geuse, swallowed and panting in the wake of the emotional torrent, her cheeks redden in ecstasy.

The slight hitch in her breathing is, unmistakably, because the scene is exciting her.

Regulus: “Lady Pandora?”

Emilia is not the only one with questions about Pandora’s attitude, for Regulus speaks.

He furrows his brows at the clapping Pandora. She glances back at Regulus with her cheeks still red, aborting her applause to point at Geuse.

Pandora: “Archbishop Regulus Corneas.”

Regulus: “Yes.”

Pandora: “He is coming.”

Instantly, Regulus flips to hang upside down, and goes flung hurtling high into the sky overhead.

Regulus: “Wha—?”

It’s the same kind of infantile violence as grabbing a doll by the leg and flinging the thing away. Regulus has not a clue as to what is happening either, making a dumb noise as he hits the apex of the throw—only to slam back down to the earth. Having obviously transcended terminal velocity in his fall, it seems he had been thrown with his leg still grabbed.

Helpless, Regulus smashes to the ground head-first.

Out thunders the echoing boom as the earth bursts apart, the trees caught in the crash falling and falling in sequence toward Regulus’s point of impact. The secondary attack pins Regulus beneath the lumber, silence falling upon the forest.

Emilia falls speechless, her blank mind working frantically to figure out what on earth just happened.

She didn’t see a single thing. But supposing there is something that she did make out—???: “I am sure I did…INFORM.”

Fallen to his knees and robed in black vestment, blood streams from the man’s eyes as he gazes forward.

Glaring at the gaps between the trees and the rising plumes of dust, breathing ragged and having turned his resolve into a victorious bet, is this man.

Freed from the agony of being shrouded in black SOMETHING, he stands.

He is—not Geuse. This man is Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti.

Petelgeuse: “I will not allow you to pursue them…you shall pass—NO FURTHER!!”

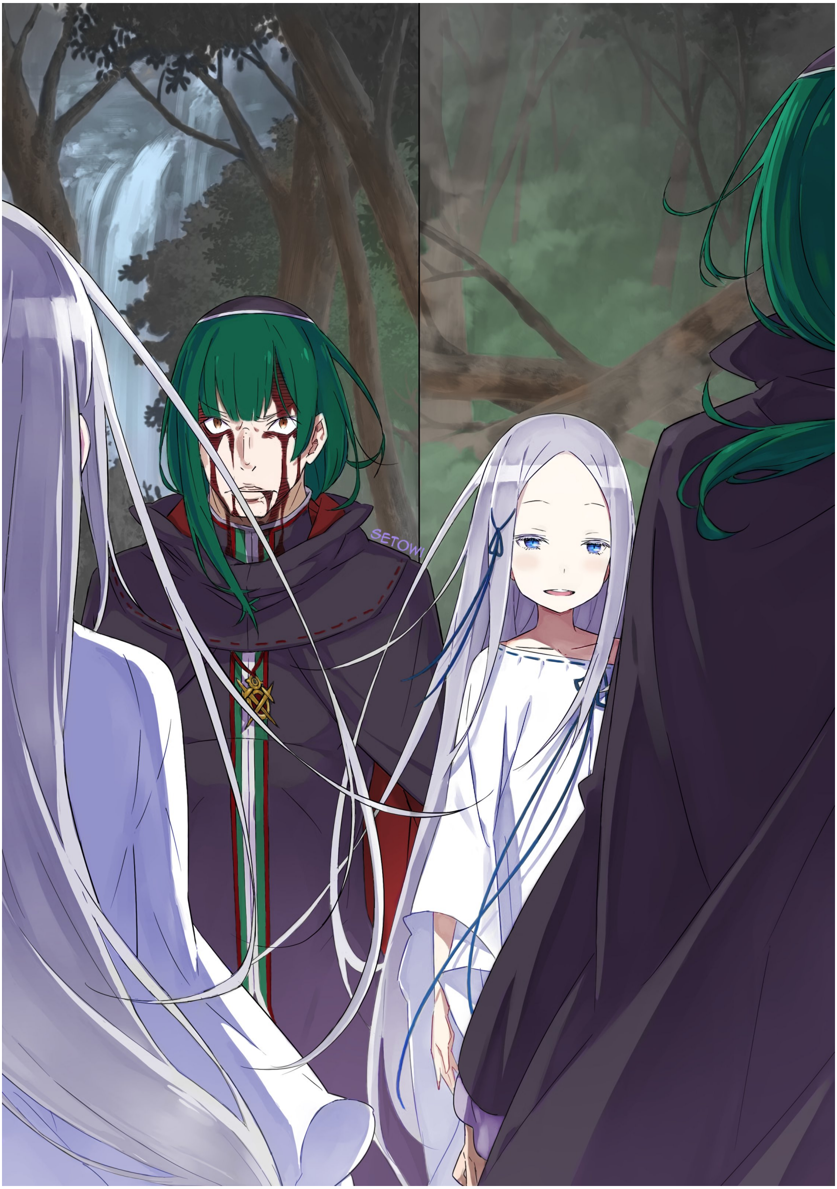

SETOWI

Chapter 119:
Back Then, Even Now, Love Unchanging

1

Streaming tears of blood and gritting his teeth, Geuse shrieks.

Emilia cannot stop the goosebumps from running down her spine.

Until a moment ago, a black SOMETHING had been trying to subsume Geuse's body. It has stopped gorging on the outside of him, and presently squirms within him.

Geuse's body spasms, pitches, beneath his black vestments.

The blood seeping through the thick fabric gives suggestion of how gruesome his state is, and informs that an unimaginable nightmare is unfurling in his interior.

Emilia: "Geuse…"

What on earth did Geuse put inside him?

And what was that attack that toppled Regulus? It was like she couldn't see what was happening, and gives Emilia a sense of Déjà vu.

It's almost as if, just a little while ago, she had witnessed the exact same—

???: "You have proven your resolve magnificently. Archbishop Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti."

A breezy female voice interrupts Emilia's thoughts.

The calm speaker is Pandora, looking down at Geuse as he breathes raggedly and spits blood. Even while watching Regulus shunt into the sky, her tranquil countenance had remained utterly unshaken.

Pandora: "You have done well to subsume that witch factor, being that you are unqualified. With my name as Pandora, I confer to your resolve and to your ironclad will the seat of Sloth."

Geuse: "Do you believe that I desire any SUCH SEAT? My present desires total merely to one. Without a moment of regret for my sacrifice, the safety of that family!"

Fortuna and Emilia are gone from the warzone.

Geuse had resolved to stake his lifeblood on their escape. Pandora's brows perk up in surprise, when a redness flushes her cheeks, her smile intoxicated.

Pandora: "Love. Very wonderful."

Geuse: "It is an emotion that you will NEVER UNDERSTAND!"

Pandora, persistently transcended and aloof. Geuse, prepared to fight to the end.

He supports himself painfully on one knee as he raises his trembling arm, forcing his bloody eyes wide as he screams:

Geuse: "Authority of Sloth—Unseen Hand!!" Overwhelming pressure bursts from Geuse's position.

But Emilia's eyes cannot discern the nature of this force. Geuse had merely extended his arm and yelled, yielding no visible changes in the world. Even so,

Emilia: "The forest's being torn down?!"

Throughout the area surrounding Geuse, as if beset by invisible serpents, out spreads the aftermath of destruction. Trees snap, earth shatters, clumps of dirt and grass scatter through the air.

Geuse: "Aaau…aaaaAAAAAAAAAA!!"

All while indiscriminately ravaging Geuse's surroundings, the destruction answers to his scream as it directs it path toward Pandora. Although faced with demolition akin to an oncoming giant, trampling over the woods, she shows no indications of moving from that spot.

So being, the destruction proceeds on its course, capturing the small Pandora and—

???: “Say.”

Geuse: “—?!”

???: “I came here, I’m present here, so what do you think you’re doing in moving the situation along without paying the slightest of mind to me? Giving and wantless as I am, I still have to think that about now’s a suitable enough time for me to be angry.”

The instant the invisible serpent reaches Pandora, a white figure cuts into the attack’s path.

His hair fluttering, Regulus’s raised hand has stops the shockwave. An impact which would kill any ordinary person washes over him as he simply stands there, absolutely nothing happening to him. Or even that is understating it. He had been slammed into the ground with a force strong enough to burst the earth apart, his body supposedly buried in the soil, and forget about injuries: there isn’t even a speck of dirt on him.

Emilia: “No way…”

Her hand to her mouth, Emilia is speechless.

His safe return from Fortuna’s surprise attack she could at least understand. If he possessed combat ability far exceeding that of Fortuna, then perhaps he had managed to defend against the lethal attack.

But Geuse’s invisible strike presents a different story. There is no white fog to obstruct Emilia’s view this time—she had plainly witnessed Regulus be thrown into the air, and slammed into the ground. He had, undefended, been slammed into the ground.

There was still some million in one chance that it hadn’t wounded him.

But the absolute lack of dirt or soil or whatever filth on him is beyond any explanation. There's some kind of trick, preventing attacks from—no—preventing outside effects from influencing Regulus.

Geuse: "Regulus Corneas!"

Regulus: "Can I say how unpleasant it is? The factor has not acknowledged you, and there you are ignoring your bodily collapse to force the thing into submission. You don't think that's an insult to us who reached our seats by way of proper process? That it doesn't wound the unwavering speck of pride I have in myself?"

In line with the swing of Geuse's arm, Regulus's face rebounds.

His neck rotates as if he's been punched, but when he promptly returns his head to proper position, not a trace of the blow besmirches his face. He simply furrows his brows in displeasure, undefended as the consecutive punches proceed to batter him.

Echidna: "I don't think staying here will show us any particular developments." Geuse's offensive to Regulus' defensive as he mercilessly repels the attacks.

Emilia watches her old friend staking his life in the battle, when Echidna addresses her from behind.

Emilia glances back, glaring the expressionless witch.

Emilia: "You're telling me to leave? But look at what happened to Geuse, how frantically he's trying!"

Echidna: "Though, the question of whether his efforts are going to reach a desired result does leave some room for debate. And unfortunately, I have no intentions of debating with you. It doesn't interest me to torment the weak, and hearing even one extraneous syllable out your mouth is the pinnacle of unpleasant."

Emilia: "Then it should be fine for us to stay quiet and watch. I'll…" remain here, and see Geuse's resolve through to the end.

But when she goes to make that assertion, Emilia's own heart keeps her from saying anything. The hand fails to touch anything at her chest, and so she recalls why she came here. It was to challenge the Trial and overcome her past, is why.

Emilia is currently witnessing her legitimate past, which she wanted to forget.

Geuse's fight here assuredly did happen, and perhaps its outcome is what she ought to watch over, rather than what became of Fortuna and young Emilia.

—But that would be taking Subaru's feelings, having seen her off, and Geuse's feelings, having attempted to secure Emilia and Fortuna's escape, and betraying both of them.

What happened to Fortuna and Emilia after Geuse presented them their escape?

She needed to unearth more of her slumbering, unrecovered past, and reveal the answer.

Echidna: "It seems like even your deficient brain can understand which decision is wiser."

Emilia: "…You're right. Let's follow me and Mother. Will Geuse…?"

Echidna: "Don't worry, it's a battle between Archbishops of Sin. The scales won't tip in either of their favors so easily. It's another story supposing that someone else joins the fight…but, it's inconceivable that she would involve herself in battle anyway."

The ferocity of Geuse and Regulus' fight compounds.

Blood trails from Geuse's eyes, his nose, his mouth. Correspondent with the escalation of damage ransacking his insides, the unseen destruction he manipulates shoots up in accuracy and force. But Regulus remains so unchanged and ordinary that it's abnormal. Even with the destruction showering his undefended form, he merely stands there with a bored expression, looking down upon Geuse's resistance.

It practically feels like, if he chose to go on the offensive, the situation’s trend would instantly shift.

Pandora: “Hauauh…”

Echidna’s gaze spears through to Pandora, heart racing and expression aroused.

Indeed, it seems that she is not going to involve herself in the fight. A beautiful girl faced with an abnormal battle, panting rather sexually—leaving all that strangeness aside,

Echidna: “I’m changing the scene. —To you and your mother, escaped into the forest.”

Emilia: “—oop,”

Echidna raises her hand and clicks her fingers.

Everything in Emilia’s vision warps as the forest scenery shifts, the false feeling of the ground beneath her feet being covered over with something new abruptly leading her to stumble. She raises her head. No destruction has reached this section of the forest, this familiar spot.

???: “No! Mother, no! Please don’t leave me!”

Hearing the shrill voice of a crying child, Emilia jerks her head up.

What she faces is a familiar tree—with its inside hollowed out and re-purposed into a room large enough to shelter a small child, what herself and her mother called the Princess Room.

Fortuna and crying young Emilia are conversing outside its entrance.

Emilia clings to Fortuna’s chest. Fortuna grasps her daughter’s shoulders, and frantically,

Fortuna: “Please listen to me, Emilia. Everything’s okay. I’ll come… yes, I’ll deal with this quickly and come right back. So please stay hidden here while I’m doing that. Please.”

Emilia: “No! I don’t wanna! Mother Fortuna, you’re making a face like Geuse did! Like Geuse did, what’re you gonna do! L-Leaving me, what’re you…going to…”

Emilia’s little hands cling desperately to keep her mother from escaping.

Fortuna should be easily capable of untangling herself from a child’s grip if she wanted to. Her reasoning for not cruelly untangling herself from Emilia’s hands is evidenced by her amethyst eyes as she gazes at Emilia.

Fortuna is Emilia’s mother. So she cannot bat away the hands of her crying, clinging daughter.

Emilia: “Don’t leave me! Let me be with you! I won’t tell lies anymore! I won’t break promises! I’ll be a good girl, I’ll be a good good girl…so don’t leave, me…”

Fortuna: “Emilia…Emilia, Emilia, Emilia!”

Not wanting to be separated from her mother, and willing to sacrificing everything so that she does not have to separate from her mother, Emilia shrieks. Fortuna, her expression breaking down with emotion, hugs her daughter tight. If she does not press her daughter’s face to her chest as she is, she’d see it.

Her daughter would see her mother’s expression, see the overflowing and unceasing tears, see the teardrops wetting her mother’s cheeks.

Emilia: “Mother, Fortuna…”

Young Emilia had not seen her mother crying, but older Emilia clearly did.

Emilia had never imagined that her perpetually noble, marvelous, strong, respectable, not even weak in the slightest mother, had ever been so wounded and assuaged with sorrow that she cried such feverish tears.

As she watches her mother cry, the onlooking Emilia hits her limit.

Unable to put her hands to her cheeks in time, the tears in her eyes arise one after another.

Having seen this, having seen her mother's face in this instant, she understands.

Not that she had ever doubted it, but truly in this second, she is again convicted.

Emilia: "Mother Fortuna…was, my real mother…"

Her birth mother, whoever she was, doesn't hold any significance to Emilia now.

As if Fortuna's insistence that she was just a substitute could ever make Emilia forget that she was her real mother.

Although spoken by precious and respected Mother Fortuna as they were, those words alone were ones that Emilia could not accept.

Emilia: "I love you, Mother Fortuna…"

As if anyone could say anything to make this feeling bend.

???: "Lady Fortuna—!"

A man's voice calls out to Fortuna from behind as she holds Emilia close.

Fortuna wipes her face with her sleeve, hiding her torrent of tears as she turns to face the speaker.

Her gaze lands on an elf man in lightweight dress.

He is one of the elves who lives in this village, and someone who Emilia knows too. Fortuna: "Arch, how is the village?"

The man runs over while Fortuna questions him in regular voice. The man, Arch, looks to have noticed that Fortuna was crying, but goes without touching on the topic and shakes his head.

Arch: "It's the same everywhere. The Archbishop's subordinates and the village's men are reciprocating the fight, but…"

Fortuna: "Isn't looking good, then."

Fortuna lowers her gaze, biting her lip at the poor state of the battle.

Emilia looks anxiously up at her mother, saying nothing as she grips her clothes and trembles.

Arch notices her shaking.

Arch: "It's okay. You don't have to be scared, Emilia. Believe in all us villagers, us adults. And besides, your mother is a very strong, very scary person."

Emilia: "Mm, mm…"

Fortuna: "Arch, was that 'scary' really necessary? Geez…"

Fortuna crosses her arms in indignation. But she does nod to Arch's indirect words of consideration:

We can't stay utterly pessimistic about this, and gazes at the Princess Room.

Fortuna: "Hiding her here won't work anymore, will it."

Arch: "Frustrating as it is, staying in the forest means they'll find her before long. Could their goal be…?"

Fortuna: "The seal deep in the woods, likely. Where did they find out about it? And even that woman!"

Fortuna seems to have particular hostility toward Pandora's presence as she bites her lip in frustration, before giving a strong shake of her head.

Fortuna: "It's fine, but anyway, I'm going. I'm the strongest fighter in this forest, this isn't the time for me to be dragging feet over here."

Arch: “No! We will be the ones to fight! Lady Fortuna, you take Emilia and exit the forest!”

Fortuna: “What will running away accomplish? Have our peaceful lands stolen from us…? That logic isn’t going to stop me. Us losing isn’t the problem here. The problem here is having them disclose the seal!”

Fortuna beats back Arch’s yells with an even stronger tone.

And, embarrassed that she snapped back at him,

Fortuna: “I’m sorry.”

Fortuna: “I know you resent me. There was honestly no reason for all of you to get wrapped up in this. When Emilia and I came… placed burdens you didn’t need.”

Arch: “No! As if there could possibly be any one of us who thinks that!”

Fortuna: “Arch…”

Arch responds ferociously to Fortuna’s regretful voice, as if this alone is something he must not allow her to say. His face reddens, his long elfin ears tapering back in fury.

Arch: “Please stop constantly excluding us from your problems! With our long lifespans, perhaps it may have only felt like the blink of an eye…but even so! We spent the same time together, saw the same things together! Have you forgotten that?!”

Fortuna says nothing.

Arch: “Who could possibly think ill of you! When we have great debts to you, your brother…to Emilia’s mother, how could you ask that we shamelessly forget what we owe!”

His emotions detonating, Arch pleads Fortuna while practically in tears.

The yet-young elf breaths raggedly as he falls to his knees, sniffling as he looks up at Fortuna. She closes her eyes in silence.

Fortuna: “I’m sorry. —Once again, I’ve invalidated the family I live with.”

Arch: “Lady Fortuna…I-I may have, said too…”

Fortuna: “No, it was important that you did. I’m sorry, Arch. And thank you.”

Fortuna gives kneeling Arch her thanks, and presents him her hand. After a moment of hesitation, Arch takes Fortuna’s hand and quietly stands back up. Fortuna turns to face Emilia.

Fortuna: “Emilia. You Mother has an important role she has to fill to protect everybody. We’re going to be separated for just a little bit.”

Emilia: “D-Don’t, Mother. I…I…”

Fortuna: “Please. It’s only for a little bit, so please listen. Go with Arch, and leave the forest. This forest is…going to be, sooo dangerous soon.”

Speaking to Emilia, who borders on tears as she shakes her head, Fortuna glances back to Arch.

Her determined amethyst gazes makes Arch’s skinny body go rigid.

Arch: “La-Lady Fortuna…I…”

Fortuna: “Arch. You’re still young and have a future. Please take Emilia, and…I know it’s a hard world to live in, but there has to be hope.”

Arch: “I…don’t say these things as though it’s the end! I-I’m staying in this forest to the last, with everybody!”

Fortuna: “Please, Arch, Emilia. She’s my, my brother’s, my sister in law’s, daughter.”

Arch: “—!”

This was merely the voice of a frail woman, absent of Fortuna's strength and nobility.

Hearing the voice of this woman and mother, Fortuna, tears stream down Arch's face.

Arch buries his face in his hands as he sobs.

Arch: "It isn't fair…! When you hear something like that, you know it's impossible to refuse…! I, want to fight with everyone! But!"

Fortuna: "I'm sorry. For pushing everything onto children, please forgive us."

Fortuna puts her hands on the shoulders of the crying young elf, begging for forgiveness.

Arch says nothing, but accepts Fortuna's request.

Now, the people that Fortuna must persuade here amounts to only Emilia.

Fortuna: "Emilia."

Emilia: "No! I, I wanna be with you, Mother! Please! I ask please! Please, let me be with you! I don't wanna, be alone…"

Fortuna: "You're not alone at all. Listen closely."

Emilia bawls, unreceptive. She puts her hands over her ears, trying to shut out every word of her mother's goodbye, which makes older Emilia want to pull her young self's cheeks taut.

Not to punish her for disobedience. But so that she cannot escape from a single syllable of any of the words that Fortuna is going to speak.

Fortuna: "Emilia."

Fortuna squats down. Hugs Emilia.

She takes Emilia's arms in her grasp, stops her from plugging her ears, and when her daughter acts out by pressing her head against her, Fortuna nuzzles her cheek against her daughter's silver hair. As though touching something, someone, more beloved than any other, taking care so that they will not break.

Fortuna: "Your Mother is always right there with you. Right there when you close your eyes, in your memories. Right there when you cradle yourself, in your heart as it grows warm. Right there when you call out, beneath the same sky that your voice echoes. You and Mother are always together. Always, always, forever…together."

Emilia: "Liar. Liar, liar, liar…You're lying, Mother…"

Fortuna: "Emilia. —Promise."

Emilia attempts to discard her mother's words as being mere consolation, when Fortuna looks her in the eye and speaks. The word PROMISE leads Emilia to swallow her breath, shut her mouth. Led by Fortuna's gaze to her outstretched palm, young Emilia too, places her palm to Fortuna's.

Fortuna: "Emilia and her Mother will always be together. That's what I promise you."

Emilia: "Y-You'll, really…be with me?"

Fortuna: "Yes, really. More than anyone else in the world, your Mother loves you, sooo much, Lia."

The tender call of 'Lia' is what makes the dam of tears for young Emilia, for old Emilia, burst.

Sobbing and bawling, two Emilia's present and past.

Emilia: "Mother Fortuna…l-love you too…love you, love you…"

Emilia: "I love you. I love you, Mother Fortuna. Love you, sooo much, love you, treasure you…"

The emotions of the two Emilia's overlap as they frantically answer to the love given to them.

They strain their voices, press their bodies close to her, to show that should they do otherwise they will fail to convey, fail to express, all of these feelings in their hearts.

Fortuna: “Love you, Lia.”

On her cheeks, eyelids, forehead, Fortuna’s soft warm lips touch her.

Although permitted to share touch, to share embrace, Fortuna had been late to learn how to express love as a mother, and never would do such things—making this the moment that Fortuna truly, from the bottom of heart, first accepted herself as being Emilia’s mother.

Fortuna: “—I’m counting on you, Arch.”

Arch: “…Understood.”

Having conveyed her absolute love to her daughter, Fortuna stands and calls for the young man. Arch receives the bawling Emilia from Fortuna, holds her firm, and gives Fortuna one big bow of his head.

Fortuna: “Get away safely.”

Arch: “I will…Yes, I will! I won’t let Emilia…won’t let this girl be hurt by anybody!”

Fortuna’s cheeks relax in relief.

She points to a road deeper into the forest.

Fortuna: “That way. I’m begging you.”

Arch: “…”

Arch breaks into a run, toward where Fortuna is pointing, saying nothing.

In his hold as he sprints through the forest, Emilia peeks her head out from behind his shoulder—to sight her mother as she grows distant. She cries out, but makes no sound. Fortuna’s sharp eyes soften so tenderly—

Fortuna: “—I love you, Emilia.”

2

Held by Arch, Emilia looks frantically in the direction where her mother has disappeared.

Like she’s begging, that consistently staring like this might make her vanished mother reappear.

Like she’s hoping, that perhaps she’ll come to follow them.

Arch: “Emilia!”

Emilia’s stubborn spirit communicates well to Arch as he holds her small form.

Arch’s face turns into a mess as he considers what to tell her young heart, having undergone separation with Fortuna.

Echidna: “—I’m surprised.”

Says Echidna to Emilia, the two running side-by-side in pursuit of Arch.

Still affected by the parting with her mother, and not quite suppressing her weeping, Emilia questions Echidna using only her gaze. The white-haired witch shrugs.

Echidna: “That you didn’t stay behind there, and followed your past self without hesitation. I was certain that it’d be like before when watching Sloth, that you’d protract the scene with your mother so girlishly.”

Emilia: “…I know I told you before. I’m here to watch my past through! Mother, and Geuse, and everyone…that’s why they…”

Echidna: “Mmhm, mmhm. Said something unasked for, didn’t I?”

Looking like she did not get the answer she wanted, Echidna shakes her head.

Even Emilia has to feel irritated with Echidna’s callousness, but before she can mention it, young Emilia buries her face in her hands.

Emilia: “Why? Why? How come this…happened? I-It’s, because I… I, broke my, promise…and left the, room…”

Arch: “No. No, Emilia. It’s not your fault at all! It’s not Lady Fortuna’s fault, it’s not anybody’s fault! There’s no need to blame yourself!”

Emilia: “But then, how come? How come, we’re separated? Mother…and Geuse too, how come…do, do they hate me? Lots of, heaps of people, hate me so, this’s why it…”

Her incredibly sudden parting with Geuse and Fortuna has cornered Emilia’s heart right to the precipice of breaking.

Thinking back on what foreboded this situation, and on her own actions, young Emilia sinks into a sea of self-invalidation.

She broke her promise. She left the room she wasn’t meant to leave. She knew about the seal she wasn’t meant to know about. It looks like everything that caused this started by her own deeds.

Emilia: “Should I’ve…stayed there, stayed in the room? If I did, would, nobody be gone…and I could, be with everybody?”

Arch: “Emilia…”

Emilia: “Was, I a bad girl…? Is everybody, in the world going to, hate me…and, I’ll be alone?”

Arch: “No…No, Emilia! Nobody, there’s nobody out there who hates you. The world isn’t here to hurt you. …The world’s here so that everybody can celebrate you!”

Arch frantically tries to persuade the bawling Emilia.

Part of is an attempt to stop Emilia’s crying, but a larger part is much like a wish—because he himself would like to believe it.

Arch's shouts strike older Emilia's heart.

It wasn't just Fortuna and Geuse. He and the other villagers had all protected her, loved her, reached out to her to make sure she wasn't alone.

It was not until this exact instant that she truly remembered: it had always, always been like this.

???: "You over there—!"

With a sharp shout, somebody slinks into the space before Arch as he runs.

The black-robed character bounds out from a gap between the trees, which prompts Arch to stop immediately and for his gaze to grow wary. But the man raises his hands in response.

Man: "Wait, don't panic! I'm one of Archbishop Romanée-Conti's fingers!"

Arch: "The Archbishop's…!"

Hearing Geuse's name from the puffed man in the robes makes relief arise on Arch's face. The man approaches after seeing Arch lose his wariness, and notices Emilia.

Finger: "That girl…then, Lady Fortuna couldn't possibly be…?"

Arch: "There's no need for concern. She's …She has merely entrusted me with Emilia, and left us together. Lady Fortuna is the most skillful of any of us in the village. She will surely defeat the trespassers, and…"

Finger: "…Though I find this hard to state, I'm afraid that's a difficult prospect."

The man lowers his gaze, his voice weak.

Arch raises his brows. The man sighs, his expression grave.

Finger: "We have confirmed the presence of the Archbishop of

Greed, and our Archbishop has entered into combat with him. Were that the only problem, and we repelled the extremist members of the faith, it might be possible for us to drive them away, but…”

Arch: “Some other issue has…?”

Finger: “—The witchbeast known as Blacksnake has been loosed in the forest.”

Arch: “—?!”

Arch is stunned.

He shakes his head in disbelief, gesturing to the forest.

Arch: “That’s ridiculous, impossible! The Blacksnake is even less controllable than the White Whale or Sizeable Hare! It’s not the White Whale, under Gluttony’s command, or the Sizeable Hare, whose course can be guided…the Blacksnake is just a natural disaster which listens to nobody! A catastrophe among catastrophes! How!”

Finger: “…The Witch Cult’s Lady Pandora has accompanied him. Lady Pandora cannot go so far as to control the Blacksnake with her authority, but she can lead it to a destination.”

Arch: “Pandora? That isn’t a name I’ve…”

Finger: “She exists in secrecy! In the Witch Cult she is taboo not to be spoken, neither by the Archbishop’s camp of moderates nor by the extremists. Now she has come here.”

Arch’s shock keeps him from saying a single word.

Arch’s failure to sink into despair results from the heartbeat of the life in his arms. Results from his knowledge that he is not permitted any pessimism.

Arch: “Lady Fortuna has stated that I am to lead Emilia to her escape. Regardless of what may happen to the forest, this girl…this hope, must be protected!”

Finger: “…I will accompany you. Although I cannot say how much this frail person of mine can assist.”

Arch’s persistent will to fight leads the man’s crestfallen look to recover into determination.

He casts his robe open, revealing rather stout muscled legs and for his age, breaking into a run as he takes the lead along the path out of the forest.

Finger: “We’ll proceed while taking care to avoid the extremists. Now, if we can just exit the forest, prospects should be—”

brighter. But in that exact instant,

Something entangles the leg of the man in the lead, leading him to fall. He topples onto his side as

Arch cries out and panickily runs toward him.

But the man shouts to the approaching Arch,

Finger: “Stay back!!”

Arch: “—?!”

Finger: “My blunder…but to think it came so quickly!”

The man uprights his fallen body. But, upright himself is all he does. His legs, for some reason, do not move an inch.

Beneath his overturned vestments—marks like black burn wounds besmirch his exposed shins.

Finger: “It’s the vile tongue of the Blacksnake! Flee!”

Arch: “But!”

Finger: “I am already beyond saving…”

The man’s face rapidly begins to change in appearance.

His skin from the neck up steadily drowns in dark, mottled marks, the eyes of his gentle-looking face bulging open, eyeballs close to falling out as his face sinks in.

His fingers claw at his mottled neck, his mouth spilling massive quantities of yellow froth.

Finger: “Ghb, bgbhgh…ahgbh, bgh…”

Immediately following his agonized moan, his eye sockets, his nostrils, his ears, his mouth, every single orifice begins leaking with dingy blood, strangling his life to nothing as it gushes away. While of course it goes for Arch, with Emilia also being subject to witnessing the pitiful death, neither can keep their usual composure. Even Echidna’s expression looks scrunched up in pain.

Arch: “Potpourri of Pestilence…Witchbeast of Blight, the Blacksnake!” His voice strained, Arch states the name of the man’s killer, the beast.

While surely it could not have been in response to that call, a forest silent but for Arch and Emilia’s breathing abruptly becomes host to another noise.

The slopping of a large animal licking its lips.

The slithering, of something long and thin slinking across the earth.

The noise is on a ridiculously incorrect scale, and it’s hard to really pin down. But it almost resembles the noise of a serpent faced with prey, its tongue flicking out, as it squirms across the dirt.

Arch: “—Fuck!”

Having guessed the true identity of the sound, Arch realizes that himself and Emilia are right in the middle of the Blacksnake’s hunting ground.

Although aware that yelling only acts to their disadvantage, he has to yell. He can think of no other methods to rebel against the thing.

Although unsure of where to run, Arch sprints away from the man. He has not a single thought for Fortuna’s directions any more. Right now, he must escape from this threat. Must protect that what must be protected.

The frantic resistance of that young elf—

Arch: “Ahg—”

—is cruelly crushed as a vile, black tongue ensnares his right ankle.

The areas of bare skin which the tongue licks are besmirched with dark, mottled burn scars.

The instant he sees it, Arch aims his open palm at his foot.

Arch: “…FULA!!”

Without hesitation, he fires a blade of wind to sever his scarred leg from the shin down. He loses his footing, and props his falling body on a tree trunk. Blood spurts from him, the agonizing pain soldering his brain as he endures, gritting his teeth so hard that they fracture.

Arch: “Humaauh!”

A crack sounds through the air as Arch’s severed stump begins freezing over. White mist transpires, Arch shrieking as he forces his bleeding to stop.

His gruesome deeds stun older Emilia silent. Instant decisions, counteracting the pain. And his strength of heart, having not released Emilia from his hold even after all of this.

Emilia: “Arch…?”

With her head pressed to his chest, young Emilia had not witnessed Arch’s actions. Neither did Arch have any intention in the least to let her see them.

Even with his face covered in cold sweat, he gives Emilia a clumsy smile.

Arch: “It’s…nothing…I’m…all fine!”

Although his speech falters, Arch replies so as to not let Emilia sense anything is wrong.

But cruel fate laughs ever on at the spirit of this noble man.

His leg has been severed, his frantic deeds done to plug the bleeding of his stump—as the uninjured portions of his frozen leg look to dehydrate, fissuring like a plane of earth bereft of water, the damage spreading.

It's as if Arch's leg is dying like a dry wasteland. And it isn't stopping at just the leg.

Arch: "…Emilia. Do you see the white flowers between those two trees?"

Emilia: "…Mm."

Arch squats down the with the tree supporting his back. Having alighted to the ground, Emilia looks where Arch is pointing, and nods as she spots the white flowers. Arch wipes the sweat from the brow. Hides his agony.

Arch: "Can, you run to those flowers? Run, past the flowers…go straight…go straight, ahead…"

Emilia: "I, can. I can. But…"

Arch: "Then, get running—"

Although confused, young Emilia now recognizes that Arch is in incredibly irregular straits, her amethyst eyes wavering.

Wavering because she will be alone. Because again, she will lose someone.

Arch: "Everything's okay. Emilia, you, won't be alone…"

Emilia: "Arch…"

Arch: "Now, run off. No matter what you hear, don't look back… run!"

Arch’s sharp command makes Emilia’s shoulders hitch, and with that, Emilia runs. She withstands the urge to look back, instructed as she is not to do it.

Arch’s words, Fortuna’s words, Geuse’s words, all echo through Emilia’s brain.

So that she can believe: If she does everything as she is told, everything will go back to normal.

So that she can convince herself: keeping by instructions is the only hope she currently has.

Running away, leaving him behind, Arch watches Emilia disappear into the direction of hope.

He gives a long sigh. Rolls up the sleeve of his jacket.

The dehydration has already covered his legs and waist, having come as far as his abdomen. He can move neither of his legs, and in fact it seems that just touching them will be enough for them to shatter and disintegrate.

Once the dehydration reaches his chest, gets to his heart, what will happen?

He hears the slithering of the beast, faced with prey.

He hears a slithering, noise like it's plotting to take the fleeing girl, the forest's hope, the significance of Arch's expenditure of the faint life he had left, and steal it.

Arch: "Like anyone could let you get away…"

The slithering stops its retreat.

As if it has regained interest, in the still-living prey.

The noise approaches. Meaning, although he senses that end is approaching, Arch's cheeks relax.

The fact that death is looming in on him means that death is growing distant from the girl.

Arch: "I know she'll be okay, Lady Fortuna."

The end slithers closer.

He hears it, and although exposing himself to mortal danger beyond parallel, Arch's pride in his achievements leads him to smile.

Arch: "…"

That smile, even though parched arid, remains without ever going dry.

3

—Emilia has long passed the white flowers.

Emilia: "Hahh…hahh…hauhhh…"

Her breathing hitches as she demands long strides from her little legs while dashing through the forest.

All while thinking about her mother and Geuse and Arch, focused on the idea that running in this direction Arch indicated is the best thing she can do, not going to consider anything else.

Emilia: "Auhh…aaaaauah!"

She shakes her head.

The tears flow. Desperately, she keeps the sobs from pouring out her lips.

What was happening, and why was it happening?

Everybody knew something, and she didn't know anything.

She didn't know what to do, didn't know a thing. Was there nothing she could do?

Who were the people attacking Fortuna, Geuse, Arch, and the others? What could she do that would make them go away? For what goal did they—

Emilia: "The, siel…"

Yes.

Fortuna and Arch had mentioned something. And Geuse's talks with Fortuna surely indicated that this object was something important.

Meaning, their goal was?

Emilia: "—Auh."

Emilia's feet as she runs suddenly strike air, and losing sight of the ground, she comes to realize that she has entered into sloping basin.

She immediately reaches out to try and stop herself, but the steep incline gives no aid to the small girl, and on the heels of her momentum Emilia trips, tumbles, falls.

Normally, perhaps she would cry from the scrapes and bruises and stand back up.

But this time, with both her body and mind entirely fatigued, the strike of Emilia's head against the ground leads her to fall momentarily unconscious.

Emilia: "I…"

All of this, when she needs to do something. All of this, when she thinks she's figured it out.

With the flame of duty kindled in her little chest, her consciousness aborts.

—The story shall leave the side of the girl, temporarily to return to the scene of the fight.

To see two fates, and see how they conclude.

Chapter 120:
Elior Forest, Glaciated Evermore

1

—The site has already changed so drastically that you could forget what it originally looked like.

Destruction like a rampage of giant, frenzied serpents. All trees felled down to nothing, some severed from their roots and dancing violently through the air.

Several craters, too deep to sight the bottom, lie gouged open on the fractured earth. The ruin is so exhaustive that the entire region could imminently cave in and transform into a pit to hell.

All of this destruction is the work of one man, standing in the dead center of the devastation. Blood spills fresh from his face, his breath faltering while he nevertheless manages to keep himself upright. He has taken SIN unfitting to him inside him, his life whittled away in exchange for power, this desecrater.

He is Geuse—Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.

Geuse: "…"

He breathes ragged, his face so lost of color that it has transcended the word 'pallid'.

But even so, he has regained more calm than what he had at the beginning of the conflict. It seems like the raging SOMETHING has, for the moment, accepted the uncomfortable environment as its temporary lodgings.

His bones and flesh have already been ravaged from inside, but control of the body is now entirely entrusted to Geuse, the power acting as equivalent for rent having increased in strength and accuracy.

Wielding this authority, overwhelming destructive power.

Unseen Hand's strength is immense, allowing him to extend his arms to places he cannot touch, let his fingertips contact what he cannot contact, sending power crashing into someone he should have no hopes of opposing.

Geuse's power, leader of the Witch Cult's moderate camp as he is, will never match that of the extremists what with their militaristic bent. And that goes double when discussing the person who possesses the greatest ability for combat in the cult, Archbishop of Greed Regulus Corneas.

That Geuse is managing to somehow face Regulus without instantly being turned into gory paste is unmistakably the achievement of the witch factor he subsumed.

But, Geuse's frantic resistance has,

Geuse: "How did…you, FIND, THIS…"

Glaring ahead with his bloodshot eyes, Geuse strangles out his voice as he holds his trembling arms aloft.

Unseen Hand's unrelenting, uninterrupted storm of concentrated violence. Having been endlessly battered around by the thing, the enemy vanishes beneath the dense plumes of dust,

Regulus: "Oh, you're done?"

When the smoke resides, it reveals Regulus merely standing there, looking bored with his finger in his ear.

His figure as he stands there rigorously probing his ear could conceivably be detached from the environment from how absolutely none of the assault has affected him. As if he had been pasted onto the scene of the annihilation in post-production.

Geuse: "Even with…all of this!"

Regulus: "How about toning it down and taking a moment to realize? To realize the discrepancy. To realize that between you and me, there is a clear power discrepancy. And you can disregard however good your compatibility against me could hypothetically get, because that isn't even the issue here.

There's nobody out there who can beat me, or can wound me. You can go ahead and subsume a witch factor, and then go ahead and bring the Dragon and Sword Saint along with you, it's still not going to work."

Geuse: "…Perhaps you may, say so…although it rather appears that I have…purchased from you, CONSIDERABLE TIME."

Regulus: "Because there's no need for me to get into a panic to overtake you. Aren't your eyes telling you? I'm just here as a chaperone. Do you think I'd go out of my way to come to this kind of place if I wasn't? Being in my mansion surrounded by my wives is enough to glut me for the minuscule fraction of peace I desire. But, well, I have to say I'm starting to get bored."

Regulus slowly steps forward.

He walks calmly through the transmogrified forest, descending from his position until his eye level matches that of Geuse, and gives an easy swish of his arm.

It's like he's swatting an insect. Geuse braces for anything to happen.

Calling within himself, he sacrifices his flesh and blood to the dark, squirming thing to gain power. He takes in a breath, ready to use the push welling up from inside him to batter Regulus around,

When Geuse's arms go flying through the air, severed at the shoulders.

Geuse: "Wh?!"

Regulus: "What a dull reaction. With how you've been annoying me, don't you think it's simple courtesy to at least writhe in a form of agony that's fun to watch? Though I suppose there was no point expecting anything."

Geuse: “AaaaaaAAAAAAAAAHHH!!”

With his arms splaying blood about the surroundings as they tumble across the ground, the eyes of the disarmed Geuse shoot open wide as he shrieks.

The cut at his shoulders is sloppy, leaving an ugly wound as if a beast’s fangs have mangled his arms off. His right arm is gone from the shoulder down, his left arm severed about halfway down his humerus.

Geuse convulses in gruesome pain.

Bloody froth spills from his mouth, the excess of pain leading him to grit his teeth so hard that he breaks tooth after tooth after tooth. His legs, already lacking in strength at the best of times, falter and drop him down to his knees. His forehead hits the ground, despair creeping over Geuse’s expression.

Regulus: “In the end, your resolve or your determination or your whatever and so on and all those other things I suppose we’re going to talk about, well here you see what they amount to. And it’s the same for everyone, so don’t bother worrying about it. There’s nobody out there who can live while carrying more than their arms’ capacity. Live while satisfied in your own little world, fulfilled, focused only on your own concerns. According to what’s fitting to your caliber. And you don’t even have arms to hold anything now… the conclusion here is obvious, don’t you think?”

Geuse: “AAAH! AAAAAAahhh…”

Regulus: “And being entirely honest, it’s not like I’m enjoying this. You might see me tormenting you like this and perhaps think that I’m some kind of sadist who feels pleasure when inflicting pain on others, but actually that would be an incredible misapprehension, and a great insult to the personality what I possess. I’m not doing this because I want to do it. There’s nothing in my life any more that I do because I want to do it. Fulfilled as I am, regardless of whether the nuance is a good one or a bad one, my preference is to reject the influence of anyone else. I am without want. I am fully fulfilled. You don’t have any right in the slightest to resent me. I was simply walking along, and you were simply in my path.”

The spouts of blood dampen in their velocity, Geuse’s screams transforming from something loud into something quiet.

With the quiet, ragged puffs of his breathing, Geuse’s form as he expels bloody foam spasms like an insect seconds away from demise.

Regulus’s words carry no malice, or hostility, or anything at all.

Because as far as he cares he is stating the absolute truth, and no reason exists to pair it with any emotion of any form. Regulus has no need to hide anything, and so truly believes this.

Geuse’s desperate deeds had influenced Regulus Corneas so little that his bangs did not even sway in the resultant breeze.

Regulus: “Speaking in full sincerity, this was all very anticlimactic. I was being called along which had me thinking that something would happen, and…well, not that there’s ever been a situation which hasn’t resulted in an anticlimax for me, but if I’m getting summoned I’d at least like for you to show me something that can hope to counterbalance to the effort I put into walking around.”

Pandora: “I give my apology, Archbishop Regulus. I have put you through the pains to accompany me, and the trip has failed to meet to your expectations.”

Pandora addresses Regulus as he looks down at the nigh-withered Geuse.

She had also kept through all of Geuse’s onslaught with Unseen Hand while standing stock still in the very same spot that she had first appeared.

Just like Regulus, her outfit has not changed an inch. Not a speck of dirt pollutes the white cloth enshrouding her small, thin frame, the purity of the garment preserved, and her beautiful face suffers not a single wound.

Regulus: “I do not mean to say that you are at fault, Lady Pandora.

I'm just saying that all these forest people and the idiots in the moderates are unanimously pathetic. Trash without even the slightest intention to improve themselves. They're not like me, sitting at heights where the very concept of improvement carries no necessity, they have these attitudes while being mundane rabble whose lives are over if they ever stop struggling. They're rejecting the idea of meeting their own capacity, and from my perspective as Greed I have to say that level of desire is inconceivably shallow."

Pandora: "It is not the case that every person in existence can consider matters in the same way that you do, or reach the same domains that you have. You are more special than anybody else, and satisfied in that self of yours. You are perfected and glorious. While they are imperfect and also glorious."

Regulus: "I'm not the most favorable when it comes to debates. I have no compunctions against receiving your praise, but I cannot say that I'm seeking commendation either. Though, there was no need to bring myself and the Blacksnake alongside, was there? You could easily dominate this forest on your own, Lady Pandora."

Somewhere right now in this forest, there exists the pestilent witchbeast.

The presence of the repugnant and malicious thing prompts Regulus's disgust, all without him realizing that from anyone else's perspective, he would deserve to be thought of in the same manner. Pandora nods.

Pandora: "If we are considering in terms of overturning their resistance, then it would indeed be possible for me to achieve it by myself. However, those are not the terms in consideration. As I assuredly did not come here for the purpose of harming the inhabitants of this forest."

Regulus: "This is what you're saying after bringing the indiscriminate Blacksnake here and leaving it to its devices? I'm sure that you're being entirely genuine about not meaning to cause harm…so have you then rationalized that fatalities are simply unavoidable?"

Pandora: “When pursuing a noble goal, it is essential that some lives be given as sacrifices. But even so, one cannot disremember the zeal to rebel against even that wicked fate. I believe that the beauty of such spirit cannot be invalidated.”

Regulus: “You’re diverging from the point, but essentially you’re talking about killing people to achieve your goals. Ahahaha. If that’s all we’re discussing, then I’d call it preferential to state it plainly and clearly. Compared to making me waste a day of my time racking my brain pointlessly, far more preferential.”

Pandora: “I feel very fondly about your approach.”

Pandora gives an enchanting smile.

Regulus shrugs and then lowers his gaze back to Geuse, who will probably die if left alone, and begins walking over to deliver the finishing blow.

Regulus: “Well it’s not like I think you’ll die from that body dying, but pulling your insides out and keeping you trammeled does make our operations easier. Though it’s pretty strange to be talking about trammeling someone who doesn’t have a body.”

Regulus raises his leg, ready to stomp down and smash Geuse’s skull to bits. But right before he can make contact, a voice cuts into the scene.

???: “AL HUMA!!”

Obeying the canto, matter takes in the world’s mana to achieve form.

Appearing alongside the explosive noise is a ball of ice so giant that it encompasses all of the visible sky above. The trees are felled and the sky’s panoramic is easily observable, but the only thing to observe is a vast sheet of pale blue ice.

Regulus: “Ahh…I swear, nobody can give it a break.”

Regulus looks up to see the continent of ice floating above him, ad clicks his tongue. Immediately, the immense ball of ice plunges down from directly above him—

—The earthquake, and the unavoidable shockwave, batter Regulus entirely.

This explosion of air and rumbling of earth exacerbates even further the collapse of this forest only describable as a ‘disaster zone’.

The sheet of ice shatters into fragments, with the crushed trees and boulders, the ground pulverized under this incredible mass, changing shape once again within only this one single day.

Shard of white ice dance through the air, scintillating.

Among their gleam is a man toppled limply on his side, with a silver-haired woman dragging him.

Woman: “Geuse! Geuse, keep steady! This is…what am I meant to…”

Geuse: “La-y Fohr-tuna…is that, YOU?”

A weak light returns to Geuse’s nigh-dead eyes.

His life still remains equally in danger, but he still manages to barely remain conscious. Fortuna nods

Fortuna: “Yes, yes, it’s me. Geuse, you’re…”

Geuse: “I am, FINE…this flesh is, due to wither someday…The finger who trusted me, and entrusted it to me, will understand…of more concern is, Emilia?”

Fortuna: “I left her with someone trustworthy and they fled the forest. She’s fine.”

Geuse: “I, see…I am, glad to HEAR SO…”

???: “—Except there’s nothing to be glad about at all!!”

Just when Geuse’s blood-slaked face relaxes in relief, the voice of an enraged Regulus shouts over him.

Having been stricken by a massive sheet of ice, Regulus's expression is furious. He combs his hand through his bangs, his eyes hosting clear animosity.

Regulus: "The very second you come back, and just who do you think you are to pull this stunt? I was seconds away from stomping that guy's head in, me, I was! With what right, with whose permission, are you taking my…my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my my mymymymymymymymymymymy!! Getting in!! My way!!"

Screaming as if in tantrum, Regulus squats down and puts his hands to the ground. He proceeds to swing his arms up, casting up dirt to dance through the air, the soft soil flying toward Fortuna and Geuse.

The quantity of scattered dirt is not especially much. It's the kind of thing a child would do, throwing sand about a sandbox, the embodiment of crude and infantile anger.

Fortuna sights the dirt and ignores the stuff as she immediately focuses her magic for a counterattack.

But—

Geuse: "You mustn't! If you neglect…to evade, all the earth…"

Fortuna: "Huh?"

Geuse interrupts Fortuna's canto, headbutting her to the ground. The two tumble across the earth undefended, when Geuse strains himself to use Unseen Hands and throw the couple further backwards.

Rather than intercept or defend against the dirt, he opted that they tumble messily across the ground.

Just when Fortuna verges on yelling to question what the hell Geuse is doing, she sees it.

The moment that the dirt and pebbles that Regulus threw hit the ground, out peals the staccato noise of raindrops beating on a rooftop as countless tiny holes bore through the earth.

Each hole is only the size of a grain of sand, but the density and piercing property of them present an issue.

The mystery attack had by and large concluded by only gouging open the earth, but one fragment of the assault did manage to hit a tree which still precariously retains its original shape.

This tree, with a trunk so thick that it's questionable whether Fortuna could loop her arms around it, rips open with countless tiny holes and bursts into smithereens.

It's easy to envision that hitting someone, and them instantly exploding into blood spatter. And the most terrifying thing is,

Regulus: "Why the hell are you people dodging! Just take the attack, turn into gore, and go be food for the bugs! That goes for you, Petelgeuse, you pile of scum, and for that woman too. I was thinking you might be okay to take as my 79th wife, and then you go and pull this rubbish!"

Regulus bends down, arms to the ground as before.

The most terrifying thing is, a deed of destruction on this caliber just meant throwing dirt around for Regulus—and took no greater effort than that, child's play.

The enraged and belligerent Regulus had taken a direct hit from Fortuna's strenuous attack, for nothing to happen to him. Aberrant, is the word to describe it.

Regulus Corneas possesses transcendental powers in attack and defense. And that incredible power is locked up in a body that hosts an egotistical, infantile mind.

A dangerous entity, as if power identical to the Dragon were given to a petulant child—such is how Fortuna judges this monster.

Regulus: "If you're not keen for being gore chunks, how about I pluck off your limbs and arrange them as decoration! I'll make you regret having made a fool of me…of Greed!"

Pandora: “Please wait, Archbishop Regulus.”

Just as Regulus prepares to once again shower Geuse and Fortuna in dirt, Pandora calls him to a stop. With his hands still touching the ground, Regulus turns his head to look at Pandora. The rage remains thick in his expression, and even when facing Pandora, who he had treated respectfully, he shows no signs of discarding his anger.

Regulus: “…What, Lady Pandora? Right now, I am midway through shaking in uttermost rage as my rights are being violated. You have some task for me, when I’m like this? What are you conniving, trying to stop me? Take careful mind of your words, and, this instant, you answer me…”

Pandora: “Please settle your anger, Archbishop Regulus. I do not permit you to kill them here. Is there nothing that you feel in seeing them?”

Regulus: “In seeing me right now, do you think I look like there’s nothing I feel? —I go prostrating myself and for this, don’t get fucking carried away, you woman!”

Seemingly forgetting that they are allies, Regulus swings up his arm with his target being Pandora. Up launches the spray of dirt, cutting straight through and decimating the trees in its path to strike her. It hits, her body exploding into a splatter of blood and gore.

Fortuna: “…No way.”

Fortuna mutters in astonishment as she witnesses Pandora’s evisceration. Someone she had loathed, now killed ruthlessly due to a breakup of internal relations.

Fortuna had utterly believed that Pandora would have some ace to disregard even Regulus’s attacks, but here she is—strewn in scarlet chunks across the ground, fertilizer for the ruined earth.

Regulus: “This is what happens when you prattle bullshit at me. How come nobody can practice any basic goddamn form of consideration? Don’t get in my way. Don’t obstruct my path. Don’t interfere with my actions. Don't rebel against what I do. Am I really asking for anything so difficult? Say, what are your thoughts on this?"

Regulus turns to Geuse and Fortuna, a shadowy gleam in his eye.

This was not the time to celebrate about a drop in enemies. If the enemy remaining after a drop in enemies is a person of absolute strength, then the situation hasn't changed at all.

Fortuna had used the greatest power in her disposal to hit Regulus with that surprise attack.

And even after being hit with it, Regulus's body suffers no wounds and his clothes don't even suffer a wrinkle. It's frustrating to admit, but Fortuna cannot defeat Regulus.

Geuse has also been so cornered that his body has broken down. Even if Fortuna asks him to do the impossible and fight on his deathbed, the combat is going to be one-sided.

All Fortuna can do is have them lure Regulus's fury, and buy time for her daughter to run. Geuse: "Let me, deal with this…Lady Fortuna."

Fortuna: "But Geuse, you…"

Geuse: "No matter how…much blood I shed, until all of my bodies are deceased, I can…KEEP, GOING. I-I, shall amass time, for you… to, flee…"

Fortuna: "Don't say these ridiculous things."

Fortuna's cheeks relax as Geuse attempts to upright himself in her arms.

It mystifies her that she can craft a smile at a time like this. She'd rather like to brag.

Fortuna: "You're telling me to leave you here and run? If I was going to do that, I wouldn't have come back here. I parted with Emilia to come back here, telling me to leave now is impossible."

Geuse: “HOW-EVER…then, if so, why…have, you returned? I-I…”

Fortuna: “To keep you from dying. And if you do die, for me to be at your side.”

With Fortuna’s amethyst eyes gazing on, Geuse’s bloody eyes wrench open.

Considerably lighter now that he has lost his arms, Fortuna draws Geuse’s body closer, to tell him from within breathing range:

Fortuna: “In a world without you, in a forest you no longer visit, what is there for me? I’m weak. I can’t survive a long period of time without you there.”

Geuse: “You are not weak in the…”

Fortuna: “I’m weak. I act strong when I’m around you and Emilia, that’s all.”

With that, Fortuna helps Geuse up.

Fortuna props the trembling Geuse up so that he stands, her body close against his as she supports him.

Seeing the couple standing in what could almost be an embrace, Regulus’s face turns abjectly disgusted.

Regulus: “Look at how fired up you are after such a protracted period of ignoring my question. What on earth could be going on? What on earth could this be? After I showed you how incredible the power gap between us is, after I taught you in such succinct and plain terms, how can you possibly figure that you can do anything? What on earth are you people thinking?”

Fortuna: “Windbag of a man. After how our attitudes have demonstrated it, surely you can tell? Thanks for all the lectures, but we’ve got only one response.”

Geuse: “IN-DEED.”

Fortuna and Geuse share a glance, and speaking together:

Both: "—Like we care, idiot."

Their voices overlap, with Fortuna flipping Regulus the bird as a bonus.

With that, Fortuna and Geuse scramble up whatever power they have available.

Regulus's face flashes crimson in fury.

Regulus: "…!! Very well! I'll take the two of you, butcher you into indistinguishable chunks, hurl you into the Blacksnake's dingy maw—"

???: "What I told you was to wait, Archbishop Regulus." For the third time, an interruption to Regulus's plans.

Pandora's arm descends from above to press Regulus's head down, his body proceeding to sink into the earth without any resistance. Buried chin-deep into the earth under a second, Regulus glares up at Pandora as she lands beside him.

Regulus: "Just incessantly!"

Pandora: "Should it be necessary that I stymie your will, I shall. As of now, my goals in having brought you here have been by and large accomplished. You have done far enough and I would appreciate you go home."

Regulus: "You drag someone along, but the second you're satisfied you demand they leave? Do you think anybody could agree with these ideas of yours? Until I've settled this irritation of mine and returned to being my usual self, I will assuredly never—"

Pandora: "I see. Then I will do it. ARCHBISHOP REGULUS COULD NOT POSSIBLY BE HERE. HE IS IN HIS MANSION, SPENDING HIS TIME WITH HIS WIVES."

Regulus: "Wa—"

The next instant, just as Regulus goes to shout something, he snaps out of view.

It isn’t that he’s sunken entirely into the dirt. He has truly blinked, vanished out of this scene. In the spot where he once was, the hole from him being plunged into the dirt is gone. All as if affirming Pandora’s statement, that he could not possibly be here.

Pandora: “Being that the racket has left the scene, we can now discuss at a more leisurely pace.”

Fortuna: “…Can I ask you something first? How come you’re here? I know just saw you die a minute ago.”

Pandora stands there as if this is entirely normal.

This girl, calm smile on her face, is supposed to be a scattering of gore. Fortuna glances over to where her remains were strewn, and gulps.

Not a trace of the gory mess remains in the slightest. Just like how Regulus has disappeared, her corpse is vanished.

Fortuna is utterly lost for words. Pandora tilts her head.

Pandora: “Could YOUR EYES HAVE DECEIVED YOU?”

Fortuna: “—!”

Fortuna shudders.

This should not be possible. But the world has reformed itself into a shape that supports Pandora’s words. Invalidating what Fortuna had supposedly seen, and overwriting it all with something strange and unknown.

The corpse is gone, Pandora is resurrected. Regulus is gone, the aftermath of his deeds are gone. Immediately after realizing this, Fortuna looks aside and nearly screams at the shocking thing that has happened.

As he stands beside her, Geuse’s arms—Geuse’s severed arms, are back to normal.

Pandora: “Since Archbishop Regulus is not here, the consequences of his actions have disappeared. It is all very simple. Although, the mending of Archbishop Petelgeuse's arms is a result of my beneficence."

Geuse rotates his recovered arms in confirmation. Fortuna's eyes waver as she watches on.

Fortuna: "Geuse, your arms…"

Geuse: "They feel to move WITHOUT ISSUE. My body, also…the insides excepted, without issue."

Pandora: "I have not rewritten so far as to change your ingestion of the factor. I would like to commend this action of yours, and the actions of she who has returned for you. Please consider this an illustration of my sincerity."

Pandora is an emblem of hatred for Fortuna. That hasn't changed, and the moment she laid eyes on her, she assuredly could not hold back her rage.

But Fortuna had not imagined that Pandora would be such a mysterious, unfathomable opponent.

She cannot come up with any clues as to what happened. She cannot comprehend what is going on. Everything that happened today in this forest transcended Fortuna's imaginings. The one thing she does understand is that, thanks to all of these incomprehensible happenings, everything is on the verge of ending.

Geuse: "Lady Fortuna, compose yourself!"

A roar cuts into Fortuna's stunned mind just as it begins to stall.

The pain of her slapped cheeks leads her to blink, and find Geuse right there, looking at her. He grasps her shoulders.

Geuse: "I am sure that you have queries, and am sure that you are confused. H OWEVER, you must leave that aside for the PRESENT MOMENT. What is crucial is to safeguard this forest, safeguard LADY EMILIA! And…the defeat of that woman shall ACHIEVE SUCH!"

Fortuna: “—Geuse.”

Strength returns to Fortuna’s eyes. She glares at Pandora.

Yes. He’s right. She might be strange and unknown, and the inability to anticipate what will happen next is terrifying. But even so, Pandora had eliminated powerful Regulus from this scene, and returned Geuse’s missing arms.

She has foolishly weakened own combat forces and rejuvenated the enemy. She might not even have realized that she has cornered herself.

Fortuna: “You’re exactly right, Geuse. Wondering about what’s happening can happen later. Now is when!”

Geuse: “We combine our strength, and DEFEAT HER! Should we repel her, the remaining cultists in the forest also WILL WITHDRAW. —We can SAVE LADY EMILIA!”

The image of her daughter passes through Fortuna’s mind.

She had been prepared for their previous goodbye to perhaps be their last. And she had indeed been acting until now with that exact resolve. But now, she sees a new hope.

Emilia will be saved. By none other than Fortuna and Geuse’s power.

Fortuna: “—Frigid white, captor of time, magic palm of sheer ice.”

The magic which had stricken Regulus even now churns within Fortuna, seeking a place where it may detonate. Her canto presents that power with form, with a target, as mana interacts with the world.

Out sounds a crack as the sharp-tipped icicle forms, the thing large enough for multiple giants to heft in concert, a spear of ice.

Its point aims at Pandora. Should it launch and strike her, she will be mutilated, her remains scattering everywhere and freezing beyond any hope of repair.

Beside Fortuna, Geuse hugs his shoulders as pressure surges from him as well.

The power runs frenzied beneath his tattered vestments, the wounds except those on his restored arms reopening. Even in this grievous state, he will expend the whole of his soul for the sake of those he believes in.

Faced with the manifestation of their powers, Pandora does not even take fighting stance as she smiles.

Pandora: “Now, please do come. —Allow me to savor your resolve to its very limit.”

The couple’s power quakes the world, all in an effort to rip apart Pandora’s smile. And—

2

Emilia wakes up in the basin and shakes her head, managing to recall her location as she glances around the area.

Emilia: “Right…I…”

Herself, covered in mud, and unfamiliar scenery. Scraped knees, legs pained from excessive running.

All of it weighs down on Emilia as she regains consciousness, with the panic constricting her chest and her rejuvenated memories informing her that this is neither a lie nor a dream.

Emilia: “Mother…Geuse…Arch…”

Precious people, who had all staked their own lives so that she could escape.

As she recalls their faces in sequence, Emilia remembers that she must do something. Everyone who had tried to protect her told her to run.

That they want her to run dead ahead, and escape the forest.

But, Emilia also thought this:

There has to be something she can do for everybody.

Emilia: “That’s, right…the siel, the siel!”

Seal. The word lingers in her memories from before losing consciousness.

The discussion a stern-faced Fortuna had had with Arch. About how the scary people had come here searching for the seal in the forest.

The forest’s seal lies deep in the deepest depths of the forest where Emilia lives, a mysterious door.

Leading to nowhere, just a metallic-looking door standing there in the middle of the woods.

The adults called the place the seal. Emilia knew its location.

Emilia: “Have to go there.”

Going there would not present Emilia with anything she could do.

She didn’t know how to open the door, and she didn’t even know what the word ‘seal’ exactly meant. But she knew something extremely important was there, and knew its location—which was more than enough for Emilia.

Considerations about what she might be able to do are not what spur her into action.

It is the hope, that going there will make things change, that pushes her forward.

Emilia: “The siel should be…but, which way was it?”

Having tearfully parted with Geuse, tearfully parted with Fortuna, and ran around the forest in Arch’s arms, Emilia runs directly for an unknown place, alone.

This may be the forest where Emilia lives, but it is no longer the forest that Emilia knows. The region that Emilia frolicked in was limited only to the village's surroundings. Forget about the seal's location, she could not even put her finger on where her mother or Geuse would be.

Emilia: "Auh, hah…"

Emilia wails at her own powerlessness.

She knew what she needed to do, but lacked the strength to achieve it. She has no mother to cling to when troubled, here. She has to be the one to act and save her mother.

Emilia: "—Hm?"

Emilia's earnest feelings spur those watching over her into motion.

Emilia wipes away her tears, when dim lights pass by her face and lead her to blink. She looks up, to find several glowing lights cutting into her vision.

Emilia: "The, fairies?"

Emilia calls them fairies. Fortuna and Geuse call these supernatural entities spirits.

Supposedly lacking any language or will, the lesser spirits answer to the young girl's frantic plea.

The lesser spirits dance in circles before the paralyzed Emilia. They all move in one direction then back again, there then back again, over and over, demonstrating the course. Emilia's voice trembles as she realizes what the spirits are trying to say.

Emilia: "You're telling me, where to go?"

They don't reply. But they do bob up and down, as if in affirmation.

Emilia: "If I go that way, I'll find the siel? I'll be able to save Mother and everybody?"

The spirits strobe brightly.

Emilia wipes away her tears as she shakes her head.

This isn’t the time to be bawling here forever.

Her mother and Geuse and so many people had helped her, and when she started crying, even the fairies came to cheer her up. After all of this, she cannot pardon herself to cower here endlessly.

Emilia: “Mm…mm, mhm.”

The spirits bob about, as if confirming whether Emilia is well. She nods in reply, and with her small frame swaying, breaks into a run. She follows the spirits’ guide, dashing desperately over the rugged earth.

She passes over hollows, scales steep inclines, passes through the gaps between trees.

At many points along the path are areas that the spirits can travel through, but Emilia cannot. She stumbles, branches scraping at her cheeks, tumbling mouth-first to the ground, which she spits out before standing back up.

Her breathing labors, tears of fear and pain welling up again.

She sniffs her snot back up, wipes her tears with her muddy sleeves, gives her grazed knees a slap and runs.

She withstands the pain and the hurt, running with all her might as the memories pass through her mind.

Memories of her time spent living in this forest, ever since she first gained cognizance.

Fortuna was a stern mother, and never spoiled Emilia in the least. She wasn’t Emilia’s real mother.

Emilia had proper, real parents, like normal.

Such had been a common thing to hear from Fortuna, repeated over and over, which Emilia both believed and did not believe. She had real parents. That made her happy. But Fortuna was also her real mother. And as far as Emilia cared, that was unquestionable truth. It was because of today's happenings that she truly understood that.

She remembers being scolded. She remembers nights where she would hold a crying, apologetic Emilia, and sleep together with her. She knew that she would always stroke her head when she woke up until got out of bed, so that Emilia would not be lonely. Emilia knew better than anyone that her mother loved her.

Everybody in the village had been kind to her.

There had always been a kind of alienation, where it felt like they were keeping their distance, and weren't sure how to interact with her. But even so, they never said anything that would hurt her, and always treated Fortuna well.

She knew that even with the Princess Room, everybody had done their best to make sure it would be a nice place for Emilia to spend her time. They prepared toys so that she wouldn't feel alone while inside, and made lots of hand-stitched dolls for her. The count of dolls multiplied by the day, and Emilia had long ago ran out of enough fingers and toes to even hope to play with them all. All of those dolls, every single stitch of thread, was proof of their care toward Emilia.

Emilia had hated Geuse at first.

Because everybody's distancing of her and locking her in the Princess Room always happened when Geuse's group was visiting. The adults were hiding things from her so that they could do something fun. When she first escaped the Princess Room and witnessed Geuse and Fortuna talking, and saw Fortuna smiling at him, Emilia was jealous of Geuse.

She thought she would never forgive him. But he had broken into tears upon meeting her. Cried and cried, spilling tears of happiness, and Emilia forgave him.

After all, those were tears of warmth. She thought back on how peaceful she felt whenever Fortuna hugged her, and patted Geuse's head. She kept by his side as he cried so that he wouldn't feel alone when the tears stopped. He’s hopeless, she thought. Just hopeless. She thought.

Emilia: “I…with everybody, again…”

She wanted to sleep with Fortuna again.

She wanted to invite everybody to the Princess Room.

She wanted to take that cheeky Geuse, who was trying to protect Emilia, and definitely stomp on his foot.

She wanted to see everybody again.

Emilia: “Because I’m…a good girl…”

The tears blur her vision as she runs, and after passing by a handful more trees—Emilia discovers the seal she has been seeking, and,

???: “Welcome.”

A girl with platinum hair stands before the door, her arms spread to greet Emilia.

3

Girl: “Thank goodness. You were the first to arrive. I was glad to have finally found the seal, but I could not locate the essential key. I am truly relieved to have found you safely.”

Emilia: “Why are…you here?”

The girl, Pandora, addresses Emilia with familiar tone and strange pressure. Emilia’s throat trembles as she asks her question, and Pandora gives a small clap of her hands.

Pandora: “Huhuhu, you must be surprised. It is all very simple. This seal is very important to me. And so I have always been searching for it. It is one of the reasons that I have come to the forest today. Which means that I need to be here.”

Pandora’s response isn’t what Emilia is looking for.

Emilia was trying to ask about Pandora's reason for being here, in this spot. When Emilia had last seen her, Geuse had been blocking her and Regulus's path. If she's here, then that means Geuse…

Emilia: "Why are…you here?"

Perhaps having noticed how close Emilia's heart is to shattering, Pandora's eyes widen. She puts her hand to her chest as she seems to reflect on what she just said.

Pandora: "I apologize. The reply that I gave you was strange. I am not the one you are asking about, you are asking about Archbishop Petelgeuse and your Mother."

Pandora is late to understand it, but she does wind up reaching the correct answer.

If Pandora had continued being mistaken, Emilia could have ended all this without her question being answered. Even though she herself did not know what she was seeking, with all of this.

Pandora smiles tenderly.

It carries no malice or maliciousness, abounding in kindness, appearing an honest attempt to dispel Emilia's anxiety.

Pandora: "Please do not be worried. You are concerned about Archbishop Petelgeuse and your Mother, both of whom are safe."

Emilia: "Huh?"

Pandora: "There is no need to be so anxious, though it would have been best should you have asked so originally. Neither I nor the members of the cult have come here to harm anybody in the forest. It is as I have stated, I have visited as I have business with this seal. So being, I am not so foolish as to create any unnecessary sacrifices."

Pandora's words are kind, and thunk one after another into Emilia's overburdened heart.

If Emilia is going to trust what she's saying, then Fortuna and Geuse are safe. Perhaps whatever's happening to everyone in the forest is nothing as bad as she figured.

In fact, this girl had just said that she had business with the seal. Meaning, once she's done with that business—

Emilia: "When you're done with the siel, will you please go home…?" Pandora says nothing.

Emilia: "Wh-When you're done with the siel, will you please leave the forest and go home? Go home without doing anything bad to everybody?"

Pandora: "—Why, of course. I have no desire for unnecessary sacrifices either."

Pandora gives a deep nod, as if she's making a promise.

She then points at the seal, and tilts her head at the teary Emilia.

Pandora: "Which means that I would like for you to please give me the key. Provided that we may open this door, we shall withdraw from the forest immediately."

Emilia: "Key…?"

Pandora: "Yes. A key. Considering the form of a door which this seal has taken, a key is necessary to open it. You would be in possession of that key."

Emilia: "I don't know anything about that…"

Emilia shakes her head.

She truly has no idea what Pandora's alluding to. She doesn't remember anyone giving her anything like a key, and the seal had been kept secret from Emilia in the first place.

There is no possible way that Emilia could own a key for a seal which she had been kept in the dark about. It doesn't even bear thinking, with how natural this conclusion is.

Emilia shakes her head.

Pandora also shakes her head.

Pandora: “There is no need for secrecy.”

Emilia: “I-I’m not keeping secrets…I really, really don’t know! I don’t have any key! I haven’t been given a key! Me, I can’t open the siel!”

Pandora: “I see. —Then, I will have to dig through the forest so that I may find the key.” Pandora’s expression looks incredibly pained. She lowers her gaze.

While her actions and tone are sympathetic toward Emilia, her ironclad mentality means that she will most likely do exactly the thing she is saying that she will. Emilia trembles.

If she cannot open the seal right here and right now, this girl will dig through the forest.

Dig through, is simple, vain decoration for it. Pandora is going to DIG THROUGH the forest, the people living in it, Fortuna and villagers, and Geuse’s group to get this thing.

This is an abnormal entity.

So abnormal, that Emilia is convinced that not even Fortuna would be a match for them.

Emilia: “I-I’ll open it! I will open it!”

And so, Emilia calls out before Pandora can start acting.

Pandora’s face brightens.

Pandora: “You truly will? Thank goodness. So the key was in your possession after all. I had thought it would be. After all, you cannot deny that you are the witch-child.”

Emilia: “A, witch’s…?”

Pandora: “Indeed, yes. Now, if you would like to see to the seal? Provided that I may investigate what is inside this door, we will stand down immediately.”

Handing the scene over to Emilia, Pandora waits elatedly for her to act.

While the term she mentioned does claw at her chest, Emilia cannot retreat and so steps forward.

Little Emilia can look up, and look up even further, but still not sight the top of the door.

It’s like a giant door that a giant made so that a more giant giant could pass through. The idea that tiny Emilia has to open this thing is some kind of empty, hollow fantasy.

She stands before the door. Standing is all well and good, but Emilia has no idea how to open it. Back when she located the seal, Emilia went through all her usual ideas for how to approach the thing. She has already tried pushing it, pulling it, climbing it, far and long ago.

Emilia’s tiny form had not made this ancient door move an inch, and she could not even get the thing to creak, much less open.

Today will be the same case.

She can reach out and touch it, but it gives not the slightest indication of moving.

Emilia: “Hahh…hauh, hahhh…ahh…”

Her pulse races abnormally fast, her blood churning sluggishly through her head.

Her chest flashes hot, and her thrashing heart could leap out of her mouth at any instant. But her limbs are dead cold, heavy, as if stuffed with lead.

She has to move it but cannot.

If she does not open this thing, something terrible will happen to everybody.

And she knows this, but can’t do anything.

Terror and despair bleach her thoughts stark white, crushing Emilia whole.

Pandora: “—Please consider thinking: I am a key.”

The voice is horrifically smooth as it slips into desperate Emilia’s ear.

—I am a key.

As ordered, Emilia focuses on only that image.

Instantly, Emilia feels a weight in her hands. She looks at them. To find that she is grasping a large, ancient, silver key.

Emilia: “A key…”

Pandora: “It is visible to you now? If so, then you indeed are the key.”

Says Pandora happily.

But there is something unnatural about her statement. It almost seems like Pandora cannot see the key in Emilia’s hands.

Emilia: “You…can’t, see it?”

Pandora: “—No, I cannot. That key will only be given to the hands of the qualified. I am certain that in this world, there are only two people capable of opening that lock.”

Pandora seems to find that position enviable. And indeed, her gaze is not fixed on the key in Emilia’s hand. Although unsure what it means that she cannot see a key which is so perceptible that it has weight, Emilia turns back to the door.

A sudden key—but Emilia can’t find anything that looks like a keyhole.

This door does not even have a doorknob. And although the key is big, in pales in comparison to this door. Can this grungy old key really open it?

Emilia: “—Ah.”

When Emilia instinctively figures out how to use the key.

Searching for a keyhole is unnecessary. The door itself is like a keyhole.

This door is not running the seal.

It is merely acting as a cap for the seal. The door is not sealing anything. The seal is something more insubstantial, operating inside of this door.

Pandora: “Now, please open it.”

Accepting Pandora’s demand, Emilia takes a step forward.

Simply pressing the key against the door, and willing for the door to open, will be enough to open it. By that alone, this door will be freed from its long, long post.

—If she opens this door, everybody will be saved.

Pandora: “…Is there something wrong?”

But the moment before she moves to press the key to the door, Emilia’s outstretched arms halt.

Noticing how Emilia’s fingers have stopped shaking, Pandora furrows her brows slightly.

Emilia goes without replying, instead staring at the key in her hands. If she proceeds to press the key to the door, the seal will open. But—

???: “Emilia. —Promise.”

Emilia hears in her mind the whispered words from her mother's goodbye.

Their conversation back then had not been about the seal.

But Emilia remembers. That she promised her mom that she would keep her promises.

She does not know about this seal. She mustn't know about this seal.

Emilia doesn't know about this place, and isn't meant to interfere with it.

She promised Fortuna. Her keeping her promise must get higher priority than anything else. She is betraying her trust, and mustn't do it.

Nobody will forgive Emilia if she is a bad girl. Nobody be able to forgive her.

And so, she must not open this seal.

Emilia: "I-I, can't open it…"

Pandora: "—Why is that?"

Emilia: "The promise…because, I promised. I don't have anything to do with the siel. I'm not allowed to open it."

Pandora: "I see. Promises are truly important things. I think it is very splendid and great that you would like to keep your promise. However…they are also things which are dependent upon timing."

Pandora matches her gaze to Emilia's, who shakes her head. She strokes Emilia's silver hair.

Pandora: "I suspect that this promise is one between yourself and your Mother. Your Mother is a very wonderful person. She has taught you something venerable and correct. Your will is precious and deserves to be upheld."

Emilia: “A-And, so…”

Pandora: “But, it sometimes happens that there come times where you must make a decision which will run contrary to a promise. Perhaps it is cruel that I am seeking a decision from you when you are still young. However, fate and its looming decisions will not take into consideration the circumstances of those it trifles. Fate loves those who resist in turn to its waves, and inspires hope in the outcome of the decision. Which is the hope that you seek?”

Emilia: “Which, hope?”

Pandora nods, smiling maternally.

Pandora: “Yes.”

She presents her hands to Emilia.

Pandora: “First is the hope that you will keep your promise with your mother, proceed without opening the seal, confront my party, and overcome this tribulation.”

Pandora raises her right hand, as if holding this invisible thing called hope.

Pandora: “And second is that hope that you defy the promise with your mother, open the seal, grant the wishes of my party, and the situation will settle down with no further injuries.”

Pandora raises her left hand, again showing Emilia this invisible hope.

Faced with these two hands, Emilia goes rigid.

She cannot even recognize her breathing, with how her lungs feel to have frozen. Should she say anything careless, Pandora may instantly withdraw both of her hands.

Unable to touch either of the hopes presented to her, perhaps it will end with them being taken away from right under Emilia’s nose.

—The terror grasps the young girl’s heart firm, not letting go in the least.

Pandora: “Which hope shall you choose? —I leave the decision to you.”

The right hope. The left hope.

The hope resultant from breaking the promise. The hope resultant from keeping the promise.

Pandora’s sweet and alluring voice.

Fortuna’s kind and chiding call of her name.

She cannot even hear her heartbeat under all this noise.

Sound disappears from the world, leaving Emilia behind in a land without color.

She’s thinking. Deliberating. Her thoughts are blazing, her brain could boil any moment.

She focuses every bodily function she has into thinking, giving the impression that everything from her neck down has died. She cannot hear her pulse, her limbs utterly motionless and alienated from her will.

She can’t choose, she can’t choose, she can’t choose she can’t choose she can’tchooseshecan’tchoose.

Which choice will save everybody? What should she do that will help everybody?

What can she do that will make her everybody’s strength? What should she do? Somebody, tell her.

Emilia: “—ah.”

Pandora: “I see. So that is your decision.”

Her thoughts solder, her vision clouds, when Emilia slips a small sound.

Seeing her decision, Pandora’s long-lashed eyes lower their gaze.

—Emilia’s fingers are touching Pandora’s right hand.

The path to not break the promise, not open the seal, and hope for everyone’s rescue.

Emilia: “I…promised, my…mother, I’d keep…my, promises, so… mother…”

Pandora: “Until the very end, you trust in your mother’s words, your compass. The answer you have reached following your indecision, and the result that your life has divined, shall I respect.”

Pandora nods in agreement as Emilia’s eyes overflow with tears.

She releases her hand from Emilia’s grasp. Emilia falls to her knees as Pandora looks on, gaze merciful.

If Pandora wanted, she could have just pushed Emilia’s hands to the door while she held key. While that has nothing to do with whether or not Emilia would will for the door to open, being that she had been seeking some kind of support, it may have been enough to send her over the edge. Pandora knew that, but didn’t do it.

That alone was something trustworthy about this utterly bizarre girl.

Pandora: “And so.”

Emilia: “…huh?”

Pandora: “Please respect my decision as I consider methods to open the seal.”

Emilia raises her head, stunned.

Pandora is not looking at Emilia. Her gaze is directed somewhere behind her. Emilia follows her line of sight, to find a silhouette pushing away the shrub as it soars onto the scene. With her short silver hair,

Woman: “PANDORAAA!!”

And covered in blood, it is Fortuna.

Compared to when Emilia last saw her, she is drowning in injuries. But even so, having been convinced that they might never meet again, just knowing that she’s alive is a relief for Emilia’s heart.

Fortuna: “Take this!!”

Apparently having not noticed Emilia’s presence, Fortuna fires off six icicles, striking Pandora without the least of mercy.

Emilia’s body stiffens at the danger, when Pandora glides in to position Emilia behind her, protecting her.

Pandora: “Beginning your offensive without first observing the area is very dangerous.”

With that, an icicle spears Pandora through the chest. Her thin waist, her right arm, her right light all proceed to be impaled with icicles, with one last strike blowing off her platinum head.

Emilia shrieks as she witnesses Pandora’s small frame be skewered with ice. Pandora’s body staggers, slumping back to land on Emilia.

Emilia catches the decapitated body as it gushes with blood. She screams. It’s all too unreal. Fortuna: “…Emilia?”

Hearing the scream, Fortuna whispers in dumb shock as she seems to come back to her senses. Rather than accomplishment in having bested a detested foe, Fortuna’s eyes waver in discord as she registers that her daughter is present at this scene.

Fortuna: “Why is Emilia…? She was meant to have escaped the…”

Pandora: “To question why is a rather terrible thing. Your daughter was worried about you, wholeheartedly hoping to help you as she ran to this site. How is it that you, her mother, can proceed without praising her intrinsic purity?”

Fortuna: “—!”

Pandora’s voice calls out from directly aside Fortuna.

Fortuna’s amethyst eyes shoot open from both the unexpectedness of it, and at the fact that Pandora’s corpse has vanished from Emilia’s arms.

Pandora: “When you look as surprised as you do, you truly do resemble each other. Parent and child indeed.”

Fortuna: “—! Emilia and I aren’t blood relatives! Her adorable face is from my sister in law!”

Pandora: “I give my apologies for that.”

Fortuna’s mouth twists in rage as a sword of ice forms in her raised hand. Her sweeping slash slices diagonally through Pandora’s torso, spraying blood everywhere. Pandora collapses back-first and limp to the ground.

Pandora: “Which means that her foster parent is her Mother. That being, you have not erred in your methods of raising her. Your daughter has grown to be a very honest, good girl. Her true parents, your sister and brother, would surely be overjoyed.”

Fortuna: “Don’t you dare talk about my brother and sister in law!!”

The fallen corpse disappears as Pandora goes over, as if this is normal, to Fortuna. Fortuna swings down her sword to bisect her, and slices off her head with the backswing.

She immediately glances behind her to kill the revived Pandora with a stab. She shoves her backwards, where she slams into a treetrunk, pinned.

Fortuna: “El Huma!!”

A blanket of frigid mist shrouds the pinned Pandora, transforming her into an ice sculpture.

A humanoid sculpture is born, sealing Pandora—already beautiful enough to be a masterwork of the gods—eternally in the forest as a belonging of nature.

Pandora: “This indiscriminate use of magic is only going to exhaust you. Would you like to take a moment to calm down, and for us to reattempt by waiting for an opportunity to talk?”

Fortuna: “—! Tedious talk!”

The ice sculpture remains, with only Pandora inside having escaped and starting walking around. Fortuna spins around to find Pandora standing there, and sloppily swings her fist to hit her. It isn’t even a magical attack. Just a punch resultant from vain struggle. It strikes Pandora in the face as if drawn straight to it.

Emilia: “—aagh.”

Fortuna: “E-Emilia?!”

Blown away by her mother’s punch, Emilia fails to catch herself and goes tumbling across the ground. Having unintentionally beaten her daughter, Fortuna’s face pales as she frantically rushes over to the fallen girl’s side.

Fortuna: “No! Emilia, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to! That wasn’t what I…”

Pandora: “This is the pain that you feel when hit. A pain equivalent to being hit has surely just run through your heart. Are you beginning to understand how heartless your actions are?”

Her hands holding an uprighted Pandora, Fortuna’s throat jars as she shoves the girl away. She stands up and looks around to find Emilia standing beside the seal as ever. No traces of being hit remain upon her white cheek.

Fortuna: “You’ve been saying so much nonsensical junk, over and over!”

Pandora: “But this time it was different, and soothed you. Are you unable to devote some fraction of that emotion toward someone who you believe you hate? I am not telling for you to love everyone out there in the same way that you love your daughter. But, there are some who change after receiving only the slightest of care. If I could be part of that count, then I would like to proceed without repeatedly presenting you any tragedies."

Fortuna: "Who the hell do you think you are to demand kindness from me?! Emilia's parents…" Noticing Emilia's gaze on her, Fortuna quickly shuts her mouth.

Emilia stares fixedly at her mother's tense face. When in presence of her daughter, no matter how detested the enemy is, there are some things which should not be spoken.

Pandora: "Then here is what we shall do. Would you like to try being the one to persuade your daughter? I have confirmed that she possesses the key, but it appears that she will not open the door. Because she is keeping her promise with you."

Fortuna says nothing.

Pandora: "If you rescind your promise, no chains will bind her stubborn heart. I promise that, provided that I may undo the seal, we will leave this forest without doing anything further. Indeed, I promise. I will keep my promise. …Very nice words."

Spoken with no hint of jest, and most likely her sincere thoughts.

But there do exist statements and actions which become overwhelmingly sardonic because of their lack of ill will.

Fortuna has seen more than enough to judge Pandora's statements as so.

Fortuna looks at Emilia.

Emilia simply clasps her hands and waits for her mother to speak. Her hands look to be gripping something, which is likely because she's holding the door's key.

Emilia has wound up recognizing the key. And if Fortuna utters a single word to render the promise ineffective, she will likely open the door. Believing that doing so will save the forest.

Fortuna: "—Don't be stupid."

Pandora: “Stupid, you say?”

Fortuna: “You’ll stand down? You won’t do anything more? How will you doing that benefit us? With everything you’ve destroyed, everything you’ve ruined, all the things we had to protect that you crushed underfoot, with even our pride broken and distorted… what’s left for us?!”

Pandora: “Things may be born from places which are barren. Do you not consider that the magnificence of life?”

Fortuna: “When it’s the pillagers saying it, the words are empty and superficial!”

Fortuna roars, jabbing her finger out at Pandora.

Pandora tilts her head, not seeming to understand what Fortuna is saying.

Fortuna: “The struggle is beautiful. There’s nothing more respectable than a will to live. —Stop it with this facile talk. After robbing of us the peace we staked our lives to create, stop your condescending speech. We had comfort and happiness and everything here. You’re the ones who ruined it!”

Pandora: “Our opinions appear to differ.”

Fortuna: “When your positions aren’t the same, the sights you see aren’t the same either. With how you’re always looking down at us from on high, I’m sure you see the sky as being a different height from us!”

Spits Fortuna.

Pandora looks horrifically sad, but Fortune isn’t going to respond to that. She instead keeps up her caution toward Pandora as she dashes over to Emilia, who stands beside the seal.

After confirming that this is definitely her daughter, Fortuna falls to her knees and hugs the small girl.

Fortuna: “Oh, Emilia…Emilia, I’m sorry. Why are you…where’s

Arch?”

Emilia: “Arch…told me, to run to the white flowers…so, me, I ran…” Hearing this, Fortuna supposes the young elf’s demise.

She hugs Emilia to her chest, keeping her from seeing her tears. Just how many had perished in this forest due to the sinister cult’s violence?

Indeed, this forest will never return to being what it was before.

Fortuna: “Emilia, Emilia…you did so well to keep your promise. You’re amazing. You’re amazing.”

Emilia: “Mother…Mother, I, I…”

Fortuna: “Emilia…you’re my pride. My treasure.”

A clinging daughter, her mother hugging her.

Pandora watches on with her expression intoxicated. Her face almost looks like she is monopolizing the most beautiful sight in the world, all for herself.

Pandora: “I have enjoyed seeing this beautiful familial love. Mutual affection truly is magnificent.”

Fortuna: “That’s disgusting to hear when you’re saying it. —The seal’s staying put. I’m not handing her over to you. Get to being an icicle, and wither here.”

Pandora: “From your phrasing, would this not usually be when you advise that the other party leave?”

Fortuna: “All I want right now is to dump the shards of your frozen corpse off the Cascades.”

Voicing curses that Emilia has never heard before, Fortuna once again begins honing her magic.

Pandora purses her lips, seeming pained.

And then.

???: “I have finally—CAUGHT UP!”

His voice sounding somewhat crazed, a man soars over the trees to arrive at this spot.

He leaps over the tall arbors, his momentum that of having been thrown, arriving on the scene with his holy vestments slathered in blood. It’s Geuse.

Fortuna: “Geuse!”

Geuse: “Lady Fortuna!”

With just one call of the other’s name, the two coordinate perfectly.

They stand positioned on either side of Pandora as she occupies the center of the clearing, the two of them commencing with their assault from both ends.

Fortuna’s left hand grips Emilia’s wavering right hand firm.

Emilia looks up at her mother’s face.

—Her expression as her gaze pierces through enemy is so beautiful she could shiver.

Fortuna: “Al Huma!!”

Geuse: “Unseen Hand!!”

Fortuna casts magic of the most powerful degree, while Geuse calls upon all of the witch factor’s power at this final moment to utilize this occult ability. The overwhelming powers surge forth, and—

Emilia: “—Mother?”

—With Unseen Hands piercing her chest through, Fortuna’s blood rains upon Emilia.

4

Strength drains from the hand clutching Emilia’s as she witnesses Fortuna’s body fall limp.

Geuse: “NoOW is—THE END!”

Geuse makes violent touchdown as he shouts, sweeping his battered arms hard to the side. As if pulled along by that gesture, Fortuna’s body dances through space along the exact same trajectory. Her limbs go limp like a doll’s, and her body tumbles across the ground as if discarded. Blood shoots out from her convulsing form like a geyser, painting the grassland red in an instant.

Geuse: “That did, PROVE EFFECTIVE. …After all of this, assuredly…”

With a ragged sigh, Geuse falls to his knees.

Emilia does not see how Geuse yet gazes at the fallen Fortuna with caution.

She merely draws closer, gait tottering, to Fortuna as she sleeps prone.

A hole gapes open through Fortuna’s back and breast, the damage so great that the innards of her ruined body are visible. The force of the bleeding dampens, leaving Emilia sitting in a puddle of blood.

She hugs her mother’s pale head, somehow managing to set it on her lap. Red spots sully Fortuna’s pretty silver hair, and Emilia frantically attempts to clean her by wiping the grime away with her fingers.

But Emilia’s fingers are already dirty with blood, and the more she touches, the bloodier Fortuna’s hair gets.

Geuse: “Lady Fortuna! Do not loosen your guard, I ask that you remain vigilant! Once I verify…”

Emilia: “Geuse?”

Geuse: “…”

With a sharp breath, Geuse heaves himself up with his palm faced towards Fortuna.

Hearing him, Emilia calls his name. After a moment of looking distantly at nothing, he blinks,

Geuse: “Lady Emilia?”

He looks to have only now noticed the girl sitting in the pool of blood.

His gaze lowers down, to where Emilia’s lap hosts the woman’s head, her limp body lying there uselessly.

His eyes, shoot open.

Geuse: “…Impossible.”

His expression one of disbelief, Geuse shakes his head.

Between his own plodding self, and the fallen Fortuna, there stands a platinum girl.

Pandora smiles at Geuse as he looks on.

Pandora: “I am afraid that there is nothing to be done. YOUR EYES HAVE MERELY DECEIVED YOU.”

Geuse: “aaaAAAHH…AAAAaAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH?!”

Putting his hands to his face, Geuse ruthlessly drives his nails into his skin, carving out crimson gashes.

The force is enough that his fingernails pare off, the bright blood from his gouged cheeks painting his face scarlet.

Geuse: “Impossible impossible impossible impossible impossible impossible?! Wh-What, what am, what am I DOING?! What have I DONE? Why, whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy?! Then for what purpose have I…what…ahh! Ahhhh?! AaaAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!”

Geuse had taken a witch factor into his body, and kept the thing’s discordant power restrained by force of will.

The most important support for that resilient will snaps away. Every single thing inside Geuse crumbles away.

Because the powers he had gained by risking his life had destroyed the one he had risked his life to protect.

Geuse suffers mental damage beyond any possible repair, screaming as he loses his sanity.

Geuse: “For what purpose—did I do anything?!”

Pandora: “Everything, for love.”

Geuse’s eyes peel wide, froth spilling from his lips as he gazes at the sky.

Pandora’s quiet voice answers the screams of his soul.

Pandora: “You have sacrificed your soul to save the person you love. This is not anything ordinary. All of your long, long time spent supporting the Witch Cult was also for the sake of that love. All of your deeds are the outcome of love. A most excellent, pathway of love.”

Geuse: “Love…LOVE…love…love…love…love…!”

Pandora: “Exactly. There is no need to fear or regret anything. Everything was inevitable. It was all according to the path of fate. The road had continued its course to lead to this point. EVERYTHING, FOR LOVE.”

Geuse: “For love…”

As he deliriously mutters the words back, Geuse’s mind shatters to pieces.

Geuse's eyes lose their color. He is trancelike, motionless.

He mutters inaudible whisperings, endlessly, a living cadaver.

Seeing Geuse's mind so utterly broken, Pandora gives a satisfied sigh.

???: "Emi-lia…"

Just as Geuse's being shatters into tiny pieces, the flame of yet another life begins to dim.

Emilia: "Mother."

Called by a voice so frail it could disappear, Emilia calls back in astonishment.

Her trembling arms reach out to draw her mother closer, to find that she had grown depressingly light. At some point, the flood of blood has stopped its flow.

Which means that her mother is okay now, right?

Emilia is not immature enough that she can think this and protect her mind. Fortuna, too weak to even move, plainly wears the face of a dead man.

Fortuna: "…I'm, sorry, brother…"

Emilia: "Mother."

Fortuna: "I didn't…stay, by, a single thing, you…told me…"

Spoken like a child giving an apology, as Fortuna voices her regrets.

Blood no longer streams from her body, though tears pour from her eyes. Emilia feels the hot teardrops land on her fingers, and scrambles to gather them up.

Because Emilia inevitably feels that these compose the entirety of her mother's current strength to live.

Fortuna: "I know, you'll…be angry, sister…I know you, won't, forgive me…”

As she listens to Fortuna mutter incoherently, Emilia finally realizes.

Fortuna’s amethyst eyes have not been reflecting any light for a long time.

She has long lost her sight, and they have degraded solely into organs for shedding tears. She is not even looking at Emilia’s face. She has not even noticed that Emilia is right beside her.

Emilia can touch her, can hug her, but won’t reach her.

Faced with Fortuna as she sobs like a child and seeks forgiveness, Emilia—

Emilia: “—I forgive you, mother.”

Fortuna says nothing.

Emilia: “You’re my…you were so good to me…and not even Father, or Mother, could beat you with how you like me sooo much…”

Fortuna says nothing.

Emilia: “So you don’t have to apologize. You do not have to. Emilia will always, always love you, Mother Fortuna. Love you. Love you, love you…love you…”

The dam bursts.

Her voice loses its usual tone, as the overflowing tears drip one-by-one onto Fortuna face.

Should teardrops compose the strength to live, then the final miracle here was the strength conferred by Emilia’s tears.

Emilia: “…Mother?”

Fortuna: “Lia.”

Her hand slowly reaches out, to touch Emilia’s cheek.

A hand which should not be moving strokes Emilia's cheeks, her ears, tickles her hair. As if touching something beloved, so as not to break it, lovingly.

Fortuna: "You big crybaby."

Emilia says nothing.

Fortuna: "I love you, sooo much…"

The strength drains from her.

Her arm thuds to the ground.

Emilia senses that Fortuna's body has grown lighter.

Her body has lost its strength, and this should be compounding the weight on Emilia's lap, but Fortuna as she lays in Emilia's arms has definitely grown lighter.

The most important part of her mother, which must not be shed, has been shed.

Even Emilia can understand that.

She has lost Fortuna, her mother.

Geuse, Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti, has lost his mind.

And Emilia—

Pandora: "Now, have you prepared yourself to choose the hope which follows the opening of the seal?"

Asks Pandora after walking over to Emilia, who holds Fortuna's corpse close.

She watches Emilia sit, all while wearing that calm expression and waiting silently for her reply.

Finally, Emilia understands.

Emilia: "Open the siel?"

Pandora: "Yes. Although highly unfortunate, your Mother, who you shared your promise with, has passed away. There is no need for promises to bind you as fetters for any longer. What do you think?"

Listening to Pandora as she speaks insane logic, as if it's normal, Emilia comprehends.

She knows what this demon wearing human shape was thinking in pulling this stunt.

This demon did what she did so that Emilia would break her promise.

Entirely for the sake of making Emilia lose sight of a promise's significance, Pandora had caused Fortuna's death, tormented Geuse's mind, and annihilated the forest.

Pandora: "Right, I forgot."

Emilia says nothing.

Pandora: "I doubt that they will be necessary for you anymore."

Pandora reaches her hand out toward unresponsive Emilia's face. For dim lights to begin glowing, encircling Emilia, before selecting Pandora's arm as their home and perch.

The minor spirits.

The fairies who had guided Emilia to the seal, and shown her the path.

And, why were they, going to Pandora?

Pandora: "Seeing as I doubted that you would come here on your own, I have enlisted their help. They do not communicate with words, but they have been very reliable."

Pandora smiles as she thanks the spirits, and with that, they dance through the air.

Since when had this started? Emilia cannot even tell.

Emilia's head wavers as she looks up at the seal's door.

It feels like the door is looming, pining to someday be opened, and watching Emilia. She feels the weight of the key in her hands. She had thought that she had dropped it somewhere, but now it is again in her grasp.

Pandora: “You do have the key. Then, you know what to do.” Pandora gives a nod. Emilia slowly stands up.

She lowers her mother’s head from her lap and silently sets it atop the grass. She twines her finger through her bangs, arranging her prided mother’s beautiful face nicely. And,

Emilia: “Just die.”

—A blade of frigid wind whistles through the air, slicing Pandora’s body to pieces.

Her spouting blood freezes in an instant. Flowers of frozen crimson bloom furiously.

With a single icicle standing central in their midst, out scatter the sanguine-flecked petals, a masterpiece of ice and death.

Pandora: “That was rather dangerous. Where on earth is this all coming—”

Emilia: “Just die.”

Rods of ice spear down to impale Pandora’s limbs, a spear of ice shoots up from the ground to pierce Pandora from groin to crown, her frozen body screeching as it shatters into pieces.

Pandora: “Please calm down. I am sure that discussion will lead us to an understanding.”

Emilia: “Just die.”

Balls of ice close in from both sides, crushing Pandora between them and transforming her into a splatter of blood.

Pandora: “We should stop. You are kind by nature, and not a girl capable of harming others. Has your Mother never told you so?”

Emilia: “Just die.”

A spinning blade of ice slices through Pandora from the feet up, casting up a spray of red sherbet.

Pandora: “It would sadden your Mother to see you like this. Neither your legitimate Mother and Father, nor Archbishop Petelgeuse, would desire this.”

Emilia: “JUST DIE!”

White mist cloaks Pandora’s body, transforming her into a sculpture of ice. The giant icy sword which slams into her the moment after smashes rather than slices her with its force, beating the Pandora sculpture to the earth.

But despite this storm of destruction and bloodlust,

Pandora: “This is something of a predicament. It appears that the effects were the opposite of what I had intended.”

Emilia: “Just die, just die, just die, just die!!”

Bawling, swinging her arms, Emilia rains icy destruction upon Pandora.

But even as they all strike her, and she dies gruesome death, she continuously comes back fully restored after only the space of a blink.

Emilia: “Hahhh! Hahhh! Hauhhh!”

Emilia is approaching her limit for using this excess of magic.

With her repeated casts of magic unfitting to her, red-faced Emilia’s lower body begins to freeze. The vast mana swallowed inside her young body is running rampant, and failing to escape outside in time.

Pandora: “The manifestation of power surpassing your capacities, such that you cannot even avoid damages to your own body, would be because of your bloodline. The blood of a witch cannot escape that karma. —Perhaps this forest had been necessary so that you would not awaken to this power.”

Emilia shakes her head in refutation of the noise. Her right leg is entirely frozen, and it’s questionable whether she can even stand.

She falls to her knees, her eyes brimming with bloodlust as she glares at Pandora.

Seeing that pointed, ominous gleam, Pandora shakes her head.

Pandora: “This is unfortunate when I am standing before my dearest goal, but I believe that I will withdraw for the day. It does not seem that you will be willing to listen to anything more about kindly opening the door.”

Emilia: “Just die, just die just die just die, just die…”

Pandora: “I will regard this day as well enough finished with only the presence of your lineage, and the creation of a new Archbishop of Sin. I will achieve my goal at another time.”

Egocentric logic, disregarding of other and entirely self-centered.

Pandora appears to have washed her hands of the situation, when white flakes flit through her vision.

Snow.

Emilia’s outrageous magical powers are running amok, warping weather to the extremes and making it snow.

At first it merely sprinkles down, but the snow progressively builds in force and strength, soon coming cloaked with wind ferocious enough to call the whole thing a blizzard.

Pandora: “It appears that, whenever we next speak, I will have to begin by having you expel everything before we may even face each other.”

Pandora looks down from the sky as she walks over toward Emilia, who breathes white puffs. Although she witnesses a hated enemy approaching, Emilia cannot move. Her body has already frozen up to her waist, and she cannot even raise her arms any more.

Pandora: “You have caused this frenzy of power, and will proceed to fall into a long slumber. Will the mana of this glaciated forest be fully exhausted, or will an entity possessing power comparable to your own counteract it? Whichever it may be, I suspect that you will spend more than a short period beneath the ice.”

Emilia: “Just die, just die!”

Pandora: “I regret to tell you that I will not die. I suspect that both you and I will still remain healthy by the time that the ice melts and we again meet. And certainly, once that time comes, we cannot have things proceed in the vein that they currently are. And so.”

Pandora’s white finger touches cold against Emilia’s forehead.

Emilia’s amethyst eyes seethe with loathing. Pandora smiles without any malice.

Pandora: “ALL OF YOUR MEMORIES LEADING TO THIS DAY ARE CONSUMMATED WITHOUT MY PRESENCE IN THEM.”

Emilia: “—Ah.”

Pandora: “Feel free to supplement them however you wish. Indeed. You did your very best to keep your promise. It would make me glad if that fact could be engraved in your heart, and you could proceed to be as you presently are.”

With her body frozen up to her breastbone, Emilia’s face recoils, her gaze unfocused and puttering.

Her eyes spin and drool trails from her mouth as Emilia’s mind is ransacked.

It crumbles.

Indiscriminately and unfeelingly, the wallpaper of her memories is replaced.

The conversations she had fade into the distance, while insults she surely did not receive assault her.

Important, unfading—a promise.

She kept her promise, and that alone was something that she would never forget. And she would never forget to keep her promises, either.

She kept her promise. The promise was kept.

Nobody had any reason to invalidate her for keeping her promise.

Pandora: “What conclusions shall your heart reach, and what smile will you give me when next we meet? I will be eagerly awaiting our wonderful reunion.”

The blizzard rages through the forest. Pandora holds her long, disheveled hair down as she starts walking.

Having remained on his knees in a stupor, Geuse is halfway buried in the snow. Pandora whispers something to him. He stands up, expression powerless.

The two of them, Pandora and Geuse, walk side by side as they leave the snowy forest.

Emilia can only watch them go.

The freeze has already reached her face, and her awareness remains only in her eyes.

Emilia lowers her gaze, and notices it.

On the ground before her, there is an unnatural lumping of snow.

As if, in the middle of this white snowscape, somebody is hugging her.

Emilia: “…”

Her mouth doesn’t move. She cannot even close her eyes anymore.

Her body is frozen, and her heart is freezing. Emilia’s consciousness —

Emilia: “—ther.”

—then came to spend a century encased in the never-melting ice.

Until a spirit found her, a spirit who was searching for her, a spirit given life in this world entirely for the sake of her.

—Until that time, Emilia remained frozen in the ice.

5

Having witnessed it all, and faced with the sight of her own frozen self, Emilia stands stock still.

She remembers everything that happened.

These scenes of the past, slowly unfolding ever since she had woken up.

All of them have been peeled of their superficial, false skin, and come flowing out.

Young Emilia had seen everything that day. She saw how Fortuna died in her arms, how Geuse's mind broke and went insane, and witnessed the perpetrator of all this evil.

And she forgot them, because of her own weakness and desire to forget them?

Echidna: "It would be a mistake to fault yourself for the falsification of your memories."

The girl standing beside Emilia, Echidna, addresses her.

Just as Emilia had experienced her memories vicariously, Echidna had witnessed everything that happened from start to finish.

She glances at Emilia, who gazes at the snow.

Echidna: "That thing you confronted was the Witch of Vainglory, Pandora. She brandishes superficial and self-serving logic, rewriting events however her whims and pleasures dictate. The dampening of her influence would be a result of time's passage, and your very own strength."

Emilia: "My, strength…"

Echidna: “As you can see, your strength is so immense that you can’t fully control it. If we are speaking entirely in terms of combat, you surpassed Pandora even here, when you were young. But battles aren’t so shallow that you can prevail on strength alone. And especially not when Pandora is a witch with a penchant for surviving.”

It isn’t clear how far her knowledge spans, but it appears that Echidna knows about Pandora. Although, her expression as she speaks with Emilia is as bitter as ever, and she doubts that she will get an honest answer if she asks her any questions.

Emilia: “…You’re not insulting me like you were before?”

Echidna: “That’s the kind of thing about you that I hate. Of course I’m thoughtful enough to be considerate toward someone who just remembered the death of their mother. Even if that someone is a filthy licentious whore.”

Emilia: “Thank you.”

Echidna gives a sigh, speaking no further comforts.

Noticing that she’s coming close to smiling at Echidna’s attitude, Emilia realizes that she has been attempting to divert her attention from the grisly memory before her in a show of weakness.

These resurrected memories are utterly things which shake Emilia’s perspective of the world.

Things which overturn Emilia’s life from its very outset.

After all, Emilia was going to save everyone in the forest—and so was her reasoning for devoting herself to the Royal selection, but,

Emilia: “I wonder if anyone’s still alive…in this frozen forest.”
Emilia had witnessed both Fortuna and Arch’s deaths.

The Blacksnake’s attack was information which had been absent in Emilia’s memory. She knew the beast’s might, and the wicked characteristic it possessed.

The Witchbeast of Blight known as the Blacksnake infects living creates with a hundred diseases just by contact alone. And it places curses on the land it travels, transforming the region into a locality of death where only witchbeasts can live.

—How many people had survived before the village was buried in snow?

And were those who survived and now encased in ice uninfected by the Snake's pestilence?

This was equivalent to Emilia losing her very reason to fight.

Indeed, she can agree with these memories being sealed.

Even had Pandora not interfered, perhaps Emilia would have wanted to forget about these events.

That is how utterly hopeless these memories are.

Echidna: "…Standing here indefinitely won't end the Trial."

Echidna gazes at the silent world of snow.

Echidna: "The past went along without any issues. Challenger of the Trial as you are, you must have recognized your greatest regret. Now you need to present an answer."

Emilia: "Present an answer for the Trial?"

Echidna: "The first Trial is beaten by demarcating an end to the symbol of your regret. Do you affirm the actions of your past self, or reject them? If you are unable to fully accept this and reject the question, this will all end without the Trial being accomplished."

Emilia gives a deep sigh.

She has thought over and over about what she needs to overcome the Trial.

When faced with counterfeit memories, she had questioned herself as to why she was unable to overcome them.

Losing Puck, and having to take over the parts of herself that she had entrusted to him, was what first let the cap on Emilia's memories come loose.

Now, Emilia finally stands at the starting point for the Trial.

But even though her legs have reached the starting line, she has lost sight of the starting line in her own heart.

She left the forest because she wanted to save everybody, save her mother.

It's turned out that those ideas weren't even idealistic ones, they were straight-out fantasies.

Her mother is dead, and she doesn't know if the villagers are safe.

If she loses the reason that she set out on this path, what remains for Emilia?

Emilia: "—That's already been taught to me."

Just when it seems that her heart is beginning to waver, a hand reaches out from the light and stops her.

A powerful arm, to pull Emilia forward when she is lost as to her destination.

Don't give up. Look forward, raise your head, watch me.

Over and over, again and again, he had said that to her.

He knew that Emilia was weak, but roared at her not to stay weak.

When Emilia shook her head and insisted everything was over, he said that nothing was damn over and pulled her back up.

When Emilia wanted to give up, thinking that she was useless, he had baselessly asserted that she was the best.

The pain from their teeth striking each other, and the warmth of their overlaid lips, lights a flame in Emilia's heart.

Emilia: “Mother loved me.”

Echidna: “…”

Emilia: “I wanted to help Mother Fortuna. I wanted her to hug me again as we slept in the same bed. I wanted to tell her, countless times, that I love her.”

Echidna: “Then do you regret it?”

Echidna is asking about the moment of Emilia’s decision, with the two hopes.

Back then, if Emilia had taken Pandora’s hand and broken the promise, perhaps Pandora’s group would have withdrawn from the forest, and Fortuna and Geuse would not have been stolen.

IF, HAD I, SUPPOSING. Using those words to look back on the past, perhaps this would indeed be the case.

Emilia: “I don’t regret anything.”

Echidna says nothing.

Emilia: “I don’t regret that I kept my promise, and stayed my ground back then. If there’s anything I regret, it’s that I wasn’t strong enough, and couldn’t consider things more wisely. I’ll never regret that I stayed true to my Mother’s teachings and didn’t listen to Pandora, ever.”

After all, hadn’t Fortuna told her?

That she was proud of Emilia, who had determined to keep her promise, and that she was her treasure?

Those very words were a treasure, to remain inside Emilia forever.

Echidna: “Your fight hasn’t lost its meaning?”

Emilia: “Nope. I…couldn’t save mother. But I still don’t know about everybody in the village. Everybody might be waiting there, waiting for rescue under the snow. I’m the only one who can save them.”

Echidna: “That land’s been polluted by the Blacksnake. Even assuming that there are villagers alive under the frost, I doubt that they will survive long while harboring infection.”

Emilia: “That’s just how you’re imagining it’ll go. A nasty kind of speculation. Everybody’s waiting for rescue under the snow. I’m gonna get them out of there quickly, and they’ll all tell me off. And then laugh, glad to be alive.”

Echidna: “Imbecilic delusion.”

Emilia: “No, it’s a forecast for a happy future!”

Emilia steps forward.

She faces Echidna and she gestures to the snowscape.

Emilia: “I won’t let you invalidate something that no one’s even seen yet! I’m not going to accept that the things my Mother left for me ended so sadly! I’m going to realize my Mother’s ideals!”

Echidna: “Ideals? Your mother was searching for something?”

Emilia: “She said so. That one day everyone would leave the forest, and be able to live like normal. Just like how Geuse’s group and all the villagers could get along, and how Subaru told me he likes me, one day that world will arrive which my Mother and Geuse were supposed to walk together!”

Echidna: “And the frozen villagers will be included in that world? After you trapped them in the ice?”

Emilia: “I feel sooo sorry about that. I’ll apologize over and over, and over and over until they forgive me! And once they forgive me, I’ll show them the world. Tell them that they don’t have to live in secret any more. That this is the world that Mother Fortuna was talking about!”

Echidna: “…”

Taking a deep breath, Emilia shouts.

They are no longer in the snow, but a world of white light.

Heedless to the absence of the prickling chill, and to the departure of the scene composed of her regrets, Emilia raises her voice.

Emilia: “I’ll shout myself hoarse as I holler my dreams, so that my mother in the sky can hear it!”

Echidna: “…”

Emilia: “I am happy in the world that my mother loved!”

The world fractures.

Seeing the fissures run through the white space, Emilia finally notices the change in setting. Her eyes widen in surprise, and Echidna strikes her hands. Together, in applause.

Echidna: “I see, understood. I didn’t expect that I’d know what would happen, but this exceeds anything I imagined. This pushy, complacent, hubristic, egotistic, hypocritical and forced purchase.”

Emilia: “Exactly. Anything wrong with it?”

Echidna: “No, I don’t really care. But this is one of those points where you’re exactly like your mother.”

Echidna scrunches her pretty brows, when Emilia asks her question.

Because it sounds like—

Emilia: “My, mother…you don’t mean Mother Fortuna, you know about my other mother?”

Echidna: “I know her. She’s part of why I get so emotional when dealing with you. Though there is still some kind of irrational resentment to it, as I lament: why does it always only happen with you?”

Echidna gives a shrug, her form beginning to fade.

Emilia feels a vague kind of weight press down on her consciousness, a floating feeling like waking up from a dream circling around her.

Echidna: “Here’s the end. No matter how complacent the logic is, a settlement with your past is a settlement with your past. All you have to do is dance clumsily around as you take your mother’s resolve to sacrifice herself and use it as your rationalization.”

Emilia: “You can say anything you want. Me, I’ve gotten used to your insults.”

Hand to her hip, Emilia shows off her composure to Echidna, who doesn’t forget to give one last jab. Echidna averts her gaze.

Echidna: “There’s still two Trials left, but…frustratingly, I doubt they’ll prove much of an obstacle.”

Emilia: “They won’t?”

Echidna: “Constant rationalizations are the nemesis of self-inquisition. These Trials, which intrude on your interior, have terrible comparability with the present you. You could call it a boon resulting from your utter neglect to think.”

Emilia: “When you talk in a way that sounds like I’m not thinking, it actually strings sooo much.” Emilia bares her displeasure.

That said, their conversation here is close to meeting its end.

Echidna is practically gone from view, and Emilia’s head is beginning to fog. She cannot keep herself conscious any longer.

Echidna: “—I hate you.”

Emilia: “But I don’t really hate you.”

What expression did Echidna make in this moment? Even though Emilia doesn’t see it, she gets the sense that she knows.

Her consciousness then ascends.

Emilia regains her conscious and groans, a hardness at her back.

Behind her is a wall. It seems that she has collapsed against it, and fallen unconscious with the thing still supporting her.

She reaches out to touch the wall and checks the writing rudely engraved there. She runs straight into an I LOVE YOU, and winds up smiling at the perfect timing.

Right now, Emilia wanted his words more than anyone else's to be the ones validating her.

Emilia: "—I'm sorry, Mother."

Her smile twists, as her voice slips, choked, out of her mouth.

Her apology echoes through the dark room, as does the noise of her sniffling.

Teardrops stream one after another, unstoppable. Unendurable.

She had chosen to act strong, to be stubborn, and not let the witch see her cry. Inside this tomb, where there are no worries of any onlookers, Emilia presses her face against the wall and cries magnificently.

Emilia: "Mother…mother…"

The tears overflow.

They're truly from forever ago. Tears that she needed to cry one hundred years ago.

She had forgotten about it, and so had never been able to mourn her mother's death. In this small chamber where no one will know about, Emilia proceeds to mourn exactly that.

So that once she exits, no one will know what her face looks like in tears.

So that she could end this, without the boy who told her weak self that he loved her seeing her being weak.

She cries, and cries, and cries, and cries.

All while mourning the memories of her mother, her mother’s affection, and everything she had given her.

Emilia remains exactly like this, proceeding to cry with her face pressed to LOVE.

Chapter 121:
Help Him

1

She wipes away her tears and pats her cheeks.

She combs her fingers through her hair, bordering on a mess as it is, and smooths out the wrinkles in her clothing.

Did her face look horrendous right now?

Puck would usually be here to comment about Emilia's appearance, but he isn't. Though, the misshapen crystal that Garfiel gave her does reassure her with its dim light.

Emilia: "…We won't be seeing each other's faces for a while." The crystal in her hand siphons her mana out from her fingertips.

It's an unContracted Great Spirit, and all it's doing is resting there inside the anchor, but it still demands an incredible load of mana. Had Subaru or Garfiel spent a full day accommodating that mana drain, they may have been run utterly dry.

But even the forcefulness of this mana drain pales in comparison to Emilia's vast stores of mana. Emilia has regained her memories, and remembered that she can use magic without a spirit's help. If she focuses her attention on her gate, she can feel the outrageous current of mana circulating through.

Emilia had been why Puck could manifest in reality. Puck would brag that it was happening using a conglomeration of ambient mana, but most likely, a large portion of the feat drew off of Emilia's unacknowledged mana stores.

All of it, so that Emilia would not have to face her forgotten memories.

Emilia: "You really are so overprotective."

With a slight smile, Emilia raps her finger against the crystal.

Perhaps in protest, or perhaps smiling wryly, the crystal strobes its light in response.

Emilia: “…Okay. Mm, everything’s fine now.”

Her mood has calmed down considerably, too.

Thinking about Fortuna or Geuse makes her heart sting, and should she relax her guard, she will definitely wind up crying again.

But Emilia cannot stay cowering forever.

She has things she needs to do. And they were surely things that Fortuna and Geuse would expect of her, and desire from her.

She exits the Trial room, and heads through the stone corridor, making for the exit.

Two Trials remain. Overcoming the first Trial isn’t enough to make the door in the chamber open. Most likely, she will need to complete all the Trials before it will.

The requirements to make the next TRIAL start are unclear. Exit and enter the tomb again? Potentially a passage of time? Either way, the Trial did not heartlessly start on her during her period spent crying in mourning. So it feels like re-entry is the requirement.

Emilia: “What would I do if Echidna does something mean to me? …I think she was sooo mad at the end.”

I hate you, she said. But I don’t really hate you, replied Emilia.

Part of that comment had been revenge against Echidna and her constant belittling of her, but considering that this witch was in command of the Trials, perhaps she could have used a little more self-control.

Emilia: “I wish for you to please not be too mad.”

While praying for Echidna's good behavior, Emilia heads for the tomb's exterior. Moonlight spilling in at the end of the hallway informs her of the exit.

She instantly forgets about Echidna for now and raises her head cheerily.

That past she remembered was assuredly nothing trifling.

It still doesn't quite feel real yet, but it was definitely a huge and unshakable event which composed part of the foundations of the character called Emilia.

But for now, all she wanted was to inform the people who believed in her that she had beaten the Trial.

To see the person who said, You can do it, and tell them: I did it.

Squinting under the dazzling moonlight, Emilia exits the tomb—

???: "I welcome your return, Lady Emilia."

Greeted at the square outside by Ram and her curtsey, not a single other person in sight, Emilia tilts her head.

2

—We'll rewind time a little, back to when Emilia's Trial began.

While traversing the route to Roswaal's recuperation hut, intending to verify the guy's motives, Subaru swallows his breath and stops still.

He can tell that Garfiel, walking beside him, also has his eyes shoot open in clear shock. For him, this situation truly must be a bolt out of the blue.

Subaru had imagined some circumstances and possibilities beforehand, but even he cannot conceal his surprise. While feeling some sympathy for Garfiel, Subaru sighs at the character blocking their path, Subaru: “I did think you’d be around…but actually seeing you makes me feel kinda defeated.”

???: “Now thert’s a serprise. Goin’ by what Lil’ Roz said, yer got eyes enough ter see through the whole erv everything, Lil’ Su.”

Subaru: “That’s him anticipating too much. Seriously, how huge are his estimations of me?”

From Roswaal’s perspective, where he is aware of Return by Death —or rather, the Redos, then indeed perhaps it all looks like the doings of an omnipotent god.

But the power isn’t that infallible. It provides absolutely no help in reclaiming what precious things have already been lost. That’s the sort of unhappy power it is.

Narrowing her eyes, the pink-haired girl—the look-alike for the Ryuzu who they parted with outside the tomb, one of the Ryuzu Meyer doubles—smiles slyly.

Subaru had anticipated her existence and his reaction only amounts to him slumping his shoulders, but Garfiel’s reaction is dramatic. His eyes peel wide as he glares at the face of his grandmother,

Garfiel: “Th’hell…why th’fuck’s there another granny here? There ain’t more than one talkin’ granny, n’ th’rest’v th’fellas who got granny’s face’re under my orders to…”

Ryuzu: “Everything has its exceptions. …Right. If we say that the Ryuzu Lil’ Gar knows as the representative of the Sanctuary is the place’s overseer, then I’d be the caretaker of the Sanctuary’s faculties. A will inherited from Ryuzu Meyer, continuously protecting the place.”

Subaru: “Then speaking in terms of the system, you’re against the Sanctuary’s freedom. I thought it was weird that none of the Ryuzu’s were against liberation and goading Garfiel. So the one who secretly took that role…was you. —Ryuzu Omega.”

It’s not Ryuzu who reacts to the name, but Garfiel. He glances back at Subaru, looking dubious.

Garfiel: “Ohmegah?”

Garfiel: “Hell’s that, Captain. That name.”

Subaru: “When there’s several of them and you don’t differentiate them, it’s hard to keep the Miss Ryuzus straight. So just for expediency, we’re calling the Miss Ryuzus we know Alpha, Beta, Sigma, and Theta. But now there’s obviously a fifth Miss Ryuzu, Omega. Not thrilled with it?”

Garfiel: “No, I just mean that name’s way too cool f’r th’granny… ain’t fair.”

Subaru: “Basically. When there’s more of you, I’ll give you cool names too.”

Garfiel: “But there ain’t gonna be more of me…”

It seems like Subaru’s naming sense has appealed rather intensely to Garfiel. The two recognize this unexpected point they have in common while Omega sighs.

Omega: “I dern’t mind whatever yer gonner call me, but yer leaving me behind ter have a happy chat. Since when have you two been such good friends?”

Subaru: “Men who trade fists with the evening sun as their backdrop are always pals. Even if comes after getting decked following a four-versus-one. Right, Garfiel?”

Garfiel: “Well yer sure got over whatever goddamn guilt yer had, Captain.”

It seems like Garfiel still cannot really agree with losing due to force of numbers, but coming from him, the jab is pretty poor. That aside, the joking around to buy time and think ends here.

Subaru faces Omega. She strokes her long hair.

Omega: “The look in yer eyes’s changed. Not a kid ter drop yer guard around.”

Subaru: “This whole kid thing feels pretty fresh, not bad. Miss Omega, do I have this right? You’re not like the other Miss Ryuzus, you don’t have a rotation? I really don’t want to have Gamma, Ampersand, Dollar, and Pound show up too.”

Subaru goes off listing whatever signs he can think of. Garfiel’s eyes sparkle.

While Subaru consciously ignores the admiring gaze of a fourteen-year-old, Omega strokes her flat chest.

Omega: “Dern’t worry. I’m the only one holdin’ the role erv overseer. Without a spec’erv a doubt, I’m the last Ryuzu in the Sanctuary with any sense of will.”

Subaru: “Not gonna go back on that comment? Going off who I know, up to 20,000 people with the same face’ll show up.”

Omega: “Now that has ter be going too far. The Sanctuary wouldn’t be able ter hold us.”

His worst fears undermined, Subaru relaxes.

He furrows his brows at the calm Omega.

Subaru: “I mean it’s nice that you’re just telling us who you are, but…what happened? With how you’ve been treated like a hidden gem up till now I was thinking entirely that you’d be in the shadows. So why’re you suddenly showing up now?”

Omega smiles.

Omega: “It ain’t nothing tricky.”

Omega: “The peace between yer and Lil’ Gar meant yer figured out I exist. Yer might not’ve actually got yer grips on me, but the second yer think that MAYBE SHE EXISTS, I lose. I showed up figuring I’d behave nicely to face my judgement.”

Subaru: “Saying ‘face judgement’ is really overstating it. …But there has to be more to it than that, yeah?”

If Omega seriously wanted to achieve her goals, she surely could have played more of a hand. Even should Subaru's group suspect her existence, until they manage to actually find her, she remains the superior party.

Subaru: "Call it guerilla warfare or whatever, if you ever felt like being an obstacle, you could've been. And your role is being the Joker to pull that off. Roswaal's been keeping quiet about your existence this whole time, and…"

Omega: "Lil' Roz's state is part erv why I'm showing up so nicely."

Subaru: "Roswaal's, state?"

Subaru's eyes widen. Omega shakes her head.

There's something sardonic about that attitude, and cavalier.

Omega: "Yer take a look at Lil' Roz as he holes up in his room right now, and yer'll figure out right away why I'm thinking erv just giving up. And erspecially when I was helping him as the Sanctuary's caretaker, with the idear that he'd steer the place int'er its correct form. …Not gonna happen with that."

Being that Subaru knows the other Ryuzu's, he finds Omega's dejected remark to be rather harsh. Perhaps Garfiel interprets her comment as being strict too, for he does not interject about her unsparing opinion of Roswaal.

Omega is tasked with being the Sanctuary's manager and caretaker. It's unclear when she first got that role, but she's probably been active for much longer than Alpha and the others. Her current attitude may have been built up over all that time.

Regardless,

Subaru: "Nevermind whatever you've been doing until now, is it safe for us to think that you're not gonna get in our way anymore?"

Omega: "Well, if yer follow my views on the correct steering, then I still got lotser things I'd like ter interfere with. The Sanctuary's liberation ain't what Ryuzu Meyer wished fer…but, times are times.

If the era means that the Sanctuary stops being necessary, then my role isn't needed either. What's kept me going until now wers essentially the thought erv not wanting ter be left behind."

Omega's voice is somewhat sad, with anxiety peeking through about her role's end. This post she has served for so long is reaching its conclusion.

Subaru doesn't know what exactly Omega feels when she reminisces on her life. While a good portion would be a sense of will and volition, perhaps there would also be a sense of liberation smattered there too.

Garfiel: "Stubborn, ain't ya. 'S a good thing t'be, granny."

Omega crosses her arms and looks up at Garfiel as he clicks his fangs.

Garfiel: "'S same fer me. I was stubborn like yer were, granny Omega. N'my thing was even worse than yers. But th'Captain used his strength, used his numbers, n' smashed th'whole fuckin' thing apart. Was honestly thinkin' 'fuck this!'…but now I just feel damn refreshed."

Omega: "Lil' Gar…"

Garfiel: "'S what th'Captain said. the Sanctuary losin' it's barrier don't mean that th'world we live'n's gonna be gone. The Sanctuary disappears, n' th'whole'v th'outside world becomes a Sanctuary. 'N there, both you n' my amazin' self got things we can do."

Omega looks down, in thought.

Her expression loses its anxiety and her brows uncrinkle. Instead she looks to be scrutinizing

Garfiel's words, and he nods in satisfaction.

Subaru taps Garfiel's shoulder.

Subaru: "Garfiel, do you…have a fever or something? You are saying some super smart, super embarrassing stuff right now."

Garfiel: “Captain. Do y’think I got th’brains t’come up with this? 80% of what I just said’s comin’ second hand from you.”

Subaru: “Seriously? I said that? Nononono hold on, oh crap, belated mortification.”

Garfiel gives an astonished sigh as Subaru squats down to the ground, ears red. He then faces Omega again and swings out his arm, gesturing an open path.

Garfiel: “I get what yer sayin’, granny Omega. N’yer basically answered what I was gonner ask. Now’s just ter question ‘bout th’nefarious plot, n’ showin’ up in person t’see th’asshole who came up with it.”

Omega: “Anything yer want. …Wonder what I’ll do.” Mutters Omega. Subaru hums his agreement.

Omega had been keeping her existence a secret. Not even Alpha and the other Ryuzu’s noticed her or what she was doing. Now that her role has ended, Omega can appear in public for the very first time.

Subaru: “If you go to the tomb, Ram and Miss Alpha’s group…right now it’s Miss Theta. They’re waiting there. They’ve probably already figured out what’s going on, so just go and talk with them.”

Garfiel: “They figured out what’s goin’ on, goddamn seriously? My amazin’ self didn’t figure a single thing’v this.”

Subaru: “That’s ‘cause your head’s running a whole lap behind.”

It’s actually more baffling that he didn’t get an idea of it, after that past conversation. All those times where Garfiel’s instinctive actions impeded Subaru’s activities in the Sanctuary float through his mind.

Either way, Omega’s anxiety is probably needless. Theta knows that there are many duplicates of herself, and Ram probably knows about the duplicates too. They’ll accept her. So the problem is—

Subaru: “The mastermind of the nefarious plot, a face-to-face conversation with the boss clown.”

3

When he enters the room, Subaru has to wonder if he’s even been here before.

Roswaal has been in this room ever since Subaru first came to the Sanctuary. This is the room he has visited every time he has wanted to talk with Roswaal. He can even remember where all its ornamentations are arranged, and yet.

Roswaal: “Weeeeeeeeeell, if it iiiiiiiiiiiiiisn’t Subaru. How nice of you to come. Even though you must be veeeeeeeeeeeery busy.”

Subaru stands wordlessly with his hand still touching the opened door as Roswaal glances back at him, and speaks in that aloof tone. He gives a joking kind of shrug, which prompts Subaru’s heart, for an instant, to want to think that nothing is irregular. But Subaru suppresses that thought and instead faces Roswaal.

The room is an absolute mess.

The bookcase has been overturned, and the ripped white bedsheets lie dumped upon it. The bed is broken in two, wood chips everywhere. The warlock stands in the middle of this destruction with his hands dripping blood.

Seeing the splinter-wounds on his hands, Subaru recognizes: He just smacked the bed apart.

Garfiel: “Captain…”

Having also seen what a wreck the room is, Garfiel takes a half-step forward, placing himself in a position where he can protect Subaru. Roswaal’s abnormal state is not evoking a caution in merely Subaru.

Garfiel’s golden eyes are clearly wary. He stoops his body forward, so that he can immediately suppress Roswaal should he do anything shady.

Roswaal: “Hoooooooow domesticated you’ve beeeeeeeecome, Garfiel.”

Says Roswaal mockingly, his lips twisting in malevolent crimson.

Keeping that smile, he closes one eye to view Garfiel only with the yellow.

Roswaal: “It’s shocking how quickly you changed your tune. You’re protecting Subaru, which means that you’ve been added to his merry band of friends. Aaaaaaand that you took your will of wills, the love that you have held so long for your mother, and discarded it.”

Subaru: “Roswaal, you’re wrong. Garfiel isn’t allying with us because he had some change in his feelings. He’s just shifted his ideas a little, and…”

Roswaal: “Thaaaaaaat is what I’m saying is superficial. You are beaten up en masse and lectured, and that’s all it takes to change your stance. Your feelings are so weak that losing a fight is enough to change them. Easily altered, shoddy.”

Subaru: “Roswaal!”

It is Subaru and not Garfiel who gets enraged with Roswaal’s screeds of heartless words.

After finishing the intense fight with Garfiel, Subaru came to understand a fragment of his feelings, a fragment of his mental pain. And also came to understand that it was assuredly nothing frivolous or cheap.

Roswaal cannot be forgiven for trampling all over Garfiel’s feelings.

Subaru: “You take that back! You don’t have any right to mock Garfiel’s feelings!”

Roswaal: “Call pliant what is pliant. Call brittle what is brittle. Is there any reason to be criticized fooooooor stating facts? Your overreaction actually reinforces my statements’ legitimacy. A twopenny sketch where cheap relationships try to validate cheap feelings. Truly…an offence to the eyes.”

Subaru: “—!”

Subaru moves to approach Roswaal in a rage.

But the one who stops him is in fact Garfiel. The one most wounded by Roswaal's insults, Garfiel.

Subaru can imagine how hurt he must be as he timidly turns to glance at his face.

However,

Garfiel: "Yer words ain't got a lotta punch t'em, Roswaal."

Says Garfiel, his arms crossed in boredom and head lightly tilted.

The attitude shocks Subaru, and does the same for Roswaal.

Had this been a Garfiel from just a little while ago, he surely would have left himself to rage and snapped at those words. But he, right now, disregarded them. As if he were bathing in a warm breeze.

Garfiel: "I ain't able t'deny that 'm full'v half-measures. 'Till this mornin' I was on yer side, n' now I'm on th'Captain's. Yer right when yer say it was a quick change'a tune."

Roswaal: "After your perfidy toward your beliefs come the rationalizations, I seeeeeeeeee. Goodness me, it appears that the strength you've validated all this time also proooooooooves substandard in reality. Ten years…assuredly no short period of time, only for a handful of days to alter your doctrines."

Roswaal shrugs and shakes his head. A murky emotion rises in his odd-coloured eyes as he glares at Garfiel.

Roswaal: "And that is what I'm calling cheap. If you really loved her, then your feelings would never change their form. Do you believe that your ten years, and Lady Emilia's century, can be handled so cheaply?"

Garfiel says nothing.

Roswaal: "All you did was interact with Subaru for a handful of days. What could possibly happen in this time? Did you create something with him which could rival your feelings toward the one you love? Of course you didn't! No matter what you create with those at your side, it will never compare to what you feel for your love! It won't rival it! That is what it means to love someone most!"

Roswaal kicks a piece of bed which had fallen to the floor. It rebounds and flies toward Subaru and Garfiel, but strikes neither of them as it instead hits the wall behind them.

Splinters of wood rain to the ground. Roswaal's assertions make Subaru hold his breath.

—Scour away everything except what is most important.

That is what loving something meant to Roswaal.

There is nothing precious he builds outside of the one he decides on, and he finds no necessity to build up anything precious outside of that, either. His feelings toward that one thing are then ironclad, and if opportunity exists for him to bring them to fruition, he will not hesitate in the least. This is what Roswaal believes 'love' is.

The moment Subaru comprehends Roswaal's thoughts, Roswaal looks at him as if he noticed it.

His yellow eye churns with the outrageous zeal of love, consuming.

Roswaal: "Do you remember the terms of our bet? The bet that you presented. Once that bet leads you to bind your greatest prepotency and become mundane, what can you do? You can do nothing. Because you…you, are so inferior that you can't even manage mediocrity!"

Subaru says nothing.

Roswaal: "The potential for you to be a foolproof ace exists solely because you have that power. Once you throw that away and become mundane, within a time limit you won't even be capable of floundering at ordinary par! Nobody! After living with one another, is capable of overcoming feelings engraved over time! It doesn't happen!"

Garfiel's decade of obsession with the Sanctuary and distortion of his love for his family. Emilia's century, with a past so terrible that she wanted to forget, and guilt that she left behind. And,

Roswaal: "A decade, a century, and my four centuries! Do you think I can tolerate for even a second that you, nobody else but this mundane you, are the one to overturn that!"

Subaru: "Because feelings never change?"

Roswaal: "Exactly!"

Subaru: "Because you've had these feelings for a long, long time?"

Roswaal: "Yes, exactly!"

Nobody can overwrite their feelings. Feelings will never, ever, change or bend.

Finally, Subaru feels that he gets it. Finally, he feels that he understands Roswaal.

Roswaal wants his feelings to be validated.

He wants to validate somebody else's feelings, so that he can believe that this is what feelings are.

And so Roswaal wanted Garfiel to remain weak.

He wanted Garfiel to remained obsessed with his feelings, frantically protecting something that wouldn't change.

Subaru: "Seriously, how come, Roswaal?"

Feelings for one single loved one.

For the sake of validating that, Roswaal is obsessed with what others are like when they have feelings for someone.

Even though Roswaal should know better than anyone what it is for someone to feel something for someone else.

Subaru: "How come you only see the weakness of love? If you know that loving someone without end is a strong emotion, how come you only see the weak things about it?”

Roswaal: “—Because that’s what I believe.” Replies Roswaal, his voice strangled.

Incredible fury flashes through his eyes, as if he were glaring at the thing he hated most in the world.

Roswaal: “Exactly! Like how you believe in others’ strength, and expect things from them! I believe that everybody remains consistently weak! They are weak, frail, minuscule people, incapable of actualizing their love for their precious one outside of merely clinging to them, that is what I believe!”

Subaru: “—!”

Roswaal: “I have gone four centuries without ever forgetting about her! The time we’ve spent apart is infinitely longer than the time that I spent with her, and still she is emblazoned in my heart and never going to leave! My heart is still in pieces from that day of our goodbye, nothing about me has changed!!”

Roswaal steps forth.

Garfiel cuts in to stop Roswaal from approaching Subaru. But Roswaal puts his hand to Garfiel’s chest, looks down at him,

Roswaal: “Wasn’t it easy? When you spent ten years giving heed to the shouts of love inside you, and through that time believed in them obstinately, didn’t you manage to bask in the feeling of loving someone?”

Garfiel: “—! Bastard…”

Roswaal: “It’s fine, entirely fine. It’s what everybody ought to do. There is no person capable of living in solitude! All live with feelings for another. And that is enough…so then why are you attempting to alter your feelings. Attempting to betray them. Did you not love her?!”

Garfiel: “Yer got it wrong! I…”

Roswaal: “What changed you?! Your muscled body was defeated in a fight, and you lost? You spent ten years for a malleable love, bent by the shattering of your fangs? Then the one disgracing and desecrating your ten years is in fact you yourself!”

Garfiel knocks away the hand at his arm. He attempts to use the backswing to thrust Roswaal back, but Roswaal wrenches himself aside and evades. Garfiel’s eyes shoot open as Roswaal grabs his arm and hoists him into the air.

Garfiel: “Hrah—!”

However, once Garfiel hits the peak of the attack, he puts his foot to the ceiling and manages to overpower Roswaal’s momentum, saving himself from slamming back-first into the hard surface. He forces his body to flip around, giving him three points of contact minus his grappled arm. He rewards this by yanking his grappled arm, pulling Roswaal closer, and ramming him in the chest with a headbutt.

Roswaal: “Ghuh…”

Garfiel: “Ha! ‘F I hadn’t heard from th’Captain that yer can do martial arts too, yer’d’ve gotten me good.”

Looking down at Roswaal as he falls to his knees, Garfiel gives a roll of his previously-grappled arm.

He bares his fangs.

Garfiel: “Hey Roswaal. Yer sayin’ things that an idiot like me ain’t gonna understand. Yer can go on about yer four centuries, but fact is yer a young guy who maybe ain’t even thirty. N’ I know my amazin’ self’s sittin’ at half’v that.”

Garfiel reaches out to grab Roswaal’s collar, hoists the clown close.

Roswaal’s face is twisted in pain. Garfiel scrunches his nose.

Garfiel: “But it ain’t that my amazin’ self’s goin’ with th’Captain ‘cause I lost a fight. ‘S true that th’loss did smart. Yer said it, my amazin’ stubbornness’s been doin’ me good fer ten years. My head ain’t mushy enough fer a loss t’turn that around.”

Roswaal: “Then why are you standing in this room…”

Garfiel: “‘Cause th’Captain…actually, ‘s was Ram. Sh’told me this after I lost. T’go into th’tomb n’ look at th’Trial. N’so, ten years later, I saw what started these ten years’v feelin’s.”

Roswaal: “Wha?!”

Shock flashes through Roswaal’s expression.

Roswaal: “Impossible…you’re, you’re not capable of facing your past again!”

Garfiel: “Yer can say ‘m not capable all yer want. I already went n’ done it, n’ saw what I saw. N’so, I wound up understandin’.”

Roswaal glares at Garfiel, who shakes his head. That silent, focused gaze of his is waiting for Garfiel to divulge what he learned.

But, Garfiel merely opens his mouth wide, and,

Garfiel: “I ain’t gonna tell yer what I figured out. ‘S a waste on you.”

Roswaal: “What?!”

Garfiel: “But I will tell yer one thing, why’m sidin’ with th’Captain.”

Garfiel lets Roswaal go, sending him toppling down to a graceless landing on his behind, and looks at Subaru. He sighs slightly as Subaru flinches at the intensity of it.

Garfiel: “‘S cause of goddamn course yer’d rather team with th’people sayin’ yer strong, we need you, than someone makin’ yer think yer gonna stay weak forever.”

With that incredibly reasonable logic, Garfiel looks away from Roswaal. He passes him by, to stand beside Subaru with his arms crossed.

Subaru glances over at him. And away. And over. And away. And—

Garfiel: “What.”

Subaru: “…No, it’s nothing. Counting on you.”

Garfiel closes his eyes, looking uncomfortable, when Subaru speaks and then squats down in front of Roswaal. With his neck down and head drooped, he makes no attempt to look at Subaru.

Subaru: “Roswaal.”

Roswaal says nothing.

Subaru: “Garfiel saw his past. That might’ve changed his viewpoint, but that doesn’t mean the feelings he’s had for his family for the last ten years weakened or wavered. The strength of the feeling stays the same, but he’s changed. You don’t find that idea a believable one?”

Though he may no longer be obsessed with Sanctuary, Garfiel’s feelings have not weakened in the least. He learned that his unreciprocated love for his mother was actually mutual, and how great a shock did that give him? Subaru couldn’t know.

But who could think that Garfiel was weak, seeing him now? Though he had wavered, and likely would lament.

Subaru: “And it’s the same for you. We’re not telling you to warp these feelings you’ve had all this time for someone. We just want you to change how you demonstrate those feelings. If there aren’t going to be sacrifices for it, then of course we’ll help you.”

Roswaal: “…I cannot tolerate that. And so what does it matter if merely Garfiel’s feelings have changed? For our purposes, yet another vital person remains.”

Subaru reaches out to Roswaal. But Roswaal does not attempt to take his hand.

He shakes his head, terrible at surrender, as he speaks about Emilia.

Subaru: “Emilia’s not going to do what you want either. She’s going to overcome it.”

Roswaal: “She cannot. She’ll be crushed by her regrets, regret ever hoping that she could change, and come crying and clinging to you…as suits her.”

Subaru: “Like there’s a girl out there whose face’s suited to crying. And actually, have you even seen her cry?”

Subaru recalls Emilia in the tomb, before their argument.

She was carrying a heavy responsibility, and grieving the loss of her bond with Puck. Her expression when Subaru glared at her, unable to hold back her tears. Recalling it lights a fire in his heart.

An unbearable inferno of rage, burning him whole.

Subaru: “I have never seen a woman so fucking horrendous at crying before!”

Roswaal: “To be wounded, to be disparaged, that is the lot of half-elves like her. Sharing the same birth as the Witch of Envy is a congenital curse. It’s inevitable that she be despised as a Witch.”

Subaru: “Fuck off, what about her’s a witch? This witch you’re talking about doesn’t goddamn exist.”

Roswaal faces down.

Subaru grabs his collar and forces him to look up, his eyes pitched in anger as he puts them on even eye level.

Reflected in Roswaal’s eyes is Subaru, blazing with an unstoppable fury directed at the world.

Yes. Right now, Natsuki Subaru is sick of everything in the world.

What about Emilia was a Witch? There wasn’t any damn Witch.

And if there was one, it would be—

Subaru: “If you’re saying she’s a Witch! It’s because you all made her one! You keep telling her that of course she’s weak, it’s obvious she’d be hated, all because of her useless birth, and you are going to make her into a Witch!"

He recalls the Witch's tea party.

The scenes flash through his mind—of the old witches, titled with sin.

Minerva, Sekhmet, Typhon, Daphne, Camilla, Echidna.

And he remembers Satella, who saw him off the moment the dream shattered.

Like he could forget her.

Her face—looked exactly like Emilia's.

Subaru: "Has anyone told her even once?! That when she's sad, when she's suffering, it's okay for her to cry! That if she can't wipe her tears away, someone at her side will do it for her! Has anyone told her even once that someone would be there for her?!"

No matter what horrible things she goes through, she accepts it as natural.

Surely her heart would have been filled with pain, and it would feel like the sadness could crush her.

But nobody had allowed her to cry, making her so terrible at crying.

Over repeated experiences in crying and crying and crying and crying, everyone learns to keep the tears out of their voice, out of their expression, and themselves out of sight.

But she doesn't know that.

She had made it this far without ever knowing that, and so she was terrible at crying.

A world that would do this, a world that had done this—was presently so loathsome to Subaru that he could go mad.

Subaru: "If the obvious thing in this world is for nobody to take her side, then my presence is going to change it! You think four-hundred year curses can't change, and I'm going to teach you!"

Roswaal: "…"

Roswaal's eyes shoot open as Subaru jabs his finger to the heavens.

By some bizarre turn, his posture right now, and Emilia's pose to the insulting witch, mirror each other perfectly—

Subaru: "My name is Natsuki Subaru! Knight to the silver half-elf, Emilia!"

Once, Natsuki Subaru had crowed the exact same line without any preparation for it, and many mocked his foolhardy determination. Thinking back, he had been even more useless back then than he was now.

But there is one thing different between now and then.

Even if someone laughs at him for it, Natsuki Subaru will feel no embarrassment.

Subaru: "Emilia's doing it, Roswaal. This girl you think's so weak is gonna tear right through the last hope you have left."

Roswaal: "As if, she can…"

Subaru "The weakness you're clinging to's getting peeled off bit by bit, and all that'll be left'll be to talk to you…I'm trusting that you'll finally start to listen."

Even after hearing all of this, Roswaal's heart does not yield.

He's exactly right. Something built over four hundred years can't be altered with just a single word.

It's like how Garfiel's decade and Emilia's century required both words and actions to begin moving. Roswaal's four centuries will be the same. The actions and the words of Subaru's group will, finally, affect him.

Is what Subaru wants to believe.

Roswaal: “…Regardless of what anyone may do, my feelings shall not waver.”

Roswaal crawls past Subaru. He reaches out his shaking hand to grab a black book beside the broken bed, and cradles it to his chest.

A legitimate, future-charting Gospel.

Garfiel and Emilia have outgrown the weakness that Roswaal believes in.

Omega and Ram have diverted from Roswaal as he attempts to establish his path.

The only HOPE that remains for Roswaal now is the gospel.

Once he has lost its writ, Subaru will be able to speak with Roswaal genuinely for the first time.

Roswaal: “I’ll, make it snow…”

Subaru: “Do what you want. I’m crushing all your plans and crushing them unremittingly.”

With that reply to Roswaal’s nigh delirious muttering, Subaru turns to exit the room. He nods at Garfiel, who seems to want to say something, and the two leave the room together.

At the very end, Garfiel glances back to the room with Roswaal in it. And, perhaps seeing something in him as he is left behind, whispers:

Garfiel: “Y’damn idiot.”

4

Their conversation with Roswaal over, Subaru exits the building and gives a sigh.

A deep one, wringing all of the air out of his lungs, expelling everything in him.

Subaru: “Crap. We were trying to make him stop the attack on the mansion, but it feels like we just cornered him into doing it.”

Garfiel: “Started talkin’ some nonsense crap ‘bout makin’ it snow, too. Didn’t look like we were gonna get a real conversation outta him…it ain’t yer fault, Captain.”

Subaru: “No, I totally cornered him when we didn’t need to. Even though I knew the second we went in that Roswaal wasn’t exactly in a normal state of mind, what the heck was I doing?”

Subaru feels like he finally understands Roswaal’s principles and motives in earnest. And Subaru has clearly given his response and feelings regarding them.

He did think it necessary to inform Roswaal that Emilia was going to clear the victory conditions, so that he would acknowledge his loss.

But—

Subaru: “Doing that meant we lost out on the most important point…”

Garfiel: “‘M tellin’ yer, don’t get down ‘bout it. Ain’t like my amazin’ self got curious listenin’ from aside wonderin’ what yer were gonna do, but what yer said ain’t anythin’ incorrect.”

Subaru: “I mean, that’s the idea…”

Garfiel: “But anyway…that pose was so cool!”

Giving Subaru a smile, Garfiel promptly jabs his finger to the heavens.

Honestly, the pose has only ever gotten terribly negative reviews since coming to this world, so finding someone who can empathize with it is the peak of happiness.

It’s Garfiel’s way of comforting Subaru. Probably. Hopefully. ???:

“—Mr. Natsuki! Garfiel!” When somebody calls to the two.

They glance over, to see Otto running toward them. He had been doing something else, and comes to a stop before them.

Otto: “It looks like you’re done speaking with the Margrave. How did everything go?”

Subaru: “Yeah. Got him to pick up the fight we put down.”

Otto: “Was that what we were attempting to do here?!”

What they were actually meant to talk about was the final trap that Roswaal set in the Sanctuary, and try to make him change his mind about it.

They found out about Omega’s presence on the way to Roswaal’s, and Roswaal is too thick-headed to change his mind about anything. Negotiations have failed.

Garfiel: “Hey, guy. Don’t get on th’Captain’s case too much. He did this super fiery awesome backtalk. Put me in a good mood hearin’ it.”

Otto: “Do you remember what you went there to do? This truly isn’t a joke.” Unable to refute Otto’s complaints, Subaru reaches the peak of guilty reflection.

But Garfiel gives the dejected Subaru a boisterous slap on the shoulders, and raps his finger off a dissatisfied Otto’s forehead. He watches as Otto yelps, pitching back, and squats down to the ground.

Garfiel: “Yer right, th’talk didn’t go great. But all that was a back-up plan anyway. —I’ll be doin’ somethin’ bout th’trouble at Roswaal’s mansion.”

Garfiel guffaws in reply to Otto’s silent criticism.

He bares his fangs, and with a loud click,

Garfiel: “Leave everythin’ t’my amazin’ self. —I am th’goddamn strongest.”

5

Ram: “And so the three idiots and one clever dragon have departed by carriage for the mansion.”

Done with the story, Ram puts her hand to her chest with her expression rather exhausted.

It’s a rare thing for Ram to display emotion when around Emilia, and surprises her a little.

Emilia: “I see then. …Well, I guess they had to.”

Ram: “…Is that all?”

Emilia: “That’s all. I mean, I am still a little…sooo just a little miffed that they weren’t waiting for me.”

All those talks, and they’re not even around to see how she did. What’s with that.

Emilia: “But it means they don’t think I’m going to fail.”

If Subaru really was more worried about Emilia than anything else, then he would’ve stayed behind.

His absence here means that somewhere else, there is someone who needs his help more than her.

Since Emilia knows that Natsuki Subaru trusts in her, that’s how it seems.

Emilia: “I wonder if he really does love me. What do you think?”

Ram: “Barusu has more feelings for you than he does for anyone else, Lady Emilia.”

Emilia: “…Huhuhu, thank you.”

Emilia puts her hand to her mouth and smiles, for Ram to lower her gaze in thought.

After a few seconds of silence, she looks up again.

Ram: “Lady Emilia, I must apologize.”

Emilia: “What’s wrong?”

Emilia’s eyes widen.

Emilia: “It’s sooo uncommon for you to apologize.”

Ram: “I think the same. …However, now is the first time that I bow my head to you sincerely.”

All of my curtseys up until now have just been poses, announces Ram. Emilia smiles wryly, while Ram looks her straight in the eye.

Ram: “I…did not believe that you would come to stand. The TRIAL had broken your spirit, you lost the Great Spirit who was your support…you even learned that Barusu had been keeping secrets from you. I did not think for a second that you would rise to your feet.”

Emilia says nothing.

Ram: “However, even with all that has occurred, you have not yielded. When you left your bed, and I realized that you had gone to the tomb…I at least recognized that I had been discrediting you.”

But even so, Emilia hadn’t gotten back to her feet at this juncture that Ram is indicating.

She just hadn’t tried to abandon the Trial. That alone was something that she never considered. She could assert that.

Emilia: “And so you helped Subaru and Otto?”

Ram: “I merely believed that my assistance would lead to a future worth seeing. It would be wrong to perceive it as myself assisting them. The person I had been assisting was you.”

Emilia: “…You might be right.”

Subaru's words were indispensable for Emilia to get back to her feet.

And Subaru's defeat of Garfiel was necessary to prove those words. And defeating Garfiel required Otto and Ram's help.

Looking only at the results, you could say that Ram aided Emilia.

Emilia: "Why did you do that for me?"

Ram: "—Because it is essential to demonstrate your own sincerity before making a request."

Emilia: "…"

With that, Ram kneels before Emilia.

Whenever Ram demonstrated politeness around Emilia up to now, however insincere the sentiment may have been, it was always by grasping her skirt and preforming a curtsey. Something within the scope of a maid's duties.

But this time is different. This is the ultimate demonstration of politeness, where anyone living in this world illustrates all the respect that they have.

Ram: "I ask of you, Lady Emilia. —Please save my master, Master Roswaal."

Emilia: "…Save Roswaal?"

Ram: "He is preoccupied with delusion. A curse of a delusion, which has kept his heart bound for a long, long time. Perhaps I would have been happy even with that. Even should he never cast his gaze upon me, and never regard me as more than a tool to accomplish that delusion, I would have been happy."

Still kneeling, Ram bares her heart to Emilia.

Beneath her expressionless mask, she may have been holding this wish the entire time.

Ram: “However, his delusion is no longer capable of taking form. The world has diverged from the writ of the gospel, the basis for everything, and Master Roswaal now clings merely to letters…I request that you may destroy it.”

Emilia: “Will Roswaal be okay if that’s destroyed?”

Ram: “I doubt so. He will likely be thrown into disarray. He may lose sight of his life’s meaning and suffer breakdown. But you are the only one, Lady Emilia. Who might be able to grant Master Roswaal’s delusion…his feelings, in a world diverged from the gospel’s writ.”

Her head bowed, Ram pleads Emilia.

Half of her speech is failing to communicate clearly to Emilia.

Roswaal’s gospel probably means that black book that he showed her. He had also mentioned that the world was diverging from its text.

What would Roswaal do in a world different from what the book said? How could Emilia do anything to do something about the hopes of a hopeless Roswaal?

Emilia: “What do I have to do?”

Ram: “—I ask for you to ascend to the throne.”

Emilia: “…”

Ram: “For you to be seated upon the throne of Lugnica. Once you achieve this, Master Roswaal’s feelings will be fulfilled. Please teach Master Roswaal that the day will come where his love is realized. Give him reason to live for today, and for tomorrow.”

This is the first time Emilia has ever seen Ram so talkative.

And so.

And so…

This emotion flooding up in Emilia’s heart, indescribable, is…?

These feelings, unstoppable, as someone who had thought her useless requests her aid, are…?

Ram raises her head.

The great love filling every inch of her small form glistens wet in her cerise eyes.

Ram: “Please, Lady Emilia. —Help him.”

The quiet words make Emilia shiver.

It feels like a shock to her bloodstream, enough to imagine that a hand is jolting her heart once, twice.

After the shiver races through her body, only one thing remains inside Emilia.

Blazing hot in her heart, solely a sense of duty.

Emilia: “I honestly don’t know how me being Ruler will save Roswaal.”

Ram: “…”

Emilia: “And I don’t think I can truly understand what your feelings are, either.”

Ram: “…”

Emilia: “But.”

Returning Ram’s silent gaze, Emilia takes a breath.

Hesitation is gone from her heart. Anxiety is gone from her mind.

Her soul blazes hotter than ever before.

Emilia: “This is the first time you’ve ever requested anything from me.”

And so,

Emilia: “I’ll do it, Ram. You believe in me, and I want to answer to that.”

In this instant, the things that Emilia ought to do and wants to do overlap so perfectly that there is no need to deliberate. She says with a smile:

Emilia: “And that’s definitely something I’ll need to start, right here.”

Chapter 122:
Booming Reunion

1

Holding her breath, the girl creeps though the darkness with her footsteps mute.

She draws her small frame even smaller than usual, paying heed to the rustling of her clothes. Her hand stays over her mouth, for if she fails to physically obstruct it, she'll let slip her wheezy breathing.

She truly wishes that her heartbeat's incessant pounding could shush itself too.

The auburn-haired girl, Petra, walks through the finally-familiar mansion anxiously, as if lost in an unfamiliar world.

In this instant, she is truly grateful for the fluffy carpeting over the floors. She found it laborious to walk on, but it's thanks to it that she can walk without producing any noisy footsteps.

She pledges to herself that, should she get another chance to clean them, she'll put all her gratitude and diligence into their washing.

Should she not allocate her attention into unrelated topics like laundry, her barely-moving legs will come to a stop. Even now she was proceeding at the slow pace of a caterpillar, so what would happen if she stopped completely? Just thinking it terrified her.

She presently loathed the length of this long, stretching, endless corridor.

Petra had been overjoyed when she was accepted to work in this large mansion.

Although near to the village, Petra considered this mansion an extremely faraway place. It wasn't a problem of distance. It was a problem of social position.

The governor and lord of the mansion the Margrave would come to Earlham Village during his spare time.

Although nobility, he assumed no pretentious airs, and he laughed off and forgave the impolite remarks of children. Petra had never heard the villagers badmouth the Margrave except on the topic of his dress.

And Petra had not particularly paid special focus on the Margrave either.

But she had always admired the size of his mansion.

Being from a small village and with two normal parents, Petra would never reach this place. While she had talked about wanting to go to the Capital and make clothes when she grew up, that was merely a dream she created that was appropriate to her standing. She knew from childhood how to give up on reaching for things that she would never attain.

When Petra was unexpectedly given a chance to work at the mansion.

And to add to that, she would be with someone who saved her life and she felt some feelings towards. Which fact delighted her more? Keep it secret, but the latter one just slightly wins out.

Regardless, her employment in this mansion was the start of a dreamlike life for Petra.

While the expansive hallways, abundant rooms, and extensive time spent on cleaning did dizzy her, the hectic days brought joy to Petra's life.

This place of aspiration and dreams now chilled her to her core with how it terrified her.

Petra doesn't know what happened, or what was going on.

What she does know is that she had finished her work, as usual, and has just had dinner alone with her senior maid, Frederica.

Petra stood on a stool was she cleaned the dishes, while Frederica collected the meal which had been meant for Lady Beatrice. They had failed to get it to her.

Petra has never seen Beatrice even once. She did sometimes wonder whether she really existed, but seeing that Frederica, Emilia, and Subaru seemed to know her, Petra went along with it without saying anything.

The lords of the mansion, somewhere far away.

Ignoring the servants Petra and Frederica, two people remained in this mansion. One was the unseen Beatrice, and the other was the girl called Rem.

Neither of them would eat meals, which somewhat dissatisfied Petra.

But Petra pitied the sleeping Rem, and she could not forget how carefully Subaru treated the girl.

Subaru's expression as he gazed at Rem's face was incredibly vivid, so emotional and anguished that Petra hesitated to even feel jealous.

And so—

Petra: "…I gotta save Miss Rem."

This unwittingly-voiced verdict alone spurred Petra's actions.

After Frederica disposed of Beatrice's dinner and Petra cleared away the dishes, Frederica instructed Petra to double-check the work itinerary for tomorrow alongside other things.

Petra truly wanted to help Frederica with the leftover work, but being still midway through her physical development, Petra's body would not withstand the fatigue of late nights. That Frederica acknowledge Petra's enthusiasm and then send her off to bed was the usual way of things.

But tonight, while on the way to her room, something irregular happened.

—All of the lights in the mansion turned off.

Surprised by the sudden darkness, Petra clung to nearby Frederica. Frederica took her tenderly in a hold, and after speaking words upon reassuring words, held her breath.

Petra would never forget how the atmosphere froze.

She had experienced this heavy aura before. The anxiety coursing inside her led her to strengthen her grip on Frederica, who quietly drew her hands away.

Frederica: “Petra. Be a good girl, listen to me. —Use the stairway behind us, and exit. Without making any sound, silently, as fast as you are able, flee.”

Petra: “B-But what about you?”

Frederica: “I’ll follow soon behind. Once you have exited the mansion, run to the village. After we safely reconvene, we will wait until morning to tidy everything up.”

Frederica faced forward as she spoke her gentle words.

She then pushed Petra lightly behind her, creating distance between herself and Frederica. The misty air hid the moon back then, providing her with absolutely zero sources of light.

Petra sensed Frederica stepping silently forward.

Simultaneously, Petra obeyed Frederica’s instructions and set out down the corridor, her path opposite to Frederica’s. She managed to reach the stairway, and just when she thought to proceed down, remembered.

Petra: “This is…just like the forest.”

She remembered where she had experienced this heavy, freezing atmosphere before.

This was the aura from two months ago, when she and the other village children had entered the forest.

The aura she had felt when in the middle of a forest full of bloodthirsty witchbeasts, with her life in peril.

Petra: “—I gotta.”

The instant she realized that, Petra’s feet proceeded not downstairs, but up.

She remembered Frederica’s instructions. She did feel guilty for violating them.

But she could not leave Rem in a mansion identical to that forest.

Because she remembered how Subaru had brought her out of those terrifying woods back then.

Petra: “—ah.”

After thinking back on those scary memories, Petra senses that she is near her destination.

Make no sound. Go unnoticed. By stubbornly adhering to those rules, her sluggish journey reaches the end of its path.

Just reaching Rem’s room did not make small Petra capable of carrying and fleeing with her. Petra had been so overwhelmed by urgency that she had not even considered that fact. She merely though that, should she reach Rem’s sleeping room and confirm that she was there, everything would work out.

A sense of duty unfitting to her small stature, and the terror of knowing that death was near, harangued her.

Nobody could fault Petra for failing to notice the obvious.

Just a few more steps, a few more meters, two rooms away, and there it would be.

Almost no distance at all left to reach her destination.

Her hear pounds so loud it could explode, the noise of her breathing slipping out between her fingers.

Just a little further, just a little more, just a—

—Reaching the room, Petra looks up.

And that's when it happens. When, outside the hallway window, wind blows aside the clouds that block the moon.

Moonlight beams in through the window, bringing color to a once-dark world.

And Petra sees it.

???: "My, what an adorable maid."

A woman so dark as to meld into the shadows stands directly in front of her.

Between Petra and the door, just three steps away.

She is a tall woman, with long hair.

Her sensual clothes display her voluptuous body gregariously. Her hand gives her braid a flick as she calmly approaches, all exceptionally erotic.

Provided that you fail to notice the large, gleaming knife in her free hand.

Woman: "From what I'm told, I have two targets with one more appended. You're the little maid, aren't you?"

Petra: "…au."

Woman: "You're shivering? Don't worry. —Your guts are bound to be pretty. Girls with futures always have beautiful entrails."

Petra has no idea what she is saying.

But she does know that her advance is synonymous with the approach of death.

Petra knows this, but her feet freeze in too much terror to move.

The slender woman holds an unfittingly large knife.

Once that thing strikes her, Petra's life will be messily reaped.

And yet,

Woman: "Good girl. …I'll send you to meet the angels."

Heartlessly, the woman raises her knife, the shivering girl as her target.

The blade slices through wind, cutting into Petra's belly—soon.

???: "PETRA!!"

A large silhouette swoops in from the other end of the corridor, cutting into the space between Petra and the knife, sparks flying alongside shrill metallic noise.

Petra's protector, their long blonde hair fluttering, is a very familiar character to her.

There is only one person with a back so large and dependable that it does not seem that of a woman.

Petra: "Big Sis Frederica!"

Frederica: "You naughty girl, Petra. I told you to flee…you are going to get a scolding after this."

Petra: "Y-Yes m'aam!"

Says Frederica in a stern tone as she glances back at Petra.

Petra trembles at the words naughty girl, nodding several times at Frederica's back in tears.

Woman: "You're the big maid? Big did indeed mean big."

With the two having their exchange in front of her, the knife-wielding woman retreats a short way and tilts her head. The way her braid sways with the movement doesn't match with the woman's strangeness, seeming somewhat comical.

Frederica: "My large size does bother me, you realize. Likely from my father."

Woman: "Then your father was big. And when you're that big, you're bound to have superb guts. I'm excited."

Frederica: "Your hobbies cannot be called tasteful."

Woman: "Women's guts are brighter and more vivid than men's. I'll do a comparison with yours, and teach you that."

Frederica jabs her arms out in front of her as she takes combat stance.

Her hands come adorned with clawed cestus, which are likely the weapon which parried the woman's strike.

They make use of Frederica's large, powerful build, so you could call it a weapon suited for her, but…

Frederica: "Frustratingly, this is not going to prove an adequate match."

Woman: "You do look like you have some ability to you, but probably, not as much as me. After an experience in the Capital where I practically died, my skills have gotten better."

Frederica: "I see. I find myself rather wishing to curse whoever failed to terminate you." Cold sweat rises on Frederica's brow.

The overwhelming grisliness radiating from this woman makes Frederica feel the strength disparity with just a glance. She looks like she is merely standing there, doing nothing, and yet a thick aura of death exudes from her.

How many lives did she reap to radiate this ghastliness?

Frederica: "Petra. This time, truly do leave the mansion. I shall stall her."

Petra: “B-But, Big Sis…”

Petra glances at the door to the room beside them.

With that, Frederica comprehends why Petra disobeyed her orders and came here. And so,

Frederica: “I would not know who has commissioned you…but it would appear that Petra and I are listed as targets.”

Woman: “Yes, you are. You, the little maid, and the spirit girl. I’m not exactly satisfied with the numbers, but I’ve never opened a spirit’s stomach before, so I’m excited for it. I was just a step behind last time and didn’t manage to do it.”

Frederica: “You certainly divulged that information smoothly. Does this not disqualify you as a professional?”

Woman: “I don’t mind it. Your mouth’s going to stop working soon, and if you’re thinking to complain to my employer, then I just have to keep you quiet.”

Frederica: “How deranged.”

This conversation could give someone a headache.

Frederica senses that speaking with the woman any further will be pointless. Regardless, she had managed to get the answers that she wished to hear.

Frederica: “Petra. She is targeting yourself, myself, and Lady Beatrice. Do you understand?”

Petra: “—Yes, m’aam.”

Petra nods as she wipes away her tears.

With that last exchange, and this statement, Petra supposes Frederica’s intentions.

She’s a smart girl. A good student. Someone Frederica doesn’t want to die.

Frederica: “Leave!”

Petra: “Yes m’aam!”

Petra practically trips over herself as she breaks into a run.

Immediately, the black-garbed woman throws something at her. Four knives, slicing through wind as they loom in on Petra’s back. Their superb aim is brilliantly disgusting, and a snap of Frederica’s cestus barely manages to deflect them.

Shrill metallic noise peals out as all the thrown knives rebound, thrown off course.

Petra does not even look back as she flees. She trusts Frederica entirely. And she has to answer to her demands.

Woman: “She’s a good girl.”

Frederica: “Yes, she’s my pride!”

Frederica swings her left cestus at the woman, who dodges by tilting forward slightly. However, then targeting the stooped woman’s stomach, Frederica unleashes a kick.

Frederica’s kick drills through the air, capable of destroying walls. Unlike her normal human mother, Frederica’s father was a half-blood from a lineage of fighting creatures. While she did not entirely approve of the blood coursing through her veins, she was thankful for its strength this time.

The kick slams into the woman, her eyes wide. She immediate brings her free hand up to block, but the kick will be more than powerful enough to snap those skinny arms of hers and—

Frederica: “Wh?!”

Woman: “Does this truly surprise you?”

Frederica swallows her breath. The woman’s scarlet lips relax into a smile, everything upside down. The moment that her hand touched Frederica’s leg, in a situation which would not forgive even the slightest error in force, the woman pulled off some nigh impossible acrobatics. She leaned her body weight into Frederica's kick and pulled herself into a one-handed handstand. Frederica shivers at the feather-light woman perched on her leg.

Frederica: "Spider!"

Woman: "Someone else called me the exact same thing not too long ago."

Her voice sounds somewhat stung, but no such sentiment reflects in her ferocious strike.

Moonlight glints off her blade as it sweeps for Frederica's neck. Frederica immediately draws up her cestus to parry it, but both this arm, and the other which was supposed to aid in the deflection, scream in pain.

Although one-handed, and with arms far skinnier than Frederica's, the woman's grip strength is immense.

Sparks fly as the blades shriek against each other and Frederica lowers the leg that the woman is perched on, then aiming for her face and—

Woman: "Poor choice."

The knife remains caught in the cestus's claws—as the woman uses this as a pivot point to flip even further overhead.

The trajectory of Frederica's kick was supposed to have caught her as she fell, but instead passes harmlessly beneath her as the woman's free hand reaches for her leg. Out from beneath her skirt, there peeks yet another foreboding knife.

Woman: "Show me your vibrant insides."

Still upside down, the woman's two knives fly in from both sides, force enough to slice Frederica in two.

Soaring down the staircase, Petra gives great swings of her little arms as she runs.

She hears the shrill peals of metal and metal from upstairs, and Frederica's quiet scream.

Petra was not foolish enough to stay fixated on stubborn, childish ideas that would keep her from listening to Frederica, fighting so that she could flee.

But even Petra, who knows absolutely nothing about fighting, does know this.

That shadowy woman is a horrifying monster.

Frederica's face had looked so scary, but the woman's smile hadn't faltered for even a moment. Petra was not unaware of the strength gap. In fact she was incredibly aware of it. Leaving Frederica behind like this means that she will be murdered.

Petra: "But if, Lady Beatrice was here…!"

The is one last person present in this mansion.

It seems like the shadowy woman is unaware of Rem's presence. Naturally, Petra does figure that the woman will add Rem to her list of targets if she does find her, but so long as she and Frederica refrain from announcing the fact that Rem is here, it's unlikely that the woman will notice her.

Petra: "This one…not it, then this one?!"

Having descended the staircase, Petra opens a random nearby door and checks inside.

It's unbelievable, but apparently Beatrice lives inside a moving room in this mansion. Should you open many of the mansion's doors, eventually one will lead to Beatrice's room. That's how powerful of a magician she was.

Petra needs that magician's help right now.

If this person is present here, then she will surely help Frederica. She'll do away with that shadowy woman, and protect Petra's dream mansion.

Petra: "Not here…not here either…big sis!"

Out of breath and eyes flowing with tears, Petra is near to collapse.

She has opened all of the nearby doors in the servant's quarters. But Beatrice has not appeared. How long has it been since Frederica started fighting that woman? Petra needs to hurry, really needs to hurry, and yet.

Petra: "Big, sis…"

She needs to run. But her legs won't move.

Petra claps her hand against her leg in an attempt to invigorate her withering heart. But it isn't enough. She can't be brave. And her hopes are seconds from waning dead also.

Petra: "—Subaru."

With weakness dominating her heart, the name she calls in desperation belongs to someone who is not here.

It's the name of who Petra thinks is the bravest person in the world.

He is amazing and courageous, overpowering his shaking legs as he faces opponents he cannot possibly defeat.

When Petra and the other villages were in real danger, and she almost died, he was their saviour—and his name is the one she calls.

Even though she knows that he isn't here.

Petra: "Subaru, Subaru…help me, Subaru."

???: "Alright, will do, Petra."

Petra: "—wha."

Crying and with her face buried in her hands, the voice leads Petra to look up.

Tears blur her vision. Somebody is standing right in front of her.

They kneel down to match the cowering Petra's eye level, and,

???: "My bad for being late. But here I am to help you. …Thank god you're safe, Petra."

His familiar face with its nasty eyes gives her an awkward smile.

His expression as he tries his best to comfort Petra isn't tender in the slightest, which brings Petra absolute relief.

Petra: "Are you…Subaru? You're here?"

Subaru: "It's me, and I'm here. Everything's okay now."

He gives a nod to comfort her. Petra reaches out to him.

She pats at his cheeks, and when she leans forward too far and falls, he catches her.

It's no hallucination and no dream, he is here. He is here for her.

She would love to bask in the relief it brings her. —But this is not the time for that.

Petra: "Subaru…Big Sis Frederica's fighting with a lady upstairs."

Subaru: "Frederica is?"

Petra: "She's dark, with a big knife…and really scary."

Subaru: "A dark horrifying lady with a huge knife…yeah, I know her."

Subaru grimaces.

It seems like they both understand how threatening she is. Petra tugs Subaru's arm. Petra: "Please, save Big Sis Frederica! Beat that lady, Subaru!"

Subaru: “Okay, just leave everything to me! …Is what I wanna say, but if I face off against someone who Frederica can’t beat, I’m gonna be a corpse in under a second!”

Petra: “…”

For an instant, Petra’s heart threatens to flood with despair.

But Subaru’s palm comes down to stroke Petra’s head gently.

Subaru: “And so I sent in some crazy strong reinforcements instead.”

Subaru looks up as if staring at the floor above, apparently imagining the scene unfolding there. His expression is somewhere between relaxed and anxious, an undefined thing.

Subaru: “Have a nuisance being an incredible nuisance for the reunion, though.”

3

Frederica is seconds from accepting as fact: I am going to be sliced in two through the stomach.

???: “Sorry fer this…but you ain’t invited.”

Metal clashes against metal alongside a voice which sounds pleasantly displeased.

It’s a contradiction, but true.

They sound excited, but also sound disgusted by their opponent.

Which is really to be expected.

Woman: “You…”

???: “Yer gonna be sittin’ there downside up for fuckin’ ever, eh?! —Get th’hell off!”

Her blades blocked and attack ineffectual, up slams a ferocious kick into the woman’s chest. Her body curves into a C as she blasts away, and the man lowers his raised leg while he clatters his arms against each other.

Both his arms are equipped with silver, gleaming shields.

One one-handed shield for each arm, both covering his fists.

Man: “Accordin’ t’th’Captain, they say THE BEST DEFENCE IS A GOOD OFFENCE.” Sharp fangs bared, the man’s teeth click as he speaks.

Man: “So there ya go. Got defensive shields set up t’go on offence. …’S best offence and best defense happenin’ at th’same time, so with two bests ain’t it th’strongest?”

It’s dumb, child-tier logic.

But this man is applying his child-tier idea, and using two shields as weapons.

The blond man takes a stance with his feet positioned far apart, glaring attentively at the opponent as he cranes his head back at Frederica.

Man: “Ain’t I right, sis—whatth’frickin’hell yer huge?!”

Instantly, the warrior’s atmosphere about him dissolves.

The man’s—no—the boy’s eyes shoot open in shock as he gazes Frederica top to bottom.

Boy: “Wh—yer serious?! That’s my sis?! Ain’t my sis meant’t be smaller, skinner, with a softer lookin’ face?! This ain’t my sis, ‘s more like my bro… agahh?!”

Frederica: “Do not be impolite.”

Frederica jabs her knee into the rude, staring boy’s side.

The boy tumbles to the ground before sluggishly getting back up. Looking at his dizzied face, Frederica notices it. The scar on his forehead.

Frederica: “Is that you, Garf?”

Garfiel: “Nevermind that, ‘m I really safe t’be callin’ yer Frederica… can’t frickin’ believe it…gahk!”

Frederica: “Do not neglect to appropriately refer to me as your elder sister.”

Halfway though standing up again, an elbow to the back sends Garfiel back into agony. Looking at him in pain like this makes Frederica remember when they were young: they had no toys in the Sanctuary, and had use their bodies to stave away boredom.

Frederica had just flung Garfiel away with complete disregard for their nine-year age gap. Exactly the same as back then.

Frederica: “No. Garf…you have truly grown large.”

Garfiel: “‘S just sounds like sarcasm when yer sayin’ it, oi! N’ just so you know, my amazin’ self’s still gonna be gettin’ bigger! Don’t think yer gonna be lookin’ down’t th’topp’er my head forever!”

Frederica: “Huhuhu, allow me to amend that. Your body may have grown larger, but you remain as small as always.”

Garfiel: “Th’hell was that?!”

Garfiel bares his teeth as he objects to Frederica’s statement. This interaction with her little brother, the first time in ten years, fills Frederica with an unbelievable happiness.

Who would have thought that the day would come where she spoke with Garfiel outside the Sanctuary?

—Someone who ventured to the Sanctuary surely did well. Ram, or Emilia, or Subaru? Which of them was it?

Frederica: “Ah, Master Otto was also with you.”

Garfiel: “Ha, that guy flat never gets his payoff. Think about A MIGURD-MADE BRIDGE COLLAPSES ON THE USUAL and eh guess h’s just that kind’a guy.”

Up arises the vision of a dejecting-looking grey-haired man.

While the siblings both reach this conclusion, from deep in the dark hallway there comes,

???: “Do you mind if I begin to act now?”

Garfiel: “Yer bothered waitin’ fer us, pretty consid’rate of yer. ‘F yer gonna be so nice then how about forgettin’ yer work n’ goin’ damn home. My amazin’ self ain’t lookin’ t’punch women around.”

Woman: “Goodness, how kind of you.”

Garfiel gestures as if swatting away a bug. The woman smiles.

Frederica taps Garfiel’s back, for he is overwhelmingly lax.

Frederica: “Garf. You are going to have a painful time should you judge her by her womanly appearance.”

Garfiel: “Yeh I got it, she ain’t anythin’ normal. N’anyway y’better bet th’only lady n’the world who’s gettin’ my real lady treatment is Ram.”

Frederica: “If you believe that sounded cool, I will tell you that it was not cool in the slightest. Ram would snort at you.”

Garfiel: “Th’fuck?!”

Frederica looks astonished. Garfiel glances back at her, indignant.

—That instant, a silver disk comes shooting from the woman’s hand.

A disc. Or no, it wasn’t a disc, it’s a knife rotating at insane speeds on the vertical. The thing whistles through the air too fast to see and it looms in on Garfiel, ready to split his head open and splatter fresh blood about the corridor.

Garfiel: “Y’know.”

Woman: “…”

The metal shields clatter together as a searing shower of sparks bursts out.

The thrown knife slices the face of the raised right shield, before a deft shift in the thing's angle sends the knife flying up to pierce the ceiling. Garfiel goes without watching this, instead racing forward, gliding over the floor on approach to the woman as he raises his other shield.

Garfiel: "I did tell yer t'get th'hell out'v here, yeh?"

Woman: "I heard, and here's my response."

Just before his fist can strike, the woman flits backward and yanks in her arm.

Immediately, the knife behind Garfiel rips out of the ceiling, rotating again with its momentum as it attacks him from behind.

A string is tied around the knife's handle, connected to the woman's other knife.

Frederica: "Garf!"

She is too slow to warn him.

The blade rotates as it closes in on Garfiel's arm, hoisted and seconds from slamming into the woman, ready to slice the appendage in two. But,

Garfiel: "—Fuckin' cheek!!"

Frederica: "—?!"

The instant that Frederica reaches him, or perhaps does not reach him, Garfiel shouts.

His arm explodes in girth. Golden fur coats it, the thing thick as a log, clearly not the limb of any human but instead that of an animal.

Even the woman has to look rattled.

With a roar, Garfiel slams his fist and the shield into the woman's stomach.

Of course, having paid not a speck of care to dodging, the knife protrudes from Garfiel's arm. But it has failed to cut through the thick limb and its coat of wiry fur entirely.

Woman: "—Gauh?!"

Garfiel: "Get outta here, woman!!"

Entirely bothered by the pain, the swing of Garfiel's fist blasts the woman away. Unable to kill the momentum, she slams into the ground, proceeding to bounce and roll further across the floor. Garfiel watches her tumble as he yanks the knife out of his shoulder. His fangs sever the connecting string and he tosses the knife out a nearby window.

Garfiel: "Ha! KURGAN SLAYS THE ENEMY EVEN MINUS HIS ARMS! 'F yer think m'gonna freak out'n cower at some pain, yer dead wrong, moron!"

Frederica: "The one being a moron is you!"

Garfiel: "Dgha?!"

Garfiel boasts, when his sister's fist strikes the back of his head.

Garfiel falls into a squat, glancing back in protest to the unforeseen chastisement.

Frederica: "Fighting in a manner which injures yourself… Grandmother would cry if she saw this."

Garfiel: "Aeuh, guh…a-ain't like I don't know what th'granny'd think'v it…"

Frederica: "Is that how you are referring to Grandmother?! I do not recall raising you to be like this!"

Garfiel: "We ain't seen each other since I was four n' finally when we get our reunion yer doin' this, yer th' one who's bein' unbelievable here!”

Garfiel breathing jars. Frederica also glances forward, to find a black silhouette languidly getting up.

The woman quietly uprights herself and flips the knife around in her hand before catching the blood dripping from her mouth on her finger, and licking it. A lovely smile arises on her face.

Woman: “—Wonderful, you are. Very wonderful. A lively boy.”

Garfiel: “Honestly, my amazin’ self wasn’t thinkin’ yer’d get right back after that one either. My bad, underestimated ya a lil’.”

Garfiel presses his hands together as he apologizes.

The exchange doesn’t exactly seem like one between two monsters trying to kill each other, but it does lead Frederica to forget the passing of time for a moment. She shakes her head, getting herself back together.

Frederica: “Garf! This woman is shrouded in mystery. Take care not to slacken your guard…”

Garfiel: “‘M sayin’ I got that. But anyway. Sist…sis, d’you know a girl called Rem?”

Frederica: “…? Yes, she is in this mansion. I, erm, heard that she is Ram’s younger sister.”

Frederica isn’t irrevocably certain about this point either.

Frederica has known Ram since childhood, and those memory include no younger sisters of hers. But Subaru explained that Rem was Ram’s younger sister, and she resembled her to a shocking degree. Apparently she was suffering from a Witch Cult affliction which erased her from everyone’s memories.

Garfiel: “She look like Ram?”

Frederica: “Exactly like Ram. But that is no pardon for you to use her as a replacement.”

Garfiel: “I ain’t gonna do anythin’ scummy like that. Jus’lookin’ t’check. —Seriously, then.”

During their conversation, the woman rolls her shoulders and rotates her legs, checking her physical condition.

Perhaps she’s giving them time to have their conversation. Her thoughts aren’t exactly clear. Either way,

Garfiel: “Sis, ‘f she’s somewhere on this floor, find an openin’n bring her out. My amazin’ hands’re gonna be full dealin’ with her.”

Frederica: “Wh-What are you saying? I will be fighting as well. With us together, our chances…”

Woman: “I truly wonder about that.”

Frederica looks at the woman, gaze sharp, when the woman conceals her smile beneath her knife.

Woman: “Please don’t make such scary expressions. And I believe that your baby brother will prove that I’m not wrong in my statements.”

Frederica: “…Garf?”

Frederica’s brows furrow in confusion.

Garfiel adjusts the angle of his shields.

Garfiel: “Sorry, sis. This ain’t someone easy enough that I can keep worryin’ ‘bout what’s goin’ on behind me.”

Frederica: “Wha!”

You’ll hold me back, is the judgement passed on speechless Frederica.

While she did recognize that her own abilities did not even touch that of the woman, it’s still insulting to hear that you are so useless that you will be a detriment.

Garfiel: “Don’t go misunderstandin’ me, sis. I ain’t sayin’ yer a detriment.”

Frederica: “…Then what are you saying?”

Garfiel: “‘F me n’ this chick get serious, this place’s gonna turn into a warzone.”

Garfiel points at himself, then to the woman. She smiles happily, as if affirming his words. She fiddles with her braid before stooping down forward.

Woman: “Exactly. …And so it would be best that you stand down.”

Battle—a sense which only the truly strong can comprehend.

Recognizing that she is far outclassed, a frustration blazes inside Frederica.

She has reunited with her brother after ten years, and she cannot even assist him at all.

Garfiel: “Stop thinkin’ bout pointless crap, sis.”

Frederica: “Garf…”

Garfiel: “Look’t my arms. These shields’re th’ones me and you played with when we were little. The strength I have now started with me n’ you.”

Frederica’s eyes widen.

Concern, care, and something other than those emotions comes through in his voice. Frederica feels that her younger brother has matured, her heart growing hot.

Garfiel: “Th’Captain still handed my ass t’me with th’power’v numbers. But bein’ ‘n top shape starts changin’ that story too.”

Stepping forward, Garfiel clicks his teeth, batters his shields.

Garfiel: “Come at me, woman. This’s my celebration fer leavin’ the

Sanctuary. N’ I’m startin’ it by annihilating th’first obstacle in my way!!”

Chapter 123A:
Bowel Hunter vs the Shield of Sanctuary

1

Subaru: “Got it? In total there are four people in the mansion we have to save. They’re all girls.” Inside the carriage, Subaru raises four fingers as he explains.

The scenery flows by as they speed along the rugged road. But even so no wind or jolting assaults their carriage. While vaguely finding it a mystifying sensation no matter how many times he experiences, Subaru nods to the two people looking at his raised fingers.

Subaru: “First is Frederica. Our buddy Garfiel’s older sister. Saying the attacker’s already there, Frederica’s the only one who could buy us any time.”

Garfiel: “Sis, hrn…Ain’t seen her for ten years now.” Looking uneasy, Garfiel scratches at his short, blond hair.

Garfiel had been so stubborn about staying in the Sanctuary. It’s going to be hard for him to face Frederica, who had abandoned the Sanctuary for the outside world.

Otto: “You truly have not seen her in a decade? From the Margrave and Miss Ram’s accounts, it sounds as though they travelled between the mansion and the Sanctuary rather frequently.”

Garfiel: “It wouldd’er been awkward fer sis too. She never came along with that asshole Roswaal…sh’did send a bunch of letters though, apparently.”

Otto: “Apparently?”

Garfiel: “Gave them all t’granny without reading them.”

Garfiel averts his gaze, looking sulky. His awkward attitude toward his sister is exactly that of a child. Their reunion is definitely going to be an emotional one.

Subaru sighs. Otto's impression of all this looks to be about the same as his as he pulls the reins.

Otto: "Then the second would be Petra."

Subaru: "Yeah. Roswaal Mansion's precocious and hopeful new maid Petra's the second. She's a completely ordinary village girl with no underside at all, so if she gets targeted it's 100% Bad."

The attacks on Roswaal Mansion so far have ended in dead Petra's 100% of the time.

The other three are also highly likely to die, but Petra has no means to fight back at all. So it's common that she gets dealt with quickly.

If they're going to protect her, they will need to find her immediately.

Subaru: "Next is Rem. She's Ram's younger sister. Though you probably don't remember her."

Garfiel: "M' still n' disbelief 'bout it, Captain. 'S just the idea of Ram havin' an identical twin sister. How th'hell could I forget that, when my amazin' self's known her such a long time?"

Subaru: "It's a CURSE where even Ram's forgotten her. Talking about ways to deal with that's gonna be a change in topic, but… anyway, Rem's not so urgent. The assassin attacking the mansion, Elsa, doesn't have Rem on her list of targets. I don't think her employer knew about Rem's existence when they hired her."

Otto: "Although, should she discover Miss Rem sleeping in the mansion, I doubt the encounter will end peacefully."

Subaru: "…You're right about that."

We're talking about Elsa here.

Rem might not be on her commissioner's list, but if she discovers her, she'll probably do something just for kicks. And while Subaru hasn't seen it himself, Rem has been killed during these loops. All he can do is pray that Rem is not in a room that Elsa just happens to open.

Otto: "Regardless, this dependence on the opponent's decisions can't be called an overly great strategy."

Subaru: "Where I'm depending on you guys, and also depending on the enemy. This is Natsuki Subaru's brand of warfare, dubbed REVERSE FURINKAZAN."

Garfiel: "S-So cool…!"

Garfiel clenches his fists, eyes sparkling.

That his random bullshit statement has given Garfiel such expectations makes even Subaru feel guilty. He decides that later, when they have real time for it, he will teach Garfiel about actual furinkazan.

He furrows his brows as he looks at Garfiel.

Subaru: "Though…"

Subaru: "I mean it's been horrifying watching this, but is this actually seriously working?"

Garfiel: "Well we're in a rush, ain't we? 'F there were any better way, my amazin' self'd go for that instead."

Says Garfiel, looking displeased.

His words are sensible ones, but Subaru's statement is truly inevitable. For Garfiel is presently outside the carriage, holding on to the thing, while talking with Subaru and Otto through the window.

His hands clutch the window frame as he dangles there, hanging alongside the zooming carriage with his feet brushing across the ground, getting dragged along by the vehicle.

Subaru has seen an enemy get mashed in a carriage's wheels before, and being that this could easily be a repeat if Garfiel's hands slip, he can't watch on very peacefully.

Subaru: "If something goes wrong and you get smushed, it's no holds barred on my PTSD and we also stop having anything we can do about the mansion."

Garfiel: "Th'hell, Captain. Bein' a damn worrywart. Everythin's all fine. Just watch this! N'thisn'thisn'this! N'this n'this!"

Subaru: "Stop!! I'm gonna die!! I'm gonna die before you do!!"

With the window frame as the pivot, Garfiel starts spinning round and round using just his arm strength. Between the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion and Garfiel's inhuman grip these acrobatics are possible. And his hold on the frame is so strong that the thing warps and creaks. Subaru can imagine the pending despair of the carriage's owner which is to say Otto.

Otto: "His Divine Protection of Earth Spirits doesn't come into effect unless his feet are touching the ground. Since we need Garfiel to be in top form, or something close to it once we reach the mansion, we can only rationalize this as a necessary measure."

Subaru: "I mean I get the logic. You know, from an outside perspective this looks like us speeding as fast as we can to shake off some guy trying to get in the carriage. When what's actually happening is we threw a fourteen year old out of the carriage to drag him along the ground while zooming at top speed."

Otto: "You do realize how preposterous both those perspectives sound when you use that phrasing?!"

Otto, handling the reins, probably wants to avoid giving that first impression. But the two dragons tirelessly pulling the carriage, Patrasche and Frufoo, pay little heed to the coachman's intentions and just run ceaselessly.

This is all more or less why Garfiel is using this mock-acrobatic means of locomotion.

Emilia's magic did heal his serious wounds back in the Sanctuary, but that did not replenish his lost blood or mana.

The travel distance between the Sanctuary and the mansion is about half a day's worth. Even if they have the dragons sprinting well, how much time can Subaru and the others really spend on recuperating?

Nothing has changed about Garfiel, with his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits amassing power from the ground, being their ace. Subaru and Otto are only there to arrange a setting where he can fight at his best.

Garfiel: "But anyway, y'stopped talkin' halfway, Captain."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Garfiel: "Th'thing we were talkin' bout. We gotta save four people, n'we only got three. I ain't heard 'bout this last person. Who's she off bein'?"

Pulling himself up, Garfiel peeks into the carriage. He gives Otto a questioning gaze as well, but Otto just shakes his head and shrugs.

Otto: "I'm afraid that I haven't encountered this final person either. I was in the mansion for approximately a week…but I never even saw her in passing."

Garfiel: "You ain't even seen her face n' she hates yer so much she don't wanna see you, yer gonna be okay, guy?"

Otto: "I would like to think that that is not the reason I've failed to see her!"

Otto frantically voices his objection while Garfiel watches on with pity.

Subaru strikes his fist against the seat and sighs.

Subaru: "The last one…Beatrice, probably, won't come out unless it's me." Otto and Garfiel shut their mouths as they look at Subaru.

The seriousness in his voice probably meant they believe him, even without asking why. Truly reassuring companions.

Subaru: “I’m taking Beatrice out of there. Dragging her out of there. I need to do it.”

Nobody else. Subaru has to be the one.

Even if Beatrice puts on a show, acting like she doesn’t want it.

Garfiel: “‘F that’s what yer say then that’s what it is, Captain.”

Otto: “If possible, I think we should evacuate the nearby villagers in Earlham as well. It will avoid some chaos. How about I do it?”

The two each show their support for Subaru’s decision.

Subaru has his role. And they have theirs.

Truly, entirely, dependable people.

Subaru: “Thank you, idiots.”

Otto: “He’s incapable of giving an honest thanks, the idiot!”

2

The battle escalated entirely, spreading destruction across the luxurious mansion.

Steel clashes against steel, shrieking metal comes with showers of sparks, the blows and slashes destroying the mundane life of the moonlit Roswaal Mansion.

The windowpane shatters and the shards of glass scatter. Damage to the floor sends the carpet flying, while paintings hanging on the wall splinter to fragments.

Woman: “Wonderful. You’re excellent.”

Garfiel: “It don’t make me happy to hear that from anyone ‘cept Ram!!”

Garfiel launches his shielded right arm, jabbing past the woman as she dodges aside, for the strike to slam into the wall. He pursues her in her escape, using the momentum from his right arm to pivot in the air and strike her backhanded with his left.

Woman: “Bad luck.”

Garfiel: “It ain’t over yet!”

The woman dodges. But before she can swing her blade, Garfiel wrenches his body again to dislodge his right arm from the wall, sending a strike hurtling for her. The woman aborts her downward slash to raise her arm, using the kickback to flip backward through the air—the instant that Garfiel’s blow skirts past the woman’s feet, the room ruptures.

Backhand blow to the left.

Punch to the right.

Sweep leg back and to the left.

Jab to the right.

Pivot and kick to the left.

Striking blow after blow as he spins, Garfiel offers no leniency in his pursuit of the woman. She has no room to do anything except avoid Garfiel’s assault, and sensing that her feet have reached the end of the corridor, Garfiel raises his head.

Garfiel: “Yer done!!”

Stepping forward, Garfiel unleashes his fists.

The punches drill through the air, silver reflections of moonlight shooting through the dark corridor in violent pursuit of the woman.

These are the arms of a beast, so powerful that they will assuredly turn a human body into gore. With her back to the wall, the woman flicks up her leg to place the sole of her right foot against the wall also.

She determines her aim to counter the incoming punches, jabbing out her dagger so that Garfiel will impale himself on its blade. Metal clashes against metal as the knife is caught between the shields. However,

Garfiel: “Like that trick’s gonna work!”

Her plan must’ve been to slip her dagger between the shields and stick Garfiel with her knife in his charge. But Garfiel’s muscles are not so weak that any woman’s skinny arms will accomplish anything.

With the kurkri’s point still between the shields, Garfiel twists aside to snap the dagger apart. But before he does—

Woman: “Then what if I add another trick?”

With her wall-set foot as the pivot, the woman flips upwards.

Instantly, the woman’s foot strikes the handle of her trapped knife, opening a slight gap between the shields.

And into that opening,

Woman: “Here’s the real thing.”

Garfiel: “—?!”

Now entirely inverted, the woman holds yet another knife in her other, left hand. This is her third ominous-looking kukri. Just how many is she hiding on her?

The thin knife easily slips into the gap between the dagger and shields.

The deadly blade does not even whistle through the air as it pressed forward, aiming to slice

Garfiel’s neck. Even if he transforms this second, the strike will hit the most lethal of spots.

But Garfiel chooses a fiendish way to counter the blade.

Woman: “Incredible.”

Garfiel: “—yhher prhahise ain’t ghonher mhake me happy!”

The woman whispers, enraptured. Garfiel spears his head forward.

His sharp fangs literally bite the woman’s left blade to a stop. Blood drips from the shallow cuts at the corners of mouth, and the knife’s metallic stench pierces his nostrils.

Garfiel: “Fhuckin’ stinks!!”

Putting force into his jaw, Garfiel snaps the knife to bits.

He spits out the shattered fragments as he swings his clawed foot up to strike the yet-inverted woman from below. The force of the kick will burst her skull apart—to counter it, she sacrifices her arm.

A wet cloth sounds to have slapped against the wall as pure scarlet splatters over the hallway. Garfiel uses his sleeve to wipe the blood from his face, and gives a deep sigh out his nose as he glances back.

Several meters away, having escaped the dead end, stands the woman. But with many bones broken from her wrist to her shoulder, her left arm hangs crooked and twisted.

Garfiel: “Pretty fuckin’ good t’get away by losin’ only an arm. Crap, m’mouth hurts.”

Woman: “…Huhu, thank you. Ahh…it hurts. It truly does. I feel alive.”

Garfiel: “Eh? Ain’t just cuttin’ others, yer like getting’ cut yerself too? Now that ain’t somethin’ my amazin’ self can understand. Not that I was thinkin’ t’make understanding with yer at all.”

The woman drips blood as she smiles splendidly, bringing about visceral disgust in Garfiel. He batters his shields together—and notices there, behind the woman,

Garfiel: “Hey, sis. Th’fuck’re you still doin’ over there? Like yer just saw, ‘s not feelin’ like I can show you me bein’ cool th’whole time.

Get off t'doin' what yer have t'be doin'."

Frederica: "…I-Indeed. I shall."

Frederica had not actually been watching in silence, but had been petrified and unable to move.

That was how extra-dimensional the fight between Garfiel and the woman was.

If Frederica had gotten involved in this battle, she would swiftly withdraw after the first few blows.

These two are just that superior.

Frederica keeps her attention on the woman's back as she glances at her destination—Rem's sleeping room. It's only a few meters away, and she is much closer to the room than the woman is, but she cannot envision herself reaching its door before her.

If she could at least reach the room, she could shoulder Rem and escape out the inside window. Woman: "You don't need to be so guarded, older sister."

Frederica: "…Huh?"

Woman: "Right now, I am stricken with your little brother. It doesn't bother me what business you have in whatever room, or what you're going to do there. None of my interest is devoted to that."

Frederica: "—!"

The woman does not even glance back as she assures Frederica her safety.

She probably isn't lying. She doesn't seem like the kind of person to trick the enemy in this manner, and she doesn't need to, either. Above all, anyone listening would hear the sincerity in her words.

Right now, all of her attention is devoted to Garfiel.

She truly could not give less of a care about Frederica.

But the woman emits an aura so dreadful that it could encapsulate the whole mansion. A pungent, violent bloodlust, which make her initial foreboding air look like a child's joke.

Garfiel: "Sis."

Frederica: "—I believe in you."

Frederica swims through the corridor, drowning in the woman's ghastliness as it is, to reach her destined room—

—After glancing at Garfiel one last time, Frederica slips into the room.

Witnessing this, Garfiel gives a deep sigh.

Garfiel: "Yer so unruffled that yer can overlook sis…ain't what's happenin' here."

Woman: "Do I look like enough a cheater that I can stay unruffled when faced with such a wonderful partner? Right now, I am only for you. —Ahh, I can't bear it."

Both radiant allure and blood-iron horror coexist in this grisly woman. She smiles.

Bathed in her fiery, passionate gaze, Garfiel spreads his stance and stoops his body low.

Garfiel: "Honestly, 's just fuckin' gross. M'rippin' yer apart, manglin' yer t'shreds."

Woman: "I promise to extract your guts without hurting them too."

Her left arm still dangling, the woman's healthy right arm readies her knife.

She stoops down so low that her breasts could touch the floor,

Woman: "I am the GUTHUNTER, Elsa Granhiert."

Garfiel: "…The Strongest of Shields, Garfiel Tinzel."

The instant that the introductions are over, Elsa moves.

Elsa's smile phases into blank darkness as she sprints, so swift that she gives no impression of being wounded. The instant that Garfiel hears the first footstep, out peals the noise of pounding against the walls, again and again and again, from every direction.

Elsa kicks off the floor, off the walls, off the ceiling as she closes in on Garfiel. She moves so fast that he cannot focus his aim, and moves like no creature he has seen before. Something approaching with these nightmarish movements was no humanoid nor beast.

And the most surprising thing is, she's obviously faster now than she was before being wounded.

Garfiel: "Entertainin'!!"

Garfiel bares his fangs, laughs, and moves.

If the enemy is using tricky movements to approach, then Garfiel will counter by doing the same.

He puts his hands and feet to the floor. And off his rear foot, explodes.

Garfiel the human-sized bullet shoots down the mansion's corridor.

He positions his shields before him, his charge as ferocious as a tiger's with a shockwave that blasts away the shattered window glass and fragments of wall.

He does not observe what comes of that, instead roaring as he spears his arm into the floor to force himself to a stop. He immediately flips himself around and back into bestial posture, and again his rear foot annihilates the floor.

The quake rocks the mansion, the carpets suffer in the destruction, flying about in tatters. Shreds of red cloth catch on Garfiel as he soars—

Garfiel: "—!!"

Elsa: "Ahahahaha!!"

Elsa plummets down from the ceiling, swinging her blade, which strikes against the zooming Garfiel's shield. The shockwave stabs through eardrums as destruction rocks the moonlit corridor.

Elsa laughs as she rebounds, making a breakneck flip sideways. The force of the slash has thrown Garfiel's course, sending him plummeting head-first into the wall. He busts through the stonework to land gracelessly in a guest room.

Plumes of white dust shadow the areas as Garfiel grabs the leg of the nearby bed. His biceps swell as he easily lifts the 100-kilo bed and tosses it out the hole he just came through. Boom, bust, and from beyond the bisected bed comes the black woman's thrown blade.

Garfiel parries it with his left shields and uses his right to slam the approaching Elsa in the face. But she ducks, and the strike merely grazes her braid. The end of her black hair tickles the tip of Garfiel's nose, when he then obeys the terror rushing up his spine and immediately zooms forward. He barely manages to dodge the slash coming to slice up through his groin, his back instead taking the hit as he blasts though the door. The battle zone relocates to the corridor.

Giving him no time to catch his breath, Elsa comes zooming in pursuit of Garfiel. Garfiel kicks at her skinny waist. A hit, isn't what it feels like. Elsa contorts her body strangely to evade, and dodges the shockwave from the kick by shifting so that it merely brushes her belly. Garfiel stands stuck with his leg outstretched as the blade of Elsa's kukri butches the air, closing in.

This isn't like the attack she fired before, when cornered. If Garfiel tries to catch this in his mouth, the speed and force of the thing will slice his head in two. Garfiel's decision is instantaneous as he catches the sweeping blade on his right shield, allows its path to continue to his left shield, and then away.

Shrieking metal. Showers of red and yellow sparks. Dark eyes opened in surprise, and the woman's exposed belly. Garfiel roars as he slams his raised leg to the ground. He takes his stance and moves to drive his fangs into Elsa's torso, intending to quite appropriately rip open her guts.

Garfiel: "—!"

That he aborts his lunge and uses the momentum to pull his head in instead can only be called instinct.

Late to dodge, Garfiel's left ear goes flying off and he takes evasive action through the spray of blood. He puts his foot to the wall, dodges the oncoming strike by shooting to the ceiling. Dodges, dodges, dodges entirely.

Garfiel's outstretched arm rips through the ceiling, leading part of the upper floor to collapse. This creates an opening in Elsa's pursuit, which Garfiel uses to escape. His hands and feet land on the carpet, and Garfiel uses his palm to put pressure on the bleeding coming from his head and its missing ear.

He takes a ragged breath. Grits his teeth at the burning pain. He sees Elsa cut through the thick smoke, walking closer, and smiles.

Garfiel: "Y'fuck…'m pretty sure I'm meant ter'v turned yer left arm useless."

Elsa: "You're right. It hurt. But people's wounds do heal."

Garfiel: "This's just goin' of my piddly knowledge, but when a mangled arm fuckin' heals we ain't talkin' about humans anymore."

Or really, it's transcending the category of 'living creature'.

Garfiel may have his E ARTHSOUL BLESSING, but he still needs several hours if he's going to make a shattered arm operable again. When on mana-rich earth, and doing everything he can to slack off. That she can heal during battle, and so quickly, is ridiculous.

Subaru had told him beforehand that she doesn't die even when you kill her, and now Garfiel's initial speculation feels legitimate.

Garfiel: “Which makes things quick. Yer ain’t a human. Dunno ‘f yer were born one, but either way yer at least stopped bein’ one.”

Elsa: “You don’t look it, but you’re surprisingly clever.”

Garfiel: “I told yer it only makes me happy when it’s Ram praisin’ me. N’ anyway I got n’idea ‘bout yer weird healin’.”

Jabbing out his finger, Garfiel states his speculation.

Despite everything and despite how surprising it may sound, Garfiel likes books. With nobody to rival him in strength in the boring the Sanctuary, reading became an important time-killing activity for him.

But that said, the books Garfiel likes are adventure novels, myths, folklore, things in that vein. His interests unfortunately do not land on anything productive for procuring knowledge.

Garfiel: “N’th’books my amazin’ self-read, there were lots’er monsters, heroes, those kinda things where yer don’t know if they really existed. And there was one’v’m just like you.”

Elsa: “…I’d like it if you didn’t equate me to a phantasm from a picture book.”

Garfiel: “It wasn’t a picture book, was one’m full’a letters. …Did have some pictures in it but whatever that don’t matter. And I can’t say clearly it was a phantasm.”

Looking indifferent, Elsa listens to Garfiel.

This thing where she entertains conversations to the end really does jar with the ferocious impression she gives while fighting.

Garfiel’ll have that face of hers going pale.

Garfiel: “After all, yer th’same as one’v the old Witches.”

Elsa: “…”

The swaying motion of her dagger halts.

Elsa's dark eyes look nonchalantly at Garfiel. He jabs his finger at her,

Garfiel: "—Yer a goddamn VAMPIRE!"

Elsa: "Not that I drink blood or anything."

With a sigh, Elsa kicks off the ground.

Her left arm has healed completely. She wields kukri in both hands as she closes in on Garfiel. He blocks she sweeping slash by raising his shields, simultaneously shooting his right leg out to kick her—and Elsa launches her own kick along the exact same trajectory, the two of them crashing feet-first into each other and blasting away.

Garfiel: "Not fuckin' cool! Yer arm's seriously all back t'normal?!"

Elsa: "But didn't you heal your ear as well, while you were buying time? We're even."

Garfiel mentally sticks his tongue out at her.

During their time talking, Garfiel used the hand plugging his wound to heal the injury with magic. He hopes for the missing section of his ear to steadily come back, but if he suffers a wound equal to what Elsa suffered, then Garfiel's healing magic will only amount to a quick and dirty stop-gap.

Garfiel: "Yer ain't denyin' it. So yer really are a vampire?"

Elsa: "People can call it whatever they want. I don't suck blood, and my meals are ordinary. When I'm in the sunlight all that happens is that the guards get riled, so it's not really anything special."

Garfiel: "So yer on about guts so much because yer a vampire?"

Elsa: "That's particular to me. I just like gazing at fresh guts and touching warm-looking intestines."

Garfiel: "That's way fuckin' creepier."

Elsa sheds and dumps her impeding black cloak.

Garfiel judges that Elsa's motivation has spiked even further and clicks his teeth. He batters his shields together,

Garfiel: "S' a big world…bit've a drag, but yer better pull it off, Captain." With that, Garfiel roars as he swings his shields down at the oncoming Elsa.

3

—He opens the door, and what comes from the room is the scent of paper.

Perhaps the cloying the smell carries the weight of all the days and years spent closed inside this space. Or perhaps if you consider the appellation A TIME-STOPPED ROOM, days have nothing to do with it.

Subaru: Just got stuck with some time in Sanctuary to think about all that stuff. And your answer's another thing I wanna hear.

Beatrice: "—How come?"

Without the librarian's permission, Subaru enters the Archive.

As always, the mood here is both melancholy and tranquil. There are no windows to let in sun, or for ventilation. Staying here a long time is bound to worsen your mood and your health.

And especially so when the expression of the girl watching Subaru is so utterly exhausted.

Beatrice: "How come you managed to reach this room again, I suppose? I don't remember calling you, in fact."

Subaru: "Sorry, but showing up uninvited is just who I am. Impossible to forget that time back in middle school where I showed up uninvited to a friend's birthday party and made the whole thing awkward."

Even dense Subaru decided to be more prudent after that one.

Though, since he announced "Well, that's all for today!" and left noisier than anyone else, he stopped getting invited to anybody's birthday party.

Subaru: "It's miserable and my heart's about a second from popping so let's cancel that topic."

Beatrice: "You're the one who brought it up, I suppose. You're like that about everything, doing things always of your own accord, in fact."

Subaru: "Yup, always of my accord. So no matter how much you hate it, I'm here."

He sees the girl swallow her breath.

After respectfully bowing his head in a way that she can see it,

Subaru: "I'm taking you out of here, Beatrice. —I'm dragging you out into the sunshine, where we'll play until your dress is caked utterly brown with mud."

Beatrice sits as she always does, on the stepladder, cradling herself.

With the black tome cradled in her arms as always, her wavering eyes gaze at Subaru.

Chapter 123B:
Happiness Reflected on the Water

1

—Taking a breath, she again challenges the tomb that she just exited.

Inside the stone tomb, isolated from moonbeams, only the pale glow of the walls provides any source of light. It wasn’t uncommon, in places where ambient mana thrived, that such natural phenomena helped to preserve visibility.

However, it was unusual for this natural lighting to be inside a manmade structure. It had, most likely, been reproduced by some inbuilt mechanism of the building.

A mechanism like a metia, functional so long as the required mana was stockpiled—sensing that the lighting in the tomb follows this or similar logic, Emilia quietly takes a breather.

Inside this tomb, she feels the presence of the minor spirits distantly.

It’s not that they’re gone. Minor spirits are like ambient mana, existing everywhere. There’s a question of whether you can perceive their presence, or whether they they’re strong enough for their presence to be perceived, but they would be utterly absent nowhere.

This particular perception of them arose from the wall’s light-producing mechanisms.

The tomb preserves a rather high rate of mana passage into and out of its space. The mana inside the tomb is kept at a fixed volume, with mana quantities never exceeding or falling short of that amount.

The degree of mana needed for preserving the wall-lights is so scant that the minor spirits cannot manifest themselves sufficiently, and that's why their presence in this tomb feels faint. Even assuming that minor spirits are present, they would be debilitated in this environment.

Emilia: "This place is sooo nasty for spiritualists." Reaching that conclusion, Emilia mutters to herself.

Perhaps overcoming the first Trial liberated her somewhat from her sense of being cornered. Having finally gained enough composure to observe her surroundings, Emilia's impression of the tomb is that.

It's not any great threat for a magician, who casts using the mana stored inside themselves. But if they exhausted their stores they would have no means to replenish them, and a magician with few gates would probably find the tomb a troublesome place too.

Though if we're talking Emilia or Roswaal, it would barely effect their combat capabilities.

Emilia: "Which is strange…since I can hardly sense anyone outside."

Having regained her capabilities as a magician, Emilia's perception of mana has strengthened. When she was outside the tomb, she felt the mana of so many entities that she couldn't restrain it. She had probably picked up the mana of practically all creatures, or perhaps the presence of practically all od, tugging at her perception. The wear on her mind was intense. She would need to learn how to control it quickly.

But that behind-the-scenes battle is postponed while inside the tomb.

Instead she needs to wait for the Trial. Honestly she doesn't know which option's preferable.

Emilia: "Ram was pleading me. Have to keep focused." Emilia thinks of Ram, begging to Emilia with her head bowed.

Ram never showed such weakness, and there she was baring her emotions so intensely. How could Emilia repay her for everything until now if not by answering to her plea?

Subaru, having returned to the mansion without observing Emilia's results, also had faith in her. His actions expressed his unwavering conviction that Emilia could do it. She needed to answer to Subaru's trust. Or actually, she needed to do even better than expected and surprise him.

Emilia: "I'm glad they believe in me, but that's not what this is about."

Though they might've been in a rush, Emilia still has to object to the fact that they all left without seeing her. She should be permitted to jolt them and sulk.

And especially in Subaru's case. The two of them needed to have a very, very serious conversation after this.

Emilia: "Anyway, this feeling…the Trial's here."

The moment she entered the tomb, Emilia felt it on her skin.

She had been somewhat unconvinced that exiting and entering the tomb would be enough for the Trial to prepare itself, but the overwhelmingly cool air in the tomb keenly informs her of the truth.

There's no need to postpone it.

Inside the Trial room, the second Trial is awaiting Emilia.

Emilia: "I saw my past. Then, the next one is…?" Her cheeks tense, nearly stiff, as she strokes her belly.

She uses the irregularity in her breathing to determine whether her nerves are steeled. They are, acceptably so.

—The Trial Room waits unchanging as it welcomes Emilia.

It hasn't even been an hour since she left. Of course it hasn't changed.

Perhaps this room alone preserves a greater load of mana, for visibility is slightly better here than in the hallway. The doorway in the back of the room stands shut and healthy as ever. What awaits her there, once she has overcome the third Trial?

Just as she thinks that thought,

“—Witness the uncomeatable present.”

Emilia: “—Hic.”

She hears it.

Murmured at her ear, her own voice.

The instant she attempts to consider what ‘uncomeatable present’ could mean, her consciousness fades to white.

The intense sensation tears Emilia’s mind and soul from her body, dragging her into another world.

Unable to rebel, Emilia crumples leaning against the tomb’s wall, before collapsing.

Her vision blurs. Her thoughts flee. Her consciousness drowns.

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Unsure of what her own lips said at the close, the Trial begins.

2

???: “Hey now, Lia. Where are you going off to, come over here.”
Stopped by that gentle voice, Emilia turns around.

A woman with short silver hair beckons her to the dining table. Her eyes are nasty. Her voice is gentle. Either indicates Emilia’s ideal for women.

Emilia: “Mother, Fortuna…”

Fortuna: “…? Are you still half-asleep? Then you stayed up late again. You’re not a child any more, you can’t be giving others trouble like that."

Fortuna approaches, her tone chiding as she pokes Emilia in the forehead.

Pressing down on the faint red mark on her forehead, Emilia widens her eyes.

Emilia: "Woah."

A sound of astonishment slips out her lips before she can register it. That's how greatly the sight strikes at Emilia's heart.

This is the first time Emilia has ever seen Fortuna sacrifice her ease of movement and wear an apron. The over-adorned frilly white apron mismatches to Fortuna's personality, but suits well to her beautiful appearance.

Emilia: "Mother, you're cute."

Fortuna: "—Where did that come from? You really are half-asleep."

Her cheeks reddening slightly, Fortuna grasps Emilia's shoulders and turns her around. She gives Emilia's back a push, and,

Fortuna: "Wash your face in the river. You'll stop saying weird things once the cold water's woken you up. Though when it's you, Lia, that might not change even when you're properly awake."

Emilia: "Wh-What are you saying, Mother? That's not what it is. I'm not half-asleep at all…and I didn't say anything a trifle weird in the first place."

Fortuna: "Where are you learning this archaic speech, a trifle? I'm sooo worried that everyone might be teasing you and putting these things in your head. I'll have interrogate Arch later."

Emilia pouts. But Fortuna merely nods back, not conceding an inch. While shocked that her own opinions are not working, Emilia slumps her shoulders and starts walking her journey for the river.

???: "Goodness, hello there, Emilia. You're not looking the cheeriest.”

???: “Gosh, she really isn’t. Which means Lady Fortuna told her off? She may’ve stayed up late.”

???: “Emilia’s old enough now. I’m sure she wants her me time now and then.”

After exiting her house and embarking along the road to the river, the elves of the village address her.

A group of older elves sit at a table surrounded by thick tree roots as they chat. She had heard they were the same age as Fortuna, though everyone, including Fortuna, sees Emilia as young.

Emilia: “Good morning. You’re all out early.”

Elf: “It’s you who’s late, Emilia. It’s nice that you’re helping your Father’s work, but it’s a waste of your youth if you don’t use some of your time for yourself.”

Elf: “Exactly, exactly. You’re so cute, Emilia, you need to have fun while you’re cute.”

Elf: “If I were as young and cute as you, Emilia, I’d be bicycling the village.”

Emilia tilts her head at the term ‘bicycling the village’ while the women all look at each other and laugh, squealing. The details of their conversation are more or less beyond Emilia, but it’s good that everyone is having fun.

Finding herself feeling happy, Emilia relaxes as well.

Elf: “There, now that’s much better than looking down. Smile, smile, let’s see a smile.”

Emilia: “—Right.”

After pointing at the smiling Emilia, the women’s fingers pull their cheeks into a grin.

Finding their argument as legitimate, Emilia identically makes a smile and nods.

Waving a goodbye to the women, Emilia resumes her course toward the river.

She scales the gnarled tree-roots, passes through gaps in verdant leaves. Hearing the burbling of a brooklet, Emilia breaks into a jog, her face beaming.

Emilia: “Iiiii’m—heeere!”

???: “Waugh?! Emilia?!”

The instant she pushes a branch out of the way and pokes out her head, she sees someone toweling themselves dry right in front of her, looking shocked. Realizing that the intruder is Emilia, the youth’s eyes flit here and there and there in confusion—

Emilia: “Ah.”

Youth: “Auh.”

Emilia puts her hand to her mouth as the youth’s feet slip and he plunges into the river.

SPLASH. A spray of water cascades up as he lands in the brook.

Emilia: “Arch! Are you okay?”

Standing atop where he fell, Emilia looks down and calls down to him.

Bubbles arise one after another on the water’s face for a moment, before a blond young man floats to the surface. He wipes his face with his hand, then raises his hand at the onlooking Emilia.

Arch: “Look, Emilia! Don’t interrupt people right when they’re almost done bathing!”

Emilia: “I’m sorry. I didn’t think anyone’d be here…but I’m glad it was you, Arch.”

Arch: “What’re you implying?!”

Emilia pats her chest in relief. Arch yells, cursing the absurdity of it all.

Emilia puts her finger to her lips and hums.

Emilia: “I mean we’re close Arch, so you’ll forgive me.”

Arch: “Auh…”

Emilia: “Me, I’ve always thought of you like a big brother…so you’ll definitely say there was no helping today and forgive me, I think.”

Arch: “Think damn what. Goddamn it…has no idea what I feel…”

Arch mumbles his regrets while sinking his mouth into the water, spewing bubbles. Which means the latter of his statement drowns and Emilia does not hear it.

Emilia: “And I came here to take a bath. Can I jump in next to you?”

Arch: “Wha? I-Idiot, don’t! Take a bath, in somewhere as open as this? Of course you can’t! Be a little more discrete! Are you trying to be a child forever?!”

Emilia: “Nuhh…”

Arch: “No nuhhs!”

Emilia: “Wehh…”

Arch: “No wehhs either!”

Having readied herself to leap into the river, Emilia pouts at Arch’s prohibition on bathing. She’s not sure why he’s so panicked, but either way Arch is being mean today. Maybe he’s mad about slipping and falling in the river.

Emilia: “Arch, I’m sorry.”

Arch: “Er, um…h-how come you’re being so docile suddenly?”

Emilia: “I thought maybe you really didn’t like falling in. I’m sorry. So let me take a bath too. If I don’t, Mother Fortuna won’t let me eat.”

Arch: “That’s something a kid’d think!”

Yells Arch, hands to his head.

He stops dog paddling for an instant, and sinks into the water slightly. Meaning, for an instant, he takes his attention off Emilia.

Emilia: “Woo.”

Arch: “Ah!”

After her quiet cheer, sunlight skims across Emilia’s eyelashes and—she’s falling.

Her silver hair flutters out behind her as she shoots toes-first into the water.

Emilia’s contact with the water gives not a single unneeded splash as she sinks with shocking calm, reaching the bottom of the deep river.

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In the clear water, Emilia's open eyes sight the fish and water plants swaying in the current. Her foot contacts the river bottom. She savors the tickly feeling of sand as she ascends. Her face pops up beside Arch,

Emilia: "—Pahh."

Arch: "No! Pahhs!"

Emilia smooths her wet hair back, and backstrokes away from the yelling Arch.

Arch furrows his brows, perhaps wanting to say more, but seems to guess that saying it won't stop Emilia anyway. He gives a deep sigh and goes around to behind Emilia.

Emilia: "This feels nice, Arch."

Arch "Well you jumped in yourself so maybe it does for you. I got pushed in, and sprayed with water when you jumped in so I'm feeling terrible."

Emilia: "Okay. I'm glad you're having fun too."

Arch: "You really are an optimistic girl, Emilia…"

Feeling complimented, Emilia floats on the water as she puffs out her chest.

Arch averts his gaze and scratches at his nose. His cheeks are red. But the water's cold. Does he have a fever?

Emilia: "Are you unwell? Is that why you're mad you fell in the water?"

If so, then of course he'd tell her off for what she did, even after she apologized.

Though, she'd like to drag Arch out of the river and heal him with magic immediately.

Arch: “No it’s not that, don’t worry. That’s not what’s going on. … Um, Emilia. Around guys, you shouldn’t…no I mean, around people, you shouldn’t be this exposed. Especially around people you’re not close with.”

Emilia: “…? But Arch, you’re who I’m closest with?”

Arch: “Even around people you’re close with! Erm…b-but just only do it around me.”

Emilia: “Not around Mother?”

Arch: “Around Lady Fortuna, me, and that woman!”

Yelling at Emilia as she tilts her head, Arch bites his lip, his face reddening further. Then he sinks into the water and grumbles, disappearing from Emilia’s view as she furrows her brows. …is the instant when he splashes up by the riverbank, and pulls himself onto the shore.

Arch: “Okay, you get out of there too, Emilia. When you’re just trying to wake up, usually you’d just wash your face, not take a bath. I don’t think Lady Fortuna would tell you go bathing right in the morning.”

Emilia: “Actually, you might be right. …I didn’t bring a change of clothes.”

Arch: “Seriously, what are you doing…”

Says Arch, looking astonished at Emilia’s reckless behavior.

Emilia starts swimming over to him, when he dashes into the forest and returns with a towel.

Arch: “Wipe yourself down with this, and wrap it around yourself until you get back to your house. Heck, you’re a handful of a child no matter how old you get.”

Emilia: “Ahaha, I’m sorry, Arch. Thank you for lending me this.”
Even Emilia has to reflect on her actions after all of this.

His outstretched hand takes her arm and pulls her out of the river, where she takes the towel and dries her long hair. It glimmers silver in the sunlight, terribly heavy with water.

Emilia: “…Was my hair always this long?”

Arch: “What’re you talking about? You’ve been growing it out for ages. Something about how it’s the same color as Lady Fortuna’s, and looks pretty.”

The towel absorbs the water, when Arch hits her with that statement.

After hearing it said it does feel like he’s right, but when exactly did she decide to grow it out?

Although feeling that something isn’t quite right, Emilia chooses to avert her gaze from the strangeness. She gets the damp out of her hair and begins toweling her body. That done, she peers into the river and reaches out to fulfil her original goal of washing her face —

—Seeing her face reflected on the water, Emilia’s throat jars.

Pale skin. Amethyst eyes. Pink lips. Long, glistening silver hair. All exact components of her own self. Nothing has changed, and nothing is strange.

As if.

Strange things, odd things, incorrect things, are all she sees here.

Emilia: “auh, ah…”

Patting, slapping at her cheeks, Emilia exhales choppy breath after choppy breath.

Her lungs feel like they’re convulsing. She can’t breathe properly. Her guts constrict, and throbbing, painful pressure coursing through her whole.

Arch: “Emilia, what’s wrong?”

Noticing Emilia’s irregular state, Arch speaks with his voice low.

Emilia keeps staring at the water’s edge, motionless, as Arch touches her shoulder and strokes her head from behind.

Arch: “Did you see something strange in the river?”

Emilia: “…No.”

Arch: “Did your stomach start hurting? I can’t use healing magic, so I’ll have to take you to someone else…”

Emilia: “That’s, not it.”

She feels the touch of Arch’s palm and hears the sound of his voice. But does not draw her gaze away from the water.

Arch follows Emilia’s gaze, seemingly realizing what she is looking at. He timidly points at Emilia reflected on the water.

Arch: “Did something happen to your face? But I think it looks the same, pretty as always.”

Emilia: “It’s an adult’s…”

Arch: “Huh?”

Emilia: “My face is an adult’s. …I’ve never even seen my face before.”

Seeing an unfamiliar face on the water, Emilia whispers with trembling voice.

She moves her fingers to check whether this face may not be hers, but the reflection mirrors her movements and denies that possibility. This face belonged to her. Never seen it before, and it’s hers.

Emilia: “I…”

After noticing that one decisive point of oddity, many more inconsistencies come into focus.

She looks down. Her chest has grown. Her hair too.

Her limbs are longer than she remembers, and there’s supposed to be a bigger size difference between herself and Arch.

People’s perceptions of her and conversations with her have changed in nuance.

And how many times have people pointed out that she’s not a child?

No. She isn’t.

Emilia: “—I have to go.”

Arch: “Emilia?”

Emilia stands up, her head swaying slightly as she turns around.

The forest she ran through, and the village. The house where Fortuna awaits.

She needs to go back there.

She doesn’t know what she needs to do yet, but that point alone is unshakeable truth.

Emilia: “Arch, I’m sorry. I’m going back to Mother Fortuna’s.”

Arch: “Y-Yeah…that’s fine, but is everything okay with you?”

Emilia: “I’m fine now. I’m sorry for interrupting your bath. And I’ll be okay without the towel.”

Emilia takes off the towel and pushes it against the confused Arch.

She makes sure that he takes it before breaking barefoot into a run. Fast as she can, back to her house—and behind her,

Arch: “Emilia!”

She hears Arch.

Her heart insists that she has no time to wait, but she still ends up stopping. As if someone had told her to never let a single thing Arch says escape her.

She glances back. Arch raises his hand.

Arch: “I don’t know what’s up, but if you’re ever worried about something, you can always talk to me! Because I…because I’m like a brother to you!”

After a second of hesitation, Arch gives Emilia those impassioned words.

For some reason, hearing them makes something surge up in Emilia’s chest.

She’s definitely happy to have heard those words.

But she has a feeling that that the thing swelling up from her heart differs from ordinary joy.

Emilia: “Right! Thank you, big bro!”

Emilia waves in response to the blushing Arch, and resumes her run.

3

Fortuna: “…I’m sure I just told you to wash your face, so how did you manage to come back with your whole body sopping wet? Your Mother’s mystified.”

Sighs an astonished Fortuna as she welcomes her dripping-wet daughter back home.

While her hair has mostly been toweled dry, Emilia’s white clothing sticks to her skin and water drips from her skirt.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, Mother. I was kinda…sooo kinda half-asleep.”

Fortuna: “I know I said to wash your face to get rid of your sleepiness, and you sure did put some energy into doing that. You really are a child no matter how old you get. Did anyone see you looking like this?”

It’s embarrassing that someone would see you when you look like a drowned rat, is probably what she means.

Then, miraculously, no she didn’t run into anybody on the way back.

Emilia: “No, it’s okay. Only Arch saw.”

Fortuna: “Hm…Arch. Well, if it’s him…but I suspect Arch has started viewing you differently than he used to…”

Emilia: “Mother?”

Fortuna: “Ah, erm, no, it’s nothing. Now, come here.”

Emilia lowers her gaze. Fortuna looks on resignedly before stroking Emilia’s head, then taking her hand, and pulling her into the house. But water continues to drip from her clothes.

Emilia: “Mother, the house is getting all wet.”

Fortuna: “Just need to towel that dry afterwards. Anyway, I have a towel, so dry yourself with that and get changed in your room. I’ll make breakfast when you’re back.”

This house, made in a hollowed-out tree, was created by pouring mana into an old arbor to change the thing’s shape. Emilia and Fortuna’s house was hand-made by Fortuna, and is a rather large dwelling for only two people. The second floor has each of their rooms, while the first floor is a dining and kitchen space.

Thinking back on it, it was a luxurious use of rooms. —’Thinking back on it’, is a rather weird statement. Fortuna: “Come on, get going.”

Emilia: “Wagh.”

A towel presses itself into her face while she is in thought. Emilia looks at Fortuna in protest, but seeing her Mother’s gaze as she puts her hand to her hip quickly leads Emilia to surrender.

The towel smells like sun on her face. She dries herself as she returns to her room on the second floor.

Her room is a plain thing.

This also goes for Fortuna, but Emilia doesn't especially like pointless decorations. Her room hosts the bare minimum of furniture, with a few extra fixtures. It has a wooden box with her clothes in it, which Emilia squats down next to. She grabs a random outfit out of it and speedily changes out of her wet clothes and into that.

Just like with her room, Emilia feels no urge to embellish her clothing.

She pulls a short-sleeved outfit, long enough to cover her uppers and lowers, over her head. Then she changes her undergarments and exits the room. —While making a conscious effort not to look at the object beside the clothes box.

Emilia: "Mother Fortuna, I'll wash the wet clothes by myself, so…"

???: "Goodness. I think that filial and excellent of you."

Emilia: "…"

Emilia puts the laundry in a basket and comes down the stairs, when a man's voice welcomes her.

Emilia's breathing jams as she hears the kind, affectionate voice. She looks over at the dining table.

Usually Fortuna and Emilia would be the only ones around that table, and so one of these three chairs is excessive. It's the chair they use when a certain someone is visiting, which Fortuna brought out from deeper in the house.

The person seated in that chair is of course the familiar,

Emilia: "Geuse."

Geuse: “Indeed, it is lovely to see you again, Lady Emilia. Now, has anything notably different happened for you?”

Emilia: “Me? No, it’s been same as usual. Geuse, it’s been sooo long. I didn’t know you were coming today, how come you’re here?”

Geuse: “You did not know? I was sure that I had asked my finger to contact you prior…”

The mild-faced man, Geuse, puts his hand to his chin in thought. He is a good-natured person and appears to be earnestly disconcerted, but Emilia instantly deduces the culprit.

She passes by Geuse to peer into the kitchen, where she sees Fortuna with her hand to her mouth, stifling a laugh.

Emilia: “Mother, you kept it a secret.”

Fortuna: “Huhu, now did I? I might’ve only forgotten about it.”

Emilia: “I don’t think so. Geuse’s seat is there, and you’re making food for three.”

Fortuna: “Ah, sharp eyes. You’re usually a little off-kilter, but you’re so perceptive about these things.”

Fortuna winks at Emilia and whistles as she picks up a dish. She presents it to Emilia.

Fortuna: “Now come help set the table, Lia. You can’t cook anything on your own, so I should at least be able to ask you to arrange things.”

Emilia: “Hrmp…changing the subject. And I can’t cook because you won’t teach me.”

Fortuna: “You’ll absolutely mix up the sugar and salt, and I’m too scared to put a girl who can’t handle a knife properly in the kitchen.”

Cutting off Emilia’s rebuttals, Fortuna sets dish after dish on the table. Although unsatisfied, Emilia follows dejectedly behind her to the table.

Seated at the table, Geuse looks at the fragrant dishes and breaks into a smile.

Geuse: “I am privileged to partake in your cooking, Lady Fortuna. The joy does not fade, no matter how numerous the occasions I relish it.”

Fortuna: “And there you go again, saying that so easily.”

Geuse: “I am merely conveying my honest feelings?”

Fortuna: “That’s what I’m saying is devious.”

Geuse tilts his head, looking somewhat distressed.

Watching their exchange makes Emilia smile. Just watching them is enough to make Emilia completely forget about how Fortuna argued her into submission.

Emilia: “If Mother’s food makes you so happy, Geuse, you should just live here too.”

Fortuna: “Wh—Emilia!”

While placing a large plate overflowing with vegetables on the middle of the table, Emilia rides the conversation and tries that sentence out. Immediately, Fortuna looks panicked and her face flashes red as she glances over at Geuse.

Fortuna: “D-Don’t say anything crazy. Geuse has so many things he has to deal with, he’s fitting time in his busy schedule to come see us and…”

Geuse: “I am overjoyed by the offer, Lady Emilia. Were it a possibility, I would like to oblige. Sincerely I would.”

Fortuna rushes to object while Geuse replies calmly, the two in utter contrast. Geuse’s statement kills

Fortuna’s momentum and she plops down into her chair, before drawing herself up small.

Looking at the two, Emilia also takes her seat.

—This scene unfolding before her looks overwhelmingly natural to Emilia.

Emilia: “Mother, Geuse, if neither of you object then you should just do it. No one’s going to stop you from being like that. Ah…unless I’m stopping you?”

It’s plain to see that Fortuna and Geuse think favorably of the other.

Perhaps they’re not going any further than this fixed limit because of Emilia’s presence. However, Emilia’s worry is—

Fortuna: “You’re not.”

Geuse: “You are not.”

—promptly dispelled by the two as a needless anxiety.

Emilia’s eyes widen. Fortuna and Geuse look at each other, realizing that they said the same thing, and laugh.

Emilia: “See, you really do get along sooo well.”

Fortuna: “Stop teasing us, Emilia. Geuse, tell her off too.”

Geuse: “Indeed, Lady Emilia. Fortuna- sama is a splendid person. Should someone of my likes overstay their welcome, it will burden her with objectionable rumors.”

Emilia: “Hrrmpf. But, I think you’re too late for that.”

Geuse undersells himself as he elevates Fortuna. Emilia sees a sadness in Fortuna’s gaze as she looks at him, and raises her finger.

Emilia: “After all, everyone always tells me it when I go outside the house. Not to cause trouble for Mother Fortuna or Father Romanée-Conti.”

It’s pretty funny how dumbstruck the two look at hearing that.

Emilia puts her hands to her mouth to keep herself from laughing, settles her breathing, and,

Emilia: “I’m serious. When I stayed up last night, and got transfixed in bridging the differences between the old books you gave me, Geuse, and the maps…everyone praises me for helping in my Father’s work.”

Fortuna: “Wh-Who is, saying…”

Emilia: “Ms. Tehena from across the street, Ms. Mitto, and granny Tansei.”

Fortuna: “Those three gossips…!”

Imaging their faces floating in the air, Fortuna bites her lip in frustration.

Her brows shoot down in anger, her face just a little scary.

Emilia says, ‘now now’ to console her, and,

Emilia: “Anyway, everyone thinks that. And me too, um, I, erm, thought about stuff, kinda a lot, and, hrmm, uhhh…it’s…”

Geuse: “Lady Emilia, there is no need to force yourself to ponder it.”

Emilia: “N-No! I think it’s good! But it just kinda feels like Mother’s being taken away so I can’t calm down!”

Everyone else is fully ready for it, but the two of them and Emilia are being fickle.

Though their problem is one thing, and Emilia would prefer that her emotions not get in the way of their decision.

After all, even by Emilia’s view, they’re a wonderful match for each other.

Emilia: “I think it’d be sooo great. You two should think about it too.”

Fortuna and Geuse are silent.

Emilia: “Not anyone in the forest, and not me, and not anyone’s going to stop you. I’m not gonna let anyone tell you it’s bad or you can’t do it!”

Emilia’s hands strike the table as she speaks zealously.

She then realizes that she’s getting too passionate, and looks taken aback. The two gaze at her as she strokes her hair and seats herself.

Emilia: “A-And so…I’ll leave the rest to you young’ns.”

Fortuna: “Seriously, Emilia, where are you leaning this?”

Fortuna looks astonished as always at red-faced Emilia’s comment. But the expression soon vanishes beneath a laugh,

Fortuna: “Hee, huhuhu.”

Geuse: “Ahaha, Lady Emilia…indeed, you have grown. I was lacking in discernment when I judged that nothing was different.”

Fortuna: “You were, Geuse. She’s my prided daughter, of course she would.”

Geuse: “Yes, I underestimated her.”

Fortuna and Geuse look at each other and laugh.

The atmosphere around the two is even more tender than before, and Emilia senses that her own statements have brought about a change.

The two of them abound with warmth.

The gaze they share, surely, carries a different nuance from before.

—It’s a terribly happy scene.

Fortuna: “…Emilia?”

Fortuna glances at Emilia and calls her name.

Emilia swallows her breath and buries her face in her hands. She panickily wipes away the tears threatening to spill from her eyes, and gives a forced, “Ah.”

Emilia: “I, think there’s some gunk in my eye. Gunk that’s sooo big.”

Fortuna: “That big? Are you okay?”

Emilia: “I’m okay, it’s only fist-sized.”

Geuse: “A-Are you certain you will be well?”

Emilia: “I’m fine!”

Emilia rubs vigorously at her eyes as she stands up.

She leaves the table, and begins heading for the second floor.

Emilia: “I’m going to put in some really good eyedrops. It’ll freshen my eyes up so well they’ll fall out.”

Fortuna: “Your eyes are such a pretty amethyst, Emilia, don’t throw them away. They’re exactly like my brother’s, and lovely.”

Emilia: “And they’re the same color as yours, Mother.”

Perhaps not expecting that response, Fortuna’s eyes open in surprise. Emilia sees Geuse laugh at her expression, and Emilia laughs too.

She smiles as her foot lands on the staircase. She glances back at the two.

Emilia: “You two eat breakfast. I’ll be back right away.”

Fortuna: “It won’t be good once it gets cold, so really do come back right away.”

Emilia: “Mm, right right away.”

Geuse: “Then we will await your return restfully, Lady Emilia.”

With those send-offs from Fortuna and Geuse, Emilia takes a deep breath.

She glances back one last time, looks down at the two at the table,

Emilia: “—I love you both.”

With that, Emilia returns to her room.

Emilia closes the door to her room and sighs, expelling all the air inside her.

Her innards feel squeezed, constricted. She slaps her cheeks to psych herself up, shakes her head, and walks over to a corner of the room.

Next to Emilia’s box of clothes is something long and thin, with a thin cloth draped over it. Emilia had never thought to reach for that thing until now, but,

Emilia: “If I don’t face it, it won’t start.”

Give her courage.

Emilia traces her finger over her lips, remembering the warmth as she pulls the drape. The cloth falls. Behind it is a polished full-length mirror to reflect Emilia from her head to her toes—

???: “—Did this scene of ideal happiness grant you with anything?”

—With a white-haired witch standing where Emilia’s image should be.

Chapter 124A:
Listen Up, Stupid

1

—How many times has he come to this room to see her?

The first time they met, Subaru easily foiled the girl's illusory looping hallway and entered the Forbidden Archive.

Their first impressions of each other were mutually horrid.

Beatrice preformed a mana drain one someone still midway through convalescence, and promptly downed Subaru. Afterwards she had to put up with his endless revenge-inspired meddling.

They would insult each other every time they met, but despite that got along ridiculously well, and Subaru found himself stopping by the supposedly-veiled Forbidden Archive.

Subaru and Beatrice had had many yelling matches, spit flying everywhere, over these almost-two-months that Subaru has been in the mansion, just one immature exchange after another.

Those exchanges changed after the Royal Selection properly began and Subaru returned from the Capital.

Beatrice was rejecting him. With knowledge gained in the Sanctuary, where she was absent, Subaru learned her history and fate, and accordingly understood some reasons for her stubbornness.

Then he prattled as if he knew anything, trying to understand her solitude—and Beatrice, long bereft of tears after these four hundred years, wailed her laments.

There was nothing he could've said to the exhausted girl after that. Immediate circumstances led Beatrice to lose her life, and Subaru saw that final expression on her face as she protected him.

That expression seared itself into his memory. Running off his emotions, Subaru returned here.

—So that this time, no matter what it took, he'd get her out of this place.

Beatrice: "Taking me out of here…?"

Is Beatrice's bewildered response to Subaru's grand opening statement. She hugs the gospel tighter, drawing her knees to her chest as she sits atop the stepladder.

Beatrice: "Unwanted meddling, I suppose. Nobody asked for you to do that, in fact."

Subaru: "This isn't about anyone asking or not asking me. I'm taking you out of here. Decisively."

Beatrice: "Just scram and have that foolish girl comfort you on her lap, I suppose."

Subaru: "You little…this's war! You say something like that and it's war!"

Beatrice brings up a topic back from when Subaru was overloaded in this mansion, and he strains his voice to distract from his internal shame.

Beatrice snorts at him and glances away.

Subaru: "Anyway, this isn't the time to be mucking around like this. We have basically no room to postpone anything. Have you grasped what's going on outside?"

Beatrice: "…I do know that some uninvited guests have come to the mansion, in fact. After the big and little maid did something or other, two preposterous people started going on a rampage, I suppose."

Subaru: "Though, one of those preposterous people's a helper who I brought along. I don't think he'll lose, martially speaking, but unfortunately I get this feeling the difference in their resolve'll determine the win. And so I can't accommodate too much of your solemnity here."

Beatrice: "Then you're evacuating the mansion's residents while your assistant buys time …is your scheme, in fact. Are you trusting in your ally or aren't you with this sloppy strategy, I suppose?"

Subaru: "The strategy's like this 'cause I know he's way too kind."

The restorative effects of Garfiel's Divine Protection of Earth Spirits mean that his current condition is 80~90% of his maximum. When adding on his lack of hesitation for battle, he's quite a considerable fighting force. But Subaru doubts that he has sufficient resolve to kill his opponent, which will keep him from putting in his all, which is a bit of a minus.

Meanwhile Elsa is in perfect condition. Subaru judges her strange, unexplainable combat strength as a good match for Garfiel at his best. Her tendency to enjoy herself during her battles is something of a minus for her combat-wise, but she has that inexplicable immorality. Elsa's statements give no suggestion that killing her indefinite times will make her stay dead either. Subaru's tentative estimations dictate that Elsa has the slight advantage.

Subaru: "But if the strategy's working, Frederica should collect Rem while Garfiel's suppressing Elsa. Petra met up with Otto, so now there's only one essential evacuee left before we can save everybody."

Beatrice: "Essential evacuees…you mean to say that Betty is the last, in fact."

Subaru: "Yeah, I do."

Subaru had instructed Petra go meet up with Otto, who has guided the villagers in Earlham to safety, and retreat after helping with a few gambits in the mansion.

Subaru has spent time reaching the Archive, and she should have finished her departure by now.

Subaru: "And so I'm getting you out of here. If you don't wanna run while holding my hand, then I'll piggyback you or cradle you or do whatever to you, so just behave and come over here and…"

Beatrice: "Don't make me repeat myself, I suppose. I don't need your help, in fact."

Subaru steps closer and offers Beatrice his hand, but she speaks low to reject him. He comes to a stop in front of her as she turns her head in indication of the room.

Beatrice: "Hear me, I suppose? An isolated space, of power worthy of Betty, separated from the cloisters of time. This is Beatrice's Forbidden Archive, in fact. Regardless of whatever threatens the outside, that threat will never reach Betty's Archive. Your fears are needless, in fact."

Subaru: "Nope, they're needed. Your Archive's randomness does mean it's strongly advantageous when it comes to fleeing, true… but, it has a fatal flaw. And the enemy knows what it is."

Beatrice: "A fatal, flaw?"

Beatrice furrows her brows, indeed unable to let the comment pass. But Subaru just responds to her harsh gaze with a nod, and gestures to the door behind him.

Subaru: "Your power which randomly connects to some door in the mansion is strong. But…it only works on the mansion's CLOSED DOORS. So if you leave the mansion's doors open, you're certain to reach the Archive eventually, since you'll be losing doors until only the Archive's is left."

Beatrice: "—Hic."

Subaru: "It's such a stupid thing. I bet you didn't notice it either. I was wondering why I hadn't realized it until practically I witnessed it myself."

Subaru remembers when Elsa, having noticed the loophole in Gate Crossing, found the Archive. If Garfiel wasn't around to impede her, Elsa would unmistakably come here while using that exact same method. And likely take Beatrice's life.

Subaru: “Though of course, it’s not like I’m underestimating you, or saying that her showing up here means you’re going down easy. It’s just that her strangeness is some of the most extreme I’ve ever experienced. If we can do this without facing her, there’s nothing better.”

If they can defeat Elsa then he would like to do that, but it’s not an essential requirement for clearing this loop series. If Roswaal is the one hiring her, then so long as Subaru crosses the time limit for the issues in the Sanctuary, Roswaal should stop having any reason to keep hiring Elsa. The whole insignia affair in the Capital proves that this would make Elsa withdraw. Either way, right now they need to survive through the attack on the mansion and—

Subaru: “Beatrice. This place isn’t safe. If you’re not here, she won’t disturb the library. So just for now…”

Beatrice: “Why does that woman know how to break Betty’s Gate Crossing, I suppose?”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru spits out the suitable bargaining chips to convince Beatrice to leave.

But Beatrice, perhaps listening to Subaru’s statements or perhaps not, whispers a whisper differing from what Subaru’s looking for.

Subaru shuts his mouth. Beatrice remains upon the stepladder.

Beatrice: “It’s inconceivable that she would abruptly conceive of how to break Betty’s Gate Crossing on her first encounter with it, in fact. Whoever taught her those methods knows me, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Beatrice. This isn’t the time for that conversa—”

Beatrice: “—It’s Roswaal, in fact.”

Subaru can’t divert her.

Her swift thinking makes Subaru swallow his breath.

Seeing his reaction, Beatrice understands everything. Roswaal hired Elsa, and his goal is to kill Beatrice. Which means—

Beatrice: “It is written in Roswaal’s gospel that I be killed, I suppose.” Giving no heed to either Subaru’s affirmations or denials, Beatrice sighs.

It’s unlikely that the relief Subaru perceives in that sigh is just his imagination. Unable to overlook the comment, Subaru puts pressure on Beatrice.

Subaru: “Want to tell me what that sigh was? And why the hell you look like you’re agreeing?!”

Beatrice: “It’s what it looks like, I’m agreeing, in fact. If Roswaal’s gospel has ordered him to do this, then that means my fate is decided, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Fuck is that…Roswaal’s book is Roswaal’s book, and your book is your book! Your book really says to go get killed by Roswaal, does it?!”

Jabbing out his finger, Subaru glares at the gospel in Beatrice’s arms.

If nothing has changed from the previous loops, then for four hundred years, that book has written just blank white paper.

Beatrice’s expression turns gloomy and she opens to a page of the gospel. She spreads the book open and presents it so that Subaru can see it—showing a book of only empty pages.

Beatrice: “Nothing is written, in fact. Identical as ever, only blank pages, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Then there’s no reason for you to get killed like Roswaal’s book says! It’s same as ever, you’re who decides what you do!”

Beatrice: “…The same as ever, I’m the one deciding?”

Subaru: “Yes! Nothing being written means you must’ve faced choices during all this time. Small things to big things, you’re the one who decided every path you took! So there's no reason for you to dance along to someone else's choices this time, eith—"

Beatrice: "What in my life have I ever decided?" The doleful question crushes Subaru's momentum.

Beatrice tilts her head as she gazes at Subaru, her eyes melancholy. She flips through the blank pages

Beatrice: "All the time Betty spent in Roswaal's mansion, protecting the Archive that Mother entrusted to her, endlessly, endlessly… when during that did I ever have time belonging to myself? When did Betty, having lived empty centuries without writ, ever leave her footsteps anywhere in the world? What did Beatrice ever do, and who is she?"

Subaru: "Bea, trice…"

Beatrice: "Betty's life, Betty's four hundred years, are as blank as this gospel, in fact. A void, in fact. What I chose by myself, what I gained by myself, what can attest of myself…all non-existent."

Beatrice claps the gospel shut and sets it on her lap. She strokes its nameless cover as she quietly speaks,

Beatrice: "I'm identical to an empty book. Losing me here simply means losing a blank, letterless text. Never anything to anybody, merely a book shoved in a bookcase—it'd be laudable for it to be gone, in fact."

Subaru: "What if there's people who don't want that blank book gone?"

Beatrice feels to be verging on abandoning her four centuries and her future. Subaru manages to get words out in an attempt to connect to her heart.

Subaru has not yet found his reply to Beatrice's tearful scream from back then.

But even so, should he fail to speak here, she will give up on herself.

Subaru: “You called it nothing, a void. But there assuredly is a book wedged inside that bookcase. There are people who know that book exists. And maybe there’s people who’ll want to pick up that book someday, you think they’d stand the thing going off and destroying itself?”

Beatrice: “The book has neither name nor author, I suppose. Supposing for argument that this benevolent someone exists, opening that book and seeing the inside would only disappoint them, in fact. The blank book doesn’t want to watch the disappointment unfurl across that person’s face either, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Then! Then what is that book doing in that place!”

Beatrice: “…”

Beatrice gazes emotionlessly at Subaru.

It feels like a retort, saying this whole dialogue lacks any apparent meaning. Subaru raises his head regardless, continuously reaching out to Beatrice’s distant heart.

Subaru: “If someone who picks it up’s just going to be disappointed…then for what sake is that book there? Wasn’t the book made because it had meaning?”

Beatrice: “…The book’s author crafted that book for the sake of a person, in fact. The book is made to appear empty to everyone except for that SOMEONE, I suppose. If we assume there’s to be meaning, then the very instant the book reaches the SOMEONE comprises the meaning of that book’s creation.”

Subaru: “And so then—”

Beatrice: “The book mustn’t be disposed of until it reaches the SOMEONE, you’re saying, I suppose.”

Subaru swallows his breath.

He notices an instant before can voice it what a cruel breed of hope he is arguing for. Beatrice sees Subaru’s expression, and a horribly pained smile arises on her face.

Beatrice: “Exactly. If Betty truly were just a book…then she’d be happy to wait for that day, in fact.”

Beatrice would have waited there for that day when the SOMEONE’s fingers flipped through her pages. If she were a book.

—But Beatrice isn’t a book. She’s a little girl, shivering from prolonged isolation.

Beatrice: “If I were a soulless, mindless book…then I could have faultlessly believed in Mother’s instructions forever. I could have been Mother’s lovely Beatrice forever, I suppose.”

If she were an entity like a doll, lacking a heart and comprised only of ornamentation, she would have never deliberated.

If she were an entity like a book, unshaken by the constant passing of time, she would have never lamented.

Beatrice was not that thing.

Beatrice: “But I have a heart. Should time pass I do think about things, at least enough to lose faith in what I believed in, in fact. I agonize and deliberate, I suppose. There were countless nights where I scrambled to salvage my memories, because I’d forgotten what Mother’s face, what her smile looked like!”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “There were times I couldn’t bear being alone, and I yearned to touch someone! But everyone leaves me behind! They’ll say whatever they’ll say, state it’s for the sake of something more important than me, assert their rationale, and desert me! Mother did! Roswaal did! —Even Ryuzu did!!”

Beatrice shouts, her face scrunched up and near to tears.

Hearing the name Ryuzu makes Subaru remember what he heard in the Sanctuary about Beatrice’s past. And the root of all the present Ryuzu’s, Ryuzu Meyer.

She and Beatrice had only known each other for a fleeting instant, but their story still told of a definite bond. —Still left a persistent scar on Beatrice's heart.

Beatrice: "—Just, enough, in fact."

Beatrice loses her momentum. The tone of her voice plummets.

Her expression, twisted with emotion, returns to its usual apathy as she hugs the book on her lap close.

Beatrice: "Betty's gospel will not outline Betty's future. …I've known it for a very long time, in fact. Even Mother forsook Betty's fate far and long ago."

The lack of writ about the future means that the gospel's owner has fallen into a dead end. While judging off Subaru's possession of Petelgeuse's gospel, that was how Beatrice appraised books with frozen writ. Appraised that the same thing was happening to herself.

Beatrice: "If Betty's fate has been outlined in Roswaal's gospel… how sardonic, I suppose. But that does ease me, in fact. It's inconceivable that Roswaal would take half-measures, I suppose."

Subaru: "An old friend of yours might kill you…how is that relaxing?"

Beatrice: "It's obvious, in fact."

Beatrice nods.

A fleeting, affectionate smile arises on her face.

Beatrice: "If Roswaal's gospel has written about me…then it means that Mother has certainly not forgotten about me, I suppose."

—Warped.

Beatrice's smiling visage makes Subaru notice that he is seconds from drowning beneath an emotional torrent.

It's warped. Beatrice's visage as she rejoices in her contact with her mother's love is so warped it's unbearable. Subaru could stand that this thing, that this happening, was a mother's love—as fucking if.

Beatrice: "…What are you thinking to do, in fact?"

Subaru bites his lip and endures the sensations welling up in him as he steps forward.

Caution cloaks Beatrice's expression as she perceives the alarming vibe emanating from Subaru.

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "I asked you a question, I suppose. What are you thinking to do, in fact? If you try anything, I'll show no mercy, I suppose. I've already accepted my fate, in fact."

Subaru: "Accepted goddamn what. So you're no different from Roswaal. No, he's at least self-aware, you're multitudes more awful. Utterly hopeless, let it get fucking worse."

Anger surges from inside him.

It's an emotion that Subaru has constantly combated since all these events in the Sanctuary.

Anger at himself while challenging the Trial, anger at the witches for toying with him, anger at Garfiel for underestimating himself out of childish stubbornness, anger at Roswaal for obeying the writ to try and affirm the fragility of feelings, anger at Emilia for not believing in herself or Subaru's love—

—and now anger at Beatrice, and everyone who cornered her into this.

Subaru: "You're stupid. Say whatever about your fate, say whatever about your Mother's orders, anyone looking from aside's gonna think it's sad. You have a heart? You can't be a book? Of course you goddamn can't, stupid. Did staying holed in this moldy room make you incapable of recognizing that?"

Beatrice: "Stu…!"

Beatrice's eyes shoot open, and after a look of surprise—indignation.

She gets to her feet on the stepladder, her skirt swaying as she points at Subaru.

Beatrice: "You! Who do you think you are referring to with that comment, I suppose! I'm stupid, I'm stupid? How do you dare say this, in fact…and especially by you! What do you think you could possibly know about Betty, I suppose!"

Subaru: "I know you're stupid, and you don't realize you're stupid, so I'd say I know you better than you do! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stuuuupid!!"

Beatrice: "Y-Y-You…!!'

Subaru flips the bird as he curses, turning Beatrice's face crimson and blocking off her words. Her rage is too incredible for her to come up with any retort. Barging into openings like that happens to be Subaru's forte.

Subaru: "A four-hundred year void? Drop the affectations! You hugged your knees crying for four hundred years is what you did! You had all that time to think, why the hell are you clinging to this single answer forever! The book's not telling you anything so you think that means I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING? Are you stupid?!"

Beatrice: "O-Of course I thought about things, in fact! As I plainly would, I suppose! Can you conceive how many things I tested to see if the gospel's writ would change! But no matter what I did, no matter how I waited, it didn't! So!"

Subaru: "That's what I'm saying is stupid! The book's got nothing in it so you work to try and make letters appear, the hell is this, invisible ink on a New Year's card? No one does that any more! If none of that was working, start thinking of other possibilities!"

Beatrice: "O-Other, possibilities…"

Subaru: "Straight-out. The possibility your mom's book was wrong."

Beatrice falls utterly speechless.

But she immediately snaps at him, determining his reply as moronic.

Beatrice: “You hold your tongue, in fact! Mother would never pull such an idiotic stunt, I suppose! You…you could not possibly comprehend Mother’s vast thoughts, in fact!”

Subaru: “Nope, don’t know’em at all, stupid. Like I care anything about what your mom thinks. What we’re talking about is you. And you said it, didn’t you. You said that she’d never pull something that idiotic. Really? Can you assert it? You’ve never doubted your mother even once?”

Beatrice: “What, are…”

Subaru: “Four hundred years! Gone with a self- writing book sitting absolutely blank! The person you’re waiting for never came either! You spent all of that time alone, had so much room to think it’s ridiculous, and you never thought of it even once? You seriously never thought that this was strange?!”

Four centuries spent believing in someone.

Perhaps it sounds like a sterling way of being. But in truth it is crooked. Especially when spent only ever thinking about the person, and only ever about their words.

Especially when you’re Beatrice, who does not think her wish will come true, and has nigh given up.

Beatrice: “I-It is inconceivable that Mother would bring about anything incorrect, I suppose! O-Of course she wouldn’t, in fact. She is Mother, I suppose! Do you think it possible to doubt the words of your own mother?!”

Subaru: “Of course I do! I think the stuff my mom says is overwhelmingly lacking in credibility! That time when she misheard news that ‘a satellite fell into the atmosphere’ as ‘a satellite fell into Aichi prefecture’ and I went zooming out with the big scoop without verifying it is when I stopped trusting her! That was in third year primary!”

He would never forget the day that he sincerely accepted that, spread the rumour, and turned into a schoolyard laughingstock.

Subaru never trusted anything his parents said ever again. And he had already deemed his father’s statements as unreliable prior to that.

Subaru: “Four hundred years, and you never doubted her for even a second?! I’m not even twenty years old, and I’d run out of fingers before I could count the number of fistfights I’ve had with my dad. And that’s with twenty years. You had twenty times that, and you never felt that way even once, huh?”

Beatrice: “You…what are you wishing to make me say, I suppose?! I utterly cannot discern it, in fact! Your aims, the point of your remarks, are utterly arcane to Betty! Arcane!”

Subaru: “Then I’ll say it loud and clear! So that your stupid self and your stupid mother can hear it!”

Beatrice is about ready to clutch her head in frustration when Subaru approaches, and takes her hands.

Beatrice looks up. Subaru draws his face close, into breathing range, and asserts to the teary girl:

Subaru: “Stop getting thrown around by a blank book and a four-hundred-year-old promise. —Be the one who chooses what you want to do, Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru: “It’s four hundred years. Plenty long enough for at least one rebellious phase to hit.”

Beatrice has admirably been trying to obey her parent’s instructions.

Her stubborn volition to keep that promise has spawned her solitude and a timespan of emptiness.

Her mother, Echidna, seems to find even that time spent in agony as something sweet, but from Subaru's perspective it's profane immorality.

She's forgotten how to cry and the feeling of wanting to cry, the fuck about this is 'sterling way of being'. Don't make him puke.

With her hands still in Subaru's grip and atop the stepladder, Beatrice looks away from Subaru.

Her height as she sits on the top step is practically equal with Subaru's eye level. She eventually tilts her head down, lets her lips move,

Beatrice: "Th, en…this is, what you're attempting to say, I suppose. Betty, disobey Mother's orders."

Subaru says nothing.

Beatrice: "Abandon everything you believed in over these centuries and be free…that is what you are so easily saying to me, I suppose."

Her shaking voice gradually regains its composure.

It begins to fill with something that is not shock, and Subaru feels his hair standing on end. Ever since coming to this world, this sensation alone is one he has undeniably honed. That being, the sensation of a direly hazardous entity.

Beatrice: "—Demanding that I, Beatrice! Violate a Contract! Speaking as if you know anything!"

Subaru: "—Aguh?!"

As if stricken by a galeforce, Subaru goes flying backwards.

His back strikes the archive floor, still encircled by a wind which slams him into the wall. His breathing stalls. His bones creak all across his body and his vision strobes as he raises his head.

Beatrice remains atop the stepladder, but her expression is one of fury as she looks down at Subaru.

Beatrice: “Contracts are absolute! Absolute, in fact! And especially so for Contracts made between a spirit and a witch. You demand that it be annulled unilaterally, and by the spirit? You understand nothing, I suppose! Such a thing would never be forgiven! Not anyone! Not anything! And not even I myself would permit it, in fact!”

Subaru: “—From someone searching for backdoors in that Contract and thinking if they can’t violate it better try and get killed, that’s rich.”

Beatrice: “—!”

Subaru sighs to force the pain out of him as he sluggishly uprights himself.

Beatrice’s rage is not faltering, and her adorable expression remains thick with malice. Subaru raises his head and laughs venomously.

Subaru: “You’re an incoherent mess, Beatrice. You haven’t realized how inconsistent you’re being? Of course you’ve realized it, haven’t you. You’re a smart person.”

Beatrice: “Be silent, I suppose.”

Subaru: “No, I won’t. Annul the Contract? Sounds perfect. When you hate keeping the promise so much that you literally want to die, just stop. No one’ll fault you.”

Beatrice: “I will fault me! Why is it you don’t understand that, in fact?! Contracts are absolute, and keeping them is…”

Subaru: “Why don’t you understand it? If keeping the Contract kills you, you need to violate the Contract and live. Is it really so strange that I’m opting for this?”

Subaru easily discards these Contracts Beatrice is so fixated on. Beatrice has no words. Subaru might presently look like an incomprehensible, monstrous creature to her. Subaru finds it far more mystifying that he’s being recipient to that opinion.

Keeping promises is important, of course.

Emilia has criticized him multiple times for breaking promises, and he has gone through multiple painful experience because he broke them. And so even Subaru knows that keeping promises is very important.

Even so, he feels no hesitation about making Beatrice violate her Contract.

And his reasoning for it is exactly what he just told her.

If anyone demands that Beatrice keep the promise and die, Subaru's flipping the guy the bird and telling him this: He will make her violate the Contract, and make sure Beatrice lives. It's not even something to think twice about.

Beatrice: "Th-That is unrelenting, incorrigibly insidious of you, in fact…"

Subaru: "I know it's unrelenting, and I am sorry for saying it. But it's important so I'm not surrendering this."

Subaru's stance was decided from the very beginning. From the very beginning, the whole issue depended on Beatrice's feelings.

Beatrice cannot hide her panic and confusion at Subaru's disparagement of Contracts. And of course she can't. Contracts are that important a thing for spirits.

Having witnessed the relationship between a spirit and a spiritualist, Subaru knows they are firm, weighty, utterly unshakable things.

He knows, and he's saying it:

You are more important than it.

Beatrice: "I-If, you…were THEY…"

Subaru's response to Contracts is overwhelmingly overwhelming.

Frailty creeps onto Beatrice's expression, which borders on breakdown.

Her lips speak of the insubstantial someone that Beatrice has waited for over these four centuries.

The fictional entity that Echidna cruelly invented so that she could know WHO BEATRICE WOULD CHOOSE.

Beatrice wants to be saved.

The way that Subaru's words shake her heart and bring her to tears proves it better than anything.

Beatrice: "Will…"

Beatrice's teary eyes focus on Subaru.

Her lips tremble, and, practically clinging,

Beatrice: "…you be Betty's THEY?"

This question could be the full stop on what has gone on for four centuries.

And might be exactly what Echidna ordered her, making it what the witch wants to hear. Who would Beatrice determine as being this insubstantial THEY?

The witch used her daughter to satisfy her own curiosity, letting her spend four hundred years in solitude.

The payoff for all that time rested in that question.

Beatrice swallows her breath. Subaru looks her in the eye, and declares:

Subaru: "Are you stupid? —Of course I wouldn't be this weird mysterious THEY of yours."

2

After the ferocious shockwave gusts through the Archive, Beatrice takes the books thrown about by the wind and returns them to their bookcases.

While they did fall to the floor, none of the books look to have separated from their bindings, fortunately.

Beatrice reflects remorsefully on her use of force while inside the Archive, relieved that only very minor damages occurred.

They are her comrades, who passed four hundred years of solitude alongside her.

Beatrice had not been lying about her wish to be a book. She had fantasized many times about being like these texts, something which could wait for such a long time without it rocking her heart at all. She now thought it hope born from a stupid idea.

Beatrice: “Conceivably, it is laughable, I suppose.”

This is the wretchedness into which she has been cornered.

She mocks herself for it. But inside her small chest, self-deprecation falls subordinate to wrath.

Beatrice: “That guy…that guy…truly, what is wrong with him, I suppose!”

Just thinking about him aggravates her, brings her close to stomping the ground.

She’d like to vent these pent-up emotions on something, but everything in this place which her Mother instructed her to protect is precious.

Unable to find anything to take her tantrum out on, all Beatrice can do is wait for her bloated emotions to wither.

She returns the final book to its shelf and sighs as she smooths out her appearance. Then she seats herself back on the stepladder, reaches to cradle the black tome—and stops.

A blank book. Just throw the thing away! He had said so easily, so many times.

Then at the vital moment, he rejected the option which would have allowed Beatrice to discard the thing. Absolutely, entirely, so incomprehensible it infuriates her.

Beatrice: “I’m exhausted, in fact…”

But her fury will not last forever.

Beatrice stops puffing out her cheeks, takes that book she had hesitated to hold, and puts it to her heart.

Ultimately, to the end of the end, leaning on this thing is the only way to protect her mind.

Just as Roswaal’s gospel has writ, Beatrice’s end will arrive soon.

What emotion should she feel as she waits for it to come?

It’s finally ending. Wouldn’t that be a good enough sentiment?

It’s the one she’s supposed to be feeling, but now that it’s actually happening, she’s lost.

—You are stupid. For some reason those words remain, sitting heavily in her heart.

3

Blown away by the shockwave, Subaru tumbles down the corridor until he slams back-first into a wall. His side strikes directly against a column, leading him to shriek and writhe.

Subaru: “Ghhah! Hhgahghh…I-Impossible! Halfway through the conversation, and that idiot just…!”

The door in front of him slams shut. Subaru reaches out for the door, his expression hateful, but naturally the sight he sees after cracking the thing open is not the Forbidden Archive—merely a guest room.

Gate Crossing has activated, and Subaru has been expelled from the Archive.

Subaru: “I pissed her off so much she threw me out…fuck, messed up with my word choice!”

What he was trying to say wasn’t incorrect, but there was contradiction between how he was telling it and showing it.

Resulting in Subaru being thrown out of the Archive, and distanced from success.

Subaru: “Anyway, can’t stay here. Have to find Beako through another door and…!” ???: “N-Mr. Natsuki?”

Subaru turns around, thinking to conquer the doors via utterly random selection, when a voice addresses him. The familiarity of it, and the fact it’s calling him lead him Subaru to stumble and for his eyes to shoot open.

His gaze lands on Otto, peeking out from a neighboring room, when he’s supposed to be somewhere else. And peeking out from under Otto is Petra, also peering at Subaru.

Subaru: “Y-You guys? Why’re you still in the mansion? I thought I told you that just one wing’s fine and to run away after opening the doors?”

Otto: “Unfortunately, the situation outside has changed rather dramatically…” Otto shakes his head, his face pale as Subaru approaches

It’s inconceivable that Otto would be joking in this situation. Otto has aborted his escape, and there must be something happening which warrants that.

Subaru: “What happened? Short version please.”

Otto: “Witchbeasts did. Hordes of witchbeasts are encircling the mansion, and we cannot move.”

Subaru: “Witchbeasts?!”

Subaru’s eyes shoot open wide at the unexpected word and he looks to Petra for confirmation. She nods several times in response.

Petra: “Erm, there’s lots of witchbeasts which aren’t the dogs…like snakes with two heads, or like possums, lots of them.”

Subaru: “Do these guys live in the nearby forest?”

Petra: “They do, but…the barrier should be keeping them out.”

Subaru: “This barrier again…”

During the previous witchbeast debacle, they confirmed that the barrier between Earlham Village and the woods surrounding the mansion had been repaired. Afterwards they put top priority on looking out for weaknesses in the barrier, so it’s inconceivable that a mistake could’ve happened after such a short timeframe.

And most importantly, the beasts are surrounding the mansion for some reason.

Subaru: “It’s like with those mutts, some weird volition is operating on them…? What about Earlham’s people? Are they okay?”

Otto: “I couldn’t locate any witchbeasts when I instructed them to evacuate, and since they’ve used the carriages from the Duchess to flee, they should be safe. Patrasche is guiding them too.”

Subaru: “Okay. That’s a relief.”

It’s more trustworthy that the clever dragon be tasked with escorting them than some random guy. While praying for Patrasche to pull it off, Subaru grits his teeth. The situation is unfolding down a track unknown to him yet again.

This witchbeast attack has never happened before.

Naturally, considering the timing, it has to be related to Elsa’s attack.

Subaru: “What about Frederica and Rem?”

Petra: “We haven’t run into Big Sis Frederica or Miss Rem…Erm, I-I don’t really think they can break through them and get away.”

Subaru: “Which means they’re also still in the mansion. We’ll be thankful the beasts’re still staying outside, but how much can Garfiel do?”

Subaru strokes Petra’s head, praising her strong heart for remaining composed during this extreme situation. If it were Subaru when he was her age, it wouldn’t be weird for him to piss himself crying. But circumstances prohibit them from staying here.

Subaru: “Where are we right now? Which wing of the mansion?”

Otto: “The eastern. Garfiel should still be battling in the western wing, so I’d suggest avoiding that area to circumvent damages…”

Subaru: “And so the possible escape routes are…”

Of course Subaru needs to collect Beatrice, but it’s also indispensable that Otto and Petra escape. Subaru descends into thought, thinking to scrutinize his mental map of the mansion for any possible escape routes. However, a voice drowns out Subaru’s contemplations:

???: “—Oh my? You were all gathered here, waiting for me?”

A petrifying feeling, like a blade stroked against the back of their necks, leads all of them to freeze rigid.

Subaru promptly pulls Petra’s arm and hugs her close as he timidly glances behind him.

Further down the hallway, lit with bars of moonlight, out peal someone’s approaching footsteps. Their shape soon enters recognizably into the light,

Subaru: “What the hell is Garfiel doing?!”

???: “I’ll unveil pretty guts from all three of you—”

Kicking off the floor before the shrieking Subaru, the Bowel Hunter’s black shadow darts as she bounds near.

Chapter 125A:
The Roswaal Manor Battle

???: “—DONAA!!”

The only one who manages to immediately react to the oncoming threat is Otto.

He holds his hands out in front of him, influencing the world with a canto—the torrent of mana breaks through the mansion floor as up surges a wall of earth, which blocks the whole of the wide hallway and impedes the shadow’s advance.

However,

Elsa: “Nuisance.”

Subaru: “Just one hit?!”

One short statement, and two swings of a kukri.

The slash tears through the wall like paper, and with one kick to the bisected blockade, the whole thing crumbles instantly.

Scattered particles of mana alongside the collapsed wall’s remains. An archetypically sadistic smile alongside the silver gleam of a knife.

Elsa: “First is to slit your throats and silence you, or I suspect you won’t be cooperative.”

Subaru: “Stop saying this terrifying stuff!”

Using the momentary opening Otto created, Subaru holds Petra close and tumbles into a neighboring room. Otto follows a second behind, shutting the door before immediately maneuvering behind the bed.

A slash cleaves through the door. The dangling lower portion of the door plummets, kicked, into the room.

Subaru: “Take this I guess!”

Elsa swoops into the room, for Subaru to attack her with a wooden clothes-hanger. She dodges by tilting backward and slices the thing in two with a flourish of her blade, aiming for Subaru’s throat with the backswing. But thanks to Petra jumping in and pushing Subaru out of the way, the contact ends with only a graze.

Elsa: “Goodness. Bad girl.”

Subaru: “She’s our pride and a good girl, moron!”

Blood seeps from Subaru’s neck. He presses down on the wound pulls Petra close, retreating.

A ghastly grin arises on Elsa’s face as she prepares to pursue them.

However,

Otto: “Then how about this!”

Otto tosses a magic stone, aiming for Elsa’s face.

This glowing red thing, packed with fire mana, behaves much like a shotgun bullet. It’s Otto’s trump card, even more pure than the one he used against Garfiel.

Otto’s hidden ace shoots straight for the defenseless Elsa—detonates.

The magic stone bursts apart in crimson halfway between Otto and Elsa.

Noise and light whip through the room, a heated wind fanning Subaru as he watches:

His eyes focused so intensely that time feels to lag, Subaru sees how Elsa doesn’t even bother to turn around as she throws her knife and curbs Otto’s magic stone.

The stone detonates at an unintended point in space, burning Otto’s eyes. He screams as he pitches back.

Elsa drives her foot into Otto’s exposed stomach, sending him shooting away to crash into a wall. She does not even glance at the crumpled Otto as she instead turns toward Subaru, who swallows his breath. Elsa’s brows hitch up.

Elsa: “Oh? You’re…I think I know you from the Capital.”

Subaru: “I-I’m honored you remember me. So with that relationship in mind, would you mind overlooking us?”

Elsa: “I make a point to, no matter how long it takes, witness any guts I previously failed to behold.”

Subaru: “She’s a collector!”

Subaru can feel Petra clutch tighter at his sleeve. His thoughts solder white.

He keenly senses that his gate is dead. He can pray or set his soul ablaze, but neither his mana nor his gate are giving the slightest murmur of response. It’s impossible for him to use Shamak here, and more importantly it would be a fool’s work should he immobilize himself again. Which leaves him with only one method —Invisible Providence.

Subaru: “…”

The instant he decides to use it, a dark, alien thing slithers through Subaru’s body.

It had been still, but began asserting its presence the moment it realized that Subaru was calling it, eager to display its power and cheering.

A foreboding feeling strikes him, as if he is feeding a repugnant monster.

While consciously ignoring the feeling, Subaru issues orders to the dark power shrieking its birthing cry, and determines to cut open a pathway from his inside to the outside.

He could cry blood with this agony, and he is aversive to using this power.

Regardless. He clings onto what he can, utilizes what he can, and lives while capitalizing on whatever he can.

All to save everyone he wishes to be saved.

Elsa: “Ahh…what a thrilling expression you have.”

Subaru: “I’ll show you something better.”

Elsa: “How excited I am.”

Taking aim at Elsa’s core as she brandishes her two blades, Subaru pulls the trigger taut.

Now he just needs to release, and her slender form will be shredded mauled and perforated.

Subaru: “—○○○.”

A squirming thing flows into his bloodstream, courses through his whole.

It almost feels like the air he breathes is chromatic, like he is cloaked in blazing heat, as the dark alien nails extend, Elsa’s bisection conceivable and anticipated. Just like this, offer up everything, and—

???: “Subaru!”

A grieving cry, and the dull pain of a pinch at his side.

Subaru scrunches his face in surprise, the repugnant emotions inside him dispersing immediately.

What remains are the faint dregs of dark taint, and unchanged emanations of black murder.

Elsa has begun swooping near, and Subaru as he panickedly tries to repair his aim will not manage it in time—when,

Elsa: “—Close.”

???: “—Evaded?!”

It takes Elsa a microsecond to ascertain the gust closing in from behind, and dodge.

She aborts her attack on Subaru and twists away, dancing out from under the claws which gouge her back.

Flipping backwards, she drives a kick into Frederica’s flank and rides the momentum to jab her elbow into Subaru, sending both of them flying as she somersaults backwards—escaping from between them to calmly land on the room’s bed.

Elsa puts her hand to her back, looks at the blood on her palm. She looks to be in ecstasy.

She then looks at Frederica, kneeling on the floor, and tilts her head cheerfully.

Elsa: “Yet another…no, two more people to receive me. Truly a wonderful mansion.”

Frederica: “That ambush did not even work…those are not the reflexes of a human.”

Frederica groans in frustration, unable to hide her shivering.

The blow to his chest leads Subaru to cough as he crawls over to Frederica.

Subaru: “Frederica, my bad, thank you. And, Petra too.”

After addressing Frederica, Subaru thanks Petra, her hand in his. Petra shakes her head with her eyes teary.

Petra: “N-No, I’m who should say sorry. But, Subaru…your eyes looked so scary, and…”

Subaru: “Honestly, I think I was on the border of getting swallowed. That might’ve turned out bad if I wasn’t pulled out of it. Guess I can’t be careless about using Invisible Providence…”

Petra: “Inv…what?”

It doesn’t even merit any surprise from Subaru that his ace is a double-edged sword.

The problem here is how its uses are now limited further—all he can do is pray that this current backfire resulted from using it in quick succession.

He at least can anticipate that counting on Invisible Providence for this fight will mean losing far too much in exchange.

Petra: “Big Sis Frederica…”

Frederica: “It must have been frightening for you, Petra. You did well to not cry.”

Petra still clutches Subaru’s sleeve when Frederica calls her. Frederica gives that appraisal of her precious faux-sister’s efforts while turning to face Subaru, her expression stern.

Frederica: “Sir Subaru, my apologies. I recognize that you desired for me to take Lady Rem and flee the mansion…I’ve failed my task.”

Subaru: “No, it’s hopeless it in this situation. And the outside’s even worse than here…where’s Rem?”

Frederica: “I have her.”

Frederica holds nothing in her hands, both equipped with clawed cestus.

Subaru is anxious about Rem’s apparent absence, when Frederica turns her back to face him. Firmly secured there with ropes, carried on Frederica’s back, is Rem.

She’s bound securely, but that still makes way to an overwhelmingly surreal scene.

Subaru: “I know we’re in an emergency, but it looks like Rem’s neck’ll snap if she’s moved around too much it’s terrifying!”

Frederica: “Fortunately, would be a word I’d hesitate to use, but Rem- sama has been separated from the regular flow of time. Being so, I find nothing apparently affecting her even despite some somewhat rough treatment…”

Subaru: “E-Even so try to treat her carefully as possible okay?” It’s the result of Frederica thinking to do the best she can.

Subaru doesn’t want to complain about it when he doesn’t have any alternative plans to offer. He will have to have Rem endure through an uncomfortable experience for a little while. But either way,

Subaru: “None of us can fight except Frederica. Me and Petra aren’t battlers. Rem’s asleep. Otto fought his best, but for all his struggle he fruitlessly wound up…”

Otto: “Except I’m not dead?! Could you please not spin these terrifying tales while people are dizzied from hitting their head?!”

Subaru looks down solemnly, which resuscitates Otto who lies tumbled on the floor in a corner of the room.

He shakes his head and crawls over to the group, and trembles at the bisected door and clothes hanger.

Otto: “Who would’ve thought that the magic stone would be shot down like that…it worked fine on Garfiel.”

Subaru: “They’ve got different experience when it comes to fighting, and their brains are probably made different. Don’t compare them. It’s sad.”

Frederica: “Garf…then he truly has been raised in the manner which he appears to have been. I was not watching over him…”

Subaru puts a stop to Otto’s cruel comparisons.

It seems like even Frederica has some thoughts about Garfiel after their ten-year reunion. She might feel guilty that her eyes strayed from him and he grew up into a sort of a punk.

Leaving all that business aside and their fostering of brother-sister relations as something to do later,

Subaru: “Gotta do something to solve the problems at hand.”

Elsa: “Can I assume that you’re about done with your pleasant chat?”

Subaru: “Sorry for making you wait. And how about you? Are you mentally ready for a five-versus-one beatdown?”

Elsa: “I’m afraid you’re including three, or perhaps four stray children in your calculations?” Elsa smiles faintly as she accurately counts the number of non-combatants.

The kukri in each of Elsa’s hands sway as she easily hops off the bed. Watching this, Subaru realizes:

—No blood is dripping from Elsa’s back any more.

Subaru: “But it looked like it’d been pretty deep?”

Elsa: “You mean my wound? Don’t worry, it’s fine. Look at what’s happened already.”

With that, Elsa does a turn on the spot.

And just like Subaru suspected, the wound Frederica inflicted on Elsa’s back is perfectly gone. The clawmarks still remain gaping open on her clothes, so it wasn’t that he’d imagined it.

Frederica is the first as everyone except Subaru swallows their breath, faces tense.

Conversely, Subaru just gives a deep sigh and curses his bad premonition for being correct.

Subaru: “I mean I knew killing you won’t make you stay dead…but are you kidding, your wounds heal too? You’re basically just a monster.”

Elsa: “I don’t remember ever discarding my humanity, and I have to have some contentions about how you’re saying this to a woman.

Besides that, where could you have learned about my characteristics?"

Subaru: "Anyone'd think something was up the second you weren't split in two by Reinhard."

Elsa: "I don't go through experiences like that one often. I almost did get split in half. —I wonder what a hero's guts are like. It's extremely fascinating."

Although having borne witness to such incredible combat strength, it doesn't seem Elsa has learned her lesson.

It'd be fine for her to go around hounding Reinhard, who feels like he wouldn't die even if you killed him, so why is she so focused on constantly causing problems for Subaru's team?

He has too many bitter complaints and grievances with Roswaal than he can ever hope to voice.

Frederica: "Sir Subaru…her being present here would mean, Garf is…?"

Asks Frederica timidly, her expression stiff.

Having witnessed the abnormality of Elsa's constitution, she is anxious about her brother's absence.

But Subaru has no answer which can dispel Frederica's unease.

If there's anything he can tell her, it's,

Subaru: "Unfortunately, I can't explain why she's here either. But I seriously doubt Garfiel's been beaten down in such a short timeframe."

Frederica: "From what I witnessed, their strength seemed on even par…Garf had looked to hold a slight advantage."

Subaru: "That's how I see it too, but in the end we don't…"

…know, Subaru means to say as he glances toward Elsa, when his breathing freezes.

Following Subaru’s gaze, Frederica looks over there as well and also holds her breath.

Elsa’s brows furrow, perplexed, as she also looks at that same spot above her head.

It looks like the room’s ceiling is sinking in—falling—and,

???: “Th’fuckin’ cheek!!”

???: “Ee, eep?!”

Subaru: “That moron!!”

The instant they hear the ceiling breaking, Subaru and the others rush to the door.

Right after the five of them flood out the door, the ceiling collapses to crush the entirety of that room, furniture groaning and wood snapping apart thunderously.

The explosive noise and the gale gust out the room, the aftermath of the destruction flowing down the corridor.

Up billow plumes of white smoke. Subaru spits the gritty dust from his mouth as he tumbles down the hallway to escape the scene. It seems that everyone has manage to avoid getting caught in the collapse.

And from beyond the smoke,

???: “Don’t yer pull none’v th’s stupid crap! Now out’n’front we go!”

A familiar, uncouth voice shouts with fervour.

The battering of metal on metal and the noise of a blow follow the voice, until a silhouette cuts through the smoke and tumbles into the hallway.

Subaru: “Uh, wha?!”

Seeing that tumbling silhouette, Subaru finds himself yelping in surprise.

Well of course. This figure is not the one he anticipated, and is instead a clawed furry quadrupedal beast—with spotty fur, which looks much like a hyena.

But it is not the size of a hyena. It's huge, twice as big as Subaru.

Subaru does shudder for a moment at the arrival of the giant beast, but immediately notices that the hyena's eyes are devoid of life, and the animal is dead. He looks to find that its neck bones are broken, and may be bent into angles opposite of what they're meant to be.

Something possessing incredible power had obviously snapped the thing's neck.

And if we're to say that there's anyone in this mansion who could probably do that to the beast, it'd be—

Garfiel: "Hey, Captain. Th'hell, y'were still inside?"

—Garfiel, who kicks the smoke away and coolly appears in the hall.

He notices Subaru and the others staring in astonishment at the dead hyena, and guffaws.

Garfiel: "Yer don't need t'freak out, 's all good. My amazin' self killed it."

Subaru: "Right, thank you …or not! You stopped paying attention to her! And so I thought I was gonna die! I was terrified! I thought I was dead!"

Garfiel: "Yeah yeah my bad, but my amazin' self wasn't thinkin' t'let her go fer an instant. Sh'ran off while I was tangled up with th'pest."

Subaru: "Pest which means?"

Garfiel's face twists bitterly as he clicks his fangs.

This pest he's talking about probably means the hyena. Going off the previous conversation, it definitely has to be some kind of witchbeast but—and that's when:

???: "Geez! I can't believe this! Elsa! Elsa! Dooo somethingggg!"

Elsa: "I'd love to, but I'm sure you're the one who said 'leave this to me, go do something about the others'. Though I'm happy to have more bellies to gut."

Two female voices, one loud, one calm.

Instantly, the room that Garfiel crushed bursts once again, and again silhouettes cut through the smoke to appear in the corridor.

Weighty footsteps, and light footsteps—with a size disparity so large you'd hesitate to call them only two pairs.

Otto: "…What is that thing?"

Unable to keep silent any longer, Otto points at it and asks Subaru for an answer.

Subaru feels the cold, damp sweat oozing down his body.

Subaru: "From what I'm seeing, a biggish hippo."

Otto: "Bigg-ish'?"

Subaru: "Yeah. 'Cause hippos are big anyway."

If you took a hippo and tripled its size, it might manage to be this creature.

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Black flesh, with a thick rocky hide. Its round eyes host a red gleam, wicked and hostile. Its mouth is so large that it could probably eat Old Man Rom in one bite, with flat teeth like mortar stones. It resembles a hippo at a glance, and is probably what you'd get if you tripled a hippo's wickedness and ferocity.

???: "Spotty Rex's deaddd! He's deeeaaadd! Poor boy! It's awfuulll! Awfuulll!" High-pitched sobs wail out from atop the giant hippo in mourning of the hyena's death.

The person riding the hippo, legs flailing everywhere, is a small girl. Her brown hair hangs in a braid, and her features are rustically simple.

Her face is familiar to Subaru.

Subaru: "…From the witchbeast forest."

Back when Subaru got caught up in the loop series at the mansion.

She's from when Subaru went into the deepest reaches of the forest to save the children from Earlham Village. And she's the main reason that the children were lured into entering the forest. Subaru had heard from Roswaal that she vanished after the whole affair was over, but,

Petra: "She's from back then!"

It seems that Petra has reached the same conclusion.

If Subaru had been the only one to notice it, then he might have discarded it as some kind of misunderstanding on his part. But if Petra's memories are telling her the same thing, he has to accept it.

This girl was involved with the witchbeast debacle.

With the current situation considered, that means that even that debacle was—

Subaru: "Roswaal's, plans!"

She's working with Elsa. So Roswaal was behind the witchbeast affair too?

Which means that the events in the Capital, the events in the mansion, all of everything was in Roswaal's hands. All of Subaru's efforts had been in accord with a future dictated by a dark book of prophecies.

Subaru: "Like I can accept something so stupid!"

Fate being fixed is a real no thanks.

At very least, it will start changing from now on. All this means is that he's put the witchbeast debacle aside as another thing to interrogate Roswaal about, and that he has yet another reason to smack that clown in the face.

Subaru blazes with rage and rebellion. The girl atop the hippo finally notices his gaze.

She blinks her round eyes and waves at Subaru.

Girl: "Oh, you're the guy from before. And Petra's here too. It's been aaageeees."

Subaru: "Y-You're sure not discouraged from talking. You do realize what this situation is?"

Subaru can't hide how the girl's unconcerned attitude catches him off.

She tilts her head at Subaru's blatant caution.

Girl: "I realize, I'm wooorkiiing. Mama'll scold me if I don't do my work. But then Elsa's there off doing whatever she wants."

Elsa: "Taking the rear post is tediously boring, it was a mistake to appoint me there. My methods are far more vivid and fresh for enjoying life, compared to being made animal feed. Being killed by me is the better choice for the victim too, correct?"

Elsa starts walking over to the hippo's side as she directs the conversation onto Subaru.

Subaru sighs, then raises his finger.

Subaru: “Okay, then I’ll give you the coolest proposition ever. You take that knife you’re holding and flip it around. And then you plunge the thing into your stomach. After that you roll around on the floor. Guts everywhere, I’m happy, you’re happy. It’s the seppuku challenge. Isn’t it cool?”

Girl: “Pff! Ahahahaha! That’s awesome! Come on, Elsa, wanna try it? Elsa, you like guts. It’ll be fun! I’m excited!”

Elsa: “Sorry, but I’ve already done that so many times after getting this constitution that I’m bored of it.”

After learning that his super cool proposition has already been practised in reality, a super cool shudder rushes down Subaru’s spine.

Regardless, this doesn’t change that they have two predicaments sitting in front of them.

Subaru: “I don’t know how it works, but is it safe for me to think she’s controlling the witchbeasts?”

Garfiel: “Doubt yer wrong. S’th’same f’th’ones outside, n’same f’that mutt, allv’m’re doin’ whatever sh’says no fuckin’ fuss at all. — What’s the plan, Captain?”

Honestly, the situation has changed immensely from the initial plan. It’s not just Elsa, they have another foe—and it’s someone who commands massive witchbeasts.

So long as there are beasts outside, it’s going to be nigh impossible to escape the mansion peacefully. And most importantly, Subaru’s team has not yet assembled all of the people they need to save.

Even if they take Frederica, Petra, and Rem to the village, it’s not enough.

Subaru: “Garfiel…can I ask you to do something crazy?”

Garfiel: “Try me, Captain.”

Subaru: “I want you to stall Elsa and the girl simultaneously.”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru knows that he’s asking for something unreasonable.

Just Elsa alone is a foe who presents unparalleled difficulty. While Garfiel is keeping her put, he also needs to keep the attention of the massive witchbeast.

Subaru has, since coming to this world, learned the threat witchbeasts present to a painful extent. And so,

Garfiel: “No problem. Just leave it t’me. Gotten fired up now.”

Subaru: “—?! S-Seriously? No kidding? You can do it?”

Garfiel: “‘S what’m here for. Been talkin’ some massive talk. Too late fer me t’start whinin’ over th’enemies bein’ strong’r havin’ numbers. ‘S a THE MEEDAN WHO SHOULDERS THE MOUNTAIN LOSES ANYWHERE TO RUN.”

With that, Garfiel clatters his shields together.

Even Subaru can tell that it’s bravado, and not supported by any real self-confidence.

Regardless, Garfiel is the only one he can rely on for this.

Subaru: “Garfiel. I know I already said this countless times in the carriage, but…”

Garfiel: “I hear ya. My amazin’ self got no ideas’v dyin’ in this place either.”

Garfiel interrupts Subaru and eases him by pushing him forward with his shoulder.

He is indicating that there is no need to say anything else.

Repeating it would be inconsiderate toward Garfiel’s resolve. So Subaru swallows his words and returns a push to Garfiel’s shoulder.

By that alone, he presses a dicey form of trust on Garfiel.

Garfiel: “Now get goin’. I ain’t able t’get serious ‘f yer gettin’ in th’way.”

Garfiel bares his fangs as he speaks to the others.

Hearing it, Otto, Petra, and Frederica look at each other.

Otto: “Garfiel, don’t die. I don’t want to be zipping around cleaning Mr. Natsuki’s messes by myself.”

Frederica: “We truly have not spoken enough. But very well. We’ll speak another time, with Grandmother alongside us.”

Petra: “Y-You can do it, scary-looking man.”

Garfiel smiles wryly while nodding to the three.

Subaru feels like they just loaded a pile of death flags on him, but actually with how huge the pile is it flips into a comforting life flag, is how Subaru rationalizes things in a bid to cling to hope.

Garfiel: “N’ so, yer opponent from now on’s my amazin’ self. This time I ain’t gettin’ distracted and I ain’t lettin’ yer flirt around. My claws n’ fangs n’ shield’s’re gonna beat yer into tears!”

Roars Garfiel as he sharply turns around.

Bathed directly in his aggression, Elsa smiles while the girl’s mount give a low growl.

Elsa: “Meili. Don’t interfere this time.”

Meili: “But you’re the one interfering, Elsa! I’m just doing what Mama saaaiiid tooo!”

While having their disagreement, Elsa and the girl attack Garfiel.

Garfiel braces himself as he catches the heavy blow on one shield and the sharp blow on the other, sparks flying as Subaru runs away as fast as he can.

Subaru: “Otto! Frederica! Situation’s changed! Since we can’t leave the mansion out anywhere proper, we’ll escape from a different route so we don’t get eaten by witchbeasts!”

Otto: “You say ‘a different route’, but I’m sure we’ll be faced with the same outcome even should we take a backdoor. If we can’t have Garfiel supporting us for combat, what should we do?”

Subaru: “What if you do frantic witchbeast negotiations with your Divine Protection of Soul Language, and depending how the bargaining goes they surrender the path and we escape? Here’s your chance to be the lead role.”

Otto: “Witchbeasts generally just say ME EAT YOU WHOLE, so it isn’t really a conversation!”

It was a faint hope to begin with, and Otto looks miserable as he responds to it, running alongside Subaru.

Yes, there exist people who you can speak with, but not communicate with. It seems that principle works for both humans and animals. Elsa makes good proof of it.

Which means that there’s only one escape path Subaru can think of left—

Frederica: “Sir Subaru. I have an idea for an escape route.”

Subaru: “I know, Frederica. It’s probably the same place as what I’m gonna suggest. But…”

There’s a problem with that route.

Just as Subaru goes to point out what it is, he dashes out the hallway and swallows his breath.

Subaru: “No matter where we run they just can’t make it easy for us, fuck!”

—Before them, two hyenas notice their presence and come rushing to attack.

Though the cast of the Roswaal Mansion Battle has changed, the fight remains heated.

Chapter 126A:
Attack of Guiltilaw, Ebony King of the Woodlands!

1

—Sparks of steel-on-steel shriek and shriek in succession.

Garfiel: "Ghaaaaaaaahgr!"

Elsa: "Ahahaha! Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful!"

Her body dances through the air. Her blades elect for no fixed course as they slash for Garfiel's vitals.

Who knows how she is capable of these moves. Every single casual-looking strike closes in with deadly force and accuracy to imminently gouge into Garfiel.

Her crooked blade shreds through the air, transcending sound as it flies at sonic speed.

Garfiel redirects the blow upwards with his shields, defending himself by letting the strike slide away rather than block it directly.

The force of the woman's slash remains lethal as she shifts merely the trajectory of her swing, her body flowing adeptly aside. Cutting into that opening, Garfiel takes aim at the woman's open stomach and swings up his leg.

Garfiel's kick is mighty as a cannonball, easily capable of demolishing walls of stone.

If it hits someone at full force, their fleshy human body will offer absolutely no defense as its overwhelming strength exhibits destruction on their innards.

And Garfiel has, in fact, succeed in landing such blows to pulverize the woman's flesh and bone more than a couple times now.

However,

Elsa: “I’ve seen this before.”

Garfiel: “Fuckin’ fuck off!!”

The woman twists her open side and back away from the kick’s trajectory. Garfiel’s foot strokes across the woman’s back, merely grazing her, before tangling in her black cloak. It’s an instantaneous, but conceivably fatal lag for both the woman and Garfiel.

Elsa: “Hah—”

With a quick exhales, the woman reaches her arm around to her back, entangling the cape further over Garfiel’ legs. Her other hand darts up from behind, herself halfway through a backflip, racing for Garfiel.

The swing will slice Garfiel’s right thigh in two—before he can think, Garfiel hops with his free left foot and jabs it directly beneath his entangled right.

Garfiel’s left foot slams into the flat of the ascending blade.

Metal and wrist snap as the woman cries out sensually, dropping her knife. She does retreat, but being that his leg remains entangled and he falls back to the floor, Garfiel cannot pursue her. He uses the momentum from his kick and puts his hands to the ground to backflip away, opening distance between them before disentangling his foot.

Garfiel: “Got yer wrist n’ yer knife, haha.”

Elsa: “That’s fine. I have spare knives, and my hand will be moving again before long. And my cloak…it’s practically just an impediment while fighting you.”

Garfiel: “Yer can keep yer bravado ter yerself.”

Elsa: “We’ll check on your guts whether this is bravado.”

Garfiel uses the stolen cloak to wipe off his sweat and dumps it on the side of the hallway.

Elsa pays no mind to her cloak as she lightly touches her crooked left hand with her right, and calls out to the massive silhouette behind her.

Elsa: “Meili. Don’t just watch, give me another knife.”

Meili: “Geez, just doing whatever you want, Elsa. I’m not your luggage girl or knife caddie. And you keep fighting so Boulderpork can’t cut in.”

The girl riding the massive witchbeast puffs out her cheeks in reply as she flings something to Elsa. It’s a holder for the knives Elsa uses. She draw two fresh kukri out of it, holding both of them in one had as she feels out their grip. She looks up at the girl.

Elsa: “It’s a blight on your own cuteness that you brought that giant witchbeast along. Though I’m glad to dance with him without any nuisances involving themselves.”

Meili: “But it’s gonna be ridiculous if you get caught up in that and let the mark get away. If mama knew what you did, she’d totally scold you. I’m gonna tell her you were naughty, Elsa.”

Elsa: “If I were scared of scoldings, then I wouldn’t start without you or steal your food. It’s enough for you and the others to be the good children. I personally don’t mind being troublesome.”

While she speaks, Elsa tosses the two knives in the air and begins juggling with them one-handed. The size and speed of the blades as they spin means that Elsa could lose an arm if she made a mistake, but Elsa’s risky maneuvers end with one knife in her right hand, and one knife in her left.

Elsa: “My apologies for making you wait. It seemed like waiting would be enough to fix my hand.”

Garfiel: “Don’t worry yerself ‘bout it. My amazin’ self’s also lookin’ t’buy time, and I ain’t crass enough t’butt into a talk b’tween sisters. Family talks’re damn important.”

Elsa: “Goodness. Why do you believe that she and I are sisters?”

Garfiel: "'Cause yer callin' th'same goddamn lady yer mom? It don't matter that yer hair n'eye colors're different. 'M talkin'bout bein' family nevermindin' yer blood."

Hearing Garfiel's reasoning, Elsa's eyes shoot open for a second in surprise. She puts her hand to her mouth, and slips a very cheery laugh.

Garfiel: "Eh?"

Elsa: "Huhu…ah, no, forgive me. I wasn't expecting that response, so I went just a little bit funny. …You truly do seem like a good boy."

Garfiel: "Stop treatin' me like a kid. My amazin' self's n' amazin' man."

Elsa: "Indeed? Although, it doesn't feel to me that you're fully a man or an adult."

Elsa replies to the dissatisfied Garfiel with her cheeks still relaxed.

Garfiel's brows furrow in puzzlement, making Elsa's smile even more cheerful.

Meili: "Elsa Elsa. Don't you get the feeling this scary-looking guy's actually really precious?"

Elsa: "Yes, Meili. I am beginning to get that feeling. I may have sighted for the first time in a long while somebody who I'd rather keep alive after pulling out their guts."

Garfiel: "Stop runnin' yer damn mouths. Yer both gonna be takin' a nap after eatin' my amazin' fists."

Garfiel sharply turns his wrists as he speaks.

He doesn't really understand Elsa and Meili's conversation, but he can definitely tell that they're slighting his determination.

Should Garfiel understand that, then he has no kind words to offer.

Unless they apologize in tears as they beg for forgiveness, Garfiel will pulverise them immobile, and give them the punishment they deserve. —Such is Garfiel's duty.

Garfiel: "Bring it on already. Yer even buyin' even more damn time f'th'Captain'n'th'others t'get away. And my amazin' self ain't hopin' t'be gettin' a gold star fer runnin' away. M'beatin' yer t'yer last inch, teachin' yer a lesson. That my amazin' self's the strongest shield inside or outside the Sanctuary."

With that, Garfiel batters his shields together.

A screech rings down the hallway as Garfiel lobs his determination at the two enemies in the moonlit corridor.

Meili: "—Pffhahaa! Elsa, did you hear that? He's the strongest shield! Strongest shield…pff. Pffhaha! He is precious!"

However! The situation turns that Meili laughs, of all things, and Elsa's smile also intensifies! They do not seem to be threatened.

Garfiel: "Fuck're you laughin' at, huh?"

Meili: "Ahh, it's so funny. So funny I just laugh. You're funny too with how you think you're oh so strong, but it's the group that ran who're also just so so funny."

Garfiel: "Th'Captain's group's funny?"

Meili: "They so are. Aren't they? My pets are surrounding the mansion, so there's only one place to go to escape. That's actually meant to be Elsa's post, but she went off acting on her own, so I put a replacement there."

Elsa: "…"

Meili shots Elsa a criticizing gaze. Elsa unabashedly pays it no heed.

Her murderous eyes stare at Garfiel, observing his every action, making it extraordinarily difficult for him to move. And he also has to pay attention to Meili's comment.

Meili thumps the back of the witchbeast she's riding while Garfiel's gaze grows sharper.

Meili: "Except for Boulderpork, I brought one more huge pet with me today. He's blocking the path. So when you buy time, it actually does the opposite of what you want."

Garfiel goes silent.

Meili: "You think when you're done with me and Elsa, you're gonna catch up to the others and save them but, you're really actually not. So when I see you doing your best to buy time without even realizing that, everything's just soo funny."

Unable to keep herself from smiling, Meili laughs at Garfiel's silliness.

Faced with her juvenile malice, Garfiel gives a deep sigh.

Indeed, there are many unstable requirements piling up on them. Meili is correct, they are definitely facing a situation which exceeded their plans. However,

Garfiel: "Ha. Stupid bullshit."

Meili: "…Huh?"

Garfiel: "Yer th'ones who ain't gettin' it. You got more monsters around? We're th'ones gettin' pinned? As fuckin' if me or th'Captain'd let that fly."

Enjoying the way that Meili's smile disappears, Garfiel steps forwards.

He watches as Elsa reacts, stooping herself slightly forward, as he says:

Garfiel: "Th'Captain n' them beat th'shit outta me. —They're gonna snort laughin' so hard they blast yer dumb obstacle right outta here!"

Subaru: “We’re doomed we’re doomed we’re doomed we’re doomed we’re doomed we’re so doomed, what is even happening anymore?!”

Utterly out of breath, Subaru whines as he dumps himself to the floor.

On the third floor of Roswaal Mansion’s main wing, on the platform leading to the staircase to the top floor, are assembled Subaru’s group—Subaru, Otto, Frederica, Petra, and Rem, all holding their breath as they stay put.

The fatigue is blatant on all of them as they sit there, with deepish wounds present on the whole party.

But especially,

Subaru: “Are you alright, Frederica?”

Frederica: “…I am, this is merely trivial, it is not anything serious. Sir Subaru, I apologize to you for demonstrating such fecklessness.”

Subaru: “We’d be getting nowhere without you. The pathetic ones here are us guys, me and Otto. I’m sorry. We’re weak.”

Otto: “Th-This time alone…I lack any margin to refute your ribbing, Mr. Natsuki.” Otto gives a frustrated sigh. Subaru spits the blood out from his mouth.

While ignoring the hideous pain across his whole body, Subaru readjusts Rem’s position on his back. —He has switched roles with Frederica, and is now tasked with carrying Rem.

Otto guides Petra by the hand while Subaru is shoulders Rem. Their only fighter, Frederica, stands at the frontlines while opening a path—such has been the optimal plan for these five.

Right after parting with Garfiel, Subaru’s group were attacked by two hyena witchbeasts. Between Otto’s magic stones and Frederica’s fighting, they barely managed to repel the hyenas, but they soon discovered many more witchbeasts placed throughout the mansion to torment them.

Batlike Blackwing Mice lurking in the hallway between the main and separate wing. Hyenalike Spotted Rex wandering throughout the mansion, attacking whenever they could. Possums that cast a net over the team after they entered a room, and swooped down the second they let their guard down.

They had a particularly painful battle when dealing with a two-headed snake thick as Subaru's arm.

They managed to drive the Blackwings away with smoke, Frederica's claws bested the Rex, they fled from the possums while having their rear ends chewed, Otto's frantic negotiations managed to stall the snake, and Subaru took the opening to grapple the thing and have Frederica decapitate it twofold—and now, they're here.

Subaru: "We're just, utterly…we lost because we had to split up with Garfiel…"

Otto: "Don't be so faint of heart. Now is about when Garfiel would be confidently shouting that we'll succeed, so let's hold expectations at least equivalent to the ones that he's placed on us."

Subaru: "With how dutiful you are, you really don't feel suited to being a merchant…"

Otto is looking the least dire of all of them, stamina-wise. Subaru gives him a wry smile, psyches himself up, and gets to his feet.

The Rem on his back is, honestly, so light it's saddening. Subaru had heard that unconscious or sleeping people were heavy to shoulder, but Rem alone isn't exhibiting that.

He can barely feel her weight or her warmth. Her very presence is dim. Her faint heartbeat and respiration alone prove that she is alive as Subaru firmly corrects her position.

As if terrified that, even though this will surely not happen, he'll drop her and not notice. Petra: "Big Sis Frederica…"

Frederica: "Do not worry, Petra. There's no need to look so anxious…we will reach our destination very shortly."

Frederica responds to Petra's nervous gaze with a hearty smile.

But Frederica's situation is not as optimistic as she is making it out to be. A hyena mauled her arm during a fight, she is unable to lift her bleeding left arm, and her movements lack their usual luster. They cannot hope for her to fight at full strength, and need somewhere to immediately heal and rest.

Subaru: "Though yeah, we really are close to our destination." Mutters Subaru as he looks up the staircase—at the uppermost floor.

The team is trying to reach Roswaal's office. Of course they're aiming for the escape route there, the bad road that Elsa had welcomed Elsa's invasion in all the loops previous.

When Subaru first lost his plan to flee outside mansion, he had bordered on discarding this route as well—but after a conversation with Frederica, changed his mind.

It happened right after they left Garfiel and repelled the two hyenas.

Frederica: "There is a concealed passage in the Master's office which leads to the outside. Though it, we may capably escape the mansion and flee to a cabin in the forest. Should we use it…"

Subaru: "Sorry, Frederica. It's not gonna be that easy. There's reserves posted in the hidden passage. Since that's the path that woman got in here through."

Frederica: "…"

Aware that he the situation is nigh hopeless, Subaru nonetheless reports this information. Subaru has run into Elsa before while trying to check the hidden passage. Leaving aside whether she entered through the route this loop, she at the very least does know the passage exists.

Subaru: "Going off what Elsa and that girl said…it sounds like they have other allies. Leaving aside whether this 'mama' is actually their mother, considering how they look nothing alike…if they're gonna post a rear guard, then they're gonna post someone at that passage."

Of course they're going to block the path.

Witchbeasts are surrounding the mansion, and there's an enemy in the escape route too. They're utterly trapped, and Subaru forces his brain to fire.

Things are desperate.

It's wretched that, in a situation where their escape route is ineffective, they can't use Beatrice's help.

They wouldn't have to be agonizing about this if Subaru had succeeded in convincing Beatrice. With her Gate Crossing, escaping this place would be so simple that they wouldn't even need to think about it.

Subaru: "…I'm so selfish."

Subaru knows about Beatrice's anguish and the reason behind it, and he's still trying to cling to her aid.

He can't get her help here because he failed to bring her outside, and that in itself proves that he wasn't seeing her properly.

It's natural that she hate and eject him from the room.

Otto: "Mr. Natsuki."

Petra: "Subaru."

Perhaps thinking something about Subaru's expression as he broods, a tap come to his shoulder and a tug comes to his arm.

He looks to find that the tap is from Otto on his right, and the tug is from Petra on his left. The two each use their methods to bring Subaru back to reality, then realize that they did the same thing, and scrunch up their faces.

Looking at the two of them, Subaru sighs, feeling saved.

Frederica: “Sir Subaru. I believe that we ought to choose that path nonetheless.”

Subaru raises his head. Frederica raises her finger.

Frederica: “As you have stated, it presently appears that we are trapped in a deadlock. Ferocious witchbeasts are encircling the mansion, and the enemy is aware of our sole route of escape. Ordinary thought would have it that we will be killed unavoidably…”

Subaru: “Yes, right. I think the same, so I’ve been wondering about whether we could at least find a weak spot in the perimeter of witchbeasts, but…”

Frederica: “Incidentally, Sir Subaru. Where have you previously met that assailant woman?”

Interrupted by Frederica’s low-voiced question, Subaru quietly holds his breath.

Unable to read her intentions in asking it, Subaru nods.

Subaru: “Yeah.”

Subaru: “She targeted Emilia in the Capital before. The Sword Saint just happened to show up there and owing to that everyone got out fine. Though it’d be way too convenient to expect that hottie to burst into the scene here, definitely.”

Frederica: “I, see. Your last encounter involved the present Sword Saint. No, regardless, that does not matter. I do not wish to know the methods used previously to repel the woman, I would rather like to know her personality.”

Subaru: “Her personality?”

Subaru tilts his head at Frederica’s rather nebulous question.

Subaru: “I mean, her personality is she’s the same weird fetishist that she looks like. She’s the

GUTHUNTER, loves cutting open people's stomachs and checking out the insides. She's up there in the worldwide rankings for danger."

Frederica: "And judging by how she appeared to enjoy her confrontation with Garf, she would be particularly fixated on doing the deed by her own hands…correct?"

Subaru: "Not like I know her, but yeah she's probably that kind of character. …I don't see where you're going with this?"

Frederica: "It is simple, Sir Subaru. —Unexpected events in this attack are occurring for the enemy as well."

A powerful assertion.

Subaru's eyes widen in surprise.

Frederica: "Witchbeasts presently encircle the mansion. The young girl who was also present is likely a manipulator of witchbeasts… we shall perhaps call her a witchbeastmaster. The enemy's true designs had been to assault the mansion whilst the witchbeast perimeter was in place, and attack those of us inside, would be what it appears."

Subaru: "What makes you think that?"

Frederica: "—The timing between the attacks from the beastmaster and the Bowel Hunter are not synchronized."

For a moment, Subaru furrows his brows in thought. But he immediately realizes what Frederica is trying to say, and hits his fist to his palm.

Subaru: "That's it, so that's it! Fuck, why didn't I notice it? Yes, Frederica's got it right! With that weirdo's personality, of course this'd happen!"

Otto: "Wh-What is it? I don't quite see how everything connects…"

Subaru kicks the floor in frustration and excitement. Otto looks somewhat nervous, but Subaru just gives him a nod.

Subaru: “It’s real simple, Otto. The witchbeast attack’s actually meant to corner everyone in the mansion. And when we’re cornered, we can’t run away like normal. So we head for the hidden passage. —Is the natural course of events. Right?”

Otto: “That would be exactly the course we have followed, correct? But weren’t we saying that the enemy knows of the secret passage, and so we cannot use it?”

Subaru: “Exactly. The correct course of the attack is, we’re cornered and run into the hidden escape path, and that’s where we all get killed by a waiting Elsa. That’s their plan. …But it’s gone astray. Elsa isn’t in the passage right now.”

Otto: “…”

Why isn’t she?

Considering Elsa’s disposition, the answer’s obvious.

Subaru: “Elsa didn’t want to miss out on prey so she started moving on her fucking own. That’s why she’s out of sync with the beastmaster. And it means she’s not at the spot that she’s meant to be blocking. —So there’s no one at the hidden passage!”

Frederica: “The original plans had been for the woman to lie in ambush in the passage. Consequently, being that events are diverging from their plans, it is extraordinary unlikely that a rear guard is presently occupying the passage. The enemy shall surely realize that the situation is divergent from their plans should they be given time. Likelihood is steadily increasing that they may send another individual into the passage.”

Petra: “So we gotta race there while no one’s around!”

Following on from Subaru and Frederica’s theories, Petra practically leaps as she gives the answer.

Subaru laughs as she puts her hand on Petra’s head, and pats her auburn hair vigorously.

Subaru: “Full marks.”

Subaru: “With the information we have, this’s what’s most likely. Either way, it’s a more hopeful idea than breaking through the witchbeast perimeter outside. And worst case, we can at least check what’s happening with the office. …Let’s do it. This is the only way we’re all getting out safe!”

—Ready for that plan, the team arrived to this sight outside the office.

Everyone is both physically and mentally exhausted. Regardless, the hope of reaching their goal filled them with enough energy to move their incredibly wounded selves. And now, that flicker of hope is—

Subaru: “…You have to be kidding.”

Mutters Subaru reflexively after reaching the top of the staircase and peeking into the hallway. Otto pokes his head out above him, as does Petra below him, and all seeing the same thing, they agree with Subaru in dumbstruck shock.

Frederica: “What has happened? Is the Master’s office…?”

Frederica sits on the stairs behind them as she asks this of the three scouts. But going by their reactions, she likely has surmised that the situation is looking bad.

Subaru stifles his footsteps as he turns around and says, rather anxiously,

Subaru: “There’s a real nasty-looking one camping outside the fucking room.” —To Subaru, it looks like the monster CHIMERA.

A lion-esque feline head, with the skinny body of a horse or a goat. Its long tail whips about like a snake, and although it is smaller than the beastmaster’s hippo mount, it’s more than stupidly huge enough to block the mansion’s expansive hallway. A strange entity which looks to have burst out of myth—with easily surmised prowess in combat.

Otto: “That…is the witchbeast GUILTILAW. I-It lives deep in woodlands thick with miasma, something of the king of beasts…and now, in a human village…it isn’t meant to be the kind of witchbeast that you could possibly bring with you to a mansion…"

Subaru: "What're chances that we're misestimating, and it's actually a wimp? Like, it looks like that but actually its personality's gentle and you just feed it katsuobushi and it's happy, or something…"

Otto: "I wouldn't know what katsuobushi is, but are you saying to approach it with food? It will probably end in the beast chomping you in half."

Otto's statement leads Subaru to think of how huge Guiltilaw's head is.

Indeed. With a mouth that big, Subaru is a two-bite meal.

Subaru: "No but transformed Garfiel's even bigger. Okay, let's go get him and compare sizes. If our guy's bigger then that guy'll slink away dejected."

Otto: "If we go back to summon him, then that woman will carve us to bits. You can stop being funny, Mr. Natsuki. …Have you thought of any ideas?"

Otto entertains Subaru's joking, but his gaze is expectant.

It's like he's expected Subaru to have come up with some idea over the span of that little exchange. Thinking Otto the placer of quite ridiculous expectations, Subaru glances back to Frederica and Petra,

Petra: "Subaru."

Frederica: "Sir Subaru."

And they're gazing at him with expectation too.

Subaru: "—Seriously, just what expectations are you putting on me?"

Giving a deep sigh, Subaru shivers at the weight of the huge expectations. He adjusts Rem's position on his back, and closes his eyes.

What, presently, are their possible combat forces?

Frederica is injured and Otto has basically no magic. Neither Petra or Subaru are fighters, and they are on the third floor of the mansion's main wing. There is no way they can call Garfiel up here, and even thinking of getting Beatrice's help is a bust.

But that said, fighting while using everything available is the only technique Subaru's ever had.

Everyone's abilities, their capabilities, materials present, the opponent's situation, the requirements, Subaru thinks of them all, considers them all, mulls over them all—and sighs.

Subaru: "When neither martial or magic forces're looking like they'll work…time to stake it all on my unmatched knowledge from the 21st-century."

3

MASTER's orders.

The first thing to catch Guiltilaw's attention is a sound.

Guiltilaw: "…"

Having heard the peal of something hard tapping and tapping and tapping against the floor, Guiltilaw raises his snout.

Silent King of the Woodlands. Some localities indeed refer to Guiltilaw as such, and unlike other witchbeasts, he does not favor needless roars and pointless noise.

Contrary to his great frame and queer appearance, he soars deftly though the wastes, making not the slightest sound in approaching his prey before landing a single fatal strike and slaying the creature. Such sneaky and assassination-eqsue hunts are his greatest forte.

Thus, although his MASTER may have ordered it, Guiltilaw cannot see the hunt of lying in ambush in one spot as anything but foolish utilization of his prowess.

Although naturally, he has not the slightest intention to be an ingrate and defy his

Because the breaking of his HORN allowed Guiltilaw to escape from his curse.

Guiltilaw: “…”

Guiltilaw casts his snout around, searching for the source of the sound while ruminating on his MASTER’s orders.

Remain in place outside this door, and hunt any enemies what may approach—such is the duty that Guiltilaw has been ordered, and his MASTER’s desire.

Tap tap tap. Those nigh defenseless sounds clearly are footsteps.

Many two-legged creatures, such as his master, make this sound when they walk. Among their number are the truly strong, who do not even make such noise as footsteps, but the lord of these footfalls is not that.

They are undefended, uncalculated, unintentional, unheeding—possessing not a speck of grace.

Guiltilaw finds them irritating to mangle even for a meal with how utterly weak they are.

Guiltilaw: “…”

Silently, Guiltilaw glides away from the door.

The footsteps are coming from the western staircase, the direction from which he has heard intermittent sounds of battle for some time now.

Guiltilaw knows that his MASTER has brought in accompaniment with other witchbeasts. While instructing many beasts inferior to him in strength and size to surround the mansion, his MASTER tasked Guiltilaw with defending the door, mounted herself upon a large and dimwitted beast, and went hunting.

It did dissatisfy Guiltilaw that she chose that merely-size beast for her hunt and left him behind to guard the rear. But should the foes he face here at least be powerful ones, then he can both agree with his reason for being brought here, and preserve his honour.

Thus, Guiltilaw did not do anything so foolish as leave his post to attack the enemies, no matter what beasts they faced, until they managed to reach this very spot.

A weakling who could not even reach Guiltilaw's location did not merit battle.

A weakling butchered by beasts weaker than himself did not merit the hunt.

However. They prey has overcome the other witchbeasts, and arrived at this spot. The second that Guiltilaw sensed their presence, he felt secretly thrilled.

—And this is what he has been waiting for?

Something fragile, ignorant of what it is to even hide footsteps, with such weak lust for battle.

One swing of his claws, one flourish of his fangs, would scatter this fleeting, inferior being to bits.

Guiltilaw: "…"

What surges inside him is rage. Only rage.

His fangs will ravage the prey, and without a single lump of their flesh going down his gullet, he will leave them strewn about the floor.

That is the only thing that will assuage this burning feeling of insult.

Pursuing the footsteps, Guiltilaw moves without casting any shadow over the moonlight. Should there be anyone to witness him as his great frame glides silently in motion, they would surely think themselves observing a nightmare.

The ebony assassin approaches the footsteps, finding that the prey seems to have stopped at the next bend—Guiltlaw draws his claws to bisect the prey from behind.

Guiltilaw: “—!”

With not the slightest sound, Guiltilaw stretches out his neck and bounds for the prey’s back—however.

Guiltilaw: “—?”

The prey that he caught, and sensed had been within mauling range, is nowhere to be seen. Unsure of where to swing his upraised paw, Guiltilaw stalls for a millisecond, feeling something awry. He sniffs as he turns his head.

Where has the foolish, frail, flimsy prey gone?

Guiltilaw: “—!”

Once again, the noise of footfalls strikes Guiltilaw’s ears.

He lowers his head and looks toward the noise, to find that it seems to be echoing from the stairway.

The noise of the prey’s footsteps, descending, running down the staircase.

It appears they they have noticed his presence and somewhat accelerated to avoid him. But should Guiltilaw learn of such a thing, then he shall never allow the prey to flee.

Guiltilaw turns his head. Looks at the door that his MASTER ordered him to protect.

He may be distancing himself from his post, but this prey is surely the exact prey that his MASTER ordered him for. Should he slaughter the prey, that is tantamount to observing his MASTER’s orders.

With that decision, Guiltilaw pursues the gracelessly fleeing prey.

He is effectively teaching the prey that the moment they turned their back on him—nevermind that they were within range of his strikes—they lost any means of resistance.

For Guiltilaw, who dashed over mountains and reigned over the woodlands as King, the hunt of fleeing prey was an everyday act of amusement.

The only prey worthy of being absorbed into this flesh were the truly strong.

Prey that turned their backs and lost their fangs to resist him merely existed so that he would not forget the feeling of blood and gore on his claws and fangs—and they ought to learn this too.

Guiltilaw descends the staircase, following the footsteps.

He kicks off the wall at the stairway landing, dancing through the air to the floor below. He reaches the second floor, then the first floor in pursuit of his prey, and now stands in the lowest floor of the building.

He perceives the distant signs of fighting.

The scent of his MASTER, and the stench of the annoying dimwitted beast accompanying her. The remaining scents are blood and steel, the aroma of the strong.

Guiltilaw: "…"

Were it possible for him, he would prefer to venture in that direction, and participate in the fight. He wishes to brandish his claws and fangs in presence of his MASTER, ripping the strong fighter to pieces and drowning them in a sea of blood, supping upon the taste of victory. However. He must not desire such a thing right now. He has orders to uphold.

—Should he swiftly hunt this prey down, perhaps his participation shall be permitted.

Guiltilaw: "—)."

Guiltilaw feels the burning in his fangs ever more keenly, his body shuddering.

Again he hears the footsteps, and pursues them to hear a door shut further down the dark hallway before looking at the door, freshly closed.

Darting over, standing silently before the door, Guiltilaw uses his long tail to dexterously open the portal.

This is not his first time invading the dwelling of the two-legged creatures and brandishing his fangs.

He understands the framework of these ‘doors’, squeezing his massive frame through the doorway as he sneaks into the room. He had been expecting the prey to be waiting here at this very moment, but he cannot find the slightest glimpse of them, and yet again Guiltilaw suffers utter surprise. But his disappointment this time does not hide far away.

Guiltilaw: “…”

Turning his head, Guiltilaw’s gaze lands on a corner of the room—on the wardrobe. Sticking out from the crack between the wardrobe’s two doors is fabric from the prey’s overgarments. They swooped inside in a panic, and their clothes were caught there. The shallowness of this prey, believing that they are hiding from Guiltilaw while failing to realize that, is humourous.

Guiltilaw silences his footsteps. Creeps near the wardrobe.

He raises his tail, sharpens its tip, and hesitates for not even a second.

Guiltilaw: “—!”

His tail pistons, pierces easily through the wardrobe like a spear.

It leaves a round hole as if made by a drill—and many more of them, coin-sized holes stabbing one after another into the wardrobe, skewering the pathetic prey what cowers inside.

When more than twenty holes litter the wardrobe, Guiltilaw ceases attacking with his tail.

He reaches out his front paw and yanks the wardrobe door so that he may observe the pathetic, dead prey. The perforated door opens easily, and the prey inside—

Guiltilaw: "—Grawh?!"

The instant Guiltilaw goes to confirm the corpse's presence, a burning shock to his nose makes him recoil.

A terribly intense stench shoots through his nostrils, the sensation so painful he could wail. He promptly looks back at the wardrobe, to find a transparent bottle, broken and overflowing with colourless liquid.

The stench is coming from this substance. And the prey is not inside the wardrobe.

The protruding cloth had merely been clothes protruding from the wardrobe.

Guiltilaw: "—!"

Once again hearing footsteps peal from the hall outside the room, Guiltilaw turns around.

His nose is not working, but his eyes and ears are fine. He spots a shadow dash down the corridor, and while lamenting the insult of his disabled nose, pursues the shadow. Guiltilaw has never faced such humiliation in his life.

This is not a bold and honest confrontation against Guiltilaw, who has overwhelmed all enemies he has ever faced, nor is it him easily sinking his fangs into fleeing prey. This is an entity scrambling so horrendously for life of a wretched likes Guiltilaw has never seen before.

Assuredly, kill them. Slay them. Maul them, splay them over the dirt, trample them. Guiltilaw: "…"

Forgetting to even silence his footsteps, Guiltilaw's massive frame soars into the room where the footfalls fled.

He easily blasts through the twin doors. What welcomes him is a room remarkably larger than the others he has seen.

A large table stands in the middle of the room, and in the back of the room is a hearth. Candlesticks sit lit upon the table's white tablecloth. In a room with the moon as the only source of light, the flames flicker bewitchingly.

Guiltilaw: "…"

Fire is an irritating thing for Guiltilaw.

Even during day, when the great globe of white fire remains in the skies overhead, Guiltilaw detests fire being near him. After all, the forest that Guiltilaw lived him was engulfed in flames, and he lost his peaceful home. His horn was broken and he began obeying his MASTER during that affair as well, so fire prompts memories of both liberation and humiliation for Guiltilaw.

Guiltilaw: "…"

He hears no footsteps. But he does hear something else.

Opposite the door he just came through is yet another door, on the other end of the large room.

From that likely-cramped space beyond the door, he senses something.

Guiltilaw sniffs, but his sense of smell has not returned yet.

He cannot smell the aroma of the prey wetting itself in terror. When he mauls the prey, he likely will be unable to smell or taste its blood either, which is a disappointment.

But he can put those sensations off for another time, so long as he succeeds in slaughtering the prey. Right now, only erasing this sense of humiliation blazing in his chest, and making the prey who disgraced him shriek its death wail, will offer Guiltilaw any solace.

Guiltilaw: “…”

Guiltilaw steps forth, heading straight for the room.

Then he stabs his sharp tail into the room’s door. It fills with holes just like the wardrobe did, and Guiltilaw pulls the door open before taking a breath and leaping inside.

Guiltilaw: “—σσσ!!”

He soars into the room, roaring.

His bellow intimidates the prey, scares the weakling so that it may compensate him with his claws and fangs into its flesh.

He whips his tail about, spreading destruction throughout the room, when dust erupts from shredded bags and boxes sitting on the cupboards. His forepaw slams down on the floor, shattering it and shredding through the cloth draped across the ground for dust to erupt yet again, from below—but no. These plumes of dust thick enough to block out Guiltilaw’s vision are only growing thicker.

Guiltilaw: “—?!”

Guiltilaw’s vision drowns in white, which invades his windpipe the second he takes a breath, making him cough. Some kind of, massive quantity of flour is dancing through the air. Enough flour to rob him of his vision, and even rob him of the breath needed to roar.

???: “Got him!”

Someone, some creature, speaks.

Guiltilaw hears their voice not from inside this room, but the previous one,

???: “Eat this, the soul of science—flour explosion!!”

With a sound, something is hurled into the white-choked room.

The bright, flickering thing is one of the candlesticks from the table in the previous room.

The candlestick strikes the wall, its flickering flame falling the floor and blooming larger for an instant.

Guiltilaw: “…”

???: “H-Huh…?”

But that’s all.

The candlestick remains fallen to the floor, doing nothing in particular. The speaker sounds to have misunderstood something, and Guiltilaw knows that they are standing petrified outside the room.

Guiltilaw: “—ッ!”

Guiltilaw’s instincts tell him that he is never getting this opportunity again.

Some breed of insufficiency has happened for the enemy. And if that insufficiency had not happened, Guiltilaw would have been in danger.

Comprehending this, Guiltilaw twists his body, electing to escape from this room.

If he can exit to a spacious room, a place where he can swing his paws and his tail freely, no plans the prey come up with will present any issue. He’ll use the overwhelming disparity in strength to force them to submit, and wrest victory.

There’s no need to do anything more than that—.

???: “Yes, didn’t I tell you? That instead of doing that nonsense thing!”

???: “It’s quicker to just do this!”

The instant that Guiltilaw thinks to soar out of the room, he hears two more prey speak.

A low voice, and a high voice. The moment that he realizes these are prey of different sexes, Guiltilaw senses that the shelf behind him is collapsing toward him.

The string drawn across the entryway is connected to the leg of the shelf.

Forcefully tugged, the shelf collapses onto Guiltilaw's back. But its size only allows it to hit Guiltilaw's massive behind.

The force the blow carries inflicts damage on Guiltilaw equivalent to zero.

Calmly taking the blow, Guiltilaw severs the string with his claws.

And when he prepares to definitely leap out of the room—

Guiltilaw: "—?"

The cupboard opens, and the liquid overflowing from it streams all over Guiltilaw's body.

It feels slimy, unlike water. Its color is slightly yellow, and having it slathered over his prided black coat is hideously unpleasant for Guiltilaw. But that discomfort disappears instantly.

Guiltilaw: "—?!"

???: "Here is Otto Suwen's personal investment of trading oil—take as much as you want!"

The prey's voice calls from outside the room.

But Guiltilaw has no leeway to mind the weak prey's voice in that moment.

—The oil he is covered in catches on fire, and detested flame burns his body whole. Guiltilaw: "—ッ!!"

The King of Beasts, descended from the plains and forever obsessed about his throne in the woodland skies, without ever knowing what bested him, combusts in flames as hot as his humiliation.

Chapter 127A:
The Final Day of Roswaal Manor

1

Subaru: “Otto, you mentioned this, right. Something about using wind and water magic to make footsteps peal from far away.”

Otto: “…Actually I believe that we did talk about that before, but it impresses me that you remembered. Magic that simple isn’t impossible for me even with my currently impoverished mana, but…how would I use it? The only time I ever use it is when I want someone to turn around for a moment.”

Subaru: “We’ll be using it exactly how you said. You make footsteps peal, pull their attention, and guide them into a trap. —Then I blast them away with the soul of science.”

Otto: “You sound absurdly confident about this, though what exactly is this ‘soul of science’…?”

Subaru: “Simple, strong, certain death: a dust explosion. The methods and materials are simple as hey presto. All you need’s some fire and flour. If it’s powerful as I know it is, it’s gonna be more than enough to blast away just one single monster.”

2

Otto: “…Is what you said, then I believed you and assisted you in it, and this is what happens!”

Subaru: “Shut up! Scientific advancement always comes with sacrifices! Why didn’t it work?! There wasn’t enough flour, or not enough fire, or…are the laws of physics just different in this world? So that’s why the dust explosion didn’t…”

Petra: “Auughh! None of that even matters, focus on getting it out! Ahh, oh no! Oh no!”

Petra butts in, screaming, into Subaru and Otto's yelling match.

The three of them are in the kitchen on the first floor, lit by the glow of blazing flame. Because,

Subaru: "You used too much oil! How're we gonna put this out?! It's spreading!"

Otto: "Do you think it's possible to shirk on oil when hunting such a ludicrously huge monster?! And if we couldn't bring the flammables out and simply left them there, the results would be the same anyway! You are definitely paying the fees for this afterwards!"

Petra: "Just stop it, you guys! This isn't the time for this! We can't put it out! Run!"

Subaru: "You sound like a middle schooler failing to recover from a mishap with fireworks…"

Says Subaru, exasperated, when he notices that the tablecloth in his hands has caught alight. The flames don't go out no matter how he bats at them, so he resignedly dumps the cloth into the fire. The fire from the storage pantry has spread within an instant, and the flames have started circling around to the dining room and kitchen as well. It feels like the magic stones they use for cooking will get caught in the blaze and explode at any second.

Subaru: "We sacrificed way too much for this…"

Says Subaru, frowning, as he looks down at the charred corpse fallen at the threshold between the pantry and the dining room. It's the beast that was blocking the door to the office on the third floor, which Otto lured downstairs with his sneaky magic, then got covered in the storeroom oil and burned to death.

It had brains befitting its brawn and graciously triggered every single trap without suspecting a thing. Fortunately it was seemingly susceptible to fire, falling into a panicked frenzy when it caught alight, and proceeded to burn up without doing anything else.

Subaru did face a conundrum when his dust explosion failed, but Otto and Petra's backup plan of using oil led them to victory.

For once you could say that Otto and Petra's failure to understand Subaru's lectures on the terror of dust explosions, and dimwitted insistence to lay down insurance, saved them.

But if we're to mention problems that arose from it, then it'd be that the flames that killed the witchbeast have, even after felling the beast, neglected to go out.

The fire burns the walls of the mansion, burns the food inside the pantry, tongues of flame reaching to the legs of the dining room table.

It reeks of smoke, of a fatal and burning world. Subaru's vision begins to haze. In this land without fire brigades, they are lacking in enough water magicians to put out the fire.

Subaru: "I know that we needed to do this, considering how Garfiel and Elsa're fighting and witchbeasts are prowling around…but it's so big we'd have to reconstruct the building…"

Otto: "This isn't the time to be discussing it, Mr. Natsuki. We'll follow Frederica and escape. Swiftly, before the third floor staircase stops existing."

Petra: "Hurry! Hurry!"

It all feels unreal to Subaru as he watches flames engulf the familiar scenery, when Petra and Otto tug at his sleeve.

Otto and Petra are the only people here except Subaru. Frederica and Rem split up with them when they began their plans to trap the witchbeast, and have also been tasked with judging when the beast moved away from the door, and then securing the hidden passage in the office.

It did worry Subaru to entrust the task to Rem and wounded Frederica, but thinking about pure combat ability, it's a sensible plan. Even when Frederica's unable to use an arm, she is far more than capable of defeating Subaru and Otto.

Either way, they succeed in repelling the witchbeast.

While praying that their reading is correct and no other enemies are in the passage, Subaru's team burst out of the dining hall and sprint up the stairway, aiming for the top floor.

Subaru: "What do we do if Garfiel dies in the fire?!"

Otto: "Garfiel surely isn't so stupid, he'll be well! And it's possible for him to escape by charging through the witchbeasts outside!"

Subaru is anxious about the fire's spread, and how it chips away the battlefield for Garfiel. Otto's shouts are correct, but seriously what if—

Petra: "Big Sis Frederica!"

While Subaru broods, the three reach the third floor.

Out of breath, Petra sights Frederica standing outside the office and waves to her. Frederica seems to perceive that the group's fight was successful, and instantly looks relived.

Frederica: "Thank goodness, you're safe. It comforts me that nobody is missing."

Otto: "Please excuse me, may I ask why you are saying this while staring at me? Do you mean that I seem probable to go missing? Please stop, I'm near to weeping!"

Subaru: "Yeah yeah, just calm down calm down. We'll put improving your reception aside as an issue for later, and for now think about how to deal with our current problems. Frederica, how's the passage?"

Frederica: "It operated without any issue. And I have confirmed that the path itself is also safe, at least as far as the inner room… incidentally, am I simply imagining this smell of something burning?"

Frederica narrows her eyes as she asks about the stench. Subaru grimaces, looks at Otto and Petra, and the two shake their heads.

Subaru: "Ahm, well we kinda made a couple mistakes, and the fire we used for defeating the monster got really huge. And so…”

Frederica: “The mansion has begun to burn. …I had not anticipated that the building would return to a state of complete normalcy, but now it shall burn down entirely. …It’s no comparison to our lives.”

Subaru: “Oh, you get it. Yup. Yup it’s an inevitable sacrifice.”

Frederica: “I have little sentimental connection to this mansion. Instead, Ram’s sentiment for the building is likely strong, so you would best prepare yourself for a scolding afterwards.”

Subaru: “Wheuhghh…”

Imagining the relentless and endless chastisement, Subaru suddenly feels trepidation for their reunion.

But it’s good that he can think about the future like this. Frederica smiles wryly at Subaru’s attitude, and a relaxed atmosphere spreads across the scene.

Subaru: “Now, we just imposed another time limit on ourselves, so let’s get out of here quick. Frederica’ll take the lead, then Petra then Otto. If you hit a safe zone the second you’re out of the passage… hard to tell what side of the barrier you’ll be on, but either way follow Frederica’s instructions. Best plan is to meet up with the villagers who fled with Patrasche if you can.”

Calling an end to the jokes, Subaru quickly explains what their current direction is.

Frederica and Otto’s expressions tense as they nod in response. But Petra furrows her brows.

She raises her little hand and calls,

Petra: “Subaru?”

Petra: “I-Isn’t this kinda funny? It almost sounds like you’re not coming with us…”

Subaru: “—It does. I’m sorry, but I’m not leaving with you. We’re splitting up.”

Petra: “Why?!”

Cries Petra in surprise.

She reaches out and grabs his sleeve, her fingers shaking, trying to keep him from going.

Petra: “Let’s just run! The mansion’s burning, and there’s so many scary monsters! You can’t beat them in a fight, can you, Subaru? So won’t you run?”

Subaru: “Well you’re right so I have no excuses there, but I’m not gonna fight. Though I guess in a sense, it is a battle.”

While happy for Petra’s concern, Subaru gently unhooks her fingers. He sees the grief permeate her big, round eyes, paining his heart.

Otto taps her shoulders from behind, taking care not to startle her.

Otto: “Petra. Mr. Natsuki has something that he needs to do. Until he’s done it, he cannot leave the mansion.”

Petra: “But! Subaru’s weak! He’s in danger! We should just leave you behind instead, Mr. Otto!”

Otto: “You’re not saying that because you believe in my strength at all, are you?!”

Shaking her head, Petra looks up at Subaru with tears in her eyes. Subaru kneels down to get on Petra’s eye level and pats her head.

Subaru: “I’m sorry, Petra. You, and Rem, and Frederica will all escape the mansion safely. But that still isn’t the entire rationale for why I came back to the mansion. There’s still one more person I have to get out of here.”

Petra: “Lady, B-Beatrice?”

Subaru: “Yes. Have you met her?”

Petra shakes her head.

Petra started working here about ten days ago. She has not caught sight of that shut-in girl even once during her time living here. Beatrice is indeed a hardcore shut-in.

Even though Subaru basically never left his room except to go to the bathroom either.

Petra: “I-Is she really around? You aren’t just thinking too hard, and fooling yourself that she…?”

Though she probably is not intending to, Petra begins doubting reality.

Could it be that this person only exists inside your own head? Is what she’s asking.

Subaru: “She’s an absolute pain, lonely but a complete meddler, takes everything upon herself and answers questions all on her own and suffers for it, can’t settle issues on her own so she wants someone else to end it for her.”

Petra says nothing.

Subaru: “I’d really rather not think that my imagination could come up with someone like this. If I’m gonna fantasize about anyone, it’s gonna be a helper character who’s with their fondness gauge at maximum.”

Beatrice would never once do a single thing that Subaru wanted, didn’t know what either she or others desired, was trying to give up on thinking, and was the pinnacle of nuisancehood. And so Subaru needs to teach her.

Subaru: “You know, Petra. Beatrice is basically the same age as you. And with how you’re mature in lots of ways, you might resemble her first friend.”

Petra: “Her first friend?”

Subaru reminisces on the past Theta mentioned.

Thinks about Ryuzu Meyer, Beatrice's old friend, who left a permanent scar on the girl's heart. Beatrice and Ryuzu may not have recognized it themselves, but from an outside perspective, they were obviously friends.

Subaru: "Petra. Once I come back with Beatrice, definitely be her friend. You'll like her. 'Cause it's so fun teasing her."

Petra: "Even more than Mr. Otto?"

Subaru: "Yeah. You don't even need Otto any more."

Otto looks like he wants to say something, but Subaru consciously ignores him.

He draws his hand away from Petra's head and stands up.

Subaru: "I'm doing it. I'm searching for Beatrice. I'll do my best not to die in the fire, but if I do burn to death then I want it to go down in the records that I died because of Otto's oil."

Otto: "I'd really rather that not happen. If you don't come back safely I'll slap you, I swear."

Says Otto, looking miffed, as he sets his hands on Petra's shoulders and draws her near him.

As if drawing a line between Subaru, and the four of them.

Subaru: "Frederica. I'm counting on you."

Frederica: "Unsparing to my health, I swear that I shall cut open a path to our escape."

Subaru: "Be sparing. If we can't keep you, it was pointless for me to come here."

Frederica's eyes widen.

It's not often that Subaru sees her looking so surprised. Feels kind of nice.

Finally, Subaru looks at Rem, on Frederica's back. The sleeping princess shows no signs of seeing Subaru off.

It's fine. Rem isn't meant to be seeing Subaru off. Subaru is meant to be greeting her.

Petra: "Take care, Subaru!"

Turning his back to the four, Subaru breaks into a run.

Even at their parting, Petra's voice washes over Subaru's back. But he doesn't glance behind him.

Petra would not desire him to, either.

The flames are spreading steadily across the mansion.

—With his hand to an unaffected door, Subaru must wonder whether this fire will reach the Forbidden Archive.

2

The shield catches the blade as it slashes down, and to a screech of sparks and metal, the knife flows away.

Weaving into each other's openings, a forceful kick plunges into Elsa's stomach—she takes the blow, rotating to dissipate the strike's force, and uses her momentum to slash at Garfiel, her blade closing in to slice his head in two. But,

Garfiel: "Lax!"

Elsa: "Goodness. How harsh."

Garfiel's wide, open jaws close down on the blade, making this the fourth mouth-intercept of the day.

The force of Garfiel's jaw instantly shatters the knife, and Elsa draws her hand back before leaping backwards in retreat. The theft of her favored weapon makes her smile deeper.

Elsa: "If you were wrong by even a hair, your head would have shot off. It’s certainly impressive that you did it.”

Garfiel: “Got th’trick t’it down. ‘M startin’ t’get bored ‘v how you fight, ‘bout now.”

Elsa: “How cold. Looking like you understand a woman’s entirety, when you’ve only known her a short while.”

Garfiel: “…Fuck off with that embroilin’ phrasin’, oi. —Hrn.”

Garfiel sticks his finger in his ear, grimacing, and sniffs as he notices something.

He looks down the hallway. His mouth curves into a grin.

It doesn’t look like Elsa’s noticed it yet, but Garfiel’s sense of smell has picked up the stench. This is the stink of stone and wood on fire —otherwise said, the aroma of flame.

Meili: “—Ahh, geez, I can’t believe it! He’s sooo useeeleessss!”

Right after Garfiel smiles, the girl atop the witchbeast puffs out her cheeks.

Elsa glances at her. Meili remains peeved as she continues,

Meili: “Apparently the Shadowlion who’s meant to be stalling the others just died. He never listened to my instructions anyway, and he got mad real quickly so he was always a problem, but…how did he manage to die when aaallll he had to do was nap outside a door?”

Elsa: “The true question is, why did you bring such a useless beast with you?”

Meili: “The Shadowlion was the only one except Boulderpork who wasn’t in rut or hibernation. And he still died, I can’t believe it.”

Groans Meili as she tosses another knife to Elsa. Elsa recieves it, confirms the feel of its grip, and remains utterly apathetic this information from Meili.

It doesn’t look like Meili cares at all about the dead witchbeast either. The poor creature.

Regardless. What he’s overheard makes a wicked smile arise on Garfiel’s face.

Meili: “Eww. Scary-looking precious guy, you’re making a real nasty face.”

Garfiel: “My mug’s nastiness ain’t a match fer th’Captain’s. N’anyway, ain’t it ‘xactly what I told ya? Yer sneaky plots ain’t nothin’ t’th’Captain n’ his happy band’v friends.”

Elsa: “While yes, they have exceeded our expectations…where does that leave them now? The slaughter of one useless witchbeast doesn’t change that we still have numbers. We continue to keep you, their pivotal combat force, pinned here…and nothing especially changes about their predicament.”

Garfiel: “Yeah, yer right.”

Elsa holds her two knives loosely while Garfiel crosses his arms.

He sniffs again, thinks back on his fight with Elsa until now—and decides.

Garfiel: “‘S’bout time fer things t’get movin’.”

Elsa: “What do you—”

Meili: “Elsa!”

Garfiel’s statement makes Elsa raise her brows. But before she can finish her question, Meili cries out.

Garfiel looks to find that the Boulderswine’s eyes have changed color, and the giant animal is so agitated that it’s stomping around on the spot. Meili calls out to the creature, getting it slowly back under control. But it seems like the witchbeast has, just like Garfiel, noticed the fire.

Meili pats the Boulderswine to calm it down, then looks gravely at

Elsa.

Meili: “Elsa, the building’s burning. Somebody set it on fire.”

Elsa: “…”

Garfiel: “Hell’re you sayin’ with that ‘somebody’. —’S was obviously th’Captain. Makes sense, n’ good that it’s so upfront. Witchbeasts’re beasts. If yer gonna drive ‘em away t’ make a path, quickest way’s t’scare ‘em with fire.”

Meili: “But…then he came to the mansion to save the people inside, only to burn it down in his escape?”

The decisiveness of Subaru’s actions stuns Meili speechless. Elsa also looks to be having trouble consolidating this information, perhaps because it doesn’t fit with her image of Subaru. But Garfiel’s heart remains horribly calm in contrast to their surprise.

Naturally, Subaru had not told Garfiel beforehand that he would go this far. Garfiel did believe Subaru someone who took daring actions, but not even he expected that he’d burn down the mansion. Which makes Garfiel feel comfortable as someone who decided to enter under Subaru’s tutelage.

And most importantly, the fact that this situation has been arranged lights a spark in Garfiel.

Garfiel: “Mansion’s burning. Outside’s a horde of witchbeasts.” Elsa: “—?”

Garfiel: “Got people we gotta save, n’adversaries we gotta stall. Th’only guy who can fight’s me, n’ th’Captain told me he’s leavin’ this up t’me.”

Meili: “What’re you suddenly going on about, Mister…”

Garfiel: “‘S goddamn obvious.”

Elsa tilts her head. Meili looks like she’s observing something creepy.

Garfiel clicks his fangs, feeling refreshed.

His body is light. Nothing scares him any more.

Garfiel: “With all these conditions in place, what fuckin’ man out there ain’t gonna get fired up?! M’goddamn goin’ for it. ‘S a FACING THE DRAGON, SWORD SAINT REID LAUGHS AND DRAWS BLADE.”

Elsa: “You recognize that that saying means someone abnormal and insane?”

Garfiel: “Y’bet I know. And? Yer sayin’ there somethin’ wrong ‘bout my amazin’ self n’ you bein’ here?”

Garfiel affirms his own stupidity with a refreshing breed of momentum, leading Elsa to stare in utter astonishment. But only for a moment.

She immediately grins, licking her lips as her eyes soften beautifully.

Elsa: “You are correct. You are sincerely correct. You’ve stated it perfectly.”

Agreeing with him, Elsa points the knives she wields at Garfiel.

She crosses her blades, her long, black hair dancing as she tilts her head.

Elsa: “But would you mind if we had a change in attitude? I doubt that you are suddenly going to grow any stronger, and also suspect that you recognize this after clashing with my constitution numerous times. A bout may leave me as the more wounded party, but the confrontation still remains unproductive.”

Garfiel: “Yer right.”

About ten minutes have passed since Garfiel and Elsa started fighting.

Steel has already met steel over one hundred times, each competing viciously with the other. Garfiel holds the slight advantage in terms of combat ability. He narrowly surpasses Elsa in brute strength, in speed, and in his techniques, never once conceding predominance.

But Elsa can heal her wounds in mere seconds and happily accepts injury without feeling pained in the slightest, never once hesitating in either her offence or defense.

And while getting into wounds, it's worth mentioning that Garfiel is also wounded. He also needs time to heal himself, while Elsa does not.

He is inferior to Elsa in terms of stamina. Should the fight turn into an endless cycle of bouts, then her blades will soon catch Garfiel.

However,

Garfiel: "Five…no, maybe six? 'S how many times my amazin' self beat you in."

Elsa: "Yes, you may be correct. And?"

Landing a direct hit with a kick, smashing her into the wall with his shield, grabbing her by the leg and slamming her head- first to the floor—Garfiel has landed many fatal strikes on Elsa. The injury healed every time, and he truly was not achieving anything, but—

Garfiel: "I was anticipatin' four 'er five times at best."

Elsa: "…"

Garfiel: "Vampires ain't immortal. You pile enough killin' blows on 'em…'n eventually they're gonna run outta life. That's what I'm gonna be doin' t'you 'fore this mansion's all burned down."

Garfiel takes his stance, legs apart, as he laughs ferociously with his fangs on full display.

Elsa hears him in silence, the smile vanishing from her face. She fiddles with the end of her braid before giving a quiet sigh.

Elsa: "Meili. —Give me it, and you pursue them."

Meili: “Elsa…are you serious?”

Elsa: “When given rationale to do it, failure to do it is discourtesy to the opponent. My only regret is that I may not be able to extract your guts cleanly.”

Replies Elsa with her eyes closed. Meili does not question further.

She drops the knife holder she has been championing to the ground, and draws a different holder—one containing merely two knives, and throws it to Elsa.

Garfiel: “Hmm?”

Garfiel hums cheerfully as he watches Elsa draw the knives from the holder.

These two blades radiate a pressure so intense that none of the others she’s used can compare.

The knife in Elsa’s left hand is completely black from the handle to the blade. It looks identical to the kukri she’s been using at a glance, but this one’s blade is curved with countless, bestial fangs down its edge, specialized more for goring than ripping.

The knife in her other hand is the exact opposite, pure white with a thick body. It also looks like a kukri, but its thickness makes it seem like a strike from it could snap bones, and pairing it with the black blade makes its ruthless image compound greatly.

Garfiel: “Yer tellin’ me that’s yer ace?”

Elsa: “These are the ones I use when I’m focusing on killing the opponent, rather than seeing their guts. Exclude Mother, and you are the third person I’ve used them on.”

Garfiel: “That’s one hell’v’n opinion I ain’t glad for, n’ one hell’v’a family I ain’t jealous ‘bout, oi.” Garfiel scrunches up his face at the unpleasant confession.

Meili gives orders to her witchbeast as she nimbly moves herself. The dimwitted beast stomps the ground, charging through walls as it heads toward the main wing in pursuit of Subaru's group—however,

Garfiel: "Well, thanks fer showin' me yer ace. I don't show you mine, n' 's what ya call unfair, yeh?" With that, Garfiel stomps the ground.

Immediately, a pulse rushes out Garfiel's sole and through the ground, speeding down the hallway, passing beneath Elsa before reaching the witchbeast—and exploding.

Pork: "—?!"

Meili: "Boulderpork?!"

The earth caves in beneath the beast, which loses its balance and crashes into the wall as it falls. The impact rocks the mansion, and Meili is unable to stay atop the witchbeast, instead coming to land in the hallway. She strokes the fallen Boulderswine's rump as she looks at the floor, sees the unnatural depression, and glances behind her.

Meili: "Don't tell me, you did this?"

By utilizing his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, Garfiel can conjure depressions and protuberances in any surface within visible range that he can determine as being GROUND. It comes with disparities in effectiveness depending on how far away the target is or how large a scale he is aiming for, but it's more than enough for him to bluff with.

Garfiel has learned from Subaru to, when you've got something you really don't want others to find out, laugh with complete shamelessness.

Garfiel: "'S about what it is. Yer safe t'think that me not lettin' yer escape's n' expression'v my will. Long 's my feet're touchin' th'ground, yer ain't escapin' from anywhere my amazin' eyes can see ya."

Elsa: "Meili. You can put minimal forces upstairs. Call the others, and awaken that beast."

Meili: "…Mama'll be mad."

Elsa: "What will truly earn us a scolding is if we fail to remove the threat. And, I doubt we'll have the leeway to worry about what will come afterwards."

Garfiel: "So y'do get it."

Meili's expression loses its calm as she nods, puts her fingers to her mouth, and whistles. Garfiel silently watches on as the thin sound echoes far, all throughout the mansion. If the two were speaking truths, then witchbeasts should be approaching this spot before long.

This situation is only blazing hotter and hotter.

Elsa: "I'll pluck off your limbs and shoulder you home once you're lighter. I doubt this will all be worth it if I'm unable to enjoy myself protractedly."

Garfiel: "Where's th'option t'just quit it with th'guts thing?"

Elsa: "I'd rather quit breathing."

Garfiel clicks his neck at that statement, before stooping forward in preparation to receive the enemy's strike.

Elsa sways loosely and nimbly positions her white knife behind her, flexes her arm,

Elsa: "—I assure you that I, more than anyone else, can love you to your flesh and marrow."

A horrific, debauched smile. The shriek of blade rubbing against blade.

And,

Garfiel: "—Ghgh?!"

The white knife sticking from Garfiel's left shoulder breaks his bones apart.

—The battle between the Bowel Hunter and the Shield of Sanctuary, enters its final phase.

3

His beaten shoulders, his hips, his head all hurt.

He is battered all over after falling many times, always stifling his pained moans from the impact dead.

He runs, runs, runs, out of breath, knees shaking, eyes fogged, runs.

It hurts to breathe. He keeps his head low, so as not to inhale smoke. The flames have already engulfed the majority of the building, through which he sprints as he searches for a yet-untouched door.

Subaru: "—Hic."

Discovering an unopened door, Subaru flies madly at the doorknob and wrenches the thing open. Before him is revealed an utterly mundane guestroom, which will shortly drown in a sea of flame. Leaving the sentimentality aside, Subaru leaves the door open as he runs for another room. He goes for adjacent room, and the one adjacent that, and the one adjacent that, opening every door he sights—

Subaru: "—There!"

Freeing him from the scent of soot and char, the stench of aged paper streams out of the room.

Subaru sniffs the familiar, musty smell as he stomps across the threshold.

He raises his head. Addresses the person occupying this chamber.

Subaru: "Hey! Enough of this, stop being angry and listen to—"

Beatrice: "Get out, I suppose!"

An invisible shockwave comes racing at him, threatening to blast him away. But Subaru manages to hook his fingers on the carpet to defend himself from the force.

Amidst a pressure so intense it could drag him backwards with it, Subaru's cheeks twist into a smile.

Subaru: "Hah! Don't underestimate me too much. You think I'd put up with getting thrown out of here so quickly, over and over, by the exact same meth—"

Beatrice: "I won't say it again, in fact!"

Subaru: "Bhggagh?!"

A thick book rides the wind to smack against Subaru's forehead, dizzying him and sending him tumbling, flying backwards, ejecting him from the room.

He shoots down the corridor. Crashes into a wall. He shakes his head as the door closes itself in front of him, and he hurriedly leaps at the thing—already too late. This room is no longer connected to the Forbidden Archive.

Subaru: "Asshole! Who're you taking after, goddamn loli!"

After violently kicking the door open, Subaru breaks into a run in pursuit of another door.

That the room hadn't sent him to the second floor of the eastern wing—an area close to Garfiel's fight with Elsa—was probably Beatrice's kindness.

Subaru: "Then at least listen to me, stupid!!"

Beatrice must be thinking the exact same thing from within the Archive.

Keenly feeling that truth, and rejected times upon times, Subaru sprints through the mansion in search of the door to the Forbidden Archive.

With the fight in the western wing in its final phase, and the fire from the main wing blazing through the whole building—only a question of time remains until Roswaal Mansion burns to the ground.

Chapter 128:
Love You to Your Blood and Guts

He drives his fangs into the green tail slipping before him. Mindlessly tears it apart.

Purple fluids splatter everywhere and vivid blood showers his face, but he doesn’t care. His left eye has already been bathed in venomous fluid and blocked shut for ages.

He roars to obfuscate the burning pain before slamming his arm into the two-headed snake, killing it. He kicks its corpse, keeps everything in front of him in check as he retreats, and when the chill races up his spine—he instantly recoils back.

And the grisly blade screams past, grazing his chin.

The witchbeast in the blade’s path becomes prey to the fanglike knife. Flesh is shredded, blood spatters in sheets, a scramble of organs forms a curtain before him—which he charges through, aiming for the perpetrator woman before ramming his arms into her torso.

Elsa: “—!”

His right shield at her chest, his left shield at her flank, her flesh squelching and bones cracking at each point.

At his ears, before his eyes, from all directions come the cacophonous cries of beasts, their shrieks, his roars, crashing conflict, the pounding of metal on metal, too many noises mashed together for him to properly register the world.

He doesn’t care. This stuff in front of him, in his right-eyed vision, is what’s real.

Her voluptuous breasts crater in, the force of the gut-wrenching blow making her vomit blood. Even with her scarlet lips turning a deeper shade of sanguine, and faced with pain enough to threaten her life, her expression remains one of rapture.

It might not even be her combat strength, or her stamina, but that mentality of hers that's the real nuisance.

Elsa: "—Hah!"

Garfiel: "Ghrrrrr!!"

Her short exhale. His responding roar.

She swings her left arm from behind to in front, shrill noise pealing out from behind him. The slash reflects off the wall, rebounds off the ceiling, hits the floor as it comes pressing for the back of his head.

Garfiel: "…"

He directs his attention behind him, extinguishing the idea of evading it from his mind.

The woman before him draws her right arm firmly back, preparing to piston her serrated black knife into him. If this is to catch him between the two knives, then this blow will likely slice open his head, or maybe his throat.

He tilts aside, forcing himself out of the blade's path as it rushes to stab the back of his head.

A thunk resounds out from around his left shoulderbone. Feeling the tip of the rebounding blade bite into a gap between his bones, he clicks his tongue—when the knife slices into his joints, rendering his right arm momentarily motionless.

Elsa: "Huaaah!"

Garfiel: "Shah!"

So violent as to mute all sound, she looses the readied blade.

This unremitting attack makes for less of a 'slash' and more of a 'pointy bludgeon'.

The strike will blast his head off should it hit, mutilating it utterly. Garfiel immediately raises his left arm to intercept the strike, but with his poor posture, he cannot avoid all the damage to his right shoulder.

Animal teeth shriek against metal for only a microsecond before Garfiel's arm is easily shunted away.

With only a meagre drop in its speed, the back blade resumes its charge for Garfiel's head. More than enough strength to cleave apart his skull presses in, a second from hitting. Hitting—

Elsa: "—?!"

—what Garfiel kicks up, forcing it into the path between his head and the knife, the witchbeast's corpse.

An uncomfortable feeling like a hard-skinned vegetable against his cheek, and blistering venom that burns the skin it touches. Risking being bathed in both these things, he salvages the benefit of avoiding fatal damages.

The knife slices into the witchbeast's corpse, the battering force of the blow proceeding through the cadaver to strike Garfiel across the face.

The impact pummels him, sending him whirling left to right, spinning in circles—and with two wilful steps into the ground, he soars backwards.

His Divine Protection of Earth Spirits activates, obeying his will to make the ground he stepped on explode. The detonation sends him soaring backwards, the woman now to his back as he proceeds to zoom straight for her. —With the woman's white blade still sticking out of his shoulder.

The instant the blade touches her, the woman flinches.

Though she knows that the side contacting her is the pommel, it still makes her falter from making any instantaneous decisions.

With his right shoulder still against the woman, Garfiel spreads his stance to drop his center of gravity.

The instant this makes the woman think to step backwards and open range, Garfiel's arm shoots up and grabs her face in a vicegrip.

Garfiel: "—Partial Transformation!"

Immediately following his scream, a change occurs in the arm clutching her face.

The arm swells explosively—growing a coat of golden fur in an instant, transforming into the log-thick arm of a beast.

And naturally, it ends in a beast's paw, what with saber-like claws,

Elsa: "Kyhaaaaah!"

The thick claws gouge into the woman's face, splaying blood everywhere and making her recoil. His five fingers as they drive into her head prompt the same pain and injury as knives. Evens she has to put her hands to her face, backpedalling, shrieking while looking to the ceiling.

Garfiel: "Rhm!!"

He plunges a kick into a torso, shunting her back.

The force battering her chest carries more than enough strength to further destroy her shattered bones and ruptured innards, churning them into a greater mess.

The fallen woman drops her weapon, spitting up pure scarlet as she gives a faltering laugh.

It's horrible to listen to, and he's more than ready to swoop in and make it stop, but,

Garfiel: "Fuckin'! Just one after another!"

Just as Garfiel moves to pursue her, witchbeasts flood into the gap in his assault.

Rats with black wings, possums bloated in proportion to their anger, Spotted Rex assembled here from throughout the mansion, and a restored giant—the Boulderswine all rush in.

His claws rip apart the swarm of rats, one stomp of his foot eliminates the swollen possums, his kicks snap the necks of the Rex snapping at him, all as Garfiel faces the charging Boulderswine head-on.

Meili: “Get squished!”

Garfiel: “Y’think I’m gonna be toleratin’ that, y’dumbass!”

Tons of weight come charging with explosive force.

Rather than a blow from an animal, this cannonball is equivalent to a building dropping on him.

Not even Garfiel could take a direct blow from this and get out safely. He’d be unable to offer even a second of resistance, get blasted away and trampled flat. However,

Garfiel: “‘S what makes it fun—!”

Bracing his legs, Garfiel unleashes his Earthsoul Blessing to its utmost limit.

He feels the blessings of the earth pulsing up from underfoot, rippling through his flesh.

A warfaring glint lights Garfiel’s golden eye, fangs bared as he smiles wickedly, detonating the blood lying dormant inside him.

Garfiel: “—σσσσση!!”

This strangled bellow is not addressed to the outside, but a call to his own interior.

Flowing through his body, difficult to accept as it is, definitely not something he acquired by choice: his bloodline. He calls to his usually-hidden pedigree, feeling goosebumps as his soul trembles.

Just like his left arm that tore the woman’s face apart, Garfiel’s right arm swells explosively. Starting at his arms, his shoulders, his torso, his neck, his head all crunch as his skeleton changes shape, his face morphing from that of a human to that of a ferocious feline—a massive tiger.

Following the enlargement of his torso, his hips, his legs, his clothing fails to endure the pressure and bursts apart. Scraps of cloth hang off his frame, the two shields on his arms barely managing to stay equipped as small bucklers—here is a beast that, by physique alone, can compare with the oncoming Boulderswine.

Garfiel: “—℈!”

The floor creaks, caving in beneath him.

Even this solidly-constructed mansion cannot endure the confrontation of these two massive beasts. So giant that the hallway cannot contain him, Garfiel shatters the walls, ornaments crashing to the ground as his back scrapes across the ceiling.

Meili: “—Wugpig!!”

The girl atop the witchbeast shrieks in response to Garfiel’s transformation.

She must be screaming the name of the witchbeast. Answering to its master’s call, the Boulderswine gives a roar so strong as to disintegrate boulders and opens wide its maw with all its flat teeth, racing for Garfiel.

The witchbeast rears up on its back legs, raising its forelegs to stomp Garfiel flat.

The massive tiger, its golden eyes flaring, lets its own legs propel it into the opening before the behemoth’s crushing blow hits and stabs its claws into the Swine’s thick, stony hide.

Blades screech against bedrock as the tiger’s claws are peeled out of their sockets. Knifes fail to puncture the thick hide, and the Swine’s plummeting forelegs proceed to slam straight into the tiger. The stomp presses down on the tiger, a crushing pressure on its shoulders. The force pins Garfiel’s upper body to the ground, the merciless impact prompting the tiger to shriek.

Meili: “Don’t stop, Wugpig!!”

Bones shatter and flesh squelches, but the noises do not deter the witchbeast’s master.

Hearing her wailing voice, the Swine roars and raises its forelegs up, ready to stomp once again and crush the tiger’s head.

However,

Garfiel: “—϶!”

If his claws won’t work, the tiger has only one weapon left.

Twisting its neck, the tiger with its crushed shoulders uses its spine to upright itself. The Swine’s forelegs are raised and its belly is exposed—the tiger bares fangs.

Not even a witchbeast with skin as solid as rock can have its entire body at the exact same toughness. Compared to its legs or back, its vital regions are going to be less heavily guarded. And so, the tiger drives its sharp fangs into the Swine’s bared stomach.

Meili: “Boulderpork?!”

Garfiel: “—ℓℓℓℓ§!!”

The tiger’s jaws, so immense that they could swallow a man whole, close around almost half of the Swine’s extensive belly.

For a moment, the Swine’s hide does attempt to resist the piercing fangs. But like the points of knives stabbing into a fruit, the sharp fangs instantaneously and effortlessly tear through the thin skin.

The Swine’s shriek comes as the tiger kicks at the floor, using the momentum to roll sideways. With his fangs still sunken into his prey, attempting to shred the creature apart—it’s the hunting behavior of riverside-dwelling water dragons.

Were Natsuki Subaru here to witness it, he would deem it as being something close to the death roll of an alligator, a creature that does not exist in this world.

His hindlegs strike the floor, buying rotational and forward force as he mangles the Swine's torso. Inside the thick hide rest a vast store of blood and guts, which spill relentlessly out from the bitewounds and onto the mansion hallway floor.

Pork: "—ζ."

Eyes wide, the Boulderswine gives a weak death wail as it collapses.

The tiger spits out chunks of the Swine's flesh before slamming its rear leg into the massive creature, toppling it onto its side. The girl, having dismounted the witchbeast at the moment of the crash, is utterly lost for words as she watches her witchbeast's gruesome death.

Meili: "No, way…I don't believe it…"

Stepping back, the girl glances behind her to see what troops she has left.

Many witchbeasts have heeded her call are steadily assembling here. But they are only a mob of small- and medium-sized creatures, none of them large like the Boulderswine.

Meili: "Ugh! What is this?! Elsa! Elsa! Dooo somethinnngg!"

Elsa: "…That is a rather, unsparing demand."

Realizing that she is at a disadvantage, the girl slings senseless insults while calling her partner's name. Reply does come, from a shadowy woman who crawls out of the darkness. Her mangled face has regenerated. She fiddles tirelessly with her bloodied braid.

Elsa: "Gouging a woman's face open without hesitation, you are indeed fantastic, you are."

Garfiel: "—σσ℈! σσ℈! σσ℈!"

The woman laughs with a bloodsoaked grimace. The tiger, shoulders broken, growls in agitation. Its massive form quakes, before it butts its massive head against the fallen Swine, and pukes. The tiger moans in pain before its great body begins losing mass, bit by bit, and its enlarged form starts returning to human shape. After a few seconds there now stands a half-naked boy, batting away shredded strands of golden fur.

Garfiel: “Auh…fuck, m’back. Head hurts…”

Elsa: “I see…so you are half-beast. I did think your eyes looked rather nasty for a human.”

Garfiel: “‘F we’re gonna be followin’ yer logic, that means our Captain ain’t human either.”

Garfiel shakes his head, getting a grip on the sensation of his own human body.

Over the course of returning to human form, his broken shoulders have mended enough that they can both move. But in saying that, they still do flare with pain every time he moves them, and make his thoughts burn a soldering white.

He can’t stay in top performance for much longer.

But the same should be going for his opponent.

Garfiel: “Went n’ busted open yer witchbeast’s guts fer ya. Yer allowed t’go happily swimmin’ n’ that ocean ‘v blood there, I ain’t gonna mind.”

Elsa: “I’ll have to decline. Animal guts serve as no substitute unless I’m extraordinarily starving. The beauty of guts is that they are disembowelled from people.”

Garfiel: “Yer aesthetics make no sense t’me.”

Garfiel sticks his pinky into his ear and picks rigorously while giving an astonished sigh.

Elsa is overwhelmingly disadvantaged, but her attitude isn’t budging.

—Garfiel estimates that it will take five more tries at most until Elsa’s immortality ends.

And Garfiel has already showered four lethal blows on her. Five if you include the mauling of her face. This should be about time that she starts hitting the limit for her regeneration.

Meaning that Elsa’s stock of lives is already exhausted. Garfiel is injured as well, but that isn’t going to make him slack in this fight.

Being that no support is possibly coming from Meili’s beasts, they effectively have their blades at the other’s throat—so why is she being so composed?

Elsa: “It’s not that there’s any special reason for it. You don’t have to be so scared.”

Seeing Garfiel’s brows furrow in puzzlement, Elsa speaks as if comforting a child.

Garfiel scrunches up his face in response, growling like an animal.

To obfuscate the fact that she has clearly seen the slight confusion in his heart.

Garfiel: “Fuck off. Stop talkin’ like yer know anythin’.”

Elsa: “But it’s plain to see. Disembowelling someone means facing someone before they are disembowelled. Your face is a familiar one to me.”

Garfiel: “…”

Elsa: “It’s the face of being unable to comprehend a deviant.”

Garfiel falls speechless, his throat feeling to clench. Elsa puts her hand to her mouth and laughs.

She smiles slightly as she tilts her head.

Elsa: “Don’t worry, it’s fine. I’m not wishing to be understood by anybody. My happiness is something I acquire by spurning the life of another. To live is to spurn death.”

Garfiel: “…’M gettin’ that ‘f I take this seriously, ‘m gonna go nuts.”

Garfiel raises his arms, battering his shields together as he rejects any attempt at understanding her. He doesn’t have the leeway to be thinking about her circumstances. And her last statement has just eliminated any reason he had to pay attention out of whimsy.

Garfiel: “But I will ask yer this . …’F yer pledge that you ain’t ever gonna do nothin’ bad again n’ run away, ‘s not impossible that I’ll let you go.”

Elsa: “You truly are a precious boy.”

She shows her final mercy, then dispels it with a smile—the signal, to charge.

Blasting off, Garfiel soars ahead. Elsa counters him by swinging her white blade up to hit the ceiling, hit the floor, revolving and rebounding as it closes in on Garfiel.

Elsa’s wide white blade is a stringing-together of multiple knives. The blade-edge alternates from one side to the other, the knife rippling like a snake’s bones as it ricochets through the hallway.

Up? Down? The knife easily outspeeds the eye, soaring about as a white light. Garfiel braces his shields over his head and abandons the option of evading. The knife plunges down into his upper left arm, imparting him with the pain of broken bones as he resumes his advance.

Elsa: “I was born in Gusteco of the north, where it is very, very cold.”

Split-second combat is unfolding in this battleground, but for some reason her lilting voice sneaks into Garfiel’s ears.

It isn’t even audible. His attention is pyroclastic, focused amidst instantaneous trade of deadly attacks. There is no opening for this voice to butt in.

Is what it should be, but the woman's voice slips smoothly into Garfiel's consciousness.

Elsa: "The divide in wealth was fierce, and it wasn't uncommon at all for lower-class children to be abandoned. I was one of those children, with no parents I ever knew, drinking dirty water to survive."

Garfiel: "—Rghhhh!!"

Elsa: "I spent my days stealing objects, threatening people, doing things in that vein, with the people around me constantly changing. Why am I alive? What is happiness? …Not questions I had any time to consider back then."

His fist plunges forward, inches from belting Elsa's face.

But she leans aside to dodge the overblown attack, slicing her black blade up to cut shallowly through Garfiel's torso.

The bestial fangs pilfer his flesh. Elsa licks her lips as the bright blood bathes her.

Elsa: "It was frigid that day."

Garfiel: "Shut up! I ain't goddamn listenin'!!"

Elsa: "The wind blustering from the lofty mountains was so strong, so cold, that it froze the town that day. My breath could freeze in that chill, when the shopkeeper I stole from caught me."

With a hot sigh, Elsa speaks on, enraptured.

Her blades of death compound in momentum, slicing cut after cut into Garfiel as he fails to keep up.

Elsa: "No one would complain if he killed me, but seeing as I was a girl…I can still remember his face as he smiled, and moved to strip my clothes."

Garfiel: “Gh, auh…”

Elsa: “The bitter wind howled as he stripped my overwear, snatched my underwear…and when I contemplated that before he could do anything to me, the cold might just kill me first, I happened to pick up a shard of glass.”

Her leg sweeps up to try and belt him in the side of the head, but Garfiel counters it with a headbutt.

The impact reverberates through his brain and makes him recoil, but surely shattered Elsa’s foot too.

Elsa draws her leg back, retreats. But her expression remains one of ecstacy.

Elsa: “I wasn’t thinking about anything. I just had the shard of glass, then when he leaned forward I pressed it into his stomach, moved it, and sliced him open.”

Garfiel: “…”

Elsa: “I felt nothing for his screams, or the fact that I had taken a life. But amidst that icy gale, I did think.”

Garfiel’s breathing freezes. Elsa smiles.

Elsa: “How warm, blood and guts are.”

Elsa’s blade swings up, threatening to split apart Garfiel’s skull. He glides aside, kicks off the wall to manoeuvre behind Elsa, slams a kick into her back—but she instantly twists around and strikes his shin with her pommel, diverting the kick.

His leg crashes into the wall, which crumbles alongside plumes of dust. Garfiel clicks his tongue as he leaps back and away.

Elsa: “If there is happiness in the world, then it is in the warmth and beauty of forgetting the cold. From birth I had nothing, and now I had this: the first definite happiness I ever found. —You can’t understand, can you?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t wantin’ to, either.”

Elsa: “That’s fine. I don’t want sympathy.”

Garfiel: “Then why’d y’tell me th’damn story, ‘s fuckin’ gross.”

Elsa: “Why, I wonder?”

Garfiel’s eyes house hostility as Elsa tilts her head, mystified.

And she narrows her eyes saucily, licks her lips salaciously,

Elsa: “Because I find you truly darling.”

Garfiel: “…Sorry, but I already got a girl I like. Ain’t got time t’be datin’ a crazy bitch.”

Elsa: “So cold. But it’s fine. I’m only concerned about your innards.”

It feels like a conversation is happening, but fundamentally no conversation is.

Over all his exchanges with her thus far, Garfiel has finally come to understand this.

He has no interest or sympathy or anything for Elsa’s life story.

That was her foundation, she had those experiences, and she became this monster. That’s all.

Garfiel’s shields already know who they ought to protect.

Garfiel: “—You’re dead, Elsa Granhiert.”

Elsa: “Once I kill you, I will adore you, Garfiel Tinzel.”

Each calling the name of the other, the half-beast and the murderer wage violence.

The beaming light of the white knife slices through the corridor’s darkness, and the black knife pistons forward cleave Garfiel in two.

A knife ricochets everywhere in the corner of his vision. He cannot defend against the attack, nor does he have the option of evading it. But if he fails to take the blow and dampens his charge, he'll merely be repeating the same foolish mistake.

Garfiel: "…"

The knife slices through sound, dancing throughout the hallway.

If he cannot perceive the blade's point, he can only aim for the point it was thrown from.

Garfiel thrusts out his left arm, the fasteners on his shield loosened —and lets the thing fly.

He had loosened the bindings when he battered the shields together. Now he is tossing it, and Elsa's eyes shoot wide open as it smashes directly into her left hand—something crunches, and her broken fingers drop her white knife.

Having lost the hand manipulating it, the knife stabs into the ceiling, where it falls still.

A deep, dark smile, and a surging roar. A deathly blade murders the air as it swings down—Garfiel charging straight into it—and strikes him.

He sets his right arm upon his head to receive the direct hit from the black blade.

The shockwave pierces through his shield, rocks his skull. His eyes spin and he comes close to stumbling forward, but just manages to stomp firm and catch himself. He did it—when the woman's knee shoots up and smashes Garfiel's nose.

Elsa: "You mustn't be careless and think you're safe."

She says with a laugh, sweeping her leg up at Garfiel as he recoils.

Her leg hangs poised high, and from her shoe comes the glint of a blade in the heel—with his point aimed to stab Garfiel through the neck—

Garfiel: “Yer the one who better not be overlookin’ my amazin’ weapon.”

His open jaws swallow her heel and the blade whole, gnashing at her slender foot.

With her bones and the knife chewed up to the heel, Elsa’s eyes shoot open wide.

Elsa: “Goodness.”

Yelping in surprise, Elsa staggers away but loses her balance and tumbles to sit on the spot. Her right leg is mangled from the ankle down, inoperable, and the force of her own attacks has broken her arms as well. With her left leg as her support, Elsa gazes at Garfiel —

Elsa: “—Ahh.”

Taking in a breath, Elsa blushes like a girl in love.

Her exhale carries enough heat to be chromatic. Her wet eyes abound in hot passion.

Karlasar

—Before Elsa, Garfiel shoulders the immense Boulderswine, and throws it.

Although aware that she will be crushed beneath its incredible mass, it is not until the silhouette swallows her that Elsa's gaze strays from Garfiel.

With her breathing ragged, gazing at the grimacing blond boy with love—Elsa: "I feel thrills."

The overwhelming weight crushes the murderer, the vampire, the Bowel Hunter, until nothing remains untouched.

Her flesh squelches. Fresh blood mingles with fluids from the witchbeast.

Scenting the stench of death, Garfiel howls.

Roaring, bellowing, booming like thunder through the burning mansion.

—The Shield of Sanctuary Garfiel Tinzel, and the Bowel Hunter Elsa Granhiert, have concluded their battle.

Chapter 129:
—Choose Me

1

—When she thinks back on that instant, the terror assaults her even now.

How her clinging fingers were cast aside, and her name was affectionately spoken.

The love in their goodbye. The determination and tears in their smiling eyes. Both carried far more than enough weight to silence her.

What should she have said? She still doesn't know.

What had she been thinking? She can no longer remember.

What ought she have done? She still fails to see any answer.

—And so Beatrice remains, even now, cowering motionless in the Forbidden Archive.

Beatrice: "…Ryuzu."

The sound out her lips is a fragment from a memory so ancient, even just the word sounds wistful. When she speaks that name, emotions bursting, the frozen time inside Beatrice—the four-hundred year void—instantly comes surging to the surface.

Beatrice secluded herself inside the Archive, waiting for THEY's eventual arrival, only after Ryuzu Meyer had been lost as her existence became impetus for the establishment of the Sanctuary, and the Warlock Hector had been repelled.

Beatrice had lost someone so close to her that they could safely be called her only companion.

Anyone could see how haggard Beatrice was, having lost that friend owing to her own inability.

And everyone knew that only time would mend her injured heart.

So her Mother's conclusion was simple.

Echidna: "I suspect that warlock will return to destroy me someday. I plan to set up means to oppose him before that happens…but even that might be fallible."

Beatrice: "Yes, Mother."

Echidna: "If we engage in confrontation again, it will develop into truly heated, absolute combat. Considering the enemy's strength, my chances of surviving are about fifty-fifty…or maybe a little lower? Since Roswaal's unfortunately lost his gate, and can't assist in battle."

Echidna lowers her gaze, but Beatrice's unaffected demeanour remained stable.

It's not that she's suppressing anything. Ever since that day, her emotions have almost entirely stopped showing on her face. Who could suppose the effect that the overwhelming loss, the emotional aftershock, had had on her?

It could be that her emotions froze exactly because her heart knows that effect.

Echidna looks at Beatrice and her unchanged expression, running her finger through her white hair.

Echidna: "I'm already one of the witches least suited to combat. Once I know I can't enlist aid from

Roswaal, genius in sorcery, it's after expending all possible means that I finally begin seeing hopes of victory."

Beatrice: "…What should Betty do, I suppose?"

Everyone knows that Roswaal was half- killed in the battle to establish the Sanctuary's functions. His gate was utterly decimated, making him ineligible as a magician.

The sight of her comrade lying in bed, still moribund in this very moment, arises in Beatrice's mind.

Sounding somewhat desperate, she assaults Echidna with questions.

Beatrice: "Should I do the same as Roswaal, and buy time until your algorithms are complete? Or should I sacrifice myself, conglomerate of powerful od that I am, and become the nucleus for the algorithm, I suppose? I won't regret it for an instant when it's for your sake, in fact. …Please, use me however you'd like, I suppose."

Beatrice grasps her skirt and curtseys, displaying the greatest of trust to her mother.

Honestly, the emotion is far too brittle and fleeting to be called TRUST. But Beatrice is unable to comprehend her own present mental state, and even supposing that she did understand herself, she would have likely reached the same solution.

Reckless lust for vengeance, and indignation at her powerlessness—the question of whether or not she recognizes these two feelings of hers constitutes the only single difference.

Echidna: "—I see. Once you've told me that, even I can ask for favors without any reproach. You truly are a good girl, Beatrice."

Beatrice: "…Yes. Betty's your daughter, in fact."

Hearing such words from Echidna would usually overjoy Beatrice.

Perhaps Echidna was aware of that, for she was careful give Beatrice verbal praise only infrequently. But now those magic words sink into Beatrice's empty chest with a hideously hollow thunk.

Perhaps nothing will rekindle the fire in her heart.

Is what Beatrice thinks, and so she fails to immediately react to Echidna's next words.

Echidna: “Beatrice. I’m entrusting you to oversee my archive of knowledge. Until the time that must come does come, you’ll protect the knowledge as the Archive’s keeper. —So that nobody can steal it.”

Beatrice: “…Wha.”

Echidna: “Fortunately, you have unparalleled affinity for Yin magic. You’ll use Gate Crossing to link a familiar location to an isolated space. …Yes, we’ll call it the Forbidden Archive. There, I want you to guard over the extent of my knowledge, compiled into books.”

Beatrice’s eyes shoot open in shocked turmoil as Echidna keeps speaking, leaving her behind. Beatrice had expected Echidna to order her to accompany her in this battle of life and death. Cast into an utterly unanticipated role, Beatrice can only glance about in bewilderment.

Even though witnessing her daughter’s discomposure, Echidna continues without missing a beat.

Echidna: “It’d be best to link the Forbidden Archive to Roswaal’s mansion. I’ll dismantle my laboratory, and prepare for the final battle. I’m sorry, but I can’t expend any people to carry the books. I’d like you to ask Roswaal about preparing the bookcases and securing labor.”

Beatrice: “W-Wait…”

Echidna: “It won’t last forever. Both you and I are already liberated from the fetters of predestined lifespan. The cycling of the seasons isn’t especially meaningful for us. But in saying that, once you consider that I may be lost, it’s irresponsible for it to lack deadline. Which means…”

Beatrice: “Please wait, I suppose!”

After a deep breath, she shouts.

Beatrice cannot comprehend what her mother is saying.

Or no. Her instincts are screaming at her, telling her not to comprehend it. Echidna's thoughts are vast, always easily excelling what the ordinary man could possibly understand. Meaning that Echidna's statements represent the optimum, and Beatrice had never thought to interrupt her before.

But now is not like that. Nothing like that.

If Beatrice lets Echidna speak her whole screed, she will surely regret it.

If Echidna states the whole of her opinion, what she'll present is the absolute optimum solution with no purchase for debate. The world will follow a course affirming Echidna's stance, and Beatrice will be unable to defy it.

To defend against that, Beatrice must interrupt before Echidna can finish.

Beatrice: "Mother…what are you saying, in fact? I-I, don't understand what you mean with this Forbidden Archive, I suppose. Betty is! Staying with you!"

Echidna: "Having you with me won't influence the confrontation with the warlock much at all, unfortunately. Naturally, it would surely increase my chances, but…only by a pittance. It would fall under statistical error."

Beatrice: "B-But if it's better than me being absent, then Betty will help you, in fact! It'd be—"

Echidna: "You can't. The risk that we'll both be destroyed outweighs a tiny, potentially non-existent boost to my prospects of winning. Considering that there is a less than fifty-percent chance that I will survive this battle, I have to endeavour to ensure my knowledge survives to the hereafter."

And ensuring her knowledge survives to the hereafter means upkeep of this Forbidden Archive that she's trying to entrust to Beatrice.

In this moment, Beatrice curses her Gate Crossing and her ability to create unique spaces. If she didn't have these powers, her mother would never desire that she take this ro—

Beatrice: “Don’t…tell me…my powers were for this?”

Echidna: “…”

Beatrice: “You knew from the beginning that this would happen… supposing so, then it isn’t just about this Forbidden Archive, wh-what happened in the Sanctuary was also…”

Echidna: “Having ways to anticipate things doesn’t necessarily mean using them. I did have means to both perceive this route, and settle matters without travelling it. But I swear on my way of life that I have not utilized that power. That alone I want you to believe.”

Echidna shakes her head in response to Beatrice’s strangled question.

Echidna approaches Beatrice, who is chewing at her lip, before taking a book from the bookshelf and presenting it to her daughter.

Beatrice: “This, is…?”

Echidna: “An imperfect replica of my BOOK OF WISDOM. The Book of Wisdom’s algorithms are both advanced and moreso complicated, so I didn’t manage to fully unravel them all…but it should be enough to work as a simple guide for the owner’s future.”

Beatrice accepts the book, tracing her shaking fingers over the cover.

She raises her head to look at Echidna, who stares at Beatrice with the same faraway gaze she always has. As though she’s looking somewhere into the distance.

Echidna: “There are two books. One goes to you, and the other has been given to Roswaal. I expect Roswaal will manage what comes next provided he reads the book. I know it’s a one-sided request, but I want you to see it through.”

Beatrice: “…”

Beatrice looks down at the book, her eyes wavering as she finally realizes that she is far too late. I have to make her speak, I have to make her say it. Were her ideas, but they were not nearly sufficient.

Echidna, her mother, had already settled on all of her answers.

Beatrice could cry, pleading and clinging, but it would not change Echidna's stance.

Because that's the kind of person the Witch of Greed Echidna is, and the kind of witch she is.

Echidna: "We'll return to the topic of cutoffs. I might not return, but the archive must be opened to someone someday. Once that happens, it'll be clear to you. Someone suitable to inherit my knowledge will surely come for you."

Beatrice: "Come, for me…"

Echidna: "We'll call this person THEY. The cut-off is when THEY open the doors to the Forbidden Archive, and announce that your duties are over. —This is my final request."

Final request.

The phrase makes Beatrice swallow her breath, and look up at Echidna's face as she gazes back at Beatrice.

Her mother's constant, unchanging expression.

But Beatrice feels that, in just this single instant, it comes mixed with unfamiliar emotion.

Echidna: "Betty. —Please, be well."

2

After parting with Echidna, Beatrice obeyed her mother's request and went to stay in Roswaal's mansion, using her Yin magic to create the Forbidden Archive and stockpile books of her mother's knowledge there.

It's the sea of knowledge that Echidna had spent her life amassing and cataloguing. When holed up in this room of books, it feels like her mother is embracing her.

Leaving aside the question of whether or not Beatrice used to perceive it that way, she did obey Echidna's instructions.

If she neglected to immerse herself in her duties, the bereavement tormenting her heart would exceed what she could bear. She passed her days in the Archive, oblivious to time, with the loss always plaguing her.

???: "Replicating souls…overwriting into vessels…"

Beatrice could not accurately determine just when it started feeling hollow.

But once enough time passed that she no longer remembered when she last held a real conversation, an adult Roswaal began venturing into the Forbidden Archive.

Roswaal: "I'll be iiiiiiiiiiiiintruding once again today." The skinny, unshaven young man limped into the room.

He used a cane and walked with a lumbering gait—the battle with the warlock had destroyed his body, and his gate had lost the majority of its functions. Even attending to daily life was an arduous task for Roswaal now.

Even so, after he recovered some amount of strength, he strained his inconvenient body and displayed his debilitated condition as he faced the bookshelves.

He was just skin and bones. His looks, known for their beauty, shone with no brilliance. His sunken yellow eyes alone blazed wet with insane ferocity.

Beatrice: "—Do whatever you want, in fact."

Though really, Beatrice didn't want to let anyone at all enter the Forbidden Archive.

Until the THEY that Echidna mentioned came, this place was meant to be Beatrice's Sanctuary, never to touched by anyone's eyes.

But Roswaal was an exception. He alone was devoting himself to Echidna's wishes, as Beatrice was, a companion who she had spent more than a little time with.

Roswaal's wishes alone would permit Beatrice's heart to open the Archive.

It may have been Beatrice's faint sense of camaraderie that determined the fate of Roswaal L.

Mathers, and his family.

Roswaal ventured to the Archive, sank into the sea of Echidna's knowledge, and staked his entire lifetime upon a search for something.

Beatrice did not know if his efforts ever wound up bearing fruit.

But the Roswaal L. Mathers who had studied with Beatrice under Echidna, ten years after Echidna and Beatrice parted—when bordering on thirty years of age—lost his life, and his descendant inherited the mansion.

Roswaal: "Myyyyyyyyyy goodness, it is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Beatrice. My predecessor had told me about you."

Beatrice: "…Roswaal's dead, I suppose?"

Roswaal: "The previous Roswaal has passed away. But do be at ease. I, the current Roswaal L. Mathers, have inherited the debts toward your duties and your mother."

The second Roswaal gave Beatrice a smile.

—With one of his eyes yellow, and one of his eyes blue.

3

Nothing especially noteworthy happened after that.

The Mathers family continued to introduce themselves as Roswaal down the generations.

Though aware that they did this to remember their respect for Beatrice's deceased mother, Echidna, Beatrice did not allow the Roswaals unlimited entry to the Forbidden Archive.

Naturally. The only Roswaal to whom Beatrice could give special treatment was the first one. All the other Roswaals were imposters.

She did accommodate them somewhat, given that they were providing the mansion needed to preserve the Forbidden Archive, but nothing further.

From then on, Beatrice would only ever open the Archive to THEY.

This awaited THEY, and the guidepost her mother had given her, forced Beatrice into solitude for a very, very long time.

???: "Your power is magnificent. Please, grant it to me as my spirit." —Shut up. Get lost.

???: "You've been isolated here for so long. It's a horrendous fate. It doesn't matter who ordered you to do this, it's unforgivable."

—What would you know? About the precious duty my mother desired of me.

???: "You don't think knowledge ought to be free? Can you imagine how many lives would be saved if the knowledge stored here was spread? You must already recognize it yourself."

—It has nothing to do with 'how many'. I'm only looking to save a handful of people. And there's nobody I can save any more, except one.

Four hundred years.

Beatrice wasn't seeking them out, hadn't permitted them in, but even so many people visited the Forbidden Archive.

They each flung whatever words they'd fling at Beatrice, keeper of the Archive, before inevitably demanding that the Archive be opened.

Their proposals, propositions, and demands did sometimes sway Beatrice's heart.

She wondered countless times after the doors burst open, and she noticed the daylight spilling in from outside, whether this may finally be the arrival of THEY.

But, heedless to Beatrice's expectations, not a single one of them knew about THEY, and Beatrice's book mentioned nothing indicating that they were THEY either.

So Beatrice cast away the words, the hands, everything they offered her, rejected them, and kept her mother's words close as she passed the time until today.

Over the years, resignation and disappointment steadily overtook Beatrice's heart.

She wished that she had spoken with the first Roswaal more.

Ever since she lost the only person who could share her memories of Echidna, Beatrice had to face this concept called 'eras' all by herself.

She had nobody to rely on. Her only option was to be stubborn, and seclude herself inside an impregnable, isolated barricade.

Over four hundred years, her cage consequently took shape. Was it a prison locked from the outside, or from the inside? —Not even Beatrice could tell any more.

Puck: "Hey there, Betty. It's really been forever. It's me, Puck."

This inconceivable reunion was perhaps the only event that even minutely thawed Beatrice's frozen heart.

Beatrice: "B-Bubby? How come, you're here…?"

Puck: "This mansion's Roswaal went and swindled my daughter. So here I am with her. I wasn't expecting you to be here. I'm glad we got to see each other."

The name of this cat spirit, bashfully washing his face with his paw, is Puck.

Like Beatrice, he is a man-made spirit created by Echidna. He is the only entity who shares Beatrice's birth and circumstances, applicable as being her race.

The time that Beatrice and Puck spent together four hundred years ago was short, but felt long. Puck was created before Beatrice, and separated from Beatrice's group before the battle with the warlock had begun, wandering the world in accordance with his purpose.

Beatrice never thought that they would meet again, and practically considered him dead. She keenly felt how the centuries-long reunion made her heart surge. But, her joy only lasted an instant—.

Puck: "After I left you, I spent about three centuries wandering the world before I finally found Lia. I'm not sure what you're waiting for, but I know your wishes will come true."

Beatrice: "Yes, yes I suppose. But I envy you, in fact. The role Mother gave Betty has…"

Puck: "Mother? Who was she, again?"

Beatrice: "…"

Beatrice remembers how Puck looked, not joking in the least, his head tilted in mystification. When Puck left, he and Echidna formed several Contracts. Beatrice didn't know the detailed terms of them, but Puck's forgetting of Echidna is obviously part of it.

Beatrice: "…No, nevermind it, in fact. I'm glad I got to see you again, I suppose."

Puck: "Mhm, it's great, Betty."

Puck, having fulfilled his purpose and meaning in life, looked dazzling to Beatrice. But she knew that the topic she wanted to broach would only serve to impede his path.

So she kept quiet, smiling sadly as she wished her brother well with his future.

The unexpected reunion gave Beatrice slight joy, but moreso agony as her dead four hundred years pressed down on her heart.

Comparing herself to Puck, who fulfilled his role, Beatrice was dumbstruck at the overwhelming disparity in their performance.

And she thought:

Beatrice: "…I'm no longer able to ever laugh like you, Bubby."

Beatrice decided to get as little involved with Puck's beloved half-elf daughter as possible.

If she didn't, Beatrice would wind up taking out her pent-up resentment on the girl. She would do such wrong to her beloved brother's blameless, precious daughter that the situation would never be fixed.

Calling her heart to a stop and suppressing her emotions was her forte.

She had spent four centuries constantly doing it through the sunrise, after the sunset, submerged in the moonlight.

Her speciality. A familiar deed. Lucid resignation. That kind of thing.

That kind of life—which suddenly met an intruder.

Subaru: "M-Make it painless ok."

Beatrice: "It's incredible that you're so persistent in your frivolity, in fact."

It had truly been forever since someone had entered the Forbidden Archive without permission. While looking down at the boy, fallen on the floor from the mana drain, Beatrice sighs and strokes her hair.

Using her space-connecting powers to send the boy into a labyrinth had been an act of simple revenge.

Revenge for having to help in healing the boy when he came in wounded yesterday. Revenge for having to grant the request of the half-elf girl he saved.

Her plan had been to alleviate some of her sourness about the affair by pestering the boy.

Then he defeated Gate Crossing on his first attempt.

He must not have noticed how shaken Beatrice had secretly been.

Beatrice: “Not someone I want to have anything more to do with, I suppose.”

Said Beatrice after expelling him from the Archive.

Not even Beatrice could determine how he reached the Archive in one attempt. Perhaps his affinity was for yin magic, and he just happened to be on Beatrice’s wavelength that day. But even if he did have yin affinity, he lacked any affinity as a magician.

He’ll only be staying for a few days. With that thought, Beatrice managed to ignore the uncomfortable strain in her chest.

Puck: “Betty. Were you mean to him? Come on, don’t do that. He helped Lia, so you better give him a real apology.”

Puck showed up in the Archive the next morning to scold Beatrice for her actions, and now she had to confront the boy she had just decided she’d stop having anything to do with.

Subaru: “She shows up, and what the hell does this loli start saying?”

Beatrice: “What I suppose is that word. I’ve never heard it before, and it still disgusts me, in fact.”

Subaru: “It means ‘too young to go down their route’. Sides I’m not really into younger girls.”

Beatrice: “…Your extensive discourtesy to Betty loops around to be pitiable.”

Tit for tat.

She hadn’t intended to apologize anyway, but this conversation completely eliminated any urge.

Beatrice passed breakfast in silence, saw Puck’s rather resigned expression, and breathed a sigh of relief. Seems like he’d forgiven her.

In exchange, it wound up that the boy would be sojourning in the mansion for the long-term.

Beatrice’s desire to seriously start cursing the situation intensified, and she decided to excuse herself and return to the Archive. The mansion came with complex circumstances and history anyway, and right now was a state of emergency, too.

This gutless boy would give up before long.

All Beatrice had to do was endure until that happened.

Subaru: “Hey, Beatrice. Done with work so here I am to hang out.”

Completely oblivious to Beatrice’s thoughts, the boy came parading into the Archive while looking like a nitwit, annoying Beatrice even though she hadn’t asked for any of this, and just kept doing it whenever he found time to spare.

Beatrice could only sit there, stunned at his impudence.

There had been others qualified to enter the Archive without Beatrice’s permission. But they had all been seeking the Archive’s knowledge, or seeking the powerful spirit Beatrice.

The second they opened they mouths, it’d be requests to liberate the knowledge. Or requests to Contract with Beatrice. Always.

Subaru: “Beatrice. —Mind if I pull your drills and make them sproing everywhere?”

Beatrice: “Are you trying to die, I suppose?”

Just when it looks like he’s going to say something serious, it’s the same crap as usual.

He had been somewhat desiccate in his first few days after waking up gaining employment in the mansion, but after that, his overly-familiar attitude was off the charts.

…Is what Beatrice thought, when suddenly:

Subaru: “I’m stuck with no way out. Completely upfront, I’m looking for your help.” —He noticed the first signs of the Witchbeast Affair in the forest surrounding the mansion.

With his body bathed in a witchbeast’s curse, discussing de-cursing and potential origins of the curse with Beatrice, she felt that there was something different about him compared to before. And she simultaneously noticed:

The yin power she perceived from him, and its somewhat crooked manner of peaking.

The witchbeast affair ended without being any of Beatrice’s concern, he apparently resolved his differences with the maid sisters, and was welcomed in as a true member of the mansion.

He then went around being his jolly self, pestering her with an attitude even more over-familiar than before, and there was that one delicious episode among others about his mystery condiment called mayonnaise, all while Beatrice began meditating on an impossible fantasy.

—A boy who showed no great interest in the knowledge, or in Beatrice’s power.

Could he be the one who Beatrice had been waiting for?

The suspicion was baseless, continuous, and exhausted her. But when she tried to deem it as a legitimate theory, she stymied herself by opening her blank book of prophecy.

Being that the prophetic text said nothing, this boy could not be Beatrice's awaited THEY.

And he was lacking in too many ways to be Beatrice's awaited one anyway.

First, his eyes were nasty. His attitude too. He hadn't any cultured refinement, and short legs. He regarded something else as more important than Beatrice, and was not gentle with her.

In fact she couldn't find anything good about him. It addled the mind as to what the half-elf girl and blue-haired maid found so appealing.

There wasn't anything good about him, so why couldn't he just be uniformly disliked and alone? If he was, then when he showed up in the Archive, she wouldn't hesitate to change the way she interacted with him a little.

Is what she sometimes thought, and yet.

Roswaal: "Beatrice. I'm thinking to invite Lady Emilia and Subaru to the Sanctuary." Said Roswaal to Beatrice after returning from the Capital.

A variety of questions whizzed through Beatrice's mind, her eyes wide. But Roswaal silenced Beatrice's queries with a single action.

He stroked the cover of the prophetic book in his hands.

Roswaal: "…Do you understand? Beatrice."

Beatrice: "I-I, do understand, in fact. …Do whatever you wish, I suppose."

Beatrice could say nothing else.

After Roswaal turned his back to her, and she learned that he was leaving for the Sanctuary in advance, Beatrice decided that she would hole up in the Forbidden Archive and go without seeing anyone.

The writ of Roswaal's gospel was demanding contact with the Sanctuary.

Beatrice did start having hopes for her own gospel after hearing that. But her prophecy book contained endless pages of pure solid white as always, abandoning her heart in a wasteland.

Beatrice knew what came of Ryuzu Meyer's sacrifice.

She also knew that the place had gone unfreed for four centuries. And that people diverged from demi-human races were held inside there, awaiting liberation.

And that it was a barrier the half-elf girl needed to overcome if she was aspiring for the throne. —But what would happen to Ryuzu Meyer's sacrifice if the place was freed? To Beatrice's feelings of powerless about being unable to save Ryuzu Meyer?

To her overwhelming sense of loss, that triggered her parting with Echidna?

Her emotions had nowhere to go. Sensing that the supposedly-frozen things had begun to pulse again, Beatrice knew that the end to her fate was truly coming.

Beatrice did not know the details of what happened outside the mansion.

The boy returned from the Capital with a memento of someone dear from Beatrice's memories. Seeing it, and feeling that the world had left her behind once again, Beatrice saw the boy's group off as they left for the Sanctuary.

And, thinking that what they would bring back from the Sanctuary would be her answer, gave up.

4

Beatrice: “And so Betty has decided, in fact…!”

Before they could bring back her answer, Beatrice sensed deadly violence whipping through the mansion.

Once she realized what was causing it, Beatrice understood that fate had truly deserted her.

Beatrice: “I won’t break my promise to Mother. …But it is meaningless to spend any more time in this emptiness, I suppose!”

THEY would never come. But she could not stop waiting.

Meaning that Beatrice needed someone to steal the option of ‘WAIT’ from her.

If that meant losing her life, then she’d offer it without any hesitation.

If there was someone, anyone, who she felt she could entrust this duty to even somewhat, then she could believe that her final wish would be granted.

So when the boy—Natsuki Subaru—burst into the Forbidden Archive this night, Beatrice’s heart was moved with more emotion than can be expressed.

It felt like fate, which had never once attempted to give Beatrice’s mind solace, had finally rewarded her.

If his hands would take her life and make her defy the promise, then even that would be—

Subaru: “I’m taking you out of here, Beatrice. —I’m dragging you out into the sunshine, where we’ll play until your dress is caked utterly brown with mud.”

—And he said this.

Beatrice: “Unwanted meddling, I suppose. Nobody asked for you to do that, in fact.”

She didn’t understand. What on earth was he saying?

He had never, not even once, behaved anything like THEY before. He had never snatched her gospel away and told her, “Sorry for the wait.”

Subaru: “Stop getting thrown around by a blank book and a four-hundred-year-old promise. —Be the one who chooses what you want to do, Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “…”

—So then why was he, after all this time, disrupting Beatrice’s heart after she had already steeled her resolve?

I’m meeting my end, had been the only thought in her head.

She saw the boy upon his return, and hoped: I will end by his hands.

But he was trying to show her a future that diverged from her hopes.

This wasn’t what she desired.

Her heart that could desire this hope had, over four hundred years of time, long ago withered to nothing.

Beatrice: “I-If, you…were THEY…”

…Is what it was supposed to be, but while listening to the boy’s indignant speech, something changed in Beatrice’s heart.

Her slumbering emotions shook like flowers taking bloom after winter. She raised her head.

There would be no taking this statement back, once she said it.

She was dispelling her four-hundred year obsession with her mother’s binding words, and now clinging to something entirely unrelated and new.

And though she understood that, from her mouth, the decisive words—

Beatrice: “Will…you be Betty’s THEY?”

Subaru: “Are you stupid? —Of course I wouldn’t be this weird mysterious THEY of yours.”

The instant he spoke it, his expression somewhat mocking, Beatrice’s newly-budded hopes were betrayed.

She doesn’t really remember what happened afterwards, as she surrendered herself to anger and expelled him from the room.

But she did know that she had said something she couldn’t take back, and before it could develop into something that couldn’t be taken back, was snuffed out.

Beatrice: “…”

What an utter clown she was.

This meant that she had done nothing more than betray her mother’s instructions. And her betrayal had been barred from procuring results, degrading Beatrice’s pledge into something horrendously cheap.

Beatrice: “I’m exhausted, I suppose…”

Then all she has to do is let things proceed as she had originally intended.

It had been a mistake to consider taking his hand in the first place. That had not been the owner of a heart so valiant that they could soil their hands for the sake of another.

That had been someone like Beatrice, constantly fretting about trivial things, indecisive and unsure, constantly piling excuses upon excuses, the owner of a weak heart.

And so the Death to end Beatrice would come in a different—

Subaru: “Finally back! Hey, stupid. Stop throwing people out halfway through conversations. Now just listen to me and—”

Beatrice: “—!”

Subaru: “Plot?!”

Butting in to Beatrice’s contemplations, the boy bursts back into the Forbidden Archive.

The instant she sees the boy, edging on speaking something more, Beatrice’s emotions seethe and she blasts him away with a pulse of magic.

She watches him fail to endure it and shoot out of the Archive until the doors slam shut.

Their conversation had disintegrated, capped off with his decisive comment, and still. Just how shameless was he?

Beatrice cannot comprehend how he could leave her with that statement, and then show up so brazenly.

She puts her hand to her chest to deal with her irritation, gives a sigh, and—

Subaru: “How about cutting this out! Is this you throwing a tantrum?! If you’re gonna resort to violence first thing, the conversation’s not going any—”

Beatrice: “You cut it out, in fact!”

Subaru: “Dua!”

The higher grade of magical pulse impacts his head, proceeding down to batter his torso.

Once she confirms that the screaming, tumbling boy strikes the wall outside the door, the Archive once again severs its connection to the hallway.

She can’t believe his persistence.

Is he ignorant to the concept of ‘giving up’? Or does he not realize how deeply his thoughtless words had wounded Beatrice’s heart?

Whichever it was, the boy is continuously rejecting Gate Crossing's goodbye.

Beatrice: "…This is truly no joke, I suppose."

With that irritated mutter, Beatrice drags the stepladder over from the back of the room, and takes her usual position opposite the door. She cradles her book of prophecy in her arms as she glares at the portal.

—The boy would be belting that door open once again.

With his selfish logic and inconsiderate sales pitch, he would come.

Times upon times upon times, she would reject him and cast him away.

Because he was not THEY.

Because he himself had forfeited his right to take Beatrice out of here.

And so Beatrice would never, ever leave here.

She merely has to end here, alongside her unfulfilled promise.

Because that was the only thing that would now grant Beatrice solace.

5

Blasted out of the room, Subaru crashes head-first into a wall for his breathing to halt.

This is his sixth time being thrown out of the Archive after his first failure in persuading Beatrice. He feels that all these repeated blasts in such a short timeframe have made him better at catching himself when dealing with invisible attacks.

But Beatrice's magic pulses are beginning to feel out how intense they can go without seriously damaging Subaru, meaning he absolutely mustn't slack.

Subaru: “This isn’t the time to be polishing your stupid magic, fuck! She’s not listening…”

Wiping away his sweat with his sleeve, Subaru demands that his knees get him to his feet.

He’s been running constantly since yesterday, had blood shed and broken bones mended, meaning he’s physically exhausted. The utter fatigue makes his vision hazy, and the only thing keeping him moving is willpower.

Subaru: “The fire’s gonna be spreading for real around now…”

Subaru stoops himself low and turns his head this way and that, clicking his tongue, for fatigue alone does not explain his poor vision.

The fire that killed the massive witchbeast is steadily engulfing the whole mansion.

The lower floor of the main block is nigh completely drowned in flame, and he can see plumes of smoke wafting from the eastern and western wings too.

The spreading fire has driven most of the witchbeasts out of the mansion, so there are no monsters to block Subaru’s path as he sprints about. But the temperature inside the building is heating up like an oven and his sweat is evaporating swiftly, his singed flesh bordering on charring at any moment. The building will start collapsing before long, and Subaru’s fate will drown to nothing in the fire.

Before that can happen, he needs to fulfil his goal and flee here with Beatrice.

But Beatrice’s heart remains stubbornly closed.

Subaru: “It does help that the mansion fire’s cutting down the number of doors, but…” That’s really the only conceivable benefit of the blaze.

Gate Crossing only operates on the mansion’s functional doors. So open doors or burned doors do not apply.

The further the fire spreads, the fewer doors will potentially lead to the Archive.

Subaru: “That said, the fire’s gonna cook me before the doors are cut down.”

And he doesn’t want to think about what would happen if all the mansion’s doors burn away. Subaru doesn’t know specifically how Beatrice’s Gate Crossing links spaces to one another. Potentially, the incineration of the mansion may sequester Beatrice’s Forbidden Archive, turning it into a permanently isolated hyperspace.

There is one place Subaru can think of that Gate Crossing might connect to outside of the mansion, the laboratory with Ryuzu Meyer’s sleeping crystal, but—

Subaru: “Would she link the mansion to there in her current mental state…?”

Beatrice’s Gate Crossing has sent Subaru to the Sanctuary once before.

Subaru has speculated on why this irregular event occurred.

Beatrice had emotionally detonated and forcibly expelled Subaru from the Forbidden Archive. Her intentions strayed as she focused intensely on a ‘farewell’—and her Gate Crossing consequently sent Subaru to the laboratory, is his idea.

That location is a symbol of sad and painful farewell for Beatrice. So perhaps that’s why Subaru was sent to the Sanctuary back then.

Making it inconceivable that Beatrice’s Gate Crossing would link to the laboratory now.

Beatrice is not focusing on ‘farewell’, she is focusing on ‘end’.

If she loses her connection to the world, the mansion, Beatrice will reach her end.

It feels to Subaru that Beatrice's ultimate decision will be to do that.

Subaru: "I'm not letting you ever be ended like that!"

Taking a deep breath, Subaru breaks into a run while keeping low to the ground.

He leaves the previous door open and searches for the next door, batting away smoke as he proceeds deeper into the mansion.

He hears the constant crackling of the building's structure burning in the inferno.

His skin is scorched and the boiling air threatens to sear his eyes. He endures both with a grimace.

The smoke slipping into his nose brings him near to choking, when he discovers a yet-unopened door and pounces for the doorknob.

The blazing doorknob emits heat, and sears Subaru's hand. Already his palms are atrocious with many ugly burns. He is quite used to gritting his teeth in agony.

With a stabbing pain piercing through his temples, he kicks the door open.

Subaru: "…"

He tumbles into the room with its cloying stench of ancient books.

He opens his mouth wide and takes a deep breath, having fallen face-up, and he glares at the dim ceiling above.

A familiar atmosphere, and rage prickling at his skin—definitely the Forbidden Archive.

Beatrice: "You again, simply incorrigible…!"

Subaru: "Hauhh! Of, course I'm back! I'm coming here however many times it takes to kidnap you. If you don't like it then let me drag you out of here right now! Then that'll be the end of these exchanges!"

Beatrice: “Enough of your useless chatter, I suppose! I know that the mansion is burning, in fact! If you don’t flee outside immediately, you will simply burn to death in the fire, I suppose!”

Subaru jerks himself up, his breathing ragged as he glares at Beatrice.

She remains seated on the stepladder, her round eyes as sharp as they can get as she bares her rage at Subaru.

For an instant, slight emotion dashes along the edge of those eyes, and Beatrice’s lips tremble.

Beatrice: “Or…do you mean to burn dead with the mansion and Betty?”

Subaru: “Are you stupid! After everything I’ve said, you still don’t get it?! I’m not thinking at all to die with you! I’m here to drag you out without you dying!”

Beatrice: “—! Domineering without fail, I suppose! Leave!”

Subaru stands up, pouncing for a bookcase to bide through the first magic pulse.

He feels the gale battering him, and then a second pulse that utterly drains him of energy. He glances up to find Beatrice with her left hand raised toward the ceiling, her face twisted in anguish as she forces herself to smile.

Beatrice: “I pilfered your mana, in fact. You must remember this sensation, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You, little…”

Beatrice: “Should your grip on the bookshelf slacken, that is the end, in fact. Stop involving yourself with me, I suppose!”

The moment his knees start to give out, the third pulse of magic strikes Subaru from head-on. An invisible wall of force crashes into him. Unable to support himself, Subaru is again pushed toward the door, proceeding to tumble and fly out the—

Subaru: “Nnngh!”

—Reaching his limbs out as far as he can, Subaru manages to catch himself on the door.

Pain runs through his limbs, and experience tells him that his arms are fractured and may be broken.

He grits his teeth and forces himself to ignore it.

Beatrice: “Wh—”

Subaru: “Go through it so many times, and even I can learn how to get through. So want to defer to my efforts and start getting in the mood to talk?”

Beatrice: “You’ve lost your chance to speak with Betty, in fact. By your own actions, you are the one who squandered it, I suppose. … Why do you not understand that, in fact?!”

Subaru: “I don’t get it, no. Since aren’t you actually guilty for this as well?”

His hand against the door, Subaru gets to his feet and wipes away the blood dripping from his open lip.

He watches how Beatrice’s brows furrow in utter confusion, and slips a wry smile.

Beatrice: “What’s so funny, I suppose?”

Subaru: “I just confirmed that my consecutive assault isn’t fruitless. If you’re seriously rejecting me, stop with the finicky crap and just blast me away. You have the power for it. It’d be so much quicker to just do that.”

Beatrice: “…You are telling me to kill you.”

Subaru: “Not that you can. That was me being a jerk. Sorry. But if you’re seriously rejecting me, then there should be easier ways for you to do it.”

Beatrice, bordering on tears, has refused to kill Subaru before.

Subaru has not advanced to a stage where he can understand what her sentiment or reasoning was back then. So all he has is speculation. Assembled from what fragments of her past Subaru knows. He had his suspicions, and still asked that question, astounding himself with how mean-spirited he truly is.

But if he doesn't ask it, Beatrice won't realize.

Realize the contradiction between her thoughts and actions, and the fact of Subaru's presence here.

Subaru: "If you seriously don't want to see me, then seclude yourself in the Archive, Beatrice."

Beatrice: "What…are you…Betty has not taken a single step out of the Forbidden Archive, in fact. But you are forcing yourself in of your own accord, and…!"

Subaru: "Nope, that's incorrect. If you were serious about holing up in here alone, there's no goddamn way I'd reach the place so many times in such a short timespan. Your rejection's just superficial."

Beatrice: "That! Is because…yes, is because you are enacting the method to cheat Gate Crossing, in fact. And the mansion is burning, reducing the number of doors…"

Stuck for words, Beatrice's rebuttal trails off to a weak end.

Subaru's statement has made her doubt herself. And even if not, Beatrice has lost the pillar that kept her standing through these four hundred years, and is currently unstable.

She can no longer tell if Subaru's words are right, or if her emotions are right.

Subaru: "…"

And honestly, Subaru doesn't know either.

He has no clue why he's managed to reach Beatrice's Forbidden

Archive so unfalteringly in this short timeframe.

It may be because the mansion's doors are burning away, leaving him with fewer options.

Or maybe the emergency situation is prompting his yin abilities to showcase absurd strength, and that's letting him defeat Gate Crossing.

It might be that Subaru is actually correct, that Beatrice is not truly rejecting him, and the doors of Gate Crossing are open to him.

Subaru wishes it for it to be the latter.

But the reality is insignificant. What Natsuki Subaru needs to do here, now, is secure any possibility of bringing Beatrice out.

Beatrice: "You…you! Are not Betty's THEY!"

Yells Beatrice, clutching at her skirt.

She gives up on thinking as she appeals to Subaru, howling.

Beatrice: "You said you weren't, in fact! You…you said you weren't, I suppose. If you were THEY…even if you said it as a lie, Betty would have believed you. Even knowing it was a lie, all I could've done was believe you, in fact."

Subaru: "Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "But you said you weren't, I suppose. Said you weren't, said I was stupid, in fact. Why yes, I suppose. You're correct, in fact. Betty is stupid, a stupid imbecile, who even now cannot disregard a promise from four centuries ago…and so! Nothing you say will change that it is over, I suppose!"

Choosing rejection, an invisible wind whips around the shouting Beatrice.

The torrent of magic gusts at her dress, at her long hair, filling the Archive with a tense and turbulent air. Subaru senses that this is the greatest gale yet, his body shuddering in terror at the coming strike.

His cowering heart wants to him to retreat, to flee outside the door.

He manages to suppress the urge, bites deeper into his lip, and raises his head.

To tell what must be told.

Subaru: “I…”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru: “I’m not your THEY. I’ll say it however many times. Your awaited prince isn’t coming on his white steed. Not to the end, not ever!”

Beatrice: “—! Then! Betty shall simply rot here, in fact!”

Subaru: “Not happening. I’m not letting you choose that. I saying however many times it takes for you to change your mind. THEY isn’t coming. You can’t keep your promise. —But you won’t be allowed to die.”

Beatrice: “I just…hate you so much, I suppose!!”

With that, Beatrice’s emotions explode.

The torrent of magic changes form as it adheres to a single goal, a white light dominating everything in Subaru’s vision.

He doesn’t even have time to feel the gust of wind.

The shockwave pounds Subaru through his front and out his back, scrambling all the innards he has. His blood flows backwards through him as everything inside him is wrung out his pores, the pain agonizing.

His eyes spin, he loses his sense of balance, undergoes overwhelming vertigo, loses all perception of sound and smell and light. This might be what humans call dying.

—But, Natsuki Subaru knows.

Subaru: "—What are you doing?"

Withstanding a nausea so intense his organs could spill out his mouth, Subaru forces himself to speak so that his weakness is imperceptible.

The world exists underfoot, and the moment he recognizes that fact, he steadily regains his perception. He has his limbs, has his head, his organs aren't spilling out his mouth, his soul hasn't shed its vessel.

So what. Same thing as usual, just a near-death experience.

Natsuki Subaru is learned enough to know: this is not Death.

Beatrice: "You are, joking, in fact…"

His vision sways, blurry and unstable.

Regaining enough focus to somehow recognize that he is inside the Archive, he gazes at the girl in front of him, her arms spread wide as though witnessing something unbelievable.

It's Beatrice.

Not even she can comprehend his failure to die, and the preservation of his fundamental shape.

But there's no mystery about it. Subaru knew it would turn out like this.

It is inconceivable that Beatrice would let herself kill Subaru.

Subaru: "Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "…"

His consciousness is hazy. But willpower allows him to anchor his near-forfeited mind.

The girl before him is wavering. She cannot comprehend her own self, unable to fully reject him, as she looks at a ragged Subaru in terror.

Suspecting that his voice will reach her in this instant, he scrambles to assemble his waning consciousness, and speaks.

Subaru: “I’m, not…your, THEY…”

Beatrice says nothing.

Subaru: “But.”

The repeated and repeated rejections put Beatrice on the verge of tears.

The conversation would usually end here. Before it can—before Beatrice’s emotions can swell to their limit—Subaru speaks.

Subaru: “I…want to be with you, Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “—!”

Subaru: “You’re kind, and so you won’t be sad, I want to be by your side.”

Beatrice: “Auh…ghh…”

Beatrice’s expression twists.

It’s as though she’s suppressing fury, as though she’s suppressing tears, as though she’s struggling to keep some utterly undocumented emotion from showing on her face.

But she swallows her words, sighs a ragged sigh, and picks up the book on the stepladder. She flips through the pages, wrests through the pages, her fingers scrunching the paper, then gives quiet whine.

When,

Subaru: “—Wh, at?”

Before Beatrice can take any action, Subaru’s vision warps.

It has nothing to do with his hazy consciousness or deficient blood.

It’s a question of reality.

The Forbidden Archive is beginning to bend in front of Subaru.

The ground around him warps, the bookshelves losing their balance as they topple down one after another. Books fall messily to the floor, instantly drowning the ground in a sea of tomes.

Even still, the world continues to bend.

The ground beneath Subaru’s feet twists too, undulating like a bellows, preventing him from maintaining his balance.

Subaru: “What…what’s…?!”

Beatrice: “…”

While clinging desperately to the door, Subaru looks at Beatrice.

He finds that in this rippling room, Beatrice’s surroundings alone are untouched. The stepladder she sits on moves not an inch, supporting Beatrice’s weight as she looks at Subaru.

Subaru: “—auh.”

Before Subaru can say anything, the ground beneath him tilts.

The floor under Subaru fissures open with a noise like the ripping of paper. A black space expands from beneath the floor-tiles, unmistakably about to send him somewhere by methods other than Gate Crossing.

She might even be imprisoning him in some non-existent, hyper-dimensional space.

Subaru: “—Shit.”

It happens the moment he notices the hole and takes a step back.

The world slants in earnest, sending Subaru falling backwards in deference to gravity. The door’s gaping mouth swallows him, sending him back to the blazing mansion through Gate Crossing.

Subaru: “Hhot!”

The heat of the wall he crashes into makes him wail.

He raises his head, to find that he has been ejected into a hallway fully engulfed in inferno. The only thing he manages to recognize is the fact that he’s in the main wing.

The flames singe him utterly as he looks at the door he just exited, and, noticing that the door’s lower half is already swallowed in flames, is stunned.

It’s a miracle that Gate Crossing even worked. He doesn’t think for a second that jumping at that door will bring him back to the Archive.

Subaru: “Fuck, ing…if, this is the main wing…”

Then he might be able to find a functional door upstairs.

Vaguely recognizing from the number of doors that this is not the uppermost floor, Subaru decides to head for the stairway, engulfed in flames as it is.

The smoke stings his eyes, tears welling over. His lungs burn with every breath, though he manages to keep the smog from snatching his consciousness by holding his jersey to his mouth.

Every minute counts. Like fuck he’s actually going to reach the Archive—No. This isn’t the time for whining.

He cannot forget Beatrice’s expression at the end.

Subaru: “Stupid idiot, making that fucking face again…”

The numbness in his limbs from Beatrice’s magic pulse leaves his body.

He drags his body along, the thing more or less obeying his will, whittling at his soul as he runs for the end of the corridor.

Beatrice’s expression flickers through his mind.

It’s the same face he saw in a previous loop.

When he and Beatrice faced Elsa, and the supposedly-defeated woman took Beatrice’s life.

When Beatrice shoved him away to protect him, and had her stomach destroyed.

When she saw that Subaru was safe, and her body wordlessly turned to particles of light.

Subaru has not forgotten her final expression from back then.

It was not relief at having protected Subaru, nor joy at having procured her desired death, but a grimace.

—I don’t want to be alone. That kind of expression, obvious to anyone.

Subaru: “So like hell…like hell I’m gonna leave you on your own!” With that, he leaps into the fire as he searches for escape.

He feels something squirming and wrong inside him, but the heat from his singed flesh and the pain from his burnt skin prevent him from focusing on it.

Were Subaru an objective witness to this, he might unwittingly recoil from how repulsive it was. Subaru, running through the fire with his pledge to bring out Beatrice, is wreathed by an overwhelming mass of black miasma, embracing him almost like a protective vestment of shadow.

Oblivious to this, Subaru breaks through the wall of fire and reaches the stairway.

He gives a ragged exhale, looks at the staircase above, and recognizes that this is the second floor.

He proceeds to climb the staircase, thinking to dash straight for the uppermost floor—when.

Subaru: “…”

He hears the noise of something wet being dragged across the ground, and looks down.

The noise is coming from downstairs. His rationality tells him that this is impossible.

All he can hear around him is the crackling and booming of the burning building.

This is a mansion seconds from collapse, and that is the first floor of the main wing, where the inferno started. Nothing should be moving down there.

Subaru's sprinting all through the mansion means he knows this conflagration, which even the witchbeasts fled.

So this noise has to be a hallucination.

—But if it is, then what's that?

Subaru: "…No way."

While dragging something along with it, a silhouette emerges from the flames.

It is destined for the upstairs as it climbs the staircase as Subaru had, stopping at the landing between the first and second floor—and looks up as it notices Subaru's presence directly above it.

The silhouette is wearing black clothes, holds a black knife, has black hair, and is a woman.

Subaru: "Elsa…?"

Elsa?: "…"

The silhouette doesn't respond. But this definitely looks like the black-garbed woman Subaru knows.

Why is she here? Could Garfiel somehow have lost? If so, then Subaru's battle—Subaru's battle to save everything—has ended in defeat, and, Subaru: “No, I’m off…”

Just as he starts getting those ideas in his mind, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru has to trust in Garfiel’s strength. Even supposing that his opponent was strong, Subaru was betting on Garfiel to win.

Otto and Frederica had done everything they could to assist in evacuating Petra and Rem.

Garfiel would have done his absolute best as well.

How would Natsuki Subaru have possibly gotten this far without believing in his companions?

Subaru: “Garfiel wouldn’t have lost. So, why’re you…”

Believing in Garfiel’s valiant fight, Subaru flings words at the silhouette below him. This woman shouldn’t be here. What is underlying her actions?

But just when he goes to question her, Subaru notices something.

Or no. He’s forced to notice.

Subaru: “—You’re not Elsa any more, are you?”

The dark eyes looking up at Subaru shine with not a speck of light.

The things are so hollow and empty that it’s unbelievable that those are eyeballs in those sockets.

The noise is coming from the crushed lower body of the silhouette, dragging along behind it. But the thing still acts like it’s alive, which Subaru finds incredibly repulsive.

Subaru did think she had life force enough that she wouldn’t die, but she’s still incapable of dying after all that destruction?

Subaru: “Though, this isn’t the time to be pitying her…!”

Even supposing she’s incapable of dying, Subaru has no words of sympathy.

Considering the fact that Elsa showed up before being half-dead, sympathy would be lenient treatment even despite her state. That said, Subaru doesn't make a hobby of tormenting walking corpses.

He rationalizes that she just needs to get caught in the mansion's collapse, and have the flames cremate her.

Subaru: "Get swallowed in inferno. I'm leaving to get Beatr—"

Shaking his head, Subaru disregards the silhouette and determines to head upstairs.

Subaru: "—Huh?"

With a slight noise, the silhouette leaps.

Its mouth gapes open as it aims for Subaru, swinging its wicked blade.

Subaru: "…"

The wind from the knife as it grazes past his nose makes Subaru's lungs forget to breathe and heart forget to beat.

The thing just tried to take Subaru's life, so natural that it may as well have been walking over to him.

But its strike just barely misses Subaru, instead shattering the floor before the tips of his toes.

The enemy hadn't been going on easy on him, its dead lower half had simply lacked the leg strength needed to pounce. If it had that leg strength, that attack would have killed Subaru.

Subaru: "You've gotta be kidding!"

He promptly kicks the silhouette as it pitches forward before ascending the staircase.

He dashes so intently that he forgets to breathe, glancing back at the shadow. The silhouette’s head sways from the kick and it jerks its limbs awkwardly to the ground like a marionette, then scuttling like a spider in pursuit of Subaru.

Subaru: “Are you joking?!”

He had called her a spider-woman before, but he didn’t think she actually was one.

Stunned at her inhuman locomotion, Subaru soars to the top of the stairway. He imagines the silhouette pursuing him as he dives into the inferno of the third floor hallway.

In the very middle of this hall is the office. That room, being the sturdiest in the mansion, should still be generally undestroyed—

???: “—σσσ!!”

Subaru: “Dhhah?!”

Intercepting Subaru as he leaps into the blaze, a lion-headed witchbeast roars.

Having lost its mane, and with over half of its body burned grotesquely, this is unmistakably the witchbeast that Subaru’s team supposedly killed in the dining room.

Apparently the near-dead beast returned to this door in adherence with its master’s orders.

Meaning that Subaru is presently a moth darting into a flame.

An unanticipated meeting amidst fire. The pun is working disgustingly well.6

The half-burnt witchbeast swings its foreleg what with those giant claws. The attack grinds away at the wall, closing in to strike Subaru’s neck, more than strong enough to mow Subaru down easier than a weed despite the beast’s moribund state.

Subaru: “You’re one-trick ponies!”

But Subaru dodges by ducking low and diving forward.

Subaru has learned from the other witchbeasts that they aim for their prey's vitals. Judging that the beast will definitely aim for the head, Subaru dives into a forward roll to slip past the beast's flank.

This beast, fully capable of devouring Subaru in one gulp, roars in rage as it attempts to readjust itself and face Subaru. But things will not come so easy.

Beast: "—σσσσ!!"

In pursuit of Subaru, the skittering silhouette bares its fangs at the half-dead witchbeast.

The beast, its back turned, is slow to react as the silhouette's flourished blade showers a slash down upon it. The beast's rear left leg is amputated at the joint, blood pouring from the crooked wound as the creature's shrieks echo through the corridor.

The beast whips its snakelike tail, striking for the silhouette that crawls across the ground.

The silhouette avoids it nightmarishly, manoeuvring beyond human capacity to bat the beast's tail away with its blade, stab its knife into the beast's open wound, and bore deep into the injury.

Subaru listens to the earsplitting screech resound as he heads for the office's door, certain not to let the opportunity escape.

He kicks the record room's door open on his way, but it fails to lead to the archive, instead leading only to time loss. The beast and silhouette are still fighting behind him, but being that the only howls he hears are from the beast, it's obvious how the scales are falling.

Subaru: "Beatrice!"

Having reached the office, Subaru prays to himself as he belts the door open.

If the Archive appears before him, he can say goodbye to the monster battle.

But what cruelly shows it self is only the sight of the dishevelled office.

Subaru: “Fuck…Then this wasn’t it!”

Practically illustrating the strength of Beatrice’s rejection, the office diverges from Subaru’s wishes. He can no longer search for other doors, or return to the lower floors of the burning mansion. If there are any potential doors left, they’d be—

Subaru: “The hidden passage…”

It’s difficult to call the hidden passage, which opens via a mechanism, a ‘door.’

The passage opens by way of a sliding bookcase, and it’s rather unlikely that passing through its entrance would lead him to the Forbidden Archive.

If there are any other doors left, they’d be deeper inside the passage.

Subaru: “There should be a door midway through the passage that opens to a small room…but…”

In a previous loop, Elsa ambushed him from beyond that door.

But he doesn’t know if that door falls within Gate Crossing’s area of effect. And above all, Subaru has to think that this is Beatrice’s doing, leading him from door to door to try and expel him from the mansion through the hidden passage.

She may be aware of the mansion’s current state, and be leading Subaru down a route that will give him survival.

In that case, the hidden passage may not even lead to the Forbidden Archive.

He may be led outside the mansion, to the mountain cabin at the end of the escape tunnel, and forever lose his chance to save

Beatrice.

Subaru: “—Not giving me any time to think!”

Subaru hears the beast’s death wail as the decisive blow is struck.

The witchbeast, which unwittingly put in a valiant fight to buy Subaru time, has most likely died for real to Elsa’s silhouette.

With a shake of his head, Subaru dives into the hidden passage.

A spiral staircase lengthy enough to reach the mansion’s underground welcomes him—and it seems that the inferno has reached even this tunnel, the heat and smoke precluding anyone from doing anything here.

Subaru puts his hand to his chest to cope with the aching, steeling his resolve as he speeds straight down the staircase. Descending right after ascending. The heat simmers him, and just imagining what color his skin must be makes for a terrifying thought.

After eventually reaching the end of the staircase, Subaru peers into the darkness of the passage, his breathing ragged.

It seems like the smoke had been leaking in from a gap in the stairway wall, for he sees no effects of heat or fire in the subterranean passage.

Instead of the threat of burning, Subaru has to deal with fumbling in pitch darkness.

He walks in deeper for another ten or so meters before reaching a somewhat wider space, finds the door to the small room he’s looking for, and stops.

Subaru: “Here…”

Subaru has never gone deeper into the hidden passage than this door. He doesn’t know if any other doors exist beyond this door.

Meaning that this is potentially Subaru’s last chance for a door to lead to Beatrice. And if this place functions as a proper hidden passage—

Subaru: “…”

Shaking his head to dispel his weakness of heart, Subaru reaches for the doorknob.

If Beatrice has lead Subaru here with intention for him to survive, then his chances here are poor. Subaru fearfully touches the doorknob—

Subaru: “Hhht! This door’s another…”

Crying in pain as his hand burns, Subaru grimaces and glares at the door.

The door’s response, as if it had reflected Subaru’s heart, makes a wave of disquiet surge up in him and—he notices it.

Subaru: “The doorknob’s, hot…?”

While the underground passage may be heated, there are no signs of fire.

The smoke and heat had likely been leaking in through a gap in the stonework that composes the staircase. If Subaru’s speculation is correct, then it’s inconceivable that this door would be so hot.

This door is hot enough that you have to wonder if it’s indeed been seared by flames.

Subaru: “…Beatrice. If you can hear this, please listen.”

Taking care not to touch the door, Subaru looks slightly upwards and mutters.

With belief that his voice will reach the absent girl.

Subaru: “Did you lead me here? If you did, knowing that the only escape route is through this hidden passage, then honestly I’m speechless at what a schemer you are.”

Beatrice's tactics to lead Subaru this far were indeed quite considerable.

The encounter with Elsa's shadow and the witchbeast surely had nothing to do with Beatrice, but she definitely led Subaru here move by move.

If he proceeds to open this door and reach the mountain cabin, Beatrice's plans will likely be fulfilled.

Subaru: "But apparently thing won't go so smoothly. …I could open this door, but I won't manage to escape how you want me to. This isn't me being stubborn and insisting that I don't want to run away, okay? I'm at least half in that mood, yes, but…it's something more serious."

Addressing someone who might not even be listening, Subaru smoothly strings word after word.

He taps his nails against the door blocking the way before him and gives a sigh.

Subaru: "If I open this door, I'm probably dead. You and the others might not notice this, but right now, that's how things are on the other side of this door. It's hard to explain verbally…but I understand the soul of science and I can tell."

Setting aside the failure in the dining room, Subaru's 21st-century knowledge is howling at him. This door Subaru is presently looking at is a door commonly found during fire-related emergencies, and must not be touched.

No joke at all, Subaru's life is in danger.

What comes next is a question of whether Beatrice is listening. And if she is, will she believe what he's saying?

Subaru: "Beatrice. I'm going to open the door. —I'm leaving how you judge my statements up to you."

Although aware that this thing before him is a threat to his life, Subaru's heart is rather calm.

It’s not that his nerves are steeled, or that he’s resolved himself.

It’s that he can calmly entrust his life to another.

I mean, after all.

Subaru: “—Beatrice, I trust you.”

With his hand burning in pain, Subaru flings open the door.

And—

6

Rather than climb down the spiral staircase, the shadow reaches the bottom via something closer to ‘plummeting’.

Shadow: “…”

The blood flowing from the shadow is clouded like muddy water, its visage as it drags its crushed legs along so ghastly it does not look a thing of this earth. With a wicked black blade in its right hand, and the dead witchbeast’s heart in its left, the shadow clenches its fist to crush the organ as it proceeds deeper down the passage.

The skulking shadow has a human’s shape, but not even it can determine whether or not it possesses human will.

Its body has been destroyed such that it cannot function, its life has been whittled such that it cannot revive, and it has already exhausted the absolute dregs of its vitality as a shadow.

If you asked how the silhouette could regardless be moving around like this, then the shadow would respond: because its personality before it was a shadow was just that intensely tenacious.

The shadow eventually, silently, reaches the deepest part of the passage.

The shadow lacks a will, and possess no goal other than to corner anything moving and take their lives. Sensing that its mark has gone through here, the shadow gives an easy flourish of its wicked blade.

Shadow: “…”

With a clunk, the door in front of the shadow splits apart.

The shadow kicks the door’s debris aside, and moves to peer into the darkness beyond, Shadow: “…”

A slight wind breezes by, making the shadow feel that they are being sucked into the darkness.

White smoke overflows from deep in the darkness, and a haze begins to form before the shadow.

And then—oxygen flows into the room where incomplete combustion occurred, mingling with the traces of the fire, instantly superheating and bursting out of the room.

Backdraft.

There’s no way that the shadow, a dimwitted thing moving only to destroy, could have anticipated the explosive phenomenon.

Shadow: “…”

The burst of flames engulfs the shadow, hellfire burning its body to nothing.

The shadow’s body had lost means to either restore or revive itself, waiting only to rot, when incinerating fires envelop it, exceeding carbonization as the blaze peaks instantly hotter—and burns it to nothing.

The fire’s momentum does not stop with merely the shadow as it proceeds to zoom through the underground passage, transforming the spiral staircase into a sea of searing heat, and gusts into the office to explode for even greater conflagration.

—The Roswaal Mansion now truly collapses as it meets its moment of demise.

Seeing how the Forbidden Archive has changed, Subaru swallows his breath.

Fissures run through the floor near the entryway, the hole to the hyper-dimensional space still alive and well. The fallen bookcases have no hopes of recovery, and in fact a portion of the room is up in flames.

The situation in the Roswaal Mansion has starting affecting the Forbidden Archive too.

Subaru: "…"

But, noticing the gaze fixed upon him, Subaru suppresses his shock and changes his gears.

For now, he shall focus everything on only one single girl.

—For this is surely his last chance.

Beatrice: "You're an idiot, in fact…"

Subaru: "That's seriously the first thing you say?"

Beatrice: "Well you are, I suppose. Betty put in so much effort so that you might escape, then you squander the opportunity, and come back, in fact. …The mansion no longer has any doors, I suppose. The Forbidden Archive has caught aflame too, in fact."

She's right.

The fire spreads to some of the fallen bookcases, turning the beloved books one by one into ash.

This entire place is flammable, and it's going to burn in a flash.

Subaru: "Which means this'll be the end both for me and for you."

Beatrice: " …Yes. It's the end, I suppose. There is not much that Betty desires any longer. The fire has spread to the knowledge destined for THEY, which utterly defies the promise, I suppose."

Subaru: "Does it. Then, I want you to listen to my final speech." Beatrice's empty eyes look at Subaru.

She says nothing to encourage or refuse him, but the reaction probably means that she's at least willing to listen. Subaru gives her a nod, and takes a small breath.

The words he hadn't managed to tell her before, at their previous parting.

Right now, he will tell her everything he wishes to tell, in full.

Subaru: "Beatrice. —Help me."

Beatrice: "…Huh?"

Assertion, spoken with chest held high.

Shock dashes through Beatrice's eyes in response to sooty-faced Subaru's declaration.

She had surely attempted to imagine what he would say.

While drawing near to her unavoidable end, Beatrice had definitely run many simulations of what words Subaru would accost her with.

I want to save you. I won't let you be alone. Perhaps those manly words, and the cool greeting she had expected from THEY, where what she had been waiting for.

But if Subaru is to communicate his true feelings, such statements are impossible for him.

Subaru: "So I've been considering how I'm saying this cool stuff like, 'I'm bringing you out of isolation', or 'I'm going to save you'. …Really, they're all I could come up with while riding off momentum to get through the situation. So I've been sincerely considering. What is it I think of you? What do I think of you, and what do I want to communicate to you?"

Subaru presents his sincere, unadorned thoughts to the wordless Beatrice.

While turning a blind eye to how cowardly and unfair it is that he's leaving the reception of all this up to her.

Subaru: "This whole me saving you thing's a joke, the truth of it is, you don't need my help at all. You're strong, you're smart, you're cute…you can do anything you put your mind to, and can get done anything you want done."

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "You are more than capable enough of living on your own. Of course. If you weren't then you wouldn'tve managed four hundred years. So not a word of this stuff about helping you or saving you resounded with you."

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "But even though you're strong and smart and can do so many things, it scared you to live on your own. It hurt you. It made you lonely. Nobody can fault you for clinging to THEY."

Beatrice: "After you rejected…Betty's feelings…what could you… possibly understand!" Biting her lip, Beatrice glares at Subaru with something like hatred.

But that wavering emotion fails to fully be hatred. Beatrice holds on to that fading fury, frantically trying to preserve it as Subaru shakes his head at her.

Subaru: "I do know. That you're kind. That when someone's having nightmares, you'll hold their hand to ease them. That when someone's in unworkable trouble, you'll offer your hand and open a path. That when someone you can't help hating loses someone close to them, you'll lament for them."

Beatrice: "Talking as if, you know anything…"

Subaru: "I'm powerless. I can't be any help to you. But if we're gonna say there's anything I can do, not wanting you to be alone, then it's only cling and beg."

Beatrice's eyes widen. Subaru presents his right hand.

It's raw with burn scars, disgusting to look at. But it's still better than his atrocious left hand after all the damage it took.

He wipes it, prepares it, makes it clean enough to suitably hold her hand.

Subaru: "Beatrice. Help me."

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "I won't be able to live with the loneliness without you. Help me."

To a third-party listener, it would sound an overwhelmingly pathetic and shameful form of coercion.

I can't live without you, so please take my hand, is his threat.

He cannot do anything for the other, so he is teaching the other that they can do something for him, and by that rationale, demanding that they live.

It's an excessively selfish, unreasonable, and hopeless means of coercion.

Beatrice: "Not, fair…it isn't fair, in fact."

Subaru says nothing.

Beatrice: "Using, those words…and, saying it so…after all this, you…when you're not THEY…when you rejected Betty, and yet…"

She is tongue-tied, lost for words, hesitant to speak, emotional, and anguished.

Her eyes remain set on the hand presented to her as she firmly embraces the book in her arms.

Tears spill from her eyes.

Beatrice: “I was alone for four hundred years! I spent all that time in isolation, so what could taking your hand now, possibly…you’ll just die anyway! Human lifespans pass like a blink of the eye to Betty…after all of this! How could I cling to this!”

Subaru: “It’s impossible for me to imagine your four hundred years. I can’t talk like I understand it, either. Four centuries, I haven’t even lived a twentieth of that. I know I can’t understand all of your fear for what’ll come after I die.”

Beatrice: “Then! Then…nothing you’ve said, presents any solution…!”

Subaru: “But, tomorrow, we can be holding hands.”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru: “Tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that too. It might not be four hundred years, but we can spend our days together. It might not last for eternity, but tomorrow, and in this present, I can treasure you.”

Beatrice: “—Hic.”

Subaru: “Beatrice. —Choose me.”

Subaru has already chosen.

Now he presents the choice to Beatrice. It all rests on her.

Will she stay loyal to her mother, and punctuate four centuries by being swallowed in flames? Will she disregard her promise to her mother, abandon her meeting with THEY, and take Natsuki Subaru’s hand?

Beatrice: “Y-You are, THEY is…”

Subaru: “Not me. Don’t equate me to some other guy you built up in your head. I’m me. Natsuki Subaru. Take all your unreciprocated feelings for this four-hundred-year asshole you’ve never even seen, and dump them.”

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "Rather than fear a goodbye that might someday come, live with me in a definite tomorrow. I'm weak, but I'm still aiming so high…if we're together, you'll be so busy fussing over me you'll stop having time to think about being bored or lonely."

Beatrice: "…nng."

Subaru: "Choose me, Beatrice."

He'll repeat it however many times it takes for the words to reach her.

Because he understands her wavering feelings, and her wavering heart.

So that the selfishness of Natsuki Subaru can shoulder the burden of her guilt for her indecision, and shame for breaking the promise.

So that this girl will never cry alone again.

Beatrice: "But you'll go away…"

Subaru: "It won't last forever. The future you're fearing will definitely come. The time when you're left behind, eternal as you are, will almost definitely come. But if you think only of fear for farewells, and throw away all the fun of being together, it takes far too much out of both of our lives."

Beatrice: "But you'll leave me…"

Subaru: "Let's be together. Let's live together. Let's go together. Let's pile memories upon memories, enough to blast away your fears of goodbye, enough that you can smile and say with your chest held high: I enjoyed it. Enough that you recover those four centuries you spent in solitude, and counterbalance them."

Beatrice: "Even if…that happened! I'll be alone, someday!"

He steps forward. Closes the distance.

The girl's wavering eyes reflect him.

He looks pathetic, he looks deplorable, he's a far cry from the prince she's been waiting for.

But right there is usual, mundane Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "You'll live forever, and the time you spend with me might only be a microsecond for you. So I'll carve it into your soul. My microsecond."

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "—That Natsuki Subaru was a man, who even through eternity, was too vivid to ever fade to sepia!"

The Forbidden Archive crumbles to the sound of shattering glass.

The area around Subaru and Beatrice is surrounded in spacial fissures and scorching flames.

But in this second, he feels not fear nor fire.

The only thing in Subaru is Beatrice.

And the only thing in Beatrice is Subaru.

Beatrice's shaking hands clutch the book received from her mother.

With belief that unhooking her fingers means mending her centuries of solitude, Subaru reaches out his hand.

And shouts.

Subaru: "Choose me! Beatrice!!"

Beatrice: "—Ah."

Subaru: "You want someone to take you outside! That's why you are always! Sitting opposite the goddamn door!!"

With the decisive boom, the world meets its end.

The Forbidden Archive, the girl’s isolated cage, is swallowed and disappears in rifts and fire.

But the instant before that happens.

—A single book thunks to the floor of the Forbidden Archive.

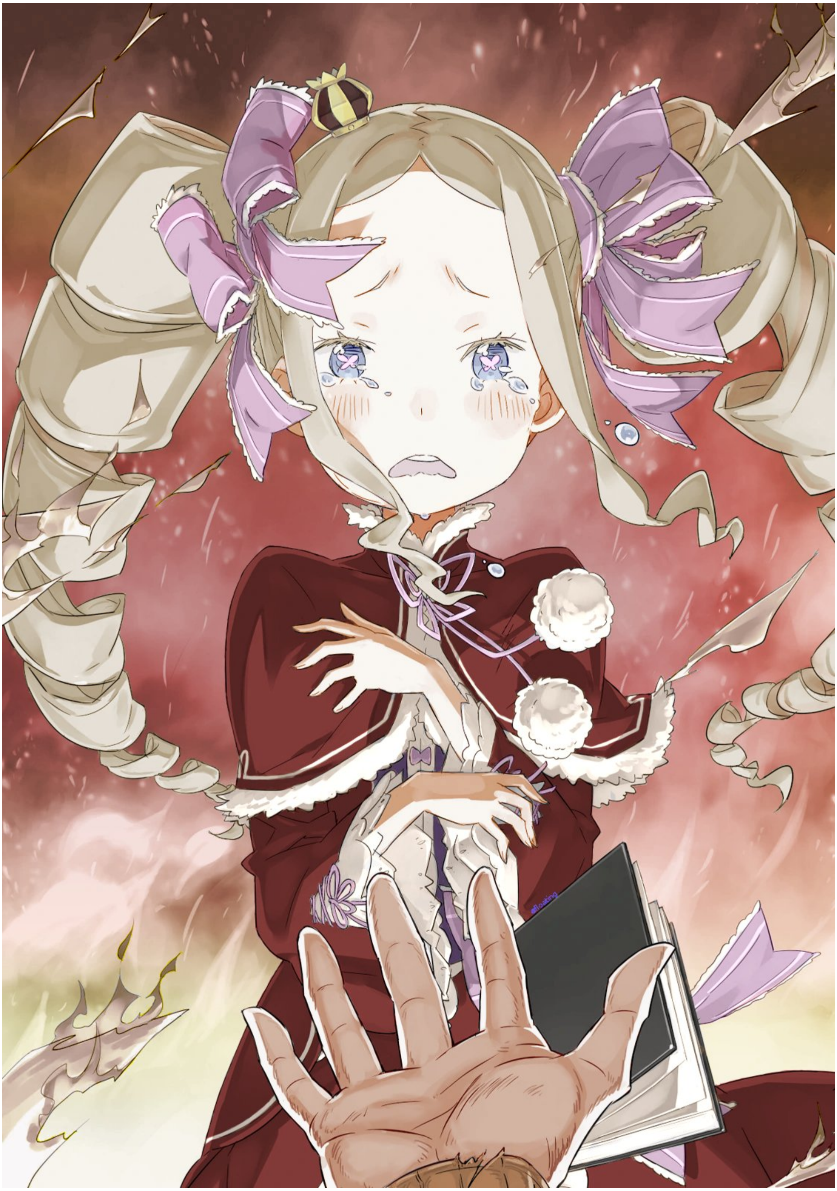
@floating

8

Having escaped through the hidden passage and reached the mountain cabin, Otto’s group watches the mansion burn from atop a hillock.

Otto, Petra, and Frederica. And Rem shouldered on Frederica’s back. The four of them succeeded in safely evacuating through the passage to the mountains.

The mountains, and particularly the area around the cabin, apparently have a barrier around them to repel witchbeasts. They see no signs of either wild witchbeasts or witchbeasts in ambush in their vicinity.

But not a single person here has the composure to rejoice about their survival.

All of them gaze at the mansion with something like a prayer, waiting for visible change to occur.

While trusting in the safety of Subaru and Garfiel, both still inside.

Otto: “…”

Putting the treatment of his wounds aside for later, Otto gazes at the mansion, regretting even to blink. Petra stands beside him, clutching her arms with a strength inconceivable by her youth.

She’s worried, so worried, so worried it’s unbearable. Everyone knows that the young girl feels great fondness for Subaru. Considering her grief, it’s impossible that Otto not pray for Subaru’s safety.

Otto: “…”

Otto gently places his hand atop her head to calm her.

He gives her a smile as she looks up at him in surprise, before returning his gaze to the mansion.

And he notices it.

Otto: “…There.”

In the middle of the burning mansion’s main wing.

A massive explosion of flame bursts from the office with the hidden passage that Otto’s group used. The windows shatter, overflowing inferno spreading everywhere in an instant, before the mansion loses its shape—and collapses.

Petra: “Auh…”

Otto hears Petra’s cry of grief.

And Otto, too, having witnessed the same reality and figured the same thing as Petra, withstands the urge to scream in denial. If he throws a fit here, it will be a disservice to the heart of the girl who most likely wants to cry even more than him.

But Otto’s thoughts are instantly invalidated.

Petra: “Mr. Otto, look!”

Otto: “Adagh?!”

Just when Otto borders on lowering his gaze, Petra’s little hand slaps him across the cheek.

The impact startles him, sending sparks across his vision and dizzying him. But he soon sees Petra’s look of elation as she points at the mansion, hurriedly looks over as well, and understands.

Otto: “Hah, hahaha…”

—A pillar of white light is extending from the destroyed mansion to the heavens.

The light twists like a rainbow, changing its angle high in the sky, shooting far to the east.

Practically announcing that its destination lies there.

Otto knows what rests in that direction.

So his cheeks relax as he watches Petra cheer in joy, and,

Otto: “Now it’s all up to you. —Truly, I am exhausted.”

9

Meanwhile, that same light that brought Otto relief is witnessed by Garfiel, half-naked and clad in only a cloth around his waist. He clicks his fangs.

Garfiel: “Ha! So y’did pull it off, Captain! Knew ya’d do it! ‘S a POSTHUMOUSLY TOO HOSHIN

KEEPS HIS PROMISES!”

Having escaped the burning mansion and sprinted into the woods, Garfiel puts his hand to his hip and laughs like an idiot.

Lying on the ground beside Garfiel is a girl, her limbs bound in restraints made of the same cloth as Garfiel’s waistwrap—Meili, unconscious.

Spoils of war! Is not how he’s going to boast about it, but she’s a living witness who was involved in the attack, and there are many things they need to interrogate her about.

But above all, Garfiel’s principles would not allow him to kill the young girl.

Garfiel: “‘Said, th’shadow lady must’a been burnt t’a crisp.”

Garfiel gazes at the destroyed mansion, sighing.

He threw a witchbeast at her which crushed her—it’s an indirect method that left no feeling in his own hands, but Garfiel still did choose of his own volition to butcher a near-human life.

His fingers shake, and he can feel a wrenching pain in his stomach.

But Garfiel suppresses those feelings with a shake of his head, seating himself beside the sleeping Meili before leaning against a tree.

Garfiel: “F’now we’ll put off th’aftertaste’v winnin’ and th’feelin’ of killin’. Nothin’ my amazin’ self does now ‘s gonna accomplish anythin’. …Countin’ on you, Captain.”

Thrusting out his fist, Garfiel glares at the trail of white light, and:

Garfiel: “Once this’s all cleaned up, we got a guy we both gotta give a good smack ‘cross th’face!”

10

—She’s been caught.

She knew this would happen, and she still grasped for it.

Even though she’s known forever that, should she take this hand, should she cling to this warmth, she would never be able to return to her nights of isolation and solitude.

Even though she’d admonished herself about how insanely foolish it was to live while depending on an ephemeral warmth.

That voice, calling for her.

Those eyes, gazing at her.

Those hands, requiring her.

Even though she’d known how she could not possibly refuse.

—Subaru.

“Yes, that’s it.”

—Subaru, Subaru.

“Yes. That’s my name.”

—Subaru, Subaru, Subaru.

—Subaru!!

“And you finally called me by it.”

11

—The blizzard rages.

Blinding curtains of white unfurl, every puff of breath freezing the instant it touches the outside air of this gelid world.

The breeze bathing her is frigid, and the blizzard winds carry snow so sharp it nigh cuts the skin. But even amidst this ferocious storm, the girl with her silver hair fluttering holds strong willpower in her amethyst eyes, and faces forward.

“I’m never, never…going to let you take anyone!!”

A glow cases her arms as she stretches them out, and unleashes a massive volume of magical power. The blizzard amplifies the glacial magic that wreathes itself in pale light, which then slices through the world like an incandescent sword, one-by-one slashing apart the white witchbeasts passing overhead.

The unpleasant noise of their chittering fangs peals without end.

The embodiment of hunger—an ancient calamity beyond any salvation, specialized only to devour its prey, something with which no-one could coexist.

Faced with the multiplying malice of ‘hunger’ there stands, not retreating a single step, the silver-haired girl.

But her breathing is ragged, and she has lost some control over her gargantuan mana, with white crystal beginning to cover her lower body.

If this continues, she will soon transform herself into an ice statue.

But, even though she knows this, she cannot retreat.

“…”

The girl glances behind her.

There rests everything that she must protect from the witchbeast's slaughter.

A dilapidated ruin, and several lives who are placing their hopes upon her small shoulders.

And a man, having not entered the ruin, who dazedly observes the girl's battle, and a dead-still pink-haired girl in his arms.

Half her body feels frozen. But a fire blazes in her heart.

Who could possibly winge and whine after witnessing them?

For what purpose, and with whose confidence, is she standing here?

"I…I won't let you be the end to anybody! Everybody's hands were linked together…and I'm going to protect that! That is what I promised my Mother!"

A torrent of pale light crashes into the horde of approaching witchbeasts.

They cry no death wails, falling motionless amid the white gleam. They witness their companions' sad deaths, before instantly choosing to cannibalize them and chewing into ice.

It's terrible to watch.

But perhaps, potentially, that's what people look like too when they're clinging to hope.

Even so. Even so.

"So long as I haven't forgotten about Mother and Geuse, and about everybody today…and about what he wrote for me, I am never giving up."

Even if she does end up encased in ice, she will never regret it.

Cutting through the blizzard, the encroaching witchbeasts grow steadily and steadily nearer, closing in on the girl and those relying on her.

If she has to, she is resolved to give her life.

But just when the girl is tormented with that thought, she hears a voice.

“No need to push yourself so hard, Emilia-tan.”

“…”

She knows that someone has just landed beside her, having descended from high above.

She looks aside. The blizzard blusters too strong, and she cannot make out their face through the veil of white.

But she knows exactly who this is.

Their voice, their attitude, and above all, the fact that they would always come for her whenever she most wanted them.

“You can hold off and fall back. —The inaugural battle of deliverance is here.”

“I’m sorry. That kind of went over my head.”

It feels like they’re smiling.

The silhouette begins to walk, immediately followed by another, smaller silhouette.

She hears a second voice.

That sounds lively, as if the speaker’s been waiting for a very, very long time for this moment—

“What comes next is a complete unknown, in fact.”

“Yeah, we’ll be doing something about this. —Together, me and you!!”

Spirit Beatrice and Contractor Natsuki Subaru, two people who will from now on engage in battles upon battles while linked hand in hand, commence their inaugural fight here.

Chapter 124B:
You Reflected in the Mirror

1

While facing the witch who stares back at her from the mirror, Emilia sighs.

Composed solely of monochrome black and white, the Witch of Greed, Echidna.

Having discovered Echidna in this dreamworld reproduction of her room, Emilia keenly feels that this truly is a place constructed from her own head.

A peaceful, tranquil, kind world where her life in the forest continued forever.

A world where she could spend her days alongside Fortuna's, Geuse's, Arch's, and everybody's smiles.

Emilia: "But that world doesn't exist, does it…"

Echidna: "Utterly not. This is a false world constructed with your memories and wishes as the basis. However, the world-arranging algorithms that precede over the Trial transcend human knowledge. The people you see in this world are most exactly who they would have been, had there been just one flick of the switch."

Emilia has just remembered the truth the day of behind Elior Forest's freezing.

Had there been no casualties back then, and the forest's tranquility have been preserved, their lives would have been ones where everyone smiled.

The sight of Fortuna and Geuse, seated jovially at the dinner table, has seared itself into Emilia's mind.

It is exactly the scene that young Emilia had wished to see from the bottom of her heart, and equally was so for the present Emilia, with her memories restored.

Echidna: “Has witnessing the uncomeatable present made you want to submerse in this world?” As if peering into Emilia’s heart, Echidna assaults her with sweet temptation.

Emilia raises her head. Echidna gazes back, her eyes as cold as her voice. She strokes her snow-white hair, letting it flow over her shoulder and down her back.

Echidna: “Your mother, and that goodman. Does witnessing their happiness give you no desire for this to continue forever? I’m sure you’ve thought it pleasant and so dreamed of spending your days with everyone in the forest, and of your friends being so familiar with you.”

Emilia: “…What are you trying to say?”

Echidna: “Just some resentment, or something like it. That you’ve found me means that you’ve already reached your answer regarding this world. And I know that this answer of yours is to choose reality over dream, and exceedingly dull. If we’re going to be seeing results regardless, I may as well leave some faint indentations behind.”

Emilia: “…”

Echidna: “Rather than the happiness of your mother and your peers, you elect for a reality where they met unfortunate demise. The result of your Trial is: you are ultimately a wretched woman who prioritizes herself over others.”

Echidna’s fierce criticism lances through Emilia’s chest.

Her words are so cutting that Emilia feels pain, and though she has not actually been stabbed, she puts her hand to her chest and impulsively retreats a step. Emilia’s reaction makes Echidna snort.

Echidna: “So long as that’s given you some self-awareness. Anyway, the Trial doesn’t take the personality of its challengers into consideration. So long as they’re qualified, be they a hopeless moral bankrupt, or be they a conglomerate of egotistic narcissism, the

Trial will accept them equally. Rest assured. You'll achieve your goals in short time."

Emilia: "It's sooo…sore a spot you're going for. Are you like this with everyone?"

Echidna: "Not at all."

Echidna shrugs in response to Emilia's strained statement.

Echidna: "Other than you, there's only two people in the world who I interact with spitefully."

Emilia: "It doesn't make me happy at all to be chosen for that world three. …I don't remember ever doing anything that would make you hate me that much."

Echidna: "There's no need to look so worried. My hatred for you has nothing to do with you being a half- elf. It isn't a question of your pedigree. With no connection to blood or nature, I just hate you. …Or no, that may not be strictly correct."

Emilia: "—?"

Echidna lowers her gaze, feeling something off about the latter half of her statement. Emilia furrows her brows at the brooding witch, before giving a small shake of the head. There's no way she can turn tail and just leave those previous comments sitting there.

Echidna has said so many things that need to be invalidated. Not only for Emilia's sake, but for the honor of everyone in the forest.

Emilia: "I don't think there's much to do about you hating me. I know how hard it is for absolutely everyone to like you. Since so many people have told me they hate me."

Echidna: "If that's the case then it would've been nice of you to show some prudence and stay in the forest."

Emilia: "Well I'm not going to do that. I'm sure I said it in the last Trial. I'm going to melt the ice and save everybody. Then I'm going to hold my chest high and teach everyone that now, the world's an easier place to roam.”

Echidna: “Easier to roam. What a brazen lie. Discrimination between races remains great, and people cannot easily accept those who differ from themselves. Which is why places like the Sanctuary retain their function even today. The disagreements you’re referring to will forever result in compounding casualties throughout the world. Am I wrong?”

Emilia: “…You’re not wrong.”

Echidna’s severe comments put Emilia on the border of pessimism.

Emilia still remembers the days she spent with Puck in the forest. How the nearby villages feared her, and showered her in more than a few curses and more than a little spite.

Echidna’s merciless attitude makes Emilia think about those days. She can try not to recollect on them, but the wounds and their unhealed scars continue to assert their pain.

Emilia: “But I’m going to act as if you are.”

Echidna: “…”

Still focused on that pain, Emilia firmly rebuts Echidna.

She watches Echidna narrow her eyes, and bites her lip, strength entering her eyes.

Emilia: “Being unlike others does, sometimes, make painful disagreements happen. Whether there’s lots or not many of you might be a big factor for what determines the victims and assailants, sometimes, too.”

Echidna: “And it’s been repeats of that, throughout history. People cannot accept those unlike them. The disparity in numbers represents exactly the disparity in strength. The many oppress the few. Now that you understand this truth, and have gotten a little bit wiser, what are you going to do? Gather up the few, and create a utopia for weaklings? Now wouldn’t that be exactly the essence of this place we call the Sanctuary?”

Emilia: “That’s…one option you could choose, I think. But I want to choose a different path. Even if I can’t change that there were victims or assailants, the future’s another story.”

The second that Emilia says the word ‘future’, Echidna’s expression freezes numb.

To Emilia, it feels like Echidna is angry, as if this is something she absolutely doesn’t want to be hearing from Emilia of all people. But Emilia continues.

Emilia: “I’m sure I’m going to do lots of things throughout the Royal Selection. I might face even more insults and spite than I did before. But I want to always say that I will never stop. To ask what’s so wrong about being unlike someone else. To ask what’s so scary about being unlike our neighbors.”

Echidna: “I’d rather you stop making be say this, but this is fundamental truth. People cannot accept the discrepancies between themselves and others. By essence, all creatures desire for others to be the same as themselves. To like the same things, love the same things, hate the same things, abhor the same things—they feel secure when matters are so, and love their capacity to sympathize. Your platform will be denied. As the ramblings of the weak.”

Emilia: “But that’s just a neglect to think! It’s lame!”

Echidna: “L-Lame…?”

Yells Emilia. Echidna’s eyes shoot open, looking not to have expected that word in the least.

Emilia puffs out her chest.

Emilia: “It is!”

Emilia: “It’s so lame. You’re not like your neighbor, so you hate them…are you a child? It’s ridiculous that someone would block their ears for a reason like that. I’ll say it countless times to any of those nitwits. Rather than mindlessly yell that you don’t like it, if you’re looking to quiet my endless tirades, it’s easier to change your thinking a little.”

Echidna: “Absolutely self-centered. Incredible self- deception. You’ll eliminate the opinions of others that you wish not to hear, so that you may enforce your own?”

Emilia: “I’m not eliminating anything. It’s up to them whether they unblock their ears. —I’m just confident that I’m the more stubborn.”

Her hand to her hip, Emilia demonstrates to Echidna that her will will not bend.

Echidna’s expression turns sour and she averts her gaze from Emilia.

Echidna: “Whatever you may assert, the world has not changed yet. The forest-dwellers, frozen in ice—supposing that they are alive, and you do bring them into a thawed world, society is not prepared to accept them. All you are doing is tossing those who were kind to you into adversity. All for your hypocritical beliefs.”

Emilia says nothing.

Echidna: “You wish to free your friends as soon as you can. But should you free them, your friends will suffer as the world rejects them. Living is suffering, and death too is suffering. In a world like this, what can your individual willingness do? What can it change. What does it change?”

Echidna is sincerely inquiring this of Emilia.

She has verified Emilia’s resolve through the two Trials of the past and impossible present. Now, Echidna is asking Emilia about her resolve for the future.

About Emilia’s prospects should she follow her intentions through.

About the route she will take to reach her imagined future.

About what Emilia will use as her cornerstone, and upon what concrete basis she will create this path.

Emilia nods in reply, and:

Emilia: “I’ll think about that after I finish the Trial!”

Echidna: “—Huh?”

Emilia: “It’s putting the cart before the horse if I get so focused on the future that I forget where I am. I know how this sounds when I’m the one saying it, but I’m a bumbler. When there’s a wall I have to scale, but I’m worrying about what’s on the other side of it, I’ll wind up falling into the hole at the foot of the wall.”

Between the Trials and her argument with Subaru, Emilia feels that she has a rather correct, objective view of herself.

She feels that her appraisal of herself is also unrestrained.

She is not someone so adroit that she can manage many things on her own.

It’s a question of whether, after putting in her very best effort on the thing right in front of her, she’ll manage to procure results.

She has hope for the future. Prospects for the future.

Resolved to aim for those hopes and prospects, she must take the very first step on the road to achieve them.

What she should be establishing right now is that exact, first step.

Echidna: “…I finally remembered how pointless it is to debate with you. Honestly this was all rather idiotic of me.”

Emilia: “I know that you’re smart, but I kinda think it’s sooo unfair for you to shut down other people’s opinions like that.”

Echidna: “Do you believe that we exchanged any opinions? I presented questions, and you replied with empty platitudes. I’d forgotten. That you’re a hopeless child, unable to stand on your own, constantly relying on others, a weak woman.”

Emilia: “You’re right…I am a weak child.”

Emilia lowers her eyes and gives a small shake of her head.

But she immediately looks back up, and matches her gaze to Echidna's.

Emilia: "But."

Emilia: "Is being weak really so wrong?"

Echidna: "…What?"

Emilia: "I know that the person who taught me something very important would say this. It isn't wrong to be weak. It's wrong to want to stay weak."

She thinks of the black-haired, nasty-eyed boy.

Lamenting his powerlessness, but kind and thus suffering more wounds than anyone else in his efforts, a precious boy.

If it were him, who borrowed everyone's aid but nevertheless took a place for the most painful parts, he would absolutely say that.

Echidna: "Reorientation."

Emilia: "Mm. I was slow to reorient."

Seeing how a smile arises on Emilia's face, Echidna perceives that there is truly no room for debate.

Echidna has no methods to stop the persistently optimistic, overly-enthusiastic Emilia.

Meddling in the issue any further would even begin to impact her dignity as a Witch.

Echidna: "…Well, enjoy the remaining T RIAL. Once you've completed it, a reality far harsher than these Trials awaits you. I'm sure you'll come to understand just how difficult it will be to uphold your shiny platitudes."

Emilia: "Thank you for going out of the way to talk to me. I'll make sure to remember what you've told me. And…"

She must be moments away from disappearing from the mirror.

Seeing how Echidna's reflection begins to fade in the mirror, Emilia continues her speech. Echidna furrows her brows, looking sour. And Emilia,

Emilia: "Thank you for showing me this world."

Echidna: "…"

Emilia: "It might be an impossible world, but it's still one I wanted to see. I never thought a day would come where I'd see them, Mother and…Father Geuse laughing together like this. Thank you."

It did hurt when Echidna told her that this world was not real.

But even if it is an impossible world, these scenes are what would have occurred.

These scenes full of happiness and love, enough to make Emilia tremble in joy and sorrow.

I'm so glad I got to see this, thinks Emilia from the bottom of her heart.

Echidna: "…You."

And so Emilia expresses her thanks—and Echidna's expression shifts.

Her expression has been one of witnessing something disgusting, her attitude has been one of withstanding displeasure, her stance has been one of scorn toward all of Emilia's action, and she has shown many such faces until now—but this expression is different from all of them.

—Echidna, looking close to tears, simply gazes at Emilia.

Emilia: "Echidna?"

Echidna: "I hate you. —I just, hate you."

Says Echidna, voice strangled and face cast down.

Her image in the mirror then warps, and the white-haired witch disappears from the glass in an instant. Instead what appears is a girl with long, silver hair and—

Emilia: "—Hic!"

A wave of rejection spears through Emilia's chest as she promptly averts her gaze from the mirror.

Her pulse has accelerated, and her breathing has grown slightly ragged.

She's supposed to have steeled herself for this, but it still terrifies her to be reflected in a mirror.

Emilia: "…"

A century passed in the frozen Elior Forest before Puck saved Emilia from the ice. —She has never seen what she looks like grown up.

The reason's simple. She's just scared.

Her century of slumber in the ice means that Emilia's heart has remained immature, while her body has matured to womanhood.

Once she regained consciousness, and first realized that she couldn't control her body very well, Emilia was struck with the illusion that her body may not be hers, and spent many nights in tears.

The reactions from the neighboring villagers helped spur on that trauma of hers.

Emilia shared the same distinctive physical traits as the Witch of Envy, and the villagers feared her like a demon. Even though they realized that Emilia was going to do them no harm, they continued to alienate her.

Once people knew that Emilia was not going to do anything, what awaited her was a life of discrimination, spite, and curses. During that time, Emilia came to at least unconsciously recognize that people hated her because she looked like the Witch of Envy.

That would be when she started rejecting mirrors and keeping her eyes from her own visage, which others detested.

Puck noticed Emilia’s mental wounds, and removed everything reflective from her vicinity. He would even call out to her when she was out fetching water, distracting her so that she would not face herself on the water’s surface.

—One of the clauses in her Contract with Puck, where he was the one in charge of Emilia’s daily grooming, was most likely something to protect Emilia.

To protect his daughter, who could not look in a mirror, Puck used the Contract as pretext to mask her trauma.

Emilia: “…I really have had so many people looking after me.”

And how long has she spent sulking alone without realizing how others felt? This is the end of the time she’s spent in ignorance of what she’s been given.

She takes a breath. Freezes.

And raises her head, undertaking the personally momentous deed of sighting herself in a mirror.

Reflected in the mirror is a girl with long silver hair and amethyst eyes.

Who is glaring so intently at her, looking as if it’s the end of the world.

Emilia: “—The heck.”

She says, the whole thing anticlimactic.

Seeing her matured visage in the mirror, Emilia sighs.

Emilia: “I look less like Mother Fortuna than I thought, it’s too bad…”

After her sulky mutter, the world shatters into pieces.

This happy, desired, but inevitably-to-part dream world, ends here —.

2

Emilia: “—ah, hauh.”

After regaining consciousness, Emilia realizes that she had fallen asleep while leaned against the wall.

She had slumped to sit on the floor with her legs splayed out aside her, relying on the wall engraved with Subaru’s messages. She combs her fingers through her disheveled hair and imagines the sight of her own self.

So that was her appearance, feared by many as a Witch, and what Subaru constantly said was ‘cute’ or that he ‘loved’.

Emilia, with her impoverished understanding of personal aesthetics, cannot tell which party is correct.

However, Mother Fortuna is Emilia’s conception of the prettiest and coolest of people. And so she does not think nasty eyes are a bad thing, and actually she doesn’t dislike how nasty Subaru’s eyes are either.

Emilia: “I just got back, this isn’t the time for me to be thinking about weird stuff.” Putting her hands to her cheeks, Emilia pulls the breaks on her own thoughts.

It’s all so ludicrously spineless of her. She safely ends the Trial and returns, and just looking at Subaru’s handwritten messages seriously gets her this elated?

Emilia: “But…this does mean that the second Trial is really over, right?”

Mutters Emilia to nobody as she gets to her feet and starts thinking about her results.

Going from how Echidna was acting at the end, the Trial is most likely over. Unlike with the first Trial, Emilia feels no particular sense that she has overcome anything.

But she indeed did wrest her near-captivated heart away, and managed to return.

Emilia: “…”

Fortuna and Geuse. As Emilia thinks back on how close they were, her heart aches.

But she suppresses her sorrow and turns her back to the Trial room.

Supposing that the third Trial is ready, it will require Emilia to exit and enter again as she did with the second Trial.

She’ll coast off her momentum to defeat the third Trial, and liberate the Sanctuary.

For Subaru’s sake, and for Ram’s request, and to actualize the big talk she spoke to Roswaal, people need her to take action.

Emilia: “—It’s just pitch black.”

Passing through the dark corridor of the tomb, her footsteps pealing off the stone floor, Emilia narrows her eyes as she notices how dim the light spilling into the ruin’s entrance is. Perhaps clouds are blocking out the moon, or this hazy glow is from starlight.

In the Sanctuary, which loses essentially all sources of light come nightfall, only the natural lighting pouring down from above serves to rip through the nocturnal dark.

Emilia: “—huh?”

Is what Emilia ponders as she walks.

So when she steps outside the tomb, the horde of gazes focusing on her lead her throat to unwittingly jam.

???: “W-We are in her presence!”

Somebody speaks up, and a chatter instantly spreads through the crowd.

The stir only unfolds further before the flinching Emilia, the overwhelmingly large group of people all focusing their attention on her.

—These are the residents of the Sanctuary.

The people who live in the Sanctuary other than Garfiel and Ryuzu.

Emilia has not interacted with them any more than necessary during her time here. Partly because Emilia's mental state hadn't been calm enough for it, partly because they had not been actively trying to interact with Emilia either.

Emilia has a kind of resignation when it comes to people staring at her like this.

The residents detest Emilia's lineage, but hold expectations for her to liberate the Sanctuary, and most of all must ascertain whether she is someone worthy of standing at their head.

And so Emilia had thought it impossible that they would show themselves to her in such great numbers before she had succeeded in liberating the Sanctuary.

Emilia had been convinced that interaction with them would only ever come about once she had achieved in attaining results.

So then why were they all gathered here?

And why were their gazes towards Emilia—filled not with loathing, but strong expectation?

???: "Can't say it's the nicest erv things…"

Before the bewildered Emilia, a girl steps forward from the group of villagers.

With her long, pink hair, this person is Ryuzu.

She steps forward to represent the villagers as she gives Emilia a smile.

Ryuzu: “Everyone here ers stuck at a standstill. Wondering what answer yer gonner give ter the Trial, and…worrying about what will happen ter us after the Sanctuary’s been freed.”

Emilia: “…I think it’s inevitable that you would. But how would this be ‘not the nicest of things’?”

Ryuzu: “Now thert’s easy. Everyone in the Sanctuary, about Lil’ Gar and Lil’ Su’s fight, er about your argument with Lil’ Roz, or…well, lots’er things. We’ve all been derscussing them in detail, and from there…”

Emilia: “D-Discussed it?!”

While she watches Ryuzu scratch her cheek, Emilia’s cheeks flush red.

Nevermind Subaru and Garfiel’s clash of wills, Emilia’s argument with Roswaal was just her being pushy with her unrefined opinions.

She had rationalized to herself that it wouldn’t be embarrassing for anyone to hear it, but now that she knows that someone actually did hear it, it is making her embarrassed.

Emilia: “But, even if you did hear about it…Miss Ryuzu, where did you?”

Ryuzu: “Hrm, so abert that…fer however I might look, I gert incredibly sharp ears. With it, yer pretty much can’t keep anything a secret so long ers yer in the Sanctuary.”

Emilia: “You do. …Wow.”

Ryuzu’s confession of eavesdropping winds up impressing Emilia more than angering her. Failing to notice how the young-looking old woman sticks out her tongue, Emilia nods in recognition of why so many people have assembled here. And,

Villager: “E-Lady Emilia.”

Emilia: “Y-Yes?”

Ryuzu: “Yer sound like yer met through a dating service.”

He’s one of the villagers—and being that he’s in Sanctuary, most likely a demi-human half-blood. His canines are slightly long, and his pupils are slit. He looks about as old as Roswaal or maybe a little bit older, seeming somewhat tense as he steps out before Emilia.

Villager: “I’m…no, we are, um…in complete sincerity, we are still undecided.”

Emilia: “…”

Villager: “About whether we may trust in you, or what it will mean to learn of the world outside the Sanctuary. Plainly said, the outside is awash with things we don’t know, and scares us. We were all born inside here and have lived inside here. We know nothing of the outside.”

This was what Garfiel had also propounded, the way of life in the Sanctuary.

The four-hundred year barrier has forced the people inside into life here for generations. They had no way to escape, and perhaps no need to think about the outside, either.

But now means to escape exists plainly before them, and this utterly foreign and unknown person named Emilia is attempting to liberate them.

Of course people would feel unease and rebellion. And doubtful that many could burst into the outside world, utterly confident.

Emilia had feared that Garfiel’s anxieties had been the consensus of opinion inside the Sanctuary.

And this man in front of her is saying things that are validating that fear.

Villager: “We could perhaps come into Master Roswaal’s care outside, but how would that differ from our present circumstances? …Plainly said, we are more anxious than hopeful. The change frightens us."

Emilia: "…Mm."

Villager: "However."

Emilia nods and edges on lowering her gaze, when the man's statement stops her.

The man straightens his posture before continuing, his expression tense.

Villager: "Everyone has heard Garfiel's…has heard the boy's voice." Emilia says nothing.

Villager: "We know what that trooper was thinking, and how he felt. And know the exchanges between him and that black-haired young man, and between yourself and Master Roswaal afterwards."

His back still straight, the man's expression twists.

Regretful, and near to tears. It sticks in Emilia's chest.

Villager: "I, sincerely speaking, thought it pathetic. That a fourteen-year-old boy was so worried for us, and that a child under twenty years old was howling at us like that. …And even though Master Roswaal stated that you could not do it, we listened to your words as well. And so, Lady Emilia."

Emilia: "—Yes."

Villager: "No matter what the results may be, and no matter what may occur after this, I believe your effort to challenge the T RIAL incredible. Venerable. Not all of us share that sentiment, and not even I have entirely accepted you yet. But I request that we may witness it to completion."

Witness what? No need to ask.

Bathed in his wilful gaze, Emilia looks at those behind him—the crowd of people who are accepting him as their representative—and nods.

Emilia: “Understood. I’ll be sure to end everything safely…and you’ll listen to what I have to say.”

Villager: “Yes. That is a promise. And to think of judging someone off hearsay, without ever interacting with them…we’re the last people who should be doing that, huh. —Wahgh!”

The man slumps his shoulders. When Ryuzu pinches his hip from behind.

The man springs up and turns around in objections, but Ryuzu just snorts a laugh.

Ryuzu: “Yer sure went on a while, sure are serious, aren’t yer. And yer fell back int’er talking casual halfway through. ‘Cause yer ain’t used ter doing this.”

Villager: “…M-My apologies.”

Ryuzu: “Anyway, there’s what we’re thinking. Apologies fer the meddler.”

With that charming little exchange, Ryuzu gets the man to stand down.

Emilia takes a deep breath, something other than oxygen puffing up her chest.

Ryuzu is giving her graces, and the people of the Sanctuary have come to see her efforts through. Who could estimate how greatly it reassured her?

Emilia: “Thank you, Miss Ryuzu. Now, I know I can try sooo hard.”

Ryuzu: “I see, I see. Well, good. …Next one should be the last Trial.”

Emilia: “Yes, it is. —I’m going to challenge it right away.”

With the strength they've given her, Emilia turns around to face the tomb.

But halfway through her turn she freezes, remembering something, and glances back to Ryuzu.

Emilia: "Ah, oh…actually, Miss Ryuzu, have you seen Ram? I'd like to tell her that I finished the second Trial, but…"

Ryuzu: "…Ram's left here ter attend ter some business. But she she's praying yer good luck. 'You have your tasks, and I have mine. Let us see them both achieved.'."

It sounds like Ram, and even though she knows it's just a report, it makes her want to give a wry smile.

Ram's task—where, and with whom, will she achieve it?

Emilia feels something astir in her chest, but she consciously suppresses it.

Ram is believing in her. And so, she will believe in Ram.

Just how Subaru and the others made a path for her, she wants to proceed from their efforts and make a path as well.

Emilia: "I'm going."

Ryuzu nods in reply, and the villagers's jabbering sees her off.

Filled with even stronger resolve than the first or second times, Emilia steps into the tomb.

Where—,

"Face the impending calamity."

The final Trial, approaches—.

3

Ram feels how her heartbeat grows a touch distant in her chest.

She has never been bathed in such hostility from this person ever before.

Physical contact with him, exchanging words with him, being ordered by him.

Those things were the epitome in joy for Ram, and her meaning in life.

And so the fact that she feels girlish elation—even when when he regards her with hostility—overjoys her.

???: “…Hoooooooow dare you show yoooooourself here.”

Mutters the tall man opposite Ram, glaring at her.

His tantalizing voice makes a sweet ache run through her brain.

Just by having his heterochromatic gaze on her, everything below her waist feels like it could shatter.

Although, this is naturally not the time to display such weak and girly things.

A woman like that would merely be deemed useless and discarded.

???: “Noooooooow then, what could you have cooooooooome here for?”

Ram: “—That is simple.”

She replies as usual, her face expressionless and manner tranquil.

With her pink hair swaying, Ram draws her wand from beneath her skirt, before pointing it at the beauty before her—pointing it at her dearly respected master,

Ram: “I have come to snatch you away from your witch delusions.”

And confesses that she is here to burn her loved one, consumed by an insane love, with her own.

Chapter 125B:
Starting as Revenge

1

The wind rages.

A single, strong gust whips violently at their hair and clothes as they face each other.

The setting is the outskirts of the Sanctuary, near the hidden house where young Garfiel and Frederica lived, in an unpopulated and unremarkable meadow.

There are no residencies anywhere near here, and even if there were, nobody would possibly pass by at this juncture. All of the people of the Sanctuary should be busy waiting for Emilia's Trial results.

To cheer Emilia on, and for Ram to exploit to clear out the crowd.

Roswaal: "Delusion, yooooooooou say."

Ram does feel somewhat guilty about using Emilia like this, but refocuses her attention as she sees Roswaal's lips relax into a smile.

Roswaal sweeps his long, navy hair down his back, then closes one eye and glares at Ram with the yellow.

Roswaal: "When you are the one saying it, aware of my feelings and my goals, it's quiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiite the sad thing to hear."

Ram: "I have have simply kept silent, but always thought so. As I naturally would."

Roswaal: "Natural…weeeeeeeeeell, I dooooooooo suppose so. From your perspective, it was a life of prolonged prostration and disgrace."

Ram: "…"

Ram responds to Roswaal's shrug by lowering her gaze.

She more or less understands what he's trying to say. Of course she would. Ram has always been paying attention to Roswaal. She understands to a painful extent how he, recipient of her love and loyalty, would perceive her allegiance to him.

Roswaal: "So, the first thing you do once unfettered from the Contract is stray froooooom my plans. That would be what you did in supporting Subaru and aiding in subjugating Garfiel, correct?"

Ram: "It had carried dual meanings, both for my objectives and to rectify Garf's idiocy. …Were I not there, I suspect that they wouldn't have managed anything."

Roswaal: "It does feel that everything worked out 'in the end'. Subaru makes some rather thoughtless bets, when so many precious things are involved and at stake. …I would never even think to make such an idiotic gamble for my precious one."

It's something of a sermon: cynical about Subaru's decision, and insistent that his own ideas are the rational ones.

And honestly, there is nothing about Roswaal's statement that Ram can refute. Many of Subaru's actions were utterly unplanned and haphazard. He had the luck of Heaven on his side for the whole

Garfiel affair, including how Ram participated in it.

Ram's opinion of Subaru being a man of only good timing hasn't changed at all.

Should you focus only on the question of achieving a goal, then Roswaal's ideas are far superior.

Provided that the gospel can be trusted.

Ram: "Won't make gambles…because what came of prioritizing accuracy was the gospel."

Roswaal: "Eeeeeeeeexactly. Although you seemed not to trust it, and have aaaaaaaaaalways been adverse to it. Again, inevitable.

You've been praying for its writ to divert at any point that it possibly could."

Ram: "…I will not deny that."

Cannot deny that.

Ram truly was adverse to the gospel. But there's a huge discrepancy between Roswaal's conception and Ram's real motives as to why.

And it racked Ram with a sorrow that she never let show on her face.

Roswaal: "Do you remember? The Contract that we formed, with the gospel as our intermediary?"

Ram: "—That, provided that history is moving as stated in your gospel, I wager my life to serve you. In exchange."

Roswaal: "Should time proceed down a path diverged from the gospel's writ, my goals face a standstill. Should I lose sight of my goals, my life loses all meaning. You are permitted to do whatever you wish with my husk."

Ram: "Your life or death rests upon me."

Roswaal: "That waaaaaaaaas the Contract."

With that, Roswaal draws a black book from his breast pocket.

He cradles the thick tomb close, stroking its cover as he gives a sigh.

Roswaal: "It must have been truly long and painful for you."

Ram: "…"

Roswaal: "After all…you had to spend your life swearing reluctant loyalty to a man partly responsible for the destruction of your birthplace. Contrary to your prayers, your heart delights when with me…it must have been agony. My deepest apologies for being so aaaaaaaaapathetic."

Roswaal spins spiteful words to wound Ram.

Partly responsible for the destruction of your birthplace. Hearing that sentence, pain and memories of her hometown, and family, in flames pass through her chest.

The ONI have a low population even for demi-humans, but in exchange, possesses incredible strength.

Ram's race had gathered up their scant numbers and established a village deep in the mountains, then were exterminated overnight between fire and knives, leaving Ram and □□□ as the only survivors.

She had formed the Contract with Roswaal the morning after the fire, as she gazed dazedly over the scorched village.

Ram accepted the Contract for the sake of survival.

Without □□□ ever knowing anything, and equally without Ram ever telling □□□ anything.

Ram: "—?"

Feeling an inexplicable sense of awryness and a faint aching in her head, Ram furrows her brows. She feels that there is an unnatural vacuum somewhere in her memories. That there's something that has to be there, but it's being obfuscated by a network of lies, telling her that no such thing existed. Even though Ram's memories make no sense without it—.

Roswaal: "The despicable longing within you, and the lust for revenge that your true heart fostered.

Even with these contrary desires squabbling within you, you proved a truly eeeeeeeeexcellent pawn.

Just how extensively have I used you, with your obedient conformity to the gospel?"

While Ram searches her memories to try and find what is off, Roswaal continues his speech. This isn't the time for this, she thinks as she aborts her search for the vacuum and faces Roswaal, who speaks sweetly as he praises her loyalty.

But the glances he sends Ram begin to adopt another kind of sentiment.

Roswaal: “But who wooooooooould have thought that you’d betray me and ally with Subaru. Do you comprehend how much grief I have suffered because of this?”

Ram: “…I have not defied the terms of our Contract. Should the world proceed on a course differing from the gospel, I will adhere not to your words, but to my own heart. The Contract…should I have disobeyed it, then I would not have escaped unharmed.”

Putting her hand to her chest, Ram asserts the legitimacy of her actions.

This Contract between Ram and Roswaal was, naturally, not any simple spoken-word promise. Spells are engraved on both of their souls, and they will suffer more than appropriate penalty should they defy the terms. Since this has not happened, Ram’s heart has not defied the Contract.

But Roswaal gives a big shake of his head.

Roswaal: “Thaaaaaaaat is what I’m referring to. Considering that you have not been punished for disobeying the Contract in this situation…your soul believes without the slightest of doubt that you are adhering to the Contract. And I must find that a terribly unfortunate judgement.”

Ram: “What might you mean?”

Roswaal: “It’s simple. —The gospel’s writ has not diverged yet. The Contract between you and I truly reaches its terminus further from now, in the future.”

Asserts Roswaal, his voice low as he looks Ram in the eye.

The statement makes even expressionless Ram’s cheeks tense. What she is hearing differs greatly from what the Contract’s spell acknowledged.

Even with all these conditions in place, Roswaal's stubborn heart is not surrendering in the least.

Ram: "The writ has not diverged? Barusu will not challenge the tomb to liberate the Sanctuary, and Lady Emilia is not doing anything to bring about snowfall. How could you state that the writ has not diverged in this situation, Master Roswaal…has something happened?"

Roswaal: "Nothing at all, it's theeeeeee same as ever. While, true, neither of the things I stated have come into fruition…they still may yet."

Ram: "That will not happen. Barusu has left the Sanctuary, and Lady Emilia is defeating the Trials. To then state that matters will resolve to fit the writ…is this the floundering of an obstinate child?"

Roswaal: "I am quite a mature adult and so can deny being an obstinate child, but I can't deny that I am floundering. Iiiiiiiiiiinded, here is my useless floundering. —An endless, over four-century long, peeeeeeeeeerpetual stretch of floundering."

Changing his course, Roswaal asserts that his own actions are 'floundering'.

The clown laughs from the back of his throat, his expression twisted in insane elation as he slaps his knees, praising the perfection of it all.

Roswaal: "Floundering, exactly, it's floundering! There is the punchline! Is there any word to more accurately describe this obsession of mine? Noooooooope, there isn't! Floundering… floundering…ahhaaaaa, wonderful. It had never even occurred to me."

Ram: "Master Roswaal!"

Roswaal: "A man floundering in dependent obsession, and a servant whose lust for revenge against a madman has morphed into loyalty to him. Our circumstances are truuuuuuuly crooked and comedic. Hoooooooowever, calling my actions floundering will do nothing to change my intentions. You have acted prematurely."

Roswaal's insane smile disappears as he presents the gospel to Ram, so that she can see it.

Roswaal: "No matter what you may believe, the Contract remains unchanged. Until she overcomes the tomb's Trials, nothing has diverged from the writ that Natsuki Subaru will liberate the Sanctuary. And even should she not bring snowfall, no deviation will come to the writ provided that I bring snowfall."

Ram: "…"

Roswaal: "You may appeal to the terms of the Contract, but I also act in equal compliance. And so we sit upon parallels. The time has not come yet for you to enact your revenge."

Roswaal lightly tosses the book, catching it in his other hand before stashing it in his breast pocket.

Flickering flames arise atop his outstretched right arm.

Roswaal shows off how the flames change color from red, to blue, to green, narrowing his eyes.

Roswaal: "You are still subject to the terms of your employment. You have acted impertinently as my servant and so face punishment. If you had truly believed that the world diverged from the gospel, then all you had to do was wait for two more days. I would have presented myself to you without resistance. …Hastiness serves well for nothing."

Roswaal shakes his head in lamentation.

Roswaal: "Although."

Roswaal: "I do understand your desire to destroy me as soon as conceivably possible."

Ram: "…So you truly do understand nothing."

Roswaal: “—?”

Ram closes her eyes, murmuring feebly in reply to Roswaal’s cynical smile.

Beneath her eyelids there rests a wave of complex emotion, never to show on her face. By closing her eyes, Ram can see her own way of life, which she pledged to never show to anybody. She raises her head. Mana converges at the tip of her wand, poised this entire time.

Ram: “There is no meaning in having you should it be after the Contract is fulfilled. After you’ve been destroyed, there is no meaning at all.”

Roswaal: “—Come.”

Ram: “As you wish.”

—Flames of vibrant hue crash into invisible blades of wind.

With waves of heat surging through their Sanctuary, the Oni and the warlock begin their crooked dance.

2

Emilia perceives the exact instant that the Trial starts.

Her five senses vanish, and she forfeits the general concept of ‘having a body’.

Her sensory organs depart from her control, leaving her as only a mind floating helplessly in space —which is what she is right now, only a soul.

This one obviously differs in nature from the previous Trials.

Emilia: “…”

She can’t speak.

She has no mouth. No eyes either, but strangely enough, she can perceive the world.

Or no. You could say that she perceives the world, but it’s not such a coherent thing yet that you could confidently call it a ‘world’.

Emilia’s consciousness floats in a void of darkness.

She can regardless recognize her own self because of the many lights speckling this dark.

The dim lights come in many colors, splayed about in considerable number.

They resemble the glow of a minor spirit, but they give a decisively different vibe from the living spirits.

They may resemble minor spirits, but their light more closely matches that from a magic stone. Regardless, being that these surrounding lights have scattered around to circle Emilia, she feels that she will not lose sight of the world.

Emilia: “…”

Surrounded by lights, and relieved that she has not been left alone, Emilia starts feeling progressively confused about the utter lack of happenings here.

The dim lights simply float there in their positions, not doing anything at all. Echidna has been showing up at the start of these Trials to explain what has been going on, but this time she isn’t there to act as a guide.

Time simply passes on by—though Emilia cannot tell what the time disparity is between the inside and outside of the tomb, she knows that doing nothing will lead to nothing.

Emilia: “—?”

I have to do something, thinks Emilia, and a change occurs.

Emilia’s consciousness, formerly fixed in place and immobile, transfers over to another spot—close enough to the lights that she could probably touch them.

She has no body, but she can touch light. It's a weird sensation.

But she has no other way to express it. If she did, then she might simply be invisible to herself and instead have a body constructed of primal magic—she may just be od.

If her od is what holds her consciousness and soul, then that does somewhat explain her current condition.

Reaching some amount of agreement, Emilia thinks to validate her ideas by heading for one of the lights.

There have to be more than twenty of these scattered lights. With no particular reason for it, Emilia reaches out for the light that glows a dim silver.

And the instant her od touches the light—she sees it.

???: "Hate, hate, absolutely hate you. Me, I loathe you. I really do. All of it, entirely true. Ever since we first met…I've downright hated you."

Emilia: "—?!"

Immediately following the voice, a vivid scene slips into Emilia's perception.

Beneath an overwhelmingly giant sun, in a burnt field, standing beside a massive and dilapidated building, bathed in crimson sunlight, is a girl with blood wetting her silver hair—Emilia.

It's her fully-grown self, who she has just witnessed in the second Trial.

And she looks woeful as she stands before the ruin, assaulting someone with her words.

Emilia: "I've had the thought countless times, and denied it countless times, but…yes, a nightmare really did catch up to me. And so I'll say it."

Emilia: “…”

Emilia: “Maybe we really shouldn’t have met after all.”

A tear streams down from the corner of her amethyst eye.

It trails down to her cheek, falls from her chin, and the instant before it strikes the ground, the world bursts into nothing.

Emilia: “…”

Swallow her breath. As just an od, she’s incapable of something so dexterous.

All Emilia can do is accept the scene she just witnessed.

What was that light? What was this scene?

That had definitely been Emilia, but she doesn’t remember this at all. Or perhaps that had been an impossible scene, like the one in the second Trial.

Emilia: “…”

It’s not, thinks Emilia.

She calms her chaotic mind, searches through her memory, and remembers.

The words she heard in the tomb when entering the third Trial.

“First face your past” “Witness the uncomeatable present.”

And now the third one. Yes, it was:

“Face the impending calamity”.

Impending calamity. So, the future?

She had seen the past and a present, and for the finish, here’s the future.

So this is the baptism that the Trial shows those challenging these alternate worlds?

Which means that Emilia will eventually meet this future?

Where she is in such a dismal place, crying as she conveys her regret for meeting somebody?

Emilia: "…"

Emilia uses her feelings of denial to dispel her unease, recovering a superficial level of calm.

But, once her mind registers the darkness again, another change occurs.

The silver light that Emilia's od had just touched disappears.

A vacuum fills the space that the light once occupied, the thing now missing. Emilia is puzzled by this, but promptly realizes what it means.

If each of these lights represents a future, then Emilia needs to touch every one of these futures before she will be freed.

—If this is a Trial, then she will have to make some kind of choice after she's seen all the futures.

If Echidna is waiting anywhere, then she'll be waiting there.

Meaning: Emilia must witness over twenty futures.

Emilia: "…"

Will they be differing futures, or all fragments of the same future she just saw?

While feeling her non-existent heart wilting, Emilia reaches for the neighboring light.

This one is blue, reminiscent of something vast and deep, like an ocean—.

???: "You're absolutely right. They were our enemy, and the wound was deep. If we withdrew here, being that neither of us can heal, maybe we wouldn’t have managed any rescue.”

???: “In that case…”

???: “But they were just a kid. —And isn’t that enough?”

Again, the scene changes.

Now she witnesses a thick forest, with two people standing at the edge of a sheer cliff.

She can’t see their faces. But she knows both of their voices.

One is very familiar, and thought the other one isn’t, she does remember it.

The two are facing off before the cliff, one of them kneeling, the other looking down at the kneeling party. Both of them look horribly morose, Emilia feels.

???: “You…you are a hero. A hero’s…all, you can ever be!”

???: “I…”

???: “Why thank you so very much for your help!”

One silhouette reaches their hand out to the other, who turns their face away and imparts those cavalier words of gratitude.

This feels like a definite farewell between these two people.

A goodbye laced with only irreparable woe and disappointment.

The world begins to fade again, and Emilia’s consciousness returns to the dark space.

Emilia: “…”

Emilia had not been present in that scene at all.

She knew who the people in it were, but it feels awry that she herself was absent.

She's meant to be facing these lights while conceiving of them as futures.

So why on earth is it showing her futures where she is absent, or scenes that she will not be present for?

—Is she being shown how her decisions may affect the futures of those around her?

If so, then these scenes only present one possibility out of many.

It's telling her to witness how her decisions will impact those other than herself.

Emilia: "…"

The blue light vanishes as the silver light did.

Twenty lights still remain.

—Each one of them carries the weight of a choice.

Steeling herself for this, Emilia reaches out to see the outcome of her decisions through.

In the next future, and the future after that, Emilia's decisions await.

3

With a swish of her wand, she creates and unleashes a blade of wind.

Invisible and inaudible, the whirling blade closes in on its target's throat as an assassin.

Roswaal: "Is that all?"

But Roswaal easily evades the imperceptible attack by nimbly jumping away.

Of course he would. He is the head of the renowned Mathers family of sorcerers, a rare breed of magician proficient in all six classes of magic. For Roswaal L. Mathers, perceiving others' manipulation of mana is child's play. Even wind magic with its invisible blades is as visible to Roswaal as fire in the night.

Roswaal: “My turn.”

With a swing of Roswaal's arm, three fireballs of differing hue rain down upon Ram.

A red fire, a blue fire, and a green fire—all three of them pursue Ram when she leaps backward, quite annoying in how they tail her. She runs backwards, her breath slightly ragged, as she unleashes another spike of magic. The windblade strikes the three flames, which Ram thought would snuff them out, but instead they each react in differing ways.

Ram: “—?!”

The instant the red flame takes the hit, like taking a bath of oil, it combusts into a pillar of fire.

The blue flame is easily sliced to pieces by wind, its embers shooting out in all directions.

The green flame looks to be engulfed in wind, when it then absorbs the wind mana and changes its shape, morphing into a snake of green fire that slithers across the ground in pursuit of Ram.

The fire pillar blazes at Ram, who kicks off from a massive tree to avoid the blue flames, and then tumbles across the ground to dodge the green flame's fangs before again striking the fire-snake with her windblade.

The snake bursts into small flares, which scatter over the meadow to smolder.

Roswaal: “Oh my…that was only one exchange of magic, and yet you seem quite wounded.”

Ram: “Hahh…hauhh…”

Roswaal: “If you acted with belief that you could win, then I must say that your estimations are raaaaaaaaaather naive. Why yes, I am currently devoting a large allotment of magic to the algorithm to manipulate the weather. Hooooooooowever, I am not so careless to accordingly neglect what is aaaaaaaaaaat hand."

Roswaal tilts his head as he watches Ram, her shoulders heaving with every breath, and spreads flames to encircle them.

He creates the three hues of flame again, which take the form of giant fireballs in his hand before moving to revolve around him. Their numbers compound with every revolution, gaining speed. It only takes a few seconds before Roswaal is veiled in a vortex of chromatic fireballs.

Roswaal: "This is from one flame of each color. Ten flames of each type, for a total of thirty fireballs. You won't manage to dispose of them all with your current abilities."

Ram: "…"

Roswaal: "Although, were you intending to confront me while my combat strength was minimized, it was the epitome of foolishness to aid in the fight against Garfiel. My abilities may be diminished, but that means nothing when your abilities are diminished as well. I can tell from the mana overflowing from you. —You transformed, didn't you."

Asks Roswaal, his voice low. Ram settles her breathing and answers only with a glance.

Perhaps having expected no reply, Roswaal shrugs.

Roswaal: "Of course you would turn out like this, should you transform without my aid. You may challenge me with only the slightest of mana, but you'll approach your limit within a minute of fighting. If we view this in terms of you expending your best efforts for the sake of your goal, it's an affront to the eyes."

Ram: "An affront…to the eyes, you say."

Roswaal: "Iiiiiiiiiiindeed, an affront to the eyes. You did state this before. When I said that you needed only wait two days to see if the world had utterly diverged from the gospel, you stated that would be pointless. I had been wondering what you meant at first…but I've contemplated it, and come to a solution."

Her breathing is calming down, but neither her stamina nor magic is replenishing. Roswaal knows this, and so he is holding off on attacking Ram to have this conversation.

It's another story if she starts being an obstacle, but Roswaal doesn't intend to kill Ram.

And Ram has to feel that this complacency of his is an insult.

Roswaal: "If we take your goal to be revenge, then the answer is simple. You may brutalize me when I am a cripple, but that will not appease you. That is the only reason I can conceive that you would abandon your chance for definite revenge by challenging me now. It is only when you slay me, partway through my own goals, that you will achieve revenge."

Ram: "…"

Roswaal: "That was partly my mistake for pressuring you into a choice at a critical moment when you were still young. It may have panicked you, after time passed and you realized thaaaaaaat fact. And so you've run amok to ensure the opportunity does not escape you. …Though, you can see how that turned out."

Ram: "—auh."

A sound slips from Ram's throat.

A hoarse, breathy sigh.

Roswaal's odd-colored eyes fixate on Ram, making sure not to miss a single one of her actions.

With that gaze upon her, Ram thinks back on everything she's done for the last half of her life.

Although she always knew it, recognizing it again, after all this time, does prick her.

Feeling the pain, Ram opens her mouth.

Wide, so wide, as she looks up at the sky—

Ram: “Ahahahahaahahahaha!”

Roswaal: “—Ram?”

They’re mirroring each other.

As she thinks of how Roswaal chortled earlier, the thrill only escalates inside her.

Her reasoning is entirely different to Roswaal’s, but yes indeed this is amusing. She has to laugh.

And of course she would. Because, in the end.

Ram: “After all the interactions, after all of that contact, you still haven’t realized how the other party feels.”

He’s dim, he’s insensitive, no, it’s something on an entirely different level.

He’s stubborn. He is fixated. He has determined that this would never happen, and so not moved an inch.

To him, it’s inconceivable that the passage of time would see feelings that started as revenge transform into yearning.

Ram: “I have been by your side…because of the Contract.”

Roswaal: “Yes, indeed you have. In that smoldering village, you and I formed a Contract of vassalage. I still remember how, even without your horn, your eyes blazed wet with fury. And so I sealed that away through the Contract, and redirected your vehemence into loyalty. Although, I did believe that a day like this would someday come…”

Ram: “You’re right. You were right. I wished to murder you. But you stole that opportunity from me, and I proceeded to spend my days in the mansion with this inexplicable loyalty…and.”

Roswaal: “Unfettered from the Contract, you have today determined to sate your desire for rev—”

Roswaal is lining up his theories. It’s hilarious.

It’s truly as if he pays no attention to anything except his own feelings, she thinks.

Ram: “Master Roswaal, I am in love with you.”

Roswaal: “…”

Ram: “I wound up falling in love with you. That is why there is no purpose in attaining you once you are broken. That is not the Master Roswaal who I desire.”

Roswaal’s eyes shoot open as his body freezes rigid.

He is stunned, as if he had truly, seriously not anticipated this in the slightest.

Karlasar

He promptly shakes his head, attempting to come up with words, but his lips merely quiver with nothing meaningful coming out of them.

Ram: “Is something the matter?”

Roswaal: “Of, course there…are you, mocking me? After all of this, mocking me? You recognized that your strength is too lacking, and so are attempting to shake me mentally, and…”

Ram: “How could I possibly believe that such wiles would work on you, Master Roswaal? I am simply stating what I truly feel.”

Roswaal: “That only makes it even less conceivable!” Yells Roswaal, stomping at the ground.

Reflecting his agitated mental state, the shroud of fireballs flies into disarray. They soon come to a halt, floating at various points around the surroundings as Roswaal glares at Ram.

Roswaal: “You love me? What on earth are you saying. You detest me. I’m a man you detest. I’m a man partially responsible for the destruction of your birthplace. You’re meant to hate me so much you’d like to murder me!”

Ram: “I did at first. But not now. Now, I love you.”

Roswaal: “This idiotic…! Who would, think such a cheap…!”

Feelings that started as revenge must proceed to be revenge.

Feelings that become yearning must only ever start as yearning.

Roswaal stubbornly believes that people’s desires and feelings cannot change.

And so he cannot believe that Ram has changed her mind so dramatically as to alter her way of life.

Roswaal: “What about your revenge! Did you not pledge for it! Did you not face your ashen village, and swear upon the souls of your dead brethren that you would accomplish revenge!”

Ram: “I do think it wrong toward my brethren, and it does pain my heart to think of my birthplace. However, I cannot change that I have fallen in love. I am prioritizing my own feelings over those of the dead.”

Roswaal: “—!”

Ram: “And you are not my direct foe, Master Roswaal. Should my lust for revenge obscure my vision, that would be the more shameful course. …Would be my excuse.”

Roswaal is utterly lost for words.

Understand the situation right now!! would probably be an unreasonable demand. Roswaal is a man who has gone for a very, very long time while sticking to his feelings.

Wholeheartedly, persistently devoting his love to one single person, doing everything he could to make his wishes come true.

His emotions, his heart, and his belief that things ought to be this way are far too strong.

And so he cannot understand feelings that change over time, or understand that strength.

There’s really nothing she can do about the fact that she finds even this aspect of him darling.

Ram: “I shall never allow you to become an invalid.”

Roswaal: “…You’re contradicting yourself. No matter what your feelings are—no, doubly so presuming that they’re exactly what you stated—I don’t understand why you are challenging me now. If the gospel diverges, then I lose my purpose in life and mentally suffer. You are aware of this, so why!”

Ram: “Because this is the moment. Barusu, Lady Emilia, Garf…now that all of them have brought your heart close to wavering, I face my single and only moment of opportunity.”

So long as the Contract persists between Roswaal and Ram, Ram cannot defy Roswaal. That Ram is currently disobeying Roswaal is because her soul has judged that she is unfettered from the Contract, as Roswaal pointed out.

But is she truly? If one party believes that they fit the conditions, then they are exempted as a target for the Contract. Does the system of ‘Contracts’ truly possess such a vague and loose set of judgement criteria?

And so Ram pleads.

That she is not the only one who believes that the requirement to disregard the Contract, the divergence of the world and the gospel, has been met. That some corner of Roswaal’s mind has registered the same thing.

That this situation has arisen accordingly.

Roswaal looks utterly confused as Ram turns to face him, holds her breath, and dashes forth.

She draws her wand, wringing out the dregs of mana she has to cast a spell.

Roswaal: “—! It’s useless!”

Ram’s actions lead Roswaal to dispel his turmoil and order his floating fireballs to strike and stall her. But not a single one of the fireballs hits her as she keeps low to the ground, their heat doing nothing more than singeing her skin.

Ram has fulfilled the criteria needed to follow the gospel’s future until now—and he cannot determine whether to discard her. The fact that he cannot perceive Ram’s designs also plays into it.

Perhaps he might even regret killing her.

If so, then that alone is enough to elate her so magnificently that she forgets her previous melancholy.

Ram: “—El, Fula!!”

She concentrates the powers of wind, invisible destruction detonating before her.

Roswaal has prepared himself in fighting posture, but he is not her target. She aims for the ground beneath it, rupturing it open and sending a great explosion of dirt to drown out his field of vision.

Roswaal: “Do you think this smokescreen will…!”

Ram: “—!”

One sweep of Roswaal’s arm shatters the momentary veil of dirt into pieces.

The barrier fades to nothing, and as she watches it, Ram gives a sharp exhale and concentrates power to her forehead.

Ram: “…auh, ghh.”

Agony. Her vision drowns in scarlet as bloody tears spill from her bloodshot eyes.

Her muscles, her bones, both of them creak as she hears the noise of her tendons ripping.

She ignores all of it, gritting her teeth so hard that she shatters them as she steps forth. The ground beneath her shatters, and in that instant, Ram has transcended the limits of mortals.

Roswaal has batted the screen of dirt away—and Ram soars at him faster than a nanosecond.

He notices Ram, but before his eyes can even shoot open, she moves. Her outstretched arm reaches for Roswaal’s torso, and he swallows his breath as he realizes that her hand is contacting his chest.

Transformation. Nothing else could have fostered this advance in Ram’s abilities.

Although it is only momentary, Ram's strength currently exceeds the limits of the human body.

Roswaal must realize that it was his blunder not to consider that she could shatter his ribcage and pop his heart.

However,

Roswaal: "—Wh, at?"

When the shock and pain fails to come, Roswaal can only blubber in astonishment.

In the blink of an eye, Ram has skidded to a stop about ten meters away from Roswaal. She faces down, and vomits blood as she falls to her knees.

Roswaal furrows his brows, unable to comprehend the purpose behind Ram's actions.

But once he sees what is in Ram's hands, his expression instantly shifts.

Roswaal: "That!"

Ram: "To, me…this is, the root of all evil."

His face pale, Roswaal moves to start sprinting over. Ram responds merely by glancing up before, without any hesitation of all, giving a swing of her arm.

—And the gospel in her hands goes flying into one of the smoldering green flames.

Roswaal: "—!"

Roswaal screeches mutely, but still the blaze consumes the gospel and bursts even hotter. Alongside a satisfying boom, the ancient book transforms into a pile of green ash. Ram watches on, as if she has been yearning to see this for a very long time,

Ram: "—Now, finally."

Ram sighs in satisfaction, her cheeks growing flush.

—The fireball thrown out of rage pierces through her petite frame in the very next instant.

Chapter 126B:
We’ll Next Meet at a Tea Party

1

—She views the future.

???: “—Gone without, you cannot even wield a sword. Thief!!”

???: “Witness. The victor remains I.”

???: “Subaru, big sister Emilia, I know you must be so tired. I’m sorry. But I’m going to wind up being a burden too. I’m sorry. All the thanks I’d wanted to say could never be enough…”

—With every colored light she touches, Emilia sees a different future.

???: “To think that someone I wanted to kill so much was actually a kind person, what an incredible nightmare.”

???: “There exist feelings which mustn’t be spoken. Does it satisfy you, now that they have come to light?”

???: “Does this make you feel that you’ve seen your promise through? If it does…if it does, then I was better off bound and dead in that cave! If I was going to see this dawn, then I should have just offed myself sooner…! Shit, shit!”

???: “God I’m sorry. I’m weak and so this. God I’m sorry. I couldn’t make the kill, god I’m sorry. Now □□□ will always be alone forever. God I’m sorry for being so weak…”

—Woe, ire, death, rebirth, farewells, meetings, the future comes to her in many forms.

???: “Yes…my dear grandchild…must’ve grown up well…”

???: “I shall never perish to such nonsense as a curse!”

???: “It’s simply that I realized something. …That along the path up to today, I haaaaaaaaaadn’t been walking alone.”

???: “How come…there’s no soul inside?!”

—Must the future be despair? Is there nothing but sorrow and suffering?

???: “Just ‘s promised, ‘m fuckin’ killin’ yer! Yeh?! NATSUKI SUBARUIIII!!”

???: “Am I being so covetous? Am I saying anhything so indulgent? Don’t anhybody die, don’t anhybody weep…what is so complikkated about it?”

???: “After all, we must bleed ourselves to our very last drop to atone, yes?”

???: “Right and wrong and good and evil’s all a bunch’ve bullshit. You’re stopping right there. Say it’s Dragon or say it’s Witch, if you’re blocking the way then I’m…then we’re, gonna smash you.”

—Then, was it wrong of her to choose this path? Was she mistaken to wish for any favors?

???: “—I believe that to pray for favors is hubris. Prayers are for when you seek forgiveness.”

—In the final world of light, a girl that Emilia has never seen awake and speaking talks.

I’d like to have a proper conversation with her, she thinks.

The sentiment proves more than enough for her deny the rejection of everything.

2

Emilia’s vision clears, and she realizes that she is in a breezy meadow.

A hillock with a white table. Emilia herself sits upon a white chair, unable to remember what happened only a few seconds ago. But she does know that she is in a dream world.

Emilia: “Echidna?”

If anyone is going to greet her at the end of the Trial, then it’s going to be the thing’s supervisor, Echidna. Emilia casts her gaze around in search of her.

But even though she can see this field stretch on to the horizon, she sights no shelters or anything indicating the presence of people. And should she leave the table to go walking around, she might lose the table and never find it again.

She’s definitely right here in this spot, but it strangely feels like she might fall off the horizon. Emilia takes deep breaths to calm herself down, and decides to start moving if nobody’s around. Perhaps there’s an exit somewhere. She’ll find that, and get out of here. She’s got nothing to gain by wasting time here.

???: “It’s been like this forever—haa—but why is it that these situations—huu—always wind up being my post—haa? I can’t say I’m thrilled with it.”

Emilia: “…auh.”

Seeing the ball of hair that suddenly appears across the table from her, Emilia freezes.

She stares at this thing before her in shock, still halfway into standing up.

And gulps.

???: “Mm…an understandable reaction—haa—and the correct one—huu. The kid from before must’ve been a tad obtuse—haa.”

Emilia: “…”

Every word out this person’s mouth comes mixed with a gloomy sigh.

She is a rather listless woman with overwhelmingly long magenta hair, wearing a black robe. Her comments are not thorny at all, and she looks relaxed as anything.

—But Emilia regardless feels a pressure so intense it's practically strangling her.

If this person felt like it, then Emilia's head would be vanished in an instant.

Emilia has regained her past, and can now manipulate such a vast quantity of mana that her body cannot contain it all. Even though she has gained a massive boost in her capabilities as a solo fighter, she feels that she has no chance against this woman.

She'd kill Emilia as easily as swatting a fly—and Emilia knows this.

Woman: "You don't need to be so wary—huu. I'm not looking to hurt you, or to get hurt—haa. Since that'd be a drag—huu. But Echidna just doesn't want to see you so she—haa—forced me here."

Emilia: "I-I, see…"

Emilia gives a timid nod.

The pressure wreathed around this woman shows no signs of letting up. Nothing has changed about her ability to easily decimate Emilia. But if nothing is going to change about the fact that the woman can kill Emilia whenever she wants, then that'll stay the same regardless of whether she's scared or not.

Emilia inhales, holds her breath, exhales. Doing this, she forces herself to calm down.

Emilia: "You're here in Echidna's place…so you're also a witch?"

Woman: "—I see—haa—so you're braver than I thought—huu. That you're not timid during the critical moments—haa—might be you taking after your mother—huu."

Emilia: "You know about my Mother?"

Woman: “I can’t tell you anything, but yes—haa.”

The unexpected relation makes Emilia gulp, but the woman looks utterly exhausted after making that comment. Emilia could try to probe into it, but she probably wouldn’t get anything.

Thinking to herself: Someday, Emilia decides to temporarily shelve the topic of her mother. She has seen her past, seen an impossible future, and now Fortuna and Geuse’s light remains shining in her heart.

For now, that’s more than enough.

Emilia: “What would you like me to call you?”

Woman: “It’s nice when children don’t throw tantrums—huu—I’d like Typhon to get a lesson from you—haa. My name’s Sekhmet—huu. As you’ve guessed, I’m the Witch of Sloth—haa.”

Sekhmet leans her body onto the table, looking up as she gives a faint smile.

The bags under her eyes and the unhealthy-looking pallor to her skin are something of a concern, but her features are attractive, and she is a beautiful woman. Still, the word ‘witch’ and the ghastly aura she emanates do indicate that she is definitely not anyone ordinary.

Sekhmet: “I really couldn’t—huu—care less about how our names as witches are treated in the present—haa—so that doesn’t matter—huu. I just want to get this request done with—haa—and settle down into self-indulgent slumber—huu.”

Emilia: “Erm, if it’s such a bother for you…could no one else have done it? Echidna doesn’t have to be the one if she doesn’t want to…but aren’t there any other witches?”

Sekhmet: “You’re not going to—haa—get a conversation out of anyone else—huu. Minerva’s the only one who could manage an actual conversation here—haa—and she can’t show her face to you—huu.”

Emilia: “Minerva…”

Sekhmet speaks with awful rhythm thanks to her pauses to sigh. But hearing that she offers a better conversation than the other witches makes Emilia terrified of imagining what the others are like. But even that sentiment is overpowered by the strong feelings Emilia has for the word ‘Minerva’.

Emilia: “Minerva…”

Mutters Emilia to herself as she tilts her head.

The word feels horribly nostalgic, something that would stimulate her memories. But that said, Emilia cannot remember hearing it in any of her memories up until now, or in any of her recovered memories either.

But it’s a mysterious name, that could evoke thoughts of someone very close to her.

Sekhmet: “No sense talking about someone who isn’t here—haa. Anyway, I’m just here to pass a message along from Echidna—huu. Then I’m leaving it up to you what ideas you come up with to end the Trial—haa. Pretty easy job for me—huu.”

Emilia: “Erm, thank you for your efforts…?”

Sekhmet: “I’ll pretend that worked—haa. Now, listen closely—huu.”

Sekhmet calls out to the brooding Emilia, and lies her head sideways upon the table. She gazes up at Emilia, and with a sigh, sets her right hand on the table too.

Sekhmet: “In the third Trial—haa—you would’ve seen the future—huu. Those futures are possibilities of what will happen—haa—in this future where you decide to overcome this tomb—huu.”

Emilia: “Possible, futures.”

Sekhmet: “There’s a chance they’ll all happen—haa—and a chance none’ll happen—huu. Though, considering Echidna’s personality—haa—even I can tell that the futures you saw weren’t the nicest ones

—huu.”

What do the other witches think of Echidna? At the very least, it seems like Sekhmet considers Echidna as someone mean. Emilia can’t exactly say much on that.

Sekhmet’s opinion of Echidna is actually a little worse than what Emilia figures, but it’s difficult to demand a worse appraisal than ‘mean witch’ from Emilia.

Sekhmet: “The future splits into infinite pathways, and so derives possibilities—haa. But the futures you saw were all seeds thick with tragedy—huu. After they sprout and bud, what blossoms will come of them…? Haa. Are you prepared to wilfully walk a path of poison blooms that may leave everyone unhappy…? Huu.”

Emilia: “…”

Keeping silent, Emilia gazes earnestly at Sekhmet.

Sekhmet looks fatigued after giving such a long speech. But she soon furrows her brows when she notices Emilia’s gaze.

Sekhmet: “…I’m pretty sure that I already gave you the question, haa.”

Emilia: “Huh, what? That was the question? I answer that, and the Trial ends?”

Sekhmet: “That’s what it’d be—huu. …Though, considering your goal, you could say that the Trial was over the instant that you managed to get here—haa.”

Sekhmet makes it sound like a free round. Emilia gives a wry grin.

Emilia doesn’t mean any ill. But the issue is just so banal it surprised her. After all, it’s obvious how Emilia would respond.

Emilia: “Worlds that end tragically for everybody. No, I’m not prepared to see those at all.”

She has to think of memories that rip at her chest, that claw at her heard.

In that world of darkness, amid those colored lights, Emilia heard their wails times upon times.

Emilia: “These are futures where everyone might meet a sad end. In the dark world before this, I saw a lot of them. Where everyone was crying, suffering, angry. I don’t know the details of what happened, but I don’t want to see a future like that.”

Sekhmet: “…But, I can assure that if you continue on the path you’re on—huu—it’s highly likely for such things to happen—haa. Is that going to make you flee? Huu.”

Emilia: “No. That’s going to make me face it.”

Sekhmet narrows her eyes as Emilia shakes her head and puffs out her chest.

The overwhelming pressure threatens to consume her, but Emilia’s spirit will not yeild.

If she comes close to losing heart, memories of her mother and father support her. If she comes close to giving up, she has someone who will encourage her to keep going.

Emilia: “We’ll sprint so fast we dodge the sad futures. But if that isn’t going to work, we’ll ride our momentum to soar over them. If people fall in the jump, we’ll put in our all and pull them back up. And if we keep doing this, we’ll wipe away every single tear.”

Sekhmet: “You sure sound confident for being so reckless—haa. When you merely talk about ideals and what’s convenient for you, you’ll break the instant that you slip up—huu. You don’t think that’ll happen? Haa.”

Emilia: “If I were alone, it might.”

Emilia responds fearlessly to Sekhmet’s mocking words.

In a sense, Emilia’s stance is one that means being dependant on others. But that is the option that Emilia has left, after never being able to choose a single thing for herself.

Sekhmet: "…"

And Sekhmet looks utterly floored.

She immediately looks down, the table and her hair concealing her expression. When,

Sekhmet: "Pff, khaah…haah, hahahaha! Ahh, yes! So that's it! Yes, that's it, that's definitely it, of course you'd give that answer now! Ahhh, hilarious!"

Emilia: "Is it really that funny?"

Sekhmet: "It's an absolute riot to me—haa. Okay? Huu. So, Echidna, right—haa. She's this terrible wacko even after her death—huu—who enjoys watching the Trial's challengers agonize over their pasts and presents and futures alone—haa. The idea that her plans would be destroyed, and like this…ahh, it's hilarious—huu."

Sekhmet laughs uproariously, taking pained breaths while speaking with cheer. She lifts her head and sits upright, leaning against the chair back to view Emilia from straight-on. Sekhmet's eyes host a nostalgic gleam as she smiles,

Sekhmet: "The Trial presumes that you're taking it alone—haa—and you answer it by saying that you won't face your challenges alone—huu. —If Echidna heard this, she'd moan sour grapes all day, all while looking dead serious—haa."

Emilia: "Oh. So that's the reply I could've got. …Mhm, I sooo want to see that expression on her too."

Sekhmet: "She's a terrible loser, so I doubt she'd let you see her looking like that—huu. That's a privilege reserved for us dream-dwellers—haa."

Emilia: "So unfair."

Emilia pouts, which just makes Sekhmet's expression more gleeful.

To an outside observer, the harmonious joy abounding from them might make them look like friends who have known each other for decades.

Sekhmet: “Though, in exchange for that, I’ll bestow you with your Trial results—haa. As you’d expect, there’s nothing to complain about—in fact, you pass with a gold star—huu.”

Emilia: “Should it really be that simple?”

Sekhmet: “Did you want a more oblique answer, or some dramatic spiel—haa? Apologies, but you’d be wrong to expect something like that from me—huu. I’m the supervisor right now, and my word goes—huu. …The Trial’s over without any issue—haa.”

With a deep breath, Sekhmet snaps her fingers. She fails to get a sound on the first attempt, or the second, but on the third try finally manages a click —and a breeze gusts from behind Emilia. Emilia glances behind her, her silver hair swaying, to find that a door has appeared at the bottom of the hill. It doesn’t look like it leads anywhere, but Emilia intuitively knows that this door is the dream world’s exit.

Emilia: “You mean…once I go through that door, the Trial’s over?”

Sekhmet: “That’s the one—haa. Congratulations—huu. In the four hundred years —haa—since this tomb was made and Echidna’s Trials came into operation, nobody had defeated these Trials—huu. Well, not that there was an abundance of challengers in the first place—haa.”

Emilia: “…Yeah. Not many people have been to the Sanctuary, and meeting the requirement to get trapped in the Sanctuary is actually surprisingly tough.”

Sekhmet: “There’s that too, but…well, it doesn’t really matter—huu. It’s all over anyway—haa.”

It does bother Emilia how Sekhmet starts getting vague, but she doesn’t pry into it. More importantly, she’s elated to hear that the Trial is over.

Honestly, she doesn't feel any sense of achievement yet. It hasn't hit her yet. She had struggled so much with the first Trial that she'd almost broken down, thinking this whole thing impossible.

She did feel that she came here resolved not to lose, but even so.

Sekhmet: "You don't look like you agree with it—huu."

Emilia: "Erm, well I am kinda bothered. Sooo just kinda bothered."

Sekhmet: "Echidna doesn't present problems that can't be solved—haa. It's incorrect to say that's the whole of it, but that's basically the whole of it—huu."

When it's one witch saying it about another, it's probably right.

Emilia nods reluctantly in a show of agreement. Sekhmet glances at her, examining her, before giving a small wave of her hand on the table.

Sekhmet: "Once you exit—haa—that door behind you, it's goodbye to this dream castle—huu. Which also means that's the end of the Trial—haa. And that you're qualified to enter the room—huu—in the back of the Trial chamber—haa."

Emilia: "Open, the door. Mm, right. And go in there…what's in there?"

Sekhmet: "The mechanism that keeps the tomb functioning is—huu. Once it's stopped—haa—the Sanctuary's duties will come to their end—huu. You'll how how to stop it once you go in—haa."

Emilia: "I stop the tomb's functions, and the Sanctuary's duties end. So the barrier disappears."

If the barrier is extinguished, then Emilia and the people of the Sanctuary will be able to exit the forest.

She doesn't know how many people will leave for the outside world once the barrier is opened. Or whether life on the outside will truly be to their benefit.

But they can’t stay closed up in here any longer.

Just like how Subaru argued Garfiel down, Emilia has to convince them. This is the end of a period spent in a place with stopped time.

Once time is moving again, how are they going to make a place for themselves to live? If possible, then Emilia wants to search for the answer with them.

She can guide them by the hand, give a push to their backs, and no matter how hard it is, she can walk at their side.

Though it’s an unreliable, shaky, and fledgling demonstration of leadership.

Sekhmet: “It’s enough.”

Says Sekhmet, as if she’s seen into Emilia’s thoughts.

That comment alone doesn’t come with any of her characteristic sighs. Sekhmet said it for her while looking her straight-on, and it makes Emilia gulp.

And smile.

Emilia: “Mhm, thank you. That’s how I want to go my way.”

With that, Emilia gets to her feet.

She brushes her hair into order, before bowing her head to Sekhmet.

She doesn’t really know why she’s doing it.

But it feels like simply saying a goodbye won’t be enough. Why is it that she feels so grateful? Sekhmet surely won’t tell her.

She pushes her seat in, and descends the hill on her way to the door.

The door feels emepheral as it stands there in the middle of the meadow, and Emilia realizes that she feels somewhat sad to be leaving the castle in a dream.

White table, crisp breeze. Bright sunshine, perfect weather.

It would be so fun to hold a tea party around that table.

Emilia: “Miss Sekhmet. Can you tell Echidna something for me?”

Sekhmet: “…Let’s hear it—haa.”

Emilia: “If we ever get the chance to see each other again, let’s have a tea party. Even if I’m doing it in a dream, I’ll definitely welcome it.”

Sekhmet: “—No problem at all. I’ll tell her.”

Her hand on the doorknob, Emilia glances back to address Sekhmet, who smiles.

Emilia returns the smile, and opens the door.

Beyond the door is darkness.

But for some reason, she feels no hesitation about stepping into it. Emilia already know exactly where it leads.

She has overcome her past, chosen her present, and now meets a door to the future.

3

—Feeling somewhat suffocated, Emilia sits up on the hard ground.

Coming back from the Trial isn’t the same as waking up from sleep.

It’s not that her body fell into slumber, but that her consciousness was taken from her body led somewhere else. Her body and soul were in different places, and seeing that her soul wasn’t sleeping, of course it’s different from sleep.

If this were the same kind of thing as normal sleep, then considering that Emilia is rather bad at waking up, quite a lot of time would pass until she was really awake. Puck would be the one to wake her up before, but he isn't here now, and so it would've eaten considerable time. And now she will need to learn how to deal with this on her own, for the future.

Emilia: "—Ah, gotta stop."

Emilia shakes her head to dispel her sleepy thoughts, and puts her hand to the wall as she gets to her feet. She feels pretty much fine. It still doesn't feel like she's overcome the Trials. But if what Sekhmet told her in the dream was true—

Emilia: "I should be able to open the door."

She looks to the back of the chamber, sighting the stone door across the small room.

The door hadn't moved an inch when she pushed or pulled it before, and just like how the tomb's walls glimmer slightly to Emilia's vision, this door also looks to be cloaked in light.

Unlocked. Might be what it means.

Emilia's footsteps peal as she approaches the door. As she stands before it, she holds her breath for a moment.

On the other side of this door will be something that liberates the Sanctuary.

Sekhmet said she'd know what to do, but honestly Emilia's a little worried that she won't. Emilia isn't exactly confident about her smarts.

Is she not allowed to bring anyone along with her? Though, alongside the fact that not many people can get this far inside, she gets a feeling that the door won't open if anyone else is around.

Perhaps this is all happening because of how smoothly it all went: Emilia cannot erase her paranoia about this door.

Perhaps it's all a deception, she wonders. You could that being warier than before, but it's a wariness limited to things connected to Echidna. A sense of caution she gets because she knows the personality of the person who set this up.

Emilia: “Anyway, have to go in. Okay, here I go.”

She balls her hands into fists to psych herself up, and moves to put her hand to the door. Should she push or pull? While she considers the issue, and just as her fingertips graze the door—

—The stone door slides sideways to make a path for Emilia.

Emilia: “…I feel like Echidna’s smiling so nastily right now.”

Mutters Emilia, pouting at her spoiled start.

Emilia gets the feeling that this door’s gimmick is some very elaborate pestering from Echidna, which slightly calms her tension.

She gives a sigh, gets herself back in the mood, and steps into the room.

The door opens into a room less than half the size of the Trial chamber.

It’s smaller than a room that’s already small. Just two beds from the Roswaal Mansion would be enough to occupy all the space.

She hadn’t expected the room to be this cramped. Her eyes widen at how constrained it is, before she spots the thing in the back of the room and puts her hand to her mouth in shock.

—In the back of the room is something like a transparent coffin, with a woman lying inside.

Her time is frozen, keeping her so beautiful that you could wonder if she was only sleeping.

The coffin looks to be made out of magic stone, and when Emilia touches it to examine its purity, she is shocked at how superior it is. Such high-grade crystal would excel even Puck’s old anchor.

A woman is sealed in magic stone capable of sealing things superior to the Great Spirit Puck. —Of course, she isn’t breathing. Emilia feels no life from her, and what remains is a husk.

Her long, sleek hair is white as frost. Her cheeks and neck, what areas of skin are visible, possess the beauty of virgin snow. Emilia's breathing near hitches before her stunning visage.

Her beautiful form is garbed in perfectly black raiment, with not a single superfluous color present, the dress-like vestment crafted to her in miraculous concord.

A beautiful woman who can be described with the two hues 'white' and 'black'.

True beauty—the utter lack of need for any superfluous accessories—would probably feel terror when faced with this black and white countenance.

Emilia: "She's beautiful…"

Emilia's thoughts escape her lips.

Emilia would find another strikingly beautiful woman if she looked in the mirror, but her sentiments have nothing to do with that.

She is simply so enraptured by the beauty of this thing before her that she is absolutely moved.

A beautiful woman of black and white.

That would be someone she met in the castle of dreams, the Witch of Greed.

In the depths of the tomb, waiting there beyond the defeat of the Witch of Greed's trials is,

Emilia: "She looks like Echidna…but who is she?"

A woman reminiscent of the Thirst for Knowledge Incarnate, but who Emilia has never seen before.

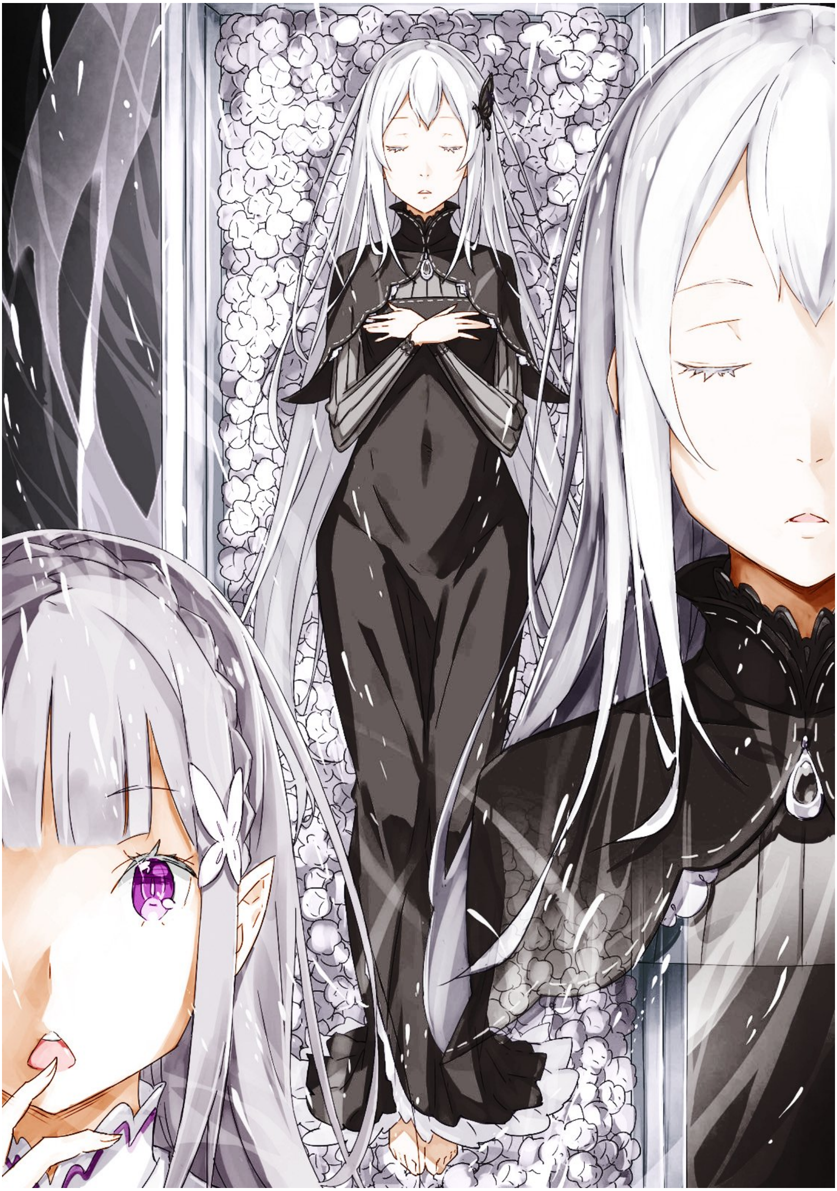

Chapter 127B:
Never Quit

1

The only observable thing in this room is the white woman in the coffin.

Emilia: “Then, this thing she’s entombed in…is the mechanism to turn off the barrier?”

Says Emilia after looking over the room, looking perplexed with her head tilted.

There are no nice and obvious levers, or magic stones you just have to crush. A dim glow shrouds the transparent magic stone encasing her, and Emilia can tell that it is siphoning mana. The only functioning thing in this place is this coffin.

Emilia: “Seriously, who is she…maybe Echidna’s mother?”

Emilia thinks back on the witch who always looked so disgusted around Emilia.

She also had white hair and wore black clothes, like the woman in the coffin, and Emilia remembers vividly how attractive her features were as well.

The visage of the witch in her memories and of the woman in the coffin have many points in common.

Like the positioning of her closed eyes, or the shape of the bridge from her lips to her nose.

Echidna had looked like a late teen, while the woman in the coffin is more in her early twenties.

Perhaps it’s better to think her Echidna’s older sister than her mother.

Emilia: "And…there's no name. But this is supposed to be Echidna's tomb."

Except Emilia goes in, to find that the woman in the coffin is not Echidna.

Perhaps the tomb's name was a deception, or—

Emilia: "Maybe this is Echidna, and the girl I saw in the dream wasn't Echidna?"

It's a crazy theory, and even Emilia has to shake her head.

Leaving aside whatever Echinda would say, Sekhmet surely would have mentioned something. And now it's too late for Emilia to simply regard anyone else as being 'Echidna'.

Emilia: "It's Echidna's tomb, but someone else is sleeping here… might be what's happening." If so, then they better change the name of the tomb.

It says that ECHIDNA RESTS HERE. But it's someone else's place of slumber, which causes lots of problems. Offerings will be going to the wrong person, among other things.

It's not the most clear-cut of conclusions, but still Emilia reaches it as she inspects the coffin, taking care not to touch the thing.

She glances over the flow of mana. It appears that the coffin and the tomb are absorbing minuscule amounts of mana from the earth linked to the tomb, and are using that mana to power some kind of algorithm.

It's an infinitesimal load of mana it's absorbing, but it's still powering as something as huge as the barrier, indicating that it's gathering the mana from quite a large area.

'Earth linked to the tomb' had been a literal statement.

The entire breadth of the forest inside the barrier is probably the tomb's power source. And the tomb takes tiny loads of mana at a time so that it won't affect that power source.

Emilia: “It’s amazing…so amazing, that I have no idea what it’s doing…” The algorithm is siphoning a flow of mana, powering the magical faculties.

Emilia can write simpler algorithms, but the complexity of the algorithm for the barrier around the Sanctuary far exceeds her comprehension.

If she stops these processes, she doubts that they will ever restart.

Not that there’s any need to restart them.

Emilia: “There. If I cut off this flow, that will probably sever the supply.”

Emilia follows the flow of mana and locates the origin point for the barrier, which uses the coffin as its nucleus.

Inside the tomb, where the woman’s hands are folded atop her stomach—is the exact point into which the mana flows. If Emilia meddles with the mana there to disrupt the algorithm, then that will terminate all of this tomb’s faculties.

Emilia: “…”

For a moment, she hesitates.

Terminating the tomb’s faculties will probably damage the mechanism that starts the Trial. Which means that she’ll no longer be able to enter the castle of dreams.

—She will probably never get to have that tea party with Echidna.

The witches, or at least Sekhmet, know about Emilia’s mother.

She had felt both awe and nostalgia for Sekhmet’s overwhelming power. She wants to know what exactly that sense of familiarity signifies.

If she cannot enter the castle of dreams, she is furthering herself from that goal. And that—

Emilia: “—I just can’t let go, can I?”

With that mutter, Emilia disrupts the weak flow of mana transmitting from the coffin to her fingertips.

A shift occurs in the power that supports the Sanctuary’s faculties and comprises its barrier. It meddles with the critical parts of the algorithm, compounding from a small into a massive alteration.

The glow eventually melts away, all signs of the algorithm vanishing from the magic stone coffin. All that remains after one last flash of light is the pure magic stone, with the woman still sealed inside.

Emilia: “…I guess that’s the end.”

Having observed no visible changes, Emilia timidly looks around the area. The flow of mana previously circling through the tomb is gone, leaving the tomb as nothing more than massive stone building.

With a quiet sigh, Emilia leans against the coffin.

The tomb has probably stopped rejecting the unqualified now. Emilia ought to bring Roswaal or Ryuzu inside, being that they probably know what’s going on, and ask them who the person slumbering here is.

Emilia: “It’s over…yes, it’s over…”

By repeating the statement over and over, Emilia attempts to catch the truth that she is not feeling.

She thinks back on the lofty talk she gave to Roswaal before challenging the tomb.

Roswaal had told her: All you have to do is procure the results you desire.

Emilia couldn’t suppose what his sentiment had been, but she doubted that he wanted her to beat the Trial. Though, he was also the one who beckoned her here and was endorsing her as a

Selection Candidate, leaving her befuddled as to his reasoning.

Emilia: “Teacher…is what he said, right?”

What she also recalls is this person who Roswaal called TEACHER.

Even someone at the pinnacle of magicianhood like Roswaal would, naturally, have had a master.

Roswaal’s master, that being this person called TEACHER, had started the Sanctuary with him.

Emilia: “And maybe…that was you.”

Thinks Emilia as she strokes the coffin.

If Roswaal had his Teacher, someone irreplaceable to him, then perhaps this white woman would suitably be it.

Emilia: “—I need to talk to everyone.”

Emilia shakes her head and pulls her gaze away from the coffin.

Though, she will have to postpone the talk about the entombed woman. According to Subaru, if they fail to exit the Sanctuary before tomorrow night—that is, dawn of the day after next—then something terrible is going to happen.

If anything obviously out of the ordinary happens in the Sanctuary, run away as fast as you can, he said.

Though she has a whole day of extra time, she doesn’t know whether any unforeseen circumstances are going to pop up.

She trots out of the room and into the hallway, making her way to the exit. If things are still the same, then Ryuzu and the people of the Sanctuary should be waiting for her outside.

Emilia’s footsteps peal over the stone as she runs down the corridor, before exiting the dark tomb for open plaza.

Where,

Emilia: “—Huh?”

Met with a blizzard raging through the Sanctuary, Emilia breathes a hazy, white breath.

2

The snow encompasses everything in sight.

The gale roars close by, and the snow thieves her body of warmth. After a white puff of breath, Emilia’s amethyst eyes blink as her throat freezes in shock.

—What on earth happened?!

???: “—Lady-lia!”

The wind howls. Her chilled ears throb in pain.

Frigid gusts feel to slice at Emilia’s skin, dressed lightly as she is, when she hears a voice calling from beyond the blizzard and stops still.

Snow has already accumulated up to Emilia’s knees and threatens to swamp her down. She takes every step forcefully, trudging through the frost, to find silhouettes gathered beyond the veil of white.

They must be the people of the Sanctuary. Meaning that they waited for Emilia in this blizzard, without ever retreating indoors—

Emilia: “Everyone! Why are you all outside in this sn…huh?”

Emilia imagines everyone huddled together to stave off the cold, when she stops.

There are about forty Sanctuary dwellers including Ryuzu. That’s a huge number to start with, but Emilia also spots someone who shouldn’t be here.

???: “Lady Emilia! Is the Trial over?!”

The speaker is a young man with a crew cut.

Emilia knows him. Because she spoke with him before coming to the Sanctuary, and she would have spoken to him even had he not acknowledged her.

It's a youth from Earlham Village's young men's brigade.

Seeing him, when he's supposed to have left the Sanctuary several hours ago on Otto's instructions, makes Emilia's eyes shoot open. And what surprises her even more is that it's not just him.

With crewcut as their leader, Emilia spots several other people from Earlham. They have come in carriages, huddling with the people of the Sanctuary inside the vehicles or in its shadow to endure the blizzard.

Emilia: "Wh-Why is everyone…? But, didn't you evacuate?"

Man: "Yes, we did. On Sir Subaru and Mr. Otto's instructions. They said that the dragons know the way, so just run."

Emilia: "Then why?! Didn't you hear that it's going to be dangerous here?"

Man: "We have heard. And we were told."

The youth grits his teeth, before raising his head and pointing beyond the forest.

Man: "To wait outside the forest, return once the signal appears from the Sanctuary, and retrieve those still here."

Emilia: "Huh?"

Man: "Such as Lady Ram and the others. Anyway, they would fire magic into the sky. We were to return to the Sanctuary once we saw it, load the residents into carriages, and leave."

Emilia: "Who gave these instructions?!"

Man: "Mr. Otto did."

Hearing Otto's name makes Emilia think of that flaky-looking merchant.

Though, no matter what impression he gives, he is Subaru's friend. Every time she sees the two talking jovially, it reaffirms Emilia's assessment that he's someone capable of rivalling Subaru. Otto had definitely planned a lot of the happenings in the Sanctuary, starting with the Garfiel affair, while acting as Subaru's co-conspirator.

Meaning that these instructions are hugely significant.

Emilia: "B-But, this was still reckless. The blizzard is blowing so hard…you should've known that doing this was crazy!"

The man says nothing.

Emilia: "What's wrong?"

The man makes an awkward-looking expression and averts his gaze. Emilia doesn't overlook his reaction, instead pressing him further.

Emilia's amethyst gaze pierces him. He puts his hand to his brow, and sighs a frigid-white sigh.

Man: "Mr. Otto told us that the truly dangerous thing would be if it snows prior to the signal. Since snowfall marks the time limit…he told us to immediately leave the forest then."

Emilia: "They even knew about the snowfall…no, just, nevermind that. Why did you come, then?!"

Man: "—Because it snowed."

The man straightens his back and gives his firm reply to Emilia's wails.

His gaze is so strong, Emilia falls speechless.

They knew that snowfall meant danger.

And they saw it snowing in the Sanctuary, and understood that they had reached the time limit for that danger. With that knowledge, they chose to come here.

They sped here, to where the residents of the Sanctuary were in danger.

Man: “We suspected that Sir Subaru or yourself would have done exactly this.”

Emilia: “…”

With a wry smile, the man answers the question in Emilia’s throat.

So the evacuees overlooking the carriages behind him were Earlham’s young men brigade. Since their goal is to evacuate the people of the Sanctuary. Everyone unneeded must have left them and evacuated. That said, those who left would be forced into the tribulation of evacuating by foot. And these men were here, because they judged that this was correct.

Man: “Lady Emilia, if the Trial is over…can they exit this place?”

Emilia: “Y-Yes, they should. But, with this snow and wind…”

The man gazes at the ground, clicking his tongue in frustration.

Snow has piled so thick that walking even a short distance is a trial. Carriage wheels won’t find any purchase in this; they are stranded.

But if they could at least find somewhere warm, where many people could bide through the cold—

Emilia: “If we can’t relocate as far as the cathedral…let’s get everyone inside the tomb. The mana there keeps the inside warm, and we don’t have to worry about the building collapsing beneath the snow.”

Man: “It’s possible to go in?”

Emilia: “I turned off the tomb’s dangerous mechanisms, everything’s dandy now. Anyway, are you able to transport everyone as far as the tomb? And the dragons should be loosed from the carriages and let inside too.”

The six dragons had accommodated the brigade and brought them all the way back here. Even in this instant, the dragons' carriages are protecting two digit columns' worth of people. It's inconceivable that they could possibly abandon the dragons.

The man nods with a, "definitely."

This should be good enough to deal with the snow for the moment. The issue now is that something dangerous is going to happen alongside the snowfall.

Emilia: "I wish we'd actually talked about this beforehand!"

Emilia mourns the lack of time she had to speak with Subaru before challenging the Trials. This probably happened because Subaru didn't want to leave Emilia with anything that would needlessly worry her.

Though she's glad for his thoughtfulness, it's ridiculous that it's going to hamper her reaction to the danger.

Emilia can think of three people who, like Subaru's group, probably know about the snow. That is Roswaal, Ram, and—

???: "Yer've done well ter make it back ter us, Lady Emilia."

Emilia: "Miss Ryuzu!"

A pink-haired girl hops out of a carriage and onto the snow—Ryuzu. With now short she is, the snow that reaches to Emilia's knees reaches to her thighs. She trudges laboriously through the snow while Emilia hurriedly approaches her.

Emilia: "The Trial's all over now! Is everybody here?!"

Ryuzu: "All erv the Sanctuary's people, en all erv the humans who came back fer us err present, yes. But…"

Emilia: "But?"

Ryuzu: "Miss Ram and Lil' Roz ain't here. The two'erve them have been somewhere else since before it started snowing."

Emilia gazes over the people and the carriages.

She does not spot that familiarly bizarre outfit, nor that dependable pink-haired girl.

Emilia: “If I don’t search for them…Miss Ryuzu! Do you know? What’s going to happen if we stay in the Sanctuary with all this snow?”

Ryuzu: “…”

Ryuzu’s cheeks stiffen and she lowers her gaze. Emilia recognizes what this means.

Ryuzu knows what is happening. She knows what the danger is.

Emilia: “Please tell me, Miss Ryuzu. We have to prevent it.”

Ryuzu: “But yer see, the timing fer it’s off. Lil’ Su said that Lil’ Roz’s planning fer snow ter fall tomorrow night, so there muster’ve been some mistake fer it to be snowing now…”

Emilia: “What mistake, it is snowing right now! So! We need to do whatever we need to do when the snow comes! Miss Ryuzu!”

Emilia puts her hands on Ryuzu’s small shoulders as she attempts to persuade her.

Ryuzu’s sour expression shifts, until she’s left staring at Emilia in dumb shock.

Emilia: “Wh-What’s wrong, Miss Ryuzu?”

Ryuzu: “…Lady Emilia. Have yer gone into the building deep in the Sanctuary’s forest?”

Emilia: “Deep in the forest? No, I haven’t…”

Emilia tilts her head in confusion.

Ryuzu: “That isn’t posser…”

Starts Ryuzu, before looking at the tomb behind Emilia.

Ryuzu: “Then maybe there wers sermthing in the tomb…that seemed special, perhaps? Like, perhaps…a giant magic stone, er something similerr.”

Emilia: “—There was. A sooo giant magic stone. I kinda wanted you and Roswaal to look at it later…”

Emilia glances around the area, then draws her lips near to Ryuzu’s ear.

So that nobody else can hear her, as they begin preparations to move the dragons.

Emilia: “There was a woman inside the magic stone. I don’t know who she was.”

Ryuzu: “—!”

This information rocks Ryuzu’s expression.

Ryuzu’s eyes shoot open as she stares at Emilia. After a long, long sigh,

Ryuzu: “Then…”

Ryuzu nods as if agreeing with something.

Ryuzu: “Understood. Lady Emilia, ask whatever yer wish. I’m obligated ter answer you. Obligated ter follow yer orders.”

Emilia: “I’m not ordering anything!”

Ryuzu: “Listen. That thing yer touched in the tomb ers a magic stone that picks who’s qualified ter command LEWES. Yer now hold those qualifications instead erv Lil’ Gar. I…no, we, shall obey you. Please order us however yer wish.”

With that solemn reply, Ryuzu attempts to lower herself while thigh-deep in snow. This will result in her kneeling and burying herself head-deep in snow, and panics Emilia. She promptly grabs Ryuzu by the shoulders to stop her.

Emilia: “Awuh! Right, okay! So I can ask things from you, Miss Ryuzu. Then I’ll ask this. Please tell me what happens when there’s snow in the Sanctuary.”

Ryuzu: “…Lil’ Su says that once it snows in the Sanctuary, the witchbeast SIZEABLE HARE will come. It’s drawn here by the mana in the algorithm ter do something as massive as change the weather ter snowfall…ers the word.”

Emilia: “Algorithm to change the weather…then, somebody’s behind this?!” Ryuzu silently nods.

This is magic immense enough to manipulate the weather. Puck could easily do this, if he was being serious. Which makes Puck the most suspicious candidate, but considering Ryuzu’s attitude and the context of the situation, Emilia immediately lands on the culprit.

Emilia: “…Is it Roswaal?”

Ryuzu: “Most likely. I think Miss Ram left ter try and stop him. But if the snow came anyway, then it’s possible that…”

Emilia: “Stop. I don’t want to think about it. Anyway I need to find them. Miss Ryuzu, I’m going to start searching the village for them. If you have any ideas where they could—”

Ryuzu: “No need fer that, Lady Emilia.”

Ryuzu interrupts Emilia with incredible confidence.

It’s like she knows exactly what Emilia’s thinking, and it makes Emilia gulp.

And,

Ryuzu: “Us Ryuzu’s keep a close eye on everything in the Sanctuary. —We’ll find and get yer ter them in a jiffy.”

Ryuzu gives Emilia her stamp of approval.

Ram, as she lies unconscious, almost looks to be merely sleeping.

Roswaal: “…Ram?”

Roswaal draws the fallen, limp girl into his arms, jerking her . But Ram gives no reply.

This girl. Who would put aside anything to give Roswaal’s words priority. Ram.

Of course she doesn’t reply.

Ram is dying this very instant. And it’s all because of Roswaal.

The burning of the gospel had sent him into a fury. His vision seethed with crimson, he had no idea what was anything anymore, but he knew that he could not forgive Ram for doing this and—

Roswaal: “…”

—Struck her with a ball of fire while she was undefended, blasting her away.

She had overtaxed herself with imperfect oni strength, and burdened herself with the exact same fatigue only hours earlier. Ram’s body had reached its limit. When a fireball blasted her.

Her life hangs in the balance.

Roswaal: “…Ram.”

Roswaal cannot remember what he thought as he drew near to her prone form and touched her.

Even now, as he holds her close and gazes at her sleeping, he does not think anything.

Roswaal regarded Ram as an incredibly convenient pawn.

She had gone through ordeals by his hand, and their Contract preserved an extremely simple relationship between them.

He exposed his true thoughts only to Ram, and spoke of his goals only to Ram. He believed that, once that goal was achieved, he would hand himself over to her as his reward for his accomplice.

But Ram betrayed Roswaal partway through his course.

Ram's statements had been correct; going by her Contract, the script for the situation had not unfolded as Roswaal intended, and her rebellion was her pre-established revenge.

So he will not fault Ram. If forced to say anything, then he would've liked her to postpone her revenge and administer it once the situation about the barrier had been definitely determined. Then there was the topic of his bet with Subaru. Garfiel had been unexpectedly pliant, and some sympathetic-sounding talk had seen Emilia reattempt the Trial, but ultimately Subaru's speeches were the ramblings of a weakling.

It is impossible to defy a predetermined future. The path to reach that future may change, but events will still lead to the destined end. Should someone stray from the path leading to the correct ending, what awaits is doom.

But they're still resisting it, and it makes Roswaal laugh. And the fact that Roswaal knows this, and knows how weak he is for fearing their actions, also brings laughter.

Why are they trying to change anything? He can't understand it.

Once any feeling reaches its peak, once it apexes, it will never fade in intensity. If you love someone, if your heart ever blazes with love for someone, then that heat, that brilliance, ought to be eternal.

And the same concept applies even if the emotion in question is hatred.

Feelings you have held for a long, long time ought to ascend to legitimacy. Feelings fostered over time are ironclad, never to yield to anyone. They absolutely must be.

Garfiel's hatred for the outside has shattered.

Emilia has accepted her detested and sorrowful past.

And Ram's endless, vengeful hatred for Roswaal has,

Ram: "I am in love with you, Master Roswaal."

Roswaal: "—!!"

A love confession like a curse, burning deep in his ears.

Words that came from the mouth of the girl in his arms, which absolutely never should have.

Had the Contract been binding her heart or soul, then he would have understood it. Her burning desire for revenge had been converted into subordination to Roswaal, and her hatred into affection. Which was why Roswaal had Ram assist him in his goals more than anyone else, and trusted her for what would come after their realization more than anyone else.

Because Roswaal believed in her love-converted hatred, and her vengeful desire to kill him. Because he believed in the hatred in the eyes of the girl he first met, and how she gazed at him with absolute murder.

—And yet Ram betrayed her own vengeance, to extol love.

Roswaal: "Why did you, Ram? …I don't understand it…"

Roswaal hears how her faint breathing grows distant, and senses that Ram's life is ending.

Her heartbeat fades. Something screams that this mustn't continue. His right eye aches. Aches, so terribly. Stop! Stop asserting yourself. He's going to lose himself.

What should he do? What must he do? He cannot tell what it is he needs to do, and what it is he mustn't do. He cannot remember it. He cannot conceive it.

He looks around the area. Nothing here is what he seeks. The gospel, which told Roswaal of the correct path, has been lost in flames. Nobody will teach Roswaal. What is the choice he must make here? Nobody will teach him.

There is nothing for it now.

Roswaal: “—Wailing wind beckons the snow, light upon the earth repatriates to sky. Each droplet is silence given form, ivory untouched by past karma’s favor laments unchanging eternity—”

A canto.

This hummed, lilting canto gives direction to the power wreathed around Roswaal L. Mathers. The vast store of mana interacts with the refined algorithm, bringing dark clouds to the night forest. Frozen wind whips past, and a chill cold enough to freeze to the core rages through the Sanctuary. Clouds burdened with snow shroud all of the enclosed forest, and white frost dances to the earth.

—This is the power of the massive-scale magic algorithm ULTIMILLION.

Roswaal: “—ugh, khh.”

The canto ends, and the extensively-held magical power is released.

A massive load of mana is ripped out of Roswaal, and even he, who boasts a transcendental store of mana, feels somewhat dizzy.

Mana for magic this extensive should truly be built up over several months, and its should be used on a smaller area. Roswaal is irregular for procuring the mana over only two days, and for affecting a range more than twice the size of the usual.

After the magician who achieved this feat gives a long sigh, he finds himself utterly lost on what to do.

Roswaal: “I’ve made it snow, as the gospel tells…what do I do now?”

Roswaal has forgotten that he has made it snow one day earlier than what the gospel’s writ stated.

Or actually, not even the bet occupies any corner of his mind any more.

Roswaal does not pay any heed to the process. His only concerns are for how the events around the Sanctuary conclude. Snow falls, and the barrier is undone. Should that happen, should that happen—then what happens?

Roswaal: “Ram…yes…Ram.”

He can no longer hear Ram’s breathing.

Roswaal looks down at her face, and gently touches her forehead. Her transformation means that her scar, where her horn used to be, is bleeding. Roswaal wipes away the blood, and as he always does with Ram, injects colourless mana formed from a combination of all six mana types into her. This was a ritual the two had always done, so that Ram’s oni blood would not conquer her.

It’s not that he’s thinking anything.

Roswaal unconsciously understands that he is merely betting that her vitality as an oni will keep her alive. He has no questions about saving her.

Ram needs to live. For the sake of Roswaal’s goals, and for what comes after the realisation of those goals.

Roswaal: “Teacher…Teacher, I…What! Am I supposed to do! Teacher…Teacher! Please tell me…please…guide me, again…”

Roswaal’s confusion reaches its pinnacle, and he cannot even comprehend his own heart as he wails.

Though he is trying to ensure Ram’s survival, his anger about her betrayal remains. He knows that he has lost his beacon, but still searches for that old light.

The snow falls, encasing Roswaal and Ram in white flakes.

Everything drowns in the white, disappearing.

With the thought of, and perhaps that is fine, not present in him in the slightest.

Emilia cuts through the snow, breathing white puffs as she dashes onward.

Emilia: “Huma! Again, Huma!”

She shouts, casting ice magic upon ice magic.

She is doing it to avoid time loss from her feet getting bogged in the snow. She uses her magic to purposefully harden the snow, giving her a path to sprint upon.

Some people might slip and find themselves in quite a bit of danger by using this method, but,

Emilia: “All! Right! Got it!”

Emilia is a practitioner of ice magic, and grew up in Elior forest. She is accustomed to frozen ground. She dashes over the freezing snow of the Sanctuary as if she owns the place, with her small escort running after her.

Emilia: “Is this honestly working for you?”

Asks Emilia, out of breath, to her guide. The girl looks up at Emilia, and replies with only a nod. They can communicate, but she won’t talk to Emilia. This is exactly what Ryuzu—what the representative Ryuzu personality—had told her to expect.

Ryuzu had suddenly begun showing special respect to Emilia outside the tomb.

She informed Emilia that she was an entity born from the soul of a girl named Ryuzu Meyer, and that there were several duplicates of her in the same circumstances. These Ryuzu’s functioned as EYES spotted around the Sanctuary, went searching for Roswaal and Ram in the community, and were now guiding her to them.

There exists in the world extraordinarily rare magic called ‘duplication magic’.

Emilia had never heard about it being utilized on living creatures before, but perhaps it had been done as a kind of forbidden magic. Emilia had kept herself from asking all the questions she wanted to ask, ran through the Sanctuary while relying on the Ryuzu double, and dashed all about in search of Roswaal and Ram.

Emilia: “If I don’t hurry…the Sizeable Hare will show up!”

The witchbeast SIZEABLE HARE.

Even Emilia, ignorant of the world as she is, knows the name of this creature.

It is one of the three witchbeasts alongside the White Whale and Blacksnake, and like those other two beasts, regarded as a calamity.

It is a witchbeast of weak, frail, tiny little hares. But the beast itself is a group of individuals, a horde of creatures. It is not each individual hare, but the entire group of them that is the calamity called the Sizeable Hare.

With its endless hunger and overwhelming numbers it would devour everything in its path. But still that would not sate it, and it would proceed to wander the world while cannibalizing itself. Indeed a calamity.

The terrifying thing is how it can multiply itself infinitely. The Sizeable Hare will usually be low in number, cannibalizing itself to stave hunger when there is nothing to eat—but should it lay eyes on prey that stokes its appetite, it cannot be stopped. It will compound endlessly in number, gnashing away until the prey is destroyed, then cut its numbers back down as it moves on and leaves behind a wasteland. That’s what this thing is.

Emilia determines that she must face this incredible witchbeast.

They have already lost the time they need to flee the Hare’s attack. The accumulated snow hinders their escape, leaving Emilia and the others without options.

The non-combatants will hide in the tomb, while a frontline is formed at the entrance.

That is the only strategy they have for opposing the witchbeast. It'll be Emilia and Roswaal. If possible they'll include Ram, needing to assemble all the combat power available in the Sanctuary. And so—

Emilia: "…"

Snapped treetrunks and buildings battered from battle. Gashes in the earth, and unnatural pilings of snow. —A man and a woman, close together in a tree's shade.

Having found Ram limp and sleeping, and the dazed Roswaal, Emilia shouts.

Emilia: "—Roswaal! Ram!!"

Emilia leaves the silent Ryuzu double behind as she slides over the frozen snow. She manipulates the ground beneath her however she wants, scattering flakes of ice as she moves like a snow pixie, before grabbing Roswaal's shoulders as he lies motionless and half-buried in the snow.

Emilia: "Are you listening?! Roswaal, come on, Roswaal! We're in trouble! We have to save everyone! This isn't the time to be frozen!"

Roswaal: "…"

Rocking him makes the snow fall off Roswaal's head. It reveals his expression, and Emilia clicks her throat.

Roswaal's face as he looks at Ram, his eyes dim, looks feeble.

Emilia: "Roswaal…?"

Roswaal says nothing. He hasn't even noticed Emilia.

His lack of reaction scares her, and she lowers her gaze to what is cradled in his arms. There sleeps a pink-haired girl,

—With snow on her cheeks, showing no signs of melting.

Emilia: "—! Ram? Ram!"

Emilia calls to Ram in Roswaal's arms, and tries waking her up.

But Ram gives no particular reaction. Of course she doesn't reply, but she doesn't open her eyes either—in fact, her eyelids don't even twitch. Emilia touches her cheek, and her lips, to find them abnormally cold. As if she's—

Emilia: "That, isn't happening!"

Emilia rejects her ineffectual thinking as she grits her teeth and reaches into Ram's clothes. Her hand strokes across Ram's chest, where she finds a faint heartbeat. It could disappear at any moment, frail, and feeble.

Emilia: "—She's alive! We're okay! We still have time, Roswaal!"

Yells Emilia with hope as she glances back to Roswaal. But Roswaal remains with his hand on

Ram's brow, looking utterly dazed.

And Emilia notices it.

There is a massive amount of mana flowing from Roswaal's hand and into Ram. And this is acting as Ram's lifeline.

Emilia: "Then, you're saving Ram's life…"

Roswaal: "…"

Emilia: "—!"

As she hits upon that truth, Emilia also hits upon the bitter truth.

Ram is unconscious, in dire condition, and Roswaal must administer the delicate treatment to heal her. They cannot participate in the fight.

Meaning that Emilia must face the Sizeable Hare on her own.

—Can she do it?

This monster is one of the three that has survived for four hundred years, since the Witch of Envy’s era.

Who could guess how many people had steeled themselves to face this thing, just as Emilia was now? None of them had managed to destroy the beast. How does Emilia propose to fight it alone? Without Puck. Only Emilia.

Emilia: “If we go now…”

Maybe they can still run? But what are they meant to do if it chases them?

If they encounter it without any refuges or hiding places, then Emilia cannot protect the civilians from the beast. Guarding somewhere like the tomb presents the most potential.

It hurts that Roswaal and Ram can’t help in combat, but Emilia musn’t abandon the fight.

Emilia: “Roswaal. Bring Ram and come along with me. Everybody from the Sanctuary…mm, everybody is taking shelter in the tomb. And I’m going to protect them. Don’t give up on healing Ram, and —”

Roswaal: “It’s useless.”

Emilia meets Roswaal’s eye level and begins to tell Roswaal of her resolve, when his whisper interrupts her.

Roswaal stares at Ram’s face, his eyes still hollow.

Roswaal: “Useless. Everything is…I don’t know the future. I don’t understand myself. …This world is done.”

Emilia: “So you’re back to saying this! Who cares about the book! Maybe someone kind of important wrote it, but how does that have any say in what we do!”

Unable to bear his resignation, Emilia raises her voice at Roswaal.

Why is this happening? This is not the Roswaal that Emilia knows.

Always composed, making bold decisions like nothing, acting like he knows absolutely everything there is to know, all with a grin. Wasn't that Roswaal?

Who is weak man, who has given up on everything, looking like a cornered and lost child?

Emilia: "Roswaal. I can't understand what you're feeling or how you're hurt right now. I do want to understand, but there's no time for me to learn. …But I want to make that time. And so I need you to work with me."

Roswaal: "…"

Emilia doesn't understand Roswaal. He could continue being like this, and she still wouldn't understand him.

But if they converse, and divulge their feelings, there are things she will understand. And things she will never understand if she never does this. And things that will never be communicated, if the time for them is never given.

Emilia needs to create the time they need to grow closer to one another.

Emilia: "Please, stand up, Roswaal. Neither of us are ending here. We won't let Ram end either. We're all going back to everyone, together, and—"

Roswaal: "I…"

Emilia is insistent. But Roswaal does not meet her gaze.

He continues staring down at Ram, his scarlet lips moving to say:

Roswaal: "I, quit…"

Spoken so quietly, it could disappear.

The frigid, whistling winds do whip by, and the words are barely audible.

The whisper hardly left his lips. It's questionable whether Roswaal himself even heard it.

But she definitely does hear that quiet sound of surrender.

And so, Emilia—

Emilia: "—Don't you dare say that!!"

—Grabs Roswaal by the collar, and screams in anger.

The movement rocks Roswaal's head, and he whimpers in pain. Emilia assaults him, unrelenting, with her words.

Emilia: "You quit?! What are you saying 'you quit'?! There is nothing out there to possibly quit! There is nothing for you to quit! Don't you dare give up! Don't you dare surrender! Not me, or Ram, or you, have any single thing we're possibly done with yet!"

Roswaal: "…"

Emilia: "I finished the Trial! The past I was so scared of! A happy present that could've happened! Sad futures that might come! I saw them all! And I still decided to walk this path…and with that resolve, I can finally walk it!"

She howls.

Wrath beyond what Emilia can ever remember surges up inside her.

Yes. There it is. Listen to that whiny voice, hear those pathetic opinions, see that gutless spirit. This is what it looks like when you accept surrender as your end.

Emilia's roaring makes Roswaal's cheeks stiffen, and he averts his gaze. This is not him being worried for Ram, this is him distracting himself and running from something he doesn't want to see. Emilia grabs him by the jaw and forces him to face her.

Emilia: "Look at people's faces when they are talking to you!"

Roswaal: "—Hic."

Emilia: “You won’t understand what people are thinking if you don’t look them in the eye. You won’t understand why people are doing what they’re doing if you don’t look them in the eye. Keep your eyes on mine, hear my voice, stand up, and follow me.”

Roswaal’s odd-coloured eyes blink as if realizing something.

His lips twitch. But he manages no words.

Roswaal: “—auh.”

Emilia: “I’ll never let anyone say that they quit. As long as you’re alive, there’s nothing out there for you to quit. And—I am not letting anyone die here!”

Emilia gets to her feet. Turns around.

Over ten Ryuzu doubles have assembled here. All of them kneel reverently, awaiting orders.

Emilia takes a breath, and shouts her command.

Emilia: “Take Roswaal and Ram back to the tomb. I’m protecting everyone, no matter what.”

Speaking grandly, and aware that she only acquired this right by coincidence, Emilia leads the obedient Ryuzu’s as she breaks into a sprint through Sanctuary’s snow.

The Ryuzu’s group together to support Roswaal and Ram, taking turns to make the path while following after Emilia.

—Emilia no longer hesitates in her course for an instant.

5

And the tales—

“No need to push yourself so hard, Emilia-tan.”

The boy who cherishes the girl who decided to protect everything returns to her side, “You can hold off and fall back. —The inaugural battle of deliverance is here.”

“I’m sorry. That kind of went over my head.”

Their usual banter makes her smile as she supports her failing body, her eyes tracking the white silhouettes as they press forward.

The two silhouettes, walking hand in hand.

She hears two voices as well.

They sound lively, and, feeling that she has been waiting to hear this, the girl’s heartbeat pounds.

“What comes next is a complete unknown, in fact.”

“Yeah, we’ll be doing something about this. —Together, me and you!!”

And the tales converge, their wishes perfect mirrors as they enter the finale.

Knight and Princess, facing beast in blizzard-swept the Sanctuary.

A Knight who cannot manage on his own brings a magician at his side, consecrating everything to victory.

—The final battle of the Sanctuary commences.

Chapter 130:
Faces in the Snow

1

Icy winds whip past. Frigid temperatures slice at his skin.

A horde of white hunger swamps everything in sight. The hand he is holding is warm.

Natsuki Subaru feels not a speck of hesitation or doubt about standing here.

Subaru: “Great that we had that cool entrance and all, but isn’t this a little weird?!”

Yells Subaru about the unanticipated scene as the snow batters his cheeks.

Roaring wind rages through the Sanctuary, which is currently embroiled in thick snow. Subaru was ready for this to happen eventually, but the date is mismatched to what he remembers.

The Sanctuary would be buried in snow and lure the mob of white witchbeasts at morning—there was supposed to be over half a day of surplus time left.

Behind Subaru there stands a silver-haired girl, breathing white with her shoulders heaving. Emilia has been unable to fully restrain the mana overflowing from her body, and half-encased herself in ice. Her left side is covered in white, and though it must be painful, not a speck of anguish shows on her face.

Subaru mentally praises the bold Emilia, while simultaneously suspecting her as causing the snow.

Was she unable to control this frenzy of magic, bringing snow, and beckoning the Hare?

Subaru: “But then the order’s off…”

The sequence between the uncontrolled magic and the Hare's arrival are backwards.

Emilia used her magic to oppose the Hare, which resulted in her suffering damage. If Subaru is following the correct course of things, then the real cause is—

Subaru: "…"

Behind Emilia, Echidna's tomb looms.

Subaru acknowledges the gazes peering at him out from the entrance, and nods. If the people inside are the residents of the Sanctuary, then they are not feeling the effects of the tomb's mechanisms. That means that the tomb's operations have terminated, otherwise said that Emilia has defeated the Trial.

Emilia has overcome the Trial. Snow is falling earlier than anticipated. There's the state of the Sanctuary's citizens, and Emilia's resolute shouts and expression. And there's also,

Subaru: "Roswaal."

Roswaal: "…"

Roswaal, dazedly staring at Subaru while sitting beside the tomb's entrance. Subaru doesn't have time right now to check if Ram, sleeping in his arms, is okay. All he can do is trust that she is.

Beatrice: "Subaru."

When the small hand gripping Subaru's own gives him a tug.

Hit with an unfamiliar form of address from a familiar voice, Subaru chokes.

Subaru: "Oughbbhnuh."

Beatrice: "…Explain that bizarre reply, I suppose."

Subaru: "It just feels so novel when you say my name, so. Can you do it again but sounding bashful?"

Beatrice: “What?! You are actually mad, in fact! This is no time for buffoonery, I suppose!” Beatrice snaps at Subaru’s silly request, her expression terrifying.

Subaru reluctantly drops the issue, expecting her to ignore it no matter how much he pesters her, when,

Beatrice: “S-Subaru…there, I did it, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beako you are adorable.”

Beatrice: “—! I’m never saying it again, I suppose! I’ll remember this for after we’re done, in fact!”

Yells Beatrice, her face red as she swings her held hand in a huff.

Subaru looks at her, charmed, while also directing his attention to the horde of approaching hares.

He licks his dry lips.

Subaru: “So, Beatrice. We’re fighting the Sizeable Hare, where’s your mental prep sitting?”

Beatrice: “I am moments post-Contract. The opponent is one of the great witchbeast triumvirate. We are unprepared and conditions are poor. My Contractor is a novice. I haven’t participated in battle in four hundred years.”

Subaru: “And?”

Beatrice: “I could ask for no handicap finer, I suppose.”

Beatrice smiles fearlessly as the beasts, their teeth chattering, swoop in to close the distance. Subaru steps forward to face their attack and glances to Emilia behind him.

Subaru: “Me and Beatrice are about to crush the Sizeable Hare. Emilia-tan, I’m sorry for this, but some’re gonna slip past so I want you protecting everyone!”

Emilia: “I’m…”

Emilia cuts her sentence off there, hesitant for a moment.

But after closing her eyes and taking a quiet breath,

Emilia: “Right. Leave it to me. —And I’m leaving it to you.”

Subaru: “Yup, all mine.”

Put the right people in the right places, split the roles up between them, do what’s best for you to do.

Emilia gives a deep breath as she concentrates on controlling her magic and erects a defensive line.

The snowfall continues to rage as Emilia forms a blockade of ice.

Subaru steps out from Emilia’s line of defense as he gazes at the white typhoon.

Red eyes and sharp fangs stretch on as far as his eyes can see. Coated in pure white fur, this is the witchbeast spurred by the most primitive and insatiable hunger in the world. The Sizeable Drove—otherwise said, the Sizeable Hare.

The chittering of their fangs makes the ache in Subaru’s soul spread to his whole body.

He has died gruesomely, flesh devoured and innards ravaged, to those fangs. He has felt the agony of a hole gaping through his abdomen, spouting blood while teeth severed his windpipe. And he knows the overwhelming feeling of loss from death, his body chewed up and missing limbs, in Emilia’s arms.

To complete this loop series, Natsuki Subaru must surmount this witchbeast.

Beatrice: “—Are you afraid, I suppose?”

Asks Beatrice to Subaru, holding his breath as he gazes at the beast.

Her face is impassive as she glances up at him. But her eyes, and her expression, inform Subaru far more eloquently than her words.

—Inform him exactly who it is that stands beside him.

Subaru: “Nope. Not at all.”

Beatrice: “Oh?”

Subaru: “Emilia’s at my back and you’re at my side. It’s like I’m strongest man in the world.”

Beatrice: “Doubtlessly, in fact.”

Beatrice’s cheeks relax into a smile.

So you do get it, says her expression. Subaru joins her in her wicked smile.

The Sizeable Hare enters a frenzy, rushing for the brazen duo.

Beatrice points her free right hand, the one that is not holding Subaru’s, at the Hare.

Beatrice: “We’ll begin with a warm-up, I suppose. —El Minya.”

Space spirals alongside the canto as purple crystals materialize around Subaru and Beatrice, surrounding them.

These things, with the brilliance and bearing of icicles, are the magical stakes that Beatrice used in a previous loop to skewer Elsa. In a single instant, forty of them have formed.

It takes less than a moment for one to aim and silently shoot off—without its aim deviating in the least, to spear straight through the open mouth of a hare. The skewer proceeds to plummet through the air and plunge into the rearward horde of hares, where it explodes. Fragments of crystal shred through the hares around the site of impact, slivering them. That is what one shot can do, and Beatrice fires forty at once.

The looming omnipresent destruction brings bloody flowers to blossom through the white world. The ruthless opening attack annihilates hundreds of hares. Aftermath of the destruction litters the clearing, where the surviving hares shriek in agony. The beast can multiply infinitely and there are still units of it left, but even so, it works Subaru up.

That is, Beatrice's unimaginably devastating destructive capabilities do.

Subaru: "W-Woaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Beatrice: "I-Is it that incredible, I suppose? It isn't anything so impressive, in fact. This is the lowest of techniques from Betty, I suppose. A piece of cake, in fact."

Subaru: "No, what, the…this, savage magic! What affinity?!"

Beatrice: "It's obviously going to be yin, I suppose. I'm not the best at other types of magic, in fact."

Says Beatrice, not looking entirely satisfied about Subaru's praise.

The ravaged witchbeast immediately starts cannibalizing the gore from the corpses and multiplies itself again, but Beatrice pays this not the slightest of mind.

Beatrice: "Pay attention in fact, Subaru. Here's a lecture from one yin user to another, I suppose."

Subaru: "What, is that all?"

Beatrice: "Huh?"

Subaru: "Was our relationship just about both being yin…"

Beatrice: "Th-That wasn't what I meant, in fact. You're a fellow yin user, my Contractor, and also umm…Betty's Subaru, I suppose. Yes. And so here's my lesson to you, in fact."

Beatrice, flustered, probably doesn't even know what she's saying. She coughs before raising her finger and lowering her voice.

Beatrice: "About the apex of yin—the apogee of Yin Magic."

Subaru: "What do I need to do?"

Beatrice: “Hold my hand, and keep me from being alone, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I mean I do think that’s important, but…”

Beatrice: “…It seems you don’t quite understand spiritualism, which gives me some concerns for the future, in fact.”

She can be as exasperated as she wants, it won’t change that he doesn’t know what he doesn’t know.

Beatrice shakes her head at Subaru as he frowns, and pulls him forward by the hand.

Beatrice: “Fundamentally, a spiritualist and a spirit fight on the battlefield as single entity with separate minds, I suppose.”

Subaru: “A single entity with separate minds…”

Subaru thinks about Emilia’s fighting style.

The most striking battle that involved both Emilia and Puck was the one with Elsa in the loot house. Emilia had placed Puck on offence while she took charge of defense. She would also use simpler techniques to buy time so that Puck could unleash massive attacks.

That bald old man mentioned that that was the basis of how spiritualists fight.

Subaru: “So I just have to do that. Okay, time for Shamak!”

Beatrice: “Being subject to your defective Shamak would probably damage us as well so I would rather we not, in fact. And Subaru, your gate is…”

Beatrice trails off, looking reluctant to speak. Subaru feels apologetic that he forced her into giving this consideration. His gate is probably junk.

He abused it. He can feel that it’s broken. Again, he is speaking fantasies.

Beatrice: "—It's coming, I suppose."

Mutters Beatrice halfway through her speech. The instant after Subaru grunts in confusion, he realizes that his feet are no longer touching the ground.

Beatrice kicks off the ground, and the jump carries the two of them straight into the air like a spring.

That exact nanosecond, a horde of witchbeast's fangs closes in on the spot the two had just been.

The Hare's fangs clatter against each other as the hares leap off the ground in pursuit of the two.

Subaru: "We're flying?!"

Beatrice: "We only jumped, in fact. I've diminished the effects of gravity with the yin spell, Murak, I suppose. If we desired, we could fly by riding the wind, in fact."

Subaru: "You see we're falling though?!"

Beatrice: "We could keep riding the wind if we were simply fleeing…but we are annihilating them, I suppose."

Like leaves tossing in the wind, Subaru and Beatrice are buffeted by blizzard. They regardless fail to gracelessly flip upside-down midair, probably by Beatrice's doing.

The two are on slow descent from their ten-meter high peak. The hares wait below them with their mouths gaping open, leaving Subaru to put his hopes in another rally of magical spears.

Beatrice: "Subaru, a continuation in fact. Spiritualists don't cast magic by using their internal mana, but by directly manipulating the ambient mana, I suppose. A Contract with minor spirits is essential for this, so you are not currently meeting those requirements, in fact."

Subaru: "Ah, uhrm, Beatrice? There's, there's kind of a whole bunch of them right under us?!"

Beatrice: “Just listen to me, I suppose. Your gate is trashed, and you cannot use minor spirits. So poor useless hopeless Subaru’s only role is to stay at Betty’s side and praise Betty’s magnificence, I suppose. Why are you even here, in fact?”

Subaru: “That’s what I wanna know!”

Beatrice: “Then I’ll teach you, I suppose.”

The witchbeasts leaping up from below them will start reaching their feet in no time at all. If their fangs bite on, the hares will never let go. Even he has to find it overwhelmingly lame to take huge damage and start crying after how cool and composed he acted. Subaru yells rather hysterically at Beatrice.

Subaru: “What do I do?!”

Beatrice: “Visualize, in fact. Imagine the same crystals that I made before, I suppose. They are crystallized mana, spears weaved from corporeal magic. They taper to sharp points, with ruinous shards packed inside them, piercing through defenses, and stabbing into flesh. —Visualize this attack.”

Subaru: “Visualized!”

Beatrice: “Now all you must do is incant, I suppose!”

The horde of hares waits below them, mouths agape.

Red eyes, bloodstained maw, sharp fangs, instincts that view Subaru as merely a wad of meat.

Utterly repugnant, utterly loathsome, this is the greatest adversary in the Sanctuary.

Both: “—El Minya!!”

Subaru and Beatrice’s cantos mirror each other, and the conjured spears rain down at the ground from on high.

Explosions and destruction rock the earth of the Sanctuary, eviscerating the ugly witchbeast.

Emilia: “Amazing…”

Sighs Emilia in admiration as she freezes a hare that slipped past solid.

Her amethyst eyes stay fixated on Subaru and Beatrice, fighting the beast beyond the shroud of snow.

More specifically, Emilia’s eyes stay fixated on Beatrice as she holds Subaru’s hand. Emilia herself is a spiritualist, who is using the minor spirits’ magic this very instant. She understands to a painful degree how incredible this magical confrontation is.

First, Beatrice is not receiving any magical reserves from Subaru.

They are definitely connected by the pass from their Contract: it’s simply that Beatrice is abstaining from doing so. Subaru was thrown into combat immediately after forming this spirit Contract. If Beatrice siphons the mana she needs from him, he won’t last. Beatrice understands this, and is taking care not to burden Subaru.

Second, it’s not that Beatrice is taking magic from Subaru—she’s giving it to him.

It’s not the most accurate phrasing, but it’s the truth. Subaru, as he holds hands with Beatrice, is receiving Beatrice’s support, allowing him to use magic that should be inaccessible to him. He isn’t using his gate, and is instead using Beatrice’s presence itself like a gate. There is no way that Subaru can possibly understand how monumental this is.

Beatrice the spirit is supplying the magic for both herself and Subaru not from some outside source, but her own magical stockpile.

And third, she is legitimately witnessing advanced yin magic.

The class of a magician’s magical affinity greatly influences their future. Specialization in any of the four main types of magic will demarcate them into distinct roles, and the same applies to the two special types of yin and yang; meaning that their essence differs greatly from the other four, even before reaching the advanced stages.

And then is the fact that they initially look to lack uses. They comes with lots of problems, like the time needed to procure results or required quantity of magical power, that are also cons.

So the yin and yang affinities are both rare, and have few advanced practitioners.

Many spells have been lost over time, unlike with the main four, making it a difficult environment to produce any new great magicians.

Yin has all of these glaring issues, and Beatrice has mastered it. And she is using ancient magic, long lost to time and history, as if it's nothing.

Emilia: "Woah, they went really high that time. Huh? They're gone…oh, there they went."

The way they fight is so dreamlike and phantasmal that it makes her lose her sense of reality. Though part of it probably comes from the fact that Subaru and Beatrice are so amicably holding hands.

Emilia can tell that Subaru is fighting desperately, but Beatrice is even smiling.

She must be having a lot of fun. It's not that she enjoys fighting, or flaunting her power. It's just that doing this is fun for her.

Emilia: "…"

Emilia blinks, and Subaru and Beatrice have moved to a completely different spot. It's teleportation magic akin to the more limited Gate Crossing. Purple spears blast through a row of hares from either end, the beasts shrieking furiously as they try to leap at the two, only for their bodies to catch on something midair and shred apart.

Emilia strains her eyes. She spots it.

The fragments from the detonated spear have not vanished, and instead sit suspended in space, as if frozen in time. The leaping hares shred themselves on those splinters, ripping themselves apart. The crystalline trap is spread all across the area as the witchbeasts move, jumping, tumbling to resolutely attack the two, all while triggering the trap quite comically.

The Sizeable Hare is a fearsome witchbeast, but the individual hares are not that threatening. They lack any great power, and should an experienced fighter pay mind to the hare's ferocity while combating it, they will definitely come out ahead.

A fighting style as reckless as 'follow your instinct to eat' will learn nothing. They want their fellow hares to be caught and dismembered in the traps, because their hunger is everything. So they pay no heed to the fact that they will die caught in the exact same trap, jump at them, and become a cadaver.

Emilia: "Ah!"

Emilia strikes another hare that escaped the siege with her magic.

She dashes over to the frozen hare and kicks it to pieces without any hesitation. It shatters into shards of ice, so utterly deceased that it cannot reform.

Subaru and Beatrice have been putting in such a good fight that only a surprisingly few hares have slipped past to Emilia. Emilia can even concentrate on suppressing her own magical power.

But even as she watches Beatrice's display of overwhelming strength, Emilia cannot erase the kernel of anxiety within her.

Beatrice's snare is powerful and cunning. The Sizeable Hare keeps catching itself in the trap, building a mountain of corpses. But Emilia cannot see the end.

What Emilia witnesses is one of the hares trembling, when another hare appears as if sprouted out of the first one's back. The hares repeat and repeat this, the beasts multiplying like mice.

100 hares compounds into 200 in an instant, and into 400 in the

next.

It has numbers, and wretched instincts ignorant to the concept of ‘stopping’.

Which is why this beast is counted as one of the great three, and has gone four hundred years doing whatever it wishes as a Calamity —

Emilia: “Subaru, Beatrice.”

Emilia calls their names. Though they look to have an overwhelming advantage, they mustn’t fall negligent.

Emilia will never forget how she shivered after returning to the tomb with Roswaal and Ram, and first confirmed the Sizeable Hare’s presence.

Those eyes regarded every single thing alive as nothing more than its food.

An entity truly incapable of any co-existence will make those who oppose it feel that utter despair.

To oppose that overwhelming absurdity, Emilia needed to demonstrate comparable power.

And that was what she had intended to do.

A torrent of magic churns within her, not fully under her control. It surely cannot all belong to her alone, and should she unleash it, it will annihilate the Sizeable Hare.

She would be offering her life in exchange. And she was prepared to do that, if it came to it.

Emilia: “Subaru…”

She murmurs his name as he fights on.

Her had known about the Hare’s attack beforehand, and it doesn’t seem that he’s fighting it without a plan. He’s brought Beatrice out of the Forbidden Archive, and has her so full of life.

He would never do anything to bring gloom to that smile.

And so Emilia believes in Natsuki Subaru.

White magic, capable of ending everything, asserts its presence in her heart. She holds it down, advising that its time has not come yet.

—She believes in his words.

3

For Subaru, using magic has always been tantamount to whittling away his soul.

At first it had been exactly like what Puck and Roswaal had said, that Subaru possessed not the slightest of talent as a magician. It was so bad that, when he first used Shamak, he couldn't keep himself from wringing out his mana and so fell immobile.

He next got by on hits of Bocco Fruit. He used magic during his duel even when he was prohibited from doing so, and ultimately he abused his gate so terribly that it collapsed. He has not any hope of being a magician.

Magic had saved Subaru many times, but he considered it something like whittling away at his already delicate core, sharpening it down, something like that. He thought it inevitable that it broke.

And so he had only dreamed about doing what he's doing now, firing off consecutive blasts of incredible magic, and could only think this reality impossible.

Subaru: "Hey, Beatrice! Should we really keep blasting them like this?!"

The Sizeable Hare generates more hares than what Subaru and Beatrice defeat. The hares eat their dead brethren, steadily compounding in number. It seems like they're using their multiplication as energy, for each hare grows more forceful the more that their number compounds.

This does encourage some dim hopes that, if they keep buying time, the hares will eventually run out of energy to multiply themselves. But,

Beatrice: "There's no limit to their propagation, in fact. That's how they were crafted to be, I suppose. Even when they verge on destruction they will not be destroyed. Unless you annihilate them all at once."

Subaru: "So what do we do? Do you have any ideas?"

Beatrice: "Subaru, are you trying to rely on adorable Betty for everything, I suppose?"

An explosion of crystal opens a hole in the mob, blasting the hares away, to be dismembered on the suspended shards. Beatrice sees this through as she pulls Subaru's arm and hops into the air. Though neither her tug nor her jump are that forceful, she easily succeeds in both.

Beatrice walks on air, dancing through space to avoid the hares' fangs as she weaves through gaps in her crystalline snare. The lack of a single drop of blood sullying her extravagant dress proves that, in this fight, she feels not the slightest agitation or unease.

Beatrice: "We're moving, in fact."

Subaru: "Right."

With that, space bends, and the two engage in a short-range teleport.

They cross through space in a manner unlike Gate Crossing, reappearing behind the horde of hares. The beasts sniff, but having lost Subaru and Beatrice, remain fraught with openings.

Beatrice: "You take the left, I suppose."

Subaru: "Right's all yours."

Visualize. Beatrice's magic reacts to Subaru's fantasy, manipulates the world, and brings about that transformation.

He definitely feels that he is benefiting at her expense, but that's why he's not playing around in the slightest.

The purple crystals of yin's Minya spells form in accordance with Subaru's imagination.

Subaru generates winding grooves on the projectiles to magnify their piercing force before firing them off all at once. His hands never touch them, but they do fire according to his will. It's like he's drawing a mental bowstring, to shoot incorporeal arrows.

They spear through the air, landing a direct hit on the undefended hares, blasting the mob of them screeching away.

Beatrice's destruction does the same thing to the right end of the mob, scattering them in all directions.

Fissures in space swallow mobs of hares, sealing several hundreds inside a closed space as if in a picture frame. The hares hop about beyond the looking-glass. Beatrice fires a crystalline spear at the heedless mob of hares—shattering the planar world to pieces, sending the hares inside to their end.

Subaru swallows his breath, astonished at Beatrice's multifaceted sorcery.

While Subaru keeps repeating Minya like an idiot, Beatrice keeps repeating entirely new combinations of yin magic to annihilate the Sizeable Hare.

It's as if she's showing off every card she has in hand to Subaru. Or as if she's doing it to remind herself of her skills.

Beatrice: "About now, in fact."

Subaru: "Hm?"

The Sizeable Hare has been cut down in number, only for it to instantly regenerate the exact quantity it lost.

Subaru witnesses this, and again feels the strangeness that he has been feeling for a while now.

Putting that together with Beatrice's muttering, Subaru feels the urge for a conversation.

Subaru: "Beatrice. They've been recovering the same number they lost…but doesn't it feel like they've never gone over their original amount?"

Supposing there are one thousand hares, if Subaru defeats one hundred of them, it multiplies to make one hundred more. If he defeats two hundred hares, he gets two hundred more hares. The scales have not tipped once, no matter how many of them he kills.

But Subaru has never seen them multiply beyond that highest number.

Beatrice nods to Subaru.

Beatrice: "Their multiplication itself may be unlimited, but there is likely a ceiling to how many hares there can be, in fact. So they cannot multiply beyond that, I suppose."

Subaru: "Then, if we can finish off that ceiling all at once…"

Beatrice: "Theoretically, that will destroy it. …But that presents its own difficulties, in fact."

Subaru sees hope, but Beatrice makes a complicated expression.

Well, of course. There are enough hares to drown out everything in sight. If they had the magic to burn everything in visible range then they might be able to destroy the Hare, but how much power would it take to do it all in one second, and get all of them?

It's a violent plan akin to missile bombing the whole region. And if even one of them survives, they will all instantly regenerate. The risk is far too great.

Subaru: "Then…okay. That's it."

Beatrice: “You’ve thought of something, I suppose?”

Subaru: “It’s me being utterly dependent on you yet again but yeah.”

Subaru watches the witchbeast multiply as he whispers into Beatrice’s ear.

Beatrice lowers her gaze in thought, and nods.

Beatrice: “I’ve been thinking the same thing, in fact. But doing it would require…”

Subaru: “I know there’s a bottleneck. However! You better not get the wrong idea, Beatrice!”

Beatrice: “—?”

Subaru: “It’s not like we have to solve this problem on our own, yeah?”

Beatrice’s eyes widen at this. She gives a quiet sigh, pitching over in Subaru’s direction to set her forehead on his chest.

Beatrice: “Truly, Subaru…you present some extraordinary solutions, in fact.”

Subaru: “I do promise to be such a thrillingly fresh and novel Contractor that you’ll never ever get bored.”

Subaru shoots her a thumbs up, his teeth sparkling. Beatrice smiles wryly before looking up, her face against his chest.

Beatrice: “Fine I suppose, let’s do it in fact. But even Betty needs time to pull this off, I suppose. Let’s see you manage well over that period, in fact.”

Subaru: “Just pretend you’re relaxing on a safe sturdy boat. It’s what I’m doing.”

Beatrice: “We’ll see who’ll be doing the paddling, I suppose.”

Beatrice pushes away from Subaru's chest.

She takes a breath, closes her eyes, and begins focusing on escalating her magic.

Seeing this, Subaru psychs himself up and kicks off the snow.

The witchbeast's fangs click and clatter as it chases Subaru, running. Silhouettes come swooping for his legs. But they're too slow. After these two days of butcheries, the Sizeable Hare looks wimpy.

Subaru: "Out of the way! Move it! I don't have the time to deal with you right now!" Subaru dodges the fangs, kicks away the hares.

He incants, using crystal spears to force open a path as he charges through the clearing with Beatrice cradled in his arms, sprinting back to the tomb.

Emilia: "Huh, wha, Subaru?!"

Emilia looks shocked as she witnesses Subaru's return.

Subaru skids to a stop beside her before placing Beatrice, her eyes closed, on the snowy ground beside him and stroking her head.

Subaru: "Sorry, Emilia-tan! We're having some trouble pulling it off on our own!"

Emilia: "I-I mean, that's fine, but…what do we do now? Right, I'm going to—"

Subaru: "No, we have an idea for how to beat it. You don't have to use your suicide bomber absolute death moves. Or actually just don't use them. It'll make all our efforts until now pointless."

Emilia swallows her breath and stares intently at Subaru's face.

Did she seriously think he wouldn't figure it out? She seriously did, didn't she.

Of course Emilia would, if truly backed into a corner in a situation like this, bring harm to herself to land the decisive blow. What an impossible girl.

‘It’s okay to hurt myself if it saves everyone?’ Just stop.

Subaru: “It’s best that everyone’s safe and everyone’s saved, duh.”

Emilia: “…Subaru.”

Subaru: “So Emilia- tan, I have kind of a crazy request. If it doesn’t look feasible then I’ll think on it more, but if it looks feasible then I want to see your best. —Let’s all win this together.”

Emilia: “…”

Emilia puts her hand to her chest, seeming to feel something about Subaru’s statement, blinking several times.

Subaru conjures crystal spears and fires them at the witchbeast horde to hold them in check, buying time for Emilia to come to her decision. It does not end up taking long at all.

Emilia: “Alright. Let’s do this, Subaru. I’m ready for anything.”

Says Emilia, steeling her resolve, her gaze determined.

Subaru pumps his fists as he glances back to her.

Subaru: “That’s the spirit. Here we go!”

4

Subaru feels incredible swells of magic beside him, coming from both sides.

Emilia stands on his left, and Beatrice on his right.

Each of them holds one of Subaru’s hands, linking the three of them together.

There was no real significance to them doing this. It’s just to motivate Subaru.

In context of battle, you call ‘motivation’ ‘morale’. And high morale is essential for dictating the tide of battle.

Subaru: “Visualize, visualize, visualize!”

Subaru envisions the wicked, powerful, magical assault.

He creates pointed amethyst spears and bombards the expanse of approaching hares with them. He fights his hardest, repeating volley after volley to keep the hares from reaching either themselves or the tomb.

Subaru is not using his own mana to cast this magic. So he is casting without suffering any strain—would be a complete misunderstanding.

He is getting the mana he needs to cast from Beatrice, but Subaru is the one regulating the magic. He visualizes the spears’ force, their aim, their quantity, materializes them and fires them, then instantly moves to the next attack.

He would be suffering even more bodily fatigue alongside this, were he an actual magician. He cannot hope to imagine the immense burden and concurrent workload. He can agree with his lack of talent for it.

The spears strike against the ground, shockwaves and detonations sending the hares flying as they screech in protest. Their fangs click and chitter and click and chitter and click and with the howling blizzard as accompaniment, it sounds like the cog-wheels of hell, or something to that effect.

The cogs on the grim conveyor to send Subaru’s team to the guillotine press ever closer.

Subaru: “Minya! Minya! Ah, crap! Biting my tongue on this magic!”

While grumbling about the unpronounceable incantation, Subaru takes aim at the charging Hare. He fires the conjured crystals, and the leading hare’s head—goes untouched as the spear strikes the ground before it, and the shockwave pushes it back into the mob.

The plan is in phase one.

Subaru is controlling the horde with his conjured spears, but he isn't killing them. They want to avoid disruption to the ceiling, and having the hares multiply at some indefinite juncture. He is keeping the Sizeable Hare at its ceiling while pinning it in place. Although,

Subaru: "If you're attracted to mana's smell, then there's no way you're prying your attention from us."

After all, there are two people here maintaining nigh- unwitnessed magnitudes of mana. And they're both beautiful girls. Subaru, right now, has flowers in both hands. Anyone would envy him.

Subaru: "Visualize, visualize, visualize…come on, you gotta be jealous! Wanna try coming closer!" Hums Subaru, not neglecting to taunt the animal.

Part of it is to inflame the enemy, but it's more about Subaru encouraging himself. If he feigns that an extraordinary situation is an ordinary one, he can manage to keep himself going.

If he doesn't do this, he cannot assure himself steady knees. Both of his hands feel a warmth. With this touch on his palms, he absolutely cannot show the pathetic side of himself.

Subaru: "Visualize, visualize, visualize…!"

Mutters Subaru over and over as he strains his eyes.

The horde of hares has pushed forward; there is a limit to how far Subaru can restrain them. But preparations are not in place yet.

Not Emilia's, or Beatrice's, or Subaru's.

Emilia: "…Subaru."

He feels someone squeeze his hand, and looks to find Emilia gazing at him, her eyes faintly open.

Her preparations are in order, then? She is smiling, awaiting Subaru's signal.

Subaru: “—Hic.”

Pushed onward by Emilia’s gaze, Subaru strains his bloodshot eyes further.

The curtain of blustering blizzard is thick, constantly concealing and revealing the places he is trying to see. But the sight of their wriggling, white forms does tell Subaru of the slight difference between the witchbeast and the snowbanks.

—Just a little more, a tiny, right there, there, there, there!

Subaru grits his teeth. Waits for the moment.

Confirming that the front, the sides, all of it, everything is correct, Subaru’s eyes shoot open.

Subaru: “Now, Emilia! Follow the lines!!”

Shouting, Subaru squeezes down on Emilia’s hand.

Emilia’s amethyst gaze focuses firmly to the front as she looks at the lines Subaru drew.

While he kept the Hare in check with conjured spears, Subaru had been simultaneously drawing lines across the earth with mana. Using formless mana to gouge into the earth had been the utmost in difficulty.

But Subaru, as talentless as people called him, overcame that ordeal by a combination of focus and pretentions that far exceeded those of the ordinary person. The ones that disallowed him from looking uncool around others, those pretentions.

He drew four lines in total.

Four long lines, that form a box around the mass of hares.

Lines that would tell Emilia where to aim.

Emilia: “Excellent, Subaru! You did sooo wonderful!”

Cheers Emilia at his beautiful set-up, saying things she would usually never say.

Emilia raises her right hand, Subaru's hand still in her grip, and places her half-frozen left hand atop it. And, incants.

Emilia: "—Al Huma!!"

The multitude of magic surges as the world transforms in accordance to Emilia's canto.

Mana rushes to Emilia and Subaru's linked hands before shooting into the atmosphere, piercing through the earth, and converging with Subaru's lines of mana. —The earth bellows as something incredible occurs.

Subaru: "Woah…"

Says Subaru, astonished, as he watches what happens.

Well of course. Anyone witnessing this would react the same way.

Emilia's magic traces over the lines that Subaru drew—and all of the snow within the box starts levitating.

All of the hares within the box remain atop the snow platform, but they have not noticed that these tremors happened because the ground beneath them is floating.

It may be a limited space, but the floating platform is still about twenty by twenty meters. This sight, of so many hares crowded together and shuddering on this platform, beautifully demonstrates the supernatural nature of 'magic'.

Subaru: "Emilia!"

Emilia: "Got it! I'm not letting them get away!"

But if they stop here, then the Hare is just going to jump off the platform.

There is one more thing they have to do to keep it from escaping.

Emilia raises their linked hands up high—and swings them right down.

The floating snowfield rumbles. Surely, the Hare never imagined what would happen.

A roar, and a frigid blast of stabbing wind.

It showers over Subaru and the others as they keep their eyes fixated on the platform, to see the results through.

—By the time the wind stops, the snowfield is vertically shut.

The left and right ends of Emilia's floating platform have folded to meet at the center.

The ground has been shut in the same manner as a book, sealing the Hare inside the snow without any means of escape.

Subaru hurriedly looks over the closed platform's surroundings. They missed—none. Movement—nowhere.

All of the hares are in one place, trapped in an extraordinarily small area. With this,

Subaru: "The big one's all on you, Beatrice!"

Subaru calls to Beatrice, telling her that the secondary set-up is complete. Hearing this, and having quietly chanted the canto the entire time, Beatrice's eyes open.

Seeing the sight before her, Beatrice laughs quietly.

It's not surprise or anything like that. A smile abounding with trust arises on her face,

Beatrice: "Here is the pinnacle of yin. —Al Shamak."

The instant she murmurs the chant, a shadow drowns out the world.

—For a moment, it is manhandled by something like vertigo.

But it really does only last for a moment.

The vertigo stops, and a shock impacts its feet. Then the bondage pressing on its body disappears. It starts off by giving a big shake to get the snow off its fur.

It sniffs the air, looks around the area.

Its eyes, its nose, its ears, all get the better of it as they prioritize the hunt for prey. Its red eyes glance about as it searches for sweet-smelling game.

Nothing. There had been prey so delectable that it made its stomach wrench painfully, right in front of it, just a second ago. With tender flesh and sweet blood, prey that might sate this starvation even temporarily had definitely been right there.

Its nose smells nothing. Its eyes see nothing. Its ears hear nothing.

The prey is gone. It looks around. Nowhere in sight.

Hunger instantly overwrites its disappointment. To distract itself from its hunger and urge to chew, it decides to bite into the white mass beside to it.

It gnashes at it, shreds its flesh, slurps at its blood while clawing out its innards. It chews away to its heart's content, swallows it down, and then notices that identical meals are unfolding all around it.

There's less prey now.

It doesn't feel like it's in danger, but in accordance with its survival instincts, it bites off the head of another white mass that frantically consumes all around it. Bites into it, and swallows it down.

And this repeats. And repeats. Spurred on by endless hunger, it goes to the neighboring prey, and the prey neighboring that, and the prey neighboring that, and the prey neighboring that, and the prey neighboring—.

Eventually, after devouring everything around, it is the only thing left.

It licks up the blood soaking the ground, leaving not a single scrap of gore or blood-soaked grass left. Once it tidily cleans up the remains of the meal, it truly is alone.

But even with meat in its stomach, starvation far exceeding its body mass assaults it.

It cries out, teeth chattering, near to madness. Unending starvation, insatiable hunger. The maddening lack of release, no matter how much it eats.

Mother must have felt this too.

For an instant, a mysterious thought passes through a mind dominated by hunger.

The indistinct thing had been a simple flash of emotion, nothing so cultivated as to reach language.

And it, too, vanishes eternally in the face of maddening hunger.

The creature trembles, trembles violently. It shrieks as it feels its innards churn about, and it unconsciously creates another entity.

This sudden, new white mass tumbles back-first onto the ground, as if it’s forgotten how to walk. Every single one of its organs registers this thing prey, and it bites into the tumbling mass without any hesitation.

It swallows it down without allowing it even to shriek. After eating, the hunger still torments it. And following all this agonized struggling, another creature other than itself is born into the world.

And it repeats, and it repeats, the same thing going on and on and on and on.

It’s alone now. Nothing else exists in this world. There are buildings, and forests, and earth, and air and wind, but no prey. It’s alone.

And it proceeds to eat.

Eventually, even IT is devoured by another stomach, and disappears.

The new lonely one repeats and repeats it all until it is that no longer. The world turns.

—Insatiable hunger is never to be sated.

6

The momentary presence of the incredible shadow makes Subaru swallow his breath.

Subaru: "…"

The black orb that Beatrice's canto created swallows the snowfield trapping the Hare that Emilia sealed, then proceeds to shrink smaller and smaller, before eventually shrinking smaller than a marble and silently vanishing.

Even Subaru, who does not know the theory behind this feat, understands what this means.

Al Shamak, the greatest of Shamak spells, is magic that affects space.

The magic swallowed the Hare and the snowfield, then blasted them all into another dimension.

Neither regeneration nor multiplication mean anything any more.

Because it's literally another world's issue.

Subaru: "I know I did…ask you to send them into an isolated space like the Forbidden Archive, but…"

Beatrice: "Do I hear malcontent, I suppose?"

Subaru's voice trembles before the incredible feat, while Beatrice pouts beside him.

She puts her hands to her hips, quite displeased with Subaru's attitude.

Emilia: "Seriously, wow…"

The whole thing makes Emilia's eyes open wide as well.

Emilia is more learned in magic than Subaru, so her surprise is happening on another vector. Her powers have probably settled in somewhat after half-freezing herself and using such immense magic. Once she figures out how to control it, she'll probably be fine.

Subaru looks around, confirming that there is nothing where the Hare used to be.

Then he glances behind him, and confirms that the tomb is secure too. Peeking out from the tomb is an expressionless mob of Ryuzu's. Looks like the Ryuzu doubles have all managed to reach safety too.

Roswaal is leaning against the wall beside the tomb's entrance, with Ram in his arms.

Ram's hand is touching Roswaal's cheek, and Subaru can see that Roswaal is crying.

Subaru: "…"

Witnessing that, Subaru feels the weight in his chest disappear.

There are still so many things that they have to talk about. Otto, Garfiel, and the others are still back at the mansion. He does believe they're safe, but they need to meet up and talk. And on this side, too. He has so many things to ask Emilia.

But somehow, it feels like everything is all right.

There are so many things he hasn't verified yet. But seeing Roswaal crying, and Ram smiling softly as she watches him, makes Subaru feel that: hey, everything's all right.

Emilia: "Subaru, come on!"

Subaru takes his breather, until Emilia suddenly pokes his cheek.

Emilia smiles at Subaru when he looks back at her, and then gestures to the area behind him. Where there Beatrice stands with her arms folded, still looking sulky.

Beatrice: “I believe that this ace deserves a few words, in fact.”

Beatrice puffs out her cheeks. Subaru replies with a nod.

And,

Beatrice: “Ah, eep!”

Subaru slips his hands under her arms and lifts her right up.

He ignores her adorable yelp, embracing her as he spins around on the spot,

Subaru: “You did it! Knew you could, I’m so in love with you, Beako!!”

Beatrice: “Wh—hold it! Sto—let me—let me go, I suppose! Betty isn’t…”

Subaru: “Yes yes yes! You are adorable! Beako is wonderful! Beako is supreme! All hail Beako!”

Showing her in praise, Subaru spins round and around with Beatrice in his arms.

Beatrice’s face flashes beet red as Emilia watches them frolic, her gaze awfully gentle. The spirit and Contractor, spinning and spinning in an energetic expression of delight—

Both: “Ah!”

—Lose their footing at the last moment, and happily plunge face-first into the snow together.

Interlude: Each Gives Concession

1

Subaru: “—Aaand, done!”

Subaru sticks the two twigs into the heap of snow before him, then wipes the sweat from his brow.

It’s an amateur work, thrown together in an hour, but he still has to be impressed at the results.

Murmurs of admiration spread through the onlooking crowd as well.

Subaru: “Yeah, I must have a talent for this stuff. If we’re ever hurting for food money, we can make it snow, and make it as the esteemed snow artists of the nation.”

Emilia: “Stop being so silly. I’m not going to make it snow to help you with that. …But, it really does look sooo good.”

Says Emilia with a white puff of breath as she sits on the stone steps, observing Subaru’s work. Reflected in her amethyst eyes is Subaru’s snowman—but since labelling it as a ‘snowman’ wouldn’t quite describe it correctly, perhaps it’s better to call it a ‘snow sculpture.’

There are now about 20 sculptures of Puck crafted from the leftover snow in the Sanctuary. What had compelled Subaru to make so many? Ask him, and he would only be able to answer with: copious romanticism.

But it’s making Emilia and the Sanctuary’s people happy, so the shallow rationale will suffice. ???: “I’m sure that you’re not trying to be, but you truly are an idiot, Barusu.” Says someone else, judging Subaru harshly.

The speaker is a girl, seated on the steps with her head on Emilia's lap. She has dressed out of her trademark maid uniform and currently wears a simple white outfit.

Her clothes burned as she wavered between life and death. While her face does look paler than usual, neither her tone nor venom suffer for it. So everything's good.

Subaru: "The two of you keep ganging up to call dumb…I did put in quite a bit of work throughout this whole mess, so can't you be nicer to me? I could use a little more commendation."

Emilia: "Mm, you're right. Thank you sooo much, Subaru. But I was the one doing work when you were away, so actually I'd like commendation too."

Subaru: "The stuff you've started saying, Emilia-tan…"

Though, Emilia does deserve praise for protecting the Sanctuary during Subaru's absence. It's uncertain whether the residents would have escaped the Hare had Emilia not instructed them to go in the tomb. And had Emilia not cleared the Trials, there would've been nowhere to take shelter anyway.

Neither is it certain that Subaru would have thought to use the tomb as a shelter. Since his thoughts had been fixated on escaping before the snow came.

Subaru: "Well, we'll call it a happy mistake that the Men's Brigade came back and sparked your motivation, Emilia-tan. …Seriously, thank you."

This is true for previous affairs too, but this whole series of events involved far too many gambles.

It feels like Subaru couldn't manage on his own, and constantly had others rescuing him. Even though he'd decided to take the hardest parts upon himself, ideally.

Emilia: "But of course, though. If you do absolutely everything for me, Subaru, I'm going stop knowing what I'm even doing here. You've done enough zipping around that it's okay for you to rest a little.”

Subaru: “No it’s just that when I want to help with all the brains and brawn I don’t have, running around like an idiot’s all I can do.”

Emilia: “But that’s going to change, yes?”

Says Emilia teasingly, suppressing a laugh as she strokes Ram’s head. Subaru instantly understands, and rubs his finger under his nose as he replies with a, “yeah.”

He made many mistakes, and others were constantly rescuing him, but he managed to save basically everything he needed to. And he would never agonize over these issues alone again.

Subaru would no longer hesitate to rely on others, would not slack in his own efforts either, and has people to give him a good kick in the ass when he needs it.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru looks up, shifting his gaze from the clearing to the tomb.

His gaze goes past Emilia as she sits on the steps, all the way to the mouth of the tomb. Inside that place, its Trial mechanism absent, are two people.

What could they be discussing inside? It does prey on Subaru’s mind, but,

Subaru: “Well, even I have enough tact not to interrupt them.”

There’s a wealth of opportunities they have to speak, but they couldn’t stand to wait.

Surely. They have mountains of things to discuss.

2

A girl and a man face each other with a transparent coffin between them.

Girl: “Mother…”

Murmurs the girl as she looks at the woman in the crystal coffin.

It feels like she’s floating, like her feet aren’t touching the ground. Some of it is from the remaining rush of battle, some of it is from her feelings of loss and liberation from losing her old haunt, and most of it is from the unreal sight before her.

She had never thought that she would see her mother again.

The woman in the coffin—the witch, Echidna—looks not at all different from Beatrice’s memories. Long, white, beautiful hair alongside her intelligent yet gentle features. It vividly revives memories of how she smiled at Beatrice, though it only happened rarely.

Beatrice: “Betty…wasn’t able to keep her promise to you, I suppose. I’m sorry.” Beatrice strokes the coffin, beginning the four-hundred-year reunion with an apology.

When they parted, Echidna had instructed Beatrice to give her stockpile of knowledge to THEY. Had given her abundant books to fill the Archive, and a gospel that told the future. Beatrice no longer has either.

The gospel telling the future that Echidna desired of Beatrice, and all of the knowledge that Echidna amassed, has departed the world as ashes.

Beatrice: “Betty never even met THEY…and the books have burned, in fact. I’ve done excessively many things I must apologize for, I suppose.”

I’m a terrible daughter, thinks Beatrice.

A foolish daughter who could not achieve even one of her mother’s requests, even with four centuries. Now she is meeting her mother who she cannot even face, and should be apologizing profusely, but—

???: “…You look raaaaaaaather more refreshed.”

Mutters the man across from her, easily disclosing her thoughts.

Beatrice glances up to see a man with long hair arise from the dim, smiling weakly. It's Roswaal. He's supposed to be a familiar face, but Beatrice cannot keep herself from feeling offput by him. Perhaps because his eyes, always crazed in pursuit of his goals ever since Beatrice had met him, now look uncertain—and because he is missing is clown makeup, his face bare.

Beatrice: "You best me in terms of refreshed in fact, Roswaal. Making my presence without cosmetics means violating the instructions from your predecessor, I suppose."

Roswaal: "The clown make-up was a sort of war paint for me, yoooooou see. Wearing it let me interact with others spiritedly, as though I were donning a mask. But there's sooooooooomething I realized."

Beatrice: "Yes?"

Roswaal: "That regardless of the make-up, I am aaaaaaan absolute clown. So how meaningful is it, truly, that I neglect my cosmetics?"

Beatrice: "I see, in fact."

Beatrice nods as Roswaal gives a joking shrug. She fiddles with her pigtails in silence before going on,

Beatrice: "Now."

Beatrice: "You must have things to say to Mother, I suppose. Reunion with her has been your…has been your family's deepest wish, in fact."

Roswaal says nothing.

Beatrice: "You mark perhaps the tenth Roswaal since the progenitor who directly knew Mother, I suppose. Lords of the Mathers family have been short-lived for generations, so the visitors to the Archive shifted rather steadily, in fact. …You've been different ever since childhood, I suppose."

Beatrice may not have been deeply involved in the history of the Mathers Family, but she did watch from aside how their affairs progressed.

The first Roswaal was Echidna's only student. Though he lost almost all of his magical ability in his fight with the warlock Hector, he did not give up on being Echidna's student.

He frequented the Archive even after Echidna's death, disregarding the dazed Beatrice as he obsessively searched and searched and searched for something, and likely gave that something to his descendant before dying.

Ever since, all the descendants from Roswaal's line demonstrated magical capabilities bordering on those of their progenitor, and the Mathers family expanded.

Now is the current Roswaal. The man standing in front of Beatrice.

This Roswaal exhibited the most supreme talent out of all the Roswaal's yet. He was such a genius that, secretly, even Beatrice had to shiver.

His power eclipsed that of the progenitor, who Echidna had singled out personally, and could have done anything he wanted with his claim as one of the strongest magicians in the world.

Beatrice: "You had all that talent, and you still failed to escape the Mathers' curse, in fact. Your family has been entranced with thoughts of reuniting with my deceased Mother, the path a cruel one you fixedly walked…I do sympathize with you somewhat, I suppose."

Roswaal: "Do you? But how are you and we any different? You spent four centuries bound by the words of your deceased mother. It's identical. Or rather, unlike my family's shifting over the generations, you suffered pain in solitude beyond what anyone can empathize. We did what we needed to strive forward toward our goal. You simply suffered in place."

Says Roswaal, his words even graver than Beatrice's.

In the end, they're both bad, she thinks.

Roswaal's family has inherited the same feelings over lives upon short lives, in pursuit of a single reunion.

Beatrice had been trapped in an empty cage for her immortal life, waiting for the day that she could fulfil her promise.

An objective onlooker would see them as equally foolish clowns.

The two glare at each other in silence.

But their silent competition ends when Roswaal averts his gaze.

Roswaal: "This is a tedious argument. When two fools point at the other whilst mocking their foolishness, we begin crossing the boundaries of vain comedy."

Beatrice: "…You are correct there, in fact."

Roswaal: "Do you mind me asking something?"

Roswaal raises his finger. Beatrice silently looks up, expressing her consent by neglecting to reject him.

Roswaal looks down at Echidna as she sleeps in the coffin.

Roswaal: "Did Subaru manage to be your They?"

The word 'they' makes Beatrice swallow her breath. She has never spoken directly with Roswaal about THEY. But Beatrice does not think it strange for him to learn about her from sources outside her knowledge.

And thinking back on it, the people who had visited the Archive until now had ultimately been brought there by Roswaals up to the previous generation. The Roswaals easily could have heard the story from them and passed it on to their descendants.

And frankly you could say that even Subaru had been brought there by Roswaal. —Not that Subaru would accept it if you told him so.

Roswaal: "…Why are you laughing?"

Beatrice: "—Ah. Sorry, I suppose. I'm not laughing at you, Roswaal, in fact. It just made me imagine something amusing, I suppose."

It amuses Beatrice how she managed to figure, with pinpoint accuracy, what the black-haired man would say. He's just that straightforward, perhaps. She doesn't want to think any further into it than that.

Either way, Beatrice shakes her head.

Beatrice: "That man is…Subaru is not fit to be my THEY, in fact."

Roswaal: "…Hrm."

Beatrice: "Subaru isn't nearly qualified to inherit Mother's archive of knowledge, I suppose. He has no mind to educate himself with the knowledge or use it for his purposes, and he lacks the fundamental background to do either, in fact. And he looks dumb and he's flimsy and he's useless at magic and his legs are short, I suppose. He isn't Betty's awaited THEY in any capacity."

Roswaal: "That soooooooounds quiiiiiiiiite the harsh opinion."

Beatrice: "Exactly, I suppose, Betty is harsh, in fact. And so I rebuffed every opportunity that came to me over these four centuries. …I rebuffed them with THEY, in fact."

Beatrice does feel something like guilt towards all those who tried to take her out of the Archive, when she thinks of it now. Not all of them had reached out to Beatrice while thinking only in their own interests. Some of them had spoken kindly to her.

But Beatrice cast away every single hand that reached for her.

Beatrice: "I know that I should've chosen THEY, I suppose. That I should have faced everyone who called to me, individual by individual, and properly thought out my answer, in fact. I was meant to choose someone suitable to inherit the Archive, Echidna's knowledge…that has to be what it was, I suppose."

Roswaal: “However, you say that the one you picked, Subaru, is unfit to be THEY?”

Beatrice: “I do, in fact. There’s no issue, I suppose. Betty’s choice is Subaru, in fact. Not THEY. I chose Subaru, I suppose.”

Beatrice sees how Roswaal’s breath catches and his eyes open wide.

It must be a difficult answer for him to accept, considering how he has devoted himself to Echidna. Beatrice had been in the exact same position as him until only a moment ago. She understands how Roswaal feels so much that it hurts.

And because she understands, she has to explain it at length.

Beatrice: “Subaru laughed at me when I begged him to be they, in fact. He crowed that he could make me happier than someone I’ve never seen, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “What a…prideful thing to say.”

Beatrice: “I don’t dislike that forcefulness, in fact.”

Rather than enticing her with polite speech, explaining to her what she should do, and clarifying how he would use Echidna’s knowledge, he was utterly candid.

Roswaal: “But no matter what he preaches, Subaru will not place you in first. It’s obvious simply by looking at him…you must already recognize this.”

Beatrice: “You don’t seem to understand, I suppose, Roswaal.”

Roswaal: “I don’t?”

Beatrice: “Betty didn’t leave the Archive because she’s Subaru’s number one, in fact. I left the Archive because I want Subaru to be my number one, I suppose.”

Choose me, he said.

I’ll be too lonely to live without you, he said.

Convenient prattle, she thought. Pleasant bullshit, she thought.

But it swayed Beatrice's heart. It resonated. It took her heart, sealed stuck in one place for four hundred years, and jolted it.

Now that she knows the freedom she felt the instant she took his hand and left the Archive, and how it almost brought her to tears, her heart just won't stop.

Beatrice: "Abandoning my post may disqualify me as Mother's spirit, but I don't mind, in fact. Betty is Contractor Natsuki Subaru's spirit, I suppose. My regret and shame for that…is gone, I suppose."

Roswaal might consider it a betrayal.

He had also been bound for four centuries by Echidna's curse, and perhaps Beatrice's announcement that she escaped it first was a betrayal to him. She didn't escape by fulfilling her role, but by abandoning it.

If she's going to face her Mother, or face Roswaal, she has to rationalize that.

Beatrice: "…"

Her heart is already resolved. She has already taken that hand.

Beatrice is going to live a life so vivid it never fades to sepia. Something so intense that, no matter how the years drag on, she never forgets those important to her. So she keeps silent, waiting for Roswaal to reply.

Roswaal: "You don't have to brace yourself. I'm not the Witch Echidna's spokesman. I have no right to intrude on your answer, whatever it may be. Just do what you wish."

Beatrice: "Roswaal…"

Roswaal: "And even had you not abandoned them, you would have never fulfilled Echidna's orders. Because I would have prioritized my own desires over you and sacrificed you. If we are speaking of betrayals, that constitutes a significant one."

Beatrice: "…"

Penitently, Roswaal acknowledges his wrongdoings for what happened in the mansion.

Just as Beatrice had realized in the Archive, Roswaal was the one plotting to take Beatrice's life. She had reasoned it the result of the gospel. Though she doesn't see how it all connects.

Beatrice: "Roswaal. What happened to your gospel, I suppose?"

Roswaal: "…It's burned to nothing. Thanks to a wicked maid who deeeeeeefied her master. The future is in ashes now. And perhaps eeeeeeeeeverything is."

Beatrice: "Everything is hollow and the future lies imperceptible… would be something, but you look considerably refreshed, in fact."

Roswaal: "—I wonder iiiiiiiiif I am."

Roswaal casts his gaze down in reply to Beatrice's perfect repeat of their previous conversation. He reaches for Echidna in the coffin, for her untouchable fingertips.

Roswaal: "I'm sad that I've lost the definite path to the answer I seek, and scared. …But perhaps I'm also joyed to read a story that I never could have read before. Though, I haven't felt so in over four centuries now, so I can't tell whether it's legitimate."

Beatrice: "…?"

Beatrice scrunches her brows. Something feels off about that statement.

Seeing her confusion makes Roswaal smile slightly.

Roswaal: "We haven't spoken nearly enough."

He says with some self-deprecation.

Roswaal: "You can't dismiss it aaaaaaas being beyond our control. At first there was need to be blindly fixated, but after that we did have time. We spent so much time in the same mansion. And even so, even though we had seen the same things, I kept avoiding you, like I was scared of talking about it.”

Beatrice: “Roswaal, what are you trying to say, I suppose?”

Roswaal: “I’m saying that it could’ve been…that we could have spent our last four hundred years like we did in Teacher’s laboratory together.”

Beatrice: “Teach—?!”

Finding an old, familiar word in Roswaal’s quiet speech, Beatrice swallows her breath. She breathes a shaky breath as she swallows down the implications,

Beatrice: “Impossible, are…you, Roswaal?”

Roswaal: “I’ve always been Roswaal?”

Beatrice: “No! Not like that…you have to know what I mean, I suppose!”

Roswaal: “I’m only joking. And you’re correct. I’m—it’s me, Beatrice. Roswaal.”

The instant he interrupts himself, Beatrice sees Roswaal in double.

She sees a tall man with long navy hair, and a young man with hair the same color. That is the youth who adored Echidna, abounding in wits as he tagged along everywhere behind her.

Beatrice: “But, then…Roswaal, this…how?!”

Roswaal: “I’m using one of Teacher’s theories from her hunt for immortality, soul transcription. I adopted the least risky of the experiments conducted in this Sanctuary, and tested it on myself.”

Beatrice: “Soul transcription…that’s the experiment to transcribe your consciousness and memories into an empty vessel, achieving a subjective immortality…but that experiment ended in failure when the souls failed to adhere, in fact!”

Roswaal: “Transcribed souls are pretty poor at adhering to vessels when they’re empty. That was a setback, but…If the issue is a problem of familiarity between the soul and vessel, then I overcame that problem by increasing that familiarity quotient.”

The research faced setbacks due to problems of familiarity between vessel and soul.

After Ryuzu Meyer became the nexus of the Sanctuary, Echidna’s crazed thirst for knowledge lead her to consider adopting the crystallized Ryuzu for other experiments.

But the Ryuzu doubles lacked any quality that let them accept foreign souls, and the experiment ended in failure. Roswaal is saying that he bested this issue by associating the vessel with the soul. After mulling over this, Beatrice finally understands what Roswaal’s presence here truly means.

—By transcribing his soul into the body of his descendants, entities close to himself, the first Roswaal continuously extended the path to reach his goal.

Roswaal: “Are you going to call me inhuman, Beatrice?” Beatrice says nothing.

Roswaal: “Are you going to call it inhuman that I, desiring only my reunion with Teacher, committed the atrocity of assembling my ignorant children as vessels?”

Roswaal’s words stab into Beatrice.

But the way that Roswaal gazes so calmly at her makes it almost seem that he’s waiting for her to lambaste him.

So Roswaal wants to face judgement too? Just like her, when she informed him that she abandoned her Contract with Echidna?

Roswaal must want to ask Beatrice, who knew Echidna, about the morality of his actions. About his four-hundred-year obsession, his unerring and unrequited love that has done nothing but inconvenience others.

Beatrice: "…It's not my job to say anything about it, in fact. I know how this sounds, but Betty's relationships with your descendants were shallow, I suppose. Though, thinking on it now, they were all just you, in fact. So I feel no disgust that you founded yourself on your children outside of the gut reaction, I suppose. My thoughts on it are euch, in fact."

Roswaal: "Euch, huh. Hoooooooooow harsh."

Beatrice: "But that's all I think, I suppose. Actually, I'm overjoyed that a friend from four hundred years ago is still alive, in fact."

Roswaal: "…I, see."

Roswaal closes his eyes. That might not have been the reply that Roswaal was looking for, but Beatrice doesn't care.

Beatrice is conveying her emotions honestly. That's how she resolved to be when she left the Archive. And now,

Beatrice: "Roswaal. Squat down for a moment, I suppose."

Roswaal: "Squat? Here?"

Roswaal tilts his head as Beatrice points to the ground beside her. Beatrice nods. Roswaal's eyes widen as he obediently squats down on the spot.

Beatrice watches Roswaal squat down as she removes her right shoe. She grasps it firm in her right hand,

Beatrice: "Grin and bear it, in fact."

Roswaal: "—Ghah?!"

Roswaal's face now rests at the perfect height to get slapped with a shoe.

The satisfying slap echoes through the room as it whacks Roswaal's face aside. He puts his hand to his reddened cheek, eyes spinning.

Beatrice puts her shoe back on during his confusion.

Beatrice: “Since I’m generous, I’ll say that’s enough to forgive you, I suppose. …It’s just consequences speaking for consequences, in fact. Subaru’s going to forgive you too, so I may as well let you off, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “…And I think that’s your hindsight bias speaking after everything ended with no deaths.”

Beatrice: “It is, in fact. Also, Subaru’s amazing for all the work he did to prevent any deaths, I suppose. You ought to take a lesson from him, in fact.”

Roswaal: “—Ha, hahaha! Reeeeeeeally now! I ought to take a lesson from him! Ahaha! My god…ahh, is that not, geeeeeeeeeeeenuinely humorous?”

Roswaal laughs as if Beatrice, hands on her hips, just told an excellent joke. He cannot keep himself from pitching back in laughter and bonking his head on the wall. Then he strikes the back of his head against the wall several times more, before giving a deep sigh.

Roswaal: “Sorry. —But I don’t feel that I’ve done anything wrong. Let me state that much.”

Beatrice: “Whatever, I suppose. If you’re going to apologize, do it the others, in fact.”

Roswaal gives Beatrice’s curt statement a nod.

Still seated on the ground, he looks up at the coffin.

And,

Roswaal: “Beatrice. What follows is a discussion only between you and me.”

Beatrice: “…”

Roswaal’s lowered voice makes Beatrice narrow her eyes.

Beatrice crosses her arms and jerks her chin to say, well, we’ll see what you have to say. Roswaal places his hand on the coffin as he pulls himself to his feet, and gazes at Echidna. His odd-colored eyes teem with maniacal passion,

Roswaal: “—If it were possible to truly see Teacher again, would you assist me in it?”

SETOWI

3

Subaru: “Man, they’re really not coming out. I know they have a bunch of stuff to to talk about, but isn’t this too much?”

Impatient with the stale situation, Subaru pouts as he waits in the clearing.

He has already made ten more snowmen. There are now thirty sculptures of Puck making various expressions, transfixing Emilia and the Sanctuary’s residents.

And Ram, who had quite enviably been borrowing Emilia’s lap for the past while, has recovered considerably and now leans easily against the stone steps. But since her gaze keeps shifting toward the tomb, it’s clear that she’s worried about what’s going on inside.

Beatrice has been awoken, and Roswaal has backed down.

Subaru doubts that anything violent will happen, but he does understand Ram’s concerns. They haven’t heard Roswaal say for himself that he’s calmed down after his fit.

But they’re assuming that he isn’t okay.

Subaru: “Well we’re just leaving that to Beako.”

Beatrice has known Roswaal for even longer than Ram has. And Beatrice was the one to tell them that the female corpse in the tomb was Echidna’s.

It’s best that the two of them talk alone if they’re going to be doing it in the corpse’s presence. Subaru can get involved on the topic of what they’re doing with Echidna’s corpse afterwards. No issue.

Subaru: “And it’ll be easier to talk about our future course after we meet up with Garfiel and the others.”

If they managed to escape the mansion safely, then they should be coming straight to the Sanctuary. Subaru asked the Men’s Brigade to drive their carriage back to Earlham Village, too. They should meet up with everyone by tomorrow night at the latest.

They need to deal with the snow covering the Sanctuary and assess damages. Considering how long that will take, it's best that they do have this free time. And also for the sake of their nerves.

By focusing on making snowmen, Subaru has managed to more or less calm down emotionally. He should be able to hold a peaceful conversation with Roswaal. He's able. Yes he is able. He rather considers himself able.

Emilia: "Good work, Subaru…Why are flailing your arms around?"

Subaru: "Ah, I mean, nothing? I'm not shadowboxing as practice to beat that fucker's face in! He'll probably get me first anyway!"

Emilia: "Really?"

Says Emilia beside him, tilting her head and looking confused.

She looks cheerfully over the rows of snow sculptures.

Emilia: "There's a whole mountain of Pucks. I know he'd be happy to see this."

Subaru: "Would he? I'm imagining him complaining like, 'But I thought I was prettier than that?'."

Emilia: "Oh, that did sound like him. Puck, are…ah, he's sleeping right now."

Mutters Emilia as she withdraws a blue crystal from her breast pocket.

The jewel has settled down into a state where it glows a deep blue, reflecting the sunlight on the snow as Emilia holds it.

Puck, devoid of any Contract with Emilia, is sealed inside this crystal.

Subaru: "But you can't summon him like you could before."

Emilia: “No, I can’t. This crystal isn’t pure enough to seal a spirit as strong as Puck. He’s staying inactive so that the crystal doesn’t break, but…I don’t think I can touch him or talk to him like this…”

Subaru: “Gotta get a better gemstone. Something like the old green one.”

The crystal pendant hanging from Emilia’s neck. It shattered into pieces following the cessation of Puck’s Contract, and apparently was quite a rare stone.

Puck apparently had it with him when he first Contracted Emilia, so not even she knows where to acquire one.

Emilia: “But I’ll definitely get a good gemstone and bring Puck back someday. Then…there are so many things I want to talk about with him. There’s everything he kept quiet from me, and everything I discovered because of it.”

Emilia lovingly strokes the gem’s face, her amethyst eyes full of determination.

She looks so stunningly beautiful that Subaru has to swallow his breath. Emilia notices this and glances up at him with a questioning hum. He rubs his nose.

Subaru: “Er, no, it’s sorta…Emilia-tan, you’ve changed. I mean you’ve always been cute but now it’s like you’re strong too?”

Emilia: “If I am, then it’s thanks to you and everyone else. I’m always only ever getting things from others. I want to be able to repay everyone soon.”

Subaru: “I mean that’s the same case here about the only ever getting things thing.” Subaru and Emilia both keenly feel their powerlessness.

But that doesn’t mean they’re going to lick each other’s wounds. Subaru gets that impression from Emilia, which he finds both heartening and isolating.

He finally got some of the confidence and strength for him to support her, and then she dashes so far ahead that she doesn't need it.

It feels like he could run after her forever, and he'd never catch up.

Emilia: "By the way, Subaru…so, um."

Subaru: "Mhm?"

Emilia: "They're taking a long time in the tomb. …Mhm, it sure is long."

Subaru submerges himself in sentimentality, when Emilia awkwardly calls to him. She glances over to the tomb, which sits there the same as ever.

But Emilia's face is steadily changing color. Her cheeks grow flushed, and seeing how the intense blush reaches to the tips of her pointed ears, Subaru panics.

Subaru: "E-Emilia-tan?! Your face just flashed to red, I mean are you okay?!"

Emilia: "I-I'm, okey. I am absolutely composed. Now I would, uhrm, like to discuss a certain matter."

Subaru: "I, I'm, indeed."

For some reason having Emilia speak politely makes Subaru wind up doing the same.

Emilia glances over the area, and once she confirms that no one is nearby, she gazes red-faced at Subaru. More specifically, she gazes at Subaru's mouth.

Emilia: "So, um…Subaru, it's like, you said that you l…love me, right?"

Subaru: "Erm, um, yes. I did say that. I love you."

Emilia: "—Well, that, erm, makes me, sooo, sooo happy, but…"

The way that Emilia's sentence trails off gives Subaru a bad feeling.

She just said, "That makes me happy, but…". Subaru can think of only one thing that could follow on from this.

This sentence ends in: Let's just be friends.

Subaru: "I did mention this before, that I'm waiting for you to notice me, and'll put in my best effort so that you do."

Emilia: "I'm…that, makes me very happy. But, even when you say these things to me, I don't really understand what it is to like someone like that."

Subaru says nothing.

Emilia: "It was the same in the carriage, and it's the same now in the tomb. You're telling me you love me, but I still have nothing I can tell you. I know it's sooo terrible of me…"

Hearing her sentence reach its feeble end, Subaru puts his hand to his chest in relief.

Emilia's answer is still in standby mode, then. Nothing's changed from before, which is fine.

So long as Subaru's repeated and persistent love confessions haven't sickened her, everything's fine. Subaru will offer Emilia his hand without fail, provided she could just get stuck enough to need it. That's the slight discord between Subaru and Emilia's recognition of the other's feelings. Which becomes utterly pointless with Emilia's next statement.

Emilia: "But! I think that we really need to talk about the baby in my tummy!"

Subaru: "…"

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———.

Subaru: “Pardon me?”

Emilia: “I don’t know if they’re a boy or a girl yet, but either way we have to shower them in love! But I was never taught about that so I don’t know what to do…You have to talk to the dad for these things.”

Subaru: “No, no, no no, no…wait, wait, wait…”

Subaru’s mind cannot catch up to Emilia as she rapidly talks on.

The speed of Emilia’s speech has made her out of breath too, and Subaru can see that she’s agitated.

There is no way that the two of them can converse decently like this.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, take deep breaths, and calm down a second. I’m doing that, right now, taking deep breaths to calm down. Oh hey there’s some snow over here.”

Subaru squats down, gets a handful of snow, and smacks it onto his face to physically cool himself down. He hears Emilia breathing deeply as he forces himself to think rationally.

The baby in Emilia’s tummy. Emilia’s the mom, and Subaru’s the dad. He doesn’t get it. Subaru’s coming of age still has yet to happen.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan. When you say baby, you mean like an infant, right?”

Emilia: “E-Exactly. I know it’ll be tough with the Royal Selection, but…that’s not the baby’s fault, and we have to make sure they’re happy! I want the baby to get the love it needs from the people who must love it.”

Emilia’s determination is noble and beautiful.

But what she’s saying doesn’t make sense. Subaru has never done anything like that with Emilia.

Which means that Emilia and someone else have—no he'd rather not think about that.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan…you know that babies don't come from storks or cabbage patches, right?"

Emilia: "But when a boy and a girl kiss that makes a baby."

Subaru: "…"

He is stunned.

At her ignorance, and how adorable she is for thinking this.

Emilia: "Subaru? What's wrong? Hey, Subaru!"

Emilia doesn't look to understand anything at all as she calls Subaru's name.

It somehow looks like her expression has grown stronger thanks to motherly self-awareness. Perhaps that was why Emilia seemed strong to him. Which means that maybe he shouldn't fix this misunderstanding.

—No. He must. This isn't the time for him to be thinking this stuff. If Emilia keeps on this course, everything's going to continue alongside Emilia's fake pregnancy. She'll be imagining her stomach growing bigger by the day and talking to the thing. Which is cute, but presents its own problems.

Emilia: "Subaru, maybe, you regret kissing me…?"

Subaru: "Uh no actually I'm craving your infinite kisses?!"

Emilia: "A-Are you now…"

Subaru regrets his knee-jerk response as the conversation flows deeper into a swamp of misunderstandings.

Subaru basically just told Emilia that he's craving infinite baby-making. And he is, but that comes later.

Emilia needs to be educated properly at this very first stage.

But how come Subaru has to be the one to do it?

Subaru: “C-Curse you, Puck!”

Subaru curses the cat spirit sleeping deep in the crystal.

In his mind, he sees the cat put its paw to his head, stick out its tongue, and say: Whoops!

—Subaru, after all his ambivalence, only realizes that he can have Ram or Frederica do the explaining long after Emilia starts pestering him about picking names for the child.

Interlude:
Emilia Camp • Warlock • Spirit • Spirit User

1

Bones creak at the moment of impact, his body whirling through the air before slamming into the wall. Unabating, the shock pierces through the flimsy woodwork, splinters showering the figure as he shoots out of building. He lands to skid gracelessly over the snow, kicking up frost as he tumbles.

"…"

The prone figure doesn't even twitch. Everything falls so silent that he could practically be dead. Subaru glances at the person who was shunted through the wall, and at the pugilist inside the building. The assailant notices Subaru's gaze, and with a satisfied sigh, "Yeh…I goddamn got it done, oi."

Says the blond boy who smiles as he clicks his sharp fangs—Garfiel.

Subaru scratches his head, watching Ram run over to the pummeled Roswaal,

"Y-You sure did."

He manages to say.

2

Garfiel and the others met up with Subaru's group in the Sanctuary half a day after Emilia announced her pregnancy, otherwise said, on the morning after the Sizeable Hare fight.

Patrasche came to the Sanctuary pulling a carriage of six people, including Garfiel.

Hearing that the girls they'd gone to rescue in the mansion, Rem, Petra, and Frederica were all okay, and that the rescuers Garfiel and Otto were fine too, relieved Subaru.

But the bonus that they brought along with them was, ???: “Oh look, hi there again, Mister.”

Says a girl with pigtails, bound in a corner of the carriage—Meili, the beastmaster who attacked the mansion with Elsa.

The unexpected reunion strikes Subaru dumb. Meili addresses him with the same friendly tone and demeanor as before, in the mansion.

Meili: “Care to hear me out? This blond guy has just no clue how to treat ladies. He leaves them sitting there wrapped up in bindings, it’s so awwwfulll. Don’t you think so, Mister?”

Subaru: “Yeah. Though I don’t know what you could’ve done to me so I’dve gagged you too. …Which means we caught you, but what about Elsa?”

Meili: “No clue there. But Elsa wouldn’t have survived that blaze, would she? So I guess she’s dead. Doesn’t bother me.”

Meili doesn’t care in the slightest about the death of her supposed compatriot, Elsa. Subaru furrows his brows.

Subaru: “You sure must be relaxed if you’re looking for better captivity conditions. Doubt you’re gonna be having a great time. You did some really bad stuff.”

Meili: “I know. But I messed up, so it’s kinda just like, oh well. And if I go back Mama will just scold me anyway.”

Subaru: “Your mom. I know you mentioned this a few times in the mansion, but that means you have some kind of kingpin. …Well, just another thing that’ll get cleared up by talking to Roswaal.”

Meili: “Give me meals thrice a day with no peppirs, okay?”

Meili cheerily turns her back to Subaru, announcing that the conversation is over. They’ll have to deal with her incarceration later. But either way, she’s an important witness to what happened in the Roswaal Mansion attack.

It genuinely surprises Subaru that Garfiel had the smarts to capture her.

Next is the safety of the Sanctuary and the Earlham villagers. After they learned that those who evacuated the Sanctuary earlier were safe in a nearby town, everyone's well-being was secured. Just when Subaru put his hand to his chest in relief, the first blow of closure struck.

Garfiel: "Personally think my amazin' self's bein' damn nice t'let yer off with just one punch."

Garfiel swings the arm he used to punch Roswaal as he gazes at the open hole in the wall. Though Subaru has quite a few objections about Roswaal, and believes that Garfiel's fury is justified,

Subaru: "When that punch is stronger than ten of my punches combined, I really have to wonder about calling it 'nice'…"

Garfiel: "Stop bein' so passive, Captain. C'mon, have a go."

Garfiel snorts and presents something to Subaru. Subaru looks to Garfiel's hands, to find him holding a branch that he must have gotten in the forest.

It's a rather good branch, thick and long. Like a wooden baseball bat.

Subaru: "…Where is this going, exactly?"

Garfiel: "'D be a dick move t'hit him a bunch. Yer get one shot, but ain't no one got any right t'complain if yer use this t'make it a good one."

Subaru: "It's already enough of a dick move to beat him up after what you did!"

And he's using a weapon. Subaru could start arguing semantics over whether or not this counts as a 'punch'. But Garfiel just tilts his head, and jerks his chin toward the hole.

Garfiel: "It don't look like anyone agrees with yer, Captain."

Subaru: “Huh?”

Stricken with a rather rueful Garfiel, Subaru looks outside to find that Ram has gotten Roswaal back to his feet, where Frederica faces him with her fist brandished over her head.

Frederica: “Brace yourself, Master!”

Frederica’s powerful arm cuts through the air as she drives her fist into the same spot Garfiel hit, his left cheek. Roswaal goes flying through the air yet again, this time coming to a stop several meters away when he slams into a tree trunk. The impact makes snow fall from the treetop, burying Roswaal beneath it.

After witnessing it all, Frederica claps her hands with a satisfied nod.

Subaru: “Seriously?! Everyone endorses this retaliation?”

Garfiel: “We gotta get closure, Captain. ‘S gonna be fuckin’ awkward later on ‘f he don’t get his payback fer what he did. Ain’t like I ain’t gonna heal him. ‘N there’s Lady Emilia too.”

Roswaal pokes his head out of the snow, his eyes spinning, as Petra and Otto await their turns beside him. Ram pulls Roswaal out, while Emilia stands nearby to heal him at a moment’s notice.

Subaru: “I mean Emilia-tan is there as a healer yes? She absolutely isn’t waiting her turn yes? Though I guess she does have a right to be included.”

Garfiel: “Eh, think’d be hard with her personality. But anyway, that’s what yer got. So c’mon, Captain.”

Garfiel pushes the wooden bat over to Subaru. He timidly accepts it.

Subaru: “You won’t let me in on the talk if I don’t hit him?”

Garfiel: “I ain’t goin’ that far. ‘S just that you wanna smack the shithead ‘cross the face too, yeh?”

A shove to his back makes Subaru step out of the house.

Garfiel shoots Subaru a thumbs up from across the hole in the wall. Looks like he's imitating things from Subaru. With that send-off from his yet-uncomfortable brother surrogate, Subaru goes to the very end of the Roswaal Closure line.

Incidentally Petra just slapped Roswaal's face with a soaking cloth.

A wet, satisfying thwack echoes throughout the Sanctuary.

3

Subaru: "Ahem, okay. Now that we've had our closure, I think it's time for us to discuss recent events and figure out what we're doing for the future."

After clearing his throat, Subaru takes charge of the proceedings and glances over the group. All the important players in this loop are together in the cathedral. Which is quite a number of people, and makes Subaru sentimental about how the household has grown.

In the cathedral are the old residents of Roswaal Mansion—Subaru, Emilia, Beatrice, Roswaal, and Ram—alongside the new Roswaal Mansion residents Otto, Frederica, and Petra. And then are the main figures from the Sanctuary, Garfiel and Ryuzu.

Rem is currently sleeping in Ryuzu's house, under the care of Pico and the other Ryuzu doubles.

Emilia: "Subaru, your eyes look kind of distant, are you alright? Are you still not feeling well?"

Subaru: "Nope, I'm fine. Just getting sentimental. Team Emilia's doubled in size. Though, add in the Sanctuary's people and the villagers from Earlham, and you'll start getting a bigger figure."

Emilia: "…You're right."

Emilia nods, her eyes similarly distant.

After demonstrating her will by holding her ground, and holding the defense lines against the Sizeable Hare, the Sanctuary dwellers and Earlham's young men's brigade must view her more favorably.

Just because someone is dependable in a pinch doesn't mean they're a Ruler, but it's a world of difference compared to when they were alienating her.

If they can interact with her more often, then they'll surely come to learn Emilia's personality. They just need to gain more understanding like that, over time, thinks Subaru.

Subaru: "Aaand I'm off topic. Okay, back to the point. So we all know what happened in the Sanctuary and at the mansion? Now I'd kinda like to exact some responsibility from the guy who triggered it all, or ask for some details, but…"

Everyone in the room turns to look at the topical mastermind.

Roswaal lies limp in a corner of the cathedral, in Ram's lap. His eyes open as he notices the gazes upon him.

Roswaal: "Ooooooooooh? After you have all tormented me so thoroughly, you stiiiiiiiiill must brutalize me further before you aaaaaaaaaare satisfied?"

Subaru: "You get what you pay for. Emilia-tan even healed you, so stop saying this shameless junk. But anyway, I'm more surprised about Ram."

Ram: "…For what?"

Subaru sticks his tongue out at the mouthy Roswaal as he redirects the conversation onto Ram. She holds Roswaal's hand as she rests his head on her lap, her words making Subaru furrow his brows.

Subaru: "No, I mean."

Subaru: "I know you weren't in top shape, but I'm impressed how you just kept quiet and watched the Roswaal Closure. I was certain you'd flip."

Ram: "Foolishness, Barusu. …I don't believe in the least that Master Roswaal is utterly incapable of mistakes. But I do wish to take his side when his path is mistaken. Of course I would find myself thinking that way. And you cannot see even that? How foolish."

Subaru: “Don’t open and close by doubling up on the fool business! But anyway with that logic, you…”

Ram: “Exactly. You were justified to strike Master Roswaal. So I accept that he was stricken. That I tend to him with care and kindness afterwards is my convenience.”

As always, Ram’s exhibitions of love are somewhat masculine.

Nobody can complain at her about her devotion to Roswaal. Garfiel alone does look like he’s beset with a dilemma, but he stays silent, probably because he’s always been talked out of mentioning anything.

Beatrice: “You have odd tastes, I suppose. After all those burns to your stomach…were Betty and miss silver-hair not around, you would have been left with those scars, in fact.”

The next one to speak is Beatrice, who sits quietly beside Subaru.

Her knees are folded up to her chest as she leans against Subaru’s left shoulder. She has assisted Emilia in Ram’s treatment, erasing the injuries, and so allowed Ram to recover so well.

Ram: “I give you my gratitude, Lady Beatrice and Lady Emilia. But I would prefer that your saving my life acts as no pretext for you to meddle with affairs of my love.”

Beatrice: “Betty isn’t generous to do that, I suppose. If you’re going to devote yourself to this wrongdoing man, even if it hurts you again, that’s at your liberty, in fact.”

Roswaal: “—It won’t happen again.”

Beatrice gives Ram her harsh reply, when Roswaal hears her and sits up.

The two of them catch their breath, and Subaru also gulps.

Roswaal is not wearing his cosmetics, exposing his unadorned face.

Without his clown make up, the handsome man covers his left eye with his hand, and gazes over the people assembled in the cathedral with his blue. He bows his head deeply.

Roswaal: “I will never achieve anything by so arrogantly making sacrifices of us ever again. —I swear it on the soul of my mentor.”

All: “…”

Roswaal: “And I’d rather Beatrice not punch me a third time.”

Jokes Roswaal as he raises his head and looks at Beatrice. Beatrice looks away, sour.

Beatrice: “The second one was your punishment for moronic blather, I suppose. The third’s beyond me, in fact.”

Roswaal: “Which is how I’d like it to stay. I’d prefer to avoid undergoing any more revenge from you all. Garfiel and Subaru were so ruthless that even I had to prepare myself for death.”

Subaru: “You’re putting my hit in the same class as that? It couldn’tve been that strong.” Though Subaru had wanted his punch to be one with some oomph.

His strike cleanly struck the tip of Roswaal’s chin, and what a sight it was to see Roswaal too dizzied to stand.

Either way. Roswaal’s statements do feel genuine. Meaning that Subaru is unhesitant to give trusting him a try. It seems that something moved Roswaal as he watched Ram risk her life to burn his gospel, contributing to his change of heart.

Subaru: “Though you’re being kinda anticlimactic considering we diverged from that gospel you loved. I was seriously thinking that winning you over while you have a breakdown’d be the last job to do in the Sanctuary.”

Roswaal: “That bud was plucked before it could sprout. No words of mine can change that I lost our bet. At the moment that I lost myself, and defied both my Contract and gospel tooooooooo bring snowfall. And you preformed so excellently that I indeed did do that.”

Subaru: "…Well, it's because Garfiel and Emilia-tan put in serious work."

Roswaal: "You have a bad habit of neglecting to name yourself at moments like this. Either way, the results are the results. You overcame every Trial that I thought impossible, and liberated the Sanctuary. …I have lost."

Garfiel: "—So hey, Captain."

Roswaal shrugs with resigned acceptance. Subaru finds himself too stuck to say anything, hen Garfiel raises his hand and butts in.

His glare remains fixed on Roswaal, while his sharp fangs clatter.

Garfiel: "Are yer ser'sly thinkin' t'add this guy t'our team? Honestly, I still ain't quite agreein' with that."

Subaru: "Garfiel…"

Garfiel: "Well, fuckin' duh! Th'fuck was this prick thinking he was doing in the Sanctuary and th'mansion? Sayin' you weren't there, Captain, th'village'd be rabbit food n' my Sis n' this girl'd be killed fer fun by the guts lady! We protect this guy, 'n we don't known when he's gonna go back t'slicing our necks!"

Howls Garfiel as he stomps the floor, a slight quake running through the cathedral.

Garfiel is correct. They have had their conversations and beat-downs with Roswaal to bring closure, but that had only been the pre-amble for hearing his explanations.

Roswaal had exposed everyone here to mortal danger for the sake of his own goals, and Subaru has seen everyone lose their lives multiple times.

This world that has no sacrifices, where everyone is together and safe, was only accomplished because he had those deaths as a groundwork while he worked together with everyone.

Subaru is furious enough that he wants to slap Roswaal, and interrogate him. He wants to do what Garfiel is saying, and turn his back on Roswaal.

Subaru: “But still, we need Roswaal.”

Garfiel: “Captain!”

Subaru: “We absolutely need Roswaal’s help if Emilia is going to win the Royal Selection. She loses this guy as her supporter, and Emilia’s out of the running. We’ll make him pay, of course…but, we can’t just say ‘okay goodbye now!’.”

Garfiel: “Yer really fuckin’ telling me to forgive a guy who tried to kill my family?!”

Subaru: “…”

Garfiel’s emotional words pierce Subaru.

No matter how Subaru tries to pacify him with words, Garfiel will not agree. He had almost lost Frederica, and almost lost Ryuzu.

This boy had spent over ten years training himself so that he could protect his family. Roswaal is his unforgivable nemesis.

Frederica: “I…forgive the Master.”

Garfiel: “…Sis?!”

But the one to rebut Garfiel is his very own blood relative, Frederica, who had almost been murdered.

Her long, blonde hair sways as she speaks. Garfiel’s eyes shoot open in shock.

Garfiel: “Fuck’re you saying! This shithead tried to…”

Frederica: “And given that, I am still alive. Because you saved me, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Yer talkin’ from fuckin’ hindsight! He tried! To kill you! And Nanna! And ain’t that…ain’t that all there is to it!”

Frederica: "…The Master has cared for me for over a decade."

Garfiel's shoulders heave as Frederica narrows her eyes. Her gaze inspires compassion, as she is perhaps moved by her matured brother's anger.

Frederica: "That I may achieve my goals, I accepted the hand that the Master offered me. I have learned much over the time since, and now I am here. To speak in more common terms, I exploited the Master's generosity for my own purposes. Would our debts not be even?"

Garfiel: "Don't fuckin' treat debts on the same level as life! You don't know when he'll betray—"

Otto: "Erm, I apologize for this when you're so enthusiastic, but would you mind if I interjected?"

Garfiel tries to argue, but this time Otto pulls the breaks.

Garfiel's furious gaze turns to Otto, who has his hand raised. But Otto lets the glare wash off him as he soothingly says,

Otto: "Now just calm down, calm down."

Otto: "We'll put aside Garfiel's emotional argument for a moment, and consider Margrave Roswaal's likelihood of committing something like this again…I think we're safe to believe that he won't, at least momentarily."

Garfiel: "Eh? Fuck're yer sayin' prick. Yer fuckin' asleep? I'll put yer lights out, oi."

Otto: "The Contract, remember? The instant that this affair reached an obvious conclusion, a Contract was bound between Mr. Natsuki and the Margrave. Correct, Margrave?"

Otto is entirely calm as he deals with a seething Garfiel.

It is also bold of him to verify the state of the Contract not with Subaru, but with Roswaal. Roswaal realizes Otto's intentions, his eyes widening somewhat.

Roswaal: “Otto iiiiiiiiiiis correct. Owing to the Contract between myself and Subaru, I cannot defy Subaru’s course.”

Garfiel: “Course, bein’?”

Subaru: “He dumps the gospel and helps make Emilia Ruler. That’s the Contract between me and Roswaal. He can’t pull this crap anymore.”

Subaru takes over, Garfiel grinding his teeth in anger.

Subaru has won the bet. Roswaal is bound by the Contract, preventing him from forcing the future to follow the writ of the missing gospel.

Though it’s another question as to whether that makes Roswaal harmless.

Garfiel: “That still don’t close th’books on what he did! ‘F we settle this with a ‘I’m so sorry I won’t do it again’, we ain’t ever getting’ ROGOS’S REVENGE DEMANDS MORE THAN ONE HAND!”

Garfiel’s shouting emphasizes his stance even still, creating a divide of opinion among the group regarding Roswaal’s deeds.

Subaru, Otto, and Frederica accept them.

Garfiel and Petra reject them.

Emilia and Ryuzu are undecided.

Subaru will need to wait and watch to see how Beatrice and Ram fall. Their relationships with Roswaal differ from everyone else’s.

Subaru: “Petra…”

Like Garfiel, Petra is adamantly furious at Roswaal.

She grips her skirt, her face red as Subaru calls her.

Petra: “I’m still against it no matter what you say, Master…Subaru. The Master tried…our Lord tried to do something terrible to the villagers. Even though everyone trusted him. Even though I thought our Lord was a good person!”

Roswaal: “…It does hurt toooooo hear that.”

Even Roswaal has to frown as a little girl lambastes him.

Petra is probably the one best reflecting the general feelings of the populace, without any ulterior inter-camp motives or complicated circumstances. Not because she’s a child. But because her attitude clearly speaks of the rage she feels toward Roswaal for betraying her honest opinion of him as her Lord.

The villagers of Earlham and the Sanctuary have not been informed that Roswaal was behind this whole mess.

Petra is present at this meeting as a sort of representative because, after the bits and pieces of conversation she heard in the mansion led her near to the truth, she never spoke up to secure absolute conviction. They are trusting in that cleverness of hers.

If Petra had tried to thoughtlessly dig for answers as any child her age would, they might have said some junk to deceive her. But they didn’t.

Subaru: “I know I’m repeating myself, but we need Roswaal. If we drop Roswaal here, we close Emilia’s path. You can say you don’t want to work with him, or conversely we could bind him in ropes to get him to, either way he’s working with us.”

Garfiel: “We ain’t gonna convince each other, Captain.”

Subaru: “We’re not. So we need to find a compromise. What do you want Roswaal to do that will satisfy you for now? And apologies but we can’t have you kill him.”

Garfiel: “—Tch.”

To keep Garfiel in check as he starts getting to his feet, Beatrice stands up. Short as she is, it’s more than enough to look down at the boy as he sits.

Garfiel clicks his tongue and shifts his glare to Roswaal,

Garfiel: “First is securing th’necessities fer th’gramps n’ grans in the Sanctuary. Yer gonna make sure everyone’s safe, no matter if they’re stayin’ or goin’. ‘S the first concrete step t’achieving what Sis’s trying t’do.”

Roswaal: “Very well, accepted.”

Garfiel: “I ain’t gonna be hearin’ any excuses ‘bout not havin’ th’funds ‘cuz the mansion burned down.”

Roswaal: “The building that burned was an auxiliary residence of the Mathers. The main residency is elsewhere. I try not to be so grossly unprepared as to fall into something as ridiculous as bankruptcy.”

Roswaal’s confident reply shocks Subaru.

It’s news to him that the incinerated mansion was a side residence. He starts looking stupid for worrying about where they would live now.

Garfiel: “N’following from that condition, two more promis…no, a Contract.”

Roswaal: “…”

Garfiel raises two fingers. Roswaal falls silent.

Garfiel lowers one finger.

Garfiel: “First’s what th’Captain said. You pledge t’everyone here that you’ll stick t’those terms. That you ain’t pullin’ any more of this shit.”

Roswaal: “…Yes, of course. And the other?”

Garfiel: “Easy. —You violate that, and my amazin’ fangs mash your head to pieces.”

Frigid bloodlust emanates from Garfiel.

The murderousness that should be spearing only into Roswaal is so intense that its ripples brush against everyone's skin like a razorblade.

Roswaal: "Very well. —Let us tie the Contract."

So when Roswaal accepts it only a few seconds later, and Subaru feels the bloodlust dissipate like an ebbing wave, his body untenses and he breathes a sigh.

Garfiel sits cross-legged with his elbow on his knee and hand on his chin, looking unsatisfied.

Garfiel: "…'S all I got for th'moment. You best leave it there too, miss."

Petra: "But…"

Garfiel: "It ain't gonna make yer friends or family happy if y'tell them."

Petra, bordering on tears, looks up at Frederica beside her. Frederica nods, and Petra suffocates her sobs by pressing her face to Frederica's chest. It's enough to pain anyone's heart.

Subaru: "Anyway, while we still have questions about how we're securing aid for Earlham's and the Sanctuary's villagers, and where we're going now that the mansion's in ashes, and basically what we're doing, can we say that we've finished exacting responsibility and've all had our say on this?"

After waiting for Petra's sobbing to stop, Subaru sums up everyone's thoughts.

If nobody objects, then they have completed the first stage of conversations about the Sanctuary and mansion affairs. Now they just need to discuss the other issues one by one—

???: "Excuse me."

But someone does raise their hand in the silence.

And it's the leader of their group, who has not yet given her opinion on Roswaal, Emilia.

Everyone's gaze focuses on her are she looks to Subaru, seeking permission to speak.

Subaru: "Go ahead, Emilia-tan. Feel free to say anything."

Emilia: "Then I'll oblige."

Emilia nods at Subaru and looks at Roswaal. Roswaal raises an eyebrow, looking rather surprised as he waits for Emilia to speak.

And she does.

Emilia: "Roswaal hasn't done the most important thing yet. This discussion isn't over until he does."

Roswaal: "Most important thing…?"

Roswaal fails to figure out what Emilia is talking about, looking confused. Subaru tilts his head too as he contemplates what Emilia could be trying to say. Emilia looks over the group, and with a quiet sigh,

Emilia: "When you do something bad, you have to say you're sorry."

All: "…"

Emilia: "Everyone's been telling Roswaal to do this and do that to prove that he's repented, and Roswaal swore to his Teacher that he won't do anything bad again, but before we even get to that, isn't there something he has to say? Roswaal, did you say it even once? I didn't hear it."

Her cheeks red with anger, Emilia rails on Roswaal.

She is saying things so juvenile that it leaves everyone speechless. But Emilia is not joking in the least, and is truly, demonstrably mad.

Emilia is angry. Even though she rarely ever gets angry at all. Except it's happening, and Emilia is mad.

To ensure that something so obvious, but that everyone forgot, does happen.

Subaru: "Roswaal."

Subaru looks at the astonished Roswaal, and smiles as he looks to catch him off guard.

Subaru: "Apologize, Roswaal. If we're going to doing things together, then you're obligated to, just as a person."

Roswaal: "…"

Subaru shares Emilia's stance, the sentiment spreading to everyone in the cathedral.

Roswaal perceives what this sea of gazes is seeking from him, and swallows his breath.

Emilia: "—Mm, that'll do."

The way that Emilia smiles after seeing Roswaal's apology leaves an incredible impression.

4

—Subaru makes an indescribable expression as he looks down at the woman in the coffin.

Roswaal: "Whaaaaaaat an impolite face to make whiiiiiile looking at my Teacher."

Says Roswaal, as he peers at Subaru from aside.

Inside the deepest room of the tomb, Subaru and Roswaal face each other with the coffin between them. So that they can speak, without anyone intruding.

But before that,

Subaru: “This is honestly your Teacher, the Witch Echidna?”

Roswaal: “Iiiiiiiiindeed. Her body rests eternal in the magic stone, her mortal beauty preserved. Living was worth it, when I can meet her again as I am now.”

Subaru: “All I really have to say about your descendant-hopping super-motivated faux-stalking is euch.”

Roswaal: “Beatrice hit me with the eeeeeeeexact same comment.” Roswaal seems to be having fun, but Subaru feels no urge to smile.

Beatrice told Subaru that Roswaal has been perpetuating his life by transcribing his soul. Subaru had told a joke about something similar before, but he had never even dreamed that it would be correct.

But it does make him agree with the family’s fanaticism for Echidna, since it was all actually just Roswaal.

Subaru: “Do you feel guilty at all about your descendants? …I guess the answer’s obvious.”

Roswaal: “The Mathers family was made for that purpose. I began it, I continued it, I constructed it. It doesn’t discomfort me, no matter who criticizes me.”

Subaru: “The quintessential stalker.”

Roswaal: “Surely not. Regardless, there’s something I’d like tooooooo confirm. About this person you saw in the Trial, who is not my Teacher called Echidna.”

Roswaal narrows his eyes as he speaks. Subaru narrows his eyes as well.

There are differences between the Echidna that Roswaal is talking about, and the Echidna that Subaru met in the dream castle. That was the shock Subaru got when he glimpsed the woman in the coffin.

Subaru looks down at her figure once again.

Long white hair and pale skin. Beautiful features, and a sleek black dress. Her distinctive characteristics are identical to Echidna's. But she is obviously someone else.

The Echidna that Subaru knows is slightly younger than the woman in the coffin. Her features erred more on the 'cute' than the 'beautiful' side, and her hair was cut shorter than the woman's. They do look alike. If someone called them sisters, Subaru would believe it.

However,

Roswaal: "My Teacher had no relatives. She had no elder sister, and no one to call a daughter except Beatrice. I know this better than anyone else."

Subaru: "So, who was the Echidna in the Trial? It was her, but with her youth restored…isn't what it feels like either. They're different people. I can tell that this isn't just a thing about ages."

Roswaal: "Anyone intruding on the Trial must be connected. If this person was the one managing the Trial, they are assuredly connected. Perhaps some external party took action while I was unaware…would be conceivable. But."

Roswaal doesn't continue, but Subaru senses that he has dismissed whatever he was going to say as impossible. He doesn't have any basis for it, but perhaps Roswaal is confident in his stalking proficiency. It's a confidence telling him it's impossible that someone could do something bad to his Teacher without him knowing about it. Which is gross.

Roswaal: "I feel that you're imagining something rather iiiiiiiimpolite."

Subaru: "Blame your imagination or actually just blame you. Anyway, me and Emilia both saw Echidna during the Trial. Or at least, an Echidna that isn't this one."

Emilia had been present when Subaru first saw the woman in the coffin. That was when they realized that the woman Beatrice called

Mother was not the person they called Echidna.

Who was the girl in the dream? Without ever reaching any conclusions, Subaru wound up starting this talk with Roswaal.

Subaru: “We can’t use the Trial’s systems to enter the dream again?”

Roswaal: “The tomb’s functions were ceased by a destruction of the algorithm. The art for it is lost, and the requirements are complex. And the miasma permeating this tomb has escaped. This tomb is just an ordinary, historical stone structure now.”

Subaru: “I, see…”

Disappointment that he cannot confirm it, and disappointment that he cannot see her again, assault Subaru simultaneously. Just for some reason, Subaru didn’t find interacting with her and the WitchES so bad, even factoring in the whole betrayal thing.

So losing the opportunity to do so summons melancholy in Subaru.

Subaru: “…We’ll put the unchangeable stuff off for later. So, what are you thinking to do with the woman in the coffin? Bury her?”

Roswaal: “I’ll neither bury nor burn her. Subaru, I’d like you not to misunderstand. …I desire reunion with my Teacher, but that doesn’t mean I’ve been yearning toooooo meet my Teacher’s cadaver. This is merely one step along the way.”

Subaru: “What do you mean?”

Subaru raises his brows, wariness and distrust swelling within him.

Subaru had thought that Roswaal’s desired reunion with his crush was a face-to-face meeting with the corpse in this tomb.

He hadn’t considered it until he learned that her corpse was actually in the tomb, but the second that

Subaru found out that Roswaal’s mentor was inside here, of course he began to think it.

But Roswaal easily rejects that idea.

Roswaal: “I desire to speak again with my Teacher, with blood running through her, soul housed inside her, life breathed within her. Retrieving her corpse is simply the first step.”

Subaru: “You’re going to resurrect the dead?! That…this world has magic to bring back the dead?!”

Roswaal: “Make sure you don’t misunderstand. This possibility is present because it is her. There is no way to bring back lives that have met a conventional death. The Od Lagna would never permit such convenient magic as resurrection.”

Subaru: “Od Lagna?”

Subaru scrunches his face at the new word.

Roswaal: “Od Lagna is…how to say, a stockpile of mana in the fount of the world. No, supposing that the world itself were a living creature, then it would be its nexus, and the od of the world. Though we can only imagine as to its exact location, and whether it is sentient or not.”

Subaru: “The od of the world…wouldn’t permit it, meaning?”

Roswaal: “To explain that would require quick perusal of the entire history of magic to this day.”

Subaru: “In three sentences.”

Roswaal: “How harsh.”

Roswaal stokes his chin as he considers what to say. Then he begins explaining as coherently and succinctly as he can.

Roswaal: “All of the magic in this world was devised by past magicians. The first incidence of magic was when an individual with outstanding talent in the manipulation of mana began casting magic of their type. As more people became capable of magic, and disparities in proficiency began to arise, it became difficult to classify the phenomenon without assigning names or classes.”

Subaru: “That’s when magic got names, and was split into the separate type affinities.”

Roswaal: “Yes. While magical techniques and knowledge was expanding, people with incredible talent for it began being born. They devised novel uses of mana, separated from the existing forms of magic, to create new magic. The development of magic has always proceeded as mundane magicians comprehensively over-apply the novel discoveries from a prior selection of geniuses.”

Subaru: “Kind of a spiteful lecture, since you’re one of the geniuses.”

Roswaal: “I may have gone through unpleasant times, oooooonce or twice.”

In every world and universe out there, the overly proficient ones are alienated. There was a time when Roswaal was immature, and suffered those gazes and obstacles. Though nowadays he would definitely smile back and secretly get revenge.

Subaru: “So what does this have to do with Od Lagna?”

Roswaal: “The existence of a font for magic and the power called mana. Research investigating into the topic proceeded as people tested unprecedented approaches and methods for using mana. Those who created magic with shocking effects began to stand out even among the geniuses. Each case of this magic produced results beyond compare to previous magic, such that a single magician could alter a region’s geography. —And when they did, they all saw exactly the same thing.”

Subaru says nothing.

Roswaal: “With its dim glow, it was the mana that they so naturally manipulated. But this was a mass of power overwhelmingly more vast than any mana they had touched before—these magicians, with their cognizance of so-called forbidden magic, all witnessed this expanse of mana, and their minds soon fell ill.”

Subaru: “And that was Od Lagna…the fountain of the world?”

Roswaal: “Just as humans fear injury or disease, the world rejects those liable to shake its foundations. Is what some first started saying about Od Lagna. The true common point between those whose minds were broken by witnessing Od Lagna, was that they reached new heights of magic that would have rewritten the practice’s history.”

It’s unclear how powerful their magic was.

They had divulged some portion of the theory behind their magic, but before they could publicly exhibit the completed algorithm and have it adopted for use, the magician who invented it would invariably have their mind broken.

Subaru: “Then resurrection would be one of them?”

Roswaal: “I wish to see my dearly departed again. The desire is omnipresent, shared by everyone, and more than a few geniuses were motivated by it. Though, before they could reach anyone, they all lost their minds to Od Lagna.”

How sardonic, thinks Subaru.

It isn’t clear whether Od Lagna truly exists, or that Od Lagna destroyed the magicians’ minds. But still, they sought. To find the limit of their abilities. To realize a goal that everyone would yearn for.

Roswaal: “One theory states that Od Lagna is the consciousness that rules over everything in the world. And though it warrants skepticism, perhaps Od Lagna could be the one bestowing people with BLESSINGS—is the nonsense that people have come up with.”

Subaru: “Trying to stay uninvolved, and then involving itself…that celestial bunch never make sense, no matter where you are.”

Roswaal: “‘That celestial bunch’ is an entertaining way to put it.”

Ignorant to the logic behind Subaru’s epithet as he treats Od Lagna as a god, Roswaal laughs. Subaru hadn’t expected this discussion, but their real topic is elsewhere of Od Lagna. Subaru brings the conversation back to, Subaru: “So, your reunion with your Teacher won’t enrage Od Lagna.”

Roswaal: “Eeeeeeeexactly. It doesn’t use any forbidden arts, or any special powers or algorithms. In fact, I’m far more worried that you would be the one displeasing Od Lagna.”

Subaru: “…Honestly I was thinking the same.”

Return by Death. Subaru doesn’t intend to reveal its requirements to Roswaal in detail, but it’s no exaggeration that Subaru’s ability is conceivably touching on the resurrection taboo.

Subaru has used Return by Death to alter his own doomed fate, and even saved the lives of others.

If Od Lagna witnessed this, there is no way that Subaru would pass its harsh standards.

Unless, perhaps, the entity that allows Subaru to Return by Death is strong enough to survive Od Lagna.

Subaru: “Just the idea makes me shudder. Anyway, your methods for this are…?”

Roswaal: “Sorry, but I’m not going to tell you that now.”

Subaru shakes his head and gets back to talking, when Roswaal fires that statement.

Subaru’s eyes dart about in confusion for a moment as he fails to understand what was said.

Subaru: “Huh, wh, wha? What did you say?”

Roswaal: “Only whaaaaaaat you heard. I’m not going to tell you my methods for achieving my ultimate goal. I’m rather sure that nothing in the terms of our Contract reeeeeeequires me to.”

Subaru: “I mean, yeah, but…come on!”

Roswaal: “I want to make this clear to you, Subaru.”

Says Roswaal coldly. He walks around the coffin to come to Subaru's side, looking down at him as he raises his finger.

Roswaal: "I have lost my guide the gospel, and lost sight of the path of how things should be. But that doesn't make me abandon my goals in the least. Our Contract prevents me from using my past approach. And even supposing I laid pointless obstacles before you, Garfiel would rip my throat open, so I am also barred from that."

Subaru: "…Yeah, exactly. So what can you do? What path can you pick except one where you reveal your goal, and come to us for help?"

Roswaal: "That is simple. —I will oversee you."

Subaru: "…"

Oversee. It's definitely not a peaceful word, and it renders Subaru speechless. Though Roswaal's eyes gleam in different colors as he looks down at Subaru, they are lit with identical emotion.

Roswaal: "Fortunately, your goal of making Lady Emilia the Ruler overlaps with my path to achieving my goal. This is where you were supposed to secure an unshakable will of iron, devoting yourself to Lady Emilia no matter the loss, and become a Knight riddled in wounds."

Subaru says nothing.

Roswaal: "But that route is defunct. You instead chose to walk a more painful, more agonizing path of thorns. Though I do respect you for it, I also pity you."

Subaru: "Excuse me?"

He can't let that pass. Subaru glares at Roswaal, who shakes his head. He is definitely doing so out of pity for Subaru.

He faces his palm to Subaru, who is both irritated and confused.

Roswaal: "This is where you should've learned what it is to lose something. You should have become a SAGE, who even in the face of loss, stringently protects only what is precious. I know how it sounds, but I wanted to save you.”

Subaru: “What’s so sagely about that. What is so clever about accepting loss!”

Roswaal: “You have rejected loss, chosen to salvage everything, and you will hurt for it. You will repeatedly suffer wounds beyond repair, repeatedly suffer loss, frantically attempt to regain what you lost, the invisible hurt compounding perpetually. And I pity that.”

Subaru: “—Hic.”

Roswaal: “And so I will not be lenient about your refusal to be a SAGE, and decision to be a FOOL. As expected, yes? After all, you’re the one who chose this.”

Roswaal’s hand lands on Subaru’s shoulder.

Subaru trembles as Roswaal draws his face near to Subaru’s, and whispers in his ear,

Roswaal: “—Should you lose anyone who you needed to protect, I will swiftly incinerate the survivors.”

Subaru: “…?!”

Roswaal: “You’ve chosen to save everything. You must not miscarry a single thing. A world of loss must not lead to the future. So long as a future where you accept loss could lead to a future I do not desire, I will invalidate it. —Now that the gospel is gone, you are what guides me to my goal, Subaru. Only you, and your path.”

Roswaal draws his face away and gives Subaru’s chest a light shove.

It isn’t particularly strong, but Subaru pitches back as if he’s been stricken, his breath catching as his back hits the wall.

This man, Roswaal L. Mathers, is terrifying.

His conceptions have changed. He has stopped relying on the gospel, and will never do anything to throw Subaru or Emilia into adversary again. He will assist Subaru if Subaru desires it, and will put in his all to keep Emilia en-route to the Throne.

But if Subaru makes even the slightest mistake, Roswaal will instantly overturn and ruin everything.

No lie and no deception. Roswaal will absolutely do it.

Roswaal: “What, there’s no need to be so scared. Provided that you continue to fulfil your roles, I will offer you my utmost assistance. —That is the Contract between us.”

Subaru: “…Really taught me to be more careful when looking at Contracts.”

Roswaal: “Your duty is to ensure that not a single person present today is lost, Subaru. Without ever losing a single person, lead Lady Emilia to the top. Should you achieve that, I will also fulfil my goal. I will see my Teacher again.”

Subaru weakly hangs his head. Roswaal gives a long sigh at him, and nods.

His shoes peal on the stone as he corrects his posture.

Roswaal: “Upon my name of Margave Roswaal L. Mathers, once we return to the main estate, I shall appoint you, Natsuki Subaru, as Knight. —The promise will be fulfilled.”

Subaru: “…”

Accolade.

Something that Subaru has yearned for, the right to stand at Emilia’s side.

Hearing it after everything else in this conversation does diminish his joy, but after everything Roswaal has said, he will definitely stay to his word. He gains no benefit from not supporting Subaru.

Seeing Subaru silently nod, Roswaal turns to exit the room. This conversation is over, is what he must mean.

But his footsteps pause before he can exit, and he turns back.

Roswaal: “Right. I did just tell you that I’d be helping you wholeheartedly, so heeeeeeere’s another piece of information.”

Subaru: “…What is it.”

Roswaal: “—I hired the Bowel Hunter to kill Beatrice, but both this and the previous attack from the Demon Beast Master are completely unrelated to me.”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

What more could there possibly be? Subaru had thought, his jaw dropping as Roswaal speaks. Unable to comprehend what Roswaal is saying, Subaru remains utterly still as he seeks further explanation. Roswaal closes one eye,

Roswaal: “There’s nothing to add. I was the commissioner for the affair in the Capital, and requested Beatrice’s assassination. But I never asked anyone to kill Frederica or Petra, and had no time to tell them the particulars. I had been following the gospel’s writ and placed the order before the Selection started, you see.”

Subaru: “But, that can’t…I mean, she and Elsa are from the same group! So!”

Roswaal: “Someone other than myself was operating to attack the mansion, iiiiiiiiis what it means.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “Adversity never seems to end, and isn’t there worth in resisting it?”

With that cynical statement, Roswaal’s footsteps grow steadily distant.

The voice echoing through Subaru’s head throws his mind into disarray as he stands, utterly still, his back leaned against the tomb’s cold wall.

All the issues he had supposedly resolved still sit smoldering in his chest.

Feeling heat from the embers, Subaru clutches his head, and sighs deeply.

5

???: “You look depressed, in fact.”

What saves Subaru, brooding as he is, is the astonished voice of a young girl.

Subaru sits there as he sees her dress sway. His gaze traces up the luxurious fabric to find an adorable face looking down at him, arms crossed.

Subaru: “Beako.”

Beatrice: “I don’t know what Roswaal told you, but my Contractor needs to stop making that face, I suppose. It reflects poorly on Betty, in fact.”

Subaru: “That’s a real issue. And I just told you how awesome I’d be oh hell this is pathetic.”

Subaru slaps his cheeks and shakes his head.

Beatrice kneels down to reach Subaru’s eye level, before narrowing her eyes.

Beatrice: “It seems that he said some terrible things, I suppose. …I don’t mind hearing out your whining, in fact. As a temporary, special service, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Just the sentence ‘whining into a little girl’s chest’ is abysmal so I’ll give that a pass. If it really is looking bad then I’ll instantly be there though.”

Beatrice: “Well, if you’re so inclined then I’ll deal with it with you, in fact.”

Beatrice snorts as she gets to her feet. Subaru lifts himself up as well.

He looks ahead, gazing at Beatrice as she stares at the coffin.

Subaru: "…That's your mother, there."

Beatrice: "And she isn't the Echidna that you know, I suppose."

Neither of them know what this means.

But Beatrice is glad that she got to see her mother again, even if as a corpse. If the one sleeping here had been the Echidna that Subaru knows, 'disappointment' wouldn't be enough to describe it for

Beatrice or Roswaal. Though Subaru is fine for Roswaal to do some anguishing, he doesn't want to see Beatrice in any more sorrow.

After all, Beatrice has already lost one of her desired reunions.

Subaru: "I wonder what happened to Ryuzu Meyer's crystal."

Beatrice: "…I don't know, in fact."

Murmurs Beatrice, leaving Subaru without a clue of what to do.

Echidna's laboratory rests deep in the Sanctuary 's woods. Inside is a system to produce Ryuzu duplicates, and the original Ryuzu Meyer who acts as both nucleus and operations for the barrier around the Sanctuary.

A girl named Ryuzu Meyer is sealed in the crystal there, like this woman in the coffin.

Or should be.

—Because the Ryuzu Meyer crystal has disappeared.

Beatrice had gone to the facility with Subaru, determine to see her old friend again, and was dumbstruck at the sight. Subaru cursed that he hadn't gone in to check the facility himself beforehand.

A giant hole gaped open on the floor where the crystal had been, both the supporting base and Ryuzu Meyer's body absolutely gone.

Subaru wondered whether they had fallen into the underground beneath the rancid, stinking room, and asked Emilia to sent minor spirits down to check—to no avail. Beneath the facility was a cavern that led to the forest through an underground passage.

Whoever took the crystal knew about the passage's existence, and had been waiting for the barrier to be broken before grabbing the crystal—is the only theory he can conceive.

The thief's motives aren't the issue here.

The issue is that they have stolen the chance for Beatrice to see her friend again. She may be acting strong, but she must be worried.

Subaru will get it back someday, and this reunion will occur.

He is determined for it.

Subaru: "Well I can sound as pompous as I want, I'm still insignificant by myself."

Subaru rolls his shoulders and stretches his arms, wryly recognizing his own powerlessness.

He is relying primarily on Beatrice, but also Emilia and Garfiel for strength.

And for smarts he can depend on Otto, or loathe to say it but Roswaal. Everything else is Frederica and Petra—he truly does have others compensating for a lot. As always, Subaru's skill and ability remains feeble and limited.

Beatrice: "Subaru, what are you grinning about, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Just thinking, there are times where you're weak and pathetic, but there's also times where you're not. All I can do is leave it to you."

Beatrice: "It feels that I understand what you're saying, while simultaneously I don't, in fact."

Though she cannot discern what Subaru means, Beatrice smiles, perceiving that he is counting on her. Subaru gives her a nod,

Subaru: “Well yeah.”

Subaru: “I’m not expecting you to figure out that much. It’d be pathetic if you saw through me. But anyway, man spiritualists are amazing. I’ve never done magic like that before, all got me really fired up.”

Beatrice: “…Ahm, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Though that was another case of be being completely dependant on you so I can’t go bragging about it. I mean I can say I’m a spiritualist, but it hasn’t exactly hit me yet.”

His Contract with Beatrice has been consumed by the course of events around the library’s collapse, making it a rather brief affair.

Though he felt a definite connection when she called his name and settled herself in his arms, which seems to be enough.

Beatrice: “Subaru. —I have something important to tell you, in fact.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Beatrice looks serious. Subaru tilts his head, waiting for her to speak.

Beatrice: “Your Contract with Betty means you’re a spiritualist, but…Betty is very different from most spirits, in fact. So you would best consider yourself as being slightly different from a genuine spiritualist, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Well the other spirits I’m aware of aren’t humanoid, and Puck’s the only one that’s sentient, talks, and moves around. So I get you’re a little different.”

The only other spiritualists that Subaru knows would be Emilia and Julius.

Emilia is Contracted to Puck, and also has a relationship with the minor spirits. Julius has multiple Contracts with multiple lesser spirits, stronger than minor spirits, and should be operating as quite the powerful spiritualist.

One exception to the pattern is the evil spirit Petelgeuse—but Subaru would rather not remember him and so he will be omitted. Exceptions are exceptions after all.

Beatrice: “Betty is…well, strictly speaking, Betty and Bubby are diverged from the principles of other spirits, in fact. Mother…the Witch Echidna made us, meaning that we are man-made spirits, I suppose. With that said, it’s logistically difficult to create us by infallible means…while Betty is inestimably powerful compared to ordinary spirits, I do have some flaws, in fact.”

Subaru: “Flaws…”

Beatrice looks ashamed as Subaru voices the word.

Beatrice is prideful, and has incredible respect for her mother. It must hurt her to acknowledge that she has flaws at her most fundamental aspect.

But Beatrice casts that weakness away with a sigh,

Beatrice: “Bubby and Betty each have different flaws, but…one of my flaws is monopolization of my Contractor, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Monopolization of your Contractor?”

Beatrice: “Put simply, merely by preserving a Contract with Betty, the Contractor exhausts practically all of their capabilities as a spiritualist. So…erm, being that you’re in a Contract with me, Subaru, you can’t Contract with any spirits except Betty, I suppose. That applies be the spirit minor or lesser, in fact.”

Subaru: “…Okay, got it.”

Grasping Beatrice’s point, Subaru nods several times.

Preserving a Contract with Beatrice uses so much of Subaru’s resources, that he has none left to Contract with other spirits.

While Emilia can ask the minor spirits, rather than Puck, for their aid, Subaru is unable to do this.

Subaru: “Well that’s kind of a disappointment, but I’ll accept it anyway. There’s heaps of benefits to a Contract with you, ignoring the cons. And I’m not going to let go of you to go making Contracts with some dumb minor spirits.”

Beatrice: “G-Good.”

Hearing that reply, Beatrice’s tense cheeks relax somewhat. But she instantly erases that expression, clears her throat, and,

Beatrice: “Th-There’s still more left, I suppose. Though it’s a very minor thing compared to that other one, in fact. No need to think too hard as you listen, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Okay. Well I’m drowning in stuff I don’t know here so please just tell me anything.”

Beatrice: “Erm, so well, Betty is a little, yes, just a little higher grade compared to most spirits, and, erm…I have poor mileage, in fact.”

Subaru: “Mileage…makes you sound like a car.”

It takes a lot of MP to use powerful magic or summon creatures in video games. That balance between cost and power is the mileage, but why is Beatrice having such a hard time saying this?

Subaru: “Huh? But for having poor mileage you used tons of magic against the Hare, and you let me use magic too, and you weren’t sapping anything from me either right?”

Beatrice: “That was using mana from the stockpile I had amassed over a long period, I suppose.

Had I been taking the mana I needed for that fight, not even thousands of you would suffice, in fact. You can thank me for that, I suppose.”

Subaru: “W-Well sure. I can’t imagine how strained I’d be if I tried doing any of that.”

Consecutive Minya’s and that final Al Shamak.

One Shamak is enough to exhaust Subaru’s store. There is no way he could have provided for all of that.

Subaru: “But we can’t keep doing that, can we? I’m your Contractor, so of course I need to supply you with mana.”

Beatrice: “I’m expecting you to, in fact. Man-made spirits like Betty and Bubby are substantiated od, meaning we don’t naturally produce mana, I suppose. So we need to get mana from the atmosphere or our Contractor, in fact. And I can only receive my mana from people, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Okay. …Then how were you getting by in the mansion?”

Beatrice: “…I-I was taking bits from everyone there, in fact.”

Beatrice must feel guilty about it, since she looks away as she talks.

She looks embarrassed, and her gaze grows even redder as Subaru stares at her. While Subaru doesn’t white understand what nuance mana drains have among spirits, going off Beatrice’s reaction, it is apparently not very good manners.

Subaru: “Anyways, you look like you’re very sorry about it so I won’t probe into it. So supposing we save the mana you collect from me for everyday functioning, how much stored mana do you have left?”

Subaru’s mana reserves are paltry and Beatrice consumes lots of mana.

Meaning that they will have to use Beatrice’s powerful magic sparingly, chipping away at her reserved mana bit by bit.

So Subaru must confirm how much mana she has remaining.

Beatrice: “—None, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…Hm?”

Beatrice: “None, in fact. I used everything I stored over those four centuries in that battle, I suppose. The loss of the Forbidden Archive also took quite an amount…and that final Al Shamak was the killer, in fact. I have no mana left in reserve, I suppose.”

So, what. That means…

Beatrice has no mana stored up.

Subaru’s mana is barely enough to cover Beatrice’s day to day.

Beatrice consumes lots of mana, and doesn’t have the mana to use her powerful magic. Subaru’s Contract with Beatrice means that he can’t enlist the minor spirits for help.

Subaru: “So…did we just make a team of a spirit and spiritualist that can’t use magic?!”

Beatrice: “W-Well, I suppose that’s one way you could put it, in fact.”

Subaru: “How else could you put it?! The hell! Are you kidding me, is this seriously happening?!”

Going from the results, what Subaru achieved by becoming a spiritualist was acquiring a little girl.

Subaru: “Actually I’m really worried about where this is going now?! Are you sure we’ll be okay?!”

Beatrice: “Whoopsie, I suppose.”

Subaru: “It’s not funny!!”

This is the newborn pairing of two people that create half a spiritualist.

Their arguing echoes, far, far, forever through the tomb.

Appendix:
Advent

—Footsteps peal through the cold, dark chamber.

Not a speck of light beams into the space, making the path a charge through dark or shadow.

But the footsteps sound without hesitation, travelling through the rancid chamber with a casual gait.

With such ease that they may as well be traversing their own room.

"…"

Water drips. Insects squirm.

Mud and gravel crunches underfoot. This place inspires nothing but discomfort, but the silhouette gives not the slightest murmur of discontent.

Hordes of insects open a path as they flee the silhouette, their stronghold disturbed. Water flows over their feet, the gentle downward slope their guide as they walk on.

Eventually, the silhouette stops, their long hair flowing behind them as they look up.

As before, there is no light.

But their eyes shine with a gleam called conviction.

Dim lights dance as wind whips around the silhouette's feet.

Their long, pink hair and long-sleeved robe flutter in the breeze. At their feet, at the point from which the wind blows, a circle draws itself in the ground.

"So the starter algorithm still works."

With that murmur, the silhouette atop the glowing circle—the girl—levitates.

She ascends as if riding on an invisible floor, rushing for the roof of the dark. That instant, as if ghosting through the bedrock, the girl launches to the outside.

The sunlight burns her eyes. The girl closes her eyelids.

It takes exactly ten seconds for her to open her eyes again. Sun rays piece through her eyelids and into her eyeballs. Prompted by rebellion toward that, and some amount of impatience, she keeps her eyes open wide.

—What she sees is the sun rising anew.

"…It's far less emotional than I expected."

Faced with the daylight, the girl tilts her head.

Indeed, not a single ripple of emotion arises in her apathetic eyes. After all her time spent with a false sun, she had hoped that seeing the real thing again would move her, but the results are unpromising.

"Either way, I've safely left the barrier. Meaning that the thing safely defeated the Trial, frustratingly. I'll give my thanks for that and no more."

If that hadn't happened, it would have been inordinately difficult to leave the Sanctuary. She would catch herself in her own scheme. When she thinks of the girl who dealt with that mess, she feels something akin to displeasure sprout in her heart.

"Well, it's no issue. I can't be too reckless in this body, and I might as well traipse about for a while to fill in the blanks."

The girl flexes her hands open and closed, checking her body's condition.

Duplicates of a progenitor body-vessel, and a subsumed soul of the same nature. She has fit her soul to it and anchored in, but familiarizing to it will take time.

“He already gave me a name, after all. I think I’ll call myself Omega.”

She smiles as she treads on the grass, slipping through gaps in the trees to exit the forest.

The journey is somewhat troubling for a young girl’s legs, but it’s no matter. The fatigue and pain prove that her soul and body are connected. She must enjoy her long-lost life in abundance.

“Beatrice has left the Forbidden Archive, Roswaal has lost his gospel. Though considering the man who pocketed the burnt remains, and Garfiel’s persistent rage, the fires are still smoldering yet. How will he face what’s to come? Perhaps I’ll watch over him, from the sun and in the shade.”

Purposefully excluding the girl that irks her, she begins to walk.

There is a world where she’s going. What never grows dull for her, abundant, endlessly sating her curiosity, a mountain of treasures for the dead Thirst for Knowledge Incarnate.

“If I’m like this, perhaps I’ll understand someday.”

Along her path, the girl sights a ring of flowers, and smiles.

She plucks a flower petal, sniffs its scent, pops it in her mouth.

Even beautiful flowers shall wilt. Why must the flowers wither?

Are even the beautiful memories shared between people destined to wane?

“—Ahh, why must love fade?” the girl muttered as she stepped forth, her long pink hair swaying.

Again the Witch is unleashed on the world.

Bonus Short Stories

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 4

1

In front of the charred remains of the mansion stood alone a girl with her hair in a braid.

The ashen air blew through her blue hair as her gaze swept across the blackened ruins. She wasn't looking for anything; her eyes just wandered around aimlessly.

"…Ya ain't gonna find anything searchin' like that."

A voice called out from behind the girl. The voice was rough, but contained a trace of concern. Because of that, the girl didn't turn around. She simply relaxed her lips. That concern was laughable to her.

After all, the girl and the owner of the voice were recently involved in a battle to the death. It had only been a day since the battle, yet the person was already showing concern.

"…Hey, don't even think about doin' anything stupid. Try anything and my fangs will rip right through ya, child or not."

"I think that's a big bluff, coming from you."

"Huh?"

"Mister, you're kind to women and children, aren't youuu? That's why I believe you wouldn't even think of being merciless to a girl like me."

The boy bared his fangs at her in dissatisfaction. Whether it was because she was correct, or because it was pointless to argue, or possibly neither.

Meili watched as the boy struggled to make up his mind and found it endearing.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to do anything. It takes time to gather witchbeasts, and if I called for them, you'd kill me instantly."

"Heh, don't "Legend of Alosya' me, like ya understand everything."

"Despite your attitude, you're the one that's here with meee."

"That's because there's no one I trust to watch ya besides my amazin' self."

Revealing his lack of allies and strength, the boy Garfiel, kicked the ground with crossed arms and squatted in the scorched remains of a garden.

And like the girl he looked towards the burnt ruins of Roswaal's former mansion. Spotting a quick flash of emotion in his jade eyes, the girl smiled sweetly and giggled.

"Mr. Tiger, you look really uncomfortableee."

"That's because… Dammit, ya already know. Stupid kid."

"That's mean. And besides, you and I aren't that different in age. That's what the man with scary eyes said."

"Dammit Captain, what're ya doin', talkin' with a captured enemy?" he muttered to himself.

Sitting down on a patch of burnt grass, Garfiel made a bitter face. In his mind he saw the black-haired boy's carefree face, while with his eyes he saw the girl's detestable smile.

That was that, then.

"…The agreement was to let ya see this."

"Yes, that's riiight."

"So? Do ya feel any better doin' this?"

The boy's concern lingered, though masked by his agitated words. At those blunt yet touching feelings the girl simply pursed her lips again. “Who knooows?” she murmured.

She realized after saying those words that she might have subconsciously tried to imitate her sister. And so Meili Portroute, a sentimental girl, smiled and closed her eyes. Within the charred ruins, the person she was looking for was nowhere to be found.

Although she should’ve known that from the beginning.

2

“Elsa, are you immortal?” Meili asked, resting her elbows on her knees with her hands on her cheeks.

In response, the listener furrowed their eyebrows as they wiped blood off their cheek. “That’s quite a question to ask suddenly.”

“I don’t think it’s that sudden. I mean, you were surrounded, covered in blood, and stabbed with a spear. And yet you seem fine.”

Meili pointed towards the other girl’s stomach, where there was quite literally a spear sticking out. It had entered through her stomach and made it all the way through, leaving the end to poke out her back. Any internal organs in the way had been pierced, and the amount of blood pouring out looked particularly deadly. Anyone could tell that it was a lethal wound.

And yet, despite receiving such a wound, the black-haired girl seemed almost calm… No, she wasn’t quite calm. Her cheeks had flushed and her breathing heightened.

She felt every moment of pain and every drop of blood. But this excited Elsa.

“That’s unsanitary ,” Meili remarked.

“Oh, that’s harsh coming from someone who surrounds themselves with witchbeasts all the time.”

“I make sure that they clean themselves. And this isn’t about the cleanliness of the body, but of the mind… Hurry up and pull that out! It hurts just looking at it.”

Elsa complied with a grimacing Meili and pulled out the spear from her stomach. The wet, sloppy sound echoed as Meili looked around their blood-stained surroundings.

In the dark, dirty shack there were the unidentifiable remains of about twenty bodies scattered all over the room.

That day, Meili and Elsa had gone on a job together to eliminate some people for reasons unknown. Thus the sea of blood around them.

Meili was to be the rear-guard, while creating the rivers of blood was Elsa's job. Those were the roles they'd always stuck with. Considering the two of them, it was the obvious choice.

"I barely know anything about you, Elsa, despite working together like thiiis."

"I wasn't hiding it. If you ask then I'll answer."

"Then I'll ask. How has that stomach wound already healed?"

Elsa stood in front of Meili, having obeyed and pulled the spear from her abdomen. Rubbing her bloody hands across it, there was no wound, just pure, soft, white skin.

"That's just unnatural."

"True, I'll admit that it's not normal. This is…the result of a curse."

"Curse?" Meili echoed.

"There are countries that would try and claim that it's a blessing, though."

Elsa's voice was uncharacteristically harsh as she rubbed the spot where the wound would have been. Meili realized that this was a topic Elsa didn't enjoy discussing.

She didn't want to cause Elsa any further pain, but she simply couldn't hide her curiosity.

“So it could be called a blessing or a curse. Does that mean you were born with it?”

“No, I wasn’t. When I was about your age, I still had a normal human body. But after I was caught stealing back in my home country, I was sold as a slave.”

“And then?”

“The person who bought me was a bit of a strange one. He didn’t have much interest in girls…but the biggest issue was his skill in curse arts.”

At this, Meili looked down behind her eyelashes at the term. As a Witchbeast User, many witchbeasts used techniques similar to curse arts. Curse arts, however, were techniques fundamentally designed to end a person’s life.

It was difficult to associate them with Elsa’s undying body.

“In Gusteko, there’s a curse art called the curse doll. Have you heard of it?”

Meili shook her head at the unknown term.

“Simply put, it’s a curse art designed to harm a person. You choose the target you want to kill, then you carve the curse into the one who will be the curse doll. Once you activate that curse, the person who became the doll is unable to die until the target is killed. They’ll be an undying doll.”

“…Isn’t that something amazing? I mean, you can create a bunch of undying people. That would put us out of a job,” Meili commented.

“Yes, that’s true. But there’s no curse art that is that convenient.”

Elsa smiled somberly at Meili’s innocent brutality.

“First, the person who becomes the curse doll loses all sense of self and can only act in ways that help it kill the target. Second, once the target has been killed, then the curse doll dies.”

“Ahh, then they wouldn’t be a good paaawn…huh? But, wait…”

Meili pursed her lips as a strange contradiction came forth from Elsa’s explanation. According to Elsa’s story, she was one of these curse dolls. But also according to that explanation, she should have no self and only act to kill a target.

“But you can talk normally, Elsa… Or is it because you’re insane? That would make sense.”

“It hurts if you think that makes sense… I’m…an exception to a curse doll.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you. Whoever bought me was eccentric and had a talent for curse arts.”

Elsa didn’t want to speak more of her former “owner,” so she cut off the explanation there. She played with her braid as she continued, “There are others like me with undying bodies. And those girls tried several different methods to kill themselves… They stabbed their hearts with stakes, they drained other people’s blood. People started calling them vampires.”

“An undying curse doll…”

Meili felt a chill upon hearing those words. She had asked ‘Are you immortal?’ Elsa responded that she was unable to die. It was just a slight difference in words, but Meili felt like there was meaning behind her choice of words.

“Do you also want to die? Like those other girls, Elsa?”

She had to ask that question. Elsa had been slashed with swords, stabbed with spears, burned her insides. Perhaps she just wanted to die like a normal person.

At Meili’s question, Elsa just looked confused. “Why?” she asked, tilting her head.

“That’s what you meant, wasnt it?”

"Really? Then I'm afraid you're mistaken. I have no wish to die. I might not want to live as long as those 'vampires' though… Mostly though, this body has its own many advantages."

"Advantages?"

"The smell of blood, torn flesh, of insides, makes me feel alive. And this body gives me lots of opportunities to feel that. I'm happy with this body." Smiling gently, Elsa dropped the spear she had been leaning on, and walked towards the sitting Meili. "That's why you don't need to look so worried."

"Worried? Me? For you?"

"Yes. When you asked if I wanted to die, you looked so sad. You really are a lonely girl, Meili."

"D-Don't say such stupid thiiings!" Meili shouted, turning red as Elsa patted her head.

Part of it was at being called lonely, but it was also because Elsa's hand was covered in blood and messing up her hair. That was something that Elsa never learned to be mindful of.

"Come on, you'll get my hair dirty. Your hair is a mess, too… Ah! How could you leave it like that? Unbelievable!"

Meili grabbed Elsa's braid that had come loose in the fighting. She had done the braid just before they started work so that they would match.

It was hard to believe that someone with such a proper appearance could care so little about their looks.

"Even if your wounds heal, a sloppy appearance won't get fixed so easily. Make sure you take care of iiit."

"Yeah, but, you know. Since you're always with me, you can worry about it. That way I can focus more on the job at hand."

"Don't try to play this off!"

Trying to braid hair in such a bloodstained environment was next to impossible. Especially since it was after a job. Elsa's wounds had healed so they should have been focusing on leaving.

Standing up, Meili grabbed Elsa's hand and started walking. If she didn't, then her partner would just end walking into a crowd of people.

That was all there was to it. There was no deeper meaning in holding hands.

"You need to stay focuseeed. If you don't, then I'll end up dying before you with your undying body."

Those words, spoken without facing each other, were meant to be half-comeback and half-teasing. And for a moment, Elsa's eyes went wide before returning to her usual smile.

"Well, who knows."

3

"Stupid Elsa… I was supposed to die fiiirst." She recalled the exchange while pushing back the pain from her wounds.

Deep within the burnt ruins of Roswaal Manor, Elsa had been crushed and turned to ash by the flames.

As far as Meili knew, Elsa had survived being stabbed, having her neck broken, and having her heart crushed. But she had yet to be turned to ash. Elsa had wished for a place to die, not that she was aware of it herself.

To feel alive in the death of others meant that you lost the sense of being alive yourself. That's what she thought now.

Thinking along those lines, that would mean that Elsa dying here was a blessing for her. At the very least, she wasn't the type of person to cry and struggle when faced with her death.

"Mr. Tiger, we're done. Thank you. I'm satisfied now."

Rather than become a captive, Meili had come to the ruins to burn Elsa’s final resting place into her memory. That was her duty as Elsa’s sister in arms.

That much had been done. And so the next step was…

“Whatever, I don’t care.” Sitting in the burnt garden, Garfiel kept eyeing Meili with a somewhat irritated expression. “If you wanna cry, I ain’t gonna stop ya.”

Taken aback by such blunt words, Meili tried to smile in response. Only she couldn’t. Finding a burning sensation in her eyes, she quickly wiped them and looked up at the sky.

And so, with her face hidden, she opened her mouth towards the sky. Garfiel said nothing as the emotions came pouring forth from her lips. And then quietly, the two mourned the black-haired girl in that blackened garden.

—And the two would never again speak of what happened that day.

END

The Witch’s After Tea Party

1

As the sun bathed the white snow in its rays, making it look magical as it reflected off its surface, she exhaled a misty breath.

The light, too bright to look at, made her slightly narrow her eyes. She put her hand against the towering tree next to her, feeling the rough sensation of the bark on her palm. This isn’t an illusion, it’s the real thing, she thought.

She clenched her fist tightly, closed her eyes due to the glare, inhaled some icy cold air into her lungs until she could take in no further, and then let it all out.

“Just as I thought, a lot of things feel different from how they used to when you acquire a new body after many centuries,” the girl grumbled in a way that made her seem older than she appeared, her peach pink hair fluttering in the refreshing wind.

She was a charming, dainty looking girl. She had azure eyes, which shone with intelligence, and it ought to be stated that her lovely features exuded a sense of elegance and grace.

With but a single glance, anyone could tell that the girl gave off a certain, extraordinary aura.

Her young, undeveloped body was wrapped in a white robe with naught an undergarment to speak of. The sight of her treading upon the bare ground with her tiny, bare feet, made her look extremely vulnerable.

Her vulnerability was not only the kind where she was vulnerable to being seen by people, but also one where she was even more vulnerable to the climate at the same time. Since the girl was walking around a snow-covered forest, her body was losing heat as each second passed, and thus was shivering all over.

To be honest, the girl’s travel attire was a huge mistake, as she hadn’t really considered this when she chose it.

“And after all that work, haaa. Would it not be comical if you froze to death due to the cold? Huuu.”

And then, suddenly, the bewitching, slothful voice of a woman echoed inside the trembling girl’s mind.

It naturally couldn’t have been the girl’s voice, as it sounded entirely different from hers. It hadn’t gone through her ears, but directly to her mind. The girl heaved an inconspicuous sigh, scrunching up her well-shaped eyebrows.

“That’s not a very pleasant thing to imagine. There is nothing to worry about in that regard, however. If I truly needed to, I could generate enough firepower to burn the whole area to the ground. You should not presume to look down on me.”

“Sooo even though you went through great pains to sneak out in the dead of night, you’ll throw it all away and get found out by making a lot of noiiise?” Is that an ideal scenario for you, Dona-Dona?”

“…”

“Cut, it out…Daphne. E…chidna…doesn’t, mean anything bad by it…or, maybe just a little? Mm, see, she must just be, relieved, to be alive again, prob…ably.”

She heard cynical remarks spoken with a sweet voice quickly get followed by faltering words of defense. The two differing voices did not belong to the girl, and they were different from the slothful voice of the woman who’d spoken first.

The three differing voices had taken turns speaking to the girl. However, all of the voices being directed towards the girl were laced with an equal amount of familiarity and complex emotions.

At that, the girl—no, the Witch who had changed her form, Echidna, relaxed her lips.

The form of the Witch with white hair and black eyes who was known for her black and white beauty had been lost. She was now using the girl's body as a vessel for her soul, having managed to pull off the improbable act of reviving herself.

It was clear she had put a great deal of effort into her revival, and this turn of affairs was greatly troubling for her, but Echidna had maneuvered through it all and accomplished what she'd set out to do.

I'm not really one to get emotional, but I'll give myself a rare pat on the back for a job well done in this matter. However…

"When you spend over 400 years as a spirit, you sort of forget what it's like on the outside…"

"You got a little over-excited there. Dona, you're such a child. Not good with stuff at all."

"I'd rather you not refer to me as a child, but… I suppose there's nothing I can say to that now."

Echidna responded to that childish voice resounding within her mind, but she knew her words wouldn't have any persuasion. In any case, I would rather not freeze to death right after my revival.

Thinking of something she could do as a last resort, and not having any other choice, Echidna snapped her fingers.

Her fingers that had grown numb produced a delicate, faint sound, and around her arose spots of crimson light. A small fireball the size of her fist flickered and swayed, manifesting an amount of firepower larger than one might think. It drove away the coldness of the snow-filled forest, which in turn banished the danger of freezing to death.

"Though the Gate seems different, the use of magic doesn't seem to be an issue. In that case…"

"You'd be a laughingstock if you made a mistake with your use of magic this time and burned the whole forest down as a result."

"It just doesn't end… How dare you all keep spouting unending sarcasm at me. After working so hard to enact this plan, I'm starting to regret bringing all of you out."

Echidna sighed at the voice of the fifth person that rang in her head, as it marked the last one.

She unconsciously stretched her hand under her robe toward the object tied around the base of her bare neck—where an imposing blue glintstone necklace hung.

Echidna contemplated for a while, running a nail along the glintstone's hard surface. A person with a trained eye would be able to tell that it wasn't just your average object, but something that held great power.

It was an extremely high-grade magic crystal of the highest level of purity. It had an extraordinary ability to store magic energy and was currently storing overwhelming power within it, making use of its entire capacity.

Even a thousand high-level magic users wouldn't be able to use up the stored mana. And while it was extraordinary that such a small fragment could hold so much, using it all up would be quite an extraordinary feat as well. Your average person could never even imagine doing something like that.

And would anyone actually believe it was currently being used to store the souls of five people?

I went through great pains to secure this magic crystal and the vessel for my own soul. I spent 400 years as a spirit, and slowly put this plan into action over the course of 10 years—and finally, the moment has…

"Echidna! Earth to Echidna! Did you even hear a word I said?"

"—. I did. You're yelling right into my ear… No, would 'ear' wouldn't be the right word in this case? Could you not yell in my mind so much? It's seriously giving me a headache."

"This isn't the time to be having a leisurely conversation! Look beside you. Look!"

"Beside me?"

She pulled her consciousness out of the sea of thoughts by following the voice, then looked dubiously to her side. Thereupon, she saw a bright red light and many trees engulfed in flames, and the fire spreading from one tree to another.

Taking a quick glance, Echidna realized her single fireball had made the trees catch fire and was the spark that had started this forest fire.

"Oh dear."

"You seem quite composed, haaa."

"Well, you see, it's important to remain calm and not panic in these situations. And while it is certainly true that this inferno was unexpected…"

As Echidna finished speaking, she pointed her palm towards the burning trees and closed her eyes. "Extinguish!" she cried, emitting words of power from her lips as she opened her eyes.

"It still hasn't gone out…"

"Heeey, Daphne has some thoughts on this… That place seems to be different frooom Dona-Dona's Dream World, so will she even be able to interfere with it just by using words?"

"That would certainly be a problem."

"A b-big mis…calculation, isn't it?"

"Dona, did you start the fire? Are you a bad person, Dona? Are you Typhon's enemy?"

"This isn't the time for talking! Hurry up! Hurry up and put it out! Look!"

"Of course. I shall do it posthaste…guh."

As she tried to reign in the Witches having a shouting contest in her head, Echidna attempted to put the raging forest fire out with a spell but was hit with dizziness instead. Her spell had fizzled out mid-cast and failed to activate.

While the Witches were wondering what had happened, Echidna swiftly grasped the situation. “I’m not familiar enough with this body yet to create a flood using magic.”

Which is to say…

“I can’t put the fire out.”

“Then you need to get out of here right now—!!”

Not only had she been at risk of freezing to death, but now she was faced with burning to death on top of that. Echidna hit the ground running, as if that angry voice had whipped her into doing so.

The forest fire is spreading, and soon there will be nowhere to escape to. I need to get out of here.

Though she was unfamiliar with this body and hadn’t lifted a finger in over 400 years, Echidna ran like her life depended on it, gasping for air as she did so.

“The harshness of the outside world, is a little, different, from what I imagined,” Echidna lamented while panting, her body feeling heavy as the cold air took it into its embrace.

Although I feel like my body is about to break, when I consider the fact that I haven’t felt like this in several hundred years—

“No, that still won’t make this any easier… Hic.”

2

Fortunately, thanks to her desperate escape, Echidna managed to avoid burning to death.

The flames that were burning the forest down were quite powerful, but by guiding them however I pleased with wind I’d created with mana, I managed to secure an escape route. I wouldn’t have gotten out of there without it.

Now that I have escaped the dangerous forest fire, I can go back to traveling in these clothes—or rather, I was hoping things would have been that easy, but…

“Out of season heavy snowfall and a forest fire…and now after all that, I’ve found a girl wearin’ nuthin’ but rags. Are my eyes actin’ weird because of the miasma?” said a man.

“Don’t worry, I’m seeing the same thing…as long as this ain’t a dream or somethin’,” another man added.

“Hm…” While sitting on a tree stump, Echidna placed her hand on her chin as if she was thinking about something. Her appearance was that of a young child, but that pose suited her rather well due to the aura she exuded.

Thus, the man, no, the men, appeared confused due to the strange sensation, and were looking at each other. They were a group of fierce-looking men dressed like bandits that gave off dangerous auras. It looked like there were 18 of them at a glance, and with each of them holding a well-worn weapon, they looked rather comical surrounding a little girl. However, not judging things from appearances alone and following their instincts was their forte. You could assume that was the case due to how they looked and what their occupation was.

“I assume you’re here because of the Great Rabbit, yes? In other words…you gentlemen are Scavengers.”

“What?” a scavenger blurted out.

“Hm? Are you called by a different name in this age? According to his knowledge, you could be called looters, but that doesn’t suit you either… I wonder what I should call you?”

Echidna tilted her head a little, making the men make nervous expressions as if they’d just felt something ominous.

Scavenging—an occupation that also existed 400 years ago—was something that involved going through the homes and belongings of the villages and people that had been ravaged by witchbeasts and turning what was plundered into money. This was especially so if the site had been ravaged by the Great Rabbit since everything apart from the original inhabitants would remain untouched, making it an ideal site for Scavengers.

“Even if there are survivors, you can easily dispose of them and make it seem like witchbeasts did it. What a clever way to hunt. You gentlemen were just born to be hyenas.”

“Hyena? You mean… Hyena-people? What are ya even talking about…no.”

The man in the front shook his head and glared at Echidna with a machete in his hand. His fear for the mysterious child and a strong desire to harm her could be seen in his eyes. It was clear he was well aware of what he should and should not get involved with.

“I don’t know what yer story is, but our livelihood depends on it. For some reason, the rabbit’s trail disappeared without a trace. On top of that, there was a wildfire and…you appeared.”

“I see, do continue,” Echidna prodded.

“You’re an ominous girl, but ya don’t look bad. And you have those ears after all,” the man said, smiling wickedly as he flicked his ear.

His gesture brought Echidna’s current physical characteristics to light—which she had because the girl who had become her vessel was a half-elf.

It’s not as if they think of me as a half-devil. What’s important is the value of the product, not the purity of the blood. Whether I’m a pureblood or a half-blood, it’s all the same to them.

“Elves are treated like that in this age too?” Echidna wondered.

“Based on the way ya say things, are you an old hag who’s been hidin’ in the woods for a long time or somethin’?” Elves are scary since ya can’t guess their age by their looks. But yeah, that’s right. Even now, elves get sold fer a good price.”

"…"

"—Woa?" the man grunted. He'd felt like his skin was boiling for a second. The other men, having felt the same thing, were startled. They all started buzzing about it, wondering what could have happened. The only one who knew what had happened touched the glintstone on her chest and tried to calm the Witch of Wrath's rage.

"Hey, I don't know if yer a brat or an old hag, but whatever you do, don't get any silly ide…"

"Alright," Echidna said, cutting him off. "At this rate, we won't be able to reach a mutual understanding. You gentlemen want to capture me and make some money. On the other hand, I want to continue my carefree journey. So, I'd like to propose a compromise. What do you say?"

"A compromise? Do ya think you're in a position to negotiate?"

"I want you to give it some thought. That way, there will be a chance that both of us make it out of this safely," Echidna appealed with a smile, her head tilted.

The child's smile made the man gasp hard and take a step back, as if it had overwhelmed him. And then, the man, looking as if he couldn't believe he'd reacted like that, immediately said, "I'll give it a listen."

"I'm glad. My proposal is simple. 30 seconds is all I need. I'll go with you without fighting back if you are able to stand in front of me for 30 seconds without anything happening to you. Since it seems interesting too."

"Ha. What's up with that? Do you think something like that will be enough to scare us…?"

"—Well then, the 30 second countdown begins now."

The moment she perceived that they had accepted her terms, Echidna stroked her long-white hair, narrowed her dark eyes, and glared at the men.

"…"

All of the men looked like they had no idea what had just happened. In their eyes, it must have looked like the child in front of them who looked to be around 10 years old had suddenly turned into a beautiful girl with white hair. However, before the men could get an answer to their question, they started succumbing to the abnormality that assaulted them one after another.

"Kah…ku."

The man holding the machete fell to his knees. His eyes darted around all over the place, not focusing on any one thing, and then began foaming at the mouth. A similar phenomenon occurred not only to him, but to all the men surrounding her as well. The eighteen men in Echidna's line of sight were unable to resist her Witch's Miasma and thus in great agony.

The men scratched and tore at their necks, rolled their eyes back into their heads, blew foam out of their mouths, convulsed, choked on their tongues, split their own heads open with their weapons, buried their heads in the snow, and died in agony in various other ways.

"—Exactly thirty seconds."

Having finished counting the 30 seconds she'd promised them, Echidna looked around. There was nothing but men lying motionless in their own blood and vomit. Unfortunately, there hadn't been any among them who could endure the thirty seconds of hell and qualify to be the Sage that could reign over the six Witches.

"It was unfortunate for all of you, but a promise is a promise. I'll just continue with my carefree journey then. I don't think anyone will mind if I borrow some clothes and shoes," Echidna said, then took some clothes that could fit her from the fallen men and put them on.

By that time, her appearance had already returned to that of the child from before.

“It doesn’t last long, it seems. I suppose I’ll have to wait until I get more used to it. But still…”

Echidna looked back at the fallen men, then closed her eyes and thought of the boy with black hair, of the boy who remained unaffected while being surrounded by the Witches covered in miasma—though he probably didn't even realize how abnormal it was to be able to do that.

"I can't wait to get to a city now that I have a little traveling money. I'd like to think that the taste of tea has changed over the course of a few hundred years… Now then."

Echidna flipped the hem of her long clothes and once again set off on her journey without a destination. While leaving, she began feeling gratitude for the men who had provided her with clothes, shoes, and travel money.

"I was about to go out and make a terrible first impression with people by wearing nothing but a piece of cloth over my naked body. It was quite a terrible mistake—I will always remember you gentlemen as being my saviors."

She hadn't uttered words of deceit or anything; she'd been sincere. Echidna would never forget her debt to them, till her soul perishes, the men who worked as Scavengers, who met the Witch here and died.

"Aah. I know, I know. You guys are noisy. Spare me already."

The Witch slowly started moving forward on her journey as she responded to the voices in her head.

—The sky was high above, the wind was lukewarm, and the light seemed to be blessing the one who had returned after hundreds of years.

END

The Emilia Camp's Great Evaluation Meeting

1

"You're as selfish as ever, uncle!"

The one bluntly admonishing him in a loud voice was a young girl who had her arms crossed.

The girl had her braided deep indigo hair bundled up over her head, and her formal clothing gave off a dignified impression. Her gentle, well-featured face could certainly be described as beautiful, but right now it was tense as she scowled, her anger clearly on display, so it would be unwise to just carelessly drop a compliment.

And the focus of this girl's anger was a tall man bearing hair of the same color as her and heterochromatic eyes, he was smiling wryly and looked like a clown.

"I dooooo apologize for the trouble I am causing you, Annerose. However, it was not necessary for you to go so far as to come to the sanctuary personally. The journey must have been difficult."

"If I had not come here personally, just who in the world would give you a proper scolding, seriously! It's because everyone else keeps spoiling you that you've ended up with such a bothersome attitude. You're already a grown man, so do be sure to reflect on this."

"My my, it would seeeeeem that I am always disgracing myself before you. But I suppose you are correct. My apologies."

His bitter smile deepened, and the man—Roswaal dropped his shoulders and sincerely lowered his head to the girl. This attitude of his caused the girl's eyes to widen,

"What's this now. For you to sincerely apologize… Did you perhaps hit your head somewhere?"

"It wasn't exactly my head, but the sides of my face have received quite the magnificent pummeling, among other areas.”

“What! Uncle’s face?! Just who exactly would have the nerve!”

As the girl placed her hand against her mouth in shock, Roswaal turned around to the sight behind him. In front of the procession of dragon carriages that Annerose had brought with her was a boisterous group. Roswaal pointed to the blonde boy—Garfiel, who was standing among them.

“It was him. It was a truly tremendous blow… I was blown right through the building.”

“What is this… I shall have a few words with him!”

Unable to hide her astonishment, the girl rapidly dashed over to Garfiel. Having noticed the girl’s approach, Garfiel looked slightly cautious.

The girl then thrust her finger toward him,

“You! To think you actually walloped my uncle, it must have been a sight worth seeing! Should uncle ever try to hassle you about it, just report it to me. I shall be your ally!”

And said this, causing Roswaal’s shoulders to drop even further.

2

“I am known as Annerose Miload. I was born into a branch of my uncle’s Mathers family… I suppose you could say he is a relative of sorts. I am pleased to meet you.”

Following this majestic introduction, Annerose offered a perfectly refined bow.

The self-awareness in every movement of this girl that was not even ten years of age made it plain to see that she was born of nobility, and moreover how pure her bloodline was. That deep indigo hair of hers was proof that she was related to Roswaal by blood just as she had explained, but—

"She's so upstanding it's hard to believe she's Roswaal's relative…"

"While the margrave might be the one most familiar to you, it would not be wise to think of him as representative of the nobility in general. It is a well known fact that Margrave Mathers is a rather eccentric person, after all."

"Well, I suppose that's true. Even back at the castle, most of those nobles were basically what you'd expect."

When Subaru quietly murmured this, Otto agreed with an ambiguous expression, "I guess so." Indifferent to this exchange, the procession Annerose had brought with her entered the sanctuary one by one—Entering the settlement, they started partitioning the passengers who numbered over a hundred.

Although the sanctuary was fortunately released at long last, its present condition could only be described as miserable. After all, the heavy snowfall that had summoned the Great Rabbit had now completely covered the forest, furthermore, the forest was also the site of Emilia's hard-fought battle to annihilate said witchbeast in addition to which it was also the location of Subaru and Beatrice's inaugural battle, the after-effects of which ruined the forest even further.

Roswaal was completely exhausted, and Emilia was having a hard time controlling her power that had just broken free of its restraints due to which they had no choice but to wait for the snow to clear out on its own. Consequently, the sanctuary was left in an out of season state of cold and regardless of whether it was temporary or not, they wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"And right at that moment, showing up with immaculate timing was…"

"—We who had made preparations in advance under the master's orders. Frightful."

"Uoohhh?!"

With their conversation interrupted as if it was completely natural, Subaru and Otto both jumped simultaneously. Witnessing their surprise, a young, blue-haired man bowed slightly as he apologized, “That was rude of me.”

The young man’s deep blue hair was tidy, and his face that gave off an impression of intelligence was adorned with a monocle over its left eye. His figured covered in a black butler uniform was rather slim, but his body was well trained and even a novice could see that his form was flawless.

“U-Umm, You are…”

“I am Clind, a steward working under Lady Annerose. I was previously in the master’s… In Roswaal L. Mathers’ employ, as a steward, obviously. Audacious.”

“A steward… It seems to me that that’s the highest position among butlers and maids and stuff.”

“Yes, that is correct. Sagacious.”

Clind lowered his chin as he answered, and Subaru felt a tremble in his spine.

He had certainly felt awed by Annerose’s conduct as well, but Clind was a step above even that. How should he put it, it was like he was so put together that it was actually off-putting.

Clind
Annerose

"Excuse me, Mr. Clind. I believe you said something along the lines of preparing in advance?"

"Correct. Master had contacted us beforehand. You are Otto Suwen, the minister of internal affairs, is that not so. I have already heard the details. Capable."

"Although I was barely involved in that decision so I can't really accept it!"

Looking on from the side as Otto screamed about his position, Subaru murmured in a low voice, "Seriously?"

The fact that this rescue party led by Annerose was prepared in advance meant, of course, that Roswaal without a doubt considered this to be something that would be necessary after he made the contents of the gospel a reality.

Although the future took a different path in the end, it was extremely ironic that they would be saved like this.

"…Thanks to which we can unravel at least part of the spell that binds the master. Thankful."

"Eh? What was that just now?"

"Is it not about time you felt hungry? I was asking if you would like to dine. Repetition."

"No, that definitely wasn't it?! I get the feeling you were saying something really important?!"

Subaru objected to this unabashed attempt at a cover up, but Clind raised his brows, dropped his shoulders, sighed as if to show his exhaustion, and showed no sign whatsoever that he would answer Subaru's questions.

This attitude of his immediately convinced Subaru that he was someone connected to the Roswaal Manor. And like so, Subaru was mystified by Clind.

"You're at it again… Teasing others like that is a real bad habit of yours, you ought to keep it in check, Clind."

"Frederica, you know this guy… Wait, that's obvious."

Frederica who was approaching them as though she had seen something she couldn't overlook nodded extremely reluctantly in response to Subaru's words, "Yes."

"Unfortunately, I have known him for quite some time. Because he has been in Roswaal's employ for a long time… I too was in his care when I first started."

"For a senior you've known for such a long time, you're rather bitter towards him…"

"I suppose so. While I do acknowledge that he certainly possesses ability befitting a steward… This man is deeply flawed in ways that that cannot compensate for. In particular…"

As if she had a list of complaints as long as their acquaintanceship, Frederica almost started enumerating all sorts of grievances. But before she could, a small figure rushed over to them.

"Big sis Frederica! The villagers have all gathered in the clearing. What shall we do now?"

"P-Petra! You can't, don't come here right now!"

"Eh?"

Petra had just finished guiding the villagers to the dragon carriages, and was now approaching Frederica for her next instructions. This made Frederica's face go pale, but she was too late.

By the time she noticed, that man… Clind was already standing before Petra who was surprised. Everyone around them was astonished by his speed that transcended human sight as he looked down at Petra, and then nodded.

"—I see. This girl's present looks extraordinarily promising. Gold star."

“P-Present…? Not my future?”

“Yes, your present. You possess a spirit full of potential, your value is at its peak at this very moment, in your youthful state. Frederica was once the same as you, but just look at her now… Disappointing.”

“Get a hold of yourself, you damned pervert!”

Frederica attacked Clind with an unexpectedly merciless kick. Clind dodged this attack from behind without even looking, and slipped behind Petra.

“Uhya”

“Th-That’s so low, you degenerate! Fight me head on!”

“Do not speak such absurdities, there shall be no fight. I merely wish to offer this girl with a promising present—Yes, Petra, I wish to offer her some advice on how to best go about her work. Favor. For what reason would you interfere with this? Mysterious.”

“You…!”

Clind remained as calm as ever, causing Frederica to start attacking him ferociously, but Clind avoided all of her attacks, keeping Petra between them all the while. Petra was already getting dizzy in this maelstrom of wind, but the battle only got more intense.

“Aah, Mr. Natsuki. I’ll handle that somehow, so I think it would be best if you went to see Lady Emilia for now.”

“That would be a great help, but what do you mean somehow…”

“Somehow means somehow. Well, considering the path ahead of me, I at least ought to be able to handle something of this level, something like that.”

Otto said this with a shrug, causing Subaru’s eyes to widen. He then immediately averted his eyes from his friend’s consideration and determination and started patting his back violently.

“That hurts! Hey, what are you doing all of a sudden!”

“Don’t worry about it. Well then, I’m leaving the rest to you, our minister of internal affairs.”

That was all Subaru said before he ran off in a hurry. “I still haven’t accepted that!” He heard a voice yell from behind him, but he ignored it like he always did.

In this manner, he quickly made it into the clearing. Right in front of the cemetery, he found Emilia talking to Annerose on the stairs. He ran over to them.

“Mm, Subaru, you’re late. What were you doing, I wonder?”

The first one to notice him was Beatrice who was sitting on the stairs. She brushed the dust off her skirt and stood up, after which she naturally lined up next to Subaru.

“Ohh, sorry, sorry. I was just chatting with Otto and then got caught up in a weird typhoon… Beako, there’s this butler wearing a monocle, you have to stay away from him no matter what.”

“—? What’s with that? Just what is that butler going to…”

“Well, this and that. Please, Beako. You’re precious to me. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I-I understand, in fact. Well, if you’re going to say all that, I suppose there’s no helping it, I shall do as you say, I suppose.”

Subaru pleaded with a sincere expression which made Beatrice turn red in the face as she nodded unsteadily. He figured that at least for now, this would reduce the risk of Beatrice experiencing something unfortunate.

Now what was left was to rack his brains as to how he could prevent any sort of contact between Clind and Beatrice.

“…Your present condition would suggest that you have encountered Clind.”

Subaru was caressing Beatrice's head due to both relief and her loveliness when Ram called out to him. Holding her elbows, she maintained her usual stance as her light crimson eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Ram has not seen him in a while, but it would seem that his incorrigible nature has not changed in the slightest."

"Aah, it was obvious, but you know him too, huh. He's that much of an ikemen and yet he's a lolicon, what a cruel act God has committed…"

"I haven't a clue what 'ikemen' or 'lolicon' are supposed to be, but that is his intrinsic nature. He had even gotten awfully friendly with Ram when she was young and bright. Surely…"

"Surely?"

"—Surely, it was the same for Rem."

Lowering her eyes slightly, Ram said this as if confirming something, as if she was persuading herself. Her words caused an ache to flash through Subaru's chest.

Rem's existence, her memories, were still gone. —Having safely brought her here from the mansion, her reunion with Ram truly was complicated after all.

Subaru had already been hurt by the fact that Ram did not remember Rem, but this time was no different. But what wasn't the same was the fact that in this world, Ram and Rem had a future.

Under the premise that they would bring Rem back, even though Ram could not recall her existence, she acknowledged that she was her sister and was doing her best to come to terms with that fact. That in itself saved him.

"Well, anyway. We'll have to coexist with Clind somehow, so we'll be counting on you for that part, big sister."

"I suppose so. If I could mention just one thing, it would be that when it comes to the young, he does not differentiate between male and female.”

“What exactly am I supposed to do having heard that?!”

It would also be troublesome to delve too deep into his perversions. This caused Subaru to shriek, and in response Ram’s lips suddenly relaxed into a dignified smile that was very Ram-like.

Seeing this, Subaru donned a bitter smile himself. And then—

“Hey, you there! Are you the Subaru Emily spoke of?”

“Woah there.”

Someone rushed towards Subaru rapidly, causing him to instinctively take a step backward. The one pointing her finger at him was none other than Annerose.

Her eyes were harsh as she glared at him and her lips trembled.

“I am, but… Eh? Why are you glaring at me with such hostility?”

“The reason is completely obvious! You took advantage of the fact that Emily is so defenseless despite her cuteness to force a chuu on her! Can you take responsibility for that?!”

“Wha…?!”

Annerose’s accusatory interrogation momentarily left Subaru at a loss for words. Emilia then cut in on their quarrel with a flustered expression.

Grabbing Annerose’s small shoulder, she shook her head as her face reddened.

“Y-You’re wrong, Anne! He didn’t force me at all. He even told me to move if I didn’t want it. I was the one who didn’t move, so… So it was consensual!”

“Wait, Emilia-tan! That way of putting it makes it sound strangely non-consensual, also, Emily? What kind of relationship do you have with this kid?”

“Emily is Emily, it is my pet name for her. Emilia and I refer to each other using pet names, that is the sort of close relationship we have. If you understand that, it’s about time you got out of our way you meddling insect.”

Her attitude as she waved her hand to shoo him away did not possess the slightest bit of the refinement of a young noble she had displayed earlier, there was only hostility towards a rival in love, and a declaration of war.

“Wait, isn’t it strange for us to be rivals in love! Emilia-tan’s the cutest girl in the world, you know?!”

“So, what about it? The two of us will raise the baby in her belly with love. So hurry up and get out of here, you homewrecker.”

“Mm! I can’t overlook what you just said! Did this brat dare say such a thing to Betty’s contractor I wonder! Perhaps I should go ahead and shut that mouth of yours right now!”

“Will you use a chuu I wonder. You’re being rather forward, Miss Beatrice.”

“You’re just complicating things, so just be quiet for a bit, Beako, big sister!”

Beatrice had gotten angry when Annerose insulted Subaru due to her misdirected hostility, and now Ram was stirring the pot too. Subaru was frantically trying to resolve the situation.

Emilia’s amethyst eyes widened as she watched all of this happen, and her lips suddenly relaxed into a smile. Her finger gently touched the magic crystal on her chest—Where Puck was sleeping.

“This is reeeeally chaotic, but… Fufu, these are the people precious to me.”

Emilia’s whisper was swallowed up by their noisy quarrel, and was not heard by anyone.

But the magic crystal shone brightly for a moment, as if the one within was listening to his beloved daughter.

END

One Day II

Chapter 1:
The Relationship of These Sisters

1

—Everyone subject to the scene would agree this is unbearable to witness.

Garfiel: “H-Hey, Sis. That luggage looks pretty heavy there. Want my amazin’ self to carry some?”

Frederica: “Garf…no, do not worry. I am merely offering some slight assistance, since it discomforts me to be constantly served as a guest. Feel free to relax, Garf.”

Garfiel: “O-Oh. W-Well, got it. Jus’ holler ‘f yer need anythin’, ‘kay?”

Garfiel scratches his cheek, standing stock still as Frederica pushes the trolley. Frederica gazes at him for a moment, but immediately pulls herself together and refocuses on her work.

The small wheels roll across the floor, their noise fading further down the mansion’s hallway.

Garfiel dazedly watches his sister grow distant.

Subaru: “…So annoying.”

Garfiel scratches at his short, blond hair, sighs, and walks off in the opposite direction from Frederica. Subaru puts his hand to his forehead, having witnessed this scene from around the corner of the hallway, and bemoans the irritating exchange.

Emilia: “They’ve had a week to calm down and talk…but they still look sooo uncomfortable.”

Says Emilia, hidden in the same place and same manner as Subaru. Subaru was squatting while Emilia spied the exchange from above him.

Subaru feels Emilia's breath grow distant as he stands up and rotates his hips.

Subaru: "It's a decennary reunion…and one without any contact during the decade. I heard their goodbye wasn't exactly an invigorating one where they were wishing each other success, and I can understand it being awkward, but…"

Subaru crosses his arms and tilts his head.

He can understand it, but it's still irritating. Annoying. Watching them makes his back itch. Garfiel and Frederica have been like this ever since their reunion. While they pretend to be on acceptably affable terms when others are around, things are actually poor.

Garfiel might look emotional and impulsive, but he's a surprisingly good actor when he puts his mind to it. And there's no need mentioning how well Frederica conducts herself. They probably hadn't been planning to, but the siblings have successfully deceived quite a number of people in this handful of days.

But it's obvious to Subaru, who has often caught the two of them alone, and now Emilia's witnessed it too.

Emilia: "It looks like Garfiel's trying to approach her, but Frederica can't look at him straight in the eye. Even though they're finally back together. How come?"

Subaru: "It's hard to enjoy the reunion when the goodbye's so messy. I mean, I'm just going off my manga knowledge here. …I think the problem's Frederica."

Emilia is right – Garfiel is ready to be open with Frederica. But Frederica looks less promising. Frederica might be feeling guilt toward her brother, who was left behind in the SANCTUARY. During all of that time, Garfiel sharpened his fangs to secure a stubborn, childish heart.

Which comprised a third of the obstacles that Subaru had to deal with in the SANCTUARY. Yes, Frederica is partly responsible for Garfiel's attitude.

But having said that, Frederica did not purposefully ruin Garfiel, and nobody is in the wrong here.

Actually if anybody is in the wrong, then it's Roswaal.

And so not Subaru and not anyone else casts blame on Garfiel or Frederica.

—But it seems like they feel otherwise.

Subaru: "Man, what a mess…"

It boils down to Frederica having an excessively strong sense of responsibility.

Frederica left for the outside world so that she could create a home for the people of the Sanctuary once the barrier was broken. She bore an incredibly noble and lofty burden for a ten-or-so year old girl. Perhaps that ambition of hers had been what caused her to leave Garfiel behind.

Ultimately the Sanctuary was lost, and what Frederica worried would happen did.

But thanks to her actions, there were places ready to accept them, scattered and shoddy though they were. And that was something she ought to take pride in.

Still, she feels more guilt than accomplishment. Because her guilty conscious must be overly strong.

Subaru: "What the hell, you can't do that. When you pull off something amazing, you have to puff out your chest with pride."

Emilia: "Mm. I agree. And if you think you did something wrong, apologize. Then they'll forgive you…I just want them to get along."

Both Garfiel and Frederica have vanished from the hallway.

Emilia looks at the spot where the two had faced off, her amethyst eyes narrowing. Subaru peers at her and nods.

Subaru: “Yeah.”

Subaru: “Alright. We’re gonna give them a little push so they can sort this out.”

Emilia: “Give them a push…you mean, have them make up?”

Subaru: “Yup. We have complicated brother-sister, sister-brother, human relations here. If the mood’s so sticky they can’t move, then how about some third parties cause enough ruckus to jolt things?”

Subaru claps his hands, raising his finger as he makes his proposal.

Emilia considers it for a moment in silence, before giving a determined nod.

Emilia: “You’re right. Mmhm, families should get along. Okay. Let’s do it. Let’s do our plumb best to have them make up.”

Subaru: “Who says plumb anymore?”

Mutters Subaru as a motivated Emilia balls her hands into small fists.

While thinking: Man, it’s been a while since we’ve done those lines.

2

The reprieve from issues stemming from the Sanctuary had only been fleeting, as the two problems of terrible post-processing and housing assaulted Emilia’s camp.

Roswaal’s plot (parts of which he claimed no responsibility for) had burned down the mansion. They could rebuild it, but reconstructing a building that had been burnt to a clean crisp would take time. It seems that there is no convenient magic in this world to reform objects that have lost their shapes, or any Full Metal Alchemist-style techniques to erect buildings in an instant.

Their only choice was to Contract a builder from a nearby village or town, or perhaps an architect specializing in noble estates and villas, to build it.

Roswaal: “Hooooooowever, that mansion was not my main house… it was an inconspicuous spot to shelter Lady Emilia while leading up tooooooo the Royal Selection. I was planning to move to the main house shortly after the Selection started. Soooooo it’s not as much of a problem aaaaaaaas you’re making it out to be.”

Is what Roswaal said when they started looking for somewhere to relocate.

Apparently the Mathers family has several mansions on hand, and the main house has already been prepared as their base of operations.

Nobody is residing in the main estate except for those maintaining the place.

Once the workers have everything prepared to welcome their masters in, the group will relocate their headquarters to there.

But where do they stay in the time between now and then?

Roswaal: “Don’t worry, thaaaaaaat’s also been addressed. Some relatives of mine have a mansion in a region nooooooot far from the Sanctuary. They’re a branch of the Mathers family. We can stay there for a while. Though I suspect the large number of guests will trouble them.”

‘Roswaal’s relatives’ is an incredibly unsettling phrase, but nobody had any better plan.

After that discussion, the main players in Emilia’s camp went to the relative’s mansion, while Earlham and the Sanctuary’s people went to Earlham Village. Perhaps so that the Sanctuary’s residents could be accepted as residents of Earlham, they were purposefully introduced to other villages within Roswaal’s territory.

Frederica had been the one to set the foundations for this, and it all ought to be considered her achievement.

Though, while all of the Sanctuary’s residents are part-demi-human, they’re also all half-bloods. None of them look too different from an ordinary human, so blending in won’t be too hard.

And though they might have different customs due to their ignorance of the outside world, the kind people of Earlham would surely teach them the basics without hesitation.

Everything might look settled, but the problems will still keep piling up. Even so, no obvious trouble is occurring at the present, since everybody has done their absolute best.

Subaru prays that all the noticeable problems will be resolved before anything can happen.

—And he has judged Garfiel and Frederica's relationship troubles as something to resolve during this blissful, boring period.

3

Subaru: "And thus masterplan Make Garfiel and Frederica Friends Again is a go…is sort of where we're sitting, do you have any suggestions?"

Ram: "This is the first thing you say to me upon entering the room? Intruding on my peace is a heavy crime to pay, Barusu."

Says Ram in an emotionless voice, seated and glaring up at Subaru.

Her face is expressionless as always, but Subaru's relationship with her means he picks out the wisps of emotion swirling in her eyes. As a qualified interpreter of Ram's emotions, Subaru judges that she is currently 'displeased'.

Subaru: "I know you look at me like that a lot, but does that mean that you're basically always displeased when interacting with me? Don't you ever get tired of being cross all day?"

Ram: "Do relax. I only do this when speaking with someone annoying or pointless to interact with."

Subaru: "I see, alrigh th…no hold on."

Subaru furrows his brows at Ram while she implies that he is currently one of the two. Ram snorts at Subaru's reaction before closing the book in her hands.

She stands from her seat and offers it to Emilia, who stands beside Subaru.

Ram: “Here you are, Lady Emilia.”

Emilia: “Thank you. But it’s okay. I know it’s exhausting if we stay for too long, so we’ll be done quickly.”

Ram: “I see. Then I shall gladly take it.”

Subaru: “So you’re not offering it to me. You weren’t kidding about gladly, geez, Sister.”

Subaru shrugs as Ram seats herself back in the chair. But something that Subaru says makes Ram’s brows furrow slightly.

She must be reacting to the word ‘Sister’.

Emilia: “Miss Rem’s still the same as before.”

Ram: “…Indeed. Again today, she’s sleeping so quietly that you cannot tell she’s alive.”

Emilia speaks with concern, and Ram replies with her voice slightly lowered.

On the bed next to Ram’s chair, where the pair are looking, sleeps a girl.

With short, blue hair and a face identical to Ram’s. A light blue sleeping gown garbs her, and the size of her chest as it pushes the blanket up is the only point of difference between her and Ram.

Obviously, this girl’s name is Rem.

She remained asleep through the mansion fire and their relocation. Until they remove whatever is causing it, she will likely remain sleeping forever.

Subaru: “Do you feel like accepting it yet?”

Ram: “I did tell you. I’m not so thoughtless as to believe entirely everything when I still haven't spoken to her yet. …Though what I'm seeing is far too persuasive to dismiss entirely."

Complex emotion arises in Ram's eyes, and Subaru winds up frowning.

Ram's expression as she watches Rem sleep is horribly melancholy from Subaru's perspective, being that he knew their relationship. The elder doted on the younger, and the younger respected the elder.

Rem and Ram's relationship was the exact picture of beautiful, familial love.

As Rem sleeps, Ram's memories contain not name nor recollection nor existence of her beloved sister.

Subaru knew this would happen, he had anticipated this would happen, but it still makes him horribly disconsolate.

But even so—

Subaru: "You say it's complex, but you come visit here every day for her."

Ram: "…I do wonder. Honestly, not even I know what I'm trying to do. But it calms me down to be with this girl you call my sister. …No, part of me is unsettled too, but…"

Subaru: "Unsettled?"

Ram: "Because I'm seeing my own face…isn't quite it. When I look at her as she sleeps, I feel something astir in my heart. It's as though I'm chasing after mist, something which my hands will absolutely never grasp."

Ram puts her hand to her chest. Subaru quietly gulps.

Everyone in the world except Subaru has forgotten Rem—but even so, she remains a thorn inside her only blood relative, Ram.

Ram doesn't seem to know the name of that thorn, but if it's something that Rem left to her dearest elder sister, then it constitutes more than enough of a clue.

Subaru: “I’m open to tell you everything I can about what she’s like or the times we’ve spent.”

Ram: “—I think we better not.”

Subaru offers to help Ram recover her memories, but Ram shakes her head.

Subaru’s brows furrow as Ram puts her hand to her chin in thought.

Ram: “It’s this, unreachable hollowness. It’s like there’s a hole inside me where she used to be. And if there is, anything you fill it with will definitely fall out. And even now, just hearing she’s my sister…her appearance is the most obvious indicator, but it still doesn’t feel real. It feels like, the moment I stop these daily visits… even what I’m feeling now will disappear.”

Emilia: “…And that’s the curse of the Witch Cult’s Gluttony?”

Emilia interjects, looking like she cannot let the topic slide. Ram looks up to find Emilia with her brows lowered in a rare display of anger.

Ram: “A gross feast of NAMES and MEMORIES…My impression of the Witch Cult was never good, but it’s certainly abhorrent now.”

Emilia: “…Witch Cult.”

Mutters Emilia quietly, her gaze lowered.

While Ram’s speculation surprises Subaru, the maliciousness of it also makes him wince.

This doesn’t feel real for Subaru, who remembers Rem clearly, but it isn’t that Rem’s existence is ‘missing’ from Ram and Emilia’s memories. It’s that it’s ‘missing in perpetuity’. Just how sand never stops falling from an hourglass, it is continuous, ongoing now and forever.

Subaru: “We can’t do anything unless we stop what’s causing it…”

The more Subaru talks about their memories together, the quicker the sand will fall. Perhaps even Subaru will forget the memory the second that he voices it.

Ram is concerned that Rem will disappear from the world—or at least that must be part of it.

Ram: “It seems that you have some thoughts about the Cult, Lady Emilia.”

Subaru bites his lip while Ram looks up at Emilia. Her pale cheeks stiffen as Ram’s cerise eyes gaze at her, before she slowly nods.

Emilia: “I’ve done lots of thinking about the Witch. Because I’ve been cursed at so much for looking like her…but, the Cult is…”

Ram: “…”

Emilia: “Apparently it’s something I wanted to forget. But I can’t regard the one I remember and the one that’s there now as the same. What could have happened since then, that it’s like this now? …That’s what I want to find out.”

Subaru: “I don’t really wanna say this, Emilia-tan, but…you get that they’re not people you can really communicate with? It’ll probably end up as a painful experience.”

He doesn’t want to snuff Emilia’s will, but it’s unfair for him not to say it.

The Witch Cult that Subaru knows is a giant mass of malice constructed by a bunch of religious crazies. He doesn’t know what it used to be like. But that’s what the cult is like now.

Emilia: “Thank you. For worrying about me.”

Subaru’s concern makes Emilia smile slightly, and she shakes her head.

Emilia: “It’s okay, I understand. What happened in my memories, and the people I was with…it's all a century ago. There's no way they could still be alive. One hundred years is sooo much of a person's lifespan. I don't think I can meet them again."

Subaru: "But you still want to know what happened…right?"

Emilia: "I'm sorry, I know it's selfish. But I think I'm the only one who needs to find out. Because I'm the only one who saw what happened there, and the feelings that were there…and what Geuse and Mother felt."

Emilia's eyes are sad as she imagines the two, but her mouth remains set in a gentle smile. There's her mother's name, and Geuse. They're important memories for Emilia, and apparently connected to the old, utterly different Witch Cult.

Subaru: "Got some really mixed feelings here, Mr. Geuse…"

Mutters Subaru to himself with a sigh, somewhat resentful toward someone he's never even seen. Emilia feels familiarity and sorrow for the name, and hearing it gives Subaru complex feelings. If the Witch Cult hadn't changed its course from when 'Geuse' joined the fold, Emilia probably wouldn't have been put through so much crisis.

If he was going to be Emilia's ally anyway, Subaru would appreciate if he could've stayed at her side from start to finish. …is the breed of selfish resentment he finds himself thinking.

Ram: "—I doubt I can be as kind as you, Lady Emilia." Although as quiet as ever, her voice is full of chilling animosity.

Subaru's breath catches as he looks at Ram as she looks at Rem. Her face is expressionless, but the glint in her eye is shockingly red.

Ram: "The Witch Cult's particulars have nothing to do with me. I won't object to your desires to hear their story, Lady Emilia. I won't, but do remember that my revenge is another matter entirely."

Emilia: "Ram…"

Ram: “I couldn’t care less about this Cult or Gluttony, but I return what I’m given, be it debts or enmity. Dismembering the heart-gouging hellion still won’t be enough for me.”

Grisly rage overflows from Ram, her petite frame seeming to blur.

As if a giant were there, emitting an overwhelming sense of presence—indeed, as if an oni were there.

Ram: “I’ll eviscerate Gluttony so thoroughly that the memory demands awe.” It’s less ‘resolve’ and more ‘death sentence’.

The recipient is absent, and her tone is utterly calm. Nevertheless, this is unmistakably a death sentence—it feels like an icicle has speared down Subaru’s spine, making him hesitate even to speak.

Subaru: “…”

With that, silence falls upon the room.

Even the noise from his fidgeting feels like it would break the tense atmosphere, so Subaru cannot move. What does shatter the stressful mood is in fact the person who caused it.

Ram: “It was unlike me to say that.”

She sighs, the tense atmosphere vanishing entirely. Subaru lowers his shoulders in relief,

Subaru: “No, it wasn’t unlike you. The Ram I know was someone who did get violent when stuff involved her little sister.”

Ram: “…I see.”

Ram’s statements had been disturbing, but she had definitely been thinking purely about Rem when she spoke them. Subaru appraises it on that point alone, making him feel glad for Ram’s sentiments. Besides, Subaru can’t forgive G LUTTONY either. If he can then he wants Gluttony’s neck for himself, without even handing it over to Ram.

The sensation of murder. —The slipshod conclusion to his fight with

Petelgeuse left very little direct feeling in Subaru's palms. Perhaps Subaru's hesitation toward taking a life could stymie him at the critical moment.

But still, he cannot forgive Gluttony, and he has the resolve to do it if it's to save Rem.

Subaru: "…We got really off topic."

Subaru scratches his head, his dark thoughts not showing in his expression.

Ram looks at him meaningfully, and Emilia looks at him concernedly, but Subaru had managed to smile at both of them, surely.

Ram: "You're right. Now, since you're intruding on me as I enjoy my unexpected holiday, I'm sure your business must be suitably important."

Subaru: "Why are you so audacious when pressuring people? Frederica's in your position and she feels so apologetic about getting guest treatment that she's helping in the mansion…"

Ram: "I'm wounded. And Frederica's the one failing to read the mood by working when she's being received as a guest. …She can't stay composed when with Garf, and Clind is inciting her into it too."

Subaru: "Mr. Clind is?"

This is the name of the Mathers family's young butler who is tending to Subaru and the others. He is handsome, with a slender face, who exudes an incredible aura of grace and capability. He gives a similar vibe to Julius, but unlike Julius Clind is polite and incredibly considerate.

And so Subaru thinks it strange that Ram doesn't seem to think too fondly of him. Though perhaps that's just what everyone looks like to Ram when they're not Roswaal.

Ram: "You should ask Frederica and Clind themselves about how poorly they interact. Anyway, I'd like to return to my reading, so do state your business quickly."

Emilia: "I'm sorry, we just keep on talking. I think Subaru mentioned this right at the start, but it's about Frederica and Garfiel…"

Emilia valorously gets to changing the topic.

'Let's do something about Garfiel and Frederica's awkward relationship!' was a nice idea and all, but Subaru and Emilia found themselves absolutely stuck on what to do.

Since neither of them are very experienced when it comes to mending sibling relationships.

Subaru is an established only-child, and so is Emilia.

Neither of them have been blessed with siblings, so nothing comes to mind when it comes to non-parental blood relations. And in Garfiel and Frederica's case they don't even have ordinary parental relations, but we'll leave that part aside.

So they wandered around the mansion in search of advice, and visited Ram, who stays in a fixed location.

And Subaru considers her the closest sister he knows. Though her relationship with Rem is gone from everyone's memory except Subaru's, he hopes that Ram might have something useful to say, considering that she and her sister had such a good relationship.

And even disregarding that, Ram is childhood friend of Garfiel and Frederica. Maybe something from an episode that Subaru wasn't around for will make her hit on an approach to fill this decade-long divide.

Emilia almost gives Ram an expectant gaze, when her lips come to a halt.

Subaru tilts his head at the frozen Emilia, wondering what happened, before following her gaze—and freezing still as well.

Ram: “…What?”

Ram narrows her eyes, looking terribly uncomfortable.

In her hands she holds a book, at which Emilia and Subaru stare.

The title, “How to Grow Closer to Your Younger Sibling,” is horrifically critical to the current affair.

—It seems that they aren’t the only ones feeling clueless about sibling relations.

Chapter 2:
Young Souls and Watcher

Having learned that Ram is useless regarding sibling problems without her memory, but that she is nonetheless a good sister, time passes on for Subaru and Emilia with no good progress.

Subaru: “But don’t you feel like Ram was being pretty unsympathetic?”

Emilia: “Don’t say that. Ram has her own opinions. …She’s known them longer than we have, so that’s probably the difference.”

Emilia smiles wryly at the pouting Subaru as they walk down the mansion hallway.

They have left Rem’s bedroom and are reflecting on the encounter as they venture about. Through Subaru’s mind passes the words that Ram left them with before their departure:

Ram: “Garf and Frederica’s relationship? It should be fine to just leave them be. They aren’t children…well, Garf is a kid, but he’s not bereft of his own ideas. Though said ideas tend to be inaccurate. They’ll manage something on their own.”

It’s a rather ruthless judgement on Garfiel, what with how fond he is of Ram.

But it’s possible that Ram regards Garfiel as something like a younger brother. His crush could be called cute, were the feelings not so intense and violent. Poor Garfiel, infatuated with a fortress of a woman.

Emilia: “—? Hm? What’s wrong?”

Subaru: “No, it’s nothing. Was just reflecting that man, Garfiel’s not the only one looking at a tall hurdle.”

Emilia: “—?”

Emilia tilts her head cutely.

Subaru hates how her mind utterly fails to put together what his gaze and words mean. Perhaps the fact that he winds up forgiving it is one of those foibles of loving someone.

Subaru: “Anyway, so Ram’s out…who to consult next?”

Emilia: “Huh? You’re going to keep trying?”

Subaru: “Well yeah. We haven’t solved anything yet, and there’s nothing manly about giving up ‘cause you stumbled on the first step. Don’t you want to improve their relationship too, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “I do, but…Ram knows them best, and that’s what she said, so maybe that’s the best thing to do.”

Subaru: “Leaving them be might solve the problem over time, but you can’t forget that it’s been a decade since they parted. I’m not going to wait another decade for them to reconcile. I want to give them a shove so they make up quickly.”

Subaru insists that they stick with the plan, while Emilia seems somewhat pressured by Ram’s statement. That said, while Subaru does want Garfiel and Frederica to reconcile, he also wants to keep this chance to do things with Emilia from escaping.

Since no matter what Subaru does in this caper, it won’t escalate into bloodshed. Could this heart, after all that protected trial and error, ever feel so light?

Emilia: “What happened? Subaru, you just burst into a grin…”

Subaru: “No, was just thinking that mulling over things without being frantic about it is bliss. Wow! No matter how everything falls, there’s no bloodshed and nobody dies!”

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru shoots her a thumbs up, his teeth sparkling, but Emilia looks at him with incredible pity. Subaru thinks back on his statement, figuring that he must have said something strange. And then shocks himself at what a brutal, inappropriate comment it was, and how impoverished his desires are.

Subaru: “D-Disregard that, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “It’s okay. I know it’s been hard. I’m sorry I didn’t realize how you felt. Subaru, maybe you should spend the day resting in your roo—”

Subaru: “No not happening and that reaction’s for when you don’t realize how I feel!”

Emilia gazes at him with sympathy.

And, at that point in the conversation,

???: “…So you’re the ones making this racket, I suppose.”

Sighs a voice. Subaru looks over to the speaker, to find a girl in an extravagant dress standing there —Beatrice.

She has come from the other end of the hallway and stopped to look at Subaru and Emilia, her brows furrowed on her cute face.

Beatrice: “You two are certainly enjoying yourselves, in fact. I can hear your arguing from the other end of the mansion, I suppose.”

Subaru: “There’s some sarcasm. If you’re sad you’re not included then just say it. We’ll let you deliberate with us in our profound discussion hour.”

Beatrice: “Who said anyone is sad about being left out, in fact! Don’t just go saying whatever you want, I suppose!”

Beatrice crosses her arms, her cheeks red with indignation. Both Subaru and Emilia have to smile at how incredibly Beatrice the attitude is.

About a week has passed since Subaru and Beatrice formed their Contract. That said, nothing especially dramatic changed about their relationship.

Subaru teases Beatrice like always, and Beatrice overreacts. These exact same exchanges unfold endlessly for these two.

But, Beatrice has been more out and about lately. And sometimes, as if remembering something, she comes to hold Subaru's hand.

Subaru: "And so on is what you say, but really you're here because you wanna hold my hand. Oh geez this poor girl's too much."

Beatrice: "Don't distort Betty's actions by giving them these weird pretexts, in fact. Betty keeps touching you because circumstances demand it, I su…Subaru, I suppose."

Subaru: "It is adorable how you reminded yourself to say that."

Emilia: "Subaru."

Emilia cautions Subaru as Beatrice's face goes red. Subaru pokes his tongue out at Emilia and reaches out for Beatrice.

Her hand lightly closes around his fingers, before she re-thinks it and timidly grasps his hand proper. It's what Beatrice always does.

He feels her small fingers on his palm. This tickly, awkward touch is the fruit of Subaru's labor.

But this time Beatrice does not do it, and instead she simply stares at Subaru's hand, hesitant.

Subaru: "What's up? I do wash my hands after going to the bathroom."

Beatrice: "I wasn't worried about that, but now that thought's going to be in my head and it's disgusting, in fact! No, it's something else…"

Beatrice glares in response to Subaru's unneeded comment, and she glances behind her. Subaru tilts his head at that, when he hears the answer come from down the hallway.

???: "Where'd you go, Beatrice-chan?"

A voice calls from down the hallway, beyond a corner, searching for Beatrice. The voice is female, filled with affection and friendship.

But hearing it makes Beatrice's shoulders hitch up,

Beatrice: "Eep!"

Squeaks Beatrice, her eyes darting around before she dives into a nearby room. Subaru and Emilia watch on wide-eyed as Beatrice peeks out from behind the door.

Beatrice: "Tell her that I'm not here, I suppose. Please, in fact."

Subaru: "Hey."

Beatrice: "Please, I suppose."

With that, she silently shuts the door. Subaru shrugs while Emilia furrows her brows in confusion. And,

???: "Oh! Subaru!"

A girl appears from beyond the bend in the hallway, her face lighting up as she comes darting over.

With the skirt of her maid outfit fluttering, the auburn-haired girl trots near—it's Petra.

Petra is also staying in this mansion following the incineration of Roswaal's estate. Considering the danger that comes with being involved, Subaru had tried to convince her to go back to the village, but she refused to listen.

Petra has been utterly focused on helping with odd jobs around this mansion as part of her maid training. What an ambitious, disciplined girl, Subaru thinks.

As if complimenting Subaru's thoughts, Petra curtseys politely to Emilia,

Petra: "Please forgive me, Lady Emilia. I present my apology for having raised my voice."

And says that.

The childishness she displayed toward Subaru instantly disappears, and Emilia's eyes widen at the maidly behavior.

Emilia: "Ah, um, it's okay. Don't worry. You can please relax, knave."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, 'knave'?"

Emilia is going to need to learn how to respond when others humble themselves around her. But putting aside that messy-yet-heartwarming conversation,

Subaru: "So, what's up, Petra. Something happen?"

Petra: "No, nothing has happened…but since I've finished my work, I was thinking to entertain Beatrice-chan. But I haven't been able to find her."

Emilia: "Beatrice-chan… Gosh."

Emilia's breath hitches, and she puts her hand to her mouth as she holds in her laughter. Subaru also comes close to snickering. Beatrice, for all of her hauteur, has been dubbed with a -chan by Petra.

Subaru burst into laughter when he first caught them interacting.

Petra: "Is there something the matter, Lady Emilia? Have I perhaps said anything strange?"

Emilia: "No, nothing. I just thought that was a bit sooo funny."

Petra: "'A bit' but 'sooo'?"

Sometimes Petra's childishness does come to the fore. Emilia gives her a smile and glances to

Subaru, her gaze asking him what to do.

Subaru pretends to mull over the issue,

Subaru: “Right. Beatrice. She loves the attention, so I’m sure you have fun fussing over her too?”

Petra: “Mhm, I do. Beatrice-chan isn’t honest at all. She’s super cute whenever I’m with her. I don’t think people like her should be left on their own.”

Subaru: “Why do you think that?”

Petra: “‘Cause she’d be lonely. You can’t leave her there.”

Subaru nods to Petra’s smart-yet-simple reply.

It took a lot of words to get there, but ultimately it’s the same reasoning by which Subaru dragged Beatrice out of the Forbidden Archive. Children see to the truth of things. Or really Subaru and Beatrice just argued at each other using child’s logic.

Petra: “How come you’re laughing now too, Subaru?”

Subaru: “It’s not that I’m making fun of you. It’s just that you’re so brilliant, Petra.”

Petra: “Really? Eheehee.”

Subaru pats Petra’s head and gives her a nod.

Then he puts his hand on the doorknob behind him, and swings the door open.

Beatrice: “Whaugh?!”

With a thunk, an eavesdropping loli gets sent to the floor.

The loli pushes herself back up, her eyes teary and forehead red from the door belting against her.

Subaru: “The heck are you doing.”

Beatrice: “Moreso what the heck are you doing, in fact! This hurts! This sincerely hurts, I suppose! It hurts and furthermore you broke your promise…”

Subaru: “I didn’t promise anything, and I didn’t even say I’d do it. After taking careful consideration of who to support, I decided that supporting Petra’d be funnier.”

Beatrice: “Funnier! Funnier, he says, in fact! Just abysmal, I suppose!”

Complains Beatrice, rubbing her forehead while Subaru blocks his ears, pretending not to hear her. When a girl cuts into their exchange. Petra faces Beatrice directly, making Beatrice’s mouth gawk open and pigtails bob.

Beatrice: “Ah, erm, um, don’t get the wrong idea, in fact…I, I wasn’t hiding from you or anyth…”

Petra: “Come on, Beatrice-chan. You’re going to get told off if you play hide and seek in other people’s mansions. Though I understand wanting to play so much you can’t help it…”

Beatrice: “What?! S-Stop acting as though Betty were a child, I suppose! Though I might look like this, I am fully an…erm, fully an…”

Petra: “Fully an?”

Beatrice: “…Nevermind, in fact.”

In the end, Beatrice surrenders. Emilia looks surprised, and Subaru also closes his eye at the unfamiliar happenings.

The entertaining thing about Beatrice and Petra’s relationship is that somehow Petra is the dominant one.

Beatrice always maintains a haughty, cocksure attitude when interacting with anyone. Subaru and Puck had been the exceptions, and now Petra has thrust herself into that count.

For some reason, Beatrice can’t interact with Petra using her normal demeanor. Not even she seems to understand why that is. But Subaru has spotted her holding hands with Petra, looking rather reluctant about the whole thing, several times now.

Nevermind what Beatrice thinks, to an outsider they're just a couple of young girls. And this is two girls, with portents of feature beauty, holding hands. A charming spectacle.

Petra looks slightly older than Beatrice. Perhaps it's happening because Beatrice struggles to counterbalance Petra when she behaves like an older sister.

Petra: "Okay, let's go. We don't want to interrupt Subaru and Lady Emilia's work. And Brother Clind got some sweets for us, so let's go eat them together. In the dining room."

Beatrice: "O-Okay, I suppose. I'll go…so you don't need to pull me along, in fact."

Beatrice sends a pleading look to Subaru as Petra leads her out of the room by the hand, but Subaru cruelly replies with a thumbs up. Emilia waves her goodbye as Petra drags her away, still looking mad and with her tongue sticking out.

That circumstances-demanded skinship with Subaru will have to come later. Emilia puts her finger to her lip as she contently watches one girl abduct the other,

Emilia: "That is sooo surprising. I didn't expect Beatrice to be weak to Petra."

Subaru: "Right? It stunned me at first. It's adorable to watch though so I didn't say anything. And I think Petra's totally right."

Emilia: "She'll be sad if left alone?"

Subaru: "I don't mind being with her all hours of the day, but that defeats the point of leaving the Archive. If she's making memories, then the pages of her photo album ought to have as many people in them as possible."

Since she has to compensate for four centuries of blank pages. If Subaru consumes all of the space in her album, it's going to get samey quick.

Her memories need to be full of lots of people and lots of faces.

Subaru believes it best to stand at her side as she clicks the shutter, sometimes slipping into the frame.

Emilia: “Subaru…sometimes you are sooo cool.”

Subaru: “Huh, what, seriously? What happened, what RNG was that?!”

Emilia: “It really is only sometimes though.”

Subaru scratches his cheek as Emilia giggles.

While it was somewhat joking, compliments from Emilia inevitably get him excited. He wants to always be reminded of this feeling whenever he teases Beatrice. Gotta keep teasing her now.

Subaru: “Feels like the aims and the means swapped places, but you do get that sometimes. Now, we got to see that heartwarming sight, so next is…”

???: “Indeed, a heartwarming sight. The spectacle of two girls with their lovely souls, smiling as they join hands…that is this world’s splendor. Effulgence.”

Emilia: “Eek?!”

Just when Subaru starts moving to the next topic, a voice speaks up that makes Emilia yelp.

Because the speaker’s arrival is just that abrupt and unexpected.

And their location is just as unexpected as their arrival. This character stands behind Subaru, so close that he can feel their breath on his neck, their expression nonchalant as they join the conversation.

???: “I do apologize for the surprise. But I could not suppress my occupational urge to present you with astonishing service. Misfire.”

Subaru: “C-Mr. Clind?”

Clind: “Yes, this is Clind. I do hope that I have not fouled your temper? Trepidation.”

A handsome, slender man gives them a perfect bow.

His blue hair is just long enough to touch his shoulders, and he wears a monocle on his left eye. His starched, black butler suit seems to take joy in being his clothing as it perfectly displays its potential, his every movement so refined that Subaru unwittingly has to stand up straight.

This man’s posture is so perfect that it could be a match for Wilhelm’s, but the aura that Clind exerts differs from the Sword Demon’s.

If Wilhelm gives the impression of a honed blade, then Clind is the flow of pristine waters. Material beauty is dissimilar to conceptual beauty. Though both soothe the mind equally.

Subaru: “It’s kind of shitty to show up behind people out of nowhere, Mr. Clind…almost had a heart attack.”

Clind: “Should that occur, we will devote our utmost efforts into your resuscitation. There is no need to fret for everything is well. Death’s Door.”

Subaru: “Um?! Except that’s no help at all?!”

While Clind’s polite gestures remain strong, his reply falls apart terribly.

However, his current behavior gives no indication to his personality or capabilities. Clind is as excellent a servant as he appears, being the paragon butler of the Milord household.

Although young, he keeps the mansion in order with his bold personality.

And that isn’t all—he’s even capable of swordsmanship in an emergency. He is so skilled that, when they first met, Garfiel tried to pick a fight with him: “Guy’s pretty fuckin’ good.” Though Clind ignored the duel invitation.

However, for all of Clind's excellence, he does have some flaws. One of them is his demonstrated penchant for mischief. Another is,

Emilia: "Petra hasn't been any trouble for you, has she? I know that you're letting her participate in the work, but I'm still kind of worried…"

Clind: "There is no need for worry. Petra is outstanding for a girl of her age. I await to see how her proficiency and beauty shall bloom. Envy."

Emilia: "I see. Thank goodn—"

Clind: "However, she shall grow into an adult. …Which I find a terrible shame. Chagrin."

Clind furrows his brows, looking utterly disappointed.

This is one of his flaws, and a big one.

Clind is extremely interested in young girls like Petra and Beatrice.

Putting it straight, he's into little girls—a lolicon.

Clind: "What could be the matter, Master Natsuki? You look as though you've seen a prospective criminal. Have I perhaps done something untoward? Confirmation."

Subaru: "It sort of seems as though you're self- aware about it, considering how precise that comment was. I'm not really into younger girls so you have that, but seriously when they're that young…"

Clind: "It appears that you could be under a terrible misapprehension. Smile."

Smile, he says, while not smiling in the least. His attractive face darkens dejectedly as he adjusts his monocle, and he turns to face Subaru.

Clind: "Do I have your attention? I do not admire Anne-Rose- sama, nor Petra nor Lady Beatrice because they are young. It is because I am infatuated with the promise and youth of their souls. To be enraptured by pure, immaculate souls is natural. And it happens that many possessors of such souls are young. Thus Misapprehension.”

Subaru: “Well…great.”

Clind gives a speech to rebut Subaru, though Subaru tunes out for most of it. However, Clind’s next words destroy that attitude of Subaru’s.

He looks at Emilia, and,

Clind: “In fact.”

Clind: “My eyes perceive a similar luster to Lady Emilia’s soul. Purity.”

Emilia: “Me?”

Subaru: “Goddamn geez, Mr. Clind!”

Emilia tilts her head. Subaru can only find himself shocked and awed at Clind’s perception. It should not be possible to determine that Emilia is mentally much younger than she appears without investigating her background and upbringing. Clind’s eyes have penetrated straight through that, and he has ascertained that Emilia is mentally a loli.

A lolicon’s nose is to be feared, thinks Subaru in dumb astonishment.

Subaru: “So then Miss Ryuzu or something’d be…”

Clind: “Her appearance is exceedingly darling, but her soul is matured. It is beyond the means of someone as callow as I to divine promise from someone so set in their ways. Recklessness.”

Subaru: “Amazing…”

It truly impresses Subaru that he can see through the loligranny.

Emilia has been party to this exchange, but doesn't seem particularly interested in Clind's fetishes.

Emilia: "Mr. Clind, there's something I kind of want to ask…"

Clind: "Please ask whatever you wish. Inquiry."

Emilia: "Did Frederica use to work here before she started working in Roswaal's mansion?"

Clind: "…Indeed. Affirmation."

Subaru furrows his brows, sensing that Clind was tongue-tied for a second.

The hesitation makes Emilia blink too, but the conversation continues as is.

Emilia: "Which means that you've known Frederica for a long time?"

Clind: "Frederica and I have known each other for a decade—I was still a manservant who had only just begun work when the Margrave brought Frederica to the Milord household. We would have known each other since then. Old Friends."

Emilia: "I knew it! Okay, so I have a question about Frederica. Is there anything she likes or dislikes that we can use as a starting point for her to reconcile with Garfiel?"

Clind: "A starting point for reconciliation. Rumination."

Clind puts his hand to his chin, in thought. He looks pretty as a portrait even while ruminating. Subaru fiddles with his track suit zipper while lamenting, "So hot guys can get away with being lolicons…" about the amazing differences in beauty. After a minute of thought, Clind nods with a quiet sight.

Clind: "I shall make chicken the primary dish for Lady Annerose's next birthday. Plan."

Emilia: "Where'd Frederica go?!"

Clind: "…Ah, forgive me. Whenever I attempt to meditate upon her, my brain unfailingly rejects it. I'm afraid this is my idiosyncrasy. Beg Your Pardon."

Emilia: "Do you maybe not get along with Frederica, Mr. Clind?"

Clind: "Preposterous. Denial."

Clind shakes his head at Emilia.

Clind: "She is an excellent servant who conducts her work swiftly and accurately, and is also proficient in tact. Should you ignore that her appearance sullies her station, what demands the maid to be adorned in splendour and beauty, I have not any complaints about her. Indifferent."

Emilia: "Um? I think I just heard something extremely prejudiced, but is that just me? Subaru?"

Subaru: "No it's not just you, it's just Mr. Clind."

It seems like Clind's unrelenting prejudice springs from Frederica's appearance. While yes, the initial impact of it did startle Subaru, Frederica is actually both diligent and abounding in femininity. There's nothing wrong about her as a woman except her appearance.

Clind: "I sense that Master Natsuki has reached the same conclusion as myself. Espy."

Emilia: "Did you? Subaru?"

Subaru: "I'm trying to end my habit of probing for other people's flaws, so could you please not?! Emilia-tan your looks are a mega critical on me!"

Emilia: "That's not what we were talking about, geez. …But, thank you." Says Emilia, her cheeks slightly flushed.

These compliments seemed utterly ineffective before, but since Emilia finished the Trial they've starting working on her somewhat, which is novel.

Puck isn't around to give Emilia lessons on fashion any more, and she's gotten into the practice of dealing with her own grooming and dress. Apparently she's been doing some trial and error on what looks stylish.

Though naturally when she started thinking about chopping her silver hair short, everyone collectively yanked the breaks on it.

Either way, it doesn't seem like they're going to get any useful information about Frederica from Clind. Subaru and Emilia sigh, hitting a quick dead end yet again. When Clind speaks up,

Clind: "Simply as speculation…"

Clind: "Judging by what I have heard, could you be seeking an improvement to the sibling relationship between Frederica and Sir Garfiel? Conjecture."

Emilia: "Yes, we are. But neither me or Subaru have any brothers or sisters, so we have no idea what to do. We've been asking around, but…"

Clind: "Being that Frederica's only issue is her appearance, I believe that issues pertaining to

Frederica that are unrelated to her appearance will resolve themselves if left alone. But it seems that you may find this stance unsatisfactory. And so I offer. Proposal."

Both: "Proposal?"

Clind raises his finger. Subaru and Emilia tilt their heads in unison.

For the first time that day, Clind smiles.

Clind: "If you are concerned about them, then ought you not speak to the person closest to them? Not Ram, but another? Opinion."

Emilia: "Closest to them…oh!"

Emilia claps her hands, her eyes shooting open as she finally hits upon this idea. Subaru reaches the same conclusion, but something is bothering him first. Which is,

Subaru: “Not Ram? I’m pretty sure we only mentioned her ages ago, Mr. Clind, how long’ve you been listening to us talk?”

Clind: “It is because I am the butler entrusted with the peace and chores of the Milord household. Declaration.”

It kind of sounds like an answer and also kind of doesn’t.

Subaru scrunches his face up while Clind bows respectfully.

His conduct as a subordinate is so perfect that it overwhelms any observers.

All Subaru can do is shut his mouth, and look sour.

Chapter 3:
Pretty Girl, Pretty Lady, Pretty Granny

1

Subaru: “And thus we hastened to speak with Miss Ryuzu who we figure knows them best.”

Ryuzu: “I’d call yer approach conscientious, all told. I don’t mind yer relying on me…but I don’t gert much I can say on the topic.”

Subaru: “Meaning?”

Ryuzu: “Meaning I agree with Ram and Lil’ Clin’. Their problem ers their problem. It’s not something outsiders need ter get too involved with.”

It doesn’t look like Ryuzu is too interested in Subaru’s proposal as she sips her tea. However, she is undeniably a key figure in this whole affair. Subaru is sticking his neck into their business with too little frivolity to back down that easily.

Subaru: “I get that their circumstances are an annoying mess. Since I’ve been involved in it if only tangentially.”

Ryuzu says nothing.

Subaru: “But I don’t think it’s something to just leave alone. I mean maybe it will resolve itself in time…but it’s aggravating both to them and to onlookers how they’re trying settle things, but it just isn’t working. If a third party can do something about it, then they should.”

Ryuzu: “That sounds like a load’erv hard-nosed meddling.”

Subaru: “Well I do have a reputation for being shameless and dense.”

Subaru puffs his chest out in pride although it likely wasn’t a compliment. Ryuzu smiles wryly at him.

The two of them are in a corner of the large room given to Ryuzu, sitting across from each other at a table as they sip from their cups, silently wetting their throats with tea. When,

???: “Excuse me, guys?”

A voice calls to them from a short distance away.

The speaker narrows their amethyst eyes, their gaze akin to glare as it pierces Subaru.

Dissatisfaction laces the voice of the speaker, unincluded as she is in the conversation, Emilia.

Subaru: “What’s up, Emilia-tan? I mean you’re cute when you’re angry, but your forehead’s getting all wrinkled.”

Emilia: “If you think so, then shouldn’t you come and help?! Geez! You’re so mean, Subaru! You ninny!”

Subaru: “Who says ninny anymore?”

Subaru smiles at Emilia’s proficient and adorable use of outdated language as he sets down his teacup. He looks again at Emilia, and tilts his head at the situation she faces.

Subaru: “You can really call this a spectacle. A fantastical drama unfolding between a pretty lady and some pretty girls.”

Ryuzu: “Yer gonner make me blush, saying that.”

Subaru: “You mingle too and it’ll be a drama between pretty girls, a pretty lady and a pretty granny.”

Ryuzu: “Yer gonner make me blush, saying that.”

Subaru: “Seriously?!”

It shocks Subaru that, just when he expected her to grumble at him, she accepts it. Ryuzu’s cheeks as she watches on with Subaru are faintly red.

The two of them gaze at a bunch of Ryuzu's identical to the blushing Ryuzu, surrounding Emilia in a mob.

—They brought 26 Ryuzu doubles from the Sanctuary in total.

These are the subservient, non-sentient doubles who are not the representative Ryuzu. Though the camp has no tasks for them, they cannot simply leave them sitting there, so they present another issue for everybody to mull over.

And the biggest problem here is,

Emilia: "Don't just look, Subaru, come help me."

Subaru: "I'd love to, but they're not gonna listen to me. You and Garfiel are the only ones who can command them. Just gotta finangle them with some witty eloquent language."

Emilia: "I know, but…we only just had a terrible fiasco when I told them to STEP AWAY. Did you forget, Subaru?"

Subaru: "Nobody would forget a three-days-passed organized search effort that went all the way over the mountains."

Subaru thinks back on the debacle from three days ago.

Crystals in Sanctuary govern the doubles' command right. One had been installed in the tomb, and one in the laboratory, each of which recognized either Emilia or Garfiel as rightholders, and presently continue to do so.

Meaning that the doubles remain in a doll-like state, unable to act without Emilia or Garfiel's orders. They pay no heed to anyone else's instructions. Garfiel says that, if they leave them without any tasks, they will literally sit there doing nothing until they die and disappear.

The debacle from three days ago happened when Emilia, ignorant to the command right's limits, tried to have the doubles spread out a little distance from the mansion by telling them to 'step away'. The annoying part is that the doubles have their own personal differences, and interpreted the command in slightly different ways.

Some of them perfectly adhered to Emilia's intentions, some of them exited the mansion, and some of them sprinted far from the mansion into the distance. Were it not for Garfiel's nose and legs, they might not have retrieve them all. They can't just leave these cute, doll-like girls to walk around undefended. And it's problematic if people start questioning the doubles.

Subaru: "Twins or triplets is one thing, but nobody'd believe in twenty-sextuplets…"

Subaru doesn't remember what the Guinness World Record was, but it was probably less than ten.

There's no point even considering it; there is no way they can use the siblings excuse here.

And as for why they have to come up with excuses in the first place,

Ryuzu: "They were obviersly made using forbidden techniques. Frankly said, it'd be an uproar if people found out what we were."

Subaru: "Aaas figures."

Ryuzu: "Yer taking someone as a foundation point, and constructing mock-od of a similar nature to them to make them—essentially yer making infinite soldiers. There's people out there who'll want that."

Leaving aside the question of practicality there, they are useful for research. Since they're basically an infinite subject base. You can use the command right to keep them from rebelling, and they disperse into mana when they die so there's nothing to clean up.

Subaru: "Which is all absolute shit."

Ryuzu: "It relaxes us ter know yer think that, Lil' Su."

Subaru feels something indescribable as he watches Ryuzu smile thinly.

Repulsion that his acquaintance could be exploited, and aversion due to the ethical issue. Those feelings are why Subaru feels adverse to the concept.

But when he dispels those feelings, and considers the technique detachedly, how long will his resistance really hold against the sheer convenience of it?

Everyone, including him, pursues an easier and easier course. Hate being so weak, he thinks.

Emilia: “Okay! So what am I meant to do?”

Emilia yells, having been somewhat excluded from the situation, as she hits her limit.

The mob of Ryuzu’s isn’t doing anything, but the silent pressure they exert on Emilia isn’t sanitary for her mental health.

Subaru crosses his arms as he wonders what to do.

Subaru: “Maybe try pacifying them with an order they can’t misinterpret?”

Emilia: “Like? They went so far when I just told them to step away, so I don’t know what to…”

Subaru: “I think saying ‘sit down’ would work?”

Emilia: “…Subaru, you’re a genius.”

It’s nothing that brilliant, thinks Subaru while Emilia asks the Ryuzu’s to sit, and they each plonk themselves down on the spot.

It feels like Emilia is the teacher at a kindergarten now that all these little girls are sitting cross-legged around her, but actually the situation is more desperate than that.

They have to come up with some smart way to deal with this. Subaru has some relevant proposals he wants to make when Roswaal returns, so now it’s an issue of waiting for him.

Subaru: “Since there’s 26 of them, naming them after the letters of the alphabet might work to individuate and remember them all.”

Ryuzu: “Yer look like yer up ter some nefarious plotting again, Lil’

Su.”

Subaru: “‘Nefarious plotting’ makes it sound bad. All I’m doing is working my brain so everyone I know reaches a happy conclusion.”

Subaru gives her a big grin. Ryuzu sighs, looking astonished.

Did she find his efforts credible or not credible? Subaru decides optimistically that his smile just looked untrustworthy. When Emilia, freed from the swarm of doubles, approaches Subaru and Ryuzu. Subaru presents her with her teacup.

Subaru: “You did a good job, Emilia-tan. Putting in good efforts as always.”

Emilia: “Thank you. But compared to Garfiel, I’m barely doing anything. Garfiel does such good work, ordering them all whenever it’s mealtime…”

Emilia takes a sip and sighs as she looks at the doubles.

The people usually looking after these girls are the representative Ryuzu, and Garfiel, the other command right holder.

Garfiel especially is tending to the girls with exquisite care, ensuring that none of them starve to death or get stranded, grumbling about it all the way.

He’s had far more experience with them for he’s been interacting with them throughout his time in the Sanctuary.

Though that’s unlikely to console Emilia.

Subaru: “Well, just gotta take it easy. Garfiel’s doing some amazing stuff, but I think it’d be nice to have a more advanced solution.”

Emilia: “Advanced solution?”

Subaru: “I’ll tell you once Roswaal’s back. Until then, care to soothe my mind by freaking out some more in a herd of little girls?”

Emilia: “You are so mean!”

Emilia puffs out her cheeks in indignation, which is adorable.

Either way, his plans are still in the draft stage and thus unready for the public. He'll iron out more of the details before he reveals it and basks in the praise.

Subaru: "Anyway, how about we leave the Ryuzu double problem for a moment, and get back on topic?"

Ryuzu: "My answer's still the same. I'm not thinking ter do anything…much ter get them moving. I think they're trying ter keep from werrying me. They act like things're going reasonably well between them whenever I'm erround."

Emilia: "That is so saucy of them…"

Subaru: "Who says saucy anymore?"

Subaru averts his gaze to disregard Emilia's glare, and thinks about the wily siblings.

They are equally unwilling to make Ryuzu worry. And they've figured out how to compensate for it without actually discussing it with each other.

Though they know each other so well, they can't make that last step. The key reason for that has to be—

Subaru: "Yeah, it's because of their mother."

Ryuzu says nothing.

Emilia: "Their mother…you mean, the one who left them behind in the Sanctuary when they were little?"

Subaru: "I've only heard the second-hand story, and I haven't asked about what she was like. Actually no, Frederica told me she was extremely unlucky, but that's about all. I mean I figure it's a given, but you did know her, right, Miss Ryuzu?"

Ryuzu puts her teacup to her lip, letting the time drag on and on. But this is not enough to escape Subaru and Emilia's focused gazes.

She gives a long sigh, and without looking at the couple,

Ryuzu: “Their mother, Leashia Tinzel, isn’t a topic I perticulerly wanner talk abert.”

Subaru: “So she’s someone you’d rather not remember?”

Ryuzu: “I didn’t dislike her ‘er nothing. Liked her a lot actually. She had that friendly kind erv charisma, and…her circumstances were the unfortunate thing, which yer can see since the misfortune didn’t kill her. Her household was ruined and she wers sold inter slavery, then bandits attacked and destroyed the traders. The bandits took her home as their spoils, got her pregnant…it’s essentially the picture erv misfortune.”

Subaru: “…”

Frederica has told him all this before, but it’s still a horrible story. Emilia has no words for how heartrending it is. Though that final part of the tale may have eclipsed her understanding.

Ryuzu: “But Leashia didn’t end in misfortune. The bandits took a liking ter her so she lived and raise her child. Until another band of bandits destroyed the ferrst one, and they entertained themselves with her again.”

Subaru: “Most people wouldn’t recover after all that.”

Ryuzu: “But she did. The bandit group collapsed, she met Lil’ Roz on her travels and gained his patronage, entrusted Frederica and Lil’ Gar ter him, then left the Sanctuary ter search fer Lil’ Gar’s dad.”

Subaru: “—She did? Garfiel said he thought his mother abandoned them.”

Ryuzu: “…Thert’s probably his weakness talking. Since there’s hope in being abandoned.”

Subaru’s breath catches at the seemingly inappropriate word: hope.

Where in this tale is there any hope? Before Subaru can figure it out, Emilia lowers her eyes.

Emilia: “She isn’t coming back because she abandoned us…means that their mother might still be alive, is that the hope?”

Ryuzu says nothing.

Emilia: “If she promised that she was leaving for a purpose, but still wasn’t coming back…it’s too frightening to think about.”

Ryuzu shakes her head, looking miserable.

Ryuzu has told them the real reason why their mother left Sanctuary. And why had Leashia’s promise never been kept? —The question lends itself to a horrible answer.

Garfiel has seen his mother’s passing.

And that fits everything perfectly.

Emilia: “I wonder if they know.”

Ryuzu: “Leashia left them after Frederica wers old enough ter be self-aware. I doubt she’s fergotten it. And Lil’ Gar…well, who knows.”

Emilia: “I think Garfiel remembers…no, remembered too. Otherwise he wouldn’t look so joyful when looking at Subaru.”

It’s possible that Emilia’s thinking of something different from Subaru, but he figures that the happening in Garfiel’s past—his farewell to his mother—has been resolved and reached conclusion. The problem is that Frederica and Garfiel have not secured that closure equally. Frederica might still feel something very deep-rooted about the whole issue.

It does seem like Frederica is the one avoiding Garfiel. That’s the impression Subaru gets when thinking back on their exchange.

Subaru: “Incidentally do you know anything about what happened to Miss Leashia after that, Miss Ryuzu?”

Ryuzu: “…I never asked abert it. And that ain’t a lie. Sermetimes you just don’t want ter know the truth, and so it goes for me.”

Ryuzu averts her gaze, ignoring the truth that she has likely already grasped. Subaru is not heartless enough to call it weakness.

A ripple crests through the dregs of tea in the teacup on the table.

He watches the wave melt into nothing, a gloomy silence upon the scene.

2

Subaru: “I’m feeling that if this goes on, everything’ll end as us prying further and further into their affairs like a couple of nosy rubberneckers, but how’re your feelings on this Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “Uhrm…I-I’d sooo rather avoid doing that.”

Subaru and Emilia leave Ryuzu’s room and walk down the hall as they consider their accomplishments, terrified that they may fail to produce any decent results.

They would rather this not end as them uncovering gossip and indulging in rumors. Naturally, their top priority is to improve Frederica and Garfiel’s relationship, but it’s just life that problems spring up when you’re dealing with problems.

Emilia: “But since neither talking to Ram or Miss Ryuzu went anywhere…maybe we’re out of options? Since Roswaal isn’t back yet either.”

Subaru: “If we’re assuming that we shouldn’t rely on the passive approach of ‘it’ll resolve itself over time’, then we can say that yeah the issue is probably family. But where their mom is…or rather, whatever happened to her after their goodbye, isn’t the issue. It’s their mental states back then compared to now, and the stances they held when they parted ways.”

Emilia: “Wouldn’t it be easier to just lock them in a room together?”

Subaru: “Here I am in shock at Emilia-tan’s unexpectedly barbaric plans.”

Subaru looks startled, but Emilia looks serious as she puts her finger to her lip.

Emilia: “I mean, right?”

Emilia: “I think what they need isn’t really time, but a reason to start talking. They’ve considered so many things over these ten years…so if they get the time to talk about it, I’m sure they’ll manage something.”

Subaru: “Hrnhmhm, but that feels passive too. It’s not really any different from the majority opinion of ‘it’ll resolve itself over time’. When people say ‘it’ll resolve itself over time’, they mean that the conversation you’re talking about will naturally occur during that period.”

Emilia: “So why don’t we make that conversation happen for them, unnaturally? I know my idea was pretty extreme…but I think it’s basically what Ram and Miss Ryuzu are saying. That we just have to leave it to them while they’re alone together.”

Emilia lifts her finger from her lip and gives it a wag. Subaru listens to her with his arms crossed and brows crinkled in deliberation.

Is that really all they need to do?

Subaru does understand what she’s saying. In fact it makes perfect sense. He’s just troubling himself over simple anxieties.

But is it really safe for their involvement to be so shallow? They don’t have to pre-arrange things in more detail for this to work out? Nothing will hit any kinks, and needlessly escalate in complexity?

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Nuh.”

When Emilia pokes Subaru in the forehead.

She looks up at him, brought back to reality.

Emilia: “I know you’re a worrier, and work so hard for everybody’s sake…”

Subaru: “You’re going to make me blush, saying that…”

Emilia: “But I worry as much about you as you do for us. You need to know that you don’t have take everything upon yourself like this. They’ll be fine.”

Subaru: “…I suppose.”

With everything dismissed by the word ‘worrier’, Subaru feels the weight fall from his chest.

The burden in his heart was that kind of intangible boulder—which he had gone shouldering upon himself.

Emilia: “It’d make me happy if you trusted me, and went along with my ideas too sometimes.” Subaru’s shoulders untense as he sighs.

Perhaps it’s not the conclusion he was after, but it seems like events are going to wind up according with the general consensus of opinion.

Subaru: “Okay. Then we’ll figure something out and—”

???: “—Goodness, if it isn’t Mr. Natsuki and Lady Emilia. What are you doing here?”

And just when he tries to adopt Emilia’s plan, someone intrudes.

A grey-haired young man carrying a massive stack of papers shows up before the two. Recognizing him, Subaru puts his hand to his chin in thought.

Actually, of all the important people in the mansion, there is only one they haven’t spoken to due to reasons other than absence.

With that thought, Subaru considers how useful this man will be for tackling the problem, and nods.

Subaru: “Okay. Then we’ll figure something out and make that happen.”

Man: “Do you mind me asking why it feels as though I don’t exist in this conversation?!"

The shout from the familiar voice echoes loudly through the Milord Mansion.

Chapter 4:
Birth of the Emilia Camp's Internal Affairs Minister

1

While working away at the massive mountain of paperwork, Otto listens to Subaru and Emilia who sit on the reception sofa.

He withdraws the needed documents from the pile, his quill pen occasionally darting over them. He scribbles formulas on a sheet of paper, does some kind of calculation before jotting them onto the paperwork, and references nearby documents while stamping the first with a seal.

With how smoothly his work progresses and how frantically his eyes move it's questionable whether he's paying attention to Subaru, but his occasional interjections suggest he isn't just ignoring them.

Emilia looks impressed as she watches Otto work, Subaru sitting beside her as he explains what they've been doing. He finishes his speech at nearly the exact same moment that Otto raps his pen into its holder.

Otto: "So you're looking to improve sibling relations, are you? … Then if you'd like to consult me, I could tell you—"

Subaru: "Where's this going?"

Otto: "You're seeking pertinent advice from someone with siblings, correct? Then I believe that instead of consulting this quagmire of only children, you'd be better off consulting me, what with my elder and younger brother, indeed."

Subaru finds himself overwhelmed by Otto's abounding confidence.

Subaru has never asked about Otto's family make-up, but apparently he's the middle brother in a series of three. So yes, Subaru and Emilia are indeed craving his advice. However, Subaru: “But weren’t you chased out of your house for being a bad son? It’d be one thing if you had good family relations, but advice from the black sheep isn’t exactly helpful.”

Otto: “Who are you implying was so poor a son that their parents disowned them?! I’ve never spoken even a single word of the like! My elder brother inherited the house, so I as the second eldest left to go trading of my own will! Perhaps it’s unexpected, but I do believe myself cleverer than my brothers, you see.”

Subaru: “What if you’re the only one thinking that and your family’s relieved the parasite’s gone?”

Otto: “Does it somehow displease you for me to be here?!”

Otto pounds his hands on the desk, his face red. Subaru shakes his head with an, “Of course not.” Merely the thought of Otto being absent is terrifying. It’s just that Subaru found himself insulting him before he could thank him.

Which is another one of Otto Suwen’s characteristic virtues.

Emilia: “But for some reason you feel really undependable, Otto. I wonder why that is? …Even though you did so much to help.”

Otto: “E-Lady Emilia too…”

Subaru’s thoughts express themselves vicariously through Emilia as she puts her hand on her chin, in thought. Apparently she is also a victim of Otto’s virtues.

This man’s aura of dependability correlates negatively with his actual capacities.

Subaru: “Look at how you’re tormenting Emilia-tan, you sinful bastard.”

Otto: “Utterly unjustified! What did I even do!”

Emilia: “So anyway, Otto. I’d really appreciate it if you could tell us what we should do about them.”

Otto: “And right into the topic! Now aren’t you two truly just master and servant!”

Otto spends a moment overreacting, before seeming to realise that his hysterics are utterly pointless.

The back of his chair squeaks as he puts his hand to his grey hair.

Otto: “Well, I believe the important thing to start with is their mutual feelings. From what I’ve seen, Garfiel doesn’t look to be the problem. His stubbornness is akin to a child’s, and I imagine that he’d like to reconcile as he loves his family.”

Emilia: “Mm, I think so too. Garfiel wants to make up. But Frederica’s having trouble approaching him.”

Otto: “Miss Frederica must be in a somewhat difficult position. She is the elder sibling, so as the superior she needs to let Garfiel have his way if they’re to reconcile. But from what I’ve heard, it doesn’t seem that Miss Frederica has erred. She may simply be exhibiting her sisterly generosity. If we consider her capacity to tolerate the younger’s tantrums as the crux of this affair…what’s the matter?”

Subaru stares at Otto as he neatly arranges his argument, and shakes his head when Otto complains.

Subaru: “No, you hit me with a way more serious opinion than I expected, and I’m stuck on where to throw in jokes…”

Otto: “It’s a serious matter that deserves serious consideration for a serious conclusion!”

Subaru: “Please forgive me. I’m too incompetent to play off your convoluted lead-up…”

Otto: “Are you trying to resolve problems or to encourage them?!”

Of course Subaru wants to resolve them, but it hurts to defy his primordial desires.

Otto and Subaru’s conversation aside, Emilia nods admiringly in reply to Otto.

Emilia: “Then…”

Emilia: “We have to address Frederica’s feelings first.”

Otto: “I believe so, yes. It doesn’t seem that Miss Frederica will exacerbate the situation by deeming Garfiel unpardonable. And honestly, I doubt anything so finnicky will be necessary for this. It’s one of those problems that time can res—”

Subaru: “We don’t want time to resolve it and that’s why we’re trying to hurry it along. Did you even listen to me all the way to the end? I swear.”

Otto: “I shouldn’t have to be hearing this!”

Sensing that Otto is reaching the exact same conclusion as everyone else, Subaru snorts somewhat mockingly. Otto is indignant, and Subaru harries him further with,

Subaru: “So where would you show off that older sibling magnanimity, if it were you? You mentioned a younger brother, so surely you’ve had a fight where you showcased your broad-mindedness. That’s the tale I wanna see, hear, sing.”

Otto: “If you’ll pardon me on the seeing and singing, yes, a tale. Honestly, my family was rather harmonious. My siblings were good people, my parents were kind, and…hold on, have we ever actually fought bef…”

Subaru: “Useless!!”

Otto: “Wh-Why on earth are you saying that! What is so wrong about a peaceful family! Are you suggesting that relationships are illegitimate if they never once involve fights? That’s ridiculous! What is there to complain about peaceful relationships with no great flaws!”

Subaru: “Well it’s the worst card you could’ve played in this situation!”

Just when it seems like Otto’s going to come up with something poignant and useful, he plays a zero.

Seeing that Otto can counterbalance even Subaru's ridiculousness, he probably never got so enraged that he started slinging curses and insults around pertaining to issues of family.

Or perhaps everyone in the Suwen family shares the same bullyable temperament as Otto. A home where life was peaceful, but only because no tormentors were around in the empty Eden.

Subaru: "This poor, sheltered young lad…"

Otto: "It feels like you are insulting me immensely but perhaps that's just my imagination!"

Emilia: "…Huhuhu."

Otto yells at Subaru, who lets his imagination spread its wings. When Emilia, watching the exchange, puts her hand to her mouth as she fails to suppress a smile. The two men fix their gaze on Emilia. She shakes her head.

Emilia: "No, I'm sorry. It's just that you look like you're getting along sooo well…kind of like brothers."

Otto: "I'm rather sure that my brothers were kinder to me than this…"

Subaru: "Don't say that, big bro. We always treated you like this, brother, you just didn't realize. Face the reality, my brother."

Otto: "Oh shut up!"

Otto has already exhausted the words and willpower needed to reply. Subaru pouts at him as he incessantly continues, "Brother mine, dear brother, broham, broski, bub-bub, broseph, Esteemed Brother My Elder," and so on. Emilia gives a clap of her hands.

Emilia: "Ah. What do you two always do when you reconcile? I think Otto always concedes, but figuring this out might bring us closer to the answer."

Subaru: "It's amazing how naturally that turned into Otto always conceding."

Emilia: “What if you try letting him win, Subaru?”

Subaru: “I…even supposing I yield to everyone else in the world… am absolutely never, ever yielding to Otto…!”

Otto: “Oh shut up!”

Barks Otto at Subaru’s atrocious little drama, rubbing at his temples as he thinks. It seems like he is seriously considering Emilia’s idea.

Otto: “Eerhm, what do I do when I argue with Mr. Natsuki, hrm…”

Subaru: “Give up usually!”

Otto: “The answer didn’t even bear thinking and now even I’m wondering what I’m doing!”

Otto cradles his head atop the desk as Emilia stands up and pats him consolingly. While jealous about Emilia’s kindness, Subaru judges that he won’t be able to get it himself in this scene and bats at his lap before standing up.

Subaru: “Well, that did help. We’ll try Frederica first, and depending how that goes we’ll judge how we’ll enact Emilia’s plan.”

Otto: “You realize that this is merely you fussing, and you may be breaking your back for no reason?”

Subaru: “I still think it’s a lot better than actually breaking your back. You disagree?”

Otto: “—Haah…”

Otto gives a resigned sigh.

The way his mouth relaxes into a smile is essential his answer to the question.

Emilia must also perceive the same thing as Subaru in Otto’s expression. She stretches easily on the spot, and gives Otto a smile.

Emilia: “Well, Subaru and I’ll be going now. I’m sorry we interrupted you when you were so busy.”

Otto: “No no no, I’m the one who invited you. Also I am surrounded by suffocating mountains of paperwork. The occasional breather helps to make it easi…”

Otto’s expression snaps into awareness.

Otto: “Hold on, why am I working so frantically on Margrave Mathers’s feudal paperworks? At some point I get asked to assist with some municipal tasks, and then am permitted to inspect even the territory’s administrative logs…I’m sure I was only trying to secure a quote for the prices of that oil…”

Subaru: “Oops, Emilia-tan. We stay any longer and we’ll be impeding Otto’s work. Let us vacate the room while happily holding hands!”

Emilia: “Huh? Oh, erm, yes let’s.”

Otto puts hit hand to his forehead, beginning to feel bewildered about his current circumstances when Subaru and Emilia abandon him. Subaru takes advantage of the moment to grab Emilia’s hand and exits OTTO’S OFFICE. And just when Subaru attempts to flee the room, his hand on the door,

Otto: “Oh, Mr. Natsuki—”

Subaru: “Hm? What. Just relax. You’re not sitting there because of any mistake or hypnotism or powerful suggestion. You have merely been beguiled by circumstances, conversational finesse, and…”

Subaru’s sentence cuts off halfway.

He cannot keep joking for he senses something grave in Otto’s gaze as he looks at Subaru. As though he is trying to talk about something important.

Subaru shuts his mouth, and Emilia tilts her head. Otto looks at the two while a mere microsecond of hesitation flashes through him.

But it all disperses when Emilia glances back.

Otto: “—No, nevermind.”

Subaru: “Come on, I’m curious now. If you’re gonna say something then say it.”

Otto: “I would like to say it, but…well, we’ll say that presently it would be like trying to hold a cloud. We’ll discuss it once things begin to look more hopeful. Since I cannot tell yet whether it would help you or just bring you unease.”

Otto scratches his head as he explains his hesitation.

Subaru tries to make Otto change his mind by silently staring at him, but he just seats himself and retrieves his quill.

Otto: “I’ll be returning to my work, so I leave Garfiel’s case to you. When the military cabinets are not functioning properly, the civil cabinets in the back are too anxious to work.”

Subaru: “—Got it. But when you can say whatever that was, do, Minister of Internal Affairs.”

Otto: “Why of course I w…civil, cabinet? Minister of Internal Affairs?”

Subaru: “Let’s go, Emilia-tan. We’ll just be bothering him if we stay any longer!”

Leaving Otto behind as he begins troubling over the change in his position yet again, Subaru hurriedly pulls Emilia along by the hand and leaves the room.

Emilia’s eyes dart about in confusion, and she glances back at Otto the moment before the door closes.

Emilia: “Ah, um, erm, Otto, good luck with your work!”

Unclear whether she’s worried for him or giving him a boot in the ass, Emilia calls out to Otto as she leaves the room.

2

Having left Otto's Office, Subaru and Emilia's course of action grows more definite. Or really they already had a defined course when the foreign element called 'Otto's opinions' butted in, and now they're moving ahead with a plan just as definite as before.

Subaru: "Thinking about it, that was a complete waste of time…"

Emilia: "Don't say that. Otto's story was, erm, well, it was…mhm, ah, erm, yes…it helped?"

Subaru: "Your unmaskable honesty shows in that question mark and it's adorable."

Emilia fails in her desperate attempts to back up Otto as Subaru praises her and focuses on searching for Frederica.

Anyway, the problem with the siblings is the sister. Garfiel's already made up his mind. Now is just to give Frederica impetus to make up hers, then—

???: "My, if it isn't Emily and Subaru. May I ask what you are doing?"

Subaru: "Ueg."

Emilia: "Ah."

A voice calls from behind them. Subaru's breath hitches awkwardly to a stop, and Emilia plainly shows her surprises as she glances back.

Their gazes land on a girl in a dress with her navy hair in a braid.

She is less than ten years old, even younger than Petra or Beatrice. She's identical to Beatrice in that she wears an extravagant dress, but hers is decorated more simply than the pigtailed girl. Unfitting to her youth, her eyes are stern and her face is dignified.

This girl's name is Anne-Rose Milord.

She is scion of the Milord family which is looking after Subaru's group, currently acting as lord of the manor in the true lord's absence, and the one receiving Subaru and the others.

While Clind and the other excellent members of this household attend to arrangements and the like, Anne-Rose is the one giving the orders, and she is suitably bold in her bearing.

A statesman's condescending mien—in the form of a child.

This is the Milord family of sorcerers, split from the main household of the Mathers family what belongs to Roswaal. Anne-Rose already has all the backbone needed to inherit this house.

Lovable childishness—is something she lacks, which is seemingly why Subaru has trouble with her. It feels like, when he's facing her as another individual human being, he is being far eclipsed in refinement by a girl about ten years his junior.

But regardless of all that, Emilia's reaction is very clear.

Emilia: "Augh, Anne. How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not Emily, I'm Emilia."

Anne: "Why do forgive me, Emily. Though you are at fault here for hesitating in your speech when you first introduced yourself. I find Emily an easier and cuter name than Emilia."

Emilia: "Really? I mean, I don't really mind it either, but…I guess there's no choice." And with that, Emilia permits Anne-Rose to use this nickname.

Emilia has got along strangely well with Anne-Rose since they met. Ask why, and they weirdly seem to just suit each other.

Anne-Rose's sentiments seem similar to Emilia's, as she displays not the slightest negativity even around the half-elf. She could be counterbalancing it with her mental capacities, but that in itself presents a problem when considering Emilia's age.

Anne: "Now what is it you're doing with Subaru, Emily? Having a tryst?"

Subaru: "Ah, does it look like one? Does it? Well oh dear, we've gotten so close that it looks like a tryst. You're allowed to blush when the shyness takes you, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "No, that's not what we're doing at all. All we're doing together is some nefarious plotting."

Subaru: "You know exactly how I feel and you just cast it aside, geez!"

Anne-Rose looks extremely interested as she asks her question, and Emilia easily shakes her head in reply. It appears that Anne-Rose hadn't been expecting especially anything, for she looks condescendingly at Subaru with an, "I see," and breathes a sigh.

Her eyes are definitely mocking Subaru's ineffectiveness. But Subaru can't see himself as being at fault. He has constantly been flirting at Emilia, and she's just gotten better at ignoring it.

Anne: "I shall inquire into your nefarious schemes later, for have you seen Clind anywhere? I need him and he is utterly missing."

Emilia: "Mr. Clind was watching over Petra and Beatrice just a moment ago." Anne: "…Phrasing truly is the crux of matters, Emily." Anne-Rose grimaces, seeming to infer everything from that statement alone.

She's known Clind for a long time, so she must know full well his disposition. After all, his tenacious LOLI SOUL is usually fixed entirely on his master, Anne-Rose. There's no need to inquire about his resilience or keenness or hopelessness.

Emilia: "He said he bought sweets for them, so they should eat. I wonder if he bought any for me. It's kind of sooo bugging me."

Anne: "…I doubt that Clind would be so impolite, so surely there are some for you. He already visited myself and presented me with tea as well."

Emilia: "Ah, did he? I'm so excited."

Emilia clasps her hands together in joy while Anne-Rose pleasantly watches.

They are in the complete opposite positions to their heights and ages. It is a heartwarming scene, but Subaru has to tilt his head.

When Anne-Rose notices him doing this, and narrows her blue eyes.

Anne: “You seem to have time available, so I’m sure you wouldn’t mind. Would you care to accompany me for a request of mine?”

Subaru: “Hey now. We might look like we have free time, but we actually don’t. What’s actually happening with this apparent free time is that we’re using this period to substantiate a definite course into doing something productive for abating future troubles which…”

Emilia: “What’s your request? I don’t mind so long as it’s something I can help with.”

While Subaru starts spinning the long-winded excuses, Emilia thoughtlessly accepts. Anne-Rose gives Emilia a smile, looking at the pair with eyes so mature they could not conceivably be a nine-year-old’s.

Anne: “There is a man of whom I would like to shock, and a maid of whom I have long known who I would like to conciliate.”

Chapter 5:
Annerose's Trap & Brother-Sister Relations

1

Why are they readily going along with the nefarious plots of a nine-year-old?

Subaru watches the back of the small girl leading them down the hallway, annoyed at his own failure to prevent this.

—Anne-Rose Milord.

Being from a branch of the Mathers household that Roswaal heads, she shares many distinct characteristics with him. Such as her notably navy hair and blue eyes.

Her hair is in a crown braid, but since Subaru doesn't know what the hairstyle is called, he mentally refers to her as Braid Loli.

She possesses a keen intelligence unfitting for a nine year old. Her cleverness and wits do make her seem a relative of Roswaal's, but the thing most reminiscent of Roswaal shows through:

Anne: "Emily, would you care to hold my hand?"

Emilia: "Huh? Oh, sure, Anne."

Anne: "So I oblige. Also, Emily. Would you care to let me hug you?"

Emilia: "Huh? Oh, sure, Anne."

Anne: "So I oblige. Also, Emily. Would you care to carry me in your ar—"

Subaru: "Enough."

Subaru gets Anne-Rose, seeking hand-holding and hugs and upsy-daisies, away from Emilia. Emilia's eyes widen. Anne-Rose brushes off her lap, undeterred, before exaggeratedly patting at her shoulders where Subaru touched her.

Anne: “How brutishly you separate people who desire to touch one another, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Where’d you get those statistics? Questionnaire looked to be about walking the Milord estate alone to me.”

Anne: “Your limited your stature must be, Subaru, if you are unable to overlook a child’s endearing mischievousness.”

Subaru: “Except I would’ve kept my mouth shut if it was just childish mischief!”

Anne-Rose cooly attempts to justify her actions. Despite her words, she is still trying to grasp Emilia’s hand whenever the opportunity appears, so Subaru can’t get careless.

Anne-Rose is a blood relative of Roswaal’s, a prodigy beyond her nine years.

And her idiosyncrasy is—for some reason, she likes Emilia way too much.

Ever since the day that the group came to stay in this mansion and they introduced themselves, Anne-Rose has shown inordinate fondness for Emilia. Emilia is a gullible airhead so she may view it as a cute show of affection, but Subaru views it otherwise.

After all, she’s related to Roswaal. While his Demi-human Fancy has been overthrown by his actual Echidna Fancy, it may not be the same for his relative.

Many of the servants in the Milord household are demi-humans. Ones that Roswaal assembled from all over his lands who have apparently suffered persecution, and are effectively taking asylum in the Milord residence by Roswaal’s will.

Considering that Anne-Rose was born and raised in this environment, demi-humans are a familiar presence for her. So, while she isn’t prejudiced against Emilia the half-elf, her friendliness is excessive.

Put simply, Subaru is trying to keep Anne-Rose from stealing Emilia. And Anne-Rose is trying to keep Subaru from monopolizing Emilia. Making them rivals for Emilia's affections. Although,

Emilia: "Come on, Subaru. I don't know what's rankling you, but you can't be mad at Anne like this when she's still so little. You're being immature."

Subaru: "Who says rankling anymore? …No I mean, nevermind that, look Emilia-tan. Plainly said, Anne-Rose's gaze isn't the kind you can dismiss as her still being young and…"

Emilia: "No excuses! I'm so sorry, Anne. I think Subaru's still flustered from being in someone else's mansion."

Subaru: "…and it still applies even when you act like I can't settle into unfamiliar beds!"

Subaru and Emilia have disparate stances toward Anne-Rose, so whenever the topic gets onto how they feel about her, it turns into one of these fruitless arguments. Why can't Emilia notice how cloying Anne-Rose's gaze is?

Subaru: "I bet that it's one of those things where only people aiming for Emilia-tan's affections can notice when others are doing the same yes that's definitely it!"

Anne: "Emily. Subaru has just confessed that he lusts for you. How indecent."

Subaru: "Your word choice's the indecent thing here! How are you only nine?!"

While Beatrice is only superficially offensive, Anne-Rose actually is offensive. Subaru could dismiss that 'indecent' as a simple riposte, supposing it came from Beatrice's mouth, but somehow it feels like a real insult when Anne-Rose says it.

Emilia: "How come you two can't get along? It's sooo baffling…"

Subaru: "It's because we both l…"

Emilia: “You both?”

Subaru: “—Mhn, nh.”

Emilia tilts her head. Subaru cannot get the rest of the sentence out.

He’s stated his fondness for her countless times, but voicing it around other people makes it feel cheap. Also he’s saying it unintentionally while running off momentum, which makes it both cheap and embarrassing.

In the corner of his eye, Anne-Rose smiles victoriously.

Anne: “Now then, I will refrain from teasing Subaru further. For let us speak inside my room, which we have reached.”

Says Anne-Rose to pure Emilia and red-faced Subaru.

Abruptly, Subaru realizes that they have walked down the whole of the hallway, and indeed stand before an overly ornate door. It’s Anne-Rose’s room. Apparently Emilia has been invited here many times before, but this is Subaru’s first venture here.

Anne-Rose takes Emilia’s hand and easily moves to welcome her into the room. But Subaru intervenes and pulls the breaks on that.

Subaru: “Wait. ‘Anne-Rose’s room’ is such a fishy series of words so I’m going in first.”

Anne: “—Huu. Very well, proceed. You are free to do what you wish.”

While she does seem bothered at first, Anne-Rose concedes to Subaru with a sigh. Subaru puts his hand to the doorknob and, slightly tense, enters the room. Where,

Clind: “I have been awaiting your presence, Master Natsuki. Tea and biscuits have been prepared. Please do find yourself a seat and relax. Powwow.”

Clind welcomes him with a formal bow.

Stunned speechless, Subaru glances back, to see that Anne-Rose looks utterly unfazed.

Emilia: “Huh, Mr. Clind? But I thought you left to go eat with Beatrice and Petra?”

Clind: “So I did, Lady Emilia. However, it appeared that the Mistress found it in her mind to hold a tea party in her room, and thusly, I attended to those preparations. Urgency.”

Emilia: “You’re right, Anne did say something like that.”

Clind: “Indeed, the Mistress so thought of me. Perceptiveness.”

Emilia peeks her head out from beside the frozen Subaru as she speaks with Clind. But it seems their conversation doesn’t quite mesh.

It’s almost like Clind said ‘thought of me’ instead of ‘asked of me’.

Anne: “It shall drive you to lunacy, should you attempt to rationally comprehend Clind’s peculiarities. It is best for the mind that you simply accept it.”

Clind: “I am always vigilant to remain one step ahead of my summons. Objective.” How the hell does vigilance achieve that.

…Is what Subaru’s thinking, but Anne-Rose and Emilia seem unbothered as they start taking their seats. While mentally tilting his head, Subaru joins the tea party too.

Anne: “Seeing that Clind has prepared the tea, we may proceed with our conversation.”

Clind: “The one regarding the bettering of Frederica and Sir Garfiel’s relationship. Conciliation.”

Subaru: “Mr. Clind, are you one of those butlers where there’s actually several of you?”

Clind: “That position has already been filled by Lady Ryuzu. Rehash.”

Clind seems to think that his inclusion in the conversation will just stymie it. He readies tea and biscuits for everyone, before going to a corner of the room where he stands as still as a statue. His gaze locks onto Anne-Rose, but she ignores it, long used to it.

Anne: “Now, Clind’s assessment is correct, this regards our mutual interest in swiftly bettering Frederica and Garfiel’s relationship… would be a valid thought?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. We’ve been racking our brains trying to do something, but we haven’t really come up with any wonderful ideas. It’s been a real kerfuffle.”

Anne: “You’re adorable when you’re stressed, Emily. —Then, now that you have ventured about the mansion to discuss the issue, and found yourselves at a standstill, you have come to me.”

Subaru: “Stop subliminally throwing your ulterior motives in there.”

Anne-Rose, nonchalant, looks utterly unaffected by Subaru’s jab.

Either way, she seems to understand Subaru and Emilia’s situation, which saves on the exposition.

Subaru: “But anyway, you’re looking to have them make up too? What’s the occasion? Everyone else just insisted to let time resolve it.”

Anne: “Perhaps because I am less inclined to resignation, and less accustomed to waiting? I must say that the people you spoke to are largely of that disposition.”

Subaru: “Frank, aren’t you. …No but, we also asked Otto.”

Anne: “Then I amend that to include those ignorant to success.”

Subaru: “Harsh!”

And how sad Otto is that Anne-Rose has managed to get this impression of him, when they’ve only known each other a week.

But it’s best that Subaru keep silent, considering that he can’t refute her.

Anne: “I cannot deny that time will resolve the issue. A divide of ten years separates them…given another decade, the issue shall resolve itself. But that is far too protracted. Why, ten years, that’s the same length of time since my Mother and Father last kissed!”

Subaru: “ggggggggn?”

Halfway through an unchildlike screed, she abruptly hits a childlike conclusion.

Subaru groans, unable to keep up with the sudden shift in gears, prompting Clind to put his finger to his mouth in request of silence.

Subaru doesn’t have a complete grasp of the situation, but perhaps her knowledge in those topics actually is that of a nine-year-old. Though he’d rather not probe into it, since Emilia is right here and also under the exact same misapprehension.

Anne: “Care to explain that bizarre groaning of yours, Subaru?”

Subaru: “It’s nothing. Just some phlegm and despondency stuck in my throat.”

Anne: “I see. What tribulations puberty brings. …Regardless, I have no intentions of making them wait for a decade.”

Emilia: “We’re thinking the same way. But, do you have any ideas, Anne?”

Anne: “What were your thoughts on the issue, Emily?”

It’s replying to a question with a question, but regardless Emilia furrows her pretty brows and puts her finger to her lips.

Emilia: “Ermm…”

Emilia: “I think they do want to make up. I feels like Garfiel’s trying to make time so they can talk, and though Frederica’s uncomfortable, I think she does want to talk.”

Anne: “I see, understood. And so?”

Emilia: “And so I’ve been wondering if it’d be easier to just lock them in a room together.”

Subaru: “Sure are going for the barbaric plans, huh, Emilia-tan?!”

While Subaru has no better ideas, it’s shocking to hear it coming from Emilia’s mouth. Also he does endorse the idea, but there are some questions to be had with it. Particularly,

Subaru: “I mean we could throw them in a room, but those two can bust out of basically any room when working together. I’d prefer we didn’t destroy half the mansion doing this. So instead of a busted mansion we have a week to get them hanging out together, what is this, a speedrun?”

Emilia: “Then what should we do, Subaru? Should I use ice to make a room that we can lock them in?”

Subaru: “I don’t think we need to use such extreme conditions to revive their family love, no! Just, look! Something like, have them go into a room while sharing the exact same goal!”

Emilia: “The same goal…?”

Emilia tilts her head, puzzled.

Subaru manages to get away from any criminal ideas, but his proposition doesn’t go any further than that.

He’s conceived of making them share a goal, but has no concrete idea of what it would be. Should they defeat some monster that they can only take on together?

Where exactly are they going to find such a convenient monster?

Anne: “In truth, my thoughts are identical to Subaru’s.”

Subaru: “Huh? You know where to hire Cyclopes and Chimeras?”

Anne: “Nevermind.”

Anne-Rose gazes scornfully at Subaru, who apologizes by poking out his tongue and donking his head.

The nine-year old sighs while Emilia's cheeks grow flush, eyes lit with expectation.

Anne: "We share the same thoughts, when it pertains to making them share a goal. But I expect that what we know about them differs, and so differs the ideas we conceive, Emily."

Emilia: "What we know about them?"

Anne: "For you have greater knowledge of Garfiel than Frederica. While I have known Frederica for surpassing eight years. That fanged face has been familiar to me ever since I've been aware."

Subaru more or less understands what Anne-Rose is trying to say.

Her relationship with Frederica means that she can supply the information needed to fill the gaping hole that Subaru couldn't address—that is, what common points could lead to a common goal between Frederica and Garfiel.

Subaru: "You're sure this'll work?"

Anne: "Provided that I may secure helpers, yes. Now, Frederica presents no issue, but Garfiel does."

Subaru: "Garfiel does?"

Anne: "Should Garfiel's personality be exactly what I have observed over this handful of days, then we should see no issues."

Subaru doesn't know how intensively Anne-Rose has paid attention to Garfiel's attitude, but as far as he can tell, Garfiel's been entirely himself during his stay here.

He isn't being pointlessly stubborn like he was in the Sanctuary, or trying to hide his fourteen-year-old immaturity. Subaru can assure that much.

Subaru: "Garfiel's being entirely genuine, so no issues there."

Anne: “Excellent. Next is the issue of helpers…perhaps we might enlist help from Miss Ryuzu, their family.”

Subaru: “From Miss Ryuzu?”

She’s who you’d name first if listing people most related to them.

But she didn’t seem entirely cooperative, and it’s unknown whether she’ll entertain this. Regardless, Anne-Rose seems to think otherwise, and gestures her butler over.

Anne: “Clind.”

Clind: “We may delay preparations for this evening’s dinner by two hours and use the kitchen. Proposal.”

Anne: “I see. Very well. Do inform whoever’s tending to dinner of that.”

Clind: “As you command, I swiftly shall. Haste.”

After that quick exchange, Clind silently exits the room. Subaru and Emilia watch on in surprise while Anne-Rose takes a sip of her tea, smiling.

Anne: “Now, let us see this issue quickly done away with. For others yet remain who must be tended to.”

She says, plunging Subaru and Emilia deeper into confusion.

2

The second that Garfiel enters the kitchen and spots that UNFAMILIAR STATURE, he sighs, recognizing that he’s been caught in a trap.

Garfiel: “…Fuckin’ everyone’s gettin’ so over fuckin’ involved.” Despite his cursing, a smile arises on his face.

Garfiel’s nose is custom-made. His sense of smell is so strong that it bares no comparison to the average man’s, and he caught the scent before he even entered the room.

That he nevertheless kept himself unaware is Garfiel's final speck of stubbornness, or perhaps his pride as a man.

???: "Garf?"

Garfiel scratches his head while the woman glances back, and calls to him in unfamiliar voice. Before Garfiel stands a woman with long, lustrous blonde hair. She is taller than him, and her build is assuredly robust. The horde of fangs decorating her mouth, combined with her powerful frame, makes her seem somewhat savage and violent.

Were it not for her gentle voice and the tender gleam in her eyes, people would constantly be getting the entirely wrong impression of her.

Frederica Baumann. Is how she's been introducing herself, or so Garfiel Tinzel hears. Tinzel is the name of their mother, and Baumann that of her father.

Garfiel doesn't know why Frederica insists on using her father's surname, and has opted not to think about it.

He doubts that those who devised this meeting took those complicated sentiments into account. Or perhaps Garfiel is just exaggerating the whole thing, and to outsiders it doesn't look like a big issue.

Garfiel: "Ain't often I see ya here, Sis."

Frederica: "And I could say the same. To think that you would find yourself here…dinner has not yet been prepared, you will find nothing here to pilfer."

Garfiel: "I ain't here fer food. Stop treatin' me like a damn kid."

Frederica: "But is it not childishness to balk when treated as a child? And I suspect that you are still young enough that you would desire such babying, Garf."

Garfiel: "Nah, 'm fourteen 'm over that hump. Who th'fuck's a baby here?!" Feeling pricked, Garfiel howls in rejection.

Frederica shakes her head at Garfiel's overreaction and returns her gaze to the front—to look into the kitchen.

Frederica: "I'm occupied with a task at the moment. Garf, I cannot devote all of my time to relaxation as you can."

Garfiel: "Ain't like I'm spendin' all my amazin' time playin' 'round either. And I ain't here t'kill time. …Think 'm here fer th'same reason 's you, Sis."

Frederica: "The same reason?"

Garfiel: "Looks like yer got asked by someone else tho."

By those words alone, Frederica seems to figure it out.

Frederica: "So that's it."

She mutters in comprehension.

Frederica: "I did think it peculiar. Out of nowhere, Lady Annerose began saying that she would die should she not have one of my meat pies."

Garfiel: "How th'hell did that manage t'trick you, Sis."

Frederica: "What did they say…no, what did Grandmother say that brought you here?"

Garfiel: "Sh'said if she ain't gettin' one'v my amazin' meat pies she's gonna go more senile."

Frederica: "I also must wonder how you managed to find credibility in that statement."

Garfiel shuts his mouth.

Hearing her say it does make him question it, but he had been sincerely worried so there's nothing to do.

Garfiel: "Well maybe y'just can't understand seein' as yer gave up on lookin' after her. Ain't weird t'all fer 'er t'show up askin' 'f dinner’s ready yet even after sh’just ate. ‘Course I’d fuckin’ worry.”

It’s actually a sad misunderstanding coming from the fact that, when the Ryuzu personality changes her rotation to the next one, the new Ryuzu doesn’t inherit memories so extensively as to discern whether dinner happened or not. But Garfiel will never notice that and neither will Frederica. The siblings’ concern for Ryuzu’s mental health compounds.

However, Garfiel’s statement pricks Frederica in a different manner than described. Because, although unintentionally, he struck on the issue of her decade-long absence.

Frederica: “…Indeed. I never returned to the Sanctuary even once over that decade. And you’re the one who protected the Sanctuary during that period. …I have no right to speak as if I know what happened there, or what has come of Grandmother.”

Garfiel: “No, I…that ain’t what I was meanin’ t’say with that. I w’s just…”

Frederica: “…”

Frederica glances back, forcing Garfiel to face her again.

Her face remains unfamiliar.

It’s been a decade. During all that time, Garfiel’s mental image of his sister remained constant from ten years ago.

Even though he’s had this reunion and spent some time with her, he is having trouble accepting it. And the situation’s the same for Frederica. She must be viewing him with trepidation, just as he views her.

But it bothers Garfiel. Why is her trepidation casting waves as intense as his own?

What was it that he made her feel?

Garfiel: “…Oh.”

With that gaze upon him, Garfiel breathes a sigh.

The answer thunks into his heart.

Got it.

Crap, he got it. He knows exactly what the emotion in Frederica's eyes mirrors.

It's the same look that Ryuzu would occasionally have, back in the Sanctuary. The same look that Garfiel would see on his own face, reflected upon the water.

Which means that it's melancholy. Combined with apology.

Garfiel: "'Course it'd be."

Garfiel had assumed that the events from ten years ago had been resolved.

Inside the tomb, he remembered the goodbye with his mother from when he was young. He now understood what his mother felt as she left them, and that resolved the issue for Garfiel. He assumed it had been equally resolved for Frederica.

But it's not.

What happened in the tomb only affected Garfiel.

Garfiel came to understand his feelings for his sister, and his mother's love. He never told or informed his sister of them, distant as she was.

And so Frederica gazes at Garfiel without any resolution to what happened a decade ago, unsure of what to say.

Even though she has matured, her gaze is identical to what it was ten years ago.

Garfiel: "Sister."1

Frederica: "—!"

Garfiel: "'M sorry I didn't say anything. But 's okay. 'M okay. I know what happened with mom, and with you."

Frederica: "Garf…"

Frederica's eyes grow teary and wet in the wake of the violent emotion.

What should he say? While frustrated at himself for his lack of eloquence, Garfiel searches for the words that will convey his feelings accurately.

He searches his head, and all the books he has ever read, for the words he must say.

Garfiel: "I get why you left Sanctuary, and why you never came back after that…ain't what I'cn actually say but, I am trying t'get it. So it's…well, y'know…"

Frederica: "You are…ready to forgive Mother?"

Garfiel: "—What's there t'forgive?"

Garfiel's mouth relaxes into a smile as he replies to Frederica with a shake of his head.

Exactly. What's there to forgive?

The love and hatred that Garfiel kept in his heart this whole time had been misaimed. He knew nothing of the truth, didn't even know his own feelings, lashing out in anger at the impenetrable darkness—all a tantrum and nothing more.

Now that he knows the truth, it's all insignificant.

There was nothing to forgive or resent.

Garfiel: "I know now that mom loved me…that she loved us."

Frederica: "…"

Garfiel: "So there ain't no point tryin't'keep me 'way from what happened. Ain’t got nothin’ t’do with my amazin’ self. So how ‘bout we get t’talkin’ ‘bout somethin’ a li’l less crap, Sis?”

Garfiel’s speech pattern returns to normal as he rubs his reddened nose.

Frederica give a long, deep sigh. She wipes the tears from her eyes.

Frederica: “Garf…you truly have grown.”

Garfiel: “Fuckin’ sarcasm! I ain’t grown a damn inch compar’d t’you! The hell happened t’yer! How’d you get so damn—ghhhah?!”

Frederica: “We may be family, but that is no excuse to say such things to women, Garf you idiot.”

Frederica grabs him by the leg and slams him to the ground, the back of his head banging against the floor.

Garfiel’s eyes spin as he stares up at the ceiling, Frederica standing in his view above him. Her face is back to a smile.

Frederica: “Come now, stand up.”

Garfiel: “Yer th’one who fuckin’ flipped me over.”

Garfiel takes her offered hand. Gets back to his feet.

He lightly brushes himself off and peers over at the counter that Frederica had been using.

Garfiel: “So? How far yer got with yer meat pie, Sis?”

Frederica: “I have gathered the ingredients and had just begun to chop them. Though, it impresses me that you remember how to make it, considering that you only ate it when you were young.”

Garfiel: “‘S ‘cause some persnicket left th’recipie behind so I could make it after she left. ‘Kay, my amazing self’ll knead the dough.”

Frederica: “Then I will do the chopping.”

Garfiel stands before the ingredients as he wraps a towel around his head, prepared. Frederica brings out the cooking utensils for him as he does so, smoothly passing them over to him.

The siblings begin working in conjunction, no decade-long divide in sight, as they easily attend to the familiar work together.

Chapter 6:
Just One More Left

1

Subaru: “But seriously I wonder if it’ll work out…”

Emilia: “Really? But I thought our plan was sooo good. I bet Anne and Miss Ryuzu’s acting totally fooled Garfiel and Frederica.”

Subaru: “You sure? …Honestly I found Miss Ryuzu’s hamminess and Anne-Rose’s last-second stage fright absolutely shocking.”

Anne: “Silence yourself, Subaru.”

The three of them sit at the dining table, waiting to see how their plan worked out, when Anne-Rose interjects on Subaru’s musings. Her cheeks burn bright red in embarrassment, which makes her look her age for once.

Anne-Rose’s plan to remedy their sibling relations was extremely simple.

The topic was Emilia’s proposal, combined with the part that Subaru couldn’t figure out—that is, how to throw Garfiel and Frederica in the same room while sharing the same goal. Anne-Rose utilized a memory shared between the two of them to easily overcome the issue.

These meat pies that Frederica occasionally cooked had been her specialty ever since her time in the Sanctuary. They couldn’t be certain that Garfiel also knew how to make them, but,

Anne: “Frederica often mentioned it. That her Grandmother taught her how to cook this, and how she remembers that her Mother cooked it for her. Naturally, Garfiel must have also been raised on this cooking, and I believed it highly likely that he inherited the recipe from Miss Ryuzu. From what I’ve seen, Garfiel is something of a nanna’s boy.”

Subaru: “I’ve got nothing against all that. My issue’s not with how you insightfully figured this out.”

Anne: “Hrmp.”

Anne-Rose puffs out her cheeks, but Subaru won’t let that erase her mistake.

They managed to successfully catch Frederica and give her an excuse to get her in the kitchen without any problems. The issue is how they dispelled Frederica’s suspicion and the motive they gave her.

Subaru: “It’s with this affliction where you die without pies. Apologize to the pie.”

Anne: “It was merely a slip of the tongue. There is nothing that necessitates me to apologize to…”

Emilia: “He’s right, I’m kinda unsure about that too. Okay, I’ll apologize with you.”

Anne: “I-I suppose I have no choice! When Emily says so I suppose I have no choice!”

Anne-Rose’s face flashes bright red as she readily agrees with Emilia.

Subaru averts his gaze from the charming yuri and looks at Ryuzu, who sits meekly at the table.

Subaru: “Miss Ryuzu, looks like you’re feeling some guilt that you snagged Garfiel in your trap so perfectly.”

Ryuzu: “Erv course not…nononono, wait! Explain that, that phrasing yer using to erksacerbate my guilt. Yer quit that, that stuff pains the heart.”

Subaru’s mean-spirited statement does bring back some of Ryuzu’s usual attitude. Then she notices that Subaru had said what he did to energize her, and, Ryuzu: “So late, after so merch has happened. I’m sterll not sure if I’m glad I did that. I do wernt them ter reconcile, erv course. But…”

Subaru: “You don’t have worry yourself over it. They would’ve wound up the same as ever saying we just left them to themselves. So the outcome stays the same. All we did is make said constant outcome happen a little earlier. …I think it’s best that things happen sooner when they can.”

Ryuzu: “Why’s that?”

Subaru: “Otherwise it’s a waste of time when you could be having fun. Humans are certain to die, so we better take action while we still have sand in our hourglass, right?”

Ryuzu: “…”

Ryuzu’s eyes widen, and she gives a powerless sigh.

Ryuzu: “Yer one erv those, errn’t yer, Lil’ Su. A guy who don’t second-guess his life principles fer a second.”

Subaru: “Nope, that’s not it. You barely get anyone who gets stuck second-guessing minuscule things the way I do. I just try not to ruminate over it by telling myself that it’s okay not to, and I’m hoping to stick to that precept.”

Ryuzu: “It’s okay, nert ter ruminate.”

Subaru: “Yeah. We have people we want reconciled, and the reconciliation makes everyone happy. So it’s fine not to ruminate, let’s get them reconciled. When there’s someone you wanna be with, save the worrying for later and go over to them with an ‘EMT!’. Is what I’ve been considering lately.”

Though of course, he can’t apply it to everything.

Subaru truly is a weak person who agonizes needlessly over trivial things. While having limited time and only a handful of available choices.

He would at least like remove his second-guessing about the choices he does make.

Ryuzu: “Yer right. When yer get old as me, yer’ve got so many things ter teach and ter learn it’s overwhelming. Doubt I wouldder thought anything like this if I stayed in the Sanctuary ter my end.”

Subaru: “You don’t usually get bored of being alive when you live life. But I expect everyone’s figured that one out without my input?”

Ryuzu: “Then I gerrss I better enjoy myself in my limited time, too. I’ll start by getting excited fer my cute grandchildren ter make up, and come looking fer me ter spoil ‘em.”

Subaru: “Honestly I can’t really imagine them just accepting anyone spoiling them.” Frederica is serious to a fault, and Garfiel is a contrarian.

Neither of them are going to nicely accept their grandma’s pampering. But since the two—no, the three—desire family love more than anything else, they all make for something quite charming.

???: “I apologize for intruding on the discussion. Rudeness.”

When the voice of a butler who silently appeared in this room whispers at Subaru’s ear.

Subaru’s eyes shoot open in surprise as Clind takes his place to stand beside Anne-Rose.

Anne: “What’s happened, Clind? I will tell you that I was enjoying a blissful moment with Emily just then.”

Clind: “It pains me to so interrupt you. Heartache. However, I am required to inform that Master Roswaal has made his return. Notice.”

Anne: “He has? Another return from him timed so perfectly as to be calculated…” Mutters Anne-Rose in dissatisfaction, her brows furrowed.

While Subaru weeps silently at how even Roswaal's relatives feel this way about his habits, Anne-Rose stands from her seat.

Anne: "It appears that my uncle has returned, so I shall be excusing myself to welcome him. Emily, Subaru, and Miss Ryuzu, I request you relax as you wait here for the siblings to return. …Particularly Emily and Subaru. You will be busy."

Emilia: "Erm? Okay, got it. I'll wait here."

Emilia gives an earnest nod, and Anne-Rose gazes at her with affection. Then she glances to Subaru, piercing him with her gaze and negative aura.

While Subaru frowns at the disparity in their treatment, Anne-Rose exits the room with Clind. Which is when Subaru notices the cups of tea assembled before himself, Emilia, and Ryuzu, and nearly squawks.

Subaru: "Did anyone see Mr. Clind set this tea?"

Emilia: "No, I didn't. Mr. Clind did excellent work as always."

Ryuzu: "Mhm, a real professional. This tea is cooled erkzacktly ter my taste."

Subaru: "I mean my tea's at the perfect temperature for me too but…how about you, Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "I like it hot, so mine is sooo hot."

Subaru: "What the hell is Mr. Clind?"

Anne-Rose said to just accept it, but Subaru is having difficulty. Perhaps this is the fundamental difference between living in a parallel world, and being born and raised in one.

…Is what he figures as he glances at Emilia and Ryuzu, who also look to feel overwhelmed by Clind. What, so he's a deviation after all. When,

???: "Hell, so here's where all th'masterminds been fuckin' lurkin'."

A few minutes after Anne-Rose and Clind leave, a blond tiger-man opens the door and makes his entrance.

He looks to have noticed that Subaru and the others were obviously behind the trap, his expression extremely complex. Either way,

Subaru: "Looks like someone found out we're the villains."

Garfiel: "C'n tell yer that y'fuckin' got me good, I looked so frickin' lame."

Emilia: "How'd it go how'd it go? Did you talk?"

Garfiel clicks his fangs as he comes over, when Emilia excitedly accosts him. Ryuzu tucks her head in, awkward, while listening intently for Garfiel's next words. Garfiel looks at the two ladies, and sighs.

Garfiel: "Yeh, thank yer fer yer excessive unneeded meddlin'. Sis n' me…sure, we had our talk. Y'ain't gotta worry none."

Emilia: "Really? Then how come you didn't come here together, holding hands?"

Garfiel: "Y'think we're capable 'v that embarrassing crap! Maybe they made up, but that don't mean a bro n' a sis're gonna hold hands so easy. Don't even joke."

Emilia: "But I don't think it's embarrassing, I think it's wonderful."

Emilia looks not to be teasing, but to sincerely think this, quite unfortunately. Garfiel has nothing more to say to her as he instead look at the hesitant Ryuzu.

Garfiel: "Granny."

Ryuzu: "…What's it, Lil' Gar?"

Garfiel: "'M sorry for makin' you worry. 'M fine now, 'n Sis's fine too. Y'don't have't worry."

Garfiel rubs his nose as he talks, and Ryuzu falls into silence. Her mouth relaxes, and an aged smile unfitting to her youthful looks arises on her face.

Ryuzu: “I see. That ers a relief. Yer can’t put ter much stress on yer elders. Makes them meet their end quicker.”

Garfiel: “It ain’t a damn joke when you say it, granny, better watch out.” Ryuzu regains her casual demeanor. Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: “Anyway, Captain. N’ also Lady Emilia, ‘m sorry fer makin’ yer do that.”

Subaru: “Don’t worry ‘bout it. Me and Emilia-tan were just killing time by improving the interpersonal relations in this mansion. Nothing that deserves an apology. Right?”

Emilia: “Subaru, you were only killing time? This was a serious issue for them, you have to take it more seriously. Hpmf!”

Subaru: “Whah?! My face-saving modesty backfired?!”

Emilia fails to notice Subaru’s roundabout consideration for Garfiel. Or so he thinks, when a smile etches itself onto Emilia’s face and,

Emilia: “Heehee, just kidding. I know what you’re doing. You’re not honest at all, Subaru.”

Subaru: “My god…EMK (Emilia-tan Maji Koakuma) strikes, and her mystique compounds…she must be trying to kill me…”2

Garfiel: “The fuck did yer just do t’my apology, oi.”

Says Garfiel, stunned. Subaru and Emilia share a glance, before facing him again and,

Both: “—We were happy to help.”

The two give their reply to his apology.

Garfiel frowns in dissatisfaction as Ryuzu shrugs in exasperation. Subaru shoots Emilia a thumbs up as she happily watches the two.

Subaru: “Also, Garfiel. What happened first with the reconciliation, but also with the supposed trigger for the whole thing, the meat pie. Honestly I was really looking forward to it.”

Garfiel: “Yer don’t make a pie that fuckin’ easy. Th’trick’s t’cook it in th’oven good n’ slow t’get that sumptuous taste. SUMPTUOUS ENOUGH TO PUT A BAUMBEM TO SLEEP ‘s a damn good saying here.”

Subaru: “The hell’s a Baumbem. Is it like a baumkuchen? But I’m pretty sure if you leave baumkuchen unattended for too long it goes bad before it gets sumptuous.”

According to Garfiel, it will take two hours before the pie is ready.

Which means it’ll coincide with normal dinnertime, and probably wind up as a dish there.

???: “—Which I must say soooooounds quite convenient.”

Having lost any way to distract himself from his hunger, Subaru redirects his attention to how to kill two hours of time—when a familiar voice speaks up.

The four glance over to the speaker, unanimously sour-faced.

???: “Myyyyyyy goodness. I leave the mansion to attend to business, and whaaaaaaaaaat an unwelcoming hello aaaaaaaaawaits me.”

Subaru: “Not that I’m not thankful for your work. But can you please just rationalize this as you reaping what you sow, this thing where we reflexively make this expression? Also me and them are still being nice. Look at Garfiel, he’s gonna burst a vein.”

A vein bulges on Garfiel’s forehead as his eyes begin going bloodshot.

This is the arrival of man whose refreshed expression remains stable even before Garfiel’s glare—easily deduced from his characteristic speech pattern, Roswaal L. Mathers.

Roswaal was the mastermind behind the events in the Sanctuary, and having confessed so, has suffered a drop in amicability from basically everyone. Garfiel's rage burns particularly hot, and it's impossible to predict when he'll explode.

Subaru also feels mixed emotions about Roswaal. And after hearing postface to Roswaal's confession, his uncertainty has only peaked.

Subaru knows that Roswaal is not responsible for everything that happened in the Sanctuary and the mansion.

For some reason, Roswaal has only revealed this information to Subaru. Subaru doesn't know why this is, but feels no urge to purposefully reveal the truth to everyone else.

The onus lies entirely on Roswaal—or at least, 90% of it does. The remaining 10% lies on some other party.

Subaru would rather not encourage any unneeded anxiety at the moment.

Emilia: "Subaru, are you okay? The face you're making is sooo weird."

Subaru: "Seriously? What's it look like?"

Emilia: "Umm well, it's like your eyes gweenked nastier, like this."

Subaru: "Seriously? My face looks that cute?"

Emilia: "But it's not cute!"

Emilia's fingers pull the corners of her eyes upwards as she mimics Subaru's expression. Even when she's trying to emulate something so awful, her cuteness overrides it. Such is her charm.

Emilia pouts while Garfiel angrily seats himself. Subaru watches Ryuzu prepare tea for Garfiel as he speaks to Roswaal, the only one left standing.

Subaru: "Anyway, welcome back. Did you finish what you went out to do?"

Roswaal: “Ahhaaaaaa, how keenly I dooooooo feel Subaru’s kindness. And yes, without issue. I visited several villages within my domain, and our new domicile.”

Subaru: “Nevermind the domicile, you went around the territory? For what?”

Roswaal: “Beeeeeeecause of the ruckus from the territory’s Lord’s mansion buuuuuuurning down. Should I fail to demonstrate my good health, some rapscallions may begin deeeeeeeevising plots. I make it a rule to attend thoroughly to my land’s peace aaaaaaaaand safety.”

Subaru: “Thoughts on the land’s Lord being the worst rapscallion devising the worst plots?”

Roswaal: “Hoooooow harsh. My citizens suffered no harm, and the villagers of Earlham are ignorant to the truth. Do you not think that this persistently thorny attitude of yours will hinder us iiiiiiiiiin the future?”

Subaru: “Ghnngh.”

Never misses a beat.

With that sharp jab of criticism, Roswaal regains his previous composure. If Subaru publicly reveals that Roswaal was the one behind this whole affair, then it only disadvantages them, both in regards to the Royal Selection and management of the territory. And so even the people of Earlham Village still believe that Roswaal is a good Lord.

Only Petra, who knows the truth, holds a different opinion. But she understands her current circumstances, and that the only thing to gain from revealing the truth is self-satisfaction. So it’s doubtful that she’ll do anything extreme. Cleverness does occasionally force people into making cruel decisions.

Subaru: “But that doesn’t make it fine for you utilize this. You forget that, and once Emilia-tan’s on the throne you’re getting the guillotine.”

Roswaal: “Terrifying. Hoooooooowever, even then I maaaaaaaay have a chance to fuuuuuuulfil my goal.”

Garfiel: “We ain’t fuckin’ talkin’ ‘bout yer meeting yer goddamn goals. Gonna make Ram cry ‘f yer keep comin’ up with more bullcrap ideas, y’piece of shit.”

Surprisingly, Garfiel cuts in to stop Roswaal’s provocations. Roswaal’s brows shoot up in surprise and he casually raises his hands.

Roswaal: “Goodness, aaaaaaaalright. I don’t paaaaaaaarticularly wish to fight with you all aaaaaaaaanyway. Why must this escalate into an argument, when I oooooonly came here to show my return? I must find this all raaaaaaaather unproductive.”

Emilia: “It’s because you’re saying things to make Subaru and Garfiel mad. And I can tell you’re doing it on purpose. Enough of that, stop provoking people. You’re not a child.”

Roswaal: “…”

Roswaal attempts to condescendingly resolve the issue, when Emilia presses down on him from further above, her hand to her hip. Roswaal’s eyes shoot open in surprise while Emilia continues.

Emilia: “You don’t have to be so anxious, we all remember what you did and what you promised. There’s no point in purposefully acting bad and worrying everyone. You are just so hopeless.”

Emilia sounds like she’s scolding a disobedient child.

But it seems impossible to dismiss her statements as incorrect or misplaced, and Roswaal remains silent without any rebuttals. In fact, the way he narrows his eyes and grimaces awkwardly makes it feel like Emilia hit the bullseye.

Though Subaru doesn’t actually believe that Roswaal is seriously operating off such childish sentiments.

Subaru: “That really did clear the air though. As we expect from Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: "…? Mm, thank you. Also, there had to more reasons for why you went around the domain than just that. What else did you do, Roswaal?"

Roswaal: "Ahahaaaaaaa, you've grown more perceptive. I patrolled the region for reasons as stated, to demonstrate my health, and…to prepare the residents of the Sanctuary for their migration."

Garfiel: "Th'preparations to move!"

Those words keep Garfiel from staying silent. Ryuzu hurriedly returns to his side as he slams his palms on the table.

Garfiel: "That means prepping where they're goin', yeh?"

Roswaal: "Assuredly. Their time as refugees means that Earlham Village is the best place to aaaaaaaccept them. But there's a limit to what the village can hold. Should their population double from its original number, they won't be able to sustain themselves. They could expand the village, of course, but that runs into the problem of the barrier."

Garfiel: "Barrier? Y'fucker, you fuckin' laid more'v those fuckin' things all over th'fuckin'—"

Subaru: "No hold up, Garfiel. We're not talking about a barrier like the Sanctuary's. There's a whole bunch of witchbeasts lurking in the mountains around there. So there's a barrier around the village to keep them away. That's the one Roswaal's talking about."

That barrier is what spurred the whole witchbeast debacle.

It's entirely infeasible to coexist with the witchbeasts, and being that the village needs this segregation, it's difficult to expand Earlham Village.

Roswaal: "Subaru explained it perfectly, theeeeeeere's the issue. Whiiiiiiiich means that the people of the Sanctuary must be distributed partly to Earlham Village, and then iiiiiiindividually to other contenders. Regardless of where welcomes them, they cannot stay together as people of the Sanctuary infinitely. I do feel the heart-wrenching sorrow, as I watch them leeeeeeeeave the nest."

Ryuzu: “Impudence and prattle…”

Ryuzu cannot hold in the insults as Roswaal feigns tears.

Roswaal crafts a smile and continues,

Roswaal: “Aaaaaaand so, I made a quiiiiiiiiick rounds of the territory. Though for interests of distance and time, Iiiiiiiiii merely visited the neeeeeeeearby locations. I sent messengers to the other townships, seeeeeeing as we have an abundance of issues that need resolution.”

Subaru: “Yeah seriously. You don’t get back to your office quick, and Otto’s gonna die from karoshi. It’s where you die crushed between the weight of responsibility and work.”

Roswaal: “What a novel way to die. Veeeeeeery intriguing.”

Subaru agrees, but doesn’t pursue the topic.

Roswaal’s back, so Ram should be more lively. …Is how far Subaru thinks before he tilts his head, feeling something awry.

Emilia: “Actually, Anne said she left to welcome you, but…she’s not with you?” It seems that Emilia hit upon the same question. Roswaal raises his finger.

Roswaal: “That’s because I had a reeeeeeeequest for her. I was thinking to address one of those issues requiring resolution.”

Emilia: “Issues requiring resolution?”

Roswaal: “The one in the banquet hall. I believe that you have already prepared yourself for it, Lady Emilia.”

Emilia: “—!”

Emilia’s shoulders jerk up in surprise.

But the shock only lasts an instant. Her expression immediately turns serious, and she glances at Subaru with strong volition in her amethyst eyes.

He savors the tingle down his spine as he tilts his head, questioning.

But nobody gives him a clear answer.

Emilia: “Okay. Is it starting right now?”

Roswaal: “We can start the instant that you are ready. And we still have time before the pie is done cooking. I would say that now is the perfect time for it.”

Emilia: “This is such an important thing, but doesn’t this all feel sooo sloppy?”

Roswaal: “It’s presently difficult for us to schedule any designated times. Considering that you’ll be occupied from tomorrow onwards, should we not take advantage of this opportunity?”

Emilia: “Yeah…okay. I’ll do it.”

Roswaal nods, entirely satisfied.

The two of them look to have reached an agreement, but Subaru has no idea what they’re discussing. Garfiel and Ryuzu must also be in the dark.

Subaru: “Hey, stop going off agreeing to things by yourselves. What are you talking about? You better not be trying to make Emilia-tan do anything funny again.”

Roswaal: “That would be a teeeeeeeeeerrible misunderstanding, Subaru. And do relax. This issue not only involves Lady Emilia, but very much yourself aaaaaaaaas well.”

Subaru: “What do you mean I’m also—”

Involved? Before he can finish his sentence, Roswaal draws his face near. Subaru unwittingly backs away, his back hitting the wall, and Roswaal’s finger landing on his nose.

Roswaal: “—We’re discussing the ceremony for your cherished knighthood.”

2

Subaru: “You know! Usually you don’t keep the details of an important event a secret from the people involved! Do people throw surprise weddings for the bride and groom? Are surprise funerals ever a thing? No they are not.”

Having been dragged into a room to get changed, Subaru complains while taking off his track suit.

The news from Roswaal in the dining room was an absolute shock to him.

—Knighthood.

The ceremony where the master acknowledges their subordinate as their Knight, and all others recognize their change in status.

It comes with extensive formalities and etiquette, which surely differ by the country and by worldview. Subaru has witnessed many such ceremonies in manga and anime, but it’s inconceivable that he’d remember what they had in common and what diverged.

And of course he can’t be expected to know the etiquette for a Lugnican accolade.

Subaru: “Expect they all went and fucking prepared everything like that’s the obvious thing to do. Maybe that damn Anne-Rose was jealous about how I’m all over Emilia-tan and’s trying to humiliate me!”

Otto: “I’d surely think not? While naturally the star of an accolade is the knight who receives it, their master is the one obligated to inform them. If Lady Annerose acted out of such pointless bullheadedness, it would humiliate not only yourself, but Lady Emilia. Do you believe that someone as clever as her would do that?”

Subaru glances over to Otto, who is assisting with his change of clothes. You may ask how do you possibly assist with a change in clothes, but these ceremonial outfits have various modes of dress. That Subaru doesn’t know.

Clind: “Master Natsuki. The correct way to wear this requires you to begin with this undervestment, and proceed with these lowers. Advice.”

Subaru: “Ah, thanks. Or no actually these clothes fit me so well it’s creepy, how long has this ceremony been planned exactly?”

Clind: “It was raised in discussion instantly following your arrival in our household. And once decisions were made to hold the ceremony after Master Roswaal’s return…I assure you that Lady Emilia has studied and rehearsed the ceremony thoroughly. Report.”

Subaru: “The report’s late! And why was Emilia-tan keeping it a secret too?!”

Otto: “Perhaps because it would be awkward? Anyway, you truly don’t know a single step of the process? That would present something of a problem…”

Subaru puts his arms through the sleeves of the clothes that Clind gives him, lost on what to do. Otto perceives Subaru’s genuine discomposure, and seems to start seeing the obstacles impeding this ceremony.

Subaru: “Right? It’s doomed. I’m glad Emilia-tan feels this way, and it’s crazy how honored I am to receive a knighthood, but we’re screwed if this ceremony fizzles out aren’t we? Yeah okay I better get on my hands and knees and beg for this to be postpo—”

???: “Y’step forward when yer called, and kneel before Lady Emilia. Then y’draw yer sword from its scabbard and pass it t’her. Lady Emilia takes the sword and puts it to yer neck, she speaks the oath…then you accept the oath in return. Thassall.”

Subaru: “…What, seriously?”

Mutters Subaru in shock.

Everyone in the room gazes at Garfiel, who crosses his arms.

Garfiel: “What. Y’don’t believe me?”

Subaru: “It’s not that, it’s that I’m shocked that you know this. How out of character is it for you to be versed in formal events like this…?”

Garfiel: “No, Captain. It ain’t that I know anythin’ ‘bout formal events.”

Garfiel waves his hand in astonishment, but that doesn’t eliminate the fact that he just outlined the formal process of an accolade. Subaru furrows his brows questioningly, and,

Garfiel: “‘S just that knighthoods ‘re awesome so I memorized it.”

Subaru: “Oh, okay. Got it.”

The reasoning is so convincing that Subaru instantly agrees with it.

His mighty chuuni mind offers assistance even here. Of course Garfiel would know about accolades! …Is the persuasiveness of this argument.

Otto: “Does that account align with your knowledge, Mr. Clind?”

Clind: “I am only scantly versed in the topic, but my knowledge does coincide with what I heard. I bow my head before Sir Garfiel’s mastery. Succinct.”

Otto: “But that makes it sound as though you also know the procedure…no, nevermind. Disregard that comment.”

Otto’s life is one of opening cans of worms to find demons inside.

Nobody who witnessed the mysterious gleam in Clind’s monocled eye would criticize Otto for his retreat.

Either way, Subaru smooths the wrinkles out of his clothes, puts on his jacket, and begins adorning it with the required ornamentations.

Subaru: “This outfit is crazy. It took me ages to get used to the butler uniform, but I don’t think I’ll ever own this look.”

Otto: “You won’t be granted enough opportunities to wear it that you could say that you ‘own’ it. It would be another case, were you entering nobility…though, I suppose it’s yet unclear what your future will bring.”

Subaru: “Meaning?”

Otto: “Lady Emilia is on the social ladder. Being that you are following her, I suspect you will attend more than a few events in this vein. This outfit was specifically tailored, after all.”

While feeling admiration for Otto’s piece, thoughts of the future depress Subaru.

He imagines these formal events, and his heart shivers, inept as it is at remaining stoic. Though these worries are only to be had if he safely gets through this upcoming ceremony.

Subaru: “Goddamn Roswaal, bet he hid it on purpose to make a laughingstock of me…”

Garfiel: “Sulkin’ ain’t gonna help yer none, Captain. Now repeat what my amazin’ self said t’make sure yer don’t forget it.”

Subaru: “I kneel, draw the sword from its scabbard, give it to her, and say the oath. I mean I’ve gone through two graduation ceremonies, I can at least memorize this much.”

Except he attended those ceremonies after properly practicing for them.

Subaru: “I know it’s way late in saying but if this’s an accolade then all the imperial knights must’ve done it.”

Otto: “Not only the imperial knights, but everyone who holds the title of Knight. Though I believe it’s rare to disregard all these requirements and pledge directly to a master. Usually you would swear fealty to the nation before selecting a master.”

Subaru: “So it’s the difference between serving the country and serving an individual. I think it’s right to be serving an individual.”

Either way. He can say ‘I am a Knight’, but it doesn’t feel true.

Subaru has proclaimed himself as Emilia's knight multiple times. Insisted it.

Even though he knows his false title is gaining legitimacy, he cannot exactly accept it. He also questions how exactly being recognized as a Knight will change him, too.

Subaru: "All this after you dressed me in these actual clothes. Seriously this fits me perfectly, when did you take my measurements?"

Clind: "Daily, interspersed between breaks in your awareness. I had already confirmed that it fit, but it elates me to see you dressing. Splendiferous."

Subaru: "I'm unsurprised about the measurements, but when did you check the fit? Have I somehow been dressed in this outfit before?"

Clind gives no reply as he smiles, and brings Subaru, who has finished dressing, over to a mirror.

As Subaru stands reflected in the full-length mirror, his breath catches.

He wears a black ceremonial outfit that clearly exceeds his standing, opulently but not outrageously decorated. No matter how Subaru poses, the captivating clothes make it look good. And when he holds himself soberly, indeed this is an outfit for formal ceremonies.

But, yeah, it definitely feels like Subaru is inferior to the clothes.

Something feels off, like he's attending Shichi-Go-San, or something.

Even so—

Otto: "Mm. It looks better on you than I expected."

Garfiel: "Does feel like th'clothes're wearin' you, but they ain't totally defeated ya. Y'c'n relax, Captain."

Clind: “Indeed, it suits you well. Lady Emilia’s impression of you shall surely climb to even greater heights. Amicability Rising.”

Subaru: “You sincerely think that? You all sincerely honestly think that?”

Subaru readjusts his collar times upon time as she glances suspiciously at Otto, who despite his frankness, failed to mock Subaru’s appearance.

But Otto’s expression remains perfectly stable, and he gazes at Subaru with pride. Not even Subaru can possibly reply to that.

Garfiel: “Here, take this, Captain.”

No amount of fiddling will invite any dramatic change.

Subaru sighs as he turns around, and Garfiel supportingly hands him his knightblade. Subaru reflexively accepts it, when the slender thing makes him swallow his breath.

Clind: “It would be best that you used your own favored blade, but being that you possessed none, our household provided this. You may keep it should you so fancy. Gift.”

Subaru: “A knight’s sword…huh. And it’s real, naturally?”

Otto: “I doubt you would ever find a wooden sword with such excellent craftsmanship. Only a child would would find joy in something like th—hm? Am I sensing a new business opportunity…?”

While witnessing the potential birth of wooden swords in parallel world souvenir shops, Subaru feels the weight of the sword in his hands.

This is not his first time holding a sword.

Last was during the witchbeast affair in Earlham Village, when he went into the mountains with Ram to search for Rem. He accepted a sword from the village’s men’s brigade, wielding the thing with barely any thought.

The sword broke before he could use it to fight any witchbeasts, so while it didn't manage to be anything decisive, it did provide Subaru with his first experience in stabbing a living creature with a blade, which he has never done since.

This knightblade should be thinner and lighter than that previous one.

But the weight he currently feels in his hands is beyond compare.

Subaru: "…"

He unconsciously clicks his throat, a constricting feeling in his chest.

The weight from that sword and this sword are entirely different.

And Subaru knows that the entire purpose of this ceremony is to recognize that fact.

Otto: "—Mr. Natsuki. I'll come and call you before it begins. I'll do the final inspection of your dress then, so please make sure to keep it orderly."

Subaru: "…Understood."

Otto must have seen the shift in Subaru's expression, and sensed how he was beginning to properly face the ceremony.

With those words, he and the others leave the room.

Subaru: "…"

Left by himself in the room, Subaru drags over a nearby chair and seats himself before the mirror.

With the sword in his hands and his visage in the mirror, he submerges himself in thought.

Knight. The weight of the title presses down on Subaru's shoulders.

Had Subaru ever seriously considered the significance of this word he so frivolously used? Naturally, he had been entirely serious back then. He would not use this as armor to conceal his rashness in proclaiming himself as Emilia's knight. However,

Subaru: "Julius, Reinhard."

Subaru thinks of the upper echelon of knights in this country.

One is the Knight Of Knights. One is the Knight Impeccable.

They are the pride of knighthood, and the emblem of anything knightly.

When Subaru called himself a knight, ignorant to those facts, Julius sternly beat the truth into him.

Subaru: "What a knight needs is power and fealty…I think was it."

If those are the requirements, then Subaru is still unfit to be a knight.

Subaru's feelings for Emilia are nothing as majestic as fealty.

He is incapable on his own, and fails to meet average capabilities even with Beatrice's help.

Both his power and his fealty are as insufficient as ever.

But now he has the will that he previously lacked.

It's not fealty, but it's comparably strong.

He might lack power, but he has the spirit and resolve to compensate for what he lacks.

He can't change that he seems too awkward to be called a knight, but that's what makes it Subaru.

Like hell Natsuki Subaru is suited to anything so magnificent as chivalry.

???: "What. Seems that I didn't need to visit after all, in fact."

It happens as Subaru faces himself in the mirror, having resolved one point.

He sees a small silhouette standing beside him, hunched forward as he is. The girl reflected aside him in the mirror, with her long, extravagant pigtails, is Beatrice.

Subaru: “I’m getting dressed. You dirty loli.”

Beatrice: “You’re already dressed, I suppose. And I was asked to come here to do something since you looked so persistently uncertain, in fact. So I had to come here to give you a slap on the back, I suppose. —But it seems that I didn’t need to, in fact.”

Subaru: “Those guys…”

Who was the meddler here? Otto? Garfiel? Perhaps even Clind? Or maybe it was all of them, and Subaru has to smile bitterly at how probable it is.

Indeed. There is no one more suited to give Subaru a pep talk at this moment than Beatrice. She is the best choice. So he’ll impose on her care.

And accordingly uplift Beatrice’s expression, as she regrets the needlessness of her presence here.

Subaru: “My back.”

Beatrice: “…?”

Subaru: “If you’re gonna slap me, then please do it. I do feel like I’ve sorted some things out…but I’m still looking for that final push.”

Beatrice’s eyes widen in shock.

Her expression is so incredibly darling that Subaru has to keep himself from chuckling,

Subaru: “Come on, please.”

Beatrice: “You don’t have to worry yourself…I know I’m not worried myself, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I’m not saying this out of worry. I just think that, no matter who gives you that slap on the back, that winds up being the final push. So if I’m choosing who that person is then I want it to be you.”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru: “I want you to slap me on the back and be the final strength I need to be Emilia’s knight. It feels more like me that way.”

He might just be saying it for peace of mind, but that’s great, what’s so bad about peace of mind? Perhaps it’s just an issue with how he’s feeling. But that just makes it more legitimate; of course he should have her make him feel better, then.

Because the heart always expresses itself with the simplest language.

Beatrice: “Y-You hopeless fool, in fact. You’d be absolutely lost without Betty, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I would. I’m utterly useless without you. And when I’m with you I’m normally useless.”

Beatrice: “Which means you’re still useless, in fact! Sheer discourtesy, I suppose!”

Subaru: “And now this useless fool’s gonna be Emilia’s knight and gradually stop being so useless. So whenever I do start bordering on uselessness, I’m putting my hopes on you.”

Subaru lifts himself from the chair and pats Beatrice’s head.

Beatrice looks dissatisfied with his vigorous manhandling, but makes no motion to stop him, and voices not a single complaint.

Subaru: “…”

After sating himself with Beatrice pats, Subaru slowly turns to present her his back.

And surely she understands what this means.

She takes a faint breath, readying herself.

Beatrice: “—Hiyaah, in fact!”

Subaru: “—!”

With an adorable shout, the noise of her palm peals through the room.

The impact from her small hand stings more than Subaru expected. And an even greater shock runs from his back into his whole body.

Subaru: “Man you’re surprisingly strong.”

Beatrice: “I didn’t walk around carrying big, heavy books every day for nothing, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s bragging makes him think back on her time in the Archive.

Why yes, Beatrice was always reading books sizeable enough to conceal her small frame. Today is where she showcases the effects of constantly bearing all that weight.

Though he doesn’t know if muscle work-outs actually do anything for spirits.

Subaru: “So we’ve unexpectedly uncovered a muscle magician. Massive Beako.”

Beatrice: “I suspect you just used an incredibly terrible epithet on me, in fact.”

Subaru: “Just your imagination. And man that fired me up. Thanks.”

Beatrice: “…You’re my Contractor, so of course I’d do this, I suppose."

Blushing slightly, Beatrice averts her gaze from Subaru.

It makes him want to pat her again. But before he can reach out to her—Clind: "—Master Natsuki, the time is near. Preparations." —Clind knocks on the door and peers in, summoning him.

With the seconds looming in closer, he gulps from the tension.

But his limbs and face feel less rigid than he expected. The pent-up tension loosens him up in a good way, and he quietly sings the praises of Beatrice's unexpectedly effective slap.

Clind: "A seat has been prepared for you as well, Lady Beatrice. As I shall also be humbly attending, I would hold the greatest of appreciation supposing that you may accept my presence. Understanding."

Subaru: "Okay, got it. Please don't laugh if I mess up."

Clind: "As you command. Solemnity."

Clind waits outside the door to escort Subaru, who gives a sigh and clicks his neck. He glances back to Beatrice, unsure of what to say,

Subaru: "Well, I'm off."

Beatrice: "As you should be, in fact."

It's a simple exchange, but it's enough.

Her words and actions have already given him more than enough.

Beatrice: "—Subaru."

But at the very end of the end, Beatrice halts Subaru one last time.

Just before he leaves the room, Subaru glances back to a red-faced Beatrice,

Beatrice: "That outfit looks great on you, I suppose."

And with that, she supplies him with the last bit of confidence he needed.

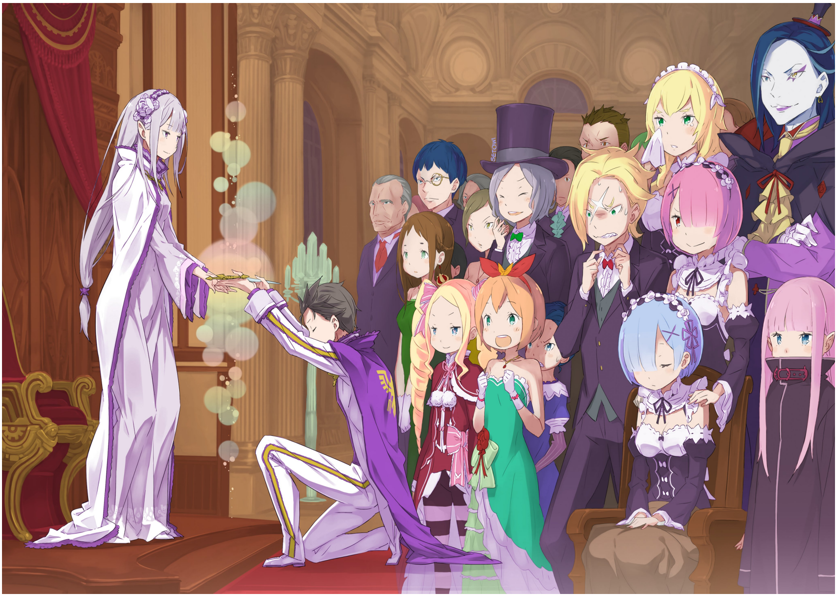

Final Chapter:
A Nonsense Dance, Under the Moonlight

1

—Subaru has been in this hall before, but it looks nothing like how he remembers it.

Candelabra line the red carpet. The flickering of their crimson flames steeps the room in further formality, prompting everyone in attendance to straighten their posture.

Almost all of the important people of the mansion stand evenly by the wall. Which means the main players of this story, but also includes some attendants from the Milord household.

Assembling only people relevant to Subaru means monopolizing the assembly with his ingroup.

Even he understands that many more people must play witness to this event.

But, having said that, should they truly have brought all of the Ryuzu doubles along?

Ryuzu nodded at him, telling him not to worry about it, but of course it's going to nag at him. Although he knows that the girls are harmless unless directed, the uncertainty over what they might possibly do unsettles him.

Though, everyone else must share that same anxiety, except about Subaru.

There are so many points worthy of ridicule among the people here.

All the main players are primly dressed in formalwear, which is hilarious.

Nevermind Roswaal and Anne-Rose, who seem accustomed to the outfits: Otto and Garfiel look even more awkward in their getups than Subaru. And disregard how Garfiel scrunches up his face, irked by his stuffy collar, Otto hasn't even noticed how blatantly awkward he looks. Guy's a riot.

The servants include Frederica and Clind, who are always in formalwear. Subaru does have some qualms about Ram, who stands with them in her maid outfit as if this is entirely reasonable. But once he sees what is beside her, his breath catches.

A blue-haired girl, seated in a chair.

Her eyes are closed. Naturally. She is still asleep. Subaru resents how considerate Ram was to bring her here, and have her attend the ceremony. He resents how Ram smirks at him, announcing that she was the one who proposed this.

Subaru looks further along to find Petra gazing at him, finely dressed as he is, with pride. Her dress amplifies her splendor, and she shines brightly enough to match Anne-Rose and Beatrice. She's meant to be a simple village girl, so how do you explain her composure here? Beatrice wears the same outfit as always, but her expression towards Subaru is gentle. Her flushed cheeks remind him of their exchange in the dressing room, which starts making Subaru embarrassed as well.

And standing before him—

"…"

—Is a silver-haired girl, waiting.

In her ceremonial outfit, Emilia enchants Subaru with an utterly new kind of brilliance.

Her silver hair shimmers like moonlight, and her amethyst eyes glimmer like jewels. Her face is tantalizingly beautiful as she purses her lips, apparently tense about this vital ceremony.

The outfit amplifies the purity that Subaru usually feels about Emilia, hallowed as a priestess' vestments, lined with sublime gold that keenly announces the nobility and seriousness of this ritual.

The instant that Subaru sights her, everything in his head falls hush.

The last vestiges of his bubbling emotions disperse, and everything except Emilia disappears from his mind.

He is absolutely not going to make a mockery of this ceremony, or of the people watching.

What does he need to do? Who does he need to be looking at? Where is his heart sitting? No need to tell him. He already knows.

"…"

Nobody instructs him; his feet take the step forward.

His footsteps make no sound upon the rich carpet. He forgets the weight of the knightblade at his hip, focused with passion holding him aloft, but calm as a resting sea, as he approaches Emilia.

Even through the storm of onlooking gazes, his heart remains unshakable.

The only thing to cast ripples in Subaru's heart, in this instant, is

Emilia.

He draws near to her, close enough to touch her.

She stands on a dais, her tantalizingly beautiful cheeks rigid. Subaru kneels before her.

With his knee to the ground, he bows his head.

All the ceremonial customs that Garfiel told him about take instant command of his body. He keeps his eyes closed as her intense gaze stares down at him.

He could almost forget to breathe in this atmosphere. Pleasant stress plays on his skin as he looks up, and he takes the sword from his waist.

He reverently lifts the weighty blade, unsheathing it horizontally before his chest.

Light from the candles washes over the steel, lighting Subaru and Emilia's eyes equally bright.

"…"

The beauty of the unsheathed blade burns itself into Subaru's eyes as he presents it to Emilia.

She sees the sword cast before her. Her lips tremble with some form of sentiment.

But she instantly asserts control over the words before they can spill, and she holds herself firm beneath the surge of emotion.

Her pale fingers touch the sword. She slowly lifts the heavy thing, until its tip points to the ceiling.

Emilia is beautiful as she holds the sword aloft. Subaru restrains his desires to witness the sight, bows his head, and closes his eyes.

What is presented to Emilia is the sword, the pride of the knight, alongside his being and his neck, which are those of the knight.

"…"

A Knight devotes their life to their Master.

Subaru's posture illustrates this vow, making Emilia's lips and eyes waver. But her hesitation only lasts a moment. Her pursed lips and focused gaze carry not the slightest indecision.

The point of the sword descends upon Subaru's left shoulder.

She rests the flat of the blade on his shoulders, and the weight almost makes him cry out. The pressure bearing on him is nothing physical, but mental.

Perhaps this sensation is the one that every knight must bear, that thing called 'pride'.

In this exact instant, Natsuki Subaru finally understands it.

The point of the blade moves to his right shoulder.

He feels the weight identically, but the coolness of the blade remains with him this time.

Of course. This is where the ceremony's most important moment begins.

"…"

"…"

Silence falls upon the hall.

No. The hall had been silent so far. The silence until now had been steeped in a strange tension, ardent and loud.

But the silence in this instant carries a new fire.

Absent of tension, absent of zeal, absent of anything, this silence is legitimate.

A quiet that falls equally upon the heart of Emilia, of Subaru, of everyone in attendance.

Only one person is granted the right to shatter it.

"—To the sun that gazes over the radiant world, to the stars that watch the realm in its sleep. To the winds, to the waters, to the earth, to the light, to the spirits residing in everything."

The silence shatters.

Emilia's lips sing the ceremonial rite.

"—To the grand world that received you, that nurtured you, that delivered you."

Trembling. His heart is trembling.

His teeth don't feel to sit right. What is his heart having trouble with?

It irritates him to even question his mental turmoil.

All he wants to do in this moment is drown in the chime of that bell.

"—To the pride that supports you, that you built, that you fostered."

He feels the heat in the gaze upon him compound.

The passion burning inside him is ready to combust.

His heart thumps wildly, maniacally, as he regardless waits for the question.

"—To everything that watches over you, to the world that raised you, to the pride that supports you, let your way cast no shame. Without fear, without dread, without doubt, be as you are in your heart."

The rite ends.

The question is coming.

This will end the ceremony. Not even Subaru knows the answer to this question. However,

“—With your will always strong, and as everything that surrounds you does, will you swear to protect me from this moment forth?”

—His heart does know how to answer Emilia’s question.

“To the sun, to the stars, to the world, to my pride—and.”

He will announce his gratitude and determination to everything stated in the rites.

Before he makes the pledge, he thinks of people who he assuredly must thank.

And so the words come naturally from his lips:

“—To my mother and my father, I swear.”

“…”

“I will protect you. I will realize your wishes. —My name is Natsuki Subaru.”

He raises his head.

The sword remains at his right cheek. But its gleam fails to catch his eye.

The only thing he sees is the brilliant amethyst, gazing back at him.

“Emilia. I am your knight.”

“—Mm.”

He says the words, and she gives her answer.

Emilia’s eyes flood with emotion.

But she manages to keep anything from spilling as she lifts the sword from Subaru’s shoulder.

She fixes its alignment and presents it back to him.

He respectfully accepts it in both his hands, and sheathes it in its scabbard.

Subaru returns the blade to his hip as he looks up at Emilia, still kneeling.

He sees Emilia give a slight nod, and stands up.

Where he,

“Also Emilia-tan you look mega sexycute in that outfit.”

“You dummy.”

—Shattering the seriousness of the ceremony, Emilia pokes out her tongue, red-faced.

2

Many dishes line the table in the banquet hall.

Social standing and class present no issue as everyone present at the accolade chats with each other, turning the buffet into something of a get-together.

Subaru: “I just went through one of the most stressful things of my life, and look at you, having all the fun.”

He watches the banquet from the terrace outside, bathed in the night wind.

A plate of food from the table and a drink rest on the nearby railing, but the swell from before hasn’t passed.

He’s having trouble getting any food or drink down his throat.

The hot flush from his neck upwards isn’t going away.

His stomach tells him that he’s hungry, but his chest is too full for anything to get through.

Subaru: “…”

In the corner of his eye, he sees Petra dancing at the head of the hall in her dress. It's the kind of dance they do during festivals in Earlham Village, but with Petra's take on it, and with her proficiency in it, it is certainly fit for a noble's mansion.

She pulls a blushing Beatrice along with her, forcing her into a shoddy dance. Though she tries desperately to stay apathetic and expressionless, Subaru spots how her ears and nose tremble, unable to hold it in.

As always, it's Petra dragging helpless Beatrice into it.

Subaru's cheeks relax as he takes his glass. He's managed to secure enough composure to at least wet his tongue. Though, he's not ready to reach for Garfiel and Frederica's pie just yet.

???: "—There you are, Subaru."

Subaru leans on the bannister, staring up at the sky, when a voice calls him. He looks down to find a moon pixie, her beauty only embellished beneath its light.

Subaru: "Or no it's Emilia-tan. Thought it was an angel."

Emilia: "You're saying weird stuff again. Are you drunk?"

Subaru: "I'm still underage so no I'm not drinking. If I'm drunk on anything, then it's on the atmosphere and my own ego."

Emilia: "See, so you are drunk."

Emilia giggles, and Subaru has to furrow his brows at that.

He sees her pale skin peeking out from beneath her neat dress—and the flush on her neck and cheeks, which makes him agree with her current state.

Subaru: "The heck, Emilia-tan. You go asking me if I'm drunk, when it looks like you're who's been drinking."

Emilia: "I haven't been. They just gave me some punch. I never drink alcohol and go all funny."

Subaru: “Man you’re cute.”

Emilia pouts, completely forgetting the seriousness from the ceremony.

Meaning that this right here is just a completely normal adorable girl.

Emilia: “So, Subaru. What are you doing alone out here?”

Subaru: “Well, I already told you. I’m drunk on the atmosphere and my ego.”

It’s a frivolous reply, but not a completely inaccurate one, either.

What is there to call this but going out into the night alone, moping, unable to vent? Not that he can divulge his feelings to anyone so easily.

Emilia: “Do you regret it…?”

Subaru: “Absolutely not. Gonna be hearing none of that, Emilia.”

Emilia: “Mm, I’m sorry for that. Sorry. But I’m happy too.”

Her cheeks still flushed from alcohol, Emilia takes a step closer to Subaru.

She leans on the bannister beside him. Their shoulders are close enough to touch, and even with clothes between them, Subaru’s body flares hotter.

Emilia: “Subaru. I apologize that the accolade came out of nowhere. I’d been ready the whole time, so I thought you knew about it too.”

Subaru: “No I’m probably just an idiot for not realizing. Thinking back, you did keep asking me if I’d practiced, but I just came up with bullshit answers to brush it off every time.”

Emilia assumed that Subaru knew, and had been regularly checking on his progress.

Subaru had simply never realized it, getting through the conversations with frivolities as they came, never understanding what Emilia was trying to say, while devoting himself to other things. And anyway this whole accolade thing was,

Subaru: “Roswaal’s fault. Actually almost everything’s been his fault lately. Is he trying to humiliate me? He’s been going seriously overboard this last while.”

Emilia: “I kinda think Roswaal’s always been like that…but, yes, it does feel like he’s been provoking you more than he used to. Maybe he wants your attention.”

Subaru: “That’s terrifying, Emilia-tan.”

Subaru’s attention will only make Roswaal an even more hopeless person, so let’s not have that.

Subaru grimaces at the surprisingly possible idea, and Emilia laughs, waving her hand easily.

Emilia: “I’m just joking. I don’t think Roswaal knows how he should act now that we know about his plotting. I’m sure that, in a bit, he’ll go back to being like before.”

Subaru: “If he goes back to ‘being like before’ it sounds like he didn’t learn anything, but…well, it’s better than him changing on us and leaving us lost on how to respond.”

It might seem like a half-hearted decision, but Subaru will agree with it for now.

With that part of the conversation over, Emilia takes a sip from her glass. She’s had it with her the entire time, and if Subaru’s guess is correct, then it’s the alcoholic kind of punch.

It feels like Emilia is getting more intoxicated, which both scares and interests him.

Emilia: “Say, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Hm, what? The alcohol’s heating you up so it’s time to get undressed? Better not do it here. Okay, let’s find somewhere else. Off we go.”

Emilia: “Sorry. I’m not entirely sure what you’re saying. No, we’re staying here.”

Emilia shoots Subaru a slight glare. It makes him shrink back and lower his head, when she jerks her chin toward the banquet hall.

Emilia: “They look like they’re having fun.”

Subaru: “Erryeeah, they do. It’s a noble mansion but even the servants are welcome, feels really cozy. As a member of the lower-middle class peasantry, I’d say it’s basically the ideal.”

Emilia: “Mm, I agree. I think it’s sooo wonderful.”

Subaru notices the affection and desire in her amethyst eyes.

Subaru and Emilia might not be witnessing the same picture. Emilia is surely seeing a peaceful scene, absent of any class- or race- based discrimination.

Subaru only perceives the superficial layer of things. Their viewpoints differ completely.

They see the same thing, but think differently.

And Subaru thinks the discrepancy is fine.

Emilia: “What’s going on, Subaru? You look sooo peaceful.”

Subaru: “I wonder. Maybe I’m just happy that I’m here, seeing the same things as you, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Really? Then I’m happy that you’re seeing things the same way.”

Subaru: “I don’t know. I might not be. But I think it’s alright for us to differ.”

Emilia glances at Subaru. He feels her gaze but keeps looking straight ahead, his cheeks relaxing into a slight smile.

Emilia notices him smiling, and nods.

It happens right when they reach their understanding that,

Subaru: “Oh, goddamn Otto. He’s overdoing it, doubt he can even hold his liquor.”

In the middle of the hall, Garfiel challenges Otto to drink a full glass of expensive-looking alcohol in one go. Otto slams the glass back down to the table, having beautifully chugged the whole thing, to the applause of the onlooking crowd.

But Otto’s face flushes bright red before swiftly paling dead white. Following this transformation, Garfiel immediately shoulders Otto and goes rushing out of the hall.

Subaru: “Guess they’re going to the toilet.”

Emilia: “Will Otto be okay? Um, he kind of looked like how the dogs in the forest do when they eat poison mushrooms, just then…”

Subaru: “You should know what’s up now that you’ve drunk yourself to your limit and hit adulthood, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Is that how it works?”

Subaru: “No I mean I don’t know.”

He’s underage.

And how expensive was that liquor that Otto just drank, and is probably regurgitating? Doubtful that anything cheap or mass-produced is going to be included in this banquet.

Subaru shoots Roswaal a glance. Perceptive as he is, Roswaal catches the look and raises his glass to Subaru. The Margrave in his clown make-up easily drinks the same alcohol that defeated Otto. Either his dignity is winning, or he’s just used to the liquor.

Emilia: “…Subaru. I want to tell you something.”

Subaru: “What a coincidence. I want you to tell me something too.”

Breaking the silence that falls between them, Emilia whispers quietly enough to Subaru that only he will hear. He nods, and while still leaning on the railing, adjusts his posture.

Emilia turns to face him too, leaving them gazing at each other within breathing range. Subaru reflexively steps backwards, but,

Emilia: “No running.”

Emilia’s hand grabs him, stopping his retreat.

The step he took winds up as a half-step, putting them even closer than before. Subaru stumbles forward and bumps onto Emilia’s forehead.

He hurriedly tries to draw back, but Emilia’s grip on his ceremonial dress prevents him.

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan? I’m happy about this situation but, it’s sorta a little tense for a conversation…”

Emilia: “I’m tense too. This is my first time having such an important talk with anyone. So we’re even.”

Subaru: “N-No I think I’m winning here…”

He desperately tries to smile and brush this off, but Emilia won’t let him go.

Emilia is warm against him as he attempts to at least ease his own stress, and awkwardly moves to hide Emilia from the banquet hall.

It is obvious that they’re hugging when they’re horizontal like this. If Subaru shuffles over a little, then it should just look like he’s got his hands on the railing, staring up at the night sky and waxing poetic.

Subaru: “Ok so those worries are dealt with, now tell me anything.”

Emilia: “…Okay, here’s a talk between me and my Sir Knight. It’s about why Roswaal invited me to participate in the Royal Selection."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia has never discussed this with Subaru before.

And it must have something to do with the Trial, that so consistently discouraged her.

Subaru swallows his breath and looks down at Emilia.

Their gazes crash into one another. Seeing himself reflected in Emilia's eyes, Subaru nods with determination.

Emilia: "Before Elior Forest was frozen, I used to live there with my Mother and…with the other elves."

It's a tale of happy memories, a tale of sorrowful memories.

While it comes with its hiccups and pauses, Emilia sincerely tells Subaru the story.

Emilia didn't know her parents. Fortuna loved Emilia in their place. The villages kindly accepted them when they had nowhere to go. And then there was the organization called the Witch Cult, secretly helping the village, and this character named Geuse.

It was a limited world, but one that showered Emilia in love and kindness.

And it was all ruined on the day that Elior Forest froze.

The With Cult acted brutally as the witch named Pandora and the Archbishop appeared. The arrival of the Witchbeast Blacksnake, and Fortuna and Geuse's tragedy. Emilia kept her mother's problems, and so lost both her and the village. Then came Puck, who she met upon awakening after a long time in the ice.

Emilia: "Puck said he'd always been waiting for me, that he'd always been looking for me. Then he stayed with me, protecting me, just like he said he would. Even now, he's inside this magic stone, waiting to be woken up. …I can tell.”

Subaru: “But you can’t speak with him, can you?”

Emilia: “He’s still asleep. But it’s not because he’s denying a Contract with me. I don’t think this magic stone will work as his anchor if he’s awake. It needs to be a higher grade, colorless magic stone. If I can just find one, and then something to trigger it…I know he’ll come back.”

A blue magic stone hangs on a pendant around Emilia’s neck.

It’s a piece of the massive magic stone that sealed Ryuzu Meyer. It proves insufficient for holding Puck, and the sleeping spirit cannot communicate with the outside.

As if his help during the Garfiel fight was really, truly his final contribution.

Subaru: “I understand what’s going on with Puck. But, about the Royal Selection?”

Emilia: “Me and Puck spent all that time in the frozen forest. Sometimes I went to the nearby towns too, but they weren’t really very welcoming.”

Subaru cannot even imagine how alienating that ‘weren’t really very’ was. And it’s doubtful that Emilia ever anticipated that she would speak of it.

Emilia: “Then Roswaal came…I think, not even a year ago yet. But it was so sudden that it left me and Puck sooo shocked.”

Subaru: “Well I’d be shocked too, if a guy in clown make-up popped up outta nowhere.”

Emilia: “That’s true, but what shocked us was that he was in this inaccessible forest. I was on my way back from the village, and he was just standing there waiting for me. And he was playing dumb like always, like, ‘weeeeeeeeeeelcome back’…”

Subaru: “Well…”

That’s certainly surprising.

It’s too late to be commenting on Roswaal’s mean-spiritedness, but Subaru can imagine the shock it gave Emilia and Puck at the time.

Emilia: “Puck got so cross…he went from morning to night, just fighting with Roswaal. Thinking back on it, it’s a good thing he didn’t freeze Roswaal solid.”

Subaru: “I mean your smile’s adorable, but that’s not really something to smile about.”

Emilia: “I guess. Anyway, Puck and Roswaal told each other what they wanted while they were fighting, and they managed to start a discussion…”

Subaru: “And Roswaal lured you in by proposing to melt the forest.” Emilia’s eyes widen. Subaru smiles wryly at her reaction.

Subaru: “It’s obvious from how the story was going. And I happened to hear something along those lines before. But, y’know…”

But there’s been a shift in Emilia’s awareness since then.

Before, she said that she was incapable of freezing Elior Forest. That she was unable to thaw the ice, even with Puck’s help.

However,

Subaru: “If you froze the forest, can’t you unfreeze it?”

Emilia: “…Mm, I had that thought too. But I doubt I can.”

Subaru: “How come?”

Emilia: “I just can’t reach the same power that I had in my memories.”

It’s an anxious, but confident statement. Subaru furrows his brows.

‘The power I had in my memories’. If what Emilia’s said is accurate, then that means power beyond human knowledge. Not even this witch Pandora could find an opening in Emilia's assault. So how come Emilia doesn't have it now?

Subaru: "But you fought the Sizeable Hare without backing down an inch."

Emilia: "I don't need Puck or the minor spirits' help to cast magic any more. But that's all. I still can't draw that power out."

Subaru: "…"

Lamenting her powerlessness, Emilia clenches her fist and weakly shakes her head.

Her expression, ashamed of her inadequacy, instead shames Subaru for feeling dejected.

Emilia, of all people, is frustrated about herself. Subaru knows this, so he should not be capable of casting any criticism on her.

And it's not even that he wants Emilia to be strong, really.

Subaru: "OK, no more self-blame. Back to the topic. We'll agree that you can't melt the ice…so how is Roswaal thinking to do it?"

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "If you can't do it and Puck can't do it, then Roswaal shouldn't be able to either. Maybe he's an amazing magician, but he can't be ten or twenty times stronger than you. So, how?"

Emilia: "It's not that Roswaal himself is melting the ice. But Roswaal knows something that might melt the ice…all he did was tell me about it."

Subaru: "Something, that might melt it?"

Something that can thaw the forest that not even the Witch of Glaciation could melt, not even with a spirit's help, and not even with ultimate magical power. What on earth could it be?

Emilia: "Dragon's blood."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "The blood of the Dragon, that grants bountiful harvests upon the land, and cures deviant earth. He said it could definitely thaw the forest."

Subaru: "Emilia, but that means…"

Killing the Dragon. Doesn't it?

She means to sacrifice the Dragon, which has always protected the Kingdom of Lugnica, for the sake of her forest?

For an instant, the incredible question rushes through Subaru's mind. But,

Emilia: "No, Subaru. I only need one drop of blood. And the Dragon's blood has been used to revitalize the soil during a famine in Lugnica before. I read that in a history book, so it's definitely true."

Subaru: "What, so…no, that seriously freaked me out for a second. I mean if we did something like kill the Dragon…"

Would that not free the Witch, sealed by the Dragon's power?

Subaru: "…"

Anxiety clenches in Subaru's chest, and he forgets to breathe.

The witches he met at Echidna's tea party. And the Witch of Envy, who saw him off at the end.

Subaru has not forgotten her.

He will never forget his resolve from their last instant of goodbye.

But she must not be let free.

She must not be loosed on the world.

His instincts assuredly tell him so.

Emilia: “The royalty of Lugnica get a chance to talk to the Dragon when they form the covenant. And some drops of the Divine Dragon Volcanica’s blood have been kept in the palace, from back then. When I’m Ruler, I want to use that power.”

Subaru: “So that’s why you’re participating…”

Emilia: “…I told you before. The reason I’m participating is sooo selfish. And there my selfish reason is.”

He can hear a smile in her words, but it’s an uneasy one.

And her eyes do waver with anxiety as she looks up at him.

She looks scared of what he will say, and what he will think of her resolve.

It seems he’s allowed to believe that he is such an implacable fixture to her, that he can make her feel this unease.

Subaru: “Don’t worry, Emilia-tan. I’m not gonna get disillusioned over something like that.”

Emilia: “…Subaru.”

Subaru: “You say it’s self-centered, but you’re not looking for your own gain. You know how to save people you want to save, and instead of dirtying your hands with something like theft, you decide to use legitimate methods. There’s nothing to criticize about that.”

Subaru gives her a reassuring smile. But her expression remains anxious.

Subaru knows. This isn’t what she wants to hear.

If he’s going to give her something closer to what she’s really looking for, then:

Subaru: “Are you shrinking back because you think your motivator is inferior to the other candidates’?”

Emilia: “—Hic.”

Subaru: “That’s a case of grass’s greener on the other side. Crusch’s an amazing person with an amazing goal, yeah, but think about Anastasia and Priscilla. Their rationale’s are nothing praiseworthy.”

Greed and ego. That’s what motivates them to participate.

Subaru wasn’t there to hear it, but what venerable reason could Felt give to be participating in the Selection?

Emilia’s desire to save people is not in any way inferior.

Subaru: “And no matter what you wanted at the start, it’s something different now, isn’t it?”

Emilia: “…How can you tell?”

Subaru: “Because you were looking so peacefully at the banquet hall.”

Unfolding in the Milord banquet hall is a sight where humans and demi-humans, nobles and servants and commoners, all interact without any division between race or class. Subaru called it the ideal, and Emilia gazed at it with longing.

Subaru knows exactly how the fire in Emilia’s heart is kindled.

Subaru: “If your goal’s to see that again, I’m helping you. I agree that it’s wonderful. No one’s gonna stop you from adding that onto your list of reasons for trying.”

Emilia: “You’ll…really, help me?”

Subaru: “What do you think I just swore to you? Stop worrying, I want you to rely on me first. When you want help I’ll help you, and when you’re unsure we’ll solve the problem together.”

Emilia: “…”

Emilia swallows her breath, her eyes wavering

What should she say? Her trembling lips cannot clearly state what she feels.

Emilia: “—Mm.”

So she mutters only that.

And smiles.

—That’s all I need, thinks Subaru.

Subaru: “Alright, my doubts are all vanished.”

With that, Subaru drinks what’s left in the glass on the railing. Then he grabs his thoroughly-cooled meat pie, tosses it in his mouth, chews.

The cool cannot degrade this flavor, and the pie just melts in his mouth. Indeed this is a masterpiece that lives up to Garfiel’s boasting.

Emilia: “Subaru, you’ll choke if you eat so quickly.”

Subaru: “I’ll savor every bite if you feed it to me.”

Emilia: “I feel like I’ve done that somewhere before, when you were exhausted…”

Subaru grins somewhat wryly in response, and leads Emilia by the hand to the hall.

She looks up at the sky once, before accepting Subaru’s escort and entering the hall alongside him.

The party is still underway, and heats up with the star guests’ return.

After bringing back a drunk Otto, Garfiel blacks out at the hands of Frederica and Ram’s joint sneak attack, denying him his attempts to drink alcohol.

Petra and Beatrice’s uncoordinated dance reaches its climax. Sweat drips from Petra’s brow, and Beatrice is determined to put in an equal effort.

Anne-Rose looks displeased that Subaru has returned with Emilia, but Clind pokes his master's puffed cheeks, aggravating her.

Ryuzu and Roswaal stand side by side, toast to their repaired relationship, and sip from their glasses.

Subaru: “It's wonderful, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Yes. It's exactly what I want to see. I'll always remember it.”

So let's have a night to always remember.

They intrude on the two girls, dancing in the most conspicuous spot in the room.

They don't know a single step, but they enjoy themselves all the same.

Through a sea of smiles and confusion, the Knight and Witch—the new master and servant—begin their nonsense dance.

Special I:
Intersecting Hopes

Crusch: “Your Highness, your humble servant will now be departing. Please take care.”

A woman respectfully bowed her head, her green hair swaying slightly, and exited through the door being held open by a few attendants. Accompanying the sound of the closing door came her sigh.

Crusch: “My apologies for troubling you, but please take care to make sure that his Highness is not uncomfortable.”

After hearing the replies of the attendants, the woman, who seemed to be suppressing her emotions, turned and strode down a red-carpeted stairway into a grand hall.

Ferris: “—Lady Crusch.”

Waiting in the hall, calling to her in an urgent tone, was an effeminate young man with round yellow eyes, cat ears, and a sly demeanor. His name was Felix Argyle, or, to most people, Ferris. He was the woman’s long-time trusted companion, as well as one of her knights.

Ferris: “Welcome back. How is Prince Fourier’s situation?”

Crusch: “Not very optimistic. His previous liveliness is entirely gone. Today, he suddenly mentioned wanting to go outside and walk in the sun. It was… painful to watch.”

Crusch Karsten shook her head, and Ferris responded with a dejected slump of his shoulders. Seeing the reaction of her flax-haired companion, Crusch spoke up again.

Crusch: “There is no need for you to feel guilt. This illness is a puzzle that the best healers of the country still cannot solve. It is not your fault.”

Ferris: “But, it’s because of Ferri’s own weakness that I cannot meet Lady Crusch’s expectations… I am deeply sorry, Lady Crusch.”

Ferris seemed less remorseful about his inability to cure the illness and more remorseful about Crusch’s grief for Fourier. As usual, he snuggled close to her, and Crusch allowed him to do so.

Crusch: “Does the course of his Highness’s… does course of the Royal Family’s disease remain unchanged?”

Ferris: “Yes, it’s the same as the previous diagnosis, although, as a healer, I don’t want to say this lightly.”

Ferris lowered both his voice and head, but continued to speak without hesitation.

Ferris: “—It is the poison of the Black Serpent. The cause of such a mysterious illness could only be from the creature we don’t know anything about.”

Crusch: “If so, then where is it now…? No, the situation at hand is more pressing. What will happen from here on?”:

Ferris: “The worst case scenario is… the death of the entire Royal Family.”

Crusch: “…”

Although she had already reached this conclusion, no matter how many times she heard it, it would still be difficult to accept.

Crusch took a deep, calming breath. This was an unprecedented situation. If she lost her cool and let her feelings run loose, the crisis would never be solved. In such chaos, the only reason the Kingdom had been clinging to stability was because Crusch and the Council of Wise Men had been working with the high aristocracy to lead the kingdom forward.

The blood of the Royal Family of Lugunica was, at this very moment, facing termination.

The first victim of the disease had been First Prince Zabinel

Lugunica. Originally, his illness had been diagnosed as fatigue caused overwork, but Zabinel's condition worsened severely in just a few days. Soon afterward, more members of the Royal Family fell ill in a similar fashion, and thus the anomaly of the disease was discovered.

Only those who carried the royal blood of Lugunica were affected. Upon realizing this, the castle collapsed into fierce commotion, only brought to a stop by various members of the Council of Wise Men, whose members resided in the Royal Castle. Crusch, and especially Ferris, the latter known within Lugunica as the one who sat at the peak of healing water magic and held the title of Blue, were also instrumental in this stability.

The various members of the Royal Family were taken to one location, where they were diagnosed and prepared for instant treatment. There, they found that no one, not even Ferris, could cure the disease.

In only a few days, the long-standing lineage of the Royal Family of Lugunica had been brought to the verge of extinction.

Currently, a number of leading healers were gathered, attempting to extend the lives of the Royal Family with magic, but it was merely a temporary solution. The situation of the Royal Family had been hidden from the public, but this pretense of normalcy could only last for so long.

Pondering the severity of the situation, Crusch thought of the person she had been visiting, the Fourth Prince of Lugunica, Fourier Lugunica.

Fourier and Crusch were close together in age, and Crusch, the daughter of a Duke, had been acquainted with him since childhood. Fourier, as a Prince, had difficulty finding friends of the same age, and so Crusch could be counted as one of his closest friends.

Crusch was the same way, never disliking his presence.

Fourier frequently visited the Karsten household, and liked to bring with him a number of troublesome problems to share with Crusch.

His real intent was to garner the attention of the girl he liked, but Crusch had never noticed.

She had always merely regarded him as dear, kind-hearted friend who she had not minded.

Fourier, along with the rest of Lugunica's Royal Family, had no great talent as a politician. Even so, his eagerness and virtue were apparent. He was far from succeeding the throne, and his future position would probably not be one of great responsibility. And yet, he was burning with the enthusiasm to do his best at his given role.

Seeing him lying in bed, on the verge of death, tortured Crusch's heart endlessly.

Ferris: "Lady Crusch…"

Crusch's expression remained unchanged, but her eyes were filled with pain. Seeing this caused Ferris's own heart to seize as well.

Using the length of their relationship with Crusch as a criteria, Fourier had known her longer than Ferris had. Of course, Ferris, as Crusch's follower, held a greater amount of loyalty to her. Ferris was content just watching Fourier and Crusch, while burying his feelings deep in his chest.

Therefore, for Ferris, Fourier was a person who evoked several complicated emotions.

Of course, Ferris's feelings would not in any way impact Fourier's treatment or diagnosis. It would compromise Ferris's pride as a healer, as well as serve as a betrayal to Crusch, who trusted Ferris more than anyone else. However, his inability to live up to that trust and save Fourier weighed heavily on Ferris's heart.

Striding through the castle, both the master and the knight walked with heavy footsteps. Crusch thought of the past and of Fourier, while Ferris thought of his incapability and his master.

In any case, today, in the castle, neither of them could do anything. Thus, together, they prepared to leave the castle and return their residence.

???: "—Lord Bordeaux! That is different from what you'd said before!"

Crusch and Ferris, on their way to the castle gate, looked up in the direction of that sound. A little ways from the main gate was a garden, lined with a trimmed lawn and trees planted left and right. The nearby argument disrupted the peace of the quiet scenery.

Crusch couldn't help but look back at the argument occurring in the corner of the garden, between two people, one facing her and one turned away. She immediately recognized the one whose face was visible. He was a tall, bald man with a strong physique named Bordeaux Zergev, a member of Lugunica's Council of Wise Men. The Council of Wise Men consisted of senior aristocrats who were responsible for the majority of the affairs of the state in Lugunica.

A post in the Council of Wise Men was gained through election, and each candidate's knowledge, heritage, contribution to the kingdom, and overall ability, would be evaluated carefully. Represented by Miklotov, they were now acting as the skeleton of the kingdom.

Bordeaux had once been a battlefield hero, and even on the Council of Wise Men was an outspoken, heavily opinionated man. He was known for his radical remarks and his attitude was enough to be ridiculed by Ferris as "always in a rage". Crusch, upon immediately succeeding her position, had been countlessly subjected to his remarks.

Perhaps it was because he always wore such a bullish attitude that his gloomy, withdrawn demeanor immediately caught Crusch's attention.

Ferris: "What an unusual expression for Lord Bordeaux."

Having noticed what Crusch also had, Ferris offered his own commentary. Crusch gave a nod and attempted to figure the situation out. If it were just a verbal struggle, there was no need for her to interfere, but even for a modest quarrel, the timing and place were poor.

The soldier standing by the gate, also having heard the shouting, had come to investigate as well, and upon seeing Crusch bowed his head to her, as if accepting her judgement of the situation. Crusch passed her gaze over the guard as well as Bordeaux, who had noticed that people had gathered around him.

Bordeaux, seemingly possessing the intent of leaving the field, nodded bitterly at them. Searching for the right words, he moistened his lips slightly. While watching the gesture, Crusch finally examined the person standing in front of Bordeaux.

Crusch finally realized why the other man had failed to enter her perception.

Crusch: "…"

He was a figure dressed in rags.

The true identity of these rags wrinkled and slightly dirty dark blue coat, hanging from the shoulder of a tall body and reaching to the bottom of his waist. His white hair, and the earlier sound of his voice, indicated elderliness. However, from his abundant hair, to the muscles in his back, and the broadness of his shoulders, there was no trace of the weakness associated with old age.

Despite being so prominent, the man had escaped Crusch's attention until just now. The reason was his perfect stance. His movements were naturally elegant, and he wasted no motion. As soon as she noticed, Crusch was mesmerized.

As a warrior wielding a sword, Crusch had an ideal to strive for. The man in rags in front of her eyes embodied her ideal, serving as proof that with continuous effort and training, that ideal, that of the "apex of the art of war", could be reached.

Ferris: "Lady Crusch?"

Crusch, who had been unconsciously drawn into a trance, was brought back by Ferris's call, but she could not recover her previous unaffected state.

Who was that old man?

Bordeaux: “I am deeply sorry to breach our agreement, but our current situation is too dire. I hope you will understand.”

The conversation between Bordeaux and the man resumed, with Crusch standing at a loss. Bordeaux spoke with an air of finality, as if hoping to leave the conversation.

Bordeaux: “If people gather here, the situation will be made public, and trouble will occur.”

Old Man: “Wait… How can I be satisfied with those words? Why… Why did you suddenly change your mind? We’d clearly reached an agreement, and…”

Bordeaux: “It’s not your fault, it’s just a matter of the timing. We will need to delay it for a while. Again, I am sorry.”

Old Man: “But…!”

To the desperate man, Bordeaux’s words came off as hesitant and empty. The reason for Bordeaux’s secrecy was caused by a need to keep the condition of the Royal Family secret. That had taken precedent over Bordeaux’s agreement with the man, and their promise had been, at least temporarily, voided.

However, although the truth could not be spoken, it was clumsy of Bordeaux to not formulate a convincing cover-up story.

Or perhaps something in their agreement left Bordeaux unable or unwilling to lie to the man?

Was hiding facts or telling lies more dishonest? In any case, Bordeaux was unwilling to lie to the man. Bordeaux stood tall and presented his words, but the man in rags could not accept them.

Old Man: “I’ve heard the rumors of the worsening relationship with the Empire. If you are hesitant to leave the country because of that, please at least send a messenger…”

Bordeaux: “It’s not that, I would ask you to refrain from asking too much. Once things have settled down, let’s choose a different place to set up a discussion. I don’t know when that will be, but…”

Old Man: “Then it will be too late! Like I said, next month, I will have results coming in, so we will have conclusive evidence… please at least look at this and consider it.”

In response to Bordeaux’s determined attitude, the words of the man in rags became more desperate. He drew something out of his pocket, a large bundle of papers. The edges were wrinkled, and the papers themselves yellowed and speckled with dirt and blood. How important were those papers to him? Seeing how his fingers shivered while grasping it, anyone could tell at a glance. But—

Bordeaux: “—Enough!”

Bordeaux waved his hand at the papers that were held to his chest. Was it because the man had not been expecting it, or had Bordeaux added unintentional force to it? Perhaps it was the overlap of both. Whatever the reason, that action had led to a result.

Old Man: “…”

The bundle of papers left the old man’s hands and scattered across the garden. The wind, although weak, easily swept the pieces of paper through the air like white petals and scattered them over the garden.

Crusch unconsciously reached out toward them, and Bordeaux’s eyes flashed with a trace of regret. However, neither could react to the man’s immediate response.

Old Man: “Bordeaux!”

With a shout, the man in rags seized Bordeaux’s lapel and shoved him against a wall. The latter released a pained breath from the impact. Although he had been pressed against the wall, raising his large body with one arm was no small feat of strength.

Witnessing the scene, Crusch should have immediately called for assistance.

However, the aura given out by the man in rags overwhelmed her and delayed her reaction. The atmosphere seemed to turn dry, and Crusch felt her skin tingle.

As was, the man in rags drove his sharp gaze into Bordeaux.

Ferris: “Guards! Don’t just stand there, come over here! Quickly!”

A voice rose and cried out for guard, stirring Crusch back into action. Looking back, she saw that Ferris, who had watched the situation deteriorate, had raised his hands to wave the guards at the gate over, who had been frozen in shock.

Granted, they had never seen a Wise Man in danger before. Three of the guards rushed to the scene with swords drawn and surrounded Bordeaux and the man.

The atmosphere seemed to spread, and the situation grew tense, but,

Old Man: “—Apologies.”

With a word of apology, the man abruptly released Bordeaux. Bordeaux collapsed against the wall, stifling his coughing with a hand on his throat.

Although the gate soldiers were watching vigilantly, the old man widened his hands to show no resistance and stepped back slowly.

Guard: “Empty your hands and listen to our instructions!”

The guards, still recovering from their earlier embarrassment, resumed their duties and surrounded the old man. According to the law, the old man would be detained and placed under investigation.

Bordeaux: “Wait… There is no need to conduct this so formally, you can release him.”

Guard: “Milord, I am not qualified to say this, but that will damage the reputation of the guards. Can the guards who protect the royals release such a suspicious person?”

Bordeaux: “In that case, restrain him for one night and then release him.”

In response to the old man’s words, Bordeaux delivered a new instruction in a regretful tone. The guards listened obediently. The old man, being escorted by the guards, turned to Crusch.

Old Man: “I am most grateful.”

At the volume he had spoken, he had been only intending for Crusch to hear those words. The old man’s clear blue eyes housed a shadow. Although curious, Crusch decided it would be too rude to force the guards to linger for their dialogue.

As the old man left, Crusch turned to Ferris.

Crusch: “Your quick response just now was a great help. I apologize for not reacting in time.”

Ferris: “No, no, it was nothing at all. I’m just glad the situation didn’t escalate. By the way… Lord Bordeaux?”

Ferris, who humbly put his finger on his lip as he turned the topic back to Bordeaux.

Bordeaux, who had recovered from his previous shock, was crouched on the ground, picking up the scattered paper. Crusch also picked up several fallen pieces near her feet and handed them to Bordeaux.

Bordeaux: “…Thank you, Duchess Karsten. I apologize for that unsightly scene.”

Crusch: “Not at all. Seeing a serious Bordeaux is so rare that I should have paid a viewing fee. That said, could you answer something?”

Bordeaux: “…”

Bordeaux, rearranging the collected papers, responded with silence. Judging that to be an affirmative reply, Crusch looked towards the direction in which the old man had left.

Crusch: “That man just now, was he an acquaintance of you, Milord?”

Bordeaux: "—He's an old friend. No, more like a battlefield comrade. A former battlefield comrade, that's what he would accept."

Crusch: "It is not my place to pry, but if you cherish this relationship, you should aim to repair it as soon as possible. Although, you should choose a better occasion next time."

What had caused trouble here had been the time and place. It was the old man who had attacked Bordeaux, but it was Bordeaux's poor choices that had caused it. Seeing the Wind of Regret blowing by Bordeaux however, Crusch did not hold him in disregard.

Bordeaux: "…I do not know if I can face him again, although I do not consider choosing my loyalty to the throne of Lugunica over my gratitude and debt toward him a mistake."

Crusch: "I see."

Crusch was well-aware that Bordeaux would not listen to her advice, so there was little disappointment. Rather, his clumsy stubbornness was even a little admirable. If she said so however, she would certainly anger him like usual.

Bordeaux: "Did you visit his Highness?"

Crusch: "I am returning from visiting his Highness Prince Fourier. Ferris's diagnosis is not optimistic."

Bordeaux: "That is as expected… While you are here, I should warn you that Leip Barielle is plotting something, although it probably will not amount to anything major. Still, be on guard."

Crusch: "Baron Barielle… I will keep that in mind."

She nodded at Bordeaux's advice. It was distraction from the main topic, but even if she kept pursuing, she knew Bordeaux would not reply. As the conversation ended, Bordeaux held the bundle of collected paper to his chest and left the garden.

Together, Crusch and Ferris breathed a sigh of relief.

Ferris: “Ahhhhhh~, that was a really tense atmosphere. We saw a really rarely seen side of the always tough Lord Bordeaux, though. He would be so much cuter if he were always like this.”

Crusch: “That would be inconvenient, since Lord Miklotov, always calm, and Lord Bordeaux, always in motion, are quite adept at handling the Council of Wise Men together, but…”

The commotion just now, what had been it about? Of course, Crusch wanted to know the details of it, but what had caught her attention more was the old man who had been taken away.

If she could, she would like to learn his true identity.

Ferris: “Anywayyyyy~! Lady Crusch, Ferri would rather not say it himself, but I think that I’m the one that knows Lady Crusch better than anyone else.”

Crusch: “Hmm? That was abrupt… There’s no need to mention such an obvious statement. You are irreplaceably important to me, so why suddenly bring that up now?”

Ferris: “Hearing that evaluation, I think I can go one step further today.”

Ferris stuck out a red tongue with a mischievous expression. Crusch could not tell what he was thinking or planning. The Wind blowing by Ferris was smoky, as if covering up his true feelings, and Crusch had always been unable to discern them.

Crusch Karsten’s Divine Protection of Wind Reading allowed her to see the flow of the Wind. That Wind caught the ripples of feelings of others, and, in general, Crusch had no issue interpreting it. However, in rare cases, she encountered those like Ferris, who were skilled at hiding their emotions.

In Ferris’s case, due to their long association, Crusch could read the Wind to a certain degree. There were others, like the Wise Man Miklotov, who could hide their feelings easily due to their many years of experience. Crusch labelled her negotiation technique as a type that was useless against experts at maintaining their

composure.

As usual, Ferris did not let Crusch read his emotions, so once he put on that air, Crusch had no choice but to hold her hands together and wait for his answer, per their norm. But she was certain that she could put her full trust in Ferris. And, this time, the trust that their bond had created had again demonstrated its strength.

Ferris: “I’m thinking that Lady Crusch is surely wondering about the old man from just now.”

Crusch: “Hmm.”

Ferris: “I’ve already prepared this for you.”

Watching Ferris, who was smiling, and seeing what he was holding in his fingertips, Crusch widened her eyes, then suddenly loosened her lips into a smile.

Crusch: “You are truly the one who knows my heart best.”

Between the faintly smiling Ferris’s fingers rested a single piece of paper, one that he had neglected to hand Bordeaux, one that was waiting to be received while being shaken by the wind.

Special II:
The Day Before the Selection

1

Crusch: “My deepest apologies, but I have read your secret report.”

Crusch, gazing across the iron bars of the cell, felt as if she were looking somewhere incredibly far away. The old man sat in the center, legs crossed and posture erect.

The rags which he had worn in the garden were neatly folded and placed on the ground. From his posture, Crusch could see that her initial assessment was correct; he was a highly trained warrior. However, his hollow cheeks and faded hair also gave a sense of unhealthiness.

Old Man: “…”

Crusch: “It’s a document assessing the pros and cons of… Oh, excuse me. My apologies for beginning so abruptly without first introducing myself.”

Meeting his silent gaze, Crusch placed one hand on her chest and straightened her posture. The dusty air in the prison seemed to stir with her movements. This change in atmosphere was rather eye-catching nature, and the eyes of old man’s gaze changed slightly in nature.

Crusch: “I am the head of the Karsten family, Duchess Crusch Karsten. Earlier, I had come across you and Bordeaux in the palace garden, and I was curious about your argument.”

Old Man: “Duchess… Karsten?”

Upon hearing Crusch’s introduction, the old man’s expression changed again, this time to one of simultaneous comprehension and confusion.

Old Man: “Should the head of the Karsten family not be Sir Meckart?”

Crusch: “Meckart Karsten is my father. Two years ago, father passed the position to me, and now I hold the position of Duchess. However, you seem privy to some of our internal affairs… But what you know is probably from several years ago. I am afraid that the reason for the earlier dispute may stem from here.”

Old Man: “Were the officials too lacking and so I must be properly investigated by the Duke?”

Crusch: “In truth, I have no intention of prying into the dispute between you and Lord Bordeaux. That is just the pretext I used to convince the guards to let me down here.”

In the face of the old man’s ironic expression, Crusch could only smile bitterly.

Currently, they were at dungeon near the Royal Knights’ barracks, which was located in the immediate vicinity of the castle. Crusch’s investigation had led her here, and she had devised a suitable excuse for the guards to let her in. Right now, Ferris was probably still chatting with the guards, stalling for time.

Old Man: “You used the term excuse, so is there another reason you are here? Is this about my disrespect to Lord Bordeaux?”

Crusch: “…Of course not, Lord Bordeaux would never allow me do so. He is a firm believer in taking responsibility for his own actions, and, as such, you will be released tomorrow morning. However, if what happened today happens again, it may not be so easy to cover up.”

Old Man: “Those reckless actions will not happen again. The dispute in the garden happened due to my own immaturity, but this cold dungeon has cooled my head down.”

The words were intoned with a smile, but the old man’s expression did not change. Even so, that self-aware admission was completely sincere. The man felt no anger toward Bordeaux, only self-deprecation. However, in that self-deprecation, Crusch saw an unusually dense, almost overwhelming emotion being carried by the Wind.

—Anger. That feeling was undoubtedly anger.

The rage that had taken root at the old man's heart was strong enough to melt even steel. With a sober, razor sharp gaze, the old man looked at Crusch. And, the cause of that all-consuming rage,

Crusch: "—The White Whale."

Old Man: "…"

Crusch: "The expression in your eyes has changed."

The moment he heard Crusch's whisper, dark anger flashed through the old man's eyes. It disappeared quickly, without leaving a trace, but it did not escape the gaze of the expectant Crusch. She presented the paper she had taken into the prison, the same paper that had been scattered and left uncollected in the garden, and stepped over the metal fence to continue the conversation with the old man.

Crusch: "Like I said at first, my apologies. I have already read through this part of your report. The rest I handed the Lord Bordeaux. This is only a missing piece of it."

Old Man: "…Lord Bordeaux is disagreeable as always. I pointed out a long time ago that he should watch his attitude, it does not seem like he has listened at all."

Crusch: "That is merely a part of his nature. It's difficult to imagine a perfect Lord Bordeaux, after all."

Old Man: "It's just as you say."

For the first time, Crusch and the old man, having stumbled upon a common topic, shared a laugh. Although this was at a bald old man's expense, Crusch was glad to have shared this moment. She breathed a slight sigh and focused on the document once more.

Crusch: “Although I only have one portion of the report, it is a very relevant portion indeed. Its contents are really quite interesting to me, and, if they are all in fact true, then this is a fairly extraordinary discovery.”

Old Man: “…”

Crusch: “Appearances of the White Whale in recent years has been summarized in here. This report also contains information from Gusteko, Vollachia, Kararagi, and several small countries. The date and time of appearance and disappearance is recorded in every summary. I only have this one document, but I am sure the full report takes it to an even greater extent.”

Old Man: “…”

The old man voiced no reply.

Mirrored in the old man’s eyes, Crusch grew ever more fervent in her narration. Of course, reading this report would cause most people to react with burning passion.

The White Whale. A Witchbeast which had hounded the world since the days of the Witch. A malicious presence that had ruined countless lives and yet still roamed free. In the past, many soldiers had been assembled to subjugate the White Whale, but the crusade had ended in failure, a black spot in the dignified history of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

The damage suffered then could never fully be recovered from, and most did not know of the full extent of the crusade’s loss. That was the most despicable property of the White Whale; that those who suffered trying to stop it would be forgotten.

Crusch was far from the only angry one. Everyone who knew about the White Whale hated it with a passion.

Crusch: “But you put your anger to use, and the results were fruitful. If we can use your information to defeat the White Whale, it will come to save a great many people.”

Everyone walking in the streets, from businessmen and pedestrians, were constantly exposed to its threat, but due to the White Whale's unpredictable appearances, it was impossible to protect everyone.

Crusch: "The victims of the White Whale will be greatly reduced, thanks to your valuable actions."

Old Man: "…"

Crusch: "—«So what of it?», is what your expression says."

Old Man: "…"

The old man's expression had changed for the first time since Crusch had delved into the contents of the document. Color returned to his cold eyes, and his gaze on Crusch intensified, as if saying "what do you wish to say?". To the silent old man, Crusch responded.

Crusch: "I understand your goal, Sir. To spend so much time and effort to track down this beast, to have the spirit to keep pursuing it, and to then give up it? You could never do such a thing."

Old Man: "…So, what should I do?"

Crusch: "Your aim is doubtlessly to punish the White Whale. To find a pattern to its appearances is for no other purpose than to track it down and end it with a sufficiently prepared force. You are a swordsman, and what swordsman would throw away the sword and choose the path of escape? Ridiculous."

With the pieces she had, Crusch could puzzle together the arrangement between the old man and Bordeaux. Together, they had been planning to scope out and attack the Witchbeast, but, due to the Royal Family's illness, Bordeaux, busy with his duties on the Council of Wise Men, could no longer assist with the plan. And so, the danger of the White Whale was left unaddressed.

Crusch: "You mentioned sending messengers to Vollachia. Then, the next appearance of the White Whale will presumably be there?"

Old Man: "If the appearance in Vollachia is confirmed, then it will come to the Kingdom of Lugunica in six months' time. Yes, if that confirmation is obtained, then soldiers could be sent out, and…!

Crusch: “This is surely why Lord Bordeaux is troubled.”

Old Man: “Why… Why?! Why, now, are you going back on your word? Have you not talked at length about your grudge against the White Whale…? You too, you too were angry at having something precious being stolen from you! Have you forgotten Theresia, Bordeaux?!”

The wrathful shout tore through the air of the prison and pierced into Crusch’s ears. The old man slammed a fist on the ground and biting his lip. It was anger directed toward Bordeaux, who had broken his promise, and directed toward the White Whale, which had taken something precious from him, but, above all else, it was anger directed at himself, for being too weak to do anything.

Old Man: “I am already running out of time… If this appearance is missed, several years will pass until the White Whale returns to Lugunica. By then, my body will weaken, even more than it has already… This body still continues to die, so if the attack is postponed, my hope at vengeance disappears…”

Crusch: “…”

Weeping.

The old man’s voice was soft and contained little trace of tearfulness. However, his spirit seemed on the verge of vanishing. This weeping, shaking the old man to his core, was more than enough to carve scars on the hearts of those who heard it.

Theresia. The name spoken by the old man was a familiar one.

And rightfully so. No swordsman in the Kingdom of Lugunica could not have heard of the name of the Sword Saint. Theresia was the hero who had ended the civil war plaguing the entire Kingdom. She was beautiful, strong, and the sword loved her more than it loved anything else.

And, in the end, she had been killed by the very White Whale she had been sent to subjugate.

Crusch: “Ah.”

Immediately after the mention of Theresia’s name invoked, another existence was invoked in the recesses of Crusch’s mind.

A person with close ties to Theresia, a person who had reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, a person who made Crusch tremble. There was only one such man in her memory. The legendary man was one who had followed the way of the sword, one who had also been one who could end a war with a sword. He had also loved the woman who was loved by the sword.

He had been a demon who had taken Theresia from the sword god.

Crusch: “The Sword Demon, Wilhelm van Astrea.”

This man was legend upon legend, with a story so fascinating that it was remembered by song. Crusch herself, had too loved that song in childhood.

Then, in front of her was the ghost she had long admired.

Wilhelm: “I abandoned that particular name. I cast off my title and house, van Astrea.”

Crusch: “I see. What name do you go by now?”

Wilhelm: “Trias. The name of a fallen noble house, once located in the outskirts of Lugunica, which was destroyed decades ago. The last head of house loved his people dearly, even though he lacked the power to defend his territory. The current me is merely wandering between worlds, unable to even restore righteousness to the house of my birth. I have only my family name left.”

Crusch: “Wilhelm Trias.”

Wilhelm: “Yes. This is the now shameful name of former Sword Demon.”

Placing a fist on the cold floor, the old man, Wilhelm, made a respectful gesture toward Crusch.

That attitude toward a member of the nobility would typically be marked as disrespectful, but Crusch did not notice this at all. In fact, this display could better be said to have fascinated Crusch so much she could hardly remember to breathe.

Crusch: "Dedicating so much to track the whale… are you aiming to avenge his wife?"

Wilhelm: "I have no other goal… No, I have no other reason to live."

In his clear eyes, there rested no sign of hesitation.

Crusch had finally arrived at the point where she fully understood Wilhelm's intentions, and understood the goal he had dedicated a decade to.

—And also understood that, considering the current situation, that goal would not be fulfilled.

Crusch: "—I have understood your wish, but you must understand that that wish cannot be fulfilled as is."

Wilhelm: "…Why not?"

Crusch: "If you rely on Lord Bordeaux, Lord Bordeaux will not be able to act in time to apprehend the Whale in half a year's time."

As long as the Royal Family was ill, no matter what fate would become of them, the Kingdom would surely enter into an unprecedented state of confusion. The Kingdom and its people would be completely shaken, and everything would be subject to change. The senior aristocrats would try to manage, but, in the end, it was the role of the Council of Wise Men to guide Lugunica back into stability.

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm remained silent. However, his mind was evidently nowhere near as calm as him expression and attitude would suggest.

Crusch could see crushing, overwhelming anger emanating from Wilhelm. Yes, pure, blind rage.

Right now, the only emotion that remained in the Sword Demon's ghost was wrath.

—Regret.

That was the emotion that Crusch felt toward Wilhelm, and endless regret. Regret, resignation, pity. Such emotions emerged one after another.

Choosing to be bound to a way of life, life choosing a path for one to be bound to. They seemed similar, but, in essence, they were completely different.

Being her real self, acting the way her soul desires to, was how Crusch had decided to absolutely live. Living as if bathed in Wind, that was what Crusch had regarded as the most perfect, the most beautiful way to live.

Therefore, the path of the Sword Demon, who had been bound to his way of life, was too sad, in reality. With unbearable burning anger in his heart, even after a decade, the Sword Demon's blade had stayed honed, and kept its sharpness. If his long-cherished wish could not be reached, then his sharpness could do nothing but tarnish.

Crusch was overcome with the desire to help him, but the same responsibility that had bound Bordeaux bound Crusch as well. Crusch finally believed she understood the meaning of Bordeaux's bitterness in that garden.

Or, rather, to Bordeaux, the name of Theresia would be more meaningful. The Wilhelm who spoke of Bordeaux without a distant title, and the Bordeaux who had called Wilhelm a friend and comrade. Crusch, in this moment, could not measure up to the relationship between them.

Wilhelm: "I must thank you for your precious time, but it seems as if further dialogue between us will no longer be significant."

Although Crusch's face presented no obvious emotion, sometimes, eyes were more eloquent than words. In Crusch's amber eyes, Wilhelm found an answer. Even without relying on a Divine Protection of Wind Reading, with experience, an ordinary person could discern what they needed to.

Having been seen through, Crusch did not commit a dishonorable behavior such as trying to hide her intent.

Crusch: "After this, what will you do?"

Wilhelm: "My plans have not changed. If I cannot depend on Lord Bordeaux, I will find another influential person to collaborate with. Before this corpse I call my body decays, it must fulfill its purpose of finding revenge."

Crusch: "…"

Wilhelm was in a dilemma.

Only the senior aristocrats had the power to return an answer to Wilhelm's request. But those senior aristocrats were now struggling to quell the confusion resulting from the royal illness. If he found a family of lower aristocrats willing to lend a hand, their house would likely lack the ability to subjugate the White Whale.

If he looked to a sponsor outside of the aristocracy, there would be further complications. A powerful businessman, such as the old fox Russell Fellow, who was based in the Lugunica, would be more concerned with using the White Whale's subjugation for commerce than for crusade.

That said, Wilhelm becoming a target for assassins would be not unlikely. Before Wilhelm had left his family, the prestige of the Astrea family would have protected him. However, now Wilhelm called himself Trias. He could no longer consider himself an Astrea. And so, if any unfortunate situation ever came about,

Crusch: "Do not lose yourself to rage. The only one who can protect you is yourself."

Wilhelm: "I understand. The inability to achieve my goal because of such frivolity would bring me a greater shame than anything else. Thank you for your heartfelt advice.”

Although he spoke politely, Wilhelm’s thoughts were already far removed from Crusch. Crusch could only think that the old man had already carefully considered each of her ideas on many sleepless nights.

If there was one thing that he had not considered due to his lack of knowledge, it was the calamity plaguing the castle. And that information could absolutely not be leaked.

Crusch: “Sir Trias… No, Lord Trias, I apologize for making you speak of that past that you do not mention lightly. Although I wish there was more I could do, I sincerely hope that your desire will be fulfilled.”

Wilhelm: “Those are wasteful words.”

Closing his eyes, Wilhelm clearly had no intent of speaking again. Crusch had also arrived at this point, where more words would be meaningless. Both sides were speechless. Crusch turned her back to Wilhelm. Her long green hair cut through the air of the prison, and seemed to propel her to its exit.

Ferris: “The conversation went smoothly? By the looks of it, it did go smoothly.”

Climbing the stairs, holding back a sigh, Crusch heard a soft shout. It was Ferris, sitting in the entrance of the guard barracks, rocking back and forth on his chair, causing a creaking sound.

He tossed the cards in his hand on the table and smiled at the two losing guards he was competing with.

Ferris: “Well, since my master is back, that’ll be all for today. I’ll send a knight by later to collect my winnings, so please be prepared.”

Crusch: “What on earth are you betting on this time?”

Ferris: “Ferri would feel really embarrassed saying it, but, but, if

Lady Crusch really wants to know, Ferri will bite back his shame and. Lady Crusch?”

Ferris’s fidgeting, blushing expression changed as he approached Crusch. His fingertips brushed Crusch’s cheeks, and the two naturally met their gazes.

Ferris: “Your complexion isn’t so good, is something wrong?”

Crusch: “I still cannot hide anything from you… It is just like the situation with Prince Fourier. My troubles feel overwhelming, which makes me angry at my own powerlessness.”

Ferris: “But, even so, Lady Crusch hasn’t stopped moving forward.”

Ferris gently wrapped a hand around one of Crusch’s, which was painfully tense. The touch caused Crusch’s shoulder to relax a little, and she returned Ferris’s smile.

Crusch: “Really, I can never win against you. You seem to know me better than I do.”

Ferris: “Of course, I already know everything. Inside and outside, there are hardly any places of Lady Crusch that I haven’t touched yet.”

Hearing Ferris’s colorful and rather dramatic words, Crusch was unsure of why the two guards behind them had reacted with confusion. While curious about the reaction, Crusch nodded in agreement.

Crusch: “I will withdraw today, but tomorrow will be different, and tomorrow’s tomorrow will also be different. Right.”

2

In the days after encountering Wilhelm, Crusch passed her time as she had expected.

The Royal Family’s health continued to decline, and the liberated Wilhelm fruitlessly searched for another collaborator. Crusch was nigh buried in her work in the Kingdom’s affairs and had needed to shamefully request her retired father's help in governing the Karsten territories.

Of course, neither those problems were Crusch's fault alone, but as long as she was involved in them, she would be frustrated at her inability to help.

This almost arrogant sense of responsibility was a part of Crusch Karsten's creed. Those cloudy, seemingly endless days eventually came to an abrupt end.

—The King of Lugunica, Randohal Lugunica, passed away.

And following him came the rest of the Royal Family, Fourier Lugunica being no exception. Fourier expired with Crusch holding his hand until the very last.

And only Ferris had seen the tears streaming down Crusch's face.

Leip: "The Dragon History Stone has new writing carved upon it. I'm sure everyone understands what this means."

In the parliament where the senior aristocrats met together, an old man was unable to hide his excitement. He was Baron Leip Barielle. Although he was the Lord of the Barielle territory, he was also a person who had been entrusted with a special task by the Royal Family. And his role was,

???: "A change in the Dragon History Stone… Is there a new prophecy concerning the future of the kingdom?"

Leip: "This is exactly the case. As is my duty anointed by His Majesty, I will convey to the assembled Lords about the change in Dragon History Stone. Please listen carefully."

He knelt and offered a respectful salute to the members of the parliament. Leip's rank was not so high that he should be part of a meeting of senior aristocrats. Still, they all paid Leip the same respect. This was the influence of the Dragon History Stone.

The Dragon History Stone—it was one of the sacraments given as proof of the Covenant in place between the Royal Family and the

Divine Dragon Volcanica. Like the Blood of the Dragon that would bring plentiful harvests to the land, the Dragon History Stone was treated as a sacred artifact, and was kept secure in a room within the Royal Castle, limited to the Royal Family and some like Leip. Only those with qualifications could enter to read it.

The Dragon History Stone appeared to be a square black plate, made of an unknown mineral. Much of its function was also not understood. The only certain thing was that when the Kingdom approached a crisis, the Dragon History Stone would describe the method to overcome it.

In the past, Lugunica had been saved many times from crisis due to the writ of the Dragon History Stone, and its reliability was more or less guaranteed. However,

Bordeaux: “Wait… Although the prophecy comes from the Dragon History Stone, are we certain we can trust it?”

Interrupting Leip’s description of the Stone’s content was a bald old man, Bordeaux. His severe, glaring expression looked down on the smaller Leip from above. Leip frowned and stared back up at Bordeaux.

Leip: “Trust? That should not be a question, Lord Bordeaux. The Dragon History Stone has never been wrong. As a member of the Council of Wise Men, surely you would be aware of this?”

Bordeaux: “I will acknowledge that it has saved the Kingdom many times, but this time is different. If the Dragon History Stone had served its purpose and tried to save the Kingdom, why did it not react to the illness of His Highness and the rest of the Royal Family? Surely the correct path would have been to save them!”

Aristocrats: “…”

Bordeaux’s phrasing was rough, spoken in a loud voice, and the majority of the assembled aristocrats seemed to agree with him.

Crusch, who was also seated in the parliament, nodded her assent. She firmly believed that if the Dragon History Stone had wanted to help Lugunica, the Royal Family should have been saved.

The strength her hand possessed as it held Fourier's had vanished, and a shadow came over her face.

Remorse, that was all she felt.

Leip: "—Concerning that, there is something I must tell everyone."

Bordeaux: "…Yes, what is it?"

Leip: "I did not mention this at first for a good reason, and I hope that everyone will be well-aware of it soon. Please listen carefully."

Bordeaux: "Clearly state what you want to say!"

Leip: "The prophecy that appeared in the Dragon History Stone did so before His Majesty passed away."

Bordeaux was stunned by Leip's words.

But that reaction was not limited to Bordeaux. Every aristocrats seated at the parliament, watching over the exchange, opened their mouths in shock.

Crusch was also lost for words. She fixed Leip with a look of disgust.

Leip: "Everyone must be wondering why I kept silent, so let me first clarify that I have not turned my back on His Majesty."

Bordeaux: "You bastard, have you forgotten your duty? Not only have you forgotten to fulfill your duty, you brazenly say it! To neglect to mention the guidance of the Kingdom engraved on the Dragon History Stone…!"

???: "Did the content of the Dragon History Stone implicitly suggest that His Majesty and his family would all pass away?"

Bordeaux: "What…?!"

Crusch exhaled sharply as that bomb was dropped on the conversation. Bordeaux, face severely reddening, turned to search for the source of those words. When,

Miklotov: “Hmm… Lord Bordeaux seems to have calmed down a little. Count Leip, can you discuss this in greater detail?”

Leip: “As you will.”

The old man who had interrupted Bordeaux stroked his long, white beard.

The representative of Council of Wise Men, Miklotov, kept a calm composure as he prompted a change in the course of the conversation.

Leip: “Ten days ago, when His Majesty was still alive, was when I first found the prophecy… I should have consulted with His Majesty, or with the assembled Lords… but instead I kept this knowledge to myself at my own discretion.”

Miklotov: “Hmm… Why did you do so?”

Leip: “The prophecy was as follows—«When the Royal Family’s line ends, the Kingdom shall find five candidates, chosen by an emblem, to tie a new Covenant as a Dragon Shrine Maiden». I did not have the heart to tell this to His Majesty while he was on his deathbed.

Aristocrats: “…What?”

Hearing Leip’s words, the senior aristocrats all sighed.

What a cruel prophecy. To tell the desperately struggling Royal Family and aristocrats that the disease could not be cured, to kill off all hope. Leip’s feelings, in this case, could not be dismissed.

Aristocrat: “The Dragon History Stone… Not existing royalty, but a new Ruler? What do you mean by five people?”

Leip: “There is an Insignia. A jewel that has been handed down by the Royal Family of Lugunica, informing them about the Covenant with the Dragon. At of the moment of His Majesty’s demise, and the bloodline of the Royal Family ended, it lost its light, but… It will shine brightly in the hands of a new, worthy person.”

Aristocrat: “You want us to find five people… who can make this insignia shine?! Preposterous! It will not be possible to determine who shall sit on the throne in such a way!”

Leip: “So you will ignore the writ?! If we cannot select a Shrine Maiden capable of bearing the Covenant, the history of Lugunica will end here! And the same is true of its bond with the Dragon!”

Those who attempted to deny this were met with Leip’s fierce words. Those who refuted him with their common sense were all forced to keep their mouths shut.

Crusch: “Would you mind if I speak?”

Leip: “Please, do you have any opinions you would like to share, Duchess Karsten?”

Crusch: “It is nothing that important. It is only natural that negative opinions arise, but first we should determine the accuracy of the writ. Could you bring out these Insignias?”

Leip: “I have prepared one for this moment. Bring it.”

Nodding to Crusch’s words, Leip gave a signal, and the doors of the parliament opened. Some servants wheeled in a cart, the Insignia of the Royal Family of Lugunica on top. Priority was given to those with strong ties to the Royal Family, such as the Royal Knights.

A black triangular stone, with a dragon carved on it in gold. and a red gem in the center. Before the Royal Family died, the red gem would always shine as a sign of the Royal Family’s prestige, but now it grew dim in the face of the King’s demise.

Aristocrat: “It will happen when this thing glows again, correct?”

Leip: “That is correct. If you have what it takes.”

The Insignia in the hands of the servants, each person surrounding the round table was lined up. Some were washed by cold sweat, others’ breaths were taken away, all as they looked down upon the

Insignia.

If it shone while held by one’s hands, it would mean that person would have opened the way to the throne. Some cracked under that burden, others cracked due to their modest ambition.

Aristocrat: “What about Baron Leip?”

Leip: “If I were to make the Insignia shine after having withheld the information about the prophecy, it would only invite suspicion. The Stone would never have chosen something that would cause such discord.”

Leip shook his head at the question, but to what extent was that a serious denial?

Snorting, Bordeaux took the initiative to pick up the Insignia; however, its glow remained non-existent. The insignia, apparently, had not chosen him.

Other members of the Council of Wise Men, including Miklotov, also picked it up, held it in their hands, and shook their heads. As time went on, everyone seated at the round table picked up the insignia, and faint gasps and small sighs spilled out, one after the other.

But then…

Miktolov: “…What?”

A rare look of surprise on his usually calm face, the first to speak was Miktolov. However, that must have been a reflection of the feelings of everyone who had gathered upon this place.

The dazzling brilliance of the Insignia made Crusch look at her own palm, and nod.

Crusch: “Apparently, even those who are unworthy can do something for the Kingdom as well.”

Saying so with surprising calmness, Crusch held out her palm, raised her head, and closed her eyes. And looked upwards.

With her eyes closed, she felt that she could see Fourier's last smile.

3

—There was subsequent confusion over Crusch's position. Thanks to the prophecy of Dragon History Stone, to Crusch's existence, the contents of Leip's words were proven real.

And thanks to this, she was now not only a Duchess, but a provisional candidate for the throne, which bestowed her significantly more power in parliament. And,

Ferris: "From the first time Ferri saw Lady Crusch, Ferri thought the she would be destined for something much greater than just a statesman!"

Having heard of Crusch's new position, Ferris clearly felt a great amount of joy, which Crusch had not even associated with her circumstances until now.

Ferris: "Lady Crusch, why are you stroking my head? I'm happy, really happy, but my ears are really weak!"

Crusch: "You always serve me loyally. From now on, I'll be asking even more from you."

Ferris: "Yes, understood. Ferri is more and more captivated by Lady Crusch with each passing day."

Crusch's praise made Ferris blush and his tail swayed from side-to-side. Then his expression sobered slightly.

Ferris: "So, what is Lady Crusch's position now?"

Crusch: "I will be a provisional candidate for the throne. There are four other candidates who are yet to be found. If I win, I will become a Shrine Maiden for the dragon."

Ferris: "But even with a prophecy from the Dragon History Stone, how much of that absurd story can you believe? Although you'll have a chance to confirm it with the Dragon."

Crusch: “Lord Bordeaux also has some feelings of suspicion. He thinks that this may be a story concocted by Leip Barielle… I, too, am a little concerned about Count Leip’s attitude. And, Margrave Mathers was also suspiciously quiet.”

The eccentric Roswaal L. Mathers had also been in attendance at the parliament meeting, dressed in his typical clownish makeup and outfit. Crusch found it curious that someone who rarely attended important discussions on the affairs of the Kingdom had been so intensely interested in the Royal Selection, and that, furthermore, he had not acted upon his interest.

Crusch: “Either way, pondering upon too many unanswerable questions is a waste of time. There is nothing that I nor Lord Bordeaux can do regarding Count Leip. And I’m sure that I look suspicious as well.”

Ferris: “Hmph. Are there really such ungrateful people who would suspect Lady Crusch?”

Crusch: “Even I found my timing in that incident more suspicious than just a coincidence. I could not have predicted the situation.”

Ferris: “But even with the timing, hadn’t Lady Crusch considered that she might be a candidate at all?”

In reply to Ferris, Crusch smiled bitterly. Ferris truly knew her heart better than she knew it herself.

Crusch recalled the emotions she had felt during that meeting. When Leip mentioned the Dragon History Stone, Crusch was just as surprised as anyone else. She had agreed with Bordeaux’s argument, and had felt anger at Leip’s reply.

But when asked to try the Royal Insignia, Crusch had done so without hesitation. And upon sighting the red gem of the Insignia shining so brilliantly, Crusch had felt no trace of surprise. There was only the sound of the Wind blowing from her soul.

—She had finally been given the opportunity.

Fourier’s wishes, his hopes for the kingdom, which he had told only her. She had found the opportunity to answer to them. To have Fourier's death become a sacrifice, to let his demise be a steppingstone to fulfilling his dreams.

Crusch Karsten calmly accepted this opportunity.

And this very opportunity had presented her with an answer to another problem that had been plaguing her.

Crusch: "Ferris, I have a favor to ask."

Ferris: "I have already confirmed his location. I will be sure to transmit Crusch's message."

Ferris had immediately understood Crusch's intent. Seeing this, Crusch smiled a slightly bitter smile, and expression that was already becoming familiar.

Crusch: "Summon the Sword Demon—We shall have a discussion at the estate."

4

Wilhelm: "To be summoned like this, I cannot help but feel slight trepidation."

Wilhelm, kneeling and offering the most respectful salute, had been personally invited and received by Crusch. They met in the reception room of the Karsten Estate.

Crusch: "You do not seem to have changed much since the last time I saw you."

Wilhelm: "Indeed, Karsten-kyo also seems to be in the same state of well-being as last time."

During their social routine, the two surveyed each other carefully. Crusch's investigations had told her that since their previous meeting, Wilhelm's actions had been fruitless, and had fully been expecting him to accept this invitation.

Ferris: "It seems that neither party is engaging in dialogue."

Wilhelm: "«I will be hearing the truth today», is what your messenger told me, so I would appreciate it if you would directly discuss the main topic today."

His gaze turned slightly to Ferris, who was standing next to Crusch, holding her wrist. Today, Ferris was wearing a short dress, through which his tail extended.

Cunning, but skilled at prompting discussion, a skill that benefitted a member of the nobility. Better than herself, at the very least. Crusch gave this mental evaluation of Ferris. Setting that thought aside,

Crusch: "The «truth» being referred to is the reason why Bordeaux was unable to assist you in subjugating the White Whale."

Wilhelm: "Indeed, no matter who I ask, I never receive a straight answer. What on earth is so grave that no one is willing to say it? Please inform me."

Crusch: "Once you know, there is no going back. Knowing this, do you still want the answer?"

Wilhelm: "If this is an obstacle in my quest for the vengeance of my wife, I will overcome it."

Steel's nature was one never to bend.

Hearing Wilhelm's reply, Crusch exhaled deeply.

It was the answer she had been expecting, as well as the answer she had been hoping to hear. But giving a reply was difficult.

What Crusch was about to discuss was information that could only disclosed to a limited number of people in the Kingdom. Leaking it to Wilhelm, an exile from the house of the Sword Saint, was not something that could be done lightly.

She braced herself and revealed her information in one beat. But that was all it took.

Crusch: "His Majesty Randohal has passed away."

Wilhelm: “—!”

Wilhelm’s eyes widened, and his expression became one of understanding. But the surprise was not over.

Crusch: “It is not just His Majesty. The entire bloodline of the ancient Royal Family of Lugunica has come to an end.”

Wilhelm: “Absurd! Such a thing cannot happen!”

The kneeling Wilhelm looked up, bared his teeth, and raised his voice. Those words were far too absurd and had brought fury to the old man. It was completely expected, after all Wilhelm—

Crusch: “Is it a shock to you, one who formerly led the Royal Knights of Lugunica?”

Wilhelm: “…”

Crusch: “This is the truth of the matter. His Majesty and his relatives were struck down by an illness which seemed to affect the blood of the Royal Family solely. Although the best healers in the country were summoned, the Royal Family did not survive.”

Wilhelm: “The entire Royal Family… Their bloodline has been disrupted… such a thing, how could it possibly…?”

Wilhelm fell shakily onto his hands as Crusch made the cold announcement. In truth, he understood.

The abrupt change in Bordeaux and the reason why no one would hear his appeal. Something major, something affecting the very existence of the Kingdom—something enough to turn even the White Whale into a mere triviality.

But Wilhelm’s anger was not shallow enough for him to be able to discard it.

But to whom did he hold this anger toward? Where should he direct it? What should he do about it? Even Wilhelm did not know, and so he pushed a fist against the floor and attempted to stifle it. The fist on the floor trembled, the floor cracked, and his blood flowed. He closed his eyes and bit his lip, trying to summon the last bit of reserve he had left.

But this could not be.

This should not be.

Crusch: “This is not the place that you should be directing your anger toward.”

Wilhelm: “—What…”

Crusch: “Your situation has not changed, except that the clouds have cleared and that you have found your answer. Now that you know the answer, what are your thoughts?”

Wilhelm: “There is no need to humiliate me further. You… What do you understand…?!”

Crusch: “I certainly do not understand anything, and I do not have the capability to even try. Currently, I am merely attempting to insert myself into a story whose characters I admire, who are on the verge of resigning themselves and stopping.”

Wilhelm’s still contained fury, however, the fire had died down slightly. Because it was a fleeting, swaying flame, one which had lost sight of a future. It was far from the intense flame Crusch wanted to see, but it was a flame, nonetheless.

Crusch: “I told you, Wilhelm. After hearing the truth, there is no turning back. This is a matter concerning the future of the kingdom, and you are now just an old tree of an experienced swordsmen.”

Wilhelm: “…And why do you want to belittle this dying, weathered tree?”

Crusch: “No, you misunderstand me, Wilhelm. What I want from you is just one answer. It is your turn to answer. I have been asking you from the beginning, first the encounter in the prison, and now here. Even if we meet again, I will continue posing the same initial question.”

Wilhelm: "…"

Crusch: "Wilhelm Trias—Are you truly okay with the way this affair will develop?"

A sigh of relief.

The old man's eyes, which had fallen into a murky depression, shot open. In there, was a blue that reflected the sky.

Crusch nodded.

Crusch: "In front of you, is the Duchess who is currently one of the most important people in the Kingdom. Prior to this, the senior aristocrats who could lend a hand to you denied you, and those who were willing to assist could not provide the necessary strength to defeat the Whale. Others who could assist would choose to use the subjugation as an excuse for personal gain."

Wilhelm: "You… What, exactly, are you trying to say…?"

Crusch: "It's the same question I have asked you, and I will keep asking. Other than the answer to this question, between the two of us, there is nothing more to discuss."

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm fell silent and tried to look deep into Crusch's heart.

But, Crusch's heart was not something that Wilhelm could see through. Even Crusch herself had difficulty adequately expressing what she felt. Perhaps, Ferris was the only one who could see though her.

And that Ferris, ignoring the heat between Crusch and Wilhelm, leaned closer into Crusch, his face showing no sign of worry or anxiety. Because he knew that his role was, above all, to provide Crusch with support. And Crusch, perhaps more than anyone else, understood Ferris and what actions meant.

Therefore, Crusch Karsten continued to question Wilhelm relentlessly.

Crusch: “Wilhelm. Shall you continue like this, soon your path will be cut off. And, with that path, your quest for vengeance on the Witchbeast cannot be fulfilled. And you will continue to waste away.”

Wilhelm: “…You are willing to lend me a chance to continue to swing my sword?”

Crusch: “I will say it again. Wilhelm, the one posing the question is me. The one who must answer is you.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Crossing her arms, Crusch threw those words at him. Hearing them, Wilhelm exhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

Then he fixed his posture, adjusted his pose on the spot, and opened his eyes.

The blue flame dwelling in his eyes caused Crusch to tremble unconsciously.

Wilhelm: “—In slaying the White Whale that killed my wife, I would like you to lend me your power.”

Crusch: “…I am just the same as the senior aristocrats that refused all your proposals. Why appeal to me?”

Wilhelm: “Duchess Karsten, can you forgive the White Whale and allow it to continue to wreak havoc upon Lugunica?”

Crusch: “I will not forgive it. Certainly, I could never forgive such cruelty, such barbarity, such violence, such ruthlessness. But—”

Pausing, Crusch gazed at Wilhelm and closed her eyes.

Crusch: “What I find most unforgivable is that the existence of the White Whale made so many people change their way of living. Unable to be themselves and act as their soul desires, their souls are defiled and become dim… That is what I find unforgivable. So, Wilhelm. What I cannot forgive today is your attitude.”

Wilhelm: “…I am a most unworthy figure, aren’t I?”

Crusch: “Yes, unworthy. I cannot bear to look at you. Such humiliation is not something that should be experienced. Therefore, the man-eating fiend causing it is also unforgivable.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm raised his gaze to meet Crusch’s eyes. Crusch unflinchingly faced his sharp, piercing gaze.

Crossing gazes, the two simultaneously relaxed their mouths, and smiled as one.

Wilhelm: “What will you ask of this weathered, old tree, my Lord?”

Crusch: “It has been decided. All I wish to see is true, bright, unashamed soul of the Sword Demon, Wilhelm van Astrea. There is little aside from that.”

Wilhelm: “I cast off the title Sword Demon and the house Astrea a long time ago. As long as the White Whale lives, I do not intend to reclaim either of them.”

Crusch: “Then, allow me to prepare the victory ceremony for you. We will one day recover your name, Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm: “—Yes.”

He nodded solemnly as a response to Crusch’s words and accepted them. Seeing his gesture, Crusch nodded, satisfied, and approached Wilhelm, detaching the sword that hung at her waist.

Crusch: “Receive it.”

Wilhelm received the sword as if it were natural, and unsheathed it in a single smooth flowing motion. Turning it around, the sword was presented to Crusch. Upon receiving it, Crusch moved it to lightly touch Wilhelm’s left shoulder with its tip, then repeated the motion on his right shoulder.

Crusch: “I hold only one expectation toward you, Wilhelm. As long as you live up to it, all will be well.”

Wilhelm: “My sword shall be devoted to you. My body shall be indebted to you. My own soul shall make an Oath to you.”

Crusch: “—Mhm. That is good.”

In response to that oath, Crusch pulled the blade, and held it out in front of Wilhelm. Presenting the sword to Wilhelm again, Wilhelm received it, sheathing it back into its scabbard, and raised it in reverence. They nod at each other in understanding.

Crusch: “Keep this sword. As a swordsman, holding a sword is necessary, no?”

Wilhelm: “But…”

Crusch: “I want to see you wielding this sword, with the attitude of a swordsman.

In the face of Crusch’s expectation, Wilhelm blinked and stood. Then, the tall old man with that treasured sword bowed to Crusch, attached his new sword to his waist, and straightened up.

In that moment, Crusch felt her previous state of confusion and anxiety blow away.

—Here, the Oath between the Duchess and the swordsman was made.

To fulfill Wilhelm’s wish and to fulfill Fourier’s dreams. If the heavens had chosen Crusch Karsten for this task, she would live up to their will.

To follow the guidance of one’s soul and to act the way it was desired. In this regard, Crusch would take up all that she could carry and stride toward a tranquil, cherished, distant future.

—On this day, the Sword Demon found his greatest ally in his quest to subjugate the White Whale.

This was the real beginning of the unity of Royal Selection’s Crusch

Camp.

5

Ferris: “Ahhhhh~, seeing you two would make anyone jealous.”

Wilhelm, who had found a path to fulfilling his ambition, and Crusch, who had established a connection with the one she had admired so much. Seeing how the two had laid down their worries and were now embracing in joy, Ferris bounced on his heels.

Ferris: “Lady Crusch jumped into the main topic way too quickly.”

Originally, Crusch had meant to first relay the story of the King’s death, before denouncing the White Whale and finally persuading Wilhelm to join the camp.

Even so, a fiery passion had entered Crusch, and she had jumped straight into recruiting Wilhelm. Although Wilhelm’s blindness worked in their advantage, Ferris’s heart was pounding like he had just successfully walked off a tightrope. He did not want to see a despondent Lady Crusch who had failed in her task, especially since the one she had been trying to recruit was the Sword Demon who she had admired so much.

Ferris: “Lady Crusch really does make people anxious… But, that’s also a very moving quality.”

Becoming a King Candidate and aiming to garner support by hunting the White Whale. Ignoring the preliminaries of conversation and immediately bringing up the main topic, Crusch had been clearly eager to free Wilhelm, in turn clouded by his frustration and desire for revenge.

Ferris, too, would stand by their side and support them through their hunt. He too was well-aware of what the White Whale had done to so many families, and as one of the country’s leading healers, Ferris believed in removing as much weakness as possible in the Kingdom.

Ferris: “Seeing this charming Lady Crusch, Ferri doesn’t want to take his eyes off her for even a second.”

Quietly narrowing his calm yellow eyes, Ferris regarded the old man who had just shed away a heavy burden and gained the weight of Crusch’s expectations.

A person who Crusch had taken a personal interest in. What would happen if he betrayed her expectations?

Ferris: “There are some things that I dislike thinking about.”

The young man’s words were so quiet that they dissipated in the wind before they could reach anyone’s ears.

—Six months after that evening, when the Royal Selection was well under way, the dream of the subjugation of the White Whale became a reality.

Short Story Compendium 3

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days I
(Volume 10; Melon Books)
(Translation Pending)

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days II
(Volume 11; Melon Books)
(Translation Pending)

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days III (Volume 12; Melon Books)

1

It was an event that happened during the rest period after a long day’s work.

Frederica and Petra were soaking in the waters of a warm bath after a hard day’s work.

“Sister Frederica, were you able to do everything without mistakes from the beginning?”

“Huh?” Frederica squeaked at the younger maid’s sudden question, her voice echoing off the bathroom walls.

In terms of her training to work as a maid under Frederica, Petra’s growth and ability to learn were truly remarkable. Her appearance as she listened was adorable, and she would always compliment those around her.

Frederica was in the middle of evaluating Petra’s efforts when she asked her that sudden question.

Honestly, she was surprised. Surprised, which changed into amusement. She certainly wasn’t perfect in the beginning.

“Sister Frederica? Why are you laughing?”

“Haha! It’s just so funny to hear that. I was actually around your age when I started working. And just like you, I couldn’t do anything at the start. No, I was worse than you.”

“What? No way. It’s not good to lie like that.”

Despite Frederica’s response, Petra decided to reprimand her in her own way, which only made Frederica smile even more.

"I'm happy that you think so highly of me. But there was a time when I was inexperienced and had to be taught the basics by my senior."

"…Sister Frederica's senior…" Petra made a complicated face as she struggled to imagine that.

Seeing Petra wear such a deeply concerned expression, Frederica rested her hand on her cheek. "Hmm, it's kind of embarrassing, but how about I tell you a story about my early days as a maid?"

"…! Yes, please! I want to hear about your awkward past!"

"D-Don't say it like that! Geez, this girl…"

The way she said it made it sound like Frederica was making a naked confession.

Although the two maids weren't wearing a single stitch of clothing, that wasn't quite the same thing.

And talking about her rookie days, comparing herself to Petra was in fact embarrassing.

"You don't have to act so excited. I'm starting to regret bringing this up…"

"Ah, no. You can't just get out of this now! You know all of my worst qualities, so this will make us even!"

"You'll definitely grow up into a troublesome maid. I'll have to tell Mr. Subaru about this later," Frederica decided, being defeated by the pushy Petra.

In any case, Frederica now had to satisfy the sparkly eyed Petra.

"Right then, where do I start…"

"Umm…Start from your senior! I want to hear about your senior. What kind of maid was she?"

"The person who taught me…"

Petra's idea saved Frederica from her initial struggle. But the new topic caused Frederica to struggle with her words.

A senior housekeeper. Just like Frederica was one to Petra, there was another who was one to her. But that wasn't something that was easy for her to speak of.

"Could we do this some other time?"

"Sister Fre-de-ri-ca."

"I-I get it. You don't have to look at me like that…" Frederica lost to the angelic, pleading eyes before her. "First, let me correct one thing. The person who taught me wasn't a maid. He was the steward of the mansion at the time."

"The steward?"

"A steward is someone that's in charge of the butlers and maids. A role that requires the ability and trust to look after a household. The Mathers household was my first workplace, and he was in charge of it."

Frederica tried her best to remove any preconceived notions that the sparkly eyed Petra had. But the harshness of her voice still came through.

"A man. The steward…"

"His name was Clind. He was the master's steward for a long time… And in fact, he was the perfect servant anyone could ask for. You could learn a lot from him. But stay away from him any other time."

"S-Sister Frederica? You're acting kind of scary…"

"Sorry. I wasn't trying to scare you. But, judging from what he likes, you're definitely his type, Petra. So stay away from him."

Frederica's face started to turn red, irrelevant to the water, while Petra looked on worriedly. Seeing that, Frederica lowered her eyes and reached out to touch Petra's cheek softly. "Listen, Petra. Clind is a very dangerous man. He may look proper, but his mind is dirty and twisted. He's a pervert that stares at young girls with a lewd gaze!"

"A-A pervert!"

"That's why he looked after me diligently when I first started.. And I believed that that was just kindness. But after a few years, his attitude completely changed…!"

Recalling such memories made her blood boil. It was right when she was going through her growth spurt: she quickly got taller, and her breasts got larger.

Her body was changing from a girl to a woman. And Clind's attitude towards Frederica had changed because of that. Seeing her steward suddenly become cold towards her, Frederica was worried that she'd done something to offend him. But that had shifted to resentment once she realized the truth of the situation.

And in the end, affection became resentment, and their relationship remained frosty to this day.

Petra watched silently as Frederica became red with rage.

And so she called out to Frederica and swam over to her, before leaping into her arms.

"I don't like the steward who taught you either!"

"R-Really? That's great…Wait, great isn't quite the right word I'm looking for. Accurate? Proper? Logical…? "

"Anyway! I don't like him! Now we're the same!" grinned Petra.

"Yes, we are… Then let's leave it at that."

Frederica was still worrying that telling her was a mistake, but seeing how Petra had become more guarded, she decided to leave it at that.

And besides…

"Sister Frederica, can I join you in your room? I want to sleep together."

"Oh, you're such a spoiled child. Okay. Alright, bring your pillow over."

Since Petra was so cute, it seemed fine as it was.

2

After hearing about the man called Clind, Petra came to a realization. At this rate, Frederica would one day be taken away by some man.

Petra had great respect for Frederica.

Though she'd only known Frederica for a few days, she still felt strongly protective about her, regardless of how little time had passed.

If time actually mattered, then her feelings of love would be considered shallow. But feelings could surpass time. Feelings of love… and of respect.

Although she conceded that time could make feelings stronger as well.

And by seeing Frederica like that in the bath, she realized that Frederica had strong, deep, and complex feelings towards a steward that Petra had never met.

It was similar to hearing her mother complain about her father. But her mother didn't hate him. In fact, they loved each other.

In any case, the human heart is complex. Even more so if the person didn't realize it themselves.

That's why Petra came to a clear conclusion. She would become someone that Frederica loved more than whatever she had felt for that man.

Petra knocked on the door and called in. "Sister Frederica, can I come in?”

“Yes, come on in.”

All live-in servants were given their own rooms. Petra also had her own room near Frederica’s, but she wasn’t yet used to sleeping alone in this large mansion.

And so ever since her first day, she’d been coming to Frederica’s room each night.

“Evening, Petra. You’re later than usual today.”

Holding her pillow, Petra was welcomed into the room by the familiar voice. Wearing her white nightgown, Frederica was a beauty to look at. With her long blonde hair loose, and her feminine curves hugged by her nightgown, she was like a princess straight out of a fairy tale.

And with her emerald-green eyes, she smiled at Petra, who said, “Yes. I was in the dining room. I was wondering if the food was gone.”

“Ms. Beatrice’s, you mean.”

Petra fidgeted silently.

On the dining room table was food that could be eaten even when it was cold. It was there so that the last occupant of the mansion, Beatrice, could eat it if she was awake during the night.

Petra knew of her existence. But she had never spoken with her, or even had proper confirmation that she was living in the mansion.

“But Subaru asked me to…”

“Mister Subaru, you mean.”

“Ah, sorry.”

Petra hid her face in her pillow over her mistake. Usually she would deliberately forget to call Subaru by his proper title in front of him, but this time it was actually a mistake.

“We can keep working on it. It took me a long time to get used to it as well.”

“You had trouble with it too?”

“Of course I did. I didn’t mention it before, but I have a hard time remembering things. I had a lot of trouble using appropriate language at work.”

Frederica had a very proper manner of speaking. And the impression of that was so strong that Petra couldn’t imagine her without it.

As if reading Petra’s mind, Frederica made a sour face. “I’m digging myself deeper again…”

“What kind of trouble did you have? Could you not remember proper language like me?”

“That’s, well… I wish it was just that…” Frederica twiddled her fingers in front of her bashfully. That piqued Petra’s interest as to what kind of secrets she had been hiding.

They stared at each other in silence for a bit.

“Normally, I would also talk to others without the use of sir this, sir that,” confessed Frederica. “But for formal occasions…I tried to speak with a certain decorum…”

“What do you mean?”

“W-Well I tried to imitate someone I knew well, a lady who raised me. And well… I ended up speaking in a really old-fashioned way.”

“Old-fashioned way?”

“Your lowly servant, Frederica Baumann, welcomes thee to Mathers Manor.”

Saying that was a serious looking Frederica dressed in her nightgown. But those words were so strange to hear that Petra froze for a moment.

But she quickly caught hold of herself and burst into peals of laughter.

“Puh, ha-ha-ha-ha! F-Frederica…! Thee…!”

“It was embarrassing… And it took a long time to fix.”

“Lowly servant… Thee…!”

“Geez! How long are you going to laugh for?! It’s night now, so don’t make so much noise. Come on, hurry into bed!”

Petra couldn’t stop laughing, so Frederica pointed to the bed sternly. Seeing that, Petra came up to the bed and dived right in.

Lining up her pillow next to Frederica’s she lightly patted it down. “I welcome thee,” she joked.

“Pe-tra.”

“Hee-Hee! Good night. Sweet dreams.”

Petra closed her eyes and pretended to be sleeping. Frederica sighed, blowing out the lights, and entered the bed herself.

“It’d be nice if the food was gone tomorrow morning,” Petra mumbled to Frederica with her eyes still closed. And hopefully during the night the food would be taken by a still-awake girl.

“Yes, I hope so too,” mumbled Frederica in response.

Upon hearing that, Petra cuddled closer in Frederica’s warm embrace and quickly fell asleep.

And so she wished to have another blissful day with her loved ones.

And for that Clind person to catch a cold.

END

Frederica and Petra’s Maid Days IV (Volume 13; Melon Books)

1

It was an event that took place while Petra was deep in her own train of thought.

“Hello, cute little lady, do you have a moment?”

“Who? Me?” A voice called out from behind her in the middle of town, and Petra turned around without hesitation. She didn’t recognize the voice, but she recognized the words. If there was anyone in the village who would be considered cute, it would be her. That wasn’t Petra’s vanity speaking, but rather her pride.

Petra Leyte, a ten-year-old girl, still believed that she could use cuteness to accomplish anything.

“Ah…”

And that cute Petra was a little surprised by the owner of the voice.

Before her stood a maid from the mansion near Earlham Village, dressed in a black pinafore. The dress was practical yet elegant and for Petra, who aspired to work with clothing, it drew her interest. Then there was the tall golden-haired woman wearing said dress who also drew her eye. Her long, slender arms and legs enhanced her femininity and her womanly figure increased her appeal. To young Petra, she possessed the ideal body. She was everything that she lacked. However…

She kept her jealous thoughts to herself and welcomed the lady with a smile. “Are you from the mansion? Do you need something?”

Being a beauty was not the same as being a cute girl. Cuteness was still capable of fighting against beauty. And so, Petra, wielding such potential, was prepared to stand her ground.

Honestly, whenever Petra remembered her past vain-filled self, her face would burn with embarrassment.

But the Petra of a few years ago knew nothing of the thoughts of Petra in the future. Even here and now, she believed that "cuteness trumped all," and used it without hesitation.

"That's right," the lady replied. "There is something I wish to ask." To Petra's winning smile, the woman calmly showed one of her own.

Most people would swoon at one look at that smile, but here it didn't work. Even the times it stunned them for a few seconds was proof of Petra's cuteness.

Since she wasn't getting the reaction she wanted, Petra doubled down against her tough opponent. "Something you wish to ask? I hope I can give you the answer you're looking for."

"Thank you. I wish to ask where the mayor's house is. The truth is, I haven't traveled here from the master's mansion much…"

"Does that mean you are new to the lord's mansion?" Petra clapped her hands together at the realization. "Ah, that's why. You're such a pretty person, I thought it was strange I've never seen you before."

"…Oh. You're very good at compliments."

Petra's eyes sparkled while the lady gently placed her hand to her lips and giggled. Elegant mannerisms, a mature composure. These were things she wanted to learn for her future.

"Will you be staying at the mansion from now on?" asked Petra.

"No, I happened to be summoned here today. But even when I come here to help out, the mansion and the master's needs are mostly handled by someone else."

“I see. That’s a shame.”

The lady’s eyes widened slightly at Petra’s words. “How so?” she asked.

Without any ulterior motive, Petra just stuck out her tongue bashfully and smiled. “It’s just, you seemed so wonderful—I wanted to become friends with you.”

“…”

“Miss?”

Seeing the lady pause quietly for a moment, Petra tilted her head at the perfect cute angle. It was a carefully practiced move, and when the lady saw it she gently cleared her throat. “N-No. It’s nothing. I’m very happy to hear you say that. If a chance arises, I would like to become friends with you too.”

“Yes, I understand. Ah, right, the mayor’s house. It’s this way.” Feeling slightly disappointed at the lady’s polite lip service, Petra pretended to remember her original request and began directing her to the house.

While leading her, Petra snuck glances at the lady’s uniform. Someday, when I have a job as a seamstress in the capital, it might make for a good reference, she thought, all the while thinking that she would love to wear such an adorable uniform at least once.

2

“I was really rude to you back then…” muttered Petra.

“I-It’s fine, Petra,” Frederica replied. “After all, you were still a young girl, and you didn’t know you were going to be working here.”

“E-Even a ten-year-old should be able to tell what’s okay and what’s not okay to do. I was such an idiot back then…” Even as her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, Petra bowed deeply and apologized profusely. Bewildered by the situation, Frederica gave a wry smile as she recalled that memory.

Frederica had been preparing breakfast when a docile-looking Petra had come up to her saying, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Since Petra looked so sullen, Frederica was worried that the younger maid had made a mistake in her work and so stopped preparing breakfast to hear her out.

And as the senior maid, Frederica prepared herself for anything. But what Petra wanted to talk about was over something that had taken place two years ago, when the two had first met.

“I understand that you feel responsible and want to apologize…”

Honestly, it was something that Frederica had almost completely forgotten.

Two years ago, Frederica was working for the Miload family, a branch family of House Mathers, and had been called to Roswaal Manor for some work. There she had been asked to deliver a message to the mayor of the local village, and had asked Petra for directions.

Back then, Petra was just a simple village girl only ten years of age. It would have been difficult to act more maturely even when asked, and Frederica wasn’t so harsh as to ask that in the first place. However, even though it wasn’t an event that she had paid heed to, hearing Petra mention it herself made her realize that there was more to the memory than she realized. She realized that she had been taken in by Petra’s cuteness.

Having an unexpected attack from a blossoming flower in an unexpected place was immeasurable, especially to Frederica, who liked cute things. Especially at the mansion, where she had been treated coldly by a charmless junior servant. After that, there’d be no way one wouldn’t be moved by being treated with such kindness.

“Sister Frederica?”

“A-Anyway, there’s nothing to be worried about. And for you to apologize when there’s nothing to apologize for… I had forgotten myself.”

“I don’t think it’s good to try and cover up one’s rude actions even when others have forgotten about it.”

“Th-That’s right. You always seem to teach me something…” Receiving such a proper, straightforward answer, Frederica began to think less of herself. She rested her hand on her cheek and sighed, while Petra slowly raised her head. Seeing her act like a guilty criminal, Frederica smiled gently. “It’s not a big deal. And Petra, was everything you remembered so bad?”

“What do you mean by bad…?”

“I remember it, too. That time, you said that you wanted to become friends with me.”

“Ah.” Petra’s eyes went wide as she recalled her words.

“And then I replied, ‘If I get a chance, I would like to become friends with you as well.’ Seeing as how that promise has been fulfilled, don’t you think it’s fate?”

“Then, we were always destined to be sisters, right?”

Seeing Petra light up like that, Frederica resisted the urge to give her a big hug.

She’s just so adorable. Every day, Frederica found her resistance being gradually worn down by Petra’s endearing demeanor; but this would have to be restored by her dignity as the senior maid.

“R-Right… I…I was destined to be your sister.”

“I’m so happy to hear that. If you think like that, that means that I got everything I wanted back then.” Petra didn’t notice the fluttering in Frederica’s voice as she counted off her fingers. “I got to see your uniform up close, and I even got to wear it. I became friends with you, I got to learn to do this job…and I became cuter than before! Right?”

“Yes, you’re very cute,” Frederica immediately replied. It was normally something she wouldn't be able to say, given her position, so now she said it with force.

"Th-Thank you very much."

Seeing Petra bashful—her cheeks colored with embarrassment—Frederica felt satisfied. But then, she had a sudden thought. "This was quite sudden. Was there something that made you remember that time?"

"Hmm, nothing specifically." Petra fidgeted as she considered Frederica's question. She looked awkward as she considered whether or not to answer, before making up her mind. "The truth is ever since I've been with you, there was something that was bothering me. And it finally hit me."

"It hit you?" replied Frederica, subconsciously mimicking Petra's cute tone.

"It did."

In any case, Frederica wondered what the spark was. If it caused her to remember something, then it would have to be related to it.

"Ah, maybe…"

"M-Maybe what?! Did I make some major mistake?!"

"S-Sister? Why are you panicking?"

Frederica had just relaxed from the previous topic, so the new one made her panic in response. She hid her panic with a smile and shook her head slightly. "No, I'm not panicking. 'A servant must always be calm and composed'; that was beaten into me…by that man!"

"Sister? Sister?"

"R-Right. No matter who taught me, the lesson wasn't wrong. I am calm and composed." Shaking off the remnants of that man from her mind, Frederica took a deep breath. "So, what did you realize, Petra? Could you tell me?"

“Umm, it’s not anything big…” replied Petra, playing with her hair sheepishly at Frederica’s question. “Do you remember last night before we slept?”

“I remember that you were lonely and you crawled into my bed.”

“R-Right, but not that. Remember? What you said before we slept.”

Frederica racked her memory, but she couldn’t remember. She couldn’t recall saying anything special. She could only remember calling Petra cute.

“Hello, cute little lady, do you have a moment?” recalled Petra.

“…I’m sorry?”

“That’s what you said to me before we slept. And it was the same thing you said to me two years ago when we first met.”

“…”

“I’m sure that’s what made me remember. It’s embarrassing, though.”

Petra most likely added on those words to help play it off. However, to be using the same words, Frederica felt like she hadn’t grown at all. Or possibly, that her feelings of wanting to hug Petra hadn’t changed since they first met.

“…Well, you certainly are cute.”

“Ehe-he-he.”

Frederica gave up all resistance and gently patted Petra on the head, who accepted it with an adorable smile. Then her eyes suddenly went wide. “Ah. Sorry. I interrupted your breakfast preparations.”

“It’s fine. We shared a nice little memory together.” Frederica smiled at Petra. “Also, could you help me with some final preparations? If you do, then I’ll forgive your actions from two years ago.”

Petra looked a bit shocked before breaking into a big smile. “Yes, Sister Frederica.”

“There’s that cutie I know so well.” Seeing Petra’s smile made her blurt that out, and Frederica admired the person she was two years ago.

The Frederica back then had managed to maintain their composure enough to protect Petra’s memory.

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Garfiel and Ram’s Complicated Love Affair
(Volume 10; Toranoana)
(Translation Pending)

Garfiel and Ram’s Really Complicated Love Affair
(Volume 11; Toranoana)
(Translation Pending)

Garfiel and Ram's Extra Complicated and Twisted Love Affair
(Volume 12; Toranoana)

1

—There was a place known as the Sanctuary, deep within the Lost Forest of Kremaldy.

Within it was only a small village and ruins with a deep history. The people there had gathered there for a very specific reason and were living together and supporting each other.

They were hybrids between humans and demi-humans—the ones that were called Mixed-Bloods.

Mixed-Bloods weren't in a good position in the Kingdom of Lugunica where people still feared the Witch of Envy and had scars left behind from the Demi-human War.

They used blood as a reason for their unjust discrimination, leaving behind a deep-rooted grudge.

The Sanctuary was also a place of refuge to protect Mixed-Bloods from the eyes of discrimination. Thus, those living there had acquired peace of mind, but only by turning a blind eye to a certain degree of inconvenience.

They all loved living in peace and were relishing in it.

And that was more of a reason why—

"—The hell is up with bringing so many outsiders here, haa?!" Garfiel said scornfully while receiving more than ten dragon carriages. He was a blond boy with his sturdy arms crossed and had a wild, dreadful aura. The earth dragon was frightened, and the people were cringing with fear at his angry gaze. But the gaze and the dreadful air that had made the people tremble was just a side effect of the thing that was directed towards his original target. Garfiel's gaze was directed at Ram alone, who was standing in front of the dragon carriage.

"…" Ram said something to the coachman after stepping out of it and boldly confronted Garfiel. As the people around watched with bated breath, she squinted her pink eyes and said, "Quite a welcoming reception, Garf, even though it's been so long since Ram has shown her face to you."

"Ha, my amazin' self feels like givin' ya a big smile and hug too, but things ain't gonna be that easy. Why the hell did you bring them here?"

"Ram wants to say that we're here on a small group trip, but she knows you won't believe something like that. —We are evacuating."

"Evacuating, huh?"

Garfiel crinkled up his nose at the not so peaceful word.

"Yes." Ram nodded at his response and pointed at the people behind her with her chin. "We traveled through the night, so everyone is tired. Let us rest for now. I'll let them inside the village right away, so kindly inform Master Roswaal and Miss Ryuzu."

"That doesn't explain much. My amazin' self hasn't heard anything about lettin' you guys in or not lettin' you guys in."

"Use your imagination and put two and two together. Royal selection, Witch Cult, evacuation, Ram is cute. That's all."

"Was that last part necessary?" Garf asked with doubt, but when Ram glared at him, he reluctantly nodded. However, before letting the dreadful air go, he looked once again at the group of dragon carriages behind her. "I'm tellin' ya. Even if you guys are with Ram, my amazin' self won't tolerate any shenanigans. Like they say, Kegeraine never draws a blank. Try ta behave yourselves at the very least."

Garfiel flashed his fangs, emphasizing them, then smacked them together, and with a light leap, he disappeared into the forest. He likely went to inform people about their arrival, following Ram's order.

"Lady Ram, will we be…safe around that person?"

It was the village chief who had asked that anxiously—she was an old lady who represented the refugees from Earlham Village. The old lady had asked her that in a faint voice so it wouldn't make the people around them anxious.

"Yes," Ram replied, nodding at the old lady's question. "You'll be fine as long as you behave yourselves like Garf…Garfiel said."

"Lady Ram, are you and that person close?"

"Ram is close…we've known each other for a long time. So Ram knows how to deal with him."

Ram looked in the direction Garfiel had disappeared to after listening to the words of the old lady that still sounded concerned.

Ram knows how to deal with him since she's known him for ten years. But even so… "Ram wonders how far Garf will go to protect this place."

2

—The Witch Cult was hiding in the vicinity of Roswaal Manor and Earlham Village.

That was the disaster that had recently befallen Ram and the others. That was the reason why she had come along with the refugees to the Sanctuary, which was under Garfiel's protection.

Around 100 villagers from Earlham Village had been evacuated. Half of them had followed Ram and come to the Sanctuary.

—The other half had more reason to worry.

"Lady Emilia is the Witch Cult's target… But then, Barusu will do something about that."

Ram stopped worrying about it after thinking of the boy whose intel had led them to evacuate.

The staff there should do their best to take care of things on their end. In return, Ram will do her best to respond to the trust Ram was given. For now, our priority is to set up a temporary dwelling—in the stone cathedral in front of us.

"The old hag told my amazin' self to, so it can't be helped, but I ain't welcoming them here. I'm just lending this place to y'all outta the goodness of my heart. Just be grateful."

"Alright, alright. Ram understands."

It was Garfiel, the self-proclaimed watchdog, who said that while watching Ram's work from behind.

The place was inside the village within the Sanctuary, in a cathedral that was a bit separated from the residential area. It was a building that was used as a meeting place, and it was large enough to accommodate a lot of people. They were in a situation where they would have to sleep together in the nave, but some could be given private rooms if needed. The representative of the village, Ryuzu, had lent it to them after they had entered the Sanctuary.

"Ram can't let the villagers return to the village until the situation is taken care of… Ram can't be too greedy."

They might have to stay in the Sanctuary for a few days or a few weeks.

Ram wants to lessen the villagers' burdens as much as possible, but we need to be prepared to survive.

For that, the men were taking the lead in unloading the cargo from the dragon carriage, but…

"Hey, hey, put more force into it, you won't be able to move it like that!"

"You are being persistently noisy while doing absolutely nothing. How about helping us out if you have time to complain?"

“Hah, don’t make me laugh. My amazin’ self is the watchdog. And I’ve told you this before, but while I care about you, I don’t give a shit about outsiders.”

Garfiel heckled and snapped his fangs provocatively at Ram, who was carrying the load. He had been interrupting them like that for a while now to crush their spirits.

“…” The expressions of the villagers from Earlham didn’t look good due to Garfiel’s harsh attitude. It was obvious that they would feel anxious if they were blatantly not being welcomed at their place of refuge. Ram started thinking about whether she should defeat Garfiel and win their peace, and while she was having such thoughts, her work screeched to a halt, and…

“Hey, hey,” Garfiel said, shrugging at her. “Aaah, too slow, too slow. The sun is gonna set at this rate.”

“…”

“The hell. Everyone is workin’ with a gloomy face.”

“…”

“If that’s the case then…it’s that…Aah.”

“…”

“Aaah! I can’t watch this anymore!” Garfiel, who had been continuously interrupting them and was being ignored, exploded out of nowhere.

He passed the silent Ram and hopped onto the back of the dragon carriage that was being unloaded, easily picked up a load that would take two grown men to lift, and then jumped out. The work of unloading the cargo from the dragon carriage progressed quickly and furiously.

“Garf,” Ram called Garfiel, who was making the work efficient, from behind.

Garf responded to that and waved his hand in the air. “Hah, no need to thank me. My amazin' self couldn't look at how sluggish…"

"How unmannered you are. If you wanted to help, you should have asked for permission first."

"How could ya say something like that in this situation?!"

Garfiel goggled his eyes at Ram's arrogant words and dropped the load he was carrying. It rumbled when it fell to the ground, and as the people nearby looked at them in a startled manner, Garfiel snapped his fangs. "Don't get too cocky, Ram. My amazin' self helped you out on a whim. You're gonna regret it since I ain't gonna help you out anymore."

"Alright. Okay."

Ram nodded at Garfiel, who had clicked his tongue, and extended her hands towards the cargo he had dropped. She proceeded to put force into her thin arms and tried to lift it up, but it didn't even budge. It didn't move no matter what she did. Next, she lightly rotated her shoulders and tried tackling it, but she just bounced back.

"Hey! Don't push yourself too hard!"

"Ram is working at the moment. You are distracting her and in the way, so go somewhere else."

"Alright! Let me help! My amazin' self will do it! Happy now?!"

"…It's, 'please let me help'."

"Don't get co…pl-please let me, help…!"

"'I beg of you, Lady Ram.'"

"Shut up!! I'm gonna move it now!! Don't bother me!! Drink some cold water and rest!!" Garf howled at Ram's needless talk and tossed a bamboo cylinder with water to her.

After Ram caught it, Garfiel started moving the cargo to the cathedral with ease. He then began to do the work of a hundred men, leaving the villagers dumbfounded.

“La-Lady Ram, is it really okay to…”

“If he wants to do it, then let him do it. It’ll make it easy for us,” she replied to the awe-struck old woman after bringing the bamboo flask to her mouth and taking a sip of the cold water.

Garfiel’s work speed was impressive now that he was focused on physical labor. He moved the cargo in no time and freed the villagers from the grueling labor.

“You guys can talk with each other and decide who gets which room. Ram has to take care of Master Roswaal, so she will be going to the village. You can use the private room as you like.”

“Oh, ok…”

“There ya go! How’s this! I am done nowwww!!”

The old woman’s puzzled reply overlapped with Garfiel’s shouts as he finished moving the final load.

Garfiel walked back with long strides and heavy steps, and Ram welcomed him. “Good job… You haven’t thanked Ram for letting you help.”

“That’s really not funny!”

An angry, desperate voice echoed through the sky of the Sanctuary.

3

—The self-proclaimed watchdog’s inhumane harassment went on without end after that.

“Aah, you don’t know anything. How much time are you taking to take the water to the kitchen!”

“You don’t know anything at all. There’s a huge water jar in the cathedral, right? If fill it with water, it should be more than enough for you guys to wipe your body. My amazin’ self will go fill it up.”

“Wait a bit. My amazin’ self will go ask the old timers. You guys need a sewing kit, right?”

“Listen here. The village’s food is limited. You can’t eat three times a day. Two is the limit. Tell me when ya don’t have enough. Huh? Shut up, my amazin’ self will go get some from our reserves.”

“Do you guys have enough blankets? If ya don’t, then let me know, since there’s a limit ta how many people can fit under one.”

“Lady Ram, is it really okay?”

“If he wants to do it then let him do it. It’ll make it easy for us.”

The living standards of the refugees were drastically improved due to the active intervention of the watchdog.

Needless to say, it was also due to Ram’s taking advantage of him.

The village chief must have understood the true meaning behind Ram saying, “Ram knows how to deal with him.”

Of course, Garfiel himself was prepared to take on the role of negotiator—a position that didn’t suit him—to avoid unnecessary friction between the residents of the Sanctuary and the refugees.

“Yo, Ram, I’m back. Is there anything troubling you?”

“Yes. Ram’s shoulders are stiff from the continuous physical labor.”

“Alright. Leave it to…wait, I’m not going to massage them! Don’t use me for your own convenience!” Garfiel complained with his spit flying at Ram, who had turned her back towards him. To be honest, it was a bit too late for him to be complaining about being treated like a tool, but of course, neither Ram nor the villagers watching all of that pointed it out. But—

“Thank you very much, Garfiel,” said the old lady. “I thank you on behalf of the villagers.”

“Huh?” Garfiel looked puzzled when the old lady bowed her head.

The old lady smiled slightly at his reaction and pointed at the cathedral that was completely ready to take in all of the refugees. “I can’t say that we aren’t feeling anxious since we are staying in a borrowed space. However, you have provided us a place where we can sit down and face our worries. That alone is a huge help.”

Garfiel became quiet after hearing the old lady’s words of gratitude. Then, after a few moments of silence…

“Hah,” he said, rubbing his nose with his finger. “Stop it, stop it, it doesn’t matter. This place has a lot of old timers, so I helped out a lil’. I don’t intend on getting friendly with outsiders though.”

“Then you can’t be friendly with Ram, either. Goodbye Garf…no, Mister Garfiel.”

“Don’t get formal on me!”

“It’s a joke.” Ram shrugged her shoulders as if saying he couldn’t be helped.

Garfiel started breathing heavily at her attitude and turned towards the old lady again, flashing his fangs. “My amazin’ self doesn’t need your gratitude, human. No way I’m getting along with you guys. I did a lot of things, not for you, but because it would’ve been bad for my heart if I didn’t.”

Garfiel bit off her gratitude and turned his back to the old lady and the others. Like saying he didn’t care about what was going to happen next, he started walking away.

“If so, then…” the old woman said before continuing her words. “Us thanking you for your kindness is because it would be bad for our hearts if we didn’t.”

After Garfiel heard it, he stopped and looked behind him.

He looked at the old woman’s mild-mannered, cunning smile, and clicked his tongue with a “Damn it,” as if he felt awkward.

"You've lost."

"Hush, I'm not good with old timers. Dealing with them is such a drag."

"That's the best compliment you could give, Garf."

"It ain't a compliment and it ain't the best, either. I saved that one for you."

"Haa…you are an idiot." Ram let out a deep sigh at Garfiel, who said that without embarrassment. She caught up to him and started walking slowly next to him, making him give a curious tilt of his head. "Garf, you are too twisted to even accept gratitude honestly, so Ram will reward you since you're so hopeless. Be thankful."

"Ohh, that's very kind of you. I like your tea, Ram. It's not just the tea though."

At Garfiel, who had chomped his fangs and smiled without any hint of malice, Ram said, "You're such an idiot."

Then she muttered, "—Dummy." under her breath.

A slight smile appeared on her face soon after.

END

Garfiel and Ram’s Extra Complicated and Twisted Love Affair Zero

(Volume 13; Toranoana)

(Translation Pending)

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters’ Dark Diary, Kill 1
(Volume 12; Gamers)
(Translation Pending)

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters’ Dark Diary, Kill 2
(Volume 13; Gamers)
(Translation Pending)

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters’ Dark Diary, Kill 3
(Volume 14; Gamers)

1

The first time she laid eyes on her, it truly was a blood-stained sight.

Sitting in the middle of a red, blood-soaked field was a silent little girl. Her round, wide eyes—the wild and long, dark blue hair. Her childish figure was stained with dirt and mud, and the only thing covering her naked body was a tattered, dirty cloth.

That cloth, covered in dew and excrement, was the only thing remotely normal about what one could easily tell was a little girl. But what was truly strange about the scene was far more obvious.

Covering the little girl were the black stains of dried blood. But none of that blood had come from the girl herself. The source of the blood staining the field was the remnants of slaughtered bodies scattered all across it.

The field was part of a well-known witchbeast breeding ground.

Witchbeasts were the enemy of humanity, beings of destruction that existed only to destroy other living beings. Their danger was on another level from ordinary beasts, and some even held the potential to cast magic. And unlike beasts, they could never be tamed, and it was impossible to cooperate with them.

That’s why witchbeasts were the enemy of humanity, and why this place, which a herd of witchbeasts had settled in, became a place in which humans could never again set foot.

The entire area that the people had evacuated several years prior had become a den of witchbeasts. And in the forest their numbers multiplied, and any weak soul that entered would be eliminated. That’s why the numerous corpses surrounding the girl were not a strange sight, but in fact quite possible. What was strange, however, was that the corpses surrounding the girl were not of humans, but witchbeasts.

And the one who had made them that way was the girl.

“This is a much greater welcome than I was expecting. I don’t have any intention of harming you though.”

The little girl turned away from the field of witchbeast corpses. In front of her was a tall, pale girl with her hair tied into a braid. She looked to be about fifteen years of age, and her body was starting to form its feminine shape. And there was an immoral charm flowing from her that only an immature age could give.

Those deep, black eyes would likely bewitch many boys.

If it wasn’t for the knife she was holding in her hands, that charm would most likely get her mistaken for a high-class prostitute by many men.

However, the black-haired girl showed no interest in showing off her beauty, and at this point, it was all the same to the girl she was confronting.

The blood-covered little girl continued to glare in hatred at the girl who covered her in blood.

There was no sign of gratitude for eliminating the herd of witchbeasts. To the little girl, the witchbeasts were not enemies, though they could not be called family either.

At the very least, there was a strong emotion in her that could not be compared to the girl in front of her. In the little girl’s gaze, there was no friendliness, only sadness and killing intent.

In her heart was an overflowing urge to kill, in her eyes was an overbearingly animalistic gaze. These were proof of the tumultuous life this girl had, short as it may be.

Many would pity her for having such a life. But there was no such expression on the girl's face. There was no compassion in her, no fragment of pity to be found.

Ignoring everything they could have learnt about each other after having met, the two girls engaged.

"Are you angry that I'm trespassing on your home? Acting like that, you really do look no different from a witchbeast. You must be the queen of witchbeasts… No, princess seems more appropriate."

"Grr, grrr."

"If you can't talk, then you probably don't understand what I'm saying. Unfortunately, I've been ordered to bring you back. Even if you resist, I will bring you back alive. If you don't resist, then I can do this without hurting you."

"Aohh! Aohh!"

"So you can't understand. Well then, show me how you are going to resist."

The little girl screamed as if she would throw a tantrum, while the girl loosened her lips and lowered her head. The girl's braid slipped off her shoulder, and the little girl smacked her hand.

The next moment, a large shadow fell over the field as if it had been waiting for that signal. With a crooked horn and a lion's head, black fur, and massive claws, it was the unparalleled witchbeast, also known as the Black King of the Forest, the Guiltylowe.

"!!!"

With a thunderous roar, the air rushed past the girl like an explosion, carrying with it a foul smell. Gazing into the overwhelmingly dreadful appearance of the beast, the girl simply licked her lips. "Such a large friend you have there," she said. "Fabulous, simply fabulous."

Despite the danger to her life that was standing in front of her, the girl continued to remain calm. As if irritated by such an attitude, the Guiltylowe raised its claws and swiped at the girl to end her life in a single stroke.

With a force comparable to a hurricane and claws sharp enough to cut steel, the girl was split apart—or at least she should've been.

"That's no good. You have to be gentler with girls."

"…!"

The girl smiled gracefully as the front right leg of the fiend was sent flying. Its sense of balance lost along with its right leg, the witchbeast suddenly found itself the prey as it fell towards the girl. At that the girl jumped lightly into the air and prepared her blood-stained knife.

"A body incomparable in size to humans… What kind of insides will you show me?"

2

From the dreaded forest of witchbeasts, the Queen of Witchbeasts was born.

That story started a few months prior, when a merchant had escaped that forest with his life.

Entering the forest to escape the rain, he claimed he had seen a human girl leading the witchbeasts when he was chased by them far from the path. He was dismissed as making things up, but that story traveled from village to village and soon became a tale told around the table at the local watering hole.

That story was never proven either way and in a few months became a folk tale…

"And that's it, I suppose."

Just like the smiling girl declared, the fallen witchbeast had lost most of its lifeforce. It was completely one-sided. The howling beast struck with all of its might, but each and every attack was swiftly evaded by the girl, who would carve out pieces of the beast's flesh with every counter.

From the first strike, the witchbeast stood no chance. After the right leg was cut off, the tail, the back leg, and the center of the back vanished to her blade. And in the end it could only give a small whimper as it begged for death.

Of course, such an understanding could never be achieved between man and witchbeast, so the beast's wish went unheard. As a result, the witchbeast struggled until its very end.

"The strange color must be a product of its diet. Or maybe it's particular to this one? It smells terrible, but I would love to compare it to another one… Can you call another one?" asked the girl as she searched the freshly killed beast's stomach with her knife covered in its entrails. But the little girl did not respond; she just continued to look on in hatred.

Unfortunately, the little girl had nothing else to fall back on. No matter how miserable its end was, the Guiltylowe was her greatest weapon. And with it gone, she had nothing left.

"I see, so it is over… That's too bad."

Taking her silent glare as an answer, the girl stopped playing with the corpses. Seeing her start to walk towards her, the little girl stiffened. The knife in her hand had taken the life of a witchbeast that had ruled the forest, and in only a moment. And if that knife was targeted at her, then the little girl would have no means to protect herself.

However…

"…Ah."

"There's no need to worry, I did say I was going to bring you back. It's not like I have no interest in your body; it's just not enough to go against my orders. Relax.”

“Gao! Gaaoo! Aooao!!”

“…It’s not pleasant to be hated so much. My heart can’t heal such damage so fast.”

As she lifted her up, the little girl struggled with all her might. But because she was suffering from malnutrition, there was little she could do against her captor.

And so, the best that she could do to stop the girl was screaming as loud as she could.

“Gaoo, aooo!!”

“I understand wanting to kill me, but it’s impossible in your current state. Biting my neck only tickles… First you should focus on getting better.”

The little girl was biting her neck, but with her weakened jaw and teeth, it was doing little. Like the girl said, it was only tickling her. The girl continued walking, leaving behind the blood-stained field and the witchbeast forest in general.

During that whole time, the little girl continued to bite the girl’s neck. Her hatred running dry, her killing intent fading, she continued to nibble at the girl’s life with all her might.

And she would continue until her life expired.

3

“Aguu.”

“…Hm? What’s wrong?”

The black-haired girl, Elsa, tilted her head at the pair of lips being pressed against her neck. Her long braid tickled Meili’s nose as she pressed her face in.

Meili just made a strange face before replying, “Nothing. Just remembering the past a bit. About the time I just met you, and how I tried to kill you by biting you like thiiis."

"…Ah, such a thing happened, didn't it? But you were so small, it was like being bitten by a small dog. It just tickled."

"That was the best a kid could do. But you killed all my beloved witchbeasts, so I wanted to kill you in the worst way possible."

Puffing her cheeks out, Meili plopped herself down on the couch and hugged her knees. Seeing that protesting gaze, Elsa shrugged her shoulders uncharacteristically while lounging on the couch. "I believe I said at the start that I wasn't there to kill you."

"Who would believe that after seeing you chop up all of my witchbeasts? You really haven't changed since then, have you Elsa?"

"And you've changed quite a bit since then. You couldn't even speak before, but now you're talking so well."

"…It's not fair that you can speak so easily to people who are worrying so muuuch."

Elsa could only look on in confusion at Meili's pouting. For someone who was without the understanding of the human heart like Elsa, understanding another's feelings was impossible.

But Elsa's words were not wrong. In fact, when she had first met Meili, before she had been taken to human lands, Meili was closer to beast than man. It was not that she hadn't learned human words, it was that she had forgotten them.

The little girl back then had lived in the wild without the help of anyone. For that to be possible, what was needed wasn't words but power. And luckily for her, that had been with her since she had been born.

Whether that was her salvation or her damnation…was beyond Meili's understanding.

"If that hadn't happened, then I wouldn't have been punished by mama all the time.”

“But if it wasn’t for that, then I would have never met you. You would’ve been all alone.”

“I think I would have been eaten by witchbeasts first. You really are an idiiiot, Elsa,” giggled Meili.

“Oh, such a foul mouth. But that’s a twisted way of looking at the past.”

“Reallyyy? Then what other ways would you suggest?”

“If I hadn’t gone to retrieve you, then I would have never met you. That would be terribly lonely. You’re like my sister now. That’s why taking orders from others isn’t always so bad.”

Meili’s eyes went wide at hearing such an unexpected answer from Elsa; all she could do was look at her in bewilderment.

Elsa in return could only look at her in confusion. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“…Our first meeting was crazy, and now you’re saying things like this. You really are a strange person, Elsa.”

“I’m well aware I’m not normal, and it’s because I’m not normal that we can be like this. You and I are birds of a feather, strange sisters together.”

“That’s so stupid,” Meili spit out as she turned her face away.

Shrugging her shoulders at Meili’s attitude, Elsa reached out and softly touched her blue braid. “You’ve gotten better at braiding. Your hair used to be all over the place before.”

“That was the one thing you taught me well. Shouldn’t you stop leaving it to me when we’re together?”

“What’s wrong with that? You’re better at it than me.”

“Keep showing me your neck like that and I might bite you to death.”

Meili puffed out her cheeks as she let Elsa play with her braid.

“It’s fine. You won’t bite anymore, right?”

“I just bit you.”

“That was just a jest, not like it was back then.”

“…What about you? Do you ever want to open up my stomach?”

Those words were meant to be revenge, but it was still a strange question.

Elsa pondered for a little bit before replying, “Let’s see, I still have some interest in your insides. But not enough to destroy what we have here. Don’t worry.”

“…Hmmm, I see… Hmmm.”

Meili did her best to respond with little emotion and replied with only lazy responses. But she sat a little closer to Elsa on the couch and continued with the directionless conversation.

From a distance, without the smell of blood that lingered on them, it looked like just a pair of sisters chatting peacefully.

END

Elsa and Meili:
The Assassin Sisters' Dark Diary, Kill 4
(Volume 15; Gamers)

1

In front of the charred remains of the mansion stood alone a girl with her hair in a braid.

The ashen air blew through her blue hair as her gaze swept across the blackened ruins. She wasn't looking for anything; her eyes just wandered around aimlessly.

"…Ya ain't gonna find anything searchin' like that."

A voice called out from behind the girl. The voice was rough, but contained a trace of concern. Because of that, the girl didn't turn around. She simply relaxed her lips. That concern was laughable to her.

After all, the girl and the owner of the voice were recently involved in a battle to the death. It had only been a day since the battle, yet the person was already showing concern.

"…Hey, don't even think about doin' anything stupid. Try anything and my fangs will rip right through ya, child or not."

"I think that's a big bluff, coming from you."

"Huh?"

"Mister, you're kind to women and children, aren't youuu? That's why I believe you wouldn't even think of being merciless to a girl like me."

The boy bared his fangs at her in dissatisfaction. Whether it was because she was correct, or because it was pointless to argue, or possibly neither.

Meili watched as the boy struggled to make up his mind and found it endearing.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything. It takes time to gather witchbeasts, and if I called for them, you’d kill me instantly.”

“Heh, don’t “Legend of Alosya’ me, like ya understand everything.”

“Despite your attitude, you’re the one that’s here with meee.”

“That’s because there’s no one I trust to watch ya besides my amazin’ self.”

Revealing his lack of allies and strength, the boy Garfiel, kicked the ground with crossed arms and squatted in the scorched remains of a garden.

And like the girl he looked towards the burnt ruins of Roswaal’s former mansion. Spotting a quick flash of emotion in his jade eyes, the girl smiled sweetly and giggled.

“Mr. Tiger, you look really uncomfortableee.”

“That’s because… Dammit, ya already know. Stupid kid.”

“That’s mean. And besides, you and I aren’t that different in age. That’s what the man with scary eyes said.”

“Dammit Captain, what’re ya doin’, talkin’ with a captured enemy?” he muttered to himself.

Sitting down on a patch of burnt grass, Garfiel made a bitter face. In his mind he saw the black-haired boy’s carefree face, while with his eyes he saw the girl’s detestable smile.

That was that, then.

“…The agreement was to let ya see this.”

“Yes, that’s riiight.”

“So? Do ya feel any better doin’ this?”

The boy’s concern lingered, though masked by his agitated words. At those blunt yet touching feelings the girl simply pursed her lips again. “Who knooows?” she murmured.

She realized after saying those words that she might have subconsciously tried to imitate her sister. And so Meili Portroute, a sentimental girl, smiled and closed her eyes. Within the charred ruins, the person she was looking for was nowhere to be found.

Although she should’ve known that from the beginning.

2

“Elsa, are you immortal?” Meili asked, resting her elbows on her knees with her hands on her cheeks.

In response, the listener furrowed their eyebrows as they wiped blood off their cheek. “That’s quite a question to ask suddenly.”

“I don’t think it’s that sudden. I mean, you were surrounded, covered in blood, and stabbed with a spear. And yet you seem fine.”

Meili pointed towards the other girl’s stomach, where there was quite literally a spear sticking out. It had entered through her stomach and made it all the way through, leaving the end to poke out her back. Any internal organs in the way had been pierced, and the amount of blood pouring out looked particularly deadly. Anyone could tell that it was a lethal wound.

And yet, despite receiving such a wound, the black-haired girl seemed almost calm… No, she wasn’t quite calm. Her cheeks had flushed and her breathing heightened.

She felt every moment of pain and every drop of blood. But this excited Elsa.

“That’s unsanitary ,” Meili remarked.

“Oh, that’s harsh coming from someone who surrounds themselves with witchbeasts all the time.”

“I make sure that they clean themselves. And this isn’t about the cleanliness of the body, but of the mind… Hurry up and pull that out! It hurts just looking at it.”

Elsa complied with a grimacing Meili and pulled out the spear from her stomach. The wet, sloppy sound echoed as Meili looked around their blood-stained surroundings.

In the dark, dirty shack there were the unidentifiable remains of about twenty bodies scattered all over the room.

That day, Meili and Elsa had gone on a job together to eliminate some people for reasons unknown. Thus the sea of blood around them.

Meili was to be the rear-guard, while creating the rivers of blood was Elsa’s job. Those were the roles they’d always stuck with. Considering the two of them, it was the obvious choice.

“I barely know anything about you, Elsa, despite working together like thiiis.”

“I wasn’t hiding it. If you ask then I’ll answer.”

“Then I’ll ask. How has that stomach wound already healed?”

Elsa stood in front of Meili, having obeyed and pulled the spear from her abdomen. Rubbing her bloody hands across it, there was no wound, just pure, soft, white skin.

“That’s just unnatural.”

“True, I’ll admit that it’s not normal. This is…the result of a curse.”

“Curse?” Meili echoed.

“There are countries that would try and claim that it’s a blessing, though.”

Elsa’s voice was uncharacteristically harsh as she rubbed the spot where the wound would have been. Meili realized that this was a topic Elsa didn’t enjoy discussing.

She didn't want to cause Elsa any further pain, but she simply couldn't hide her curiosity.

"So it could be called a blessing or a curse. Does that mean you were born with it?"

"No, I wasn't. When I was about your age, I still had a normal human body. But after I was caught stealing back in my home country, I was sold as a slave."

"And then?"

"The person who bought me was a bit of a strange one. He didn't have much interest in girls…but the biggest issue was his skill in curse arts."

At this, Meili looked down behind her eyelashes at the term. As a Witchbeast User, many witchbeasts used techniques similar to curse arts. Curse arts, however, were techniques fundamentally designed to end a person's life.

It was difficult to associate them with Elsa's undying body.

"In Gusteko, there's a curse art called the curse doll. Have you heard of it?"

Meili shook her head at the unknown term.

"Simply put, it's a curse art designed to harm a person. You choose the target you want to kill, then you carve the curse into the one who will be the curse doll. Once you activate that curse, the person who became the doll is unable to die until the target is killed. They'll be an undying doll."

"…Isn't that something amazing? I mean, you can create a bunch of undying people. That would put us out of a job," Meili commented.

"Yes, that's true. But there's no curse art that is that convenient."

Elsa smiled somberly at Meili's innocent brutality.

"First, the person who becomes the curse doll loses all sense of self and can only act in ways that help it kill the target. Second, once the target has been killed, then the curse doll dies."

"Ahh, then they wouldn't be a good paaawn…huh? But, wait…"

Meili pursed her lips as a strange contradiction came forth from Elsa's explanation. According to Elsa's story, she was one of these curse dolls. But also according to that explanation, she should have no self and only act to kill a target.

"But you can talk normally, Elsa… Or is it because you're insane? That would make sense."

"It hurts if you think that makes sense… I'm…an exception to a curse doll."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you. Whoever bought me was eccentric and had a talent for curse arts."

Elsa didn't want to speak more of her former "owner," so she cut off the explanation there. She played with her braid as she continued, "There are others like me with undying bodies. And those girls tried several different methods to kill themselves… They stabbed their hearts with stakes, they drained other people's blood. People started calling them vampires."

"An undying curse doll…"

Meili felt a chill upon hearing those words. She had asked 'Are you immortal?' Elsa responded that she was unable to die. It was just a slight difference in words, but Meili felt like there was meaning behind her choice of words.

"Do you also want to die? Like those other girls, Elsa?"

She had to ask that question. Elsa had been slashed with swords, stabbed with spears, burned her insides. Perhaps she just wanted to die like a normal person.

At Meili's question, Elsa just looked confused. "Why?" she asked, tilting her head.

“That’s what you meant, wasnt it?”

“Really? Then I’m afraid you’re mistaken. I have no wish to die. I might not want to live as long as those ‘vampires’ though… Mostly though, this body has its own many advantages.”

“Advantages?”

“The smell of blood, torn flesh, of insides, makes me feel alive. And this body gives me lots of opportunities to feel that. I’m happy with this body.” Smiling gently, Elsa dropped the spear she had been leaning on, and walked towards the sitting Meili. “That’s why you don’t need to look so worried.”

“Worried? Me? For you?”

“Yes. When you asked if I wanted to die, you looked so sad. You really are a lonely girl, Meili.”

“D-Don’t say such stupid thiiings!” Meili shouted, turning red as Elsa patted her head.

Part of it was at being called lonely, but it was also because Elsa’s hand was covered in blood and messing up her hair. That was something that Elsa never learned to be mindful of.

“Come on, you’ll get my hair dirty. Your hair is a mess, too… Ah! How could you leave it like that? Unbelievable!”

Meili grabbed Elsa’s braid that had come loose in the fighting. She had done the braid just before they started work so that they would match.

It was hard to believe that someone with such a proper appearance could care so little about their looks.

“Even if your wounds heal, a sloppy appearance won’t get fixed so easily. Make sure you take care of iiit.”

“Yeah, but, you know. Since you’re always with me, you can worry about it. That way I can focus more on the job at hand.”

“Don’t try to play this off!”

Trying to braid hair in such a bloodstained environment was next to impossible. Especially since it was after a job. Elsa’s wounds had healed so they should have been focusing on leaving.

Standing up, Meili grabbed Elsa’s hand and started walking. If she didn’t, then her partner would just end walking into a crowd of people.

That was all there was to it. There was no deeper meaning in holding hands.

“You need to stay focuseeed. If you don’t, then I’ll end up dying before you with your undying body.”

Those words, spoken without facing each other, were meant to be half-comeback and half-teasing. And for a moment, Elsa’s eyes went wide before returning to her usual smile.

“Well, who knows.”

3

“Stupid Elsa… I was supposed to die fiiirst.” She recalled the exchange while pushing back the pain from her wounds.

Deep within the burnt ruins of Roswaal Manor, Elsa had been crushed and turned to ash by the flames.

As far as Meili knew, Elsa had survived being stabbed, having her neck broken, and having her heart crushed. But she had yet to be turned to ash. Elsa had wished for a place to die, not that she was aware of it herself.

To feel alive in the death of others meant that you lost the sense of being alive yourself. That’s what she thought now.

Thinking along those lines, that would mean that Elsa dying here was a blessing for her. At the very least, she wasn’t the type of person to cry and struggle when faced with her death.

“Mr. Tiger, we’re done. Thank you. I’m satisfied now.”

Rather than become a captive, Meili had come to the ruins to burn Elsa’s final resting place into her memory. That was her duty as Elsa’s sister in arms.

That much had been done. And so the next step was…

“Whatever, I don’t care.” Sitting in the burnt garden, Garfiel kept eyeing Meili with a somewhat irritated expression. “If you wanna cry, I ain’t gonna stop ya.”

Taken aback by such blunt words, Meili tried to smile in response. Only she couldn’t. Finding a burning sensation in her eyes, she quickly wiped them and looked up at the sky.

And so, with her face hidden, she opened her mouth towards the sky. Garfiel said nothing as the emotions came pouring forth from her lips. And then quietly, the two mourned the black-haired girl in that blackened garden.

—And the two would never again speak of what happened that day.

END

Elior Forest Team: Waiting for the Thaw (Volume 14; Toranoana) (Translation Pending)

Kremaldy Forest Team:
Days Forever Lost
(Volume 14; Melon Books)
(Translation Pending)

The Emilia Camp’s Great Evaluation Meeting (Volume 15; Toranoana) (Translation Pending)

The Witch's After Tea Party (Volume 15; Melon Books)

1

As the sun bathed the white snow in its rays, making it look magical as it reflected off its surface, she exhaled a misty breath.

The light, too bright to look at, made her slightly narrow her eyes. She put her hand against the towering tree next to her, feeling the rough sensation of the bark on her palm. This isn't an illusion, it's the real thing, she thought.

She clenched her fist tightly, closed her eyes due to the glare, inhaled some icy cold air into her lungs until she could take in no further, and then let it all out.

"Just as I thought, a lot of things feel different from how they used to when you acquire a new body after many centuries," the girl grumbled in a way that made her seem older than she appeared, her peach pink hair fluttering in the refreshing wind.

She was a charming, dainty looking girl. She had azure eyes, which shone with intelligence, and it ought to be stated that her lovely features exuded a sense of elegance and grace.

With but a single glance, anyone could tell that the girl gave off a certain, extraordinary aura.

Her young, undeveloped body was wrapped in a white robe with naught an undergarment to speak of. The sight of her treading upon the bare ground with her tiny, bare feet, made her look extremely vulnerable.

Her vulnerability was not only the kind where she was vulnerable to being seen by people, but also one where she was even more vulnerable to the climate at the same time. Since the girl was walking around a snow-covered forest, her body was losing heat as each second passed, and thus was shivering all over.

To be honest, the girl’s travel attire was a huge mistake, as she hadn’t really considered this when she chose it.

“And after all that work, haaa. Would it not be comical if you froze to death due to the cold? Huuu.”

And then, suddenly, the bewitching, slothful voice of a woman echoed inside the trembling girl’s mind.

It naturally couldn’t have been the girl’s voice, as it sounded entirely different from hers. It hadn’t gone through her ears, but directly to her mind. The girl heaved an inconspicuous sigh, scrunching up her well-shaped eyebrows.

“That’s not a very pleasant thing to imagine. There is nothing to worry about in that regard, however. If I truly needed to, I could generate enough firepower to burn the whole area to the ground. You should not presume to look down on me.”

“Sooo even though you went through great pains to sneak out in the dead of night, you’ll throw it all away and get found out by making a lot of noiiise?” Is that an ideal scenario for you, Dona-Dona?”

“…”

“Cut, it out…Daphne. E…chidna…doesn’t, mean anything bad by it…or, maybe just a little? Mm, see, she must just be, relieved, to be alive again, prob…ably.”

She heard cynical remarks spoken with a sweet voice quickly get followed by faltering words of defense. The two differing voices did not belong to the girl, and they were different from the slothful voice of the woman who’d spoken first.

The three differing voices had taken turns speaking to the girl. However, all of the voices being directed towards the girl were laced with an equal amount of familiarity and complex emotions.

At that, the girl—no, the Witch who had changed her form, Echidna, relaxed her lips.

The form of the Witch with white hair and black eyes who was known for her black and white beauty had been lost. She was now using the girl’s body as a vessel for her soul, having managed to pull off the improbable act of reviving herself.

It was clear she had put a great deal of effort into her revival, and this turn of affairs was greatly troubling for her, but Echidna had maneuvered through it all and accomplished what she’d set out to do.

I’m not really one to get emotional, but I’ll give myself a rare pat on the back for a job well done in this matter. However…

“When you spend over 400 years as a spirit, you sort of forget what it’s like on the outside…”

“You got a little over-excited there. Dona, you’re such a child. Not good with stuff at all.”

“I’d rather you not refer to me as a child, but… I suppose there’s nothing I can say to that now.”

Echidna responded to that childish voice resounding within her mind, but she knew her words wouldn’t have any persuasion. In any case, I would rather not freeze to death right after my revival.

Thinking of something she could do as a last resort, and not having any other choice, Echidna snapped her fingers.

Her fingers that had grown numb produced a delicate, faint sound, and around her arose spots of crimson light. A small fireball the size of her fist flickered and swayed, manifesting an amount of firepower larger than one might think. It drove away the coldness of the snow-filled forest, which in turn banished the danger of freezing to death.

“Though the Gate seems different, the use of magic doesn’t seem to be an issue. In that case…”

“You’d be a laughingstock if you made a mistake with your use of magic this time and burned the whole forest down as a result.”

“It just doesn’t end… How dare you all keep spouting unending sarcasm at me. After working so hard to enact this plan, I'm starting to regret bringing all of you out."

Echidna sighed at the voice of the fifth person that rang in her head, as it marked the last one.

She unconsciously stretched her hand under her robe toward the object tied around the base of her bare neck—where an imposing blue glintstone necklace hung.

Echidna contemplated for a while, running a nail along the glintstone's hard surface. A person with a trained eye would be able to tell that it wasn't just your average object, but something that held great power.

It was an extremely high-grade magic crystal of the highest level of purity. It had an extraordinary ability to store magic energy and was currently storing overwhelming power within it, making use of its entire capacity.

Even a thousand high-level magic users wouldn't be able to use up the stored mana. And while it was extraordinary that such a small fragment could hold so much, using it all up would be quite an extraordinary feat as well. Your average person could never even imagine doing something like that.

And would anyone actually believe it was currently being used to store the souls of five people?

I went through great pains to secure this magic crystal and the vessel for my own soul. I spent 400 years as a spirit, and slowly put this plan into action over the course of 10 years—and finally, the moment has…

"Echidna! Earth to Echidna! Did you even hear a word I said?"

"—. I did. You're yelling right into my ear… No, would 'ear' wouldn't be the right word in this case? Could you not yell in my mind so much? It's seriously giving me a headache."

"This isn't the time to be having a leisurely conversation! Look beside you. Look!"

"Beside me?"

She pulled her consciousness out of the sea of thoughts by following the voice, then looked dubiously to her side. Thereupon, she saw a bright red light and many trees engulfed in flames, and the fire spreading from one tree to another.

Taking a quick glance, Echidna realized her single fireball had made the trees catch fire and was the spark that had started this forest fire.

"Oh dear."

"You seem quite composed, haaa."

"Well, you see, it's important to remain calm and not panic in these situations. And while it is certainly true that this inferno was unexpected…"

As Echidna finished speaking, she pointed her palm towards the burning trees and closed her eyes. "Extinguish!" she cried, emitting words of power from her lips as she opened her eyes.

"It still hasn't gone out…"

"Heeey, Daphne has some thoughts on this… That place seems to be different frooom Dona-Dona's Dream World, so will she even be able to interfere with it just by using words?"

"That would certainly be a problem."

"A b-big mis…calculation, isn't it?"

"Dona, did you start the fire? Are you a bad person, Dona? Are you Typhon's enemy?"

"This isn't the time for talking! Hurry up! Hurry up and put it out! Look!"

"Of course. I shall do it posthaste…guh."

As she tried to reign in the Witches having a shouting contest in her head, Echidna attempted to put the raging forest fire out with a spell but was hit with dizziness instead. Her spell had fizzled out mid-cast and failed to activate.

While the Witches were wondering what had happened, Echidna swiftly grasped the situation. “I’m not familiar enough with this body yet to create a flood using magic.”

Which is to say…

“I can’t put the fire out.”

“Then you need to get out of here right now—!!”

Not only had she been at risk of freezing to death, but now she was faced with burning to death on top of that. Echidna hit the ground running, as if that angry voice had whipped her into doing so.

The forest fire is spreading, and soon there will be nowhere to escape to. I need to get out of here.

Though she was unfamiliar with this body and hadn’t lifted a finger in over 400 years, Echidna ran like her life depended on it, gasping for air as she did so.

“The harshness of the outside world, is a little, different, from what I imagined,” Echidna lamented while panting, her body feeling heavy as the cold air took it into its embrace.

Although I feel like my body is about to break, when I consider the fact that I haven’t felt like this in several hundred years—

“No, that still won’t make this any easier… Hic.”

2

Fortunately, thanks to her desperate escape, Echidna managed to avoid burning to death.

The flames that were burning the forest down were quite powerful, but by guiding them however I pleased with wind I’d created with mana, I managed to secure an escape route. I wouldn’t have gotten out of there without it.

Now that I have escaped the dangerous forest fire, I can go back to traveling in these clothes—or rather, I was hoping things would have been that easy, but…

“Out of season heavy snowfall and a forest fire…and now after all that, I’ve found a girl wearin’ nuthin’ but rags. Are my eyes actin’ weird because of the miasma?” said a man.

“Don’t worry, I’m seeing the same thing…as long as this ain’t a dream or somethin’,” another man added.

“Hm…” While sitting on a tree stump, Echidna placed her hand on her chin as if she was thinking about something. Her appearance was that of a young child, but that pose suited her rather well due to the aura she exuded.

Thus, the man, no, the men, appeared confused due to the strange sensation, and were looking at each other. They were a group of fierce-looking men dressed like bandits that gave off dangerous auras. It looked like there were 18 of them at a glance, and with each of them holding a well-worn weapon, they looked rather comical surrounding a little girl. However, not judging things from appearances alone and following their instincts was their forte. You could assume that was the case due to how they looked and what their occupation was.

“I assume you’re here because of the Great Rabbit, yes? In other words…you gentlemen are Scavengers.”

“What?” a scavenger blurted out.

“Hm? Are you called by a different name in this age? According to his knowledge, you could be called looters, but that doesn’t suit you either… I wonder what I should call you?”

Echidna tilted her head a little, making the men make nervous expressions as if they’d just felt something ominous.

Scavenging—an occupation that also existed 400 years ago—was something that involved going through the homes and belongings of the villages and people that had been ravaged by witchbeasts and turning what was plundered into money. This was especially so if the site had been ravaged by the Great Rabbit since everything apart from the original inhabitants would remain untouched, making it an ideal site for Scavengers.

“Even if there are survivors, you can easily dispose of them and make it seem like witchbeasts did it. What a clever way to hunt. You gentlemen were just born to be hyenas.”

“Hyena? You mean… Hyena-people? What are ya even talking about…no.”

The man in the front shook his head and glared at Echidna with a machete in his hand. His fear for the mysterious child and a strong desire to harm her could be seen in his eyes. It was clear he was well aware of what he should and should not get involved with.

“I don’t know what yer story is, but our livelihood depends on it. For some reason, the rabbit’s trail disappeared without a trace. On top of that, there was a wildfire and…you appeared.”

“I see, do continue,” Echidna prodded.

“You’re an ominous girl, but ya don’t look bad. And you have those ears after all,” the man said, smiling wickedly as he flicked his ear.

His gesture brought Echidna’s current physical characteristics to light—which she had because the girl who had become her vessel was a half-elf.

It’s not as if they think of me as a half-devil. What’s important is the value of the product, not the purity of the blood. Whether I’m a pureblood or a half-blood, it’s all the same to them.

“Elves are treated like that in this age too?” Echidna wondered.

“Based on the way ya say things, are you an old hag who’s been hidin’ in the woods for a long time or somethin’?” Elves are scary since ya can’t guess their age by their looks. But yeah, that’s right. Even now, elves get sold fer a good price.”

"…"

"—Woa?" the man grunted. He'd felt like his skin was boiling for a second. The other men, having felt the same thing, were startled. They all started buzzing about it, wondering what could have happened. The only one who knew what had happened touched the glintstone on her chest and tried to calm the Witch of Wrath's rage.

"Hey, I don't know if yer a brat or an old hag, but whatever you do, don't get any silly ide…"

"Alright," Echidna said, cutting him off. "At this rate, we won't be able to reach a mutual understanding. You gentlemen want to capture me and make some money. On the other hand, I want to continue my carefree journey. So, I'd like to propose a compromise. What do you say?"

"A compromise? Do ya think you're in a position to negotiate?"

"I want you to give it some thought. That way, there will be a chance that both of us make it out of this safely," Echidna appealed with a smile, her head tilted.

The child's smile made the man gasp hard and take a step back, as if it had overwhelmed him. And then, the man, looking as if he couldn't believe he'd reacted like that, immediately said, "I'll give it a listen."

"I'm glad. My proposal is simple. 30 seconds is all I need. I'll go with you without fighting back if you are able to stand in front of me for 30 seconds without anything happening to you. Since it seems interesting too."

"Ha. What's up with that? Do you think something like that will be enough to scare us…?"

"—Well then, the 30 second countdown begins now."

The moment she perceived that they had accepted her terms, Echidna stroked her long-white hair, narrowed her dark eyes, and glared at the men.

"…"

All of the men looked like they had no idea what had just happened. In their eyes, it must have looked like the child in front of them who looked to be around 10 years old had suddenly turned into a beautiful girl with white hair. However, before the men could get an answer to their question, they started succumbing to the abnormality that assaulted them one after another.

"Kah…ku."

The man holding the machete fell to his knees. His eyes darted around all over the place, not focusing on any one thing, and then began foaming at the mouth. A similar phenomenon occurred not only to him, but to all the men surrounding her as well. The eighteen men in Echidna's line of sight were unable to resist her Witch's Miasma and thus in great agony.

The men scratched and tore at their necks, rolled their eyes back into their heads, blew foam out of their mouths, convulsed, choked on their tongues, split their own heads open with their weapons, buried their heads in the snow, and died in agony in various other ways.

"—Exactly thirty seconds."

Having finished counting the 30 seconds she'd promised them, Echidna looked around. There was nothing but men lying motionless in their own blood and vomit. Unfortunately, there hadn't been any among them who could endure the thirty seconds of hell and qualify to be the Sage that could reign over the six Witches.

"It was unfortunate for all of you, but a promise is a promise. I'll just continue with my carefree journey then. I don't think anyone will mind if I borrow some clothes and shoes," Echidna said, then took some clothes that could fit her from the fallen men and put them on.

By that time, her appearance had already returned to that of the child from before.

“It doesn’t last long, it seems. I suppose I’ll have to wait until I get more used to it. But still…”

Echidna looked back at the fallen men, then closed her eyes and thought of the boy with black hair, of the boy who remained unaffected while being surrounded by the Witches covered in miasma—though he probably didn't even realize how abnormal it was to be able to do that.

"I can't wait to get to a city now that I have a little traveling money. I'd like to think that the taste of tea has changed over the course of a few hundred years… Now then."

Echidna flipped the hem of her long clothes and once again set off on her journey without a destination. While leaving, she began feeling gratitude for the men who had provided her with clothes, shoes, and travel money.

"I was about to go out and make a terrible first impression with people by wearing nothing but a piece of cloth over my naked body. It was quite a terrible mistake—I will always remember you gentlemen as being my saviors."

She hadn't uttered words of deceit or anything; she'd been sincere. Echidna would never forget her debt to them, till her soul perishes, the men who worked as Scavengers, who met the Witch here and died.

"Aah. I know, I know. You guys are noisy. Spare me already."

The Witch slowly started moving forward on her journey as she responded to the voices in her head.

—The sky was high above, the wind was lukewarm, and the light seemed to be blessing the one who had returned after hundreds of years.

END

The Witch's After Tea Party:
The Witches' Evaluation Meeting
(Short Story Collection 6; Melon Books)
(Translation Pending)

The Loving World Seen Through Petra's Eyes (Short Story Collection 3; Melon Books) (Translation Pending)

Sword Demon Love Story:
The Bride’s Father
(Ex 3; Gamers)

1

—Anxiety was something that Wilhelm had never felt.

He could understand feelings of tension and caution, in which both the body and mind became tense, but such feelings were inseparable from the battlefield, and those who were not perceptive to them didn’t live for long.

Thus, Wilhelm was used to being under pressure. And that was why he couldn’t help but be surprised at how he was currently acting.

“…” Wilhelm’s limbs felt slightly numb, and he felt parched. Those sensations had come out of nowhere, and they were eating away at his mind and body.

“It seems like I, too, am a human being at the end of the day…”

“Wilhelm? Hey, Wilhelm, are you alright?” A voice called out to Wilhelm, who’d just loosened his collar and let out a hot breath. The person with that worried voice was looking at him with concern in her beautiful blue eyes.

Wilhelm psyched himself up after seeing her concerned gaze. He shook his head. “It’s nothing. I am just a bit thirsty.”

“Really? But you’ve been drinking tea this whole time… Are you perhaps nervous about something?”

Wilhelm held his breath when she asked that, as she was spot-on.

But the girl’s—Theresia’s—expression changed instantly when he answered her question with silence. “I see… So that’s how it is. Wilhelm, you’re nervous.”

Her concerned look became somewhat joyful, and he got caught in her mischievous gaze. Making him feel uncomfortable, he clicked his tongue.

“Oh, you clicked your tongue. Don’t do that when he is around. Me, Grimm, and the rest won’t care, but I think the people meeting you for the first time will care a lot.”

“I’ll do my best… What’s taking him so long?”

“Patience. He should be here soon…oh,” Theresia replied, hiding her mouth with a hand after Wilhelm looked away.

Right after that, the parlor’s door opened, and the person they were waiting for appeared.

“Mother, Father,” said Theresia, her eyes shining as she got up from the sofa.

The two on the receiving end of that had just entered the parlor. One was a graceful woman with her beige hair tied behind her head—a beautiful lady with clearly marked features. She was donned in a fluffy dress with long sleeves that suited her perfectly, and her eyes, which were sizing him up, caught his attention. The other person was a man with red hair and blue eyes—which matched Theresia’s—and it was clear at first glance that he had descended from a special bloodline. Those features were unique to the house of the Sword Saint, which had existed in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica for generations.

“…” Wilhelm also stood up—albeit a little after Theresia—after witnessing that. He bowed to the two who had appeared, being conscious of his body that had become stiff. He felt like it had become even heavier the moment they appeared. That was only natural, however. Since…

“Welcome back, Theresia. And thank you for coming, Mr. Wilhelm.”

The one who had said that was the red-haired man—whose name was Veltol Astrea, the head of House Astrea. But Wilhelm had a more appropriate way of addressing him.

“I heard you had something important to discuss… But what brings you here today, I wonder? I have no clue why you are here. None at all.”

While smiling gently, Veltol kept repeating the same thing, gradually making his tone stronger. Veins bulged on his forehead, and his blue eyes weren’t smiling at all.

Wilhelm—thinking him to be a tough opponent—felt slightly hurt as he sat in front of his future father-in-law.

2

Wilhelm and Theresia had traveled to the Astrea domain in the southern part of the Kingdom of Lugunica—and they were currently at Astrea Manor, Theresia’s home. For Theresia, she was just returning home, and for Wilhelm, he was just visiting the home of his beloved, but this trip was much more important than that. To put it simply, Wilhelm was there to greet Theresia’s parents and ask them for her hand in marriage.

In short, all hell was about to break loose.

“But I’m really glad that you chose Wilhelm. He seems like a sincere man. She has always been somewhat shy, so I was worried about what kind of man she would take a fancy to.”

“Geez, Mother… Don’t embarrass me like that.”

A table between them, Mother and Child were engaged in conversation. Theresia and her mother—Tishua Astrea—had been making small talk about the past and future, holding a cup of tea in one hand, since the first, simple greeting. Tishua seemed to be rather welcoming of Wilhelm. He hadn’t directly mentioned anything about marriage, but her joy was evident in every word she uttered. He honestly felt comforted by the fact that the mother of the bride was on his side.

However…

“So, Mr. Wilhelm. What is your status, what is the rank you hold?”

“…My apologies. I am a knight, though I was only knighted recently.”

“Oh my! So you’re just a knight! I see…so that is how it is.”

The one speaking as if he had a hidden meaning behind his words was Veltol, who was sitting in front of Wilhelm. The future father-in-law had a magnificent beard and regal features, and he was keen on finding out whether Wilhelm was a suitable partner for his daughter or not. And it seemed like he wasn’t the least bit happy with his title.

“Of course, becoming a knight without any sort of backing is no mean feat. I’ll give you that. But I think it happened far too quickly. I wonder who knighted you. I can’t wrap my head around why they would do such a thing…”

“Father, the person who knighted Wilhelm was His Majesty Gionis.”

Once Theresia added that piece of information in, Veltol did a complete 180. “As expected, His Majesty is wise! I can do nothing but admire his decision!” Looking distant, he then muttered something under his breath. “His Majesty shouldn’t have done that…”

But peculiarly, his voice was loud enough that everyone could hear.

He’s not very good at hiding things, Wilhelm thought.

Although they had only been together for an extremely short period of time, Wilhelm discovered several things about Veltol. That he loved his daughter a lot, that he wasn’t okay with his daughter getting married, that he wasn’t good at hiding things, that he was—anyway, he learned quite a bit about Veltol.

“…” He took a quick glance at the women next to them and saw that Theresia was somewhat nervous as she looked at them talk. As for Tishua, she baffled him with a gentle smile that was devoid of all emotion. To be honest, if she were the one that had disapproved of him, the unpredictable Tishua would have been more of a challenge. That’s why you could say it was a good thing that the predictable Veltol was the one who disapproved of him. Nevertheless, how the bride's father was treating him was abnormal, and there was something else that was making him uneasy.

—The nervousness that made him feel like his body was becoming numb was growing stronger by the minute.

"What is the matter, Mr. Wilhelm? It seems like you are, a bit pale?" said Veltol, expressing his concern for Wilhelm as he was being tormented by extreme thirst and stress eating away at his body. But there was no way he could tell him how he was really feeling.

If I do, he'll deem me a failure of a man who can't even control his own emotions.

What Veltol was saying wasn't wrong. Wilhelm had come emptyhanded. He didn't have a title, and neither was his future laid out for him. In fact, he had whisked away Theresia's future as the Sword Saint. That being the case, he needed to make something of himself and prove his worth.

Wilhelm began the conversation with a serious air. "Lord Veltol, Lady Tishua, there is something I want to say to you."

"You do not have the right to call me your father!!" Jumping to conclusions, Veltol tried to crush him right away.

"Honey, you are jumping to conclusions. Wilhelm has not called you that yet." Tishua pointed it out with a gentle smile. "But." She paused. "I am fine with you calling me mother anytime."

"Huh?! What the hell are you saying, Tishua?!"

Veltol stood up looking white as a sheet after hearing Tishua's words. His eyes darted to-and-fro, and then he looked at his beloved wife and beloved daughter.

"Our family is, our family is on the verge of breaking apart as we speak! How will we be able to protect Theresia from this scoundrel if we do not unite here?"

"Father! Stop calling him a scoundrel! Wilhelm isn't like that at all! If that's what you think, are you insinuating that His Majesty Gionis has poor judgement?"

"Yo-Your father has said no such thing! How dare you speak like that to me, Theresia! I will see to it that you are properly disciplined for this. I can't marry you off until then…" Veltol declared with an evil face.

"F-a-t-h-e-r!" Theresia ferociously shouted at him.

Wilhelm was a bit overwhelmed by their vigor.

"I am sorry, Wilhelm. These two are always like this." Tishua calmly apologized to Wilhelm before noticing that the cup in his hand was empty. "Oh my, your cup is empty. I do apologize for not noticing. Allow me to give you a…"

"—Hic! Stop, Tishua! I will pour it for him myself," Veltol declared suddenly, hurriedly standing up and bringing the teapot from the serving cart over to give Wilhelm a refill. As hot steam and the rich smell of tea leaves wafted through the air, Veltol stroked his beard proudly. "Go ahead and drink to your heart's content. Don't be shy. You must have been anxious since we took time to get ready, right? Do drink, do drink."

Wilhelm frowned after being pressured to drink more. Indeed, it had taken quite a while for Veltol and his wife to arrive at the parlor. Thanks to that, he'd spent quite a lot of time drinking tea and killing time, so much so that he became aware of his nervousness. As a result, he talked less and worried that his parents-in-laws had developed a bad impression of him. Maybe all of this anxiety and worry is what is making my body feel numb, he thought, and as he was about to bring the cup to his mouth…

"—Wait, Wilhelm. Don't drink that tea."

The one who had leaned forward and stopped him was Theresia. She snatched the cup out of his hand and looked at the tea by narrowing her blue eyes.

That made Veltol start panicking.

“Hey!” Veltol exclaimed with a husky voice. “Do not act so unladylike. If you want a refill, then tell me. It has been quite some time since your father has shown off his skills, and…”

“That’s right, it’s very rare. What on earth happened for you to be making tea for someone?”

“Oops!”

“Did you just say oops?” asked Wilhelm.

Veltol went pale, as if he wasn’t expecting to be questioned like that. On top of that, his face started to break out into a cold sweat, and it was clear that he was in a bit of a pickle.

“A-ha-ha…” Tishua looked down and quivered her lips after leering at Veltol’s situation. Her beautiful cheeks became red, and her moist eyes looked at her panicking husband alluringly. Although it was still hard to guess what she was feeling, it seemed like she was enjoying the situation.

Wilhelm vaguely understood what was going on. “You mean, Lord Veltol did something to everyone’s tea?”

“More like, he only mixed something into your tea. Father?”

“Eek! I’m innocent!”

Veltol, who was being glared at by his daughter, said a cliché line that people who did something bad say. Wilhelm looked at his tea as he listened to his words that almost sounded like a confession, and then things clicked. It was indeed unnatural. I felt thirstier the more I drank. My body felt strangely numb and tense. I thought it was due to the anxiety of visiting my lover’s parents’ house, but…

“Besides, it seems like I didn’t use the right ratio when I mixed in the drug. Since he looks completely unaffected even after drinking so much…”

“The person who drugged the tea shouldn’t admit to it like it’s nothing! What did you try to make Wilhelm drink? Could it be that, you poisoned…”

“I would never do something so horrendous! All I did was mix in a small amount of a drug that makes you lose control of your bladder…” Veltol confessed like a timid child, tapping his index fingers together in front of his chest.

The drug he had prepared was something that caused polydipsia. In short, no matter how much tea he drank, his thirst would never be quenched, and the urine filling his bladder would eventually leak out—

“You’re such a conniving man, Father! Even if Wilhelm peed himself because of that, I wouldn’t stop loving him! I would love both him and his pee!”

“What?! Are you serious, Theresia?! You’re fine with being with a man that peed himself?!”

“I didn’t pee myself…” muttered Wilhelm, a bitter expression on his face, but the father and daughter ignored it and started arguing again.

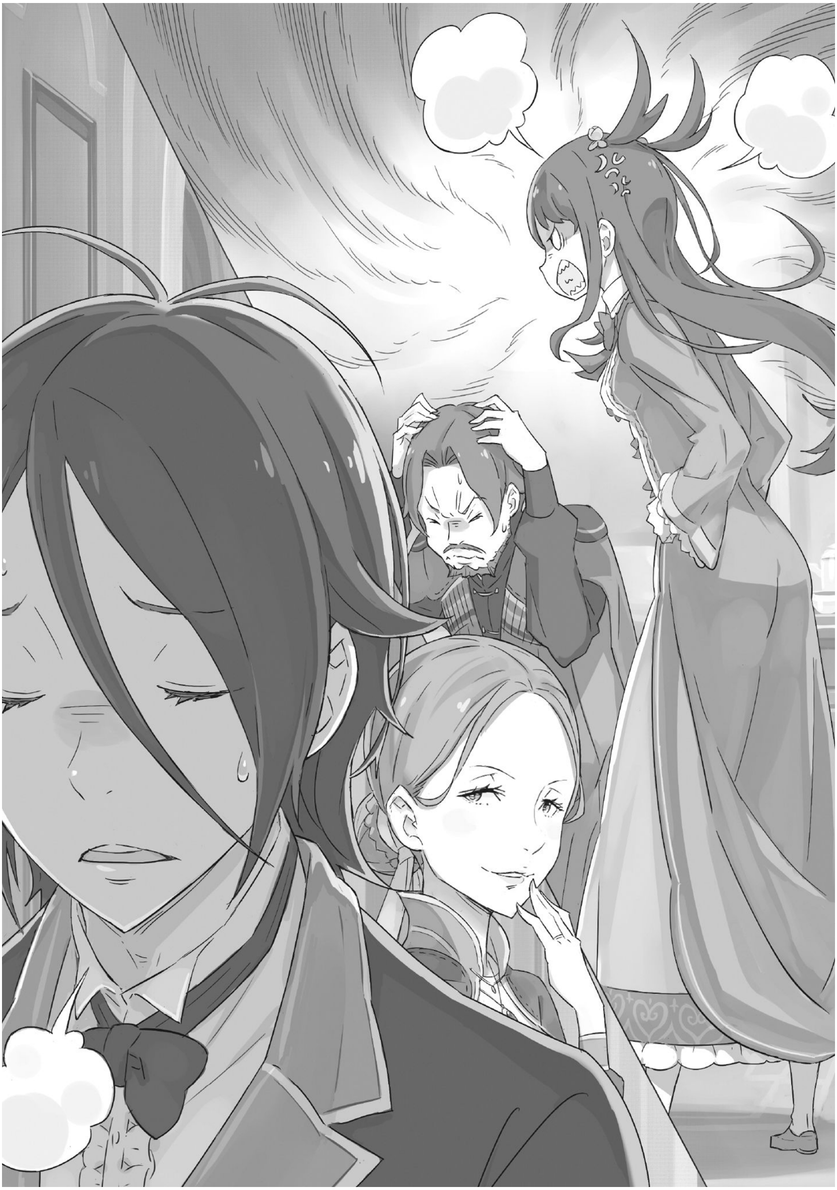

As they completely ignored the person at the center of their argument and argued about whether he had peed himself or not, Wilhelm lost the energy to intervene. Either way, the thing he needed to do was—

"The bathroom is right at the end of the hallway after you exit the room."

Sensing Wilhelm's intentions, Tishua briefly told Wilhelm where to go.

I wonder how much this lady knew about what her husband was up to.

"—Thank you for telling me the way so courteously."

Wilhelm felt like it was far scarier to ask about that, so he turned his doubt into words of gratitude upon standing up.

"Speaking of which, Wilhelm. —This is how our family is, so do you think you will be able to adjust?"

Wilhelm narrowed his eyes at her question. Veltol and Theresia were still arguing, and he didn't feel like he had the energy to join them, but…

"—I wonder, Mother. Father seems like a hard man to get along with."

"A-ha-ha, you get full marks."

Tishua evaluated Wilhelm's answer with a big smile. Looking at that smile, he was convinced that Theresia and Tishua were mother and child.

I feel like I'll be able to connect with Veltol, at least when it comes to being pushed around by our wives.

With such feelings in his heart, Wilhelm hurriedly stepped out of the door while listening to the argument between the father and daughter.

END

Sword Demon Love Story: Earth Dragon Capital Flanders (Ex 3; Toranoana)

1

“Eek… Woah, it’s really high up!”

The view had drastically changed when the crouched earth dragon stood up. Naturally, it was different from what she was used to, making her let out a gasp of excitement.

“The breeze up here feels so nice… This makes me feel like a princess.” said the beautiful young red-haired girl sheepishly while clinging on to the thick neck of the earth dragon. She was saying it jokingly, but if you were to consider her pretty appearance, you wouldn’t be able to laugh it off as a joke. At least that’s what Wilhelm, who was supporting her, thought. Wilhelm was riding on the earth dragon with the young girl and had his hands wrapped around her slim waist. The innocent attitude of the cheerful young girl brought a slight smile upon the face of the man known as the Sword Demon. His usually cold demeanor towards others melted away in the presence of the pretty girl.

“Hey, Wilhelm, are you listening to me?”

The girl turned her head towards Wilhelm. She pouted her lips, annoyed by his lack of response.

“My bad, I wasn’t listening. My breath was taken away.”

“You mean by the scenery?”

“No, by you.”

“—Hic, st-stop, saying things like that.”

He was just being honest about how he really felt, but the girl reacted dramatically to his words. She looked forward, turning her head away from him, her ears and nape of her neck turning bright red.

She probably doesn't want me to see her blushing as red as an abble. I don't know what I did to make her blush, but I want to see her adorable flushed cheeks.

Wilhelm removed one of the arms holding her waist and tried touching her cheek.

"No-don't…I don't want you to see my face, right now."

"I want to see it."

"You're so mean! Oh, honestly…"

Wilhelm became further amused when she looked down shyly and writhed uncomfortably. Then he leaned forward and gently grabbed the girl's chin, turning her around—

"—Leave it there, Trias."

A sharp and deadly sword-like aura struck Wilhelm from the side.

"…"

Wilhelm glanced around and saw another earth dragon running next to them. The sword-like aura was coming from the person riding it. It was a beautiful swordsman with blonde hair and green eyes, and she was directing her aura mercilessly—no, the tip of her long sword—at him. Wilhelm was amazed that she was willing to go that far and then spoke up while thinking so.

"I'm…no longer a Trias," he retorted tiredly, leaving aside the frustration of his expression of love being interrupted.

2

"Carol, you shouldn't be so quick to draw your sword. The people of the ranch also got really surprised, you know." The red-haired young girl scolded with puffed cheeks and her hands on her hips.

The person being scolded—Carol, the blonde female swordsman—lowered her head in deference. She was no longer emitting a murderous sword aura, so Wilhelm didn't feel in danger anymore, but…

"My apologies, Lady Theresia. I lost my composure at Trias's insolent behavior…"

"Don't make me repeat myself. The House of Trias is no more. I am no longer a Trias. And you don't seem sorry at all."

Wilhelm directed a harsh glare and harsh words at the still hostile Carol. She glared at him and opened her mouth to stir up the futile fight all over again.

However…

"Alright, that's enough! Both of you, no fighting!"

The one who came between and stopped the fight before it started was the red-haired girl. Wilhelm and Carol were considered to be formidable swordsmen of their own right, but the red-haired girl was undaunted by it.

If she couldn't handle a fight like this, then how could she have accomplished the great feat of stopping the Demi-Human War. Setting aside whether her unwavering bravery was a quality he wished for himself, Wilhelm could not have achieved such a great feat. The red-haired girl's name was Theresia van Astrea. She held the title of Sword Saint, which only the best swordsman was given, and was also a champion that had stopped a lengthy war. Nonetheless, she had relinquished her title and had just begun her life as a newlywed.

"Come on! Why does everyone keep getting in our way?" asked Wilhelm. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Don't get carried away, Tri…Wilhelm. I have been ordered by Lord Bertol to keep an eye on you so that you don't go too far with your insolent attitude towards Lady Theresia. I'm definitely not acting like this due to a personal grudge."

"The only reason you answered like that is because you feel that way…"

"Youuu guys are fighting agaaain!" Theresia shouted, stopping the two who were about to go at it again.

But Theresia, who usually had a soft spot for Carol, had begun to feel closer to Wilhelm during their time alone together. She put her hand on Carol's shoulder and said, "Carol, I'm happy that you are worried, but…we're on our honeymoon, you know? So please. Give us some space."

"But Lady Theresia…" replied Carol. "I'm worried."

"Yes, I know. But I have a really dependable husband."

Theresia, who had straightened her posture, leered at Wilhelm sitting behind her. It was a very seductive gesture and she was unaware that it was a bad move.

Seeing Theresia growing closer with the likes of Wilhelm was making Carol more and more hostile towards him. But, even so, Carol turned towards Wilhelm with a look of pain, saying, "Wilhelm, take care of Lady Theresia…"

"Does it really torture you that much to trust me to take care of her?"

It was probably after going through a lot of pain that she decided to trust me with Theresia, but she's really acting like she doesn't want me to be with her at all. And like—

"—She's just going to ride an earth dragon for the first time."

Wilhelm's sigh came out in vain on the plateau of the Earth Dragon Capital, Flanders. The rancher holding the reins of the earth dragon in the distance could be seen waiting with a lost look on his face for the three of them to settle their dispute.

3

Theresia had ridden dragon carriages before but had never ridden an earth dragon. She had unexpectedly told Wilhelm that on their journey to Flanders.

“We had earth dragons back at home and my eldest brother was a master dragon rider but…”

“But you didn’t have any talent for riding them?” inquired Wilhelm.

“No, it isn’t like that…it’s just that I was afraid of touching animals,” she replied with a lonely smile, holding her hands close to her body.

Her fear of touching animals was something that arose due to her divine protection: the Divine Protection of the Death God. How it created wounds that would never heal when she cut something made her sensitive and terribly afraid of wounding others. That was probably the reason why she had been hesitant about interacting with earth dragons. However, now that she had given up the sword and had better control of her divine protection, she felt like she had the right to give riding an earth dragon a try, something she wasn’t able to do as a child. And she was going to exercise that right of hers here in the Earth Dragon Capital while on her honeymoon.

“And then there’s this retainer here who won’t leave us the hell alone.”

Wilhelm cussed at Carol, who was trying to get in the way of their fun by complaining about everything.

Theresia smiled gently at Wilhelm’s words. “Forgive her, Carol is just worried about me. Thames…my eldest brother…was a lot like her.”

I’ve heard that two of her elder brothers and her younger brother were killed in action during the civil war. In short, it means that the overprotectiveness of her brothers are lodged inside Carol alone. I guess if I think about it that way I can see why she’s constantly interfering.

“Although forgiving her for that is a different story.”

“Hmmm, well, yeah, you’re right…”

Theresia smiled wryly and Wilhelm squinted looking at her smile. And then they heard the rancher. “We are ready to go,” he said.

I wonder if he was waiting for us to finish talking. We’ve really been troubling this kind-looking rancher for a while now.

While feeling sorry about that, Wilhelm held Theresia’s waist again and made the crouching earth dragon stand up.

“—Hic.”

Theresia trembled with a faint sensation of excitement as the view became higher instantly. She had been interrupted the first time while she was still trying to enjoy the view. This time, however, the pest didn’t get in the way, and Wilhelm, well aware of her feelings, didn’t do anything to ruin it.

Naturally, Theresia was in a position where she was looking down at the wind-swept plateau. She narrowed her blue eyes that looked as if a clear blue sky had been locked within them and gazed compassionately at the world below.

“Hey, Wilhelm, do you know? About the different types of earth dragons and where their names came from?” Theresia asked the silent Wilhelm out of the blue. Wilhelm thought about her question for a bit and then shook his head. There were several types of earth dragons that had adapted to their local climates and environments. To start with, there was the Flanna species, which was the most numerous and versatile. Next was the Eliq species, which had adapted to the cold regions of the world. Then there was the Agaress species, which were suitable for desert environments. And lastly there was the Diana species, which were said to have the most superior blood of all. These are some examples of existing earth dragon species.

But apart from their species, I’ve never really thought about where their names came from.

“Flanna, Eliq, Agaress, Diana…it’s said that all of them were flowers that existed long ago,” Theresia explained. “All earth dragon names adopt the names of flowers.”

“The names of flowers…”

“Yes. Isn’t that wonderful?”

I’m not sure if it’s wonderful or not, but I can’t stop thinking about the fact that earth dragons are named after flowers. I don’t know who named them, but I wonder why they named these friendly and loyal creatures after flowers.

“…It’s just as I had heard, they don’t try to harm people at all,” muttered Theresia while riding the earth dragon with Wilhelm and rubbing the scales on its neck. The initial wave of nervousness melted away from her expression, and she seemed to have fallen into a sense of ease riding on the earth dragon’s back.

In fact, a lot of people who get on top of earth dragons are surprised by their calm temperament and their consideration for the riders and come to trust them.

This reminds me of my own first time. I was a child, and it was before I started learning swordsmanship. I think my brother was the one who helped me.

“…”

Wilhelm also had two older brothers. Both were now deceased, however. He had carried his grief, accepted it, and overcame it. He thought he had gotten over it, but doing this with Theresia reminded him of the past, and—

“Wilhelm?”

“My two older brothers were no good when it came to the art of the sword. Though they were both bookworms, and reliable individuals, so dad and mom gave the domain to them.”

Theresia hadn’t anticipated Wilhelm’s response to her call. Nonetheless, after widening her eyes once, she immediately closed them and listened to what he had to say.

“…”

It was Wilhelm’s first time telling Theresia—no, anyone—about his family. Everyone involved in the war knew that his family, House Trias, had perished in the midst of the Demi-human War. Theresia knew it, too. That’s why neither she nor people close to him asked any questions that might open up old wounds. He then came to the sudden realization that he had been taking their kindness for granted. Unable to keep quiet now that he was aware of that, the memories he had of his family flowed out of him unreservedly.

I was scolded often by my eldest brother. I always fought my elder brother. My father lamented my behavior that it wasn’t befitting for an aristocrat, and my mother often hid my sword. But my eldest brother patiently tried to talk to me, and my elder brother always came to help me even if my foes outnumbered me. My father instilled in me the customs and the manners of the aristocrats saying that I’d never know when and where it would come in handy. My mother often hugged me whenever I did anything reckless.

That’s the kind of people they were. —We were once that type of family.

“…I see.” Theresia replied in a faltering voice after Wilhelm had finished speaking.

—But he felt that he was able to truly mourn the family he had lost for the first time.

4

“Hey, Carol! Over here! Hurry up!”

“La-Lady Theresia! Please slow down… Wait for me!”

Carol, who was unable to speak properly, yanked on the reins and chased after the excited Theresia. The two earth dragons ran like the wind, and Wilhelm watched it from a distance and was impressed by Theresia’s skills, who had improved by leaps and bounds in a matter of just a few hours. As one would expect, she improved immediately after she got the hang of it. Perhaps it was down to the earth dragon’s considerate nature, but now Theresia’s riding skills had surpassed Carol's who was a veteran rider. Wilhelm would also be in danger of falling behind if he didn't practice.

"The madam is riding wonderfully," muttered the smiling rancher next to Wilhelm while watching Theresia try to do a difficult maneuver like trotting.

We made this man, a rancher in Flanders, accommodate us a lot since it's Theresia's first time riding an earth dragon. I want to repay his kindness somehow, but…

"That earth dragon has become completely attached to the madam, so…how about that one?"

"…"

He's good, Wilhelm thought, narrowing his eyes, before observing the yellow earth dragon that Theresia was riding. The bright color of its scales matched well with her red hair.

"What's its name?" Wilhelm asked.

"Yes," answered the rancher, smiling gently and rubbing his hands together, "the name of that earth dragon is…"

Wilhelm gazed in wonder after hearing his reply. And then he laughed out loud, which was something he rarely did.

—Since the name of that earth dragon was also a flower that held a lot of memories for Wilhelm and Theresia and was very precious to them.

END

Sword Demon Love Story: The Other Side of The Honeymoon (Ex 3; Melon Books)

“Over here, Carol, come on.”

“Lady Theresia, you’ll hurt yourself if you run off like that.”

With that, the girl frowned and chased after the young girl rushing ahead. Despite the slight commotion they were causing, no one raised an eyebrow at them. After all, when it was a pair of great beauties producing such a ruckus—as the two girls were—it was considered less of a disturbance, and more of a spectacle, as though they were watching a scene in a play.

Theresia and Carol, unaware of their surroundings, walked through the streets of the merchant city of Picoutatte—marking the interlude of the honeymoon. Though the two stood on good terms, they were not newlyweds. Theresia was linked to her beloved husband, Wilhelm, and Carol was their attendant on the trip. However, Wilhelm was currently unable to enjoy his honeymoon. Because…

“He’s a fortunate man to survive a wound of that magnitude,” sighed Carol after catching up with Theresia and linking arms with her. Her gaze moved towards the clinic on the other side of the street. Two of their companions were hospitalized at said clinic, one of them being Wilhelm.

Wilhelm was on a trip, but for reasons unknown had been forced to a duel with a powerful enemy, and in exchange for reaching his goal, he had been seriously wounded and was charged with bedrest.

So, Theresia and Carol found themselves strolling through the commercial district…

“Yeah, he’s caused me a lot of grief,” began Theresia, “but he has such bad luck… That’s dad for you.”

“That’s not what I…!” cried Carol, the color draining from her complexion. “Lady Theresia, I wasn’t referring to Lord Veltol…”

“I know. I was just kidding,” Theresia said, flashing Carol a mischievous grin.

Along with Wilhelm, the other person who was also hospitalized was Theresia’s father, Veltol. In truth, his condition was at one point critical and the fact that they were now able to laugh was by virtue of a string of miracles. One being Wilhelm’s efforts, and the other being…

“Oh?” Something caught Theresia’s attention, causing her to stare in wide-eyed wonder.

She has the most exquisite sky blue eyes, thought Carol. No matter how long I stare into them, I never grow tired of them.

Following Theresia’s gaze stood a man buying sherbert from a street vendor. He was a lanky fellow dressed in a white surgical gown. His eyes narrowed in displeasure due to what seemed like nervousness, but as Carol watched him devour the frozen treat her impression of him completely changed. Maybe that’s how he always looks. There’s only one person who scowls like that.

“Oh, it’s you two.” The familiar face also seemed to have noticed Carol and her friend standing on the street.

Carol and Theresia returned the bow of the man holding a bowl of sherbert. “Are you taking a break now, Dr. Galić?” asked Theresia.

“Yup,” replied the man in the gown with a spoon in his mouth. “I can finally take a breather after dealing with all those people who fell into the river.”

He was refreshingly ill-mannered, but strangely enough, she couldn’t bring herself to complain. It was no wonder then, that Veltol’s miraculous recovery was in no small part a consequence of the doctor’s efforts. Without Wilhelm’s brave fighting or Galić’s efforts, Veltol wouldn’t be alive today. For this reason, Theresia lowered her head in respect. “I’m sorry to have created more work for you, Doctor," she apologized. "We completely destroyed that bridge, and it looks like a lot of people got caught in the middle of the commotion…"

"What? They were just onlookers at the duel," said the doctor. "They were prepared to get a little roughed up. I'm sure you were too. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, though some of them might catch a cold."

Theresia's apology referred to the duel that resulted in Wilhelm's hospitalization. The duel, which took place on the city's main bridge, ended with the adversary escaping. In doing so, they collapsed the bridge, resulting in many of the onlookers falling into the river. If one were to believe in Galić's recounting of the events, it sounded like no one was injured, but Theresia felt strongly remorseful all the same.

"Lady Theresia, please don't feel too upset by it," said Carol. "The responsibility lies with the miscreant who collapsed the bridge. It wasn't your fault."

"But…"

"In that case, your father will pay for the bridge repairs, as well as the treatment of any onlookers," Galić assured her. "No one will complain then."

Carol wanted to ease Theresia's guilt as much as possible and was grateful to receive support from Galić. Although the doctor in question didn't seem to have such intentions, on the contrary, he had said the exact right thing to Theresia. This was perhaps due to an overlap in his inconsiderate manner and her honest character.

"Thank you, Dr. Galić," Theresia said. "That makes me feel a little better."

"That's great… In that case, while you're thanking me, I'd like to ask you something."

"Me?" questioned Theresia, tilting her head in puzzlement. "What can I do?"

Galić, happily tucking into his frozen treat, frowned and said, “The thing is, your father refused to listen to me when he recommended me for a position in the royal capital. I wonder if you could somehow get him to reconsider.”

“My father?” Theresia looked back with wide eyes at the sour-faced Galić’s request. Then she glanced at Carol, who was standing next to her. “Is it a bad thing to be recommended for such a position…?”

Carol thought for a moment and shook her head. “No, it is a great honor. Lord Veltol’s recovery is partly because he is now free of the ring’s curse, but also in a large part due to Dr. Galić’s efforts. I’m sure Lord Veltol appreciates your work, which is why he recommended you.”

“But I’m saying that I don’t want to go…”

Galić appeared reluctant to further discuss the topic.

Perhaps he didn’t aspire to push his career in medicine any further.

In fact, despite his overbearing personality, Veltol, the head of the Astrea family, held a high degree of influence. With his recommendation, it would be as good as guaranteed that Galić would prosper in the royal capital.

“Does that mean you’ve put roots down here?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to go to the royal capital. It’s more to do because…the mother of my son lives there,” muttered Galić bitterly.

“Huh?” Question marks hovered over the confused Theresia and Carol.

That’s a funny way of putting it. So that means she’s…

“Your wife?”

“No, she is just the mother of my son. He’s mine by blood, but I’m not married to his mother. A contractual relationship would be a more accurate way to describe our connection.”

"Um… What do you mean by contractual relationship?"

"To put it simply, I was asked to give her my seed," replied Galić matter-of-factly.

"!!!" Theresia and Carol both blushed at the unexpectedly radical confession.

Registering their shocked reactions, Galić put his hand to his head and said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to shock you two. But that's my current situation."

"W-We should be the ones who should be apologizing for asking about such personal matters… I guess that means you don't want to meet the mother of your child?" asked Theresia.

"I think it would be better for everyone involved if we didn't see each other. I can't say I've been a good father and it's hard to imagine she's doing a good job as a mother. So…"

"I think this is up to your son to decide." Theresia, shaking off her embarrassment, shot Galić a serious look. "Happiness is ultimately a choice and one that we can only make for ourselves. It's up to you, Doctor, if you don't want to see your son, but…please don't jump to conclusions as to what your son will feel. "

"…"

"I've been through a lot too, but I can proudly say that I'm happy now. Even if you think that you haven't been a good father, maybe things will be different from now on."

Clearly, Theresia had given the delicate situation a great deal of thought.

Standing next to her, Carol couldn't help but feel proud and loved her all the more. Look at her, she thought. I want to stand at the top of the world and exclaim, "Take a look at this fine young woman."

"Well, this is amusing. Your companion holds herself in a more dignified manner than you." Looking at Theresia and Carol, the sickly-looking Galić laughed.

The scrawny healer laughed, tilted the bowl of now melted sherbet, and poured it down his throat. He exhaled a chilled breath. “You’re right,” he said. “Happiness is up to the individual. I pretended it was for my son, but I was just making excuses. I should be ashamed of myself.”

“Doctor, that’s not what I…”

“Well, I’ve made up my mind. I won’t go to the royal capital because I don’t want to see him.”

“Huh?”

Theresia’s eyes widened in disbelief. Her attempts at persuading the doctor resulted in the opposite of what she was expecting. Galić flashed a toothy grin.

“If my happiness is up to me to decide, then I choose to not go to the royal capital. It’s not as simple as whether my son wants to see me or not… But now is not the right time.”

“Oh, well I can’t argue with that… Carol…” replied Theresia.

“It’s unfortunate,” began Carol, “but you have managed to make Lady Theresia’s honest intentions work in your favor… “

In truth, Carol had never conspired against others before, and the same was true for Theresia, who couldn’t wrap her head around the doctor’s train of thought. As they metaphorically raised a white flag, Galić puffed his nose in a good mood and said, “I’ve made up my mind and I have you to thank, my lady. Now, all we have to do is to convince your father to throw in the towel.”

“Um, about that…”

“Yeah?”

Theresia covered her mouth as Galić cleared his throat. She then looked over at Carol, who nodded in agreement. They may have lost this battle, but they still had Veltol to win the war. He was known to be childish and absolutely relentless.

"Who would've thought there would come the day I'd hope to see Lord Veltol act in a less than graceful manner…" Carol admitted.

"Let's see which of them can turn the tables in their favor," giggled Theresia.

"What a pair of sinister grins…" said Galić, looking at the two girls.

Carol had known Veltol for a long time, so she and Theresia were confident in their victory. But even so…

"What kind of person is she? The woman who um…isn't your wife…" asked Theresia.

"I can't speak for others, but she's an eccentric woman. She has excellent abilities, but is difficult to handle," replied Galić. "I'm not sure if her decision to bear my child was because she wanted to or…she desired the genius of a healer for her child."

"That's an unusual mindset for one to have. It's not something one sees much in this day and age."

Marriages were a way of introducing superior bloodlines and preserving them. It was much rarer nowadays, but it was much more common hundreds of years ago. There were select families such as House Astrea that were so strong that regardless of new blood introduced to the lineage, it could not dilute it, and so the concept of pedigree was lost.

"She had an old-fashioned mentality, but it didn't feel that way to me," explained Galić. "When push came to shove, I couldn't keep up with her fiery passion…plus she was a real beauty."

"Men are such simple creatures…" Theresia gave a look of disdain at Galić's impertinent manner. Carol also shot a similar look of disgust and Galić roared with laughter.

He laughed in such a manner that could strike a nerve in others. "That's why," he said, "you may advise your father to not be concerned with an immoral man like me. And don't worry about your husband straying away. I know a fastidious man when I see one."

“It pains me to say it, but I agree with him on that one,” said Carol, reluctantly siding with Galić.

“Oh, Carol…” Theresia flushed at their affirmation, which Carol grudgingly had to admit was adorable.

Wilhelm thought the world of Theresia with his whole heart and soul. That was why he fought in that duel with no regard for his own life. He was met with fortune and successfully accomplished his goal. It was a feat that Carol herself could not have accomplished, to her shame.

“But that doesn’t prove that my feelings are worth any less than that man’s.”

“Um, Carol? Why are you suddenly so enthusiastic…”

“You have no idea how much I’ve been thinking about you, Lady Theresia. And my feelings are no less than his. You know that!” Carol was so stirred up that she clutched Theresia’s hands with her own.

Feeling overwhelmed by the momentum of their conversation, Theresia gawked back in astonishment. She looked away. Her pale cheeks blushed slightly, her lips quivering. “Oh, um Carol… I appreciate how you feel, but…”

“Yes!”

“It can get pretty packed here with people, so don’t get too excited… Ok?” cautioned Theresia with a gentle smile.

Carol quickly came to her senses and felt startled by what she saw around them. The eyes of the entire street were on her, who up to that point had been boldly expressing her feelings. Her cheeks turned into a shade of vermillion red, causing Galić to chuckle at the sight. “As a healer, I would advise you to get something cold for those hot cheeks. I highly recommend the frozen treats they have just over there.”

“Um, er… Well…” Carol bit her lip in frustration at the doctor’s teasing manner.

Theresia tugged her sleeve. “Don’t mind him,” she told her. “Alright then, we’ll go with your suggestion. I’ll treat you to a bowl of sherbert, Carol.”

Then, whether this was what Galić had in mind or not, Carol let out a pathetic cry. “L-Lady Theresia…” But in the end, Theresia’s allure was too much for her to resist and so she staggered along behind her.

“Hehehe! All the best, you two!” chortled Galić as he turned around with a smile.

Biting back the urge to lash back at the doctor, she held herself for a moment. At least, she hoped that her time with Theresia would make up for her humiliation and green-eyed jealousy of Wilhelm.

“Hey, Carol, what flavor do you want?”

However, such a feeble wish was nothing compared to the smile of the girl standing next to her, so Carol ran to join her mistress’s side.

END

Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero (Shibuya Marui 2017 Event) (Translation Pending)

Re:Zero Ex:
I Can Hear the Festival Music
(MF Bunko J Summer School Festival 2017)
(Translation Pending)

Memory Snow Prequel: Liar Days (Emilia Birthday Event 2018) (Translation Pending)

Bonds of Ice Prequel:
Frozen Days
(Emilia Birthday Event 2019)
(Translation Pending)

An Ordinary Day (Special Bonus)

“Hm? What are you two doing?”

“Oh, Subaru.”

“You’ve finally returned, I suppose. Betty got tired of waiting.”

Subaru widened his eyes at the unexpected sight across the opened door.

The place was Roswaal Manor, in Subaru’s private room. The people waiting for Subaru, who had returned after finishing a small errand, were Emilia and Beatrice.

It isn’t that much of a surprise that those two are together. The Emilia Camp became more united since the Sanctuary incident got resolved. Not only the new members, but the relationships among the old ones, including Beatrice, have changed a lot.

“In a good way though, of course. And looking at you two together is something that fills me with joy.”

“A-ha-ha, Beatrice told me she wants something from you and wanted me to wait here with her for you,” Emilia said.

“Well, that much is common courtesy. And on top of that, Betty was getting tired of being alone,” Beatrice replied in a prissy manner with a standoffish straight face next to the smiling Emilia.

Her attitude is in between that of an honest person and a twisted person, but she’s become pretty mellow now, Subaru thought as he gazed at Emilia, who shared his feelings of adoration for her level of progress.

“So?” Subaru said before continuing. “It’s nice that you guys were waiting for me, but why were you two sitting in the same chair? If you want to flex that you guys are close, then I want to be a part of it."

"I don't know what flex means, but we were drawing together, in fact."

"Drawing? That's a bit…" Subaru looked at Beatrice in surprise, as her reply had been completely unexpected.

His adorable contracted spirit then picked up the notebook on the table. "It was enough to keep Betty occupied a bit, I suppose. It's quite a masterpiece, in fact."

"Yeah, it's a masterpiece," Emilia confidently added after Beatrice's self-evaluation.

Subaru took the notebook that supposedly held their masterpiece and gasped. It made him recall the snow statue that Emilia and Beatrice made during the snow festival not too long ago when Roswaal Manor and Earlham Village got covered in snow because Puck was in his Magicletting Period.

I do admit that they are hardworking and diligent, but their artistic sensibilities are nonexistent, so the possibility of it being reflected in their drawing is highly likely.

"No, but Emilia-tan and Beako have a lot of potential. After all, I am Emilia-tan's Knight and Beako's Contractor, so I should believe in…"

"Look, we both drew Puck first. It's drawn well, isn't it?" Emilia asked.

"Yeah, I like your bold use of colors," replied Subaru as he was cheering himself up, but when he turned the page, his hopes were instantly dashed.

However, it wasn't like the snow statue that gave him a headache just by looking at it. It was just purely the work of a child whose skills couldn't quite capture what was in their head, which relieved him.

"Yeah, both of you have used colors boldly and that's nice. You guys just need to look at the real one and… Oh wait, the real one isn't around."

"…Betty has been lonely, I suppose. That's why she's been drawing Bubby and distracting herself."

"Hmmm, I see. I'm not confident that it would help, but…"

Subaru looked at Beatrice lowering her eyebrows in grief and pursed his lips, then began smoothly drawing the Puck in his head on an empty part of the page.

Come to think of it, I've carved Puck on potato stamps for radio calisthenics classes in Earlham Village. I've carved cute-looking Pucks the most in this other world, so if I make use of this experience—

"—Woa… It's amazing, Subaru! You are reaaally good at drawing! Right, Beatrice?!" Emilia's eyes sparkled with great joy when she saw the impromptu illustration of Puck.

Next to her was Beatrice, who peered into the notebook with widened eyes while grabbing it with both hands. "…Betty is proud to have contracted with Subaru as of this moment, I suppose."

"And you are saying that now?!" Subaru exclaimed. "I'm sure there will be an occasion where you'll feel like that in future, so I kinda want you to save that for then!"

"It's just a joke. But it's true that Betty is impressed, I suppose." Beatrice stuck out her tongue and playfully apologized to Subaru for startling him.

Subaru was relieved after hearing her words, but Emilia, whose excitement hadn't cooled down, agreed with Beatrice. "That's right. Not to mention your potato drawing, you have a lot of special skills, Subaru. Hee-Hee, I am reaaally happy that I have such an amazing knight."

"…"

"—Hm? Subaru? What happened?"

"Nothing, it's just that my heart almost gave out because you said something really cute. Hey, listen to me, Beako. That person over there is my master."

"Sorry, I have no idea what you're trying to say," Emilia replied.

"And besides all that, you also have the title of being Betty's pa-pa-pa, pa-pa, partner!" Beatrice shouted at him with a red face as Emilia tilted her head at Subaru, whose face was melting like butter.

While witnessing their responses that came from both extremes, Subaru didn't feel bad since his drawing skill was praised. Of course, he wasn't in a position where he could remain happy.

"It's because I did some drawing here and there. Though in my case it was more of an expression of my otaku side than an actual interest in art. But in the end, I kind of failed."

"Failed…even though you are so good at it?"

"People become good at what they like. I was satisfied with myself when I reached a certain level. But if I had gotten successful as an artist, then I wouldn't have met you… No! Even if I had become an artist, I'd still seek you out and draw you, Emilia-tan!"

"Is that so? I feel like I would be happy to meet with you no matter what the situation is," Emilia answered with a smile at Subaru's rather idiotic words.

Filled with happiness due to her compassion, Subaru involuntarily pulled on Beatrice's cheek, thinking he must have been dreaming.

"Hey, why are you pulling on Betty's cheek! Pull on your own cheek, in fact!"

"I wanted to touch your soft cheeks while joking around. Don't make me say it."

"Um, umm… Ah well, you're such a hopelessly clingy boy, I suppose."

Believing what Subaru had told her, Beatrice didn’t move while he pulled on her cheek. He was going to enjoy her lovely cheeks since he had gotten her permission to do so.

“—Oh, hey Subaru. Can you draw me and Beatrice if it’s fine with you?” asked Emilia after suddenly striking her palm gently with a fist as she gazed at them.

She carefully extended her hands, then hugged Beatrice and sat on Subaru’s bed.

“It would really be some nice eye candy for me, and it would make me happy, but…but what about the business you had with me, Emilia-tan?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, this is what I wanted to do. I had some free time, so I wanted to talk with you.”

“Beako! Did you record that?!”

“Record? You’re using words that Betty doesn’t understand again…”

Even though Beatrice looked as if she didn’t want to do it, she didn’t move from Emilia’s lap. Subaru understood that it was what the girl who was bad at relying on the goodwill of others truly wanted.

So, Subaru responded to her request and set himself up in front of the two girls sitting on the bed. “It’s going to take a while, is that ok?”

“Yeah, it’s alright. —It’s reaaally an amazing time for me even if we aren’t doing anything,” Emilia replied with a gentle smile.

“I suppose,” Beatrice agreed.

“Alright.” Subaru got pumped up after hearing their replies and then rolled up his sleeves.

—An ordinary, pleasant, and happy day went by slowly as the sound of him working hard as he ran his brush over the paper was accompanied by laughter that occasionally rang out from the room.

Comic Alive Collection 3: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 3

My Fair Bad Lady

1

“Emilia: “Hey, Subaru, did you hear? A “Wandering Genius Chef” is coming.”

Subaru: “…What?”

In response to Emilia’s statement, her eyes sparkling, Subaru tilted his head greatly, and he asked another question.

They were at the Roswaal mansion’s garden, and it was still early morning before breakfast. What jumped at him in this clear, morning atmosphere were Emilia’s look of anticipation and her statement, forgetting to say her greetings.

She had good looks, amethyst eyes with jewels, and she did give off a brave impression at a glance, but her gestures full of charm and cuteness changed the feeling she gave off noticeably.

Frankly, even though she had a beautiful face, she was cute. She was an angel.

Emilia: “Subaru, did you listen to me properly?”

Subaru: “Of course, EMT. So, uhhh, what was it again?”

Emilia: “Jeez, you didn’t listen to me after all! Like I said, a “Wandering Genius Chef” is coming. Doesn’t that sound reeeeaally exciting? Doesn’t it?”

The silver bell like tone was also colored with her joy, not hiding her cheerful and lively mood.

It was a cheerful mood that he’d always watch, but he got interested when he heard Emilia say “Wandering Genius Chef”, so it couldn’t be helped.

Subaru: “A wandering…genius chef? Who is that again? That person with a dimwit sounding title.”

Emilia: “Ah, you can’t say that. Umm, it kinda seems like it’s a person who’s reeeaaally skilled with cooking, and so apparently their cooking is known to be so good that “Eat a bite, and your body will be captured. Eat two, and your heart will be captivated. Eat three, and your soul will be trapped.”

Subaru: “Is that slogan not a curse?”

The cheerfully told reputation had too many details that made it sound like it’d be a first and last time experience, so he couldn’t accept it easily.

Anyhow, disregarding the exaggerated reputation, it seemed to be an event where the so called rumored chef would display their skills, so it sounded good. The news not getting to Subaru was a mystery, but he said

Subaru: “Well, it is Roswaal, so it’s very likely that it’ll be a surprise show. Emilia-tan, when did you hear about this?”

Emilia: “A little while ago.”

Subaru: “Ah, then there’s no doubt about it.”

Roswaal, the head of the mansion, was a strange one that always had his eccentric outfit and his clown makeup on him. Him saying things like wild statements and suggestions was an everyday thing, so Subaru easily understood how he was the link to this time’s matter too.

Subaru: “Either way, I wanna hope that the person doesn’t fail to live up to their name.”

Emilia: “Yeah! I’m reeeaally looking forward to it. I don’t really get it, but even in a sense of foreseeing my future, it’s something necessary, so I’ll look forward to it.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan’s future?”

Emilia was in high spirits with Subaru, as he expressed his agreement, but her phrasing somewhat bothered him. However, even he didn’t know what exactly was bothering him. Without finding out what was the cause of his discomfort in the end, he said

Subaru: “Well, oh well. Alright, then let’s start doing radio calisthenics. Doing them energetically, carefreely, and enjoyably, that is.”

Emilia: “Okay, got it. Then let’s do the stretching exercise and stretch our arms outward~!”

Emilia, someone who got completely accustomed to a different world’s custom, let out the standard yell, and the radio calisthenics commenced. Subaru also focused on those calisthenics while listening to that comforting voice.

2

Rem: “Subaru-kun, did you hear? Apparently, the “Chef That Can Make the Dragon Howl” Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm

VI-sama is coming tomorrow."

Subaru: "…What?"

Rem starts talking to Subaru like that, her eyes sparkling, as he returned from his duties after his morning radio calisthenics. She was a girl that would usually keep in mind having a stiff expression, but her unhideable excitement turned into passion, and it all poured out from her body.

Rem: "Yes, like I said, the "Chef That Can Make the Dragon Howl" Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI-sama is coming! Isn't that amazing?!"

Subaru: "Ahh, sounds kinda amazing in various ways. Is it really okay to call the person a chef? Not something like an adventurer?"

Rem: "What are you saying, Subaru-kun? Isn't it obvious? Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI-sama is a peerless chef."

Usually Rem would have completely positive opinions in regards to Subaru, but for some reason she acted displeased and rebuked him, perhaps having to do with her heavy infatuation with the chef.

Subaru: "So it's the cook that's coming tomorrow. Uhhh, I heard about it from Emilia just now, but is it a famous person?"

Rem: "Of course! It's a chef that can make the dragon howl, seeking for unknown supremacy, blessed by the food goddess, and the person has mastered all the styles of tastes in the world. They're famous for their "Eat a bite, and your body will be captured. Eat two, and your heart will be captivated. Eat three, and your soul will be trapped."."

Subaru: "That slogan sounds dangerous no matter how many times I hear it…Rem seems to be very knowledgeable."

Rem: "I am incompetent, but I do cook, after all. I respect and aspire to be like those who are at the top of that road. That's why I'm really looking forward to this."

Rem would show him her rare smiles carefreely. Just looking at it would make him have such a fine smile that his cheeks would loosen, but when he thought about how an unknown person had made her bring it out, he wasn't very amused because of his male instincts.

It was Rem's surprising fangirl tastes that came to light during the visit from the bard Liliana.

Rem: "What's wrong? You seem to look a little angry."

Subaru: "…Noo? Rem and Emilia-tan seem to be obsessed with that Dias VI person, so don't mind me. I'm meant to just lick plates at the corner, anyways."

Rem: "Haha. Subaru-kun, don't just say weird things please. Ah, but…"

Rem smiles at Subaru, who pouted and fell into servility, and in the middle of it, she made a face that indicated she had remembered something.

Rem: "Even though you licking plates was a joke, it is said that Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI-sama is very strict with manners and demands certain decency, so…"

Subaru: "Any world's workers will have an abundance of people that are hard to please. I'll ask just in case, but are they the type of people who take away the cooking when you have bad manners?"

Rem: "No, it's said that they turn you into cooking."

Subaru: "They're that type of people?!"

He asks about the type of person of the busy restaurant, and Subaru had chills run down his back. However, he immediately saw Rem bursting into laughter, and he understood that it was one of her jokes.

Subaru: "Jeez, spare me from jokes that are hard to laugh at."

Rem: "Sorry. Subaru-kun believes me too easily, so I just sort of did it. However, manners truly are important. Although, I don't think there's anything that strict. Especially for me and Subaru, people of lower positions."

Subaru: "Ahh, right. If the hurdle for that isn't lowered, then…"

He couldn't stand being judged the same way regardless of if he'd been receiving education or not. Subaru felt relief that this world didn't have comparable table manners—he tried to feel relieved, but once again, something bothered him. Well, what could it possibly be?

Rem: "Since it's a special occasion, I also want to learn something from tomorrow's cooking. Subaru-kun, you remember my flavor today, because tomorrow, it'll definitely be somewhat different."

Subaru: "Mm…o…okay. Alright alright, I'll be judging it properly. Look forward to it."

In response to Rem's words, her expressing motivation, Subaru put aside his discomfort, and he nodded. He pats Rem's head even with the situation being like that, and he resumed the servant work with her as she purred.

At any rate, he was looking forward to tomorrow.

3

Ram: "Barusu, do you know? The "Lustful and Womanizing but Legendary Chef" Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI has been invited to the mansion by Roswaal-sama for tomorrow. Make sure to behave yourself."

Subaru: "…What?"

He finished his share of early morning duties, and he sought to clean the mansion's east wing, having teamed up with Ram, and she suddenly brings up that topic from behind him.

When Subaru turned around, who had already tilted his head three times today, he meets the eyes of Ram as she had her arms folded, snorting her nose very pompously.

Ram: “Like I said, tomorrow the “Lustful and Womanizing But Legendary Chef” Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI will be displaying their abilities at the mansion. I do feel pity for Barusu, you not being able to participate, but behave in a way so that you don’t hurt Roswaal-sama’s honor.”

Subaru: “Wait Wait Wait Wait, hold up with all that. Who’s coming again? Dias-san?”

Ram: “Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI. Apparently it’s a person who gets grouchy when you don’t go through the trouble of calling them by their full name. Barusu, you make sure that you absolutely do not make a mistake in their name, too. Also…”

Subaru: “Wait a second, seriously wait.”

Subaru interrupts Ram’s words midway, as she pressed for an answer, and new pages for the “Chef Information” that started with Emilia began to add one after another. What exactly did it all mean?

Subaru: “That Dias Lepunzo…-san, is that the same person Rem was talking about?”

Ram: “I don’t know what Rem told you, but I heard about it along with my talk this morning with Roswaal-sama, so maybe it’s concerning the same person. So?”

Subaru: “But there are some unresolved differences between that and the personality Rem told me about.”

According to what Rem happily said, the visiting chef had a reputation of being the type of worker that can be hard to please, but even if she was as wrong as possible, the person shouldn’t have been a lecher.

Subaru: “What’s more is that, just like that, I’ve become unable to participate in eating, but what is the meaning of this?”

Ram: “I told you it was a lustful womanizer, didn’t I? The person mastered any and every delicious food. That Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI chooses their customers, displaying their abilities, which is obviously limited to women only. Disgusting."

Subaru: "If that was the case, then Roswaal wouldn't be able to eat, either. Isn't that odd?"

Ram: "Roswaal-sama has a certain position. He won his seat after proper negotiations. There's no seat for Barusu. Deal with it by licking someone's leftover plate. Roswaal-sama's is a no go, and forget about Emilia-sama's. Rem is an absolute no, and if you lick mine, you can go die. …Licking Beatrice-sama's leftover plate would be fine."

Subaru: "Licking plates seems like it could happen, but what kind of punishment game is this?!"

Once he was even set up to lick Beatrice's used plate on top of not being able to eat, he couldn't help but raise his voice.

Subaru: "No matter how you look at it, this is too much. Where is Ros-chi? I'ma have a talk with him!"

Ram: "Unfortunately, Roswaal-sama went out to see Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI right now. He'll be back during dinner tomorrow…in other words, just before the cooking starts. There's nothing you can do about it."

Subaru: "This is hopeless—!"

It was the flow of a conversation that made it seem like it was prepared only to set up Subaru.

Subaru: "Besides, why is it that even you guys are being notified the day before and not just me? This is too sudden."

Ram: "It's a chef that travels. The person is very hard to get a hold of, and it was also hard to get them to agree this time, too. But, they got interested when they were told that there were four beautiful looking girls."

Subaru: "It's a lustful chef!"

The reasoning that satisfied the demand was so agreeable that it was unexpectedly convincing.

Emilia was of course beautiful, and Rem and Ram were the incarnations of beautiful girls too. Beatrice also had the cuteness of a doll if she stayed still.

Subaru: “Can I…can I really forgive such oppression…?!”

Ram: “Deal with it. Besides, having expectations as a servant would be a presumptuous honor. Also, the food this time is more than just a meal…no, this is irrelevant.”

Ram didn’t even give any consoling words to Subaru, who was regretful as he broke down. Ram was going to say something at the end, but she ended the conversation and quickly went back to work.

In the end, Subaru did not know what Ram was starting to say, being knocked down. And that is how the morning slowly went by with him having his feelings crushed.

4

Beatrice: “Come to think of it, have you heard? Apparently the successor Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI the “Decapitating Cook” is coming.”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait wait!”

It was an interaction that happened four times today, but the impactful way she started the conversation caused Subaru to forget the standard reaction he had up to this point, and so he raised his voice as much as possible.

The person who frowned unhappily at Subaru’s state was this girl who tried to bring up a topic with a rarely seen smug face, Beatrice. She snorted her nicely shaped nose with a “Hum” as she glared at Subaru.

Beatrice: “You must have some nerve to interrupt me, I suppose. Besides, you shouldn’t be so noisy in the library. You’ll stir up dust, and you’ll hurt the books’ feelings, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Ignoring that airhead-like insistence of you understanding the books’ feelings, what did you say just now? Can you repeat it?”

Beatrice: “Right. The successor Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI the “Decapitating Cook” is coming tomorrow.”

Subaru: “Yes that! That’s it! What is that super dangerous nickname?! Decapitating?! I never heard of this!”

It was a chef whose name would always change whenever he asked about it, but all of them should’ve been barely out of the chef category so far. However, if a bizarre image was added after coming here, then of course Subaru couldn’t be obedient like a willow swaying in the wind.

Subaru: “First of all, the person just needs one cool name! In fact, having so many feels threatening, or rather, that so called important something is faint! What does “Wandering Genius Cook”, “Chef That Can Make the Dragon Howl”, “Lustful and Womanizing but Legendary Chef”, and “Decapitating Cook” all mean?! There’s too much mess displayed! Is there really someone with so many names?! If there’s more people like that, tell me! I’ll give them a scolding!”

Beatrice: “Roswaal seems to be called stuff like “Demi-human Lover”, “Clown Nobel”, “A Good and Bad Pervert”, and “Top Royal Magician”. I suppose.”

Subaru: “When he gets back, I’m gonna give him a scolding!”

Subaru scratches his head recklessly at all the names he was told while he resented how it was one of his friends.

Beatrice lets out a clear sigh at Subaru, and she said

Beatrice: “I don’t get what’s irritating you, but it doesn’t seem to be a big deal, I suppose.”

Subaru: “There’s no way it isn’t a big deal. Decapitating sounds beyond scary. The person did something, got that nickname, and still continues to be a chef.”

Beatrice: "…Ah, I get it. You're misunderstanding me, I suppose. They're said to be a "Decapitating Cook", but the reason they're called that isn't because they actually do cut heads off."

Beatrice's shocked way of shrugging her shoulders didn't match her appearance. However, Subaru felt relief from the behavior of the girl who had a mismatched impression for now.

Subaru: "Oh, is that so? Well, that's right. That is right. There's no way a person that decapitates the heads of people they don't like should be able to continue carefreely as a chef…not to mention, even more so when it's a famous chef."

Beatrice: "Of course. However, it's said that when Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm is at a dining area, the people they end up not liking somehow lose things like their positions and jobs, and there's a lot of times when they get ruined."

Subaru: "A "Decapitating Cook" in a sense of human resources?!"

He clearly understands the truth of the nickname that didn't pop up until now, and Beatrice's explanation had credibility.

Anyhow, if they really didn't cut heads off, then he'd be relie—

Subaru: "No, wait…"

Subaru was going to think that, and then he pulled back his heart that seemed like it was going to be relieved.

Something, yes, something bothered him.

The information collected up to this point and the discomforting thing that made him worry several times—its identity arrived, and it was appearing and disappearing on the other side of his doubts.

Emilia's testimony, "Wandering Genius Cook". Rem's testimony, "Chef That Can Make the Dragon Howl". Ram's testimony, "Lustful and Womanizing but Legendary chef". Beatrice's testimony, "Decapitating Cook".

He joins all of those together, steps into the core, and he grabs onto the truth—.

Subaru: “The foreseeing of Emilia’s future. Annoying manners. Lustful and womanizing. And then, decapitating cook.”

The worrisome words pile up, and Subaru finally arrived at a single answer.

And it was nothing but a cruel plan that was too villainous.

Subaru: “No way…no, if it’s Roswaal, then it might be done.”

Roswaal L Mathers was Emilia’s biggest supporter, and you could even say that he was this girl’s unique supporter, as she had few allies. However, completely letting your guard down and believing all of Roswaal’s actions were sincere and friendly would be a mistake.

Roswaal was a man that could come up with certain clear solutions. If he couldn’t, then he wouldn’t be able to continue living with a high position as a Margrave among the nobles.

Therefore, surely Roswaal also demanded that severe lifestyle from Emilia, too.

It was also a sort of method he couldn’t imagine Emilia doing, as she was kind and pure.

Subaru: “…I have to…do something.”

Emilia’s smile, lively voice, and the fingertips he touched shined inside his memory.

That smile, voice, and touch, he had to protect all of it.

Subaru: “I’ll do it. I will be on your side, I swear.”

Subaru renews his determination, lifts his head, and he clenches his fist.

In his heart, he decides that he had to do it. Which meant that the only thing he had to do next was run.

He was already receiving his reward everyday. Just that was enough.

Beatrice: “Oiiii. …No good, I suppose. You aren’t listening at all. Whatever, I suppose.”

Subaru gets completely lost in his thoughts, and he forgets about Beatrice being there.

Beatrice raised one knee and looked away to pout, as she was being ignored.

None of them said what they were thinking, which would cause a tragedy in the distant future—at the time, these two had no way of knowing that.

5

Subaru: “Puck, did you know? The “Wandering, Womanizing, Legendary Decapitating Chef That Can Make the Dragon Howl” is coming to the mansion tomorrow.”

Puck: “…Was it really like that?”

The fifth interaction was something that had seemingly similar form, but it was definitely different than all of the ones he had up to this point.

Subaru, someone who had been the listener until now, became the speaker.

Subaru calls out to someone at the mansion’s rear garden, having a secret talk, and he sharpens all of his senses to take caution.

Then, the one who tilted his head at Subaru’s topic was a gray haired kitten spirit floating in the air.

It was Puck, who was Emilia’s contracted spirit as well as someone who called himself her guardian.

In response to Subaru’s words, he lifted his tail as high as his body, and while playing with the tip of his paws he said

Puck: “Lia told me about it happily, so I do know a chef is coming. However, I feel like they didn’t have such a strange name. I feel like it was a more simple and shady one…”

Subaru: “Well, it sure was a bit off. There’s actually a lot more names, but it’s all a mess. But it’s fine. That’s not important right now.”

Puck: “Hm~, if Subaru says it’s fine, then okay, but I don’t understand what you’re getting at. What do you need?”

Subaru: “It’s a request for you to come with me alone. Of course, Emilia-tan can’t hear about it, since it’s something that involves her.”

Subaru lowers his voice, and he spoke to Puck while looking at the situation around him.

Afterwards, the round eye-balled kitten stiffens his expression, and he comes down slowly to match Subaru’s eyelevel.

Puck: “If it’s about Lia, then I’ll listen to anything. I’m all ears.”

Subaru: “Right. But, make sure you don’t reveal this to Emilia-tan. I don’t want to cause any unnecessary worry for her…besides, if Emilia-tan finds out and notices, it probably won’t work.”

“…”

Puck squints his eyes, and Subaru felt something cold running down his back.

The small spirit in front of him changes his mindset after hearing it was something important related to his precious, beloved daughter. That was the only thing the petty human could feel a tremendous difference in.

Subaru: “About tomorrow’s chef…the dinner is a trap set up by Roswaal.”

Puck: “What do you mean?”

Subaru: “He’s not trying to inflict harm and such. The cooking the chef will bring out will probably be really delicious. It having a scrumptious flavor also is guaranteed.”

It made Rem’s heart flutter that much. Dream-like food was certainly going to appear at tomorrow’s dinner table with definite form. However, there was a trap.

Subaru: “What Roswaal and the chef will be wanting to see…is manners.”

Puck: “Manners, like table manners? Why is that a trap?”

Subaru: “You don’t get it? Think about Emilia-tan’s future position. She’s a candidate to be king, and from here, she’ll be invited to a lot of parties and dinings. In those times, there will be many occasions when she’ll be tested for appropriate behavior.”

Puck: “—! In other words, tomorrow’s dinner is for testing out Lia’s manners.”

Subaru: “Yes, it’s a trap. The “Decapitating Chef” curses the future of those with unacceptable manners. People who get judged negatively by that chef will never be able to hope for success. Up to this point, there seems to be no end to the number of people that lost their future in exchange for temporary happiness from getting involved with the chef, despairing as they ended themselves. This is what Roswaal’s trying to do.”

Subaru listened to Beatrice, and in the forbidden archives he realized that plan.

Initially, his feelings of not wanting to believe it were the strongest, and he sought to deny it in disbelief. However, from Roswaal’s perspective, it was a logical decision. Was there a measure as appropriate as this one that would be a test for the future harsh battle that is the royal selection? No, there wasn’t.

Subaru: “But, for Roswaal to do such a thing…no, if it’s him, then it’s possible……!”

Puck: “Then what should we do? Lia believes in Roswaal, but I feel bad for her."

Puck's ears fold weakly, and his eyes were clouded with sadness in his depressed look. Subaru understood his feelings so well that it hurt, and he hit his chest. He did it strongly, and it was if blue veins stood out on his forehead.

Subaru: "That's why I called you. Emilia will be saved by you and I."

Puck: "Me and Subaru? How?"

Subaru: "Easy to explain. Tomorrow, Roswaal and the others will try to test Emilia's manners. Emilia having her meal without knowing about it…that's what we should help out with!"

Emilia didn't have to know about the cruel reality. If Roswaal became aware of how Emilia noticed it, then that devil like man would surely come up with a different plan again.

However, this time Subaru and Puck recognized that devilish trick beforehand. They were also on Emilia's side, no matter what. They could struggle secretly and openly for her sake.

Subaru: "Let's do this, Puck. You and I will save Emilia."

Puck: "—Yeah, I'm up for it. Got it. I'll put a bet on your feelings."

When Subaru held out his hand, Puck landed on his palm, having only thought about it for a second.

It looked different than a handshake, but both of their intentions were able to be united.

Puck: "So, what do we do tomorrow?"

Subaru: "There can be some interferences. That's why first we need countermeasures for that. After that, let's meet up to follow up according to the situation. In other words, we won't be getting sleep tonight."

They both had the same goal and were acting to protect the girl that was important to both of them.

Subaru and Puck prepared for tomorrow as they watched for an opportunity to destroy the evil scheme, polishing the nails and fangs while they had smiles on their faces that would look exactly the same to an outsider.

6

That day, Ram was in a bad mood since morning.

Of course, she wasn't so crude to show that displeasure on her face. That's why her behavior was as mannered as usual, and on the surface, she appeared to be dignified. However, her heart wasn't at peace.

Ram: "So damn unsightly, Barusu."

If she slipped up, she would let out the irritation she had towards the servant that had a frivolous look on his face.

Normally, as a servant of a mansion, similar to Ram and Rem, all of the duties would—today visitors had also arrived, and Natsuki Subaru was in the position of needing to keep up with all of the work.

Just for this crucial day, he wouldn't appear being in what you would call bad shape, which he'd have since morning.

Rem: "Nee-sama. Subaru-kun is tired from doing all this work he's not used to. I'll do my best to work too, so let him get some good rest, please."

Only Rem, Ram's younger sister that was equal to her with half her body, noticed her irritation that wasn't shown on her face and followed up.

However, Rem spoiled Subaru, the target of Ram's anger, and the burden being put on her only caused Ram's impression of Subaru inside her to worsen even more.

Ram: "Barusu, you better prepare yourself for when this day ends."

Ram decides on how she would let out her accumulated anger, as she suppressed her discontent and devoted herself to her work.

Like that, it was in the afternoon when the master Roswaal brought home the guest Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI.

???: “I’m honored to be invited, I say.”

……”

He had a fat belly, an oily face, and he looked at them with a belittling look while having a really vulgar smile.

He had gray hair, and he was a large fatso, big both vertically and horizontally. They guessed he was around 50 since he had somewhat thin hair and a mean look. To the side, he brought along petite luggage holders who had cloaks that completely covered the body up to their heads. It seemed like the servants were there so that the luggage would be minimal, allowing him to travel.

Roswaal: “Meeting up took sooooome time. Sorry for returning late. However, this is the person that was talked about. Be as respectful as poooossible.”

Having returned, Roswaal expressed his warm welcome at the side of the legendary chef with two people. Ram and Rem respond to those words by bowing with dignity as they said

Rem and Ram: “Welcome, thanks for coming.”

in unison. The fat man responds by breathing heavily and trembling as he said

???: “Morniiiin, I can’t handle this, I say. The beauty and the loveliness of you two increases your charm even more than the fact that you guys are twins, I say. Nice tastes, I say.”

Roswaal: “Well well, thaaaanks.”

The somewhat aroused man says that, and Roswaal gives a vague reply.

While listening to him, Ram imagines slapping the fat man, kicking him in the stomach, and bouncing him like ball, clearing the rage inside of her.

???: “Woops, can’t do that. Sorry for being so sudden I say, but would you mind guiding me to the kitchen, I say? I want to fulfill my wish, I say.”

The luggage holders sighed as they nudged the back of the man who seemed like he would continue chatting vulgarly from beginning to end. His expression changes, having noticed it, and he asks about the kitchen with a serious face.

Rem: “Understood. I shall guide you.”

Rem takes the initiative and offers to guide him, and she walks with the two of them towards the kitchen. That’s when Ram noticed the man looking at Rem’s butt as she walked in front. However, the follower saw the master bow his head repeatedly for his impoliteness, so she held back on saying anything.

Roswaal: “Soooorry sorry. Did he offend youuuu?”

Ram: “…No. No way. I would never harbor ill feelings towards a guest Roswaal-sama invi…”

Roswaal: “And your real feelings?”

Ram: “By any means possible, I want to crush those eyes that look at my little sister indecently.”

Even now, remembering that low-life look horrified her. If it was that bad, then Subaru’s was better. Even if his looks were suspicious at times, she believed in his incompetent point of being self-restrained.

Ram: “Rem doesn’t worry about it, and Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama wouldn’t even notice. So I thought it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Roswaal: “Yeeeah. By the way, I haven’t seen Subaru-kun. Where is he?”

Ram: “My apologies. Barusu’s been in bad shape since morning, so he’s sleeping in his room. I actually wanted to throw Barusu at…I wanted to leave dealing with the guest entirely to Barusu.”

Roswaal: “Oh, that’s too baaaad. Tonight’s dinner was going to have a flavor that would make you see things differently.”

Roswaal really said it regretfully, so Ram looked down quietly and said

Ram: “Shall we talk to Barusu so that he can show up tonight?”

Roswaal: “We shouldn’t be forceful. If it seems like he can come, then he’s welcome to do so no matter how sick he looks. There’s no point in just worrying about Subaru-kun.”

Ram touched his shoulder gently, and she felt heat. Roswaal smiles at Ram, her having slightly blushed cheeks. He closes one eye, and he charmingly says

Roswaal: “Ram should enjoy herself, too. It’ll definitely turn out to be a night that has that beneeeefit.”

7

—He definitely saw it with his eyes from the opening between the curtains of the closed room.

Subaru: “Target spotted. No doubt about it. It’s the real deal.”

Puck: “…Which means that we should also confirm the trap theory.”

Puck folds his arms, and he gives an acknowledging gesture with his chin at the boy who looked back at the darkness. The boy agrees by shrugging his shoulders, and he squinted with his sanpaku eyes that tended to slant.

The atmosphere was different. The kitten sensed it, and he let out a sigh.

Puck: “We’re really doing this, right?”

Subaru: “Yeah. Whether we do it or not, I’ll definitely still have regrets. If that’s the case, then it’s much better to regret after doing it. That’s what I feel right now.”

Puck: “I might’ve misunderstood you. Got it. If you’re that ready, then I’ll help out as much as I can. I’ll do it all for my cute, beloved daughter.”

Subaru: “For her. —Yeah, that’s right. You said it.”

The two quietly exchange words in the quiet atmosphere.

They settle on a target, and their intentions unite. They no longer had any hesitation or doubt.

The boy adjusts the position of the chair he sat on. He holds onto his breath, and he looks down on the tool in front of him. He was never familiar it, but it wasn’t his first time touching it, either. He never expected a former mallet handle to be useful this way. You’ll never know what will be useful in life.

With the little strong emotions and the readiness to go further in his chest, the boy tackled the battle.

8

Four hours after the arrival of Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI, the dinner preparations were set up, and Ram went to call Emilia and Beatrice.

It was a person that was said to be a supreme chef. Rem was sent to observe the chef, and although she didn’t show it on her face, she had clear expectation and excitement coming from her body. Meanwhile, Ram had to handle the majority of the afternoon chores.

Ram: “Screw Barusu.”

Having made it in time safely for dinner, Ram let out a sigh with her fatigue while accumulating gouges of anger onto each step of her duties. When she did, she summoned Emilia and the others, who were waiting for dinner time.

Emilia: “He was looking forward to it so much too. Subaru is reeeeaally unlucky. …Wonder if we can leave something for him. Can I ask?”

Ram: “I think Roswaal-sama has taken that into consideration. Emilia-sama, you’re probably fine to enjoy the dinner without thinking too hard about something petty.”

Emilia: “Yeah, got it. Will do. Thank you.”

Emilia appeared to be disappointed with Subaru’s absence. However, she was better off worrying about herself, rather than another person. There was a “reasonable significance” behind inviting Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI and having dinner, although Emilia didn’t realize it.

Emilia: “Speaking of disappointing, Puck also hasn’t shown up. He should be somewhere in the mansion, but he’s not in the crystal stone. Ram, have you seen him?”

Ram: “Nope, I haven’t seen him. Besides, with him having the form of a Great Spirit, being at the dining table during dinner with the chef would be a little…”

Emilia: “I guess there’s a problem with that. Even though he’s always kept clean…”

Even though he just looked like an animal, a being like that having dinner with them would not be a desirable situation.

In response to Ram’s indirect wording, Emilia also accepted the situation reluctantly, and she sat at the dining table.

Beatrice: “Even so, he’s also a very disappointing man, I suppose. It showed clearly in his behavior.”

The next person she called, Beatrice, also mentions that, in regards to Subaru’s absence.

Unlike Emilia, she didn’t say sympathizing words, but it was completely clear that she was acting worried, so from Ram’s perspective, it looked more pleasant.

Ram: “Yes, I agree. Although, Beatrice-sama may be lonely.”

Beatrice: “…Wait a second, I suppose. I don’t get how you came up with me being lonely out of that. Answer me, I suppose. Big Sister. Hey, Big Sister!”

She soothes Beatrice, her getting angry with a red face, and she also arrives at the dining table.

Just when she did, Roswaal and Rem also arrived at the dining table. When Rem noticed her, she ran up to her with short steps and said

Rem: “Nee-sama, I’m sorry for leaving you with the afternoon work. Did it work out?”

Ram: “It’s just extending normal work, so of course it wasn’t a problem. How about you, Rem, did you enjoy it?”

Rem: “Yes! Nee-sama, thank you. Look forward to tomorrow and so on.”

From Ram’s perspective, Rem being prideful and appearing to have learned a lot was lovely as she would usually be reserved. When she pat her head unconsciously, the younger sister squinted her eyes while feeling ticklish.

Ram: “Does Rem having returned from the kitchen mean it’s aboouut time for the meals to be brought out?”

Rem: “Yes. There wasn’t any more help needed for setting the table, so I went to the dining room. Nee-sama, let’s sit down, too.”

Ram: “Yes yes. No need to be in that much of a hurry. It’s improper.”

She gets her hand pulled by Rem, frolicking like a child, and Ram also sat down at the dining table.

Then, the dining room door opened, and the supreme chef, who had a major role in tonight’s feast, made his appearance, as if having chosen to show up at the same time the five of them sat at that place.

???: “Sorry to keep you waiting, I say. Is everyone here, I say?”

The man shakes his fat body, and he looks around the dining room. When he did, he checked on the beautiful girls with lovely looks gathered at the dining table, and he breaths heavily as he nodded approvingly.

???: “Certainly certainly, I say. It’s just like you said, Margrave-sama, I say. Well then, since the preparations and confirmations have been done, let’s bring in the cooking.”

Emilia: “Yes. Please treat me well.”

He stared particularly at Emilia with his lustful eyes. Emilia waved at the chef carefully with a smile without knowing how exactly he was looking at her.

???: “—May I join in as well?”

It was a voice that somehow sounded unconcerned and was hoarse. Everyone gets surprised by the unfamiliar voice and the sign of a new person, and they turn towards the dining room entrance. To the side of the fat man, what showed from the crack of the door was a person with a brilliant, black dress.

She had long, charming brunette hair, and a jet black dress that covered a lot of the body for a woman. Her pulled back lips had somewhat thick lipstick, and her eyeliner and long eyelashes increased the charm of her eye power. She had a thin scarf on her shoulders, and it looked like she had a terrible way of walking gracefully with her heels tapping.

Everybody was absorbed with that person’s entry, and they lost their breath.

Natsumi: “Is something wrong? It’s me. Natsumi Schwarz.”

That person gracefully tilted her head while being looked at by everyone in silence, and she unabashedly names herself as she did a curtsey that was so perfect that it surprised everyone.

Ram: "…"

Ram recovers from the initial shock, and she was unsure of what to do next. Ram, someone who tended to have snap judgement, showed rare hesitation, as this type of situation was beyond her imagination.

She felt an alluring power in the intruder that made it hard for her to look away, but she frantically looked towards Roswaal. Just what kind of decision would the master make as the person in charge of this occasion—?

Roswaal: "I aaaaam sorry for this, Natsumi-sama. Go ahead, take a seat. I'm sorry, but adding one more guest can't hurt, perhaaaaps?"

—Continue dinner!!

Roswaal's reply that guaranteed hospitality was completely and clearly talking about that reality.

When the young woman that gave off a weird vibe smiled, the fat man with an overwhelmed looking face nodded excitedly, and like that, he left the dining room to bring in the cooking.

This meant that in an instant, the leading role was transferred pitifully from the chef to the young woman. After the young woman sent off the man, she naturally went towards Emilia's side with elegant footsteps.

Natsumi: "Do you mind if I sit here?"

Emilia: "Um, go ahead. Madam? Goodness Roswaal doesn't tell me anything."

Emilia chats with the young woman nonchalantly without hiding her surprise.

When Ram looked at people other than her, she saw that Rem and Beatrice had varied reactions—Beatrice had a frown with curved lips, while Rem looked at the young woman with eyes of an affectionate mother. And above all, there was Roswaal bending his body, and while shaking his shoulder, acting on an unbearable impulse, she said

Ram: “I…I did not th-think it w-would come to this…”

Ram fights desperately against her laughter, and she decided to abandon questioning in this situation for now.

The young woman Natsumi Schwarz—although Natsuki Subaru’s cross dressing left some traces, he had Emilia fooled with a body that was pretty much the same as a woman’s, and it was so perfect that it was terrifying.

9

He accomplished his disguise successfully, and having acquired the seat next to Emilia, Natsumi Schwarz—Natsuki Subaru, who became a fictional woman, secretly made a firm fist, as he got the response he had hoped for.

Puck: “But, this is just the beginning, Subaru.”

—I know, I won’t reveal our motive.

While smiling with his face that had make-up, Subaru whispered and gave an acknowledging gesture with his chin at Puck, who was hidden.

When they recognized Roswaal’s objective, they shared the information on the chef they obtained beforehand, and Subaru boldly decided that he had no choice but to crossdress to protect Emilia.

Fortunately, this also wasn’t the first time he crossdressed. The memory he had from before was not good in any way, but just reopening an old wound was nothing to him if it was for Emilia’s sake.

Also, the truth was that Subaru had reached such a high level of perfection with his crossdressing skills that it was sad.

Eyeliner and eyeshadow to disguise his sanpaku eyes and nasty look. He temporarily acquired double-edged eyelids through the use of fake eyelashes and tools, and his skin color was vividly brought out through the contrast between his lips and his makeup. The long brunette wig was borrowed from the clothing room, and the dress that concealed his body’s constitution also was found at the same place. There was a maid with a similar constitution that had worked there before, so he was right with his idea that there would be her outfit left behind. And then if he could disguise his appearance, acting as a woman with gestures and behavior would be easy for Subaru, being the clever one that he was.

The one thing Subaru couldn't cover up by himself was his natural voice—which was what made his past crossdressing a completely bad memory, and it tormented him this time too as well. However, he overcame that, too.

Subaru: "You sure are looking forward to the food, Emilia-sama. Are you confident in your manners?"

Subaru's voice, which he talked to Emilia majestically with, was not a manly, low-pitched one. It was one that had no hint of its sex, thick with androgyny. There was only one person in the mansion that had this type of voice.

It was Puck, Subaru's teammate, the cat spirit that called himself Emilia's guardian. He was in his chest hidden by a scarf, and he was speaking from there.

If you had to describe it, this would be a two-person haori—together, Subaru and Puck were a single Natsumi Schwarz.

"…"

He felt strong looks coming from Ram and Beatrice. Based off their reactions while having clear frowns on their faces, they probably knew that Natsumi was truly Subaru. However, it was not a problem with the quality of his cross dressing; it was definitely a more different factor. Rem was looking at Subaru for the same reason, but her look was no different from the gentle one she usually had. He didn't know what they thought of him, but for the moment, they didn't intend to blow his cover.

Roswaal seemed to be simply enjoying Subaru's idea, being in female clothing. Subaru hit the bullseye with his assumption that Roswaal would not act cold.

Unexpectedly, Emilia, the person of concern, really didn't notice anything, so he wanted to highly influence her with this current force.

Dias: "—Thank you for waiting, I say."

Dias blah blah blah, the chef that returned, politely set the table in front of Subaru and the others, one plate at a time. The silver lid on top of the white plate—when the cloche was removed, they saw that it was cooking that probably prepared whitefish.

The fragrant smell was captivating.

Dias: “It is Lauté Roy’s Pozzo, rag dish sauce.”

It was white fish with its exterior broiled lightly, and sauce that was a vivid yellow and green. The smell rising from it arrests his senses immediately, casually grabbing onto his stomach, and he drools heavily.

Puck: “Subaru!”

Subaru seemed like he was going to unconsciously become a slob, but then he came to his senses with Puck calling him. He just narrowly avoided having all this crossdressing efforts go to waste. After he suddenly looked to the side, Emilia also widened her eyes as she looked at the food, and everyone else had the same sort of reaction, more or less.

It was too evil to combine the temperament of forced table manners with this violent type of delicious feeling.

The shell called humanity comes off, and the power that uncovered his wildness was included in the scent. Subaru swallows his saliva that was coming up, and he reached for the fork and knife before anyone else.

Natsumi: “Well, it looks quite delicious. It’s too good to eat.”

Puck matches Subaru’s lips as he lets out those thoughts at this time. While focusing on that voice, Subaru paid close attention so that his plan wouldn’t backfire, and he challenged the cooking in a way that wouldn’t be grabbing the cutlery rudely.

He holds down the whitefish with a fork, breaks it down with a knife, and eats it. It was cooked beyond perfection, as the cooking broke down just from the fork touching it. Combined with the sauce, the visual taste violated his brain. He holds his breath while looking like he was going to get knocked out, keeping his sense of smell away from the delicious food's premonition.

If he got overwhelmed now, he wouldn't be able to come back. He was far from being able to show a path for Emilia, rather, Subaru himself was most likely to be the first one to be captivated by the cooking.

Steel self control, and his feelings towards Emilia. He'd use those as weapons, and he'd challenge the cooking.

He opens his eyes upon renewing his determination, and he slowly brings a mouthful towards his mouth with a fork.

"…"

The flow of the processes, appearance, conduct, all of those various things polished to beauty—the instant the food entered his mouth, the result of his hard work and will crumbled. He felt like he was going to faint.

The violence of the overwhelming taste hits him through his lips and tongue, and his working brain, the blood flowing throughout his body, the muscles that supported his body, his bones, his cells—Subaru's poor determination and readiness were destroyed.

He gets stepped on, assaulted, and knocked down, and when Subaru realized it, he collapsed.

???: "—What's wrong, I say?"

Subaru left his seat, tapped with his heels, and he walked up to Dias bla bla bla. In front of the puzzled man, he inhales, breathes out quietly, and slowly kneels as he said

Natsumi: "I completely underestimated you. Sorry!"

He rubs his forehead against the floor, and he declares a complete surrender.

It was Subaru's natural voice, in other words, a man's voice. Puck, hidden in his chest, said "Crap", as he held onto his head, but Subaru felt the unexplainable shock of his despondency.

That's why Subaru bowed his head to Dias bla bla bla while being moved and completely defeated as he said

Natsumi: "The cooking is ridiculously delicious. I thought to eat it elegantly. However, that was impossible. Anyone would definitely think the same. It's a given to eat food with good manners, and it makes sense. But, I thought to myself, why not comment on the cooking and eat while saying "it's delicious it's delicious"!"

Subaru piles up his words frantically while not being able to see the person's face. It was an excuse, and him being a poor loser after having their plan foiled. However, it was also unstinted praise that came from the heart.

Dias bla bla bla listens to that jumbled praise and excuses, and he kept silent. And then

???: "—Wahahahahahaha!"

He thought the silence would continue, but the sound of laughter suddenly echoed throughout the room.

After Subaru lifted his head at once, that voice from the dining room entrance—he realized that it came from the mouth of a short person that showed up there.

???: "My, I am surprised. I did not think there would be a clever person, who, despite having heard the rumors about me, would try to sum things up like that in the middle of eating a meal."

The person reveals her face that was hidden with a hood. The one who said that with an archaic way of speaking was this girl with childish looks. Subaru could not respond to the girl's intrusion, who appeared to be Dias blah blah blah's assistant. However,

???: "Although you've been completely defeated by my cooking, it's rare to see a Master that responds cheerfully. I see, the Margrave is a bad person, too. I guess this is the type of stuff you like."

Roswaal: "I thought it was the best, in terms of hoooonest impressions. On the other side, it seemed to be your personal favorite…well, ah well."

Roswaal agrees carefully with the girl who folded her arms and puffed up with pride. The situation makes Subaru widen his eyes, as he turned around and asked "What's going on?". Then

???: "There's a lot of rumors about Master that go around, but they're all nonsense. Master has this bad taste of messing with people where she doesn't deny the exaggerated rumors that are at her destination, toying with the people that believe in them like gems."

The one who came into the conversation and answered Subaru's doubt was Dias bla bla bla. No, based off what the man had just said, it seemed like he wasn't Dias bla bla bla. The real Dias bla bla bla was—

Dias: "It is I, Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI! Your meeting with the rumors, and the opposition against your taste, those conflicts were truly entertaining! Well done!"

The girl—the real Dias bla bla bla laughs cheerfully, and Subaru became dumbfounded automatically.

When he did, the real Dias bla bla bla held out her hand towards him, and when she helped him up, she slowly sat him on his original seat, and she pat his head softly.

Dias: "What a masterful disguise. This is also splendid! This means we too should respond by showing what we can do, not wanting to be outdone! Rodriguez, help me!"

Rodriguez: "Yes I say, Master!"

Dias bla bla bla leaves behind handsome words, and she rushed out of the dining room with her disciple Rodriguez.

The next course would probably be brought in like that, but it was a tempestuous event.

Roswaal: "Weeell then, the legendary chef's initiation has ended safely, so let's resume diiiinner. Suba…thank you for your valuable sacrifice, Natsumi-sama."

Ram: “Well done, Barusu…I mean, Natsumi-sama.”

Beatrice: “It was splendidly unsightly. Nii-cha was an inevitable enemy, I suppose.”

Rem: “Natsumi-sama is lovely. It’s okay to have confidence in yourself.”

Ram, Beatrice, and Rem grade the event in order. If there was an open hole, then Subaru would seriously want to be buried in it. Emilia taps Subaru’s shoulder while he had that type of mental state.

Emilia: “I don’t really get it, but can I ask one thing?”

Subaru: “…Go ahead.”

He waits for what Emilia would say, trembling from her reaction. That’s when Emilia tapped his cheek with her stood up finger, and while tilting her head in a lovely way, she said

Emilia: “Your voice sounds reeeeaally similar to Subaru’s. Who are you?”

That was how he was hit mercilessly with what was the biggest sense of defeat of them all.

10

Dias: “That turned out to be a pretty rewarding dinner, don’t you think?”

She completely puts away her tools , and she smiles while carrying a large bag. Roswaal smiles wryly at her words, having escorted her up to the entrance lobby, and he says

Roswaal: “I’m soooorry we all couldn’t come out to see you off. It was niiiice seeing everyone caving in and being captivated. To tell you the truth, I also want to lie down right away.”

Dias: “I’ll say it again. I also realized my own inexperience by seeing Margrave’s ability to be composed.”

Roswaal shrugs his shoulders, and Dias looks to her side, laughing heartily. She saw Rodriguez cowering. Dias sighs at her irritating disciple and said

Dias: “What’s the matter, Rodriguez? You shouldn’t have a dull look when setting off. Make it a majestic one.”

Rodriguez: “Master is fine with it, but I have some thoughts. Even though we didn’t do any ridiculous pranks, if we showed our skills normally…I wouldn’t have had to behave in a way that promotes weird rumors of me being lustful.”

Dias: “Wrong! Making them swallow the rumors and pulverizing composed looking people through flavor is the funnest! Besides, as long as you keep using that sort of ending with your sentences, the rumor of you being lustful won’t go away. No matter how many times I point it out, you don’t fix it!”

Rodriguez: “Ending of my sentences, what do you mean, I say?”

Dias looks away from her disciple that said that phrase unconsciously, and she raised her hand at Roswaal.

Dias: “Well then, it’s about the time to go. There are still many places we must visit. Being very popular is problematic, too! There’s too many people I want to tease.”

Roswaal: “Do you really not want aaaany payment? We made you show your skills so much, so I cannot bring myself to let you go unpaiiid.”

Dias: “No need no need! When it comes to earnings, I have plenty. To make up for not getting money, you’ve forgiven my selfishness. Besides, I saw something great today. I was also able to experience presenting a meal to a spirit.”

Dias makes a cunning expression that didn’t match her childish face, and she looks at the mansion across from Roswaal. Currently, the girls and the one boy that gave in to Dias’ cooking and had their consciousness wandering while being in a trance should’ve been in the dining room.

Dias: “That crossdressing boy was good. His honest impression excelled especially in all his praises. I enjoyed that too, and I truly felt it. So, I don’t need money. Besides…”

She doesn’t finish her sentence, and Dias reached for her head with her hand, and she removed the hood that covered it. Underneath it, she had beautiful, golden hair, and slightly long ears.

Dias: “You wanted to show that Half elf girl to me, as someone who is an elf, right?”

Roswaal: “…There’s definitely a possibility that she will change discrimination against elfs. If she did, then you wouldn’t have to hide the fact that you’re Dias, and you wouldn’t have to hide behind your disciple.”

Dias: “Don’t do too much stupid analysis, Margrave. I do this because I want to. I won’t give any special services to spread that girl’s reputation.”

Dias thrusts his finger at him, and after smiling with her teeth showing, she put her hood back on. Afterwards, she valiantly turns her back on Roswaal, and she walks outside majestically.

Dias: “Well, it didn’t feel bad. So if something comes up again, call me. If it’s related to me performing, then I won’t refuse.”

Roswaal: “Can I believe that to be a good connectioooon?”

Dias: “Do whatever you want. Jeez. Ah, right.”

Roswaal displays shamelessness by focusing on the future until the end, and so Dias looked back with a beaten look on her face, and she pointed at the mansion as she said

Dias: “I want to hear honest impressions next time, too. Until then, I would appreciate it if you don’t let go of that elf girl and the boy. How you interpret that is up to you.”

Roswaal: “Eeehhh, then I shall do so.”

Roswaal accepts her consent, and Dias departs with Rodriguez.

Roswaal sees them off, and when he let out a long sigh, he said

Roswaal: “I wasn’t sure what would happen in an hour, but with this, I’ve created a connection with Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI.”

Although there were some irregularities, it should probably be said that he fulfilled his initial goal.

There was a lot of matters that made him have stiff shoulders. However, he didn’t just have stiff shoulders today.

Roswaal: “Nevertheless…ahh, it was a masterpiece.”

What popped up in his mind, was a completely clear figure of Subaru crossdressing.

In that short period of time, he wasn’t bothered by teaseful jokes. It was a very worthwhile dinner.

That was because it was a time when his eyes, tongue, and memories enjoyed themselves.

Roswaal: “Pfft, ahahaha”

Having those thoughts, Roswaal laughed alone, being unable to handle it. With a face that he wouldn’t show to anybody, at a place that couldn’t be seen, he raised his voice without any hesitation at all.

The World Petra Saw
(Edited Machine Translation)

I

—For Petra Leyte, the world seemed very small and complete.

Petra was born into the Leyte family in the small village of Arlam, in the territory of Margrave Mathers.

Petra was neither blessed nor born into a wealthy family. She grew up healthy in a very ordinary village, to a very ordinary family, as one of the very ordinary village girls.

The village of Arlam was a typical ordinary and rural village in the world, with nothing to write home about.

Aside from the fact that the mansion of the Margrave, the lord of the territory, was located near the village, there was nothing remarkable about it. Compared to other places in the territory, there might have been more chances to see their lord in person.

It was a terrible thing to ask a young girl to understand such a unique opportunity.

The first thing to note is that this lord, Roswaal L. Mathers, was a strange man. His appearance did not match that of a typical nobleman.

As rumor had it, he liked to wear makeup like the clowns in fairy tales, and his outlandish and strange costumes were more bewildering than awe-inspiring.

—If the lord didn't do his job properly, the people under him would have a hard time.

It was an idea that Petra had vaguely kept in her mind from stories and conversations with adults. And even as a child, Petra knew that her lord was not a normal person.

In fact, the attitude of the lord, who occasionally wandered into the village for a visit, was strange.

He did not act like a lord, but he messed with the adults, annoyed the golden-haired maid with him by saying things she did not understand, and left nothing but confusion in his wake.

Petra couldn’t understand how adults such as Muraosa laughed and forgave such behavior, and Petra once complained directly to the lord. But—

Roswaal: “Oh, weeell, that’s harsh. But you are a very brave girl to tell me that. I hope you will remember that courage and take good care of yourseeelf.”

For some reason, Roswaal patted Petra on the head happily, Ignoring her indignant feelings.

Since then, Petra had given up on his eccentricities, thinking that it was useless to try and talk to the lord.

Having said that, the focus of the story returns from the village and the lord back to Petra.

As mentioned before, Petra had lived her life as an ordinary village girl in a village with no distinctive features. In the words of her lord, she could add the crown of a “very brave girl” to that.

As Petra grew up as a village girl, she became aware of something at the same time as she became older.

It was apparently a budding sense of self-consciousness that she was “a little cuter” compared to the other children in the village.

In fact, Petra’s appearance was more than gorgeous enough, even taking into account her young age.

She had large round eyes, light pink lips, long, slender arms and legs, and white skin. Her reddish brown hair was very fine and flowed softly and gently in the wind. Petra’s young but lovely appearance was so that the whole village was convinced that she would become a great beauty in the future.

Such self-awareness for a child is not easily trivialized by this.

In addition, Petra was not only good-looking, but she was also more intelligent than the other children. However, it was the kind of intelligence that could be called “cunning.”

Petra thought that being born with good looks was the same as being blessed with a Divine Protection or talent.

So it was only natural that she should use her good looks and utilize them to her advantage.

—When Petra broke something just for fun.

—When Petra stole a sweet Orage from the field.

—When Petra skipped taking care of the livestock and went out with friends.

In the face of angry adults, Petra used her cuteness in a powerful way.

If Petra got teary-eyed, looked down, and spoke words of remorse, it would be enough to prevent the adults from strongly scolding her, and they would leave it at that. It was only natural that they would not be able to scold the other children with her.

Her parents, who were the only ones in a position to scold Petra without such ties, were completely fooled by their beloved daughter, who acted like a good girl in front of them, and she grew up to be a little devil.

—With Petra, you could see the good in her eyes.

Even as a child, or perhaps because she was a child, she had no hesitation to jump on such advantages. Naturally, the children of the village would often gather around Petra, and as a result, Petra would grow more and more cheeky.

Doited on by the village boys, relied on by the village girls, and adored by the adults, Petra watered the flower of self-consciousness, and it blossomed.

It was around this time that Petra began to mistakenly believe that she was the center of the world.

Anyway, children, despite their misunderstandings, are a lovely thing.

Petra's growth did not go beyond the realm of being a mischievous child, and her actions with her friends were only minor incidents in a small village.

The center of the world, Petra Leyte —did not realize her misunderstandings and only learned a little bit about the size of the world until she turned ten, a few years after becoming self-aware.

It was a rare occasion when a peddler stopped by the village of Arlam to sell silk fabrics and miscellaneous goods.

It seemed that the merchant was on his way back from selling a variety of rare textiles to the lord, who liked to wear eccentric costumes. On his way back, he unpacked his goods in the village of Arlam along the way.

Merchant: "Kararagi to the west, Vollachia to the south. And it's all the rage in the Royal Capital of Lugunica."

Petra's world changed when she saw the items the merchant had laid out with his sales pitch.

The girl's eyes were drawn to the colorful, brightly woven fabrics, and she was instantly captivated by the fantasy.

With her natural charm, she was able to win over the merchant and her parents, acquire some textiles, and sat on her bed in her room and stared at them endlessly.

They became her irreplaceable treasures and made her dream of one thing.

2

—As the months passed by, Petra turned twelve years old, still keeping her dream alive.

At this age, changes come not only to the mind, but also to the body.

Gradually, she prepared to blossom not as a childish girl, but into a woman.

Petra, who was still just a budding flower, her prized cuteness still healthy and strong —If anything, it had become polished with self-awareness and poised to become more sophisticated and glamorous.

The twelve-year-old Petra was still the center of the children in the village and had a reputation among the adults for being cute and smart, but in her room, she puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

The reason for this lay in the dream that Petra had.

The repercussions of that chance event had grown in Petra's mind with the passage of time. Two years have passed since then, but her treasure remained carefully stored away, its color unfaded.

Her dim longing became concrete, and Petra had a dream in her hands.

—In the future, I want to go to the Royal Capital and work as a tailor.

She wanted to make pretty and fashionable clothing, decorated with beautiful fabrics as she desired. The admiration for the many textiles that had captured her eyes that day had made Petra dream of such a future.

Looking back, maybe the reason Petra did not like the lord very much was that she did not like the way he dressed. It was terrible. It was blasphemy against clothing, she thought.

Aside from her anger at the lord, Petra's frustration ran even deeper.

This was because the people around her were not very supportive of Petra, who was working hard to realize her dream by practicing her sewing.

The reaction of the children, especially the ones around her, was really depressing. Sometimes when Petra asked them about the future, she never got the answer she wanted.

Lucas would sniff and say he's going to take over his father's job as a lumberjack, and Mild's stomach would growl while thinking about something complicated. The brothers Dine and Cain would never stop fighting over who would marry Petra; when she would say she would be leaving the village, her younger friend, Meina, was adorable, but she would always start crying when Petra would tell her that she would be leaving for the Royal Capital.

Here, Petra was feeling completely alone.

The kids around her depended on her, but she had no friends to turn to. Even if she told the adults, they would just laugh as if her dreams were just a fantasy.

What a surprise. Being cute was so lonely.

This was an unbelievable reality for Petra, who had always been able to get by on cuteness alone. This was the first time Petra had experienced the frustration of a situation that could not be managed with cuteness.

As a result, Petra spent her days in agony, with dreams and worries in her heart.

In the future, when I grow up a little more and become prettier, it will all be solved.

For the time being, I'm pinning all my hopes on my future self.

At such a troubled age, the twelve-year-old Petra once again experienced a strange encounter one day.

She was on her way to a nearby riverbank to go krafish fishing with all her friends. Petra, who didn't want to get her clothes dirty, could only watch the fishing, but it was still fun to hang out with her friends. She was worried about her future —but that was a different matter.

???: “Hey, hey! Hey there, kids! You know where the person in charge of the village is?!”

Then, in a very familiar manner, a black-haired boy spoke to her.

He had mean-looking eyes and an incongruous face. He was a man who wore very formal clothes that did not suit him at all. His face was overshadowed by his clothes.

However, thanks to his ill-fitting appearance, Petra was soon able to surmise the identity of the person she was dealing with.

Petra: “Oh, are you the new servant in the lord’s mansion?”

Servant: “Oh, you’re right! As expected of Petra! So smart! So cute! The best in the village!”

Petra: “…Did I mention my name?”

Servant: “Ugh!”

The boy clapped his hands excitedly and groaned at the staring Petra.

Petra’s guard went up when she suddenly heard someone call her by name, even though the person was a stranger. There was also the feeling of resentment at being startled by his words. How in the world did he know her name?

Servant: “Oh, look, there she is, there she is! The most beautiful girl in the village! Speaking of Petra of the village of Arlam, her brave name is echoing high and low, even in Roswaal-sama’s mansion! See?”

Petra: “Oh… In the lord’s mansion? Oh no, I’m so embarrassed…”

Servant: “It’s true, it’s true! Rather, it’s inevitable! Oh no, the real thing is a hundred times cuter than the stories, haha!”

The boy, who was in a panic, was frankly relieved to see Petra looking down with her hands on her cheeks. Petra —pretended to be embarrassed by the boy, and was looking carefully for his reaction.

One should not trust someone easily just because their clothes look like they are related to the mansion. There was a man who used to come in and out of the lord's mansion and who used to stare at Petra and the others. He had a handsome face, and his clothes suited him, but his stare was unsettling.

And if one looked closely, one could see that that person and this boy were wearing the same clothes. Petra was surprised to see how different they looked depending on who was wearing the clothes, but one could never be too careful. Being cute could also be dangerous.

Servant: "My name is Natsuki Subaru! Long story short, I'm an apprentice butler! I'm a hard worker who's been taking care of Roswaal-sama's mansion since yesterday. I hope we can all get along!"

Unaware of Petra's suspicions, the boy —Subaru, boisterously introduced himself.

His greetings lacked the composure of an adult, and his behavior was not polite. There was a sense that he was looking down on the children; also, the way he closed the distance between them irritated Petra.

To put it simply, Petra had the worst impression of Subaru when she first met him.

However, Lucas and Mild, who were confused at first, quickly became friends with him, perhaps because they liked his attitude, which was neither adult-like nor childlike.

If that happened, Petra, who represented the children, would have to accept him.

Petra: "…So, you're looking for the person in charge of the village? What do you want with them?"

Subaru: "Well, I've been asked by my Maid-senpai to deliver something to them. So, I guess I'm running an errand!"

Petra: “Hmm. All right, I’ll take you to Muraosa.”

With Lucas on his back and Mild and Dine hooked around his waist, Petra guided Subaru with a forced smile. Petra thought that it was also a bit of a ploy, that he was not angered by the mischief.

Incidentally, the one in charge of the village was actually Mayor Milde, but she was deliberately avoided, with Subaru taken to her younger brother, Rathhum-san (Muraosa), who looked more like a village chief.

Petra was sure the people at the mansion would scold her later for this. It would be interesting.

The next day, the village was abuzz with rumors about the new servant who had joined the mansion.

It was a small village. Although there were no major incidents, even the slightest thing could easily become known. In particular, people from the lord’s mansion would frequently come to the village to buy groceries. It was only natural that rumors would start to circulate about the kind of person that one would be meeting many times in the future.

Petra: “Um, I’m not sure. But, he doesn’t seem like a bad person.”

When asked by her parents, Petra casually replied with a safe answer.

After the incident with the escort yesterday, there were quite a few people who came to Petra, who had met with Subaru, to find out the truth about the rumors. The other children were also asked, but Petra was still the one that the adults relied on.

Petra didn’t have a very good impression of Subaru, but it was not good to say anything different from the other kids. It was hard to keep the cute and cuddly wheels on track. Petra breathed deeply, having gotten through the barrage of questions.

Petra: “…Huh? Who is that girl?”

After escaping from the circle of adults to the outskirts of the village, Petra's eyes widened. There, she discovered a girl with light brown braided hair —for two days in a row, she had seen this unfamiliar girl.

Petra: "What are you doing out here all alone?"

Girl: "Oh…"

Unlike the previous days, Petra had no hesitation in calling out to the girl. The girl who turned around at her call was quite cute — even from Petra's point of view.

Her clothes were simple, and her hair was unadorned, but the quality of her face was quite outstanding. Petra was filled with an overwhelming desire to do something about her appearance.

Having worked tirelessly to improve her own cuteness, Petra was also keenly attuned to the cuteness of others. She especially disliked seeing cuteness go to waste, and she took care of her mother and Meina in many ways in that regard.

She had a tremendous desire to pour her own cute spirit onto this little girl.

???: "I'm Meili. Because of some circumstances, my family is sending me to this village for a little while."

The girl who said her name and smiled —Meili was a quiet girl.

She was quick to answer questions, but did not often talk to people on her own. She had a personality similar to Meina's, which made Petra feel like she had to lead the way like an older sister.

Petra: "Come on! Let me introduce you to everyone. I'm Petra! I'll be your friend!"

As soon as Petra took the shy Meili with her, Lucas and her friends immediately welcomed her.

As children, once they got to know each other, it was easy for them to talk. She quickly became one of the friends of Petra and the others, and that day they ran around the village to deepen their friendship.

Lucas: “Hey, come look. …This animal looks like it’s a girl.”

Meina: “Oh, wow, that’s amazing! Meili, it feels like you can talk to animals!”

In the midst of all this playfulness, Petra and her friends were especially pleased with the puppy that Meili had taken in. The dark brown-haired puppy seemed to have been brought by Meili and was very friendly. The children were completely enticed by the way it performed tricks, as if it could understand Meili’s words.

Petra: “Meili! We’ll definitely play again tomorrow!”

At dusk, as they parted, Petra grabbed Meili’s hand and promised to see her tomorrow. She nodded shyly, and Petra went home, satisfied.

Petra: “Today, I made a new friend. She was all alone, so I invited her to play.”

When Petra reflected on her day at the dinner table, her parents looked at her with admiration and praised her. This also helped to boost Petra’s self-esteem.

It was true that Meili was a good girl, but it was Petra who had reached out to her. Not only was she cute, but she was also kind. This felt like it would bring the Royal Capital closer.

Petra went to sleep feeling good, with a little bit of selfishness swelling her heart.

The next day, Petra woke up as usual, and went out to play as usual; an ordinary day —unaware that fate always masquerades as such.

Petra: “Sorry to keep you waiting. What are you going to do today?”

At the height of the Fire time, Petra met up with Lucas and his friends at noon, and then met up with Meili at the edge of town. As they were all talking about what they were going to do today—“10”

Lucas and friends: “Oh! It’s Subaru!” “Huh? Subaru!” “Yay! Subaru is here!”

Lucas’s face lit up, and he and the others started running at once. Then, standing in their path was Subaru, whose uniform did not suit him. He was surprised by their momentum.

Subaru: “Whoa! Hey! Bring it… Aaah!”“11”

He opened his arms and tried to catch them, but he couldn’t stop them at all. Lucas and Mild, and the brothers Dine and Cain, collided with them, and Subaru and the kids fell to the ground without a moment’s hesitation.

Petra: “Geez! Guys, don’t do anything dumb! Subaru, are you okay?”

Subaru: “Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I’m fine. I was overconfident in my abilities. How embarrassing.”

When Petra called out to Subaru, who had fallen on his butt, he laughed and scratched his head. Petra tilted her head at Subaru’s appearance and asked, “Huh?”. It was the first time she had seen him in two days, but the impression she got from him was quite different compared to that time. At that time, he looked like a fool who had no time to spare.

Petra: “Subaru, did something happen yesterday?”

Subaru: “What? No, no, no, n-nothing at all! It’s not like I borrowed the lap of the girl I have feelings for, cried my eyes out, and then went to sleep with a runny nose. Nothing like that happened at all!”

Petra: “Hmm…”

Petra was told to deny what she had not asked about. At any rate, it seemed that he did not fall asleep in someone’s lap, crying and sniffling. Though, there might have been something similar to that had happened.

Petra: “Well, okay.”

Compared to the Subaru of the day before yesterday, the Subaru of today was more likable to Petra. She did not know how Lucas and the others felt, but Petra felt like she should try to be a little more friendly with him.

Petra: “So, are you running errands today?”

Subaru: “That’s part of it, but right now I have free time. Why don’t we take a little tour of the village? …Hey, don’t get on my back! Don’t get snot on my back! Even if it’s not snot, that still wouldn’t be okay!”

Petra: “…Uh, do you need help?”

Subaru: “…Please.”

Petra felt a little bit sorry for Subaru, who was dragging the clinging Lucas and the others along with him. While accompanying him on his tour of the village, Petra somehow managed to introduce him to the adults in the village.

Rathhum-san, who was called Muraosa. Milde-san, the real village chief. Makizi-san, who organized the young people of the village and sometimes wore a mask.

And so, while Petra was helping Subaru introduce himself around,

Subaru: “Well… In this case, I guess It’s a good idea to gather the people of the village and have a chat with them so that I can get a better idea of things.”

Petra: “All at once?”

Subaru: “I’m going to give them a big old hello and say, “Let’s be friends from now on.””

Then Subaru laughed with the face of a mischievous little boy. Seeing that innocent smile, Petra took a liking to Subaru for the first time.

3

Subaru: “Victory!”

Villagers: “—Victory!!”

The good impression Petra had of Subaru was almost overshadowed by an unfamiliar dance.

The radio calisthenics drew in many people in the village. However, it greatly embarrassed the adolescent Petra. And yet, once again, Lucas and his friends loved it, and it spread to the adults as well. The offsetting favoritism worsened, and Petra began to dislike Subaru more and more.

Dislike may be an overstatement. But, Petra hated it as she was not good at it, and her clothes did not match the situation.

Petra: “You’re the only one who understands how I feel…”

Petting the head of the puppy that Meili was holding to her chest, Petra tried to understand with a fleeting smile.

On the way home after the “dance,” she caught Subaru and brought him to see the puppy, and to her surprise, the puppy gobbled up Subaru’s hand. Petra, who had been disappointed by everyone’s acceptance of Subaru, felt that she had finally found a friend.

Petra wanted to ask Meili to sleep over with her tonight. —This was because Petra was having feelings for the puppy that she would bring.

???: “Oh…!”

It was Cain or Meina who exclaimed in surprise. It might even have been Petra herself.

Suddenly, the puppy twisted around, slipped through Meili’s arms, and ran off. Everyone rushed after it, but it was impossible to catch up with the puppy. The puppy dove through the white fence on the outskirts of the village and ran into the forest.

Kids: “What should we do…?”

The puppy entered a forest on the opposite side of the road from where they usually played —into the forest that the adults had warned them not to enter. This was a place where the power of magic stones was used to create a barrier to keep dangerous creatures away. In other words, it was a dangerous forest.

If a small puppy were to enter such a place—

Kids: “Petra…”

The anxious children’s eyes focused on the confused Petra.

Petra was the center of the children. Whenever something happened, they turned to her first. And when they did, it was Petra’s duty to live up to their trust.

Petra: “Mei-, Meili…?!”

Petra was asked to do something, but she couldn’t say anything. In place of Petra, it was Meili who tried to go under the white fence. Meili stiffened her cheeks in nervousness, but she looked straight at the forest.

Meili: “I’ve got to go get her…”

Petra was shocked as if struck by lightning at the sound of Meili’s voice, which Petra felt responsible for, and she felt ashamed of herself for trying to stop her when Meili was so desperate.

Petra: “…”

Magic stones for the barrier were hung on trees at equal intervals to separate the forest from the village.

After confirming the location of the magic stones, Petra drew a map in her mind and wrote down evenly spaced boundaries on it, deriving an area where she could safely search for the puppy.

If one entered a dangerous forest and was attacked by something, one could escape to a ward. —Following this route, they could look for the puppy safely.

Petra: “I’m going into the woods with Meili. You guys…”

Kids: “Not so fast!” “Petra’s going, right?” “I’m going to die out there!”

Petra linked her hands together with Meili’s, then Meina’s, then Lucas’s, and so on. No one was scared to turn back.

Petra: “…Yeah. Thanks.”

Petra had always been relied upon by everyone. But at this moment, for the first time, Petra felt like she could be the one to rely on everyone. She might not have had the courage to do it alone with Meili.

But—

Petra: “—Let’s not lock our hands together; it makes it hard to walk, okay?”

Following the map she had drawn in her mind, Petra led everyone through the forest.

Petra: “…”

Stepping on branches and leaves, Petra’s heart was beating noisily in her chest as she made her way through the forest. Dusk was approaching, and the visibility in the forest was getting worse. “What if I take a wrong turn, or miss something?” Anxiety and tension made Petra’s forehead sweat.

An hour had passed since they had entered the forest. Even now, Petra regretted her lack of preparation.

Food to attract the puppy —no, dangerous animals might come. Calling out loud —that was also dangerous. Notifying the adults — they should have done that, even if they were afraid that they would have gotten angry. Bringing a crystal light —would it have been enough to turn back before it got dark?

Petra: "…"

In order not to lose their way, they scratched the trees with rocks that they had picked up, but it was only a small comfort.

Little by little, the expressions on Petra's friends' faces became more and more anxious. If one person broke down, it would spread all at once. The first person to do so might have been Petra.

Petra remembered the location of the barrier. But would she really be able to escape in time after they found the puppy? Maybe she was doing something terrible right now.

Her anxiety was growing bigger and bigger, and tears were beginning to form in Petra's eyes. After two or three more deep breaths, she would tell the others to go back. She would tell them to leave it to the adults.

And then—

Petra: "Everyone… We should go…"

Meili: "—I agree. It seems that the time is riiight."

Petra: "Huh?"

Closing her eyes tightly, she was about to tell everyone to go back when she heard a voice.

It was a voice that she had heard before, but it was filled with a tone of voice that she had never heard. When Petra opened her eyes to see what was going on, she saw Meili's face right in front of her.

The frightened and unsure girl —her expression was different, with a mature gleam.

It was no longer cute, and it had a creepy beauty to it that sent shivers down Petra's spine.

Meili: "I'm sooorry, everyone. But this is my taaask."

Just as she thought she saw a smile and heard a voice, Petra's consciousness was snatched away by a presence behind her. She hurriedly turned around. There was a huge, black dog. Petra heard it growl. She tried to scream, “Run!”, but she couldn’t speak. —Petra’s consciousness was cut off there.

4

—Petra’s consciousness did not return until the evening of the following day.

???: “Petra! …All she does is worry me!”

Slowly, Petra opened her eyes while lying in bed, and the first thing she saw was her mother holding her with a bright red face.

Recognizing the sound of her mother’s voice, her father immediately rushed into the room as well. Then he hugged Petra and her mother at the same time and started to cry loudly.

Father: “The people of the mansion rescued you guys when you went into the forest. Subaru-sama, in particular, had a tough time, but he brought everyone back.”

This was what her parents told Petra, whose eyes were blank as she tried to figure out what had happened.

It seemed that the puppy was a dangerous animal that lived in the forest —a Witchbeast, and Petra and her friends had been in real danger. Surprisingly, it was Subaru and a maid from the mansion who had saved Petra and the others from danger.

Petra: “Come to think of it… That might have happened…”

Listening to the story, Petra traced a vague memory.

It was a very painful memory. It was hard to breathe, and her body was hot. Petra was lying on the grass, surrounded by Lucas and Meina. Then, Subaru and someone else arrived. And, when Subaru talked to her, she asked about Meili, who was not there—.

Petra: “Yeah, that’s right. Where’s Meili? What happened to her?”

Father: “…The girl was brought back by Subaru-sama. Soon after, her worried family came to pick her up. So everything is alright, Petra.”

Petra: “…I see.”

Petra’s parents told her that Meili and her family had left the village of Arlam after saying goodbye. Petra somehow knew that this was a lie.

Petra remembered that just before it all had happened, Meili turned into a completely different person. If that puppy was a Witchbeast, then there must have been something wrong with Meili when she had first brought it here.

Even so, Petra wanted to exchange words with Meili once more if possible, but—

Kids: “Petra, you’re up!” “Petra, you’re awake!” “Wake up, Petra!”

Without allowing Petra to get any sentimentality, her friends came noisily stomping into the house.

Lucas and his friends woke up earlier than Petra, and it seemed that they received the same explanation as Petra. Moreover, they honestly believed the story and were sorry to hear that Meili had left.

Meina: “Why don’t we go to the mansion to visit Subaru?”

It was Meina, who was usually not very assertive, who suggested this. Lucas and the others agreed to her proposal with all hands on deck. Petra agreed with the idea, but she thought it was unusual.

Petra: “It’s unusual for you to say something like that.”

Meina: “Because if it weren’t for Subaru, I might never have met my brother or sister…”

Petra knew that Meina’s mother was pregnant. As an only child, Petra was a little envious, and when she learned that she was going to have a younger sibling, Meina would become an older sister.

Petra understood Meina, and that certainly made Petra want to thank Subaru.

Petra: “Well, let’s all go ask the lord of the mansion!”

Even Petra, as expected, was grateful to Subaru for saving her life. The strange dancing had taken a toll on his likability, but that could be made up for.

From now on, I’ll be a little kinder to him. I’m very understanding.

???: “A visit for Barusu? He is surely still asleep… Oh well. The only person who would be embarrassed to be seen with a dumb sleeping face would be Barusu, so that’s fine. Come, follow.”

Petra was nervous about visiting the mansion, but the pink-haired maid who answered her call was surprisingly kind. Her expression and voice were cold, but Petra could somehow see that it was not because she was distant, but because she was like that to everyone.

Petra: “Don’t you have to tell the lord first?”

Maid: “The mansion’s miscellaneous affairs are left to us. Unless, of course, you are an assassin who has come to take the life of Barusu… Are you assassins?”

Petra: “There’s never been a cuter assassin.”

Maid: “Right? So then, it’s okay.”

The maid did not deny that she was cute, and she guided Petra and the others with a prim face. The six of them were brought to a room with a magnificent door. They were nervous about going up to the mansion for the very first time.

Subaru must have been lying in that room. It was already evening, but he must have been a sleepyhead.

Maid: “We’re coming in.”

After knocking and making sure there was no answer, the maid opened the door.

There was a spacious room with a very large bed in the back. When she found a young man with black hair lying there, Petra entered the room with a sense of relief—

Petra: “Subaru, isn’t it already evening? You shouldn’t be sleeping this late…”

—Petra’s face and throat froze as she tried to smile and speak to him.

Petra: “…”

With a peaceful face, Subaru was sleeping, breathing gently. If one excluded his face, he might have just been a sleepyhead.

But, Subaru’s sleeping body was covered in scars and bandages, with white scars here and there.

—Petra understood that all of them were the marks of the beast’s fangs and claws.

Maid: “Keep quiet, so as not to wake him. Call out when you are finished.”

After saying this, the maid went out into the hallway. After the maid’s words, Lucas and the others anxiously walked up to Subaru’s side, but Petra was unable to move.

Petra couldn’t move an inch, and at the same time, everything that had happened to her came flooding back.

Petra: “—Ah”

While she was suffering in the forest, Petra had asked Subaru to do something for her. It was not just something. She had asked him to bring back the missing Meili. Her father told her that Subaru had brought back Meili. He said he brought all the children back, and was a little injured and had had a hard time. —How was this a little bit of an injury?

Petra: “Ah, ah…”

It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.

Petra brought Meili into the fold. She also loved the puppy that Meili had brought with her and let it run away into the forest. Petra took everyone into the forest where they weren’t supposed to go. They should have turned back, but she couldn’t bring herself to make that decision. Even in a daze, she asked Subaru to do something so reckless. As a result of his recklessness, she also inflicted indelible scars on Subaru.

Everything, everything, had been brought about by Petra’s hubris.

Kids: “Let’s write something on Subaru’s bandages…” “Write, write…” “A token of sympathy…”

Petra stiffened, and Lucas and the others turned the covers over and looedk at the bandages on Subaru’s leg. They wrote their own words on the bandages, showing some consideration and keeping their voices low.

And then, Meina shyly wrote a note of thanks.

Meina: “Petra?”

The last in line was Petra, and Meina, holding the quill, tilted her head. Finally, everyone else noticed Petra’s condition, and she could not accept the pen.

Her knees were shaking, and Petra could not look directly at Subaru.

Kids: “Petra?” “What’s wrong?” “Are you ok?”

Lucas and the others tilted their heads at Petra’s strange behavior. As they looked at her, it reminded Petra of the forest. When they had entered the forest, Lucas and the others had looked to Petra. At that time, Petra had summoned up what little courage she had left, but—

Petra: “—Hk!”

—Today, I can’t do it.

Stifling a sob in the back of her throat, Petra covered her face and ran out of the room. The maid in the hallway narrowed her eyes at Petra as she ran, but she didn't follow her, as if she knew straight away that Petra would head for the front door and run back to the village.

In fact, that was what happened. Petra ran away. She ran home, barged into her room, winced at the sound of her startled parents' voices, and just continued to shake with fear.

For the first time, Petra became aware of her responsibility for her own actions.

Petra: "It's all my fault… I did an awful thing…!"

It was late that night when Petra tearfully told her parents about it.

Petra knew that Lucas and his friends had come to visit her because they were worried about her running away from the mansion. Petra's parents were worried about their beloved daughter and kept calling out to her in her room.

She despised it all, pretended not to hear it, and locked herself away. But she couldn't bear the ever-growing guilt, so she stumbled into her parents' bedroom in tears.

Petra's parents were very surprised at first when they heard Petra's story.

She told them about Meili, the puppy, her request to Subaru, and the serious injuries he received. Petra told them that everything was her fault. Petra sobbed, wondering what she should do.

Mother: "It's okay. …Sure, you did some bad things, Petra."

Petra's mother put her daughter in the same bed and stroked her head as she spoke. Her father crawled in next to her, and Petra sniffled as she was sandwiched between them.

Mother: "If you do something wrong, you need to apologize. Put your heart into it, and do your best."

Petra: “…But even if I apologize, there’s no way they will forgive me.”

Mother: “Do you apologize because you want forgiveness? Or do you apologize because you want to? Which is it, Petra?”

Petra: “…”

Petra felt like she was being told something very important, and she fell silent.

Isn’t the purpose of an apology to ask for forgiveness? At least, up until now, Petra had used an apology as a tool for that purpose. Even though she felt bad and said she was sorry, she used an apology as a means to ultimately be forgiven.

Was there meaning in an apology for something that could not be forgiven?

Father: “Make sure you go tell Subaru-sama that you’re good and sorry. If you’re afraid to go alone, your mother and I will go with you. But, you are the one who has to apologize, Petra.”

Petra: “…”

Petra’s body was hugged tightly, and she rubbed her forehead against her father’s chest. Thinking about it, it was probably the first time since she could remember that she had truly indulged her mother and father in this way.

Even in front of her parents, Petra had always hidden her true feelings. So now, when she apologized to Subaru, she really wanted them to be there for her, but—

Petra: “—No, I can apologize properly, all by myself.”

—Petra said, thinking that she did not deserve to be pampered.

5

It was two days later that Subaru, who had woken up safely, came to the village to greet everyone.

Subaru: “Well, it was dangerous, very dangerous. But, I’m glad everyone’s okay!”

Subaru gave a thumbs up, although he was not dressed in his usual mansion uniform; it was a funny-looking black and white outfit that Petra had never seen before.

However, Petra judged objectively that he was dressed much better than he would have been if he had been in more formal clothes.

Kids: “Subaruu!” “Feeling better!” “Subaru is standing!” “Subaru is standing on the ground!”

Subaru: “Oh, oh, you little brats. I’m glad you’re all doing well. You should show me some gratitude.”

With an embarrassed look on his face to the grateful adults, but with his usual attitude to the children, Subaru proudly talked about his achievements. Both Petra and the adults somehow knew that this was a way to keep the people around him from worrying.

It was frustrating for Petra to notice that he was like that. What Subaru had done for the village and for Petra and the others was huge, but why?

Kids: “Subaru, let’s play!” “Let’s play, let’s play!” “Let’s catch some krafish!” “A big one!”

On the other hand, Lucas and the others were oblivious to Subaru’s condition and tried to pull him along in the same manner as they did before. When Petra saw Lucas reaching out to climb up—

Petra: “Lucas! What are you thinking! Subaru’s only just recovered!”

Lucas: “Uuwawaa”

Without thinking, in a loud voice, Petra scolded him, and a startled Lucas landed on his buttocks on the spot. The loud voice caused everyone to turn around at once and notice Petra, who was far from the circle.

Subaru, too, raised his hand to Petra,

Subaru: “Oh, Petra. Why are you over there…”

Petra: “…Hk.”

Subaru: “What is it?!”

The moment he spoke to her in a friendly manner, Petra turned away and ran. There was Subaru’s surprised voice, but Petra couldn’t stop herself.

Although she had decided that she would apologize, she did not. This was just like at the mansion.

Petra: “huff, huff…”

In the end, Petra ran straight to the other side of the village. Bending her knees and taking several deep breaths, she looked around and saw that she was on the outskirts of the village —the same place where she had met Meili and the puppy.

Petra: “Everything…”

???: “—This is where things got a little messy.”

This time, without exaggeration, Petra was so surprised that she thought her heart would stop beating.

When she turned around, Petra saw Subaru standing slightly behind her. Subaru exaggeratedly raised and lowered his shoulders as he staggered and leaned against the tree trunk where a magic stone hung.

Subaru: “B-But I am too injured… To run as fast as I can… Huff, I don’t know if it’s okay to be out sick… If you’re injured… But not sick…”

Petra: “Why…?”

Subaru: “As I thought, I can’t catch my breath fast enough… Or, maybe I just have too little stamina.”

Chuckling, he sat down there. Petra was simply bewildered, not knowing the true meaning of this. Gesturing to Petra, Subaru tapped his hand on the ground next to him.

Subaru: “Well, sit down, Petra. Let’s have a little talk.”

Petra: “—Okay.”

When asked, Petra didn’t have the courage to refuse.

Petra sat down next to Subaru. Petra looked over and glanced at him, stealing looks at his profile. He did not look angry. But, he had every right to be.

Subaru: “Uh, I’m not quite sure what’s going on here, but everyone told me to go after you, Petra. Is there something you want to tell me?”

Petra: “—! Oh… Well, that’s, that’s true.”

Apparently, this situation was orchestrated by those around her in order to make Petra apologize. In other words, the whole village was helping Petra to redeem herself. Lucas, Mild, Cain, Dine, and even Meina were all trying to get Petra to apologize.

If Subaru was set up like this, he would be able to blame Petra without hesitation—

Subaru: “I wonder what about. Ah, maybe, did you get hurt before I brought you out of the forest?! You might have gotten mercilessly bitten into by those dogs, and if that left a scar… then, I’m sorry!”

Petra: “Oh, what?”

Subaru: “The worst thing that can happen to a girl is getting a scar. Well if I recall, to prevent scars, you gotta keep it moist or something like that…”

Subaru, whose face had turned pale, became blatantly anxious that he might have hurt Petra. Petra was often taken aback by his wisdom, and wondered if it was a ploy to stir up Petra’s guilt —she soon realized that it was not intended to do so at all.

Petra: "…"

The boy in front of Petra really didn't think that she had done anything wrong. Rather, he felt bad about what he had done to Petra, and that was all he could think about.

That misconception, that misunderstanding, on the contrary, angered Petra.

Petra: "Subaru."

Subaru: "That's right! Petra, show me where you got hurt… Oh, no, I don't want to see it if it's in a weird place…"

Petra: "—Subaru!!"

Subaru: "Yes, yes, yes, yes, what's wrong?"

Turning around, Subaru finally looked up and made eye contact with Petra, who had shouted loudly. Petra's eyes were moist with large tears, and his unusual black eyes widened as he looked at Petra.

Petra's emotions were racing, and she wanted to scream. But, anger was not what she should have been voicing right now.

Petra "Sor-"

Subaru: "Sor?"

Petra: "I'm sorry…!"

As soon as Petra finished, tears began to flow down her cheeks. Subaru became more and more panicked at the sight, but Petra left her emotional breakdown to herself and just kept on going.

Subaru: "P-Petra! What's wrong? Why are you apologizing?"

Petra: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry…! I'm so sorry…"

In front of the panicked Subaru, Petra just continued to cry and apologize.

Petra: “—Like I said, everything is my fault.”

Confessing her sins, Petra kept her gaze down to the ground and clenched her hand tightly.

The tears were still running down her cheeks, but Petra managed to calm down enough to talk. As it was, Petra faltered and confided in Subaru about her sins, just as she had told to her parents.

She felt that everything was her fault: Meili, the puppy, the request to Subaru, and the serious injuries.

Subaru: “…”

After listening to the confession of her sins, Subaru quieted down with a difficult look on his face.

When she closed her eyes, the image of Subaru lying on the bed came back to her mind behind Petra’s eyelids. The way he was gasping for air after following her this far was also fresh in her mind.

The real Subaru, right next to her, with his sleeves rolled up, had many white scars on his arms. They were scars that would never go away. Just as Subaru was worried about Petra earlier—.

Subaru: “—You know, Petra.”

Petra: “…Yes.”

When Subaru called her name, Petra gnashed her back teeth, knowing that the time had finally come.

What would he say? How would she be rebuked? Petra, who had always been forgiven for every problem, had no idea how scary it was to not be forgiven.

So, when she looked up and saw Subaru’s troubled grimace, Petra forgot to breathe.

It was not the kind of face one would give to someone that they would never forgive.

Subaru: “Not that it’s your fault, Petra… You’re wrong. If you have apologized… It’s not.”

Petra: “Umm…”

Subaru: “Hmm, maybe this is it.”

Petra was upset as Subaru tilted his head and chose his words. Noticing Petra’s turmoil, Subaru nodded to Petra, his expression becoming one of understanding.

Subaru: “—I forgive you.”

Petra: “…”

Subaru: “Well, it’s true that you made a lot of mistakes, Petra. I felt it would be different if I irresponsibly just said “There’s nothing to be sorry for.” And so, when I think about what the best thing to say to this tearful, remorseful Petra would be…”

Petra: “…”

Subaru: “I forgive you, Petra. Don’t worry. I’m not angry. I’m just glad that you and Meina don’t have any scars. But not me and Lucas. A man’s scars are his badge of honor.”

Subaru then laughed with a face that was completely devoid of any sense of anger.

The look on Subaru’s face was the same as when Petra had first taken a liking to him.

Petra: “—Fuah”

Petra cried out, experiencing another breakdown, a shock quite different from the one she had experienced before.

6

That night, Petra was in bed in her room, alone with just her thoughts.

Why was Subaru not angry? Why was I forgiven?

Petra: “I am…”

Not because she was cute. Petra had already learned more than enough to know that there were some things that could not be helped by that. So, that was not the reason for why Subaru forgave her.

Sweet. Gullible. Simplistic —such was Petra’s assessment of the adults and children she had used her cuteness as a weapon to toy with them in the past.

It was none of those things. If cuteness was not a weapon, then Petra shouldn’t be allowed to use it.

Petra: “Be kind, because…”

Kind, as soon as that word came to mind, a sudden understanding dawned on Petra.

The reason for why Subaru forgave Petra was probably because Subaru was kind. The reason for why Subaru went into the forest to save Petra and the others, worked hard, did not complain when he was injured, came to show his face to the worried villagers, and patted the head of the crying Petra was all because he was kind.

Petra: “—Ah”

Immediately, Petra realized that she had been living her life in a very misguided way.

Petra thought it was because of her cuteness that the adults allowed her to play pranks, to take food, and to skip work. That was wrong.

What a misunderstanding. What a stupid misunderstanding. Those things were allowed to happen because everyone had been kind.

The reason for why Petra was overlooked was because she was spoiled by the kindness of the people who let Petra off with no proper self-reflection, no awareness of her own wrongdoings, or no vow to not do the same thing again.

Petra’s life had always consisted of indulging in someone else’s kindness.

At last, Petra realized this.

It was thanks to the greatest act of kindness ever that she finally realized it.

???: “Oh, Petra. You’re all dressed up today.”

The next day, Subaru met her in the village square and smiled at Petra’s appearance.

He never mentioned anything about yesterday’s tears. Petra thought that this was also Subaru’s kindness. She wanted to indulge in his kindness. That’s why Petra didn’t mention yesterday’s tears, either.

Instead, she picked up the hem of her skirt and twirled around adorably on the spot.

Petra: “Heh, heh. Right? Isn’t it cute? Isn’t it cute?”

Subaru: “Oh, you look super cute. Where did you get that outfit?”

Petra: “Umm, you know. This is. I didn’t actually buy it! I made it!”

Subaru: “You made it? Oh, I see! Oh, right, right, right. Petra, that’s awesome!”

Tilting her head slightly at Subaru’s reaction, which alternated between understanding, surprise, and satisfaction, Petra felt better about his honest response and puffed out her chest, her cheeks reddening.

Petra’s outfit today was a lovely and gorgeous dress —as she had told Subaru, Petra finished it from scratch herself. Two years ago, Petra dreamed of a treasure, and she worked hard to create it using that woven fabric. And, on this day, she showed it to the world for the very first time.

Subaru: “Petra, as expected, you have good taste. I’m sure you could open a store in the future.”

Petra: “…Really, you think so?”

Subaru: “Hm?”

The high spirits that Petra had been feeling up to that point suddenly faded away at Subaru's words.

Petra's voice was not cheerful, and Subaru looked a little confused. However, Petra was afraid of what he just said. It wasn't the first time Petra had told people that she wanted to work as a tailor in the future.

But the responses were always in jest, and no one took her seriously.

The adults laughed at her, and her friends didn't believe in her — Petra's dream.

What would Subaru think about that? Such feelings swelled up rapidly in Petra.

Petra: "You know, in the future, I want to go to the Royal Capital to work as a tailor."

Subaru: "…"

Petra: "This dress is practice for that… It's only one dress, but I'll practice more, and then."

Stuttering and speaking a little too fast, Petra spoke of her dream.

Not in the usual joking way, but in a wishful one, to someone who needed to hear it.

Upon hearing Petra's dream, Subaru—

Subaru: "That's a nice dream. I bet you will become the best tailor in the Royal Capital."

Petra: "—Ah"

Subaru, who usually would answer with a laugh, did not laugh at Petra's dream.

With a serious face and voice, Subaru patted the anxious Petra on the head and supported her dream.

—Subaru did not laugh at the dream that everyone else laughed at.

Petra: "…"

Why is this person so kind?

With that thought, Petra's cheeks unconsciously reddened as she looked at Subaru with her big round eyes.

—That face that only Subaru saw was the cutest Petra had ever shown.

At twelve years old, Petra Leyte had a dream.

—No, It's not necessarily about being a top-notch tailor and opening the best store in the Royal Capital.

Petra: "I love to make clothes. That's never going to change, but…"

As she gazed at the finished treasured dress, Petra thought back to the day when she first had her dream.

That day, Petra had been dazzled by the colorful woven fabric and dreamed of going to the Royal Capital. But now, Petra knew the true meaning of that inspiration.

At that time, Petra was not moved by the beautiful textiles. She was fascinated by something that did not exist in her own little world, by the impact of the totally new and unknown.

Petra mistakenly believed that she was the center of the world, based on the reasoning that she was cute and such.

Petra had been protected until now by so much great kindness. Learning this, Petra's world was once again knocked out by a shock that was as great as the colors she had seen back then.

That was why—

Petra: "Lucas is the heir to his lumberjack father. Mild is going to be a cook and revive the village tavern. Dine and Cain are… Yeah, there's no point in asking. Yes, yes."

While Petra was gathering with her friends and talking about the future in their usual way, the brothers Dine and Cain started fighting again. The topic of discussion was, of course, Petra's future husband.

Meina: "So, Petra? Do you still want to go to the Royal Capital?"

Perhaps it was because Meina had recently come to realize that she was going to be a big sister, but she no longer seemed as lonely as before. In response to this question, Petra's cheeks turned red.

Petra: "Let's see… It might be a little different now."

Meina: "Is that so? Then, what do you want to be in the future?"

When Meyna asked this, Petra stuck her tongue out at her. With a smile so cute that one could not help but admire it,

Petra: "—In the future, I want to be the wife of a kind husband."

END

The Loving World Petra Saw
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

???: “Hmmm.”

The girl groaned as she furrowed her shapely eyebrows and made a troubled face.

She was a pretty girl, and she was well dressed. She had reddish-brown hair that she wore above her shoulders and a big red ribbon that she wore on her head. Her clothes were made of simple materials, but she knew how to keep them colorful and fashionable, and how to bring out the beauty of her childish cuteness without using makeup.

Petra Leyte —that was the girl’s name, and she was also a beautiful girl who would be known in the future as the best-looking girl in the village of Arlam.

This was not just Petra’s ego, but an objective assessment as well. She did not rest on her laurels, but made every effort to improve herself.

At one time, Petra had a theory that “cuteness is all that matters.”

Now that she had changed her mind a bit, Petra came to realize that “cuteness is not everything,” but her cuteness was still a weapon. There was no way Petra could neglect it.

However, cuteness was no longer a universal weapon, and this was a blow to Petra.

Because—

Petra: “It’s hard to be noticed by Subaru if you’re just cute…”

For Petra, who was at that troubled age, the biggest problem at the moment was the love that resided in her small chest —the so-called problem of “first love.”

Petra prided herself on being cute, but she had never been in love before.

Arlam was a small village, and the boys of Petra’s age were her childhood friends. They were the same people she knew from back when she was sniveling and peeing the bed in her sleep. They were not romantic relationships, but more like family relationships, like those with siblings. However, the young men in the youth group, who were a little older than Petra, were like her father, if not her brothers. They were more and more difficult to fall in love with.

And for Petra, who had never known anything outside of the village of Arlam, love remained a distant thing.

Of course, there were some childhood friends who had feelings for the cute Petra, but she was so used to listening to them that she didn’t pay them any mind.

So, this was Petra’s first love, her first big show, her first big game. And Petra, who was not only cute but also cunning, did not sit on her looks.

Petra: “Even with a quick glance, I can easily recognize Subaru when I see him.”

Petra nodded repeatedly, recalling the name of the person she was thinking of and his uncomplicated goodness.

Natsuki Subaru —a servant who had taken up residence in the mansion of the Margrave who was the lord near the village of Arlam, was the person Petra had a fondness for.

His demeanor was casual and overly familiar, and his black hair and eyes were unusual. To Petra’s eyes, who was interested in clothing, his servant’s uniform did not suit him very well. However, if she put aside these initial impressions, Subaru had a very kind and gentle personality.

This was not to say that love was clouding Petra’s eyes.

Petra was aware of that; she was calm, even though she was suffering from the fever of her first love. Her natural competitive nature convinced her that she could not win this battle if she lost her cool.

Petra: “So, the first step is to know your enemy. If you don’t, you can’t do anything about it.”

Petra nodded vigorously as she made her plan.

—Do not sit on your laurels, do not neglect efforts to improve yourself, and do everything you can to know your enemy.

That was Petra’s conclusion and roughly the best mindset in this battle.

???: “…Petra, are you done thinking?”

Petra: “Oh, I’m sorry, Meina. I’ve kept you waiting.”

Meina: “No, I’m fine. But you were being so serious.”

It was actually Meina, who had been with her the whole time, who spoke to Petra after she had decided on a course of action after much deliberation.

She was Petra’s childhood friend. She was like a younger sister, but she was a little sad that Petra didn’t spoil her these days, as she would soon have a younger brother or sister.

Petra nodded her head in response to Meina’s words, and then said, “I see.”,

Petra: “I’ve got a fight that I don’t want to lose… and speaking of which, what did you write on the bandage on Subaru’s leg? Lucas and his friends seem to have written some weird stuff on it…”

Meina: “Me? I wrote, “I love you.””

Petra: “You love him?”

Petra’s eyes widened in surprise as she was struck from an unexpected direction. Petra's astonished reaction surprised Meina, and Meina shook her head and said, "Uh…yeah."

Meina: "I thanked him for his help… but everyone else wrote the same kind of thing, and Lucas and the others were writing so big that my writing was really small."

Petra: "O-Okay, so just tell me… how much do you love him?"

Meina: "How much?"

Petra: "For example, if it was Subaru or me, who would you choose?"

Meina: "Uhhh."

A difficult question was thrown at her, and Meina looked extremely troubled.

But Petra, who had asked the question, was trying hard not to let her inner impatience show on her face. If her sister's feelings were true, then a fierce battle would ensue that would be merciless and unforgiving.

Petra shuddered at the thought of such a thing happening. But—

Meina: "Comparing Subaru to Petra, I like you better…"

Petra: "Real…"

Meina: "Compared to Lucas, though, you're in trouble…"

Petra: "I see, Lucas and… What? Did you just say you like Lucas, Meina?"

Petra's eyes widened at the unexpected confession, and Meina's face flushed. Petra felt a hot fluttering sensation in her chest at Meina's unexpected reaction.

As it was, Petra hugged her cute friend and stroked her head with her hair tied up in twin tails.

Petra: “Meina, is cute! Cute, cute, cute… You’re too good for Lucas!”

Meina: “Oh, don’t say that in such a loud voice! Petra, you idiot!”

Petra, who had forgotten all about her last-minute fears, blushed as Meina shouted at her in such a way.

2

Petra: “I’m sorry that I ran out of the mansion without saying goodbye the other day.”

???: “—. It’s not something that you should apologize to Ram for. Ram will give you credit for apologizing, though.”

The pink-haired maid replied to Petra, who bowed politely, with an irreverent expression and attitude, but with an inscrutable kindness in her words.

This was right after she had learned of Meina’s love interest and was relieved that her friend was not her love rival. A blushing Meina had pushed her away, and as Petra strolled through the village, she saw a familiar maid’s uniform.

She was a maid in uniform who worked at the lord’s mansion. She had come to the village to do some shopping, and Petra had caused her a little trouble a few days ago. The apology Petra just made was for that.

However, the pink-haired maid, who called herself Ram, was not very friendly, and Petra, who was a bit braver than the others, could not hide her surprise. And then, instead of Ram, it was,

???: “Nee-sama, what is this girl talking about…?”

Ram: “The children once came to see Barusu after he had been bitten by the dogs. They couldn’t stand to see him so ugly then, so they left him alone.”

Petra: “I didn’t leave because Subaru was ugly…”

Ram: “A joke.”

When Petra protested, Ram shrugged her shoulders with a nonchalant expression. Petra’s lips pursed into an “Ooh” as she savored the disappointment in her attitude.

???: “Her mischievous side is also part of the charm of Nee-sama. But, it may be difficult to understand at first.”

And so, it was the person standing beside Ram who stepped in front of Petra. A girl dressed in the same maid uniform as her, this girl’s face was a perfect match for Ram’s.

She was another face Petra had seen many times in the village. She was one of the lord’s maids, though they had never exchanged words like this before.

Rem: “Nee-sama is my sister: I am Rem. What is your name?”

Petra: “Um… My name is Petra Leyte. Uh, I’m always happy to help the lord.”

When asked by the blue-haired maid, Rem, Petra was a little pressured, but she managed to reply. In response, Rem closed her pale blue eyes and smiled.

Rem: “Surely Roswaal-sama will be pleased to hear you say that.”

Petra: “…And thank you to Rem-san as well. I was told later that you and Subaru came to the forest to save us…”

Rem: “—. No, not at all. That all was because of Subaru-kun.”

At Petra’s words of thanks, Rem was humble and then boastfully puffed out her ample chest. Then, Rem seemed to be looking heartily proud at something.

Rem: “It was Subaru-kun who had figured out that you were in the forest and in that particular place. Rem only helped a little bit with that. And after that, Rem caused a lot of trouble for Subaru-kun and Nee-sama…”

Rem lowered her eyebrows and mentioned her mistake. However, Petra's attention was not on the subtle expression of remorse, but on the change of expression that she had just shown.

Reddening her cheeks, loosening her lips, lowering the corners of her eyes, and placing her palms on her hot face, Rem told her about that day— Petra felt a certain passion in her attitude.

And that passion had only one possible destination, based on the current trend of statements.

Rem: "Subaru-kun is…"

The smooth movement of Rem's tongue as she talked about Subaru with vigor. The bitter face of Ram, standing right beside her, proved the intensity of her words.

What surprised Petra, of course, was the passion, but also the sudden change of Rem's blushing cheeks.

Petra and Rem had been friendly with each other for a long time, even though they only saw each other from a distance. However, when she came to the village to get the necessities for the mansion, they never exchanged any friendly words. This was largely due to the fact that Rem had a cold impression of being inhospitable to others.

However, that cold impression had now melted away, and Rem had the loveliness of a girl with a heart and soul. This made Petra smile, even though she was younger than her, but at the same time, it made Petra feel a sense of danger.

Because, it was obvious that Rem was feeling something special about Subaru.

Petra: "Stare…"

Quietly, Petra let the initial shock sink in and quietly observed Rem.

She had short, silky blue hair; clear, jewel-like pale blue eyes; and a face that was not beautiful, but rather cute and well-shaped, with a wealth of expressions that changed from one moment to the next. —Her slender white arms and legs, large breasts, and revealing modified uniform made her a formidable opponent.

Ram: “Ram has nothing to do with this.”

On the other hand, Ram, who had the impression of sharp and dignified beauty compared to the softer Rem, answered that way ahead of Petra’s eyes that were assessing her enemy. It was as if she had read Petra’s inner thoughts, which made her nervous for a moment, but it was probably just an accidental remark.

In any case, Ram’s attitude toward Subaru was not that of anger. In other words—

Petra: “Once again, I am Petra. It is nice to meet you.”

Rem: “—? Yes, thank you for your kindness. Rem is Subaru-kun’s Rem.”

Petra’s offered hand was squeezed back, and she stared at Rem, who smiled softly, with a strong determination. Rem tilted her head with a face that didn’t match the cute hostility of such a young girl.

That is, in only having introduced herself, did she not hide her thoughts and feelings in the slightest.

3

???: “One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.”

The shouts of radio calisthenics stretched up into the sky around the square of Arlam Village.

Radio calisthenics had become a morning ritual for the villagers, and Natsuki Subaru was the one who got up early and moved his body in front of the villagers gathered in the square, calling out to them.

Now that he had recovered from the wounds that he sustained in the Witchbeast incident and was again in good health, Subaru visited Arlam Village every morning and spent time with the villagers in relaxing radio calisthenics.

This was a great opportunity for Petra to be able to see Subaru every day. The truth of it was, doing radio calisthenics was embarrassing for her, but it was worth it.

Petra: “Without this, I would lose out to Rem-san, who he sees every day.”

Acknowledging Rem as her love rival, Petra spent her days unilaterally vowing to fight the good fight. Without this strong awareness, the advantage of Subaru’s coworker, Rem, was undeniable.

Of course, the frequency of seeing someone is not an essential condition to make love come true, but it’s hard not to develop feelings for them. It’s a natural desire to see the person one loves every day, win or lose.

So, radio calisthenics was convenient for Petra. It was worth the effort of waking up all the adults, including her parents, and even Muraosa, for this. Eventually, it became a habit, and now everyone was gathering together without Petra having to wake them up, and a pleasant morning came.

Subaru: “Alright, Victory! Let’s gather! See, there’s a reward for being here today!”

After a final shout, an enthusiastic Subaru raised his hand and gathered the villagers together.

What Subaru held in his hand was a sweet potato stamp with a picture engraved on the cross-section of the sweet potato. It was made by the dexterous Subaru, and the villagers who participated in the event would receive a stamp as a prize for their participation. There was nothing to be gained by collecting them, but many people looked forward to them because there was a different sweet potato stamp every day.

Petra was one of them, and she loved everything Subaru did for the most part.

Subaru: “Oh, Petra, you did a great job of keeping your arms and legs moving this morning.”

Petra: “Hehe, really? Was it cute? Was it Cute?”

Subaru: “Oh, it was cute, it was cute. And for such a cute Petra, I’ll give you a bonus, and…”

When it was Petra’s turn to have her potato stamp card pressed, Subaru’s hand slipped in response to Petra’s excitement. When he tried to regain his grip, the potato stamp fell to the ground and rolled around.

In a panic, Subaru scurried off to pick up that potato stamp, and then—

???: “…Yes. Don’t panic. You’re just scatterbrained.”

Subaru: “Who even says that these days.”

???: “Don’t make fun of me.”

Before Subaru was able to, a person had reached for the potato stamp, picked it up, and handed it to him. In response to Subaru’s comment, the other person poked his forehead with their finger.

It was a person wearing a white robe with a hood covering their head. The tone of her voice and their thin appearance led Petra to believe that it was a woman. Petra wondered if there was such a person around here.

Petra: “Hey, Subaru…”

Subaru: “—. Mm, oh, oh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Okay, let’s resume. Let’s stamp it!”

With a pop, a potato stamp was pressed on the participation card, but Petra couldn’t pay attention to the pattern. Petra’s eyes were glued to Subaru, who was in front of her, the whole time.

Just before, Subaru was looking somewhat happy, stroking his poked forehead and relaxing his lips. To Petra’s eyes, Subaru looked too happy.

Girl in robe: “…Huh? You dropped this. Here.”

Petra pretended that the participation card had been taken by the wind, and deliberately sent it flying at the feet of the girl in the white robes. The white-robed girl picked it up and handed it to Petra with a casual gesture.

Petra’s eyes widened, peering at the shape of such an opponent from directly below.

This was a woman with jewel-like amethyst eyes; long, beautiful silver hair; and a well-shaped face that made Petra tremble —a formidable foe, indeed.

Petra had decided that her strongest lifelong love rival would probably be Rem. Victory over her was the condition for Petra’s first love —it would be a fierce, hard-fought battle, even for the cute and unrivaled Petra.

However, here an enemy suddenly rose on the board, much to Petra’s dismay.

Girl in robe: “—? What’s wrong?”

Her gesture of tilting her head slightly, without malice, was also charming, and the other party curiously gazed at Petra. Petra did not know how the woman herself felt about Subaru.

However, it was clear that Subaru had special feelings for her, just as Petra had for Subaru.

And Petra, struggling with her first love, was unable to find a good way to fight back—

Petra: “—Bleehh!”

Girl in robe: “Eh?! Why?!”

The other party was surprised by her childish behavior, and Petra snatched the participation card from their hands. She decided to declare war on them with such a childish approach.

—Petra’s battle continued. Being cute was not enough to win. The world was a very big place.

END

Rem’s Very Ordinary Happy Day

1

Rem, the Roswaal residence’s first head maid, wakes up early in the morning. A certain room at the mansion’s east wing—Rem wakes up on her bed, and what she wakes up to is a dawn with a sky still left with traces of the night.

“…”

Signs of the morning appear towards east with a faint glimmer of light mixed with the dark night sky. The girl laying down on the bed opens her eyes quietly as if she had heard the footsteps of dawn.

She had a small body with her small hands and legs. Her rather short hair that had equivalent lengths on all sides was a bright, sky-blue, and her round light blue eyes, which had a color similar to her hair, were charming. Her features indicative of youth were cute.

However, she herself was completely unaware of how much she excelled in her looks.

Rem: “Fuwa…”

She wakes her body up with a small yawn. Rem steps onto the floor from her bed while wearing her blue nightgown.

She was very good at waking up. When she stood up without being pulled back by drowsiness, Rem stretched in the middle of the room. She wipes off the tears in the corner of her eyes, bidding farewell to the traces of her dreams.

Rem: “I need to wash my face and change…”

Speaking of the things she had to do was a secret habit of Rem, which she did before she started her work.

Putting things in order and organizing her actions was an essential ritual for Rem, as a person who was aware of how she wasn't very good at dealing with things.

She was barely satisfying her duties as the mansion's head maid by doing the ritual in secret, or at least, that's what Rem thought.

"…"

She heads towards the bathroom with a towel in her hand while she organizes her thoughts and washes her face.

Her loosened thinking tenses up from the cold water. After she wipes her face with the soft towel, she goes back to her room and it was time to change her clothes.

After she dropped her thin nightgown onto the bed, this young lady's soft skin was exposed, as she had only her underwear on.

Rem was small in comparison to other 17-year-olds, but her body's non flatness was rich with similarities of a woman. In particular, her breasts had been growing considerably in these past few months, which also annoyed her.

Rem: "Haa…"

Rem lets out a seemingly melancholic sigh and turns around to the closet. She had many uniforms organized in a row in this place stored with clothes—identical maid outfits were hung up. She picks one set of clothes without hesitation, and starts to put on the uniform that she was used to wearing.

She had actually been living like this and wearing her maid outfit for almost 10 years.

10 years—it was the same date and the same time when the oni village went into ruins and she and her sister Ram were found by Roswaal. For Rem, it was literally more than half her lifetime.

That was the only time period where Rem would put on this maid outfit.

She had no displeasure or questions towards that, and she thought she'd continue on like that but—

Rem: "I wonder if it'd be weird to wear different clothes every now and then…"

Rem sees her own image reflected on the dresser installed on the closet, and looks carefully at her uniform. It was standard for a maid to have a well-kept appearance and it was the minimum preparation done to avoid embarrassing herself in front of the master. That was what Frederica told her many times, which was a person Rem followed as an example for being a maid and who also told her about the etiquettes.

Rem of course followed those teachings, and she didn't fail to spend time on her personal appearance.

However, she was more enthusiastic about it in these past several weeks and would check on it briefly. That being said, the enthusiasm was more about her preferring to be "Cute", rather than it was preferring to be "Perfect".

Rem: "…Let's leave it at this."

Rem turns around many times in front of the dresser, and puts an end to the preparations that didn't have an end in sight.

After she finished putting on her very exposing maid outfit, she put on her flower hair ornaments, and she was done. She turns over the edge of her short skirt, exits to the corridor in a lively way, and takes a deep breath.

The corridor of the mansion was filled with the morning's cold air. Rem breathed in a lot of that air, and started to walk happily. The place she headed towards—was not the room next door, which was the room of her older sister, Ram.

Rem: "—Good morning"

Rem says her greetings with a very thin-like voice and steps into the room. The design of the room was the same as Rem's private room, but its interior was designed delicately based on the owner's personality. It still didn't have much property in it, but she felt that even that really emphasized his character. “Every night and every morning” Rem saw it, she felt her chest warm up.

It was a room used by a servant. It was not Rem’s room. It was not Ram’s room. Excluding the sisters, this servant living in the Roswaal residence could only be one person. In other words, this was that person’s room—

Rem: “—Subaru-kun”

Rem looks down on the boy lying down on the bed in this dim room and calls that name. However, that voice also seemed like it was vanishing and that it was something fragile, so there was no way it reached this boy, who was still in the middle of dreaming.

But, she said her greetings before she entered the room, so she called out to the sleeping boy.

Rem: “So, Subaru-kun is an oversleeper, considering how he still isn’t waking up.”

Rem uses that type of reason to justify her actions as she stands beside the bed. And then she looks at the sleeping boy—she looks at Natsuki Subaru’s sleeping face, and the impulse she experiences inside her causes her to loosen her lips greatly.

Subaru was lying down on the left side of the bed, and was sleeping while holding onto the blanket with his arms. Subaru was sleeping with a black jersey. They were reproduced clothes that Rem made by copying the foreign appearance Subaru had originally. She felt warm and fluffy inside from seeing him use those clothes as his sleep-wear.

She didn’t just feel warm and fluffy, though. He would usually have his bangs up, but he had them down on his defenseless sleeping face and it had a childish cuteness to it. He had lips that let out surprisingly quiet breathing and pretty fingers that were holding the blanket fiddling with it. His legs were short. He was drooling on his pillow. It was cute.

Rem: “Subaru-kun is cute…”

Such blind devotion”, is what she thinks as even she was a little amazed herself, but she couldn’t betray the way she viewed it all. Actually, perhaps it couldn’t be helped because she felt that way.

It makes Rem’s white cheeks blush. She enjoys herself with Subaru’s sleeping face and appearance.

She sharpens all of her senses. It was the readiness to pick up all of the signals Subaru gave out.

She continues that observation that was exaggerated to the point of it being ridiculous for a short time and says

Rem: “Th-That’s it for today…I can’t take much more. I have to let it go…”

Her heartbeats speeds up. She becomes aware that not just her cheeks were having a fever, but her ears were too. Rem somehow restrains herself and pulls her attention away from Subaru’s sleeping face. She steps back. The boy is completely remotely removed from her field of vision, and she somehow recovers herself.

Rem: “That was close…a little more and I’d lose control of myself.”

Rem puts her hand on her forehead, and gives herself credit for her self-control. Taking a peek on Subaru’s sleeping face was her daily routine “every morning”, but not once did she test if her offensive lust and her defensive self were settled down.

It was always a close battle.

—Furthermore, it was as if she wasn’t aware of how she had suspicions of following her desires when she was giving in to impulses from seeing his sleeping face.

Rem: “I really did try my best this morning, if I may say so myself. Geez, Subaru-kun is a sinful person…”

If he was awake, then surely he would have asserted false accusations from those brief words.

Rem leaves those words along with a hot sigh and quickly goes to leave Subaru's room. She completes the first thing she did in the morning for her daily routine, and then this time Rem heads towards Ram's room.

Rem: "—Good morning."

Whenever Rem entered her sister's room, the voice she called out to the inside with was of course about as quiet as the buzzing of a mosquito.

The lights were turned off in the room and it was dim, but in comparison to Subaru's room, it was pretty bright. That was due to it getting closer to the morning, and it was proof of Rem wasting her time in Subaru's room. That being said, it didn't hinder her work and it didn't cause her to be late. She was waking up early for time to see his sleeping face.

Just from that, the amount of sleep she got decreased. However, her daily was not just about physical strength, but about willpower as well. After all, she was just aiming to replenish her willpower. It was not just Subaru's sleeping face that did that—-

Rem: "—Nee-sama is lovely today too."

Ram was lying down on the bed facing upwards. Rem lets out a faint smile at Ram, whose sleeping face was exposed.

Ram was Rem's twin sister. "Their appearance made them look like two peas in a pod" is what she's been told various times, but Rem did not believe it at all.

She had a stern face and light pink eyes that were full of strong intellectual self-confidence. She had beautiful, brilliant pink hair that even had transient glossiness. She had a perfectly balanced body and slender, flexible limbs—her sister was perfect no matter what she looked at, while she was a younger sister who improperly copied her only with her outward appearance.

Rem had people tell her that she had her good points, so she tried her best to not feel like she was indebted, but—-

Rem: "But still, Nee-sama is my role model."

She was always full of confidence. She was always right. She was always strong, no matter what. That was who Ram was.

She felt indebted to her sister who was like that, but she also was proud of her. So, Rem put in her love, respect, and deep affection into her voice, and called out to Ram.

Rem: “Nee-sama, Nee-sama. It’s morning. Please wake up.”

She felt guilty for her figure that slept peacefully, but she hardened her heart and body and shook Ram awake. Doing this and waking up Ram was also part of her daily routine before starting her work. Ram softly whispering “Just five more minutes…” was also an everyday thing Ram did when she opened her eyes from being called to.

Even Rem wanted to let Ram sleep to her heart’s content if she could.

Rem: “You can’t do that, Nee-sama. If you don’t hurry, change, and get ready, then you won’t set a good example for Subaru-kun, who is an apprentice. Moreover, Subaru-kun still hasn’t recovered from the witchbeast injuries, so I don’t really want to make him do work, and I feel bad…”

Ram: “…You’re more worried about Barusu than you are worried about me, so I don’t want to wake up.”

Rem: “Nee-sama, please don’t say such pitiful things. …But, if you take a day off, then just me and Subaru-kun will do the work. Okay. Nee-sama, today you can…”

Ram: “Actually, I’ll get up. Alright, help me change, Rem.”

Ram bravely takes back those previous remarks, as she suddenly raises her upper body and puts her hands up in the air.

Rem opens her eyes wide at her sister quickly changing her mind and then lets out a happy smile.

Rem: “Nee-sama, you are hasty, huh. We do need to change your clothes, but first we need to comb your hair. You have quite the bed hair today. Did you sleep late?”

Ram: “I didn’t have good sleep because you haven’t been sleeping with me lately, Rem.”

Rem: “Geez, and how many years has it been since you and I slept together again?”

Rem combs Ram’s hair with the comb she took out while being immersed in the nostalgic memories. Her glossy pink hair was smooth, so it was if it was dancing in her hands. The thin feel she felt with her fingers should’ve been about the same as Rem’s. —That’s what she suddenly thought.

Rem: “Perhaps I’ll try growing out my hair….”

The reason Rem had her hair short was because she wanted to have the same hairdo as Ram.

If she matched her looks and features by having the same hairdo as her sister and the same clothes, making people say they’re two peas in a pod, she felt like she’d be closer to being like her. Doing that was also Rem’s raison d’être.

However, now she thought about if it was okay to change that childlike obsession.

Rem: “Nee-sama, would you find it weird if I grew out my hair…?”

Ram: “…Are you asking if I’d think it’d be weird? Or are you asking if other people would think it’s weird? Based on that, my answer will be different.”

Rem: “Ummm, would Subaru-kun think it’s weird…?”

When she tried to talk about the source for her anxiety, Ram bluntly let out a deep sigh.

Ram: “Why are you saying this so suddenly? Did Barusu say something to you?”

Rem: “No, it’s not that. It’s just, I thought I’d comb Nee-sama’s hair, and so…”

Ram: “…Emilia-sama did make her hair long and she does have pretty hair.”

She easily sees through her intention of covering up her reasons, and then Rem lets out a wry smile.

Ram responds to the hints of her smile by shaking her head in disappointment.

Ram: “Rem, you’d of course look cute even with long hair, no doubt about it. It makes me want to pull Barusu and tear him up.”

Rem: “Nee-sama…”

Rem feels both joy and unease at Ram, whose voice and attitude were stern.

She felt glad about Ram worrying about her, and she felt uneasy from thinking about how there may be tension between Subaru and Ram.

Rem: “Nee-sama, do you hate Subaru-kun?”

Ram: “Me hating him and me feeling that he isn’t appropriate for my cute Rem are two different matters.”

Ram gives a flat denial, which makes Rem reflexively open her eyes wide at her.

However, soon after, it changed into a smile filled with emotion.

In other words, Ram’s reply just now meant she didn’t hate Subaru.

Rem: “Thank you, Nee-sama. I also am proud of my Nee-sama.”

Ram: “Oh. Weelll, of course. I am an older sister that one would want to take pride in after all.”

They slipped off topic, but the confirmation of their sisterly love causes Rem to feel happy. Ram begins to hum in a seemingly very good mood. —She also was unusually skillful with her humming.

"…"

In response to that humming, Rem also starts to pleasantly move the comb again and gently styles her sister's hair.

This was also a ritual for the important sisterly bond between Ram and Rem, which was done every morning.

2

In the Roswaal residence's spacious courtyard, Subaru and Emilia were having a friendly chat about something that appeared to be fun.

Rem loosened her lips while looking down at that from afar.

Rem: "Subaru-kun looks cute with how he seems to be having fun."

Subaru's state of being merry filled Rem's heart with so much emotions to the point of them overflowing.

In this courtyard at a time this early in the morning, Emilia's contract with the lesser spirits—she was spending the one time in the day where she'd interact with the spirits. That was a habit Emilia continued to have ever since she came to the mansion, and then Subaru also showed up to these things, which was a habit he continued ever since he came to the mansion.

Beatrice: "—Interrupting the invaluable time of spirits, he really is a hopeless person."

Suddenly, a voice calls out to Rem from the side, who was looking down at the courtyard.

She was focused on the garden, so she was a bit startled from having not noticed that presence. After that, the appearance of the person who called out to her gave her an even bigger startle.

Rem: "Beatrice-sama"

Beatrice, who was standing right next to Rem, responds to her calling out by folding her arms without giving an answer.

It was a girl with a lovely appearance. She had her faint colored hair put into drills, and she wore a magnificent dress that had a lot of frills. Her looks were also well kept like a doll and looked perfect.

Her looks were lovely. There was no better word to describe them.

Rem: "You can't rival Nee-sama though"

Beatrice: "I can't help but feel like I've suddenly been insulted for some reason."

Rem: "That's not true. Nobody can be compared to Nee-sama. I think Beatrice-sama has her own good points. Please don't get depressed."

Beatrice: "The more you speak, the more it's becoming a plan to make me unhappy, I suppose!"

The intention to cheer her up provokes anger from Beatrice, who was irritated, and so Rem says "My apologies" to her and bowed. She wasn't trying to anger her, but for some reason something irritated her.

Rem: "Are you perhaps hungry? It's just a little more time until breakfast…"

Beatrice: "I'm displeased from being hungry? Don't make fun of me! These mansion guys are intolerable with their behavior, I suppose! Everything is that guy's fault…!"

Beatrice says those words, and looks towards the courtyard with a frown on her face.

What she saw was Subaru and Emilia still continuing their friendly chat. She then says

Beatrice: "That guy is influencing you, and it's also showing in your sister, I suppose. Nothing can be more irritating than this."

Rem: “Influence…right. It’s because Subaru-kun is lovely.”

Beatrice: “Why is it that you smiled there? …I’m now starting to regret my decision to start a conversation with you.”

When Rem smiled at the topic of Subaru, Beatrice put her hand on her forehead and sighed. She murmured those words while having that worn out state, and Rem recovered from her initial startling.

Putting aside Beatrice’s regret, it was rare for her and Rem to have silly conversations. Also, whenever Beatrice was the one to start the conversation, the amount of strange occurrences that happened were enough to count on one’s hand.

Rem: “I’ll have to write about this thing with Beatrice-sama in today’s diary entry today too, huh.”

Beatrice: “Oh? You keep a diary? Quite methodical, I suppose.”

Rem: “Yes. I started doing it lately to record the daily things that happen with Subaru-kun and Nee-sama. There are still six volumes, so I’m embarrassed about being poor with writing, but…”

Beatrice: “Six volumes…? It’s only been about one month since that guy came to the mansion…”

Rem was embarrassed from her own incompetence, although for some reason Beatrice was shivering with her face.

She had a countless amount of things written in her diary, but her literary talent and the amount of time she had weren’t very permitting. It was next to impossible to express Subaru’s charm and Ram’s wonderfulness, so—

Rem: “Would it be conceited for me to think “But even then, some day…” ? I wonder.”

Beatrice: “I’m not the one who knows, I suppose! Do whatever you want! …Geez, if it’s just that, then it’s as if I was worrying too much, I suppose.”

Rem: “Worrying too much, you say?”

Beatrice: “I don’t want to get involved with trouble by giving you something like a day off again.. So, before it gets to that, I just thought to look over your condition moderately, I suppose.”

Beatrice confesses that with a sigh unsuitable for her appearance with a face that seemed to be pouting.

Those words cause Rem to choke. She opens her eyes wide. It was a bolt out of the blue.

The trouble Beatrice was talking about was surely the “Rem’s Day Off” that happened the other day.

It was a sudden day off proposed to Roswaal by Subaru out of consideration for Rem’s health—Rem was allowed to rest, and it was the day where everyone at the mansion carried out the duties for the work of that time.

To be honest, Rem got startled from the sudden proposal and she felt sorry for troubling them. She also had unease about leaving the work up to them, but as for the result, it was also a time when she was able to truly feel how she was very blessed.

Ever since then, it seemed that she was trying to put more and more of her soul into her work, but it seemed that Rem wasn’t the only one who believed that the circumstances didn’t end with just that day.

Rem: “Did you perhaps worry about me?”

Beatrice: “…”

Rem: “Thank you, Beatrice-sama. Those feelings really make me happy. I understand. From now on, I’ll have you let me work with everything I have in me even more!”

Beatrice: “That’s exactly what I’m telling you to stop doing! Loosen up and make sure you don’t get tired, I suppose! If you don’t, it’ll cause trouble again!”

Beatrice swings her hands and knocks off Rem’s declaration, who renewed her enthusiasm. When that rejection caused Rem to hang her head in despondence, Beatrice pulled on her drills with her fingers and said

Beatrice: “It’s weird to get tired even when we have more employees than before, I suppose. I know that he is useless too, but making that half man cooperate well with your sister…”

Rem: “Nee-sama is perfect. She doesn’t have even a single weakness.”

Beatrice: “…Then insert that guy for a single weakness and use him well.”

Rem actually wanted to refute her by saying he wasn’t a single weakness, but she kept that to herself. In this case, the important thing wasn’t the extent of the gap, but rather Beatrice’s opinion on him.

It was just that the opinion in itself was something that couldn’t have possibly been related to the Beatrice back then.

Beatrice: “What are you laughing about?”

Rem: “I’m sorry. But, I’m happy. Beatrice-sama wouldn’t worry about me like this back then, after all.”

Beatrice: “…That’s not really true. I am full of sympathy, I suppose.”

She pouts. Rem says nothing to the girl that turned away.

In actuality, that may have been right. Beatrice was already kind to begin with, and Rem also had thoughts about that sometimes. However, she never spoke about that until now.

Rem: “Beatrice-sama, a little while ago you said that Subaru influenced both me and Nee-san…but I kinda think he’s influenced you too.”

Beatrice: “That’s some pretty severe sarcasm.”

Rem: “But I wasn’t trying to be sarcastic…”

Beatrice: “Then that’s even worse, I suppose.”

Beatrice snorts her nose with displeasure, and after that, she reached out for the room’s door that was right nearby when she turned her back on Rem. That was the parlor, but as someone who was connected to the door of the forbidden archives through her “Door Crossing”, it could be none other than the entrance to Beatrice’s room.

Rem: “Beatrice-sama, I’ll call you again when it’s time for breakfast.”

When she said those words to the small back of the girl who sought to return to the forbidden archives, Beatrice waved her hand in silence. The distortion of the room then emits, and then the girl vanishes into the forbidden archives, a place different from where she was.

Rem: “Just as I thought, Beatrice-sama has changed too.”

Rem whispered those words while knowing that they wouldn’t reach the vanished girl’s ears.

Back then, Beatrice would rarely show up to the mansion’s breakfasts.

She was rewarded for her perfect attendance this past month, since she also didn’t turn down this morning’s invitation either.

“…”

When she looked outside the window, she saw Subaru and Emilia leaving the courtyard.

They went together like that, headed towards the Alam village, a place close to the mansion, and should’ve been going to do radio calisthenics with the villagers, which was something that had become an established event. After that, they’d have breakfast, and then they’d return to the mansion.

Rem: “I have to hurry.”

Rem sees off the images of those two who became smaller and also aims to hurry over to the kitchen.

Everyone in the mansion gathered for breakfast. Rem hurries over the corridor's carpet while she feels satisfaction from having something like that become an ordinary daily thing.

3

Emilia: "Wow, you even made tea today, Rem. It's been a reeaally long time since you did that."

Emilia greets Rem, who came to her private room, and says those words like that, smiling with a cheerful face.

She had long silver hair and clear, bluish purple eyes. Even for Rem as someone who saw her older sister Ram as a superior being, this girl had such beautiful looks that you'd admire them spontaneously.

It became a sunny day within an instant, and it was around 2:30PM. Lunch had already ended, and the people at the mansion each went to do their respective duties. It was now that time to rest.

She brought in delicious baked sweets and tea. Supplying Emilia with time to rest was also part of a maid's job, although normally Subaru would be the one to take the initiative and take that role.

Rem: "Subaru-kun and Nee-sama went to go shopping at the village for today. There's a lot of things on the list, so they weren't able to make it for the break time."

Emilia: "I see. That's something that's been rare lately. Lately you've been going with either one of them for shopping too."

Rem: "Yes. I asked a selfish favor of them today. …I wanted Subaru-kun and Nee-sama to get along better."

Just like she said in the conversation in the morning, it wasn't as if Subaru and Ram had tension between them. In fact, if you considered just their interactions, then they did get along with each other, and you could even say they had a nice relationship.

But as for them, they each had a bit of a dishonest side. She wanted to improve that.

Rem: “So, I dared to harden my body and my heart.”

Emilia: “I seee. Making them get along better…yeah, that’s a good thing. I also highly approve of it.”

Emilia puts her hands together in front of her chest. Her expression suddenly brightens and then she gives Rem her approval. However, she tilts her head after that gesture with a “But” and says

Emilia: “I thought that Subaru and Ram got along reeeaally well, though…See, didn’t the two of them and Puck go to the mountain to get tea ingredients before?”

Rem: “Yes. Thanks to that, Nee-sama’s assessment of Subaru-kun improved a lot. But, I wanted to give them a push after that, and I thought I’d make an opportunity for that push myself.”

The shopping note asking a favor of the two made it necessary for them to run around in the village, so it did take up time. If they opened up their hearts during that time, then it would be a step forward for Rem’s plan for happiness.

However, that plan for happiness wasn’t just for Ram, but Emilia also had to work together with them—

Emilia: “—? What’s wrong?”

Rem: “No, it’s nothing. Anyways, with that, today I will be a waitress. I can’t make tea as good as Nee-sama does, and I can’t talk about fun things like Subaru-kun, but please forgive me.”

Rem bows with an expression of her hidden thoughts, pushes the cart, and enters Emilia’s room.

In comparison to Rem and the others’ rooms for employees, Emilia’s private room was a remarkably bigger size. It was a design close to Roswaal’s office. It had an ebony desk inside, a large table in the center, a chair used for receptions, and a bed placed in the room next to it.

There were also countless books and documents spread over the reception table and the business desk.

Emilia: “Sorry. There are things scattered around. I’ll clean them up quickly.”

Rem: “I am sorry for causing inconvenience to you.”

She says that and Emilia starts to clean up the documents spread out on the reception table

Behind her, Rem also begins to prepare the tea. When she opened up the table safely, there were steaming cups.

Emilia: “Hm? What about your tea? Not going to drink any?”

Rem: “No, I am a mere waitress, so drinking with Emilia-sama would be…”

Emilia: “Ram and Subaru always go drinking together though…”

Rem: “… But…then I will accept your offer.”

For a second she felt hesitation, but Rem immediately withdrew her previous remarks and participated with her.

The maid’s rules were complicatedly inconsistent, but it was something Subaru and Ram were doing. She wanted to regard that relationship highly more than she wanted to protect those rules, although it would be disobeying what Frederica taught her.

Rem: “If we meet again, next time I’ll apologize…”

Rem prepares her tea while apologizing to the senior maid, who was a woman that was away from the mansion for personal reasons. She then takes up Emilia’s offer and shared tea time with her.

“…”

They both tilt their cups and spent the time quietly enjoying the tea’s taste and smell.

During that time, nothing representing a conversation broke out. Rem notices this and experiences some awkwardness, and she felt very annoyed at her own passivity.

Rem naturally had a passive attitude. She was aware of this herself. Ram of course was no match for Subaru in terms of assertiveness, as he was someone who overflowed with energy.

On the other side, it was also difficult for Emilia to understand her sense of distance with Rem. This situation was a manifestation of that incomprehensible distance, and Rem was disappointed in herself for allowing this to happen.

Maybe she shouldn't have taken up Emilia's offer after all—

Emilia: "…It's lovely doing this every now and then, drinking tea quietly, isn't it?"

Rem: "…"

Emilia: "Usually it would be Subaru talking a lot, and Ram would give me various advice during my studies, but when it's with Rem, it's reeeaally relaxing."

Emilia lets out a faint smile, and Rem becomes surprised at the girl who said those words. After she took a peek at Emilia's face, it seemed as if there were no signs of her lying in her expression. This meant that those words just now were here true feelings.

She was quite embarrassed with how she blamed herself for the silence and how she had looked downward, feeling worthless.

Rem: "…How are…your studies going?"

Emilia: "I think you could say they're not going poorly. As for myself, the place I started at is a place more behind than the other people, so I have to work harder."

She searches for a topic, looks towards the business desk, and Emilia lowered her eyebrows at Rem, who asked that question.

There were a lot of demands for Emilia, a candidate for the next era's ruler, for someone who was a participant of the royal election. As a ruler, she would be burdened with the kingdom, and she of course would have to have a lot of intelligence and education to support that wisdom.

Currently, Emilia was at the stage to study that, and it was difficult to say her level was up to standard even with the compliments she received. But still, the royal selection would begin in the near future.

Emilia: "Before that, I want to get better, even if it's just a little bit."

Rem: "I understand how you feel. Nee-sama and I did nothing but study right after we were picked up by Roswaal-sama."

At that time when they had just left the village, Rem was ignorant of the outside world, not considering Ram's knowledge.

Studying in the mansion was not all there was to one's work and knowledge as a maid. Apart from the minimum reading and writing, they were taught everything they didn't know. That is why Rem had memory of putting earnest efforts into her studies too, just like how Emilia was doing now.

Emilia: "You and Ram did nothing but study in the beginning?"

Rem: "Yes. In particular, I was worse at it than Nee-sama, so it was really terrible."

Emilia: "So you two were like that too. I guess there's nothing like a shortcut after all. I felt some eagerness…but I have to keep working at it, huh."

Rem: "You get eager too, Emilia-sama?"

Rem felt it was something surprising and opened her eyes wide at Emilia, who became frail near the end of her sentence. Emilia pouts with a "Isn't that a given?" at Rem's reaction and says

Emilia: "All the other candidates are reeeally splendid. As it is, I'm viewed as a problem by being a half elf, so if I wasn't, I would have alwaaaays been at the forest."

She heard that the Great Elior Forest was the forest where Emilia was born and raised. Rem didn't know any more details than that, in regards to her birth place.

—Come to think of it, Rem had avoided getting close to Emilia up until now.

That was because of Rem's exclusively conservative thoughts. Only her irreplaceable sister and the surrounding world that was attached to her were important to Rem.

Rem wasn't interested in Emilia, for better or worse. That's why she tended to avoid participating and supporting more than what Roswaal had ordered her.

And then Rem thought that Emilia didn't need her assistance, as she was someone who was always positive and worked hard.

Rem stayed as herself, while Emilia stayed as herself. It was advisable for both of them to go through while having minimal involvement with each other. That was the mere, weak relationship she thought they had.

However—

Rem: "Emilia-sama, you're really bad at singing."

Emilia: "Ehh?! What's this all of a sudden?!"

Her calm expression makes a complete 180. Emilia raises a voice at Rem's words with a face that looked like she was going to cry. Rem looks at the change in her facial expression, and with an unconcerned face she says

Rem: "You're surprisingly clumsy with your fingers, and you're a little too honest, so you have a side that's easy to deceive too. Also, you're easy to accept the influences around you…and you cover yourself with a bucket."

Emilia: "Subaru covered me with a bucket! Also, wasn't it necessary?"

Rem: “Yes, that’s right. …I know everything that happened in this month.”

Rem knew this much about this person Emilia, who she tried not to get deeply involved with. She could also talk about more than what what she just told.

Emilia listens to Rem’s murmuring, puts her hand on her face with an “Ah” and a pouting face, and after that she let out a playful looking smile.

Emilia: “Then I’ll get even too. Rem, you are actually a reeeaally obstinate person with your stubbornness. Also, you like things like picture books, poetry, and you’re a little bad with mayonnaise. And you’re really close with Subaru!”

Rem: “Nice one, Emilia-sama. I can’t refute that. I particularly agree with the last part.”

Emilia: “Fufu, right? But, why did you say that so suddenly?”

After Emilia stuck her chest out with pride, she tilts her head in curiosity. Rem response to Emilia’s doubt by shaking her head with a “No”.

Rem: “There’s no big reason for it. It’s just that, I wanted to make sure of things. It’s been half a year since I met you, Emilia-sama, and yet, far more things have happened in this past month from that point.”

Emilia: “…Hm, that’s true. Ever since Subaru came along, it’s been reeeeaally busy. You and Ram have been talking much more compared to back then, too.”

Rem: “So, err…umm, see.”

Rem searches for words to express the inner thoughts she couldn’t explain well and goes into deep thought. Emilia sees Rem projected in her bluish purple eyes, and she kept the words to continue in silence.

She sees that attitude and makes a decision. Back then, Rem was honestly apathetic towards Emilia's courses of action, as long as Roswaal didn't care about whether it was as he illustrated or not.

But, because this time she had feelings different from back then…

Rem: "I'm assisting Emilia-sama too. At this time for the upcoming Royal Selection, my abilities are very weak…but I'll do what I can with my poor abilities."

Emilia: "…"

Rem: "I thought I knew Emilia-sama. What I said just now is like the basis for those thoughts. I learned about Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "…They weren't just weird things?"

Rem: "There…may have been some weird things."

When Rem gave a smile while being teaseful, Emilia pouts with a "Geez", and right after that, she starts to laugh. Like that, they laughed with each other while sitting across at a table.

Emilia: "Thanks. It makes me reaaallly happy that you said that. This is because of Subaru-kun too, huh."

Rem: "…Yes. Subaru-kun is lovely."

Emilia: "Yeah. Subaru is a reeeally good kid."

Rem and Emilia subtly share their differing opinions and they drink their cups together.

It became a different time than the middle of the day and the tea time that she thought it was, but—

Emilia: "Rem, can I ask a quick request?"

Rem: "Yes, what is it?"

Emilia: "Please give me another cup of tea. For some reason, right now I want to drink Rem's tea."

—In response to Emilia's request, Rem started to prepare the tea with the deep affection that came from her heart.

4

The sound of the bell causes Rem to run, and when she started to run, a surprising combination awaited her.

Rem: “Did you call me, Roswaal-sama? …and the Great Spirit.”

It was the Roswaal’s residence at the top floor’s terrace in the night—the individuals that met Rem there were Roswaal, who was sitting in a chair, and Puck, who was the calm spirit on top of the table next to him.

It was a wizard with clown make-up, and a great spirit in the form of a grey kitten. There were several existences that were beyond human understanding in the mansion, but among them, Rem cowered in fear to the two people who stood out.

Puck: “You really do come over immediately when you are called. But, you don’t have to cower like that. Weell, I think it’d be hard for you become smaller than me like a scaredy cat anyways.”

Rem: “I apologize for not being able to live up to the Great Spirit’s expectations…”

Roswaal: “It’s not something to take seriouuoosly, Rem. That was a Great Spirit joke.”

Puck: “Yes yes, a spirit joke. Spirits don’t really think it’s funny either, though.”

Puck wraps around his very long tail around his body and laughs softly with a carefree tone. At Puck’s feet on top of the table, there was a glass filled with amber liquid.

There was a glass in Roswaal’s hand to make a pair. The thing these two were doing together was—

Roswaal: “Relaxing and having an evening drink with the Great Spirit, huh. Subaru-kun found the family treasure’s wine cellar. As a descendant, I cannot help but check out my ancestor’s achieeevements. Then, I ran out of sakana for the sake.”

Puck: “Then it came to “Call the hostess”. And then I called you. Sorry.”

Rem: “Hostess…that’s Kararagi’s way of saying “Excellent woman”, right?”

Roswaal: “Rem, I just tooold you. Do not take a Great Spirit’s words seriouusly.”

Rem is given an order once again from the head of the mansion, and she bowed respectfully. That causes Puck to give a disapproving "Boo Boo" at Roswaal, although he gave a nonchalant look at that Great Spirit's behavior.

Anyhow, Rem soon figured out the reason she was called over.

Rem: "I understand now. I'll start the preparations immediately. Do you have any requests?"

Roswaal: "Nooope, I'll leave that up to you."

Puck: "I'd like mayonnaise! I want mayonnaise!"

Rem mainly receives Puck's request and she quickly moves towards the kitchen. In her head, she had a conversation about the ingredients that should have been left over. Sake sakana and mayonnaise. Lately, the latter condiment has been a definite meal of the mansion.

The people in the mansion mostly liked the mayonnaise idea Subaru came up with.

Rem was a little bad with the strong, sour taste of it, but everyone liked it—in particular Subaru did, so she highly valued it as a fundamental, unique flavor. People other than him liked it too, including Emilia, Puck, and Beatrice, so she put her powers into using it to create new cooking too.

Although, they weren't asking for that grand of a tour de force with the sakana. Rem takes out the fish from the refrigerator that used a magic stone, quickly grills the cut fish, and added mayonnaise.

Puck: "Hmmm, that jolts my instincts. What a nice smell."

Puck says those words like that at Rem, who came back with the sake sakana, while washing his face.

Puck did look like a kitten, and he really was a spirit, but the way he acted and his tastes were just like a cat. Rem gives a wry smile at that figure while hiding her feelings and placed the plate on top of the table.

Rem: “If you can leave the plate and glasses like that, then I will clean it up. If you don’t need anything else, then I will leave, but…”

Roswaal: “Good work. I’ll have you rest like this for tonight…is what I waaant to say, but may I have you stick along with us for a bit?”

Rem: “—? Yes, I can. Umm, sake is a little…”

Roswaal: “I know you don’t driiiink. The smell is also risky. Perhaps you should separate yourself a bit.”

Rem is told to stay in the terrace, and she stiffens up slightly as she responds to him.

Roswaal lets out a faint smile at those words, and put the glass in his hand next to the table, which was a place opposite of Rem.

Rem really had no resistance to sake, although that was pathetic to the oni clan.

All of the Oni were heavy drinkers who liked sake—that was some well-known gossip, but Rem really did see adults drinking excessively while having drinking parties many times. Also, unlike Rem, Ram stayed calm even after drinking. She was the real heavy drinker. A true oni.

Roswaal: “You sisters are extreeeeme. Even Ram surprises me with the same face she always has, but Rem surprises me too in a different way. You were fine with sake cooking tooooo.”

Rem: “When I’m cooking, perhaps there’s a difference in my concentration when it comes to separating the unnecessary from the necessary. At the party, I just couldn’t handle my tenseness…”

Puck: “During the previous party, you and Lia were always happy, after all. That was cute in itself, so I kinda think it’s fine as long as you just recognize what is moderate.”

In response to Rem’s contemplating while having her head down, Puck said those words with mayonnaise on his whiskers while wrestling with the sakana.

The party was the Roswaal residence's "Stargazing party" that happened the other day. The hidden wine cellar in the mansion was discovered, and they had a party with the cellar's sake.

During that party, Rem showed quite a shameful sight.

Rem: "I showed a really indecent side of myself at that event…"

Puck: "If it's you embracing Emilia with a bright red face, then it's cute. Even if Betty and I want to get drunk off sake, we can't…I wonder if Betty is different. Her circumstances are a bit different than mine."

Puck recites the event in a calm way, and Rem didn't know how to respond.

Puck: "You make a troubled face whenever you're troubled now, huh. I think that's a good thing."

Puck looks at Rem, who was silent, and nods his head while saying those words. When Rem reflexively put her hand on her face in response to those words, Puck focused back on the plate.

Roswaal: "You are like that with jokes too, but your fickle personality is hard to understaaaand. Keeping moderate distance is important for relationships with people."

Rem: "That's difficult, but I'll try my best. …So, Roswaal-sama."

Puck says something unexpected to Rem, and Roswaal teaches Rem the essentials for relationships. Rem nods at that advice, and after that, she bounced back and called out to Roswaal.

Just from her calling out to him, Roswaal understood what she was getting at.

Roswaal: "It wouldn't be right to make you stay here where there is the smell of liquor drifting about. Soooo, I will quickly go into the main topic…Subaru-kun's body."

Rem: "Tell me about Subaru-kun's body."

Roswaal: “About his body, the gate that he used excessively is in an exceptionally bad state.”

It was so heavy that it sounded serious, but Roswaal still said those words.

In the middle of the strife at the forest started by the witchbeasts, Subaru’s mind and body were both exhausted, so he became burdened with quite the amount of debt. In particular, he suffered a remarkable loss to his gate, which was an organ necessary for using magic. He was just about to look over its progress too.

Roswaal: “It’s hard to say that me, Ram, Emilia, the Great Spirit, or even Beatrice have an aptitude for healing water magic. Surely the only one with an aptitude for it would be Rem, but that’s for operating on external injuries, so stuff inside aren’t in her area of expertise.”

Puck: “That would only be using it recklessly, so it is worrying.”

It was Puck getting into other people’s business, but nothing could be done about how she couldn’t deny it. Anyhow, there was a reason behind Roswaal’s preface. If there wasn’t a way to heal his body—

Rem: “Someone who is an expert with examining insides will take care of Subaru-kun?”

Roswaal: “He has achieved something great from the incident that happened the other day where the damage didn’t spread in the village and the mansion. Which means that I have the biggest obligation to reward him for thaaat. Thus, I’ve made various sinister plans with the Great Spiriiiit.”

Roswaal spreaded his hands and joked around, but Rem felt relieved by the sincerity of those words.

The way Roswaal spoke meant that he already had a solution. That was what Rem understood, as someone who worked for him for these past 10 years.

The question was what was the solution, and how would Puck be involved.

Roswaal: “There’s merit. There’s even a long-awaited opportunity. Soooo, I thought to guide the kingdom’s best healeeer for him. That’s why I requested a present from the Great Spirit.”

Puck: “You don’t really need my permission either. Putting aside how it was at that place, Roswaal is the one that holds that right, isn’t he? You know how I am, and Lia shouldn’t interfere as well, as long as her “relatives” are safe.”

Roswaal: “Although, it would be bad if your good mood got hurt and you become big again.”

Puck: “Come on I rarely do thaaat. Geez, you sure hold grudgeees.”

They were laughing with each other in good moods, but Rem knew that the conversation was actually dangerous.

When Roswaal went to the forest to see Emilia for the Royal Selection, he clashed with Puck, who opposed it. As a result, she heard that the “topography changed”.

However, Rem put that aside as something minor, and she turns her attention towards the part she was given. It was the reason Roswaal called Rem out to this place.

Roswaal: “You have a face filled with determination even without me saying anything, but I’ll dare to clearly give my orders. Rem, I give you the role to observe Subaru-kun…or rather, I give you the role to watch over him so that he doesn’t do anything unreasonable.”

Rem: “In other words, Roswaal-sama, you’re giving me that? A just cause?”

Roswaal: “You’ve really bent the meaning of your circumstanceees. But, I don’t dislike it.”

Rem: “You’ve ordered to me to watch over Subaru-kun, as someone who does my best to avoid stepping on Subaru-kun’s shadow and avoid breathing in Subaru-kun’s breath as much as possible, at morning at night, every day.”

Puck: “You restrict yourself like that? I didn’t know that.”

Puck finds out about Rem’s several daily voluntary restrictions she established and he opens his eyes wide. But, he cannot be surprised. That was merely the beginning. He becomes afraid of Rem’s restraints no longer being in effect. He didn’t place as much restrictions on himself like that, nor were they as good as those.

Rem: “But, it still isn’t the time when I should talk about all of it…”

Puck: “Hmmm?”

Rem: “Anyways! I humbly accept the order. From here, I’ll follow your order and I’ll follow Subaru-kun around. It’s Roswaal-sama’s order, there’s nothing wrong with it.”

Rem pays no attention to Puck, who tilted his head in doubt, and she gives a salute to Roswaal as she straightens her back. After that, she moves smoothly back to the terrace, and she showed an elegant curtsey there.

Rem: “Alright then, please excuse me. Roswaal-sama, Great Spirit, sweet dreams—”

Rem gives a response that sounded more poetic than usual and she gallantly leaves the terrace.

They see off that spirit, and then Roswaal and Puck look at each other. Then, Puck points the tip of his tail towards the table—towards Roswaal’s glass and says

Puck: “The girl was probably downwind, huh.”

Roswaal: “…I wasn’t aiming for what just happened right now either, okay?”

They said these words. The clown and the kitten take a sip of their glasses and resume their evening drinking as they say “Oh weell”.

Rem: “—I knocked. Excuse me.”

Rem knocks the door as if caressing it and invades the room in a way that made it seem like she slipped in.

The lights were already off. Inside this room, what rose into the darkness was a light blue luminous point that turned on a mysterious looking light—in short, it was just the light of Rem’s eyes, who was immersed in the smell of sake.

Rem: “I knocked properly.”

She says that reminder again and puts up a guard. Rem silences her footsteps and steps into the room. It was the place she frequently passed by “every night and every morning”. Even if she closed her eyes, she would reach the place she intended to visit.

But, closing her eyes wouldn’t be fulfilling her objective, so she would have her eyes open.

Rem: “Subaru-kun is cute…”

She had a black haired boy lying down on the bed reflected in her eyes. As soon as that happened, Rem relaxed her face. She had more of a faint smile than a normal smile.

This was how she would enjoy Subaru’s sleeping face daily before she went to bed in her own room. Rem thought there were good points in Subaru when it was the morning or the night, while Subaru thought they were annoying points.

And then she had conflicting feelings with the gap between her usual lust and her feelings of guilt, but today they were clear. This is because tonight wasn’t out of her self-interest, but was a duty given to by Roswaal.

Rem: “I’ve been ordered to watch over him at a distance where I can feel him. So, it can’t be helped.”

While giving a broad interpretation of the master’s orders, Rem gets close to the bed and kneels on the bed. After matching the position of Subaru’s eyes, who was sleeping, the distance between their faces shorten at once.

As a result, they were close enough to feel each other's breath.

Rem: "…Is it okay for you to be this defenseless in front of me, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru did not respond to the talking that was quiet like a whisper.

Subaru surprisingly wasn't turning over and continued to sleep while not knowing about Rem's invasion. Even his breathing was quiet, contrasting with the liveliness he had when he was awake.

"…"

She incidentally is fascinated by his sleeping face more than usual, and Rem shamefully blushes.

She came here intending to strictly control herself, and yet what a fickle oni she was.

Since back then, Rem wasn't able to give genuine approval to her sister Ram's adoration of being okay with even dedicating both her mind and body to Roswaal.

It was because of the difference between her respect she had towards Roswaal, and the deep affection Ram had towards Roswaal, but that difference even turned into a inferiority complex too without Rem knowing it.

But, the person who suddenly came here was Natsuku Subaru. His existence became bigger in her, and she became able to understand the same feelings of adoration Ram had towards Roswaal.

She came to understand that she really was passionate and that it was something that could not be restricted.

"…"

She puts her kneecaps to the bed, and then Rem puts the upper half of her body onto the bed. While looking at Subaru's face right by her and his figure she says

Rem: “You have fingers of a boy, and yet they are slender and lovely. Your face while you sleep is calm like a baby. Your hair is hair that will turn into bed hair after sleeping if you don’t dry it properly.”

She talks about the interesting parts of Subaru one by one. But, none of these things were faults. This was the terrifying side of Rem’s fever.

Rem: “Lips…”

She concentrated her look on the particularly defenseless point on his defenseless sleeping face.

His lips were slightly open to breathe, but they were so close that if she put her face a little closer, she would touch them. She could feel his breath. If this was a restriction too, she would be breaking it.

Rem: “—-Ah”

But, as soon as she became aware of that restriction, Rem’s world quickly starts to return to the usual.

She was immersed in the smell of sake, but it wasn’t much. It was a matter of the amount she sniffed. Once she sobered up, she controlled herself sternly, and the girl who could control herself from touching the person she fell in love with returned.

Rem: “…What a fool I am.”

After the thoughts tinged with the smell of sake cleared up, regret and shame start to overwhelm her. While blushing from that shame, Rem grinds her teeth at her patheticness and stands up.

Roswaal ordered her to simply keep a moderate distance and observe him.

That didn’t change. Even if she broadly interpreted it and used it like a just cause, it was extremely arrogant disrespect.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, you can’t seduce me with this and that.”

Rem smiles as she accuses Subaru of a crime he had no memory of committing as he sleeps. Just like she usually did, she withdrew herself without doing anything. She decides that she'd apologize to Subaru for what she did tonight tomorrow, and finally, Rem playfully touches Subaru's lips with her white finger and—

Rem: "Ah"

The moment she touched his lips with his finger, Subaru moves with a desire to have something in his mouth and takes in her finger with his mouth. He licks her finger with a hot, rough feelings. Rem's thoughts climax, and she falls into a state of confusion.

That licking didn't continue for long, and Rem's finger was immediately released, but—

Rem: "…"

Rem is dumbfounded as she looks at her right hand's index finger. She couldn't move from that spot. That finger was so slippery and wet with saliva that she knew it clearly even in this darkness, as the mysterious looking light followed it around.

Rem: "…Will this be narrowly forgiven?"

The choice to wipe it with a towel or an apron quickly disappear from her head.

Inside of Rem, there were two options in regards to this finger—to do it, or to give up.

Rem created all kinds of restrictions for when she'd confront Subaru, but what happened just now was completely out of her expectations, and she never thought about measures against this.

She didn't because this was obviously a once in a lifetime event that wouldn't come by again if she let it pass by her. It was a miraculous moment.

Rem: "But…"

The devil inside her and the angel inside her butt heads, and the disturbance starts a whirlpool.

She was a proud survivor of the oni clan, but she was enjoying her sudden good luck. But, the only person who was conscious in this place was Rem. Nobody was looking. If Ram found out, what would she think? Was this an action that she could be proud of to her perfect sister? She honestly hated how the moment she had her fingered licked vanished from her memory.

Two opinions conflicted severely with each other inside of her head. Rem's breathing was rough, and it became intense. Sweat appears on her forehead. Her whole body was stiff with tension. She was worrying, struggling, and—

Rem: "I-I can't do that…"

A white horn grows from her forehead, and she was in utmost pain. Rem pushes her finger wet with saliva against the apron…and wiped it. A sense of emptiness filled up her heart within an instant, but she ignored that, as she thought "This is for the best".

Rem: "Right, Subaru-kun—"

She overcomes her time of distress and sought to turn to Subaru's face with a frail smile. However, those words were interrupted, and Rem held her breath in astonishment.

Rem puts both of her hands together on the bed, and she breathed roughly. Arms went around the upper half of Rem's body, and the man used his physical strength to forcibly pull down that girl who stiffened up.

Rem: "—-eek"

That sudden event causes her to blank out once more.

She loses her cool in embarrassment as a fever rises on her face, and Rem understood the situation she was in with a blush on her face.

She was laid down on the bed facing upwards, and she was embraced. Her uniform gets wrinkled from that reckless action, and her felt like her skirt was riding up too. —It was a really shameless appearance.

Rem: “—!”

He embraced Rem even closer with his surprisingly strong arms as she recognized the reality. They were both in each other’s embrace, and it made Rem’s heart jump so much that it seemed like it would explode.

The angel and devil inside of Rem start fighting once again about the situation.

It was not Rem being assertive, but rather him being assertive—

Subaru : “Munya…”

Rem hears the sleep-talking from the person she is troubling inside of her head that was in chaos and Rem becomes exhausted at once.

If she tried to move around her head, Subaru was still in a deep sleep, and he also wasn’t aware of how he was holding tight onto a large human body pillow.

Rem: “That’s right. Subaru-kun isn’t like that, after all.”

There was relief in that whisper, along with some disappointment. She had complex feelings for the action that wouldn’t happen when he was conscious. Thus, to make up for the bothersome part, she enjoyed his temperature and smell with her whole body.

And then—

Rem: “It can’t be helped. I tried my best to resist, but Subaru-kun won’t wake up, so I can’t move. So, I’ll continue to resist like this until Subaru-kun wakes up.”

She leaves those words that were only deceptive, and Rem rubs her nose and chest against Subaru like that, deciding to continue experiencing it comfortably.

—There was also a just cause to it. It was fine to have a day like this once in a while.

She allows herself to understand herself like that, and Rem starts to slowly doze off as well. She starts to yield the doziness.

The next day, Ram came to wake up Subaru, and she saw him and Rem, who both slept in and were in an intimate situation. A situation where Subaru was given a violent scolding broke out with him not being able to argue about it.

—Everything was scenes of Rem’s very ordinary happy day.

Kararagi Girl Meets Cats

1

“Hoshin of the Wilderness” was the name of a legend, someone that no one in the world was unaware of.

The beginning of his legend traced back to four hundred years ago, when the western area of the world was naught but ruins, with many small countries vying for supremacy.

A small country that did not have a desirable location by any standard, and was on the verge of being overshadowed by the other countries—the very first stretch of soil where Hoshin placed his flag on, having decided that he would start taking action, was the miserable land of “Kararagi”.

Hoshin had never been a person blessed with the talent for the arts of combat, the legends depicted.

Hoshin was an extraordinary man of wisdom, who excelled at holding discussions, knowing how to guide the hearts of people, the legends depicted.

Hoshin became well-acquainted with the ruler of Kararagi, controlling the management of the country from the shadows. In the blink of an eye, he formed friendly relations with the other countries, expanding his circle, sometimes using stratagems, sometimes by amity, and sometimes with his flair for business, the legends depicted.

When the surrounding countries realized that Kararagi had been operating behind the scenes in an effort to dominate the western lands, it was already too late.

With the majority of the small insignificant countries under the jurisdiction of Kararagi, and also with the inscrutable maneuvers of Hoshin, who had become the leader of that grand alliance, no one was able to stop them.

Thus, the era of war and competition between powerful figures came to an end, and under the name of “Hoshin of the Wilderness”, the Federation of Kararagi City States was founded.

???: “Haa~. No matter how many times I hear it, the legend of Hoshin really fascinates me.”

Having finished listening to the full story, the girl exhaled a breath of admiration with rapt attention.

She was a young girl with cute and adorable facial features, aged around eleven or twelve, and her stature was slightly shorter than the average of those the same age as her, yet she was far more good-looking than the average standard for those of the same age group.

Soft, purple hair and light blue-green eyes that shone with curiosity. With her pale and clear skin, her appearance could fool anyone being told that she was a noble girl from a nice place.

However, this girl—Anastasia was not from such a highborn family.

Anastasia: “Hm? Sup? It’s rude to stare at someone’s face like that.”

All of a sudden, Anastasia began appraising the person in front of her with a doubtful gaze. Her eyes contained none of the charm of a sheltered girl, and a glimpse of craftiness and vigilance not befitting her age could be seen.

Because of her origins, it was only logical that she was quick-witted. The person, with his jaws wide open, bared his fangs as he laughed.

???: “Nothin’. I was just thinkin’ that the little kid I picked up from that alleyway became quite an influential person. Well done, well done.”

Anastasia: “Talkin’ about an old story again? Uncle, don’t people often tell ya that you’re annoying?”

???: “If ya say that, then that means you’re way more annoyin’, since ya keep pesterin' me to tell ya the same story again and again, Ana-bo! Ya better prepare yourself, because I'll continue diggin' up whatever past things for another few years or so."

As Anastasia pouted, looking sullen, the large, calloused palm of a hand ruffled her hair. She didn't brush away the arm, but both her face and eyes still seemed to hold dissatisfaction, which the owner of the palm involuntarily let out a wry laugh against.

He didn't mind her competitive and indomitable spirit. If she wasn't like that, then there was no point in him doing all of this.

Anastasia: "That's enough. The elderly are people who're always talkin' about the same things, so I'll bear with it for your sake."

???: "Oh, ya worded that pretty strongly. Where did'cha learn that?"

Anastasia: "I heard it from the owner of the tavern, and also from the regulars. I only regret that I couldn't question and get any weaknesses out of the dead drunk old man before I quit my job there."

Exchanging banter and sticking her tongue out, Anastasia escaped from the hand patting her head, heading over to the doors. While doing that, she speedily and neatly adjusted her hairstyle and kimono.

Anastasia: "Breaktime's over. Uncle, Chuden-san'll fire ya if ya keep skippin' work, too."

???: "That's scary. With your earnings, providin' for someone with a large body like me'd be tough."

Anastasia: "Why do I have to look after your basic needs?!"

???: "Ain't it obvious? You're gonna buy me and make me yours, right?"

Revealing his sharp canines with a smile, he touched his own neck with his broad fingers. The collar, the remnant of his days as a slave, was wrapped around his neck, fashioned from cold, rough metal. What was supposed to be an object for discipline was now a testament to their promise.

Anastasia held her breath at the gesture that invoked her memories of the promise, nodding immediately after.

Anastasia: “…Yeah, that’s right. That’s right, but because it’s like that, it’ll be bad if ya dropped dead on the side of the road before I save up enough money. Take care of yourself properly!”

With a quick retort, Anastasia stuck her tongue out and then bolted out of the room. Listening to her pattering footsteps fading in the distance, he broke into a smile, gazing out the window.

Outside of the window was a cloudy sky, and his appearance was reflected in the slightly foggy glass.

An enormous frame that was too large to be fully reflected in the window of the room, and the visage of a beast that didn't bear the slightest resemblance to Anastasia. His bare skin was covered by dark brown fur, unsparingly exposing the majesticness of a demi-human, different from that of an ordinary human.

Ricardo Welkin—a giant man, unique even among the kobolds, and also a hired bodyguard associated with the Chuden Trading Company. To add to that, he was acting as someone akin to a supporter and a guardian to Anastasia.

However, the 'guardian' part was something that Anastasia would never acknowledge openly.

2

The headquarters of the Chuden Trading Company were located in the Second City of the Kararagi City States, Banan.

Within Kararagi, there were ten large cities, all of them numbered from one to ten. Each city functioned similarly to a small country, governed under a mayor and a set of city laws, allowing it to exist as a sort of federation.

In the city of Banan, it could be said that the Chuden Trading Company was a mid-level organization. Having one of the most prominent enterprises, the Regret Trading Company as its parent company, the Chuden Trading Company was underneath its umbrella as a subsidiary associate.

It didn't restrict the kind of goods it sold, but managed to handle those in a prosperous manner, so those that frequented Banan generally visited the Chuden Trading Company.

For that reason alone, while the gates of the city were open, with merchants from the outside rushing inside all at once, there was always a waiting line in front of the company. Because of that, the staff and attendants having a hectic schedule was a daily occurrence.

???: "—Anastasia! I'm runnin' out of change! Hurry up and bring over the copper box and silver box!"

Anastasia: "Yes!"

???: "Not only those! Also…"

Anastasia: "A burlap sack, right? Gotcha!"

While being showered with orders being yelled at her, Anastasia carried out the wooden boxes with her thin arms. They were packed with coins meant solely for payment. The copper box contained copper coins, and the silver box was filled with silver coins respectively. Both of them were quite cumbersome for a young girl, but there was no way she could dump everything down on the floor.

Anastasia's position was that of a staff member that managed the actual trading—not. She was an attendant that ran all over the place to support the staff, a role commonly also referred to as a "helper."

As instructed, Anastasia utilized the little tricks that she had come up with to make her job easier, throwing in the heavy payment boxes by the staff's feet.

The trading grounds where transactions took place in the Chuden Trading Company was a location where the merchants from outside of the city directly rode into on their wolf carriages—wagons pulled by a large wolf-like species known as Ligers. It was a place where those merchants could trade with the company on the spot.

Many long tables were lined up in the place, with the staff and merchants commencing their negotiations with the tables in between them, exchanging merchandise, money, and the such.

Each staff member was in control of different categories of products. Today, the employee that Anastasia was assisting had been put in charge of clothing, accessories, and textiles. The amount of money flowing in and out was huge, and all the product appraisals that they had to do were likewise dizzying.

???: “Next! Divide the customers that’re crowded around! Don’t spend more time than ya need!”

Anastasia: “From Hoshin’s sayings! ‘Time and money are equally valuable!’”

She didn’t even have the time to see the staff member nod in response.

Anastasia ducked under the elongated table, coming around behind the line of people and sorting them out, while she examined the goods and catalogs piled on the luggage platforms of the carriages with her eyes. There were multiple lines, and a few young boys that were also helpers. However, they were all working at a slower speed compared to her.

She carried out twice the amount of work compared to helpers twice her age, but she didn’t take pride in that. Even if the people around her were envious of her achievements, she thought nothing of them, so it was only natural that she wasn’t particularly proud.

After dealing with the waiting line that had formed at her place, Anastasia surveyed her surroundings with haste, wondering if she should get started on doing the same to the other rows of people—

Anastasia: “—! Hey, you! What are ya doin’!”

In the middle of the waiting line being managed by a different helper, who was taking a long time with their work, a man jolted with surprise upon hearing the shout of anger that had come from Anastasia. He was a man with a scrawny figure she did not recognize, about to lay his hands on the loaded goods while pretending to take the catalog.

When the man realized that his attempt at thievery had been unsuccessful, having heard Anastasia’s voice ring across the area, he immediately made an effort to escape. Thrusting aside a helper that had ran over to stop him, he made a break for the exit of the place of commerce.

Anastasia: “I won’t let’cha go!”

Thief: “Outta my way, ya runt!”

However, faster than the man could flee, Anastasia blocked his path with her arms spread out. The man spat at the resistance being put up by the helper, balling his hand into a fist and holding it high over his head. It happened right before she was struck.

???: “You’re askin’ for a little too much, aren’t’cha!”

A muscular arm, twice the size of that man’s own arm and fist, was swung, and the poor man was sent flying towards the heavens. And just like that, he descended back down onto the floor of the trading grounds head-first, collapsing and lying on the floor. Limp.

Timidly opening her eyes upon catching his scream of pain, there was an abrupt shift in Anastasia’s expression.

Anastasia: “Uncle!”

Ricardo: “Good job noticin’ that thief, Ana-bo. Well done, but it ain’t good to be reckless. Imagine gettin’ injured from somethin’ like this. It’s gonna be a dumb ‘n heavy loss for ya. What ya hate the most are things not worth the effort, right?”

The kobold that had sent the thief flying—Ricardo, told Anastasia with a loud laugh, as she jumped at him. He then lifted the scrawny man up by the back of his neck, dragging him out of the area.

Ricardo: “Here, this way. Ya sure did have the guts to pull off something like that, in a place where I’m standin’ guard. Better get ready for one of your arms to go bye-bye.”

Thief: “…That runt, doin’ an unnecessary thing and gettin’ in my way…”

The man glowered at Anastasia with a furious scowl, Ricardo's threat falling on deaf ears. She slowly approached the thief, who looked like he might snap at her at any moment, and then promptly slapped him across the face.

A satisfying smack echoed throughout the place of transactions, stunning both the man and the surrounding people.

Anastasia: "Lowerin' your own worth by doin' stupid things, and holdin' a grudge because ya were called out is the worst. Where's your worth now, after bein' slapped directly in the face by a little girl? You're pathetic!"

While Ricardo watched Anastasia with a pleased smile, the thief choked on his words, raising only a "Guh" against the young girl's blistering criticism of his actions. —And then, the trading grounds erupted with cheers of delight.

???: "Well said!"

???: "It was refreshing to hear that!"

???: "Serves the thief right!"

Anastasia: "Thanks, thanks."

Smiling and trying to appear amiable to the approving cheers from the crowd, Anastasia returned to being a young girl of her age, which she was. Her surroundings became even more lively at the change of her attitude, and Ricardo took the thief outside meanwhile.

Ricardo: "I'm probably supposed to do something like rippin' off your dominant arm and throwin' ya outta town, but…"

Arriving at the back of the trading grounds, Ricardo haphazardly tossed the man on top of the soil. The man paled upon hearing the intimidating threat, crawling on the ground on his hands and knees. However, Ricardo, flicked his own beard with a finger,

Ricardo: "—I'll let'cha go for today. I can't come up with somethin' that's harsher than what that midget just did to ya, so. I'm sure ya have some thoughts, opinions or whatever ‘bout it. Make sure ya never show your face ‘round here ever again.”

The man instantaneously scurried away when Ricardo shooed him off with a gesture. Staring at his back until he was out of sight, Ricardo yawned, as he moved to go back to keeping watch over the place of commerce.

???: “Do ya really think the thief from earlier will have a change of heart?”

Ricardo: “…Oh, it’s the man, Chuden. Ya were watchin’?”

Having heard that voice speaking to him, Ricardo turned around to see a fox-eyed, chubby man standing behind him. It was a man who wore a nicely tailored indigo kimono—Chuden Agri, the representative of the Chuden Trading Company.

Chuden brushed the lower part of his kimono with a hand, his fox-eyed gaze moving towards the direction the thief had run away in,

Chuden: “It’s customary to cut off the dominant arms of thieves, and then chase them out of the city… Surely, I don’t think that you, the guard dog of the enterprise, doesn’t know that.”

Ricardo: “It was settled as attempted thievery because of Ana-bo. Dependin’ on how ya look at it, she struck him a much harsher blow than losin’ an arm. If it were me, I would be way more scared of that.”

Chuden: “With the right opportunity, anyone could go back on the path that they strayed from, huh. Ya know that such a thing doesn’t exist, Ricardo-dono.”

Ricardo: “Of course, even I know that much. —I memorized his features. The next time he’s up to no good ‘round these parts, I’ll take his dominant arm, and his non-dominant arm as well. That’ll do, won’t it?”

When Ricardo growled out with a deep voice, Chuden said nothing for a moment, before giving him a nod.

Chuden: “Splendid. I was worried sick for a moment, thinking the Hound Ricardo had lost his motivation.”

Ricardo: “Stop it, it’s embarrassin’. Now, I’m a pet dog with the company’s collar ‘round my neck, right? Ruff, ruff.”

Chuden: “Well, it’d be reassuring if ya were really, genuinely our pet dog… Oh well, I guess I’m okay with that for now.”

Ricardo: “The way ya said it kinda bothers me…”

With a sniff, Ricardo responded to Chuden while frowning. Seeing his expression, the fox-eyed man shook his head in an exasperated manner, continuing with a, “By the way,”

Ricardo: “…What is it?”

Chuden: “There’s somethin’ important I want to talk to ya about. It’s about a bit of a troublesome matter. For further details, let’s head to my room.”

Hearing the telltale signs of something ominous from Chuden, Ricardo deepened his frown, knitting his brows even further.

—Speaking from experience, in conversations that had begun like this, there had been no instances where the matter at hand could be put away as ‘little’.

3

Chuden: “Recently, there’s been frequent occurrences of caravans bein’ attacked around the outskirts of Banan. Have ya ever heard of ‘em?”

As Ricardo entered the office he had been invited into, feeling ill at ease, Chuden brought up the topic he had mentioned earlier.

Ricardo made a face in turn, replying with, “Sorta.” His large ears had also caught wind of reports of damage being done to the caravans on the outskirts.

Ricardo: “But, I only happened to hear it. If it’s gonna be about somethin' outside the city, then it won't fall within the range of the company's bodyguard. To begin with, the people who're being attacked're merchants from the outside… they're not included in the people I need to protect."

Chuden: "You're absolutely right. That's true, but those merchants are our important trading partners. Furthermore, their goods will also become our merchandise in the near future. If those were snatched away by brigands, and the merchants distanced themselves from Banan to boot, then the damage done will be enormous."

Ricardo: "…Ya better not be telling me to do something about those brigands, bandits or whatever."

His background was quite renowned, but having expectations being placed on him because of it was stressful.

If the perpetrators were a gang of bandits that preyed on caravans, then their numbers would be no less than fifty people. Depending on the circumstances, there could also be a hundred of them. Taking them on all by oneself was something an idiot would do.

Ricardo: "If the enemy has a ton of people on hand, then it's absolutely, definitely impossible, even if it's me bein' sent out. It is even possible to fight 'em alone?"

Chuden: "Oh, please put your mind at ease if it's about that."

With a sly look on his face, Chuden laughed in response to Ricardo's concerns,

Chuden: "For the matter at hand, this time, even Banan's Senate considers it a problem… Includin' our company, the Association of Commerce will pitch in and gather people for the job. So, I want ya to spearhead the group, find the problematic gang of bandits, and wipe 'em out. Well, that's about it."

Ricardo: "…That's still an unreasonable demand, ya know."

He grumbled, but deep down, he understood that Chuden was doing all he could to prevent him from backing out of this whole mess.

Because of the way Kararagi's government's was structured, the merchants had a say in whatever concerned the cities. The majority of the people affiliated with the Senate that dictated how the cities were ran, were either influential merchants or leaders of trading companies. Chuden was one of the latter.

Since he was sharing his plans, Ricardo could take a wild guess and say things had already progressed up to a point that the bill was submitted to the Senate, and all he, the person involved, had to do, was to nod in agreement.

Ricardo: "Puttin' a kobold like me in charge of a ragtag group of people? What're ya thinkin', really."

Chuden: "A talented person's given a position where he can display his talents. It's only natural."

He answered brazenly, spreading out a map on top of his desk. It was a rough sketch illustrating the outskirts of Banan, and Ricardo saw red marks being placed on several roads that were being used by the merchants.

Chuden: "These are the surrounding routes, and the places where the caravans have been raided. There were zero survivors in every caravan attacked. Their goods and dogs, taken as well. For a gang of bandits, they're being pretty thorough with their methods."

While staring at the map, Ricardo set his eyes on the areas next to the places the bandits' assault had taken place—a forest and a rocky field. If a band of brigands with sufficient numbers needed to conceal themselves, then there was a high possibility of them setting their base somewhere around that area.

Like that, as the two went on with their conversation, their eyes fixed on the map—

???: "'Scuse me, I brought some tea."

Announcing that, Anastasia entered the room, holding a tray with steam coming out of the cups placed on top of it. She set two cups of ryokucha[6] on the desk, in front of Ricardo and Chuden.

Ricardo: “What, Ana-bo, servin’ as a waitress? What happened to your job as a helper?”

Anastasia: “The busiest hours’ve settled down, and I was told I could take a break after I bring tea to ya two. More importantly, why’re ya both staring at a map?”

Being shrewd enough to bring her own cup of tea with her, Anastasia tilted her head as she blew on her ryokucha. Ricardo pointed a finger at the map in response to the question,

Ricardo: “We’re talking about how a lot of people’re dyin’ ‘round these red circles. Right now, we were at the part where Chuden demanded me to solve it.”

Anastasia: “Eh, you’ll solve it? Will ya be safe?”

Ricardo: “Oh, you’re worried for me?”

He appeared to be happy, a broad smile making its way on his face, but Anastasia shook her head, saying, “No,”

Anastasia: “That’s not it. Ya need to use your brain for a job like searchin’ the culprit. Are ya fit for the job?”

Chuden: “Please don’t worry. What I asked Ricardo-dono to do was to split open the culprits’ heads once they’re found. In that case, that would be his field of expertise, wouldn’t it?”

Anastasia: “Ah, then that’s good. What a relief.”

Ricardo blew out a sigh, seeing the two get along very well. His sigh was as powerful as a gale, its force blasting both of them away and causing Anastasia to snap at him with an, “Uncle!”

He jabbed a finger at her face in return,

Ricardo: “Ya know what? This ain’t a game. Us adults’re gonna talk about important things, so a child like ya should go outside and chase after butterflies or somethin’.”

Anastasia: “Butterflies aren’t even worth a coin, so there’s no way I’ll chase them around. More than that, lemme hear the details. It might be dangerous if I don’t know anythin’, so?”

Ricardo: “Why’d not knowin’ ‘bout the brigands on the outside be dangerous for a helper inside the city?”

Chuden: “Well, why not? This might take up all of your time for a while, so let’s have Anastasia listen to it as well.”

Unlike the hesitant Ricardo, Chuden was remarkably benign towards Anastasia’s curiosity. Originally, he had been charmed by the bright future in front of her, so his softness was brought to light in these situations.

As for Ricardo, he really did not want to let Anastasia hear about the bloodier side of the world. However, his concerns would be the target of laughter coming from the people around him, with them telling him he was being overprotective.

Anastasia: “—Hmm. I see, even the outer parts of the city don’t have it easy.”

Receiving the same explanation as Ricardo had been given before, a comment of indifference slipped out. Of course, was what Ricardo could only think in response to that reaction, which had been identical to that of a child who did not know best.

However, contrary to how Ricardo had perceived her answer, Anastasia continued with a, “By the way,”

Anastasia: “What sort of goods did the victims load on their carriages?”

Chuden: “Their goods? According to the reports, it seemed like they departed after packing up antiques, such as jewelry before coming to Banan. Caravans of handicrafts, mana stones, weapons, and armor were also attacked by the bandits.”

Anastasia: “Uh-huh, is that so?—Kinda strange.”

Anastasia tilted her head sideways, muttering under her breath.

Ricardo: “There, that’s enough. Chuden, ya shouldn’t make a kid listen to weird things like that either.”

Ricardo had noticed her nearly inaudible muttering, but he prioritized sending her away more than making conversation with her. Anastasia looked upset, but Chuden reluctantly ordered her to leave.

Anastasia: “What’s with ya?! You’re bein’ mean, Uncle!”

Holding her unfinished cup of tea, Anastasia stuck her tongue out as she was forced out of the room. Ricardo closed the door after watching her leave, shrugging his shoulders.

Chuden: “Really, you’re so overprotective of her.”

Ricardo: “Say whatever ya want. Yeah right, I’m overprotective. That’s what I am, so I won’t let those bad guys come close to the city Ana-bo’s in. I’ll get on with it and finish the job.”

Refusing to be mocked, Ricardo bared his fangs as he glared at the map. Affected by the frightening, unnerving air being released from his enormous frame in close proximity, Chuden exhaled, his cheeks stiffening slightly.

Chuden: “The Hound is living up to his name, huh. It’s scary, but at the same time, I’m really glad you’re on our side.”

4

—A few days passed since the dramatic scene that had occurred at the Chuden Trading Company.

Inside a tavern located at the western end of Banan, a girl was leaning on the counter while babbling endlessly to the female owner.

???: “And then he left me here, after treatin’ me like a nuisance and all. Uncle was being unfair.”

????: “I see. I thought I haven’t seen his dog-like face for a while, so that’s what it was about… Is that why you came here to drink until you're dead drunk, Ana-chan?"

Anastasia: "Yep. I'm heartbroken right now, so cheer me up please. Oh, and I want a refill."

The girl being referred to as "Ana-chan", pestering the owner to refill her cup of milk was Anastasia, as you all know. Despite being bothered before opening her tavern, the owner handled the young girl's request with kindness and a touch of tenderness.

To the owner, Anastasia was an adorable employee who had been working at her tavern until quitting three months ago. The owner's positive feelings towards her were not as extensive as the ones she directed towards Ricardo, but she cherished her nonetheless.

Because of that, she could condone Anastasia visiting her even while she was making preparations to open her tavern, and she was also willing to listen to her complaints.

Tavern owner: "But, it's a little unexpected. I thought the relationship between you two was one-sided on Ricardo's end. To think that Ana-chan'd feel lonely while he's away…"

Anastasia: "That's 'cause Uncle's mine. I already made reservations for his collar, so he shouldn't go places where I can't reach him. He doesn't understand that, for cryin' out loud!"

Even in the present, a collar with a broken lock was fitted on Ricardo's wide neck.

The collar was an item that had restricted his movements during his days as a slave, and it was now a mere ornament, devoid of its function. Although he had cast off his status as a slave, he left the collar attached to his neck in order to do penance.

It was something Anastasia was tremendously unhappy about.

Someday, she would set a price befitting him, and then she would purchase him. After that, she had decided she would take off the collar with her own hands and toss it away. That was one of the many dreams that Anastasia wished to fulfill.

Anastasia: “Thanks to ya and Uncle, I’ve gotten real close to making my dream come true. That’s why I need to do my very best. I need to try harder more than ever.”

Tavern owner: “Your dream? What kind of dream is it? Can I hear it?”

Anastasia: “My dream’s to become as big as Hoshin-san! In order to do that, right now’s the time to lay low and be obedient, so I can save up power, knowledge, and money.”

“Mfuh,” she snorted as she spoke about her dreams, optimistic and vigorous, and almost making the owner chuckle at her.

There were many merchants who looked up to the legend of “Hoshin of the Wilderness”. If one were born in Kararagi as a young boy, then that person would dream of experiencing the same success story at least once in his life.

However, if it was a young girl she was close to with those dreams, then it was a special, different case.

Anastasia: “Come on! You’re laughin’ too? That part of ya’s the same as Uncle!”

Tavern owner: “Sorry! But, I think that dream of yours won’t necessarily end as just a dream. In fact, you were taken away by Chuden-san from that large company… Like that, if you became his wife, then you could at least become a higher-up of the city, right?”

Anastasia: “Me, becomin’ Chuden-san’s wife? That’s a little… no. No, no.”

Apparently, the girl cackling in a child-like manner wasn’t aware of how attractive her appearance was. Even though she was adorable enough as she was currently, the owner guessed she’d eventually grow into a beautiful woman.

When the time for that arrived, what the owner had just said wouldn’t be something to laugh at.

Tavern owner: “You know what, Ana-chan. You probably won’t believe me right now, but please remember this. You’re cuter than the average child, so there might be people out there who’re up to no good. If you feel like you’re in danger, make sure to talk to Ricardo or Chuden-san about it.”

Anastasia: “Ehh… but, that’s…”

Tavern owner: “Just remember it.”

Having been warned with a serious expression, Anastasia gave a nod to her words with, “Okaaay.” She guessed the owner was going to continue lecturing her, so she drank up the refill she had gotten for her previously empty cup of milk.

Anastasia: “Thanks for the drink. I still have work to do today, so I’m gonna head back.”

Placing three copper coins on the counter as payment for the milk, Anastasia jumped off her seat. The owner momentarily looked disappointed, but soon after, waved her hand at the back of the small girl who was leaving her tavern,

Tavern owner: “Ana-chan, come and show your face here durin’ your next day off, will ya?”

The last thing Anastasia heard from the owner before she left was her Kararagi dialect, which rarely came out of her.

Anastasia: “Hmm, I still have a lotta time… Uncle ain’t here, anyway. What should I do?”

Stretching out her body outside the tavern, Anastasia struggled to think about what to do with too much time on her hands.

Today was a holiday, a complete day of rest that took place once a week. She had said to the owner she still had work to do, but there was nothing on her schedule. Having said that, even if she went to the trading grounds to be of assistance, it was obvious the people there would greet her with disapproving looks.

Anastasia: “It’s bothersome even if I’m told to curry favor again… okay, I think I’ll just walk around while eatin’.”

Straightening herself with her head held high, Anastasia started strolling down the busy street, which had various people weaving in and out of it. Like this, ever since she had been able to carry her own wallet around with her, walking while eating had become one of her secret hobbies.

Back when she had been living in the back of the streets, stalls selling food out in the open had been her hunger's greatest enemy. Because she could enjoy those foods in the present day, she thought that she had acquired a good social standing compared to where she was previously.

Anastasia: “Hn…”

As she kept on walking while stuffing herself with the dekoyaki[7] she had bought, she felt a set of eyes staring at her.

Glancing at the direction of the stare, her eyes met with a grimy boy who was looking at her hands. She could easily imagine where he had come from. He was a hyena, living in the slums at the back of the city.

The people who rummaged through garbage dumps, desperate to obtain enough food to get by everyday, were referred to as hyenas. They did not have a house, and they did not have anything to eat either. Hyena was a term that was said to have existed since the era of Hoshin.

Anastasia had also been a hyena in the past. In her case, living in extreme poverty and surviving on what meager amount of food she could get her hands on had not been anyone else's business. And so, she had her own opinions and thoughts about the gaze the boy was directing at her. However—

Anastasia: “—That's just stupid.”

Anastasia crammed the rest of the dekoyaki into her mouth, and then showed off the empty container to the boy. Shaken by her domineering action, he turned around and scampered back into the alley in a hurry. How unambitious.

The attitude of waiting to be fed with one's mouth wide open like a nestling, expecting to be given things as charity, was what got on Anastasia's nerves the most. —In reality, she had attained her current position because it had been given to her.

Because she understood what it felt like, Anastasia's heart ached with pain, caused by her own actions, as well as her words that ended up tying her heart as if it was a piece of rope.

Ricardo was there for her, but he could possibly be—

Anastasia: "Ah—?!"

The moment she let her guard down while thinking about something else was taken advantage of, and a hand reached out and felt around the inside of her kimono from behind. She immediately flung off the person's arm, but it was too late. A small shadow pulled out her wallet from her kimono then sprung away, and she could see their back as they threw themselves back into the alley. Her wallet had been stolen. —And it had been taken from her so easily.

The one who got robbed was the fool. That way of thinking was something Anastasia knew too well, being a former hyena. Her usual self might have given up on taking it back, thinking her wallet had been stolen because she was not careful enough, but for this occasion, she was not in the mood to give in.

Anastasia: "Wait up!"

Chasing after the fleeing shadow, Anastasia also jumped into the alley. It had been a long time since she had set foot on the rough, low-quality roads at the back of the street, but it was a place where she had ran around for years, ever since she became old enough to become aware of her surroundings. Her body remembered how to navigate around the area.

She caught up with the thief soon enough, using her footsteps and voice to lead them where she wanted them to go. Cornering them into a dead end right after, the shadow that had run straight into her trap turned around to face her with a frustrated expression.

Anastasia: “There, gimme back my wallet. Between me and you, there’s a difference in how much experience we’ve got.”

Hyena boy: “Wh… what experience…? Wearing clean and pretty clothes like that… To a person like you, I won’t…!”

Even if she told him she had previously been in the same position he was currently in, he probably would not believe her. To add to that, it was meaningless to say such a thing.

Drawing closer to the hyena glaring at her, Anastasia made a move to take back her wallet from him. Along with her nutritional condition, she also had a grasp on the arts of self-defense, something she had learned from the trading company. Snatching back her wallet could be done effortlessly. However—

???: “—Right. How can I stand being criticized by a runt like you, talkin’ like ya know everythin’?”

Anastasia: “—kh?!”

Hearing a man’s voice from behind, Anastasia attempted to turn backwards in a panic.

Despite that, at a speed faster than her own, a harsh, sharp blow struck her upside the head, and she collapsed onto the ground. Both of her hands and feet felt weak, and her consciousness immediately started fading away, growing distant.

???: “Heh, ya did a great job. There, take that wallet, and hurry up and get the fuck out!”

Hearing the man’s voice, which gave the impression that he was quarreling with someone, Anastasia vaguely registered that she had been caught in a trap. Someone’s trap, by someone. She felt like she had heard the rowdy voice somewhere before.

—The man’s voice, sounding like he was wishing misfortune upon her, was a voice she felt like she had just recently heard at the trading grounds.

Meanwhile—the band of mercenaries that had Ricardo as their leader was having difficulties with the extermination of the brigands.

They did find a few of them inside the forest around the city, the place that had been marked down on the map, but the brigands' numbers were too small for them to be able to pull off their many raids on the caravans, which was the matter at hand. Upon being spotted by the group of a few dozen people, the brigands immediately scattered and fled in disarray. The possibility they would continue to commit thievery was low.

However, they accomplished nothing other than that, and not a trace of the problematic culprits of the caravan attacks could be found.

Ricardo: "So, they're also not in the cave that we found in the forest. Even though I didn't expect much because of how narrow that entrance was…"

Having received reports that brought zero advantages to them one after another, Ricardo's expression darkened as he added several more "x" marks on the map.

There was also the fact the mercenary group was not cooperating too well because it had been built in a hurry, but Ricardo believed it was his incompetence that did not let the group achieve the results they so desperately needed, even if they were doing their best. Though, the situation was so incomprehensible that it weighed on his mind even further.

Ricardo: "Is there a chance they went to a different place? It's making me concerned, since it overlaps with us settin' out to exterminate the brigands, though…"

Even the Senate responsible for the management of the city wasn't a tight-knit organization. It was impossible to say that it was certain there was nobody assisting the bandits, wishing for the downfall of the current members of the Senate. If things turned out to be like that, then the situation would go on to become more complicated.

However, compounding even more, Ricardo could not help but feel like the situation was wreathed by a different intention or purpose.

???: “Ricardo, a caravan departing from Banan is here. Please come and meet them, just in case.”

Ricardo: “Got it.”

The vice-captain called out to Ricardo, who was grumbling to himself inside the tent set up where they had established camp. Heading outside through the tent flap, he saw a caravan that took along several dozen wolf carriages, moving along the evening road in a large group.

They had more than a few sturdily-built guards with them, and it could be said they were a large caravan with quite a lot of people.

Ricardo: “Traveling over a long distance during this time of the day? Ya must be pretty busy.”

Caravan leader: “It’ll be a big problem if we worry about the dear, mighty sun, and end up missin’ an opportunity for business. Hoshin’s gonna sneer at us from the skies. I don’t want that to happen.”

Ricardo: “Well, I agree… Anyhow, ya got quite an intimidatin’ bunch of guards with’cha.”

Caravan leader: “Recently, we heard that it’s unsafe ‘round here. It’s not like ya guys got nothin’ to do with it too, right?”

The large man leading the caravan gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. Ricardo didn’t have the privilege to respond to him directly. Instead of answering his question, he walked up to one of the caravan’s wolf carriages, pulling up the cloth which covered the luggage platform.

An iron cage was placed on the platform, and inside of it were the merchandise—multiple humans who had been pushed inside.

Ricardo: “…Slave trading, huh.”

Caravan leader: “Do ya detest it, mister? I guess it makes sense, since that collar of yours is evidence that ya used to be a slave.”

The man pointed his finger at Ricardo’s neck, saying that after he looked at the hole in the collar where the gem had been taken off. The existence of the gem, depending on its presence, displayed the corresponding status of collared slaves. In the case of Ricardo’s collar, it proved that he was a freed slave.

Ricardo: “Slave tradin’s also a legal business. If the agreements are upheld, then it’s unreasonable for me to meddle with it.”

Sniffing at the slaves, who possessed dull and lifeless eyes, Ricardo moved away from the wolf carriage. And then, he spoke to the representative of the caravan, telling him, “Ya can go ahead.”

Ricardo: “Sorry for preventin’ y’all from leaving. Be careful on the way out, even though we’re on alert. If ya get attacked by the rumored brigands, instead of havin’ all your possessions robbed, they’re also gonna rip off your bones as well as your flesh.”

Caravan leader: “That’s dreadful. We’ll be as careful as possible.”

“Scary. That’s real scary,” the man laughed, and then made his caravan start leaving the area. Ricardo separated himself from the mass of wolf carriages as well, giving orders to the mercenaries and telling them to monitor the group of merchants as they left.

???: “—Mister Wolf, you’ve got a nice expression on your face.”

A guard that was stationed at the tail end of the line of carriages spoke to Ricardo, his thick voice giving him an image of stickiness and humidity.

He was a robust man. He was also taller than Ricardo, who was already more than two meters tall, and although the width of the man’s physique was inferior, his experience in combat was probably comparable with Ricardo’s, since his body was covered in scars from wounds created with sharp blades, such as swords.

To add to that, what stood out the most on the man’s body were the four arms protruding from his shoulders—the proof that he was a part of the Multi-Armed Race.

Ricardo: “It’s rare to see a multi-armed person in Kararagi, instead of the Empire.”

Multi-armed man: “Ufufu, you’re right. It seems like most of the multi-armed people drifted away to Vollachia, but my ancestors carried on their legacy in Kararagi. Which means their descendant is me.”

Showing off his goggling, large eyes, and the weapons—broadaxes, that were held in each of his four arms, a grisly smile spread across the man’s face. Ricardo did not like the way he smiled, but what he disliked more was his attire.

An atmosphere of powerfulness surrounded him, and he was lightly equipped with leather armor that merely protected his vital spots. He was also wearing an item made out of fur, draped over his head, but Ricardo was not a fan of the fashion sense evoked by the piece of fur. It was obviously because—

Multi-armed man: “You’re curious? You’re curious about this. Ufufu, of course you are. Because this is the pelt of your fellow wolfin. It was hard, trying to neatly peel off the skin of the one I killed.”

Ricardo: “Looks like you’ve misunderstood, but I’m just a dog-human… a part of the kobold race. I only grew up to be this large because I ate a lil’ too much.”

Multi-armed man: “Ufufufu! I know. You wolfins are on the verge of going extinct, so you’re taught to say that. Since the whole race can lie to preserve their blood, isn’t it admirable, compared to the Oni clan that perished? Don’t you think so?”

The man bent over provocatively, peering up at Ricardo from below. However, Ricardo did not respond to his taunt. His arms remaining crossed, he jerked his chin towards the tail end of the wolf carriages, which were all driving further away from where the two were standing.

Ricardo: “You’re being left behind. Aren’tcha a guard? Stop being unnecessarily curious and get on with your work.”

Multi-armed man: “…That’s too bad. Ahh, that’s a bummer. Ufufufu, too bad, too bad.”

Saying that with a hint of persistence, the man withdrew his four broadaxes and returned them to his back, where he carried them. After that, he stared at Ricardo from head to toe with his goggling eyes, and then,

Diddley: “I’m Diddley. If we’re able to meet again somewhere, I want to talk about this pelt.”

Ricardo: “I see, Diddley. I’d rather not. If I see ya again, I’m gonna lop off that head of yours.”

Diddley: “Ufufufufufu!”

Diddley nodded his head over and over again at Ricardo’s response, acting as if things had gone exactly as he wanted. He then chased after the wolf carriages with a bounce in his step, moving away into the distance in a well-behaved manner.

Watching him leave until he was gone with a wary eye, Ricardo cracked his neck, giving off a loud pop as he did.

Vice-captain: “Those were a creepy bunch.”

Ricardo: “Slave traders’re just like that… Oh, there was one guy so weird that I didn’t wanna take the time to separate him from the rest. He called himself Diddley. Do ya know him?”

Vice-captain: “I don’t know, but someone might. I guess I should ask around.”

Ricardo: “It’s not related to the extermination of the bandits, but… Well, it’s just out of curiosity. Idiots who miss the point like that guy ain’t good for children’s education, so I’ll kill him if I see him durin’ a day off.”

The vice-captain next to him widened his eyes as Ricardo muttered irritatedly. And then, he burst out into laughter.

Ricardo: “What’s that laugh for?”

Vice-captain: “I just thought that you’ve changed. These days, it’s pretty well-known between fellow mercenaries. That the Hound’s fallen deeply in love with a girl who’s still very young.”

Ricardo: “Everyone’s been tellin’ me that… Ya guys must be really bored.”

Nudging the vice-captain who was talking nonsense, Ricardo let the dull thuds of his footsteps be heard as he returned to his tent.

Once again, they were going to focus on digging out and exposing the brigands’ hideout. If they continued like this, achieving nothing, then it wouldn’t be strange to have Chuden or someone at a similar position give them snide remarks, or even tell them to hurry up.

Ricardo: “And, Ana-bo’d sulk if I left her alone for too long.”

Saying that out loud, Ricardo remembered that he had just been laughed at by the vice-captain, feeling a mixture of surprise and exasperation.

It could not be helped, even if a rumor like that was circulating around. Him being “deeply in love” was a misunderstanding, but he himself acknowledged the fact that he cared for her, and also the fact he worried about her. Because of that,

Ricardo: “It’s nice if she were at peace, without any eventful things happenin’.”

Before ducking under the tent flap, Ricardo murmured as he gazed at the sinking sunset.

The sky was light-purple, with the colors of dusk and sunset intermingling. The same, beautiful color as the hair of the girl that came to his mind.

—With Ricardo's wish in vain, Anastasia was currently encountering the largest predicament she had ever come across in her whole life.

Anastasia: "Nn, nnnh,"

Her mouth was gagged, and her hands and feet were tied firmly. Unable to even raise her body from the floor, she was in a state of imprisonment, like a perfect example of being kidnapped.

This is bad, this is really bad, Anastasia cried out as she twisted her body around with all her might.

Right after she had woken up, Anastasia had realized that she was in an abnormal situation. It took only a moment for her to assess the situation, and she also remembered clearly what had transpired before she lost her consciousness. Because of that, Anastasia had been exceptional at keeping her composure for a person who had just been captured. Although, whether it would lead her to breaking out of her crisis or not, was a different question altogether.

—She remembered the person that had struck her, just before she had been knocked out.

He had the voice of the man who had attempted to commit thievery at the trading grounds a few days prior. His attempt had been seen through by Anastasia, and he was the person who had been knocked down onto the ground by Ricardo. After that, she had delivered a slap to his face as he kept directing resentful complaints towards her, and the applause she was showered with was fresh in her memory. —She figured the man bore a grudge against her for that reason, and it was why she was having such a terrible time.

Anastasia: "If 'hats so, ten't 'hat ol guy's…"

Severe punishments were delivered against thieves. That was the Kararagian Style. Following it, the man should have received the natural punishment, which involved losing his dominant arm, at the very least. If he was trying to get his revenge on Anastasia, even after what he had pulled, then his tenacity was splendid. Though, she wanted to tell him to be more passionate about something other than this.

Anastasia: "…"

As she pursued Ricardo's responsibility for the situation, Anastasia finally regained her calmness.

Anyhow, even if she continued making a racket, it was probably fruitless. She could see no windows in the room, and she could not imagine her voice reaching outside. Her captor would not confine her in a place where her clamors could be heard outside, in the first place.

Judging from the way her voice echoed, the room was not that wide. The floor she was lying down on was cold and hard, made out of stone—not built out of stone. A shed had been erected right on top of a rocky tract. She could not imagine the ground having been leveled either, leading her to think her captor had done a poor job, which could be described as sloppy in many ways.

—What was the objective of the man who had captured her?

Finishing her quick examination of the room, Anastasia's thoughts wandered to the objective of her opponent.

If it were the thief from earlier, then his motive would most definitely be revenge. The issue at hand was the details of his revenge. Having come this far, he would not release her after just giving her a good scare, most likely. Killing her after teaching her a lesson… was not a far-fetched guess, were the thief a shallow, hot-tempered person.

Anastasia: "'ell, prolly a 'lave."

Selling her off to slave traders was the choice with the highest possibility of happening.

In the first place, slave trading was not particularly rare around Banan, or even in the Kararagi City States as a whole. Laborers were valuable assets as sources of manpower, and they were in demand for all sorts of tasks, such as servants and maintenance workers of the highways.

Back when Anastasia used to live in the slums, nearly being caught by slave traders was not uncommon. Even considering Banan's city laws, the enslavement of hyenas in the slums were overlooked. Because of that, there was an unspoken agreement between the slave traders about keeping one's hands off clean-looking children, but…

Anastasia: "I 'crewed uph."

Once she had gone ahead and made a mistake, there was no way to justify it.

The Chuden Trading Company was her sponsor, and she also had Ricardo with her to begin with. Should he ever hear that she had been trafficked by a slave trader, he would definitely bare his fangs at the man who had done so.

She was not getting ahead of herself because it was an objective truth. —Well, perhaps she was being somewhat arrogant.

???: "I'm telling the truth! She's a first-class article. You guys will understand if you take a look!"

Just as Anastasia came to that conclusion, out of the blue, someone's voice drew near.

His harsh voice cracking, a scrawny man entered the dark room. Anastasia remembered his face and the sound of his voice, identifying him as the thief from back at the trading grounds.

Following the man, two more men walked into the room. Both of them had a large build, and comparing them to the skinny man, the difference between them could be put as that between a withered branch and the trunk of a giant tree.

???: "We ain't doubtin' ya. It's just that people make mistakes when they get cornered."

Thief: "Do, do you really mean it? Why would I do something so reckless? L-Look, it's that one…"

Intimidated by one of the large men, the thief seemed to be growing agitated. Seeing him point at her with a trembling finger, Anastasia immediately acted as if she had been unconscious for the whole time.

A presence peered at the “unconscious” Anastasia. And then,

???: “Huh, she’s a real fine one. She’s a pretty girl, and she’ll grow to be super beautiful. This ain’t just a win, this is a huge win.”

Anastasia: “—uh,”

Anastasia let out a tiny cry as she was forced to sit up, her head being grabbed off the ground. However, the man did not notice that she was awake, resuming his inspection of her while handling her without care.

Judging from the flow of the conversation, this man was a slave trader. Having been told she was a “fine one”, Anastasia recalled what the tavern owner had said to her in her former workplace. She was wrong to have paid no heed to her words.

If she could, she wanted an opportunity to meet her and apologize directly to her, but…

Thief: “Th-Then… it’s a deal, right? Right?”

???: “Ya said ya wanted to join our tradin’ company, and promised to bring a souvenir. Yeah, you’re able to bring such a fine article. You’re a great help to us.”

Thief: “Then…!”

???: “Bu~t, that’d only apply if this girl were a stray dog, without any leashes from anywhere attached to her.”

Thief: “—Eh,”

Immediately after he emitted a voice, sounding like he had caught his breath, there was a violent sound, and something crashed into the wall. Soon, Anastasia heard a pained scream and the noise caused by someone writhing in agony, comprehending that the thief had been struck by a fist.

It was punishment for arbitrarily overstepping the unspoken agreement, one that was heeded by human traffickers, as a mere amateur.

Thief: “Aah! Aaaah! It hurts… it huuurts! Gweh!”

???: “Quit screechin’ and quiet down. The sleeping child’s gonna wake up and be scared.”

As Anastasia was let go, she sensed the trafficker turn around. Upon cracking open her eyes to assess the situation, she saw the thief lying down on the ground, said trafficker gazing down at him. He dug the heel of his foot into the thief’s stomach, eliciting a cry of pain.

Trafficker: “Geddit? Even we traffickers have a set of rules we gotta follow. We’re able to run our business, only because the city laws overlook it. Can a guy who’s clueless ‘bout them work with us? Hey, whaddya think?”

Thief: “Gah, fh… I… I’m so, I’m sorry…!”

Pressed against the earth by the man’s weight, what sounded like creaking bones reached Anastasia’s ears as well. The thief pleaded for his life, blood trickling out of his mouth. The trafficker was crouching down beside him, bringing his face closer to him.

Trafficker: “Ya learned a lot from this. Good for you. From now on, we’ll train ya ‘round these areas with hands-on guidance, so ya can rest easy.”

Thief: “Th, thank y…”

Thinking he had been forgiven, the thief was about to express his thanks, but he was forced to stop midway.

The clack of a metallic sound, and the thief’s “Eh?” overlapped. The shivering thief touched his own neck with a finger, his face sinking with despair from the chilly, solid sensation.

Thief: “Wh…why… did you put a slave’s collar on me…?”

Trafficker: “I told ya you’ll get hands-on guidance, right? Becomin’ a slave’s the fastest way to learn about the rules surroundin’ slaves. You’re a wuss, but you’re young. You’ll survive if you’re fortunate ‘nough.”

Thief: “That’s not what you sai—bgeh!”

Sent flying with a kick to the side of his face, the thief was knocked unconscious, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. After making sure he was out cold, the trafficker fastened handcuffs on him, and threw him away on the floor.

Trafficker: “Jeez, this is why amateurs pull some scary shit. Ahh, though, we were lucky to obtain a first-class article. The rule breaker got declassed to a slave, too. I’m glad none of us suffered any losses.”

???: “But, I think it’s a large problem for these two new slaves.”

The other man, who had been silent for the whole time, responded thickly to the trafficker’s comment. The trafficker cocked his head with an, “Ahh…” towards the man’s reply, directing his gaze at Anastasia. And then,

Trafficker: “Sorry, but I don’t consider slaves as people. These’re products, same stuff like meat ‘n fish.”

Saying that, the trafficker exited the shack, bringing along the large man accompanying him. The door was locked from the outside once again, and the two presences left the area.

Inside the shack, with the darkness and silence returning, Anastasia let out the breath she had been holding the entire time. Her heart pounded and she was drenched in cold sweat. It was good that they had not noticed it, but…

Anastasia: “Though…”

She had caught the eye of a trafficker who acted very much like a real trafficker.

It seemed like the thief had also been turned into a product, but she could not bring herself to think he had deserved it.

Because, whether retribution was carried out sooner or later, did not serve any purpose to Anastasia.

—A few hours had passed, and Anastasia judged that it was night-time based on her intuition.

In the meantime, she had been left lying on the cold floor, tormented by the urge to roll over multiple times, but she had to bear with it every time. It was because,

Thief: “Why do I have to go through such a… Dammit, dammit…”

The thief had regained his consciousness, perpetually mumbling and whining, unable to accept reality.

If he realized Anastasia had been awake, then there was no mistake he would shower her with a storm of profanity. So, she had to endure the impulse to turn over, in order to prevent herself from causing any unnecessary noise.

Anyway, being dissatisfied with the comfort of the hard ground was something she would have never thought of in the past. Anastasia did not think of it as becoming weak due to her living a relaxed, enjoyable life. Nothing was bad about it. Rather, she was slightly proud of herself.

If one lived like a human being, then of course they would not be able to bear living like a non-human. No one should be a pushover and behave submissively at the bottom of the ladder. Dreams must remain big and high up in the sky.

Thief: “Oi, you’re actually awake, right? Hey, you’re awake, right?”

As if he had ran out of things to say in his monologue, the thief dragged himself towards Anastasia. Hearing the tone of his voice and the feelings of resentment deep in his bones, it was clear that the man was intending to inflict harm upon her. His hand grabbed the cloth tied around her mouth, roughly taking it off.

Anastasia: "…I'm awake. You've been noisy for some time."

Thief: "Y-You, you're awake, you're awake! You… youuuu… how dare…!"

Anastasia: "Just sayin', but I don't recommend hurtin' me. Ya understand my product value as well, don't ya? That trafficker might as well get rid of ya for real next time."

Thief: "Uh… guh, fguh,"

Just by hearing those three words, "get rid of", the thief immediately withdrew his fury. The pain of being beaten and kicked seemed to have recurred to his mind, and he grew discouraged, holding his head in his hands.

Anastasia: "Where's this place?"

Thief: "…"

Anastasia: "Don't ya have somethin' that might come in handy?"

Thief: "…"

It was no use, the "conversation" was not going anywhere.

Deeming it useless to talk to the man who appeared emotionally and mentally drained, Anastasia sat up slowly. She twisted around her body, stiff from being unable to sleep well, and started crawling over to the door of the shack.

Thief: "It's pointless."

Ignoring the thief's pessimistic words, Anastasia somehow managed to stand up whilst leaning against the wall. After that, she played around with what looked like the handle of the door, but it showed no signs of opening. If so, should she remove the rope around her wrists by rubbing them against the ground?

It happened when she thought of that.

???: "Sneak, sneak… Hmm, does it feel like someone's in there?"

Anastasia: “—?!”

The moment before she began struggling in vain, she heard a voice coming from the other side of the door. Frankly, it sounded way too nonchalant, but it was enough for Anastasia to think the voice to be unrelated to the traffickers.

Anastasia: “Here! I’m inside! I got captured!”

???: “Ooh, someone’s in there! Wow~! It’s just as Hetaro said! Got it~!”

Saying that, the presence outside distanced itself from the door by a tiny bit. Anastasia wondered what they were going to do, but she instantly came to realize the reason, and hurriedly threw herself towards the side of the door. The very next moment,

???: “Oryah~! Mimi go boom!”

Simultaneously with the shout, a tackle accompanied by a bluish-white light blew off the door into the shack. The hinges burst apart, and the wooden door ricocheted around the room loudly.

???: “Alright, it’s a success! Mimi is awesome~! Hum! Hum!”

Anastasia: “…”

Anastasia was rendered speechless by the excessively violent method that had been carried out. However, taking no notice of what she thought of it, the silhouette standing at the doorless entrance was displaying a dance of joy, seemingly having a great time.

The silhouette was too tiny. Their height was only around half of Anastasia’s, who was already on the smaller side for her age. Their physical appearance, lit by the moonlight was not even that of a human. They were a cat, and if one were to speak of a bipedal, cat-faced race, that would be no other than a cat-human.

Cat girl: “Ooh, you’re tied up. Tied up! Wait a lil’ bit~!”

The cat girl giggled innocently, walking over to Anastasia, who was unable to move due to being restrained, to remove her bindings. “Clink!” She exclaimed, showing off her claws, and then used them to sever Anastasia’s restraints.

Anastasia: “Uhm… Thank you?”

Cat girl: “Yup, ‘thanks’ is important~! If you’re able to say it then well done. Mimi also gets told by Hetaro and Tivey to not forget it~. You’re a good girl. Good girl, good girl.”

Anastasia: “S, stop, it’s a bit embarrassin’. Anyway, who’re ya?”

The orange-haired cat girl patted Anastasia’s head without any hesitation. When Anastasia kept her distance and asked her a question, she blinked her large eyes, and,

Cat girl: “Fufu~, glad you asked about that~. Umm, Mimi is a chivalrio thief! Chivalrio!”

Anastasia: “Chivalrio what…?”

Although the girl declared it triumphantly, placing a hand on her hip, Anastasia had no clue about what she was saying. Was it a name? No, if so, why would she be calling herself “Mimi”?

???: “Onee-chan, it’s ‘chivalrous’, not ‘chivalrio’.”

However, Anastasia’s doubts were answered from a different direction. She heard the sound of a calmer voice from the entrance of the shack, the same the girl had entered from earlier. There, making an appearance and peeking inside, was a petite cat-human, just as Anastasia had expected. Even including physical differences within a race, he was identical to the girl.

???: “We are sorry for confusing you. I’m Hetaro, and this is Mimi-onee-chan. For now, please just follow us.”

Unlike Mimi, her little brother—Hetaro seemed quite rational, bowing to Anastasia. Just like how she had acted a moment ago, Mimi looked proud of herself, her head held high beside him.

Their identities were surrounded by mystery, but Anastasia understood that they meant no harm. If so, Anastasia: “From Hoshin’s sayings! ‘Decisiveness is the mightiest sword!’ All right, I’ll follow ya.”

—Women should be courageous, and men should be charming.

Two intruders had suddenly entered, followed up by their astonishing declaration of being “chivalrous thieves”, but Anastasia decided to believe them. It was mostly because of her ability to judge the characters of people, something she had fostered within her short life, that she had decided that the two children were not trying to be evildoers.

Hetaro: “Come on, you too! Let’s go together!”

Not only did Hetaro invite Anastasia, who had displayed her will to escape, on their breakout, but he also tried to bring the thief with him. However, the thief directed a frightened look towards the children.

Thief: “Do-Don’t say anything stupid! If I ran into you guys… and get found out, they’ll kill me! I-I’m having none of this. Dy… dying is something I absolutely don’t…!”

Hetaro: “That can’t be…”

Anastasia: “It’s useless. Ya can’t help him no matter what ya say. —Only those who’re determined to walk down their own path, are able to live an honest life.”

She stopped Hetaro, who was persistently struggling to convince the thief, and walked out of the shack. Even after that, Hetaro looked like he was unable to decide what to do, but Mimi clapped his shoulder.

Mimi: “Hmm, it’s disappointing~! But it can’t be helped. We can only save the people who reach out their hands because they want to be saved~.”

Unexpectedly, Mimi had reached the same conclusion as Anastasia, trying to pull Hetaro towards them by grabbing his hand. Prompted by his sister’s words, he finally gave up on the thief.

Anastasia: “Which part of the city’s this?”

Hetaro: “We’re at the edge of the trash heap. Those traffickers always use this place, and…”

Mimi: “We discovered it by ourselves! It’s time for justice~!”

“Trash heap” was a common name for the disposal site meant for burying dirt and scrap under the ground. Because it was a place people preferred not to approach, nor to linger around for long, it was the most optimal choice as a hideout for traffickers.

Gazing up at the moon, Anastasia blew out a small sigh, then searched for the route that would bring her back to the streets.

There was quite the distance between this empty place and the populated slums. Anastasia was confident in how far she could walk to a degree, but comparing herself to Mimi and Hetaro, she would not be able to catch up to them. Even if she shouted for help, she would only attract slave traders. The best option was to continue running while making little noise, like this—

???: “That’s no go~od. Tricking us and trying to run away.”

However, her wish in vain, the voice called to her from above.

Anastasia: “—hk!”

When Anastasia immediately stopped in her tracks, a giant man landed in front of her with a heavy thud on the ground. And then, her breath caught in her throat as she saw the man’s bizarre frame.

The hide of an animal draped over his head, the large man was a member of the Multi-Armed Race, four arms protruding from his shoulders.

The voice of the man with goggling eyes was the thick, sticky voice she had heard earlier in the shack. He was the other man who had been standing behind the trafficker.

Multi-armed man: “It’s good you’re energetic, since you’re going to be a slave. It’s wonderful that you’re energetic. But, being too energetic isn't good. Let's calm down, shall we?"

Anastasia: "—h,"

As the man said that, bringing his face closer to her, a scream almost tore itself out of her throat.

Strictly speaking, it was not the man who incited her fear himself. It was the foreign item she witnessed in his hand.

Multi-armed man: "Ah, this? I surprised you, didn't I? Sorry, sorry. But, you see? This guy saw you guys off while you all escaped, right? He really was clueless on how things were done, watching a slave in the same room run away and doing nothing."

While laughing, the man shook the item dangling from his hand—the thief's head. Decapitated with a terrified expression plastered on his face, could he not have understood the reason of his death until the very end?

The man haphazardly tossed away the severed head, which still had blood dripping from the neck. And then, those bloodstained hands of his reached out towards Anastasia's neck—

???: "Pre-emptive strike!!"

Multi-armed man: "Whoa."

Right as Anastasia was about to be captured, Mimi drilled a glowing kick into the man. He effortlessly caught it with his bottom left arm, and grabbed her body with his upper left arm as well.

Mimi: "Mm?! Wha? A lot of hands? Not fair!"

Multi-armed man: "Yes, it's not fair. Sorry for that. The more arms you have, the stronger you are. Isn't that obvious?"

Hetaro: "Let go of onee-chan!"

Unlike Mimi, who was being optimistic and carefree despite being caught, Hetaro quickly ran to get behind the man.

However, the man evaded him as if he had a pair of eyes on his back, and since Hetaro had nowhere to run, he could not escape from the two right arms of the man as a result.

Mimi: “Not fair! Not fair!”

Hetaro: “Mh…! Sorry, onee-chan, I’m sorry…”

Mimi, who was thrashing around, and Hetaro, who was painfully aware of their difference in strength. The man restrained them with his four arms, his eyes filled with enjoyment, moving to look at Anastasia.

It was as if he were saying, “You might be able to run away right now, because my hands are full.”

Anastasia: “Only a person like the guy who died earlier would believe an offer that’s too good to be true.”

Multi-armed man: “I guess that’s how it goes. Being clever is going to knock your feet from right under you in some cases. I obtained two cat-humans who look like they’d be useful to replace the idiot… You’d call this being very fortunate.”

The man laughed in his sticky voice, and Anastasia sensed another trafficker approach her from behind. She was restrained yet again, commodified for good this time.

So, before she was gagged yet again—.

Anastasia: “Just remember one thing.”

Multi-armed man: “Hmm?”

Anastasia: “If ya lay your hands on me, a scary, scary wolf’ll come. —I’m rather unlovable, too.”

Hearing Anastasia’s declaration of her hostility, the man’s shoulders shook with happiness.

Multi-armed man: “Ufufufu! Nice, that’s very nice. —Then, I guess I’ll be looking forward to it.”

He did not take it as Anastasia being unwilling to admit defeat. Therefore, the game between them had been established.

—She would not play a game in which she had lost before it even started.

Even if the trafficker grabbed her shoulder roughly, and she was dragged away with a gag in her mouth, the fighting spirit continued to burn in Anastasia's eyes, refusing to die out.

7

Contained within the legend of "Hoshin of the Wilderness", was the story of the bloodless liberation of a stronghold.

According to it, Hoshin entered the enemy's stronghold on his own, gained the devotion of the stronghold's master with his eloquence alone, convinced them to open their robust gates, and welcomed them as an ally.

Multiple theories existed regarding the method he had used to enter the stronghold.

Shamelessly paying a visit by walking up to the front gates, burying himself inside the cargo brought into the fort, and there was even a theory that stated he had played dead to take them by surprise.

However, no matter how divided the opinions concerning his entry were, the manner in which they were tied to his exit was the same in every single one of those theories.

—Hoshin liberated the stronghold without causing any bloodshed, saved the minor power, Kararagi, and his legend began.

From that point onwards, Hoshin used his first achievement as a foothold, jumping into the ongoing battles between countries vying for supremacy. And then, it would eventually lead him to build up the history—the birth of the Kararagi City States.

Remembering such an anecdote, Anastasia was impressed by how exceptional legendary heroes were.

How gallant did he have to be, and how aware of his chances of success did he have to be, in order to set foot in enemy territory all by himself? It was well-known that Hoshin had been inexperienced in the arts of combat, and the only weapon he had was his tongue. That part of him was similar to herself.

Making it so that the only difference between them… was probably how Hoshin did not experience having a slave's collar fitted around his neck, because he never blundered in a way that would happen to him.

Anastasia: "…"

Feeling the cold, hard sensation of the collar against her skin, Anastasia sighed, recognizing the difference in the capabilities between a hero and herself.

She was not in the mood to joke that she now sported matching collars with Ricardo, but the existence of the collar gave her a sense of relief to an extent. It was because she knew her opponents were legitimate slave traders.

People might wonder if the words legitimate or illegitimate even applied to the trafficking of slaves, but there was quite the disparity between the two.

The difference could be distinguished by whether they used slave collars or not. The collar Anastasia wore was one kind among the tools referred to as meteors, connected to the owner's gate through the gem of the collar. Because of that, the owner only had to think of it in their head to cause pain to slaves as punishment, and in many cases, slave traders used these meteors to manage and maintain their slaves.

Without these meteors, slave traders would have to resort to violence to discipline their slaves. In that case, the possibility of reducing the slaves to defective products could not be avoided, so the more legitimate a trafficker was, the more they would handle their slaves carefully.

That was why the existence of the collar evidenced that the slave traders had some decency—she did not have to worry about being killed, at the very least. It was the primary source of Anastasia's relief, and the reason why she could carry on thinking.

???: "Nn~! Mnn~!"

And, there was one… no, there were two more things that provided her with moral support.

It was the existence of the two little cat-humans, who had the same collar fastened around their necks, and who had been trapped inside the same shack with her.

Mimi: "Nnnn~! Mnnnn~!"

With her endless amount of energy, Mimi continued to struggle in an attempt to free herself of her bindings for hours on end. Hetaro was lying down beside her in silence, but he wasn't curled up out of resignation.

Hetaro: "…"

The lack of noise from him was not because he was pessimistic, but because he was contemplating how breaking out of this situation would be achieved. Without a single trace of submission nor compromise within them, the look in his eyes said he was biding his time, the same as Anastasia.

Hetaro was vigilantly looking for an opportunity he could seize, Mimi was full of vigor, and both of them were not remotely close to giving up.

With that as the case, Anastasia had hope. A gigantic, shaggy source of hope.

Anastasia: "'omehow, gotta tell 'ncle…"

She had to pass down her location and her predicament to Ricardo.

It was the only thing Anastasia could do, as a method to liberate this stronghold of the slave traders.

???: “—Hm.”

Like that, the trafficker from before made an appearance in front of the three children, who were desperately searching for a way to escape.

???: “I’ve already heard from Diddley, but two cat-humans in exchange for an idiot is an excellent deal.”

Opening the door and surveying the room was a well-dressed man who let out a snort.

Anastasia remembered seeing him on the previous night, guessing that he was the head of the slave traders. The day before, she had not been able to see his face from the front, but she could see it today, his accessory-covered attire in full view as well.

The leader had brought several bodyguards with him, and among them was the four-armed man. Upon noticing Anastasia’s stare, he gave her a twisted smile, waving his hand.

The head of the traffickers, three bodyguards, and one berserker. It seemed grandiose for a thorough inspection of their products.

Leader: “What, I heard y’all were causin’ mischief yesterday. I’m a faint-hearted man. Thanks to my nature, our business is goin’ rather well… Oi.”

Politely, he answered to Anastasia’s unspoken observations. After he nodded, the bodyguards took the children’s chains off the wall, but it was not as if they were about to be freed.

Leader: “Time to repack the boxes. The business over at Banan’ll try out another place soon, too.”

Tugging at Anastasia’s chains roughly, the leader told her she would be shipped out, in a roundabout way. She was taken outside of the room, and she was also about to be placed in the luggage platform on the outer part of the wolf carriage.

However, it happened in the middle of being brought onto the carriage.

Mimi: “Mgghh!”

Bodyguard: “Wha… hey! Wait!”

Mimi began going on a rampage after she had been taken outside just like Anastasia had been, shaking off the bodyguard’s arm. She hopped off the ground, trying to pounce onto the leader of the traffickers. Was it instinct that made her target the head of the group, rather than any tangible strategy? The choice in itself proved correct, as the leader’s cheeks stiffened for a moment.

Multi-armed man: “You were already told causing mischief isn’t good~.”

However, Mimi’s revenge was brought to a halt midway. The huge, four-armed man barged in between her and the leader, bashing her with two of his arms. She was slammed against the ground, unable to soften her landing and bouncing across the earth.

Mimi: “Gyaa!”

Leader: “Ah, hey, Diddley! Don’t overdo it! It’ll be bad if she gets damaged!”

Looking at Mimi, sprawled out on the ground, the leader slapped the giant man on the back. The man—Diddley, he was called, reacted to his words by shrugging his shoulders and stepping backwards.

Leader: “Sorry for that, lil’ kid. Even so, ya shouldn’t do that. We don’t wanna go out of our way to damage our goods. If ya behave well, then we won’t have to treat ya like this.”

Mimi: “Oh~, I won’t be fooled, bad guy!”

Mimi retorted at the leader, who crouched down to speak to her in a disgustingly sweet voice. The punches’ impact had dislodged her gag, and she demonstrated her indomitable spirit with her mouth, now freed from the cloth.

Mimi: “Misdeeds will make you have a bad time! Even if we get caught, Hetaro and Tivey shall stand in your way~!”

Leader: “You’re an energetic girl, even after gettin’ punched in the face… It’ll be worth disciplinin’ ya.”

Mimi: “Wh… mih, gyaah!”

While she was speaking, every hair on Mimi’s body stood up, and she cried out at the top of her lungs. Her eyes widened as she screamed. The cause was the slave’s collar. The leader had commanded it to torment her.

Hetaro: “—hk!”

Seeing his elder sister writhing in pain, Hetaro grimaced as if he were experiencing the same torture. Eventually, once Mimi had been weakened enough, the leader of the slave traders put the gag back in her mouth and then stood up.

Leader: “What’re ya doin’, almost lettin’ her escape, ya dunce? If ya don’t pull yourself together… Do ya wanna play with the collar too? The motivation you’re lacking’ll return to ya pretty fast, won’t it?”

Bodyguard: “I-I’m sorry! I won’t do it again!—hk,”

The bodyguard who had messed up got his face’s side slapped. He then repositioned the unconscious Mimi in his arm. Anastasia, watching the sequence of events, had already realized that they had been captured by a truly troublesome bunch.

They were organized, ambitious, and capable to top it all off. She was getting fed up with them.

Leader: “Well, if ya try to run, you’ll be put through a painful, painful experience like what just happened. I’m sure ya learned your lesson, so… hey, let’s go out. Ya better bid farewell to your hometown.”

Hearing the leader speak with a contemptful edge in his voice, Anastasia gave a quick observation of her surroundings. No matter where she looked, the area was filled with scrap. It was certainly the trash heap, indeed. She was not impressed one bit.

Leader: “Ya look like ya had enough of sayin’ goodbye to your hometown. Let’s go, then… hey hey, wait a minute.”

As Anastasia stared at the ground, the leader pushed her from behind, trying to shove her into the carriage. Pressed by the momentum of the shove, she lost her balance and fell to the ground.

Leader: “What, I didn’t hit’cha that hard. That ain’t good, ya need to live strong.”

One of his bodyguards pulled Anastasia to her feet after she fell forward. She shook her head while being forced to stand back up, hiding her clenched fist from their field of view.

Like that, she tried to walk towards the wolf carriage, pretending to look like nothing had ever happened—

Anastasia: “…hk,”

Seized by cold fear, Anastasia raised her head. Standing in front of her and looking down at her was Diddley, his goggling eyes opened wide.

Feeling those eyes peer into her, a chill ran down her spine. He saw me, she thought, feeling the skin under her collar itch from dread.

She would be punished with the collar, just like Mimi. —However, her predictions were,

Diddley: “—Ufufufu.”

—Rejected by Diddley, who loosened his lips, laughing in a subdued voice.

He did not bring up anything about her actions, returning to being cautious of their surroundings like the other bodyguards. Anastasia was dumbfounded by it, but she was pushed from behind once again, stepping onto the platform of the wolf carriage.

The luggage platform was curtained inside, having been tampered to make sure its contents could not be seen from outside. It was probably a plan to separate illegal slaves from those that conformed to the rules and agreements of slave trading. Of course, Anastasia and the two cat-humans had been made slaves in a way that violated the rules, and the slave traders would not be able to get away with it if they were ever exposed.

Anastasia: "…"

Unlike the shack, the platform had a window. The area was cramped as a result of all the alterations, and the three kids were pressed against each other; it could almost be described as "being packed inside a box".

Leader: "Ya better be on your best behavior in here. Havin' to bully children pains my heart, after all."

Pointing at his own neck, the leader threatened them with the fear of the collar, lowering the cloth that covered the platform. Right before the sight of the trafficker was hidden by the fabric, Anastasia caught a glimpse of Diddley's smile.

It was horrifying, feeling as if he had seen through her scheme, but she had no idea of what went through his mind.

Hetaro: "Onee-chan, onee-chan…"

Mimi: "Mhkyu~…"

Inside the confined space—box, Hetaro was worried for the unconscious Mimi. She had not come to her senses yet, but her life was not in any particular danger. The effect of the collar was of that sort. Moreover—

Anastasia: "Ya 'ook it off…?"

Hetaro's gag was out of his mouth. When Anastasia tilted her head out of confusion, he noticed and showed her his sharp front teeth, clacking them together.

Hetaro: "Our teeth are more sturdy than most people's. I'll teach onee-chan too after she wakes… uhh…"

He hesitated, having imagined Mimi starting to make a racket the moment her mouth was freed. He could already see her raising hell in her loudest voice, and then getting knocked out by her collar again.

Not only were their hands and feet bound together, but they also had the collar around their necks. Hetaro's issue must be the way to deal with those. However, Anastasia had various, effective solutions for what to do.

Anastasia: "'irst… pwah. We should compare and adjust the information we have at hand."

Hetaro: "—How…"

Hetaro directed his surprise towards Anastasia, who had taken off her gag by bringing her hands to the back of her head. She exposed the palms of her shackled hands so that he could see what she was holding. In her hands, was a metal shard she had secretly snatched when she had fallen over, before being placed on the wolf carriage.

Anastasia: "When I picked it up after pretendin' to trip, I was scared for a second, thinkin' I got seen."

She was unsure of the true intentions of Diddley, who had overlooked it. However, it was true that she had been saved by his caprice.

The conditions were strict, but they had been fulfilled. Mimi and her sibling, Anastasia herself, and the outside world she was able to see from the luggage platform. The slave traders' leader and their appearances, the map of the surrounding area of the city that was fresh in her memory, and Ricardo—.

—If Anastasia could connect all of them together, then she would be able to "liberate the stronghold".

Anastasia: "Hey, I have somethin' to ask ya, but… doesn't the wound on your cheek hurt?"

Hetaro's expression stiffened in response to her question.

Feeling that his reaction met her expectations, an adorable, cunning smile spread across her face.

8

Vice-captain: “Ricardo, I discovered it while asking around, but it seems like that Diddley guy is quite nutty.”

The vice-captain reported his findings, returning to the tent, while Ricardo was glaring at the map inside. Sitting on a chair far too small for his giant physique, Ricardo made a frustrated face at the results of the vice-captain’s investigation, gnashing his fangs together.

Ricardo: “Anyone’d know that by takin’ one look at the Skin Wearer.”

Vice-captain: “Whoa, Skin Wearer describes him pretty well. Well, it’s not a bad name to call him. He’s practically infamous for skinning his opponents once he kills them.”

Ricardo: “He has a damn terrible hobby, is what I think, though…”

Recalling the four-armed man, Ricardo wrinkled his nose out of disgust.

He would be alright with it if the man only wore the hide of animals, but in reality, the man wore the skin of demi-humans he had killed. Ricardo did not think the man would be satisfied with only having one or two of those “collectibles”. Therefore, he probably had a countless number of skins, enough to swap them out depending on his mood or the weather.

Vice-captain: “He apparently comes from further north, but he recently came here to work and gain publicity. Right now, was it the… Razcrew Trading Company that we just met? It seems like he’s contracted exclusively to them.”

Ricardo: “Gainin’ publicity? Does he look charmin’ enough to do that? Though, I see there’s someone who’s quite knowledgeable ‘bout that guy.”

Vice-captain: “They said they once got into a fight with him in a tavern. One of their ears was torn off. They got off lucky.”

The vice-captain said as he shrugged, but Ricardo agreed with him. If the person had gotten away with just an ear torn, then they were fortunate.

The strong stench of blood wafting from that man was not something any ordinary mercenary could compete against. They would be killed with a mere twist of his arms. And he had four of them, so the difference in ability between him and the others was glaringly clear.

Vice-captain: “You got a scary face there, Hound. Even if you grow bloodthirsty, isn’t he irrelevant to our job?”

Ricardo: “I know, I know. Fuck, I’m headin’ out for a lil’ while.”

Keeping the irritation burning in his chest at bay, Ricardo left the vice-captain behind, exiting the tent. Gazing up at the night sky above the camping grounds, he used a finger to fumble around with his collar out of boredom.

Still unable to get a grasp on where the group’s target, the gang of bandits, was located, Ricardo could not hide how discouraged he felt from his weakened sense of smell. Piling on that, he felt even worse because a person who got on his nerves had rubbed his wavering state of mind the wrong way.

Diddley, the man who had peeled the skin of the people who shared the same race as Ricardo, and draped it over his head. He could not help but feel a thick sort of malice from how Diddley had called him “Mister Wolf” to his face. Excluding that man, who had referred to Ricardo as a wolf without being convinced of what he called himself, the only other person who did the same was Anastasia—.

Ricardo: “What, my beard’s tremblin’… huh?”

Caressing his beard, Ricaro raised a brow as he felt a tinge of uneasiness. From a slight distance ahead, he could hear voices coming from an argument. Spontaneously, he started walking in that direction.

???: “Ya know what, runt. It’s dangerous ‘round here. Ya better hurry and go back to the city.”

????: “But, I’m saying I need to talk with the person in charge. Please let me through.”

Along with the exasperated voice of a rough fellow, a rather formal young voice overlapped with it. Once Ricardo took a look at them, he saw a tiny, tiny cat-human arguing with a mercenary standing guard at the grassland.

Ricardo: “What’re ya causin’ a ruckus about? A full-grown man yellin’ at a child. How shameful.”

Guard: “Ah, Ricardo-san… No, it’s ‘cause this runt wouldn’t listen to me tellin’ him to go home, so…”

The guard repeatedly dipped his head at Ricardo, who barged in between them. Snorting at the guard’s behavior, Ricardo then glanced over at the boy. He was a young cat-human with an intelligent-looking face.

Ricardo: “Son, I’m the representative around here. What, if ya need to talk about somethin’, I’m all ears.”

Cat-human: “Are you the person in charge?”

The boy, clothed in rags, widened his eyes at Ricardo’s attitude. He immediately gave him a polite bow afterwards, kneeling down and lowering his head further to the ground.

Cat-human: “I ask of you. Please rescue my elder sister and brother.”

Ricardo: “Your siblings? What’s it about?”

Cat-human: “It’s the slave traders. They were caught by them, and I… want you to save them.”

Ricardo: “…Aah, I get it now. I’m sorry to hear that, but…”

Ricardo scratched his head, feeling an inkling of pity at the boy's desperate plea.

His older siblings were most likely cat-humans, and they would be perfect targets for the traffickers to prey upon, if they were as young as this one. Compounding on that, the rags the boy wore—assuming they were hyenas from the slums, if the slave traders tried to capture them it would not infringe on Banan's city laws. It had been a mistake to ask Ricardo to go against that.

If only I wasn't on duty, Ricardo thought, mercy starting to bud in his heart. However,

Cat-human: "Please look at this."

Intercepting Ricardo's rejection, the boy took off the rag he was wearing. Looking at the chest and stomach area of his scrawny body, Ricardo let out a small grunt.

—The boy's skin was swollen with dark red, and the internal bleeding underneath had formed a drawing.

The more Ricardo stared at that drawing, the more it started looking like a map, and he realized that it was a map similar to the one which depicted the outskirts of Banan. The very map he had been glaring at until recently.

Ricardo: "Son, this injury of yours… no, what's this map?"

Cat-human: "Someone is inflicting wounds upon either my sister or brother. With our Divine Protection… the power of the Divine Protection of Trisection, we three can split our injuries and fatigue between each other, and… this wound is a result of that."

Ricardo: "Drawin' a map through injuries… That's pretty darn impressive. I see, so they showed ya their whereabouts… wait."

The boy's siblings, who had been captured by slave traders, were letting their youngest sibling know of their location by having wounds etched into their body. Ricardo was amazed by their idea, but it was not enough to force him to take action. However, he furrowed his brow upon thinking about something. —That was not all there was to the map.

Ricardo: “This map…”

The map of the surrounding area of Banan. It was a map similar to the one Ricardo owned, but it was too similar. The map on the boy’s body even had a few notable places marked down, such as where the caravans had been attacked, and where Ricardo’s group had thought the bandits were hiding.

It would be impossible to draw this map if without the siblings having looked at Ricardo’s map while doing so. Between the two maps there were a few differences, such as the mark on the camping grounds near Banan—the current location of the mercenary group, and the mark that traced the highway extending from the city, as if it was following along the path.

Ricardo: “This place, the highway, and the workplace of the bandits… Connecting those together…”

Guard: “Ricardo-san? …Wha—whoa!”

While in deep thought, his eyes fixed on the map etched on the boy’s body, the guard called out to him. However, Ricardo grabbed the guard’s shoulder, baring his fangs and shouting out,

Ricardo: “Gather all the big shots and come inside the tent right now! The kid’s achieved an incredible result!”

9

The boy called himself Tivey, showing the dark red map engraved upon his body in front of everyone. Supporting Tivey’s shoulders, who was standing on top of the desk, Ricardo pointed at the bloody map for the mercenaries to see.

Ricardo: “Listen up, everyone. Look at this map on this boy’s stomach. Right now, someone’s etchin’ the details of the map into the body of his sibling, who was captured. It’s a freakish thing, but we can glean somethin’ from this.”

Vice-captain: “It’s about the location of the slave traders that caught his siblings, right? That's amazing, yeah, but it's not…"

Our business, the vice captain did not say out loud, keeping his words ambiguous. However, his sentiments were shared between everyone in the tent.

Unrelated to whether they disliked or even tolerated slave trading, the objective of this mercenary group was the subjugation of the brigands. Even if they felt sympathy for Tivey, they could not stray away from their goal. Towards the mercenaries who had that in mind, Ricardo shook his head with a "No,"

Ricardo: "What's important's the huge amount of marks on this map. The place where the caravans were ambushed, and the place we mistook as the bandits' hideout are also marked. Ain't it strange?"

Vice-captain: "I guess it doesn't sit right with me, but… what meaning is there to it?"

Ricardo: "Just listen. There's an 'X' symbol placed where the caravans were attacked, and another near the area we mistook for the place the bandits're lurking around. In exchange, there's a circle placed on the slave traders who should still be on the move… Ya should know what the creator of this map wants to say."

Vice-captain: "—. Whoa whoa, Ricardo. You can't be…"

Understanding the context behind Ricardo's savage grin, the vice-captain widened his eyes. However, there were a lot of mercenaries who had yet to reach the answer to the mystery. To make sure everyone could hear it, Ricardo spoke,

Ricardo: "Our targets, those we're lookin' for, ain't bandits. Slave traders that do business borderin' on a bunch of brigands' business… no, our target's a Muggers' Tradin' Company, made up of those who disguise themselves as traveling merchants, and then launch attacks on other caravans."

It was obvious why they had not been able to find anything while searching for the hidden gang of bandits. No such gang existed. The crimes had been committed by an armed group, who pretended to be traveling merchants and attacked people who passed by.

Looting the wolf carriages and goods of other caravans, and turning their employees into slaves. Like that, selling off what they harvested, as well as their slaves to some other city, then traveling around the whole country while engaging in business was the go-to method of these Muggers' Trading Companies.

Ricardo: "So, it's this Muggers' Tradin' Company, but… they're roaming around this area on the highway durin' this time of day. Judgin' from the speed a loaded wolf carriage can move at, there's only one candidate."

Vice-captain: "—The Razcrew Trading Company!"

The vice-captain clicked his tongue, thinking about the group that had just passed in front of the camping grounds a few hours prior, the very group that had just came up in their conversation before the meeting. He looked like he was panicking, fearing that the Razcrew Trading Company would escape if they did not take immediate action, but Ricardo shook his head at him.

Ricardo: "There's nothin' to be panickin' over. I told ya. This map will keep tellin' us where that bunch's headin' for. Before long, they'll stop in their tracks to set up camp."

Once the band of mercenaries got a hold of their location, then it would be time for the Hound to live up to his reputation.

Vice-captain: "Fold the tents! We'll be pursuing the Razcrew… no, the Muggers' Trading Company at once!"

The vice-captain raised his voice, and the slightly energized mercenary group scattered immediately, all at the same time. Watching his fellow mercenaries leave the tent, Ricardo gave a firm clap on Tivey's shoulder, who had fulfilled his role to the very end.

Ricardo: "Son, good job for doin' your best. Ya were amazin'."

Tivey: "If it's for onee-chan and onii-chan, then it's… to be… expected…"

Replying with that, Tivey grew weak as he relaxed his body. Ricardo promptly supported him, feeling the burning temperature of his tiny body and seeing his labored breathing. It was only natural. Tivey must have endured an unbelievable amount of pain because of these injuries. If he had been reduced to this state as a result of the pain being distributed, then the suffering of his siblings, who were on the receiving end of such atrocities, must be beyond description.

Because of that, Ricardo and his group needed to give it their all.

Ricardo: “Ana-bo, your message has been heard loud and clear.”

Lifting up Tivey in his arms, Ricardo called out to the girl who was not present.

Accurately drawing out the map she had only taken a single look at, connecting the dots between the bandits and the slave traders, and delivering it to the “Uncle” etched into the area of the camping grounds. —The girl who had played a key role in achieving this result.

Ricardo: “I gotta find ya safe and sound, and ask ya why ya were caught by some slave tradin’ company…!”

Why had the girl, who was supposed to be in the city, been thrown into the midst of such a critical emergency?

However, Ricardo did not even think that it had been the doing of the man he had let off the hook.

10

—The clash between the band of mercenaries, led by the Hound, and the Razcrew Muggers’ Trading Company began in the middle of the night.

The deserted village, located at the side of the highway that linked cities together, was a place often used as a camping ground by legitimate caravans that stopped by on their travels, in order to let their weary feet and Ligers take a rest.

The camping ground, formerly a village that specialized in agriculture, had a few, abandoned houses left scattered around as a reminder of old times. The existence of the houses, all equipped with roofs, made it more than just a little appealing to use as a place to set up camp.

Because of that, the fact that an illegitimate Muggers' Trading Company was making themselves comfortable at this place, had fully incurred the blazing wrath of the Hound and his group.

Mercenaries: "…"

The Hound and his forty rowdy mercenaries were quietly surrounding the deserted village that was sinking into the darkness.

Fires that had been set up at the camp, used to clear the view of those standing guard, and the vulgar voices of the ones holding a feast, while chugging down their alcohol-filled mugs. The carriages with the tethered Ligers had the seal of the store number on it—proof that it was the company the mercenaries were after, and there was no mistaking it for any other.

The map engraved into Tivey was perfect. Remembering the boy he had left in the tent before carrying out their plan, as well as his pleading voice that surfaced into the back of his head, the Hound gave his orders to the vice-captain, and placed small troops in various places around the village.

Confirming that they were ready to go, the vice-captain nodded at the Hound. Receiving his signal, the Hound threw his head back to look up at the sky and opened his jaws,

Ricardo: "Awooooo—!"

A bestial roar was released, as if reaching for the round moon shining in the night sky.

The next moment, the Hound's limbs swooped down towards his assigned position—and the battle had begun.

Man: “Uwohhhh—!”

Ricardo: “Shut it, moron!”

With one swing of his large machete, Ricardo struck down the frenzied man who lunged at him.

The thick chunk of iron penetrated the man’s head, his skull exploding like a fruit. Looking at the body that had fallen over, with blood and brains splattered all around it, the men behind the corpse gulped one after another.

The men: “Hk…”

Ricardo: “Don’t stop in your tracks, ya dolts!”

Being horrified by their ally’s glamorously mutilated body, and because of it pausing their movements and freezing their thoughts, were actions below those of a third-rate fighter.

Ricardo sliced through one man, and bashed in the neck of another, snapping his neck. He shoved a third man into the wall by kicking him with all his strength, pulverizing the top of his head with the butt end of the machete and knocking him down to the ground.

A Muggers’ Trading Company that disguised themselves as a regular company, repeatedly plundering and pillaging other caravans in the middle of their travels. Even with such an extravagant title stuck onto them, they proved themselves to be a letdown the moment they were forced to be on the side of the ransacked.

Vice-captain: “Ricardo! How’s it going over there?!”

The vice-captain swung a bloodied sword as he ran towards Ricardo, who kicked away the corpse near his feet. Observing the disastrous spectacle created by the Hound’s rampage, the vice-captain started to lament the situation, a hand placed on his forehead.

Vice-captain: “I wasn’t worried about you, but this is too much. Are you planning to massacre them?”

Ricardo: “Is it worth holdin’ back ‘gainst these fellows? I almost feel like cuttin’ all their limbs off and throwin’ them into boilin’ hot oil.”

Vice-captain: “I understand how you feel, but please think about what comes next. We might even have to explain this to the Senate, so this can’t be resolved by murdering everyone and reaping all the benefits.”

Ricardo: “What, if they tell me to slit my stomach and apologize, then I’ll do just that! But, that’s only after everythin’s settled peacefully. And that seems unlikely if we find Ana-bo and the boy’s siblings.”

Anger burning inside of him, Ricardo barked at the vice-captain, who seemed concerned about the Senate’s intentions.

The only factors that had made it possible to ascertain the identity of the Muggers’ Trading Company, were Anastasia’s quick wits and the cooperation of Tivey’s siblings. Such small children were forced to do more than they could manage. Ricardo and his group had a duty to repay their deeds.

Hearing Ricardo’s words, the vice-captain’s expression fell even further as he looked up at the sky.

Vice captain: “Aah, goddammit! This is why exactly I didn’t want to be paired with you. Your influence is rubbing off on the others, and I’m worried if there are going to be enough of those fellows to give their testimony by the end of this…”

Ricardo: “I won’t target the leader, at least. If some morons remain alive at the end, then that’s fine, ain’t it? Rather…”

Vice-captain: “I know. It’s about the Skin Wearer dude, right?”

Diddley the Skin Wearer. That man of the Multi-Armed Race was unmistakably the main force of the Muggers’ Trading Company.

Neither ambushes nor cheap tricks would work against that. He was in a different dimension altogether, compared to people who would fall for those.

Ricardo: “Goin’ up against that guy’s impossible unless it’s me. Don’t let the others try and fight him.”

Vice-captain: “Needless sacrifices are just gonna keep piling up otherwise. Say, it should be almost time…”

The mercenaries had been told to send out a signal with a whistle once Diddley’s whereabouts were located. If Ricardo slayed him, then the victors of the battle would become set in stone.

Waiting for the sound of the whistle to ring across the clearing, Ricardo pricked up his pointed ears, but—

???: “Heeeeeeey! Come oooooooout, Mister Wooooooolf!”

A thick, sticky, and grisly laugh echoed, thoughtlessly shaking the air of the deserted village, reeking of blood, with its cheerfulness.

11

Due to the Hound’s planned attack, the Razcrew Trading Company had been hit by a devastating blow within the blink of an eye.

Those that were either drunk or slumbering were easily killed by the mercenaries, and their numbers were reduced by one third. However, the people who had managed to avoid death during the first assault were the real members that composed the Muggers’ Trading Company. They would certainly be small fry if facing against Ricardo.

However, that only applied if they were against Ricardo.

???: “Shit! What the hell’re these guys, tryin’ to make light of us?!”

An aide countered a mercenary that had tried to attack them, and Razcrew grinded his teeth, facing the fresh corpse.

Five mercenaries had made their way inside Razcrew’s bedroom, which was located in the abandoned house that was the most intact in the deserted village. Every intruder was cut down by the sword skills of his aide. However, it was clear this attack was not only a racket caused by five people, as they could hear screaming and the clashing of swords ringing out from all over the village.

Razcrew: “This ain’t the work of some dumb bunch of bandits… it’s the work of those simpletons at the highway.”

The news of Banan’s Senate organizing a band of mercenaries as a countermeasure against damages done to caravans had reached Razcrew’s ears as well. Because of that, he had wrapped up his business in Banan, and attempted to leave in order to try out another place for trading. All this, while the mercenary group wasted their time searching around in the corner of his eye.

Aide: “Boss, what shall we do with the others?”

Razcrew: “They have Diddley. Even if we sat around doin’ nothin’, those who don’t know their place can get killed off for all I care. Rather than that, there’s something I need to check.”

Hearing the name of the multi-armed berserker, the aide immediately closed his mouth. By now, that madman would be gleefully skipping around the battlefield, sprinting freely while decapitating people.

However, finding the cause of this chaos came first. If an unusual disturbance had occurred in his usual work, then the problem would be lying within the “unusual” part.

Razcrew tested the sensation of the bracelet he had snapped onto his wrist, an object linked with the gem on the slaves’ collars, and headed for the place where his products were safeguarded, while bringing his aide with him. And then,

Razcrew: “If I remember correctly, that girl was in this box.”

Standing in front of a specific box, Razcrew ordered his aide to open the door. When it creaked open, the heavy stench of blood wafted out of the box, and Razcrew knitted his eyebrows in frustration.

???: “—hk,”

On the far side of the box, he sensed someone catch their breath.

Entering it, Razcrew squinted his eyes amidst the dark, and nodded, making sense of the situation from the scene in front of him.

Razcrew: “I see. Those runts had some kind of Divine Protection… Not bad.”

The female cat-human with her stomach area painted in blood, and the male cat-human who had suffered through an identical number of injuries. Razcrew was honestly impressed by the girl standing in front of them, as if trying to protect them.

That appearance and that skill. She was a masterpiece among every “product” he had handled so far.

Razcrew: “Ya did well, considerin’ your hands ‘n feet were tied together. Those wounds… didja pick up a shard of glass at the trash heap or somethin’?”

Girl: “Ya seem like ya got time to be light-hearted. You mean that sca~ry wolf ain’t comin’ to pick me up?”

Razcrew: “Our rabid dog’s probably takin’ him on right now… Rather, the damage you’ve caused’re gonna cost ya a pretty penny.”

Razcrew showed off the bracelet on his left hand to the bluffing girl. Just by thinking about it, he could cause his collared slaves to feel a great deal of pain. He had already carried out that threat on the female cat-human.

Imagining the pain, even that girl stiffened her cheeks, and Razcrew drew out a dagger with a twisted blade from the inside of his outfit. It was one of his favorite torturing devices.

Of course, he was not planning on hurting the girl and decreasing her value as a product. The dagger was meant for the cat-humans behind her.

Razcrew: “Listen, missy. It’s not necessarily ya yourself who has to take responsibility for your screw ups. What happened this time’ll teach ya a good lesson.”

Razcrew jerked his chin, and his aide reached his arm out to hold down the girl. Like that, he would torment the cat-humans to a suitable degree in front of the girl, and make her regret what she had done. And if Diddley swept up the surrounding mercenaries, then it would be the end of this ruckus.

Girl: “Responsibility for my screw ups, huh…”

Razcrew: “Hm?”

As Razcrew pondered on how he would clean up the mess in advance, the girl’s faint voice reached his ears. Turning around, he saw the girl meet his eyes with a glare.

Those light blue-green eyes had a power that sucked him into them —

Girl: “If that’s so… it means you’ll be takin’ responsibility for what you’ve done!”

The girl declared out loud in a harsh tone.

In a flash, the female cat-human sprung to her feet with great enthusiasm, grinned, and then,

???: “Evil won’t prosper in this wo~rld!”

She shouted, the back of her feet landing a powerful kick on Razcrew’s face.

12

—In that one fleeting second, the situation inside of the box had taken a drastic turn.

Anastasia: “…”

Mimi had jumped awake due to Anastasia’s call, and she kicked away Razcrew while covered in blood, her appearance harrowing. The moment she did that, Razcrew should have punished her using his bracelet.

The punishment being given to her through her gate, Mimi’s tiny body shook as if she was about to start bouncing around. However, it did not contain enough power to halt her justice. It was because the punishment was being shouldered by Hetaro.

The Divine Protection of Trisection was a Divine Protection that enabled the siblings to share sensations such as pain. The distribution defaulted to an even split, but they could consciously unbalance it. It was also possible to receive a hundred percent of the pain when drawing the map, or when the eldest sister was receiving her punishment.

Hetaro: “I’m not as strong as onee-chan, so… I can only do things like this.”

Hetaro had said, his resolve to accept Anastasia’s suggestion of etching the map onto his body too bright for her eyes. Even now, as he suffered from the pain and bleeding, he took on his sister’s punishment and protected her until it ended.

Mimi: “Ooh~! Chya~!”

The fighting strength of Mimi, who was bouncing all over the room, having comprehended the will of her brother, was much higher than what Anastasia had imagined.

The aides, who were taken aback by the falling Razcrew—jumping into the gap that appeared for nary a moment, Mimi punted one of the two aides with her short legs, defeating him by slamming him against the wall.

Those were bodyguards that Razcrew had brought along, commanding them directly. They could not possibly be weak, but the fighting strength of the roused cat-human had increased even further, influenced by her excitement.

Aide: “Sei!”

The aide came to his senses after his ally was defeated, unsheathing the sword on his waist. The single-edged blade, known as a katana, released a single, terrifyingly sharp strike. However, Mimi skillfully ducked under it, and,

Mimi: “Aiyaiya!”

She made him lean backwards with a blow from her tail, and followed up with a powerful headbutt to his stomach. Batting at the throat of the staggered enemy with her short limbs, she then finally knocked him out cold by flinging him across the box.

Mimi: “You see that? It’s Mimi’s overwhelming victory!”

Triumphing over both Razcrew and his aide, Mimi jumped with elation over her win.

Anastasia’s eyes were wide open, having witnessed Mimi’s maneuvers. That fight was only supposed to buy some time for them, but she had not expected Mimi to wipe the traffickers out.

Anastasia: “Anyways, I guess this wraps it up!”

Although she was surprised by results that exceeded her expectations, Anastasia stole the bracelet from the fallen Razcrew.

Even if they were to escape from this area, it would be difficult with their hands and legs left shackled together. So, the best option was to make securing their safety a priority, and wait for the scary wolf to come running towards them.

Mimi: “Ooh, the collar came off! Hetaro’s also came off~!”

Anastasia: “Alright! We can take off our collars usin’ this, just as I thought. What’s left is…”

The bracelet acted as a key, and Anastasia used it to remove her and the siblings’ collars. After that, she took the collars and refastened them on Razcrew and his two aides.

Razcrew: “Ya little… don’t think… you’re gettin’ away with… pullin’ this shit… gaaah!”

Regaining his consciousness, Razcrew threatened her in a low voice when he noticed the collar around his neck. However, Anastasia punished him with the bracelet, leading him to pass out once more. It was hard to control it, so she had accidentally inflicted the same pain on the unconscious aides, but with this, she had finished securing the safety of her group.

Anastasia: “What’s left is Uncle… I believe in ya, so please don’t betray my trust…”

Next to Mimi, who was beginning her treatment of Hetaro’s injuries, Anastasia murmured quietly while rubbing the bracelet, praying that the next time someone opened the box, it would be a familiar face.

Razcrew: “Gyaaah!”

Anastasia: “Ah, my bad.”

She carelessly made an error while trying to control the bracelet, and Razcrew’s scream echoed across the box as he was punished.

13

Summoned by the large, intense act of self-assertion, Ricardo paid the man a visit, only to witness a sea of blood.

???: “Ahaa, you came to see me, Mister Wolf.”

Breathing heavily from excitement, the berserker directed his gaze towards Ricardo. A massive number of corpses were strewn around his feet, none of them retaining their original shape.

However, even as he stood in front of the mountain of corpses, all of them mangled beyond recognition, there was something he could make out with a single glance.

Ricardo: “That, that too, and the other one over there. They’re not my allies, they’re yours.”

Multi-armed man: “Huuh, were they? They were loitering around in front of me, so I got annoyed and killed them. Stuff like that happens sometimes, right?”

Ricardo: “Hell no. Don’t lump me in with ya, damn idiot.”

Feigning ignorance while raising his bloodstained broadaxes was Diddley the Skin Wearer. He adjusted the piece of fur he wore with one of his four arms, and glared at Ricardo with his goggling eyes.

Diddley: “Just as I expected. The wolf that girl was talking about was you.”

Ricardo: “…You’re the one who let Ana-bo do as she pleased. Rather than bein’ whimsical, you’re just stupid. What ya did resulted in y’all being on the verge of a wipe-out… There’s a limit to riskin’ your life to make the others laugh.”

Diddley: “Really? Personally, I’m fine with it if it means I can play with the wolf.”

I see, that’s truly the logic of a berserker.

The misjudgement of the person in change, having hired Diddley for his skills without taking his personality into consideration—it was rare to see someone with such an amoral personality to this extent, so perhaps it was cruel to tell his boss to sense that part of him before contracting him.

Vice-captain: “Ricardo…”

Called by the vice-captain who had accompanied him, Ricardo pointed towards a different part of the battlefield with his large machete.

Ricardo: “If I confine this guy to this area, then the others surely won’t get pushed back any further.”

Vice captain: “The same could be said for the opposing side, though.”

Ricardo: “Shut up. Just leave and go somewhere else. Pray for my victory.”

Shooing off the vice-captain and his concerns, Ricardo faced Diddley alone. Taken aback by the fact that Diddley was waiting quietly for the vice-captain to leave, Ricardo raised a brow.

Ricardo: “What, you’re more well-behaved than I imagined. I thought you’re a rabid dog, but it seems like you’ve been disciplined.”

Diddley: “It’ll be my loss if the flavor grows weak, all because I was bad-mannered in front of my feast, don’t you think? I’m Diddley. I have a personality that wants to taste delicious things while they’re in their best condition.”

Ricardo: “I see. I don’t have any standards of tasty or nasty in a fight to kill each other. —Ya haven’t done any unnecessary things to Ana-bo, have ya?”

Diddley: “Would you have been more passionate about this if I did?”

Ricardo: “I’d be about to toss ya into boilin’ oil, ya dolt.”

Their banter serving as a trigger, Ricardo took one step to close the distance between him and Diddley’s chest. Diddley intercepted him with his four broadaxes, swinging them towards his broad frame with varying trajectories to each of them.

With the wind blowing around him, Ricardo dodged the strike of the first broadaxe by lowering his posture. After deflecting the two following strikes with his machete, he greeted the Skin Wearer with a front kick before the final attack reached him, flinging him away.

Ricardo: “Goh, ruyaaah!”

Along with a war cry, the machete was swung down towards the staggering Diddley’s head.

Diddley caught the blow, one that could even split a giant rock in half, with the two broadaxes he held above his head. Steel collided against steel, and sparks flew. As they were about to enter a competition of strength, the multi-armed man lashed out using his remaining two arms. Ricardo immediately fended off the broadaxes that approached him from both sides, using his breastplate to do so.

His ribs creaked, and the impact even passed through the organs behind them. Vomiting out a glob of blood that surged up his throat, Ricardo leapt backwards using the momentum of having Diddley pushing against him. He broke into a fit of coughing.

Ricardo: “Kah, peh, peh! Damn, you’re pretty good at this!”

Diddley: “You’re good as well, Mister Wolf. Well then, let’s start taking this seriously.”

Diddley responded with a persistent, wide smile to Ricardo, who spat out blood and verbal abuse. Immediately after that, the multi-armed man’s giant frame disappeared from his sight as if it had been blurred out from sight. A four-armed anomaly prowled within the dark night.

Ricardo: “He can pull that off with that body of his?”

Ricardo growled, narrowing his eyes in the dark at Diddley’s unexpected display of the arts of stealth.

He had not thought that the man with an incredibly self-assertive appearance would be able to dive into the darkness so spectacularly, like this. The berserker was absent in his field of vision, and the thick stench of blood in the air prevented him from tracing his movements with his sense of smell.

If Diddley had covered the area in blood for this purpose, then he had an eye for some tough tactics to face, unexpectedly.

Ricardo: “—hk,”

Instantaneously, he swung his machete up just as there was a sound of something cutting through the wind. Their weapons clashed, and Ricardo sensed he had turned aside three strikes in total, judging from the impact he felt in his hand. Canceling out three gigantic broadaxes with one swing was the fruit of Ricardo’s abilities.

However, if one of the four strikes had made its way through, then it meant that Diddley’s tactics had bested him.

Ricardo: “Ghn…”

A broadaxe sunk into his left shoulder, severing his wire-like fur and dense muscles. Fresh blood spewed out, pain and fury exploding in the back of Ricardo’s throat.

Diddley: “Uha~h! I can’t cut it off with one broadaxe!”

Yelling with delight, the berserker flipped backwards with fearsome nimbleness, lurking back into the dark night. The sound of him stepping on grass, which would mean he had landed, could not be heard. His skill in melting into the darkness was akin to facing a wild beast.

It could be said that the way he carried himself was like a living nightmare.

The incarnation of a nightmare that wore the skin of those it killed, and brought forth death with its four arms. It was a strong, vivid image.

Diddley: “How is it? How is it, how is it, how is it? Are you enjoying my dance?”

The source of the slight sound of the ground being kicked, and the thick, sticky voice did not match.

A strange gait he used to set his voice and footsteps independently from each other, deceiving Ricardo’s eyes with his art of stealth, his ears with his voice, and his nose with blood. Ricardo did not have the means to pursue the giant form that prowled in the dark.

Distancing himself, and then approaching. Slinking around, bouncing around. To the right and to the left, above and below, the number of wounds inflicted on Ricardo were gradually increasing from the strikes of the broadaxes that aimed to kill, lashing out one after another, changing their trajectory as they pleased.

The moment Diddley struck, even if Ricardo deflected his attacks, his senses relying on the direction of his opponent’s murderous intent, blocking up to three hits was the limit of his defense. The remaining strike would carve into his body, and it was only a matter of time until he was beheaded.

Ricardo: “Shit, dryah!—Fine, then. I’ll interrupt your damn dance by killing ya!”

Letting out a shout that would make others forget that he was facing a difficult situation, Ricardo carried his machete on his shoulder and jumped backwards. The Hound held up his weapon while looking straight ahead, with an abandoned house to his back.

If he made sure there was a wall behind him, then he could limit the direction of his opponent’s assault, having it arrive from his front or his side. Although he did not know “when” or “where” would Diddley make a move, it would be possible for him to shut off “where” he would strike.

Despite that, the berserker gave a delighted laugh at Ricardo’s martial judgement.

Diddley: “Ufufufufu! That’s right, you would try to do that! But, you know!”

Ricardo: “—hk!”

The next moment, Diddley came into view in front of Ricardo. However, he appeared far beyond the reach of both Ricardo and himself—he was not aiming to engage in close combat.

His broadaxes drew a wide arc upon being thrown, transforming into discs of death as they advanced on Ricardo.

Hurling the broadaxes was a move that brought certain death to their enemies, who would have taken a desperate measure, because they had not been able to break through Diddley’s art of stealth. — In order to deal with four attacks coming from four different directions at the same time, four arms were required.

Diddley: “I’ll kill you, and then I’ll show off your pelt to that girl. What kind of face do you think she will make?”

Ricardo: “…”

Laughing cruelly, Diddley spoke of the unsavory future actions, to be performed after he finished his job. Unable to put up with him any further, after having heard the contents of his speech and having looked at his expression, Ricardo opened his mouth wide.

—To subdue his opponent's lethal attack, Ricardo decided to play his strongest card as well.

Ricardo: "GRAAAAAAAH!!"

Opening his jaws, that were lined with sharp teeth, Ricardo released a roar of destruction in front of himself.

The very air rumbled, and the earth was turned over from the quaking din. The spinning broadaxes were blown away, swallowed by the massive shockwave, and the wave of sound landed a direct hit on Diddley, staining his giant frame with blood.

Diddley: "Wh…a…?"

His eyes widened from the unforeseen attack, Diddley tilted his head, his face covered with blood.

Ricardo: "Oooaaaarrrgh!!"

There, Ricardo lunged at him without a single pause in his movements, mercilessly swinging the machete he had carried on his shoulder.

The machete stabbed into the berserker's thick neck, sending his large physique flying along with the fur he wore, much to Ricardo's satisfaction, and caused a blood flower to bloom.

Diddley: "—ah,"

The sound of bones and flesh being squashed out of shape overlapped, and the berserker crashed down onto the ground.

Diddley: "Amazing… I was… fascinated by your… performance…"

His neck broken, Diddley uttered that out with a smile, letting out one, final breath of joy before he fell silent.

—That was the end of the Muggers' Trading Company, the evil that had grown rampant within the city of Banan.

The day after the incident, Ricardo and Anastasia were in the chairman's office of the Chuden Trading Company.

Sitting on the sofa and sipping some ryokucha, Ricardo sighed as he finished giving his job report to Chuden.

Ricardo: "So, we got rid of the fellows who were up to no good. We also retrieved Ana-bo, and our losses… ain't that big a deal."

Chuden: "It appears so. It seems like a lot of unexpected situations were piled on top of each other, but…"

Having listened to the detailed account of the whole event, Chuden, sitting on the opposite side of Ricardo, nodded deeply. Receiving his somewhat inarticulate response, Ricardo wrinkled his nose with, "What,"

Ricardo: "You're puttin' it ambiguously. Do ya have any complaints or somethin' 'gainst m…"

Anastasia: "Of course! Do ya have any idea of the dreadful experience I went through because of ya? Ya deserve a pay cut! A pay cut! Be strict with him, Chuden-san!"

Ricardo: "Ghn… I already said I'm sorry, haven't I, Ana-bo…"

Ricardo's expression clouded over as Anastasia continued ranting right beside him. Chuden had also shrugged his shoulders in exasperation, and Ricardo sincerely felt bad for his mistake this time.

Thanks to Anastasia's quick wits, they had succeeded in annihilating the Muggers' Trading Company.

However, having listened to how it all began, listened to the details of Anastasia being captured by the slave traders—Ricardo felt deeply indebted to her.

He hadn't expected that acting on the mercy in his heart to end up backfiring. The predicament that Anastasia went through during the whole incident was a consequence of Ricardo's carelessness, and therefore, completely his fault.

Ricardo: "But, we were able to shut down the Razcrew Tradin' Company thanks to it…"

Anastasia: "Think about what'cha did!"

Ricardo: "Yes, I'm sorry! I'll work hard to make sure nothin' like this ever happens again…"

Ricardo flattened his ears against his head, apologizing to Anastasia, who was fuming. Looking at their interactions, Chuden burst into laughter.

Chuden: "Jeez, ya two are… no, I understand. For the matter in hand, the credit will go to Anastasia. For Ricardo-dono, well, consider it somewhere between receiving credit and your mission being labeled as failure."

Anastasia: "You're too soft, really. Uncle's gonna get ahead of himself!"

Chuden: "If that's so, then it's alright if ya discipline him strictly."

Anastasia: "Aah, yes, understood. I'll discipline him strictly!"

Looking as if she had received official permission from Chuden to do so, Anastasia glanced sideways at Ricardo.

Her eyes made him anxious of the coming future, but at the same time, those were the eyes of a girl who had "liberated the stronghold". Ricardo was also proud, since it proved he had made the right choice regarding her.

Chuden: "Anyway, Anastasia, ya did an excellent job in connecting the dots between the slave traders and the brigands. Where did ya find out such a thing? Did ya hear them spill it on accident?"

Anastasia: "Ah, uhm, it's not a big deal. They had a leader standin' at the top, didn't they? I remembered seein' the jinglin', shiny stuff he wore."

Chuden: “Ya recall seeing his accessories?”

Anastasia: “I just remembered seein’ those while I was workin’ as a helper. And, I thought the incident had been all about the customers, who were buyin’ and sellin’ them, then bein’ raided by the bandits, based on what ya and Uncle were talking about. And then… I imagined maybe that’s why the gang of bandits that Uncle was lookin’ for couldn’t be found. In the first place, I thought it was strange that, for a bunch of bandits, they were goin’ after products that were hard to sell out before the price dropped, so…”

Chuden: “…”

Chuden held his breath, hearing Anastasia speak as if she had merely been lucky.

Beside her, Ricardo had also been left speechless by her bizarre way of connecting her ideas. What was even more terrifying than that, it was not the fact she had reached the correct answer using her eccentric way of thinking, but the method she used to deliver that answer to Ricardo.

Anastasia: “The siblings who were captured along with me… ah, they’re cat-humans, but when the older sister was bein’ beaten, the younger brother’s cheeks were also swelling up for some reason. I thought they were linked together through a Divine Protection. Then, they said they had one more siblin’ outside.”

Chuden: “…So, to make the map appear on the other sibling’s body, ya etched the map into the body of the sibling ya were with?”

Anastasia: “I’m glad I was able to take a single look at the map here. Thanks to that, I could draw it pretty accurately.”

The fact that she had been able to draw out the map she had only gotten a glance of, and a very precise one to boot, was not of much importance to Anastasia. Staring at the sky out of the window in the wolf carriage, measuring their location and the distance they had travelled by looking at the position and height of the sun, listening to the number of times the wheels rotated, and using those to add on to the map made out of injuries, were considered as trivial to her as well.

Once they had pinpointed where the slave traders were hiding during the night, in the camping grounds, it was certain victory for the mercenaries, the uncertain variable known as Diddley excluded. Anastasia had been the key figure for all of that.

Ricardo: “Though, how could ya do that inside a carriage that held ya captive…”

Anastasia: “On that luggage platform, the wall’d be warm where the sunlight hit it, and I’d been countin’ the time ever since the bell rang durin’ noon. And because I did all of that, the locations on the map were perfect, right?”

Ricardo: “Oh, uuh, you’re right…”

Ricardo nodded slowly. Just as she had said, perhaps it was not that impressive if she had done those one by one.

However, counting every second to keep track of time, ascertaining their direction from the position of the sun and the angle of the sun’s rays, coming up with a plan to escape, and engraving a clear-cut map that existed in her memories into a human body, accomplishing such things simultaneously was normally impossible. And she had done it all by herself, so what were he and Chuden able to say?

Chuden: “Well, well… you’re really beyond what I imagined.”

Anastasia: “—?”

Chuden seemed extremely satisfied about Anastasia, who innocently cocked her head sideways. He was the man who had noticed her resourcefulness, pulling her into his trading company from her former position as the poster girl of a tavern. He could not help smiling about her actions that had allowed him to recover what he had invested, and his conviction that his eyes hadn’t deceived him.

However, Ricardo was deeply concerned about Chuden’s expectations, fearing them as dangerous and risky.

That's why he deliberately spoke in a loud voice, rubbing Anastasia's head roughly.

Ricardo: "Well, I guess she was really beyond what we all imagined. I didn't expect Ana-bo to crush the enemy's captain before I came to save her, and even treat him like a slave! I'm astonished!"

Anastasia: "Th, that couldn't be helped! I thought it was dangerous outside, so I had to secure our safety inside… Also, he brought it upon himself since he's a slave trader… Stop that! My hair's goin' all over the place!"

When Ricardo had gone to pick her up, Anastasia had already placed a slave's collar onto the leader of the enemy, splendidly giving him a taste of his own medicine. There was no sweeter revenge than a slave trader having a slave's collar fastened around his neck.

Ricardo: "I promised I'll entrust the handlin' of my collar to ya, but maybe I was too hasty."

Anastasia: "Don't make fun of me! Even if it's a verbal agreement, I'll protect it with my lifeeee. What the heck are ya sayin'!"

Ricardo laughed while showing his fangs to Anastasia, who shouted at him with a reddened face.

He had omitted it from the report, but considering she was acting like this, then it was probably wiser for him to shut his mouth about Anastasia bawling and jumping onto him the moment she saw him come to pick her up.

Chuden appeared to be dumbfounded by their exchange. Since the focus of the conversation had veered off from Anastasia's achievements, he thought he should put an end to it for now.

Chuden: "By the way, about the little cat-humans… the siblings that cooperated with the arrest of the culprit… Where might they be?"

Finally, Chuden asked them about the people who had contributed greatly to their cause, noticing that they were absent despite having been brought up several times during their conversation. Ricardo and Anastasia both frowned at the question.

Ricardo: “About that… I’m not sure. There’s no doubt the eldest sister treated the injuries of her two little brothers with her Healin’ Magic, but…”

Anastasia: “She said, ‘Justice does not ask for anything in return~!’ and just… left.”

Chuden: “…What?”

Chuden’s inquiries were shared by Ricardo and Anastasia.

The three siblings, who had made a significant contribution to the extermination of the Muggers’ Trading Company, did not seek any rewards nor words of gratitude, and had disappeared as the morning sun rose, the sister carrying her brothers and dashing off gallantly. No, they had returned to the entrance of the city with Ricardo and the others, so they should be somewhere around Banan, but…

Ricardo: “Allies of justice… do those kids know what it means?”

Anastasia: “Of course they do… I hope. It’s true that I was saved by their justice and courage, and I think I’ll be able to meet them again somewhere.”

Those siblings were incredibly loud, so they would probably be easily found if one went on the search for them. However, what Anastasia wished to say was definitely not that.

Ricardo crossed his arms, responding to the smiling Anastasia with, “Right.”

Hearing that, Anastasia stretched out her body. And then,

Anastasia: “Well then, since I got an extra, unnecessary day off, I’m goin’ back to work.”

Ricardo: “Wait a minute! Ya know what happened yesterday and today. Do ya have enough energy to…”

Anastasia: “But I’ve been asleep the entire time. If you’re the bodyguard of this company, then ya should get back to work too, Uncle! Ya need to make sure you’ll never make a blunder like this one again!”

Being pulled by the hair on his arms, Ricardo was shoved out of the room by the small girl.

Once he had finished giving his report, he planned on chugging some alcohol and lazing around. However, such an insignificant wish failed to reach the ears of the enthusiastic girl.

Anastasia: “Your price fell from this huge blunder, right? Then the day I can buy ya ain’t that far away!”

With a wide grin popping across her face, the girl shamelessly daydreamed of human trafficking.

Feeling like he had been reduced to a harmless creature by her smile, Ricardo, ashamed, blew out a sigh.

He supposed being told that he was going soft was only natural, since hearing what she said made him feel good.

Filled with deep emotion, Ricardo scratched his head, and followed behind Anastasia.

Sunlight on the Water

1

One day, in the early afternoon, it started with a declaration that came out of nowhere.

Priscilla: "—Al, I am bored. You shall commence something that is of my interest."

Al: "Hey hey, Princess. Even a tyrant will be surprised by your opening sentence. I can't keep up with you either, if you don't change the pacing of your speech depending on the situation. What was that?"

Priscilla: "I am bored. You shall commence something that is of my interest. If you are unable to do so, I shall lop your head off."

Al: "Huh?! Isn't there no doubt that you're being a tyrant?"

Al shouted with a muffled voice, holding up both of his hands and gazing up at the sky.

Leaning against the iron fence on the balcony, when he stared intently at the magnificent, blue sky, he saw the clouds flow quickly across the wide expanse as they were blown by the wind. Absentmindedly thinking that tomorrow's weather might worsen—right after that, the tip of Al's chin, who was leaning backwards, was pushed by a strong force.

Al: "Dah! Whoa! Gyah!"

Just like that, Al's unsupported body half-rotated, using the fence as a fixed fulcrum. Coming dangerously close to being thrown out into the air, he immediately grabbed onto something with his right arm, desperately pulling over the soft and smooth sensation towards himself.

Al: "Th, tha, that was close! Right now, I was totally wandering on the border between life and death…"

Priscilla: “Unfortunately, your crisis is ongoing nonetheless… no, your current situation is more dangerous.”

Al: “Eh?”

While looking at the garden that was located right below the balcony, right as Al breathed out a sigh of relief, he was told that he was in more danger than before. Letting out a silly voice, Al returned his gaze to the balcony. And then, on the other side of the iron fence, he saw the pale arm that he had hastily clutched onto—the owner of the arm, smiling sadistically.

She was a girl with orange hair, clothed in a red dress that boldly exposed her luscious skin. Effortlessly supporting Al’s body with her left arm that was in his grasp, she extended her delicate, pale fingers towards him,

Al: “Pri-Princess?! Princess! With a more merciful heart, please hear me out! I only have one thing to ask of you, I promise!”

Priscilla: “Although it was only for a few seconds, you shall embrace the honor of touching my exquisite, gem-like skin, and sink to the bottom.”

Al: “Gyaaaaah!”

Along with the cruel pronouncement, the fingers on his right hand were forced off as if they were repelled from her arm. What she did was basically a flick to the forehead, only that she did it on his fingers instead, but the speed and power of the flick was in a different league. A shrill sound resonated, and the force of it sent his whole body airborne.

Blown backwards with the feeling of floating in the air taking control over his body, while remaining upside down—he was plunged headfirst into a body of water, submerging below the surface.

“Ri, ri, ri, right now! I feel like Al-sama has fallen into the pond!”

Priscilla: “Oh, Schult. You have shown your face at the right moment. Here, I have a desire for tea, so you shall promptly prepare it. It is your job. Do not make me wait."

Schult: "Y-Yes! Of course! But, Al-sama also looks like he is in trouble!"

With bubbles floating out from the gaps in his helmet, Al sank down into the rather deep water. In the distance, he could hear the concerned voice of the boy, as well as a boisterous laugh that came from the girl who was using his predicament as an appetizer for her boredom.

—I wonder what the heck I'm doing.

Thinking that, Al kicked out at the bottom of the pond, propelling himself up to the surface with a powerful thrust.

2

At the southwest area of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, this place was known as the Barielle Barony, which was governed by Baron Leip Barielle.

Leip, the lord of the domain, had laid down a rule of tyranny that was hated by all of his people. He had also imposed heavy taxes and made excessive labor mandatory, which caused the Barielle Domain to be referred to as a penal colony on one occasion.

However, during these few months, the bad reputation of the Barielle Domain had disappeared into the shadows. Far from that, rumors were circulating around, saying that the relations between the lord of the domain and the people were at an all-time high in recent years.

All of that was because of Leip, who had a change of heart after taking a young, intelligent, and beautiful woman as his wife, the fruit of him starting to make dedicated efforts for his people—not. Every one of the people knew that wasn't the case.

The change had occurred not in his heart, but the lord of the domain himself. Namely, although Leip had been managing his domain, he came down with an illness, so his wife, who became the lord of the domain on his behalf, had improved the domain's relations with her own ability.

Since Leip had fallen ill, the fate of his territory was entrusted in the hands of the elegant woman, replacing Leip's position as the new lord of the domain. Her talents were regarded as something that was divine, and she had captured the hearts of the people all at once.

Taking the place of the previous lord that continuously exploited his people, was a female lord who administered a reign that supported her people. With her unprecedented, dignified beauty, as well as her frequent observations of the territory that made her easy to approach, the people of the Barielle Domain were captivated by her existence.

That was the reputation of the compassionate woman, admired and praised by the people as the "Sun Princess".

Al: "…If word gets out that the Sun Princess tried to drown her attendant by kicking him into the pond, I have no idea what the people are gonna think about that."

Priscilla: "Do not speak of something that is scandalous as that. To begin with, the dead do not have a mouth to make their voice heard… Comparing the claims of you, a ruffian who is as good as a suspicious man, and the beautiful me, who do you think will the people believe?"

Al: "What you said right now is especially scandalous, without a doubt!"

Al asserted with a thumbs up, while sitting cross-legged near the pond at the garden of the mansion.

He was drenched in water from head to toe due to being submerged in the pond, and his clothes, let alone his underwear were soaked as well. Exposing his zori to the sun by taking them off, the upper half of Al's body became naked as he took his vest off, struggling to wring it out.

Putting the fabric in between his chin and chest, he used his right arm to squeeze it forcefully. It was only natural that he was having a hard time twisting the water out of his clothes, as he was one-armed, since his left arm wasn’t at where it should be.

Schult: “Al-sama, I will squeeze it! Please leave it to me!”

Unable to stand by and watch Al continue struggling, the young boy decided to raise his voice. Having a tender and adorable face and wearing a small butler uniform, his appearance was heartwarming because it looked like he was trying to do something that he couldn’t do just yet.

However, even such feelings were—

Priscilla: “Halt. It will be troublesome if your fingers were roughened from carrying out washing such as that. Shall your comfortability deteriorate, I will immediately dismiss you from the position of lying by my side.”

Schult: “Wah, wah, wah! Priscilla-sama, I will be surprised if you hugged me so suddenly…!”

Just as she took him in her arms from behind, the boy with a reddened face—Schult, shrunk into himself. Looking at his embarrassed expression as he was being tucked into the girl’s arms, it was a mystery how the smile-provoking impression that he had given earlier had changed into an immoral feel, to the extent that it was almost strange.

Priscilla: “What, Al? For what reason are you staring at us absent-mindedly with an idiotic look on your face?”

Saying that, the orange-haired girl who had Schult in her arms smiled daringly.

She was certainly the sun—someone with radiant beauty so bright that it would blind the eyes of the people who laid their eyes upon her. Orange hair that shimmered in the sunlight and eyes that were of flames that blazed fiercely. With the engrossing charm that she had, as well as her refined limbs that were exposed without regret, she enthralled the hearts of those who saw her, regardless of if they were a man or a woman.

A girl that left an impression so strong, that even her red dress didn't look good enough compared to her. She was the very Sun Princess who managed the domain in place of her husband, Priscilla Barielle herself.

Al: "Ah, no, I was just double-checking that oneshota[8] is nice, yeah. Thank you for the meal."

Priscilla: "Again, that is a word that I do not know of. Is that another one of your hometown's 'Great Waterfall Language' or whatever it is?"

Al: "Yeah. Also, there's water here and there in my helmet, and it's hard to see what's in front of me. It's like that."

Lining up vague excuses, Al put his hand on his helmet, making it ring as he adjusted it. The clacking sound came from the welded part of the black steel helmet that he always wore on his head.

Schult, still held in Priscilla's arms, widened his eyes as he watched Al fiddle with his helmet.

Schult: "Helmet! Your helmet will rust if you leave it like that! If your helmet is gone, then you will be headless! It's scary! You need to dry it quickly!"

Al: "Your misunderstanding is cute, but it's not my head's made out of iron, so I won't be headless, y'know? And there's no need to worry about this helmet getting rusty anyway."

Schult: "Eh? It will not rust? You also have a head… it's a little bit disappointing."

Al: "I don't know what part of it is disappointing, Schult-chan."

Al smiled wryly at Schult, who seemed saddened for some reason, and then slapped the water out of his helmet by hitting it.

Al: "This helmet's been specially made. It's something that I have quite a connection with, see that?”

Priscilla: “Huh, that is the first I have ever heard about it. Where have you stolen it?”

Al: “Why is your first choice ‘steal’?! Come on, put more faith in me!”

Priscilla: “I cannot think that someone of your resourcefulness is able to buy something of that caliber. Where have you stolen it?”

Al: “It’s from the gladiators’ Colosseum that I was in a long time ago—! But, it’s not like I stole it! It’s just that when I was running away from that place, a kindhearted guy gave it to me. It was being displayed in the Colosseum, so I think it’s a pretty decently made helmet. Maybe.”

The moment the word “gladiator” popped up in Al’s explanation, sorrow flitted across Schult’s expression for a brief moment. However, the attitude of Priscilla, who didn’t even bat an eye despite hearing the same word, made Al a little bit happy.

Priscilla: “You were one of the gladiators at Vollachia, indeed. If that is so, then you must be from somewhere on the Gladiator Island Ginunhive. That helmet would be an item associated with the Gladiator King, or more accurately, a replica.”

Al: “I can’t even hide anything from a knowledgeable human! Yeah, you’re right, I was forced to work at the Gladiator Island for so long. I also dropped my left hand there. The helmet’s the alternative for my severance pay.”

Al spat out in such a manner, half-sulking at the fact that his personal history had gotten profoundly exposed. Anyway, setting aside where he came from, it was true that his helmet was specially made. There was no need to take it off and dry it.

Al: “So, it’s no use even if you make a curious face like that, Schult-chan.”

Schult: “Ah, um, I am not actually curious about it! Men aren’t all about their faces!”

Al: “That isn’t even a follow up! And it hurt me unnecessarily!”

Failing to console Al, Schult’s shoulders sagged dejectedly. Patting the boy’s head, when Priscilla casted a sidelong glance at the helmeted man,

Priscilla: “What, a man’s value is not determined by his face alone, however, his face is one of the standards that ultimately decides his worth. Schult, you are also to not forget that you had gained my favor because of your lovable appearance. You must hold back your growth as much as possible. Also, I will be unforgiving of any unwanted hair.”

Al: “At least make it an order that he could work out somehow by putting in effort, Princess.”

Schult: “I-I will do my best…!”

Al: “See! Schult-chan’s straightforward, so he believed it.”

As Schult made his declaration while clenching his fists, Al gave him a pitying look. However, to Schult, devoting himself to Priscilla was something that was pretty much the same as his reason to live. It would be insensitive to get in the way.

After choosing which direction her attendant would be going down with a casual remark, Priscilla drew out her fan from her cleavage. No matter how many times Al saw the same gesture, it was a bold hiding place that was also pleasing to the eye, but Priscilla covered her mouth with the fan, and,

Priscilla: “Hm, the boredom that had been diverted has returned. Al, before long, you shall provide your next act of entertainment. I have enjoyed seeing you drown in the water. Next shall be… hmm, shall you dance atop a fire?”

Al: “Ohh, that’s a good idea. I also felt like drying my clothes right now, hey, idiot!”

Priscilla: “Despite being about to accept it once, why have you come to your senses so abruptly? What was that, right now?”

Al: “I’m just playing the straight man after pretending to go along with the silly man, but don’t make me explain. You’re gonna shave down my heart.”

When Al shrunk bank, discouraged, he could see that Priscilla’s mood was starting to tilt towards the sullen side. She was as fickle as a cat, but she was far more violent than one. That was what was scary about his master.

Al tilted his head to the side in contemplation, unsure of what to do although he wanted to humor her in some way or other.

Priscilla: “As a jester who serves to entertain me, you shall always remain conscious of your minimum duty. Adhere to Schult’s example. If it were my words, that one has the willingness to accomplish it, whatever it is.”

Al: “That’s way too much of an unreasonable demand.”

Priscilla: “It is not. Schult, tell me a story that will alleviate my boredom. Right now, at this place.”

Schult: “Eh?! Ah, yes, I will do my best. Umm, umm…”

Since Al couldn’t comply with her wishes, Schult was chosen to be on the receiving end of Priscilla’s tyranny instead. Seeing the boy thinking as hard as he could to come up with something was starting to weigh heavily on his conscience, so he attempted to stop it, but—

Schult: “Ah! I remember one thing! Just a while ago, a housemaid-san was talking about a rumor.”

His face brightening up, Schult spoke with his hand raised in the air.

Schult: “I heard that there’s been many cases of people going missing, in a village that’s at the south of the domain! There’s a forest near the village, and it’s said that anyone who comes close to the spring will not be able to return! It’s a rumor about the ‘Nightmare of Ladrima’. Ooh, it’s scary!”

Al: “What the heck? With you saying stuff about me being headless and all, do you like stories about hollows[9] or somethin’?”

Smiling wryly at the realization of Schult’s unexpected interest in hollows, Al let the water fall out from the gaps in his helmet. After that, letting out a metallic clunk from the welded part of it, when he turned to Priscilla with a “Hey, Princess,”

Priscilla: “The village in the south, ‘Nightmare of Ladrima’, a spring that causes people to disappear… I see.”

Seeing Priscilla muttering wearily made Al have a bad feeling about it.

And so, the bad feeling that he had became a reality before he could make a move.

Priscilla: “Interesting.”

Priscilla said, closing her fan and pointing the tip of it towards Al and Schult,

Priscilla: “It will be enough to relieve my boredom. Why don’t I resolve that incident by my own hand!”

Fully motivated and completely willing to stick her nose in a troublesome matter, Priscilla beamed, her smile as brilliant as the sun.

3

—Ladrima, the village that was located in the southern area of the Barielle Barony, was a normal village that could be found anywhere.

Far away from the kingdom’s main highways, any signs of its development were thin. It was nothing more than one of the many villages that existed within the domain, and the only thing that was slightly popular about it was its flowers, which were the village’s specialty. The villagers lived their lives with little change because they liked it that way. Because of that, in the present day, Ladrima Village was thrown into an uproar due to the strange incidents that rarely happened to them.

Al: “…Well, that’s why I said that we should disguise ourselves before coming here.”

Priscilla: “Do not utter such foolish things. Why is it necessary for me to disguise myself and elude the attention of the people? There is not a reason that exists for me to feel ashamed. The commoners shall burn my influence into their memories to their heart’s content.”

Al: “I’m saying that it’s to make sure we don’t stand out, not about feeling ashamed, but… I guess it can’t be helped now.”

Scratching the back of his neck, Al sighed at the gazes that were directed towards them. All the staring was coming from Ladrima’s villagers, who were surprised by the intruders that appeared so suddenly, which was a reasonable reaction.

After all, the dragon carriage that pulled up to the village was embellished by gold, silver, and jewelry, which was basically the exteriorized form of a nouveau riche’s tastes.

Along with a vivid, eloquent golden carriage, if an extraordinarily beautiful girl came into view in addition to that, it was only fair that the villagers would be confused, unsure of what was going on.

Just as Al had thought, a large portion of the villagers’ astonishment were directed towards Priscilla and the dragon carriage, but he wasn’t aware that quite a few of them were staring at the one-armed, helmeted man with an eccentric outfit.

If it was the case of standing out, then the master and servant were similar in that sense. Anyway,

Al: “Firstly, the basis of an investigation is making steady progress by gathering information from people, but…”

Priscilla: “Slow and steady investigations do not suit me. We shall immediately head towards the spring that was brought up earlier.”

Al: “I thought that you’d say that! Schult-chan, can you keep company with her?”

Since his master hated the sound of words such as ‘slow and steady’, as well as ‘little by little’, it seemed like she had no intention to follow the ironclad rules of investigation. With Priscilla already having grown tired of waiting, Al tried to entrust her to Schult, who was also accompanying her.

However, there was no response from him. Al turned around, only to see the young butler running his eyes over a large book with his undivided attention, while making a solemn expression on his face.

Al: “Schult-chan?”

Schult: “Ahh! Ah, I’m sorry! I was too focused on the book!”

Al: “Scolding you with ‘That’s neglect of duty!’ can wait. What’s that book?”

Schult: “Priscilla-sama gave it to me! She said that it would be useful if I remembered the stories when she is bored… She told me to keep reading it until I can recite it.”

As Schult had only recently learned how to read and write, he was struggling with the major challenge that had been given to him, to the point that smoke might erupt from his head at any moment. Priscilla’s fickle and self-indulgent actions were a common occurrence, but Al still felt bad for Schult, since the boy was at the mercy of her whims.

Al: “Princess, what did you teach Schult-chan this time? I feel sorry for him.”

Priscilla: “Knowledge will aid one’s life. Schult has a myriad of things that he must learn. Do not measure it with your pathetically small standards at your own discretion. However, I will not deny your feeling of wanting to admire a teary-eyed, assiduous Schult.”

While covering her mouth with her fan, Priscilla casted a sidelong glance at Schult. Her thoughtfully arranged plans were extremely difficult to find out. It also included the possibility of the ‘plan’ not even existing, however.

Al: “Schult-chan’ll need to stay strong. Though, the villagers’ restlessness will probably reach its limit pretty soon. We should really explain the whole thing to them.”

Priscilla: “In addition to that, you will be gathering information from the people slowly but steadily, you are saying? Well, I suppose that is alright. Until Schult finishes reading his book, I shall make an exception and go with you.”

Priscilla accepted Al’s apprehensive suggestion without protesting, much to his surprise. Before she changed her mind, he raised his hand while facing the people who were gathering around them at a distance,

Al: “Sorry for surprising you guys. We aren’t anyone suspicious. We might not look like it, but please think of us as something like an investigative team. Recently, there’s a couple of incidents that’s been occurring around this village, right? We’re here to investigate it.”

Gesturing towards the three people in the group, including himself as he clarified the purpose of their visit, the villagers exchanged glances with each other.

Putting it honestly, there was no persuasiveness in what he said. Along with his claim that they weren’t suspicious, and the investigative team that consisted of a woman, child, and a helmeted man, there were too many dubious points. Al was already prepared for the information gathering to become complicated and arduous.

However—

“The woman by your side… I may sound rude if I say this, but is she the Sun Princess?”

Al: “Oh?”

The person that tentatively stepped forward was a man with short hair with a few gray hairs mixed in, who looked close to being middle-aged. He gazed at Priscilla, as if he was acting as the representative of the villagers’ opinions.

Receiving his gaze, Priscilla gave a small sniff, along with a "Hmph,"

Priscilla: "Not once have I ever called myself with that name. However, it is true that the commoners within the domain have been regarding me fondly as such. If you gaze at my eminent beauty that is identical to the sun, it is a reasonable conclusion nonetheless."

Man: "—Ohh, just as I thought!"

The man's eyes shone as he heard Priscilla's words, which were rather excessively self-conscious. And then, his astonishment and amazement having been transmitted to the other villagers, they all kneeled down simultaneously.

Man: "To, to think that the Sun Princess would actually visit us! We were consulting the surrounding villages about the spring, but…"

Priscilla: "It was passed from one place to another, and it has finally reached my ears. I have arrived at this village in person because of that. Surely, I am able to expect that you will not waste my effort in coming here by feigning ignorance, saying that it is a matter that has been already dealt with?"

Man: "Ye, yes!"

Taking control of the village's will within an instant, Priscilla gazed over at the kneeling villagers with satisfaction. After that, she turned around to face Al, who stood still the whole time,

Priscilla: "Here. What are you doing, Al? Making slow and steady progress is your task. I shall be displaying my authority like this. While I am doing that, you shall promptly fulfill your role."

Al: "That's fine by me, but… I dunno, but I'm not satisfied with that!"

When he went along with Priscilla to do something, there were times that Al seriously doubted if he was making the right call, or was actually mistaken. It was probably because he had never seen her fail.

Priscilla: “Naturally. After all, this world is made to be convenient to myself.”

Saying her signature phrase dauntlessly, Priscilla laughed as she gave Al a supportive push on the back.

Afterwards, thanks to the obedient and cooperative villagers, the gathering of information progressed quite smoothly.

Al: “There’s a forest next to the village, and there’s a spring in it. And, during these two months, they say that the people that headed for the spring all disappeared one after another. First, it was a villager, then it was the person who went to look for the missing villager, and then it was someone who stopped by, and then…”

Priscilla: “An unusual rumor had been spread, and once in a several days, there will be someone who would approach the spring and then vanish. —What a peculiar, absurd idea it is.”

Priscilla narrowed her eyes against the information that had been gathered from the villagers, which was organized and presented to her in a straightforward manner. She sounded terribly bored, but Al had the same opinion as her.

Undoubtedly, it was no more than the saying: “a mummy hunter becoming a mummy”[10] consequently happening in real life.

Al: “They also said that they sent out search parties from the village over and over again, but the end result was always terrible. Apparently, the forest becomes foggy, and they were alone when they realized it. There were also instances of some managing to come back safely, but some people also don’t come back. So, that’s how a missing person incident happens consecutively.”

Priscilla: “That is not enough of a reason for the continuous damage that has been done to this village. The foolish commoners who dare to venture into a dangerous forest, are surely not limited to the people in this village. What lured in the outsiders?”

As expected, Priscilla was looking at things differently. Impressed by what she focused on, Al whistled to express it, but his whistle didn't give out any sound. Before he incurred Priscilla's displeasure with the noise that sounded like a hoarse sigh, he cleared his throat with an "Ahem,"

Al: "This is the masterpiece. It's about this spring, but it was exaggerated even before the rumors were spread. Approaching the spring, you will be swallowed up by the fog. If you manage to pass through it… supposedly, you can meet the dead."

Priscilla: "—Huh. Meeting the dead, I see."

Al: "There's also rumors of it being connected to the afterlife or whatever, but both of them are a bunch of nonsense. But, unexpectedly, there's no end to the amount of people that are being tricked by that rumor. As of now, only a few dozen people fell victim to it, but it could turn into a major incident if the numbers keep increasing."

If the source of the rumors—the root of all evil wasn't resolved quickly, then it could develop into a situation where the country has no choice but to move. Once that happens, even if the issue was settled, Priscilla's capabilities as the lord of the domain would be questioned.

As someone who was waiting to participate in the Royal Selection, it would be preferred if she was prevented from being put in a bad position. Thinking from that point of view, Schult's choice to pick up the rumor of the incident was absolutely correct. Because of that, they were able to make moves that were necessary to solve the problem.

Al: "What do we do, Princess? Forming a quick investigative team and stamping out the issue could be one choice we could make…"

Priscilla: "Obviously, we shall immediately head into the forest and inspect the actual spring. If it is a problem that I am able to settle, then I shall put an end to it with my own hands. Are there no objections?"

Al: "Are you serious? By heading into the forest, you mean… you would go in there? Bugs might jump outta there, y'know?"

Priscilla: “Fool. Is that enough of a reason for me to withdraw from it? First of all, my radiant authority repels the likes of insects.”

Declaring something that couldn’t really be asserted as a lie, Priscilla appeared to be fully motivated to enter the forest.

That wasn’t a decision that was meant to be praiseworthy, since Al knew that Priscilla didn’t say that just because she wanted to deal with the problem right away. It was just that he thought that she seemed rather proactive in resolving the issue. Unlike her usual self, she was being supportive.

However, the level of Al’s bewilderment was not as much as the villagers that just heard of Priscilla’s plan.

The idea that the representative of the lord of the domain, Priscilla, would be directly venturing into the forest, provoked a type of perplexity that made them feel like their world was turned upside down. Panicking and all flustered, the villagers attempted to stop her from doing so.

Man: “We, we cannot let the Sun Princess do such a dangerous thing! If you insist that you must go, then we will follow you! Every villager will aid…”

Al: “Wait, wait, wait, wait! I know that you’re worried, but every villager?! Don’t be ridiculous. We won’t be able to move a muscle if a huge crowd comes with us!”

Al spoke up, alarmed when the chief of the village lost his cool, but it seemed like the man wasn’t the only person to believe in the reckless plea that he made on the spot. The villagers genuinely looked ready to accompany Priscilla.

The chief gripped his fist tightly, a slight tremor in his voice.

Man: “The previous era of the lord of the domain felt like hell. Words are not enough to describe our gratitude towards you, the Sun Princess, who is now governing the domain instead of that lord. At least, please let us be your meat shields!”

Priscilla: “Hm, hm. That way of thinking is not bad. You are doing quite well for a band of commoners. Do not forget the loyalty that you are pledging to me."

Al: "Is it the time to be saying that?!"

Priscilla sounded content, but it would only be troubling and burdensome even if they brought along a ton of people who were unable to fight.

Using his vocabulary to its fullest extent, Al struggled to cajole the villagers into stopping them from providing their assistance.

Al: "We really appreciate that you guys feel that way, but there's no point in overloading ourselves with meat shields. The Sun Princess wishes for you guys to stay here quietly, waiting for good news."

Priscilla: "That is quite a convenient interpretation of my words."

Al: "The Sun Princess wishes for you people of the domain to remain safe! Hurrah, long live the Sun Princess!"

Villagers: "L-Long live the Sun Princess—!"

When Al lifted his arms into the air with desperation, the villagers were enticed into doing the same whilst raising their voice. The situation was being developed way too forcefully, but with this, Al hoped that he was able to put a stop to the villagers' self-sacrifice.

After that, all they had to do was hurry up and leave before the villagers came to their senses.

Al: "Let's go, Princess. Life is limited, but the possibilities are infinite. Let's go to a hopeful tomorrow."

Priscilla: "Mh, let's go, was it? That is a new word from the 'Great Waterfall Language'. I like the sound of it."

When Al gently tugged at Priscilla's hand, she followed him without getting angry nor protesting. Behind her, Schult was still grappling with the contents of the book, following them while looking like his head was going to explode at any moment.

Priscilla: “Well then, we shall be settling the situation promptly. Let’s go.”

Using the newly-learnt word, Priscilla authorized the departure of the dragon carriage in a good mood.

The villagers saw through the gold-adorned carriage’s departure, giving Priscilla their three rounds of cheers all the while.

4

The forest with the spring in question had a peculiar ambience that floated around it, as if it was rejecting any person from entering it.

Whether it was due to the problem of the spring that was happening, or whether it was something unique to the forest that was there from the start, whichever it was, there was no mistaking that something malevolent was permeating the area.

Al: “Well, we’re ignoring that and trespassing on the forest without hesitation, though.”

Al muttered out calmly, while treading on the grass that peeked out from the ground and straining his eyes at the overgrown trees.

Several dozen minutes after departing from Ladrima, the group of three had arrived at their destination, and had already begun their investigation whilst trampling on the ground. Of course, they couldn’t ride through the forest in the dragon carriage, so the inspection was being conducted on foot.

Al walked at the front, using his Blue Dragon Sword to make a path by cutting down the greenery that blocked their way. They marched ahead in a way that the two people behind him were following after his footsteps, which were made by the firm steps of his zori. Anyway,

Al: “Wasn’t it better to leave Schult-chan at the dragon carriage, together with the driver?”

Turning his head to the side, Al spoke to the two people behind him —Priscilla, who was boldly heading further into the forest with her high-heeled shoes, and Schult, who was timidly tagging along while linking arms with her.

Upon hearing those words, the look on Schult's face morphed into an apologetic one. On the contrary, Priscilla glowered at Al,

Priscilla: "Fool. If Schult had been left at the dragon carriage, then I cannot see the point in bringing him with us. I am able to discern that you wish to be alone with me in the dark, but you think too much with the lower half of your body."

Al: "I didn't make that suggestion out of immoral thoughts! It's made out of the purer upper half of my body!"

Schult: "It's, it's alright! I will do my best so that I will not inconvenience both of you… ah! I will fall down! Muh! I endured it!"

Priscilla: "Hm, well done, Schult. I shall praise you for that."

Unlike Al, who had gotten his suggestion brushed aside, Schult looked delighted, complimented by Priscilla after nearly tripping over. It wasn't like he was jealous. Perhaps, maybe.

Rather than that, the slow pace they were walking at and the tense atmosphere was a larger issue to him. The uproar about the spring didn't draw too much of his interest, but he was getting stressed by how sluggish and leisurely they were being.

Al: "Why don't we just torch the forest? That way, it'll be quick and easy 'cause the spring will also evaporate."

Priscilla: "The number of foolish statements that you make have been increasing more than usual, Al. Firstly, how will you make up for it if you settled the incident using that method? That is as good as defeat."

Al: "Is it a problem of winning or losing?"

Priscilla: "Everything will be, if one regards it as such. Since losers continue being defeated without recognizing that, the belief that they will lose before the match even begins is ingrained into them."

Priscilla asserted fiercely, crossing her arms with a “To begin with,”

Priscilla: “I am also fond of flames. Burning objects makes me excited[11]. However, setting the forest on fire just because there are people who approach the spring… that is a lowly, wretched reason for the wildfire it would cause. How preposterous.”

Al: “What I don’t understand more than that are your preferences… But, okay, I get it. I’ll go back to cutting down the plants.”

Instantly deciding that it was meaningless to oppose Priscilla’s views, Al focused on creating a path they could walk on with his Blue Dragon Sword. To road to their destination was a trackless path. The forest was so dense that he could understand why many people went missing, but it also made him wonder if the reason why they were disappearing was unrelated to the spring.

There was not much of a reason for one to enter a forest that wasn’t that big. Although, that was only fair because it didn’t even meet the requirements of having a path so that people could pass through.

Priscilla: “Tempted by the forest’s spring, I see. What a hackneyed tale.”

Priscilla spoke out from behind, sounding like she was trying to stifle her boredom. Hearing that, Al agreed with a “Yeah,”

Al: “Apparently, the first person that went missing saw some magnificent light that danced in the forest. They were led by it, and went after it without thinking… And now, those who want to meet the dead keep getting swallowed by the spring one after another.”

Priscilla: “Wanting to meet the dead… It is increasingly being reduced into a hackneyed tale.”

Al felt like something was off with what Priscilla had just said. Boredom, anger, dissatisfaction, contentedness, joy—her whims were erratic and elusive, but what she muttered out didn’t match any of those emotions.

It was as if she currently felt an emotion that was something similar to envy or jealousy. That was what he thought.

Al: "…Princess, you don't have someone you wanna meet?"

Priscilla: "I have no idea. Recently, the only person I am familiar with who has passed is my beloved husband."

Al: "He's not dead yet. Looking from an outer point of view, he's just under medical care."

Priscilla: "He even leaves the care of his excretory system in the hands of others. That is surely the equivalent of being dead."

Al could no longer see any strange indications in her attitude, which wasn't even trying to hide her disgust. Ignoring it and shrugging his shoulders, he looked at Schult, who had remained quiet during their exchange.

Perhaps, the topic and he and Priscilla had spoken about was upsetting for a boy that was young as Schult. Just as he expected, Schult seemed to remember the person who was brought up in the conversation, his face turning white as paper.

Schult: "Master was… a bad person, right?"

Al: "The opposite of justice is another type of justice. There's a wise saying like that, but Master Leip can't be referred to as just, to say the least. He's a completely evil guy. Though, it's not like we're the just ones either."

Priscilla's husband and someone who was the original lord of the Barielle Domain, Leip Barielle had been scheming to seize the kingdom's real power by using her as his puppet. However, his aim has been shattered by Al and Schult, and he had already been broken down mentally, losing the ability to function normally in everyday life.

Al: "There were a lot of people who were happy to see him like that. It's evidence of Princess's popularity, but it's pitiful."

Schult: "But, I… at least, I will pray for his soul to be at peace."

Al: “I said he’s not dead…”

Al tried to say, but paused when he saw Schult fold his hands with a solemn expression. He supposed that it was alright that at least one person would earnestly mourn for Leip, hoping that the lord would become even a little bit better in his next life.

Priscilla: “Rah, stop that, stop that. It is a waste of time, praying for that gaunt, senile man.”

However, it seemed like Priscilla disapproved of the prayer that Al had turned a blind eye to. With a fiery look in her eyes, she shook Schult’s head, who was clinging on to her arm,

Priscilla: “If you have the time to spend on such trivial matters, return to memorizing the contents of the book.”

Schult: “Eh, ah, yes! I will memorize the contents of the book! Uhm, the first one is…”

Al: “Don’t bully a pure kid…”

Although Al touched on Priscilla’s immature behavior, Schult stopped praying and went back to his recitation of the book. Poor Leip, he thought as he internally put his hands together in a prayer for the lord instead, driving his sword into a remarkably thick branch that was in front of him and slicing it off.

Priscilla: “Speaking of, Al. You seem to reject the idea of meeting the dead, almost terribly so.”

Al: “Because there’s no way it exists. If we die, it’s over. We can’t meet the dead, and we aren’t allowed to try and meet them. It’ll only make us miserable. You have the same opinion, right?”

The space between the trees was small and narrow. Nicking a branch, Al kicked it in. It didn’t break with one hit. He bashed it with his foot again, but it still refused to break off. The wood was tough.

Priscilla: “Even if we have arrived at similar conclusions, with me and you, the processes that we have gone through to reach that are disparate. We cannot meet the dead. That is true.”

Al: “…”

With his third kick, the tree toppled over with a dull thud. Lifting it up with his shin and moving it aside, he continued creating the path—

Priscilla: “Or—is it that there is someone you do not want to meet?”

Grinding his teeth at the words that rang in his ears, his leg that he put too much strength in flung aside the fallen tree. It rolled across the forest floor in a disorderly fashion, disturbing the nearby leaves and branches, and Al blew out a long breath.

She was really a girl who would bluntly and mercilessly trample down the hearts of other people.

Al: “You know what, Princess. Do you really think I’ll talk about something as serious as that…”

Forcefully calming down his heart, Al feigned an easygoing attitude and turned around. However, his words didn’t reach Priscilla. It wasn’t only her, but Schult as well.

“…”

The area was foggy. And, Al was alone before he knew it.

5

Al surveyed his surroundings. When he realized it, his vision was clouded in white, and it felt like he was in a world that was only vaguely a forest. In fact, he was unsure if he really was still in the forest. Unable to sense the presence of the two people who were right next to him, he placed his Blue Dragon Sword on his own shoulder.

Al: “You’re kidding me. This is unfolding just as I heard how it’ll go like.”

The villagers’ testimony, the story that he was doubtful of, thinking that it was just a fishy tale, had become reality.

Entering the forest of the spring would cause the intruder to be captured by the fog, leaving them all alone. There were people who managed to pass through it and return, but if they were unlucky, then they would be dragged into the spring—

Al: “And they’ll be able to meet the dead, huh. Sorry, but that doesn’t make me happy.”

Depending on the person, it might be worth taking the risk of going missing for that, but reuniting with the deceased only made Al feel like it was uncanny.

Al: “Instead of that, I’m happier if I could accidentally touch[12] Princess under the cover of the fog.”

Prioritizing his ulterior motive over the sacred mystery of the spring, Al reached out his Blue Dragon Sword and parted the fog. The tip of the sword touched thin air, and he couldn’t detect the existence of the trees that were previously crowded around the area. It was unnatural.

Following the theory of when one became lost in an unfamiliar place, it would be wiser to stay put as much as they could. However, Al knew that his two companions, who were unconventional and unknowledgeable respectively, would probably not adhere to that.

Al: “I have no choice but to look for them, huh… Give me a break.”

Breathing out a sigh at the situation where he had no choice but to actively move around, he slowly advanced into the fog.

Fog being attributed to a sign of misfortune was an idea that was accepted in every part of this world. The kind he was surrounded in was different from the fog that would be primarily thought of as a bad omen, but it didn’t lessen its eeriness.

Raking away at the fog that was so thick that he could feel it, Al strained his ears, seeking to meet up with his two companions. He was reluctant to call out to them because of his instinct. Somehow, he had a bad feeling about it. It was—

"—Who is it?"

Al stopped in his tracks, cautious of the breath that he heard beyond the fog. On the inside of the helmet, what stirred his eardrums was the sound of someone else's breath, but it was too deep for him to think that it was Priscilla, nor Schult.

The other person obviously sounded like a man. None of his company matched that description. With tensions running high, Al braced himself.

"…"

In front of him, he could hear the faint sound of footsteps drawing near. Heading towards him expeditiously.

Surely, there was no way that the deceased would actually appear —.

"—I found you, traitor."

Al: "…"

As Al shuddered, an old man with a robust physique broke through the fog, appearing before his eyes. He was a white-haired elderly man who wore well-tailored clothes, and had eyes that were murky with ambition.

He was someone that Al recognized. Eyes boiling with hatred, the man glared at him,

"You are…"

Al: "I said he's not dead!!"

Before the man spat out his rage, Al directed a slash at him that diagonally cut him down.

"…"

Unable to react in time to the sudden act of violence, the old man received the full extent of the blow. Then, the man simply dispersed into nothing as he fell on his back, melting into the fog without leaving a single trace behind.

Watching the man disappear, Al lifted up his Blue Dragon Sword while breathing heavily. There were no bloodstains on its blade.

Al: "Hey, so it's really a fake story! At least bring the dead to me. The dead!"

At the sudden appearance of the old man who had been recently brought up in a conversation, moreover, who was still alive, Al expressed his anger towards the sloppy and careless supernatural phenomenon. No matter how he looked at it, what just happened was way too realistic.

It probably wasn't because it decided to listen to Al's opinion, but as he kept on ranting, multiple shadows emerged around him, switching places with the disappearance of the fake Leip.

A huge man who was armored from head to toe, a black-clothed man who held a long katana, a half-naked, smaller man who had blades fused to his fists, and there were also others that Al could recognize. He let out an involuntary sigh.

Al: "An assembly of fellow gladiators is fine by me, but what the heck? Did you guys die without me noticing?"

"…"

There was no response. Instead of that, the black-clothed man lashed out his weapon, drawing a horizontal line.

Al immediately closed the distance, crouching down to avoid the silver flash of the blade. He had challenged that one strike thousands and ten thousands of times. His body remembered what was coming. Meeting the knee that followed after the first strike with his own sword, Al skewered his opponent the moment he lost his footing.

The huge, armored man had the habit of raising his arm whenever he executed a powerful technique. The smaller man distanced himself from those who flung themselves at him while expecting to die, fearing the damage that could be done to him. Nothing had changed. In fact, they were worsened in terms of quality.

“They’re not faithful enough to the original—!”

Carving through the torso of the large man who raised his arm, Al threw the Blue Dragon Sword at the place where he knew that the smaller man would retreat, seeing that he refused to come any closer. Spewing out fog instead of blood from where they were fatally wounded, the imposters of his old friends vanished.

The next one that appeared wasn’t a gladiator. However, Al recognized his face as well. With all his gratitude, he swung his sword.

Al: “Thank you very much for the farewell gift!!”

He sliced through the neck of the gatekeeper, the person who had given the steel helmet to him as a parting gift when he escaped from the Colosseum. Watching the leering smile dissolve into the fog, Al confirmed that he repelled the second wave of enemies.

Al: “Goddammit, making me do something that leaves a bad taste in my mouth… Everyone was alive when I ran away from there in the first place. Ah, it’s only Ghajit that I killed.”

Just as what he did to the imposter, Al had killed Ghajit by skewering him in the stomach. If that was it, then it could be said that he certainly did meet the dead.

Al: “Smells fishy… Well, it’s out of the question if you can’t pick who you want to see.”

It would only perplex the person who went to meet the deceased, if the people they were previously affiliated with were haphazardly summoned left and right. To begin with, the living were also appearing, so the preconditions of meeting the dead had already fallen apart.

Al: “Though, I’m dealing with the rumors in order. Is the afterlife the next thing I'll be debunking if things go on like this?"

In that case, he predicted that the name 'Al' would be put on the list of missing people. The requirements for that would be him being killed by the fog that he encountered moments ago, or having a separate, unpredictable event happen in the same area.

Al: "Seems like the third wave arrived while I was talking about that."

As Al assumed a stance with his sword held firmly in his hand, fed up with the whole thing, the fog in his sight began squirming around. The silent, swirling fog weaved itself to form a shape, molding it into the existence of a new being.

By now, he wouldn't be surprised no matter who came to him. —That was what he thought. However,

"…"

The being that was supposed to be constructed by the white fog, was pitch black to the point that it completely filled up his vision.

Slender limbs that were cloaked by the color of darkness. The churning fog was engulfed by the jet black shadow that expanded vehemently, losing its original form and causing the world to be overwritten with ease.

—What was replicated was a forbidden being who shouldn't have been there.

Al: "—ah,"

A hoarse breath escaped from his lungs, and Al became aware that he was pinned down and rendered useless.

He had realized that this fog replicated the people that its target had some kind of connection to, whether they were dead or not. However, this… this was breaking the rules.

This transcended life and death. This was a blasphemous act against everything that ever existed.

Al: “Ah, aaaahhhhhh—!!”

Unexplainable, vicious fury flared up from within Al, making him let out a shout that was driven by his raging emotions.

He had to obey the voice that inspired his willingness to act, kicking off the ground and cleaving through the shadow in front of him, using every last bit of his strength. That was what he needed to do.

Despite that, his shout of determination rang shrilly, the foot that was supposed to kick the ground trembled, and the sword that he was planning to hack into the enemy with had slipped out of his loosened grip, falling down onto the floor.

He couldn’t move. He wasn’t able to move. It was impossible to do so, because it was hopeless.

Thousands, ten thousands, several hundred millions of tries. Even with all that, it was futile. —Even now, Al had been already certain that it was impossible.

“…”

His teeth chattering, Al felt like his knees could give out at any moment.

In front of him, the shadow began advancing slowly towards him. The black-clad being was wearing a dress that was of the same color as the darkness that hid her from the world. The hem of her dress swayed in the shadows, and her thin arms were lifted up while straightened.

He saw every one of her delicate, supple fingers. Silent, tender, and loving, they reached out for his defenseless neck.

He would be at ease if she touched him. He would be at ease. That’s why—

“…”

The sudden jolt of terror caused Al to crumple to the ground, landing squarely on his bottom. Just like that, the inadvertent petrification of his body had worn off. Doing everything he could to pull back, he attempted to distance himself from her.

Al: “S…top. I, I’m… I’m…!”

“…”

His voice cracking, Al’s shout refused to manifest as one. The shadow didn’t pay attention to his rejection, closing the distance that he had just widened, walking up to him and persisting in laying her fingers on him.

Al was on the verge of letting out a scream of despair, but—

Al: “Eh?”

The next moment, the shadow’s chest was pierced by a crimson, lambent sword from behind.

While he was taken aback by the sight that was unfolding before him, a blinding light emerged from where the blade had struck immediately after. A red and white refulgence swelled up one after another, and the darkness that was made out of the fog burst into flames instantaneously. Her whole body was fully blanketed in fire.

“—How frivolous. In the end, a counterfeit is nothing more than this.”

Beyond the fog that was evaporating into a scarlet blaze, the voice of the bored-looking girl reached Al’s ears. On the other side of the wall of flames that flickered between them, there stood Priscilla, a crimson sword held in one hand.

The power of the treasured sword had incinerated the shadow that was weaved by the fog. It had been, right in front of Al.

Al: “How, dare…”

Priscilla: “…”

Al: “Look at what you’ve done! In front of me, how could you… bhah?!”

Priscilla: “Hold your tongue. Do not point your misdirected anger at me, foolish commoner.”

As Al grinded his teeth, his body shaking with raw fury, Priscilla ruthlessly delivered a sharp blow to the side of his face with her sword. Tipped over by the force of the hit, Al blinked in surprise from the impact.

Al: “Ah, kah… Hh, Prin… woah! Hot! Gyaah! Fire! Ahh, fire!”

Priscilla: “This is your penalty for your insolence. With the flames of the Yang Sword, you shall become a little bald and reflect on your actions.”

As the result of receiving punishment from the heartless Priscilla, a part of Al’s helmet was lit on fire. He made an effort to put it out by desperately rolling around on the forest floor, sinking to the ground in a slovenly manner after the flames were extinguished.

Looking down at Al, Priscilla stuck her Yang Sword into the ground, letting out a disdainful sniff as she did.

Priscilla: “The more shackles that are chained to one, the more they will be tempted by these kinds of evils. The more one puts on a front of disinterest, the more likely they will be to turn out like this. How disgraceful. How laughable.”

Al: “P-Princess, are you the real one? You’re not fake, right?”

Priscilla: “If I step on you like I usually do, will the pleasure cause you to recall your memories?”

Al: “Wow, really faithful to the original! You’re the real one!”

Looking up at the beautiful girl who was tilting her head with a touch of her cruelty, Al was relieved, feeling that he had returned to the world that was within the territory of sanity.

Right before that, he still felt the effects of the terror that had been replicated, but now that it had been dissipated into the fog, he could tell himself that it was a counterfeit. There was no problem. There shouldn’t be.

For now, he could simply be happy with being able to meet up, and also how neither of them were harmed in any way.

Al: “You’re completely fine?”

Priscilla: “There is no possible way that I will be enticed by such a lowly illusion. Do not move unnecessarily from where you are. The fog will be clear soon. Schult shall be clearing it out.”

Al: “Schult-chan will? Why?”

Priscilla: “I have given him the answer. If Schult is not an egregious fool that knows no bounds, then there is no problem.”

With the mention of the young butler who wasn’t present at the moment, Al was puzzled by Priscilla’s doubtless, unhesitating assertion. However, his puzzlement wasn’t solved by words, but rather, it was solved by the results.

“…”

A twisting curve. It was definite, greatly distorting Al’s vision to the point that it could only be described as that.

Within the contorting realm, the scenery alone was wrenched out of shape, since there were no changes to Priscilla, who remained standing with her arms crossed. Leaving her and Al unharmed, only the world was given a tremendous twist, warping and tearing off. After that, the fog gradually came apart, shredded indiscriminately —

Al: “No way.”

Right after Al blinked his eyes, the fog that had been scattered around in huge quantities had completely vanished. He and Priscilla were back inside of the forest—and in addition to that, they were transferred onto a patch of grass on the side of the spring.

In front of the dumbfounded Al, a spring that wasn’t that large was stretched across the area. The water was crystal clear, with countless water weeds floating on its surface, and he could see that the petals were swaying in the wind here and there.

And, a boy was standing in the middle of the spring, waist-deep in the water with both of his hands raised in the air.

Al: “Schult-chan?! What are you doing?!”

Priscilla: “Schult has banished the evil that has been encircling this spring. Creating the fog, leading astray those who lost their way, and submerging them into the spring when they have been spellbound. A bewitching, hideous evil such as that."

Saying that to the astonished Al, Priscilla glared at the spring with an expression of displeasure. Noticing that the two were present, Schult's face lit up with joy, and he started heading in their direction.

Schult: "Pr-Priscilla-sama! Al-sama! I found it, as you can see! The Water Mirror, it was sunken under the water just as you taught me!"

Al: "By 'Just as you taught me', you mean…"

Schult: "In the book that was given to me, it was just as what was written in the fairytale!"

As Schult said that while wading through the water, making his way back to them, Al was struck speechless, remembering the book that the boy had been reading. The book that Priscilla had made Schult read until he knew it by heart, making him recite it even when they were in the forest. The book was about—

Priscilla: "Springs, lakes, and the edge of the water. Near those places, there are an abundance of anecdotes such as this one. If that is so, in areas of water where its flow is concentrated into one place, mana is prone to piling up in there. Naturally, although rare, there are cases where it would give rise to phenomenons like this."

Schult: "The secret of how not to be tempted by the monster, or the hollow, at the edge of the water was written in it!"

Priscilla: "It is a fairytale to read aloud to children, amusingly."

Priscilla explained, casually closing one of her eyes, but Al's stupefaction remained lingering, unable to be subdued. That meant that she had already discerned the truth of the spring, right from the very moment where she caught wind of a part of the rumor.

Schult: "Priscilla-sama, this is the Water Mirror. I broke it, and the fog disappeared."

Jumping out of the spring, Schult made a dash towards Priscilla, even though he was soaked to the bone. In front of her, he handed over a faintly white, translucent crystal to her. That was probably the Water Mirror.

Priscilla: “Well done. I shall praise you for it.”

Schult: “Thank you very much! I am happy that I could be of help!”

As Priscilla received the Water Mirror, drawing back her chin, a broad smile spread across Schult’s face. Watching the two’s interaction from behind, Al scratched the back of his neck, feeling awkward.

Al: “So, is the case settled now? The incident was caused by the evildoings of the accumulated mana, or whatever.”

Priscilla: “—Like that, an incompetent one might have jumped to that conclusion before heading back.”

Detecting a hint of menace in her callous remark, both Al and Schult widened their eyes. Shortly afterwards, the Water Mirror burst into flames in Priscilla’s hand. Transparent chunks of mana were scorched by the heat, and then—

[—hhk]

The Water Mirror changed its form abruptly, flinging itself out of Priscilla’s hand. Two pairs of wings, a small, blue-colored body, and goggling compound eyes—it was an abnormal being that had the body of a human, along with the wings and head of an insect.

Letting out a high-pitched shriek, the misshapen being attempted to escape from the area.

However—

Priscilla: “—Do you really believe that I will let you escape with ease, Evil Spirit?”

The tip of the twirling Yang Sword sliced off the wings of the small being, boring through its torso and pinning it to the ground. Immobilized on the ground like a preserved specimen, the abnormal being thrashed its limbs around, struggling to free itself.

"—hhk"

Priscilla: "Do not chitter about like a bird. Combined with your appalling appearance, I am thoroughly disgusted by your existence."

Priscilla twisted her sword in an irritated manner, drawing out additional screams from the insect-like being. Witnessing such a scene, Schult fell down, his legs giving out, and Al gulped in a large breath of air.

Al: "Princess, is that a Spirit…?"

Priscilla: "It is as you can see. For the most part, the Water Mirror had disguised itself as something that was naturally created, in an attempt to wait until we have passed through. That shamelessness, as well as its audacity to underestimate me… is deserving of ten thousand deaths."

Al: "Ohh, it's an Evil Spirit. It's the first time I've seen one…"

Al grimaced, looking at the Spirit—the Evil Spirit that was desperately gasping for breath, skewered by Priscilla's Yang Sword.

Evil Spirits were a species of Spirits, but there were no differences between the two in a strict sense. However, as Spirits that harbored malice against both people and animals, the term 'Evil Spirit' had spread far and wide. Originally, Spirits were supernatural lifeforms that were represented by mana, mostly free from the rights and wrongs of the physical world.

On the other hand, it was a rare occurrence, but Spirits that evidently bore ill will towards those around it, such as what was inside of the Water Mirror, were born. They were called 'Evil Spirits' and were given the same treatment as witchbeasts, designated as the harmful enemies of humanity.

Priscilla: "This one had been luring humans to it by utilizing the ability of the Water Mirror, drowning them in the spring and absorbing all of their od. Presumably, it used that method to amass its strength. It is similar to the traits of a carnivorous plant.”

Her explanation implied that the missing people had fallen victim to the Evil Spirit’s scheme, over and over and over.

Having the desire to meet the dead, if the missing people had entrusted their single wish to the spring, and were able to reunite with the people they wanted to see before dying, then that didn’t sound too bad. However, if they were devoured with their wishes in vain, then—

Schult: “Priscilla-sama, this Evil Spirit…? What will you do with it?”

Priscilla: “Obviously, I will dispose of it. It went ahead with its barbarous acts within my domain. There is no atonement for that, no matter how many times I shall slaughter it. Yet, I am benevolent and generous. —Since although it is deserving of ten thousand deaths, I shall be settling it with only one.”

Schult seemed to hold a small amount of sympathy for the Evil Spirit that was letting out anguished screams of pain. In spite of that, Priscilla simply paid no mind to his pity.

Perhaps the Evil Spirit had found a ray of hope in Schult’s behavior, as it stopped its thrashing limbs, lifting its neck so that the boy could see it, starting to cry out as if it was making a desperate appeal. It looked like it was acting as if it was begging for help, as if it was saying that it would do anything for it.

Schult: “—h,”

Gazing at the Evil Spirit, Schult’s voice caught in his throat, tears welling up in his eyes. Even with him glancing over at her while being at a loss for words, Priscilla’s blood red eyes did not waver even in the slightest.

And then, before unnecessary friction was created between the girl and the boy, Al interjected.

Al: “Imagine this. I did it on impulse. I won’t do it again. I’ll turn over a new leaf. Even if it’s trying to tell you that…”

Schult: “Al-sama?”

Al: “You heard it back in the village. The first victim was led by a swaying light inside the forest. That means, this guy has been targeting humans from the very beginning.”

Evil Spirits were Evil Spirits, their nature wouldn’t warp into something else so abruptly. There was no reason for their malignity either, as they were purely an enemy against humanity. Because of that, there was no need for sympathy, nor compassion.

Priscilla: “At most, you shall gradually burn to death. With that, it shall be the repose of the souls of my people.”

When Schult fell silent from Al’s words, Priscilla openly declared as such, concentrating her power into the Yang Sword.

Following her will, the blade of the Yang Sword began to emanate a red-hued light. The brilliant, blazing flames snaked towards the edge of the sword, incinerating the Evil Spirit’s tiny body.

An earsplitting screech was released. However, the shriek was eventually swallowed by the flames, fading out slowly and surely, disappearing—cut off without any warning, never to be heard again.

That was the final act for the consecutive cases of missing people—The “Nightmare of Ladrima”.

6

Al: “From the bottom of that spring, I heard that the bones of the missing people were found one after another. Most of them were turned into piles of bones, but they say that they’ll somehow be able to tell apart who’s who with the accessories that the victims were wearing.”

A few days after the incident with the spring was resolved, Al passed down what he had just heard to Priscilla.

They were on the balcony at the second floor of the Barielle Mansion, during their tea time that was between their working hours. Priscilla, who was drinking the tea that Schult had made for her, frowned at the report from the man that appeared in front of her.

Priscilla: “That spring? What are you talking about?”

Al: “It’s the after story of the Evil Spirit-related things that happened very recently! You sound like you forgot it for real and it’s scaring me!”

Priscilla: “Spring, Evil Spirit… ah, you are talking about Ladrima. Do not unearth a topic that has already lost my interest. You will make me wonder what is happening.”

Al: “Is it my fault? Was it my fault? Okay, I’m sorry~!”

Apologizing to Priscilla, who looked both disinterested and dissatisfied, Al sat down on the side opposite to her. A slightly warm breeze was weaving through the balcony, and the weather was fine to the point that the warmth of the sun could make him drowsy.

Priscilla put back her cup on the table, sniffing at Al’s lazy attitude.

Priscilla: “To begin with, how can you unearth a story that is already over, in that deplorable state of yours? Just to let you know, you played a lesser part than Schult during that day.”

Al: “Stop! ‘Cause I can’t deny that! You forgot the whole incident, but you remember that?!”

It was hard to forget the truth of him being trapped within the Water Mirror’s illusion, becoming a hindrance to his companions. Al’s face reddened inside of the helmet as he was forced to recall the memory of it, pointing a finger at Schult, who was refilling the teacups.

Al: “Really, why didn’t the Water Mirror’s trap work on you and Schult-chan? I can understand why it didn’t work on you because you’re off the charts, but Schult-chan’s just a shota!”

Schult: “Ah, yes. I am just a ‘shota’…”

Al: “Sorry to say this while you look embarrassed, but shota isn’t a word that’s used to praise someone.”

As Schult laughed shyly, Al patted his head to the point that he was messing up his hair, moving his face closer to the boy. It was as if he was asking for the key to breaking through the illusion, which Schult responded by dropping his gaze to the floor.

Schult: “I didn’t do anything special. Before even that, what illusion…?”

Al: “We’re starting there?!”

Priscilla: “It is not a difficult topic. It is just that Schult did not have a deceased person that he wished to meet, nor did he feel like he had to put on a facade and conceal his desire to, because he does not have anyone that he seeked to reunite with. Firstly, his precondition of falling victim to the Water Mirror’s illusion varied from yours.”

Stealing back Schult from Al, Priscilla put the boy in between her cleavage. While looking at the enviable sight, Al narrowed his eyes, mulling over the contents of Priscilla’s clarification.

—The reason why Schult wasn’t caught in the illusion, was because he didn’t have the happy memories to fulfill the requirements of being trapped in it.

Being an orphan, Schult was found when he was on the verge of death, and he didn’t have any memories of his family, nor did he have any memories of joyous days from before he had been taken away by Priscilla. Because of that, the illusion didn’t work on him.

If that was so, was the negation of the effects of the fog a fortunate or an unfortunate thing? Which one was it?

Al: “At the very least, I don’t feel like I was fortunate…”

It was a period of time where he was associated with the living as well as the dead during the many encounters that he had in the fog, but to Al, all of those were unwanted reunions. Besides, every one of them were fake.

"…"

His expression hidden within his helmet, Al glanced over at Priscilla, who appeared to be delighted with Schult in her arms.

The girl who had pierced the shadows with the blazing Yang Sword didn't question him about what he had seen in the fog. Of course, she probably didn't even remember what she had burnt.

Although Al understood that she wasn't being considerate or anything, that it was just the result of how she ought to exist, he found solace in her attitude, feeling gratified by it.

Priscilla: "What is it, Al? Staring at me? You cannot exchange positions with Schult."

Al: "It's true that I'm jealous, but I'm not looking at you because of that! …By the way, you really didn't see anything in the fog?"

Priscilla: "Disappointingly, the only person I am familiar with who has passed is my beloved husband."

Al: "I said he's not dead! Even though I met him in the fog! Though he's alive!"

Among the various unwanted reunions that he had, meeting Leip was one of the most awkward experiences that he ever had.

Priscilla laughed softly at his revelation, and Schult made a surprised face. After continuing to laugh for a while, she gave a slight tilt of her head.

Priscilla: "By the way, Al. Where did you hear the report of the village that you have given to me just now?"

Al: "Ah, a messenger came from the village in question just a little while ago. They told me the whole story, gave their regards to you, and… oh yeah, the flowers were delivered to the entrance."

Priscilla: "—! You utter fool! Tell me that earlier!"

Schult: "Hyah! Pr-Priscilla-sama?!"

Her eyes lighting up at the last segment of Al's report, Priscilla swept Schult up like a princess, rushing out of the balcony. Al got a late start in chasing after her, who ran off at breakneck speed, but he immediately followed her with haste.

Like that, Al finally caught up with the two at the mansion's entrance—in front of a bouquet of large flowers.

Priscilla: "Yes, yes! Grandeur, elegant, and truly adorable. I shall praise the residents of Ladrima for it!"

Putting one hand on her hip in high spirits, Priscilla broke out into a wide smile at the bouquet—the flowers of the finest quality that were brought into the mansion along with the report, its red petals blooming opulently.

Priscilla's reaction was close to when she was given a luxurious, golden dragon carriage, when she saw many bizzare works of art, and also when she admired Schult. In other words, she was elated.

Al: "Are those flowers that high quality?"

Priscilla: "Ha, how pathetic it is to be ignorant. These are flowers that only bloom in a part of Lugunica, the forest of the spring in Ladrima, called 'Kurenai'."

Al: "Never heard of them… wait, what? Did you just say that they only bloom in the forest of that spring?"

Priscilla: "They only bloom during this certain period of time. It may well as be the one thing that makes that puny village worth existing."

Crossing her arms and lifting up her bountiful chest, Priscilla nodded over and over again as if she was ascertaining the quality of the flowers.

Staring at her serene expression from the side, Al understood why she seemed so eager to resolve the incident of the spring. In retrospect, she was strongly against burning down the forest.

Her beaming face told him the reason for this, that, and everything.

Al: “So, Princess, you saved that village because you were after those flowers from the very beginning, right?”

Priscilla: “Do not utter such foolish things. Ladrima is my domain. There is no way that I will grant them my acts of goodwill only because of that. —However, I will not deny that it is why I had taken immediate action.”

Unapologetic and with no intention to hide it, Priscilla walked over to the bouquet unhesitatingly.

If the truth of her actions were known, then the villagers that extolled her as a goddess of mercy would be baffled. Of course, there was no point in letting them know. There were things that were better off staying unknown, like how people say that ignorance is bliss.

Al: “In actuality, you did save the village. Even if you were prioritizing your personal desires.”

Because Priscilla wanted to adore the large, red-hued flowers, the actions she took to do so saved the village, and it ended up leading to the villagers giving her their support. It basically proved what she always said: “This world is made to be convenient to myself.”

Schult: “Priscilla-sama, where should I bring the flowers to?”

Priscilla: “You shall adorn my room and the entire mansion with it. While the flowers still contain life, they shall please my eyes with their beauty. Do make sure to treat them attentively so that they do not wilt.”

Schult: “Understood! I will do my best!”

Following Priscilla’s orders, Schult ran off in an effort to gather all the vases in the mansion. After watching the young butler’s departure, Priscilla noticed Al’s presence, and,

Priscilla: “Ahem, Al. What are you doing? If you have the time to stand there and do nothing, go and be of assistance to Schult. Assume that every one of these petals are worth at least two times more than your life.”

Al: “…You’re being too harsh, Princess.”

With Priscilla in a good mood, in high spirits, and her tongue being as sharp as ever, Al let out a shameful, wry laugh at her razor-sharp words.

And then, before his butt was kicked by the crimson girl who had the red flowers behind her—his cruel and compassionate master, Al rushed to take part in the preparations of carrying the bouquet of flowers into the mansion.

Arc 5:
The Stars That Engrave History

Volume 16

Chapters 1-19

Chapter 1:
It Always Starts With a Visitor

1

—He breaks into a sprint, launching himself forward.

Air breezes over the sweat that drips from his brow to his eyes. He blinks it away, ignoring it. His lungs ache with every breath. His innards twist into knots.

He grits his teeth and dispels all his pain. The only thing left in his mind is the world ‘goal’.

“—!”

Someone is yelling far in the distance. Their voice draws ever nearer, closing in on Subaru as he runs. With their call as his landmark, as his beacon, he sprints onward, onward—

“—!”

The frantic voice draws him in. Heedless of the white light swamping his vision, he runs. And,

???: “Goal, in fact!”

The second he crosses the finish line clumsily drawn underfoot, the sky and the earth swap places. Small weeds poke into the crown of his head, and Subaru instantly puts his hand to the ground for a forward roll. The habitual action kills his momentum, and with two more unneeded rolls, he lands sprawled out on the ground.

Subaru: “Bhaahhh! Auhhg! Everything hurts! Everything stings! But it’s over! I did it!”

Breathing breath after ragged breath, he still finds it in him to shout. He complains as he does to invigorate his faltering heart. He mustn’t feel that his fatigue is simply wear, or that his effort is simply exertion. He must remember that this is not the end, and there is still more to come. Every time he tries to dictate where the finish line is, to give himself that satisfaction, Subaru puts his hand to his chest and thinks of that night.

???: “Good job, Subaru, I suppose.”

A small silhouette enters Subaru’s view from above. A loveable girl with long, cream hair and an extravagant outfit—Beatrice.

Her fluttering dress looks out of place in the meadow as she presents Subaru with a towel. He accepts it and vigorously towels his head dry.

Subaru: “Ah, thanks. Was looking to cool down so this’s perfect.”

Beatrice: “I’ll tell you that Petra cooled it before you go pinning this on me, in fact. Go thank her and she’ll jump for joy, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Petra’s really considerate that way. But man, weird to see you out here, Beako. Something putting you in a different mood than usual?”

Subaru swings his arms as he sits up and slides over to Beatrice. She puts her hand to her hip, averting her gaze.

Beatrice: “Just whimsy, in fact.”

Subaru: “Oh wow so it was whimsy huh.”

Beatrice: “…And I wanted to personally see what you’re like when you’re putting in your best, I suppose.”

While keeping her gaze averted, Beatrice easily unveils her hidden intentions. She’s so much more honest now. Subaru feels keenly that time has earned him her trust. Beatrice looks like she wants to say something to Subaru as he grins, but,

Beatrice: “Now, this must involve more than just gallivanting about, in fact. What comes next, I suppose?”

Subaru: “I’ll have you know this gallivanting is pretty taxing on its own, mademoiselle. While I cannot say whether I’ll meet your expectations, I'm tackling the obstacle course of dreams next."

Beatrice: "…Ah, right, in fact. You mean the playground that Garfiel built in the forest, I suppose. 'Obstackle…?'"

Subaru: "Obstacle course. You don't have to force yourself to memorize it. Just ignore it."

Beatrice: "But Subaru, I want to understand every word you say, in fact."

The smooth line makes Subaru's cheeks relax even further. Beatrice looks puzzled by his reaction, before she realizes what she just said and her expression instantly shifts. Her cheeks are adorably pink as berries.

Beatrice: "N-No, I didn't mean it like th… it just came out that way, I suppose."

Subaru: "Nonono, no worries, I know exactly what you meant. Everything's cool, I love you too."

Beatrice: "You know exactly nothing, in fact!"

Subaru chuckles as he jumps to his feet and scoops a sour-faced Beatrice into his arms. She looks displeased in his hold, but makes no complaints about being carried.

Beatrice: "Subaru, you reek of sweat, I suppose."

Subaru: "Breathe with your mouth then. Or just drain the mana directly."

Beatrice: "I'll sap you dry if that's what you're asking, in fact."

Subaru: "You're gonna be the one crying after that."

Beatrice: "A-As if, I suppose! Cease your nonsense, in fact!"

With Beatrice in his arms, Subaru breaks into a run. His breathing returns to normal during their banter. Beatrice makes a perfect weight for running from the track in the field to the obstacle course in the forest. Since she’s far lighter than she looks. Basically a feather.

Subaru soars with her in hand, so light he may have grown wings.

2

Their new mansion is surrounded in just as much green as the old one. Shrubs grow in abundance throughout the verdant mountains. Subaru feels the cool breeze wash over his bangs as he launches into a run.

Subaru: “Okay! All! Right!”

The forest is so lush that it drowns everything visible in green. Here, Subaru sprints forward and lightly puts his hand to a sideways log, defeating the obstacle with only a small hop and his momentum. ‘Vaulting’ proves an effective means of locomotion in places strewn with obstacles, or in urban areas with copious buildings. Parkour champions the technique: a sport that Subaru often watched on television, all while amazed at the superhuman feats of the athletes. He never anticipated once that he would be training himself in this field.

Subaru: “Hup! Hah! Okay!”

The climbing apparatus is the star of this obstacle course that Subaru got Garfiel to construct. One large post composes the central pillar, while logs are assembled together in the space around it. It is essentially a classical jungle gym but with a slight avant-garde flair.

The thing looks a mess to climb even while taking it slowly. Subaru leaps onto it with all the momentum from his sprint, using the slight contact his fingers and toes purchase to shoot himself upwards, as if scaling a vertical wall. He races quicker than the eye can catch all to the top of the jungle gym. But there still more to this stunt, and more purpose to the gym.

Subaru: “Hup! Hup! Hup!”

Subaru reaches the slight footing at the peak before hopping to the uppermost point of the structure. He gazes down. Drop looks about six meters. Obviously, nothing is laid upon the wild, mossy ground. While the earth could have been soft once, it is now well-trodden and hard. Meaning the terrifying fall is definitely going to hurt. However,

Subaru: "—Hah!"

Without any hesitation, Subaru leaps down to the hard earth. Entirely undefended as he is, this jump may appear the worst of his usual recklessness. But Subaru unhesitatingly stretches out his legs and contacts the ground. Suffering the pain of the impact, he writhes in hideous agony—or not.

Subaru "…"

Subaru bends his legs and ducks to dissolve the impact, breaking into a forward roll to further avoid damage. One more roll, and another onto his hands and knees, before he darts to his feet, sustaining no injury at all. He merely brushes himself off, wiping the dirt from his track suit.

This is another parkour stunt: the land and roll. The stunt involves a landing combined with a roll to disperse the impact. It allows one to safely fall from moderate heights. While it's no big deal for superhumans, it is a question of life or death for ordinary human Subaru. Just practicing this technique should be broadening his horizons for what he can do.

Subaru: "So that's basically it. That improve your opinion of me?"

Subaru spreads his arms wide and looks to Beatrice, who watched the whole thing. Beatrice sits calmly on the stump for spectators, her eyes widening.

Beatrice: "Honestly, I am a little surprised, in fact. It did improve my opinion somewhat, I suppose."

Subaru: "You're back in love with me?"

Beatrice: "Subaru, recently, I've been having trouble deducing what you're trying to make me say, in fact!"

Subaru: “I only want to know you love me.”

Beatrice’s attitude already demonstrates it more than enough. Subaru gives the red-faced, indignant Beatrice a smile before glancing behind him.

As shown by that spot of parkour, part of the forest has been repurposed into an obstacle course for Subaru. No one’s going to complain about it, since it’s on Roswaal’s land. But Subaru has to keep his honest urge to send Garfiel occupationally into construction, having seen how easily he cleared the timber and built this, to himself.

Garfiel is surprisingly nimble-fingered and attuned to detail. Perhaps his young, reckless talent will bloom in more fields in the future.

Subaru: “Anyway, guess we’re calling it here for today.”

Beatrice: “Huwah, I suppose.”

Subaru catches the towel that Beatrice throws to him, and wipes off his sweat as he did in the field. Then he stretches his legs, waist, so on. The old world already drove the importance of limbering up into him, but now that he’s seriously exercising his body, he truly does feel the effects.

He can’t do the splits, but he has grown more flexible. He puts his foot to a nearby tree-trunk and stretches his body out. When he seats himself and spreads his legs, Beatrice walks over behind him and presses him down, letting him fall forward.

Subaru: “Done stretching. Alrighty, let’s get ourselves back to the mansion and blob out.”

Beatrice: “Indeed, in fact.”

That comment would’ve earned him an insult before, but Beatrice accepts it without argument. She is both accustomed to how Subaru handles her, and to responding to it. Beatrice reaches out for him. Subaru accepts, and hand-in-hand, they exit the forest.

Subaru: “Beako, are you holding back on the mana drain? It feels like you’re taking less than usual.”

Beatrice: “I’m at least considerate enough to take care when you’re exhausted, I suppose.”

Subaru: “My my, how incredibly your opinion’s changed in just these two short hours. But we don’t want you to suffer from this, go back to the usual.”

Subaru smiles wryly at Beatrice as he lifts their linked hands. She glances aside at him and sighs. Instantly, the usual sensation hits. Beatrice is directly entering the interior of Subaru’s closed gate. This is the backdoor dedicated to extracting mana from Subaru, without passing through the gateway. Only she can use this backdoor, and it is Subaru’s lifeline.

Subaru’s abused gate has completely stopped functioning. But the loss of his gate does not stop his od from generating slight amounts of mana. Actually it is proceeding to generate more and more mana despite the lack of an outlet. If left like this, the mana inside Subaru will frenzy, and he’ll pop like an overinflated frog—is how he understands it.

But leaving aside whether he’ll actually explode, Beatrice tells him it’s dangerous. Since the mana exchange required to preserve their contract simultaneously resolves the issue, Subaru and Beatrice absolutely must have physical contact at least once daily. Subaru is constantly stockpiling tiny loads of mana, and Beatrice needs mana to function. Both in terms of personality and constitution, their compatibility is excellent. Although,

Subaru: “If you could mana drain people outside your contractor, we could easily keep you in mega loli mode.”

Beatrice: “Don’t you go mulling over that, I suppose. I thought we came to an agreement about that ages ago, in fact. And you are amassing mana, even if it is in small amounts, I suppose. Even if it is tinier than a sparrow’s teardrops.”

Beatrice has an idiosyncrasy where she only mana drains her contractor. She had been constantly and randomly draining mana from people in Roswaal's mansion before, but apparently that involved using the Forbidden Archive as a mediator.

Beatrice: "The Forbidden Archive was arranged to mediate my mana intake, draining it from entities inside the mansion, in fact."

Was Beatrice's explanation. So the plan to drain mana from Garfiel, who looks to abound in the stuff, or from Emilia, initially struggling with her vast pool of it, is a wash. It's like someone's silently telling him: of course it wouldn't work out that perfectly.

But, while it disappointed him at first, he's glad for it now. Touching Beatrice is now a ritual representing more than just their relationship, and he likes feeling the truth of their connection. The relationship between Subaru the spiritualist and Beatrice the spirit differs somewhat from those of normal spiritualists. They need to recognize how their partnership represents them, by doing things like this.

Beatrice: "I'm done, in fact. This is enough to fill me for today, I suppose."

Subaru: "Oh, kay, haauh… nothing, to it… haa… haa…"

Beatrice: "I've already decided not to comment when it comes to your bravado, in fact."

Done with their daily ritual, Beatrice gazes flatly at Subaru. They step off the forest trail and onto paved ground, proving that they're close to the mansion. The path resembles the one from Earlham Village times, but now that it crosses through the nearby town of Costuul, it all fells far less remote.

Beatrice: "If I were going to pick, I'd say I preferred the quiet forest, I suppose."

Subaru: "I think noisy towns and quiet forests both have their appeal. I wouldn't pick one over the other. But since the Capital's the only big city I've seen yet, Costuul feels pretty novel."

Beatrice: "Hrmpf, in fact. Subaru, your ideas are mismatched with

Betty’s, I suppose.” Beatrice pouts in clear dissatisfaction.

Subaru pulls her onward, chiding her with a “yeah yeah” as he heads towards the path to the mansion. When,

???: “—Subaru-sama! Beatrice-chan!”

Someone shouts their names, and the two of them look up. They find a girl running towards them from the road to the mansion. Her face and voice are familiar, and her adorable expression brightens upon sighting Subaru and Beatrice. Her auburn, shoulder-length hair flutters in the wind. The catlike roundness of her eyes give her expressive face even more charm. Anyone would catch themselves smiling at her friendly, lovable attitude.

A sweet wildflower, out of anyone’s reach. That would be a good descriptor for Petra Leyte.

Petra: “I was just leaving to go fetch you two. Thank goodness we didn’t miss each other.”

Says Petra after running up to them, out of breath with her hand to her chest. Subaru gives Petra, who had grown to his chest, a pat on the head in response.

Subaru: “What’s the rush? We weren’t gonna escape. Did you just get those baked tarts at the perfect temperature for us or something?”

Beatrice: “Then it’s sensible that she would make haste, in fact. Since it’s incredibly important, I suppose.”

Petra: “No! That’s so not it! You guys are being jerks!”

Petra puffs out her cheeks as Beatrice nods solemnly, and goes to remove Subaru’s hand from her head. But once her hands clasp his own, she stops. She keeps that hold on Subaru’s hand, cheeks flushed red as she continues,

Petra: “Leaving the tarts aside for the moment, it’s something else. The mansion has received a guest. Emilia-sama said to go and fetch you, and…”

Subaru: “Wait, Petra. Just stop there. I’m getting a terrible feeling about this.”

Petra: “Huh?”

Clearly wary, Subaru cuts Petra off. She looks surprised at this, but Beatrice doesn’t. Well yeah. Beatrice has witnessed the same things that Subaru has, considering they’ve been together ever since moving to the new mansion. Quite a few things have happened between now and the day they left SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “And the conversation pattern goes exactly the same. When you show up to fetch me, or Frederica does, or sometimes Otto or Garfiel do, it always means trouble. I’ve learned that much.”

Beatrice: “A guest suddenly appears while Subaru is out… indeed, this absolutely is the pahttern bespeaking misfortune, I suppose.”

Petra: “B-Beatrice-chan, you’re using words that Subaru-sama does…! Subaru-sama, stop teaching her weird things!”

Subaru: “The mansion’s consensus is that Beako gets to do what she wants. But anyway, the guest. Petra, me and Beatrice are absent due to stomach-ache.”

Petra: “No! You! Don’t! Emilia-sama will be furious! And I have no reason to disobey her. Come on, this way!”

Petra used to be such a Subaru adherent, but living here has led her to oppose him when needed.

Her hands grab Subaru’s arm and she pulls him along, putting in her greatest effort to drag him away. As she does, Subaru glances to Beatrice, her hand in his.

Subaru: “Beako.”

Beatrice: “Enjoy your day, in fact.”

Subaru: “You’re coming too!”

Beatrice: “Ghhah, I suppose!”

It starts as a plea for help, and instantly transforms into embroilment. Beatrice quickly attempts to shake him off, but

Subaru keeps a tight grip on her left hand. And her right hand is restrained by Petra, leaving her doubly without an escape. With Subaru refusing Beatrice's escape, and Petra refusing Subaru's escape, the trio venture along in their nonsense arrangement to the mansion.

Subaru: "I know it's too late to kick the visitor out… but that just makes me wish we'd been told sooner."

Petra: "You mean, to have a messenger on messengers? But then we won't know far we need to go out to anticipate them beforehand. That much is clear."

Subaru: "I'm just saying it'd be nice for everyone's mental health and relations if we did something about that. Anyway, do you know who today's visitor is, Petra?"

The one receiving the guest is going to be Petra, Frederica, or Ram. One of the three. Since Petra is out here fetching Subaru, one of the other two will be dealing with the guest.

Petra: "Umm, well, not really…"

Subaru: "You don't know? Maybe you didn't see their crest, but you'd have to've seen the messenger. And even if you didn't I'm sure they would've told you something when they told you to fetch us…"

Petra: "They were in an incredible rush, saying that the guest was extremely important. But they didn't look important."

Subaru: "You can't judge much off of people's appearances. Sometimes you get little girls with powerful drills who also command dark powers. Though they may seem a mere dress-wearing loli, in truth they preside over—"

Beatrice: "Shut it, I suppose!"

Beatrice is the one calling off the jokes, leaving Subaru silent. Petra looks at the silenced Subaru, still worried.

Petra: "I don't judge people based on their appearances anymore either."

Subaru: "That's good, Petra. Dunno what happened to change it but it was important you did."

Petra: "I thought the new nasty-eyed choresman who came to the village was a weirdo… but he really wasn't."

Subaru: "It boomeranged!"

Stricken somewhere that he didn't expect, Subaru tilts his head at Petra. Never mind her first impressions of him, the stuff she mentioned earlier is important. Petra doesn't judge people by their appearance, but she still thought this visitor was odd.

Subaru: "So what're they like?"

Petra: "I guess… a kitty?"

Subaru: "A kitty?"

The image of a grey cat spirit, long tail wagging, comes to mind at the word 'kitty'. Subaru's feelings for him are complex, and there are things they must talk about upon his eventual return.

Subaru: "Gotta ask him for his daughter."

Beatrice: "I thought of Bubby too, but Petra's surely seen him before, I suppose. So it can't be him, in fact. Petra, what kind of kitty was it, I suppose?"

Petra: "It's so cute that you're calling them a kitty too, Beatrice-chan."

Beatrice: "Pet! Ra!"

Says Beatrice indignantly to a teasing Petra. Petra gives an easy, "Sorry, sorry," and looks up in thought.

Petra: "I guess they weren't really a kitty. I haven't really seen one before, but I suppose they were a catfolk demi-human. I always think of Big Bro Garfiel when I think of demi-humans though."

Subaru: “Garf’s mixed race, and he doesn’t have any blatantly obvious demi-human traits. Best you can manage on closer inspection is how intense his eyes are.”

And I guess you could mention his sharp canines. According to Garfiel, his canines will always keep growing, much like a rodent’s incisors, and he needs to chew on hard objects to maintain their length and sharpness. It’s not uncommon for Ram or Frederica to flip out at him after catching him chewing on the mansion’s banisters.

Subaru: “So a demi-human who looks demi-human has arrived. If they’re catfolk then they’re probably a beastman, and I do know a couple of those.”

It’s a given in the Capital, but Costuul also has many beastfolk demi-humans. A long period of time has dissolved the discrimination against demi-humans in the domain of Roswaal the Demi-human Fancier. Making this area a nicer region for demi-humans to live in, or so says the local bunny-eared bartender. But Petra, who spends her time working in the mansion and goes to Earlham Village rather than Costuul on her days off, naturally is less familiar with them.

Petra: “I get it. Could you show me around Costuul on my next day off, then?”

Subaru: “Yeah, sure. I’m sure you’ll get to go there for shopping and stuff too, and you wanna be making as many friends as you can.”

Subaru gives that poorly-thought promise, and Petra pumps her fist. Beatrice only sighs and smiles wryly at Subaru.

Subaru: “Aaaand we’re here. Back at our beloved abode.”

The gates come into view during their conversation, and Subaru lifts his hands, linked as they are with the girls’. He ignores their protests as the gesture forces them to stretch, correcting his own posture and looking at the mansion.

This is the new mansion replacing the old, burnt one. Its exterior gives the same western feel that the previous did, and is similarly designed. There is space between the front gates and the doorway, with garden lawns flanking the gravel path. On the right side is a fountain, while the left continues into a path to the side end of the mansion, where carriages are parked, that has stables for earth dragons.

The fountain comes with an installation of colorful flowers, and at a fixed time daily, it sprinkles them with water. One section of the flowerbed holds Subaru and Petra's vegetable garden, letting them harvest fresh vegetables in-season. It's quite well-praised when the crop is bountiful.

The group pass through the front garden and the gravel path, leading them to large double-doors. The knocker shares the shape of the Mathers family crest, using the raptor motif, which indeed makes this feel like the primary estate of the Mathers.

Subaru: "I noticed an unfamiliar carriage over by the stables. Guess it's the visitor's."

Petra: "The carriage is a dragon carriage, but it wasn't being pulled by anything like Patrasche-chan. It wasn't a dragon, it was more like a big dog."

Subaru: "Pulled by a big dog… actually, maybe it's…"

Thinking back on his internal bestiary, Subaru gets a clue of the visitor's identity. But before he can reach a definite answer, the solution ends up finding him. Which is to say,

???: "Oh! Hullo mister, it's been foooreeeveeer! Have you been well?!"

A stupidly cheerful, high-pitched voice comes hurtling at Subaru, startling him as he opens the door. Petra gives a wry smile, and Beatrice squeezes Subaru's hand slightly. With these reactions in the corner of his eye, he looks ahead at the figure bounding toward him.

They are small. They are shorter than Petra, but a little taller than

Beatrice. Meaning that they're a child's height, but this may be as tall as she'll ever get. Her body is covered in short, orange fur, and her alert cat ears are adorable. Her eyes abound with curiosity and her loud mouth is curved mischievously. Her long, orange braid is very feminine, and her perfectly-fit white robe makes her all the more cute.

She's effectively a bipedal kitten, and in some sense, a cat-lover's dream. A catfolk—and one who Subaru knows.

Subaru: "Mimi! It's been ages. You're as full of energy as always!"

Mimi: "Mhm! Yup! I'm super duper full of energy! You get it, mister! And I even grew bigger and now I'm an adult. Hmhmhm!"

Mimi puts her hand to her hip, smirking boastfully as her tail sways to and fro. She just looks like a lively, energetic girl, but actually she is a vice-chair of the beastman mercenary company Iron Fang, with considerable fighting prowess and many other surprises. She once helped Subaru in fighting the White Whale and Petelgeuse, and shares his tendency to be cloyingly friendly and familiar with anyone, which perhaps makes her the best friend he unaffectedly made during the whole affair.

Incidentally Iron Fang is basically the private army of Emilia's political opponent Anastasia Hoshin, so they are an enemy going by that. But being hostile towards Mimi is entirely tasteless.

Subaru: "Thanks for coming all the way. Right, introductions. This cute maid here is Petra. She's an upcoming almighty maid who works in our mansion. And this blatantly wary loli is Beatrice."

Mimi: "Okey! I got it! The maid who's Petra's and your baby! Got it! I won't forget it!"

Beatrice: "I-I feel she's remembering me by hideously improper means, in fact…!"

Beatrice is trembling, hiding behind Subaru's back. It seems she's scared of Mimi and how unforgivingly forward she is. Mimi mercilessly dives into her, Mimi: “What? You’ll never be big like me if you shrink up like that! Come on, get out here, out you get!”

Beatrice: “Wh, no, wa, stop, I suppose! Betty doesn’t mind being small, and you’re too small to be saying this anyway, in fact!”

Mimi: “Hmhm! Listen to the rooky. I’m huge inside, so my outsides’re gonna catch up to me before long! The Boss said so!”

Beatrice: “It’s nonsense, I suppose!”

Mimi pulls Beatrice to the front, manhandling her entirely. Beatrice looks to Subaru for rescue, but he enjoys watching her being people-shy while also making friends, and simply watches over her with a fatherly look.

Petra: “Um, Subaru-sama. Beatrice-chan is looking to you in sheer terror.”

Subaru: “People mature by battling their weaknesses. Beako is a little too averse to new things, so it’s best she start developing that challenger’s mentality now. Let us watch her in silence, mom.”

Petra: “M-Mom… y-yes, let’s.”

Subaru senses his mistake as he sees Petra blush and fall silent. But correcting it would be a mess so he decides to go with it. He turns his attention to Mimi, dancing circles around the room with a tight grip on Beatrice’ hands.

Subaru: “So if you’re here, then are the others… are your brothers or Ricardo with you? Also I’d really rather goddamn Julius not show up without booking in first.”

Anastasia’s Knight, Julius Juukulius, has a very complicated relationship with Subaru. Subaru doubts he can be sincere with him even when seeing him face-to-face. Subaru knows he has some trouble dealing with Anastasia, but she’s still preferable to Julius. But Mimi casts aside Subaru’s worries with a shake of her head.

Mimi: “Nope. Not Hetaro or Tivey or the Boss or Julius or my Lady are here! It’s just me! I’m here all on my own! Hmhm!”

Subaru: “That’s impressive and all, but… what are you here for, then?”

Mimi: “Ummm, uhhh, oh right!”

Mimi tilts her head, before pouncing onto Beatrice. Heedless of Beatrice as she hurries to support her, Mimi gives a sunny smile,

Mimi: “I’m inviting you to a party! My Lady said let’s all hang out! So here I am to invite you! I’m super excited! Super! Excited!”

Chapter 2:
Pedigree of the Poseur

Subaru tilts his head, Mimi merrily waving her arms as she takes the lead. ‘Party’ is a pretty extravagant word, and it’s coming out of nowhere.

Subaru: “A party invite… from Anastasia-san? But that’s still like, what happened? Is there something to celebrate?”

Mimi: “Celebrate? Celebritty? Whatever! Who cares, it’ll be so much fun eating food and getting drunk! So much! Fun!”

Subaru: “You’re clearly too young to be drinking.”

Mimi: “Heeheehee. I’m an adult as of this year! The Boss says I can drink! But my Lady says I can’t.”

Mimi puffs out her chest, and the belled ornaments in her hair chime. Subaru’s eyes shoot open in shock,

Subaru: “What, you’re allowed to drink, then you’re fully grown?! No way. How old are you!”

Mimi: “I just turned fifteen! So I’m an adulty adult. I’m a big girl!”

Subaru: “Big girls don’t talk like they’re still in grade school! But anyway…”

Having regained some composure, Subaru puts his hand to his chest as he recognizes the differences in adulthood between this world and the old one. It’s essentially the same as genpuku. The age of adulthood is about fifteen in this world, and that’s when it’s legal to drink and smoke.

Subaru: “…would be the right way to consider it, Petra?”

Petra: “Yes, that’s right. But going into more detail, boys leave their homes and find work at fifteen, while some girls start getting married around then. If they don’t get married, it’s also when they’ll usually start working. Like me."

Subaru: "Which means you left your home pretty early. You're a feisty girl, you."

Petra: "Heehee, I'm feis… I don't think that was a compliment."

Petra glares at Subaru, who heads over to an exhausted Beatrice. Mimi has released her, and her pigtails are in some disarray. She looks bitterly up at Subaru.

Beatrice: "After participating in your training and being manhandled by this cat, Betty is exhausted, I suppose… Subaru, carry me, in fact."

Subaru: "Participating? All you did was watch…"

Beatrice spreads her arms out, reaching for Subaru, and he scoops her into his arms. He's more muscular than he used to be, and since she's light as a feather, the weight doesn't bother him at all. Though, he does sort of look like a dad cradling his daughter now, which is not ideal.

Mimi: "Oooh! You're holding the baby! That's awesome! Hold me too! Me too!"

Subaru: "Your Boss'd be another story, but I physically can't do it. Request denied."

Mimi: "What! That's no fair! No fair! Unfair! Unfair!"

Mimi scampers around Subaru as he holds Beatrice. For some reason Beatrice smiles victoriously. Eventually Mimi grabs onto Subaru's track suit,

Mimi: "Okey then! I'll just climb up!"

Subaru: "Idiot! Stop, you'll topple me over. Petra help me stop he— what're you doing?"

Petra: "Ah, erm, I'm not jealous or anything. I'm not. But would you mind if I climbed you, Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: “Um yes?!”

Subaru holds a little girl, with a kitten girl and a maid girl pursuing him incessantly. The shenanigans in the foyer continue without resolution.

When,

???: “—I thought you were taking forever to return, and here you are monkeying about in the foyer.”

The frigid voice makes Subaru and Petra stand up straight.

Mimi’s eyes sparkle with curiosity for the new speaker, while Beatrice sighs.

The voice is coming from the stairway overlooking the foyer. Subaru glances up to find a girl standing there, where she can see the four of them She has pink hair, and wears a short-cut maid outfit. Her cerise eyes look apathetic, and though she is cute, there is nothing cuddly about her. This is Petra’s colleague, Ram, the head of the maids in the mansion.

She gazes coldly at Subaru and snorts a breathy, “Ha.”

Ram: “Filthy.”

Subaru: “You’re the filthy one for reaching that conclusion! Maybe you can argue about how sound this is, but it’s still a heartwarming scene!”

Ram: “You always bend reality to suit your purposes. But, Barusu, you mustn’t forget. —I judge only by what I’ve seen.”

Subaru: “Maybe you could take off your weird filter before you start looking please?”

Ram glances at him disinterestedly, apparently unwilling to hear him out. She ignores the stunned Subaru and looks over at Petra, who instantly starts to quake.

Ram: “Petra. I told you to drag Barusu here by the neck if you had to. Would you like to explain why you are playing with him in the foyer?”

Petra: “I-I’m sorry, Sister Ram.”

Ram: “It seems you weren’t listening, Petra. I believe I asked, why are you dawdling here in the foyer?”

Subaru: “Stop acting like the sister from hell. It was just me screwing around. Petra’s not to blame.”

Ram: “Of course she’s to blame. I’ll pummel you, Barusu.”

Subaru: “She’s only a little to blame!”

Pleased with that concession, Ram jerks her chin to the room behind her.

Ram: “You mustn’t keep Emilia-sama waiting. Barusu, to the upstairs parlor. Petra, the dining room. Beatrice-sama, accompany Barusu.”

Beatrice: “Of course, I suppose.”

Mimi: “What about me? Come on, what about me?”

Petra regretfully lets go of Subaru’s sleeve, but he remains caught in the energetic catgirl’s firm grip. Ram brushes aside her hair, caught on her cheek.

Ram: “I ask you accompany Barusu to the parlor, dear guest. I’m afraid that your companion is unsettled by your absence.”

Mimi: “Hokay. Guess I gotta go back then. I done a no do.”

Even Ram is polite when receiving guests. Mimi laughs boisterously in reply, but Subaru catches something that he can’t ignore.

Subaru: “Companion? But I thought you said you were alone?”

Mimi: “I did, and I am. Not Hetaro or Tivey or the Boss or Julius or my Lady are here. But Joshua’s here. I’m alone being Joshua’s boddygar, boddygard?”

Subaru: “Bodyguard?”

Mimi: “Yes! Boddygard!”

Mimi puffs out her chest, smirking. Subaru pats her head before looking back up at Ram.

Subaru: “I’m sorry. I was so sure it was only Mimi. I didn’t realize I was making someone wait.”

Ram: “So it seems. It’s fine, but do hurry. Emilia-sama’s patience will tire before long.”

Subaru: “Can’t have that. Okay, see you later Petra. Let’s go, Mimi.”

Mimi: “Whoo!”

Who is this mysterious Joshua?

He must be someone from Anastasia’s faction who Subaru doesn’t know. If they’re sending him as a messenger, and appointing Mimi as his bodyguard, he must have suitable rank. He could have an important post if Mimi refers to him without an honorific, but then again considering how indiscriminately friendly Mimi is, it doesn’t exactly indicate much.

Petra: “I’ll bake the tarts once everything has settled down. You will taste them, won’t you, Subaru- sama?”

Whispers Petra before darting out of the scene. Frederica must be waiting for her in the dining room. Subaru doesn’t know whether they’ll serve food in the parlor, but either way, it seems like it’s going to be a while before he gets to eat Petra’s tarts.

Subaru: “Who else is in the parlor with Emilia-tan?”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama has not returned yet, which leaves her with Otto and Garf. If the visitor is an assassin in disguise, Garf will be enough to manage them.”

Subaru: “Doubt we need to be so worried about direct attacks. I already told Emilia-tan to use Otto as a human shield.”

Ram: “If I ever feel in danger, that’s what I’ll do too.”

There are no words for how they treat Otto. Well actually no there are. Either way, if those three are the ones in the parlor, Otto must be stuck pulling more than his weight. Should they neglect to lessen the strain upon him swiftly, they are liable to lose their precious Internal Affairs Minister.

Beatrice: “He never gets his reward, I suppose. I don’t understand why he’s even friends with you, in fact.”

Subaru: “It might be invisible to others, but me and Otto are tied together with a solid bond of masculine friendship. Rock solid.”

Mimi: “Ooh! Rocka solid!”

Ram’s sigh guides the three up to the parlor: the very first room after scaling the foyer staircase. Ram knocks on the door, which then opens from inside. The face that peeks out belongs to,

Garfiel: “There yer are, Captain. Yer were takin’ so long I was thinkin’ I’d haveta go’n get ya.”

Subaru: “It would’ve been funny if you all said you were leaving to look for me and left Otto there on his own.”

Garfiel: “Crap, it wouldda. Now’m imaginin’ him panicking everywhere n’ freakin’ out.”

Garfiel, with his short blond hair, sharp fangs, and characteristic forehead scar, shares a mischievous grin with Subaru. He jerks his chin, his arms crossed, apparently keeping himself posted at the door.

Garfiel: “Get in here. Th’guest’s sayin’ y’gotta be here if we’re gonna talk. Otto n’ Emilia-sama were tryin’ t’give ‘im a welcome, but it all juss looked like a comedy.”

Subaru: “Honestly I’d want to see that.”

Ram: “Cease this foolishness and enter the room. We’re already delayed.”

Subaru: “Guh.”

Ram drives her foot into the small of Subaru’s back, and he goes stumbling into the room. His odd posture as he bursts into the scene earns him stares from those in the parlor. The predominant emotions are relief, exasperation, and confusion, respectively.

Subaru suppresses his urge to make excuses to the relieved and exasperated parties about his tardiness, and turns to face the confused individual.

???: “…”

The prim, handsome man gazes back at Subaru. A well-tailored outfit garbs his slender frame, and his long violet hair is tied in a ponytail. He exerts a scholarly air, and his monocle only supports that impression. His yellow eyes are rather sharp, and between that and his pout at he peers at Subaru’s unfamiliar face, he looks displeased.

Neither party makes the best first impression on the other.

Man: “And this would be…?”

The visitor is the one to speak first. He looks away from Subaru, and to the two people seated before him. A beautiful girl, with silver hair flowing down her back, is the one to nod and answer him.

Emilia: “Right. I apologize that he arrived late. —This is my Knight, Natsuki Subaru.”

A tingle shoots down Subaru’s spine. The words ‘My Knight’ are simply so wonderful that they captivate him every time.

Man: “M-May I point out that he seems, ah, enraptured…?”

Beatrice: “Subaru. Stop making funny faces, I suppose. He’s going to think… huh? Erm this feels quite forceful, in fact. No, you’re, holding too tigh—Suba–Subaru! Ow! Ouch, I suppose!”

Subaru: “—Aah! Ahh, sorry. Was tripping.”

He had almost unwittingly squeezed Beatrice to death to distract himself from his feelings. A Beako Hug or also a bear hug. That’s what it was. Anyway. The guest looks on skeptically as Subaru clears his throat and puts down Beatrice.

Subaru: “As stated a moment previously, I am Natsuki Subaru. I serve as Knight to Emilia-sama, who makes her presence before you. It pleases me to make your acquaintance.”

Man: “…”

The track suit makes it a little slovenly, but his manners align perfectly with courtly etiquette. He used to think cynically of the pretentious attitudes of knights, but now that he’s trying it himself, he finds it works surprisingly well for him. It’s not a question of whether it suits him or not. It’s that he feels himself being more of a knight. The pressure, knowing that one misstep will leave him a laughingstock, gives the rigid seriousness meaning. Under the tutelage of Garfiel, with his extensive knowledge as a Knight Fanatic, Subaru has fostered etiquette that disgraces him not as a knight.

Subaru glances to the door to find Garfiel watching him, satisfied. Garfiel notices Subaru’s glance and flips him the bird. Subaru taught him the gesture, but he’s using it wrong. While he may be a good teacher, Garfiel is a failure of a student.

Man: “You humble me. I am… I myself am Joshua Juukulius , visiting you as an envoy on behalf of Anastasia Hoshin-sama.”

Subaru: “Then you would be Joshua-san. What a fine name. Still, I must apologize for my poor punctuality. Allow me to—Juukulius?”

Halfway through the diplomatic fineries, Subaru finds himself tilting his head at the familiar word. Joshua nods with a, “Yes,” and adding onto that,

Emilia: “That’s right, Subaru. Joshua is Julius’s little brother. And they’re both supporting Anastasia together, it’s sooo sweet.”

Laughs the girl, her chaste demeanor gone, and her speech far more casual. Her face as she looks at Subaru is her true face, naturally. Subaru sighs, staring impolitely at Joshua as he seats himself opposite him. As he seats himself beside Emilia, like it’s natural.

Subaru: “What, so he’s Julius’s brother. Actually now that you mention it they are pretty alike. You have that disdainful… or not, intense, gaze of his. Or that mocking… or not, elegant, smile of his. Or that hellish… or not, pretty, hair color of his.”

Otto: “If you need force it every time then would you care to refrain from commenting?!”

Says Otto, unable to hide his sweat. He’s the Head Minister of the Emilia Faction’s Internal Affairs, or more rather he’s the only one capable of being said minister so that’s why he has the title. But diplomacy terrifies him immensely.

Subaru: “Did you lose weight?”

Otto: “Life here is simply too exhilarating, yes! When things in this exact vein keep happening in constant succession, the mental fatigue leaves me too exhausted to exercise, and thus skeletal! Skeletal!”

Mimi: “Skellytall! Skellytall!”

Cheers Mimi, unintentionally aggravating Otto further. It looks like the only thing keeping Otto quiet is the fact that Mimi is the guest’s companion. She disregards him entirely as she scampers over and leaps onto the seat, beside Joshua. Beatrice also looks at the seats. But Subaru, Emilia, and Otto are fully occupying the seat opposite Joshua and Mimi. They could scooch together to open room for Beatrice, but it would look lame. And so Beatrice promptly seats herself on Subaru’s lap. Subaru naturally loops his hands around Beatrice’s waist, making sure she won’t fall.

Subaru: “Now, finally getting to the main topic…”

Joshua: “P-Please wait! Who is this girl?”

And Joshua winds up too flustered to talk. He points at Beatrice, sitting on Subaru's lap, and leans forward so forcefully that his monocle slips. Apparently he lacks Julius's composure. Subaru decides that he prefers this to Julius, while Mimi instead speaks up.

Mimi: "Geez, you're so behind, Joshua. This is Beako, she's Subaru's baby. It's so obvious. And beside him's the mommy, and beside her's the housekeeper?"

Otto: "Honestly I am far too unconfident about what my current standing is to be hearing that I'm the housekeeper so would you please care to stop?!"

Mimi: "Housekeeper! Housekeeper! Wow! It's like a witchbeast name!"

Otto's pleas are entirely ineffective on Mimi, the embodiment of dumb innocence. Nobody bothers to react to Otto, who slumps his shoulders. Subaru puts his hand on Beatrice's head.

Subaru: "Sorry for not introducing her. We're just so used to sitting like this that I completely forgot to explain."

Emilia: "Otto-kun forgot to mention it too. And it caught me unawares as well."

Subaru: "Who says caught me unawares anymore?"

It's Emilia's usual phrasing, but Subaru agrees with the sentiment. And Otto must be getting so accustomed to this life that he's forgetting to interject with common sense. It's a good problem to have.

Subaru: "This is Beatrice. Mimi's right, she's the child of myself and Emilia-sama."

Joshua: "What?!"

Joshua, aghast.

Emilia: "Geez. No she's not, Subaru. Look at how you shocked Joshua. I know we kissed but you can't make babies by kissing. I've been studying.”

Subaru: “Ah, sorry, Emilia-tan. I think some private stuff just got thrown right into the open. It was my bad so I’ll just introduce her normally.”

Beatrice: “This is what you get for using me for tomfoolery, in fact. You best regret it, I suppose.”

Subaru forces a smile at Emilia and Beatrice. Emilia’s misunderstandings about making babies have only been rectified when it comes to ‘making babies by kissing’. Subaru couldn’t go any further into the topic, and, anticipating the shock the subject would give Emilia, the faction’s women decided to wait until she’s more mentally mature.

Basically everyone is overprotective.

Joshua: “Ehrm… so, Miss Beatrice’s true station would be…?”

Joshua fixes his monocle, overwhelmed with his initiation to Roswaal Mansion and its people. But shouldn’t the unruliness of everyone here be pretty close to Anastasia’s Faction, which has Iron Fang?

Subaru: “I’m sorry that the conversation keeps slipping. Beatrice may look like an ordinary, lovable little girl, but she is actually my contracted spirit. She is a loligranny.”

Beatrice: “Exactly, I’m a spirit, in fact. And I know that you’re mocking me with that word ‘loligranny’, I suppose.”

Beatrice brushes Subaru’s hand aside and digs her head into the underside of his chin. She has grown rather proficient in Subaruese, making verbal gaffes generally impermissible. ‘Loligranny’ is just a combination of ‘granny’ and ‘loli’, a word that he has already explained to her, so of course she saw through this one.

Joshua’s reaction to Subaru and Beatrice’s heartwarming exchange is extreme. His prudish but charming face falls frigid.

Joshua: “—I see. She’s a spirit.”

Nobody who catches his whisper can decode his sentiment. It’s not that he’s hiding his emotions. It’s the opposite. The emotion is so convoluted and complex that it’s impossible to tell what lies at its core. But everyone can see that it was not a very friendly statement.

Garfiel: “Hey, guest. You got a problem with our Captain havin’ a spirit with him?”

Garfiel has inherited Subaru’s old role. Which is, practicing disrespect to anyone. While everyone else deliberates on how to address the problem, he fearlessly dives right in. Joshua promptly shakes his head,

Joshua: “No. It’s nothing important. Just, it struck me that Natsuki-dono is a Spirit Knight. As I myself am sure you already know, my brother is a Spirit Knight. The title is so rare that you could call him the only holder in the nation.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know. When we were fighting the Witch Cult, he… um, he. He really hel… h-hel—ghk. Helped me, out a… lot, so…”

Otto: “Are you truly so reluctant to accept that he saved you?!”

No. But thinking back on his battles with Julius makes him feel awkward about what he's saying, and makes the old wounds from his beatdown sting.

Beatrice: "I heard that there was another knight who uses spirits, in fact. What an odd turn of fate for it to be your brother, I suppose."

Joshua: "What do you mean by 'odd turn of fate'. Spirit."

Beatrice: "It's obvious what I mean, in fact. Precursors are destined to be excelled, I suppose. His best place is as an ornament on the glorious road that Subaru and I—nhaaha!"

Subaru: "Don't pick fights with people we just met. And I've got nothing on Julius. I'm never gonna beat him in what he does. I don't beat people who're good at puzzles by challenging them to puzzles, I beat them by challenging them to Mario Kart."

Subaru musses Beatrice's hair and bows his head to Joshua. While pushing Beatrice's head into a bow as well.

Subaru: "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make a fool of your brother. Or really, I know that I'm less capable than him. This spirit here is just being a braggart."

Joshua: "An admirable, and correct judgement. When comparing yourself to my brother, it's natural to recognize your inferiority."

Subaru: "Uh?"

Subaru was looking to make a mature compromise, but Joshua's abrupt arrogance makes things precarious again. Heedless of Subaru as he furrows his brows in confusion, Joshua catches the light on his monocle,

Joshua: "Yes. My brother is amazing. At the age of twenty is the second most capable of the Imperial Knights, the finest Order of Knights of the Kingdom. His service to Anastasia-sama currently distances him from his station as an Imperial Knight, but once her wishes are fulfilled he will be secured a place as Head of the Imperial Knights. He has a close, amiable relationship with the Sword Saint Reinhard, and holds himself impeccably in both public and private contexts. He is strict on himself and others, disciplined, ambitious, always seeking improvement. His beautiful looks enrapture scores of women, and his personality is accordingly excellent. Yes. My brother is amazing. You're nothing compared to him."

Subaru: "…uh."

Joshua speaks with passion, his face red as he goes on and on and on.

Subaru has no reply, and Beatrice recoils too. Garfiel and Otto stay silent, unsure whether this could get deadly, and Mimi is too busy stuffing her cheeks with snacks to help him out of this. There is only one person here who can counter Joshua's screed.

Emilia: "Heehee. Joshua, you love your brother Julius sooo much."

In this room exists an angel who will take anything positively. Her words make Joshua realize what he just said, and his face reddens in shame rather than excitement. He clears his throat, managing to compose himself.

Joshua: "M-My apologies. I may have fired myself up. I have some difficulty restraining myself when it comes to my family."

Emilia: "No, it's okay. I want to hear you talk about Julius more. I've only ever seen Julius while in the Capital here and there, so there's lots more I want to know about him."

Joshua: "R-Really! Well, there are several memories of me and him that—"

Subaru: "How about we save those for another occasion, and finally get to the point?! How does that sound, Otto! Garfiel!"

Both: "Huh?!"

Subaru cuts in, forcing the other two into the conversation while they pleadingly try to stay out of it. But they do promptly nod in agreement. Joshua then notices that the conversation has strayed incredibly far, and, Joshua: “Th-Then, we will save the stories of my brother’s magnificence for another time. I must… I myself must also fulfil my duties and reconvene with Anastasia-sama shortly.”

Emilia: “Right. I’m sooo excited for them. So, it really took us a long time to finally get here… but what is this visit all about?”

Joshua’s awkwardness lingers as he feigns calm, while Emilia easily enters Royal Selection Candidate Mode. The tone of their voices drop, bringing a tenseness to the parlor. Emilia can establish tension like this because she has come to recognize her place as a budding politician.

Joshua: “—I speak to Emilia-sama on the behalf my master, Anastasia Hoshin-sama.”

The prickly tension makes Joshua’s expression regain its former warmth. He puts his hand in his pocket, withdraws a letter, and sets it on the table. He opens it. Looks down at the letters and their black ink.

Joshua: “Anastasia-sama wishes to invite yourself and all of your associates to the city of Priestella.”

Emilia: “An invitation to Priestella City… Priestella is the Watergate City, yes? The big city near the border between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Kararagi City-States.”

Joshua: “You are correct. Anastasia-sama is presently sojourning there, rather than the Capital… and she wishes to invite you.”

Joshua quietly lowers his head. Emilia looks away from him and glances to Subaru. Obviously, this gaze means, “what are your thoughts?”

Subaru feels similarly to Emilia about the whole thing. Everyone knows that Anastasia is staying in a mansion in the Capital’s noble district while she’s in Lugunica. When Mimi mentioned an invitation to a party, Subaru was certain it would be to that mansion.

Joshua: “Priestella is a scenic place. The city is distinctive in itself, and makes for a popular tourist destination. Anastasia-sama finds herself delighted and at ease there.”

Subaru: “It’d be great if you were just showing us a nice place, but… you’re not, are you? Emilia and Anastasia aren’t friends.”

If Subaru remembers this right, then Anastasia was particularly harsh on Emilia during the dialogues in the Palace. The candidates most unsparing toward Emilia were her and Priscilla. Crusch is simply not racist, and Felt is in Emilia’s debt. So, while Anastasia did help during the White Whale and Witch Cult fights, Subaru’s personal opinion of Anastasia is not very good.

So he doubts that this invitation is anything so kind-spirited. As if supporting Subaru’s doubts, a grin etches itself over Joshua’s face. And,

Joshua: “Anastasia-sama invites you out of her beneficence. She has noticed the valuable object you are searching for in Priestella.”

Emilia: “What I’m searching for?”

The instant that Emilia shows her interest, Otto’s expression screams: He got her! This tells Subaru that Joshua snatched away predominance before they could stop it, but he still cannot see the crux of this deal.

In that delay, the opponent takes full control of the conversation. Grinning, Joshua speaks on:

Joshua: “—In Priestella City there is a shop selling magic stones, in which slumbers the high-grade colorless stones that you desire. I believe that you are currently seeking an anchor for the Great Spirit?”

—The second that Joshua gains dominance, the Emilia Faction are fated to leave for Priestella.

Chapter 3:
Each Gives Perspective

1

Emilia: “It wasn’t fair to Otto-kun that we decided so much on our own.”

After speaking with Joshua and returning to her room, Emilia speaks as she offers Subaru a seat. Subaru seats himself there and chuckles,

Subaru: “Leaving Otto’s panic aside as a legend for future generations, I basically always support your ideas, Emilia-tan. But if I’m gonna mention something to be worried about, it’d have to be the fact that they’re ready and waiting for us.”

Emilia: “I don’t think Anastasia would take risks anyway, if she’s sending messengers. Mimi-chan may’ve been there, but Joshua-kun still took control when I tried to take control.”

Subaru: “She recognizes you as an opponent if she’s sending her Knight’s family as her messenger. I always wondered why in Sengoku dramas, when they send important people as messengers, they don’t just kill them. But turns out there’s all this background stuff. Didn’t think I’d be learning that by experience.”

It’s a question of trust between the parties and the people. If the people learn that the rulers acted unjustly, it harms the ruler’s standing. And each faction faces too many enemies to be acting disgracefully. Otherwise, since a group faces more clandestine enemies the larger it grows, it’s simple logic to be careful when challenging influential people.

—The meeting with Joshua Juukulius is over, and night has fallen upon the new Roswaal Mansion.

Since it would be awful to send them back on the same day they arrived, they offered to let Joshua and Mimi stay the night, and accepted the invitation to Priestella City. Joshua had been rather imposing when discussing the topic, but everyone saw his relief peeking through when their side accepted the invitation. His monocle was likely just a decoration to garner a certain impression from others, the earnest young lad.

Subaru: “He’s way more likeable than his brother.”

Emilia: “You are always so insincere about Julius. Do you still have a grudge from that time in the palace?”

Emilia catches Subaru’s mutter, and amusedly pokes fun at him. Just thinking about the affair used to make his face redden in shame, and his stomach burn with indignation. But how about now that some time has passed?

Subaru: “It’s still too vivid for me to laugh and smile about it. I was young back then. And I have reflected on my actions. Wish he’d do the same.”

Emilia: “But I heard you both apologized and made up. It’s so uncool to give shallow apologies and keep simmering on the inside.”

Subaru: “Mnngh… But I’m only human!”

Emilia looks at him reproachfully, but Subaru remains stubborn. Subaru looks away. Emilia frowns at him for a moment, but ultimately can’t hold back her grin.

Emilia: “Fine. Subaru, you are just so stubborn. But you’re not allowed to fight with Julius if we see him in Priestella. You’re a knight now, and knights mustn’t misuse their power.”

Subaru: “Yeah yeah you’ve bested me my Liege.”

Subaru covers up his blushing with some jokes and rubs at his upper lip. He gazes absently around Emilia’s room, before seeming to remember something,

Subaru: “Oh yeah, Emilia-tan. I don’t really know much about Priestella, is it known for anything?”

Emilia: “Hmp, you need to study more, Subaru. Priestella is one of the five main cities of Lugunica, on the Tigracy River that marks the border with Kararagi. It’s famous for being built right on a huge lake, with canals flowing through the city.”

Subaru: “Ok so leaving aside that that’s all second-hand information, it’s a floating city. Well you have Venice, so may as well be possible here too.”

Venice springs to mind when it comes to aquatic cities. The town is surrounded by water on all sides, with lakes winding nonchalantly through the stone cityscape. It’s one of those romantic places that everyone visits at least once, and Subaru regards it as a picturesque spot too. And so that’s the impression he gets of Priestella.

Emilia: “No, Subaru. Priestella isn’t a floating city, it’s a Watergate City.”

Subaru: “Watergate?”

Emilia: “Yes. It’s in the middle of a lake, so the city floods when it rains. They built huge walls around the city to stop that, and there’s gates to regulate the water levels. The gates are sooo amazing and famous that they don’t call it the Floating City, they call it the Watergate City.”

Emilia’s explanation flips Subaru’s pretty water town into an enclosed watery jail. The concept is all so beautiful, and then they ruin it with these giant walls. Subaru tilts his head, wondering why they built this whole mechanism.

Emilia: “I think there’s lots of theories behind the city’s construction. Like, they were testing the limits of their technology, or trying to conquer the floods without relying on magic or the Dragon, or trying to trap a powerful, evil witchbeast.”

Subaru: “None of them sound sensible but they all somehow feel possible which is how you know humans did it.”

The average person wouldn’t come up with the idea, but the geniuses of humanity are fundamentally liberated from the reins of common sense. And sometimes their ideas get realized. Either way.

Subaru: “But we still don’t know what they’re planning. …Doubt they’re just being nice and directing us to what we’re looking for.”

Emilia: “Are you sure? Have you ever considered trusting in people more, instead of being so suspicious?”

Subaru: “Sorry, but all the candidates have their faults. And I don’t trust what they’re plotting for a second.”

Crusch herself is trustworthy, but Subaru doesn’t know whether she’ll stay a demure lady, and he has to keep wary of Felis. That problem is solved if Wilhelm reins Felis in, but the Sword Demon puts Subaru on edge too. Knowing their circumstances, it’s difficult to trust them when they’re left to their own devices.

Subaru has no idea what Anastasia is thinking, or what drives her. He cannot divine her motives for sending this invitation. Julius may be the knightliest of knights, but Anastasia is ultimately in control. And the business lives of the members of Iron Fang are unrelated to who they are as people. Subaru can’t dislike them.

Reinhard and Rom from the Felt Faction may merit trust. But Felt’s thoughts are unclear to Subaru. So long as she’s willing to participate in the Selection, Subaru must brace for the tricky, devious girl to be scheming something. If she seriously deploys Reinhard, and he becomes their enemy, their chances of beating him in combat are a dream within a dream.

The Priscilla Faction is hardest to read. Subaru cannot trust either of them. Al might also be from Japan, but he is surprisingly loyal to Priscilla. So he will not stand up for Subaru, while Priscilla’s capriciousness is already terrifying. She could randomly visit to decapitate him with a smile on her face. That’s her breed of absurdity.

Even though a year has passed, no candidates know the motives of the others. Subaru needs to probe deeper if he wants to know more than what he learned at the Palace. Which is one reason for accepting this invitation.

Subaru: “Honestly I am terrified of being in Anastasia’s debt. How did she figure out you were looking for a colorless magic stone anyway?”

Emilia: “Puck showed himself in the Palace, so I didn’t want anyone to know he’s limited. I was trying to be sooo careful… but you just can’t stop people from saying things.”

Subaru: “That’s what happens. So even if we get the magic stone, it just means things are back to status quo from the other factions’ perspectives. The benefits are in establishing the debt.”

That said, Puck’s return will enhance Emilia’s already significant combat strength. But no amount of combat power alone will secure Emilia’s win in the Selection. It would just make their defeat of the Sizeable Hare more convincing, if anything.

—The defeat of the Sizeable Hare in Sanctuary.

This second achievement of the Emilia Faction, unrelated to the defeat of Sloth of the Witch Cult, is unfortunately not recognized by the public. There were no witnesses to the Hare’s defeat, and it is impossible to retrieve any corpses as proof.

They threw the thing into another dimension never to return. It’s the truth, but not believable. The Al Shamak spell that Beatrice used is forgotten in this era, and she lacks the mana to demonstrate the technique again.

So while they reported the Hare’s defeat to the Capital, it has yet to be deemed as a legitimate achievement. And if they go into detail, they will have to describe Sanctuary in detail too, and thus reveal that Roswaal kept a hidden village in his territory. Ultimately they had to stop pressing the issue.

They were told that their claims would gain credibility if the Hare remains unseen for the next decade, but by that point it’s too late to be a useful achievement. Though it doesn’t bother Emilia too much, since it all happened extremely suddenly.

Subaru: “But it’s still annoying. Seriously how much pain did those fucking rabbits put me through…”

Emilia: “But we really did beat the Sizeable Hare, even if they don’t believe us. That scary witchbeast won’t hurt anyone else anymore. Isn’t that enough?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan you are way too positive and kind…”

When you do something righteous, it ought to be acknowledged. Emilia speaks magnanimously, making Subaru recognize how pathetic he is. How nice would it be if he could think the way Emilia does? He will never achieve it. It just irritates him not to get recognition he deserves.

Emilia sees Subaru sulking, and her mouth relaxes into a smile. Subaru hasn’t noticed that Emilia sometimes gazes at him with this tender look in her eye. Or that her expression during these moments lacks the maternal spark of a mother watching over a child, and is instead something indescribably complex.

Emilia: “And people already know that you’ve achieved things, Subaru. It’s formally recognized that you fought the White Whale and defeated Sloth.”

Subaru: “For those… it really feels like I only got the scraps. People were doing a lot more than me for the White Whale, and I just happened to snag the perfect moment at the end. And I didn’t have that goal in mind for Sloth.”

All he was thinking during the Petelgeuse fight was to protect Emilia. Or, no, that’s not quite accurate. What Subaru felt back then was both desire to protect Emilia, and hatred for Petelgeuse personally. It’s not a question of which is legitimate. Both are, and both desires are Subaru’s own. It makes him uncomfortable that a fight which was basically a personal grudge is deemed as being for the sake of the world at large.

Emilia: “But that’s the same for the Sizeable Hare. You defeated two of the witchbeasts that had been tormenting the world for four hundred years in such a short timespan… I know I’m not one to say this, but it’s like you’re doing sooo much more than you should.”

Subaru: “Yeah. And there I am involved in both. Honestly, I think what I’ve done’s excessive. Let’s just hope the last one doesn’t show up.”

Emilia: “—Yes.”

Subaru trusts in the power of words and prays to never encounter the Blacksnake. But Emilia’s response is rather wooden. It’s almost as if she has some personal thoughts on the Blacksnake.

Emilia: “So anyway, about Priestella.”

But before he can address the shift in her attitude, she changes the topic. Obviously she doesn’t want to talk about it. And, having grown somewhat wiser, Subaru decides not to force an explanation out of her. Though sometimes he forgets to pay attention to things like that and acts exactly how he used to.

Emilia: “We know we’re going, but do we really want to go with the same people? I kind of wanted to talk with Roswaal about it, too.”

Subaru: “I think we’re fine. You’re going, so naturally your Knight, that is me, and my partner Beako will be coming too. But being serious, we bring Garf for combat and Otto too since he’s so insistent to go. I’d really like for Petra or Frederica to come too so all your needs are addressed, but…”

Emilia: “It’s too bad. Roswaal’s busy with the Meeting of the Western Lords. We’ve known forever that Petra needs to join him for her maid training. Though she’s sooo angry about it.”

Subaru: “Because she completely hates Roswaal after the Sanctuary thing. Roswaal enjoys it, which keeps Ram quiet, but

Petra is maturing justly and brilliantly as a maid, but her core is still dangerously childish. Her harshness on her master Roswaal is particularly striking, and she conceivably would wring the water from her washcloth into his tea. But since Subaru is on Petra’s side, he’s ready to overlook it even should he hypothetically witness it.

Only time will mend broken trust. But it seems that a year was not enough for Petra to start listening to Roswaal.

Subaru: “Which means Frederica should go with them as a restraint and a model of proper etiquette, which leaves Ram in the mansion. Hold on this is dicey.”

Emilia: “Really? Anne will be going to the meeting too, so Clind-san will be there. I’m sure he’ll be friendly with Petra, so maybe Frederica doesn’t need to go.”

Subaru: “Clind-san… I don’t really get him.”

Subaru thinks back on the powerful butler of the Milord Mansion, where the group stayed while their mansion was being prepared. He works with such incredible refinement that the eye can’t catch it. It’s a mess of a compliment, but it’s what describes him.

Subaru’s training in parkour also began with Clind, who taught him the basics. He coached Subaru, who cannot exceed the physical limits of the ordinary man, when he was trying to figure out how to move without disregarding his boundaries. Anne-Rose and Clind have visited the new mansion multiple times to hang out. Subaru had Clind watch him practice his parkour, but then Clind defeated Garfiel’s obstacle course without breaking a sweat and without ruffling his clothes. He’s inhuman.

Subaru: “But leaving aside who’s staying in the mansion, we shouldn’t worry about it. And anyway I should be the one more concerned about being careful. Goes for you too, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Mm. I do feel bad about agreeing without discussing it. I’ll have to apologize to Otto-kun.”

Subaru: “He doesn’t care about his dignity, but he does hold onto things for ages. I’ll tell him that I told you off so hard you cried.”

Emilia: “Heehee, thank you.”

Subaru fires an uppercut into the air, and Emilia smiles. She puts her hand to her chest and touches the blue crystal pendant hanging there. Even now, the Great Spirit Puck sleeps in that crystal.

Never mind his true power, this gem isn’t even strong enough for him to communicate. If he even twitches, the jewel will break and he will be unleashed—or so Emilia and Beatrice say. Once he is free, Puck will inadvertently bring great destruction on the environment, eventually run out of mana, and disappear back to where he came.

Emilia is constantly supplying the crystal with mana so that this doesn't happen, and preserving Puck. Now they just need to make a good crystal from colorless magic stone and they should be able to restore him. Anastasia is saying she has seen magic stones that can withstand this wear.

Emilia: "Once I can talk with Puck again… there are so many things I want to ask him. So—"

Emilia closes her eyes, saying nothing more. Her long eyelashes quiver, and Subaru quietly scratches his head. He can only vaguely figure what Emilia is thinking.

Subaru: "You better get back here, cat spirit. I got a mountain of complaints for you."

And, as her knight should, he agrees with her alongside his insults.

2

Otto: "You know! I'm saying this with everyone's best interests in mind!"

Otto Suwen slams his glass to the table, clearly in a bad mood. After his conversation with Emilia and dinner, Subaru decided to see Otto before his nightly routine, and has been listening to him drunkenly complain for the past while.

Garfiel: "'S been like this th'whole time. My amazin' ears're sick'a it."

Says Garfiel in exasperation, sitting beside Subaru as he listens to Otto complain. He sticks his pinky in his ear and scratches his head, his sharp fangs clicking as he laps at his glass of milk.

Subaru is insisting that they not give alcohol to minors like him. Frederica and Ram agree, and he is trying to establish twenty as the drinking age in Roswaal Mansion. Also one time naughty Otto encouraged Garfiel to take a sip of alcohol and it turns out he can't hold his liquor at all. Now just seeing a bottle of the stuff is enough to make him grimace.

Subaru isn't going to break the laws from the old world, so the only drinkers in the mansion are Roswaal, Otto, Ram, and Frederica. Which means that the only drinker in the room is Otto.

Subaru: "Don't sulk. Emilia's sorry about deciding everything on her own. She knows she should've discussed it. Don't think it would've changed anything though."

Otto: "But there is more to things than their outcome. The process is important. You often get conversations where the conclusion is apparent from the very beginning, but the course you follow to get there is essential. Especially when we're unguardedly accepting their offer… you mustn't play into the opponent's hands!"

Subaru attempts to smooth things over, but Otto snaps at him. He's completely correct so Subaru can't rebut him, but,

Subaru: "What the hell, you sound like an actual internal affairs guy. After how hard you resisted it in the beginning? Guess you weren't so reluctant about it after all."

Garfiel: "We're juss acceptin' a damn invitation, it ain't that complicated, Otto."

Otto: "It's almost invigorating how little you two have changed!"

Subaru and Garfiel dig into Otto in concert and high-five. The three friends are around the same age, and often hang out together. It is beautiful how naturally their conversations fall into this exact pattern.

Who cares about what Otto thinks. He makes a wonderful internal affairs minister. He was well-educated as a merchant's son, learned the ways of the world as a travelling merchant, and he's both smart and calculating. This has to be a better fate for him than somehow getting swindled into slavery. Though, he still tilts his head, wondering how this even happened to him as he chips through mountains of paperwork. Guy's stubborn.

Since he's seen Roswaal's confidential paperwork, is accustomed to his post as Emilia's helper, and is neck-deep in managing the territory of Margrave Mathers, he has no hope of escape.

Otto: "What is that, that pitying look. It's like you're gazing at a chicken seconds before strangling it."

Subaru: "It's more like I'm gazing at a battery hen that only gets to live for its eggs."

Otto: "Even worse!"

Garfiel: "Yer be quiet now. 'N stop teasin' him so much, Captain. Rules're t'keep it t'ten Ottos a day."

Otto: "How much is that?! How much is ten Ottos a day?!"

Yells Otto, his face red, but neither Subaru or Garfiel respond. This is what it's like when he's drunk. He's working a stressful job, so they give him his drinking time, but it might actually just encourage even more stress.

Subaru: "Otto vents best by yelling anyway."

Otto: "Clearly not!"

Garfiel: "Yeah yeah now quiet down 'n pour yerself another drink. Anyway, Captain, got somethin' I wanna check with ya."

Subaru: "Oh? Don't get that often. Go ahead."

Otto grumbles as he refills his glass and quietly sips at it. Garfiel glances away from him, his mouth white with milk.

Garfiel: "'S 'bout what the enemy's doin', obviously. The candidates ain't never got any scuffles goin' before, 'n now she's up in our face lookin' fer a fight. She gotta be up t'somethin', yeh?"

Subaru: "You mean, you think she just challenged us to a duel?"

Garfiel: "'Course I goddamn do. 'S what she's thinkin'. Forget that weedy Joshua prick, you see the cat kid who was with 'im?"

—The cat kid is the same age as you. The comment is too tasteless for Subaru to actually say it. But what's his problem with Mimi? Far as Subaru could tell she was acting the same as usual, just reaching for her tea and biscuits. And she did the same thing through dinner too.

Garfiel: "That girl's damn tough. N' she was starin' at my 'mazin' self, not juss durin' the talk, but all through fuckin' dinner. She musta figured out 'm th'strongest guy in the place."

Subaru: "Are you sure…? No, I mean, Mimi is strong, and she is kind of a battle junkie, but…"

She doesn't seem marginally smart enough to have ulterior motives. Subaru can only see her as transparent, or actually just airheaded.

Garfiel: "Either way, sh's keepin' n' eye on my amazin' self while she's here. Best we make sure you and Emilia-sama ain't caught on yer own while we're over there, Captain. Otto's one thing, but we ain't ever recoverin' if we lose you."

Otto: "You do realize that this fief will be an absolute mess if I'm gone?! I wish that you would take that into consideration sometimes!"

Garfiel isn't trying to belittle Otto as he urges caution. It's just that he needs to make the comparison if he's going to get his point across to Subaru. Though he doesn't pass up the opportunity to play with Otto.

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm definitely relying on you for that. Don't want to draw it out so this'll be short but, I'm counting on you, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "Yeah, make sure ya do. Count on The Strongest of Shields, aka The Legendary Guardian, Garfiel Tinzel!"

Garfiel proudly points at himself with his thumb. Subaru nods at him. He takes a sip from his own glass of milk, regretting how awesome Garfiel's titles are. He'll probably get even more titles once his might and valor resound all through the Kingdom. Will Subaru's imagination be strong enough to provide for Garfiel then?

Subaru: "I wonder if I'll ever have a stroke of genius like Invisible Providence again… only Fortune herself knows when she'll smile upon me."

Garfiel: "Yer mullin' over somethin' again. You ain't gotta trouble yerself. Y'get things done when it matters. I got faith in that."

Emilia's the same, but the trust in Garfiel's gaze is incredibly convincing. It instantly makes Subaru feel that he must match up to it. He's trying not to mistake the self-improvement needed to meet that trust with blind, headless sprinting.

Subaru: "If we've got Garfiel then we don't have to worry about our combat strength. Emilia-tan's a pretty strong fighter on her own too, and I'm decent enough with Beako. The problem here's Otto… are you seriously coming with us?"

Otto: "Of course I am! I don't want to know what insane arrangement you and Emilia-sama will land yourselves in if I don't go!"

It's also electrifying how little they trust Subaru when it comes to negotiations. Emilia is as honest and pure as she appears, and while Subaru is devious he's also inexperienced. So naturally they look like sitting ducks to Otto.

Otto: "Also, Priestella is the birthplace of Hoshin of the Wastes, the founder of Kararagi. It has contact with Kararagi since it's on the border, making it a highly significant place for merchants. I find myself duty-stricken to visit it too."

Subaru: "I thought you washed your hands of being a merchant ages ago. The hell are you doing."

Otto: "You are mistaken if you think that I will resign myself to being an Internal Affairs Minister forever! My ultimate goal is still to be a successful merchant with his own shop! This is a necessary road to get there, a necessary road on the path to my goal!"

Garfiel: “Possible that th’road leads ter yer death.”

That stuff about trapping him here is honestly pretty shallow, and if he yearns to go and can help them as Internal Affairs Minister, it makes sense that Otto should join them. Everyone in the mansion knows, for all their banter, that they can’t function without Otto. And Otto knows it, too, which is why he can’t leave.

Subaru: “Or you could just be a masochist but we’ll disregard that.”

Otto: “Did you just agree at me in an incredibly impolite way or am I only imagining it?!”

Subaru: “It’s not important. Anastasia’s going to be there, and we don’t know what terms she’ll hit us with. We’re counting on you. You’re on bureaucracy, Garfiel’s on military. And I’m there to make things fun.”

Otto: “Do more!”

Subaru could try his absolute best, but he will never be stronger than Garfiel. He could study his absolute best, but he wouldn’t have time to eclipse Otto as a bureaucrat.

Subaru: “Just gotta do what I can do. One of those positive steps to self-improvement that I’ve mulled over with Beako.”

Garfiel: “Yer gonna be fine if Emilia-sama ‘n Beatrice’re with ya. Meanin’ my amazin’ self gotta cover for Otto. Watch yer back for me, yeh?”

Otto: “Why does it feel like I’m the greatest burden here… I can’t say that I agree with it.”

Subaru gets serious, and Garfiel accepts his post of babysitter. Otto grumbles and takes another sip of his liquor. The night grows darker, the mood pleasant.

Subaru: “Now, we’re gonna be busy tomorrow, so I’m calling it about here. What about you, Garfiel?”

Garfiel: “I’ll stay’n drink some more with Otto. Gettin’ pretty close t’beatin’ him at Shatranj. Might pull it off now that he’s drunk.”

Garfiel disregards Subaru and grabs a game board and pieces from the back of the room. The game is called Shatranj, with rules similar to Shogi or Chess. Subaru finds himself impressed that every world has these games. Otto is apparently quite good at them, and though Garfiel has been trying his hardest, he has suffered losses upon losses. Also Subaru is outrageously good at Othello, but struggles at Shogi and Chess.

Subaru: “Don’t stay up too late. It’ll stunt your growth.”

Garfiel: “Yer said that before n’ so that’s what I been doin’ but yer sure this fuckin’ works? Don’t feel I grew at all this year.”

Subaru: “Frederica absorbed some of the growth so your case is complicated.”

Garfiel: “Fuck you Sis!”

Roars Garfiel, baring his fangs as he slams the Shatranj board on the table. Then he hunches over and starts meticulously arranging the tiny pieces. While watching Garfiel go at it, Subaru waves to a red-faced Otto.

Subaru: “Don’t you get too drunk either. If you wind up hungover and useless, Petra will think even less of you.”

Otto: “I feel like she’s been rather harsh with me lately, but perhaps it’s just me. Could you have a word with her?”

Subaru: “You mean tell her to try harder?”

Otto: “I was clearly asking you to tell her to be nicer to me!”

Subaru answers with a bitter smile, telling Otto that it’s impossible, and leaves the two to play Shatranj as he exits the room. The crystalights in the hallway tell Subaru that it’s almost past midnight. Usually he would be in bed by this hour, but,

Subaru: “Wound up running late today.”

With that excuse, Subaru ignores the staircase to his room on the third floor of the eastern wing, and heads for the women's bedrooms in the western wing. Where,

Subaru: "—Mind if I come in?"

Subaru always knocks on the door. He knows that no one will reply. So does he say it because he has hope? Or perhaps he confirms that there is no reply, so that he doesn't forget.

—So that he doesn't forget the inferno, always blazing in his chest?

Subaru: "…"

Subaru opens the door. A pitch dark room welcomes him. It's a simple room. Its layout is identical to the countless other guest rooms in the mansion, but it plainly lacks in furniture. Just a bed in the middle of the room, windows, their curtains, a small table, and a vase with flowers. Subaru knows that no one will complain, but he still dislikes the austerity.

Call it sentimental, but he wishes that the place had some human warmth. Perhaps the day will never come where he manages to disregard that wish as weakness.

Emilia: <If you could rationalize things that way, I don't think we ever would've found common ground to our arguments. I like you sooo much just the way you are.>

Beatrice: <It is a vice to want beyond your means, in fact. Subaru, you are reckless on your own, I suppose. …But you're not alone any more, so I'll manage something for you even if you're being greedy, in fact.>

Subaru: "They're coddling me. And Emilia-tan is tantalizing me with those provocative statements."

Subaru wishes she would be more careful about saying 'I like you' or 'you're so cool'.

He has told her how he feels, but Emilia is too immature for it. Their relationship still has yet to go anywhere romantic. But even supposing it did suddenly go somewhere romantic, Subaru is not mentally ready for it either. Give him two more years, no three—or even more if it's possible. That's the kind of loser he is.

Subaru: "God it's so rude of me to go on about Emilia or Beatrice while I'm here. Petra'd beat me up if she heard this."

Petra might have the best grasp of romance and its subtleties out of anyone in the mansion. Somehow everyone is terrible at relationships. Roswaal leads the charge with his toxic obsession, with the others all having their foibles too. Garfiel's feelings for Ram are still a middle school crush, though Subaru has no place to talk. Ram's ideas about extreme loyalty dictating love are perplexing, and Frederica's love life is a complete unknown. Otto sometimes mentions while drunk things about being raked through the mud for philandering, but the consensus is that these claims are lies and pretense. It's a disgrace to these adults that a thirteen year old girl is beating them.

Subaru: "So how does that stand. I don't think that tendency will change much, even after you wake up. Either because I'm a loser, or because you respect me."

Subaru pulls a chair over and seats himself beside the bed. Moonlight slips in through the crack in the curtains, illuminating her face as she sleeps.

The light of the moon spills over her pale face, pink lips. She is a sleeping beauty with short blue hair, her curvy body garbed in thin negligee, her chest rising and falling in time with her breathing.

—She has slept for over a year now.

Subaru: "Got lots of things to tell you today. Since some guests showed up uninvited, and with this crazy offer. I started my day with my usual—"

Subaru speaks calmly to her as she sleeps. He uses his same comedic phrasing as always, but his tone is incredibly gentle. He speaks as though lulling a child to sleep as he cheerily tells her about his day.

She doesn’t respond. Even so. These trysts unfold every night. Tonight is rife with things to discuss. Until the moon sits low in the sky, the tale goes on between Subaru and the Sleeping Beauty.

Chapter 4:
On the Road

1

It takes them three days before they set out for Priestella.

Roswaal: “I respect Emilia-sama’s decision, aaaaaaand there’s nothing urgent for her to do here, sooooo I’m amenable to it. Though it iiiiiiiiis worrying that their intentions are uuuuuuunreadable.”

The Meeting of the Western Lords—a conference between Margrave Roswaal and the other lords under that banner—will be taking place in the mansion of the most neutral lord among them. The lords are generally compliant to Roswaal’s beat, but some definitely do voice objection and unease about his support for Emilia.

Most of the lords are copacetic to Roswaal’s policy of demi-human favoritism, or really, equality for demi-humans, but half-elves are not commonly regarded as demi-human. Over the past year, they have succeeded in getting some lords to superficially support her through discussions and deals. This conference is, in part, to establish a podium for her to speak with the lords who still stubbornly refuse her. Roswaal is leaving the mansion empty to set up that groundwork.

Emilia: “I’m sorry. I honestly wanted to attend the meeting too, but…”

Roswaal: “Iiiiiiiiit would backfire. The purpose of this meeting is so that you may speak with them later, meaning that it would be foul play to reveal you at this stage. Hoooooowever, if you could calm the confusion and silence the rebelling lords with some masterful piece of oration, that wooooooould be nice.”

Emilia: “…I don’t think I can manage that yet. Okay. I’ll behave.”

Emilia purses her lips and casts her gaze down in frustration.

Roswaal nods at her, satisfied. Subaru does want to object to Roswaal's somewhat sarcastic tone, but at least it means the guy is speaking with her more sincerely. It's infinitely better than last year, when Roswaal blatantly kept Emilia the Accessory away from the political issues—or so Emilia divulged to Subaru after he complained about it.

Roswaal makes a far more dependable supporter now that he's being proactive. But since his motives are questionable, it's only half as beneficial as it initially seems.

Subaru: "Assuming that Petra's definitely going to the meeting… who's left in the mansion?"

Roswaal: "Anne-Rose and her associates wiiiiiiill be attending. I doubt there will be any issues if Clind-kun is present, coooooonsidering his favoritism for Petra. I was intending to leave Frederica here, since she gets along poorly with him… what about you, Ram?"

Ram: "I shall accompany you as you desire, Roswaal-sama."

Subaru: "You say 'as you desire' but it's totally your desires talking…"

Ram is still an advocate for Roswaal, but is less hesitant to insist upon her own desires now. Roswaal seems to be accepting it without thinking it strange. Their relationship of one-sided dependency looks to have changed. The dependent atmosphere around them is gone, and it feels like they actually understand each other now. Though it's unclear whether it's beneficial to have someone around who empathizes with Roswaal.

Ram: "What are you staring at. Say anything thoughtless and I'll mash your eyes to paste, Barusu."

Subaru: "Sister, in your mind, just how incessant am I exactly?"

Ram: "…"

Ram makes an extremely complicated expression. It's not because it's a tricky question. It's just the expression she makes whenever

Subaru calls her ‘Sister’. She doesn’t dislike it, but it doesn’t feel legitimate. Since she has yet to recover her memories of Rem, those years of being worshipped by her little sister are still lost to the void.

Roswaal: “It would worry me were it only Emilia-sama and yourself leaving, buuuuuuut I’m sure that you’ll be fine with Garfiel and Otto-kun accompanying you. Otto-kun will keep you from bumbling into any horrendously awful agreements, and Garfiel resolves the worst of problems by pulverizing them while you flee.”

Emilia: “But I think that’d cause sooo many problems too… I’ll do my best to keep it from coming to that.”

Subaru: “Leave pressuring them to me, Emilia-tan. I’ll be right on them whether it’s Anastasia-san or Julius. There’s this chatty witch I know who’s taught me all about people dodging important topics in conversation.”

Emilia: “I’m not sure if that’s something to brag about…”

Subaru shoots Emilia a thumbs up and grins, teeth sparkling. Naturally, Emilia knows that Subaru is joking around to relax her. They have build enough trust over the last year for that much understanding, at least.

Roswaal: “Noooooooooow, Beatrice. I can trust that yoooooooou’ll look after them?”

Beatrice: “Of course, in fact. You can’t rest easy about any of these people were Betty not with them, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s pigtails bob as she puffs out her chest. Her adorable attitude puts a smile on everyone’s face. Though she herself just looks displeased.

—Regardless, with this conversation over, they determine to leave for Priestella.

Joshua: “Ask for the Water Plumage Pavilion once you arrive. That is where Anastasia-sama awaits you.”

Mimi: “Don’t keep her waiting!”

On that note, Anastasia’s subordinates leave the Roswaal Manor. They leave for Priestella first to tell Anastasia that the invitation has been accepted.

Garfiel: “Yeh, take care.”

Mimi: “You take care too, Garf! I’m gonna be super on edge waiting, so you better come!”

Garfiel: “Hell about you’s on edge. But I get ya. These guys ain’t got a hope without my amazin’ self. We’ll settle this there. Get yer neck ready fer th’rope.”

Mimi: “Huh? Okay! I’ll get it super ready!”

This cute little exchange between Mimi and Garfiel was particularly notable. Garfiel had been so wary of the two during their stay, but going by Mimi’s attitude, feels like his fears were misplaced. Or rather, feels like Mimi is extremely affectionate when making friends. She started calling him ‘Garf’ out of nowhere, so perhaps Anastasia’s invitation really isn’t hostile.

Joshua: “You may have won Mimi over, but I… I myself shall not yield so easily.”

Says Joshua, trying to stay stoic while following his cheerful bodyguard. Mimi keeps a tight grip on his arm, yanking him down and forward as she bounds ahead. His expression is dead serious during all of this, which is kind of comical. But even Subaru has fostered enough kindness over this year to not inform him of the fact.

Emilia: “Joshua-kun, will you be okay? You have such a lovely outfit, but the sleeve’s seconds from coming off…”

Joshua: “P-Please don’t worry. There’s no need for concern!”

While Subaru can understand the poor boy’s feelings, the attending angel cannot. Emilia speaks with sincere concern for Joshua, who mustn’t raise his voice and instead tries to pry Mimi off, looking miserable. But Mimi is expectedly stronger than Joshua and his efforts come to nothing.

Joshua: “My brother may call you his friend, but I believe he is being far too kind. Which is one of his virtues. I believe it my job as his younger brother to compensate for that, so you best not expect any mercy from the Juukulius family.”

Subaru: “What, you already stopped with the ‘I myself’ thing?”

Joshua: “P-Please pay attention to what I’m saying! Trying to make a fool of me! Not a very pleasant man, are you!”

Subaru: “I’m more worried about you and how you’re forgetting your place as your master’s servant. If you deride people in public, it’d probably wind up as a black mark on the Juukulius family.”

Joshua: “—!”

Joshua’s face pales, but Subaru isn’t trying just to criticize him. And Subaru’s at far higher risk for insulting people in public anyway. Not that Joshua would know that, and Natsuki Subaru being Natsuki Subaru has reason not to tell him.

Emilia: “Subaru, stop bullying younger kids. I’m so sorry, Joshua-kun. Subaru’s… he can be like that.”

Joshua: “—N-No… I was truly being impolite. I apologize.”

Subaru: “Just ‘I’? Ow! Ow, that hurts, Emilia-tan!”

Subaru immediately starts criticizing Joshua again, when Emilia grabs his ear and yanks it. Joshua sees tears rise in Subaru’s eyes, and, satisfied, decides to leave the conversation there.

With a deep breath, Joshua files into his dragon carriage. But since ligers are pulling the vehicle rather than dragons it’s really a dog carriage, which he files into. Perhaps dog races are a thing here?

Subaru: “Might be worth it to introduce some forms of entertainment, like horse racing and stuff…”

Subaru's ideas that use his Unique Knowledge From The 21st Century never graduate from his imagination. But maybe he should more seriously consider utilizing his knowledge. First he needs to judge what the pros and cons of popularizing horse racing would be, and,

Emilia: "What's up, Subaru. You look like you're thinking of something sooo devious."

Subaru: "Got a rare flood of ideas from my Unique Knowledge From The 21st Century. Like a burst of Subaruisms."

Emilia: "Oh, you thought of another new topping? I liked the mayonnaise, and I liked the tartar sauce too."

Subaru: "This time I'm thinking unique in a way that the populace would never conceive."

Incidentally the Roswaal Mansion carries a stockpile of tartar sauce, just like it does mayonnaise. Basically everyone here likes it, but it doesn't entirely satisfy Subaru.

While all this chitchat is going on, Joshua and Mimi get ready to leave and their carriage begins to move. They aren't sitting on the coachman's seat to drive, Mimi just mounts one of the two ligers and controls their course directly. Her white robe flutters as she smiles cheerfully.

Mimi: "Okay! See you two and Garf later!"

They pleasantly see Mimi off, and wave goodbye to a wary Joshua through the window too. Two days after seeing them off, Subaru and the others leave for Priestella.

2

Otto: "It will take us over ten days to get there, even if we hurry. We have no real need to hurry, either, so let's relax and take our time."

Nobody has any objection to Otto's plan. He is the one most accustomed to traveling among them, and he probably holds the median value in their group for physical resilience. If they travel at a pace that puts no strain on him, then everyone should enjoy a safe journey.

Otto: “Considering the carriage’s load, we will have Frufoo and Patrasche-chan pull the carriage. And since we plan not to camp anywhere, we should be fine with only the bare minimum of emergency supplies.”

Garfiel: “‘S no good fer th’body t’just sit there in a carriage th’whole time, Otto.”

Otto: “If that’s what you think, you’re always free to leave the carriage and run.”

Garfiel: “Yup, that’s what’ll do.”

Emilia: “That’s what you’ll do?”

With this little scene where Garfiel and Otto’s usual banter shocks Emilia, the journey to Priestella begins.

But, having said that, the journey itself proceeds without issue. They have some trouble when they cross borders into non-Mathers territory, or when passing through other lords’ gates, but the issue is more or less resolved by flashing the Mathers family crest or showing Emilia’s presence. This itself is liable to stir up trouble too, but they come across no one plotting anything nefarious because of this journey.

When wild dogs or witchbeasts appear on the road, foolishly trying to attack the carriage,

Garfiel: “Perfect. Been wantin’ t’smack some critters around.”

Garfiel violently tears through the group, scaring away the instigating animals. His perfect work as a bodyguard actually makes the poor witchbeasts sympathetic. But even terrifying Garfiel has to kill downtime by chewing on a knife he brought, giving him a trace of gap moe. Also it’s always unnerving to see him chew the hard steel to bits.

Beatrice: “Mm. This dragon isn’t bad, in fact. I’ll concede that much, I suppose.”

Says Beatrice, seated next to Subaru, who holds the reigns. Perhaps it’s a surprise, but Otto isn’t the only one tasked with driving. It took a year of trying, and a dragon that knows Subaru’s idiosyncrasies, but he can drive a carriage now. Is one thing you could say, but this is Patrasche and Otto’s dragon Frufoo. Though, the only other dragons that the Roswaal Mansion keeps are Rascal and Peter. Of course Subaru’s familiar enough with them to name them.

Subaru: “How about less condescension, and more helping me with the reigns? Patrasche is abounding in maternal spirit, I’m sure she’ll be nice to you too, Beako.”

Beatrice: “I’d rather not, in fact. Actually, that dragon is quite plainly glaring at me, I suppose. She doesn’t consider me a friend, in fact. What are these horrendous lies about maternal spirit, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Hey, there’ll be no badmouthing Patrasche. I’ll never let anyone insult Emilia-tan, Rem, you, or Patrasche.”

Beatrice: “You include me in your list, but still won’t let me, I suppose?”

Subaru: “When it’s someone on the list, they’re being naughty!”

Beatrice tries to escape, but it’s impossible on the narrow driver’s platform. Subaru grabs her by the scruff of the neck and draws her near, setting her on his lap as she struggles. He attempts to sentence her to tickle torture, when a strand of her hair brushes across his nose, making him sneeze dramatically—and the carriage swerves.

Otto: “Natsuki-san! Don’t let them do anything odd! If they exit the Windbreaker Blessing, we’re all going to have a terrible time with the motion sickness!”

Subaru: “Sorry! Beako was being so much fun that I just…”

Beatrice: “Don’t you try to make this Betty’s fault, in fact! Subaru just went and… stop tickling me, I suppose! Sto–pffweheehee!"

Otto sighs at the two as they play. Emilia giggles,

Emilia: "They really get along so well. Not too long ago, I never would've imagined that Subaru and Beatrice would be so close."

Otto: "Personally, I can't believe that they were ever apart. It's almost sickly how sweet Beatrice- chan is and how doting Natsuki-san is."

Emilia smiles solemnly, looking something like a mother or older sister to Otto's eyes. But Otto isn't tasteless enough to point it out, or to encourage Subaru's antics.

Otto: "We'll leave them to their merriment while we discuss something more important. That is, we will discuss the goals of Anastasia's faction, and how we will respond to them."

Emilia: "They're not trying to just put us in their debt."

Otto: "The first of the three years in the selection has passed, making this the final opportunity to establish definite groundwork. Once we establish our footing here, we will secure our support base at the Meeting of the Western Lords. If you ignore that the other factions had that issue resolved from the beginning, we should be about equal to them in our progress."

Emilia: "Where is Anastasia sitting right now?"

Emilia has been estranged from the exact movements of the other factions for a while. Because they needed to train Emilia from scratch on how to be a politician, and let her acquire the skills she needs, rather than panic her with unneeded information. Roswaal and Otto, the internal affairs duo, understood that as her reasoning for focusing her attention elsewhere, and also understand that it ought to be safe to remove some of those restrictions on this journey.

So Otto nods to Emilia and begins mentally organizing the facts.

Otto: "First we will discuss the support for the candidates as of the present. Initially, Duchess Crusch Karsten and Anastasia Hoshin were generally understood as the sure winner and the competition. The other three factions, including yours… if you'd allow me to be blunt, they're somewhat seen as space-fillers."

Emilia: "…Mm, I can't deny that. But from what you're saying…"

Otto: "Exactly. Common opinion has changed over this last year. Because the other three factions, starting with yours, have made notable achievements."

The most conspicuous achievements from the Emilia Faction, predictably, are the defeat of Sloth and the White Whale. Crusch's Faction was the one leading the offensive against the Whale, but Crusch herself has publicly stated the greatness of Sir Natsuki Subaru's contribution to the effort. Though the other factions were helping, Subaru headed the Sloth offensive. Both achievements instantly drew public attention to the previously-disregarded Emilia. Emilia also stands out negatively due to her heritage. For better or for worse, Emilia is widely acknowledged as the topic of much gossip and rumor.

The other unknown candidates, Felt and Priscilla, have also been given similar benefits.

Priscilla Barielle has done remarkable work. After inheriting land from her deceased husband, Leip Barielle, she used Lugunica's unfortunate position as a nation bordering the long-hostile Vollachian Empire to her advantage, and instantly made allies of the neighboring territories in the confusion. Almost like magic, she pacified Vollachia and made allies of the lords. Then she revitalized lands that had been ruined by war. In this short time frame, she has definitely shown good prospects. She also has her overwhelming attitude and her looks going for her. Southern Lugunica grows more and more supportive of her by the day.

Meanwhile, Felt has Reinhard Van Astrea and the territories of the Astrea family: relative to the other candidates, she is stuck in the shadow of her knight. The title of 'Sword Saint', as overwhelmingly famous as it is, is not especially useful when choosing a new Ruler. The attitudes of the local lords, including those in the Astrea domain, veer closer to distrust than caution.

But Felt overcame this poor situation quite unexpectedly. Rather than consult the powerful nobles who could stymie the other candidates, she assembled those who had resigned from office and commoners on the streets. Felt is stupidly good at picking out those with hidden aspirations, or talented people who were never given a chance. Never mind the rumors about her having royal blood, she can identify people's talents and assign them to a post, which is perhaps the most important quality in a leader. From that small trigger, the Astrea household and its surrounding territories burst into activity, while the onlooking lords began to slowly change their tune. It's still just a small spark, but she is definitely carving herself a place in history. Nobody important in this nation is ignoring her.

Otto: "…is where each faction is now. Our faction is quite notable for its achievements, but the other two parties have a more stable foundation. Though, I believe that we could disregard that if the Sizeable Hare offensive were officially acknowledged."

Emilia: "Otto-kun, you're saying the same things as Subaru. But maybe this means it's safe to take a narcissistic view, and say that we're about in the middle."

Otto: "For now. Yes. But… there have been some changes on Duchess Karsten's front. Ones that are to our benefit."

Emilia: "To our benefit?"

Otto: "Yes. Duchess Crusch Karsten, as if she's a different person, has lost some of her luster over this year. She used to be stern in both public and private affairs, someone that the supporters of the previous Duke Karsten couldn't help but accept."

Something has changed in her politics and policies. She has become less decisive, and plainly gives a soft impression. Rumors have spread that she attempted her best to serve the unwomanly role of Duchess, but finally her true colors have come through.

She's apparently busy dealing with unsatisfied subjects and lords, even calling upon the previous, retired Duke's assistance.

Otto: “People were certain that she’d win the Selection, being that she secured the first achievement with the White Whale offensive… but, it’s unclear what exactly led to her downfall. Emilia-sama, be sure to keep vigilant.”

Emilia: “—I see.”

Emilia lowers her eyes, full of gloom. She can’t help but feel sympathetic for her rivals, but Otto finds that stance dangerous and fragile. They’re eventually going to oppose each other. It’s disadvantageous to be unduly supportive. This last year has taught Otto that the truism applies in both commerce and politics.

Otto: “Try not to brood on it. More conversations like this will have to happen in the future.”

Emilia: “Mm. Thank you. I know you’re just looking out for me.”

Otto: “Excellent. Now, let’s finally get onto the topic of Anastasia’s faction. They have nowhere to call their base in Lugunica, but have the backing of important merchants in Kararagi. Stores that had originally been considering the idea are now springing up across Lugunica, all with Hoshin Company’s backing.”

Emilia: “But what does that mean? Maybe there are lots of new stores, but that doesn’t mean lots of new suppor… oh, there’s more people who know her, so she’s more visible?”

Otto: “That would be a side-effect, I think. Her goal is more simple than that. —She can use far much more money. And since money is so simple, it works on anyone. There is no creature of society out there who lives in peace after economic downfall.”

Making allies of merchants means making more friends in the world of business. And being that economics supports society, holding economic power means she can attack and defend that society. She’s making allies all over the place, making it nigh impossible to counter her, a businesswoman who prioritizes her economic strength.

Otto: “I believe that Anastasia’s faction is the one we must be most cautious of. And then we get an invitation from them… and it all feels like we're going to wind up in their debt. Do you understand how immeasurably troubled I am?"

Emilia: "…It's finally sunken in sooo deep. I'm sorry for acting so rashly."

Otto: "Nothing to worry, just as long as you understand. You'll never do anything careless again I'm sure… I'm sure… because I'm sure that you understand!"

Emilia bows her head, and Otto shakes his in submission, then sighs.

Otto's clear explanation of matters makes it very easy to understand. Emilia nods over and over.

Indeed. The world of politics is complex and tricky.

She already knew that her thoughts of 'I'll do my best' and 'Let's do our best' wouldn't secure her the victory, but it dizzies her to think that she has to pay mind to what the others are doing. She's glad that he's revealed these secrets to her, but it also makes her far more uneasy.

Otto: "You don't have to agonize over it alone."

Says Otto, imagining how Emilia must feel. Emilia looks up. Otto fiddles with his grey hair.

Otto: "You may be the central figure, but that doesn't mean that you have to do everything yourself. You have this whole carriage with you."

Emilia: "This whole carriage?"

Otto: "Natsuki-san is at the reigns. Beatrice-chan is on guard to make sure he doesn't slack off. Garfiel is keeping lookout atop the carriage, and I am the one who planned our itinerary. What you do is thank all of us for our work, and we'll bumble our way to Priestella."

Emilia's eyes widen, comprehending what Otto means. And it's funny, because this indirect phrasing reminds her of someone else.

Emilia: "Otto-kun. You sound sooo much like Subaru."

Otto: "What?! Truly?! Oh no… he must've infected me over all this time spent with him… n-no, please no, this terrifying thought just —"

Subaru: "Hey, Otto! What are you talking so cheerily about with Emilia-tan? Emilia-tan smiles are my diet, so you better not steal any!"

Otto's shoulders hitch up as the person in question butts into the conversation. Otto's reaction makes Emilia smile, and Otto smiles back, looking defeated.

Subaru: "Come on! What's so interesting?! This isn't fair! Beatrice, take the reigns. I'm busting in."

Beatrice: "Auh! No, in fact! Stop, I suppose! I can't… I-It'll flip over! It's going to flip over, in fact! Look, she's going to flip it over, I suppose!"

Hearing the yells from the driver's seat, Otto resignedly gets to his feet. A certain impatient knight must be hitting his limit. Time to swap places and visit the dragons.

Emilia: "Otto-kun."

When Emilia calls Otto from behind as he prepares to move to the driver's seat. He glances back at her, and his breath catches. Emilia's trusting smile stabs him through the chest.

Emilia: "I know I'll cause some problems, but I'll still do my best. I'm counting on you."

Otto: "—Yes, please do. I'll take my own enjoyment in the scraps."

Emilia: "That also sounded kind of like Subaru."

With a bitter smile, Otto steps over to the driver's platform. Subaru and Emilia are both devious. For Otto, stricken with an illness where he must answer to the expectations upon him, they’re a lethal combination.

While all this banter unfolds, twelve days pass from their departure. Emilia’s group safely arrives at the Watergate City, Priestella.

Chapter 5:
The Watergate City, Priestella

1

—Upon their arrival, Subaru and the others are greeted by towering, grand walls. Subaru: “Yeah, this looks exactly like the prison I expected it to…”

Mutters Subaru as he pokes his head out of the carriage window, Otto at the reigns. Beatrice captures Subaru’s muttering, her head also out the window beneath Subaru.

Beatrice: “Joshua said it was a sightseeing spot, but Betty doubts that, in fact. It looks far more depressing than relaxing, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Agreed. I mean, I guess the bridge and gates and stuff are kinda cool.” Subaru nods in agreement to Beatrice and looks down.

Their carriage is travelling across the massive, stone Tigracy Bridge, which leads to the front gates of Priestella.

Subaru stretches slights and looks over to the horizon, where he sees sunlight glinting on the water. To him it looks like an ocean, but since oceans don’t exist in this world, it has to be a lake or a river.

Beatrice: “Priestella is a city built upon a lake, in fact. The land inside those walls becomes so flat that it forms a basin in the center, I suppose. If you envision the city as an old trap, then of course you’d expect the center to easily flood, in fact.”

Subaru: “You mean that thing ‘bout it being a trap for some nasty witchbeast. Emilia mentioned that too. Is it actually true though?”

Beatrice: “This is my first time seeing this place, and I don’t know what the specific purpose of it was either, I suppose. But I suspect it is true, now that I’ve seen it, in fact.”

Beatrice's bluish eyes gaze at the city's gates beyond the bridge.

The walls keep her from peering inside, but she must be imagining what the city looks like. It's unclear how precisely the books in the Forbidden Archive spoke of the world, but Beatrice's extensive knowledge has helped on more than a few occasions.

Beatrice: "…Why are you stroking Betty's head, I suppose."

Subaru: "Because it's there. I wanna spend all the time patting you that I'm able."

Beatrice: "Utter nonsense, and patronizing, undesired nonsense at that, in fact!"

Nevertheless Beatrice neglects to swat Subaru's hand a way and he proceeds to pat her more while gazing past the bridge-railing, at the lake. The pristine waters give him a clear view to the bottom of the lake, with not a single piece of litter or pollution in sight.

If the whole lake is like this, it's an example of incredible ethics.

Subaru: "Actually I didn't notice any litter or illegally dumped industrial waste on the road either. Probably 'cause people don't have much stuff but still it's nice."

Otto: "Priestella is particularly strict on littering since it has to preserve its landscape. There will be a simple border check once we enter the gates, please don't get weirdly assertive and reject the binding paperwork they give you."

Warns Otto, having caught Subaru's muttering. Subaru tilts his head.

Subaru: "Paperwork?"

Emilia: "I think you're usually exempted from it if you have a crest on your carriage when you're going to the Capital, but absolutely everyone has to fill out paperwork to enter Priestella."

Subaru nods, impressed, and more or less accepts it as a passport and customs check. But once again he tilts his head at the words ‘binding paperwork’.

Subaru: “Is it written on paper that makes you geass yourself? Like it does something to your od once you sign, and the second you break the terms your gate stops working or something…”

Emilia: “Eek, that’d be sooo scary… there shouldn’t be anything that forceful. The paperwork is just a statement that you won’t do anything bad. But it means your conscience will be keeping a close eye on you.”

Subaru: “…We’d have world peace if everyone were as strict on themselves as you, Emilia-tan.”

Subaru smiles wryly, aware of his own scummy personality, at Emilia’s idealism.

Either way, he understands that there is paperwork, and that it is not actually binding.

Otto: “There are nationals laws that must be upheld, but the Mayor and Lord who manage the city have rather extensive authority there. There are many things about Priestella that simply differ from national law. The paperwork will surely mention what they are, so please refrain from mocking it and actually read it.”

Garfiel: “‘S a goddamn pain. How ‘bout you read it n’ tell us what it said when yer done.”

Otto: “You’ll never mature with that attitude. It’s necessary for you to learn how to at least skim paperwork, what with your social position. You can’t just stockpile bizarre trivia from the books you like.”

Garfiel: “It ain’t b’zarre trivia, ‘s a man’s lust fer th’dramatic. Yeh, Captain?” Subaru: “You got it.”

Garfiel balances precariously on the carriage roof as he peeks his head over and down. Subaru nods firmly in reply, Otto sighs, and Emilia watches happily. Beatrice shakes her head in lamentation.

Beatrice: “You two children are just impossible, in fact.” Otto:

"They are a nightmare to herd."

Who could guess how Beatrice's statement resounded with him.

Unfortunately for him, no one else in the carriage is capable of empathizing with his grief and exhaustion.

—Patrasche roars, and everyone directs their attention to the front. The gates of Priestella stand directly before them.

2

The border inspection ends with underwhelming ease.

Emilia and Otto were right. The paperwork described the terms they would have to follow to enter the city, and the rules by which they needed to abide once inside.

That said, every term was practically impossible to accidentally violate, so there's no need to pay that much conscious attention to them.

All you have to do to enter the city is read the paper, sign your name, and get the officer's approval. The officers did panic a little once Emilia introduced herself, but being that Anastasia passed through here too, they probably figure that something is going on.

Subaru: "Guess it is pretty big news to have two girls with the right to the Throne in one place."

Emilia: "There wasn't too much fuss, so I think Anastasia let them know beforehand. Or maybe it was Joshua-kun or Mimi-chan."

Subaru: "Joshua feels possible if you ignore his clumsiness, but I seriously doubt it was Mimi."

It doesn't feel like the catgirl has that kind of sensibility.

But not because she's selfish or anything. How to describe it?

Subaru: "'Cause she's cute."

Emilia: “Yes, because she’s cute.”

And it’s so mysteriously persuasive that it makes Emilia nod. Subaru crosses his arms, finding that no other word fits. Also for some reason Beatrice stomps on his foot.

Subaru kills his time by placating a displeased Beatrice, until Otto and Garfiel finally finish their drawn-out inspection and join the others beyond the gates.

Subaru: “Hey guys. What held you up?”

Otto: “Garfiel did. I’ve been constantly, constantly telling him to practice his writing, and still…”

Subaru: “Garfiel, you can’t write?”

Garfiel: “I can. ‘S just, eh, puttin’ it how you would yer’d call it avant garde or, eh, whatever.”

Meaning his handwriting is so horrendous that the officers couldn’t read it.

The officers must have offered to write for their illiterate client, but Garfiel’s pride would not allow it.

Subaru: “I won’t say anything against you, but you better study if you don’t want this to happen again. I know you write letters to Lewes-san, and those ones have to be legible.”

Garfiel: “Ha, now there’s a joke, Captain. Me n’ granny go way back. My nanna can read anythin’ my amazin’ self writes, even if it’s with my left hand.”

Subaru: “You aren’t thinking to improve at all are you.”

Says Subaru, sighing in exhaustion, to a proud Garfiel.

Garfiel’s grandmother Lewes is not living with him in Roswaal’s mansion. She and the twenty-four duplicates have been tasked with duties in various forests in Roswaal’s domain.

Emilia and Garfiel still hold the command right for the doubles, and their orders still reach the doubles from a distance. The team is trying to utilize this and have the girls serve as middlemen for communicating orders.

Subaru proposed the idea, and Lewes carries the responsibility for the work. Garfiel opposed it all at first, but generally agrees with it now.

And so Lewes and the doubles are living in Earlham Village. The plan is to go girl-by-girl, teaching them everything they need to know, and sending them to towns and villages once they're ready.

Subaru: "It's like a huge spy operation, which kinda makes it sound bad…"

But he loathes to simply leave them there, hanging around without any role or purpose. Perhaps Subaru's guilt from discarding them in a previous loop is what spurred the idea.

Emilia: "Subaru? They finished the bag check for the carriage, let's go?"

Emilia calls Subaru out of his reverie, and he hurriedly glances up. He gives a strained smile as she looks curiously on, and grabs Patrasche's reigns.

As if sensing Subaru's unease, the smart black dragon nuzzles her snout against the back of his neck. It mystifies Subaru how relaxing the rough sensation is.

Subaru: "…Thank you, for everything."

Subaru replies to her silent compassion by stroking her hard scales. Patrasche responds with her snout, and Subaru finally tugs the reigns to set off for Priestella proper.

They exit the front gate to find a river flowing between the exterior gates and the city. They cross the stone bridge over the river, the inner gates open, and Priestella reveals itself.

Subaru: "Woah…"

Subaru sighs in admiration at the sight unfolding before him.

And he isn't the only one reacting like this. Emilia and Beatrice, seated on either side of him, also express their wonder.

He must apologize for using the word 'jail' on this aquatic city.

When Subaru first heard about Priestella, he envisioned something like the old world's Venice. He was correct to do so.

The city is circular, enclosed in turn by the circular walls.

Ignoring the fact that its size is that of a city, its shape is essentially that of a sports arena. The outer rim is the most elevated, elevation dropping the closer you get to the center.

Dense rows of stone buildings line the tiers of the city, the most western-seeming architecture that Subaru has seen yet.

Large canals run through the town, with notably massive canals—rather, waterways—dividing the circular city into four even sections. Subaru sees several gondolas paddling on the water, and a tingle shoots down his spine at the thought: gondoliers.

The Blue City, The City of Water, The Watergate City Priestella. Each one rings true. The sight brings nothing but wonder.

Subaru: "Amazing…"

He says, and no one can deny him.

The guardsmen at the gates smile in satisfaction at the group's astonishment. Most likely, everyone who passes through these gates reacts exactly the same way.

That reaction both fulfils the guardsmen's office-bound obligations, and is the greatest of rewards to them. Definitely is. Right into their trap.

Garfiel: "Yeah, this's stunnin'. So Otto wasn't just spoutin' bullcrap."

Garfiel recovers from the shock first and rubs the tip of his nose.

But his excitement has not faded, for his cheeks remain slightly red.

His masculine passion for the dramatic must have been set alight by this amazing place (which falls under the heading of ‘things that are gigantic’).

Otto: “I’ve always wished to visit this place, connected as it is to the God of Merchants, Hoshin, but this is stupendous. It was worth visiting regardless of Hoshin.”

Otto fidgets with his hands, looking incredibly emotional.

The mention of Hoshin reminds Subaru of the name: Hoshin of the Wastes.

Subaru: “Hoshin’s that guy. That one merchant guy from ages ago who made crazy riches from a burnt wasteland.”

Otto: “You’re a little off, but overall correct. Four hundred years ago, Hoshin travelled the yet- untamed lands of Kararagi unaided, transformed it into an economic infrastructure using solely his own wits, and made a fortune. The man is a paragon.”

Solely because it’s about a merchant, Otto’s eyes blaze with passion as he tells the story of Hoshin. If he built the foundations for one of the four great countries, the Kararagi City State, then Subaru can agree with the legend being passed down.

Subaru: “Anastasia calls herself Hoshin after him too.”

Otto: “It’s very bold of her. I doubt there is any way to more plainly state her enthusiasm and goals, but everyone alive is going to be skeptical. Though I do presently think she has achieved enough to warrant the name.”

Subaru: “If she’s seriously doing something to warrant the name, then… well, snagging Lugunica’s throne works. Just marching toward her goal.”

Sincerely impressed, Subaru manages to pry himself from the beautiful scenery.

He strokes Beatrice's head and tugs Emilia's sleeve to pull them away from the mesmerizing city.

Subaru: "So, Anastasia's waiting for us at the Water Plumage Pavilion. Dunno where it is, but considering who she is, doubt it's someplace cheap."

Emilia: "Mm, right. I think she told the gate officers about the visit too, so it's going to be a nice

place. I think Otto-kun investigated more into that…"

Otto nods and hops onto the coachman's platform. He jerks his chin, gesturing to the carriage.

Otto: "I've supposed the route, so allow me to lead. We won't be able to rush since boats have higher priority than carriages in this town. Which I note because I suspect Natsuki-san still struggles with leisurely carriage rides."

Subaru: "Oh yeah? If it was just Patrasche, I wouldn't even have to say anything just stare at her in my trembling boots, and she'd have the carriage doing whatever I want. Right?"

Subaru boldly gazes at Patrasche and winks. Patrasche looks away. Somehow, it feels like she just sighed at him.

The unexpected reaction dejects Subaru. Emilia consolingly pats his back, while Beatrice takes his hand and files him into the carriage.

Garfiel: "N' we're off!"

Announces Garfiel from his new, dedicated perch on the carriage's roof. Otto smiles wryly as he whips the reigns, and the carriage rolls into motion.

Their pace is truly slow, so sluggish that the drop in speed from the uphill inclines cannot feasibly explain it.

Subaru: "But going off what I'm seeing out the windows, there really aren't many carriages."

Emilia: “There aren’t. And look how all the roads wide enough for carriages aren’t straight, they’re windy, because the canals have higher priority than streets.”

Subaru: “Ah, you’re right.”

Emilia is right. Footpaths and carriage roads make winding detours around the canals, which cross through the city. It is inconvenient, but stops feeling that way once Subaru watches the canals alongside the carriage, and the gondolas passing by.

Subaru: “Carriages have the Windbreaker Blessing, but do boats have anything? Like a Blessing of No Capsizing, or a Seabreeze Blessing, something.”

Emilia: “I don’t really know, but I don’t think the boats themselves have blessings. But maybe the boatsmen have a Blessing of Lakes or Blessing of Ferrying.”

Beatrice: “Though this knowledge isn’t particularly widespread, water dragons have blessings, in fact. One that protects then from the effects of water, much like those of earth dragons, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Water dragons. Wouldn’t mind seeing one. And just one.”

Beatrice: “I’m sure there’s bound to be some in this city, in fact.”

Though she answers Subaru’s question, Beatrice’s reply is not proactive, what with her dislike of animals. Her strange awkwardness does not end merely with Patrasche, but apparently extends to water dragons.

Subaru: “I don’t think hugging, say, a liger’d be that unpleasant.”

Beatrice: “It doesn’t kill me not to touch animals, I suppose. Betty is cuter than them, in fact.”

Subaru: “Doubt fighting an animal in a match of cuteness’d go anywhere… actually you might lose a few points if you fought on the same terms?”

To Subaru’s eyes, even Patrasche looks a combination of cool and cute. But a different kind of cute to Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice's cute of course.

Beatrice looks on suspiciously, while Emilia jumps excitedly on the word 'liger' and gazes at Subaru.

Emilia: "Me too! Do you think they'd let me touch them if I asked?"

Subaru: "You could've asked when Mimi was at the mansion. You get weirdly considerate about things like that."

Emilia: "They're their riding dogs, I can't just do whatever I want with them. I've been missing the feeling of fur, since Puck hasn't been around."

It seems that even Emilia, who loves Puck like family, has been enchanted by his fur. Subaru agrees to ask about it and Emilia starts humming happily. While hideously tone-deaf.

Listening to her shoddy humming, Subaru puts his hand to his cheek and leans on his elbow as he gazes at the cityscape. He leans on the window frame. Beatrice gazes out the window's glass, kneeling on her seat. Subaru deliberates whether to tell her that it's bad manners to do that, when,

Beatrice: "Oh, Subaru. Here's your chance, in fact."

Subaru: "Hm? Wh—woah!"

Subaru looks over to see a giant spray of water from the canal as a passing fish—or no, it's not a fish. The creature has a long, serpentine body, alongside stubby but present limbs. It's a water dragon. Its blue, slippery skin evokes images of snakes, but its head is clearly a dragon's.

Sharp fangs crowd its mouth, and catfish whiskers extend from its snout. The earth dragon looks like a bipedal lizard, while the water dragon is more oriental. Subaru almost wants to call it Shenlong.

Subaru: "But it looks kinda stuck up, or unfriendly."

Beatrice: "That's what it looks like to humans, I suppose. Water dragons are much more bothersome to domesticate than earth dragons, in fact. You must raise it from hatchling to adult before it recognizes you as its master, I suppose.”

Subaru: “So they take time. Me and Patrasche bonded the second our eyes met.”

Beatrice: “It baffles me how she’s so attached to you, in fact.”

It baffles Subaru too.

Though she is originally from Crusch’s faction, she grew extremely attached to Subaru from the moment he picked her for the White Whale offensive. Subaru believes his choice back then, picking the highly assertive Patrasche, was the correct one.

There are so many times where he would have failed without her.

Subaru: “Hmpf. The visage of our Patrasche abounds in refinement far the superior.”

Emilia: “Subaru. How come you’re suddenly talking like Anne?”

A strange rebellion against the water dragon, dancing through the canal, overtakes Subaru. And though the dragon couldn’t have noticed his gaze, it turns to glance at him. The dragon pokes its head out of the water and screeches. For some reason Subaru hears the “Eyes off, interlopers,” loud and clear.

Subaru: “I think this asshole just insulted us. Which means it’s time for…”

Dragon: “—℈!”

As revenge, Subaru decides to mimic the roars of the giant black witchbeast he saw when the mansion was burning down.

When a sharp, dignified roar cuts through to the water. Patrasche’s roar.

She perceived her master’s belligerence toward the dragon and got him revenge. Subaru doesn’t know what she meant with that bellow, but her voice and glare terrify the water dragon, which squeaks and slinks back underwater. Then it speeds up and carts its boat swiftly away. The boatsman panics at the sudden speed while Subaru watches on, dazed.

Subaru: “Wh-What just happened?”

Otto: “—Natsuki-san, please keep Patrasche-chan from doing anything too strange. I’d truly prefer that we didn’t make a scene so shortly after entering the city.”

Scolds Otto from the driver’s seat. Subaru waves at him dismissively and whistles through his fingers so that Patrasche can hear him. They can’t exactly communicate by whistling, but hopefully it lets her know that he’s grateful.

Subaru: “Water dragons are pretty cool, but Patrasche is the coolest.”

Beatrice: “…Ours is better than that undignified water dragon, in fact.”

Beatrice begrudgingly agrees with Subaru, perhaps because he spoke so happily.

While they cross a canal by bridge, Subaru thinks of the panoramic view of the city he saw from the gates.

Subaru: “Feels like these canals split the city into four or something.”

Emilia: “They do. The giant waterways in the middle of Priestella divide it into districts. Going clockwise from the main gates, they’re District One, District Two, District Three, and District Four.”

Subaru hums.

Subaru: “Pretty uncreative naming scheme. They could’ve gone for something more like East Blue. Don’t you agree?”

Garfiel: “That I do, Captain.”

Beatrice: “No one cares about your tastes, I suppose.”

Says Beatrice icily at the happy pair. Emilia smiles as she watches on and raises her finger, speaking as if she has read this in a book,

Emilia: “The numbered districts all have different stores and occupations, and the residential areas are concentrated in districts Two and Three, which are farthest from the gates. The Water Plumage Pavilion must have lots of visiting travelers, so it’ll be in District One.”

Subaru: “Which means we should be hitting it soon… or now.”

The slow carriage comes to a stop during their conversation. Apparently they’ve reached the inn. Otto loops around from the driver’s seat and into the carriage.

Otto: “We’ve arrived. I’ll speak with the employees to have Frufoo and Patrasche-chan moved to the stables, so feel free to… no, actually, please wait by the entrance.”

Subaru: “What changed your mind? Is it really that bad for us to go in first?!”

Otto: “It is. We don’t want you to encounter Anastasia-san, and for me to come back and find she’s hooked you.”

Subaru frowns at Otto’s lack of trust, but nobody can refute him considering their track record. They take their hand luggage and leave the carriage while an employee escorts Otto behind the establishment, out of sight.

Subaru watches them go, stretches, and finally directs his gaze to the Water Plumage Pavilion.

Subaru: “Now, just what kind of lodgings have we… we.”

Subaru’s jaw drops. Emilia puts her finger to her cheek, tilting her head.

Emilia: “The building looks sooo funny. I don’t think I’ve seen one like it.”

Garfiel and Beatrice share Emilia’s candid thoughts. But Subaru gets a different impression from the place. Of course he would. After all,

Subaru: “An inn? …This is a ryokan.”

Built of smooth wood, with sliding glass doors.

And hedges, and a gravel path from the gates to the entrance, and a tiled roof, leaving no room for doubt.

Right there in the middle of such a western city, and entirely out-of-place piece of architecture. This is the day that Natsuki Subaru meets the wafuu structure called the Water Plumage Pavilion.

???: “Look at the surprise on you. Was a good choice I made, hand-picking this hotel.” When a calm, cheerful voice cuts into his stupefaction.

Still stunned, Subaru slowly redirects his gaze—beyond the hedges, to where someone peers over at their group.

She has a white fur dress and an eye-catching fox scarf. The cold season has already gone, and the dress has fabric thin enough to call in season, but the scarf could be important since it’s exactly the same as ever.

A slight frame and long, wavy violet hair. A pleasant smile on her charming face, and an indecipherable glint in her aquamarine eyes.

No doubt about it. This is the one who invited them here. A direct, face-to-face welcome from Anastasia Hoshin. And,

Anastasia: “Been some time since I last seen you. Many thanks to you for coming all the way. Figures to me the journey’s worn you out. How says we spend time relaxing inside, then chat?”

Before Otto can return, she easily takes the lead.

—Everyone present can see so.

Chapter 6:
Two Spirit Knights, Two Greedy Merchants, and One Selfless Angel

1

Contrary to everyone's expectations, Anastasia seemed to be striking a preemptive blow. The atmosphere in the Water Plumage Pavilion tensed.

Emilia: "—Thanks for welcoming us in person, it makes us feel at ease."

Coming out to meet Emilia had certainly been calculated. While Subaru was lost in thought, a slightly confused Emilia voiced a reply, grabbing his attention.

Anastasia cast a frown at Subaru, probably pondering the origins of Garfiel, who was standing next to him, and Beatrice, who was clinging to his sleeve. Subaru, having spent many days frolicking with them in the mansion, was calmed down by their presence.

Anastasia: "—The same face as always."

Her gaze left Subaru for Emilia as she murmured to herself, her light green eyes bearing a hint of ridicule. Her relationship with Emilia had changed little in the year past, a small conflict arising between them was not unexpected.

Subaru: "Well, she's just as cute as… No, she's even cuter than before."

Emilia: "Subaru, don't kid around with such a serious expression."

Hearing her response, Subaru rubbed his nose with an air of awkwardness, noting that Beatrice was paying close attention to the proceedings. The corners of Anastasia's mouth lifted in a faint smile.

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun, I heard that after the subjugation of the White Whale stuff went a bit awry. Are Roswaal’s border territories doin’ well?”

Subaru: “Sorry you had to catch such unpleasant news. Thanks to your troops, we survived the aftermath. As companions, we’ll mutually support each other, right?”

Anastasia: “Is that so? I’m glad ya think the same way. The two of us were glad ya could come. It’s been a while since you’ve seen Julius, yes?”

Anastasia clapped her hands together, taking an opportunity to tease Subaru, who immediately caught on and frowned. Emilia and Anastasia laughed simultaneously, as Subaru grew uncomfortable, thinking that neither of them understood his complex relationship with Julius. He had tried to explain it over and over to Emilia, but each attempt inevitably ended in failure.

Garfiel: “Ah… That’s a bit strange. I’m guessin’ the woman’s one of Emilia-sama’s enemies?”

The previously silent Garfiel voiced a question, making no attempt to conceal his hostility. Subaru scratched his head in helpless embarrassment, and Anastasia’s round eyes grew rounder.

Emilia: “Garfiel, you’re not wrong, but you’re putting it in a pretty extreme way. After all, weren’t we invited here?”

Garfiel: “Yeah but still, won’tcha hafta stab each other in the back one day? That’s gonna sting after actin’ all buddy-buddy.”

Emilia: “That’s true. Garfiel’s a gentle person, so I’m worried about that…”

Garfiel: “—Hk! Who’s gentle?! What’re ya talkin’ bout, Emilia-sama!”

As expected of him, Garfiel hurriedly tried to deflect Emilia’s sarcastic words. Anastasia eyed him curiously, wondering why he seemed so embarrassed, when,

???: “Ah! Garf’s here! Miss, why didn’t you tell me?!”

The wooden door of the inn was flung open with a bang. The racket was caused by Mimi, a catgirl whose lovely face shone brightly as she noticed her audience. She flew into the room and surprised everyone by firmly grasping Garfiel’s arm.

Mimi: “Welcome! You’re tired, you’re tired, so Mimi will guide you to your room! That’s where you’ll be staying! Hey, you’re not budging at all!”

Garfiel: “Oi, oi, wait, wait! My amazin’ self hasn’t agreed… You’re strong! What?!”

Mimi: “This way! That way! Hurry!”

The petite Mimi clung to Garfiel’s arm and, though he should have been strong enough to break free, he was dragged along helplessly, nonetheless. Perhaps she was using a secret technique, but it was way more likely that Garfiel did not want to distance Mimi by shaking her off. After all, despite appearances, they were supposed to be the same age.

Anastasia: “Hmmm…”

Garfiel allowed himself to be dragged away with little resistance and Anastasia had a rare troubled look on her face, as did Emilia.

Anastasia: “Haaaaa, Mimi’s always been lively, but even so I can’t help but be surprised just now.”

Emilia: “Ah, that’s right. That’s good. I thought you might have felt she left you alone.”

Anastasia: “Not at all, that’s not a problem. However—”

After their exchange, Anastasia’s briefly softened gaze sharpened. Finding himself chilled to the bone by that calm look, Subaru unconsciously moved to stand in front of Emilia.

Anastasia: “I’d like you to tell me what kind of a child he is, the one who has attracted Mimi’s attention.”

The dangerous question was loaded with the quiet, burning rage a woman would hold towards pests who surrounded her cute daughter or little sister. It subtly conveyed that Mimi was loved, and, although they'd arrived early, the thought of dealing with this left Subaru exhausted.

???: "…Why is it, Natsuki-san, that you suddenly have such a tired face?"

At that moment, Otto, who had returned from securing the ground dragons and their carriage, found Subaru in an exhausted state and joined their gathering at the entrance of the inn.

2

Priestella's famed hotel, the Water Plumage Pavilion, was tiled with wooden floorboards resembling tatami mats. This place was clearly geared toward exhausted pedestrians like Subaru, who immediately seated himself on a cushion.

Subaru: "If you're that obsessed with me, I may get in over my head."

Beatrice: "What are you babbling about all of a sudden, in fact. Why are you so restless, I suppose?"

Beatrice calmly took a seat next to him, in front of a table, but Emilia and others seemed puzzled at the notion of sitting directly on the floor. The long wooden desk and the large hall were all reminiscent of a Japanese-style inn, excluding the lack of an actual tatami floor.

However, a true expert like Subaru found some reasons to take away some points.

Subaru: "For example, this place lacks a sliding door and a paper door, and, unfortunately, the employees are not dressed in kimonos. It's in poor taste to resemble a ryokan on the outside, but not faithfully reproducing the atmosphere."

Ultimately, Subaru could not shake away the uncomfortable feeling that the setting was straight out of a fantasy in spite of the employees' clothing and hospitality.

Subaru: "So, my grade totals to seventy points. This place is barely acceptable, but what's good's good, that's how I would judge it. I hope you will work hard to improve in the future."

Beatrice: "What are you talking about, in fact?"

Subaru: "It's a cheap, spirited, and light-hearted kind of fun that relieves my frustration… so I'll be fine even if you let go of my hand."

Beatrice: "…Just to be sure, I'll hold it for a little while longer, I suppose."

The grip on Subaru's left hand slightly strengthened, and he said no more, instead turning to face Emilia on his right. Emilia, who had been examining the strange surroundings, noticed his gaze.

Emilia: "It's so amazing, isn't it? It's only a little strange from the outside, but I feel reaaally odd as soon as I enter it, sitting on the floor and taking off my shoes…"

Subaru: "I didn't have a bed in my bedroom, I had a futon on the floor. I'd be surprised if this place doesn't have any… Would the employees let me have one?"

Otto: "What an unusual and unnecessary proposition… Or, rather, is Natsuki-san familiar with Kararagi-style customs?"

Otto, sitting opposite Beatrice, joined the conversation between Subaru and Emilia. The phrase "Kararagi-style" caught Subaru's attention, causing him to frown.

Subaru: "'Kararagi-style'? Is this building a product of it?"

Otto: "That's right, these wafuu architectural styles are designs taken from Kararagi, although their use isn't as widespread here. In Kararagi itself, designs much akin to the Water Plumage Pavilion's own are considered traditional."

Subaru: "So why is this hotel in that style? Is it a diplomacy thing?"

This wafuu architecture was doubtlessly of Japanese design. Subaru wanted to confirm his suspicions on why that was.

And as if to supplement Subaru's thoughts, Otto raised a finger and spoke.

Otto: "That would be because of Priestella's history itself. Hoshin of the Wilderness was responsible for its construction. I trust you've heard of him?"

Subaru: "Really, I've heard a bit about this Hoshin of the Wilderness."

Otto: "Despite being born in such a dark age, he managed so many achievements. Even calling him a Sage would not be a stretch. However, it was because of how dazzling he was that disputes ended up happening."

Otto's story took place just over a hundred years ago, when Priestella had been split between Lugunican and Kararagian cultures. Priestella was geographically Lugunican, but its founder Hoshin considered himself and was considered by the world as a native of Kararagi. Lugunica disliked the cultural influence of Kararagi and had tried to eradicate all traces of its culture, but the locals took offense and protested, which led to several territorial disputes between Lugunica and Kararagi. Eventually, diplomatic relations deteriorated to the point where both countries had been on the verge of cutting off their relationship.

Otto: "Fortunately, this didn't last. Gradually, regulations became more relaxed, and Lugunica and Kararagi mended their relations. During that period, import of Kararagi's customs slowed down. It was probably due to this ordeal that Lugunica felt secure in letting its security measures become more lax."

Subaru: "In any case, it's good the problem was solved. So Kararagi customs can be traced back to Hoshin?"

Otto: "It seems so. Hoshin was a person with innovative ideas from the start. His influences on ideology, technology, and legislation were immense."

Subaru: “—I see.”

Subaru drew his hand to his chin. He had received the answer he was looking for.

Otto’s story confirmed that Kararagi’s founding father, Hoshin of the Wilderness, had the same identity as Subaru and Al, that of a person summoned from a different world.

Subaru now knew of three people who had been summoned into another world, but the timings were all off. Hoshin from four-hundred years ago, Al from twenty years ago, and himself from one year ago.

Subaru did not understand the time gap, or why he had been chosen, and it was meaningless for him to speculate wildly. But he certainly was not alone. Just knowing that granted Subaru’s heart some small salvation.

Anastasia: “—It would appear that everyone’s enjoying this ryokan.”

A thin sliding door made of wood slid open quietly, and Anastasia, entering with perfect timing, stood at the other side with a smile. And, standing next to her,

???: “Long time no see, Emilia-sama. I sincerely apologize for being late. I should have been the first to welcome you.”

A man with an apologetic face and a sweet, soft spoken voice. Just from hearing it, many women would assume it to be the voice of an angel. An amusing pipe dream, but the voice did have the necessary color, beauty, and strength. This was the voice of the Finest of Knights, Julius Juukulius, which existed solely to vex others’ hearts by simply existing. At least, that was how it felt to Subaru.

Emilia: “Mhm, it’s been a while, Julius. You look like you’re doing well.”

Julius: “I am grateful for your consideration. Likewise, Emilia-sama’s kindness and beauty are ever the more polished. It’s as if the shade of your gaze alone strengthens this Kingdom, while the rest of the world suffers a loss.”

Subaru found his speech, as always, pretentious and disgusting. Julius turned his gaze from Emilia to Subaru.

Julius: “It’s been a while since we’ve met face to face. You seem lively as always, Natsuki Subaru-dono.”

Subaru: “…Stop with your phony attitude, it sends shivers down my spine. “Subaru-dono” my ass, you’re so transparent.”

Julius: “It’s a well-known fact that you were officially recognized as Emilia-sama’s Knight. Your former disrespect of the position should now be disregarded by both of us. First and foremost, as a Knight, are you trying to behave accordingly?”

Watching Julius’s virtuous attitude, Subaru scowled.

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m her Knight now. No one thought I could do it, but here I am.”

Julius: “I see. Although your position has changed, your attitude has not—In that case, I will make do without the courtesy.”

Julius dropped his formal attitude and gave a slight smile before approaching and looking down towards Subaru, who was sitting on the floor.

Julius: “Then, once again… Long time no see, Natsuki Subaru. Have you been working hard every day to be an honorable Knight?”

Subaru: “Do you even need to ask? After all, I was beaten horribly by someone who thought I was dishonorable, or whatever.”

Julius: “It seems my reputation is being attacked. I recall it being an honorable duel.”

Subaru: “Don’t oversimplify it, you bastard…”

However, the one at fault had been Subaru, and even if he tried to say otherwise, it would only make himself look worse. So Subaru, rather than futilely defend himself, insulted Julius in a light exchange of banter. Seeing this, Julius narrowed his eyes as if to say “Hmm”.

Julius: “It seems that your shortcomings have been rectified somewhat. If you learn to see things with a Knight’s perspective, you will go far. Emilia-sama and Roswaal-sama have an eye for potential, it seems. Even so…”

Subaru: “—?”

After appraising Subaru, Julius looked around until his yellow eyes stopped on Beatrice, who met his gaze steadily with her own pale blue eyes.

Beatrice: “What is it? You shouldn’t stare too hard at a lady, I suppose.”

Julius: “That was terribly rude of me. I did not expect that a high-level Spirit like you would be present here.”

Beatrice: “Because Betty is Subaru’s partner, it is natural I appear here. I am on a completely different level than the Quasi Spirits who you have brought in. I wonder if you are afraid of me, in fact.”

Beatrice stood with her hands on Subaru’s shoulders and her chest puffed up. That grumpy attitude was based on Julius’s attitude toward Subaru, who was inferior to Julius in every way except one. Both were Spirit Knights, but Subaru’s contracted Spirit was of a higher grade.

Julius was accompanied by his six Quasi Spirits, one for each of the six attributes. Great Spirits were stronger than Quasi Spirits, who in turn were stronger than Micro Spirits. Taking that into consideration, it could be said that Subaru and Beatrice were the stronger team.

—However.

Subaru: “If you’re comparing actual ability, we have so many faults and are such a waste of potential that we can’t even compare to his Quasi Spirits.”

Beatrice: “Hmph. If he does not stop disrespecting Subaru… I’ll tell you what will happen if you disdain Betty’s partner, even if you are a handsome man who causes Betty’s heart to waver, I suppose!”

Subaru: “A handsome man who causes your heart to waver?!”

That was hardly what Subaru had wanted to hear, but it was Julius himself, a possible cause of the crack in their relationship, who explained the reason.

Julius: “Do not misunderstand, your Spirit is not going to betray you. Her instinct is merely being shaken by my Divine Protection.”

Subaru: “Your protection…? Seriously, you also have one? What kind of protection?”

Julius: “The protection I have is the Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits. Simply speaking, it is a kind of Divine Protection that garners the favor of Spirits. I also have a contract with Quasi Spirits of six attributes. Only with the power of that protection am I able to maintain them.”

Beatrice: “Betty will not lose! Subaru is better than you… I suppose!”

Subaru: “Thank you! Please, don’t hurt me any further!”

Although the bond of trust between Subaru and Beatrice was unbreakable, he was still disappointed at her lack of a firm response. Whenever Subaru faced Julius he would, without fail, become worked up over any of his own shortcomings. That had been the main reason for his former hatred of Julius.

Anastasia: “As usual, our Knight’s payin’ attention to Natsuki-kun.”

Julius: “Not at all. I am merely discussing the attitude of a Knight as his senior. One’s view of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica may be appraised from his behavior.”

Anastasia: “Well, Natsuki-kun already has a reputation as a Knight, doesn’t he? You’re really dishonest, Julius.”

In response to Anastasia's teasing, Julius lowered his head and nodded silently. Anastasia probably would have won anyway, only to be smug about it later. Their motions had that air of familiarity.

—Beatrice patted Subaru's left shoulder, while Emilia his right.

Beatrice: "Don't be too worried, in fact. Looks aren't everything, I suppose."

Emilia: "I'm glad that Subaru and Julius are getting along, I'd be happy if you two became good friends."

Subaru: "Thank you for this mood where it's hard to say thank you…"

How would other people view this? All Subaru could receive from them was unhelpful comfort. He scratched his cheek with frustration as Anastasia took a seat across from him.

Subaru: "Come to think of it, why are only the two of you here? Mimi and Garfiel… are probably on a date, but…"

Anastasia: "It's like you said, Mimi's with the blonde child right now. Hetaro adores his sister and is probably keeping an eye on them, and Tivey is probably keeping an eye on Hetaro. That's why they're not with me at the moment."

Subaru: "Did Ricardo not come? I know that the kitten triplets are pretty strong, but isn't it comforting to have a full-grown Knight around?"

It was odd that the triplets were here, but Ricardo, that large Kobold that betrayed one's expectations for his race and who usually handled their antics, was missing, as was Julius's brother Joshua.

Julius: "Unfortunately, we're not in Priestella just for fun. Ricardo and my brother Joshua have business elsewhere. You should have met him by now, yes?"

Subaru: "Yeah… and he's a lot like you. If his frame were a little steadier, he could play you perfectly. Actually, he should do that anyway. You can leave now.”

Julius: “I’ll keep your interesting opinion in mind, but that would be difficult for Joshua. He is not a child well suited for excessive travel. Frustratingly, I hold several concerns about him, as his older brother.”

To Subaru’s annoyance, Julius took him seriously and began worrying about Joshua. Otto interrupted Subaru’s awkward silence by clearing his throat.

Otto: “Hmmm—I don’t mind this casual atmosphere, but now that almost everyone’s here, could we all give introductions?”

Anastasia: “I’d like introductions too, since the only people here I really know’re Emilia-san and Natsuki-kun. I especially wanna hear more about this competent-lookin’ officer and that powerful Great Spirit-chan.”

Subaru: “Oioi, it’s really not like you to be lacking information, Anastasia-san. Is something amiss in your reports?”

Otto: “I can imagine why you would have that impression, but I think it would be best if we don’t get into whose information is accurate!”

Subaru stuck out his tongue and tried to look cute, as the so-called “competent-looking” Internal Affairs Minister held his head in his hands, making noise.

Dodging a question by the competent seeming officer, she gave a nod to Julius.

Julius: “Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Julius Juukulius of the Royal Guards of the Kingdom of Lugunica, although presently I am merely serving as Anastasia-sama’s Knight.”

Julius gave Otto a slight bow, who nodded in response to his elegant gesture. Julius then moved on to an introduction of his master, Anastasia.

Julius: “You are in the presence of one the candidates for Monarch of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Anastasia Hoshin, the gifted businesswoman who runs Kararagi's Hoshin Trading Company."

Otto: "Right… Right, yes!"

Subaru: "Don't bow to just an introduction!"

Otto: "—Hk! It was a mistake, the momentum was overwhelming!"

Subaru gave the back of Otto's head a whack, as Anastasia watched, pleased with Julius's introduction.

Subaru: "Don't be intimidated by titles! Our Emilia-tan is a wonderful candidate for the same throne, and she won't lose to Anastasia!"

Emilia: "Mh, that's right. I'm also a candidate, so I'll do my best."

Subaru: "Ahhhh, you're so cute. I can't help but say EMT for the first time in a while!"

Emilia: "I'm somewhat troubled that I find your antics calming…"

Seeing their typical pointless banter, Otto regained his composure and faced the opposing camp.

Otto: "Thank you for your detailed introduction. I'm slightly late in saying this, but I am Otto Suwen, Emilia-sama's Minister of Internal Affairs… Yes, thanks to certain circumstances caused by a certain someone, a Minister of Internal Affairs is indeed what I am."

Subaru: "There seems to be bitterness about that decision."

Otto: "Originally I was going to be a simple merchant, but now what has become of me…"

Although his voice echoed with lament, Subaru stood firm, refusing to give Otto the opportunity to escape. Anastasia stuck her tongue out in a show of sympathy for Otto.

Next, everyone turned to Beatrice. Seeing their gazes, she presented her small frame proudly and squarely, then declared, Beatrice: “Betty is the Great Spirit Beatrice, I suppose. I am Subaru’s Contracted Spirit, I suppose. As you can see, Betty ranks highly both as a Spirit and in cuteness, in fact. I would appreciate some delicious tea and a sweet snack, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Maintain dignity until the end!”

It would always be in Beatrice’s nature to be a mascot character.

Subaru pulled her into his lap and began stroking her hair while she glared, displeased.

Subaru: “Well, that’s why she’s a Spirit in a Contract with me. It’s funny that both of us have the same part as the butt of all jokes, but…”

Julius: “I did believe you had a good compatibility with Spirits, so I would not call this unexpected, but I did not imagine a contract with a Great Spirit like Beatrice-sama would resemble this.”

Subaru: “Don’t praise my Beako too much. She’s just like her family, anything nice will just go to her head.”

Beatrice: “Hmph. I’m declaring my displeasure with that rough treatment, in fact.”

Beatrice gave him a look suggesting that she had barely accepted him, and Subaru tapped her cheeks in response. Now that things had calmed down,

Otto: “Well, introductions are over, and the atmosphere seems to have calmed down for time being. So, let’s talk business, yes?”

As Emilia’s Minister of Internal Affairs, it was Otto’s role to take the lead in conversations like this and prevent them from being derailed. Anastasia answered while fiddling with her white fox fur scarf.

Anastasia: “Eh…? Well, it’s our job as the hosts to entertain our guests. Feel free to do whatever you’d like.”

Otto: “Well then. First of all, what are your reasons for inviting us to Priestella?

Anastasia: “Don’t worry, ya don’t need to be so guarded. I’m not plannin’ anythin’. A year’s passed since the Royal Selection started, and we haven’t had opportunities to see each other as of late, so I thought I’d just set one up.”

Most people would be easily misled by her gentle demeanor, but Otto was a veteran at negotiating. The conversation had turned into a battle between merchants.

Otto: “Taking our situation into consideration, we are present here because you lured us with bait. It is only natural that we would be cautious.”

Anastasia: “Well, we did invite you here for a reason. There are souvenirs in Priestella that ya’d want, right? Think of it as a gift.”

Subaru: “…How did you know which gift we would want?”

Anastasia: “It’s sorta a company secret, Natsuki-kun. We’ll just say that I’m an inquisitive gal and leave it at that.”

Anastasia covered her mouth while laughing. It would be a stretch to say she was making fun of Subaru’s frustration, but that was how it felt to him. Aware of his angst, Beatrice could not help but sigh, while Subaru wondered how Anastasia learned of their circumstances.

Emilia: “It’s not something I was hiding, so it was inevitable for that information to leak.”

Emilia’s frank admission assuaged a part of Subaru’s worries, and Anastasia blinked in Emilia’s direction, who responded by tilting her head.

Emilia: “From this point onwards, I think that it would be better if everyone appreciated what Anastasia’s done, instead of being suspicious of her.”

Anastasia: “…Respondin’ to your enemy in such a well-intentioned way. Besides, I’m not helpin’ ya purely for your benefit, Emilia-san.”

Emilia: “But thanks to you I have a way to find what I’ve been looking for. Thank you. I don’t know how I can repay you, but I truly do thank you.”

Anastasia: “…”

Anastasia’s eyes widened at Emilia’s smiling response. To her surprise, Julius, seated next to her, softened his gaze, earning himself a glare.

Anastasia: “Is something strange, Julius?”

Julius: “No, it is merely that your surprised expression is so rare. I think that it is just as beautiful as your natural, unaffected face.”

Anastasia: “Trying to escape with flattery… Well, I still appreciate those sweet words.”

With the help of Julius’s words, Anastasia shook off her surprise and regained her usual tone. Then she fixed a sharpened gaze on a curious Emilia.

Anastasia: “Emilia-san, it’s been a year and you still have a disadvantage that ya need to work around.”

Emilia: “Mhm, I’m lacking in many areas and causing everyone so much trouble, so I’m trying hard to catch up as soon as I…”

Anastasia: “One correction. Your greatest disadvantage ain’t that. It’s that ya resemble the terrifying Witch from those stories.”

Anastasia exhaled deeply and smiled, causing Emilia to stiffen in shock at her sudden change in attitude. Disregarding her, Anastasia turned to Subaru and Otto.

Anastasia: “What about you two? Will you continue to support her? If you do, her reputation will affect your own.”

Subaru: “I will, and I’ll do my best to, because it’s my policy to praise and support her no matter what!”

Otto: “Because of that, most of the burden lands on me. Funnily enough, I have no way out either…”

Subaru throwing a thumbs-up, Otto glaring with a bitter gaze. Seeing their conflicting attitudes, Anastasia readjusted her scarf.

Anastasia: “Well, it’s fine. You surely understand the value of gratitude, after all.”

Otto: “Gratitude, huh? Gratitude is great. You don’t have to keep it in the inventory, and there’s no deadline attached to it.”

Anastasia: “Yep, isn’t that right? And most importantly—”

Otto’s words matched Anastasia’s as the two each revealed the face of a merchant.

Anastasia and Otto: “—You don’t have to put a price tag on it.”

They spoke unanimously.

Anastasia clapped her hands as Otto drooped his shoulders. It seemed that it was an established saying. Their perspectives on gratitude were chillingly identical.

Anastasia: “Now, back to what Emilia-san needs… Colorless magical ore, one of the highest possible grade of purity.”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. Can you tell me what you know?”

On the way to Priestella, Emilia, having consciously realized that she had been acting out of selfishness, had felt guilty and had not intended to involve Subaru and Otto and the others. Nevertheless, with the opportunity right in front of her, she of course needed to act. She was closer than ever to seeing her precious family again.

As Emilia held her breath for a while, Anastasia replied.

Anastasia: “The best supplier of high-density ore is the Muse Company. The person responsible for it currently resides in this town, Kiritaka Muse—A man whose heart was stolen by a Songstress.”

Chapter 7:
The Sinful Man Sets Sail

1

Subaru: “His heart was stolen by a Songstress… Is that a nickname? It sounds like he’s trying to sound cool, but he’s being addressed like that, it’s not cool at all.”

Upon hearing Subaru’s response, Anastasia laughed before playing with the tips of her soft hair.

Anastasia: “You’re right, it sounds more like a nickname than a title. But ‘my heart was stolen by a Songstress’ is what he claims.”

Subaru: “Ehhh, what does that even mean?”

Anastasia: “That his heart was stolen by a woman, and he proudly and publicly announces it—Hey, doesn’t that remind ya of what happened durin’ the Royal Selection meeting at the Royal Capital?”

Subaru: “Leave that dark, embarrassing history out of this.”

Subaru’s face twisted just thinking of his humiliation at Julius’s hands. It made him want to grab his head and roll on the floor. Even though he still believed he had been in the right, his way of expressing his thoughts had left much to be desired. Anyway,

Subaru: “I see what you mean, though. Although I regret to admit it, I can actually relate. Then, what’s he like?”

Anastasia: “The nickname’s rather excessive, but the man himself’s both responsible and flexible. Bein’ named heir to Muse Company takes more than just bein’ the eldest son. There’s no need to doubt him as a businessman.”

Otto: “I can also guarantee that, Natsuki-san. The young master of Muse Company… Kiritaka Muse, is famous indeed. His skill is astounding, even without the Muse Company’s already renowned reputation for dealing with magical ore.”

As a merchant, Otto also knew of Kiritaka. However, after agreeing with her appraisal, he cast a sharp glare at Anastasia.

Otto: “Indeed, Emilia-sama needs pure magical stones from a professional supplier, and we sent an inquiry to the Muse Company… but they were not open to negotiation. It does make one wonder how and why Anastasia-sama is securing their aid.”

Anastasia: “Perhaps it’s a matter of trust? Maybe it’s a matter of sincerity. Whatever the case, one side must be willin’ to approach the other in order to establish a workin’ relationship, don’t’cha agree?”

Otto: “…I guess you could say that.”

Otto gave up on challenging Anastasia, who remained impassive, having been feigning a poor understanding of the situation. He moved on to discuss the magical stones themselves.

Otto: “First of all, do they actually have the rare magical ore we’re looking for?”

Anastasia: “I can understand your suspicions, but I’m sure you realize that if we were simply lyin’ about a prominent trader it’d be obvious by now?”

Otto: “I see. Then, are there any other conditions, or is it alright for us to negotiate with him?”

Anastasia: “You’re quite worried, but it’s fine. Remember, I was simply aware where Emilia-san’s camp could find the magical ore they’ve been lookin’ for, and I’ve already explained why I gave ya that information.”

As Anastasia had said, gratitude required no price tag.

Otto, understanding this, relented his questioning of Anastasia. It seemed that an agreement had been reached on the topic of the magic ore. Seeing their conversation come to a close, Emilia raised a nervous hand.

Emilia: “Umm, is it okay if I ask something?”

Anastasia: “Please, go ahead. Anythin’ related to our business and personal relationships are a matter of trust. We’ll get some peace of mind by clearin’ away those doubts.”

Emilia: “It seems this doesn’t have much to do with money, does it…”

Anastasia: “This is more than just a matter of hourly wages, after all. Well, that’s to be expected. Don’t you agree, Natsuki-kun?”

Anastasia smiled at Subaru, who gave an indifferent shrug in response. Emilia continued to ask her questions,

Emilia: “You’ve told us a little about Kiritaka-san, but I’m still curious about the Songstress you mentioned. Is she someone famous?”

Although it was a simple question, Subaru also wanted an answer. As far as he knew, Kiritaka’s surname, Muse, referred to a Goddess of Song in his world’s mythology. It was an odd coincidence, but it could simply have been his fate to fall for a Songstress.

Subaru: “I wonder if she’s supposed to be some kind of mythical figure. Of course, she’s not as influential as Hoshin of the Wilderness. Actually, if Hoshin had fallen for someone mythical, it would have probably been a disaster.”

Julius: “Rest assured, the Songstress Liliana-san is very real and currently remains in Priestella. Having been taken in by Kiritaka-san… That’s what her position is like right now.”

Subaru: “Right now… Do you mean it is different from her normal situation?”

Julius: “I heard that she was originally a poetic bard who sang and traveled. Kiritaka-san saw one of her concerts, and the situation became what it is now.”

Listening to Julius’s answer, Subaru pictured a bird caught in a birdcage. Birds were animals that would live freely until they caught the eye of a master who would entrap them. Was that what Liliana's situation was like? Did Kiritaka's paranoid affection keep Liliana trapped?

Subaru: "That's an unpleasant story. Her singing should not be kept for just one person, she should do it freely."

Julius: "I do agree with that, but there may be a misunderstanding here. Although, given Kiritaka-san's obsession with Liliana, it may be an inevitable conclusion."

Subaru: "My opinion of this Kiritaka guy has been declining somewhat steadily. Will the negotiation really be fine? It's hard to imagine communicating with someone as eccentric as that."

A greedy and disgusting rich man came to mind, one who was both gluttonous and lustful. As Otto had mentioned earlier, it was strange of him to turn a blind eye to Emilia's seemingly innocent search for magical ore. Subaru's impression of the man was poor indeed.

Subaru: "I'm not looking forward to showing my pretty Emilia-tan to such a person."

Julius: "Him seeing Emilia-sama shouldn't be a problem. Kiritaka-san is a little difficult to handle, but he wouldn't be so indiscreet. However…"

Julius broke off, as if unsure how to continue, leaving Subaru puzzled at his rare hesitation. Finally, Julius sighed quietly and shifted his gaze, first to Emilia, then to Subaru.

Julius: "It might be best not to bring Beatrice-sama with you."

Subaru: "What's that supposed to mean?!"

Anastasia: "Well, Kiritaka-san and I are on good terms, so I've spoken with him enough to imagine what he'd think."

Julius's and Anastasia's words. The opinion of those two led to one single conclusion.

Subaru stood up and,

Subaru: “…He’s a lolicon?!”

Julius: “That is something that people are only able to speculate on. In other words, it is an unconfirmed rumor. In any case, his tastes do not change how charming Anastasia-sama is.”

Anastasia: “Your words lack elegance.”

Elegant or not, Anastasia did not seem to mind what Julius had said. Subaru’s theory stood unrefuted, and so he accepted that it was true, thinking to himself, “are you serious?”

Subaru: “More annoying lolicons, as if Clind-san weren’t enough trouble…”

Recalling that universally competent butler, Subaru wanted to bury his head in his hands. However, there was definitely differences between Clind and Kiritaka’s tastes.

Clind would probably show no interest in Anastasia. What Clind sought was inner youth and it was reflected by his attitude towards Emilia. He saw her inner immaturity and respected her as a mental loli.

—On the other hand, Kiritaka was a person who placed emphasis on external appearances. Anastasia was probably around the same age as Subaru, but she looked significantly younger. Since her body had little potential for further development, she could be considered a legal loli. Kiritaka’s propension to like her was a matter of course. And Beatrice…

Subaru: “Our Beako is a versatile loli that can accommodate the tastes of both Clind and Kiritaka…”

Beatrice: “Betty did not quite understand that, but it feels like it was a very rude comment, in fact.”

Subaru: “Idiot! Ugh, I’m worried about you! You… you have a dangerous appeal. You’ll make me worry if you’re not more aware!”

Beatrice: “I, ah, hm… I-If you’re that worried, then you’re not doing anything wrong, I suppose. Hehehe.”

Although she did not share Subaru’s panic, Beatrice happily grabbed on to the hem of Subaru’s sleeve. For the time being, Subaru was going to hold onto her tightly. As long as they were in this city, it would be a good idea to keep an eye on her.

Emilia: “So, umm, does he just like short people?”

Anastasia: “Such an innocent response. No, it’s more like he’s the type of person who prefers eatin’ fresh, immature fruit…”

Subaru: “Stooooooooop!! Don’t say such dirty things to my angel! I understand now! No more is needed! Yes? Stop, stop!”

Subaru guarded Beatrice with his left hand and Emilia with his right. Anastasia laughed at Subaru’s overprotectiveness while Julius showed a wry smile.

Otto: “Setting aside Natsuki-san’s attitude, we accept your conditions. If possible, I would like to meet Kiritaka-san. Would I be able to find him in Priestella’s Chamber of Commerce?”

Anastasia: “That’s right. Well, Kiritaka-san’s pretty busy, seein’ as he has to run many of the city’s functions. So I wonder whether you would find him there, or in the City Hall.”

Anastasia responded to Otto’s serious question with light teasing, and the latter could only helplessly accept her answer. Otto brought his hand to his chin, then turned to Subaru.

Otto: “As expected, even the first step will be difficult. I would like to set up a safe place to calmly talk things through beforehand, but… where should we go?”

Subaru: “That’s right… Well, to be honest, I have no mental map of this town at all, so I was planning to just wander around.”

From the main gate, Priestella had not appeared to be too large, but as an outsider, navigating the unfamiliar townscape would be a nightmare. Subaru was confident in his sense of direction, but how useful would that confidence be in a town where travel was conducted by waterway?

Otto: “Perhaps, there are people giving tours along the waterway—After all, many tourists come here, and there are probably people guiding tours to capitalize on that.”

Subaru: “That wouldn’t work, I’d definitely get seasick. Once in elementary school, I got so seasick crossing a lake on a field trip that people made fun of me for being drunk.”

Beatrice: “Betty doesn’t quite understand what that means, but you look like you have bad memories of it, in fact.”

Looking at a reminiscing Subaru, Beatrice voiced her pity. In any case, Otto’s suggestion was probably the best, so Subaru would have to accept it. That was when,

Julius: “Forgive me for interrupting your discussion, but that worry is needless.”

Emilia: “What do you mean, Julius?”

Emilia widened her eyes and turned to look at Julius, who smiled faintly.

Julius: “It’s simple. We have already sent messengers to keep in touch with Kiritaka-san. We should be able to discuss the details as soon as the messengers return.”

Emilia: “Messengers?”

Julius: “My younger brother Joshua, of course. Ricardo is accompanying him.”

Subaru was glad to finally know where those two were, but he was also somewhat annoyed. Although they were addressing a natural obligation,

Subaru: “It would have been nice if they were here to welcome us in front of the inn.”

Julius: “Since we invited you, it is our duty to handle these arrangements. You do not need to be worried about the finer subtleties. Those are not worth mentioning.”

Subaru: “Don’t bring them up then!”

Their banter was the same as always. On one hand, Subaru’s respect for Julius’s faction grew, but on the other, he was deeply troubled by his own faction’s lack of preparation. Anyway,

Anastasia: “In that case, all of ya are probably anxious, but we should wait for the two of them to come back. Speakin’ of which, my personal bodyguard hasn’t returned.”

Subaru: “Oh, right.”

Subaru assumed a more relaxed posture and sat down. He prepared himself to answer questions about the absent Garfiel. Anastasia immediately followed that lead,

Anastasia: “As ya can see, Mimi’s absent—what’s she doin’? That child that went with her… the one named Garfiel. I’d like ya to talk about him in detail.”

Subaru: “His name is Garfiel Tinzel. He’s fifteen years old, the age where kids have fancy dreams. He has the habit of biting things and snoring loudly. But, other than that, he’s an honest, straightforward kid. Even if his feelings are battered, his naive way of looking at things won’t change. He’s that kind of pure youth.”

Anastasia: “That’s likely true.”

“I don’t want my cute little sister stolen from me”, seemed to be what Anastasia was desperately, yet sweetly, thinking. Even without considering his potential relationship with Mimi, Subaru thought of Garfiel as a cute little brother, and believed in making his value known.

Emilia: “I wonder what Songstress-san’s famous voice sounds like. I feel reaaally anxious. I wonder if she’d perform for me if I requested her.”

Julius: “Don’t worry, Liliana is someone well-versed in social customs. If she’s present at your meeting with Kiritaka-san, I’m sure she’d be eager to perform.”

Emilia: “Oh, that’s right. That sounds fun.”

—Meanwhile, Julius’s words seemed to further Emilia’s interest in the topic of the Songstress.

Otto, seeing the dialogue between the two pairs of made up of a liege and a Knight, sighed.

Otto: “Since we’re in opposing factions, I thought relationships would be more tense… Did I overthink things?”

Beatrice: “You don’t need to be discouraged, in fact. You’re not thinking too much; Subaru and Emilia simply aren’t thinking enough, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s rare show of sympathy confirmed Otto’s suspicions that he would be mentally and physically overtaxed during his stay in Priestella.

2

Joshua had returned, while Garfiel was soon to arrive as well.

Joshua: “Kiritaka-san is usually busy, but rather than being at the City Hall today, he’ll be at the his office in the Muse Company Headquarters, so this is an ideal time to visit him.”

Anastasia: “That’s that, then. Mhm, you did well, Joshua.”

Joshua, upon returning to his older brother and his lady, made his report. After Anastasia nodded, satisfied, Joshua turned his gaze to Subaru.

Joshua: “…Thank you for coming such a long way. I’m sure you’ve heard the story from Anastasia-sama by now, but we’ve established contact with Kiritaka-san.”

Subaru: “Oh, thanks a lot. That saves us loads of time.”

Joshua: “I do not enjoy helping you, I’m just following Anastasia-sama’s orders. I really wanted to avoid having my brother meet you.”

Subaru: “You’re honest, as usual.”

Julius’s eyes widened at Joshua’s frankly hostile speech, which was something rarely seen. He was apparently unaware of the animosity Joshua held toward Subaru.

Julius: “Joshua. Everyone present, including him, are here under Anastasia-sama’s invitation. Being rude to our guests will hurt Anastasia-sama’s reputation, so please refrain from doing so.”

Joshua: “…My sincere apologies, nii-sama.”

Julius sighed at Joshua, whose gaze had turned sulky. He then turned to Subaru and said apologetically,

Julius: “Apologies, from both of us. Usually, my brother does not engage in this kind of behavior… It seems that the cause is the unfamiliar environment.”

Subaru: “I don’t mind if you guys do it separately, but being picked on by both brothers together in this environment is kinda scary for me, too.”

Julius: “Heh. We’ll keep that in mind.”

Julius responded to Subaru’s words with a mixture of humor and irony. Joshua looked unsatisfied, but when Subaru caught his eye, he turned away. Was the reason intense jealousy?

Emilia: “Well, thanks to your kindness, we can go visit Kiritaka-san now. Can we consider this inn as a place to stay afterward?”

Anastasia: “Feel free to do so. The Water Plumage Pavilion is a lodging with a great track record, both in atmosphere and comfort. Please look forward to dinner.”

Emilia: “That’s true. In that case, we’ll look forward to it.”

Emilia clapped her hands and smiled at the confident Anastasia. Then, running a hand through her long silver hair—

Emilia: “We’ll be sure to speak properly with Kiritaka-san first, so that we can enjoy a delicious dinner without any worries.”

As Emilia finished talking, she stood up to leave the inn. Subaru followed behind her as they made their way towards the ship that Joshua had secured for their trip to the office of the Muse Company, where Kiritaka was currently located.

???: “Oy, Captain! Wait there! I’m tellin’ ya!”

Garfiel hurriedly leapt in front of the inn to intercept them. His shining blonde hair and clothes were slightly dirtied, and his expression was tired as he joined the other four.

Garfiel: “Ah… ah… Found ya. If it weren’t for that dog-faced guy, don’t think I’d have survived.”

Subaru: “By dog-faced guy, do you mean Ricardo? Were you on a sweet date with Mimi, before her big, scary uncle interrupted?”

Garfiel: “A date? This ain’t no joke! As soon as that midget dragged me away, another midget lookin’ like her attacked me ‘n nearly killed me. If I fought back, they’d prolly start cryin’, so instead I just spent the day runnin’ away…”

From Garfiel’s story, Subaru surmised that it had been Ricardo who had prevented that tragedy. Mimi, of course, had two twin brothers who could have caused it. Perhaps it had been Tivey, whose calm disposition could have been hiding a sharper side. Or perhaps Hetaro, fearing that his sister would be taken away, had displayed his siscon tendencies for the first time. Whoever it had been, the situation seemed fine now.

Garfiel: “So, seein’ as I didn’t wanna be excluded from yer plans, I rushed over here, Captain.”

Subaru: “Ah, my bad. We were planning on meeting the guy who’s selling the magical ore. Thinking on it, I guess we should’ve waited for our bodyguard.”

Garfiel: “That’s obvious, yeah?”

Subaru added the relieved Garfiel to his party and made way for the docks. The boat that Subaru’s group was going to ride on had already been prepared. All the boats were fairly small, with only enough room for eight people, including the boat’s sailor.

Sailor: “There’s a city law about boat size. If the boats are too large, the waterways get clogged, and it’s unsafe if boats get too close together.”

The dark-skinned sailor steering their boat was happy to answer Subaru’s questions. Dragon carriages on wide highways weren’t much of a problem, but on waterways, traffic rules needed to be set.

Sailor: “If a collision happens and a ship sinks, that’s usually regarded as the fault of the sailor’s lack of technique. Besides, a lot of these ships have been passed down from generation to generation, so losing one would mean losing your reputation as well.”

Subaru: “Of course. Regarding the ships’ water dragons… Are there any problems with those?”

Sailor: “You should give it a try. In the water, there’s no way you can compete with water dragons, so when you see one, it’s customary to let them have the right of way. Some of the boats are pulled by small water dragons, so you should try those at least once.”

Like ground dragons, they had good instincts and could be trusted to handle a smaller boat. Remembering how he had felt the first time he saw a ground dragon, he was excited by the sailor’s follow-up recommendation. Maybe his first ride with a water dragon would evoke the same sense of wonder.

Emilia: “This is my first-time crossing water on a ship. I’m reaaally excited.”

Subaru: “Is that so? Well, this does feel different than the sea.”

Emilia: “What is this ‘sea’?”

Subaru: “Imagine an endless pool of water. My hometown was right next to it.”

Emilia: “Hmmm… But, that would be nice when you felt thirsty.”

Subaru laughed in response to Emilia’s childlike answer. Unfortunately, drinking sea water when thirsty would lead to death. Regardless, he could not mention that sea water was saltwater without raising more questions.

Otto: “Where there’s a river, there’s usually a bridge, so if you need to smuggle something without crossing a bridge, your only other option is going by boat.”

Subaru: “Sure sounds like you’re talking from experience.”

Otto: “I-It’s not like I’ve ever done anything like that! I-It’s just, second-hand knowledge! Stop casting such strange suspicions on me, really!”

Garfiel: “Ottobro, ya really are sweatin’ over there.”

As if ignoring Otto’s suspiciously specific denial, the boat followed the sailor’s movements as it turned to join the main waterway ahead. Incredibly, the current was flowing against the direction of the boats.

Subaru: “What, how is the water flowing like this?”

Emilia: “Hehehe. I actually know the answer to that. Look, look at the city walls.”

She lightly patted Subaru’s shoulder and pointed into the distance with her free hand. Subaru cast his gaze in that direction and saw the great stone towers stationed on the city’s walls. There were four of these towers, positioned on the north, south, east, and west side of the city.

Emilia: “Those towers control the flow of water in the town. Inside them is a magical device with a sophisticated mechanism, and its operation is powered by a magical water stone. It seems that the big floodgates in the city are also controlled by it.”

Subaru: “Wow, that is incredible. This is even cooler than the travel laws.”

Thanks to Emilia’s explanation, Subaru somewhat understood the mysterious mechanism behind the flowing waterways of the city. Sure enough, the Watergate City Priestella was very different from the others, and Subaru still had much he needed to learn about it, including the city’s laws.

Subaru: “The laws here are closely related to the operation of the city, right?”

Emilia: “Is this about Kiritaka-san? Like I said. I wonder what kind of a person he is… It would be great if he gave us the magical ore upon hearing our story.”

Touching the pendant hanging on her chest, Emilia murmured her hopes, seeming uncertain of herself. While listening to her murmurs, Subaru placed his hands on his chin and closed his eyes. Then, he swayed his head along with the movement of the boat and whispered,

Subaru: “—Eh.”

Beatrice: “…Betty didn’t catch what you said just now, I suppose.”

Beatrice had probably been the only one who could hear him. Upon hearing her loud voice, everyone turned to stare at him. Feeling their gazes fixed on him, Subaru smiled and said.

Subaru: “Crap, I’m gonna puke.”

—In an instant, a fuss was created on board.

Chapter 8:
Traveling with Seasickness

1

Beatrice: “You should be better now, I suppose.”

Subaru: “No, wait a little more. Wow, this is terrible, the world is still shaking. I’m still shaking. Even death can’t cure this sickness…”

On a street facing a large aqueduct, Subaru and Beatrice sat side-by-side, their feet dangling over the side of the waterway. Together, they admired the flow of the clear water. Onlookers smiled faintly upon seeing them. Perhaps they assumed they were siblings, or perhaps they thought they were tourists who had never seen such structures.

Subaru: “Neither of those assumptions are entirely wrong… But it’s sad that they don’t really know what our relationship is. Uuuueh.”

Beatrice: “You should focus on recovering rather than pointlessly worrying, in fact. I wonder why you think Betty is here, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Were you worried that I’d be lonely? Beako is so kind.”

Beatrice: “…That’s irrelevant, in fact. Just hurry up and get better, I suppose.”

In order to accommodate the weight of Subaru leaning against her, Beatrice strained her small frame. Seeing this, Subaru’s love for her increased exponentially. Could it ever stop growing?

About fifteen minutes ago, Subaru had been forced to continue his journey on foot after he had created a fuss with his seasickness. Emilia, Otto, and Garfiel had remained on the boat to head for the negotiations with the Muse Company and Kiritaka.

Originally, Emilia had also wanted to accompany Subaru on foot, but Otto had said, “The longer we keep the other party waiting, the worse our impression will be”.

Heeding his advice, she left Subaru behind. It was most likely the right decision.

Subaru: “Well, even if Anastasia told us to be careful… In broad daylight, most people probably aren’t going to try anything.”

Certainly, there was anxiety in being left alone in an unfamiliar city, after being invited by a political opponent, but the escort named Garfiel had been brought to deal with that.

However, Subaru, who was currently alone, was important enough to the Emilia Camp that an attack on him was not completely inconceivable.

Even so, if Anastasia had malicious intent, she was too savvy to orchestrate an attack on him in the middle of the day. In addition, Subaru trusted that Julius would not support any type of ambush.

Subaru: “As he said, a Knight must remain chivalrous at all times…”

Beatrice: “Subaru. It’s rather annoying when you laugh to yourself, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Wait, I totally wasn’t laughing! Well, I’d never think of that guy and laugh! Anyway, let’s go.”

Subaru stood up and took a deep breath, rubbing his arms and neck lightly. Although they still felt a little heavy, the seasickness was mostly gone. He could more or less move around normally again.

Beatrice: “Well, Betty will help if needed, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Ohhh, I’m counting on you. Even so, I doubt anything will happen. Only an idiot would attack us in broad daylight with so many people around.”

All of the Royal Candidates needed to keep an eye on their reputation. In public, they needed to appear both pleasant and authentic. Emilia, who was a naturally honest and kind girl, did not need to worry herself about pretenses.

Subaru: “In other words, Emilia-tan’s real advantage over the other candidates is her angelic innocence..!”

Beatrice: “Your thoughts are going in an unpleasant direction, in fact—Subaru, Subaru, look, let’s go that way, I suppose. Follow me.”

In the past year, Beatrice had become entirely accustomed to putting up with the easily distracted Subaru. She had been navigating through the unfamiliar cityscape with ease while leading him by hand.

Muse Company’s headquarters was apparently located at the boundary between the first and second districts. Subaru, having been seasick, had only dimly registered the directions, but Beatrice had memorized them all. If there was one problem that they had, it would be the complexity of Priestella’s pathways.

Although they had arrived by following the main canal, they had to take detours around the several small waterways feeding into the main one. Sometimes there were bridges, but on several occasions, Subaru had needed to jump over a narrow waterway while carrying Beatrice.

Beatrice: “Subaru, that is a splendid fountain, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You’re right… Beako, how did we get to the park?”

The fountain which had caught Beatrice’s attention stood in the center of a park. It was surrounded by well-maintained flowerbeds and children playing games. This was indeed a peaceful and relaxing sight. The only issue was,

Subaru: “Is this where we’re supposed to be going? This is the last place I’d picture finding the heir of a large company. If businessmen made deals here, then all of their money would get wet.”

Beatrice: “I wonder if seasickness makes you cynical, I suppose. That’s the first thing you think of upon seeing this beautiful scenery… Betty feels sorry for her partner, in fact.”

Subaru: “The old you would have blushed and tried to hide this mistake, but now you're becoming rather fresh… You're breaking your father's heart."

Beatrice: "Y-You're four-hundred years too early to be calling yourself Betty's father! Subaru lacks tact in discussing such matters, in fact!"

Subaru was unsure why Beatrice had overreacted to the latter half of his sentence, but didn't pursue the issue. Their problem right now was figuring out how they arrived at the park.

Subaru: "Beako. Since you were leading me so confidently, I thought you knew the way."

Beatrice: "I know the destination, in fact. However, the roads were complicated, I suppose. In order to avoid getting lost, I used the 'left-hand-method' that I had read about before. It didn't work, I suppose."

Subaru: "The 'left-hand-method'?"

Beatrice: "Holding out your left hand and following the wall, in fact."

Subaru: "Isn't that for mazes?!"

Beatrice's method was a well-known tactic in conquering a maze. Subaru recognized its effectiveness, but there were a number of drawbacks, too. Namely,

Subaru: "If you start using the left-hand method in the middle of a maze, you might end up touching the inside wall and never be able to leave! Furthermore, we're not in a maze, we're in a city!"

Beatrice: "Hmph! It's just like Subaru to disregard tried and tested wisdom, I suppose. Betty was the Guardian entrusted with maintaining the knowledge of the Forbidden Library. She pities the fool who disregards the wisdom of history, in fact."

Subaru: "I'm not the fool, you're the fool for not using that tried and tested wisdom correctly!"

She was old enough to be self-righteous (four-hundred years) but it had taken her long enough to enter the outside world (four-hundred years), that there was a big enough gap (four-hundred years) between her common sense and time spent in the world. And so, she was a surprisingly unreliable loli.

Beatrice: “I wonder if Subaru has a better idea, in fact. Let’s see you try, I suppose.”

She put her hands on her hips, fixating on Subaru with a disagreeable glare.

—On the other hand, Subaru had just suffered the embarrassment of letting Beatrice see his seasickness and wanted to make up for it by appearing reliable.

Subaru: “Haha. You correctly decided that this place is like a labyrinth, but you were wrong to think that it was a perfect maze and use the left-hand-rule. I have some less flawed, no, flawless tactics.”

Beatrice: “Hoho, you’re pretty confident, I suppose. Go ahead and tell me your plan, in fact.”

Subaru: “Hee, I’ll tell you. Its name is the Caged Method.”

Beatrice: “—?”

Beatrice tilted her head, a question mark floating above her. The name did not convey the actual content of his plan, so Subaru cleared his throat and started to explain thoroughly.

Subaru: “Okay. First of all, we’ll call our current position the starting point. If we proceed, we will eventually reach a fork on the road. We’ll continue until we hit a dead end. Then, we’ll go back to our first fork.”

Beatrice: “…Mhm, continue, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Then, we’ll map out that branch and choose another one. Using the same method as the first branch, we’ll walk until we hit a dead end. Eventually, we’ll have every branch and every path of the dungeon mapped out."

Beatrice: "That would take far too long, in fact! I wonder if we would even arrive before nightfall, I suppose!"

Subaru: "I-Idiot! What's wrong with taking the certain path?! How many people do you think safely survived a dungeon with this method? I'm doing just as you said, relying on the wisdom of history!"

Beatrice: "Losing sight of your goal by relying on wisdom is a bad habit, in fact!"

Certainly, it hurt that Beatrice had trampled on his idea, but even Subaru had to admit his plan had too many faults. It was a time-consuming tactic, and besides, they had no pen or paper with which to draw a map.

Subaru: "Then there's only one other method…"

Beatrice: "What is it, in fact? Betty's confidence in Subaru is significantly lower now, I suppose."

Although the method was reliable, it was not going to improve Subaru's image. Acting in good faith did not make one reliable.

Subaru: "Okay, we'll have to work together here."

Beatrice: "On what?"

Subaru: "Let's humbly ask for directions."

Beatrice: "That's fine, in fact…"

Subaru had accepted that he could not solve the problem on his own. He thought Beatrice's pride would be the only problem, but she seemed okay with it as well. Fortunately, Kiritaka Muse was both a famous merchant and heavily involved in the management of the city. Everyone around would know where his office was.

With that in mind, Subaru looked around, hoping to find someone to ask. But, Subaru: “Even though this is a park, there’s nobody here.”

Beatrice: “The timing is bad, in fact. It’s late afternoon, the perfect time for naps, I suppose.”

Subaru definitely agreed with Beatrice’s words and the temptation to nap in the shade rose. Shaking it off, he decided to head back to the direction of the main canal, where it should be busier, when—

Subaru: “—Do you hear something?”

The faint sound of wind and of a tiny waterflow. It was a voice—no, it was the sound of a singing human voice?

???: “…”

Subaru could hear it only intermittently, but he was drawn toward it, looking for the source of the song that prickled his heart. Beside him, Beatrice also seemed to have noticed that sound.

Upon arriving at the scene, they stood, overwhelmed, forgetting to even breathe.

—A lone girl stood in front of a monument at the back of the park, her voice raised in song.

She was a small girl with dark skin, large round eyes, and a vibrant face. Her crisp yellow twin-tails were decorated with small, strange ornaments. In her hands, she held an instrument between the size of a guitar and an ukulele. She played and sang simultaneously.

The energy contained in the song could only be described as overwhelming.

Subaru, listening to her sing, felt a nonexistent squall by his face and a nonexistent earthquake under his feet. The clarity, the volume, of her song was overwhelming. Her voice, singing a tune like a ballad, was the only sound in existence.

Subaru: “…”

That lone girl, using only her voice and fingertips, created an energy comparable to that of an orchestra.

Subaru was far from the only one who had been utterly captivated by her. There was an audience of around twenty people, all holding their breaths, completely unaware of Subaru. Likewise, Subaru had only noticed the singing girl, whose presence entirely dominated the space.

As Subaru's entire body trembled, the girl's song came to its climax and the audience's enthusiasm came to its peak—

Girl: "—Without money, without a future, without hope, with only vanity. What can I see but the darkness? And beyond that darkness, nothing. The end, the end, the end is approach—"

Subaru: "How is this song so exciting even after calming down, oy?!"

Girl: "Huh?!"

The song which even dreams could not create had been unexpectedly interrupted by Subaru.

As soon as he had surprised her, the girl stopped singing and dropped her instrument. Of course, the music had also stopped—Immediately, the intense atmosphere surrounding the girl vanished. Subaru realized that he had screwed up.

Subaru: "Oh no, I didn't read the mood. Sorry, I didn't mean—that hurts! —hk! —ow! —eh?!"

Beatrice: "Subaru you idiot, it's ruined, in fact. What a waste of a rare and lovely mood, in fact. You just had to thoughtlessly ruin it, I suppose. You've gone too far, in fact."

Before he could apologize, a sharp pain pierced his toes. Looking down, he saw an indignant Beatrice stomping on his foot with her heel. Beatrice seemed to return to reality when the song was interrupted, and considered that interruption unforgivable. Then,

Person one: "Oh… what was that song?"

Person two: “This is a park … just a little a while ago, I was in the darkness.”

Person three: “No, I couldn’t help it at the time, but…”

Person four: “When I grow up, I want to defeat Themion and save Draffin…”

Person five: “I want to support that dream…”

Person six: “Tina-chan…”

Person seven: “Lusbel…”

One by one, the audience who had been swallowed by the song slowly tumbled back into the reality. Everyone turned to the criminal who had ruined the song. Some had collapsed under the influence of the song, and some of the boys and girls were using the song as an excuse to draw closer together, but fact remained that they had all come back to their senses.

After returning to reality, they all glared at the source of the song’s disruption—In other words, to the criminal named Natsuki Subaru, a man with a reputation for failing to read the mood.

Everyone: “—Don’t do thoughtless things!”

Everyone loudly and angrily cursed Subaru, who apologized profusely.

2

Girl: “Thank you very much for your time, everyone. Actually, it was a blast.”

Subaru: “Don’t sound so happy about it. Take a look at my feet, they’ve been stepped on so many times, are they still the same size? Are my feet okay?”

Beatrice: “I wouldn’t care, in fact. For now, don’t consider Betty to be on your side, I suppose.”

Beatrice turned her face away and stubbornly denied Subaru, so he checked them on his own. His right foot had almost doubled in size.

Subaru had poured water on the concert, so their reaction wasn't entirely unexpected.

One by one, the audience had thanked the girl who had sung and shook hands with her, and about half of them had stepped on Subaru's feet before leaving. Subaru had been unable to say anything, and Beatrice had tolerated it, leaving the public's opinion of Subaru as that of an enemy. Subaru prepared himself for both external and internal bleeding in his feet.

Subaru: "Don't you think you should let me rely on your healing magic?"

Beatrice: "It would be a waste of my slowly accumulating Mana, in fact. Wait for it to heal naturally, or ask Emilia, I suppose."

Subaru: "You and Emilia have been taking care of me for a long time, huh."

Ever since he had come to this world, he had sustained a steadily increasing amount of injuries, but they rarely lasted. Even injuries from his daily parkour, such as bruises, abrasions, and sprains, would be promptly healed by Emilia or Beatrice. His fear of pain had not decreased, but there was relief in knowing that his injuries had all found a cure.

Subaru: "Well, I'll just treat the pain as a lesson this time."

That said, Subaru caressed Beatrice's head, who was still turned away. Beatrice gave him her gentle hands.

Beatrice: "Well… Well, I suppose it's fine, in fact. As long as you reflect on it and learn your lesson, I suppose."

Subaru: "Yep, I'll do just that. Sorry, I was wrong…"

Subaru and Beatrice finished their talk, and turned to the girl. Because he had been troublesome for her, Subaru would try to apologize. The girl, who had been watching the entire time, said, Girl: “A flash of inspiration!”

Subaru: “Eh?”

Girl: “Listen—I don’t know the difference between our years.”

Leaving a staggering Subaru behind, the girl pulled the strings on her instrument and instantly found a rhythm. She timed herself, breathed in a small breath, and started to sing.

Girl: “My love, do you see it, do you feel it? The difference between our ages. Even though our surroundings may change, I wouldn’t care one bit. All I care about is our height difference. Wait, my love. Please wait a moment. A little bit, a little bit, just a little bit more. If I stand on the tips of my toes, I can reach you. If the two of us stay so close together, the difference in our ages is irrelevant. So please, only two years, please wait that long. The distance between our love is sweetly melting away.”

Subaru: “As the distance in our love shrinks~, it turns into a quiet, burning love~. Eventually, two cranes will deliver to us two children~, and our future will be a bright love story~.”

Beatrice: “Eeeehhhhh?!”

At the end of the girl’s song, Subaru suddenly joined in with an ad-libbed rap that trampled all over the rhythm of the previous song. Beatrice raised her voice with astonishment, demanding an explanation as he and the girl high-fived.

Beatrice: “Wait a minute! Why… Why is Subaru suddenly part of the song, I suppose? Why did you just accept his addition, in fact?”

Subaru: “Oy oy, what are you talking about, Beako… Does the song cross a line?”

Liliana: “Well said, Liliana’s heart is trembling with excitement!”

Beatrice: “Y-Your attitude that Betty is the wrong is unacceptable, I suppose…”

Subaru, feeling bad for Beatrice who had no one on her side, turned to the dark-skinned girl.

Subaru: “Let me mention that Beako and I aren’t in the kind of relationship that you’re thinking of. Even if she grew two more years, she still wouldn’t be in my target range.”

Liliana: “Eh? She’ll only be thirteen or fourteen by then? Despite how I look, I’m good at guessing ages. Well, I guess this is a skill gained from life experience.”

Subaru: “She’ll be roughly four-hundred-and-two years old.”

Liliana: “Oh, please. There’s no need to be this stubborn just because I hit the mark.”

She dismissed Subaru’s words as an excuse and ignored them, which pained him. Subaru also thought that correcting her would lead to too much trouble. Anyway, the topic had changed too much.

Subaru: “Back to the original topic, was the inspiration you mentioned earlier the song?”

Liliana: “Yeah, that’s right. Despite how I may look, I’m easily moved. Once I saw your interactions, I felt like I needed to immortalize them in song. Be proud!”

The girl, speaking quickly and fluently, raised her hands or her mouth.

Liliana: “Ah, but what I did wasn’t enough. Big bro there helped by adding the bit at the end. That was the first time I’d gotten such a reaction, I was very happy.”

Subaru: “That was because the Rap God himself blessed me, I certainly couldn’t do it again. I don’t have the skill or experience.”

Liliana: “—One single, shining moment…”

The girl made a sad face to Subaru, who looked into the distance.

Seeing the mutual understanding that had been achieved without words between the two drained the patience of the little girl who had been left out.

Beatrice: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Mhm, what is it… Beako?!”

Beatrice yanked his sleeve down and a shockwave sent Subaru flying. The momentum would not kill him, but he still bounced all over the lawn of the park, causing him to roll his eyes.

—Meanwhile, Beatrice, the culprit, turned to the dark-skinned girl.

Beatrice: “It’s no good for you to take inspiration from us anymore, in fact. Betty is putting an end to it, I suppose. If you resist, you’ll end up like him, in fact.”

Liliana: “Ha… a… Ah, hm, do…”

Beatrice: “Be quiet, I suppose. Only think about promptly responding to Betty, in fact. The reason nothing is happening to you right now is because your song was lovely, I suppose. But who knows how long this mercy will last, in fact.”

Even seeing her trembling, Beatrice’s voice held no mercy. Seeing her hurried nod, Beatrice sighed. The girl was too scared to form words. Then,

Beatrice: “Muse Company, take Betty to where Kiritaka Muse is, I suppose.”

Liliana: “—Eh?”

Beatrice: “I will not say it again, in fact. Lead the way or be subjected to Betty’s anger, I suppose.”

Liliana: “I-I’ll lead you there! I will!”

When pressed with the choice, the girl instantly raised the white flag. Beatrice nodded, satisfied, as Subaru walked back toward them, and Beatrice looked up at his eyes upon his return.

Beatrice: “Tell me if you have any complaints, in fact.”

Subaru: “Is it acceptable to use your accumulated Mana like this, for educational purposes?”

Beatrice: “It depends on the time and place, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Such kindness and consideration, Beako… Was it okay to threaten someone to guide us?”

Subaru scratched his face and looked down. Beatrice looked at him with a sullen gaze. Subaru continued,

Subaru: “That child is probably the famous Songstress who knows Kiritaka. Maybe we shouldn’t make a bad impression on her.”

She’d mentioned that her name was Liliana earlier, and there was no mistaking that singing ability befitting a Songstress, even if her personality wasn’t what he had imagined.

Liliana: “I’ll do anything you want me to. E-Eh, whether it be guiding you or licking your shoes… All I humbly ask… is that you spare my life…”

There was a girl on the ground desperately begging for her life. Correction, that girl was the Songstress Liliana.

Although, looking at her, no trace of the graceful Songstress could be seen.

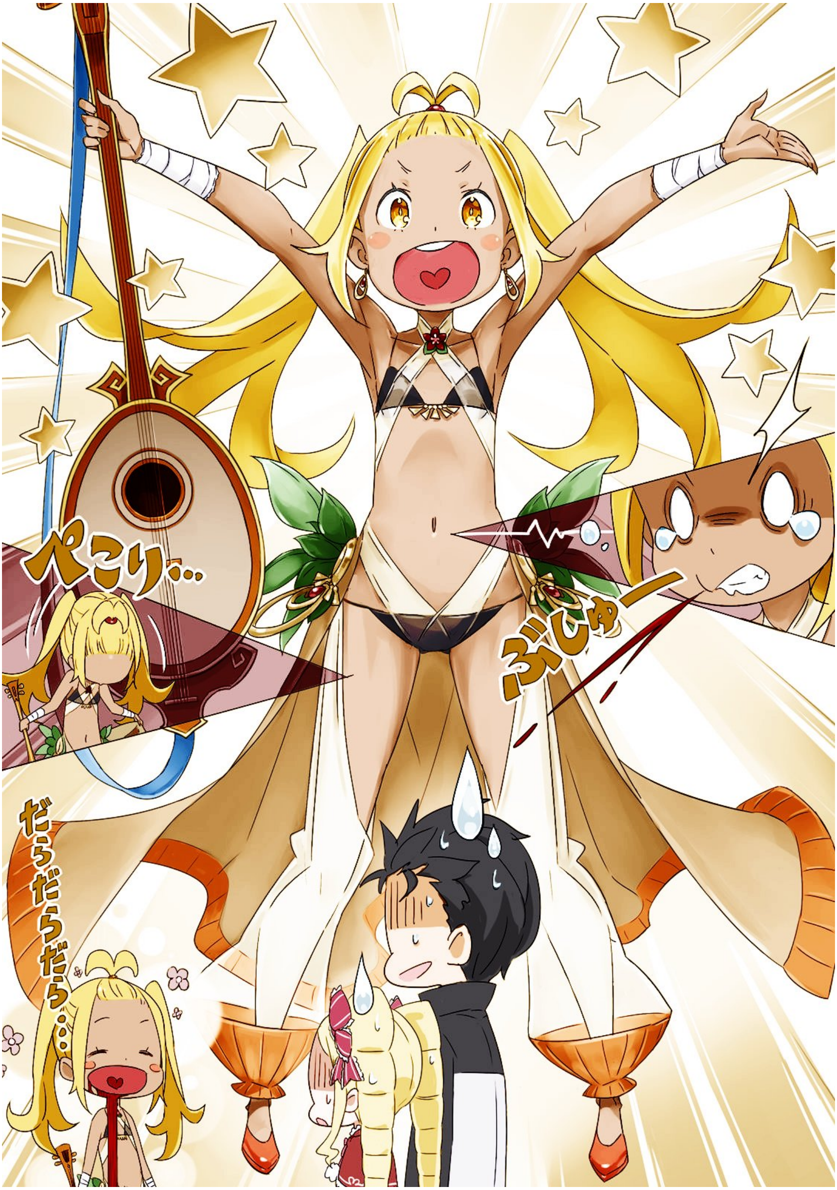
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Chapter 9:
The Value of a Songstress

1

Liliana: “Then, let me introduce myself once again. Although I’m no longer a traveling minstrel, I’m still a free-spirited bard who goes wherever the wind blows me, crossing the continent with only my singing voice. My name is Liliana, please continue to advise me in the future—Hk.”

Beatrice: “You bit yourself, in fact.”

One hand holding her instrument gracefully, Liliana smiled as blood flowed freely from her mouth. Beatrice gently wiped it away for her. It seemed her tongue had been wounded rather seriously.

Beatrice: “It’s rude to bite your tongue like that.”

Subaru: “Have you heard of—Ah, are you the famous Songstress? I know you introduced yourself with her name, but it’s probably kinda rare to just meet her on the street.”

Liliana: “Ah, um, I’m not fond of that title since I’m only a fledgling musician. It sounds so sophisticated. I’m so far from reaching my peak. If people thought I called myself the Songstress, they’d say I’m too conceited.”

Wiping at the bloodied lower half of her face, Liliana’s expression seemed almost coy, leading Subaru to hesitate over his interrogation of her. He decided that rather than interrogate, he would try to casually converse with her. Even so, considering the words she had just uttered, she seemed to have a very high sense of professionalism.

Subaru: “Although I can see where you’re coming from, I think you can accept some praise. That being said, I also sort of admire your attitude about it.”

Liliana: “No, no, it’s nothing so grand. Focusing on getting through each day is fine. So, please.”

Subaru: “—?”

Liliana stretched out a hand to a confused Subaru, who had been admiring her. Since it was empty, Subaru had no idea what she wanted and tilted his head at her smiling face.

Liliana: “Now that you’ve heard the voice of the Songstress, please give me something in return. Did you think listening was free? If so, then your attitude troubles me.”

Subaru: “Then give me back the emotions you made me feel! And take back your moniker as a Songstress too!”

Liliana: “What are you saying?! How do you think a bard ambitions to make a living?! Are you saying I should be giving out feelings for free and eat air as food?! I don’t think so!”

Liliana stomped angrily on the ground. What she said wasn’t wrong, but Subaru’s impression of the Songstress had been significantly lowered. Judging from how cold Beatrice’s large eyes were, he assumed she felt something similar.

Subaru: “Alright. Let’s discuss a tip. How much do you want?”

Liliana: “No, no, the tip should be for the customer to decide based on what his heart feels. Although the more the better.”

Subaru: “For fuck’s sake.”

Taking advantage of Liliana’s laughing, which showed her bloodstained teeth, Subaru pinched her chin with his cold hands. Her face was small, so it was incredibly easy to pinch, and Liliana had to run several laps around Subaru before he let her go. Stepping away dizzily, she muttered “It was just a joke” over and over to herself.

Liliana: “If you’re looking for the Chamber of Commerce in the first place, you should be Kiritaka-san’s guests, right? I wonder if you should be acting this rudely.”

Subaru: “You know, I don’t know you very well, but my impression is only getting worse. I think it’s about time we got going.”

The more he talked to Liliana, the closer Subaru came to reaching the limits of his patience.

When they had found out they were lost, they were already very close to being late, and if they delayed themselves any longer they would very likely miss a critical negotiation. After said negotiations, there would be more challenges and Subaru did not want to lose face by missing the critical first step.

Shaking her head, and her hair with it, Liliana ceremoniously announced, “I understand” and began to lead the way.

Liliana: “So why does the honored guest want to see Kiritaka-san?”

Beatrice: “You don’t understand your position here, I suppose. Stop nosing into matters that you are unrelated to and quietly take us to our destination, in fact.”

Liliana: “Eep!”

Faced with Beatrice’s intimidating tone, Liliana gave a cry resembling that of a small bird’s. Subaru pulled on one of Beatrice’s spiraled twin-tails.

Subaru: “You don’t have to be so angry. Then again, we can’t reveal everything, so a simple, clear explanation would be difficult to give.”

Liliana: “But, I’m Kiritaka-san’s confidant. Isn’t it just a matter of time before I find out?”

Subaru: “Well, if it’s really only a matter of time, then there should be no harm in me taking precautions.”

Liliana: “If you say so… You’re not a person with very good character, huh.”

Subaru: “You’re pretty straightforward, aren’t you? Without your talent for singing, you’d be in serious trouble.”

—There was a saying that geniuses were often strange people. Liliana was probably one such example. Singing was second-nature to her, but her social manners were lacking.

Liliana: “But really, I am a little worried. I’ve been out for a long time, so I’ll probably be scolded when I get back.”

Subaru: “When we’re discussing negotiations, please take care not to speak up. Alright?”

Liliana: “I got it.”

Subaru: “Huh, really?! Convincing you so easily was totally unexpected! You’re blowing my mind.”

Seeing Beatrice and Subaru’s satisfied expressions, for some reason, Liliana puffed out her cheeks in a pout. She raised the instrument in her hands, and began to play.

Liliana: “Inspiration just hit me—Big Waves, Large Waves, Waves of the World!”

Subaru: “No thanks, we’re good.”

Before the solo could start, Subaru hurriedly snatched Liliana’s instrument out of her hands. Liliana made an “Ahh” sound and she stretched to reach it, but her tiny body couldn’t reach Subaru’s hands.

Subaru: “It’s not a human hostage, it’s a musical instrument. If you lead us to the Chamber of Commerce without derailing us, I’ll give it back to you.”

Liliana: “You’re terrible! Evil! Barbaric! Depraved!”

Subaru: “Hahaha, that’s such an overstatement!”

Having just been denounced as the world’s most wicked person, Subaru plucked a string on the instrument. The sound it made was similar to that of an acoustic guitar.

Subaru, who had had a lot of free time at home, had practiced until he'd become fairly skilled. He could play and sing to a 70's folk song without much difficulty. If he introduced that music here, maybe it would take off and the music industry would be revolutionized.

Subaru: "Well, maybe it'll be like it was with mayonnaise."

Even though he had not considered the implementation of the plan at all, the idea had taken root. In original world, finding an application for a good idea was often taken for granted. In fact, Subaru had no idea how to get around to actually implementing it, just like he had no idea how to mass produce and market mayonnaise.

Subaru: "Playing guitar and telling stories to village kids are both within my skill range. Listen."

Liliana: "Wait, wait, please stop! I can't let an amateur play my instrument! If you break it, I can't make a living anymore… Huh?! You're pretty good! And I've never heard the song before! Eh, what is this?!"

As he walked, Subaru surprised Liliana with his folk songs, plucking some chords. Like this, Subaru and his friends began the walk to the Chamber of Commerce.

Beatrice: "Good grief, I suppose…"

An exhausted Beatrice trailed after the two.

However, her footsteps seemed like they had been set to the tune and rhythm of Subaru's melody.

2

The door of the Muse Chamber of Commerce was not very different from the buildings surrounding it. The First Street and the Second Street separated the residents of Priestella from the tourists and the Chamber of Commerce was located directly between the two.

In terms of convenience, it was only natural that the building was located in the First Street, which was directly accessible from the main gate, but its location in the city also indicated the influence of the building's owner. It was both the innermost and the outermost building, highlighting its uniqueness in an almost exaggerated way.

Liliana: "This is it, the long-awaited Muse Chamber of Commerce."

Springing over with a dance-like motion, Liliana indicated the building in front of her. Although there were taller buildings surrounding it, the four-story Chamber of Commerce seemed to stand incredibly tall. That said, Subaru felt a little regretful.

Subaru: "I knew it wouldn't look as grand as it had appeared from the entrance of Priestella, but I'm still a little disappointed… It didn't steal my heart the way the Japanese-style Water Plumage Pavilion did."

Liliana: "The Water Plumage Pavilion, that weirdly-shaped place on First Street? If you use that as your comparison, even Kiritaka-san will look kind of poor. But, that aside…"

Liliana swung her body up and down in exaggerated motions and reached out the palms of her hands.

Liliana: "Weeell, now that I've fulfilled our agreement, can you give Lyulyre-chan back to me? If I don't have it back by tomorrow, then I'm not sure how I'll survive."

Subaru: "Ah, right, right. Here you go."

Subaru had become tired of singing and playing the back-scratcher-shaped instrument halfway to their destination. Liliana hurriedly took it from him, breathing as if in a panic, and checked it for scratches, then began to rub her face against it and gave it a kiss.

Liliana: "Ahhhh, it's good to have you back. I'll never let you go again!"

Subaru: "It's impressive that your attitude can annoy me this much. I think this is the most annoyed I've been at someone's attitude since Petelgeuse."

Liliana: "Hooo, I don't know who he is, but he sounds similar to me.

Tell me about him! If I ever meet this Petelgeuse-san one day, I can't promise he wouldn't be my lifelong rival!"

Subaru: "He's a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult."

Liliana: "Here he goes again! Stop being such a joker! That should be your new name!"

Liliana, dressed like a dancer with a lot of exposed skin, showered Subaru with an overreaction. However, she tilted her head at his cold response, and gradually began to assume a serious expression.

Liliana: "Wait, were you serious?"

Subaru: "That's right. You probably won't have many other opportunities to compare yourself to someone who's dead and gone, so make what you will of it."

Liliana: "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a minute!"

At Subaru's words, Liliana objected with amazing momentum. Her reaction surprised Subaru, who wondered if she was angry at being compared to a Sin Archbishop. Her next words threw Subaru off even more. They were,

Liliana: "What you said just now, why did it sound like you met a Sin Archbishop?"

Subaru: "…And if I did?"

He did not know what she had meant to ask, but it was definitely something important. He had not expected such a reaction after telling her Petelgeuse's identity as an Archbishop. Although, it wasn't impossible that she had encountered the poisonous, insect-like Witch Cult before, since they seemed to appear everywhere.

Subaru stiffened up, alert, and Beatrice also paid close attention to the situation, ready to act immediately if need be. One slow reaction, and it would be too late for them.

An oppressive feeling atmosphere, with two people looking to see how she would react, Liliana spoke. She said, Liliana: “Are you perhaps the… Lolimancer, Natsuki Subaru-sama?”

Subaru: “Ugh.”

Beatrice: “Ugh, I suppose.”

Under Liliana’s shining gaze, Subaru and Beatrice replied at the same time.

That was the most dishonorable name that Natsuki Subaru, who had been knighted and allowed to call himself Emilia’s Knight in name and reality, had earned in the past year.

—They say, the half-elf’s Knight is a mysterious person who always has a little girl beside him.

Liliana: “You were indispensable in slaying one of the Three Great Witchbeasts, the White Whale, alongside Duchess Crusch Karsten, with the Sword Demon Wilhelm himself calling you his benefactor! And immediately after, you continued to make the world tremble! With help from the famous businesswoman Anastasia-san of the Hoshin Trading Company and the Duchess Crusch, you defeated the Witch Cult’s Archbishop of Sloth! And there are unconfirmed rumors that you are also the hero who defeated the Great Rabbit, which has been plaguing the world for four-hundred years!”

Subaru: “Itchy, itchy, itchy, itchy, itchy!”

Liliana: “What a terrifying reputation!”

Liliana, with two hands raised, wore the expression of a girl who’d found her dreams as she listed Subaru’s merits. Some were accurate, and a few were exaggerated, but he could find no real error in her list.

Even so, her words embarrassed him enough for his entire body to itch, while Beatrice wore a seemingly dissatisfied but happy expression.

Liliana: “And the one being followed loyally by a little girl whose skill in magic is legendary! You’re that Subaru-sama! Aren’t you?!”

Beatrice: “Haha. Betty’s partner Subaru will surpass even the most outstanding figures in history, in fact. He will become the brightest star known to man, I suppose! You should respect him more, in fact!”

Subaru: “H-Hey!”

Beatrice, sticking her nose out proudly, and Liliana, bowing down. The two caused more headaches than any troublemaker, and it seemed like their show at the entrance of the Chamber of Commerce had attracted attention of the staff there. Upon seeing them and finding the kneeling Liliana, they all promptly returned to their work.

Subaru: “You, do you always act so exaggeratedly? Everyone here has a strange ‘oh, it’s Liliana, as always’ kind of expression on their face!”

Liliana: “Ah, please stop. Seeing a legend in front of me, my heart is racing! I’m glad to have a chance to witness you in person. Hehe.”

Subaru’s previous unease had all but disappeared, but Liliana grew more and more frantic, saliva even dripping from her mouth.

Liliana: “Well, could—Could the people you’re meeting with in the Chamber of Commerce really be the ones I’m thinking of?!”

Subaru: “…Who are you thinking of?”

Liliana: “No, it’s just that I’ve made a lot of songs based on the famous Emilia-tan. I know she’s a real person, but in my mind, she’s always been a fictional character! If it’s who I think it is, it’s Emilia-tan! Oh, hehe!”

Disregarding Subaru completely, Liliana flew into the Chamber of Commerce. After falling still for one shocked moment, a dumbfounded Subaru could only chase her into the building.

Beatrice: “Subaru! That girl, she even dropped her instrument, in fact!”

Subaru: “Should she really be treating her lifeline like this?!”

Hurriedly grabbing the Lyulyre from Beatrice, Subaru ran into Chamber of Commerce. Seeing the reception staff gawking at the upper floor, he deduced that Liliana had just run up the stairs.

Receptionist: “Y-You are…?”

Subaru: “We’re with Emilia-sama, who should be with Kiritaka-san right now. They told you we would be late, right?”

Receptionist: “Yes, they’re there right now… but Liliana-sama…”

Subaru: “I know the way, can I go up?”

Seeing the receptionist’s stiff nod, Subaru hurried after Liliana. There was no real reason to be in a rush, but the thought of Liliana and Emilia meeting face-to-face made him uneasy. Or, rather, perhaps it would be better to say that their meeting could bring about a troublesome atmosphere.

Even more frightening was that Liliana’s exceedingly strange personality would clash with Emilia’s, and Emilia’s experience and skill in interaction were overwhelmingly inadequate.

Beatrice: “Liliana was acting strange, Betty wonders if she will stay like that!”

Subaru: “I really don’t want to think about what will happen if we don’t stop her.”

Registering Beatrice’s words, Subaru sped to the third floor. Although he had yet to catch her, he’d saw the back of Liliana’s clothing. Now he just had to aim for his goal! Time to show off his parkour skills!

Subaru: “Come on!”

Flying up the stairs, Subaru began to skip steps entirely, using his hand to do an elegant horizontal rotation, drawing ever closer to Liliana, before finally catching her in front of a room near the staircase.

Subaru: “Liliana, wait!”

Liliana: “Uwaah?!”

Liliana, who was still salivating, yelled in surprise as Subaru reeled back, gasping for breath. He had caught her standing upright.

Liliana: “Oh, you caught up, but I’m not quitting so easily. I’m not giving up!”

Subaru: “If you want to meet Emilia no matter what, I’ll ask her for a private meeting, but she’s in the middle of a very important meeting right now.”

Liliana: “Uh… Well. I guess I got a little carried away.”

Hearing Subaru’s serious tone seemed to cool Liliana off a little. She relaxed her shoulders, and Subaru shook his head and handed her the instrument.

Liliana: “Ah, thanks.”

Subaru: “The tool you make a living off is incredibly important. Don’t just throw it away and run. It wouldn’t have been surprising if the instrument used by the Songstress had been taken and pawned off at a high price.”

Liliana: “Don’t worry, Kiritaka-san gave it to me. He loves shopping around.”

Subaru: “Your sponsor is really not ordinary!”

Speaking to Subaru with a bitter smile, Liliana held her cherished instrument to her chest. Her expression was one of sincerity and disbelief at being able to abandon it so easily. Since she’d thrown it down for her ambition earlier, Subaru didn’t know if he could believe her smile.

Liliana: “Well, I’m fine with saving my meeting with Emilia-sama until later… But first, can I discuss something with Natsuki Subaru-sama?”

Subaru: “Drop that bothersome honorific, it’s itchy! Well, what do you want to talk about?”

Liliana: “There’s so much! I want to know how accurate the stories are. Not just so I can hear them but so I can sing about them, too. I can write so many songs from that inspiration, maybe even a heroic one that will be passed down for generations! Just thinking about it makes my heart race!”

Holding out her clenched hand, Liliana’s eyes shone with energy.

While this puzzling scene was happening, Beatrice finally caught up and stumbled upon Subaru and Liliana’s proximity.

Beatrice: “Ah, you, strange girl. Don’t stand so close to Subaru, in fact. Move away, I suppose.”

Liliana: “Don’t worry, it’s not that big of a deal. Speaking of which, I also have some questions for the young girl who follows Lolimancer-san!”

Beatrice: “Betty is not a young girl, I suppose! She is a proper lady, in fact! How rude!”

Subaru: “You two are so noisy, always arguing like that! Shush! Emilia-tan is doing negotiations inside…”

Beatrice, who was in an awful mood, and Liliana, who failed to recognize that she was the cause. Subaru was caught in the middle of their argument, and, in his frustration, inadvertently raised his voice. And, at that moment—

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

The door opened unexpectedly, and Subaru’s name was called from the inside.

Looking through the open door, Subaru saw what looked like a reception room, where everyone was sitting on a chaise longue, looking at him with surprised expressions.

The Emilia Camp, Otto and Garfiel, as well as Emilia herself. Sitting opposite of them was a lean statured young man who was wearing fine-looking clothes. The one who had opened the door was a middle-aged man who was probably with him.

Subaru: “A-Ah… Emilia-tan. What a coincidence.”

Emilia: “A coincidence? Why were you being so loud… Uh, Kiritaka-san?”

Seeing Subaru making an embarrassed gesture, Emilia wore a look of confusion as she turned to the young man sitting opposite of her, who stood and grabbed something from the table.

Then he turned where Subaru was standing,

Kiritaka: “Do, do, do, do, do, DON’T TOUCH MY LILIANA!!”

Suddenly raising his voice, the young man hurled a glowing blue piece of magic ore.

Pure, concentrated energy exploded in front of Subaru, whose vision was momentarily engulfed in blue. Seeing it, he faintly registered a thought of “Wow, how beautiful”, before the impact swallowed him.

—Like that, the first day of formal negotiations broke down.

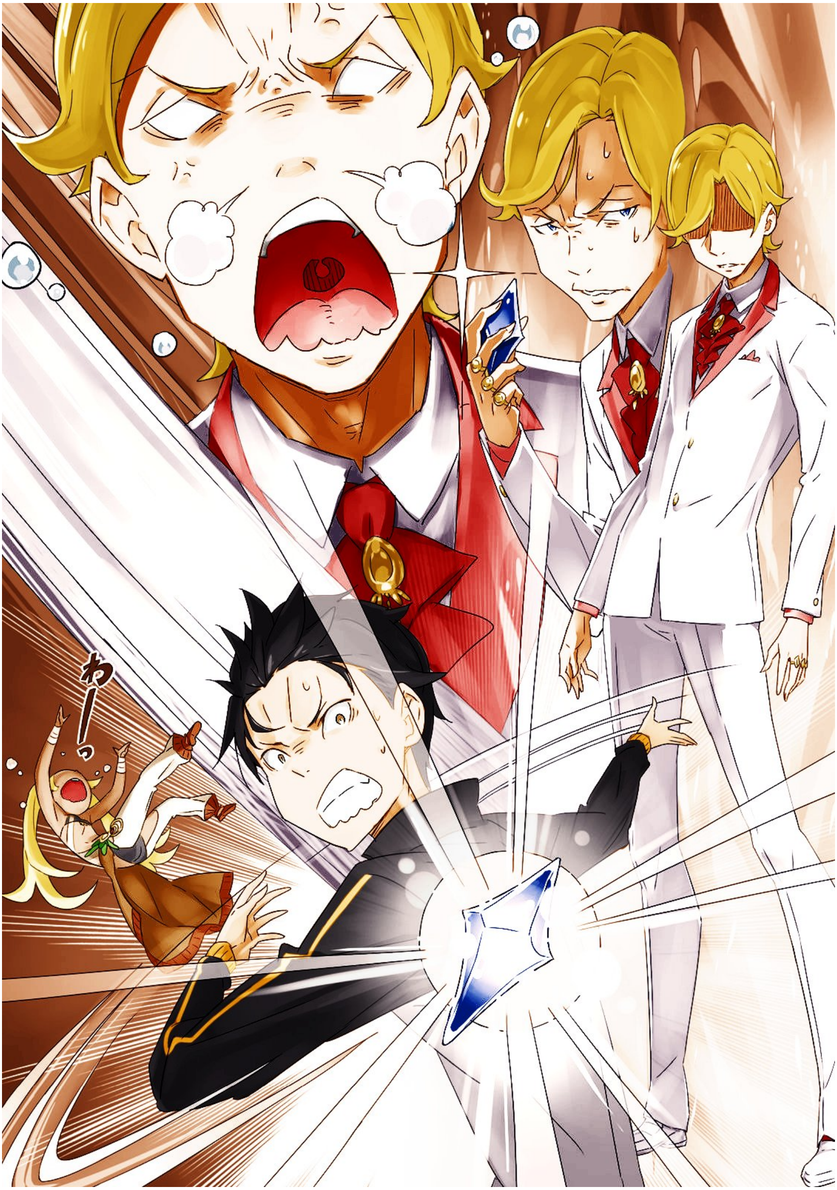
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Chapter 10:
The Way of the City of Water

1

Negotiations between Emilia and Kiritaka Muse had proceeded unexpectedly smoothly.

Kiritaka, as a businessman, had likely been trying not to show favor to a single Royal Selection Candidate. However, Emilia had approached him directly, meaning that this meeting was a rather major event for him.

Of course, Emilia, who had been taking casual sips of the complimentary tea, was not thinking of her actions in such a way. Garfiel, who had steadily grown addicted to the accompanying desserts, was also not considering the political ramifications of their actions.

It could be said that, in the reception room of Muse Company, the only one who could read Kiritaka was Otto.

Kiritaka: “I understand that you have come a long way. Please excuse me for being unable to meet you at your convenience. Although I understand that it is disrespectful, due to my position, it is unwise for me to travel freely… In addition, I have become quite attached to this place.”

Otto: “Not at all, that is a very reasonable way to think. We are the ones who should be sorry for intruding in your busy schedule.”

Kiritaka: “I will treat whatever you need from me with the utmost priority and care.”

While exchanging polite greetings, Otto scrutinized the man facing him. The famed Kiritaka Muse was well-known, even outside of Priestella. His behavior revealed an image both majestic and stylish.

He was still fairly young, probably somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. His tall, thin body was clad in finely made clothes, and his pale golden hair was meticulously combed to the back of his head. His rather uncomfortable-looking ornaments showed sophisticated taste, and his introverted and concise words and gestures revealed that he was probably highly educated.

Otto, as the Emilia Camp's Minister of Internal Affairs alongside Roswaal, had unknowingly accumulated a rather impressive amount of experience in negotiations. So he had immediately judged Kiritaka's attitude to be almost unmatchable.

Speaking frankly, Emilia was incredibly fortunate to have Otto with her. If Otto had let Emilia face Kiritaka alone, she would surely be swayed by his skilled rhetoric, and would have ended up overspending on expensive but ultimately useless things.

From the past year, that was the impression Otto had gotten of Emilia.

Kiritaka: "May I inquire as to what you need from me? According to Anastasia-san's messenger, the products you are procuring are stocked by our company."

Otto: "It may be too soon to say so. Actually…"

Interrupting Kiritaka, who had begun to address the main topic, Otto looked to Emilia.

Emilia was content to leave the negotiations to Otto. Garfiel, similarly, maintained his usual attitude, eating desserts while fixing a sharp gaze on one corner of the room, staring at a leisurely-looking figure who was dressed from head to toe in white.

In Kiritaka's words, the man in white was present to protect the staff from excessively assertive visitors. "Recently, the world has not been in a peaceful state, so I hope that he can join us", he had said.

Otto had a faint idea of the man in white's identity.

It was said that Priestella's Muse Company made use of a mercenary force known as the Scales of the White Dragon, a group which was well-known even in Lugunica. This man was probably one of its members.

Rumors claimed that their group operated locally, but, a few years back, they had formed close ties with the Muse Company. If those rumors were true, then Kiritaka had been the one who brought them into the fray.

Otto: “We have a special request. That is, we are looking for a rare type of stone, even by Muse Company’s standards. We are searching for colorless magic ore with outstanding purity. I hope that this is something we can buy from you.”

Keeping in mind his evaluation that Kiritaka was not someone he could afford to be careless around, Otto stated his request plainly. Playing around with vague terms would be meaningless. After all, Kiritaka had very likely seen through the true reason for their visit as soon as it had been prepared.

And Kiritaka also understood that he could not refuse a direct request from Emilia.

Kiritaka: “I see. We do indeed stock magic ore… and we do indeed have some spellstones with a higher grade of quality than those stocked by regular merchants. Emilia-sama, no matter how much colorless ore you want, we are also willing to prepare…”

Otto: “Kiritaka-san. Please be straightforward with us. We have stated our request, that is, a colorless magic crystal of the highest purity. That is all we need.”

Kiritaka: “…That is rather discourteous.”

Kiritaka was not simply lacking in straightforwardness. He was merely using a negotiation technique. Despite perfectly understanding Otto’s intentions, he casually dropped the names of other goods that he believed would appeal to Emilia. To him, the goods had been marked as sold long before the negotiation had even started. The only remaining question was the matter of the price.

Otto: “We are indeed requesting something that may be troublesome for you, so as to be flexible about the price, we have prepared something that you will find beneficial. Mining rights to the magic ore in the Great Forest of Elior, part of the territory ruled by Margrave Mathers, who is backing Emilia-sama.”

Kiritaka: “Please do not turn this into the kind of fraud that muddles prices. We are the only formal company that trades raw magical ore, so we cannot consider this proposal. In our line of work, credit is everything to us. I’m sure you would understand, Otto-dono?”

Otto gave a silent sigh. It seemed that Kiritaka knew of his origins.

The Suwen family’s business was nowhere nearly as famous as the Muse family’s, but it was hardly unknown. The main players supporting each of the Royal Candidates were sure to be heavily investigated, along with the candidates themselves.

That said, many questions were left unanswered by these investigations, which were the bane of the Emilia Camp. Garfiel had lived in Sanctuary his whole life, and Emilia had spent a century frozen in the Great Forest of Elior. Both the Lolimancer and his Contracted Spirit were of unknown origin.

Thus, Otto, whose identity had easily been discovered, would certainly have it used against him frequently.

Kiritaka: “Otto-dono? Your complexion seems to have changed. Are you okay?”

Otto: “Of course, please don’t worry about me. I just thought of something disconcerting and it made me a little uncomfortable, that’s all.”

Shaking his head at Kiritaka’s words, Otto decided to save that unproductive line of thought for later. Once again, he urged that Kiritaka provide a straight answer to his question. Kiritaka took on a meditative attitude.

Kiritaka: “Of course, we will not refuse to let go of our commodities no matter how much you plead, and of course we are going to follow Emilia-sama’s request.”

Otto: “Then…”

Kiritaka: “However, the magical ore you are requesting is special. In truth, on the occasion when I was first sent to Muse Company’s branch in Priestella, the president—that is, my father—gave it to me as a gift. Rather than treating it as a commodity, I prefer to think of its sentimental value.”

Otto: “…”

Regardless of whether the story were true or false, Kiritaka had made a cunning move. Hearing Kiritaka’s words, Otto bit his lip.

As Kiritaka had said, the extremely rare magic ore they were requesting was more than a mere trading commodity. Taking into account the magnitude of Muse Company’s transactions, it was too good of an opportunity not to seek extra profit.

So how could even greater value be made even greater? Not with commodities, but with human sentiment. Since the ore being sold had important personal value, that meant it needed to be exchanged for even greater value.

Emilia: “I see… I didn’t realize it was something so important to you.”

Emilia’s expression reflected that Kiritaka’s story seemed to have touched her deeply. Otto could only conclude that Kiritaka wasn’t cut out to be an actor, considering how guilty he looked.

“It took both action and effort to get your desired result”, Otto thought to himself as he cleared his throat.

Otto: “I appreciate your kindness. Even so, we still hope to find what we came here for.”

Kiritaka: “I understand. I am a merchant who sells magical ore, and I know that it is better to have it shine in the hands of someone who needs it than to have it sit as a decoration at my home. I am willing to give it to you. There are only a few conditions.”

Otto: "—Conditions. Let me hear them."

Having established that there would be an additional price tag, Kiritaka commenced the real negotiation. After Otto agreed to hear them, Kiritaka held up three fingers.

What unreasonable conditions would there be? Even thinking about them was enough to give Otto some mild aching in his stomach.

Kiritaka: "First of all. The Muse Company has been holding on to this colorless magic crystal that Emilia-sama has been seeking since some time ago. However, in order to keep it out of the hands of malicious people, we have hidden our possession of it. I hope you understand this."

Otto: "…That is only natural. That you have confided in us your circumstance, without attempting to hide anything, removes all of my suspicion."

At first, Kiritaka had denied any past knowledge of the affairs of Emilia Camp. But in order to bring this deal to a successful conclusion, he gave up this knowledge.

Kiritaka: "Then the second one. As the deal is signed, I want to have the Hoshin Trading Company in presence, leaving it so that the legitimacy of our transaction is confirmed."

Otto: "I understand… That poses no problem."

It seemed there had been also a deal between the Muse Company and the Hoshin Trading Company. It seemed to be intended to semi-publicly reveal that Emilia owed Anastasia a debt. Although it was slightly uncomfortable, it was a legitimate request, so Otto could not refuse.

So far, none of the requests would be considered deal-breakers. So, the third request—as soon as he said it, Kiritaka's true intentions would become clear.

Otto held back a sigh as Kiritaka waved the third finger in front of him.

Kiritaka: “Third—Avoid all contact with the Songstress named Liliana, who is currently residing in this city.”

Otto: “—Huh?”

Hearing a name suddenly appear of nowhere, Otto froze.

Of course, Emilia and Garfiel, who were accompanying him, had the same reaction—No, never mind, those two had remained unchanged ever since the negotiations started. Emilia sipped her tea and Garfiel stared at the figure in white. Although they had left all the negotiations to Otto, seeing their blatant lack of participation irked him.

Otto: “I am sorry, but I think I may have misheard you. Did you just say to avoid contact with the Songstress…?”

Kiritaka: “No, there was no misunderstanding there. These conditions are all we request. If you have any questions, please ask them, and please consider the deal carefully…”

Otto: “If you do not mind, can I ask for the reason? At this point, I can’t recall our deal having anything to do with the Songstress.”

Kiritaka: “…It is not something that necessarily needs to be said. Can you agree to that promise?”

His tone sinking, for the first time, Kiritaka exposed his emotional side. Otto, who could not understand the condition, was lost on what to do.

Put simply, the third request passed the horizons of his imagination. Accepting posed no future obstacles to Emilia, and although she would regret not being able to meet the Songstress she had discussed with Anastasia, it was hardly important enough to scrap this deal for.

That they had so effortlessly come to an agreement was surprising.

Otto had not dared to expect that negotiations could have gone so smoothly, although Kiritaka could, at this point, still change his mind. Subaru, who had been lost halfway, would be here soon, and would certainly turn that matter into something troublesome. Otto wished to tie the deal up before he arrived.

Otto: “Emilia-sama, is this alright with you?”

Emilia: “Mhm. I’m a little disappointed, but I guess it can’t be helped.”

Having earned the confirmation from Emilia, Otto agreed to the deal. Kiritaka was satisfied to accept this commitment, and the most stressful part of the negotiation came to an end. Now, they could discuss the actual monetary price, and maybe pick up a few small items.

Kiritaka: “There are a few other quality goods that you may be interested in… would you like to see?”

Kiritaka stood to retrieve a wooden chest from a shelf in the back. The chest, having been placed on the table, emitted a glow as it opened, dazzling Otto and Emilia. Inside were all sorts of magical stones, carefully arranged on cushions, the most radiant of which was the colorless, transparent one, devoid of any elemental trace.

That was the colorless stone that Emilia had been pursuing.

Kiritaka: “Would you like to inspect it by hand?”

At Kiritaka’s words, Emilia raised her head.

She nodded, drawing a small breath, then stretched her nervous fingers towards the stone. But, at that moment,

Garfiel: “Emilia-sama.”

Man in White: “Young Master.”

Simultaneously, the two guards called to their respective master. They turned to look at each other, and then to face their surprised masters.

Garfiel: “There are two loud ‘n annoyin’ somethin’s comin’.”

Man in White: “There seems to be the sound of footsteps coming from downstairs. Allow me to go investigate.”

He strode soundlessly toward the door as Garfiel tensed his body. The sound of the disturbances drew closer, until they seemed to be right in front of the door—

???: “You two are so noisy, always arguing like that! Shush! Emilia-tan is doing negotiations inside…”

The voice was an incredibly familiar one. As this thought was shared by three people in the room, the man in white opened the door of the reception room, revealing a familiar scary face. With a petite girl on either side of him, this man, Subaru, was truly worthy of the title of Lolimancer.

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Hearing Emilia’s call, a pale Subaru finally noticed the presence of everyone else. At that moment, Otto wanted to complain, but he decided to observe everyone else’s reactions first and held back.

And so, Subaru held up his hands and smiled weakly.

Subaru: “A-Ah… Emilia-tan. What a coincidence.”

Emilia: “A coincidence? Why were you being so loud… Uh, Kiritaka-san?”

Hearing Emilia’s surprise, Otto’s own reaction was also delayed.

When he finally caught himself, Kiritaka had reached a hand into the wooden chest of magic stones and glared at Subaru with a gaze bordering on frantic. He clutched a blue pure magical stone, and,

Kiritaka: “Do-, do, do, do, do, DON’T TOUCH MY LILIANA!!”

Accompanying his frantic cry, a magical stone was thrown. Without anyone to stop him, the stone arched towards Subaru and knocked his body away in an explosion of blue.

Man in White: “My apologies for that embarrassing spectacle. The Young Master is usually calm, but if matters involve Liliana-san, he quickly flies into a rage… I will try to calm him down, but, for today, let’s end negotiations here.”

After the commotion died down, the middle-aged man in white acted as the mediator who had to calm down both sides. He bowed his head with an apology.

Kiritaka’s frantic voice could still be heard from the closed door behind him. That scene was unsuitable for outsiders, so the members of Emilia Camp had been ushered out of the room.

Liliana: “Kiritaka-san is really troublesome, even taking away my chance to speak to Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama! Ugh, I’m so annoyed, ugh!”

Liliana’s anger, on the other hand, was also endless. Speaking in an angry huff, she announced that she’d come up with a new song titled “The Avant-Garde Master of Life and Death”, causing Beatrice to furrow her brow.

Man in White: “Liliana-chan, please forgive the Young Master.”

Liliana: “…I understand.”

Although it took a long time to understand, Liliana had finally been talked down. Subaru’s interference had rendered a smooth sailing negotiation utterly fruitless.

Subaru: “In other words, Liliana’s a rabid fangirl, and is obsessed with us. Kiritaka knew and wanted to keep us from stealing her. That was the point of the third condition?”

Otto: “And just as I was about to have the deal tied down, Natsuki-san had to come ruin everything. I finally understand now. Does having you around do any good for anyone?!”

Subaru: “I acknowledge that this was my fault, but who would have thought that after getting seasick things would turn out like this… That’s hardly something I had any control over.”

Otto could not hide his dissatisfaction at the result of the negotiations. Subaru spoke lightly, but he was also hardly satisfied, having taken a blow from Kiritaka's magical stone, and realizing that negotiations on the following day would be incredibly difficult based on Kiritaka's angry tone.

Emilia: "Come on now, please don't be so angry, Otto-kun. Subaru didn't do this on purpose, these things just happen sometimes."

Subaru: "That's right. Keep going, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Subaru, you also have something to apologize for. You shouldn't have been so loud with Liliana-san. We were the guests there, so we definitely troubled the people working a lot. The receptionist will also be in trouble."

Subaru: "Yes, I'm sorry."

Subaru bowed his head in an apology, and Emilia nodded a "very good". Otto gave a helpless sigh as he watched his master's hopeless attitude.

Otto: "Anyway, today's negotiations have ended here, so we should be getting back to the Water Plumage Pavilion… However, I have something to attend to first. So, I'll meet back with everyone later."

Subaru: "Something to attend to?"

At his unexpected words, everyone turned to Otto, who gestured in the general direction of Muse Company's headquarters.

Otto: "We've gone out of our way to come to the faraway Priestella, so I'd like to take the time to improve relationships here. Although, as for today, it is only necessary for me to go. There may come a day when Emilia-sama may need to come. If that ever happens, I'll have to trouble you, Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "Yeah, I understand. But, why am I not needed today?"

Otto: "If you show up unannounced, they may be unable to sufficiently welcome you. We need to be considerate about where you go."

Emilia: “Yes. I understand. I’ll keep it in mind.”

After hearing Emilia’s reply, Otto gave a “please go home promptly”, as if speaking to a group of children, then disappeared into the depths of the Second Street. As for Garfiel, although he wanted to accompany Otto, he was rejected with “please prioritize Emilia-sama”.

Emilia: “So, Subaru, what were you talking about with Liliana-san?”

Subaru: “Oh? Is Emilia-tan concerned about me talking to other girls? I wonder. I’m glad to see this subtle change.”

Emilia: “No. Don’t get me wrong, I just want to know what kind of a person the Songstress is.”

Subaru: “So it’s better for me to misunderstand, here?!”

Emilia, as always, naturally and mercilessly cut into Subaru’s heart. But, in any case, she gave Subaru a reason to chat with her, so he began to recount his earlier experience.

Subaru: “At first, when we encountered her in the park, I thought her song was super powerful. It was an astounding performance, even as the Songstress. Right, Beako?”

Beatrice: “Betty won’t deny this point, in fact. She doesn’t deny it, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Beatrice looks so distressed, what happened?”

Subaru: “—Talent in one area comes at the price of competence in others. Liliana perfectly showcased the meaning of that.”

Subaru could fully understand Beatrice’s distress. Liliana had poured her heart and soul into music, and in turn became a rather pitiful girl.

Subaru: “In short, rather than striving to be an extremely talented person in one area, you should strive to be a mildly successful person all around.”

Garfiel: “Ooh, that’s pretty philosophical, Captain. If her singin’ makes people think that, it must’ve been amazin’.”

Subaru: “I won’t deny it. Speaking of which, meeting Liliana was worth coming up with that conclusion.”

Everyone decided to return to the inn by foot. If they were to take the waterways again, then Subaru would become seasick again, which would mean leaving him behind.

Emilia: “Like Otto-kun said, it wasn’t easy for us to come here, so I want to take a walk and appreciate these beautiful streets.”

Rather than having Subaru feel guilty that they were walking for his benefit, Emilia phrased her reasoning as a cute request. Subaru had no complaints, and Garfiel and Beatrice did not object.

Subaru: “If I hadn’t been able to accompany Emilia-tan back to the inn, I would’ve gone mad with worry.”

Beatrice: “You don’t need to worry, in fact. If we get into trouble then Betty would place her left hand on a wall, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I think I’ve already told you about the defects of that method.”

Garfiel: “Ya two don’t need to worry, you’ve got my amazin’ self’s nose. Whether it’s the smell of the inn or the smell of that midget devil, my amazin’ self remembers it.”

Subaru: “—Heh.”

Noticing that Garfiel had used Mimi’s scent as an example, Subaru subconsciously gave a malicious chuckle. The little kitten’s reaction to Garfiel, though surprising and puzzling, was probably nothing other than goodwill. Plus, they were of similar age. Subaru thought they made a rather good match.

Incidentally, Garfiel was still the same, wanting to dedicate himself to Ram. And Ram had no special feelings for him, regarding Garfiel as a little brother, nothing more.

Subaru: “In any case, Garfiel. You’re my little bro, so as a big bro I’m praying for your success in love.”

Garfiel: “Ahh? Whaddaya just say, somethin’ all touchy-feely, Captain? Well, yer makin’ me feel sick.”

Subaru wore an expression of “I understand” as he patted Garfiel on the shoulder. Garfiel cocked his head and laughed, exposing his sharp-toothed grin. Subaru hoped from the bottom of his heart that the kind, well-intentioned Garfiel would find happiness.

Emilia: “This is really a nice city. Everything seems so fresh and the people here look so happy. I can’t help but feel excited.”

Their surroundings seemed to delight Emilia, and, seeing her expression, Subaru felt happy as well. She did have a point, though. The architecture in the city must have taken a great effort to design, and everything functional seemed to simultaneously serve as artwork. The icing on the cake was, of course, Priestella’s beautiful waterways which doubled as transportation.

Subaru: “Although the city was built like this, the origins of the design are unknown.”

Emilia: “Apparently its construction pushed the limits of technology at the time, because it had something to do with keeping dangerous Witchbeasts trapped inside the city. But that doesn’t change its beauty, right?”

Emilia stopped at a bridge overlooking the waterway and smiled. Subaru, overtaken by the mood, nodded as if to declare, “Yeah, that’s right”.

For whatever reason, Subaru had arrived here, at this point. The results that he had earned, and the results he was reaching for, as long as they could be reached, nothing else mattered.

Because the most important part of anything was not the beginning, but the end.

Subaru: “That’s what you always said, Mom.”

Emilia: “Just now, did you say something?”

Subaru: “I just remembered the magic words that the woman I respect most in the world said to me.”

The days of those memories were long gone, but even so, Subaru had gained so much courage from them.

It would be impossible to forget them, because the lesson he’d learned from them was something that could not be forgotten. Natsuki Subaru, today, lived with those memories inside him.

Seeing Subaru and Emilia’s exchanging smiles, Garfiel and Beatrice waited on the side. Those two were occupied in their own world, and no one could interrupt them. Even Beatrice recognized this point.

Beatrice: “He has such a foolish expression on that face of his, in fact.”

Garfiel: “When a man’s sharin’ such a good mood with the woman he likes, of course he’ll act like that. My amazin’ self’s relieved, looks like the Captain’s a man.”

Beatrice: “I wonder what that means, I suppose.”

Garfiel: “No, it’s just that the Captain surrounds himself with girls too small ‘n too many men… Supposin’ he weren’t so close with Emilia-sama, a misunderstandin’ might’ve happened.”

Beatrice: “Subaru is a masculine man, in fact! He’s both a man and a pervert, I suppose! He’s always willing to randomly touch Betty and Petra, I suppose!”

Garfiel: “That’s not really a nice way to vouch for him, yeah?”

The two talked at length about Subaru’s preferences, and about his reputation of touching girls younger than him. Subaru and Emilia, satisfied with their view of the City of Water, did not even hear the irrational dialogue taking place behind them.

Emilia: “Well then, it’s about time to go back. Plus, I kinda want to admire the inn again. Its shape was reaaally odd but interesting.”

Subaru: “Wafuu-style architecture. I also want to see it again, although for different, less charitable reasons than Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Is that so? Haha, then, we should hurry.”

Emilia withdrew her hand from the railing, and took a few steps backward with an excited smile. Because she was feeling a bit impatient, Emilia had not taken the time to confirm that there was no one behind her.

Emilia: “Ah.”

???: “Whoops.”

She backed right into a man wearing a hood who had passed by them. She stumbled slightly, and the man reached out to steady her.

Emilia: “I-I’m sorry. I… I wasn’t looking behind me…”

Subaru: “Sorry from me too. This girl, she’s so troublesome. I’ll be sure to scold her.”

A flustered Emilia apologized to the man wearing the hood. Subaru joined her side and bowed his head to the man. He took care not to call Emilia’s name, taking the precaution of keeping people from realizing who she was and causing a commotion in the streets. Of course, the hood that Emilia wore was one that hindered recognition.

So, if they made as much as slight contact with someone, it wouldn’t develop into a big deal. This time included.

???: “This time, I was the careless one. After all, I was a little distracted in admiration.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

???: “The miss that I just bumped into has the silver hair of a beautiful girl, doesn’t she? A woman I once wanted to marry had that kind of beautiful hair. Remembering that hair, I didn’t avoid you in time.”

His remark should have seemed urgent, but his voice sounded rather slow and intoxicated.

Judging from his voice, the man, dressed in a long robe, sounded fairly young. Hearing him mention marriage, Subaru froze, and immediately judged him as a man who he did not want near Emilia.

Subaru: “Well, we can consider this a fault from both parties. Since we’ve conveyed our apologies, we can both move on now.”

Emilia: “Wait, Subaru. That was a kind of an insincere and apathetic apology…”

Subaru: “That’s fine, no?”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru pulled her arm, wishing Emilia to leave, Emilia herself seemed lost for words. Seeing their interaction, the man in the hood slowly shook his head.

???: “I don’t mind. I don’t place any anger or blame on you. If you want to leave, feel free to leave. If we are to meet again, fate will provide us with another opportunity.”

Subaru: “Ahh, that’s very true. Well then, maybe fate will guide us to a future meeting.”

Accepting the man’s poetic farewell, Subaru responded similarly and left with Emilia’s hand in his. Subaru stole a quick glance at her. In that moment, for reasons unknown to him, Emilia wore a meaningful expression as she glanced over her shoulder at the man they’d just left.

Subaru: “Sure, my attitude wasn’t great, but I wanted to protect my Emilia-tan and get her away from that strange guy.”

Emilia: “Hmm? Ah, right. I genuinely didn’t think Subaru’s attitude was very nice, since it was my mistake, but that wasn’t what I was thinking about…”

Stopping here, Emilia's eyes reflected her confusion. However, with a meditative expression and quivering lips, she continued,

Emilia: "That person just now, I feel like I've met him before… That's how I felt, but, since his face was hidden, I couldn't be sure…"

Subaru: "Someone that Emilia-tan knows? Well, I should probably know them as well."

Probably because it was still bothering her, Emilia turned around once more. But the figure had disappeared, and she had no idea where he had gone.

Emilia: "Mhm… but, I don't know. Who was he?"

Garfiel: "Yo, Captain. Why're ya lookin' so nervous, clingin' to Emilia-sama's hand? Were ya afraid that someone's gonna steal her?"

Seeing Subaru and Emilia emerging from the bridge, Garfiel approached them, and Subaru stuck his tongue out at him.

Subaru: "Idiot, this is no time for games. If there's some strange guy hanging around, you have to show up to help. If it's an opponent that I can't handle, then Emilia-tan would be in danger."

Garfiel: "Suppose if that happened, then you'd protect her with yer life. That's what makes the Captain a man."

Subaru: "If I acted as a shield then maybe I could take one hit. Then if the enemy kept going, we'd be in trouble. I have no confidence in my endurance, either physically or mentally."

Hearing Subaru's humble evaluation of himself, Garfiel laughed. He doubtlessly believed that Subaru was just humble, but, to Subaru, it was indeed a proper evaluation. It was perhaps better to say that Garfiel overestimated Subaru.

Garfiel: "No cause to worry. If my amazin' self thinks that some bastard's tryin' t'attack ya, they'll be sent flyin', no doubt about it. Besides, the guy didn't move like he knew how to fight. Was just some regular guy, one who didn't know no martial arts."

Subaru: "You can tell that?"

Garfiel: "Just by lookin'. Can also tell the Captain likes to swing swords 'round. My amazin' self could tell as soon as ya moved yer wrists."

Subaru: "Really? That sounds like some kind of magic trick."

Subaru had never told Garfiel of his high-school experience with kendo. Subaru had already realized that his so-called skill would be of no use in this world. But his exercise bore traces, which the knowledgeable practitioners of this world could apparently see.

Subaru: "Having said that, are you still worried, Emilia-tan?"

Subaru put this thoughts to the side and spoke to Emilia, who was still gazing around, before giving up with a shake of her head.

Emilia: "Mhm, it's okay. Sorry to trouble you. Let's go back."

Subaru: "Well, when we get back, make sure to hug Mimi for a while to make you feel better. Oops, I'll be hugging you though, Beako, so there's no need to be worried."

Beatrice: "Betty hasn't said anything yet, I suppose!"

Hearing Beatrice's complaints and Subaru's proud expression, Emilia laughed. Then, covering her mouth, she replied,

Emilia: "That's true, holding Mimi does seem to be very comforting. I'll be sure to do that."

As Emilia spoke, she checked her surroundings once again, then dropped her uneasy gaze in exchange for a smile.

3

???: "—I see. Now I understand the meaning of having come here."

A man spoke into the cuff of his coat, shaking the hem of the hood.

Recalling the girl he had just come in contact with, his mouth curled into a smile, a smile that let off a miserable feeling.

???: “I went out of my way to come here. If it had been for nothing, then I couldn’t let it go as if nothing had happened. Since this is a special reward, this is another matter.”

The words themselves were mild, but the voice which had announced them was feverishly sticky. It was as though the feeling had been cooked in a sticky pot, and then had been left out under the sun and the moon. The feeling held that kind of unpleasantness.

???: “I will never let go of anything I own, and I want what I own to be perfectly suited for me. Since I am perfect, I must be continually satisfied. So, being aware of those missing numbers would, of course, be unsatisfying, and must be filled.”

The man spoke his tongue twisters as he raised his head. At that moment, his hood fell, revealing white hair. With the wind swaying his white hair, the slightly unhappy man announced.

???: “I must make her my seventy-ninth wife, to satisfy that vacancy.”

In the City of Water, the white-haired devil spoke in a voice full of derision.

Chapter 11:
A Surprising Reunion, a Fated Reunion, and an Unintended Reunion

After the meeting with the strange hooded man, the journey proceeded with no further incidents. Occasionally, Emilia would glance into the water, deep in thought, but she covered her discomfort with a smile before anyone could question her about it.

The only distinct feature of the man they'd encountered was that he was a man of similar age, wearing a hood, but he seemed to have some kind of connection to Emilia. From Emilia's perspective, his behavior would have been fairly courteous. He may have been a little extreme in describing her hair but, more importantly, Emilia's silver hair rarely made a good impression like it had on him.

Subaru: "Speaking of which, the recognition-hindering cloak…"

Suddenly, it hit Subaru that the effects of Emilia's magical cloak, the one she always wore to keep her identity hidden, had not affected the man just now. If the cloak had been operating at its normal effectiveness, the man would only have been able to notice Emilia's presence. However, he had apparently seen Emilia's silver hair.

Meaning that the man could resist the cloak's spell.

Subaru: "Beako."

Beatrice: "So you've noticed it, in fact. Emilia and Garfiel haven't, and so they are walking around oblivious, I suppose. Careless children, in fact."

Beatrice, walking by Subaru's side, knew exactly what he was worried about.

As she led Subaru away from Emilia, Subaru brought his hand to his chin and frowned.

Subaru: "I don't think he used any trick, but that guy was just suspicious. The cloak's cognitive obstruction should not be resisted so easily."

Beatrice: "So he is either proficient in magic, or he has some Divine Protection… Anyway, he's not just an ordinary man, I suppose. What a bother, in fact."

Subaru: "Should we say something to Emilia?"

Beatrice: "That's not necessary, in fact. If he were acting with malice then Emilia probably would have noticed it, I suppose. We don't need to scrutinize this too much, in fact."

Hearing Beatrice's assertion, Subaru replied with an "I see", accepting it.

Beatrice had spoken what she believed to be correct. Since she often spent time observing humans, and had been paying close attention to Emilia's attitude, Subaru listened to her. There was no need to unnecessarily provoke unease.

Even so, Subaru and Beatrice must at least remain alert. In this vast city, meeting the man again by chance was unlikely. But there was a chance that he sought to actively contact them, so they needed to be wary.

Garfiel: "Hurry up, Captain. If ya go as slow as Beatrice, then it'll be sundown by the time we get back."

Beatrice: "Stop saying unnecessary things, I suppose. Smelly, annoying creature."

Garfiel turned back at them and was laughing happily in response to Beatrice's rude insults.

Suddenly, his expression changed. His ears moved back and forth, and his nose twitched.

Subaru: "What's wrong?"

Garfiel: "Nah, it's just, near the hotel… I can sorta hear an argument.”

They turned the corner as Garfiel finished talking, and Subaru and the others also heard the commotion. Indeed, it sounded like someone, or maybe multiple someones, were furious.

Subaru: “It sounds like it’ll turn into a fight, what a mess.”

Garfiel: “The Captain caused a fuss during the negotiation and ended up eatin’ some magic ore, do ya really have the right to say what’s a mess? If I weren’t at the Chamber of Commerce, ya would’ve been taken by the guards.”

Subaru: “That’s just my irresistible charm… Emilia-tan?”

Subaru suddenly found Emilia, who had just caught up, running past him. He called out to her, but she paid him no attention.

Emilia: “That voice, it sounds really familiar… Actually, I think that’s Joshua’s voice.”

Subaru: “Ah, you’re right. That does sound like the voice of that weak bastard.”

Emilia: “I’d be worried if he was in trouble. Let’s go.”

Leaving the less tense Garfiel behind, Subaru raced after Emilia. Turning another corner, he could finally see the Water Plumage Pavilion, where—

???: “Alright asshole, how many times are you going to make me say this?! Stop being stuck up and call your master here already!”

Joshua: “You’re so barbaric that I wouldn’t even call my brother here, let alone my master! Please leave while I’m still capable of speaking calmly!”

???: “Can you really not understand what I’m saying, oy? Let’s go, ya bastard!”

A young man with purple hair—Joshua stood with his arms spread in front of the hotel, quarreling with another man. Although he was facing away from Subaru, his physique was clearly quite burly. Judging from his attitude, a brawl with Joshua would be inevitable.

Emilia: “That’s enough!”

In the time it took Subaru to judge the two men’s difference in combat prowess, Emilia had already rushed over and separated them. Having been jerked away, Joshua wore an expression of abject shock.

Joshua: “E-Emilia-sama?!”

Emilia: “I was on my way back from my business when I heard you two. Arguing in front of the inn like this. What’s the reason for your quarrel? Calm down and tell me about it.”

She spoke as if mediating an argument between two children. In that moment, the atmosphere of that place settled down. Subaru sighed with relief, and Garfiel sighed disappointedly, as if to say “Aww, no fight?” as he caught up with them in no hurry.

Joshua: “Everyone is arriving one after another… My apologies for troubling you.”

Emilia: “It’s no problem. Now, please tell me about your argument.”

Joshua: “How could I trouble Emilia-sama with such a petty thing…”

Joshua stubbornly refused Emilia’s intervention in the matter, as if worried that Emilia would use this opportunity to her advantage. If that was the case, then he was being paranoid. Even in a hundred years, Emilia wouldn’t be able to come up with such a cunning idea.

???: “There ain’t much to what happened. I was sent here, but this guy wouldn’t let me in, screaming. So, I was gonna have to fight him.”

In that tense moment, the man arguing with Joshua spoke up. His sharp eyes glared at Joshua with malice, and his voice was dangerous as he complained about his reception.

Joshua: “How many times are you going to make me say it? If you’re going to disguise your identity, at least do an appropriate amount of preparation. Even wearing your neat clothing, you can’t hide your true nature. You can only push a lie so far!”

???: “Oh well, excuse me! Hey, I don’t like dressing up like this. I’m running someone else’s errand! Ah, fucking understand what I’m saying!”

The man scratched his head in frustration, as Joshua refused to accept his claims. Even with Emilia’s interference, along with the others, the two were still stuck in that argument, like a world composed of only them.

Emilia: “Really, how can we set things straight like this? Subaru, how should… Subaru?”

Emilia, puzzled by the situation with the two men, turned to Subaru, who stood with his hand on his chin, frowning in thought in front of her. His gaze rested on the man who had been arguing with Joshua.

Emilia: “What’s the matter, Subaru?”

Subaru: “No, I might be mistaken… But I think I’ve seen him somewhere before…”

???: “Huh? What, oy. Are you picking a fight with… Hk?!”

Hearing the dialogue between Subaru and Emilia, the man’s sharp gaze turned in their direction, looking for a new place to direct his anger. But after seeing Subaru, he immediately stiffened.

His lips trembling, he pointed at Subaru.

???: “Y-You… that time with Reinhard…!”

Subaru: ““That time with Reinhard” is really specific… ah.”

“That time with Reinhard” was Subaru’s main clue. And then Subaru realized who he was. He was much better dressed than before, and his demeanor was slightly different, but his malicious eyes hadn't changed.

Subaru: "Chin! Chin, right?! Wow, long time no see. Why are you here?"

Chin: "Don't act like we know each other! Who is this 'Chin' in the first place?! My name's Rachins!"

Subaru: "So it's Chin after all!"

Rachins: "Shut up!"

Subaru dropped a hand onto Chin's shoulder, and Chin, or rather, Rachins, hurriedly shrugged it off. Subaru pouted at his cold attitude.

Emilia: "Do you know him?"

Subaru: "Ah. Well, he's a familiar face that reminds me of the time I first met Emilia-tan in an alley in the Royal Capital. That was when she rescued me from a robbery."

Emilia: "Eh, that's ri… Uh, a robbery?"

Subaru: "The next time was when you were called to the Royal Candidate Meeting and I got stuck in an alley with Priscilla and he got his friends to attack us. Yeah, he's a great guy."

Beatrice: "To a lady like Betty he sounds like scum, in fact."

Hearing Subaru's words, Emilia and Beatrice reacted thus. Garfiel, who'd been hanging back, cracked his knuckles loudly, and Joshua's expression became even more serious.

As the situation became more sinister, Rachins's already pale face turned white.

Rachins: "W-Wait, wait. So maybe that did happen a long time ago, but let me explain why I'm here and let's forgive and forget. Yeah?"

Subaru: "Garfiel. What do you think?"

Garfiel: “There’s gonna be no pity from my amazin’ self, yeh?”

Rachins: “W-Wait, wait a minute! Really, wait! Waaaaaaait!”

Rachins felt Garfiel’s aura that was distinguishable from a simple thug’s, and immediately realized that he had no chance of winning. You could say that being able to realize this was a skill that Rachins had developed just this past year. He fell onto his knees, begging with his hands over his head, then pointed at the hotel.

Rachins: “It’s the truth! I was summoned here… No, my employer was summoned here! But she said that she’d take a few laps around the city first, so I was sent to the inn to notify them. I’m not lying!”

Garfiel: “Ahh, I gotcha, I gotcha… But hey, why don’tcha try explainin’ more slowly?”

Garfiel’s threatening attitude didn’t change as he approached Rachins. Although Subaru felt bad for Rachins, he found no reason to think better of him. His dress had improved, but his character had not, and so he had no way to make a good impression. It was inevitable that Joshua deny him entry into the hotel. Honestly, Subaru could empathize with him.

Garfiel: “Hey, that’s unlucky, ya bastard. Pickin’ the hotel my amazin’ self’s at was tough lu—Hk!”

Garfiel was backing Rachins into a corner with a clenched hand.

However, Garfiel’s movements were suddenly interrupted when he immediately swung to face the other direction. His eyes widened for a moment, before narrowing into thin, wary lines. His hair stood on end, as his teeth, claws and muscles all reacted as if entering into a war zone.

A reaction too abrupt, too straightforward and too sudden.

Garfiel’s primal fighting instincts had been awakened, and thus Subaru was also infected by a sense of urgency. He, and the others, turned to follow Garfiel’s glare.

???: “Rachins, I was worried you would not return. Why are you making a disturbance here?”

In that moment, Subaru saw an illusion that a flame was standing in front of him.

The flames were shining red, taking a human form that waved its hand. No, not just a human form—they were human. Hair the color of crimson, burning fire, eyes that trapped the clear blue sky in them. His slender body was clothed in white and his neatly arranged face was one that could never be forgotten.

His aura, slamming into everyone nearby, was the aura an ordinary person would feel upon seeing a hero. That was exactly what the situation was.

There was no mistake. This man’s name was,

Subaru: “—Reinhard.”

Upon hearing Subaru’s hoarse voice, the young man in question smiled gently. The smile was a soft one, intended to calm others down.

With just that smile, Subaru felt as if he had been taken into the arms of a guardian of peace. And it was not just Subaru, but everyone else seemed to relax as well.

Reinhard: “It’s been a while, Subaru. I did not expect to see you here. Although our meeting is thanks to Julius, who called me here.”

Subaru: “O-Oh. Long time no see. How are you doing… Wait, are you saying that you were also called by Julius?”

Reinhard: “Technically, it was Felt-sama accepting Anastasia-sama’s invitation. I’m just here as her Knight, and I didn’t expect to see you here.”

As always, Reinhard’s presence dwarfed everyone else’s. Although Subaru had experienced this before, it had never affected him to this degree, and he found it almost difficult to carry a casual conversation.

That Subaru could feel Reinhard's aura, which he was previously unaware of, attested to Subaru's own growth. The more Subaru trained, the more he came to understand the difference between them.

Reinhard: "I see. It has been a year, hasn't it? You seem much better than you were when we last parted ways. That makes me glad."

Subaru: "Don't say it like that, you sound like you're making fun of me. I was a little proud of my growth, but seeing you makes me feel like it amounted to nothing."

Reinhard: "I did not intend any such thing. In terms of my growth, I am rather disappointed. I have not changed much in the past year, so it is honestly rather embarrassing."

That was probably because he'd already maxed his level, or close to it and it was difficult to raise it further. Seeing a man who was obviously already so strong but still wished to be stronger, Subaru could not help but feel intimidated.

Reinhard: "By the way, Subaru."

Subaru: "Hmm, oh, what is it?"

Reinhard: "The one who's been staring at me this whole time, is he your friend? If so, I would be glad if you asked him to relax a little."

Reinhard smiled wryly in Garfiel's direction.

Garfiel himself was incredibly tense, looking as if he was ready to rush forward with his teeth and claws to attack prey. Those were weapons that Subaru had relied on countless times over the last year. However, Subaru doubted that Garfiel was capable of harming the young man standing before him.

Subaru: "Garfiel, stop it. This is Reinhard. He's my… friend. He's not going to hurt you, I wouldn't allow it."

Subaru hesitated briefly before saying "friend".

One time, he had been personally saved by the Sword Saint, and his last parting with Reinhard had been after Subaru's humiliation at the Knights' Training Field. When Reinhard reached a hand out toward shim, Subaru had turned it aside.

However, while Subaru considered all of this, Reinhard nodded with ease.

Reinhard: "Now, I have been introduced by Subaru. I am his friend, Reinhard van Astrea. I would be grateful if you would tell me your name."

Garfiel: "—It's Garfiel Tinzel."

Reinhard: "A fine name. You're well trained. For someone so young, it's amazing."

Subaru was struck by how accurate Reinhard's assessments were.

In the one year after leaving the Sanctuary, Garfiel had learned much about the outside world and gained a calmer temperament. If he were to calm his demeanor and the way he spoke, then Garfiel would look roughly twenty years old, when in fact he was merely fifteen.

Reinhard's remarks indicated that he'd easily seen through this.

Reinhard: "I've heard some of the rumors about Emilia-sama's guards. The Strongest of Shields, Garfiel Tinzel, and the Spirit Knight, Natsuki Subaru, are both famous. It brings me pride to call you my friend."

Subaru: "I'm glad to be called by my proper title, for once."

Reinhard: "I've heard some of the other titles, but they are a little less pleasant. Speaking of which, is the Spirit from the title Spirit Knight that little girl over there?"

Reinhard's attention turned to Beatrice, who shrank down next to Subaru. At some point, she'd taken his hand without him having noticed. Reinhard knelt, to look into her eyes.

Reinhard: "I can tell that you are a revered Great Spirit. It honors me to be able to speak with you like this.”

Beatrice: “…Betty is Subaru’s Contracted Spirit, Beatrice, in fact. Betty doesn’t dislike your admiration, I suppose. Just, you should keep your distance, in fact. Surely you understand why, I suppose.”

Reinhard: “I understand completely. I am sorry to trouble you.”

Unlike Garfiel, she revealed no obvious weariness. However, she clung to Subaru’s hand with unusual tightness, and could not conceal its slight shaking.

However, it was not because she was afraid. This was something else.

And Reinhard, with his respectful, humble words, turned ceremoniously to Emilia.

Reinhard: “Emilia-sama, it has been a long time. Even in my own territory, I have heard about your achievements many times over.”

Emilia: “Yeah, long time no see, Reinhard. It’s really been a year since the castle. We’ve also heard about your achievements, too.”

Reinhard: “We have done far less than Emilia-sama has. I have been able to do little to help my master. Compared to all of Subaru’s achievements, I can only feel frustrated.”

Emilia: “Hahaha. Yeah, Subaru is amazing. I’m proud of my Knight.”

Emilia’s chest swelled with pride after hearing Reinhard’s flattery. Although she’d obviously missed the social rhetoric in Reinhard’s words, listening to what Emilia said made Subaru happy, even if the situation was equally embarrassing.

Anyway,

Subaru: “Looks like we’ve done enough greetings, but did you call Rachins’s name earlier?”

Emilia: “Ah, that’s right. Do you know him, Reinhard?”

Reinhard: “Yeah, I do. He is currently working under the employ of Felt-sama. Although finding places for him to be useful is difficult, Felt-sama has placed high hopes in him.”

Subaru: “That guy, Felt hired him?!”

At that piece of unexpected information, Subaru stared in shock. Reinhard turned to Subaru and frowned apologetically at his reaction.

Reinhard: “My apologies for failing to consider your feelings, especially since I was present in the alley where you two had an encounter. Afterward, a lot of things happened… When I told Felt-sama, she demanded on the spot that I invite them over.”

Subaru: “Ah, well, if you say so then I’ll believe it, but… Seriously, what kind of a coincidence is that? More than that… wait. You said ‘them’, as in plural?”

Reinhard: “Felt-sama has hired three men, including him. Those three are indeed the ones who tried to rob you in the alley.”

Subaru: “The Tonchinkan trio gets to work together?!”

Facing this cruel, mischievous fate, Subaru couldn’t help but cry to the heavens.

Immediately after being summoned to this world, Subaru had been attacked over and over by the same trio. He had not quite forgotten about them, but he had hardly expected to encounter them here, either.

Emilia: “Well, setting Subaru’s surprise aside… Rachins is under your care, and the employ of Felt-chan, correct?”

Reinhard: “That is correct. Felt-sama wanted to walk around the city and sent him to notify the inn of her arrival. I came since he had yet to return.”

Reinhard repeated what Rachins had said, and Rachins nodded rigorously.

Rachins: “Th-That’s right! I kept saying the same thing over and over. Everybody doubted me for no reason. I demand an apology, oy!”

Reinhard: “Rachins. I have said this many times, but your words as a messenger lack the tone required. Although people can grasp the general situation, believing you is difficult.”

Rachins: “Bastard, whose side are you on?!”

Reinhard: “I am on the side of justice. And, in this case, I think it was inevitable that my friend’s younger brother would misunderstand.”

Turning away from a fuming Rachins, Reinhard smiled towards Joshua, who returned it with a rather embarrassed one.

Joshua: “Long time no see, Reinhard-sama. This time, it seems that my blunder has caused your messenger to…”

Reinhard: “The fault is ours, Joshua. Also, that honorific is so annoying. I know it has been a long time, but acting so distant makes me feel a bit lonely.”

Joshua: “Although my honorable nii-sama and Reinhard-sama are friends, right now they are also political opponents.”

Reinhard: “You have not changed. You don’t have to always imitate the olden days’ Julius in that regard.”

Reinhard gave a wry smile, while Joshua seemed to clench his teeth.

—Anyway, the commotion had died down safely. Although the temporary problem was gone, it was replaced by the emergence of other questions. That was,

Subaru: “Even so, if not only us but you as well were called here, then what’s Anastasia planning to do?”

Reinhard: “The invitation sent to us stated that she wished to exchange a useful piece of information in return for something.

Although we initially thought that Anastasia-sama may have been up to something, we did not expect that Emilia-sama and you had been invited as well.”

Subaru: “So are you saying that we should be prepared for something even more shocking?”

Reinhard: “That is a possibility, yes. What do you say, Joshua?”

Once the attention was shifted to Joshua, one of the masterminds of the appointment, the young man shifted his monocle and blurted out, “I guess we’ll see”, to deflect the topic.

With his usual pleasant demeanor, Reinhard turned back to the inn.

Reinhard: “This is a pretty rare structure, the Water Plumage Pavilion. I have heard that this style of Wafuu architecture only exists in Kararagi.”

Subaru: “Ehhh, that’s surprising, you haven’t seen it before either. You’ve never been to Kararagi?”

Reinhard: “Yes. I am banned from going abroad. Because of the fear that the treaty between the countries will be breached, I must avoid the borders too. We are close enough to Kararagi as is, so Priestella is pretty much the limit of where I can go.”

Emilia and Subaru were stunned at Reinhard’s prohibition on travel. Maybe it was his style of joke, but Reinhard, who laughed lightly, did not give off that impression.

Asking about it would feel a little uneasy, so they postponed that line of questioning back.

Subaru: “We’ve been here for a while, and it’s kind of tiring to just linger near the entrance for so long. How about we go inside, since Felt isn’t here yet?”

Reinhard: “Sure, I’m not supervising her right now. Sometimes she runs off to stretch her wings and play. It’s nice to relax once in a while.”

Rachins: "…"Sometimes"? Isn't she always just stretching her wings and playing around?"

Reinhard: "Rachins, did you say something?"

Rachins: "Nope, nothing. So, can I go already? This is fun and all but it's goddamn uncomfortable."

Rachins muttered a curse under his breath after requesting permission to leave. Reinhard couldn't help a sigh.

Reinhard: "Join Camberly and Gaston in guarding Felt-sama. Although there should be no danger, Rom-dono did not accompany us, and if Felt-sama takes any dangerous action, you have to be there to stop her."

Rachins: "Yeah, I got it. What are you gonna do?"

Reinhard: "I'll go into the inn, and stay with Emilia-sama. If anything happens, send me a signal with a Goa, and I'll be there in five seconds."

Rachins: "You ain't kidding, are you, oy."

Having finished, Rachins squeezed past Subaru. Halfway past, he did not forget to give Joshua a hard glare, still wary of Reinhard. He was really the model of petty evils.

Subaru: "Well, let's go inside. We'll say hello to Anastasia-san and tell her that Reinhard's here."

Reinhard: "I believe Joshua's in charge of that. Well, let's get going."

Joshua: "…Yes, I am. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Joshua looked slightly lost. Was it because the situation had played out strangely and he did not fit in? In order to comfort him, Subaru, Reinhard, Emilia, Garfiel, and finally even Beatrice dutifully followed him into the inn.

Subaru: "I'll feel bad if I shove everything onto him."

Reinhard: “I’ll join Subaru in accompanying him.”

Emilia: “Ah, the two of them are going, I will too.”

Garfiel: “If the Captain ‘n Emilia-sama are goin’, my amazin’ self’s goin’ too.”

Beatrice: “Betty doesn’t want to be the only one excluded from the group, in fact… But it wouldn’t be too much of a bother even in that case, I suppose.”

Subaru and Emilia: “Yes, adorable adorable.”

Subaru and Emilia, walking to her left and right, both stroked her head gently. Beatrice swatted their hands away, annoyed, then obediently grabbed the hems of their sleeves.

Joshua: “This place. Anastasia-sama is welcoming other guests right now.”

They were at a different room than the original dining hall. Subaru eyed Joshua wearily.

Subaru: “Guests? Did she invite even more people?”

Joshua: “…You are about to find out, no matter if you look at me with those beastly, menacing eyes.”

Subaru: “‘Beastly’ is quite the harsh wording. Come on, my eyes aren’t that scary!”

Joshua: “You do not need to raise your voice like a Witchbeast for me to understand that.”

Subaru: “That’s even harsher, and what kind of Witchbeast, dog, rabbit, or whale? Pick one.”

These were Subaru’s top three most annoying Witchbeasts, from memory. Although, it seemed to him like there had been another, a Witchbeast with the face of a lion, which had been burnt to cinders, but it hadn’t been very remarkable.

While Subaru was sorting through his faint memories, Reinhard gently whispered “Whale…”, interrupting Subaru’s train of thought. Upon noticing Subaru’s gaze, he spoke.

Reinhard: “Whale, do you mean the White Whale, Subaru?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, that’s right. That’s the worst whale. There were so many times where I thought it was dying and it just refused to die. Thinking back on it, it was such a miracle.”

In fact, the increase in the number of White Whales honestly did make their victory a miracle. That Witchbeast had been such an amazing creature, and the disaster it wrought was likewise extraordinary. It had caused so much suffering that even now, Subaru’s chest tightened in pain at the thought.

Reinhard: “The subjugation of the White Whale, would you mind telling me about it in more detail later? I am not a man who is completely unrelated to that monster. Although, that would be a be a long story to tell.”

Subaru: “—Of course. As for your story, if it’s difficult to talk about then you don’t need to.”

Subaru was only vaguely aware of Reinhard’s experiences with the White Whale. To Subaru, the battle with the White Whale was the fruit of an old swordsman’s decade-long obsession with vengeance. And Subaru also knew of the Sword Demon’s origin, and of his relationship to the red-haired youth. As to what had happened between them, Subaru had no way of knowing.

—This was not the topic that Subaru could pursue out of curiosity, was how he judged it.

Reinhard: “Thank you.”

Thus, Reinhard responded briefly to the Subaru’s thoughtfulness.

Subaru sought nothing other than that.

Seeing Reinhard’s lowered gaze, Subaru gave a long sigh. Emilia and Beatrice looked at him, worried, and Subaru gave them an “I’m alright” smile.

Joshua: “We have arrived. Please wait in this tearoom until their meeting ends.”

Joshua, who had finally led them to their destination, gestured to a cross-style door. The style was so detailed that hanging on the door was a paper scroll. Subaru, although delighted, felt that his Japanese soul had become quite a bit strange.

But his optimistic thoughts would only exist for a brief while.

Joshua: “Excuse me. Would you mind being joined by other guests?”

He directed the question at the guests already occupying the tearoom. Someone inside, who shifted slightly, responded.

???: “—Sure. We do not have much to do right now.”

That calm voice made Subaru frown at start, but then surprise overtook him. It was impossibly familiar, and impossible to forget. Not only that, Subaru had only just been thinking about its owner. No one aside from Subaru seemed to notice it—Or rather, no one but Reinhard. His face became stiff, his blue eyes swaying with hesitation.

Joshua, having not noticed, opened the door. There was a quiet sound of wood on wood, as the occupants of the tearoom came into sight.

Then, the occupants, seated on mats of cloth, looked over to the new guests.

Reinhard: “—Ah, Oji-sama?”

Wilhelm: “Is that, Reinhard?”

The voices of the grandfather and the grandson overlapped.

That was the unintended reunion between Reinhard van Astrea and Wilhelm van Astrea.

Chapter 12:
Crushing Atmosphere of the Tea Room

1

Everyone currently gathered in the tearoom was someone of exceptional importance.

Emilia: “Even so, it’s surprising that Reinhard and Wilhelm are blood-related. It’s no wonder that they’re both skilled swordsmen.”

Subaru: “It’s natural that you did not know, you had no reason to. If families were based on similarities then people would end up with a pretty big family, Emilia-tan.”

The wooden floor beneath the long table was covered with mats, in the style of a traditional Japanese living room, in front of a long table. Emilia and Subaru were seated next to each other, holding a whispered conversation without discussing anything too significant. They were chatting to calm their nerves.

Beatrice: “Betty is already alert and won’t let anyone try anything, in fact. Subaru can stop being wary and looking at everyone with those mean eyes, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You know I was born with a mean look. I’m not staring at anyone warily. Besides, I know what it’s like to be glared at with cold eyes, so please stop.”

Beatrice was also sitting near Emilia, keeping a vigilant watch. Emilia sat with her legs folded underneath her, and Subaru had his legs crossed, while Beatrice sat with a rigid posture. It was a position she’d taken for Subaru’s sake, although she couldn’t resist fidgeting a little.

Subaru: “In any event, Garfiel’s here if something were to happen. And besides, no one here would act so rashly.”

Subaru’s gaze left Beatrice, whose knees were shaking, and directed his attention toward the corner of the tearoom, where Garfiel was sitting. Although he noticed Subaru and wanted to wave at him, his hand was too busy being caught by Mimi.

Right now, several key figures in the Royal Selection were gathered at the table, while the others were keeping an eye on the situation from the corners of room. In other words, Garfiel and Mimi were sitting together. Hetaro and Tivey were also present, glaring at Garfiel with dark malice.

Joshua was also seated in the tearoom, looking extremely uncomfortable.

Reinhard: “I am very grateful for this hospitality. Felt-sama may be a little late in arriving since she is out in Priestella, but she should be here shortly.”

Anastasia: “Ya don’t hafta be so formal, especially ‘cause ya accepted my invitation on such short notice. Oh, but it’s a strange coincidence that y’all arrived so close together.”

Anastasia took a gentle approach to meet the etiquette-conscious Reinhard. Reinhard raised his head and looked at Julius, who was standing by Anastasia’s side.

Reinhard: “It has been a while, Julius. We last met face to face at the Chamber of Commerce.”

Julius: “Ah, that is correct. I apologize for asking everyone to come in such little time. But it gives me peace of mind to know that you have all kept safe.”

After greeting his friend, Reinhard returned to his seat across the tatami room. If seating at the table reflected the positions of the factions, then Reinhard was seated at the lowest-ranking position. Sitting at the head was the host, Anastasia. Next to Anastasia was Emilia and her faction, and Reinhard, who was representing Felt’s faction, was sitting in front of them. Across from Anastasia was,

???: “It feels like it has been a long time since everyone has gathered like this.”

The speaker, who wore a dignified smile, was a beautiful woman with green hair.

Amber eyes which seemed to contain the very picture of harmony, dressed in a feminine navy-blue dress, giving off an air of nobility. Although, if one had known what she had been like before, it would be hard to see her as the same person.

Emilia: “We haven’t seen you in a while either, Crusch-sama. You seem to be doing well.”

Crusch: “Yes, that’s right. I previously caused you a lot of trouble, so let me offer my thanks. I have also heard of quite a few of the deeds that you were involved in. Upon receiving the news, my thoughts were that those were things only you could do.”

Emilia was not afraid to call out to Crusch, who replied to Emilia in a soft tone. Her old decisive personality seemed to have disappeared along with her memory, and she had yet to recover it. She was no longer a savvy, brave politician, but merely a beautiful aristocratic lady.

If the aforementioned events that Emilia had been involved in were to happen to Crusch’s current self, they would have ended in tragedy, for certain.

Ferris: “Really, hearing people talk about nyou like that was surprising. Eradicating the Great Rabbit and becoming a Spiritual Arts User, who’d have expected that out of Subaru-kyun?”

Next to Crusch, a beautiful girl with cat ears— no, a feminine young man with a coy manner spoke up. He was Ferris, both Crusch’s Knight and the supreme healer in the Kingdom.

Unlike his incredibly different master, Ferris hadn’t changed in the slightest. It was reassuring, but, at the same time, he remained difficult to understand.

Subaru: “Well, becoming someone who people can rely on has always been one of the biggest goals in my life. As for my contract with Beako, well, it probably annoys you, but my life was in danger at the time, so I had no choice but to make it."

Ferris: "Even though I gave nyou such a solemn warning? Subaru-kyun would eventually end up overworking his Gate. Without Beatrice-chan, it'll crack open with a bang, so you'll have to be especially careful, nyan."

Subaru: "Understood. And there's no other guy who can make Beako this happy."

Although they both spoke in a teasing tone, Ferris's warning had been serious, heartfelt advice, so Subaru also responded with an equally serious attitude. Dropping a hand on Beatrice's shoulder, whose face was red, he considered this the tuition fee.

Subaru: "Even so… I didn't expect Crusch-san and her faction to have also been invited. I was already surprised to encounter Reinhard outside, but now I'm about to spray nosebleeds."

Ferris: "Ugh. That would be overdramatic. But it is quite a surprise that we'd all coincidentally arrive nyon the same day, though."

???: "Since no specific date and time was established for the meeting, that we arrived together was the result of estimates—It is rare for us all to have a chance to gather together, so this is our good fortune."

That was the last member of Crusch Camp. Sitting next to Crusch was Ferris, who was seated in a woman's pose. Next to him was the old swordsman, Wilhelm, sipping his tea. He was dressed in the same butler outfit as always, but it suited the image of drinking tea in a Japanese-style room.

Actually, due to the seating arrangements, Reinhard and Wilhelm had ended up seated next to one another. However, that was a most heart-rending scene.

Subaru: "They haven't even met eyes yet…"

Subaru whispered his observation to Emilia, who quietly agreed. Wilhelm and Reinhard were, as grandfather and grandson, direct relatives, but aside from offering mutual pleasantries, they had yet to acknowledge each other.

The tearoom was dominated by silence, and Subaru, feeling uncomfortable, took the time to think their situation over. The Emilia Camp was largely unskilled at reading the mood, being composed of airhead members who, whether due to their KY-ness, nature, or just being middle-schoolers or even children, were unable to do anything in the heavy atmosphere.

It was also hard to forget how Joshua, who had returned after being summoned away, had given a scared "Whaa" upon seeing the situation.

The Astrea Family. The name was so well-known that even Subaru knew a little of their family history. 'Sword Saint' was a title that was passed from generation to generation, and the two people in front of Subaru, as well as the previous Sword Saint, formed a lineage of people of such great strength their mere presence changed the battlefield.

Wilhelm's obsession with the White Whale obviously originated from the defeat of his wife, the previous Sword Saint. Connecting these facts would lead to one question.

—Why had Wilhelm chosen to borrow the power of Crusch's faction, rather than the power of his own family?

Taking the question further, why had Reinhard not participated in the fight against White Whale?

Wilhelm had said that he had started chasing the White Whale about fourteen years ago. If this had been a problem ever since the Royal Selection had started, then Wilhelm could not cooperate with Reinhard, who was a member of an opposing faction. That made sense.

But Wilhelm had begun his revenge-driven hunt for the White Whale at a time the House of Astrea had nothing to do with the Royal Selection. Of course, then Reinhard would have been a child at the time, and would have lacked the ability to defeat the White Whale. But, considering his later growth, why had Reinhard never sought out the White Whale?

Wilhelm’s sentiments and Reinhard’s thoughts, Subaru had no insight into either.

—He would love to listen if they were ever willing to discuss it.

However, asking directly would be like unscrupulously cutting into an old wound and rubbing salt under the scabs. And although Natsuki Subaru was incredibly curious, he had grown quite a bit in the past year. He had come to understand that if he pressed the topic, people would find him annoying.

Reinhard and Wilhelm, though in hostile factions, were both valuable, talented people who Subaru had a good relationship with. And so, the trust they placed in him was not cheap enough to be thrown away just because of his curiosity.

So, all he could do was hope that someone else would bring it up.

Emilia: “By the way, Anastasia-san, why did you gather everyone here? I think you had some purpose… Right?”

Unaware of Subaru’s worry, Emilia directed a question at Anastasia, who tilted her head with a smile.

Anastasia: “Of course, I have somethin’ I’d like to discuss with each of ya, but, to answer Emilia-san’s question, I had to think pretty hard to come up with somethin’ that’d lure each of ya here.”

Emilia: “We came for the magic stones, but what about the others?”

Anastasia: “Everyone’s got all sorts of burdens and whatnot. Gettin’ to know that is simple… Just, there are also those where ya just can’t understand what they want.”

Emilia: “Those you can’t understand…?”

Emilia crossed her arms, her face a troubled one, though the problem was nothing so difficult. After all, there were those not present, which made it unnecessary to ponder which Camp was the least open to communication.

Wilhelm: “Priscilla-sama and Al-dono were not invited, were they?”

Anastasia: “Those two are completely set on their own path and I wouldn’t even know where to start findin’ out what they’re lookin’ for. To be honest, even Felt-san treats land and money like they’re completely irrelevant.”

Reinhard: “Regarding that point, we’re at Felt-sama’s mercy as to when she arrives. That said, I do wish she would care a little more about those matters.”

To Anastasia, who had admitted that she had left out one of the Camps relatively easily, Reinhard displayed his understanding, expressing the same opinion.

Hearing that, and agreeing only with part of the content, Emilia raised her hand and spoke,

Emilia: “It’s on my mind too, to know about everyone’s circumstances. I’ve been studying a lot, but given my distinguished position, it’s super-duper tough.”

Subaru: “Who even says ‘super-duper’ these days…”

Emilia: “Hmph, Subaru, you meanie.”

After a short delay, Emilia puffed out her cheeks and pinched Subaru’s right shoulder. Incidentally, Beatrice was also pinching his left shoulder, so he was getting his just dedserts.

At any rate, the positions of the Priscilla Camp and the Felt Camp were clear. Then all that was left was the reason, perhaps the weakness, that led Crusch here.

Crusch: “As to why we came to Priestella, it was because Anastasia-sama seems to have some information regarding Gluttony.”

Subaru: “…”

As if reading Subaru’s thoughts, Crusch replied.

Crusch’s words struck Subaru like a bullet, and it was something that he could not overlook. Meanwhile, Anastasia caressed her scarf with a wry smile.

Anastasia: “I wasn’t keepin’ anythin’ from Natsuki-kun, but there’s a matter of priorities. Under these circumstances, solvin’ Crusch’s problems should take precedence. Ain’t that right?”

Subaru: “Gah, gr… shu… fu… F-Fine, that’s fine.”

Julius: “I see you’ve grown up a little.”

Subaru: “Bastard, I’m already on the verge of exploding.”

Selling to the highest bidder was the basis of decision-making in business.

Subaru had managed to put the brakes on his fury at Anastasia’s explanation, which was fortunate, since Julius had begun to look uneasy.

Subaru: “Who are you, my parents? On that topic, my dad could beat me up ten times better than you ever could!”

Ferris: “Eh… Ferri-chan is scared…”

Subaru: “Don’t be shaken so easily! Are you scared of your own family?!”

Subaru snapped at Ferris, who had snuggled up to Crusch, but he was joking rather than scolding. On that note, his words about his father, Kenichi, were certainly true, rather than humility or exaggeration.

Anastasia’s reason was acceptable. However, it would be another matter entirely if the information were to be given to only Crusch and not Subaru. Information on Gluttony was crucial to restoring Rem, who was still sleeping in Roswaal’s mansion.

Even though he had accepted the reason, he would not be so easily swayed.

Anastasia: “Even though you’re making such a scary face, you’ll feel more at ease after you've heard the full story."

Subaru: "Then… Are you telling the truth?"

Anastasia: "It ain't a lie, and I'm sure Crusch's faction's got no intention of keepin' it to themselves."

Subaru turned to Crusch, who seemed to have some difficulty maintaining a composed expression.

Crusch: "It is only natural. Of course, in order to retrieve my memories, I want the information on Gluttony. However, I also know that Subaru is also determined to defeat Gluttony for the sake of that young girl. Under such circumstances, I have no desire to monopolize the information."

Subaru: "Crusch-san…"

Crusch: "In addition, the more comrades I find who share my goal, the better. The more people there are working against the elusive sinners of the Witch Cult, the more likely we are to win."

Crusch, who spoke in a light tone, gave Subaru peace of mind. Her true desire was, of course, to restore her memories and improve her flaws. But that did not come in-between her goodwill toward Subaru.

Holding an honorable nature which had not been dimmed at all by her amnesia, was this woman named Crusch Karsten.

Subaru: "I'm grateful. Thank you, Crusch-san. I will cherish the opportunity that you've handed me. Definitely."

Crusch: "That said, the information is our priority. We won't concede that."

In response to Subaru's determination, Crusch straightened her back and met his gaze.

Of course. They shared a heated competition. But her benevolent smile was out-of-place for this occasion, so she and Subaru smiled together.

The one who interrupted the moment was Crusch's Knight.

Ferris: "Nyaaau. Seeing Subaru and Crusch-sama like this is really annoying, stop it. Subaru's such a greedy man. Are the two flowers at your side not enough? Really nyow!"

Crusch: "Ferris, that is not a very courteous thing to say. Subaru is not someone who would be swayed by temptations like that."

Subaru: "Yeah, don't say that. Certainly, Crusch-san's beautiful and very cute, but I have a loyal heart… Although it is split in two right now, but—owowowowow?!"

Beatrice: "That's not a very loyal heart, in fact. You should just stay quiet and reflect on what you just said, I suppose."

Subaru, who'd been trying to agree with Crusch, had his ear caught in Beatrice's tight grip. His eyes watered in protest, but before he could complain, he noticed that she was pointing at Crusch.

Following Beatrice's finger, Subaru saw that Crusch was wearing a bright blush, looking downwards. Thinking back, what odd words had he spoken?

Subaru: "Oh no, Emilia-tan, did I say something strange?"

Emilia: "Huh? Hmm, I'm not sure. Subaru, you just talked the way you usually talk to me…"

Subaru: "That's right. Then what did I do? Holding Emilia-tan's hand lets me think better, may I?"

Emilia: "Yes yes. Think hard."

Subaru tapped his forehead with the hand that held Emilia's, as he cast a gloomy look. Meanwhile, Ferris took the opportunity to whisper to Crusch,

Ferris: "See, it's like that. Subaru-kyun is subconsciously excessively friendly to everyone he meets and always tries to play a cool and handsome act. It's like he's messed up in the head. Don't pay it any attention."

Crusch: “Yes, I’ll be careful. Ha, I was a little shocked.”

Crusch placed a hand on her chest with a sigh of relief.

Subaru found this feminine action incredibly cute. Crusch and Ferris, who were unaware of his thoughts, held hands as if making a promise to each other. Anyone who stumbled across this scene would have assumed that they were girlfriends.

Now, everyone had revealed their reasons for coming to Priestella.

???: “Ehhh, there’s a complete set. From what Rachins said, I was supposed to just meet with that older brother and the lady from Kararagi.”

The paper door was thrown open, revealing the girl standing behind it.

She was an agile, pretty, blonde girl with large chestnut-crimson eyes and a crooked smile. Her small face was full of naughty charm and her slim but agile physique seemed a touch more feminine. Just as in the past, she was dressed in an outfit focused on enhancing movement speed, one that also happened to leave her navel and legs exposed.

Felt: “What, surprised I still look this way? It’s only been a year, you know.”

Reinhard: “Felt-sama.”

Everyone slumped their shoulders upon seeing her, and Felt noticed their disappointment. Reinhard, however, stood up to welcome his master as she approached.

Reinhard: “I was sure I left a change of clothes on the dragon carriage, what happened?”

Felt: “Bah! I wanted to go sightseeing in something comfortable. That said, you wanted me to get changed in the hotel, but who’d wear something that looks so itchy? You should know I’m like this by now!”

Reinhard: “That is really just like you…”

Reinhard placed a hand on his forehead, speaking in a helpless tone. Felt, who was dragging the Kingdom’s strongest hero around like a plaything, looked happy to enter the room.

Felt: “Right, and here I am—I am grateful for your hospitality today and I hope our discussions will go well. There, all done with greetings.”

For a moment, Felt looked as elegant as a noble’s daughter. She gave a naughty smile and mimed a curtsy without a skirt, and immediately reverted to her usual self.

Subaru was quite self-aware of his own disagreement with the aristocratic community, but Felt’s attitude toward them seemed to have worsened notably in the past year.

Felt: “Man, this is a really bizarre building. I’ve never seen one like it before, so I got curious and explored a little before coming here.”

Felt sat down on the mat originally occupied by Reinhard, who moved another one over and sat earnestly next to her. By chance, Felt was now next to Wilhelm, separating grandfather and grandson.

Emilia: “Well, long time no see, Felt-chan. How have you been?”

Felt: “It’s weird to have ‘chan’ added to my name. Anyway, I’ve been well. Nee-chan, you’ve been… a little too lively, no? I’ve heard a lot of rumors about really scary things.”

Emilia: “It’s Subaru who’s been lively, not me. As for me, I’ve been lucky to be saved Subaru’s hard work, that’s all.”

Felt: “Ah! That’s right!”

Upon hearing Emilia’s reply, Felt leapt to her feet with a clap of her hands, her eyes fixed straight at Subaru.

Felt: “I’ve heard a ton of ridiculous rumors about you, nii-chan. I’ve just got to know, how many of those rumors are actually true?”

Subaru: “It seems like you’ve decided that they were all fake before even asking me. Your level of faith in me is disappointingly low.”

Felt: “Because they’re all so wild! I heard that you cut the White Whale in half by yourself, you crushed a Sin Archbishop’s skull to bits with your own two hands, and even the Great Rabbit was roasted and eat—”

Subaru: “I really was involved in all of those, but the rumors have been blown hundreds of times out of proportion!”

If Subaru really had done as the rumors said, then he would’ve been hailed the Kingdom’s hero and probably even have been put on the throne. With that authority, he’d have made Emilia Queen and they’d be ruling together.

Julius and Wilhelm: “—Heh.”

Subaru’s reaction had drawn a small laugh from the audience. The two sources of laughter were from people sitting on opposite sides of the room, Julius and Wilhelm.

The two, both of whom seemed to have felt embarrassed at their subconscious reaction, sought each other out and relaxed when they found someone who had given a similar response. Felt, whose eyes had been darting back and forth in confusion, asked,

Felt: “Why did the old man and the Knight laugh? Me, did I say something strange?”

Subaru: “Everything you said was strange! You gave me too much credit. If I did that much, then I’d deserve a Nobel Peace Prize!”

Although Subaru didn’t fully understand what he had earned, he knew that it was meant to be a symbol of honor. Back when he had been presented with some medals for his achievements, he did not fully understand their actual and symbolic value, so he had never personally felt the merit that came along with it.

In fact, the medals that he had received were quite valuable in the Kingdom.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono’s contribution was indispensable during the battle with the White Whale. If he were not there, I have no doubt that we all would have perished. It sounds like an exaggeration, but it is no laughing matter.”

Julius: “The same is true of the battle with the Sin Archbishop. No other person developed our tactics and took command. Were he not there, myself and the others who helped would not have been able to subjugate the Sin Archbishop.”

Subaru: “…”

Overwhelming faith from Wilhelm and Julius.

Their straight-forward support for him struck Subaru speechless. The lively atmosphere left his entire body burning with embarrassment. His face was red from ear to ear, and blood was liable to spray from his eyes at any moment.

Subaru: “N-No, stop it! Don’t praise me so much! The higher you raise me, the bigger my ego gets, shouldn’t you all be clear on that?!”

Julius: “No, not at all. Although it is true that you made a fool of yourself at the start of the Royal Selection, you have proven your worth time and time again. You have more than made up for that disgrace. You absolutely deserve to be commended to this extent.”

Wilhelm: “There is absolutely no need for humility. You have had a hand in accomplishing great things. Those successes would never have happened had you not been present. I will be proud to have shared a battlefield with you until the end of my days.”

Subaru: “—Ah, um.”

So far, Subaru had died in a number of painful, gruesome ways. However, this would be by far the most horrifying. Being pelted with compliments.

Subaru, embarrassed to the verge of death, looked to Emilia and Beatrice, pleading for help. However, the two people at his side merely smiled sweetly.

Emilia: “That’s right. Subaru has worked reaaally hard. I’m truly proud to have him as my Knight.”

Beatrice: “W-Well, it’s only natural that he’s so successful, because he’s Betty’s partner, in fact. He’s only going to get more and more amazing, I suppose. So it’s a good habit to get used to praising him, in fact!”

The situation having gone in an entirely unexpected direction, Subaru was stricken with panic. Then, everyone took turns speaking.

Reinhard: “Amazing, Subaru. Everyone praises you for doing something amazing, something no one else could have done. I am glad to call you my friend.”

Crusch: “I would have lost so many loyal men without Subaru-sama’s help, even Wilhelm, who has been supporting me to this day. Allow me to thank you again.”

Ferris: “Although you don’t have any combat ability, you never lost heart during the battle with the White Whale. It allowed Crusch-sama to make the speech that changed the tide of the battle. In short, thank nyou very much.”

Anastasia: “Thanks to Natsuki-kun’s information, both myself and countless other businessmen’re no longer plagued by the White Whale’s fog. We got a lot of money out of it. Ya have my gratitude.”

Mimi: “Oooh! Are we taking turns complimenting onii-san? He’s very strong! He’s very handsome! Only second to Mimi! Your turn, Garf!”

Garfiel: “Ya, I dunno what happened, but deservin’ of praise, that’s the Captain. That’s my amazin’ bro. Ya know, like ‘fame comes with the right deed’ and whatnot.”

People were taking advantage of the momentum and piling flattering remarks on Subaru, who was blushing from all the warm encouragement, shrinking and shrinking. Felt treated him with a laugh, baring her snaggletooth.

Felt: “It sounds like they were true, but… it looks like onii-chan’s nature hasn’t changed. That’s a relief!”

Subaru: “You guys, stop it! Everyone’s ganging up on me!!”

After Felt summarized the farce taking place, Subaru could no longer withstand it and exploded. The tension which had originally cloaked the tearoom melted away with the sound of laughter.

2

Subaru: “Ah, damn, my lifespan’s seriously shortened…”

After the fun in the tearoom dissipated, an exhausted Subaru had left for his room.

Everyone had inexplicably showered Subaru with praise, before occupying themselves with cross faction conversations, as if forgetting about their opposition. Of course, it could not be said that no one had any intent of trying to delve into the secrets of the other factions, but most of the conversations were just idle, fun chatter.

Although the candidates could at any moment end up in a confrontation, from another point of view, they were all women of a similar age, so conversation on topics other than the state of the Kingdom came quite naturally to them.

In fact, Emilia had been very much looking forward to having an opportunity to talk with other girls her age.

Subaru: “Well, it could be said that a conversation between Emilia-tan and Beako would be just like that…”

Beatrice: “Don’t bring up her real age, in fact. Do you want to start a war, I suppose?”

Beatrice reprimanded the imprudent Subaru with a sharp voice.

Turning to see the source of the sound showed Beatrice sitting on a pile of quilted blankets in his room, desperately trying to ease her numb feet.

Subaru: “Even though you’re a Spirit, your feet fell asleep. Are Spirits supposed to have circulation, though?”

Beatrice: “Betty has circulation, in fact. Her body is designed to imitate an actual human body as closely as possible, in fact. Betty will feel the pain that humans can feel, I suppose. Upon diving underwater for too long, I’ll lose consciousness, in fact.”

Subaru: “So you breathe, too?”

Beatrice: “Of course I do… Hey, don’t try to sniff Betty’s breath, I suppose!”

As Subaru’s nose approached her, a somewhat-embarrassed Beatrice pulled the quilts around herself. Subaru took the opportunity to flick her numb foot, which felt like it had sprung back to life. Beatrice’s eyes watered.

Beatrice: “That hurts, in fact… Betty’s about to cry, I suppose… Subaru’s a bully, in fact…”

Subaru: “Okay, okay, my bad, my bad. Come here, come here.”

He patted his knees with a wry smile as he sat down, and Beatrice moved from the quilts to his lap. Caressing Beatrice’s voluminous twin-tails hanging from her head, Subaru said to himself, “But then again…”

Subaru: “The interior decor makes it a nice room, and it looks like the staff did their best to match the rest of the hotel… But here are some subtle deficiencies.”

It was probably caused by the fact that woodworking technology had developed differently here than it had in his original world.

The design of Water Plumage Pavilion felt quite alike the design of a hotel from Subaru’s original world, but despite the presence of wooden beams and paper doors, there was a certain something that felt off.

The beds had probably taken many painstaking attempts to figure out, before the designers had decided on laying animal skins on a wooden bed. The feeling wasn't bad, it was just a slight deviation from what Subaru was used to.

Subaru: "I really can't agree with not sleeping on the floor just because social norms dictate that blankets have to go on beds."

Beatrice: "Putting a blanket directly on the floor is poverty, in fact. Betty cannot accept her partner becoming a man with no earnings, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm always working you so hard."

Beatrice: "What's that supposed to mean, in fact?"

Garfiel: "What're ya two chatterin' on about?"

Beatrice, who had been engaging in coordinated banter with Subaru, jumped up at the sudden appearance of a third voice. However, her feet were still numb, so she lost her balance and fell into the bundle of quilts on the floor. Subaru quickly reached over and righted her flipped skirt.

Subaru: "Garfiel? Is your adventure over?"

Garfiel: "The midget finally let me go free after spendin' th'entire day. Beatrice, why're ya actin' crazy?"

Subaru: "She's never been so far away from home before, so she's super excited! She even had trouble sleeping, isn't she cute?"

Standing at the entrance to the room, Garfiel laughed hard enough to reveal his sharp teeth.

Because the guest room also had a paper door, Beatrice had not heard it open and was scared at the sudden intrusion. Subaru, on the other hand, was sitting facing the entrance, so he'd seen Garfiel immediately.

Subaru: "So, what's up? Dinner?"

Garfiel: "Nah, dinner prolly won't be 'til later. There's nothin' for me to do alone in my room, Captain, and besides, Ottobro still hasn't come back yet."

Subaru: "Well, Otto isn't a kid, so you don't have to worry too much about him. Even if we incur some debt here, I doubt he'd give us any extra trouble in solving it."

Garfiel: "Right."

Otto had left a few hours ago to go settle a debt. Garfiel had no objection to this, since, after all, he knew what Otto was like.

Of course, when it came to asking Otto for help, there was something incredibly reliable about him.

Subaru: "But those are different things."

Garfiel: "What're ya talkin' about now?"

Of course, Garfiel was used to Subaru's frequent mutters to himself. Garfiel gestured toward the corridor with his chin.

Garfiel: "If ya don't have anythin' goin' on, can ya tag along with me for a bit, Captain?"

Subaru: "Tag along with you? Oh, a bath? A bath, right? You mean a bath? Open air bathing is too good to pass up on. I was looking around earlier, and I found a yukata, and the thought of seeing Emilia-tan in a yukata is enough to raise my spirits! They've been raised already!"

Although the tatami and architectural style were very difficult to reproduce, the yukata appeared to have been commercialized. Subaru praised those in Kararagi who had been responsible for the spread of Wafuu, inside his mind.

However, standing before such an excited Subaru, Garfiel wore a serious expression, one that was somber enough that even Subaru could not continue to joke around. A worried look came to his face.

Subaru: "Garfiel. What's wrong? Is there something you want to do?"

Garfiel: “No, it’s not really that big a deal, but…”

Touching the white scar on his forehead, Garfiel fell silent for a moment. Then he stared straight at Subaru.

Garfiel: “I just wanted to know exactly how strong the world’s greatest hero is.”

Chapter 13:
Peaceful Dinner

1

The Water Plumage Pavilion’s rustic courtyard, paved in gravel, was full of Japanese hospitality. Although expecting an extravagant pond would be too much, the bamboo-like plants on the sides of the stone road were a nice touch.

Subaru: “Even so, Wilhelm-san didn’t join us.”

Subaru sat in a corridor facing the courtyard, picking at the gravel with his toes.

He thought of the white-haired old man had who had indifferently declined Subaru’s invitation with an apologetic expression. What was Wilhelm up to?

Alone in his room, he would certainly feel bored until dinnertime.

Subaru: “That said, he doesn’t seem like the kind of person who’d be concerned with how others spend their time.”

Julius: “Saying it like that makes it sound like we’re spying, even though we were invited here.”

Subaru: “It’s not like I’m here because I wanted to be… even though I am here…”

Subaru replied to Julius with sarcasm, who sat next to him in the hallway with his legs crossed gracefully. Julius nodded with a smile, as if to say “Truly”. However, the man sitting on the other side of Subaru did not want to admit it as frankly.

Ferris: “Oh, please. Haaaa, do you think Ferri-chan is here because he wanted to see it? Subaru-kyun just dragged me here, and he was just too annyoying to protest against it.”

Subaru: “Well, I’m sorry, I guess. You should be here in case anything bad happens. Although, it seems that isn't going to be necessary."

Subaru squinted at Ferris, who was shaking his cat ears in agitation, then looked past him to the fast-paced battle taking place in the courtyard.

Frankly, the battle moved so quickly that Subaru's eyes could barely keep up. Even so, he could plainly assert one thing.

Subaru: "Really, that bastard Reinhard's a damn monster."

Julius: "Although it's hard to deny, I do not enjoy using such a word to describe a friend."

Ferris: "It would be hard enough to deny it under nyormal circumstances."

—The sight that was unfolding before them affirmed their conclusions.

In the courtyard paved with gravel, a fierce match was being staged between a roaring blond teenager and the red-haired hero defending against the former's beastly pressure.

The challenger, Garfiel, burned through an endless flow of motivation as he struck at Reinhard from every possible angle. However, whether using claws, fangs, legs, elbows, or knees, each of his attacks were seen through and evaded with ease. Not to mention,

Subaru: "That guy, is he really just standing there without moving?"

Julius: "It was the original condition, after all. Reinhard would never violate it. Nevertheless, failing to force him to do so is probably humiliating for Garfiel."

Garfiel kept launching attacks at Reinhard from different directions, trying to take those opportunities to expose a weak point. But no matter how much he tried, Garfiel was not going to find a weakness that did not exist. Not only that, but Reinhard was also dodging without much effort.

Reinhard had been standing in the same place since the start of this rash challenge, having never conceded an inch.

As Garfiel rushed at him repeatedly, Reinhard's two feet remained fixed in place.

—At first, when Garfiel visited Reinhard's room to challenge him, Subaru had summed it up as a reckless move from multiple points of view.

Thinking back, that Reinhard even agreed to Garfiel's challenge had been unexpected.

Frankly, the match was solely a product of Garfiel's desire. Accepting the challenge would not provide Reinhard with any benefit. Considering the difference of strength between the two, Reinhard presumably would not have that childish sense of masculinity to flaunt.

If the complicated relationship between Reinhard, the Royal Guards, and his political opponents were considered, then fighting Garfiel was, in some respects, an unnecessary danger. Even if he believed that no one had set up any tricks or traps, accepting the challenge had been unnecessary nonetheless.

Considering this, it had been unlikely for the match to even happen, and Subaru had certainly considered dismissing the idea entirely.

However, from the bottom of his heart, Subaru wanted to witness its fulfillment.

The one who took the responsibility of serving as the fighting power of the Emilia Camp was, without any doubt, Garfiel Tinzel. However, outside conditions could often influence the outcome of a conflict, so achieving victory solely through battle was plainly impossible. Furthermore, Garfiel's flaws were not few in number, either.

Emilia's faction had gained much fame throughout the past year, and much attention had been directed toward Garfiel. Because everyone within the Emilia Camp recognized and praised his strength, Garfiel himself was quite arrogant. He had always been able to live up to those expectations with results and achievements.

However, this one-sided consideration of Garfiel also posed a troubling fact. Garfiel had yet to face enough opponents as strong as him since leaving Sanctuary.

The only person who had fought him on equal footing was the homicidal demon Elsa, during the battle in Roswaal's old mansion, and it had ended in Garfiel's victory. Since then, he had not experienced any hard-fought battles that compelled him to show off his full strength.

Although Garfiel had indeed once lost to Subaru, Otto, and Ram, the conditions of that victory could be entirely attributed to their dirty tricks. In terms of a proper, clean battle, Garfiel Tinzel was a man who had never experienced defeat since birth.

—Therefore, even knowing that it was cruel, Subaru longed for a battle between Reinhard and Garfiel to happen.

To continue without losses, and to remain unaware of his limits. That was not an impossible path. However, if he remained ignorant of his own limits, and merely relied on the luck of continuously facing weaker opponents, then Garfiel would never be certain where exactly his own strength ranked.

And so, Reinhard van Astrea, the hero whom Subaru had only seen in action once. Subaru chose to trust in his power.

Subaru: "I trusted his power… But I didn't think the difference would be this great."

The situation had proceeded in the exact direction that Subaru had hoped it would. However, he was not as surprised as he was astonished, to the point where overreactions would have been superfluous.

Having brought an excited Garfiel to Reinhard's room, Subaru made the blunt request and Reinhard readily consented to it. Subaru had been so surprised he had almost fallen over. Afterward, in response to Garfiel's suggestion of going out of the city to avoid casualties, Reinhard had responded with a smile, "The yard is spacious enough, although we should mention to the manager that we will not be damaging his land."

Reinhard probably had not intended for his words to carry any malice, but they did serve as more than enough provocation for Garfiel.

Garfiel had accepted Reinhard's proposal, exuding an aura of anger so intense that Subaru, who had been standing beside Garfiel at the time, barely retained his composure upon feeling his rage all but stab into Reinhard.

They had then proceeded down towards the hotel courtyard, where a few rules were set. Weapons were not allowed, nor were dangerous Divine Protections. Wounding the other party was also prohibited.

During that time, Subaru had called Ferris in case of any injuries. Subaru also invited Julius and Wilhelm as commentators on the battle itself. Unfortunately, Wilhelm had declined, so it ended up being just Julius and Ferris who watched the battle with him. On that note, Otto still had yet to return.

Subaru: "By the way, I didn't mention this to the women or Mimi's brothers."

Julius: "I think that was wise. If Anastasia-sama learned of this, then she would no doubt turn it into a performance. If it reached Hetaro or Tivey, then Mimi would surely be upset."

Julius agreed with Subaru as they surveyed the courtyard. Of course, with such an exciting battle taking place, people would inevitably become excited.

A handful of spectators gathering was something that Garfiel had surely considered from the very beginning of the match. Rather than regret a poor performance for being unable to go all out, he had wanted the fight to be taken somewhere where real skill would be all that mattered.

The hotel courtyard was spacious, and the scenery could be appreciated, but if it were to serve as the setting for a fierce battle, then it would not spacious enough. And Reinhard had also raised the condition of “no damage to the environment”.

The setting had been chosen as to push Garfiel to either be considerate or to regret being overtaken by anger, as a boy naturally would. What results would come of this?

Subaru: “Hey, Julius, can I ask you one question?”

Julius: “You can ask me more than one if you prefer, but whether or not I will answer is another story.”

Subaru: “Don’t say such ambiguous things. This is why I hate you.”

Subaru dropped his face onto one hand, and began speaking in a serious tone.

Subaru: “In your opinion, how is Garfiel?”

Julius: “—He’s strong. According to the rumors, he is the shield guarding Emilia-sama. It is a well-deserved reputation. Although, knowing of his association with you, my expectations were psychologically lowered.”

Subaru: “I’m going to beat you up.”

Julius: “He is strong. His talent is certainly real. In terms of combat alone, I do not know if I could beat him or not. And he has plenty of room for growth. Once he breaks out of his shell, he will be able to compete at the pinnacle of the martial arts.”

Julius’s powerful assertion revealed that he was excited to see that possibility and that the potential sleeping within Garfiel was quite genuine.

He also seemed to embrace his envious admiration of Garfiel’s talent. This came as no surprise. Julius was also a man of battle.

Ferris: “But, even if there’s a bright future awaiting him, it’s sad that right nyow he’s just being toyed with.”

Ferris spoke a cruel truth. However, no one could say nothing to deny it. It was plain for all to see. Garfiel himself could see it more clearly than anyone else.

Perhaps Garfiel would one day walk amongst the strongest. Perhaps he would be the strongest.

But, right now, facing off against the strongest man in the world, what he was going through would surely best be described as being toyed with.

Garfiel: “—Tch.”

Reinhard: “That’s a shame. Too hasty.”

The Sword Saint reached forward, catching Garfiel’s arm. With a giant swing, he mercilessly threw him down into the hard gravel.

A cloud of dust surrounded him, knocking the wind out of Garfiel. He quickly attempted to get back on his feet, only to find Reinhard’s hand on his forehead, leaving Garfiel motionless before drawing a sigh.

Garfiel: “I lost.”

Even before being scrutinized by others, he admitted defeat.

The ability to make that admission most likely indicated that Garfiel was still maintaining his sense of self-esteem, even if barely.

Subaru hoped that would serve as some small comfort to him, at the very least.

2

—Garfiel did not appear for dinner that night.

Anastasia: “Why’d you go off by yourselves and hide such an interestin’ thin’ from us?”

Anastasia glared at the men as she voiced her bitter complaints, upon meeting them in the tatami room.

Rather than being dressed in her usual white fur, she was wearing a yukata, her purple hair dripping with water. Her white skin was slightly reddish, and there was a faint scent that did not match her childlike appearance.

Julius: “I think it is different from the way you are phrasing it, but I specifically did not invite Anastasia-sama since you seemed to be having friendly conversations with the other candidates.”

Julius met her straight-forward words with a bitter smile and a bow, then sat beside her. The men had finished cleaning the courtyard after the contest and had only just returned.

Hearing that remark, a mischievous smile appeared on Anastasia’s lovely face.

Anastasia: “Ahh. My Knight seems to be speakin’ some rather sophisticated sophistry. We can’t connect everythin’ to money, can we? But my Kararagi spirit, which likes a lil’ noise, is still a little upset.”

Subaru: “The spirit of our Strongest Shield hurts more, so let’s not bring it up again. Ah, he’ll be fine after a night of hanging his head in sorrow, but until then, please let him recover in peace.”

Following what Anastasia had said, Subaru made this request out of concern for his emotionally troubled honorary little brother. Everyone present nodded in assent. However,

Felt: “Anyway, is that what happened? This merciless Knight here doesn’t know how to be nice to opponents and the like. Sorry about that, onii-chan.”

After hearing about the incident, Felt gave Subaru a crooked-toothed laugh as she fiercely pounded Reinhard’s shoulders repeatedly, the red-haired Knight sitting next to her with a wry smile.

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, speaking like that will lead to misunderstandings. I did not exert any undue pressure in the battle just now, and I myself was at risk several times. Both my body and mind were enriched from that experience.”

Felt: “That’s not at all convincing considering how scared Gaston and the others are of you. Did you really have to freak them out so much when you first met?”

Reinhard: “No matter who I face, I cannot afford to be arrogant. If I become too overconfident in my ability, it will result in my failure.”

Faced with Reinhard’s resolute determination, Felt gave a disinterested sigh.

Although their dialogue reflected the nature of their shifty transition to proper master and subordinate status, Reinhard’s words were of greater concern to Subaru. Having witnessed the battle in the courtyard, he clearly saw the root of Garfiel’s concern. In a brief epiphany, he realized that Reinhard’s words contained no irony or hypocrisy.

Reinhard was merely saying what he believed to be true. Although the speech might sound sarcastic, the authenticity of his words seemed to prevent anyone from thinking so.

Perhaps that was his most dangerous ability.

Reinhard: “Speaking of which, Felt-sama. About that outfit.”

Felt: “What is it, you complaining? I was taking a bath with others, and everyone changed into this, so I did too. ‘It’s embarrassing, it’s disappointing’, is that what you want to tell me?”

Reinhard: “Not at all, I just wanted to tell you that it suits you well.”

Felt: “Annoying!”

Those sweet words from the respected, revered, and most powerful Knight Amongst Knights.

Countless women would be incredibly envious of the beautiful bouquet of words that Felt had swatted away by expressing her frustration. The way she wore her bathrobe also suggested that she was someone who was a little rough around the edges.

—As Anastasia had said earlier, the women had been in the bathhouse while the match between Garfiel and Reinhard had been going on outside.

For that reason, all the women attending dinner were in yukatas. Not only Anastasia and Felt, but also Mimi, Crusch, Emilia, and even Beatrice were all dressed in bathrobes.

Subaru: "Beako, you unexpectedly took a bath…"

Beatrice: "After Subaru left Betty alone in the hotel, your partner was captured by Emilia, in fact. She forced Betty to go, I suppose."

Unexpectedly wearing a pale blue bathrobe, the cute Beatrice seemed to be having difficulty figuring out how to correctly don the yukata. Strangely, Beatrice's wet hair retained its usual drill-tailed form. If he yanked on her curly hair, then they would probably bounce more crisply than usual.

Subaru: "So, that's Beako's testimony, but what's the truth?"

Emilia: "Hm? Beatrice looked so lonely when she told me that Subaru left her, and since I'd just been invited to go bathing, I took her with me. I thought she looked happy about it, though…"

Beatrice: "Th-That's a lie, in fact! Don't fabricate the truth, I suppose! Betty or Emilia, who does Subaru believe more, I suppose!"

Subaru: "I'll take that as your confession."

Combining Beatrice's unflattering claim with Emilia's assertive judgment, Subaru arrived at the natural conclusion.

Seeing Beatrice unwilling to yield, Emilia gave a happy smile. She also wore a bathrobe, her freshly washed silver hair gathered in the back. Subaru quietly delighted in seeing the whiteness of her neck.

Emilia: "Subaru, you're breathing heavily. Do you have a fever?"

Subaru: “It’s merely the heat of love. Emilia-tan, can I braid your hair?”

Emilia: “Sure, but food will be served soon. Afterwards?”

Emilia pointed toward the table, and Subaru reluctantly retracted the hand that had been stroking her hair. The people around them seemed to be looking at them strangely.

Subaru tilted his head at the person opposite of him, who happened to be Felt.

Subaru: “What’s so weird?”

Felt: “I don’t know too much about you two, but I still get a sense of distance between you two. This kind of interaction doesn’t have the slightest bit of an erotic atmosphere. Seems your relationship hasn’t changed at all since our last meeting.”

Subaru: “It’s not like erotic flirting happens these days! And there’s no need to bring up what happened at the Royal Castle, and my chest hurts so please stop!”

Subaru reacted to Felt, not understanding what she was saying. Throughout the past year serving as Emilia’s Knight, Subaru’s self-awareness had increased to a sufficient point, and he was aware that the distance in their relationship as man and woman had not been shortened.

In all honesty, their romantic relationship was probably at a lower point than it had been before Subaru had become her Knight.

This was largely in part due to Emilia’s mental age. Emilia’s emotional maturity had yet to grow to a degree where she could accept Subaru’s romantic advances on her. So her getting along with him was nothing too significant.

His love had not faded, but the intent behind his interactions with her had changed. As long as there was no change in Emilia’s emotional awareness of him, their relationship would persist like this, intact.

At the least, Subaru understood that even if he took the first step, nothing would come of it.

Subaru: “Put it this way, this feeling might be something close to what Crusch-san is going through in her relationships.”

Crusch: “My relationships, what?”

Subaru sighed absentmindedly and his hand rubbed against his jaw. Crusch looked over at him, wearing an incredulous expression.

Of course, she had bathed with the women, so she was also dressed in a yukata. The chest that her former men’s clothing had hidden was emphasized by thin bathrobe. Without her inspiring aura, Crusch’s face had been both beautiful and innocent, even in the yukata she had dressed under Felix’s careful instructions.

Crusch glanced to the side, as Subaru rubbed his nose with his fingers.

Subaru: “Yeah. Although Ferris is always clinging to Crusch-san, it could be said that they don’t see each other as man and woman, right? And the starting point between you two is only a little bit before us, so maybe we go about treating the people we like the same way.”

Crusch: “Well, it’s a bit embarrassing when you say it like that. Haha. Right, Ferris?”

Ferris: “Ferri-chan is devoted, even if Crusch-sama rejects my heart.”

Crusch: “…”

For a moment, the air in the room was frozen by what Ferris said.

Crusch’s smile became stiff, and Ferris welcomed her response with a smile. Incidentally, Ferris was dressed in a bathrobe as well, as if competing with the girls. Anyway, now was not the time to dwell on that.

Subaru: “I’m so sorry for revealing the secret that I dug up. Alright, I guess it's time to eat."

Crusch: "Don't run away after digging up a bomb like that!"

Subaru tried to redirect the topic toward food, an idea which was immediately rejected by Crusch's teary eyes.

That was really an unexploded bomb he had dug up, and one Subaru had not been expecting to have to encounter. As Subaru wandered his eyes across the room, wondering what to do,

Wilhelm: "Ferris. Take care to not scare Crusch-sama. Your lively and dangerous side feels more prominent than before."

Before the silence could become awkward, Wilhelm, who had been silent until then, interjected, and the mood shifted again.

The elderly man was the only person on the male side that was present in a bathrobe. It seemed that he had taken to the baths right after the women had left. Both his posture and yukata played their part in demonstrating the harmonious Japanese atmosphere felt when he sat upright.

If he had a sword by his side, his image would have been perfect.

Ferris: "What, why would Wil-jii say that?"

Wilhelm: "A respectful love, a treasured love, a romantic love. Love is often taken for granted. Incurring confusion for the purpose of hiding your feelings is unpleasant for innocent hearts. Should I not speak harshly about this?"

Ferris: "Ha-nyah. Don't say it like that, that's a bit much."

Listening to Wilhelm's heavy sermon, Ferris muttered in a low voice, demonstrating his surrender, and snuggled up against Crusch's shoulder.

Ferris: "It's okay. It was obviously a joke, so don't be so nyon edge. If Ferri-chan were to really upset Crusch-sama, it'd be a huge problem."

Crusch: "Th-That's right, isn't it? Phew, I was a little scared since I was unused to it, but I appear to have misunderstood Ferris's thoughts because I cannot use my Divine Protection to its fullest right now."

Ferris: "—Not at all."

Crusch sighed in relief, and a fleeting emotion flashed through Ferris's eyes as he watched her, leaving Subaru feeling uneasy.

That complex emotion was something that he could not easily reveal.

During this year, Ferris had been the one who had to deal with his master's amnesia.

During that time, he must have tried his best but still felt anxious and guilty, just like Subaru. Even so, his master, lacking the foundation of her memory, had needed to rely on him, and so he could not show any confusion.

???: "The preparations for dinner have been completed. It will be served, does anyone mind?"

As the conversation came to an end, the timing on behalf of the hotel's staff was perfect. Joshua, who had been sitting without presence in a corner until then, gave permission to have a steady flow of food brought up by the manager.

Everyone watched as their meal was arranged on the long table, their gazes colored with wonder. However, Subaru's surprise came from a different vector than the others'.

Emilia and the others were surprised by the variety of dishes, many of which they had never seen before, while Subaru was surprised by the sight of familiar dishes. Since there was no sea in this world, it had been nearly impossible to find such a dish, but Subaru immediately fixed his attention on the sashimi dish before him.

Subaru: "This, may I eat it as is?"

Anastasia: "I guess you're not accustomed to it, since you'd never experience this kind of dish without livin' next to water. The Water Plumage Pavilion's actually famous for this."

Sashimi was not the only thing Subaru recognized. There was a variety of Japanese dishes placed together on the table. In the midst of all the confusion, Anastasia began to bring food to her mouth, and Subaru took that as a cue to start.

He immediately went for the fancy sashimi and soy sauce. Emilia and Beatrice, seated beside him, both issued an "Ah!" Concerns about a species of parasite arose as he swallowed, but, taking into account the class of hotel and the host, it was hardly a plausible worry.

Instead, Subaru simply focused on enjoying the tastes.

Subaru: "Delicious! Ah, it's been so long since I've had sashimi!"

Emilia: "I-It's delicious?"

Subaru: "It's not even a matter of delicious or not, since this is simply a proper delicacy. It's probably due to its freshness, but this probably makes the top of my list. If there's any sushi vinegar and rice here, I could show you guys how proper Tokyo-style sushi is made."

Emilia: "Sorry. I've got no idea what you're talking about. But you're right, it's delicious."

Partially listening to Subaru's train-like speech, Emilia imitated him and dipped the sashimi into the soy sauce. As she tasted it, her amethyst eyes widened as she gripped her hands excitedly, exclaiming, "Mmmm!".

Looking at the honest reaction of that master and servant duo, the others also began to taste the food.

Anastasia, who was dissatisfied for having been deprived of her share, relaxed her gaze as she watched Subaru and Emilia's honest and pure reactions, muttering to herself "Ahh, it's hopeless".

Despite some people having missed the dinner, and despite some anxieties being present, the participants were able to enjoy themselves in relaxation.

—On this night, with its bright moon, the compassionate and forgiving world allowed for this peace.

Chapter 14:
The Sword Demon under the Moon

The dinner party had been one where everyone had forgotten their political hostilities.

After dinner, Subaru retired to his room, where the staff had already made his bed. Looking at the two futons, placed side by side, Subaru felt his admiration for the hotel increase. It followed the Japanese custom that had towels, blankets, futons, and the like all be arranged when the resident had vacated their room.

Although, he had always thought that such a practice left people feeling rather defenseless.

Beatrice: “Subaru. It looks like while we weren’t here, people succeeded in sneaking into our room, in fact—!”

Subaru: “Ah. It looks like the futons and towels you messed up were rearranged or replaced.”

Beatrice: “That…! Yes, it’s definitely a trap to tempt Betty, I suppose. They’re hiding under a guise of thoughtfulness, in fact.”

Subaru: “Sometimes, people just have good intentions. Though, this service isn’t free.”

Beatrice carried herself with an unnecessary level of alertness and diligence, even though she could barely keep her eyes open. Subaru quickly ushered her to bed.

Since officially forming their contract, Subaru and Beatrice had slept in the same room. Although Anastasia had offered Beatrice her own room, she would just have left for Subaru’s room anyway, so they’d respectfully declined.

That wasn’t to say that Beatrice was a child who couldn’t sleep alone. Rather, Beatrice used their nighttime contact with Subaru to sap the excess Mana from his defective gate. Truly considerate of his physical condition.

Beatrice: “So, Betty isn’t here because she wants to be near Subaru, in fact. Don’t misunderstand, I suppose.”

Beatrice, who had originally devised the terms of the contract, had spoken thusly.

But where her intent once laid no longer mattered. Subaru had long since become accustomed to falling asleep to the sound of someone else’s breathing.

Beatrice: “…That green stuff was toxic, in fact. It’s unforgivable, I suppose…”

Happy and tired, Beatrice buried herself in the futon and was promptly dragged into a dream, thinking of the wasabi that had traumatized her at dinner.

Touching Beatrice’s frowning forehead, Subaru took in her cute sleeping face until he was satisfied, then climbed to his feet.

Subaru: “Now then. I’m going to take a bath, too. Have a good rest.”

Next to Subaru’s futon laid an unused bathrobe. If he did not know how to wear it, he could easily just ask a staff member. But of course, Subaru had no issue figuring out the garment, and could wear both kimonos and yukatas properly.

If asked why, he would answer that hit was because he had been got bored during his spare time in his original world.

Subaru: “If Ferris and Anastasia aren’t there, I could also go decorate one of the women’s bathrobes.”

He of course wanted to seek out Emilia’s bathrobe. The other Royal Selection candidates were all lovely maidens, but if Subaru could tailor Emilia’s clothing and dress her up, then he could ensure she would never be inferior to them in the slightest.

Subaru: “Well, it can’t be helped. I guess I’ll be satisfied that I got to do Emilia’s three braids after dinner.”

Although she had let her hair down before bed, they had launched a “three braids wave!” as they came undone, just as Subaru had planned. Naturally long, wavy hair, like Anastasia’s, was also beautiful, but Subaru considered Emilia’s long silver hair the most eye-catching.

Subaru: “The three braids and three braid wave are lovely. Emilia is definitely a shrewd woman. I could never do such a thing with Beatrice.”

Beatrice’s hair inexplicably never left its twin-tailed drills. It was probably because she was an Artificial Spirit. Changing her hairstyle was possible, but it always reverted to its original form as soon Subaru’s hands left her hair. It was so fascinating that he had played with it a number of times.

While looking forward to the next morning, Subaru collected his bathrobe and left for the baths, treading carefully on the wooden floor to not wake Beatrice. Thinking of the people whom he shared the hotel with, Subaru did not feel the need to be alert. He rather pitied anyone who would dare to launch any type of scheme.

Reinhard: “Although I doubt that anything will happen, I will know if anything is amiss. I hope that everyone can spend the night peacefully.”

Those were Reinhard’s reassuring words as they had left the dining room. The sense of safety was not just limited to the hotel, it extended to the entire region. Knowing Reinhard, even feeling safe in the entire city would not be a stretch.

So, for now, Subaru could wander the hotel without taking any precautions. Although it was regrettable that the hotel lacked an open-air bath, Subaru was still excited because he found bathing the most enjoyable part of any hotel stay.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru came to a stop, his relaxed expression shifting as he looked through a corridor into the courtyard, where Reinhard and Garfiel's battle had taken place. In the evening, its atmosphere was different, and rather pleasing.

A round moon floated in the dark sky, blanketed by thick clouds which gave the scene a glamorous charm. A cool wind blew through the garden, where a lone figure stood.

Subaru: "—Wilhelm-san?"

A sturdy back, and long white hair.

At a glance, Subaru could tell that the yukata-clad figure was elderly, and there was only one man he knew who fit the profile.

Wilhelm: "Is it Subaru-dono? Did I surprise you?"

Probably having been long aware of the movement behind him, Wilhelm turned to greet Subaru, a soft look in his eyes. He stood with his hands tucked in the sleeves of the bathrobe. His posture, combined with the Japanese-style garden. Why was the image so perfectly natural?

Wilhelm: "Are you going to the baths next?"

Subaru: "Yes, that's what I was planning on doing. By the way, I came here to see the garden in the evening, not because I got lost since I'm unfamiliar with the hotel."

Wilhelm: "That would not happen to Subaru-dono. I also came to indulge in the beauty of the garden, so I believe that I can understand Subaru-dono's mood."

Subaru: "…It's still embarrassing to be spoken of so highly."

Subaru turned away, scratching his cheek in embarrassment, as Wilhelm, without any trace of exaggeration, spoke of him with unflinching trust.

Wilhelm was the person Subaru had grown to respect the most since coming to this world. There were people who he wanted to stand alongside, and people who he wanted to compete with, but the only person who Subaru looked at with nothing but respect was Wilhelm.

Both as a person and as a man, Wilhelm was Subaru's role model.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono probably came here searching for the peace and solemnity of the garden at night. My presence here must be very frustrating."

Subaru: "Not at all. Rather, seeing the Sword Demon in this windy garden is so perfect that I want to forever engrave this image in my heart. I like seeing people who shine in the moonlight."

As far as Subaru was concerned, Emilia's beauty was undoubtedly the most commensurate with that of the moonlit night. Her long silver hair was different from the glow of the sun. Emilia's beauty was like the illusory of the moonlight, and Subaru wanted to be the stars hovering around the moon.

So, seeing the Sword Demon standing under a moonlit night was a sight that Subaru had been longing to see.

Wilhelm: "…Subaru-dono should not waste such heartfelt words on an old man like me. If you whispered them to the woman you love, you would surely capture her attention."

Subaru: "Putting on those airs would just be an insecticide to all the lovely butterflies I've attracted. And at the moment, those words are completely incomprehensible to the one whose heart I want to reach the most."

Wilhelm: "Trying to bring out her flawless smile, searching for the perfect words… That anxious feeling is one of the pleasures of love, Subaru-dono."

Hearing Wilhelm's light tone, Subaru gave a relaxed shrug of his shoulders.

Subaru: "Oh? You seem to be referencing your faraway love story. Did you ever go through that, Wilhelm-san?"

Wilhelm: "Would you like to hear it?"

Subaru: “Be sure to tell me every detail.”

Subaru gave a ceremonious, respectful bow, and Wilhelm’s attitude was tinged with a look of joy, as he said “Then, it cannot be helped”.

Wilhelm: “When I was a young man, I was just as terrible with words as I am now. I never wanted to discuss anything other than swords, since I had no interests aside from swordplay. I must have bored my wife to no end when we first met.”

Subaru: “But, your wife didn’t dislike talking to that Wilhelm-san, right?”

Wilhelm: “She was an open-minded woman. Whether it be the loss of a heavy responsibility which burdened her heart, or escaping a duty, neglecting the thoughts of others, we never discussed any of those in our conversations. She was born a gentle, warm person, and it was probably because of that innate kindness that she kept exchanging words with me.”

Wilhelm closed his eyes with a wistful smile.

Subaru bent silently over the corridor, listening to the old man’s memories.

Wilhelm: “Because I was such an unsociable person, my wife always supplied the topics during our conversations. On top of that, I initially failed to notice how drawn I was to her. Whenever I spoke with her, I avoided facing the abominable agitation in my heart.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san was really bad at talking to women, huh.”

Wilhelm: “Really, I devote everything in my being to the sword. When I gripped my sword, I forgot about everything else, as if merely swinging my sword would give me a way of survival—The one who reminded me of the reason I had taken it up was my wife.”

Subaru: “Is that when you realized you loved her?”

Wilhelm: “…You seem to have seen through me, Subaru-dono.”

Wilhelm fell silent, and Subaru followed suit.

Wilhelm was surely unaware of the expression he currently wore. Subaru, however, felt a strong wave of pride wash over him as he saw it. The look in Wilhelm's eyes, the wrinkles on his face, the tone of his voice, were all legendary. The wife he loved just as strongly now as he had then, Thearesia van Astrea.

The old man's expression, attitude, and very existence all generously sang of the love he still held for his wife.

No matter who, anyone who saw him would, without doubt, instantly see that he was in love. Even if everything in the world were to wither and fade, not a single person would fail to understand the depth of that emotion.

That was the depth of Wilhelm's love, clearly something that should be worn with pride.

Subaru: "…"

As Subaru gazed upon Wilhelm's face, his eyes unconsciously welled with tears.

Unbearable feelings arose spontaneously and gathered as heat in his eyes. He did not know why it had touched him so much. Why did his heart feel so warm upon seeing someone in love?

Crying in such a situation would only serve to bother Wilhelm.

Wilhelm: "Like Subaru-dono said, that was when I realized my feelings for my wife."

Subaru lowered his face, pretending to scratch his head as he hid his tears. Although he should have noticed that Subaru had started crying, Wilhelm continued talking.

Was he just immersed in the past, or was he pretending not to notice Subaru's reaction? Subaru had no way of knowing, so he kept silent and continued to listen.

Wilhelm: "The sword was everything to me, but it was only one part of who I was. It was my wife who made me realize this obvious truth, and so, every time I swing my sword, I am reminded of her.”

Subaru: “Is that, true even now?”

Wilhelm: “—That is truer now than it ever was.”

Wilhelm took a moment to formulate a response.

Finally, turning his back to the moonlight, Wilhelm faced Subaru. The feelings flashing across the old man’s face were so complex that Subaru could not quite read them all.

Pride. Remorse. Hesitation. Enthusiasm. Shame. Courage.

—But those all stemmed from his love.

Wilhelm: “I try my best to keep holding my sword, so that I will continue to be reminded of my wife. Even death could not take her from my memory, and, when my time comes, I want to die with a sword in hand. I would be with her forever.”

Subaru: “…”

This was Wilhelm’s awkward, straight-forward way of expressing the love that he could not otherwise.

Subaru swallowed, repeatedly taking deep breaths to loosen the pressure in his heart and the numbness in his tongue, until he finally judged himself as being able to speak again.

Subaru: “When I die and what-not, please don’t talk about such things that have no sign whatsoever of happening. Wilhelm-san is definitely surely completely absolutely totally entirely even younger than super young, and so even thinking about your retirement is certainly going to trouble people.”

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono?”

Subaru: “Crusch and Ferris both are very dependent on Wilhelm-san. Crusch’s memory loss is a very serious issue, and Ferris who is supporting her hasn’t said anything about it, but I’m sure he’s completely spent himself. So they'll be a mess if Wilhelm-san doesn't help! And, I too!"

Wilhelm: "…"

Subaru: "I also have many, many things I'd like to consult with Wilhelm-san. We're obviously in opposite factions, so maybe that's just naivety, but I…"

Subaru truly liked Wilhelm.

Wilhelm, who had buried in his heart of hearts his love for his wife, and sought vengeance for her, was someone who Subaru truly respected. Even if that had not happened, even if their relationship had remained just as a ten-day mentorship, then Subaru would still have deeply respected Wilhelm's strength and fortitude.

Hearing the Wilhelm that he respected so much speak of death was terrifying to Subaru.

Subaru was far more sensitive to the notion of the people he cared about dying. This was due both to his contract with Roswaal and to Subaru's own views on Return by Death shifting. There was also a part of him who was always secretly worried about Emilia and Beatrice.

Wilhelm: "…I am the just same as before, truly terrible with words."

Upon hearing Subaru's stubborn, desperate words, Wilhelm smiled.

The old man directed a warm look at Subaru, whose breaths were still shallow, and spoke.

Wilhelm: "It was terrible of me to have you worry so much. Despite my earlier words, I am not always thinking of death. Although it is an inevitable truth, I have struggled through the hardest challenge already."

Subaru: "…Ah."

Subaru relaxed slightly as he came to a realization. Wilhelm was speaking of the battle with the White Whale.

Wilhelm had been prepared to fight his fated enemy even at the cost of his life. At that time, surely, he had been prepared for the possibility of dying in battle. But, in the end, he had prevailed, and —

Wilhelm: “I think I am in good condition. I have fulfilled my dearest wish and survived, and now I can live free of shame.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san…”

Wilhelm: “I did what I needed to do, and I think there is nothing more honorable than that. Then and now, aside from merely swinging my sword, my chest is shaking with the pursuit of happiness. I have people who I have pledged my support to, and I have visited my wife’s grave. I have received so many blessings.”

Yes, that was it.

That was right. Wilhelm would not do anything unreasonable.

The steady, calm smile of the old man. Subaru, as someone who was young and superficial, had no way of seeing through it. But that smile was by no means a fake or ironic one.

Wilhelm was not unreasonable. And even in the unlikely event that this was the case, he would not have spilled a long-held burden to Subaru.

However, from the beginning, did Subaru’s attempts to have Wilhelm reveal his thoughts not amount to naught but arrogance?

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono—This is a virtue, but also a weakness.”

Subaru: “…”

Seeing Subaru’s anxiety, Wilhelm spoke quietly.

There was no smile in the voice, but there was no criticism either. Rather, the way he spoke was reminiscent of how an older person would caution a younger one.

Speaking more frankly, it was the tone a grandfather would take with his grandson.

Wilhelm: “My wife did this too, the bad habit of neglecting and shoving aside one’s own feelings while focusing on those of the surrounding people.”

Subaru: “Bad habit, is it… No, I’m hardly such a good person. I don’t want anything like everyone’s happiness. I only wish for the happiness of people I’m close to.”

Wilhelm: “The range of the people who you consider close to you is also a problem. While it was not what my wife desired, she held a great amount of power for a woman, and could reach far more people than she ever wanted to.”

Wilhelm’s wife, Thearesia, had been the previous Sword Saint.

Despite lacking common knowledge, Subaru had heard plenty about her in the past year. The civil unrest that took place in the Kingdom of Lugunica, which came to be known as the Demi-Human War, had been single-handedly ended by the woman who took the moniker of Sword Saint, in a few years.

What she had accomplished with her undue strength was the salvation of the country’s stability. Natsuki Subaru would never be able to compare with such a hero.

Subaru: “I understand, about your wife, but I can’t match up to her in any way.”

Wilhelm: “In peacetime, my wife was just an ordinary woman who admired flowers. Even if she is a hero of legend, she did not always act as such. And Subaru-dono, your reputation is good, and your influence is wide. In the future, your range will surely increase, and you will be able to do more and more.”

Subaru: “This kind of thing…”

Wilhelm: “I am convinced that Subaru-dono is a person who will surely accomplish what he cannot achieve alone, by gathering those who likewise cannot achieve it by their lonesome.”

Subaru: "…"

Speechless. Wilhelm had overestimated him by so much, and that had struck Subaru speechless.

That he was someone who could do such great things, could Subaru really believe this?

He was fragile and weak, his intellect was lacking, and his ideas were often poor and baseless. Because he was a person who could not do anything by himself, all he could ever do was rely on others to solve his problems.

That method would surely show its flaws, one day. For now, he was barely struggling along, but eventually he could certainly face failure. When that time inevitably arrived, Subaru had so many people to disappoint.

Wilhelm: "I apologize for bringing up the same things. It must trouble you to hear them over and over relentlessly."

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san, I…"

Wilhelm: "There may not be many people conscious of it, but it is something that everyone will come to understand one day."

Subaru: "I'm just an immature little child who is clumsy at everything I do."

Wilhelm: "Well, this immature little child who is clumsy at everything he does is one who I'm very fond of."

After a moment, Wilhelm nodded in satisfaction.

Wilhelm: "And the people who think like this will surely increase from now on."

As if deeply touched by Wilhelm's words, Subaru again fell silent.

Part of him was overwhelmed, and wanted to cast the notion from his mind. However, because the idea had come from none other than Wilhelm, Subaru could not give it up so easily.

In the depths of his heart, he could not believe in himself to that extent. But he also could not discard Wilhelm's belief in him.

Subaru decided to keep the feelings he had felt within him, until he had fully digested them.

He was very conscious of his own deficits. So any feelings, encouragement, or words, he had decided to carry within him.

And that was how he decided to treat Wilhelm's words.

Subaru, who was desperately but resolutely sorting his feelings out, failed to notice Wilhelm's tender gaze.

Wilhelm: "…I spoke too much and kept you here for a long time, my apologies."

Estimating that Subaru was done grappling with himself, Wilhelm spoke up. Accepting it, Subaru judged that tonight's scene would end soon.

Subaru: "Me too, I'm sorry for asking so much, but I really wanted to hear your love story with your wife."

Wilhelm: "No, it's been a long time since I've had the pleasure of talking about my wife. Lately, both Crusch-sama and Felix have been busy."

Subaru: "In addition to hearing a love story, I've also gotten insight into how another faction operates!"

Wilhelm: "I was a little bit excessively sentimental. Listening to an old man's long ramble must have been incredibly boring."

Wilhelm's blue eyes lit up with affection as he smiled lightly. Subaru did not notice the fleeting emotion and instead focused on what was just happening.

Initially, Wilhelm had stood alone in the garden.

He had told Subaru that he had come to appreciate the garden at night. The best location for enjoying the view of the garden was the corridor where Subaru was currently standing. In fact, standing where Wilhelm stood meant that much of the garden's moonlit landscape would be hidden.

Of course, Subaru may very well have been overthinking. But, if there were something else that would bring Wilhelm to the garden, then it would be,

Subaru: "…That's where Reinhard stood."

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm's location, where he had been standing all along, was the absolute territory that Reinhard had continuously defended against Garfiel. That patch of gravel was where the handsome red-haired swordsman had stood, the very picture of unflinching immobility.

That Wilhelm had felt that sense of disturbance and had gone to confirm it would have been perfectly natural. However, only Wilhelm knew the reason that he had yet to leave that spot.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san. I don't want to nose into another family's affairs, and I've graduated from being the lively character who insists on hearing everything that's happened just to satisfy my own curiosity, but…"

Wilhelm: "Ah, feel free to ask."

Subaru: "Do you not get along with Reinhard? Even though you're obviously family?"

The grandfather and grandson, and the complex relationships in the Astrea Family.

Even understanding that he may have been undermining the trust that had built up between him and Wilhelm, Subaru still breached the subject.

He might have chosen not to do so had he not just spoken with Wilhelm in the garden. He watched Wilhelm's profile, which overlooked his grandson's footsteps.

After their exchange, how could he refrain from asking?

Wilhelm: “While speaking with Subaru-dono, I thought of it.”

Subaru: “…”

Wilhelm: “Why am I unable to speak these words to my own grandson?”

Those distressed words came straight from Wilhelm’s heart.

Wilhelm’s face fell flat. He was expressionless, but certainly not emotionless. He was suppressing his feelings to hide his lament behind a hard shell.

What Wilhelm now possessed was pure, unmistakable regret.

Wilhelm: “I am a man with a lot of remorse, but there are three regrets in particular that I can raise no excuses for. One of them is the cause of the distance between me and my grandson.”

Subaru: “But, doesn’t Wilhelm-san regret it?”

Wilhelm: “Even regretting it should not be allowed. The criticisms I spoke to my grandson… to Reinhard, were so harsh. It was something unforgivable, so unforgivable, and stupid, that it cannot be fixed anymore.”

Wilhelm, who was still hiding his feelings under a guise of expressionlessness, seemed to be burning with an emotion, a flame, that had consumed Wilhelm for years. It was one of both anger and regret, one that he had always clung to.

Wilhelm: “I used the crusade against my wife’s murderer as an excuse to avoid facing that remorse, and, after successfully crushing the enemy, I recognize that I should begin to search for a way to reconcile.”

Subaru: “But you lack the courage?”

Wilhelm: “I am honestly so shameful. My grandson certainly resents me even now. Thinking of this, I cannot take a step forward.”

Wilhelm issued a deep sigh of disappointment. Subaru was dumbstruck seeing an old man who seemed to have shrunk rapidly. And, finally, inadvertently leaked a laugh.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono?”

Subaru: “I am sorry, I did not mean to laugh, that was inappropriate.”

Wilhelm cast a disbelieving look at Subaru, but Subaru felt similarly disbelieving. Really, this old man, how many times would he surprise Subaru in one night?

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san seems to be thinking that he’s unqualified to call himself Reinhard’s grandfather…”

Wilhelm: “Yes, that is correct. Compared to my grandson, I came to a standstill after realizing my mistakes. He is far too kind to the cowardly person that I am…”

Subaru: “If you put it that way, then I can only see a grandfather who’s afraid of being hated by his grandson.”

Wilhelm: “…Huh?”

Wilhelm shook off his gloom and looked Subaru in the face. Subaru waved his hand, still fighting an impulse to laugh.

Subaru: “I don’t fully understand the reasons for the poor relationship between Wilhelm-san and Reinhard, so I might be misunderstanding. But to the eyes of an outsider, Wilhelm-san wants to reconcile with Reinhard and looks to be seriously trying to apologize, so making an apology would be a good idea.”

Wilhelm: “But Reinhard will not forgive me.”

Subaru: “If he doesn’t forgive you at first, keep apologizing until he does. You’re not apologizing to be forgiven, you’re apologizing because you want to apologize, right? The person making the apology has nothing to worry about, because they’re not a bad person.”

Wilhelm: "…"

This time, it was Wilhelm's turn to fall speechless at Subaru's extreme theory.

Of course, Subaru understood that his words were very headstrong. Even so, he believed it was necessary to keep insisting.

In order to motivate Wilhelm. In order to let him face Reinhard.

Subaru: "Of course, after being alienated for so many years, a sudden apology would initially be thought of as «What's going on with this guy?». However, if many apologies were made, then «What's going on with this guy?» would give way to either «There's no helping it, then» or «Ugh, this guy's too annoying»."

Wilhelm: "I think things would deteriorate."

Subaru: "But at least they will change. Don't you think that any change is better than being stuck in the worst-case scenario your situation seems to be in?"

It was universally acknowledged that Subaru had presented an awful initial impression to many people. Breaking through interpersonal barriers was nothing to Subaru.

Subaru: "After a few years, if you give him some pocket money, you could immediately soften his attitude toward you. Although his impression of you may be poor, if you do something nice for him, won't he come to think of you as a nice person? Reinhard is incredible to deal with, and even I unexpectedly became his friend right away."

Wilhelm: "But… it won't be that simple with Reinhard…"

Subaru: "—Reinhard said he wanted to hear about the battle with the White Whale."

Subaru spoke in a humorous tone, and, bit by bit, Wilhelm seemed to relax.

Subaru told Wilhelm of what Reinhard had said outside the tearoom, immediately after meeting Subaru. Upon hearing that, Wilhelm suddenly opened his blue eyes.

Subaru: “I don’t know if the White Whale is related to your poor relationship, but if it is, then Reinhard’s definitely concerned about it. Of course, he’s certainly heard of how Wilhelm-san crushed the White Whale, and I’m sure he wants to know about how you avenged his grandmother after ten years.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Subaru: “That guy is surely also looking forward that your frozen relationship starts moving, right now.”

Subaru had no way of knowing Reinhard’s intentions.

Subaru had always seen Reinhard as a man who was ridiculously perfect beyond perfect, and had never associated him with powerlessness or ignorance before.

But those were flawed ideas. Reinhard was also human. He had worries just like anyone else.

Even the man Subaru had regarded as superhuman, Wilhelm, was, beneath the surface, an ordinary man and ordinary grandfather, filled with ordinary troubles and shortcomings. It would be no surprise if the same held true for Reinhard.

Subaru’s words just now had surprised Wilhelm, who closed his eyes as if he were meditating on them, examining them. Time seemed to be flowing by with the still wind.

Then, after a moment of silence between the two, Wilhelm reopened his eyes.

Wilhelm: “My grandson… Reinhard would listen to me.”

Subaru: “Annoy him with a hello first and bounce back if he rejects you. That’s happened to me with every girl I’ve met aside from Emilia-tan.”

Wilhelm: “Really—”

After hearing Subaru’s reply, Wilhelm shook his head.

Then, the old man looked up, leaning his head back and fixing his eyes on the moon hanging in the sky.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono is invincible.”

The words were spoken with the hint of a smile.

Chapter 15:
A Deafening Silence

1

The next morning, a bleary-eyed Subaru stood in the sunlit courtyard. Feeling the hard gravel and sand through his shoes, he took a deep breath of the cool morning air.

Emilia directed a smile at the pleased Subaru as he gave a relaxed, “Mmm!”.

Emilia: “What is it? Subaru seems happy today, did something nice happen?”

Subaru: “Many nice things happened. An important event happened last night, Emilia’s charming braid was an unexpected treat, and the baths were spacious and comfortable.”

Emilia: “Ah, I can say the same. I also took a very comfortable bath yesterday. The bathhouse in the Roswaal mansion is great, but the bath surrounded by stones here is so fresh.”

Last night, the beauty of Emilia’s melodiously flowing silver hair, as the braid Subaru had made was unraveled, had been breathtaking. Although her usual long straight hair also showed her frosty, snow-like beauty, seeing an unusual hairstyle on her had its own sense of privilege.

The conclusion really was that, no matter what, a cute girl would always be cute.

With that in mind, Subaru turned his attention back to the present as Emilia spoke again.

Although indoors, the bath went as far as it could to resemble an open-air bath, and the decorations evoked a natural image of the outdoors. Cobblestone covered the ledges along the bath’s wall. If it had been made of marble instead, the bath would have lost much of its uniqueness.

Emilia: “Since I saw this type of bath for the first time, I ended up having a lot of fun frolicking with Crusch-san and Felt-chan.”

Subaru: “That’s a prime fanservice scene from a gyaru game. It’s a CG that’s absolutely necessary to collect.”

Emilia: “C… G?”

Subaru: “It’s nothing, I was just teasing you. You seem happy, and most importantly, did you enjoy it?”

Emilia: “Mhm, very.”

Emilia, whose happiness was shared with Subaru, also seemed joyful at a glance. This feeling alleviated the initial anxiety and suspicion that had accompanied both master and servant on their trip to Priestella. The issue was—

Subaru: “Those two over there have such unhappy, gloomy looking faces.”

Beatrice: “…It’s nothing, in fact.”

Otto: “Please don’t mind me… hic. I just had a little, hic, too much to drink.”

Standing where Subaru was pointing was a loli sporting twin-drills and a frosty expression on her face, and a man whose usually elegant features were pale.

Needless to say, these two were Beatrice and Otto. After some careful consideration, Subaru decided to say hello to the almost transparent Otto.

Subaru: “Otto. You were a no-show at dinner yesterday, where did you go?”

Otto: “Like I said when we parted ways, hic, it’s rare for me to have a chance to come to Priestella, and while, hic, we’re here, I wanted to establish some connections.”

Subaru: “What’s up with you? You’re even more drunk than you were when we first met.”

Otto: “…? My memory might be messed up, but, hic, my first meeting with Natsuki-san didn’t seem to involve alcohol…”

Subaru: “Well, it’s your own memory, so think what you will.”

Otto, who was reproached for an unknown reason, wore a helpless expression, although Subaru’s comments were all moot.

From Subaru’s perspective, he had numerous first meetings with Otto, but the first one had been with a frustrated Otto in a tavern, who had been as equally pale as the current one. Shortly afterwards, however, Subaru Returned from Death. Therefore, from Otto’s point of view, their first meeting had been the embarrassing one in which Subaru had been responsible for saving him from the Witch Cult.

Of course, it was futile to argue, since both would be wrong.

Subaru: “Don’t do things that would give Beako bad habits. Well, I can understand that you were in a rush to help our faction.”

Otto: “I did this all of my own volition—Even though I have no idea why I did this to myself.”

Otto, whose head seemed to be feeling rather heavy, was unable to respond to Subaru. After a moment he looked up at the courtyard, changing the course of the conversation with an “Actually…”,

Otto: “What happened to Garfiel? It is unusual that he is not up at this time. Isn’t it convention for him to get up earlier than anyone so he can find the highest mountain to howl from?”

Subaru: “There’s probably not anywhere high up here, but that isn’t why he’s not here. Though, that would be his own juvenile secret. Please be gentle with him the next time you meet.”

Otto: “To someone who has no idea whatsoever as to what happened, aren’t those words too misleading…?! Ahh, my head still hurts.”

Subaru: “You’re certainly self-destructive.”

Watching a nigh-comatose Otto collapse onto the floor, Subaru smiled. He then turned around and looked at Beatrice, who had been silent since the beginning of their exchange.

Subaru: “So, what’s up, Beako? Yesterday, you were so lively, but now you’re all gloomy. That’s so not cute.”

Beatrice: “Don’t just assume things, I suppose. I’m not feeling gloomy, in fact. Betty just suddenly remembered a few things, which she has to carefully scrutinize, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What’s the matter? If you have any trouble, spit it out. If it’s something dangerous, you might not know how to handle it.”

Surprised at what Beatrice had said, Subaru narrowed his eyes slightly and gave a gesture indicating his readiness. Emilia also nodded as if she were listening carefully.

Beatrice bit her lips, revealing a rare hesitation, before choosing her words with a pompous air.

Beatrice: “It started yesterday, after Subaru abandoned me to play with Garfiel, in fact.”

Subaru: “A questionable interpretation, but go on.”

Beatrice: “Betty had gone to look for Emilia to kill time with, I suppose. On the way to her room, I ran into an employee, who I made a little bit of small talk with, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beako… making small talk…?!”

Learning that Beatrice’s ability to communicate had somewhat improved left Subaru speechless. He turned to Emilia, shocked, and she gave an eager nod.

Incredible! The notion of Beatrice initiating conversations with strangers was entirely unexpected. Maybe the freshness of travel had let Beatrice experience an unexpected growth. After returning home, he needed to update the Beako Growth Diary with this development as soon as possible.

The diary, which recorded Beako's daily growth in detail, had already reached three volumes. Thanks to this journey, he could add a new page.

Unaware that her daily activities were being recorded, Beatrice found Subaru and Emilia's attention annoying, and reacted with a dissatisfied "You're exaggerating, I suppose!".

Beatrice: "I'll keep talking, in fact. When the waiter saw Betty, he said he had news and put on a very mysterious expression, I suppose. He told me, «At night, something scary will haunt this hotel», in fact."

Subaru "…"

Beatrice: "Honestly, when Betty heard she hesitated to tell anyone so as not to create unnecessary confusion, I suppose. Although, I still decided to do some preparation last night as a precaution, in fact…"

Beatrice's voice rose as she became worked up, and she did not notice how Subaru had fallen silent. Then, she dropped her voice to a whisper, as ceremoniously as if she were spreading a little-known secret.

Beatrice: "In the middle of the night, Betty heard something strange, I suppose. I didn't want to wake up Subaru, who had a stupid expression on his face as he slept, so I quietly left our sleeping quarters alone to investigate, in fact."

Subaru: "You shouldn't stare at someone else's sleeping face, it's creepy."

Beatrice: "O-Of course I didn't stare, I suppose! I just gave a glance, as a lady's etiquette dictates, in fact!"

She might not have looked at the sleeping Subaru at all, but it was so cute that Subaru put the matter aside for time being. Beako took Subaru's acquiescence as a sign to continue, and her mysterious expression reappeared.

Beatrice: “Betty noticed an unusual presence hovering near the hotel, so I tracked it, I suppose. After a while, I finally found its source on the front porch…”

Subaru: “You found it?”

Beatrice: “Well, there was a dangerous pale face slowly emerging from the darkness, I suppose. It seemed to be dangerous to Betty at a first look, so she confronted it, in fact.”

Beatrice’s petite forehead shone faintly with sweat, as if she were fully immersed in the grim situation she had been involved in last night. Although Subaru did not understand how a Spirit’s sweat glands worked, it made the atmosphere rather tense, so he chose to not comment on it.

Beatrice: “Shortly after, probably due to its fear of Betty’s power, the figure slowly melted back into the darkness, I suppose. After repeatedly confirming that there would be no trouble later, Betty returned to the room, in fact. Then I stepped over the idiotically sleeping Subaru to return to the futon, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Don’t peep on someone sleeping, it’s indecent.”

Beatrice: “I only confirmed that you were okay, I suppose! Absolutely no such thing like touching your forehead or eyebrows happened, in fact!”

This was certainly a self-admission, but because it was so cute, Subaru again neglected to mention it.

All in all, that seemed to be the end of Beatrice’s horror story. Subaru held his chin and nodded slightly as he began to consider what she had said.

In a Japanese-style inn, a ghost story had occurred.

As a matter of fact, after living in this other world for a year, Subaru had come to realize that such ghost stories were not widespread here. That was most likely because spirits were already well-known as invisible beings. If the existence of invisible beings was acknowledged, there was no need for such things like ghost stories

Even so, that kind of weird rumor still existed here, and that the hotel had even inherited a story about Japanese-style spirits was really rather incredible.

Subaru heartily admired this phenomenon, as he took a conclusive breath.

Subaru: “So, what happened last night, Otto?”

Otto: “Ah, I remember now. As I lay on the porch, still on the verge of vomiting, I noticed that Beatrice-chan was staring at me, but I was unable to speak at the time. Finally, I couldn’t hold back and went to vomit in the bushes, and once I’d come back, she’d vanished.”

Subaru: “That would be it, then.”

Beatrice: “…How is this, how is it possible, in fact?”

It was almost too much for Beatrice to handle.

It was, at this point, incredibly obvious that the true face of the so-called specter was actually a drunk Otto, and she had no idea what to say.

What she had been certain she had seen was relentlessly rejected, and Beatrice looked as if her ability to reason had vanished. Subaru stroked her as though comforting her, but in his heart, he concluded that Beatrice was bad at sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings.

The waiter, who described the specter to Beatrice, had surely seen that Beatrice had the unusual aura of someone who was gullible, and would take any kind of prank too seriously.

Her red face, full of remorse and dissatisfaction, was so adorable that Subaru gave it the highest level of praise.

Felt: “Yo, everyone’s gathered here already.”

Then, a light female voice cut into the crowd of laughter.

Looking to the source of the sound, Subaru spotted a figure in the corridor— a girl shaking out her short, golden hair, Felt. She had replaced the yukata with her usual light attire, swinging her slender arms with ease. Although she had grown to be a touch more feminine, she looked like she was still firmly rooted as a girl from the streets.

Subaru: “Morning. You’re dressed so casually, I can just feel Reinhard’s lament.”

Felt: “Don’t preach me about it. That guy annoys me with it so much, and even Rom-jii is on his side. It’s such a bother.”

Voicing her dissatisfaction, an impatient Felt leapt from the corridor and landed beside Otto, who was promptly ignored. She then turned towards Subaru and crooked her head to ask,

Felt: “Having said that, there’s a thing that I’ve been curious about.”

Subaru: “What is it?”

Felt: “Ah, that is to say, why have you all been doing this weird dance together?”

Felt wore a curious expression as she watched Subaru’s strange dance—his everyday habit of morning radio gymnastics.

Whether before starting a long journey, or taking a few steps on the road, everyone would start their morning with radio calisthenics. This scene had long appeared every morning in not only the Roswaal mansion, but across the entirety of the Mathers territories.

Subaru: “Oh, it’s just the secret to health and longevity. Performed by everyone, from the children to the elderly, the age of the popular «radio calisthenics » of healthiness will reign. After Emilia-tan becomes the Monarch, our radio gymnastics will become a government-mandated morning activity!”

Emilia: “Yeah, I’d be happy if everyone could do it together.”

Felt: “That’s… I can’t help but feel that if such a thing becomes reality, your reputation as a Monarch’ll be ruined…”

Scrutinizing their movement, Felt muttered her cynical thoughts.

It was saddening to see, but sooner or later, even those who had not wanted to follow along were drawn into it after realizing the benefits of this easily performed activity. The popularity of this movement after it has spread to the various villages was indeed high.

Subaru: “Beako and Otto were also reluctant from the very beginning, but now they even participate despite having suffered through a lonely night of fear of ghosts, or a morning of a hangover!”

Beatrice: “Betty was dragged into this by Subaru, in fact.”

Otto: “I obviously just wanted to sleep off my headache, but then I heard the claps and saw the dancing…”

Beatrice: “Even if I’ve become sick of this, I’m addicted.”

Otto: “Utterly fascinating.”

Beatrice and Otto gave a somewhat weak explanation, while Subaru and Emilia stood proud. Felt scratched her white neck as she pondered the two distinctly different sets of responses.

Felt: “Indeed, I often hear of popular, strange activities happening in onee-chan’s vicinity. Strange dances, hollowed-out pumpkins, women carefully baking food for their beloved as a gift. Events like that…”

Subaru: “Although now they’re only unique occurrences in the border territories, I know that one day it will be turned into a project popular across the nation. Considering this, we could try using Anastasia-san in our schemes.”

Valentine’s Day would revolutionize the snack industry, and the markets would broaden. If the topic of large economical shift came up, Anastasia would immediately find a way to capitalize on it. If it wasn’t too late to do that, Subaru considered trying to catch Anastasia in her free time to discuss those opportunities with her.

Felt: “Has onii-chan always given off that kind of feeling?”

Emilia: “Well, Subaru has always been that way. It seems like he’s teasing, but he really wants to improve things, even if he always pretends to be fooling around.”

Felt: “Yeah but, you don’t even know if he’s joking or not until the dust settles…”

Emilia’s answer slightly frightened Felt.

Occasionally this kind of thing would happen due to Emilia’s mental age. Sometimes it would be hard to tell which one was younger or older, and Felt was no exception to that.

Felt, who struggled and crawled her way up in slums, had her unique way of living, too.

Emilia: “Why is Felt-chan all alone, isn’t Reinhard worried when you’re not together?”

Felt: “I’m not some kid who needs to be taken care of, and besides, that guy’s just annoying when he’s near me, so I just told him to go off somewhere, since onee-chan and everyone else would be here. It’s so annoying, as soon as anything happens that bastard arrives in the blink of an eye.”

Emilia: “Right. Then I feel at ease.”

Emilia carelessly chuckled at Felt’s complaint. Receiving a response which did not match her expectations, Felt gave an anxious sigh and began playing roughly with her blonde hair, revealing her irritation.

Emilia: “Felt-chan, you have such beautiful hair, you shouldn’t play with it so crudely. I’ve been taught by Subaru and Frederica-san to respect hair.”

Felt: “Damn, you’re so bossy… Let me mind my own hair, and didn’t I say to stop adding «chan» to my name? It gives me goosebumps!”

Emilia: “Even if you say so, I can’t drop this habit all at once. I’ll try my best, but if I can’t hold back, I’ll be very sorry. Is that fine?”

Felt: “It’s not fine in the slightest!”

Because Emilia did not hold any maliciousness, Felt could only give a low, cat-like growl to vent her irritation. On a surface level, people hearing their conversation would smile, as it looked like a happy exchange between best friends.

Subaru: “Well, our radio calisthenics are done, so feel free to go to bed. Or you could take a bath, they’re nice and refreshing.”

Otto: “I have already taken a bath… but, sadly, the smell of liquor did not seem to wash away.”

Subaru: “Before Garfiel shows up to yell at you, you’d best hurry up and wash it away. In my hometown, there’s a saying that any issue can be solved with a few hot baths.”

Otto: “It would be a catastrophe if he saw me like this… since you gave me your advice, I’ll follow it while I still have my life…”

Subaru lifted the depressed Otto to his feet and gave his weak shoulder a pat. Otto sighed, still despondent, as Subaru gazed up at the sky.

A sky full of smiles. Thin clouds hung in the early morning sky, reflecting the calm weather. Just as Subaru came to note this,

???: “—Good morning, citizens of Priestella.”

Subaru: “Huh?!”

A loud sound seemingly appeared out of thin air, echoing in everyone’s ears, surprising the unprepared Subaru.

It was no illusion; as Subaru looked around in panic, he saw Emilia, Felt, and Beatrice also glancing around, alarmed.

Subaru: “Hey, what’s this? It’s a really loud voice.”

Felt: “It’s not some kind of fantasy, it’s just a loud voice in the streets…”

Felt whispered softly to herself, while Subaru also made his own commentary, while suspecting that it was not unrelated to magic.

Speaking of magic that could send sound to an entire group of people, Subaru recalled the spell that made it possible to share one’s consciousness, Nect, that Julius had used before to connect everyone’s consciousness. However, it was simply a way of connecting people mentally within a limited range, and could not deliver sound directly to the ears.

Pondering this, Subaru thought that he had found a suitable answer. That was,

Subaru: “Something like a loudspeaker?”

Felt and Subaru had provided similar comments on the phenomenon, talking about a loud voice.

Resounding from the sky, the noise was loud enough that the entire city was probably able to hear it, in a very similar way to announcements made from a loudspeaker.

The only problem was that, in this world, there had no been any sign of such a scientific and technological development so far.

Otto: “Ah, you didn’t know? This broadcast functions with the help of a Mana-powered instrument in Priestella’s Metropolitan Government Hall.”

Subaru: “Mana… so it’s magic!”

Otto answered Subaru’s question, nodding as if to say, “Yes”.

Otto: “What I heard yesterday, when I was drinking with a great variety of people, was that every morning the City Hall would use a magical device to deliver an announcement to the citizens of Priestella.”

Subaru: “Huh, that’s such a strange daily routine.”

Otto: “Information that needs to be conveyed to all of the city’s areas can be heard immediately and conveniently. In the event of an emergency, evacuations or directions can be given easily. In order to keep such a stressful time from being too chaotic, doing this every morning allows the citizens to get used the speaker.”

Subaru: “Oh… I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

Using a magical device to prepare for emergencies.

Small villages were trouble enough, but if an accident took place in the city, handling it would quickly devolve into pandemonium. It was never a waste to come up with pre-emptive countermeasures to deal with such problems in advance.

It was unusual and fairly innovative for someone to take the time to ensure that the citizens would be well-prepared for it.

Subaru: “It looks like a pretty smart guy is responsible for this, maybe the Mayor?”

Otto: “No, it seems that it was Kiritaka-san who provided the magical device in the first place, and came up with the habit of using it for broadcasts. So it is only natural that he is involved in the management of the city.”

Subaru: “Eh…”

His admiration was suddenly interrupted by that impact.

Kiritaka had most likely been the one who’d yelled “Don’t touch my Liliana!” yesterday. Scenes of the negotiation flashed through Subaru’s mind. The screaming. The flash of the magical stone. The elegant man who had cried for Liliana afterward.

Subaru: “No, no.”

Beatrice: “No way, in fact.”

Emilia: “That seems a little…”

At Subaru, Beatrice, and Emilia’s perfect synchronization, Otto smiled wryly.

Otto: “I thought that you would reply like that, but the person in charge of the broadcast is in fact Kiritaka-san. Listen, isn’t that voice familiar?”

Kiritaka: “This is a magical device which can transmit my voice throughout the entire city. If I startled anyone unfamiliar with this, I offer my apologies. You’re very lucky to be hearing this broadcast today.”

Subaru: “Who’s that?”

Despite Otto’s follow-up, Subaru still had difficulty associating this voice with his impression of Kiritaka. He was so serious that it did not sound like a lolicon at all.

Subaru: “No, wait. Clind-san also doesn’t seem like a degenerate… could it be that lolicons are clever at disguising themselves? Lolicons with high social status are terrifying.”

Subaru again recalled the omnipotent butler. He had overwhelming intelligence and ability, but it was mixed with that kind of helpless inclination. Although it wouldn’t be quite right to call Clind a representative of all lolicons, it wasn’t impossible that there would be case of a high-class lolicon who resembled him.

Subaru: “Well, this Kiritaka guy is still very suspicious, and impressions from voices aren’t the most reliable…”

Kiritaka: “And to those who are listening, allow me to deliver, filled with my feelings… no! Filled with your feelings, a world of blessings! The morning has finally come… This is the Songstress Liliana, please be sure to listen!”

Liliana: “Ah, it’s me.”

In the midst of the mess, the man in Subaru’s memories and the man making the broadcast finally aligned.

This bother had decided to plague Subaru even in the early morning. He heard the shuffling sound of people changing locations, and then a slight cough which seemed to contain a smile.

Liliana: “Weeeell, hello everybody, this is Liliana, who was just introduced. Doing this every morning makes me feel the weight of expectation, but I still want to do my best to sing and play to create joy. Please oblige me.”

Subaru immediately recognized Liliana’s characteristic way of speaking, and felt as if he could see her odd behavior even through the magical device.

Curiously, unlike Kiritaka’s voice, which intermittently faded through the magical device, not a trace of Liliana’s voice was lost.

Subaru did not know if there was such a concept as an affinity for magical devices, but if there were any such blessings, those would suit the girl whose voice was loved by the Goddess of Song, so she would be able to sing clearly through the static.

Liliana: “Well, I’m eager to sing. Please listen—The Sword Demon’s Love Song, Act Two!”

Liliana inhaled gently as she prepared her instrument before playing it.

The song’s title stole Subaru’s attention from Liliana’s speech. If the song was indeed the tale of what he thought it was, then—

The song about to be played was the touching tragic love story about a woman, and a demon who lived by the sword.

2

The Songstress Liliana’s act of terrorism ended with her song, and Subaru returned to the living room for an early breakfast.

To be honest, the existence of the Sword Demon’s Love Song had struck Subaru like an unexpected bolt of lightning.

He should have realized long ago. No matter in which world, at any time, any heroic deeds that had been accomplished would be preserved for future generations. They could be documented in a number of ways, such as in writing or paintings.

It was not inconceivable that the heroine who had ended a civil war and the Sword Demon who took that heroine as his wife were immortalized in song.

Of course, even if Subaru had been aware of this possibility, he could not have done anything regarding what had happened this morning. He had not even known about the magical device, and he could not have known to tell Liliana to think about her actions.

Now, he could only curse the Songstress who had chosen her song at the most inopportune time without any regard for the situation.

His already poor impression of the Songstress had somehow plummeted even further at her inexplicably poorly timed enthusiasm. Liliana was an idiot, Kiritaka was a fool.

Subaru: "Has Wilhelm-san… come here yet?"

The earliest to arrive in the living room were the previous occupants of the courtyard, with the exception of Felt, who had parted with them after leaving. She would probably come later together with Reinhard.

Thinking of the song he had just heard, recalling Wilhelm's thoughts on his wife and grandson, and picturing the old man's smile, Subaru was unable to suppress the feelings that sprung up in his chest.

As for the words to say upon seeing him, Subaru had no idea how to find them. Even so, as long as there was communication, Subaru would be glad. Still, he seriously hoped that Wilhelm had somehow missed the song.

Subaru: "That group of overly-serious people, it's impossible that all of them would be sleeping in on the same day."

The three main members of Crusch's faction, and even Felix, worked and rested on a balanced schedule. Even having lived with them only a few days, Subaru was well-aware of this.

On a journey to an unfamiliar place, they would probably be nervous and maintain their schedule even more rigorously, so it was impossible that they would have missed the broadcast.

Emilia: “Subaru, you look awful, what’s wrong?”

Emilia leveled her gaze at Subaru, who sat on a cushion, rapidly tapping his feet in anxiety.

After the broadcast had ended, Subaru had immediately proposed that their faction should go to the tearoom. After confirming that the tearoom was empty, he claimed its undisturbed peace.

Emilia and the others simply savored the tragic lyrics of the Sword Demon’s Love Song and indulged in Liliana’s voice. They were unaware that the Sword Demon recorded in song was Wilhelm, or of any of the origins of the Sword Demon.

Therefore, it was no wonder that they could not empathize with Subaru’s anxiety.

Even more frightening was that Liliana’s song had captured even Subaru.

Subaru, who had been plagued with a sense of trepidation upon hearing the song’s title, could not bring himself to leave the courtyard while listening to it. Or, rather, that kind of thought did not even surface at the time.

Liliana’s singing must have contained magic. Because of this, even after recovering, Subaru could not shake off a sense of anxiety when thinking of that hasty brunette.

Subaru: “…It’s nothing. Nothing, nothing, just, I’m a little hungry… You see, even though the inn’s food is delicious, isn’t it a little lacking in quantity? My body wants me to pilfer snacks so I can eat them and grow.”

Emilia: “Subaru, I don’t believe you.”

Although she was usually easily deceived, Emilia saw right through Subaru’s bluff at this critical moment. Was he so easy to read?

Subaru's confidence vanished.

Otto: "Really, Natsuki-san. Although I do not know what you are anxious about, we are discussing our plans for the afternoon. You should be paying attention."

Subaru: "This afternoon's plan, oh yeah, the second negotiation with Kiritaka. Hmm… Could we take Liliana hostage so we can exchange her with the magic stone we want?"

Otto: "Why in the world would you propose such a forceful plan?!"

Otto, amazed by Subaru's words, raised his voice as his face adopted a gloomy expression. Seeing that, Subaru tilted his head with an "Eh". Perhaps it was due to his still-burning anger towards Liliana, but it probably wouldn't serve to raise the plan's success rate.

Otto: "In any case, this afternoon, we'll be attempting negotiations with Kiritaka-san again, and the one we should try to win the trust of is that member of the Scales of the White Dragon, who is the most likely person able to persuade Kiritaka-san.

Subaru: "Scales of the White Dragon, that's such a cool name. Was he at the meeting yesterday?"

Otto: "Yes, the Scales of the White Dragon is a well-known mercenary group in this area. Although they were established a long time ago, they were recently hired as a private force by Kiritaka-san. That man was their representative."

Subaru: "Of the people who were there… Ah, he's probably the best person to talk to."

While he had not been there to observe the room the negotiation had taken place in, Subaru had a vague recollection of the presence of a middle-aged man in white before the magic stone's light engulfed him.

Compared to Kiritaka, who was mad for Liliana, who was often in a state of madness herself, Subaru was certainly eager to talk to someone more rational than the two.

Otto: “Judging by this morning’s broadcast, Kiritaka-san’s anger should have calmed down somewhat, and he should be willing to listen to us. However, if Natsuki-san is going to be present, then he will be significantly less reasonable, most likely.”

Subaru: “I know my scary eyes put people off the first time they see me, but I didn’t expect such an aggressive reaction. That kinda hurt.”

Emilia: “It’s okay, Subaru. I don’t dislike those fierce-looking eyes. My Mother also had very fierce eyes, but she was such a gentle person.”

Beatrice: “Subaru’s face isn’t that bad, in fact… Actually, I was mistaken, I suppose.”

Subaru: “No comfort is preferable, actually. Don’t make me face the truth.”

Subtle bore the gentle and stern words of the two women, before urging Otto to continue. Otto went on saying, “So,”

Otto: “During today’s negotiations, I think Natsuki-san should not accompany us. Is that okay?”

Subaru: “No matter what, I don’t have a choice but to agree, but if you succeed, then what’s the point of me being here?”

Otto: “Between having just Natsuki-san come for nothing, and having all of us come for nothing, we should choose the smaller loss of just Natsuki-san, who only runs around playing with Beatrice-chan.”

Beatrice: “I feel like you’re underestimating Betty, in fact! It’s annoying, I suppose!”

Beatrice’s anger was dismissed, and their plan of action was finalized for the time being. Nevertheless, Subaru had also considered what Otto was likely thinking.

Subaru: “Then this afternoon I’ll go with Emilia-tan to take a walk with Beako.”

Emilia: “Ehh? I won’t be going to see Kiritaka-san with Otto-kun?”

Otto: “They have surely anticipated that we would come to negotiate again, and if we were to take Emilia-sama, we would be making a sudden, unannounced visit, and we will fail just as we did yesterday… Natsuki-san, I am glad you realize this, but I cannot help but think that you’re up to something.”

Otto glared at Subaru, who responded with an innocent whistle.

He had told Otto about meeting Liliana yesterday, but he had neglected to mention where they had met. And Kiritaka had most likely predicted that the Emilia Camp would be looking to negotiate again.

Now, what would Kiritaka do with Liliana if he did not want her to meet Subaru and the others? The clue was Liliana’s actions on the previous day.

Subaru: “I found a nice park, and I’d like Emilia-tan to come with me. We could take stroll with Beatrice holding our hands between us.”

Emilia: “Wow, that sounds like fun. But I wonder if it’s okay for us to relax like that. Well, Otto-kun?”

Otto: “I can’t refuse if you stare at me with such expecting eyes. Well, Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama both cannot attend due to a variety of circumstances, so I will visit the other party with Garfiel. Please do not cause any trouble.”

In affirmation of Otto’s words, Emilia and Subaru nodded earnestly. But Subaru also stuck his tongue out at Otto’s back as an apology.

Liliana would almost certainly not be present at the Muse Chamber of Commerce today. In that case, Subaru could only assume that she would go to the same park as yesterday. If she were not to be found there, Subaru would accept that there was nothing he could do, but he still wished to establish a relationship with her if he could.

If Kiritaka truly loved Liliana from the bottom of his heart, there was quite a large possibility that he would agree to a direct request from her.

Of course, he wasn't just thinking of using Liliana. If he abused her good intentions, Emilia would oppose it, and Subaru's own conscience wouldn't let him walk free. Thus, Subaru decided to tell Liliana his story without any reservations.

Subaru hoped that the result would be honest, even if it strayed from the heroic biography that she had been expecting and ended up disappointing her.

Immortalized in history as a hero, in song. Just the thought gave Subaru goosebumps, but if he had to add fuel to the fire, he wanted to leave an honest impression. At the very least, his audience would be disillusioned about Subaru's famed heroic deeds upon learning of his miserable mistakes along the way.

Anastasia: "—Good morning. You're all up early."

Just as Emilia's faction decided on their internal and external plans of action, the door of the tearoom was opened, revealing the figure of Anastasia. Today's Anastasia wore her usual fox scarf coupled with a kimono.

It was indeed a surprise to suddenly see a kimono, and Subaru was excited. Emilia's eyes gleamed for a different reason; she was delighted to see the unusual clothing. Anastasia gazed at them with pride.

Anastasia: "Very nice, very nice. I'm glad to be shockin' people so early in the morning."

Emilia: "Anastasia-san, that dress is so beautiful. Is that what you were talking about yesterday?"

Anastasia: "Yep. This is the kimono I mentioned at the bath yesterday. Although it looks a lot like a yukata, it takes a lotta preparation to wear."

Anastasia turned delightedly, showing off her blue-dyed clothing, which was charmingly patterned with floating, scattered petals. He never ceased to be amazed at Kararagi's ability to recreate the

Japanese style. And what he had thought to be nearly-certain, now turned out to be certain.

—Kararagi clearly shared much with the Japanese culture Subaru was familiar with.

Subaru: “That type of clothing, has it been handed down from generation to generation?”

Anastasia: “Well, you’re quite knowledgeable, Natsuki-kun. This type of clothin’ did seem to be more common at the time of Hoshin. Though, that method of production was temporarily lost, and only in the past decade or so did craftsmen start bein’ able to reproduce them.”

Subaru: “Hoshin’s era.”

This mysterious man, Hoshin of the Wastelands, appeared once again. Now, Subaru had no choice but to suspect that Hoshin, like Subaru and Al, had been summoned. However, unlike Subaru and Al, Hoshin had been from four-hundred years ago.

Subaru: “The priority is figuring the current situation out, but afterward I might want to take a good look at this Hoshin…”

On the matter of his summoning, Subaru did not intend to start digging for knowledge at this point.

He did not know anything about the mechanism of summoning, nor did he know the purpose of the summoner. However, this call was one-sided, only attracting him to this place. There was no such convenience that would allow him to go back home.

On this matter, just considering it would be like fishing for the moon in a puddle. There was no solution. What Subaru wanted to know was what predecessors he had had, what kind of footprints they had left in this world, and where they had ended up. Nothing more.

Reinhard: “Good morning, Subaru. Did you sleep well last night? You were a great help in reminding Felt-sama to return to her room this morning.”

Felt: “How annoying. It wasn’t my intention to go back there.”

After Anastasia, Reinhard strode into the tearoom with Felt in tow. He deposited her on a cushion, giving no indication of whether he had heard the song that morning or not.

He certainly must have known that the Sword Demon’s Love Song was referring to his own grandfather.

Reinhard: “Anastasia-sama, you look more beautiful with each passing morning. I had been a little concerned about your modesty, but now it seems unfounded.”

Anastasia: “Hehehe, this is my treasured possession. I can’t go into Priestella without preparin’ myself. On that note, I still to have to show off to Julius.”

After that, Julius also joined them, and Anastasia showed off her garb to her Knight. After she had received her due flattery, Anastasia tilted her head at him.

Anastasia: “Didn’t Mimi and the others join you?”

Julius: “Ricardo said he had something to do and went out to the city last night, but Mimi and her brothers… they seem to be following Garfiel of the Emilia Camp.”

Emilia: “They’re following Garfiel?”

Emilia looked up upon hearing the name of one of her servants. Julius nodded.

Julius: “Mimi found Garfiel leaving the inn, and immediately gave chase. Then Hetaro went after her, and Tivey, who cleans up their messes, said that he would handle it, so they all left Joshua.”

Anastasia descended upon Joshua with her hands on her hips, the latter hiding behind the tall Julius. The handsome young man bowed his head to his wrathful master as he stepped forward timidly, looking extremely pale and concerned.

Joshua: “I am deeply, extremely sorry… I desperately tried to stop them, but Mimi and Hetaro were not listening at all. Tivey said to please leave everything to him."

Anastasia: "Well, if Tivey's there, they shouldn't cause any problems. Let's put it aside, we're the hosts, but we're makin' quite a spectacle of ourselves in front of our guests.

Patiently patting the ashamed Joshua's shoulders in a sign of forgiveness, Anastasia turned to face everyone present with a gracious smile. She shook her supple hair, her fingers playing with her scarf.

Anastasia: "As you've just witnessed, this embarrassin' fiasco is happenin', I hope ya'll excuse it… Our adorable deputy captain, seemingly distracted by her first love, is having a hard time fightin' her impulses."

Mimi was obsessed with Garfiel and wanted to cling to his side, everyone present could see this. Everyone, with two exceptions. Emilia had tilted her head in confusion, and Joshua issued a sigh of "So that's what it was".

Subaru: "By the way, Felt, I didn't see that Tonchinkan trio at all. Are they all staying here?"

Felt: "You mean Gaston and the others? Well, having them living here would be a waste and a joke, and they're so unused to places like this that they'd feel awkward. They're living somewhere cheaper in the city, but…"

As she answered Subaru's question, Felt grinned, showing her teeth.

Felt: "Hey, that Tonchinkan nickname ain't so bad, since their names are Gaston, Rachins, and Camberly. It's not confusing at all, and they don't seem to mind it."

Subaru: "I also think it's a great nickname, I want to praise the me from a year ago. When I first heard their real names, I thought a miracle had happened."

Tonchinkan were called Tonchinkan, cheers to his past self who hadn't made them Anpontan. And it seeming that he was somehow pleased with that, cheers to the future of Tonchinkan, who he would continue to call primarily Tonchinkan from this moment onwards.

Crusch: “—We are late, it looks like we are the last ones here.”

Finally arriving in the tearoom was Crusch’s faction. Today, she had worked her long green hair up, and fitting of her new self, wore a gorgeous ladylike-like floral hairpin.

She took a brief walk into the room, followed by Felix and Wilhelm, who was, as always, solemnly dressed, his back upright. Looking at the old man’s posture, Subaru couldn’t help but shake his shoulders. He swallowed, trying to steal a glance at the old man’s face, and Wilhelm caught Subaru’s gaze.

Wilhelm: “…”

He showed a faint smile, giving a slight bow. Witnessing this action, Subaru received the message contained in the earlier smile: “You have nothing to worry about”.”

Subaru’s heart began to beat faster, until he saw Felix, sitting at Crusch’s side, winking and giving a peace sign.

—No worries, we’ve taken care of it.

That was the message Subaru received from Felix. Perhaps he had noticed Subaru’s attention. He ceased making his gestures and began to cling to Crusch’s side as he always did.

Subaru was conscious of what it was like to be useless and was afraid of appearing nosy.

Crusch and Felix certainly knew more than Subaru about the connection between Wilhelm and those songs. They were more sensitive and had greater proximity with Wilhelm. That was natural, because they were his companions. Subaru did not need his worries.

Subaru: “Better to say that it is our negligence that we couldn’t help Garfiel.”

This was not to say that he should not care about others. Rather, it is better to first do something for your own faction, which would leave you free to help others.

However, the turbulent depression in Garfiel's body was something that could only be overcome by Garfiel's own efforts, so that line of thought would solve nothing.

Anastasia: "Well, there's still a few people who haven't shown up, but in all likelihood, they won't be comin'."

Clapping her hands, Anastasia declared so. Although the number of occupants was less than that of last night's attendees, the number was still impressive. After all, among what happened last night, eating itself had also been very exciting.

What to put on this morning—with a short pause of anticipation, Anastasia smiled and said,

Anastasia: "Bring it in."

At her orders, an employee of the inn opened the door, and, immediately afterward, a large heated block of iron was carried in by staff.

Anastasia: "Today's treat is the traditional Kararagi breakfast—the daisukiyaki pancake!"

Anastasia rolled her sleeves up slightly, raising her voice.

In front of a silent crowd, the inn's staff coated the iron with a layer of oil and carried in an assortment of ingredients one by one into the room.

The daisukiyaki pancake—from the name, the iron plate, and the assortment of ingredients, Subaru saw something incredibly familiar. Something called,

Subaru: "A Japanese… okonomiyaki…?!"

As something that had been passed down as daisukiyaki, the Japanese okonomiyaki pancake arrived on stage.

3

Emilia: “Subaru, Subaru, look at my masterpiece!”

Beatrice: “Subaru, this is the best pancake made by Betty, I suppose. You can have it, in fact.”

Emilia smiled earnestly, and Beako’s face was a little flushed. Each placed their best pancake in front of him, each one a daisukiyaki that had failed to become a daisukiyaki. To Subaru, they were just charred blocks of black charcoal. The two, however, were completely unaware of their lack of skill, and Subaru did not disdainfully throw away their feelings.

Subaru: “Try it yourself before you recommend it to others.”

With this sensible suggestion, Subaru held back a look of pain as the two obediently started on their pancakes, and turned his attention to the other factions.

Reinhard: “Finished, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Oh, it’s good, make me some more. I’m always grateful for your skill in cooking and making delicious sweets.”

Reinhard: “If you count on me for anything else, I’ll be living up to my honor as a Knight.”

This was Felt’s faction. Reinhard made perfect pancakes at an impossible pace, and Felt gobbled them up just as fast. Hidden somewhere in Felt’s slim figure was King of Stomachs. Or she was just gluttonous. Either way, she ate far more than her share.

All in all, Reinhard had yet to eat, while Felt had already polished off ten.

Incidentally, Emilia’s faction was faring awfully as mentioned earlier. As had just been demonstrated, Emilia and Beatrice had not pulled their weight, and the only successful members were Otto and Subaru.

Otto: “Look, Emilia-sama and Beatrice-chan. I cooked them properly. Oh, eat this… Ah! Emilia-sama! Self-reflection is good, but don't eat them raw! Beatrice-chan, that's too much sauce!"

Much thanks to Otto, who acted like a father, stomachaches could be avoided for a while.

Of the other factions, the person that stood out the most was Anastasia. This was the surprise breakfast that she had planned herself. She had both deep confidence, in herself, and love, for the daisukiyaki.

Anastasia: "Watch carefully! This is the real daisukiyaki!"

She flipped the pancakes neatly and smoothly, and put beautifully-made pancakes onto Julius's plate.

Julius: "I am unworthy of eating Anastasia-sama's food, but I think they would be better if they were cooked for a shorter amount of time. Of course, I do not mean to bother Anastasia-sama."

Anastasia: "Yeah, yeah, they need to be less charred. Even though Julius's a man, he speaks like a tender maiden."

Unlike Subaru, who redirected his offerings and told the people who had presented him with a gift to reflect on themselves, Julius not only ate the slightly-burnt pancakes, but kept a straight face and gave Anastasia pointers to improve.

That person was a role model as a Knight. Subaru absolutely did not want to imitate him, and lacked the ability to do so anyway.

Sitting at their side, eating sticky raw pancakes, was Joshua, looking pitiful. His monocle seemed to be fogging over, preventing him from seeing properly, and he desperately tried to hide his struggle. He would feel mortified if Subaru, who he hated, noticed this embarrassing spectacle, so Subaru did not call out to him.

After seeing the difference in elegance between the brothers, Subaru could only conclude that the most stable faction was Crusch's.

Felix: "Oh, Crusch-sama, Ferri-chan made really beautiful pancakes, take a look!"

Crusch: “Hmm, you certainly have, but I will not be defeated.”

Like a passionate competition between two women, Crusch and Felix conversed. Their confidence was supported by their results—the pancakes they had made were perfect. Felix had even added cat ears to his.

Felix: “Please enjoy my daisukiyaki, they’re filled with Ferri-chan’s love. Crusch-sama, open wide!”

Crusch: “Hey, hey… That, um…”

Although, the happy scene did feel a little off-putting. That may have been because Subaru knew they were man and woman, or because he knew that Crusch’s temperament had changed after her memory loss.

Anyway, master and servant appeared to have no problems. The last member of their faction, sitting next to the peach-colored space, and focusing on his own pancake, was Wilhelm.

Wilhelm: “Hmmm…”

Wilhelm, who had been trying to turn the dough over, closed his eyes and sighed. It seemed that his pancake had been torn apart after Wilhelm had left it on the iron for too long, causing it to stick.

He had unexpectedly seen Wilhelm’s clumsy side.

Subaru: “I feel like I saw something I shouldn’t have, but in that case…”

Feeling that he should help Wilhelm, Subaru climbed to his feet, then sat back down, reconsidering. He then nodded to Wilhelm,

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san.”

Wilhelm: “…Subaru-dono?”

Hearing his name, Wilhelm lifted his head. Noticing that Subaru had seen his clumsiness, his brow furrowed in shame.

Subaru gave him an encouraging nod, and gently pointed to his neighbor with his jaw.

Wilhelm, who understood his meaning, swallowed quietly.

Wilhelm: “…”

Moving to the place indicated by Subaru, Wilhelm took a seat next to Reinhard. He obediently followed each of Felt’s instructions, producing pancakes without halt and failing to notice the exchange between Subaru and Wilhelm.

Although, Subaru had already communicated everything he wanted to say to Wilhelm.

Consternation, confusion, hesitation, doubt, all wavered in Wilhelm’s eyes. He took a long time to reach a decision. Finally,

Wilhelm: “—Reinhard.”

Reinhard: “…”

Reinhard froze as Wilhelm forced himself to call his grandson's name.

His spatula hovered in midair as his hands stopped moving, and Felt plated the pancake with a perfect catch.

That act was inelegant, but Reinhard took no notice of it.

The red-haired youth faced Wilhelm with wide eyes. Wilhelm met his gaze head on, without so much as drawing a breath.

Wilhelm: "…"

Reinhard: "…"

Abruptly, silence fell.

Not just between the two, but also between the people around them who had noticed. The entire room stilled, and the only remaining sounds were those of daisukiyaki burning on iron plates.

Time seemed to stagnate as everyone held their collective breaths.

Wilhelm: "I, um, that is…"

Reinhard: "What is it, oji-sama?"

Wilhelm: "I… I am not so good at this, so, you, if you know any kind of trick to make it easier, could… you teach it to me?"

Those were Wilhelm's clumsy, stuttering words.

Only Crusch, Felix, and Subaru widened their eyes, understanding what kind of resolve Wilhelm had needed to choke those words out. Wilhelm himself seem to sag with exhaustion after posing the question.

Wordlessly, Reinhard swallowed as he considered how to answer. His fair features stilled as an unfamiliar emotion washed over his blue eyes.

Reinhard closed his eyes and buried that emotion into a soft sigh. Then,

Reinhard: “Yes, I understand, oji-sama.”

The corners of his mouth turned up as he closed his eyes. That expression could only be described as a smile.

It was not the reassuring smile he usually wore to give others a sense of security. This may have been the only time anyone had seen the young man named Reinhard step out of his role as the Sword Saint, and show a genuine smile.

Wilhelm’s dumbstruck expression slowly reclaimed its composure. He lowered his face, closing his eyes as if he were enduring something. He probably had difficulty processing that feeling immediately.

However, the real genuine feeling was there. Once delivered, it only needed to be accepted.

The long divide between the two, grandfather and grandson, could only be offset by a corresponding amount of time.

Subaru, seeing such a possibility play out in front of him, clenched his fist with a plethora of emotions.

From the bottom of his heart, he wanted to greet Wilhelm with joy. And,

???: “—It will not be so easy, Honored Father. Don’t think your relationship will be fixed with just that.”

Suddenly, a red-haired figure threw open the sliding door of the tearoom.

The face of the red-haired man who had spoken those words carried so much malice that everyone froze on the spot, forgetting the flow of time.

Chapter 16:
Uninvited Guests

1

That touching moment was spoiled in the worst way.

The red-haired man’s behavior and attitude all betrayed an ugly nature. A rather repulsive smile spread across his unshaven face. He looked to be in his forties and carried the unpleasant scent of alcohol about him.

Although his actions and appearance all evoked a sense of disgust which seemed to reflect his character, the man underneath the poor grooming was quite handsome.

The beautiful characteristics—their desired form, were contaminated by something that was completely different. Something about the tall man’s posture exuded an aura of repulsiveness.

Subaru: “…Who are you?”

???: “Ahh?”

The first to break the shocked silence that had fallen across the tearoom was none other than Subaru, who reached the back of his own waist, and gripped the handle of the weapon there.

Having lost his cool, Subaru’s spinning head drove him to act impulsively. There was nothing that could have angered him more the interruption of the reconciliation between the clumsy, awkward duo of grandfather and grandson.

Only Subaru knew why he was in such a frenzied rage.

It was not just a reconciliation between a friend and someone he respected that had been interrupted. It was reconciliation between family. The beginning of a family looking for a connection. To dare to treat it like that,

Subaru: “Answer me. Who the hell are you?”

???: “…You’re really casting a hostile look at me, kid. As a Knight, you do know who you’re trying to provoke, right?”

Subaru: “Don’t make me laugh, mister. The one being provocative is you. I’m just asking you exactly what you’re doing here.”

His patience reaching a breaking point, Subaru stood from the banquet on the spot.

Beatrice, who was sitting next to him, saw the feelings fueling his reaction and shifted her position so that she could take his hand at any time. His reliable partner had accurately sensed flames of anger residing in Subaru’s heart.

Glancing at Subaru with an unpleasant expression, the man scratched his head with a rude gesture.

???: “You’re so annoying, kid. Hey, Sword Saint. Or Juukulius too, or even Argyle. Cut down this rude kid for me.”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Pointing at Subaru with the hand he had been scratching his head with, the insolent man casually gave an order to three people in the hall, Reinhard among them.

Seeing that humiliation to his comrades, or rather, to people who he could call his comrades, Subaru wanted to strike at that grin with his whip.

Julius: “Please pay heed to your words.”

But he was interrupted by Julius’s words before he could move.

Julius, who had stood up at some point, gently placed a hand on Subaru’s shoulder from behind. Julius nodded slightly at the frozen Subaru, then turned to face the man.

Julius: “Currently, Felix and I, and Reinhard as well, we three are on temporary leave from our normal duties as we are serving our specific masters. Therefore, even the Deputy Commander should not hold the right to command us.”

Felix: “Yep. Ferri-chan is now an obedient servant to the venerable Crusch-samaaa~. Therefore, I have nyo obligation to comply with the order.”

Keeping his sitting posture, Felix held Crusch’s arm as he offered an immediate follow-up to Julius’s words. Although Crusch, whose arm had just been taken, appeared a little surprised, she still filled her eyes with her strong will as she turned toward the red-haired man.

The expression on everyone else’s faces were similar; no one hid their hostility toward the man. That was natural. They had just shared a pleasant atmosphere, which had been torn apart by the man.

However,

???: “Ohh, ohhhh, I’m scared, how scary. Wasn’t it obvious that I was just kidding around? It’s not like I don’t know the gravity of my orders as the Deputy Commander.”

Subaru: “The… Deputy Commander?”

The alcoholic man seemed to find something funny, slapping his legs in laughter at Julius and Felix’s reactions. During their exchange, a word he could not let slip past reached Subaru. And so, he frowned, and posed his question.

In response, the man once again leveled his mocking gaze in Subaru’s direction.

???: “That’s right. That’s my delectable adornment. Deputy Commander of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Heinkel, that’s me.”

Subaru: “Don’t give me such a righteous look.”

Heinkel: “Hahaha, this kid’s voice is really harsh. It hurts, hurts,

hurts me… I'll shut your worthless mouth, you dog."

Subaru: "—Hk!"

The darkness twinkling in the man's narrowed eyes sent a shuddering chill down Subaru's back. It was different from the awe-inspiring presence of a strong person, or an overwhelming being like the White Whale or a Witch. It was something far more unspeakable.

That something was familiar to Subaru, and yet it was impossible to recall exactly what it was. There was nowhere to escape that sense, and Subaru felt a ringing in his ears.

Julius: "Calm down, Subaru. Don't let the atmosphere of the Deputy Commander swallow you."

Julius, who stood by his side, spoke to Subaru, his head dizzy.

Hearing him, that man—Heinkel, faced Julius with a dark smile.

Heinkel: "Ha! A worthy reply. An exemplary, polite answer. To show that respect as a Knight, you truly are the Finest of Knights."

Julius: "Allow me to accept the compliment, Deputy Commander Heinkel… If I may ask, what is the reason for your visit? If my memory serves correctly, your duty as Deputy Commander should be guarding the Royal Capital."

Heinkel: "Drop those sarcastic words. Just how great of an influence on the vigilant defense of the Royal Capital can the absence of one man make? Captain Marcus-sama can handle it perfectly alone, far better than I could… Ah, although, a Royal Family who could suffer disaster is missing."

Wilhelm: "Heinkel!"

Considering his position, Heinkel's speech was incredibly disrespectful. Upon hearing it, Wilhelm roared his name in fury. The Sword Demon, shaking with anger directed a sharp glare at Heinkel, who merely shrugged his shoulders.

Wilhelm: “Heinkel…”

Heinkel: “Just calling me once is fine. I’ve yet to lose my hearing from old age. Well, treat that as a drunken idiot’s nonsense and ignore it. More importantly—”

Heinkel responded to Wilhelm’s bitter voice by sticking a finger into his ear as he closed his blue eyes. Then, he opened them to look at Wilhelm.

Heinkel: “Isn’t that a very nice feeling? I want to offer you my congratulations for your defeat of the White Whale, but you’ve been avoiding me. This is a feat that took fourteen long years to accomplish, after all. I’d think that I also have the right to join the joyful celebrations. Isn’t that the case, Honored Father?”

Wilhelm: “Heinkel, I…”

Heinkel: “Reinhard, what about you?”

Reinhard: “…”

Heinkel viciously stabbed his words into Wilhelm’s chest.

Although the old man’s face showed the pain of being cut by a blade, Heinkel showed no sign of caring. Instead, he directed his malice at a new target, Reinhard, who had silently observed the situation until just now, slowly looked at Heinkel upon hearing his name.

Heinkel: “Shouldn’t you also be congratulating Honored Father on the burden that’s been lifted off his shoulders? Since he’s carried out a wife, a mother, a grandmother’s vengeance. At least offer him some nice words. That said…”

Reinhard: “…”

Heinkel: “—With this, Honored Father has finally avenged the previous Sword Saint who you’d murdered, isn’t that right?”

—Subaru withdrew his original assertion.

Saying that Heinkel wore a malicious look on his face had been a mistake.

Rather, he was the face of malice itself.

Heinkel's words, expression, attitude, tone, behavior, and gaze—all of these were manifestations of his intent, one that could only be described by the term "malice".

Indeed, every bit of Heinkel's demeanor contained nothing but pure malice.

Subaru: "Previous Sword Saint, murdered…?"

Subaru quietly blurted out those impressionable words. In his consciousness, there were other questions swimming about, but Subaru could not reasonably sort through them.

However, malicious intent would always spring on such an opportunity.

Heinkel: "Yeah, the predecessor Sword Saint, murdered. Although I don't know exactly how ignorant you are, but you have to be familiar with the title of Sword Saint, right? Our current Sword Saint is the most powerful hero of our day… But that was something he got from murdering his predecessor, robbing it from his own grandmother. Although that fact was immediately hidden from public knowledge."

Wilhelm: "Silence, Heinkel! You… Just how far are you intending to go?"

Heinkel: "If you want to say something that sounds nice, then please stop, Honored Father. If nothing else, you simply don't have the right to disagree with me. After all, when the last Sword Saint died, the first to condemn Reinhard was none other than you."

Wilhelm: "—Hk."

Heinkel's words contained a dense, noxious poison of abhorrence. And the contents of his speech were no more than vulgar curses.

Reinhard had murdered his predecessor? Inconceivable.

Wilhelm had bitterly condemned that Reinhard? Inconceivable.

After all, to Reinhard, his predecessor had been…

And to Wilhelm, Reinhard was…

So obviously, that could not have been possible.

Reinhard and Wilhelm: "…"

Neither Reinhard nor Wilhelm would deny it, closing their mouths.

Why? If either of them denied it, if either of them uttered a simple "no", then Subaru would instantly believe it.

A comrade and a beloved mentor. A malicious man covered with the scent of alcohol. There was absolutely no question as to who Subaru would believe. Therefore, he wanted one of them to deny those words.

Heinkel: "Is it hard to communicate now? Of course it is. It's been this way for fourteen years. Neither you nor my father have changed at all. Without change, it's impossible for you to reconcile. That'd be too convenient. Would Thearesia van Astrea forgive such a selfish affair?"

In the silence of the tearoom, only Heinkel's profane words echoed.

The previous Sword Saint—She had been Wilhelm's wife, as well as Reinhard's grandmother. And, to Heinkel,

Heinkel: "My dead Mother is cursing us. Three generations, and none of us have been forgiven."

Reinhard's father. Wilhelm's son. Considering Heinkel's words and deeds so far, Subaru correctly deduced his origin.

Subaru: "Heinkel van Astrea…"

Testing the name out, he found that it echoed with the sense of correctness.

The man in front of him was undoubtedly a member of the Astrea Family. Even if his nature as a human was completely different from the other, upstanding Astreas that Subaru knew.

Heinkel: “Don’t attach the «van» to my name, kid. I haven’t been given that honor. It’s just Heinkel Astrea.”

Subaru: “…?”

Hearing Subaru’s questioning breath, Heinkel clicked his tongue and looked away.

For the first time since arriving here, bitterness flashed over his half-visible face. His eyes, which had contained only sadistic glee as he’d insulted his family, seemed to carry a look of pain.

—As soon as he’d begun to ponder what had happened, Subaru was interrupted.

Emilia: “So… what did you come here for?”

Subaru: “Emilia?”

Everyone had been shuddering at Heinkel’s unforgivable attitude. However, it was Emilia who first stood up and questioned him.

Her silver hair floating behind her, she stood next to Subaru, who could feel a wave of anger emanating from her. To Emilia, not feeling anger over the ruined atmosphere of the room or over such impolite behavior was impossible. She only ever became seriously angry when the situation concerned the feelings of others. And even she was aware of how Reinhard and Wilhelm had been hurt.

Emilia: “We were dining happily. To deliberately spoil such a peaceful moment, what exactly do you intend?”

Heinkel: “…Oh, this is unexpected. Are you not Emilia-sama? I’ve heard the rumors. A poor half-devil girl who stands no fighting chance but struggles along anyway.”

Emilia: “Although I’d like to one day talk to you and ask how you think of me, right now I only want to hear one answer from you. Why did you come here?”

Heinkel: “…”

Was he attempting to throw Emilia off with insults? Subaru saw through him, and the surprised Heinkel felt disappointed. The members of the other factions also seemed surprised at Emilia’s calm demeanor.

It was a stark difference from the innocence Emilia had shown in the past. To say that she was pretending to be innocent would be a lie, however. This was Emilia being true to herself.

Emilia: “The reason why we all gathered here, was because we were invited by Anastasia-san. It’s very rare that we are all gathered in the same place, so I don’t think you would have randomly targeted such an opportunity. If you are someone important among the Royal Guard, then please tell me exactly what you want.”

Heinkel: “Tch. Not the same as the rumors…”

Emilia: “Answer me.”

Heinkel, who had been again scratching his head, was shaken by Emilia’s momentum.

Although Emilia was angry, she was by no means preparing an attack. The pressure emanating from her had nothing to do with magic. It was merely the strength of her feelings.

Felt: “You marched in with confidence, just to back down when a girl glares at you. Mister, that’s pretty embarrassing.”

Anastasia: “That’s right. Just when I was lookin’ forward to sharing a fun story, too. Songstress-san’s apparently quite the whimsical character, that’d be more interestin’?”

Crusch: “Well, is that so? Then, I’d appreciate it if this puzzling man would leave, since I’d love to discuss these rumors about Songstress-san with everyone here.”

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

Following Emilia, Felt, Anastasia, and Crusch spoke up as well.

Like Emilia, who still faced Heinkel, the three joined their domineering forces in opposition to the man. Facing the pressure and intimidation of all four, Heinkel’s face could not help but twitch.

They were on completely different levels. Considering his title, his position was rather lacking.

Julius: “I am sorry, Deputy Commander. If there is nothing else for the time being, then I believe, for the benefit of all parties involved, that you should take your leave.”

Heinkel’s reaction, and the attitude of the Royal Candidates.

Julius calculated that this would be the right time to bail Heinkel out. Subaru would have preferred to crush Heinkel on the spot, but changed his mind after seeing Reinhard and Wilhelm.

He did not fully grasp the situation, and so he could not make hasty judgements.

Heinkel: “Grr…”

Julius: “Deputy Commander. Please make a decision. If possible, it is better for both parties to say nothing more…”

???: “—There is no need for that, commoner.”

That lustrous voice shined with the self-assurance of one that looked down on everything.

The owner of that confident voice, which could shake the will of its listeners, seemed able to impose their own superiority wherever they went.

Capable of dismissing common sense and establishing a new set of rules, ones which allowed no protest or objection.

All the people in the tearoom looked at the sliding door near where Heinkel stood.

Everyone was fully aware that someone was about to stride in from the corridor. Heinkel had long since ceased to exist in anyone’s mind. There was only caution against the sun’s burning scowl that lit the corridor as it walked down.

???: “So, all of the trivial people have arrived? You have prepared a stage for mine debut. You deserve praise for your behavior, and that only.”

A boldly exposed chest hugged by a blood-red dress, a mouth coquettishly covered by a fan. Her arms were crossed under her ample chest, pushing it up in the glamorous act of showing off her white skin without reservation. The behavior of a villainous woman.

Her bright red eyes resembling the licks of a flame, a seductive atmosphere that amounted to an enchantment capable of mesmerizing all the men in the world.

Even seeing her once would scorch her violent beauty into one’s memory forever. Excessive beauty would go as far as to become violently so—Her existence proved this.

A teenage girl named Priscilla Barielle.

The uninvited fifth candidate of the Royal Selection.

2

Priscilla: “So is this it? Frozen faces in a lifeless environment. Do you like this stale air so much? Or is it that every time we meet, such an atmosphere forms? If so, that’s incredibly pitiful.”

Priscilla frowned as she looked throughout the room and spoke in a provocative tone while fanning her face.

Due to her abrupt debut, no one was able to rebut her insults.

Priscilla: “What a poor reception. I deliberately graced this place with mine presence. Placing your forehead on the floor and treating me with admiration and praise is what the correct reaction would be.”

Subaru: “…That’s how people would treat a deity. It won’t happen unless you actually become the Monarch.”

Priscilla: “Hmm?”

Subaru couldn’t help but comment on Priscilla’s arrogance. Hearing his mutter, Priscilla turned to look at him, trapping Subaru with her bright red gaze.

Subaru: “What?”

Priscilla: “…Who are you? I had heard that this would be a gathering of fools who know not their place and would compete for the throne. Of course, they would also bring fools who support them. But why is a vulgar commoner like yourself present?”

Subaru: “Are you for real?”

Subaru was halted by the hostility facing him.

Priscilla’s words were neither joking nor mocking. Or rather, she was being genuine. Priscilla had honestly completely forgotten about Subaru’s existence. Although they had gone for a year without seeing each other, Subaru’s idiocy in the Royal Capital should not have been so easily forgotten.

Although it would be correct to say that it was a very Priscilla-like attitude, it was not an attitude that was particularly appreciated.

???: “Princess, that’s a bit much, isn’t it? Although I don’t know how much he’s worth to you, to me he’s almost like a brother. He’s a very interesting opponent, yeah?”

Then, a frivolous voice cut across the heavy atmosphere that was about to get worse. That voice sounded muffled, and was accompanied by the sound of metal. A man with a single arm spoke soothing words as he entered from the corridor to join Priscilla’s side.

His face was entirely covered by a jet-black helmet, and his solid, broad physique gave the impression that he was a strong man. He was both a servant to Priscilla and, like Subaru, a summoned man from another world. Al.

And, of course, he had accompanied his master here, inserting himself between Priscilla and Subaru.

Al: “Hey, you remember, right? It’d be hard to forget a guy appearing in the Castle and doing something dumb to embarrass himself in front of so many people. It’s that guy. Princess even clutched her stomach when she had a good laugh about it.”

Priscilla: “I have no impression whatsoever. In the first place, Al, I would never laugh so hard that I would need to clutch mine stomach. Do not belittle an honorable presence such as my own to the level of a casual commoner. I shall not be this tolerant next time. I shall cut off your head.”

Al: “You see, brother? Sorry, I couldn’t do anything. Maybe if you work hard to become better.”

Subaru: “Give me a little more credit for the things I’ve done in the past year!”

Al soon gave up trying to jog his master’s memory and instead turned to apologize to Subaru, his head bowed in apology. Subaru sighed, feeling like Al had not changed at all this past year.

Although, for the middle-aged Al, undergoing a noticeable change from his light-hearted demeanor would be fairly impossible.

Heinkel: “You’re a little late, Lady Priscilla. How long were you going to make me act alone? I’d heard that you were supposed to be coming earlier…”

Priscilla: “Silence, commoner. You shall dance as ordered to. Until I give the order to stop, you are expected to dance until you die. Those who misunderstand their duties or attempt to correct a mistake they believe I have made are condemned to death.”

Heinkel: “Guh…”

On the other hand, Heinkel, realizing that the atmosphere in the room had changed, immediately turned to Priscilla, who was standing behind him. However, any type of argumentative attitude taken toward Priscilla would be entirely futile.

Although Heinkel was embarrassed by the uncompromising Priscilla, Subaru raised his gaze after listening to their conversation.

Subaru: “Priscilla. Did you bring that guy?”

Priscilla: “Listen, commoner. Just who allowed you to dare to speak to me without the proper honorific? Even the compassionate and generous I, when faced with such a helpless person, have a limit to my patience.”

Al: “Princess.”

Al called briefly to her as he saw the brutal look lodged in her eyes as she glared at Subaru. Then, Priscilla closed one eye and gave a slight breath.

Priscilla: “For some reason, my servant seems to have taken a liking to you. To Al, who spared your life… No, there is no necessity to thank Al. Worship mine forgiveness. If you do so, I shall spare you.”

Subaru: “…Thanks for your generosity and consideration. Then, the answer to my question is…”

Priscilla: “If you are under the impression that I brought this commoner here, then you would be correct. He is present at mine calling.”

Subaru: “For what purpose!”

Subaru raised his voice at the assertive Priscilla and questioned her purpose.

Uninvited guests upon uninvited guests had arrived. What kind of plot was brewing here, Subaru needed to know.

However, in the face of Subaru’s question, Priscilla merely tilted her head, and—

Priscilla: “Perhaps because I thought that it would make an interesting sight.”

Subaru: “…An interesting sight?”

Priscilla: “That is correct. Distorted family disputes, and the joy and sadness that comes from relationships. Such ugly performances are so very exciting. In fact, do you see? The Sword Saint and the Sword Demon acted rather human. Such a sight is very rare.”

Subaru: “Priscilla!”

That twisted, crooked perspective enraged Subaru.

As Priscilla said, Reinhard’s family dispute was hardly seen. And that sea of bitterness was hardly something that needed to be known by anyone in the world.

If Heinkel had not appeared, such a dark history would never have come to light. Without him, the mending of the normal relationship between grandfather and grandson would have been underway.

To have torn that—

Al: “Stop, brother. There’s no meaning to have a fight happening here. Princess’s poor character isn’t a thing that’s been here for a day or two. Just think of it as bad luck… as bad stars, and try to let it go.”

Subaru: “If you know your master has a poor character, then you should be trying to lead her onto the right path by reining her in. Indulging a rampaging horse is just irresponsible.”

Al reached for Subaru with his single arm, slowly shaking his head. Since his hand was grabbing Subaru’s wrist, if anything happened, he would not be able to draw his sword on such short notice.

In other words, his actions were indicating that he had no wish whatsoever to fight.

Noticing this, Subaru took a long breath. He looked around and found that he was the only one who had acted on his impulsive anger. Outsiders aside, even Julius and Felix had not wanted to start anything.

Of course. This was a gathering for the candidates to the throne. No one wished to entertain the possibility of anyone getting hurt here.

Subaru: “But, even in this case, no matter how much their hearts suffer…!”

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Emilia’s wavering eyes called to Subaru, who continued submerged in his fury. Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Subaru also knew that Beatrice was granting him her support.

Feeling the support of the two, Subaru was unable to bow his head.

Anastasia: “That vicious hound’s fury’s lookin’ like it’s over. I’m wonderin’ something… even though I didn’t send ya an invite, how did you come to learn of this meetin’?”

Priscilla seemed ready to take her leave and carry on her agenda. However, Anastasia took an opportunity to halt her.

Although Anastasia’s tone was soft, she was quite alert.

Anastasia: “After all, a child runnin’ their mouth shouldn’t be allowed to run free.”

Priscilla: “Don’t talk to me with that affectation, mine ears are decaying. I am more than capable of keeping up with a quick-thinking fox.”

Anastasia: “Oh my. Could it be that you’re neglectin’ to mock me as a “commoner”?”

Priscilla: “If you have yet to see what you should have, then that level of ignorance places you in the same category as all of those other fools. Could it be that you are foolish enough as to want me to overlook you?”

The two were engaged in a battle of words—However, Priscilla may or may not have been deliberately provoking Anastasia’s natural business focused rhetoric.

Anastasia leisurely caressed the scarf on her neck.

Anastasia: “Leaked information is quite worryin’, ya know.”

Priscilla: “Anything that reaches someone else’s ear has been leaked from a mouth lacking caution. And the more one learns, the more holes that can be found; this is self-evident. You are not the only one who observes and listens to others.”

Anastasia: “Ah, but ya see, I’d thought of you as someone who wouldn’t engage in espionage to deal with the likes of us.”

Priscilla: “A flying insect buzzes near mine ear. But what can I do without knowing its location? I would have to catch the insect using my eyes and ears, which is precisely what I have done. Of course, the same holds true for you.”

Priscilla’s implication was that she treated every opposing candidate as a fly near her ear, indicating that she was never to be overlooked.

Subaru held the same opinion as Anastasia. It was inconceivable that Priscilla had actually adopted the appropriate tactics and put them into practice against her enemy factions.

And the result of Anastasia’s negligence brought about the worst of happenings on this day.

Felt: “That mister is Reinhard’s father, yeah?”

Ignoring the conversation so far, a frivolous voice shifted the topic.

Her gaze sweeping across the room, the still-eating Felt, her mouth still soiled with daisukiyaki sauces, she found Priscilla’s gaze, and glared back.

Felt: “After all, I’ve had some experiences at the Castle, so I caught what was going on from the conversation. I’m not really interested in this guy’s family relations. Only, if Reinhard and the mister are together, that's different."

Priscilla: "…Ho. And what did the little girl from the ghetto notice?"

Felt: "Although I don't really care about him, I'm not unrelated to him. The lands of the House of Astrea are in fact a lifeline for us. Except this guy hasn't actually given Reinhard the lands. The power of the family is still in the hands of that mister."

Next to Felt, Reinhard's cheeks stiffened slightly. Subaru, and the others, caught on to Felt's concern.

Having been raised as an orphan, Felt had nothing to her name, and was currently using Reinhard's parents'— The Astrea Family's lands as her base, where, bit by bit, she accumulated support by producing results.

However, those lands were not Felt's own. They were the assets of the Astrea Family, and were on loan to her and Reinhard.

But those were not Reinhard's own territories. Even he had borrowed them.

Heinkel: "Heh. Looks like you've finally realized the seriousness of the situation, idiot."

Interjecting in their conversation was Heinkel, who wore an expression of pride and laughed with an "as I expected". He looked as if he had been waiting for the topic to return to Reinhard and Felt, his gazing shifting back and forth between the two.

Heinkel: "That's it. The head of the Astrea Family is still me. I haven't passed the position on to Reinhard, nor do I intend to pass it to him. After all, the cumbersome affairs of politics shouldn't burden our busy Sword Saint."

Felt: "A family head in name only. You should be ashamed. When we went to the Astrea territories, only a handful of civil servants and maids with bloodshot eyes were maintaining it. Now that we've been restoring it, you actually dare to return to rule it?"

Heinkel: “Even if only in name, even if I’m irresponsible, the crown of family head is still mine. What’s more, haven’t my lands begun to improve? The people should be crying out in support of their lord now. I’m so loved by my people, I’m moved to the point of tears.”

Heinkel relentlessly mocked Felt, who tried to swallow her rage.

At those vile and poisonous words, Subaru’s vision turned white with rage. The room was filled with anger at that disgusting sight.

All the while Heinkel, bathed in a rain of contempt, kept a joyful face.

It was clear now. This man was completely abnormal.

Heinkel: “Your sense of crisis is right, Reinhard’s master. The Astrea territories are mine. However, I’ll never support you. You can clearly see who I’m supporting!”

Heinkel stood as if on a stage, expecting thundering applause. He gestured towards Priscilla, a clear declaration that he would support a different candidate than his son and father.

Heinkel: “I’ve heard about your achievements in the past year, taking my place, the lord’s. In addition to agreeing that is a great achievement, I will also say—it is time for you to take your leave of them now. If you understand it, hurry and hand them over to me…”

Priscilla: “Hey, commoner.”

Heinkel: “—Ahh? What is it, Lady Priscilla? I’m doing something very important right now.”

Priscilla: “Shut up.”

The ensuing violence had to be seen to be believed.

Shortly after she had finished speaking, Priscilla thrust her fan at Heinkel, who widened his eyes. Following the unfolding fan was a terrifying gust that slammed Heinkel’s slender body toward the ground with powerful momentum.

Heinkel’s eyes rolled back in his head, having lost his consciousness after the impact. But Priscilla’s attack went one step further.

She kicked him into the air with a swipe of her foot, and swiftly reached her hand up to meet his body.

Al: “Princess, end your anger here. Otherwise, he’s going to die.”

Priscilla: “…”

Priscilla was stopped before she could deliver the final blow with her arm by Al, who had predicted her outrage. Priscilla then turned to her helmeted servant, in response.

A sword of red crimson had appeared in her grabbed wrist. It had a Western-style curve and a narrow blade, but it was engraved with wave-like flames. It was a most unusual sword, having instantly materialized in, and disappearing from, Priscilla’s hand in the blink of an eye.

Witnessing that, Al slowly released Priscilla’s wrist.

Al: “Really, spare me. You even drew your Yang Sword, that’s really not good for my hear—Gah!”

Priscilla: “That was very rude, Al. From whom did you receive permission to dare to touch mine flawless skin? You won my favor on a whim, so to defile mine body is a mere dream laying at the end of a dream.”

Priscilla forcefully slapped her freed hand on Al’s stomach, bringing him agony. She exhaled loudly from her nose, then looked down at the pitiful Heinkel who was writhing on the ground.

After witnessing the brutal look in his eyes, he had certainly deserved this. However, what Al said was also true.

Priscilla: “However, there is some truth to what you said. It would be excessive to kill him.”

Al: “If you think so… then I hope you’ll be gentler with me in the future, gah.”

Priscilla: "Quiet. I am not a demon. I will allow you to lick mine feet later as a reward."

Al: "Don't put it like I get turned on by that?! It'll lead to misunderstandings!"

Al, who had fallen to his knees after receiving a blow, desperately defended himself, but did not receive Priscilla's attention. She gazed at Heinkel with her blood-red eyes, having calmed down for the time being, and snapped her fingers.

Priscilla: "Schult. Move the commoner out of here. Although dull, he is seemingly a worthwhile recruit. Considering the trouble of bringing him into the fold, giving him up would be a shame."

Schult: "Yes, Priscilla-sama."

In response to her call, another figure emerged from the hall.

It appeared that a child who was many years from being fully grown had been waiting in the corridor.

He had pink fluffy curls, a slim figure and a fair face that would easily be mistaken by a woman's, and a high voice which indicated that he had yet to reach puberty. Seeing an undeveloped child dressed in a butler's uniform felt unethical.

Schult was the name of the young boy who, if going solely by appearances, looked to be around Beatrice's age.

Schult: "I apologize, Heinkel-sama."

To the unconscious Heinkel, Schult grabbed Heinkel's feet and began to struggle to pull him outside. Of course, it was very unreasonable to expect a child to carry Heinkel out. However, Schult made no complaint about Priscilla's order, and at the same time he treated Heinkel with an attitude of respect.

Al: "Schult-kun always tries to be brave and strong, no matter what kind of an order he receives. Princess needs to remember to praise him later."

Priscilla: “That is only natural. He is under mine employ and serves me wholeheartedly. And I am not so merciless as to let mine loyal subjects go without reward. Later, I shall allow him to lick mine feet.”

Al: “Schult-kun wouldn’t realize that you’re joking and would tearfully do exactly as you request. Please give him a more conventional reward.”

Priscilla: “Hmmm. Then perhaps I shall give him the honor of being held by mine body as I sleep.”

Al: “…Well, that shouldn’t be a problem. But now I want to take his place.”

That was the listless dialogue between Priscilla and Al as they watched Schult and Heinkel leave.

Finally, all the outsiders had been removed. Now, only the members of the Royal Selection’s factions remained.

Felt: “So, what’s going to happen with that guy? You seriously want to drive us away from the Astrea territory to weaken us?”

Priscilla: “You do not have to treat that commoner’s words with such gravity. Were you not responsible for the revitalization of that territory? If the lord returns to his house intending to drive you away, then who would follow him? Although the people are foolish and ignorant, they are not heartless fools who forget their grace. If you make a large wave, a correspondingly large wave will return to you. He shall not be able to summon any waves.”

Felt: “…Then, why was that guy invited?”

Priscilla: “It has already been said, has it not? I found the situation interesting. Sooner or later, all I want shall be in mine hands. That is an established fact. In that case, my route shall only vary depending on what is entertaining and what is not. And that route is precisely decided by me. To that end, I brought him in as a toy to kill time.”

No matter what happens, the outcome cannot be changed—The absolute confidence Priscilla held transcended common sense and unreasonably imposed her will upon the world. The only way to deal with it would be to give up and bow down, or to fight it with a similar attitude. And so,

Candidates: "…"

Here, four candidates met her gaze without hesitation in an expression of confrontation. Accepting those glares, Priscilla gave a hearty, delighted laugh.

Priscilla: "Excellent. The outcome has been decided, but mine journey will naturally have its share of happy excitement. Mine self has decided that you are all a cut above the commoners. And, once you have become worthy of being mine opponent… Then, I shall of course welcome you with my full capabilities."

"You are not worthy as my opponents", was the judgement Priscilla had just made.

No, she had said so long ago. She still treated Emilia and the others as insects. She did not even recognize them as enemies at all. Then,

Felt: "I'll be sure to make you cry and regret that arrogance."

Felt's declaration was a precise representation of the will of all the occupants of the room.

Chapter 17:
That Ever-Present Armor

—Fully recovering the meal's original atmosphere was now impossible.

After hearing Felt's sharp words, a satisfied Priscilla had left the hotel with Al in tow. It could probably be said that she was delighted at having achieved all her goals there.

Considering the damage she had wrought, she really was selfish.

Everyone soon returned to their meal in the tearoom, unable to chat as happily as they had before. And so ended the dinner event.

Her impact had been incredibly hurtful to everyone present. In particular, the feelings of both Reinhard and Wilhelm must have been unimaginable to outsiders. Even so, the fortitude of those two men was strong enough that neither would allow any of their anxiety to show in their expressions.

Of course, the imminent reconciliation of grandfather and grandson could only be postponed. Just that was enough for a hard knot of grief to take root in Subaru's heart.

Otto: "We were incredibly lucky that Garfiel was not present."

Those were the words left by Otto as he departed for the Muse Chamber of Commerce following the meal.

As he had said, it would have been a serious matter if Garfiel or someone else prone to rage had been present during the meal. It was not difficult to imagine Garfiel flying at Heinkel in a rage and causing a violent tragedy.

Everyone at the breakfast had, for the most part, calm and rational natures— Maybe Priscilla had even factored that into her satisfaction.

Subaru: "…How could that be? That'd really be a coincidence among coincidences."

The luck which Priscilla arrogantly prided herself on was next to impossible. It had only brought them the worst of results. Although irrefutable, it was painful to admit.

The worry Emilia and Beatrice felt had been surely more painful than any indignation Subaru felt.

Even Felt had been acting reasonably, leaving Subaru the only one who had let his emotions get the better of him. To both foe and friend, Subaru wanted to give apologies for his lack of consideration.

Emilia and Beatrice had returned to their rooms for a short break, before accompanying Subaru on their walk.

Subaru took the time to try to walk off his frustration, his footsteps harder than usual. The inside of his shoe pressing against his foot felt rather like a reflection of his frustration.

Landing on that train of thought, Subaru began to apply more and more pressure in his steps, trying to relieve his feelings, until—

Julius: "Do not step so hard on the floor, Subaru. You will cause trouble for the staff of this inn."

Subaru, who had been gazing down at his feet, turned his head toward the sound. He had apparently unknowingly walked into the corridor facing the courtyard. Standing in the courtyard was Julius, who was bathing in the wind.

His hand swept his purple hair back in a practiced gesture, and it withstood the cool breeze with a dramatic image.

Julius's handsome face, as always, inspired envy in Subaru, who clicked his tongue at the other young man before taking a seat next to him at the porch.

Julius: "Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama are not with you, correct?"

Subaru: “That’d be the case. They’re not children. They’re at the age when they want some private time, and I have the decency to respect that right. I’ve set up a time and place for a date later.”

Julius: “Although I am unfamiliar with some of the phrases you used, it seems that even you have learned to better understand the thoughts of others.”

Subaru: “Ugh, you…!”

In a breach of convention, Julius was the one who first spoke words that instigated quarrel. However, after seeing Julius’s expression, Subaru’s annoyance dissipated.

Julius shook his head slightly,

Julius: “Apologies. If you were truly one incapable of being considerate of others, you would not have been able to denounce the Deputy Commander with such anger in front of everyone… I should offer you my gratitude.”

Subaru: “That sounds like a thanks, so please don’t give me one. That guy just rubbed me the wrong way. Compared to everyone else who maintained their cool, I must have looked awful.”

Julius: “No such thing happened. It was precisely because of your rash atitude that others could calm down, even myself included. Your impulsive reactions were helpful, it seems.”

Subaru: “You, you weren’t planning to praise me from the start, were you?”

Subaru frowned at Julius’s genuine tone.

Julius’s words were always accompanied by the traces of a taunt when spoken to Subaru, although said taunting came from both sides, so Julius was not solely at fault. In any case, it was nigh impossible for Subaru to accept that compliment in earnest.

Subaru: “I know. I should be calmer and more collected to be like a Knight. Even holding the position of Knight, I’m aware I still cannot consciously keep a cool head, even though that’d all be outlined in a schoolboy's book of manners."

Julius: "That is correct. Indeed, from a knightly perspective, your behavior was by no means commendable. However—"

Facing the uncomfortable Subaru, Julius fell silent. However, his next action led Subaru's eyes to widen in surprise.

Subaru: "What are you doing?"

Julius: "It is as you can see."

Subaru: "All I can see is you bowing at me."

Julius bent down and inclined his head to Subaru.

This was not a Knight's courtesy. Nor was it a ceremonious ritual. There was no formal inspiration of his motion at all. It was pure courtesy, one that was completely ignorant of position. It was a behavior completely unlike Julius.

Julius: "Thanks. Thank you. Thank you for showing the indignation that I could not."

Subaru: "…I have no idea what you're talking about at all."

Julius: "Valuing the honor of a Knight means that, no matter the occasion, you must act with virtue. Even if your own friend is being disdained, even if your own friend is treated with inhumane words, you cannot indulge in behaving according to your own feelings. But you are not like that."

Maintaining his posture, Julius repeatedly gave Subaru his share of thanks. For the latter had compensated for the former's shortcomings.

Subaru could only feel puzzled at the unexpected reaction.

Julius: "Caught between my Knighthood and my emotions, I quickly repressed my anger. However, seeing your passionate rebuttals, I felt ashamed of myself. So I wish to thank you."

Subaru: “Thanking me for being angry in your behalf, huh…”

Julius: “…”

Subaru uttered a sound of understanding, and Julius finally looked up.

With just one sentence, Julius had finally revealed his genuine feelings, reflected in his gaze. Seeing him, Subaru could only give him a snarl.

Subaru: “What a stupid thing to say. Really, stop kidding around.”

Julius: “…Stop kidding around, huh?”

Subaru: “Of course. Why would I be angry in your place? I was angry purely because I’d personally been ticked off, not because there was someone else who wanted to snap at that bearded guy. I could never do something as clever as express someone else’s anger.”

Subaru spoke these genuine thoughts to Julius, feeling like he had misunderstood the matter.

Subaru did not consider his anger to be some kind of noble indignation. After all, only Reinhard and Wilhelm could understand their own feelings.

Subaru was an outsider who had simply been angry that such an atmosphere had been defiled. His anger was purely for his own sake.

Subaru: “If you were angry, why didn’t you say something? I couldn’t have calmly dealt with the old man alone, but if you’d been backing me up then we might have fazed him.”

Julius: “No matter what, he is still the Deputy Commander of the Royal Guards. It would be fairly troublesome if I made an enemy of a commanding officer.”

Subaru: “This has nothing to do with your rank. Not to mention, you just blurted «no matter what», don’t be so narrow-minded.

You're constantly thinking about behaving like a Knight, or acting with a Knight's demeanor, or whatever. Is even your heart coated in a Knight's armor?"

Julius: "…"

Facing a silent Julius, Subaru rested his elbows on his knees and with his cheeks in his palms, and gave an exaggerated sigh.

What a stupid quarrel! Subaru had not only rejected Julius's gratitude, but had also been enraged by him.

Thinking of the cause of the incident, including Heinkel, made him even angrier.

Julius: "Even my heart is coated in a Knight's armor… Ah, that is pretty harsh."

Subaru: "Although I think my wording was pretty cool and artistic, just ignore it. I was only kidding."

Julius: "No, I will keep it in mind. I am glad that I am learning a lesson from you. This is something that I never would have thought possible a year ago."

Subaru: "That uncomfortable stuff might be over with, but I still have nightmares about it."

He still sometimes had dreams set in the Knights' Training Field, about his confrontation with Julius and his subsequent brutal beating.

Although the physical suffering he had experienced at the time was painful to recall, what he had gone through mentally and emotionally in the aftermath hurt far more to remember. The memory of his own incompetence had been clearly imprinted into his mind, where, from time to time, it played like a movie.

Although, of course, his nightmares were not merely filled with his duel with Julius, but that event was something that could rival the memories of several deaths.

Julius: “If you can help it, I would rather have this not continue. Thinking of meeting you in your dreams every night is unpleasant.”

Subaru: “That’s rich, coming from the culprit. Don’t you think I’d rather share my dreams in intimacy with Emilia-tan?”

Julius: “So your pursuit of her has been reduced to relying on dreams, rather than your own ability. That suits your style.”

Subaru: “You bastard, don’t treat me like trash after praising me. Take a damn look at yourself!”

Julius: “Anastasia-sama is a lovely woman. There is no greater honor than being able to serve her in at a distance. Naturally, I think I should be very happy with my place.”

At Julius’s calm response, Subaru gave a cat-like growl.

The uncomfortable atmosphere vanished along with his bow as Julius recovered his usual image. Subaru frowned in relief, cleared his throat with a cough, and changed the flow of the conversation.

Subaru: “About that bearded old man… he said he was the Deputy Commander or whatever, is that true?”

Julius: “Your doubts are understandable, but that is indeed true. That man was the Deputy Commander of the Royal Guards of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Heinkel Astrea himself.”

Subaru: “Are they blind? Or deaf? Or messed up in the head?”

Julius: “You truly do question everything. Of course, none of the Royal Guards or other squires can question the qualifications of the Deputy Commander. In fact, the title of Deputy Commander serves more like a decoration, and no one has seen him perform his duties as of yet.”

Julius answered with a shake of his head, and Subaru’s imagination swam with the mental image of a senior official.

To be given incredible rewards while shirking any truly important responsibilities—that was exactly how Subaru envisioned the majority of high-ranking government officials, and that was indeed Heinkel's situation.

On top of that, the people around him even understood his incompetence and knew of his demeanor.

Subaru: "Could it be that he's taking advantage of his status as the Sword Saint's father?"

Julius: "…That is not the complete picture. Taking the role of the Deputy Commander is not something that would escape the attention of his son, Reinhard. Although Reinhard's fairness is universally acknowledged, but what if it concerns his family? Not everyone would trust him."

Subaru: "I don't think that Reinhard would be willing to bend his moral code for his father."

Julius: "Even so, he is still Reinhard's father. No matter what others think, to Reinhard, he is undoubtedly a family member who shares his blood. No one can know what he himself feels."

Julius spoke calmly to appease the heated Subaru. Grinding his teeth, Subaru voiced a groan.

It was exactly as Julius said. No matter how mediocre he was, as long as he was Reinhard's father, then only Reinhard's own heart would know whether or not he should renounce their relationship. As a Knight who values fairness and civility, he should not be deceived by paternity. But it would not be easy for Reinhard himself to freely cut off such a relationship.

Obviously, outsiders could hold a firm stance on what Reinhard should or should not do, but to do so would be incredibly arrogant.

Subaru: "«That is not the complete picture», you said, so are there other reasons? What else could there…"

Julius: "He's also the Head of the House of Astrea, and the son of Wilhelm-sama. To put it bluntly, he is related to the Kingdom's best Knight and the previous Sword Saint. The possibility that not gifting him a high-ranking position would lead to treason cannot be overlooked.”

This was Julius’s brief, emotionless reply.

Hearing those, Subaru only needed a few seconds to understand the implication behind it.

Subaru: “This country! Whether it’s Reinhard! Or Wilhelm! I’d never believe that! If Heinkel resented the country, then the Sword Saint’s family would turn against it…?! Treating them so cautiously, as if they were a time bomb, if that’s how it is…!”

If so, wasn’t that an insult to Reinhard and Wilhelm? Their honor was so obvious, yet the country still believed them capable of treason?

The anger that Subaru now felt matched its earlier intensity, back when he was facing Heinkel. Julius shook his head and pressed a hand to Subaru’s shoulder.

Julius: “Your anger is expected. However, the Kingdom has to deal with every possibility.”

Subaru: “Something impossible isn’t a possibility! That kind of thing would clearly, obviously never happen!”

Julius: “…Wilhelm-sama is the former Commander of the Royal Guards.”

Subaru: “—?!”

Subaru, who had been trying to escape Julius’s grip, unconsciously stopped moving after those words.

Julius: “Fourteen years ago, a member of the Royal Family was abducted in the Royal Castle. At that time, Wilhelm-sama was the head of the Royal Guards, and was placed in charge of the search for the kidnapped member of the Royal Family.”

Subaru: “So, what about it? Even I know about famous events like this.”

Felt was the member of the Royal Family who had been abducted in childhood—A story that had become widespread. Subaru, who had already dismissed the story, did not catch the meaning of Julius's words.

Subaru: "I know the Royal kid was never found. So what about it? Wilhelm-san took responsibility, and then resigned as a Royal Guard, so he has a reason to hate the Kingdom? But then…"

Julius: "At that time, the former Sword Saint was sent out to subjugate the White Whale, on what became known as the Great Subjugation. That happened at the same time Wilhelm-sama had been searching for the kidnapper, away from the Royal Capital."

Subaru: "…"

Pondering Julius's words, Subaru fell into a void of thought. Something Wilhelm had once said seemed to fill that blank in.

Wilhelm had said it. He had said that he had not been able to be at his wife's side at the time of her death.

Subaru: "…He said he had not been able to be with his wife when she died, and the Royal Family investigation kept him from that. So do you mean that Wilhelm-san ended up having a grudge against the Kingdom, or something like that?"

Julius: "I do not know what Wilhelm-sama's true intent was. However, it is true that after the search for the abducted princess was terminated and the Great Subjugation ended in failure, Wilhelm-sama withdrew from the Royal Guards. After that, the branch of the Royal Guards would have collapsed if it were not for the steps Marcus-sama took to reorganize them."

Subaru: "I don't give a damn about that! I'm trying to talk about Wilhelm-san! You… Is that what you think? That Wilhelm-san would resent everyone because of his wife? That… That's…!"

Raising a banner of rebellion toward the Kingdom, due to his own resentment.

Was that really how Wilhelm van Astrea was seen by everyone?

Why, after seeing someone who was so deeply in love, and willing to give up everything for his love, could anyone think that? Had they never looked him in the eye, or gazed at his steady back?

Had they never seen the Sword Demon's frank, honest blade?

Subaru: "That person would never do such a thing, why does nobody understand!!"

Julius: "…"

This time, Subaru indeed threw off the hand on his shoulder, and shoved Julius's chest. He stood and backed up, glaring at Julius, and losing his momentum.

The yellow eyes looking back at him seemed to almost admire Subaru's anger. He understood. He knew that this degree of anger was inappropriate.

What Julius had said to Subaru had not reflected his own views. Julius's own attitude was plain for all to see.

After all, one year ago, Julius had been led by Wilhelm after the latter had slain the White Whale. He had comforted Wilhelm, who had spent fourteen long years trying to avenge his wife. There was no way that he would have ever suspected Wilhelm to intend to rebel against the Kingdom.

Subaru: "…Sorry. I was being an idiot."

Julius: "No, do not apologize. You are in the right. I am the one in the wrong—If anyone should apologize, that would be me."

Dropping their gazes, they both closed their eyes. They both felt an unbearable weight.

Their helplessness in doing anything to change the country's doubt in Wilhelm. Subaru and Julius both, even if they vented their feelings, were still ultimately powerless.

Subaru: "So is it the same thing for Reinhard?"

Julius: “…Following that same logic, Reinhard would resent the Kingdom for sending his grandmother to her death and, in turn, killing his predecessor. But that is not the case.”

Subaru: “Then…”

Julius: “However, the Kingdom does not doubt that Reinhard has no intent in holding a rebellion. Rather, that suspicion goes to Heinkel-sama.”

With the drop of Reinhard’s father’s name, Subaru’s eyes widened.

Even though it was a name he did not want to hear, he could not just plug his ears at the topic. Any conversation involving that name would not be pleasant.

Subaru: “How is Reinhard’s relationship with his father? Aside from the obvious blood one.”

Julius: “There was a period of time when Reinhard gave Heinkel-sama his complete, utmost obedience. That might seem natural since they are father and son, but… There was a time it exceeded the bounds of what it should have been.”

Julius averted his eyes from Subaru’s, as if speaking regretfully.

The relationship he had said “exceeded the bounds” of a typical parent-child relationship. His words were vague enough that it was difficult to know what he had meant. However, Julius did not look eager to elaborate, and returned his gaze to Subaru.

Julius: “As Reinhard grew to be more self-reliant, that attitude should have disappeared. But, without decisively knowing whether Reinhard would still listen to Heinkel-sama’s words, those doubts could not be dissipated.”

Subaru: “…So, to keep Heinkel from giving Reinhard an order to turn against the Kingdom, Heinkel was shown favor, right?”

Julius: “Perhaps it was even worse than that. Although this is still a rumor that is considered hearsay, I will tell you, because you are also Reinhard’s friend, and because you felt anger for his sake.”

With that troubling opening remark, Julius looked over their surroundings with a sweep. Confirming that there were no eavesdroppers, he stood close to Subaru's side. Then,

Julius: "The Deputy Commander was a suspect in the investigation of the abduction of the Royal Princess fourteen years ago."

Subaru: "—?!"

Julius: "There was no conclusive evidence. However, he has been repeatedly questioned about his suspected involvement."

Subaru: "If that's true, then, the abduction was…"

Julius: "The truth of that matter is no longer relevant. Such a suspicious character is in the position to command the Kingdom's greatest military strength. That is the crux of the problem now."

The glorious blessing following the title of Sword Saint.

However, as more and more of the situation came to light, Subaru began thinking the title to be more of a curse than a blessing.

Subaru: "However, if he's really related to the abduction, then Heinkel is the reason why his father and mother couldn't meet face to face one last time."

Julius: "…That's not all. I have also heard that it was Heinkel-sama who recommended that Thearesia-sama, who had already set her blade aside, be the one to take his place in the Great Subjugation against the White Whale."

Subaru: "He actually sent his mother to battle against the White Whale?!"

Julius: "There is an accurate record of this. The Deputy Commander refused to battle with the White Whale, and instead recommended that his mother Thearesia do it."

Utterly speechless—Subaru could not find it in himself to formulate a response.

Unlike the unfounded rumor before, what Julius had just said was backed up by real evidence. Records and witnesses meant that this was fact.

Heinkel had sent his own mother as his replacement to the battle with the White Whale.

That is to say, his mother subsequently died in battle, and his father took up the blade of revenge because he could not be with her in her last moments. However, rather than face any punishment, Heinkel used his son's talent as a shield to protect his comfortable and stable life.

How could it be? How could there be a human who was capable of this?

Subaru: "There has to be a mistake somewhere, right…?"

He did not want to believe it.

It was not about wanting to believe in Heinkel's humanity. Subaru had already accepted him as the worst kind of person, and anyone who spoke to him could instantly tell.

However, he was reluctant to admit that such evil beyond evil, such immorality, such depravity even existed. He hoped to believe in ethics, or honor, human nature, and had thought there was a limit to how much evil human nature could permit.

However, things that would be a sin even in imagination could happen in reality.

Julius: "…Apologies. That is not something I should have told someone who had not fully prepared themselves."

Julius whispered to the speechless Subaru, his voice shrouded in gloom.

Subaru could fully empathize with the feelings which Julius's tone had given away, something which was entirely unlike the always calm and rational Julius.

Subaru: “It’s… It’s not your fault, I was the one who wanted to hear about it. Although it would be a little easier if I could blame you.”

Julius: “I am not in a position to accept your words. Obviously, what I relayed to you were just rumors about the business of another family, but I still spoke of them as if I had witnessed them myself. No matter how you look at it, I spoke without thinking of the gravity of those rumors. As a Knight, I really should be ashamed.”

Subaru: “But you witnessed it, didn’t you? Since you’re Reinhard’s friend.”

Subaru replied to Julius’s self-deprecation.

Julius again lifted his head toward Subaru, who nodded back at him.

Subaru: “Although I don’t know the specifics of your friendship with Reinhard, I can still see that you’re worried about him. So I won’t condemn your anger or call it too aggressive. I don’t think it’s right to just withdraw from something like that solely because it’s not your business.”

Julius: “…Then, what would you do?”

Subaru: “Is it wrong to interfere if you hear others around you crying? If I saw my friend feeling hopeless, I’d certainly call to him. If you care about Reinhard, doing so would be completely natural. Especially since your feelings aren’t like mine.”

If Julius were to interfere for nothing other than his curiosity, Subaru would regard him with contempt.

However, Julius’s feelings, as proven by both his attitude and his words in their exchange, were nothing so shameful.

Subaru: “Didn’t I just tell you? There’s no need to adhere so rigidly to you knightly honor or whatever. And even if there is a need, occasionally taking off your armor and becoming Juli wouldn’t be so bad. Who’s to say that acting casually wouldn’t lead to a better situation?”

“Juli” was the pseudonym Julius had given during the battle with the Witch Cult.

Due to his position, Julius was unable to join any mercenary group, so he had elegantly hidden his identity with a slightly falsified name. In the end, however, no one ended up using it, not even Julius himself. However, that Julius was the one least like a Knight so far.

Julius: “Juli, huh… That is quite the nostalgic name!”

Subaru: “It was from so long ago, and it was only used once. I’m pretty impressed with myself for remembering it.”

Julius: “«There’s no need to adhere so rigidly to your knightly honor or whatever», you really have stated some difficult things. I am sure you know what they all call me.”

Subaru: “It’s because they’ve been calling you the greatest and whatnot that you’ve become so physically and mentally stiff. You should shed that armor when you bathe, and do some stretches with me before putting it back on.”

Subaru bent over, affixing his palms to the ground as if showing off his newfound flexibility. Although his body had been quite stiff before he had started learning parkour, the first thing he did was to learn how to move with more softness and pliability.

Then, to Subaru who was showing off his flexibility,

Julius: “If you are trying to show me up, I really cannot do anything but sigh.”

Subaru: “Oh?!”

As he spoke, Julius spread his legs apart and reached toward the ground. Subaru could not help but admire his control over his slender legs and the suppleness of his hips as he lowered himself to the ground.

Was that to say that Julius could easily surpass Subaru in any area?

Subaru: “Gah… But, but! If it were playing a Lyulyre, or sewing, I’d definitely win…!”

Julius: “Although I cannot see the merit of triumphing in hobbies, I have also taken up playing musical instruments. Although I would have to say that tailoring is fairly difficult.”

Subaru: “Grrr! You really had to say it! Hobbies! A hobby held by a guy like you can’t be anything but superficial. I’ll never form a band with you. My lead singer role will be taken away!”

Julius unwound his feet and stood with a flourish.

He suddenly flicked his bangs at Subaru, then smiled at the sky as if boasting a victory.

Julius: “I see. As Juli, gazing at the sky and bathing in the wind feels like this.”

Subaru: “Eh?”

Julius: “In retrospect, the sky I saw back then was also somewhat different from how it usually was. So this would be the reason, then.”

Subaru: “You keep getting more and more unreasonable. You fake bastard.”

Subaru shrugged his shoulders in annoyance and flopped onto the floor of the corridor. Julius narrowed his eyes, being dazzled by the sun, displaying a wry smile at Subaru’s attitude.

At last, the uncomfortable air surrounding their conversation had dispersed.

Of course, what they had discussed was still lodged in their memories, and lumps still remained in their hearts. But, even so, they could at least work through their frustration together.

—Looking at that image from a distance, the two would seem like a pair of ordinary friends.

Chapter 18:
A Time for Song and Dance

1

Subaru finished his simultaneously important and trivial conversation with Julius and left the Water Plumage Pavilion with Emilia and Beatrice.

Emilia: “In the courtyard, you were chatting in a friendly way with Julius for once. What were you talking about?”

Subaru: “First of all, thinking that I was getting along with that guy was a mistake, but what do you think we were talking about?”

Emilia: “Where should we go play next time?’ Something like that.”

Subaru: “Are we school friends?!”

Even if Emilia’s casual assumption about their relationship was right, even assuming Julius and Subaru went to the same school, they would be in entirely different social groups. Schools, just like society, ran on a hierarchy.

In a sense, didn’t something like division between classes exist universally, not just the aristocratic society?

Subaru: “Whether in this world or another world, those hardships are the same…”

Emilia: “Hey, hey, what did you talk about?”

Subaru: “I was anxious to ask about those recent hostile events at the tearoom. What exactly happened earlier? What preceded that? What’s going to happen next? Those kinds of topics.”

Emilia: “Isn’t that being friendly?”

Emilia tilted her head in question. Subaru followed suit with a sigh.

Looking at only their trivial words at the end of their conversation, maybe they did look like friends. But it was himself and Julius, so that wasn't possible. He wasn't a friend, he was something infinitely more annoying.

Although it was impossible to say exactly what that was.

Subaru: "Well, he's definitely not a friend. There's no doubt about it."

Emilia: "Honestly…"

Emilia turned around to look to Beatrice, who wordlessly sighed in response. Subaru felt somewhat alienated by the air of mutual understanding between the two.

In any case, his conversation with Julius in the courtyard had concerned Reinhard, Wilhelm, and their relationship with Heinkel Astrea. So if he truthfully conveyed the contents of their conversation to Emilia, then Subaru would feel rather guilty. In addition to hesitating to reveal the private affairs of the Astrea Family, Subaru did not want to cause unnecessary stress for Emilia.

—After all, it was a helpless, tricky situation.

The deep scars in the history of the Astrea Family were something that outsiders could not easily approach. Julius had been involved in the history himself and, acknowledging Subaru's concern, had relayed everything to him.

—And still, Subaru felt a nauseous itch in his stomach.

Emilia: "So, Subaru. Although it's a pleasure to take a walk like this, what are you planning?"

Subaru: "…"

While Subaru wrestled with his inner anxiety, Emilia suddenly smiled and uttered such a remark.

Subaru, taken by surprise, was momentarily lost for words. He hurriedly blinked and shrugged.

Subaru: “That’s harsh to hear, Emilia-tan. I just had a pure wish to wander the beautiful Watergate City with Emilia-tan. At most, I have only a trace of a temptation to lure you too close to a spot with water dragons and appreciate your appearance when soaked with water.”

Emilia: “Huuuu, Subaru, to say such a thing. You really are a stubborn person. Even I know that something so trivial isn’t your real intent.”

Beatrice: “…”

Emilia raised her pouting cheeks, and Subaru pressed a hand to his forehead, uncomfortable. He looked to Beatrice for aid, however, the young girl walking between Emilia and Subaru gazed up at Subaru with the same expression Emilia wore.

Without any support, Subaru quickly raised his hands in surrender.

Subaru: “Okay, I surrender. I’m sorry. I’ll give up on the Emilia-tan Wet Clothes Plan.”

Emilia: “Su-ba-ru.”

When his name was called out in anger, Subaru dropped his raised hands and surrendered for real this time.

Emilia: “Subaru, you’re naughty.”

Subaru: “You saw through me, Emilia-tan. Although, I was your mentor, so I should be rewarded… Right, right, I’ll be serious now.”

Emilia: “Stop it already.”

In response to Emilia, who’d raised her hand in an “I’ll hit you” gesture, Subaru could only smile wryly.

Subaru: “I wasn’t trying to hide anything, I just wanted to give you a little surprise. Right now, we’re headed to Priestella’s city park, where I unexpectedly met the Songstress, yesterday.”

Emilia: “Wow, Songstress-san? Um, then, will she be there today?”

Subaru: “Your shining eyes are adorable. Yeah, I have the famed Songstress’s contact information. Although I have faith in Otto’s ability to negotiate, I also have faith that his bad luck will probably cost us this opportunity. So, this is insurance.”

Emilia: “I see. And if we’re on good terms with Songstress-san, then she herself could ask Kiritaka-san to trade us the magic ore as a personal favor.”

Subaru: “That’s it. Well done.”

Subaru gestured his arms over his head in the shape of a circle. Emilia was so innocently happy.

In fact, although the transaction would hardly be as simple and straight-forward as Emilia had said, there was no need to point out her mistake. Emilia was only purely looking forward to getting along with Liliana. Subaru could handle all the other stuff behind the scenes.

Subaru: “I can’t help but feel that the likes of Emilia-tan and Liliana will have some kind of a chemical reaction…”

Emilia: “Chemical reaction?”

Subaru: “From the looks of it, I think Emilia-tan and Liliana will get along well.”

Emilia: “Will we? Haha, I hope so.”

Although somewhat apologetic to Emilia, who was just looking forward to the meeting, Subaru had already been somewhat beset by the fatigue that would surely follow any meeting with Liliana.

Even while hoping that Liliana would be in the park to fulfill his goals, Subaru prayed that he would not have to see her again. Of course, if she wasn’t there, the afternoon would just be a date with Emilia—although he wished to avoid that, Subaru couldn’t deny that he would enjoy it.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, don’t you want to go cruising on a water dragon with me? I think that’d be fun, and it would strengthen our bonds.”

Emilia: “I’m not sure what cruising is, but if it’s anything with a ship, I think Subaru would get seasick if we did. That would tire you out, so we should avoid it.”

Beatrice: “Not to mention, the park is right in front of us, in fact. Now isn’t the time to give up, I suppose.”

Beatrice pulled on an uncomfortable Subaru’s wrist, and led him onwards as she continued to walk forward.

They had arrived at the destination without any hesitation, and Subaru gave up any resistance after seeing the entrance to the park. The fountain located at the center or city’s park showed an unexpected spectacle. The audience gathered in the park was even larger than the one on the previous day.

Subaru: “Since we came here earlier, I was prepared for the possibility that Liliana wouldn’t be here…”

Seeing the crowd gathered, however, that thought turned out to be merely a worry. Today’s performance seemed upbeat, with both rallies and applause from fanatical listeners, an atmosphere which dominated the park.

Subaru: “Clapping and yelling?”

Beatrice: “Today looks quite a bit livelier than yesterday, in fact.”

Met with the same confusion as Subaru, Beatrice tilted her head to the side.

Like the magical broadcast that morning, Liliana’s singing was typically peaceful, and quietly drew its audience away from reality. It was precisely because of that nature that the presence of this frenzied crowd seemed off.

The expected situation had been mixed with something unexpected.

Emilia: “Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. She really deserves to be the Songstress-san.”

Although Emilia was eager to push through the hustle and bustle to have a good look, Subaru had a bad feeling about the entire situation.

As they approached the front of the crowded audience, Subaru began to feel an uneasy sense of regret.

Subaru: “…”

However, he could not quite vocalize that feeling, and so Subaru had no excuse to stop.

Not to mention that Emilia was looking forward to seeing the commotion for herself. After all, Subaru could not betray those amethyst eyes which sparkled with expectation. Or rather, he could not make a decision in time.

Soon after, the fanaticism of the masses turned into a thunderous round of applause as they continued to push through the crowd.

That is to say, the cause of that commotion was coming to an end. The place where the crowd’s excited sight was concentrated became visible. And there,

???: “That was a really amazing dance! After seeing that extraordinary dance I started to lose myself!”

Priscilla: “Not at all, your performance and singing were what captured mine attention completely. Just as it deserved to. It has been a long time since I’ve seen such a display of skill.”

There, talking and shaking hands tightly with each other, were the Songstress and a woman of crimson.

Subaru’s intuition had been right.

2

Today, Subaru again bore witness to an audience shedding tears to Liliana’s playing and singing.

If something today were different from yesterday, it would be the presence of Priscilla, who stood beside Liliana, also being showered with “your dance was too powerful”, “so touching”, “I’ll definitely come again”. The recipient of all this generous praise, Priscilla, fanned herself and spread her arms wide in response.

After that rough interaction with their fans, the only people left were Subaru, Emilia, and Beatrice. Noticing their obtrusively idleness, Liliana’s twin-tails bounced once more.

Liliana: “Oh, hey! If it isn’t Natsuki-sama and Emilia-sama! And Natsuki-sama’s little girl-sama! What are you all up to?”

Beatrice: “I wouldn’t know who this girl-sama is, I suppose. Subaru, explain it to me, in fact.”

Subaru: “Why don’t we let the one who came up with the name explain it? Here, I’ll give you some tasty candy, so behave.”

Beatrice: “You won’t mmm… fool me like this, I suppose, mmm…”

Setting aside Beatrice, who was busy sucking on the sweet in her mouth, Subaru turned to Liliana, whose twin ponytails bounced eagerly like dog tails. Although Emilia widened her eyes in response to the Songstress’s exaggerated reaction, Liliana’s presentation of her odd behavior was only just beginning.

Subaru: “Although it’s only been a day, here you are, staging another grand performance. Were you kicked out by Kiritaka again?”

Liliana: “Eeeh! Weeeeeeell, that would be right. The one who loved me gave me such an earnest plea, so I complied. Isn’t that the mark of an excellent woman? I think it is.”

Subaru: “So, even after being booted out, you thought that holding a performance would be perfectly fine…”

Liliana straightened her thin chest and stroked a nonexistent moustache. Next to her, Priscilla stood with arms crossed across her ample chest. Catching sight of Subaru, she snorted at him with contempt.

Priscilla: “What have you been doing? Even if you were taken in by mine allure, resting your gaze upon me like that is incredibly rude. Men who are obsessed with mine beauty are at most allowed to inhale my scent to fuel their sweet dreams.”

Subaru: “I didn’t see your dance, but even if I had I wouldn’t have been too excited. I only like delicate type girls like Emilia-tan, so your alluring body doesn’t do much for me.”

Priscilla: “Preferring a half-demon over me is a mark of utter helplessness. Of course, I am not so narrow-minded as to not accept strange tastes. Moreover, if you cannot understand true beauty, then your gaze can only be dismissed as hopelessly short-sighted.”

Subaru sensed a certain futility in attempting to argue tit-for-tat with her. Their values were too different. Subaru could not use his common sense to compete with Priscilla, who genuinely believed that the world itself belonged to her.

Anyway,

Emilia: “«An amazing dance», that is to say, Priscilla was dancing?”

Priscilla: “Feel regret that you missed it. Dancing is not something I do lightly. That is to say, this artist’s song had something to offer.”

Priscilla presented Liliana to the stunned Emilia.

Subaru was shocked by her answer, while Liliana rolled her eyes at him. Ignoring Liliana, who began to pretend she was blowing bubbles, Subaru stared straight at Priscilla.

Subaru: “You danced for people? Hey, that’s completely unexpected.”

Priscilla: “Then, how would you regard the frenzy of that crowd of fools just now? Although the artist’s song did have magic in it, without the presence of mine dance, the audience would have merely fallen into a stupor and become puppets who could only listen. Although that could be said to be a form of enjoyment, I am not too fond of it. Fools shall remain fools, and the ignorant shall remain ignorant. Why not have color added to both mine and their day?”

Subaru: “…In other words, fools indulging in foolishness will be happier?”

Priscilla: “Ho. You are obviously a commoner, but you are quite adept at comprehension.”

Feeling grateful at Priscilla’s praise would be impossible.

Not to mention that Priscilla showed no sign that she had remembered his earlier presence in the inn. He would settle for being happy that Priscilla remembered Emilia.

Liliana: “But, but, Priscilla-sama and Emilia-sama. So many exciting people are assembled here, I really appreciate it.”

Liliana had withstood the sinister atmosphere and offered that reaction.

She had picked up on the rivalry between the two and had designated herself as the mediator, rather than the awkward Subaru doing so. Maybe her odd quirks and air-headedness were just a front.

Liliana: “Ehehe. Was my song so beautiful? Honestly, that just embarrasses me. Hehehehe.”

Subaru: “Nope, this is her real nature.”

Liliana was blinded by her delirious state and fell into a fidgeting embarrassment. Subaru realized he had overestimated her and slumped his shoulders disappointedly. Then, he suddenly noticed that there was no one around Priscilla.

Subaru: “Are you alone? No Al, nor that piece of shit, nor the cute butler?”

Priscilla: “I allowed Schult to go for a walk, but he seems to have gotten lost. He tries very hard, but is a good-for-nothing at everything he does, that is the cute kind of child he is. Since Al’s constant nagging is annoying, I sent him out to look for Schult. As for the piece of shit, I am unsure. Perhaps he is at a tavern somewhere."

Subaru: "So «piece of shit» is actually a common language between us…"

Subaru was thrown off by the unexpectedly serious reply. It seemed that Heinkel was poorly received even by his own faction.

Although he fully understood why Heinkel was treated that way, why had Priscilla bothered to invite someone like that to her faction?

Subaru: "She'd definitely say something like «because having him nearby would interesting», though…"

Priscilla: "You seem to understand quite well. Well, I have collected him for some rather small reasons. Those who approach me and attempt to market themselves shall be welcomed so long as I can find them a purpose for mine amusement. If they become an obstacle, they can be discarded at any time. That man is, at best, that kind of person."

Subaru: "No, how do I say this… He doesn't seem like he'd live up to your expectations in any way whatsoever."

It seemed as if it was precisely because her expectations had not been met that Priscilla had flown into a violent rage. But perhaps Priscilla had even already long forgotten that event.

Subaru: "But don't you feel like this is dangerous? Right now, I'd never let Emilia-tan go out alone."

Priscilla: "What danger is there to me, now that my three attendants are absent? The only advantage they would grant me would be the ability to see what is behind mine self."

Subaru: "Ah, is that it?"

That was quite a disdainful judgment of the capabilities Al and the others possessed. However, after seeing Priscilla in action, that perspective was understandable. At the tatami room, the ability that

Priscilla had demonstrated was far superior to what was possible for a human.

Subaru: “Speaking of which, I’ve also been kicked in the jaw before.”

During the loops that had happened in the Royal Capital, Subaru had once displeased Priscilla enough to have been kicked in the face. His body had flown so high it had hit the ceiling, and he had been put in a half-dead state with just one shot.

Remembering it made Subaru feel severe pain, like his jaw had been broken.

Subaru: “So, you threw Al aside and came to see Liliana?”

Priscilla: “This mere urban landscape has done well to soothe mine boredom. Unlike the narrow structure of the Royal Capital, the city has many a place worth viewing. As I explored, a lovely river of song flowed to me.”

Liliana: “Yeah~, at first when the dancing created a frenzy, I really had no clue what would happen. Sometimes there are people who recklessly join my performance and change the mood. Although most of the time my song hits them, and they change their minds.”

Subaru: “You really don’t act like the Songstress should at all…”

To just invade a song like that was too bold of a move.

And, indeed, it was rather a shock that Priscilla had joined in with a dance. That the audience had been so taken with it meant that her dancing was on par with the song itself.

Priscilla: “Although it would be a stretch to say you can win hearts and minds like I can, there is in fact a certain value in your voice. How about it? Come to mine side. Let mine influence give you status, and allow me to offer you the honor of playing for mine mansion.”

Liliana: “…”

In other words, Priscilla rather appreciated Liliana's song and gave her an unreasonable demand. Although the idea painted Liliana as Priscilla's personal musician, darker implications behind Priscilla's words were present as well.

If her anger at being unable to win Liliana reached the same level as her appreciation for Liliana's music, what would she do? It was that terrible implication.

Then, Liliana replied,

Liliana: "Thank you very much! That's such an uplifting evaluation, and it makes me really happy! But! but! but! Please allow me to refuse…"

She did not know about Priscilla's terrible anger, nor was she capable of reading the mood.

With that horrifying ignorance, she rejected Priscilla's proposal with casual enthusiasm.

Priscilla: "Ho, you refuse. Why?"

Sure enough, Priscilla's voice lowered, and her gaze darkened.

Shivering. Subaru, who was completely unrelated to the situation between them, felt a blade of cold brush his back.

In one sentence, the atmosphere was about to turn deadly.

In her own world, free of tension, Liliana stroked the box which held her instrument.

Liliana: "I am Liliana, a traveling bard. Although it is true that I am being asked to stay in the city like this, I am a traveler who will return to wandering in the wind sooner or later. Not bound by land, not bound by others, that is how I serve my profession—such a way of survival that has long been decided."

Priscilla: "Therefore mine invitation was refused."

Liliana: "Whether my mother, or her mother, or her mother's mother, my family has always walked that path. We are all people who have chosen to forsake everything that is material, so we may carry on, leaving only song in the hearts of others. Just as no one can capture the wind, no one can stop a song. Therefore—"

Priscilla: "…"

Liliana: "Although I am very happy about your invitation, please allow me to refuse. After all, even I do not know where my song will travel, because every decision has been entrusted to the wind."

Lifting her instrument, speaking proudly, Liliana's expression bore no trace of hesitation. Her usual tricky expression was gone, as was her deliberately affected atmosphere that existed to provoke the nerves of others.

There was just a bard—the pride of such creatures who wished to preserve their stories in song.

After listening to Liliana's reply, Priscilla held one hand aloft and closed one eye. With her other eye, she trained a scorching crimson gaze, like boiling magma was held within them, at Liliana.

Then, at Liliana's unwavering expression, Priscilla suddenly gave a sigh.

Priscilla: "—Excellent. That determination is also pleasing. Forgive me, the vulgar one here seems to have been I."

Liliana: "No, no, not at all. I am very, deeply sorry."

Toward Priscilla, whose mouth was on the verge of blooming into a smile, Liliana offered a heartfelt response.

Really, the interaction between the two left Subaru dumbstruck. Squinting at his frozen expression, Priscilla frowned as if displeased.

Priscilla: "What is it, commoner? You seem bothered."

Subaru: "It's really nothing other than shock. I thought you were going to bisect Liliana after she rejected you, and I started to shiver…"

Priscilla: “That is a rather ridiculous worry.”

No such thing would happen, was what Priscilla’s “Hmph” indicated.

However, before she had heard Liliana’s reasoning, Priscilla had no doubt intended to kill her. Before that decision had been consciously reached, however, Liliana’s opportune words had the balance to tilt in a lucky direction. At least, that was how Subaru saw it.

Emilia: “But, I was also a little surprised. Since Priscilla-san seems like a «I’ll take whatever I want» kind of person.”

The landmine that Subaru had taken pains to avoid was unexpectedly triggered by Emilia.

Emilia bluntly blurted out her impression of Priscilla. Subaru involuntarily straightened his back and spun around to face Priscilla. But, Priscilla merely closed her eyes, and—

Priscilla: “What foolish words, half-devil. How could your clouded eyes ever judge mine character? There is a limit to how many impolite insults I shall allow.”

Beatrice: “What an unforgivable girl, in fact. If you have time to muse on the helplessness of others, then you should reflect on yourself and your own demeanor, I suppose. Betty thinks that would be more meaningful to both parties, in fact.

Emilia: “Beatrice…”

As she listened to Priscilla’s relentless derision, Beatrice gripped Emilia’s hand, who had a troubled face. Priscilla, however, raised her eyebrows, looking at Beatrice as if noticing her for the first time.

Priscilla: “Such a little girl dares to speak like that. Mine magnanimity is not determined by age. If you hold the incorrect notion that your youth will spare you mine wrath, you would best change your attitude right now.”

Beatrice: “Your meddling really is unnecessary, I suppose. Watch who you call little girl, in fact. Taking Betty’s appearance at face value will cost you dearly.”

Flames of hostility burst into existence between Priscilla and Beatrice.

The two girls dressed in elaborate dresses seemed to have terrible compatibility. Although Subaru never doubted for a second that Beatrice would win, he knew that these conflicts were inevitable when the Royal Candidates met. This was just the type of relationship they had.

Subaru: “Don’t be so stubborn, Beako. Priscilla’s just volatile like this, and arguing with her is pointless.”

Beatrice: “Subaru, do not stop Betty, in fact. Aren’t you angry that Emilia is being belittled, I suppose? Show me some evidence you’re a man, in fact.”

Subaru: “Could you not say such terrible things?! Not to mention…”

Subaru was shocked that Beatrice, who rarely showed concern towards people besides him, was angry for Emilia’s sake. Even Emilia, the recipient of that concern, was surprised.

Emilia: “Beatrice, I’m fine.”

Moving Beatrice’s hand out of the way, Emilia gently touched the girl’s head. For a second, a tearful expression appeared on Beatrice’s face.

But it lasted for merely a moment. Beatrice adopted her usual expression as she turned back to Priscilla.

Beatrice: “Be grateful that you’ve been spared, I suppose.”

Priscilla: “That is how you should feel. Thank your own adorable face.”

Both Beatrice and Priscilla snorted slightly.

Although at the end Priscilla had ended up praising Beatrice's appearance, the infuriated Beatrice was completely unaware. "I'll let you go because you're cute", that was an odd explanation. Subaru did not understand it at all.

Subaru: "You really are an irrational woman…"

Priscilla: "Of course. Are you so arrogant that you believe yourself capable of seeing through any woman, let alone I?"

Subaru: "Are you saying it's my fault…? What really started this incident was you telling Liliana you wanted her."

Priscilla's reasoning for allowing Liliana to escape the palm of her hand remained a mystery. Subaru directed a curious gaze at her. Unexpectedly, Priscilla covered her mouth with her fan.

Priscilla: "Everything in this world is already mine. As such, there is no necessity to hold all that is beautiful and lofty in mine palm. Those things just need to exist. As long as they continue to exist, then there is no problem."

Subaru: "…"

Priscilla: "This world is already mine courtyard, that is to say, where a songbird sings is unimportant. Placing her into a cage? Vulgar. Guarding her from an outside enemy's hands? Vulgar. In fact, those are all rather troublesome actions."

Priscilla's views drove any of Subaru's presumptions into the ground. Her alienation from even alienation left Subaru speechless.

That was not to say that Subaru was unable to understand what she was saying. However, what she saw was just too different from what Subaru saw.

Therefore, Subaru would never understand her for as long as he lived.

Frankly, he thought it was horrible. But maybe it could be seen in another light. This terrible feeling, perhaps, might also inspire admiration or longing in others. Maybe that was exactly why Al chose to follow Priscilla.

Liliana: “Hey, hey, hey! Now that everyone’s calmed down, let me serve as an ambassador and show off goodwill as I show off my voice! Yeah, I’ll do just that!”

In this way, slicing through the atmosphere, Liliana abruptly made her own proposal. She took her Lyulyre and flicked its strings at tremendous speed, before concentrating on swaying her own body along.

Liliana: “Only this time, Priscilla-sama doesn’t need to join in with a dance, just enjoying the song is fine. I will open fire with the full passion of the Songstress! Please listen carefully!”

Priscilla: “Ho?”

Liliana’s words brought an expression of interest to Priscilla’s face.

Liliana: “Emilia-sama also seems to have first arrived just as my first song ended. I hope that instead of seeing me as a singer whose selling point is her cuteness, you’ll come to see me as poet who has earned a little bit of money with her blessed singing voice and her excellent playing technique.”

Emilia: “Wow, really?”

Liliana: “Although I’m not the most qualified of musicians, I hope you’ll be satisfied.”

Regardless of Liliana’s assertion, Emilia was undoubtedly interested in her performance and singing. That was why Emilia, who had been taken in by their previous interaction, looked forward to Liliana’s proposal.

Taking note of the subtle sense of distance between Emilia and Priscilla, Liliana appeared to enter a state of preparation. She discreetly waved Subaru over and said in a quiet voice,

Liliana: “Natsuki-sama, Natsuki-sama. Although this is just my personal opinion, are Emilia-sama and Priscilla-sama on poor terms?

Subaru: “That’s hardly a matter of opinion, it’s obvious from their exchanges. Besides, Priscilla doesn’t get along with anyone, of course there’s tension with Emilia-tan.”

Liliana: “This is huge!”

Liliana seemed shocked, and her hair jumped like an alert dog’s tail. Were nerves linked to her hair? He really wanted to reach out and grab it.

Liliana: “So, so, let me come here and cut that tension away, and unite the two in a world of charm and song. Ah! Just now, did your imagination just annoyingly turn somewhere dangerous when I said «cut»? That’s no good!”

Subaru: “It’s exhausting when you say both inspiring and uninspiring things in one sentence, so don’t do that anymore.”

Subaru marveled at Liliana, who seemed like a madman, yet was capable of caring for others. Sweeping away the bad air with a song was something simple and straightforward.

Both were companions in shared interest to Liliana’s singing. Even Priscilla would not act cynically towards Emilia as she listened to the Songstress she so admired.

Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them, Natsuki-sama? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “No, I don’t think so.”

Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them, Natsuki-sama? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “Is this a parody where I can’t advance unless I say yes?”

Liliana presented that false choice with the same inflection and tone, and Subaru had no choice but to give up and choose “Yes”.

Liliana's expression suddenly became open again.

The high degree of difficulty in communication between the human species and the Liliana species was certainly a matter to be considered properly in the future.

Subaru: "Alright, I'll buy some snacks while Liliana sings. Emilia-tan, I'll be right back, so don't argue with anyone and wait here quietly, okay?"

Emilia: "Really. You don't need to worry so much, and besides it wouldn't happen anyway. I don't want to fight with Priscilla-san."

Subaru had cautioned Emilia just to be sure, but she wore a large smile. Although he did not doubt Emilia, even if she did not initiate an argument, Priscilla's presence made the likelihood of one rather high.

Subaru: "Beatrice. If something happens with Emilia-tan, I'll leave it up to you."

Beatrice: "I know, in fact. If that girl tries to talk again, I'll turn her into ash, I suppose."

Subaru: "You won't argue either, right?"

Committing that task to Beatrice, who was much more volatile than Emilia, Subaru prepared to leave the park. But, before that,

Subaru: "Priscilla, is there anything you won't eat?"

Priscilla: "How unexpected. A commoner like you is actually showing consideration. Well, in that case, prepare something interesting. If you find something boring, I shall present it back to you along with your decapitated head."

Subaru: "Guessing what you'd like would be like playing rock-paper-scissors, why'd you have to impose that cruel condition?!"

Subaru thought about giving her the first delicacy he could find. Priscilla being Priscilla frowned at his answer.

Priscilla: “Rock, paper… scissors?”

She tilted her head to the side.

Since she had once forgotten Subaru, maybe she had even forgotten that they had played rock-paper-scissors, in the past.

Subaru had no idea what to say. She truly was impossible to deal with in every sense of the word.

Emilia: “Subaru, be careful.”

Beatrice: “If anything happens, call for Betty, in fact.”

Sent off by Emilia and Beatrice’s gazes, Subaru waved his hand. Afterwards, he waved his hand and winked at Liliana as if flirting, then ran from the park.

Soon afterwards, the light melody of Liliana’s Lyulyre arrived on the wind.

Hearing it, Subaru thought of returning to the park as soon as possible, thinking that he had to be a part of the recital at all costs. He injected more power into his running stride.

3

It had been ten minutes since Subaru left the park.

Subaru: “I’m so worthless, really.”

After leaving the store, Subaru looked at the contents of his paper bag and sighed.

In order to procure proper desserts, the errand boy Subaru went for the first suitable store he found and completed his shopping as soon as possible. Although he was intrigued by Priestella’s famous delicacy, a rare product called Gina Jelly, he didn’t have the courage to bring it back to Priscilla.

Although phrasing it as fearing the of deterioration the relationship between the two factions sounded nice, what Subaru in fact feared was Priscilla's unsatisfied reaction itself.

Subaru: "But, I wonder if this tastes the same as Eel Jelly. Although I do feel ashamed about lacking the courage to confirm it for myself, I don't quite hate myself."

Subaru whistled at his complicated self-examination, running along the road to the park at a brisk pace.

He had counted ten minutes since he had left, and there had been no change in his contract link with Beatrice. Even so, his masculine pride bid him to return as soon as possible, but,

Subaru: "Gah, sorry."

Turning quickly around a corner, he nearly collided with someone. Although he had hurriedly avoided them, Subaru turned his head to make sure.

Subaru: "Sorry, my bad. I don't think I hit you, but are you okay?"

???: "Hey, bro, is that any way to apologize? You should show me more sincerity!"

The man who Subaru had almost collided with replied in a rough voice, his expression changing as he saw Subaru.

At the same time, Subaru himself was also stunned.

Subaru: "Whoa, is it Chin? You were even hired by Felt, why are you still up to the same mischief?"

Rachins: "You're so damn annoying! I've told you that it's not Chin! And what are you even doing here?!"

The man who angrily spat those words was yesterday's messenger. The one who had made a mess of delivering his message. According to what Felt had said, he had supposedly been instructed to spend the night at another hotel in the city.

Subaru: "You're all alone, and not with Ton and Kan? That's really curious."

Rachins: “Curious or whatever, what do you even know about me? There’s nothing between us, so why do you keep trying to start something? You’re so annoying, goddamn move already.”

Subaru: “You’re so cold, even though we have a relationship of life and death.”

Rachins: “I don’t remember that kind of thing?!”

Rachins, who was unfamiliar with Subaru, made an irritated face as he tried to avoid him.

Even Subaru himself had trouble understanding why he felt such kinship. Perhaps the ordinary person sensors in Subaru’s heart treated Tonchinkan as ordinary people. So many of the people in this world were ridiculously strong, so facing them would have Subaru breathe a sigh of relief.

Even though they had obviously killed him once before. He was really getting bolder.

Rachins: “Anyway! Don’t bother me! I’m working right now!”

Subaru: “You used to screw around and mess with people, and now you’re doing proper work… I’m so happy for you.”

Rachins: “Who the hell is this «you»?!”

As Subaru pretended to weep, Rachins escaped from him and headed for the crowd. Having received a cold reaction, Subaru scratched his head in self-reflection.

If one had the bad habit of not taking the initiative to talk to people, there would also be a lingering sense of distance.

Watching Rachins disappear into the sea of people, Subaru turned toward the park again. And then his feet suddenly stopped.

Subaru: “Hmm?”

Subaru turns his head and begins to feel suspicious. Before his eyes, in that subtle moment, is the reason that Subaru stopped—there were people who had stopped.

The crowd that Rachins had headed towards were all frozen in their tracks, and Subaru inadvertently followed suit. Rachins curled his lip and pushed his way out of the crowd.

Rachins: “This guy, that guy, and this guy too! What’re you all looking at?!”

Filled with irritated insults, Rachins also aligned his gaze with the gaze of the masses, which were directed at the top of the roof of a towering building.

An exceptionally tall building that acted as a clock tower, inlaid with a mosaic of crystal engravings, and a magic crystal fitted at the very top. In any metropolis or town, this building would be taken for granted. Each city or town would have several of these clock towers.

In the city of Priestella, there were also a number of clock towers scattered about. The clock tower here was merely one of many. However,

???: “—Gosh, honestly. Please excuse me for making a ruckus, my sincere apologies.”

There, a figure stood, staring out from the open window of the clock tower, dangerously close to its edge. The figure’s attire drew the attention of everyone nearby, and its voice trembled as if bathing in the weight of all that attention.

???: “Thank you. I really only need just a little bit of it, so please let me borrow your time.”

It spoke words of apology, but, compared to genuine words of regret, its words felt far more self-righteous, as if prioritizing its own intentions.

That shivering voice broke, sharply. Listening to it was painful on the ears, and there was a fierce, desperate need to remove that discomfort immediately.

The reason for that strange feeling could perhaps be traced to that figure's off-putting appearance.

—The figure's head was entirely wrapped in bandages, leaving only its dazzling eyes uncovered. Its body was wrapped tightly with a black coat, and both wrists were captured by a long chain, the ends of which dragged on the ground, swaying both left and right as their owner paced the tower.

It offered the masses a strange gesture—a smile, perhaps, but the bandages concealed and distorted its mouth too much for the expression to be comforting.

???: "My apologies, I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Wrath."

After saying that terrible title, the figure reported its name.

???: "—I am called Sirius Romanée-Conti."

With malice, she smiled.

Chapter 19:
Theater of Malice

1

Those words were spoken with both intimacy and graciousness.

Hearing the bandaged figure's opening speech, the crowd could only gaze up in stunned silence. The figure standing high above them had a peculiar, striking appearance. Its voice was ear-piercing, yet incredibly entrancing.

However, those notable features were secondary to something much greater.

The reason why no one dared to move their eyes from that figure was, in fact, incredibly simple. Calling that reason biological instinct would be no exaggeration.

—No one would be so foolish as to heedlessly look away from a life-threatening enemy.

???: "Huh, what?"

???: "What did that person say just now?"

???: "This a joke, right? The Witch Cult, what's with…"

Delayed understanding gradually spread through the crowd.

However, no one took action. Everyone merely questioned the people near them, as if doubting what they had heard.

Rachins: "Just now, what did that bastard say? Did you hear it?!"

Rachins, who had raced back towards Subaru, shared that reaction. Although he crossed the crowd and approached Subaru while keeping an eye on the clocktower, Subaru, standing at a distance from the crowd, did not let his gaze waver for even a second.

A disaster would surely occur as soon as he looked away.

Considering the identity of that figure, that was a doubtless fact.

—That is, that figure was a creature of the same breed as Petelgeuse.

Subaru: “Also, claiming to be a Romanée-Conti…?”

The bandaged figure had given its name, Sirius Romanée-Conti.

Ridiculously enough, Romanée-Conti was in fact Petelgeuse’s surname, although it was impossible for that Spirit of evil to have blood relatives.

Subaru: “It doesn’t feel that all the Sin Archbishops have that same family name.”

An entire family named Romanée-Conti would be far too much of a nightmare to handle.

A wicked religion spreading the teachings of the Witch, and a family under the name of Romanée-Conti, producing Sin Archbishops for generations? Even just the thought seemed so distorted and foul it made Subaru feel a proverbial nauseating stench.

At the same time, an endless wave of anger towards the Witch Cult rose inside Subaru.

Although it was not the Gluttony that he had been pursuing, if this was someone who could give him a lead, then—

Subaru: “—I’ll try to capture it and force it to spew everything out.”

Although difficult, that could force open a path to Gluttony.

Determined, Subaru calmed his blazing heart, and focused on finding his connection with Beatrice. Beatrice would appear for Subaru as soon as she was summoned.

This was an effect of the contract between a Contractor and his

Spirit. Deep within himself, Subaru grabbed onto their connection, and prepared to seize it, when,

Sirius: “—Alright! That’s enough!”

Subaru: “—?!”

Just as he was about to call Beatrice, a shrill, dry voice called loudly from above.

That voice gave the impression that it could permeate the entire city. The bandaged person clapped its hands, and Subaru opened his eyes to see it watching the crowd beneath.

Sirius: “It took twenty-two seconds for everyone to fall quiet. However, thank you all for your attention. I am very happy. In addition…”

Despite the irony in those words, the bandaged person, Sirius, kept its arms crossed as its entire body shook. Although it looked incredibly happy, the friction between the chains hanging from his arms and the walls of the clock tower created a nerve-wracking sound.

Sirius: “You and you there, and the two buddies there, and you there too. My apologies, but please do not be so angry. I am very sorry to take up everyone’s precious time. Sorry, and thank you.”

Subaru: “What…”

Sirius twisted his body around, as if it were genuinely complaining.

Subaru had been prepared to yell “what a joke”, but, before the words started leaving his mouth, he noticed that he had been included amongst the four people who Sirius had pointed a finger at when saying “do not be angry”.

Looking around, he saw the other people who Sirius had pointed out—They all seemed to possess some amount of skill. A demi-human with a sword at his waist, a woman in a blindfold, and Rachins, each sporting blushed faces.

Those who had been named had all been people who had been prepared to take some action against Sirius. This was a warning that their plans had been seen through.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru felt cold sweat begin to bead his forehead, and he stopped calling for Beatrice.

He had long understood how terrifying an attack by the Witch Cult was, and knew that survival was everything. In the square around Subaru, no fewer than thirty people had gathered.

If he was not able to find an advantage in any way, then his situation was already deadly.

Subaru gave a wink to the other four who had been mentioned by Sirius, forming eye contact.

The demi-human, who looked like an adventurer, caught his eye, and the blindfolded women sensed his intention, as did a sharp-looking city merchant. Only Rachins's face revealed vague confusion as he looked away from Subaru.

Rachins held the most powerful card—the ability to summon Reinhard.

On the previous day, Reinhard had cautioned Rachins to remember to signal him in case anything happened. So there was a well-established signal between them, and as soon as Rachins used it, Reinhard would come. And as long as Reinhard rushed to the scene, then Witch Cult or Sin Archbishop or Sirius or whatever, any enemy would be cut down without fail.

However, there would certainly be casualties as soon as Rachins made the signal. That was probably what led Rachins to hesitate.

If sacrifices were disregarded, that would be the best way to deal with Sirius.

But did they have to resort to that immediately? Would those sacrifices be worth it?

Sirius: “Okay, thank you. It looks like we have all calmed down a little bit. I understand your restlessness. Hearing the name «Witch Cult» did not give you a good impression, did it? I am not planning to do anything too special. The reason I took everyone’s precious time today is because I wanted to confirm a matter.”

???: “To confirm… a matter?”

Sirius: “My apologies, but please do not chatter so much. My head is not too good, so if everyone speaks at the same time, I will feel troubled. Then I will be very sad. That would not be good, would it? If there is anything that is currently bothering any of you, please tell me. I am taking up everyone’s time, and I feel very guilty, so no matter what the question is, I will answer. Is that okay?”

Sirius, from beginning to end of that speech, spoke in an intimate, rational manner, but that attitude was off-putting. That was a given, considering the sense of disgust people would direct towards a bandaged figure who revealed only its teeth and eyes.

Presumably, everyone thought like this. Even at Sirius’s suggestion, the crowd remain silent and eyed the people near them. In that case,

Subaru: “With all due respect, may I ask you a question?”

Since no one took the initiative to raise their hand, Natsuki Subaru spoke up, raising his hand.

Subaru, detecting himself at the center of a wave of surprise, kept his gaze fixed intently on Sirius, who looked down to Subaru.

Sirius: “Yes, please do. Thank you. You were someone who had gotten a little angry earlier, so I am very happy that you are willing to talk to me. What do you want to know?”

Subaru: “Although I don’t know what’s going on here, I’m keeping some girls waiting. Four of them, actually. So it’d be nice if you could let us go as soon as possible.”

Sirius: “Oh, my! That is truly terrible, my apologies. But I did not expect that of you. Is it a man’s dream to have four girls to serve?

That is really bad. Is it not sad to leave some of them crying? We have to put an end to this unallowable disloyalty that absolutely cannot happen that must be completely banned."

Subaru: "O-Oy?"

Sirius's voice grew more and more energetic halfway through the speech, before dropping into a whisper. However, after hearing Subaru's puzzled voice, Sirius raised its face suddenly.

Sirius: "No, no, I just got a little emotional. My apologies. Although I try so hard to remain level-headed, I always become unwittingly excited. Thank you for worrying about me. Well… you asked when I would let everyone go?"

Subaru: "…Ah, that's right. We'd appreciate it."

Sirius: "My apologies to bother you, I am really very sorry. But there is no problem. Even though I am in the Witch Cult famous for not being calm and quiet, I honestly hate troubling anyone. The others often worry other people, and I feel very sorry about that."

Unexpectedly, dialogue was fairly easy to establish, but Subaru noted something mysterious.

A soft demeanor, an extremely humble attitude, and the dialogue they had exchanged—taking all that into account, could it be that Sirius was a woman?

The bandage rendered that face invisible, and the body was covered with a coat, so it was difficult to discern. The voice was high, but rather than sounding feminine, it sounded unnatural and mechanical, so that was also difficult to use as a criterion for judgement.

"But maybe it is a woman", Subaru thought indifferently.

In fact, judging from Sirius's behavior and attitude, there was no danger in particular.

Her abnormal appearance and the way that she had introduced herself led to several people being on guard, but if these factors were disregarded, then she was easier to establish dialogue with than Priscilla.

In the surrounding crowd, the lingering tension gradually soothed, as people watched on curiously, as if waiting for her to make her point.

Subaru did so too, although he felt slightly nervous still.

Sirius: “Thank you. And I am sorry. It looks like I scared everyone. But I am very happy that all of you are willing to hear me out like this.”

Subaru: “It’s not like we won’t forgive you. But let’s get down to business already.”

Sirius: “Right, right, thanks for reminding me. Let us talk about the main topic. I appeared in front of everyone to affirm something, in the first place.”

Sirius shook her body while rubbing her two chains together, creating a jarring sound.

In fact, rather than being off-putting, that action looked humorous. She seemed much more like a jester or performer than someone dangerous.

Subaru’s face eased into a smile, and his apprehension vanished. He no longer found it necessary to call for Beatrice. He just hoped he could quickly hear Sirius out and leave.

Subaru: “So, what do you want to affirm?”

???: “Yeah, yeah, hurry up and tell us!”

???: “Yeah, I’m about to be late for work!”

As soon as Subaru urged her on, a pandemonium of chattering began.

The last man speaking pointed at the magic crystal on top of the tower Sirius was occupying, and burst into laughter. As the whirlpool of laughter spread, Subaru couldn't help but relax even further. Sirius looked like she had lost to the atmosphere and put a troubled hand on her head.

Sirius: "Sorry, my apologies. Really sorry. I know everyone is busy. I will finish my speech immediately, so please stay with me for a while."

Subaru: "So tell us already!"

Sirius: "Okay! Well, here it goes. The matter I want to affirm is very simple. To put it bluntly, there is something I want to say about Love. Wow, that was embarrassing."

Although the bandages should have covered up any blushing, Sirius covered her face with a hand, trying to cover her shame up. As everyone laughed silently and infectiously, Sirius's appearance began to seem increasingly out of place.

Sirius: "Although I expected that I would be laughed at, it still makes me feel troubled. Thank you for listening to me. Thank you, and I also have a request."

Subaru: "Request?"

Sirius: "I think, if everyone can stay with me for a while, I can affirm that Love. My apologies, I can really say some unruly things."

Sirius stumbled through her words, rubbing her hands and chains together as she made her suggestion.

Faced with such an adorable sight, the crowd reacted with a "What, is that all?" Subaru also crossed his arms, nodding as he felt the joy spread through the crowd.

Sirius lit up and began clapping her hands.

Sirius: "Really? Thank you, thank you! My apologies. The world is truly very gentle. Full of love and tenderness. Whenever I understand this, I cannot help but want to express my gratitude. People are able to understand each other and care for each other.

Maybe I am saying «thank you» and «my apologies» so that I can confirm that."

???: "Yeah, yeah, we get it, Sirius! So what next—?"

Sirius: "Ah, my apologies!"

The blindfolded female adventurer had cheered at Sirius. As if hearing the voice of a classmate she had been friends with for a decade, Sirius caught her gaze and began laughing with her.

Then, as if finally remembering her purpose, Sirius retreated into the clock tower and reached out a hand to its window. And there,

Sirius: "Sorry to keep you waiting. Well, come here."

???: "—!"

She spoke with a friendly voice as she pulled someone through the window.

A little figure moaned and writhed in her grip—a little boy whose entire body was bound by chains.

He was only about ten-years-old, and his entire body, from ankles to shoulders, was wrapped around with a chain. He was also gagged with that chain, the corners of his mouth dripping blood. Only his neck and above were free, and he desperately moved his head, crying as if pleading for something.

Sirius: "My apologies that I have scared you so. However, as a man, crying like this is not good. Although I wanted to keep that a secret for you, you look like you are about to urinate yourself. If everyone gets to know that, you will be embarrassed and sad."

???: "Mmm! Mmgh!!"

???: "Yes! It's so embarrassing!"

???: "If you're a man then don't cry!"

???: "Men only cry three times in their lives, and even then, for only a moment! Haha!”

As Sirius comforted the crying boy, the crowd below mocked that little boy.

Everyone had gone through a period of time where they cried over little things, so their teasing was not malicious, but their lack of thoughtfulness was clamorous.

Sirius: “Alright, that is enough, everybody! It is true that this child is a little clumsy, but he is in fact very brave. Isn’t that right, Lusbel-kun?”

Lusbel: “—!”

The boy, who was bound by chains, was probably not very light, but Sirius easily held him up with one hand as she reproached the crowd while stroking his head. Lusbel, as the boy was so called, desperately moved his head as if to place distance between himself and Sirius’s face.

That sight was rather humorous, and although knowing that it would be demeaning to the boy, the crowd still unconsciously laughed.

Sirius: “Excellent. Well, please pay attention. My apologies. This is Lusbel, a nine-year-old boy who lives in Priestella. His family name is Kallard, so his full name is Lusbel Kallard.”

Lusbel: “Mmph! MMMMMMMPH!!”

Sirius: “His father is named Muslan Kallard. Muslan-san works to maintain the stability of the waterways. Ina Kallard, Lusbel-kun’s mother, is pregnant. Her stomach has just started to grow larger, and so Lusbel-kun is looking forward to having a younger brother or sister. The Kallard family lives on Third Street. They often go to the city park with a family friend, Tina. Lusbel-kun and Tina-chan are childhood sweethearts, and they love each other dearly. Lusbel-kun’s dream is to have Tina-chan stand at his side and support him. Tina-chan is a girl with pale blond curls, and her growing beauty as she blossoms into adulthood is much anticipated. That Tina-chan also wants to support Lusbel-kun's dream. Upon hearing of the song "Delphin Betrayed by the Sunset", Lusbel-kun wanted to become an adventurer just like Delphin. It is a very commendable dream for a boy of his age. Although there may be people who would laugh at that childish dream, I would not do so at all. Who could laugh at that manly spirit? I believe that Tina-chan also thinks this way, which is why she gives Lusbel-kun her heartfelt support. Right, although Lusbel-kun's dream is to be an adventurer, he is also really looking forward to meeting the child inside his mother. His original plan was to immediately embark on the journey of adventure, but he put it on hold, out of consideration for his newborn brother or sister. Because of the large difference in their ages, that child will certainly be very much loved. Lusbel-kun is a good kid who is considerate of others, so I think he will be a very good brother. I would also be happy if everyone could support Lusbel-kun's feelings. Ah, yes, we cannot forget about Tina-chan. In fact, the one I originally wanted to bring here was Tina-chan rather than Lusbel-kun, because I think girls are closer than boys to the kind of Love that I want to affirm. However, my heart was impressed by Lusbel-kun's desperate pleas. Sorry, I am not a very strong-willed person. So I changed my mind… Ah, although, being temperamental is just my usual attitude. When I talk about my Love, I speak wholeheartedly. Oh, how annoying, I am so embarrassed. Really, my business does not matter. We should be focusing on Lusbel-kun and Tina-chan. Because they already love each other so much, I do not know how much they will come to adore to each other in the future, so separating them would make me very, very sad. So I decided that I would respect Lusbel-kun's feelings and help him. So, although Lusbel-kun was just slightly scared and even cried a little, he is, in reality, a very brave child. Thanks, and my apologies. I have finished talking in a way that is convenient for everyone."

Lusbel: "Mmph! Mmmph! Mmgh!"

Listening to that child's, to Lusbel's, life, everyone understood and agreed.

It turned out that, although mixed with a little bit of shame, Lusbel's courage was indeed commendable. With that in mind, Subaru wanted to hit himself for having such a ridiculous, demeaning thought earlier.

But this was not the occasion to blame himself. Showing support for the boy was far more important than taking the time to be self-deprecating. And so,

Subaru: “Lusbel, don’t cry! You’re the best!”

Subaru shouted loudly, praising the courage of the young boy who shed tears.

Knowing the true courage buried under those tears, how could he laugh at that shame? Rachins, who stood next to Subaru, joined in the encouragement.

Rachins: “Yeah, don’t cry anymore! You’re a man, right?! If so, show us your cooler side, kid!”

???: “Yeah, listen well, Lusbel! You’re Priestella’s pride!”

???: “Lusbel—! Amazing—! You’ll be a great man!”

The audience cheered up, and everyone present began clapping.

That was not only a scene of praising a young man’s dedication and courage, but also a beautiful scene showing the kindness of human nature.

No matter how weathered or desperate one appeared, what mattered was their will to protect what they valued, and that light was what attracted people to them. For such a revelation, people could not be thankful enough.

Sirius: “Ah… Thank you, thank you, thank you! Ah, this is amazing! I believed that we could all understand it. I knew everyone would praise Lusbel-kun’s courage. Because he demonstrated Love in his courage! If you know him, you will love him. Because of this mutual understanding, everyone now has an in-depth understanding of each other’s Love!”

???: “Sirius—! Thank you, thank you so much!”

???: “Lusbel-kun—!!”

Sirius’s eyes widened as tears began to flow freely. Seeing the bandage around her eyes becoming stained with those tears, Subaru felt something hot welling in his own eyes.

His shoulder was gently nudged. Rachins, who stood by his side, was laughing at the crying Subaru. However, the tears in his eyes, even as he smiled, did not escape Subaru’s notice.

Looking around, the surrounding groups of people also seemed to share their emotions, joining arms with one another. Subaru remembered watching the Football World Cup. When people stood together against the world, people always look to connect and share their joy with those who they were not acquainted with.

And now, that sort of Japanese spirit was gradually spreading. There was indeed a solid bond between people.

Sirius: “Our inability to understand each other creates barriers between us. Our minds being unable to empathize leads to antagonism. Our inability to reach conclusions has us giving up on one another. That is all very heartbreaking. In fact, it is a tragedy. But now, everyone, are you sad? Do you feel heartbroken?”

???: “Not at all! Sadness or whatever, none of us feel that way!”

Sirius: “Thank you! So, do you feel happy? Does everyone feel happy?”

???: “Of course! It’s been a long time since I’ve been so happy! Thank you, Sirius! You’ve worked so hard, Lusbel!”

With a splash, a whirlpool of applause formed, giving birth to a circle of gratitude for the exalted Lusbel. Now, the heart of everyone here was in one single place, thanks to the two standing on the clock tower.

Lusbel twisted his body and sobbed, finally opening his mouth, disregarding the chain and screaming through his broken teeth,

Lusbel: “Guh, gah! Wake up, save—! Please, …me! Hel… hk!”

Sirius: “I want to commend your courage, your love, Lusbel-kun! Please look below. Everyone, so many people are affirming your feelings! Ah, thank you! My apologies, Lusbel-kun. Although you were a last resort, I just want to affirm this scene. Ahh, ahh, the world is so gentle!”

Sirius hugged Lusbel tightly in her arms.

In the face of this beautiful sight, thunderous applause echoed. Subaru put his hand to his mouth and whistled. The recipient of that warm applause, Lusbel, stared in surprise.

That was a man who had struggled his hardest. Even if he had no strength left to even cry, not a person laughed at him.

Sirius: “Sure enough, there it is. We have Love. It existed, here. Everyone’s heart became one, and that became one with a scene of joy as well. We do not need tragedy. We are tired of a world which would have us cry. No one wants such a world. If our hearts want to connect, then they should do so through sharing joy and happiness. Whether it be tragedy! Or Wrath! No one needs any of it!”

???: “That’s right! Tragedies or whatever, we don’t want any of it!”

Sirius: “Ah, that forbidden Wrath that causes hearts to tremble so! Rage, that passion! If the deadly sin of passion is rooted in our hearts, if we are unable to unroot that retribution, then we should fill it with joy! At this moment, everyone’s heart is connected as one!”

Sirius cried loudly, and once again lifted Lusbel into the air.

However, the movement did not stop there. Sirius, bathing in everyone’s admiration, tossed Lusbel into the air.

Sirius: “Please give! Thunderous applause!”

Crowd: “…”

Sirius had given the flying Lusbel the best possible stage.

Watching the young boy soaring through the sky, as if flying into the sun, Subaru took the initiative of leading the crowd into a round of applause.

Roaring thunderous applause, a heavenly blessing to Lusbel, who skated through that sky.

That little body spun and spun, but as soon as it reached the top of its trajectory, it began to arc downward. Lusbel headed straight to the ground. The crowd vacated where he was about to fall in a hurry.

That was the triumph of a hero.

Endless applause, praise for the falling boy.

???: “MMMMMM!!”

Lifting his head and seeing the ground rushing toward him, Lusbel moaned.

He desperately wriggled his small body that should have been exhausted, wanting to do anything he could to avoid that rock solid ground, tirelessly fighting to his last moment.

Everyone shed tears at seeing the unwavering tenacity of humankind. Then,

Sirius: “—Ah, the world is so gentle!”

Before the fierce collision, Sirius let out a shout. The applause of the crowd, who heard that voice, became louder and louder—

Crowd: “…”

As if eggshells had fallen to the ground, the sound of something breaking echoed, and everyone’s field of vision was dyed red.

The whole body was crushed by the hard ground head-first, and what was once Lusbel’s body, which had once contained the breath of life, became a splatter of flesh in the square—the courageous boy was scattered.

—And just after seeing that scene.

Crack.

The sound of eggshells breaking echoed like a round of applause. The square became a pool of bright red.

That, was an ending.

2

Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them, Natsuki-sama? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Immediately after Subaru thought he had blinked, a dark-skinned girl stood in front of him.

She put on a clumsy, flirtatious attitude as she stuck out her tongue and scratched her cheek.

As if in a trance, he turned his head to see a smiling silver-haired girl watching him from nearby, and a red-haired woman wearing an irreverent attitude. And then a petite girl who held his hand—

Liliana: “…Ah, ah, what’s going on? Ignored? Are you ignoring me?! P-Please stop it, don’t look at me with that bitterness. Ah, ah, stop it, stop it… D-Don’t sigh like that after hearing my song… Don’t look so disappointed, forgive me… Gk.”

Faced with his silence, the girl in front of him, Liliana, shuddered as if remembering something she was unwilling to recall.

Witnessing this situation, Subaru opened his mouth, and,

Subaru: “…I feel sick.”

Liliana: “Huh?! Did that actually just happen?! Looking at a girl’s face so intently, at such a close distance, and the first thing you say is that you feel sick! I, Liliana, am even more ashamed of Natsuki-sama than your mother is!”

Liliana pretended to be tearful, turning her face away, still keeping an eye on Subaru's reaction, but Subaru could not even notice her annoying attitude. He shook where he stood, and could not help but collapse on the ground.

Emilia: "Subaru? What's wrong?"

Beatrice: "What's wrong, I suppose. Subaru? Subaru?"

Beatrice, who was holding his hand, and Emilia, who stood nearby, looked down at Subaru, who had collapsed on the spot, with concern. Subaru grew so pale that the two could not help but hold their breath.

Subaru: "—Disgusting."

It had been a year since he had last Returned by Death, and the overwhelming incident that had just preceded his death left him on the verge of vomiting as he held his shaking knees.

Thus, the spiral of death began once more. This time, the cycle of nightmares was staged in the city of Priestella.

—Once again, the curtain rose.

Bonus Short Stories

Priscilla's Cheers for Me:
Drunk Father Part

1

…The stench of blood and booze mixed together pervaded through the room.

Collapsed, broken shelves; fragments of splintered ceramics scattered about; crude swords and bloodstained cudgels; all of these things served as proof that a nasty, chaotic fight had broken out.

There was not a single beautiful thing here, only contemptuous filth.

Therefore, the girl in crimson who'd walked into this filth not only stuck out like a sore thumb, but was so alien, to the point you'd have reckoned the world had messed up in casting her role.

Her orange hair shimmered like the sunshine, her deep crimson eyes were like that of scorching flame, and her blood-red dress was emblazoned with terribly expensive jewelry. Yet all of those flashy gems didn't hold a candle to the girl's beauty itself.

Her beauty was the sort that would overrun your mind the moment you laid your eyes on her. Were the notion of extravagance be made into an attack, then the girl's beauty was its very quintessence: a violence that painted over the sense of beauty held by all humanity with its own tinge.

The girl, who'd ended up coming to the wrong stage, glared at the dimly-lit room with her crimson eyes.

The spectacle in front of her was a miserable, nauseating one. The traces of fighting left around the surroundings were as aforementioned, however, the detail which caused the biggest impression was omitted from the explanation.

Tons of human remains lay down on the ground. And what's more, some of their limbs had been cleaved off, their innards removed from their bodies, to the point that a lake of fresh blood had been formed.

The stench of it was absolutely stifling, and the faint, yet pungent smell of booze, was also overwhelming. Most likely, the casks of alcohol lining the walls had received some damage, causing their contents to spill out.

The stench of blood and booze filling the air made the atmosphere an epitome of the world's decadence. And, in this decadent room…

???: "…The hell's up with you, women shouldn't be coming into a place like this."

…Was present a sole survivor, who sullenly hurled those words at the girl.

The lights were off in the room, so they couldn't see each other's faces clearly. However, she could tell that he was a man, that he was tall, that he was pissed off and that he was drunk on blood and booze.

She could tell some other things as well, but she'd ignored them since they were but trivial compared to the current information. Instead, she let out a snort, covering her mouth with the fan she held in her hand.

The Girl: "Don't go treating me as if I were one of those maids or village girls, saying woman and all that. Unavoidable as it may be, that fools will always be fools, it would be beyond prideful of me to have you beseech forgiveness for that act of foolishness."

The Man: "…Shit, is the alcohol going to my head? I don't get a single word of what you're saying."

The man grimaced in annoyance as he took in her words. He placed one of his hands on his head before then slowly shaking his head left and right, so as to stave off his tipsiness. Then, with his opposite hand, the man readied his Sword—his Knight Sword.

The Man: "Well, whatever. Phantom or not, things are gonna be way easier if I cut ya down."

The Girl: "What a rash man. I shall praise you only for the notion of not trying to squander my time."

The Man: "Get lost, phantom woman…!"

Right after he said those words, the figure of the man closed the distance between them in one fell swoop. The distance between them vanished in the blink of an eye, making it so the girl's slender neck was in range of the man's sword.

You could even call his sweeping blow rather flashy, in stark contrast to his shabby appearance.

Specifically, his sword slash was one from which you could really feel the training he'd put in to fell his enemies with a single stroke —No doubt, this was what had produced all those bandit corpses strewn around the room.

Likewise, the girl was going to have her head lopped off by his attack and find herself among the corpses. —Just before she ended up like that though, the man's Knight Sword was beaten back with a shrill clang.

The Man: "What the…!"

The man drew back, letting out a cry of astonishment at having had his blow blocked. He probably wouldn't have been this agitated if that had been the only reason. However, the girl's behavior had been weird.

She'd warded off his blow by uppercutting the back of his sword with the tip of her fan. Then, as he remained stupefied by that fact, the girl's body vanished from in front of him…

The Man: "Where did sh… Bh!"

A blow struck him on the side of the face a split second after he'd let his gaze wander about, leading to his tall figure spinning around in mid-air before slamming into the wall. And just like that, the man bounced off in reaction, then one blow after another, totaling three, slammed into his back, causing him to cough up blood as he collapsed into a pool of blood.

As the man foamed blood there, a high-heeled shoe stomped down on his head.

The Girl: “The absolute disrespect of pointing your sword at me, you ought to thank your lucky stars.”

The girl imposingly spat those words out at the man she’d knocked down, trampling down on him to the point his skull creaked. Naturally, the fallen man didn’t possess the awareness to reply back to her; and if he stayed like this, he’d probably drown in his pool of blood.

???: “…Princess, Princess, how did things end up like this?”

The girl let out an irked sigh as she heard the voice coming from behind her, before turning herself around. She saw a strange figure wearing an iron helmet standing by the entrance, illuminated from the back.

The iron helmet gazed at the inferno inside and the man who was being trampled over by the girl, and said:

The Helmeted Figure: “I reckon he’s gonna die if you keep up like that, so could you take your foot off him?”

And thus he proposed that, to save the wretched man from the hell found in the pool of blood.

2

Currently, the Barielle Barony was going through a period of change.

The trigger behind that rested with the Royal Selection taking place in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica—with the five girls who’d been selected as candidates in the ceremony to elect the next King in place of the Royal Family which had succumbed to disease.

One of these five candidates, Priscilla Barielle, was the famed “Sun

Princess” of rumors.

Originally, her husband, Leip Barielle, had been the one to rule the Barielle lands. However, he was full of ill-repute in regards to his conduct as its governing lord.

In reality, the citizens who’d been subjected to the laws of his territory had suffered in poverty, passing their destitute days not knowing what the morrow would have in store for them. —Yet a change came to them during those days.

Leip fell gravely ill all of a sudden, around the time the Royal Selection properly set into motion. And thus, his young wife, Priscilla, took over from her ill husband as the governing lord.

Her excellent skills purged the Barielle land from its stagnant atmosphere in a flash. And even though Leip ended up passing away, things moved along under Priscilla, fulfilling the will of her deceased husband.

The way she was so honest and sincere was a salvation for the citizens of the barony, who’d suffered under its misrule.

Thus, its citizens revered her as a Goddess of Salvation, and with everlasting gratitude and respect, fondly referred to her as the “Sun Princess” in honor of her beautiful appearance so reminiscent of the Sun.

Priscilla: “So then, what shall it be? Hanged to death or decapitated? Given that I am so generous, I shall let you choose.”

The “Sun Princess”, Goddess of Salvation, said that to the bound man with a cruel smile.

They were now in the largest building in the nearby village of Agante, away from the bandit’s den that had stunk of blood and alcohol—in one of the rooms of the village chief’s abode.

Of course, regardless of whether this was the best house the village had to offer, it still didn’t come close to Priscilla’s level; however…

Priscilla: “A shabby house, complete with insipid furniture. And to make matters worse, the quality of the food here is terrible, nary a single thing is worthy of me… Nevertheless, they did their utmost to make us feel at home. Who am I to pose blame for that which is unattainable. It would be futile to subject them to petty blame.”

That was what the “Sun Princess” ordained, so her subordinate, the iron helmet—Al, remained silent.

However, just as he thought Priscilla had shown an attitude that could even be labelled as merciful, she’d gone and forced these cruel choices on the captured man. He really couldn’t fathom her at all.

For the time being, he’d go ahead and metaphorically put his hands together in prayer for the wretched man. Actually, in regards to that, it was impossible given he didn’t have a left hand so nothing to be done there. That said…

Al: “Still, aren’t you scaring him a little too much, Princess? Be like that, and you know how it goes, even those who can talk, ain’t going to.”

Priscilla: “What are you babbling on about, Al. When did I threaten him? All I have done was to be merciful.”

Al: “Oh, you’re really in the mood to take his life…? That was a little unexpected.”

Al was trying to change the subject, but the girl—Priscilla—had eyed him with a gaze full of scorn, leaving him to fiddle with the seams of his helmet in exasperation.

???: “You people know who the hell I am and you’re still treating me like this?”

The wretched man bound by rope was the one interrupting their exchange. Al had a bad feeling in reaction to what he’d spewed out.

He wasn’t specifically uneasy about what he’d said, rather he was uneasy about Priscilla’s reaction, who’d heard him.

Priscilla: “Hoh, “Who am I”, he said. A commoner who runs his mouth saying such amusing stuff. Did you hear him Al?”

Al: “Yeah, I did. I heard him, and exactly ‘cuz I did, I can’t help but worry whether you’re gonna fly off the handle, Princess. How about I propose that for now we listen to what he has to say?”

Al chose his words as neutrally as possible and proposed that, as Priscilla sure enough smiled in interest. Yet, the man’s scowl grew deeper, as if he’d interpreted his words as backing him up.

The Man: “That oddball there sure as hell gets it. Hey, getting these ropes off of me as soon as possible would be wise. Making me angry isn’t going to get you people anywhere…”

Priscilla: “Enough chatter. Hurry up and reveal who you are. Did I not tell you back in that vile pigsty, that the only thing you have going for you is that you had not squandered my time.”

The Man: “…I am Heinkel Astrea.”

In an instant, the man was overwhelmed by what Priscilla said, his blue eyes full of grim emotion as he named himself.

Al stopped fiddling with his helmet as soon as he uttered his name. Perceiving that from the corner of his eyes, the man—Heinkel—said: “It seems like you knew” in triumph.

Heinkel: “Astrea, I’m an Astrea. I’m gonna say it one more time, just so that foolish woman can understand. Astrea, that’s my surname. There’s no way you don’t understand what that means, right?”

Priscilla: “Well, I don’t. What sort of meaning is that name supposed to have for me?”

Heinkel: “Whoa.”

The man’s triumphant face froze in place as soon he felt her fan right against his neck. Instantly, cold sweat ran down the man’s face, it was as if the memory of being almost killed earlier had come flashing back.

Priscilla: “Do not get the wrong idea, foolish commoner. The one who has got the right to decide things here is me, and only me. No matter what your name is, no matter what peerage you're from, and no matter who's father you are, they shall not sway my choices."

Heinkel: "Gh, kh…"

On the receiving end of Priscilla's cold words, Heinkel was left completely speechless. Most likely, the seriousness behind her words must have gotten through to him as he looked into her crimson eyes.

Nevertheless, Al couldn't turn a blind eye to the red hair, blue eyes and make or break power the man who called himself Astrea possessed.

Al: "Enough with this, Princess. This guy's the Sword Saint's… Well, going by how you said it just now, this guy must be the Sword Saint's father, right? We'll end up getting in a real mess with that one if we were to kill him."

Priscilla: "What, Al, are you thinking that I would lose to such a twisted guy?"

Al: "You probably wouldn't, Princess, but I'm saying I'd be a goner. Schult-chan would fall into peril as well."

Priscilla: "Ugh, since when did you up your negotiation game so as to bring up Schult."

Priscilla furrowed her shapely eyebrows and glared at Al as the latter gave her a polite bow. She let out a small snort at his attitude and silently pulled her fan away from Heinkel.

Right after he was set free from her murderous intent, Heinkel began to breathe heavily, as if he'd just remembered.

Heinkel: "Hh, hhaa, hhaa… Wh-What is with you people? You know that I'm an Astrea, and yet…"

Al: "Oh, if I tell ya that this beautiful, noble lady right here is up there as the cream of the crop, a candidate for the Royal Selection in the Kingdom of Lugunica, Priscilla Barielle-sama… you'll get what position you're in, right?"

Heinkel: "A-A candidate for the Royal Selection…?"

Having heard something so unexpected, Heinkel's face went pale. Realization had probably sunk into him, of which position, between his and Priscilla's, was seen as being more important in the Kingdom currently.

Plus, it wouldn't be at all strange if he knew about Priscilla's reputation due to the position he was in.

Heinkel: "But what was a woman in your position doing in that den of bandits…"

Priscilla: "Miscreants have threatened my citizens right here in my lands. So what's so strange about me getting involved there?"

Al: "Or well, she says these things like she really cares about her people, but in actual fact, she was just in the vicinity by chance and heard something that sounded interesting, so that's why she headed over."

Heinkel: "Something that sounded interesting…?"

Al: "A Knight-Errant heard it from the villagers, and thanks to his chivalrous spirit took it upon himself to deal with the bandits, heading alone to their den deep in the mountains. That's quite the moving tale a poet would be fond of, no?"

Al shrugged his shoulders, as if he were messing about with him, causing Heinkel to close his mouth in silence. Even Al could immediately perceive that his silence wasn't one born out of awkwardness.

Brief as their time in contact had been, Heinkel was not the sort who possessed such a virtuous nature. There was no way he'd taken up his sword for a reason like not being able to bear watching someone suffer.

Priscilla: "I can fathom a guess at what you are aiming for. Most likely you were after this thing, that which the bandits had in their possession?”

As she said that, Priscilla held something up in front of Heinkel. A cup of dull-silver hue. A wave of muted emotion flitted across Heinkel’s eyes as soon as he saw it. Dejection at having laid his eyes on something so disappointing—Or perhaps feelings which bordered loathing.

Priscilla: “It seems like the bandits were claiming all sorts…, like “If you pour liquor into this cup and drink it, you shall be cured of any malady in the blink of an eye.”, passing it off as being true. Indeed, it must be a “Meteor”. However…”

Heinkel: “That crap is just a sham that turns alcohol into a drug to alleviate pain. It’s not like using it on someone who’s sick is gonna cure them. It’s a dud.”

Priscilla: “And so you found out after you slew the underlings who refused to hand over the “Meteor” to you. Hah, how amusing. That bunch who died due to their exaggerations are even more asinine than you.”

Priscilla spat her words out and tightened her grip on the cup in her palm. Right after that, the cup was engulfed by flames, burning to nothing in the blink of an eye.

Heinkel peeled his eyes open in shock, not at her melting the silver, but rather at the raging hellfire. In contrast, being quite familiar with it, Al just cracked his neck bones and said,

Al: “Princess, it freaks me out when you don’t tell me you’re gonna do that, plus aren’t you going to burn your pretty little hands?”

Priscilla: “Cease with your misguided concerns. More importantly, you ought to send this foolish commoner over to that slum girl. This time I shall overlook things, due to the fact he spared me the trouble of hunting down these bandits.”

Leaving those words behind, Priscilla turned away from Heinkel, the look on her face indicating she’d lost interest. Actually, she’d probably completely detached her interest away from him. Safe to say, that was a lifesaver for Heinkel.

Yet, he spoke towards her turned figure…

Heinkel: “You mentioned you are a Royal Selection Candidate, didn’t you? Then I think I can be of use to you.”

Priscilla: “…”

Priscilla stopped in her tracks in response. She turned back around and looked down at Heinkel. Shivers ran down Al’s spine as he caught a peep of the look in her eyes from the side.

Were Heinkel to make one mistake with his words, he would lose his head in the blink of an eye. If it came to that, then they wouldn’t be able to avoid coming to blows with the camp that had the “Sword Saint”. That said, Priscilla’s point of attention was already focused on Heinkel. If Al were to interrupt her now, he’d be the one inviting her displeasure.

Worried about his own skin, Al waited for what Heinkel would say next, feeling like he was in prayer.

Priscilla: “Speak up. What can you do if that’s the case?”

Heinkel: “…The Sword Saint’s brat is a nuisance to you, right? I’ve got a plan that can handle this kid who says she’s the boss and makes his loyalty into her plaything. Heh, Heheh.”

Heinkel informed her of his hostile intent towards his own son, as well as towards the girl whom his son had sworn as his master, all the while flashing a wicked grin. —This left Al somewhat impressed.

And it seemed Priscilla was as well; she batted one of her eyes shut, and said,

Priscilla: “And what would you wish from me in return?”

Heinkel: “Blood.”

Priscilla: “…Blood.”

Heinkel gave her a firm nod as she repeated the word just to make sure.

Then, the father of the “Sword Saint”, the man who used the name “Astrea”, spoke up with his expression contorting.

Heinkel: “When you become King, give me the Dragon’s Blood that’s kept in the castle. I… I need a miracle for her to wake up.”

END

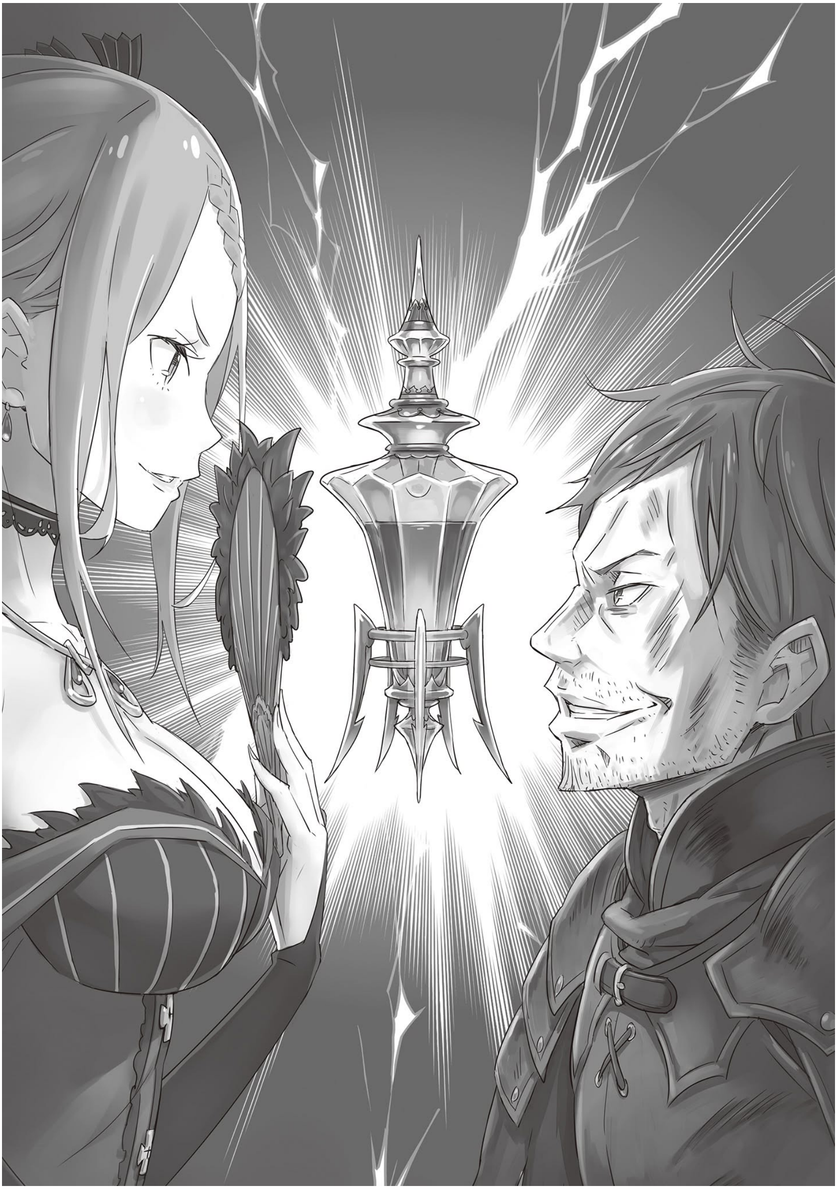

Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle:
Page 1
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

Petra: “Really, everyone thinks that I won’t be angry, they’re all so pigheaded.”

A young girl with a puffy red face, Petra vented her frustrations.

This is a girl with slightly bright reddish brown hair, and clear round eyes. Although she is not yet mature, her body is already slightly feminine, you can use the word "endearing" in order to describe this combination of features.

Her budding body is wrapped up in her usual maid’s uniform and exudes an aura that makes people think that she’ll grow up to be a beauty just by looking at her.

Frankly speaking, she is a beautiful girl whose future deserves to be looked forward to.

But right now, this beautiful girl with such potential is clenching her fist, giving an extremely passionate speech with great enthusiasm. And the content of it is…

Petra: “Emilia-neesama is a total airhead, Ram-neesama just slacks off all day, I’ve asked Otto-san to take a break but he still works crazily non-stop like a machine, Garfiel-san keeps burying the knives that he bit into deep in the soil of the garden, Subaru-kun does not notice my feelings, Beatrice-chan is so cunning, the Master does not reflect, and Otto-san does not sleep at all!”

Petra, who was employed at the Roswaal mansion, listed the names and problems of everyone she thought were close to her. The girl, who was counting on her fingers, had in her mind the people who were very important to her but at the same time very were worrisome to her.

Then, after quickly venting her dissatisfaction with these people, Petra gently stroked her slightly bulged chest.

Petra: “Really……… The only one who can ease my mind is Frederica-neesama, it truly gives me a headache.”

After a long sigh, it all came down to the woman she respects.

Petra’s words did not sound like a complaint or an anecdote about a frivolous love affair (of course, this should not be heard by the people mentioned above), nor did it sound like a one-man play with a wall.

So, who is Petra talking to?

???: “Pe, Petra-chan, why are you telling me all this? “

The person who said that was a blue-haired girl the same age as Petra, lazily looking at her head.

She is a girl with long hair that ends in a braid, and is wearing thin black pajamas. The young girl’s looks were no less comparable with Petra’s, and her body exudes an aura that does not match those of her age.

The young lady tilted her head and yawned while covering her lips..

???: “I don’t think there is anything I can do for you.”

Petra: “No! I just want to talk to you about it.”

In response to the girl’s cold response, Petra fearlessly leaned towards her. Maintaining her composure, Petra continued.

Petra: “Because …… Meili, aren’t you bored being alone all the time, right? I’m here to talk to you.”

Meili: “Petra you… you really are a good person.”

Facing Petra’s nonchalant claims, the girl called Meili was left a little speechless, and then she shrugged helplessly and parted her lips.

2

Petra Leyte is only thirteen years old and is the youngest girl in the Emilia camp.

It should be said that she is still a child, and everyone in the camp loves her unconditionally. Regarding this fact, she felt love from everyone and felt very blessed.

However, although Petra accepts this blissful fact, she is unwilling to rely on such an environment.

Petra still remembers that there was a time when she was too prideful and made too many mistakes that were unwelcomed and shameful. After an in-depth reflection, she secretly made up her mind.

Before relying on others, she must do her best to do everything that she can.

For Petra, who holds this kind of mindset, the people in the mansion are tricky enemies.

After all, these people will spoil Petra whenever they have a chance. And in unison, they relied on the fact that they were older, insisting on the adult theory, that it is only natural for adults to spoil children.

This is too cunning. No matter how hard Petra works, she can't change her age. Therefore, they are really super cunning for using this as a weapon.

Having said that, Petra hopes that the people who wielded an invincible weapon, the banner of adults, would show a consistent attitude.

Although Emilia and Beatrice always proclaimed to be older, they look too adorable on the outside to come off as adults. Otto is indeed very smart, and Garfiel is also fairly strong, but isn't the cunning and powerful Roswaal the pinnacle of human trash? In other words, both Otto and Garfiel are both useless existences.

On this point, Subaru is neither too strong nor too smart, but he's super gentle, so his score is only worth one million points. It's just that Subaru always makes himself suffer in order to protect others, he is very worrisome. Although she wants to support him normally and get close to him, but because she has never given up on her admiration for him, she can't guarantee that she can accomplish these wishes "normally".

In addition, there is Ram who can obviously do anything she wants, but has a lazy attitude and poor taste for men. At this point, Petra's evaluation of the members of the Emilia camp has ended. In summary, all of the members require Petra's help.

If this were to be heard by people who claimed to be adults, Petra would be afraid of her image being defined as an evil instructor who evaluates scores without mercy.

Petra: "…Of course, everyone except for Frederica-neesama."

Meili: "Petra-chan, aren't you just too deeply invested in the role of being an old and caring mother?"

Listening to Petra's complaints Meili, who was playing with a doll while sitting on the side of the bed, sighed.

The place where they talked is the secret confinement room under the Roswaal mansion. It is a basement that simply bears such a name.

For the time being, it has a design where you can only lock the entrance from the outside, so it can also lock the people inside, and except for that, it doesn't have any other special jail functions. A bed, desk, living room and even clothing, all kinds of daily necessities are readily available, in addition to the "goodwill" care, the interior decoration is also luxurious.

100万点

This is the home of the girl who was sent to Roswaal’s mansion as an assassin and attempted to take the lives of Petra, Subaru, and the others, but was imprisoned because of her failure.

Of course, this method of dealing with the defeated Meili also caused considerable controversy in the Roswaal mansion.

Considering her position, she is undoubtedly a dangerous individual who has been hostile towards them. In addition, she has the "Divine Protection" that can manipulate demon beasts as she pleases, so it is very difficult to completely subdue her.

Despite this, they still decided to keep her in the mansion, on the one hand, to find out her behind-the-scenes relationships, and on the other hand, there is also Subaru’s defense of her… However, the main reason for this decision is because the latter has greater influence.

Meili: “Since I failed my mission… If I go back like this, I will definitely be killed.”

Speaking frankly without any fear, Meili also expected the way she would be imprisoned.

As a result, Meili was confined as a prisoner in the basement of the mansion and lived a life of imprisonment. Of course, Petra has also been warned by the people in the mansion that even if Meili is already imprisoned, she must not let her guard down around her, but…

Meili: “… I don’t even know when it started, you don’t even bring guards with you anymore.”

Petra: “…? Meili, did you just say something?”

Meili: “I said, this mansion is full of careless and worrisome people”

Petra: “Ah, Meili, you think so too? Me too!”

In response to Meili’s sigh, Petra giggled in agreement.

It feels that everyone’s high level of vigilance towards Meili has become nominal. During this year, Subaru and Emilia were completely ensnared by Meili, who was not even resisting. They were completely defenseless.

And this kind of defenseless performance can be clearly seen throughout this confinement room. For example, Meili received carefully handmade dolls by Subaru, as well as the bedding selected by Emilia, and so on.

…It is guessed that, besides Petra, Otto is probably the only one who is still keeping a good eye on her.

Meili: “Petra-chan, you really are a capable child.”

Petra: “Yes, that’s right. My memory is especially good.”

Taking a sip of the tea she brought, Petra smiled brightly at Meili’s words.

Yes, she has a good memory. She can do anything smoothly and thoughtfully, and most of her work can be done quickly and easily. In addition, her face is also very cute. It is because of these things given to her by her parents that she can stay here.

Petra will never forget that Meili once set off a fierce demon beast fiasco in her home village Arlam. The same was true for the mansion battle following it.

Only the fact that Meili is a dangerous girl, she will never forget. She comes into contact with her with such topics consciousnessly in her mind.

Meili: “…That being said, why do you come here often?”

Petra: “If the feelings arise, even if you have any intentions, you would naturally choose to give up. Therefore, I will speak to you. It is fine for you to like me just like this.”

Meili: “…”

Seeing Meili, who lost her interest in an instant when she heard those words, Petra's mood lightened a little.

Facing Meili, whose attitude is like that of an adult, is extremely disproportionate to her appearance. Petra wonders when she began taking revenge in this kind of way. If these bickering conversations continue, will she one day choose to forgive her?

Petra was clueless about the future.

Meili: "…Despite Petra-chan being so gentle, she can't forgive that strange clown makeup wearing nobleman?"

Petra: "The Master is another matter. I can't see any form of reflection from him, so that's why I can't forgive him."

Turning her face away, Petra expressed her dissatisfaction with Roswaal, who still treated her as if nothing had happened.

Roswaal, who was carrying out various strange plans in the "Sanctuary" and in the mansion, was reprimanded by Emilia for his conspiracies and seemed determined to change. …It should've been like that, but it is doubtful as to whether that will really happen.

His unpleasant attitude still exists today, and Petra is plagued by it every day.

Petra: "Emilia-neesama said that Master is just a child who likes causing trouble."

But in fact, Emilia's evaluation of Roswaal is very accurate, and Roswaal does not refute this, which is very interesting.

Having been a maid for a year, Petra has a clear image of Emilia's image as a candid, innocent, and a downright good person, as well as her being defenseless against other people. Such a beautiful adult is really a miraculous existence.

However, it is precisely because Emilia has such a clear pair of eyes that she can see through Roswaal's twisted nature. It's really awe-inspiring.

Of course, respect and antagonism are two different things, and Petra's girlish heart is really complicated.

Meili: "But, don't you still have to go out with the Master? Isn't the travelling plan made by onii-san and that half-devil neesan a mistake?"

Petra: "En, um, yes… really, super unlucky"

Meili: "Aha. Petra-chan is really revealing a very unpleasant face. It's not cute at all."

Petra answered in a deep voice with a serious face, while Meili laughed loudly.

…The meeting of the Western Border's Leaders, this is the name of the meeting to be held in a few days.

And the one who is to preside over this meeting is Roswaal, the great nobleman who was appointed as the kingdom's court magician, and held a vast territory with many people. In this way, he promised to provide full-support as the backer of the candidate Emilia in becoming the next king.

Therefore, people in his territory must naturally adopt a policy of supporting Emilia. However, the progress of its work was unable to proceed smoothly due to the matter of Emilia's lineage.

In order to persuade these anxious and opposing powerful people, Roswaal ran around everywhere this year, and the final adjustments are to be made during this meeting.

In other words, this is an important meeting discussing the future of the Emilia camp, and Petra herself voluntarily agreed to act as an entourage. For Petra, who has to learn everything, this is an opportunity. As a member of the camp, she wants to participate in the learning process. However…

Petra: "That meeting unexpectedly collided with Subaru and the date of their travel…"

Meili: “Aren’t they just going on a trip? And now, even if it’s a little trip, the distance between those two won’t grow any closer!”

Petra: “I don’t have that kind of worry. I want to see the Watergate City too!”

Petra immediately refuted Meili’s suspicion, then sighed at her ill luck.

Watergate City Priestella. This is the name of the city where Subaru, Emilia, Beatrice and the other two are about to head for. They are setting off to the city known as the city of water, one of the five largest cities in Lugunica. The invitation came from one of the candidates for the election who’s in the same position as Emilia.

Petra: “However, their work cannot be finished within one day…”

Meili: “Originally it might have been possible to go street-shopping with onii-san.”

Petra: “That’s right…Ah, don’t let me have unrealized fantasies! Really, Meili is really cold-hearted!”

Meili: “Of course. I’m an assassin.”

Meili smiled while snickering, pointed to herself and reported her dangerous profession. Petra’s eyes widened at her attitude, and then she shrugged helplessly.

Meili: “Ahla? What kind of reaction was that?”

Petra: “It’s this kind of place, Meili is acting just like the Master.”

Meili: “…”

Meili squinted her eyes when she heard Petra’s words.

Acting like a wicked person, pretending to be a dangerous person, she must be doing this in order to keep Petra away from her. This naive approach must have stemmed from her negative thoughts.

In a sense, she is also a troublesome child like Roswaal.

Petra: “However, comparing you with the wicked things that Master would do, he wins. I’m sorry, Meili, I compared you with the Master.”

Meili: “The clown who can make Petra-chan say such a thing is probably indeed more excessive.”

Of course. That kind of supervillain, Roswaal is the only one. Petra will probably never forgive him for a lifetime. Therefore, Roswaal will also never forget what he has done for the rest of his life.

However, thinking this is also playing right into Roswaal’s hands, and the thought of that makes her frustrated.

Petra: “Ah, it’s already that time, it’s about time for me to start preparing to go.”

Looking at the engraved magic crystals on the basement wall, Petra realized that she had stayed too long.

By the way, the engraved magic crystal is cutely decorated by the skilful hands of Subaru and Emilia, which wiped out the depressing atmosphere that should have belonged to the confinement room.

Meili: “If Petra-chan goes out, is the one staying in the mansion Petra-chan’s favorite onee-san?”

Petra: “No, it’s going to be Ram-neesama. Meili, are you okay with not eating for a week?”

Meili: “I really hope you can give a good reminder to the onee-san with pink hair…”

Petra: “Fufu, just kidding …probably.”

Even if it’s Ram, she probably wouldn’t forget to give food to Meili. However, Petra was still a little worried, so she made up her mind to leave a letter to convey the matter to her well.

After packing the tea set she had brought, Petra looked back at Meili. Then, gently put her hand into her pocket.

Petra: “Meili, I’ll leave this to you.”

Meili: “…? What is this? A handkerchief?”

Petra: “Yes, a handkerchief. I want you to tie it on my right wrist.”

To Meili who tilted her head and looking confused as Petra gave her a white handkerchief, Petra smiled towards her

This is a spell that protects the journey. …Although it is different from the original meaning of the spell, it has the feeling of doing something big, like embarking on a journey. Even if it is only a superstition, it is still meaningful.

Meili: “Petra-chan really is an amazing person.”

Feeling Petra’s energetic aura, Meili smiled knowingly, and then gently tied the handkerchief that was handed over on Petra’s slender wrist.

Meili: “Be careful on the road. Be sure to pay attention to your surroundings.”

Petra: “Meili you too, you will gain weight if you eat up all of the steamed potatoes.”

The two girls looked at each other and smiled, and said a brief parting.

Although it was a little strange or even a little out of harmony, it was still a conversation between friends.

…This is a page that exists in Petra Leyte’s blissful life.

END

Mimi Pearlbaton’s Bite of Love and Passion

1

The moment she caught a glimpse of that person, lightning rumbled and thundered throughout Mimi’s entire body. “Woaaa.”

“Huh? What’re you starin’ at, ya little pipsqueak?”

While being struck by the lightning, Mimi easily brushed off the impact and looked at her opponent. It was a blond boy that had crinkled his nose.

He had short hair, sharp emerald eyes, jagged fangs that had been forged by chewing on hard objects often, and somewhat of a wild, edgy outfit. Everything about him rumbled and thundered through her.

“I see, I see. You are quite good. Mimi has liked you quite a lot.”

“Huh?”

“Name! You are good to tell your name! Mimi is Mimi! Duper strongest Vice Capain!” Mimi pointed her hands towards the sky and energetically announced her name.

The boy was puzzled for a second after he heard her announce her name, but he immediately changed his expression into a competitive one. He proudly hit his chest and shut his mouth, making a loud sound with his fangs.

“Hah! That’s really bold of you to declare yourself the strongest in front of my amazin’ self! It’s the thing called ‘Galaown’s declaration of war’!”

“Galaoun! I have no idea what that is! Is that your name?”

“Not at all! My amazin’ self is Garfiel Tinsel! Lady Emilia’s Shield and the Perfect Guardian! I’m the Gorgeous Tiger!”

"Oooh! That's amazing! Which one is your name?!"

"Garfiel Tinsel!"

"Garfiel!" Mimi repeated excitedly.

The boy—Garfiel—made various poses by vigorously moving his arms and legs around, making Mimi point her orange ears up and jump up dramatically in the heat of the moment. The staff in her hand slipped out and hit the foot of the slender young man next to her.

"Ouch?!" the young man screamed, but Mimi paid him no mind.

"Garfiel… Umm, Garfiel…"

"Don't call my name again and again. What just…ouh!" Garfiel frowned at Mimi, who'd crossed her short arms and was tilting her head, then looked behind him and screamed.

A certain maid was standing there. It was a pretty girl with pink hair and pink eyes. She'd pinched Garfiel's waist from behind with a sly glare, not considering the negative impact it had on her prettiness. "How long are you going to keep our guest standing at the entrance? Hurry up and show them the way, Garf."

"Huh, ain't it your job as a maid to show them the way, Ram?"

"You don't get it at all. A man who is good at things should naturally take over the work of a woman who can't do anything… Wait, who are you calling a useless woman? I'm going to smack you."

"My amazin' self hasn't said anythin'!"

"Hmph." The maid sneered at Garfiel after making an unreasonable demand.

Mimi's eyes widened with surprise at the exchange of words occurring in front of her and then jumped, landing on the foot of the young man who had picked up the staff. "Not again!" he screamed tearily.

Mimi, not seeming to care, pointed her finger at Garfiel. “Garf! Garf seems better! Mimi will call ya that too! Garf it is!”

“Hey, only my family can call me… Ahh, she’s seriously throwing me off my game. The hell is she?”

“She’s a guest,” Ram informed him. “A rather cuddly-looking one at that.”

Garfiel roughly scratched his head, his expression a mixture of caution and confusion. Mimi nodded repeatedly as she watched the girl next to her hugging her elbows.

“Garf,” Mimi repeated the short yet pleasant sound under her breath. She rolled the lightning that had struck her heart and felt the pleasant sensation of playing catch with it.

—This is probably the thing that Roshi was takling about! Rumble rumble boom’s passionne!

That was Mimi’s first impression of Garfiel, which she kept forevermore.

2

Mimi Pearlbaton was the eldest among the three siblings, which essentially made her the strengthiest by default. It didn’t quite make sense, but that was ok to Mimi. She was the elder sister to her two brothers Hetaro and Tivey, so she was obligated to protect them.

Since she needed to protect them, she needed to be the strengthiest. That was her logic. The eldest sister always being the strengthiest at everything was the philosophy that made Mimi the person she was. It was a conclusion that both the pink-haired maid and the blond maid would strongly agree with. In fact, Mimi had been following that logic and living full of vigor to this day.

All of this is thanks to ma’lady–Anastasia—who has given us three a job and a house to live in. And because of Ricardo, who’s like a parent to Anastasia. And, and it’s also thanks to everyone in the Iron Fang. Mimi will include Julius and Joshua in it, too.

Joshua might cry if Mimi forgets about him, so it can't be hepled. And Mimi was about to forget, but Roshi's existence is pretty big for Mimi since he taught us a lot of things in the beginning.

Roshi is a strange old man who saved Mimi and Mimi's brothers when we were wandering around the slums and on the verge of dying. He's something of a savior to us.

"If it hadn't been for Roshi back then, it would have not ended well for Mimi!"

As Mimi recalls, Tivey was about to get caught by the kidnappers and Mimi somehow stopped it but got stabbed in the belly by Mimi's opponent. Mimi got stabbed four times, and Mimi was still two years old, so Mimi was only at the beginning stage of being the strenghtiest, so even Mimi was in a near death situation.

While they were running for their lives while Hetaro was dealing with a stomach wound as bad as Mimi's, an old man suddenly appeared in front of Mimi when her wound started to feel better.

"Blease zave, big bro and elder sis…"

Mimi remembers Tivey crying and screaming with his elder sister and brother on his back. Even Mimi felt regret after hearing that. Since it's a failure of the elder sister to make the younger brother cry. That was the only time Tivey had ever cried like that. Whenever Mimi asks Tivey about that time, he responds with, "There wasn't such a time, there wasn't." He is a forgetful child.

Mimi is getting way off topic. Anyway, the old man who appeared was Roshi. He took the three of us, who were worn out in many ways, to his shack, tended to our wounds, and fed us.

"Well, there isn't any deep meaning behind it," Roshi said. "It's justa that I felt like I wanta live a life that the Sun would be proud of, so I couldn't leave the three dirty cats abandoned on the street behind."

Roshi, who had picked up Mimi and her siblings, laughed with his dirty clothes and his ugly face with a chipped tooth. After that, the three cat’s and Roshi’s life began somehow. The three of them didn’t know anything, as they were just kittens. The three kitten siblings were taught the means to survive by Roshi, who was very knowledgeable.

The energetic Mimi was taught how to fight. The kind Hetaro was taught how to live cautiously. And the wise Tivey was taught knowledge regarding various things. Roshi had always said that it would help the three of them in the future.

There was something else he said often; Roshi often talked about three important things.

“Listen, Mimi. Don’t talk bad about people. And don’t be someone who breaks promises. Just one more thing: have one thing that you’re second to none in.”

“Hmm, hmm, hmm. Hmm! Why thouhg?”

“It’s obvious. A person who talks bad about others will end up being alone. It’s far wiser to not speaka bad from the beginning. A person who breaks promises will also end up being alone. So, it’s obviously better to follow this advice. And the last one…”

“The last one is?”

“…You’ll see tons of good and bad things while you’re alive. You might only see the bad things in the people you are with, but it can’t be helped. But it isn’t like everything about that person is bad. Humans are just a cluster of flaws. So, be the best you can be at one thing, and that will…”

“And tat will?”

“Give you full points. My cute, dirty, cat daughter, you will be able to be a full point.”

After saying that, Roshi smiled, showing off his chipped teeth. His teeth were yellow, his face was full of wrinkles, and his white hair seemed like it hadn’t been washed in a while and reeked, but Mimi liked that smiling face. And the word ‘Full point’ made her heart flutter. She felt like a full point was something amazing. A woman who'll become a full point, Mimi.

“So, what if it was a hundrd things instead?” Mimi asked.

“Hm?”

“If ine can be a full point then what would it be if there were a hundrd? Would Mimi be more amazning than Roshi?”

“—Aha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha! That sounds amazing! A hundred you say! A hundred things that you are second to none in! In that case, if one can give you a full point, then a hundred things will make you a hundred full points!”

“Oooh! A hundrd full points! That sounds really amazining! Mimi would be a giant ameng men!”

As Mimi puffed her chest and hopped dexterously, Roshi slapped his knee. The walls of the shack broke and tilted but the two at the moment didn't care about it.

Roshi picked up Mimi and held her high in the air and said, “Listen, hundred full points daughter! You may have many things happening in your life from now on, but don't forget my teachings, and keep up that high spirit of yours… Well, it's not something that I need to tell you!”

“Yeah, you don't need to tel me! De-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Oh wait, you need to stop laughing like an idiot like that. Since you won't be able to grasp hearts that way.”

“Grasp hearts? What's that? Mimi is strong so everything can be grasped easily!”

“Whoa, this has nothing to do with strength. But it's difficult to explain. And on top of that, I guess it's parental love? It makes me feel deeply uneasy when I think about whether you'll be able to grasp hearts or not. Bloody hell!”

“Bloody hell!” Mimi mimicked Roshi's energetic voice and waited for him to continue.

Seeing her wait, Roshi scratched his nose, looking uncomfortable, and continued. “Whatever, the hell with it. Listen, Mimi, I won’t feel like explaining it no matter what. But you’ll know it anyway when the time comes. Oh, you know what lightning is, right?”

“The one that goes rumble rumble boom?”

“Yeah, that. A time will come when the lightning makes your chest go rumble rumble boom. That’s a sign, so hold on to it tight and don’t let it escape.”

“Tight… What should I not let go of?”

“Heh.” Roshi laughed at Mimi’s question. And after taking a pause, he smiled at her with his chipped teeth. “It’s obvious—the thing called fate.”

3

And so, the rumble rumble boom has happened, and this is Mimi’s fate. Mimi hasn’t asked about it in detail, so Mimi doesn’t know much about it, but if the person who has made the rumble rumble boom happen is Mimi’s fate, then Mimi’s fate is Garfiel.

“Stare, stare.” While shaking her legs on the sofa in the drawing room, Mimi observed Garfiel sitting opposite her.

Mimi has been looking at him for a while now, but his impression hasn’t changed. It hasn’t changed, but Mimi’s heart is pounding passionnattely. Fate is something to be feared. Mimi thought that Mimi was just going to be Joshua’s guared but Mimi has stumbled upon something huge.

“Nom.”

“Mi-Mimi? I want you to stop chewing on my sleeve…”

“Ooh! Joshua’s clothes are kinda damp, what happened?”

“You chewed on it! What on earth is up with you?! You’ve been acting weird for a while now!”

Joshua was sitting next to her and making a fuss while swinging his drool-soaked sleeve.

‘A kid who isn’t calm in someone else’s house isn’t a good kid.’ That’s what ma’lady had told Mimi. Mimi sighed. “Joshua, don’t be too noisy, alright? We didn’t come here to play,” she said, urging him to take the situation into account.

Joshua’s thin shoulders trembled, and he reluctantly hung his head.

“Argh… I have a lot of things to say, but you are right about this…!”

The silver-haired girl in front of them—Emilia—laughed when she saw how the two of them were acting. “A-ha, you two are reaaally close, aren’t you? It felt funny watching you two.”

“I’m… I’m embarrassed to show you such a thing as a messenger…” Joshua said with reddened cheeks.

The young man in green sitting next to Emilia lowered his brows at that. “No, don’t worry about it. It might not be the right thing to say, but I feel closer to you this way…”

Joshua became more timid after hearing that, and Mimi nodded as if she knew what was happening.

Joshua is thin and weak, so Mimi has to protect him as a guared. Julius has told Mimi to make sure that he doesn’t push himself too hard. Mimi accepted Julius’ request saying it can’t be helpd. Just like how Mimi is the eldest sister, Julius is also an elder brother, so he carries a lot of burdens too. So, Mimi is going to concentrate on being a guared and—

“Yo, pipsqueak. Do you have some business with my amazin’ self?”

“Woahaaa!”

Mimi had been staring at him, and, unable to focus at all, kept looking away. She was startled and jumped when the person who was the reason behind that spoke to her up close.

Garfiel, in front of her, had his eyes wide open in surprise. “Wh-What’s wron’ with you?”

“—? Why did Mimi just jump? Everything is a mysterie!”

“Hah, the hell are you saying… I don’t get you at all, hey,” Garfiel said, smiling lethargically.

Mimi thought of that as his ferocious smile and became more and more restless. And then…

“—Excuse me. I had Petra go get Barusu just now. He will eventually… Oh my.”

“Hiyaaah!” Mimi shouted.

At the exact moment the pink-haired maid opened the door, Mimi slipped through her side and jumped into the hallway. The maid raised her eyebrow at the suddenness of the situation, but Mimi’s back kept getting farther and farther away.

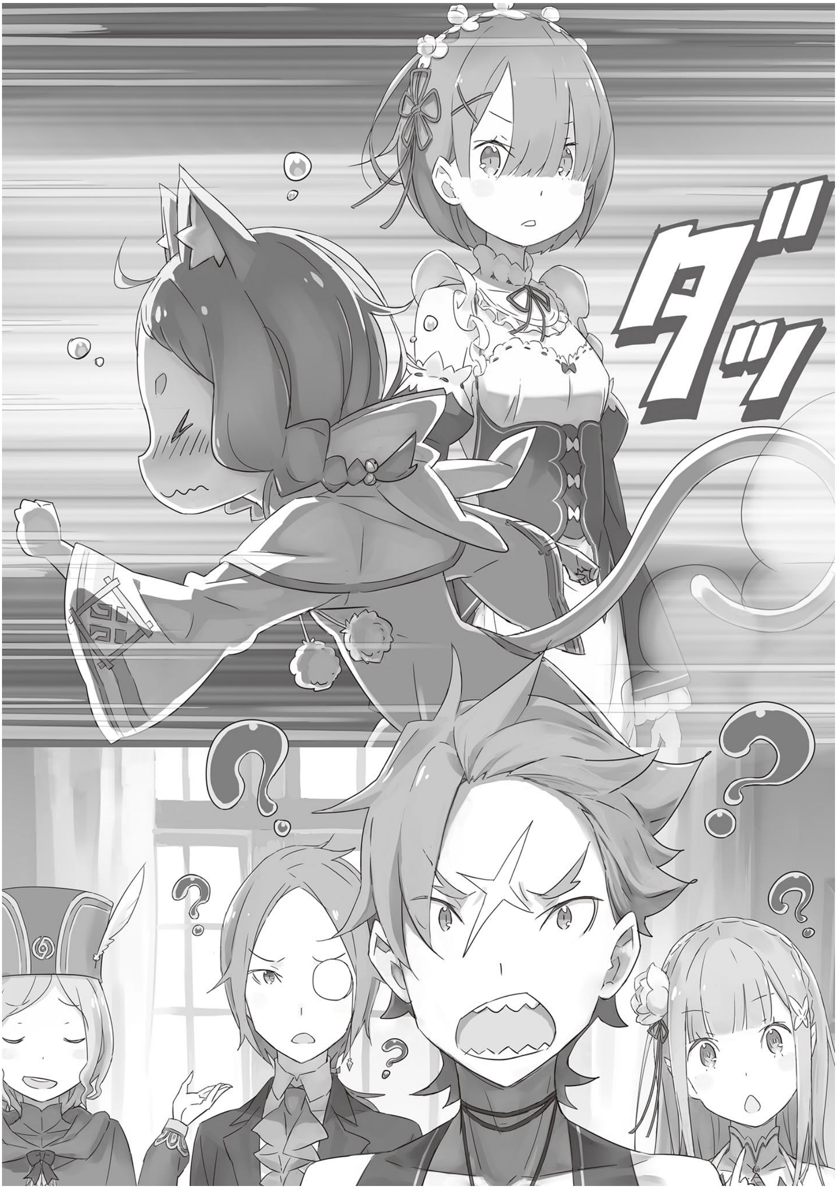
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“What was all that about?” Ram asked.

“My amazin’ self has no idea either. And wouldn’t it be dangerous to leave her like that?! Who knows what that little pipsqueak will do inside the manor.”

“…” The maid scowled with her well-defined brows at Garfiel’s words. Then she glared at him, looked out of the room once, and closed the door softly.

“Hey, Ram? The hell are you thin…gaa ouh?!” When Garfiel challenged her decision, the maid flicked his forehead and sighed in exasperation.

“Shut up, Garf. She isn’t going to do anything bad even if we leave her be…it’s simply that it was getting hard for her to be here.”

Garfiel, Emilia, and Joshua tilted their heads after hearing her words.

Only the young man in green was smiling wryly, which the maid sneered at it.

“Ah well…leaving aside Lady Emilia, you men are so inconsiderate.”

“—? Why was I given special treatment?”

Emilia tilted her head, and the maid didn’t respond. She just recalled the side profile of the small kitten-human girl as she slipped by her and ran to the other side of the closed door.

I’ll keep the fact that her face was as red as an appa to myself, Ram thought.

—That was her own way of showing mercy as a fellow maiden in love.

END

Ex 3:
Sword Demon Love Story

Sword Demon Love Story: The Bride's Father

1

—Anxiety was something that Wilhelm had never felt.

He could understand feelings of tension and caution, in which both the body and mind became tense, but such feelings were inseparable from the battlefield, and those who were not perceptive to them didn't live for long.

Thus, Wilhelm was used to being under pressure. And that was why he couldn't help but be surprised at how he was currently acting.

"…" Wilhelm's limbs felt slightly numb, and he felt parched. Those sensations had come out of nowhere, and they were eating away at his mind and body.

"It seems like I, too, am a human being at the end of the day…"

"Wilhelm? Hey, Wilhelm, are you alright?" A voice called out to Wilhelm, who'd just loosened his collar and let out a hot breath. The person with that worried voice was looking at him with concern in her beautiful blue eyes.

Wilhelm psyched himself up after seeing her concerned gaze. He shook his head. "It's nothing. I am just a bit thirsty."

"Really? But you've been drinking tea this whole time… Are you perhaps nervous about something?"

Wilhelm held his breath when she asked that, as she was spot-on.

But the girl's—Theresia's—expression changed instantly when he answered her question with silence. "I see… So that's how it is. Wilhelm, you're nervous."

Her concerned look became somewhat joyful, and he got caught in her mischievous gaze. Making him feel uncomfortable, he clicked his tongue.

“Oh, you clicked your tongue. Don’t do that when he is around. Me, Grimm, and the rest won’t care, but I think the people meeting you for the first time will care a lot.”

“I’ll do my best… What’s taking him so long?”

“Patience. He should be here soon…oh,” Theresia replied, hiding her mouth with a hand after Wilhelm looked away.

Right after that, the parlor’s door opened, and the person they were waiting for appeared.

“Mother, Father,” said Theresia, her eyes shining as she got up from the sofa.

The two on the receiving end of that had just entered the parlor. One was a graceful woman with her beige hair tied behind her head—a beautiful lady with clearly marked features. She was donned in a fluffy dress with long sleeves that suited her perfectly, and her eyes, which were sizing him up, caught his attention. The other person was a man with red hair and blue eyes—which matched Theresia’s—and it was clear at first glance that he had descended from a special bloodline. Those features were unique to the house of the Sword Saint, which had existed in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica for generations.

“…” Wilhelm also stood up—albeit a little after Theresia—after witnessing that. He bowed to the two who had appeared, being conscious of his body that had become stiff. He felt like it had become even heavier the moment they appeared. That was only natural, however. Since…

“Welcome back, Theresia. And thank you for coming, Mr. Wilhelm.”

The one who had said that was the red-haired man—whose name was Veltol Astrea, the head of House Astrea. But Wilhelm had a more appropriate way of addressing him.

“I heard you had something important to discuss… But what brings you here today, I wonder? I have no clue why you are here. None at all."

While smiling gently, Veltol kept repeating the same thing, gradually making his tone stronger. Veins bulged on his forehead, and his blue eyes weren't smiling at all.

Wilhelm—thinking him to be a tough opponent—felt slightly hurt as he sat in front of his future father-in-law.

2

Wilhelm and Theresia had traveled to the Astrea domain in the southern part of the Kingdom of Lugunica—and they were currently at Astrea Manor, Theresia's home. For Theresia, she was just returning home, and for Wilhelm, he was just visiting the home of his beloved, but this trip was much more important than that. To put it simply, Wilhelm was there to greet Theresia's parents and ask them for her hand in marriage.

In short, all hell was about to break loose.

"But I'm really glad that you chose Wilhelm. He seems like a sincere man. She has always been somewhat shy, so I was worried about what kind of man she would take a fancy to."

"Geez, Mother… Don't embarrass me like that."

A table between them, Mother and Child were engaged in conversation. Theresia and her mother—Tishua Astrea—had been making small talk about the past and future, holding a cup of tea in one hand, since the first, simple greeting. Tishua seemed to be rather welcoming of Wilhelm. He hadn't directly mentioned anything about marriage, but her joy was evident in every word she uttered. He honestly felt comforted by the fact that the mother of the bride was on his side.

However…

"So, Mr. Wilhelm. What is your status, what is the rank you hold?"

"…My apologies. I am a knight, though I was only knighted recently."

"Oh my! So you're just a knight! I see…so that is how it is."

The one speaking as if he had a hidden meaning behind his words was Veltol, who was sitting in front of Wilhelm. The future father-in-law had a magnificent beard and regal features, and he was keen on finding out whether Wilhelm was a suitable partner for his daughter or not. And it seemed like he wasn't the least bit happy with his title.

"Of course, becoming a knight without any sort of backing is no mean feat. I'll give you that. But I think it happened far too quickly. I wonder who knighted you. I can't wrap my head around why they would do such a thing…"

"Father, the person who knighted Wilhelm was His Majesty Gionis."

Once Theresia added that piece of information in, Veltol did a complete 180. "As expected, His Majesty is wise! I can do nothing but admire his decision!" Looking distant, he then muttered something under his breath. "His Majesty shouldn't have done that…"

But peculiarly, his voice was loud enough that everyone could hear.

He's not very good at hiding things, Wilhelm thought.

Although they had only been together for an extremely short period of time, Wilhelm discovered several things about Veltol. That he loved his daughter a lot, that he wasn't okay with his daughter getting married, that he wasn't good at hiding things, that he was—anyway, he learned quite a bit about Veltol.

"…" He took a quick glance at the women next to them and saw that Theresia was somewhat nervous as she looked at them talk. As for Tishua, she baffled him with a gentle smile that was devoid of all emotion. To be honest, if she were the one that had disapproved of him, the unpredictable Tishua would have been more of a challenge. That's why you could say it was a good thing that the predictable Veltol was the one who disapproved of him. Nevertheless, how the bride's father was treating him was abnormal, and there was something else that was making him uneasy.

—The nervousness that made him feel like his body was becoming numb was growing stronger by the minute.

“What is the matter, Mr. Wilhelm? It seems like you are, a bit pale?” said Veltol, expressing his concern for Wilhelm as he was being tormented by extreme thirst and stress eating away at his body. But there was no way he could tell him how he was really feeling.

If I do, he’ll deem me a failure of a man who can’t even control his own emotions.

What Veltol was saying wasn’t wrong. Wilhelm had come emptyhanded. He didn’t have a title, and neither was his future laid out for him. In fact, he had whisked away Theresia’s future as the Sword Saint. That being the case, he needed to make something of himself and prove his worth.

Wilhelm began the conversation with a serious air. “Lord Veltol, Lady Tishua, there is something I want to say to you.”

“You do not have the right to call me your father!!” Jumping to conclusions, Veltol tried to crush him right away.

“Honey, you are jumping to conclusions. Wilhelm has not called you that yet.” Tishua pointed it out with a gentle smile. “But.” She paused. “I am fine with you calling me mother anytime.”

“Huh?! What the hell are you saying, Tishua?!”

Veltol stood up looking white as a sheet after hearing Tishua’s words. His eyes darted to-and-fro, and then he looked at his beloved wife and beloved daughter.

“Our family is, our family is on the verge of breaking apart as we speak! How will we be able to protect Theresia from this scoundrel if we do not unite here?”

“Father! Stop calling him a scoundrel! Wilhelm isn’t like that at all! If that’s what you think, are you insinuating that His Majesty Gionis has poor judgement?"

"Yo-Your father has said no such thing! How dare you speak like that to me, Theresia! I will see to it that you are properly disciplined for this. I can't marry you off until then…" Veltol declared with an evil face.

"F-a-t-h-e-r!" Theresia ferociously shouted at him.

Wilhelm was a bit overwhelmed by their vigor.

"I am sorry, Wilhelm. These two are always like this." Tishua calmly apologized to Wilhelm before noticing that the cup in his hand was empty. "Oh my, your cup is empty. I do apologize for not noticing. Allow me to give you a…"

"—Hic! Stop, Tishua! I will pour it for him myself," Veltol declared suddenly, hurriedly standing up and bringing the teapot from the serving cart over to give Wilhelm a refill. As hot steam and the rich smell of tea leaves wafted through the air, Veltol stroked his beard proudly. "Go ahead and drink to your heart's content. Don't be shy. You must have been anxious since we took time to get ready, right? Do drink, do drink."

Wilhelm frowned after being pressured to drink more. Indeed, it had taken quite a while for Veltol and his wife to arrive at the parlor. Thanks to that, he'd spent quite a lot of time drinking tea and killing time, so much so that he became aware of his nervousness. As a result, he talked less and worried that his parents-in-laws had developed a bad impression of him. Maybe all of this anxiety and worry is what is making my body feel numb, he thought, and as he was about to bring the cup to his mouth…

"—Wait, Wilhelm. Don't drink that tea."

The one who had leaned forward and stopped him was Theresia. She snatched the cup out of his hand and looked at the tea by narrowing her blue eyes.

That made Veltol start panicking.

"Hey!" Veltol exclaimed with a husky voice. "Do not act so unladylike. If you want a refill, then tell me. It has been quite some time since your father has shown off his skills, and…"

"That's right, it's very rare. What on earth happened for you to be making tea for someone?"

"Oops!"

"Did you just say oops?" asked Wilhelm.

Veltol went pale, as if he wasn't expecting to be questioned like that. On top of that, his face started to break out into a cold sweat, and it was clear that he was in a bit of a pickle.

"A-ha-ha…" Tishua looked down and quivered her lips after leering at Veltol's situation. Her beautiful cheeks became red, and her moist eyes looked at her panicking husband alluringly. Although it was still hard to guess what she was feeling, it seemed like she was enjoying the situation.

Wilhelm vaguely understood what was going on. "You mean, Lord Veltol did something to everyone's tea?"

"More like, he only mixed something into your tea. Father?"

"Eek! I'm innocent!"

Veltol, who was being glared at by his daughter, said a cliché line that people who did something bad say. Wilhelm looked at his tea as he listened to his words that almost sounded like a confession, and then things clicked. It was indeed unnatural. I felt thirstier the more I drank. My body felt strangely numb and tense. I thought it was due to the anxiety of visiting my lover's parents' house, but…

"Besides, it seems like I didn't use the right ratio when I mixed in the drug. Since he looks completely unaffected even after drinking so much…"

"The person who drugged the tea shouldn't admit to it like it's nothing! What did you try to make Wilhelm drink? Could it be that, you poisoned…"

“I would never do something so horrendous! All I did was mix in a small amount of a drug that makes you lose control of your bladder…” Veltol confessed like a timid child, tapping his index fingers together in front of his chest.

The drug he had prepared was something that caused polydipsia. In short, no matter how much tea he drank, his thirst would never be quenched, and the urine filling his bladder would eventually leak out—

“You’re such a conniving man, Father! Even if Wilhelm peed himself because of that, I wouldn’t stop loving him! I would love both him and his pee!”

“What?! Are you serious, Theresia?! You’re fine with being with a man that peed himself?!”

“I didn’t pee myself…” muttered Wilhelm, a bitter expression on his face, but the father and daughter ignored it and started arguing again.

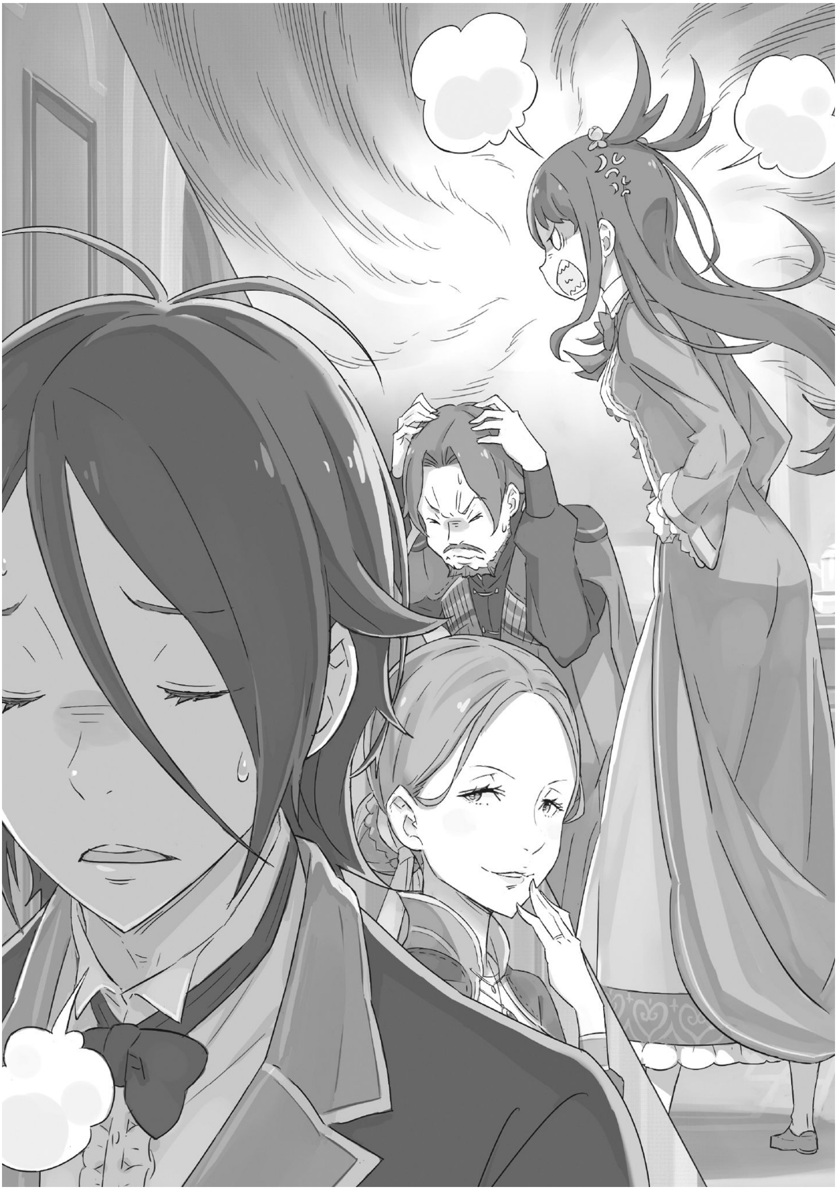

As they completely ignored the person at the center of their argument and argued about whether he had peed himself or not, Wilhelm lost the energy to intervene. Either way, the thing he needed to do was—

"The bathroom is right at the end of the hallway after you exit the room."

Sensing Wilhelm's intentions, Tishua briefly told Wilhelm where to go.

I wonder how much this lady knew about what her husband was up to.

"—Thank you for telling me the way so courteously."

Wilhelm felt like it was far scarier to ask about that, so he turned his doubt into words of gratitude upon standing up.

"Speaking of which, Wilhelm. —This is how our family is, so do you think you will be able to adjust?"

Wilhelm narrowed his eyes at her question. Veltol and Theresia were still arguing, and he didn't feel like he had the energy to join them, but…

"—I wonder, Mother. Father seems like a hard man to get along with."

"A-ha-ha, you get full marks."

Tishua evaluated Wilhelm's answer with a big smile. Looking at that smile, he was convinced that Theresia and Tishua were mother and child.

I feel like I'll be able to connect with Veltol, at least when it comes to being pushed around by our wives.

With such feelings in his heart, Wilhelm hurriedly stepped out of the door while listening to the argument between the father and daughter.

END

Sword Demon Love Story: Earth Dragon Capital Flanders

1

“Eek… Woah, it’s really high up!”

The view had drastically changed when the crouched earth dragon stood up. Naturally, it was different from what she was used to, making her let out a gasp of excitement.

“The breeze up here feels so nice… This makes me feel like a princess.” said the beautiful young red-haired girl sheepishly while clinging on to the thick neck of the earth dragon. She was saying it jokingly, but if you were to consider her pretty appearance, you wouldn’t be able to laugh it off as a joke. At least that’s what Wilhelm, who was supporting her, thought. Wilhelm was riding on the earth dragon with the young girl and had his hands wrapped around her slim waist. The innocent attitude of the cheerful young girl brought a slight smile upon the face of the man known as the Sword Demon. His usually cold demeanor towards others melted away in the presence of the pretty girl.

“Hey, Wilhelm, are you listening to me?”

The girl turned her head towards Wilhelm. She pouted her lips, annoyed by his lack of response.

“My bad, I wasn’t listening. My breath was taken away.”

“You mean by the scenery?”

“No, by you.”

“—Hic, st-stop, saying things like that.”

He was just being honest about how he really felt, but the girl reacted dramatically to his words. She looked forward, turning her head away from him, her ears and nape of her neck turning bright red.

She probably doesn’t want me to see her blushing as red as an abble. I don’t know what I did to make her blush, but I want to see her adorable flushed cheeks.

Wilhelm removed one of the arms holding her waist and tried touching her cheek.

“No-don’t…I don’t want you to see my face, right now.”

“I want to see it.”

“You’re so mean! Oh, honestly…”

Wilhelm became further amused when she looked down shyly and writhed uncomfortably. Then he leaned forward and gently grabbed the girl’s chin, turning her around—

“—Leave it there, Trias.”

A sharp and deadly sword-like aura struck Wilhelm from the side.

“…”

Wilhelm glanced around and saw another earth dragon running next to them. The sword-like aura was coming from the person riding it. It was a beautiful swordsman with blonde hair and green eyes, and she was directing her aura mercilessly—no, the tip of her long sword—at him. Wilhelm was amazed that she was willing to go that far and then spoke up while thinking so.

“I’m…no longer a Trias,” he retorted tiredly, leaving aside the frustration of his expression of love being interrupted.

2

“Carol, you shouldn’t be so quick to draw your sword. The people of the ranch also got really surprised, you know.” The red-haired young girl scolded with puffed cheeks and her hands on her hips.

The person being scolded—Carol, the blonde female swordsman—

lowered her head in deference. She was no longer emitting a murderous sword aura, so Wilhelm didn't feel in danger anymore, but…

"My apologies, Lady Theresia. I lost my composure at Trias's insolent behavior…"

"Don't make me repeat myself. The House of Trias is no more. I am no longer a Trias. And you don't seem sorry at all."

Wilhelm directed a harsh glare and harsh words at the still hostile Carol. She glared at him and opened her mouth to stir up the futile fight all over again.

However…

"Alright, that's enough! Both of you, no fighting!"

The one who came between and stopped the fight before it started was the red-haired girl. Wilhelm and Carol were considered to be formidable swordsmen of their own right, but the red-haired girl was undaunted by it.

If she couldn't handle a fight like this, then how could she have accomplished the great feat of stopping the Demi-Human War. Setting aside whether her unwavering bravery was a quality he wished for himself, Wilhelm could not have achieved such a great feat. The red-haired girl's name was Theresia van Astrea. She held the title of Sword Saint, which only the best swordsman was given, and was also a champion that had stopped a lengthy war. Nonetheless, she had relinquished her title and had just begun her life as a newlywed.

"Come on! Why does everyone keep getting in our way?" asked Wilhelm. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Don't get carried away, Tri…Wilhelm. I have been ordered by Lord Bertol to keep an eye on you so that you don't go too far with your insolent attitude towards Lady Theresia. I'm definitely not acting like this due to a personal grudge."

"The only reason you answered like that is because you feel that way…”

“Youuu guys are fighting agaaain!” Theresia shouted, stopping the two who were about to go at it again.

But Theresia, who usually had a soft spot for Carol, had begun to feel closer to Wilhelm during their time alone together. She put her hand on Carol’s shoulder and said, “Carol, I’m happy that you are worried, but…we’re on our honeymoon, you know? So please. Give us some space.”

“But Lady Theresia…” replied Carol. “I’m worried.”

“Yes, I know. But I have a really dependable husband.”

Theresia, who had straightened her posture, leered at Wilhelm sitting behind her. It was a very seductive gesture and she was unaware that it was a bad move.

Seeing Theresia growing closer with the likes of Wilhelm was making Carol more and more hostile towards him. But, even so, Carol turned towards Wilhelm with a look of pain, saying, “Wilhelm, take care of Lady Theresia…”

“Does it really torture you that much to trust me to take care of her?”

It was probably after going through a lot of pain that she decided to trust me with Theresia, but she’s really acting like she doesn’t want me to be with her at all. And like—

“—She’s just going to ride an earth dragon for the first time.”

Wilhelm’s sigh came out in vain on the plateau of the Earth Dragon Capital, Flanders. The rancher holding the reins of the earth dragon in the distance could be seen waiting with a lost look on his face for the three of them to settle their dispute.

3

Theresia had ridden dragon carriages before but had never ridden an earth dragon. She had unexpectedly told Wilhelm that on their journey to Flanders.

“We had earth dragons back at home and my eldest brother was a master dragon rider but…”

“But you didn’t have any talent for riding them?” inquired Wilhelm.

“No, it isn’t like that…it’s just that I was afraid of touching animals,” she replied with a lonely smile, holding her hands close to her body.

Her fear of touching animals was something that arose due to her divine protection: the Divine Protection of the Death God. How it created wounds that would never heal when she cut something made her sensitive and terribly afraid of wounding others. That was probably the reason why she had been hesitant about interacting with earth dragons. However, now that she had given up the sword and had better control of her divine protection, she felt like she had the right to give riding an earth dragon a try, something she wasn’t able to do as a child. And she was going to exercise that right of hers here in the Earth Dragon Capital while on her honeymoon.

“And then there’s this retainer here who won’t leave us the hell alone.”

Wilhelm cussed at Carol, who was trying to get in the way of their fun by complaining about everything.

Theresia smiled gently at Wilhelm’s words. “Forgive her, Carol is just worried about me. Thames…my eldest brother…was a lot like her.”

I’ve heard that two of her elder brothers and her younger brother were killed in action during the civil war. In short, it means that the overprotectiveness of her brothers are lodged inside Carol alone. I guess if I think about it that way I can see why she’s constantly interfering.

“Although forgiving her for that is a different story.”

“Hmmm, well, yeah, you’re right…”

Theresia smiled wryly and Wilhelm squinted looking at her smile. And then they heard the rancher. “We are ready to go,” he said.

I wonder if he was waiting for us to finish talking. We’ve really been troubling this kind-looking rancher for a while now.

While feeling sorry about that, Wilhelm held Theresia’s waist again and made the crouching earth dragon stand up.

“—Hic.”

Theresia trembled with a faint sensation of excitement as the view became higher instantly. She had been interrupted the first time while she was still trying to enjoy the view. This time, however, the pest didn’t get in the way, and Wilhelm, well aware of her feelings, didn’t do anything to ruin it.

Naturally, Theresia was in a position where she was looking down at the wind-swept plateau. She narrowed her blue eyes that looked as if a clear blue sky had been locked within them and gazed compassionately at the world below.

“Hey, Wilhelm, do you know? About the different types of earth dragons and where their names came from?” Theresia asked the silent Wilhelm out of the blue. Wilhelm thought about her question for a bit and then shook his head. There were several types of earth dragons that had adapted to their local climates and environments. To start with, there was the Flanna species, which was the most numerous and versatile. Next was the Eliq species, which had adapted to the cold regions of the world. Then there was the Agaress species, which were suitable for desert environments. And lastly there was the Diana species, which were said to have the most superior blood of all. These are some examples of existing earth dragon species.

But apart from their species, I’ve never really thought about where their names came from.

“Flanna, Eliq, Agaress, Diana…it’s said that all of them were flowers that existed long ago,” Theresia explained. “All earth dragon names adopt the names of flowers.”

"The names of flowers…"

"Yes. Isn't that wonderful?"

I'm not sure if it's wonderful or not, but I can't stop thinking about the fact that earth dragons are named after flowers. I don't know who named them, but I wonder why they named these friendly and loyal creatures after flowers.

"…It's just as I had heard, they don't try to harm people at all," muttered Theresia while riding the earth dragon with Wilhelm and rubbing the scales on its neck. The initial wave of nervousness melted away from her expression, and she seemed to have fallen into a sense of ease riding on the earth dragon's back.

In fact, a lot of people who get on top of earth dragons are surprised by their calm temperament and their consideration for the riders and come to trust them.

This reminds me of my own first time. I was a child, and it was before I started learning swordsmanship. I think my brother was the one who helped me.

"…"

Wilhelm also had two older brothers. Both were now deceased, however. He had carried his grief, accepted it, and overcame it. He thought he had gotten over it, but doing this with Theresia reminded him of the past, and—

"Wilhelm?"

"My two older brothers were no good when it came to the art of the sword. Though they were both bookworms, and reliable individuals, so dad and mom gave the domain to them."

Theresia hadn't anticipated Wilhelm's response to her call. Nonetheless, after widening her eyes once, she immediately closed them and listened to what he had to say.

"…"

It was Wilhelm’s first time telling Theresia—no, anyone—about his family. Everyone involved in the war knew that his family, House Trias, had perished in the midst of the Demi-human War. Theresia knew it, too. That’s why neither she nor people close to him asked any questions that might open up old wounds. He then came to the sudden realization that he had been taking their kindness for granted. Unable to keep quiet now that he was aware of that, the memories he had of his family flowed out of him unreservedly.

I was scolded often by my eldest brother. I always fought my elder brother. My father lamented my behavior that it wasn’t befitting for an aristocrat, and my mother often hid my sword. But my eldest brother patiently tried to talk to me, and my elder brother always came to help me even if my foes outnumbered me. My father instilled in me the customs and the manners of the aristocrats saying that I’d never know when and where it would come in handy. My mother often hugged me whenever I did anything reckless.

That’s the kind of people they were. —We were once that type of family.

“…I see.” Theresia replied in a faltering voice after Wilhelm had finished speaking.

—But he felt that he was able to truly mourn the family he had lost for the first time.

4

“Hey, Carol! Over here! Hurry up!”

“La-Lady Theresia! Please slow down… Wait for me!”

Carol, who was unable to speak properly, yanked on the reins and chased after the excited Theresia. The two earth dragons ran like the wind, and Wilhelm watched it from a distance and was impressed by Theresia’s skills, who had improved by leaps and bounds in a matter of just a few hours. As one would expect, she improved immediately after she got the hang of it. Perhaps it was down to the earth dragon’s considerate nature, but now Theresia’s riding skills had surpassed Carol's who was a veteran rider. Wilhelm would also be in danger of falling behind if he didn't practice.

“The madam is riding wonderfully,” muttered the smiling rancher next to Wilhelm while watching Theresia try to do a difficult maneuver like trotting.

We made this man, a rancher in Flanders, accommodate us a lot since it's Theresia's first time riding an earth dragon. I want to repay his kindness somehow, but…

“That earth dragon has become completely attached to the madam, so…how about that one?”

“…”

He's good, Wilhelm thought, narrowing his eyes, before observing the yellow earth dragon that Theresia was riding. The bright color of its scales matched well with her red hair.

“What's its name?” Wilhelm asked.

“Yes,” answered the rancher, smiling gently and rubbing his hands together, “the name of that earth dragon is…”

Wilhelm gazed in wonder after hearing his reply. And then he laughed out loud, which was something he rarely did.

—Since the name of that earth dragon was also a flower that held a lot of memories for Wilhelm and Theresia and was very precious to them.

END

Sword Demon Love Story:
The Other Side of The Honeymoon

“Over here, Carol, come on.”

“Lady Theresia, you’ll hurt yourself if you run off like that.”

With that, the girl frowned and chased after the young girl rushing ahead. Despite the slight commotion they were causing, no one raised an eyebrow at them. After all, when it was a pair of great beauties producing such a ruckus—as the two girls were—it was considered less of a disturbance, and more of a spectacle, as though they were watching a scene in a play.

Theresia and Carol, unaware of their surroundings, walked through the streets of the merchant city of Picoutatte—marking the interlude of the honeymoon. Though the two stood on good terms, they were not newlyweds. Theresia was linked to her beloved husband, Wilhelm, and Carol was their attendant on the trip. However, Wilhelm was currently unable to enjoy his honeymoon. Because…

“He’s a fortunate man to survive a wound of that magnitude,” sighed Carol after catching up with Theresia and linking arms with her. Her gaze moved towards the clinic on the other side of the street. Two of their companions were hospitalized at said clinic, one of them being Wilhelm.

Wilhelm was on a trip, but for reasons unknown had been forced to a duel with a powerful enemy, and in exchange for reaching his goal, he had been seriously wounded and was charged with bedrest.

So, Theresia and Carol found themselves strolling through the commercial district…

“Yeah, he’s caused me a lot of grief,” began Theresia, “but he has such bad luck… That’s dad for you.”

“That’s not what I…!” cried Carol, the color draining from her complexion. “Lady Theresia, I wasn’t referring to Lord Veltol…”

“I know. I was just kidding,” Theresia said, flashing Carol a mischievous grin.

Along with Wilhelm, the other person who was also hospitalized was Theresia’s father, Veltol. In truth, his condition was at one point critical and the fact that they were now able to laugh was by virtue of a string of miracles. One being Wilhelm’s efforts, and the other being…

“Oh?” Something caught Theresia’s attention, causing her to stare in wide-eyed wonder.

She has the most exquisite sky blue eyes, thought Carol. No matter how long I stare into them, I never grow tired of them.

Following Theresia’s gaze stood a man buying sherbert from a street vendor. He was a lanky fellow dressed in a white surgical gown. His eyes narrowed in displeasure due to what seemed like nervousness, but as Carol watched him devour the frozen treat her impression of him completely changed. Maybe that’s how he always looks. There’s only one person who scowls like that.

“Oh, it’s you two.” The familiar face also seemed to have noticed Carol and her friend standing on the street.

Carol and Theresia returned the bow of the man holding a bowl of sherbert. “Are you taking a break now, Dr. Galić?” asked Theresia.

“Yup,” replied the man in the gown with a spoon in his mouth. “I can finally take a breather after dealing with all those people who fell into the river.”

He was refreshingly ill-mannered, but strangely enough, she couldn’t bring herself to complain. It was no wonder then, that Veltol’s miraculous recovery was in no small part a consequence of the doctor’s efforts. Without Wilhelm’s brave fighting or Galić’s efforts, Veltol wouldn’t be alive today. For this reason, Theresia lowered her head in respect. “I’m sorry to have created more work for you, Doctor,” she apologized. “We completely destroyed that bridge, and it looks like a lot of people got caught in the middle of the commotion…”

“What? They were just onlookers at the duel,” said the doctor. “They were prepared to get a little roughed up. I’m sure you were too. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, though some of them might catch a cold.”

Theresia’s apology referred to the duel that resulted in Wilhelm’s hospitalization. The duel, which took place on the city’s main bridge, ended with the adversary escaping. In doing so, they collapsed the bridge, resulting in many of the onlookers falling into the river. If one were to believe in Galić’s recounting of the events, it sounded like no one was injured, but Theresia felt strongly remorseful all the same.

“Lady Theresia, please don’t feel too upset by it,” said Carol. “The responsibility lies with the miscreant who collapsed the bridge. It wasn’t your fault.”

“But…”

“In that case, your father will pay for the bridge repairs, as well as the treatment of any onlookers,” Galić assured her. “No one will complain then.”

Carol wanted to ease Theresia’s guilt as much as possible and was grateful to receive support from Galić. Although the doctor in question didn’t seem to have such intentions, on the contrary, he had said the exact right thing to Theresia. This was perhaps due to an overlap in his inconsiderate manner and her honest character.

“Thank you, Dr. Galić,” Theresia said. “That makes me feel a little better.”

“That’s great… In that case, while you’re thanking me, I’d like to ask you something.”

“Me?” questioned Theresia, tilting her head in puzzlement. “What can I do?”

Galić, happily tucking into his frozen treat, frowned and said, “The thing is, your father refused to listen to me when he recommended me for a position in the royal capital. I wonder if you could somehow get him to reconsider."

"My father?" Theresia looked back with wide eyes at the sour-faced Galić's request. Then she glanced at Carol, who was standing next to her. "Is it a bad thing to be recommended for such a position…?"

Carol thought for a moment and shook her head. "No, it is a great honor. Lord Veltol's recovery is partly because he is now free of the ring's curse, but also in a large part due to Dr. Galić's efforts. I'm sure Lord Veltol appreciates your work, which is why he recommended you."

"But I'm saying that I don't want to go…"

Galić appeared reluctant to further discuss the topic.

Perhaps he didn't aspire to push his career in medicine any further.

In fact, despite his overbearing personality, Veltol, the head of the Astrea family, held a high degree of influence. With his recommendation, it would be as good as guaranteed that Galić would prosper in the royal capital.

"Does that mean you've put roots down here?"

"It's not that I don't want to go to the royal capital. It's more to do because…the mother of my son lives there," muttered Galić bitterly.

"Huh?" Question marks hovered over the confused Theresia and Carol.

That's a funny way of putting it. So that means she's…

"Your wife?"

"No, she is just the mother of my son. He's mine by blood, but I'm not married to his mother. A contractual relationship would be a more accurate way to describe our connection."

"Um… What do you mean by contractual relationship?"

“To put it simply, I was asked to give her my seed,” replied Galić matter-of-factly.

“!!!” Theresia and Carol both blushed at the unexpectedly radical confession.

Registering their shocked reactions, Galić put his hand to his head and said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to shock you two. But that’s my current situation.”

“W-We should be the ones who should be apologizing for asking about such personal matters… I guess that means you don’t want to meet the mother of your child?” asked Theresia.

“I think it would be better for everyone involved if we didn’t see each other. I can’t say I’ve been a good father and it’s hard to imagine she’s doing a good job as a mother. So…”

“I think this is up to your son to decide.” Theresia, shaking off her embarrassment, shot Galić a serious look. “Happiness is ultimately a choice and one that we can only make for ourselves. It’s up to you, Doctor, if you don’t want to see your son, but…please don’t jump to conclusions as to what your son will feel. “

“…”

“I’ve been through a lot too, but I can proudly say that I’m happy now. Even if you think that you haven’t been a good father, maybe things will be different from now on.”

Clearly, Theresia had given the delicate situation a great deal of thought.

Standing next to her, Carol couldn’t help but feel proud and loved her all the more. Look at her, she thought. I want to stand at the top of the world and exclaim, “Take a look at this fine young woman.”

“Well, this is amusing. Your companion holds herself in a more dignified manner than you.” Looking at Theresia and Carol, the sickly-looking Galić laughed.

The scrawny healer laughed, tilted the bowl of now melted sherbet, and poured it down his throat. He exhaled a chilled breath. “You’re right,” he said. “Happiness is up to the individual. I pretended it was for my son, but I was just making excuses. I should be ashamed of myself.”

“Doctor, that’s not what I…”

“Well, I’ve made up my mind. I won’t go to the royal capital because I don’t want to see him.”

“Huh?”

Theresia’s eyes widened in disbelief. Her attempts at persuading the doctor resulted in the opposite of what she was expecting. Galić flashed a toothy grin.

“If my happiness is up to me to decide, then I choose to not go to the royal capital. It’s not as simple as whether my son wants to see me or not… But now is not the right time.”

“Oh, well I can’t argue with that… Carol…” replied Theresia.

“It’s unfortunate,” began Carol, “but you have managed to make Lady Theresia’s honest intentions work in your favor… “

In truth, Carol had never conspired against others before, and the same was true for Theresia, who couldn’t wrap her head around the doctor’s train of thought. As they metaphorically raised a white flag, Galić puffed his nose in a good mood and said, “I’ve made up my mind and I have you to thank, my lady. Now, all we have to do is to convince your father to throw in the towel.”

“Um, about that…”

“Yeah?”

Theresia covered her mouth as Galić cleared his throat. She then looked over at Carol, who nodded in agreement. They may have lost this battle, but they still had Veltol to win the war. He was known to be childish and absolutely relentless.

“Who would’ve thought there would come the day I’d hope to see

Lord Veltol act in a less than graceful manner…” Carol admitted.

“Let’s see which of them can turn the tables in their favor,” giggled Theresia.

“What a pair of sinister grins…” said Galić, looking at the two girls.

Carol had known Veltol for a long time, so she and Theresia were confident in their victory. But even so…

“What kind of person is she? The woman who um…isn’t your wife…” asked Theresia.

“I can’t speak for others, but she’s an eccentric woman. She has excellent abilities, but is difficult to handle,” replied Galić. “I’m not sure if her decision to bear my child was because she wanted to or…she desired the genius of a healer for her child.”

“That’s an unusual mindset for one to have. It’s not something one sees much in this day and age.”

Marriages were a way of introducing superior bloodlines and preserving them. It was much rarer nowadays, but it was much more common hundreds of years ago. There were select families such as House Astrea that were so strong that regardless of new blood introduced to the lineage, it could not dilute it, and so the concept of pedigree was lost.

“She had an old-fashioned mentality, but it didn’t feel that way to me,” explained Galić. “When push came to shove, I couldn’t keep up with her fiery passion…plus she was a real beauty.”

“Men are such simple creatures…” Theresia gave a look of disdain at Galić’s impertinent manner. Carol also shot a similar look of disgust and Galić roared with laughter.

He laughed in such a manner that could strike a nerve in others. “That’s why,” he said, “you may advise your father to not be concerned with an immoral man like me. And don’t worry about your husband straying away. I know a fastidious man when I see one.”

"It pains me to say it, but I agree with him on that one," said Carol, reluctantly siding with Galić.

"Oh, Carol…" Theresia flushed at their affirmation, which Carol grudgingly had to admit was adorable.

Wilhelm thought the world of Theresia with his whole heart and soul. That was why he fought in that duel with no regard for his own life. He was met with fortune and successfully accomplished his goal. It was a feat that Carol herself could not have accomplished, to her shame.

"But that doesn't prove that my feelings are worth any less than that man's."

"Um, Carol? Why are you suddenly so enthusiastic…"

"You have no idea how much I've been thinking about you, Lady Theresia. And my feelings are no less than his. You know that!" Carol was so stirred up that she clutched Theresia's hands with her own.

Feeling overwhelmed by the momentum of their conversation, Theresia gawked back in astonishment. She looked away. Her pale cheeks blushed slightly, her lips quivering. "Oh, um Carol… I appreciate how you feel, but…"

"Yes!"

"It can get pretty packed here with people, so don't get too excited… Ok?" cautioned Theresia with a gentle smile.

Carol quickly came to her senses and felt startled by what she saw around them. The eyes of the entire street were on her, who up to that point had been boldly expressing her feelings. Her cheeks turned into a shade of vermillion red, causing Galić to chuckle at the sight. "As a healer, I would advise you to get something cold for those hot cheeks. I highly recommend the frozen treats they have just over there."

"Um, er… Well…" Carol bit her lip in frustration at the doctor's teasing manner.

Theresia tugged her sleeve. “Don’t mind him,” she told her. “Alright then, we’ll go with your suggestion. I’ll treat you to a bowl of sherbert, Carol.”

Then, whether this was what Galić had in mind or not, Carol let out a pathetic cry. “L-Lady Theresia…” But in the end, Theresia’s allure was too much for her to resist and so she staggered along behind her.

“Hehehe! All the best, you two!” chortled Galić as he turned around with a smile.

Biting back the urge to lash back at the doctor, she held herself for a moment. At least, she hoped that her time with Theresia would make up for her humiliation and green-eyed jealousy of Wilhelm.

“Hey, Carol, what flavor do you want?”

However, such a feeble wish was nothing compared to the smile of the girl standing next to her, so Carol ran to join her mistress’s side.

END

Volume 17

Chapters 20-36

Chapter 20:
Shared Empathy

1

Squatting on the ground, breathing heavily, Subaru finally endured the urge to collapse.

Emilia and Beatrice surrounded him, wearing looks of concern, and even Liliana seemed worried. Priscilla seemed faintly interested, cooling her face with her fan.

Bathed in their concerned voices and gazes, Subaru gradually reoriented himself.

Feeling like time was slowly accelerating back to normal, Subaru realized what the taste in his mouth was.

He was reminded of switching channels on a television. There was nothing like a loss of the sense of smell, taste, or sight, but his surroundings had suddenly disintegrated into powder, and transformed into something entirely different.

Subaru's eyes, ears, nose, and skin had all adapted to the new world, but his consciousness could not forget the previous channel, so there was a sense of violation.

All he could do was ignore it, to chew, chew, chew, and swallow the sense of unease that came from switching channels until it was finally over.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru clenched his teeth and finally climbed to his feet.

He shook his head and looked around. The park was full of bright sunshine, a place of relaxation with fountains and green lawns, and a colorful spread of flowerbeds.

Subaru was presently surrounded by four beautiful girls—Emilia, Beatrice, Liliana, and Priscilla. He had heard Liliana's words twice now.

Emilia: "Are you alright, Subaru? Your complexion doesn't look so good."

Subaru: "…Emilia-tan. Just now, did Liliana say that she'd sing another song?"

Liliana: "What do you mean?! I, Liliana, was ignored to such a degree that this situation shocked and hurt my heart! Compensation! I demand compensation!"

As she spoke, Liliana seized Subaru's sleeves in a frenzy, declaring a lawsuit, only to be shaken off by Subaru. He ignored the indignant "Hey!" the Songstresses issued and turned to Emilia, who seemed to pick up on Subaru's seriousness.

Emilia: "Yes. Liliana said that she'd sing us another song that we missed. Then Subaru and Liliana started quietly chatting in secret about something."

Subaru: "That happened just now? I got it, thanks… thank you."

Just saying those words of gratitude, he felt an unspeakable sense of disgust.

Subaru could not help but raise a hand to cover his mouth. Seeing him in this state, Emilia made a puzzled frown.

Emilia had not done anything wrong. Needless to say, his appreciation was not bitter. However, it evoked the incomparable malice in the previous world.

Subaru: "So, this means that I…"

"Died", he finally realized, but he was unable to vocalize the word.

—Natsuki Subaru had died.

After he died, he would return from the time he said goodbye to the world. Although he was relieved at his successful return, remorse also rose in his chest.

Obviously, Subaru should have been prepared.

In that forest a year ago, in Sanctuary, during the Trials, Natsuki Subaru had resolutely rejected death, and the grievances that accompanied it.

But he had still died. And so easily, too. Without resistance, without a sense of defiance, without even awareness.

Why was that? The situation had obviously been abnormal, but even Subaru himself had no clue what had happened. He had clearly experienced it himself, but he could not understand any of it.

Subaru had not even realized how abnormal that situation had been. And not only Subaru. Everyone present had been afflicted with the same madness as him. They had obviously seen the chained-up, howling boy, but they had all frenziedly cheered for his solidarity. Not to mention the insane round of applause that had accompanied the child's fall, welcoming him to his death.

What exactly had triggered all of that? And how exactly had he died without even realizing the reason?

He had not been able to recognize an agent for his death and, even now, he could not find one. Or, perhaps, it had been in front of him all along, and he had failed to see it as a threat. But he could not trust anything he had felt. Although he had registered the abnormality of the situation after his death, until that very moment, he had not been able to think clearly.

How had he died, in the end?

Were there any explosives attached to the falling boy's body? They could have exploded upon his impact with the ground, blowing up the surroundings. In fact, that was almost exactly like the memory of this instant death.

It was all very vague. His memory at the instant of his death was greatly blurred by his madness at the time. Even if he were completely calm now, the state of mind he had been in at the time prevented him from being able to comprehend that memory at all.

If Subaru had truly been in a state of madness, then it would be virtually impossible to unravel the insane memories of his death.

Emilia: “Are you really okay, Subaru? Even Liliana’s wearing such a bothered expression.”

Liliana: “I’m not doing anything so pointless. How Natsuki-sama thinks of me doesn’t make me sad at all, so please don’t get the wrong idea.”

Emilia: “See? It’s so obvious that it’s really bothering you.”

Even someone as clueless as Emilia had seen through Liliana’s brazenness. Through their dialogue, Subaru remembered his current situation.

At this point in time, Subaru was supposed to take advantage of Liliana’s song to go run an errand and buy reconciliation sweets. And shortly after buying something, he had met the monster called Wrath.

—There were less than fifteen minutes before that nightmare of a speech would begin.

Subaru: “You’re kidding me…”

In his experience with Return by Death, never had the time between the save point and the death been so close together. Time ranging from a few hours to a few days, that was what Return by Death had always given Subaru in the past. The time he had now was extremely short.

In just fifteen short minutes, what could Subaru do?

But even while he puzzled over this, time flowed on.

In this situation, merely avoiding death would be incredibly simple. Subaru only needed to avoid the place where the speech would be delivered. That way, the cause of death, such as the possible bomb, would not affect him.

It was incredibly unlikely that a bomb affecting the entire city had been prepared.

So, if Subaru only wanted to live, he could simply not go. Sirius would not target Subaru.

Pure, indiscriminate malice. And Subaru just happened to be just there.

Therefore, even if Subaru were not present, that square would still be Sirius's crime scene. The speech unrelated to Subaru's presence would happen regardless, and everyone there would be affected.

At the very least, no matter how that turned out, that falling child was doomed to die.

Subaru: "I have to stop it… Damn, I have to…!"

Subaru scratched his head and arrived at a decision.

He couldn't not save him. Lusbel was not guilty of anything. That poor child was looking forward to a newborn brother or sister, and had taken his childhood sweetheart's place on that tower. How could anyone be so cowardly as to think only of themselves and not attempt to rescue him?

Subaru: "Beako and I…"

—Will go together, Subaru hesitated to declare.

Beatrice: "What is it, Subaru?"

Turning to face Subaru, Beatrice voiced a serious question.

Now that he knew a critical situation was imminent, bringing Beatrice with him was the obvious option to choose in terms of combat effectiveness. If she were absent, Subaru's combat strength would be cut in half.

Even so, Subaru hesitated. It was not for a sentimental reason like not wanting Beatrice to fight.

Of course, saying that reason had not flashed through his mind at all wouldn't be true, but that was not Subaru's key reason.

—That would be Emilia. Or rather, leaving Emilia here.

Subaru: "…"

The Witch Cult was in this very city.

Those fanatics—although he had yet to know whether or not that phrase should be plural, at least the Sin Archbishop of Wrath was present. He had no clue if she was working with any other cultists, because their status was completely unknown.

However, in a city where the Witch Cult was active, the notion of leaving Emilia alone, with no one to protect her, left lingering anxiety in Subaru.

Leaving someone important in a place beyond his reach was far too dangerous.

Leaving someone out of his sight, where the Witch Cult's devilish hands would be able to reach for was far too dangerous.

Deep in his heart, turbid fear plagued Subaru.

Then, would he take Emilia to where Wrath was? That was out of the question. Having Emilia encounter the Witch Cult would undoubtedly lead to tragedy. Only that was certain. Just recalling Petelgeuse made that clear. Subaru could not let Emilia near the Witch Cult. The reasons could not even be questioned. It just had to be like that.

Subaru: "Beatrice and I…"

Beatrice: "And what, Subaru?"

Subaru: "We'll eat the same sweets, is that fine?"

Beatrice: "…?"

Beatrice frowned as she heard Subaru. She probably suspected that he had been thinking something else entirely. Subaru nodded at Liliana, who seemed completely lost, and turned to Emilia.

Subaru: “I’ll go on a short trip to buy some sweet snacks, then I’ll be right back. Emilia-tan, just wait here, while elegantly and steadily listening to Liliana’s song.”

Emilia: “Got it. But is it okay if I don’t go with you?”

Subaru: “That’s fine, just believe in me. I’ll protect you.”

At his words, Emilia blinked her wide eyes and nodded with a blush. Then, Subaru quietly beckoned Beatrice, who treated him with a suspicious gaze. He put his lips to her ear.

Subaru: “Protect Emilia for me. If I need your strength, I’ll call you immediately.”

Beatrice: “…What did you encounter that you can’t even tell Betty about?”

Subaru: “Just be prepared. If I call you, then you can assume it’s a pretty bad situation.”

Subaru gently pinched the slightly displeased Beatrice’s nose, then waved and took off. He sprinted without looking back, even feeling the eyes of the four people who saw him off on his back.

Running down the road, he reached the square in less than five minutes.

However, he had departed a little late. In this strained situation, with very little time, the slightest difference in timing could be a matter of life and death.

Subaru: “Although this is the case, without shopping, I’ll have nearly ten minutes…”

Subaru slowed into a walk, and surveyed the square where he had arrived. Before, he had focused on the tower without a chance to observe the surrounding area, but, at least for the moment, no conspicuous, black-clad strangers were anywhere to be seen.

Then, was it alright to think that Sin Archbishop was most probably acting alone?

Subaru: “The question is what to do next. Once that speech begins, I could very well be forced into that hazy state of mind again.”

Since the origin of that anomalous area was unclear, once it captured him again, he had no idea if he could retain his sanity. Thus, Subaru assumed that it would become impossible to recognize the anomaly as anomalous, due to the frightening power within that brainwashing space.

Subaru: “Should I tell everyone to take refuge somewhere away from here…? It’ll be like the situation with Petelgeuse… No, there’s not enough manpower, and if it causes too much of a ruckus, Sirius may act preemptively.”

He could ask the victims who should not be involved in the situation to take refuge. But how would he accomplish that? After all, if Sirius’s speech did not have any particular target, then the location would not be limited to this square.

If there were no audience here, she would just go elsewhere. As a result, the incident would only unfold to a different set of victims.

Subaru: “In that case, the only way is to eliminate the culprit…!”

His primary advantage was knowing that Sirius was planning to appear here.

It was very similar to the battle to subjugate Petelgeuse. No matter what, the Witch Cult could not be allowed to run free. To prevent the evil cult from carrying out their crimes meant that the fundamental causes needed to be eliminated. Otherwise, tragedies would only repeat themselves until the root cause was eliminated.

He had realized that far too late.

Had he reached that conclusion quicker, Subaru would not even have come to this place alone. No, returning to this square had been the wrong choice, in the first place. Had he at least returned to the inn, he could have turned to Wilhelm or Julius for help.

Subaru: “Wasting time on these thoughts is useless. I’m the only one here now. As soon as the speech starts, I have to be ready to act… No, the solution is actually much simpler!”

Finding an answer, Subaru glanced at the bottom of the clocktower—the white-colored tower from which that abominable speech had been professed. He noticed a small window at the bottom of the tower, presumably where Sirius had entered to give her speech from above.

In that case, she should already be in the tower, preparing for her speech that would be happening shortly. Even if she had yet to enter, Lusbel himself might be bound in there, awaiting rescue.

So, Subaru glanced cautiously to his left and right and approached the bottom of the clocktower. He quietly moved the inconspicuous iron gate in the alley to the side, opened it, and slipped inside.

The inside of the clocktower was dark beyond compare, its frigid air filled with dust.

The entire tower was entirely silent. Unlike clocktowers from his world, this one had no gears. The passage of time was tracked using the glow of a magic crystal. Its color would change naturally, reflecting the slight changes of atmospheric Mana over time.

—Therefore, the only sound that would ever be heard inside the tower had to be made by someone else.

???: “…Mmgrr!”

???: “No need to cry so noisily. Are you a good boy? You must be a strong child. Daddy Muslan and Mommy Ina, and your younger sibling too, they must be so proud of what a strong boy you are. You are such a good kid.”

An unpleasant voice echoed. Terrified childish whimpers of fear echoed.

Sobbing sounds came echoing from the top of the spiral staircase. It sounded like a grudge, a blessing, a hate, and a love.

It was distorted. It was twisted. It could never be said to be normal.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru became convinced that it was indeed Sirius, inhaled deeply, then held his breath.

His heartbeat began to accelerate, his chest thudding as he ascended the steps. Fortunately, the stairs had been crafted from stone. With care, he could silence his steps, especially since the enemy should be focused on the child in her arms.

Subaru steeled himself to call for Beatrice at a moment's notice as he slowly climbed the stairs. The tension escalated as the sound coming from above grew louder and closer.

Although the tower itself was high enough that Subaru needed to crane his head to see the top, there was nothing of note on the journey up. A large pillar sat in the center of the tower, and the spiral staircase encircled it, along the wall of the building.

The voice of a demon and the voice of a hero came from the end of those stairs. One single window faced the outside of the tower—presumably to give people access to adjust and check the spellstones installed on the clocktower. The sound came from the space just before that window.

It gave off a comparable feeling to an attic.

Subaru stealthily peered out from under the stairs, and saw that there were indeed two stray figures exchanging words that interrupted that silent darkness.

There was no one else. It was safe to say that horror stories with Witch Cultists lurking in the shadows had been avoided.

—Then, all that was left was for Subaru to look for an opening, and strike the first blow.

Subaru: "…"

Capturing her alive would not be a possibility.

Although that was what he wanted to do, the degree of difficulty would be too high. Not to mention that as long as she was alive, who knew what kind of tricks she could pull?

Subaru crouched down and put his hand on a handle. He grabbed hold of what was held by his waist, and yanked it loose.

In his two-handed grip was a weapon with an elongated, curved end, woven from special fibers.

The weapon was commonly known as a bullwhip, and some archeologists in some of his world's most famous movies had been known to carry them while exploring ruins. This one in particular had a longer range and was more difficult to manipulate than the one held by that archeologist from the movies. But in the past year, under Clind's tutelage, Subaru's skill had vastly improved.

Among all kinds of weapons, Subaru had chosen the whip as his main weapon.

Unlike swords, hammers, spears, and bows, the whip was incredibly versatile. More importantly, with weapons like the sword, Subaru's potential improvement in just a few short years was incredibly limited. Subaru already had a little familiarity with swordplay in kendo, and knew exactly how difficult it would be for him to reach any heights using that weapon.

Therefore, Subaru chose neither the spear nor the sword, but the whip. Originally, he had always relied on his smarts, creativity, and trickery to win.

In that case, a weapon that played to his strengths would allow him to better exert his power. Whips would also allow him to attack from mid-range.

Subaru: "…"

The distance from the end of the stairs to the creepy figure was about four meters. That was also the limit of Subaru’s range. To make sure his strike would connect, he must take one step. No, it should be okay to take only half a step before stepping in and swinging the whip.

In any case, the ability to kill in one-shot was not to be expected of a whip. To try and do just that, other factors needed to be relied upon.

In this situation devoid of factors other than natural ones, one could only use height.

—In that case, there was no choice but to strike from a distance.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru inhaled gently and exhaled slowly. Then he held his breath again.

He stood up and continued to climb the stairs, clutching the whip with his right hand. The figure hidden in the shadows did not detect him lurking behind. That gave him the upper hand.

Subaru took a half-step forward and flung his arm upward. With a sharp whistle, the tail of the whip flew toward its target. This preemptive sideways attack, which sought to prioritize its curved, angled speed over power, seemed to mirror a move in badminton.

The head of the snake cleaved through that air, biting toward its target’s unprotected back, trying to entangle that wicked figure’s neck and pull it down into the abyss.

However—

Sirius: “Why are you so angry?”

The silhouette whose back was facing him replied in a distracted voice.

Immediately thereafter, the shadow swung her right hand at lightning speed to deflect the blow from Subaru’s whip, using the chains that hung around her arm.

It was as if a silver snake had soared through the sky to intercept a flying snake.

For a second, Subaru was stunned by that sight, but recovered and moved his arm diagonally, determining that the front of the whip had indeed made contact with its prey.

Sirius: “Oh my.”

With a little giggle, the collapsed figure—Sirius regained her balance and climbed to her feet.

Although the chain dangling from her right arm had deflected Subaru’s blow, the whip bit into part of the chain’s locks, dragging Sirius to the ground as Subaru yanked on it.

Subaru: “H-Ha!”

Facing the struggling Sirius, Subaru further tightened his grip as he rushed toward that bandaged freak in a semicircle, ramming into her with a shoulder. Her body, which was lighter than expected, easily flew forward because of his body mass.

Sirius: “Gah!”

Sirius gave a soft cry, and, after thudding onto ground, tumbled through the window, just as Subaru had planned. Much more than ten meters spanned their location to the ground floor—there was at least one child that would be crushed like fruit, had it fallen from this height.

Subaru: “Are you okay, Lusbel?!”

Subaru did not confirm Sirius’s impact, instead running to the other figure on the floor. That small body belonged to Lusbel, who held the ends of a chain in both hands, gazing up at Subaru with fear.

The chain in his hand was connected to the chain wrapping around his entire lower body, another expression of Sirius’s bad taste.

Subaru: “That guy…! Forcing you to tie yourself up…!”

Little by little, he realized the extent of the horror Lusbel must have tasted, being forced to hold that chain against his neck, quite literally strangling himself. Even now, traces of terror were still engraved in his face.

Once aware of that maliciousness, Subaru felt uncontrollable anger. He immediately grabbed the boy's shoulders, taking the chain from him.

Subaru: "Enough! You'll be fine. You'll never have to do such a thing again. Come with me!"

Lusbel: "But, if… I, I don't follow, the terms of our agreement, then Tina… Tina will…!"

Lusbel replied, eyes watering and lips quivering.

Seeing him, Subaru's throat became choked with emotion. That child had, in an attempt to protect his childhood friend, agreed to a deal with the devil. And, even experiencing what he had, Lusbel was more worried about his friend than about himself.

Even though his legs were trembling, even though his teeth were chattering, even though his vision was being blurred by tears, even though he was no longer capable of forming coherent sentences.

Subaru: "It's okay. In this city, there are… many… reliable people."

His hoarse voice was unable to convey say what he wanted to say.

In order for the youth to feel at ease, he needed to speak comforting, authoritative words. The Sword Saint was in the city right now. As was the Finest of Knights. The Kingdom's leading healer, and various other people that could destroy a small city.

Therefore, there was no need for any fear. No evil forces could run rampant. Yeah. Exactly. Fear was completely unnecessary. There was no need for it at all. And, so,

Subaru: "So… My legs, stop, shaking!!"

In front of Lusbel, whose eyes had become unfocused with fear, Subaru desperately beat his unresponsive legs and yelled.

His voice, laced with grief, unexpectedly echoed, compounding the fear residing in his chest. Subaru felt as if there were a sense of disgust, with an unidentified origin, entangling his entire body.

Lusbel: "—Guu…"

Lusbel vomited yellow, with a sound like the bursting of a bubble. His body started to cramp up as he exhaled, collapsing in a pool of his own vomit. Subaru wanted to help him up, but then he too felt as if his own organs were being twisted inside him. Subaru also succumbed to the discomfort of his internal organs, and he spewed out the contents in the stomach, feeling as if he had been thrown into flight.

The daisukiyaki he had eaten in the morning had become unrecognizable, and the acrid, visceral smell of his gastric acids were overwhelming. Gulping, Subaru continued to retch vigorously, tasting only pain as his vomit threatened to drown him.

While he vomited and vomited, dizzily, tinnitus ringing in his ears, eyes turning in their sockets, his body was still shivering non-stop. Not from cold. An invisible hand was twisting his stomach, his internal organs being shuffled around. Subaru was aware of its origin.

They were, undoubtedly,

Sirius: "—Your fear is but proof of your gentleness."

Hearing the gentle voice coming from behind him, Subaru vomited again.

Almost drowning in the fluid overflowing from his stomach, Subaru collapsed onto the dirtied ground. He felt a touch of slimy liquid on his cheek. He was so close to the accumulation of filth on the ground that every repeated shallow breath led to the bursting of a yellow bubble.

Most people would not be able to bear such a terrible sight, yet she gazed it at with a soft smile.

While Subaru and Lusbel looked at each other, desperately struggling to breathe in their own vomit, wracked by invisible tremors—

Sirius: “People are able to understand each other. People can become one. Gentleness does not exist for oneself. It exists for others. Gentleness only shines because it exists for the sake of others. Only being gentle to yourself, that is selfishness! So, your gentleness, existing for the sake of others, is worthy of reverence! Ah, ah, this is Love!”

Subaru: “Guh, ah, hk…”

Sirius: “Please feel it as your heart desires. Let me witness your heart’s contents. Feel, and let me witness your Love. Your endless tenderness. Your virtue that bid you to save Lusbel-kun!”

As she spoke, Sirius broke into a dance as she gazed at the two, both lying in a pool of vomit. She crossed her arms with one hand pointing to Subaru and the other to Lusbel, shaking her waist. As if dancing. As if offering a tribute.

Sirius: “You two gentle souls will feel together Lusbel-kun’s fear. You shall feel Lusbel-kun’s fear, and, through that, Lusbel-kun’s feelings will pass to you. Lusbel-kun, through your fear, feels what you shall feel again from him. Your fears once again felt, and Lusbel-kun’s own fear is compounded. Your compounded fears, felt by Lusbel-kun, shall in turn compound your own fear. That fear, mixed with Lusbel-kun’s fear, will become a brand-new, fresh fear, and the freshness of Lusbel-kun’s fear shall again be passed to your true fear. The true fear that you feel, and a second and a third fear born through Lusbel-kun, will lead to his fear, and the next level of fear generated by Lusbel-kun’s heart will be added to your own new greatest level of fear…”

Something was whispering into his ear. That overwhelming momentum approached non-sense. Subaru had no time to try to comprehend those words. Why? Because for Subaru, everything passing through his hearing and his vision were terrifying. If breathing were terrifying, then blinking was terrifying. But not blinking was very painful and unbearable. Even that pain existed only to be presented as a symbol of terror for Subaru, today. Feeling one pain means feeling the pain that he would feel the next time. That would make Subaru feel continuous, endless, infinite fear. So refusing to blink would not do. But, if he blinked, the world would fall into darkness for an instant. In that dark moment where nothing could be seen, he would not know what was happening. Although there might be nothing at all happening, he had no way of knowing for certain. Being unable to confirm anything was terrifying. If the unknown instinctively aroused fear, then to live was but an endless attempt to overcome the fear. In the end, that so-called fear had always been the feeling of weakness that began to plague a creature upon feeling a threat to its life. Being able to have this emotion was synonymous with being a lifeform. The function of this horror was similar to pain. After all, creatures who left their instincts of danger behind could not survive. To numb your fear was to condemn yourself.

Sirius: “Oh my? You two look to be losing your minds. Loving and emotionally enriching people can sometimes be very fragile. Ah, that is because Love is just painful. However, it is precisely because love exists that we can survive. This is really very difficult. Then, I shall fetch Tina-chan to help me. Lusbel-kun has worked hard.”

Being numb to the value of life meant violating an inherent ability to survive. In other words, fear was necessary. Therefore, there was absolutely nothing to be ashamed about even praising the performance of feeling so frightened, like right now. Of course, that kind of thing was just an assumption devoid any meaning. But, conducting such thought experiments was the best method to resist an overwhelming, dominating fear in the hope of finding a victorious breakthrough, was it not? Subaru certainly thought so. Lusbel, in front of him, began to convulse as his eyes rolled back in his head. The light of that young boy’s life was about to be extinguished.

That was sad and regrettable. However, Subaru could not be discouraged. He would struggle and fight to the end, wasn’t that what he had vowed? Even in that terrible, toilsome, damaging Trial last year. If not, why exactly did Subaru find it so sad and painful to survive, even so? Scary.

Very very scary. Terrifying. Everything was terrifying. Alive. Terrifying. Blinking. Terrifying. Breathing. Terrifying. Rancid. Terrifying. Disgusting. Terrifying. Scary. Scary. Scary. Scary. Scaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscary—

2

Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them, Natsuki-sama? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Immediately after blinking, the world flipped upside down, and Subaru collapsed as soon as he heard the fresh sound. A girl’s awkward face approached, and caught his fall as he collided fiercely with her forehead.

Liliana: “Gah?!”

Subaru: “Huh?”

A sharp voice cried out.

Subaru stumbled several steps backward from the sudden, piercing pain. Somewhere in front of him, a sound of something falling into the grass was made. Subaru did not respond immediately, as he was too busy rubbing his forehead.

Subaru: “Wh-What just…?”

Emilia: “What’s wrong, Subaru? You suddenly headbutted Liliana. That’s no good. If you don’t like the other person, you should resolve your differences by talking it out.”

Beatrice: “That’s right, in fact. Before resorting to violence, we should give that uncouth-looking girl ample warning that we want to send her flying, I suppose.”

Liliana: “Am I really so ugly?!”

Liliana leapt to her feet with an unexpected cry.

Upon hearing her words, Emilia and Beatrice exchanged glances without speaking. Liliana suffered another metaphorical blow, and collapsed again.

Priscilla: “What a ridiculous farce. Commoners are not allowed to treat my songbird in such a manner. This shall not happen again.”

Perhaps refusing to condone the violence being imposed on Liliana, Priscilla issued a complaint about Subaru’s behavior.

Subaru gave her a vague nod, confirmed his location, once again, and—

Subaru: “…Disgusting.”

A second reset had not changed his evaluation of that monster at all.

Chapter 21:
Optimal Solution

1

—Subaru's second Return by Death hit him with an unprecedented sense of fatigue. Falling under the spell of madness twice had placed a tremendous burden on his mind.

Especially the second one. That overwhelming fear had been imprinted deeply into him, and he had been fully aware of himself at the time of death.

The shivering that came from deep within his being, the fear that would never cease, the individual named Natsuki Subaru breaking, his fragile spirit crumbling into powder. This death had probably occurred due to a mad, fear-induced heart attack. Sirius had been delighted to see Subaru so terrified, having been reduced to a machine whose purpose was to excrete fluid.

He had wanted to rescue Lusbel and challenge her on his own, and that futile attempt had come at an incredibly heavy price.

However, although Subaru had died twice in as little as thirty minutes, and had yet to produce material results, his time had not been completely wasted. Sirius, perhaps wishing to give Subaru some small comfort before his death, had, in her sincere and respectful manner, explained exactly what had been happening to both him and Lusbel. That was,

Subaru: "Our fear, compounding as we felt each other's feelings… The same principle as resonance?"

Subaru had felt Lusbel's fear, and Lusbel felt that augmented fear from Subaru, which then transferred to Subaru. The never-ending cycle of fear would override any previous state of fear and eventually grew to the extreme, becoming fatal.

There was no doubt that had been the cause of death. For both the first, and this second death.

The flow that had led to these events, the statements from Sirius, and her status as Wrath. Those clues led Subaru to a conclusion.

A scene that should have made people feel disgusted or angry, had instead drawn smiles and laughs from them. Fear that had belonged to Subaru being transferred to a child, frightening him even further, before returning twofold to Subaru.

—Sirius's Wrath could viciously manipulate the feelings of others for her own enjoyment.

That was most likely a special form of magic that did not belong to any of the natural forms of magic belonging in this world, just like Petelgeuse's Unseen Hand. It was an ability belonging to the Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult. This Wrath was a power closely related to emotions.

It was an ability befitting the Sin Archbishops.

However, although Subaru had finally pieced it together after two deaths, that was the only intelligence he was certain of. Now, the question was the conditions for the Authority to be activated—in other words, the method to break out of this deadlock.

Once the trick behind Petelgeuse's Sloth was found out, he became fairly easy to defeat. His Authority had two sides to it, the Unseen Hand and Slothful Cancellation of Others' Actions, and Subaru had been able to resist both.

It was still unknown to Subaru what was the root cause of both those resistances. Although he now had his own version of Unseen Hand, his Invisible Providence, Subaru was still confused about all that.

In fact, considering the Witch's Scent's relationship with his Return by Death, as well as his immunity to the effect of the White Whale's Fog of Oblivion, Subaru had optimistically thought, "Am I actually immune to the Witch Cult's foul techniques?!" However, his recent murders at the hands of the Authority of Wrath seemed to disprove that theory.

Given his two encounters with Wrath, in the worst case, the triggering condition for the Authority might even be “contact with Sirius”.

As soon as he heard her speak, as soon as he saw her figure, Subaru had probably fallen under her spell. Taking that into consideration, finding a way to capture her would be difficult indeed. The most straightforward and reliable solution would also be the most extreme—to destroy the tower from a distance with magic.

No contact would be made with Sirius, and he would not need to lay eyes on her. Knowing where she would appear, he could take the opportunity to launch a pre-emptive strike, and he would be able to ensure that Return by Death would not be triggered again.

Only, he would need to disregard the sacrifice of a courageous child, and so Subaru could never seriously consider such an option.

“Sacrifices were necessary”, who would be self-righteous enough to say such a thing?

To decide on a utilitarian “greater good” at the price of other lives would mean, form the perspective of those that were sacrificed, that the entire world would be lost. Subaru could not tolerate the loss of his own life, so how could he arrogantly place a price tag on the lives of others?

His goals were as he had just determined. He needed to rescue Lusbel and prevent any unnecessary sacrifice. What troubled Subaru most, however, was achieving both at the same time.

Subaru: “Then, to rescue Lusbel… the only viable way is defeating Sirius.”

Should he try to rescue Lusbel by himself, the situation would end up the same as last time. No matter how much he struggled, trying to fight Sirius alone was tantamount to suicide.

Sirius’s combat skills were evidently nothing to scoff at. Although she wielded a chain, just deflecting Subaru’s surprise attack was impressive in itself.

Even considering Subaru's lack of experience in combat, the strike of a whip was too fast to be followed by the untrained eye. To have been able to react so quickly to a surprise attack, and to deflect it with her chains, how skilled must she be?

Subaru could not even begin to imagine.

In other words, what Subaru needed was someone with the power to overwhelm Sirius with pure combat skills, who trusted Subaru enough to help him, and who could resist the power of Sirius's Wrath.

Subaru: "What kind of a miracle would it be if I just found a guy who coincidentally satisfied all those requirements…?"

Subaru sighed to himself as he considered this opportunistic line of thought.

However, the notion that there would be someone who could remain unaffected by Sirius's power was not a baseless one. The presence of someone who was immune to Sirius's Wrath, much like Subaru could see through Sloth's power, was not that inconceivable.

After all, Subaru's accreditation as Petelgeuse's killer had only come around from his unique resistance to Petelgeuse's powers.

Since everyone in the square had been taken in by Sirius's speech, he could assume that no one there had any such resistance to Sirius's Authority, and therefore there was no Sirius Killer present.

At the square, four people, including Subaru, had been prepared to fight Sirius, but she had taken special care to point them all out. And then, Subaru finally realized it.

Rachins had been at the square.

Subaru: "—Reinhard!"

Although Subaru, extreme opportunist as he was, had tried to resist engaging in commonplace thinking, he finally remembered the man whose presence was the very peak of opportunism.

2

Although Subaru was not attempting to justify his delayed reaction, the reason it had taken so much time to connect Rachins with Reinhard was arguably the short interval between his deaths.

A death followed by a death, madness followed by madness, all happening in the span of a mere fifteen minutes.

In that state, being able to calmly identify the crisis and calmly explore countermeasures before choosing the best solution was nigh-impossible. If anyone tried to belittle him, Subaru would have liked to respond with a sharp complaint about Return by Death.

Subaru did not want to trigger Return by Death. If circumstances would permit, he would rather share a tranquil, peaceful life with Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice. However, this world would never permit Subaru such a happy life. He was destined to live through every day while struggling desperately.

So, at this moment, Subaru was desperately making an argument.

Subaru: “I finally found you, I’m not letting you go so easily! Please, call Reinhard here right now! This is an emergency!”

Rachins: “So annoying! Why should I take the risk of being lectured by that red-haired bastard? You must be kidding!”

A lively crowd had gathered around the two, who were angrily roaring at each other. The crowd seemed to relish the tense atmosphere, eagerly expecting a fight to break out at any given moment.

Upon resurrection Subaru had an epiphany, and acted on it immediately.

Like last time, he left Beatrice as Emilia’s guard, and used his errand as an excuse to leave the park. After arriving at the square, he had searched desperately for Rachins. Now, he had finally entered the negotiation stage.

His search for Rachins had really been quite time-consuming, so upon seeing him, Subaru had roughly grabbed his shoulder, which had led to their current quarrel.

However, Rachins had only agitated Subaru further by shouldering him in retaliation.

In any case, an argument was now inevitable. Subaru spoke rapidly and anxiously under Rachins's harsh glare.

Subaru: "Can you listen? Calm down and listen to me. I'm not playing around. If you don't want to die, hurry up and call Reinhard here right now."

Rachins: "Huh? You devilish brat, are you looking down on me? You think you could actually kill me? Forget that bastard Reinhard, see if I don't kill you right here."

Subaru: "Ah, that isn't what I meant…!"

Rachins regarded Subaru's words as a provocation, and his anger started growing out of control.

After all, Subaru and Rachins had never been on good terms. In addition, it seemed that Rachins had a poor impression of Reinhard, who should be his comrade. Someone he would already be reluctant to call had been requested by someone disliked by him, and so Rachins stubbornly refused Subaru's request.

Subaru: "You stubborn, inconsiderate idiot…!"

Subaru gritted his teeth looking at Rachins and grabbed his head in his hands.

Needless to say, Subaru, who had failed to speak clearly and calmly, was also to blame. However, seeing his negotiations being refused to such an extent, he could not help wanting to make a complaint.

Although, to Rachins, Subaru must have looked to be a raving madman. Subaru's hands were tied due to his inability to reveal any of his foreknowledge.

—However, the situation being what it was, Subaru had no other way.

Subaru placed a hand on his chest, attempting to suppress his fear.

Subaru: “Rachins. This is not a joke. The reason why I want you to call Reinhard is because there’s a strong enemy I cannot handle.”

Rachins: “Someone you can’t handle? Don’t think so highly of yourself.”

Rachins snorted derisively.

Seeing that expression, Subaru lowered his gaze, took a deep breath, and opened his mouth.

Don’t come, don’t come—while making such a wish, Subaru spoke,

Subaru: “—The Witch Cult will show up here.”

Rachins: “…”

Subaru opened his eyes as Rachins’s face froze at his disturbing words.

Finished, Subaru immediately looked down to his chest, but the pain he had been expecting did not arrive. The punishment for disclosing information that could potentially reveal his Return by Death had not taken place.

First of all, he was decidedly relieved about this, and dropped his shoulders.

—Although Subaru had not triggered Return by Death for a year now, the penalties associated with it remained.

In particular, when he had attempted to spill everything to Beatrice, Subaru had been wracked by the infernal pain he had come to associate with Return by Death. It was as if the Witch of Envy, who was probably the one responsible for that black magic hand, had forgotten his commendable farewell gift to her at the Witches’ Tea Party in Sanctuary. How rude.

Therefore, Subaru was still unable to discuss anything related to Return by Death with Beatrice or anyone else. Needless to say, he would share still his knowledge with his partner, Beatrice, as long as he did not have to face punishment.

But that was a long story. One that he did not have time to consider right now.

At any rate, right now, the important thing was that Subaru had successfully told Rachins his legitimate reason for needing Reinhard, without being punished by those black hands.

In fact, hearing the name “Witch Cult”, Rachins seemed to reconsider his stance, dropping his gaze and narrowing his eyes in contemplation.

Rachins: “Hey, brat.”

Subaru: “It’s Natsuki Subaru. Stop always calling me “brat”, Rachins.”

Rachins: “That’s Rachins-san to you, Shitty Subaru. How much credibility does that statement have? Using the Witch Cult as a bluff isn’t something to do lightly, you know.”

Rachins spoke with a low voice, casting a hostile gaze at Subaru.

In this world, the name of the Witch of Envy and the Witch Cult were incredibly weighty, no matter where they appeared. This stemmed from the fact that the idea of the Witch being the embodiment of absolute evil was deeply rooted in the world’s history.

Even Rachins was wearing a serious expression, one that he would normally never reveal. He was finally taking this seriously, so now Subaru could only respond with equal seriousness to him.

Subaru: “I’m not kidding around, nor lying. The Witch Cult will come here. Many people will be in danger.”

Rachins: “Where did you hear this… Ah, damn it. That’s right. Your faction did kill the Witch Cult’s Sloth. Fuck, that shit’s actually got some credibility…”

Before Subaru could come up with a response, Rachins found his own conclusion. Although that was in fact mere speculation, that merit seemed effective in having Rachins believe him.

Rachins: “Are they targeting the city? Or this specific square?”

Subaru: “So you’re going to believe me?”

Rachins: “You’re the one who said to stop messing around, right? Listen up, Shitty Subaru. Although I don’t want to be lectured by that bastard Reinhard, I also don’t want to run into trouble that could kill me. Since what happens next is entirely dependent on my mood, you’d better be careful with your next words.”

Although Rachins still held some measure of doubt, he wanted to hear the details. Surprised at this reasonable judgment, Subaru decided to continue with the conversation.

Subaru: “I understand, sorry. The Witch Cult’s Wrath is planning to attack this square. She will appear at that clock tower, and her target is everyone in the square, not any specific individual.”

Rachins: “That’s consistent with the Witch Cult’s style. Damn it, how much time do we have?”

Subaru: “There’s probably only five minutes left. So, seriously, call him right now.”

Rachins: “Five minutes?! You’re kidding! Why didn’t you say that sooner?!”

Subaru: “That’s what I was trying to tell you five minutes ago!”

Although Rachins was outraged at the lack of time, Subaru had spent ten long minutes finding him and convincing him. Subaru had not wished to walk this kind of tightrope, if possible.

Running around the city and calling for Reinhard would have been more reliable than talking to Rachins. However, time did not allow that of Subaru.

Subaru: “Anyway, please, could we stop messing around so you can call Reinhard? According to your conversation yesterday, it’s through something like fireworks, right?”

Rachins: “Fireworks, what’s that…? I shoot magic in the air, and that bastard Reinhard can see it and recognize it as the signal.”

Subaru: “…That’s simple and clear, which is good, but what would happen if someone else suddenly fired magic into the air?”

Rachins: “There’s no need to worry about that. Apparently, the red-haired bastard can tell who’s responsible for which magic.”

Even being unaware of the details, Subaru could tell how out of the ordinary that ability was. Then, he belatedly realized the obvious—It seemed that, during the past year, Rachins had also improved himself to the point where he could use basic magic. It was hard to imagine that he was capable of using magic back when Subaru first met him, one year ago.

Rachins: “I’m not a performer, so move aside already, you annoying bunch!”

Rachins finally gave in to Subaru’s persuasion, and prepared to call Reinhard.

The crowd, who had been whispering “Are they starting yet?”, “Is it finally happening?” backed off, disappointed, as Rachins raised a hand, kneading Mana.

Seeing the swirl of red Mana—of fire-attribute magic, Goa—Subaru felt an odd sense of unsettling disconnect.

This time, the situation should have drastic changes, and move forward.

Although it had been a rather extreme case of persuasion, Subaru was still excited to learn that he could work with Rachins like this, even if the latter’s actions were based on self-preservation.

This could be said to partially amount to Subaru’s growth in the past year, and his defeat of Petelgeuse. Rachins, too, had changed in the year past. Whether Subaru or Rachins, if one of them had not changed in the previous year, then this collaboration could never have happened.

Therefore, this result had been born of a simultaneously optimistic yet realistic growth.

Reinhard would come here.

As a result, dealing with Wrath would also be easy. No matter how powerful the enemy was, they would be dwarfed by the Sword Saint. The Authority of Wrath surely would not work on Reinhard. For some reason, Subaru trusted that mysterious sense of his.

Rachins: “Goa!”

Rachins recited the incantation, and a red flame burst forth from his raised arm. The flame skyrocketed, and soon exploded with a dry sound in the blue sky.

Call it fireworks or magic, it seemed a little shabby, but that signal was presumably more than good enough for the hero it was meant to reach.

Perhaps what happened next was due to that hazy relief.

Because of course. It was obvious. He should have thought about it.

Had the thought of Reinhard’s arrival caused him to relax so much that he neglected to pay attention to his surroundings?

Sirius: “—Oh my. There seems to be a fireball in the sky. What a beautiful, blinding light.”

If any commotion arose near the clocktower, it was only natural that the enemy would detect it.

3

Sirius, appearing on the white tower, wore that bandage concealing her face, as always.

However, the expression she wore was obviously a smile. Something about the tone of her voice reflected a little bird chirping melodies in the sunny Spring.

Sirius raised a hand over her eyes and squinted at the brilliance of that Goa. She seemed to be regarding that red flame with the same admiration most people would treat fireworks with.

Sirius: “This is great! Well, everyone, my apologies. Good morning!”

That unusually high-pitched sound snatched the crowd’s attention from the fireball, and they turned to face Sirius.

Even Subaru did. So, he could not blame their collective reaction.

Subaru: “No, don’t look!!”

Seeing that fierce, bandaged smile out of the corner of his eye, he immediately issued a loud warning.

However, not a single person heeded his warning and looked away. Of course. Subaru himself had held the same feeling about Sirius since their first contact.

Even if he turned his face, his left cheek could still feel that intensity. Those vicious waves of danger that existed to threaten his life.

Faced with a bloody carnivore, how could anyone avert their gaze? Looking away from a dangerous pair of sharp fangs could only be done by those who had already given up on living.

Refusing to die, their human instincts directed their gazes upon Sirius.

Sirius: “Oh my. Silence came much faster than I expected. This must be thanks those two men who attracted your attention before I appeared. Thank you. Please applaud those two young men.”

Sirius clapped her hands together as she spoke, the chains attached to them clattering on the floor, as she regarded Subaru and Rachins, who still held his arm outstretched.

Subaru, feeling a cool breeze on his face, clenched his teeth and attempted to refrain from reacting to Sirius's gaze.

Redirecting Rachins's attention would be impossible. He had already been entrapped by Sirius. No matter what Subaru did, he would be unable to get through to Rachins, and then Sirius would entrap him as well.

In fact, now, Subaru could not bring himself to cover his ears.

He had expected that even being aware of Sirius would mean her charm would become irresistible. Therefore, what Subaru had originally intended to do was immediately avert his gaze and cover his ears. Even if such measures would render him defenseless, he would not be subjected to her mental manipulation.

However, after his eyes were captured, that premeditated countermeasure was no longer available.

And why would he cover his ears? Because he didn't want to hear Sirius's voice.

However, why would he willingly deprive himself of such a pleasant sound?

Subaru: "…"

His attention placed on her, Subaru forgot himself and turned to look at Sirius.

Sirius watched Subaru as he did so, gleefully clasping her hands together and shaking her body from side to side. The chains again rubbed against the ground with metallic friction and a rattling noise, as if reflecting the defenses of Subaru's strong heart being broken down.

Sirius: "All right! It took nineteen seconds for everyone to see me here. My apologies. But I am very happy. And, although I do not know why, it seems to me that there is a child here who loves me far more than expected. Well, then, I have to introduce myself."

As she spoke, Sirius lowered her head respectfully, facing a whirlpool of anxious gazes. Raising her head, basking in everyone's gaze,

Sirius: "I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Wrath. I am called Sirius Romanée-Conti."

She reported her daunting name.

That title should have been symbol of disgust and terror, and should have evoked an incredibly negative response. Instead, as she opened her speech, the crowd reacted as if she had introduced herself as a friendly neighbor.

Sirius: "Oh, thank you. My apologies for taking up everyone's time like this. However, please rest assured that I put an end to all this soon."

???: "—Will you? Then it seems fortunate that I rushed here as soon as I could."

The voice that replied was deeper and softer than Sirius's fictional kindness, and permeated, touched the hearts of the people of the square, Subaru included.

Sirius: "…"

Sirius lowered her gaze once more, and Subaru and the rest of the crowd turned to the side.

They were all facing the waterway which ran behind the square. A smooth flow of water erupted alongside the wind of someone moving at incredible speed.

There, a red flame burned.

There, clear, sky-colored eyes blinked.

There, a fair, calm face revered by all who gazed upon him appeared.

—The embodiment of the concept of a hero, envisioned by all humans, was now a reality.

Reinhard: “Searching for a shortcut took a little bit of time. Sorry for being late.”

The hero took not five minutes, but thirty seconds to arrive, and offered his apology. Having sprinted through the roads—no, having traveled by waterway, the recently-arrived Sword Saint swept his eyes quickly through the circle of people, before raising his eyes towards Wrath and sighing.

Reinhard: “I understand why I was called. That judgment was correct, Rachins. Or was it you, Subaru?”

Leaping from the water to the ground, and then into the square, Reinhard relieved the stiff Rachins, then patted Subaru’s shoulders with his hands.

Recognizing the touch of those palms as real, Subaru gave several gasping exhalations as his whole body shuddered.

Subaru: “Rei-Reinhard?”

Reinhard: “Yes, it is me. From the looks of it, this is quite the emergency. Standing overhead, at the tower… That is a Sin Archbishop, right?”

Reinhard, offering a reassuring nod, stood in the spotlight.

Subaru saw his fair eyebrows wrinkle as he deliberately chose not to face Sirius. Reinhard seemed to also understand the danger.

Subaru: “She has a brainwashing ability. Although it feels a little better now… If I heard her voice or looked at her now, I’d immediately fall back under its spell.”

Reinhard: “I know. And not just sound and sight. It seems that even feeling her presence in my skin will have that effect. I do not know if I am able to remain calm for long, when near her.”

Subaru: “You’re kidding, even you…?!”

Hearing Reinhard’s vulnerable statement, Subaru fell into speechless despair.

Although he had no basis in believing so, he had been convinced that as long as Reinhard were here, everything would be fine. However, Reinhard himself had told Subaru that he would not be unaffected by Sirius.

In that case, it would be difficult to even come up with an idea on how to deal with that wicked presence.

Sirius: “I apologize if mistaken, but could it be that you’re the famed Sword Saint-san? If so… what a wonderful day this will be!”

Reinhard: “As you said, I am Reinhard van Astrea, the current inheritor of the title of Sword Saint. Unfortunately, I think that title is too heavy for me now.”

Sirius: “Nonsense! But that poses no problem! It is very nice to have you here. Because this country bears the greatest trust and highest expectations in you as a Knight. Everyone loves you, and you love everyone. You are the embodiment of my hope, the ideal of my Love!”

Reinhard: “Am I?”

Sirius was indeed shaking her hands noisily and engaging in an ecstatic dance. Reinhard, although facing away from her, was chatting with her quite casually. If communicating with her would lead to falling under her spell, then Reinhard’s lack of action equated suicide.

Subaru spoke up anxiously.

Subaru: “Hey, hey, Reinhard… going on like this isn’t good. It’s not good at all. It’ll be really bad. Although I can’t say why.”

Reinhard: “…That looks to be the case indeed. And that is not applicable to me exclusively. Taking the others into consideration, I cannot prolong this too much.”

Subaru should feel anxious, but gradually became unaware of why. Reinhard sighed at his puzzlement, and took a step forward. Then,

Subaru: “Reinhard?”

Reinhard: “I cannot hold on for too much longer—So, I will get rid of the problem as soon as possible.”

As soon as those words faded, Reinhard tensed his legs slightly, and leapt forward.

That was the same movement he had used to leave the waterway—but this time, it produced a rippling blast, and everyone in the area gasped as they felt the impact of waves spread over the ground.

Leaving behind that share of amazement, Reinhard turned the explosive energy into ascending momentum.

Sirius: “Hahahaha! Ah, how impressive this is—”

The kick of the ascending Sword Saint effortlessly struck Sirius, who had crossed her arms to receive the blow, and she was flung far into the sky above the white tower.

Chapter 22:
A Casual Response

1

Could this be called aerial warfare?

Reinhard had leapt toward Sirius, knocking his opponent from the tower and sending her flying through the sky. Touching down on the white walls of the clock tower, he flew off like a bullet by slightly bending and stretching his knees again.

Sirius: “Hahaha! Ah, how impressive you are!”

As the heroic figure flew toward her, she raised her voice, ecstatic, and waved her arms about. Accompanying that motion was the piercing whine of her chain unraveling from her wrist.

That fully extended chain could now be used as a whip, although its merit as a weapon relied more in its intimidating appearance and violent sound, rather than convenience. Only a deviant with no common sense would opt for such a weapon.

That iron snake had undoubtedly tasted the blood of more than just a few people, and, at this moment, it was partaking in one of its routine hunts. Attempting to crush its prey with its iron jaws, the whistling wind it created resembling applause.

But even that blunt snake, who could approach the speed of sound, was clueless.

—In this world, there was a human existence as departed from common sense as Sirius, albeit in a different manner.

Reinhard: “A chain, how troublesome.”

Hearing the sound of the chain entering the fight, the Sword Saint frowned and gave a troubled mutter.

In the midst of such an intense battle, he seemed to be letting out a slight grievance that was better suited to the atmosphere of a mild annoyance in one's daily life.

Sirius: "Hahaha!"

Sirius, on the verge of panting, revealed her passionate laugh to the spectators.

Surely, that was inevitable. However, the reasoning behind Sirius's delight was mysterious. Whether it was because of desperation, or whether she was genuinely happy, that much was clear to all the spectators looking up at the scene, Subaru included.

This was a situation that only Sirius would have laughed in.

Reinhard: "…"

Sirius flew upwards, and Reinhard pursued her from below.

With Reinhard as her target, Sirius delivered a quick, precise blow, slamming the chains of both her arms. Even facing that oncoming chain, Reinhard did not reach for the sword hanging at his waist.

If his words from long before were true, it was not that he did not intend to draw his sword, it was that he was unable to. Reinhard's legendary sword would only allow itself to face worthy opponents.

In that case, he had been condemned to be unarmed while fighting that horrible freak. Even Reinhard, who Subaru had the utmost trust in, would need to undergo a bitter struggle—perhaps he would even fail to live up to Subaru's expectations, in a show of human weakness.

If so, then that trust would soon be shattered.

Aiming a follow-up strike of her chains at Reinhard, a high-pitched noise echoed.

Shockwaves and sparks danced violently. To Subaru and the other spectators, lightning seemed to flash through the sky. The ability to accomplish that kind of witchcraft was precisely the proof that Reinhard transcended the boundaries of human skill.

Reinhard met the chain head on, lifting his slender right leg to defend.

That attack had been so surprising that it would have elicited a laugh from anyone. Right after the impact, Reinhard wrapped the chain around his foot with a turn of his ankle, moving it to suit his own will.

The movement itself had not been anything special. Reinhard had met the approaching chain with his right leg and wound it around his foot in a makeshift weapon, using it to open an immediate follow-up.

In only a moment, he had easily shifted from offense to defense.

Needless to say, not everyone could keep up with the fight. Among those present, only the handful of people with combat training could follow those rapid, continuous shifts between attacking and defending.

In that moment of understanding, there was an urge to laugh. Subaru gave a long sigh and relaxed his shoulders. Fortunately, Reinhard was a comrade, and Subaru had never been happier that he was on his side. If he were the enemy, then Subaru's shoulders, knees, and bladder would have all given out.

Sirius: "Haha, hahaha! Aha, HAHAHAHA!!"

Sirius laughed loudly, her right arm spinning wildly like a tornado.

Since her left arm had been captured by Reinhard, she could only resort to the use of the right one. However, although the whistling snake tore through the sky, flying from every direction, it was blocked by the chain on Reinhard's right foot, creating a high-pitched whine and a shower of sparks.

Every spark dancing in the blue sky, was accompanied by the sound of a metallic musical instrument that permeated the square, in a whirling performance of red and yellow.

A strike, another blow, but during that period, Reinhard had further closed the distance between himself and Sirius. Soon, after exchanging an array of blows, he reached her.

Sirius: “How unexpected! You’ve actually reached this point! Amazing!”

Reinhard: “You are very proficient. I find it a shame that you’ve committed yourself to evil.”

In those moments, the two exchanged words the way they exchanged attacks.

Reinhard quickly pulled back his right leg and thrusted his left hand with aligned fingers. Sirius greeted it with a powerful swing of her arm, the undulating chain diving at Reinhard with exposed fangs. And, although that chain was made of steel, Reinhard had used his own hand as a blade and cleaved it in two.

In the past, Subaru had witnessed the perfect splitting of disposable wooden chopsticks—a party trick. If Reinhard were to partake in those performances, he could split a steel blade like paper. The fact his strike had had the beauty of a sword was enough reason to believe so.

The severed portion of the chain continued with the same momentum it had into the clocktower, the violent collision shattering one of the building’s walls. The sight of smoke and the rubble crashing into the square shook Subaru out of his trance.

He had been completely fascinated.

Reinhard and Sirius’s fight—No, Reinhard’s fight, had entranced him. Whether it was envy or fear that had caused said fascination was another matter entirely.

Subaru: “Leaving her to Reinhard is fine. Then, I…!”

He could not continue to dawdle here, blindly ogling the fight and waiting for an outcome.

Subaru squeezed through a gap in the crowd, running to the opening of the tower. Now that Sirius’s attention was fully devoted to Reinhard, Lusbel, who had been prepared for her speech, had probably been abandoned in the clock tower.

Saving him would ease Subaru's worries.

Just in case, so that if Sirius got away from Reinhard, Lusbel's safety would be guaranteed. Subaru climbed anxiously up the spiral staircase, again tasting that dark, damp air.

The tower was much brighter now than it had been fifteen minutes ago, much thanks to the light flooding in from the walls broken by Sirius's chain.

After safely ascending the spiral staircase, Subaru discovered Lusbel, bound in chains, on the top floor. He had been left face up on the ground, the floor wet by his incontinence. The child's sobs touched Subaru deeply.

Subaru: "Lusbel! You're safe now, don't worry!"

Subaru tenderly took the chained Lusbel into his arms. He ignored the warm moisture as he saw Lusbel's desperate, tearful gaze turning away from his own, terrified of Subaru's face.

Lusbel: "Mmm!"

Subaru: "It's alright, I'm on your side. And as for that monster, a reliable hero is fighting her right now. So, let's take this time to get you out of here."

Lusbel: "Mmm."

Subaru spoke with the utmost sincerity. Gradually, Lusbel's body lost its strength, abandoning his struggle, and he faced Subaru with a tearful but clear expression.

After Subaru nodded in response to that inquiring gaze, Lusbel began sobbing anew, for a different reason than before.

Subaru: "Wait a second. Let me get this off you."

After gently stroking the crying boy's head, Subaru started cautiously working on the chain as not to hurt him. From shoulders to ankles, the chain had been wound tightly, and he had also been gagged with it. Subaru took care to avoid hurting the child as he unraveled it.

Subaru: “Well, I got it off. Can you stand up? If not, I can carry you.”

Lusbel: “D-Don’t worry, it’s… thank you… hk.”

Lusbel rose unsteadily to his feet, shaking his stiff legs, offering his gratitude. Although his face was stained with tears, he was still a strong child. Subaru patted his head again.

Then, as he turned his gaze to outside, where the violent offensive and defensive sounds were repeatedly triggered,

Subaru: “Staying here might actually be safer, but we should probably get out just in case. Can you walk? Are you hurt anywhere?”

Lusbel: “My right arm, just a little bit…”

Lusbel frowned and obediently presented his wound to Subaru.

On his outstretched right hand was a sharp laceration that had been made by a snake-like weapon. Its origin was clear. Seeing the blood oozing from the wound, Subaru contorted his face in discomfort.

Subaru: “Bastard, tying up such a small child, and even doing this to him.”

Lusbel: “No, no. This just suddenly… suddenly started hurting while I was tied up.”

Subaru: “Suddenly?”

“While he had been tied up”, Subaru registered distractedly.

At least, Subaru should not have hurt him in the process of unraveling the chain. His movements had been cautious, and Subaru would have noticed if he had caused Lusbel an injury this serious.

—Terrible, ominous apprehension rose in Subaru's heart.

Subaru: "…At any rate, we can't stay here. Let's go."

Subaru took Lusbel's uninjured left hand, running away. Leading him to the bottom of the spiral staircase, to the exit of the tower. And upon Subaru's return to the square, he heard—

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

The mob had plunged into a frenzy, eagerly awaiting the execution of that captured freak, calling for vindication. Eyes filled with bloodlust, mouths twisted in snarls, howling for murder.

Endless abhorrence of evil. Incredulous aversion to unnatural monsters. Wanting to be rid of an enemy who could not be accepted at a physiological level. Such negative emotions called for murder.

And what was this called?

—This was known as Wrath.

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

A crowd of complete strangers stood side by side as comrades, moving toward the same goal.

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

Their very hearts united in the face of adversity, and the philosophy of good and evil being questioned in those extraordinary circumstances.

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

Choosing to be united in such extreme conditions, pushing that limit, that was—

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

Sirius: "Joining feelings into one… this is surely Love, correct? Well, there is no doubt that this is a scene only Love could achieve, don't you agree?"

In front of that hellish scenery, Sirius murmured in her usual voice.

Sirius had been pressed to the side of the clocktower by the hero. The surrounding crowd eagerly cheered for the death of that unnatural person, knowing that their Sword Saint had the power to kill the abomination.

Sirius even seemed to have lost the chain on her left hand, now in a precarious situation. With both hands unarmed, the monster had no way to defend against Reinhard's knife-like hand.

She was clearly facing a dead-end—however, Sirius wore her usual placid smile.

Reinhard: "Are there any last words you wish to say?"

Sirius: "Thank you. Then, allow me to offer you a piece of advice. The other Sin Archbishops may not be as docile as me, so if you wish to ask their last words, you might suffer for it."

Reinhard: "—I will keep that in mind."

In the face of Reinhard's warm kindness, Sirius spoke calm, provocative words. Reinhard nodded in compliance and stepped forward, ready to execute her with the blade that was his hand.

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

As the voice of the crowd grew in intensity, Sirius's fate had been sealed. This was obvious, so why?

Standing at the entrance of the broken tower, Subaru felt a throbbing chill, which threatened to break his heart.

Why? What did that mean? He desperately wanted to speak, but his mouth could not move. Once it did, Subaru knew what he would say.

Subaru certainly would join the loud cries of "Kill her!".

Sirius: “We know each other. Mutual humility. Mutual recognition. We forgive each other. That is exactly the correct form that Love should take.”

Subaru feeling subdued, Sirius continued to preach her rhetoric.

At first glance, she seemed to make sense, but taking into account that it was Sirius saying so, the proposition and the atmosphere itself became horrifying.

Reinhard: “…”

Reinhard seemed to have made the same judgment as Subaru.

There was no longer any meaning in letting Sirius speak, so Reinhard moved forward. However, just before Reinhard reached her, Sirius smiled and held her arms into the air.

Immediately, accompanied by a crackling sound, chains were ejected from the cuffs of her coat. Those chains were fired through her sleeves, and then wrapped around the tower as Sirius began to fly once more. She intended to escape—but just before she could, Reinhard stomped on the ground. Shockwaves spread upward, like an explosion, and a red flame attacked Sirius.

His hand struck at her in a smooth, upward motion. A one-hit deathblow. In that moment, Sirius’s life would end.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

And the crowd’s cry, would be fulfilled.

With tremendous momentum, Subaru’s heart spiked with fear. And driven by a sudden impulse—

Subaru: “Reinhard!!”

Calling upon the hero’s name, Subaru yelled, guided by the impatience of the crowd.

Subaru: “—KILL HER!!”

Reinhard slashed.

A clean line swept neatly from Sirius's left shoulder to her right flank.

That exquisite cut was so sharp, that even Sirius's slashed body did not react to the slash for a few seconds. Finally, the blood in her body noticed the wound, and her body collapsed diagonally as blood began to spray.

Sirius: "…Ah, this gentle world."

Her internal organs spilling out, Sirius's body was cleft in half.

Her upper body continued soaring upward, pouring blood and intestines through the air, while her lower body, left in place, became a fountain, sprinkling blood through the square.

A nightmarish spectacle had been propelled into the heavens above and the earth below, respectively.

No one could bear to look straight at that horror. However, no one looked away.

No one could look away.

Reinhard: "…It cannot be."

After landing, Reinhard uttered a stunned mutter.

Subaru saw that his blue eyes were shaking with grief, the shadow of despair enveloping his fair, handsome face.

—And then Subaru could see no more.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru, and the rest of the crowd, lay scattered in the square that had turned into a pool of blood. From their left shoulders to their right sides, everyone had been bisected, as clear as day.

Subaru: “…”

Blood and viscera spilling out, Subaru’s consciousness did not have time to understand what had happened before being pulled into the embrace of death. Just before that happened, he felt something else.

A boy’s left hand, whose owner had also been split in twain, squeezed Subaru’s own right hand tightly, seeking salvation from him.

It seemed like he had felt that somewhere before.

2

Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them, Natsuki-sama? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “—Ghk!”

Beatrice: “Ow! Ow, that hurts! It hurts in fact, Subaru!!”

Immediately after the blink, Subaru was surprised to hear the voice he had just heard.

The sudden switch in consciousness had him clinging to Beatrice’s hand with the same vice grip that he had been making before his Return by Death, strong enough to crush Appas.

Beatrice tearfully kicked Subaru’s shin after suffering from that sudden atrocity, who recoiled in pain and loosened his grip on her hand.

Liliana: “Wh-Wh-Wh-Why did you do that? Why would you attack Beatrice-sama’s lovely hands so suddenly? You’re going to ruin then… but it’s okay, I… I-I’ll kiss and lick them and to heal them, ha… haha.”

Beatrice: “It’s alright, I suppose! That’s quite gross, in fact!”

Beatrice flushed with panic as Liliana grabbed her hand, blushing and breathing heavily. She ducked behind Subaru. Even if he had injured her hand, her trust in her partner had not diminished.

Emilia: “Subaru, are you alright? Just now, you suddenly turned pale…”

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan…”

Emilia joined his side, reaching a hand to his cheek, her face rife with concern. Subaru saw himself reflected in her amethyst eyes and breathed a sigh.

He had come back.

He patted his shoulders and chest, which had been bisected. His abdomen had been cut, and his head had been smashed. Although Subaru was confident in his experience with deaths, this had been his first clear experience of being slashed down. Taking precedence over pain was a sense of astonishment and loss, the knowledge of death tugging at Subaru’s soul. This was a death that Subaru, who was commonly subjected to them, could accept.

Subaru: “Why, can’t I find a simple conclusion…”

Once again catching up with the memories he had inherited, the realization of death assaulted him, forcing him to recognize it. Although he had not registered much pain, the sense of loss and shock hit Subaru one after the other. His partial understanding of the phenomenon grew, albeit not completely so. There remained an event beyond his understanding.

That is, this time, the cause of death—

Subaru: “Disgusting…”

Needless to say, he had long understood.

Subaru had been killed exactly the same way that Sirius had been, this time. To put it bluntly, Subaru had died in the exact same manner Sirius did. Looking back thirty minutes, to that first death, Subaru died shortly after joyfully witnessing Lusbel’s death. The previously unknown cause of death had now been identified.

—Somehow, someway, Sirius could deliver death to any who witnessed death.

Not just brainwashing with emotional changes. Even changes that occurred in the body could be shared. It was not merely brainwashing, but bodywashing. Or could it be called soulwashing?

In other words, killing her meant that the people in that square would all be killed.

Subaru: “What to do…?”

Defeating Sirius using brute force could be achieved by calling Reinhard.

However, that would come at the price of the life of everyone in that square. In that case, the result would be no different from Sirius’s intended atrocities.

Summoning Reinhard was nothing more than a correct and easy-to-understand solution at first glance, but it was, in actuality, the wrong answer. In this case, what could he do?

Subaru: “Call Reinhard, and tell him to take her alive…?”

That was unlikely, but perhaps not impossible to him.

Since Reinhard was capable of killing Sirius, he should also be capable of depriving her of her consciousness. The problem was that it was not clear if her mental control would end would her being caught alive.

Subaru had come in contact with Sirius and Lusbel, and had gone mad and died. If that mysterious madness continued to infect everyone, then capturing Sirius would be fruitless.

If she were killed, everyone else would die with her.

If she were caught, there was a possibility that she would spread her contagion of irresistible madness.

Just existing made her a threat to others, she was this kind of bomb-like existence. She truly deserved her title of Sin Archbishop.

Subaru: “What else can I do?”

Unable to find a breakthrough, Subaru found himself in a dilemma.

If Reinhard were called, he would surely be able to kill or restrain Sirius. Would that be okay, ignoring the possibility of falling into madness?

Subaru: “…”

Time passed even as Subaru pondered. Seeing Subaru staying quiet, those around him all appeared uneasy. Subaru did not want them to remain worried, nor to reveal what was going to happen.

He hurriedly changed the expression on his face and announced,

Subaru: “Ah, right. That is… Yes, I suddenly felt like I was going to puke up the daisukiyaki from this morning. My chest was a bit uncomfortable.”

Liliana: “Ah, I see, I see. I, too, often feel nauseous, which is accompanied by a lot of gas…”

Subaru: “Stop right there. No matter how you act, you’re still a girl.”

Subaru interrupted Liliana’s jokes with a smile and turned towards Emilia. Seeing that, Emilia lowered her gaze.

Emilia: “If Subaru says so, I’ll believe it… this is a special case, okay?”

Subaru: “Mhm, thanks… Then, I’ll go buy desserts, as Liliana suggested. Emilia-tan, please continue to enjoy the song.”

Thanks to Emilia’s kindness, Subaru was able to make an announcement after wavering. Then, holding Beatrice’s hand again,

Subaru: “Beako. Come shopping with me. Let’s take a walk and flirt like we always do.”

Beatrice: “What are you suddenly—Mhm. Betty understands, in fact.”

Beatrice, whose face turned red, showing her tsun side, changed attitude upon seeing Subaru’s face, showing the dere side. To put it more appropriately, she accepted his offer after noticing his pleading expression.

Subaru took the confused Beatrice’s hand and ran from the park for the fourth time, pulling on her hand. This time, rather than leaving Beatrice behind, he would bring his reliable partner with him. Even though he had yet to reach any kind of breakthrough.

Priscilla: “—Hmm.”

—Staring at the retreating figures of Subaru and Beatrice, the woman of crimson watched the duo with a thoughtful expression.

Chapter 23:
Disrupted Situation

Beatrice: “So? Tell me what happened, in fact.”

Having left the park, Beatrice waited until they had left Emilia and the others’ sight, and slowed her steps, speaking up. Although she had slowed down to talk, Subaru grabbed her arm and led her forward.

Beatrice: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “Sorry. We have to talk where no one else is around. There are many things that I want to discuss thoroughly, but we don’t have enough time—In fact, we have less than fifteen minutes.”

Beatrice: “…I understand, I suppose. Explain while we walk, in fact.”

Beatrice marched along obediently as Subaru turned his face away, trying to hide his anxiety. The presence of his understanding partner lightened Subaru’s heart, and he carefully sorted through the thoughts swimming in his mind as he tried to relay them to Beatrice.

Subaru: “The Witch Cult will attack the square that we’re heading to, and we have to stop their evil deeds.”

Beatrice: “Witch Cult… hk.”

Beatrice’s breath caught, and she urged Subaru to continue.

What troubled him were the rules and penalties for giving out information learned through Return by Death. Even if he had been able to safely relay tidbits to Rachins, there was no certainty that he could do so with Beatrice—That was the nature of the devil of shadows whose hand bound Subaru.

The Witch that interfered with Subaru’s disclosure of information acquired via Return by Death would make a decision and pass judgement only after determining not only what Subaru was divulging, but also the person he was talking to.

If that were not the case, then why had Emilia's heart been crushed after the secret had been revealed? That was the only explanation he could come up with.

So that was why Subaru paid careful attention to what he told Beatrice. If it were just Subaru withstanding the pain, then that would be no problem. It was scary. It was. But it was not something he was unable to endure. However, if that devil's hand reached Emilia or Beatrice, Subaru would be crippled by guilt.

She might be forgiving to Subaru, but that Witch would be merciless to others.

Beatrice: "As usual, you can't say anything, I suppose?"

Subaru: "…Sorry. I'm so unreasonable."

Beatrice: "Fine, in fact. Betty will believe it without any basis, I suppose. They're Subaru's words, so Betty will believe them, in fact."

Beatrice took Subaru's hand with her own, who bit back his own powerlessness. Saved by the warmth transmitted from that palm, Subaru searched for his next words. Sirius, Wrath, emotion sharing, soulwashing—scrutinizing the information that could be conveyed, and he would share awareness of the danger with Beatrice, little by little.

Subaru: "First of all, the member of the Witch Cult that's going to show up is the Sin Archbishop of Wrath, who is, uh… A freak."

Beatrice: "If that's the information that needs to be conveyed then Betty thinks that Subaru is having bad thoughts, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm just probing what's safe and what's not. Anyway, there's something very important that we'll have to deal with. Her abilities… she can control emotions, or is it sharing senses between people?"

Beatrice: “Controlling emotions and sharing senses?”

Beatrice lifted her head.

She was unable to imagine it in concrete terms. Of course, Subaru also could not clearly understand the effect of that Authority.

Subaru: “Explaining is a little difficult… if the Sin Archbishop is overjoyed, then no matter how angry people around her are, they will also feel happy.”

Beatrice: “…I don’t really understand how that’s a threat, in fact.”

Subaru: “It’s this big thing where recognizing danger is impossible. No matter how dangerous the situation is, you don’t get that feeling of crisis. You’ll accept it with delight and won’t be able to correctly grasp the situation, understand?”

A crying, pleading child who did not want to die had been cheered for by the masses.

They had found joy in everything in front of them. Horrifying. Subaru was sure that, in that state, he would have been delighted up until the point a knife touched him. Even if it meant his head would be disconnected from his body by that blade.

Beatrice: “I understand the sharing of emotions, I suppose. What about sharing senses, in fact?”

Subaru: “That’s not all. When someone else feels pain, I’ll feel it too. If the Sin Archbishop’s head is cut off, then the heads of everyone watching it will also be cut off.”

As he explained further, his frustration at the hopeless situation began to surface again.

If you decapitate her, your head will also be chopped off—There were few abilities that would make one more hesitant to kill than that. He had been able to escape through Return by Death, so he could think of measures in advance now. But everyone affected by that Authority before had no way of overriding that at all.

Subaru: “But even if you try to catch her alive, then there’s the possibility you’ll go crazy just by being in the vicinity. If she dies, then we’ll all die too. She’s really the worst kind of enemy, troublesome alive or dead.”

On his second death, Subaru had been swallowed by fear and driven mad. The origin of that fear had been Lusbel, who desperately sought for help. However, on that occasion, Lusbel had continuously felt the horror that led up to that madness. It could be taken as meaning that Subaru had less mental fortitude than the boy.

For Subaru, it was hard to say, “I should have been better”. Because it was hard to imagine that Lusbel, who he had spoken to earlier, would be able to resist such overwhelming terror.

Something other than just being made to share fear must have killed Subaru, in his second death. Something beyond just sharing emotions and senses—Without the knowledge of what that was, finding a strategy that could defeat Sirius would be difficult.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru did not continue to speak, but he kept a grip on Beatrice’s hand, nonetheless.

Obviously, he had taken Beatrice, but he still had not found a solution. As such, Beatrice would probably be entangled in a battle with no real hope of victory.

What should he do? The easiest thing to do would be to have Reinhard take Sirius alive, considering the possibility of madness being induced. Subaru considered just summoning Reinhard like last time, giving enough explanation, and having him capture Sirius.

Why not call Reinhard before Sirius appeared? Before the sudden attack on the square, he would talk to Rachins again, warning him of life-threatening danger, and Reinhard would be called to deal with the crisis. Reinhard would not attack instantly, without asking for details. Even if Subaru explained why he had made an emergency call, there would be at least a few minutes until Sirius would make a move.

Subaru: “Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot. If Reinhard’s called, then Sirius is going to react immediately. There won’t be time to explain, and everything will speed up just like last time.”

Subaru needed to inform Reinhard before his battle with Sirius started.

Could he do it? Subaru had no confidence that he would be able to express his thoughts in time. In that previous loop, although he had wished to tell Reinhard to capture her, his mouth had disobeyed him and joined the crowd in yelling “kill her”. This was an undeniable precedent.

Beatrice: “Subaru. There’s still more bad news, in fact.”

Subaru: “…Seriously? I don’t want to hear more bad news.”

Beatrice: Betty understands, I suppose. But, I have to tell you… Betty would be useless in a battlefield with Reinhard, in fact. I’d just be a cute little girl, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Beatrice spoke suddenly, her eyes downcast.

Beatrice: “Because of his constitution, Reinhard acts as a beacon for Mana, in fact. It’s like it doesn’t belong in this world, I suppose. The surrounding Mana in the atmosphere will follow him blindly, causing damage to the environment, which becomes a shackle to him, in fact. Spirits and magic users will be unable to use Mana, and Betty won’t be able to do anything, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What… the… That there should be such a thing…”

Even as he said so, Subaru realized that it was nothing so unthinkable. On the day Subaru had been summoned to this world, Reinhard and Elsa had fought a battle over the Insignia that qualified Emilia for the Royal Selection, in that final loop.

Subaru recalled that, while treating Old Man Rom, Emilia had mentioned that if Reinhard revealed his true ability, magic would be ineffective.

Beatrice: “If Reinhard can solve the problem, then it wouldn’t matter if Betty can’t do anything, in fact. But, if just Reinhard isn’t enough…”

Subaru: “Beako won’t have the option of being useful.”

That fantasy was also killed.

Just his presence would cause all magic to cease functioning. Calling Reinhard would now be counterproductive.

—Awful, awful, awful, awful, awful, awful, what a disaster.

Subaru could no longer see any light. Had he been right or wrong in calling Reinhard? What about bringing Beatrice? What would be the correct procedure, here?

Should he ignore Sirius and give priority to the task of saving the people in the square? In that case, Sirius would only find another place to do the same thing. There was no point.

As he contemplated, anxiety began to burn through Subaru’s mind. Subaru expended as much effort as he possibly could in desperate search of a solution, but could find none.

Even so, time ticked on mercilessly, leaving Subaru behind.

Beatrice: “…Subaru, we’re at the square, in fact.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Hearing her, Subaru suddenly looked up and saw the square.

The two had arrived at their destination, which would soon be marked by tragedy. No solution had been found yet. Their time limit had been cut short, little by little.

The white clocktower. The crowded square.

There were less than ten minutes before the tragedy would take place. Subaru's solution was insufficient. How to solve it correctly? What to do?

Beatrice: "Subaru, I might have come up a solution, in fact."

As Subaru's face was taut with tension, Beatrice spoke up. Subaru's blank mind was startled by her sweet voice.

Subaru: "Came up with a solution?!"

Beatrice: "Betty might be wrong, I suppose. But Subaru's description of that Sin Archbishop's abilities sounds familiar… I'm thinking of a higher-level magic, called Nect, that has a similar effect, in fact."

Subaru: "Nect…!"

Nect—It was a form of magic that Subaru had experienced in the past. With Nect, magic users could share the awareness and feelings of others. Indeed, it seemed similar to Sirius's Authority.

While wondering why he had not noticed at first, Subaru thought out loud.

Subaru: "If it's the same as Nect, is there any counter for it?"

Beatrice: "…In the first place, countering Nect is unnecessary, I suppose. It is intended to unite comrades and express feelings, in fact. Using Nect as a weapon seems strange, I suppose."

Beatrice gave her unhappy reply to an anxious Subaru. Subaru had once reluctantly shared his vision with Julius using Nect, so that the latter could defeat Petelgeuse, countering his Unseen Hands by making them visible.

Nect's ability was used for cooperation between allies. It was absolutely not the kind of magic that should be used to take hostages.

Beatrice: "Normally, there is a condition for Nect, in fact. Enough trust between the two parties so that a passage of Mana can be established is necessary, I suppose. The Archbishop's Authority probably has the power to circumvent such a condition, I suppose.”

Subaru: “So her Authority can forcibly achieve it. More than that…”

Beatrice: “How to deal with it, I suppose—Shamak is the most obvious answer, in fact.”

Subaru: “Shamak-san has arrived! It’s too versatile!”

Subaru perked up at Beatrice’s proposal.

Shamak was an incredibly familiar magic. In painful, hard, dangerous times, in the hopeless of situations, Shamak had always faced adversaries alongside Subaru. Prior to contracting Beatrice, Subaru’s main sources of strength were Rem, Patrasche, and Shamak.

And even after the destruction of his own Gate, through his Contract with Beatrice, Shamak was still helping Subaru.

Subaru: “I see, Shamak, huh… If it’s Shamak then surely everything is somehow…”

Beatrice: “Subaru seems to have an unusual level of trust for Shamak, I suppose. It’s the most basic of Yin Magic and it’s really not that useful, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Even Beako isn’t allowed to badmouth Shamak like that…!”

Beatrice: “What’s made Subaru defend Shamak to this extent, in fact?”

Beatrice listened to the incomprehensible ramblings with a sigh, then glanced around carefully while holding a finger up.

Beatrice: “Shamak interrupts consciousness—it’s a magic that forcibly disconnects one from their surroundings, I suppose. Subaru uses the magic strangely, in fact, but Betty doesn’t have any problem with it at all.”

Subaru: “In other words…?”

Beatrice: “When that magic is cast on the crowd, everyone’s minds will be blinded with Shamak, and it should be possible to escape the effects of the Authority of the Sin Archbishop, in fact. Though I’m worried about whether I can stop it from affecting Subaru, I suppose.”

Beatrice spoke with confidence and Subaru clenched his hands with excitement at this new glimmer of hope.

Subaru: “Alright, good. I’ll be depending on your magic. Then… what’s next?”

Beatrice: “Aside from Reinhard, who can defeat the Sin Archbishop, in fact?”

Subaru: “…”

With Reinhard, Beatrice would not be able to use her Shamak strategy. Therefore, he needed to be excluded from their calculations.

However, on this occasion, Reinhard was perhaps the only one who could defeat Sirius.

Beatrice: “Speaking of which, since Betty needs to use Shamak on people the moment the Archbishop is defeated, Betty won’t be able to fight, in fact.”

Subaru: “That’s right. Then… we’re back at square one.”

Without Beatrice’s backing, Subaru would almost certainly be unable to defeat Wrath. Without his trump card, just his whip alone would not allow him to escape unscathed.

Subaru: “At that time, it seemed like there were other people who could fight in that square…”

Subaru thought of the first time at the square.

Upon detecting a threatening presence in the tower, several people reacted immediately. A beastman, a blindfolded woman, a serious-looking businessman, and Rachins.

Excluding Rachins, how would the remaining three fare? Adding Subaru to their number would total four, and would that mean that victory was in sight?

Subaru: “What a stupid train of thought, asking strangers to trust me. I don’t think there’s anything I haven’t thought of now…”

???: “—That’s where I come in, because I know what I’m capable of?”

Subaru: “—?!”

A sudden voice from behind pierced into his hopeless thoughts.

At that all too familiar voice, Subaru and Beatrice looked back in surprise. Standing behind the two with their hands on their hips—

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan? Why are you here…”

Emilia: “Subaru seemed to be acting strange, so I was worried that something bad was happening. It looks like I was excluded, that’s one of Subaru’s bad traits.”

Having been criticized, Subaru pressed his mouth shut.

Astonished at Emilia's sudden appearance, he could not respond. She should not be here. He did not want her to be here. Beatrice took his place and looked up at Emilia.

Beatrice: "You should have stayed in the park, in fact. Why did you come, I suppose?"

Emilia: "…I just couldn't wait. Subaru told me to stay, but Priscilla told me otherwise."

Subaru: "That woman in red?"

Emilia: "She said that if I didn't follow you, I'd certainly regret it. When I caught up and saw that nothing had happened, I thought about leaving quietly, but you two seemed to be discussing something serious. So I couldn't go back."

Emilia had been influenced, and the face of the villain who had driven her decision came to mind.

Subaru gritted his teeth, mentally cursing Priscilla and her arrogant, disruptive meddling. That malicious whimsy had perfectly arranged the situation Subaru wanted to avoid the most.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, I'm happy. I'm glad, so, from now on…"

Emilia: "The Witch Cult will appear? I heard you loud and clear… So even if Subaru tells me to go back, I won't. It's not just another person's business to me either."

Subaru: "Emilia!"

He was not trying to keep Emilia out of danger for no reason.

He spoke sharply, desperate to drive Emilia away.

She must not meet the Witch Cult. Subaru could not quite articulate why, but it was not born of anything like stubborn protectiveness. He instinctively understood that it must not be allowed.

Emilia absolutely could not meet the Witch Cult. To Emilia, that cult was a poison to be avoided. Although that held true for the majority of people born in this world, Emilia was a special case.

Subaru: “We’ll manage something. Emilia doesn’t need to be involved. This has nothing to do with you.”

Emilia: “Even so, what if Subaru is hurt because I’m not there? I’d never let that happen. If Subaru fights, I’ll fight by his side. If Subaru wants to protect something, I’ll do my best to help. And since Subaru will certainly protect me…”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “I also want to protect Subaru. I promised I wouldn’t cry like that anymore.”

Emilia spoke with an unyielding heart.

In order to keep her away from danger, Subaru had to summon every drop of his courage, face adversity with a heart of steel.

However, Subaru, right now, was afraid. He was terrified of fighting.

Three times.

Three times Subaru had lost to Sirius, and three times he had lost his life. No matter how experienced he was with death, he had still died so many times in such a short span of time.

Death was horrible, unacceptable, and no matter how much he experienced it, he could never grow used to it.

Having his life taken was completely unreasonable. That denied his self, trampled on his existence, insulted his soul. It was something that stole from him.

Although he tried to cover everything up with frivolity, Subaru could not brush off everything that affected him. Even while stubbornly maintaining that he had people he wished to protect, he could never cast off his weak heart, that was afraid to die.

Natsuki Subaru, no matter what, had not been able to overcome that weakness.

Beatrice: “…Subaru. You should give up, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “Emilia is stubborn, I suppose. She won’t change her mind, in fact. Betty also understands Emilia’s feelings, I suppose. Betty wants to protect Subaru the same way… Betty isn’t able to deny her that, in fact.”

Beatrice was the key to their strategy and also the party who called the shots. If she waved the white flag, then Subaru would not be unable to resist.

Emilia looked to Subaru sincerely, and Beatrice sweetly. Under their gaze, Subaru finally gave in.

Subaru: “…The Witch Cultists will target you. If that happens, think of yourself as a priority.”

Emilia: “Mhm, I understand. Even if I’m caught, Subaru will definitely save me. I believe in you and I’ll do my best.”

Subaru: “Don’t jinx it… So, how much of our conversation did you hear?”

Having been accepted by Subaru, Emilia gave a relaxed smile.

She touched her fingers to her lips.

Emilia: “I heard the gist of it. The Witch Cult is going to wreak havoc with a magic like Nect, which Beatrice wants to counteract with Shamak. During that, I have to work hard to beat that villain.”

Subaru: “That’s a child-like way of understanding it, but it works. Emilia-tan, can I depend on you?”

Emilia: “Leave it to me. I’m plenty strong.”

Emilia makes a guts pose with her hands in front of her chest. That lovely action showed a certain lack of tension, but she seemed to have understood the situation.

Subaru felt restless and useless about relying on Emilia. Moreover, the timing of Beatrice's magic was difficult for him to get a grasp on, which made it another element of anxiety. But,

Subaru: "Emilia-tan and Beako are both here, so I can't fail…!"

Instead of feeling anxious, the boy used that to fuel his determination.

Subaru: "Besides, it's almost time."

Between Beatrice's proposal, and Emilia's arrival, more than half of their remaining time had gone by. They would have to try their best responding to Sirius's appearance. If possible, it would be preferable to knock Sirius down from the tower while keeping Lusbel safe inside.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan. Soon a strange person will appear on the tower. Attack them with a big first shot. Having her fall from the tower would be ideal. Afterward, Beako will prepare her spell, so when we get the signal, we'll start the fight."

Emilia: "Mhm, I understand. Although I do not know if things will go that smoothly, but I'll try."

Emilia's expression stiffened and both Subaru and Beatrice nodded at each other. The plan was set.

Subaru: "—She's here!"

A figure could be seen moving about in the clock tower's window.

A slender body wrapped in a black coat and a head wrapped in bandages. The ends of her chain, hanging from her hands, struck the ground with rattling sounds, as the monster looked down at the square.

The people there had yet to notice that anomalous presence. Sirius stood on her stage, shaking her body and opening her arms as though admiring the people, who were unprepared for that imminent threat.

And then she clapped and made a sound—the eyes of the people who heard the sound were drawn to the monster, and her speech would begin.

Subaru: "…"

Swallowing, Subaru witnessed the arrival of the moment with a sigh.

With imposing gestures, Sirius raised her chest to speak fiercely—

Emilia: "Ul Huma!"

A huge icicle appeared in front of the tower, hitting Sirius who stood on the edge.

The thick icicle, which was around the size of five people, struck the wall of the clock tower with a violent crash. An icicle speared through the front of the tower, and the walls split apart. Subaru's jaw dropped in amazement, seeing the tip of the icicle piercing the tower.

Subaru: "E-Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "Subaru said we needed to strike first, so I did… Did I mess up?"

Subaru: "No, good job! I just didn't expect you to attack before her introduction."

Subaru had not motioned for her to act yet, and was surprised that Emilia had judged Sirius as a threat at a glance.

Now the biggest problem would be her behavior, since Sirius had been equally unprepared. Maybe the blow had even taken her out. Moreover, the panicked crowd seemed to be entirely fine, so perhaps Sirius had indeed been incapacitated before her sense sharing had been activated.

That had been entirely thanks to Emilia's great contribution.

Subaru: "Beako, what do you think?"

Beatrice: "First of all, think of a way to address the people around us who are misunderstanding, in fact."

As Beatrice's surprise turned to pride, Subaru wanted to ask whether they had gotten Sirius.

Emilia surveyed the destruction of the tower while Subaru slowly turned to face the uneasy crowd surrounding them. The beastman and the blindfolded woman were there—how unfortunate, they were people that Subaru had considered as possible allies in this battle.

Subaru: "Uh, well, what do I do now? Explain that we didn't mean any harm?"

Emilia: "—Mm. You better do that, Subaru."

While Subaru scratched his head, pondering the explanation, Emilia suddenly grabbed his shoulders, placing herself in front of Subaru, who fell down on the floor.

In that moment, a crack sounded through the air, and a blue sword of ice appeared in Emilia's hands. She assumed a battle-ready posture, facing down the crowd, aiming the tip of the sword towards them.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan? You don't have to go that far…"

Emilia: "It's not that. Look closely, Subaru. Their eyes look insane."

Subaru: "—Eh?"

Scared by Emilia's suddenly firm voice, Subaru surveyed the crowd around them, and could not help but exclaim. Like Emilia had said, their eyes held no trace of sanity.

The people around them were tomato-red from the neck up, the blood vessels in their faces on the verge of bursting, bloodshot eyes glaring at Subaru’s group.

Rather than doubting their sanity, Subaru saw they were indubitably full of mad fury.

Subaru: “Beako! What about Shamak?!”

Beatrice: “…It failed, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What?”

Beatrice: “This magic is fundamentally different from Nect… No, it’s evil, in fact. This is nothing like magic, I suppose. A curse… it is Curse Arts, in fact!”

Beatrice raised her voice in anger, and Subaru could only answer with a frown.

He was not sure of the specifics, but Beatrice’s Operation Shamak had not worked. He understood the issue but had no solution. And there were further problems.

Then, the masses had been completely engulfed by madness…

Crowd: “It stinks. It stinks. It stinks. It stinks. It stinks. It stinks. stinks, stinks.”

It was a terrible, viscous, sound, tenaciously cursing everything in the world.

Subaru: “…”

With the sound of a detonation, the wall of the clock tower collapsed.

A crack ran through the icicle that had been embedded into the tower, and it shattered to pieces. Shimmering, the ice crystallized in the sun, accompanied by the faint sound of footsteps.

The footsteps of an abomination.

She was not unhurt. Half of the bandages wrapped around her face were stained with blood, which also dripped from her left arm and her chain. She had a terrifying appearance

Emilia's premeditated attack had no doubt had an effect.

Only, it had also caused something undesirable.

Sirius: "Disgusting, the stench of that woman, filthy and detestable, the stench of the half-devil who stole my husband from me, the stench of maggots, endless filth. Hate, I hate it so much, burning it to cinders isn't enough."

Subaru: "…What are you saying?"

Sirius: "And that other woman, she's obviously not her, but she has such a similar stench, how shameless, the stench of rotting insects, ah, ah, ah ah aaAAAAAAH! How hateful! How rancid! How vile! I hate you!"

The anomalous woman clutched her bleeding head with a harsh cry. Spit flew from her mouth as she ruthlessly stomped her feet. Subaru knew this odd behavior. It was wild as ever, but its direction was obviously different.

Sirius: "My! Are you testing the love for my husband, Spirit?! From me, were you not satisfied with taking my husband from me, YOU HALF-DEVIL WHORE?!!"

Gritting her teeth, she issued a wrathful cry as she leapt forward.

Sirius, who had fallen from the tower, folded her arms overhead, and red flames sparked into life. They sprayed from both arms, and a line of flame formed as she landed in the square.

Exercising her limbs, armed with her flame, the monster raised her head.

Emilia held her sword of ice ready as she stood in front of Subaru and Beatrice, guarding them. Swinging her gaze back and forth, Sirius yelled with a furious voice.

Sirius: “I am! A Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult! Representing Wrath!!”

Red flames gushing forth, she bathed the crowd in heat as she raised her arms to the heavens. In a frenzied crisis completely different from the situation Subaru had expected, the madwoman introduced herself.

Sirius: “—Sirius Romanée-Conti!! Fucking half-devil and Spirit, I’ll scorch your corpses and scatter your ashes at my husband’s tomb!!”

Chapter 24:
Resolution of Ice and Fire

With flames of rising crimson on her arms, Sirius's shrieking was infernal in nature. The reason why that was felt even through the bandages was her eyes, dominated by rage completely out of the ordinary.

Those light-crimson eyes, normally so clear they seemed capable of sucking people in, were now glaring at Subaru and the others with hatred, tinged by the red-hot blaze on her arms.

—No, that was not quite right. Because,

Crowd: "Stinks, stinks, stinks, stinks, stinks, stinks, stinks…!"

Sirius had not registered Subaru's presence. She merely glared with passionate hatred at the two standing in front of Subaru—that is, at Emilia and Beatrice.

Subaru: "What's up with her? She's not the same as before…"

Subaru could not hide his wavering confusion at Sirius's rage.

In the short span of time since he had encountered her, Subaru had met a relatively normal Sirius three times. Among those encounters, although Sirius had not been a person that followed common sense, she had not been someone irrational, overrun by rage.

In fact, she had always been attempting to justify her claims to impose on others.

So, the Sirius in front of them was completely foreign. She had lost her rationality and fallen prey to rage. Putting it simply, she now seemed a perfect fit for her title as Wrath's representative.

Sirius: "I could keep burning and burning you, but it wouldn't be enough… like maggots, like flies. Haha, how much do you hate me?! Even in my saddest days, am I not allowed the freedom of mourning?”

Emilia: “…I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

Sirius: “Ah, ha?!”

Emilia responded fearlessly to Sirius’s enraged allegations, and stayed fearless at Sirius’s fierce reactions. She pointed the tip of her sword of ice at the crowd behind Sirius.

Emilia: “If you feel angry at me, I’ll hear you out. After all, the sudden provocation came from us, it’s natural that you’re angry. However, this has nothing to do with the other people here. Please liberate them.”

Sirius: “That’s the wrong attitude! If you want to let everyone go, do it right! It’s natural that I’m angry? Then apologize to me! Apologize, repent, crawl on the floor and cry and beg for forgiveness, then let me shoot flames into your ass and scorch your internal organs away!”

Emilia: “Having my organs burned would be troublesome—So, let’s settle this simply.”

Sirius tilted her head upon hearing Emilia’s low voice.

Emilia immediately twisted her upper body slightly and darted forward. Her pale wrists wielded her sword of ice as if it were weightless.

The sun glistened off the sharpened tip of the sword as she drove it towards Sirius’s shoulder.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan?”

Sirius: “—Tch!”

Subaru’s exclamation overlapped with Sirius’s snarl. Facing that swing, Sirius immediately lifted her left wrist, bringing flames to the swords. However,

Sirius: “Fucking half-devil!”

Emilia: “Please don’t say that anymore. It feels dirty.”

Emilia’s sword, although bathed in Sirius’s flame, did not vaporize into air. The pale tip of the sword did not lose against the heat, and met Sirius’s burning left wrist—only, Sirius’s chain had been also wrapped around it.

With a high-pitched noise, ice sword and flaming chain collided with a brilliant flash of Mana. After only a brief contest, Emilia’s sword shattered with a crisp snap.

Sirius: “You, damn…!”

Looking at the ice sword, reduced to a mere handle, Sirius gleefully attempted to slam her arm against Emilia. The chain, tinged with the heat of the fire, would burn wounds on those it touched.

And so, Emilia’s beautiful face was wounded—But on the verge of that happening,

Emilia: “Haaa!”

There was a shout that did not fit the scene, and this time, Sirius’s wrist was struck. Emilia’s sword of ice had deflected her.

Sirius: “Ah ah aaaah! Ah ah ah ah ah! Just die already!”

Sirius’s cries of wrath pierced the air as she swung both arms over her head. The center of the area she was targeting was occupied by Emilia.

Emilia’s ice blade extended at the hilt, its shape having been changed into that of a hammer. Sirius met its blow with both hands, retreating, only to be pursued by Emilia.

Emilia: “Haah! Hahh! Yah!”

Sirius: “Disgusting! Half-devil! Maggot! Fly! Insect! Loathsome bug!”

Through use of centrifugal force and control over her body, Emilia demonstrated an unimaginable show of close quarters combat.

Against that mallet of ice, the flame-wielding Sirius had been reduced to defense. Looking at Emilia's one-sided attack, Subaru, as a third-party observer, judged that she would triumph. Even so,

Subaru: "This isn't the time to be in a trance! No, Emilia!"

Beatrice: "Subaru, you can't be distracted right now, in fact."

If Emilia killed Sirius, the last death would certainly repeat itself. Death would be spread to everyone in the vicinity.

Although Subaru had foreseen this crisis, Beatrice quickly scolded him. Subaru, wondering what had happened, followed Beatrice's gaze.

Crowd: "—Dirty insect."

Subaru: "Crap."

The members of the crowd behind Sirius were all flushed with anger. The crowd looked at Subaru and Beatrice and made cursing gestures reminiscent of Sirius. In fact, they were completely sharing her Wrath.

That wave of anger was focused on Subaru.

Subaru: "It's not just sharing feelings, but also doing things like brainwashing a crowd into acting on her will?"

Beatrice: "Identifying the situation is good, I suppose. If a solution doesn't exist, then all we can do is escape, in fact!"

As Subaru groaned, considering his troubles, Beatrice immediately jumped onto his back. The crowd advanced towards Subaru, supporting that light body with his hands.

Subaru: "Emilia, help stall for us!"

Emilia: "I won't be too messy about it!"

Receiving her strong reply, Subaru broke into a sprint, fleeing from the crowd. Fortunately, the pace of the masses who had lost their rationality was far from normal.

They chased Subaru with hands outstretched, empty wrath in their gazes, looking not unlike zombies. The main difference was that rather than wanting to eat Subaru, they wished to rip and tear him limb from limb with their bare hands.

Subaru: “If we keep stalling like this, someone could come…”

Beatrice: “Even if someone comes, without figuring out the conditions of victory, it would be meaningless, in fact. Even if Reinhard comes, would he be able to solve this, I suppose?”

Subaru: “In short, our worries won’t end even if he comes…”

In any case, the one who could summon Reinhard, Rachins, was presently part of the crowd threatening Subaru, face colored bright-red. He was one of the people most motivated to push forward, trying to be the first to reach Subaru.

Maybe it was the influence of his own mental image of Subaru, formed even before Sirius shared feelings with him.

Subaru: “We have to think of something!”

???: “Dirty insects!”

A man leapt at Subaru, who ducked his head and threw himself past his opponent’s arms, grabbing one of them before sweeping the man off his feet and sending his body flying. The masses showed no consideration to the tumbling man until he knocked them over. Turning from this bowling-like scene, Subaru spoke.

Subaru: “They’re so angry that they aren’t thinking at all.”

Beatrice: “However, that isn’t what I would recommend, in fact. In such an atmosphere, they probably won’t hesitate on trampling on their friends accidentally, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That won’t do!”

He did not want any sacrifices. The reason why Subaru fought so hard for so many was precisely this. Of course, Subaru understood that there were things that he could not reach.

There were many things he wanted to protect. However, there was a limit to what he was able to.

Of course. Subaru was not an omnipotent being.

Subaru: “However, I’m the one who chooses that limit!”

Beatrice: “That’s Betty’s Subaru, in fact!”

Hearing the greatest possible support from his back, Subaru drew his whip.

“I’ll save as many lives as I can. So please forgive me for any injuries”, those were Subaru’s feelings. Aiming at the feet of the crowd, his whip launched through the air.

With the crack of a small thunderbolt, the whip hit the stone pavement. Although it was not lethal, it was still a weapon, and, when wielded mercilessly, could incapacitate an opponent if used with all its might.

If maybe, after witnessing that power, the mass of people be cowed into retreating,

Subaru: “It won’t go that smoothly.”

Then, there was no other way.

Subaru swept his whip through the crowd, this time targeting the leading figure. A medium stature, light-blue hair, sharp eyes—wasn’t that Rachins?

Attacking people who he knew would make Subaru feel sad.

Subaru: “Although this aches my heart, I can’t let myself be torn apart either. Sorry, Chin!”

Rachins: “I’m not Chin?!”

Subaru lashed his whip at Rachins's feet and yanked upward. His body spun in a half circle, and he caught the people surrounding him as he fell.

After doing that, Subaru moved himself to the left of the crowd, guiding the footsteps of those following him to another route so that the ones who had been knocked down would not be trampled underfoot.

Subaru: "Right, they can't think… In that case, as long as I—"

Just as he was about to say, "stall long enough", Subaru felt a chill rise on his back.

To Subaru, that chill was like the imposing intimacy of his gloomy lover. Even if he were reluctant to meet her, she gave Subaru the help he needed most. They had that kind of complex relationship.

—In other words, that was the breath of death.

Subaru: "Ah!"

Beastman: "You maggot!"

A large blade whistled towards Subaru's head, accompanied by a shrill wind.

The beastman had leapt from the crowd, aiming at Subaru's neck. Although he had prominent pointed canine ears, his nose and mouth seemed to resemble the cunning charm of a fox.

The half-fox, using his white tail as a brace, was unaffected by Subaru's tricks as he took multiple other slashes in an attempt to separate Subaru's head from his body.

Subaru: "Beako!"

Beatrice: "Shamak!"

Beastman: "—?!"

In a serious confrontation, Subaru could be cut down in only five seconds.

In a flash, Subaru had determined the difference in their power and called Beatrice's name. She immediately realized Subaru's intention and cast a Shamak which enveloped the beastman's face. His slender body and large sword were also engulfed by the dark fog, stripping his combat effectiveness away.

Subaru: "Does that cut off the link with the others?"

Beatrice: "There's nothing to that effect, I suppose. Even take the fighting, the link itself did not cut off, in fact! Most likely, that curse will stop only taking effect after that freak dies, I suppose!"

Subaru: "What do we do?!"

Beatrice: "Betty is thinking hard, in fact!"

Solving that mystery was a task best left up to Beatrice. So the only thing that Subaru could do was to give Beatrice ample time to survey and think, and to keep the brainwashed masses from disturbing her.

Subaru: "And on Emilia-tan's side…?"

Subaru turned his gaze, worried about Emilia, who was still busy confronting Sirius.

During this year, Emilia had dedicated her time to learning about both politics and combat. Her combat effectiveness was much higher than Subaru's, and she was motivated.

Even so, Subaru worried about Emilia, not because he thought he was better, but because Subaru was a man and Emilia was a woman, nothing more.

Most people would probably dismiss that worry as meaningless. And that was because—

Emilia: "Haaa! Yah! Hah!"

Emilia was shouting slightly listless battle cries accompanying her onslaught, but Sirius was ignoring all of them.

Emilia spun around, her twin ice swords slashing toward Sirius, who whipped her burning chain through the air and knocked the blade away while cursing angrily. With a crash, ice fragmented into powder and dispersed, but, bending down, Emilia pushed an ice spear upwards, its power sending Sirius flying away.

She was making use of her huge store of Mana, forging weapons of ice meant to be destroyed shortly after being used. Subaru had named this combat technique Ice Brand Arts, in honor of the ephemeral beauty of shattering ice, which reminded him of an ice fairy of fantasy.

The wreckage of smashed ice illustrated the intensity of the fierce battle between Emilia and Sirius. In that ballroom of scattered ice, the heated, fiery battle between the two warriors wielding opposing arms of frost and fire.

Emilia: “Haaa!”

Emilia spun around, twirling her spear at Sirius, knocking her back. She immediately followed up with another blow, lashing out with the tip of the spear. Sirius nimbly twisted her body in midair, avoiding her strike and capturing the spear in her grip.

Sirius: “Blazing! Boiling! Burning! My heart is trembling! Ah ah aaaaAAAAAH! This is Wrath!”

Emilia: “Ah?!”

As if echoing her call, the intense heat redoubled its efforts. Emilia’s spear was instantly turned into a spear of fire, and Emilia involuntarily released it because of the heat. Immediately after, Sirius, holding the spear, landed and attacked at once.

Sirius: “Your dirty amethyst eyes, your dirty bell-like voice, your dirty silky silver hair, your dirty fair skin, your dirty cute face! Those all exist purely to seduce men! Ah, such lust! You bitch, you dirty whore! Just die! You just want to tempt men? You want to take that person from me? You filthy slut! You disgusting half-devil!”

As a wave of heat passed over Emilia’s squinted eyes, she once again created a blade of ice. It met the spear of fire, which had broken into a three-pronged spear, head-on.

With an intense grinding sound, the madwoman and Emilia exchanged gazes.

Emilia: “My eyes, my voice, my silver hair! All of those came from my favorite person, from the most beautiful person in the world! Treating them like they’re dirty infuriates me!”

Sirius: “Fury?! Did you just say fury?! Don’t kid with me! Fury is mine! It’s the precious thing that I received from that person! This duty and the name are all gifts from that person! To, without authorization, without permission, take that away from me… I won’t allow it! Won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t!”

As her speech came to an end, Sirius’s attitude changed dramatically as she cried out in grief. She caught the spear in her grip and snapped it, driving the flames into Emilia. In response, Emilia created another pair of ice swords.

But had Emilia been affected by Sirius’s cries? Her face, which had previously worn a strong sense of purpose, seemed to have slackened.

Subaru: “—This is bad.”

After catching a glance of the side of Emilia’s face, Subaru’s instincts began to scream of bad news. There was no basis. But Subaru was sure.

Emilia’s expression had changed, or rather, her feelings towards Sirius had changed.

No matter how kind-hearted she was, there was no way she would be so easily moved by emotion mid-battle. Before the brawl had begun, there had not even been any kind of conversation to make her feel any emotion, either.

And if she was reacting the way she was nevertheless…

Subaru: “Emilia’s being affected by Sirius’s power.”

However, she had not immediately fallen into the palm of Sirius’s hand.

Emilia, currently in a defensive battle, was still matching Sirius blow-for-blow. She was not as far gone as the crowd, and was just as lovely as usual. Then, inspecting the situation—

Subaru: “When Sirius first appeared, why weren’t Emilia, Beatrice, and I affected by her emotional link?”

Emilia and Beatrice had resisted her power just as Reinhard had. Was there any individual trait, or something similar to that, which was shared between all of them? Subaru’s initial assumption had been that Reinhard had been able to resist it just because he was Reinhard, and discarded thinking any further about it.

But if there was in fact a specific reason, then he could start hypothesizing.

Subaru, who had fallen prey to Sirius’s Authority three times already, was now also able to resist her like this—that was also something to take into consideration. If that was the key to a breakthrough—

Subaru: “Bea…”

Beatrice: “Subaru!!”

The moment Subaru had wanted to convey his newly found realization, an anxious cry echoed in his ears.

As Subaru’s eyes widened, and something collided with his right side.

Subaru: “Guu—”

His body folded into the shape of a “K” from the power of the blow, and Subaru immediately hopped to the left, attempting to lessen its impact. As he coughed up stomach acid, he attempted to check the damage the blow had caused.

The blindfolded woman, moving like a shadow, had suddenly approached him. That defenseless-looking woman had delivered a rather piercing blow with her palm into Subaru’s side.

Beatrice: “Subaru! Don’t die, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Even I wouldn’t reach a game over from that… but that hit was super-effective…!”

Although his ribs ached, Subaru judged that his other bones and internal organs had not been harmed; it was nothing too serious, as long as there was no internal bleeding.

Subaru: “This guy and that guy too, why are these enemies so troublesome?”

Beatrice: “Either Subaru looks unreliable just because the enemies are strong, or because he himself is too weak, in fact.”

Subaru: “That’s true, you…!”

His whip bounced as it chased the blindfolded woman’s feet, and as she turned her attention to below her, Subaru tossed a handful of grit in her face. Although it did not affect her blindfolded eyes, it distracted her enough for Subaru to throw himself at her shoulder, knocking her over.

Subaru: “My lack of fighting strength seems to have come in handy. If the attack had been serious, I probably would have died on the spot.”

Beatrice: “…Although I can’t say that that’s something Betty would accept eagerly, that works, since we have more trouble coming up, I suppose.”

Beatrice reiterated her annoying remarks about Subaru, who breathed a sigh of relief after defeating the blindfolded woman. He tilted his head in a gesture of “I’m not listening”, as Beatrice frowned and gestured with her chin.

She indicated the large waterway connected to the square.

Subaru: “You’re kidding me…”

Subaru moaned as he caught sight of the waterway, where another gathering of enraged people had emerged.

Beatrice: “Betty thinks that they heard the commotion and rushed over to see what’s happening, in fact.”

Subaru: “Then they entered the scope of her power and were swallowed… Are you serious? Is her ability a ranged-type?”

—Panic, fear, madness, would be transmitted from person to person.

The sharing of feelings by Sirius had brought about precisely a result that reflected that phenomenom.

“Ah, so that was it”—The magnitude of her threat was worse than even Petelgeuse’s.

Subaru: “The more you try to flee, the more victims she finds… How can that be stopped?!”

Beatrice: “However, something is off about this entire situation, I suppose… Subaru knocked over that woman, and I cast Shamak on that fox-man. Couple that with how the damage to Chinkarahoi didn’t appear on anyone else, in fact.”

Because the situation was dire, Subaru did not correct Beatrice mistakenly calling Tonchinkan Chinkarahoi. And beyond that, the details that Beatrice had just pointed out could serve as a basis for speculating on the conditions of Sirius’s emotional link.

Subaru: “…Are we going to have to defeat that whole crowd too?”

Beatrice: “If Subaru has the fighting ability to do that, then we can go for it, I suppose—Betty’s Shamak can also lend a hand in stripping their consciousness away, in fact.”

Although a cruel means, that had indeed been Subaru’s initial plan.

He could avoid putting himself through unnecessary worry. Subaru needed to avoid the expansion of such a disastrous situation. Now, to act on Beatrice’s proposal—

Emilia: “Ah!”

Subaru: “Emilia?!”

Subaru attention was diverted to Emilia’s pained cry.

He turned and saw her lying on the slate ground of the square, with Sirius, who was brandishing her flaming wrists, looking down at her.

Sirius: “Growing! Growing! Love culminates! That quantity is power! There is love for all! Everyone! Human beings love each other, and become one! They can share thoughts, they can share wishes, and, be it joy or sadness, they can talk to each other and share their feelings! In that case, this is the inevitable result! The half-devil isn’t included in the bond of Love and should just disappear like a crushed insect!”

Emilia, who had held the initial advantage, had gradually lost her footing until the two were about even.

As time dragged on, had Sirius’s strength increased, or had Emilia’s strength decreased? Whatever the case, Emilia looked upwards at Sirius, breathless, regret displayed on her face.

Emilia: “Something’s off. What you’re saying is right, but… it somehow feels wrong too. Why?”

Sirius: “Because you go against the truth! Because you are a dirty half-devil who cannot understand Love, and you will live and die not knowing Love! The existence of a half-devil is evil! Even your birth, even the meeting of your father and mother are wrong! The union of trash and insects birthed an unholy piece of shit that needs to end its existence here!”

Emilia: “—Hk!”

At the end of that unbearable tirade of abuse, Emilia’s eyes changed.

Kind and gentle as she was, Emilia could not tolerate such harsh words, which demeaned not only her existence, but even her parents’ meeting.

Biting her lip, Emilia pushed against the slate ground, leaping to her feet. Her enraged gaze trained on Sirius, a silvery shimmer gathered in her hand.

Emilia: “…”

Her sword slashed through Sirius’s coat, splitting it wide open.

Emilia, in her rage, would stop for nothing as she took another swing at Sirius, her sword of ice reaching the thin body in front of her—

Emilia: “—Eh?”

???: “Mmph!”

—Subaru saw the chained girl and froze.

A blonde, curly haired girl, bound in the same manner that Lusbel had been, blood pouring from her mouth, sobbed. Her small body was firmly bound to Sirius’s slender body.

Tina—the name flashed through Subaru’s memory.

Sirius: “—That Wrath you have is scary.”

Subaru who had noticed the girl, and Emilia, who saw the girl’s tears, were overtaken by rage. And at that moment, Sirius gave her most ferocious smile yet as a wave of heat blew Emilia’s body away with alarming momentum.

The explosion whistled through the air as Emilia was knocked backwards. She flew across the stone, tumbling until coming to a stop at the very center of the square.

Emilia: “Gah, ugh…”

Emilia moaned as she writhed in pain. Sirius gazed at Emilia as she clapped, her flames burning so high they could be seen from a long distance.

Sirius: “An insect shouldn’t give me such a sweet passion. It’s incredibly disgusting.”

Emilia: “…”

Sirius: “Well, thank you. My apologies.”

With her wrists held over her head, Sirius’s whirlpool of flame roared once again.

Even steel would melt with nary a touch of that flame. If it touched her directly, then not even a shadow of Emilia would be left behind. She would be completely burned from the world.

If he did not act right now, he would not be able to save her. And not saving Emilia was unacceptable. Subaru clearly understood all this, and yet—

Subaru: “Move already, feet!”

Tina: “Mmph!”

Subaru’s feet were trembling with something like fear, leaving him unable to walk.

Subaru’s inaction had begun the moment he had laid eyes on the terrified girl that was bound to Sirius. Beatrice, on his back, was similarly unable to move.

Feelings could be shared with Spirits. Idiocy, that was not the time to think about that.

Subaru: “E… milia…”

His throat vibrated but he could not even call the name of the girl who he loved so deeply. Emilia certainly could not have heard him.

Emilia's thoughts as she lay on the stone floor, unable to move, watching the imminent blaze unfold before her very eyes.

—Even those were scorched by unforgiving fire, leaving them forever a mystery.

Terrifying heat baked the slate ground, and, as the heat wave became the impact, the world was dyed a brilliant gold.

Faced with that fantastical scene, Subaru's knees shook, and he collapsed on the spot.

Beatrice: "Suba… ru…"

Beatrice, still clinging to his back, called to Subaru in a stuttering voice.

Subaru could not respond. His line of sight remained fixed on the ground beneath him, as he refused to face reality, swallowed by an overwhelming dread.

Right now, if he looked up, he would lose to fear.

No, the heart he had long lost to fear would shatter and break. If he had to see where Emilia had turned to ash, if he had to see where Emilia had vanished from the world, then—

Beatrice: "Su-Subaru. Subaru!"

Even so, Beatrice continued desperately calling Subaru's name.

His head was knocked several times, but Subaru could only embrace his horrified and timid heart, shaking his heads slowly.

It was impossible. Even if that monster were standing right in front of him, Subaru—

???: "—I caught up."

However, the moment he heard that sound, Subaru's heart shook off that fear. Rather than fear the sight in front of him, he feared being left in the dark.

Raising his head, he looked to the direction of the sound—the place where Emilia had been incinerated.

There, a man stood.

Smoke rose from the charred rocks, which still crackled with heat. In the midst of that destruction, the man assumed a leisurely pose. There, in his arms—

Subaru: "Emi… lia?"

In the man's arms, there rested a girl who should have disappeared in flame. Although she had passed out from exhaustion, she was physically unhurt. Emilia had lost her consciousness from the accumulation of her exhaustion and fear, but she was peacefully resting, safe and sound.

Subaru: "You…"

The person who had suddenly appeared and saved Emilia's life.

His horrified heart denying him a celebration of Emilia's safety, Subaru involuntarily voiced his wavering thoughts with a similarly trembling voice.

The man who heard and turned around. Then, he spoke.

???: "I came to meet her, so it's great that I was able to catch up."

Subaru: "To… meet? What's that supposed to…"

???: "—Isn't it a matter of course that I come to meet a woman who I intend to take as my bride?"

At that abrupt utterance, Subaru fell speechless.

At Subaru's stiff lack of breath, the man—a white-haired youth, gave off an easy-going smile.

Regulus: “I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Greed—Regulus Corneas.”

It did not intend to boast, but rather speak for granted facts.

Regulus: “As promised—I’m here to take her as my seventy-ninth wife.”

Chapter 25:
Leo’s Theater

An enigmatic, white-haired youth suddenly entered the barren, chaotic battlefield that had been ripped asunder by ice and fire.

His white hair was neither too long nor too short, without any distinct style. His figure was also neither too muscular nor too slim; he had a medium build which gave off the weak impression that it would be immediately swallowed by the crowd. But,

Subaru: “Sin Archbishop… Greed…?!”

The mediocre young man’s self-introduction left quite an impact on Subaru. As long as Subaru’s ears had not failed him gravely, then that young man had in fact called himself a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.

And perhaps that statement certainly had not been a lie. If that were not the case, then how else could he have been unscathed from Sirius’s final attack, like nothing had happened?

—Such an anomaly was impossible.

Regulus: “Even so, it’s great that I caught up. After all, my bride nearly turned to ash. Even I, who rarely express any particular expectations, do hope that my bride’s humanoid shape can be kept. More than that being a matter of merit, I think that it’s a matter of course. After all, I do not have the perverted habit to devote my love to a lump of ashes.”

In front of a trembling Subaru, the young man—the Sin Archbishop, who had called himself Regulus, looked down at Emilia in his arms, weaving such words, bringing with him a fear that refused to dissipate.

Although he spoke smoothly and fluently, the contents of his discourse were empty, as if he were just repeating the same joke over and over. Emilia, who was forced to listen to that joke, did not stir. She seemed to have lost consciousness entirely, her slender form only lying prone in his arms.

Regulus raised a finger to the white hair on his eyebrows.

Regulus: “Although it’s gratifying to see nothing is wrong, it seems regrettable that I can’t reveal my heroism to my bride today. I think that a heroic rescue in the midst of a dead-end crisis brings two people people’s hearts to a very important place. Well, after all, that the two’s hearts shall be connected is already an established fact, and the only question is of the timing. Isn’t it great?”

Subaru: “You, what have you been saying…?”

Regulus: “Hmm?”

Regulus, who had been speaking his self-righteous truth, discovered Subaru and frowned upon him. He then gave a very tired sounding breath,

Regulus: “Don’t you understand basic concepts like politeness? The first thing I did was introduce myself. The reason why I did so, is because it’s the most important thing to do at the start of a relationship. No matter what kind of relationship, isn’t it necessary to start with an acquaintanceship where we both know each other? So, just because I’m someone who cares about such things, I often think that no matter whom it is, I will be as friendly as possible with anyone. I’m not saying that there isn’t a chance that the other party is shy. Even if you think you want to become well-connected, when you start by introducing yourself, sometimes you cannot help but hesitate. Out of consideration for those types of people, I try to introduce myself as much as possible, and act to create a space where they feel comfortable. Of course, I don’t expect this grace to be immediately obvious. However, I do have hopes that after some time, they will be able to detect the meaning of introductions. Or, rather, that they will become aware of it. Or is it natural to talk to someone you meet for the first time without introducing yourself? If that’s the case, then there’s a slight difference between my common sense and those people’s culture. In that case, although both parties feel a sense of obligation, it becomes necessary to refuse the other side in advance as to prevent a misunderstanding. That isn’t so different from what I said before, about taking being gentle with each other for granted. In fact, saying so feels impolite. That's a lack of etiquette, and the other party is left with a lesser value. A false assessment of each other's value imposes on others. This is a violation of the rights of others. From any rational perspective, this is an infringement of my rights."

Subaru: "Oh. Ohh…? S-Sorry… my name is Natsuki Subaru."

A frenzied look rose in Regulus's eyes as he prattled on, serving as a warning siren to Subaru. Acting on that fear, Subaru trembled as he gave his name.

Then, hearing Subaru's introduction, Regulus squinted his widened eyes.

Regulus: "…Yes, that's fine. Because giving respect invites respect. Although the conditions for achieving a world that creates both comfort and respect are taken for granted, you are not obligated to seek the happiness of others. As long as you pursue your happiness, others will also correspondingly find happiness. Don't get caught up in your desires, just accept your truths and feel satisfied with your everyday needs. That is the peaceful way of life."

It would perhaps be worth questioning whether his smooth speech was serious or not. But his bright eyes proved that his words were neither joking nor ironic; rather, they were his genuine beliefs.

It was the same with Sirius—Taking his words out of context would perhaps make them seem decent. But Regulus's demeanor and words held the same superficiality and distortion as those of Sirius.

Regulus: "After all, is it really so hard to find the proper mood to establish dialogue? Why is it impossible for mankind to do this as a matter of course? Why is it acceptable to consciously, unconsciously, indifferently, continue to cause subtle harm to others? Subtle injuries hurt, don't they? On top of that, if anything serious works its way in, it might grow into a life-threatening disease. The body and the soul are one and the same. I hate those who misunderstand life to the extent that they unconsciously threaten others. Don't their minds seem warped?"

Subaru: "…"

Regulus: "Obviously, they're flawed as human beings, and it's not okay for that behavior to remain unconscious. It is, of course, wrong to impose a burden on those who are discriminated against. Most people have common sense, but why can't they consciously realize that the world is carrying on? Even without realizing that they're trampling upon the hidden hearts of others, if they don't become conscious of their twisted, flawed mistakes, then don't their feet just keep trampling and trampling?"

As if unhappy with Subaru's silence, Regulus repeatedly pressed for an answer.

Regulus's speech was gradually becoming faster and faster, clearly conveying an increase in excitement. Even so, Subaru still could not respond. At the thought of giving a response, his heart flinched.

Subaru: "All that said, don't you know…"

Sirius: "Thanks for the lesson—BURN, SCORCH, AND DISAPPEAR!!"

A cascade of fire poured down from behind Regulus.

Sirius had waved her arms to summon a flame which mercilessly consumed her fellow Sin Archbishop. Subaru, witnessing this atrocity, found himself once again unable to move.

Beatrice: "Subaru…"

Subaru: "I… know. But, it's okay."

Beatrice, also trembling in fear from Subaru's back, gripped his shoulders until they hurt. She too was worried about Emilia, who had been caught in that waterfall of flame, in the arms of Regulus.

It was impossible for Subaru not to fear for Emilia, who had been caught up in that display of violence. Even so, he held a steadfast belief.

Regulus: "—I say, to interrupt someone else's conversation like that, how awful are you at reading the mood? If you want to say something, speak up, raise your hand. Do you think I have the presence of mind to just wait for you to speak up?”

Regulus twisted his wrist, and the vortex of flame vanished.

The heatwave dissipated as if dismissed by magic, while Regulus, standing at the center of the vortex, remained untouched. Naturally, Emilia, resting in his arms, was still in the same state.

Even engulfed by the flames of that intensity, not a single drop of sweat surfaced on his face, let alone a burn.

Regulus: “You and I share the title of Sin Archbishop. Since I know that your head is messed up, I could have turned a gentle blind eye if it were just a little mistake. Fortunately, there was no harm done. Only…”

Turning away, Regulus lowered his voice and glared at Sirius, who bore that gaze as she closed her coat, once again hiding the girl bound to her from the surroundings, gritting her teeth all the while.

Regulus: “You were planning to burn this girl along with me. I would be a little reluctant to say that I will forgive that kind of behavior. Ah, it’s better to say that it would be impossible. Since ancient times, no matter what the story or the morality of the characters, if one’s loved ones are hurt, then their anger is inevitable. Because that’s a right that everyone has, I am well within my rights to take revenge.”

Sirius: “Angry! Hah, did you get angry?! Don’t make me laugh! A superficial and insignificant man like you cannot speak so lightly about anger! Anger is mine! It’s what I got from him, and it’s more important to me than anything else. To…”

Regulus: “Ohh, I see. Are you still clinging to the idiot who died while he was ahead? How annoying, how disgusting. That’s neither constructive nor rational. Death is the end. This is a matter of course, isn’t it? Unwilling to admit even that and clinging to just memories… You really are flawed. If someone you love dies, find the next one. Rather than yelling about love, love, love, exercise the rights you have been granted. Disrupting that natural cycle, ah, you really are hopeless scum.”

Sirius: “You, who laughed at that person’s death, TO SPEAK SO ARROGANTLY!!”

Sirius, who had been relentlessly demeaned, flew into a rage.

The stone flooring cracked at the mercy of the madwoman’s stomp as she directed her twin chains of flame forward, which flew toward Regulus at an alarming rate. A burning, tearing sound accompanied the weapon on its lethal journey.

The chain hit Regulus’s flesh, striking his cheek to one side. However, neither Sirius’s fury nor the chain’s attacks had been calmed by that single blow. Left to right, top to bottom, front to back, Sirius’s copper chains beat relentlessly at Regulus’s whole body. On top of that, the chains, flying at incredibly high speeds, projected waves of heat as well, completing a cage made of flames.

Sirius: “Disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear! TURN TO ASH ALONG WITH THAT DAMNED HALF-DEVIL!!”

The fence of flame converged towards its center, trapping Regulus in that raging pillar-shaped inferno.

The temperature of that storm was high enough to melt the floor tiles where Regulus stood, and the ground beneath him either evaporated or sunk to form depressions.

Sirius witnessed the blazing result, out of breath. Sharing her wrath, the crowd of wild-blooded people around her bled from their eyes and noses, making strange sounds as they congregated together.

Regulus: “I say, how many times do I need to tell you the same thing?”

Regulus stepped forward on the stone slabs, which were half-melted and glowing red, as if nothing had happened.

Whether it was his white hair, his clothes, or Emilia’s arms, nothing held a trace of injury. Only his expression had changed into one of childish dissatisfaction.

Regulus: “I’ve thought about it. No matter how many times the same thing is said, some people cannot understand. They don’t care enough to endeavor to understand what is said. Is that contempt? So, whether carving what they’ve learned in their hearts as commandments, or doing careful self-examinations, or remembering it was something to be thought about the next day—they don’t do any of that. They forget, and continue doing the same things. Saying the same thing over and over again is not only blasphemy, but also contempt which gives negative impacts to both parties. Both their own value and the value of the other party are fundamentally degraded. That’s how it is. It’s a form of violence that disregards words and actions. So, that is what I thought.”

Sirius: “You damn insect…!”

Regulus: “In the early days of the Witch Cult, its doctrine went like this, “If one cheek is hit, present the other cheek and ask why”. It showed the value of mutual understanding. Ah, but I’ve thought of this too. It’s also true that someone whose cheek has been beaten should fight back—That’s especially necessary against those who don’t know pain.”

Only listening to the content of that speech would make it seem very stern and proper. But Regulus was a distorted existence.

Regulus: “…”

Regulus, who stepped out from that depression on the floor, wore a grim smile towards Sirius. That smile was certainly no friendly gesture; rather, it was closer to the licking of a tongue as a predator surveyed his prey.

It was still unknown how Regulus had defended against Sirius’s flame and chain. Perhaps his power was purely defensive in nature, and the Authority of Greed granted no means of attack.

Therefore, it could not be said that Regulus’s behavior would have fatal consequences.

—But, he could affirm. At this rate, Sirius would die.

And there was no way that Regulus was a holder of purely defensive abilities.

If that young man took any actions, there was no doubt that Sirius would die. If that were the case, there would be no problem at all. In fact, having the number of Sin Archbishops reduced due to in-fighting would be worthy of celebration.

However, although gratifying, Sirius's death would drag most of the people surrounding her down with her. Of course, this included Subaru, as well as the crowd trapped in Sirius's Wrath, and certainly Lusbel and Tina, who had surely prayed for one another's safety and sacrificed themselves.

Subaru: "…"

Even now, fear was spreading all over the Subaru's body.

His fallen knees trembled so much that even breathing became an abnormal act. But, even in this state,

Beatrice: "Subaru."

In his ear, a weak, unreliable voice echoed.

Although the owner obviously could not hide her trembling fear, her warm voice still spoke up from behind him. It was conveying a message along the lines of "Rely on me".

Subaru clenched his teeth and staggered to his feet.

He refused to be unable to do anything and delegate everything to the slight weight of the child on his back. Having said that, he would not be able to do anything at all without her strength. Therefore, Subaru refused to struggle alone, but also refused to throw everything to one person.

If Subaru were alone, then he would have remained on his knees in fear. The reason why Subaru could stand was because he was not alone. The other people engulfed by the madness were different.

Only Subaru had someone close by; only Subaru was not by himself.

Tightly clinging to that real feeling, Subaru fought back his fear.

Subaru: “Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “I know, in fact.”

With only a single call, Beatrice could fully understand what he needed.

Confirmation with each other was unnecessary. Each of them doing their utmost to accomplish each of their respective responsibilities—as long they did that, they should arrive at their desired outcome.

Both Sirius and Regulus, the Sin Archbishops had completely forgotten about Subaru.

They could only see each other and fully intended to kill one another. Sirius burning Regulus and only Regulus to ash was the best outcome, but that would be impossible.

Therefore, Subaru aimed to stop Regulus’s rampage. He had to attract Regulus’s attention to himself and take measures so there would not be a large number of victims.

And, above all,

Subaru: “Don’t you dare touch Emilia like that…!”

Inexhaustible love pushed the fear away from Subaru’s heart, lighting it ablaze. If he did not address his dishonest heart first, then he would never be able to fight Regulus. At the moment, Regulus had his back turned to Subaru, and his attention was being completely diverted by Sirius, which was of great convenience to Subaru.

Beatrice: “—Shamak!”

As Subaru forced his trembling legs to move, Beatrice chanted a spell from behind him.

Her powerful spell, Shamak, covered Regulus's body in black haze as it severed him from the world, beautifully hindering his gait. Right before Regulus was engulfed, Subaru took a combat position and fiercely whisked his whip forward where something had been.

He was aiming at Regulus's neck.

His whip followed through as it attempted to ensnare Regulus. Surely with this much commotion, even Regulus, arrogant as he was, would have to pay heed to Subaru. Perhaps there was even a possibility that Regulus would fall victim without realizing what had happened, thanks to Beatrice's Shamak.

Subaru: "There's no response!"

Beatrice: "He's coming, I suppose!!"

Beatrice's warning had come after a heavy sense of anxiety had already hit Subaru. His whip passed through thin air; the missing presence of its target painfully obvious.

The next moment, a white-haired youth kicked off the ground towards Subaru, emerging from the black haze.

Regulus: "This has been messy from the very beginning. You've been stirring up my modest life with your magic. Could you evaporate off somewhere?"

Beatrice: "Mi… No, Murak!"

Regulus held Emilia with his right hand, as his empty left hand suddenly swiped at Subaru. Beatrice immediately gave up performing an attack in favor of casting a gravity-altering spell on Subaru. Subaru immediately affirmed Beatrice's judgment and leapt upward to avoid Regulus's reaching fingertips.

Murak was a type of Yin Magic with the effect of partially relieving a physical object from the tethers of gravity. Subaru's flesh was now lighter than a feather, flying upwards, leaving Regulus behind.

Regulus: "Why do you want to avoid it?"

Subaru: “Why wouldn’t I avoid it, it’s scary!”

Subaru cast his whip at Regulus again, who had looked overhead at Subaru. Rather than aim at any particular spot, Subaru only struck, hitting Regulus’s head. His white hair floated outward from the impact and the head that should have been lacerated by the whip was uninjured. Almost as if his hair had merely been swept by a breeze.

Regulus: “What if my bride had been injured? Don’t you think that’s it’s a matter of course that girls should be treated gently, and that it’s not something that needs to be taught? Don’t you even understand this?”

Subaru: “Don’t be stupid! The person I want to treat most gently in this world is that girl. In the first place, what’s with the “bride this” and “bride that” that you’ve been going on about…”

Regulus: “It’s been decided. It’s destiny—After all, I made a promise in my dreams.”

One hand bracing himself against the wall, Subaru was dumbfounded by Regulus’s smiling reply. Something felt awry, but Regulus clearly did not care.

Regulus: “She and I are connected. That’s fate, you know. I feel generally satisfied with myself, and I don’t want anything at all. And although I don’t particularly desire anything, I’m not so narrow-minded that I wouldn’t accept what’s given to me. Especially what fate’s given to me. Although most people do not expect this, I wish to protect my world, which is within my reach, at all costs. That would be myself and the people who are important to me.”

Subaru: “…”

Regulus: “I will protect her. I’ll welcome her as my bride and love her as she’ll love me, and together we’ll enjoy a peaceful life. Therefore, for the sake of that, I won’t refrain from exerting the power that I’ve been given.”

Subaru: "Then, what… Then what about her own will? Obviously, one of the parties has not consented yet, so aren't you getting ahead of yourself?"

Regulus's stern statement had just confirmed his ironclad convictions. On one hand, it was a straightforward, righteous, and harmless way of thinking. On the other, it was ridiculous to a deadly extent.

It was difficult to explain exactly why it was dead wrong, but it was something that had been clear from the very beginning. Because Regulus had fallen into a frenzy, everything had gone off track.

Subaru's voice trembled, but not only due to fear. At his question, Regulus smiled and continued as though discussing a disposable topic.

Regulus: "Are you worried about me? If that's the case, thank you. However, there is no problem. Fate is inevitable… In particular, either love or friendship, that cannot be established alone. If fate told me that she would be my bride, then I am fated to be her groom, and this is all something that's already been decided."

Beatrice: "…Something is completely wrong with him, in fact."

Towards Regulus and his flawed theory, Beatrice leaked a subconscious murmur of disgust.

Subaru held the same opinion. Regulus used pretty, smooth words to cover up the underlying madness of a stalker in his beliefs. Subaru did not even want to know the extent of trouble that the sentiments of a stalker would bring.

Subaru: "I've had enough. It's impossible for us to understand each other. It's disgusting to admit that such a horrible person is a rival for love."

Subaru removed his hand from the wall and allowed himself to float back to the earth. Looking at Subaru, who fell silent, Regulus nodded as if he'd grasped the main idea.

Regulus: "I see. I understand. You know, I'm sorry to say, but… the fate of a lover can't be shared. I find homewreckers to be quite unsightly."

Subaru: "Shut it! Emilia-tan is my bride. I won't give her to someone like you."

Regulus: "Ohh, this is Emilia. A lovely name. Very suitable for love birds to call softly, very suitable for this adorable girl indeed."

Subaru: "You don't even know her name… yet you say you want her as a bride? What a joke! What made you…?"

Regulus: "Her face."

Subaru was choked speechless with anger. Misunderstanding his silence, Regulus tilted his head.

Regulus: "A cute face. That's all love is about, right?"

Subaru: "Die."

Beatrice: "Drop dead, I suppose."

Agreeing with Subaru's assertion, Beatrice also denied Regulus his overly casual love.

Pedaling toward the ground, Subaru's weightless body was still under the effects of Murak. As Subaru shortened the distance between them as he rode the wind, Regulus lifted his gaze, as if shocked. At this time, Regulus could not understand the implications of Subaru drawing within close-combat range.

Subaru himself understood how stupid it was to approach Regulus. Rather than being unintelligent, Regulus did not share the familiarity with battle that Sirius did. That was not to say that he was unprepared, rather, he needed no weapon. Therefore, getting close to Regulus would be nigh-suicidal. Even so, Subaru had one pressing reason to fight with Regulus at close quarters.

—Because his trump card could only be used in close range.

Regulus: "Why did you come here? I don't really understand.

Although it’s not necessary, I do hope that you can tell me. I don’t lack thoughtfulness, after all. I wish to understand even withering opponents.”

Subaru: “Thanks for the enlightenment—Beako!”

Beatrice: “Ready, in fact!”

Regulus approached Subaru with his left hand extended. Each of those fingers was likely a fatal weapon that would reap Subaru’s life. Before that could happen, Subaru took a breath and shouted.

This was one of the fruits of the efforts that Subaru and Beatrice had accumulated over the course of the past year,

Subaru: “—E · M · M!!”

Regulus: “…What?”

The high-pitched chant made the Mana inside of Subaru’s damaged Gate sensitive to Beatrice’s manipulation, and from there, exclusive magic which no one else had yet developed was casted. One of three original spells devised by Beatrice and Natsuki Subaru—the magic of absolute defense, E · M · M, was activated.

Subaru’s body would be wrapped in an invisible magical field which would allow him to sidestep from the plane of existence, nullifying any attack on him, be it physical or magical.

Regulus’s fingertips did not bring any harm to Subaru upon reaching him. Upon witnessing this incident, for the first time, Regulus revealed an expression of stiff shock.

And then, Subaru aimed at his face and fiercely released his left fist.

Subaru: “Dora!”

Regulus: “—Hk.”

The side of Regulus’s face was struck.

Subaru had struck him with a hard blow, but not the slightest redness had been left on his face, which was pushed back. The damage had been completely invalidated. It seemed that the eternal and constant guardian of Regulus's flesh had the same effect as what Subaru had done.

Beatrice: "Not ready yet, I suppose!"

Before Regulus could counterattack, Beatrice shouted that the conditions for the next move had not yet been reached. In close proximity, Subaru needed to avoid Regulus's attacks. Being on the defense would make each action incredibly difficult. In that case, Subaru needed to give up part of his soul.

Regulus: "Don't worry…"

Subaru: "Invisible Providence!"

As Regulus suffered a blow, his words were cut off. Because he had been sent flying.

Subaru looked over the scene as he coughed blood, roughly wiping at the corners of his mouth with his sleeve.

No one but Subaru could have seen the imperceptible will of the gods.

But Subaru could clearly see a black arm protruding from his chest —coursing with dreadful power, also known as his third arm.

His entire body creaked, his soul weakened, and something venomous flowed through his body, materializing as black blood in his throat. After paying the price for the ability, Subaru was able to summon a full-out attack. That blow, which consumed so much from Subaru, probably would not match up to a kick from Garfiel.

Even so, that invisible attack should have a corresponding effect to the effort needed to cast it.

Beatrice: "Subaru, are you okay, in fact?"

Subaru: "Cough… somehow. And as for that guy, he's powerful, but his attacks are kinda flat. Among all those I've faced so far, it's about the same as Rachins.”

Spitting out the remainder of the blood clogging his throat, Subaru pointed out Regulus’s poor fighting skill. Regulus’s ability was so inexperienced and amateurish that even Subaru could face someone of his level. As long as Subaru kept his concentration, maybe those murderous fingertips could be continually avoided.

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru’s shoulder was knocked. That was Beatrice’s silent report.

Because of its potent effect, their original spells had short durations. In addition, their spells had daily limits, and overuse would result in loss of potency.

Subaru: “Although the effects of E · M · M have ended, in this case, there’s a chance even without magic. So if I can get closer…”

Beatrice: “Victory could be waiting, I suppose. There’s a glimmer of hope in sight, in fact.”

Regulus: “There’s no such thing. I apologize for the misunderstanding. I dallied for longer than I should have, being that you’re not so interesting. But that’s not the issue here. It’s not good that we’re having a disagreement. This is a violation of rights. Since I’ve been hit twice since we started, if I don’t land an attack, that would be unfair, right?”

Regulus landed from midair, glaring at Subaru and Beatrice, who had renewed their determination.

His expression had lost its original calmness, first becoming moody for a moment, and now reaching outrage. At last, he had recognized that Subaru regarded him as an enemy. But as he thought about his original purpose—

Subaru: “Wha?!”

Regulus: “…What are you up to?”

The ground between Subaru and Regulus suddenly ignited. Subaru was pushed backward by the wave of heat which bathed him, while Regulus bore the hot air as it blew past his face.

Obviously, the two turned to the culprit for this—Sirius.

So far, for whatever reason, that madwoman had not involved herself in the fight between Subaru and Regulus. Although the intent behind her inaction was unknown, Subaru would have preferred her to have remained silent. Her actions resulted in a very abrupt change.

He had no means to combat Sirius's flames, and strongly preferred to deal with Regulus, who could only engage in close combat. Even worse, he had yet to find a solution to defeat her as well.

Subaru gulped as the situation deteriorated.

But things got worse, far worse than what Subaru had imagined.

Sirius: "—I've found you."

Subaru: "—?"

Standing unsightly, Sirius stared at the two men glaring at her—no, at only Subaru.

The madwoman had completely forgotten her desire to kill Regulus, merely staring with single-minded obsession at Subaru. Her gaze was filled with madness, and Subaru's throat suddenly caught.

Then the monster lifted her previously lifeless, drowsy hands and pressed them to her face.

Sirius: "I've found you, found you, found you, found you, found you. Ah, ah, ahahah! Aaaah! Yes, it is really you! My apologies, I didn't notice at first. My apologies, my greatest apologies. This is great. It really is. Sure enough, you came back for me?!"

Subaru: "What…?"

Sirius: "Darling, where have you been?! No matter where I looked, I could not find you. Even after I tore your spares open, I still could not find you anywhere. Even though I had always, always always always always always always always always always been looking… And you noticed how I had been searching, and you came back!”

Her high-pitched sonorous voice overflowed with obvious enthusiasm.

Keeping her hands on her cheeks, she wriggled her body and gave a series of pleased sounds. It was truly difficult to put into words the state of this monster, so strangely it looked in front of Subaru.

However, if pressed for an answer, one would say those were the actions of someone who had been searching for a lover for a long time. Of a woman who had been consumed by blind love.

Sirius: “Because my thoughts have arrived! Because I want to be one with you—you finally noticed the wish that I have always been praying for! Because my Love finally reached you!”

Subaru: “…”

Sirius: “I’ve always been waiting for only you… My dear, dear Petelgeuse!”

Speaking with a frenzied smile, Sirius Romanée-Conti called the name of her bereaved lover, as she cast a tender, affectionate look at Subaru.

Chapter 26:
Spear of Love

—The already dire situation had deteriorated drastically, resulting in the worst of awful conditions.

Subaru trembled under Sirius's mesmerized gaze and her shuddering, glowing breaths.

The madwoman gave no regard to the heat scorching her bandaged face, her mad, brilliant eyes focused on watching Subaru—no, not just watching, but staring.

Subaru: "Dear… Petelgeuse?"

That was a madman's name, one which Subaru had never wanted to hear again. Subaru would be lying if he said he did not think of her as a madwoman, calling herself Romanée-Conti, and ranting passionately on her love for her late husband.

Even so, he was reluctant to seriously consider that idea as correct, as doing so would combine the existence of the lunatic Petelgeuse and the madwoman Sirius.

He did not want to think of the union between the worst possible couple, with Romanée-Conti as the surname.

Subaru: "A couple where both lovers are Witch Cultist, and Sin Archbishops at that, is ridiculously disastrous… Although it cannot be helped that he'd choose a bride like that…"

Really, the morally bankrupt all belonged to the Witch Cult. The self-righteous Petelgeuse, Sirius who imposed her love without permission, and Regulus who treated love with flimsy fatalism—they were all scum.

Subaru: "Like how your names are a bit similar. Do they all end in an S-Sound?"

Subaru tried to bury the thought in his mind under trivial, pointless thoughts. But, right now, Subaru felt as if he had found something extremely odd, although he could not quite put his finger on what it was. Try as he might, he could not find it.

Sirius: “Please do not be so silent, Petelgeuse. You are such a mean-spirited person. See, you are already, already, already giving me that usual cold attitude… It makes me really anxious!”

Sirius, unaware of the cause of Subaru’s brooding silence, took her own interpretation of it as she kept her hands on her face and her waist twisting back and forth. The nightmarish scene spread as the crowd around Sirius took up her strange, delusional expression of affection.

Regulus: “…Really, I can’t deal with you anymore. Although his trick just now probably gave you that kind of idea, it’s still really rather tragic. Fate should tie you together, no matter what kind of obstacles are faced. Like me and my brides. However, a separation by life and death before results can blossom is not only sad, but very unsightly.”

Sirius: “Yes, thank you very much. My apologies. Now, excuse me, but I am busy. You know, right? Mutual understanding is important. Mutual concessions are also important. You have completed your purpose, so could you leave as soon as possible? After all, I also have my own private affairs.”

Regulus: “Indeed, my purpose of finding my bride has been fulfilled…”

Sirius’s madness had given way to rationality, and Regulus overlooked that implication as he looked at Emilia, still in his arms. Then he turned toward Subaru.

Regulus: “But the one who wants to kill me and my bride, and who has been annoying since the very beginning, has yet to allow me proper vengeance in accordance with his infringement of my rights. I dislike taking a violent initiative, but in this case, it would only be a just revenge. Yes, this is an act of righteousness. Although I could endure this and leave, I would be doing legitimacy a disfavor. That is to say, leaving would be a loss of justice. I should not set that precedent.”

Subaru: “Don’t give me that high-and-mighty tone. Obviously, you don’t like me, so you want to kill me. Don’t justify that with some shitty doctrine.”

Regulus: “Actually being talked back to is quite a surprise. Being spoken to as if I were mistaken is even more of a surprise. You, are you the type of person who disagrees with their opponents? In that case, the only thing I can say is that your vessel is both small and superficial. I think that this kind of person, who can’t listen to the words of others with sincerity, will one day earn their just desserts, what do you think?”

Subaru: “Do you have the right to say this?”

Regulus’s eyes widened as if incredibly taken aback.

Perhaps he was being sincere, convinced that his speech was justified? No, he was absolutely convinced. If not, he could not be a leading subordinate in that abnormal group.

Establishment of rational conversations were only an illusion. Although they spoke what seemed to be human tongue, they were creatures belonging to an alien ecosystem.

Forgetting that would lead to being swallowed up by their words.

Regulus: “Sirius. You seem to have excluded him from the scope of your Authority. What happened?”

Instead of facing the silent Subaru, Regulus directed the conversation to Sirius.

Frowning at his speech, Subaru belatedly discovered that the fear which had been gripping his heart had vanished. They had not left the range of the sphere of influence—no, that was not the case, as proven by the fact that Beatrice was still slightly trembling on his shoulders.

In other words, only Subaru had been excluded. And the reason for that was,

Sirius: “Is it not obvious? Since I know that he is that person, if I continue to share my feelings, they might accidentally transmit to him.”

Regulus: “Don’t give me that shy look, it’s really creepy. Having proclaimed your love, love, love, there’s no point in pretending to be innocent. I really don’t understand you.”

Sirius: “Do you not think that allowing those inexplicable feelings that cannot be expressed with words to be felt in such a manner is tasteless? Until the end of the end, until the very moment I become one with him, I will seal that feeling inside me. I have already decided so. Yes, for the sake of Love!”

Regulus: “Because of that dishonesty, your important feelings will never be able to reach him, you know? You are calling yourself Sirius Romanée-Conti, right? Don’t you think that using someone else’s family name is rather unpleasant? I suppose that, in a sense, it’s like you are violating Petelgeuse’s legacy. Well, he’s already dead, so it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Sirius: “I and that person were in love with each other!”

Hearing Regulus’s amazed speech, Sirius exploded.

The madwoman grasped at her hair in a frenzy, spittle flying from her mouth as she screamed at Regulus.

Sirius: “After all, whenever I gazed at him, he always met my eyes! When I touched him, he did not scold me! When I spoke to him, he gave me his attention! When I inhaled his breath, he never told me off! I was allowed to sleep with him! I could freely borrow his things without him getting angry! He allowed me the honor of burning the half-devil! He gave me my name! He smiled for me! Only for me! Only for me, onlyformeonlyformeonlyforme!”

Her breathing grew wild as she sobbed tears of unrequited love.

Well, she had made herself clear. Sirius’s existence was one of dark, twisted, pure love.

Regulus: “Ah, oops—Dealing with such strong subjective convictions is tricky.”

Shrugging, Regulus spoke as if seeking agreement from Subaru.

Subaru bit back a “Do you have the right to say that?” to keep Regulus from lashing out. He needed to temper the balance between the two foolish extremists near him. Facing the two Sin Archbishops, Subaru saw no light of hope to break the deadlock. Rather, the situation had worsened due to Sirius’s interference.

Subaru: “No, did it get even worse because Sirius’s interest has shifted?”

Even if Subaru had broken away from the shared fear, there would be no marked improvement in his combat power. Obviously, Beatrice would be his main advantage, but she was trapped in an unfavorable condition, her sharp judgement dulled by terror.

At least, only facing Regulus would help.

Subaru: “…Hey, Sirius.”

Sirius: “Yes, what is the matter, my dear?”

Sirius candidly responded his call. Although Subaru was internally astonished at that unexpectedly serious response,

Subaru: “I have a bit of private business with Regulus here, so could you wait patiently for a while? Please.”

Sirius: “Do you wish me to wait?”

Making use of Sirius’s misunderstanding could grant Subaru a chance at victory.

Sirius appeared to have assumed Subaru was Petelgeuse due to his Invisible Providence, which resembled the Unseen Hand used by Petelgeuse. Although that was quite the false accusation, Subaru would have to take advantage of it for the time being.

Petelgeuse had been a Spirit. If he were still alive, it was entirely possible that he would have possessed Subaru as his next host. Although, the problem would be that Subaru had not indicated that he had recognized Sirius up until now, but Sirius, in her present state of mind, had not seemed to notice the issue.

With that in mind, Subaru hoped to break that deadlock. The result,

Sirius: "My apologies, I cannot do that. Please let me refuse, even if it is very important to you."

Sirius ruthlessly rejected his plea.

Seeing Subaru's disappointed gaze, Sirius bowed her head.

Sirius: "Of course, I originally wanted to comply. But you are quite diligent, and you will surely slip far away from my extended fingers while I wait. I know you. After all, we have been together for so long. You have always tried your utmost and overstrained yourself alone to reach your desired results… and…"

In all honesty, Subaru could not help but feel a heartfelt admiration for her love.

Even so, Sirius's regard of Petelgeuse's hard-working nature was a rather blind perspective. That willingness to toil would be welcomed if this were a mere businessperson, but as a Sin Archbishop by vocation, he would only bring harm to the world.

Sirius: "Finally, finally, we were able to meet again. It has been a year, a whole year, since I have been at your side. In this century, this is the longest we have been apart! And even after a year of not seeing me… You ask me to leave? I do not want to. I refuse. In this period of absence, I always wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted to become one with you!"

Subaru: "…"

Sirius: "On top of that, you still want me to wait?! And now you have a Spirit who I have never seen before! Where did you find her?! What exactly is appealing about woman like that?! She is small, her face is arrogant, and she has no breasts, no hips, no fragments of femininity! Is it because she is a Spirit?! Because you are a Spirit, your woman has to be a Spirit too? The time we spent together loses to such a flimsy reason? I'll burn you."

The direction of her speech became perverse, and became weird, and a crazed shimmer of unbridled frenzy rose in her gaze again. The crowd also left courting affection for anger, blood streaming red from their eyes and noses.

Sirius: "And, is the half-devil in his arms the reason why you need to deal with Regulus? That filthy half-devil! That silver-haired half-devil! Why are you so partial to her?! Stop immediately, shouldn't you have understood that long ago? That despicable, loathsome, hateful, abhorrent fucking Witch…! If you revive her, I'll burn her before your very eyes!"

Subaru: "You're… so increasingly incomprehensible, you…"

The madwoman gave a bloodthirsty shriek, revealing her animosity towards both Emilia and the Witch of Envy.

Was the goal of the Witch Cult not the Witch of Envy's resurrection? Subaru could not understand Sirius's attitude of loathing of the thing to be resurrected at all costs. Rather, Sirius had absolutely no resonance with the Petelgeuse she longed for.

Although he had originally thought that they could not have been companions, they turned out to be nothing but enemies.

Subaru: "…"

The three-way deadlock resurfaced.

Regulus planned to kill Subaru and Sirius.

Sirius would defend against Regulus and draw out the non-existent Petelgeuse within Subaru.

Subaru wanted to rescue Emilia from Regulus and to free Tina from Sirius, and, if possible, kill the two Sin Archbishops.

Obviously, only Subaru's situation was far too harsh. Searching for a solution that Subaru did not have the ability to attain, his forehead began to bead with sweat.

Return by Death, followed by Sirius's appearance and Regulus's debut. After that, a melee battle between Subaru and the Sin Archbishops had ensued. This loop had been the longest yet. During that period of time, although he had retrieved useful intelligence, nothing but awful things had happened.

Subaru: "…Beako."

Beatrice: "You can try either one, in fact."

From his back came the timid voice of his partner, who would lend her support to him whenever he was about to fall to fear. Subaru, who had been entrusted with what would happen next, made his decision.

And at that time.

Regulus: "—Oh."

Sirius: "…Hk."

Simultaneously, Regulus and Sirius both, changed their attitude. They each put their hands into their coats, and, from there, retrieved a book.

Subaru: "That is…"

A familiar thick book with a black binding.

There was one such book in Subaru's possession, and so there was no mistaking it. That was what all the Witch Cultists possessed, the Gospel.

Subaru: "…"

Ignoring Subaru, who had raised his guard again, the two Archbishops opened their own Gospels and turned over their pages, surveying its writ.

Then, although the timing had been identical, they closed their respective books, their expressions giving stark contrast to each other.

Regulus: “I assume the content is the same for both of us, is that true, Sirius?”

Sirius: “Shut up, Regulus. Why… Why now? When finally, finally I found him again…”

Regulus wore a light smile, and Sirius, who gritted her teeth and spoke in a voice full of remorse. Even if the predator and the madwoman held opposing feelings, their wills were unified.

The two looked to Subaru.

Regulus: “Although regretfully, it’s time. My free time with you has ended. You should thank the Gospel… Well, that’s not right. That doesn’t make sense. After all, what’s the use in being thankful to paper? So, rather, you should be grateful to me, who follows the Gospel faithfully.”

Subaru: “Thank you for your faith… But what was that about time? What are you talking about?!”

Regulus: “It’s just as you heard. We were given free time before we need to do what must be done. I took that meaningful time to retrieve my bride.”

Sirius: “I feel incomplete… In front of that person, I should not be subjected to such treatment. It is too cruel. I am being washed away by sadness, you know?”

Regulus spoke with composure, while Sirius forcibly expressed her sorrow. The crowd collapsed, and Beatrice bit back tears.

However, Subaru and Regulus both remained completely unaffected.

Regulus: “Sorry, but your small, superficial love doesn’t touch my complete self at all. At most, it makes me feel a little dirty.”

In a contemptuous voice, Regulus, with Emilia still in his arms, turned his back to Subaru.

Really, he looked as if he were just planning to let them go. If Regulus left by himself, that was fine. But,

Subaru: “Stop, you bastard! Don’t just run off! Let her go! Otherwise, I’ll…”

Regulus: “I thought you’d do that.”

Subaru: “—?!”

Regulus stopped and only turned his head to smile.

Under that smile, Subaru felt as though a blade brushed his spine, and he swallowed, his entire body stiff. It was impossible to prevent Regulus’s next move.

Regulus: “I think that if my bride finds one of her attendants gone, she’ll be lonely, and I think it’s rather heartless of me not to invite you, who was in love with her—So I won’t kill you.”

Gently, Regulus tapped the ground with his toes. Although it was a gesture of comfort, as if adjusting his shoes, his foot dug neatly into the stone slab as if it were a shovel driving into soft ground.

The wreckage of the slate flew toward Subaru. Bullets of soil seemed to defy gravity, travelling without aim. Some of them brushed the outside of Subaru’s right leg—and, in the next moment, Subaru’s leg vanished.

Subaru: “—Eh?”

A beast’s claw had torn clear through his leg. On his right lower limb, cleanly exposed in a twisted cross section, were white bone, pink flesh, and yellow nerves, and neatly severed green blood vessels.

Before he could comprehend what had just happened, the pain struck.

Subaru: “—Hk?! Gah, ahk! AaaaAAHH?!”

The world became pure white, as if his head were being punctuated by countless sharp needles.

A scream lodged in his throat, Subaru was unable to support his own weight as he tumbled to the ground. His outstretched fingers desperately held his right leg. The wound was so large that the palm of his right hand could not cover it all.

Beatrice: “Subaru?! Subaru! Subaru, wait, I suppose! Right now!”

Beatrice fell to the ground along with Subaru, noticing his severe injury, and panicked as she began a chant of healing magic. Regulus nodded in satisfaction at the scene.

Regulus: “This is adequate retaliation for your reckless behavior up until just now, so I’ll let it go. Although I did consider the possibility of you doing it again, I think I still want to look forward to your future. This pain is sure to stop you if you consider hurting another person again. Don’t thank me. Just save someone else next time.”

Subaru: “AaaAA—Hk! Kah, gah, can’t, kuu, gah!”

Pain, agony, suffering, hurthurthurthurthurthurthurthurt—!

A haze of agony. Molars being ground to dust from gnashing. A flashing world. The absence of up and down, left or right. Was he sleeping? Or was he alive? Or maybe he was dead?

Confusion. Cluelessness. Noideanoideanoidea. Even so, there was something he needed to know.

Subaru: “E-Emili…a! Wa, gah—hk, t—hk”

Beatrice: “Subaru, you can’t afford to mess around! If you have to vomit, turn to the side. If you don’t, your throat will…”

Enduring pain and madness, Subaru moved his head, his hands still holding his wound. His heartbeat was like an alarm bell and his internal organs constricted upon themselves with the sense of urgency, causing him to vomit repeatedly.

The petite Beatrice, while desperately supporting Subaru's rampaging body, did her best to cast healing magic. However, someone was laughing at her mockingly.

Beatrice: “You can't be serious, in fact.”

Sirius: “My apologies. However, this obviously is not a joke. It is only natural, is it not?”

Behind Beatrice, in abhorrent whispers, Sirius replied in a dark tone.

Around Sirius, a crowd of people rolled as they screamed in pain. All of them, with their hands on the wound left in their right leg, desperately sought salvation. Like Subaru, their right leg had been torn off by a beast.

Sirius: “My beloved Petelgeuse would say that feeling pain is living, and that those feelings allow Love to be exercised. I know that better than anyone. However, I believe there is a better way of representing that form of Love. Thank you. That representation would be becoming one. After all, Love is a prayer for becoming one! Seeing the same sights, feeling the same emotions, living the same life, ending with the same death, being together, that is Love!”

Opening her hands, her palms struck each other in a burst of clapping.

Sirius gave harsh puffs of air as she fixed her intense, envious gaze on Beatrice.

Sirius: “No matter who, everyone should experience the same feelings as him. However, only you and that dirty half-devil will be denied that experience. Who would grant you such an honor?”

Beatrice: “There's no woman out there who would be driven mad with jealousy as much as you. But it does not matter, since Betty has long been Subaru's closest confidante. Betty belongs to Subaru.”

Sirius: “—Hk!”

Beatrice refused to flinch under Sirius's cruel words. Madwoman and Spirit glared at each other, until Sirius turned away, breaking the interaction.

Sirius: “Now, I can only entrust him to you. After all, I must prioritize the Gospel’s instructions. Yes, there is no other way. My apologies. My apologies. You know I want to return to your side as soon as possible.”

At this moment, Sirius still acted madly in love with Subaru. The madwoman left the bloodstained square with a single jump. Beatrice had no choice but to give up chasing her. She understood that refusing to allow her to escape would merely result in more sacrifices.

Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

With fluttering eyes, yellow bubbles burst from Subaru’s mouth.

Beatrice pressed her palm against his wound, attempting to stop the flow of blood. The wound was too deadly, and any slip in concentration would lead to Subaru’s death. For Beatrice, saving Subaru was, naturally, her greatest priority. Although, there was another priority Beatrice had to follow.

Subaru: “If you don’t treat the other injured people…”

The number of wounded people rolling around the square was over thirty. They had all suffered the same injury as Subaru, and in a cruel twist, the healing being performed on Subaru had not reached them. She would need to heal every injury individually.

That was the burden Beatrice needed to take up. But, even if she exhausted her store of Mana, it would still be insufficient.

Beatrice: “—Subaru, I’m sorry, in fact.”

Desperately trying to heal Subaru’s injury, determined to keep a strong facade, Beatrice spoke with a hoarse voice. A stream of tears flowed down her white cheeks.

Beatrice: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry…”

Beatrice voiced a string of constant apologies. Even though she knew her voice could not reach Subaru, rendered unconscious by pain. Even knowing that it would not solve anything.

Beatrice: “I’m sorry, Emilia—”

Sirius had created so many victims and left the plaza. Regulus had taken Emilia with his overwhelming power.

—The two Sin Archbishops had been released into the Watergate City of Priestella.

Chapter 27:
Noise

A piercing sound.

Abrupt, vibrating, heavy, empty, distant, nearby.

The vibration was in his nearby vicinity. The sound coming from his eardrums shook his skull, travelling through his bones to the tip of his limbs.

The flow of his blood dulled, as if his blood vessels were infected by an inflow of sludge. His organs were sluggish, as if filled with clay. And oxygen did not reach his brain, leaving his thoughts foggy and unreliable.

That heavy echoing sound showed no signs of relenting, making him feel as if his eyeballs were rolling around aimlessly behind his eyelids.

???: "…"

The sensation in his body was very slow, and he felt tired and unable to move. Accompanied by nausea and sluggishness, Subaru slowly opened his eyes.

The darkness he had become used to faded, giving place to a sudden white light, which his eyes were unable to accept. In that white light, forms and shapes moved about, as if children had cast paint everywhere in a room of white.

Such emotions became distant, as the world he saw gradually settled down.

Everything became distant as he entered a calm world, and, after tens of seconds, his eyes were restored to their original state, as darkened rooms and dirty ceilings opened. He felt the breaths of many bodies moving around and keeping busy in his surroundings. People moving around in order to keep the surroundings busy, and their bodies.

???: “—Hey, bro, you’re awake!”

Ears ringing with tinnitus, Subaru was attacked by a sudden sound with an unnecessary amount of strength. It had sounded with such volume that the people who had been busy in his vicinity stopped moving, their eyes focusing on the source.

???: “Cat-eared young lady, over here! Everyone else, keep working! Sorry, but keep working! We’re fighting against time!”

???: “Really nyow, you’re annoying. People need quiet here, so quickly get back to work.”

With a bow of his head, the large being apologized for his loud voice. An angry young woman—no, a young man approached the beastman with a dog’s head, who spoke with a Kansai dialect. Wearing a revealing dress fit for a woman, a bloodstained Ferris looked down at Subaru with a sigh of relief.

Ferris: “Now that you’ve woken up, do you understand the situation… Actually, can you speak right now?”

Subaru: “…Ah, Ferris?”

Ferris: “Yep, it’s everyone’s favorite Ferri-chan. You’re Natsuki Subaru-kyun, and we’re at a field hospital right nyow since you were heavily injured, got it?”

Ferris quickly explained the situation to a hoarse Subaru. Reluctantly, his brain digested his speech word by word.

Looking around, Subaru identified his surroundings. At last, he noticed that he was lying on a simple bed made of pieces of cloth. And in fact, as Ferris had said, the surroundings looked like a field hospital.

Around him, people lay writhing in pain, awaiting treatment like Subaru’s.

The smell of blood, and miserable, whispered cries. Just healing magic could not keep up, he could see that wounds had been sewn together by needles and threads.

Subaru: “What… What the hell is this?”

Ferris: “Looks like you’re still confused. Slowly, try to remember what happened before you fainted. If you recall that, you’ll find the answer.”

Ferris’s words were not gentle, but that was not because of his mood. Rather, he had no energy to spare for gentleness. His sleeves were rolled up, and his white skin and face were stained with blood.

Imagining just how much work Ferris, a first-rate healer, had done in the face of this tragedy was not difficult. And, the cause of this tragedy was—

Subaru: “The Witch Cult…”

Ferris: “Really, those guys are the worst. My understanding of them was too naïve… I never expected them to pull something like this. Of course, nyo one else was expecting this either.”

Remorsefully biting his lips, Ferris lowered his chin at Subaru.

The regret that made Ferris tremble was painfully clear to Subaru. Although Subaru understood that, there were other uncertainties. There were other things he needed to check.

Subaru: “E-Emilia?! What happened to Emilia? Is she here?”

Ferris: “…”

Subaru: “That bastard, Greed… the Sin Archbishop took Emilia. Then, I…”

He spoke those last words with a tremor, because he knew that he had been right to be anxious. In Ferris’s lowered gaze and silence, Subaru found a clear answer. At the very least, Emilia was not here.

Then, if his impression before passing out was correct, she had been taken by Regulus.

Subaru: “And Beatrice?”

Ferris: “…Beatrice-chan?”

Subaru: “Yes, the little girl who was with me? She has an arrogant, adorable face, and curly twin-drills as… What about Beatrice?”

Emilia had more than likely been abducted by Regulus.

Judging from Regulus’s attitude, the likelihood that he would hurt Emilia was low—although that was uncertain. Although he could not be forgiven, that was the case for the time being.

But what had happened to Beatrice? Sirius and Regulus had both been present, and Sirius had held a strong hostility toward Beatrice. Since Subaru had been safely carried into the field hospital, they had escaped from Sirius. So, who had protected Subaru?

Subaru: “Hey, please. Tell me. Beatrice…”

Ferris: “…”

Not finding an answer to his unease, Subaru desperately sought an answer from Ferris, who closed his eyes. Standing next to him, a giant beastman closed his eyes—Ricardo, the Captain of the Iron Fang, who was looking at his side.

Following his line of sight, Subaru widened his eyes.

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Lying away from the people receiving treatment was a lone maiden in a dress. Seeing her not moving at all, in a makeshift bed like his own, Subaru lifted the towel covering his stomach and attempted to run towards her.

However, halfway to his feet, severe pain crippled him. On top of that, his right leg stopped obeying him, and his posture broke down completely.

His head was heavy with fatigue, and he could not understand why he was unable to move his right leg. Hurrying to take a look, the horror of his own leg left Subaru speechless.

Subaru: “Oh…”

Ferris: “Subaru-kyun would’ve lost a foot without Beatrice’s healing magic. You’ll have to thank that kid later.”

Subaru’s right leg was missing about half of its flesh, and was quite obviously in a poorer condition compared to his left. The wound was also wrapped in several layers of thick bandages, and a board had been fixed to his heel. All those had caused him to lose his balance.

He could not help but brush it with his fingers, and, in that moment, a bolt of realization struck him.

Subaru: “I remember…!”

The consequences of Regulus’s last blow before his departure.

Before taking Emilia, he spoke nonsense, and kicked the ground up as easily as he could kick sand, and that soil had poured on Subaru’s leg. At that moment, Subaru’s right leg had been wounded as if mauled by a wild animal’s claws. And that had resulted in the present state of Subaru’s right leg.

Ricardo: “When I stumbled upon the scene, your leg looked like it was connected by only a piece of flesh and skin. That cryin’ lil’ miss desperately healed ya before we got a proper healer.”

Ferris: “After that, Subaru was carried here and treated by Ferri-chan. Although Ferri-chan’s treatment cannot guarantee that your leg will be the same as before, nyow the bones and nerves are linked, and the flesh is regenerating, so you have to rest.”

Crossing his arms, Ferris made a cross, prepared to deal with Subaru’s reluctance, however, Subaru obeyed in silence, his attention focused on Beatrice’s bed. As Ferris sighed in relief, a large hand supported Subaru’s shoulder, hooking around it like a worm, and, Ricardo: “As for gettin’ ya to that lil’ miss, I can handle that.”

Subaru: “Sorry about this… Thank you.”

Ricardo: “No worries.”

Ricardo moved Subaru’s entire bed near Beatrice’s. From there, Subaru leaned forward to take a better look at her. Immobile, the little girl was sleeping so quietly that Subaru could not even hear her breathing.

Even though she was a Spirit, Beatrice slept like a human. Unlike Puck, she could not dematerialize into an Anchor, so this was how she reduced the burden of materialization on her Mana.

For this reason, seeing Beatrice’s sleeping face was hardly uncommon for Subaru. Only, this was the first time he had seen her sleeping quiet to the point it nearly seemed like she was dead.

Subaru: “She’s, just sleeping… right? Still, I’m worried…”

Ferris: “Asleep isn’t the right word. Right now, she’s lost her function as a Spirit… A state of suspended animation might be closer.”

Subaru: “Suspended animation? Why…?!”

Touching Beatrice’s forehead, he was surprised to find how low her temperature was. Brushing her adorable eyelashes and her face yielded no reaction, just as Ferris had reported. In response to the look on Subaru’s face, Ricardo squatted down.

Ricardo: “Accordin’ to the cat-eared lady, this happened because she overused her Mana. That’s all there is to it. I found the square ya were in by complete accident, bro. Everyone there had pretty much the same injury, which the lil’ miss was taking care of on her own.”

Subaru: “…”

Ricardo spoke with a sigh, leaving Subaru silent for a while.

Injured people with the same wound as Subaru—that was the result of sensory sharing. The injury Subaru had gotten from Regulus was propagated to everyone else, which had been Sirius's doing. The madwoman seemed to have left the scene, and Beatrice's fight had begun there.

She had given equally thorough treatment to Subaru and everyone else who was wounded.

Of course, Subaru was a greedy man who asked for too much, and the child who accompanied that Subaru likewise refused to give up anyone. So Beatrice had squeezed out every last drop of her Mana to save all those people, at this heavy price.

Subaru: "Beatrice is fine, right…? She just needs a little rest…"

Ferris: "…To be honest, I'm nyot too optimistic. Ferri-chan is a first-rate healer, but doesn't know much about Spirits. And this child is no ordinary Spirit either, right? So I don't really knyow any real solutions."

Subaru: "There… there has to be a way! I have to help Beatrice, I…"

Only a year had passed. He had told her he would free her from the Library, in order to bring her happiness. Beatrice was an existence that could not be allowed to end here.

Happiness, happiness, happiness, no one deserved happiness more than this child. She must be happier than anyone else.

Ricardo: "The problem's that she's run out of Mana, right? Can't she geddit from somewhere else? If bro's her Contractor, then she should be able to get some from him, right?"

Ferris: "…You idiot, Subaru-kyun. His Gate is fractured, so I can't deliver Mana from somewhere else. The quickest way to do that would be to send Mana through Subaru-kyun."

Subaru: "Right… Bokko fruits. What if we had bokko fruits? With those, I could restore my own Mana, and then I can give some to Beatrice…!"

Ferris: “You idiot!”

Ferris snapped angrily as he glared at the desperate Subaru, who looked up. He was surprised at that unexpectedly sharp reprimand, and Ferris immediately put on a fiddling, shy demeanor.

Ferris: “How many times have I said this? That’s really dangerous for Subaru-kyun’s body. In fact, it would be like poison. If you did that, we’d just end up with two casualties… So you can’t.”

Subaru: “…”

Ferris’s strict words were tinged with sadness. Reading that sincere thought, Subaru closed his mouth and swallowed his reckless judgment.

Ferris was an expert in healing, so he had of course considered a myriad of ways to help Beatrice. Subaru’s sudden thought must have already been considered.

Ferris: “I can understand Subaru’s worry about Beatrice-chan. And although I understand, there’s nyothing we can do for her right nyow. There are many other things that we have to worry about besides just that girl…”

Subaru: “Beatrice… Right, there’s Emilia too…”

Ferris’s words snapped Subaru back to reality.

He turned his attention to the field hospital—and found that something was off. There were people with wounded right legs, the same injury as Subaru, but there were also plenty of people with different injuries.

Subaru: “How’s the situation…? No, what else has happened? What’s with all the injuries?”

Ricardo: “The Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult are here like you said, bro.”

Subaru: “But it can’t just be them, right? I only saw two Archbishops. This level of damage can’t be enacted by just two people. In other words, they’ve brought the fodder Cultists too.”

Two people with overwhelming power had been the first notice of a threat. So Subaru had simply assumed that the two Archbishops would be the only Cultists present—but it was only natural that, as Petelgeuse did, they had brought underlings to the city as well.

That was the only possible explanation for such damage.

Subaru: “The two Archbishops and the Cultists under them, are those the ones attacking the city right now?”

Ferris: “On this matter, there are a variety of…”

Ferris’s voice was bitter as he began to answer Subaru’s conclusion.

However, before he could confirm or deny it, from a direction he had never imagined came an unexpected interruption. That was,

???: “Yahoo, yahoo, yahoo!”

The space rang with the sound of a high-pitched voice.

The voice’s relaxed tone contrasted sharply with the somber atmosphere, as if someone had accidentally tuned into a television channel showing an entertainment program, during a serious conversation.

Subaru: “Wh-What…?”

Hearing the sound, Subaru looked around wildly, and, unable to find the owner, he immediately realized its source.

Subaru’s immediate impression of the sudden voice was that it sounded like it had come from a loudspeaker or radio—a thought that mirrored one he had this morning.

Subaru: “The city’s broadcasting magical device?”

???: “Hello, all you meat creatures! No matter how many times you’ve heard it, doesn’t my beautiful and lovely voice excite you? Gahahahaha!”

As if verifying Subaru's idea, the voice appeared again, being broadcasted by a magic speaker.

That voice rang with child-like cruelty, like a girl who scorned etiquette and trampled on conventional manners of speech. Her sharp laughter seemed able to pierce right into one's mind, causing both mental and physical aversion.

Subaru: "What, a stupid voice, this is…"

Ferris: "Hush, Subaru-kyun, quiet."

Ferris straightened his ear with one finger and put another over his mouth. Ferris was serious, seemingly completely absorbed, and Ricardo wore a vigilant expression. The bedridden injured all clapped their hands over their ears, sobbing.

Apparently, this did not seem to be the first time they had heard it.

???: "Alright, you meat creatures enthralled by a beautiful girl's enticing voice, I have news for you—we're all tired, so we're going home now. Just kidding! The true tossing and turning of day and night starts now! Gahahahaha!"

A harsh, squeaky voice, like a mirror next to the ear being scratched with sharp claws, filled with sadistic glee.

What, what, what was this voice, what was this woman?

Forehead dripping with cold sweat, Subaru was well-aware of his body's abnormal condition. As Subaru's mind struggled to catch up, his body had noticed something unusual.

???: "Setting aside my funny, laugh-inducing joke, let's continue with the news. As I said just now, the city has been occupied by us. You're all caged birds… No, you're all insects in a cage for insects."

Subaru: "—?!"

???: "Insects are just bugs, and the owner of that cage gets to decide just what to do with you. Wings and head, prepare to have them removed… Kahahaha, how ugly, how awful! What a merciless life.

You should be thankful for being left in my tender care. Gahahahaha!”

Repeated, malicious high-pitched laughter. One which belonged to an evil presence which despised others and found vicious delight in trampling upon their existence.

Subaru knew this kind of presence better than anybody.

???: “Wait, wait, wait. You idiots can’t understand the real meaning of my precious words. Poor incompetent fools, only thinking about slabs of meat and mating in their free time. My gentle, loving self will make this easier to understand. I’ll tell you with my spit, which you masochists love.”

Subaru: “…”

???: “Insects in a cage can’t do anything about their owner’s mood. The most you can do to please us is to lie fearfully in your cage. When we’re in a bad mood, you can only tremble in fear as we tear your wings or legs off. When I bring you honey, I’ll be like your mother, gently stroking your heads. That’s why, kahahahahaha!”

In the face of that constant viciousness, Subaru imitated Ferris and the others, and listened silently. A breath, a word, and muddy feelings in his chest accumulated, as Subaru sealed his will with iron.

And then, he noticed. He noticed it.

What was that?

???: “Later, we’ll have more to ask of you scum. You’ll wear desperately ugly expressions, cry that you don’twanttodiedon’twantodiedon’twanttodie and think of ways to emerge from the crowd and give us aggressors what we want. In that case, my continent-renowned kindness might make me consider setting down the cage in my hand. Gah—Isn’t that really easy to understand! Gahahaha!”

With excitement, the speaker clapped, stomping her feet from her seat.

Her speech, her attitude, her voice—Subaru found them all unbearably irritating, but that was not the problem at hand.

From the beginning, he could hear that sound. He had thought that it came the same room as that magical device being used in the broadcast. Faintly accompanying that woman's voice, was a sound that had reached Subaru.

However, he was unsure of what exactly that sound was. What was still worse was that he had almost, but not quite, reached the answer. Unknowing, unaware, unwitting.

He concentrated. He heard his noisy heartbeat, the noisy flow of his blood. Reject and understand, reject and understand.

—A very faint buzzing sound, like the flapping of a myriad insect wings.

He was very close, infinitely near the right solution. Although close, he was not quite there. A plume of flapping feathers, that was the noise that seemed to be mixed into the broadcast. Many magical phenomena were unclear to Subaru, so perhaps it was just his imagination. But Subaru's common sense felt that something was off. A sense of discomfort rose.

That sense of violation and the sound of those feathers were stuck in Subaru's mind, and did not leave.

???: "And that's the end for my precious words. Perverted meat creatures and insects should work their hardest. Like I've said earlier… us aggressors have taken control of the four towers that operate the waterways in this city. So I think it's best that you don't try anything weird, yeah? I can't bear to see a drowned human being's dead face, because it's unbearably ugly! Gahahahaha—"

That cruel high-pitched laughter was interrupted as the sound faded. The sound of wings was gone as well. Subaru could finally disengage his body, and he immediately flew over to Ferris and Ricardo.

Subaru: "What did you think of the broadcast just now?"

Ferris: “What I think of it… Our limbs were mercilessly taken, and we’ve been reduced to just a head, that’s how Ferri-chan sees this.”

A bitter Ferris bit down on his nails, replying to a Subaru, who frowned. Various places had become stages, for the purpose of being seized by the enemy.

Subaru: “So just now, that was the Witch Cult…”

Ferris: “The first broadcast came while Subaru-kyun was sleeping. This is the second one. During that first broadcast, they called themselves, the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Lust.”

Ferris paused, looking unsure of whether he should continue or not. Subaru, ignorant of the reason for his hesitation, tilted his head.

The common practice among Archbishops of the Witch Cult was to first announce their Sin. Only after that, their name would be conveyed. The Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishop of Lust—the third archbishop that Subaru had not imagined was present. Her name was,

Ferris: “Although this is disgusting, and Ferri-chan doesn’t believe it in the slightest, this is the name that was given.”

Ferris prefaced it, sharing his opinion that the credibility of the testimony he was about to repeat was very low.

Ferris: “Capella Emerada Lugunica—Although it couldn’t be true, as it’s the nyame of the Royal Family.”

Chapter 28:
A Strategy Meeting Covered in Wounds

Subaru: “Wait, let’s calm down. First, can we sort through what information we’ve got, is that okay?”

Ferris’s words had pushed the limit of what Subaru was able to handle at the moment. Ferris and Ricardo nodded at Subaru’s raised hand, as they considered the new information that had been broadcasted.

Subaru: “Moving anywhere… will be pretty difficult with so many injured people.”

Ferris: “Well, most people have already received first aid, and there shouldn’t be any myore people showing up, but still.”

With a sense of professionalism, Ferris gave his opinion on a change of location. Subaru took a moment to examine the conditions of the field hospital, his first concern.

Minimal lighting, and a ground made out of cold stone. From the unique feel of its air, Subaru judged the place to be underground—almost like the parking lot of a large department store.

Subaru: “Are we still in Priestella?”

Ferris: “It’s one of Priestella’s shelters. The broadcast this morning mentioned these, remember? In Priestella, they’re always concerned about flood damage in the case that an issue with the waterways ever occurred, so there are shelters all over the city. This is one of the shelters on First Street.”

Ricardo: “The square where I found ya’s nearby. After a rough start, we managed to bring bro and those other refugees to safety!”

Talking over Ferris, Ricardo gave his proclamation as he pounded loudly on his thick breastplate. Ferris glared intently sideways at Ricardo, who had not lowered his voice no matter how many times he was warned.

Ferris: “It’s lucky that Ferri-chan was also here, with so many people wounded. This dog-faced mister wouldn’t have been able to handle any of the treatment.”

Ricardo: “Yup! Now I don’t need to have any regrets! Gahaha!”

Ricardo’s usual attitude and his laugh were refreshing, even if they were out of place for this somber hospital. Even among so many injured people, if one person kept a positive attitude, everyone could maintain hope and feel saved.

Ferris: “So, what happened to Subaru-kyun…?”

Subaru: “Ah, right. There were two Sin Archbishops in the square, Greed and Wrath. The one who destroyed my leg was Greed, he was the one who abducted Emilia… However, he was not the one who injured the legs of everyone else around me. That would be Wrath.”

Ferris: “How did that happen?”

Subaru: “The Archbishop of Wrath… It’s a little difficult to explain, but her Authority is one that makes other people feel someone else’s wounds and feelings.”

He chose his words carefully, attempting to give a simple explanation of Sirius’s Authority. Ricardo had his head tilted, and Ferris’s complexion changed as he realized the implications of her ability. He looked to the wounded, and then looked towards the bandages wrapping Subaru’s right leg.

Ferris: “So… that’s the reason why Subaru-kyun and everyone else had such a similar injury. I had a bad feeling already, but…”

Subaru: “Ah…”

Absurd emotions often accompanied a distorted character. However, with Sirius, this absurdity was also physiological in nature, reflected in her Authority.

Subaru was so disgusted, and yet he had still more to say.

Subaru: “And Greed’s also very troublesome.”

Ferris: “Ahhhh~… Ferri-chan’s already tired as is, I don’t have the energy to hear about more troublesome things.”

Subaru: “Sorry, I don’t think that’s possible—That damned Greed, his ability can nullify any attack even though he has no idea what he’s doing. It’s also apparently applicable not only to himself, but also those he is touching.”

The unconscious Emilia, in Regulus’s arms, had been defenseless. She should have been exposed to Sirius’s flames and other attacks, but Regulus had flawlessly defended both himself and Emilia. Rather than saying that he had fought bravely, it would be more correct to say that he had made Emilia invincible with his inexplicable ability.

In that case, it would prove to be an incredibly tiresome situation.

Ferris: “A guy who can pass nyon injuries, and a guy who’s invincible… Ah, you’ve gotta be kidding me.”

Subaru: “That former Sin Archbishop… Petelgeuse’s ability to use multiple Unseen Hands was quite powerful, but this guy’s on a completely different level.”

That said, Petelgeuse’s ability had ended up not being effective on Subaru. Considering his ineffectiveness as a Sin Archbishop, Subaru had thought of him as a simple lunatic rather than a Sin Archbishop proper.

Thus, this would be his first formal battle with the Witch Cult.

Subaru: “And the Archbishop who just introduced herself the same way… I think it’s safe to assume that Lust’s abilities are probably just as troublesome.”

Ferris: “Worst of all… there could be five Sin Archbishops here.”

Subaru: “Five…?!”

Ferris uttered a hypothesis which was terrifying beyond Subaru’s wildest imagination. What had happened, to give him such an idea?

Ferris sighed and straightened his finger at Subaru's subdued eyes.

Ferris: "Listen. Think of that broadcast, what Lust said. She said they have secured the control towers of the waterways in this city, right?"

Subaru: "Ah, right, they said that, which means that they could be planning to sink the city… So, that's a very dangerous situation…"

Ferris: "And there's the possibility of an Archbishop occupying each… Already, there are three Sin Archbishops gathered in one place, which is completely unprecedented. So the worst of the worst possible situation comes to mind… because there are four control towers."

Subaru: "Four… Tch."

Speaking the number out loud, Subaru finally understood what Ferris meant. There were four control towers, placed north, south, east, and west, which controlled the watergates of the city of Priestella. Occupying all of them implied—

Subaru: "So it could be that each tower has an Archbishop guarding it? In that case, that should make four Sin Archbishops…"

Ferris: "Subaru-kyun, consider what just happened—The broadcast just now used a magical device that is only present in the City Hall, at the center of the city. The enemy is occupying five places that manage the city's functions, meaning that they've captured five strongholds."

Subaru: "—Hk."

The increasingly hopeless speculation left Subaru breathless.

Like Ferris said, the City Hall must have been taken to deliver that broadcast. In addition to the Sin Archbishop of Lust, who occupied it, there were at least two other Archbishops.

The only fathomable explanation for that would be a coordinated mass attack from the Witch Cult.

Subaru: “Aside from the square I was in, has there been any other commotion? Have there been any other attacks?”

Ferris: “…”

If this were a great offensive by the Witch Cult, it would be difficult to imagine that they would only target a single location. In the face of Ferris’s silence, Subaru could only pray that his worst fears of casualties would not become reality.

Absentmindedly, Ferris cast his gaze downward, falling silent. Ricardo gave a cough, a set of sharp teeth visible on the beastman’s dog-like face, and Subaru widened his eyes.

Ricardo: “Honestly, the only situation we know’s our own. We don’t even know where the other shelters are, nor their situation. However, it ain’t a good idea to go take a stroll outside.”

Subaru: “Why? Shouldn’t we look for allies so that we can collaborate? Aren’t you worried about them… That’s right!”

As he spoke, Ricardo gestured with his hands, and Subaru hurriedly looked up at Ferris.

In this shelter of wounded people, it was odd that Ferris and Ricardo were the only acquaintances of Subaru’s. Especially considering Ferris.

Subaru: “Where are Crusch-san and Wilhelm-san? It’s unusual for you three to be separated. Are they in another shelter?”

Ferris: “…You’re asking a difficult question, Subaru-kyun. The only ones you know here are Ferri-chan and this mister, and as you can see—”

???: “—Do not bother Subaru-sama too much, Ferris.”

Ferris replied with a sense of unease, and Subaru felt deep anxiety rise within himself.

Then, a gentle voice relieved that intense atmosphere. Suddenly hearing that voice, Subaru looked up and around. However, no matter where he looked, he was unable to locate its owner.

???: “I’m sorry. It seems like he is surprised. Ferris, please do not tease Subaru-sama too much.”

Ferris: “Yes. But Crusch-sama is such a meanie.”

Subaru: “What? Huh?”

Ferris, who was conversing with his invisible master, reached into his dress. Subaru’s already widened eyes became even wider, as Ferris pulled out a familiar object from his bosom.

The source of his little trick dawned on Subaru.

Subaru: “Wait, this is…”

Ferris: “That’s right. It’s part of the loot from a year ago. We used them too, remember?”

Ferris replied, revealing a hand mirror in his grip.

At first glance, the mirror lacked any defining characteristic, but rather than show a reflection, its face reflected a beautiful woman with green hair and a gentle face—without a doubt, that was Crusch.

This magical device, known as a Conversation Mirror, was more or less this alternate world’s version of a cell phone, which lets it owners speak through paired mirrors. A year ago, they had played a role in the battle with the Witch Cult, and they had been brought to this city as well.

Crusch, on the other side of the mirror, frowned slightly before the silent Subaru.

Crusch: “Ferris. Subaru-sama seems a little troubled. Did you hide this from him?”

Ferris: “Syorry about that. But, but, I didn’t think our next call would be so soon, so I didn't think it'd be important to tell him yet."

Subaru: "W-Wait. Give me a moment. Thanks to the Conversation Mirrors, you're in contact with Crusch and others, who are at another shelter, is that right?"

Crusch: "Indeed."

As Master and Knight talked, Subaru took a moment to sort through his confusion. The Conversation Mirror explained why the Crusch-fanatic Ferris was so calm, confirming her safety.

For the time being, it was fortunate that he was able to confirm that Crusch was safe. Then, Subaru looked at the mirror in Ferris's hands.

Subaru: "Thank goodness… it's difficult to say right now with what's happening, but we're lucky that we could get in touch. Crusch-san, are you hurt at all?"

Crusch: "No, thank you for your concern. Fortunately, I managed to find a shelter in time, without suffering any injury. I heard that Subaru-sama received a serious wound. How are you doing?"

Subaru: "I can't say that I'm completely fine, but it's good enough. I'll do something about it. I can't stay and rest, I have to do something as soon as the wound's bandaged… Ferris, don't glare at me like that."

As Subaru announced his intent, he felt Ferris's harsh glare stabbing into him for the betrayal of his prescription for complete rest. However, although he was being ungrateful, Subaru could not sit by in idleness. Breaking the deadlock they were in was of utmost urgency.

He could not lie around obediently, waiting for conditions to deteriorate.

Subaru: "We'll talk about this later… Crusch-san, how's the situation in your shelter? Who else is with Crusch-san?"

Crusch: “Yes. There are several others with me…”

???: “I’m also here, Subaru. Fortunately, everyone who remained at the inn made it here.”

From somewhere behind Crusch, an elegant voice joined the conversation, interrupting her.

The moment he heard it, Subaru froze briefly, before giving a sharp shake of his head. He did not want to be a fool who did not realize how encouraging that voice was.

Subaru: “Your presence there is kinda reassuring, Julius.”

Julius: “I was worried upon hearing that you ended up being carried into a shelter, unconscious. Since your usual liveliness has returned, it seems that my worries were baseless… Is it true that Emilia-sama was abducted?”

Subaru: “…It’s true. Sorry. I’m so useless.”

Julius: “You were facing two Sin Archbishops. I am not so heartless as to blame you for a lack of strength. Anastasia-sama and Crusch-sama are both here, as well as a few members of the Iron Fang. Ah, two of Felt-sama’s followers have joined us here as well.”

He quickly confirmed Emilia’s status, without holding Subaru accountable, and carried on with the conversation. Although the kindness from the other side of the mirror was touching, it amplified Subaru’s feelings of guilt. While listening to his words, Subaru looked around, and confirmed the presence of a certain face in the refuge.

Subaru: “Right, you should tell Felt’s people that their friend is here. He’s wounded, but away from mortal danger.”

Julius: “I see, that’s good to hear. I will be sure to pass it on. They are trying to act brave, but their worries are obvious—Well then, Subaru.”

After Ton and Kan had been informed of Rachins’s safety, Julius lowered his voice, changing the atmosphere of their conversation.

Julius: “What do we do?”

Subaru: “…I have no clue as to why you’re asking that of me.”

Julius: “Remember that time with Sloth. Dealing with the Witch Cult is likely to be your specialty. Maybe you could come up something unexpected and solve this dilemma?”

Subaru: “What sort of unreasonable expectations are those? Sorry to disappoint, but I’m not some kind of expert on the Witch Cult.”

Julius: “That is regrettable, but there’s also Emilia-sama. There is no doubt that your heart is most anxious. I sincerely want to know what you are planning to do.”

Subaru’s reply obviously had not answered Julius’s expectations, but he was not discouraged. He understood that thinking of Subaru as some miraculous Witch Cult slayer would be too much to look for.

Rather, the latter half of his sentence held his true question, the true topic.

Subaru: “…Emilia was taken by Greed. Even now, his own hair-raising, self-serving beliefs chill me to the bone. I don’t want to leave Emilia with that bastard for even a second.”

Julius: “That is to say, to rescue Emilia from Greed is your responsibility.”

Subaru: “Of course… Did you just say responsibility?”

Julius spoke in a subdued tone as adjusted his bangs behind the mirror. Then, the Knight spread his palm towards the mirror, showing his five fingers raised.

Julius: “Listen, Subaru. Ferris should have clarified that the Witch Cult has occupied five key locations in Priestella. Taking into account that there should be someone on the level of a Sin Archbishop at every place, it’s tantamount to a battalion. And so, allocation of battle forces is a very important issue.”

Subaru: "…You're saying that because the city will drown if the water gate is tampered with at just one location?"

Julius: "That's right. The condition for defeating the Witch Cult is to attack each of those five places at the same time. In the meantime, we must reestablish contact with our forces, who are scattered across the city… You understand how difficult that is, right?"

As long as they were unable to get in touch with their comrades at the various shelters, it would be difficult to string together all the combat forces in the city, as Julius said. Originally, the magic of the city was responsible for maintaining contact with those places.

However, when the City Hall had fallen, everyone had been separated and had sought refuge in different shelters. Each of the shelters needed to judge the situation and act accordingly, independently of each other.

Ferris: "By the way, this mister here has confirmed there are Witch Cultists roaming in the city. Also, there's seemingly a mob of people who have lost their minds wandering the city."

Subaru: "…Witch Cultists and that bastard Sirius's bullshit. This is looking more and more desperate by the second."

Hearing Ferris's unwelcome piece of information, Subaru scratched his face in agitation as more bad news came to light. At the very least, there had to be a way of getting in touch with all the existing combat forces—

Subaru: "Otto and Garfiel are missing, and Emilia's also missing in the sense she's been kidnapped by Greed. What a mess…"

Julius: "Joshua and the three Deputy Captains of the Iron Fang are all missing, as are Wilhelm-sama, Felt-sama, and Reinhard. Priscilla-sama, too…"

Subaru: "I don't know where that middle-aged garbage man Al's at, but Priscilla should have been in the city park before the commotion started. I don't know what happened to her after that… Damn it, Liliana should be with her too. I wonder if they're safe."

Priscilla was not normal in any sense of the word, and Liliana was also honestly very strange. Subaru did not want either of them getting hurt. Taking into account Priscilla's proclaimed luck and that Songstress's character, Subaru assumed that they would be fine.

Patrasche had also been in the Water Plumage Pavilion. Subaru thought her smart enough to avoid drawing attention, but he was worried about her nonetheless.

Constant sources of worry plagued Subaru, and he felt that launching simultaneous attacks at five different location was outside of the realm of possibility.

No matter how it was said, it would be impossible. There were not enough combatants to attack five locations, not to mention that they would be facing Sin Archbishops. The only thing most people could bring to such a fight was hope.

Subaru: "…Wait. Why do we have to go after all five places at the same time, in the first place?"

Julius: "What do you mean? It is as we have already said. The Witch Cult can do tremendous damage from any of the locations they currently occupy. Leaving one of those places in their hands…"

Subaru: "No. It's not like that though, right? I understand that we need to seize all four towers eventually. But why at the same time?"

Julius: "Once they discover that that one of the locations has been sabotaged, it would be only natural that the other Sin Archbishops would take action, no? That must be why they launched such a coordinated attack on the city."

Julius gave a coherent response to Subaru's train of thought.

While listening to his words, Subaru pondered their accuracy. Of course, Julius's logic was clear and sound. But the opponents they faced were not normal ones.

In that square, Regulus and Sirius had fought each other with intent to kill. Regulus had not been serious, and so the damage was minimal, but Sirius had definitely been intending to incinerate him. Regulus should have been able to rip her apart her in minutes without Subaru in the way.

Those guys, were they really working together to capture the city?

Subaru: "…Do they have any real sense of cooperation? Of course, they said that they could manipulate the watergates on those control towers, but can they stay organized and in touch with each other every step of the way? I don't think so."

Julius: "On what basis?"

Subaru: "In the square I was at, two of the Sin Archbishops were trying to kill each other. They only stopped because they were given new instructions from the Gospel. If that were not the case, one would probably have killed the other."

Julius: "So they can't coordinate properly…?"

Julius still appeared faintly uncertain at Subaru's wishful thinking. Subaru understood his concern, however.

Subaru: "Is there anyone with access to the outside?"

Julius: "A couple of the Iron Fang's members are scouting the towers… What are you thinking?"

Subaru: "Although this could just be conjecture, but if they wanna keep in touch regularly, wouldn't the simplest way to do that be launching magic into the sky? The control towers are far apart, and the city is complex, so verbal communications is troublesome. At the very least, it would take a long time without a Conversation Mirror."

Julius: "The likelihood that the Witch Cult brought any such mirrors is low. If many of those had been brought, the Spirits would react to the communications. My Quasi Spirits would doubtlessly have detected them already—Right, that's it."

They reached the same conclusions simultaneously. Subaru prefaced with an "Ah".

Subaru: “If they don’t have regular, clear communication, there’s a good chance they won’t act unless there’s a visible disturbance when one of their location is attacked. There’s no way that they will strike, if they’re unaware of it in the first place. And so, that reduces our need to disperse our combat forces.”

Julius: “…The only problem with this proposal is that one place is different from all the others.”

Subaru: “—The City Hall. That building can inform the other towers of the attack using that magical device. So we’d have to start with that one.”

First, they had to focus on capturing the City Hall at the center. They would have to go there and defeat the existing force there and make the Witch Cult there withdraw, then crush the forces at the other towers one-by-one.

Even then, it would be a test of speed, but the risk would be much lower than that of attacking all five locations at once. Subaru wished to believed so.

Julius: “…”

On the other side of the mirror, Julius fell into thoughtful silence. Subaru’s proposal was based on the poor relationship between Regulus and Sirius, optimistically assuming that the cooperation between members of the Witch Cult was a mess among messes.

Of course, if the Gospel had given a command like “Kill Everyone in Priestella”, that hope would be fundamentally subverted. If that were the case, he should have attempted to ask for the content of the Gospel back then—

???: “—My deepest apologies for being late, can everyone hear my voice?”

In the middle of a heavy silence, another voice suddenly joined the conversation. The weather-beaten, aged voice of a swordsman which Subaru looked up to was more reliable than anything else in the present situation.

The face of a grey-haired old man was reflected in the Conversation Mirror.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san! You’re okay!”

Ferris: “Wil-jii! Thank goodness. You didn’t get in touch, it made people worry!”

Not only Subaru, but Ferris also heard a familiar voice. At their welcome, Wilhelm, reflected in the mirror, opened his eyes with a surprised face, and bowed gently.

Wilhelm: “My apologies, I was caught up in some trouble and could not find a calm place. Now, finally, some citizens and I have arrived at a shelter. Subaru-dono and Ferris, seeing your safety gives me peace. And Crusch-sama?”

Crusch: “I am fine. Wilhelm, I am so glad for your safety.”

Wilhelm: “Do not worry about me… it was due to my powerlessness that I was not at your side in this situation. Please allow me to trouble you to wait quietly. I will definitely come to pick you up.”

Subaru: “Amazing, this feeling of relief isn’t normal…”

As Crusch and Wilhelm spoke through the mirror, Subaru, finding that the dialogue between master and subordinate held an overwhelming sense of security, sighed with admiration for Wilhelm.

Then, while he was happy for his safety, Subaru ruminated on his prior conversation with Julius, as he attempted to organize a summary for Wilhelm. However,

???: “There are several things to be said, but this is the most urgent of those.”

At that moment, Wilhelm vanished from the mirror, the old swordsman replaced by a beastman—a kitten wearing a monocle. It was a Deputy Captain of the Iron Fang, Tivey, who seemed to have joined forces with Wilhelm. His expression was unusually anxious.

Ricardo: “Hey! If it ain’t Tivey! Your safety is better than anythin’ else.”

Tivey: “You too, Captain… But, we’re not safe right now. Is onee-chan with you right now?”

Ricardo: “Mimi? I haven’t seen her, did somethin’ happen?”

At Tivey’s feeble voice, Ricardo squinted into the mirror. From Tivey’s side, someone cut into the image, and—

Hetaro: “Captain! Onee-chan! Onee-chan …!”

Ricardo: “Hetaro? What’s the panic for?”

The one who had flown into view was Tivey’s identical brother, Hetaro. He was usually a mellow youth, but, right now, his face was distorted in pain. Tears filled his round eyes, and his voice shook as he gazed into the mirror.

Hetaro: “O-Our Divine Protection of Trisection activated, it’s coming from onee-chan! H-Her wound was so serious… The wound is being transferred into me and onii-chan… Hk!”

Tivey: “Onii-chan, calm down… It’s as he said, Captain. Onee-chan was wounded, and the injury is being transferred to me and onii-chan, so…”

Ricardo: “—Okay, both of ya, wait there. I’ll find Mimi immediately. Don’t cry, just wait.”

His voice lower than any Subaru had ever heard from him, Ricardo spoke into the mirror. In that smooth sound, Subaru felt a pressure unlike any he had felt ever before, and he stepped back, trembling.

The beastman’s eyes were full of anger, and his open mouth revealed a row of sharp canine teeth. He drew his blade, a large hatchet, his large muscles tense.

He almost appeared to be searching for the missing girl in that very moment.

Anastasia: "—Wait, Ricardo. I can't allow such a selfish action."

However, a voice from another mirror was the one that stopped Ricardo from charging out immediately. Ricardo turned back to face Anastasia, who had claimed the mirror.

He frowned, lifting his hatchet towards his employer.

Ricardo: "Don't stop me, lady. I'm not kiddin' around right now."

Anastasia: "Ricardo, our long bond and relationship'd show that I'm not kiddin' around. Don't make me say it again. Right now, random actions cannot be allowed. Even for Mimi's sake."

Ricardo: "Are you askin' me to abandon Mimi??!!"

Opening his mouth, the rage expelled from Ricardo's mouth shook the air of the shelter.

That intensity was no laughing matter. Subaru stumbled several steps backward, away from the beast who emanated shock waves of rage. Ricardo fixed his glare on Anastasia, the signs of a carnivore exuding from his body.

Through the mirror, Anastasia met it unflinchingly.

Anastasia: "You should understand, Ricardo. These are unforeseen circumstances. You are one of my most important weapons. I cannot let you leave without permission."

Ricardo: "You're sayin' this to me? Who do you think you're talkin' to, Ana-bo… Tch!"

Anastasia: "You, of course. Don't'cha forget, dog monster."

The two spoke names only old acquaintances would recognize. His skin tingling with electricity, Subaru searched for a place to interject. But there was none.

He wanted to support Ricardo's emotional decision. But he could also understand Anastasia's sound opinion. And he was an outsider. Anastasia, someone who was not, someone who held a close relationship with them, chose to prioritize the safety of the city over Mimi.

Subaru realized that there was nothing for him to interrupt. Ricardo, too, should understand her point.

Subaru: "…"

In this way, time trickled on.

If Ricardo forced his exit, Subaru, who was injured, and Felix, who was a non-combatant, could not hope to stop him. Anastasia, who looked coolly into his eyes from across the magic mirror—only she could do anything.

However, Ricardo suddenly turned his head away from the mirror's gaze.

Anastasia: "Wait, Ricardo!"

Ricardo: "—Stop, don't rush to make a conclusion."

Seeing Ricardo's movement, Anastasia spoke. Ricardo gave a quiet response. He turned back and sniffed at the entrance to the shelter.

Ricardo: "Somethin's close by. What's this… the scent of blood?"

Subaru: "The scent of blood…?"

Among so many wounds, he seemed to be able to detect a fresh scent of blood.

Alert, Ricardo pointed his hatchet to the entrance of the shelter, glaring. Subaru and Ferris swallowed, watching Ricardo's judgment.

???: "—!"

A shadow rushed into the refuge of the shelter with heavy footsteps.

In that moment, the patients in the shelter, intimidated by the insolence of the intruder, held their collective breath. It was none other that Subaru who broke that silence.

—Standing there was a familiar short, blond acquaintance.

Subaru: “Garfiel?!”

Garfiel was sweaty and out-of-breath. Suddenly noticing Subaru, he ran over with a strange wobble in his step.

Then, Subaru noticed. The reason behind Garfiel’s wobbly movements, was being held in his arms.

Garfiel: “…”

Everyone was lost for words as Garfiel reached Subaru. There, he bowed his head before Subaru and collapsed, kneeling.

Garfiel: “Sorry, captain… hk! My amazin’ self’s… worthless…! Incompetent… hk!”

After saying so, Garfiel raised a cry of sorrow.

—Embraced by his bloodied arms was the figure of a dying Mimi.

Chapter 29: Gorgeous Tiger

1

—Half a day before Garfiel had rushed into the shelter,

Mimi: “And then~ Hetaro was on the verge of tears, so Mimi had no choice but to hold his hand. And then Tivey looked lonely, so Mimi had no choice. So I ended up holding both of their hands~!”

Garfiel: “…Ah, is that so?”

Mimi: “Yep, that’s riiiiight. And then, after that, the lady looked reaaaaaaally happy!”

Even having been given that uninterested response, the petite girl walking beside him smiled, not discouraged in the least.

That girl, who was like the very picture of innocence, had orange hair and round eyes. Garfiel had no idea why she had entangled herself with someone from a hostile faction—this beastwoman, Mimi.

She had been like this since he’d arrived at the city of Priestella. No, looking back, she had been clinging to Garfiel ever since she’d gone to the Roswaal mansion as a messenger.

Initially, he had suspected that Mimi had been trying to get a read on Emilia’s strongest retainer, but that hypothesis had been soon dismissed due to Mimi’s behavior. Now, he was honestly thinking that she somehow liked him.

It was impossible to deduce the reason, and Garfiel could only tilt his head curiously to the side.

—Now, they were walking along Priestella’s streets side-by-side in the dusk.

Neither had invited the other, rather, Mimi had just followed

Garfiel as he skulked away from the inn.

Although he had hoped he could be alone to meditate, Garfiel was too embarrassed to give that excuse to shake her off. Overwhelmed by Mimi's eagerness and lack of understanding for such subtleties, he had started exchanging such empty conversations while trying to sort through his feelings.

Mimi: "Garf, your expression is weird. What happened? Was it something fun?"

Garfiel: "If somethin' fun'd happened, wouldn't my amazin' self look happy? My amazin' self doesn't wanna talk 'bout it, an' there's no obligation to talk 'bout it."

Mimi: "If you keep talking about complicated stuff like obligations, you'll end up like Joshua, yeah? Mimi thinks it's better to relax and have fun! It's better when Garfiel throws his head back laughing like an idiot~."

Garfiel: "You sayin' I look like an idiot?"

Mimi's exaggerated words really were too exaggerated, and Garfiel bared both his teeth and eyes wide open.

She squeaked an "Ahh~!", and dashed away. She stopped not much further ahead, giggling as she waited for him to catch up, seemingly having forgotten their previous interaction.

Garfiel found it incredulous that she, of all people, would accuse him of being the one who laughed like an idiot.

It had only been one hour or so since Garfiel had challenged the Sword Saint Reinhard to a battle before dinner. The strongest in the Kingdom—or, as some would say, the strongest existence in the whole world, was the Sword Saint of the current generation.

Before their actual meeting, Garfiel had heard of his strength from Subaru.

Reinhard was a friend, a benefactor, and an acquaintance with whom Subaru had awkwardly parted with on their previous meeting. Encountering him in this unexpected place had come as a surprise.

Through conversation, Subaru revealed that he had somewhat successfully resolved his previous embarrassment. Since that grievance had dissipated, Garfiel felt no particular obligation to hesitate any further.

To Garfiel, the title of “Strongest” held a very special meaning.

To be the Strongest. Aiming to become the Strongest. To strive to become the Strongest.

Garfiel believed that as soon as a man was born, his first cry would place that as his lofty goal.

Everyone, no matter who, had once longed and dreamed to be the Strongest as they walked the long road known as Life. Everyone would eventually forget that distant dream. Everyone except Garfiel.

That dream had taken root in his heart and had been a source of much of the persistence he had shown along the way. To Garfiel, the title of Strongest was both a combination of his natural goal, something he had held ever since he had been born a man, and an indispensable condition for him to be able to protect everything he wished to protect.

Therefore, in front of the man who famously stood at the apex of strength, Garfiel could not hold back his restless teeth and claws.

He had gone to Subaru and received permission to challenge Reinhard. The Sword Saint seemed a far cry from the Strongest—he gave off the impression of being a meek, kind man with no martial prowess. He looked like he could be broken like a twig, with just one hand.

However, Garfiel knew that the stronger someone was, the better they were at hiding their strength. Setting aside his own tendency to act up, the majority of powerful people did not look strong as they went through their daily activities. Roswaal and Subaru were like that.

And so, he judged Reinhard to be similar in that regard.

—The bout would take place at the gravel-covered courtyard of the hotel.

Refusing Garfiel's proposal to leave the hotel for the city's fields, for fear of damaging their surroundings, Reinhard insisted on fighting at the inn, adding the condition that the courtyard could not be damaged.

That could only be said to be humiliating. Even if he were the strongest man, he was underestimating Garfiel. Immediately, Garfiel dragged him outside, intending to make him regret that demeaning arrogance.

The confrontation took place in the courtyard, where Subaru issued a command marking the start of the match. Garfiel bared his teeth, thinking only of striking the crimson hero with the metal at his wrists.

Garfiel: "…"

Such an idea vanished almost instantaneously after the command was issued.

The atmosphere of the man before him had changed faster than one could blink. Until that very moment, his gentle atmosphere had not disappeared. But it dissipated, revealing a sharp blade, or a finely honed flame.

An ordinary person would not be able to feel how his natural state was razor sharp, as if he were a sword himself. The sense of oppression was such that to those who knew little about martial arts, it would manifest as a sensation like their lungs were being crushed.

But neither of those were Garfiel's case.

At the very least, Garfiel was a man with strength worthy of a match against the Sword Saint.

Noticing that natural posture, his internal organs trembling under the pressure, Garfiel howled away his hesitation as he flew at Reinhard.

Their match was not meant to be lethal, and they had agreed to cause no serious injuries—forgetting their agreement, he had aimed at Reinhard’s throat with his sharp claws, striving for a decisive blow. And in the moment before his blow landed, his body was elegantly caught in midair, and Garfiel truly understood the disparity in their strength.

Garfiel: “—I lost.”

After that, despite launching offensive attacks from various angles, all of those were casually evaded by Reinhard, and he had done so with casual parries. On top of that, Reinhard had done all that without even taking a step away from where he had first stood.

In other words, Garfiel had exhausted all his strength against only Reinhard’s upper body.

Having been tossed away, a fist was displayed in front of his face, and Garfiel declared his own defeat.

The Sword Saint had not even drawn a sword, his area of expertise. He had defeated Garfiel with only his bare fists.

As to what Reinhard and Subaru had said after that, Garfiel could not quite recall. To be so ungracious or foolhardy as to not accept his loss was not an impression that Garfiel had wanted to give. So he had left the hotel with only a few words.

He was unable to sort through his feelings as they were swept into a whirlpool.

Strangled by his unanswerable emotions, Garfiel had sought to find an answer as he walked the Watergate City alone as the sun was setting—That was how it was supposed to go.

Mimi: “Garf! Gaaarf! Look! Take a look~! The sunset’s completely reflected in the water! It’s supeeeer red! This is awesome~! Amazing! So beautifuuul~!”

The noisy girl led Garfiel around, pulling on his sleeve, yanking on his hair, settling on his shoulders, and he had been left with no choice but to follow her. Thanks to her, he had accomplished leaving the hotel, but at the cost of his time to feel depressed by himself.

Garfiel: “Oy, from the very start, you’ve been so noisy. Can’tcha settle down a bit, midget?”

Mimi: “Ahhh… nope~!”

Garfiel: “An immediate answer?!”

She grabbed Garfiel’s wrists, running and spinning. Wrists gripped with unexpected strength, Garfiel turned on the spot along with her.

The idea of pulling his wrist from that vice grip and fleeing at the speed of light had crossed his mind, but he didn’t know the limit of Mimi’s physical ability as a demi-human. Mimi might have been able to catch up with Garfiel’s escape with ease.

He also had to take into consideration how conspicuous he would look.

Before leaving for Priestella, both Frederica and Ram reminded him repeatedly that troubling Emilia or Subaru because of his own quirkiness would set a bad example. The only one he could trouble was Otto, who was like an older brother used to cleaning up messes.

Garfiel: “Haha.”

Mimi: “Oh, oh, what’s wrong, Gaaarf? Is there something voxing… vicing… vixing you?”

Garfiel: “Ya mean somethin’ vexin’?”

Mimi: “Yep, vixing! What happened~? Say it, say it~!”

He was unable to speak candidly to Mimi and so she hit him repeatedly in the side with an “Oi, ooiii~”. Feeling the poison being drummed out of his body by her petite, oddly sturdy form, Garfiel clicked his fangs.

He leaned into the waterway, appreciating the view.

Garfiel: “Ah… it’s really a movin’ scene.”

Mimi: “Right? This is awesome~! Amazing!”

Although Mimi should only be listened to half the time, the reflection of the setting sun in the water was indeed a bright, inspiring scene. The glittering water was stained with white and yellow light, and the sky was dyed by the orange sunset.

When he finally noticed, Garfiel was sitting on the edge of the waterway, spending his time vaguely watching the sluggish travels of people on foot and of sailboats on the waterway.

Mimi: “Hmm~ hmm~ hmm~”

Taking a seat beside him, Mimi shook her feet happily as she hummed a tune through her nose. Although her character was one which couldn’t be silenced, right now, she was behaving quietly. Grabbing Garfiel’s half-clothed shoulders, she bobbed her head from side to side.

Taking a sideways glance at her happy profile, he belatedly discovered that the color of Mimi’s hair matched the orange shade of the sunset exactly. He subconsciously reached out a hand to brush her head, and Mimi seemed to be pleased, leaning into his touch.

Mimi: “Fluffy? Fluffy? Mimi’s head is often touched by the lady too! She pets it and calls it something like a healing idol.”

Garfiel: “Ah, it really is kinda comfortable. That healing idol stuff or whatever, the Captain sometimes says stuff like… that.”

Mimi: “Gaaaaaarf, do you still feel annoyed?”

Garfiel: “It’s somethin’ else now!”

Mimi: “Huh?”

As Mimi tilted her head, her face the very picture of innocence, Garfiel laughed inadvertently.

It felt as if he was getting rid of the heavy things in his chest, washing away the feeling he was someone cheap. The sense of defeat and humiliation was replaced by straight-forward, rebellious spirit.

Garfiel: "…Bein' the Strongest so suddenly ain't possible. My amazin' self's still climbin'."

Mimi: "Ohh~, so you're climbing the ladder to being the bestest~!"

Garfiel: "Hey, ya understand pretty well. Yeah, it's the proper way to becomin' the strongest."

Mimi raised her fist, and Garfiel responded by tracing the white scar on his forehead with his fingers

Although her chattiness was annoying, she had also cheered him up. If he were alone, he would probably still be moping gloomily. He was glad that Mimi had accompanied him.

Garfiel: "I guess I should thank her. Oy, midget, while we're here, how 'bout we go to a stall 'n grab a bite? It'll be my amazin' self's treat…"

Mimi: "Gaaarf, look!"

Garfiel: "Ah?"

With that invitation to eat, Garfiel got to his feet, patting down his bottom.

Mimi was still seated by the waterway, pointing towards the other margin, and Garfiel's attention wandered towards that direction. Then, he narrowed his eyes.

On the other side of the waterway, the ropes of a sailboat had come undone, leaving the boat stranded as it began to drift along with the flow of the water. It was unmanned; however, the issue did not reside there.

Mimi: “Hey, kids!”

Mimi gave a loud warning cry in the direction the boat was heading —another boat, where five children were playing, the drifting vessel heading towards them. The children had not noticed the approach of the other boat. If they collided, their boat could end up capsized, throwing the children into the waterway.

At Mimi’s shout, other people around the waterway had taken notice. One of the boat owners flew toward the children in a panic, but he would not make it in time.

Hearing the shrill voices of the people around them, the children finally noticed their situation and panicked as the saw the sudden approach of the empty boat. Then—

Garfiel: “Yo, kids. Thank that midget cat nee-chan who first noticed ya.”

Mimi: “Garf!”

He had suddenly leapt onto the boat, astonishingly keeping the vessel’s balance as he landed. To the children, the silent arrival of Garfiel would have seemed like he had suddenly fallen from the heavens.

The children stiffened upon gazing a blond stranger with a mean look and a fanged and fierce smile. Taking advantage of the fact that none of them moved in protest, Garfiel scooped the five children into his arms, making another leap.

Escaping from the small boat, they landed on the sidewalk near the waterway. Immediately after he released the children, the two boats collided violently, capsizing the one that had been carrying the children.

Garfiel, by cleverly keeping hold of the ropes connecting the boats, had also prevented a chain reaction of collisions that would have sunk a series of boats. Restraining the movement of the overturned boat had prevented the detached boat from drifting further downstream, minimizing the damage it’d cause.

Garfiel: “Aight, that should do it!”

After tying the ropes firmly, Garfiel ended his struggle, with an uproar of cheers and applause from the witnesses. One of the shipowners, who should have been monitoring his boat, bowed his head to convey his gratitude, which Garfiel waved off, scratching his head and looking shy. Then,

Kid One: “O-Onii-chan. Thank you very much.”

Garfiel: “Ohh?”

All the rescued children gathered and poured grateful words upon Garfiel.

They had lost the timid expressions they had worn on the boat, merely gazing at Garfiel with glittering expressions. As Garfiel met their gazes, their hyperactive clapping hands began to move even faster.

Faced with that, Garfiel felt his mood lighten as he rubbed his nose.

Garfiel: “There’s no need for anythin’ like that. Happened by chance… Ah, yeah, by chance. My amazin’ self was guided here by a wind of fate. It’s the City of Water, surrounded by waterways… if anyone ended up sheddin’ tears, then the waterways’d end up overflowin’, yeah?”

The applause began to calm as Garfiel gave his complacent response. The cheers had also become intermittent, subtle voices starting to be heard. However, unlike the spectators around them, the children showed dramatic reactions.

Kid Two: “Wow, amazing!”

Kid Three: “So coooooool!”

Kid Four: “No tears, regardless of danger!”

Kid Five: “Never flinching! Never doubting! Never hesitating!”

Garfiel nodded with satisfaction at the excited children. Then, with an eager gaze, one of them voiced a question.

Kid One: “Onii-chan, what’s your name?”

Garfiel: “It ain’t anythin’ worth mentionin’. However, if pressed for it… My amazin’ self’s a tiger. Yeah, a golden tiger. Call me Gorgeous Tiger!!”

Kid Two: “Gorgeous!”

Kid One: “Tiger!!”

Garfiel struck a pose, leaning back with his hands stretched obliquely to the sky. Eyes shining, the children gave hushed whispers of excitement as they imitated him.

As Garfiel shared his heart with the children surrounding him, Mimi rushed over, her eyes shining as well.

Mimi: “—Garf, so coooool~!”

She ran over to join the ranks of the children crowding around Garfiel, making a pose.

The delighted laughter of the children, Mimi, and Garfiel rang through the waterways at twilight.

—The applause and cheers had long since dissipated, leaving only the solitary shipowner regarding them with a smile.

2

Garfiel bounced with energy as he ate one of the snacks he had bought to share with the children at a stall, walking victoriously.

Garfiel: “Them, my amazin’ self said, ‘Now, I won’t let ya take even one more step forward, ya scum! It’s the Captain’s territory, and you’ve already been trapped here!’. Hah!”

Mimi: “Amazing~! So cool~!”

Kid One: “Woah! That’s so cool~!”

As Priestella was infiltrated by the glow of sunset, Garfiel shared heroic stories of the past year with Mimi and a blonde kid.

What he had just described had been one of the most impressive events that had happened, the Earth Spider Hunt. A nearby village had an outbreak of a Witchbeast known as Earth Spiders, and the three-man force of Subaru, Garfiel, and Otto had been forced to subdue them. They had demonstrated a perfect combination of Otto and Subaru's scheming skills and Garfiel's strength.

Along with Mimi, one of the rescued children happily listened to Garfiel's recollections. He was a child with blond hair, who looked to be around six or seven years old. He had lovely features and a cute smiling face that would surely one day attract lovelorn sighs from women. But right now, he was just a child admiring Garfiel's way of life and heroic stories.

After buying the children snacks, Garfiel had taken it upon himself to escort the children safely to their homes, one-by-one. Out of the five, four had returned home unharmed, which meant that this boy was the last one.

Garfiel: "With just a small group, ya went out pretty far to play. Ain't that dangerous?"

As they undertook the considerate journey to the child's house, Garfiel frowned.

The children's boat adventure had taken them to the border between the First Street, where the inn was located, and the Second Street, where the Muse Headquarters was located. As they walked, Garfiel couldn't help but think he had wandered too far. In fact, they had come all the way from Third Street. Without any detours, the journey would take close to an hour to complete.

The child grinned in response to Garfiel's words.

Kid: "Occasionally, a Songstress goes to the park on First Street. We were looking for her!"

Garfiel: "Songstress, uh… Is that so? Captain said her singin's pretty amazin', too, but my amazin' self's kinda suspicious."

Rubbing his nose, Garfiel found it difficult to agree with the child's reply.

Garfiel had only met the Songstress Liliana once, at the Muse Headquarters. Even that brief interaction had been enough to leave a significant impact on him. Liliana was, beyond a doubt, a girl with a strong personality. However, that strength was rather incompatible with the impression of a pure, honest bard.

Mimi: "Gaaaaaarf, have you never heard the Songstress's singing? Iiiit really iiiiiis very powerful!"

Garfiel: "You have, midget?"

Mimi: "Yep~! I didn't fall asleep until the end~! Mimi's so strong~! Praise Mimiiiii~!"

Garfiel obediently stroked Mimi's stretched-out head. She yelled out "Success~!", and happily dashed away, before turning back around expectantly.

Mimi: "So, did you hear the Songstress sing?"

Kid: "Nope, we missed her. However, since we'd gone all the way to that faraway street…"

Garfiel: "So that's why ya were playin' in the river? Well, it's good that my amazin' self was there."

Kid: "Gorgeous Tiger!"

Garfiel: "Ha!"

As the boy stretched his hands toward the sky, and Garfiel mimicked his motion.

Gorgeous Tiger was here.

They posed together energetically, but the child soon dropped his arms with a melancholic sigh. Garfiel tilted his head to one side.

Garfiel: “Why do ya look so down? Don’t sigh, yer happiness will run away, y’know.”

Kid one: “Well… My sister will be mad when I get home.”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

As the boy revealed his fearful attitude towards his sister with a cry, Garfiel overreacted by grabbing his shoulders anxiously.

Garfiel: “C’mon, c’mon. But, why’s she goin’ to be so angry?”

Kid: “…Because, I snuck out.”

Garfiel: “Ah…”

The boy seemed to have neglected to inform his sister that he would be going out with his friends today. As a result, his family was probably frustrated and worried sick right now.

That feeling was not unfamiliar to Garfiel. As a brother, the presence of an older sister would, no matter for how long, continue to exist as a terrifying barrier. Even after ten years of separation, after he had grown up, the fear of losing to the sister he met face to face nearly every day had increased, rather than decreased.

Garfiel: “Gotcha. Leave it up to my amazin’ self.”

Kid: “…Eh?”

Garfiel patted his chest proudly as the little boy revealed his shock. As if trying to ease his downcast, Garfiel laughed, showing his sharp teeth.

Garfiel: “The scariness of an older sister’s somethin’ my amazin’ self’s familiar with. If yer scary sister comes rushin’ at ya, my amazin’ self’ll protect ya.”

Kid: “Onii-san!”

The emotional child hugged Garfiel tightly. Mimi joined the hug, grabbing Garfiel from behind.

In this way, being held front and back by the little ones, Garfiel renewed his determination and struggled along with them as they continued their journey towards the boy's house.

The sunset was approaching in earnest, and it was unlikely that they would make it back by dinner time, but that would be fine for today. No matter how he looked at it, he would not be able to dine in the same hall as Reinhard without some unease. However, after a night of cooling down, he would probably be able to manage it.

That was thanks to the children who admired the Gorgeous Tiger, as well as Mimi's inscrutably infectious cheerful attitude.

???: "—Fred!"

A deafeningly high-pitched voice soaked with emotion suddenly attacked Garfiel's ears.

He lifted his head in surprise, and caught sight of the sprinting figure of a girl. She had long, elegant blonde hair, and was glaring intently at the boy who clung to Garfiel.

The boy looked in her direction and opened his mouth. Then,

Fred: "Onee-chan…"

Sister: "You, just how worried are you going to make us before you're satisfied?!"

The girl leapt forward with both feet to deliver a dynamic flying kick to her brother, whose body gently bounced back. An optimal flying kick, without losing any momentum—Garfiel, witnessing that action, was frozen by shock. He was too slow to respond to the beautiful girl, who had landed beautifully.

The girl herself was likewise beautiful. She looked at Garfiel with a sharp gaze, and dug into his foot with her heel.

Sister: "You suspicious person, what do you want with my Fred?"

Garfiel: "Gah… First of all, move yer foot, midget."

As he faced the maelstrom of her attack and angry words, Garfiel replied in a steady voice. Seeing that her pre-emptive attacks had not caused any harm, the girl retreated backward with a frightened expression.

Although she had thought that Garfiel would be angry, Garfiel had yet to reach a state of anger. Rather, he was still surprised. He had never imagined that there would actually be a sister who would indiscriminately deliver fierce kicks to her younger brother.

Incidentally, the impact of the young boy who had been kicked had been impact softened. With a "Hey~!", Mimi had flown towards him gracefully, hugging him and landing gently.

Now, they had gotten to their feet, brushing each other off.

Seeing that through the corner of his eye, Garfiel issued a sigh. And at his reaction,

Sister: "What's with that attitude… If you have something to say, just say it, and don't do anything to me or Fred… I-I'm terrifying when I get mad…"

Garfiel: "First of all, you're misunderstandin' here. Also, don't fly at yer brother like that. Ya might accidentally cause a serious injury, got it?"

Sister: "Hah…"

Squatting down, Garfiel spoke quietly to the girl.

The boy's sister was also young—only around ten-years-old, the age of just before puberty, when kids would try a little too hard. Her initial sharpness had faded, and her expression morphed into a tearful one at Garfiel's calm and steady replies.

What she had said was surely a bluff, but she had gathered her courage to go up against Garfiel. In a sense, her courage had rendered her even more afraid, in an unfortunate turn of events.

Fred: "Ah, Gorgeous Tiger… Please don't get too angry with my onee-chan."

Then, unable to bear seeing his sister trembling, the boy patted his body clean of dust after recovering from the shock and stood at her back, pleading with Garfiel. The older sister's expression revealed that her self-esteem had been hurt because of his pleas, but she still had the dignity to try to protect her younger brother from Garfiel. Although he didn't know what had happened at first, they didn't seem to have a bad relationship.

Garfiel: "So my amazin' self looks like a bad guy. That's kinda displeasin' to hear."

Mimi: "A bad gai! Being a bad guy isn't good, Gaaarf, be Gorgeous Tiger instead!"

Mimi leapt up and gave Garfiel's head a poke. Although it didn't hurt, it was a rather puzzling blow.

The pointless stare-down between siblings and Garfiel continued. And just as he wondered how long this would last,

???: "Onee-chan, Fred, where are you two?"

The voice that broke the stalemate came from someone else.

Hearing that gentle voice of a woman, the siblings caught each other's gaze. Garfiel watched with eyes widened as the two ran in its direction. Sister and brother arrived at the corner of the road, where a woman emerged. They flew towards her without hesitation.

That blonde woman was more than likely their mother.

Fred: "Mom!"

Sister: "Mom, that suspicious person, something about 'gorgeous', and Fred…"

The younger brother held onto his mother with tears in his eyes, and the elder sister continued to weave her false accusations. After listening to the children's rambles, the person in question smiled.

Seeing the family in such a state, Garfiel shook his head in dismay.

It wouldn't have been convenient if the city guards were called upon at this point. Relieved that there was an adult with whom he could discuss the situation calmly, he stepped forward to explain, thinking of prefacing with a "Sorry".

Garfiel: "…"

But he stopped in his tracks upon gazing upon the other person, her children still clinging to her, as she turned her face towards him with a smile.

Mimi: "Gar∼f?"

Garfiel froze, and Mimi turned around, surveying him. However, Garfiel was unable to respond to Mimi's concern. His heart, in a state of chaos and confusion, had no such energy to spare. After all, the person who stood there was,

???: "Well, my children seem to have been taken care of, my apologies. If possible, could you tell me what happened?"

She spoke in soothing, gentle tones which held not even the slightest sign of malice or suspicion. With a few steps, she had arrived in front of him. Even as Garfiel trembled and shivered at her presence, she tilted her head in confusion.

That expression, that attitude, that voice, they all rocked Garfiel to the core.

Garfiel: "—Mother?"

A hoarse murmur escaped his throat.

Chapter 30:
Tiger and Cat under the Moon

1

???: “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t expecting guests, so the house isn’t very tidy.”

Mimi: “Hmm~! We don’t mind~! It looks clean~! Very clean~! Mimi’s room looks a lot more chaotiiiiic~!”

???: “Ah, ah, that’s no good.”

The woman casually stroked Mimi, who sat on the sofa, kicking her legs and looking very comfortable. Mimi made happy noises, completely relaxed around the woman.

Immersed in this scene, Garfiel looked silently at the woman. Her long blond hair flowed to her waist, her skin was fair like snow, her slim body retained a woman’s curves, and her soft face displayed a pair of clear, calm emerald-green eyes.

Her youthful appearance suited that of a woman in her mid-twenties, but Garfiel knew that she should be in her mid-thirties. The fact that it did not match up to Garfiel’s expectations was precisely the source of his confusion.

???: “Gorgeous Tiger-san, does tea not match your tastes? I’m sorry, I didn’t even think to ask what you’d like to drink…”

The woman—a woman who claimed to be Reala Thompson, frowned at the silent Garfiel. He was shaken back into awareness by her voice. He looked down at the cup of tea that had been served in front of him, and hurriedly grabbed it.

Garfiel: “No, no, my amazin’ self was just bein’ a bit silly… I’m just thinkin’ that this room’s unusually big, that’s all.”

Reala: “Is that so? My family’s very big, and so is our house… but that makes it hard to clean. It looks like I was careless again.”

Reala accepted Garfiel’s hurried excuse without a trace of doubt, laughing elegantly, putting her hand on her mouth. She was dressed in well-tailored clothing, suitable for living in a mansion that could only be described as large.

Her smile, her sweet tone, everything about her struck Garfiel with nostalgia. However, Reala spoke not a word of Garfiel’s gaze. This detail alone gripped Garfiel’s heart with pain.

The woman who claimed to be Reala Thompson looked exactly like the woman who had been imprinted clearly into his mind—Reshia Tinzel, Garfiel’s mother.

Garfiel’s separation from his mother had happened shortly after his birth, back when he had no self-awareness, so obviously his memories of his mother were scant. Even so, Garfiel knew every detail of her face, after seeing her in that detestable Tomb where the Trial had been hosted. There, he witnessed his separation from his mother.

Her face, her voice, her love, Garfiel knew them all from the Trial. And that same Trial had shown him the unfortunate death that reached her shortly after her departure. So, to Garfiel, seeing his mother again was an impossible dream.

But if that was so, then who was this woman in front of him?

Reala: “Mimi-san, your ears look so soft. Would it be possible for me to touch them?”

Mimi: “Please go ahead~!”

Reala happily reached out to Mimi, who tilted her head, and stroked Mimi’s ears with a look of contentment.

Mimi’s smile was one only a little girl could wear. They were an odd pair, a tiny beastman and a suspicious thug-like demi-human, but they had been invited in without a second thought. This woman had simply no sense of wariness.

Such attitudes were, to Garfiel, all associated with motherliness.

His mother Reshia had been quite the unfortunate woman. Her parents had lost everything to debt, and had sold her to a group of slave traders, who were in turn ambushed by demi-human bandits. They had made Reshia their plaything.

Somewhere along the way, she had become pregnant with Frederica, and as his mother's stomach swelled, the bandits simply abandoned her. After that, she was taken by a different band of thieves and spent a long time with them.

His older sister Frederica had grown up in that group of bandits, and remembered those times. Although she did not like to talk about it, the fact that Reshia had departed as soon as she became pregnant with Garfiel, indicated that it had been a rather poor environment.

Suffering misfortune after misfortune, Reshia wandered around with her daughter, while carrying a child. Fortunately, she soon was rescued by Roswaal, a pompous noble. He had made her a proposal—he would take them to Sanctuary, where they would be given food, safety and shelter. In Sanctuary, Garfiel was born, and Ryuzu became his guardian.

Life had treated his mother in a way that could only be summed up as "cruel".

However, his mother's personality was unknown to those who only heard her stories. Those who really knew his mother would never give her life such an unfortunate evaluation.

Ryuzu: "Ah, Reshia. That girl was always inexplicably, weirdly optimistic, always lookin' towards the future. Despite sufferin' through painful days where she could've died, she'd always say, "Maybe something nice'll happen tomorrow. Even if today's hard, tomorrow may be better." Like a lil' child, she always looked forward to the lil' happy things in life."

Frederica: "Our honored mother was… she may have been dismissed as a foolish woman by other… people. To be honest, I believe that she never really grasped lessons on how to best survive… But she was an incredibly wonderful person. That is one thing I can say for certain. I love our mom with all my heart, and I am happy to be her daughter.”

Roswaal: “Is this about your mother, Reshia-san? Riiiiiight, although I never had too many chaaaaances to chat with her face to face, but… she was a strange person. Or maybe it’s better to say incredible? She was muuuuch more sensitive to happiness than most people. She was always cheerful, finding happiness in eeeeven the worst of situations. Yeeeep, that’s not something I disliiiiiiked.”

Ryuzu, Frederica, and even Roswaal all spoke fondly of her. Within Sanctuary, anyone who had known his mother said the same thing. She was someone who was always relaxed and happy.

If that had not been the case, she would not have left to look for Garfiel’s father foolishly, who had more than likely encountered misfortune. And then she had immediately suffered another misfortune and died, and what happiness did she get?

—He had never found the answer as to where his mother’s happiness was.

Garfiel: “If I couldn’t find it, I should’ve just given up…”

Nails dug into the palm of his hand as he clenched his fist, to the point blood was about to gush. He should have given up. But he had never understood that. It had taken a long time, but he had finally grown to accept it.

This was plainly the case, but why, now, had she appeared again? As she had always been, with a carefree and cheerful attitude that told him that she did not know him?

Garfiel: “…”

In order to keep her from noticing, he had resigned himself to secretly observing her expressions and behaviors.

Nothing felt unnatural. It was strikingly clear that his mother treated him as a stranger, as if it were completely natural.

Was this her answer?

She had a new life. Unaware of Garfiel, she led her happy life. She had attained happiness like this, by driving away the promises that she had once made.

“I don’t care to know about your affairs”, was that his mother’s answer to—

Fred: “Motheeeeeeer.”

Sister: “Mom, I’m hungry.”

Garfiel had been silent as Mimi and Reala played around. Brother and sister joined them in the living room after going to their rooms to change.

The sister cast a stern look at Garfiel, and then immediately huddled close to her mother.

Sister: “Mom, tell the guests to go home, and then we can eat.”

Reala: “As an older sister, what are you saying? Gorgeous-san and Mimi took care of Fred when he nearly drowned. We are indebted to them.”

Sister: “About that, couldn’t it be that that Gorgeous person was the one who did it? So he could come to our house and take advantage of our generosity. Maybe he wants money.”

Reala: “Hey now, that’s going too far. But you’re right, we have to thank him for Fred… Should we give him money?”

Sister: “Mom?!”

The sister, who had realized that her words were about to become the reason for her family’s bankruptcy, flew into a panic. On the other hand, Reala, who failed to grasp the reason for her daughter’s rant, glanced around in confusion.

For Garfiel, that smiley interaction between parent and child made breathing harder than walking barefoot on thorns. Draining his tea in one gulp, Garfiel set his cup down with a clang.

Garfiel: “Since my amazin’ self doesn’t seem to be welcome here, we’ll be leavin’.”

Mimi: “Haauhh? Why~?”

Garfiel: “No particular reason.”

Although Garfiel wanted to leave, Mimi continued to resist. However, as if he had not heard her, Garfiel picked her up. As he stood to go, Reala looked distraught, while her daughter cast a smirk at him.

Well, Garfiel would respect her feelings—And, with that thought,

Fred: “Don’t go, Gorgeous Tiger…”

Seizing the hem of Garfiel’s pants, the little brother blocked his way. For a second, for reasons unknown to him, Garfiel hesitated to shake off his little hands. But,

Sister: “Fred, honestly, you’re…”

As the younger brother advocated for a suspicious criminal to stay, the older sister placed her hands on her waist in anger. Reala clapped her hands, capturing everyone’s attention before the sister jumped her brother.

Reala: “Everyone, look, it’s not good to not get along. You’re pushing our guests to leave, Fred seems to want them to stay, so don’t force them to do anything, onee-chan.”

Sister: “But, mom…”

Reala: “No buts. Gorgeous-san and Mimi, stay for a while, won’t you? I’d be delighted to share dinner with you, and tonight’s meal is my best dish.”

Fred: “Moooom, you call everything your best dish…”

Reala: “Mhm, shouldn’t that be obvious? Mom always tries her best on every dish for you.”

Everyone present wore a panicked expression towards Reala, who flexed her bicep. But Garfiel moreso than anyone else.

This harmonious atmosphere. It cut deeply into Garfiel’s heart.

Reala’s words cast upon him a unique sense of happiness and helplessness. Accepting her invitation would be the worst possible thing that Garfiel could do.

Garfiel: “Sorry ‘bout yer invitation, but a few of my companions are waitin’ for me. They’ll be worried if we’re late, so we should be headin’ out soon.”

Reala: “…”

Suppressing the pain in his chest, Garfiel prayed that his voice would not tremble.

At his answer, the sister’s face became stiff, and Reala frowned, her gaze cast down. And,

Reala: “I understand, there is no point in forcing you to stay if it bothers you. It’s like what they say, “Show your guests hospitality and sowaire.”“

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

That exchanged had been the one that had hurt Garfiel the most on this day. Losing to Reinhard in that duel, the initial impact of seeing Reala, looked so miniscule, so utterly trivial, compared to how he was feeling now.

Unconsciously, Garfiel placed a hand close to his chest, as if needing to confirm whether his body had been torn or not. And to that Garfiel’s state—

Mimi: “Garfiel, let’s go.”

Mimi, who had refused to leave until then, gently took Garfiel’s hand in hers and began leading him away. Facing her concern, Garfiel obeyed silently. So, with their hands on the handle of the living room door, ready to go outside,

???: “I’m home! Oh, do we have guests?”

On the other side of the door, appeared the figure of a gentleman sporting a magnificent beard.

He appeared to be a man wearing well-tailored clothing, and gave off an energetic atmosphere. From the tone of his voice, from his facial features, he seemed to be a man of accomplishments.

At that man’s appearance, the children scrambled to their feet with joy. Then, that man would be—

Dad: “Hmm… I haven’t seen this stranger’s face before.”

Fred: “Dad, this is Gorgeous Tiger.”

Sister: “He’s a suspicious person.”

Dad: “What?”

Faced with the sharply contrasting attitudes of his son and daughter, the father tilted his head in distress. He turned to Reala, who stood quietly in the living room.

Under the man’s loving gaze, Reala loosened her cheeks.

Garfiel had hit his limit.

Garfiel: “It ain’t a big deal, we were goin’ anyway.”

Leaving that sentence behind, Garfiel grabbed Mimi and hurriedly pushed his way of out the room, scrambling toward the front door as if running away.

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger!”

From behind, a sad voice called to Garfiel. However, Garfiel had no response to that call.

Who was Gorgeous? What was Tiger? He was Garfiel, not Gorgeous

Tiger. Where was that golden tiger now? A tiger was a strong, powerful creature who could not be shaken by anything.

Where was the tiger now? A real tiger wouldn't be so affected by such things, would it?

Mimi: "Garf! My hand, it hurts!"

Garfiel: "—Hk."

Too focused on his thoughts, Garfiel did not notice that cry of pain.

He did not notice until Mimi had broken free of his vice grip, extracting her hand from his nails, which had been digging into her. Her small hand was now swollen and blue.

Garfiel: "S-Sorry… my amazin' self…"

Mimi: "Gar~f, you were weird at that house too. My hand really~ hurts."

Mimi mumbled quietly, and Garfiel smacked his forehead with his hand.

They fell into an awkward silence as the Watergate City's moist wind caressed their faces. The sun had fallen from the sky completely, the city shrouded by the light emitted by magic stones. The sunshine on the water's surface was replaced by light from the magical lamps, but he was in no mood to enjoy that scene's mysterious and quiet beauty.

???: "Hey, you two, over there!"

Someone approached Garfiel and Mimi with gasping breaths.

Looking up, the magic light revealed the man from before, who had shed his coat. Finally arriving in front of the two, he put his hands on his knees, panting violently.

Dad: "Ah, I finally caught up… This won't do… I used to be more energetic, but I'm completely out of shape now that I've gotten a desk job…"

Garfiel: “…Do ya need anythin’ from us?”

Garfiel indicated that he was not interested in the man’s words.

The existence of this man, although not to the degree of Reala’s children, also caused distress in Garfiel. His voice was full of harshness, but the man paid no mind to it, placing his hand on his head, displaying his embarrassment.

Dad: “No, I heard from my wife that you two were benefactors of my son. It’d be completely unjustifiable if I never displayed any gratitude.”

Garfiel: “…It’s no big deal, If ya talk so big like that, my amazin’ self’ll be embarrassed.”

Dad: “Everything involving my kids, no matter what, is incredibly important. Saving him from danger makes it even more important. Really, if you need anything at all… Ah, I’m really sorry. My name is Garek, Garek Thompson. Despite how I look, I work at Priestella’s City Hall, so if there’s anything I can do to help you…”

Garfiel: “Really, we’re…”

A man who had a way with words—Garfiel, who wished to leave as soon as possible, was suddenly at a loss for words when trying to get away from Garek. But if he were indeed Reala’s husband, if he really knew her, then—

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’s got only one question… would it be okay for ya t’answer?”

Garek: “Yes, anything. No matter what, I’ll do my best to answer.”

Garek responded to Garfiel with a benevolent smile.

The same was true of Reala too, and their son Fred. This entire family was too kind for their own good. Only their daughter had any proper sense of suspicion.

With that in mind, Garfiel was very cautious in his choice of words.

Garfiel: “Yer wife, Reala… What’s her real name?”

Garek: “…”

As soon as Garfiel posed his question, the atmosphere shifted. The smile faded from Garek’s face. He pondered Garfiel’s question silently for a few moments, before replying in a level voice.

Garek: “What do you mean?”

Garfiel: “I mean it literally. It’s like “No matter what, Reid plays a straight game”, right? Playin’ with words ain’t my style. Tell me, yer wife, is her name Reshia instead of Reala?”

Garek: “—Guh.”

Garek’s expression had been unsettled by Garfiel’s straight-to-the-point statement. Garek took a moment to swallow before his voice escaped his mouth.

Garek: “You… Do you know anything about my wife?”

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self also wants to know that.”

Garek: “…”

Garfiel responded sincerely to Garek’s trembling voice.

At those words, Garek fell into silence, as if he were thinking. Waiting for his reply, Garfiel took Mimi’s good hand into his own.

Glancing up at him, she smiled as she usually did.

Garek: “…It seems that I should tell you the truth.”

As Garfiel looked sideways at Mimi’s smile, Garek spoke with a sigh.

His voice was weighed with fatigue and powerlessness. Garfiel frowned, waiting for his next sentence. Then,

Garek: “My wife, Reala… has no memories from before out meeting, fifteen years ago.”

2

Garek had met Reala before becoming an influential person in the city of Priestella, back when he was merely a merchant rooted in Priestella.

On that day, on his way back from negotiations that had taken place far from the city, Garek, who had been driving a dragon carriage, had found his path blocked by a landslide. The business deal had broken down, and Garek could not stand the frustration of having to face even more misfortune while on the road, as he struggled to repay a loan.

—Then, in that tragic landslide, he found a woman buried alive.

It had been a miracle. There was no other explanation.

Refusing to make a detour, Garek had desperately wondered if he could still follow his original route. Around that time, the heavy rain finally stopped, and Garek's full field of vision returned.

Garek had come across the landslide not long after it happened, meaning that the woman had been buried for a fairly short time.

As a result of the various miracles overlapping, Garek had found and rescued the woman, who was still breathing.

She had been covered in mud, and he had found no luggage near her. Taking the unconscious woman to his dragon carriage, Garek immediately rushed to a nearby town, where she was taken to a clinic, and awaited her rehabilitation.

Garek: "At the time, her condition was incredibly precarious. She had a high fever, and had various injuries and bone fractures from the landslide. Her heart even stopped at one point during treatment."

As the unlikely situation carried on, both the people at the clinic and Garek struggled to help her, hoping for her recovery. Why had Garek wanted so desperately to save her? There had indeed been a reason which explained his actions, yet it was unknown to him.

He was grateful to everyone's efforts, from the bottom of his heart.

Garek: "Hard work paid off and she survived. Although she was still heavily wounded, I remember being really relieved when it became clear her life was no longer threatened. She woke up shortly after. It took a week… I stayed in the city, waiting for her to wake up."

The failure of negotiations had made the future of Garek's company grim.

In that situation, wasting time equated wasting money. Garek did not understand why he had been restraining himself from his travels. But something unknown kept Garek rooted there.

Then, after a week, the woman woke up.

After her awakening, the people rejoiced. She spoke to the crowd gathered around her with a trembling, faint voice.

Garek: ""Who am I?", were her first words."

The woman had forgotten her name. No, not just her name. She had forgotten everything.

Who was she, where did she come from, and what was she trying to do? What had happened before that cliff had collapsed?

Everyone was at a loss regarding her treatment, as she could not remember her family members. All she had were the clothes she was wearing during the accident. Sewn on the fabric were the only discernible letters of her name, or perhaps even an acronym. "Re".

Garek: "Influenced by the name of a blossoming flower, I decided to call her Reala. Then, I planned to take care of her until her wounds had fully healed."

Her wounds healed little by little, and, soon enough, she was discharged from the clinic.

Reala, even having nowhere to go, remained a cheerful woman. She treated that terrible accident as if it had never happened, and she had the power to make all those she interacted with smile.

In her situation, it would be impossible not to feel uneasy. The loss of one's own memories was equivalent to losing one's own existence. But she still carried on smiling, because she felt it necessary to do so.

Or maybe she was concerned for the people around her.

But the most important reason was that she did not see herself as unfortunate.

Garek: "The nervousness from confessing to her, asking her to come with me, is still fresh in my memory. The time between my question and her reply is probably the most anxious I've ever been in my life. Even more so than when I proposed marriage to her."

So, accepting Garek's proposal, Reala went with him to Priestella.

The reason why he had refused to abandon her, the reason why he had waited so long for her to wake up, was incredibly simple.

At that moment, when he dragged her from that landslide, carried her to his dragon carriage, and cleaned the mud off her face, Garek fell in love with her instantly.

Garek: "My business, which had been unlucky until I took in Reala, improved quickly. The people around me said that it was all thanks to my talent. Ridiculous, it was all thanks to Reala. She brought me good luck, she blessed me, so now I can be a merchant like this, a city manager, and a father."

Garfiel: "…"

Garek: "I love my wife, and our children are both very cute. I used to care about her past, but, at this moment, no matter who she was before, I consider my wife my most important person."

Garek finished speaking about everything, from their first encounter to the present, and concluded thus with embarrassment.

Garfiel, who had been silent from beginning to end, listening intently, looked up at the sky.

In the darkness, stars were scattered everywhere. The glorious full moon and the glitter of the stars were probably looking down on his current thoughts.

Garek: “I am very sorry to ask this of you, but I cannot help but do so.”

Garfiel: “…”

Garek: “What is the relationship between you… and my wife, Reala?”

This—how cruel was this question.

His line of sight fell from the sky to Garek in front of him.

Garek’s gentle eyes held firm determination as he gazed at Garfiel. He would not be so insensitive as to misunderstand what Garfiel would say, or what emotions he held.

And so Garfiel knew exactly which answer would be correct.

Garfiel: “…”

Opening and closing his mouth.

Breathing, exhaling, inhaling, breathing repeatedly.

Heartbeat, fast. Eyes, dazed. A burst of pain in his head, the need to retch.

The swirl of mixed emotions tightened his chest, already on the verge of collapse.

—Mimi gripped his hand tightly.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self, has…”

Garek: “…”

Garfiel: “Nothin’… to do with yer wife.”

There. He had said it, said it out loud.

With that sentence, the vortex swirling in Garfiel's heart swiftly vanished.

He was left with only a suffocating sense of loss. Garek, who stood in front of him, lowered his head as if he had made a mistake, not wanting to look Garfiel in the face, speaking with a trembling voice.

Garek: "I feel so sorry…"

With a look of unnatural pain, he bowed. However, Garfiel did not want to see Garek's reaction.

Enough. He had enough already, stop. He wanted to leave, wanted to stop being hurt.

What had gone wrong? Whose fault was it? Was it his own fault, or was it Garek's fault? Who should he blame? Who should he crush, who should he eat, who should he send flying?

What could he do, to end the pain in his heart, to make it vanish, disappear to parts unknown?

???: "Honey…! This is great, Gorgeous-san and Mimi are still here."

Garfiel: "—?!"

Those words echoed with immense volume. Grief and turmoil raised the noise, making it so intense it could kill.

To Garfiel, on this day, its appearance was immensely scarier than a knife.

Garek: "Reala, why…"

Reala: "You left in such a hurry, but I didn't want you to go home empty-handed, so…"

While Garek was surprised by his wife's appearance, Reala winked, walking by him.

Then, she approached the stunned, stiff Garfiel, stretching out her hand.

Reala: “These are some sweets soirée that I made. Although it’s not much of a sign of gratitude, I’m still proud of it. So I hope you’ll accept it.”

Garfiel: “…Ah.”

Her smile held not a trace of malice. Stubbornly, Garfiel refused to speak. His exchange with Garek had opened old wounds, preventing him from being able to speak to Reala.

Anyone able to read the mood would understand the meaning of his silence. And yet,

Mimi: “Oh! A dessert, that’s so much fun! Amazing, I’ll share it with the lady!”

Obviously, Mimi smiled at the bag of sweets presented by Reala, completely neglecting to notice the atmosphere. Garek looked shocked, and Garfiel was speechless. But. Only Reala laughed in joy at Mimi’s reaction.

Reala: “I’m so glad you like it, and please go share it with the one you call lady.”

Mimi: “Okay, onderstood! Unter… understood~!”

After saluting with the hand that was not being held by Garfiel, a hand still displaying a blueish hue, Mimi put that container in her pocket and clapped Garfiel on the back.

She had applied enough power that he couldn’t help but enter a coughing fit, and Mimi smiled.

Mimi: “Well, this time, we’re really leaving! Gorgeous Tiger and Gorgeous Mimi will see you later~!”

Reala: “Alright, safe travels. Take care not to fall in the water, Gorgeous-san.”

Mimi took Garfiel’s hand, and Reala waved as they left.

Smiling, Mimi turned back and waved, only for Reala to wave even more vigorously. Only the two men had been left with pained expressions after this smiling farewell.

Garfiel: “…”

Like this, Garfiel was led along the path to the side of the waterway by Mimi, his arm being pulled. Mimi did not speak to Garfiel, walking until Reala had long vanished from view.

Garfiel: “Hey, midget…”

Mimi: “Over here~!”

Garfiel: “—?!”

Garfiel wanted to stop Mimi, but was suddenly interrupted.

Mimi, still holding Garfiel’s hand, rapidly leapt onto a three-story building stone, ascending with the use of footholds. Garfiel was pulled along, of course, forced to take the same pace as her. With a few leaps, the two reached the top of the building.

Mimi: “Hmm! Feels so good~!”

Garfiel: “So good, my ass! What were ya pullin’, just now…”

As Mimi bathed in the breeze, Garfiel turned around to confirm her intention.

However, he saw that Mimi was staring at him, her face devoid of a smile. He saw himself reflected in her round eyes, and Garfiel did not understand the unease brewing in his heart.

Faced with Garfiel’s silence, Mimi’s expression suddenly broke.

Mimi: “Garf, do you want to cry?”

Garfiel: “Huh? What’re ya sayin’, why would my amazin’ self cry?”

Mimi: “I know that Garf is strong, but you shouldn’t put on that strong act. Reala, she’s Garf’s mother, right~?”

Garfiel: “…”

At Mimi's unexpected question, Garfiel held his breath.

She had accurately grasped the flow of the things. If she did indeed know of Garfiel's circumstances, then that conclusion would be easy to make. However, Mimi knew nothing about Garfiel's family. Her ability to discern the truth was really rather impressive.

The fact she had brought up that horrifying topic in such a straightforward manner shook Garfiel, and he hesitated.

Garfiel: "Why… would ya… think that…?"

Mimi: "Garf and Reala smell supeeeer similar, and both of Reala's children also smelled a bit like Garf. That's why~."

Her assumption was not based on logical reasoning, but on something innate, and thus she could see the truth clearly. If Mimi had inferred her conclusion from Garfiel's words, he could have made attempts to hide his past. But, like this, Garfiel was unable to deny it.

His legs giving out, Garfiel looked up at the sky, in a daze.

Both the stars and moon were unchanged, and just as before, they were looking down at Garfiel.

Mimi: "So, is that right? Is Reala Garf's mother?"

Garfiel: "…My amazin' self doesn't know. Is that woman still my amazin' self's mother?"

At Mimi's words, Garfiel covered his face with his hand.

He did not know. That truly, unmistakably was the feeling swirling in Garfiel's heart, right now.

Reala was unmistakably Reshia. Just as Garek had said, and as her actions up until this point had demonstrated, Reala had completely forgotten that she was Reshia.

Forgetting everything, Reshia had found a new start as Reala, raising her children, living happily.

Garfiel: “Ah, come to think of it, that’d make those two kids my amazin’ self’s lil’ brother ‘n sister…”

Although he had only realized it just now, those siblings, their father a different person from his own, were related to him the same way he was related to Frederica. In other words, those siblings were his own lovely younger siblings. It had been a relationship he had longed for ever since his childhood, being the youngest between himself and Frederica.

—Wouldn’t it be nice if he could enjoy that relationship without the circumstances that surrounded it?

Garfiel: “Even if my amazin’ self tells her ‘bout my heritage, nothin’d change…”

Reala had forgotten her time as Reshia.

Even if Garfiel spilled out everything he knew, the fifteen years she had spent as Reala would still remain unchanged, and the fifteen-or-so years she had spent as Reshia would remain lost.

Only, Reala would then be saddled with the burden of fifteen years of guilt, feeling like she had lost her life as Reshia. That was unnecessary. Garek would only be able to witness his wife’s depression, and their children would only watch their mother’s suffering, while being completely unaware of its cause.

Doing so would only be for Garfiel’s own sake.

Garfiel would be the only one gaining from having Reala accept that she used to be Reshia. Neither Frederica nor Ryuzu knew of Reshia’s survival. If Garfiel said nothing, the two of them would never know.

The members of Reala’s family would not know of her past without Garfiel’s testimony. If they learned of it, those happy times would most likely be lost rather than preserved.

All it would take for all of this to be successfully resolved, was to have Garfiel hide everything, hide all of his feelings accumulating in his chest, and let go.

Garfiel: “Why is my amazin’ self…”

Could he not even find the courage to throw it away, to forget it, to bury it deep within himself?

Tiger… Tiger, where did you go? Show me the right path.

Only he could bear everything, take on everything alone, and still have the strength to stand up.

Tell me, tiger… tiger. A true tiger was the strongest existence, second to none.

Garfiel: “…”

Holding his head, biting down on his molars, lamenting the feelings swirling back and forth mixing together, it was then Garfiel noticed.

Mimi: “It’s okay…”

In the next moment, he noticed that his head was being gently stroked, hugged by a small bosom.

Garfiel: “…”

Still collapsed on the ground, Garfiel was grabbed by Mimi from behind in a hug.

Resting her chin on his head, her small palm gently stroked Garfiel’s head. That tender touch on his back, moving back and forth, gradually eased the pain and agitation of his head.

Garfiel: “What, what’re ya doin’, this is…”

Mimi: “Hmm, if Garf needs to cryyy, I think there’s a specific place where boys are allowed to cry! Although I forgot where, I remember the lady telling me about it~!”

For a moment, she seemed to be giving an answer, but her train of thought drifted away.

In order to keep his heart from shaking, in order to keep his voice from trembling, Garfiel chose his words carefully.

Like this, holding Garfiel, Mimi giggled.

Mimi: “Well, although I’ve forgotten, is it the feeling of a woman’s chest? Is it like that? That’s it! It’s alright for a man to cry on the chest of a woman he’s interested in!”

Garfiel: “…Who’d be interested in a midget like ya.”

The one Garfiel was interested in was a woman who was never kind when he wanted her to be, but when he least expected, after which she would beat him with her fists. She was a woman who was incredibly difficult to deal with.

The girl in front of him did not resemble her at all. However, Mimi was still smiling despite Garfiel’s answer.

Mimi: “That’s fine! Even if Garfiel’s not in love with Mimi, Mimi already is! Hey, a girl who likes Garf! So! Mimi’s chest~! It’s okay to cry there~!”

Garfiel: “—Ah.”

What a foolish notion. What was this? Some kind of language game? It was only a child’s excuse, loaded with nothing but assertiveness.

There was obviously nothing, so stop kidding around.

Tiger… Tiger, where did you go?

Right now, come back to my heart. Howl your deep, ferocious roar, beat this slouched back, force me to wake up, do something to my feelings.

Otherwise, otherwise… Otherwise, it will be too late.

Garfiel: “Mother…”

Enough, enough, enough! Stop talking. Don’t make such a weak voice. Don’t cry with such a weak voice.

He was a tiger, a tiger. The most powerful, the strongest, studier than anyone. The Strongest of Shields. However,

Garfiel: “Mother… mama… mama…!!”

Mimi: “Good boy.”

Garfiel: “Why! Why did ya forget me?! I’ve met ya after all this time! Can’t my amazin’ self… even call ya mom?!”

Mimi: “It’s alright, Garfiel’s a good boy, a good boy.”

Garfiel: “Mama… mama… mama…!”

Tiger… Tiger, where did you go?

What do I look like now? Stars, moon, sky, tell me.

What do I look like now?

If I can’t be a roaring tiger, then what do I look like right now—?!

Chapter 31:
The Cost of a Mistake

1

Mimi: “I got it~!”

Garfiel: “Noisy, stop sayin’ that!”

The next morning, Garfiel, looking to be in a rather poor state, walked the streets with Mimi.

Giggling, Mimi touched the chest of her robe, which was stained with Garfiel’s tears and saliva. The stench was such that it caused physical pain to Garfiel’s nose. To Mimi, who had the same sharp sense of smell, that stench must have been unbearable, but upon hearing Garfiel’s advice to wash it, she’d replied—

Mimi: “Mmm, it’s fine! After returning to the hotel, I can get a change of clothes~. The lady’ll be really mad that I didn’t go back last night. Oh, and Hetaro and Tivey too~!”

Garfiel: “…My bad.”

Mimi: “Mimi isn’t worried about it~! Mimi will only say that Garf’s a very good boy when he’s sobbing and crying!”

Mimi replied with an innocent smile to Garfiel’s weak apology.

On the previous night, Garfiel had both reunited and shared a second farewell with his mother. After being branded by a series of wounds, he had shamefully ended up crying into Mimi’s chest on a rooftop. And, even more embarrassingly, the sobbing had sapped his strength so much that he had ended up falling asleep.

The next morning, while he was still sleeping on Mimi’s lap, he was woken up by a loud voice that could be heard all over the city.

Garfiel attempted to maintain his composure, but it was easily noticeable that he was embarrassed around Mimi, who in turn kept being her normal self.

Having been unable to come up with an excuse, he was chewed out by the owner of the building on top of which he had spent the night, and they went on their way home.

Mimi: “Do you feel better?”

Garfiel: “It’s, you could say, uh… Somethin’ like that.”

Mimi: “It’s like that, right?”

Garfiel: “…Yeah, like that.”

Unable to voice his true gratitude, Garfiel frowned. However, Mimi’s attitude did not change because of his lack of words.

He recalled last night, when Mimi had blurted out that she was interested in him.

Involuntarily, his eyes followed Mimi’s figure. Before, he had thought that Mimi was just tagging along with him, feeling a sense of kinship due to their shared non-human heritage. But she’d unexpectedly been following him with romantic intent.

And, even having given her confession, she acted the same as she always had.

Even though he’d done the same with Ram, as soon as the tables were flipped, he felt thrown off. Now as the recipient of those feelings, Garfiel caught a glimpse of yet another shameful weakness.

Mimi: “Well, what should we do this morning? Go to your mother and see her?”

His thoughts having been sidetracked, Garfiel jumped in surprise, both at the suddenness of Mimi’s words and their actual content.

Garfiel: “Wait, what? Why’d we go see her?”

Mimi: “Hmm? Because Reala is Garf’s mother, right? So you should talk properly, right?”

Garfiel: “This midget really can’t read between the lines…”

Mimi seemed to be unaware of the subtleties of their relationship, despite having spotted the most important part of their relationship with pure instinct.

He was put in a difficult position, unable to answer questions about whether they were family or not. Garfiel immediately realized that it was useless to try to explain, and then gave up. And he realized that that was yet another problem.

Garfiel: “‘Tis fine… there’s no need… to let her know that my amazin’ self’s her son.”

Mimi: “Is that really okay?”

Garfiel: “Yeah… Ah, gotta think about whether I should tell sis…”

Frederica was clever. After the initial shock and confusion passed, she would certainly come to the same conclusion as Garfiel, even faster than he had.

And even if she didn’t reach the same conclusion as he did, she still had the right to know of their mother’s survival. But would it be right to have her experience the same suffering as he did?

Garfiel: “There’s still time before makin’ a decision.”

Mimi: “That’s right∼. That’s really hard∼, Mimi∼ doesn’t know her mom either, so Mimi gets it∼.”

Garfiel: “Stuff ‘bout moms… ya understand?”

His ears trembling at Mimi’s unexpected statement, Garfiel replied back with a question. Mimi only nodded with a relaxed attitude, prefacing with “Yep∼”.

Mimi: “Mimi, Hetaro, and Tivey never knew mom and dad. They probably thought “triplets, raising a super big family’s too hard”, so they left us somewhere∼. Then, we were picked up by the Captain, so he’s family, and lady’s family too!”

Garfiel: "—So… ya really do have a big family."

Without knowing the reason, he suddenly felt that the atmosphere had relaxed as he stroked Mimi's head. At that moment,

Mimi: "—Waah!"

Mimi quickly brushed aside his hand and leapt away.

Garfiel stared eyes wide open at her reddened face, as she turned her back to him, emitting a "Uh, uhh" while rubbing her head.

Mimi: "For some reason, ever since yesterday, getting too close to Garf feels weird."

Garfiel: "Right, sorry… Do ya want my amazin' self to leave?"

Mimi: "I don't want that either, something not too close and not too far feels the best~."

She scrambled next to him with small steps, stopping in a place outside of his reach.

Garfiel frowned, completely puzzled, as Mimi gave her usual smile. Just now, his own face seemed to tinge with a faint redness.

Mimi: "Hey, oh oh, sowarie! There's the sowarie! Let's eat the sowarie!"

Garfiel: "Y-Yeah, sure…"

As if in a hurry to change the topic, Mimi withdrew the candy bag from her pocket. That was what Reala had given Mimi last night, before they'd parted ways.

Momentarily, a pain like numbness flowed through his chest as Mimi put candy on his open palm. He snorted at the aroma wafting gently towards his nose. That "sowarie" was a baked sweet, made by baking bread dough with sweet condiments in it, stuffed with cream and red bean paste inside.

There were two large, round sowaries in the box, one each for Mimi and Garfiel, which would serve as their breakfast.

Mimi: “Yay! It’s sweet~! Good! Delicious, super delicious~!”

Garfiel: “Ah, it’s delicious!”

Garfiel voiced his agreement to Mimi’s loud applause.

It was slightly sweet, but not overwhelmingly sugary, and the dough was fluffy and soft. If consumed shortly after being baked, it would’ve been even more delicious. Or was that his mother’s specialty?

In that case, Garfiel could have had more chances to taste it.

Mimi: “Garf~?”

Garfiel: “This really isn’t like my amazin’ self, yeah?”

At Mimi’s concern, Garfiel shoved those wishful thoughts away and walked away. Turning back his back to the place where his mother lived, he returned his thoughts to his friends, who should be waiting for him. Like Mimi, Garfiel had stayed out without permission.

Because of that, he would certainly be severely scolded—

???: “—Hello, hello? Is this okay? Can everyone hear? Meat creatures who can hear, good for you! Worthless meat who can’t, go fester and die, that’d be a huge help for me. Gahahahaha—”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

Mimi: “Hmm~?”

Just having taken a short step forward, a voice suddenly assaulted Garfiel’s and Mimi’s eardrums. The two glanced at each other and looked up to the sky at the same time.

The voice seemed to have boomed from the heavens.

Garfiel: “That voice sounds like…”

???: “Well, well, well, was there any idiot who died from shock right now? If not, well, it doesn’t really matter, but if there’s anyone brave enough to dare to ignore this lovely lady, then, my mood will be ruined!”

Ignoring Garfiel’s emotions, the voice kept speaking at that annoying volume.

The other people walking on that matinal cityscape all looked up at the sky, dumbfounded like Garfiel. It felt like a shockingly loud voice—but that conclusion would be wrong.

Garfiel, possessing a sense of hearing different from a regular human’s, could tell that this voice was not a loud one coming from one source. Rather, it permeated the entire city, spreading the way an echo would.

However, knowing that would not yield any answers to his questions. All he knew was that—

???: “You boring creatures do nothing but ruin my mood. There’s no value here at all—You’re all just garbagegarbagegarbage! If all you’re thinking of doing is having that disgusting breath, thinking those disgusting thoughts, and drooling your way through life, it’d be much better if you just plunged your head into a ditch and drowned! Please go die soon, please, I beg you! Gahahaha!”

—The owner of this voice had the vilest of souls.

Garfiel: “What kind of joke’s this? Stop fuckin’ around!”

Mimi: “Garf… I keep feeling like this is super, super unpleasant…”

As Garfiel cursed in irritation, Mimi showed an anxious expression. Faced with her attitude, Garfiel traced the scar on his forehead, clicking his fangs.

That expression did not suit her. That expression, he did not want to see it from her.

???: “Well, well, then, since the big, dull, rotten meat creatures can’t seem to figure it out, I’ll explain it. I have control of the radio!

Meaning, meaning, meaning—!”

Garfiel: “Get on with it, what’s the meanin’?”

???: “That—I, no, WE have control of this City Hall, right? Ah, by the way, do you know those control towers, at the edge of the city? Those are also ours now!”

Garfiel: “Control tower… Are those the ones Ottobro talked about?”

Regardless of whether the owner of that voice was telling the truth, Garfiel felt that threat, holding his breath.

Before and after arriving at the city, he had heard about Priestella’s structure from Otto. As the Watergate City, Priestella had water running all around it, and once had a role as a trap meant for a very powerful fiend, and that function was still operable.

And the control towers located north, south, east and west of the city allowed control of the operation of the waterway—If those were now in control of this host, who possessed the most vile character possible, it meant that the population of the entire city had been taken hostage.

Reaching the same conclusion as Garfiel, panic and anxiety began to spread though the civilians. Everyone screamed in dread, and in the city echoed loud, toxic, joyful laughter.

???: “Kahahahaha—! By now! At this moment! Only now are you realizing that you’re all going to be decimated! It’s shocking how brainless you all are! It’s too much for me! Ah, garbagegarbagegarbage! Gahahaha—”

Garfiel: “…”

???: “Oh, this won’t do, I’m sorry. If I go on any longer without giving my name, you’re all going to try running away from reality, right? Why don’t you allow this gentle and benevolent lady teach you what’s real in a very simple way?”

In a city of panic, Garfiel held Mimi’s hand tightly, then listened carefully to what the voice was saying.

???: “I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Lust—”

Garfiel: “Witch Cult—!”

Capella: “Capella Emerada Lugunica-sama! Gahahaha! Respect me! Worship me! Then cry and beg and die tragically like worms! You rotten slabs of meat! Kahahahaha—!”

2

Upon hearing the broadcast, Garfiel was forced to make a choice.

Although the broadcast of the self-proclaimed Witch Cultist had induced panic, the actions of the citizens of Priestella were very orderly. Even in that turmoil, they had kept emergency procedures in mind and fled into the nearest shelter.

People passing by had attempted to guide Garfiel and Mimi into a shelter. However, they had refused to take their lead and instead chose to go elsewhere immediately.

However, that had led Garfiel to make yet another choice.

And the result of that choice—

Reala: “Ah, Gorgeous-san!”

Garfiel: “…”

In the shelter he had arrived at, Reala had run towards Garfiel upon seeing him, relieved to find an acquaintance.

Garfiel endured the pain in his heart, and managed to turn his face to her.

—That was the result of his choice.

From the very moment Garfiel had refused to be led to a nearby shelter, he was forced into a decision. He had to opt between going back to where he should be, alongside Emilia and Subaru, or going out of his way to make sure that his mother was safe, even after having decided to part with her for good.

Rationally, Garfiel knew he should have immediately returned to Emilia and the others. Even so, he had told himself that since this shelter was relatively near where he was right after hearing the broadcast, he could afford to check on her safety.

Reala: “I’m glad that Mimi-san is fine as well. That broadcast had me worried.”

Mimi: “Ah, nothing’s happened to us~! The sowarie was delicious, thanks for the feast!”

Reala: “Ah, that’s good, I’m glad it was to your taste.”

And Mimi had not objected to any of Garfiel’s choices, and followed along.

Of course, she had wanted to return to Anastasia and her younger brothers. To her, Reala was a stranger, and she had no real obligation to go and check on her safety.

Garfiel: “…”

While listening to his own excuse, Garfiel, having finally confirmed Reala’s safety, was free to leave. He needed to return to Emilia’s side immediately, and come up with a plan.

If the name of the Witch Cult were to appear, Garfiel would protect Emilia. That was the manly promise he had made with Subaru, one which he would absolutely never break.

Even if he could not protect himself as a tiger, he could never forget that he was a man.

Garfiel: “It looks like everythin’s good, so my amazin’ self will…”

Reala: “Wait… Gorgeous-san, have you…”

As Garfiel prepared to leave, Reala’s timid murmurs caught his ears. Upon seeing Garfiel frown at this unusual attitude, she quietly continued.

Reala: “Have you seen my children yet…? They left early this morning… and they're not in this shelter…"

Garfiel: "—?!"

Hurriedly looking up, Garfiel scanned his surroundings. However, the figures he sought were nowhere in sight. The visages of his siblings were not in this place.

Reala: "Even my husband… No, nevermind, I said something superfluous…"

Garfiel: "What's up? My amazin' self'll be bothered if ya try to hide anythin' now."

Reala: "—The broadcast came from the City Hall. My husband should be going to his job at the City Hall… So, if something happened there…"

Garfiel: "…"

The City Hall was a tall building at the center of Priestella.

During the broadcast, the Sin Archbishop had announced that they had seized the City Hall, a place that supposedly maintained the operation of the city. Most likely, Garek was there.

Garfiel: "Haaa… haa…"

Garfiel's heart quickened, and he felt like he was going to collapse from how strongly it pounded.

Garek, who was at the most dangerous place, and his missing brother and sister. Confirming Reala's safety had led him to learn that her family was in danger.

Garfiel: "Captain, Emilia-sama…"

Their faces, as well as Otto's and Beatrice's, flashed through Garfiel's mind. He must return to those people and become their strength.

But, as if tailgating that idea, the faces of his siblings and Garek also flashed through his mind.

Reala: “I’m sorry to have disturbed you, Gorgeous-san. Please forget what I said.”

Garfiel: “…”

Reala: “Just now, I was a little bit too frightened. My children and my husband are well-aware of this city’s emergency procedures.”

Reala showed a strong smile, but her hands were clasped, as if in trembling prayer.

There was no doubt that her gesture was reluctant, and she was only desperately putting on an act to keep Garfiel from worrying.

Garfiel: “…”

Silence, silence, silence.

In silence, gritting his teeth, Garfiel’s mind blazed. Mimi faced him, also silent, waiting for his decision. In silence, she only held his hand.

Garfiel: “…Don’t worry, leave yer children and husband to us.”

Reala: “—Gorgeous-san?!”

That unexpected answer left Reala speechless with surprise. With conviction, Garfiel nodded, then looking down at Mimi.

Garfiel: “It’s my issue from now on, so ya should go back.”

Mimi: “Hiiiiiiiii-ya!”

Garfiel: “Owww!”

At being told to return, Mimi brought her foot down on Garfiel’s, who cried out loudly in pain. Mimi took the moment to stand tall.

Mimi: “Garf said something so cool, so how could Mimi not match him~? I’m definitely going with you~!”

Garfiel: “Bast… No, it’s fine. Sorry.”

Mimi: “You should be offering your grititude!”

Garfiel: “—Thanks.”

Mimi: “You’re welcome!”

Mimi giggled sweetly, and Garfiel began laughing as well, feeling like he’d been saved.

Then, turning back to the stunned Reala, Garfiel spoke.

Garfiel: “My amazin’s self’s goin’ to look for yer family, so stay here with everyone else, and wait for us.”

Reala: “But… why would you do so much for us?”

Garfiel: “…”

Why was he doing this?

Reala’s wavering gaze questioned Garfiel as to his true intentions.

And Garfiel grinned at her, showing his teeth.

Garfiel: “Because my amazin’ self’s a golden tiger! Gorgeous! Tiger!”

Mimi: “Then Mimi, is also Gorgeous Mimi~!”

Shouting their stupid lines, their levity shocked the people gathered in the shelter. Garfiel and Mimi put on a pose much to Reala’s shock, and then, with a valiant spin, the two rushed out from the bunker.

Mimi: “Garfiel, what do we do?”

Garfiel: “Use the smell to track’em. Those two and Garek, ya still remember their smell clearly, right?”

The problem was that the city was very large, and water flowed everywhere.

The environmental conditions were not optimal to accurately find their scents. In a city this populated, a powerful sense of smell could only do so much. Nevertheless, the olfactory sense of the two demi-humans would be able to yield some results.

First, they returned to Reala's house, following her scent. Getting a whiff of them there, they would look for his siblings by following their scent.

Meanwhile, the evacuation of the city's citizens had proceeded smoothly. The city, unpleasantly enough, appeared to be a ghost city. Finding instances of looting was to be expected in situations like this, but the absence of that kind of immoral behavior was very likely due to the reputation of the Witch Cult.

Mimi: "Hmm, is it this one? Gaaarf, I smell them!"

Garfiel: "…Right, we're headin' towards this smell."

Garfiel also picked up the scent Mimi did, and tracked where the siblings had gone. Those two seemed to have traced yesterday's route, starting at their house at Third Street, and moved in the direction of the First Street.

And upon thinking of First Street as their destination, a thought flashed through Garfiel's mind.

Garfiel: "Those two went to the park to see that Songstress…"

On the previous day, the boy had said that he'd left too late and failed his objective. Having learned his lesson, he had left early this morning, determined not to miss the music of the Songstress again.

This time, his sister must have accompanied him.

Garfiel: "In that case, if we go to First Street…"

If they went there, then they could hurry and join Subaru and the others.

Garfiel brightened slightly, thinking that the situation had turned in his favor in a surprise twist—And then he smelled it.

Garfiel: “…”

Mimi: “Is this their father…?”

Mimi noticed the same thing Garfiel had, simultaneously.

A scent that split from the siblings, mid-way towards the First Street. The scent of Garek, who had headed in a different direction —to the City Hall in the middle of the city.

Again, the time to make a decision descended on Garfiel.

If he went straight to the First Street, he would probably find the siblings. If they had arrived in time for the Songstress’s performance, they would certainly have found safety.

But, what about the City Hall?

As time passed, the people in the City Hall, where the Witch Cult had already made their attack, were in increasingly greater danger. Garek was in a place where, at any second, the likelihood of his death increased.

Mimi: “Garf… what do we do?”

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel was once again forced to choose.

He could choose to confirm the survival of the siblings, and then reunite with Subaru. In that case, he would be abandoning Garek, in the City Hall.

How could Garfiel’s relationship to Garek be described?

Unlike Reala, or Reshia, and the children she had given birth to, there was no direct relationship between Garfiel and Garek. If blood connection were used as a criteria for rescue, Garfiel had no obligation to rescue Garek.

However, what would become of Reala, if she lost him?

She would spend years mourning with her children, a possibility borne because Garfiel had forsaken the City Hall here. That family would shed endless tears.

Garfiel: “…The City Hall’s where that Sin Archbishop’s at, right?”

Mimi: “Yep~!”

Garfiel: “Those control towers are very dangerous, but if we can just get that Archbishop and kill her, then…”

Mimi: “Everyone will be saved~? Awesome~! Too awesome~!”

Bouncing on the spot, Mimi applauded Garfiel’s opinion. However, she immediately stopped jumping on the spot,

Mimi: “Although, it’s not a big problem, but… I feel kind of oneasy…”

Garfiel: “Uneasy?”

Mimi: “It’s very dangerous. That kinda feeling. It’s not clear, but it’s that feeling.”

What she meant was that she had no basis for feeling those nasty sensations.

Garfiel felt thrown off by her timid attitude, at a time when the stakes were high.

Up until then, Mimi had constantly supported him from behind, agreeing to his every judgement. And he thought that, once again, she would give her backing.

Garfiel: “How shameless… Expectin’ others to just do nothin’ but support me.”

Mimi: “Garfiel, what can I do?”

Garfiel: “It’d be dumb to not pay attention to yer unease, and the Captain ‘n the others are gonna gimme hell for that, but…”

It would be shameful for the strongest of the Emilia Camp to turn tail and run away in fear because of that. And, no matter how much he struggled, in order to save the city, they would need to attack the City Hall eventually.

Garfiel: “First of all, we gotta confirm the situation of the City Hall. Like if there’s someone guardin’ the place. And then we’re gonna rip off that Archbishop’s neck, that’s what.”

Mimi: “You mean scooting? Hmm… Hmm! Okay, we’re going scuuting~!”

Although Mimi was still a bit reluctant, she agreed with Garfiel’s safety measure.

Seeing her draw her beloved wand from her robe, Garfiel also drew his twin shields from his waist and attached them to his wrists. As his arms were covered in silver armor, he declared himself ready.

Garfiel: “Let’s go.”

Mimi: “Alright~!”

With that response to Garfiel’s brief words, the two headed toward the City Hall.

According to information from Subaru, Sloth of the Witch Cult had had several minions fighting alongside him. Although they could not match up to Garfiel himself, the Witch Cultists that were experienced in combat were capable of posing a threat, especially in sufficient numbers.

On the road, alert of any guards who may have been assigned there, the two traveled cautiously and carefully towards the City Hall.

Garfiel: “This is… odd, what’s goin’ on?”

Far from an overwhelming number of Cultists, they found no one standing guard.

Maybe they had missed them—No, they would not be able to cheat Garfiel and Mimi’s noses. In that case, Garfiel: “It’s like they’re thinkin’ guards ain’t necessary!”

Mimi: “…”

As he recalled the voice from the broadcast, Garfiel’s anger at the Sin Archbishop peaked.

They had never thought that anyone would attack them. Perhaps they were assuming that their control of the control towers was absolute, and that their victory had already been achieved.

The sheer arrogance. He was going to tear them apart with his claws and crunch them with his fangs.

Mimi: “Hmm, hmm~”

As Garfiel gnashed his teeth, Mimi let out a soft groan. She rubbed the back of her neck restlessly, looking disturbed, her nose twitching over and over again.

Garfiel: “What’s up?”

Mimi: “I don’t know~, but I think that something’s wrong. Garf, something’s off.”

Garfiel: “Don’t kid around!”

Seizing the hem of Garfiel’s pants, Mimi suddenly spoke discouraging words. Garfiel snapped at Mimi, who wanted to retreat after coming all the way here.

The Witch Cult had neglected to even establish an outpost. Retreating just because the atmosphere seemed off was not something they could do. If they left right now, the possibility of tragedy befalling Reala’s family would only increase.

Garfiel: “Ya can stay here if ya don’t wanna go. My amazin’ self’ll bite off that Archbishop’s head without a problem!”

Mimi: “Garf!”

Shaking off Mimi’s fingers clutching the hem of his pants, Garfiel leapt out of their hiding place.

Following the path of the waterway coming from the square, he immediately dashed towards the building, the City Hall, right in front of him.

The distance was narrowing. The atmosphere remained stagnant. Their arrogance was real, what a joke. Nothing happened. Ten steps left. Nine steps. Eight steps. Seven steps. He scaled a wall, finding an easier route to first attack the top floor. Six steps. Five ste—

Mimi: “Garf—!”

Garfiel: “—?!”

And when he put strength on his foot for his next step, Garfiel leapt not forward, but sideways.

Immediately after, the sharp light of the edge of a terrifyingly sharp blade flashed by his gaze, and the cobblestone at his feet was slashed.

That destructive energy had been completely silent. The stone steps that were cut obliquely remained still in their previous location, as if unaware they had been cut. Fluttering, choppy white smoke was the remnant of the friction created by that sharp slice.

Garfiel: “…”

Were it not for Mimi’s warning cry, Garfiel would have been struck by that sword. A most beautiful and exquisite slash had barely missed Garfiel’s head. If that artistic cut had hit, Garfiel’s head would end up being put on a pike for display in the square.

Cold sweat.

At that moment, Garfiel turned back, and something landed.

Giant: “…”

Woman: “…”

Before his eyes, two figures had suddenly appeared from above.

One of them was a giant man, so large Garfiel had to tilt his head back to gaze upon his head, leisurely holding a large sword in each hand. The other was a slender, delicate woman, holding a long sword with a single blade in her grip.

Both were wearing black robes, covering their faces, so their identity could not be discerned.

Garfiel: "…That ain't a nice greetin', y'know?"

Scratching the back of his neck, which was covered in cold sweat from shock, Garfiel spoke, trying to divert their attention from determining his own combat strength.

However, neither shadow returned any words to Garfiel's own.

Mimi: "Garf, these two…"

Going around them, Mimi rushed to Garfiel's side. Garfiel did not dare to even look at Mimi, instead keeping his eyes on the two figures.

Garfiel: "Yeah, they're strong."

Mimi's voice was tense, and Garfiel silently answered by placing his hand on her shoulders, supporting her.

The two shadows they were facing gave off the feeling of dreary, ominous demons. The preternatural levels of danger the two exuded were impossible to measure accurately. The unfamiliar atmosphere pricking at Garfiel's skin robbed his mouth of saliva, and he felt his throat rapidly drying up.

It was plain to see that the enemy's strength far transcended the human realm. They were clearly superior to that female murder machine with whom Garfiel had once fought.

Garfiel: "Only two people…?"

No other shadows lurked around.

The only guards were the two before him. They had masked their existence from Garfiel up until now, so there were no other potential presences. Those with strength had already chosen to stop hiding themselves.

In other words, the two in front of them were the barriers they needed to break through to recapture the City Hall. As soon as he understood that, Garfiel shuddered, the corners of his mouth raising.

Garfiel: “Heh, interestin’…!”

Mimi: “Garf?”

Garfiel: “If we win, we can break through…!”

His heart stirred with vigor as Garfiel refused to let fear dominate it, bashing his shields together in front on his chest. High-pitched sounds and sparks scattered, igniting his soul just as it began to cool down.

However, grasping Garfiel’s pants, Mimi shouted—

Mimi: “No, no! Garf, no! Those two, we can’t! They’re super~ strong! Mimi and Garfiel absolutely can’t win alone! We can’t!”

Garfiel: “Hmm. We won’t know ‘til we try. I’ll never admit defeat like that. Besides—”

Mimi attempted to discourage him, but, to Garfiel, the content of her statement seemed to imply his own weakness. Garfiel however clicked his tongue, jerking his chin towards the two hostile shadows.

Garfiel: “—Even if we run away with tails tucked between our legs, they’ll catch up to us.”

Mimi: “Then, then, once! We’ll hit them once, dodge, and then run away. If it’s just us, we have to leave! Without the Captain or Julius —!”

Garfiel: “…”

At Mimi's frantic words, Garfiel bit his lip and pondered.

Indeed, Garfiel also understood that Mimi was correct. Those two held fighting ability that might exceed that of Elsa. Facing two such enemies at once, could only be called a suicidal act.

As there was no other way, was withdrawing the right course of action?

The two figures before their eyes were a barrier. Overwhelmingly might stood in their path, a barrier that had to be surpassed.

Garfiel, having been defeated by Reinhard, had realized how far from the strongest he was.

With consciousness that he must become the shield of those most important to him, he had to walk down the path to become the strongest. A journey necessary so he could become a golden tiger.

He had unexpectedly reunited with his mother, and met her new family, albeit not how he had once hoped. And if he withdrew here, Garek would—

Mimi: "…"

Again grabbing the hem of Garfiel's pants, dominated by tumultuous thoughts, was Mimi, who kept her uneasy expression. Suddenly, Garfiel recalled their gentle night. She had been his kind guardian.

Just then, his stubborn feelings began to gradually melt away.

Garfiel: "…Aight, we'll be doin' what you said. We'll hit 'em 'n run, and find others to come help us—Is that okay?"

Mimi: "Yeah! Yeah! That's it—Let's do it~!"

Mimi gasped with delight, after Garfiel withdrew his reckless ideas.

Having unified their views, they turned to face the figures before them. The shadows had waited in silence ever since they had intercepted the two. Garfiel and Mimi's brief quarrel had provided the perfect opportunity to launch an offensive. Had they held back because of honor? Compassion? Caution?

Garfiel: "—Let's go!"

Mimi: "Hah!"

—If they were merely cautious, then they would be crushed.

Not needing a signal, Garfiel and Mimi leapt into the fray in tandem. Garfiel flew toward the woman, and Mimi attacked the giant.

As Garfiel approached her as fast as a bullet, the woman gently shifted her upper body, and, in the next moment, was swinging her blade downward at an alarming speed. The beauty of the sharp flash of her sword as it split the air was such that it fascinated Garfiel and caused him to momentarily lose himself.

Garfiel: "—Gah!"

However, he was not so foolish as to fully lose himself and allow the blade to reach him.

It bounced into the shield on his right wrist, and he took the opportunity to kick the woman's torso. She swiftly avoided his blow with terrifying nimbleness, rotated her blade, and fired off another strike. His neck as the aim of the slash, Garfiel blocked with the shield on his left arm. Immediately after, he lashed out a kick at her form right in front of him, her light body flying away easily.

Garfiel: "Haa!"

Looking at the form of the woman, who had been easily routed, Garfiel felt exhilaration.

Upon glancing back, he saw Mimi, adept in maneuvering herself against large enemies, successfully ducking under the strike of one of the large swords and firing back magic—She was about to exit the square.

Mimi seemed like she was going to be able to escape safely. The giant did not have the speed to match Mimi as she ran away, and the woman did have the ability to fight Garfiel. In that case,

Garfiel: “If we can win one—!”

If he could take her out, it would be easier to launch another attack later. After defeating the woman, the giant would be much easier to tear to pieces.

Garfiel kicked off the ground, moving towards the woman, who was still collapsed. Her sword was still far from reaching his left shield, and her torso was full of openings. If he slammed his right fist into her, the woman’s body would be completely torn to pieces. There was no way that the woman had an immortal body like Elsa.

Garfiel: “Gotcha!”

He would be able to take out the woman.

At the moment Garfiel became convinced of this and raised his voice, death arrived from behind.

—The giant, who should have been faraway, had approached Garfiel, bringing with him the stench of death. Garfiel’s body reacted instinctively like a loaded spring.

Immediately interrupting his attack, he brought his left wrist to his back, leaping away from the spot.

However, a blow from behind smashed through the defense posed by Garfiel’s left arm altogether, slamming Garfiel into the ground with a yelp, bones creaking.

Garfiel: “Ahhh?!”

Giant: “…”

Garfiel was swallowed by shock and groaned violently at the weight of that unimaginable blow.

Having bounced up from the ground, an outrageous attack from the side again assaulted his body in midair. With the help of his twin shields, his arms barely moving, he defended against the impact—but his body was sent flying with terrifying momentum.

Targeting Garfiel, still gliding through the air, his trajectory parallel to the ground, the giant and the woman dove forward in pursuit at the same time.

Woman: "…"

Giant: "…"

Garfiel: "Haahhahhh!"

Garfiel was sandwiched between the two parallel attacks.

He met the longsword approaching him from the front with a shield, and managed to just barely block the fierce blow of the giant sword at his back by kicking its midsection. The longsword once again emerged from the fray, being met with a shield, the dancing sparks scorching Garfiel's cheeks. Immediately after, the large sword struck Garfiel's body as it descended upon him.

Garfiel: "Hah!"

His bones and sternum creaked, the power of the blow painting Garfiel's vision blood-red. He had been subjected to the strikes of two of those large swords, but their blunt blades had spared Garfiel's life.

A cry of agony followed the blood spilling from his mouth, as he somehow managed to escape from his predicament by using his whole body as a spring. However, the two difficult enemies would not allow his survival.

Woman: "…"

Silently, a quiet slash approached Garfiel's neck.

Although the intensity of this strike could not be compared with that of the previous one, the sharpness of the woman's sword was beautiful in that it was laced with the breath of death, ignoring the need for raw power. Even the tip of that calm, elegant blade would split him in twain, just as if he had been slashed by its midsection.

Giant: "…"

Also wordless, the giant's battling style was brutal and crude.

However, that kind of brutality was not one that left everything to chance and relied on recklessness, it was the brutality of someone who could harness and optimize their destructive power. Most people would barely be able to hold even one of his heavy swords, but he easily swung two of them, each in one of his giant arms.

Garfiel: "Ah, ah, hah, ah, haaah!"

A slash like the flow of water. A slash like a raging cyclone.

Although their styles were different, the effectiveness of their dynamic was commensurate with their overwhelming skill, and they attacked in perfect tandem; Garfiel had no choice but to stand his ground and fight to the death.

Desperately bouncing backwards on the stone steps, dodging a heavy slash, feeling a sharp wind whistle just over his head, relying on his instinct to withstand attacks with his shields, dodging, bouncing, defending.

—But, if they kept at it, sooner or later, he would be overwhelmed by their momentum and be beheaded.

Woman: "…"

Giant: "…"

The two figures pressed Garfiel without respite, giving him nary a chance to breathe. Like that, his oxygen-deprived head could not be dedicated to finding a ray of hope. His every effort was directed on avoiding a fatal injury.

His attention would surely fail to keep up as his exhaustion mounted. He would suffer a fatal blow.

Masterful combat, transcendental swings. They could easily and simply reap Garfiel's life, despite his confidence in his physical strength. The more time passed, the more escape routes closed to him.

—Decision. A decision was pressing.

The only way out of this dilemma was to reveal his true fangs. Only in that moment would Garfiel be able to say who was clearly and overwhelmingly superior, him or the enemy.

And that thought briefly revived him. He sought an opportunity to breathe.

Garfiel: "—Huh…"

The woman's blade weaved deadly slashes. He cast both wrists forward to capture her, twisting his body the least he could to avoid the full impact of the giant's attack.

As expected, the giant's blow smashed Garfiel's left shoulder, and his right kneecap was shattered. But, in exchange for a breath of fresh air, that damage was nothing.

Garfiel: "Kah, haaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAA…"

Woman: "…"

Giant: "…"

With a raging roar, he released the heat boiling in his body.

The same feeling of boiling blood expanded to his field of vision, which became nothing but pure white, a cracking sound echoing from beneath his face as his bones shifted. His face was twisted, his teeth elongated into fangs, and he exercised his arms as their muscles expanded rapidly, his body becoming covered with golden hair.

Only his upper body had changed, leaving him in a half-beast state.

The smell of blood chased his rationality away momentarily, but, in this state, he was not completely devoid of thought. Seeing the person in front of them turn into a beast, it was impossible for any hostile party to remain calm.

Woman and Giant: "…"

Facing those two speechless figures, Garfiel growled, with the intention of shattering their eardrums. As the enemies' footsteps froze as if blasted with a gust of wind, confirming that his nails had grown into thick, double-edged weapons, he decided to gouge their bodies.

The tips of the nails of his front paw descended toward the woman —Just before that, the form of giant man squeezed in front of her.

No matter. Even those thick muscles were nothing worth mentioning, they were but paper shields to his claws. And shielding was just what the giant intended to do—he stretched out his arm, the blade of his large sword facing down, making a gesture of neither defending nor attacking, but choosing to protect the woman.

Cute. But it was over.

—His paws would tear through the giant's body, followed by the slender form of the woman.

Garfiel: "—?!"

That process had already been set in motion but had been paused in the first motion.

Garfiel's tiger paw connected with the giant, but had failed to tear through the man's body. Before that happened, he had caught Garfiel's paw in his own hands.

He had uncovered the front part of his robe to reveal six additional arms.

With Garfiel's thick arm suppressed, the large sword he gripped firmly blocked the tip of Garfiel's claws, meeting the violent attack from head-on.

—That was the Absolute Defense of the Eight-Arms.

Garfiel: “…”

Too stunned to react, Garfiel hesitated. He could not believe that the giant had withstood his crushing blow without faltering.

Which meant that, in that moment, Garfiel had left himself exposed and completely unprepared.

Woman: “…”

Reappearing from behind the giant’s back, the woman launched herself at the unprepared half-beast. Garfiel’s back, now wide and covered by tiger’s fur, was much like a practice doll for the woman sweeping her longsword. As the tip of the sword approached, Garfiel felt the invisible breath of death on his neck.

However, his paws captured by the giant’s hands and his body unable to move, all he could do was wait for death—

Mimi: “Hold on a second!”

Garfiel: “…”

Just before Garfiel was split in half, the woman’s cut was stopped by an unfolding blue magic barrier, together with a shout. Her strike bounced into the barrier, and the irritating noise of a blade scraping on ice pealed, the barrier disappearing as the woman landed back on the ground.

The orange-haired kitten had saved Garfiel in the nick of time.

Mimi: “Garf, you said we’d run away!”

For the first time, something like reproach colored Mimi’s voice.

In his half-beast status, hearing the voice coming from behind, Garfiel’s rationality returned as he began to recognize his own stupidity. By ignoring anxieties, being far too careless, and being too dismissive of his opponent, he had put himself in a dangerous situation. In his moment of despair, Mimi had rescued him.

Garfiel swallowed as he appreciated the sturdiness of Mimi's barrier.

The violence in the woman's blade really did not match her appearance, and Mimi's defensive capabilities were also quite considerable. Garfiel was incredibly fortunate that she was there.

Garfiel: "Oh, aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Woman: "…"

Immediately after the relief spread to his chest, Garfiel forcibly broke free of the giant's grip. Kicking at the body, and spotting his blow being blocked by an arm, Garfiel picked Mimi up by the waist and disengaged from the battle.

In this way, he would flee from this place with Mimi. As they had originally planned, they would gather reinforcements and return to this place to fight anew.

Woman: "…"

While they fled, the woman bounced again in pursuit. But once again, Mimi deployed a barrier, this one larger than the previous one. The woman's slash was once again repelled, and Garfiel gathered all his energy into his legs to escape as fast as he could.

—A breath. The figure of the woman stopped, gently casting a hand in front of the barrier. With a leap, she approached.

Garfiel: "—Ah."

Woman: "…"

Garfiel: "Eh?"

A quiet sound accompanied a light impact.

His jaw dropped as he witnessed the events unfolding. Garfiel had finished making another jumping motion, pulverizing the stone pavement, But as the half-beast sailed through the air, fresh blood followed him, a line of red being drawn in the air.

That blood, where was it pouring from?

Garfiel: “Midget?”

Having his thoughts of maintaining his half-beast form interrupted, Garfiel rapidly changed back to human form. However, the sensation of losing his tiger fur was buried under a wave of chills crawling down his back.

In his arms was the weak, loose body of Mimi. He turned his gaze down. Looking up at his flying figure, was a woman whose blade whipped through the air.

More than half of that longsword was coated with red, viscous blood.

A warm liquid dripped onto Garfiel’s lower abdomen. Mimi remained limp and motionless in his arms, and he could see the wand she loved falling from her hands.

Garfiel: “…”

Landing, jumping again. Repeatedly leaping onto nearby buildings, he fled without glancing behind. Fortunately, their adversaries were not following them.

Were they uninterested in anything other than guarding the square, or was this a show of humanity? It did not matter. After four, five lengthy leaps away from the square, Garfiel crushed the roof of a building as he landed, lowering Mimi’s body still in his arms, and checked Mimi’s condition.

Mimi’s eyes were closed, a large amount of blood spilling from the wound in her chest.

Garfiel yanked her clothes open to check on her wounds. Her vitals had not been struck. Of course, that did not allow for any optimism. Due to her blood loss, she was in need of immediate healing magic. He needed to calm himself.

Garfiel: “…”

Placing his hand on her wound, Garfiel willed healing magic into Mimi's body.

Garfiel was one of the best users of healing magic in Sanctuary. He had always felt that it was slightly useless, but, in the event of any emergency, he'd hoped to accomplish something. Therefore, Garfiel had poured all of his magical efforts into healing magic, and he had a rough but complete grasp of the art of healing. As long as the injury was not fatal, he was fairly confident that he could heal it, even if it were a deep one.

The wounds on Mimi's body would soon close with the waves of healing Mana. Sweat beaded his forehead as he put his hand on the wound, directing it to suppress the overflow of blood. He continued to dedicate his power to mend the cut skin, muscle, injured internal organs, desperately willing them to be fixed, giving her Mana continuously. Continuously. Continuously.

—The wound did not close.

Garfiel: "What… What…?"

Who was whispering in such a soft voice?

Any who could make that kind of soft sound in this situation deserved nothing but Garfiel's wrath. He glanced around wildly, looking for the source. There was no one there. Finally, he realized. That voice was his own. He was aware of it.

So that soft voice had been him? Had he made that sound? Such a sound was, was, was—

Garfiel: "Close, close, close, healhealheal…!"

Exhausted, with all his might he ordered all of the Mana in his body into her treatment. The wave of healing magic flowed into Mimi's form, filling her with a gentle current of Mana.

In spite of this, the unsealable wound refused to close.

Garfiel: "—You're jokin' me, right?"

Unable to accept the reality facing him, Garfiel again muttered with a weak voice.

Immediately afterward, he hit himself in the face and bit down hard on his lip to keep himself grounded. Now was not the time to make such a soft voice. There had to be a way.

What could he do, what could he do, what could he do, what could he do? He had no idea. But he could not give up here. Not knowing was not a reason to give up. He had to do whatever he could to save this girl.

Because she was the one who had let Garfiel cry. Such a child, who had been hurt trying to save him, could not die like this.

Garfiel: "…"

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel began to run. One of his hands rested on the girl's wound, trying again to staunch her bleeding with his ineffective healing magic.

The smell of blood, the smell of death. In these deserted streets, even any thoughts about what had happened had vacated Garfiel's mind.

Someone, anyone! Please, save this kid! Someone, anyone, bring a miracle! Tell me what to do! If there's anything I can do… what can I do to save her?!

Garfiel: "…"

Feeling himself at wits' end, Garfiel sharpened his sense of smell. The smell of water. The smell of blood permeating his surroundings. Strong emotions, charred meat. Amid those foul scents, Garfiel found a very familiar odor brushing past, and immediately followed it, running, running, continually, endlessly, running.

He flew into a shelter, evoking an immediate uproar at his bloodied appearance. But he had no time to care at the moment. Opening his eyes, he searched for that figure. Searching, searching, searching…

???: "Garfiel?!"

He found him on the other side of the shelter. At the back of that deep, dark, cold underground facility, he discovered the one he had been desperately searching out.

Subaru. Natsuki Subaru.

To Garfiel, that existence was miraculous, and, in the worst case possible, he would be able to find a glimpse of light in the worst of situations.

His legs were staggering. His head was shaking. Due to the light weight in his hands and his clogged throat, Garfiel swayed back and forth.

As he approached, Subaru glanced around him and gasped, becoming aware of the unconscious Mimi in his arms. Under Subaru's gaze, Garfiel bowed his head, holding Mimi out, earnestly cursing his own stupidity.

Garfiel: "Sorry, captain… hk! My amazin' self's… worthless…! Incompetent… hk!"

He had been unable to protect that family, his vow to become a shield for them had not been fulfilled, he had challenged those hostile forces of his own volition, and had failed to get any results.

Subaru: "Garfiel, what… No, it's not the time for that. Ferris!"

Ferris: "I know! Hurry up, hand over that child!"

Mimi was taken from Garfiel's outstretched arms, and placed in a bed near Subaru, a thin figure standing next to her.

In the next moment, overwhelming healing energy flowed, permeating the space. Garfiel's own could not even compare to that. If Garfiel's healing prowess were likened to a drop of rain, that person's ability would be akin to a waterfall.

Witnessing magical power that could resurrect even a lost life, Garfiel witnessed the treatment as if his soul had been drawn out of his body. Subaru gently placed a hand on Garfiel's slackened shoulder. With a glance, he could see that Subaru had endured an appalling injury to his leg.

Subaru: “Although I can’t say that this went well, you did a great job bringing her to Ferris. Thanks to you, the girl can be saved.”

Garfiel: “Thanks to me…?”

What was Subaru saying?

Thanks to Garfiel, Mimi had been saved? Ridiculous! Mimi had been hurt so severely, and it was all Garfiel’s fault. Mimi’s life should never have been in danger in the first place. All of this had happened because of Garfiel’s poor judgement.

Hollow and twisted thinking, unresolved thoughts of remorse, and self-conscious stupidity. And the world would never forgive Garfiel’s foolishness.

Mistakes would always have their consequences. And so, an horrifying outcome arrived.

Subaru: “Ferris, what happened…?”

Subaru’s expression grew worried upon feeling something unusual.

Subaru dragged his leg, heading over to the bed where the treatment was being performed, calling the name of the person casting his potent healing spells.

In that terrifying torrent of magic, the healer shook his head.

Ferris: “Why…? These wounds, they will nyot heal…! If it goes on like this, I don’t know if I can save her!”

His anguished cry echoed across the room, and Garfiel turned his face towards the heavens. But he was underground. So, the underground sky had nothing to tell Garfiel.

—The cost of his mistake could be paid in nothing but blood.

Chapter 32:
The City Hall Raiders' Conference

Ferris: "Ah, really! Healing magic has nyo effect, so we can only use such a primitive treatment!"

Ferris, with blood staining his cheeks, clenched his teeth in irritation while waving a hand.

Lying in front of him in a cot, blood still flowing from her chest, was Mimi's unconscious and faintly-breathing form.

Wholeheartedly wanting to stop the bleeding, he had been forced to bind her wound with a cloth imbued with magic and several layers of bandages. In the case of arm or leg injuries, the bleeding could be suppressed by lifting the injury higher than the heart. Only, Mimi's wound was on her chest, just above her heart.

The amount of time she had left could only depend upon her own vitality.

Subaru leaned against the wall, worried about Garfiel as the latter watched that desperate treatment, collapsed on the ground. He saw that instead of looking at Mimi, Garfiel had plunged his bloody hands into his short, blond hair, casting his gaze downwards, a far cry from his usual optimistic self.

The blood covering his body was not only Mimi's. It was plain to see that he had his own severe wounds. Blood stained the corners of his mouth, and his left shoulder and right knee looked particularly painful. His pants were torn near his knees, where flesh was missing,and white bone could be glimpsed.

Subaru: "Garfiel. Mimi can be entrusted to Ferris, for the time being. You also need treatment for your wounds. Can you administer healing spells yourself?"

Garfiel: "…Ah, yeah."

Nodding, Garfiel slowly pressed his palms to his wounds and began to deliver healing Mana into his own body. As he watched the wounds slowly healing, Subaru looked down at the Conversation Mirror in his hand.

Reflected in the surface of the mirror was a silent old swordsman, his wrinkled face bearing a complex expression. In the depths of his own heart, what kind of conflict had risen? Undoubtedly, Wilhelm must have reached the same conclusion as Subaru.

Subaru: “The wound cannot be closed, which is to say…”

Wilhelm: “In all likelihood, it is a wound caused by the Divine Protection of the Death God.”

Finishing Subaru’s words, Wilhelm came to the expected conclusion.

The Divine Protection of the Death God. A terrifying power that rendered any wounds caused by its owner uncurable. That Mimi’s wound could not be healed by magic was probably due to such a Divine Protection.

Then, as far as Subaru knew, only one person had possessed it. Of course, while it could not be asserted that no other person had the same Divine Protection,

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san. Although this is something I fear hearing … How is your arm injury?”

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm briefly closed his eyes in meditation, then removed his coat and presented his left shoulder to Subaru. The bandage wrapped tightly against it had no traces of blood. Then there was no bleeding—so his attacker could not be nearby.

Wilhelm: “Even assuming that the injury was given by someone with the same Divine Protection as my wife, as long as my wounds have not opened, she cannot be near. Although, that should be a matter of course.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san…”

Was he frustrated, or was he relieved? Subaru did not know.

Wilhelm believed to have lost his wife fifteen years ago. The events of one year ago might have made him doubt her death, but he had refrained from raising his hopes.

It was a common weakness of human beings to hold a small modicum of hope, even if it was difficult be unconditionally hopeful. However, even if Wilhelm succumbed to that weakness, Subaru found no shame in it whatsoever.

Therefore, at this moment, Subaru found no words he could say to Wilhelm. Of course, the latter desired neither casual comfort nor encouragement.

Behind Subaru, a change in the situation had occurred. That was—

Ricardo: “Bro. Sorry to take yer time while you’re treatin’ a wound.”

Saying that, Ricardo sat on the ground near Ferris, who was desperately conducting his treatment. The beastman sat in front of Garfiel, whose hair was still moist with fresh blood, eyeing him sharply.

To meet that gaze, Garfiel slowly raised his head.

Ricardo: “I dunno what happened to ya. But I know that if ya hadn’t brought her here, Mimi’d not have made it. So,”

Garfiel: “…”

Ricardo: “Really, thank ya very much. I’m deeply grateful.”

With two fists on the ground, Ricardo kneeled and bowed his head.

As Ricardo’s forehead hit the ground, thanking Garfiel for bringing someone who was much like family to him to this place, Garfiel appeared dismayed.

Mimi's prognosis was still far from optimistic. It was understandable that Garfiel held some guilt for not being able to successfully protect Mimi. However, that did not mean that Garfiel was to blame. What good would it do to blame him?

In his heart of hearts, Ricardo had, of course, hoped for Mimi's safe return. There was no way that he felt calm about Mimi's situation, considering she had been brought back in that state.

Even so, Subaru could clearly see that Ricardo's vaulted posture reflected his complete sincerity. At the same time, he also felt unforgiving anger at those who left Mimi in that state. Therefore,

Subaru: "Garfiel. Although it's probably hard to talk about it, tell me exactly what happened. It's hard to believe that you're in such a state. Not to mention…"

As he asked Garfiel to explain the situation, an idea took root in Subaru's mind.

Earlier, as he sorted through their information with Julius and Wilhelm, contemplating the siege of Priestella, the idea had briefly crossed his mind.

Seizing five key locations around the city, the Witch Cult had taken the lives of everyone in the city hostage. According to their speculation, each location must be occupied by a mighty force. Assuming that was right—they were most likely guarded by Wrath, Greed, Lust. Then, the likelihood that Gluttony was also present was high.

—That Gluttony was precisely Subaru's target. He could not let that go.

Greed, who had kidnapped Emilia, and Wrath, who had regarded Subaru as Petelgeuse. Lust, whose ugly nature he had heard earlier, and Gluttony, the target he had been hunting.

Although the situation was indeed the worst of the worst, at the same time, there had never been an opportunity better than this. Now that he was trapped in a spider web, it was the right time to exterminate all the spiders.

Subaru: “Anyway, we have to defeat all of these guys somehow. After all, if we don’t, we’ll never be able to return safe and sound.”

Garfiel: “…”

With that declaration, Garfiel stared at him in surprise. Subaru nodded with encouragement, urging him to speak.

Garfiel: “…After hearin’ that broadcast, my amazin’ self and the midget went to the center of the city. Both of us hated the annoyin’ voice of the person talkin’.”

Ricardo: “We were also discussin’ a way to do that. Looks like ya got the first chance.”

Garfiel: “On the way to the City Hall, there were no sentries, there was nothin’ gettin’ in our way. So my amazin’ self rushed straight towards the City Hall, where…”

Garfiel’s words stopped, as he clenched his teeth, his fists trembling.

This was not fear, but anger. However, Subaru believed that that anger was directed not at his opponent, but at Garfiel himself.

Issuing a fiery, angry breath, Garfiel continued,

Garfiel: “Two enemies appeared. One of ‘em was this huge bastard that lugged around two giant swords. Th’other was a thin woman with a long sword. Either one of ‘em’d probably gimme a run for my money in a one-on-one fight. No… they’d prolly be stronger than my amazin’ self.”

Subaru: “Even stronger than you…? Was one of them the broadcaster?”

Garfiel: “…Prolly not.”

Subaru almost wondered whether if his hearing had gone wrong.

Garfiel was not only the strongest in Emilia’s faction, and among all of the people assembled to counter the Witch Cult's offensive, the most capable one. That very same Garfiel had just judged two people to be individually stronger than himself. And if his assumption was right, those people were not Sin Archbishops, but just run-of-the-mill Witch Cultists.

Garfiel: "Those two didn't give me the feelin' of malice like the broadcast did. Even though my amazin' self left openin's while escapin', we still got away… that seemed like some kind of swordsman's etiquette or whatever."

Garfiel regarded his opponents' strength with something like awe. Unlike his usual lively self, he seemed to be atrophied, clearly still affected by Mimi's state.

Ricardo, who had been listening to Garfiel, slapped his knees with a dull sound and stood. Then he grabbed Garfiel's shoulder,

Ricardo: "Strong or not, I don't give a damn. What I want to know is, who of the two left ya in such a state? Who did that to Mimi? Who should I seek revenge on? Tell me."

Garfiel: "…The woman was the one who cut the midget. That's why, that woman, I gotta—"

Wilhelm: "—That woman, could you please leave her to me?"

Ricardo's thirst for vengeance for Mimi had been ignited, and Garfiel swore that same goal, with shame. The one who had interjected, however, was Wilhelm, who had been listening silently through the mirror.

To him, too, that was, by no means, something he would leave as is. But it was cruel to the two who did not know about Wilhelm's circumstances.

Ricardo: "Why? This has nothin' to do wit'cha, Wilhelm-san. Ya can't take my right to get revenge on those who harmed my adorable family."

Wilhelm: "I… cannot say for certain without having confirmation. However, if what I suspect is true, then that woman is a very important one to me. I must insist.”

Ricardo: “That’s… if ya make me angry, I ain’t gonna spare ya.”

Although Ricardo snarled in agitation, Wilhelm stubbornly refused.

Precisely because he understood the situation of both sides, Subaru could not determine who was in the right. Therefore, it was not Subaru who drew an end to that quarrel, but,

Crusch: “—Wilhelm. And Ricardo-sama. Now is not the time for strife between allies. Not when so many civilian lives are exposed to danger.”

Wilhelm: “Crusch-sama…”

With a cool voice, filled with fortitude, Crusch scolded the two.

At the reproof of his master, Wilhelm bowed in shame, while Ricardo scratched his head bloody, folding his arms. In the meantime, considering options that would avoid internal strife,

Anastasia: “Okay, okay. Let’s make a decision.”

Clapping gently, Anastasia took the mirror and pointed at Subaru. Smiling at Subaru becoming timid, Anastasia fiddled with her fox scarf.

Anastasia: “First of all, I wanna bring up the raid on the City Hall proposed by Natsuki-kun. Me and Crusch-san’s faction support that. If we take the City Hall, we’ll also rescue people familiar with the city’s workings. And even if it isn’t retaken, the situation of the waterways could be improved a little bit, yeah? Although that might be just me and my wishful thinkin’.”

Subaru: “No, I’m thinking the same thing. Moreover, if the other side launches an attack first, our choices will be reduced. If we want to act, the sooner the better.”

Anastasia: “…What’s this, ya really became reliable in this past year, no? In any case, it’s just as Natsuki-kun said. Thanks to the Conversation Mirror, we can have people cooperatin’ in three different places, and, fortunately, about seventy-percent of our total combat power can be dispatched right now. It'd be reasonable to say that an attack on the City Hall'd fare well, yeah?"

With Anastasia's opinion, Subaru glanced at Garfiel and Ricardo.

In order to conquer the City Hall in one fell swoop, it would become necessary to send out a beefy number of powerful forces. A raid on the City Hall would entail deploying forces from this shelter—Garfiel and Ricardo. Then, from other the shelter, Julius and Wilhelm would also join. If the members of the Iron Fang, as well as both Ton and Kan, and the numerous other adventurers staying in the city were added to their ranks, their combat effectiveness would be improved.

Subaru: "Honestly, if Reinhard were here, everything'd be just perfect… Could we get Ton and Kan to summon him?"

Julius: "It's strange that we haven't located him, is that what you're thinking?"

Julius, in response to Subaru's attempt to maximize their combat power, shifted his gaze towards the two thugs in the same shelter as him.

Julius: "Before entering the shelter, the two seemed to have fired magic into the sky as a signal. However, Reinhard, who should have appeared instantly, did not appear. And, this is not quite the pleasant thought, but…"

Subaru: "But what? Really, please stop doing this hesitation thing, I can't take it anymore."

Julius: "Then, I welcome you to feel the same trepidation that I do—Felt-sama's followers were separated from her and Reinhard just before all this happened. It seems that they were last seen speaking to a red-haired man."

Subaru: "Red-haired man… you can't mean that fucking bastard, right?"

Julius: "I can neither confirm nor deny this."

Subaru gritted his teeth indignantly while listening Julius's elegant answer.

If Subaru's speculation were right, Felt and Reinhard had met Reinhard's father, Heinkel—what would the two have to talk about with that man?

And why were they still not taking action even now?

Subaru: "However, he showed up at Sirius's speech in that previous loop… What's the difference? Is it because of the broadcast? Has he taken action already?"

Subaru did not fully understand what the conditions were before and after that event. In any case, knowing that they could not count on Reinhard to show up was a cause for alarm.

Subaru's shoulders dropped in contemplation. Meanwhile, Ferris had returned from the back of the shelter, his feminine costume stained with black blood and his face drenched in sweat.

Ferris: "Huu~. That took quite a while."

Ricardo: "So, how's Mimi's condition? Is she fine? Did you save her?"

As Ferris wiped his forehead of sweat, Ricardo questioned breathlessly. And Garfiel, from behind him, also cast him a panicked gaze without standing up.

However, at the appeal in their eyes, Ferris shook his head ruthlessly.

Ferris: "I can't say that I've saved her, but the wound isn't getting worse. That's all thanks to her brothers right nyow. By strengthening their link, she's barely managing to hold on."

Ricardo: "That's their Divine Protection of Trisection, right? In that case, what'll happen to the brothers?"

Ferris: "Their Divine Protection is mean to have three children share the burden of fatigue and injury. They've strengthened their bond, allowing the brothers to hold the burden of their seriously injured sister. In that case, although her life can be prolonged…”

Tivey: “—When nee-chan’s life is exhausted, we’ll die too, right?”

From the mirror, a pained high-pitched voice echoed forth.

Ricardo frowned and took the Conversation Mirror, which reflected Hetaro and Tivey, sitting side-by-side. The two brothers were also clutching their chests in pain.

Ricardo: “You guys are idiots. Really, just a group of hopeless idiots.”

Hetaro: “…However, when I think that this is nee-chan’s pain, knowing that we are feeling the same pain together makes me a little happier.”

Tivey: “I’m not as strong as my brother. So, Captain. I believe that you’ll be able to do something for us soon. Because if I die, I’ll become a ghost and haunt you.”

Being assigned to aid with the injury their sister had sustained, the two brothers experienced the same serious injury. Seeing Hetaro and Tivey lying side-by-side in their shelter, Ricardo let out a deep breath and took his machete in hand. Then,

Ricardo: “…In other words, we gotta move quickly, then. If we don’t, there’s no point.”

Ricardo whispered in a deep voice that emanated with his passionate feelings.

No one could stop him. No one could not comprehend his emotions.

Anastasia: “Send the Iron Fang out and have them clear the road ‘til the City Hall. Then we’ll have our best break into the buildin’ itself, and try to seize it in one fell swoop. The enemies are a huge man and a slender woman. And it’s correct to think that Lust’s gonna be there too.”

Subaru: “The elites here are Garfiel and Ricardo, and Wilhelm-san and Julius.”

Crusch: “—I’m going too.”

Those words came from Crusch, who had tied her hair into a ponytail.

She stood with sword in hand, having shed her dress, replacing it with clothes suited for battle.

Subaru: “Crusch-san, by saying you’ll go, you mean that you can fight?”

Crusch: “Although I am not as strong as I was before, I have had Wilhelm as a teacher. In addition, I can use Wind to augment my strikes. I am not intending to be a burden.”

Before losing her memory, Crusch’s power was enough that her presence had made a difference in the battle of the White Whale. However, the strength of the currently amnesiac Crusch was unknown to Subaru.

Honestly speaking, Subaru had thought that her newfound femininity meant that she had mostly lost her aptitude for battle.

Wilhelm: “Crusch-sama’s talent with the sword has not declined. That, I can guarantee.”

Wilhelm’s words wiped away the last of Subaru’s discomfort. The old swordsman nodded, gazing through the mirror towards his master’s side.

Wilhelm: “However, please be careful. I implore you, please place your safety first.”

Crusch: “It is the obligation of the nobility to bear the burden of war and to shed blood before the common person does. If innocent people weep, then I will shield them under my wing. I will fight, Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm: “…Honestly. But it is because of that that I offer you my sword.”

Crusch spoke resolutely toward Wilhelm's allegiance. Ferris raised his hand as he watched Wilhelm nod, the latter's face full of admiration.

Ferris: "Yes! Yes! Ferri-chan too! If Crusch-sama will fight, then please let Ferri-chan accompany you! Please!"

Crusch: "Ferris has travelled between shelters to cast healing spells on those in need of treatment. I am glad that you feel that way, but do not mistake which battlefield you should be fighting on."

Ferris: "Gah…"

Silenced in that manner, Ferris bowed his head, agonizing while searching for any retaliation. Unable to find one, he raised a white flag with a tearful expression.

Ferris: "Wil-jii. Definitely do a good job protecting Crusch-sama, okay? Absolutely absolutely."

Wilhelm: "Mhm, I understand. Even if my own life is in danger, even if it burns out—I will do so."

That was Wilhelm's answer to that trust, full of tragic determination.

Ricardo waved his sword gently, and Garfiel finished his own treatment and stood with his back leaning against the wall. Through the mirror, Wilhelm stood gallantly with sword at his waist, and Julius stood next to Crusch who had changed her clothes.

A total of five people, with the strength to strike at the City Hall. At Anastasia's direction, the Iron Fang would restrain the Witch Cultists and pave the way.

The dawn of the decisive battle—which would also include Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "Gah, ugh, ahh…!"

Ferris: "S-Su-Subaru-kyun! What are you doing?!"

Biting his molars to endure the pain in his right leg, Subaru finally climbed to his feet.

Ferris, flushed in fury, slapped Subaru upside the head, glaring at his leg, which was still missing skin and muscle.

Subaru: “Ferris, that hurt!”

Ferris: “Of course it did! I’ve obviously said that you absolutely need rest, but you keep being unreasonable! Subaru-kyun, have you been cursed to go against Ferri-chan’s diagnoses? Do you want your feet to rot off?”

Subaru: “Even if it rots and drops from my body, there are still things that I have to do. Ferris, you should understand my feelings. Do you think I can really stay here obediently and wait for results?”

Ferris: “…Muu.”

Ferris raised a hand to his mouth as Subaru pressed on. Sending his companions to a place where survival was unlikely, then waiting for results—Subaru could never endure such a thing. If he could come up with some clever idea and help someone by just standing by, how could he lie here?

Subaru: “You can fight like this, treating people. Well, I must fight too. Beatrice protected me, and Emilia’s still in danger because of Greed. In this state, you want me to retreat?”

Ferris: “…Is that to say that you won’t regret losing your foot?”

Subaru: “Of course I’m bound to regret it. But I’d regret not fighting more.”

Ferris: “Heh… Then, Subaru-kyun also wants to play a cool role.”

With an exhausted expression and a sigh, Ferris held a hand to his forehead. After that, he violently flicked his finger on Subaru’s forehead, causing him to lean back, and Ferris pressed his hand to the wound on Subaru’s right leg.

Ferris: “What I’ll be doing now is giving you a bit of solace!”

Subaru: “Solace is… Ah, wait a minute, Ferris-san. The injury kinda hurts, so rubbing back and forth like that… It doesn’t hurt…?”

His hands on the wound, Ferris ravaged Subaru’s leg—was what should have happened, but, instead, a faint light shone from the injury, ending the pain which had been piercing through it like a sharp blade.

Subaru, shocked at the effects of that magic, looked Ferris in the face. Then,

Ferris: “You look murderous?!”

Subaru: “No, no! Although, if you have such convenient magic, don’t be so reluctant to give it sooner! This is great, I can move!”

In front of Ferris, Subaru jumped lightly with his right leg as Ferris’s sharp tongue took a jab at him. While enjoying the joy of his new freedom of motion, he began to dance in place. Pain was no longer a problem.

His palm hit the wound with a smack as he celebrated the amazing change. Then, Subaru looked down, feeling something sticky and wet. His hand were covered in bright red. The wound on his right foot had ruptured.

Subaru: “Hey, hey, hey?! Didn’t you heal it?!”

Ferris: “I nyever said I healed it. I just asked if you’d regret it if you lost your leg. Ferri-chan just removed the touch sensation of your right leg. As long as you’re careful running around, you can keep your leg.”

Subaru’s bleeding legs shook as Ferris re-bandaged the wound and cast fresh spells. The blood stopped; however, Subaru felt even more uncomfortable, realizing that he couldn’t feel anything from his leg. It was similar to anesthesia, but he did not feel quite as sluggish. Aside from not being able to feel touch, his right leg’s actions were almost normal.

However, pain itself was also a limiter to avoid destroying one’s own body. For the sake of convenience, those sensations had been revoked.

Ferris: “Of course, I’m doing this reluctantly. When we meet back up, there’ll definitely be some residual effects. If you wanna keep them at a minimum, be careful!”

Subaru: “…Understood. You’ve been a great help, I’m grateful.”

Ferris: “…Subaru-kyun is absolutely, certainly planning to ignore Ferri-chan’s words.”

Ferris sighed and turned away from Subaru, who nodded and reexamined his leg. Although he would like to say something like “I’d never do such a thing”, if the situation arose, he could not promise that he would comply with Ferris. Unable to make any promises, Subaru could only thank him once more before rushed to Garfiel and Ricardo.

Subaru: “Right, I’m coming too. It’s useless to try to stop me. I don’t think I’ll be too much help in combat, but there must be something I can do…”

Ricardo: “Why’d I stop you? You’ll bring wit’cha the strength of a hundred men. I’ll be counting on ya.”

Subaru: “I can do things like—huh?”

Although he had been waiting for a rejection, he had been eagerly welcomed into the party. Subaru wondered what in the world was happening as the beastman Ricardo opened his mouth.

Ricardo: “The White Whale, and Sloth too. Both times, I saw yer courage for myself, bro. You’d be wrong if ya think only Wilhelm sees yer value. I also see someone worthy of praise.”

Subaru: “Really, truly? Feels weird…”

Inspired by Ricardo’s words, Subaru’s self-invitation was gone without any problem.

Before leaving the shelter, Subaru approached Beatrice’s bedside and gently touched the forehead of the girl who slept quietly.

Subaru: “Beatrice, I’ll be going out. I messed up and left you like this, so now it’s my turn to work hard. I’ll take care of those guys and get Emilia back. You just stay here and rest well.”

Beatrice: “…”

Silence. Comforted by her peaceful breathing, Subaru stood up.

Meanwhile, Garfiel and Ricardo spoke to Mimi, who looked miserable as she lay unconscious. Although she also gave no response, the two men showed an opposite expression, showing strong determination.

Subaru: “We’ll leave the shelter and join up at the large waterway leading to the City Hall—So, everyone, be careful.”

Before their departure, everyone exchanged glances, determination fueled by their respective oaths, fierce momentum propelling them onward.

The war to regain Priestella would commence with a raid on the City Hall.

The two swordsmen in their way, and the Sin Archbishop of Lust. Inscribing those targets in their minds, the soldiers marched toward the battlefield.

Chapter 33:
Stratagem on the City Hall

1

—The silent Priestella's siege had, up until now, seemed to be naught but a fanciful story. Walking atop of the stone slab, Subaru glimpsed the flowing waterway.

The water running within was clear and pollution-free. Even now, it flowed along its constant, well-established path. The mysterious mechanism which split the flow between left and right was still up and running. As long as the floodgates resumed their function, anyone would believe that the peril the city was under was little more than a nightmare.

Garfiel: "Captain, ya can't drag yer feet, y'know."

Subaru: "I know, I know. Every second that passes, the danger of this City Hall Capture mission increases by ten percent."

Ricardo: "In that case, if eleven seconds pass, then we're screwed, yeah? Well, that prolly ain't far from the truth, actually."

Garfiel, who had taken the lead, narrowed his eyes in displeasure as Ricardo's loud voice rang out through the air. However, the beastman's expression was not discouraged in the least. Carrying his sharp machete, he strode forward with vigorous steps, but not even his cavalier attitude was enough to relieve Garfiel's tension and guilt.

Ricardo looked no different from usual, while Garfiel had clearly discarded his usual demeanor.

Even so, three people who Ricardo considered family were hurt, and maintaining a calm state of mind right now was difficult. This had been made clear back in the shelter.

On the other hand, that typical unfounded self-confidence and recklessness of Garfiel's had vanished, and what remained was a cautious and more timid attitude, a change that emitted an ominous message.

Subaru: "…Well, I can't say that I'm any better off, either."

Those two were not the only ones unable to maintain their usual state of mind.

Subaru had suffered an injury to his right leg, Beatrice was unconscious, and, most importantly, Emilia's safety was unconfirmed. All of those weighed heavily on his mind. The only reason he had been so quick to try and change the situation is that his experience told him that not seizing the initiative would hasten a terrible result.

Three groups to capture the City Hall building, each of them with their own problems.

Having encountered neither Witch Cultists nor mobs along the way, they successfully arrived at the rendezvous point. And there,

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono."

Crusch: "It is great to see that you are all safe."

Wilhelm and Crusch seemed enthusiastic about Subaru's arrival. Of course, Julius had also come along with them, who elegantly stroked his hair.

Julius: "I am sure that you are worried out of your mind for Emilia-sama, are you sure it is okay for you to be here instead?"

Subaru: "I am not stupid enough to lose sight of what's truly the priority here, for the good of everyone. And as irritating as it sounds, Emilia was why that bastard was there in the first place. I feel that I don't know to think about him harming Emilia, right now."

Julius: "I feel for you. If Anastasia-sama were placed in the same situation, I doubt I would be able to keep my composure."

After nodding in response to his concerned words, Subaru turned to Wilhelm. The old swordsman closed his eyes as he crossed his arms, his whole body irradiating the quiet energy of a swordsman. Subaru could not tell what he was picturing in his mind, nor what thoughts were swirling behind his eyelids.

However, as if sensing Subaru's gaze, Wilhelm opened his eyes, and reached into his coat. He withdrew a mirror and handed it to Subaru.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono, this is a Conversation Mirror. In the heat of battle, I doubt I shall have any leeway to operate it, so I shall leave this to you."

Subaru: "Understood. Let's move as planned."

Placing the mirror carefully in his pocket, Subaru nodded. As discussed earlier, the Conversation Mirror would be distributed among the members of the three shelters, so that there would be one person in charge of communication. Subaru, the least useful in fighting affairs, held one mirror, while the other was held by Ferris, who was been travelling between shelters. The last one was held by Anastasia, who served as their source of intelligence.

Ideally, they would have these three places cooperating for the best results.

Crusch: "Then, to confirm again. We are moving to the battlefield identified by Garfiel-sama, where two Witch Cultists are guarding the City Hall. One is a giant who handles two broadswords, and the other is a woman with a slender longsword. Is that right?"

Garfiel: "Yep, that's right. Neither of 'em are yer common swordsmen. If ya don't do like I did, you'd prolly end up sliced in two by either of 'em in no time."

Going over all their information once again, Crusch was the first to speak again. Nodding at Garfiel's response, she turned back to Julius and Wilhelm.

Crusch: "In addition to those two, we believe that the Sin

Archbishop of Lust is also occupying the City Hall. I imagine that other Witch Cultists will make an appearance there as well. Have either of you heard much about Lust?"

Julius: "My apologies. As far as knowledge from the Royal Guards goes, no one has ever heard of Lust. Sloth and Greed are much more famous, and Subaru should be better suited to talk about Greed."

Halfway through speaking, Julius had turned to Subaru. Subaru nodded—

Subaru: "Having seen Greed for myself, I don't believe that the stories about him are a lie. But… that Empire. He took out their strongest Knight? I'm a bit skeptical about that. He's strong, but, in terms of combat prowess, he's such an amateur. I could match him. Although, he can negate any attack…"

Ricardo: "And that wasn't due to yer own strength?"

Subaru: "Not this time. The Sin Archbishop had a quarrel between them, and although Wrath engulfed Greed in flames, it didn't hurt him in the slightest. Even his clothing was untouched. He didn't even break a sweat."

Regulus's Authority could easily be dubbed as invincibility. How convenient. If that were true, then the City Hall Raiders would eventually be forced to face the worst of enemies. Although he wanted to believe that it was not such an unreasonable and straight-forward ability.

Subaru: "If only we also had our strongest, we wouldn't have to worry about it…"

Julius: "Reinhard would never be absent when innocent civilians are in such danger. I think that he may be facing a problem that leaves him unable to move. It is possible that, much like us, he has been caught in an encounter with other Witch Cultists."

Only Julius seemed to understand what was passing through Subaru's mind at the moment.

Prior to the start of all this, Felt and Reinhard had come into contact with Heinkel. He could only hope that the obnoxious idea which had taken root in his mind upon hearing about their meeting was wrong.

Subaru: “Other than that, there’s something that I want to confirm. The name Lust called herself, Capella Emerada Lugunica. Why would she possibly call herself part of the Lugunican Royal Family?”

Ricardo: “She’s gotta be jokin’. Everyone knows that the whole Royal Family has died.”

Crusch: “It might not be misinformation. It seems too premature to dismiss it as just a prank.”

Ricardo and Crusch gave Subaru differing opinions.

The Witch Cult being what it was, either possibility was worth considering. The poor character of this Lust could be clearly heard in her voice. A prank, as Ricardo had said, was likely indeed, but she could also prove to be an enigma.

However, in the face of those different proposals, Wilhelm raised a hand.

Wilhelm: “I do recall one thing.”

Subaru: “What is it?”

Wilhelm: “Although I do not know of any Capella, I have heard a little about the reputation of Emerada Lugunica. That does not necessarily mean that there is any direct connection… but there was indeed someone named Emerada in the history of the Royal Family of Lugunica.”

Subaru: “—!”

Surprised by this, everyone’s eyes grew wide as Wilhelm pondered with his hand to his chin.

Wilhelm: “Her name traces back to before the Demi-Human War, before I joined the army. So around fifty years ago. At the time, the

Lugunica Royal Family had someone very beautiful and very clever by the name of Emerada-sama.”

Subaru: “And Lust called herself Emerada? For what purpose?”

Wilhelm: “As for her intentions, I do not know either. Only, I believe that Emerada-sama became ill at a young age. But… a state funeral was never held in her honor.”

Neglecting to hold a funeral for the death of a member of the Royal Family was somewhat strange. Subaru tilted his head, and Wilhelm attempted to explain.

Wilhelm: “The reason given was that the times were rough. However, the real reason was that public sentiment was against it.”

Subaru: “The people didn’t…?”

Wilhelm: “Although Emerada was beautiful and very intelligent, she… her nature was extremely cruel, and an immeasurable amount of darkness laid within her. Therefore, even the Royal Family of Lugunica regarded her as… a heretic. Even the news of her death was in fact hidden from the public for a while.”

With only an unconfirmed testimony, saying such dubious words about the Kingdom he had once served probably left a bitter taste on Wilhelm’s tongue. His words had begun to waver in the second half of his explanation.

And everyone had seen for themselves Lust’s terrible character.

Subaru: “I’m sure it’s not her… but Lust called herself Emerada…”

Wilhelm: “An attempt to slander the Royal Family of Lugunica, and some harassment in poor taste of those who know Emerada-sama’s name. I think it is a rather roundabout way to induce suspicion.”

The result of Wilhelm’s conclusion was a sigh of relief. Unlike those with little loyalty to the Kingdom such as Subaru, Garfiel, and Ricardo, the feelings of Crusch, Wilhelm, and Julius were unfathomable.

Such ungrateful, vicious ridicule toward the Royal Family was certainly not permissible.

Subaru: “In spite of that… Capella, Capella…”

Julius: “Any thoughts on that name?”

Julius turned his attention sharply as he spoke, noticing Subaru’s bitter expression.

Subaru: “Nothing, it’s just…”

After a brief pause, Subaru scratched his head as he continued.

Subaru: “It’s not just Capella. Regulus, and Sirius too. And come to think of it, even Petelgeuse… But it’s hard for me to believe it makes sense. It can’t be it.”

Garfiel: “Cut the crap, Captain. Tell us already. What’s so special ‘bout their names?”

Subaru: “It’s no big deal, but… It’s just, you could kinda say that they have the same names as the stars in my hometown, or something like that.”

Crusch: “Name of the stars, is it?”

In response to Subaru, Crusch widened her eyes, looking deeply interested. Seeing that everyone else shared her reaction, Subaru scratched his head.

Subaru: “Don’t give me strange looks, okay? In my hometown, all the stars were given names, and the Sin Archbishops just happen to share their names. I quite enjoy learning about the stars and their stories, so I know some extra details.”

Crusch: “Really, you have quite the unusual hobby. Stars, huh.”

Subaru: “Just so you know, my name, Subaru, also comes from the stars. But that’s not important right now. That’s all I have to say. Sorry if it’s boring.”

Feeling embarrassed, Subaru attempted to shake the inquisitive eyes of the ones staring at him. However, Crusch rejected Subaru's attempts to end the conversation.

Crusch: "Please wait, Subaru-sama. Is that all there is to those star names? It just so happens that their names are coincidentally the names of your stars, is that all?"

Subaru: "You think that's not all?"

Crusch: "For example, could the roots of their names be the names of the stars that Subaru-sama knows about? From the reason of their founding to the activities they carry out, everything about the Witch Cult is shrouded in many layers of mystery. We cannot easily discard something that they may share a connection with."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru, although surprised at Crusch's unexpected questioning, was still lost in his own thoughts. Really, Subaru had always believed that the star-related names had been mere coincidence. Why? This was, after all, a different world. There would be no reason for the names of the stars Subaru knew to have disseminated here.

But could he say so with absolute certainty?

In this very place, Priestella, Subaru had witnessed Japanese house architecture being replicated under the guise of Wafuu architecture. In Kararagi, the okonomiyaki, and perhaps even the Kansai dialect, were cultural landmarks established by Hoshin's own hand.

Perhaps the founding of the Witch Cult had some root in modern knowledge known to Subaru. To name the Sin Archbishops after stars was a tasteless endeavor, in practice.

Subaru: "Petelgeuse. Regulus. Sirius. Capella…"

Julius: "Correct. Subaru, you said there were anecdotes related to the names of the stars. What kind of stories are those? Maybe there is a connection somewhere."

Subaru: "Anecdotes, anecdotes…"

He dug through the thinning memories of his original world, recalling his fading knowledge about the stars.

He had once deeply loved celestial illustrations. Knowing that his name's origin laid in the stars, Subaru had greedily immersed himself in drawings of constellations and had engraved a great number of stars into his mind.

And among them, there was a star with the same name as the widely-detested Sin Archbishops.

Subaru: "The underarm of Orion, or the hand of Orion…"

Crusch: "Eh?"

Hearing the word "underarm" in a place she never would have imagined, Crusch tilted her head to the side. However, Subaru did not register her reaction, approaching her, and gripping and shaking her slender shoulders.

Subaru: "Hand of Orion! That's right! It's called the hand of Orion!"

Crusch: "Su-Subaru-sama? What… Orion's hand?"

Subaru: "Petelgeuse… the origin of his name is a star. His Authority was the Unseen Hand, and the star he was named after has another name, the hand of Orion!"

It was almost laughably far-fetched.

But were they only related by chance? Was it merely an amusing coincidence of symbolism?

Not Petelgeuse, but a star named Betelgeuse—that was a familiar name to Subaru. The small mismatch had been the reason he had yet to notice it.

Subaru: "Sirius is "the one who burns" and "the one who shines", and she can use Fire Magic, that's not subtle at all. At most it's literal… Regulus is the "little king". Isn't that exactly like that bastard's self-centered values?! And Capella is…!"

Crusch: “Capella is…?”

Subaru: “Female goat! A female goat! Capella’s a female goat!”

Digging through his memory, Subaru searched for some meaning relationship between the mythos of the stars and the Sin Archbishops. A smirk emerged on Subaru’s face, showing off his excitement in finding a meaning to the connections.

Instead, listening to Subaru’s answer, Crusch kept her brow pressed down while holding his shoulder. Then she looked to the other four people, who also wore complex expressions.

Julius: “Orion’s underarm?”

Wilhelm: “Something that shines?”

Ricardo: “Small king?”

Garfiel: “The hell’s a “female goat”?”

Subaru: “—Ah?”

At the reaction of the four people who tilted their heads, Subaru belatedly realized that his discovery was far more useless than he had first thought.

Crusch: “Subaru-sama, I apologize. It seems that my thoughts have led us astray.”

Yes, even Crusch looked sorry.

2

The attempt to relate the name of the stars, as well as their origin, and the names of the Sin Archbishops had failed spectacularly.

However, they had no time to spend lamenting that failure. No more time could be wasted before launching a blitzkrieg operation, in which time was of the essence. As a result, they attacked after their abilities and combat styles were shared and discussed between them.

To be on the safe side, the members of the Iron Fang, who had accompanied Julius and Crusch, had gone ahead as a scouting force, ensuring that the way to the City Hall was clear. The six of them would arrive safely.

Garfiel: “Yep, it’s just like last time, nothin’s changed…”

Nose twitching, Garfiel confirmed the lack of any new enemy presences. According to what he had said, he had been ambushed after crossing the road straight ahead, as he was about to enter the City Hall. But neither Garfiel’s nose nor Subaru’s eyes found the silhouettes he had mentioned.

If those were not present, they could just take the City Hall and move on. Just as Subaru wanted to celebrate a lack of enemies,

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel equipped his shields in both hands, and Ricardo held his machete in a battle-ready stance. Wilhelm, on the other hand, eyed the whole of the plaza with the calmness of a tranquil lake. What would it mean, for those three, that there was no enemy in sight? In particular, Wilhelm surely had much he needed to confirm.

Julius: “This area is completely open. Although my Quasi Spirits have been sent to patrol it, they found no path we could sneak along. It seems that our only option is to approach directly.”

Julius had six Quasi Spirits following him. He had sent those to scout out their surroundings, then report back to the group. The location was especially unpleasant, as it was difficult to launch an offensive. And, likewise, was difficult to defend.

Subaru: “Can’t you send your Spirits inside to scout? Just knowing how many enemies there are and the building’s general layout would make our job that much easier.”

Julius: “Apologies, but my buds are still unable to perform an order that complicated. And it is possible that the enemy is not unable to detect the presence of Spirits, so that would be difficult.”

Subaru: “That wouldn’t be your fault. Still, that’s a shame, it would have been really helpful.”

Not knowing the circumstances inside the City Hall itself would mean that their turmoil would possibly escalate. That said, waiting would only cause the situation to worsen. Although the Witch Cult had claimed they were going to make a request during the next broadcast, there was no way they could negotiate with them.

Subaru: “Then, just as we planned. Although the enemy has combat effectiveness on their side, we’ll take one person at a time. We’ll handle this quickly, and then get rid of the guy who’s occupying this place!”

Julius: “Although that is optimistic thinking, I look forward to our success.”

Julius gave an ironic response to Subaru’s speech, and the party took off. Without needing a signal, they ran up the straight road, towards the plaza in front of the City Hall.

There was no sign of an enemy appearing from anywhere.

Garfiel ran in the lead, followed by Wilhelm and Julius. Ricardo followed them, and Crusch and Subaru held the rear. His right leg felt, for all intents and purposes, fine. Although it was in a strange state of feeling no sensations, he could run without hindrance.

Crusch: “—They’re here!”

Two figures fell upon Garfiel, who stood in the lead.

As the group witnessed the large blades and a slender longsword flutter in the air that composed the surprise attack, Crusch gave a courageous shout and drew her own weapon, at the rear.

—One Blow, One-Hundred Felled was unleashed.

The strike that was unleashed, cutting diagonally towards the enemy, was a special attack by Crusch, one that was augmented by her Divine Protection of Wind Reading. Anything within her field of vision, even at great distance, could be struck by one of her blades of wind. That was Crusch’s long range swordplay, which had even made a dent in the White Whale's magically enhanced defenses.

The sound of steel on steel rang out, and the giant and woman whirled away.

Subaru: "Did you get them?"

Crusch: "No, they deflected it! No hit!"

Her surprise attack to counter the surprise attack had failed to make contact.

Two black-garbed figures landed on the stone pavement, having dealt with the wind blade using their own steel blades, and turned around. Two giant blades, and a single-edged longsword. From top to bottom, they were indeed both clad in the despicable black garb of the Witch Cult.

The two figures did not show any side-effects from the previous attack. They tilted their bodies forward slightly, about to kick off from the ground. However, before that,

Julius: "Although you blocked Crusch-sama's blow, can you take this?"

Three different colors glowed from above, the light emitted by the Spirits pouring down upon the Witch Cultists. Julius's six Quasi Spirits, working in groups of three, cast a magic attack on the giant and woman both. That magical light, which Subaru had never seen before, applied an appalling pressure to the two opponent, the tremendous pressure forcing them to kneel.

As the enemy was unable to withstand that force, Garfiel and Wilhelm rushed the woman, while Ricardo swung his blade over his head as he leapt towards the giant.

Garfiel: "Take this!"
Wilhelm: "Haa—!"
Ricardo: "It's over!"

In a flash of silver, emanating an overwhelming pressure, the Sword Demon took off, aiming to run his blade across the opponent's body.

Ricardo's machete, driven by that uncanny physical strength held by the beastman, slashed down in a straight line, not to cut, but to smash the unprotected head. If they could strike a kill at this interval—

Woman: "…"

The kneeling woman turned her sword in her grip and slashed at Garfiel and Wilhelm's legs. They immediately dodged by leaping, but the woman followed with the same trajectory, twisting to stretch a leg around Garfiel's neck, moving him into the range of Julius's magic.

Garfiel: "Wha—"

Entering Garfiel's blind spot, the woman protected herself from any magical effects using Garfiel as a shield. Then, her knee shattered Garfiel's nose as she grabbed his left arm with her free hand and used his shield to block Wilhelm's slash.

At this profound display of skill, Garfiel cried out in pain, while Wilhelm cursed.

Breaking their stalemate, she delivered a roundhouse kick to the old swordsman, releasing Garfiel in the process. Although her movements should have been constrained, her blow was powerful enough to send Wilhelm flying. Just as he regained his balance, she had already made another half-turn on the spot, delivering a swift follow-up kick.

Giant: "…"

Meanwhile, Ricardo's attack had been stopped just short of the giant's head.

Still kneeling due to the magical effects cast by Julius, the giant had readily discarded the big swords he held in both hands to block the hatchet block that approached his skull. Then, he lifted his unguarded hands and brought them between his head and the hatchet.

Ricardo: "Idiot, it's over!"

As the obvious result of his flawed judgement, his arms would be severed.

Even though Ricardo's machete was blunt, it contained incredible momentum and power. The giant's thick arms were amputated by the impact of the blow and his upper arms flew through the air as black blood spewed forth.

Giant: "…"

Ricardo stepped back and swept his machete up, aiming to bring it upon the giant who had lost both of his arms. A slash powerful enough to knock down a gigantic tree would vaporize the giant's neck.

However, the giant simply used his extra arms to retrieve his broadswords from the stone pavement, deflecting the fatal blow with merely one of the swords.

Ricardo: "What?!"

A curtain of blood sprayed forth from the stumps of the giant's amputated arms, nullifying the effect of the magic that Julius had cast. Now freed, the giant was again capable of the agile action that betrayed his enormous form. Even though he had lost his arms in a split-second decision, he had the determination needed to discover the effects and the weaknesses of the magic spell, and act accordingly.

Ricardo gradually became unable to withstand the flurry of blades that followed. The giant was far too skilled with those titanic cleavers, and far too battle-hardened. Even though he had managed to knock away the pair of broadswords, Ricardo had one of the giant's other hands thrusted into his torso.

He groaned at the power of that blow, and another fist collided with his face, sending the beastman's burly body flying backward.

Woman: "…"

Giant: "…"

Against the three opponents who were now on the defensive, the woman and giant raised their weapons, weapons of special kind, with clear intent to kill.

The back line finally having caught up with those other three—

Julius: “Combination Magic, Fall Goa!”

Crusch: “Hit!”

Subaru: “Come on, please!”

Julius’s incantation ushered wind, and a shade of vermilion mixed with the vortex of air. The resulting tornado of flame swiftly met with the woman trying to chase Garfiel, the latter jumping back to safety.

Then, with overlapping voice almost resembling a prayer, Crusch’s wind blade and Subaru’s whip whistled through the air, striking the giant’s body. His huge form shook due to the diagonal slash, and a painful wound appeared on the giant’s chest, courtesy of the source of that shrill sound.

However, neither injury was a serious matter for him. Even so, they had succeeded in stopping the giant’s assault, and the fallen Ricardo kicked up at the giant’s jaw.

Ricardo: “Ha, ya were askin’ for it!”

Subaru: “Is this really the time to say that? Fall back, Ricardo!”

Carried by the momentum of the kick’s release, Ricardo spun backward, retrieving his hatchet and wiping his face of blood, before retreating to join with Crusch and Subaru, ready to confront the giant again.

Glancing to the side, and seeing that the woman had been enclosed in a tornado flame, Subaru’s eyes involuntarily widened.

Subaru: “What’s that?! You, you can actually use such spectacular magic?!”

Julius: “It is merely a bluff. I am not proficient enough to make it lethal just yet. And in fact…”

Julius replied bitterly, and the spectacle before their eyes confirmed his words. As the woman bathed in that tornado of flame, the sword in her hand flashed—and the heart of that wind was pierced by her slight movement. Unbalanced, the tornado collapsed and faded.

That woman’s elegant, peerless swordplay. And the giant’s own special physiology.

Subaru: “You’re kidding…”

The front of his black robe was opened, and the giant’s many arms were revealed. He nonchalantly picked his severed arms up from the ground and pressed them against his stumps, as blood and flesh knit with a sickening sound. A mere moment later, the giant’s formerly missing arms were reattached, with only scant traces of the injury remaining. As if confirming that healing, he took his large blades in them again, waving them around as if to test the feeling.

Both looked undefeatable.

Subaru: “By contrast, it’s clear that our blitzkrieg failed.”

Looking sideways, Garfiel and Wilhelm, who had escaped using Julius’s magic support, were receiving first-aid to their injuries, by way of Garfiel’s healing magic.

However, the reality set in that Garfiel and Wilhelm, working together, had been soundly defeated. That sense of despair could not easily be erased.

But it would be a mistake to say that their situation was completely hopeless.

Subaru: “Although close combat is unreliable… long-ranged attacks could still be effective.”

Julius’s magic, Crusch’s blade of wind, and even Subaru’s whip had connected. The last one would not be all that helpful, even if it had indeed worked, but the other two attacks certainly had a chance to turn the tide.

Subaru: "…"

At Subaru's comment and expectant gaze, both Julius and Crusch nodded.

Garfiel and Wilhelm also understood the power of their opponents in close combat. From the start, Ricardo had not held any designs to face either of them alone.

The melee fighters would interfere with their enemies' movement, and any gaps would be filled with magical attacks. This was likely the best way to minimize injuries and achieve victory.

The unity of the entire party would start the pace of the battle again. Then, at that moment,

???: "Chaotically, grudgingly, a mad triple-time! What kind of garbage pieces of meat like you can so foolishly, ugly, superficially dare to live? In the words of this elegant, patient lady—Kahahahaha!"

Abruptly piercing the battlefield was an inconspicuously sharp laugh.

However, upon hearing that voice, everyone understood that the appearance of its owner meant the situation had taken a turn for the worst. Therefore, Subaru shuddered and shifted his gaze around, searching for that figure.

Where was she? Where was that laughter coming from?

???: "Where are you looking, you dull, dimwitted pieces of shit? It's because of this foolishness~ that you can't be saved. Come one, open your filthy eyes wide, and think hard with your empty heads. Then maybe this gentle lady will show mercy to your filthy souls!"

Crusch: "—No way."

Next to Subaru, whose gaze swerved around, Crusch had drawn a hoarse breath. Her amber eyes were fixed overhead. With a sinking feeling of understanding, Subaru followed her gaze expecting to see Lust at the end of it.

Her line of sight pointed to the roof of the City Hall, far away. That place was the origin of the loud ridicule poured down upon them, as if the owner of that voice was looking down upon ants from a great height.

In fact, that was more or less the situation. That was because,

Capella: “Gahhahahahaha! Really, that face! That stupid face! Did you save it just for me? If so, it is such a wonderful imitation of a foolish ape that this kind lady would like to give you praise! Or would you prefer saliva? You’d be very happy with my precious saliva, right? For you pieces of rubbish, it must be a coveted treasure, right~?!”

Raucous laughter echoed through the air as Subaru glanced upward. The giant and swordswoman did not have the slightest reaction as an ally joined them against their fellow opponents.

On the battlefield, Lust appeared, and—

Capella: “Once more! This lovely lady is the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Lust—!”

—As the name of Lust was announced, a black dragon looked down upon them with a smile.

Capella: “—I am Capella Emerada Lugunica-sama! Die! You rotten slabs of meat!”

Chapter 34:
Chaotic Duel

—Standing on the rooftop of the City Hall, a black dragon flaunted its wings at Subaru's group below.

Opening its mouth to reveal rows of sharp teeth and a long, snaking red tongue, the black dragon narrowed its golden eyes, continuing to issue a laugh so high-pitched it caused physical pain.

That black dragon's appearance was more or less exactly how Subaru had imagined the dragon species. Patrasche's sharp and awe-inspiring face was very much dragon-like, but her mane and physique were not. Ground dragons were, on average, comparable in size to a horse, while the dragon overhead was closer to an elephant.

With that figure, the black dragon could not possibly be capable of flight. Perhaps its strong wings merely served as a bluff.

Yes, flight should've been impossible.

Capella: "Being ravished by your heated gazes isn't exciting at all, you meat creatures in heat! Ahhhhh, this is awful, being seen by people like you who can only think of sexual gratification! So I won't approach you!"

Fanning its wings towards the ground, a gust of wind enough to make one's body tremble whipped forth. A long tongue flitting outward as if licking its lips, the black dragon—Capella gave a twisted smile.

That dragon's expression was incredibly chilling. Because of the language barrier, communication was heavily dependent on interpretation. Patrasche was a good example of that. She came off as quite likable, because of her gracious attitude to not let emotions show on her face.

On the other hand, one could not help but be disgusted by the dragon in front of them, for how human-like it behaved.

Subaru: “…I haven’t heard any mentions of this before, but can dragons speak?”

Julius: “As they have lived for a long time, dragons are extremely intelligent and can understand human language. As a matter of course, it seems that the Divine Dragon Volcanica, who forged a Covenant with the Kingdom, can of course communicate with us through language. Even though… I do not know if it would reveal this much emotion.”

Julius, from a distance, gave a detailed answer to Subaru’s question. The Finest of Knights had his blade raised at shoulder-height, eyes never leaving the black dragon. Of course, Subaru and the other four were in the same state.

In front of them were two swordsmen of outstanding strength, and above, there was the black dragon who had named herself the Archbishop of Lust. Their original unease had compounded into a wall of tension.

Subaru: “At the least, we have a chance of dealing with the swordsmen…”

The woman, wielding her longsword with nary a flaw in posture, and the giant, who waved his swords around, as if refamiliarizing himself with the blades. Although the extent of the swordswoman’s strength was still unknown, the giant had chosen to directly take Ricardo’s attack. Needless to say, it was not because of any clumsiness, but because he had a strategy in mind, knowing that any damage would be regenerated. Long-range attacks, their earlier plan, would still be incredibly effective.

However, that would only work if all six people tried their best to have the attack connect.

Subaru: “Is there anyone here who’s fought a dragon…?”

Wilhelm: “—Yes.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san, seriously?”

Although Subaru had thought his question hopeless, Wilhelm had responded with a low voice. The old swordsman turned to face the surprised Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Nearly forty years ago, I was sent to subjugate a Blight Dragon named Valgren who appeared to Lugunica’s south. The concentration of forces caused much diplomatic tension because of the proximity to Vollachia.”

Subaru: “Setting the diplomatic ramifications aside, how was the experience of fighting a dragon?”

Wilhelm: “Ten-percent of the Knights’ Order, which totaled five-hundred, were sent to the battle against Valgren, and, although the crusade succeeded, forty-percent of those Knights died. The crusade succeeded, but the result was a disaster. Its fiery breath, its endless stamina, and the vulnerability of a swordsman in midair are all things that we should have taken into better consideration.”

Subaru: “It would seem that our situation is even more desperate…!”

Seeing Subaru’s despair, Wilhelm prefaced with an “Although,”

Wilhelm: “Valgren was one of the most difficult beings to fight, truly worthy of being called a Dragon. Compared to it, this one is too small to be called a Dragon. It should die upon beheading.”

Subaru: “And Valgren did not?”

Wilhelm: “Valgren had a total of three heads which all needed to be removed.”

Having finished speaking of that distant tango of death, Wilhelm tightened his grip on his sword.

So a beheading would certainly kill it. That was reassuring.

Seeing Wilhelm’s well-prepared stance, Subaru also took up a battle pose, whip in hand. Seeing their refusal to yield, the black dragon Capella seemed rather surprised.

Capella: “My, my, my, you’re all so disgusting. You’re beaten and miserable, and, aside from my reinforcements, you’re facing a Sin Archbishop! You rotten creatures should hang your heads and channel the meekness of insects, and yet you’re acting all normal? Was putting you with all the other insects wrong? Gahahahaha!”

Garfiel: “Stop fuckin’ around! What can ya do’gainst our numbers? My amazin’ self’ll go up there ‘n crush ya!”

Capella: “Kahhahahaha, the barking of this rabid dog is hurting my graceful ears. Or, rather, I made a mistake. You’re no rabid hound, you’re only a puny kitten! Meow~ meow~ meow~ meow~, don’t be angry just because the kitty you were with died!”

Garfiel: “Wh-Wha—Hk?!”

Faced with those cruel jabs, Garfiel shouted, but choked on his own response.

The dragon was clearly referring to Garfiel’s earlier defeat, where he had almost been beaten to death. This, added to the details of what had happened to Mimi, meant that Capella had been watching the fight. And, what surprised Garfiel even more,

Garfiel: “Bastard, how did y’know my amazin’ self’s a demi-human…”

Capella: “Haa? How do I know that? Don’t think so highly of yourself, not even a single one of your hairs interests me. I could tell that you were a filthy half-breed the moment I saw you! If you’re not making a mockery out of me, then you’re a fool! Too stupid to die!”

Spitting out unspeakably cruel curses, Capella turned toward the rest of their party, snorting,

Capella: “Such stench! Such stench! You slabs of meat all smell rotten! Wrinkled old meat! Meat that feigns cleverness! Hairy beast meat! Ah, disgusting! Oops, but—”

Capella, constantly giving her toxic comments, turned her gaze slightly—in Crusch’s direction.

A sticky, feverish light entered her squinted eyes as she poured all her attention upon Crusch, who subconsciously hugged herself tightly. When Capella spoke again, her voice was almost pleasant.

Capella: “But mixed with all that refuse is quite the piece of meat! So beautiful, so cute, such a nice scent, perfectly in line with my tastes! It looks immoral! What beauty! That body! That appeal! Ah, I reallyreallyreally want to break it with my own two hands!”

Julius: “—That’s enough.”

Capella: “Ahh?”

Had she become completely fascinated? Her expression trance-like, the black dragon stared towards Crusch, as if wanting to lick her from top to bottom.

At this moment, the rising pressure of anger interjected to interrupt her.

Capella: “…”

Her attention still fixed on Crusch, the black dragon looked up impatiently.

And before her wide-open eyes, Julius entered the scene, waving the tip of his sword much like an orchestra’s conductor.

Julius: “Be burned by my sixfold light, El Prailium!”

Julius’s six Quasi Spirits formed a circle overhead, each gleaming with a different color as they fired a multi-color beam of light downwardward. The rainbow beam turned white at the point of impact—Capella, and she began to scream because of the direct hit.

Capella: “—Gaaaaaaaaah!!”

Julius: “This is the price of your chatter. If you had any real skill, you wouldn’t spout such nonsense.”

Obeying Julius’s command, the Quasi Spirits continually fired that scorching light.

With Capella's piercing scream serving as background music, the two swordsmen who had been silent and still, suddenly kicked off the slate ground, flying towards Subaru's group.

Wilhelm: "Stop there!"

Garfiel: "Like hell ya won't!"

Here, Garfiel and Wilhelm both spoke up.

Wilhelm flew straight for the swordswoman, while Garfiel faced the giant' twin blades with his own twin shields.

Woman: "…"

Wilhelm: "Don't leave, show me your swordplay!"

As she began to retreat after meeting his first blow, Wilhelm cut her off with a sudden strike.

The old swordsman's breakthrough struck up and down with the violence of a storm. The length of her longsword was not proper to quick action, which served her defense poorly as Wilhelm lashed out rapid strike after strike.

Even so, the woman also proved fearsome. She cleverly shied away from any swing that she was unable to parry with precise foot placement, and smoothly, with practiced ease, she regained her balance.

Each time her whirling sword stabbed forth it became more apparent that the female swordsman's body was molded to hold the sword she was using.

Wilhelm's skill had been enough for him to challenge the White Whale, and even now he still stood at that level, but the woman's outstanding talent and skill was enough to press Wilhelm back.

Wilhelm: "Gooooooh!"

Woman: "…"

Issuing a roar, with momentum smooth as silk, Wilhelm's rotation of cuts and swings increased in speed.

Who would laugh at the old man now? His swordplay was the pinnacle of swordsmanship, his sword would captivate the eyes of many younglings, who would be inspired to pick up the blade and follow his example. His blade a mere flash, it killed the air itself, it killed the ground itself, aiming to embed the tip of the blade into the woman's body.

Still silent, the woman was prepared to withstand each strike of the old man's blade, which had been sharpened for years. Without words, without righteousness, the woman was like a doll whose only purpose was battle. A doll that swung its sword according to the rotation of its gears, according to the fighting genes engraved in her body. She killed the air, she killed the sky, she killed the ground itself, and mercilessly parried away the blades approaching her.

A quiet swordfight, that did not seem to be purely a battle of steel against steel.

Her sword must have been light. Much lighter than the old man's. However, each side's swordplay was clean and pure, and aside from strikes on their respective targets, no unnecessary destruction happened.

That was the beautiful realm of the sword, a most honorable one to reach, for the beings who lived the life of a swordsman and of using the blade.

Wilhelm: "Haaaa!"

Woman: "…"

The two waged their silent battle with repeated collisions, their swords only being seen as flashes.

—This was the sacred realm of the sword itself, and intruders could not be tolerated.

Not far away, another battle unfolded.

Garfiel: “Oooooooooooh!”

Giant: “…”

Roaring, muscles flexing, earth being trodden, and—a hit on flesh echoed.

Struck with dizziness, ignoring the hit he had suffered, roaring at the feeling of hitting back his opponent, spitting out bloody vomit due to the feeling of having his internal organs crushed, rebelling against his opponent’s power to pulverize his very bones.

Unlike the elegant duel taking place next to them, the battle between Garfiel and the giant was one marked by chaos.

Although the giant could be called a swordsman, his fighting style was different from what that would imply. Not sophisticated at all, it was irrational as a barbarian’s or a mindless beast’s.

Garfiel: “Hah, kuu, ah!!”

Correspondingly, Garfiel also fought without a sense of etiquette.

Garfiel’s fighting style was wild and animalistic. Due to Subaru’s influence, he had named it Garfiel Battle Shield Style. It was an absurd sort of violence that only Garfiel, who relied on instinct, could perform—it could not be imitated by anyone.

In fact, Garfiel’s violence and the giant’s barbarianism really meshed well with one another. This savage, straight-forward duel was one of stamina—the battler who reached their limit first would lose. Therefore, the victor and the defeated would become apparent for all to see.

Giant: “…”

The giant’s swords were so incredibly heavy that receiving them with only one arm would surely shatter Garfiel’s elbow, so he needed to use both his arms to deal with them. However, if both arms were used, nothing could be done about the other giant sword, which meant a direct hit.

Therefore, Garfiel needed to decisively use his shields to parry those swings. Holding them obliquely, his arm blocked the massive sword, but allowed it to slide along the shield with its momentum, thus deflecting it.

Frighteningly, the giant was not merely wielding its swords wildly and blindly. That barbarian style of battling was savage, but his strikes were shockingly direct and powerful.

That could not be achieved with talent alone. That was skill that could only be acquired after the giant had clearly practiced tens of thousands, tens of millions of swings. Taking those straight swords with a half-baked block would surely be impossible. With the slightest of wrong moves, the giant sword would cleave the silver shield in half despite its bluntness, and Garfiel's body would resemble that broken shield.

Garfiel: "Don't… kid 'round… no more—!"

Therefore, Garfiel had to do everything possible to combat the violence of those large swords.

As they slashed from above, he parried. As they swept from the sides, he parried. As they swung up from below, he parried. Then, from a gap, his arm took a punch, forcing Garfiel to retreat.

The problem was that, in addition to two powerful hands waving large swords, the giant had another six arms. Garfiel's defense could be punctured with a third attack, and the giant had started using not two, but three hands to grasp those swords.

Garfiel had the advantage in speed, but that giant's strength and versatility was far superior.

As his chin was struck, he parried a massive sword, and his knees were kicked, sending his face plummeting toward the ground. Four more blows followed this, but Garfiel caught himself as he fell, and finally managed to block the incoming overhead slash by planting his feet firmly on the ground.

Blood, broken bones, and bitter cries, those were what this savage battlefield was filled with.

The blood of the people watching boiled, and they could not help but shout. The sound emitted by the clashing of shields and swords was akin to various percussion instruments being struck, and the sparks flying around akin to the fireworks of a live concert.

Subaru: "…"

On one side was Wilhelm's quiet duel, and on the other was Garfiel's roaring war.

Subaru and Crusch held their breaths, unable to join either battle. That was not due to any inability—rather, they were too shocked by the fighting spirit from both sides to react.

However, unlike Subaru, who was submerged in such emotions,

Ricardo: "This is bad, we have to act soon."

Ricardo, who had been surveying Julius's magic overhead, took a step forward. Seeing Ricardo's movement, Subaru issued a "Right" and also began to move, but—

Crusch: "Subaru-sama!"

Ricardo: "Get down!"

Feeling a sudden yank on his collar, Subaru found himself being dragged to the ground by Crusch. Ricardo stood in front of the two, shielding them, releasing a ferocious roar.

Ricardo: "WAAA, HAAAA—!!"

The roar created fierce sound waves which shook the atmosphere, creating an invisible force of destruction.

This roaring wave was an attack of the same quality as the one Mimi and her younger brothers had used against the White Whale. This was an incredibly powerful skill that had noticeably injured it, and Ricardo had just now unleashed it completely on his own.

But, beaten back by the roar was—a glowing black flame that had broken through the white light, and swept the ground. The jet-black flames rippled frighteningly, causing the hearts of those who witnessed them to tremble from its horrifying nature, rather than its heat, as everything they touched crumbled to dust. The black flames that were intercepted by the roar's soundwaves were dispersed with ease, being scattered all over the square.

However, the real horror of those flames was only discovered after they hit the ground.

Subaru: "That fire… isn't going out…?"

Black ash fell to the slate ground, still burning, without any sustenance. Despite this, the flames continued to burn, spreading to the surroundings. Even more scary was the fact that any fire that had fallen on the surface of the water also continued to burn. Like dripping burning oil into the water, the fire continued to assert its existence.

Ricardo: "Bro, how long're ya plannin' to stay like that? Really, doesn't this kinda thing usually happen in reverse?"

Julius: "Subaru, no matter how you look at it, being protected by a woman is…"

Ricardo and Julius both offered discouraging words to Subaru, who was still recovering from the terror of the scattered black fire. Following their line of sight, Subaru discovered he was laying on the ground, with Crusch on top of him, shielding him from any damage.

Subaru: "Waaah!"

Crusch: "I am glad that you are unhurt. Please rest assured, I shall refrain from telling Ferris and Emilia about this."

Subaru: "I feel even more ashamed for feeling relieved!"

Crusch pulled him to his feet, decreasing Subaru's coolness factor by another ten-percent.

Patting the dust off his bottom, Subaru looked up towards the source of the black flame—obviously, the black dragon, and he frowned. He could sense nothing from her but a sense of disgust.

Capella: “Disgusting, disgusting, don’t look at me with such an aroused gaze! Stop looking, don’t violate me with your dirty eyes! Kahahahaha! It’s like they say, you’re forbidden from stroking any dancers who perform for you, so stop ravishing this charming lady! Gahahaha!”

Subaru: “What the hell…”

Despite taking Julius’s magic head-on, Capella acted as if nothing had happened.

However, that was not to say that she had not suffered any harm. In fact, she had suffered considerable visible damage from his attack. The proud dragon’s right wing had been scorched until it was no more than a hanging, bloodied piece of flesh. Perhaps she had wanted to use the wing to protect her body, but the damage meant that even that had failed.

The power of that spell had burned through the black dragon’s wings, reaching her body. Her abdomen had been scorched and melted, and her innards seemed to have been boiled until they looked like jerky. The right side of the dragon’s head had been blown off, and the tongue that enjoyed ridiculing others had been severed. Her eye dangled freely, no longer resting in its socket.

Half-dead would not suffice to describe it. It was nothing but a corpse.

Subaru audibly swallowed, Julius and Ricardo frowned, and Crusch could not help but give a feminine gasp. However, that was not because of the dragon’s horrific state.

—Instead, it was due to that injured flesh regenerating.

Blood vessels wriggled, flesh swelled, bones squeaked, torn fibers sewed themselves together, and Capella’s destroyed body regenerated at an alarming rate.

In a bizarre scene, the impossible heat given off by her regeneration evaporated any remaining traces of blood, creating red steam.

Capella: “Now, having seen even my beautiful internal organs, are you satisfied? You perverts are so full of carnal desire that you even want to see the asshole of your favorite piece of meat, aren’t you? Gahahaha! Satisfied? Hey, were you so satisfied you started leaking?”

Subaru: “How… what happened?”

Capella: “Shouldn’t you be able to tell on sight? Do you actually have to ask? How foolish are you? But this benevolent lady shall answer you. As you can see, I’m obviously immortal!”

Immortal—the simplest, most absolute description of her power.

Subaru could not help but gulp at Capella’s description of her own power. The thought that she was bluffing crossed his mind. He did not want to believe her words, so it would be comforting to think that she was bluffing.

Subaru: “It’s nothing but a quick regeneration ability…”

Capella: “Call it whatever you want. I’m amazing, and those who call it “invincibility” are idiots. I don’t think that they’re far from the truth, though.”

Subaru: “…”

Capella: “My my my, you’re unable to even talk anymore! You disgusting rotten pieces of shit! You putrid filthy meat! Go die! Everyone except me should go die—Wait! Wait! Wait!”

Suddenly, Capella interrupted her own hateful words. She unfurled her healed wings and fluttered them, slowly bringing her bulky form toward the roof of the City Hall.

Thinking that she was preparing to swoop upon them, Subaru braced himself for her attack. However—

Capella: “Time’s up, I have to go make the next broadcast, so I’ll go back inside. Talking to you is just a waste of time, and I'm in a hurry! You all just stay here and die, along with that rather lovely piece of meat! Go rot in hell!"

Subaru: "H-Huh?"

Suddenly losing interest, Capella yawned, dropping the tension. Then she—albeit it wasn't really certain if you could call the dragon a "she"—Capella turned around and strode into the depths of the City Hall with heavy footsteps, where Subaru lost sight of her.

He could not help but consider whether that was meant to lure her enemies deeper in or not—

Julius: "She might be trying to lure us in, don't you think…? But we cannot allow her to make that broadcast."

Subaru: "If we let her go, people in the city are gonna start panicking. Shit, do we have to go inside and chase her like this?!"

He had a bad feeling about it.

In the first place, with that size, how did Capella enter the inside of the City Hall? Although he did not know how large the broadcast room was, it seemed that Capella would destroy the room with the slightest of movements. Or perhaps she had the Witch Cultists set the Magical device up so all she needed to do was to speak. But he did not have the time to consider that right now.

Ricardo: "Aight, leave the guys on the outside to those two and me. Ya rush inside with Julius-niichan and Crusch-jouchan."

Ricardo gave instructions to Subaru and the others. Subaru replied with a quizzical gaze, hoping that there was some rationale for that decision.

Ricardo: "Don't be like that. These swordsmen are a tad too much for you and Crusch-jouchan, and I ain't suited for indoor action. Julius-niichan shouldn't have a single problem with that. Don't'cha think?"

Julius: "A very apt judgment. I would have made a similar decision.

To be honest, I would be rather worried leaving only Wilhelm and Garfiel here, so I shall leave that up to you, Ricardo.”

Ricardo: “Leave it to me, kiddo!”

Julius and Ricardo nodded to each other, with no time for Subaru and Crusch to interject. Being from the same faction, perhaps they could communicate their intent with only a glance. Subaru was unable to protest, so, scratching his head,

Subaru: “Garfiel! You’re absolutely not allowed to lose! After you send that guy flying and we defeat Lust, we’re going to go save Emilia, you hear me?!”

Garfiel: “Captain, I ain’t got time to deal wit’cha right now!”

Subaru spoke to Garfiel, who was still engaged in his chaotic war, and nodded to Julius. Next to him, Crusch lifted a hand towards her mouth, aiming her voice in Wilhelm’s direction.

Crusch: “Wilhelm, I shall leave it to you!”

Wilhelm: “As you command!”

Wilhelm gave a brief response to his master’s brief words.

A true master and vassal exchange only required those brief words. Having shown her intent to go along with the plan, Crusch joined Subaru, and, led by Julius, they charged towards the City Hall.

Leaving the central square, the three ran towards the interior of the City Hall. The two figures guarding the tower responded to their movement, forgoing their current opponents for Subaru’s group.

Ricardo: “Standing in a line like this makes things easier for me, HAA—!”

His ferocious laugh created destructive sound waves which swept up the stones of the pavement, and the giant and woman faltered at the attack. Although the power of the roaring waves had begun to diminish, they were still effective enough to halt the two. Behind them, their respective dance partners caught up, speaking words of discontent.

Wilhelm: “How discourteous, ignoring me when I only have eyes for you!”

Garfiel: “Don’t turn yer ass to yer opponent unless ya want it gone, ORAAAAA!”

Woman: “…”

Giant: “…”

Slashing and slicing, striking and stabbing, the chaotic duels in the square continued, fierce battles which allowed for no outside intervention.

While hearing the sounds of those ferocious battles, Subaru and his group rushed towards the front entrance of the City Hall, waltzing inside without even slowing down.

Subaru: “Where would the broadcasting room be?”

Crusch: “I do not know for certain, but I assume it would be at the uppermost level, for the voice to reach as far as possible.”

Julius: “There may be ambushes along the way, be careful!”

Past the main entrance, they arrived at the reception lobby of the City Hall.

In times of peace, that place should have been crowded, with a pretty lady providing a reception service and bright lights coloring the scene. But now, it appeared to have been ransacked, the lights of the place dimmed to create an ominous atmosphere.

Fortunately, there were no other Witch Cultists occupying this level, nor were there corpses strewn across the room, so—

Subaru: “Come on, let’s go. There should be some kind of floor map telling us where the room is!”

Julius: “If we can, I would also like to confirm the safety of the City Hall’s staff, although that does appear to be too greedy right now…”

Subaru: “What’s…”

He checked the help desk and confirmed that no one was hiding there, then pointed to the stairs. Julius responded without a word, glaring at the back of the lobby, and gently shook his head. Crusch followed him with a frown, and, upon tracing his gaze, her expression was filled with horror. Seeing her reaction, Subaru went around the reception and joined the two—and placing his gaze upon the same thing, held his breath.

???: “…”

With dragging, pitter-pattering steps, a figure appeared. Peeking around the stairs, a child wearing a mischievous smile emerged.

At first glance, he only looked like a child. A petite physique, a childlike face, evoking an image of youthfulness. However, those ideas were only present until taking notice of the boy's eyes.

His dark-brown hair hung loose, and his body was wrapped with a single cloth, giving him a rather grim appearance. With a devilish smile on his little face, his eyes looked as if they contained all the poisons in the world, with decaying glows and toxic liquids—they were, of course, not the eyes of a decent human being.

And, in the present circumstances, it was evident what was wrong with him.

Kid: "So happy, very happy, so very happy, so very very happy, because of this happiness, such happiness, incredible happiness, such incredible happiness, such incredibly incredible happiness, deserves! Drinking! Gluttony-! The longer you wait for something, the hungrier you get! So the first bite must be delicious to make up for it!"

Pleased, happy from the bottom of his heart, the barefoot boy marched as if dancing to a beat.

As he spoke, he revealed a snaggletooth, a canine too long that was peeping from his mouth. Seeing that image, that attitude, that exaggerated speech, Subaru's mind began to boil.

If this was not just his imagination, if this boiling rage did indeed exist, then this was—

Subaru: "You, kid. If you're just some naughty kid who was left behind while playing hide-and-seek, then confess that right away. If that's really the case, we'll forgive you and let you go. Otherwise, hurry up and give your name."

Kid: "Hahaha, what do you mean, onii-chan? You look mad. Are you someone with a grudge against us or something, by any chance? If we could remember, we would, but we're stupid and have bad memory…”

Speaking in a low voice, Subaru deliberately endured the desire to raise his voice. And, as if deliberately provoking Subaru, the kid twisted his juvenile face into a mocking smile.

Kid: “Are you sure that attitude is really meant for us? Or is it for someone that isn’t us?”

Subaru: “That’s enough. I can see that you are—my enemy!”

Kid: “We are a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Gluttony, Roy Alphard.”

Subaru: “GLUTTONY—!!”

As soon as the child claimed to be Gluttony, Subaru struck with his whip. Slashing through the air, his whip mercilessly cut through the wind on its journey towards his enemy’s face. However—

Roy: “Well, it’s not uncommon to face people who want a bite of us.”

—His teeth biting the end of the whip, Gluttony spoke brazenly.

Chapter 35:
Ambushes and Surprises

1

Subaru’s first merciless strike had been blocked by teeth.

Subaru: “…”

Biting the front end of the whip, dancing as if deliberately intending to infuriate, was Roy Alphard of Gluttony.

Alphard, too, was a sound Subaru was familiar with.

Subaru: “This bastard also shares the name of a star—Hk!”

Crusch: “Subaru-sama, that topic is over! Allow me to engage him!”

As Subaru raised his arm for another brutal blow of his whip, Alphard drew his own weapon. At the same time, Crusch unleashed her Hundred Man Strike. A frenzied blade of wind instantly swept through the lobby of the City Hall, bisecting chairs and the reception desk.

Of course, the cut should also have ruthlessly sliced up Alphard, but —

Roy: “Wow, awesome! But although this one looks tough…”

Crusch: “—Eh?!”

The boy, as if seeing the invisible blade of wind, bent over backward to avoid it. Like a bridge, his head rested on the floor briefly, before he flipped backward.

With that action, he assumed a battle-ready pose, crouching with his face raised.

Roy: “As an attack, since allies’d be caught up in it, that was a rather third-rate tactic. It doesn’t seem all that delicious!”

With that, Alphard kicked the ground, his body flying forward like a bullet.

His mouth opened to expose rows of sharp teeth resembling a hound's. Coupled with his appearance, people would mistakenly think he was a straggly wild dog. Only, a wild dog's danger level could never compare.

Crusch brought her sword up to meet him, attempting to behead him with a downward slash, but—

Roy: "Good muscles, but not polished enough! To us, you're not even a beginner!"

Crusch: "—Ah!"

As he waved his right hand, Crusch's sword bounced away with a sharp sound. At a closer look, there was a cloth wrapped around Alphard's wrists, and tangled up in those were twin daggers, one in each hand. Weapons that took advantage of the speed and flexibility of his thin, small body to fight.

The one dagger that had parried away her sword, the left one, swept towards Crusch's throat. Although she immediately twisted her body to avoid it, Alphard flipped through the air around her shoulder, and kicked her in midair to blow her away.

Crusch: "Wha—!"

Subaru: "Crusch-san!"

Roy: "It's not the time for you to be looking over your shoulder. In fact, you're the easiest target!"

Alphard stomped on the ground, flying at Subaru, who was still distracted by the sight of Crusch sliding on the floor. In the dim lighting, the thin figure of Gluttony, wrapped in rags, disappeared in the darkness, and Subaru lost sight of his figure—

Subaru: "Not good…"

Julius: "The perfect decoy, as evidenced by his track record with

Sloth.”

Roy: “Wha—?!”

Aiming at Subaru, who was full of openings, Alphard had revealed an opening of his own.

Subaru, keenly aware of his own powerlessness, had once sworn to himself that no matter the situation, he would not let his blood rush to his head and act hastily. Biting his lip, he grounded himself with the pain, giving their most powerful party member an opportunity to strike.

And Julius’s piercing strike silently approached that small body.

Alphard immediately managed to twist in midair to evade, but his body was still cut down by the Finest of Knights, red blood spraying out, Gluttony’s body rolling onto the floor.

Roy: “Ugh! Woah, surprising—”

Julius: “Then, how about another surprise. Bloom, my buds!”

As Julius spoke, his Quasi Spirits began another barrage of attacks as Alphard bounced back to his feet, then darted away. At that moment, rainbow iridescence filled the dim hall, an aurora blossoming forth from Julius’s back, aiming at Gluttony.

Roy: “A Spiritual Arts User!”

Julius: “I hope one such as you, who appreciates gourmet, will enjoy. No matter which bud, I am proud to enjoy the bloom of these child flowers.”

Roy: “Awful, they’re pretentious, we don’t like them!”

Seeing the world burning in the aurora, Alphard spoke as he escaped high. Julius’s thin sword followed his back, hunting down Alphard with a flurry of sword strikes from all directions, who attempted to escape with a sideways jump.

Julius: “—Lolimancer!”

Subaru: “Don’t call me by that name! Juli!”

Julius: “Take Valkyrie with you to the top floor! Stop the broadcast!”

Hiding away each other’s names, Julius declared that he would hold off Alphard.

While supporting a wheezing Crusch, Subaru judged this as the most reasonable course of action, but he could not quite agree with it.

That boy, mocking them as he darted around was, after all, Gluttony. The enemy who Subaru had pursued for over a year. Saying that defeating him was one of Subaru’s top priorities would be no exaggeration.

And even though he was right there—

Crusch: “I-I understand. Juli-sama, I will pray for your blade to be swift and true.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

However, before Subaru could protest, Crusch climbed to her feet and gave her response to Julius. Subaru suddenly raised his face, seeing hers full of resolve.

Crusch was another victim of Gluttony, having been robbed of her memories. Of course, she had also wanted to seize this chance to retrieve her memories. Even so, she assumed her own responsibility and entrusted the fight against Gluttony to others.

Even setting aside those feelings, she was also well-aware of her own lack of strength. Ironically enough, both Subaru and Crusch were being pressed for choice at the same time as they stood up.

Roy: “So what’s going to happen? How are we doing it? Are we all going together? Even the disappointing woman and scummy man can be served as appetizer. Then, Juli-sama, we’ll eat him, swallow him, nibble him, lick him, taste him, swallow him, bite him, bite him into pieces, into pieces, and devour! Gluttony-!”

Julius: “Don’t say anything unnecessary. I didn’t become Juli in vain!”

Alphard still wore a smile and a relaxed attitude, in the narrow space limited by that aurora. Julius pursued victory, the dancing strikes of their swords producing steel sounds.

But during all of that, Julius’s and Subaru’s eyes caught for a moment. That gaze did not convey anything to Subaru by itself, but —

Subaru: “Ah, fuck it! Listen! Bastard, you absolutely can’t lose!”

Julius: “That is what I should say. Losing is not acceptable, and neither is dying. No, you absolutely cannot die here.”

Crusch: “Let’s go, Lolimancer-sama!”

Scratching his head, Subaru set aside his feelings for the time being and started running. Although he should have at least sprinted in front of Crusch, in truth, and much to his own shame, she could react to any surprise attack much faster than he could.

Subaru chased behind the still-wounded Crusch, and they both sprinted up the next flight of stairs. Before leaving, he took one last look at Julius’s and Alphard’s fight in the lobby. Julius seemed to have the advantage, but he could not let his guard down.

Julius: “Go!”

Subaru: “—Crap!”

Aware of Subaru’s gaze, Julius did not permit him to worry about his own status.

Although he was incredibly annoying, the idea of something happening to him was troublesome. Subaru turned to follow Crusch, bounding up the stairs in one breath.

Knowing that something might be lying in ambush, they immediately took another flight of stairs, heading towards the topmost room. And on the way there, Crusch: “Subaru-sama, I must apologize. If I am not mistaken, your priority should be Gluttony…”

Subaru: “Stop it, Crusch-san. Nobody thinks it’s your fault.”

While keeping watch on the situation upstairs, Crusch softly let out an apology. However, Crusch should have also been frustrated. Being apologized to would not heal the wounds either of them had. And he did not want to blame himself, if he were apologized to.

Subaru: “…I’m sorry, Rem. Please wait a little longer.”

Voicing the name of the girl who was still sleeping in the mansion, Subaru let out a heartfelt expression of regret.

In fact, he would like to run back right now and tear that sneering, malicious Sin Archbishop limb from limb. If that brought her back, what would be wrong with it?

The turmoil that would ensue would shake up the lives and deaths of many people. The consequences would be much easier to take in if he were a simple-minded person, unable to think ahead about these issues.

Although, he knew that if he did that, Rem would probably be angry with him upon waking up.

Crusch: “…”

Crusch said nothing to Subaru, who held his breath and repressed the emotions building up inside him. He just closed his eyes, expressing regret for his own apology, and they resumed their march with her at the forefront.

The City Hall was a five-story building, and Subaru and Crusch were already on the fourth floor. There were conference rooms and archive rooms for paperwork on the middle floors, and from a quick check on the information displayed at each landing, it was safe to assume that the broadcasting room was located on the top floor. In other words—

Subaru: “Lust is also gonna be there…”

Crusch: “Yes, that is true. But, considering the size of this corridor, would she really…?”

Peeking into the corridor on the fourth floor, Crusch raised her eyebrows in suspicion. Her question was natural, and Subaru held the same question.

The corridor of the fourth floor was only wide enough for four people to walk side-by-side, at most. Albeit a guess taken at a distance, the black dragon looking down at the square seemed to be as large as an elephant. It was very hard to imagine that it would be able to fit into the corridors in the building.

Of course, there was the possibility that, instead of ascending through the corridors, it had just destroyed the wall and forced its body into the room.

Crusch: “What do you think?”

Subaru: “At least, I don’t think there’s gonna be an ambush in the corridors. Crusch-san, do you agree with this? I think the real problem is an ambush at the broadcasting room, but… it’s been so long since they went inside. I’m sure that they’re setting something up.”

Crusch: “…Yes, I agree with you. I am certain that they are preparing an ambush in the broadcasting room.”

Subaru: “There’s no doubt that’s where they’ll be. However, the people who were supposed to be in the City Hall have not been found so far. If we’re not careful, then this hostage situation will…”

The more he thought about it, the number of bad situations coming to his mind increased.

It was not the kind of problem that would be solved with just martial prowess. Crusch’s fighting power was, as stated by herself, average, and she could not be relied upon to use magic. Subaru’s ability was also decreased because of Beatrice’s departure from the frontlines. And, upon closer inspection, it was clear that a lot of blood was pouring from his right leg, to boot.

Subaru: “You can’t call yourself brave until you plunge into the tiger’s den. Once the battle taking place outside finishes, we should be able to join them down there and the situation will change quickly…”

Crusch: “In that case, there is no reason for Lust to postpone the broadcast any further. In the end, Subaru-sama and I have no option other than acting to prevent it.”

Subaru: “The best way to deal with an ambush…”

Crusch asserted, and stared at Subaru. Feeling himself overpowered by that passionate gaze, Subaru gulped.

Subaru: “Uh, Crusch-san?”

Crusch: “I have heard from Wilhelm, that Subaru-sama is the one able to come up with the optimal solution to these situations. And so, I believe it as well.”

Subaru: “That’s some heavy trust!”

Wilhelm’s overestimation of Subaru’s performance was compounded even further by Crusch’s own expectations, who had forgotten the times when Subaru had been underrated by everyone.

Feeling as if he were about to be crushed by the weight of the expectations being placed on him, Subaru mused about it as much as he could in the short time he had left. And, even although he was not completely sure of it, he came to a decision.

Subaru: “What can we do to deal with an ambush…”

Crusch: “Yes?”

Subaru: “If someone’s going to wait for us as a matter of course… Let’s break that course.”

2

—There were several important factors in an ambush.

First of all, the location. Ambushes were a tactic that consisted of a person waiting for the opportunity to attack their enemy from a dominant location. That was the most essential element.

Secondly, it was necessary to be certain that the enemy would indeed appear at the set location. If the key opponent were missing, it would render the ambush completely pointless.

Moreover, it was also necessary to correctly estimate the time of arrival of the enemy at the location of the ambush. Spending too much time lying in wait would make the one setting the ambush lose their focus, and the ambush would not have the maximum effect.

So, assuming that Lust was setting an ambush, all three of these conditions had been fulfilled.

No matter what, they needed to break into the broadcast room within a set amount of time. From their enemy's perspective, there was no easier situation to hunt their prey than this.

Subaru: "Therefore, we must first destroy this situation."

Crusch: "Got it… No, I am of nobility. I decided once to believe in Subaru-sama, so I will never change that. I will leave it to you."

The broadcasting room located on the top floor—No, one floor above that.

Earlier, Capella had appeared on the rooftop through the top floor, and that was exactly where Subaru and Crusch were preparing to execute their plan to defeat their opponent's strategy. Crusch, who had been initially puzzled by Subaru's proposal, seemed determined. This way of doing things was her invariable merit, both before and after losing her memory.

Crusch: "Honestly, I wish to see how the battle in the square is faring…"

Subaru: "But if we go check on them, then our actions will be meaningless."

Even at this height, they could hear swords clashing, as well as Garfiel's cursing. In other words, that fight was still ongoing, so no aid from that front could be expected.

Subaru: "Anyway…"

Looking around, Subaru examined the roof. Claw marks had been left here and there on the ground, probably traces of the black dragon walking around. The railings and fences that looked over the square had disappeared due to the magic damage caused by Julius.

Subaru thought of that tremendous power as he went around the rooftop, heading to the side opposite to the square. Assuming that the floor layout was correct, they were indeed just above the broadcasting room.

Naturally, Capella would be lying in ambush there, waiting for Subaru and Crusch.

Crusch: "…Subaru-sama."

Subaru: "What happened? Please take a moment if you're unprepared."

Crusch: "I am sorry, but just now, I noticed something."

Subaru: "…?"

Crusch spoke rather weakly as Subaru busied himself with an iron fence. Subaru looked at her with surprise, and she looked back at him with a stiff expression.

Crusch: "I seem to have a certain fear of heights, so let us hurry."

Subaru: "An unexpected weakness… Got it. Ready!"

Confirming that the fence was firmly fixed, Subaru nodded to Crusch. She returned a stiff nod of her own, and stepped meekly into Subaru's chest with arms outstretched.

Crusch: "—Please do not let go."

Subaru: “Crusch-san, there are many men who would misunderstand, so it’s better if you don’t say those kinds of words often.”

Crusch: “—?”

Subaru turned his head towards Crusch, a wry smile plastered all over his face. Then, with Crusch nestled in his arms, clinging to him, he swung loose from the iron fence with great force.

Naturally, their bodies were drawn downwards by gravity, heading straight towards the ground, the wall of the building at their side—and as they fell, they reached the lowest point the whip wrapped around Subaru’s wrist would allow them to.

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Supporting the weight of two people at the same time, Subaru’s shoulders were in enough pain that it seemed his arms were about to come off. Twisting sideways, the two swung in an upward arc, reaching the outer wall of the City Hall. Seeing the window of the broadcasting room approaching, Subaru stretched out his feet and shattered it.

Crusch: “Gah—Hk!”

Subaru: “Wha—?!”

As shards of glass fell onto the floor, Subaru and Crusch rolled into the broadcast room. For a moment, Crusch seemed like she had released a small cry, but Subaru pretended not to hear it as he released her from his arms.

Both climbed to their feet, immediately looked around, and found that inside the room.

???: “—Hk.”

Staring blankly at the two who had just jumped in, with eyes wide open, was a black dragon sitting in a stiff posture.

The same massive body they had seen on the roof had been stuffed into that room. The black dragon had folded its wings and twisted its neck, apparently facing the door that led to the corridor. Presumably, it had originally intended to turn Subaru and Crusch to ash the moment they tried to enter, but that idea had been seen through.

Obstructed by that huge body, it was in a room that confined her movement greatly. Although the black dragon attempted to attack both of them, starting to spread its wings,

Subaru: “Crusch-san!”

Crusch: “Right!”

Released of her fear of heights, Crusch nodded a response, before shooting a slash. Her blade of wind sliced into the black dragon, damaging a wing, and rushing towards it, she slashed one of its front legs with a direct blow. Lust screamed loudly as dark blood began to spray.

Dragon: “AAAAAHHHHHHHH!!”

Subaru: “Watch out! Get down… Woah?!”

Capella writhed in pain as she flapped her wings and swung her neck wildly, destroying the room.

Although the room was rather larger than usual, its durability was not enough to withstand the rampage of an elephant-sized creature. In order to escape from this destruction, Subaru turned to run, but at that moment he noticed something.

—At the foot of the black dragon, a young girl trembled in desperation, bound in chains.

Girl: “—!”

Subaru met eyes with that tearful girl. Realizing that Lust had adopted a very effective hostage strategy should the initial ambush fail, he was filled with rage.

Focusing, Subaru’s body instinctively chose to move forward rather than escape.

Managing to dodge the tail that zipped over his head, he slid toward the little girl that was laying down next to the feet of the black dragon. Picking up that shuddering petite body, he flicked his whip fiercely at the back of the black dragon's head. It did not seem to inflict too much damage, but it allowed Subaru to express his rage.

But Crusch's strikes were not so powerless.

Dragon: "Wait! Wait! You've got the wrong… Hk!"

Crusch: "Nothing was asked to you! This is retribution for the chaos and turmoil you have wrought upon the city!"

Crusch's blade did not forgive the black dragon, who held its head in a rather human-like manner.

With almost disappointing fragility, Capella bore no defense to that steel blade. Crusch cut the remaining wing, her slender legs kicking the dragon's screaming body. How different it was from Subaru's leg strength, as that huge body was shaken violently by the kick's power, and Capella stumbled backwards to the opposite direction of the window Subaru had broken.

Both of the black dragon's wings had yet to begin to regenerate. Although she had called her body immortal, if this was her rate of regeneration, then it could not be called a threat.

Crusch: "—It is over!"

Dragon: "Wai—"

Not allowing it to finish, Crusch ran as she let loose several successive attacks on the black dragon's body, head, and wings. Its huge body slammed through the wall, smashing through the window frame and falling outside.

The black dragon, having been thrown off the building and began its descent immediately spread its wings—Not. One of the wings had been torn away at its root, and the wing from the other side had been torn, now resembling a hook, so the dragon was unable to support flight.

Dragon: "—Hk."

The black dragon, without a chance to regenerate, had no time to say anything, simply falling to the ground. A few seconds later, the noise of Lust hitting the ground arrived. It was the sound of meat slamming against a wall, or a wet towel being dropped on the floor.

Crusch: "I shall go and confirm the situation. Subaru-sama, can you take care of this child?"

Subaru: "R-Right, I got it."

Crusch walked up to the window from which the black dragon had fallen, ever vigilant. With heartfelt trust in her, Subaru gently released the girl who had been caught up in the current turmoil. She was still in a state of fear, confusion in her quivering gaze as she looked at Subaru. It was inevitable. It was natural that anyone experiencing being glared at by a dragon would be scared beyond their wits.

Subaru: "It's okay, that bad dragon has been killed by the superheroine onee-chan over there just now, though not easily… Where's everyone else?"

Girl: "Ah, eh…"

Subaru: "Although it's hard to believe, we're on your side. We're to save you. We need to do some things before the bad guy comes back. Can you help me?"

He bent his knees, keeping their lines of sight level, and spoke with a gentle tone. This was the subconscious behavior he would use whenever speaking to someone younger, due to his fondness for children. She seemed to calm down slightly, taking deep breaths as if steeling herself before replying.

Girl: "There's a room over there… Everyone's, in there."

Subaru: "Are they trapped there? That room…"

The girl pointed to a little room at the back of the broadcasting room.

Rather, this room was not the broadcast room. Although it was a large division, there was no broadcast equipment at all. Even if the radio were a magical device, Subaru could not find anything resembling one such thing in the room. Perhaps it was some kind of preparation room. So that meant that room that the girl was indicating was most likely the real broadcasting room.

As he turned his gaze over, Subaru hesitated. He wanted to inquire about the life or death of the people inside. However, asking the girl such a thing was far too cruel and inconsiderate.

Subaru pat the still shaking girl's head, slowly making his way toward the room.

Girl: "…"

Heart beating hard and fast, Subaru felt sweat break out on his neck.

Suddenly, his throat felt parched and dry as well. Not even his voluntary Tarzan Jump had made him so nervous. This was the sense of a nasty premonition, a terror which preoccupied his mind.

Crusch: "Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "Everything's fine. I'm gonna check it right away. What happened to Lust?"

Crusch: "…Everything is fine here as well. I do not know why she's staying put, though."

Crusch replied while still being wary of Lust under her gaze. Upon hearing that answer, Subaru took a deep breath and headed for the room, reaching out to brush the doorknob.

In the broadcasting room, there was a possibility that there were other Witch Cultists hiding. With that in mind, entering through the door to inspect what laid inside was not the better option for Subaru.

But, for some reason, that kind of worry seemed superfluous. In fact, this idea was right. Because, in reality, no Cultists occupied that room. Occupying it, was—

???: “…”

“…”

With speechless gazes, they looked at Subaru with amazement.

No, maybe he just wanted to assume they were looking. Subaru had no way of understanding how they observed the world, and he did not particularly want to understand.

He simply felt dismay. His voice would not work. This was what it meant to be truly speechless. His thoughts froze, and he thought of nothing. However, there was something he finally did understand.

—The true nature of that irritating sound accompanying the jarring voice in the broadcast he had heard in the shelter.

Subaru: “—What, is this?”

In response to Subaru, that sound spoke. That sound was one which welcomed Subaru, a fearsome sound, a defiant sound, a joyful sound, a meaningless sound—

The sound of numerous beating wings echoed throughout the broadcasting room.

In the darkened room, countless blinking red compound eyes moved, as if staring at Subaru.

There were many, many flies crammed into one room. And all the flies were the same size as people, this one, that one too, all of

them.

???: “—AAAHH!!”

Subaru: “—Eh?!”

Amidst the blank haze of his consciousness, Subaru registered a sudden pained cry.

Shocked into a sudden response, Subaru slammed the doors to that room, closing along with it the sound of a hundred beating wings. And Looking back, he found—

???: “Gahahahaha! Stupid, stupid! You dregs, the meat in your heads simply isn’t enough. You actually tried to match me in a battle of the wits? Who put sugar into your brain and made it into soup?! Kahahahaha!”

Under the heel of the girl who issued that sharp raucous laughter was Crusch, in agony.

There was no doubt that the familiar poisonous laughter—

Capella: “It’s me, Capella-chan! Gaahahahaha!”

As Capella winked and stuck out her tongue, Crusch vomited a large amount of blood, the whites of her eyes barely showing.

Chapter 36:
The Beginning and Conclusion of Love

Behind him was a room full of gigantic flies. Subaru and Crusch had defeated the black dragon, and it now lay motionless on the ground outside.

And yet, in front of Subaru was a girl, laughing as she repeatedly dug her foot into Crusch.

Sinister laughter, a sardonic tone. The person in front of him was undoubtedly Capella Emerada Lugunica, the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Lust.

—His entire body started going haywire.

Subaru: "What, what is this…?"

Capella: "Do you actually have to take the time to think about it? You scum shouldn't worry about such things—the best choice for you is to recognize the reality before you! You saw a beautiful maiden shaking with fear! But in reality, it was a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, tadaaaaa~!"

As Subaru's mind raced, Capella danced around, sticking her mocking tongue out at Subaru. Under her feet, Crusch's eyes rolled back, vomiting profuse amounts of blood.

Although no trauma was visible, it was plain to see that she had suffered a life-threatening injury. With the only person in their group able to use healing magic, Garfiel, far from them, the current situation was the worst of scenarios.

Capella: "Didn't you find it strange at all? Here, at the City Hall, where the city is managed, why would there be a child meat? But your first reaction was doubtlessly "Ah, this kid is in danger, I have to save her…", no? What a disappointingly stupid train of thought!"

Subaru: "Sh-Shut up, already. There's plenty I'd like to say but first, move your damn foot.”

Capella: “Hmm? Are you so captivated by my beautiful legs that you’re dripping already~? Or are you thinking of this female meat that’s desperately licking my feet? Indeed, she has a lovely body, are you trying so hard that you can’t restrain yourself right now? Gahahahaha!”

Subaru: “—! You bitch! Bastard, we’re not just creatures for you to tread on!”

Capella wore an ecstatic expression as her heel was driven into Crusch’s sternum again and again. In response to her atrocious actions and ridicule, Subaru’s veins boiled with rage.

His lower body tensed, ready to move forward. Capella, who had provoked Subaru, seemed to welcome an attack. However, Subaru was not so foolish as to blindly rush forward.

Even without her memory, Crusch was a fearsome warrior. Wilhelm had vouched for her strength, allowing her to partake in this battle. And yet, in the span of just a few seconds without Subaru’s sight focused on her, she had lost without posing any resistance.

There was no doubt that Lust’s strength was undoubtedly far above Subaru’s. Therefore, Subaru needed to solve the situation without engaging her in combat.

Subaru: “…”

Crusch, whose very life was in danger, needed to be saved immediately and taken to Julius and the others.

It was up to him to engineer an escape, abandoning their mission in the process. That was of the utmost priority. Even though they would fail to stop the broadcast, that mission was not as important as their lives. And they also had not found the people who they should be rescuing, at least not on this floor.

His only conclusion was that they did not possess enough martial strength to retake the city in secrecy.

Therefore, Subaru could not hesitate.

Capella: “Huh?”

Subaru: “Haa!”

Capella exhaled, slightly surprised by Subaru’s sudden action.

The target of Subaru’s whip was not Capella, but a shelf running along the wall to the side. He found a metal bust, large enough to be embraced by two arms, and wrapped in it his whip, deftly flicking his wrist and throwing it towards Capella.

Subaru now wielded a high-speed metal whirlwind as weapon. And he now held much more power, enough to open a hole in the wall. Whether to block or evade, she would need to remove her foot from Crusch.

Subaru would take advantage of that moment to retrieve her.

Subaru: “Take that!”

Capella: “I will~.”

Subaru: “Huh?!”

In contrast to the Subaru’s spirited shout, Capella responded with casual words.

Immediately after, the sound of a hard object encountering bones and flesh was accompanied by blood spurting forth from Capella’s forehead, which had been torn almost completely apart. She had not even bothered to protect herself. The inside of her scalp was visible, and blood stained her cheeks.

Subaru could no longer bear to look at what had originally been such a cute face. Her left eye had been half-destroyed, and its light had vanished, but it nonetheless remained fixed on him. This unexpected situation left Subaru’s mind momentarily blank.

His action had been intended to distract his enemy, but he had been caught off guard instead—and a Sin Archbishop certainly would not let that moment go.

Capella: “Why do you people feel like playing into the palm of my hands so adorably? I wuuuuv~ that kind of hopeless stupidity. Gahahahaha!”

Capella’s ridicule slipped into Subaru’s frozen thoughts. The girl turned to face the still rigid Subaru and, in the next moment, a gust of a black whirlwind hit him, abruptly sending him flying.

Subaru: “Gah!”

As if he had been smacked by a giant, his right half took a heavy blow, and Subaru was knocked into a table, before rolling to the ground. His entire body was shook, and he dizzily climbed to his feet, supporting himself against the wall. What he saw next was—

Capella: “What’s wrong? Are you so stunned by my beauty that you can’t even move?”

Subaru: “—What… the fuck is that?”

Capella: “You actually have to ask? Just use your eyes for once~!”

Capella happily shook her hips in a dance, and Subaru was unable to even articulate a cry of anguish.

The girl’s short skirt swayed, and protruding from its hem—was a dragon’s tail, thick and black, which had just been used to attack Subaru. The disconcerting appearance of a petite girl spliced with the mighty tail of a dragon imprinted itself upon Subaru’s consciousness.

What would a person even have to say about that?

Subaru: “Could you be… a human that can transform into a dragon?”

Capella: “Correct! Your hopeless brain couldn’t even realize the truth upon impact! Even after this gentle lady had given you so many hints here and there, you still couldn’t reach it, you helpless scummy meat.”

Subaru: “—!”

Capella waved her tail lightly as Subaru took in her physiology and identity. Her long tail slammed from overhead, and the ground cracked as Subaru barely threw himself aside in time. But—

Capella: “Being relieved is quite naïve of you~.”

Subaru: “Ugh! Waaaaaaah!”

However, as he prepared to pull himself to his feet, Subaru was hit by her gigantic left fist. As he bounced away, he took another hit from the dragon tail awaiting him, and after a violent impact with the ceiling, was slashed by razor-sharp feathers, finally coming to a stop on the ground.

Coughing violently as the impact sent him rolling across the floor, he witnessed the true face of the terror that had assaulted him.

Where before there had only been a black tail, now there was a fist covered in bestial hair. Then came the black tail from before, and finally, a pair of bird wings, with feathers sharp enough to slash across Subaru’s body—And these all belonged to that young girl’s form.

Capella: “You should have just about figured the answer out, right~?”

“Alien” was the only word that came to mind.

A dragon’s tail, a beast’s arm, the wings of a great bird, all perfectly fused to a human girl’s body. He could not think of any other suitable words to describe her. Other than words, a sense of physical aversion rose upon gazing at this creature that should not exist.

He could feel nothing but a sense of disgust toward the monster in front of him.

Subaru: “Variation, transformation…”

Capella: “I’m the Sin Archbishop of Lust, Capella Emerada

Lugunica. All the love and respect in this world exists to be monopolized by myself alone. If someone loves me, no matter how abnormal their desire is, I'll respond. In short, I'm the ultimate embodiment of all kinds of virtue and beauty in the world. Any girl matching your preferences, I can become. Hey, I'm a woman who does her best, aren't I? Kahahahaha!"

While wantonly speaking nonsense, Capella turned to face Subaru and began to freely change her form.

She shifted from her abnormal shape back to the tiny girl, but her hands and feet and then immediately extended to become the curvy body of a grown woman. Just as Subaru realized this, she changed into a simple village girl, but, in the next moment has become a maiden with an innocent face and a lewd smile.

Capella: "Now, how do you like me?"

Subaru: "…"

Speechless. He was unable to say anything. One glance, and he realized that it was the worst possible situation.

She was a desecration of human values. Despite being so simple, straight-forward even, the Authority of Lust desecrated and trampled on all values, so that the holder would be the only loved thing in the world.

Looking at her, Subaru saw that the wound marring her face had been long healed, without any trace of the injury. Her terrible ability to regenerate—or rather, her ability to transform, had long cured her old injuries.

In any case, the mystery of how the dragon had become a girl was solved. He had originally thought she was like Petelgeuse, able to possess the bodies of others, but, if that were not the case—

Subaru: "—Huh?"

If that were not the case, then what had happened with the dragon from earlier, and the flies inside the broadcast room?

Capella: “Have you finally realized it?”

Subaru: “Wait… Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a second.”

As if she had read his innermost thoughts from his facial expression, Capella broke into raucous, mocking laughter.

She had become a graceful lady with long hair, and even the sound of her laughter changed as well. In this situation, where he was uncertain of even who he was speaking to, Subaru shook his head.

No way. It was impossible. It could not be true.

However, were he right, everything that had happened could now be explained.

Capella’s Authority of Lust allowed her to change and transform her own body. And if this ability of hers were effective on objects other than her physical body…

Capella: “Has your waterlogged brain finally realized the identity of those disgusting flies~?”

Subaru: “They… they’re…”

Capella: “Hmm, hmm, hurry and give your answer, and I’ll hear you out~. Gahahahahaha!”

Capella covered her mouth with her hand and laughed, loudly and proudly.

His heart of hearts unable to endure the horror, Subaru said in a trembling voice—

Subaru: “—They’re… the people in this building, who you have transformed.”

Capella: “Correct~! But you were pretty slow, so no prizes~. I won’t complement you. Ah, pointless scum, what’s your defective brain even for~?”

Subaru: “That’s my line!”

Capella did not look remorseful about this brutal atrocity in the least.

Needless to say, she had just stuffed those people into a dark room. When their red compound eyes had fixed themselves on Subaru, their wings, which were not capable of flight, had been flapping desperately, issued a loud buzzing flutter.

—They must have been asking for his help then.

Subaru: “There’s something wrong with your head! Why… How could you do such a thing! Why would you do it? Turning people into flies… Why?!”

Capella: “It’s horrifying, right~?”

Subaru: “It’s beyond twisted! You… You, you…”

Capella: “Maybe it’s just because I can’t help but create disgusting creatures~?”

Again, Subaru could not find words to respond. With harsh breaths and clenched teeth, Subaru fixated on her with a fiery, intense gaze of hatred, his eyes blood-red from pure murderousness.

She would toy with the lives of others, even turning them into flies. Those atrocities were even worse than murder. Much worse.

In the past few hours, Subaru had successively encountered four Sin Archbishops who he had never met before.

Sirius of Wrath, a madwoman who manipulated the emotions of others and imposed selfish love.

Regulus of Greed, a villain who self-righteously and forcefully imposed his own values upon others.

Alphard of Gluttony, a blasphemer who stole people’s Memories and Names, a poison that eroded the natural course of human life.

And Capella of Lust, a monster who stripped away both human dignity and identity.

They were all hopeless, cursed with madness.

Capella: "…"

In contrast to Subaru, so enraged the blood vessel in his head were about to burst, Capella had settled into a bored silence. In the next second, she took on a mocking tone.

Washed over by Subaru's anger, Capella spoke,

Capella: "—Indeed, it's annoying and disgusting. That's exactly why."

Facing Subaru's unbridled fury, Capella wore a more pleasant smile than before. She clapped her hands together, pointing to the room packed with flies.

Capella: "When you look at a room full of stupid giant flies, you get a horrible sense of physiological disgust, isn't that right? Of course, that's only natural. No matter who looks at those ugly creatures, they can't help but want to run. They can't stand it. That's right."

Subaru: "What… does that…"

Capella: "No matter who, everyone feels disgusted with that ugliness. And those scummy pieces of meat have become dreadful pieces of shit, looking beyond horrible. It's a matter of course that no one would love them. That's also natural."

Subaru: "What?! What are you trying to say?"

Capella: "Human beings, however, are creatures that can't live without loving or being loved. But when their loved ones have become such creatures, no matter how much they want to, they just can't bring themselves to love them. In that case, they redirect their love to others. No matter how reluctant they are, they just can't love anything dirty."

His mind went blank.

Tilting her head slightly, she spoke her incomprehensible, monstrous words.

Listening to her clapping, Subaru was overtaken by a desire to escape. Now, immediately, without hesitating for even a second, he wanted to disappear to a place without this monster.

His body did not wish for those eyes to be fixed on him, his ears did not wish to hear that voice directed at him, his mind did not wish to remember that existence in his presence, all in a sense of physical disgust.

Was she not the embodiment of aversion—of physiological, biological repulsiveness?

Something which he was genuinely unable to stand, was that not the definition of the horror that stood before him?

Capella: "So gentle and merciful, I really am the perfect woman. Since it was decided that I'd monopolize all the world's love and respect, then I absolutely can't slack on my duty. In order to be loved better, I'll work hard to be loved, and change myself to suit your tastes. In order to capture your attention, I'll take away everything you're interested in. Everything but me. It doesn't matter who you loved originally, you'll choose me in the end. I'll work hard to make that happen. I'll improve improve increase perfect improve improve improve improve improve my own charm! And reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce the charm of the meats who aren't me! Anyone, no matter who, would fall for this world's most beautiful and charming me!"

Subaru: "…Just, kill me already!"

Capella: "Why? I'm a philanthropist, how could I be so brutal as to kill you? Even if you're worthless scum… if there's a chance that you'll love me, even if there's a tiny, slight chance, for every single person, I'll let them live even one more second if they'll give me my due praise! Only those who are not able to do so will be killed! After all, Capella-sama is a commendable, most praiseworthy woman!"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru: "I see now."

Capella: "Do you really? Well, now that you understand, quickly give your words of appreciation to Capella-sama. Let yourself be melted by Capella-sama's love and become my favorite piece of meat…"

Subaru: "Fucking die."

He could not think. But there was no need to think.

The enemy in front of him was truly the most vicious enemy. Everything other than that piece of knowledge was entirely unnecessary.

Subaru's whip suddenly flew forward. The monster jerked backwards as her face was suddenly attacked, removing her foot from Crusch. Taking advantage of that opening, Subaru immediately moved, picking up Crusch.

Capella: "See, after all, male meat long for female meat, your fluids won't stop leaking. Didn't you deny it earlier? Didn't you weave so many beautiful words? Don't you like beautiful things? Don't you like cute things? Don't you like soft and comfortable things? Don't bullshit me!"

Subaru: "—!"

Chasing Subaru, Capella spread her arms apart, while spitting spoken venom.

One hand turned into the head of a snake, while the other became the head of a lion—those distorted heads chased Subaru, showing their canines as they prowled up and down the floor of the room.

Although his right foot had begun to bleed again, he still felt no pain. It did not matter anyway. Feeling the warmth and weight of the person in his arms, making every effort to protect the woman he carried, Subaru focused every last bit of his athletic ability on dodging Capella's pursuit.

Capella: “Don’t you care so much for that scummy female meat? Then, for the rest of your short life, hold tightly and don’t let go! That tempting body! Those alluring eyes! Those sweet lips and the adorable voice that escapes them! That pleasant meat meat meat! Because she’s stimulating, you’re clinging so desperately to her, unable to let go? Die! Die! Go die! Go die right now!”

Subaru: “Don’t talk nonsense, bastard! I’m not that kind of person!”

Capella: “Shut the fuck up! Male scum should just obediently stay put and emanate the stench of rubbish! Female sows should obediently stay put and emanate the stench of an animal! Have you never thought of it? Can you honestly say that you’ve never thought of anything perverted for even a second? Doesn’t that one second mean it’s that kind of relationship between a male and a female meat? What’s the difference? What’s the difference?! Tell me what the difference is!”

The snake and lion writhed as if reflecting Capella’s excitement, twisting across the room. The sound rang out of teeth crunching and chewing on a wooden desk, disassembling its body, and finally sending its legs flying. That same force sought Subaru, trying again and again to reach him.

Caught in the center of that destructive storm, issuing a pained cry, Subaru guarded Crusch’s body as he desperately avoided those continuous attacks. Capella stood at the exit of the room. Even if he wanted to take the opportunity to escape, Capella’s body expanded and contracted, changing back and forth between women, girl, and child, in an anomaly that looked to be taboo.

Capella: “Don’t you want to stroke her hair? Don’t you want to brush her lips? Don’t you want to hold her body? Those cheap thoughts are always justified with beautiful words, with love as an excuse! Love is beautiful, isn’t that just a self-righteous justification? Aren’t you using beautiful words to cover up your desires?!”

Subaru: “—You!”

Capella: “Admit your Lust directly! Don’t try to hide it behind love!

Or are you refusing to say it? Refuting what's already been determined… Say it! I love her! I love her because of her own nature! Her nobility, her gentleness, her compassion, her temperance, her eyes that reflect the sky, her way of life that makes her willing to live for the sake of others, her strength to endure injustice, her vulnerability that she shows only to me, I don't want to leave her alone. Her reassuring voice, her loving gaze, her compassionate eyes, her lips that call my name so gently, her warmth that grips both of my hands, her touch that rouses my heart, her beautiful hair swaying in the wind. Because fate brought us together, because I believe that only she would accept me, because she was always by my side when my heart was pained, because she has taught me so many important lessons, because we have been together for all, all, all of this time, I want to see and feel the same things that she does from now until forever. Because we promised, I swore to never forget that vow, because I find her different from all others, and only she knows who I truly am, because I can't pretend to be something I am not in front of her. Because I was so lonely, I always wanted someone to understand me. Because you reminded me of those first feelings and taught me what it means to truly love someone. You were the one who wiped the tears from my face, you were the one who emerged from the boundless sea of people to find me, you were the one who hugged me tightly when I was about to break, you were the one who scolded me for my naivety for the first time, you were the one to scold me like no one had scolded me before, you were the one to speak to me in a way that did not patronize me, you were the one who took me to see so many sights I'd never seen before, you were the one who took my hand and led me out of my birdcage. No matter when, you support me, no matter what, you understand me. We're meant to be together, always, I can't live without you, you're my everything, you love me because I love you too, because your chest is so warm, because with you, all of the colors of the world shine so brilliantly, I can't feel happiness without you, I can't live without you. In this world so filled with lies, only this is truth."

With a still expression, Capella spit those words out as if they were curses.

As she spoke this long, touching confession, Capella's face was intertwined with beauty, adoration, obscenity. And with an even more complex and strange expression—

Capella: "—All of them, all of them, all of them! Aren't they just sweet nothings!"

Subaru: "…"

Capella: "Those are words only meant for comforting others, what's the harm in removing them? Do they have any sincerity? Any character? They're merely nauseating nonsense, how annoying! Acts! They're nothing but acts! In truth, you've only been attracted by the appearance of that meat! If you really love those towards whom you speak affectionate words and share affectionate touches and pillow talk with, see what happens when they become a fly! Could you love them? Are you not afraid of them? Are you not disgusted? Of course you are! You'd feel nothing but disgust oozing from your every pore! Well? Think about what you've said!"

Insane verbal abuse, a delusion of victimization, jealousy, hate, self-obsession.

Spit splashing across the room, Capella lost control of herself as she hysterically destroyed the room.

The snake's hiss, the lion's roar, Capella's cries, Subaru could not stand to listen to them any longer. The noise became like a storm, and the room began to collapse. No matter what he did, he could not see anything past the smoke.

Did he still have his feet on the ground? Was the right leg safe? The only thing he was certain of was the heartbeat of the woman in his arms, which continued to infuse Subaru with determination.

—But even such a fight would come to an end here.

Capella: "Hey, meat. I can see you!"

Subaru: "—Huh?!"

Breaking through the smoke, the lion's head suddenly rushed in. Then the fangs snapped at Subaru's right leg, which had already lost half of its flesh. And so, what was left of his leg below the thigh was torn off completely, blood spurting forth fiercely.

The injury had already directly exceeded the limits of Ferris's healing ability, and Subaru's mind began to boil as he struggled through the pain of losing his right leg. He issued a mute violent cry of agony, his throat unable to bear it.

Of course, he could not support his own body anymore.

As he collapsed, Crusch rolled onto the ground in front of him. And his blood began to overflow. That was no exaggeration. It looked as if a bucket of blood had been suddenly overturned. It was clear that Subaru's life force was dwindling rapidly.

Capella: "Ah, what a headache. It seems that I couldn't help but get excited—how impolite of me. Kahahahaha!"

Subaru: "…"

Maintaining his position on the ground, Subaru stuck one convulsing hand to his wound.

Although the palm of his hand was blocking the wound, the momentum of the bleeding had not diminished. In fact, another feeling began to well up in Subaru's body.

Soon, everything would end. This was the familiar feeling of death, which gradually approached Subaru.

In just a few hours, he had felt the pain of losing his right leg twice. His complexion transcended paleness to take on a yellow pallor, and his breathing sped up and up as his eyes grew bloodshot.

Capella: "Oh my, my, aren't you about to die~? Watching the agony this piece of meat is in is particularly distressing for my compassionate self who feels for others."

Subaru: "—Ah… Ah…"

Capella: "The piece of meat that you've been protecting is also going to die soon. It's such a shame that I indulged in my hobby a little bit… and decided to see if she'll lose to my blood… Oh, that's right~."

Capella squatted down, glancing at Subaru's twisted, agonized face. Then the monster smiled and stretched a hand to the wound on his leg.

Capella: "I wonder what kind of unsightly meat you'll become~?"

Subaru: "…"

As she spoke, Capella turned her other hand into a blade, cutting into the hand that had been caressing Subaru's wound until now. And, bit by bit, her blood dripped onto Subaru's stump of a right leg. Black blood blended together with red blood, forming a rather indecent scene. And right after,

Subaru: "—?! Hah, ah ah ah ah ah?!"

Capella: "My blood is different from other people's blood. After all, mine is mixed with dragon's blood, which contains a great curse~. I wonder if you will last longer than that female meat~?"

Capella hummed happily, but Subaru could not form any kind of reply.

His entire being was already half-dead, and even his pain had become sluggish. Just a second before he died, the blood that had invaded his body via his right leg's wound ravaged and eroded him.

As if a foreign body with self-awareness had entered his body, a fear of a much higher degree than that of a regional pain overtook Natsuki Subaru, as if attempting to completely rewrite his existence while merging with him.

Unable to understand, he was not allowed even the mercy of death.

And as that monster had said, Crusch was the same. She was suffering identical pain. If she had to endure such a pain, wouldn't she be better off dead! Let us die! Let us die! Let me die! Let me die! Let me die! I don't want to die!

Capella: “Gahahahaha! Well then, the invaders have been well taken care of. Well, it’s about time that I…”

After looking back and forth at Subaru and Crusch, collapsed in agony, Capella stood, satisfied. She reverted to the petite girl’s form, her tail vanishing as she headed toward the broadcast room, swaying her hips. Suddenly, she paused, as if noticing something.

Her gaze fell on the wall that had been destroyed by the black dragon which had served as a decoy.

Capella: “My, my, they were pretty decent after all∼.”

???: “—!”

And, after having fallen from the building only a short while ago, the black dragon had crawled up from the side of the building. Seeing its enemy, it gave a deafening roar, before breathing a mouthful of black flames towards Capella.

—At that moment, the upper floor of the City Hall was engulfed by jet-black flames.

Bonus Short Stories

Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle
Line 1

1

“Mr. Otto, I find it unfair that you're always traveling together with Master Subaru.”

With such rather violent comment, Otto was stopped by the call of a maid girl.

The mansion's novice, was no longer an appropriate expression to describe her skill. The girl, who during this year had gained enough skill to call herself by the title of a maid, was named Petra.

There was Petra, her face charming, her cute cheeks reddened, making a cute a statement, to which Otto bitterly smiled.

The place was the Roswaal estate's hall, the time was early morning.

Although he had been walking around the site for the purpose of relaxing his body, which had hardened after finishing the paperwork that had taken him the whole night, his sleepy head ended up receiving one unthinkable accusation.

“No, I think it is absurd for me to be told that, or rather, that is just vis major.”

“Is it really so? So you haven't been secretly asking the Master to please let you go out together with Subaru when he goes out?”

“That means I'm being treated like a pretty creepy guy here, doesn't it?!”

When he saw Petra's doubtful eyes, Otto made an exclamation loaded with a denial of extraordinary strength.

—The focus of Petra's suspicions was in the plan to visit the Watergate City, which was abruptly decided yesterday.

Regarding this topic, jumping into a well-prepared opponent's pocket was one of the few things that Otto himself was truly interested in. But even so, it seemed to be an object of envy for Petra.

Because, after all, in the list of those destined for the Watergate City 'Priestella,' Petra's name was not.

"I think it cannot be helped, though. Petra, you have had plans to attend the meeting directed by the Margrave for a long time already, after all."

"That's… I understand. I mean, that's a thing I myself suggested."

Leaving a childish tone at the end of her sentence, Petra vexedly pinched her uniform's apron with her fingers.

Petra, who would not be accompanying them to Priestella, would be playing the role of standing next to her master, Roswaal. This was, in fact, something she herself had proposed, and a challenge too. Therefore—

"Shall I go and speak with the Margrave, then?"

"—It's fine. I'm not a kid anymore, I can't be causing others trouble for this kind of things."

When Otto made a light diversion, Petra clearly and promptly replied with her own determination. When Otto heard her doubt-lacking decision and burst into laughter, "Aaah!" Petra's eyes were opened wide,

"Mr. Otto, you're evil! You were just testing me!"

"Haha, forgive me. But your answer was prompt, wasn't it? That made me feel at ease."

While Petra expressed her anger with swollen cheeks, Otto apologized to her.

But, in the depths of his apology, the relief he felt at Petra's decision was genuine. Although he felt bad for Petra, he wanted her to excellently fulfill her role as Roswaal's guard at the meeting.

Roswaal's behavior had had no questionable points to be seen during this year. Ever since the disclosure of his plans at the 'Sanctuary,' Roswaal had been vigorous, actually doing his business as a supporter.

This meeting was the result of that year. Since Otto would not be able to accompany him to that place, when it came to the topic of who to put in his place, it was Petra.

Subaru, Emilia, obviously Ram, and even Garfiel and Frederica who had been affected by his plan, showed Roswaal tolerance. That was a virtue of them.

Not forgiving him was way easier than forgiving him. For Subaru and the rest, those who were able to do it naturally and without anguish, Otto felt appreciation.

Therefore, he and Petra, those with the ability of not forgiving Roswaal, were necessary.

"I kindly ask you to act as the Margrave's babysitter. Petra, you are the only one who can do this."

"Good. I was going to do well even if I wasn't told to, …and you, Mr. Otto, make sure to watch over Subaru and Emilia-Sister for me. Beatrice too, you take your eyes off her for a second and she disappears, you know. And Garf… well, he's pretty burly, so maybe there's nothing to worry about."

"Hmmm, that is an incredibly precise evaluation. By the way, are you worried about me?"

"—? Mr. Otto, you'll be alright, won't you? Why should I be worried?"

"I really don't get why I'm being looked at with such a confused face, you know?!"

With a face, that looked more incredulous than he had imagined, being directed at him when he was just asking for the sake of testing her once more, Otto's laments echoed high inside the Roswaal estate in the morning.

2

"Mr. Otto, is now a good time?"

Along with a graceful knock, spoke and showed her face the beautiful leader maid who owned long golden hair.

The one who arrived, her green eyes cast down, acting somehow apologetic was the person who managed the tasks of the maids working for the Roswaal estate, it was Frederica.

Seeing her visit his workplace, "Oh," Otto rose his eyebrows.

"Ms. Frederica, how unusual for you to come at this time. Wasn't the break after the end of Fire time going to start soon?"

"That is right, today I will be laying tea and baked sweets out in the dining room. Petra will also be making very fluffy souglés… Excuse me. I have strayed away from the topic."

While she walked forward to the center of the room, Frederica looked a little embarrassed as she put her hand on her own lips.

It was a gesture she could be seen doing whenever she smiled or looked straight ahead at someone. It was probably something she did in order to hide her fangs, which were just a tiny little bit pointier than a human's, and it seemed to have ended up becoming a habit.

Although Otto did not mind it in particular, maybe it was something a mature woman would pay attention to. Because, whenever she went loose and gave a broad smile, she and Garfiel looked very similar, like the siblings they were.

"Mr. Otto, as it appears Petra was impolite early this morning, I offer an apology from my side too. I have already made sure to firmly warn that girl."

While Otto pondered such matter, Frederica bent herself deeply at the waist and spoke. Hearing what she said, “No, no,” Otto shook his neck sideways,

“How exaggerated. There was nothing bad enough to be called impoliteness. Petra and I were just talking like we usually do… although, in that case, I am not sure if it is completely fine for me to say it.”

“Come on, Mr. Otto, even you think of it that way after all, am I not right? It is simply not correct. If she goes on taking advantage in that way of the kindliness that the people who look after her have, that child’s growth will stop.”

“You know, I somehow get the feeling that what you are showing is, rather than consideration towards me, concern for Petra’s future.”

“That is… not something I can entirely deny.”

Before Otto’s reproachful glare, Frederica awkwardly smiled as if she had given in.

Although it was brave of her to conceal nothing, it was a well-known fact that Frederica doted on Petra and was trying to bring her up to be a splendid maid. Since Petra, with her own ambition to improve, also idolized the woman who was not only loving towards her, but also skilled at her work, it was evident, even from an outsider’s eyes, that they had a good relationship.

“So, would her conduct at the next meeting be like some sort of culmination for that growth?”

“Indeed. That child is a fast learner when it comes to work, too… I just cannot take my eyes off her.”

With a nod, Frederica proudly affirmed the way her favorite apprentice had grown. Otto closed one eye at her calm expression, “Well then,” and so he broached,

“Could it be that it is your younger brother who you are actually worrying for?”

"…Nothing can be hidden from Mr. Otto, it seems. That is correct, indeed. As you know, Petra is within my eyes' reach, whereas Garf is where my hands cannot reach him."

Her worries unending, Frederica put her hand over her ample chest and breathed out a sigh. Even Otto understood Frederica's misgiving and the unending fears she had about his younger brother.

In Garfiel's case, what caused that anxiety was his surroundings rather than the person in question. During this year, Otto too had been made to endeavor to do several things, by his quick-tempered younger brother figure, who possessed strength superior to that of an ordinary person.

Although, fortunately, Garfiel idolized Otto as an older brother and did respect his opinions.

"Whether that child's behavior will cause trouble for Lady Emilia is what I am worried about. Up until now, that child has had no actual involvement with those related to the Royal Election, but…"

"This time, he shall do so. Certainly, that makes me anxious too…"

Nevertheless, Otto did not harbor an anxiety towards Garfiel as strong as the one Frederica harbored.

Despite appearances, Garfiel had the prudence necessary to keep his mouth shut when matters out of his own area of expertise came up. Where he to choose between the two, that kind of anxiety was way bigger when it was Subaru.

Stirring up trouble at the scene through unnecessary remarks was his specialty. Incredibly, things often went well because of it, but that did not stop the griping pain in Otto's stomach.

"Lady Emilia is no exception in that respect, though."

"…How troubled is Mr. Otto. However, Mr. Otto, I must apologize for making you deal even with these worries of mine, though."

"What, troubled… that kind of gives me the feeling my neck is being wrung.”

“Fufu. We do rely on you, though. No matter what anyone says, a camp where Mr. Otto is missing just does not function. I kindly beg, please, take care of everyone… especially my foolish brother.”

While Otto scratched his cheek with a finger, Frederica bowed politely before him, with a smile.

As he admired that posture, beautiful enough to be fascinating, Otto felt very deeply moved by her words.

“Oh, Mr. Otto, is something wrong?”

“I don’t know, being treated this decently has moved my heart much more than I though it would… I swear to do my best.”

Firmly, in front of the surprised Frederica, Otto raised his fist to show his newfound enthusiasm.

And then, with his fist clenched, Otto tilted his head,

“By the way, Ms. Frederica, are you worried about me?”

“About you? Uh, what does that mean…?”

“Even Ms. Frederica does this to me?!”

And so, being her perplexity so genuine and lacking in any malice, Otto ended up wounded.

3

“Otto, I’ll be entering whenever I want. I just brewed you tea, so thank me.”

When Otto returned to his workplace after taking a bath, he was greeted by such insolent voice and attitude.

Inside the room, sitting on Otto’s desk and elegantly tilting a cup of tea, was a pink-haired maid girl who possessed a sharp sweetness, Ram.

To her imposing attitude and nonexistent respect for those around her, Otto bitterly smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“At this point it is no longer surprising, but why now? I would think you would be in the middle of treatment with the Margrave at this time if it were a normal day, or am I wrong?”

“Yes, that’s right. So I took a moment from my work hours and decided to drop by. And even during this break, my time with Master Roswaal is being chopped to bits. I hope you’re conscious of it.”

“That’s an awful way to phrase it.”

Nevertheless, aware that such things were just typical of Ram, Otto took the cup that had been put on the desk for him, and carried it to his mouth. An exquisite scent and flavor passed through his nose and tongue, making him inadvertently fall into a trance.

“Seriously, Ms. Ram, your skill as a tea server is so first-class.”

“Of course it’d be. Besides, the other merits Ram has are like stars. However, since the time when they can peek from a sky clear of clouds is short, they must chose whose head should they float above.”

“I know that much, though.”

“…That’s no good. As expected of Otto.”

“Excuse me, could you stop scorning everything with my name?!”

“Hah!”

Snorting, Ram brushed Otto’s appeal aside in a way that admitted not of a reply. Although, in his current state of mind, even that was something he had already accepted as part of his daily life, Otto’s lips broke into a smile immediately after that.

“What? If you feel joy at being scolded, then you’re hopeless.”

“So you are aware that you are scolding me… No, I’m thinking, there has been an awful lot of people coming to me with tasks today. Ms. Ram, you, too, have come for something about Priestella, have you not?"

"…"

Narrowing her light pink eyes, Ram kept her silence at Otto's words. But the very fact that she did not deny it was enough as a backup for Otto's conjecture.

She, too, realized her silence was just an affirmation, and let out a sigh,

"…Who we're dealing with is a proper Royal Election candidate. On the contrary, here we have the not-proper Lady Emilia going out to meet her personally. You understand your duty as her adviser is an important one, right?"

"Shouldn't you say it in a little softer way?"

"Glossing over the facts isn't going to make them change. Besides, Lady Emilia's course of action will affect Master Roswaal's greatest desire too. —And I don't wanna see that face of discouragement when things fail either."

"…"

"What?"

"No, I just wonder, whose face is it that you do not want to see, the Margrave's or Lady Emilia's?"

Seeing Otto tilt his head, "Tch," Ram mercilessly, strongly clicked her tongue. Ram's sentiments were hard to understand and difficult to see, but she was genuine and loving.

In fact, Subaru, Garfiel, and even Beatrice were on the range of people she was considerate to.

"Anyway, you've been warned. Looks like you've done drinking the tea Ram herself brewed. Think of this as your reward being already paid in advance, and then go give it all you've got out there."

“What, so this was a bribe? At least, I want one more cup when I come back.”

“—That settles it, then.”

As she lightly descended with grace from the desk, Ram loosened her lips. Before that smile, Otto sighed with the feeling of someone who had been just thoroughly finished.

So, since they were already talking about agreements, Otto looked back at Ram’s smile,

“By the way, this will also be the first time I have actual involvement with the Royal Election, aren’t you worried?”

“Stop asking when you already know the answer. How nasty.”

4

“Could it be that they trust me, after all?”

Remembering his exchanges with Petra, Frederica, and then Ram, Otto tilted his head in puzzlement.

Since he had stayed up during the whole previous night, today he planned to rest a little, before morning came. Before doing so, Otto washed his teeth in the bathroom, and went back to his bedroom.

“Ah, Otto.”

And, during the way back to the room, who he happened upon was Emilia dressed in her nightgown.

With her long, silver hair damply wet, Emilia was unexaggeratedly beautiful as she smiled. It was not unreasonable at all for Subaru to lose his mind, thought Otto from an objective point of view as he bitterly smiled.

“Lady Emilia, will you be going to sleep soon?”

“Yes, I will. I gotta rest well and prepare for Priestella. I know I might end up causing a lot of trouble for others, but I will definitely be doing my very best.”

Clenching her fist in front of her chest, Emilia eagerly spoke with a look full of motivation. Then, “But,” she continued,

“If you’re there, I’m sure it’ll be alright, Otto. Because we rely on you a looot.”

“…”

“Well then, good night. Otto, have sweet dreams.”

Waving her hand, Emilia left a smile behind for Otto, turned her back to him, and took her leave like that. While he saw her off from behind, Otto slowly shook his head sideways,

“…Looks like they trust me, after all.”

And so, letting out a slightly uplifted voice, he breathed a deep, long sigh as he looked forward.

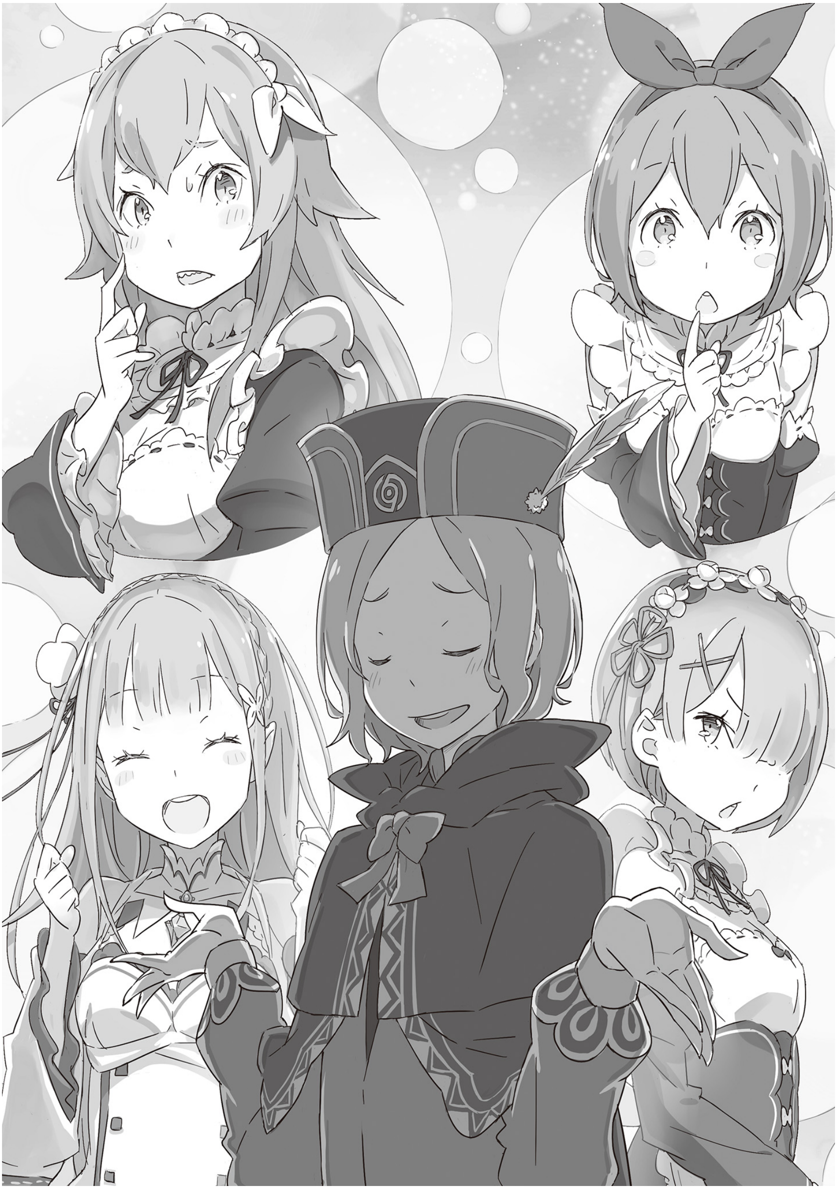

Petra's Emilia Camp Struggle:
Page 2
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

She is someone with guts, Petra Leyte had such pride.

Otherwise, she will not be able to devote herself to her new surroundings, nor will she have the courage to catch up with the people ahead of her.

Therefore, Petra has been desperately using her small body to move forward with all her might.

Some may say that the time and effort she spent is nothing remarkable, but that has nothing to do with Petra.

As long as that person and those people don't laugh at her, that's enough.

Therefore, she won't be bothered by it.

???: "That's the maid over there, isn't it? The one who is rumored to have caused the fire at the residence of the Margrave."

The topic was unfolding softly on the scene.

The speaker was not deliberately attacking Petra personally. Petra, who was just a maid and had no personal influence, was not worthy of being put in their eyes.

And Petra herself understands this. Therefore, she will not feel depressed by this.

Obviously, that should've been the case, but as she was about to confront the bearded man who stated this fact, suddenly the tall cloaked man next to her said…

Rosawaal: "…Unfooortunately, the cause of the fire was duuue to my own negligence, Viscount Aluz.”

These words, as if they were protecting Petra, made Petra feel ashamed.

2

…After seeing off Subaru and the others who were setting off for the Watergate City, Mathers and his party, including Petra, also set off for the western border for a meeting according to the scheduled plan.

???: “Remember not to get in the way of Roswaal-sama. In addition, the people in the meeting are a group of people who are even more dubious than you could possibly imagine. Remember to not show them any weakness. Keep your eyes and ears open at all times.”

This is the advice from a solitary person. No, although she is not alone, Ram stayed behind in the mansion.

In order to take care of Rem, who’s asleep, and Meili, who was imprisoned in an underground confinement room, Ram did not accompany them on this trip. To be honest, even if Ram came with them, she wouldn’t have been of much use as a maid, but her presence can bring an aura of peace that the others can’t replace.

She doesn’t know if these kinds of thoughts were showing up on her face, or if Ram’s gaze was like a torch blazing with wisdom. Before leaving, Ram gently patted Petra on the shoulder and gave her warning.

Petra: “Always keep your eyes open…”

Repeating this sentence subconsciously, Petra remembered it in her heart. Although these words weren’t repeated constantly to her, since then it has been engraved deeply into Petra’s heart.

Keeping your eyes open at all times. Keeping your head up at all times. …It’s a very good feeling.

???: “Petra, are you nervous?”

Seeing Petra putting her hands on her flat chest, Frederica, who was sitting next to her on the dragon carriage, spoke aloud. Facing this ideal woman with long flowing blonde hair who squinted her emerald eyes, Petra gently shook her head.

Petra: “No, just thinking about something. Something that Ram-neesama told me before we left.”

Frederica: “Is that so? That’s great. If you’re getting nervous now… it would spell trouble for us during critical moments. But, it seems like that child has also said something to you.”

Petra: “Emm, there is nothing to worry about nee-sama. However, it’s something that makes me feel really good.”

Frederica: “Hmm… ahahah, hearing that makes me a little bit jealous.”

Pursing her lips lightly, Frederica gently stroked Petra’s little head. The gentle touch made Petra’s cheeks tighten. Petra enjoyed it for a moment, then shyly laid her head on Frederica’s chest.

Frederica felt a little awkward due to Petra’s words, and this discovery couldn’t help but make Petra feel happy. Even if she is not worried, Petra’s most respected and beloved woman is Frederica. Although Ram was a little lonely as she did not come with them, Petra was happy to be able to be with Frederica.

However…

Roswaal: “…Really, I can’t staaaand it. Even I would feel sad to be so blaaatantly isolated by my compaaanions. Even if I don’t want to, these next few days are a triiip with the three of us. Let’s get alooong. 」

Petra couldn’t help but feel tired of the man who showed such a frivolous smile and possessed a cheeky manner of speech.

As soon as she laid her eyes on someone with such a nasty face, Petra’s face flushed red with anger.

Frederica: “Master, please seriously consider the matter of the meeting!”

Roswaal: “Don’t be so unfrieeendly. This time, you took the initiative to come alooong, so I was looking forward to the opportunity for our relaationshiip to get cloooser. “

Frederica: “Master, please stop saying such baseless things. Truly.”

Upon hearing his fake words, Frederica also came to the support of Petra. The man who became the target of the crowd, could only raise his hands and reluctantly surrender, then he sat down deeply into his seat in the dragon carriage.

However, his lips marked with violet lipstick were still muttering softly, and he had a slightly resentful expression on his face.

And this person is the Margrave, Roswaal L Mathers. Not only is he the owner of the mansion that employs Petra, he is also the core figure of this meeting, and at the same time, the person that Petra hates the most in the entire world.

3

…The talks on the western border are literally just a gathering of people.

Originally, the title of Margrave only referred to the possession of lands within his territory. In other words, his title has attracted so much attention as a key role in national defence, that the territory owned by Roswaal is referred to as "Margrave’s Western Territory". The participants in this meeting are powerful people who assist this powerful man in ruling the western borders.

The attendees ranged from noblemen with titles to high officials holding mayoral positions. There were farmers who owned huge farms and wealthy merchants in the territory.

And since it is Roswaal who gathered these numerous and disorderly people together, he is in a position where he must correctly guide the direction of the talk.

Petra: “…”

After the dragon carriage arrived at the destination, as soon as he entered the mansion's magnificent hall, the attendees who knew of Roswaal's arrival all cast their gaze upon them.

The emotion contained in their gaze was so complicated and strange that Petra couldn't understand it.

However, one thing can be inferenced, that is, all the participants have hidden motives and are evaluating the things that they're interested in, in an unobtrusive manner.

Roswaal: "Ohohoh, everyone has arriiiived. Truly gathered up neeeatly."

???: "…What are you talking about? Margrave Roswaal is the one who came here so soon, I am really flattered."

To Roswaal, who greeted the people standing in the magnificent hall from a distance, a man with a beautiful beard immediately responded.

Seeing the man walking over the carpet and approaching this way, Roswaal's smile deepened silently.

Roswaal: "Viscount Aluz, thank you veeery much for preparing your mansion for the meeting on such short notice."

Aluz: "I am honored. I understand that the Mathers's consideration is a very important matter. I am very grateful to have the opportunity to speak to you."

Hearing such fake polite remarks, Petra couldn't help but sneer inwardly at the social interactions between the nobles.

About half of the participants have gathered in the hall. Originally the meeting was scheduled to start tonight, but it seemed that a lot of people had arrived before noon.

It is said that by coming early to such meetings, one becomes able to grasp the direction that the topic will head in advance, to some extent. This also applies to the ill-intentioned Roswaal, who arrived at his destination half a day early.

As it is now, he's like an opera performer who is watched by people with a sense of enjoyment, maybe this is his bad karma.

Aluz: "That's the maid over there, isn't it? The one who is rumored to have caused the fire at the residence of the Margrave."

Inadvertently, Petra was also put onto the stage. At this moment, even though she was dumbfounded by the accusation, she just showed a firm expression and couldn't help but want to boast.

But that's the end of the performance that she could receive praise for.

This is the moment of the greatest humiliation in Petra's life.

4

Petra: "I… I feel so horrible."

Reflecting deeply, mutters spilled out of her mouth, and Petra drooped her shoulders in a manner not unlike that of a child.

This is Petra not long after she was caught in the middle of the crossfires between the nobles and drowned in humiliation. In order to prepare for the evening meeting, Roswaal was resting in the guest room of the mansion at this time. Similarly, Petra and Frederica, were also assigned a personal room. They were also ordered to take a break due to their work preparations at night, but…

Petra: "Mu… I can't relax at all…"

Although she knew that her manners were not proper, Petra couldn't help but pace back and forth in the mansion of Viscount Aluz. As soon as she walked out of her room, she looked for a way to dispel her sense of humiliation.

…In the eyes of the people around her, Petra has never made any mistakes thus far.

After all, this is just a question of the goals set by Petra.

Petra has harsh standards set for those close to her, so harsh that they would be in shock from hearing their scores. This behavior is no exception for Petra herself.

In addition to her own appearance, Petra's evaluation of herself is also extremely strict.

Petra: "This is all the Master's fault…Eh?"

Petra, who was groaning and cursing Roswaal's being, suddenly raised her eyebrows. A group of servants of the mansion who seemed to be hurriedly running around for some reason, came into her sights.

Petra: "Excuse me, did something happen?"

Petra stepped forward and asked her question.

Servant: "Yes, we can't find the chef in charge of tonight's meal… Although it's said that they have a strange personality, if this continues, they will definitely miss their meals."

After listening to the explanations of the brainstorming and chattering servants, Petra offered to help.

Having said that, she just heard the report, and can't help much.

Petra: "Seeing other people having trouble makes me feel a little relieved… I really am a bad child…"

Although this is rarely seen, for Petra now, everything will be linked to self-loathing. At least for now, she hopes to make some contribution to finding the chef through hard work, as a way to untie the knot in her heart.

Petra: "If I asked for Frederica-neesama's help, maybe she could find that person with her sense of smell, but…"

Frederica, who has the blood of a beast human, should be very good at finding things. Petra often asks Garfiel to help find missing items, and then secretly gives him some raw meat as a reward.

It’s just that Petra is reluctant to treat Frederica in the same manner as Garfiel.

???: “…Hey, little girl, the little girl over there, can you hear me?”

At this time, a voice flicked past Petra’s ears, who was walking through the mansion deep in her thoughts and worries. She turned her head in confusion and saw a slender white arm stretching out from a hedge.

Petra’s eyes widened at the hand that was repeating the call of "little girl".

???: “You came at just the right time. Come over and grab my hand. I accidentally fell in!”

Petra: “Fell in… how did you fall in… Uh-huh, let’s ignore that for now. Uh-huh, hay!”

Putting aside her doubts, Petra grabbed the hand which had a prideful tone and pulled on it with all her might. Petra’s small size doesn’t have much strength, but fortunately, the other person’s body is very light. Soon, there was a sound of someone’s lower body getting plucked from the soil, and a whole-body leapt out of the hedge.

It was a young girl wearing a white hood. She is petite in stature and is about the same age as Petra. And such a girl was just buried in the hedges of the aristocratic mansion just now.

Petra: “How so very strange… Mmmph.”

???: “Stop, stop, I can understand your feelings, but please don’t yell, little girl.”

Just as she was about to yell, the girl covered Petra’s mouth quickly. Staring at Petra who was struggling, the girl asked seriously…

???: “Will you stop shouting?”

Petra nodded heavily.

???: “Moi am not a suspicious person. Okay, now continuing the conversation. Moi am…”

Petra: “Ahhhhhhhhhh! Someone h… Mmmph!”

???: “You really are a girl who people can’t put their guard down around. Although that’s quite likeable, it is quite troublesome right now.”

Once again, Petra tried to pull a clever stunt, and the girl quickly put her hand in front of her mouth. The girl looked as if she had lost to her. When she saw Petra’s wide-eyed expression, she sighed in frustration.

???: “What? This time, you won’t scream anymore, so let go of your mouth? Even if you say that to Moi……”

Petra: “Fuha, didn’t you just let go? Ack, what are you doing?”

???: “Humu, yeah. Let’s say that I escaped from an uninteresting situation, I guess.”

What an exaggerated person.

Her voice was cute and clear, but for some reason, she felt an incredible majesty that did not correspond with it.

However, it was precisely because such words came out of this person’s mouth, it made Petra clench her fists unconsciously.

Petra: “It’s impossible to run away because you are not interested. If you always run away, you will develop a habit.”

???: “Huh? How courageous, you dare to lecture Moi. But! Moi has always ignored unpleasant situations and lived as she pleased. This meeting will continue to be. So, what’s wrong?”

Petra: “If this goes on, won’t you one day be abandoned by people important to you?”

???: “Isn’t this the thinking of the weak who shifts their own way of living onto others?”

She doesn't know if it was Petra's words that ignited her fuse, but the girl suddenly lowered her head. On the side of the hood, golden bangs were reflected in her blue eyes underneath a faint glow.

The young girl's words are unusually firm and strong, containing an unshakeable will. However…

Petra: "It is not a matter of being strong or weak! Nor does it have anything to do with the idea of being annoying or troublesome! What's so strange about wanting to be gentle with people?"

???: "…"

Petra: "It's difficult to be gentle with others. But if you keep insisting on not doing it, you'll develop the habit of running away, you really won't be able to do it ever. So…"

Beyond those words, Petra felt a vortex of emotions swell inside her heart.

Yes, it is difficult to be gentle with others. In the past, back when she thought she was the centre of the world, Petra didn't discover it as a matter of course until the end. Something that a gentle person taught her.

She has been living blissfully in the gentleness of gentle people.

…So, Roswaal must've protected Petra as well.

???: "…Umm"

It seemed that she had said something that was not very pleasant, and she seemed to have lowered her head unconsciously, but Petra immediately raised her head.

In her mind, that voice echoed. …Keep your eyes open all the time.

???: "Well, what a wonderful encounter. What a heart-wrenching expression."

In front of Petra like this, the girl crossed her arms and murmured softly in an inexplicably happy mood. The smile at the corner of her mouth made Petra feel a sense of deja vu.

That’s right, this is the ill-smile that Roswaal often showed to Petra.

???: “Moi likes you very much, little girl. In respect to your frank and awe-inspiring opinions, Moi shall step back this time. Since you are in this mansion, surely you must also be attending the dinner party? Moi shall bring you heavenly pleasure.”

Pointing to Petra’s chin, the girl spoke with confidence. Petra looked confused

Petra: “Uh. Speaking of which, who are you?”

???: “Fufu, don’t be scared when you hear it. Moi am Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI! Little girl, be proud! It’s really amazing for a temperament master like Moi-self to be taken aback! As for this reward, you shall receive it tonight!”

With such a declaration, the girl, Dias walked out of the atrium with a big laugh. Then she was quickly seen by the servants of the mansion and was carried away on their shoulders and taken away.

Petra half flinched and furrowed her eyebrows

Petra: “What a strange name…”

She can’t help but whisper the feeling that any ordinary person would feel when they hear it.

END

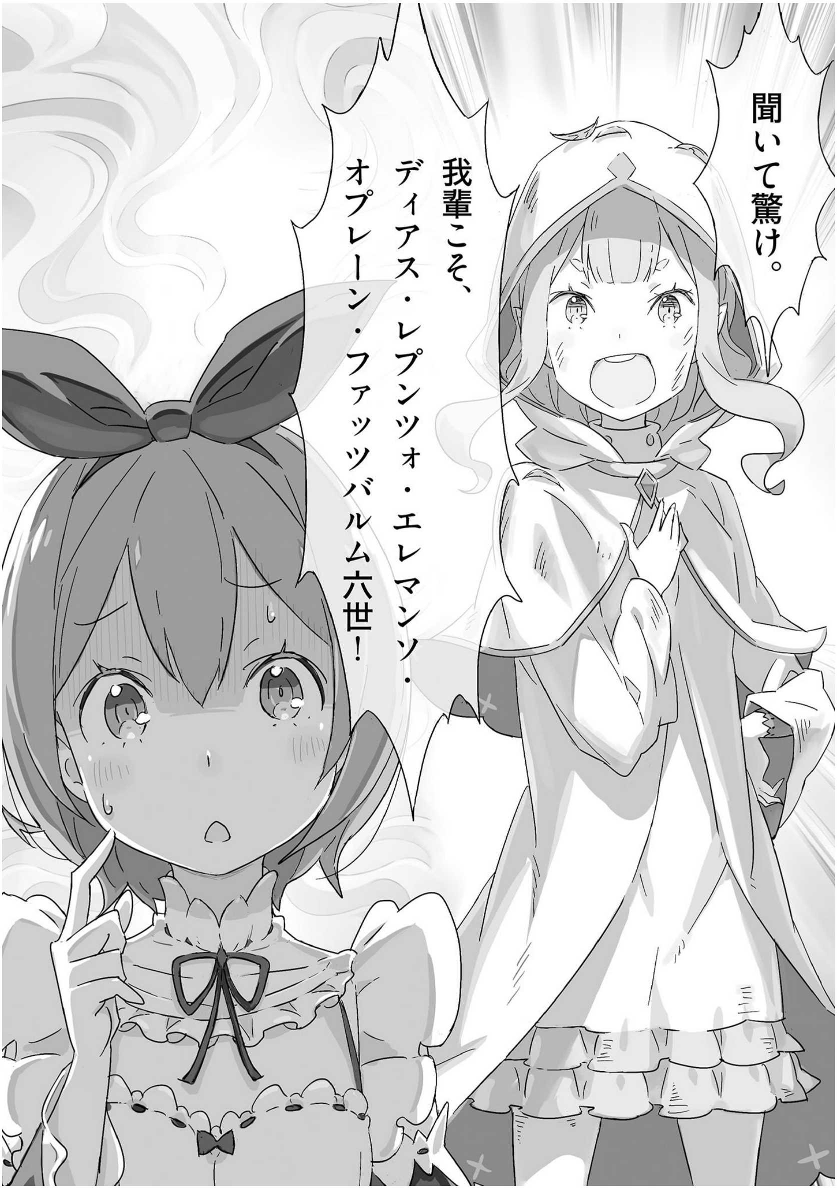
聞いて驚け。
我輩こそ、ディアス・レプンツォ・エレマンソ・オプレーン・ファッツバルム六世！

Joshua Juukulius's Careful Encyclopedia

1

There was something Joshua Juukulius had found odd during the past year and few months.

Whenever he picked up any food, Mimi and her brothers would enter his room without fail.

“Does the light turn on or something whenever I touch food or what?” he wondered.

“—? What happened all aba sudden, Joshua? Didu hit your head?” Mimi tilted her head, standing in the middle of the room with countless crumbs from her snacks stuck around her mouth.

Joshua pinched between his eyebrows and ridiculed himself for asking such a dumb question as he watched Hetaro heroically wipe the crumbs off his sister's mouth.

“Joshua, you okay?” Tivey asked. “Wouldn't it be better for you to tell the Lady and ask to have a rest?”

“—. It's fine, thank you for caring for me, Tivey. But I'm okay.”

“…Don't overwork yourself,” Tivey reminded him, adjusting the position of his monocle. He was the youngest of the three.

Joshua got along with him most, perhaps because they both had older brothers. He even copied wearing a monocle, which he had started doing after becoming friends with him and developing a slight admiration for him.

Joshua sighed loudly as he touched the “copycat” monocle.

The reason for his fatigue was not just incessant work and the frequent moving of his base for missions. The mental aspect was probably a big part of it. Anyway—

"—So, a messenger for a royal selection candidate, huh? Lady Anastasia is indeed ill-natured," Joshua mumbled with a pale face, rubbing his aching stomach.

2

The Kingdom of Lugunica, facing the peril of having no king, was in the midst of selecting the new ruler of the next generation. Five candidates were gathered to participate in a three-year-long selection where one of them was to be chosen as worthy to sit on the throne. House Juukulius showed its support for a foreign country's major merchant, Anastasia Hoshin.

She was recommended by a major merchant who was not only foreign but who also uncommonly established himself in just one generation. At first, the opinions split evenly within House Juukulius. People who strongly supported Anastasia were criticized.

What managed to persuade those opposing opinions and gained House Juukulius's support was Anastasia's talent and personal virtue. Above all, it was the achievements of Julius Juukulius, the "Most Excellent" knight.

As Julius's younger brother, Joshua had always been doing his best to live up to his expectations. It was hard to say that it all bore fruit, but one thing he never failed to do was putting in hard work.

He had pride in cooperating generously as one of the Anastasia Camp.

Despite that, he was not very blessed with big roles this past year, and he had to endure times of misery, but—his time had finally come. In that moment, he felt shameful for the cowardice that was giving him stomach pain.

Of course, my cowardice is my own problem, and it's wrong to hate Anastasia for that, but—

"Shall I say I wanted to do things properly taking one step at a time? …No, that would just be an excuse. I can't face my brother or Lady Anastasia like this…"

"Huuuuuh, Joshua's going round and round again! Donchu get tired of thinking about that stuff all the time? Mimi thinks dat is weird!"

"Ugh, Mimi is supposed to have the same role as me, but what is this difference in our perception…"

Joshua slumped his shoulders as Mimi gave him harsh pats on the back.

—On this occasion, Anastasia chose Joshua for the big role of a messenger to a royal selection candidate.

Anastasia definitely had enough chances to do research on all of the candidates, holding a solid and broad information network. And the result was—using all that information, and deciding to invite them to the Water Gate City of Priestella, the current hub where everyone had been brought together.

Three groups were invited: Crusch Kartsen, a duchess who was considered to be the leading candidate; Felt, who came from the slums and possessed the Sword Saint; and Emilia, a half-elf with silver hair.

Messengers would be sent to each of these groups, and the one Joshua was responsible for was—

"—The half-elf Emilia out of all the people…" he lamented.

"Looks like you have something against half-elves?" asked Hetaro.

"No, um…It's not like I hate them. It's just…aren't they scary? She belongs to the same race as that Witch of Envy. I've heard that they even share similar appearances?"

Joshua explained the prevalent sentiment in response to Hetaro's innocent question.

The legend of the Witch of Envy was a fundamental fear for all humans living in this world. Just imagining a girl with an origin that embodied that made one's blood run cold.

"If it were Duchess Kartsen, I've met her before, although it was long ago. Even if it were Lady Felt, I've interacted with her first knight, Sir Reinhard. Why, despite all of this…"

"Mmmmm, you're such a scaredy-cat! But Mimi thinks da lady is not scary! More like…kind? Or dangerous?"

"Oh, that's right," commented Joshua, "Mimi and the others have met her before, true."

Unlike the troubled Joshua, Mimi and her siblings had contact with the Emilia Camp.

The battle with the Witch Cult and subjugation of the White Whale that took place a year ago was a shocking incident that almost made Joshua foam at the mouth, and they had even cooperated with the camp.

"Then, could I ask what your impression of them is, Tivey and Hetaro?" Joshua inquired.

"Huh? Why did you skip over Mimi?" Mimi wondered.

Joshua gently patted Mimi's tilted head.

Mimi happily climbed onto Joshua's lap with a "Don't wowwy!"

Joshua tickled Mimi's throat, signaling Tivey and Hetaro before it was too late.

"We didn't interact much with Lady Emilia based on our strategy," said Tivey. "We just saw her during the conferral of honors… But we didn't feel like she was scary."

"The lady was cute…" Hetaro admitted. "Ah, I withdrew after the fight with the White Whale, so I don't know much about Lady Emilia. But it's a different story when it comes down to her knight…"

Joshua furrowed his brows at Hetaro, who had a point. "Ah yeah, there are many weird rumors about him…"

To tell the truth, one of the reasons why Joshua was so alert about the Emilia Camp, apart from that it was where the half-elf Emilia came from, was the existence of that suspicious knight.

Rumors whispered that he was an outsider who got mixed up in this grand royal selection, who neither came from a family of honorable knights, nor had any sort of extraordinary abilities.

However, if one tried to get information about the Emilia Camp, that black-haired knight of an unknown origin would most definitely come up in the conversation.

“I’ve heard he was involved in the subjugation of the White Whale and defeating the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult…” Joshua began. “It’s not like I am trying to doubt the fact that my brother contributed to the defeat of the Sin Archbishop…”

The fact that some unknown fellow might share the credit with my brother is infuriating. Moreover, my brother was the one who actually managed to do it. Without question, the top honors should go to him.

“To begin with,” he continued, “he joined the subjugation of the White Whale and Sloth. While not confirmed, he might have subjugated the Great Rabbit, and even though his origin is unknown, he became a royal selection candidate’s knight. And a person who brings along a fearless little girl? I have no idea who I am supposed to imagine!”

Lady Emilia is equally inscrutable and frightening for choosing that kind of mysterious person to be her knight. Even apart from that, there are an endless amount of terrifying rumors about the Emilia Camp.

In the first place, the person who recommended Emilia to join the royal selection was Margrave Mathers, an infamous hypocrite.

He was also known as the “Demi-human Lover,” a well-known lecherous man who was rumored to force the demi-human maids in his mansion to wear indecent outfits.

He had a beast-human with a ferocious face and a bloodthirsty internal affairs officer as his two distinct subordinates. Those two were also quite tricky—the record on the former one could not be found even after full use of Anastasia's information network. And the latter one was notorious for being wanted in his hometown.

On top of all that, there were even terrible ghost stories, like dozens of girls with the same face coming in and out of his main residence at the same time, or that there was smoke rising from the kitchen daily from steaming potatoes.

—Indeed, it seems like a dark and sinister and demonic place.

"The more I think about it, the less I understand why Lady Anastasia chose me to be a messenger for them… Maybe I unconsciously did something rude and she just wants to quietly get rid of me?"

"That's a bit too pessimistic…" thought Hetaro.

"But! Can you think of any other logical explanation for this? Ah… Ah… What shall I do… I guess I should ask Lady Anastasia about her true intentions, right?!"

If there's a chance that all this was some sort of mistake, perhaps clinging onto said possibility will be better.

"If it isn't a mistake and right to the point," said Tivey, "I feel like the Lady will think of a way to keep your mouth shut."

"—Hic!!"

"Even Tivey…" murmured Hetaro.

Joshua, frozen with a pale face, naturally blocked out the conversation happening in front of him.

He just felt like he was caught up in a grand conspiracy, standing up in a daze.

"Oh? What happen, Joshua? Pee? You wanna go pee?" asked Mimi after falling from Joshua's lap, looking up at him while lying on the floor.

Joshua loosely shook his head in response to her question. “I-I can’t accept this kind of big role like this. I’m scared… I’m scared but! I need to go and straightforwardly ask Lady Anastasia her true intent…” Joshua headed towards the door, leaving those words behind. He then left the room, looking for Anastasia.

The three siblings left in the room glanced at each other.

“Tivey, you shouldn’t make fun of him too much,” admonished Hetaro. “Joshua is a serious guy.”

“I’m sorry,” Tivey replied. “But I kind of get the young lady’s thoughts.”

Tivey slightly lowered his eyebrows at Hetaro, who had given him a bit of a hard time, just like an elder brother would do. Mimi hugged them both as hard as she could from behind.

“Really,” she said, “He and m’lady be having a hard time. Julius too, huh.”

3

“So, Lady Anastasia, I would like to ask you what your true intentions are. Depending on your answer, I may have to suggest that I am not fit to complete this mission…”

“What the heck, Joshua, ya so serious,” Anastasia replied.

Keeping in mind the talk he had with Mimi and the others prior to this, Joshua simply went to Anastasia’s room and was greeted with her soft wry smile.

This was after he shared all of his thoughts, as he could not bear to keep them bottled up anymore. Of course, he adjusted his words so as to not feel ashamed in front of his elder brother, Julius Juukulius.

Nevertheless, there was no denying that what he was asking itself was pathetic, so his complexion was poor.

“Ya don’t have to worry, Emillia’s place ain’t that scary. Emilia or even Natsuki ain't gonna bite."

"But what about the margrave… Or the two subordinates? Or the smoke from the kitchen…"

Anastasia put her hand on her cheek and squinted her pale blue-green eyes in thought.

"Hmm, I was making Joshua help thinkin' it'd be all good, but guess it just made things scarier. T'was my bad."

The reflection she voiced was about the fact that Joshua was helping her organize the information collected from the network. That sort of putting complex content together was one of Joshua's specialties, so he felt confident about having been a help.

However, it was also true that he was all swept up by what he had seen and heard—what a dilemma.

"Hm, I get your worries, Joshua. If you're gettin' that worried, shall we rethink 'bout ya bein' a messenger?"

"…I apologize."

"Nah, all good, all good. —But lemme try one thing?"

"Hm?"

Anastasia closed one eye and mischievously smiled at Joshua's dark face. Startled and unable to understand her words, someone knocked on the door behind him.

The person whose face peeked out of the doorway was…

"Did you call me, Lady Anastasia? I got the notice from La…"

"B-Brother?!"

It was no one but Julius himself who entered the room after a respectful bow.

While Joshua was completely astonished by Julius's appearance, Julius just squinted his eyes with a short “Ah, Joshua,” before continuing. “What were you talking about with Lady Anastasia? Is there something you want to ask me?”

“Ah, um-m-m, no, to you, um…”

“Ya, that’s the deal. He’ll be needin’ you, Julius, to keep goin’.”

Joshua fell into disorientation. He did not want his brother to know about his shameful cowardice. Anastasia waved her hand to call Julius over. “Remember how we said we were gonna send Joshua as a messenger ta Emilia’s place? He wants ta learn more about those folks so that he doesn’t come across as rude.”

“I see. That’s why you called me.” Julius approved while nodding, easily taking in Anastasia’s concise explanation. He then looked at Joshua with his clear yellow eyes. “You are right to be mindful like that. Lady Emilia is completely different from what you heard from rumors or her reputation before the start of the royal selection. If you keep that kind of false impression, it indeed might be rude towards her.”

“Brother… Th-Thank you. This is very helpful and motivating to me.”

Hearing the words of Julius who valued his thoughts with a smile, Joshua’s dark clouds of thoughts cleared up. He could feel his anxiety vanishing.

Anastasia was nodding repeatedly in satisfaction with her arms crossed.

—Indeed, her insights are genuine. I must work hard for her from now on, too.

“Ah, and if you go to Lady Emilia, you should be careful of her knight,” Julius continued. “He is…well, you do not know what to expect from him at first sight. However, he has a strong sense of loyalty towards Lady Emilia, and remarkable mental fortitude and determination.”

“…Brother?”

“He is also a spirit arts user. He was officially awarded and earned the title of knight. In other words, he is a spirit knight just like myself. Not because of that, but watch out alright… Joshua?”

While Julius was eloquently throwing out all of those precautions, his younger brother did not show any reaction. Julius raised his eyebrows.

Yet Joshua just responded with a short “It’s nothing,” shaking his head. “Brother, thank you for your detailed explanation. Thanks to you, I’ve realized he is an opponent I must be very careful of. — Lady Anastasia, I will perfectly fulfill my role as a messenger.”

“Ya,” she replied, “lookin’ forward to it, good luck.”

“Yes, leave it to me! I will definitely bring back good news!”

With glowing eyes, Joshua proudly ran out of the room, short of breath with a hand on his chest.

Julius watched him leave, and turned to his mistress, still raising his eyebrows in faint surprise. “…My little brother… Did he act rudely?”

“He-He, nah, all good… I think Joshua was suspectin’ I was up to somethin’ though.”

Julius let out a sigh as he observed how Anastasia smiled—thinking how his younger brother’s behavior itself was likely a sign that Anastasia’s plan had been fulfilled.

END

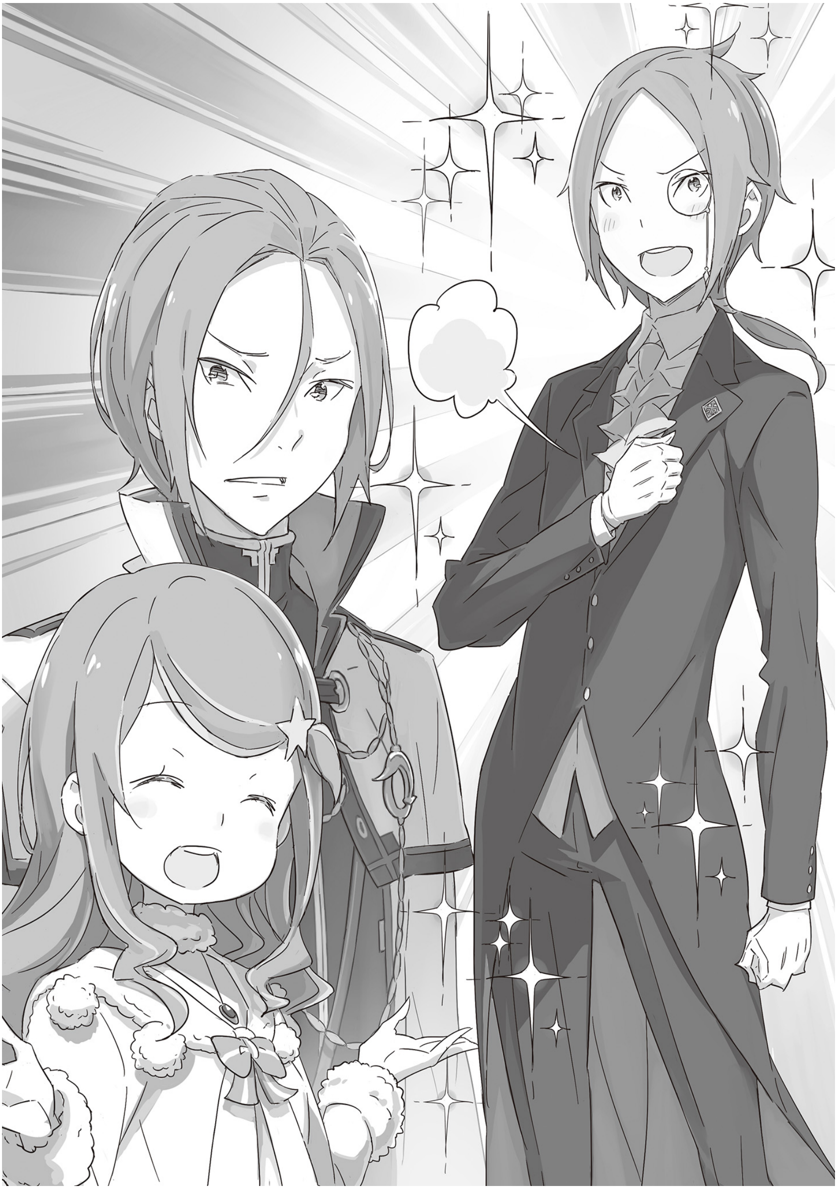

Volume 18

Chapters 37-48

Chapter 37: Regroup

1

Distant, fierce voices.

Voices, their owners unknown. Voices, their sources unknown.

Were they masculine? Feminine? Did they come from above or below? Everything regarding that was unknown.

???: “…”

An angry voice. And a mourning voice. And also, something like an accusing voice. And was that a crying voice?

Voices. They poured down like a waterfall of sound, its rough waves an ensnaring whirlpool. As if he had finally spoken out loud something deeply rooted in his heart, to someone he had finally met.

His turbid identity was swept away, lost to those muddy tides.

Hands and feet, head, bottom, chest, back. Melting, mixing, blending together.

Even his own existence, incomprehensible as it was, was swallowed up by the waterfall of sound, flowing away as if lost forever. His body, scattered.

All he knew was the black stagnation which swallowed the world he could perceive. It was thus that he realized that the dark stagnation was invading his body, allowing it no form of resistance, progressively bringing along an end.

But, at this very moment, a knot, so tangled that it could never be unraveled, was resisting that erosion. That knot refused to shrink back. It would never be dismantled, never be shriveled, never be denied.

By no means had his entire being succumbed to the stagnation in his body, by no means had his entire being surrendered to the darkness, in the battlefield that could be called his body.

And finally, finally—

2

???: “—!!”

The first noise that flooded into his ears was someone’s enraged roar.

After hearing that sharp voice, he opened his eyes to be greeted by a white ceiling. At the same time, he realized that he was lying spread-eagle on a hard surface.

???: “—Useless!!”

His newly-regained consciousness came along with the clear sound of an insult. The voice was rife with unbearable anger, accompanied by actions befitting an emotional outburst. He heard the distinct sound of a hand slapping against skin.

???: “Stop it! You should understand that the responsibility for that blame does not lie with a single person here.”

???: “Shut up! I don’t want to hear those stupid wordplays! An outsider shouldn’t interrupt!”

Accusatory voices and unquenchable anger. A sign of conflict.

From what he could hear, allies seemed to be arguing in a spacious room. He stretched out his left hand, trying to support himself with the wall as he got up.

But, halfway through, his brain was overwhelmed by shock and pain, and his breathing suddenly hitched. His eyes felt as if they were sticks of combusting dynamite, and his field of vision was suddenly stained by vivid blood-red.

As the impact of the pain ravaged him, he finally pulled his upper body upright, taking in the scene of the quarrel.

—Three men and women quarreled in the middle of a room… No, rather, all three of them were men.

A tearful Ferris was attempting to hit Wilhelm with his fists, while Julius stopped him in desperation. The sound that he had heard earlier had been that of Wilhelm being struck on the side of his face. And following Ferris's line of sight, he could see that the old man, his cheeks slightly dyed in red, was bowing his head in shame.

Wilhelm: "From the bottom of my heart, I apologize."

Ferris: "At least give me an excuse! Give me a reason that I can accept, that you were powerless to stop it, something to convince me! Just apologizing doesn't mean anything!"

Julius: "Ferris, you're creating a pointless commotion. Can't you see that Wilhelm-sama is incredibly remorseful?"

Ferris: "Remorse…?! What's remorse going to do? Useless! Pointless! Everybody, everybody… Why…? Why did no one think to rescue Crusch-sama…?!"

Ferris's gaze pierced both Wilhelm and Julius in another fit of rage, but almost immediately after, he sank to the floor, defeated and weak.

And as the crying Ferris issued a condemnation, the two men could say nothing. While being looked by Wilhelm and Julius, Ferris slammed his gloved hands on the ground contemptuously.

Ferris: "Am I supposed to be Blue…? I can't even do anything right now…! Useless, useless, useless, useless, useless…"

Ferris sobbed, as he continued to curse angrily. This time, however, those insults were directed at himself. That was another option he could take. After all, no one could interfere with him after realizing that he was most angry at himself.

Julius: "…"

Julius's sigh came intertwined with Ferris's sobs. Wilhelm remained silent, and a crushing atmosphere shrouded the room around those three people. Then,

???: "Yo, Captain. Ya finally awake?"

Garfiel appeared in the doorless doorway, noticing Subaru's state, which had gone unnoticed by the other three people. In response to his voice, Julius followed Garfiel's gaze and gazed upon Subaru's stirring, wearing an expression of relief.

Julius: "I am glad. Ferris, Subaru seems to have finally awakened."

Ferris: "…Right."

At Julius's call, Ferris wiped his face with his sleeve as he stood. His disgraceful attitude vanished as he walked towards Subaru, examining his body before firmly fixing his eyes on Subaru's.

Ferris: "Well, you seem to be fine. Your mind is clear, right? Do you know your name and place of birth?"

Subaru: "I'm Natsuki Subaru, from Japan."

Ferris: "A country I've never heard of… I was born in Crusch-sama's territories."

Ferris's expression revealed that he believed Subaru's answer to be a pointless joke. He stood and immediately turned to leave. No one was willing to throw accusatory words at him, and so everyone watched in silence. Only Wilhelm followed after Ferris. Before he left, however, the elderly man turned to give Subaru a ceremonious bow.

After the two left, the tense atmosphere in the room finally thinned. But, at the same time, they became aware of an increasingly somber atmosphere instead.

Garfiel: "Captain, even if ya can get up, ya shouldn't be forcin' yerself to do anythin' right now."

Subaru: "…You look the worst out of all of us."

Leaning against the wall, Garfiel called out Subaru, who responded to the haggard-looking teenager with his own greeting.

His cheeks and blond hair were saturated with blood, and his clothing was torn in far too many places to count. His pallor was just as awful as when he had first arrived at the shelter with an injured Mimi.

As he considered this, Subaru's own sluggish thoughts finally caught up.

Subaru: "We're alive, huh."

Garfiel: "Right. My amazin' self and Captain survived, so that's all good 'n well, but we can't even celebrate it. Fuck it all."

Affirming Subaru's mutter, Garfiel grinded his teeth down bitterly.

As he watched Garfiel, Subaru once again confirmed his own survival—that is, he understood that Return by Death had not been triggered, and that the operation to capture the City Hall had ended.

Of course, since he was still alive, he had to have been rescued by someone, but—

Subaru: "What happened to the City Hall…? How did I get here?"

Julius: "We are still in the City Hall right now. The Witch Cult abandoned it, and we captured the building we targeted. Looking just at the results, we could call the operation a success, but…"

Julius knelt next to Subaru as he began to answer his choppy questions.

Upon closer inspection, the Finest of Knights looked awful. His hair was uncharacteristically messy, and his face and neck were covered with wounds. His Knight's uniform was also dirtied with blood. Considering all this, it was hard to say he was safe and sound.

But, most importantly, his normally graceful features were currently twisted with remorse and humiliation.

Julius: “First and foremost, it is good to see you up again. If anything had happened to you, we would have lost our source of morale.”

Subaru: “…Don’t say useless stuff like that. What happened? I don’t care about morale or anything like that. The Witch Cult chose to abandon the building… What the hell?”

Julius: “You heard right. As said previously, the Witch Cult abandoned the building, and we took back the City Hall. But the hostages were turned into inhuman things, and the Cultists who caused all this managed to escape after achieving their goals. This can hardly be called a good result.”

Julius stated the situation in mellow tones. A stark contrast to Subaru’s anxiety.

However, that stiff tone and those drooping eyes… It was obvious that the circumstances Julius was explaining were so serious that he could not hold his indignation from showing in his voice.

And, Subaru could not ignore what he was just told.

Subaru: “Inhuman things, meaning…”

Julius: “You must have seen it too, on the upper floor of the City Hall. That unending, nightmarish sight.”

Shaking his head, Julius affirmed that cruel reality.

Subaru vividly remembered the shiny red compound eyes and the sound of the wings desperately beating in a cry for help. His nausea was held in check by the knowledge that they had been expecting salvation from him, another human.

His heart seemed to tighten with feelings that were neither truly sympathy nor fear.

The Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishop of Lust, Capella, was a truly despicable monster who trampled freely on human dignity and values, all while spitting her brand of ridicule. What that monster played with was neither the human spirit nor the human heart, but something even more sacred.

Julius: “The square, as well as the City Hall’s interior and upper floor… Everything, our division of labor included, was all a ploy to gain time. We were dancing on the Witch Cult’s palm the entire time… They could have easily, little-by-little, killed us all. The reason why that did not happen was your keen judgment and the efforts of the human who was turned into a black dragon.”

Subaru: “My… judgment?”

Julius: “You activated the Conversation Mirror, made a move on the top floor, and, as a result, the status of the City Hall was successfully communicated to Anastasia and Ferris. The prompt arrival of our reinforcements, the Iron Fang and Ferris, was solely due to your actions.”

Subaru: “Did you think those words will comfort me?”

Julius: “…That was not my intent. I was merely stating the truth as it is. It is up to your own heart to decide how to take those words.”

Subaru was irritated by Julius’s poised answer. However, Julius’s cold reply was also evidence that he himself was not calm either.

Confirming that neither’s mental state was great, Subaru took a deep breath.

Subaru: “One more thing about what you said just now, what happened to the black dragon?”

Julius: “This happened on the top floor, so I may not know any more than you do… There was a person who was transformed by the Authority of Lust. As disgusting as that Authority is, what is much more surprising is how well it replicates things. The man who was been turned into a black dragon made his way to the top of the building, even as he was on the verge of death, and breathed fire to make Lust back off. It was probably thanks to that heavenly intervention that we were able to save your life.”

The one who Julius spoke of was the black dragon that had been slashed and thrown out of that room by Crusch. Since Capella’s power was to mutate and transform, that black dragon was very likely one of the hostages in the City Hall. Subaru and Crusch had disregarded his call for help, and relentlessly attacked him.

And despite those circumstances, that person still fought with all his might.

Subaru: "The one who was turned into a black dragon, is he…"

Garfiel: "He can't die."

As Subaru fretted about the dragon's safety, Garfiel suddenly interrupted with a calm voice. He would not meet Subaru's gaze, instead staring directly up at the ceiling.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self won't let him die. We can't let him die. We have to save him… He must be saved… otherwise…"

Julius: "He has been like that for a while now. Apparently, it appears to be someone he knows. Although his scent has changed, Garfiel seemed to recognize him from his actions. In any case, his healing is now complete. He is fine, although a little anxious. He is resting at the back."

Subaru: "An acquaintance? Garfiel, is this someone you know from the city?"

Garfiel: "…"

Garfiel's choice to remain silent came as a surprise to Subaru. Garfiel did not look back either.

In any case, he was grateful that the life of their savior, the black dragon, had not been extinguished. But the others, the flies, they—

Julius: "We cannot say that they are okay, but at least their safety has been assured. Ferris has made his diagnosis, but…"

Subaru: "That is to say, it's not a wound or illness that Ferris can fix… Damnit!"

Unable to help hitting the floor with his hand, Subaru pondered the feelings of those who had lost their bodies. Exactly how strong was the sense of loss they were feeling? They had been turned into something inhuman, horror and cruelty wholly different from the loss of life.

Loss of life simply meant that one had only lived up to that point. But the loss of human form meant only the loss of identity… while existence had yet to come to an end.

Those who were tortured by that incurable curse were also gathered in the City Hall. Were they above him? Or below? Regretting that he could not even remember how many were suffering that fate, Subaru could only think of other things that needed to be confirmed.

Since he knew he was still alive, the next question that emerged was a natural one.

Subaru: "Are you and Garfiel both uninjured?"

Julius: "As you can see, both Garfiel and myself were not significantly injured, and neither was Ricardo. Although, we can certainly say we were humiliated… but that is an afterthought."

Subaru: "…"

Even as he said so, Julius's teeth clenched down on his lip, his voice laced with shame. Seeing his anger, Subaru was consumed by a similar sense of frustration, thinking on the opponent Julius had faced.

Julius had fought against the detestable Gluttony, Alphard.

In all honesty, Subaru wanted nothing more than to rip that Sin Archbishop apart with his own hands. But even supposing that Subaru had stayed to fight him, his escape would have been completely inevitable.

But he could not remain calm, knowing that his sworn enemy had escaped.

Julius: "…I apologize for not fulfilling the role you assigned to me."

Subaru: “If you say so, but I don’t have any problem with it… They’ve broadcasted something, right? That’d mean they have achieved their goal.”

Julius: “Correct. Same as before, the voice was that of Lust. Just… No, it was inevitable. Moving on, their requests were made. We have to discuss that as well.”

From Julius’s expression, Subaru could tell that Lust’s request had not been anything proper. Although he did not wish to hear it, covering his ears would be pointless. He would have to learn it sooner or later. But, before that—

Subaru: “Broadcast aside… What happened to Crusch-san?”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “Crusch-san also went to the top floor with me… And she ended up in a worse position than me, suffering at the hands of Lust for much longer…”

The image of Crusch spitting up blood, with only the white of her eyes showing, flashed through Subaru’s mind. She had suffered such injury without suffering any visible trauma. Presumably, something life- threatening must have happened.

And Ferris’s anguished cries. Although he did not want to believe the worst, the most obvious conclusion was—

Subaru: “Ferris… said something that did not sound good, so…”

Julius: “Crusch-sama is still alive. There is no doubt about that.”

Subaru: “Don’t phrase it with those implications!”

In that brief moment, Subaru saw a vague ray of hope. However, it vanished as soon as he saw Julius’s expression. That was the expression of a person with something unbearable on their mind, devoid of the relief of having saved a life. On the contrary, it seemed that something more terrifying was happening—

Julius: “Ferris has been doing his very best, but the current situation is far from good.”

Subaru: “Far from good… What the hell is going on? What’s wrong with Crusch-san… If Ferris can’t do anything, why aren’t we putting our heads together and trying to help?!”

Julius: “Calm down. No matter how worked up you get, the situation will not change. So calm down already.”

Julius snapped sharply at Subaru’s disgraceful outburst. But his calmness only served to fuel the present Subaru’s rage.

Subaru: “Bastard, how the hell can you be so calm?! We lost so soundly to that lot! How can you not be angry?!”

Julius: “—Of course I’m also boiling with rage!”

Julius sharply swatted aside the arm that Subaru had stretched forward to grab him. Subaru fell silent as he saw Julius’s gaze waver after his roar.

Julius: “…Apologies for my unbecoming violence. It seems that I am yet to be mature enough to control myself.”

Julius reached out a hand to Subaru, who had fallen after his arm had been forcefully blocked. Although he clearly understood Julius’s feelings, Subaru had deliberately attacked his attitude, and he felt great shame upon hearing Julius’s apology.

Subaru: “Crusch-san, she…”

Julius: “…was attacked by Lust, right? A foreign agent has contaminated her body. And it is currently wreaking havoc inside her. Ferris’s distraught reaction is quite appropriate.”

As Julius spoke, a clear image of Crusch’s incredible pain, in his last memories of that assault, came to Subaru’s recollections

That ultimate pain, her body infiltrated by a devilish monster, which siphoned away her own flesh, blood, bones and even soul. That pain was one which that no human should ever have to endure.

The fact that he could not do anything about it was probably the reason for Ferris's attitude from before.

Before and after Subaru's awakening, Ferris seemed to have blamed Wilhelm. Presumably, he held the old swordsman accountable for being unable to protect their master on the battlefield. In fact, he was only searching for someone to carry the blame. Both the accusing Ferris and the accused Wilhelm understood this.

And so Wilhelm had remained silent after Ferris had struck him, while Ferris had cried over his own hateful weakness.

The two men who had just left the room were attending to their miserable master now.

Thinking about that trio, the sense of failure in Subaru's heart only grew stronger and stronger. However, Julius interrupted Subaru's emotional torrent.

Julius: "—Subaru, there is something that I must confirm."

Subaru: "What is it?"

Julius: "Although it is rather difficult for me to point this out… it seems that you have yet to notice."

Subaru felt a wave of doubt surge at Julius's roundabout question.

Narrowing his eyes at Subaru, Julius brought a gentle hand to Subaru's collapsed body. The latter adjusted to see what Julius was doing, his hand gradually moving from his foot to his right thigh.

Unsure of what Julius was doing, he looked down carefully to where Julius's hand traced a line from Subaru's thigh to his right foot.

Subaru had treated his injury casually. Subaru had only recalled his memories of Crusch being defeated by Capella at the top floor of the City Hall and had conveniently forgotten about his own injuries.

What had happened before he lost consciousness?

He had unconsciously understood and accepted the feeling of Returning by Death—but the feeling of death had not arrived. He should have been relieved, but—

Subaru: “What? This is—?!”

His breath suddenly catching in his frozen throat, Subaru could not help but doubt his own eyes. His right leg was right in front of his eyes, but there—

—Was a seam of black, ugly, charred-looking skin. His right leg was currently being eroded by that wriggling something.

Julius: “It was not Ferris who fixed it, nor was it any type of healing magic. Your leg… the one which had been torn apart… fixed itself. And it does not even look as if it hurts.”

Subaru: “…”

It was as Julius had said.

His ugly right leg felt neither pain nor a sense of violation. His first instinct was to wonder if it only maintained the illusion of being connected, but he could bend his knees and move his toes as intended.

However, the wounded areas had turned black, connecting the shredded parts of his leg. The erosion extended both up and down his right leg, visibly running in his blood vessels.

Julius: “Subaru, I must have to confirm it with you again.”

Subaru: “…”

After seeing the dramatic changes to his own leg, Subaru could not even speak. To Julius’s question, Subaru could only slowly lift his head, and then—

Julius: “Are you… truly fine?”

The most terrifying thing about his right leg being healed was that it did not prevent him from standing and walking as he pleased.

Garfiel: “That onee-san named Ferris said that Captain’s leg was neither injured nor sick, so even if my amazin’ self tried to use healin’ magic, nothin’d happen. All I’ll be getting’ is the feelin’ that I’m healin’ somethin’.”

Rolling up the leg of his pants, Subaru could see that his right leg was laced with black blood vessels. The embroidered patterns appeared to be elastic when touched, and the texture was close to that of skin. If the color were ignored, he would be able to say that everything was normal.

Julius: “Did you reattach it yourself…? That would be the only thing that would reassure me right now.”

Needless to say, however, Subaru possessed no regenerative powers that allowed him to reattach his own limbs. This was the second time losing that leg, and his own memory told him that the first time around, his leg had shown no signs of repairing itself.

Of course, the consequent line of thought was to figure out what could have caused this, but Subaru could think of only one thing.

Subaru: “Is this because that bitch Capella dripped blood onto my leg…?”

He had descended into a realm of confusion after his leg had been ripped off and his blood oozed out.

For that reason, his memories were blurred, and he could not say with absolute certainty that it was indeed the case. However, Subaru had no doubt that he had seen Capella cut into her own wrist and poured droplets of blood on Subaru.

At that time, she had also mentioned something incredibly concerning. Yes, it was—

Subaru: “Crusch-san… She suffered the same thing that I did.”

Julius: “That being… having blood dripped into her wounds? What an unpleasant act. Maybe it has some significance as a ritual… Leaving behind an immediate impact? Or perhaps it is a curse. I have heard those operate differently from the laws of regular magic.”

Subaru: “Curse… Yes, curse sounds right. It was cursed blood… No, it was something different… something like… Blood from a dragon? Right, it was blood from a dragon. That’s what she said!”

As Subaru gazed at Julius’s puzzled face, he sifted through his foggy memories, and could not help but clap his hands together at his success.

Capella had indeed mentioned, while witnessing Subaru’s suffering brought about by her blood, that her own blood was mixed with dragon’s blood. That had not seemed to be a jest, a bluff, or a lie. And it provided several clues.

Julius: “Blood from a dragon… Does that mean the Dragon’s Blood bestowed to the Royal Family?”

Subaru: “I don’t know any details, but is there really such a thing in the Castle?”

Julius: “It was one of the treasures granted by the Divine Dragon Volcanica, as per the Covenant. The Dragon’s Blood is famous for being potent enough to even turn barren soils fertile again.”

Subaru: “It’s pretty powerful, that Dragon’s Blood… I don’t know if it’s really related, or what that’d imply.”

Considering that Capella had called herself a Lugunica, the name of the Royal Family, this was an object of concern. Especially, as Wilhelm had said, due to Emerada Lugunica being a real historical figure.

Albeit unbelievable, was she really part of the Royal Family? But having the Dragon’s Blood mixed with her own blood stirred questions.

Julius: “In any case, with the information that it might be related to blood, then Ferris might be able to help her.”

Subaru: “Ah, that’s right. Let’s hurry…”

Garfiel: “Wait, Captain. Wait a sec.”

Finally, information that might lead to a turnaround.

Subaru wanted to rush to share that information, but Garfiel, arms crossed as he leaned on the wall, poured a metaphorical bucket of ice-cold water over his head. In response to Subaru’s glare, Garfiel dropped his gaze.

Garfiel: “Captain, ya haven’t seen it yet, ‘n the fewer people see, the better.”

Subaru: “…What does that mean?”

Garfiel: “It means what ya think it means. That pretty onee-san won’t like it if ya see her.”

Garfiel looked down, avoiding Subaru’s probing gaze. Growing increasingly uneasy, Subaru instead turned to Julius, who, like Garfiel, shook his head with eyes similar to Garfiel’s.

Julius: “In fact, I am afraid that Crusch-sama very much hopes to avoid the gaze of others right now. She is a noble person, so she does not wish that anyone sees her in such a weakened state.”

Subaru: “Is it… really just because she’s weak right now?”

Julius: “…”

Julius said nothing. He merely quietly turned his gaze from Subaru.

And just that one small action answered everything.

Subaru: “…It’s all my fault.”

Julius: “Subaru, that’s—”

Subaru: “It’s all my fault! I… Obviously, I should have known better than anyone else how underhanded they can be! I should have foreseen and prepared as much as I could before we challenged them!”

The more he tried to imagine what was happening to Crusch, the more horrified he became.

And the intense self-reproach those thoughts brought to Subaru… A product of his anger at his own incompetence, as well as of their own anger, as well as courage and regret for his reckless challenge.

Subaru knew of the awful natures of the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishops, right down to his bone marrow. And not just Petelgeuse. Before the attack on the City Hall, Subaru had met Sirius and Regulus himself, in rapid succession. After those encounters, how could he have underestimated Capella?

Was his pride to blame for the decision to fight back against such overwhelming strength at a disadvantage? This had all happened because of his misjudgement.

Subaru: “Everything, it’s my…”

???: “—That’s enough. Whether you’re cryin’ or complainin’ it’s really becomin’ quite bothersome, so would ya mind stoppin’?”

Subaru, bearing all the blame, was about to sink deeply into a sea of self-loathing.

What reached Subaru’s ears, however, was not a gentle voice lifting him from that ocean of dark thoughts. It was a cold, apathetic one, accompanied by a frigid gaze and a bored exhale.

Subaru: “…”

He turned to the entrance of the large room.

Standing there with her hands clasped together, under the gaze of everyone in the room, was a purple-haired businesswoman with a gentle face. However, the lethal glare she fixed on Subaru was completely out of character for her usually gentle features.

Subaru: “Anastasia…”

Anastasia: “I understand that ya feel disappointed after a defeat on the battlefield, but if all ya do is mope and complain, those around ya will feel bothered. And even if ya mope on and on, yer losses ain’t gonna disappear.”

Anastasia’s reprimands were directed toward Subaru, who had been crushed by defeat.

For a second, Subaru was too stunned to understand. The very next moment, however, his mind was overtaken by rage, but before he begun to speak—

Julius: “Anastasia-sama, please retract your statement. Subaru was the one who had the most direct contact with the sinners of the Witch Cult. Even if he’s moping or sighing…”

Anastasia: “How unlike ya, Julius. Ya usually focus on the issue at hand, but right now you’re being so emotional… If ya came here just to play with yer friends, ya might find that Joshua suits you a lil’ better.”

Julius: “…”

Julius, who had attempted to defend Subaru, was silenced by the frosty sight of his master. Subaru’s white-hot rage was bathed in ice-cold water, but he still felt incredibly confused about Anastasia’s attitude.

Then, looking at Subaru, who was utterly speechless, Anastasia fiddled with the fox scarf around her neck and spoke to the other two occupants of the room.

Anastasia: “…Yeah, thought so. Julius, things with Crusch-san seem kinda busy right now, don’t they? Why don’t’cha see if ya can go and help? And the blond child over there, would you mind accompanying him for a bit?”

Urging Julius and Garfiel to leave from the room, Anastasia fixed her eyes on Subaru. If two of the four people in the room left, a confrontation between only Subaru and Anastasia would occur.

Anastasia: “Don’t worry, I won’t do anythin’ bad.”

Anastasia promised so, with a decidedly not-so-cute smile.

Julius bowed and left, Garfiel trailing behind him, a cautious light in his eyes. Until the very end, he kept his concerned gaze trained on Subaru, before giving him a nod and leaving.

Anastasia: “Garfiel-kun’s quite the adorable boy. Until the very end, his worried gaze was fixed on Natsuki-kun. Looks like he takes good care of people.”

Subaru: “…I’m sure you didn’t get me alone just to gossip.”

Subaru gave a thorny reply as Anastasia began idly chattering about Garfiel after his departure. A similar exchange had happened in a previous interaction, in which she had been intending to catch Subaru off guard.

Subaru turned to see Anastasia stroking her hair as she surveyed the half-destroyed room, before lifting a chair and seating herself.

Anastasia: “My, havin’ a relaxin’ chat like this with Natsuki-kun really takes me back… all the way to the night before the battle with the White Whale.”

Subaru: “Back then, we were scheming a plan for success. This time, nothing like that is in sight… Even though we recaptured the City Hall, the situation hasn’t improved at all…”

Anastasia: “Yes, nothin’s changed. Rather, everythin’s gotten worse, and we got no optimal course of action to follow…”

Subaru realized that her carefree voice had, for a second, honed itself into the razor-sharp blade of a knife. He could not help but straighten his back, while Anastasia glanced at his leg.

Anastasia: “Everythin’ okay with yer leg? Last I heard, it’d been shredded.”

Subaru: “Fortunately, I can run and jump just fine, although this looks kind of gross.”

Anastasia: “Well, bein’ able to run and jump right now’s what matters most. There's still a lotta things to do, but until then…"

Anastasia let the conversation drift lightly toward Subaru's injury, before inhaling sharply.

Subaru realized that she was finally arriving at the main topic and frowned. She pointed her hand at the ceiling—no, she was pointed somewhere beyond the ceiling.

Anastasia: "Did ya ever end up hearin' the third broadcast after yer operation?"

Subaru: "No, I didn't, what did they say…? It was some kind of request, but I don't know what exactly those were."

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun missed two of the three broadcasts, how careless."

Anastasia giggled softly, holding a hand to her mouth, and Subaru put on an unhappy pout. Even so, she kept her hand over her mouth, and narrowed her eyes, fixing them on Subaru.

Anastasia: "One of the demands—I'm sure that only Natsuki-kun and I can understand it."

Subaru: "Only me… and Anastasia-san?"

What exactly did that mean? Subaru's mind swam with questions. He had never felt that he and Anastasia held anything in common. After all, this was their first time engaging in a proper conversation.

With such a shallow relationship, what exactly did they have in common?

???: "—My my, Ana, sometimes your manner of speech ends up only serving to annoy others, you know. I think this is exactly one such case."

Subaru: "—?!"

The voice of a third person suddenly echoed in Subaru's ears. This voice belonged to neither Subaru nor Anastasia. Instead, it felt lighter and more neutral.

Subaru hurriedly toured the room with confused eyes, but not a single unknown figure was to be found in their surroundings. Julius and Garfiel had left, and there was no sign that a person had approached the entrance of the room.

Where in the world had that voice come from?

Anastasia: “Ya say that, but don’t’cha do the same thing I do? Look at poor Natsuki-kun. He’s in such a state of confusion right now.”

???: “Oh, that will not do at all.”

Subaru: “That, who is…?!”

Anastasia spoke to the third voice as if all were natural. Rather than relieving Subaru’s frenzy, he verged on hyperventilating as attempted to discern what exactly had brought on this turmoil.

???: “You do seem quite frightened, my apologies.”

Subaru: “…”

His eyes fell upon it. The third party that had spoken up. The owner of that voice that had so suddenly intruded the scene.

No, that third voice had not intruded. It had been in this room since the very beginning.

In fact, it had entered the room with Anastasia.

Echidna: “My name is Echidna. Well, I say that… But what I really am is an Artificial Spirit.”

Subaru: “Echi—?!”

“It” smiled deftly at Subaru, who was swept away by pure shock.

Lips curling up on both sides, eyes narrowing slightly. That should… probably, be something like the imitation of a smile.

—Wrapped around Anastasia’s neck, a scarf of what appeared to be faux fox fur was smiling.

All the while naming itself after a Witch whose name Subaru would not forget, and revealing its identity as a Spirit.

Chapter 38:
The Witch Cult's Proposals

As Subaru gazed at that thing, eyes wide in shock, he momentarily forgot how to breathe.

Echidna: "Although I had been anticipating this kind of reaction, it is still somewhat overwhelming. Even though I may look like this, I am, by gender, a woman… Well, no, I am a Spirit, so it is difficult to determine whether I have a gender. I am not sure if there is a distinction between male and female Spirits, for starters. Maybe I should just say that I identify as female?"

Snow white hair and sharp black eyes. A neutral voice that cleverly weaved roundabout words. Those characteristics brought to mind that figure consisting of only two colors, black and white—the Witch in Subaru's memories.

Subaru: "What a… terrible joke. You're saying you're Echidna?"

His first encounter with the Witch of Greed had been before taking the Trial in the Tomb of Sanctuary. She had lured him to one of her Tea Parties. She had enticed her guest with sweet words in an attempt to make him turn into a puppet out of his own will, dancing as she pulled its strings. And, on top of that, she wanted to borrow him to seek all the answers that she herself could not witness. She could be said to be curiosity incarnate.

Subaru did not wish to see her ever again.

Subaru: "You… actually turned into a fox? Stop screwing around. And appearing during this moment of crisis, what are you scheming this time?"

Anastasia: "Wait a moment. Stop jumpin' to conclusions and listen."

Subaru had recovered slightly from his initial shock, ready to bring retribution upon the white fox in front of him who was claiming to be Echidna. However, he was cut off by Anastasia, the person wearing the white fox around her neck.

Subaru's hostility towards the white fox was then directed to Anastasia.

Subaru: "Don't tell me not to be upset! Don't bullshit me! What are you doing with her and what… have you been deceived by that? In the first place, she shouldn't be out of the Sanctuary."

Anastasia: "I don't know what you're going on about, but it's been over a decade since I first met Echidna… And since then, we've barely ever been separated. Ain't that just a little different from what you're sayin'?"

Subaru: "Over a decade…?"

Anger bubbled deep within him again, at the thought that she had been doing whatever she wanted, free to interact with greater society all along. Echidna's own testimony was the only source of information regarding the fact that she could not exit her castle of dreams. So, had she been pulling the wool over his eyes about that as well?

Subaru: "You're always like this… Do you get a kick out of watching people flail around in the dark while you laugh at their ignorance?"

Echidna: "…My, my, it seems that I am detested through and through. Although this is a misunderstanding that seems quite difficult to resolve, it has cleared up some things."

Anastasia: "Yep, it's just as Echidna's said."

In contrast to Subaru's fierce anger towards Echidna, Anastasia and the white fox exchanged a calm, understanding glance.

Seeing Subaru frown to that, the arctic fox shook her head in an unexpectedly human manner.

Echidna: "Although I have no clue whatsoever as to where your distrust of this other Echidna stems from, I would say that those issues are completely unrelated to me."

Subaru: “What do you mean?”

Echidna: “It is a simple affair. I do not know anything about any Echidna outside of myself. I was born knowing nothing outside of the fact that I am an artificially-created Spirit, as well as my own name. Other than that, I have no other clues regarding my origin.”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

He had been expecting some sort of explanation, but the arctic fox spoke words unsuited to what Subaru knew of Echidna. Or, rather, if she really were Echidna, then anything she said could very possibly be misleading words meant to trick Subaru.

Claiming to be an Artificial Spirit and calling herself Echidna, despite the fact she had stated that she possessed no previous recollection of Subaru, he could not just carelessly believe her.

Anastasia: “Well, Natsuki-kun’s expression’s full of nothin’ but suspicion.”

Subaru: “Of course. For me, who knows Echidna’s true nature, this reaction is only natural. You too should… Right, my bad. Echidna’s saying she doesn’t remember anything, right?”

Anastasia: “It seems ya got absolutely zero intention to believe it… Ah, we’re operatin’ on a time limit, so that’s a real headache to have in this situation.”

Contrasting with Subaru’s clear vigilance, Anastasia spoke in her usual casual tone.

Echidna was working with her—just that alone was enough for Subaru to become wary of Anastasia. And although both Julius and Ricardo were people of trust, the degree of said trust would perhaps need adjustments. Subaru could not allow himself to hope that the master and the subordinate were not unified in their opinions.

Subaru: “Why would you tell me your name, if you don’t have any memories? There should be no reason to do that… unless you’re sure I know Echidna.”

She had given him her name and disclosed her origins. Was that not proof that she was “Echidna of the Tea Party”? Which meant that she was not the “Echidna in the Coffin”, the one Roswaal was seeking. And so, there was no doubt that she was the one Subaru had met. In that case, there were a mountain of questions he had for her.

That said, he understood that this was not the time for those questions. However, facing Subaru’s visible impatience, Anastasia sighed tiredly.

Anastasia: “It seems things only got so rowdy ‘cause Natsuki-kun missed the broadcast.”

Subaru: “The broadcast? How is the Witch Cult’s message related to this?”

Echidna: “—Because one of their requests was “Surrender your Artificial Spirits.”“

The white fox answered the question curtly.

The content of that request left Subaru’s mind blank as he struggled to comprehend the ramifications. The broadcast, the Witch Cult’s demands, the Artificial Spirits. That was to say—

Subaru: “No way…”

Echidna: “Although it is something I would rather not believe, they are demanding Artificial Spirits—That is, those with the same physiology as me and the girl that accompanies you. Because of this, is it not natural that we should approach you for a chat?”

Subaru: “How do you know that Beatrice is an Artificial Spirit?”

Echidna: “The only thing I can say is that I noticed the moment I gazed upon her, but I am not quite sure how. But I think that she, too, would be able to recognize me on sight. Maybe it is some kind of Spirit detection?”

With a more cautious attitude, the white fox answered Subaru’s questions one-by-one.

At the very least, Beatrice had not mentioned anything about the fox scarf upon first encountering Anastasia at the hotel. However, it was very possible that Beatrice had detected something, but, unsure of how accurate her sense had been, had not voiced her concerns out loud.

Why did she have to carry all those burdens alone? Subaru turned as if to ask her, and immediately felt a sharp pain, as if someone had stabbed him in the heart.

Echidna: “I believe it is unavoidable that the child by your side could not detect me properly. I have many defects as a Spirit. I cannot mimic those so-called Contracts, and I cannot even use magic to defend myself. Although, to compensate for this, I am confident in my ability to hide my presence. This time, though, I am presently starting to doubt that confidence.”

Subaru: “You can’t form a Contract… Then, what is Anastasia…”

Anastasia: “This child and I don’t share the relationship of Spirit and Contractor. Our relationship’s different to the kinda relationship Spirits and Contractors have… If I hafta call it anythin’, I’d say that we’re accomplices.”

Echidna: “I want to witness this child’s future, so that is why I am following her around like this. Having been with her for a few years now, we have become something like conversation partners. From time to time, she even discusses her business matters with me.”

The arctic fox spoke with a fleeting grin, and Anastasia lightly scratched her neck. Their relationship seemed harmonious and friendly, and Subaru presumed that they shared a certain degree of trust.

Subaru: “Why… would you disclose such a thing to me? It’s not like you have the ability to fight, or something like that.”

Echidna: “Is it not natural that we would disclose some of our own affairs if we wish to gain your trust? Furthermore, with the lives of the population of this entire city hanging in the balance… At this critical juncture, it falls to us to take action. Falling into internal strife because a small, relatively insignificant detail is something to be avoided."

Anastasia: "I also really wanted to stop her, but… This child doesn't pay attention to others' advice at all after havin' made up her mind, so… I'd like for you to at least hear her out, for the time being."

The white fox was unusually frank and genuine for someone called Echidna, and Anastasia's words supplemented her accomplice's words. Belatedly, Subaru realized the reason for Anastasia's earlier coldness—she had taken on that demeanor to create an environment for a one-on-one conversation with Subaru.

Along with that, in order to successfully persuade Subaru, she had deliberately ushered Julius and Garfiel from the room.

Anastasia: "Of course, I won't comply with the Witch Cult's requests. But if both us and Natsuki-kun don't mention anythin', no one'll know what an Artificial Spirit even is. We need to know what's goin' on before convincin' anyone to reject the demand."

Subaru: "I have no intention whatsoever to listen to anything that bunch has to say, so I strongly agree… but that doesn't mean that all my skepticism about that fox calling itself Echidna is gone."

Anastasia: "Don't worry much 'bout the name. Does this Echidna you know really have such a poor character, Natsuki-kun? If so, it's rather troublesome to see you treat this child in such a way."

Subaru: "I'll apologize if it's someone else entirely, but the timing is awful, and their attitude and speech patterns are almost identical. And…"

Anastasia: "And?"

Subaru wondered if he should tell Anastasia, who tilted her head.

To Subaru, it was unclear just what kind of existence were Artificial Spirits. All he did know however, was that Beatrice and Puck both were Artificial Spirits, and they had been created by the Witch Echidna.

Of course, if the white fox in front of him were truly an Artificial Spirit, it was safe to assume that she had likewise been created by Echidna's hands.

In her search for eternal life, Echidna had devised a mechanism to create replicas. There was some doubt as to how much of that claim was valid. But if it were assumed to be true, then it was reasonable to reach the conclusion that she had become a Spirit.

Casting away her flesh, freed from the notion of lifespan as a Spirit—if she could extend her existence in this manner, it would certainly fit with the Witch of Greed who longed for omniscience.

Therefore, there was no question that the white fox was the "Artificial Spirit that Calls Itself Echidna". However, her claim that she possessed no other memories—was that true or false?

Anastasia said they had been together for more than a decade. However, that alone was no reason to believe her. It would come as no surprise if she had been plotting something for a decade.

If someone were to say that she had been planning all that for this exact moment, Subaru would not have a hard time believing them.

Anastasia: "Hey, hey, ya look like ya had a terrible experience."

Echidna: "Such intense hatred makes me actually curious about this other Echidna, but I suppose we should set that topic aside for now… Whether he believes us or not is irrelevant. By the way, Ana, should you not tell him what is going on already?"

The arctic fox spoke with a defeated tone, accepting Subaru's grudge towards that suspicious Witch, and Anastasia, at her urging, shrugged and clapped her hands together, picking the conversation back up.

Anastasia: "Well, your suspicion's somethin' to be discussed later. The most pressin' matter is the Witch Cult's demands. The Witch Cult made three other requests."

Subaru: "Three other… So, a total of four?"

Anastasia: “We’ve taken the City Hall back, so… it’s really the number of control towers still in their hands. Since most of their requests were rather mockin’ in content… try not to be offended.”

Mocking demands—once again, they had gone too far. Subaru, who believed that his impression of the Witch Cult could not grow any worse, had his notions shattered.

Anastasia caressed the tail of the white fox with her hands, as Subaru silently urged her to speak. Then, licking her lips, she said—

Anastasia: “The first one was to surrender one of our Artificial Spirits. This demand came from Gluttony.”

Subaru: “Gluttony…”

Anastasia: “Although I’ve got much to say on that, I’ll save my comments for later. Next is Wrath—She wants the Book of Wisdom brought to this city.”

Subaru: “—Hk?!”

At yet another unexpected shock, Subaru involuntarily widened his eyes. And seeing that, Anastasia narrowed her pale-green eyes.

Anastasia: “Judgin’ from that reaction, I’d say that Natsuki-kun knows somethin’ ‘bout it?”

Subaru: “…”

Anastasia: “No worries, that’s excellent. It’s been troublin’ me quite a bit. Echidna doesn’t know anythin’, and neither does Julius nor any of the others.”

Subaru: “…That fox really said she doesn’t know anything? Even though it’s the Book of Wisdom, huh…”

Anastasia flashed a slight smile. After all, before this breakthrough, she had been puzzling over something without even a clue on how to reach the answer. But now, she had found a glimmer of hope. Of course, that smile carried nary a hint of cuteness either.

And it was also factual that her apprehension was visible after Subaru's question.

Echidna: "No, I am afraid I do not know anything… Then, if you allow me to speculate… the Echidna you know is connected to this Book of Wisdom, correct?"

Subaru: "Yes, that's right."

Anastasia: "In that case, I gotta ask even if I don't wanna know… What kind of person was this Echidna that Natsuki-kun's acquainted with? Is she related to the Witch Cult?"

The perception shown by both Anastasia and the white fox was outstanding. At the same time, they were closely related to one of the parties, so Subaru was tempted to think they were feigning ignorance.

Of course, it was inevitable that they would think this way.

If he were to believe what the white fox had said, Echidna was merely her name. Only Subaru knew that the Artificial Spirit's creator was Echidna. And, most importantly, this proved that among the Witches, only the name of the Witch of Envy had been recorded into history. Not a trace of the others was left.

Only those of the Emilia Camp, who were faintly aware of Echidna's existence and nature, would get a feeling of crisis because of her name.

Subaru: "—Echidna… is the name of a Witch from a long time ago. In addition to the Witch of Envy, other wicked Witches existed. She was one of those. Although she's long dead, her soul remained anchored to this world. Having met her before, I'm now very wary of her."

Anastasia: "Hey, Natsuki-kun, do ya have a fever? You're speakin' some rather outrageous words here."

Subaru: "There's nothing wrong with my head. Those Witches are incomprehensible, twisted existences. They can even create Artificial Spirits, so just accept this much."

Echidna: “In that case… then this Echidna could be said to be my parent, huh.”

Subaru’s answer was sprinkled with implications, and the white fox drew meaning from words that surely sounded frustrated. Although he was not really trying to hide anything, Subaru felt a twinge of regret at not being upfront with her from the get-go.

Echidna: “Discovering the secret behind my birth at an unexpected time is one of the many joys of life. If you have the opportunity, I would like to listen to more details.”

Subaru: “…Although you’re a Spirit yourself, you’re so obviously clueless about everything. Even our Beatrice seems to know much more than that… No, come to think of it, Beatrice has never mentioned anything about you. Where did you come from, and what were you meant to do?”

Echidna: “Regretfully, whether you are talking about the circumstances of my birth or the purpose I was made to fulfill, both of those are wholly unknown to me. Right now, I am merely following the path of this rather interesting child.”

At Subaru’s accusation, the white fox cast a meaningful sideways glance to Anastasia, who slowly moved her gaze to Subaru.

Anastasia: “I’m also quite curious ‘bout the connection between Echidna and this Witch. And she… cannot be unrelated to the Witch Cult. So, let’s return to the topic of the Book of Wisdom…”

Subaru: “The Book of Wisdom is the prototype of the Witch Cult’s Gospels… That is, it’s the original, complete version. It holds prophecies that describe the future and follows principles similar to the Dragon History Stone.”

Anastasia: “The same as the Dragon History Stone… Then, they’d be highly credible. Is it possible the Witch made the book herself?”

Subaru: “That’s what she implied, but the two existing copies should have been incinerated. If more copies were ever made, then I don’t know of them.”

Echidna had given copies of her Book of Wisdom to both Beatrice and Roswaal. And it had been confirmed that both of their copies had been destroyed by fire during an incident a year ago.

Beatrice's Book of Wisdom had crumbled to ash along with the Forbidden Library. And Ram had burned Roswaal's Book of Wisdom, rejecting the future recorded within it. Since both had been destroyed, there should be no Book of Wisdom in existence.

Anastasia: "But that's just what you've heard from the Witch Echidna. Do ya think her words'd be truthful regardin' that?"

Subaru: "There's that…"

Although unhappy that Anastasia had simply denied his assertion, Subaru himself also understood that the credibility of that statement was not very high. However, he did not think that Echidna had lied.

Presumably, only Subaru, who had spoken to the Witch face-to-face, would have such a feeling.

Subaru: "…"

Anastasia: "Not trustin' the person, but trustin' her words. What a troublesome person for Natsuki-kun."

Subaru: "I myself think so, too… I obviously didn't intend to trust her, but I trusted her words concerning this, how contradictory."

All of Echidna's actions had been cleverly scripted, meant to coax Subaru into becoming her puppet.

However, that did not mean that everything had been a lie. Did Subaru believe that because he wanted to? Or was he still dancing along to that Witch's tune unknowingly?

Anastasia: "For the moment, regardless of Natsuki-kun's personal feelings, there are three possibilities for this Book of Wisdom. First, the Witch was lyin', and other copies were made."

Subaru: "And the second is that the Witch Cult doesn't know that the Book of Wisdom no longer exists, and are causing an uproar for nothing… But the third one is?”

Anastasia: “There’s a possibility that a Book of Wisdom remains, even if her words weren’t lies. One single reason—that is, one of the copies wasn’t completely destroyed by fire, and unburnt remains still exist.”

Subaru: “—Wha?”

That the Book of Wisdom might have left remains was something that Subaru had not considered at all.

With Subaru dumbfounded, Anastasia shook a finger.

Anastasia: “Although it’s not somethin’ that’s clear-cut, the book was made by a Witch, wasn’t it? Couldn’t we say that it’d probably be difficult to destroy, or that it’s possible to restore it to its original state?”

Subaru: “Indeed, I really can’t say it’s impossible… But the real question is, who would have found and kept a restored one?”

Anastasia: “If you didn’t see the book bein’ burnt with yer own eyes, and it was last seen somewhere easily accessible… Maybe I’m overthinkin’, and the second hypothesis is far more likely, but, in either case, we won’t accept their proposal.”

Anastasia faced Subaru with a dainty hand placed over her mouth, citing various possibilities.

Who could have access to the remains of a Book of Wisdom? The remains of the one in the Forbidden Library were certainly impossible to reach. The mansion itself had burnt down, and the Book was consumed along with the Forbidden Library itself.

But what about Roswaal’s book? Although he had heard that Ram had burned it with magic, after that, Emilia’s magic must have scattered the ashes in that snow-covered Sanctuary.

What if it had survived the fire? And what if the book could really be restored? It would not be surprising if someone had picked it up.

It was not totally uncanny.

Subaru: “If anyone could bring it here, it would be someone from my faction, and they all would have told me about picking it up. Therefore, I’m confident that the Book of Wisdom isn’t in this city.”

Anastasia: “In any case, it doesn’t matter. I don’t need to concern myself so much with a book I know nothin’ about.”

Confident—although he had said so, his feelings were perhaps closer to wanting to believe.

However, Anastasia did not dwell on this point, nor did she intend to dig deeper into the details of the Book of Wisdom. Rather,

Anastasia: “Then, the next demands came from Greed and Lust. They’re plain and simple, and there’s absolutely nothin’ worth discussin’ ‘bout their words.”

Subaru: “Those two… No. Gluttony and Wrath are no different. So, what’s going on? What did they request?”

Both Capella of Lust and Regulus of Greed were undoubtedly the worst of the bunch.

And before he had even met Capella, Regulus had injured his right leg and kidnapped Emilia, so Subaru bore a number of negative emotions for him. The fact that he had yet to hear any news about Emilia worried Subaru.

Anastasia: “Here’s to hopin’ you won’t get too angry ‘bout it.”

Subaru: “Depends on what’s the content.”

Subaru’s response to Anastasia’s uneasy opening remark was immediate. With an expression of “if you put it that way”, Anastasia sighed.

Anastasia: “Lust’s proposal is the same as the others, and it’s just mockery… “Send twenty pairs of men and women who love each other to the control tower—they absolutely won’t be harmed”, somethin’ like that.”

Subaru: “That lying bitch! The hell does she mean, they won’t be harmed?! Did she forget that she’s the one who’s turning people into flies and dragons for fun?!”

As always, Subaru grew furious when confronted with Capella’s evil demands.

Twenty pairs of men and women who love each other—it was horrifying to even imagine what that terrifying monster who sung about love would to do those men and women.

Anastasia: “From what I could tell, that Sin Archbishop doesn’t consider changin’ someone’s form to be harm. “I won’t hurt anyone~” is more along the lines of her exact words… I almost felt like I could see her speak. Well, next’d be Greed’s demand…”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru choose to remain silent, angrily waiting for Anastasia’s next sentence.

However, seeing that attitude, Anastasia seemed to find it difficult to continue, hesitating for an exaggerated amount of time. Then—

Echidna: “The request of the man calling himself Greed was, “I want to hold a wedding with my silver-haired bride. So don’t interfere with anything regarding this marriage!”“

Anastasia: “Echidna…”

Echidna: “Ana, you seemed to have a hard time saying it, so I do hope it was alright for me to move things along.”

In Anastasia’s stead, who was far too hesitant, the white fox guarding her neck spoke first. However, the exchange between the two did not reach Subaru’s consciousness.

—Hold a wedding with a silver haired bride.

And who would be the bride of Regulus of Greed? The question did not merit any consideration at all.

Subaru: "—STOP FUCKING AROUND!! YOU FUCKING BASTARD!!"

Therefore, Subaru's volcanic eruption of anger was entirely reasonable. Anastasia could not help but frown, and the white fox's hair stood up on end. That was how direct and pure Subaru's rage was.

In his mind, the image of a white-haired man took form. An ignorant villain, holding transcendental power, had captured Emilia, and insisted that her only value lay in her face.

But that powerful man was nothing more than sick in the head. What nonsense was he spouting this time?

Subaru: "Beatrice! And the Book of Wisdom! And Emilia! They say they want them? Hah! The Witch Cult isn't getting their hands on a single one of them! I'll show them for messing around with that bullshit proposal!"

Anastasia: "…I anticipated that reaction, but hearing ya say it so crisply like that really is reassurin'."

Seeing Subaru's passionate appearance, Anastasia smiled along as well.

Not due to a happy mood, but because that same passion was rising in her as well.

Anastasia: "Our Artificial Spirits… Well, I got no intention of turnin' Echidna over to them. In addition, I refuse to be intimidated by the Witch Cult. I brought both Crusch-san and Emilia into this city, and the Witch Cult has made them suffer, so… I won't be able to face either of them again if I don't get us out of this."

Echidna: "Oh, Ana, you are so militant."

Anastasia: "That's precisely 'cause I know how to level the playin' field so we can claim victory. We absolutely can't escape right now. Because we're sure to crush that Witch Cult and force them to pay reparations."

Calculating misfortunes, reputation, victories, and losses.

Her clever words glossed over it slightly, but Anastasia's fighting spirit showed not the slightest intent of retreating from the battle. Unlike Julius, Garfiel, Wilhelm, or even Ferris, she was only able to speak with such recklessness due to her lack of personal experience with the horrors posed by the Sin Archbishops.

However, Subaru did no such thing.

In this case, there was absolutely no need to say anything that would needlessly damage their morale. And even more importantly, her presence, as vengeful as it seemed, was undoubtedly trustworthy.

Anastasia: "Everyone's got to agree with that sentiment, even slightly. Havin' said that, they're still a few steps ahead, but who can accept this ending?! We can make excuses for failure in the next world."

Subaru: "…"

Anastasia: "As long as we're still alive, there's still a chance. And we absolutely can't throw away our lives, that'd be far too tragic."

A ferocious smile rose on Anastasia's usually gentle face.

The pressure emanating from her petite form could have anyone forget that she was no warrior, experienced with the battlefield… No, that was wrong. She was, with her own profession as a battlefield, a warrior with the experience of a hundred battles under her belt.

Having chosen wits as her battlefield, she was a battle-hardened warrior.

Anastasia: "Whether it's Crusch-san, or the people who have lost their human form, if we can get our hands on Lust, she'd probably be able to heal them up. And Natsuki-kun, your beloved princess was stolen away. This ain't a pill you can swallow, right?"

Subaru: "Like you need to ask! Emilia will be my wife, damnit! I'll get rid of that bastard Gluttony, and take Rem's memories back! I'll find that long-winded Sirius and knock her teeth out! And I'll drag

Capella here and force her to apologize and change everyone back before beating her senseless!"

Echidna: "My, Ana and this Natsuki boy are both treating the impossible like it is easy. But, truly, that is the thing I find most endearing about you."

Subaru echoed Anastasia's forceful declaration, and, seeing their spirited state, the white fox nodded with satisfaction.

The first and second battles had ended in failure.

But the next battle was ahead of them. No one would die, and they would let no one die. In the end, they would survive, victorious. That would be Subaru's triumph.

Anastasia: "Ricardo is standin' guard, lookin' for Joshua and other lost children. He should be back shortly. And then, again, we'll hold a full-fledged strategy meetin'."

Subaru: "We also need to reconfirm the situation throughout the shelters and near the control towers."

Anastasia: "That won't slip my mind. Hey, it looks like my mind is finally startin' to work."

Since they had decided to do what they needed to, their hearts would be steeled with determination. That was the natural way.

While nodding at Anastasia's words, Subaru turned his gaze to the outside of the City Hall. From beyond the window, only one side of the city could be seen. But, he could see the towers that controlled the watergates standing tall.

There was no way to distinguish which tower was east, west, north, or south. So, each one could hold Emilia, Rem's memory, a sworn enemy, or a loathsome monster.

—In this city, the battle to save those precious loved ones continued.

Chapter 39:
Knightliness and the Tardy Man

After reaffirming their determination, Subaru and Anastasia made their way downstairs, toward the reception hall.

Subaru had been lying down on the third floor of the City Hall—the middle one out of all five floors, which seemed to normally function as a conference room.

Anastasia: “Since the fifth floor was completely destroyed by the dragon’s breath, the fourth floor is technically the top floor now. All of Lust’s victims are gathered and restin’ there.”

Subaru: “…What happened to the broadcasting magical device? The top floor burned down…”

Anastasia: “No worries, it’s been removed and put in safekeepin’. The magical device itself’s shaped like a large metal box, so it’s easy to carry around. It seems that the sound’s picked up by the box, and then transmitted by sound-detecting magical devices installed throughout the city.”

An antenna… and perhaps something akin to a loudspeaker?

The metal box and loudspeakers functioned as a pair of magical devices. Whatever the case, the magical device had been recovered safely, along with the hostages. Those were perhaps the only good news Subaru had heard upon waking.

Except for the fact that there were pros and cons in using magical devices, and the fact he did not feel comfortable saying that the hostages were safe.

Subaru: “Did you say that Capella’s victims are gathered on the fourth floor?”

Anastasia: “Even though they’ve been turned into flies and, in one case, a dragon, their minds are still human, so they understand what we're sayin' and follow directions… Although I can't really say if that's actually a good thing."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru also could not decide whether it was fortunate that the transformed people had retained their human consciousness. To be aware of having become a creature wholly different from a human, and an insect no less, must have come with a saddening, disorienting sense of loss.

However, could it be said that despite having lost their flesh, they had survived, just in another state? Was this also called a loss of self? The answer to this, presumably, would only be known by those who had experienced it.

Anastasia: "They can also move normally. Thankfully, there haven't been any suicide attempts yet. Things happened too abruptly, and most of 'em haven't really had a chance to react yet… In short, if we can fix everythin' before the dust settles, things should turn out just fine."

Subaru: "Suicide…?"

Anastasia: "Don't'cha think it's a concern?"

Subaru: "…"

That was a question Subaru could not afford to answer rashly. However, this question also meant that, compared to Subaru, Anastasia seemed to be taking this twisted situation calmly.

Anastasia: "As long as there's life, there's hope, but without a will to live, that hope's gonna be destroyed. Just havin' a breathin' body ain't enough, it's the will to live that we can't afford to lose."

Although he could not see Anastasia's face, facing forward and away from him, he heard the conviction in her voice.

However, Subaru wholeheartedly agreed with her perseverance in regard to life and death.

Living was necessary. And as long as there was life, there was a chance to resist. To that end…

Julius: “Anastasia-sama.”

As Subaru and Anastasia made their way downstairs, the first to notice their reappearance was Julius, who called the name of his master.

Originally, Subaru had barely given the first floor’s reception hall a passing glance. Even so, upon sight, the lobby was so deeply engraved with the traces of a valiant struggle that it was obvious what had passed. Overturned tables and chairs, walls scored with sword slashes and scorched with magic, splatters of blood that had been hurriedly wiped away but were nonetheless present here and there.

Although Julius had been so regretful of Gluttony’s escape, he had evidently not wavered for even a second during their battle.

Julius: “How was your discussion with Subaru?”

Anastasia: “It was a lil’ bit lengthy, but it came to a smooth conclusion. Just like us, Natsuki-kun is very determined not to remain defeated. And so…”

Anastasia nodded in response to Julius’s inquiry. After a brief moment of lightheartedness, she cast her gaze in another direction.

Opposite the stairs Subaru had just descended, Ricardo’s burly form appeared in front of the lobby’s entrance. He recalled that Anastasia had mentioned that Ricardo was outside, looking for survivors.

Anastasia: “Ricardo, welcome back. How’s the situation outside?”

Ricardo: “Does this look like a happy face, miss? It’s pretty bad. It’s prolly worsening with time. Those bastards are experienced at makin’ trouble.”

Ricardo frowned with an annoyed sigh at the results of his inspection.

While rubbing his dog head, he gave a series of instructions to various members of the Iron Fang. A few of them left to stand guard, while others went to rest further down the hall.

Subaru: “What do you mean, the Witch Cult’s making trouble? I mean, I know the current situation’s already as troublesome as it can be, but… is there anything else?”

???: “The broadcast, Captain. It was that goddamn broadcast.”

Garfiel, coming down the stairs, answered Subaru’s puzzled question. As he crunched down with his fangs in frustration, Subaru prompted someone to elaborate.

Subaru: “Broadcast… You mean the one where they stated their requests? Did they say anything else?”

Julius: “It was nothing too exaggerated, they just boasted that they had crushed the force trying to retake the City Hall. But the way that Archbishop of Lust phrased it was poisonous indeed.”

Ricardo: “Thanks to her, the people at the shelters I went to had their fighting spirit broken. It’s difficult to cheer ‘em up with the recapture of the city.”

Julius closed his eyes, and Ricardo wrinkled his nose. After hearing their answer, Subaru immediately understood what they had meant by the Witch Cult causing trouble.

Earlier, Capella had made a broadcast with a list of demands, alongside the information of Subaru’s defeat during the operation to retake the City Hall.

The ordinary citizens, who had no capacity for combat, were completely discouraged by what was thought to be the defeat of those with the capability to stand up and fight. And those who could fight would understand the harsher implications. They would understand what Subaru and the others were thinking by attempting to retake the City Hall so early.

They would realize that a powerful force was needed to achieve that. But the raid operation had failed, despite having said powerful force.

In other words, Capella's broadcast was an attempt to defang those inside the shelters, stopping them from mounting resistance regardless of their combat ability.

Ricardo: "Thanks to the records in the City Hall, I found the location of all the shelters in the city, and visited the nearby ones one-by-one, but… You can guess how that went."

Ricardo reaffirmed Subaru's fears. The problem resided in the hearts of the people. Rather than being a failure to motivate them on Ricardo's part, the blame could only be placed on the Witch Cult. Those people had bad personalities to the point of being impressive.

Anastasia: "Without determination, we won't have courage. The next fight'll be dangerous indeed…"

In contrast to Subaru's fury, Anastasia was quietly contemplative, drawing her hand to her chin. Hearing her soft voice, Subaru raised his head, and she started with an "Isn't that right?"

Anastasia: "Even if we fight, we have no chance of winnin'—puttin' that thought into everyone's mind encourages them to give up without a fight. What do ya think'll happen next?"

Subaru: "They'll give up to despair and become depressed… is that the answer you want from me?"

Anastasia: "If they just wanna hug their knees and cry, that'd be almost childishly endearin', don't'cha think? But that won't be the case. If ya lose the option to fight, but the will to live doesn't vanish, what's left?"

Subaru: "…So you're saying that—"

Subaru understood the essence of what Anastasia wished to convey. Horror struck him. However, the notion that the Witch Cult had deliberately attempted to create this situation meant that an unspeakable amount of disgust accompanied his realization.

As if to encourage the tremor growing within Subaru, Anastasia clapped her hands together. And continued—

Anastasia: “The answer to their salvation’s already been given, in the form of a request, no less. Thus, it makes sense that people would show up, who’d be tryin’ to fulfill those demands out of desperation. That goes for the owners of the Artificial Spirits and the Book of Wisdom. And it wouldn’t be odd if even those “lovers and married couples” started poppin’ up.”

Subaru: “But not everyone would go to those extremes, right?!”

Anastasia: “Certainly not. There are some who would refuse to trade their survival for the lives of others. Those’d instead seek a way to flee the city. No matter what, there’ll be plenty of panic, and we won’t be able to get anythin’ done in the confusion.”

Once the contagion of panic spread, with a single misstep, the already-precarious balance would collapse entirely. It hurt to imagine the city in that state, where the Witch Cult had taken full control through fear. Each of them had been given the ultimate power to destroy everything.

A literal dictatorial switch, able to cast everything into the water.

Subaru: “Before that happens… could we somehow visit everyone and motivate them?”

Anastasia: “That’s not very realistic, is it?”

Subaru: “Then the actual problem is that this situation’s too damn pessimistic!”

Panic was a natural consequence of the anxiety in everyone’s hearts. And the only way to fight this inevitable panic was to provide hope.

Subaru: “We are preparing to mount a counteroffensive—Saying even that much would give the little bit of hope needed to stave off much of the panic, wouldn’t it?”

Anastasia: “I think that we should be prepared for some damage as a result, at least. I don't think it's worth the effort, and they'll get carried away with their antics again."

Subaru: "Wait, wait, Anastasia-san. That doesn't sound like what I have in mind."

Subaru scowled, feeling uncomfortable with the way Anastasia was talking. His attitude prompted a tired sigh from her.

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun's ideal of refusin' to sacrifice anyone—although admirable, it's not realistic in the slightest. Our forces took too much damage in the first stage of the battle, and we won't be able to pull through without takin' some losses. Isn't that obvious?"

Subaru: "The first and the second time… Yes, that was indeed the case. But that's not the same as accepting any future sacrifices… In fact, that's exactly what we're trying to avoid!"

Anastasia: "If we were about to launch one final, victorious strike, I'd agree withcha. But that's not the case. The only people who should be put on the boat are those who still have the will to swim, even if it sinks. Puttin' those who will drown on board ain't a winnin' strategy. They'll just be deadweight."

Subaru: "—! Winning or losing—!"

Anastasia: "And if we lose, all of us will drown! If you don't care about winnin' or losin', then let's talk about livin' or dyin'! Natsuki-kun, your philosophy of taking no losses is really too naïve!"

Anastasia's building anger only served to fan the flames of Subaru's own rage.

Raising a warning arm, Julius stopped Subaru from approaching Anastasia. However, his careful gaze was trained not on Subaru, but on Anastasia, almost as if he were standing on Subaru's side. He sighed lightly and closed his eyes.

Julius: "Anastasia-sama, I understand your feelings, but I must agree with Subaru. Even if preventing Anastasia-sama's worries is indeed impossible, I would prefer dealing with them nonetheless. And damaging our morale… that is exactly the Witch Cult's plan."

Subaru: “J-Julius!”

Julius’s support of Subaru, even at the expense of defying his own master, tempered Subaru’s anger with surprise, and he even felt a surge of renewed confidence. If Julius, paragon of righteousness, the renowned Finest of Knights, shared Subaru’s opinion, then Subaru himself was not wrong in the least.

However, Anastasia only turned to Julius, caressing her scarf.

Anastasia: “Do you think I enjoy talkin’ so loosely about takin’ losses? I don’t even know for a fact that the other shelters will fall to chaos! Ultimately, it’s just a possibility. Even so, there’s no way we can deal with every troublesome possibility one-by-one!”

Julius: “But…”

Anastasia: “Y’ain’t a lil’ kid anymore, so ya understand, don’t’cha? With how limited our resources are, the only way to handle the Witch Cult effectively’s to put everythin’ into offense. And even then, there’s only so much we can do. If we spread ourselves too thin, there’s no way we can actually do everythin’ we want.”

Anastasia’s words must have sounded cold and relentless to Julius, who bit into his lip resentfully, like a scolded child. At the same time, those words also addressed Subaru’s own reckless idea.

Of course, it was not that Subaru did not understand Anastasia’s perspective perfectly.

The weight of saving even one life was such a heavy burden. To save even one person was endlessly difficult. And the more people sought salvation, the more difficult it would become to save them all. The likelihood of something going wrong would increase. So saving as many people as Subaru wanted to was nigh-impossible.

Of course, even children could draw this conclusion.

The more appas a person had, the more likely they were to slip out of one’s hold. Or, alternatively, the more likely it would be for someone to stumble and fall because they could not see their feet, or for their arm strength to give out.

Anastasia: “We’re talkin’ ‘bout winnin’. We need to compromise as adults, instead of railin’ on like spoiled children. A Knight’s reputation shouldn’t be so cheap as to make ya unable to see the difference, right?”

Julius: “…”

Julius closed his eyes after hearing Anastasia’s statement. As he lowered his head, Subaru could see that his fists were clenched behind his back. It was clear that Julius was unwilling to object further. However—

Subaru: “Giving up here means that the pride of a Knight will be sullied.”

Anastasia: “…Hey, Natsuki-kun, have ya been listening at all? Aren’tcha actin’ like ya did at that first meetin’ at the Royal Castle? Through whatever twists and turns, you’ve become a Knight too, ya know.”

Subaru: “Yes, I’m also a Knight now. And because I’m a Knight, I’ll never give in!”

The more appas you held, the more likely they were to topple to the floor.

But Subaru and Julius were Knights, and, rather than holding appas, they were holding something far more precious. Rather than holding fruits that could be dropped without consequence, in their hands were human lives.

Lives which screamed and sobbed and were cared for.

Subaru: “This is something that’s mattered to me from the very beginning. I still act at the mercy of that ideal. The morals of this world have not affected me that much yet!”

Anastasia: “You’re sayin’ somethin’ mysterious again… But the fact of the matter is, during the battle against the White Whale, and the battle with the Witch Cult afterward… people died. For sure, there were casualties in those fights. Natsuki-kun, did ya say anything like this regardin’ those fights too?”

Subaru: “Don’t treat me as a fool, Anastasia. Their deaths were tragic, but those people were prepared to die in battle, even if they did not want to die. They understood what they were doing. There’s a big difference between those, who were prepared, and innocent civilians, who are not!”

He understood that this notion was unreasonable, and that it might be completely illogical. However, this was what Subaru believed. That awareness was what mattered to him in a situation of life and death.

Subaru: “The people of this city should not be forced to prepare themselves for death. It is up to them to regard this place as a battlefield. There was never any obligation for them to take up a soldier’s awareness. Leaving them behind is wrong.”

Anastasia: “Even if it’s wrong, people will be attacked even if they’re unprepared. And when that happens, won’t those people have to be prepared?”

Subaru: “No. It’s only logical that those who have prepared themselves for battle will be met by others likewise prepared for battle. That’s what Knights are for, it’s their duty to protect those who aren’t prepared to protect themselves! That’s the kinda Knight I idealize! That’s the dashing Knight I pretended to be, in front of those defenseless village kids!”

Having accepted the accolades of a Knight, Subaru found himself able to live his dream. It was only natural that he would think in this grand way. The village children looked at him with admiration shining in their eyes whenever Subaru said something valiant and dashing. And so, Subaru wanted to do his best for them.

Of course, it helped that Emilia, when she listened in, would look at him with those same bright, shining eyes.

Subaru: “As Emilia’s Knight, I want to fight for Emilia, but that doesn’t mean that no one but Emilia matters. Anastasia-san, as your Knight, Julius fights, above all, for you. But he doesn’t want to stop there. He’s not satisfied with just that. That’s the nature of a Knight, they’ll stop at nothing to look dashing and valiant.”

Anastasia: “…”

Subaru: “Julius especially. He could be on the verge of death and still be putting on that cool act of his, because this bastard is the Finest of Knights. In other words, he wants to look way cooler than anyone else.”

As Anastasia was stunned silent due to his words, Subaru gestured toward Julius with his thumb, who promptly fell into an embarrassed, awkward silence.

A speechless Anastasia and a stunned Julius were so rarely seen that Subaru could not help but grin happily, even though it was not the time nor the place.

Subaru: “Defeating the bad guys is a simple enough goal. But deciding to live with the guilt of making sacrifices is ridiculous. Everyone must be saved, every villain must be defeated. Even if you don’t succeed, you have to set out with that idea, right?”

Choosing the option to accept sacrifices from the start was not the same as failing to stop said sacrifices as a result. Of course, it would be easy to interpret that as a selfish sense of self-satisfaction, but—

???: “—To live for your own satisfaction is the most human way to live. I completely agree with you, bro.”

Subaru: “—!”

As Subaru elaborated upon his naïve ideals, a new voice inserted itself into the scene, one that sympathized with his point of view.

Everyone was surprised to hear that voice, and turned their faces to the entrance of the City Hall. Having caught everyone’s attention, the man there looked back and forth, seemingly unhappy.

???: “Hey, looking at me with such enthusiasm is a little off-putting. I know that my seductiveness isn’t exactly at its prime, so I don’t know how well I’d meet all your expectations.”

Subaru: “—Al.”

It was Al, one of Subaru's acquaintances who had disappeared after he had left the hotel this morning. He seemed unharmed, speaking with lighthearted jests and no trace of hostility.

Without moving from his location, he glanced back and forth at the people crowding the room again.

Al: "Are these the only familiar faces at the City Hall? Weren't there more this morning?"

Subaru: "…They're upstairs with Crusch-san. Why are you here?"

Al: "Well, when the commotion started, I decided to turn ass and find a place to hide for a bit. When things started settling down, I took a peek outside, and heard the broadcast. So I decided to come to the City Hall. My first thought was that you were probably involved, and, if not, I'd at least be able to find someone who knows what's going on."

He spoke his usual absurd optimism while playing with the seams of his helmet, making a metallic sound. However, everyone but Subaru felt more than a little displeased at his answer.

After all, he was one of the few people who was capable of fighting, yet had chosen to prioritize his own safety.

Al: "C'mon, don't look at me like that. I'm sorry that I couldn't be there, but it's just that the stars didn't align properly. Besides, I don't think the results would have changed based on my presence alone."

Garfiel: "Oy, captain. Is this bastard tryin' to provoke us or somethin'?"

Garfiel was the first to reach the limits of his patience. Al's casual demeanor had infuriated Garfiel.

Thinking back on it, Al and Garfiel had never met. When Priscilla crashed the nice breakfast at the hotel, Garfiel had been absent. From his point of view, Al was a strange and potentially dangerous man.

Subaru: “Wait, wait, Garfiel. He’s Al, the Knight of Priscilla, one of the candidates of the Royal Selection, although he hasn’t officially met you yet. I didn’t tell you, but all five candidates are in the city right now…”

Al: “Technically I’m just the Princess’s subordinate, and not actually a Knight, bro. I don’t expect much of myself to be able to call myself a Knight. Oh, by the way, I don’t mean anything rude about you, bro.”

Although Subaru had stopped Garfiel from overreacting, Al responded to his introduction with a note of irony. His attitude had Garfiel gnash his fangs together in rage again.

Anastasia: “Alright, enough, enough! Shush! You’re all being seriously too annoyin’.”

With a loud clap, Anastasia diffused the swiftly escalating tension. Her round eyes fixed themselves on Al—

Anastasia: “Aren’tcha just like your master, appearin’ so suddenly and makin’ a mess of the atmosphere? What a terrible personality. Causin’ a fight’ll rub people the wrong way, so how about you drop it for now?”

Al: “Wow, such hurtful advice. Unfortunately, this is just the way I am. Everyone says that I tick people off and disrupt their rhythms. Well, it works as a survival technique.”

Al stuck a finger into the gap between his head and his helmet, scratching the nape of his neck sheepishly. Anastasia turned to Subaru with a small sigh.

Anastasia: “Although things seem to have gotten even more complicated, my plans won’t change. If the path to victory requires sacrifices, then I’ll make a plan with those in mind. If Natsuki-kun refuses to take any losses, then work hard and think of a plan. I’d also like to avoid any sacrifices, if at all possible.”

Subaru: “Then, you won’t stop me from visiting all the other shelters?”

Anastasia: “…If ya got time to spare, then go ahead. Anyway, we do need more combat power. If ya find anyone at all who can fight, try to recruit them.”

Reluctantly, Anastasia withdrew her opposition of Subaru’s idea. Convincing her to change her mind entirely would have been impossible. As such, Subaru would not complain about the leeway he had been granted.

Anastasia: “Take a Conversation Mirror. For the time bein’, let’s set your time limit to six hours, so return before that. After that, we can’t screw up anymore, so keep that in mind.”

Subaru: “Time limit… Right, I haven’t asked yet. What’s the deadline for the requests?”

Julius: “The deadline was set to tonight, at the time the date changes—That’s only nine hours from now.”

This time, Julius was the one to supply the information in Anastasia’s stead.

If there were six hours to go until the strategy meeting, then Subaru would only have around three hours after he returned. Before that, he had to somehow come up with an idea that would sway Anastasia.

On top of that, before the time limit, he also needed to find a way to defeat the Witch Cult and actually make it come to fruition. Only then would the city be saved… but no, even that was not enough.

Rescuing Emilia. Retrieving Rem’s memories from Gluttony. Restoring those who had been mutated by Lust to their original forms. Only by achieving all these goals could he say that they had claimed complete victory.

Subaru: “There’s not much time left, do you have a map of where the shelters are?”

Anastasia: “Yup, we’ve got several. Here’s a map of where Ricardo and the children from the Iron Fang have gone, and where they are goin’ now.”

Ricardo's map was given to Subaru, where the shelters the beastman had visited were marked. Comparing it to another map, it seemed that the Iron Fang had set out for the farthest shelters. Conveniently, this left the nearby shelters to Subaru, who had to travel by foot.

It was almost as if someone had expected him to do this.

Julius: "Subaru, allow me to accompany you."

Subaru: "Julius? No, you shouldn't. You'd be a huge help, but we'd be in trouble if we didn't leave enough fighters in the City Hall."

Julius offered himself as a escort, but Subaru refused the proposal, citing lack of strength as the reason.

Ricardo had been stationed to patrol outside, and Subaru intended to take Garfiel with him as well. Although Wilhelm was upstairs, giving him the responsibility of defending the entire City Hall would be too heavy a burden. And even if that were not the case, the Crusch Camp was currently entrenched in gloom.

Upon hearing Subaru's reply, Julius nodded, albeit reluctantly. He seemed to be far less calm than usual, and his impulsiveness was a rare sight indeed. Subaru gave his shoulder a light pat, then pointed to Garfiel with his chin.

Subaru: "Garfiel, come with me. We'll go visit the other shelters and look for people who can fight. We have to find a way to end this prolonged restlessness."

Garfiel: "…Right, got it. Leave it to my amazin' self."

Even though Garfiel's response to Subaru's request came a beat late, he nodded in consent. With that, Subaru examined the map in his hand, thinking on which direction he should start exploring Pristella, starting out from the area around the City Hall

His top priority was securing combat power—in that case, locating Reinhard would be his best course of action.

Al: "Maybe go to the shelter nearest the hotel first? I don't think the

Princess would've wandered far from there."

Subaru: "In that case, if we follow this path… Wait a second."

Subaru halted, seeing Al's finger pointing to a place on the map. He had inserted his own plans into Subaru's quite frankly. Tilting his head inquisitively, Subaru asked,

Subaru: "You're… coming along too?"

Al: "Yep. After all, going alone would mean trouble, and not finding the Princess would also mean trouble. If I had known this'd happen, I wouldn't have left her alone even if she told me to go away. In a mess like this, I'm afraid of what'll happen to her if I don't look for her."

Subaru: "…What a picture-perfect master-servant relationship, oy."

Although the situation gave him a somewhat odd feeling, Subaru was grateful for the increase in manpower. Garfiel, on the other hand, was very visibly disgusted upon hearing that Al would accompany them. After all, at this critical juncture, he would certainly keep one eye open around unfamiliar people.

However, although Al was somewhat annoying, he did seem to genuinely want to find Priscilla.

Subaru: "Speaking of Priscilla, I last saw her in the park on First Street fifteen minutes before the attacks happened. If she didn't leave the vicinity, she should be in a shelter near there."

Al: "Really? That's super-helpful info, bro. Then let's start from there."

Delighted at this news, Al pounded Subaru's back several times. Then Subaru, with a pleased Al and a frowning Garfiel in tow, left the City Hall for the nearby shelters.

And, seeing them off was—

Echidna: "Ouch, you were totally treated like the bad guy there, were you not?"

Anastasia: “Quiet, ya scarf fox. It’s not like I haven’t worked it out already. If Natsuki-kun’s still able to speak with such conviction when he returns, then he’s really bad at learnin’.”

Anastasia spoke with a slightly helpless expression, and the scarf rustled slightly on her neck.

No one else noticed that this short conversation was taking place.

Chapter 40:
Corrosion of Wrath

1

Twenty-five shelters per district made a total of a hundred shelters in all of Pristella.

At Al's suggestion, they started their search on First Street, where they were more likely to be able to find those needing help. They were required to travel prudently and move cautiously in order to avoid as much combat as possible.

Al: "Having said that, I feel like we're overreacting. After all, we have that bro with us. You'd think we wouldn't need to be so scared, bro."

Subaru: "It's best to be careful. Our own forces are limited, whereas the enemy's barely been scratched. Even one second of negligence'd cost us. Not to mention, in addition to the enemy, we're trying to avoid others causing a commotion."

Anastasia's opinion, back in the City Hall—she had introduced the notion that the populace's unrest could lead to riots. Although he wanted to believe it would not happen, he could not deny that possibility.

Visiting the various shelters and trying to assess the situation while recruiting combat power—Subaru intended his mission to be an opportunity to fight the mounting sense of anxiety.

Al: "Yep, that also sounds about right… Well, you won't hear me complain about going the safe route. After all, if it comes down to a fight, all I can do is rely on that bro."

Subaru: "You… often say that, but are you really unable to fight? You did manage to reach the City Hall safely."

Al: "If I had to choose between combatant and non-combatant, I'd have to go with the former. However, at best, my skill's just that of a normal person. If I'm up against those who have gone beyond the limits of a normal human, I'd be a corpse at the edge of the screen in about two seconds. Nope, no way, it'd be way too reckless to consider."

Making a noise with the rim of his helmet and waving his right arm about in dismissal, Al declared his own powerlessness.

Although somewhat dissatisfied with his attitude, Subaru's views on the matter matched Al's. There was a certain level of skill that he would never be able to reach. Perhaps the difficulty of survival in this world meant that its inhabitants' biological composition was fundamentally different. No matter how much Subaru trained, he would never be able to match the likes of Julius or Garfiel, let alone Reinhard—no one could ever reach that level.

Subaru: "But, that shouldn't be enough reason not to fight."

Al: "Shouldn't it? Personally, I think that having no chance of victory is more than enough to convince me not to even try. Ahhh, except leaving something like regrets behind. Well, I'm not that kinda person, anyway."

Subaru: "…"

Al: "C'mon, don't be mad, bro. I think your positive attitude is great. It's just not one I can really adopt myself. That's all."

With the stance of each party already established, their dialogue could only run parallel. Subaru kept quiet, and Al apologized for putting him in a bad mood, before noticing something and raising his head. Following his land of sight was Garfiel, who had been quietly scouting the road that lay ahead.

Crouching on all fours, Garfiel turned back eerily silently, wrinkling his nose.

Garfiel: "Looks like the next three roads're all clear. Or actually, more like lifeless 'n barren 'n empty. It's technically safe, but really damn suspicious, yeah?"

Garfiel snorted, despite the positive impression.

Avoiding battles had been their goal, but not having encountered a single incident also fueled a sense of unease. A quite puzzling feeling, however time did not allow them to entertain such hesitation.

Subaru: “Pointlessly fretting won’t do us any good. The shelter we’re targeting’s just up ahead. Let’s get there as fast as we can. The roads are safe, yeah?”

Garfiel: “My amazin’ nose says so, at least. Damn, looks like we don’t have any other choice.”

Scratching his short blond hair, Garfiel stomped the ground in frustration. Subaru nodded, and Al’s silent shrug indicated that he had no objections.

Although their journey from the City Hall had already taken about fifteen minutes, thanks to their caution, it had been safe and sound thus far. After all, the worst case that they had considered would be that the Witch Cult had stationed troops all about the city.

Thinking that they would stumble upon road after road of that lot would be no exaggeration.

Al: “Doesn’t it seem like the Witch Cult’s unexpectedly neglected to set up sentries?”

As he ran, Al turned to comment. Glancing at him, Subaru questioned him with a “Why would you think that?”

Al: “The reason’s very simple, they don’t have the manpower to monitor the streets. Haven’t you noticed, bro? Compared to the city’s vital points, the Witch Cult was lax in securing the city. And it’s the same with allowing the opposing force to move so freely. If they seriously wanted their demands fulfilled, they wouldn’t be acting like this.”

Subaru: “Blocking everything off and giving exact demands would be the common thing to do in that case, wouldn’t it? Then why do you think they didn’t? Is there any other goal?”

Al: “Hah, I wouldn’t claim to know. But, I’d imagine it’s something like—”

Although Al had probably wanted to respond casually, at Subaru’s stern glare, he fell silent for a moment, probably with a wry smile under his helmet.

Al: “—Whether we comply with their demands or not doesn’t really matter.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Al: “If they were serious about their demands, you’d think they’d have been more precise and detailed. However, I’m sure you’d agree there are ways of twisting their wording, bro… So they aren’t taking their demands seriously. If we follow through, great. If we don’t, whatever. It’s that kind of feeling.”

Subaru: “Why… then it’s like they’re just toying with us…!”

Al: “Aren’t they just toying with us? Is that really so unlikely?”

In contrast to Subaru’s speechlessness, Al spoke with a blank, listless voice. And to his final question, Subaru found himself unable to even deny it.

—They were simply being toyed with. That was all.

Considering the vicious imagination of the Witch Cult, such a possibility was no joke. During their attack, although they had acted with the advantage and made tactically sound decisions, there were many places where their movements were incomprehensible.

During the battle in the City Hall, Capella and Alphard had been lying in ambush, but Sirius and Regulus were absent, indicating that they were not using their entire strength. In addition, Subaru’s party had suffered no casualties.

Now, the disparity between the city’s occupation and the Witch Cult’s lax attitude also served as evidence that the Cult were not doing their utmost to have their demands be met.

Garfiel: “Captain! No need to listen that bastard’s words. You, if ya keep casually plantin’ funny thoughts like that in the captain’s head, my amazin’ self’ll grind ya to dust, yeah?”

As Subaru fell into a sea of contemplativeness, Garfiel turned to glare at Al, who was running alongside Subaru, with a ferocious gaze as he snapped at him.

Garfiel: “Endlessly chatterin’ on ‘bout stuff that doesn’t even matter, a bastard like ya, without even the balls to fight, should just shut the fuck up! No matter what those fuckers’re plottin’, my amazin’ self’ll just keep hittin’ and beatin’ and crushin’em! That’s all ya need to know!”

Al: “Aren’t you suggesting extreme measures again, huh? Although it is true that I’m no match in a real confrontation against them, that doesn’t mean my thoughts don’t matter. Speaking of which, what harm does guessing their intentions bring us, huh?”

Garfiel: “You bastard—”

As his teeth made a sharp ringing sound, Garfiel’s feet grinded to a halt. At the same time, Al also stopped moving, filling the atmosphere with tension.

Subaru cut between them at once, holding a hand against each of their chests.

Subaru: “Hold up! The hell’s wrong with the two of you? Is this really time to be turning your weapons on allies?”

Garfiel: “This bastard’s not an ally, captain. It’s clear he’s up to no good. It’s definitely best if we just did away with him here ‘n now.”

Al: “Actively looking for a fight’s a no thank you, but I’m not one to stick to non-resistance when someone’s motivated to fight.”

Garfiel cracked his wrists, and Al turned around. Subaru, frustrated at their attitude, felt rage begin to boil within him as well. The pricking of a thousand thorns emanated from the core of his body, bidding him to beat and punch and kick the two uncooperative men —

Subaru: "…Something's wrong."

He was worried about the possibility of his head overheating and immediately jumping to murder as a response. No matter what, his own anger had escalated too quickly. And why were all of them so hostile and frustrated to the point of turning on each other?

And the conflict between the two seemed to be agitating Subaru as well—

Subaru: "No… way…"

An inability to direct the flow of his thoughts and feelings—with that realization, Subaru felt a chill. After all, he had felt this exact sense of discomfort many times before.

Subaru: "Is Sirius's influence approaching…?!"

Fanning his face with slaps, Subaru tried to reawaken his own consciousness as he glanced around.

His inspection yielded no sightings of that bizarre monster, nor did he hear her jarring voice. However, the dim feeling of gloom and disgust pressed heavily into his very being.

Subaru: "Hey, Garfiel, Al, stop! Take a deep breath and calm down. Isn't it strange that your argument's escalating so quickly? That's probably due to Wrath's influence. Your emotions are becoming uncontrollable."

Garfiel: "Hah? Whaddya mean, captain, this guy's stupidity's what's pissin'… wait."

Subaru: "…"

Hearing Subaru's claim, Garfiel gritted his teeth, pressing a palm onto his head. Slowly, he shook his head and blinked many times in quick succession.

Garfiel: "…It's not really worth fightin' over. That kinda thing's usually only just an annoyance."

Subaru: “That’s Wrath’s ability. Just to confirm, but you are sure there are no enemies around us, right?”

Garfiel: “Not a whiff, nor a sign… that’s for sure. But…”

Precisely because his senses were so trustworthy, Garfiel began to shudder.

In other words, the scope of the Sirius’s power was far beyond their imagination. If the theory that she was currently occupying a control tower was correct, then her Authority’s influence encompassed almost the entire city. Of course, there was quite the difference compared to its intensity in the square.

Al: “Well now. This is what it feels like to be tampered with by others. Not something I’d want to experience more than once, for damn sure. Now I’ve tasted the worst feeling.”

Al murmured, the torrent of anger engulfing him cleared, much like Garfiel’s. He glanced over at Subaru, lifting his chin.

Al: “But, bro. If we don’t get a move on, it’s dangerous, no?”

Subaru: “What? What are you talking about?”

Al: “You noticed something was strange, bro, and after listening to what you said, we also realized something was wrong. However, that’s not the case for other people, yeah? If this feeling is spreading through the entire city… then, for the average person, unaware of the situation, it’d be impossible to stay rational, yeah?”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

As he considered what Al had pointed out, the worst-case scenario flashed through Subaru’s mind. He exchanged a glance with Garfiel, who had imagined the same scenario and flinched sharply. Instantly, they sprang into action, beginning a reckless sprint. Their destination was the nearest shelter.

Al: “Ah, wait!”

Watching the two of them shoot off, Al hurriedly turned to chase them from behind.

In his anxiety, Subaru completely disregarded stealth as he raced forward with irresponsible abandon. Garfiel's steps, however, were sharper and travelled farther than Subaru's, and in the blink of an eye, he had left Subaru in the dust. His shadow vanished at the T junction of the next street.

According to the map, there should be a shelter at the corner into which Garfiel had disappeared.

Al: "Is the road safe?!"

Subaru: "Garfiel rushed in without any hesitation. So no one's there!"

Answering the shouts coming from behind, Subaru arrived at the corner, lagging far behind Garfiel. Without losing so much as a single drop of momentum, he turned the corner and saw the stone cottage. Rushing towards the hastily opened door, he confirmed that there was indeed a ladder connecting to the ground and frantically sprinted down the stairs, his dim field of vision finally opening up—

Subaru: "You're… kidding me…"

—Splattered with blood and screams of sorrow, a landscape of hell spread before him.

2

Al: "They killed and killed each other… Only a fifth of them are still breathing, and those guys are going to have to completely recover. This is really the worst of situations."

Gazing upon that horrific scene, Al bit back his feelings and whispered with a strangled voice. Subaru, sitting beside him, had no energy to respond.

In the shelter that they had rushed into, the people gathered in the refuge had turned on each other, causing a fratricidal catastrophe.

The initial argument had most likely been a trivial matter.

Forced to squeeze into a cramped, claustrophobic space, fearing the demands that the Witch Cult had broadcasted. During that time, dark thoughts had snuck their way into their hearts. The situation would not improve even if it stayed as is, so it would be okay for them to take action, right? Those emerging ideas roused action, and action required contact with others. However, the consequences of such contact were not necessarily anything good.

The explosive conflict between Garfiel and Al, on the road, had been the product of such a thing as well.

However, there had been no Subaru in the shelter to calm everyone down. The quarrels had intensified as everyone's feelings collided and spread, infecting the surrounding area, doubling the effect. As emotions had risen back and forth, their unbearable anxieties grew into abominations. That had ultimately resulted in tragedy.

Garfiel: "The survivors have fainted, and their wounds have been treated. But the burial of the dead… that'll have to wait. Captain, have ya contacted 'em yet?"

Subaru: "I have. The Iron Fang should be on their way here. I think entrusting the survivors to them will be fine. The problem is, after that…"

Subaru had underestimated the degree of the disaster caused by the amplification and propagation of the emotions.

In the closed space dubbed a shelter, the intensity of the waves of emotion inside the hearts of people was unpredictable. Of course, no one would be able to maintain a positive and optimistic attitude, and even if those emotions were negative, nuances could still usher in tremendous differences.

If the initial feelings were only sorrow, lament, or despondency, without any initiative to take action, the people would be relatively fine. However, if the initial emotion had been rage, or anything similar, the result would the same they were witnessing inside this shelter.

Subaru: “I’ve heard that people were urged to flee to these shelters, but… that may have been a bad idea in hindsight.”

Assuming that the Authority of Wrath worked on the basis of sharing and intensifying emotions, then the greater number of people residing in her sphere of influence, the more effective her power would become.

In short, if people were mirrors, any beams of light originating from them would be reflected back infinitely due to the sheer number of reflections. Replace light with emotions, and it goes without saying that said emotions would be greatly amplified.

Even the most minimal contact with others would have terrifying consequences.

In this situation of unease and fear, this Authority forced each person to be alone.

Subaru: “How disgusting…”

Garfiel: “Captain, what are we gonna do? I agree wit’cha on visiting these shelters, but if things go on like this…”

Having finished with healing, Garfiel, his forehead drenched in sweat, wore an anxious expression. Understanding the reason for his unease, Subaru fretted over the wording of his response.

No matter what, Subaru could not organize his thoughts. To visit the various shelters, to assemble forces, to call on everyone to not abandon hope—none of those courses of action were wrong.

However, the pressing situation did not leave Subaru with the time to comb the city.

The handful of people who were willing to fight on had likely been the source of the tragedy. Their hearts had brought about strife. With the shelters functioning as isolated test tubes of emotions, persuading the remaining people to leave the shelters might even improve their chances of survival.

Subaru: “But if we do that and fail to retake the control towers, everyone will die.”

After all, these were shelters set up in the city of Pristella.

Perhaps they had been designed to protect its citizens against any potential floods causing by the opening of the floodgates. In the unlikely event that Subaru and the others were overwhelmed and the watergates were released, those who would have left the shelters for fear of their companions would suffer certain deaths.

Whether staying inside or going outside, a foolproof measure did not exist.

Garfiel: “Captain…”

Subaru: “…”

As Subaru wallowed in indecision, Garfiel’s gaze pierced his profile.

That was an expression and voice which sought answers and salvation from Subaru. That was the figure of someone seeking the only light they could depend on in a world of darkness, looking for guidance and reassurance.

How could Subaru respond to that expression?

Just like him, Subaru was also grasping at straws for a solution. Just like him, Subaru too could not find an answer amidst the darkness.

However, there was no point in complaining about his weakness. Throwing a tantrum, raging to the heavens, taking it out on someone, would save no one. If he had the leisure to complain about his weaknesses, it would be far better for him to say something meaningful.

Anything meaningful at all would be fine, as long as it benefited someone else.

Al: “Captain this, captain that… Really, it’s like you’re casting a reliable, convenient charm, bro. What an outstanding attitude, it’s making me tear up, really.”

However, the one who suddenly broke Subaru's silence was instead the man with a sword. Leaning his back against the wall, Al's gaze moved from the scene of horror to Garfiel.

His cold indifference took Garfiel aback for a spell.

Garfiel: "Hah? The hell's that mean, ya bastard…"

Al: "Do you not understand without having me explain it? It's exactly as I said. Refusing to think and delegating your judgement to others is easy. Is "captain" some kind of magic spell to you? Is it the name of a superman who can get you out of any tough situation?"

Interrupting Garfiel was Al's mocking attitude.

Al: "From just those moments I can tell how much you depend on him, but does this guy here look like such a big shot? In terms of strength, you have him beat, no question. In terms of intelligence, there'll always be someone out there better than him. And luck? Even if you said he's got good luck when he's stuck in a situation like this, no one'd believe you, yeah?"

Garfiel: "Shut the fuck up! Ya fuckin' bastard, quit talkin' shit 'bout the Captain like that! The hell do ya even know 'bout him? This person here's damn amazin'!"

Al: "Wow, wow, are you just a kid? Where's that strength, then? If he really were as amazing as you say, he'd have taken care of this whole deal by now. Or are you saying that he's already thought up a solution, and he's just pretending to fumble along?"

Even as Garfiel began shouting, Al's ironic tone did not falter. And as he learned over to peer into Subaru's face, Subaru found that he could not retort to any of his words.

At that reaction, Al straightened up, continuing with a "You see?"

Al: "Being responsible for everything, carrying everyone on your back, is remarkable, isn't it. It's a protagonist's privilege. However, most average people cannot take on such a role. They're not strong enough. Of course, that goes without saying for me, and even you, bro. You’re the same. So why do you have to carry such a burden? Don’t get your hopes up. It’s pitiful, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru did not quite understand what Al was trying to say. Could he be under the sway of the Authority of Wrath once again? If so, what kind of feeling was now dominating Al’s heart?

Anger? Sadness? Something else entirely?

He seemed furious, but also mournful, and also mocking. Even figuring out what he felt in that moment was of extreme difficulty.

Al: “Hey, bro. What’s been troubling you all this time?”

Subaru: “…What’s been troubling me?”

How to save this city. How to keep the people who had fled to the shelters safe from harm. How to rescue Emilia. How to cure Crusch. How to restore Rem’s memories. How to drive away the Witch Cult. How to find the optimal path, where everyone would be saved.

Al: “How to best serve your venerated princess—are you unable to even answer that immediately?”

Subaru: “…”

Hearing the disappointment in Al’s voice, Subaru slowly raised his head.

Motionlessly, Al was looking down at Subaru. As his face was covered with a helmet, his expression was indiscernible. However, somehow, Subaru found his own chest being saddled with anxiety.

Al: “I only care about the Princess… about Priscilla. So everyone else, frankly speaking, is completely irrelevant to me. For example, acting together with you, bro, is only so I can improve my odds of surviving and finding the Princess.”

Subaru: “Al…”

Al: “So, that’s why I don’t understand your feelings at all, bro. That’s important, this is a priority… In that case, it’ll be impossible for you to see what’s most important. Wanting to take care of everything, doesn’t that just make you a cliché of a guy who doesn’t know how to fight for what you find most important?”

Clicking his tongue, Al strangled some kind of emotion.

Even Garfiel could not find a retort to that devilish demeanor. And even Subaru, who bore the brunt of it, could not find the correct words to return.

Al: “The silver-haired miss is the most important thing for you, isn’t she, bro? If you’re just saving her, do away with the fretting and hesitating and act. It’ll be easy.”

Subaru: “…Don’t bullshit me. I’ll definitely kill the bastard who kidnapped Emilia. And in any case, it’s not like I even have any idea how to. It isn’t as easy as you say.”

Al: “But you’d have much less to burden you compared to saving everything. If you reduce your load, your body becomes lighter, and the scope of your reach will increase. Isn’t that the case?”

Subaru’s weak words of resistance were smoothly deflected by Al’s snappy comment.

Al: “Are you trying be a saint? Or a hero? If so, it doesn’t suit you whatsoever.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Al discarded Subaru’s confusion as something ridiculous. Subaru found that very attitude incomprehensible.

Back when he had quarreled with Anastasia in the City Hall, the one who could even described as stubbornly assertive, and who regarded him as an ally, had been none other than Al.

It had been Al who had agreed to his approach on evil, laced with self-satisfaction. However, after arriving here, why he had changed his opinion?

Subaru: “What you’re saying now is totally different from before. Are you or are you not on my side, which is it?”

Al: “No, no, no, you’re completely off. I’m not saying that indulging in self-satisfaction’s wrong. But the limit of that self-satisfaction’s another topic entirely. Your idea of wanting to rescue everyone, bro, was denied upon seeing the horror in this shelter, right? In that case, it’s enough, isn’t it? If that’s the case, why not just leave this place? You can be honest now, and protect only that which is most important to you.”

Subaru: “Leave this place… You mean running away? In this situation?”

Al: “What’s so wrong about it? What’s wrong with choosing to flee in the face of something you can’t handle? After recovering the Princess, I intend to flee from the city. I don’t have any obligation to the people here, or to morals about humanity, or anything that justifies putting my life at risk.”

Sticking his fingers into the neck of the helmet and scratching lightly, Al glared at Subaru.

Al: “You could do that too, bro. Save just the miss… just Emilia, and run away, and you’ll be just fine. Anyway, the Witch Cult are pests that’ll just come back even if defeated here. Just like bandits on the side of the road, yeah? There’s no reason to get involved.”

There was only one answer to Al’s suggestion.

Subaru agreed that the Witch Cultists were pests. And it was undeniable that there was no benefit to being involved. However, they had been the ones instigating such a catastrophe. Subaru had to take action to dispel the sparks they had created.

From Al’s perspective, he probably had no idea why Subaru felt he had to act.

Of course, except for the situation of imminent peril Emilia was in, having been kidnapped. Even assuming Emilia’s situation was irrelevant, Subaru could never choose the option of escape.

And the question was why. Well, that was because—

Al: “And even if it needs to be done, it doesn’t have to be you, bro. So why are you so insistent?”

Subaru: “If a kid jumped into the road at a busy intersection with the light still red, before even thinking about a reason, I’d immediately pull him back onto the sidewalk… It’s probably something like that.”

Al: “…”

Al’s sigh in response to Subaru’s answer was obvious.

Subaru himself was wondering if his answer was truly the correct answer. But upon taking a moment to think about it, the words just rolled off his tongue, and the tightness in his chest vanished slightly.

Subaru: “I don’t find it a hassle to put everyone into consideration. Because I’m here, I’ll try to do those things, one by one. Because I’m here, I will be able to do things. There are a lot of places I won’t be able to reach, as the people here can prove.”

He thought it cowardly to pretend to be completely unrelated to the whole thing. It was something Subaru should not have even considered to do.

Garfiel: “Cap…”

As he began to call upon Subaru, who had responded so calmly, Garfiel seemed to cut himself off. Just now, Garfiel had hesitated to say the word “captain”. Al had just pointed out Garfiel’s reliance, so he was probably trying to resist the urge.

Subaru found himself pleased by Garfiel’s concerned hesitation.

At the same time, he realized something. A sudden idea. A miraculous coup that could be used to take advantage of the Authority of Wrath.

Subaru: “Garfiel, don’t hesitate, okay? Just call me the usual.”

Garfiel: "…"

Subaru: "Although, initially, you embarrassed me a little, but that shyness is long gone. Although there's no guarantee that I can live up to your expectations, but I'll try to do it as long as I can."

He had no way of knowing what he looked like under the expectant gaze of Garfiel.

However, it was due to the result of Subaru's actions that Garfiel was sometimes able to see him as a beacon of hope just when he thought he had reached a dead-end. And a once-lonely young girl, who had once denied everything, felt the same way.

Therefore, Subaru had no choice but to take responsibility for his actions.

Garfiel: "…Yeah. Yeah, that's right, Captain. Got it. My amazin's self's also going to be helpin', no matter how much strength's needed. So, as long as ya don't say anythin' feeble, it'll turn out just fine."

Subaru: "Alright. Then, I'll be relying on you. After entrusting the wounded here to the Iron Fang, we'll have to return to the City Hall immediately. After all, Anastasia will probably oppose it."

Standing up and patting himself down, Subaru went over to Garfiel, his head still lowered, and struck his shoulder.

Garfiel snorted, clasping his fists together as he gazed him. Then, Subaru turned and tilted his head at a silent Al.

Subaru: "My mind's been made. Although in a different direction than you were hoping for."

Al: "…As you prefer, bro. At least, I'll follow you until we find the Princess, or until it becomes meaningless for me to stick with you."

Although his proposal had been entirely rejected, Al responded without any disappointment.

Even if uncomfortable with his attitude, Subaru shifted his footsteps towards the outside of the shelter, prepared to act immediately after reinforcements arrived.

Behind him, along with Garfiel, Al followed suit, slightly distanced from them. As he regarded the backs of the two striding forward, Al reached for the back of his neck with his one arm, supporting it with a hand, and exhaled a long, long sigh.

Al: “I’m sure… you don’t know what will happen if you don’t meet the expectations of that many people. After all, without suffering in such a way, you probably would never understand.”

Chapter 41:
Heroic Reveries

Anastasia: “You sure came back early?”

As they returned to City Hall, Anastasia greeted them with a somewhat strained smile.

Having left the building full of bravado only to return like this, honestly, Anastasia’s was about the last face Subaru wanted to see.

But this was no time to be concerned with such feelings.

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m back. But I’ll head out again as soon as I’m done here. There’s just something I have to try in City Hall first.”

Anastasia: “Did you come up with somethin’ again? I got a bad feelin’ about this.”

Subaru: “Well… the first shelter was a horrible sight, I mentioned that in the communication mirror already. And I think the influence of Wrath must have affected other shelters as well.”

Anastasia: “So they’ve succumbed to the emotional resonance… It’s not like I don’t feel it myself. If I let my mood drop, it feels like it’ll just keep on droppin’ forever. …But I guess it works a little differently on everybody.”

Subaru nodded at Anastasia’s analysis.

In fact, Subaru had also noticed this on the street. The effectiveness of Sirius’ Authority can vary drastically between people.

Perhaps simply being aware of the Authority’s existence could help alleviate its effects: “The fact that Subaru was able to calm Garfiel and Al this way precisely proved this.

Al: “I dunno how the shelter got like that, but I can’t help but worry ‘bout the same thing happenin’ to our main guys bunched up here. I’d really rather I didn’t come back here only to get caught up in another blood sacrifice or somethin'."

Anastasia: "Well, you had no need to worry about that. Luckily, we only have intelligent, rational people here. Though I can't say the same about the guy who's always screwin' up the atmosphere."

Al, who came back with Subaru, said this while looking around the first floor of City Hall. Hearing this, Anastasia snorted, putting a stop to Al's smart-assery with a gibe.

Seeing Al reply with a silent shrug, Anastasia turned back to Subaru.

Anastasia: "So, what're you plannin' to do? You came back 'cause you had an idea, right?"

Subaru: "Aah, right. …By the way, where's Julius? He isn't with you?"

Anastasia: "I don't like bein' bombarded with question after question, you know… Julius' been actin' a little strange. I think part of it's because we haven't found Joshua yet, but I've a feelin' that's not all of it."

Subaru: "Acting strange… Now that you mention it, he was a little strange, wasn't he?"

Waking up after the failed attack on City Hall, Subaru did notice that Julius was less articulate than usual. He seemed to be making judgements and suggestions that he would never have made in normal circumstances, and there was a visible lack of confidence about him.

He was a man with a strong sense of duty. Subaru had thought that it was because of regret for letting Gluttony escape, but perhaps it was more than that.

Garfiel: "Capt'n. It's a bad habit t'be concernin' yerself with every problem out there. I know you're worried 'bout Julius, but that ain't somethin' we can fix right now."

Subaru: "Ah, yeah, you're right. Well, I'm sure that guy'll do just fine on his own without anyone worrying about him. Compared to that, we got our own things to deal with. Anastasia-san. The broadcaster on the top floor is still in working condition, right? It's not like it's broken, or we lost the manual or something…"

Brought back by Garfiel's reminder, Subaru asked this question. On the receiving end, Anastasia blinked her round eyes a few times before answering,

Anastasia: "It's not broken, and I've worked with similar devices before so that's fine… but what do you plan to do with it?"

Seeing the surprise in Anastasia's eyes, Subaru scratched his cheek.

Even though he'd expect her to oppose it, it was the only plan he could think of. In terms of minimizing casualties, it would also be the most effective measure.

Subaru: "As I said in the communication mirror, the area is currently under the influence of Wrath's Authority. The shelter we visited… became washed in blood because some small irritation was allowed to fester. The slightest negative emotion could spiral into the extremest disaster. It's scary."

Anastasia: "Yes. My thoughts exactly. The more people there are, the harder it is to control and the more rapidly panic spreads. That said, with the refuge shelters… or even without the shelters, people will tend to huddle together. Right?"

Subaru quietly nodded to Anastasia's question.

What's so frightening about Sirius' Authority is that the more people are together, the more powerful its influence becomes. And when people heard the Witch Cult's threats over the broadcasts, that started an inescapable trend of panic: "A truly sickening way of exploiting people's helplessness.

It was unclear whether the Witch Cult was hoping for their cooperation, but the fact is that it created a vicious cycle that was threatening those people's lives this very moment.

Anastasia: "Do you mean to say… you've thought of a way to counter it?”

Subaru: “It’s only a “Maybe this could work” kinda thing. I do think it’s worth trying. It’s just…”

Subaru’s words abruptly trailed off in front of Anastasia’s expectant gaze.

Seeing this, Anastasia narrowed her eyes as if to peer into Subaru’s innermost thoughts, while Subaru exhaled a deep breath,

Subaru: “Once we start doing it, everything will be heard by the Witch Cult, word for word. So there’s the possibility that we could run into other dangers if we provoke those guys.”

Anastasia: “And in exchange, there’s a good chance that we can reduce the existing threat.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. Now that we’ve retaken City Hall, and with Sirius’ Authority being the only one affecting the shelters… even though it’s hard to balance the risks, I still think…”

It’s impossible to imagine how the Witch Cult will react if they did something big here. The dangers were equivalent to bringing a burning match into a gunpowder arsenal, as is always the case when dealing with the Witch Cult. What makes it so difficult to assess is that the gunpowder could also blow on its own at any moment whether they bring in the match or not.

Anastasia: “—I think I know more or less what you’re planning to do now, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “Really?”

After briefly sinking into thought, Anastasia let out a long sigh and said. Hearing this, Subaru raised his brows, surprised at her reaction,

Anastasia: “Going by the flow of the conversation, and since you asked about the broadcasting device at the start, I’d be more worried if I still can’t figure it out after that.”

Subaru: “W-Well, yeah, I guess. So what do you think? You’re against it, aren’t you?”

She’ll probably oppose it, just as he thought beforehand.

And so, Subaru would have no other choice than to clear the giant hurdle of convincing Anastasia—

Anastasia: “Haa, what am I gonna do with you…”

Subaru: “…Egh, you’re ok with it?”

Anastasia: “Logically speaking, it would be the best course of action. Regardless of how much I like winning, if it means leaving a mountain of corpses behind by the time we eradicate the Witch Cult, there’d be too bad of an aftertaste.”

Getting that unexpected answer, for a moment, Subaru stood there stunned.

Meanwhile, Anastasia chewed her lips as if trying to deal with some indigestible emotion inside her, but it was Garfiel who broke the silence.

Garfiel: “Yo, Capt’n and Big’Sis-chan. What’re you guys talkin’ ‘bout doin’ again?”

Anastasia: “Such an unperceptive child… Even my Ricardo could’ve figured it out.”

To Garfiel, who was left out of the loop, Anastasia tossed that unsparing remark. Garfiel gritted his fangs as he heard this, but Al patted his shoulder from behind, laughing at Garfiel as he turned around,

Al: “Basically, what bro’s thinkin’ is this: “Rather than tryin’ to stop the Authority of Wrath from spreadin’ throughout the city, it’d be quicker ‘n easier to try to turn it to our advantage instead.”

Garfiel: “Turn it, like what…”

Subaru: “Sirius’ ability causes the sharing of emotions. When people are anxious and afraid, that emotion swells as more people bunch together, until eventually, it gets set off by something small and explodes. So…”

Anastasia: “If you can replace fear and anxiety with another emotion… paint it over with something like hope, then that’ll be what’s shared instead.”

Garfiel’s question was answered by Al, and Subaru, then lastly by Anastasia.

While listening, Garfiel’s eyes grew wider as he leaked a groan of understanding,

Garfiel: “Aaah so that’s it! Then they won’t be killin’ each other. And if things go well, even the ones whose spirits’re broken’ll return to the fight.”

Subaru: “When they’re engulfed by the surrounding atmosphere, even seasoned fighters would be unable to stand. If we can release them from that anxiety, I think we won’t have any problem bolstering our forces anymore.”

Garfiel: “Ain’t that awesome?! Do it, Capt’n! We got th’arcane device. So th’sooner we start…”

Anastasia: “Wait wait! It’s not all that simple. It’s not like I hadn’t considered it myself…”

Anastasia clapped her hands to stop the over-excited Garfiel.

Seeing this, Garfiel bared his fangs,

Garfiel: “Hah? Why’re we holdin’ off? Y’just said you agreed, didn’t ya? Don’t tell me you’re backin’ out at th’last minute.”

Anastasia: “I never said I’m backin’ out. I told you, I’ve thought about this. There’s another problem to this other than just weighin’ the pros and cons.”

Subaru: “The pros and cons… the ones we talked about earlier?”

Anastasia: “The pro is the goal of this strategy itself: “Eliminating anxiety and despair from the citizens so we don’t have that constant threat at our backs. The con is that whatever we broadcast into the city would naturally also get into the ears of Witch Cult. We have absolutely no idea how they’ll react.”

Anastasia raised her hands to both Garfiel and Subaru, and with “However”, she continued,

Anastasia: “In terms of disadvantages, I believe they’re almost negligible. The Witch Cult never forbade resistance when they made their demands in the first place. It’s as if they don’t even mind if they’re thwarted or opposed.”

Subaru …Now that you mention it, even though we attacked City Hall, they didn’t use that as an excuse to exact any retribution. It’s like what they did to the people in City Hall was just for their own amusement.”

Anastasia: “Amusement? I like that word. It’s a pretty accurate way of describing those guys’ sick inclinations.”

Anastasia sighed, while Subaru wanted to gag just at the thought of those Sin Archbishops’ faces.

However, they both agreed that there was no extra risk in making the broadcast itself. So then, Anastasia’s concern was—

Anastasia: “While I’ve no objections about the broadcast itself, the problem is… what’ll it contain, and who’ll be saying it.”

Subaru: “What and who…?”

Not understanding what Anastasia was saying, Subaru furrowed his brows.

If she was asking about who should make the broadcast over the city to rouse up the people’s hopes and chase away their anxiety, then—

Subaru: “Well, that’s where Anastasia-san comes in. People recognize you as a Royal Selection Candidate. If something inspiring comes from Anastasia-san's mouth…"

Anastasia: "This might sound strange coming from me, but I think it's difficult to expect that kind of effect from my words. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not up to that task."

Subaru: "…"

Anastasia shook her head at Subaru's intuitive suggestion.

Subaru didn't understand her meaning. Since, naturally, the whole of Priestella would know about Anastasia's position as a Royal Selection Candidate.

Her fame certainly far exceeded anyone else present.

Subaru: "Not up to it… why? I mean, Anastasia-san, you're…"

Anastasia: "If renown is all that matters, then I would indeed be the most suitable. If that's all it took to change things for the better, then I'd be happy to do it. But that's not how things are. My renown and beatin' the Witch Cult are not related at all. Just knowing that "Someone famous is fighting the Witch Cult"—might do something, or it might not."

Subaru: "But…"

Anastasia: "In that case, it'd be pointless. What's needed is hope. Hope that could replace all the anxiety in people's hearts with a single stroke."

Subaru had no words to reply to Anastasia's statement.

Honestly, he wanted to chide her for her faintheartedness and refute what she was saying. However, it wasn't anyone else, but Anastasia herself who seemed to rue the pitifulness of that statement the most.

Anastasia could not have said those words without thinking. Quite the opposite.

It was precisely because she had thought it over thoroughly that she had judged herself unworthy of that role.

Anastasia: “I may be able to trick and beguile people with magnificent words. And I’m sure that out of every ten, five would be deceived. But it’d be only a frail, desperate straw that would give way at the slightest whiff of wind, and all it would accomplish is create a momentary change in feeling.”

Subaru: “Th-Then… what about Crusch-san? She has the military experience and belongs to a noble family of Lugunica.”

Anastasia: “Right, the words would certainly carry weight if it came from Crusch-san, but that would be the former Crusch-san. The current Crusch-san doesn’t have that kind of influence over people. Not to mention that Crusch-san is currently fighting for her life. That’s a problem that’ll have to be settled before askin’ her to inspire anyone else.”

Subaru: “Fighting for her life? It’s that bad?!”

Hearing that Crusch was in even worse state he had been told, Subaru took a step towards Anastasia.

With the height difference between them, Anastasia looked up at Subaru and tightened her lips. Subaru quickly turned to Garfiel, only to see him weakly shaking his head,

Garfiel: “Th’cat-eared Sis’ won’t let her die, I’m sure’of it. She’s injected so much life-force into her… but I’m against lettin’ her talk in front of the broadcastin’ device as well. Hell, she can barely make a sound…”

Subaru: “Damn it! Then what about Julius? If it’s Julius, he’d…”

Anastasia: “It’s true that Julius is a Knight of the Royal Guard, one of the greatest Knights in the Kingdom, and my pride. But how much would Julius’ name mean in this city? At best, his chances’re about the same as mine. And I’m more eloquent.”

Crusch was out of the question, and Julius was also shot down.

Of the faces in City Hall who could possibly inspire hope in others, only Wilhelm and Ricardo were left. But Ricardo has neither the influence nor the popularity.

And how could anyone ask this of Wilhelm now? Even if he agreed, what advantage would Wilhelm's title as former head of the Royal Guard even bring to the table?

Subaru: “Then, what do we do? Who else is there…?”

Al: “Well…”

Just when Subaru thought he had found an effective countermeasure against Wrath, he was stuck without anyone to execute it.

While Subaru sank into these thoughts, Al casually raised his hand,

Al: “If anyone's gonna do the broadcast, shouldn't it be you, bro?”

Subaru: “—Hah?”

Hearing him say this as if it were a matter of course, it took Subaru a moment to react.

Leaving his mouth gaping open, there was nearly no need to think twice about what Al had just said.

Making such an unfunny joke at a time like this, what was he thinking?

Subaru: “Say, Al. We're in the middle of a serious conversation here. The kind where every second counts. I can't deal with your jokes right now.”

Al: “Oyoy, wait a minute. I'm aware that I'm a guy Princess-san hired because more than half of my remarks are irrelevant, but I wasn't joking just now.”

Subaru: “If you weren't joking then what made you think I could do it? Either you're trying to be funny or you're mad, and I don't know which's worse here.”

Al: “What’s so crazy ‘bout that? Why don’t you have a look around?”

Although Al was someone who has “Not Serious” written all over him, at that, he suddenly lowered his voice and nudged with his chin. Following his movement, Subaru shifted his gaze to the two others beside him—Anastasia and Garfiel. Though Subaru had imagined that they must be just as baffled by what they had heard,

Subaru: “…Oy, you guys too?”

“…”

Their gazes were serious, certainly not surprised or annoyed at all.

They were staring at Subaru with sincere affirmation in their eyes.

It was almost as if they were saying they agree with Al.

Subaru: “You’re kidding, right? Why do you look like you’re all agreeing here? If Anastasia and Julius can’t do it, what makes you think I can?!”

Al: “Well, like I said on the street, we all got this far because of you, bro. Garfiel agrees with me. The way he keeps callin’ you “Captain, Captain” and all.”

Subaru: “How’re those two things connected?!”

Al: “Same thing! You must’ve done somethin’ right to make Garfiel call you that. That just shows how much he trusts ya, right? You seem to think what you did wasn’t that big of a deal for some reason. But aside from you, who else in this city or this world can say that they’ve defeated “Sloth” of the Witch Cult?”

Subaru: “…”

Al brought his face right up to Subaru’s.

His cold helmet bumped into Subaru’s forehead, and a small warmth could be felt through the icy hard metal, coming from Al’s forehead on the other side. For a moment, feeling himself pierced through by his invisible eyes, Subaru held his breath.

Al: “In a city occupied by the Witch Cult, who better to inspire hope in people than a man who’s killed a Witch Cult Sin Archbishop? The only ones around who meet the criteria are you and Reinhard. And you’re the only one here.”

Subaru: “—gh.”

Getting hit with another bump to the forehead, Subaru stumbled backwards.

Watching Subaru back away holding his head, and Al gave his single shoulder a shrug.

Anastasia: “I’m of the same opinion. If anyone should do it, it’d be you, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “Anastasia…”

Saying this, Anastasia looked down.

It was an expression that seemed to be lamenting her own powerlessness, all the while entrusting that hope to someone else.

At this point, seeing that expression, Subaru finally noticed the great expectation resting on his back.

Subaru: “Garfiel… you think so too?”

Garfiel: “I dunno any details ‘bout you killin’ some Sin-bishop “Sloth”. But yeah, I’m thinkin’ th’same thing.”

At Subaru’s quiet question, Garfiel scratched at his short head of hair,

Garfiel: “If there’s a voice in this city that can become people’s hopes… I say that voice’d be your’s, Capt’n. If y’really give it your all, I’ve a feelin’ y’can do it. That’s what I think.”

Subaru: “…”

That is a baseless, and tremendously heavy trust.

Surprised, and holding his breath, Subaru clearly understood the magnitude of the faith placed in him.

Looking back, he saw Anastasia. Who nodded.

Next, he saw Al. Who shrugged his shoulder.

As before, Garfiel was still watching Subaru. When Subaru turned to face him, he nodded as well.

Subaru: "…"

Taking in each of their reactions, Subaru turned up his head.

Narrowing his eyes to the light of the weak crystal lamp, he exhaled a long, deep sigh.

—They think way, way too highly of him.

He had felt it from Wilhelm, Julius, and Reinhard as well.

They've got it all wrong about Subaru. All wrong.

They themselves were so much better, have worked so much harder, and were so much nobler than he was.

Yet, as if it were a matter of course, they praise Subaru, offer him their help, and greet him with such warmth. That fact had always tormented Subaru.

When the person you respect, the person you don't want to lose to, and the person you can never catch up to all give you their affirmation, it's not just a simple matter of being overjoyed.

It made him anxious. That someday, when his real self is exposed, he will surely disappoint them.

When they realize that the real Subaru is actually pathetic, weak, and hopeless, surely, they'll be saddened, and will regret the warmth they had shown him.

That was what he had always thought. And yet,

Even Al, Garfiel, and Anastasia, had such expectations of Subaru.

On the verge of being crushed by its weight, Subaru had pushed himself to his limit, and yet his limit was not nearly enough as he tried to live up to that expectation over and over.

This is the road Natsuki Subaru chose.

—The road he had once promised to a single girl that he would take. Her hero's road.

But, one way or another, he was no longer just her hero. What Subaru was carrying now, was—

Al: "If you do this, bro, from now on it'll be heroic reveries that you'll be carryin' on your back."

Al suddenly gave this warning to the silent Subaru.

Watching Subaru's eyes drop, Al continued in a listless voice,

Al: "You can never lose. You must only win. You'll take up their hopes, carry their expectations, and fight to show them the future. If you make this decision here, that's what you'll have to do."

Subaru: "…I can never lose, huh. Sounds just like how it's always been, doesn't it?"

Al: "The weight of it's different. If bro loses here, the defeat won't just end with bro."

Subaru didn't understand what Al was saying.

Subaru's battles had always been this way. When Subaru loses, Subaru isn't the only one who's lost. Everything Subaru wanted to protect would be lost with Subaru's defeat.

It had always been this way. It had never been otherwise.

If defeat didn't cost him anything, he would have had no reason to fight.

The fact that Subaru was fighting was because there were things that could not be protected unless he fought.

And after today, their numbers would swell to unbelievable proportions.

Subaru: “Tch, isn’t that still how it’s always been?”

Al: “…”

Exhaling a sigh, he had made up his mind.

The pounding of his heart until now settled down as his vision cleared.

Though he couldn’t see Al’s face, he could sense that Al was holding his breath, watching him with an astounded expression.

Subaru: “Anastasia-san, I’ll do it. If my voice can make a difference, then leave it to me.”

Anastasia: “…You’re sure? Once you take on people’s hopes…”

Subaru: “It’ll be no different from what I always do. “Hero”, doesn’t sound too bad, does it. Though honestly, it’s kinda embarrassing to be calling myself that…”

Seeing Anastasia’s worried expression, Subaru softly rubbed the tip of his nose,

Subaru: “If it’s just a matter of being a hero, I’ve already made my decision a year ago. Otherwise, I’ll bring shame to the girl watching over me, and the girl whose back I’m watching.”

Anastasia: “—Is that so. Well, alright. Boys always like to show off, after all.”

As if saying “There’s no helping it”, Anastasia smiled, and gave Subaru a light poke in the chest.

Subaru was a little taken aback by that reaction.

Since that might've been the first time he had seen Anastasia let down her guard and show her true emotions.

With that feeling rapidly melting into his chest where he had been poked, Subaru lifted his face.

Subaru: "Thank you, Garfiel. Al. For helping me make up my mind."

Saying this to the two at his back, Subaru followed behind Anastasia.

Just what would he say when he's standing in front of the broadcasting device, he wondered.

He's still not sure what or what not to say.

But, strangely, there was no confusion or anxiety accompanying it.

After all, it's just the same as usual, right?

—Because he knew that, just as usual, he has no choice but to show off again.

Chapter 42:
The Newest Hero and the Most Ancient Hero

1

—An oppressive silence had fallen over the refuge shelter.

There was the occasional faint sound of sobbing and someone nervously tapping their fingers on the floor.

Listening to that unsettling backdrop in that stillness, the girl hugged up her knees, feeling the coldness of the wall against her back.

It was a little girl with golden hair.

Resting her chin on her small, pale kneecaps, the girl gently wrapped her arm around the little bundle at her side.

Leaning against the girl's left shoulder, with his head buried between his chest and legs, was an even younger boy—the girl's younger brother. He had been crying vehemently until now, but, apparently tired from the sobbing, had now fallen asleep.

Wet teartracks still lined his cheeks, and the corners of his eyes were red from crying. The girl wanted to softly stroke his hair, but hesitated, afraid that it might wake him.

If he could sleep, then it'd be better if he kept on sleeping.

While listening to her younger brother quietly snoring, she hoped that he might at least find some rest in his dreams. Because the reality outside those dreams would be far too harsh for her little brother to bear.

Though the same applied to his older sister, thinking this of him.

—It had been several hours since the announcement that the Control Towers to the Great Water Gates of Priestella had been taken.

That morning, the girl was out in the city plaza with her little brother when they heard the broadcast. She couldn't believe her ears when she heard those words, full of hate and malice. Worrying for her parents as she listened to that unacceptable ultimatum, the girl took her frightened little brother by the hand and ran to the shelter with the adults around her.

—If an unexpected situation occurs, quickly retreat into the shelters.

That was the emergency response procedure broadcasted from City Hall every morning.

Honestly, the girl didn't remember paying much attention to the morning broadcasts aside from the Bard's songs. But those words nevertheless remained at the back of her mind such that she immediately remembered them when the emergency arose.

However, neither the girl nor the surrounding adults seemed to have any idea about what to do once they were inside the refuge shelter.

—Witch Cult. Control Towers. Great Water Gates. Demands.

That vile woman's ear-piercing voice showered abuse upon the frightened people.

Every one of her deranged, senseless words filled the girl and the adults' minds with dread.

Trapped in this dark shelter, they knew nothing of what was happening outside. It was only natural that as time passed with no improvement in sight, panic began to take hold.

First, the voices of mutual encouragement weakened, then gradually, anxiety and frustration festered in the silence. By the time anyone noticed it, displeasure had have become apparent on the faces of everyone around them, and the atmosphere had been infested with pent-up discontent and hostile gazes.

Once it begins, there's no stopping it.

Staring at each other, shouting at each other. At worst, people begin trading punches.

Even in this shelter, this atmosphere was looming, ready to explode at the slightest touch.

Boy: “aa—h.”

Yet the perilous air on the brink of drawing blood was shattered by the girl’s crying little brother.

It appears that, even with the violent urge boiling inside them, the adults still had enough decency not to attack in front of a little golden-haired child crying for help.

The sound of a child crying is powerful, in a way.

She had always thought that her little brother’s crying was noisy. But, realizing what it had accomplished just now, the girl hugged her brother from behind and wept a little.

With this alone, violence had been averted inside shelter.

But everyone knew that it was only a temporary calm resting upon a precarious equilibrium.

Next time, it would certainly not be something a child’s cry could stop.

Knowing this, the people in the shelter, who should be tied by their shared fates, began to keep their distance from each other, not only verbally, but with their gazes and their breaths.

As if to avoid being influenced by other people’s consciousnesses, they shut out everything from the external world. Who knows what might draw someone else’s attention, incite their anger, and end up pulling the trigger?

So whether it was for themselves, or for everyone else, they held their breaths with rigid faces as they waited for time to pass. “Something will change if you just wait for it”, they left themselves to that fleeting hope.

Girl: "—a."

Suddenly, the girl lifted her face with a quiet moan.

While silently yearning for a change to come, she caught the subtle shift in the atmosphere.

Spurred to the same reaction, the people around her also turned their heads, perhaps for the first time in hours. This is because everyone living in this city knew that the faint tremble in the air—was an indication that a broadcast was coming.

In that world of silence, it almost sounded like someone nearby sighing. That precursor to the broadcast sent a sense of physical revulsion throughout her body.

The change they were hoping for should have been something positive. But a broadcast only brings the Witch Cult's malice.

What kind of impossible demand would that shrill voice impose next?

But here, the girl's pessimistic prediction was betrayed.

{—Uhhh… so um… can everyone hear me properly? Mic-test mic-test, one-two one-two}

Instead, the voice she heard was that of a youth who sounded somewhat confused.

Unlike any other broadcast before this, the youth's voice was lacking confidence. It wasn't the charismatic voice of the man she had grown used to hearing every morning. But a young voice she had never heard before.

The girl's eyes grew round. The surrounding adults also traded gazes of doubt, unsure of what was going on.

Such sentiments would not reach the person behind the broadcasting device. Nevertheless, after doing a few more checks to make sure that the broadcast going through, the youth cleared his throat. And,

{Sounds like you guys can hear me, that's a huge relief. So, first of all, sorry for doing a broadcast all of a sudden. I probably scared you, huh. Considering the circumstances, most of you must be on edge about what I'm going to say. But don't worry. This isn't the Witch Cult broadcasting to you now. Please know that first}

…It's not, the Witch Cult?"

Apparently not used to talking through the device, the volume of the youth's voice fluctuated up and down.

But, since the listeners were so overwhelmed by the content of his words, no one bothered to remark on it. Looking up overhead to where the voice seemed to be falling from, the darkened expressions on the people's faces began to shift. It was the sensation of having sighted the first glimmer of hope.

Someone quietly muttered,

Then, that means… we're saved?"

Those words encompassed the hopes of everyone inside the shelter.

That's it. Isn't it? If someone who's not the Witch Cult is speaking through the broadcasting device, that can only mean that they've recaptured City Hall. If someone managed to drive the Witch Cult out of City Hall, then maybe the Witch Cultists in the Control Towers and all over the city are also—

The Witch Cultists… are all driven out…?"

{Next, I have to apologize for getting everyone's hopes up, because the threat of the Witch Cult hasn't gone away yet. We were able to retake City Hall, but they're still holed up in the Control Towers. Those guys' demands, and the danger of the city sinking beneath the water are still in play. Please understand that as well}

"…"

Yet, this fleeting hope wasn't crushed by anyone else, but by the youth behind the broadcasting device himself.

It was almost as if the youth had read the minds of everyone inside the shelter. But isn't it far too cruel to extinguish their fledgling hopes this way?

Someone who had unwittingly stood up with expectation in their eyes sat down again.

Nobody can blame that someone for feeling discouraged, being told that their hope of being relived from their fears was misplaced. Instead, the fierce point of everyone's anger turned to the youth making the broadcast.

{I'm sorry}

However, the youth had apparently foreseen that the crowd's anger would fall on him.

{Where are you listening to this broadcast right now? Maybe you're in one of the refuge shelters, and I'm sure there are those who didn't manage to escape into the refuge shelters as well. Everyone must be filled with anxiety, right? I can understand what it's like to be afraid and wanting to curl up into a ball. And I guess you're all thinking "Who is this random guy toying with everyone's hopes at a time like this?"}

"…"

{I'm… just a nobody. Like everyone else, I'm just being tossed around by fate, getting crushed under the unreasonable circumstances, and so scared that my legs can't stop shaking. That kind of guy. Even the job of doing this broadcast… I only accepted it after making a huge fuss. And I still think that the burden is too heavy for me. Honestly, there are others who are more qualified to talk to everyone like this. I'm sure there are}

The youth's voice was trembling, as if speaking straight from the people's terrified and cowering hearts.

And then, what followed was simply the honest thoughts of a youth doubting his own value.

The attitude of the listeners had gone beyond surprise and disappointment, until all that was left was uncertainty.

Right now, when what everyone yearned for was hope, why did they put this youth in front of the broadcasting device?

Even the youth himself said that there were more qualified people.

But why did they send him?

{But here I am, talking to everyone. So many people greater than I am told me that I should do it. That it won't be totally pointless. But, can you hear me trembling? Speaking in front of people isn't my strong suit. I'm not good with words, and I don't have the charisma to lead anyone. I'm weak, helpless, and even here, in such an important position, I can't help but want to run away…}

The tone of his voice gradually fell, as if dragging the listeners' hearts into the abyss.

That weak, faltering voice sounded like it was creaking through a chest shrunken by anxiety, only to tangle up at his stomach. If the youth behind that voice was within arm's reach, she would've liked to plug his mouth to shut him up.

Boy: "Big sister…"

Before she knew it, her younger brother was awake.

Hearing that call, the girl hugged her little brother's ears as if to keep that wimp's voice from sneaking in and infecting him with it's cowardice.

But, as the price for protecting her little brother, that voice continued to strike upon the girl's eardrums, drawing her into its weakness.

Still, the youth's voice went on,

{I don't know what I can do… what I really want is just to plug my ears, hold my head, hide in a corner by myself and wait for someone else to fix everything for me…}

Girl: “—no…”

Squeezing her eyes shut, the girl shook her head as if rejecting that sense of helplessness and despair.

I know. I know even if you don’t remind me.

What the youth was saying was nothing less than the inner thoughts of every person cowering under the Witch Cult’s threat.

It was the weakness eating away at the girl’s heart.

It was the cowardice rooted in the depths of the adults’ minds.

It was the unbearable dread tormenting her little brother’s soul.

Surely, it was something nobody could do anything about.

And to have to face that unreasonable reality in spite of this—

{—But, since I can’t run away, I’ll fight. That’s just the kind of guy I am}

Saying this, the youth’s voice was clearly shaking.

Girl: “…huh?”

Not sure if she had misheard it, the girl opened her eyes and looked around her.

The owner of the voice wasn’t there. But all around, she could see astounded faces just like her own.

The voice paused for a moment, as if choosing his next words.

And,

{Let me ask you again. Everyone listening to this voice, where are you now? Have you escaped into a refuge shelter? Are you hiding inside your house? Are you trembling alone? Are you with someone? Are you with the person most important to you? Or, even if you’re next to an unfamiliar face, is it a face that you have grown to know over the past few hours?}

"…"

{It's a pretty arbitrary request, and it may be difficult, but please don't be alone. When a person is alone, they'll just start coming up with lame ideas. I know that from experience. Trust me. So please don't be alone. Stay with someone. And—}

Inhaling, with only a slight hesitation,

{And if you can, look at the face of the person who's with you}

Girl: "…"

Following the youth's words, the girl's gaze slowly fell into her arm.

Her little brother was looking up at her. His swaying, uncertain emerald eyes met hers.

{Whose face do you see now? Is it someone important to you, or a stranger who you've spent these past few hours with? Or maybe it's a friend. …But most likely, it's a wretched face. A face that's about to cry, a face that's in distress, and I imagine it probably isn't smiling. No, perhaps there is someone out there who is putting up a strong face, forcing themselves to smile so as not to worry the people around them. If there is, then that's an amazing person. If someone you care about is smiling this way, you should be proud of them. But now, with that in mind, compare it with the smile you know}

Her brother's face was close to crying.

It was a crumpled face, a face that was about to burst into tears again.

While, reflected in her brother's eyes, her own face was hollow as if it had lost its expression.

{—Is this acceptable to you?}

Girl: "…no way."

A small, thin voice slipped from the girl's lips.

It was a weak and broken sound that was impossible even for herself to hear.

Nevertheless,

{I can’t accept this. I will not accept this}

The youth’s voice rang, as though having heard her reply.

{I also have people I cherish. Friends I hold dear. And I cannot forgive whoever put that pained, sorrowful expression on the faces of the people I love. I don’t want you to force yourself to smile. You kidding me? Quit joking around. I want to raise my voice and shout that the smile of the girl I know should be way cuter than this…}

Boy: “B-Big sister…”

{I don’t want to keep losing. It’d be too pathetic to give up here. There’s no way I can allow it. They are the ones in the wrong. Even if you are too weak to do the right thing, to strike down those in the wrong, you should at least know what is right. And when you know that you are right, there is no way you can allow yourself to lose to those who are wrong. At least, I don’t intend to surrender and bow to those guys}

Girl: “Fredo…”

Hearing her little brother faintly calling her, she gently held him closer and pressed her forehead against his.

A feverish heat transferred between them. Hot, very hot, it was the heat of life.

She couldn’t tell if it was her younger brother’s or her own, but the heat was certainly there.

{I want to run away, but I can’t run away. I want to cry, but I can’t cry. The enemy is strong, but I don’t want to lose. And so, I’ll fight. I know I am weak, and stupid, but still I will fight. They are wrong. They are wrong to have made the people I care about look like they’re about to cry. So, fight. I will fight. —And I want you all to fight}

Girl: “—hk.”

Her breath clogged. Her throat suddenly closed, ashamed of her own weakness.

Surely, it was because the voice of the youth had ceased to tremble, but had become powerful, as if pointing to the road ahead.

She could understand the youth’s feelings. She received the youth’s message, painful and clear.

In her heart, the girl’s will was the same as the youth’s. She wants to fight. She wants to do all she could to drive out the thugs who had attacked their city. But, both she and her little brother were small, young, and their reach were far too short.

They were helpless, ignorant, weak, and cowardly, and so—

{Don’t get me wrong. I said I want you to fight, but I’m not telling you to pick up a stick and fight them. In fact, please avoid doing anything so reckless. I don’t want you to mob up and spill blood fighting against the Witch Cult. What I am asking you to fight for is to not look down}

Girl: “To not… look down…”

{Staring at your feet isn’t going change anything. Your gaze isn’t going to bore a hole in the floor, and even if it does, that won’t fix a thing… So please, lift your face and look ahead}

She looked up. Not at her knees, not at her brother’s blond hair, but at the shelter.

And there, she saw the faces of those around her also lifting.

Their eyes met, wide open as if in astonishment.

Just like the girl, everyone had subconsciously raised their faces, obeying the voice of the youth.

{If you look around you, surely, you’ll meet someone’s eyes. Like you, this is someone who is afraid and wants to run away… but, just like you, this is also someone who doesn’t want to lose. There is the person you cherish, there is the person you are looking at now, and, if you add yourself to the list, that’s already three people. There should be more depending on where you are}

Just as the youth said, the people’s gazes intersected as they lifted their faces.

The gleams within their irises were complicated, and surely, the girl’s own eyes must’ve been the same. However, there now seemed to be something more than just tremors of terror.

{If you can see that you are not alone, then that’s enough. You are not alone. That in itself is powerful, don’t you think? I don’t want to see saddened expressions on the faces of people I love. And I don’t want the people looking at me now to see a miserable expression in my eyes. I’m not the only one who’s so vain, weak, and stubborn, am I?}

“…”

That beseeching, calling voice was trying to muster the people’s courage.

And yet, to the girl’s ears, the youth was pleading for help—for something, anything, to cling to.

And then, she realized it.

The youth’s feelings had never changed since the moment this broadcast began.

While lamenting his weak, insufficient self, he did not give up.

He was telling himself that that was his only weapon, and telling everyone else that they were also the same.

{Please, help me believe this. I may be weak and hopeless, but I can’t give up just yet. I’m not the only coward who hates to give up… please, help me believe it}

It was a cowardly voice. A cowardly plea.

It was a voice which, when everyone needed help, was shamelessly shouting quicker and louder than anyone: “Please help me”—

{Or… am I the only one?}

The voice lost its confidence. Or rather. The youth’s voice had no confidence to begin with.

A sense of agitation surged up. Don’t go. Whatever it takes, she wanted to shout for him to stay.

Girl: “…you’re. not.”

A faint voice, indiscernible like a mosquito’s cry, spilled from her throat.

This voice would not reach him. The reply would have to be louder.

In order to answer the voice of that coward, afraid and alone—

{Who believes… even now, we can still fight… am I the only one?}

Girl: “—YOU’RE NOT!”

Opening her mouth, the girl screamed at the top of her lungs.

Voices resounded throughout the refuge shelter. Not just the girl’s.

Others who had also lifted their faces shouted out as well.

They were voices resisting against sorrow, weakness, and fear.

If that was the youth’s plan all along, then they fell for it through and through.

Who cares, even if it was? That wimpy trembling of his voice, that faltering pep-talk, that pitiful encouragement, and that pleading, clinging faith, even if all of it had been an act…

If they fell for such a masterful performance, who could blame them?

But, if this really was the voice of a clumsy wimp, how could anyone just leave him be?

{I'm not, am I?}

Girl: "—You're not!"

{You guys are still fighting, aren't you? You haven't been swallowed by weakness, have you?}

Girl: "We haven't… we don't want to lose!"

The depths of her chest grew hot. The roots of her teeth were trembling, and a passion different from anger was raging.

That feeling wasn't the girl's alone. It was a flaring passion engulfing everyone into a single inferno.

The anxiety they had only recently shared now became a bonfire of a different emotion.

{If you are with someone important to you, hold their hand and believe in them. If you're with someone you don't know, give them a nod and assure them you'll do your best together. Because neither you nor that person have been crushed by defeat or are about to give up fighting. And as long everyone goes on fighting, I will fight to the end as well. I will fight—I will fight, and win}

"…"

In the end, this is just a shelter far away from City Hall.

No matter how loudly they shouted here, no matter how they scream that they are with him, none of it would reach the youth.

Still, the youth sounded relieved, as though he had heard the girl and the others' replies. He received it, he received it and proclaimed in a voice trembling in swelling emotion:

—I will fight, and win

There was no question of whether it was possible.

Only faith that surely, he will.

Just as the youth believed that the girl and the people of this city would not be beaten by despair—

The girl and the citizens believed that the youth behind that voice will prevail in the perilous battle ahead.

Why did they believe it? Because surely, this voice—

{—My name is Natsuki Subaru. I am the Spirit-Arts User who defeated Sin Archbishop Sloth of the Witch Cult}

"—!!"

An uproar erupted at the revelation of the youth's identity.

The girl didn't quite understand the significance of that declaration. But this was not the case for the people around her. The impact was overwhelming, and certainly not in the negative sense.

At first, they were startled, then, as comprehension followed—hope and faith spread explosively as even the girl's heart was swallowed by that wave of emotion.

{My colleagues and I will do everything to take care of the Witch Cult in this city! So, please believe in us and fight on. Hold onto the hands of the people precious to you and cast away the cowering part of yourself that wants to surrender. And…}

"…"

{—Leave the rest to me!}

Deafening cheers erupted, flooding the shelter with heated enthusiasm.

Expectation became hope, and, in a single breath, one hope became hope innumerable.

The girl looked down at her younger brother in her arms and saw the undeniable light dwelling in his eyes.

Just to be sure, she embraced her brother tightly once more. Her brother's arms wrapped around her body in return, and, while savoring the warmth of that embrace, the girl looked up towards the ceiling.

Unable to hide his fear or apprehension, that youth nevertheless took on the hopes of every person in this city and declared that he will fight.

The girl closed her eyes, sketching out the image of the hero whose face she didn't even know, and prayed for every imaginable good fortune upon him.

—Because surely, he must be just a common-place youth, fighting for the sake of someone important to him.

2

Leaving the magic device shaped like a gramophone, Subaru slowly stepped back.

Nervous sweat had completely drenched his forehead. Leaning against a nearby workbench, he roughly swiped it off of his brow.

Taking deep breath after deep breath, he wondered if the device was picking up that sound.

But when he looked to Anastasia, who was in charge of operating the device beside him, it seemed she had already safely powered it off. Instantly, he was washed over with relief.

Subaru: "…Hhaa, that was exhausting."

He spilled a sigh as his head churned with unimaginable fatigue.

Honestly, he was in such a trance while he spoke that he could barely remember a thing he said. It wasn't that he forgot everything, but the memories were too vague in places.

And he had Anastasia's speech notes, too…

"…"

Wiping off the droplets hanging down his chin with a sleeve, Subaru noticed that the room was extraordinarily quiet.

The people who had been watching the broadcast didn't say a word. Beside Anastasia, were Garfiel and Al. While Julius and Ricardo, who later joined them, were also standing in a corner of the room. To see all these usually-noisy people suddenly dead-silent couldn't be a good sign.

Unless, was his incoherent broadcast just that bad?

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun."

Subaru: "Uwaha! I'm sorry! I'll do better next time!"

Anastasia: "Why're you apologizin'? Strange child."

With his heart wracked by anxiety, Subaru blurted out an apology the instant he heard his name. While, laughing at his reaction, Anastasia tilted her head smiling.

Anastasia: "It's a strange thing to say to a strange child, but, Natsuki-kun, did you…"

Subaru: "Hm?"

Anastasia: "Did you use to be a con-artist back in the day or somethin'?"

Subaru: "What's with that baseless accusation all of a sudden?! As you can see, I'm just a normal everyday student… or actually, in a certain sense, I'm not even a student!"

Anastasia: "Ah, no no… I didn't mean that in a bad way. I was just trying to say that the way you spoke was exquisite… how you cast them into despair only to lift them up again, simply an impeccable use of rhetoric."

Waving off Subaru's protests, Anastasia weakly giggled "Tahhaha".

But, hearing this only made Subaru more muddled than ever.

Subaru: "Rhetoric? The hell're you talking about? I blanked out right away and didn't even know what I was saying. All the letters on the cheat-sheet got blurred together and I couldn't remember a thing after I gave up reading."

Anastasia: "Yeah, you pretty much skipped our draft. You can't imagine how I felt when right off the bat you started sayin' things that had nothin' to do with what we discussed… but it seems I needn't have worried myself."

Subaru: "I'm very sorry about that! But, generally, wasn't it more or less in line with the notes? I mean, if it was that bad, you would've stopped me, right, Anastasia-san?"

The notes in his hand: "the cheat-sheet he'd forgotten about at the most crucial moment, was filled with flowery oratory designed to clear away the anxieties of the people in this city.

It was a proud conglomeration of Anastasia's negotiation techniques, Garfiel's vast stores of proverbs, and even some of Subaru's modern knowledge of neat and witty comments.

Even though he couldn't read from it when it actually mattered, he probably had some of its ideas floating around in his head and wound up including them in his speech one way or another.

Anastasia: "I don't know how to put this, but, Natsuki-kun, your speech didn't even touch on anythin' in the notes. I mean, none at all."

Subaru: “—Eh?”

Without leaving any ambiguity on the matter, Anastasia’s words instantly shot down Subaru’s speculations.

Suddenly growing rigid, Subaru looked around at the others to confirm if this is true. However, the other four only showed their respective version of awkward faces as Subaru’s gaze passed over them.

Among them, Julius took one step forward. And, while picking at his front hair,

Julius: “It’s just as Anastasia-sama said, Subaru. Your broadcast didn’t contain any of the things we discussed beforehand. In particular, the part that was supposed to have been revealed at the start, about your accomplishment of slaying Sin Archbishop Sloth, was moved into the second half. It was almost to the point that I wanted to ask you what you were trying to do.”

Subaru: “Seriously? If I didn’t say that, then wasn’t I just some super-random-guy to them?! If it was like that, you could’ve stopped me! Even if I had to start over it would’ve been better than confusing the hell out of them!”

Julius: “Start over? That’s unthinkable.”

While Subaru started flipping out at Julius’ confession of doubt, Julius shook his head with an expression of complete seriousness.

Then, with almost a sense of reverence towards Subaru,

Julius: “—It was… a wonderful speech.”

Subaru: “…Aah?”

Julius: “It didn’t matter that you forgot the notes. With your own ability, you’ve accomplished something far beyond our expectations. I have nothing but praises for your achievement. This is the same sentiment which I had felt when you slew the White Whale and Sloth.”

In front of a stunned Subaru, Julius only piled on his exaggerated praises.

In a way that was utterly unlike Julius, Subaru thought he saw excitement in “The Most Perfect Knight”’s eyes. But the moment he regained his senses, Subaru began to suspect that something was up.

What’s gotten into this Knight? Could Subaru have upset his composure that much?

Subaru: “Quit joking around… I always thought your jokes aren’t very funny, you know.”

Julius: “If that sounded like a joke to you, then it’s only because you think far too little of yourself. But, then again, perhaps that is exactly what made your speech what it was. It was a speech no one but you could have made.”

Subaru: “You really are making fun of me, aren’t you?”

Considering the critical situation they were in, Julius’ praises were only making Subaru more frustrated.

Subaru had already gotten used to Julius’ sarcasm by now, but this wasn’t the time to be pointlessly bickering like this. If the speech didn’t have the effect they had hoped for, then they’d need to come up with another plan as soon as possible.

Subaru: “Instead of giving people strength, if all I did was make them distrust us, then it won’t work even if I try again. Next time someone else should…”

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun, that’s enough of your self-deprecation, you know? It’s making people uncomfortable just listenin’.”

Saying this, Anastasia put a stop to Subaru’s whining from the side.

Glaring at Subaru with a look of disapproval on her adorable face,

Anastasia: “Your speech was exceptionally effective, guess I have to spell it out for you since you can’t seem to realize it yourself. —

Natsuki-kun, your speech was more perfect than we could've ever imagined. You have the talent of a true demagogue, you know."

Ricardo: "I'm with th'young miss y'know! Khhhhyya, that gave me shivers! What's with you 'n words! Y'make it look easy, bro! The way y'tricked Emilia-sama, Crusch-sama, that lil'girl 'n th'ground dragon into fallin' all over ya, m'I right?!"

Subaru: "Both of you're saying things I can't just let slide! What d'you mean tricked! Who're you calling a demagogue!"

Listening to their overly-scandalous evaluations, Subaru raised his voice, shouting.

But Anastasia and Ricardo only innocently looked at each other and shrugged. And here, seeing how everyone seemed to be in on it, Subaru began to suspect that they weren't entirely joking.

This grew all the more obvious when he saw Garfiel, squatting on the floor, watching him.

Garfiel: "Capt'n…"

Subaru: "Garfiel… what do you think?"

Garfiel: "Capt'n's the Capt'n a'right. I was right t'follow ya outta th'Sanctuary… that's what I think."

Subaru: "…Your expectations are always a bit too heavy on me."

Garfiel: "Well that's yer own fault, ain't it, Capt'n."

Garfiel got up and walked over to him, flashing his fangs smiling. Seeing this, Subaru expelled a sigh through his nostrils, and,

Subaru: "In that case, running from my responsibilities would be the same as giving up, wouldn't it. I don't want that to happen… that's probably what I said in the broadcast, right?"

Anastasia: "There you go."

Anastasia smiled, watching Subaru scratching his head, looking deflated as if only just now accepting this. She pumped up her little chest at this unexpectedly good outcome and softly rubbed her scarf with her hand,

Anastasia: “In fact, you’ve raised everyone’s morale so high that I’m gettin’ worried they’ll start doin’ somethin’ stupid. Even here, you’ve got us pumped full of spirit on account of Wrath’s Authority, you know.”

Subaru: “If you exaggerate like that I’m gonna think you’re pulling my leg again… seriously, just how good of a radio DJ was I, anyway…”

Getting hoisted up higher and higher was only making it harder to wrap his head around it.

Tearing himself away from the whirlpool of warm gazes, Subaru slowly walked up to the arcane device once more.

Subaru: “In any case, if that speech had made a difference, that’s better than anything. Hopefully, this’ll be enough to stave off any more violence in the refuge shelters… So, any thoughts on our next step?”

Anastasia: “Now that the citizens are calmed down, we’ve taken care of everything apart from the root cause itself. However, after Natsuki-kun’s speech, the Witch Cult definitely knows about our intentions now…”

Subaru: “Wonder what their reaction will be. Like you guys said, aside from the fact that it’ll be irrational, there’s not much else to go on. At the same time, we must settle this as soon as possible.”

Regardless of the effectiveness of Subaru’s speech, it didn’t change the fact that the means to destroy this city was still held in the hands of lunatics. Even with the greatest optimism, chances were, the Great Water Gates would be released at the stroke of midnight and the city would be swallowed beneath the flood.

No matter what, they must end this before that happens.

Anastasia: “And to do this, we’ll need to capture all four towers at once… correct?”

Subaru: “There are four Sin Archbishops and two enemies we don’t know about. We’ll need to consult with our forces on how to tackle this.”

Simultaneously capturing all four Control Towers is the necessary condition for saving this city.

Concentrating their forces like they did for assault on City Hall wouldn’t work here. Since, as soon as they attack any of the towers, there would be the risk of the other three releasing the floodgates.

Subaru wasn’t confident that they could survive these odds four times in a row.

Up against six major enemies, their fighting strength was—

Subaru: “It’s a… difficult hand. There’s the chance it could turn into a repeat of our attack on City Hall. But… if we could have at least one more card.”

???: “—In that case, how about a Joker?”

While Subaru counted their forces on the fingers of his hands, a voice abruptly chimed in.

Without thinking, Subaru turned towards the figure standing at the entrance of the room, and,

Subaru: “Sounds like in the time since I last saw you, your evaluation of yourself has gone up quite a bit?”

???: “Not nearly as much as Natsuki-san, being asked to make speeches and all… I never thought I had a hero among my friends, but guess I was wrong.”

Subaru: “Still don’t think it suits me, though.”

Seeing the figure shoot him a mischievous smile, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and laughed. Then, walking up to the entrance, he gave that smiling figure a high-five.

Watching this reunion, Garfiel's face also brightened,

Garfiel: "Otto-bro! Yer safe, ain't ya!"

At Garfiel's delighted call, Otto, who had been missing since the troubles started, answered with a nod.

Aside from the dirt on his clothing, Otto seemed completely unhurt. Joining them, he gave the approaching Garfiel a high five as well,

Otto: "I barely escaped with my life. It's a miracle that I survived and somehow made it here alive. Glad to see you two are safe. Though, I know you guys are way harder to kill than I am, so I wasn't all that worried."

Subaru: "Is that right. Actually, I wasn't all that worried about you either. Why is that?"

Garfiel: "I dunno. That's just Otto-bro's natural-vibes maybe?"

Otto: "Can't you worry about me a little more?! In this kind of crisis, it was extremely dangerous to be out there alone, you know?!"

But, in reality, he did manage to rejoin them, so that wasn't very convincing.

Anyway, while they were in the middle of this joyous reunion, Anastasia clapped her hands and squeezed herself into the conversation,

Anastasia: "Alright alright, calm down calm down. First off, it's nice to see that Otto-kun is alive. And I'm sure there're mountains of things you want to ask each other about what you've been up to and such, but…"

Cutting off her words there, Anastasia shot Otto a glare with her green-onion-colored eyes,

Anastasia: "That conspicuous remark you just made… mind telling me what it meant?"

Otto: “The Joker, right? It’s a simple story. If I let him come in right away, my survival would’ve been pretty much overlooked, so I cleverly asked him to wait outside for a bit.”

Looking a little embarrassed, Otto walked over to the door at Anastasia’s prodding and gave a signal to someone on the other side of the door.

Preceded by the sound of footsteps, a new character walked into the room. And,

????: “—Sorry I’m late.”

One sentence. And that utterance alone charged its listeners with the feeling of being reinforced by ten thousand men.

Alongside the sensation of a gust of wind sweeping by, was the illusion of a towering flame appearing before their eyes, compelling their hearts to shudder.

And in reality, this reunion did indeed hold that kind of power.

For the strength that they have been dying to obtain had arrived.

Reinhard: “Reinhard van Astrea—it’s a bit late, but I’ve come to join you.”

Saying this, the red-flame Sword Saint announced his intention to join the fight.

Chapter 43:
Before the Rendezvous

1

Reinhard: “Forgive me for not providing assistance at this critical moment. I can only reflect on how I was lacking.”

Receiving the gazes of those present in the room, Reinhard apologized.

At the sight of the Sword Saint with bowed head, everyone grew silent for a moment. It would be easy to sling negativity in response to his apology. But, words of blame were easier to form than ones which conveyed true intent.

In truth, the fact that they had spent all this time in dire need of power while Reinhard had been missing, his status unknown, had not changed.

To think how the attack on the City Hall would have gone if his strength were present at that moment, that could not be helped. So even simple, negative words, did not easily emerge from anyone’s lips. However,

Subaru: “Really, you idiot. Do you have any idea how much trouble we’ve been in without you?”

Approaching that crimson hero, only Subaru called out to him, while poking his chest.

As that fist lightly touched him, Reinhard, with an attitude like he could not justify himself to Subaru, turned his gaze away. At that scolded and crestfallen appearance unbefitting of him, Subaru snorted.

Subaru: “You know, if you were gonna come anyway, you should’ve shown up fifteen minutes earlier! Then I wouldn’t have had to give a speech that didn’t fit my character at all. That’s supposed to be your job, isn't it?"

Reinhard: "Sorry… However, it was a great speech befitting you. Though many things are required of me, giving courage-rousing broadcasts of that magnitude is not something I could do. You were the right choice."

Subaru: "Between me and you, the required role for that broadcast is a little different, I think."

Subaru poked Reinhard's chest once again, and he smiled wryly. And, he also poked the tip of that downcast hero's nose with a finger.

Subaru: "Reinhard."

Reinhard: "What is it…?"

Subaru: "Since you came, it's like a hundred men did, no, a thousand. I can expect that much right? Can I count on you?"

Reinhard: "…"

It was a force comparable to ten thousand men. Subaru's hundred-fold, even thousand-fold evaluation was laughable.

At Subaru's expectation-filled question, Reinhard's blue eyes blinked. But that hesitation immediately faded, and Reinhard's lips formed into a smile.

Reinhard: "Ah, I want you to count on me. If you expect that much of me, I will comply."

Subaru: "That somehow-making-women-happy kinda talk, can you stop that? Well, no matter… And with that, if anyone has something they want to say now, please go while we're at it."

Seeing that initial discomfort disappear from Reinhard's face as he laughed, Subaru turned and looked back. Gazing over at the faces that had not said anything until now, he pointed to Reinhard.

Subaru: "At these times, the side that gets special treatment suffers much more. Besides, a chance to scold this Sword Saint that wants to be scolded doesn't come by often. So go ahead, do it, do it."

Reinhard: "…"

Subaru: "After you've railed on him enough, let's talk—About how to help everyone."

Subaru puffed out his chest as he spoke.

At that attitude, people held their breaths. Otto and Garfiel, the only two who were used to Subaru's bravado, smiled.

And it was good to have one or two fellows able to see through to his true intentions.

They did not have to hold in their thoughts, because it was right after he had made that kind of speech.

2

After that, Reinhard's personal talking to (details omitted) was held, and again talk of how to recapture the city started up again.

However, other than Reinhard and Otto's similar lines of thought, there was no clear improvement. The number of enemies that they had to attack, and the necessary strategy of striking all control towers simultaneously did not change.

Subaru: "But in the midst of this chaos, where was Reinhard and what was he up to?"

As they all sat around in a circle talking, Subaru suddenly interrupted with that question. Reinhard's expression clouded at his words. Today, his face often became like that.

Subaru: "You don't have Felt with you, and there's a lot of things I want to hear about. Ah, I'm not blaming you, or anything like that, okay? Please believe I'm past that stage."

Anastasia: "What Natsuki-kun was sayin', well, it's somethin' that bothers me too. No way the Sword Saint got scared and went into hidin', I wasn't thinkin' anythin' like that. But I am wantin' to hear a convincing reason."

Following Subaru's question, Anastasia joined in. Judging from the fact she was casting sideway glances, it definitely seemed like she had received reports from Julius.

Right before the turmoil began, Reinhard and Felt had been in contact with Heinkel. After her question, Reinhard's expression clouding over doubly, seemed to be proof of that assertion.

Wilhelm included, the Astreas' approach to the topic of Heinkel was very evasive. Subaru did not know if he should voice it, but the way they treated him was like—

Subaru: "Like someone who's been stuck inside for ten years, and now is a pro-NEET child who's treated as a tumor by his aging parents…"

Otto: "Natsuki-kun's jumping to weird imaginings again, so I'm sorry, but what will you do? If it is hard for Reinhard-san to talk, then I can speak, but…"

While Subaru recalled flashes of an evening news special on shut-ins, Otto chimed in. His worried gaze was directed at Reinhard, and his tone held an apologetic sort of feeling.

Subaru: "Wait, you came together with Reinhard, so did you really stay with him during the turmoil?"

Otto: "No, there was nothing like that. I joined up with Reinhard-san at the last moment… However, I have mostly figured out the situation."

Reinhard: "Thank you, Otto. But this is a problem of my family. Truly, it is a difficult topic to discuss, but it would be for the best to speak of it myself."

Reinhard bowed his head and refused Otto's considerate offer. He gazed ahead, and corrected his posture straight a moment later.

Reinhard: "Firstly, though I have said it many times, let me apologize once more. I was the one person who should have been the first one to assist, so I must apologize for not being able to join you for several hours. I am deeply sorry."

Julius: "…On that point, our view is as we said earlier. We cannot forgive everything like there was no problem. However, you are needed in the upcoming battle. If you seek to repent, then perform well in the fights to come."

Reinhard: "I will do so, Julius… At the time of the Witch Cult's first broadcast, Felt-sama and I were called to a corner of the Second Street. The one summoning us was Deputy Commander Heinkel."

Reinhard, who had started relating the event, called Heinkel "Deputy Commander" in a stiff voice.

It was widely known that they were father and son. And yet, he called his father by title. It was enough to bring about the realization that the the two did not have a simple father-son relationship.

Subaru: "After that fighting and separation from before, Felt answered a summon from him?"

Reinhard: "Deep inside, Felt-sama too would have wanted to refuse. However, the talk regarded a matter related to authority over the Astrea territories, so we could not refuse. What request would be made was unknown to us… Felt-sama accompanied me, and we headed towards the appointed place."

Subaru: "There, how did that discussion end up…"

Reinhard: "My apologies, but as that matter is directly related to the matter of the Royal Selection, I would appreciate being allowed not to elaborate. It is enough to say the talk did not go smoothly."

Reinhard's tone of voice fell, and it was easy to tell the talk had gone poorly. Even if it had not gone down like that, Felt lacked experience dealing with negative emotions. Taking Heinkel's despicable nature into account, it was not difficult to imagine how the talk would have played out.

In the midst of such conversation—

Reinhard: “Then, the Witch Cult’s first broadcast happened. While we could hardly believe our ears, it was clear that we needed to move immediately. It was my intention to head out right away if there was a truly dire situation. The other retainers, they also had a method to call for me if needed, which we prepared beforehand.”

That method was to launch magic into the sky at any time as a signal. Upon Sirius’s appearance, had Rachins fired off the signal, Reinhard would have rushed to the scene within thirty seconds. There were no lies in those words.

However, Reinhard had heard the Witch Cult’s broadcast filled with clear malicious intent, yet still did not move. He did not come running to the scene, and not just that, but had kept silent for several hours.

Why was that?

Subaru: “You knew that the broadcast was coming from the City Hall, no? At that point, you would have had the option to run to City Hall… Then why didn’t you come?”

Reinhard: “…”

It was not that he was scolding him. That was not his intention, but his voice was firm as he pressed for answers.

There were more than a few things that occurred to him. If Reinhard had been present during that fierce battle for the City Hall—Crusch, who was suffering now, would not have been harmed during the fight. It might even have ended without that strange event befalling Subaru’s right leg.

Though it was not intentional, the gazes growing harsh here were not just Subaru’s.

Receiving the stares of everyone in the room, Reinhard, who had until then been speaking fluently, closed his mouth, and lowered his gaze once again. With long lashes and shining eyes, he was hesitant to speak any words beyond what he had already spoken.

Even so, after those few conflicted seconds slowly passed, the hero choppily continued his words.

Reinhard: “—Deputy Commander Heinkel… took Felt-sama as a hostage.”

Subaru: “…”

Reinhard: “That is my irreversible failure. Felt-sama was taken custody, and a sword was held against her neck to stop my movements. And so, I could not act.”

Subaru clearly understood why Reinhard had struggled with those words so much.

The master he should give his all for, had been taken captive by none other than his father's hands. Just how much had Reinhard's heart been affected by humiliation and shame?

Subaru: "…Tch, what the hell? That Deputy Commander, is he a pawn of the Witch Cult or something?"

Receiving that shocking confession, Subaru muttered to himself, while thinking of Reinhard's feelings.

If it were true, it was certainly cruel. He had heard that Witch Cultists had hidden themselves here and there, so it was difficult to know just who could be one of them. But for one of them to appear among family like that was something he did not even want to think about.

After seeing how Sin Archbishops other than Petelgeuse really were like, his opinion was all the stronger. All the Witch Cultists were the lowest of the low, mere human trash.

Reinhard: "—If it were like that, how would I react? My feelings, how would they be…"

Subaru: "What?"

However, Reinhard responded to Subaru's idea, an idea accepted by roughly half of those present—with a somewhat uncomfortable voice.

That attitude of his, Subaru wondered about it. However, the other half—made up of Anastasia, Julius, and Otto, were making expressions that said they had reached another conclusion.

Reinhard: "The Deputy Commander is not a member of the Witch Cult… At least judging from his remarks after seizing Felt-sama, I saw nothing that suggested so."

Subaru: “Then what is he, some kind of idiot? No, even if he isn’t stupid it is fine… Then, why? Why take Felt hostage? Doing something like that, what point—”

“Is there?”, Subaru was about to say, when he realized.

The depressed look on Reinhard’s face and the pitying one on Otto. Seeing those at the edge of his sight, the conclusion he drew almost made him want to laugh.

He could not laugh at that. It was completely helpless. Then, Heinkel’s actions—

Subaru: “—Were just because he wanted to keep you there?”

Reinhard: “…”

Subaru: “From the Witch Cult broadcast, he realized the city was dangerous… So, to get himself some protection quickly, he just wanted to dearly hold on to the strongest guy at hand?”

Reinhard: “…The Deputy Commander said something like, “your precious master and father are both here. Will you abandon them to save some bastards whose faces you don’t even know?”“

Subaru: “Your own father spouted that bullshit?!”

His rage boiling over, Subaru struck the floor with his fist.

Throughout this day, ever since morning, he had been repeatedly coming face-to-face with this passionate rage. However, he had never imagined feeling this furious about an opponent completely unrelated to the Witch Cult.

Reinhard: “I had no words to reply with. Of course, Felt-sama was saying it was all a bluff. Since she would be fine, she told me to go rescue the others—But remaining there even then was my decision. The blame indeed lies within me.”

Subaru: “Why does it have to be like that?! Whose fault it is, it’s obvious to everyone here who’s to blame here?!”

Reinhard: “Even so, the choice was mine.”

At the shouting Subaru, Reinhard would not concede his share of the blame.

That obstinate Reinhard, he probably would not bend on that, no matter what anyone said. Subaru furiously held his tongue and forced his violent feelings to calm down.

Reinhard: “Nevertheless, I was trapped in that stalemate. What happened after is nothing remarkable. Even after further broadcasts I was left unable to act… I was severely scolded by Felt-sama.”

Anastasia: “But she ain’t witcha. Is Felt-chan doin’ alright?”

Anastasia asked Reinhard, with a bitter smile. The girl’s expression was blank, making her hard to read as she fiddled with her scarf. Even so, she was showing concern for Felt’s state, as the latter had not joined them.

Anastasia: “Bein’ held hostage like that for hours’d be quite tiring mentally. Now that Reinhard-kun’s here like this, I’m thinkin’ the issue’s probably been all sorted out.”

Reinhard: “Yes, that is the case. Felt-sama has now joined her retainers at a shelter. The Deputy Commander has been arrested and Felt-sama is watching over him.”

Subaru: “Arrested… He was caught, huh.”

Reinhard: “I am content with that result. But without Otto’s cooperation, even that could hardly have been achieved, I think.”

Subaru: “Ah, so that’s where Otto’s name comes in, huh.”

Subaru furrowed his brows at the mention of Otto’s name, who had yet to appear in this tale. Having reached his turn, Otto lightly cleared his throat to call for attention.

Otto: “Those were the state of affairs. And so, I arrived at that scene by complete accident. Simply because I was aware of the relationship between the three, by happening upon the scene I could roughly come to understand the situation.”

The Astreas’ family problems and the situation with Felt’s problems related to territories. Knowing that much already, he had spotted Heinkel holding Reinhard in place with Felt as a hostage. Even someone slow in the head would be able to figure out what kind of situation was happening.

Otto: “I, too, understood that being unable to borrow Reinhard’s power in the fight against the Witch Cult was the worst-case scenario. I went pale at that thought, so I knew I had to do something about it.”

Subaru: “And so Otto somehow drew attention to himself, and Felt was freed. That was how Reinhard was able to move, and now he managed to reach us… Something like that, yeah?”

Otto: “Luckily, Natsuki-san’s big speech happened too, so the meetup point was decided without any worry. It would have been nice if we could have moved a little faster, but I had a lot going on as well.”

Reinhard nodded as well, albeit briefly, confirming Otto’s contribution.

Again, the silver-tongued Otto had played an active role somewhere unseen by others.

Garfiel: “But still, what happened to Ottobro ‘til then? Honestly, walkin’ ‘round the city with yer strength, isn’t it the same as committin’ suicide?”

Otto: “About that, there were a lot of twists and turns… No, I will explain it.”

Clearing his throat, Otto indicated the outside of the City Hall building.

Otto: “As scheduled in the morning, I left for the Muse Company alone to request the continuation of negotiations from Kiritaka-san. He had also cooled his head overnight, so it seemed like it would be easy to agree to restart negotiations…”

Subaru: “It seemed, but?”

Subaru assumed that the Witch Cult would have started their broadcast and interrupted discussions.

However, Otto resumed speaking while shaking his head.

Otto: “At the location of the Muse Company, in the plaza of the Third Street, the Witch Cult… A Sin Archbishop made an appearance. We found out about the Witch Cult’s attack when that figure created quite the uproar.”

Subaru: “A Sin Archbishop…?! Before the broadcast?”

Otto: “Yes. Before the broadcast.”

Otto confirmed for Subaru, who was leaning forward in surprise.

But, when thinking about it, that was not impossible. Sirius, and Regulus too, were two other Sin Archbishops who had acted before the broadcast. Other than Capella, who at that moment was attacking the City Hall, the likelihood that those Sin Archbishops would have been doing something else in their free time in Pristella was high—

Subaru: “Wait, Otto.”

Otto: “…”

Subaru’s tone of voice had lowered, and Otto’s gaze turned grim. That worried attitude of his confirmed the thoughts appearing in Subaru’s imagination.

Sirius and Regulus were both encountering Subaru at the time, and so, they could not have been there. Capella too would have been participating in the attack on the City Hall. Then, the Sin Archbishop that had appeared before Otto could only be one.

Subaru: “The one you met by chance, could it be the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony?”

Otto: “…Yes. That was his claim. There was no reason for him to lie, so I think it is the truth. The Sin Archbishop who appeared at the plaza, introducing himself as Gluttony, looked to be a child.”

Otto’s testimony matched up with what Subaru had seen of Roy Alphard.

The selection standard for Sin Archbishops, it was not that he wanted to know anything about that, but Gluttony was at least outwardly a child—a rag-draped, dirty looking child at that. In both words and attitude, he seemed like a he was just kid.

Otto: “At first, unsure if it was an abandoned child, someone called them while drawing closer. Since he was guarding the Muse Company, I think it was one of the White Dragon’s Scales. That person was the first to succumb to Gluttony. I became unable to move. Literally.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “Just like that, a person was simply done in. It seems so surreal, but there’s no choice but to believe. Immediately, more of the White Dragon’s Scales all moved to surround him, but it did not end well.”

With his face going pale, Otto quietly spoke of that wretched spectacle.

Gluttony, as if he were performing a casual dance, seemed to have cut down the mercenaries. What was even scarier was, the keen nose of Gluttony—it was a sense of smell which never lost track of his prey.

Otto: “The situation was such that the people on the street tried to run for their lives. However, that guy did not allow that. What he did, I do not know in all honesty. But even those far away from him were caught up in Gluttony’s rampage. The same happened to those inside buildings.”

Subaru: “What was he after?”

After asking that absentmindedly, Subaru realized it was a meaningless question. The acts of the Witch Cult were not consistent with the nature of their goals. And in fact, Otto shook his head, signaling he did not have the answer to Subaru's question.

Otto: "Well, what could it have been… But anyway, it became a dire situation. Even if I tried to flee from that place, I could have been caught up in his attack the moment I showed my back. It was a complete dead end… If it weren't for Kiritaka-san, I doubt I would have made it here as well."

Subaru: "Kiritaka, how did he do that?"

Otto: "To begin with, it seems he must be a careful person. In the office of the Muse Company's president, there's a concealed passage in the building connected to an underground waterway. I escaped using a small boat there. While running away, I saw Kiritaka-san's back being cut open."

Subaru: "…"

Otto: "From the Third Street, I ran away. After that, the Witch Cult broadcast happened and it became impossible to walk around in the city carelessly. Nevertheless, I cautiously moved around the area. That's when I finally came across the scene from earlier."

In other words, by "the scene", he meant the one where he found Reinhard, whose movement had been impeded. That was where his story ended, and at the same moment Subaru understood that Otto had gone through hardships, and had again managed to survive.

But what he was concerned about in his story was—

Subaru: "Why did Kiritaka do that? From what you've told us, he even sacrificed himself to aid in Otto's escape. That was how it sounded like to me."

Otto: "…Yes, indeed. Kiritaka-san, by sacrificing himself, let me escape. In fact, right at the end, he was slashed because he pushed me to the floor and covered me with his body."

Subaru: "Why go so far…"

Inside Subaru, his mental picture of Kiritaka was nearly non-existent. Even the slight image he had was fixed on that scene with his face going red, screaming, throwing a spellstone while throwing a tantrum. Of course, he had not assumed that was all there was to that man.

But to sacrifice his body trying to save a stranger… He had not looked like a man with that level of fortitude.

Otto: “Since I was a customer invited to his shop, he might have held something like a trader’s pride. But definitely, it would seem he had a better reason for himself as well. One a little easier to understand.”

Subaru: “Easier to understand, you say?”

Otto: “Have you not realized? It’s Natsuki-san.”

To the confused Subaru, Otto firmly asserted his reply.

With the abrupt appearance of his name, Subaru was shaken. At Subaru’s reaction, Otto closed his eyes for nary a moment.

Otto: “Witnessing the existence known as a Sin Archbishop cutting down his own subordinates, Kiritaka-san must have felt like there was something he had to do about it. He must have held onto some sense of duty, I think. Then the one that became his hope was you, Natsuki-san.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “After the happenings of the previous day, Kiritaka-san already knew about Natsuki-san remaining here. And definitely about your achievement of vanquishing Sloth as well. If so, then naturally that would lead to hope. Putting my escape as his top priority must have been because he expected me to join with Natsuki-san.”

Otto’s explanation fit perfectly, and it slammed into Subaru’s chest with a thud. But that was nevertheless an unreasonable story.

Deep down inside, he knew. To go on, to carry that, it was true, he had decided that already. But then again… Was everyone expecting that from Subaru?

That small, hopeless, and useless person, were they really trusting the fate of the city to a bastard like that?

Otto: “Natsuki-san, please do not misunderstand.”

Unknowingly forming a cynical smile, Subaru was pulled back by a voice. Otto looked straight into Subaru’s eyes. He spoke to that stiffening Subaru’s expression while shrugging,

Otto: “Kiritaka-san had thought of various things regarding his role and responsibility to the city. I understand that Natsuki-san too is hesitating about bearing the fate of the city. But, definitely, what Kiritaka-san entrusted Natsuki-san with is a slightly simpler matter.”

Subaru: “…What?”

Otto: “It is obvious. Somewhere in this city is the woman Kiritaka-san loves. Before wishing for the safety of the city, what he expected most from Natsuki-san was for his loved one to be safe.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “That was what he told me when he pushed me onto the floor.”

In short, Otto wanted to tell Subaru that he struggled too much. Those words, spoken to Subaru who felt as if he were burdened with the fate of the city, trembling under that immense weight, unexpectedly pierced deep into his conceited heart.

His face growing hot, Subaru felt ashamed of himself.

What about this city’s fate, what about all these hopes and expectations, how ridiculously stupid.

All Subaru had been considering was the city, which would find itself in disaster if it were not lifted up and saved. But what Subaru had to protect was not something described with that grandiose, superficial word, but the individuals that make up the city. One life, and many other “one lives”.

And each of those lives in turn had others precious to them, and it was just a matter of saving those connections.

Otto: “To think of it not as bearing a single large entity, but instead as lifting many small parts of the whole on your back, does that ease your feelings a bit?”

Subaru: “Wow. It’s a different way to think, but it actually feels right.”

Otto’s assistant power was just so high that Subaru really could not think how things would be without him.

Subaru’s face, which had been gazing downwards, looked up, and, at that result, Otto seemed satisfied.

Anastasia: “What’s that, ain’t it a nice relationship? Lookin’ at it even makes me a lil’ jealous.”

Sensing a pause in their chat, Anastasia threw out a tease. Subaru and Otto, who had been sitting down while talking nearly face-to-face, reflected on her quip.

And then gazing again at all of them, Anastasia tilted her head.

Anastasia: “Even sayin’ so, based on what ya said… The Muse Company’s finished…”

Otto: “The truth is that we cannot know for sure. I only witnessed the events up to Kiritaka-san being slashed, but whether that wound was life-threatening…”

Julius: “Is thinking about Gluttony’s motives truly a waste of time? To me, no matter what, the idea that he caused that disturbance for no reason is unthinkable.”

The one who interjected was Julius, making a disgusted face. That assertive tone of voice stuck in one’s mind.

Subaru: “Don’t just get weird like that. Is there any reason you think that?”

Julius: “…No, I cannot claim that there is some clear basis for it. It is merely my impression from crossing swords with him at the City Hall. I do not believe we should write him off as merely a simple hedonist.”

Subaru was also in agreement. He was not simply a hedonist; he was a malicious hedonist. But that impression was an answer different from what Julius seemed to expect.

Subaru: “According to the broadcast, Gluttony’s request was an Artificial Spirit, correct? Maybe there’s a chance he had gone to find it?”

Reinhard: “It is indeed a possibility. However, there is a problem even before that. Should we not suspect whether the being known as an Artificial Spirit even exists? Is there really such an existence in the first place?”

Subaru mentioned a possible motive that came to mind, and Reinhard joined in with an argument of his own. His question would be the question many others who had heard the broadcast’s demands must have had as well.

Of those present here, only Subaru and Anastasia knew the answer. Without meaning to, Subaru peeked at Anastasia’s face, but her expression was unchanged, as expected of her experience. She had no intention of revealing it, is that what she was saying?

Otto: “—Sorry, just one thing.”

In front of Subaru, who was wavering in his judgement, Otto was again requesting attention.

That guy, with a touch of anxiety held in his face, let out a sigh mixed with resignation. And,

Otto: “I also do not know anything regarding the matter of the Artificial Spirit. But regarding another request, the Book of Wisdom demanded by Wrath…”

Cutting off his words there, after a moment of hesitation Otto spoke,

Otto: “I apologize—The one who brought it to the city was me.”

Chapter 44:
Nothing Left Unsaid

Otto raised his hand and dropped that bombshell, plunging everyone in the room into a state of shock.

The unverified existence of the “Book of Wisdom” was just confirmed, not by anyone else but by one of their own. It was only natural that they’d be shocked—with Subaru being the most shocked of them all.

Subaru: “Wh-Why would you have the Book of Wisdom?”

Otto: “Before you misunderstand, let me explain. I was indeed the one who brought the so-called Book of Wisdom into the city, but the book isn’t mine. I was pretty shocked when I heard the Witch Cult’s request as well.”

Anastasia: “So-called”? That’s a curious way to put it. What do you mean?”

As Otto’s answered the shaken Subaru, Anastasia picked up on that descriptor and asked. At that, Otto looked around at the others, and,

Otto: “You guys all know about the Book of Wisdom, right? Simply put, it’s like the Gospels… those suspicious-looking books of prophecy that the Witch Cultists have… except it seems to be the original. I heard that the difference in accuracy is huge.”

Anastasia: “The Gospel’s original…? It might be a stretch, but that reminds me of the prophecies of the Dragon Annal Stone. Though of course, their credibility, reputation, and standpoints are nowhere near the same.”

Otto: “I’ve never seen the Dragon Annal Stone and the Gospel’s prophecies in action so I can’t say anything about their reliability… and the same goes for the Book of Wisdom, I’m afraid. By the time I got my hands on it, the book was already nothing more than mostly-burned remains.”

Subaru: “Burned remains…”

Otto’s description matched the fates of both volumes of the Book of Wisdom in Subaru’s mind.

One belonged to Beatrice, and was lost in the flames of the burning Forbidden Library. The other belonged to Roswaal, and, according to Ram, was lost in the burning Sanctuary.

It was hard to say how much of its creator, Echidna’s testimony could be trusted, but if her words were to be believed—then both volumes should have been burned.

In that case, what Otto obtained must be its charred remains.

Anastasia: “I see. I think I know why Otto-kun brought the book into Priestella now. It’s to seek the help of Restoration Master Dartz, isn’t it?”

Otto: “…That’s correct.”

With that simple reply, Otto nodded to Anastasia’s conclusion. Though both Julius and Reinhard appeared to accept this with an air of understanding, Subaru seemed confused by the term he had never heard before.

Subaru: “Hey don’t all suddenly go “Ahh” and leave me out of the loop here. What’s a Restoration Master?”

Anastasia: “Just as the name implies, they are Light Magic specialists who can restore objects to their original forms. Dartz, who lives in this city, is quite a famous member of their circle. Even books that are more than half damaged can be restored with pretty good results, if given enough time.”

Otto: “I managed to make contact with Master Dartz and give him the remains of the Book of Wisdom. So the book should be in his workshop at the moment.”

With Otto’s testimony, the Book of Wisdom’s whereabouts has finally been revealed.

Garfiel: “But then, when did Otto-bro meet that guy?”

Otto: “Yesterday, after the negotiations with Muse Company fell apart. Once everyone went their separate ways, I paid a visit to Master Dartz. We had a chat in private, and he seemed pretty enthusiastic about taking on the job…”

Subaru could just imagine Otto going pale in the face when he heard “Book of Wisdom” come up during the upheavals today.

That explains how the burned Book of Wisdom survived and why it was brought to this city, but Otto’s motives were still unknown. Just why would he want to restore the Book of Wisdom?

Honestly, Subaru had no good impressions for the Book of Wisdom.

It was an ominous book not only associated with its creator, Echidna, but with the Gospels in the hands of the Witch Cult. It was the reason Beatrice was bound in the Forbidden Library for four hundred years, and the reason Roswaal’s plots wrought violence upon the Sanctuary.

The truth is, Subaru was relieved when he heard that the books were destroyed.

Otto: “I won’t go into the details of how I acquired it or why it’s here to be restored. I only intended to clarify the Book of Wisdom’s existence and its current location. Anything beyond that is an internal matter within our faction.”

Julius: “But now we have the Witch Cult listing the Book of Wisdom as one of their demands. Whose responsibility do you think that is?”

Otto: “I don’t think anything the Witch Cult does can be blamed on anyone other than the Witch Cult. But if you insist on it, I’ll have to make some unfriendly remarks of my own.”

Otto stood his ground in front of Julius’ protests. And, seeing Otto turn his gaze to Anastasia, Julius quickly shook his head.

Julius: “My apologies. I said something useless just now. Naturally, I have no intention of laying the blame on you. The Witch Cult’s crimes will be properly repaid when we exact punishment upon them.”

Otto: “Agreed.”

Otto nodded to Julius’ determined words while stealing a glance at Subaru. But, seeing that secret gaze, Subaru couldn’t say a word.

What was Otto thinking? Even if Subaru had no intention of suspecting him, he still had no idea what he was up to. Seeing Subaru like this, Otto quietly moved his lips,

{Otto: “Let’s talk later}

The message got through.

He’ll explain everything, then. In that case, they better put the matter on hold for now.

Reinhard: “Now that the Book of Wisdom’s existence has been confirmed, we can’t be so sure that the part about Artificial Spirits is just delusional ramblings.”

With that settled, Reinhard started off with the new topic.

Though it was only going with the flow of things, now that Otto has already revealed something potentially disadvantageous to himself, there was no reason for Subaru to continue withholding his.

Subaru: “Anastasia-san.”

Anastasia: “I know I know. Well, this won’t be easy.”

Seeing Subaru seeking her consent, Anastasia took off the scarf around her neck. She spread it out on the table, while everyone else tilted their heads at her determined expression.

But, what she did next turned all their tilted heads straight.

Anastasia: “—No need to play possum anymore, Echidna. You can speak up now.”

Scarf-fox: “In my case, rather than “playing possum”, wouldn’t “playing fox” be more appropriate, Ana?”

“—!”

Following Anastasia’s call, the white fox scarf stretched out its limbs with a will of its own. Seeing this, the same expressions of shock washed over Julius and Ricardo’s faces.

It seems Anastasia had hidden Artificial Spirit Echidna’s existence even from the members of her own faction.

Ricardo: “Hey Miss… I dunno that thing. The hell is that thing…”

Anastasia: “Sorry for hidin’ it from you, Ricardo. Julius too. —This child would be the Artificial Spirit we’re talkin’ about. Her name’s Echidna, and she’s been my partner in crime for a long, long time.”

Scarf-fox: “Hey Ricardo. It’d be pretty awkward to introduce myself like we’ve just met when I’ve technically known you for ages. We can be all buddy-buddy just like usual if you want.”

Echidna was exceptionally friendly to a Ricardo who looked like he was looking at something creepy. And, as off-put as Ricardo was by the white fox’s attitude, Julius’ face looked even more shocked.

Faced with the secret his master had hidden from him, his pupils were wavering with a rare and unconcealable dismay,

Julius: “…then that means, Anastasia-sama is also a Spirits-Arts User?”

Anastasia: “Nnnn~ not exactly. There is no Spiritual Contract between me and Echidna. I just don’t have the knack for it. And also, unlike ordinary spirits, Echidna can’t fight at all.”

Scarf-fox: “That’s right, I’m as incompetent as it gets. I’m afraid I might even be the weakest spirit there is. So weak that even the Spirit-Knight couldn’t sense my presence.”

Julius: “Is that, so… no, but then…”

Julius’ suspicions were dismissed by Anastasia and Echidna in turn. But, rather than being assured, he turned his gaze toward Subaru, who was standing at the sidelines.

There was a certain sharpness in the yellow gaze he directed at Subaru.

Julius: “Why does Subaru look like he already knows? When I… as your Knight… didn’t know, how could he…”

Anastasia: “It’s not like that. It’s…”

Subaru: “It’s because she’s an Artificial Spirit, just like my partner, Beatrice. After we heard the Witch Cult’s demands, Anastasia-san explained it to me. …So I only found out really recently, not much different from you.”

Julius: “She’s an Artificial Spirit…? Anastasia-sama, is this true?”

Cutting Anastasia off, Subaru explained to the stupefied Julius. Seeing Anastasia nod to his question, Julius muttered “Is that so…” and briefly closed his eyes as if to take it all in before exhaling a deep sigh.

Julius: “I’m sorry I interrupted you. Please forgive me for any displeasure I might have caused you, Anastasia-sama. I am deeply ashamed.”

Anastasia: “I’ve no right to chastise you when I’ve been keepin’ it secret all this time. I should be askin’ your forgiveness instead.”

Julius gave Subaru a nod and apologized to Anastasia. But, seeing Julius’ apology from the side, Ricardo grabbed Echidna off of the table.

Ricardo: “Still, that’s really mean, Miss! How long have we known each other? Why’d ya keep somethin’ like that from me? I’m kinda hurt! Is that all we are to each other?”

Scarf-fox: “I’d appreciate if you don’t handle me so roughly. Even in this form, I'm still quite finicky about my hair. And we wouldn't want to damage Ana's adorable appearance, now would we?"

Ricardo: "Pretty glib-tongued, ain't ya. Ugh, nevermind. I'll let it go this time."

After pulling and squishing it to his heart's content, Ricardo seemed satisfied and let the white fox go. Landing on the table, the white fox quickly scuttled over to Anastasia, wrapped around her neck, and became inanimate once more.

Having resided there for long, it was impressive how quickly it could return to its lifeless state.

Anastasia: "And so, the Artificial Spirits exist as well. …That said, just like Otto-kun's Book of Wisdom, I've no intention of handing this child over to the Witch Cult."

Subaru: "Sorry for keeping it secret. But, it's the same with me. Beako is my partner. I won't even let her hold hands with those lunatics."

Anastasia and Subaru both asserted their decision to refuse the Witch Cult's demands.

Hearing this, Reinhard nodded, and,

Reinhard: "I know. Of course. We cannot accept a single one of their demands. Although, perhaps the one about wedding their bride could be overlooked."

Subaru: "Absolutely not! Because the bride those assholes are talking about is Emilia!"

Otto: "Pff?! Emilia-sama's been taken?! And here I was wondering why I haven't seen her around, so she's in trouble?! Couldn't you have brought it up sooner?!"

Reinhard widened his eyes, and the shocking news sent Otto's eyes spinning. Subaru clenched his teeth in front of those two's reactions and continued with "Sorry…"

Subaru: “It was all my fault, I watched her get taken away. But, since they’re talking about a wedding, they shouldn’t have done anything to hurt her. So we have to go over there, kill them, and bring her back. Absolutely, absolutely…”

Reinhard: “—Yes, we will. We absolutely cannot allow this.”

Just the thought of Regulus sent rage boiling within Subaru’s mind, and, in support of that indignation, Reinhard burnished his intent to fight.

It was an aura so dependable that it was terrifying. Without a doubt, his presence was tremendously reassuring.

And, at this thought, Subaru turned his gaze to the corner of the room—toward the man who had stayed out of the conversation thus far.

Sitting there, leaning against the wall, his expression was hidden behind his helmet.

Subaru: “Hey, Al. You should join the conversation too. You haven’t said a word since the end of the speech. Our most lethal weapon got held up all because of that guy you brought. You better do something to make up for that, you know.”

Walking over, Subaru called to the downcast Al.

And, sighing at the lack of a reaction, Subaru brought up Reinhard’s father—Heinkel.

Heinkel had taken Felt hostage and effectively pinned Reinhard in place.

This clear-cut betrayal by turning a weapon on a Royal Selection candidate was not only a crime of lese-majesty, but fell nothing short of treason. Normally, there’s no way an offender could escape the death sentence after committing such a heinous crime, but just how will Reinhard handle this?

At least, Subaru couldn’t glean it from the side of Reinhard’s face.

Al: “—I’m sorry, but I’m out.”

Subaru: “…hah?”

Perhaps distracted with his thoughts on Reinhard, Subaru didn’t react until Al had already stood up. Taking his back off of the wall, Al looked like he was about to walk right past Subaru. Realizing this, Subaru quickly grabbed Al’s shoulder, turning him around.

Subaru: “W-Wait! You’re out? What’re you talking about? We need every fighter we can get right now, and you want to leave us? What’re you, crazy?”

Al: “Crazy or whatever, you’d be crazy to count me as a fighter to begin with. Any random guy you pull from the shelters who’s been in a fight’ll be better than me. So it doesn’t matter if I go.”

Subaru: “The hell is that! Don’t give me that moody bullshit! What’s going on all of a sudden? If you got something to say, say it!”

Al: “—You’re the only person I don’t wanna hear that from, bro.”

Shaking off Subaru’s arm, Al’s penetrating glare pierced into Subaru from inside his helmet.

That indiscernible gaze and uncharacteristic tone sent a chill crawling up Subaru’s back.

It was unlike hostility or murderous intent, but a fiery emotion all the same.

Subaru felt as if he had seen that inexplicable emotion from somewhere before, but he couldn’t remember where or what it was.

And he went without understanding as they continued their standoff, when—

???: “My inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: “—Your gaze makes heat swell in my chest∼.”

Subaru: “Shut up!!”

???: “Pyiichi?!”

Subaru reflexively lashed back at the happy-go-lucky voice that came out of nowhere. The target jumped at that shout and tumbled flamboyantly over the table behind her.

Rolling around, moaning and wailing, it was a girl with auburn skin—

Subaru: “You’re… Lilianna?!”

Lilianna: “Uugyaouu! My elbow! My knee! Every bone that can be called a bone in my body is shattered! All six of my ribs are broken! There’s no mistake about it!”

The one energetically rolling on the floor in front of Subaru was the Bard, Lilianna.

Seeing her the same as ever, Subaru didn’t even bother pointing out that humans had more than six ribs but only patted his chest in relief.

Subaru: “I was pretty worried after we got separated, but I’m glad to see you safe. That’s a relief.”

Lilianna: “Safe?! Can’t you see I’m on the verge of death here?! How can you pat your chest in relief in front of a damsel in distress, what kind of sick humor is that?! My inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: “—Fingers! Ears! And eyes~!”

Subaru: “You’re still pretty lively, aren’t you?”

Sitting up cross-legged on the floor, she strummed her Lullyleigh, suddenly a picture of health. Although the abruptness of her recovery was rather unsettling, Subaru was just glad that she was alright.

Subaru: “But, how did you get to City Hall? It must’ve been dangerous wandering around outside…”

????: “Naturally, isn’t that for me to decide? Commoner.”

Subaru: “Gh.”

Before he could ask Lilianna how she got here safely, an arrogant voice answered the question in her place.

With the ringing of high-heeled footsteps, a woman in resplendent red stepped into the meeting room. Adorned in rouge from head to toe, she swept her blood-red eyes across the room.

Priscilla: “Looks like all the actors are gathered. It was good of you rabble to have gotten ready for the star to arrive. Be sure to keep it up in the future.”

Smiling in a good mood holding a spread fan over her lips—it was Priscilla.

Her sudden entrance surprised everyone including Subaru, but the first to react was none other than her servant, Al.

Al: “P-Princess-san! So you’re alright… I was worried when I couldn’t find you.”

Priscilla: “Mm, is that Al? What is the meaning of you dallying with these peasants instead of serving me? Is it not your duty to look upon my figure, listen to my voice, inhale my scent, and obey my commands? And Schult, making me have to look for him myself, there should be a limit to your insolence.”

?????: “P-Please forgive me, Priscilla-sama…”

While Priscilla mercilessly berated her worried servant, a little boy in butler’s uniform peeked out his head from behind her, timidly clinging to her dress. It seems that Priscilla not only saved Lilianna but her butler as well while strutting around a city overrun by the Witch Cult.

Subaru: “What kind of crazy audacity is that…”

Subaru spilled a sigh at the fine line between exceeding bravery and recklessness. Hearing this, Priscilla turned her glare to Subaru. Snapping close her fan, she briskly walked over to him, and, Priscilla: “You there, don’t move.”

Subaru: “—hk.”

With a swoosh of wind, she held the tip of her fan to Subaru’s throat.

As usual, moving with inconceivable speed, she reached him before his eyes could even register her motion. But, since Reinhard did not intervene, Subaru figured he was in no actual danger.

Subaru: “What’re you doing? We’re having an important conversation here, we don’t have time for…”

Priscilla: “Good. —So that clumsy broadcast earlier was your voice, then?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, what about it?”

As pathetic as it was to rely on Reinhard’s lack of movement as his indicator, Subaru chose to huff back at the huffing Priscilla. At that response, she narrowed her eyes,

Priscilla: “Decidedly, I will not tolerate anyone getting more attention than myself. So, I’ll prove how obviously superior I am to the likes of you.”

Subaru: “Huh? Ow?!”

Flicking up the fan at Subaru’s neck, it snapped against his chin so hard that tears came pouring out his eyes. With this, Priscilla left him, and imperiously sat herself down in one of the seats at the round table.

Priscilla: “Such a worthless chair. I can tell how cheap it is just by sitting on it.”

Making that scalding remark about the quality of the furniture, she swept her gaze across the faces seated at the table. Then, opening her red-painted lips, a splendidly gruesome smile rose on her face.

Priscilla: “Come now, I will allow you to tell me everything about the current situation. Be good slaves and fulfill your responsibilities to your utmost. As reward, I will lend you my help. Remember to be grateful.”

Al: “Wait, Princess-san! Now that we’ve found each other, there’s no reason to stay here, right? We should get out of this dangerous place and…”

Priscilla: “Are you suggesting I run away, Al? If so, then you are gravely mistaken.”

Seeing Priscilla reclining into her seat as if intending to participate in the conference, Al hurriedly protested. But Priscilla shot back a glare, instantly freezing Al inside his metal helmet.

Priscilla: “Are you listening? I am the one who decided to stay in this city. And I will be the one to decide whether to leave it. I do not accept instructions from anyone. Besides, you want me to turn my back on these rabid fools and shamelessly run away? Who do you take me for?”

Al: “…”

Priscilla: “Everything in this world works in my favor. So why should I leave and allow this obnoxious mess to continue? If you wish to call yourself my servant, then know this, Al. I am favored by divine providence, and thus, my actions are divine providence.”

Priscilla’s will could not be swayed.

Everyone present, most of all Al, knew this. Seeing Al slump his single shoulder, the young butler—Schult, quietly snuggled against him. And, wryly smiling at his consoling gesture, Al made up his mind as well.

Subaru: “Otto, you have a minute?”

Otto: “Yeah, let’s go.”

As the round table began briefing Priscilla on the current situation, Subaru whispered to Otto. Apparently having anticipated this, Otto complied without a hint of surprise.

Subaru: “Garfiel, let me know when they’re done.”

Leaving this instruction behind, Subaru left the meeting room with Otto.

And as soon as they were outside, they turned and faced each other in the hallway. Meeting Subaru's gaze, there was no confusion in Otto eyes. He knew exactly what they needed to talk about.

Subaru: "Why the hell're you trying to restore the Book of Wisdom? No, before that, when did you pick up its remnants?"

Otto: "It was a year ago, after we've settled the problems in the Sanctuary. After Emilia-sama's snow disappeared, I was wandering around the premises when I… well, it wasn't exactly by chance. I heard what happened from Ram-san, so I was actively looking for its burned remnants as well."

Subaru: "So then, the one you found was Roswaal's Book of Wisdom?"

Otto: "Yes. I was unusually lucky since that happened to be the place I wanted to check out."

"Unusually lucky" must be a jab at how usually unlucky he was. Although Otto was wryly smiling, Subaru was in no mood to share that sentiment.

Because Otto's reasons for doing this was still a knot inside Subaru's chest.

Otto: "Tell me honestly, Natsuki-san, what do you think of Margrave Mathers?"

Subaru: "Roswaal?"

As Subaru sank into silence, Otto posed him this question. It sounded both somewhat relevant to the topic at hand, and yet not relevant at all. For a moment, Subaru pondered on the question,

Subaru: "Well… I think we definitely can't let down our guard about that guy. Not after everything that happened a year ago. But, since that guy's goals are clear now, and assuming they haven't changed, I don't see him as an immediate threat. In fact, now that we understand each other, I kinda feel like an accomplice."

Otto: "I don't trust Margrave Mathers at all."

Otto declared, pointing out how naive Subaru's thinking was.

Hearing this, Subaru widened his eyes at the sharpness of that statement.

Otto: "You mentioned what happened a year ago. Yes, that's true. But he has been plotting long before what happened in the Sanctuary. You and Emilia-sama seem to be awfully forgiving about that."

Subaru: "…It's not that we forgave him. Everything that guy does makes me want to scream "What the hell", and I'm still super pissed off. But, the fact is, we need that guy's help. So there's not much we can do, and Emilia has the same considerations."

Otto: "That's called being forgiving. …Though I'm not saying that's a bad thing."

Otto shot an impatient gaze at Subaru, conveying his sense of urgency.

In other words, Otto was telling him that he wasn't nearly wary enough. Of course, Subaru knew that it was something he had to keep eye on, but,

Otto: "It's fine. The way you're approaching it is fine. There's no need to change that. Since I'll be seeing to the necessary precautions."

Subaru: "Precautions?"

Otto: "As the Internal Minister, I've had plenty of opportunities to interact with Margrave Mathers. From what I've seen over the past year, I didn't notice any signs of scheming or strange behaviors. But, that's not to say he couldn't have already laid his plans before that. He could easily have put some sort of delayed-activation in place."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru closed his mouth. Otto's wariness and concerns got through.

He had every reason to distrust Roswaal. It was just the natural consequence of that man's actions, be it good or bad. Though in this case, mostly bad.

Otto: "If he follows the Book of Wisdom's every word and believes that it foretells the future, then one look inside the book will let us know everything that he is planning. That way we can take the necessary measures to guard against any betrayals in the future."

Subaru: "You mean, you want to restore that book… because you don't trust Roswaal?"

Otto: "…Quite the opposite. It's precisely because I don't want to distrust my allies that I want to make sure. At least, I want to know for sure that nothing unfortunate is going to happen. So I kept the Book of Wisdom in hopes of restoring it. …I didn't consult you before doing this, sorry about that."

With this apology, Otto lowered his head.

But, in front of him, Subaru couldn't say a word. He did not feel like he had the right.

Otto's concerns and the actions he took to resolve them—

They were all things that Subaru and Emilia should have noticed. In fact, the pains he took to do this were entirely for Subaru and Emilia's sake.

Now that he realized how Otto had been silently helping him, Subaru felt at once ashamed, remorseful, and incredulous that he hadn't realized this earlier.

And why would Otto do this for him? Was it just because they are friends?

Otto: "I won't tell you why, though. It's pretty boring anyway."

As if having read Subaru's thoughts, Otto replied.

Being beaten to the punch by the smiling Otto, Subaru breathed a deep sigh.

Subaru: "Somehow, it's like you're always bailing me out, you know."

Otto: "That may be, but I think you're good just the way you were when you made that broadcast, Natsuki-san."

Otto scratched his head, while Subaru clicked his tongue and dropped his shoulders, a bit embarrassed by his considerations.

Subaru: "I understand. I'm on board about the Book of Wisdom. But the problem is, those assholes are still looking for it. So what do we actually do?"

Otto: "Regardless of whether it's successfully restored or not, I think we better get it back. There's a great chance that Master Dartz could get hurt, and that'd be the last thing I want."

Subaru: "But we're going to simultaneously attack all four Control Towers. We don't have any forces to spare for that."

Otto: "I may be a non-combatant, but I can more than handle myself if I travel by the waterways. I may not look like it, but duping animals like water dragons is one of my top strong suits, you know."

Putting his hand beside his mouth, Otto must be boasting of his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering.

In fact, when it comes to running away, Otto's Divine Protection would actually be quite handy. Besides, the enemy's main forces were concentrated at the Control Towers. Assuming they didn't bring any extra Witch Cultist lackeys, Otto shouldn't be in too much danger.

Otto: "Rather than worry about me, you should be thinking about the assault-teams. You have to save Emilia-sama, after all. That's quite the responsibility."

Subaru: “Understood. I’ll take that Greedy asshole’s head myself.”

That white-haired monster who took Emilia flashed across his mind.

That, and the fact that he was a Sin Archbishop, meant that he was an enemy that must be defeated.

Otto: “Shall we head back? They must be about done with the debriefing.”

Seeing the invigorated Subaru, Otto turned his head to the meeting room. But, just as Subaru nodded and was about head inside with him,

??????: “Subaru-dono.”

He was stopped by a call from the stairway.

There was no mistaking who that voice belonged to. The person upstairs, watching him with his stern blue pupils—was Wilhelm.

Subaru: “Otto, you go on ahead.”

Otto: “Alright. We’ll continue this later.”

Otto went back into the meeting room while Subaru walked up the stairs to meet Wilhelm, waiting on the upper level.

Then, as soon as they were at the same height, Wilhelm lightly bowed his eyes.

Wilhelm: “Sorry I could not join the conference. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Subaru: “With the situation as it is, no one would think to blame you, Wilhelm-san. So, um… how is Crush-san?”

He heard she wasn’t well. Or, not just unwell, but in quite a terrible state. As a woman, she probably wouldn’t want anyone else to see her like that, either.

Thinking back on the wretched state of his leg, he could imagine what kind of damage Crusch must have sustained. And that thought alone made him regret imagining it.

To Subaru query, Wilhelm softly cast down his eyes.

Wilhelm: “Crusch-sama has asked to speak to you, Subaru-dono. May I trouble you to come with me?”

Subaru: “Crusch-san asked for me? No, of course I’ll come, but… is that really alright?”

Wilhelm: “It is her sincere wish. Though Ferris will not be happy about it.”

Subaru: “…I guess not.”

Ferris would probably have some bitter words to say to Subaru.

After all, the only two who faced off against Capella on the top floor of City Hall were Subaru and Crusch, and Subaru alone should have protected her.

Wilhelm: “If Ferris says something disrespectful, please do not mind him. And please forgive him, if possible. Deep down, he does understand. It’s just that he is facing emotions that he could not process.”

Subaru: “Watching the person most important to him suffer… I can understand why he’d want to curse the people around him, if only just to take his mind off of the one he’s worrying about.”

If venting his rage could ease some of his pain, then who could blame him?

And so Subaru was prepared to take on some of his abuse as well.

Wilhelm: “This way.”

Without remarking on Subaru’s reply, Wilhelm led Subaru towards the place where Crusch would be waiting. Tick, tack, the regular rhythm of their footsteps echoed through the hallway.

And on the way,

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono, there is something else I need to tell you.”

Subaru: “What is it? Is it something other than Crusch-san…?”

Wilhelm: “It’s about the two swordsmen accompanying the Sin Archbishops.”

Unwittingly, he stopped his breath.

It should have been so obvious, how did he let it slip his mind? Mimi’s unsealable wound, inflicted by the “Divine Protection of the Death-God”.

The true identities of those super-class swordsman should—

Wilhelm: “One of them is “Eight Armed” Kurgan. A formidable swordsman who had been a general of the Vollachian Empire, a man who should have died ten years ago.”

Subaru: “A man who… should have died? Uhm, Wilhelm-san…”

Wilhelm: “And the other…”

Wilhelm cut Subaru off just before he could ask his question.

He stopped his steps, and Subaru followed suit. Then, Wilhelm turned his back, and sank into a momentary silence. Subaru took a step forward to peek at the side of Wilhelm’s face—but instantly regretted it.

He should not have seen it.

Wilhelm: “—The other, is the Previous-Generation Sword Saint, Theresia Van Astrea. My wife… who should have died in battle against the White Whale fifteen years ago.”

Subaru: “…”

The fact that he could have kept his voice so steady must be a testament to the strength of his will.

But when Subaru saw the wrenching agony that twisted the side of Wilhelm's face, all that impression fell away.

Chewing his lips, with rage and grief interwoven within his eyes, a crazed passion contorted his wrinkled face beyond recognition—one look at that expression, and all his emotions were clear as day.

Subaru: "Your wife… and a general of the Empire? Unless… they're actually still alive…?"

Wilhelm: "If that's… no, that isn't possible. Whether it's my wife or Kurgan, both of them are dead. That cannot be overturned. The dead are still dead, but being defiled."

Subaru: "If they're still dead, then… it's something like Necromancy?"

Necromancy—magic that manipulates the dead, is quite common in fictional universes. Of course, as far as fiction is concerned, magic that can return the dead to life is quite common as well. Although, nothing so convenient exists in this world.

This was something Subaru had painfully come to understand in the year-and-several-months he had spent here.

Wilhelm: "Magic that manipulate the dead are forbidden. Though I do know of someone who once used it. In the Demi-Human Wars—the civil war in Lugunica between Humans and Demi-Humans decades ago, she was one of the three enemies of the Kingdom fighting on the Demi-Humans' side."

Subaru: "Three enemies of the Kingdom…?"

Wilhelm: "The Demi-Human Hero, Libre Fermi. The Great Strategist, Valga Cromwell. And…"

After pausing for a moment,

Wilhelm: "The Witch, Sphinx. The abominable existence who, without batting an eye, ruthlessly spilled the blood of Human and Demi-Human alike. The only Witch besides Satella whose name remains in the History of the Kingdom."

Chapter 45:
An Inescapable Curse

As Wilhelm spoke the name of a Witch he had never heard of before, Subaru shuddered.

Aside from Satella, the only Witches Subaru knew of were the six Witches of Sin he had met in Echidna's tomb. The fact that Witches other than those somehow existed was devastating news.

Subaru: "Then, Wilhelm-san, if that Witch, Sphinx, is involved in this raid by the Witch Cult… Are you saying there's a Witch too, in addition to the Sin Archbishops?"

The main enemies numbered four Archbishops and two warriors. If that was the case, adding a Witch to their forces made the disparity in strength become a desperate matter.

However, Wilhelm raised a hand at Subaru's concerns.

Wilhelm: "Pardon me, my wording was unclear. The existence known as the Witch Sphinx perished in the Demi-Human War. There is no possibility that it might be participating in this assault."

Subaru: "The Witch is dead? There's no mistake? The impression I have of Witches is that they tend to fake being dead, and have lots of freedom even after really dying."

Satella, too, was like that, as whenever Subaru violated the taboo, it would draw her out. And in the castle of dreams, enjoying her afterlife, Echidna was the same.

Even hearing a Witch was dead was no guarantee at all.

Wilhelm: "What impression Subaru-dono has of Witches I am unaware. But Sphinx is only named a Witch, merely an existence given that title for convenience. The fact is that the Kingdom's military referred to it as such, but the concerned party never called itself the same."

Subaru: “Calling them a concerned party… Did Wilhelm-san ever meet them directly?”

Wilhelm: “Several times, during the civil war. The event that may have triggered the end of the Demi-Human War may even have been the beheading of Sphinx. Roswaal, Bordeaux, and my wife were all leading figures of that time.”

Subaru: “Roswaal?!”

An unexpected name popping up caused Subaru to open his eyes wide.

At that reaction from Subaru, Wilhelm slightly lowered his head for a moment and became immersed in thought.

Wilhelm: “I knew the Roswaal-dono of two generations ago. Although back then I was not very friendly… she took care of me.”

Subaru: “Two generations ago… Ah, that’s right. The name Roswaal is inherited from generation to generation.”

Wilhelm: “Unfortunately, that predecessor passed away soon after. I grew distant from them following that, and the current Margrave Mathers is only a passing acquaintance… But this is all superfluous talk.”

He was now lending an ear to tales of surprising relationships, but the original topic was definitely not about that. Subaru nodded his head, and then Wilhelm continued his tale with an “And so,”

Wilhelm: “Not Sphinx, but some being using a spell that acts similarly, is my thought. The method of controlling the dead was at the time called cases of Corpse Soldiers.”

Subaru: “Corpse Soldiers… That… Does it have any weaknesses?”

Wilhelm: “From what I know, the Corpse Soldier is limited to a technique for moving the body. It does not seem to be able to bring back the abilities possessed in life. It merely shames the dead while keeping the appearance. A reflection of the user’s nature.”

Subaru: “But, the Eight Arms, and… that.”

He was at a loss for words.

The one turned into a Corpse Soldier, whose very death was being profaned, was Wilhelm’s wife. Even if Wilhelm had already accepted it, Subaru was speaking of it with hesitation.

Wilhelm made a bitter face at Subaru’s reluctance, loosening his lips.

Wilhelm: “I am grateful for your concern. But, it is necessary—Yes, the skills of both my wife and Kurgan are close to their abilities in life. It exceeds the power a mere Corpse Soldier can pull out.”

Subaru: “Then, isn’t it possible that this is something different than a Corpse Soldier? If so, then your wife might not even have died…”

Wilhelm: “My wife is dead. Because my strength was lacking.”

The side hanging onto a fragile hope here was Subaru. Wilhelm’s clear voice cut down Subaru’s feeling with a single stroke.

And there were no words Subaru could say to that elder swordsman’s profile.

Wilhelm: “Even at the time, that which could not simply be judged as merely a Corpse Soldier did very rarely exist. Whether it was due to aptitude in the procedure, or another factor I am unaware of… We should perhaps believe that it may be the strength of those two.”

Subaru: “Is there a way to take them down?”

Wilhelm: “Thoroughly destroying the body, or cutting away the curse mark somewhere on the body. Then the Corpse Soldier will return to a simple corpse. It must be done this way.”

Wilhelm’s considerate voice could not easily be heard.

He was conscious of his calm, trying his best to focus on what he felt he had to do—His trembling voice, his clenched fist, his scrunched eyes, in that moment he was unable to hide anything.

Wilhelm: “I apologize for holding you this long. Crusch-sama cannot be made to wait any longer. Now, this way.”

Wilhelm bent his back and indicated the door of the division they had reached. On the innermost part of the fourth floor, was a room with a crumbled plate labeling it as a lounge.

Inside, Crusch, who had called Subaru, was waiting.

Passing Wilhelm’s side, Subaru headed for the door, the sound of footsteps echoing.

Definitely, the distance to the door felt awfully long. There was even the impression that the soles of his shoes stuck to the floor and interfered with Subaru’s progress.

The fact that this reluctance was his own weakness, Subaru was clearly aware of that.

Subaru: “—It’s me. Natsuki Subaru. Is… Crusch-san?”

He knocked, and called out with a voice so quiet he wondered if it reached the other side of the door. Like that, after a brief silence, taking no more than a moment, the other side slowly opened the door.

The face that appeared was Ferris’s. But his appearance had changed entirely.

Ferris: “Subaru-kyun…”

Red eyes puffed up from crying and disheveled brown hair. Covering his entire body in black stains was, not his, but someone else’s blood, his white skin splattered. He must not have had time to clean it. His cheek and neck were also smeared with fresh, sticky blood.

Witnessing such a miserable appearance, his breath inadvertently caught in his throat.

Subaru: “Crusch-san called me, I heard. So…”

Ferris: “Yeah. Inside, she’s on the bed… Definitely don’t do anything unnecessary, please.”

A firm voice, with some hatred intermingled near the end. However, that hate was not directed at Subaru. It could be said to be directed at everything. Hating everyone in the world, Ferris was now controlled by rage with nowhere to go.

Taking a deep breath, Subaru followed Ferris inside.

It was not a very spacious room for a lounge. Long tables and chairs were arranged in two rows, and further back, the small room was divided by a threshold. The bed was past it.

And on that shabby bed she was laid.

???: “Na… tsuki-sama?”

Crusch, fully conscious, recognized Subaru had entered and called him by name.

Reacting to her voice, Subaru’s throat felt like it had constricted. Readying himself, feigning calm, calling out assuring words—He was unable to even do something so simple…

Crusch: “My appearance is not presentable… My apologies…”

Subaru: “…No, that’s not, like that… Haaa. It’s not like that.”

Seeing Subaru’s tense atmosphere, Crusch apologized in a lethargic voice. Subaru, feeling flustered by her sorrowful attitude, raised his voice to mend his vague words from earlier.

—Having been drenched in Capella’s blood and clothed in its curse, Crusch was in a wretched state.

Her neck, the back of her hands and feet—over all exposed skin, dark-blackened veins were visible. It was not difficult to imagine that under the towels and blankets and clothes, the skin there would be afflicted with the same. These black blood vessels, which pulsed instead of circulating blood like regular blood vessels, gave off the appearance of a writhing serpent strangling Crusch's thin body.

That formerly white, unblemished skin of hers was now being violated horribly.

Of course, the damage was not limited to areas below the neck.

Crusch's dignified visage, reminiscent of a slender sword's beauty—its left half had received disfiguring stains. Compared to that, the right side of her face retained her beauty. That rather emphasized the contrast between the two sides, and made the unfairness of a noble person being defiled more apparent.

A patch had been placed to cover the left eye, the sight underneath difficult to imagine.

Subaru: "This is… The same curse left on me, the dragon's blood?"

If it was indeed the same, then nothing could be crueler.

Because he knew Crusch Karsten, there was no limit to Subaru's heartache.

He looked down at his own right leg. Like Crusch's skin, it also was mottled and wrapped with blackened veins. However, Subaru's leg, terrible sight notwithstanding, was otherwise unaffected. Neither pain nor feelings of pain were felt by him at all.

But Crusch was definitely different. Her breathing was labored, and whenever the dark veins pulsated, she sighed as if withstanding pain.

Subaru: "Ferris…"

How was it not cured, he wondered as he turned to gaze at the greatest healer in the Kingdom. However, Subaru's brief thought only served to hurt Ferris, who further grit his teeth in helplessness. He bit down on his lips, stabbing his own arms with his nails while bowing his head. Ferris understood his lack of power and regretted it more than anyone else in the room.

Knowing the relationship between the two, Subaru had no reason to doubt all possible methods beyond his imagination had been exhausted already.

Subaru: “Crusch-san… What do you need of me?”

Why, in such a painful situation, had she called out for him?

He did not think that there was something he could do. Maybe there was something she wished to say. To ask for revenge on Lust, who had done this to her. Perhaps even some resentful words would be directed towards Subaru.

Even if fed insults, even if curses were poured on, he would accept it all.

At Subaru’s question, Crusch opened her mouth, enduring the pain. Leaning in close to her lips, he paid his utmost careful attention, to make sure her faint breaths would not go unnoticed. And—

Crusch: “…Un-Unharmed… I am relieved.”

Subaru: “…”

Crusch: “I heard… that like me… you were cursed…”

Subaru felt a burden lift from her in the softness of her relieved sigh. At the same time, he understood the true feelings in her heart, and grew so angry at his own stupidity he wanted to die.

He had been thinking it would be easier to be criticized.

So he had doubted Crusch’s integrity, and had underestimated her noble heart. She had truly just been worried that Subaru had been afflicted with the same pain as herself.

Subaru: “Sor… I’m sorry… Crusch-san…”

Having suspected her feelings because it had resulted in her suffering, and being unable to suffer on her behalf, he squeezed out those mixed emotions in his voice.

Without realizing what he was doing, he stretched out his hand and grasped the hands Crusch had weakly laid over her stomach. The black blood vessels had no special texture even if touched. That the feel of skin with this ruined of an appearance did not change was even more pitiful. But,

Crusch: “Fuu…?”

Subaru: “Ugh?!”

The sudden sound of Crusch’s sigh, and the simultaneous pained noise from Subaru’s throat overlapped.

Agony as if he had grasped a hot iron stabbed into his whole body starting from his palm. In an instant, Subaru released Crusch’s hand and stared at the palm the sensation had come from.

That blackened erosion was spreading over it.

Subaru: “What the…?!”

Ferris: “Show me, Subaru-kyun!”

Grasping the groaning and hurt Subaru’s hand, Ferris inspected the erosion. The light of healing blanketed the spot, but there was no sign of either the pain or the affliction fading away. Instead—

Subaru: “Ferris… Crusch-san’s hand!”

Ferris: “Eh…?”

Subaru’s gaze was directed at Crusch in astonishment, and beckoned Ferris to direct his own the same direction. And those yellow eyes widened as well, witnessing the same occurrence as Subaru.

Subaru had grasped Crusch’s left hand—on that hand, though slightly, the blackened erosion had thinned. Looking down at his right hand, noticing that shift, a certain idea passed through Subaru’s mind

Subaru: “No way, it moved from Crusch’s body to mine… Is that it?”

He could only think that. The change on the hand he had touched and the change on his own were positive and negative, respectively. There was no doubt that the curse had traveled from Crusch’s body to Subaru’s.

Ferris: “Bu-But I haven’t changed at all? I examined Crusch-sama’s body, I touched her many many times since… Me, for me…”

At Subaru’s hypothesis, Ferris shook his head.

That was not joy at a possibility for healing being found, but rather an appearance of suspecting that the hypothesis was false. No, his own feelings were definitely different.

Ferris: “I can’t make Crusch-sama feel better…”

Subaru: “Then, let’s try it one more time.”

Pushing aside Ferris, left in dismay, Subaru once again stood before Crusch. Crusch, her face showing she was unaware of what had occurred, directed her glistening eyes at Subaru. To not show a tense face to that eyepatch-wearing, single-eyed gaze, Subaru took a deep breath.

To check it again, this time, he lightly brushed Crusch’s cheek.

Subaru: “—Guh, ugh!”

Immediately after, Subaru’s brain was stabbed with pain as if magma had been poured into his veins. Through the tips of his fingers, the curse that was violating Crusch’s body flowed in, and seared his senses.

Subaru: “Gaaaaah!”

Feeling unbearable, severe pain, Subaru screamed loudly and yanked his body away. Like that, falling back with the momentum, the hand which had been touching Crusch lost contact with her body.

Subaru: "Ah, haaa, haaaaaa…"

His lungs shivered, and his eyeballs cramped.

Opening and closing his mouth repeatedly like a fish on land, Subaru desperately sought oxygen.

Ferris: "Su-Subaru-kyun… Are you okay?"

Seeing his breathing start to calm, Ferris spoke to Subaru. Barely able to spare enough feeling to notice the hard floor he had landed on, he raised his body with difficulty. And gazing up at the face of Crusch, as she laid in bed,

Subaru: "How is it, Ferris? Was it effective, even just a little?"

Ferris: "Ah…"

With a plop, Ferris sat back down again to confirm Crusch's condition.

He too would have seen it with his own eyes. The cheek which was being eroded by the curse had been relieved, just a little bit. If such treatment was possible, then saving Crusch was also—

Crusch: "You cannot, Natsuki-sama…"

Subaru rose to try once more. However, it was none other than Crusch herself that stopped him.

Not understanding the meaning of her words, Subaru asked.

Subaru: "Did you not… notice? Your hand is…"

Crusch: "—Hand?"

Hearing this, she looked down at her right hand. And it was then that she finally realized the change that had occurred.

Similar to his right leg, blackened blood vessels covered the skin. That much was fine. With that alone, his resolve to take on Crusch's curse would not be shaken.

However, there was definitely something strange.

Compared to the spots which had been taken from Crusch, the extent of the erosion was much greater. The corrosion on her body, the darkened parts of her left hand and cheek, those dark blood vessels had all grown a shade lighter due to Subaru's touch.

However, Subaru's right arm, having absorbed that dark erosion, had its skin completely covered in black, all the way up to his elbow. The concentration was clearly different. The ratio the curse was transferred at was not one-to-one. It was more on the level of ten-to-one, perhaps not even that.

Subaru: "No, even then…"

Whether that was cause to hesitate was another matter.

There was pain in the moment of transfer. But, once it had been accepted onto his body, there was no sign that the curse would actually hurt Subaru, so far.

Compared to Crusch's constant hellish suffering, the pain Subaru felt lasted for only a moment. Besides, there was not even any need to consider which side should bear the burden of its torture, the man or the woman.

Whether it was his right leg or right hand turning black, if it was for the sake of saving Crusch, it mattered not.

Crusch: "Natsuki-sama, that cannot be… I am unable to accept those feelings."

Subaru: "Don't be silly. It only stings a little, so it's fine. Compared to getting a tattoo while showing off and regretting it later, let's think of it like dirtying a body that was already dirty in the first place. I can take away the pain too. It's strange, but I don't feel any pain, so…"

Crusch: "Can you guarantee that will be true in the future…? It could be that both Natsuki-sama and I will become unable to fight. In the current situation, that would be a fatal blow…"

Worrying more for the city and the people than her own body, that was Crusch's judgement. It was logically sound, but not everything should be considered with logic alone.

Crusch: "Ferris, please stop Natsuki-sama…"

Ferris: "I… I am…"

Crusch: "Please. Because Natsuki-sama is now needed by people other than me…"

Ferris: "If Subaru-kyun resolved to help… C-Crusch-sama's suffering…"

Ferris's hesitation in making a decision was because he kept Crusch at the top of his priorities. That, nobody could blame him for. Of those present, no one was in the wrong, after all.

The notion that "whatever is not wrong is right" was mistaken.

Crusch: "You must not be overwhelmed by the emotions of a single moment. Natsuki-sama, I ask of you…"

Subaru: "Crusch-san, even then, I…"

Crusch: "Did you not say so before? —"What is left, leave it all to me."“

Subaru: "—Kh!"

Crusch's pleading eyes took hold of Subaru and would not let go.

Had those reliable words come from his mouth? Was Crusch telling Subaru to fulfill the words she had heard?

Crusch: "Please say that to… me as well…"

Subaru: "…"

Crusch: "“All that's left, to leave it all to me."“

A pained smile was awaiting Subaru's words.

Swallowing his breath and shifting his tongue in his dry mouth, Subaru quietly closed his eyes.

Without thinking of the future, only immersed in what was in front of him, he was making her say things that did not need to be said, so at least—

Subaru: "Crusch-san, calmly rest here, please."

Crusch: "…Natsuki… sama."

Subaru: "Because everything that's left, you can leave it all to me."

Crusch: "—Yes."

If it was just filling the needed role and saying the desired words, then it just had to be done.

Hearing Subaru's reply, Crusch took a deep breath and seemed to relax.

Her eyelids weakly blinking shut not a moment after proved that, up until now, by any means possible she had been holding onto her consciousness. At that moment breathing a quiet sigh, Crusch once more began her time of battling the effects of the curse's erosion.

Subaru: "Sorry, Ferris. But I have to go now."

Ferris: "I'm… What should I… Is it alright?"

Draping a towel like a blanket over Crusch and standing up, Subaru heard a small voice as he was leaving. It was the first time Subaru had seen Ferris showing weakness.

In his innermost thoughts, what he wished now was to remain at Crusch's side. But in the current situation, Ferris's ability would not allow for such a thing.

Subaru: "I need your strength. I'm not saying to leave City Hall. But I'll tell them to evacuate the wounded here, if something happens. So, I'll leave that to you."

Ferris: "…The one I wanted to help most, and I can't help them."

Subaru: "Ferris…"

Ferris: "Sorry. I said something stupid… Just give us a moment, please."

While looking away, Ferris sat down on a chair next to the bed. Subaru lightly patted his shoulder and, finally, he stepped out of the lounge.

Unchanged from when he had entered, Wilhelm stood upright, waiting in the hallway.

Wilhelm: "Thank you very much for considering Crusch-sama's feelings."

Calling out to Subaru upon his return, Wilhelm spoke. Did the events that transpired within the room leak outside, or perhaps Subaru's expression was just easy to read?

Subaru: "It isn't some noble tale like I considered her feelings. Since it's more a story of how I was encouraged… My body, what's up with it anyway?"

Taking on Crusch's curse, and its effect being weakened against him in the first place. Going back even further, everything about the Witch Factor and Return by Death was, in truth, ambiguous.

One day, would he get to see the reason and reach the conclusion for such things?

Subaru: "We will leave Crusch-san to Ferris. Once everything is settled, I'm thinking of trying what I did once more."

Wilhelm: "Is that right arm fine?"

Subaru: "At first glance, it's a bit iffy. If I wear long sleeves and gloves it might look alright… For the sake of rescuing a pretty girl, a scar that doesn't fade away isn't any trouble at all."

Even though he had some aversion to it, those were Subaru's true feelings.

If there was no other solution, then he would absorb Crusch's curse in full, even if his body became pitch-black because of it. Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice, he would have to beg forgiveness from all of them.

Subaru: "But, that's all something for after we overcome this turbulence. Wilhelm-san, let's head down. The others may be discussing the plan to retake the control towers right now."

Probably, all the top-class powers that this side could muster would already be gathered there.

What followed after would depend on their compatibility with the abilities of each Sin Archbishop, as well as the timing and execution of the capture plan. Only six hours remained until the deadline imposed by the Witch Cult.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono, regarding that matter, I have a request."

Subaru: "A request?"

Wilhelm's words stopped Subaru as he headed for the stairs—The elder swordsman nodded his head towards the door behind him, showing concern in his eyes for his master within.

Wilhelm: "If possible, please recommend for me the task of subjugating Lust. Since I am aware of its powers of mutation and super-regeneration, I will request this of you."

Subaru: "Revenge for Crusch-san, is that it?"

Wilhelm: "That as well. But beyond that, it is essential to capture Lust alive and have it explain what was done to Crusch. For that, I will even become a demon. Before cutting off its head, I will definitely question her about it."

The killing intent given off by the Sword Demon felt like a wave of heat to Subaru. Furiously, darkly, having been unable to do anything, Wilhelm's ardor to avenge his master now rose up like flames.

Subaru: “That spirit is fine… But are the Corpse Soldiers alright?”

Wilhelm: “…”

Subaru: “Your wife, would you not know her best? Whatever else we do, it’s Wilhelm-san who needs to settle that score.”

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono, has Reinhard arrived below?”

Wilhelm suddenly interrupted Subaru, while he spoke of his concerns.

Awkwardly, Subaru nodded. Reinhard’s strength was indispensable for the attack. However, it was possible that the previous generation Sword Saint could obstruct him.

Wilhelm: “The true nature of the Corpse Soldiers, could you avoid speaking of it to Reinhard?”

Subaru: “…Eh?”

Subaru was perplexed, unable to grasp the reason for the abrupt request.

Subaru: “That’s… Don’t tell that guy about Wilhelm-san’s wife, is that what you mean?”

Wilhelm: “Yes, that is correct. For Reinhard… for my grandson, I want to avoid him meeting my dead wife. He will surely blame me. Because the fault is none other than my own.”

Subaru: “That sorta thing, that it’s Wilhelm-san’s fault, that…”

“Is not true”, he wanted to say, but Subaru could not carelessly remark so.

Because the image of Heinkel’s appearance ruining the mood earlier in the morning had appeared in his mind.

There was no credibility. However, it could not be denied. Wilhelm had once accused Reinhard of being the cause of his wife’s death. And he had not rejected such a difficult and unbelievable past.

Wilhelm: “Does Subaru-dono know that the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint is special?”

Subaru: “…Honestly speaking, I’d say I know little about it. Maybe the people called Sword Saint all had the Divine Protection and having it means you become incredibly strong. I only have that impression of the Divine Protection…”

Wilhelm: “That understanding is rough around the edges, but it is correct. But if there is a difference between the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint and other Divine Protections… it is the fact that it can be inherited.”

Subaru: “An inherited… Divine Protection…”

At Subaru’s sigh, Wilhelm nodded. The elder swordsman closed his eyes as if recalling a sorrowful past.

Wilhelm: “That Divine Protection has been passed down for generations since the time of its founder, Reid Astrea. The Divine Protection lives on in the bloodline of the Astrea family, and selects one person in the family as the next Sword Saint. My wife’s Divine Protection definitely passed down to Reinhard.”

Subaru: “A Divine Protection that is inherited down the family… Is that so? And when your wife passed away, the Divine Protection transferred to Reinhard.”

Something caught in Subaru’s head as he tried to understand and make sense of it.

After the preceding Sword Saint had been defeated and slain by the White Whale, Reinhard had inherited the Divine Protection. It was a painful past, but one that could also be described a proper passing on.

That flow did not fit at all with what had been said in the argument between the members of the Astrea family this morning.

Wilhelm’s mourning, Heinkel’s mockery, Reinhard’s silence, those were all interfering with the idea of a legitimate succession. And the answer was—

Wilhelm: “It was… at the time of the battle against White Whale.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san…”

Wilhelm: “Reinhard received the Divine Protection during the Great Subjugation, which my wife had joined. During that battle, my wife was abandoned by the sword, and could only participate as an ordinary woman.”

—That was the truth of the Astrea family division.

Amidst the great expedition that had been sent out to subjugate the White Whale, the Divine Protection was suddenly passed down to the next generation. And, during the skirmish, the former Sword Saint lost her Divine Protection, having been left behind in that battlefield.

The previous generation, having now become an ordinary person, had still fought against the Witchbeast to protect the many other soldiers that had accompanied her—And then disappeared.

Wilhelm: “The one that took away the sword from my wife was none other than me. Overruling my wife, who was loved by the sword, forcing her to cast it aside, and turning her into an ordinary woman, I was the one who did it. That… was what called forth the death of my wife.”

Subaru: “…”

Wilhelm: “The Sword God did not forgive my wife’s betrayal, and so her Divine Protection was taken away while on the battlefield. She could rely only on a single blade. I think of how she must have felt then… It was true that I could not accept it, and defamed Reinhard, whom the Divine Protection had chosen. Driven by impulse, I could not forgive my grandson, even as he wept over the death of his grandmother, bearing a burden too heavy for his shoulders… I regret that now.”

The regret that Wilhelm had revealed to Subaru on the previous night—He was referring to that mistake.

Even knowing that Reinhard had not done anything wrong, Wilhelm was unable to accept that fact as he mourned his wife’s death. As a result, the Astrea family had split apart.

Wilhelm: “I do not want to repeat it again. Reinhard has no responsibility in my wife’s death. I have no reason to blame my grandson at all.”

And so, he was saying he would bring this to a close himself, instead of revealing it to Reinhard.

That feeling he now understood painfully well from this talk. Even Subaru would wish the same to happen if possible. But the burden Wilhelm carried was too high.

Subaru: “About Crusch-san and your wife… They will be taken care of, Wilhelm-san. And even if I don’t talk about the Corpse Soldiers, you never know where they’ll show up…”

Wilhelm: “That is definitely a needless worry, Subaru-dono.”

Subaru: “Eh…?”

Wilhelm shook his head at Subaru, as the latter was about to point out that it was not certain. And the Sword Demon spoke as his expression twisted into a fearsome grimace.

Wilhelm: “—Because, there is no chance of my wife not coming to meet me.”

Chapter 46:
A State of Mind

When going back to the rendezvous point with Wilhelm, everyone had been looking forward to Subaru's return. With Reinhard looking at Wilhelm, the grandfather welcomed the reunion with his grandchild while pulling his chin.

While the two stood together along the wall exchanging sidelong glances, Subaru sat down next to Otto at the round table.

Subaru: "I'm sorry for being late. How did the negotiations turn out?"

Otto: "We just ended up with the same matters we got from the start. It will surely be better from Natsuki-san's side … how is Crusch-sama doing?"

Subaru: "It seems she isn't doing well. However, it's not like we can already say that there is no hope. Once we get to the negotiations after driving out the witch cult, we might be able to do something."

Otto: "Is that so? If that's the case then that alone is good news."

With Otto stroking his chest with a *ho*, everyone else having listened to the story also made a similar gesture of relief. While viewing their reactions, deep down, Subaru wanted to give them a heartfelt apology.

Although it wasn't a lie, it was a statement which was far removed from reality. There might be a way to save Crusch, which would also be considerably risky for Subaru. If her conditions were among the same conditions as Subaru's, he would expect her chances to rise considerably. (TN: "Probably referring to the conditions needed for the dragon's blood injected by Capella to not be rejected or something like that)

Subaru: "Either way, Crusch-san's return to the frontlines for this battle is impossible. Since it seems that Ferris also doesn't want to be separated from her, I think is would be best if the relief party were to stay behind at City Hall. Additionally, where we'll be meeting, there is the possibility that we will become unable to communicate."

Anastasia: "That means the plan to attack the four places simultaneously hasn't changed. Seems that gettin' to the location from City Hall in the center as seen from each control tower comes first, right? Then… …"

With a clap, Anastasia looked out over everyone's faces.

In that case, shall we finally truly go into the main issue? —There are four control towers and four Sin Archbishops. For the sake of defeating them, we will hold a war strategy meeting."

From Crusch's faction was the "Sword devil" Wilhelm.

From Felt's faction was the "Sword saint" Reinhard.

From Anastasia's faction were the "Valuable knight" Julius and the "Leader of the iron fang" Ricardo.

From Emilia's faction were the "Spirit knight" Subaru and the "Shield of the Sanctuary" Garfiel.

And then, from Priscilla's faction was—

Priscilla: "Me and Al will be together."

Subaru: "Although you said such a thing … … will you fight as well? You're a Royal selection candidate, aren't you?"

When each faction's fighters were affirming, Priscilla boldly raised her own name. When Subaru scowled at that, she snorted at him so as to try and scoff at him.

Priscilla: "I would surely be a candidate for the throne, don't you think? Since the previously important fool has become useless, you've united every last one of the untaken weakling fighters. I stand above everybody both at the sword and on the stage precisely because I am who I am."

Wilhelm: “Now you’ve become difficult to ignore. With “fool”, surely you mustn’t mean my lord by that?”

Priscilla: “Since I have something in mind, just don’t stand in my way, I guess. There’s a devious expression, old soldier. Through withdrawal by “losing a fly to catch a trout” and the like, the tales of the chosen cannot be told.”

From the start of the discussion, Wilhelm and Priscilla already clashed with a dangerous presence. Seemingly habitually ignoring the scene, because of various circumstances Wilhelm’s side could not afford to waste time. Since Priscilla’s side generally operated in an excessive manner, that also did not leave out hateful language.

Anastasia: “Yeah yeah, let’s move the discussions forward, because both the weaklin’ and the fool stuff is all fine by me. We ain’t gonna turn on each other.”

Priscilla: “Oh, that’s boring. Isn’t my obedient listening to the weakling’s story to a manageable degree?”

Anastasia: “I guess it wasn’t like the story was about the victory of the weak? If you do not show the extent of your magnanimity, then nobody will follow you. Everyone is getting equally irritated. Have some patience.”

Priscilla: “Hmph.”

As Anastasia’s remark was missing its target, Priscilla did not object as she only snorted. As she watched the weapon being pointed at her, Wilhelm, who had been staring daggers at her, had also withdrawn it.

Since it was natural that there were disagreements between the factions, he made a serious face.

Wilhelm: “Well then, Priscilla-sama’s faction will be Priscilla-sama and Al together … … even if your boy cannot expect to be taken into consideration?”

Priscilla: “Can something even be done by such a very delicate and weak child? That child has been accompanying me throughout merely for the sake of serving me. Naturally, we will put him aside beforehand."

Wilhelm: "Understood. Then it's been decided that we'll capture the four locations with no less than eight fighters."

The boy who was Priscilla's butler —Schult, while drooping his head, was exactly evenly split between fighting and not fighting at the round table.

Leaving out the names of the eight combatants, the non-combatants were Anastasia, Schult, Liliana and Otto with Crusch and Ferris on the upper floor making six people.

Anastasia: "Before we split up our fighting force, shall we go ahead and reaffirm our knowledge of the Sin Archbishops once more? Let's see, the person who has seen all their faces … … is just Natsuki-kun, right?"

Subaru: "Yeah, I think so. Although even I am disgusted with talking about the witch cult's leaders, I will try to get myself to give an explanation. I know about their abilities, though to a certain extent."

While gathering everyone's attention, Subaru began to speak.

About the witch cult who which had attacked this city and the horrible Sin Archbishops who controlled it.

Subaru: "First is Wrath. This Sin Archbishop, who calls herself Sirius, is a fellow who's completely wrapped in bandages. I don't know what she looks like, though I believe she's probably a woman. She attacks using the chains wrapped around her arms. In addition, it seems like she also uses fire magic."

Reinhard: "If it's only that then she doesn't seem to be a significant threat. Is she considerably talented?"

Subaru: "If it's said by you, then it's difficult for anyone to answer, Reinhard. … … If we're talking about simple fighting strength, then Wilhelm or Julius will be able to provide sufficient opposition. Her other ability seemed to be an equal match with Emilia though.

Nevertheless, she has the Authority of Wrath.”

Reinhard: “An Authority… …”

Reinhard frowned to that sound as he brought his hand to his chin.

Subaru continued as he nodded back at him,

Subaru: “The biggest point about a Sin Archbishop’s repulsiveness, is their characteristic ability called their Authority. Being an incomprehensible force which differs from both magic and sorcery, it’s useless to even think about how it works. Since every one of them is powerful, defeating the Authority will become the crux of defeating a Sin Archbishop.”

Wilhelm: “Since Subaru-dono had supposedly defeated Sloth in the past, was that the Authority itself?”

Subaru: “It was. The Archbishop of Sloth’s Authority, the “Unseen hand” was Sloth’s second ability. The Authority can grow an unknown number of powerful arms which are not only invisible, but also have incredible strength. If someone were to be caught in them, they could easily completely tear their body apart.”

Julius: “Having witnessed them myself, I’ve also verified their repulsiveness. In practice, it’s believable that just by snatching a body its power could gouge out someone’s flesh.”

Julius followed up on Subaru’s explanation.

During the united front against Petelgeuse, it was Subaru lending his eyes that made him see Petelgeuse’s “Unseen Hand”. He was in an ideal position to reinforce his explanation.

Subaru: “Moreover, Sloth has the ability to forcefully snatch away the energy of people in his range. Whether this was the Authority is difficult to tell, but we overcame it by using spirit art users who were immune to it. This was also because it was me and Julius.”

Julius: “Even if we were able to tell whose ability it was, assuming the Sin Archbishop was holding such a terrifying ability, it’s not like we would definitely succeed if we were to assign a capable fighter to the right opponent.”

Subaru: “You said an unusually good thing, Julius. It’s something like that.”

When Subaru praised him in his own way, Julius looked at Subaru with a discerning though lukewarm eye. While getting an uncanny feeling from that gaze, Subaru once again clearing his throat continued,

Subaru: “So, let’s go back to the discussion about the Authority of Wrath. What we know as of now about Wrath’s ability, is the sharing and propagation of emotions and senses.”

???: “Sharing … emotions and senses?”

Since Subaru’s explanation didn’t really make sense, most of the discussion members tilted their heads. Because it was difficult to explain, it was necessary for Subaru to choose his words carefully.

Subaru: “I mean, It’s that Wrath is able to unipolarize the emotions of people in its range. It makes one person’s anger into everyone’s anger and one person’s sadness into everyone’s sadness.”

Anastasia: “What the heck’s that? If that’s what it means, then it’s simple as to why.”

Subaru: “Certainly if it were just that you would just forcefully make yourself use your ability to sense the mood, but it’s not like that. The scary part of this ability is when it’s able to unipolarize until it reaches hostility. That is, if Wrath is your opponent and directs their hostility towards your perceived companions, it will definitely also be transmitted to the people in the perimeter.”

Otto: “So it turns the townspeople in its perimeter against us?”

Subaru: “Exactly.”

By snapping his fingers, Subaru indicated that Otto had drawn the correct conclusion.

Although it gave everyone depressed looks, the problems didn’t end with just that.

Priscilla: “Foolish commoner, did you say that Wrath or whatever can share emotions and senses some time ago?”

As the first to finally reach an understanding, Priscilla reclined on her seat.

Piercing through Subaru with her crimson eyes, while concealing her mouth with her folding fan,

Priscilla: “If the explanation from just now was about sharing emotions, then sharing senses is again different. And if we then assume that that is just my way of imagining things, is it not a considerably repulsive ability?”

Subaru: “I don’t know how you’re imagining it, but it’s the worst. Wrath’s Authority shares the wounds of people in its range. This does not exclude Wrath’s wounds.”

Ricardo: “If even the person himself ain’t no exception … … hey, bro, that ain’t true, innit? Ain’t that the worst? In other words, wouldn’t other fellas die if Wrath were ta be killed?”

He had already once realized that terrible scene in practice by Reinhard’s hand.

Even if they crushed Sirius, who was the source of the malice, that act alone would inflict permanent wounds to the people surrounding them. They wouldn’t know if anyone dragged into the fight would be fine if they managed to kill her.

Priscilla: “—Interesting.”

To this hopeless information, everyone held their tongue without coming up with counter-measures. In such a midst just one person, only Priscilla was cheerfully warping her cheek into a sneer.

Priscilla: “Very well. I will give that Wrath fool a picking. You’re free to rejoice.”

Subaru: “Well, wait, wait, wait up! Although I don’t know why you're so eager, it's not something you can take so lightly! Were you listening to what I said?!"

Priscilla: "Let's settle that I was listening. Thus upon having listened to that, I have declared that I will go. They are indeed a disgusting opponent with cowardly methods, so it's appropriate for me to cut them down."

Without even listening to Subaru's attempts to stop her, Priscilla looked over everyone while folding her fan to make a sound.

With that sharp gaze and zeal, she overwhelmed even strongest fighters present.

Priscilla: "If you've said everything about the Authority, then there is a verse that comes to mind about those Karakuri. "Wanting to be accompanied by the same masses who disregard you" and the like is impertinent. The vulgar masses exist entirely for my sake. If some insolent worm turns their hand to me, I immediately throw them out of my garden."

Al: "P, princess … … Aren't you bragging even a little too much?"

Priscilla: "What kind of foolishness are you saying, Al? Knowing your cowardice, what is it about that you get cold feet from the insolent opponent who sours my mood? With me, there is no point in being afraid if the singer is there."

Al: "It's not like I'm saying it because there's nothing to be afrai… … Singer?"

When Al tried to stop his master's irrational behavior, he stopped as he heard an unexpected word. While generously nodding at her follower's surprise, Priscilla, pointed with her folded fan at Liliana who sat at the corner of the round table.

As she suddenly became the topic of the discussion, Liliana opened her eyes wide at the fan that was thrust before her.

Liliana: "Did mean m-me with that name?! Why are you doing that so suddenly and neglectfully again?!"

Priscilla: “You mustn’t be forgetting about your travels? How long your songs have shaken the hearts of the masses. You should do the same thing with that. In short, you should fight for the emotions of the vulgar masses and such.”

Liliana: “Seems like I was making you anxious just because I raised my voice a little? You might say that under no circumstances you are overestimating me too much, but pressuring a weak young girl like me … …”

Priscilla: “Oh. So, if it’s your choice, you allow the song you inherited from your ancestors to be defeated?”

As Priscilla snorted, Liliana’s facial expression changed to Priscilla’s words which sounded like she despised her wholeheartedly.

Showing a forced smile, she wore a facial expression with an earnest charm as she menially tried to ward it off.

Liliana: “That is, what do you mean … …?”

Priscilla: “It seems like it even if you do not think so. Does your song, which has been passed down so zealously, seem like it is being sung when the hearts of the people, which are begging for help, are exposing their sometimes unsightly cowering? That kind of loser’s whining, is that not all a bunch of idle futility? Even a dog’s barking is still better than insisting on being selfish. There, how is it sinking in? It’s like the praise of a loser.”

Liliana: “Aah Aah! You’re going so far as to say it?! Are you blurting it out?! Fine! I’ll go! I’ve understood alright?! Catching me, the minstrel Liliana, like that! Using such language! A woman will become obsolete with this silence! Even the late Kiritaka-san will come crawling out of his grave with regret like this!”

Because of Priscilla’s fierce provocation, Liliana became excited as she intensely exploded back at her. With her face becoming a bright red, she violently strummed the musical instrument placed on top of her lap.

Liliana: “Stop it if you were thinking about letting even a requiem be sung to comfort Kiritaka-san's soul who pitiably fell into the city's waters! I'm a scramble of emotions? Bring it on! I, the person who has come to inherit the song, and my song, which has dazed the people of the world, will we lose to an unknown power due to something like that?! We don't know the song's power after all! *Grrr*!"

(TN: "Probably somewhat inaccurate in some places here. Liliana's manner of speech feels weird in general…)

Schult and Otto hurriedly dragged down the thoroughly excited Liliana who was performing while lying sprawled on top of the round table. Taking a distant view to the corner of the room where Liliana who started playing was held down, Subaru had shifted his focus to Priscilla.

Subaru: "Her manageability aside, you seem sure of her success. But even if you're right, to just throw her into this when you don't know her chances … …"

Priscilla: "I am not planning to lose or anything. Everything in this world will be made to my liking. Besides, it is because I was together with that singer that I have come so far as to this city hall. After taking her around with me precisely because I recognized that singer's usefulness, I have again decided to take her with me."

Subaru: "Are you saying that Liliana is an opposing force to Sirius?"

Priscilla: "It would be my defeat if it were not for that singer. And something like my defeat is impossible in this world. Therefore, it is because of that singer. Need I explain this any further?"

Because none of the insufficient explanations were feasible, it steadily became unbearable for Subaru. However, it was Schult who raised his hand instead who tried to follow-up on Priscilla's remarks.

The butler boy's adorable eyes quivered as he chose his words with utmost care,

Schult: "U, uh well … … I think that it's true that Liliana's song has a special power. It’s true that they were released from anxiety or irritation when they listened to Liliana-sama’s song … … That is also what we learned from several refuge shelters which we passed by before we came here.”

Subaru: “You were letting Liliana sing to the refuge shelters you were visiting?”

Priscilla: “I believe I said so.”

Subaru: “You didn’t say that!”

Even the insufficiency of her explanation was excessive.

While being troubled by Priscilla’s attitude, Subaru turned his head to Reinhard.

Subaru: “Hey, Reinhard. Do you know of an innate ability that can see people’s, or rather … … Oh right, they’re divine protections. Can’t such things like divine protections be seen?”

Reinhard: “I think there’s a divine protection which learns about people’s divine protections. I’ve heard that the owner of the “Divine protection of Judgement” can see them. They aren’t in Lugunica, but in Vollachia, aren’t they? I see, so we want to check what kind of divine protection Liliana-sama has? It will certainly become one of our main questions.”

When he understood the purpose of Subaru’s question, Reinhard went deep into thought.

Since he just tried to ask because he had nothing to lose, even he knew that he had asked something unreasonable from Reinhard. Subaru shook his head to the pondering red haired youth and said “Never mind”.

Subaru: “Although I strangely expected something since you said that you heard all kinds of incredible things, it’s not like you’d be convenient to that extent. It’s fine. For now, we’ll be able to cancel Wrath’s authority somehow with Liliana’s song after testing it a little … …”

Reinhard: “You don’t need to worry about it, Subaru. —I’ve received it now.”

Subaru: “Ha?”

Patting the shoulder of Subaru who tried to propose an experiment with Liliana’s song, Reinhard smiled. After that, while narrowing his blue eyes, he gazed at Liliana who was performing in the corner of the room.

And then,

Reinhard: “I was surprised. Liliana holds the “Divine protection of Telepathy”.”

Subaru: “I was surprised by you because of the divine protection from just now. Eh? What did you say just now? Did you say that you received it? What did you receive, the treasure that is children?”

Reinhard: “Subaru, it’s not a situation to be making fun of. I have been able to confirm Liliana-sama’s divine protection. The “Divine protection of telepathy” is, so to speak, a divine protection which transmits the owner’s thought to others. It’s a divine protection which primarily just transmits trivial thoughts to companions whom the owner shares a close bond with, but … … a song, huh? I hadn’t even thought of something like that.”

While Reinhard was honestly admiring Liliana, Subaru’s jaw dropped after seeing him with such a face from his side.

Since Reinhard’s power was already a cheat, this guy, who was said to be beyond superhuman, was being loved way too much by the gods.

The divine protection he needed, that divine protection which he thought of turned up in his possession or something if he wished for it.

Subaru: “—?”

Barely managing to reach even a thought, Subaru picked up on what happened.

He could acquire a divine protection he thought of if he wished for it. At least it could only be expressed with what happened to the present Reinhard himself. Though that in and of itself was an extremely and reassuringly enviable power.

Since it seemed likely that he was mistaken about something, Subaru did not finish his remark.

The members of the Wrath capture group were decided —Priscilla, Al and Liliana.

Chapter 47:
Recapturing the City Outpost

1

Subaru: “For now, let’s leave the task of dealing with Wrath to Priscilla’s squad. We’ve got assurance from Reinhard that Liliana has a Divine Protection.”

Reinhard: “An unfamiliar Divine Protection may not sound very reassuring. But certainly, Liliana-sama’s song may be an effective countermeasure for what we’ve heard about Wrath.”

Following Subaru and Reinhard’s remarks, the gazes of the round table participants turned to Liliana. She was playing with her braid, and while holding it under her nose, she was play-acting as if it were a beard.

Liliana: “Ee-yeh, please leave it to me. This Liliana, once she gets a request, she definitely gets the work done. Rest assured, I only sing in a place where my singing is desired. And if so is wanted, then I sing! Isn’t this such a happy thing?! If I could even get some tips, then that’s cause to throw up my arms and celebrate!”

Subaru: “Something like a tip won’t be coming out of this, so first quit with the capitalist pig talk.”

Liliana: “Buhaa—!”

The excited Liliana deflated, and now Priscilla let out a snort instead. With eyes like crimson flames, she turned to inspect Subaru and Reinhard in turn.

Priscilla: “Seeing two boys gossiping in whispers, I looked into what they were plotting, but it seems they were merely wasting their energy on a useless consultation. That singer’s worth had already been confirmed by mine own self. Now, to crush those foolish fanatics.”

Subaru: “Even saying that, we need to be sure that nothing backfires on us…”

Priscilla: “How amusing—I am staking my singer’s life on her song. This singer who ran her mouth, why would she take on some uncertain danger to her life? There is no point in taking on that kind of risk.”

Subaru: “…”

The words she spoke did not leave Subaru much to reply with. In truth, the one that had suggested using Liliana, and believed her potential enough to face off against Wrath, had been Priscilla herself.

Unlike her words and attitude, her prudence and cleverness were exceptional, and already well-known.

Al: “Princess, don’t bully bro too much. Let’s just stay quiet, us two.”

Priscilla: “What’s that, Al? Worm, are your thoughts and your views still crooked? You have aged quite enough as a man but still just act like a girl, I see. Do not lower your worth even further in front of these commoners.”

Al: “…It’s not like that.”

Turning away his gaze with a swish, Al rested his chin on his right arm and entered a complete observer mode. Priscilla gave a snort to her servant’s behavior, reclined on her seat, and ceased talking.

Finally, it seemed like the story would flow into the next part now.

Subaru: “And with that, Wrath’s capture will be left to Priscilla’s team. Now, to form groups for the others… Let’s talk about Lust. Who to handle that one, I would like to nominate Wilhelm-san for this assignment.”

Julius: “Nominating Wilhelm-sama? May I ask the meaning of that?”

Wilhelm: “I have humbly requested as much from Subaru-dono, Julius-dono.”

Wilhelm raised his hand and answered Julius’s question. The elder swordsman collected his gaze, and lightly shifted it upstairs.

Wilhelm: “As you all well know, my master, Crusch-sama, is currently suffering under the effects of the cruel power of the Witch Cult’s Lust. I have an obligation to fight for my master as Crusch-sama’s servant. This is also a wish of mine that goes beyond my sense of duty.”

Anastasia: “Ya wanna capture the Sin Archbishop alive if possible, and ask ‘em ‘bout those symptoms. Wilhelm-san’s motive must be somethin’ like that.”

Wilhelm: “It is as you say. Therefore, please leave the subjugation of Lust to me.”

Those blue eyes with strong will behind them let out a darkness which pressured the room.

Wilhelm’s deeply-held determination, and his gratitude towards his master—with eyes that showed those feelings, nobody could raise half-hearted words against it.

Except only one, of his own flesh and blood.

Reinhard: “In truth, I am opposed to it.”

Wilhelm: “…Reinhard.”

While everyone was overwhelmed by the swordsman, only Reinhard’s expression did not change. Staring at Wilhelm with his usual serious expression,

Reinhard: “Currently, honored grandfather has lost his composure. Of course, to feel hostility towards the Sin Archbishop who harmed Crusch-sama is understandable. However, I do not believe that you will be able to achieve the objective with that feeling.”

Wilhelm: “Losing one’s composure is a hinderance in achieving the objective? Is that what you are saying to me?”

Reinhard: “Considering Crusch-sama, failing to capture Lust cannot be afforded. Therefore, I will take on that task. At least, I will be able to face that side with a better mental state.”

Reinhard’s words were correct, and had been formed with sound logic, one which considered possible situations to ensure as much certainty as possible. That Wilhelm was being too forceful, and was losing his composure was not incorrect. But, when Reinhard gave that opinion, Wilhelm loosened his lips.

Surely not gently, but instead with a smile like a ferocious beast’s.

Wilhelm: “—Losing calmness here is a given, Reinhard.”

Reinhard: “Nevertheless, honored grandfather…”

Wilhelm: “Just who do you think your grandfather is? I am Wilhelm, the Sword Demon. I am a half-hearted person who has attempted to become one with the sword, but instead fell in love with a woman. But because I am a half-hearted person, I have never done anything I should half-hearted!”

A fierce smile washed over Wilhelm’s clear and mild impression. It now was reminiscent of a demon who had burned away his life, having dedicated himself to blood and iron, having been fascinated by the sparkling beauty of a blade.

And despite that, the demon yet held a smidgen of warmth in his gaze.

Wilhelm: “When I decide to wield the sword, my heart is uplifted. Even if I am not calm, on the battlefield, it is all the same to me. That is how I have lived on to this age. This time as well, I have no intention of rotting away without repaying my obligation to my master in full. I shall not decay. Your worry is unnecessary.”

Reinhard: “That reasoning, it’s not just that mentality…”

Wilhelm: “A mentality held to the end becomes certainty. Even if it takes fourteen years, even what some may call a blunted sword shall fulfill its vengeance on its wife's enemies."

Upon being told that Wilhelm believed he had avenged his grandmother's death in full in the battle against the White Whale, Reinhard could not say anything further. But even then, Reinhard kept his eyes downcast, unconvinced. At his grandson's obstinate posture, Wilhelm continued on with "Besides,"

Wilhelm: "The battlefield that requires you is not here. The scene you are needed in is elsewhere."

Reinhard: "The scene I am needed in…"

Wilhelm: "—Subaru-dono. My grandson, please take him with you to your battlefield. To rescue Emilia-sama, you will need to battle Greed. Reinhard would act as a sword for you."

Suddenly having his name called, Subaru opened his eyes wide. As if pulled along by Wilhelm's nod, the gaze of Reinhard also turned to him.

At that appearance, Subaru scratched his head as if thinking it can't he helped.

Subaru: "Honestly, I wanted to wait to say this until after the topic of Lust was sorted out… Yeah. Your power's frankly something I want to borrow for the fight against Greed that I'm in charge of. For that annoying fucker, I definitely think I'll need your strength."

Regulus of Greed floated into his mind. According to his fragmented knowledge of the Sin Archbishops' abilities, the power Regulus possessed was the most dangerous of all those deviants.

Though he could not say for sure, in the current situation, he could not imagine calling Regulus's ability by anything other than a stupid word like "invincibility". Of course, he did not want to think of him as a simply invincible existence. Some kind of weakness or limit had to exist, that was what he wanted to believe.

Subaru: "To break through Regulus's invincible defense, we need strong attacking ability to deal with him. To put it simply, his offensive and defensive ability, compared with the other the Sin

Archbishops, I think is at the top. So, I want to borrow Reinhard's power for when we attack him."

Reinhard: "An untouchable opponent… Certainly, for a monster such as that, I would be the right choice. However…"

Even after hearing of Regulus's absurd power, Reinhard's hesitation did not disappear. But, seeing Reinhard's worry, another voice rang out.

That sound was coming from none other than the one next to Subaru.

???: "—Then, Wilhelm-jii'll just be goin' with my amazin' self."

Striding forward was Garfiel, gnashing his sharp fangs as he glared at Reinhard. Reinhard made a surprised face at him, as if wondering, "You?"

Garfiel: "Recommend me, Captain. My amazin' self's skills, ya understand 'em too. For rescuin' Emilia-sama, my amazin' self's not needed. Right, Captain?"

Subaru: "No, Garfiel. I don't want to tell you something like that…"

Garfiel: "I don't need comfortin'. And I'm not sayin' this stuff just 'cause I'm sulkin'. It's the other way 'round. For my amazin' self, this time, there's another bastard that needs seein' to here."

His brows furrowing at Garfiel's attitude as the latter breathed roughly, Subaru realized far too belatedly.

That was it. Among those whose appearances had been changed by Lust in the City Hall, there had been a person who was an acquaintance to him—someone who had been turned into a black dragon.

Then, for Garfiel, Lust was no opponent he was unrelated to. In addition—

Garfiel: "It's true that we can't forgive that damn woman, but it's not just that. That duo, the ones who schooled me, they were with that disgustin' Lust."

Subaru: "…"

Garfiel: "'Cause of my amazin' self's mistake, there's an idiot that got injured without needin' to. So my amazin' self's got to give 'em as good as possible for them. And so, my amazin' self'll be followin' gramps over there."

At Garfiel's keen gaze, Wilhelm slowly lowered his chin.

Here, the elder swordsman and the young warrior were united, standing together in a fight for vengeance. At the root, they both shared motives borne of thinking strongly about women they cared about, so they had even more in common.

Towards Garfiel's expression, Subaru too had nothing more to say.

Subaru: "I might be repeating myself here, but Lust's power is to mutate and transform. She can morph herself and can also force mutations onto others. And… her blood. No matter what, do not let her blood touch you. It's what caused Crusch-san's injuries. Personality-wise… They're all terrible, but she's especially bad."

Wilhelm: "Understood."

Garfiel: "Stomp and crush 'em."

At Subaru's last confirmation, neither Wilhelm nor Garfiel showed any sign of backing down.

When Subaru finally made eye contact with Reinhard to check what he thought, the Sword Saint, who had been firm up to this resolute scene, seemed to have lost the desire to speak.

Reinhard: "It does not matter. Garfiel's ability is certain. And if my honored grandfather is there, then by whatever means necessary he will cut them down, that can be relied on."

Garfiel: "Sayin' it like that makes it sound unconvincin'. "The torktoi's mild but the taste's superb", as they say."

Reinhard: “It is the truth. I believe in yours and my honored grandfather’s victory. I will act as Subaru’s sword.”

As Garfiel scratched his face with an uncomfortable look, Reinhard nodded to Subaru. From the Sword Saint’s believable words, Subaru felt like he had received a lot of help.

Subaru: “I’m sorry about this selfish hope, Reinhard.”

Reinhard: “It is fine. No matter where the battlefield is, I will give my utmost efforts. If that will be of help to you, then that is what I wish for.”

Subaru: “For just relying on you, I’m really sorry. The thing is, I’m relying way too much on you being really strong, but… the parts where you’re lacking, I’ll fill them in somehow, so please look forward to it.”

Reinhard: “…”

Hearing those words, Reinhard suddenly widened his eyes and shut his mouth. Subaru tilted his head at that unusual reaction, and Reinhard laughed lightly, keeping a faint smile.

Reinhard: “For you, that would be nothing at all, right? —Aah, I am looking forward to it. To see you filling in for me, the parts I cannot reach.”

Subaru: “—? Then look forward to it a lot, I am too. So, I think we know the flow by now, so inevitably, there’s the last one, Gluttony…”

Julius: “—Then, me and Ricardo are left to be in charge of that.”

Following after Subaru’s words, the one agreeing in a low tone was Julius. Hearing him speak in a rough voice which was unlike him, Anastasia directed a concerned gaze at her Knight.

Anastasia: “Julius, you alright? Your complexion hasn’t been lookin’ so good for quite a while now…”

Julius: “I apologize for causing you anxiety. However, I am fine.

When speaking of comforts and discomforts of the body, I cannot make something like weak complaints in front of Subaru."

Subaru: "What do you mean by that?!"

Julius: "Of course, I was thinking of your difficulties with your leg when I spoke. Please do not snap at me like that. In a situation like this, I have no intention of getting into arguments with you."

Subaru: "Hm…"

He took a lot of damage from a motive he had not thought of. At the same time, he felt a strange sense of something being out of place. Julius's appearance seemed suspicious to him, just as it had been for Anastasia. Why that was, he still did not know, but even then…

Julius: "Ricardo and I will be taking the leftover responsibility of handling Gluttony. Originally, Subaru and Wilhelm-sama would have served as his opponent. Due to their ties with him, they would have wanted to manage it themselves. Because you assigned this task to us while enduring those feelings, we will definitely carry it out for both of you to see."

Subaru: "…Ah, so that's it."

What Julius felt was true, Subaru would have wanted to subjugate Gluttony himself. Wilhelm would too, and above them, Crusch, still suffering, would have felt the same.

The Authority of Gluttony, which consumed Memories and Names—thinking of Rem, who had suffered that damage, being put into sleep that lasted even now, Subaru wanted to crush Gluttony completely with his own hand.

Hitting, kicking, stomping on him, forcing him to regret the atrocities he had committed, to turn his face into a teary mess as he forced him to bow down to the ground until he felt catharsis, that was what he wanted to do.

That role, he had given over to others—

Subaru: “No matter who it is, honestly, I don’t want to leave it to them. Rem… I wanted to restore her. I wanted to get her back myself. I believed doing that to be my role.”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “But, if it won’t do unless I entrust it to someone, then I’ll leave it to you. Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s by process of elimination… and only by process of elimination, but I will leave it to you. For me, you’re the only one I can tolerate handing this role to, even if I don’t like it.”

Rem’s very memory and existence were being held hostage.

Emilia’s freedom had been taken away, and she was still waiting for help to arrive.

Both of them were precious relations to Subaru, both of them were precious people he had to get back, and so, to both of them, Subaru wanted to show his cool side.

However, Subaru was Emilia’s Knight, and Rem’s Hero too, so,

Subaru: “I will defeat Greed, and I will rescue Emilia. Blowing away Gluttony, I’ll hand it to you… Don’t screw it up.”

Julius: “—To your expectations, I will respond. Especially this time, definitely this time.”

With a firm nod, Julius accepted Subaru’s trust.

The Finest of Knights then gazed towards Wilhelm, and inclined his head slightly.

Julius: “Wilhelm-sama.”

Wilhelm: “Of what I wanted to say, Subaru-dono has spoken most of that for me. It is true that I do not have the most harmonious feelings for Gluttony… And so, I too will entrust it to Julius-dono. There are too many scoundrels present in this city.”

From that Sword Demon growing sharp, Julius seemed to gain a bit of courage. Ricardo, who had until then quietly observed their talk, now chimed in,

Ricardo: “And what’s this, my thoughts don’t even seem to be heard in this talk y’all havin’. I don’t even get anyone to care ‘bout me, that it?! Though, that this lineup’s the best so far, I can agree to that.”

Anastasia: “Ricardo really’s lookin’ for attention. Gettin’ miffed like that with yer big size doesn’t really look cute, ya know… Take care of Julius for me.”

Ricardo: “Relax. Have ya ever see me lyin’? Ana-bo.”

Anastasia: “Could ya stop usin’ that title? I’m yer master, ya know?”

Ricardo guffawed loudly at the sight of Anastasia’s miffed face and puffed-up cheeks. The black-iris eyes that gazed down on Anastasia had a very kind glint in them.

Subaru: “Then, with this, the lineups are decided, right.”

—Following Subaru’s remark, all those present at the round table nodded their heads.

Subaru: “For the attack on Sirius of Wrath, Priscilla and Al. Counting Liliana, that’s three in all.”

Priscilla: “The notion that I may succumb to the toying of emotions is a laughable one indeed. Showing my opponent how they were in the wrong place at the wrong time while facing the wrong enemy, such a helpless fool deserves a lesson!”

Liliana: “I only sing, I only sing~! It’s what I am, just a lump of meat that sings! Do not cherish your life, cherish the stage. Okay, good, I feel like I can do it. Right now, I really feel like I can do it!”

Al: “…”

Priscilla fanned herself as Liliana engaged in questionable self-hypnosis. Al’s face could not be seen, but the impression that he was still not convinced seemed to come from his whole body.

Though it was a mildly unsettling trio, confidence-wise they were the strongest there.

Subaru: “Next up, for the capturing of Lust, Garfiel and Wilhelm-san.”

Garfiel: “Got it. My amazin’ self will grab ‘em by the throat, ‘n make ‘em cry ‘n say sorry.”

Wilhelm: “Please leave it to me—With the both of us, it is assured.”

The pair with the most fighting spirit, could it be said to be these two?

The Sword Demon Wilhelm had his gratitude for his master, and also his wife, who he had not forgotten even for a moment. As for Garfiel, there was some form inside him that could not be grasped, some emotion that made his feelings quake.

Perhaps these two warriors both sought some answers in the battle ahead.

Subaru: “And for the conquest of Gluttony, it’s the two of you, Julius and Ricardo.”

Julius: “By none other than you both, we have been entrusted this task. It will certainly be resolved. Like this, then, I will negate him.”

Ricardo: “Those damn bastards made my family suffer. I don’t need to hear those words to know. I’ll punch ‘em, hit ‘em hard and make ‘em cry.”

This pair had the least connections to the Witch Cult. And yet they could safely be expected to not fall behind the others, since it was definitely certain that both were highly-respected battlers. Together, he had already overcome hardship with them. Nowhere in these comrades-in-arms lay any cause for doubt.

Because of that, the choice to yield the detestable Gluttony was made possible.

Subaru: “The last one is Greed, Reinhard and I being the two to meet him. I'm counting on you."

Reinhard: "—Ahh, leave it to me. I am depending on you as well, Subaru."

At Subaru's request, Reinhard nodded his head with his usual resolute attitude. But something in his draped mien seemed soft, and while in the middle of battle it might strike one as imprudent, right now his appearance seemed to overflow with humanity.

Why it was such a reassuring look, Subaru did not know.

Anastasia: "Then, with this, the choices for the fights're decided. And on the matter of choosin' places to set up Communication Mirrors for reports, there are three of 'em in all. Assuming one's left in the City Hall… For the other ones, what should we do?"

Subaru: "Personally, I definitely want someone to take one for Wrath. And one to… Lust or Gluttony, one of those two would be nice, I think."

Anastasia: "What're your reasons?"

Subaru: "Wrath is someone with influence over the whole city. The situation the city's in will change based on whether we can beat her or not. Therefore, that news is something I want to be able to share quickly."

Regarding the use of Communication Mirrors, they all nodded as if Subaru's suggestion was correct. As for the reason for bringing a different one to Greed,

Subaru: "As we've said, Reinhard will be with Greed. Assuming anything about Greed beyond his ability being unknown would be optimistic, but I can't say that the possibility of it being handled instantly doesn't exist. If it ends up being like that, I want to set up a situation where Reinhard can be sent as reinforcements."

Otto: "However, unless the team at Greed possesses a Communication Mirror, then sharing that information would be impossible, correct? I certainly believe that Natsuki-san's opinion is largely correct."

Subaru: “The answer to that is simple. Use the broadcasting magical device. With a city-wide broadcast, I want us to keep everyone informed of places that need help. Using the Communication Mirror, Anastasia-san will organize all the information, and will take on the responsibility of conveying it to everyone. How’s that?”

Anastasia: “I’m thinkin’ that’s wise. Yer head seems to work well sometimes, Natsuki-kun.”

Anastasia laughed with an impressed look, and tossed a Conversation Mirror towards Priscilla. She caught it with her fan, and presented it in front of Liliana.

Liliana: “Wa-Wa-Wah?!”

Priscilla: “Singer, you take it. Since I cannot lift anything heavier than tableware.”

Liliana: “That fan is almost as heavy as some tableware. Don’t say pompous things.”

Priscilla: “Do not speak so foolishly, inspect this design. Gold is hung and inlaid from it luxuriously, and from just that it is weighty. Do not toss it in with the likes of dishes.”

Liliana: “Then isn’t that heavier than tableware…”

Regardless of what she had said, in the end, Liliana wound up taking it. Ignoring Liliana, who was quickly fixing her hair in the mirror, the last Conversation Mirror was passed to Wilhelm.

Subaru: “Considering the number of enemies, the group assigned to Lust needs this more than the group for Gluttony. Since two people are going it should be fine, but contact Anastasia right away if it seems dangerous.”

Wilhelm: “Understood, I will be sure to contact her.”

Showing consideration for Julius, Wilhelm placed the mirror in his breast pocket.

However, it was a slightly worrying judgment. Wilhelm could become hot with fury and ignore the instructions from now. And Garfiel, needless to say, was the type to explode at the slightest provocation.

—Regardless, like this the battle preparations were complete.

Subaru: “Let’s take a moment. Once that’s done, we’ll leave and start the operation to recapture the control towers.”

At Subaru’s words, everyone present replied by nodding their heads. However, seeing their quiet, tense appearances, Subaru thought the mood was poor anyhow.

Subaru: “If you’re making angry faces, don’t you get the feeling that bad stuff gets closer?”

Otto: “A sign that Natsuki-san will say something strange occurred once more.”

Subaru: “It’s not weird. It’s important. No matter how large of an army gathers, if morale is low, it can turn into a rabble. I’m not saying our morale is low here, but I don’t think my motives are bad. So, let’s raise our voice.”

While clapping his hands, Subaru stood up.

Subaru: “Let’s do this, everyone! With this fight, get rid of these bastards who have disturbed this city! The Witch Cult fails, and we get a happy end!”

Others: “…”

At Subaru’s urging, they looked at each others’ faces. Then, nodding —

Others: “Ohhhhh—!!”

Like that, a high-morale reply came back.

If they were able to return with such a strong answer, then they would definitely be fine. This many members, this much of a vanguard, it was not something that could just be prepared again.

—The city recapture, began in earnest.

Subaru: "—This fight will be our victory!!"

With Subaru saying whatever he wanted, the round table meeting concluded.

2

Her muffled sensations recovered; her consciousness slowly returned to reality.

As reality started to permeate through drowsy senses, the feelings in her hands and feet naturally returned. Then, while feeling spread through the rest of her body, her first sensation was of something soft embracing her.

Warm, it was relaxing like she was wrapped up in a large animal's fur.

She had felt something similar quite a long time ago. A long time ago, back when she was young, a time when her mind was not running in time with her body, a time when she feared sleeping alone.

Now far from the feeling of that fur's texture, quite some time had passed since then.

Emilia: "—Ah."

At first, her eyes welled with tears from its nostalgic touch. Putting aside her silly desire to keep feeling the warmth, she slowly opened her eyes. Her long eyelashes shivered, and amethyst irises blankly noted the world.

She was in a room with high ceilings, and strange decorations which she had never seen before. Lying on a bed there, she found herself wrapped up in a summer blanket crafted from quality fur.

A stranger seated beside her had been cleaning her face with a wet towel.

Emilia: “You are…?”

???: “…”

Looking down upon her when she opened her eyes was a beautiful woman with a pure-white face.

That rather sickly, blood-drained face, was pretty and expressionless like a doll’s. Her beauty was such that she would surely light up the room if she smiled, but her face was rigidly held like a mask, which could not laugh.

Rising, her long hair waving behind her, the woman in a black dress left the room right away.

She quickly tried to call out to her, but as she fretted on how to call her while not knowing her name, the door clicked shut. As such, she found herself alone.

Emilia: “Where am I?”

Hesitantly, she sat up on the bed. Though she felt slightly heavy, no pain or signs of poor condition could be felt. The heaviness could be from using too much magic she was not yet used to, a sign that her body was unable to withstand that burden.

Having gotten that far, right away she remembered what had occurred to her.

Emilia: “Right. Ah, at the square, I fought a strange person, and…”

Continuing on, in her head the events from just before she lost consciousness came to mind.

A monster with a face wrapped in bandages—The one Subaru had called Wrath, had turned with fearsome combat prowess and downright creepy amounts of anger towards herself. For a moment, she had taken on the fight at an advantage, but then losing to the force of those fiercely burning flames, she had been sent flying—

Emilia: “And then, I must have passed out. But I’m still alive.”

As she was outmatched, there was no doubt it had been a desperate situation.

Someone had perhaps come to her aid. Subaru and Beatrice had been there, it could be she had been rescued by those two. Even then, her heart was crushed by how pathetic she had been.

Emilia had struck such a pose at Subaru, and had boasted so much, but not only had she lost, she needed to be rescued too.

Emilia: “Mh, there’s no time to be dejected. I’m already late, so there’s no time to pause in my steps and repent. I’ll reflect while walking.”

Tapping her snow-white cheeks with both hands, she raised her spirits. Time spent depressed was time squandered.

Having been provided a bed and blanket and even having been watched over by a caretaker, this place must be a benevolent someone's home. Since she had not been taken to her own place, her situation may have been quite severe.

Emilia: "But I can't feel any pain, so maybe a skilled healer… Ehh?"

While moving to stand, Emilia came to realize something about herself.

Emilia: "I'm naked."

When her bare feet touched the floor, she noticed that not a single piece of cloth was draped on her body. Emilia's head tilting, she first wrapped the blanket around her body and got down from the bed. Gazing around the room, she looked around hoping for something to wear, but regrettably could not find anything.

Emilia: "Hmm, what should I do? If I leave the room like this, I'll be thought of as bad-mannered…"

Before leaving the forest, and after leaving the forest, in-between study sessions, and having learned various things, that point had been drilled into her by Puck and Annerose, respectively. She should not show skin in front of others. Following that rule, then her own appearance right now was completely a problem.

Emilia: "But, I'm worried about everyone and it's an emergency, so it can't be helped."

She had to find out what had happened after the conclusion of the battle with the Sin Archbishop as quickly as possible. With that as justification, Emilia emerged from the room garbed in a single blanket.

Walking out to the corridor, it was definitely not a building she had ever seen before. However, compared to how she had imagined it, the outside of the room gave an oddly unsophisticated impression of a cold hallway.

Emilia: “I thought I was somewhere like a mansion, but that was totally wrong. Hmm, is it just this room that’s strange?”

Turning back, she looked at the room she had slept in.

A large bed, and a small wardrobe. However, upon closer inspection, she could not escape the impression that something was off about it. It gave the impression that a bed and other furniture had been brought and messily piled inside an empty room.

And that might not have been wrong. By checking the atmosphere of the corridor, this was definitely not a place meant for people to live in. This was a place where people worked. If she focused her ears, the faint sound of water and a hint of something operating could be heard.

While Emilia puzzled over that, there—

???: “Ah, it seems you’ve opened your eyes, how relieving, what a relief. I’m relieved you’re safe.”

Emilia turned around, having been addressed.

Just then, at the far end of the corridor, a young man emerged. Having discovered Emilia, the white-haired youth grinned at her, walking relaxedly.

???: “However, I’m not comfortable with you walking around right after waking up. It’s just that you endured a lot of hardships, so if something happened to your body, it’d be a headache. In that regard, I want you to take good care of yourself. Even moreso since it’s not just your body, I mean.”

Emilia: “Hm, you are…?”

Blinking, Emilia gazed at the young man speaking to her.

That attitude of narrowing the gap between others with a single step was somewhat close to Subaru’s. However, the crucial difference between Subaru and him, was that his attitude had no intention of respecting the other person.

That was Subaru's timid virtue, and the young man in front of her did not show any hint of it. It was as if he did not have any remorse for others.

—At the same time, Emilia was recalling a feeling she could not describe regarding the young man in front of her.

???: "Is that so? Sorry, sorry. I've even seen your sleeping face, but this is your first time seeing me, I'd assume. I haven't even given you my name yet. Even if you and I are to be in a relationship, this kind of impolite attitude won't do. I was too hasty on that point, it is my fault. I honestly am sorry. Since I am a human being capable of such things."

Emilia: "Y-Yes…"

Emilia's reply to that endlessly, fluently speaking young man was quite heavy.

The reason for that might be that his attitude overwhelmed her, but a more significant implication was contained within. That was, Emilia's subconscious was appealing to her.

—She felt that she recalled seeing this young man, somewhere before.

???: "It's a waste of a scene, it's a shame that this place lacks the atmosphere. But I believe that when you look back to it, you will remember it as a special moment. If you were to look at it that way, it would not be a bad thing. A small happiness day-by-day is just more than enough to make the path known as life brighten up. I'm sure this is especially true for you. You want to look at the good parts of life, and not just the bad parts. Don't you think so too, Emilia?"

Emilia: "I don't recall telling you my name… So, you are?"

???: "Oops, I'm sorry. It's a bad habit of mine to stop considering my surroundings when I become excited about something. It's for that reason that I sometimes dislike my affectionate personality. It could be that you are the one making me feel such emotions. And so, my name, was it?”

After an incredibly long and flexible detour, this young man was barely entering the main subject.

Feeling mysterious tingles burn her skin, Emilia did not take her eyes off of the young man’s behavior. She intuitively understood that her own safety was at risk.

And the cause of that intuition was the young man in front of her.

Regulus: “My name is Regulus Corneas. I hold a leadership position in a certain group, but something like that is of no concern to you. What is indeed important to you is just one thing. That I am your husband, and that you are my seventy-ninth wife.”

Emilia: “…Eh?”

The young man—Regulus presented his name, and the meaning of what he so marvelously spoke of, she did not understand. Emilia was confused, and her pretty brows frowned. However Regulus paid no mind to Emilia’s reaction, and was staring at the girl’s body, covered only with a single light cloth.

Regulus: “That appearance is poison to the eyes. I’ll order a change of clothes to be brought over right away. You can relax. They are in the same situation as you, my other wives. Putting on wedding attire is something they have gotten used to.”

Emilia: “Wedding attire, what do you mean? No, it isn’t just that. Calling me your wife, what are you saying?”

Regulus: “Right. I was forgetting the most important thing! For one such as myself, that was dangerous.”

Emilia opened her mouth to ask another question, but Regulus was not listening. He clapped his hands, and lightly grabbed Emilia’s shoulder as she was about to question.

As she felt the odd amount of force coming from those fingers, Emilia frowned. Drawing close enough to touch Emilia’s forehead, Regulus gazed into her eyes.

Regulus: “I was forgetting an important, very important question. Your awareness of the wedding comes after this. Emilia, this is important, so I want you to answer from the depths of your heart. For our future, it’s very important.”

Emilia: “…”

At that weird level of pressure, Emilia swallowed her breath, remaining silent.

Taking her attitude as assent, Regulus smiled. And with that smile, he asked.

Regulus: “Emilia, are you a virgin? This is really important.”

And with that smile, he spoke.

Chapter 48:
The Person You Will One Day Fall in Love With

1

For a moment, Emilia did not understand the meaning of what had been said to her.

Without thinking, she swallowed. The young man in front of her—Regulus, in response, raised a hand while smiling.

Regulus: “Aah, I’m sorry for doing this so suddenly. I may have shocked you a little. Honestly, I apologize on that point. It seems I keep on having to say it, but I am a man capable of apologizing. There are unsightly people in this world who do not acknowledge their own sins and blame this and that, too small to admit they make their own mistakes. They think they do not get a single thing wrong, even if you empty out everything they’ve done since birth to this very moment and examine it. Mistaken so, I think they become like that, but just how arrogant can they be? If they could just examine what lies under their feet a little more, and compare themselves to the vastness of the world and come to truly understand how small of an existence they really are, then they would not end up like that, just a single apology, is what they call a personality? It reflects their character. Don’t you think so?”

Emilia: “Then, apologizing is important?”

Regulus: “Correct! That’s right, apologizing is important. What a relief. It’s obvious, and you seem to understand that point, so I am quite relieved. In this world, people that can not understand something so obvious are unexpectedly many. It makes me dislike them. So, it seems there’s no problem on the matter of adjusting understandings between the spouses about apologizing. I’m relieved, it seems like I’ll be able to get along well with you from now on. And so, I apologized. The problem was, I was being a little impatient…”

Having spoken up to that point, Regulus’ eyes looked Emilia up and down. As her body was only wrapped in a blanket, she froze up a little at that view.

Regulus: “Yes, shyness is important even between spouses. On that point I think you are very good. Once again, it’s about the question from just before, I’d rather you not misunderstand. I, more than anything, was not checking whether or not you are a virgin from a worldly point of view. I’ve said this multiple times, but I am your husband and you are my wife. It will not do for a marriage to lack strong ties of affection and courtesy. Connected with the long, long chain called love, devoting everything to your partner is obvious. Therefore, that you have never been touched by another man… That’s the kind of assurance I need.”

Emilia: “Assurance that, I wasn’t touched by others…?”

Regulus: “Of course, checking whether or not you retain your maidenhood by sure evidence is nonsense. But as a kind of touchstone, I think it has such significant value. So, deliberately, even knowing it would be an experience you don’t enjoy, I asked. I want you to understand that this is due to my love for you. Some stranger you don’t love, who cares about how their virginity is. It’s because I love you, that’s why I’m checking.”

Regulus fluently and continuously spoke of the rationale behind his thoughts. Battered by these waves of words, Emilia felt something creepy about the cooly-talking Regulus.

Without knowing why, something about his appearance ceaselessly stirred a feeling of déjà vu in her heart, and the contents of what she heard pouring like water were not retained in her memory. Only, she was aware of one thing.

What he treated as important, the term “virgin”. That was—

Regulus: “And so, I want to ask once again. —Hey, are you a virgin? Or not?”

Emilia: “Um, by “virgin”, what do you mean? Sorry. I, haven’t heard it before.”

Regulus: “…What?”

After being thrown a question prepared with flowery words, Emilia apologetically replied so.

She knew Regulus had a strong attachment to the word, but Emilia did not know very well what it meant.

Perhaps, it refers to a young girl, she thought.

Inquiring in a low voice and hearing Emilia’s reply, Regulus’ expression clouded.

Closing his eyes, he shut his mouth. Fallen in thought like that, his appearance caused anxiety to creep up, but the silence didn’t last as long as imagined.

Opening his eyes wide, Regulus reached his open hand towards Emilia. And,

Regulus: “Excellent. —You are, my ideal girl.”

Emilia: “Eeh?”

Holding Emilia’s hand, Regulus wore a bright smile on his face.

It was a truly happy face, unlike the smile from just before. He had the kind of expression, that a beaming child might make after getting a toy they really wanted from their doting parents.

Regulus grabbed and shook Emilia’s hand up and down, and repeated the gesture many times.

Regulus: “Yes. That is how it should be. The virginity of the body this, the virginity of the body that, it’s not really suitable for me as a touchstone, I had always thought so. However, the true sense of pureness is what lies in your heart. Your body being virgin is a given! What’s really important, is that your mind remains virgin as well. I feel as if I have reached a truth. Amazing. You have brought something new to my previously satisfied self.”

Emilia: “…”

Regulus: “Yes, yes, I get it. Rest assured, I will welcome you as my wife. Besides, because of that I realized something important. Henceforth, when welcoming a new wife, just inquiring as to their virginity will be insufficient. If they are not at the level of a child lacking knowledge of what virginity even is, that lowers the value of a wife. An adulterous heart will not do. It is unbefitting of my wife.”

Releasing Emilia’s hand, Regulus stepped away with a very satisfied appearance.

The meaning of his remarks were still not very well grasped by Emilia. In the first place, what he meant by “husband” and “wife” was a mystery to her. By Emilia’s understanding, the wife was part of something the father and mother were, one each, but from Regulus’ remarks, the image of many wives came to mind. Such was a notion far off from Emilia’s common sense of the nature of married couples. Perhaps he was talking about a different concept with a shared pronunciation?

Regulus; Whoa, and your appearance cannot be left like that. I will arrange for a change of clothes straight away. —No. 184! Come here.”

Emilia: “…”

Leaving the perplexed Emilia alone, Regulus suddenly spoke out a number. Then, from the other side of the corridor, the woman who had left the room Emilia was in now appeared. A young woman with long blonde hair and a polite manner, she arrived next to Regulus and demurely greeted him on the spot. Regulus nodded at her gestures, and

Regulus: “For her…A change of clothes for No. 79 As soon as that’s prepared, I will hold the wedding. This child is in the same position as all of you. Get along, and do take care of her.”

No. 184: “…”

Regulus: “Yes, you are no longer prone to laughing. —Good child. A good wife.”

To the silently nodding woman, Regulus spoke as if satisfied.

After that, approaching Emilia who still seemed lost, he ran a finger through the side of her silver hair, and stroked her head.

Regulus: “Then, a little while later.”

Emilia: “Yes…”

Emilia’s instinct was appealing to her, to avoid going against him.

Accepting Emilia’s short reply, Regulus then, with the sound of footsteps, disappeared to the other side of the corridor.

Regulus had merely just been there, calmly too—Even then, his existence gave off a strange pressure, which seemed to her a dangerous threat that reminded her of the time her old homeland had been threatened.

No. 184: “This way.”

The woman next to Emilia suddenly called out to her. She had been gazing at the back which had long since disappeared. Hearing the woman’s voice for the first time, she was reminded of string instruments from its clear beauty. However, the voice, just like her expression, felt as if all feelings of emotion in it had frozen and hardened.

Emilia: “Hey, sorry. I, have a looot of questions I want to ask…”

No. 184: “Your change of clothes.”

Emilia: “The clothes are important, but there’s also…Yes, do you know where this place is? I was, at a plaza in Priestella with a Witch Cult person…Ah, really.”

Ignoring Emilia as she tried to ask questions, the woman started to walk off immediately. Following quickly behind her, Emilia kept asking questions trying to somehow shine light on the situation, but that fully-turned back replied to her with nothing.

Guided by the woman in front of her, she arrived next to the room she had slept in previously. It was also a space which resembled a simply arranged room, in which furniture had been forcefully shoved inside.

Emilia: “This must have, originally, been a slightly different room…”

No. 184: “The clothes chosen with care, and so on, Husband-sama brought them over. No. 79, you are to change into them.”

Emilia: “By No. 79, do you mean me? Just now, I think Regulus called me by that, too. You’re…”

No. 184: “I am No. 184 His wife, like you.”

Emilia: “Like me…”

As the door closed, only then did the woman—Naming herself No. 184, engage herself in conversation. There was no change in the voice which had lost its emotion, but it seemed barely possible to make conversation.

Emilia: “About the word ‘wife’, I’ve asked a few times, but does it mean the same as ‘missus’? Then, I, don’t think I’ve become Regulus’ missus…”

No. 184: “Even if no such idea resides with you, he has such a notion. And if he has that idea, that means yours are irrelevant.”

Emilia: “Isn’t that strange. To become a missus, you have to be married with your master, right? I, didn’t get married with Regulus, and don’t have any thoughts to. Marrying is between a guy person and a girl person, who say they will keep being together and have to keep liking each other after. I, can’t make a promise like that with anyone yet.”

No. 184: “If you mean a wedding, it will be held right now. With that, the matter will be concluded.”

No. 184 did not seem to possess any notion of listening to Emilia’s words. Even as dialogue seemed established, it actually wasn’t, and Emilia became more and more confused.

In the meantime, No.184 had approached Emilia, and was trying to pull aside the blanket covering her.

Emilia: “Ah, wait, what are you doing?”

No. 184: “Changing you into bridal attire right away. Fortunately, your clothes are already prepared. When undressing you to lay you in bed, your size was checked, so please rest assured.”

Emilia: “You were the one who undressed me?”

No. 184: “Do you think I’m Husband-sama? Please be assured. He does not make a habit of stealing peeks at women’s skin, and he doesn’t have any interest in women in the first place. After your virginity has been assured, he does not do anything.”

Emilia: “You, are talking about that ‘virgin’, too?”

No. 184: “…It is surprising. Surely, but it wasn’t acting, you really did not know?”

For the first time, something resembling emotion slightly flitted across No. 184’s expression. At that faintly surprised look, Emilia opened her eyes wide, then slightly laughed.

Emilia: “What, you can be surprised, too. Then, you can talk while smiling. That is, much better suited for you, I think.”

No. 184: “…Husband-sama does not desire it. I will also leave this advice with you: “Husband-sama likes your usual look. It is wiser not to laugh, rage, or change your expression. If possible, even not opening your mouth would be better, I think.”

Emilia: “Are you saying not to talk? Why?”

No. 184: “Since you won’t know, whether it infringe on Husband-sama’s rights.”

Stripping the bedding from Emilia, No. 184 proffed undergarments. After receiving it, she held it up to her body, and the size seemed to fit perfectly.

Watching her putting on the undergarments while shaking her hands and feet, No. 184 suddenly gave a long sigh.

Emilia: “Is something wrong?”

No. 184: “…No, I was merely thinking that you were beautiful. Your narrow hands and feet, white skin, and long silver hair, especially.”

Emilia: “—? Thanks. Even if you don’t really mean it, I’m happy. I only have Subaru and Anne telling me things like that.”

No. 184: “Subaru…A man, is it?”

Emilia: “Yes, my knight. He will rea~lly be worrying about me, I think. So, I want to find out where I am quickly…”

Probably, it would be causing him lots of worry.

In Emilia’s head, there wasn’t any concern of Subaru having been done in. He had Beatrice with him, and the notion of Subaru falling into a situation where he would die didn’t reach Emilia’s imagination in the first place. Subaru, he would get through it somehow.

And so, being captured without being able to say anything to Subaru was really pathetic.

No. 184: “That man you call Subaru, do not ever mention him to Husband-sama.”

Emilia: “Uh, why?”

No. 184: “To borrow Husband-sama’s words, the virginity of your mind may become suspect.”

Emilia: “Again, it’s about that ‘virgin’.”

Giving a term as the reason without explaining what it meant was really confusing.

Without explanation beyond that for the pouting Emilia, No. 184

took a pure white dress from the closet, and held it close to Emilia's body.

With a brilliant-looking front, and many fancy ornaments stuck on, it was a beautiful dress.

Emilia: "But, it looks hard to move in."

No. 184: "Complaints too, not speaking those would be wise. I will dress you now."

Wondering, her head tilted askew, whether such a wonderful outfit would even suit her, Emilia was putting it on as instructed by No. 184, she was changing into the dress.

2

Regulus: "—Aah, isn't that just great. As I thought, white suits you."

Emilia: "…Thanks."

Regulus said in a bright voice when he saw that Emilia had changed clothes,

His appearance too had changed from their hallway meeting just before. Emilia's expression suggested that she had noticed, and Regulus lightly popped his collar in reply,

Regulus: "A wedding is important, you know. Normally, I am of the thought not to not be attired as such, but I wouldn't want to embarrass you with some unfun stubbornness. It is the ideal for spouses to show consideration for each other, without thinking of it as uncomfortable. For this level of work, I do not wish to burden you with worried thoughts about all the consideration I have shown you, I merely want you to know that, if it is for your sake, I am a man that can accept making some changes. And for the venue, it will be ready soon, in just a little while."

Emilia: "The venue…You mean here?"

Dressed in a white tuxedo and robes, Regulus turned his head, and following him, Emilia also gazed around the space she was in.

It was a cathedral—To be exact, it was a cathedral used only for the single important task of beginning a wedding ceremony.

After having been changed by No.184, Emilia had left the building for the first time, and quickly realized she had been resting in a room within one of the control towers. As such, Emilia had been led by No. 184 from the tower and brought right to this cathedral.

The outside of the cathedral was busy with laboring figures bustling about, for the wedding preparations which they were methodically continuing. And wordlessly, blankly carrying out the preparation of the venue, wherever one looked, were beautiful and fashionably attired women.

Regulus: “These girls are my wives, they’re in the same position as you are. All together, they number 291…It’s sad, but a lot of those kids died, you know. But still, for those that are still with me, I pour my love onto them equally, I think. That’s obvious. Some principle of favoring and loving only one person is too distorted to be fitting for what you call a husband. I never do such absurd things. A fixed love, in a fixed amount, by fixed ways, I divvy it out. Here, there is no favoritism, no inequality, no injustice. Be relieved. For I, also love you in that same way.”

Emilia: “What you are saying, isn’t it…”

???: “—Husband-sama. Briefly, a word.”

“Isn’t it weird?”, Emilia was about to say.

Coming to the front, No. 184 who had been waiting at their side spoke to Regulus Hearing No. 184’s words, he vaguely furrowed his brows.

Regulus: “You know. I’m talking to her right now, you see that, right? Interrupting me now, when we’re sharing in nurturing the sprouting of love between us, just me and her, don’t you think you’re smearing poison on it? Or is that just not on your mind? Such small courtesies between a husband and wife, I think they’re really important. Didn’t I keep telling you that? And yet, by still getting in the way, you’re making my very minor wish go to waste.

What do you think, No. 184?”

No. 184: “I am truly sorry. However, this is important. I know it is presumptuous, but I am only acting out of concern for Husband-sama. I humbly ask you, to hear my words.”

His speaking grew more rapid, and signs of danger erupted from Regulus’ whole body. However, even exposed to that razor-sharp look, No. 184’s resolute attitude did not bend as she advised him. Naturally, at that sight, Regulus drew back the thorns from his appearance.

Regulus: “…Fine. Speak. Sparing some kindness for the wife, is a husband’s generosity. I am not such a petty man that I can’t even do that much.”

No. 184: “I am truly grateful. Well, it is regarding the message of the broadcast from a while ago…Will that be all right? If, potentially, a disturbance was made at the wedding.”

Regulus: “The broadcast? Ah, the one that the trembling voice I don’t really know made. Does it actually matter? If they just talk, it’s not a problem at all. It’s some complaint-filled coward that can’t even speak of their own skills, listing off some fitting words, that’s all it seems to me. If it’s Capella, or Sirius, if it’s for those trash then I don’t know…But I don’t care. Or, is it that you don’t trust in my strength? Then, as a wife, are you doubting your husband’s abilities?”

No. 184: “No, I believe in it. If Husband-sama is there, then we have nothing to worry about. I was merely hoping for Husband-sama’s words to wash away my anxiousness, that’s all. Please kindly forgive a lacking wife, who failed to rely on you.”

With a seemingly prepared reply, No. 184 tried to dodge Regulus’ inquiry. With a feeble girl’s words and an expressionless face and voice, No. 184 compelled him. And Regulus shook his head as if impressed by her words.

Regulus: “Is that how it was. That, I myself didn’t think of it, sorry. Even if I wasn’t asked, I still should have noticed your anxious thoughts. One must consider the thoughts of others, even if they are unspoken, so just how much was I acting as I pleased? I reflect on myself.”

No. 184: “It is rather I that is deeply sorry. Husband-sama’s words have given me courage. I, too, will immediately set out to help in preparing the venue.”

Regulus: “Ah, please do.”

Giving her farewell, No. 184 turned away from Regulus. At the same time, she met Emilia’s eyes and gave a furtive sort of wink. That was, probably, a warning to Emilia about the carelessness of her words from before she had been cut off.

It was not wrong to describe Emilia as having neglected the danger Regulus poses. As such things were communicated, Emilia didn’t hesitate to make a split-second judgement.

Emilia: “—Watch out!”

No. 184: “Huh?”

As No. 184 was trying to make her escape, Emilia tugged hard on her arm. Clutching her tall but light body to her chest, Emilia took a big step backwards.

The space in front of her, where No. 184 had stood moments before, was caressed by the wind. Opening a long furrow in the cathedral floor, shattering it, and piercing straight through in a line of destruction. Without slowing down, the wind hit the main gate, turning the entryway into powder, then spread its destruction outwards.

Emilia: “…”

At that instant of overwhelming destructive power, Emilia, who was cuddling with No. 184, could not speak. No. 184 also, noticing the destruction while getting up from behind her, froze and completely curled up.

And, standing at the destruction’s point of origin in a pose as if he had swung his right arm moments before, was Regulus,

Regulus: “Sorry, sorry. My hand just slipped. —It’s a relief that nothing happened to you kids.”

Emilia: “…”

Regulus: “I’ll be in the waiting room until it’s time, so call me when everything’s ready, ok? Aah, while you’re waiting too, wouldn’t putting up your hair be better? That option is much more attractive, I believe. It is beautiful as it is, I think, but putting effort into being beautiful is something that must be done ceaselessly is what I’m thinking. Rather than trying to stay beautiful, trying to become beautiful, is more the minimum level of courtesy towards someone that likes you, I say. Of course, I myself remain satisfied with my currently filled environment, but I have no mind to limit what I have been given already.”

Talking as if the moment’s destruction was nothing, Regulus, while smiling at Emilia, headed for the waiting room door on the other side of the cathedral. Blankly left staring at the leftover traces of destruction, she was taking in deep breaths.

Emilia: “Just now, what was that…?”

No. 184: “…Thank you very much, for saving me.”

Saying so, No. 184 pulled away from Emilia’s bosom Her previously frozen form fixed her disheveled hair, and she left Emilia’s side right away. Her steps were taking her to, where the other women inside the cathedral were preparing.

It seemed those women were continuing their work with looks that suggested they were completely unrelated to the destruction from before. Not only that, but several of them had gathered around the destroyed floor and door, and could be seen beginning to work on somehow hiding its traces out of view.

Emilia: “Wait! This is weird! Don’t you guys think it’s weird?”

Others: “…”

At that unperturbed attitude, Emilia raised her voice in confusion. As one, the women paid no heed to Emilia's voice, and merely continued to prepare in silence.

If it's like this, then it will go on forever, Emilia thought, heading for the only person who her words seemed to get through to. Towards No. 184,

Emilia: "Just now, weren't you almost killed? If I hadn't pulled you back, surely your body would have been blown away. It was scary? Then, why."

No. 184: "Well, what is it? I've already thanked you for saving me. Beyond that, what else do you want from me? Anything else, is that not a violation of my rights?"

Emilia: "This isn't about rights or obligations! Let's talk about something more—More important!"

Emilia pointed to the women still hard at work inside the cathedral.

Emilia: "Regulus said they're his wives. They're all, that person's wife? And since they're wives, they do what he says? If you're a wife, then even if you're about to be murdered, you quietly accept it…That stuff, is weird. It's weird!"

Emilia: "That is too strange…Marriage is soo happy, it's something happy people do, isn't it? To me, you, the others; None of them look happy at all. Am I, wrong?"

No. 184: "Yes, you are mistaken. Even if you aren't happy, marriage is possible. Spouses do not have to love each other. If they keep on being together, they become spouses. Then, as spouses, they grow used to it."

No. 184, did not deny that she remained in a position she hated. Not only was she not refuting it, she was even affirming her own situation. That was distorted, and wrong.

Marriage, is for those who want to become spouses. It is not something you just want to get used to.

Emilia: “That marriage stuff, I have no intention of going along with it. I, will be leaving like this.”

Others: “…”

Those women who had not been paying attention to Emilia’s words, at that they now raised their faces. As the wedding dress-clad Emilia announced her rejection of the marriage, they stared.

Weathering the storm of those emotionless gazes, Emilia squared her shoulders.

Emilia: “I have someone worrying about me. And there’s a lot of things I have to do no matter what. So, I can’t just end up in a place like this. Together with everyone, right away, I will do what I have to.”

No. 184: “Such things, Husband-sama will not forgive it.”

Emilia: “I, do not remember having become a wife of Regulus. So, I don’t want something like forgiveness. Together with everyone, then…I will definitely return to save you all.”

No. 184: “—Euh.”

Emilia: “All of you, I know you’re not staying with Regulus because you want to. So I’ll, talk to Regulus and free everyone. Anyone that still wants to stay with him then, can just keep being his wife. But, the people that want to be separated, I’ll separate them. Even if you’re forcefully married like that, it’s meaningless if you’re not happy together.”

The picture Emilia had painted inside her mind, was of two people who loved each other and looked forward to being joined together. What floated in her mind, from her dream before, were Fortuna and Juice’s appearances. Those two people had never wed, and had never become spouses. Still, she thought it was good.

If it was those two, then Emilia wished she could have married them. A happy marriage and marriage ties of mutual love guaranteed, their relationship was the right one.

So—

Emilia: “I know of people who loved each other, but could not be married. And so, getting married and being unable to be happy after, I don’t like that kind of relationship.”

Others: “…”

At Emilia’s declaration, a stir spread throughout the indifferent women. But, No. 184 rapidly extracted herself from that hubbub.

She looked right at Emilia, and then at the destroyed entrance.

No. 184: “If you are choosing to leave, then that is your right. However, Husband-sama would not forgive us. On the spot, surely, we will all be slain.”

Emilia: “Even though you’re his wife…?”

No. 184: “A wife that cannot even fulfill Husband-sama’s wishes, is the same in Husband-sama’s view as one not able to fill all the requirements of a wife. If you leave, we will die. If you will still go, it will be you who kills us.”

Emilia: “…”

Facing Emilia, No. 184 while taking her own life hostage spoke.

Her opinion, with its extreme contents. As if it reflected the opinion of them all, the women in the cathedral stood to surround Emilia, and restricted her movements.

Of course, there was nobody there who could fight and stop her. They were all somewhat ordinary women. Born from ordinary households, having ordinary morals, having lived while yearning for ordinary happiness, ordinary women.

At some point, a wheel had come loose, and they had merely become accepted as one of Regulus’ wives.

Others: “…”

She was unable to refute one bit of their resolute determination. Emilia had seen Regulus' crimes with her own eyes.

For just slightly talking back, he had simply tried to blow their life away in response, it was that Regulus. When he learned of Emilia's escape, it was hard to claim that he would not take his anger out on them. It was none other than Regulus' wives who understood this well.

Emilia: "How many, of Regulus' wives are here?"

No. 184: "Husband-sama's spouses, total 291 people. Of those, 238 have already passed away, so the remaining number 53 in all."

Emilia: "Those wives who passed away…"

No. 184: "Do you need an explanation?"

The question she received in reply, gave off a feeling of mocking her question.

That answer, even without asking, Emilia came to realize it. And that answer lay in none other that the actions of those women circling around her without speaking.

Emilia: "If I left, then all of you would suffer something harsh…"

Rather than a harsh punishment, it would more likely be a certain, unavoidable death.

Unmistakably, these women were hostages to Emilia's free will. Thinking of the damage leaving this place would incur, she should not move rashly.

She thought about Subaru and his companions, outside of the cathedral in Priestella, worrying about her now.

She thought of them, and in her mind, Emilia apologized.

Then,

Emilia: "Okay. The wedding, let's do it."

3

After that, the venue's preparation proceeded at a rapid pace.

Though they weren't professionals, the damage was repaired so well that it was barely noticeable anymore. Just by looking at the fine workmanship, one could tell just how often those women had to clean up after Regulus' tantrums.

After Emilia agreed to proceed with the wedding, No.184 and a few of Regulus' other wives tended to her hair in the dressing room and decorated her with various adornments.

Except for the times when Annerose helped her with her hair, this was the first time Emilia's hairstyle had been so elaborate since Puck disappeared within the crystal.

Her long silver hair was gathered up and woven into a braid.

So as not to distract from the purity of her white dress, with only a few simple embellishments, Emilia's bridal gown was complete.

Emilia: "…"

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Emilia admired the women's handiwork.

Indeed, she looked very different from usual. With no one around to make demands about her hair aside from Subaru's occasional requests, it had been a while since she was imbued with such feminine charm.

Though she couldn't help but feel it was wasted on her.

No.184: "Well, let's go. Please take care not to damage Husband-sama's mood."

No.184 reminded Emilia as they headed out of the dressing room.

Turning into the chapel, Emilia saw that the attendees had already lined up, waiting for her arrival—all of them wives of Regulus, along with Regulus himself in a white tuxedo standing in front of the altar.

Although she didn’t know the exact procedures, Emilia stepped onto the red carpet laid from the entrance and walked towards the altar where Regulus was waiting.

Regulus nodded with satisfaction when he spotted the beautifully adorned Emilia,

Regulus: “I almost didn’t recognize you when you put on the dress, but the adornments took it to a whole other level. I was right to have kept No.79’s seat vacant. I couldn’t be happier with my judgment.”

Emilia: “No.79…Why’s that number vacant?”

Regulus: “Well, there used to be a woman who I initially thought would be a perfect fit for that number, but unfortunately I deemed her unsuitable before the wedding could take place. Although her all-important looks was very close to my ideal, I nevertheless reluctantly kept that seat vacant. But thanks to that, I met you, so it was all worthwhile after all.”

Emilia: “Kept… vacant…”

What’s that supposed to mean?

The mere sound of it reignited Emilia’s already desensitized sense of awryness.

But even with this vague outline, she couldn’t quite put her finger on just what it was. Meanwhile, Regulus adjusted his suit in front of Emilia in her bridal gown.

Regulus: “Well now, shall we commence the wedding ceremony? I suppose it’s a bit on the informal side, but I hope you don’t mind? As long as the ceremony proceeds properly, the rest are just superficial details. I’m not one of those fools who prioritize the surface only to lose sight of the essence. Failing to see a matter’s substance that way is simply laughable. How can someone be satisfied with only exteriors and outward appearances? Content with their ignorant, self-contained existence, they’re are too stupid to even notice that they're being laughed at behind their backs."

Emilia: "…"

While Regulus continued his convoluted tirade, No.184 walked to the other side of the altar. Apparently, she would serve as the facilitator of this ceremony.

Indeed, she seemed to be fulfilling a coordinating role among Regulus' 53 wives as well. Though it wasn't clear what that coordination amounted to when Regulus could kill any of them on the slightest whim.

That was just another reason why this man was beyond forgivable.

Emilia: "Say, Regulus. There's something I have to tell you before I marry you."

Therefore, Emilia wanted to make it absolutely clear.

No.184's expression tensed at Emilia's words. But Regulus gave a surprisingly friendly nod in reply.

Regulus: "Aah, that's right. There are some important things I want to tell you as well before you become my wife. Though I suppose I could gradually teach you after we are married, it's vital that you should be mentally prepared beforehand. To discover our differences here and there after we're already married would be tragic, don't you think? In order to make sure something so unfortunate doesn't happen, I think it's crucial that we openly share our thoughts with each other. Once we become a couple, we'll be bound heart and soul, so it's important that we sort this out first."

Emilia: "Mmn, yeah. If it means being bound heart and soul, it's important, isn't it."

Regulus: "Right? It's good that we get on the same page. So, my other wives must have already told you some of the rules, but why don't we go over them. First, once you're married to me, you are forbidden to smile."

Emilia: "…?"

Frowning, Emilia didn't seem to understand Regulus' meaning. But Regulus raised a finger and continued, "Well…",

Regulus: "It's quite important, you know. I like your face. I really like your face. I select my wives based on their faces. Beautiful, adorable, charmingly well-proportioned faces. I've had 291 wives in all, and all of them had beautiful faces. Your face is adorable too. And that's why you will become my wife. Do you understand?"

Emilia: "…"

Regulus: "Here's what I think. There are many, many people in this world much more selfish than I. Don't you often hear about couples whose love begins to die the moment they get married? They went into a relationship because they liked each other, but as soon as they're living together all sorts of problems start popping up. Incompatible tastes in food. Incompatible habits. Incompatible hobbies. Incompatible schedules. There're all sorts of selfish excuses, and once the illusions about their partner fall away, they treat them like trash. I utterly despise such hopeless people."

Smiling, Regulus happily extolled his views on love.

Innocently, unreservedly, he raved about his indignation at those who scorned love.

Regulus: "Who isn't a little selfish? But why the disillusionment? Someone you like may have different sensibilities than you, but why the disillusionment? How can people be so stupid? Isn't it absurd? That's why I select partners based on their faces. If my partner has a face I like, I won't grow disillusioned no matter what kind of person is behind it. Because I love that face. As long as that face is there, my love would never die."

Emilia: "…"

Regulus: "Even if they don't put away their clothes after they take them off. Even if they're a murdering maniac who indiscriminately butchers children. Even if their cooking skills are atrocious. Even if they sold their own brother to pay off their debt and ran away. Even if they don't separate different colored laundry that'll color-bleed into each other. Even if they're a psychopath who secretly kills animals for fun. Even if they have god-awful taste in clothing. Even if they're money-grubbing by nature. Even if they don't like to bathe and smells like a homeless person. Even if they seriously believe the apocalypse is coming and keeps on talking about it—I don't dislike them."

One after another, Regulus pointed to the 53 women present, shouting.

It wasn't clear which one which of those descriptions matched which one of the women. Nor could Emilia understand how he could claim to love only their faces and separate that from the person underneath.

Regulus: "I would never say it in past-tense like "I used to love". I love your face. Even if you're the Witch who seeks to slaughter every person in this world in utmost, excruciating agony, I will not grow disillusioned. As long as I have your face."

Emilia …What does that have to do with not smiling?"

Regulus: "It's very simple. There are times when a girl who's normally cute and beautiful can suddenly turn repulsive the moment they smile, you know? As if I could allow such a thing. So, it's not only smiling, but crying as well. Either way, I won't allow your cute adorable face to be distorted in any way. So, no smiling. No crying. No sulking. Only adorableness is permitted."

Holding Emilia's chin in his fingertips, Regulus quietly demanded.

As for what would happen if she refused, those earlier events had already answered that question.

But what made no sense was how he could he commit such senseless atrocities when he claimed to love their faces.

Emilia: "You said you love their faces and would never grow disillusioned… if so, then why did you attack this person earlier?"

Regulus: "Huh?"

Seeing Emilia pointing to No.184, Regulus tilted his head.

Without lowering her arm, Emilia broke free from Regulus' fingers,

Emilia: "If I hadn't pulled her away, this person would certainly have died. This is also someone whose face you love and therefore took as your wife, correct? If that's true, then how could you do such a thing?"

Regulus: "Aah, that's simple too. It's because, temperate as I am, she still managed to upset me. I don't ask for much, do I? But some people are just way too inconsiderate. I thought surely none of my wives is like that, but what else can I do when it's right in my face? Since there's no helping it, I had no choice but to fulfill out my obligations."

Emilia: "And so, you became disillusioned? You're contradicting what you said just now…"

Regulus: "I'm not disillusioned. I still like her face, I still love her. Even if she's dead, that still doesn't change my enduring love for her. Don't you hear it often? "Even when someone you love dies, that person lives on inside your heart, because your love for that person endures and will not fade"? That's exactly how it is with me."

Regulus' twisted logic was impeccable.

Impeccable, without the slightest confusion, his logic was complete within his mind. Without the slightest room for rebuttal, it was perfect, flawless.

In front of the speechless Emilia, Regulus furrowed his brows.

Because he spotted a color of distrust within the silent Emilia's eyes.

Regulus: "I've actually been wondering for a while now… do you, maybe have a problem with me? If so, then that's really disappointing. I've already made concession after concession out of consideration for you, yet can't you appreciate my considerations at all? A person shouldn't be all talk, you know. If you have just the slightest consideration for other people's feelings, if you could just put yourself in other people's shoes, you wouldn't be like this, I don't think. If a person can't even make that modest effort, then I can't see how such a person can have any value whatsoever. It's disrespectful. More specifically, it's disrespectful to me. That, that's unforgivable."

Emilia: "I think marriage should be something reeeaally beautiful."

Regulus: "Huh?"

Emilia: "It's a ceremony that joins two people who love each other and want to be with each other. It's a reeeaally big deal to like someone, and so, to find someone out of all the people in this world and have that person also like you back… is an amazing thing, I think."

Emilia in her bridal gown held a hand to her chest, while, listening, Regulus' face contorted with disbelief. The expressions of the wives in attendance, including No.184 at the altar, began to darken.

They must be worried for her, Emilia figured.

—It was proof that they were compassionate, kind-hearted people after all.

Emilia: "Why do you call your wives by their numbers?"

Regulus: "Why get caught up on names? Just like getting bogged down by the superficials, it's a complete misunderstanding of love. I don't need these superfluous embellishments to be confident that my love is real. And so, there is no need to debase myself with such vain trivialities. For love to be equal, one has to let go of those inessential aspects, don't you think?"

Emilia: "…I see. But, I don't dislike being called "Emilia-tan" by Subaru at all."

Regulus: "Subaru…?"

Hearing a name he could not let slide, a color of displeasure rose on Regulus' face.

But Emilia ignored the shift in Regulus' expression as she continued,

Emilia: "When Subaru calls me Emilia-tan, his voice is packed with feeling. And, occasionally, when he leaves out the "-tan", I can immediately tell that it's something special. I don't think it's pointless at all. Names should… carry that kind of feeling."

Regulus: "Hey uh, it's like you're just talking by yourself at this point, but, who is Subaru? It's a person's name, isn't it? Actually it's a man's name, isn't it? A girl who's about to marry mentioning a different man's name in front of the man she's about to marry, that goes against all common sense no matter how you look at it, doesn't it? Even if it's just some random stranger's name it still hurts, you know. It hurts. You know?"

Emilia: "He's not a random stranger. Subaru is my chosen Knight, a person who calls me by my name and tells me that he loves me."

Regulus: "—Hha?!"

Hearing Emilia's answer, a flood of bloodcurdling aura gushed from Regulus's body.

Sensing this, No.184 and the other wives immediately tried to run for it, but,

Regulus: "Don't move!! Anyone dares move, I'll cut their head off!"

Emilia: "…"

Regulus: "I'll let you explain yourself. Try to choose your words carefully so I don't misunderstand. I don't want this wedding to turn into someone's funeral. You know?"

Heaving his shoulders, shuddering, Regulus suppressed his emotions as he spoke.

Held in place by Regulus' threat, none of the attendants moved. But, without flinching, Emilia met his swelling aura head on.

Emilia: "Marriage should be between two people who love each other. But, I don't think this meets that criteria at all."

Regulus: "…"

Emilia: "Because, I still don't know how to love a man as a woman. Even though Subaru tells me that he loves me, I still can't return his feelings or even give him a straightforward answer. That's reeaaally unfair of me, and I know how much it hurts him. But…"

Regulus fell silent. But Emilia wasn't thinking about him.

Anyone could tell. That Emilia's eyes did not see him at all.

Emilia: "Even though I don't know how to love someone, I'm sure someday I will. One day I will love someone as a woman. And I've already decided who I'll love when that day comes. That's why…"

Taking a breath and looking up at Regulus, Emilia spoke.

Emilia: "—I can never be yours."

Regulus: "—hk! Aaaagh is that right?! Well I don't want a selfish bitch like you as my wife either! ALL THE BETTER HHAAHHH??!!"

Regulus' face bursted red at Emilia's declaration.

In front of Regulus' reaching fingers, Emilia's whole body surged with mana to meet his attack. To counter his unknown destructive mechanism, her first action should be—

"—?!"

Just when their attacks were set to begin, a violent noise crashed throughout the chapel.

Accompanying the sound was tremendous momentum as something shot straight into Regulus' body like a bullet. Crashing into Regulus in his white tuxedo and shattering upon impact was a wooden door panel—one of the two at the chapel entrance that they had just reinstalled.

It had flown all the way from the entrance to hit Regulus.

And,

???: “Damn it, we kicked at the same time but the result’s not the same at all! What’s with your leg strength?!”

????: “Sorry I didn’t adjust it properly. But it managed to hit the target I was aiming to hit, so it turned out alright, didn’t it?”

???: “The flashiness of the entry is nowhere near the same, okay? My kick only managed to open the door, but your kick landed a direct hit on the enemy…”

Two grumbling silhouettes appeared at the chapel entrance.

One was a black-haired boy, and the other a red-haired youth.

Emilia’s eyes widened in astonishment, and in front of her, Regulus picked away the wooden shards like picking off insects. Standing there, unhurt, he was glaring at the two intruders with contempt in his eyes.

Regulus: “You certainly have the gall, crashing a sacred wedding ceremony. I don’t remember inviting any male guests, but mind telling me who you are and what wedding presents did you bring? HHA?!”

Met with Regulus’ bellow, the two at the entrance looked at each other.

Then, giving each other a nod,

Subaru: “Spirit Knight without his spirit partner, Natsuki Subaru.”

Reinhard: “Descendant of the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea.”

Announcing his name, Reinhard took a step forward.

Next to him, Subaru gave Emilia a wink before pointing at Regulus, saying,

Subaru: “I object to this marriage. —And I’ll be taking the bride with me.”

Bonus Short Stories

Otto Suwen’s Internal Affairs Struggle
Line 2

1

“I see… Hm, I understand. I’ll remember that, teacher.”

“Please do so. Well then, go back directly, please.”

Bitterly smiling to Emilia’s vaguely mischievous reply, Otto split from Subaru and the others, and started walking towards the city of water.

It was an exchange on the way back, which doubled as an evaluation meeting after the negotiations at the Muse Company had ended up being cancelled.

Having received Anastasia’s invitation, the whole Emilia Camp had arrived to Priestella. Otto had proposed to split with his fellows, such as Subaru and Garfiel, and go alone to do something else.

As his ostensible reason, he said that he would do it to keep up acquaintance, as the Internal Affairs Minister of his camp, with an influential person of the city. And, in fact, he did intend to fulfill such role, but his primordial reason was not that.

Subtly breathing, Otto directed his gaze at the bag he held in his own hands.

It was a handbag with nothing extraordinary to it, but the matter was its content.

Inside the bag was one book—of which, furthermore, most pages were burned to lumps of ash.

This book’s name was the ‘Book of Wisdom’—accurately speaking, that thing used to be the ‘Book of Wisdom.’

A big part of its binding was charred, and not a single page could be used to consult its contents. Since it was in a condition that made it more accurate to call it a bunch of burnt paper rather than to call it a book, the thoughts of the person who carried it around were unclear.

Truthfully, even Otto's reason appealed to him to dispose of such book stub at once. But his instinct, too, appealed to him to not do so.

Trapped between both his own reason and instinct, Otto took a deep, deep breath.

When he thought about what was about to come, he felt pretty heavy-hearted. —Because, in any case, from this, Otto would try to, ironically, restore the book that he knew well it was better to dispose of.

—The name of the 'Master Restorer' Darts was a famous name in his field.

He was someone who repaired broken and damaged items for a living, and he was said to use an extremely rare magic, called restoration magic, that could return whatever object to what it was in the beginning.

There were a lot of artisans who used their techniques to repair works of art such as pictures, but restoration magic seemed to be something he had devised all on his own, and some rumors stated he had turned even a 'Meteor' back to its original state.

Where Darts was located was in the Watergate City Priestella—therefore, relying on the rumors about him, Otto had brought the mysterious book stub to this city of water.

If the mysterious script were to be repaired by his hand, then maybe the book's content could be inspected. However, only restoring the book had the risk of the content being unreadable. Therefore, in order to restore even the item's original function, the 'Master Restorer' Dart's power was necessary.

Rumors had it that he was someone hard to please, but he would have to find a way to coax him.

Doing so, repairing the ‘Book of Wisdom,’ and verifying its contents was absolutely necessary.

Only if he could do that, would Otto Suwen be able to accept his current position.

—So would be the necessary ceremony for him to establish himself as the Emilia Camp’s Internal Affairs Minister.

2

—A story from those times, when the topic of the trip to Priestella had not even come out yet.

“—It’s this late at night, and you’re still working?”

When he was suddenly addressed from behind, Otto turned back.

The time was late night, the place was the dining room of the Roswaal estate. It was that one time of the day, so late even plants were said to be sleeping; but, for one part of the mansion’s residents, it was just the beginning of their active hours.

Otto was from that part, and from that same part was also the girl who stood behind him—

“—I see you were awake too, Ms. Ram.”

“Of course I’d be. I better lighten and support Master Roswaal’s workload, even if it’s just a little, or else he’ll just be overexerting himself.”

Seeing Ram holding her own arms as she spoke, Otto bitterly smiled.

Habitually, this girl in maid clothes would affect a disposition that was sloppy, frivolous, and indolent towards work; however, she was actually the one who devoted herself to the mansion’s owner with more passion than anybody else.

Although it was nothing worthy of praise, there were a lot of times in which Otto, immersed in his paperwork, had seen the sun rise from his room. Just like in his case, it was late when the lights in Ram's own room disappeared.

He knew that was a vestige of the fact that she took her work to her room and kept helping her master.

Of course, were he to point that out, her reaction would be instantaneous—

"Disgusting."

"What, I have not said anything, why have you looked at me when saying that?!"

"Stop talking so loudly. It would be bothersome if you happened to wake Lady Emilia or Petra up. If you want a diversion, you may go hit Barusu's room's door to your heart's content."

"I will not do such a malicious thing. …Ms. Ram, will you too drink coff?"

Shrugging his shoulders at Ram's curses, Otto shook his own cup and showed her its content.

The cup's content was coff—a simple beverage made out of parched beans that were made into powder and then dissolved in hot water. Its flavor was controlled by the quality of the beans and the way it was brewed, but Otto was not too mindful of the flavor.

His main objective when drinking coff was its trait as the most effective beverage when it came to fighting off sleepiness.

During his daily life as a merchant, which made up a considerable part of his whole life, his body had gotten totally used to a life of not sleeping.

In business, things such as driving a dragon carriage, while ignoring sleep in a match against speed were the order of the day.

On those days, coff's power was definitely indispensable to open his dropped eyelids by sheer force, making it some sort of comrade-in-arms to Otto.

Staring at Otto's comrade-in-arms, "Hah," Ram snorted,

"I don't need it. I don't even know how you can drink such muddy water."

"That's an expression I've heard a lot, but this is the first time I've met someone who actually uses it."

Seeing Otto drink the coff with a bitter smile, Ram said nothing. Instead, she passed by Otto's side, took tea leaves out of the cupboard, and started brewing her own portion of tea.

The flavor being controlled by the way it was brewed happened equally for both tea and coff. In that respect, the way Ram brewed tea was so polished it could have the previous remark taken back, and even Otto could clearly tell the difference in flavor.

Then, Ram poured tea on a laid out cup and took a glance at Otto,

"If you throw out that muddy water in your hands, I'll allow you to drink Ram's tea."

"Hmmm, a charming offer. Although I do have objections I would like to make about it being treated like muddy water."

"It's just muddy water to me. Even Otto's clothes are green, and you also sip muddy water, just like weed."

"I understand! Look, I have shed the muddy water! Brew some tea for me, please!"

Giving in to her sharp tongue, Otto went to the sink and threw his comrade-in-arms out. Although his shed comrade-in-arms's resentment could be heard from the drainage, Otto covered his ears to hear absolutely nothing.

As she watched that from the side, Ram pushed the steaming cup towards Otto,

"Sip it."

"Don't say it like that!"

Receiving such a rather Ram-like offer, Otto accepted the tea with stiff cheeks.

When he put it on his mouth, a sweet fragrance went through his nasal fossae. Just as expected, the way Ram brewed it had something different about it.

And—

"—Seems like your wariness of Master Roswaal still hasn't faded very much."

He was made to realize that the flavor of the tea was probably not the only thing that had something different about it.

When he heard those words, Otto swallowed the tea that was in his mouth. It was not even anything particularly surprising. He could be sure that it was no mere coincidence that they happened to meet here this night.

More than anything, since she was Ram, she would have already predicted Otto's answer.

"I think it is natural. Can one be not wary of the Margrave?"

"Someone with a magnanimity so big it makes one shiver and a surpassing softness wouldn't do it."

"A person who possesses such things… I have one close to me and, to be honest, it makes my head hurt."

Ram's accurate metaphor made Otto's head hurt in a non-metaphorical way.

It was difficult to forgive the incident that, approximately one year ago, Roswaal had perpetrated towards his camp, population, and generally everyone who was related to him. It was even more pertinent to reword it as an unforgivable felony.

And despite everything, Subaru and Emilia had forgiven Roswaal's felony. —It was not as if they had actually forgiven him in form, but their treatment of him was as good as an acquittal.

Of course, they could not afford to lose the position Roswaal had as a margrave for the Royal Election, though.

“Even without that, I am afraid it looks like the conclusion would be the same…”

“Self-interest is not all that makes people move. To live thinking that, just because it is so for oneself, it must be so for everyone else is proof of a poor mind, Otto.”

“That is an amazing argument, but what if this was an affair without relationship to the Margrave?”

“It’s unknown what the forgiving side feels. Barusu doesn’t matter, but I wonder if Lady Emilia is fine with that.”

The purity of Ram’s nonchalant attitude left him without any more words to speak. In any case, Otto would not be able to become as defenseless as Subaru, Emilia, and the rest were. He could not afford to, he thought too.

“It has been roughly a year since I started helping out with the work here at the mansion, has it not? I can no longer help my shoulders growing stiff with how much I am straining my mind. Why is it that, even though I have a roof, a bed, and a room, my sleep hours have decreased more than back when I was a travelling merchant?”

Whether he did peddling or worked under somebody else, wherever he was and whatever he did, Otto was fated to be burdened with trouble. —It was, probably, Otto’s older brother who had said that.

At that time, it was just something he laughed off; but it had become his circumstances, at which he was pretty unable to laugh. Yet, while aware of it, Otto dared to think of laughing.

If it was trouble he would not be able to avoid burdening himself with anyway, at least he would bear them all as he laughed.

“I like my current life just as it is. Even if it is an environment in which, for example, my sleep hours get awfully ground, or I am made to treat my years-long comrade-in-arms as muddy water.”

"All Ram did was to make an offer. Otto was the one who stabbed his comrade-in-arms from behind."

"—Therefore, I shall make every effort that is possible for me to protect this environment."

Without following Ram's jest, Otto drank up the cup's content and spoke. Directly receiving that look of Otto's from the front, Ram cast her light pink eyes down.

"Otto will protect by doubting. Then, Ram shall protect the present by believing."

"…"

"We're dividing roles. Ram will be in charge of believing, Otto will be in charge of doubting like a bad person."

At being called a bad person, Otto experienced an upsetting feeling.

Still, would even such assessment be appropriate if he were to compare himself to the people who were cursorily pictured in his head?

"Even so, I think there are too many people in charge of believing in this mansion…"

"And that's why Otto is necessary. The right person in the right place. …The impression of usefulness that expression gives is way too strong. Let's leave it at the level of a bucket for a roof leak."

"Lady Emilia will be angered. You know she has a strangely strong sense of gratitude towards buckets."

Listening to Otto's reply, Ram collected the empty cup and took it to the kitchen. Otto scratched his head as he stared at her small back.

The talk was over, said her back. Slight caution or warning? Or was it just trying to convey 'I'm watching you,' like Ram would do?

"Otto."

Suddenly, a voice addressed Otto as he was about to take his leave from the dining room.

When he turned back, Ram stood still at the kitchen's entrance, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

"What would have to happen for you to feel like forgiving Master Roswaal?"

"…Forgiving him is probably something I cannot do. But."

Ram's light pink eyes demanded the continuation of the words Otto had cut. Having resumed his advance, Otto put his hand on the dining room's door and, as he took a step forward to the hall outside, answered.

"—If only I had the chance, maybe I could think of dispelling my distrust."

3

No matter what happened, Otto would probably never forgive Roswaal.

He did just that. Just that was done to him. Therefore, it was a reasonable retribution.

Deeds would always jump back at oneself. Roswaal's current hardships were the result of his own deeds. Because he thought that, Otto felt no pity for him.

But it was just as he had answered Ram. —If he had the chance, maybe he would dispel his distrust.

And, probably because he himself wanted that chance, he had gotten involved in this disloyal act.

"—I see. Now this is a big deal, you."

In the dim store's interior, a tall, spindly man took a look at the remains of the mysterious script that was brought to him, and spoke while touching his well-ordered mustache. Inside the store from which had already been completely evacuated, “Do you understand?” Otto rose his voice at the words of the man—’Master Restorer’ Darts.

“Its condition is so ruined it makes me feel apologetic as the one showing it, though…”

“I’ve been in this path for so long. I know an article that’s got history behind it when I see one, you know. Even with my long experience as a restorer, things with charm this deep are seldom met by the eye.”

Despite his peculiar expressions, Dart’s eyes shone, and anyone who saw him could tell that he was enthusiastic. As Otto felt alleviation at having apparently overcome the first obstacle,

“Then, do you think you could fix it?”

“Restoring it is a work I feel as distant as returning a collapsed sand castle to its original state. If the article is like this, returning it to its original state is gonna be a legendary exploit… I can do it.”

“—Ngh! So I may ask for it?!”

“No problem, but, may I say something?”

Nodding to the eager Otto, Darts closed one eye while fiddling with his mustache.

“Leaving the time it’ll take to restore it and the remuneration for later… if you don’t mind, may I ask what you intend to use this for?”

“…I am sorry for you, Mr. Darts, who will be repairing it from now on; but once I am done verifying the book’s content, I intend to burn it up without leaving a single fragment.”

“Hmph, an honest man you are. …Will your goal be fulfilled with that?”

With no signs of displeasure, Darts stared at the mysterious script on the desk and asked. To those words, “That is right,” nodded Otto with his shoulders shrugged,

“If possible, instead of being always in charge of doubting people, I want to have the relief of knowing at least my fellows will not stab me in the back. And it would be nice if such relief helped my stomach too.”

“—That’s good. I’ll take it. However, before I do my job…”

“I know. That is why I brought it.”

Before Dart’s assenting eyes, Otto took an alcohol bottle out of his handbag and put it on the desk.

The ‘Master Restorer’ Darts was famous for his fondness of rare articles and alcohol. And also for drinking enough to end up full before accepting a job.

“—Allow me to keep you company. If it is for my mind to be at peace, I am fine with it.”

Readily pushing the alcohol bottle onto the desk, Otto showed his teeth as he smiled. Being that smile directed at him, Darts, too, formed a terribly malicious smile on his face.

The necessary ceremony, for Otto Suwen to become the actual Internal Affairs Minister of the Emilia camp.

As if preparing for that ceremony, this day, Otto drank alcohol until he was full along with Darts; and, the next morning, he returned to the ‘Water Plumage Inn’ in a drunken condition.

There was one act in which Beatrice saw his intoxicated form and feared like a hero, but that was a story different from the one now. —This was one of the problems held by the always-troubled Otto.

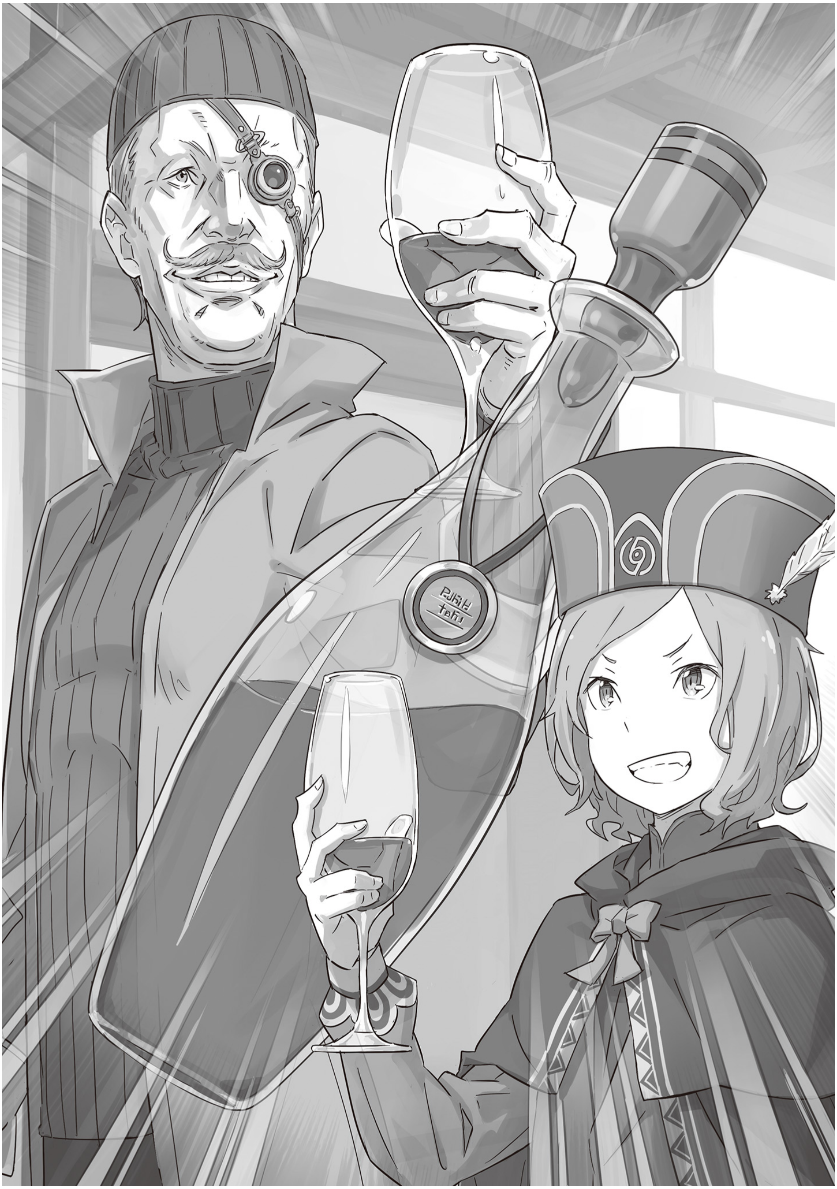

Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle:
Page 3
(Edited Machine Translation)

In the serious atmosphere, there was a deafening sound. Petra straightened her back.

The spacious meeting room was filled with a strange and unique atmosphere of tension. In the center of the room, there was a table with space for more than a dozen people to sit around, and now it was filled to the max.

There were more than ten attendants, each with his or her own servants, making a total of more than thirty people gathered in the meeting room.

…The meeting of the Western Border Leaders.

That was the grandiose name of this meeting, and the goals of the participants were just as the name would suggest.

Lugunica was divided into four parts: North, South, East, and West, and the person who ruled the western borders of Lugnica, was Petra’s master, the renowned Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers

The meeting was centred on Roswaal, who brought together the powerful people of the Western Borders.

The owner of the mansion, Viscount Talion Aluz, whose position was second only to Roswaal’s in the west.

The mayor of the industrial city of Costuul, one of the five major cities in the kingdom, Reynolds Rex.

The one who owns a number of vast farms and is known by the name of "Dairy King", Griffith Allen.

Also, the head of the Western Merchant Union, "The Hypocrite" Gwen Merrett.

At the moment, the situation of the gathering of outstanding people, including the above-mentioned ones, is hellish. None of them are people who you can underestimate, and they are not Roswaal's comrades.

If there were anyone who was Roswaal's comrade, it would be…

???: "…Petra, it's been a long time since we last met. I am relieved to see that you are still in good spirits."

The first to enter the meeting room and greet her like that was a youth with dark blue hair, Clind, whose master is Roswaal's relative, Annerose Miload.

Frederica: "The meeting is about to begin. Could you please go back to Annerose-sama's side? Also, please don't approach Petra at will."

Clind: "Why must I follow your instructions? Are you Petra's mother or guardian? There is no such information in my memory. Doubt."

Clind,who just entered the scene, and Frederica, who had halted his advances, sandwiched Petra and faced off against each other.

It seemed that Frederica didn't want Clind to get close to Petra, so she was always lashing out at him. It was at moments like this that Petra felt that she was truly valued by her, so she secretly expressed her gratitude to Clind for his existence.

Having said that…

Petra: "Frederica-neesama, Clind-san, the meeting has already begun…"

With Petra's mediation, Frederica and Clind ceased fire. After Clind, who elegantly bowed before making his exit, had returned to his master's side, Petra and Frederica gestured towards each other then proceeded to head back to their designated position.

During this small incident, the participants took their seats at the conference table, and the meeting between the leaders of the western border officially began.

As usual, the purpose of this meeting is mostly to bring resolutions to important issues related to the rule of the western borders.

Before Petra was educated in the mansion as a maid, she had only a vague impression that Roswaal, who held the title of a Margrave in the West, was one of the select few who held enormous power in the Kingdom of Lugnica. Of course, the greatest person in the kingdom is naturally the King, but Roswaal, who ruled the West under the king's orders, can be considered the greatest person in the West of the Kingdom.

Therefore, even at the talks held at the borders of the west, Roswaal participated in the negotiations as the speaker and gave his final rulings on major resolutions that can greatly influence the lives of the citizens, including Petra.

This is not only Roswaal's power but also his duty. …However, this time is different from the ones before.

Talion: "…I hope to hear Margrave Mathers's views on the Royal Selection."

The first to bring up the topic everyone wanted to discuss was a gentleman with a beard, Viscount Talion Aluz. Sitting across from Roswaal in the venue, he was the acting speaker of the day.

The heavy sense of responsibility gave a strong sense of tension in his eyes and expressions.

Petra: "…"

At the start of the meeting, Petra, who was acting like a part of the furniture, stiffened, feeling the tingling tension on her skin.

Glancing at her side a little, Frederica, who was also in the same position, stood upright and composed. Adhering to unwavering etiquette adds supreme beauty to her standing posture. Petra couldn't help but be fascinated by it.

Tailon: "Oh, but please don't choose the Royal Selection itself as a topic to start this long-winded meeting. Time is precious. Especially for someone in a position like me."

Gwen: “Too roundabout Talion-chan”

In contrast to Petra who was immersed in it, the tension in the conference hall had already begun to shift.

The man who interrupted the words of Viscount Aluz while leaning his body on the table was an unshaven brave man. The representative of the Western Merchant Union Gwen Merret. He stroked his brown hair.

Gwen: “That is not what we were hoping to hear, right?”

Talion: “I thought I told you before, stop calling me Talion-chan, alright?”

Gwen: “Ah, sorry sorry… After all, we are much more concerned about the candidate you are backing than just the craziness of the Royal Selection in general, don’t you agree Roswaal-chan?”

Without even heeding the warning from the Viscount, Gwen gave Roswaal a lazy smile. His attitude towards Roswaal seemed to be a bit more intimate than that of the other participants, but…

Gwen: “Besides, didn’t you say this beforehand? “Because I found a candidate to participate in the royal election, I will be backing that girl, I’ll leave the work of shielding and supporting her to you all” There was such a thing. But…”

Gwen, who was smiling but at the same time not smiling, frightened Petra.

Gwen: “If that girl is a half-elf, isn’t this just a trap?”

Gwen’s words added to the heavy atmosphere of the conference room.

Including Viscount Aluz, the other participants who had not yet spoken probably agreed with Gwen. And Annerose, who stood in the position of her comrade, seems to be ready to change their views.

The atmosphere was filled with a strong sense of suspicion against

Roswaal and rejection towards the "half-elf".

Petra: “…”

Half-elf, using this term, treating Emilia in such a manner truly aroused Petra’s anger.

However, it was only during this year that Petra started feeling such anger for Emilia after getting along with Emilia day and night and learning about her as a person. For most people, half-elves and the “Witch of Envy" are closely interlinked. If she didn’t personally know Emilia, even Petra would probably react like them.

Therefore, as long as they get to know Emilia, their mindset will change accordingly. However, the curse carried by the name of being a half-elf wanted to take even such an opportunity away from Emilia.

In order for Emilia to get this opportunity, today’s meeting took place.

Therefore, Petra is looking forward to Roswaal’s first words. Looking forward to the most annoying unforgivable master who was the only one that could reverse the predicament that Emilia is currently in.

She doesn’t know if he realizes Petra’s contradictory thoughts and expectations or not. Roswaal nodded to everyone.

Roswaal: “In other wooords, as long as the subject in question is a puuure-blooded elf, Gwen-dono would raise his hands in faavour?”

Gwen: “…”

This is the first time Roswaal spoke at this meeting. Let alone Gwen and other participants, even Petra was caught off guard by his unhesitant tone.

And Roswaal crossed his hands on the table between the white gaps that were born.

Roswaal: “Putting aside whether I was joooking or not…Before I tell you the deetails of the Royal Selection, I apologize for conveying to you the incorreect contents. Hoooowever, please don't misundestaaaand."

Gwen: "Oh? Misunderstand?"

Roswaal: "My pooosition is not such that I have to aask you, but a position where I can commaaand you."

In response to Roswaal's deep voice, the atmosphere in the venue once again tensed to its limits.

In this atmosphere, Roswaal closed one eye and stared at his surroundings with his yellow pupil.

Roswaal: "You looots' circumstances and that of those quuuarrelling trash nobles are different. Emilia-sama, who I back, is an indispensable presence for winning the Royal Seleeection. For this reason, the Mathers family has spent a looong time preparing the western borders to become what it is toooday."

Griffith: "Fufufu. That statement makes it sound like preparations for the Royal Selection began several generations ago."

In the middle of Roswaal's speech, the morbidly obese "Dairy King" Griffith interjected. Facing the question of this giant who had almost passed his twilight years, Roswaal shrugged.

Roswaal: "This weeestern border is a place of exile for weirdos. After the ooorigin of Emiiilia-sama was made public, those vassal loords who immediately changed their attitude are fundaaamentally different from everyone present heere, no?"

Griffith: "Why? Do you plan to suppress and hold our reins using the power of your authority?"

Roswaal: "The inteeensity of suppression depeends on the resistance…That is whaaaat I would liiike to say, at least."

In the hostile venue, the atmosphere around Roswaal changed instantaneously. All the attendees were surprised by this sudden change in attitude.

Roswaal: “In the paaast, I would give priority to quickness aand reliability and take the most pooowerful approach. But unfortunately, it is quite tricky to use that method right nooow.”

As he said this, Roswaal glanced at Frederica and Petra behind him… No, he glanced at Petra. Seeing him look directly in her blue eyes, Petra couldn’t help but hold her breath.

… “Keep your eyes open at all times.” What Ram said echoed in her mind.

It wasn’t until now that Petra realized that the original meaning of those words also contained the meaning of having to observe carefully.

Roswaal: “Neeevertheless, even if I talk exteeensively about Emilia-sama’s character here, it still laaacks authenticity, right? Sooo I’ll just change the player. Petra-kun, cooome here.”

Petra: “Ah?!”

The sudden call of her name caused Petra’s shoulders to twitch as she screamed.

She wondered if she heard the wrong name but Roswaal’s nasty smile that gave her a feeling of Deja Vu was in her field of vision. At that moment, Frederica couldn’t help but utter angrily.

Frederica: “Master…! Master, doing such a prank in a situation like this… I can’t remain indifferent.”

Roswaal: “Praaank? My, what an unexpected staaatement. As you know, there is no persuasiveness in my words that can gain their trust. This can be easily seeeen from their usual behaviour”

Frederica: “These words should still be coming from your mouth…”

Roswaal: “In addition, regarding persuasiveness, yooouu can’t do it either. After all, I have been with you for faaar too long, they knoooow you. So naturally, they would have biased thoughts towards you.”

Frederica: “Guh…”

To Frederica, who wanted to take on Petra’s position instead, Roswaal said so first. And the reason Frederica stopped speaking after hearing the reason was due to that indisputable fact.

Backed by this ruthless fact, Roswaal looked at Petra again.

Roswaal: “Hooowever, I haven’t spent a long time with Peeetra-kun. They should aaall know about the matter regarding her haaating me, right?”

Petra: “…”

There is no way to deny it. Petra recalled that when she first arrived at the mansion for this meeting, her matters had already been known.

She was investigated in some form and Roswaal had already expected it.

In other words, he wanted to let Petra, who does not support Roswaal, support Emilia.

Talion: “That said, Margrave Mathers. Will that maid’s words really have such power…?”

Gwen: “Isn’t it fine, Talion-chan? Let them be.”

Regarding Roswaal’s answer, Viscount Aluz and Gwen once again disagreed. However, the debate between the two ultimately ending with Gwen’s victory is a matter of course. This is also true for this time, Gwen’s words forced Viscount Aluz to make concessions.

Then…

Petra: “…”

Returning to her consciousness, Petra was already bathed in the gazes of all these powerful people and had become the center of attention.

Petra: “That……”

With thirsty lips and dry tongue, Petra’s head devolved into intense chaos. The tense strings shook her heart, and she began to feel dizzy. Why did it turn out like this?

Just a year ago, Petra was a mere village girl. For her, the people who own villages, towns, and majestic and spacious territories outside of her own village were as far from her as the sky.

But now, Petra is standing in front of them like this…

Annerose: “Don’t be afraid. Just treat them like you treat uncle.”

The one who spoke to Petra, whose breathing had become rapid, was a young girl sitting a little further away …Annerose, sporting a bun of dark blue hair. Her awe-inspiring attitude and posture made Petra’s breathing slightly disturbed.

After all, she was only a nobleman who was ten years old and is younger than Petra.

Annerose: “Take a deep breath, and then say something about Emily. Even if you make any strange remarks, I will cover for you. After all, it’s all for Emily.”

Annerose’s words made Petra choke, then she closed her eyes tightly.

Annerose held excessive kindness towards Emilia. Even if she wasn’t on stage, her words were still powerful.

If she can speak for the unsuspicious Petra to support Emilia, then it is not a bad choice to follow it.

However, Petra will not do it

Petra: “…Thank you, Annerose-sama. But let me do it.”

Annerose: “Re…, really, can you do it?”

Petra: “I will work hard. After all, this is a task entrusted to me.”

After an earnest request, Petra accepted the task of the day and volunteered to take up this task.

She remembered all the words Subaru and Emilia said to Petra before leaving the mansion. Amongst them, there is not a word expressing concern regarding Petra's shortcomings.

Subaru and the others never felt uneasy regarding Petra, they have always been looking forward and never hesitated to believe in her.

And so…

Petra: "…Master"

Roswaal: "Hmm? What's wrong?"

Petra: "I really hate you more than anything."

Turning her head, Petra's thin lips opened, and she confronted Roswaal angrily. Upon hearing this, Roswaal raised his eyebrows slightly in surprise.

But Petra no longer looked at the changes in his expression following it, but instead quickly turned and lifted the corners of her skirt.

Then, she showed a perfect curtsey that was enough to intoxicate all the people present.

Petra: "I must apologize for taking so long. I am a maid serving Margrave Roswaal L Mathers, Petra Leyte."

All: "…"

Petra: "Although I am still clumsy and might repeat myself, please allow me to tell you about Emilia-sama. Not about a "half-elf", but about Emilia-sama."

Facing the sight of the vassal lord, Petra opened her words with this kind of opening remark.

Unbelievably, her inner turmoil had disappeared at this very moment, and nothing but boundless pride filled her eyes.

This is a matter of course, because,

…How could you not laugh with joy when you speak of a person you like.

Behind Petra, who made such an awe-inspiring declaration was Roswaal, who smiled at the immature figure with excellent posture, and Frederica who was tightly holding onto his arm and shaking with anger.

No matter how much Roswaal apologized, saying that he overdid it, Frederica would not let go of his arm and calm down. But compared to her anger, there was another overflowing sentiment that filled Frederica’s heart at this moment. This is also a matter of course.

Because, it is far more important to guard her cherished, beloved sister’s shining stage than to be angry at her master with a bad personality.

END

Joshua Juukulius's Second Careful Encyclopedia

1

—As a breeze flew through the sky, it took a letter with itself.

???: "W-Wait! Please wait!"

Shouting, the boy raised his hand into the sky, aiming for the floating letter. However, the letter left him behind and flew away, as if flapping wings, with utter grace.

Chasing it down the slope was an elegant faced youth.

His tied purple hair, his clear face, and his bright twinkling yellow eyes, along with glasses on just his left eye, were features characteristic to him. Wearing a well fitting dress of black, it could be safely said that he came from a noble household.

That was also another factor that made his dash down the slope look like there was something wrong.

???: "Kh ~hk…! If only, I had taken a look, at the content… Ah! Ah ~hk!"

Sitting beside the window in a quiet room, immersed into the world of literature. —That was the kind of scenario befitting the youth, but here he was, looking upwards and shouting.

People in the surroundings wondered what he was doing, as they witnessed the youth fall flat in the middle of the slope. And, where the letter, which was sought after by the youth, had landed was visible.

—The letter hung onto a dragon ferry travelling in the waterway, and went along with it.

After borrowing the power of wind, this time it borrowed the power of water. Rather, it would be more appropriate to say that it borrowed the power of the water dragon, but that was not the issue here.

???: “…Hey you there, are you alright?”

Passing by the fallen down youth, who gave off the impression of being asleep, was a huge man who asked that question. Seeing the lack of response, the passerby looked at his face, sensing that the problem here may be severe—

???: “—Darn it! I cannot just stay fallen at this place!”

???: “Huh?!”

Forcefully swinging his long legs, the youth sprang and stood up. At his sudden movement, the passerby was visibly surprised, to whom the youth responded to with a “Kindly excuse me”, bowing gracefully.

???: “Though I have shown you an unpleasant sight, I assure that there is no need to worry. I have been given the responsibility of completing a certain task, and I will surely complete…”

???: “I-Is that so. So then, what should be done?”

By the end of the energetic youth’s words, the passerby pointed towards the waterway.

Where he pointed to, there was visible a swimmer swimming leisurely, a ferry carrying a letter, and a street.

???: “W-Wait! Please wait!”

Changing his expression, the youth continued his chase for the letter.

2

—Reaching the age of 17 this year, was Joshua Juukulius, the younger brother of Julius.

The Juukulius household has been a noble family and had a long history with the kingdom of Lugunica. Traces of the family’s prominence and the outstanding members of the household go back to several generations.

Although there are several noble households who do not do so, in the Juukulius household, being born as a male directly meant that you must become a royal knight. Naturally, the child also received the necessary education for that, following the words “the correct way of life for achieving elegance” that have been passed down the generations since ancient times.

However, Joshua’s body betrayed the expectations of his parents, who also held the same belief.

When he merely held the sword in simple playful imitation when he was a child, just that affected his breath, before even receiving any proper training. His education plans were changed, after he got bedridden due to a fever.

—As far as he could remember, he could only see most of his days and time being spent sitting on a bed, reading a tome.

“…”

Turning the pages, he looked outside the window, where he could see the garden of his mansion, and his brother practicing the way to uphold the sword.

He was under the same teacher that Joshua was supposed to be under, had received the same education as what Joshua was supposed to receive, and had taken the responsibility upon himself which Joshua was supposed to take. —Seeing his figure, young Joshua narrowed his staring yellow eyes.

—At a great distance from him, in the garden, red spheres hung onto the trees.

Joshua: “Hah, hah…”

With both his hands on his knees, Joshua panted hoarsely in a desperate attempt to regain his strength, making an expression as if he was on the verge of death.

It had been a total of five minutes since he had started his pursuit for the floating letter—and his body had already reached its limit. On top of that, instead of flying, the letter was now on a ferry, distancing itself away from Joshua further and further.

Joshua: “If I, am unable to, get hold of it, again… it’ll be, quite a, problem.”

Joshua shook his head, as he tasted a bit of blood in his saliva accompanying his immense breathlessness.

The letter was important. He cannot just lose it, and his apologies will not be accepted either.

The content of the letter included instructions that will have a severe impact on the future of someone who may become the ruler of the kingdom. —And he knew, that person was also waiting for the letter.

He did not believe in something like hope, but in what was spoken in jest was the undeniable strength in the tone. The letter surely held sincere, heartfelt feelings.

—For a year and a half now, Joshua had been working with his master, Anastasia.

Not just her being a royal candidate, but even ties to the supreme council that she represented. Being able to help someone like her with housekeeping was an honour for him. However, the stimulus for fascination and joy for Joshua, was stepping into the outside, unfamiliar world.

Unlike when reading books, he could feel the true essence of the reality that was this world—and had witnessed the scene of a person’s life transforming with his own eyes in the Chamber of Commerce.

And, in those scenes, the person was somewhat having the exact the same expression always.

The heart-breaking belief of the young Joshua, was that this was an expression of sincerity.

Henceforth, no matter how discomfiting the other party was, they would not tolerate such an attitude. Moreover, using your own mistake to cause harm to the opposing party was simply unspeakable.

Joshua: “So, if the letter gets away now…”

???: “—Mister! Please, take this!”

Joshua: “Eh?”

Joshua tried to lift his eyes and head with his further strengthened determination. What was in front of him was the letter he swore to chase till the edge of the world.

Eyes widened, hands shivering, Joshua held the letter. He was not dreaming. It really was there.

Joshua: “Ah, ah, a~h.”

???: “Very well! If this made you happy then my spirits have also been uplifted, that is!”

Joshua: “Yes, yes! Thank you very much! If I was to lose it, I would… I would, be unable to face anyone in future!”

???: “Then I am truly glad! It is an honour I could be of help!”

Hugging the letter to his chest, Joshua bowed his head. A smiling young boy stood in front of Joshua.

With soft, pink hair, and two cute large, round eyes. Perhaps around ten years of age. Despite his youth, he was well-dressed in robes, and though his nature and disposition was unknown, he gave off a friendly aura.

This young boy had recovered the letter. He could be called nothing but impressive.

Joshua: “By the way, how you did you come to understand that this letter belonged to me?”

???: “I saw mister dashing down the street shouting about the letter with his hand raised to catch it, that is! That is why, I realised that I must not let it go.”

Joshua: “You are right, this letter is indeed important… And I was running behind it, though I was not fast.”

He had been running slowly due to his heavy breathing, feeling sincere embarrassment when the young boy said that he was “dashing”.

???: “Afterwards I hurriedly called out to the master of the ferry. I asked for it politely, and I was able to receive the letter, so I was simply fortunate!”

Joshua: “…No, that is simply your modesty. I am truly grateful.”

The young boy had a modest attitude, and he was quick to point out how what he did was not his feat.

Regardless, Joshua wanted to truly show gratitude to him for his help.

Joshua: “However, I must thank you for this…”

He had nothing on himself right now, but he was just heading to the inn. However, taking the young boy that far with himself would not be good either.

Joshua: “If there is something I can help you with, then please ask anything.”

???: “Ah, then…”

On Joshua’s suggestion, the boy blushed in embarrassment.

And, hesitating for a moment, said.

???: “The truth is I, seem to have lost my way. As embarrassing as it is, I am currently a vagrant child, that is!”

And, explaining his position, provided the perfect opportunity for

Joshua to pay back his favour.

3

Walking down the street was the unusual and perfectly matching pair of the young boy named Schult and Joshua.

Schult: "—That's why, I am trying my hardest to serve the one who showed the grace of taking me in! I am working hard, just so that I am not crushed by my debt to them!"

Joshua: "That is really splendid! It's truly splendid, Schult-kun!"

Schult: "Y-Y-Yes, thank you very much for such words."

Schult turned his head downwards and smiled at Joshua's praise. Seeing him, Joshua was sincerely awestruck.

He was surely a well-natured young boy. From what he said now, it could be said that he had not been brought up in a favourable environment. However, fatefully encountering someone, he was now striving to accept the happiness and fortune he was blessed with at face value.

That was somewhat not like Joshua.

Joshua: "…It seems Schult-kun highly respects that person."

Schult: "Of course, that is! So much so that respect is an understatement, that is! Ah, but, I truly do respect Al-sama and Yae-sama too. Heinkel-san, I am unsure about him…"

He was usually smiling like a flower, but now he made a difficult face. Shaking his head and doing away with his tired expression, Schult glanced at Joshua.

Schult: "Mister must also be having someone he respects. Is there someone like that?"

Joshua: "—. Huhu, I awaited that question."

Schult: "Oh! How cool!"

In front of Schult, who widened his eyes, Joshua raised his face and his pointed his palms forwards. The sun was visible through the gaps between his fingers, making him narrow his eyes and inhale lightly. That was because—

Joshua: “When you look at the sun, you become unable to see the beautiful wind flowing by. To me, my elder brother was a similarly dazzling existence.”

Schult: “Mister’s brother huh! He really seems to be someone amazing, that is!”

Joshua: “Ha~h, you are right! Nii-sama is truly amazing. He is always working hard, as if he can do anything and will try to do anything. His form, his mindset, he is truly the greatest!”

Schult: “Greatest! He really does seem like someone amazing!”

As Joshua clenched his fist, Schult clapped.

It was not rare for Joshua to talk about his brother, but it was rare for him to hear about his brother. Joshua’s heart experiences an unexpected warmth, as it gets charmed by him.

Joshua’s brother, Julius Juukulius, was unquestionably a person who deserved to be respected.

The will to live was strongly etched onto his soul. He had a habit of underestimating himself, but was able to sincerely and objectively acknowledge his own effort and was fully capable of helping himself.

If nobody tells you that you are an amazing person, you will inevitably stop believing in that.

Henceforth, for Joshua, who was only cheaply imitating Julius—

“…”

An incident that happened, that negative incident, and calling back to it, Joshua sealed his lips.

As soon as he heard those words of praise, Joshua stopped his footsteps. The walking Schult looked backwards and glanced at his face. And,

Schult: "—It really seems like mister truly likes that onii-san!"

"…"

Schult: "Hearing this about him, even I have gotten excited! If there happens to be a chance, I would love to meet mister's brother!"

Seeing his smile, he sighed.

Doing away with the conflicting feelings in his heart, Joshua smiled and blankly nodded.

Joshua: "Yes, you are correct. Nii-sama is perfect, so he will surely treat Schult-kun well. If there happens to be an opportunity, then please do."

Schult replied with "Understood" energetically.

He really wanted to meet his brother. The sight of Schult, who heard the praise of his brother and his desire to meet him, was heart-warming indeed.

Behind his eyes, that observed that soothing sight--

???: "—Hmm. Though it's between all this work, something calming."

An eccentric feeling ran up his spine. They were on a street. With a number of people passing by, with a number of voices sounding by, that voice alone shook up Joshua's eardrums with a complete lack of constraint.

Regardless of even that, he could immediately make out the fact that those words were directed at him.

Joshua: "—Schult-kun, listen to my instructions and dash ahead with all your strength, please."

Schult: “Mister?”

Looking back at the street and glancing at the owner of that voice, said Joshua as he patted Schult’s shoulder. Schult was puzzled, but he had no time to explain the details. —No, even he himself did not know any details, including the opponent’s identity.

However, staring at exactly that place among the crowd filled street, the petite youthful boy’s aim was Joshua, and it could be understood at a single look that the boy was not someone harmless.

Joshua: “Here, please take this. Please convey it to my nii-sama or Schult-kun’s master.”

Gently handing over the letter he held, Joshua stepped forward. Schult, who had received that letter, was confused on what he should do. But, before even that,

Joshua: “Run!”

As per how he was instructed, Schult turned and started running. The little boy did exactly what Joshua told him to, swimming between the crowd of people. Seeing his back, Joshua then turned his head forward. —The one standing on the other side of him was now directly in front of him.

Joshua: “—Kh ~hk.”

???: “Sorry for the surprise, onii-san. Even we wanted to play around a bit more. The time promised to mama is coming close. At this point, let’s just wrap this up.”

Joshua: “I don’t even have anything to say regarding that…”

A sound was heard. Joshua, who had received those words, unfortunately had no way of stopping the youth. Swordsmanship, magical talent, body handling, everything would be ineffective in his body. However, the safety of the letter, and Schult was—

Joshua: “Truly…”

???: “Well then, deepest apologies, but there’s no time. —Thank you for the treat!”

Insanity could be felt within that voice, as a shout echoed through the street. Hearing it, above all.

—He unclearly thought whether he had managed to do something even minimally substantial for his Greatest brother, right before his consciousness left him.

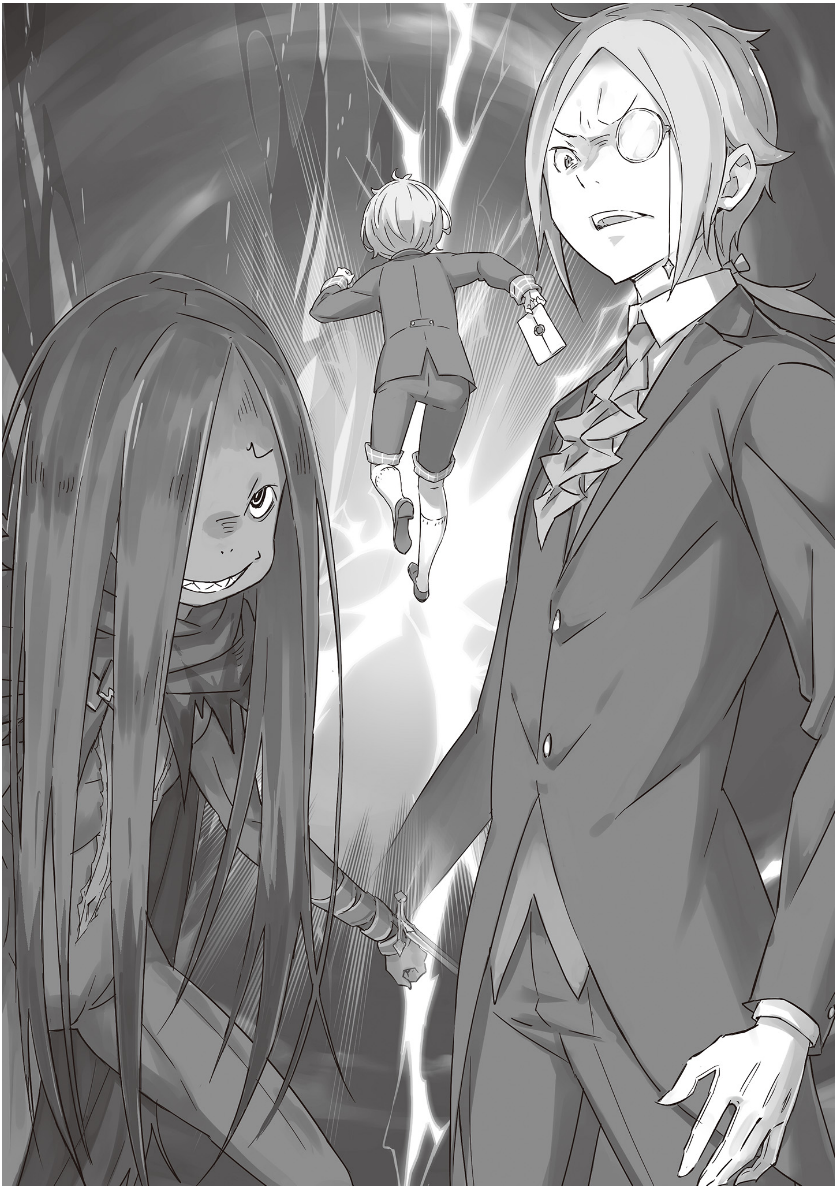

Comic Alive Collection 4: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 4

Felt’s Royal Selection Life from Zero

1

—Ever since she was little, she had been seeing one certain dream over and over again.

It was a dream which began in a dimly lit room.

In a room where only the moonlight was streaming in, she was gazing up at the ceiling. The ceiling was high. It felt like she had been pushed inside a small box, rather than laying down on a bed.

???: “—Are ye really sure about this?”

Suddenly, she heard the voice of someone.

When she tried to look at where it came from, her body would not move. It was not because it was a dream. Even if this was not a dream, during this moment, her body would not move the way she wanted it to.

She simply, somehow felt like this was the right thing to do.

????: “Yes, I’m sure. I can already imagine my brother or wife objecting to it, if they ever happen to know about this.”

She could also hear a reply, the voice sounding different from the first person who had spoken.

It seemed like someone and someone were talking to each other, standing on opposite sides of the box that contained her.

The voices sounded as if they were familiar, but also unfamiliar to her at the same time.

Perhaps, the reason for why the voices felt ambiguous was her own problem. However, she could clearly feel the emotions brimming within the voices.

The familiar voice was filled with disgust, while the unfamiliar voice was filled with affection.

Although, disgust and affection… Neither of those were what she desired, nor yearned for.

???: “I’m indebted to ye all. If I can return what I owe, then I don’t mind taking on this job.”

????: “Thank you. I’m sorry for troubling you, —.”

???: “Ye shouldn’t be worrying about me. You’re concerned for the wrong person.”

????: “…You’re right.”

A cold, sharp voice, and a voice that regulated its emotions firmly.

Inside the box where she could only see the ceiling, her gaze met with someone’s face when they peeked in. For some reason, a shadow was cast upon the face, and she could not see it because it was smudged black.

However, she knew the person was the owner of golden hair and red eyes.

????: “…”

The person gently lifted her body, picking her up from the inside of the box.

They were quite large in size—no, she was small. Almost as if she were an infant. The owner of the voice held her effortlessly, rocking her softly.

????: “Ahh, you’re warm. And you’ve become heavier… Someday, there will be a time when you’ll grow up, so much that my arms won’t be enough to hold you.”

The man said, whilst embracing her.

His voice almost sounded as if it were trembling. Held in the man’s arms, she felt his heartbeat. It was a strangely calming sound, one that made her want to cry.

????: “…I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Suddenly, her ears were pulled away from the sound.

The man handed over the infant in his arms to the person in front of him. The person’s palm was calloused, large, and treated her roughly, just like her impression of him.

She felt ill at ease, completely different from a moment ago. It was not only because of the hardened skin of the palm.

???: “Lending a hand to some human… How far I’ve fallen.”

The person who had placed her on his palm was staring at her, his gaze being a mixture of disgust and disdain.

It was greatly irritating to the infant’s heart.

She did not like it. She wanted to cry out. However, her small limbs could not break free.

?????: “…”

Enveloped by the calloused palm, even her freedom of speech had been seized. Like that, the man started walking with heavy footsteps. She was being taken away from the familiar room, as well as the calming man.

She did not want that. She didn’t. She hated it.

She pleaded for that man to stay with her. She wanted him to stay by her side. She did not want him to let her go.

Even so—

????: “—I love you. Forever and ever.”

An unhelpful voice that did not offer any relief. It was the last thing he had said to her.

2

???: “…It’s morning, huh.”

Her eyelids were warmed by the morning sun streaming through the gap in the curtains, and her consciousness floated up to the surface.

With the sensation of the soft bed wrapping around her whole body, the girl sat up whilst drawing the sheets closer to herself. She scratched her neck-length, golden hair rather violently, and absently turned her neck as she yawned.

Entering her teary-eyed, blurred vision was the room she became used to seeing during these two months.

???: “Jeez, the room is annoyingly huge as always.”

Inside the luxurious room that anyone would be jealous of, the girl muttered with dissatisfaction as she clambered off of the bed of the highest quality.

Having just woken up, the girl stood on the shaggy rug with nothing but her undergarments on her pale body. She had a small frame for her age, and her body lacked feminine curves—however, her well-proportioned face and her strong-willed eyes contained a glimpse of beauty, giving her a promising future when her charm would bloom into a flower.

Her name was Felt. She was a notorious problem child in the past, having made a living in the slums of the Royal Capital with her skill in stealing. —However, the position resting upon her shoulders as of now was wildly different.

The main factor of the dramatic change in the environment around her was—

???: “—Are you awake, Felt-sama?”

With the door to the room being knocked on, Felt could hear a clear, beautiful voice from the other side. Simply listening to it would make one have high hopes for the owner of the voice to have a pure heart and an elegant appearance.

In reality, when people would look at the owner of this beautiful voice in the Capital, most women would let out screams of admiration and then proceed to faint. Even so, despite being a very young woman, Felt curled her lip with apparent distaste.

And then, glaring at the owner of the voice from the other side of the door,

Felt: “Nope, I’m not awake. I’m not awake, so don’t come in.”

???: “You are able to establish a conversation by talking in your sleep? If that is the case, you have developed a new talent, one I do not know of.”

Felt: “You’re damn annoying…”

Upon clicking her tongue at how he did not understand the sarcasm in her tone, the door to the room opened slowly.

Like that, a tall, young, and refined man made his appearance, dressed in a shirt and a pair of pants. His red hair, reminiscent of flames, and his blue eyes that engulfed the azure sky were his defining characteristics. What distinguished him even further was his unpleasantly handsome face, and he was directing a smile at Felt, one that would cause the maidens in the Capital to collapse.

However, his smile had vanished the moment he saw Felt’s appearance when he entered the room,

???: “Felt-sama… Although this is your room, a woman walking around in her undergarments is a little…”

Felt: “I just woke up. Besides, I already told you to not come in. You’re the one who didn’t listen, so don’t blame me.”

In nothing but her underwear, Felt crossed her arms and stuck her slim chest out in the middle of the room. The young man frowned, averting his gaze from her valiant pose.

The interaction was between a young man and woman, but there was no embarrassment associated with it. Felt saw the person in front of her as something different before she thought of him as a man.

Letting out a snort, Felt gazed up at the young man as he looked away from her.

Felt: “Or, does the greatest knight among knights have the capacity to get excited by a miserable-looking body like mine? If that’s it, then I would have to be even more careful about my surroundings, won’t I?”

???: “Please do not demean yourself with words such as ‘miserable-looking’. You have a charm that is unique to yourself. Moreover, it is preposterous for a knight to have their heart swayed by their master.”

Felt: “Who told you to console me about my child-like body shape?! Get out!”

As she threw a pillow from her bed, the young man caught it effortlessly and politely stepped back out of the room. He walked out into the hallway, and then slowly bent over into a bow,

???: “Breakfast is ready. Auntie is also waiting, so please come to the dining room.”

Felt: “I get it, I get it. Just go.”

???: “Understood. Pardon me, I will be taking my leave. —Also, Felt-sama.”

While Felt waved her hand half-heartedly as if she were chasing off a bug, the young man smiled at her, having tossed the pillow he had received back onto the bed with an excellent throw. And then, keeping the same expression on his face, he said,

???: “Good morning.”

Felt: “…That part of you just never fails to get on my nerves. Get the hell out, Reinhard!”

Felt’s first shout of anger in the morning had been scattered in four directions, blocked off by the door that had been closed quietly.

Irritated by the feeling of “losing” the argument for no particular reason, Felt pulled out her clothes from the cabinet, and hastily took off her undergarments.

As the only act of defiance she could do, she decided to pick an outfit that Reinhard might dislike.

3

—The reason why Felt was accompanied by Reinhard and staying in his mansion was the result of several events, and a coincidental, unavoidable circumstance all becoming tightly entangled.

Reinhard had referred to all of that as “fate”, but Felt absolutely hated how it sounded.

She was unable to stomach how he thought everything had been decided from the very beginning. More than anything, they had the worst encounter and their process of getting to know each other was equally as terrible. With their already complicated relationship, just imagining how everything between them was predetermined had aggravated her.

To Felt, it was like being told she was destined to draw the short end of the stick.

That was the honest opinion of Felt, who had obtained the status of the mistress of Reinhard van Astrea, the knight among knights that everyone in the Capital was envious of.

???: “Oh, Felt. Yer up pretty early today.”

Felt: “Ah.”

Once Felt had gotten dressed and exited her room, she came across a large silhouette of a person. The person was a hulking man, gigantic to the point the petite Felt really had to look up at him.

If they had met in a back alley, the difference in their physiques would make Felt be prepared to die. Fortunately, however, this was not a desolate alleyway, and she was also not unacquainted with that person.

Actually, phrasing it as such was unnecessary because of the close and long-lasting relationship between them.

Felt: “Morning, Rom-jii. I don’t really wanna wake up early, but if I stay in this mansion, I tend to get woken up like a good citizen.”

Her face brightening up, Felt ran towards the person she had called “Rom-jii”—a bald, old man with a large frame of over two meters. She had a tender expression on her face, appearing incomparably adorable in contrast to when she had been dealing with Reinhard.

Rom’s shoulders shook with laughter as Felt unleashed a cute charm befitting of her age.

Rom: “Wahaha, being a good citizen is a nice thing, since you’re tiny for yer age. If ye eat properly and live an orderly life, ye’ll grow taller.”

Felt: “From your perspective, it practically won’t make any difference even if I grow or shrink. Like, barely any difference.”

Rom: “That ain’t true. Even though I’m like this, I pay close attention to yer growth.”

Saying that, a smile spread across Rom’s deeply wrinkled face, and he patted her head roughly.

Felt remembered thinking her head might fall off when she was little, but she did not dislike the feeling of the calloused palm. In fact, she was fond of it.

There was a time when she did not want to be treated like a child, but in all honesty, moments like these were the best at making her feel at ease.

—By chance, the dimly lit room from her dreams crossed her mind.

Felt: "…"

Rom: "…Hm? What's the matter, Felt?"

Felt: "Ah, uh, it's nothing. Never mind that, were you able to sleep well?"

Felt put on a smile and asked him, shaking off the strangely sentimental feeling that struck her chest. Receiving her question, Rom answered, "Don't be silly," while slapping his bald head.

Rom: "If you're asking me whether I was able to sleep or not, then yes, I did sleep. But, I can't say it was comfortable."

Felt: "That's true. Life here is way too different compared to what we know."

Rom: "Yes. Well, although that ain't the only reason for my lack of comfort…"

Rom tilted his head while placing a hand on his chin, with Felt copying his gesture. He laughed at her imitation, then urged her to start walking by patting her on the back.

Rom: "Hey, it seems like breakfast's ready. I can have high expectations for how it tastes, right?"

Felt: "Yeah, Granny's meals are super duper good. She's the best at making snacks, though."

Rom listened quietly to Felt's boastful praise, nodding as she blabbered along. They continued to have their pleasant chat while they walked down the hallway.

Felt: "Hm? Ooh, they're going at it again."

Pausing in front of the window, Felt peered into it. The green garden of the mansion belonging to Reinhard stretched out below her, and a sight she had become familiar with was unfolding in there.

Rom: “…What in the world are they doing?”

Felt: “It’s just that warped personalities don’t straighten up easily, so they’re in the process of getting their characters beaten back into shape.”

Rom asked, standing next to her, and Felt answered him whilst propping up her arms on the frame of the window, her chin resting in her hands.

In the garden carrying an relaxed atmosphere, where the fresh grass and flowers of various colors flourished, three men were sprawled across the grass, piled on top of each other.

They had quite the boorish appearance, lying on the ground in a fully unconscious state.

And then, there was an elderly man tending to the grass beside the trio. His expression remained indifferent as he brought a wheelbarrow with practiced ease, placing the three men on top of it with little effort, and then wheeled them away towards the back door of the mansion.

Watching the process to the end, Felt smiled whilst showing off her fang,

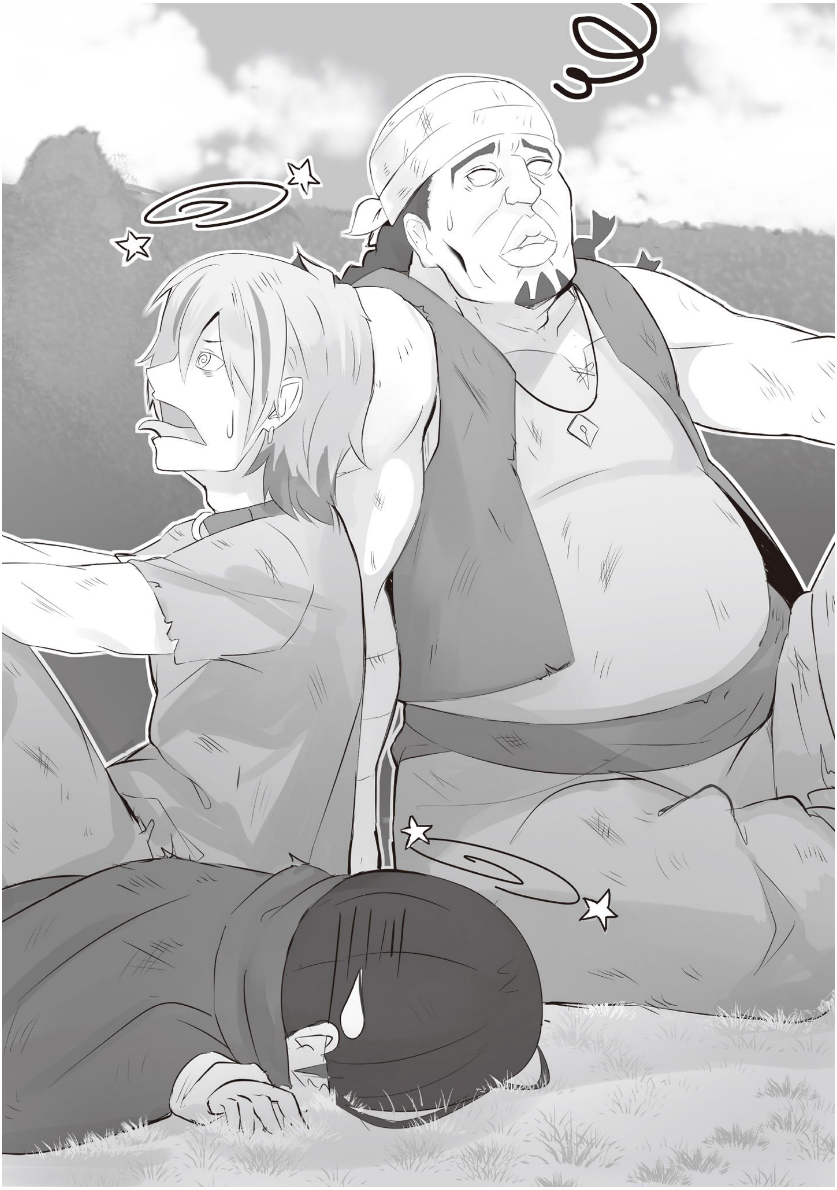

Felt: “Apparently, they had nowhere left to go because they angered a higher-up, so they chose to follow us as a last resort, but they changed their mind after one night and were about to run away. Then, they were found out by Gramps in the middle of their escape, and got beaten up by him.”

Rom: “I see. I guess it’s a typical conclusion, but did ye predict this?”

Felt: “If we could understand each other by talking it out, then they wouldn’t be here, both in a good way and a bad way. Isn’t it more interesting to make those nasty guys tag along?”

Felt did not dislike those who never knew when to give up, nor those with unpreferable personalities. The area she had lived in was a den full of people like that.

The trio was certainly the representation of Felt’s home environment. However, no matter what, she would not be blindly optimistic about it by declaring it as a good thing.

Rom: “Should that be described as tolerant or optimistic…? Perhaps it’s in the blood.”

Felt: “Hm? Did you say something, Rom-jii?”

Felt clasped her hands together behind her head, turning around to face Rom as he murmured something out. He simply shrugged his large shoulders in response to her words.

Rom: “Oh, I just said I’m hungry. Here, hurry up and get walking.”

Felt: “Yeah, yeah, got it.”

Prompted to get a move on, Felt took Rom with her as she started walking in the mansion. She did not wish for it, but she had become accustomed to her life inside the residence within the span of two months.

At least, to the point she would be walking with a bounce in her steps if she was on the way to the dining room.

Felt: “Mornin’!”

With great anticipation for breakfast in her heart, Felt arrived at the dining hall, having brought Rom along with her. Upon opening the large doors and entering the room, the long table was already lined with steaming plates of breakfast.

And then, turning around at Felt’s cheerful entry, two shadows bowed to her.

???: “Certainly, Felt-sama. Good morning.”

???: “…”

An elderly woman and man had responded to her greeting with gentle smiles. They were entrusted with the management of the mansion, and their duties included taking care of Felt and Reinhard.

Reinhard seemed to have a close relationship with them, referring to them as “Uncle” and “Auntie”. Meanwhile, Felt got along with them, simply calling them “Gramps” and “Granny”.

???: “…”

Reinhard was already seated at the dining table, and three young men were forced to sit at the same row as him, their eyes rolled against the back of their heads. Their physiques were large, average, and petite respectively—easy to understand, and they were placed in their seats in the order of their heights.

Furthermore, Felt’s regular spot was in front of Reinhard, and Rom would be sitting next to her during this morning. She pulled out Rom’s chair, then settled into her own seat, and,

Felt: “Alright. So, time to dig in.”

Reinhard: “—. There is no problem with that, but are you sure there is no need for an explanation regarding those three? My very first thought was that you would be surprised by them.”

He was taken aback by how Felt was about to start eating without making any mention of the trio. Listening to his words, she scratched her ear with a finger, muttering out a, “Ahh,”

Felt: “I saw Gramps bring them along with him from above. Plus, I thought it would be something like this since yesterday. I already told Granny and Gramps, right?”

Auntie: “Indeed. Felt-sama spoke to us last night.”

Felt leaned against the back of her chair, tilting her head, and Auntie returned a nod. And then, the woman who had aged with grace chuckled as she gave her husband a sidelong glance,

Auntie: “Grandpa over here was probably delighted that you have relied on him. Unbecoming for his age, he was full of vigor, waiting at the garden since dawn.”

Uncle: “…”

Uncle wordlessly shrugged at Auntie’s testimony. It was rare for the taciturn Uncle to even utter a word, so no one had reprimanded him for his manners, which could be taken as improper.

Suddenly, Auntie gazed at Felt with a mischievous look in her eyes,

Auntie: “Anyway, it is quite an interesting thing. You had been attempting to break free from the mansion with utmost effort, yet now you are reminding us to ensure those three do not escape.”

Felt: “Hey, hey, did you have to say that?”

Rom: “Huh, ye mean Felt was trying to escape? What do ye mean by that?”

As Felt made a face at the remark she could not counter, Rom’s eyes gleamed with curiosity beside her. Looking at his reaction, Reinhard began to speak with a, “To tell the truth…”

The red-haired young man had an innocuous look, his blue eyes traveling across the entire mansion as if he was surveying it, Reinhard: “A promise has been made with Felt-sama. If she was able to sneak out of the mansion, unobserved by myself, Uncle, Auntie, and the other residents, then we will not track her down against her will.”

Rom: “A competition, I see. That makes sense. I can see Felt taking it personally when someone picks a fight with her. She was probably suffering defeat every day, then.”

Felt: “D-Don’t say it like you’ve actually watched it… That’s why I didn’t want you to hear about it!”

Rom pointed it out with a smug look, causing Felt to bury her head into her hands with a reddened face.

Everything had begun ever since she had been captured by Reinhard in the slums, and confined to this mansion by his hand. Since then, she had exchanged a promise of the competition that Reinhard had explained earlier, and she was desperately searching for a way to escape during night and day.

Of course, as a result of her plans failing one after another, Felt had been staying in this mansion like this, and on top of all of that was yesterday’s events.

Yesterday’s events were a serious matter for Felt—no, it was a grave matter even for the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Felt: “The Royal Selection… the battle to take the throne? Are you hecking kidding me? Why did you have to involve me in that unbelievable situation?”

Reinhard: “To be precise, it is a competition to be selected to accede to the throne, not a battle to take the throne. A competition, not a battle.”

Felt: “That’s not the damn problem. You’re misunderstanding me.”

Felt glared at Reinhard’s nonchalant face, her lower lip jutting out.

The Royal Selection—it was the very event that took place in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, a grand incident that shook the country to its roots.

As far back as a few months ago, due to a contagious disease that occurred in the castle, the members of the long-lasted royal family had collapsed one by one, and at last, every one of them had passed away.

As a result, the throne of the current Kingdom had fallen vacant, and was placed in a worrying state of instability. The Kingdom was in a situation where it had to pick out the next King as soon as possible, but as some kind of joke, it was none other than Felt who had been set up as one of the candidates to the throne.

The person who had forcefully dragged her into that unbelievable situation was Reinhard, sitting in front of her with an innocent look on his face, and that was his true objective for confining Felt to the mansion.

Of course, there was no way anyone could unconditionally become a candidate for the next King. Not to mention Felt came from the slums, a street child who made a living through thievery. What could have gone wrong for someone like her to stand on the stage of competing for the throne? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to question Reinhard's sanity.

However, in the face of Felt's unknown origins, Reinhard had announced an outrageous theory to everyone in the castle.

According to him, Felt was a surviving member of the royal family, having been kidnapped fourteen years ago.

Such a theory was not worth a single thought of consideration, and it was also a load of ludicrous nonsense to Felt's ears. Yet, the associates of the royal castle had all taken Reinhard at his word, and had begun examining the possibilities in earnest. That fact was also ridiculous, so Felt had been sneering at them, however.

Felt: "With the thing with Rom-jii, it all got ruined, huh."

Rom had snuck into the castle in an attempt to rescue Felt. His plan ended in failure, and Felt had to declare her participation in the

Royal Selection to free him from his capture.

He had apologized profusely for what he did, but Felt did not regret her decision.

She had made her own choice. Felt had already admonished herself to not be rueful over what she had chosen. To live was a chain of illogical events. Unreasonable things descended on people without giving them any measures to take against them. They were what they were.

In a world where such inconveniences ran rampant, what would she expect from extending her whining and complaining to even what she had decided for herself?

Such a foolish thing did not exist. That was Felt's conclusion, and her philosophy of life.

Felt: "That's why I only hate unreasonable things. To sum it up, it's you, Reinhard."

Reinhard: "You are being quite critical, Felt-sama. I am unreasonable?"

Felt: "No way! I won't let you say you aren't aware of it. If you're the type of person who can't even see what's right below his feet, then I don't wanna talk to you at all."

Reinhard: "You are being quite critical."

Reinhard repeated himself with a troubled expression, aimed at Felt's scathing words.

Anyway, setting aside her dissatisfaction with Reinhard, Felt did not regret her choice. Of course, Rom had been the trigger, and Reinhard was the one who had dragged her out into that place.

However, hearing the speeches delivered by the four other candidates firsthand—the various advocations made by the influential people of the Kingdom, who had gathered at one location, it was true that passion had begun simmering inside of Felt.

She did not know the specifics of what she could do yet.

Even so, as long as this passion continued to urge her on, she had decided that she would not stop moving forward.

Felt: “Though, I feel like there’s a lotta weird stuff going on in the Royal Selection.”

Reinhard: “Do you have any queries concerning the Royal Selection?”

Felt: “Well, anyone would think it’s strange. Even if my birthplace or whatever was shoved aside, what kind of standards are being used to pick the candidates of the King?”

Although Felt did not undergo education, she could imagine a mountain of abilities and talents that would be required for one to possess in order to become King.

Despite the fact that the royal family had been wiped out, it would not lessen the weight of the blood that ran under one’s veins. If a noble’s lineage, close to the original royal family was to be chosen, gifted people would be nominated as candidates, and that would be the natural course of events.

However, every one of the candidates who had stepped onto the stage of the Royal Selection alongside Felt, had all carried a uniqueness that was particular to each of them, but it was hard to say whether they met those kinds of criterias.

Felt: “A merchant from some other country, and a high-handed woman acting like she’s the most important person in the world. There’s also the half-elf girl. There was only one noble woman, but then there’s me. This isn’t a game, dammit.”

Reinhard: “Of course, everyone is aware of that. However, the glow of the insignia has chosen you and the other candidates… It is the will of the Divine Dragon who protects the Kingdom.”

Felt: “So, are you saying the Dragon is a womanizer? How weird are its tastes, choosing me and all that? Are ugly people included in its tastes?”

There were five Royal Selection candidates, and every one of them was a woman. As Felt mocked the truth of it, Reinhard looked like he had no clue of how to answer that.

Auntie: “Now, now, how could you say such a thing, Felt-sama?”

Auntie said in place of the hesitant Reinhard, butting into the conversation. She had been listening to the conversation in silence, but her brows were knitted, as if she could not put up with Felt’s words for any longer.

Felt: “What’s it, Granny? You’re mad because I badmouthed the Dragon?”

Auntie: “No, it is not because of that! I am angry because you have belittled yourself. Calling yourself ‘ugly’… even though you are this lovely? Auntie is saddened.”

Felt: “Wha…? You’re mad at me about myself?”

Upon displaying her astonishment towards the unexpected interruption, Rom-jii folded his arms beside her with a nod. Even Uncle was nodding deeply next to Auntie, and Felt suddenly felt out of place.

Rom: “Listen, Felt. I also think yer appearance is not bad…”

Felt: “Okay, time to drop the topic! How I look doesn’t matter at all! That isn’t even the problem! Hey, bring back the original topic! Talk about the topic before this, Reinhard!”

Reinhard: “Me?”

Sensing that the conversation would take a turn into something awkward, Felt cut Rom off and drew Reinhard out to make him talk. He seemed surprised at her momentum, and then blew out a short sigh, Reinhard: “Ah, yes. I understand your concerns surrounding the Royal Selection. I cannot fathom the Divine Dragon’s preferences, but the first encounter of the Kingdom and the Dragon—when the covenant was exchanged between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Divine Dragon, the person who had conversed with the Dragon was recorded as a woman, said to be the Dragon Maiden.”

Rom: “And then, in the current situation where conversing with the Dragon once more is highly desired, the next Dragon Maiden would be chosen among the women. I’m assuming that’s how ye interpreted it.”

Reinhard: “If you could, please consider it as the consensus of the Kingdom, not only myself.”

Felt: “Those are the opinions of bigwigs like nobles and knights, right? For evidence, the people in the slums never heard such a thing, like me over here.”

As a representative of the lower classes, she did not welcome any efforts for one to have their way with her, using the “consensus of the Kingdom” as an excuse. Reinhard’s troubled expression against Felt’s opinion remained on his face,

Reinhard: “Are you stating that you are against the Royal Selection?”

Felt: “I’m just saying there’s a lotta things that make no sense. Ah, more than being against it, I have a complaint. I didn’t have the right to choose my knight. Can’t you do something about it?”

Reinhard: “As much as I would like to take your requests into consideration, I believe it will be a difficult task to entrust you to another knight, unfortunately. With all due respect, you have lashed out at the knights and the people of importance at the scene of the Selection, so I presume that it will be a struggle to find someone who could make a pledge to dedicate their sword to…”

Felt: “I know, okay? I’m just being sarcastic. It can’t be helped, so I guess I’ll put up with you.”

Reinhard: “Yes, please bear with me. This body of mine, this sword, everything is for you, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Ugh, so annoying.”

Felt stuck out her tongue at Reinhard’s overly formal response.

Taking Reinhard’s reputation within the Kingdom into account, anyone would be perplexed by Felt’s attitude towards him. However, every person in this mansion, including Reinhard himself, did not reprove her for it. In fact, they saw her attitude in a favorable light.

Rom: “Well, it’s what Felt decided for herself. I don’t plan on complaining about this and that at this time, but… I can’t deny we’re somewhat inadequate as a Royal Selection team.”

Once the topic at hand had reached a stopping point, Rom muttered that out whilst patting his bald head.

The Felt Camp, one of the teams about to start fighting in the Royal Selection—setting the leader, Felt aside, it included Reinhard, her number one knight. Rom, who was basically her family. The married couple who was involved with the Astrea family and managed the mansion, and lastly—

Reinhard: “These three, who have been remaining unconscious for a terribly long time?”

Felt: “Doesn’t it feel good to have nothing? I’m starting to find this fun.”

Reinhard: “…Fun?”

As Felt contorted her face with a smirk, Rom and Reinhard simultaneously stared at her in wonder. Receiving their gazes, she showed her fang with a, “Isn’t that right?”

Felt: “No one expects anything from us. No matter what you think of it, it’ll be even more of a sight if we flip over the situation from there. This is our advantage.”

Rom & Reinhard: "…"

Felt boasted with a remarkable amount of assertiveness, slapping her own slender chest.

Hearing her overly confident stance on the matter, Rom and Reinhard were unable to utter anything at the moment. Instead, what made the time resume its ticking was a loud clap.

Auntie: "Come now, let's proceed with dining instead of conversing for eternity. Wonderful ideas will not come to your mind if you are hungry. Grandpa says so, as well."

Uncle: "—h?!"

As Auntie said that whilst clapping her hands, Uncle widened his eyes at his name being used to her advantage.

Seeing the married couple's interaction, Felt accidentally burst into laughter. After that, she cracked her neck, and then grabbed her fork and knife to eat her long-awaited breakfast.

She learned some manners during these two months, at least.

Reinhard: "Felt-sama."

Felt: "There's proper etiquette for this, right? I know, I know."

Reinhard: "Yes, please."

It was terribly vexing to have something pointed out by Reinhard even during one meal.

In the future, could there be a possibility that he would give her instructions for anything and everything for the sake of the Royal Selection? If so—

Felt: "Maybe this'll be the first time I'll regret my own choice."

Like that, Felt sated her hunger, squashing out her bitterness with the delicious breakfast.

With breakfast coming to an end, Felt returned to the room that was hers for the time being, keeping a careful eye on the time before heading out to the mansion's garden after a while.

And then, there was the trio, sprawled out on the grass yet again.

Felt: "Don't you guys feel dizzy, getting that desperate even though you missed breakfast? Plus, it's not lunch time yet."

Stepping on the grass, Felt stood next to the trio, tilting her head at their state. They were in the same situation as during the morning, except they were not tidied out of the way, probably because they would not be a bother to Uncle's work. Adding to that, Uncle had determined they would be unable to move despite leaving them unattended.

???: "Sh, shut up. How dare you mess with us…"

A sharp-eyed man had said first upon looking at Felt's gaze, his voice rich with spite.

Lying down on the grass with their limbs spread out, among the three men whose heights were large, medium, and small respectively, the man with an average build and a face full of caution—his name was—

Felt: "I'm not messing with you, Rachins. Actually, I'm a little impressed. I only have one body, so I couldn't split up and get on the move like you three."

However, it must be said that although they could cooperate with each other, it was hopeless if they were defeated one by one.

????: "Wh-What the hell is that old man? He disappeared from my sight when I thought I grabbed him."

?????: "To me, it looked like you were bouncing around on your own and then fell over, Gaston."

Gaston: "There's no way I would do anything crazy like that…"

The large Gaston and the tiny Camberley were exchanging words, sounding exhausted. They appeared to be less hot-blooded compared to Rachins, but all three of them seemed to balance each other very well.

Anyway, Felt could agree with a certain point in their after-action review.

Felt: “I feel you, totally. Gramps gave me a terrible time just like you guys. But, don’t get the wrong idea. Gramps is like that, but his methods are the most gentle. Granny and Reinhard are way more merciless than him. Especially Reinhard, he’s the worst. It’s like he’s trying to break our spirit.”

Gaston: “O-Oh, okay, I see…”

Felt’s stories about her struggles began flowing out like a river. When it came to planning an escape from House Astrea, Felt had more than ten times the amount of experience compared to the trio. However, she did not intend to divulge further information, since she would only be venting out her frustration, as there was not a single attempt which had ended in success.

Rachins: “…Rather than that, you don’t have any complaints against us?”

Rachins asked out of the blue, sitting cross-legged on the grass whilst raising his eyes to look at Felt.

Felt: “Complaints? Me? Why?”

Rachins: “Why, you ask…? I mean, we three are trying to escape.”

He spoke honestly with an embarrassed expression, causing Felt to smile wryly.

Felt: “Well, I expected you guys would try and escape. Though, I don’t even think I was able to be on friendly terms with you all from that short chat from yesterday.”

Felt shrugged her slim shoulders, gazing at the faces of each individual.

Rachins's group will be accepted into the Felt Camp. —She had decided to take the first step with her choice.

Yesterday, on the way back home from the castle, where Felt had announced her intention to participate in the Royal Selection, she and her companions had stopped by at the loot house—their old home, and encountered the trio at the site of the demolished building. They had pointed a knife at Felt, threatening her to fork over her money, but their opponent was completely out of their league.

In the blink of an eye, the trio had been thoroughly defeated by Reinhard, who had been present, and originally, they would have been delivered to the guards. Felt had prevented that, and also extended a hand to them.

It was not as if Felt had been unable to help herself, nor did she take action out of sympathy. She simply thought it would be interesting to win over those three as her allies, and to have them accompany her.

If she were to keep moving in order to become King, she would purposefully choose a refreshing lot of people to bring with her, if things were going to be that way. She had brought them to the mansion for that reason, told them the whole story behind her actions, and made them promise their cooperation, but—

Felt: "Minds change once you cool down. I was also raised in the slums, you know? It's easy to see through the true natures of the people who live there."

Camberley: "Huh? That doesn't really sound like we're being complimented."

Rachins: "That's because it's not even a compliment. Stop screwing around, damn it…"

Felt: "It's good that you guys are stubborn, but you probably didn't even think it through before trying to escape, right? You sounded like you were all being chased by someone else in the first place."

Rachins: “Guh…!”

They had invoked the ire of their superior because they had messed up at work. Their conversation had gone like that, if she remembered correctly.

In other words, even if they fled from Felt, they would have to keep running from owning up to their mistake, so it was unsuitable as a solution to the root of the problem.

Gaston: “Wh, what should we do?”

Camberley: “I thought it would work out somehow. Though, I don’t have anything to support that.”

As Felt had thought, the trio did not have anyone or anything they could rely on.

That foolhardiness about them showed that they were residents of the slums, indeed. Even among the residents, she felt like they were a little too rash, however.

Felt: “There isn’t much stuff I can say. It’s just… this place is much better compared to trying to escape as a conditioned response. Well, I won’t tell you to listen to me no matter what, or anything like that.”

Gaston: “…But, that’s just going to be a loss for you. If you were raised in slums, I can’t think of a reason why you’d lend a hand to us, even though you won’t get anything in return.”

Felt: “My reason for lending a hand…”

Gaston muttered out in a low voice, gazing at Felt. Rachins and Camberley were also staring at her in the same fashion, causing her to scratch her head from having their eyes on her.

Rachins: “It’s just as Gaston said. Lending a hand to us even if you won’t get anything in return? Impossible! No one would think they wouldn’t be treated as a sacrificial pawn, if you tell them to believe you like that!”

Camberley: “Huh? But weren’t you saying we could try believing in her yesterday?”

Gaston: “Shut up for a little while, Camberley.”

As Camberley said something he could have kept to himself, Gaston grabbed his face with the palm of his hand. With the forcefully silenced Camberley behind him, Rachins continued to glare at Felt,

Rachins: “What’s your objective? What do you really wanna make us do?”

Felt: “…I told you everything about my plans yesterday.”

Felt closed one of her eyes in response to his doubt-filled eyes.

The trio had asked her an identical question the day before, and she had given them the same answer. She did not make a sincere plea with them. She had only invited them to come along with her.

Felt: “A lotta people piss you off, right? That’s why I’m inviting you all to make them pay. And you guys are worried because… you don’t know what kind of role you’re supposed to take up, I guess.”

Rachins: “…”

The moment she uttered that one sentence, Rachins’s facial expression had morphed into something else. Gaston and Camberley saw his face, casting worried glances towards him.

Presumably, Rachins was the one who made the most decisions out of the three. However, he was also the easiest to sway, so it seemed like the other two provided him with their support. Such was the nature of their relationship.

They had come this far as a group of three, yet they held no confidence within themselves.

What led Felt to invite them in was not much of a proper reason, and they were not wanted in the sense of being absolutely necessary to her team. Not to mention they had been living their life in the slums. —They did not know why they were chosen.

Because they understood they had nothing to pride themselves on, more so than anyone else.

Felt: “Don’t worry. I don’t know what to do either.”

Rachins: “Ah?”

Felt: “I told you, didn’t I? I grew up in the slums, but now I’m suddenly set up as a Royal Selection candidate. If I was full of motivation, and if I were to say that I already made up my mind on what to do and what to achieve, I would be a monster. The monster’s my knight, not me.”

Reinhard was a monster in terms of physical abilities, but he was quite unreliable when it came to other things.

Felt: “So, I can’t tell you guys to start working your butts off out of the blue, and I won’t say it, too.”

Rachins: “Th, then, what are you planning to do?”

Felt: “I’m saying, let’s start thinking about it after this. I have to learn so many things, and it’s definitely gonna be a pain to study… but, maybe you could throw away your belief that you have nothing, you know?”

At Felt’s fanged smile, Rachins and the other two exchanged dumbfounded glances.

They had nothing. It was the same for Felt, who had no idea of what to do with herself. That was why, as fellow people who possessed matching personal problems, they could at least chatter away and argue amongst themselves while moving forward.

Camberley: “…I’m thinking I can go with you, Missy.”

Unexpectedly, Camberley had been the first to say that. Having been carried on Gaston’s shoulder, Camberley clenched his fists in front of Felt as he was lowered onto the grass.

Camberley: “It’s a little too difficult for me to understand, but now I know which one is easier to understand. It would be really bad for us even if we ran away from here, so…”

He turned around, nodding at Rachins and Gaston.

Camberley: “Let’s reconsider it. Even if we apologized to that Russell and he were to forgive us, our positions as errand boys will never change, right?”

Gaston: “…To think I’ve been convinced by you. That hadn’t happened since I picked up Rachins from the back alley. He was like a ragged piece of cloth back then.”

Rachins: “Shut up!”

Gaston said that while laughing wryly, and then Rachins barked out a retort at his words. However, it was also a sign that the two had allowed themselves to relax and show their agreement with Camberley.

The balance had tipped over. As for which direction it had tilted towards, Felt understood that well enough.

Rachins: “…Just saying, but we’ll be ready to escape at any moment if things start turning against us.”

Gaston: “We’ll also filch any valuables along the way!”

Camberley: “If it comes to suddenly turning aggressive and running away, no one does it better than us!”

The trio declared respectively, finally making their choice to join the Felt Camp.

Felt gave them a contented smile, and then crossed her arms.

Felt: “I’ll tell you this, but even if you throw Gramps and the others off guard, they still won’t have any mercy on you guys.”

Gaston, Rachins, & Camberley:

“W-We won’t do anything like that!”

“We aren’t even planning to!”

“We’ll only try a little!”

The more they spoke, the more their true intentions were exposed.

Well, Felt could laugh it off as an easily comprehensible fault of people who had been raised in the slums.

5

Rom: “—It seems like you’re unexpectedly motivated to do this.”

Felt: “Rom-jii?”

After spending a few heartwarming moments with the trio at the garden, Felt was about to return to her room, only to be greeted by Rom in front of it.

He had a good-natured old man’s look on his fierce, scary face, which caused Felt to scratch the tip of her nose with a, “Oh, you were watching?”

Felt: “It’s not like I can just run away from it right now. Also, I don’t wanna lose when I decided I would do it. You also don’t remember raising a loser, right?”

Rom: “I raised ye to make sure ye wouldn’t get discouraged from getting tossed around by the harsh realities of the world, but with that, ye might be more of a first-class student than I thought.”

Felt: “Heh, give me a break, treating me like a first-class student and all that. It doesn’t suit me.”

Felt shook her head at Rom’s words whilst laughing mischievously. Rom narrowed his eyes at her reaction, with deep emotion surfacing onto his face for some reason.

Strangely, a forlorn feeling tugged at her when she saw his face, and Felt stiffened her expression. And then, although she was deciding this out of all times, she asked him a question that she had to ask.

Felt: “You know… we couldn’t really talk because yesterday was like, a really busy day, right? But, you know, I have something I wanna ask you.”

Rom: “What, you’re being unlike yerself. You’re acting like an ordinary little lass.”

Felt: “—. You’re right, I’m not acting like myself. I get it. Then I’ll just say it.”

With Rom jabbing at her hesitation, Felt took a deep breath before looking at him straight in the eye.

And then, she announced what she had declared back at the castle once more.

Felt: “—I’m participating in the Royal Selection. It’s annoying how this is going the way Reinhard wanted it to, but I also talked it out with Rachins and his group. I also ran my mouth in front of so many people, saying, I’ll do it. But that’s not enough.”

Rom: “Hm, not enough, ye say?”

Felt: “Actually, this is just me being selfish, so I wasn’t planning to make you come with me. But if you aren’t here, I’ll be worried and I won’t have the confidence that I’ll make it. So…”

Rom: “…”

Felt: “I want you to help me. I want you, my only family, to stay together with me.”

To Felt, the only person she could trust was the elderly man in front of her, without exaggeration.

Ever since she became aware of her surroundings, she had been raised in the unforgiving environment of the slums. Rom had always been there beside her. Felt had been taught how to live, learned how to use things to her advantage, and had been gifted with her life.

Even after she had matured and started living separately from him, she did not believe that the distance between their hearts had widened. She strongly felt that way even in the present.

Rom: “…What are yer thoughts on yer origins?”

Felt: “…”

Rom: “The young Sword Saint said it at the castle. That you’re the daughter of the topmost family in Lugunica, and also that ye might be the infant who was kidnapped from there. That ye had a family. What…”

Felt: “You’re my only family, Rom-jii!”

Felt exclaimed, cutting off Rom’s hoarse voice.

Rom: “…”

He stood still, his face stiffening at her response. She angled back her head to gaze up at his face, biting her lip before beginning to speak.

Felt: “I don’t know if that’s actually true. I’m not interested either. My only family is you, the person who stayed together with me since I was a kid. I don’t give a damn about the people who aren’t here anymore, or weren’t even here to begin with.”

She was not putting up a brave front, nor was it a bluff. Those were her genuine, true feelings.

Whether it concerned where she was born or who was her kin, the information that her surroundings had made a scene about was a trivial matter to her, and she couldn’t care less about it.

What was important to her was the person who had stuck with her. That was all.

That was why she wanted that person to stay with her even from now on. That was all.

Rom: “…Oh well, that’s really unlike yerself.”

Having received the full attention of Felt's gaze, Rom broke into a smile. He let out a sigh, looking as if he had been taken aback, and stroked his bald head slowly.

Rom: "If it were ye from a little while ago, ye wouldn't have told me about this beforehand. Ye would've dragged me into this as ye pleased, and then stick yer tongue out as if ye just didn't do that. I still haven't forgotten the day when the loot house got blown away."

Felt: "Uh… no, that was my fault for jumping on a sweet deal…"

Rom: "Aye. It wouldn't have turned into a load of baloney if ye at least discussed it with me. So…"

As Felt reflected on her mistakes with slumped shoulders, a large palm caressed the sulking girl's head.

And then, he crouched over to Felt, who appeared to be surprised,

Rom: "If I don't stay next to her and watch over her, my granddaughter'll keep being a handful. I can't go into retirement in peace like that."

Felt: "Rom-jii…!"

As Rom said that with a laugh, Felt's face brightened. Wondering where her previous anxiousness and nervousness had gone, Rom shrugged exasperatedly at her rapidly shifting attitude.

Perhaps Felt had grown embarrassed at how her reaction went from one extreme to the other, as her cheeks flushed as she quietly escaped from Rom's palm, which had been resting on her head,

Felt: "Al-Alright, it's decided, then. With this, I won't have to come across a situation where you shriveled up and died while I'm unaware. It's worth celebrating or something."

Rom: "Yes, yes, I get it, I get it. Either way, I wasn't even planning on leaving ye and returning to the slums. I guess I'll have ye do yer best and let me live a life of luxury after my retirement."

Felt: “You said you won’t retire, right? I’ll have you work really hard for some time, together with me.”

The time it would take for the Royal Selection to be settled was three years at the very least. Rom drew back his chin in an exaggerated manner at Felt’s demand, which had taken that into account, and said, “Fine.”

At that, she internally heaved out a sigh of relief.

Although she did not expect him to reject her request, the uneasiness that came from the possibility of it had lingered within her. She would fight whoever turned against her as an enemy, but preferably, she wanted Rom to watch over her from behind.

Felt: “Right. Sorry for saying these things at short notice, but Reinhard said he’s planning to leave the Capital tomorrow. Apparently, we’re going to his home towards the east or something.”

Rom: “House Astrea’s territory, I see. If ye wanna fight through the Royal Selection, ye have to start from securing the foundation of yer team. It’s the correct choice.”

Felt widened her eyes when she heard Rom mutter that out with a hand to his chin.

His interpretation was completely identical with what Reinhard had told her. It was almost as if he knew it without needing an explanation, and Felt scratched her cheek at that.

Felt: “It’s like you know about the Royal Selection more than me, Rom-jii.”

Rom: “Nonsense. How much longer do ye think I’ve been living compared to ye? It’s easy to understand this much with a little bit of thinking.”

Felt: “Really? Though, I felt like you’re really reliable. As expected of my Rom-jii!”

She prioritized the sense of security it would bring as the reason for why she wanted Rom to remain in her team, but the indication that he would take a bigger role made her feel as if he would be very trustworthy.

Felt: “That’s why we’re gonna leave the Capital, but are you alright with it?”

Rom: “In the first place, my only personal belonging is this body of mine. I had nothing from the moment the loot house was blown away. If it’s about whether my mind is prepared for it or not, then it’s a yes.”

Felt: “Right, it’s good if that’s the case, but… did you already hear about it from someone else?”

Rom: “Only about leaving the Capital. His devotion to ye is pretty admirable.”

Felt: “You mean, that bastard…?”

Reinhard’s face crossed her mind at Rom’s mocking manner of speech.

Had he informed Rom in advance out of consideration? Simply thinking about it made Felt curl her lip into a sneer, however.

Rom: “Ye might not like him, but there isn’t a knight greater than him out there. Since ye’ll have to put up with him for a long time, ye better find a way to get along with him.”

Felt: “Like, putting you between us whenever we talk?”

Rom: “I wonder why you’re so open with yer hate for him…”

She could only describe the most important reason for it as how Reinhard had been the largest obstacle, standing between Felt and her reunion with Rom, causing her animosity towards him to be nurtured daily.

If was not as if no other reason existed for it, but—

Felt: “Well, I’ll think about it because you told me that… I’m gonna go back to my room, but what will you do? Will you come with me?”

Feeling somewhat strange about having an endless conversation in the hallway, Felt pointed at the door behind Rom.

Felt: “There’s a ton of books he told me to read. So, it’ll be really helpful if you could be someone I can talk to…”

Rom: “No, I don’t mean to disturb ye while you’re studying. I’ll at least learn how to pose myself as an old geezer that assists the higher-ups from my predecessors.”

Felt: “Ah, you’re talking about Gramps and Granny. Right, you don’t have friends either, so use this opportunity to get friendly with them. Gramps won’t speak, so go together with Granny.”

Saying that, Felt parted ways with Rom and entered her room.

She saw a mountain of books dumped on her desk, containing the materials she had to learn as a “ruler”, all chosen by Reinhard.

Felt: “He’s a really merciless guy…”

Felt let out a weary sigh at the sight before her, then cracked her neck before walking towards her desk.

Whilst telling herself that this was a necessary step to move forward, since she had decided to not escape, after all.

6

After staring after Felt as she entered her room, Rom breathed out a heavy sigh.

By chance, it was simultaneous with the moment Felt had also let out a sigh after looking at her mountain of books, but it was an unknown fact to them, who were inside and outside of the room respectively.

On top of that, there was a large difference between the individual emotions embedded into their sighs.

Felt, who had resolved herself to attempt to complete her homework, and Rom's sigh, which harbored remorse and uncertainty.

???: "—It seems like you've endeared yourself to Felt-sama."

????: "…"

It was when he had distanced himself from Felt's room, wondering what to do from now on as he took a step forward.

Upon whirling around towards the voice behind him, he spotted a silhouette approaching from the end of the corridor, making its way towards him with noiseless steps. The shadow was a white-haired, elderly woman who had a straightened posture—the woman Felt had called "Auntie" out of admiration.

She was a gentle person, never forgetful of her courtesy and consideration, but the woman currently walking before Rom was a swordswoman, wildly different from her amicable impression.

In fact, although she held nothing in her hands, Rom could feel the razor-sharp spirit of the sword stabbing into his entire body.

Rom: "Greetings. I thought I didn't forget to give my thanks after the meal?"

Auntie: "Well, well, how are you able to prattle on like that? Have you procured Felt-sama's trust with those insincere words of yours, as usual? If that is so, it seems like your despicable nature hasn't changed."

Rom: "That's a harsh way of putting it. Ye talk about me as if ye know who I am, but have we even met? I wonder what in the world are ye talking about…"

The woman narrowed her eyes as Rom cocked his head. The gleam in her eyes was already sharp as a sword, yet it was growing increasingly cutting, on the verge of switching into the will to fight by revealing her withdrawn blade.

Rom took one step back from his unexpectedly short tempered opponent. However, the moment he made that one step, he noticed a different person standing behind him.

Conceivably, the person was surrounded by a threatening aura, more so than the elderly woman before him—

????: “…”

Rom: “Not only are ye silent, but ye even concealed yer presence. I guess there’s quite the bunch of dangerous servants here. Although, that lad alone would be enough when it comes to fighting.”

Auntie: “You shall not insult the young master. There won’t be a next time.”

Behind him was the silent gardener, and at his front was a sword-like, elderly woman. Rom’s cheeks stiffened slightly at the fact he was trapped between the two, but he waited to see what would be their first move.

If he were to act carelessly, then the gardener would be more troublesome than the elderly woman.

Rom: “Ye seem pretty hot-tempered. That’s yer true self, ain’t it?”

????: “…Do, not… anger my, wife.”

A low, guttural voice kept Rom at bay as he spoke to the elderly woman. From the hoarseness of the voice, he was able to judge that the gardener was unable to speak rather than refusing to do so.

Thinking of the gardener as a voiceless man who was also affiliated with the Astrea family, distant memories started to resurface.

There used to be a fateful connection between Rom and the Astrea family. Inside of that—

Rom: “—I see. I thought I’ve met ye two somewhere, but ye got that kind of connection.”

Rom’s convinced muttering had slipped out, causing the elderly woman to tighten her expression into a fierce look upon hearing it.

As he had thought, the one who easily got emotional was the wife instead of the husband.

Rom: “It seems like that aspect of ye hasn’t changed, Carol Remendis.”

Carol: “—hk?! Where did you learn my…”

Rom: “The people involved at that time, especially the fellows from the Kingdom… Most of them are here.”

The elderly woman held her breath as Rom used a finger to tap his own head. While watching her reaction, Rom gazed out of the window at the garden below.

Rom: “Ye probably only caught those three thugs as a part of taking the opportunity to do what ye were doing. That means the person ye were keeping yer eyes on throughout the night was me.”

Carol: “You should be more than aware of the reason for that.”

Rom: “It seems like that youngster also knew my true identity, after all. Damn Sword Demon… Ye built a pretty nasty family, just as I thought. How irritating.”

He patted his bald head with the palm of his hand, scowling as wrinkles of loathing etched themselves onto his face. It was an expression that he had never shown Felt—after she became aware of her surroundings, at least.

Ever since the day the loot house had been blown away, everything had started taking a turn for the worse and showed no signs of stopping. It was as if Rom’s past, something he had wanted to forget no matter what, began advancing on him in a circle all at once, whilst it also felt like what he had discarded was being collected.

The turning point in life that had visited Felt, his relationship with the Astrea family, his fateful connection to the married couple, and everything.

Rom: “The past is in the past, and war is war. There’s nothing I can say aside from that result.”

Carol: “Out of all the people, you are saying this? Who do you think would believe your words?”

Rom: “I’m Rom-jii, a small-time scoundrel who earned a small sum of money by buying and selling off stolen goods in the loot house. I am nothing more, and nothing less. I’m not thinking of using that girl… Felt.”

He shook his head slowly. Closing his eyes, the memories he had shared with the infant had reemerged.

He had continuously watched over the girl’s growth, ever since she had been tiny to the point she could fit in his palm.

—His resentment and vindictiveness from back then had all been washed away by the days he had spent with the girl.

Uncle: “—Can you, keep… your, word?”

Looking at Rom’s eyes, the elderly woman hesitated to pursue his declaration with her words. The person who had asked the question instead of her was the owner of the hoarse voice, while maintaining the piercing look in his gaze.

—He saw the warrior with a shield within the man, someone who was always beside the Sword Demon.

Rom: “Can I keep my word, ye ask? Seems like you’re misunderstanding something.”

Uncle: “…”

Rom: “I already made that vow a long time ago. That girl saved my way of life, ye know.”

Saying that, Rom purposefully turned back to face the husband as he began walking. The gardener did not stop him even as he passed by. The elderly woman did not attempt to strike him from behind with the sword she had hidden at her back, either.

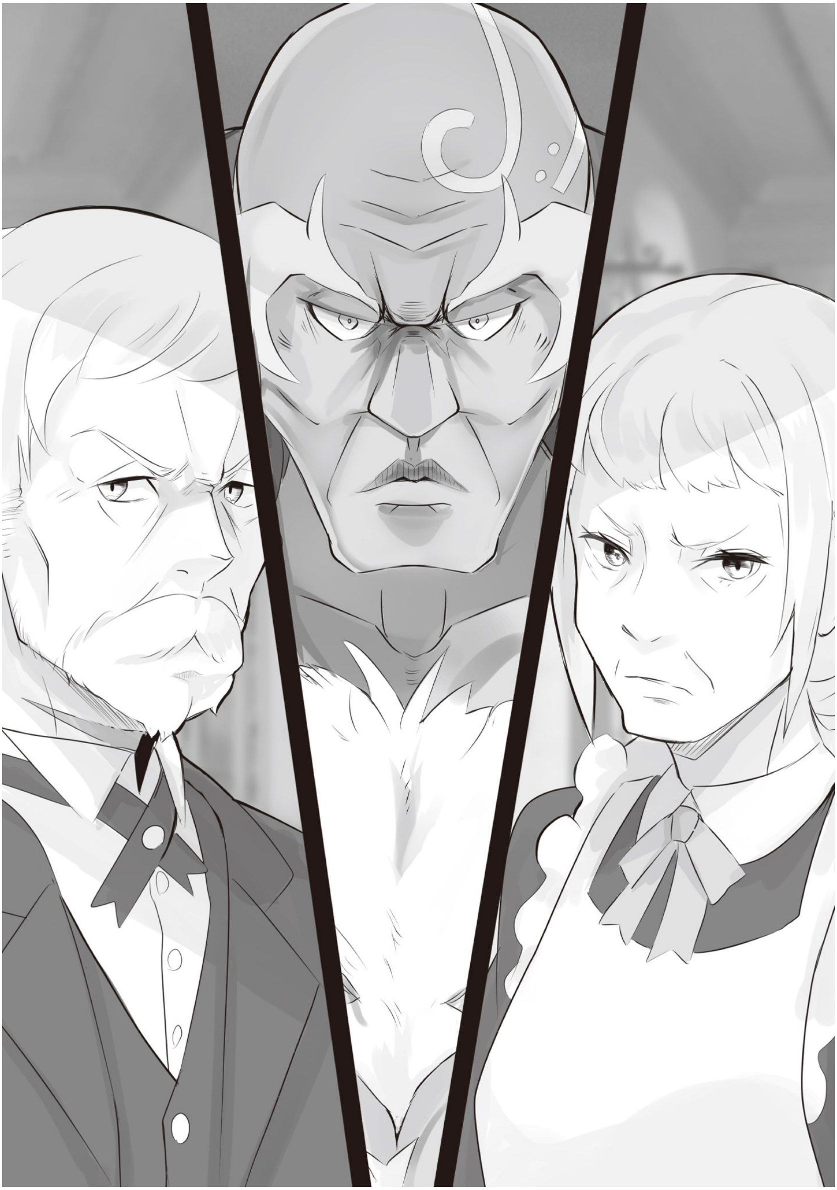

Even if they did such things, Rom could not blame them. His lack of virtue had shaped his sins.

However, if they were granting him a reprieve, then he would do all he could.

As someone who had brought misfortune to both his enemies and brethren alike in the past, he would give everything he had to his one and only granddaughter.

Upon making an uneventful turn at the corner of the hallway, Rom's resolve had shifted into a sincere vow.

7

Felt: "Ugh…"

Felt grimaced without making an effort to hide it, right as she turned around the corner of the hallway during midnight.

There was only one person in this mansion that she would show such a reaction to. Said person forced a smile as he saw her blatant attitude.

???: "Felt-sama, allow me to question your decision to say, 'Geh' upon meeting me."

Felt: "Doesn't matter. What, weren't you out somewhere?"

She said to him, sticking her lips out at how his words sounded like a lecture.

Felt had eaten dinner after grappling with the massive amount of teaching materials in her room, but Reinhard had been absent. However, according to Auntie, there was a possibility that he might come home late.

Reinhard: "I apologize for being unable to join you for dinner. I was required to report my schedule from after tomorrow to the castle, and I also attended to a personal matter. Were there any problems?”

Felt: “Those three idiots finally took on a bolder attitude, and they ate loads of food. That’s pretty much it.”

It was after they made their choice to join the Felt Camp, but Rachins and his group’s voracious appetites were truly impressive. Truthfully, Felt had been worried about Auntie potentially finding them unpleasant, but she seemed content with the fact that the young men enjoyed her cooking, remaining pleased for the entire duration of the meal. Felt had been relieved thanks to that.

Anyway—

Felt: “Did you just get back? I wonder if there’s any supper left. Gotta ask Granny.”

Reinhard: “Thank you for your consideration… Have you just finished taking a bath?”

He was quick to spot Felt’s damp hair and her flushed face. She nodded while fanning herself with a hand, her skin tinted with red because she was fresh out of the bath.

Felt: “Yeah, I’m going to have to say goodbye to the bath in this mansion after today. I also had my energy drained by the heartless amount of homework you gave me, so I guess I was sad about having to leave it.”

Reinhard: “I see. Ah, please do not forget to dry your hair before going to bed. It will become tousled if it remains damp, and it would be such a waste if that happens to your beautiful hair.”

Felt: “Mind your own damn business.”

She stuck her tongue out, adding to her own unfriendliness, which caused Reinhard’s smile to become increasingly strained. Felt narrowed her eyes at his back as he passed by her, attempting to return to his room with a, “Alright, I will be taking my leave, then.”

For some reason, she felt like something was wrong when she compared him to his usual self.

Felt: “Hey, Reinhard. Are you feeling down, by any chance?”

Reinhard: “…”

Reinhard’s eyes widened slightly as Felt stopped him by calling his name. Seeing how he had reacted with surprise, she herself was also somewhat taken aback.

It was not rare for Reinhard to appear surprised or impressed. However, no matter his reaction, there was a constant sense of calmness and placidity attributed to his behavior.

Currently, it almost looked like those sorts of barriers had been discarded from his expression.

Perhaps, what she said had been an unexpected blow against him in a true sense.

Reinhard: “May I ask what led to that thought?”

Felt: “Eh? Uhh, it’s not really a big deal. Usually, you would go somewhere, come back, and then start blabbering your head off even though I never asked you to. But today, you aren’t even trying to say anything, and you tried to wrap up the conversation as quickly as possible.”

Reinhard: “…I’m surprised. I have always assumed you disliked me.”

Felt: “Just because I noticed doesn’t mean I don’t dislike you. I used to be desperate about trying to best you every single day, to begin with. If anything, I was observing you carefully to see if you’ll let your guard down.”

Felt denied his suspicions by wording it strongly, unable to bear the thought of him having a bizarre misunderstanding. Just then, Reinhard gave her a vaguely stiff smile, responding with an unusual, “I understand.”

And then,

Reinhard: “You do not have any plans after this, do you, Felt-sama?"

Felt: "…Nah. I'm planning to sleep in early to prepare for tomor…"

Reinhard: "Would you like to speak with me in my room for a little while? There is something I would like you to hear ab…"

Felt: "Listen to me, dammit!"

She protested at how Reinhard had moved the conversation along without her permission, but he did not respond. He started walking away, completely set on welcoming her into his room.

Felt: "…"

Felt could simply return to her room, treating the matter as something that was none of her business. In fact, that was how she had been acting towards him so far. However, there was a case where Rom had provided her with advice.

That she would have to put up with him for a long time. That she should find a way to get along with him.

Felt: "…Oh man, guess I don't have a choice."

Shrugging her shoulders that were still warm from the bath, Felt followed after Reinhard. His room was at the end of the corridor, positioned precisely on the opposite side of the mansion from Felt's room.

Reinhard: "Here it is."

Felt: "Huh."

Striding through the doorway as Reinhard opened the door, Felt stepped into his room for the first time.

She glanced around, surveying the interior of the room, but she was greeted by a dull place.

The layout was identical to her own room, and the arrangement of furniture was also quite similar. He had the same bed as her, and a worn out desk was placed at the edge of the room. The bookshelf next to the desk was filled with books that looked humorless and boring, and a nondescript painting was hung on the wall.

Reinhard's room was organized and tidied thoroughly, giving of the feel of a typical first-class student's room.

Reinhard: "It may not appear like anything special, but…"

Felt: "You're right, it's nothing interesting."

Reinhard: "You are quite critical."

He forced a smile as he replied, somehow regaining his usual relaxed mood without Felt's knowledge. She did not mind it, but it would be tiresome for her if he constructed a wall between her and himself, even though she had accepted his invitation.

Letting her gaze travel around with those thoughts in mind, Felt set her eyes upon a part of the wall. Only that place had a subtly different impression compared to the room of a first-class student.

It was a sword that was hung on the wall. It was not that big—on the small side, in fact. It was elaborately embellished, but it seemed like it would not be too practical. —From Felt's point of view, her first thought was that it looked decently expensive.

Felt: "What's that sword? It looks totally different from the one you're always carrying around."

Reinhard: "Ah, yes. Unlike the Dragon Sword, this is merely a nameless sword."

Saying that, Reinhard caressed the hilt of the sword fitted into a white scabbard, hanging by his waist. The sword he carried with him at all times was one that was tied to an anecdote, which rumored that it had slain the Witch.

Compared to such a weapon, any famous, renowned sword would surely be a downgrade, but—

Reinhard: "—My father had prepared this sword for me, early in my childhood.”

Felt: “Huh.”

Hearing his words, Felt narrowed her eyes at the polished sword that was neatly tended to.

Yesterday at the castle, she had met Reinhard’s father just for a brief moment. They did not stumble across each other at the area of the Royal Selection, but he had paid her a visit in the waiting room before it began.

To be honest, he was not a likeable person. To be blunt, she ought to regard his character with scorn.

That was the very reason why she felt as if she could not say anything positive, nor negative about how Reinhard perceived his own decision to decorate his wall with the gift he had received from such a man.

Felt: “Anyway, you read a lotta books that I can’t understand.”

Felt changed the subject, pulling out several books from the bookshelf before lying down on the bed without being advised to, and then flipping through the pages. Every one of the books were either historical or academic.

Witnessing Felt’s posture, Reinhard brought a hand to his own forehead.

Reinhard: “Your manners are unbecoming for a lady, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Even a real lady wouldn’t care about how others would look at her, when she’s in her mansion and fresh out of the bath.”

Reinhard: “That is not quite true. You must start thinking about it as such.”

Felt: “Where did you learn that it’s ‘not quite true’, huh? Was it written in these excessively long books? Sounds way too fishy.”

Reinhard held his tongue at Felt, who had sat up whilst disturbing the sheets. Whether it was because she blamed him for his lack of evidence, or because she had mentioned the credibility of his books, it was uncertain which one had struck home with him.

Felt: “From the spine of the books, you only have these kinds of stuff in your bookshelf, huh. Why don’t you get more interesting books, since there’s no reason for why you can’t? Don’t you know how to have fun?”

Reinhard: “Books exist to garner knowledge. You yourself have learned how to read and white because…”

Felt: “Rom-jii only put it all into my head because he said it’ll be useful. Actually, it turned out pretty well since I became able to read sign boards and letters. He also taught me how to calculate numbers to make sure no one could cheat me out of my reward after doing my job. Though, that was necessary for me to survive.”

Reinhard: “…”

Felt: “You didn’t have to be cornered into a desperate situation in order to live, right? That’s why your way of thinking is kinda freaky. You’re correct, but you’re only correct. It’s not like you wanted the books that are in your bookshelf, am I right?”

Reinhard fell silent. Did he lack a rebuttal because he could not find the words to make one, or because verbal abuse was swirling within his chest, which he was directing towards Felt?

That was alright. In fact, it would be more “normal” for him to be furious at a little girl after she had said all she wanted to say to him without restraint.

If she could catch a glimpse of Reinhard’s true colors, which were not reflected in the atmosphere of his room…

Reinhard: “…As of now, I am at a loss for words. I will return a proper response to you eventually.”

Felt: “—. Right. Then, that’s fine.”

If he did not attempt to deceive her with sugar-coated words, then that was good enough.

After that, Felt sat cross-legged on the bed, and Reinhard pulled the chair near his desk, sitting down in front of her.

Felt: “And? What do you have to tell me?”

Reinhard: “Allow me to give you a quick report. Today at the castle, I received an official announcement of my appointment. For the next three years until the conclusion of the Royal Selection, I will be transferred from the post of a Royal Guard to the position of the knight who will be at your side. What will be of me after that will be determined by the course of the Royal Selection, but I look forward to being able to work with you. Although I am very inexperienced…”

Felt: “Quit it with your overly formal stuff. I already heard about it yesterday, as well as after the duel, to the point my ears were starting to itch.”

Originally, Reinhard belonged to the Royal Guard of the Kingdom, and in principle, he was not permitted to leave from his duties. However, exceptions were made for the knights of the candidates who participated in the current Royal Selection, allowing them three years of freedom—in other words, they were entrusted with the role of the sole knight of their mistress.

Felt was uninterested in the trivial matters that accompanied such a fact, and she had displayed that in a curt manner. However, a slightly somber look had crossed Reinhard’s face during their exchange.

She recalled yesterday’s events, thinking the change in his expression could be tied to a topic related to the castle, another topic related to the Royal Selection, or—

Felt: “By any chance, do you look sad because of something related to yesterday’s duel?”

Reinhard: “I… cannot deny that. No, it is related.”

The duel—Felt had brought up a dispute that had occured behind the scenes, whilst the Royal Selection candidates had been delivering their speeches of their respective ideals and policies.

Simply put, it concerned a disagreement between fellow knights of the candidates, but the circumstances of the incident and the positions of the two contributors were quite complicated.

Specifically, the knight who had been handed a crushing defeat was not an unfamiliar person to Felt.

Felt: “You’re familiar with both of them, right? I only know that boy, though.”

Reinhard: “Julius has taken responsibility for the disturbance, and the Knight Commander has given him the order for suspension. Fortunately, he is unscathed, but… I believe he is reproaching himself for his dishonorable actions.”

Felt: “Huh.”

The knight that had been mentioned was a person who had given Felt a very knight-like impression at first glance.

Although the reputation of being the “knight among knights” was attributed to Reinhard, from what Felt had seen, she thought it was far more suitable for the other knight to be described as such.

Was there a problem with the knight’s behavior or the way he spoke?—Felt could not bring herself to approve of what he had done as well.

However, she also could not really agree with how Reinhard had decided to perceive his fellow knight’s behavior as, “reflecting upon his own dishonorable actions”. That knight was not necessarily regretful about it.

Reinhard: “And, this is about Subaru, who is our mutual friend, but he is currently visiting the mansion of another candidate, Duchess Crusch Karsten. Although, I do not know the reason for why he is staying there.”

Felt: “Putting aside whether that boy’s ‘our’ friend, why did things turn out like that? He fought for the half-elf girl, right?”

To be exact, she thought the boy had fought for his self-righteousness because he wanted to believe that, however.

Though he had been placed in a rather complex position, Subaru was someone identical to a savior to Felt. It was true that the incident with the Bowel Hunter would have gone south if he had been absent.

As Felt’s thoughts reached a certain point, an awful possibility occurred to her.

Felt: “This is just a maybe, but you didn’t go to console the boy, right?”

Reinhard: “No, you are correct. I believe his physical and mental state has been driven into a corner…”

Felt: “Ughhh, you really had to do that, just as I thought! Don’t you understand that you’re only rubbing salt into his wound by doing that…?”

Looking at Reinhard’s puzzled expression, Felt sympathized with Subaru for the first time. She was able to figure out why Reinhard appeared discouraged because of that.

Felt: “Even I would sympathize with nii-chan… He refused to meet with you, didn’t he?”

Reinhard: “He did not refuse to see me, at least. However, my visit did not yield a pleasant farewell. It is an unfortunate result, considering we will be unable to see each other for a while.”

Felt was once again astounded by Reinhard’s display of his dejected feelings. Pained by a hostile disagreement with his friend… his reaction to it was akin to a human’s.

Felt: “Seems like even someone like you has a human side, acting dejected because you guys parted ways without making up. Have you known that boy for a long time or something?”

Reinhard: “No, I met him on the same day I met you. Yesterday, when I met him once again at the area of the Royal Selection, it was the first time we had seen each other since that day.”

Felt: “What?! Then your relationship with him is thin as a piece of paper!”

Reinhard: “Whether I knew someone for a long time or not is unrelated to my respect for them. Subaru has something I don’t, and that alone is unmistakably worth my respect. Nothing is special about acknowledging a person that one finds likable as a friend.”

Felt: “It sounds like you’re mocking him when you say that. Maybe nii-chan thought of what you said as something like that?”

Felt muttered out with a look of exasperation at Reinhard, who had uttered such a pure, guileless opinion with a straight face. Looking at his stiffened cheeks which had resulted from Felt’s words, it was too easy to imagine how Subaru had reacted.

Of course it would turn out like that. She felt like she had completely understood, and nothing else.

Felt: “So, the regret is nagging at you, huh… What are you gonna do about it?”

Reinhard: “What I am going to do about it?”

Felt: “I won’t mind even if you put off our departure to your home. If you can’t concentrate on your job because you’re too worried about not making peace with him before leaving, that is.”

It could not really be described as compassion, but Felt could be considerate to that extent.

In fact, it was true that Reinhard had been distressed to the point it had been written on his face. If he could not perform well because of that, then Felt would be at a loss with how to deal with him.

Reinhard: “—No, I am grateful for your consideration. However, I am fine.”

Even so, Reinhard had shaken his head at Felt's offer.

Reinhard: "I cannot afford to delay your first step because of my own issues."

Felt: "I'm saying it's hard to take the first step!"

Reinhard: "Moreover, I am somewhat able to put my mind at ease, since you have been attentive to what I had to say."

Felt: "…"

You don't understand, Felt attempted to reprimand him as such, and was rendered speechless as his lips loosened into a smile. His constant look of placidity remained stripped away, however.

—It felt like his genuine smile was there, beyond the walls that were taken down.

Felt: "Well, I guess that's fine."

Saying that, Felt bounced her hips as she jumped off of the bed. And then, she stood on her tiptoes in front of Reinhard, who was looking up at her.

Felt: "We're done here, right? It was a good way to kill time before going to bed, at least. I also found out my great knight was more useless than I thought."

Reinhard: "Useless… that is the first time someone has evaluated me as such."

Felt: "Then I'll say it to you for all the times it went unsaid. Useless, useless, useless!"

Felt let out a yawn after repeating the word three times in a row. And then, Reinhard forced a laugh as he rose from his seat, opening his room's door for Felt.

Feeling as if he would follow her to her room if she did not say anything, Felt jammed a finger towards the tip of Reinhard's nose right as they entered the hallway.

Felt: “Don’t follow me. I’m going to sleep. You better hurry up and go to bed and forget about it.”

Reinhard: “I believe letting it slip from my memory would be an unfaithful act…”

Felt: “When tomorrow comes, it’ll be no use even if you bring your annoyances from today to the next day. The next time you see him, you better apologize to him properly. Until then, at least try your best to study how to apologize with your books.”

Shoving the books into Reinhard’s chest as he gazed at her with widened eyes, Felt pushed the bewildered knight back into his own room. After that, she attempted to leave without saying anything else, and then,

Reinhard: “Felt-sama.”

Upon being called on, Felt held back the urge to click her tongue as she halted in her tracks.

Felt: “…What?”

Reinhard: “Thank you very much. I would be honored if I am allowed to have a moment of your time to speak with you again.”

Felt: “You…!”

Reinhard had invited her to his room at night with an innocent look.

Felt stuck her tongue out, one half of her exasperated, and the other half of her flushing at his defenselessness.

Felt: “Who cares, you idiot!”

Huffing that out, she began stomping towards her room.

The lingering sensation from taking a bath had already disappeared, but a vague heat had remained in her cheeks.

8

The next day, after welcoming their last morning in the Capital, Felt was taken along by Reinhard, having finished their preparation to depart to the Astrea Territory, where the house Reinhard had been born in was located.

Auntie: “Please take good care of yourself, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Thanks for having me, Granny, Gramps. Stay healthy, you two.”

She would be parting ways with Uncle and Auntie, who had been nothing but kind to her during these two months, plus a few days. With Auntie having teary eyes, and Uncle bowing silently while they were seeing her off, Felt endured the feeling of being about to cry.

Auntie: “Our granddaughters are residing in the main residence. We have addressed a letter to them to make sure they serve you well, so please make them work hard.”

Felt: “Your grandchildren, huh. I’m looking forward to meeting them… And yeah, thanks.”

Through these two months, Felt’s life under house arrest had started against her will. However, Auntie and Uncle had played a large part in why her life in the mansion did not turn into a bad memory. That was why her gratitude was sincere.

I want to see them again. The way she could think like that was also genuine.

Gaston: “Damn, holy crap! What the heck is this dragon carriage? It might be obvious but nobles are amazing!”

Rachins: “It’s not even something to be scared of! More than that, can someone make sure this isn’t a dream?”

Camberley: “Leave it me to me! Gaaahh! Ouch! I twisted my own cheek and it feels like it’s burning!”

The three idiots who were in the same carriage had put their stupidity on full display, making Felt laugh during their trip. Various hardships were awaiting the three even after arriving at the Astrea Mansion, but that was a story for another time.

Rom: “Anyway, I’m still not used to seeing ye dressed like that.”

Felt: “I didn’t have a choice. I don’t like it either, but I was told that no one knows who would see me even if I’m on the carriage. I can’t decline if Granny begged me to wear it.”

Rom: “Well, ye can’t be wearing my handmade rags forever… It suits ye.”

Felt: “…Hmph.”

Felt turned away her reddened face as Rom complimented her on how she looked in a dress. She had plenty of worries, but she could be at ease if Rom would stay beside her. She was able to reaffirm that.

And then—

Reinhard: “This will be about after our arrival, but I believe undue hardships may be placed on you initially. I cannot proclaim this loudly, but the Astrea Territory…”

Felt: “Save the bad news for later. I had more fun with your story of your own failure from yesterday night.”

Reinhard: “My story of my failure?”

Remaining clothed in her dress, Felt threw her head back leaned backwards at Reinhard’s look of surprise.

She grinned as if she was implying that even if one’s outer appearance could be changed, their inner being—their core personality would stay the same.

Felt: “You should look for something interesting, too. You’d better, if you’re my knight. Don’t keep making me approach you. Isn’t that your job, the knight among knights?”

Reinhard: “…”

He fell silent for a moment as Felt showed off her fang with her smile. Subsequently, he nodded after fully processing her words.

Reinhard: “—I understand. I swear upon my oath as a knight to make an effort.”

Felt: “This is no good, probably.”

As Felt shrugged her shoulders, seeking agreement, Rom and the three idiots reacted with exasperation. Reinhard appeared to be offended, but Felt only gave him a sideways glance as she gazed out of the window.

The dragon carriage ran slowly across the stone pavement, moving outside of the Capital—to Felt, who was leaving her birthplace for the first time in her life, a full-scale “something” was about to begin.

The knight among knights, and a candidate to accede the throne for the next era, who had a complete lack of self-awareness.

Bringing a elderly man with special circumstances and three thugs along with them, the carriage was heading straight towards the east of the Capital.

Like that, their story would be taking a leap outside of the Capital. Not to mention that they would be cut off from their pathway to become concerned with a major incident that would occur a few days later, one which would shake the very Kingdom—but that was a story for another boy.

—Another story of their own was waiting for Felt and her team, after all.

END

Royal Selection Life From Zero: The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint

1

The dragon carriage clattered noisily as it made its way down the road.

The earth dragon pulling it was safeguarded by the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, which shielded the inside of the carriage from the gusts and rattling outside. However, this Divine Protection had its limitations—it lost its effect once the dragon ceased its stride. It would also take a certain amount of time until it regained its effects again. Such being the case, the rattling wheels were proof that the Divine Protection had indeed lost its effect. But what had caused the sudden halt?

“Oh, Young Master! You have returned!”

“Wow, it’s been a while, Young Master! Wh-What a pleasure to see you again!”

“Reinhard! Please come and watch my sword practice again! Promise!”

With each resounding cheer, the dragon carriage came to a halt, its passengers engaging with the crowd outside the window. Waving and exchanging words and smiles, they attracted the attention of even more onlookers, approaching the carriage in droves.

With such frequent stops, it was no wonder that the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion wouldn’t reactivate. From the moment they stepped foot in the domain, the carriage had become well-acquainted with both the wind and the rattling.

The dragon carriage started up once more as the high-pitched cheers saw them off. Rattling slightly, a young red-headed man returned to his seat and bowed his head to the person before him. “Apologies for stopping the carriage so many times.”

He was a man of remarkable charm. With fiery hair akin to a flame, and eyes as blue as the azure sky, his countenance possessed an ethereal quality, with a smile that enchanted both men and women alike. His voice was indulgently sweet, stirring the hearts of anyone who heard it.

This captivating youth was called Reinhard van Astrea.

Naturally, the person before him blushed in response to his concern. "If you're gonna apologize, at least try to look sorry!" admonished a girl donning a dress in irritation, cheeks red with anger.

The girl, too, possessed her own charm. Her shimmering golden locks were adorned with black ribbons, and her eyes sparkled red like the blazing sun. Her lips revealed a fang befitting her disposition, and her still-youthful figure was clothed in a dress.

Her name was Felt. And she, along with the other man, were the only passengers aboard the dragon carriage. However, the air hanging between them starkly contrasted with their outward appearance. It was only natural. Their relationship was not defined by sex, but as mistress-servant, although the air was excessively bleak even putting it that way.

In such an atmosphere, Reinhard cast a troubled gaze at Felt. "Lady Felt, they are residents of the domain directly under the control of House Astrea. The town and the mansion are in close proximity to each other, so we need to foster a good relationship with them. Besides…"

"Besides?"

"Tilmi, the village gossip, is the most dependable of the bunch, while Jonas dreams of becoming one of the Kingdom's soldiers. And Roswell's baked bread is the best in town. They're good people," Reinhard praised the townsfolk.

"I don't know why I didn't hear about them sooner," Felt blurted out, resting her cheek on her knee, legs spread in a very unladylike manner.

Reinhard raised an eyebrow at her mumbling. “I thought you were angry, my lady?”

“All I’m angry about is your habit of making me look bad first, then making yourself look good. I ain’t got nothing against the people!”

“But you seemed to be in a hurry, so I assumed there was an issue.”

“Oh, shut it! I want to use the bathroom! It’s gettin’ hard holdin’ it in! And these damn clothes! It’s such a pain to use the bathroom in them! You gonna take responsibility if I piss myself?!”

“Isn’t that an issue regardless of whether I…take responsibility or not?”

“Who cares?! If you don’t want that to happen, then hurry up!”

Sullen and annoyed, Felt extended a leg in an attempt to land a kick on Reinhard, but he avoided it with grace, sitting down with a nod. “Understood.” His gaze then shifted outside the window, directing his attention to the path before them. “Rest assured, my lady, we will be there shortly. Your wish will soon be granted.”

Felt snorted at his pretentiousness, peering out the window next to him. Beyond was an expansive view, with an iron gate atop a gently-sloping hill. It had been left ajar and showed signs of age and rust.

As the dragon carriage entered the premises through a gate that had long abandoned its purpose, a building came into view.

“Your folks’ house, huh?”

“Yes. The place of my birth,” Reinhard affirmed with a smile. “The main Astrea family residence, as well as a temporary abode for Your Ladyship.”

Felt’s crimson eyes reflected the full view of the house approaching before them.

Despite growing up in the slums, Felt was a native of the royal capital, thereby familiar with the grandeur of the mansions of nobles. In fact, she had spent the last two months in confinement in one of those mansions, so she could only imagine the magnificence of the Astrea's main residence, and the home of the much-lauded Sword Saint, Reinhard.

"Sure is a lot smaller than expected," Felt bluntly admitted upon beholding the mansion up close. Compared to the other mansion in the royal capital, the main residence was much more modest. Of course, it was still a mansion in terms of size, but it was so simple, it paled in comparison to the stunning structures of the royal capital's Nobles District.

The rusted iron gate remained as-is, with the building also mirroring its signs of age. The vast garden, once a realm of carefree leisure, now appeared to be devoid of purpose.

Felt's apprehension had her anticipating a throng of servants upon their arrival. However, the unease plaguing her now was of a different nature.

"This may come as a surprise, but this is what my family was like," Reinhard confessed.

"You sayin' you guys were one of those poor noble families?" Felt blurt out in disbelief.

"No need to look at me with such pitying eyes."

Felt's voice dropped like a weight, and Reinhard chuckled at the look in her eyes. "I understand the misconception. But it's too early to pity me. It's certainly true that I'm not exactly the wealthiest noble in the kingdom. And the domain isn't particularly grand, either."

"Sure… Well, whatever. Live strong!"

"Well… Thank you," Reinhard said, tilting his head in acknowledgment at Felt's encouraging thumbs-up.

With that, the two travelers arrived safely at the main residence. Reinhard stepped off the dragon carriage first, then turned around and extended a hand to Felt in a gentlemanly gesture. "Lady Felt, may I take your hand?”

“As if!” Shrugging off his concern, Felt landed nimbly beside Reinhard, sticking out her tongue. Reinhard retracted his hand with a wry smile, looking back towards the mansion.

For Reinhard, returning to his hometown, and to the main residence, was a long-awaited homecoming. Felt glanced his way, attempting to discern his feelings. However, something was amiss.

“Where are the three men who came before us?” Reinhard wondered.

“Hm?” Felt swept a gaze around the mansion upon Reinhard’s words. “Oh, the Rachins crew? Huh, yeah, where the hell’d they run off to?”

Their companions were a trio of rogues—Gaston, Rachins, and Camberley. And they had apparently grown impatient with waiting for the sluggish dragon carriage upon entering the domain. Supposedly, they had gone ahead of them to the mansion on foot.

There was also the matter of welcoming them. The trio’s actions had been approved, making it their task to inform the mansion of their arrival.

“Perhaps they are already inside,” Reinhard thought aloud. “I am concerned about the fact that there is no one to greet us, but I will show you inside. Our servants may be few in number, but they are very efficient.”

“You said they’re the granddaughters of that old couple, right?” Felt recalled. “If so, then yeah, I’d think they’d be.”

Felt’s mind reminisced about the elderly couple who tended to the other Astrea family mansion in the royal capital. They were a sweet, pleasant couple, and Felt liked them. When she parted ways with them, they told her that they had two granddaughters at the main residence.

“I was looking forward to meeting them!” she exclaimed. “That old couple really did a lot for me…”

“Aaaaahhhhh!”

The front door to the mansion slammed open with a bang, and a scream echoed through the courtyard. Reinhard swiftly guarded Felt. Just then, a man—or rather, a group of them—emerged before the vigilant pair, howling uncontrollably.

It was a trio of men—large, medium, and small in stature—each exuding a presence of mischief. There was no doubt that they were the missing troublemakers in every way.

These were the three men who were supposed to have gone ahead of them: Gaston, Rachins, and Camberley. They were lying in the yard in a state of tatters, exaggeratedly screaming in pain.

Reinhard, who had been observing the three, rushed toward them. “Gaston, Rachins, Camberley, what in the world happened?”

“What’s it look like happened?!” cried Rachins. The three battered idiots sprawled out on the ground turned to Reinhard, who was headed toward them. They pointed at the house they had just tumbled out of in unison.

“We went ahead and were takin’ a breather, y’know?” Rachins attested.

“Yeah, a break!” shouted Gaston. “Then we knocked, but nobody said nothin’, so we went in…”

“Then those crazy twins came at us and…!” Camberley trailed off.

“Hi,” came a voice. “Crazy twin here, standing on your right.”

“And your left,” said another voice.

“Eeeeeh?!”

As the trio lamented their state, two figures appeared out of the blue. The men clung to each other in fright. Paying no mind to the trembling trio, Reinhard looked at the two figures standing at the mansion’s entrance.

They were a pair of petite young girls with peach-colored hair. From the comments of the trio and the follow-up remarks by the girls themselves, they were most certainly twins.

“Flam, Grassis. Did you do this to them?” Reinhard’s shoulders dropped as the twins alternately opened their mouths in response.

“They looked suspicious, so we felt obliged to do something,” Flam confessed.

“They’re delinquents,” Grassis judged.

“They’re not delinquents. You should have been informed via letter. These men are guests of Lady Felt. Or rather, they will be working for her from now on, which makes them your colleagues.”

“I am sorry for my ignorance, Young Master.”

“Young Master, my ignorance.”

Reinhard appeared exasperated at the twins’ words. Neither Flam nor Grassis appeared very apologetic at all. Felt, however, sputtered a “pfft” at the exchange between the three. “Ha ha!” Felt interrupted Reinhard with a laugh. Smiling like a fiend, she defended the twins. “As far as looks go, I can’t blame you ladies. If I were you, I’d beat the crap out of them, too, if they showed up at my place!”

“My lady…” Reinhard’s brow wrinkled deeper and deeper at Felt’s words as she folded her hands behind her head.

“What, you gotta problem? I got nothin’ to do with their discipline. That’s your responsibility.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Reinhard continued his thought. “It’s just improper for a young lady to laugh in such a way.”

“Oh, quit nitpicking already!” Felt clicked her tongue. “Especially when it’s always with me! And you guys, how long you gonna stand there cowerin’ like that? Get your asses inside!”

Reinhard’s warning fell on deaf ears. Scolding the trio, Felt headed for the entrance with long strides, unsuited to the dress she wore. Her imposing presence pressured Flam and Grassis to make way and welcome her in as the lady of the mansion.

“We’ve been expecting you, Lady Felt,” greeted Flam.

“Expecting you,” welcomed Grassis.

“Howdy!” Felt accepted their warm welcome with a smile, unafraid. The twins made a path, and Felt patted them affectionately on their shoulders. “Your grandparents really helped me out back in the royal capital. I’ll be in your care now!”

“Grandmother asked us to serve you well,” Flam said.

“Grandfather gave us flower seeds,” Grassis added.

Acknowledging their words with a nod, Felt slowly entered the mansion. “Wooow.”

Once inside, she cast a somber gaze around the space, taking in the mansion’s ambiance. The interior did not betray the impression of the building’s exterior, retaining the humble, cozy atmosphere it once held.

“Why’s it so insanely different from the mansion in the royal capital?” she asked.

“The mansion in the royal capital was designed to match the look of the Nobles District,” Reinhard explained. “Originally, it was gifted by His Majesty the King in honor of my grandmother. So naturally, in comparison to that one, this one’s rather…”

“Shabby, huh?” Felt finished his sentence. “In other words, this is where your real strength lies?”

“Yes, correct. The other mansion in the royal capital was intended to live up to the name of the family that bore the Sword Saint. In short, that one is simply a matter of vanity.”

“Vanity, huh? You nobles sure love to soak it all up, huh?” Snorting at Reinhard’s explanation of his mansion’s size, Felt continued into the building. With Reinhard in tow, they reunited with the trio. However, there was one more person, someone who was like family to Felt, whom they had to meet at the residence.

“Well, it’s about time. I was really getting impatient waiting around for you guys.”

“Old Man Rom!” Felt’s face lit up as she looked up at the voice. On the second floor of the stairwell overlooking the entrance hallway stood the figure of a hulking old man, waving his hand in the corridor.

The man possessed a towering physique, surpassing most others in height and width—a testament to his belonging to the giant tribe. This man, lovingly dubbed ‘Old Man Rom,’ was Felt’s foster parent, and the only family member she truly trusted.

Like Felt and the others, Old Man Rom had departed the royal capital to the main residence in a dragon carriage, yet the reason he arrived before all the others was apparent.

“So how was your meeting with the bigwig?”

“Horrible! Well, I mostly stood next to Reinhard.”

“I see, I see.” Old Man Rom nodded gracefully, hand on his chin. “However, all things are an experience, you know.”

Felt’s lips twitched as she recalled the hardships she endured.

On the way from the royal capital, although they hardly made any stops along the way, they did pay a visit to an influential figure’s mansion as a sort of courtesy call. They appeared to have a connection with Reinhard’s family, so he hoped they would cooperate with them in the royal selection.

While Felt and the others went to do so, Old Man Rom had opted to leave separately, departing for the main residence ahead of them.

According to Old Man Rom, he just isn’t a fan of formalities. But there’s probably more to it than that. After all, a lot can happen when you live long enough. It’s a natural process. Even a fourteen-year-old like me can understand that. I guess if he wants to tell me about it someday, he will.

Felt, however, respected Old Man Rom's intentions, and refrained from pressing the matter any further.

"I brought in the luggage," Rom said. "The twins said I could use any room I like. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, not at all," Reinhard allowed. "As long as you don't enter my, my family's, or Flam and her sister's private quarters, you're free to use any room of your choosing." With a nod, he looked back at the twins behind him for confirmation, and continued, "You didn't allow Gaston and the others inside, but let Old Man Rom in without issue, I see."

The twins exchanged glances at Reinhard's comment on Old Man Rom's casual demeanor, appearing to have already made himself at home in the mansion.

"Well, Old Man Rom looks super strong," said Flam.

"I don't wanna get hurt," added Grassis.

"Try not to avoid difficult tasks from now on," Reinhard chided gently. "It was fine this time, but it could have caused serious problems."

Suddenly, three voices arose in protest of Flam and Grassis's questionable work ethic.

"Why don't you scold them a little tougher!" shouted Rachins.

"Demand an apology!" insisted Gaston.

"Unfair treatment!" cried Camberley.

Felt grinned mischievously at the sight of Reinhard's poor handling of the situation. "Well, at least we won't get bored here, huh?"

"If that's what Your Ladyship desires…" Reinhard trailed off, gaze sweeping across the faces of everyone in the house. At last, he turned back to Felt, who wore a smug grin. “I, too, shall strive to bring a smile to your face, my lady.”

2

After bringing her scant belongings into her room, Felt completed her move. Having originally grown up in the slums, she had no real possessions of any kind. She had given away most of her household goods in the royal capital, only bringing with her some clothes that Old Man Rom had made for her, and her favorite knife for self-defense, along with the meager savings she accumulated little by little and the change of clothes, including dresses, the old woman from the mansion in the capital had made her bring.

“I’d rather not wear any of these, but at least this one’s better than the ones Reinhard picked out…”

Although Felt had been wearing these fluttery costumes for more than two months, she showed no signs of warming up to them any more than she did to life in the nobleman’s mansion. They just weren’t her style. However, Felt was aware she needed to come to terms with wearing these kinds of clothes. She understood her position.

She had willingly chosen this role and was therefore prepared for it. So, as a compromise between shame and determination, she resolved to wear at the very least the dress from the old woman. If I let Reinhard control even what I wear, I’ll die from frustration!

“Inside the mansion, I’ll dress as I please, though!”

Promptly removing the dress she had been wearing, she tossed it onto the bed. What she wore over her undergarments was the one outfit she always wore in the royal capital, namely a peasant’s best dress. Donning gloves and snug boots, she would have no problem flying and jumping around.

As Felt inspected the condition of her footwear, someone knocked on the door and spoke up from outside. “May I, Lady Felt?”

“No,” she replied, promptly declining the visitor’s request despite instantly recognizing their voice.

“I understand. Pardon me,” they continued, ignoring her wishes and entering anyway.

Felt scowled in irritation at their stubborn persistence. “What the hell did ya knock for?! What if I was changing?!”

“I could feel you jumping around from outside the room, Lady Felt,” Reinhard said. “I heard you were going to change. I had a feeling I’d find you dressed in that manner.”

“Shut it with the sermons! I’ll dress as I please in the mansion! In return, I’ll wear a dress when the situation calls for it. Consider it a compromise!” Felt declared, pointing her finger at him.

“So like a conditional agreement,” he said, as he considered her proposal for a brief moment before giving in. “I understand.”

Felt folded her arms in front of her in response to the unexpectedly frank reply and puffed out her chest. “Good. So what did you want? I was about to take a nap.”

“Well, I’d be happy to give you a tour of the mansion and the domain if you’d like. However, I’m sure you must be tired after the long journey, so if you would like to rest, that is fine, too.”

“Why the hell are you acting so wishy-washy? You’re being awfully sympathetic, huh?”

“Your Ladyship made a compromise, so I want to reciprocate. I will come for you at dinner time, then, so please rest up.”

“Hmph.”

After Reinhard retracted his offer, Felt shut one eye in thought.

Truthfully, Felt had no intention of napping. Rather, she had already planned to sneak out and explore the area herself. Reinhard’s proposal was in line with her intentions, with the exception of the fact that he would be tagging along. Looking closely, she noticed that he had also changed his attire, shedding his armor-like stiffness appropriate for a knight. He now donned a white jacket and black trousers, an outfit befitting of an ordinary young man.

Although this get-up isn't remotely enough to cover up his great brilliance, Felt thought, looking at Reinhard's new look. But his choice of attire made it clear to her that he had a certain level of consideration toward her, albeit in his own way.

Consideration, in essence, requires compromise, huh? Felt gave in, and so did he. So I might as well…

"Hm… Okay, Reinhard. I've changed my mind," she announced. "You wanna show me around, right? Then be my guest."

"Are you sure?"

"Before my mood sours again. I've also been curious about the view from the dragon carriage, so why not?" With a twist of her head, Felt gave Reinhard a light prod in the chest and headed for the door.

Reinhard placed his hand on his chest and bowed to her. "As you wish. In that case, I shall do my utmost to please you, my lady."

"Ugh, don't say it so awkwardly. You're gonna make me change my mind again. Let's get this over with."

Felt's words were met with a short "Yes," and Reinhard stepped up beside her. Side by side, he appeared to be an otherwise ordinary young man without his knightly attire. A person's dress was often enough to alter one's appearance entirely, with such changes often extending beyond the price of each garment. Reinhard's current outfit matched Felt's usual outfit well, exuding a sense of comfort.

"Um… You said you knew I'd dress like this before you came into my room, right? Were you peeping?"

"It was merely an educated guess," Reinhard replied with a wry smile. "Your Ladyship looked uncomfortable in the dress while we were in the carriage, so I extrapolated from that."

Felt's lips twitched in frustration. It was far from amusing, making her feel as if she had been manipulated in the palms of his hands. "Let's get one thing straight, though. I'm not goin' out with you alone! I'm inviting Rom and the others, too! So it won't be just us!"

"I never said we were going out alone! Indeed, having Rom and the others around does make it much easier to protect you, my lady."

Such a textbook response did little more than sour Felt's already bad mood even more.

3

The Astrea family domain was surprisingly modest, considering the reputation of the Sword Saint's lineage, which was widely acknowledged throughout the kingdom.

The Astrea domain comprised only of a small fiefdom, with one small town named Hakuchuri, which was centered around the main Astrea residence. The size of Hakuchuri was also modest, primarily engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, and the local specialty: the earth dragon industry.

"Beyond the High Klara Plateau is Flanders, one of the five great cities," Reinhard explained. "Flanders is said to be the birthplace of earth dragons, with a long history of its industry flourishing within the city. Hakuchuri also reaps benefits from this, providing homes for many artisans skilled in the craft of saddles, reins, and earth dragon gear."

"Is that what you were talking about before? We can actually ride an earth dragon? I'm actually kinda looking forward to that."

"Then I will make that happen," he assured. "Allow me to find a good earth dragon for you."

"Cooool," Felt responded nonchalantly, before prancing nimbly down the road. Reinhard could not help but smile at his mistress's inability to mask her enthusiasm as he continued leading their tour of the Astrea Domain.

For Felt, who had been born and raised in the royal capital, this was her first real foray into the outside world. It was no wonder that nearly everything that caught her eyes struck her as fresh and novel. Indeed, merely observing her surroundings served as ample amusement for her stroll.

“Hey, Reinhard. What’s the deal with those things?” Felt asked with curiosity, pointing at something.

“Those are black sheep,” Reinhard replied without hesitation. “They’re not raised for meat, but for wool.” However, it was clear that this simple explanation wasn’t enough to satisfy his mistress’s curiosity, so he continued. “Their sheared wool is in high demand, as it can be spun into cotton or yarn. The majority of farmers in this region raise black sheep, as it’s an ideal location for grazing. In fact, I’d imagine such wool must have also been used in your clothing, Lady Felt.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool! But won’t someone steal ‘em if they’re allowed to roam free like that?”

“Unlike in the royal capital, in a town of this size, everyone knows each other. People worry more about witchbeasts attacking their grazing sheep than them getting stolen. Also, the wild earth dragons keep them in check. There’s hardly ever an issue.”

“What…? They’re wild, but they protect livestock?”

“They’re rather friendly toward humans. So much so, in fact, that they often support us with our daily routines.”

Felt nodded, impressed by Reinhard’s knowledge. She squinted out at the pasture. The black sheep were fuzzy creatures with dark fur that peacefully grazed in the fenced-in grassland. Reinhard mentioned they were at the ideal size to start shearing.

Felt’s questions about livestock, farm equipment, the ranch, the town, and everything in between, were endless. In fact, she didn’t even have any complaints about Reinhard’s guidance at that moment. Well, except for one.

“It still woulda been better if I wasn’t alone with you, though.”

Reinhard smiled wryly and furrowed his brow in dismay at Felt's snide remark. "I am indeed hurt to hear you say that to my face, my lady."

As Felt had grumbled, it was indeed just the two of them, her and Reinhard, strolling through the town of Hakuchuri. Neither Old Man Rom nor any of the three idiots had come along to accompany them. Of course, as she had mentioned before setting out, she did make sure to invite their other party members beforehand. However, everyone else just so happened to be too busy with their own tasks to join them.

"But I didn't wanna cancel just because of that. I ain't no coward, y'know!"

"If Your Ladyship was displeased, I would've had no intention of forcing to you to come."

"This is about my mood. It has nothing to do with you. It's a matter of my own personal victory or defeat. Anyway, I'm having a good time for now."

Waving a dismissive hand in the air, Felt snickered at Reinhard's concern. It was unclear how he may have interpreted her response, but nonetheless, he proceeded without pause. That was his own answer.

Felt strolled along, hands clasped behind her head, glancing up at the tall figure beside her. He's strong. There ain't no question about that. He also almost always has answers when I ask him something. He's probably the best servant one could ask for.

And yet, Felt had always felt an itch of frustration toward him, a particular sentiment that always prompted her to act stubborn around him. Such an emotion was baffling to her, which only fueled her peculiar obstinacy toward him.

"Is something the matter?"

"Nothin'," she replied curtly. "But this area's your hometown, isn't it?"

“I was born in the royal capital. However, I grew up here as a child, so you certainly could call this my hometown. Why do you ask?”

“And despite that…”

Reinhard’s answer made Felt close one eye. And then…

“Oh, Sir Reinhard! You’ve returned!”

A high-pitched voice caught their attention. When they turned around, there was a townsman waving their hand in greeting. Reinhard’s conspicuous appearance, just like earlier in the dragon carriage, made him rather easy to pick out from the crowd. As he waved back, the villager quickly bowed his head, looking immensely pleased.

“That’s Cochran. He’s the heir to the ranch we saw earlier. His friend works as a craftsman of earth dragon equipment. I thought I’d ask him to make some earth dragon gear for you, Lady Felt.”

“It’s crazy how you seem to know so much about everyone you see.”

“Well, it’s a small town, you see. They’re also the residents of our domain. Not to mention I consider them my friends from my hometown. It’s not much to brag about.”

“Friends, huh?”

Felt twisted her head to look at the young man who had greeted them. She had no doubt that he had friendly intentions, as he was the one to approach them. But does he really regard Reinhard as a friend? she wondered. The young man appeared to be the same age as Reinhard. However, it seemed to her that he had drawn a line between them due to their different family backgrounds and personalities, among other reasons.

Reinhard responded to Felt’s musings with a sad smile. “I am in a different position than them, after all. It is indeed challenging to form casual friendships. Nonetheless, I’m willing to open up to them.”

"You're the most powerful knight in the kingdom, a nobleman, and a lord, right? I can understand how they feel. Oh, could it be? Even in your hometown, you don't have a single friend, do you?"

"I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but I don't have anyone I could call a drinking buddy," Reinhard said, shrugging nonchalantly at Felt's unintentionally sardonic probing. "Even though I am a knight, that title is merely a burden to me here. And yet, it's not something I can simply discard, even if I wanted to."

"Have you ever wanted to discard it?" Felt asked, taken aback by his last remark.

"No. I have never… It's my fate to carry this weight on my shoulders."

His response was devoid of any shame or pride, which made Felt feel an itching frustration. She swiftly shook it off, however, quickly smiling to reveal her fang. "I see, you don't have any friends. No wonder no one came to see ya when you came all the way back to your hometown."

"Well, if you put it that way… Also, it's in poor taste for you to derive pleasure from that."

"Heh heh." Felt snickered. "No matter what you say, it's not going to work on me now." Reinhard had never left himself open, but she'd finally managed to catch him in a moment of vulnerability. I'm gonna keep toyin' with him for a while.

However, Reinhard interrupted Felt's plan with some words of his own. "However… It didn't appear as if you had any friends to bid you farewell in the royal capital yourself, my lady."

"Ugh!" Felt groaned.

"In fact," he continued, "if it weren't for Master Rom, that would mean that you also had no friends."

"Ugh, just drop it!" Felt snapped, her face flushing red since he'd hit her where it really hurt. "Old Man Rom is the only one I need!"

Just as the entire situation was headed to a stalemate, Reinhard suddenly lost his poise and smiled. His shimmering azure eyes reflected the surface of the nearby lake. Felt pursed her lips and asked, “What?”

“Nothing. Your Ladyship really respects Master Rom. It’s endearing.”

“We’re family, you know. Even a great swordsman like you, who can do anything, must have someone he admires, right? Even in the royal capital, it was like that with the old couple, wasn’t it?”

The elderly couple who managed the other mansion had affectionately referred to Reinhard as ‘Young Master’. They loved him. If only in terms of their relationship, they may be his subordinates, but they were practically like family to him. That was why he could act so naturally with them.

“Of course. I admire the old couple, but if you are talking about respect, I respect all my family and ancestors. But of all of them, I suppose I respect my great-grandfather the most.”

“Your great-grandfather?”

“My grandmother’s father. The head of the family two generations ago, Veltol Astrea.”

“Was he also a Sword Saint?” Felt was not too familiar with the intricacies of Divine Protections. All she knew was that the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint was passed down from generation to generation in the Astrea family. If Reinhard, the current Sword Saint, held him in such high regard, then it was only natural that his great-grandfather must have been a Sword Saint as well.

However, Reinhard shook his head at the notion. “My great-grandfather did not inherit the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint. However, he was a virtuous lord beloved by his people for his morality and sound governance. There are no records of him as a swordsman, but I did hear that my grandfather, himself a swordsman, admired him, too. So I imagine that he must have had some skill with the sword.”

“Heh. A virtuous swordsman. I can’t imagine that,” Felt remarked.

Though Felt herself wielded a blade in the form of a knife, it was a personal style vastly different from swordsmanship. When she thought of what a swordsman was, Reinhard was what came to mind. So, it was difficult for her to imagine a virtuous swordsman, as she had nothing but complaints about his character.

“Although it’s true that you’re pretty popular with the townsfolk,” she admitted. “Maybe it’s just ‘cause I’m a stray dog with no concept of that ‘virtue’ stuff…”

“Lady Felt?” Reinhard paused and peered at Felt’s pensive expression. Their gazes locked, blue meeting red, when Felt’s lips twitched. Suddenly…

“You’re way too close!” she spat.

“Ah, my apologies.”

She pushed Reinhard’s chin away with her palm, forcing herself past him. Reinhard chuckled as he was shoved aside and turned his gaze to the sky. Above them, the sun had already begun its descent, tinting the sky in gradients of fading scarlet.

“Lady Felt, it’s about time we return to the mansion. Dinner will be served soon.”

“Hmm, fine. We’ve been walkin’ around all day, so I am gettin’ pretty hungry.”

“Flam and Grassis are preparing dinner tonight, so I’d like to reintroduce you to them again at the table.”

“True, we only chatted a bit earlier.” The twins, who appeared younger than Felt in age, possessed the ability to easily outmatch the three idiots, as expected of being the granddaughters of the elderly couple. It must have been a testament to the training they received from their grandparents.

“They’re both caretakers of the mansion and may sometimes serve as Your Ladyship’s guards if need be,” Reinhard explained. “They descend from a family that has served House Astrea since the beginning, so their skills are truly impressive."

"I don't care 'bout that now. What I care about is their cooking skills!"

"They learned from Auntie, so you can count on their culinary finesse to be outstanding as well."

"Awesome!" Felt clenched her fists in delight at Reinhard's evaluation.

Unbeknownst to her, Reinhard smiled at the sight of the biggest smile she'd shown all day.

As Felt made her way home, a sense of relief swept over her. A feeling she never realized she was capable of. She had been uprooted to a foreign land, surrounded by strangers, and forced to navigate a world she had never known before. Felt was both anxious and determined and resolved not to succumb to defeat.

That half-day journey really cleared up some of my fears. The residence isn't so big, there ain't so many servants, the locals are friendly, and the land isn't so vast. The list could go on, but Felt left it at that. Seeing the reality right before my eyes makes me wonder if those anxieties were all in my head. Thanks to this, I can finally face this new life head-on.

"I'm starting to think you're pullin' some strings, though."

"You overestimate me, my lady. I possess no such ability to control people's minds or actions. It's merely happenstance."

"Well, I can only pray that's true," Felt said, mischievously poking out her tongue, despite having no particular deity to pray to.

Everything is in Reinhard's control. With such paranoid imaginings lingering in her mind, they strolled through town, up the hill, and back to the mansion. Just then…

"You sure you didn't do anything, huh?" Felt asked with a puzzled look.

“I’m afraid I’m just as lost as you this time,” Reinhard responded to her doubts, equally baffled. For there right before them, at the gate of the mansion, lay a basket containing… a baby.

Accompanying the basket was a single note: “Please take good care of Ilya.”

4

“Her name’s Ilya. She’s a baby. She was abandoned in front of the mansion.”

Felt delivered the facts bluntly, placing the basket in the center of the table. There, atop the dining room table, a baby girl with golden locks slumbered peacefully. She couldn’t have been more than a few months old. They had brought her back inside the mansion with them, having been unable to come up with another option.

Everyone in the mansion exchanged awkward glances at Felt’s introduction of the infant. Along with her and Reinhard, everyone else had gathered in the room, including Old Man Rom, the three idiots, and the servant twins. Yet the presence of so many people did nothing to diminish the initial shock.

A heavy silence hung over the room. The peach-haired twins were the first to break it, looking at Felt and Reinhard.

“Young Master and Lady Felt,” Flam began, “you certainly wasted no time having children.”

“The fastest birth ever,” added Grassis.

“Listen, you!” Felt exploded. “I! Am! In! NO MOOD FOR YOUR STUPID JOKES!”

What the twins had intended as a joke failed to amuse, only fueling Felt’s anger instead as she slammed her hands on the table. If their intent was to make light of the duo who carried the baby inside, it only fell flat. However, Felt’s aggressive outburst startled the baby as well.

“Ah…” the baby started to coo.

“Oh dear, Lady Felt, you woke her up,” Flam pointed out.

“She’s awake,” added Grassis.

“Uh-oh…”

The baby’s eyes slowly opened, revealing identical blue pupils reflecting the faces of the diners around her. Then, one second passed, then two, then three, then…

“Waaaahhhhhh!” Little Ilya wailed loudly in response to Felt’s outburst. The volume of her cry was so loud, it echoed throughout the entire mansion.

“Oh, shit! She’s crying!” Felt cried, instinctively covering her ears. “Oh, somebody! Anybody, please, do something about that baby!”

“I regret to inform you, but…” started Flam.

“We’re inexperienced,” Grassis finished.

“Useless! Hey, Reinhard!”

“I’ll give it a try, however…”

Flam and Grassis immediately raised a white flag, while Felt was reluctant to do anything from the start. All the girls had abandoned this fight, so Reinhard, appointed in their stead, scooped up the baby, gently rocking her back and forth and patting her back with a soft thump. “There, there, don’t cry,” he soothed. “You’re a strong child. You’re a good girl, Ilya.”

However, Felt protested his method as futile. “Don’t flirt with her! It ain’t like she wanted you to pick her up!”

However, in Reinhard’s arms, the cries gradually subsided.

“There now, settle down,” he continued. “Calm down… There, you’re all better now.”

“That was impressive. Almost as surprising as when you blew up the loot house.”

“Oh.”

Felt looked at him in shock. Ilya, now quiet, patted Reinhard’s face with her small hand as he smiled in relief. Perhaps she found solace in their identical eyes.

“Or maybe she’s just happy to be held by a good-looking guy. She’s a girl, after all,” Old Man Rom remarked.

“If that’s the reason, babies are crazy,” Felt replied.

Reinhard cradled Ilya as Old Man Rom folded his arms in agreement. But then the tiny Camberley of the three idiots interjected with a “Wait a minute!” He stepped forward and held out his arms to Reinhard. “Give her to me. I had lots of brothers and sisters, so I’m used to handlin’ babies!”

“That’s good to know, but Ilya’s already stopped crying.”

“Never mind that! I’ll show you how to really soothe a baby!”

Reinhard handed Ilya to the confident Camberley, who peered into Ilya’s face and widened his eyes. “Belobelobelobelobah!”

“Waaaahhhhhh!!!”

“‘Really soothe a baby’ my ass!” exclaimed Felt. “Now she’s cryin’ even harder!”

Camberley, making comically exaggerated expressions, only succeeded at upsetting Ilya once again. Despite his attempt to test his soothing skills on her, he was unable to lighten the cranky Ilya’s mood. Negotiations collapsed, and he completely succumbed to the baby’s power.

“Damn! What’s wrong with me? Gaston!”

“Oh, huh? Why ya givin’ her to me?! Uhh… belobeloblaaa—”

“Waaaah!”

Camberley tossed Ilya aside. Gaston, making the next attempt, was also unsuccessful. With Ilya's face red and tear-stained, Gaston passed her off to the next in line. "Rachins, I'm countin' on ya!" he exclaimed.

"Whoa, hold up! What am I s'posed to do with a kid…?! Huh?" Rachins protested with a miserable expression as Gaston entrusted Ilya into his care. However, once in his arms, her crying suddenly ceased.

The baby's unexpected reaction made Rachins break into a chuckle. "Heh, heh… I dunno what's goin' on, but she stopped her cryin'. I guess—"

"Waaaahhhhhh!"

"Hey! Don't go makin' me look like a fool! What, ya run on a time delay or somthin'?!"

"No," Old Man Rom chimed in thoughtfully. "She was probably taking her time evaluating you, and after some consideration, she concluded you were insufficient."

"Shut yer trap, old man! Then you do somethin' about it, Cromwell!" Rachins, who failed the screening test by a slight margin, yelled indignantly as Old Man Rom preached about the psychology of the baby and passed her to him.

Upon having Ilya pressed into his large palm, the wrinkles in Old Man Rom's face deepened as he smiled. "There, there, stop crying now," he soothed.

"Heh, what do you think you're doing?" Rachins said snidely. "If it's that easy to make her stop crying, we would've…"

"Ah—"

"Wha the hell?!"

The three idiots had failed at every attempt, but Old Man Rom appeared to have some sort of magic touch with Ilya. In the end, Reinhard and Rom were the only ones able to pass the bawling baby's judgment.

"As a girl, I can see why she'd choose the young master, but…" Flam commented.

"Old Man Rom is a mystery," Grassis finished her sister's sentence.

"There's nothin' mysterious about it!" Felt erupted. "Choosin' Old Man Rom just shows the kid's got good taste! I'm not happy about lumpin' him in with Reinhard, though!"

The trio hung their heads in shame as the girls talked down to them, despite having also been useless. Still comforting Ilya, Old Man Rom turned his head, casting them a sidelong glance, and said, "Even so… No clues but a name, huh? Wasn't there anything else in the basket?"

"Just a pillow and blanket to wrap her in." Reinhard inspected the basket, gaze downcast. "There was no signature on the letter, either."

"If they're the kinda parents who'd throw away their own kid," Felt said, clicking her tongue, "you really think they'd sign anything? Ridiculous."

Prompting a disapproving look, Felt pointed an accusing finger at him for his lack of understanding. "Get it? This brat was abandoned by her folks. They probably saw you in this mansion and thought they'd leave her here to grow up in a big place. It's disgusting."

"…"

"What about a nearby town? Any chance we might find the parents there?"

Opposite the bitter Felt, Old Man Rom posed the thoughtful question to Reinhard, who pondered the question for a moment before shaking his head. "As far as I can remember, it's hard to say. There were a few pregnant women in town, but…" he trailed off, squinting at Ilya. Wrapped in a white swaddling cloth and fiddling with the hairs on Old Man Rom's arm, it was evident that the baby had only been born very recently. "At this rate, Ilya must only be a few months old. Considering the women who have given birth in that period, the potential candidates are very few. Plus, there's the matter of her appearance…"

"Blonde hair and dark blue eyes, huh?" Felt interjected, running her fingers through her own hair. As far as she knew, hair of this shade wasn't an unusual sight in Lugunica, nor were blue eyes. Thanks to her job and former occupation, she had developed the habit of observing people, and both were quite commonplace. "Blonde hair ain't uncommon. Even my hair's golden."

"Indeed, it is not unusual to see people with gold hair like you, Lady Felt," Reinhard acknowledged. "However, that is mostly limited to the suburbs of the royal capital. In Hakuchuri and southeastern regions like Flanders, brown hair is far more common. The people we met just earlier were the same, weren't they?"

"I suppose so, now that you mention it," Felt said, recalling the townsfolk, still fresh in her memory. Reinhard's right: everyone we met in town had brown locks, while the elderly folk sported gray. "But why's that matter?"

"Exactly what this young man is trying to convey," another voice broke in. "The child's hair and eye color are quite peculiar for a newborn baby… In this region, anyway."

"You're right, Master Rom. Although I do hope my concerns are unfounded…" Reinhard mused thoughtfully, while Felt crossed her arms at his guess.

With a twist of her head, she snorted lightly and scratched her temple. "Ahh shut up! Just what are you tryin' to say, anyway?!"

"There's a possibility that there's more behind Ilya than just being an abandoned child. Therefore, I must ask you something, my lady."

"What?"

"What do you want to do with Ilya once we bring her back?"

At Reinhard's soft-spoken question, Felt's voice lodged in her throat. Choking on her own breath, her gaze turned to Ilya, cradled in Old

Man Rom's arms. The baby remained the same, still entranced by the hairs on his arms, oblivious to all the gossip about her taking place behind her back. Abandoned by her parents and left in this mansion, with not a single say in the direction of her own future.

"Lady Felt, please make a decision," Reinhard urged as she pondered.

He wants my input for this decision? Is that his idea of showing respect? Or is he just usin' the situation to test me and see if I can make decisions on my own without his or Old Man Rom's help?

"You're a cheeky bastard, ain't ya?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing. So, you want me to decide what's gonna happen with this kid, right?"

Whatever Reinhard's intentions, Felt's determination was set. Puffing her cheeks, she flashed a mischievous smile and pointed at Ilya. "I got nothin' against this kid, but I'm pissed as hell at the folks who dumped her here. So, I wanna find them and have a little chat!"

"A chat, you say?"

"Yes, a chat. I wanna chat with them, and I wanna know what really goes on in the minds of parents who abandon their kids. I wanna have a discussion." Felt's expression contorted as she spoke. "I wanna talk to the folks who abandoned their kid, and I wanna know how they feel. And for that reason…" she paused. "I'm gonna keep this kid around and scare the shit outta them!"

Reinhard was silenced by Felt's proclamation. The others around her were also rendered speechless. However, aside from their facial expressions, their eyes held the same gaze. Simply put, they were eyes conveying warmth.

"What the hell you lookin' at me like that for? You got a problem or something?!"

“It may have been my fault, but you need to learn to be more honest with your feelings…”

“Shut up!” Felt snapped at Old Man Rom’s affectionate expression with a growl. “I’m serious! Stop makin’ up weird shit!” However, the intensity of her excitement was once again far too extreme for the baby.

“Waaaahhhhhh!!!!” The baby’s cries reverberated through the mansion from the dining room table once more.

“Ahh, goddammit!”

5

Late that evening, just past midnight, Ilya finally grew tired of crying and fell asleep.

“Kids are something else,” Felt remarked, exhausted, plopping down on the couch. “Where does such a tiny body find so much stamina?”

“Speaking of tiny bodies…” Flam said.

“Like yours,” Grassis added.

As the twins retorted to her rant, Felt glared at them. “Shut up. I don’t wanna hear anything from people who are half my size. Just how old are you two anyway?”

“We’ll be twelve this year.”

“Time to become independent.”

“You ain’t independent if y’all’re always together. But still…”

The twins, puffing out their chests, were surprised at Felt’s words.

“That’s true…”

“A blind spot.”

Ignoring them, Felt shifted her gaze toward the back of the room, at the table in the common room, the basket on top, and Reinhard

hard at work beside it. “You can even change a baby’s diaper? You really can do anything.”

“Anything is a bit of a stretch,” Reinhard replied. “But I once looked after the babies of an acquaintance of mine. So I do have some experience with diapers.”

“Oh, you took care of babies, huh?” Surprised by this unexpected scene, Felt laid back down and rested her cheek on her hand. From the corner of her eye, she saw the twins squirming, cheeks slightly tinted. She cast a dubious gaze between the twins and Reinhard, puzzled by their reaction. “Oh. I get it! You’re the babies of that acquaintance of his!”

“Lady Felt, that’s so embarrassing!”

“So humiliating.”

Blushing, the twins furtively affirmed Felt’s observations.

Convinced by her reaction, Reinhard chuckled. “You figured it out? Yes. I’ve known Flam and Grassis since they were both babies…”

“You mean you put your hands on those poor babies?!” accused Felt.

“Wait a minute. Please allow me to explain myself.”

“I’m only kidding. It’s one thing for you to hold me prisoner, but it’s quite another to change diapers for these two when they were babies. It’s also completely different from changing this other baby’s diaper right now,” Felt said, lowering her finger and blowing on its tip.

“That’s a relief,” Reinhard replied, withdrawing his hand. “That said, the diaper is now successfully changed. Flam, Grassis, did you get that?”

“Yes, Young Master. It’s perfect.”

“The diaper master.”

"I'll be counting on you. Now then, let's change the blanket and mattress. But she might get uncomfortable if we use something she's not used to, so we'll keep the original bedding for now."

At Reinhard's prompt and efficient instruction, Flam and Grassis bowed and left the common room. Only Felt and Reinhard remained in its confines, just the two of them—or three if you counted the sleeping Ilya.

"With the exception of Old Man Rom, all the men are useless," Felt complained.

"Even if they can't tend to Ilya, they should be able to assist in finding her parents," Reinhard suggested, advocating for the trio against Felt's earlier assessment, his hand resting upon the basket. "Tomorrow, I'll have those three men aid in our endeavors."

Felt frowned at his response, having only intended to say that comment to herself. "Tomorrow, huh? Are you sure? They're deadbeats. They might run away, y'know?"

"I've already talked to the people in town and at the dragon carriage stop. I instructed them to stop and report anyone in traveling clothes or with similar features to Ilya's. I also inquired about the town's recently expectant mothers. But unfortunately, there was no one who resembled her mother."

"After doing all that, is there anything left for those three idiots to do?" Felt was slightly taken aback by Reinhard's diligence as she eyed him with skepticism. For starters, Reinhard's the main one who's been lookin' after Ilya since after dinner. Where on earth did he find the time to do any of that?

"If you don't mind, Lady Felt," Reinhard said, changing the subject, "would you like to try changing her diaper?"

"Uh, maybe next time if I feel up to it," she conceded. "I saw how to do it, so I can probably do it."

"That's good to hear." Reinhard nodded, and Felt pursed her lips at his apparent aloofness.

Pretending to teach Flam and Grassis, Reinhard proceeded to show them how to change diapers, with the intention of Felt learning from it as well. Felt didn't want to entrust everything to Reinhard either, so she had planned to learn from the start.

"You knew I wasn't gonna say anything myself, huh?" Felt muttered. "Shit, you're so annoying."

"What's wrong?" Reinhard asked, raising an eyebrow at Felt's tongue-in-cheek remark.

"Nothing… Wait, no, it's not nothing. What do you think it is, really?" Felt scratched her head with her free hand as she lay slumped on the sofa.

"Lady Felt?"

"Bringing the baby here, finding the parents, and taking care of her were my own decisions. You made me choose. But what are your thoughts on it?"

"…"

"Oh, and for the record, I don't want you to include my opinion in your thinking. I am me. You are you. Let's keep the two separate. Otherwise, I'll feel really weird."

She swung her legs up and down to gain momentum. Raising herself up on the couch, Felt straightened and turned to Reinhard. She noticed him shut his eyes.

Then he looked back at her, motioning gingerly toward Ilya with his hand. "I suppose that even if you had ordered me to abandon the baby, I would still have gone along with it. There is no truly correct answer in this case."

"That's not your opinion, though…"

"And then," he continued, "I think I would have secretly searched for Ilya's parents and sheltered her somewhere in the mansion, behind Your Ladyship's back."

“Oh?” Felt said as Reinhard smiled softly, arms outstretched. Dumbfounded by his grin, she realized that she had been the one he was stringing along. Her face flushed, and anger welled up inside of her. “Y-You…”

“Lady Felt, Ilya is…”

“Ugh…! Don’t act so superior!” Felt wanted to shout at him, but restrained herself at the very last moment, reflecting on the situation. But the anger lingered, and she glared at Reinhard with indignation, delivering her outburst in that single sentence.

In the end, Reinhard always got his own way. Regardless of Felt’s intentions, he was devoted to this baby whether out of his own desire or not.

“You’re only doing it ‘cause you think it’s best for the baby,” she said.

“Indeed, it is in my nature to help those in need,” Reinhard acknowledged. “But in this case, I don’t think one needs to think so hard when it comes to helping a baby, right?”

“…”

“And if you don’t mind me getting a little personal…”

Felt’s eyebrows rose at the sound of the word ‘personal’. It wasn’t very often that Reinhard would preface a statement with his own personal views. And that was precisely the response that she was hoping for on this occasion.

Reinhard smiled thinly at Felt’s anticipation. “It is an honor for me as a knight to be in agreement with you, Lady Felt.”

“I… uh…”

“I remember that moment when you gave me your orders during the royal selection ceremony. I, too, would like to follow my mistress’s wishes whenever possible.”

Felt’s mouth hung open in embarrassment from the sheer audacity of his comment. Reinhard simply shrugged in his usual fashion in response to her reaction. It wasn't an act of courtesy, nor was it a random slip of the tongue. It was unmistakably his genuine opinion, but that fact alone was what triggered Felt's agitation.

Felt gritted her teeth with a shudder, and blurted out, "You know, you really are a jerk, ain't ya? That's exactly what creeps me out about you!" Her heated outburst echoed throughout the mansion. Then, just a beat later…

"Waaaahhh!"

And, in retribution for her poor judgment, the mansion trembled with wails all through the night.

6

At midnight, at the same time that Astrea Manor reeled with violent tremors…

"Did you find the woman and child?"

A low voice pierced a dimly lit room. The voice was mature yet robust, despite its gruffness. It held the kind of power attributed only to those who have reigned above others for numerous years, a power one could only call dignity. Naturally, the owner of the voice had his subordinates. As if to prove this point, multiple breaths of air stirred in the air as one man spoke up. "Please forgive me, sir, but we are still in pursuit. We have no doubt that they have already departed the city."

"Find them. Any leads on their destination?"

"They have no one to turn to and limited resources. We must start from the nearest point and work our way up."

Upon hearing this report from his underling, the man with the voice issued commands without a moment's hesitation. "You're taking too damn long. Narrow it down. Start with Hakuchuri."

In response, the room rustled with unrest. However, the subordinate making the report quietly bowed. "Understood, sir. I will send someone immediately. Although things may get a tad messy…”

“That’s not my concern. My priority is to secure them, but even if the woman doesn’t make it back, make sure the baby does.”

“So be it. Let’s go.”

With that, the subordinate left the room, accompanied by the rest of the men. The door quietly shut behind him, leaving the lone man in the bleak chamber. He creaked out of his chair, rising to his feet, and walked over to the window behind him to peer out.

“I wonder where they’ve run off to…”

Outside the window, the city of Flanders, one of the five great cities, loomed in the distance at night. The room that he occupied belonged to a mansion on a hill commanding a panoramic view of the city.

In his top-floor chamber, the man drew a cigar from his desk drawer and lit it. The faint glow revealed a deeply wrinkled visage. His golden hair had already lost its luster. And his blue eyes brimmed with a fierce glint. “I will find you, Ilya,” the man muttered, his voice drifting away, swallowed up by the dark, starry sky above Flanders.

7

The past few days in Hakuchuri went by like clockwork. It had become routine to hear the wails of a baby and the intense quarrel between a boy and girl in the Astrea’s main residence, situated atop a hill.

“Waaaaah!” The baby bawled with all its might, causing the townspeople to pause in their work. Exchanging glances, they would laugh and comment, “Looks like it’s started up again,” before returning to their tasks.

Such became the day-to-day rhythm in the town of Hakuchuri.

“Lady Felt, I don’t want to repeat myself too often, but please listen to me closely once more.” With a stiff preamble, Reinhard cut in wearing a serious expression on his face. It was unusual for this man, ordinarily mild-mannered, to carry such stridency in his voice, but it was not necessarily a reflection of his emotional state, rather because otherwise, his voice might miss its intended audience. After all, the baby had been wailing with a ferocity that rocked the entire mansion.

“Waaah!” The sobbing baby, Ilya, had been doing her damnedest to protest her life’s woes with all her might. Felt and the others had also done their damnedest to tend to Ilya over the past few days since deciding to keep her at the mansion. However, Ilya was not one to compromise, using her status as a baby as a shield.

Of course, they could never burden a mere infant with adult matters, but…

“All you do is cry, cry, cry!” Felt exclaimed, covering her ears. “That’s all you do, all day, every day, all around the clock!”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Reinhard said. “It’s not all day long. The actual frequency is every few hours. It’s just that babies can’t distinguish between morning and night, so it’s easy to feel it that way.”

“Did I give you the impression that I give a shit about such petty things?” Felt barked, her hands over her ears. “If you have time to bullshit, just show her your face and make her stop crying!”

However, Reinhard shook his head. “No. Right now, anything I do to stop her from crying now would only be a stopgap measure. If we don’t get to the root of the matter, Ilya will weep and sob over and over again. It’s becoming unbearable, even for me.”

“Don’t play the victim card now. What do you mean, the ‘root of the matter’?”

“That, of course, lies with you, Lady Felt. That’s why Ilya is crying right now.”

“Me? What the hell are you talking about? What’s this got to do with me?”

“Take a look,” Reinhard said, pointing at Ilya, who was lying on her bed. Felt, annoyed by Reinhard's remark, glanced at the diaper wrapped around her.

"It's Ilya's diaper," he continued. "Your Ladyship was the one who changed it. But look at how you put it on. It's quite sloppy. I have no doubt that Ilya is itchy."

"Oh, who cares?" Felt moaned, refuting Reinhard's accusation. "As long as it covers her ass and keeps her from shitting all over the place!"

Indeed, the cloth serving as Ilya's diaper was wrapped around her quite haphazardly, and indeed, it had been Felt who had wrapped it. But that said, the whole idea of changing diapers seemed ridiculous to her in the first place.

"Lady Felt… Please be more attentive to Ilya's feelings. Otherwise, you'll only get further away from your quest for the throne."

"Quit talking nonsense! What's a diaper got to do with becoming queen? You get off on watching me change a brat's diapers or something? Pervert!" Reinhard's argument was swapped for a polemic, and Felt clawed at her head in frustration. "Why do I have to deal with this? Where are those twins? What about those three idiots? What the hell are they doing?"

"Flam and Grassis are occupied with the mansion's chores. Rachins, Gaston, and Camberley are looking for Ilya's parents, and I'm sure Your Ladyship knows what Master Rom is up to."

"Mugugu…"

Felt could not say a word as Reinhard drove her into a corner. At the same time, he turned to Ilya, asking, "Are you all right?" He proceeded to readjust her diaper. "There, there, we'll take care of you now."

As aggravating as it was to listen to Reinhard, Old Man Rom was currently away from the mansion. He had left to meet an acquaintance outside of the royal capital, so he was quite busy on his own. Consequently, with Old Man Rom absent and Felt left to care for the baby, her spirits had all but spiraled down the drain.

“So it’s just me and you who are available right now, Lady Felt,” Reinhard concluded.

“If that’s the case, why don’t you search for those parents instead of those three morons?” Felt asked.

“Those three can barely do a thing for Ilya. So if I do that, you’d be left to deal with Ilya all on your own. Don’t you see?”

“What have I done…!” With her head in her hands, Felt sighed at the sight of Ilya, now in a cheerful mood after having her diaper changed.

It had been five days since Ilya arrived at the mansion, and the baby’s tyrannical tendencies were only getting worse. How carefree you are, despite the turmoil you’ve been causing for everyone around here, all the while wearing the smile of an angel. Who do ya think you are, a queen?!

“We gotta find her parents quickly,” Felt lamented. “Otherwise, even I can’t tell what I’ll end up doing to them for making me go through this.”

“In such moments, just look at Ilya’s face,” Reinhard suggested. “Doesn’t her innocence wash over you and make you feel at peace?”

“It’s exactly that face that’s driving me insane right now.”

Although Felt was tempted to snap back at him out of habit, this situation called for something different. There really is no way to win over a baby whose life is bound by neither day nor night. Can’t help but wonder if her folks abandoned her not because of poverty, but because of her incessant wailing.

“Good grief, if that’s the case. Give me a break.” If crying alone was reason enough to abandon a baby, then the world would be overrun with abandoned kids. Before even discussin’ whether I’ll become the queen or not, I don’t wanna believe the country I’m living in is such a cruel place.

"Ah, it's a beautiful day." With Reinhard fretting over Ilya, Felt gazed out the window absentmindedly. The blue sky, white clouds, and idyllic scenery spread out below them. It was not particularly tranquil, but her lack of sleep from the previous night's crying made her feel a bit dazed.

"If you want to sleep beside Ilya, I can sing you a lullaby," Reinhard offered.

"Don't treat me like a child," Felt snapped. "I'll kick your ass." What, does this guy have eyes in the back of his head? How'd he know I was dozing off? Leaning against the windowsill, the wind tousled her golden bangs as she drifted off to sleep…

"Hmm?" Felt squinted against the breeze and sunlight, clearing her throat with a sudden sense of discomfort. She spotted someone skulking around the landscape from her elevated position. The moment they caught sight of Felt, they turned around in a panic and scrambled away.

"What the hell! That bastard!"

"Lady Felt!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Felt vaulted out of the window. Reinhard was startled by her swift reaction but was unable to catch up to her since she'd already landed in the garden. On all fours, Felt turned her attention downhill, where she could still see the figure's back, receding into the distance. Determined to chase after them, she broke into a run, when suddenly…

"Lady Felt," Reinhard said, appearing beside her a split second later with a hand on her shoulder. "If you need anything, please let me know. That is what I am here for."

For a moment, Felt wanted to shake him off, but she dismissed her spontaneous reflexes. Taking stock of the situation, she pointed down the hill. "Some weird-ass creep was gawking at the mansion. Go get 'im!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Reinhard exclaimed, accepting her command.

“Please take care of Ilya,” he added, thrusting the baby into her arms.

Reinhard’s figure faded with the wind not a moment after Felt received the baby’s limber, warm body. Kicking the ground, he caught up to the man in a flash. The suspect seemed confident in his ability to escape, but he was no match for Felt, let alone Reinhard. After all, this was a man of iron defenses that even Felt had not been able to escape over the last two months.

“Oh, it’s settled. That takes care of that.” Felt nodded as she put her hands under Ilya’s armpits, letting her legs dangle. A cloud of dust rose at the end of her line of sight as Reinhard pinned the man down, rendering him incapable of resistance. It all happened so fast, Felt couldn’t exactly see what he did to the man, but she figured that wasn’t important.

Waiting, still holding Ilya, Reinhard returned at a leisurely pace, dragging the man back by the scruff of his neck.

“Lady Felt, this way.”

Without pausing to catch his breath, Reinhard threw the man he had dragged to the ground. He was a middle-aged man with an unremarkable appearance, staring at Reinhard with blank, trembling eyes. “Ugh, you’re even more of a monster than the rumors say, you…”

“Though I’m accustomed to being called such things, right now, I’m Lady Felt’s knight,” Reinhard declared.

“Quit giving that answer whenever you’re called that.” Felt clicked her tongue at his textbook response. “It’s hard on the ears.” She then turned her attention to the trembling man. Observing his nervous smile, she tilted her head and asked, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’ve been spyin’ on our house, haven’tcha?”

“Heh, heh. Well, I heard that the Sword Saint had returned, and I was curious to get a glimpse of him.”

Felt glanced at Reinhard. “Reinhard, do as you please with his fingers.”

The panic-stricken man’s face paled. “Wait, wait! You’ll what?! Don’t hurt me! What are you doing?”

Reinhard really left an impression on him, huh?

Reinhard rubbed his brow at the sight of the hysterical man, begging for mercy. “Lady Felt, you’ve portrayed me as a rather terrifying being…”

“That’s just common sense. You should know the trouble you’ve put me through.”

Shrugging at Reinhard’s troubled frown, Felt smiled, flashing the man her fang. “Anyway, it’s your turn now. Who are you, where are you from, and why are you here? Answer, or else.”

“O-Or else…?”

“I’ll sic Reinhard on ya.”

Reinhard no longer defended himself against Felt’s ruthless proclamations. He chuckled, accepting the harsh orders. “If that is my duty as your knight,” he acquiesced.

Sensing something far greater than a threat in this alliance, the man exclaimed in a panic, “Alright, alright! I got it, I got it! I’m from the Black Silver Coin! I was ordered by my higher-ups to find the baby!”

8

“The Black Silver Coin, huh?” Felt put a hand to her forehead as the man recounted his story in full. To be honest, having grown up in the royal capital, I’m not so familiar with the affairs outside of the area, but even I can guess who these Black Silver Coin guys are and what they do for a living.

“The Black Silver Coin is an organization based in Flanders, one of the five great cities,” Reinhard explained. “On the surface, they can appear in a bar in the city, or as an earth dragon goods dealer…”

“But in reality, they are the underworld of the city, the leaders of the dark forces of society. A common trope, ain’t it?” Felt surmised.

There were similar entities in the royal capital with different names, but the reality was the same. Felt had tried to avoid getting involved, but society was not big enough for her to remain completely unaffected.

“But not even the underlings seem to know much more than that.” She sighed. “We have no clue who from the Black Silver Coin is looking for Ilya, or why. Also…”

“We have no idea why Ilya was left at my residence,” Reinhard added.

In the end, they obtained no further information, other than that Ilya was the target. The man they had captured was rolled up in a bamboo mat and shoved into a storeroom, but that was another issue.

We could go directly to the Black Silver Coin, Felt thought, knowing it was a rather rough method. I can just go to their headquarters, use Reinhard as a shield, and uncover the truth. However, Felt quickly abandoned this idea. Not only due to her reluctance to rely on Reinhard but also because she knew it wouldn’t solve the root of the problem.

“But if we don’t do something, we’ll be stuck like…” Pondering over what to do, Felt sank into the weight of her thoughts as she lay on the sofa. Standing by her side, Reinhard looked affectionately at Ilya sleeping peacefully on her bed.

But all Felt could think about was taking action to break through this stagnation.

“Woo-hoo! We’re back! Raise your hands and give us a warm welcome!”

A cheerful, high-pitched voice carried upstairs from the front door of the mansion.

“…Those idiots!” Felt growled. They were supposed to be on duty looking for the parents! Seeing Ilya's sleeping face twitch at the commotion, Felt clicked her tongue and left the room. Standing in the doorway, she raised an eyebrow. "Shut up, you damn idiots! You're gonna wake Ilya up!" she shouted at them.

Camberley puffed out his chest and laughed. "You're one to talk! Besides, you should be talking to us with gratitude!" he cried, before pointing at the front door with all the strength his small frame could muster.

Felt shot him a dubious look. "What? What did you just say…?"

There, Rachins and Gaston appeared, and with them, a beautiful woman with long grayish-brown hair. She appeared to be in her twenties and exuded a soft and gentle aura. Intimidated by the imposing atmosphere of the mansion, her eyes darted around the room with an air of dread. Noticing Felt's gaze on her, she hastily bowed her head.

The woman's appearance deepened the quizzical wrinkles between Felt's brows.

The fearful woman and the three idiots basking in their triumph were nothing but trouble—well, the trio, anyway.

"Reinhard, tie 'em all up."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hold on with that order! Look closely! It's the brat's mom!"

The instantaneous reaction nearly overlapped with the swift verdict, but that, too, quickly unraveled at Rachins's words—his declaration that this woman was none other than Ilya's mother.

"How did you know…that she was Ilya's mother?" Felt asked.

It was undoubtedly a welcome revelation. But this was not the time for complacency. There remained a strong possibility that the trio had made a mistake in their haste. In response to Felt's misgivings, Rachins smirked with a "Heh. Dumb people might not have caught on, but I figured it out as soon as I saw her clothes. Parents usually abandon kids ‘cause of money. That’s why abandoned kids are usually so shabby. But this kid had clean clothes an’ a nice basket, so I knew right away somethin’ was off.”

“This guy was brought up properly. Unlike us,” Gaston chimed in, standing beside Rachins.

Rachins, embarrassed, immediately cleared his throat and interjected, “Nobody cares ‘bout that now. The reason for abandonin’ her wasn’t the money. Also, she was left on the Sword Saint’s doorstep. So the story’s simple. Lives were at stake. That’s why her folks left her here.”

If she were taken in by the Sword Saint’s family, the chances of her being traced were significantly reduced. Indeed, an assassin from the Black Silver Coin had been repelled. If his speculation proved correct, everything was going according to plan.

“It’s great that you figured out that much, but what happens next?” Felt asked.

“Well, if I was a parent who left my kid with the Sword Saint,” Camberley began, “y’know what I’d do? I’d run far, far away acting like a decoy to protect that kid! So while monitoring the dragon carriage stops wasn’t a bad one, we took it one step further! By setting our sights on long-distance dragon carriages, at last, we were able to come up with this deciding factor!” Exaggerating his gestures, Camberley thrust his hands out before him. Felt, however, had no idea what this ‘deciding factor’ was. She tilted her head in confusion.

“Take a good, good look!” Camberley continued. “This is it, this!”

“This… Hmm?” Stepping forward at Camberley’s assertion, Felt finally grasped the situation. In his outstretched hands, he held a long, thin thread of some sort. No, not a thread, but a strand of human hair.

The hair was long and had a grayish-brown hue. Camberley gripped it tight, proud of his victory over Felt. “This hair, found in that kid’s basket, belongs to someone else! Its color is different from the kid’s, which must mean it came from one of the parents who dumped her here! Which means… This hair is her mother's!"

"That's a creepy method…"

"Is that all you have to say to us after we've made it this far?!"

Camberley tore the lock of hair in his hands and glared at Felt for her offhanded comment, but she quickly brushed it off with an apologetic wave of her hand. "Whatever, good job. But it's still not enough…"

"An outsider, a hair match, and a long ride in a dragon carriage. Not to mention—" Interrupting Felt, Gaston listed out their reasoning, then gestured at the woman with his chin.

Looking closely at the woman once again, Felt saw what he was referring to. The woman standing before them had a bandage wrapped around her neck and chest, hidden by her clothes.

"So it wasn't only the daughter who was in danger, but the mother as well…" Felt clicked her tongue. "Hey, twins!"

"You called for us?"

"Lady Felt wants us."

Flam and Grassis suddenly appeared as if they had literally sprung out of the water. The trio was startled by their sudden appearance, and the woman also looked at them incredulously. Felt, however, accepted it as a matter of course. "I hope you're ready to patch up that injury," she said. "I'm not doin' it. You want her bandages to come out lookin' like one of my diapers?"

"Lady Felt, you've acknowledged your guilt," said Flam, one hand covering her mouth.

"Burn in your own sins," said Grassis, one hand covering her mouth.

"Shut up!"

Following their banter with Felt, the twins approached the nervous-looking woman. They took her by the hand and began to guide her to the parlor. However…

"Ah, before that," Felt stopped them in their tracks. "What's your name?"

"…"

"Your name, lady. Your daughter has one. You have one too, right? At least…"

Just as Felt was about to say, tell us, the woman pointed at her own throat. She then proceeded to shake her head sideways, indicating she could not speak.

"I said her wound needed treatment, an' she gave in. At first, she mistook us for her pursuers," Rachins explained to Felt as the woman disappeared into the parlor.

Felt nodded in agreement. "Not surprising. You don't look like the type of person you'd expect to find in the Sword Saint's household. But thanks for finding her. It really helps."

"Heh!" Rachins was momentarily taken aback by Felt's praise, responding with an immediate smile. Gaston and Camberley mirrored his sentiment from behind.

Yet, there stood one figure, feeling excluded from the picture entirely.

"So, what's with you looking so dumb? It's weird," Felt remarked.

"I must confess, I am surprised," Reinhard responded hesitantly as Felt turned around. The woman's presence, Rachins's efforts, and the twins' duties—in each case, Reinhard observed them in silence. Evidently, his heart was filled with a rare sense of surprise.

"What do you think?" Felt asked. "They're not so bad, huh? Not for a bunch of street punks, anyway."

"…"

“I didn’t anticipate anything like this, though. Well, I suppose there are times they’re more useful than you, the not-so-almighty Sword Saint.” Folding her hands behind her head, Felt gave Reinhard a devious smile.

Reinhard exhaled softly at the expression and continued. “However, we don’t truly know if that woman is Ilya’s mother, do we? We haven’t been able to glean anything from her yet, so long as we can’t talk to her. At this rate…”

“Proof, right? Piece of cake,” Felt interjected, closing one eye, addressing Reinhard’s unnecessary worries. “We just gotta get her to meet with Ilya. Then we’ll have no problem.”

9

“Wah!”

Seeing Ilya happy in her mother’s arms, Felt looked at Reinhard, expecting he had admitted his defeat.

“It’s not a defeat at all,” he remarked. “Through this reunion, Ilya is safely back in her mother’s arms. It’s an unprecedented achievement. It’s a victory for all of us. Rather, for Ilya.”

“Why you gotta be so fussy about it?” Felt retorted. “Anyway, now we know for sure.”

The woman sitting on the sofa in the center of the parlor was indeed Ilya’s mother.

Such was evidenced by both Ilya in her arms and the compassionate gaze of the woman watching her baby. There was nothing to doubt about that.

“A woman who embraces her daughter so lovingly would never want to abandon her, would she?” Reinhard mused.

“And she’s beautiful, too,” Gaston remarked.

“Yeah, that’s important,” Rachins agreed.

“I’m open to older women,” Camberley added.

Reinhard’s convictions lost their emphasis with the trio’s petty judgments layered on top. Flam and Grassis shot them a disapproving glare for their extra commentary, causing them to shrink back. Seeing this through the corner of her eye, Felt snorted and turned her attention to Reinhard. At that, he lowered his head reverently under her gaze. “Please rest assured, Lady Felt. I am your knight, and my loyalty to you is unwavering.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t even say anything, so quit actin’ so concerned. Also, your focus should be on the lady and her kid now, not me. For now, anyway.”

If what she wants is the Sword Saint, then the best thing we can do now is grant her wish. The woman’s injuries were attended to without incident, and she found herself more at ease. At this point, Felt’s curiosity extended beyond her well-being, as she wanted to know just who was responsible for harming her and putting Ilya in danger.

“It would’ve been easier if it was simply the case of a bad husband who got violent with his wife and child,” Felt remarked.

“Easy is a stretch, my lady. That’s one of the most painful tragedies in the world.”

“I don’t mean to imply that I wish such suffering upon this family. I merely suggest that resolving it would have been more straightforward.” Rebuking Reinhard for his stiff take on the matter, Felt shrugged her shoulders. It definitely would’ve been less complicated if the problem had been limited to this mother, daughter, and husband, or rather, to a single family. We’d only have one person to prosecute. However… “The Black Silver Coin is involved. This isn’t just about them anymore.”

“What? The Black Silver Coin?” Rachins, Gaston, and Camberley, who had played a major role in the hunt for the parents, were astounded upon hearing Felt’s verdict.

Felt briefly explained the story to the incredulous trio. She mentioned the assassin who was after Ilya, and his affiliation with the Black Silver Coin.

Hearing this, the trio’s faces paled as they exclaimed:

“You’ve gotta be kidding! The Black Silver Coin is the governing entity of one of the five great cities.”

“They don’t give a shit who crosses them!”

“And those who do cross them end up in the river!”

The three of them desperately appealed to the others, blaming their adversaries. Felt, roughly scratching her head, concurred, “That’s right. If those guys are so bad, we can’t even have a proper conversation without first thinking of a way to deal with them.”

“That’s not what we mean!” the three idiots protested in unison, but Felt’s stance was unyielding.

“If you wish for me to open up an escape route, I shall risk my life to fulfill my duty…” Reinhard offered.

“That’s not gonna solve this whole problem,” Felt replied.

“Indeed, I am acutely aware of that.”

If the problem could have been settled by brute force alone, there would be no hand more powerful than Reinhard’s unparalleled strength. However, Felt was well aware such means were not always the best course of action. The event unfolding before them was one of them.

“Hmm?” Suddenly, Felt, lost in thought, looked up, feeling the weight of someone’s gaze. The source of the stare was the mother, holding her daughter in her arms. Her hazel green eyes were filled with a mixture of anxiety, hope, and uncertainty. The root of her complex sentiments became apparent. “Are you wonderin’ why we’re trying to help you?” Felt asked, her tone firm.

In response, the woman nodded her head.

“Don’t get me wrong. We…or at least, I, am not doing this for you. If there’s anyone I’m concerned about, it’s Ilya.”

“…”

“I’ve had to deal with her crying at night for days on end. I’m on the verge of exploding from lack of sleep. I thought I’d have no mercy on the parents once I found them, but when I finally found the mother… I realized she was in a messy predicament. It’s a pain in the ass.”

The harshness of Felt’s words caused the woman to stiffen up in anticipation of what she might say next. Ilya, however, oblivious to the tension in the room, reached out her hand towards Felt, smiling faintly in her mother’s bosom.

Felt noticed herself relaxing at this sight. “Damn it…” she muttered.

Unlike her mother, nothing was out of the ordinary for Ilya. Ever since she came to this mansion, she had only seen Felt exude explosive anger from her petite body, always raising her voice.

“I’m getting impatient,” Felt said. “And I won’t be satisfied until I unload this onto those responsible. Hey, you… What about you?”

The woman pointed at herself in surprise, expression puzzled.

“You left that brat here so you can be a decoy, right? Aren’t you angry that they made you do that? Aren’t you pissed that you have to run all over the place?”

“…”

“You think Ilya wants to grow up hearing that her mom was basically running around with a sign on her back saying ‘loser’?”

“…”

The woman’s expression changed at Felt’s provocation. Her face reddened, her eyes widened, and with the exception of the arms holding Ilya, the rest of her body tensed up. Not with words, but with her whole body, she expressed that she did not want that to happen. Felt laughed at the sight. “Twins! Get some paper and a quill!” she commanded.

“Here’s some paper,” Flam said, handing her a sheet.

“Here’s a quill,” Grassis said, handing her a quill.

Felt extended her hands as Flam and Grassis quickly responded to her request. Receiving the paper and quill, Felt offered them to the woman.

“Write down your names. Both of them. The names of Ilya’s mother and father.”

“…”

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. It’s your decision. This is it,” Felt explained.

The woman closed her eyes, contemplating Felt’s words. Then, opening them back up, she offered Ilya to Reinhard. Reinhard gently took the baby into his arms and gasped. Before their eyes, the woman ran her quill over the piece of paper. The mother’s name, her own, was Kalifa. And in the remaining space, she wrote the name of a man—Ilya’s father.

“Doltero? Is that her father’s name?” Felt asked.

“Nooo!” The moment they heard that name, the three idiots collapsed behind them in shock. They screamed and shrank back, clasping their hands together and shaking their heads frantically in disgust.

“What’s your problem?! Quit being so fussy, would ya? You’re losing the respect I just started to have for ya!”

“Take back all the respect you want,” Rachins exclaimed. “But Doltero? No way! That’s the name of the Black Silver Coin’s leader! Oh, wait! I know! It’s gotta be someone else wit’ the same name! Talk about confusin’!”

Perhaps out of desperation, Rachins and the others desperately tried to rewrite the reality of the situation. However, the woman, Kalifa, proceeded to write Doltero's family name after his first.

"Doltero Amule."

This time, the three idiots were out of moves, and they deflated into a heap on the spot. Apparently, the family name also matched the head of the Black Silver Coin as they knew it. In other words, Ilya is indeed related to the head of the Black Silver Coin…

"No wonder they're after her… Wait, something's not right," Felt said.

The Black Silver Coin was trying to retrieve their leader's daughter. I get that. But what about Kalifa? She's his lover or something like that and fled because she feared for her life. Isn't that the exact opposite of wanting to come back?

"If the enemy had been anyone other than Black Silver Coin, I would've understood. But the guy we caught was also from the Black Silver Coin. How can that be? Generally speaking…"

"…"

"Why didn't Kalifa turn to the leader of the Black Silver Coin?"

If his mistress and daughter were in danger, the boss of the Black Silver Coin wouldn't remain silent. Wouldn't Kalifa naturally seek his help for the sake of Ilya's safety? But she didn't. So what could've happened?

"It's starting to smell fishy, isn't it? I'd like to give this Doltero guy a good beating."

"I understand what you're thinking, Lady Felt, but it won't be that easy. When the other party is the Black Silver Coin and its leader, you need to be prepared when making contact with them."

"Were you just talking about Doltero?" A gruff voice suddenly interrupted, causing everyone in the parlor to turn their attention to the entrance. There stood Old Man Rom, having returned from his earlier meeting.

“Old Man Rom, you’re back!”

“Just got here. So what’s this about Doltero? And who’s that young lady over there?”

Rubbing his bald head, Old Man Rom frowned as he observed the unfamiliar Kalifa.

The situation unfolded just as it appeared. Everyone in the mansion gathered in a single room, each wearing a complicated look on their face. The trio had all but lost their usual vitality. The twins held out a piece of paper with two names written on it. Reinhard cradled an infant in his arms, and Felt sat on the sofa. Old Man Rom nodded deeply and spoke. “Hmmm. So you’ve made some progress. But what does this have to do with Doltero?”

“I’d like to ask something, too. If this is true, then you’re truly extraordinary, Old Man Rom.” Jumping off the couch, Felt nimbly ran up to him and looked him straight in the eye. “Are you acquainted with that Doltero guy from the Black Silver Coin?”

“Not only do I know him, but he’s the one I just went to see.”

“Hell yeah!” Felt jumped for joy at Old Man Rom’s response, closing one eye.

“What the—?” Old Man Rom quickly caught her lightweight body, wearing a dumbfounded expression as he asked, “What’s this all about?”

“That’s great, that’s great, that’s great! I knew you’d be the one to come through for me!”

“That’s a flattering assessment, but I still don’t get what’s going on…” With Felt in his arms, Old Man Rom searched Reinhard for a clue to the missing information.

Reinhard held Ilya under his gaze and addressed Felt. “Lady Felt.”

“Yes, you heard that, right? Now we got all the keys we need. All that’s left is to figure out what to do with those keys, right?” Felt’s crimson eyes sparkled as she grinned with satisfaction.

Reinhard bowed in response to her smile and spoke again. “Lady Felt, right now, you look just like Ilya the way you’re being cradled by Master Rom.”

“Shut up! Hurry up and get your ass ready!!”

10

The air in that one room gave Felt a strange sense of déjà vu. It carried a stifling sensation, caused by an eerie sense of oppression that filled the large space. The thick walls, dim lighting, and crude furnishings seemed intended to intimidate guests—coupled with the absence of chairs for anyone to sit on—and after some thought, Felt understood the true nature of the déjà vu she felt.

It reminded her of the royal castle. The atmosphere of that hall, the stage where she stood when she was forced into the royal selection, all of it was very similar.

“In other words, it’s full of enemies, just like back then. Only this time, I’ve managed to get this far on my own. That alone makes me feel so much better.”

“Don’t worry. No matter what happens, Lady Felt, I guarantee I will protect your person…no, everyone here. If anything happens, and if I have to pick you up, please bear with it and hold back your screams.”

“I feel the same as before. Having you next to me ruins my mood.”

Felt snorted at Reinhard’s statement filled with loyalty as usual and casually crossed her arms. Reinhard chuckled at her response, also emanating his usual self.

Their boldness was evident in their capacity to have a normal exchange.

The two currently stood in a room within Doltero Amule’s mansion, located in the heart of Flanders, one of the five great cities. In other words, they were in the very heart of the Black Silver Coin.

Naturally, it should have been expected that a sudden visitor would be turned away at the door. However, tonight, Felt and her party were granted entrance into the mansion where they were treated to the hospitality typical of the underground world.

The reason for this special exception was soon revealed.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting…” The door to a large room opened, and a stern voice accompanied by a solemn bow was directed at them.

A slender man in a black suit appeared. His entire body radiated a piercing sense of intimidation, his eyes like a serpent. Truly the image of an adversary.

The snake-eyed man turned his gaze toward Old Man Rom, who stood behind Felt and the others. “The Boss is here. Lord Cromwell, consider this a special exception.”

“I appreciate your efforts, Safis… Anyway, it’s not a bad deal for him.”

“I see.”

According to Old Man Rom, the name of the snake-eyed man was Safis. His gaze shifted to Kalifa, holding Ilya, accompanied by Felt, Reinhard, and Old Man Rom. Behind those cold eyes, no one could discern what impression Safis had of the mother and daughter.

The answer was never revealed, as the sound of the great door creaking interrupted the silence.

The moment the figure appeared, the air in the room grew noticeably heavier.

The air was bitter in taste, black in color, and low in resonance. The figure sat down heavily in the single chair at the far end of the room, surrounded by this aura of intimidation. He had shimmering blond hair slicked back and deep blue eyes that perfectly matched Ilya’s. However, there was a stark contrast in the rest of his appearance. It was vastly different from that of an ordinary human.

“Are you a demi-human?”

“In every sense of the word. But what importance is blood here, human girl?”

“Well, nothing, I guess?” Felt replied, looking at Ilya peacefully asleep in Kalifa’s arms. “I guess it’s just a good thing she didn’t inherit too many of her father’s traits.”

The man cleared his throat in response to Felt’s comment. “You’re an honest brat with a lot of guts. I agree with you, though.”

Agreeing with Felt’s irreverent remark, the man touched his nose—not a human nose, but a pig-like one—and smirked. It was visibly obvious at first glance that he was a pig-human.

The Pig King, Doltero Amule, as he was known, sat before them in all his dignity.

"Now that we're done with the introductions, I'd like to proceed," he said. "You know why we came all the way here, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Nodding gravely at Felt's question, Doltero called out the name of the silent mother with her child. "Kalifa." Kalifa's expression hardened at the call, but she stoutly made eye contact with the man.

The exchange of looks between this man and woman, the father and mother, carried complex emotions that were hidden from the eyes of anyone else.

"Why did you run away?"

Kalifa could not answer that question with words. It was impossible for her to say anything. Her larynx had been destroyed. Such was the reason behind her bitter decision to leave her daughter at the mansion of the Sword Saint and use herself as a decoy.

The cause that had driven Kalifa to such extremes could be nothing else.

"You ran away with Ilya. I sent my men after you, but you wouldn't return. I didn't think I'd get a chance to ask you why. But now that you're here, tell me."

Doltero's question was cruel to Kalifa, who was clearly unable to speak, and his posture revealed another side of things: the hidden circumstances of the aging Pig King, Doltero.

"Why did you run away? Why did you return with the Sword Saint?"

"Don't blame her for running. She had no choice but to flee. She and her daughter were threatened with death, so she turned to the Astrea family. That's all," Reinhard answered on Kalifa's behalf. He looked across at Ilya's peaceful sleeping face in her mother's arms before stepping forward. "When her life was threatened, she put her trust in us to protect her daughter at the very least. That's why she left you."

“Nonsense. She fled because her life was threatened? Then why rely on you? If something had happened, why not turn to me first? I am…”

“Shut it, big shot. How can she rely on someone who can’t see his own two feet?” Felt mocked provokingly, butting into their conversion. “That’s why the woman and child have given up on you.”

A tremendous rage swelled up in the room at Felt’s words, but it was not Doltero himself who was enraged. “You’d better watch your tone. You are forgetting that this is the headquarters of the Black Silver Coin. I do not recommend that you cross the line, even if you are a guest.”

Felt locked eyes with the source of the cold voice and icy stare with her crimson eyes: Safis. Standing at the back of the room, Safis was the only member of the Black Silver Coin that Doltero allowed to be present. A testament to his level of trust in him.

“Do you think there is no danger just because you have the Sword Saint at your side? If that’s what you believe, then you greatly underestimate us. We have our own way of doing things. You can count on that…”

“Hey, I’m not kidding. Do I look like a coward who can’t fight without a guardian? I don’t care if he’s here or not.” Felt pointed at Reinhard beside her, clicking her tongue in response to the insulting remark. “And don’t you dare speak to me so blatantly, you two-faced snake bastard.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You’re making baseless accusations.”

“Oh really? I applaud your acting ability.” Felt commended the performance of Safis, who had slightly furrowed his brow.

Doltero touched his pig nose with a bony hand amidst the swarthy exchange between his guest and his subordinate.

Old Man Rom opened his mouth in thought, saying, “Well…” The wise old man, who had been quietly observing the proceedings behind Felt and Reinhard, lowered his gaze and spoke. “If this mother and daughter were targeted, Doltero, you couldn’t possibly be unrelated. Anyone hostile to the Black Silver Coin would be drooling over her. And yet, this mother and child did not turn to you. Not simply because they didn’t want to inconvenience you. No, there was a different reason…”

“They didn’t consider the Black Silver Coin an ally, did they?” Absorbing the final part of Old Man Rom’s statement, Doltero’s blue eyes flashed with understanding.

The organization that dominated the underworld of Flanders had bloodthirsty enemies who would seize any opportunity to exploit a weakness that could lead to the downfall of its leader. And the word ‘enemy’ did not always have to refer to those on the outside alone. If the boss were to fall, certain individuals on the inside might reap benefits as well.

“You were the only one I confided in about Ilya being my daughter, Safis.”

Doltero’s deep, rumbling voice bore down on Safis, his confidant. The snake-eyed man took it in stride and returned his superior’s stare. There was no hint of confusion or doubt there, nor anger or pretense.

“If the Black Silver Coin targeted them, Kalifa would have no choice but to flee with her daughter in tow. And you’re the only one who knows that they are my weakness. Do you have anything to say about that?”

It was not an invitation to plead his case, but rather an offer of mercy to leave a last will and testament. Doltero’s heart must have been churning with emotion after the betrayal by his most trusted confidant. Felt watched with bated breath to see how it would all unfold.

Then, in response to the Pig King’s question, Safis ran his hand through his dark green hair and replied, “Everything is true. There is nothing to correct, sir.”

“I’ve had my eye on you,” Doltero said with deep anguish to Safis, who plotted this opposition against him. “You were the man who was most loyal to the organization. That is still true.”

Upon hearing these words, Safis let out a bitter laugh, catching everyone in the room off guard.

“What’s so funny?” Doltero asked.

“Your eyes are not clouded, sir,” he responded. “I am still loyal to the organization…or rather, to you. I have pledged my life to the organization and its head, and I will not lie about my allegiance.”

“Huh? What the hell are you talking about?” Felt was taken aback by Safis’s peculiar response after confessing his betrayal. If he’s tryin’ to reconcile the situation, he’s missing the mark. Confessing his betrayal and then emphasizing his loyalty? He’s just makin’ excuses! “You took advantage of your boss’s weakness and attempted to overthrow the organization by usin’ his daughter and mistress, didn’t ya? And you’re saying this now? Do you really think you can get away with such excuses?”

“Correction. The words you just spoke are only partially accurate. That mother and daughter are a thorn in the Boss’s side. They posed a threat to the security of the organization and the head of the company. That is the truth.”

Felt frowned deeply, trying to process what he had just said. Her head was occupied with question marks, and Old Man Rom nodded on her behalf. “I see. The man I knew was never one who would attempt a rebellion. I wondered how you could have gone to such great lengths, but your loyalty has gone too far, Safis.”

“I was indebted to you and swore allegiance to the organization,” Safis replied, straightening his posture. “I owe my life and pride to this place, and I have nothing else left to call my own. It is my duty to eliminate liabilities for the sake of the peace of the Black Silver Coin.”

Then, Safis took a knee on the spot and with a single wave of his arm, a dagger appeared in his hand as if by magic. For a moment, the air crackled with tension. In its midst, he placed the dagger against his own neck. “Sir! I am prepared to pay for this disloyalty with my life. But once again, I urge you to consider this as you stand over my corpse. What is the meaning of keeping Miss Ilya by your side?!”

“Damn it! Reinha—” Felt cried out for Reinhard to stop Safis in his haste, but before she could, the sharp blade tore through the skin of his slender neck. Immediately after, a gust of wind swept through the room.

A shockwave blasted through the air, followed by the delayed roar of a sharp impact piercing through flesh. When she turned to see what had happened, it was not the lifeless body of Safis in a puddle of blood that she saw. Safis had been struck in the face by a fist and was sprawled against the wall with his eyes rolled back. The one who delivered the fatal blow was none other than…

“The name ‘Pig King’ is very much alive and well, huh?” Old Man Rom remarked.

“If that were the case, he would have never allowed Safis to do anything so stupid,” Doltero responded.

Doltero, with a gigantic frame comparable to that of Old Man Rom from the giant tribe, moved faster than the wind. Casting his eyes down, the Pig King withdrew the fist that had struck his subordinate and slowly turned around to face them. His calm blue eyes fixed on Kalifa and Ilya. The sound of the blow brought a frown to the sleeping Ilya’s face, but she soon returned to peace.

“Nothing fazes her, huh?” Felt commented.

“She’s a heavy sleeper,” Doltero said. “Must take after her father in that sense.”

Doltero’s face relaxed as he lightly mocked himself for his subordinate’s lack of control, but only for a moment.

“Boss! What’s all the commotion?” As the grand doors swung open, the members of the Black Silver Coin who had been waiting outside appeared. They looked around the room, their eyes falling on the unconscious Safis and Doltero withdrawing his fist. They were unable to conceal their shock.

“This is… Boss, what happened… Mr. Safis?”

“Don’t get worked up. You’re before guests. Take Safis with you. I still need to speak with him. Ensure he receives treatment and doesn’t die,” Doltero ordered his perturbed subordinates with no further explanation. Neither did they ask for elaboration, and they quickly left the room carrying the fallen Safis.

After witnessing this, Doltero sat down again in his chair with a heavy thump of his feet. The eyes of Doltero—or rather, those of the Pig King—turned to Felt as he pressed his thick arm into the armrest, hand on cheek. Seeing the color in his eyes, she sensed an unpleasant discomfort, as if someone had rubbed their fingers over her internal organs. The cause of this discomfort was apparent.

“Thank you for coming all the way out here, Royal Selection Candidate. But you’ve wasted your time.”

“What?”

“I have no daughter. Therefore, consider it a wasted trip.”

For a moment, Felt’s mind went blank, trying to comprehend what had just been said.

Seeing the change in Felt’s expression, Doltero asked, “Don’t you get it?”

He continued, “Get the woman and child out of here at once. They are an eyesore.”

The moment she grasped Doltero’s true intentions, Felt bared her fang in anger and shouted, “You’re an eyesore! You’re a pain in the ass!”

Doltero had taken Safis’s advice to heart. He acknowledged that the very existence of Kalifa and Ilya, the mother and daughter, was a thorn in his side. And he sought to cut them out of his life in order to prevent those around him from realizing this weakness.

This man, his mistress, and his daughter—he was a parent on the verge of abandoning his own child.

“I didn’t come here to have you abandon Ilya!” We came to make you pay for what you’ve done! So why’d it have to come to this? “You have a home, you have money, you have power! If you’re a parent, you should at least take care of your kid! You toss ‘em aside so easily once the going gets tough! If that’s the case, then why did you even bother to…?”

“Felt.” Old Man Rom’s large hand gripped Felt’s shoulder from behind as she erupted into a furious rage. He shook his head with a somber expression as her crimson eyes flashed with anger.

The wise old man silently urged Felt, not to give up, but to step back.

Felt’s heart was filled with indignation at this attitude. “…Yeah, you’re right,” she said. “All right, all right!” Her anger quickly subsided, and she stopped fighting back, clicking her tongue in frustration. Once again, there was no anger in her eyes as she glared at Doltero. Only disappointment and contempt. “She’d be better off without a shitty father like you anyway. I’m the same way.”

Kids are better off apart from parents who can’t even be bothered to protect them. As someone who grew up without knowing her parents, Felt sympathized with Ilya who was about to be on the same boat as her. She wanted to get Ilya out of this place as soon as possible. Ilya can’t find happiness in a place like this. She shouldn’t have anything to do with it.

“Lady Felt.”

Felt, who was about to pull back Kalifa’s arm with a snide remark and a snarl, was accosted by Reinhard. Looking up at him in annoyance, her gaze met his clear blue eyes. She waited for his next word, curious about what he wanted to say, but his lips quivered. Nothing could be said. Even the knight among knights, the Sword

Saint, could not speak.

“Let’s go…” Felt said to the silent Reinhard, tilting her chin up. Reinhard lowered his eyebrows at her words and silently stepped forward to follow her.

“I’m very grateful for your help, Royal Selection Candidate.”

“I’m not sure if you’re being sarcastic or not. What do you care, you pig-nosed bastard? I don’t want to see your face again, and I certainly don’t want anything to do with you ever again,” Felt spat at Doltero, who’d left her with that parting remark, without turning around. With a tug on her arm, she turned to escort Kalifa and Ilya out of the room.

Just before leaving the room, Kalifa stopped in her tracks, turned to Doltero, and bowed her head. As if to show him the sleeping face of the baby in her arms, for the very last time.

“…You, too, will regret it someday,” Old Man Rom said to Doltero as they left.

“No, I won’t.” Doltero’s response was firm and demanded nothing more.

With a sigh, Old Man Rom departed the room.

In the empty chamber, after all the guests had taken their leave, Doltero brought his hand to his face. He looked at his wrinkled palms and closed his eyes. “Ilya,” he whispered, in a voice only audible to himself.

11

“In the end, we didn’t get anything for it, did we…?”

After the whole thing was over and they had returned from Flanders to Astrea Manor, Felt scratched her head in the dilapidated garden of the mansion and let out a sigh. As for the mother and child, what transpired at the headquarters of Black Silver Coin became the truth. Doltero and Ilya were not related.

They were complete strangers. Ilya had become a baby without a father.

Thanks to this, both mother and daughter no longer had to fear for their lives, so it was all the better for them. It was safe to say that nothing bad had happened to them, but rather that some connections had simply gone missing from their lives.

“Still, it’s a feeling that I can’t shake.”

Felt was lost in thought, and beside her, Reinhard was equally pensive. They were the only two people in the garden of the mansion at the moment. Normally, Felt disliked having him tag along, but this time, she turned a blind eye to the fact.

Right now, Felt simply wanted someone to talk to, even if it had to be Reinhard.

“It beats talking to a wall,” she huffed.

“I am honored. It is a privilege to have Your Ladyship confide in me.”

“Quit saying such annoying things…! By the way, Reinhard.” Felt frowned and looked up at him. She recalled the last time she had been stopped by him, just before she ended her conversation with Doltero. He couldn’t say anything. And I couldn’t say anything to him, either.

She was unsure whether they couldn’t say anything because there were no right words at that moment, or they simply were unable to find it. Either way, she remembered that there had been nothing she could say to him.

“Well, I don’t have parents, and you have a messy family situation. We just ain’t the family type, so I guess it was too much for us.”

“I don’t know how to respond when you put it so bluntly.” Reinhard laughed at Felt’s comment, revealing that she hit a sore spot.

Felt knew only a little about his complicated relationship with his parents. She knew his mother had an inexplicable illness and had remained in a state of sleep ever since he was a child. As for his father, she regarded him as the worst kind of human being, to put it mildly. In her actual words, he was a scumbag.

Reinhard had grown up in such a family environment, and the orphaned Felt had been brought up by Old Man Rom. As a result, neither of them was very good with this family stuff.

“But despite being a Sword Saint with no formidable enemies, if you find yourself in a situation that can’t be solved by just beatin’ up your opponent, it’d be a stalemate. Shall we reconsider your title as the ‘best knight’?”

“I admit, the results this time were rather disappointing. I could not be of any help to you, and made you feel I was unworthy of the title of ‘best knight’.”

“Don’t take me seriously, moron. It’s a joke, a joke. I’m not saying I’m happy to be with you. It’s not about that. But as far as being a knight goes, I guess you’ll do for now.”

After chewing out Reinhard for not getting the joke, Felt plopped down on the unkempt lawn and crossed her legs. Reinhard, usually quick to nitpick about soiling her clothing, offered no comment. The two of them simply spent their time together in silence, bathed in the grassy breeze, gazing up at the same sky.

“Just as we were thinking about makin’ a move, feels like we were the ones hit with a blow, don’t ya think?”

“What? I, uh… no, Lady Felt, you see…”

“So, it won’t go like this next time,” Felt said emphatically, fists clenched.

“What?” Reinhard asked, taken aback.

Hearing his stunned reaction, Felt arched her neck back, viewing his face upside down. “You just made a stupid noise; did I say something strange?”

“I didn’t say that. I was just thinking that you might be depressed, my lady."

"Me, depressed? Hey, hey, what the…"

Felt's head snapped back up and she turned her hips around to face him directly. Still on her haunches, she looked up at Reinhard's tall figure and stared into his sunlit countenance.

Felt recognized the shadowy look on the knight's face. "You're the one who's depressed, Reinhard, not me."

"Me?"

"The fact that you are unaware of it is a serious matter. Well, you don't have any experience with losing, do you?" Shaking her head in dismay, Felt stood up and dusted off her bottom. Then she directed her fist at Reinhard's chest, wearing a troubled expression, and gave him a light prod. "Oh, I hit you."

"I didn't feel the need to avoid it. Besides, it's your hand."

"Now, was that part really necessary? And remember this. If you're gonna keep following me from here on out, you're going to have to deal with this kind of defeat more than once."

"…"

"What the hell, man? You didn't really expect me to win all the battles and rise to the throne so easily, did you?"

Reinhard was blindsided by Felt's declaration that he could possibly lose.

Even though she framed her question in a sarcastic tone, Felt was only partially convinced. Reinhard had never considered the possibility of losing. It was not so much his trust in her, but rather his immense confidence in the path he himself tread.

He must have carried a sense of omnipotence where he believed we couldn't possibly lose as long as I was with him. However, even with Reinhard's presence, situations could still arise that were beyond his control. In fact, they were hit with such a situation right after the royal selection had just begun. He was forced to face the disparity between his perceived ideals and the reality before him and was subconsciously experiencing a dissonance between these contradicting worldviews.

“You really are like a little kid sometimes, aren’t you? You’re no different from Ilya.”

“That’s…a bit much, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not too much or too little. I’m sure there’s a lot you don’t realize. Let’s get you into diapers, Reinhard.”

“My lady!” Reinhard got slightly emotional and Felt snorted at his reaction.

She wasn’t necessarily trying to pick a fight; she simply wanted him to be prepared. “Reinhard, what did you want to happen with Ilya?” she asked.

“I…wanted Ilya to be safely reunited with her parents. We believed she had been abandoned by them, but our assumption turned out to be wrong. When it comes to Ilya, both Kalifa…and even Mr. Doltero…”

“Well, Kalifa, sure. But Doltero abandoned Ilya. He tossed her to the side like trash.”

Deep down, Felt herself couldn’t not understand Doltero’s reasoning. His decision to keep the mother and daughter away wasn’t motivated by a desire to protect the Black Silver Coin or his own position.

“But it doesn’t matter to the one who was thrown away whether the reason was protection or abandonment.”

“…”

“He never even said he loved her. Absolutely inexcusable!”

Reinhard fell silent, struck by the anger in Felt’s voice. Despite his complicated family background, he had never experienced abandonment. He was not qualified to interject in the abandoned Felt's words of concern for the similarly abandoned Ilya.

"Ah, shit! This ain't what I wanted to talk about. I'm not saying that not having parents is an instant misfortune. I met Old Man Rom thanks to not having parents," Felt hastily clarified, sounding somewhat embarrassed.

Felt had never known the faces or names of her parents, nor did she particularly care about the reason they abandoned her. If it had been their abandonment that had led to her death, she may have harbored a grudge or two. But fortunately, it was the strongest man in the world who had taken her in.

"If blood is the sole factor that determines familial bonds, then I'd much rather have a family of my own choosing. Even Ilya, whose father is gone, can choose her own family."

If Reinhard's account held any truth, Felt's family may have been part of the royal lineage of the Kingdom of Lugunica. But all the royals were dead. The fact that she could no longer speak to them because of that was no reason for her to deny her blood ties. Even if they had still been alive, she doubted she would have wanted to meet them—not out of ill will, but for entirely positive reasons. She had chosen her family. She was content. There was no need to seek them out. That was all.

"I don't know what that bastard was thinking. Nor do I want Ilya to know."

"But what if Ilya wishes to meet her father someday?"

"Then that's her choice. If she grows up and gets annoyed by my fussing that she shouldn't meet him, then that's her choice too."

She had no intention of embellishing her words by claiming to be an outsider. How Ilya chose to live her life was solely up to Ilya. It was none of Felt's business what Doltero or Kalifa desired for their daughter. Nor was it her business how Ilya would choose to respond. Felt's only concern was ensuring that Ilya could live her life to the fullest from this point forward.

Upon hearing Felt's response, Reinhard once again found himself at a loss for words. Yet, this silence was not born out of surprise or confusion, but rather the result of another emotion. As evidence, he nodded several more times to himself. "Yes, yes," he said. "I am honored, Lady Felt."

"Huh? What? Don't just come outta nowhere with your weird ass comments."

"You just said that what you choose is important."

"Oh, oh, well, yeah. I guess so…"

There was no room for denial. As Felt nodded, Reinhard offered a thin smile and placed his hand over his heart. "It was Your Ladyship who chose me as her knight. I was reflecting on that fact…"

"Eh? Stop making everything about yourself! When the hell did I choose you? You practically forced me into it!"

"I left the decision to you. I am proud to say that, even if it wasn't your true desire at first, it was you, my lady, who chose me."

"Guh, guh, guh…!" Felt grunted, face flushed, at the loquacious knight who responded with such words.

However, Reinhard, haranguing Felt in such a manner, seemed to have returned to his usual demeanor. It appeared he had recovered a bit from his previously despondent state.

"…Hmph. I'm the mistress who declared that you're gonna experience countless defeats from now on. You'll regret becoming my knight soon enough, won't you?"

"I'm confident that will not happen. Based on what occurred with Ilya and Kalifa, I am convinced of that."

Ilya and Kalifa severed ties with Doltero and returned to the mansion with them. Though they were no longer in danger, the life of a single mother with a baby was nonetheless a challenging one. Although it only lasted for a few days, Felt couldn't help but watch their departure down the road, this mother and her baby whom she had reluctantly cared for, as a melancholic dream.

“So,” Reinhard began, “you helped her secure a live-in job at a ranch in Hakuchuri.”

“You’re the one who talked to the ranch,” Felt retorted. “I had no part in it.”

“Then what about the money you gave them?” Reinhard, blocking her escape route with amusement, made Felt give him a genuinely disapproving glance.

It was true that Felt had given Kalifa a sum of money to prepare for her newfound life, as she needed some support to get back on her feet. It just so happened that she possessed a considerable amount of unspent cash on hand, remnants of her plan to climb up the social hierarchy, which terminated upon her unforeseen departure from the slums.

“I hope Ilya finds happiness,” Reinhard expressed to Felt, who turned her face away from him with a pout.

For some reason, it sounded like a fragile hope, and it drove her crazy. “We’re close enough to see them again if we wanted to, jackass,” she huffed.

“Yes, indeed,” Reinhard said, responding to Felt’s profanity with a smile.

After all, this banter was typical of their relationship. Felt, though oblivious to her own feelings, had grown to find comfort in such a relationship. Growing irritated by the silence, she turned her attention to the desolate garden that lay before them. “Not that I care, but look at this garden! Doesn’t it look like crap in such disrepair?”

“Originally, there was a big flower bed here,” Reinhard explained. “My grandmother adored it. However, after the family stopped tending to it, it deteriorated and ended up like this.” Bending down, he parted the patchy grass and revealed the remnants of a brick circle there. It was evident that this space had indeed once been home to a flourishing flower bed, although no trace of its former glory remained.

“Why do flowers die? Why don’t they keep on blooming?” Reinhard mused in a melancholic tone while gazing at the former site of the flower bed.

Felt tilted her head and pondered this, but she quickly recomposed herself. “I don’t know. Isn’t it because they want attention? If they are always blooming beautifully, they will be neglected, right? That’s why they’re always busy blooming and withering. Just like Ilya.”

Reinhard fell silent at Felt’s response.

Felt scratched her cheek absentmindedly, sensing that her words might have unintentionally struck a chord with Reinhard.

“Lady Felt. Do you like flowers?” he asked.

The sudden question caught her off guard. Felt contemplated Reinhard’s question, tracing one of the bricks buried in the ground with her finger. “No, I don’t like them…”

“…”

“Or so I thought, but I never really spent enough time looking at them to say I like or dislike them. So I neither love nor hate them.”

Her response carried an ambivalent tone, in which at that moment, a sudden realization dawned upon her. Before her eyes was a desolate flower bed, devoid of anything save for recollections of the past. So Felt suggested:

“You should make a flower bed here. Then I can decide whether I like flowers or not.”

“Me, flowers?”

“If you want me to like flowers, then grow some beautiful flowers,” Felt selfishly demanded, her posture slightly straight. “Until then, I'm not gonna give you an answer."

It was amusing to picture Reinhard, the gallant knight, tinkering in the dirt at Felt's behest. Such a sight would undoubtedly enhance the landscape of the mansion.

Reinhard was taken aback by the unexpected request.

"What the…? Why do you look so happy?"

"Oh, well… This will be my first attempt at tending a garden, too," Reinhard explained, his restless demeanor indicating newfound possibilities.

Felt widened her eyes at his reaction, followed by a laugh that exposed her fang. "Yeah. Remember to keep that attitude for our next loss," she quipped in response to Reinhard's smiling face, prodding him in the chest. He didn't dodge her fist. "Oh, but I won't give up on winning in the end. Don't make the mistake of thinking that."

"Understood, my lady," he responded. Felt rose from where she sat, noticing Kalifa leaving the mansion. Trailing behind her were the three idiots, carrying large bags and staring adoringly at the nervous Kalifa.

The trio had been assigned to transport the myriads of household goods they had prepared over the past few days for Ilya and Kalifa's new life at the ranch, and they certainly did not seem dissatisfied with their orders.

Flam and Grassis, who had toiled to prepare these goods, cast disheartened glances at the three idiots, while Old Man Rom gently patted the two on the head.

Felt was a little miffed at this sight but quickly set aside her frustration when her eyes met Ilya's, carried on Kalifa's back. Nestled against her mother, Ilya watched Felt and Reinhard standing in the garden with her blue eyes, then broke into a joyous smile as she waved her tiny hand.

Reinhard's words echoed in Felt's mind. "I hope Ilya finds happiness," he'd said. She shared the sentiment and knew precisely how to make that happen. And so, resolving to articulate her thoughts to the baby, this child that she found so similar to herself, she opened her mouth wide, and bellowed with all her might:

"Ilya! Live strong!"

END

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

1

—A young man raced across the hill with desperation.

Out of breath and his body drenched in sweat, the young man continued to run on the dark path without any regard to his appearance. Even with the branches grazing against his cheek and neck, leaving stinging red scratches, he wasn't bothered by it.

At the moment, he was desperate. He was running faster than he had ever ran in his whole life.

If he didn't, he would be caught. He would be caught. Caught by the things that he saw, caught by what caused him to abandon everything in order to escape. —Caught by the faces he knew, but the things he didn't know.

"Damn it, damn it…!"

Frustration and misery spilled from his lips, and bitter tears surfaced on the corners of his eyes. What crossed through his mind is the scenery of his dear old hometown—memories of the place he had just left behind.

It was a rural area with nothing. He didn't like it. That's why he had left the moment he turned fifteen.

Afterwards, he had wandered around from place to place, gaining experience from persevering in the face of adversity, and eventually became an adult. When he finally obtained a place where he could settle down, the thought of his hometown had suddenly occurred to him.

—His parents, who had been against him leaving his hometown until the end. His sibling, who had secretly given him his help during his escape from home. The girl who was his childhood friend, who had expressed regret when he bade her farewell.

How could I have the nerve to think of that after such a long time, he had thought to himself, but his work was going smoothly. He could assume a defiant attitude and return in a triumphant mood. So, for the first time in years, the young man had set out for his hometown.

—And now, he was running in the mountains in midst of the darkness, whilst tasting blood in the back of his throat.

Why did it turn out like this? What in the world could he do about it?

What he only knew, was that he could not leave that place, that area, that hometown all alone.

He could not leave his family, his sibling, and his childhood friend, in such a sickening state—

“Someone, someone has to…!”

Do something. —Keeping that thought in his heart, he continued to run.

In the direction where the sun peeked in from between the mountains, he continued to run.

As if in pursuit of the sun, he continued to run.

2

—The “Sun Princess” of the Barielle domain.

The reason why Priscilla Barielle was admired by her people as such, was because of her nature and ability, as well as her shining beauty without any exaggeration.

Formerly, the governing of the Barielle domain was one that was oppressive towards its people.

Leip Barielle, Priscilla’s husband and the man who died before the days of the Royal Selection, was not exactly incompetent, but he was a coldhearted elderly man who seemed like he had an utter lack of compassion.

Therefore after his death, Priscilla, having taken over his duty of governing the territory, appeared as a savior to the people who were living in hardship. She was the sun itself, lighting up the darkness that they were shrouded in.

That's why, as an indication of reverence, the people admired Priscilla as the Sun Princess.

"—Personally, in the meaning of lacking compassion, it feels like Princess and Leip jii-sama are about the same."

Leaning against the handrail in the corridor that connected two buildings, the man who gazed down at the mansion's entrance hall muttered to himself.

He was someone who had a very eccentric, distinctive appearance.

Lightly dressed in coarse clothes over his reasonably trained body, wearing a type of unusual footwear known as zori, and missing his left arm from below his shoulder. He was what was called a one-armed man. However, what made him stand out even more than the fact that he was one-armed, would be the jet black steel helmet that covered his entire head.

An eccentric outfit, a missing arm, and a helmet that hid his face—it was the person who Priscilla Barielle kept at her side and appointed as the role of a jester, Al.

It sounded like an insult at one glance, but Al himself was pleased with being given the title of a "jester". He preferred it over the position of being Priscilla's first and foremost knight, a position that would surely be the target of gossiping.

It's not that he doesn't like Priscilla. He simply disliked the title of a knight. Knights were good-for-nothings, after all.

Al: "If anything, Princess is always welcome. She doesn't get angry when I stare at her cleavage, and also forgives me for it."

"—Saying those kinds of things again, are you. I can just tell on Mistress~?"

Al: "Whoops."

Al, having been talking to himself, turned around as he heard a teasing voice. Standing behind him was a girl, dressed in the red and white-themed clothes of a servant—

Al: "Oh, it's just you, Yae. You have bad taste, eavesdropping like that on someone who's talking to himself."

Yae: "Though, I regret listening in because it was vulgar."

Al: "What I'm talking about right now is the problem with the eavesdropper's integrity. The topic of my integrity is for another time."

Yae: "Eeh~? You're being unfair~."

Saying that, the girl that reluctantly twisted about was Yae Tenzen —one of the maids that served Priscilla in the Barielle Mansion, and also someone who would be a colleague to Al.

With fair skin, slender limbs, and long red hair that was tied back, she was a beautiful girl, around twenty years old. Also being mischievous, she had eyes that gave the impression of a cat.

As someone that was designated as the Grand Chamberlain by Priscilla, who took a liking to unusual things, she was one of the odd people. A glimpse of her oddness could be seen from how she quickly was able to accept Al's bizarre appearance, and how she could interact with him in a straightforward manner.

Anyway—

Al: "The fellows down there all came here for Princess, right? They never quit, do they?"

While saying that, Al jerked his chin towards the entrance hall downstairs.

There was the sight that Al had been previously gazing down at, which consisted of the people of the domain crowding around the mansion, with the servants having their hands full as they tried to handle the situation.

Thinking normally, swarming around the the mansion of the domain's lord in such large numbers could be considered as an act of an armed uprising, but,

Yae: "The feelings of the people who bring gifts, and the feelings of the people who ask to see her just so that they could greet her… Because Mistress isn't the type of person to disregard these things, I also admire her as well, you see."

Standing next to Al, Yae bragged as she watched what went on downstairs.

Just as she had said, the people who were gathered at the entrance hall were not there out of ill will, but out of respect for Priscilla. As a matter of fact, the entrance of the mansion was lined with gifts that were delivered from all over the domain, and requests for an audience with Priscilla were flowing in endlessly.

If the mansion of a person in power was accessible to the masses like that, it would inevitably sow the seeds of trouble. That was why the response towards the people who enter the mansion needed to be handled carefully—

Al: "Despite all that, what's you, the Grand Chamberlain's intention of not handling the situation? In the name and for the safety of Princess, who you admire so much, isn't this the part where you should be working your butt off?"

Yae: "But they keep coming one after another, and it doesn't look like there's an end to it. Also, Yae-chan only wants to work for the amount that she gets paid for. Also, it could be a good opportunity for the other maids to grow more professional?"

Al: "Which one's the truth, really? What a cunning maid…"

This was exactly what would be things said in the same breath.

Seeing Yae's unabashed attitude on display as she stuck her tongue out, Al placed his finger on the welded part of his helmet, fiddling with the metal fittings and causing it to clang.

It was a habit of his when he was thinking about something, but he found that he had been touching his helmet more often than he usually did. Al was aware that he was being nervous, as the Royal Selection had officially begun.

Al: "Putting someone off their stride and playing with them is my specialty, but these days it's me who's being put off his stride, and it doesn't feel good."

Yae: "Right, you're quite an honest person aside from his appearance. It's helpful because you're easy to interact with."

Al: "By that, you mean I'm easy to tease, right?"

Yae: "—? Is there a difference between the two?"

Al: "It's scary that you think there's no difference."

As Yae tilted her head to the side to indicate her curiosity, Al shrugged his shoulders with a shake of his head.

However, it was somewhat of a surprise that he had been evaluated as an honest person, aside from his appearance. Keeping the fact that he was serving Priscilla in mind, it was difficult to accept it as a compliment. The parts of a human that the crimson girl saw value in were all ephemeral and ambiguous to the extreme.

She wouldn't necessarily not cut his head off the moment she deemed Al as boring.

Yae: "Even so, I think you're making light of Mistress a little too much."

Al: "For Princess, being scared of her is just about right. —Hm?"

It was right after Yae saw through his inner thoughts despite being unable to see his facial expression, and his response to what she said about it. The area downstairs became abruptly loud, and Al's attention became focused on the entrance hall once again.

As he wondered what the matter was about, the sight of a young man pushing his way through the line of the people caught his eye. Covered in sweat and coated in mud, he could tell that the young man was unclean at a glance.

Since this was the mansion of the lord of the domain, the people were all dressed appropriately. That is the bare minimum of consideration that they are able to show, and the young man doesn't have it. Namely—

Al: "Unless he's a huge idiot or lacks common sense…"

Yae: "It's probably about something urgent that he needs to talk about, if he's in such a hurry~."

Replying in an easygoing manner, Yae stroked her own hair whilst narrowing her coal black eyes. In that moment, seeing that the air of nonchalance around her had vanished, Al unconsciously touched the metal fittings of his helmet.

Then, the ragged-looking young man arrived in front of a maid, and cried out,

Young man: "Please, let me meet the lord of the mansion… My home, my hometown is being swarmed by living corpses!!"

The young man's shout rang across the entire area, and silence instantaneously reigned over the bustling entrance hall. In the midst of it, the young man dropped to his knees, gasping for breath, and the tears that he could not hold back any further started falling onto the floor.

Seeing the young man collapsed on the ground, as well as the droplets that rolled down his cheeks,

Yae: "—It seems like this is the type of request that Mistress is fond of."

Al: "…I'll call Princess over."

Like that, against Yae who had an unreadable smile on her face, Al let the clasp of his helmet make a metallic clang.

3

“It… it was four days ago when I returned to my hometown. At first, because it had been a few years since I’ve returned home, I thought that was why my family was being distant towards me.”

Little by little, the young man, kneeling on the ground, started talking about what had happened to himself.

The place he was currently at was not the entrance hall, but the large hall that was recently being increasingly used for audiences with the people of the domain. Inside the room in which the floor was completely covered by a scarlet carpet, were the members of the Barielle domain’s private army, the Crimson Battlefront. Each of them sported radiantly red equipment, and were lined up by the left and right walls of the room.

“…”

In the hall that was dominated by the color of red, a girl, wearing a blazing red dress, was seated on top of a luxurious chair. It was the person that the color red suited the most in this mansion, Priscilla Barielle herself.

While being exposed to Priscilla’s blood red gaze, the young man who came over to make a request was trying his best to explain the situation, continuing to speak falteringly.

Young man: “What I thought as strange, was the unnaturalness of the responses I got from them. Our conversations were inconsistent, and they were speaking about things that didn’t match up with my memories.”

Al: “So you’re saying that it can’t be dismissed as forgetfulness. But, calling them living corpses because of that seems kinda wild.”

Like that, the one who poked at the young man’s explanation, was the only person concerned with the mansion who wasn’t wearing the color red, Al.

Including the Crimson Battlefront that was standing at attention, the Grand Chamberlain Yae who stood behind Priscilla, and the young attendant who stood next to Priscilla, Schult—whose crimson eyes had gained her favor, every person concerned with the large hall were donning "red" in a characteristic manner.

Among them, Al's existence was an anomaly, having the appearance of a person who didn't belong there. Apparently, the young man had gotten the impression of that from Al, as he directed a questioning look towards him.

Young man: "O-Of course, that isn't just the cause of it. I saw a… crucial moment…"

Al: "Right, a crucial moment. What did you see?"

Young man: "That, is…"

The color draining from his face, the young man's gaze wandered around the hall upon being asked to elaborate. That was the expression of someone who was frightened by the memories in his own head, his body seized up with fear. Gasping out wordless breaths through his dried lips, the young man was unable to deliver his next words.

Or, it was a reaction that was capable of withering his love for his hometown, along with his words.

However—

Priscilla: "—Do not fall silent there, commoner."

Said Priscilla with a glare towards the petrified young man, who came close to stopping himself from speaking. His shoulders were trembling from the callous tone of her voice.

Priscilla: "Shall you lose to your cowardice, your lips shall never move again. Enough of your conceitedness, seeking to depend on my mercy like that is utterly preposterous."

Young man: "Ah…"

Fierce words that were without a speck of kindness burnt the young man's cowering heart with its scorching heat. The next moment, seeing the gale that raged through his heart and the pitiful manifestation of his disappointment, Al harbored a sense of sympathy for the young man.

So, Al shrugged his shoulders towards Priscilla, and called over to her with "Princess,"

Al: "Don't add insult to injury when he's this weakened. You can always put it another way, you know?"

Priscilla: "There is no 'another way' to put it. There is only the truth. —Listen, commoner."

Sniffing disdainfully at Al who tried to advise her on the matter, Priscilla crossed her arms in a way that put emphasis on her bountiful chest. Just like that, as she pierced through the rigid young man with her gaze,

Priscilla: "If you shall keep your silence, the risk you took whilst you ran day and night, and the regret you hold for your hometown that drove you to the point of doing so, shall all come to naught. Ask your heart if that is acceptable."

Young man: "…"

Priscilla: "What, it is the hometown that you had abandoned once. Thinking no more of it for once and for all, and continuing to live your life could be considered as one decision. Whether that is to be referred to as wise, or referred to as cowardly is not my problem."

Keeping the fierceness of her words, Priscilla unhesitatingly scorched the young man's heart into a burnt field. She didn't mind, even if it only left behind a pile of ash as a result.

However, having received her smoldering words, the young man pushed open his eyes.

Priscilla: "—So, what will you do? Are you a coward?"

Young man: "…A coward, I am. I'm not wise, either. But, I won't be a dastard.”

Against the question that was asked, the young man answered as he raised his head. As if she knew the answer from the very beginning, Priscilla showed her acceptance of it with a generous nod.

As a result, Al’s words were used as a stepping stone, and it made him feel like there was an itch in his stomach.

That was why the impish grin that Yae was giving him provoked his annoyance. In comparison, Schult, who stood by Priscilla with a nervous look on his face, appeared more charming than that.

Young man: “During the night on the day I returned home, I couldn’t sleep because the feeling that something was wrong was acting like a sore. Without even having a meal together with my family, I was laying down in my room…then, I noticed someone leaving the house. It was as if they didn’t want to be seen, so I became curious and chased after them, and…”

With an expression that projected his resolve, the young man resumed his explanation. Then, after a brief moment of hesitation, he let out the decisive words that cemented the issue in place.

Young man: “—I saw villagers, with limbs that were falling apart, sewing them back together.”

“…”

Young man: “At first, I thought I had mistaken it for something else, but that wasn’t it. They were trying to stick their rotting arms and feet back on to their bodies, trying to restore it to the way it was before. I… saw it going on.”

Seeing something that shouldn’t have been seen. In a story, there was only one path towards the end that was waiting for a witness like that. However, the young man had gone against the laws of storytelling, and was somehow able to escape from where it had all occurred.

Young man: “I stepped on a twig, and they found me. But, I ran for my life and managed to get away, using the passage that led towards the mountains from the back of my house. Then, I kept running and running…”

And just like that, he had come to ask for Priscilla, the lord of the domain’s help while completely out of breath.

Yae: “Say, where did the topic of living corpses come from? Are you saying that they called themselves that?”

Young man: “…Long ago, there was the story of dead bodies moving around and attacking people near my hometown. Because of that, when parents would scold their children, they warned them that the living corpses were coming. That’s why,”

Yae: “—What you thought was a superstition actually showed up. You came to that conclusion, I see~.”

By calmly pointing out the steps that the young man’s conclusion skipped over, Yae added supplementary information to it. Once that was done, she casted a glance at Priscilla’s face from the side, before closing her mouth. Similarly, Al said nothing.

They understood that Priscilla must be the one to decide on what to do with the young man’s appeal.

Nonetheless, there was someone present in the room, someone that was unable to take on a rational point of view like them.

Schult: “Priscilla-sama…”

Calling for his master with a feeble voice, the one who focused his watering eyes on her was Schult. The young, kind-hearted boy was sympathizing with the words of the sorrowful young man, seeking mercy from Priscilla.

That was a request that could incur Priscilla’s displeasure, and bore the danger of receiving judgement for it.

However, when Priscilla looked at Schult, she slid her fingers in between the locks of his pink hair, caressing him. She caressed him, and said nothing. Just with that one action, a relieved expression appeared on Schult’s face.

Priscilla: "—And then, what do you desire from me? You have informed me that your hometown has been swarmed by living corpses, and have delivered the report of an ongoing crisis. What do you seek in return?"

Young man: "Please, take back my hometown…no,"

Biting his lip, the young man shook his head. He had attempted to seek hope in Priscilla's question, and realized of his own accord that it was a plea that lacked reality.

Priscilla wasn't the type of person who would try to grant a hopeless wish. At the moment, the answer that she was looking for wasn't an intangible pipe dream.

—What already happened can never be changed. No matter what or who, it was an act of pride that could never be forgiven.

So, the young man did not ask for her to save them.

Young man: "Please, destroy the living corpses. My hometown… my family, my sibling, my childhood friend… Please put them to rest. —I ask of you."

Lowering his head, the young man spoke of his wish, one that was sorrowful but required determination in order to be said.

"…"

Hearing it, what sort of answer will Priscilla return? Peeking at his master from the inside of his metal helmet, Al already knew with a single glance. Everyone inside the room who served her understood as well.

It was because Priscilla had sadistically loosened the corners of her red lips, putting on a smile of satisfaction.

4

The young man's hometown, Coffleton, was one of desolate villages that were located at the southernmost area of the Barielle domain.

True to the words of the young man, who had said that he became tired of how empty it was, the village had no distinctive features. The preconditions were also different from

Ladrima, another village that Priscilla had visited in the past.

During that time, Priscilla had been after Ladrima's specialty, which were bright red flowers that were known as Kurenai. However, unlike Ladrima, Coffleton didn't have a single alluring aspect to it.

So, as one of the strange incidents that were commonplace within the domain, it could have been easily dealt with just by sending a part of the Crimson Battlefront, but—

Al: "I wonder why it turned into a visit from Princess herself, yet again."

Inside the dragon carriage that was being pulled by a scarlet Earth Dragon, Al grumbled as he looked up at the extravagant interior.

Under the effect of the "Divine Protection of Wind Evasion", the carriage was exceedingly cozy due to it neither feeling the wind, nor shaking from the speed it was running at. Provided that Al wasn't very enthusiastic about the trip, a road with no inconveniences was extremely inconvenient to him.

In front of Al, who had rather strong feelings towards the trip, Priscilla closed one of her eyes with a "What,"

Priscilla: "Are you dissatisfied with my decision? Quite a recklessly daring one you are, Al."

Al: "Why does one complaint make me be treated as a reckless person? Aren't I being treated harshly these days?"

Priscilla: "Fool. My view on everything is always just. If you feel that you are being treated as such, then that is because your services only amount to it. Shifting the blame on to me… Now, that is the height of idiocy."

Elegantly re-crossing her long legs, Priscilla covered her mouth with the fan that she pulled out from her cleavage. Waving his hand at the gesture with a “Sure, sure,”

Al: “Actually, doesn’t having the lord of the domain herself come over, without even bringing her private army seem like a bad move? Well, if we’re against ordinary villagers, then they might grovel in front of your authority. But, from what we’ve heard, we’re against zombies, right? I wonder if exercising power over those sponge-brained people will really work?”

Priscilla: “Once again, you have used words that I do not know of. What do you mean by ‘zombie’ and ‘sponge’?”

Al: “Ah, dead bodies that walk around are called zombies. A sponge is… how to put it, an item you use when washing the dishes. To put it simply, I meant that it’s all dry and crappy.”

Priscilla: “Huh. Setting aside ‘sponge’, I like the sound of ‘zombie’.”

Loosening the corners of her lips in a good mood, Priscilla narrowed her blood red eyes.

Priscilla: “So, you were saying why I opted to visit the place. Can you not imagine why?”

Al: “The only reason I can think of is because you found it interesting. Is there a different reason?”

Priscilla: “Perhaps. Indeed, the reason that comes first is because I found it interesting. —However, that is not the only reason. Until the issue is resolved, you shall gauge my intentions. If you are not able to obtain an answer before it is resolved, expect your treatment to become worse.”

Al: “What’s that, a quiz? If a penalty for it exists, then I would like it if there’s a reward as well.”

Priscilla: “How rapacious. Fine, then. When you have successfully ascertained my intentions, I shall let you lick my feet.”

Al: “Is that your latest trend or something, Princess? I’m starting to wonder if I should really lick your feet.”

Is that a reward or a penalty? It would be a reward for those with peculiar interests, but fundamentally, it would be a type of punishment. Though, if he thought of it as being able to be near Priscilla's feet, then Al could try his best to picture it as a reward.

"Er~, I apologize for having to interrupt the suggestive conversation between you both, but…"

Like that, there was the voice that hesitatingly wedged itself between the exchange between Al and Priscilla. The voice came from Yae, seated next to Priscilla inside of the carriage during the whole time.

Raising her hand slightly, she put on a flippant smile and tilted her head in a blandishing manner.

Yae: "Why have you taken me with you? Usually, you would have a flower on each arm with Schult-chan and Al-sama… One is a carnivorous plant, but it would be like that under normal circumstances."

Al: "A carnivorous plant… No, there's still the possibility that Schult-chan could be that one, although just barely…"

Yae: "Ah, of course you're the carnivorous plant. I gave you a gentle and lenient rating."

Al: "Right…"

While his shoulders were sagging from Yae's merciless evaluation of him, Al inwardly had the same doubts that she held.

This time, Priscilla did not bring Schult with her on the trip to Coffleton. It was a rare thing for her to do, as she usually had him follow her around wherever she went.

It was the first time that she brought Yae from the mansion instead of Schult.

Yae: "To begin with, I was only hired by Master… although he is now deceased, I was hired by him as a waiting maid of the mansion, in order to serve Mistress. My situation right now kind of feels like working outside of what I was contracted to do…?”

Priscilla: “In other words, what? Are you saying that you wish to resign, because you have received treatment that is unfitting of your terms of employment?”

Yae: “I never said that much~. It’s just that I prefer to not work outside of my hours and contract from my standpoint, so if that was to be imposed on me no matter what…”

Priscilla: “You would like to be granted a reward befitting that, yes? Do not be worried. I reward the efforts of the common people. After all, it was my decision to have you accompany me. —You think that I would deceive you?”

“…”

For a moment, the air inside the carriage smelled as if it was being burnt, and Al stiffened his body in response. Intimidated by Priscilla’s low voice, Yae’s cheeks hardened slightly as well.

However, Yae immediately returned to her usual self, placing both of her hands on her cheeks, and,

Yae: “Not at all! No way, no way! Surely not! How foolhardy it is to doubt you! All I did was state my position. If you say so, then there’s no problem. I am your faithful dog. I will gladly water your precious flowers, as well as your carnivorous plants~.”

Al: “Just saying, but if you don’t properly feed bugs to carnivorous plants, there’s research data stating that they’ll be evidently weaker than if you only gave them water…”

Priscilla: “Cease your interference, Al. There is no current need for your knowledge of carnivorous plants. Well then, Yae. If you had a change of heart, you shall show that with your actions. —As for Coffleton, what about it?”

Reproving the grumbling Al, Priscilla threw over a broad question towards Yae. Then, Yae grabbed a bundle of her red hair, and while tickling the ends of it against her lips, Yae: “Eh~, there isn’t information in particular that I can give you. Ah, the man who informed you about the living corpses is Array Denkuts. He’s the second son of Charon Denkuts and Monet Denkuts, and the eldest son is Riddle Denkuts… Hmm, maybe that’s all~. There isn’t anything remarkable about the village, so~?”

“I’m sorry that I could not be of any help to you,” she added as an apology, but what she said was worthy enough of astonishment. Of course, it wasn’t as if she made an arbitrary statement. It was all based on the truth.

In every town and village within the domain, surveys were held in order to grasp the number of residents, as well as their names. Naturally, those records would be delivered to the lord of the domain, Priscilla. However, Yae, the Grand Chamberlain, had readily breathed out the needed information as if she knew it all.

Those that are competent would be used accordingly. —She was a mysterious girl, but that was why Priscilla had given her a position that required responsibility.

Yae: “—Ah, it looks like we arrived~.”

Once the conversation came to an end, the dragon carriage gradually came to a stop. When the driver, who was holding the reins, opened the door of the carriage respectfully, a cool breeze greeted the three’s visitation.

Then, there was nothing else that was decent enough to be called a welcome.

Al: “…As far as I can see, there’s nothing but farms and fields.”

Yae: “Because it’s that kind of place. There’re only eighty-eight villagers, and it’s narrower than the mansion… more like narrower than the grounds of the mansion.”

Gazing down at the village from the top of a hill, Al and Yae exchanged their impressions of the scenery of the rural area.

It sounded nice if it was proclaimed as verdant and pastoral, but a single glance at it was enough for those looking at it to perceive it as a desolate village, a place that was too monotonous for the young people. It was understandable why the young man had abandoned his hometown.

Al: “There are so few houses, and they’re tiny and arranged close to each other. But…”

Pausing mid-sentence, Al observed the village from a distance. It was relatively far, but the village’s activities of daily life could still be seen from where he was. Smoke drifted into the air from where they were cooking their meals, and there were people who were walking around the village.

A rumor such as it being occupied by living corpses, seemed terribly contradictory to what it looked like.

Al: “Though, it looks like a normal village right now. The zombies that I imagine don’t seem like they would cook or do the laundry like that.”

Yae: “Forty years ago, the corpse soldiers that raged through the Kingdom of Lugunica were apparently not in a state where they could live an ordinary life. While their bodies continued to rot, the only thing they did was to keep attacking the living. But, corpse soldiers of strong people were said to have been strong as when they were alive.”

Receiving Al’s words, Yae replied with the knowledge that she had garnered from picking up bits and pieces of it. Either way, being bossed around even after death sounded like a horrifying thing to experience.

Al: “Well, it could be worse, because at least they get to die. If their mind stopped working, then they probably wouldn’t be aware of their misfortune, so.”

Yae: “That’s quite the funny assumption you have there~.”

As Al touched the metal fittings of his helmet while in deep thought, Yae directed a jeer at him. Without answering to it, in order to figure out what they were doing next, Al turned to Priscilla who stayed silent the entire time.

Al: “There’s the possibility that the young man who came to the mansion might’ve been out of his mind. Maybe we should’ve investigated him instead… Princess?”

Priscilla: “…”

There was no response to his call, and Priscilla remained silent as she stared at the desolate village below. However, what dwelled in those blood red eyes was intense loathing, and a rage that had developed into shimmering flames.

Her emotions had been lit ablaze by her convictions, something that was obviously different from what Al and Yae were feeling.

Priscilla: “I could care less about who they are or where they are from, but to induce disorder beneath me in this manner…”

Curling her lip, Priscilla left those words as she promptly started walking. Seeing her walk with an unwavering gait made Al and Yae take a moment to register it, before they hurried to catch up to her.

Al: “Hey, Princess! I understand that you’re flipping mad, but why so sudden?!”

Priscilla: “You shall understand if you look. You shall scent if you smell. If you strain your ears, you shall hear the degenerates that are manipulating their strings, playing with dolls. —All of that, shall I deem as an act of insolence against me.”

Al: “Everything doesn’t make any sense!”

Priscilla’s way of speaking was hard to understand, and it took time for Al to simplify her words inside of his head. And now, Priscilla was walking very quickly, so she wasn’t giving him enough time to do so.

Descending from the hill with a confident air, Priscilla entered Coffleton, the village in question without a single falter in her steps. Noticing Priscilla and her two companions, the man who stood at the entrance of the village raised his brows.

Man: “Oh, how rare it is to have visitors from the outside. With a dress like that, what did you come to the village for—”

Priscilla: “Silence.”

Raising his hand lightly, the man who had spoken to them in a friendly tone opened his eyes wide.

The next moment, with the crimson treasured sword that Priscilla drew out from empty space, the man was cut down diagonally from the shoulder.

Man: “—kh,”

A short cry escaped the man, and his body was enveloped in flames soon after.

—The Yang Sword that Priscilla possessed, was one enhanced sword that incinerated everything it slashed. Remaining alight, the flames of hell would ignite the very existence of those that it came into contact with, until nothing but ashes were left.

As if to prove that, the man’s body was transformed into cinders, and—

Al: “Whoa, whoa, whoa?! What the hell?! Burning the first villager to death?!”

Yae: “To be exact, I think he was slashed to death, but it seems like it doesn’t really matter no matter which one it is. Eeh~.”

Witnessing the act of violence that occurred right in front of them, even Al and Yae were unable to hide their bewilderment. However, without so much as a glance towards the bafflement of her companions, Priscilla sniffed disdainfully at the blackened corpse of the man.

Priscilla: “A ‘zombie’ shall not speak to me so unceremoniously. I grant my protection to the people, however, it is not as cheap for me to grant it to a counterfeit such as yourself. Know your place.”

Al: “But he was talking, and he also had a sociable smile! Is he really a zombie?!”

At the very least, Al viewed the man that was burnt to death as a human. To add to that, he had categorized the man as a friendly human, so it could only be described as a tragedy for him to be killed like that without question.

Yae: “I’m going to repeat that I think he was slashed to death… Ah, the other villagers…”

Next to Al who held his head in his hands, Yae’s cheeks twitched as she looked around. Surrounding the three were the villagers who were murmuring amongst themselves, having shown themselves after noticing the presence of the unfamiliar visitors.

Priscilla had made incredibly quick work of the man, so they hadn’t caught sight of the fate of the first villager. Though, there was a human-shaped chunk of ash lying around, so it was only a matter of time until they comprehended what had gone down.

Yae: “U~h, everyone, this is…”

In order to find a way to say something that would gloss over the situation, Yae racked her brains for an excuse. —However, Al had understood Priscilla more so than her, at least by a small margin of half a step.

Al: “Princ—”

Priscilla: “Hmph.”

Even with half a step, he was unable to come close to Priscilla, who was already far ahead of him.

“…”

The villagers had sealed their fate the moment they came by defenselessly. With a ruthless flash of Priscilla’s Yang Sword, the small elderly man that stood at the front was mowed down, bursting into a blazing fire soon after.

“Ah… AAAAAAAHHH—!!”

Beholding the abrupt display of murder just before their eyes, the villagers plunged into a state of panic. However, the scream immediately quieted down. The man who let it loose had been decapitated, his scream cut off.

Priscilla: “See, Al. The man had given an accurate report.”

Al: “What’s accurate?! Right now in progressive form, I can’t think of this as anything else other than a scene where the higher-up, who made a wrong decision, loses their mind and goes around shutting people up!”

Priscilla: “—For what reason, is there not a single woman nor child present at this place? Where is the reason for us to be encircled by nothing but well-built men?”

Twirling her crimson sword in her hand, Priscilla shoved the tip of the blade against the chest of the headless man. Naturally, with the impact of being pushed backwards focused on its upper area, the body—did not topple over.

The reason why there was no blood coming out of the surface of the severed neck, was because the Yang Sword had cauterized the wounds that it created, but that wasn't all there was to it. — Wriggling a part of itself, the headless body attempted to lay its hands on Priscilla.

Al: "—tch!"

Clicking his tongue, Al forcefully tackled the headless man. Without his head, the man was easily sent flying, but he repositioned himself by landing on the ground with his hands and feet.

Al: "Yuck."

Looking squarely at the surface of the severed neck, Al voiced his disgust at the nauseating sight.

Squirming around at the man's wound, were tentacles that resembled the countless roots of a plant. Like weeds that danced around underwater, the writhing appendages prevented Al from making a move, and lunged at him—not before combusting.

Priscilla: "Do not think that you will remain safe, when you have made physical contact with the edge of the Yang Sword. Burn to ashes, counterfeit."

In front of Priscilla who had spat those words at him, the man let out a muted cry of death as he disintegrated into a pile of cinders. In the meantime, the surrounding villagers did not run away, but were staring at the "foreign enemy" with eyes devoid of human emotion.

Registering that Priscilla's intuition was unquestionably correct, Al unsheathed his Blue Dragon Sword from the back of his waist.

Al: "Dammit, those really are zombies! Stay back, Princess!"

Priscilla: "Hm, I shall leave it to you. I have had enough of these begrimed filth entering my field of vision.”

Al: “Eh? Are you serious?”

While trying to look good, his expectations of Priscilla helping him to get rid of the zombies were tossed out of the window.

Once Priscilla actually put her sword away into the sky, she patted Al on the shoulder and stood behind his back. Like that, Al was dealing with more than thirty expressionless living corpses—.

Al: “I’m gonna die from this, aren’t I?”

Yae: “Hey! Al-sama is so cool! This is where you should show us your manliness! If you were to be extravagantly bitten to death, I’ll tell Schult-chan that you died nobly~!”

Al: “Stop messing around and help me!”

Yae: “Ehh?”

Assuming a stance with his Blue Dragon Sword, Al barked at the Grand Chamberlain that was cheering him on halfheartedly. As if on cue, the man at the front holding a farming tool took a swing at Al with it.

Then, a black blade penetrated straight through the man’s forehead.

“…”

The man halted his steps, his neck rearing backwards from the force. However, his head bounced back like a spring, and he resumed his action of trying to land a hit on Al with his farming tool.

Hacking off both of the man’s arms with the Blue Dragon Sword, Al immediately cleaved through his neck, torso, and knees with a returning strike.

Al: “Finally, one down… after doing this much!”

Yae: “Wah, I’m already feeling overwhelmed. Aren’t my skills too ineffective against these energetic people?”

After Al finally silenced one zombie whilst breathing heavily, Yae directed a pout towards him. A black knife—the same kunai that was sticking up in the man’s forehead, was held firmly in her hand.

Kunai were daggers that were unique to the west, and she had many more weapons that were hidden under her red maid uniform. Hence, her true worth as Priscilla’s maid was her ability to fight.

It couldn’t be helped that one would be complaining over the current circumstances. Yae’s style of fighting consisted of attacking vital spots after ambushing the opponent, which was completely ineffective against zombies, as neither their heads nor hearts served as proper weak points.

Al: “Princess! Hey, Princess!”

Priscilla: “Do not chatter as if you were a bird. You are degrading my preeminence. If you are my attendant, you shall remain dignified.”

Al: “Can’t you see for yourself with those pretty eyes? I’m gonna die from this, hey!”

While vocalizing his complaints, Al went on to cut down one, then two zombies, making his way through in the midst of the enemy whilst being prepared to die.

Trying to pass through the zombified villagers, who were attacking him all at once, felt like he was trying to search for a way out of a fatal situation. Even so, it was only a matter of time until he was overpowered by the difference in numbers.

And yet, Priscilla seemed to enjoy watching Al’s desperate struggle, and—

Yae: “Al-sama, do your be~st. The only thing I can also do is to cheer you on.”

Al: “Shut up!”

For some reason, Yae was throwing words of encouragement at him as if she had nothing to do with it, so Al yelled at her to cut it out.

With two people who weren't facing the situation properly behind his back, Al's unprecedented fierce battle went on.

It was after several tens of seconds that Priscilla drew out her Yang Sword once again, in order to save Al, who was actually about to die.

5

Al: "Still, to think that it was a zombie village for real…"

Muttering to himself, Al used his foot to turn over the corpse of the villager that he had cut down. The face the villager made was far from a peaceful one, but all he could do was pray for him.

Because, unlike regular bodies that fell victim to bladed weapons, the body that laid in front of him was in a gruesome condition, covered in deep gashes and having been hacked into pieces.

The damaging of a corpse to this extent, which one would suspect that a lunatic was responsible for, was definitely not a common sight. Without doubt, Al did not intend to chop the villager up, and he had the excuse that he did it out of necessity.

Al: "To begin with, there's ten times the amount of burnt bodies compared to bodies that were slashed apart, so I don't even need an excuse for that."

Al said, looking around at his surroundings to find that there were piles of burnt bodies all over the place.

While fighting back against the wave of villagers, the body count had eventually climbed up to fifty—but, ninety percent of it were burnt bodies, and the number of villagers that Al cut down ended up amounting to close to nothing. During the middle phase of the battle, Al was only able to cheer for Priscilla's crimson sword dance together with Yae.

That was the most optimal solution, as the villagers that were turned into living corpses had an abnormal amount of vitality, and they were moving around freely even after their weak points, such as their necks and hearts, were crushed. By chance, the zombies were defenseless against the flames of the Yang Sword, and killing them in any other way required the cruelty of chopping them up.

Their abnormal vitality, and how they looked like when they were burnt into a crisp. They were increasingly becoming similar to the zombies that Al knew of, even having similar characteristics. Furthermore, labeling them as parasites sounded like it would fit them more, rather than simply referring to them as zombies, but—

Al: “I’ll call them zombies so that it’s easier to understand… Anyway, true to Princess’s observation, there aren’t any zombies of women and children. Unless they’re secretly made into food inside the village…”

Yae: “Please stop thinking of scary things like that~. Believe it, I went looking for them properly.”

While Al was comparing the faces of the blackened corpses with what was inside of his memories, Yae, who left to check out the village by herself, came back after being done with it. She made a grimace at the words that Al muttered out, then gestured behind her back with a hand.

Standing there were the women and children, who were all likely to be residents of Coffleton.

Yae: “During the day, each one of them were apparently made to stay inside of the sheds and warehouses of their houses. According to them, monsters that looked exactly like their family were forcing them to keep living normally…”

Al: “That’s…”

To be honest, that was a rather disturbing demand to make. Even if the zombies were identical to the family members of the villagers, what was inside them would still be entirely different. To add to that, they had ordered the remaining villagers to act like everything was the same. —Al could only think, “Are you in any position to make those demands?”

However, all the villagers could do was to obey. To make matters worse, because the zombies’ limbs were falling apart, they were also forced to sew them back on.

Al: “I thought I was pretty resistant against these kinds of topics, but yeah.”

Yae: “I can’t see your face because of your helmet, but I can’t work in an environment where my co-workers could look at this without batting an eye, because it’s too scary. So, it’s alright even if you’re afraid, Al-sama.”

Al: “It’s not like I was afraid. Though, it is a horrifying thing.”

Whilst smiling, Yae uttered something that sounded like she was trying to console Al, who cracked his neck in response. Like that, Yae directed a stare at him that said “What do we do?”, indicating the question of how they were going to deal with the villagers.

What Yae was concerned about, was how they were going to inform the villagers of the fates of their family members. On top of being turned into zombies, they were charred into piles of ashes. Did Al and Yae ought to tell them the truth?

Having encountered a difficult problem that he hadn’t really imagined happening in his life, Al wordlessly fiddled with the metal fittings of his helmet, but—

“—I see. So, those are the survivors of the village.”

Priscilla, who had returned to the dragon carriage that was left on top of the hill, came walking in. As she fixed her gaze on the survivors, Al hastily grabbed her shoulder with a “Princess,”

Al: “I know how you feel. But, bear with it. If we tell them that you gleefully disposed of the guys, the women and children will go into a frenzy, and we’re going to end up having around twenty more burnt corpses.”

Priscilla: “Who do you think I am? Do you believe that I, to the wives who have lost their husbands, to the children who have lost their fathers, and to the sisters who have lost their brothers, would thrust the truth in front of them and laugh about it?”

Al: “…”

Truth be told, he really thought that she would, but he swallowed back his words before they came out of his mouth.

In the meantime, Priscilla moved towards the survivors of the village. In front of them was a girl who stood aimlessly, glancing at Priscilla and mustering up the courage to ask,

Girl: “Um… is Array safe?”

Al: “Array…?”

Yae: “He’s the man who came over to the mansion to give a report about this. Array Denkuts.”

As Al tilted his head at the name of the person that the girl asked about, Yae reminded him about it by whispering into his ear. That was the name he had heard while he was in the dragon carriage, still on his way to Coffleton. If the girl was that worried for the safety of the young man, then—

Priscilla: “Certainly. Are you the one who let that one escape from the village?”

Girl: “…All I did was distract the imposters. But, I’m glad that he’s safe.”

Breathing out a sigh, the girl appeared relieved from the bottom of her heart to hear of Array’s safety. She was genuinely worried, to the point that she was willing to tread on dangerous ground for him.

However, as a result, the girl’s actions had ended up informing Priscilla of the surreptitious invasion of the living corpses.

Priscilla: “I shall grant you a reward. Come.”

Girl: “Eh, ah… yes…”

Approving the contributions of the girl, Priscilla beckoned the girl to come closer. While showing her puzzlement from being addressed in such a pontifical manner, the girl took one step towards Priscilla—

Priscilla: “Do not bite down.”

Girl: “—h?!”

The next moment, without hesitating even for a second, Priscilla stole the girl’s lips.

Their first meeting, with no explanation, and between two women —jumping over those factors with a single breath, the villagers at the back were taken aback by Priscilla’s sudden move, one that could be considered as violence if looked at from a different angle. Of course, they weren’t the only ones who were flabbergasted.

Al: “Hey, hey, hey, hey! What the heck is going on?!”

Yae: “—hk! Al-sama!”

Al: “Yeah?! What…wait, whoa?!”

As Al looked to have a debate on what the definition of a reward was, Yae called out to him. Right after he knitted his brows from the call of his name, Priscilla let go of the girl’s lips.

—Whilst biting down on a grotesque tentacle with her teeth.

“…”

Immediately, Priscilla dragged the appendage out of the girl’s body. About one meter long, the tentacle thrashed around, attempting to slam the razor sharp tip of its body against Priscilla—

Al: “Oraaagh!”

But, it was blocked by Al's Blue Dragon Sword. With one strike, the tentacle that appeared as thick as the roots of a tree was halved without difficulty, and it started wildly tossing around on the ground. Like a fish out of water, it seemed as if the tentacle was desperately struggling to survive.

Priscilla: “However, you are not deserving of life.”

With those words, the thrashing tentacle was lit ablaze by her treasured sword. In a similar fashion as the zombified villagers, the appendages fell still the moment it was burnt into a crisp.

Al: “So, this is the essence of the zombies. They're parasites… no, parasitic creatures?”

Al gulped as he saw the ashes of the tentacles that laid on the ground, feeling repulsed by the sight of it.

He recalled the foreign substance that was crawling around on the severed surface of the headless man from earlier. It meant that the same things that were inside the zombified men, were also rooted inside of the women and children.

However, the girl hadn't turned into a zombie. What was the difference between them?

Yae: “It might depend on their constitution, or their blood~. Or, simpler than that, maybe they just can't control the bodies of women and children?”

Priscilla: “Nevertheless, perhaps they prey on them in order to rise up onto land. —Truly hideous.”

Priscilla spat out, narrowing her eyes at Yae, who looked after the girl that was in a coughing fit. She then reversed the position of the Yang Sword in her hand, and took a swing at the cowering villagers.

“—Ah,”

Immediately, the survivors collapsed—and all of them began vomiting onto the ground. While Al was dumbfounded by what was going on in front of him, Priscilla directed a grunt towards him.

After that, when she gently caressed the blade of the scarlet sword that she held,

Priscilla: “My Yang Sword cuts down those that it wishes to cut down, and burns those that it wishes to burn.”

Al: “You mean, you only cut and burnt the tentacles inside their bodies?”

Priscilla: “You are quick to understand. I shall praise you for that.”

Al: “For a second, I thought you also chopped up the survivors, so I was worried stiff.”

Anyhow, if Priscilla’s Yang Sword wasn’t available, they would’ve probably had to do something like that. Even worse, they would have to kiss every single survivor, and drag the parasites out of them.

Al: “Though, the reward was a kiss from Princess, huh. For my reward, instead of making me lick your feet, that kind of thing is fine by me.”

Priscilla: “Fool. It is true that my lips are a glorious treasure. However, what I meant by ‘reward’ were their lives. As a result of that one prioritizing emotion over survival, this entire ordeal was brought to light. It is an undeniably commendable effort.”

Breathing out a sigh at Al’s words, Priscilla gave high praise to the girl’s actions.

Al: “So, a girl’s love managed to stop a tragedy. That sounds too good to be true, but I’m glad that there wasn’t any more damage than this…”

Priscilla: “—No, it is too soon to be feeling relieved.”

Priscilla shook her head at the conclusion that was given to the extent of the damage done against Coffleton, rejecting the idea that it was over. Having caught the note of assertiveness in her voice, Yae momentarily stopped checking up on the villagers and turned around.

Yae: “Does that have something to do with the dragon carriage that left, after Mistress ordered something to the driver?”

Priscilla: “Certainly. —I have directed the dragon carriage towards the Crimson Battlefront at the mansion. They are heavily equipped, and I have given them the command to conduct investigations at three separate villages, near the basin of the Tenrill river.”

While answering the question, Priscilla spread out her scarlet fan, pointing it at the river that flowed beside the village. Realizing the true meaning behind Priscilla’s gesture, Al and Yae shuddered at the implications that were made.

Yae: “So, Mistress believes that the river is the source of infection.”

Al: “From what little I know, it’s a given that those that get bitten by zombies get infected, though?”

Priscilla: “Those did not have the habit of biting its hosts. In addition to that, they were making the effort to blend in, correct?”

Al: “That’s true.”

That was the difference between the zombies that Al knew, and the villagers that were controlled by the parasitic creatures. They weren’t trying to initiate violence, but they were trying to take the place of the original villagers, and were attempting to protect their own territory.

It was as if they were not after the bodies of their victims, but their entire lives instead.

Al: “If that’s what it is, then parasites are not very nice at all.”

Priscilla: “Do make sure that you never drink from the river. If possible, do not even touch it. The crops that were grown using the river water must also be burnt up.”

Al: “You’re being thorough about this. If so, we should also be careful of the bugs at the water’s edge, ‘cause blood-sucking bugs are common around those areas. I often heard about diseases being spread by bugs.”

Priscilla: “—In any case,”

With a low voice, Priscilla narrowed her blood red eyes, then made a pause.

Instantaneously, a chill raced up Al’s spine—no, it was something similar to that, but it was not a chill. It was not cold, it was hot. A scorching heat brushed against his spine as it passed through.

A burning smell flickered across his nostrils, a smell that he recalled catching a whiff of in the dragon carriage. The air that encircled Priscilla Barielle was the telltale sign of her judgement, of her decision of what to do against the ones responsible for wreaking havoc upon her land.

In other words—

Priscilla: “—Whoever it is, they shall pay the price for their act of folly. Indeed, with their lives.”

6

The Crimson Battlefront was quick to act upon Priscilla’s orders.

Just as their master commanded them, the soldiers, all heavily equipped in red, had gathered at the basin of the Tenrill river, in order to proceed with their investigation of three other villages.

As a result, it was discovered that two villages were also affected by the parasitic creatures, and in return for procuring the safety of the women and children, the Crimson Battlefront ended up disposing of the infected men.

Al: “Even with your Yang Sword, you can’t save the men like how you did with the women and children?”

Priscilla: “The Yang Sword is not omnipotent. Even if it is able to eradicate the foreign substance that is inside of a body, it cannot fill in the hole that is left behind. If I were to put this in your words, there is no salvation for a brain that has been turned into ‘sponge’.”

Receiving Priscilla’s answer, Al drew back his chin with an “I see.”

In other words, the parasitic creatures took root in the brains of the men, and had gradually obtained control over their bodies. Since their brains were the first thing that would be taken over, their memories and actions would become more vague and unclear as time passed.

Once again, what was going on matched up with the attestations that the young man had given at the Barielle Mansion.

Al: “So, about the dude who came to the mansion… Without eating anything, he ran out of the village the moment he saw the guys sewing back their limbs, right? …I hope he didn’t drink any water.”

Yae: “The women were being extremely careful about that, because they were focused on getting him out safely~. They gave him boiled water and emergency food… keeping him away from the source of infection.”

Al: “They did a great job. Seems like he’s loved by them.”

Al whistled, impressed by the lengths the women went to keep the young man safe. Thanks to their efforts, he was unharmed, and the girl who risked her life for him was also safe, thanks to Priscilla. The village was in ruins, having lost all its men except for one, but they didn’t lose everything.

Perhaps, it was possible to rebuild it.

Al: “Now, if we were able to avoid an ending with a bad aftertaste because of this and that… What are you thinking, Princess, staring intently at the map like that?”

Priscilla: “—Do you not think that something is strange? There are four villages near the basin of the Tenrill river, however, only three out of four have been affected by ‘zombies’. There is one village that has remained unaffected by it.”

Inside the village chief's house that was now uninhabited, located at the center of Coffleton, Priscilla made a query at Al while gazing down at the map on the table. In response, Al muttered out an "Ah,"

Al: "Maybe they were fasting, without drinking any water as well? I heard that there's a sort of religion that does those things. They say that no eating, no drinking, and no entertainment is a symbol of their belief."

Priscilla: "If that is the reason why they were unaffected, then that shall be a different problem. What I have made speculations on is the water flow… The village that remained unaffected is located upstream."

Pointing at the map, Priscilla divided the upper stream and the lower stream of the river, by how they were unaffected and affected respectively. Water naturally flows downwards, so if someone had poisoned it, the area affected would be below that point, which would be the lower stream.

Yae: "Because of that, I went to investigate the connection between Coffleton and the unaffected village."

Opening the door of the village chief's house, Yae made an appearance, her red hair flowing behind her. Carrying herself with an easygoing attitude, she shoved herself between Al and Priscilla, marking a spot on the map.

Al: "What's the mark for?"

Yae: "It's to show where the watermill is. The forest at the riverside has wood harvested from it, and the wood is brought downstream on a boat. I think the watermill was mainly used for grinding, but something smells fishy."

Priscilla: "—It functions as a cover for their scheme, I see."

With Priscilla's response hitting the nail on its head, Yae gave her a nod.

Seeing that the two had already come to a conclusion on the matter, Al raised his right arm with a “Wait,”

Al: “Sorry to interrupt your excitement, with schemes and covers and whatnot… but, you guys already decided on what this whole thing is? As something like a terrorist attack?”

Priscilla: “Naturally. No matter how slow-witted one could be, what would they think of this, if this is anything other than a man made crisis? Do not lower yourself to an imbecile, Al. Surely you understand the disparity between a jester and a fool?”

Al: “…The one who makes others laugh, and the one who gets laughed at.”

Priscilla: “The former shows great promise. However, the latter will remain worthless to the end, unless it is actively sought after. By no means shall you forget this.”

Despite saying those words in such a forbidding manner, with Priscilla being Priscilla, it was rather thoughtful of her. However, Al had a personal reason for why the current situation didn’t sit well with him.

—The “Zombie Outbreak” that occurred in the Barielle domain, was something he had never even heard of.

Yae: “Al-sama, your face is scary. It’s not a good thing~, so smile!”

Al: “You can’t even see my face.”

Al grunted in response to Yae’s encouragement. It was as if she thought he was sulking from his conversation with Priscilla. After that, he pointed his finger at the map that Priscilla was glaring at, and,

Al: “If the water mill is a cover up, then does that mean you’re suspecting its manager, or the wood traders for being responsible?”

Priscilla: “It is reasonable to start placing down suspicions from there. Yae, who is their representative?”

Yae: “—Edda Rayfast. They say that she’s a heroic woman who unifies the rowdy men~. There's a chance that Mistress can get along with her."

Without having to look back at her memories, Yae answered in a flash.

Priscilla: "Hm. Setting aside the possibility of that one getting along with me, we have 'cleared' the first requirement."

Priscilla replied, closing an eye. Hearing her response, Al and Yae both tilted their heads with a "Requirement?"

Seeing the reaction of her companions, Priscilla loosened the edges of her red lips,

Priscilla: "Yes, every one of those 'zombies' were male. If we consider what was set as a precedent, then there is a low possibility of that heroic woman or whatever being 'sponge'-brained."

Al: "Ah, I see. That's true."

Priscilla: "However—"

There, Priscilla cut herself off mid-sentence and closed her other eye as well. Finding her silence uncomfortable, Al attempted to call out to her, but,

Priscilla: "Forget it. Everything shall come after I see the truth for myself."

"…"

It was very characteristic of Priscilla to decide everything by herself before letting him speak.

She was definitely aware of Al's concerns, but she never gave it a single glance. Despite that, when she realized that Al wasn't following her as she started walking,

Priscilla: "What are you doing, Al?—Follow behind me like a domesticated dog."

She would say something like that as if it was obvious, which Al couldn't help but find irresistible.

Al: "Should I really lick those pale feet like a dog, while breathing heavily?"

Yae: "Wagh~. Al-sama is really off-putting~."

As he tried to follow after Priscilla, who walked ahead with her head high, the red-haired maid next to him expressed her disgust. Touching the metal fittings of his helmet, Al started longing to see the pink-haired, young butler that was not present.

7

—Al's first impression of Edda Rayfast was more of her being "iron-blooded" instead of a "heroic woman".

Under her dark skin, the blood that streamed through her veins could be colored pitch black, instead of the normal red. A plump body, thick limbs, and heavy make up that seemed more fixated on valor more so than beauty, along with a fur coat over an outfit that looked like it could burst apart at any moment.

With one look, it could be garnered that she had a different aesthetic sense compared to the average person.

Edda: "I see that you're Priscilla Barielle-sama."

Edda said, gazing down at Priscilla who was seated on a chair in the reception room. Moreover, the reason why Edda was looking downwards at her was not because of the height of the chair, but their different physiques.

Priscilla was not a short woman, but Edda's was so tall that even Al had to angle his head up to the point that his neck hurt. Though, even Priscilla couldn't possibly become angry at—

Priscilla: "Lower your head. Who do you think I am?"

Al: "You're going to get mad at that?! Even if it's a matter of height?! Isn't there nothing that could be done about this?!"

Priscilla: “What is there to cause an uproar about? Considering that this one has the audacity to look down on me, it shall be solved within a moment if this one becomes half-buried under the floor. My displeasure has been incurred, all because there was not even a single mechanism that opens the floor.”

Al: “People won’t make large-scale preparations on that level, even if they used the ‘maybe driving’[1] mindset! If you aren’t half-buried under the floor, you might make an important guest feel displeased with you… What a tough life!”

Priscilla: “How vociferous. This time, you are being unbearably bothersome about this and that.”

Al: “That’s… I’m worried about you.”

Al felt his words stick in his throat as Priscilla buried herself deeper into the couch, whilst placing her hands over her ears.

If he told her that he was worried, then he was telling the truth. However, Al’s concerns were not enough of a reason for Priscilla to stop in her tracks. Beside him, he could see Yae let out a sigh.

Sure enough, Priscilla sniffed disdainfully with a “Hmph,” then turned back around to face Edda.

Priscilla: “I only came here for one thing. Either your lumber industry, or the watermill that you manage, are being used by someone to orchestrate their heinous scheme. Have you realized?”

Edda: “—A heinous scheme, I see.”

Yae: “Starting with Coffleton, three villages that are located at the basin of the Tenrill river have already been affected by it. Have any of your employees claimed to feel sick, Edda-sama~?”

Edda raised her thick brows upon having the problem brought to attention by Priscilla, and placed a worm-like finger on her lips upon being questioned by Yae. Her reaction was an indication that she knew something about the ordeal.

“That isn’t a good look to make in front of Priscilla,” was what Al would've told her if he was in his usual state of mind, but he was currently not calm enough to be considerate for Edda.

Because of that, he pretended that he wasn't aware that Edda's cloudy eyes would be the cause of Priscilla's irritation.

Priscilla: "You have a face that says that you have an idea of what is happening."

Edda: "—This is between you and me."

Possibly having resigned herself to the fact that she would not be able to escape from Priscilla's investigation, Edda replied immediately. Perhaps that was one of her abilities, to be able to select the most optimal choice for her survival.

If she had played dumb one more time, Priscilla would've unsparingly drawn her Yang Sword against her. And so, the potential of a scene of bloodshed was avoided, and Al was relieved that the situation didn't have to come down to—

—There, it had resulted in his carelessness.

Al: "—Oh."

Al realized that his footing was becoming wobbly, unable to stand firmly. Looking down at his feet, he understood why.

The floor had disappeared. Altogether with the carpet, sofa, and even the reception table, the floor opened downwards. Al's body began falling down into the underground area, pulled by the force of gravity.

Al: "Princ—"

Yae: "I'm sorry, Al-sama!"

The moment he started falling, Al attempted to call out to Priscilla, but was flipped over by a force that struck his shoulder. Glancing at what hit him, Al saw that the person who had kicked his shoulder in order to grab on to the ceiling was Yae. Being put in the same predicament as him, she narrowly avoided plummeting down into the pitch black space by grabbing hold of the lights on the ceiling.

In return, Al lost his balance, and it became clear that he wouldn't be able to circumvent his fall. So, he instead searched for the figure that he had to check up on out of the corner of his eyes—

"…"

His line of sight intermingling with the red, crimson girl's gaze, Al then started to fall.

Falling, falling, falling down. —Falling below the surface with his body turned upside down.

Letting out a soundless cry, Al remained helpless as he plunged down into the deep, dense shadows.

8

"…"

Under the floor was a vast, fathomless darkness.

The floor that had opened without any warning had engulfed everything into its chasm, which should be referred to as an abyss.

Into the darkness went the red carpet, large sofa, reception table, the cups that still had tea in them, and one man with a jet black helmet whose delayed judgement made him unable to react in time.

Watching the man disappear into the bottom of the void with a lasting cry, the scarlet woman who had been plotted against—Priscilla Barielle, narrowed her beautiful eyes that were equal to the exquisiteness of a jewel.

Edda: "Careless, you were."

Priscilla: "…Careless, you say?"

Behind her, a voice called out towards the nape of Priscilla's neck as her gaze lingered on the abyss, and she turned around to face the owner of the voice.

Curling her blood-colored lips was Edda, the person who had conspired against Priscilla and her companions. Priscilla stared unflinchingly at her ugly smile without a single change to her expression,

Priscilla: "—Directing your hostility towards me in such a straightforward manner is something that I cannot imagine as the act of a sane being."

Edda: "Really?"

Priscilla: "On top of that, you have weighed that I was careless with your capacity. You are deserving of ten thousand deaths."

Edda: "Reaaally?"

Even with Priscilla confirming her culpability, Edda's body trembled with a delight that was out of place. Her dark skin continuing to quiver with every passing moment, it only served to heighten Priscilla's displeasure.

Unhesitatingly, Priscilla reached out her hand towards empty space, aiming to draw out her crimson, treasured sword that utilized the "sky" as its sheath. However—

"—Mistress!"

At the same time with the exclamation, obsidian blades whizzed through the air, and the sound of gouged flesh rang across the room.

What flew across the room were kunai, knives that originated from the west, and the one who threw it was Yae, who had evaded her fall by borrowing Al's shoulder as a platform. The kunai she threw had penetrated the foreheads of the enemy—the two men who appeared from the hidden door on the wall behind Edda.

The length of the blades weren't long, but it was enough to seize their lives by impaling their heads and stirring up their brain matter,

As Edda received one of the blades on the center of her neck, she wasn't an exception either.

Yae: "Oops~. Mistress, I'm sorry. I carelessly did it out of reflex."

Nimbly landing on her feet next to Priscilla, Yae apologized for bringing down the three using her knives. Hearing those words, Priscilla lowered her arm, and,

Priscilla: "I do not mind. Although I would have preferred to execute them myself, it does not hold enough value for me to slight the loyalty of my chamberlain. More importantly…"

Yae: "Eeh, from this height, Al-sama might… wow, I can't even see the bottom of it~"

With Priscilla crossing her arms beside her, Yae frowned as she peered into the abyss.

It was no wonder she made that face, since the bottom of the dark chasm was completely imperceptible. Yae dropped one of her kunai down the hole to test the depth, but there was no sound of it hitting the ground. Considering how deep it was, and the fact that it was a trap made specifically to lure in enemies, there was no telling what other traps were lying around the very bottom.

All in all, there was no other option but to believe that Al's chances of surviving were close to non-existent.

Yae: "Mistress, this is extremely hard to say, but I believe that Al-sama passed~…"

Priscilla: "—Hm. What was it that made you think of launching an ambush against me?"

Yae: "Mistress?"

Having finished analyzing the trap and giving the mournful news of Al, Yae tilted her head questioningly.

Priscilla stared ahead at the kunai-impaled Edda and her subordinates, concentrating on their bodies as if she was studying their intent, with not a single hint of concern for Al's wellbeing.

She was being indifferent to the point that it was as if Al's entire existence had been consigned to oblivion.

Yae: "Mistress, I don't think Al-sama would be able to rest in peace, being treated like that~"

Priscilla: "Fool. Neither I nor you have the time to spare on such trifles. To begin with, do you not think that it is strange?"

Yae: "Strange?"

Priscilla: "—If the objective was to bring harm upon me, then why was the trap activated when I moved away from the abyss? Their aim would have been off the mark. If so, that is illogical."

Yae tightened her cheeks, picking up on the feeling that something was wrong after hearing Priscilla's indication.

She was correct. Priscilla was originally standing above the abyss. If the Priscilla Camp—no, the heart of the camp, Priscilla, had been targeted, there would be no meaning to the trap if she wasn't the one who fell in.

Despite that, the enemy had purposely triggered the trap in a way that wouldn't drag Priscilla into it—

"—That's, you know, because I didn't wanna leave any injuries on your body."

"—h,"

Priscilla and Yae raised their heads upon hearing the low, reverberating voice.

In their line of sight, a gigantic figure was slowly getting back on her feet, with the kunai still stuck in her neck. Her thick, worm-like fingers grabbed on to the hilt of the blade, and pulled it out roughly. She acted as if she had no regard for the human body, but strangely, there was no blood flowing out of the wound.

—The reason for that could be easily deduced, in light of everything that happened so far.

Yae: “Do you happen to be a living corpse?”

Edda: “I take offense to being called something like that. I’m just moving around in a bloodless body.”

Edda—or Edda the living corpse widened her grisly smile, answering Yae’s question in an annoyingly nonchalant manner.

There was no hint of pain in her expression, and she would be no different than a living human with a monstrous face if she didn’t have the wound on her neck. However, a gaping hole in her neck was in plain sight, and looking at it would make one doubt their sense of reality.

“…”

Facing the living corpse, Yae casually moved in front of Priscilla to defend her, but without acknowledging her chamberlain’s thoughtfulness, Priscilla directed a scornful sniff at Edda.

Priscilla: “I have the same opinion as you. ‘Living corpse’ does not sound appealing to me. You shall call yourself a ‘zombie’ from now on.”

Yae: “Wait, Mistress, is now the time for that~?!”

Priscilla: “No matter the time or situation, I shall always be who I am. If that shall be bent, then that is not me. Although, I suppose this is an unforeseen situation.”

Priscilla usually spoke as if she was all-seeing, but this time, she made it clear that she was unable to foresee what was currently going on. When Yae expressed her surprise against that, Priscilla shrugged her pale, thin shoulders.

Priscilla: “It could be simply put as ‘hideous’ if those were creatures that are only able to mimic a human, as well as to speak. However, the state of these ‘zombies’ are undoubtedly not limited to that. —You said that you did not want to leave any injuries on my body, correct?”

Edda: “Yep, I did.”

Priscilla: “I see. —In other words, your next objective is my body.”

Edda’s dark red lips twisted further into a more sinister smile.

The next moment, the two dead men on the ground sprung up, and they immediately threw themselves at Yae and Priscilla.

Obviously, the men were also living corpses.

Yae used her long legs to kick out at one man who made a move to grab her, and she took hold of the other man’s collar, skillfully throwing him over her back. As a result of her endeavor, the two living corpses vanished into the bottom of the abyss.

Despite that—

Edda: “I still have more men, you know. You thought you could run from me?”

Yae: “Ugh~!”

The moment Edda let out a roar of laughter, every door in the room slammed open at all once.

Reinforcements appeared from the entrance and hidden doors, and more dropped down from the attic of the open ceiling. Yae strained her cheeks as she counted her remaining kunai, noting the overwhelming number of men that stood before her.

Yae: “We seem to be at a laughably big disadvantage~. Mistress, do you have any good ideas for what to do?”

Priscilla: “The chamberlain is the one that must present their ideas to me. Is depending on me the first thing you must do? How shameful.”

Yae: “But, Mistress~!”

Yae struck the approaching living corpses with her kunai, slicing through their arms, legs, and necks as she cut down enemy after enemy, piling up dead bodies that carried a rotten smell. However, no matter how many times she knocked them down, the bodies would continue to stand back up.

Seeing Yae being gradually driven into a corner, Priscilla sighed.

Priscilla: “—Yae, leave me and draw back. Then, you may search for Al.”

Yae: “Eh?! Mistress, I thought you had forgotten about Al-sama’s existence?”

Priscilla: “All I said was I had no time to spare on such trifles. Do not grumble about such a foolish thing. If it is for your escape, then I shall wrench open the opportunity to do so. You ought to be honored. You shall kneel.”

Yae: “Kneel…? Eek!”

Right after Priscilla’s display of arrogance, a crimson flash swept across horizontally.

Yae instinctively kneeled down, Priscilla’s treasured sword ruthlessly sailing above her head in a wide arc. Fire erupted from the red gleam of the sword, and the living corpses that were in its trajectory floundered around as they turned into ash.

Priscilla: “You shall go.”

Yae: “Mistress, please stay safe~!”

Having already made her way to the ceiling with a leap, Yae slid into the attic. Like that, she quickly withdrew from the reception room that became a battlefield, and Priscilla was left alone in the area.

Priscilla: “Hm.”

After seeing Yae’s escape through, Priscilla swung her crimson sword three more times, enveloping the unscrupulous fellows that attempted to come close in flames. However—

Edda: “Seems like the end’s drawing near.”

Priscilla: “Indeed.”

Edda sneered, having watched her men’s desperate fight earlier in a relaxed manner. She was looking at the treasured sword in Priscilla’s hand, its brilliance having clouded over and there being no remaining traces of the force of its shimmering flames.

Priscilla: “The sun has been obscured, it seems. As usual, this sword does not abide by my will.”

Having said that, Priscilla carelessly tossed her sword in the air. The sword decapitated a living corpse that stood behind her, and dematerialized as if it had been sucked in by the sky. The sword that had the “sky” as its sheath had returned to the “sky”.

The living corpses surrounded Priscilla, who was now empty-handed.

Edda: “I don’t mean to hurt you. Will you behave well and follow us?”

Priscilla: “Do not let those filth lay a finger on me. Also, you shall entertain me courteously.”

Crossing her arms, Priscilla lifted her bountiful chest as if she was showing it off, and made such demands. Hearing that, Edda raised her brows, and her face broke into a grin.

The “heroic woman” continued whilst grinning,

Edda: “I don’t dislike your haughtiness. —It’s most suitable for the paradise’s administrator.”

9

At the bottom of the deep, dark abyss, Al was losing hope in his sewage-covered self.

Al: “Is this for real…? I sure did a good job surviving, hey.”

Grimacing at the unsteady ground, as well as the lukewarm feel of the ground against his hands, Al wiped his dirtied hands against his pants and scraped out the mud that got into the gaps in his helmet.

While he was doing that, Al clicked his tongue at the unlit darkness as he glanced at his surroundings. He momentarily paused the removal of mud from his helmet, taking out a white stone from one of the pouches near his stomach.

—It was a lagmite ore, which was a special stone that emitted a glow upon being subjected to external impact.

It had different characteristics compared to mana stones, and it was a convenient object due to being able to act as a light source without any fire. Knocking the lagmite against his helmet, a dim, white glow illuminated the area.

Then, looking at the first thing that entered his sight, Al uttered an "Yuck,"

Al: "It wasn't like I thought I was lucky for not dying, but…"

He was at the bottom of the abyss, which was the trap in the reception room of the Rayfast Mansion, laid out below the floors with a mechanism that allowed them to be opened. The enemy's aim was obviously the deaths of those who fell into the trap, but Al had managed to avoid the worst outcome.

That didn't mean that he dodged the trap cooly and put himself out of harm's way. Al only survived because he landed right on top of a cushion, the impact of his fall being absorbed by it.

However, the cushion was—

Al: "…A mountain of rotting bodies, huh. What an awful smell."

Hoping that what was clogging the gaps and metal fittings on his helmet was actually "mud", Al made a face at the fates of the humans that had acted as a cushion for him.

The number of bodies did not fall within ten, nor twenty.

They were most likely a part of the workers of the lumber industry that Edda managed. Each of the bodies had their clothes on them, and none of their accessories had been taken, so they were definitely not killed for money. The bodies were crudely dealt with, but the reason why the corpses were corpses was probably not a simple matter.

Al: “That means, the fact that living corpses don’t last for long is a flaw. If it’s like this, then the living corpse business will probably not succeed. It’s full of elements that the high-so[2] upper class would hate, anyway.”

Since she made the first move, it was guaranteed that Edda Rayfast was connected with the living corpses. Considering her influence and financial assets, there was also a good chance that she was the mastermind.

If that was the case, then the safety of Priscilla, who had been left above, would be a cause for concern—

“That Yae… she made sure to stay there even if it meant kicking me down, so she’s probably doing her job properly. Even without any help, Princess might figure it out on her own, but… ah?”

As Al observed his surroundings, relying on the light of the lagmite ore, he sensed a strange presence that came from the direction of the mountain of bodies. Turning his face, Al tilted his light source.

—Immediately, his gaze met with hollow eye sockets, and he took an intuitive step back.

Al: “Uwoh?!”

“Aa, aaAAaAaAaagh!”

With a long, drawn out moan of the dead, the mangled body squirmed around. It stretched out its arms, revealing raw bone underneath its stripped flesh, and lunged at Al to drag him down into the pit of hell.

Al gulped in a breath with a momentary delay to his reaction. Unable to meet the attack in time, the corpse extended its fingers to puncture his skin—

"—bh,"

Al: "Eh?"

The next moment, a kunai fell from above, pitilessly boring through the dead man's rotten head.

—At that time, Al had no way of knowing that the kunai was the one that Yae had dropped from the reception room, in order to measure the depth of the abyss.

Saved by an incomprehensible streak of luck, Al had accomplished a narrow escape from death.

Perhaps even the moving corpses differed in quality, as the body became motionless once its head was broken through. Its rotten arm dropped back to its side, and the body collapsed without a single cry, falling completely silent.

However, Al had only gotten away from the plight that the first body had put him in.

Al: "…You're kidding me."

In front of the murmuring Al, the mountain of bodies convulsed, and he could tell that its putrid meat and rotten fluids were soaking through the muddy ground. Wondering about the true identity of the "muddy ground", Al backed off slowly as an acrid stench filled his nostrils. He was trying to prevent himself from drawing the attention of "that" as much as he could.

Despite his attempts in the face of death, it was thwarted by intruders that appeared in an unexpected way.

Al: "Wagh?!"

As if making a fool out of Al's effort to make sure he didn't provoke the corpses, the intruders crashed right on top of the mountain of bodies, splattering their surroundings with an enormous amount of rotten flesh. What was shown in the white light of the lagmite was something foreign that fell from above, yet again, but it was two humans this time.

If Al had seen it correctly, one of the bodies had a kunai sticking out from its head.

That meant their killer was Yae. It was evidence that she was having a hard battle on the floor above, but it was also poor timing.

Al: “Wo, woaaaaahh—!”

Impacted by the falling men, larger movements started to form within the mountain of bodies that had been convulsing earlier. Its motions were rightly increasing in size, and it was as if the mountain itself was beginning to move.

—Masses of human bodies that far exceeded the numbers of ten and twenty melded into each other, forming a single entity that was grotesque to the point that it no longer looked like a human. Having assembled into a huge lump of living corpses, it started rolling towards Al.

Al: “This… this has gotta be a joke—!!”

Turning his back on the impending cluster of corpses, Al started running with all of his might.

Out of everything he had experienced in his life, the unsteadiness of the ground and the low visibility of this place was among the worst experiences that he ever had. Running desperately for his life to this extent, was something he hadn’t done since he had escaped from the Colosseum of the Gladiator Island during the night—but back then, his pursuers were humans no matter how terrifying they were, yet what was chasing him right now was of a completely different nature.

Al: “ The sewers? A wastewater treatment plant?! Does this place have an exit?!”

Zori were not compatible with filthy water, but Al was able to carry on running without tripping on his feet. Since the wide passage continued straight ahead, there were no other passages he could swerve into in order to let the combination of bodies pass by. Such a strategy was unusable in this place.

It was probably not very pragmatic to keep being on the run without a map, nor a sliver of knowledge about where the exit was.

Running away was worth it if the mess of corpses were able to be out of breath, but Al had no chance of winning a stamina showdown against a bunch of dead bodies that already ended their activities of life.

To add to that—

Al: “Guh, is this for real?!”

In front of him, multiple silhouettes came into sight. They stuck their hands out, staggering on their feet in the orthodox style of zombies. Thinking that perhaps the speaking zombies he saw back at Coffleton were a rare type, Al ground his teeth upon seeing the unintelligent zombies make their entry.

Of course, there was no way that the zombies that blocked off the passage wouldn’t notice Al and the mishmash of bodies, as they were scattering the rotten smell as they went, while their feet splashed against the muddy ground.

Zombies at the front gate, a cluster of corpses at the back gate.[3]

Being grabbed by one of the zombies would put him at the risk of death, but before that, being crushed underneath the mass of bodies would also put his life in danger. —In this place, there wasn’t a single reliable ally that could come to rescue Al from his crsis.

To save his own life, he had to exert himself to the best of his ability. —Using everything that he had.

Al: “Shit, I don’t know the width or the length of this place! I’m at a disadvantage, but can I wrap it in…?!”

The encounter with the jumble of corpses that were closing in on him, and the zombies that were approaching him before his eyes. Al desperately paid attention to the surrounding terrain, biting down on his lip underneath his helmet.

Then, along with his determination, he barked out, Al: “—Goddammit! Expand, domain!!”

The moment he shouted, the space around Al briefly contorted as if it was twisted off, curling and sagging.

As if receiving the intervention of an inconceivable being, like the disproportionate feeling of looking into the world through bubbles that floated on the water’s surface, a bizarre scene such as that seeped through the area that was filled to the brim with a thick fetidness.

Then,

Then, then,

Then—.

10

Edda: “Right here, we’re planning to create our maker’s paradise.”

Saying that, Edda peered into Priscilla’s face from where she was sitting on the floor, right in front of the crimson girl. Receiving her gaze, Priscilla rested her chin on her hand whilst crossing her legs in an elegant fashion, murmuring out a “Huh,”

Priscilla: “Your colloquy fails to capture my interest in any way. How are you going to regain lost ground from here?”

Edda: “How cold. But, the consistency in your attitude’s valuable. You’re arrogant towards everyone no matter who they are, and you also have the necessary power and position… definitely ideal, I’d say.”

Priscilla: “—I see. I am able to discern this conspiracy for the most part.”

Edda: “Ohh, really?”

Seemingly unaware of leaking any information of the sort, Edda tilted her thick neck to the side. Directing a wary look at the action that lacked a single speck of charmingness, Priscilla quietly glanced outside of the window.

Inside Edda Rayfast’s mansion, Priscilla was confined to the furthermost room.

Her hands were unshackled, and it was also possible for her to walk around the room freely. She was on the third floor, but she also had the option of escaping out of the window. However, there were watchful eyes stationed outside of the room, and she could see more than ten living corpses guarding the area just by taking one look at the window.

The sun had already been obscured once. After it had gone down, it would take time for it to rise up again.

Even Priscilla didn’t think that she would be able to escape from the crowd of corpses while she was empty-handed. To start with, she absolutely refused the idea of trying to escape from the mass of the deceased by the sweat of her brow.

Priscilla: “When the time shall come for me to exit this mansion, I have already decided that I will be triumphantly walking out from the front.”

Edda: “Such bold words. But, you might be able to grant that wish, because…”

Priscilla: “Because you are scheming to take over my head as well as my body, using those vile, parasitic creatures?”

Edda: “—Fufu.”

Receiving an incinerating gaze through narrowed, crimson eyes, Edda’s large body trembled. With fingers that were too big for the transparent glass she held, she set it down on the table.

Poured inside of the glass was an amber liquid. Judging by its faint fragrance, Priscilla could tell that it was an alcoholic beverage of excellent quality. However, it did not entice her tongue.

The glass was put there after their conversation. Considering what they had spoken about, there was no way that it was just an ordinary drink.

Edda: “You’re clever. So you don’t need any explanations, right?”

Priscilla: “The villages that surround the Tenrill river have been dirtied by the asinine poison that you have sprinkled into it. Perhaps the liquor over here is tainted by the same substance, am I correct? What a dull, uninteresting lot.”

Edda: “I’m sorry. To make up for it, I made your drink a special one.”

A special drink. It was rare for the preliminary mark to ring hollow in such a way against Priscilla.

Thinking about the villages that used the water from the Tenrill river, as well as the grave situation where the villagers from said villages turned into living corpses one by one, there was no room left to doubt the idea that the parasites—the cause of the fiasco, entered the body through water that had been ingested from the river.

Priscilla had been aware of that since her time at Coffleton Village, but there was only one problem.

Previously, it was believed that the parasitic creatures’ sole targets were adult men, and that they were also harmless against women and children.

The reason for why it was controlling Edda Rayfast, being after Priscilla’s body as its next objective was because—

Priscilla: “—Among specific breeds of insects and rats, there are certain species that prefer to build a nest as a group. What is required to maintain order within the nest? The answer is clear, even if they are wild animals that only have a miniscule dot of a brain.”

Edda: “…Huh. What’s it?”

Priscilla: “A queen.”

Considering the current situation as entertaining, Priscilla smiled for the first time since she entered the mansion.

Creatures that make their nests in groups, prioritizing reproduction and the expansion of their nests, will put a queen at the very top of their society. The idea that females were essential to breeding children seemed to be invariable logic, no matter the size of the living creatures.

Not a king, but a queen. It was an odd way of existing, but it coincided with the current situation.

That meant—

Priscilla: "—Apparently, you hideous parasites are able to establish the logic of a queen, despite there being no life in your bodies. For all of you, reproduction should be a dream within a dream."

Edda: "Ah, who knows. The speed of our growth is very fast. At first, we may be corpses that are only able to move once the brains are rotted, but that leaves hosts that have their intellect and thought process intact… If that goes on, we'll be able to attain control over our hosts while they're fully alive."

Priscilla: "Are you saying that sometime in the future, you would create natural-born 'zombies'? What a repulsive era of millenarianism that you are scheming, really. That is the paradise that you all desire, and you are telling me to become its administrator?"

Edda: "I won't let you refuse. You know it's no use even if you did, right? The maid you let escape isn't caught yet, but that's just a matter of time, too."

Yae was having a difficult time making her escape even as of now, but the corpses that were stationed around the mansion and its surroundings were guarding the area strictly. The forest that circled the mansion was especially a field where Edda's subordinates, who worked for her lumber industry, were able to move around as they pleased. Even with Yae's swiftness, she would be at a disadvantage.

As Priscilla analyzed the situation calmly, Edda laughed at her.

Edda: “Mufufu. You don’t have to be so unwilling. Even as I’m saying this, it’s not like I’m a completely different person. —It’s just that I changed the order of my priorities.”

Priscilla: “Do not spout such nonsense. Death, that is what it is called.”

Edda: “—Gufu,”

Blowing out a raw-smelling breath from her thick lips, Edda produced a low, guttural sound as she laughed. Hearing the ugly noise, Priscilla knitted her shapely eyebrows.

After that, she gently reached for the glass with her thin, pale fingers—

Priscilla: “—Nn.”

Edda: “You gulped it down, without even trying to drink it secretly. Obedient, aren’t you?”

As Priscilla tipped the amber-colored glass of liquor over, licking her lips, a look of surprise crossed Edda’s face. Perhaps, she had a hard time believing that Priscilla had complied with her orders without putting up a fight.

However, there were no indications of any cheap tricks that had been played. Priscilla didn’t splash the contents of the glass against the floor, but she drank the whole thing instead.

That meant that the same parasites that were in Edda had also entered Priscilla’s body.

Edda: “Sooner or later, the effects will start to appear slowly. Once it does, we should be able to have a more friendly chat. Let’s also talk about our maker.”

Priscilla: “That name again, huh. It seems that you are quite devoted to them.”

Edda: “Well, that’s because our maker is our maker. Our real parents… to be exact, our maker is the incentive that allowed us to be reborn. To make a paradise where our maker could be at peace —that is the mission that has been bestowed upon us.”

Priscilla: “Building a paradise for your maker, I see. —How boundlessly dull.”

Priscilla shrugged her shoulders at Edda, who spoke with a sinister tone of reverence in her voice, whilst bending down to face the crimson girl. Hostility briefly flitted across Edda’s eyes upon hearing Priscilla’s choice of words, but it disappeared as soon as it came.

As Priscilla rested her chin on her hand once again, Edda stood up in front of her, staring down at her beautiful face,

Edda: “No matter what you say, it doesn’t sound convincing at all after you ran from us, scared of how we would treat you. It’ll be quite the sight, seeing someone as arrogant as you being committed to serving our maker.”

Priscilla: “Hum, that sadistic taste of yours is not so bad for an unsightly woman such as yourself. I have finally found a point of compromise for Yae’s nonsense. —There is a chance that I am able to get along with you, is what that one had said.”

Edda: “Ahh, really? Well then, does it mean that you feel like making friends with me now?”

Priscilla: “Do not utter such foolish things. —I shall execute you by my hand. It will be worth seeing you quiver your fattened, bulging body, begging for your life to be spared whilst shedding those tears. So, how is that? If I am able to derive pleasure from that, surely you will agree with my previous words?”

Priscilla loosened her lips with a graceful smile. —To be exceptionally beautiful, that was her true essence.

For the first time, Edda shivered as if she had been terror-stricken by Priscilla's existence. Almost as if she couldn't believe that she was actually scared of her, she gave her own palm a glance.

Edda's body had already been reformed, setting her free from the suffering and hardships of this world. Despite that, what was the tremor that passed through her body just now?

Through narrowed eyes, Priscilla gazed up at Edda, who was supposed to be at an advantage compared to her. She pulled out her fan from her cleavage, using it to cover her mouth.

Then, she said it. Her signature phrase, as well as the rationale that was absolute, one that she believed without a doubt.

That is—

Priscilla: "You shall keep this in mind. —This world is made to be convenient to myself."

Edda: "…"

Priscilla: "Therefore, no matter how much effort is put into your endeavors, you will meet your end, scorched into mere cinders. In the meantime, you shall spend your time wisely at the most. —Until the performance of my jester arrives."

Saying that, Priscilla directed the tip of her fan at the floor, and said nothing more.

There was no need to say anything more than that.

11

When Yae Tenzen stepped into the underground area, it was after everything was over.

Yae: "Hyah∼, the smell is going to twist my nose."

Rotten flesh blended together with wastewater, creating a putrid stench that made Yae grimace. It was as if her consciousness was growing faint just by taking a whiff of the smell.

Since she was able to see in the dark quite well, Yae didn't have any light sources with her. However, the sight that emerged within the darkness looked like a painting from hell, something that made Yae regret receiving her training to improve her night vision.

Dead bodies, dead bodies, and more dead bodies. Looking towards her left, and looking towards her right, the area was full of piles of corpses, corpses, and more corpses.

Reflecting back on her life, seeing dead bodies was hardly a rare occurrence for her, but looking at this many bodies with their dignity as people stripped from them was a sight that wasn't seen often. Unlike torture and humiliation, as if they were judged as worthless and tossed aside, the mountains of piteous lives that met their tragic ends were strewn about on the ground.

Yae: "Aren't I quite loyal, obeying Mistress's orders in this situation~? But, rare possibilities only occur once in ten thousand times, so…"[4]

Yae came here to look for her co-worker who fell in, but nevertheless, the chances of his survival were probably slim. She already had a difficult time coming to the underground space, but she had gotten fed up with its depth once she had actually climbed down the abyss.

Stretching down from the mansion's floor for dozens of meters, it was at a height that even Yae could fall to her death from.

Creating such an area underneath the floor was an idea that made Yae harbor a strong dislike for it, just by thinking about it. The bodies that laid all over the place were most likely precious labor forces, those who were involved with the hard work it took to build the trap. Living corpses wouldn't ever complain about anything, so it could be said that they were the right people in the right place, in the meaning of digging their own graves.

Yae: "Well~, as a co-worker, I guess he fails in terms of his attentiveness to his appearance. In that sense, Al-sama was equal to the living corpses, but his cleanliness was a wee bit better than them~."

Because of that, the scales would barely tip in favor of how much Yae liked Al as a co-worker. To be honest, however, she was unimpressed with the fair match that was going on between the comparison between Al and the living corpses—

"…Putting me side by side with zombies results in a fair match, huh. I won't be happy even if I win a match like that."

Yae: "Woah."

Walking along the edge of the passage in order to keep the damage from the rotten fluid to a minimum to her very best, Yae raised her face, startled upon hearing the voice that came out of nowhere, and was further surprised by the figure that came into view in the darkness.

With a gait that was like that of a ghost, the one whose feet made disgusting splashes along the floor as he came was—

Yae: "—Al-sama, is that you? Is it alright for you to come near me? Have you accidentally turned into a living corpse?"

Al: "I've been bitten and scratched all over. There's no symptoms right now that I'm aware of, but I can't just say that it's nothing. I know that there are a lot of cases that go: one scratch, and it's over."

Yae: "Based on what me and Mistress's worked out, you won't be infected through your wounds. Unless you didn't drink any water… To be honest, I wouldn't want to associate with anyone who would drink any sort of water from this environment, even if they were a living corpse~."

Al: "I'm also the type that survived on muddy water, but if I'm given the option to drink the water here, then it's a no thank you."

Saying that, the one-armed man who wore a jet-black helmet slipped out of the darkness. He was in an appalling state, being covered by filth from head to toe, but one glance at him was enough to tell that none of his wounds were fatal. Neither did he have any wounds that resulted from his fall.

Yae: “Can Al-sama like, fly? I heard that the Margrave of the west is good at doing that~.”

Al: “I guess I’m also called a jester, but it’s a different type compared to that kind of jester. I just happened to be lucky. Right as I fell, there was a cushion made out of a mountain of bodies…”

Yae: “Ughh~, do you really call that ‘being lucky’?”

Al: “It’s cheap as long as you don’t die. That’s a way to justify things, coming from my hometown.”

Once they had their conversation, Al leaned against the wall and flumped down onto the ground.

“…”

They were exchanging banter, but Yae could see that Al was deeply exhausted. Several hours had passed since he fell into the abyss, and if he was continuously moving around, uncertain of whether he would live or die, that was only natural.

First and foremost—

Yae: “These… heaps of bodies around us that were living corpses… Did you—?”

If her speculation was correct, then some of the bodies were the labor force that existed to create this underground area, and they were sacrifices as well. However, there were also quite a few bodies that seemed to be used in other ways, making Yae feel like there was a large difference between the conditions of the bodies.

Long story short, it appeared that the intellect-possessing living corpses at the mansion on the surface and Coffleton Village, and the walking corpses that didn’t possess the same intellect, were mingling with one another.

What those corpses had in common, were lacerations that they received from a blade that was large in width.

Al: “Ahh, I’m tired. Good job surviving, me. Really, good job, and thanks to god…”

Yae: “…”

Looking at the helmeted Al letting out a long, weary sigh from the side, Yae narrowed her eyes.

Assuming that the disastrous spectacle in this underground area was what Al had carried out on his own, then Yae would word it as “unexpected”.

If Yae would appraise Al honestly, then he was a man who wasn’t that skilled. He was second-rate as a swordsman, but since one of his arms was lost, he would be second-rate-and-a-half at best even as a warrior. It was also hard to think that he excelled in continuous battles, so she had a hard time finding what he was the best at doing. In reality, she perceived him to be a moodmaker.

Yae thought that the most she could expect from him, was for him to be Priscilla’s shield when push came to shove. —To think that he was able to annihilate a horde of living corpses, even if they weren’t in the best condition.

Yae: “The power of love, is it~?”

Al: “Don’t say something so scary. …Ah, so, how’s Princess? Is she safe?”

Yae: “It’s about that, but things aren’t looking too good~.”

Al: “Aah?”

Shrugging her shoulders against Al’s voice of skepticism, Yae explained the events that had occurred after he had fallen into the abyss.

Edda Rayfast’s conspiracy, and the entire area that was controlled by a swarm of living corpses. About how Priscilla had been captured by the enemy, and how Yae and Al were the only ones who were in the position to move freely—.

Yae: “We’re outnumbered nonetheless. If it’s just me, then there’s a possibility that I can do my best to escape~, but, by the time I return with reinforcements…”

Al: “There’s a high chance that the parasites have already gone inside Princess, you’re saying.”

Yae: “If that happens, then there’s no use in doing that… is what I think~.”

“What should we do?” she added, asking for Al’s opinion.

However, there weren’t many measures that they were able to take. Against the horde of living corpses, they only had two cards in their deck. Al’s survival was a fortunate occasion, but it was hard to think that it was a move that would change the situation drastically, and Yae’s attention was focused outside the mansion—on the red-adorned Crimson Battlefront, who were patrolling the villages near the Tenrill river, stamping out the living corpses that were there.

If they were called over, then some living corpses would equal to nothing in their eyes. The problem was the likelihood of Priscilla turning into a puppet, with her consciousness seized by the parasites while the Crimson Battlefront was still making their way towards them.

Against that, Yae could only think of a baseless countermeasure that consisted of counting on Priscilla’s aberrantly strong sense of self. Relying on that in order to make their move, was something that Yae felt more reluctant to do than actually doing it.

Ignoring Yae’s complicated feelings within her mind—

Al: “Why did you come to look for me? If you were planning to save Princess, then your best bet would be to sneak out and call the Crimson Battlefront.”

Yae: “—. I had the same thought at first. To be honest, I couldn’t count on you being alive after that fall, so~. But, Mistress,”

Al: “Princess did what?”

Yae: “Told me to look for you. She said that she had no time to spare on such trifles, so I thought she had quite a lot of faith in you… Al-sama?”

Yae remembered Priscilla’s bold order that was given to her, right as she withdrew from the battlefield. Honestly, it was a bad move that she would see no value in obeying if it wasn’t Priscilla’s idea.

All in all, it didn’t turn out to be in vain because Al was alive, but Yae had no idea of how this was going to connect to whatever would happen in the future.

Having that kind of view on the situation, Yae glanced at Al, sensing a shift in the air around him.

Yae: “Al-sama?”

Al: “…”

Slowly getting up from his previous position where he was slumped down on the ground with his head lowered, Al fiddled with the metal fittings on his helmet and made them clang. It was a small and weak metallic sound.

The gesture was something that Al showed often, but, just for this one moment, it gave Yae a different impression than usual—

Al: “—She really did it, that woman.”

His murmur contained an echo of enjoyment, and it added further to Yae’s puzzlement. Then, in front of the bewildered Yae, Al began walking in a way that seemed like he was dragging his feet.

Where he was headed for was the direction in which Yae came from, which was the pathway that led back to the mansion on the surface.

Yae: “Al-sama, there are a lot of enemy-sans up there~!”

Al: “Yae, don’t you realize it?”

Yae: “Huh? Realize what…”

Al: “Do you think that Princess would make a boring move that’ll turn out to be fruitless? A stupid move that people like you and me can recognize as a bad move… I don’t think she would take any measures like that.”

Yae: “That’s…”

Her words becoming stuck in her throat from what Al pointed out, Yae started to question her own actions. He was right. She herself had thought that looking for Al wasn’t worth it.

Despite that, why did she follow Priscilla’s orders? That is because—

Al: “—After all, the world operates in a way that makes it convenient for Princess.”

So, if Priscilla had chosen Al for the occasion, then it was the best move that one could make in this situation.

“…”

Drawing out his Blue Dragon Sword from the back of his waist, Al began walking on the path that led to the surface, with traces of irritation in his steps. Behind him, Yae followed along hurriedly, asking him, “What are you planning to do?”

Yae: “There are loads of enemy-sans out there, you know? Al-sama, are you planning to win against them hundred-on-one?”

Al: “Worse than hundred-on-one, it’s dangerous for me even if it’s two-on-one. I know what you’re capable of. But, I’ve been in plenty of circumstances like that.”

Yae: “Plenty of hundred-on-ones, you’re saying?”

Al: “Circumstances where I’m outnumbered, I’m saying. Fighting hundred-on-one and there being a hundred enemies are two different things, Yae.”

Yae: “…”

Al: “There’s no chance of winning if it’s a hundred-on-one, but what if it’s a hundred one-on-ones?” Of course, I’ll be at a disadvantage, but don’t you think that there might be a small chance, like one out of ten thousand?”

That was the correct way to attack when the enemy had greater numbers, but it was a preposterous pipe dream, considering the difference in strength between the two and the living corpses.

However, the man in front of Yae was speaking with an air of confidence, almost as if he had the experience of having shot down a star in the past, about the possibility that was tiny as a hole that was made by a needle.

Yae: “One out of ten thousand is as good as nothing… To add to that, if it’s that possibility, then I’ve already used it up. I thought that the possibility of Al-sama’s survival was one out of ten thousand, so~.”

Al: “If it comes to that, then it means that I have to draw out a possibility that’s one out of twenty thousand. I’m a boy, too, so this fires me up. —As long as the possibility isn’t zero, I’ll wrench it open.”

In front of the conversing two, a spiral staircase that connects to the surface came into view. They would be at the surface if they climbed up the stairs, but what was waiting for them was a hell of hordes of living corpses that was worse than hell—.

Al: “While I’m being loud, you should slip out of the mansion and go and pick up the Crimson Battlefront. Either way, the parasitized people all gotta be eradicated.”

Yae: “…Are you serious about doing this?”

Al: “Don’t make me repeat myself. I don’t want to be out of breath during my signature phrase.”

Saying that, Al took his first step on the spiral staircase. Knowing that making any more attempts to stop him would be tactless, Yae gave him a respectful bow, Yae: “I was quite fond of you and Mistress.”

Al: “Don’t say something like you’re bidding us farewell. It’ll bring bad luck.”

Finishing their brief exchange, Yae quickly passed by Al as she began running.

It was unknown what kind of hidden trick Al had up his sleeve, Yae decided that she would consider his feelings, even if what he put up was simply a life-risking act of bravado. —Calling over the Crimson Battlefront, she would let them wipe out the living corpses.

In order to exterminate the source of the stench that was twisting her nose, without letting them out of the dirty garden that they were in.

Like that, behind her, Yae caught the last traces of Al’s murmuring voice as she ran ahead.

Those were words that Yae could not grasp the meaning of at all—

“—Expand domain, begin thought experiment.”

12

Decapitating the living corpse in front of him, without turning around, he thrust his sword into the torso of the enemy that appeared behind him. Forcefully twisting his sword around, the rotten body’s torso was torn off easily, and it rolled out onto the floor.

“…”

Next, and then next, Al continued to cut down the bodies one after one. Some time had passed since he started doing that, as the mansion was overflowing with dead bodies.

The bodies were only walking around in the first place, so he could claim that all he did was remove the abnormality out of the normality.

In one way or another, a corpse was a corpse, and that was how it should be.

However, if it came down to that, then Al would start to become unsure of what he was doing.

Al: “It’s not like I’m exorcizing them, and it’s also not like I’m putting their souls to rest either. It’s an operation where every single corpse that went into the blind alley of fate is mowed down. …It’s way too ironic, considering that it’s me who’s doing that.”

Or, perhaps even that was something that Priscilla had expected to happen, all in the palm of her hand. The holder of crimson eyes that seemed as if they saw through everything—even Al couldn’t possibly fathom the inner feelings within her bountiful chest.

Yet, Priscilla, who would never weigh her own destiny on anything else but her own scales, had chosen Al to shift the ongoing deadlock on the board, and there was no way to change the truth that she indeed chose him to do that.

There was also no way to change the truth of Al’s stupidity, as he was putting in his utmost effort all because of that.

Al: “Now, killing and killing, I got a hundred and thirty-four of them… that Yae, she only made a rough estimation, didn’t she. This is way more than a hundred-on-one. But, soon…”

“—Our patience is going to reach our limit.”

Al: “…”

Wiping the rotten fluid that was smeared against his Blue Dragon Sword on the curtains, Al turned around to see a giant shadow that stood at the end of the passage. A humongous frame that was hard to refer as human-sized, ugly facial features, and reaching his eardrums was a voice that got on his nerves—

Al: “This is between you and me, but shouldn’t you rename yourself from ‘heroic woman’ to ‘filth’?”

Edda: “How dare you do this. Do you know how much trouble I went through to ready this number of corpses? Everyone was a part of the precious labor force for the paradise.”

Al: “Trouble? All you did was make them drink water. Don’t make a face like you’ve gone through the same hardships as a marathon runner, when you were only standing at the water supply station.”

Building a paradise, or whatever it was, Al had no interest in what the kingpin of the living corpses had to say. Unfortunately, he didn’t remember being disciplined to listen to the villain’s speech quietly.

Because of that—

Al: “I’ll kill you, and take Princess back home. Soon, in all seriousness, I’m gonna lick those pale, long feet.”

Edda: “A vulgar person, aren’t you. I won’t let you get in the way of our mission.”

Edda laughed malevolently at Al, who pointed his Blue Dragon Sword at her whilst speaking about his obscene wishes.

The next moment, Edda’s steely oil-colored skin swelled up, and aberrant bumps began thrashing around underneath her tight, stretched out clothes. Just like that, her clothes were torn apart, revealing skin that Al wasn’t happy to see—and gruesome abominations made their appearance.

“…”

That—was an aggregation of multiple living corpses that Edda had taken into her heavy build. Hands and feet were sticking out all over her body in an unnatural fashion, and the faces of the dead that were letting out silent screams were attached to places such as her stomach and back.

Feeling repulsed at the abnormal, anomalous presence that she gave off, Al curled his lip inside of his helmet, clicking his tongue.

Al: “Gross.”

Edda: “I’ll also make you a part of me, and use you as an ingredient to take that woman down a peg or two. After that’s done, with that woman’s status and beauty, a paradise is going to be built on the ground—h!”

Al: “—hk?!”

Bouncing her body with great force, Edda’s gigantic frame closed in on Al with a jump that ignored her heavyweightedness. What made that possible, was perhaps because she was reusing the unnatural muscular strength of the bodies that she had taken in. Flying through the air while showering her surroundings with fetid fluids that were pouring out from all over her body—she was undoubtedly the worst enemy to face.

If one free-willed mind was attached to the cluster of corpses that he came across underground, it was going to turn out like that, was what Al had discovered just now.

Against the monster that had piled up disaster upon disaster, turning into what would be the definition of ‘hideous’, Al made a massive leap that propelled himself backwards.

Then, in his mind, what he envisioned was not the approaching enemy, but the damsel in distress, who was at a place beyond where Al and Edda were standing.

—Aah, for crying out loud, why do I have to go through a terrible experience like this?

That was unmistakably because he was unfortunate enough to come across her.

Therefore—

Edda: “DIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEE—!!”

Sailing through the air, the giant corpse advanced on Al as it flung its foul spit around and scattered the acrid stench that was coming from it, reaching out towards him with its countless hands.

Seeing that with his very own eyes, Al gave a light shrug of his shoulders, and,

Al: “—For me and you, the stars were not in our favor.”

13

Priscilla: “You are late, Al. How long must you make me wait? Even irreverence has its limits.”

Al: “…Are those really the words to say to the brave, laudable me, who finally arrived here after finishing a fierce battle?”

Having opened the door with a muddy, slush-covered appearance, Al’s shoulders sagged upon receiving an unkind welcome.

Staring at Al, the girl who was re-crossing her legs in an elegant fashion was Priscilla, who had been taking on the role of the damsel in distress at the innermost place of the mansion. However, she gave no sign of being affected by the insecure position she was put in, undeviating from her usual arrogance, which was very much like Priscilla Barielle.

Al: “I’m an utter idiot, too, being relieved by that rather than getting fed up…”

Priscilla: “It is inevitable for men to kneel down before me. There is no need to feel ashamed about that. If anything, you ought to understand the logic that it is only natural. So, what about that discourteous, insolent ringleader of the living corpses?”

Al: “I had a hard time fighting it, as if I seriously only had a chance to win with a possibility of one in ten thousand, but… well, I thought that you would want to do it yourself. I made sure that it couldn’t move and left it there.”

Priscilla: “Hm, that is good. I shall praise you for that.”

Priscilla said, leisurely standing up from her seat and passing by Al with a confident air. Tilting his neck at her gallant form, he let out a small sigh and chased after her back.

Leaving the furthermost room in the mansion, after moving ahead for a while, they arrived at—

"…uh, aah, uhh…"

Priscilla: "Hmph. Really, you have been reduced to a laughable state."

Below Priscilla's feet laid what was once Edda Rayfast, left on the ground.

It was in a condition that could be described with one word: horrendous. The body that was a mishmash of corpses was already not a pretty sight, but the rotten flesh that was all over its body had been shaved off, and it was similar in appearance to a caterpillar with its torn off limbs.

Al had described Edda's thick fingers as caterpillars, but it wasn't even a funny story if the main body was turned into that.

Priscilla: "I was planning to watch you sob disgracefully as you pleaded for your life, and satisfy myself with that, however… That is not going to happen with this wretched state that you are in."

Edda: "You… what, was… that. Everything… just, like, that…"

Becoming a living corpse, she had separated the hardships of this world from herself. That was Edda had boasted, but she was shaking her head, the roots of her teeth chattering out of the fear that she felt towards the things that had happened to her.

Knowing that Edda's words were directed towards Al, who had reduced her to that state, Priscilla didn't answer her, drawing out her beautiful, crimson sword from midair.

Unchanging from when it had been put away once, the bright red brilliance hadn't returned to its blade, but,

Priscilla: "Even supposing that the sun is obscured, the smoldering heat will not die out. Your death will not be a painless one, but I have said that I will scorch you into mere cinders. I shall not go back on my word. —Here, you shall dream of your paradise and turn into ashes."

Edda: “At… any rate… you will… same, as me…”

Perhaps something was on her mind, as she was about to voice her refusal to accept her defeat, until the tip of the sword sank into the face. Forced into the choice of silence, Edda’s wide-eyed face began glowing a weak red color, and she eventually combusted into flames.

Just like that, the flames that made Edda its starting point spread across the floor and the walls, its range continuing to expand as it begged for wood to make into fuel, in order to become a great fire that would incinerate the mansion itself.

Al: “—Princess, is nothing happening to your body?”

Staring at the growing fire, Al made his question towards Priscilla’s back.

It was difficult to imagine that Edda and the living corpses did nothing to her while she was being held prisoner by them. As far as he saw, there were no traces of her being physically harmed, and her attitude was also that of the usual her.

Because of that, he didn’t want to think that the living corpse-creating parasites had made their way even inside of Priscilla, but—

Al: “They did something to you, didn’t they? For example…”

Priscilla: “Is it about the boorish treatment that exists to modify my impeccable body into a ‘zombie’?”

Al: “…”

Receiving Priscilla’s gaze, Al instinctively fell silent. It was still alright if her scarlet eyes contained anger. However, what dwelled within her gaze was the emotion of a lull in the sea that he couldn’t read the details of.

Towards Al, perplexed by her windless stare, Priscilla loosened her lips with a breath of air.

Priscilla: “Do not worry. Supposing that the foreign matter is eroding me from within, surely you are aware of the method that is used to remove it?"

Al: "What do you mean by a method to remove… ah."

Faced by the smiling Priscilla, Al recalled what had happened back in Coffleton Village.

Priscilla had kissed a girl who had been infected by the same parasite, forcefully dragging the parasitic tentacle out of her body. If it was that method, then it would be possible to remove the parasite that had taken root in the host's body.

However—

Al: "Ne-Neither Yae or Schult-chan are here, though? You also burnt the only person of the same gender that was left as well…"

Priscilla: "Fool. Even if a portion remained unburnt, for instance, who would entrust my lips to lips that are rotten in two meanings? Enough is enough, you shall prepare yourself. Is it none of your concern, no matter what will happen to me?"

Al: "No, that's…"

Al took a step back as Priscilla fixed him with a glare. Despite that, the distance that was created between them was easily closed by Priscilla's confident strides, and soon, Al found himself cornered into a wall.

Al: "Wai… wait, Princess! See, the mansion's burning right now, so now's not the time for…"

Priscilla: "You have gallantly risked your life for me. I shall grant you your reward for that. —Do not move."

Al shook his head slowly, but Priscilla acted like his refusal meant nothing to her. Touching him, who was covered in head to toe in filth that was disgusting to even brush against, her pale fingers hooked the rim of his helmet.

And then—

Priscilla: “—No matter how many times I see it, you have an unsightly look in your eyes.”

Continuing her words, the shrill sound of a black helmet hitting the floor echoed throughout the burning mansion.

14

Yae: “As expected of Mistress~. Mistress herself is safe, as well as her ally. It’s quite fantastic!”

Priscilla: “That is to be expected. However, words of praise are pleasant. You shall praise me as much as you would like.”

Yae: “Haha~.”

Back at Priscilla’s private room in the Barielle Mansion, Yae was prostrating before Priscilla, having been ordered to take care of her nails.

Already, the scheme of Edda Rayfast—the person who had been in the command of the living corpses, was broken, so all they had to do was to sweep up the living corpses that remained in the surrounding area, and settle the situation for once and for all.

From the beginning until the end, Priscilla had resolved nearly every tale with her own strength. Of course, even Yae prided herself on how she had given a small handful of her assistance for that, but it was really only a small handful.

Everything had played out in the palm of Priscilla’s hand, and had ended without being able to get out of there. Everything, including Edda and the living corpses, as well as Yae and Al’s fierce struggle. —That, was just a little frightening.

Priscilla: “Your hands are idle, Yae.”

Yae: “…Oops, I’m sorry, Mistress. I was just thinking about things for a little while.”

Priscilla: “I see. It is irreverent to be absorbed in thought while you are taking care of me. What have you thought about?”

Yae: “E~h, you see, it’s that. It was when I brought back the Crimson Battlefront, and met up with Mistress and Al-sama in front of the burning mansion. At that time, didn’t Al-sama seem rather restless? No, if it’s said that he’s always restless, then that’s true, but~.”

Of course, it could be thought that the exhilaration from making it out alive from a life-or-death crisis still remained inside of him. He had survived against an enormous number of living corpses, after all. Really, he had passed through the narrow possibility of one out of ten thousand.

Truth be told, when she found the two in front of the mansion, Yae was confident that it was a moment that surprised her the most in her whole life. She almost wanted to compliment herself for not showing that on her face.

It was just that Yae had the feeling that Al was perceiving something incomprehensible, something that couldn't be defined as 'exhilaration'.

Priscilla: "That is because that one is an idiotic man."

Priscilla's reply seemed like an answer to Yae's suspicions, but it actually wasn't. It was an airy answer that didn't pry into the core of the topic, but it didn't seem like she would be speaking about it any further.

Yae: "—There, Mistress. I'm done with your treatment. As usual, your nails are unbelievably beautiful."

With the feeling that she was wrapped in smoke, without any way to voice her suspicions any further, Yae finished working on Priscilla's nails. Her words weren't flattery, as Priscilla's innate beauty really did shine through even her fingertips.

Her whole body, no matter which part, was the personification of beauty. It was to the extent that it was unbelievable, even as a fellow woman.

Yae: "Should I call for Schult-chan right now? He could share your bed as always…"

Priscilla: "Not tonight. Perhaps I am doing this just in case, but I will wait and see how it will go for the night. I had burnt up the foreign matter that had gone inside me from the glass of liquor, however, there is no need to terrorize him.”

Yae: “I see. …The living corpses were too ambitious, trying to steal your body like that~.”

With the power of the crimson sword, Priscilla was able to burn whatever she wanted to burn at her will. It was only natural that whatever substance that entered her body was immediately dealt with. It wasn’t hard to imagine her promptly setting the parasite ablaze, right after she had put the glass that she had been given to her lips in an ostentatious display.

Yae: “Well then, Mistress, you must be tired, so I will be leaving now. Even Al-sama looked exhausted, so please rest well.”

Priscilla: “Mhm. —Yae, you have done well.”

Right as Yae was about to leave the room after performing a bow, Priscilla spoke her words of acknowledgement. Receiving that, Yae lowered her head even further, and disappeared in front of her master without leaving behind a single footstep.

Afterwards, Yae realized with a sudden jolt that this was the first time that Priscilla had acknowledged her efforts in such a natural manner.

It meant that Priscilla had recognized what Yae did today as a large, difficult task. Even Yae, having been demanded to take up a role that was unworthy for a simple chamberlain, had fatigue and the sense of fulfillment piling up on her at an equal rate.

If she were to put it honestly, today was the worst day—but it wasn’t… bad. Since the day she began working at the Barielle Mansion under Priscilla, Yae thought that today was the most interesting day that she ever had.

Yae: “Really, I have an unlucky nature, don’t I~. But…”

Opening and closing her palms, Yae blew out a small sigh.

It was fun. It wasn’t bad. It wasn’t as if she didn’t think, “If things continued to go like this.”

That was why—

"—That's enough."

In the midst of the depths of night, where the moon was concealed by the clouds and the insects' songs could not be heard, someone called out to Yae from behind.

"…"

Halting in her tracks, holding her breath, and stopping the trembling within her heart, Yae turned around.

She recognized the voice. Yet, she didn't remember the voice sounding so frigid.

Along with that, feeling apprehensive of the current situation to begin with, Yae put on her usual smile.

Yae: "Is it Al-sama~? What are you doing outside during midnight?"

Al: "…"

Yae: "I'm sure you're tired today, so I thought you were taking a rest. Or, is it that you couldn't sleep because you were overwrought, since you cut down too many people? If that's so, I think you shouldn't be there. If it's the other chamberlains, then you'll be forgiven even if you did some things with them, but any further than that…"

Al: "Is Princess's room. Yeah, I know."

Interrupted by a quiet tone of voice, Yae shut her mouth for a moment. Then, she put up the same smile.

Not yet. It wasn't over yet. He didn't know yet. She could still save the situation.

She could still make sure that these memorable days wouldn't end yet.

Yae: “Even more so if you understand. Of course~, if you would sneak into a woman’s bedroom, she’ll be a beautiful one, but doing that to Mistress is really difficult, as you would expect. If you’d like, then should I accompany you~? You see, with your hard work today, maybe you look a little more handsome to me, just a bit…”

Al: “You talk a lot when you’re troubled. But, that’s no use. I’ll create no openings.”

Yae: “…”

Al: “I’ll say it just once more. Beyond this area is Princess’s room. What are you going there for during a night like this?”

Receiving the words of Al, who seemed convinced about the matter, Yae dropped her shoulders with bated breath. With a slow shake of her head, her tied red hair swayed callously in the night.

So, this was it, was the conclusion that the determined Yae had drawn from her heart.

Her attempt to deceive him had no effect, so he probably wouldn’t listen to her excuses either. Al knew everything.

Yae: “I thought I was quite perfect at hiding it, so how did you find out?”

Al: “Don’t worry, you were perfect at it. It’s just that I’m the one who’s cheating, playing foul a little and all. …Though, it was an answer that I didn’t want to believe.”

Yae: “As ever, your words are difficult, and they’re not understandable to an uneducated person like me~.”

With a carefree attitude, Al was the man that acted like a jester, and he always positioned himself by Priscilla as if he was keeping her safe. Yae thought of it as him being cautious of her at all times, as well as being considerate towards her.

Whether that was hostility that came from deducing Yae’s aim, or whether it came from something else, was what Yae didn’t know herself. With the reason remaining unclear, the relationship between Yae and Al would come to an end.

Yae: “…If you could overlook this situation, I won’t cause any harm to you, Al-sama~?”

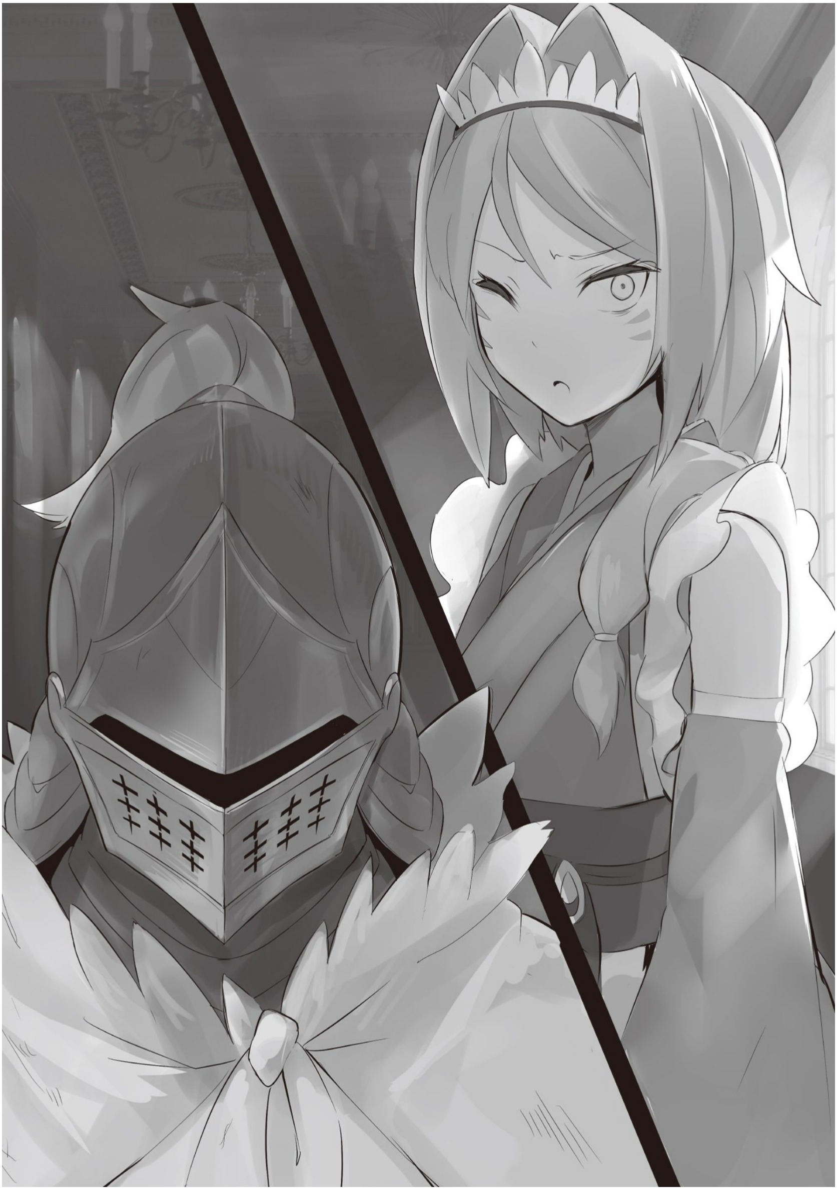

Al: “Maybe I would’ve listened to that, if there wasn’t anything that would be taken in return.”

Yae: “Is that so~. Yes, that’s a shame. But, if you say so—”

Lifting down the corners of her eyebrows, Yae acted as if she was going to talk about a different topic while lashing out her arm. Instantaneously, the thrown blade flew straight towards Al, stabbing him in the chest.

Al: “Guh,”

Yae: “I didn’t hate you, Al-sama.”

As Al let out a grunt of pain as he collapsed, the blade having gouged itself into his heart, Yae spoke to him with words that failed to serve as consolation.

Seeing Al’s death to the end, caused by the unfaltering strike that she had hit him with, Yae exhaled a short breath and turned her back on him, attempting to get back to her advancement towards Priscilla’s room.

Priscilla was extremely intuitive, so there wasn’t a chance that she would sleep through the whole ordeal. The possibility of her waking up from the dispute between Al and Yae was still there. Yae was ashamed to say it, but she would be out of moves to make if Priscilla did wake up. That’s why, before that—

Yae: “—I wanted to carry out my task, though~.”

With the Blue Dragon Sword held against the back of her neck from behind, Yae dropped her kunai in a low-spirited manner. Giving a fleeting glance backwards, she could see the man of the jet black helmet standing behind her.

The kunai that was supposed to have been stabbed into his chest fell onto the ground, and Yae saw that the tip of the blade had buried itself into the piece of wood that Al had hidden in the chest area of his clothes.

That was as if he knew where Yae was aiming for when she had thrown the kunai.

Al: “Didn’t I tell you? I cheated. The timing where you’ll kill me, too, and everything.”

Yae: “I don’t understand. …If I said that I would give up, will you stop?”

Al: “…In case you were really planning to come over to our side, then I’ve considered it. Until this morning.”

Yae knew that she was asking for too much when she directed the question at him, but what Al returned to her while sounding pained, was a strange answer.

He said that he would’ve arrived at a different conclusion if it was until this morning. He said that he might’ve considered Yae’s suggestion.

However, there was nothing to be troubled about now. What triggered it was—

Al: “On top of the rotten, muddy mountain of corpses, Priscilla chose me. That’s why I will choose her back. —Yae Tenzen. You are the woman who will kill Priscilla. I won’t let you kill her twice.”

Yae: “…I haven’t succeeded even once, though?”

Al: “Yeah, you’re right. To set that in stone, I’ll nip what is uncertain in the bud.”

Hearing Al’s words that were beyond her comprehension, Yae felt fear settle into her skin. That wasn’t towards the hostility that would make one imagine their death. The feeling was directed towards the abnormal fixation that Al harbored, something that was unfathomable to other people.

It was not because of her sense of duty, nor was it because it was her job. Trusting her own instinct and skill, Yae thought that she needed to kill this man.

Al: “Sorry. Me and you, were just unlu…no,”

Yae: “Sshhh—!”

In an instant, Yae twisted her body, aiming to strike her opponent’s windpipe with the blade that jumped out of her sleeve.

During that moment, right as the glimmering, black blade was about to reach its target, a voice was heard.

A voice.

Al: “—the stars were not in our favor.”

—The next day, one chamberlain from the Barielle Mansion resigned from their job because of familial matters.

It was an extremely rude way to quit their job, as the chamberlain hadn’t spoken a single word to her master, Priscilla, about it. However, when Priscilla had received the report, all she said was, “I see.”, and she said no more than that.

The chamberlain who quit was distressed by the emergency that had occurred a day before in the Barielle Domain, was what the steel-helmeted man who served Priscilla had been gossiping about.

The other chamberlains who were all her colleagues had sympathized strongly with her, but as they were buried under the work that their busy days brought forth, their interest in their former colleague had started fading away.

—Only the young, pink-haired butler would continue to regret being unable to say farewell.

As a matter that was settled as that, her existence would be continued to be hidden by the shadows of history.

—The unusual event in Barielle Domain that had occurred, and had been settled. This, was something such as a superfluous addition to that.

"…"

At the bottom of the dark, humid area, there existed a small silhouette. The silhouette was a single girl who looked child-like in appearance, having been held captive in rigid restraints.

In the midst of the darkness, the girl didn't move a single muscle, waiting quietly for the passing of time.

Before long, mice began congregating under her, their scuffling faintly audible as they went. Although they were mice, if there were only one or two, then they were still cute. However, the number of mice in this area was out of the question.

Exceeding the likes of a hundred, two hundred, a thousand, and two thousand, the mice that surrounded the captive girl in the dark were tremendous in numbers, standing still without letting out a single cry.

If this amount of mice gathered together, then they would be able to devour the likes of a young, little girl within minutes, without leaving any bones behind. However, the purpose of the mices' gathering was by no means because they viewed her as prey.

If anything, it was the opposite. —The mice did not view her as prey, but they were venerating her as something special.

That was the loyalty that was directed towards a queen, what could only be established by the dominance of their instinct, which was an impossible evil that was brought to fruition. The mice, having lost their free will, gazed at the girl with eyes that were identical to a corpse.

Describing their devotion as something that was directed towards a queen, paled in comparison to what it actually was. Instead of it being aimed at a queen, it was more of something that was pointed towards a god—towards the "maker" that had created them.

Taking control over everything, using everything that we could use, and creating a paradise, we will welcome our maker.

Understanding the unexpected chaoticness of her dear children such as that, however, the girl continued to wait in silence for the passing of time.

Until then—

“—Deliberation is required.”

END

Otto’s Bittersweet Peddling Trade Log

1

‘—Laddie, don’t you feel like it’s way too noisy?’

“Oh, is it?”

When he heard that familiar voice slide into his eardrum, the young man that was in the cargo wagon tilted his head.

He was a delicate, grey-haired man. He gave off a slight aura of passivity, yet his countenance was excellently kempt, and his attire was carefully selected, preventing him from giving other people a negative impression.

Rather than being liked, not being disliked was what he put more emphasis on. —A device with the purpose to avoid provoking anybody’s sensitivity in a bad way; that was how the youth saw his attire.

However, his desire to not stand out was not due to the need of sheltering himself from the world. The traveling merchant did all this for the sake of trading—the job that had become his livelihood, and wherein the impressions others had of him mattered.

The youth’s name was Otto Suwen. Somebody like him, who acted as an independent merchant as he traveled across every land, accompanied solely by his beloved dragon, was what one would call a wandering dreamer.

And now, Otto was in the middle of securing his freight inside the wagon of his dragon carriage.

He would transport his procured goods to another land, where he would make a profit by exchanging them for money or other goods. That was the simple way peddling worked, and Otto’s business was no exception to this rule.

Otto stopping by this city in the mountains this time, too, had been with the purpose of promoting the alcohol and other luxury items he had most recently procured. Now, with his business having ended peacefully and his sales having been a huge success, all he could find the will to do was departing, but—

‘Even so, laddie, aren’t you acting terribly absent-minded? Your transactions seem to have gone well in the end, but not even the hay is of good quality.’

“You are pretending to worry about me so that I get you delicious herb? You have become quite glib.”

‘I won’t pretend I don’t have any hidden motives, laddie, but it’s also true that I’m worried about you, you know? Though, of course, there’s nothing better than some good hay.’

“Yes, yes, I get it. Still, that seems to be caused by the crop failure that has been happening lately, so the toasts and luxurious banquets will have to wait for when we are back at the bigger city.”

‘And that’s the reason why you’re so anxious to depart? Suspicious, huh.’

The voice that spoke to Otto doubted his answer. Since they had been together for a long time, she was able to perceive trivial anomalies in him, which made her a reliable, but on the other hand problematic, partner.

In an attempt to not let her notice his internal impatience, Otto raised his voice deliberately,

“There is nothing wrong, really! Anyway, business here is over! ‘Time is money,’ like the Hoshin proverb…”

“—Mister merchant! Are you there, Mister traveling merchant?!”

“…”

Otto’s pretext was effortlessly eclipsed by the resounding, throaty voice of a man.

In both terms of volume and terms of intention, effortlessly.

‘Laddie, that.’

“I know, you do not have to say it, Frufoo.”

With despondency added into his voice, Otto covered his face with his hands as he squatted. If only he could get overlooked by staying huddled here. Without that fleeting hope coming true,

“Oooh! I have found you, Mister traveling merchant! This is good news! A sign of hope!”

Tearing off the wagon’s cover, the other man peeked inside, found Otto, and broke into a smile. The latter did not even get the energy to put into words how wrong it was to peek into someone else’s dragon carriage without permission.

Otto breathed out a sigh of resignation as he stood up reluctantly,

“Uuuh, if I remember correctly, you are…”

“Colin! Colin Lavril! I am the representative of Guineb!”

In contrast with Otto’s apathy, the man who introduced himself as Colin was quite intense.

Judging by his hair that was becoming thin, and his tidy mustache that had a white tint, his age was probably already around sixty; and despite this, his brimming spirit was so healthy that his saliva reached Otto, who was in the deepest part of the wagon.

“Well, Colin-san, what is it that you want from a humble traveling merchant like me…?”

“That is it! To tell the truth, I have a very urgent consultation to make, which is why I was searching for a traveling merchant!”

As he wiped his face with a hand towel, Colin replied avidly to the question that Otto made timidly. However, the fact that he was searching for him had already reached Otto’s ears a while ago.

“His voice could be heard from every part of the city anyway, though…”

“Did you say something?!”

“No, nothing really. Could you have misheard?”

“I see, mishearing! But if we interpret this as a divine omen, it turns out to be an excellent presage, indeed!”

Bringing it to a pretty forced positive conclusion, Colin clenched his fist with immense strength. Then he used his free hand to make a sign towards Otto, who was standing still.

“Well then! It would be of no use to talk in a place as cramped as this one! Let us go to my residence instead! There is an important matter I need to discuss with you there, Mister traveling merchant!”

The option to refuse seemed to no longer exist for Otto. Also, he wanted to avoid having his favorite dragon carriage dirtied by Colin’s saliva during the interrogation. Because, no matter who made fun of it for being cramped, to Otto, it was still the important dragon carriage which he had been moving with for many years.

“My condolences, laddie.”

When he was about to follow after the jubilant Colin, his partner spoke those words to him. The pity in that voice being genuine, Otto sighed deeply.

“And this is why I wanted to depart quickly…”

‘Doing it a few seconds earlier would’ve changed nothing. The problem is that you’ve got pretty bad timing, laddie.’

Without even complaining, Otto raised both hands in resignation.

“Hmm? Mister traveling merchant, may I ask who were you talking to?”

Suddenly, Colin, who had stopped walking, thoroughly surveyed his surroundings with his eyes, and tilted his head. In his eyes, Otto did not seem to be talking to anybody. And his understanding was not actually incorrect.

Because, in Otto's surroundings, there was no 'human' to whom one could talk.

Unfortunately, Otto had no reason to explain the details behind that. So, "No," Otto shrugged his shoulders in response to Colin's doubt.

"I was not talking to anyone. Could it be that you have misheard again?"

"Hmph, so I keep mishearing things… These omens of good luck are non-stop! I can feel hope surging as if from a fountain! Everything looks so promising, Mister traveling merchant!"

Otto thought of prolonged mishearing not as a good omen, but as a sign of an illness or something of the like; but, without particularly getting into the topic, "It seems so," Otto adorned his tired face with a vague smile.

'Good grief…'

Only the light blue-skinned land dragon observed Otto's insincere smile as if lamenting it.

2

'Guineb' was a city located in an inconspicuous area, hidden within the mountains of the southern lands of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

It was said that, originally, it was close to a mine from which magic minerals were extracted, and its urban development was caused by the workers who operated there and their families building their homes. And after that, people had started gathering in that small, which had gradually evolved into the city that it was now.

"However, by the time the city was done developing, the essential veins were already exhausted! My grandfather moved here hoping that it would become the second Costuul, but it seems he ended up disappointed!"

"The Mining City 'Costuul,' right? The everlasting ores there account for a huge part of the kingdom's magic stone industry. As one would expect from the city that is rumored to have been the Dragon's nest."

"Oooh! I see that you are knowledgeable! Just like any man who survives through business ought to be!"

Sitting in front of him was Colin, hurling eulogies at him one by one with his loud voice and saliva. Otto, sitting on the reception sofa, was in the process of dodging both the chatter and his saliva with an insincere smile.

The place where he had been brought to after having his departure interrupted was the best mansion in the city—although its scale was nothing compared to an actual mansion like the ones found in the Capital, it was certainly the best residence in Guineb.

It seemed like Colin had not lied when calling himself the city's representative.

Normally, Otto would have been pretty welcoming of a chance to become close to an influential person in that land; but in this one case, the circumstances were a little different. Therefore, now that he had had enough participation in his small talk, Otto raised his eyebrows and broached the main subject.

"I think that is enough, Colin-san. What is that business you have called me for?"

"Hm."

"As you know, I am a traveling merchant… I am the sort of person who hates, more than anything, to stay in one place for too long without earning a single coin. My negotiations in Guineb are already over. If possible, I would like to cross the mountains as soon as I can, so…"

"—That is it."

When he was already choosing his words at great speed in a desperate attempt to flee from the scene, Otto shut his mouth. Because Colin interrupted his pretext, and the palm of the man's hand was shoved in front of his face.

When Otto fell silent at his rudeness, “That is it,” Colin repeated,

“The consultation I wish to make, Mister traveling merchant, is precisely about mountain-crossing!”

Finally, thought Otto as he tried to keep Colin from discerning the tension in his own mind.

Mountain-crossing—that was, as of now, an inevitable part of the path that one needed to take to arrive in Guineb.

“…”

To travel back and forth to Guineb, which was within the mountains, one had to use the passage that stretched out from the mountain’s base. And on the way there, it was also necessary to cross through the bridge above the river that was on the valley floor; but the condition said bridge was currently in made its utilization impossible. And that meant—

“I guess that you are already aware, Mister traveling merchant, but the latest spell of rain has made the river on the valley floor overflow. Thanks to that, the bridge towards the mountain’s foot drifted away, leaving no method to arrive in the city other than crossing the intricate mountain road!”

Like Colin said, the bridge above the river had drifted away, leaving Guineb in the state of a solitary island.

Still, it was not completely isolated from the outside world either. If one gave up on crossing the river and used the harsh, twisted mountain road, it was possible to travel from the mountain’s base to the city and vice versa.

However, there was no doubt that it would take way more time than crossing the bridge, and that the path was too dangerous. Not many would go to such extents just to attempt to do business at Guineb, where there were no particularly impressing profits to be made.

Having developed within the mountains, Guineb had a certain degree of self-sustainability. Traveling merchants not visiting for a few months would be no matter of life or death. For that reason, it could be concluded that traveling merchants would not be appearing in the city for a while. —And that is where Otto had come in.

“I thought that I would be forced to endure this until the bridge was fixed, but you, Mister traveling merchant, have come with truly perfect timing! You see, although we are completely fine with what we have here, to get luxury items we have no choice other than to request them!”

“This is pretty good luck for both of us, then. Thanks to that, I can feel my pockets full after a long time, so…”

“It sure is! However, Mister traveling merchant, you are a special case! The bridge fell a few days ago, and you were already at Guineb when it happened, which means you took that troublesome mountain road before the bridge fell! Such a meaningless detour for a traveling merchant who hates to waste his own time!”

“…”

“Or could it be that you indeed know it, Mister traveling merchant? The ‘mountain-crossing’ method to arrive in Guineb! Regardless of how precipitous the mountain road is! And without any magic to cross the now bridge-less river!”

With Colin leaning towards him and looking at him with bloodshot eyes as he let his saliva fly, Otto gave a sigh of grief.

—Although his behavior lacked grace, Colin’s inference was, for the most part, correct.

In fact, Otto had decided to trade at Guineb after finding out the bridge had fallen. He had assumed that, in the situation Guineb was right now, the demand for luxury items would be high, and so he had gathered them up with great haste.

And unless Otto had broken through the river that had overflowed because of the rain, then he could not have wasted several days crossing through the precipitous mountain road on foot.

His most recent negotiations had been led to success by some method impossible for everybody but Otto.

“That method is a business secret of mine… Sorry, I cannot reveal it. If this strength is meaningful, it is because only I know it. If I were to disclose it…”

“Understandable! Very understandable! But there is a certain circumstance which makes me need it desperately!”

“Circumstance?”

Otto’s eyes widened, and Colin nodded several times with great intensity.

Then he turned back to look at the parlor’s entrance, and spoke, “Come!” in an unnecessarily loud voice. After that, the door opened, and a man with a pale and slender face timidly made his appearance.

His age seemed to be around five years older than Otto. The man, characterized by a mole next to his nose, gave off an impression of faintheartedness. Then he greeted Otto with a “H-Hello,” barely taking his eyes off the floor.

“This is my son, Arhim! The matter we were discussing is related to him! Hey! Use that mouth of yours and talk to Mister traveling merchant!”

“U-Uuh…”

Grabbing his son by the shoulders, Colin firmly made him sit next to himself. Shrunk in fear of his father’s vigor, Arhim kept alternately looking at Otto and averting his gaze.

An unnecessarily passionate father, and a son who lacked even the necessary energy; the two were each other’s exact opposite.

“So, Arhim-san, I have been told that you have something… a consultation for me.”

“S-So you see… er, at the mountain, uh, Marone is… so, uuuh…”

"—?"

"I have a daughter named Marone! Well, actually, she is my son's fiancée!"

In the end, as Colin could stand this no longer, he began the explanation in Arhim's stead. Since this also brought visible relief to his son's mind, Otto quietly lent an ear to the father's explanation.

The explanation included some derailments, but once it was concisely summarized—

"Arhim-san's fiancée, Miss Marone, was kidnapped by the ruffians settled in the mountain. And you wanted to get aid in order to bring her back…"

"That is right! Of course! Because we could not afford to rely on outsiders, I made an appeal in the city to see if any brave hero volunteered to help with the rescue… but the only result is that now I know that this place is full of cowards! How deplorable!"

"Cowards, you say…"

"Those men took a youthful damsel away! Back when I was young, such a crime would have never been forgiven! We would have gathered the citizens and torn those ruffians to pieces!"

In response to Otto's summary, Colin's face reddened as he called the citizens cowards with disdain.

He felt like the biggest one out of those cowards was the one shrinking next to Colin, but Otto sympathized with his wish to not blame the frightened Arhim or the citizens.

Stories of broke people who took weapons and degraded themselves to become bandits were quite common.

And between people who chose to steal to survive and people who had a home and a job, the readiness to wield a sword was extremely different. Cowardice, too, was a quality necessary to live.

Otto did not think that it was shameful to lead a modest life.

Therefore, he sympathized more with all those people Colin labeled as cowards.

“Even so…”

Otto put his hand on his chin and brooded over the misfortune that the ruffians had brought into Guineb.

Of course, it was indeed an unlucky incident, but Guineb’s contact with the outside world had always been pretty limited, which would make it a perfect hunting ground for bandits. The fact that problems like this one had not arisen until now felt rather miraculous.

Consequently, it would be indispensable to establish countermeasures to deal with these situations in the future.

“Mister traveling merchant! Are you listening?!”

“Eh? Oh, yes, pardon me. I was just thinking about something…”

Otto had no obligation to trouble himself with the defense of a city he did not even live in, but whenever he saw a hole so conspicuous, he could not help but feel the urge to cover it.

He thought of that as his own way to remind himself that, in life, self-preservation was of crucial importance.

“Anyway! This is a huge emergence! Miss Marone was kidnapped two nights ago! If she does not get help as soon as possible, her life will be in danger… and that is where you appeared, Mister traveling merchant, with some unknown method to cross the mountains! If that is not fate, then I do not know what it is!”

“A simple coincidence…”

“If it is not fate, then what is it?!”

His insistence was strong. His face was annoying. Otto shut his mouth at Colin’s force.

Still, leaving aside his animosity towards the coercive Colin, he was genuinely worried about the safety of the woman that had been kidnapped by the ruffians. Otto was not insensitive enough to use self-preservation as an excuse to ignore the suffering of a helpless woman. Colin's plan to form a rescue team was definitely more humane than giving up and leaving her to her own devices.

"…Uuuh."

"So, what do you say, Mister traveling merchant?!"

As Otto oscillated between his sensibility as a person and his instinct as a merchant, that question was thrown at him. However, from the moment he had been called to this mansion, he did not have any choice left as Otto.

If he rejected Colin's proposal, Otto would be remembered as the one who forsook the fiancée of the city representative's son, and he would not be able to do business normally in Guineb ever again.

But if he agreed to Colin's proposal and disclosed everything, he would forsake the advantage that only he had, and that would be a huge loss too.

Therefore, there was only one choice that Otto could make here.

"The method I used to come here, I cannot tell you that."

"Hoh! Mister traveling merchant, will you forsake my innocent daughter…?!"

"But listen to this!"

When Colin's expression turned grim, Otto shoved his hand towards the man's face as if getting his revenge, thoroughly interrupting his noisy voice.

When he saw Colin's surprise, he donned a small smile in an attempt to not give off that impression,

"I will personally send the rescue appeal to the outside. Meanwhile, the citizens will begin the bridge's repair as soon as possible."

And just like that, he corrected the proposal, in order to end up not with huge losses, but with minimum losses.

3

‘Laddie… Come on, you know the one who got manipulated back there was you.’

“Excuse me? I would say it was the best choice I could make if I wanted to keep the damage at the minimum. Even I am aware of how excessive this new baggage I have taken is, you see.”

Sat on the driver’s seat as he held the reins, Otto protested, with visible annoyance on his lips, towards his partner. But to his proposal, ‘Yeah, sure,’ his partner gave an exasperated answer, sounding as if she was already used to this.

“Muu…”

As much as he attempted to look displeased, deep down Otto acknowledged that his partner was right.

Honestly, it was indeed true that he had been thoroughly manipulated. Both as a merchant and in the humanitarian aspect, Otto had been fully duped by Colin; it was that simple.

“I knew it, I should have pretended to not hear anything and departed at once. And thanks to that miscalculation, I got into this trouble… But there is a woman in danger, so, well, you know.”

‘Now that you know that, you can’t just pretend you don’t see it. Laddie, there’s no way you can be a bad person.’

“Well, you see. Even I have an order for what is important to me. And if someone tries to alter that, I will respond. You are also one of those things after all, Frufoo.”

‘Yeah, thank you very much.’

When he heard her apathetic reply, “Muuu…” he complained once again, but the only thing that his partner did was chuckle.

—Right now, just as Colin had requested, Otto was heading towards the closest city to Guineb.

He could collaborate to save a woman, but he could not disclose the information that he had. That was the conclusion, or rather, desperate measure, that the afflicted Otto had reached at the interstice between his human self and merchant self.

Of course, his collaboration was not entirely out of goodwill either. It turned out that he had made the Lavril family promise, in written form, that he would receive preferential treatment whenever he came to do business in Guineb in the future.

So, if one looked at the solid facts, he had closed a deal that, on top of helping somebody else, would also be lucrative for his business. Him still feeling defeated despite all this was probably due to his own lack of generosity.

'Meh, I don't think it's that, I think it's just that they've got you tied by the neck.'

Otto's partner read his mind, making Otto breathe out a sigh.

Behind him, inside the moving carriage's wagon, there was a silhouette that did not belong to his cargo. It was a man cowering and holding his own knees, the one who had had his fiancée stolen, the poor Arhim.

When making the deal with Otto, the one thing Colin had not allowed Otto to reject was this man's company during the journey.

"From the moment your fiancée gets stolen, you're already a failure as the Lavril heir! And if it turned out that, on top of that, you just sat the whole time watching my daughter get rescued, there'll be no way to get your sunken honor back!!"

That was what Colin had stated as he pushed his son from behind.

It was not like he thought that it was not reasonable, but Otto was the one in charge of supervising Arhim during his redemption journey. Despite his strong opposition, in the end, the pressure had left him with no choice other than accepting Arhim's company.

Thanks to that, the ambiance in the dragon carriage was drearier than ever.

Arhim had seldom opened his mouth ever since the journey's beginning. Considering the 'Divine Protection of Wind Break' was active in the carriage, it was most likely not a matter of physical comfort, but of feelings.

"I see that when family matters and woman problems get mixed, the only result is literally always going to be a disaster."

'Now that's quite deep when you say it, laddie. I wonder, laddie, is that girl still anxious for you to return to your hometown so she can burn you at the stake?'

"Just the thought of it makes me feel depressed, so I would rather not think about it."

When he heard her speak of the problem he had left behind in his hometown, Otto grimaced and shook his head sideways.

He was a traveling merchant, obviously, but it was for a different reason that, years ago, he had become unable to go back to the city where his old home was. If he went back, he would cause trouble for his family. And his own life would be at risk too.

"Such absurd circumstances, seriously. But I'm used to it. …It's horrible to get used to these things, isn't it."

"—Who, who are you talking to?"

When that voice suddenly reached him, Otto's shoulders rose, and he turned back. He did and saw Arhim leaning from the wagon into the driver's seat, even though he was holding his own knees a while ago.

"I heard you talking, but there's no here… and, uh, I found that creepy."

Arhim restlessly looked around, puzzlement showing on his face after confirming that there was no one there indeed.

“Aaah, yes; to tell the truth, I have a habit of mumbling quite large monologues.”

“I-Is that so…?”

“You see, when you are a traveling merchant, a big part of life is traveling alone with nobody to have a conversation with. I guess it is just natural for a lot of us to get the habit of talking to the air, like me.”

“…That’s pitiful. Good thing I’m not a merchant or anything.”

His words of compassion made Otto feel the strong blood link between Arhim and Colin. A father and son whose attitudes and behaviors were as different as their natures were similar.

“What is the matter, though? We are still pretty far from the city…”

“I-I need to pee. Can’t we stop over there for a moment?”

“Aaah, I see. That is certainly a problem.”

When it came to bodily functions, it was reasonable even for Arhim to muster his almost nil courage. Being soiled by the father’s saliva and then also being wet by the son would be way too miserable for both the carriage and Otto.

Pulling the rains immediately, Otto parked the carriage at an edge of the mountain road. He saw Arhim descend from the carriage, after saying his thanks, and then head towards a thicket that was away from their path.

‘That’s something he should’ve taken care of before departure.’

“He is not used to traveling. Just let him off, please.”

Showing his exasperated partner a bitter smile, Otto quietly waited for Arhim to come back from that. They still had a long way to go, and it made him heavy-hearted to think that this silent journey would continue for a long while, but—

“H-Hey! Come here for a bit!”

"Hm?"

Interrupting Otto as he was deep in thought, Arhim called. Wondering what was wrong, Otto looked around the forest, from the driver's seat, with strained eyes, but he could not detect Arhim's silhouette.

"Arhim-san? What happened?"

"C-Come here! A bug I've never seen before… b-bit me in a weird place!"

"What do you mean, a weird place… Please give me a break…"

When that distasteful sentence reached his ears, Otto jumped off the driver's seat as he scratched his head. He pushed through the thicket and advanced into its depths, and there, in a location completely separated from the carriage, he could see Arhim's back.

Wondering why anyone would choose a place like that to pee, Otto dropped his shoulders. Getting bit by insects was nothing uncommon when traveling, but getting bit in weird places was, by itself, a huge problem.

"Arhim-san, the place where it bit you… never mind, you do not have to show me. It can become quite serious if it swells, though, so the sooner you tell me—."

It was possible to treat, for now, with the medicine that was packed in the carriage. That was what he tried to tell him.

The next instant.

"—Guh?!"

Otto's sight got greatly blurry when he received that impact. Right after he felt what he thought was grass under his feet, the back of his head was hit by a hard, heavy object.

He let a cry escape and tried to stay firm, but it was of no use. Shook and unable to support the weight of his head, his body tottered. Without even getting the chance to take a defensive stance, he plummeted to the ground.

He hit his face. The pain. The taste of dirt inside his mouth.

“…”

His consciousness faded away. While it faded, Otto thought vaguely.

—I sure hope the place where I fell isn’t near to where Arhim peed.

4

“—You’re awake?”

“…Ueh?”

With his face rubbing against cold fabric, Otto made an inane sound and opened his eyes.

His sight was blurry. After blinking several times, his eyes’ focus gradually lined up with the world, finally allowing Otto to see the person who was in front of him, looking at his face—a red-haired woman.

A woman with bright red hair tied behind her head. Her eyes had an intense brilliance to them, and her pretty face gave off an air of tenacity, but her beauty was clouded by the faint signs of fatigue and the dirtiness of her clothes.

“Wh-Where…?”

“Sh. Be quiet. I don’t want those guys up there to notice.”

The first thing that came out of his thirsty mouth was a hoarse voice.

In response to that sound, the woman put a finger to her lips, and then pulled a water bucket, which was right beside her, towards her. She proceeded to take some water out with her hands and let it dampen Otto's lips as he panted. Thanks to the liquid, which tasted like he was literally absorbing the woman's kindness, Otto slowly came to his senses.

"Thank you, very much. Uh, you are…"

"Slave Number One. Or Captive Princess Number One. You're Number Two. Choose whichever you want."

Even while they were having such a trivial exchange, it was obvious just how desperate their situation was. Hearing Otto reply like that despite said situation made the woman's lips break into a small smile.

"I wasn't expecting a guy with a face like yours to be that tough. I'm Marone. Allow me to welcome you, my esteemed junior slave."

"Such a welcome is not very pleasant to hear upon entrance, senior… Wait, did you just say you are Marone-san?"

"Yeah, that's what I just said."

In front of the puzzled woman, Marone, Otto tried to hold his own head. But sadly, his right arm, which was inconveniently linked to the wall, did not allow him to do so.

Otto turned to look at his right arm, only to find it linked to the wall by a chain, its freedom stolen.

"…This is bad."

"Is it? Don't you think it's better than a collar? After a long time of complaining I got them to treat me better."

"I'm not sure if this is actually a treatment improvement, or a mere stopgap to distract you, Miss… I mean, you're Marone-san, and I'm in this situation, so…"

The fact that his brain worked so ordinarily in a moment like this made him feel bitter.

Inside Otto's mind, the story he had heard from Colin at Guineb and his current situation connected instantly.

Marone being captive, and Otto becoming captive after getting beaten. A situation in which he was anchored to the wall and was called Slave Number Two or Junior Slave. —This was, unmistakably, the ruffians' hideout.

"Now that I look at it in this new perspective… Yes, it's a horrible scene."

After he observed his surroundings with strained eyes, there was a sudden drop in Otto's mood. And that was to be expected, for the place where they were being kept was a prison furnished with metal bars and stone walls.

Dirty fabric, fragments of fine porcelain, and other things of the like were scattered on the cold stone floor. Although a passage stretched out from the other side of the bars, the faded lighting made its end invisible. Still, judging from how cold the air was, he felt like they were trapped in some place below the ground, like a cave or something similar.

"Could it be a passage made to facilitate mining at a now disused mine?"

"Wow, you're smart. So you're just an unlucky guy who got involved with them by pure chance?"

"Aaah, no idea. I really cannot deny that 'unlucky' bit, though."

Feeling his cheeks stiffen at Marone's question, Otto confirmed that there were no human silhouettes in the prison, except for her and himself. For reasons of space, it was hard to imagine that were was another prison nearby, but,

"Excuse me, was I the only one brought here? Or did I come with someone else?"

"It was only you, yeah… Did you come with a friend?"

"Well, we were not close enough for me to call him a friend, but he was not someone I would feel good abandoning, either. …He was a spindly man, taller and older than me.”

“Spindly, older… Any other characteristic?”

While Marone pondered, “Oh, yes,” Otto put his free left hand on his chin.

“Now that I think of it, he had a big mole next to the nose. Also, he looked unhealthy, and that is all I…”

“…Okay, that’s enough. That’s enough, really.”

“—?”

“So that coward came to drop someone who didn’t even know a thing about all this, didn’t he—!!”

“Huuuh—?!”

Marone’s reddened, angry face and loud bellow made Otto widen his eyes in shock.

Otto was witnessing such insanity from the same person who, a while ago, had told him to stay silent. Otto’s consequent surprise was considerably big too, so their voices ended up producing a colossal echo in the passage.

“Hey, don’t you think your impulsivity could have caused us a lot of trouble?!”

“Haaah, haaah… Sorry. I should learn to manage my anger. I’m still a novice at this senior slave thing, okay?”

“I am sure your aptitude as a slave is not the problem! Wait, what the…?”

Marone apologized for her blunder with her eyes cast downward, and Otto tried to inquire about the meaning of her words. However, he was interrupted by the sound of multiple footsteps that came close—which belonged to the men of vulgar appearance who appeared on the other side of the prison.

Coarse smiles showed on their faces as they clapped when they saw Otto awake.

“So you’re finally awake, lil’ slave Number Two.”

“…That nickname was not some prank by Marone-san?”

“It’s the tradition or something, you see. Though it’d be great if it could just quickly rot and go extinct along with these scums.”

“That’s our Number One, as full of life as always.”

As they whistled, the men laughed Marone’s invective off. They were a group of bandits, every single one of them having a slovenly appearance and an unrefined attitude, so simple that they could very well be characters from a picture book.

There was no doubt that they were the bandits he had heard about in Guineb. A disused tunnel getting made into their hideout was, considering the way the city of Guineb had developed, very ironic.

“If we ignore the lack of sunlight, living here might not actually be that bad, right?”

“You heard that?! It’s a good thing Number Two doesn’t know when to shut up! ‘Cause you know, it’s too hard to get any information out of them when they’re tight-lipped. And those guys ain’t even fun to torture.”

“What happened to my land dragon and my carriage? I think they were parked nearby.”

Paying no attention to the bandits’ mockery, Otto voiced what was currently his biggest concern.

It would have been absurd for them not to notice that Otto’s dragon carriage was parked near the mountain road. Of course, he would also expect his carriage and cargo to be seized. He did not think they had any reason to kill a land dragon that was docile towards people, though.

“Relax. Your business tools, your fortune, everything’s safe with us.

As for your land dragon, it looks like she doesn't love you anymore now that you're a slave. She turned her back on you just like that, and now she's workin' for us. I've always wanted a dragon helper, so it's all perfect."

"Is that so? That's what matters…"

He bit his lip in frustration as he cast his eyes downward, and the men laughed, making fun of his bad loser attitude.

On the receiving end of that, Otto masked the strong ache in his chest. The situation had already gotten pretty bad by now, but there was still something that he needed to verify. So he asked—

"—What happened to the man I was with?"

"Oh?"

"I refuse to believe you were so absorbed in me and my carriage you did not notice him."

He wanted to confirm Arhim's safety, since he was not here. However, Otto was having very pessimistic thoughts about this. He could not be seen inside the prison. If he had been caught alive, he should have been here, regardless of whether he would be treated as a slave or not. And yet, he was not.

But the men looked at each other and, with incredible ease, disproved Otto's worst guess.

"Aaah, that dude. The man you were with! If you're talkin' 'bout him, we just let him go. By this time he's probably back at the city as if nothin' happened, and gettin' comforted by his noisy father."

"…You let him go?"

"Yeah, since he gave us a present. He was so scared. Even we can be merciful sometimes, you know? Ain't that right, guys?!"

In response to the man's dramatic expression, the surrounding others cheered in approval.

But Otto was not feeling it. The men had freed Arhim, that was what they said. They had simply freed a person who had seen their faces and knew of their crimes.

What was the meaning of that?—When he arrived at that conclusion, Otto was aghast.

“…Arhim-san was your accomplice?”

“Don’t call him our accomplice! Be a little more elegant and call it a cooperative relationship, slave Number Two!”

The affirmation that supported Otto’s guess overlapped with the sublime burst of laughter coming from the men.

He had accompanied him during the journey in the carriage, made him stop the carriage halfway, pretending he was going to pee, and then he had lured him into the thicket; everything had been done for two purposes: sealing a hindrance’s mouth and acquiring a new slave.

That man had artfully manipulated him. His biggest miscalculation had been to think of Arhim as nothing more than a timid coward. Now he could not laugh at Colin anymore.

“Well, stay like that for a while. We think our time around here’s already runnin’ out. For now, just enjoy everything your temporary slave lives have to offer until then.”

As if he could see the silent Otto’s stupefaction, the man mocked him as he rang the metal bars.

“Enjoy what? Next time you get close, I’ll bite your fingers or whatever into a thousand pieces!”

“Oh, Number One, you’re sooooo scary. I guess you’re still hurt ‘cause of that man ditchin’ you.”

Leaving behind those frivolous words, the men left the two slaves behind as they moved away from their cell.

Until the sound of their footsteps became inaudible, Otto and

Marone said nothing.

During that time, the passage's lighting faded, letting the faint darkness spread over the cold prison once again.

5

"First of all, that man and I weren't engaged or anything."

"Oh, I see, what else…?"

To the disproportionate disclosure of facts, Otto reacted weakly, with a pitiful expression and voice.

A while after being mocked by the bandits, Otto had talked to Marone inside the faint darkness, thus beginning a mutual information exchange with the purpose of getting to know their circumstances.

Over the course of it, they had talked about the request Otto had received at Guineb, and they eventually brought up the topic of Arhim and Marone's relationship; but the revelation she suddenly dropped was way too much for Otto to process.

Just what was the truth and what was a lie, and how dark was the city of Guineb?

"So, is Colin-san conspiring with Arhim too? Are both father and son collaborating with the ruffians near the city and preying upon the residents?"

"Hey, I don't think the situation is as hopeless as you put it. Colin-san may not realize he has a distasteful habit of never listening to others, but he's not one to get involved in twisted stuff."

"Well, he certainly did not seem to be a very good actor…"

That person, put in kind words, was not hypocritical; and put in harsh words, he was like a fair of malicious sincerity.

Now that Marone herself denied Colin's involvement, Otto wondered if Arhim's individual crime—which was actually not individual because he collaborated with the ruffians, was truly one.

“But, in that case, how do you explain the contradiction between Colin-san’s statements and the facts?”

“Hmm. Well, this is gonna sound weird, but look, aren’t I a beauty?”

“I find it annoying when people praise themselves with such incredible frankness, but it is true. You are a beauty.”

“So, what if Arhim thought having a beauty as his fiancée would help him avoid his father’s mockery? Considering what kind of father-son relationship they have, it makes sense.”

“No, no, that can’t be…”

When he said that, Otto remembered what he had seen of their relationship and shut his mouth.

Colin took every chance he had to steal his son’s right to make decisions. Maybe that had become unbearable, even for somebody as submissive as Arhim. However, him sacrificing Otto and Marone to keep his pretensions was probably something Colin wanted to avoid.

“You see, some days ago, Arhim took me to the forest saying he had something to tell me. I knew the bandits were in the mountain, and more than two girls had been kidnapped already, so I didn’t want to…”

“Hey, hey, hey, wait. Please wait.”

Information Otto could not afford to let slide came up, and thus, Marone replied to Otto’s interruption with a “What?” and a displeased face.

“Uh, Marone-san, you were not the first one to be kidnapped by the bandits?”

“Of course not. There were a lot more people. When I got here, I was slave Number Two. …Do you get what that means?”

“Th-The numbers have advanced…?”

It was not hard to imagine what had happened to the previous Number One and the rest. Once a young woman was caught by the ruffians, her fate was either to become a plaything or to be sold off as a slave.

“Don’t worry. They haven’t laid a single finger on me. …I’m high-quality, so they can sell me at an equally high price, they say.”

“…”

“Also, it seems those guys have something to ask you. That’s what I heard when they brought you here. They need your collaboration to cross the mountains safely, I think.”

“…Colin-san and Arhim were the only ones supposed to know about that, though.”

“My condolences.”

Producing a loud sound with the chains that restrained her as she spoke, Marone made Otto’s bad luck reach the limit. Still, thanks to that, he was able to make out the whole situation.

At first, he had found it suspicious. Despite the fact that it had everything that a scoundrel would feel attracted to, Guineb had, miraculously, never met with misfortune until now—and the reason was no miracle. It was just that, until now, everyone in the city had been closing their eyes to the outrage and pretending that everything was fine.

“But Colin-san actually took action this time. —Could it be that the fact that his son’s fiancée was kidnapped by the bandits made his patience give out?”

“To begin with, it was that very same son who handed his fiancée over to the bandits, but whatever. Was he that scared of his father seeing through his pretensions or something? …And now even you’re pretty deep into this embroil, Number Two.”

“It is the same embroil you are in, Marone-san.”

Everything had originated from the discord between a father and a son, the latter, who had a hoard of immature grudges inside him, using the city's most beautiful woman as a convenient lie for the sake of his own pretensions. And then there was Otto, a poor victim of the circumstances.

"…Is this seriously the pinnacle of my bad luck?"

Seeing Marone in this embroil was pitiful too, but it would never be the same degree of pitiful that his own case was.

When he thought he had found a sales plan that was perfect and exclusive for him, all of his earnings, including his dragon carriage, had been taken from him, and now the only thing awaiting him was a life crisis and a slave status—

"Hey, chill, no need to be so pessimistic. I'm sure there's good things in life too. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and someone'll come to help us."

"Help us, the unfortunate ones who ended up dragged into a problem caused by someone else's pretensions? Who would?"

"Uh, a traveling knight that happens to pass by?"

A rather wonderful thought, yes, thought Otto, admiring the strength of Marone's heart.

Marone, whose time in this prison had surely been way longer and more severe than Otto's, had not lost a single fragment of the spirit she had back when chains were not binding her.

That was a virtue. A precious virtue that shone as brightly as a miracle in a city like Guineb.

"But I am a merchant."

—Pessimism, that was all he needed. In business there was neither 'absolute' or 'relief.'

Therefore, Otto, pessimistic as he was, kept thinking about the worst of the worst one time after another.

Somebody coming to help them, something so convenient was not going to happen. Because what a traveling merchant ought to trust was not fate, but the fortune that they held firmly in hand, and nothing more.

6

“Still, we were also pretty damn lucky to have caught a ‘protege’ in the end!”

Before Otto, who was tied in the dragon carriage’s wagon, one of the bandits spoke as he laughed loudly.

The morning after that conversation at the prison, Otto had been loaded into his own carriage as cargo, and now he was being threatened by the men to guide them safely across the mountains.

Even though he had only spent one day captive, the sunlight and air from the outside felt extremely yearned for. —But he did not even have time to fully experience that pleasure.

Satiated with their misdeeds in Guineb, the bandits planned to cross the mountains and move to their next hideout before Colin sent an advanced subjugation team out. For that purpose they were using Otto’s carriage and land dragon, with him and Marone being treated as booty.

“Hey, Number Two. Can’t you do something about this situation with your divine protection?”

Inside the wagon, Marone asked in a low voice. From the bandits’ perspective, their treatment of Marone, who was the best article in their booty, was not bad. At least, it was a thousand times better compared to Otto’s, for he had been sloppily tied and thrown into the wagon. However, that was just another facet of their difference in luck.

“I guess it depends on the definition of ‘something.’ Do you have any rough expectations?”

Borrowing Marone’s hand, Otto put his back against the wall as he tried everything he could to sit. When she heard Otto’s words, “Let’s see," Marone pondered,

"The next instant, all the villains will be utterly smashed to bits… Something like that."

"What kind of things are you expecting from my divine protection?!"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not expecting things from your divine protection, I'm expecting things from you, Number Two."

"From someone whose name you don't even know?! How?!"

Otto raised his voice in response to Marone's words. Marone looked at him and donned a small smile, but that smile was ephemeral and their exchange was hollow.

The hope Marone put into words did not represent any serious expectation about Otto's divine protection either. She was simply resisting to keep the despair before her eyes from gnawing at her heart.

"Number Two, your divine protection is the 'Divine Protection of Guidance,' right? That's what you said, I think."

"—Yes, that is right. Unfortunately, my divine protection is not powerful enough to smash my opponents to bits."

The 'Divine Protection of Guidance'—that was the trump card Otto had shown the bandits.

A way to cross the mountains that was not using the fallen bridge nor the steep mountain road—since Arhim had told the bandits that Otto happened to know that, he would not be able to feign ignorance. Therefore, before they resorted to torture, Otto himself had decided to reveal that he was a 'protege.'

Divine protections were blessings bestowed upon people at birth—in general, they were the kind of superpowers one could call blessings.

Having one of those rare powers that were bestowed upon one person in a thousand was like having a special talent that nobody else had. Their effects functioned in a way different from how magic did, and a lot of them had effects that surpassed the limits of human understanding.

The divine protection that Otto had exposed was also irrefutably an ability outside human understanding.

“It is quite difficult to use. This divine protection is not as omnipotent as its name might suggest.”

“But it’s thanks to that divine protection that you were able to go from the prison to the exit while blindfolded, isn’t it? That’s impressive.”

Whether his words were humility or self-deprecation, Marone hurriedly advocated for Otto.

Marone was talking about the moment when Otto had demonstrated his divine protection in front of the bandits.

Otto had to prove that his presence would be necessary for the bandits’ escape when crossing the mountains. There, Otto had explained his divine protection, and, in order to demonstrate the effects of the ‘Divine Protection of Guidance,’ he had traversed an entire intricate tunnel, blindfolded all the way through.

“The shortcut we will take is not the mountain road you know, but I will let you be the judge of its effectiveness.”

“Besides, now that they know you’re a ‘protege,’ they aren’t gonna kill you. They were rejoicing because ‘proteges’ sell well, actually.”

“Yaaaay, I’m so glad to have been born as a ‘protege’—is not what I would say! To begin with, if I did not have a divine protection, I would not have been caught in this.”

Although popular belief stated that divine protections were always convenient, there were a lot of hardships that only ‘proteges’ understood. And the nature of those hardships could not be understood even by fellow ‘proteges.’

—The holder of a divine protection for hearing too much and the holder of a divine protection for seeing too much had very different tribulations.

Therefore, Otto decided to dodge Marone's words with nothing more than a vague smile. She did not say that out of malice, and it was true that he was still alive thanks to his divine protection.

"If I did not have a divine protection, huh…?"

"Hm? You said something, Number Two?"

"No, just something trivial. Leaving that aside, may I ask for one thing?"

History had no records of a situation being solved by complaining. So Otto hid what he murmured earlier behind a bitter smile and asked a single favor of Marone.

"…"

When she heard the petition, Marone's eyes widened, and she tried to ask about Otto's intentions, but,

"Come on, time to go! Make way, slaves! We can't all fit in there if it's too cramped!"

As saliva flew, the bandits got into the wagon. In that instant, Otto and Marone were separated, and the wagon was dominated by the turbulent men's presence and stink.

One of the bandits got onto the driver's seat, took the reins and ordered the land dragon to start running. The land dragon showed signs of hesitation for an instant, but soon the carriage started moving slowly.

"Well, you're in charge of guidin' us, Number Two. You're the only one we can rely on. And if you can't, Number One's gonna have a very bad time."

Thrusting a knife towards Marone, he threatened him with a coarse smile and barbaric attitude. In response, Otto obeyed, using his divine protection to direct the carriage's course towards a shortcut.

"Good thing you're cooperative. Thanks to that we didn't have to go thru any complicated process."

"Complicated process, you mean…"

"I'm talkin' 'bout some light torture. Pacifist meetings make my heart hurt, don't you see?"

The man beside him said casually as he brought a stained club to the palm of his hand. When he looked at it, the club's tip was tinted dark red, giving him a rough idea of what their pacifism was like. Anyway—

"Head to the right from here, please. After advancing a little, we will enter a path that looks quite narrow, but it is just wide enough for the carriage to barely pass, so you can go ahead without stopping."

Before he was called from the driver's seat, Otto contributed showing them the way by own initiative. When they heard Otto point several paths hidden in nature, the bandits, who were a bit doubtful at first, finally comprehended the power of the 'Divine Protection of Guidance,' and started recognizing him as a 'protege.'

"Damn tho, this guy really turned out to be a great find. That coward finally did somethin' useful."

Maybe because calm surged up within his mind, one of the men spoke contentedly. Otto easily guessed who the word 'coward' in that phrase was referring to.

"What was the cooperative relationship you all had with Arhim-san like?"

"What? You wanna know 'bout the guy who sold you? I'll tell you then."

Seeing negative emotions in Otto's gaze, the man continued as he chuckled to himself.

"After we messed with that city a few times, the guy came to our hideout along with a woman. Then he said he could bring us women regularly in exchange for us not doing stuff in the city."

"…So you accepted that offer?"

"No, idiot. As if women were enough. We told him to send alcohol and food too. And that's how things with that guy started. Looks like we actually made his old man angry this time, tho."

To summarize, Arhim's dealings with the bandits were a choice made by him, and they were going fairly well until the problem with Marone.

—To have peace in exchange for the citizens' sensibility, that was basically it.

"That is all I wanted to know."

When he showed his understanding through a nod, "Oh, yeah?" the man ceased his boasting. Thanking him for that, Otto took a glance at the side, where Marone was.

"…"

Marone's face, after lending an ear to the talk and finding out the truth behind the town she had grown in, looked pale.

Now she knew the truth, but that was not necessarily comforting. Furthermore, the emotion called comfort only meant something for those who remained after the tragedy. For Otto and Marone, there was no future.

But the condition for that ending to arrive was that things continued as they were currently.

'—'

The bandits around Otto did not have any reaction in particular to the strange sound that came out of his lips. They had been informed that this was an absolutely necessary process for Otto to use the 'Divine Protection of Guidance.' It was a necessary ritual for Otto to get information from his divine protection. —That was the lie that he had told them.

"—Number One."

Immediately after the strange voice ceased, Otto spoke with human words. When she heard that call, Marone's shoulders went up. There was a promise they had previously made.

This road was the designated place, and 'Number One' was the key word—

"—Gh."

Clenching her teeth, Marone grabbed the chain linked to her arm and clung to the wall. Her behavior surprised the bandits, but Otto strongly coiled the chain that linked him to the wall around his wrist.

And before the bandits could grow suspicious of such behavior—

'—Laddie, don't you dare die, please!'

Right after the balanced mix of trust and recklessness that was his partner's voice, a violent impact rocked the carriage, knocking it over and throwing out, along with the men's screams, everything that was not secured inside the wagon.

—In that rift of the forest, all of them fell to the bottom of the valley, heads facing downwards.

7

"How did we get saved in the end…?"

In the treatment center's waiting room, Marone wondered, a bandage around her head.

Her confusion was justified. However, Otto—severely wounded, with bandages coiled around his head and neck, and one of his arms hanging from a sling, shrugged his unharmed shoulder.

“Well, I think we do not need to worry about such trivial things. There wasn’t any traveling knight making a gallant entrance, but we’re alive, so not everything is bad.”

“I don’t know, Number Two, I kinda get the feeling you’re messing around…”

“By chance, since we were linked to the wagon, we stayed there, but the people who weren’t were unfortunately thrown out. And right next to a precipice, too. They definitely had no luck.”

“I think I remember that, everything was spinning, right? But, hmmm…”

Seeing the incomprehension on Marone’s face, Otto donned a bitter smile.

The two were at a treatment center located in the city in the mountain’s foot, their place of destination. Like Otto declared, he had successfully guided them across the mountain. However, in that place, none of the people who supposedly accompanied him during the mountain crossing were present; the only one there was the woman who joined him midway, the senior slave—Marone, who was not a slave anymore.

“Marone-san, while you were receiving treatment, I went to do some small reports on my own. I reported that the bandits were using the tunnel, and also that Arhim was secretly collaborating with them.”

“…So, will they send the kingdom’s army to Guineb?”

“I do not think it will become a large-scale thing, but an official investigation will be done. Arhim will not be able to make any excuses, so he should get arrested, no doubt about it.”

As soon as the broken bridge was fixed, an investigation would begin in Guineb. It was possible for Arhim to flee before that if he used the steep mountain road, but he probably did not have the courage nor the willpower to do so.

Although Arhim was the one directly responsible for the slave trading, the origin of his deviation had been the discord between him and Colin. The Lavril house was in a desperate position in Guineb. Even if that was not the case, it was still the city that had allowed its own women to become sacrifices. A mere apology would never be enough to fix everything.

“By the way, Marone-san, you also have the choice to join the investigation and return to Guineb…”

“Ufufufu, hell no.”

“Exactly what I thought.”

It was a fact that, whether Arhim was arrested or not, not many in the city would want to get involved with her. Not wanting any part in such a situation, Marone firmly stretched her back as she stood up.

“It’s all right. I don’t have any relatives, nor a family that’d get sad because of me not being there. This was an excellent chance… a new beginning.”

“Now that optimism is too impressive coming from a person who almost got sold against her will by some insignificant men.”

“I know, right? Number Two and junior slave, you really should respect your senior a bit more.”

“Yes, sure. Well, there is something I would like to gift my Number One and senior.”

In response to the surprised Marone’s “Eh?” Otto showed the leather bag that he had been hiding behind his back. Taking it instantly, Marone peeked into that heavy bag, and when she saw what was inside, she was rendered speechless.

“This is…”

“To tell the truth, it seems like there was a huge bounty on the bandits we were with. Their identities were discovered thanks to a few utensils that remained in the wagon. So, basically, even though it was an accident, we contributed to their annihilation… and this is the reward money from that.”

“…”

“Oh, but considering the individual merits, it cannot be split in equal halves! I reserved the right to take a slightly bigger part. My carriage needs repairs, too, so I need enough money for that.”

Talking fast, Otto gave a justification for his injustice. Regardless of whether his words were true, the quantity that he gave Marone sufficed, it was enough for a woman to find a new life.

“That was very terrible, the worst experience… but both you and I earned something. Do you see it, Marone-san? I was able to elude a deficit, and you, Marone-san, have completed your preparations for a new start. Furthermore, despite everything, we’re alive!”

“…That’s right, we’re alive. We were saved. That alone should be enough.”

“Indeed, or, in economic terms, this is what I’d call a surplus… uh.”

When he was joking with an eye closed, Otto’s throat was blocked by surprise.

The cause was the arms that surrounded his neck and back. In front of Otto, with her face red from an intense emotion, Marone surrounded him with her arms, and then she pulled Otto towards her plump body, embracing him.

He felt a little disconcerted. But Otto immediately noticed that she was trembling.

“Please take very good care of yourself. I shall be praying for your prosperity in the future, senior.”

“Thank you, Number Two… No.”

Separating her face from him, Marone shook her head sideways, a few tears on her eyes. And then, she asked a question.

“What’s your real name?”

To that question, Otto smiled, and answered.

“—Just call me Number Two, senior.”

8

With a piercing sound, the dragon carriage, which had been previously applied makeshift repairs, slowly advanced on the highway.

‘Still, laddie, that was a terrible way to show off.’

“Do not say it, please. I know that, and I am reflecting on it a lot too…”

From the driver’s seat, Otto hung his head and sighed. The one who sighed too when she saw Otto was his partner: his land dragon, Frufoo, whose evident exasperation was visible on her usually inexpressive face.

As always, Frufoo looked in a pitying way at his master, who had just gone through a series of misfortunes and calamities,

‘What do you mean you got reward money? Every single one of those guys fell down the valley, and I’m pretty sure there’s nothing that can reveal their identities. How do you even get a single coin from that?’

“Uuuuh…”

“And as if that wasn’t enough, you’re fully aware your latest profits and your cargo have all gone down the drain, but somehow that doesn’t stop you from giving half of the savings hidden under the wagon to some girl you probably won’t see again… Laddie, are you an idiot?”

“I do not believe I am an idiot, but… am I an idiot?”

“You’re a huge idiot.”

While he conversed with the merciless Frufoo using his ‘Divine Protection of Soul of Language,’ Otto looked up at the sky.

A big part of the story he had told Marone at the treatment center was an invention of his. Of course, it was true that an investigation about the bandits and Arhim's case was going to be made in Guineb, but that one part about his profits and the reward money was a bunch of lies.

All the profits he had made in Guineb had fallen down the valley along with his cargo and the bandits, and their recovery had been impossible. He had not lost the savings he used to hide under the wagon's floor out of stinginess, but he had gifted a good part of it to Marone, so he was not that far from going bust.

"But, wouldn't I have nightmares if I forsook a person who has done nothing wrong…?"

'Laddie, that's exactly what you said when we got involved in this.'

He had said that, indeed. That he would have nightmares was what he said as he got dragged into embroils, and that he would have nightmares was also what he said as he suffered great losses at the last moment. Consistent from the very beginning to the very end, it was due to this tendency that Otto kept suffering losses.

From the moment he had exposed the Lavril house's defects, it was guaranteed that his business would no longer receive any special treatment in Guineb. This time, Otto had certainly done nothing more than letting his time, business opportunities, and profits go to waste.

"Could it be that my only profit was being thanked by Marone-san for helping her?"

'Hahaha, laddie. Being satisfied with that sounds so knightly.'

"You are joking! Don't you see that I am a pure merchant from head to toe?!"

With unpleasantness showing on his face, Otto directly denied Frufoo's remark.

Otto did not comprehend those creatures known as knights, at all. Nor would he ever be able to.

“I feel like meeting one would be problematic. Plus, I do not feel like associating with them, either.”

‘Aaah, you said it. Now we know soon you’re going to get involved with a knight or something and have a very bad time.’

“Could you stop making my future out to be so dark?!”

His partner’s unpleasant prediction made Otto’s voice crack. He was not joking. Otto wanted to be successful as a pure merchant. And for that reason, he wanted to avoid trouble as much as possible.

“Isn’t there some place where we can find a strategy to make huge profits, with guaranteed safety and no risk factors?”

Aware that such a thing was not only oneiric, but straight up fantasy, Otto said it. Hearing that, Frufoo expressed her tiredness by lowering her head,

‘Laddie, as long as you’re you, something that wonderful won’t happen. —But I think you’re fine just the way you are, laddie.’

“What does that mean?”

‘After all, in any case, laddie, when you get your own store, you won’t have a reason to travel anymore, and you won’t have a job either. Please realize your dream as calmly as you can, laddie.’

“What does that even mean?!”

Higher and higher, his cry kept on echoing until it reached the sky.

Hearing that, Otto’s beloved dragon’s thick throat vibrated with a grandiose laugh.

With that laugh, she said.

‘Well then, let’s keep trying to make your dream come true until the end of time, laddie.’

END

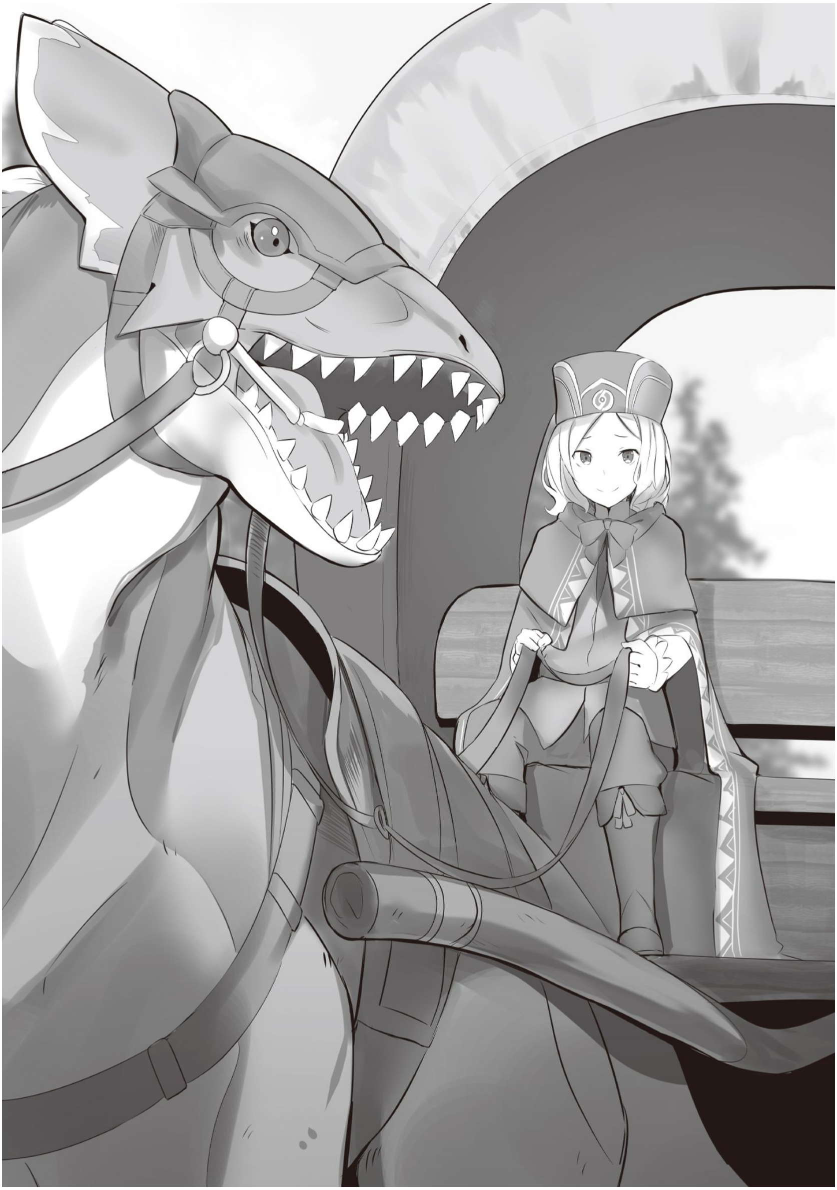

Bonus Short Stories

A Foolish Teatime in April

“So, back where I’m from, once a year there’s a day when you’re allowed to tell lies.”

“There you go again, Subaru, you’re always making up things like that.”

As Subaru noted that with a raised finger, Emilia brought a hand to her mouth and smiled.

It was a scene in the early afternoon, on a day at Roswaal manor.

With most of the servant work finished up, everyone but Roswaal (who was too busy) gathered together for a little break before preparing for the evening, and exchanged pleasant conversation.

As they sat, the subject of Subaru’s hometown (the world he was originally from) was brought up…

“Nah, nah, that part actually isn’t a lie. It really exists, it’s called ‘April Fool’s’. It’s a day for plotting when, just for this one day, anyone can say this, that, or the other thing to try and trick someone else.”

“I don’t see the meaning, you know. I can’t imagine a reason it would be necessary to do that, I suppose.”

Sampling her tea at the edge of the dining hall’s main table, Beatrice was terribly unwilling to accept the idea.

Perhaps as a result of Subaru’s persistent invitations, she had recently begun to show up quite often for these break time snacks, but even then the little girl worked to maintain a subtle sense of distance.

Regardless, Subaru wagged a finger left and right with a “Tsk, tsk, tsk” in response to what she pointed out.

“Don’t stop thinking, Beako. Now see, this kind of event always has a hidden meaning. For example, by creating a single day where you tolerate lies, you're more likely to value the honest time you spend with the people who matter to you, or some kind of moral of the story like that…"

"If they're important to you, shouldn't you value them every day, anyways?"

"You should, but if I don't disprove that point here, that's the end of the conversation, isn't it?!"

What Emilia said as she tilted her head was certainly true, but if he agreed then the topic ended there. It wasn't that he'd become addicted to it after the snow festival, but Subaru was actually fairly enthusiastic about importing events from his old world into the new one. …He was fairly sure it wasn't just a lingering attachment to his old world.

In response to Subaru, a girl raised her hand with an enthusiastic "Yes!".

"Oh, Rem, I can count on you to believe what I'm saying, right?"

"Of course. If it's Subaru-kun's words, Rem can believe any out-of-the-blue words, even if they seem like a dream. Even if everyone else in the world were to abandon you!"

"That means you don't believe in April Fool's itself, doesn't it?!"

As the girl, Rem, strongly affirmed her support for him, Subaru's shoulders sagged in frustration at her words. When he did that, Rem's older sister Ram asked "And so" with an icy tone.

"What is it you're trying to say, Barusu? If there's a day when it's alright to lie, then that would be Barusu the Liar's time to shine?"

"Barusu the Liar… that sounds like words from the title of a children's story… But, it's not like that; maybe we should give April Fools a try?"

"'April Fools'… We should try telling lies, you mean?"

“Yeah, yeah! It’s like you have to try things out, or like a try-before-you-buy, or like a two-week free trial, or something.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not really sure what you’re saying.”

As Subaru’s words piled up rapidly, Emilia didn’t seem to be ready to go along with it. Showing her agreement with Emilia, Ram snorted with a ‘Ha!’.

“As expected, that ridiculous suggestion is so very you, Barusu. By the way, Ram and Rem are actually triplets.”

“Now you’re getting into the rhythm of it and telling lies, nee-sama. Triplets, there’s no way that could…”

“…”

“What?! Why aren’t you saying anything? It’s a lie, right? C’mon, Rem, it’s a lie, right?”

Shaken by Ram holding her silence with a serious look, Subaru was flustered and looked to Rem for confirmation. In response to his query, Rem touched a finger to her lips.

“Rem isn’t sure. The possibility that Rem has a sister besides nee-sama… aagh!”

“R, Rem, what’s wrong?!”

“Nothing, it’s just, the moment Rem thought she might have a sister besides nee-sama, her heart ached…”

“Hey, hey, there’s no way you need to worry about…agah!”

Seeing Rem hold her hands to her chest, Subaru ran to be by her side, but was blown away by Ram. Then, gently holding her little sister’s shaking shoulders, Ram gently stroked Rem’s head.

“It’s alright, Rem. Ram has only one cute little sister. She only lost sight of things for a moment due to Barusu’s cunning trap… he absolutely will not be forgiven for that.”

“That’s quite a stray bullet there!”

“I’m sorry, nee-sama, for making you worry. …It’s just that the privilege of being your little sister is something that Rem wants all to herself. Sorry for being selfish.”

“It’s fine. You’re cute, Rem, the cutest in the world.”

“Nee-sama…”

With the sisters hugging each other close, while it wasn’t much fun to be pushed to the side, Subaru praised himself for at least contributing to the beautiful sisterly love.

“Hoho, those two really do care for each other. Oh, but I’m glad. When I was wondering if the two of them actually were triplets, I was rea~lly surprised.”

“That’s for sure. If they were, I guess she’d be named Rim or Rum? I already know a Rom so I’d like to stay away from that one.”

“I don’t think that names are something that you can change that easily, though…”

As Subaru sat with his arms folded, Emilia gave him a wry smile, but soon she let out an ‘Ah’, and her eyes shone. Then, with a somehow mischievous air, she stared at Subaru.

“…? What’s up, Emilia-tan? You’re so cute when your eyes sparkle.”

“To tell the truth, Subaru… I’m a quadruplet.”

“Mmmm~! You’ve learned from your predecessors and added improvements, but it’s lacking in originality!”

He wasn’t that concerned about whether it was original or not, but the part of Emilia that was overly-honest was showing up too much in her lie, so it would be nice if she gave it more of a twist.

A twist that wasn’t just thinking small, like changing triplets to quadruplets.

After Subaru's comment, Emilia realized her mistake and her head drooped.

"I see, that's too bad… Ah! I've got it! Puck! It's Puck! Puck is a quadruplet!"

"Mmmm~! What you're thinking is just a little bit off from what I was trying to point out! But I'll commend your effort…"

"Tha, that's something I can't just overlook, you know! Is that true, I suppose?"

"Someone fell for it that I hadn't expected to."

As Emilia achieved progress at a dizzying tempo that one might compare to a turtle's pace, the plausible-sounding lie that was woven by the sound of her silver-bell voice caught Beatrice hook, line, and sinker.

For someone who usually seemed so intelligent, she was a girl who's cuteness was immediately visible at times like this.

"Hoho, were you tricked? That was actually a lie. There's only one Puck, not four of them."

"Ack, to think you were deceiving Betty… It seems underestimating this girl would be more unwise that I thought, you know…!"

"It's a battle of wits between young girls."

For both Emilia, who was gloating victoriously, and Beatrice, who was wallowing in defeat, in truth, it was a battle that neither side understood properly.

Cutting to the heart of it, both of the young girls—strictly speaking, it probably wasn't accurate to call Emilia a young girl, but still, at any rate, one couldn't help but smile at how the two of them looked.

"You know, it seems like April Fools is getting more results than I'd expected."

“…Lia and Betty are getting along well, and the maid girls are getting along too, after all. Mhmm, mhmm, following on the heels of the snow festival, you’ve got quite a way with things, don’t you, Subaru.”

“Oh, hey, Puck.”

As Subaru whispered to himself, Puck, a grey-furred cat spirit, plopped down on his shoulder.

Puck, too, looked back and forth over the same scene that Subaru was seeing.

“But, I wouldn’t want you to be teaching her too many bad habits. I want Lia to grow up healthy and adorable, forthright and graceful, after all.”

“It’s not like I’m teaching her to just tell lies at random, without looking at the situation. Also, it’s kinda cute when she’s tricking and being tricked by the people who are close to her, isn’t it? Not to mention, you need to think about the kind of battlefield Emilia-tan will find herself on in the future.”

The Royal Selection—that was the title of the trouble that was certain to rain down on Emilia in the near future.

There, where it was said that the race for the kingdom’s throne would be held, Emilia would have to jump into the chaos of a political dispute swirling with schemes and conspiracies.

“And that with the sort of honesty where she thought someone would be tricked by the lie that Puck is a quadruplet.”

“I’m not sure why, but when you put it that way, I’m getting a little worried, too. There’s no mistaking that I raised her to be cute, but maybe I was overprotective?”

“Hmmm, but if you’d neglected your responsibilities, I get the feeling that would be something to be uneasy about, too, so it’s hard to say…”

It was mostly related to her own innate nature, so one couldn’t just blame it all on Puck. It wasn't a bad thing to be honest to begin with. It's just that being sly would make it easier to go on fighting.

As well, Emilia had already made up her mind to walk a path that wasn't easy.

"All I can do is support the path that Emilia-tan walks, then."

"…? Subaru, were you saying something to me just now?"

"Nah, it's nothing. It's just this Royal Selection thing; I'm half hopeful and half worried about how it'll go."

"Oh, the Royal Selection…"

As Subaru shrugged to cover it up, Emilia lowered her amethyst eyes slightly. Suddenly, he regretted his careless words, worried that he had perhaps caused her needless concern.

"Now that you mention it, you know nothing at all about the Royal Selection; isn't that right, Barusu?. Naturally, you know nothing about the other candidates as well."

"Hm? I guess that's right, don't know a thing. I did hear that there's five of them, including Emilia, but…"

"Yes, that's correct. Emilia-sama is the candidate that Roswaal-sama found, and in terms of order that they were reported to the royal castle in, she was the fourth."

"So, when the final fifth candidate is found, we're off to a sunny start at the Royal Selection."

Both Ram and Rem came to join in the conversation, and Subaru followed along with the new topic of an overview of the Royal Selection that awaited them. The April Fool's atmosphere faded away, as the content of the new topic was very close to the core of things.

Subaru decided to take the opportunity for serious information gathering about the upcoming Royal Selection.

“So, what kind of people are the other candidates that we know about?”

“To begin with, the first one is called the ‘War Maiden’, has single-handedly cut down many enemies on the battlefield, is rumored to preserve her beauty by bathing in their blood, and leads an upper-class noble house.”

“An amazing one right at the start!!”

Hearing a flavor of introduction quite different from what he’d been imagining, Subaru couldn’t hide his surprise.

She was one of four people that would stand alongside Emilia. Of course, he had imagined she would be an opponent who would have no less of a presence, but still…

“So, with the top batter being the War Maiden of Freshly Drawn Blood, that’s a little too much impact, isn’t it…?”

“Oh my, Barusu, if that’s all it takes to make you back away, I can just imagine how you’ll react to the rest of what’s coming. This is still only the opening act. When you hear what’s next, your heart will freeze. Rem, tell him.”

“Eh, Rem should do that?”

Rem was surprised to have her older sister call her name. Seeing Rem’s reaction, Subaru snorted at Ram as though to say “There you go again” at her exaggeration.

“You have to admit, treating that as an introduction like that makes it seem like you’re just blowing things out of proportion, right?”

“Hm, not at all. The next candidate is called the ‘Sun Princess’…”

“Oho, the ‘Sun Princess’. Somehow, that sounds quite wonderful…”

“When she walks, her surroundings become a sea of fire, leaving not even a blade of grass.”

“Princess Prominence?!”

It wasn’t her glowing smile that was her selling point, or anything like that, but the name of one who caused physical burning, then. As Subaru sat astonished, Rem puffed up her chest and nodded, “That’s correct.”.

“She’s a very menacing individual. Subaru-kun, if you ever happen to meet her, for your own safety, you must make sure to hold on tightly to Rem’s hand.”

“Ah, yeah, I will. So, besides the Fresh Blood Maiden and the Burning Princess, there’s also…”

Seeking information about the next savage… or rather, candidate, Subaru glanced over at Emilia. Noticing his line of sight, Emilia narrowed her amethyst eyes suspiciously…

“Hoho, try to control your amazement, Subaru. The truth is, the third candidate is…”

“*gulp*”

“…a quintuplet!”

“Mmm! After coming this far, an unfortunate mistake in the batting order! Or wait, everything up to now was a lie?!”

“Ah! How could you tell it was a lie?”

Looking at Subaru holding his head in his hands, Emilia brought a hand to her mouth in amazement. Behind Emilia, placing their hands together, Ram and Rem spoke in unison.

“Nee-sama, nee-sama, Subaru-kun is entirely crestfallen. He’s cute.”

“Rem, Rem, seeing Barusu drowned by his own plan is truly pitiful. How pathetic.”

“Seeing you two pull that kind of coordination really brings back some memories! Damn it, you got me!”

Entirely convinced the topic of April Fool’s Day had faded away, he ended up being completely taken in. How frustrating. Seeing the strategist experience first-hand being drowned by his own strategy, Beatrice sniffed with her well-shaped nose.

“Good grief, what an entirely silly bunch you are, I suppose. Going on and on about lies and this and that, I just can’t be bothered to go along with it, you know. Isn’t that right, Bubby…”

“““““Mhmm, that’s right, Betty.”““““

“Eh?”

Surprised by a voice that sounded overdubbed, Beatrice turned around, and the unmistakable pattern in her eyes was more easily visible as they widened. As her field of view came about, she saw that the number of Pucks lounging on the table had increased to four.

“Nga~h! Bubby actually has become quadruplets, I suppose?!”

Jumping in surprise, Beatrice pulled on Subaru’s arm. When Subaru reacted to that with a ‘Wha?’ and turned around, there was only a single Puck lounging on the table.

“Hey, what’s up, Subaru?”

“Whaha?! Bubby, I was positive there were four of you just a moment ago, I suppose!”

“Ah, I get it, I get it. I can tell that you want to join in, but you shouldn’t be trying to draw attention with a weak lie like that. Honestly, Beako, you’re so…”

“I wasn’t! I wasn’t, you know! I wasn’t, I suppose! Bubby? Bubby?!”

With her face gone bright red, Beatrice desperately defended her intentions. However, Subaru gazed at her warmly, and Emilia and the others looked at her as though they were seeing something amusing.

“Hmf! Who, who cares about April Fool’s, you know! I hate it, I suppose!”

Beatrice's indignant voice reverberated magnificently through the Roswaal manor, where lies were being permitted.

Perhaps that would leave them with a stronger sense of how precious it was to be sincere to the people who were important to them.

As he smiled, Subaru wasn't confident in whether or not it had been that sort of teaching moment.

END

Volume 19

Chapters 49-60

Chapter 49:
Thus Opens the Crusade Against Greed

Emilia: “—Subaru!”

There came a voice which seemed to summon Subaru, who had crashed through the entrance of the church and sprinted inside.

It belonged to Emilia, who stood in front of the altar, clad in a white wedding dress.

Dressed in a snow-white dress, her long hair coiled in a braid on her head, she was simply too beautiful, lovely to a truly dazzling degree. In the right circumstance, Subaru, more than anyone else, would have wanted to admire Emilia’s bridal attire, but—

Subaru: “I’ll sort out my thoughts on EMT later. Seems like we crashed this wedding here.”

Reinhard: “The ceremony was already going awry, it seems. Though we will still be regarded as the intruders here.”

From a ways away, Reinhard snuck a glance at Emilia and Regulus, as those two glared at each other, and agreed with Subaru’s mutters. The ceremony seemed to be on the verge of a complete breakdown, offering them a perfect opportunity to intrude.

Upon hearing their words, Regulus’s already sour face reddened with rage. He yanked at the front of his suit as his mouth twisted in a vicious pout.

Regulus: “Sorry, though I feel for uninvited guests such as yourselves, this wedding will soon become a funeral anyway. The emotional preparation for such a joyous event to become one of lament… Ah, right, you needn’t consider such matters anyway. Since you’ll soon go from the ones bidding farewell to the ones who should be bid farewell to.”

Subaru: “Hey now, what are you going on about when you were rejected right before the wedding? And the bride is so fed up with you that she's about to take a Narita divorce. "1" Show me a little shame here. Besides, didn't you hear me when I introduced this guy beside me?"

Regarding Regulus's murderous rambling, Subaru taunted him as he eyed Reinhard. Surprised, Regulus exhaled an "ah" between his teeth.

Regulus: "What, the Sword Saint? I think I've heard of him once. Isn't that the moniker of some guy who knows of nothing but swinging a sword? What are you planning to do with that kind of guy? Could it be that you thought of him as some trump card? Hahaha, that's rich. Whether it be reputation from history or glory from the bloodline or whatnot, all that's nothing but old-fashioned traditionalism. Notions like that, when struck by a wave of progress, should crumble to ash. Isn't that just nature at work? You two, are you here to demonstrate?"

Reinhard: "Funny that you say I know of nothing but swinging a sword, huh. In truth, many of the expectations that fall upon me stem from that one role. But there is one slight problem here."

Even faced with such arrogance, Reinhard showed not a trace of annoyance. As he spoke, his hand crept quietly toward his waist.

Sheathed there was a celestial sword, with engravings traced by the claws of the Dragon itself, which Reinhard always carried. However, as he clenched his palm around the hilt, he shook his head.

Subaru: "What's wrong, Reinhard?"

Reinhard: "The Dragon Sword Reid is an unparalleled blade, which has been passed down since the first generation of the Astrea family, but it does have one flaw. It refuses to be unsheathed in the presence of any enemy it deems unworthy."

Subaru: "Which means?"

Reinhard: "It seems that the sword has concluded that this enemy is not worthy of being drawn against.”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Regardless of whether Reinhard had the intention of doing so, Regulus had received a rather humiliating evaluation. But Subaru had personally witnessed how the sword had not made its appearance during a confrontation with Elsa, and so he understood what Reinhard had meant.

However, even with that in mind, Regulus’s unflattering appraisal remained.

Regulus: “What can a Sword Saint who can’t even draw his sword do against me? Know your place, scum. In the first place, I’m not even on the same level as you. You fools, who can only ascertain their own worth by comparing themselves to others. Don’t you dare think less of me.”

Subaru: “Sounds like you really do think you’re all that.”

Facing the burning obscenity in Regulus’s eyes, Subaru found himself genuinely surprised. Ignoring all his threats, and listening to only the heart of his speech—

Subaru: “Hypocrisy is your forte, isn’t it? Claiming to have achieved perfection, you’re the one who prattles on about being superior to others.”

Regulus: “—Hk! You lowlife, don’t you condescend to preach to my satisfied self!”

Infuriated by Subaru’s jeers, Regulus finally put his threats into action.

With murderous intent, he kicked the ground in front of the altar; instantly, the paved floor shattered with astonishing force. The torrent of destruction pummeled straight ahead towards Subaru, sweeping shards of wood and stone into its overwhelming embrace and shattering them into fine dust.

Subaru: “—Whoa?!”

Reinhard: “Subaru, over here.”

Just as the destructive wave neared him, someone caught him by the neck and yanked him to safety. A sudden gust of wind freed Subaru from the shackles of that torrent—this was Reinhard’s doing. With one hand, he had pulled Subaru and evaded the attack.

Gently depositing Subaru back on the ground, Reinhard spun around, bending his knees, preparing to face Regulus. However—

Regulus: “Don’t move! Dare to try anything, and they’ll all be dead in an instant.”

Reinhard: “…”

Glaring at Reinhard, who remained with his knees lightly bent, Regulus placed his hands on the walls of the church.

Rows of elaborately dressed women watched him impassively, as the guests of the wedding. Clearly, they recognized the intent of his actions and the severity of the situation, but they only stood in place, indifferently accepting the surrounding chaos.

Subaru: “On that note, though I’d rather not look too far into it, who are these women?”

Regulus: “All of them are my dear beloved wives. Lovely princesses who cherish me and are in turn cherished by me. Could you bear to allow such innocent girls to die? How could you be so cruel?!”

Subaru: “Goddamn, I had a slight suspicion, but I can’t establish a conversation at all.”

Had there ever been any impression that he could? Regulus’s rhetoric was completely incoherent.

To hold these women hostage, and yet to declare that they were his beloved wives, was a line of thought outside the realm of reason. The worst of it was that both the proclamation of innocence and the notion that Regulus would kill them were undoubtedly true.

This illogical hostage situation was indeed an extremely effective tactic against Subaru's group.

Regulus: "It's not like I want them to die, or anything like that. Even so, if you still resist further, I'll have no choice. I'll start at the beginning and go in order. Isn't forcing me to do something so awful just heartless?"

Subaru: "Not like that makes any sense at all, but I don't remember pushing you to that point?"

Regulus: "Don't make excuses! Maybe I'd be the one directly killing them, but you're the one triggering the event. Your murderous intent would be the true weapon. You're using me as the weapon. You're the real murderers! Don't try to escape that responsibility. You heartless wife-murderers…!"

Hatred burned in Regulus's eyes as he gnashed his teeth and glared at Subaru. The murderer who spouted his twisted rhetoric seemed not disturbed in the least by his own revolting statements.

While trying to buy time with dialogue, Subaru snuck a meaningful glance at Reinhard. However, their volatile opponent held about fifty hostages in his grasp. If both walls collapsed at the same time, even Reinhard would not be able to prevent any casualties.

Subaru: "…"

If it went on like this, they would be stuck in stalemate—No, this was developing exactly the way Regulus hoped it would. However, the moment he thought so,

???: "Have you forgotten about me already?"

Regulus: "Huh?"

Celestial lights began to dance beside Regulus. In one instant, the light enveloped the entire cathedral, in the next, a sharp sound was born, interfering with the world. The light and sound chained into each other, intertwined and resonating, a simple, clear melody filling the temple.

In the blink of an eye, a grand barrier of ice shone in the center of the room. That sanctuary of ice spread throughout the cathedral, with Emilia in front of the altar as its center, and created a thick barrier around the women in attendance, who Regulus had taken hostage.

In addition, the ice had frozen Regulus's legs to the ground, and a frozen sword pressed itself against his bare nape—a sword which extended from Emilia's hand.

Emilia: "You were far too careless there. Even I can't expect to just jump into a fight with you, so I prepared long and hard to freeze you like that. You lost."

Regulus: "…I say, you're truly incapable of reading the atmosphere, aren't you? Right now, aren't I about to force them to back down? This is an important scene, showing that I'm righteously capable of facing despicable enemies with resolve. And my wives too, everyone clearly believes in me and prays for my victory… Who do you think you are?"

Emilia: "Free all of us this instant. Although no one's said it, some of them only stay with you because they're afraid. Even so, you should cherish them, since they're the ones who go out of their way to help you…"

Regulus: "—Really, who do you think you're talking to? Looks like not making you a wife was wise indeed."

Emilia: "Eh?"

Subaru: "Emilia, no! It's not enough to stop him!"

Normally, this would be the finale of the act. Emilia's judgement was not off.

However, if there was something different about the situation, was that her opponent simply exceeded the limits of humanity.

Emilia: "—Kh!"

With a sigh, Regulus began twisting his frozen limbs. With that slight motion alone, the ice encasing his lower half began to disintegrate.

The frozen prison shattered to dust, an action so easy that it was like the ice had melted. Faced with this reversal, Emilia had nary the time to even draw breath before Regulus seized her by the neck, and allowed her to dangle, suspended by only his hand.

Regulus: “Such violence, without even knowing how to keep yourself decent for a man. It doesn’t matter that you’re physically and mentally a virgin if you’re cheating on someone mentally. You whore. You filthy slut. As if toying with my innocent heart weren’t enough, you took it a step further, and tried to threaten it. Never have I seen such an unforgivable woman.”

Emilia: “Kuu, huu… uuu…”

Regulus: “How many men have you seduced with your pretty face? Just a brief smile, and every man would be kind to you? Just a small sound, and every man would be ecstatic? Just a gentle touch, and every man would pour gift upon gift onto you? Ah, ah, you dirty bitch.”

Subaru: “Stop! Take your hands off her, you fucker!”

Sighing to himself, Regulus’s voice was filled with disdain as he spoke to Emilia, still caught in his grasp. His eyes, cold and inhuman, cut through Subaru’s outrage at those unspeakable words.

Regulus: “How stupid are you, that you can’t work this situation out? Or are you one of those fools who’ve already given up on understanding? Here am I, ceaselessly trying to explain. but people like you, who hold thoughts of self-improvement and abandon all conscious thought, don’t you think you’re too wasteful of my generosity? Do your best to stand in someone else’s shoes, can’t you even do that? Still playing cards like that, isn’t your skill in interaction just too poor?”

Reinhard: “Let Emilia-sama go, and I’ll hear out your requests.”

From beside Subaru, who found himself speechless with rage, Reinhard spoke to Regulus.

Hearing that, the savage raised his eyebrows. Seemingly judging that conversation could come to flow more smoothly with Reinhard than with Subaru, Regulus redirected his words.

Regulus: “Not bad, not bad, that modest attitude. Precisely because people have all sorts of means of communication, if they want a topic to flow in the direction they desire, they have to learn to use those methods effectively. Those who don’t understand this, the majority, can only rely on brute force to realize what they strive for. How off-putting. Shouldn’t it be clear that matters can be settled through negotiation, without requiring a show of strength? Well, people like that aren’t impressive in the least. Fellows like those stand no chance against a pacifist like me, isn’t that just nature?”

Reinhard: “No need to spin it so dramatically. Instead, allow me to listen to your request. Witnessing Emilia-sama’s suffering is painful for both me and my friend.”

Regulus: “Alright. Then I’ll say it straightforwardly—Remove the sword from your waist and come stand in front of the altar.”

As Emilia’s face turned pale, Regulus, in a deliberate motion, hoisted her higher. Her feet dangled in midair, and her sword of ice clattered to the ground.

Faced with that display, Reinhard hesitated no longer. He freed the Dragon Sword from his waist and handed it to Subaru.

Subaru: “…In case of emergency, I will draw this sword and cut down that bastard.”

Reinhard: “That is quite the idea, but, regrettably, I doubt you would be able to unsheathe it either. Rest assured, I will rescue Emilia-sama.”

Concluding their whispered conversation, Reinhard complied with Regulus’s orders.

The Sword Saint stood, unarmed, in the middle of the temple, stopping when Regulus commanded, “Stop here”. There were only about five meters left between the two, but to Reinhard, that distance could be traversed in an instant.

And yet, the issue lay in how Regulus currently held Emilia in his hands, and would break her neck the second Reinhard drew near. And they had yet to grasp the true nature of Regulus's invincible Authority.

Freeing himself from Emilia's prison, and setting off a path of destruction with unknown means. Somewhere in those actions lay the principle behind his invincibility.

Subaru: "…"

Holding his breath, Subaru monitored Reinhard's movements carefully.

At this moment, unable to find an opportunity to break the stalemate, he could only rely on Reinhard. Eager as he was to leap into action, he knew that nothing he did would solve anything.

Reinhard: "As you wish, I will stop here. What next?"

Regulus: "Let me kill you. Isn't it easy? It's a little cliché, I think so too. I can't feel any sincerity in your idea to step forward for the sake of my wives or this slut? It's not that I want to force you to be unreasonable. I just don't want to be misunderstood as a selfish and self-centered person. I'm just a normal man, satisfied with the simple joys of my everyday life. I do hope you fully understand."

Reinhard: "…"

Regulus: "So, there's only one condition for me to free the hostages. You stand in this place, and bear one strike from me. No defending yourself, and no evasion. As long as you do this, I'll free all the hostages. Only then will I forgive that cowardly two-on-one attack you set on me."

Reinhard: "One strike, yes?"

Faced with Regulus's proposal, Reinhard stroked his chin as he mediated upon it.

Watching his thoughtful figure, Subaru mentally shook his head desperately at the absurdity of the proposal. Regardless of how Regulus appeared, the power behind his attacks were obvious.

An obscene power which could disintegrate even the building's materials, such that even Reinhard would not be able to withstand such a strike. Even if he clung to his life, if he were rendered unable to fight, it was impossible to even think about continuing the battle.

Reinhard: "I understand. I accept."

However, contrary to Subaru's internal fracas, Reinhard accepted the condition like it were nothing. Stunned, Subaru watched Regulus nod with approval.

Regulus: "A wise epiphany, I see. You've got my respect. Although you're an enemy who tried to kill my wives, you seem to have at least some basic human humility."

Subaru: "Hanging onto hostages even as some invincible person, and he doesn't feel as if he's in the wrong…"

At a glimpse, Regulus and his mellifluous, flowery words were truly disgusting. However, it seemed that Regulus had not heard Subaru's spite, for he kept his hand laid on Emilia's neck as he turned his right hand to face Reinhard.

Subaru: "R-Reinhard, you… What are you thinking?"

Reinhard: "Subaru, as promised. Where I'm lacking, you'll find a way to fill in the gaps, right?"

Subaru: "Quit being so discouraging…"

"Even the hardest battle has a chance of being won", that was the sort of answer that Subaru had been hoping to hear. However, before he had time to respond, Regulus waved an arm at Reinhard.

He was incapable of seeing it. Fingertips sliced through the air, as if tossing something at Reinhard. However, the destruction was invisible. That attack might well very have been something like an Unseen Hand.

But, whether that speculation was true or false, it was left unanswered.

Reinhard: “…”

Reinhard’s figure, which had been standing in front of Subaru, collapsed into a splatter of blood. His bisected body toppled to the ground, as if stuck by an oblique sniping shot, completely absent of its usual fearless temperament.

Subaru: “Eh—?”

Large volumes of blood flowed forth from Reinhard’s fallen corpse, dying the crimson carpet a shade darker. His body trembled like a spring, convulsing in its death throes. Finally, the moment came where even those movements subsided, and the corpse entered the realm of true death.

This was Reinhard van Astrea’s unquestionable demise.

Regulus: “No matter how a person acted in life, death’s a simple matter. Those who’ve accomplished great feats, those who’ve committed great sins, death treats them equally, reaping their lives in the same manner. In this world filled with inequality, it’s one of the few truly just parts of life.”

Having killed Reinhard with only a wave of his hand, Regulus simply shook his head. The murderer wore a serene look, as if this had nothing to do with his own actions.

Regulus: “Precisely because they know that the end will inevitably come, the living must pursue happiness while they live. Therefore, I’m extremely satisfied with the low threshold of my happiness. And if I were Greed, it’s only because I’m always eager to appreciate what I do have. If I were never satisfied with the amount I have, instead wanting everything, I would never be happy in my life. But fortunately, I was born with a unique gift, the sensibility of finding satisfaction in simple joys.”

Holding the arm which had killed Reinhard to his chest, Regulus began to laugh. Then—

Regulus: “My satisfied self wants to hear it. Did you die satisfied? If so, congratulations on your death. If not, then I’m sorry for your loss.”

Subaru: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAUGH—”

Before the echo of Regulus’s mocking words had even faded, Subaru sprang into action with a roar.

He grabbed a chair and flung it at Regulus. Faced with that projectile, Regulus slammed it away with a single swipe, as if it were a mere insect. To say that the impact shattered the chair would be an understatement; having pulverized it, Regulus stepped away wearing an expression showing his displeasure.

Regulus: “Compared to that graceful one, you’re really both noisy and crude.”

Subaru: “Being a Knight without a trace of knightliness happens to be my specialty!”

Treading on the carpet stained with Reinhard’s blood, Subaru drew his whip from his waist, and directed the tip toward Regulus.

In response, Regulus simply made a show of tightening his grip on Emilia’s neck as he lifted her.

Regulus: “Are your eyes just for decoration? Can’t you see that I have leverage here?”

???: “—This is all very strange. According to what you promised, you should have liberated the hostages.”

Regulus: “—Eh?!”

The instant he heard that sound, Regulus’s face became stricken with horror.

Tearing his gaze away from the center of the church, Subaru witnessed a slender figure rising from the pool of blood, and felt his throat close with shock.

Regulus: “Wha—?!”

Reinhard: “—Divine Protection of the Phoenix.”

With brevity, Reinhard responded to Regulus’s astonishment, and three figures moved as one.

Subaru swung his whip to yank a blonde-haired woman, who was hiding behind the altar, to safety. Even as her throat was being choked, Emilia kicked her sword of ice over to Reinhard. Reinhard, who had appeared out of nowhere, caught the sword and swung it towards Regulus.

With the woman shielded from the line of fire, the Sword Saint, holding the blade of frost, hesitated no longer.

In the next instant, sound vanished from the world—a brilliant blue light accompanied the shockwave that engulfed the church.

Chapter 50:
The Shackles of Love

1

—When the aurora faded and Subaru's vision returned to him, the state of the cathedral had completely changed.

Subaru: "Though I know I've said this before…"

Witnessing that scene with his own eyes, Subaru took a soft breath.

In order to avoid inhaling the scattered dust particles and wood chips, he covered his mouth with his sleeve. Standing inside the church, now exposed to the air outside, bathed in the evening breeze, Subaru stomped on the floor and jabbed a finger at the man in front of him.

Subaru: "Sure enough, this guy's a damn monster!"

Reinhard: "Though I have said this before, how depressing. Even my heart would be hurt by such words."

Subaru: "Is this really an occasion to complain about heartache?! Your physical wounds are obviously the bigger issue here! The hell do you think this is?!"

In the face of Reinhard's apparent aberrance, Subaru could not help but frustratedly bury his face in his hands.

Reinhard returned him a wry smile, as the sword of ice in his right hand shattered and dissipated. Although it had only been swung once, being able to withstand the Sword Saint's might indicated that its durability was deserving of praise.

The one who had made that sword, Emilia, was currently being embraced by Reinhard's left arm.

In that instant, he had freed Emilia's neck from Regulus's grasp, keeping her safe. As a result, Regulus was the only one who had suffered that bombardment.

Aside from that initial blow, everything seemed to have worked out—

Subaru: "On that note, what a close call we had. Hey, are you okay?"

No. 184: "…"

The object of his concern was the woman he had yanked out of danger, just as Reinhard had, before chaos had fallen. Although the golden-haired woman was rather beautiful, her empty eyes and expressionless face gave off a foreboding air.

Sure enough, the shock of the situation had gotten to her, was Subaru's thought, and so he met the eyes of the woman as she sat.

Subaru: "Sorry if we surprised you, but in order to take advantage of his weaknesses, we didn't really have any other choice. If you're hurt anywhere, tell us and we can help fix you up."

No. 184: "…"

Although Subaru called out to her, she still gave no reaction.

Although this situation was worrying indeed, he could not worry about just her and her alone. Leaving the woman sitting still on the spot, he strode toward the altar—Or, rather, where the altar had once stood.

This place, which strongly resembled what Subaru knew as a church, had been completely desecrated by Reinhard.

The front of the building—where the altar and the corridor leading to a side room had been located, had all been demolished in the wake of the supernova. All that had barely survived were the very edges and the back of the building. Fortunately, due to the protection of Emilia's wall of ice, the seated women had remained untouched.

Subaru ran where Emilia and Reinhard were standing near the crumbling altar. Stepping out of Reinhard's arms, Emilia immediately gave a pained cough.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, are you okay?"

Emilia: "—Coughcough… Ah, I'm fine. It's just that my throat feels itchy…"

Subaru: "How are you? Did anything strange happen? Did that creep lick your face or anything? And this wedding dress is spectacular… Did he put it on you? Damn, that fucker, I won't let him go. But this dress truly is amazing. No matter what you wear, you look cute, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Subaru, calm down a bit. I can't quite figure out what you want to say."

Faced with the frantically concerned Subaru, Emilia retreated gently.

Looking at his distressed appearance as he carefully ascertained that she was safe and sound, Emilia sighed with a smile.

Emilia: "Right, thank you for coming to save me. I knew all along that you'd come."

Subaru: "I also knew that Emilia-tan'd believe in me and wait for rescue. But if I'd crashed the wedding even a little later, who knows what could've…"

Emilia: "It doesn't matter. I wouldn't have married him. If I were to marry, it would have to be someone I like."

Subaru: "That, that's great! Really reassuring. Then, this person you like…"

Emilia: "Ah! Reinhard! Your injury, how is it?!"

Just as Subaru prepared to go on an offensive strike, Emilia caught sight of Reinhard and cried out at him. Seeing Emilia's interest in Reinhard where it mattered, Subaru paused and scowled.

Reinhard, who had saved Emilia—unexpectedly, he had sustained quite the heavy injury.

The front of the white clothes had been almost exaggeratedly torn and stained entirely with red. Witnessing this explosive scene, Emilia sucked in a cold breath.

Subaru: “Ack, how brutal! Are you sure this is fine?!”

Emilia: “Yes, what a grievous wound! Let me take a look, I’ll heal you!”

Reinhard: “Thank you. But do not worry about it. The wound has begun to heal.”

Responding to the fretting, flustered pair with a smile, Reinhard wiped at the blood with his own white sleeves. And on his clean chest, the traces of the injury were indeed disappearing. In moments the wound was completely gone, leaving only Reinhard’s pristine skin.

Subaru: “The wound’s… vanished… Hey, what happened just now? You hid it even from me. Did you sneakily hide some blood packets on your person or something?”

Reinhard: “And by ‘just now’, you mean…”

Subaru: “Stop putting on airs, or are you being for real right now…? Just now with Regulus’s hostage situation, I didn’t know how you planned to deal with it, so I just watched silently. But how did you survive? Ah, just tell me already!”

Reinhard: “Let me put it this way, watching silently was a huge help. Thanks for taking care not to set him off.”

Even faced with Subaru’s impatience, Reinhard responded in an even tone. Thinking that he was just trying to maintain a lighter atmosphere, Subaru sighed.

Subaru: “I just thought that since it’s you, there must have been some trick up your sleeve. But seeing you fall in that shower of blood had me thinking you really were dead, how terrifying…”

Reinhard: “Even so, you reacted in time. I am very happy you had such faith in me.”

Subaru: “Who told you to give this dramatic speech on shortcomings and whatnot?”

He lightly knocked Reinhard’s shoulders, responding to that guilelessness with coarse words. Listening to their conversation, Emilia’s eyes widened with surprise.

Emilia: “Only with those words, you worked that entire scheme out?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, you passed Reinhard the ice sword to Reinhard too, didn’t you?”

Reinhard: “That really was a huge help. Not having a weapon on hand and having to strike his body directly was an uneasy notion, for some reason. But I am glad that it worked out.”

Subaru: “Yep, it ended with half the building collapsing. Please take responsibility for that. Well, this also counts as a survival flag.”

Having had numerous encounter with Elsa in the past, Subaru could not be too optimistic. Now, while talking like this, his Regulus alarm was not slacking around.

Subaru: “So, Reinhard, the correct answer to the mystery of that scene is…? Did you use an avatar? It could not be some kind of cloning technique. Please don’t tell me that in addition to being a Knight, you’re a Ninja as well.”

Reinhard: “Although I do not know what an Ninja is, I am sure it is not such a huge mystery. This Divine Protection of the Phoenix is just a blessing that can be used to revive the dead. So, your observation that I looked like I was dead was correct, I was just a little bit dead.”

Subaru: “Just a little bit dead, my ass! Did that mess you up, or are you just an idiot?”

Being met with such an unexpected answer sent Subaru into another frenzy.

Dying under the Divine Protection of the Phoenix or whatnot, wasn't that just making a mockery of death? Those were words better left unsaid to Subaru—Or, rather, perhaps it was better to say that only Subaru could speak like that.

Subaru: "What are you doing, stealing my niche and all that…"

Reinhard: "—? My apologies, but at the time, I felt that it was the most effective way to deal with the Sin Archbishop. And it did in fact work rather smoothly. Ah, but, if possible, I would prefer to avoid dying again."

Emilia: "Dying in order to save only me, I can't help but feel guilty…"

Subaru: "—Guh."

Emilia: "Subaru? What's with that painful expression?"

Struck by the force of her reply, the psychological burden of those words was quite something. Moreover, it seems that this dialogue could continue no further.

Reinhard: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "Understood."

Narrowing his blue eyes, Reinhard called for Subaru. The latter raised his head at the call, and Emilia glanced towards the place Reinhard was looking.

—The predator, emitting an ominous aura, filled their line of sight.

He stood atop the collapsed remains of the church, overlooking the other three. White hair, white clothes, and a blank expression; this predator, made of white, snorted and spoke,

Regulus: "Leaving me out, and just bantering and laughing in a place like this. Speaking of which, how can you stand to maintain an air of normalcy, isn't that too inhumane? Unless, you felt like you've just stepped on an ant or something? Is blowing me away no different from stepping on a bug? What's up with that?!"

As he fanned the flames of his own exaggerated outrage, Regulus leapt from the smoldering wreckage to the remains of the cathedral. As he landed, he straightened out the coat of his white suit, brushed at the sleeves of his shirt, and readjusted the legs of his matching trousers, before turning his narrowed gaze upon them.

His body was unchanged from Reinhard's blow. Whether injury or filthiness, neither showed even a trace on his form.

Reinhard: "I see. As I had heard from Subaru, you truly are a strange opponent."

Emilia: "Just now, the Sin Archbishop that had you mentioned, Subaru… he's the one?"

Regarding him, Reinhard and Emilia each offered their own input. Hearing this, Regulus turned a spiteful glare upon Emilia.

Regulus: "Ah, that's right. I'm a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Greed, Regulus Corneas… Speaking of which, you tried to go through a wedding ceremony without knowing even the identity of the one you're marrying. This is a problem that precedes not having an awareness of being a wife. Impudent, immoral, incompetent! Really, your deficiency as a woman knows no bounds, honestly!"

Emilia: "Incompetent and whatnot, you didn't tell me anything at all. Impudent and immoral are also groundless. And you're from the Witch Cult… Witch Cult, Witch Cult…"

Faced with the resentfully cursing Regulus, Emilia was about to refute his points before she suddenly sank into silence. Her hand on her head, Emilia's eyebrows lifted as if she were thinking hard.

Emilia: "A Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult… You, have you met me before?"

Regulus: "Huh? How would I know? Although, right now, if you were to say that our meeting was fate, that would just be a ridiculous farce. Such a face of rare sweetness, but in spirit you're such a degenerate woman who cheats on her man in her mind, how endlessly infuriating… Uwah!"

Subaru: "The hell are you rambling on about aimlessly, you moron?"

Aiming at the face of Regulus, endlessly-ranting, Subaru flicked his whip. Under that impact, Regulus's face snapped to the side, and he snarled with fury.

Unsurprisingly, his face bore no trace of the blow.

Subaru: "At this point, for real, if we can't solve the mystery of his invincibility, we won't be able to win this…"

Reinhard: "Whether at close range or from afar, every attack is negated. Even Emilia-sama's magic does nothing to stop him. There has to be some kind of trick to defeating him… Subaru, watch out for yourself, alright?"

Subaru: "Why does it sound like you're saying something messed up…?!"

Reinhard patted that confused Subaru's shoulder briefly—Then, he vanished.

In the next moment, Reinhard slammed directly into the predator's torso, sending him sprawling backward.

Regulus: "Huh, ah—?!"

With a cry, Regulus, who had had no time to brace himself, flew backward and slammed into a mountain of debris, causing it to collapse further and disintegrate.

Reinhard: "His opponent will be me. Hopefully you can solve the mystery of his invincibility as quickly as you can. I shall buy time for you."

Subaru: "Right, buying time's nice and all… But wouldn't it be better to just defeat him in one fell swoop?"

Reinhard: “If I could, I would have done so already. Take these women to safety. If they remain here, they will be dragged into the battlefield.”

Emilia: “Wait, Reinhard. Although you might not be able to use it a lot, take this.”

Calling out to stop Reinhard in his tracks was Emilia, holding a sword of ice, freshly shaped by magic.

Emilia: “I’ve been concentrating reaaally hard to make this, so it should be a little more durable than the last one.”

Reinhard: “My thanks are inexpressible.”

Accepting her proffered blade, Reinhard offered her his ceremonious gratitude in return.

Then he turned and leapt away from the ruins of the church, following Regulus. In a single step, he vanished from Subaru’s field of vision, crossing an impossible distance. Immediately following his disappearance, a shock wave slammed into Subaru’s skin.

As he bathed in this feeling, he turned to look at Emilia.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan! So they avoid getting caught up in Reinhard’s battle, for the time being, please help get these women somewhere safe. They all have to leave… speaking of which, are they all Regulus’s wives?”

Both now and before, the uniformity of the women trapped in the wall of ice felt unnatural.

Did their status as Regulus’s wives make all of them members of the Witch Cult? At a glance, there were more or less fifty of them. If they attacked as one, how could Subaru handle them without Beatrice’s help? Only now had he begun to worry.

However, Emilia shook her head, denying Subaru’s anxiety.

Emilia: “It’s fine. Although they’re his wives, I think most of them are only here through force and coercion. So don’t worry.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s alright then. If they were a threat, Reinhard wouldn’t have overlooked… Gah, watch out! Just now, flying missiles have started attacking us! How dangerous!”

Outside the cathedral, Reinhard and Regulus had engaged in a battle that resided far beyond the limits of humanity. The wreckage and stone fragments, swept away by various impacts, flew with the momentum of a bullet. If he were to be struck by one, there was no guarantee that he would stay intact.

Although Reinhard had an overwhelming advantage when it came to offense, as long as the nature of Regulus’s Authority remained a mystery, that advantage would amount to naught. Subaru needed to come up with a countermeasure before the villain changed aims—

Emilia: “Hey, are you okay? You’re not injured anywhere, are you?”

During his moment of reflection, Emilia had started shaking the blonde woman by the shoulders.

That was the same woman Subaru had rescued earlier using his whip. Based on her position in front of the altar, she seemed to have a unique status among the others. However, her expression was just as blank, bearing not even the faintest trace of emotion.

Looking up at Emilia, the woman shook her head slowly.

No. 184: “I… We must stay here. If you want to escape, please take care.”

Emilia: “Stay, why? Are your legs injured? Then I’ll heal you right away. Just this wall of ice isn’t enough to keep you all safe. We have to leave soon!”

No. 184: “Please allow me to refuse. Only you can leave this place.”

Emilia: “Why?! You’ll be caught in the battle if you stay here! Regulus will attack anything he wants to, regardless of your presence. Please, hurry and come with us…”

No. 184: “—Husband-sama did not instruct us to leave.”

Emilia’s desperate persuasion was interrupted by the woman’s cold voice, conveying her feelings, equally devoid of warmth. Her cold, frozen gaze met Emilia’s own amethyst eyes.

No. 184: “Not listening to Husband-sama will make him angry. If that happens, there will be only one possible result.”

Emilia: “That’s… not…”

Subaru shared Emilia’s exasperation.

To call the woman determined would be wrong, for she had no selfhood. To call the woman unwavering would be wrong, for she had no resolve. Her speech and attitude spoke of a resignation that had long become inescapable.

She—or rather, they, had given up long ago.

Those hearts, shattered by Regulus, could no longer consider anything other than him. This was a cursed brutality which no longer required words or actions.

Subaru: “Regulus’s opponent is the Sword Saint Reinhard. I know you’re terrified of Regulus, but Reinhard’s not going to have any issue killing him. So, don’t stay here. There’s no need to endanger your lives.”

No. 184: “It does not matter who the opponent is. Sword Saint? Please, do not make me laugh. How could anyone match Husband-sama… match Regulus Corneas?”

The woman dismissed Subaru’s reassurances with naught but contempt.

That was the first time she had shown any sort of genuine emotion. The scornful dismissal of an adult, looking down upon a child’s ignorant delusion.

—Only then, did Subaru understand the true nature of this distorted relationship.

The wives of Regulus Corneas had absolute faith in their husband’s strength. The shackles of a curse that no one and no thing could remove, that unwavering trust. Even the knowledge that his opponent was the Sword Saint Reinhard did nothing.

The unparalleled, overwhelming power Regulus possessed held complete dominion over the hearts of his wives.

The wife trusted her husband, and the husband maintained a firm grip on his wife's heart. In a sense, it was the ideal state of a relationship. But that serene surface gave way to permanent distortions of the deeper aspects.

Subaru: "Damnit…"

Subaru came to the painful realization that mere words would not move them.

The women before him all unanimously believed this; the lack of dissent and dead silence only served to prove so. To force them to leave would take nothing less thorough than knocking all of them out and moving them one-by-one, but they could not afford to undertake those actions.

Subaru: "—Reinhard! Change of plans! Execute Operation S!"

Dispelling the idea of persuading the women, Subaru climbed atop the collapsed altar and called out to Reinhard, who was currently defying the law of gravity as he dashed across the side of a building, in the streets of the city where night had begun to fall. He flicked his eyes to the side, towards Subaru.

Reinhard: 9Doing Operation S first? Subaru, have you ensured the women's safety?0

Subaru: "—?! The hell?! Where's this sound coming from?!"

Reinhard: "This is the Divine Protection of Telepathy, which can spread my voice to allies within a certain range."

Subaru: "Could you stop being so superhuman?!"

To Subaru, who could not conceal the shivers it provoked in him, Reinhard's behavior seemed beyond human understanding.

Running and kicking off from a wall, Reinhard flew into the air and spun rapidly. The instant before he landed, he allowed his clothing to spread, slowing down his momentum, and swung his slender legs to send a blade of wind slicing towards the ground.

Sweeping up both dust and bricks from the pavement, the wave slammed directly into the predator waiting at its destination—Regulus's figure, unable to stay standing, was blown away again.

Subaru: "That murder circus just now, what was it?"

Reinhard: "He attacks by throwing stones or sand. There is no gap of safety between the particles being scattered around, so I have to pass between them."

Subaru: "To me, that sounds more like dodging rain—More importantly, move the battlefield! Those women won't move! They're so terrified of Regulus, they don't dare to!"

Reinhard: "I see, understood—Then, allow me to try."

Lowering his voice, Reinhard approached Regulus with a light jump.

Climbing to his feet once again, Regulus stomped on the ground, sending pieces of wood and grains of sand flying. However, with the most minimum of movements, Reinhard evaded and drew Emilia's ice sword, using it to send Regulus's body flying to the skies above once more.

The screaming of the villain and the crisp sound of the shattering ice blade overlapped.

Emilia: "Subaru! Wait, what are you planning to do?"

Subaru: "Lead that bastard away from here… Wow, Emilia-tan is bold."

Emilia: "This dress is pretty, but really inconvenient…"

Standing in Subaru's line of sight was Emilia, who had yanked away part of her dress.

The restrictive parts of the white wedding dress had been daringly torn open, revealing more of Emilia's white thighs than should have been visible in an enticing sight. However, the difficulty of moving in that clothing had been lowered.

Emilia: "It doesn't matter! Anyway, what do you want Reinhard to do?"

Subaru: "A plan we thought of before the battle, since we don't know what the true extent of Regulus's Authority is—We'll have to test possible weaknesses one by one."

Emilia nodded as Subaru retrieved Reinhard's beloved sword from one corner of the cathedral. Then, he and Emilia rushed straight towards Reinhard's battlefield.

2

Regulus: "Gah! Bastard, quit jumping up and down!"

Cursing loudly, Regulus waved both his arms up and down. His target was Reinhard, who zigzagged rapidly back and forth, and his weapon was the plentiful gravel laying about.

Normally, bits of gravel could only serve to blind an opponent and the character of those who used it as a weapon was unworthy of praise—but if Regulus were the wielder, the power of this despicable tactic would skyrocket.

Buildings began to crumble where the gravel came into contact with them, and the surrounding scenery fell into ruination.

Reinhard: "—Tch."

Watching the cataclysmic destruction unfolding in front of him, Reinhard launched into a dramatic evasion.

He lowered his body as if he were planning to drop into a crawl and sped into motion. Contrary to his seemingly unsightly appearance, he was moving so fast that he had ventured beyond the reach of ordinary people.

And thus, Regulus, who was no different from an ordinary person, had no way of catching up to Reinhard.

Regulus: "Damn… Hey! Where'd you run off to, looking like a bug?!"

Faced with the thread of losing his target, Regulus attacked all directions indiscriminately.

The rising of goosebumps on skin was a sure sign that whatever was approaching would be terribly dangerous—a survival instinct everyone was born with, warning against enemies close at hand.

In actuality, that had little to do with the presence of a clear threat. Any living creature was susceptible to this feeling. Regulus was no exception; the tingling of his nerves, all throughout his body, tipped him off that something was wrong.

—Only, this incredible threat was approaching from all directions, an oppressive ring of menace.

Regulus: "You bastard, what in the world areeee—?!"

Reinhard: "I am but a Knight to Felt-sama, a Royal Candidate. Please also be sure to give her all your support."

Regulus: "—?!"

A voice so steady, that might or might not have been a joke.

The shocked Regulus took a sharp impact on his head—perhaps it was smashed by steel. The weapon had been bent completely out of shape, and a squeaking sound indicated that it had been cast aside.

Humiliated, Regulus glared at the ground as he bit his lip. With crisp footwork that prevented ease of attack, Reinhard assumed his stance.

The offensive and defensive abilities of both the Sword Saint and

Greed, their superiority were clear to both parties in the confrontation.

Exerting conventional combat power, the strength of Reinhard, which could toy with even the deadliest of Sin Archbishops, could not be said to be of this world. But even so—

Regulus: “The one to win will be me, can’t you understand? Although I have no clue how well you’ve been doing with this violent power that can only think of oppressing others, you, whose happiness is built upon the sacrifice of others, will be stopped here! With this power, how many people’s lives have you trampled upon? That greed really is despicable.”

Reinhard: “—That really is distressing to hear. It is true that, because of me, some have lost sight of their happiness. Without question, the reason why I do what I do is none other than for the sake of atonement.”

In the face of Regulus’s ridiculous rhetoric, Reinhard’s eyes narrowed slightly. Seeing the Sword Saint’s responsive movement, Regulus widened his own.

Regulus: “The hell is this? Some kind of ‘you don’t need to say it because I already know’ ploy? “I’m aware of my own sins. I’m aware so I’m trying to fix my bad qualities, I tell you”, so it’s an attempt to let it all be water under the bridge? Jokes can only go so far. No one’s holding any expectations to what you’ll do in the future. All that matters is what you’ve done in the past. Your feet were trampling the ground, where someone licked your soles. To such a person, whether you help tens of thousands or hundreds of millions of people, it’s all meaningless. Sinner, just die. You, able only to beg of others, stop pretending to be a good person already.”

Reinhard: “I really do get the feeling of being shown a mirror when talking to you. This must be the reason why Subaru told me to avoid seriously lending an ear to you.”

Regulus: “Speaking of which… that guy over there, is that this Subaru? The rapist bastard who snatched my bride from me… Even if she ended up being a dirty whore, his transgression can never be forgiven. To those who try to take what belongs to others, due punishment is—Wha?!”

Halfway through his tirade, Regulus’s world suddenly spun upside down.

At that moment, Reinhard had dropped his stance and grabbed Regulus’s left ankle, spinning him around. A rotating field of violent destruction, Regulus’s back hit a wall.

Under that impact, a shower of dust scattered as Regulus’s body, still being spun around by his momentum, crashed through and collapsed a building.

Reinhard: “Although direct contact with you feels rather dangerous, I’ll try to get it over with as soon as possible.”

Regulus: “What, are you doing this so you can call him a friend? What a nauseating fake show of hypocrisy… Your debased self naturally has no decent friends. With someone known as a rapist, sharing a friendship is—”

Reinhard: “Dealing with you really is unbearable—doubly so when you slander my friends.”

The wind suddenly wrapped around their bodies, and the sense of rapid rising followed closely.

If you were to take a glimpse, the figures of the two would be suspended in the midst of the night sky, and right next to them, the full moon shone brightly. At that place, where the light of the moon lay within reach, Regulus clicked his tongue.

Regulus: “So, it’s not a matter of strength at all—Dropping me from such a height will end this, you can’t be truly naive enough to believe that. Are you playing me for a fool?”

Reinhard: “Indeed, I could try slamming you down with force and lodging you in the earth… but you will have to deal with something else.”

Regulus: “What are you…”

In midair, without any foothold, Reinhard alternated between drifting up and down by shifting his body slightly. Regulus, still being gripped by his foot, was subjected to centrifugal force and, still being swung by Reinhard, his eyes widened as he glanced downward.

Regulus: "No way…"

Reinhard: "What's coming seems to be known as 'the first wave'—I hope that I will not see you again afterwards."

It was a rare sarcastic line from Reinhard, but Regulus had no leeway to pay attention to it.

Reinhard, with all his might, swung Regulus downward at once. Whipping through the air, Regulus's dense form sped into the canal directly beneath him with the momentum of a bullet—Regulus, bathed by the wind, could only watch as the surface of the canal approached.

Regulus: "The only threat is the water…!"

Rotating as he sailed downward, Regulus stretched out his hands, intending for them to slam into the water. The unprepared Reinhard, hovering defenselessly in the sky, would follow in a moment.

Then, that calm face of his could be shattered in a single blow. The idea was—

Subaru: "—Emilia, do it!"

Emilia: "Ul Huma—!"

Hearing the voices of that hateful man and woman, the corner of his eye barely caught a sight of that detestable pair. A black-haired boy gesturing with a finger, and a silver-haired girl who chanted quietly.

In the next moment, falling from above Regulus, were icicles shooting forward at a speed which matched his momentum.

The icicles caught his limb by way of the sleeves of his suit, accelerating his fall. Further, the last one slammed directly into Regulus's back, freezing his body solid.

A total of five icicles restrained Regulus's extremities, using his body as a freezing point as it plummeted into the canal. Immediately, a magical, freezing hand stretched forward, centering on where Regulus had fallen, tracing the flow of the water—The canal was turned into an icy tomb, without so much as a single opening.

3

Subaru: "—Operation Splash, nicknamed Operation S, was a complete success!"

Reinhard: "I hope this was effective."

Next to Subaru, who gazed into the frozen waterway, landed Reinhard, cloaked in moonlight.

After having thrown Regulus from the sky, the trajectory of that fall should have meant that he would not be able to avoid the falling water, but in fact even a droplet brushing him would have been a miracle. That Reinhard could move so well in midair was hardly even surprising.

Emilia: "Sealing his range of movement and tossing him into water, freezing it afterward. There's no way he'll ever surface again, is there…"

From Reinhard's other side, Emilia stared into the water.

The one who had drawn up the battle plans had been Subaru, and the one who had facilitated them had been Reinhard. However, Emilia had been the one who had pushed Regulus the most. Even if the other party had been an unreasonable murderer, Emilia still wore a rather timid expression.

If everything proceeded smoothly, he soon would be naught but a drowned corpse. Emilia felt that she had gone too far, and this feeling was not without reason.

Subaru: "…"

Gazing to his side at Emilia, Subaru crossed his arms in consideration. Though he felt rather sorry for her, to have Regulus drown was the best outcome. If that were not possible, leaving him in a state mirroring death would be best.

However, the worst possibility must also be expected. For example —

Subaru: "Reinhard!"

Reinhard: "—Tsk!"

—When, right in front of their eyes, the ice's surface cracked. And immediately after, a jet of water spouted up, blasting straight towards them.

At the sight of gushing water, Reinhard grabbed both Emilia and Subaru as the jet of water closed in on them. His arms wrapped around their waists, he jumped backwards in one leap—after they were well out of the reach of the droplets of water, Reinhard narrowed his eyes.

Reinhard: "It seems that it has yet to be settled."

Subaru: "Right. On that note, this guy, he's really bad news."

Reinhard and Subaru had each fixated on something different.

Reinhard was watching the figure standing atop a drifting piece of ice, whereas Subaru was looking at the outcome that had been caused by the jet of water which that figure had capriciously unleashed.

Water droplets flew about, pouring down near where Subaru and the others were standing.

The outcome was nothing so charming as the pitter-patter stopping and just dampening the earth below; each part of the spray bored thoroughly into the earth, carving through the ground as if biting with the force of a gigantic beast.

Their destructive power was not inferior to that of the stones and sand thrown by Regulus. Which was to say, whether wielding solid or liquid, Regulus's attack power stayed constant.

Emilia: "…His body, it's not frozen at all. Just like what happened at the church."

Muttering this, Emilia looked at Regulus, still perched atop that piece of drifting ice.

Subaru had entrusted her with the task of freezing his body and limbs using magic. As per Subaru's instructions to show no mercy, the icicle pierced right through Regulus's limbs and the center of his body. Such an act should have left him more than half-dead.

However, when he had fallen into the water, the tip of the icicle had not penetrated his body, and so Regulus had been merely frozen on the surface, just as he had been in the church.

To Regulus, neither freezing nor magic was effective. Like slashes and blunt force blows, he could also invalidate those types of attacks.

Subaru: "Although, when he shrugged off Wrath's flames, I did suspect this a little… I guess that basic idea of his invincibility being specialized in either physical or magical damage is out of the window, then."

Emilia: "Were you able to confirm what you wanted with Operation S?"

Reinhard: "I will have to get a little closer for that…?!"

The moment Reinhard responded, there was a change in the surface of the canal.

A vortex appeared on the water's frozen surface, a distance from where the crack was. Gradually, its momentum increased, pulling in the drifting ice which Regulus occupied. And then—

Subaru: "A water dragon—!"

Leaping from the heart of the maelstrom, the dragon bared its fangs at Regulus, who was standing on top of the ice.

Domesticated water dragons usually swam in the waterways surrounding the city. The water dragon, who should have been trained to not attack people, opened its jaws wide, aiming to lunge at Regulus's slender back.

Perhaps, even that water dragon had been influenced by Wrath in no small measure, a tragedy that never should have taken place—However, its jaws did not have a chance to close.

Subaru: "—Hk."

Subaru's throat involuntarily clogged up at the gruesome spectacle unfolding before him. What happened in this moment, how could it even be described?

—The water dragon's maw jerked out of place at the very moment it had clamped down onto Regulus.

As if in a game of Daruma Otoshi "1", the water dragon's lower jaw was dislocated. Keeping its momentum as it flew toward Regulus, its mandible was displaced. A maw which should have dragged Regulus into the canal, unable to correct the dislocation, was split in two with a great shudder.

The halves of the bisected water dragon poured blood into the water as they were submerged. After a moment, an exaggerated amount of blood and viscera that had once been a water dragon floated to the surface. This had been its gruesome demise.

Reinhard: "Emilia-sama. If possible, could you make me a spear?"

Emilia: "…Eh?"

Reinhard: "A spear. A spear of ice, please. I have troubled you."

Faced with the same sight, Reinhard muttered this to the befuddled Emilia. Connecting the dots, Emilia hurriedly focused her Mana. After several unsuccessful attempts, eventually Emilia created an ice spear, and handed it over to Reinhard. After testing the feel of the weapon he had received,

Reinhard: “Excuse me.”

Grasping the ice spear, he drew his wrist back to aim Regulus, and let the missile fly.

The spear flew true— however, it was not the sharp tip that had been pointed at Regulus. As it turned to its side, its shaft scored a direct hit. But what had happened, was that when the shaft of the spear crashed against Regulus, it fell straight into the waterway, broken into two.

Emilia: “What is the meaning of this…?”

Subaru: “I see… I get it, Reinhard.”

Seeing the state of the broken spear, Emilia tilted her head in confusion. From beside her, Subaru grasped the meaning behind why Reinhard had done this, shuddering at its outcome.

Hearing Subaru’s acknowledgement, Reinhard nodded and said,

Reinhard: “Emilia-sama, did you see what happened to the spear upon hitting him?”

Emilia: “It broke, right? A spear of ice is different from a real one, so it’s natural for it to have broken in two after it struck with that sort of force…”

Reinhard: “Not quite, the spear did not break. The part of the spear that hit him is missing. The part that hit him is missing, separated. The spear was broken not into two, but three.”

Reinhard’s explanation served as an answer to what had happened to the spear and with the water dragon.

Neither object, upon contact with Regulus, had managed to penetrate his body. With an ordinary barrier, the collision would have caused a projectile to bounce off or shatter from the impact, but neither had happened. Regulus’s body literally rejected anything that collided with it.

Regulus: “—What cluelessly naive expressions you’re all wearing. This is just how it is.”

Just as the three reached a consensus, Regulus’s voice suddenly reached them, from the ice.

That calm voice made it sound as if he were just whispering to himself. The instant Subaru thought that, an unpleasant shock hit him in the back.

Regulus: “Ununderstanding, ununderstandingununderstandingununderstanding. All of you, really, reallyreally understand nothing. It’s useless. You have no chance. No matter what you do, you can’t win. No matter how much you strain and struggle, you can’t reach me. Why can’t you understand that? I’ll say it to you, show it to you, force you to see… you could never understand.”

Regulus whispered to himself as he leapt from the ice. Having jumped forward only slightly, his body plummeted into the canal; for a moment, his figure vanished. However, with one hand on the edge of the canal, he pulled himself from the water, climbing back onto the street. Then, once again, he squared his gaze at those who were watching him.

Reinhard: “—His body isn’t wet in the slightest. His breathing remains unchanged. Naturally, the fragments of ice need not even a mention, nor has a single a drop of blood splashed onto him. His clothes are completely clean, and no water drips from him.”

Observing Regulus, Reinhard gave Subaru a quick report.

Upon hearing that, Subaru nodded and tried to think, even as he suppressed his horror. It seemed that everything he had intended to confirm with Operation S had been checked.

However, there was not a trace of good news. It was the worst forecast possible.

Reinhard: “Subaru, my sword.”

Subaru: “Oh, ah, right…”

At Reinhard's request, Subaru quickly handed over the sword that he had been holding all along. As Reinhard gently tested the handle of his beloved sword, Emilia looked on from the side, wondering timidly,

Emilia: "Can the sword be unsheathed?"

Reinhard: "No, the handle is still fixed. It seems that it will not indulge me… but there is no other weapon that can be used to confront him."

Emilia: "Since your sword can't be drawn, what are you going to do? Attack him directly with the sheath?"

Reinhard: "Not exactly. But that's not too far off."

With nary a trace of tenseness in his voice, Reinhard stepped forward. He placed himself in front of Subaru and Emilia, shielding them from Regulus's line of sight.

Reinhard: "Subaru, please allow the task of buying time to be handed over to me. You can continue to decipher his Authority."

Subaru: "Feels like the difficulty just rose a level. But I'll do my best."

Emilia: "I-I'll also do my best!"

Reinhard: "Then, I will also do my utmost—Go!"

As soon as the sound of his voice fell, Reinhard flew forward. Regulus, who had been kept waiting, met him with only calmness.

Regulus: "I say, did you not see? If not the fate of that lizard, then the spear… Is your imagination truly so lacking?"

Reinhard: "Only paying attention to a coin by your foot will draw your attention away from what is important—as my master once said."

Regulus: "Is that so?"

Regulus's sigh, deep and uninterested, overlapped with Reinhard's opening strike.

The sound of muscles and bones being penetrated by something sharp reverberated through the air, and Subaru's throat could not help but stiffen. He watched as Reinhard gripped the scabbard, slamming the hilt of the sword into Regulus.

Regulus: "—Oh, seems that you don't even have a strategy."

The sound of these blows was different from the fate of the water dragon and the ice spear. At least Reinhard's beloved sword would not break upon hitting Regulus, no matter what he did. However, it did not seem that damage had been inflicted on Regulus. Reinhard's previous attacks, although dealing no damage, had at least been enough to send him flying, but now, even that effect was lost.

Reinhard: "Feel free to brag. You are the second person to force me to use Dragon Sword Reid."

Regulus: "I can't hear anything but belittlement, you are making a complete fool of me, aren't you? That isn't what using a sword is supposed to mean? Such a denigrating gaze, such disparaging words, it's only natural that much is obvious to those who understand!"

Reinhard: "That's all rather—Kh!"

As he provoked Regulus, Reinhard weaved in and out of super-close combat. Faced with those murderous fingertips, Reinhard evaded with even greater movements.

Suddenly, his legs stopped moving. No, they were kept from moving.

Reinhard collapsed onto his knees, kneeling in place. His right calf split open, spilling forth copious amounts of blood.

Subaru: "Were you hit?! What happened?!"

Subaru cried out, and Reinhard frowned through his confusion.

Neither Subaru, observing from a distance, nor Reinhard, the party concerned, could discern what had happened. The solution came from the other fighter, giving a failing mark.

Regulus: “With your inhuman eyesight and reactions, you were able to escape the bits of gravel and water. But you’re too naive, aren’t you? If you truly want to confront me, prevent me from sighing. You can’t, can you? Just now, I sighed.”

Reinhard: “Even breaths…”

Regulus’s relentless kick approached Reinhard, who had fallen to the ground.

A direct hit would be an attack enough to rend Reinhard’s torso into pieces. Faced with that attack, Reinhard no longer had any time to dodge. Hastily, he quickly lifted the sword in his arms, blocking the blow with its jet-black scabbard—

Reinhard: “Ugh…!”

Regulus: “Just what do you think you can do, with that annoying scabbard in the way? Clinging to something that you’re unworthy of, why do people like you do such things? I can’t understand at all.”

With this defensive action, Reinhard’s body was sent flying as if it were a toy ball.

Although protected from the fatal power of the kick, he crashed through the side of a building nearby, eventually rolling on the pavement. As Reinhard’s body rolled and rolled, the destruction only continued.

In that moment, Reinhard’s form, sent flying by a kick, became nothing but a bullet.

Regulus: “Right, and now—”

Subaru: “—!”

Seeing Reinhard off well into the distance, Regulus seemed to remember something as he turned around. Being firmly fixed by that gaze, Subaru immediately tensed. Emilia, from beside him, immediately chanted magic, and in an instant the sky was covered with a multitude of icicles, which ruthlessly flew toward Regulus.

However, the results spoke for themselves.

Regulus: “A woman who can’t read the situation is just the worst. Having to spend time on disciplining them is a lot of work. However, because women are just ignorant creatures, they must first be taught. That’s just how it is. They’re much better after they’ve been tamed, though.”

Slamming into his body and shattering into shards, those icicles were unable to even make him budge. Languidly, Regulus approached them.

Subaru: “Emilia! Trying to fight is useless right now! Anything we do before figuring out his trick won’t have any effect!”

Emilia: “But…!”

Subaru: “Right, for now, let’s just get the hell out of here!”

Seizing Emilia’s wrist as she tried to remain stubbornly, Subaru tried to pull her away from Regulus. But Subaru’s actions only served to excite Regulus further—

Regulus: “Haha, are you trying to flee? Well, that doesn’t surprise me. Now that the situation is like this, where you stand no chance against me, though you should have understood that well before you childishly knocked upon my door… If you want to flee, then flee.”

Just what was he thinking? Regulus watched Subaru and Emilia flee with nothing but smiles. However, given this chance to escape, they needed to capitalize on it. No matter what, right now, they had no time to even stop and think—

Regulus: “—But, you’d have to get away first.”

As he spoke, Regulus approached the canal. Leaning over, he grabbed and hoisted half of the water dragon's corpse out of the surface of the water. Grabbing its tail, he looked back with a ferocious smile.

Emilia: "H-Hey, Subaru… I have this feeling of foreboding."

Subaru: "What a coincidence, so do I."

As for what would Regulus do, neither had any clue. However, every unremarkable action he took had completely extraordinary results, that much was plain as day.

Therefore, Subaru and Emilia's pace increased rapidly.

Taking his time, Regulus smiled pleasantly as he raised his head, before leaping into motion. He set foot on the roof of an adjacent building, then jumped over its upper floors, landing on another, taller structure, until he finally reached a building the height of a clock tower.

After that period, both parties now stood so far apart each other's faces were the size of beans. However, despite the distance they had gained, Subaru could still make out Regulus's face.

—He could see that murderous smirk so clearly.

Regulus: "Come, if you want to try to hide, see if you can—Whore undeserving of becoming a bride, and the mentally-raping bastard that cherishes such a woman. For posterity, I'll deliver to you a rain of blood!"

Regulus lifted the half of the water dragon with both hands, and squeezed the corpse mercilessly.

The dragon's flesh split with an unpleasant squelch, all of its blood gushing forth, and Regulus swung the blood-soaked remains with glee from his perch up high.

He held the corpse's tail, still drenched in blood, as if waving a wet towel. It rotated over his head, endlessly scattering blood in a halo.

Farther, farther, until its momentum brought it to where Subaru and Emilia had ran away to. Then, the result was—

Emilia: “—Subaru!”

Subaru: “Run run run runrunrun!”

The downpour of blood became a rain of destruction, further blighting the city, this carpet bombing chasing the pair’s figures, forcing them to flee further.

Chapter 51:
Malice in Trickery

1

Ricardo: “Why’re ya makin’ that face. Somethin’ botherin’ ya?”

Just before reaching the control tower, Ricardo spoke to the knight, who wore a stiff expression.

Halting in his step, Julius raised his brows in surprise.

Julius: “How surprising, Ricardo. I never expected you to be concerned about others’ worries.”

Ricardo: “Don’t mistake that phrase for somethin’ else. The one with ya’s just me. Even if ya say somethin’, it’ll be a secret from miss too.”

Julius: “…You’re not wrong, huh.”

Though it was rare, Ricardo often made correct observations of people.

If not for that, he wouldn’t have been able to take up his role as the head of the Iron Fang, hearing only fragments of his splendid career would lead tell so. Looking at only one’s self and ignoring surroundings was no way to stay alive. Slave, mercenary, this applied to both roles.

Ricardo: “Now that’s quite the brutal brat. Even so, I’ll play the role I’m supposed to, so ya can depend on me. I’ll also take son-in-law’s consultation.”

Julius: “That ‘son-in-law’ is scary. I do not hold any such strange feelings for Anastasia-sama.”

Ricardo: “What’s that, ‘s miss’ affair huh. Maybe it’s about Mimi. Besides, she hasn’t managed to convince miss yet.”

"…"

Julius smiled bitterly. This gesture of quietly shaking his head was graceful as always, but this time he lacked precision when choosing appropriate words.

And at that gesture,

Ricardo: "Somethin's off 'bout the recapture of City Hall. Miss agrees too. Miss hasn't heard much 'bout it, but I'll force it all out."

Julius: "It seems you are rather unforgiving."

Ricardo: "Of course, it's life-threatening. Don't want t' leave my back to someone who's in th' dark. 'Re ya goin' t' fabricate some kinda excuse as a rebuttal?"

Julius: "…No, it is indeed as you say. It was I who was mistaken. Certainly, I am increasing our risk by hesitating to speak."

Julius earnestly nodded to the pursuing Ricardo, and curved his brows with elegance.

However, no more words came out of the mouth of his troubled self. Facing that attitude, Ricardo got out of his own numbness and let out a sullen voice.

Ricardo: "Why're ya stoppin' there? It's sad that you're so lost. Just let it out of yer mouth and frankly speak it all out, can't ya do that? Jus' what's stoppin' ya?"

"…"

Ricardo: "Julius."

Julius: "I apologize. I am unable to decide which words would be appropriate to express what I want to say. —The reason for my worry is just as you guessed, the Sin Archbishop that was encountered in the City Government Building. Roy Alphard of Gluttony, was that person, unmistakably. Unmistakably, but…"

Julius confusedly cut off his words halfway as uncertainty wavered in his yellow eyes.

Julius: “Similar to the other Sin Archbishops, perhaps Gluttony also possesses an inexplicable ability. The power of eating memories, eating names, was noticeable back at the time of the battle with the White Whale. However…”

Ricardo: “Julius—!”

Ricardo called out the moment he felt unease touching his very core. And Julius instantly recognized the meaning behind it.

—The atmosphere trembled, all sounds disappeared from the world, and a light rose into the sky.

There could be only one situation in which that extraordinary light would pierce the night sky. It must be the aftermath of a slash by the strongest individual in this world.

Ricardo: “Such a fancy move. I’m correct to assume it’s the Sword Saint, huh?”

Julius: “Ah, Reinhard, isn’t it. It seems that Subaru and the others have already come in contact with Greed. We cannot afford to make any delays either. We must also hurry.”

When one Sin Archbishop was attacked, the other Sin Archbishops did not come together in defense and retaliation.

Julius and Ricardo sped up their pace, aiming for the approaching control tower.

Ricardo: “So, what’s so strange ‘bout that Gluttony? Did ya say he’s an extraordinary monster?!”

Ricardo tapped on his shoulder in hopes of hearing Julius’ story to its conclusion and interrupted Julius’ forward momentum. Julius turned his head and looked back, with a gaze which denied what he had just said.

Julius: “No. Although it does seem like he was not completely serious, the skill of Gluttony does not seem to exceed human knowledge itself. If we both are his opponents, then that may just be enough for him, however, the enemy's creepiness is a totally different subject."

"…"

His unavoidable worry itself was because of the fact that Julius himself did not know the extent of its true creepiness. And it was Julius' unusual selfishness which made him avoid mentioning this argument in the previous strategy meeting.

Julius considered Gluttony to be an unfathomable and eerie opponent, but still believed that he must cross swords with him.

Ricardo did not know the reason behind it.

It could not be said that even Julius clearly knew, either.

"…"

They kicked the stone pavement and passed the curve of the street to its exit. There lied one of four control towers, colored differently compared to the other buildings, and in front of that was—

???: "A~h, we thought that you'd come. We expected that you'd come. That's right, that's exactly right, that's completely right, perhaps that's right, maybe that's right, probably that's right, isn't that right, isn't that probably right, because that's right ~tsu! The wait was well worth it ~tsu!"

—Before the entrance of the control tower, a lone boy stood on the cobblestone square.

Dressed in dirty rags, dark brown hair left to grow for a long time till it reached great length. His crazy eyes twinkling and shining with happiness, sharp canine teeth and a dripping tongue hung from his mouth.

With both arms slouched down, he was a young boy. No matter how you looked at him, he barely seemed to have any power and looked like simply a vagrant child—but an aura of dreadfulness emanated from his body.

Ricardo: “One more thing, jus’ to confirm… It’s him, right?”

There wasn’t any need to ask, whether it was. There was no doubt, it was completely convincing.

As a response to Ricardo, Julius only lowered his jaw quietly.

There was no possible doubt, no possible mistake, that it was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony standing there.

The worst kind of blasphemer who chewed on the names and memories of others.

Julius: “Roy Alphard—”

Roy: “Yes, correct answer. That’s our name. We’re happy that you remember it. Quite happy. Pretty happy. Really happy. As we’re happy. Because we’re happy, drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! It would be worthwhile to eat, and dri~nk. And also…”

Declaring his name, Alphard laughed with terrible brutality. His eyes glared directly at Ricardo standing right next to Julius.

He opened his mouth and rings his nose as his eyes filled with ecstasy.

Roy: “This time it seems that we will be even getting a puppy-chan. That makes us unbelievably happy. After all, our stomach might have had gotten a bit troubled if it was ju~st Julius Juukulius-kun. Whatever you say, it would have had been completely tasteless, won’t it.”

Julius: “It seems I have gotten rather bored by your words of insult. Henceforth to settle this quickly, I asked my friend to accompany me this time. Though it is definitely inelegant to have more than one person…”

Roy: “A~h, it’s nice, that way of starting. Doing that to raise self-consciousness may be nice and it is typical of Julius-kun bu~t, it’s rather weak. We are gourmands so tasting that is a bit problematic, but still, we are intrigued as Julius-kun is one of the top-class we have seen till now! Tidy a~nd consistent.”

Julius: “Well, well… in addition to the big welcome we received, I am grateful for those words as well.”

Roy: “Well that cannot be helped ~tsu! Our, our honesty is something that gets overlooked. What we want you to overlook right now is this slight mismatch of characters.”

Waving his hands, Alphard did not bend his posture till the end. Provocatively, Julius kept his calm, but Ricardo was unable to hide his feeling of unpleasantness. He clicked his tongue and cracked the bones of his neck.

Ricardo: “O~h, say what ya wanna say, boy. It’ll be mistake to overlook you as just some brat. What ye’ll get for your sins won’t be very pretty. I’ll even travel across dimensions just to beat your ass. Because, boy will I break that.”

Roy: “Oh, scaryscary. Don’t stare at us with that scary face. We apologize if you got offe~nded that we called you a puppy, Ricardo Welkin. But still, we still longed for you a bit, you know? Don’t scare us, in that rough loud voice of yo~urs!”

“—?”

Calling Ricardo by his name, he shouted, as Julius frowned. Seeing his eyes, Julius shook his head. Strange. Alphard’s remarks were merely a madman’s delusion, but the enormous sense of discomfort could not be easily wiped away. For example—when did he, learn Ricardo’s name?

Ricardo: “Damn spooky brat… From where, and when, did ya learn our names.”

Roy: “It wouldn’t be ve~ry wise to try and investigate. It’s just that, it’s obvious that we would know your name. Isn’t that true, Julius-ku~n?”

Julius: “No matter how much you consent, I cannot respond to you. You too, I am completely ignorant regarding you. If this is the way you will do it, I will break the flow just as much.”

Roy: “Look, there’s that boring conclusion again. Even though we care about it quite much, it's uneasy it's uneasy it's unpleasant ~tsu! Hiding it in the chest, putting aside thinking about oneself for later ~tsu! It's pretty virtuous as a knight, but it's pretty boring as a person."

Pulling out his knight sword, Julius's lips silently whisper something.

And immediately afterwards, six extremely brilliant lights surrounded Julius.

They were the six quasi-spirits Julius is always accompanied by.

This mix of swordsmanship and spirit-arts was what made Julius the Knight Impeccable.

Roy: "Neither the aroma of the feeling of inferiority, nor the rich texture of experiencing frustration, even the sweetness of a strong desire, or the rare taste of a sense of satisfaction after you've aged, you have no~ne of them ~tsu!"

Julius: "—Ricardo. Give it your everything from the very beginning. Let's work together."

Ricardo: "Yeah, leave it to me."

Shaking his arms, Alphard revealed the daggers attached on his wrists. Wielding two daggers was Gluttony's fighting style, but it did not seem to be enough to stop Julius' magic or prevent Ricardo's blows.

As long as the battle wasn't an ambush, their respective victory and defeat were already in sight.

Regardless, in Ricardo's eyes, Alphard did not seem an opponent that could provide a rich and challenging battle experience.

Julius: "Spirit Knight, Julius Juukulius."

As per his manners, Julius gave his name ahead of the fight.

However, Ricardo, who was standing next to him, had no such obligations to follow. They fixed their eyes, waiting for Gluttony to give his identity.

Seeing Ricardo's line of sight, Alphard shouted.

Roy: "How nice, quite nice, perhaps it is nice, isn't it nice , maybe it is nice, possibly it is nice, probably it is nice, because it is probably nice ~tsu! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! Gourmet, bizarre eating, satiation, overeating ~tsu! Spiciness, blandness, deliciousness, delicacy ~tsu! We will eat everything up ~tsu! Even a life without taste, is also a taste that's new to us ~tsu!"

Julius: "—El Clausel."

The vibrance of the six colors draw a circle in front of Julius's eyes, and an extremely bright light emanates from the tip of his sword that aimed to stab through Alphard's center.

Multiple affinities mixed, that destructive power develops into a rainbow-colored blow that could swallow up everything.

Ricardo stepped on ahead with momentum that crushed the cobblestone, just behind the dazzling light. As if in an attempt to have Ricardo push Alphard aside, right into the extremely vibrant light. Against the heavy slashes and the rainbow-colored extremely vibrant light, Alphard uncovers his fangs.

Roy: "—Truly, nii-sama is as magnificent as imagined. We will be enchanted, geez ~tsu."

2

Beneath the moon, flashes of silver sliced through wind, as sparks spilled forth from a symphony of swordplay.

The first musician was a Sword Demon who swung a pair of blades with crisp notes.

His partner welcomed him; a swordswoman whose movements flowed reminiscent the path of a gentle stream.

Flashes of metal danced through the air; the clash of steel should have sounded cruel, and yet, somehow, this symphony was wistfully melancholic. The ringing of sharp, precise collisions resembled the gentle caresses of a pair of lovers.

The reason for this was simple; these two swordsmen complemented each other on a level beyond perfection.

Wilhelm: “Haaah—!”

The Sword Demon steeled his breath as he let loose a flurry of elliptical blows.

Those precise arcs were practically a form of art, their clean movements the ideal standard for all aspiring swordsmen.

His sheer skill was so overwhelming that anyone who was worthy of calling themself a knight would have been so captivated that their battle would be guaranteed a loss, and yet he merely, almost casually, unleashed flurry after flurry.

Theresia: “…”

One single, light blow would have been more than fatal, in this rain of unending death.

However, meeting this peerless hurricane was a longsword whose owner was truly extraordinary.

Moreover, that longsword had an odd quality.

The length of the blade, as tall as its owner, was too unwieldy to make a proper weapon; and yet, the slender swordswoman swung the huge blade with ease, as if it were weightless.

Although the longsword’s owner was draped from head to toe in a black cloak, impeding on her vision, the tip of her sword flowed as if dancing through water.

Whether it be in terms of speed or polish, the twin blades greatly outstripped the longsword. Even so, each and every one of the Sword Demon’s piercing attacks were, without fail, absorbed and deflected.

Between the sparks and sharp clangs, with an almost pitying hiss toward the Sword Demon, the swordswoman leapt backward. A beat too slow to react to the unexpected move, just as he was about to push forward, the gleam of a blade pierced his forehead.

Wilhelm: "—hk"

Flashing before him, was a blow that he couldn't allow to make contact.

This was a specialized killing blow that flashed faster than the blink of an eye, which disguised the approaching blade. If not for his extensive experience in dueling her, he would have been unable to see through the imminent death he'd nearly been dealt, and glem would have passed through the brain and killed him.

The skin between his brows burned at the close call. In an instant, the Sword Demon cast off his misgivings, and began to pursue to woman who'd frozen in her stinging pose.

Wilhelm: "huu, kuu"

Theresia: "…"

Before he'd even gathered himself enough to act, the woman had driven her toes into his flesh.

Her slender feet pierced between his well-exercised abdominal muscles and jolted his organs; the weight of her kick bent his body double, as a silver flash drew an arc, which hung over his head.

The glittering sword flew straight as true, as if meaning to cut down the moon.

Having reached the peak of its flight, the sword began to glide back to earth, and slicing straight through the atmosphere, meaning to bisect the sword demon.

The power behind that attack was incomparable to any previous ones; both the deadliness of the blade itself and its owner's skill were more than capable of slicing through any human body.

Approaching in the briefest of flashes, was this certain death.

Wilhelm: “Stop looking down on me!”

Still bent double, he immediately swung both his arms upward, staggering as they met the crushing force overhead.

The Sword Demon’s own blades overlapped as they caught the weapon bearing down on him, as his jaws clenched from its sheer power. Unable to fend it off entirely, his arms began to fall; shallowly, the blade pierced his forehead.

Blood spurted forth, splattering his field of vision red. However, he hadn’t fallen to knees, not had his own swords been broken.

Wilhelm: “kuuuu”

The arms holding the sword back strained upward, pushing the fallen sword back again.

Sweeping the heavy blade aside, the residual aftershocks shook the form of the swordswoman before him; taking advantage of the moment, he kicked forward.

The force that should have slammed back into the ground was instead redirected into the woman’s airborne form.

The combination of the force from the falling blade and the kick slammed the woman’s body into the distance. The aging Sword Demon lunged into the slender body that had nowhere left to flee.

—An opening.

Against the swordswoman who had flown into the air, with no escape route, the Sword Demon lowered his shoulder and unleashed an attack.

Catching up to her fleeing form, the attack came simultaneously from top and bottom. As one, the two blades drew an arc, tearing toward her slender form with the bite of a wild beast.

In midair, with her back turned toward him, she could make no counterattack.

Even so, that clarity of that attack found itself shaken.

Theresia: “…”

The hood that had covered the swordswoman’s head, unable to withstand the tug of gravity as she flipped her body, swished back, revealing what had once been hidden,

Cascading down was long hair the color of a beautiful, raging flame.

Theresia: “…”

At the time of its entry into her field of vision, the swordsman's attack carried a flaw which existed for briefer than a single instant.

A incredibly subtle, slight deviation from perfection, was this mistake. Even so, no one else would be able to parry this attack.

However, considering the Sword Demon's current opponent, this mistake was fatal. To an existence which had once won the favor of the god of swords, that turbid blade could not reach at all.

Theresia: "…"

At the scene in front of him, the Sword Demon's throat was frozen by a shudder.

That certain blow had been interrupted midway.

It hadn't been anything special. The woman merely drew her sword in midair, and wedged it between the swords that came from above and below. As easy as sliding a brace between a pair of fangs.

The blade and the pommel of her longsword completely caught the advance of the two swords right in their tracks. What had the Sword Demon shudder was that bite of steel on steel rang out only once.

Catching the two blades with only one crisp sound, meant that she had calculated the timing of both of them colliding with her own weapon down to the millisecond.

What was truly horrifying was the necessary clarity of vision, skill, and sheer nerve to even attempt such an act.

Wilhelm: "—kuu"

The stunt, so far beyond what common sense dictated was possible, drew a sigh from the Sword Demon's throat.

At that moment, the leg of the woman who was still caught between the swords flew in a wide arc, kicking away the Sword

Demon's hands, which still rested where his attack had stalled.

The impact jolted his weapons from the hands which wielded them, and, in that moment, he found himself completely defenseless.

Then, with a flash of steel, the longsword made a cross.

The combination of the speed at which the blade approached, and the range that couldn't have been shorter.

Even with a little time and distance, the empty-handed swordsman had no way to block.

The longsword pierced his thin skin and continued drive into his organs and sever his spine, driving through his left side in one single motion and splitting his body into halves—coughing up blood and internal organs, the body already shackled by old age breaking with blow. That was the unavoidable fate that awaited him.

That was the end that could not be evaded, and the conclusion of the matter.

After the end of his life, having lost everything, he couldn't even cling to a chance at redemption.

—That kind of conclusion was simply impossible to accept.

Wilhelm: "RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH—!"

He rebelled against the bloody end that flashed through his mind.

The throat of the sword ghost burned with the final scene of the illusion, the vitality of his twilight years erupting forth. Breaking the limits concentration so that even passage of time stalled, only he and his opponent existed in that moment, the sounds and colors of the world fading from focus.

The impending blade traced an unexpected orbit to stab into his body.

Slowly feeling the touch of the blade piercing through his fragile skin, as well the heat and pain of bleeding, whilst feeling as if the natural force of gravity had increased tenfold, he planted all his the power into his two feet.

Digging his heels in hard enough to shatter stone, he redirected the force of swinging his arms to the right into a reactive motion.

Reversing his body with the shortest distance and best angle, turning to the side as if approaching the blade that brushed his body, a form of evasion which allowed him to roll along the blade that slid across his side.

Theresia: "…"

Having been thwarted in her attack, the swordswoman's follow up attack was delayed by but a brief moment.

In that time, the Sword Demon retreated several paces, plucking his twin swords from midair. With a sigh, he placed the palm of his hand onto his side, checking the depth of the wound.

This was certainly no minor scratch.

He'd turned while a blade had been invading his body, after all. Spinning while being pierced, he'd naturally draw a wound on his own body.

Fortunately, by a hair's breadth, he'd kept the blade from plunging into his organs, but the amount of blood dripping from the wound mere centimeters away from his innards was by no means a small amount.

To ordinary people, this was a serious injury. Although that was natural—

Wilhelm: "…From the very start, I didn't feel that I could persist in this battle for long."

He'd already been running on a time limit, it had only grown shorter.

The Sword Demon—Wilhelm rolled off his shirt and violently staunched the bleeding from his waist; exposing his healthy flesh during this emergency treatment, he was not pursued.

The woman opposing him merely watched quietly, her gaze devoid of emotion.

At his own anticipation of any swaying or subtle changes in those eyes, Wilhelm gave a bitter smile. Pressing on his open the wound, he awoke himself with the pain.

Wilhelm: "Such weakness is useless. Stop dreaming, this sacred reunion, you will one day be able to indulge in as much as you want, in the heavens."

Theresia: "…"

Wilhelm: "I don't think I'm hallucinating. Nor do I expect miracles. My wife was a woman who was reluctant to follow the way of the sword, but pushing the responsibility of wielding the sword onto others, was something she never once did."

An emotionless corpse, a revived construct.

Crimson hair silky and flowing, smooth skin snowy and transparent, eyes bijous of precious gems; closing his own, he recalled that cute face that he would never tire of.

All this was before him, and all this shouldn't have been before him.

Wilhelm: "Theresia, how lovely you are. —Therefore, you can't remain here."

Wilhelm tightened his grip on his swords, taking up fighting a stance again.

At this moment, standing here, was not the husband of Theresia van Astrea. The one who prayed to stand here was not Wilhelm van Astrea.

Who stood here at this moment was Sword Demon Wilhelm.

—Facing his dead wife, Wilhelm steeled his spirit, his gaze becoming clear and clean.

Even if his blood were boiling, he wouldn’t allow his anger at the sinister presence to come to a breaking point.

But, right now, at this moment, at this time, anything else was superfluous.

His old friend, his comrade-in-arms, his wife, had said to Wilhelm.

Don’t allow heat to besmirch the blade, don’t allow your blood boil, you must learn to love the coldness of steel.

How about now? Was it growing hot?

Wilhelm: “No, it’s frigid. Like the blade of a knife.”

Under the moon, the Sword Demon pierced his opponent with a gaze of steel.

The talent swordswoman who was his opponent, also waved the tip of the her longsword again, without any flaws.

In an instant, their swords once again flashed again toward each other.

The sounds of steel intertwined with each other was a wail, a plea, a courtship.

The expectation of an end, and the hope that it would never come to an end.

As if exchanging endless dialogue without a single word. The sound of swordplay played ceaselessly, echoing.

3

Garfiel: “Ah, damn it! No response ‘t all, what a joke!”

Kicking off the ground, kicking off a wall, kicked off a roof, and soaring up.

Flying diagonally in the air, his short blond hair fluttering as it bathed in the wind fluttering, exposing his teeth, a picture of desperation.

Time and time again, gnashing his fangs, fighting the burning sensation in his body and chest.

Garfiel: “Bastard! What’s up, hello!”

His clothes fluttering, he broke into a run the instant he touched the ground again.

This was a feat that only those of exceptional strength and endurance, far beyond a human level, could achieve. However, the one who flew over the city with only his own body expressed no pride in his abilities.

Instead, he kept roaring into an unresponsive hand mirror.

The one sprinting was Garfiel, who was howling into the magic device in his hand—the conversation mirror.

The conversation mirror, which should have been able to link him to others who possessed one, remained silent. No one picked up Garfiel’s call, even though, clearly, there were two groups of people capable of responding.

Garfiel: “City Hall guys, or Wrath fightin’ guys! Th’ hell’re ya not replyin’ for!”

The conversation mirrors were supposed to have been assigned so that everyone could stay in contact during their respective battles.

In fact, they’d been working perfectly fine just after he’d left City Hall. But now, when contact was necessary, the function of the dialogue mirror had fallen silent.

—This needed to be communicated immediately.

Garfiel: “Gotta tell ‘em that they’ve to evacuate City Hall now, damn it!”

As he said so, he leapt upward, skipping the street in front of him as he took a shortcut.

Although his rough landing shattered the roof he landed on, Garfiel had no attention to spare. Compared to damage to the city, ensuring the safety of his companions was far more important.

The goal of his rapid travel was City Hall.

Garfiel was rushing back to the place he'd left only dozens of minutes ago. Leaving behind Wilhelm, his comrade-in-arms, he desperately called to the conversation mirror.

There was no other reason.

Danger was quickly approaching City Hall that was serving as their base.

—Wilhelm and Garfiel had arrived at the control tower occupied by the Lust, at about the same time that Reinhard began to engage with Greed.

Having witnessed the distant aurora, the two entered the control tower.

None of the witch cultists nor the troublesome people who they'd expected had appeared to intercept their path. As expected, the Witch Cult minions in the city seemed to only consist of insignificant opponents.

Everything had been smooth sailing until then, and hadn't been any other rooms worth checking out aside from the water gate control room.

So, the pair naturally headed to the top floor to prepare for a decisive battle with Lust. In the imagination, the proportion of the power of the Lust camp is the most dangerous. In addition to Lust, there were two outstanding fighters, which meant that the two would have to face three enemies—naturally, they were both engulfed in tension.

Wilhelm: "If possible, I'd appreciate the swordswoman being left to me."

Garfiel: "Th' cap'n also told me so. Seems like there's something between ya. But, my amazin' self also has a bone t' pick with that woman. Can't let ya have 'er so easily."

Wilhelm: "That is my wife. Those bastards made a mockery of my wife's death, trampled upon her soul, and forced her to point a sword that which she'd sworn to protect."

Garfiel: "…"

Wilhelm: "No matter what, this is impermissible."

On the way, Wilhelm had revealed his reason for wanting to fight.

That was a reason that Garfiel, who should have had no basis to give up, couldn't help but keep his mouth shut against. And his inability to form reply in that moment, may have been just what decided the most fitting opponent of the swordswoman.

Garfiel: "…"

Although he'd said nothing, Garfiel conceded the opponent to Wilhelm. Wilhelm also indicated his understanding of this, silently bowing his head to express his gratitude.

So, when he stepped into the control tower, Garfiel felt his the cold sensation of his hair sticking straight up.

If Wilhelm is going to fight the female swordsman, then he'd have to deal with the remaining two by himself. The swordswoman went without mention, and the giant accompanying her was no less powerful than she was.

Although Lust was seeming lacking in terms of combat effectiveness, Subaru had repeatedly emphasized that what was fearsome about the Witch Cult was its direct combat ability.

Silent tension and pervasive fighting spirit.

As his sense of smell caught an increasingly strong scent of blood, Garfiel equipped the silver shields which had been strapped legs, and rushed into the room.

There, he saw it.

“Why the hell would I just be obediently waiting here? Fool.”

Words scrawled in blood, occupying an entire wall of the room.

When he realized what they meant, Garfiel’s head seethed.

Fleeing from a battle as if it were a matter of course, a type of personality which could straightforwardly say that there was no obligation to wait.

Wilhelm: “—Neglectful. Those bastards are exactly the type to pull this kind of trick.”

Wilhelm lowered his voice and retrieved the conversation mirror from his sleeves. The reason for trying to get in touch with City Hall so immediately was because Wilhelm had thought of the notion first.

Wilhelm: “If our forces are sent out in raids, then our base’s combat power will naturally diminish. These guys won’t have any shame in exploiting this gap.”

Before the pale-faced Garfiel, Wilhelm grimaced at the unresponsive mirror.

At the same time, along the roof of the control tower, emerged a deep, oppressive hostility.

A feeling that his back was being stroked by a blade, was what tipped Garfiel off about the existence of the enemy.

Wilhelm had also felt the hostile presence.

Wilhelm: “Garfiel-sama, I’ll entrust City Hall to you.”

Garfiel: “‘F it comes down t’ it, my amazin’ self can get there faster.”

They exchanged ideas in a flash.

The enemy was as a razor-sharp, clandestine blade. Exposing their backs as they tried to flee would only result in the both of them being cut down from behind.

Between them, one of them needed to stay.

Then, one of them needed to return to City Hall.

Wilhelm: “Please, continue to try to establish contact. —My master, I entrust her to you.”

Garfiel: “Goes without sayin’. ‘S a ‘Libre’s voice rouses the blood of soldiers’.”

Garfiel caught the thrown conversation mirror and sped out of the control tower.

Like so, he flew across the city, crossed the waterway, and continued into the mirror that offered no response. —Wilhelm’s battle was also probably starting.

Garfiel: “Damn it! All that, for nothin’…!”

If Lust launched a surprise attack on City Hall, there would be very little forces capable of greeting her.

Anastasia and Ferris had no combat power, and Crusch had collapsed from her injuries. Although several members of the Iron Fang stood on guard, their combat power wasn’t enough to compare with Mimi.

The instant that he thought of Mimi, Garfiel’s chest grew sore.

The girl who, even now, hovered in the abyss of death, who he’d rescued, saved, protected.

Keep her alive, saving her, clearly should have been his duty.

That duty had been conceded to another due to sentiment, and his chance at vengeance grew further by the second. However, even the work that was taken as an alternative could not be completed satisfactorily.

What was he doing? Looking as he did, what was he doing?

To Mimi, Subaru, his sister, Ram, or anyone, he couldn't lift his head to face them.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self, once again—!"

Can't do anything?

The unresponsive conversation mirror reflected such an unpromising face. In the moment that he cursed himself,

Garfiel: "—?!"

As he smashed the roof whilst leaping, he was a beat too slow in reacting to the shadow flying in from the side.

That form, far more massive than his own, met him with a horizontal impact.

The reason why he couldn't even issue a cry of pain was because his throat was hooked under an elbow. Blood and oxygen unable to circulate through his brain, maintaining his consciousness grew steadily more difficult.

Pulling him back into gradual consciousness was the force of the impact over his whole body.

The body that had greeted his obliquely from the air and slammed into a nearby building. Breaking the wall with his entire body, Garfiel tossed up a cloud of dust.

The dull pain and broken bones drew a groan from Garfiel, as he felt himself being liberated from the restraint. Using his body's elasticity, Garfiel slammed the ground as hard as he could, pulling himself upright again.

He found himself in a structure with no lighting. The smog that filled the room had become a white smoke under the moonlight, and, before his own blood-coughing figure, he could detect another presence.

That was undoubtedly the culprit who'd sniped him and landed them in here.

Garfiel: “Ya bastard, y' really know how t'-”

The instant when he'd taken a battle stance, a fist slammed into his stomach.

Garfiel's entire abdominal area took the force of his opponent's huge fists, and his body flew upward. Then, he was smashed by the fist that had been swung from above, and the already decrepit floor broke beneath him and he fell another level.

Garfiel: “Kuu, what… guu?!”

The sole of a foot slammed into his downward falling body.

The damage caused by both the momentum and the mass caused him to spit blood, and his body, stomped on once again, crashed fiercely and directly through to the entrance to the building, where it was smashed into the street.

From this striking impact, Garfiel continued to cough and he climbed to his feet. At the same time, he applied simple healing magic himself, knitting broken bones as he raised his head.

The one who'd chased Garfiel from the top of the building to here was a hulking figure who he needed to crane his head to see.

Although covered head to toe in black robes, even that could not disguise the thickness of his arms and legs. Rather than saying he was muscular, it would be no exaggeration to say that he wore an armor of muscle.

To Garfiel, this would be the third time facing that enemy.

That name was already known as well.

Garfiel: “Kurgan of Eight Arms…”

He was one of the Vollachia Empire's sword swinging heroes.

Although he was said to have died in battle while defending an imperial city ten and some years prior, for him to be here right now, could he have suffered the same humiliation in death that Wilhelm's wife had?

Kurgan: "…"

When Garfiel spoke that name, the giant, Kurgan, extended his arms.

At that moment, the clasp of his robes gave way, revealing his figure. That is to say, the hero Kurgan revealed his expertise in close-range battle.

As expected, his strong body was covered by a thick armor of muscle.

A powerful physique which could rival the giants, and face on a neck which could be described as demonic, filled with the domineering expression of a war god.

And what made this war god a war god, were the eight arms which enabled those strange fighting techniques.

In addition to the two arms that usually grew from the shoulders, two more arms sprouted from the same place. Move down his body revealed two more arms using his shoulders as the starting point, and the rest stretched their palms forward from behind.

That was in accordance with Kurgan's name Eight Arms. Someone capable of sapping his enemy's will to fight with just his natural body.

Kurgan: "…"

Facing Garfiel, who'd swallowed a deep breath, Kurgan kept his silence as he drew his weapon.

Strapped to his thick legs, coincidentally mounted in the same style as Garfiel's shield, were a pair of thick, long, distorted blades—the Ghost Cleavers that this war god swung.

This war god drew two other Ghost Cleavers from his back, for a total of four. Although the remaining four arms are still unarmed, Garfiel would nonetheless be completely overwhelmed.

He had no leisure to underestimate the enemy in the slightest.

Garfiel: "…"

His body trembled.

In front of this real hero, Garfiel's body trembled from his core.

Garfiel stared at the hero, the legendary figure, the great man who'd made a mark in history.

To not know the name of the Kurgan of Eight Arms was impossible for him.

Garfiel indeed took great interest in his myriad legends coming from every which way.

And today, he stood in front of his very own eyes, as an enemy.

This was a nightmare. A ongoing nightmare that had begun yesterday.

What else could it be, malicious as it was?

Garfiel: "…ha, ah, huh."

Garfiel's breath quickened as he reached toward his legs.

Mounted there in the same way as Kurgan's Ghost Cleavers were silver shields. Unaware of how many times his fingers slipped, finally, the straps came undone.

Placing his shields on his arms as if to cover his fists, he knocked them together for confirmation, creating a sharp note which echoed in the night sky.

His equipment is ready, and his injuries had healed enough to not be debilitating.

However, his mind was still, at the moment, frazzled.

Garfiel: "'S no time t' say stupid shit—!"

Clenching his fangs, Garfiel hit himself in the face.

Shaking his head from the dizzying pain and shock, he turned his gaze forward again. Assuming his stance again, he bared his fangs at the war god before him.

Garfiel: "'F you're jus' standing there, th' hell's my amazin' self for! Whether 's th' cap'n! Or the other guys too! They're all fightin'! Obviously, all yer good for 's fightin', so th' fuck're ya stallin' for?"

Kurgan: "…"

Against the screaming Garfiel, Kurgan remained impassive.

The silent war god that Garfiel was facing would only watch him quietly. With a pout, he broke the line of the street, then rushed forward with a single step.

Through the soles of his shoes, he absorbed the power of the earth, allowing his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits to redirect all that energy into a blow.

His fist was truly infused with the power to shatter a stone building.

His silver shield reinforced the fist's blow, one strong enough to break even a hero.

His arm flew straight and true into Kurgan's waist—

Garfiel: "—How's this?"

Kurgan: "…"

Using the full force of his body, Garfiel's attack was blocked by Kurgan's Demon Cleaver.

The Demon Cleaver, blocking the direct attack to Kurgan's abdomen, withstood the power of Garfiel's blow. He did not evade, nor did he flinch.

With only a hard block, a full-bodied attack was dispelled. The hero of Eight Arms had used only a single arm.

Garfiel: “—kuu”

Garfiel’s stiff expression ushered in a punch from the shoulder. The body that turned backwards was caught by the arm that protruded from a side, and, unable to escape, he could only take a wild beating.

His cheekbones were broken in an instant, and his fundus was crushed. The field of view of his right eye was stained bright red. A razor fang shattered and blew away. His body still caught, he was thrown to the ground, kicked down the street by a powerful leg, and rolled, rolled, rolled, rolled into the nearby waterway.

Garfiel: “—aa”

Everything went in a flash, and he stared at the moon that floated so high above him.

That moon seemed to laugh at him. Afterward, Garfiel’s body sank into the waterway.

—The surface of the water was slowly dyed crimson.

Chapter 52:
The Stars and Sin Archbishops

1

The collapse was pushing in.

That shower of fresh blood, each drop and every drop, like a malevolent hand grasping gallant destruction, trampled over the city.

Wherever the droplets touched, more so than striking a sheet of paper with the edge of a blade, it unresistingly lost its cohesion. The destructive propagation demolished buildings, and the aftermath, in turn, spread further collapse around it.

Subaru: “Aaaaaaaaaa!!”

Emilia: “—Tsk!”

Fully aware that he was being unreasonable, yet wringing out breath from his lungs, Subaru continued powering through his sprint. Jogging alongside him was Emilia, her gleaming silver hair fluttering through the air and her mouth tightly shut, similarly mid-stride.

However, the scenic water city’s specialty canals stretched out from them in all directions.

Simply put, finding a straight path to properly escape on was proving difficult. In front of the dashing pair spread waterways, while destruction from the rear threatened to swallow them both.

Subaru: “Watch out!”

Emilia: “We’re sailing close to the wind, but…Subaru, grab on!”

As their escape route cutting off caused Subaru to raise his voice, Emilia instantly conceived of a different notion. He grabbed onto her outstretched arm without hesitation, and in that same moment, a chill came over the surrounding air.

It was the effect of both magic borne of the spirits' borrowed strength and the power of Emilia herself, acting together.

Emilia: "—Please, everyone!"

Once Emilia commanded them so, from each luminous point blue light surged downwards.

In the next instant, the ground beneath was instantly soaked with white, and in the blink of an eye a whole world of frost had spread.

Subaru: "Oouh?! Emilia-tan is amazing! So clever!"

Emilia: "Control is difficult, so don't let go of my hand!"

Subaru looked up, his right hand still linked with Emilia's own. Tightly grasped in the half-elf's raised left fist, was an icicle directed ahead which had shot forward moments before.

Freezing the ground and thrusting from it an icicle, her borrowing of the propulsive force from her magic had thus hastened their escape. Even more surprising was the course of ice formed by the spirits in the air.

On the edge of the waterway in front of them, something like a ski jump had been formed, and the Subaru and Emilia pair, gliding with their built-up momentum, had sailed over the channel.

Subaru: "Eee-yahaa!"

On the other side of the waterway, another course of ice had been created. While she was touching down and skating over it, Subaru honestly praised Emilia's skill.

Subaru: "Nice, Emilia-tan! I fell for you all over again!"

Emilia: "But, I can't think of a way to stop! What should we do?"

Subaru: "Eeh."

Emilia had already released the icicle, but the leftover momentum was still plenty to cause unavoidably high damage once they hit an obstacle. Using only her ice magic, conveniently making something like a cushion for two to absorb the heavy impact wasn't a possibility.

In the meantime, the pair was drawing closer and closer to a wall. Moments before impact, feeling Emilia's hand tightly squeezing his, Subaru made a snap judgement.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan! Install curve!"

Emilia: "Cu, cur—ve?"

Subaru: "A gently-bending kind of wall! In a circle!"

Hearing Subaru's desperate call, Emilia with her magic meekly obeyed.

Right in front of their sliding forms, a gentle curve formed, and following along it while turning widely, those two avoided impact.

Subaru: "Just like that, don't let the curves cut off! Twirl—! Twirl—!"

Emilia: "T, twirl—! Twirl—!"

Just so, turning widely like that, as to not cut off at a wall, more curves of ice formed.

Viewed from above, an ice wall shaped like mosquito-repellent coil was created, and the two bodies reaching the midpoint just barely lost enough speed to safely come to a stop.

Subaru: "Huuh, after wasting a bunch of Emilia-tan's magic, we did it somehow."

Emilia: "More importantly, the attack from earlier."

As the stopped Subaru let out a sigh, Emilia whacked her ice formation with her hand and shattered it. Watching the crushed ice returning to mana particles, and turning to see the traces of the destruction they fled from, a shiver ran up Subaru's spine.

Centered around the tower on which Regulus' attack had originated, the scenery of the city had changed.

Especially near the center, where the impacts of blood had been strongly felt, the destruction was severe. Further outwards in the perimeter of destruction, deviations in its traces formed. But even then, few buildings still held their original shape. In other words, it was an attack with an abnormally high area of effect.

At Subaru's location, the attack had crossed the waterway and reached over. That it had barely failed to reach Subaru was the result of chance and a desperate escape—not.

Subaru: "Reinhard."

On the building Regulus had stood up to this moment, there was now no one.

Instead, in its vicinity thick smoke was rising, and the sound of tremendous destruction was echoing.

2

Regulus sent the Water Dragon to its death by tearing it apart, smirking while it sprayed blood.

In that moment, he could already see two small figures desperately trying to escape down an alley.

How puny, how very petty, how truly trivial.

Laughing mockingly as his scattered blood trampled on the city, he eagerly awaited the moment that destruction would catch up to the fleeing duo.

A Prostitute and a Rapist. For them, death in a hail of blood was fitting.

Regulus: "Scatter! Scatter away! You heinous fiends who trampled on my heart!"

Reinhard: "—My apologies, but I can't let you do that."

Immediately after declaring his rage and victory with those words, he was startled by a voice speaking close to his ear.

As he turned around, a head of red hair with the appearance of flames fanned by the wind came into view.

Regulus: "How foolish you look! Getting in the way of someone's love with such zeal!"

Reinhard: "If your method was proper and respectful of rights, if once rejected you could promise to pull away cleanly, then I would not even hesitate to cheer for you."

At Regulus' infuriated voice, Reinhard responded with a laugh and a tease.

While that ever-so-composed posture was indeed hateful, what now took hold of Regulus' feelings was an inexplicable suspicion. —Then, leaping in a single burst, came Reinhard's leg.

Certainly, that right leg, on its shin it had suffered a serious injury.

Though not entirely torn off, to say it was held to the ankle with a mere strip of leather was no exaggeration. Far from battle-worthy, it was in no state to bear walking on. That it had left that state meant,

Regulus: "That is so dumb, it's not just swordsmanship, is healing magic your specialty, too? With all those talents of yours that better than others, just how much did you trample over their hearts on the way here? Shattering the hearts of others without even trying filthy does that feel good huh?!"

Reinhard: "Among your misconceptions—In one respect, I will definitely correct you."

Reinhard twisted, the wind shrieking as it shrouded his body.

His released spinning kick blew through the air, landing directly on the water dragon's body wielded by Regulus. That corpse which had already become a simple mass of meat now shattered—,

Regulus: “Wha!”

Reinhard: “I cannot use any kind of magic, let alone healing magic. It was simply the spirits in the air that came to my aid, hastily healing the wounds on my foot.”

As the force from his leg demolished the body, with a twist of his ankle he rescued it from Regulus’ grasp. Through that very skillful footwork, the water dragon’s remains was not excessively ill-treated, and was then gently tossed onto the roof of a partially-wrecked building.

Then,

Reinhard: “Perfect. —Next on the checklist, Tactic J will commence.”

Regulus: “Kuaa!”

At the same moment he begrudged Reinhard’s hypocritical act, his sword’s pommel knocked him upside the head. Smacked away, Regulus’ body rolled down the slope of the roof.

Askew over the ground and headed straight downwards, in his ear again was,

Reinhard: “I’ll put it to the test.”

Regulus: “—?!”

Leaping at the same angle with a bullet’s speed, Reinhard drew close, grasping Regulus’ leg as he inverted mid-fall, and with a shake his form was swallowed up by Reinhard’s actions. Now Reinhard, while carrying Regulus, leapt in the direction of the fleeing Subaru with an awesome storm, accelerating quickly enough to tear off the leg of any ordinary person.

Regulus: “Just whaaat the—”

Reinhard: “Nothing particularly special.”

Claiming so, Reinhard lifted up Regulus' body as he stopped.

With the attitude of a child grasping a doll's leg and playing roughly—While Regulus' temper at that treatment was exploding, he came to understand the finer details of Reinhard's plan.

Wielding Regulus's body, Reinhard flung him into the falling droplets of blood.

Even demolishing buildings formed from stone, that shower of blood imbued with force by Regulus.

If it had such power, then that attack made by Regulus' ability may even be effective against whatever protection he had on his own body.

If that had been the idea, it proved a foolish one.

Regulus: "If it's my own strike then it must work on me? I don't know just how naturally gifted you were born but don't viciously look down on others so much I say. There's no way I myself would be done in with some stupid method like that?"

Reinhard: "This too was ineffective—"

Those droplets of blood, touching Regulus' body, became simple droplets on the spot and splashed off of his form. Obviously, the priority was different.

At that same moment, Reinhard suddenly released his grip on Regulus' leg.

He was an intelligent fellow. If he had let the droplets reach him as such, his palm would have turned into a mess which couldn't possibly grasp a sword again.

The force of the swing disappeared. Landing there onto the street, Regulus once again faced Reinhard. He narrowed his eyes in warning.

Reinhard: "Somehow, it no longer seems possible to touch him again."

Regulus: “It seems you have a keen nose, do you want to get hurt again like you did a while ago.”

Reinhard: “From now on, I will be wary of your breath and vision both. If there are any other precautions to take, I would be glad to hear them.”

Regulus: “Get out of my sight, right now!”

Stepping forth with both hands raised, Regulus ran at Reinhard.

With unbelievable speed, Reinhard turned in a broad arc to dodge, giving him a wide berth. Using the pommel of the dragon sword, he rained blows down on Regulus from a distance.

Regulus: “You just love to run, no matter where you go…!”

Reinhard: “Being unable to solve the problem with sword strikes, how impotent. Truly, I am ashamed of myself.”

Regulus: “You haven’t even drawn that sword of yours yet!”

Facing Reinhard as he weaved back and forth, Regulus made a relatively unseen motion of reaching out his hand.

However, such a flippant attack could never reach a hero like Reinhard. Not only that, Reinhard’s bright blue eyes were still wary of the heavily breathing Regulus’s petty tricks.

Regulus: “Ah?”

But then, a spear suddenly flew straight forward.

Aiming at Regulus, who faced the straight-backed Reinhard, an icicle speared through the ground at his feet.

However, the ice under his feet, after he’d taken a single step, shattered before the image could even become concrete.

Flippantly, Regulus cast his gaze about, settling on the silver-haired maiden who stood at the other end of the canal, hand outstretched. Undoubtedly, the ice magic had been one of her little tricks.

Disgusting, was this visceral feeling of tumbling and boiling.

Regulus: “Each and every one of you, what can’t you understand already?! The fact that we’re different! What we have from the moment of our birth is different! You all can’t reach or compete with my completed self. Accept that you’re lackluster, be satisfied with it, and die!”

Nomatterwhatnomatterwhat, enough of the relentless opposing evildoers.

Such an absolute gap could not be reduced. Why, was this so hard to grasp.

Reinhard: “Tactic A has also failed. What next?”

Regulus stomped his feet, splitting the alleyway, no space left in his ears to listen to Reinhard’s mumbling.

3

Emilia: “No good! As expected, that attack was ineffective!”

Subaru: “It didn’t! Which is to say, the possibility of his feet being an achilles heel is also gone…”

Emilia, as per her instructions, had attacked the soles of Regulus’s feet- however, they’d rent the ice without any trace of injury.

Reinhard: “Tactic J failed as well. Apologies, my capabilities are lacking.”

In an instant, Reinhard had also used the Divine Protection of Telepathy to send a psychic message, and Subaru no longer found himself thrown off balance by these superhuman idiosyncrasies. Closely examining the injury on his right foot revealed that it had stopped bleeding, but even if it had been entirely shredded, this wouldn’t have been the least bit surprising.

Besides, the implications of a shredded foot, Subaru had already experienced.

Subaru: “If his invincibility is a barrier, it may not extend to where his feet come in contact with the ground, so I came up with Tactic A (Soles of Feet)…”

The grounded parts of him had to have disabled the power, or he’d just sink into the ground. Subaru had thought this might be the case, but he’d turned out to have been wrong.

According to Reinhard’s report of Tactic J (Self-Destruct), the idea that Regulus would have to disable his invincibility to launch his invincible attacks was also off.

In that case, Tactic I (Ball in Pool) was also a no-go. It seemed that reality denied the notion that there would be a weakness in his invincibility.

Subaru: “Is, is there anything else? An invincible enemy’s weakness, weakness…!”

Covering his mouth, Subaru furiously ordered his mind to spin.

Before encountering and even after having met Regulus, what he’d often been troubled by, was the means of defeating someone with an ultimate shield, and whatever other ways there may be.

Flying through Subaru’s mind were answers from a variety of subcultures, as though he’d almost figured it out, but there was no clean-cut answer.

Subaru: “Is the way I’m thinking about this off? Is the direction wrong?”

What was needed, was perhaps not a way to break through the invincibility.

Rather, something more fundamental- Regulus’s authority, what was its nature?

Emilia: “Subaru, what else is there? I, what should I do?”

Emilia questioned Subaru, who’d fallen deep into thought.

Before them, across a large canal, the fierce battle between Reinhard and Regulus continued, but she was unable to offer any help, which left her feeling discomfited.

Whether Emilia or Reinhard, both trusted in Subaru, both had expectations of Subaru.

And not just the two of them. The allies stationed elsewhere, and the citizens of Priestella he'd called with his broadcast, all shared those sentiments.

"…"

Thinking, thinking, thinkingthinkingthinkingthinkingthinking.

Although those memories were distasteful, Subaru began to think back to everything since his first encounter with Regulus, up until this instant, his actions and words, the attacks and schemes he'd tried to pull.

There should have been something. There should have been some reason. Not just Regulus was fine. Including the other Sin Archbishops, there should have been something. They were all scum. That much was already clear. It wasn't that-

Subaru: "The names of, the stars."

Emilia: "Subaru?"

Suddenly, Subaru realized it.

Before, he'd thought of the same thing, and now he cast aside the joke to think of it seriously.

Now that things had reached this point, he began to consider an abandoned idea anew.

Regulus, Capella, Alphard, Sirius, Petelgeuse.

These star-related names gathered in one place, could he really treat them so casually as a coincidence?

In retrospect, the Water Plumage Pavilion, the customs of Kararagi, Hoshin of the Wastes.

In this world, so many places had been touched by the influence of Subaru's original world, that he couldn't simply treat it as a joke. Why had he only realized just now, that the Witch Cult did not originate from here?

Petelgeuse, was Betelgeuse. The hand of Orion, Unseen Hand.

Regulus was Leo, Little King. Thus, he had a title.

This Little King, was truly a title commensurate with him-.

Subaru: "Emilia. I have something to ask you."

Subaru spoke quietly, and Emilia opened her eyes to nod.

Subaru could feel the attention radiating from her snow white face, and closed one eye.

Subaru: "That man grabbed you about by the neck once, right? It's about that time."

Emilia: "Mmm."

Subaru: "Regulus's hand, was it warm? Or was it cold?"

Emilia: "…"

At Subaru's inquiry, Emilia widened her eyes.

And so, she touched a hand to her slender neck, with a tap, and replied.

Emilia: "No. Thinking back on it… I couldn't feel anything. Neither heat nor cold, there was no temperature."

Hearing Emilia's response, Subaru held his breath.

From when he'd been cast into the canal, his undisturbed breathing and unsoaked body. The ineffectiveness of attacking the soles of his feet, the ineffectiveness of the cancellation of his own attacks.

Impeccable in both offense and defense.

If this was no simple, mere Invincibility-.

Subaru: “Reinhard!”

He called across the canal, the name of the hero doing battle against the evil.

In relentless battle, Reinhard determinedly looked toward Subaru.

In order for him to hear, Subaru raised his voice high.

Subaru: “-That man, check if his heart is beating!”

Subaru’s loud words had Emilia, had Reinhard widening their eyes.

So, Regulus, he-

Regulus-.

4

Otto also left City Hall for fulfilling the duty imposed on him after he confirmed the simultaneous raids on the four control places had been carried out, and after each of the parties had departed to conduct them.

Anastasia: “I don’t think it’s strange to think that he should be stopped… but it is also true that right now, we have to reconfirm where the Book of Wisdom, that the Witch Cult had requested, is. Pitiful, isn’t he, that Otto-kun.”

Was what Anastasia said at Otto’s departure.

It seemed to be true that Anastasia wanted Otto to remain in City Hall as well. It was the place where Subaru and the other camps had already clashed with a Sin Archbishop.

Though City Hall is expected to function as the headquarters, there were not many brains that could scout for information from several different places at the moment.

However, leaving the Book of Wisdom in the hands of others was not something that could be done either.

You can establish a relationship of cooperation with the opposing Sin Archbishop, but once out of that situation, they will return to being an enemy. When that happens, the effectiveness of the Book of Wisdom being watched over by others was something that should be avoided.

Truthfully, it was about the Book of Wisdom being completely away from the situation in which it would be negotiated over—but Subaru and Garfiel were fine with that.

Otto wanted to sigh as he felt his own personality was at fault here.

Otto: "I wonder, when did I become someone who ran around for others like this…"

Hitting his grey hair with his hand, Otto worried over the question that had come to his mind several times in the past year.

The position he stood in was unexpected, his relationship with people was unexpected, his current emotions were unexpected.

What will his family think when they get to know that he is doing all this?

Otto: "If I am fine and successful, I'll try writing a letter…"

If Subaru was here, he would definitely point out a death flag, saying something strange, as Otto stepped onto the city's third avenue.

The Sin Archbishops should be concentrated in the control towers, and considering that, they should not be in the city. They should not, be.

Otto: "Ha~a… ha ~tsk"

Grabbing his chest tightly, Otto felt his heartbeat quicken.

Witch Cult, Sin Archbishop, Witch Cultists—Otto had bad memories of them.

A year ago, Otto recalled his first encounter with Subaru. He couldn't forget how scared he was of the Sin Archbishop back then.

The eyes of a madman who wouldn't think twice before taking away one's life. That madman, the figure of fanatics, who would dedicate their blood and flesh by his own will.

When he truly hoped for help, only the silence and loneliness had dominated.

He had never been as scared at any other time. He had never felt so empty in any other moment.

Comparing the fear of then to fighting Garfiel, facing the bowel-hunter, encountering herds of witch beasts, that was nothing.

The encounter with the Witch Cult dropped an immensely dark shadow on Otto's heart. Even though he knew how horrible that thing was, it was not something that could be erased so easily.

Emilia, who, due to her similarity with the Witch of Envy, could not escape prejudice due to the witch.

Subaru, who was fated to become her knight and fight for her, and aim for the devils of the Witch Cult.

Beatrice, who fought along with Subaru, and spent all the strength she had in that small body.

Garfiel, who put his everything to his fist in order to protect his family.

Ram, with sweetness that cannot be ignored, but on the flip side, with a stinging tongue.

Frederica, who lived in negative feelings for her brother, and has a sense of responsibility for her position.

Petra, who acted with a clear smiling face with everyone while being treated as a child.

I love everyone.

Though he had not intended to stay in one place too long, unfortunately, it was too comfortable.

Even though he knew to stay away from scary things, he was unable to avoid them.

In order to save this place, I would like to stand by their side and support them; even in my fear, I want to help them where their hands cannot reach. That's why–,

Otto: "Somehow, I must fulfill my role."

Saying this, he stepped onto Third Avenue. There stood a small figure in front of him.

Beyond the stone bridge on the waterway there was a square, and that was where the shadow was.

Besides that shadow, several more figures could be seen.

But right now, Otto's eyes were fixed on only one small phantom.

Sound disappeared. Everything went terribly quiet, and nothing could be heard. A situation where living beings sucked in their breath and held it, trying desperately to conceal their existence, Otto Suwen knew this situation well.

Subsequently, the figure in front his eyes gently clapped its hands and, as it disheveled its long hair, raised its face. But still, his heartbeats were surprisingly calm.

???: "Welcome, onii-san."

"…"

Lye: "Welcome to the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop, representing Gluttony… Lye Batenkaitos' dinner banquet ~tsu."

Opening his mouth, full of fangs, the Sin Archbishop who shouldn't have been there, laughed gruesomely.

Chapter 53:
A City of Strife

1

Subaru: "—Check if his heart is still beating!"

Intuition was the instinct that had aroused Subaru's awareness.

He wasn't absolutely convinced, nor did he have a basis for thinking so. All he could think was that that thought was not without meaning.

The Sin Archbishops, the names of the stars, the Kararagi which bore influences from his original world, and those other than Subaru who found themselves summoned here.

The world still bore the marks of their claws. If the Witch Cult were also engraved with this etching, then the names of the stars Subaru had thought of didn't necessarily have only a passing relationship with them.

If Regulus Corneas's power could not be treated as straightforward Invincibility, then, he'd need to think outside the box; and thus an idea emerged in his heart.

Hoping that there would be no connection, Subaru had already said a sort of prayer asking thus.

And, in the next moment.

Subaru: "…"

A noxious sense of oppression came, casting an illusion that had Subaru feeling as if the sun had been blotted out.

The air hung thick with pollution. He'd be hard pressed to find words with which to express this discomfort, this disgust.

The disgust of the peeling of a scab, the discomfort of a stench exhaled to the face, the aversion of a sticky tongue over bare skin.

The origin of this turbid air, was the evil which had turned his head to look back.

The instant that he met its gaze, Subaru's body began to tremble involuntarily.

Expressionless and empty, those eyes, like a curse, plunged deep into his soul. As if pierced by a rusted needle, even his lungs and heart were frozen by terror.

However, even as Subaru found himself immobile, overcome by such feelings—

Reinhard: "Don't look anywhere unnecessary. Your opponent should be me!"

Turning to regard this Subaru, meant turning his back to the Sword Saint.

Raising his hands high, Reinhard had clasped in his hands what could only be described as broken signposts and scrap metal. Such materials which were only ever destined to be waste, but in Reinhard's hands, they were no inferior to a treasured blade.

A long blade slanted through the air struck the back of Regulus's suit.

The bursting shockwave expanded in midair, leaving a sorrowful wail from the assailed atmosphere in its wake, raising vortexes in the large canals where thin sheets of ice floated.

This was the aftermath of that sword's strike. Had the force of evil been shattered to pieces, it would have come as no surprise.

However, before he could take a single step.

Regulus: "Don't get me wrong, Sword Saint. I've been entertaining you because my heart is obliging and considerate. But even my gracious self has limits."

Reinhard: “…”

Lightly, Regulus patted the place where he’d been struck by the sword, and tilted his head.

Reinhard, alerted by this motion, tossed aside the scraps in his hands and made to leap backward at a wide angle—just as he prepared to jump, his feet froze in place.

Reinhard’s superhuman intuition.

It informed him of dire, imminent threats to his self, and preemptively detecting incoming attacks. His keen instincts told him that he could not dodge to the rear. He immediately straightened and began to search for alternative routes.

Regulus: “The air there, has already been touched by me.”

Due to the sharpening of his senses locking him into place, at that moment, Reinhard had been left unprepared.

His opponent had him trapped in an invisible yet present envelope. Reinhard’s judgment told him to slip by the force of evil’s side, but, in order to do so, he’d be forced to make a defensive strike.

Reinhard: “Haa!”

The blow that he dealt had enough force to shear through stone.

The hilt of the Dragon Sword pierced into Regulus’s chest, but the force of evil grasped it easily.

Regulus: “Futile effort, thanks for your trouble. Just pray that you won’t be hurt too badly.”

Reinhard: “Just as Subaru said, your heart doesn’t seem to be beating.”

Regulus: “—!”

Regulus’s relaxed smile hardened, as he glanced down at his chest.

The hilt that was buried in it, and the Reinhard who was straining his sharp senses; he wouldn't have missed any movement of life, no matter how subtle.

Having taken that blow, Regulus leapt high in the air, agitated.

Directly, as if reproducing the scene from earlier.

Reinhard blocked the kick with the sheath of the Dragon Sword, his body was sent flying from the impact. However, what unfolded next was different.

Subaru: "Reinhard!"

As declared, the air behind Reinhard had filled with countless traps of breath set by Regulus.

Shot into them in his unguarded state, the results weren't difficult to imagine.

His white clothes stained with blood, Reinhard's entire body was torn. He leapt up, but how much that could mitigate his wounds was uncertain. Buried in rubble again, Reinhard amplified the collapse of the city, making it impossible to estimate his condition.

But what could be determined for certain was Reinhard's answer.

Subaru: "Not bad, Reinhard…!"

Emilia: "Subaru!"

Subaru: "It's okay. Reinhard, he should be fine! So worry about him later!"

Emilia: "I understand! I, what do you need me to do?"

He'd thought that Emilia would be concerned foremost with Reinhard's safety, and was taken aback by her response. The Emilia looking at Subaru was attentive, and fully understood where she needed to stand on this battlefield.

There was both a strong reliance on Reinhard and perhaps a trust in

Subaru.

Emilia: “Reinhard too, he went through all that hassle because he trusted you. What should I have realized about Regulus? Tell me.”

Heavy trust. Heavy expectations. The reality of that belief was too heavy, enough to stir up his fighting spirit.

He’d certainly need to give Reinhard proper gratitude as well. Later, he’d definitely go and help retrieve his remains.

Regulus: “The two of you, always rambling on, but acting in simplicity in your desperation, wouldn’t that be easier? Your despicable and evil behavior has angered me, so it follows that you should be punished, doesn’t it? Yes? Isn’t this right? Impoliteness, infidelity, no matter which, are rebellious acts worthy of ten thousand executions.”

Having kicked Reinhard away, Regulus sneered at the inconvenience.

Across the canal, a spirit of evil began to swell forth, and, in truth, Subaru almost couldn’t bear to bring himself to face it.

However, running away right now would be meaningless.

Natsuki Subaru would be unable to repay Emilia and Reinhard van Astrea.

Subaru: “A pure heroine, yet unseen of this century, suspecting her of infidelity makes you the slut, idiot.”

Regulus: “Ah?”

Subaru: “Isn’t it uncouth to list all the reasons we should be afraid here? Try in the slightest to redirect that empty mind of yours.”

Hearing the sudden strength of his speech, Regulus widened his eyes.

Subaru knocked his own head, as if boasting.

Subaru: “Just how much of a lovely, smooth life you’ve had until now, I don’t know, nor do I want to know… but have you noticed yet? The you of right now, is in checkmate.”

Regulus: “Checked? You’re so vague that I can’t even laugh. What are you trying to say. No, you’re incapable of explaining yourself in comprehensible language, is also a possibility. Well, there’s no need to force yourself to say irrelevant things, isn’t that right?”

Subaru: “Eh, don’t say that, after all you have the right to listen, your favorite right.”

Regulus: “My right…?”

Regulus frowned, and Subaru, with a light, ridiculing smile, continued “Yes, after all—”

Subaru: “Losing without even knowing how your regret came about, would certainly leave you with regrets.”

Regulus: “—Enough of you! Just disappear!”

This movement shrinking in on himself becoming a fuse, Regulus leapt from the edge of the canal. Lacking sufficient jumping power, his body plunged into the water; however, his movements were unaffected by the flood, and he found himself with no water resistance.

Before him, Subaru confirmed patted Emilia’s shoulders.

Subaru: “Emilia, right now!”

Emilia: “Ul Huma!”

Receiving Subaru’s instruction, Emilia gathered magic to release the icicles.

So enormous that they needed to be gazed up at to seen fully, the spears of ice were aimed directly at Regulus, formed an overhanging railing of ice to surround him as he surfaced.

Regulus: “I’d actually thought you’d try something, but no matter what you do, it's futile, looks like no matter how many times you're taught, you'll never learn! What, are you planning to stick with your mistakes? Without even that degree of wisdom, repeating the same thing over and over. Do you always treat others with such futility while despising them? Don't get carried away, how incomplete!"

Regulus bared his teeth, cut down the railing of the ice, smashed it, and, with overwhelming force, shattered it. The barrier collapsed with ease, and despite her best efforts, Emilia's magic couldn't sustain the cage of ice.

But it was enough. This was fine.

Emilia: "I can't, I couldn't even buy time properly."

Subaru: "That's not right, Emilia-tan."

Seeing the ineffectiveness of her power, Emilia wore a gloomy face, but Subaru shook his head.

A look from a different angle. This had been enough to accomplish Subaru's purpose.

Subaru: "That man's character is insidious. He can't help but crush what he despises. Even if it's unnecessary to destroy whatever obstacle he's facing, he can't feel that he's won without shattering it completely."

Singing ballads to fulfillment, spouting his self-satisfying rhetoric, was Regulus.

The pitiable nature of his heart, the scarcity of his tolerance, and the volume of his vanity were plain to see.

Subaru: "In the first place, there was no need for him to break through the obstacle. But he took that superfluous action. Even a second, even a millisecond, is the result."

Emilia: "With that one second, can you defeat Regulus?"

Subaru: "As long as I accumulate them, I'll definitely show him the victory. I’ll pare that monster’s skin from his body.”

For this, Reinhard had laid the foundation.

Testing Regulus’s heartbeat, conveying that it had no movement to Subaru.

There was no heat, no heartbeat, no breath, and no outside influence from his surroundings.

Although this is undoubtedly an Invincibility, its essence was not undefeatable.

Subaru: “Emilia, over here!”

Subaru took Emilia’s wrist and crossed the dented alleyways with her. Emilia kept pace with Subaru, as she turned back to attack Regulus with an icicle.

Regulus, seeing the two flee, pursed with rage brewing in his chest.

Regulus: “Even after all that boasting, why the hell are you running? Calling someone stupid, proclaiming that you’ll kill them, just how much do you plan on making fun of me? Who the hell do you think you are? You coward!”

Since his physical abilities were no superior, the speed pursuing Regulus was little different from the speed of the escapees. Rather, it could be said that he was slower than Subaru.

However, since he was blessed with his unrelenting composition, the ceaselessly pursuing evil would eventually catch up.

Emilia: “Subaru! Where are you running to?”

Subaru: “Our destination is the church! Our target is, Regulus’s wives! In between…”

Hearing Emilia’s inquiry, he replied back.

Suddenly, halfway through his words, he noticed from behind—

Regulus: “—Stop paying attention to extraneous things, you!”

Subaru: “Uwaaaaa?!”

The distance that had existed until now vanished without a trace, turning his head, Regulus had already appeared in front of him.

Forcing an approach to only one step away, Regulus waved his hand toward them, and Subaru barely jerked his head out of the way. He felt that his opponent was already on his heels, so he swept up Emilia and approached a nearby wall, stepping on and along it in one motion.

Emilia: “Wawawa, Subaru’s amazing.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, hold tight to me!”

Emilia, stunned by Subaru’s acrobatics, hugged his neck and wrapped her feet around his waist. Soft and fragrant, she filled Subaru with a fresh wave of energy. Kicking hard on the edge of the wall, he flew across it.

The results of his practice in parkour were revealed. Just gaining distance like this—

Regulus: “I’ve said already, that your commoners’ efforts are futile.”

Saying so, Regulus touched the lower part of the wall Subaru was climbing with his palm.

There was the sound of rock grinding, and the stone wall collapsed as if it were tofu. The wall lost its support and fell. Needless to say, the same happened to those climbing on the wall.

Subaru: “Uwah!”

In the process of falling, he yanked out his whip and flicked it without any real direction. The front end hooked onto something, and Subaru forcefully pulled his body upward.

With a swing of his foot, he gave a hard kick the moment he touched the wall. Combined with the force of the reaction, the centrifugal force generated by the whip allows his body to be thrown further and further, achieving an amazing climb with Emilia still on his back.

At a closer glance, the two of them had arrived at a warehouse that had already lost almost half of its volume.

Subaru crashed onto the balcony that protruded from the eaves and looked at his palm.

Subaru: “Wow, I didn’t expect to achieve a brute force escape…!”

Emilia: “Subaru! In short, we just have to get to the church! The direction is?!”

No longer gazing at his palm split open with faint pain, he followed Emilia’s voice to see the surroundings. Fortunately, the height of the balcony, in addition to Regulus’s, allowed everything to be easily seen.

Far, far in the distance, he could see the church that collapsed from Reinhard’s first attack. Somehow, at some point, it had grown quite distant.

Subaru: “No! We fled in the opposite direction! What now?!”

Emilia: “Is that it, there?”

Subaru: “It’s right there, what’s that matter…”

Emilia: “Let’s travel like this!”

Emilia, upon hearing Subaru’s response, clapped, and a bridge formed on the balcony.

The mysterious blue-and-white bridge began from the balcony and connected through the alleys all the way to the church, imitating a large road in midair.

Regulus: “What?!”

Gazing up at the bridge made of frost, Regulus, who had expected the pair to drop down, was also taken aback. Quickly responding to Emilia's decision to solve their conundrum with a brute force method, Subaru stood up, clapping his hands on his thighs, then going up the stairs leading to the icy path.

Regulus: "I'm not letting you go, you know!"

Walking under the new icy construct, Regulus picked up a stone from the ground, and tossed it at the bridge. The hastily built path received a critical hit, cracks immediately spreading across its entirety.

The terrible collapse spread, shattering the bridge and transforming it into a tragic display of crystal light. Witnessing this, Regulus laughed devilishly. But,

Emilia: "We're the ones who are going to win, so it doesn't matter if you destroy the bridge!"

Regulus: "Wha—?!"

Scattering every which way were brilliant shards of ice, as Subaru slid forward on an ice structure created by Emilia.

Using the slope of the bridge as a launchpad, using the principles of a ski jump, it leapt over the alley, and flew over Regulus toward the church.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, you became so witty!"

Emilia: "Maybe Subaru led me astray."

Subaru: "That statement shouldn't be used in response to praise!"

Although he had a means of long-range attack, Regulus could only touch what was in reach of his arms' length.

They kept well away from his figure, delirious with rage. Staring at the approaching church, Subaru's eyes narrowed.

Emilia: "What should we do, when we meet the women in the church?"

Subaru: “I don’t know if they’ve been threatened, or if they really do admire him…”

At Emilia’s question, Subaru lowered his chin into his palm, interrupting himself.

What emerged in his mind were the women, shocked by the Regulus’s actions in the church. The fear he’d seen then, if only it were genuine, thus he prayed.

But, if it really had been an act—

Subaru: “Forget the mind, it may be that even their hearts were stolen away. —Heart in the literal sense, that is.”

Greeting his face were burst of wind blowing on the head, and the height of the ice structure began to fall, as it approached the church.

Behind, was Regulus giving chase. Reinhard’s life hung in uncertainty. The chances of victory were slim, but the dilemma still steadily approached—

Was everyone else doing fine?

Clearly, he had no room to even ponder such questions, but couldn’t help but think of them.

2

To take over the charge of the Control Tower from Gluttony, this was the battle between Julius, Ricardo, and Alphard.

Julius: “—El Clausel”

With the power of the six-colored quasi spirits, a rainbow-colored radiance emanated from the tip of the knight sword.

What rolled out was a preemptive strike aiming straight for its opponent’s death.

Clausel was a magical technique of the same type as Clarista which had managed to damage even Petelgeuse's body, however, unlike Clarista which had the destructive bright light stick to the sword itself, Clausel was a long-range attack.

The impression of the Sin Archbishops was still strong in Julius' mind thanks to Petelgeuse.

The feeling which Julius got while fighting the madman, the Sin Archbishop of Sloth, a huge sinner and someone who had given great suffering to the world for a long time, was completely different from the current situation—that is, the fight with the current enemy is completely different.

Julius Juukulius, who had gotten the title of Greatest Knight, often misunderstands people due to their behavior, but he believes in this so-called theory that all human nature is ultimately good.

He believes that all human action is up to interpretation, but there are some things which humanity must think about, like the influence of one party's actions over the others.

Then, for Julius, the Sin Archbishop named Petelgeuse Romanée Conti and his self-conscious dolls, the Witch Cultists, were all too overwhelming.

Someone who can't understand that, who disregards hard work and efforts of others will inevitably become an enemy for him.

For Julius, the worst done by the Witch Cult to him was to harm his knightliness.

No hidden tricks, no trump cards saved for the last.

From the very beginning, Julius did not hesitate to cut down those devils.

An extraordinary technique that simultaneously handled all six colors of magic with the help of six quasi-spirits.

Not even the slightest of mismatch of magical power was allowed. This was established only after the bonding of the quasi-spirits, thanks to the efforts and talent of the genius spirit user named

Julius.

This was not the exact same thing as what Roswaal L. Mathers could do, who sat at the pinnacle of magic. This had been created by Julius and was unique to Julius.

At the first look, the magic doesn't feel too scary, and the opponent gets scattered away without an opportunity to rethink subsequently.

Julius had one belief in his chest—that he must prioritize blowing away the enemy rather than investigating the incompatibility between them.

The extremely bright destructive light shatters the stone pavement and preys upon both the arms of a small shadow.

Long dark brown hair, dirty rags, dulled shining daggers, get swallowed up by the shine of the rainbow light—

Roy: "This is surely something nii-sama didn't expect, he has a weakness of turning away your eyes from what he doesn't want to see, doesn't he?"

Ricardo: "—What?!"

As he collapsed onto the ground, Alphard's muttering voice could be heard. The blasphemer, with his long tongue hanging outside, kicked the ground with a posture low enough that it could almost be said that he was lying on the ground.

The speed of the bright light will never be late enough to not reach its opponent. In order to avoid this approaching arrow, you would need a physical ability comparable to that of Reinhard or—

Roy: "We admired you, nii-sama. Nii-sama, who hates to show his hard work to others, would use such devilish skills in desperation, how would we not know that ~tsu."

Julius: "What are you saying!"

Roy: "Thinking we wouldn't know, Julius nii-sama is truly innocent. But, we love that part of you ~tsu! Gyahahahaha ~tsu!"

Alphard jumps around the ground and avoids the magic, with a movement that suggested that he already knew that trump card would be used. Ricardo subsequently runs to strike Alphard, who had escaped the magic, but that pursuit too was a move which he had anticipated.

Ricardo plunges into him in front of the river, as daggers collide and sparks scatter. Ricardo was overwhelmingly superior in strength. Alphard countered the strength difference with unimaginably skilled sword handling. The cobblestone breaks and rains beside the blasphemer.

At the same time, Ricardo cried out as Alphard slashed into his shaggy torso.

Roy: “Lo~ok, a stub of dog meat ~tsu! Hard and luscious meat, should be made sticky and soft to make it easier to eat to make it easier to bite to make it easier to digest to make it easier to shit out to make it easier to decompose to make it easier to fertilize vegetables and after it makes all that so easy the meat should be eaten to start the cycle cycle cycle cycle of the food chain ~tsu! A~h, how wonderful ~tsu!!”

Ricardo: “Ngh, gh, ghk?!”

The speed of Alphard, who had given that quick speech and has daggers attached on both of his arms, was not something extraordinary. His growth period had not ended yet, and his body has still not toughened, however, his physical ability had contradicted those looks till now, as he rips into Ricardo’s body, who was all defensive.

Julius: “Ricardo!!”

Fur like wires and thick muscles. Ricardo’s body, which was like an armor itself compared to the normal human body, had suffered no wound by any technique till now with the exception of Alphard’s attack.

With eyes wide open, Julius was stunned by looking at Ricardo’s bleeding wound.

Alphard attacks with high speed moves, each move targeting and aiming precisely at the joints and thin parts of the fur. Regardless of the qualities of Ricardo's body, if you get attacked at the key areas, you will get hurt, you will shed blood, and you will lose your life.

Julius: "—hk."

At the moment Julius saw the bombardment of blows, Julius summoned the quasi-spirit once again. The slashes of wind mixed with the flames of a fire, the sword commanded the quasi-spirits of two colors—Ia of Fire and Aro of Wind. From the side, a slash with a reddish flame heads towards Alphard.

Roy: "Yes, we knew that pattern already too ~tsu!"

Julius: "Wha?!"

Roy: "That surprise is completely honest ~tsu! Our stomach will not have any difficulty either ~tsu!"

However, Alphard was ridiculously unaffected by it, with one arm precisely attacking and with eyes at the back, to see whether what he thought would happen, as he kicked into his empty torso.

His heel penetrates into the abdominal muscles, as if he broke into Julius, who was working extremely hard in this situation, just like the person he is. At the front, just when Ricardo started his counterattack, his toe launched itself right into his lower jaw.

Roy: "How nice how nice, this has become fun ~tsu! That nii-sama is! That Ricardo-san is! They both are fighting this great battle and we are their opponent! Even though us, with our weak bodies, absolutely can't do it, can't reach it, can't see it, can't understand it, should have already had given up in this position ~tsu! A~h! To make it so fun, ho~w unfair unfair unfair ~tsu!"

Julius and Ricardo fell to their knees at the same time. Alphard, who stops their pursuit, repeatedly somersaults on the stone pavement, as if to keep the two under pressure.

They must take his incredible skill and childlike brutality under consideration.

Ricardo: “This is, much more than what I heard. Even so, the hell is that guy, pisses me off. The way he walks, the way he talks, everything ’bout him’s jus’ so creepy!”

Ricardo, who barely ever gets hurt and barely had any older scratches, said that with a foggy voice while licking the wounds on his arms. Julius rises, taking heavy breaths, and also agreed with Ricardo’s anger.

Julius: “It’s the same as City Hall… no, just his behavior is still equally incomprehensible. It may be an attempt to mock us, but it’s counterproductive and nothing else.”

Roy: “Even if you say that, it’s always the human nii-sama hiding his feelings of worry from the non-human Ricardo-san, no? We said that we~ already know about that ~tsu!”

Julius: “You bastard…”

Clasping his hands, Alphard laughs uncontrollably, and Julius sends the quasi-spirit of Water, Qua, under Ricardo to heal his wounds as he stepped ahead.

Ricardo: “Ah! Hey, Julius! Don’t go out there!”

Julius: “You just quietly stay here, till your wounds heal enough that the bleeding stops!”

Pointing his knight sword forward, Julius dashes towards Alphard. However, the movement now was clearly not the same as the one before.

In the sharp steps and slashes, Alphard, who received the first attack, felt his eyebrow get slightly slashed.

Roy: “This is…”

Julius: “The power of the quasi-spirit of Yang, In, and at the same time,”

Roy: “Oh?”

Alphard's question overlapped with the responding voice.

Julius' long legs jump up and kick down Alphard's head, pushing down the blasphemer's cheeks into defeat. This time, his defense wouldn't make it in time. His hanging arms lag behind, and rolling his eyes, Alphard turns and desperately attempts to dodge.

Roy: "Uwa kyya! The one right now, was?"

Julius: "My quasi-spirit of Yang. The one with my sword is the quasi-spirit of Yin. It is a mutual partnership that improves physical ability. This, was a first timer for you, isn't it?"

Roy: "…Oh, hehe, as you'd expe~ct! Julius-sama is wonderful! Still loaded with charm that neither we nor us knew about, isn't it ~tsu!"

Julius: "–?!"

With his cheeks dyed red, Alphard looks at Julius with flushed eyes.

At the moment Julius frowned at that warm gaze, Alphard removed and threw away the dagger attached to his arm. A shrill sound echoed as it pounded on the cobblestone.

Immediately afterwards, his heel breaks the cobblestone.

Roy: "As it seems like you cannot surprise us with swords, this time we intend to see it by using fists ~tsu."

Julius: "Gh—~hk!"

Alphard closed the distance in the blink of an eye, as he launched the bottom of his palm while twisting his waist. Julius countered it with his empty left hand, but the shock penetrated right through his arm into his chest.

Unimaginably, the forceful lurch from the ground and the twisting of the waist had increased the destructive force of his palm strike, and Julius, with no time lag, was sent flying.

If Subaru would have had witnessed this sight, he would have had thought of a car accident.

Roy: “Our fists that have taken down more than eighty-eight people… we suppose they shook up nii-sama down to his bones’ medullas, no?”

This was also an equally violent sight, like a car unable to stop runs over and sends the defenseless human beings flying.

Julius could not afford to respond to Alphard’s crazed smile.

His chest bones, his internal organs all got crushed, blood floods onto his clothes and his tall body gets blown away. Ricardo, who was being treated, quickly responds to the situation.

Ricardo: “Julius, watch out!!”

Ricardo hugs and defends Julius, who was unexpectedly going to crash into the wall straight from his head. Even the enormous dog got swallowed into the impact and got knocked into the building, crushing the stones.

Ricardo, who had rushed to help Julius, shakes his head as a plume of dirt rose. The blood in his head concentrates in one side, and he spat out the blood in his throat to prevent choking.

Ricardo: “Spirits! Don’t know if ya can hear me, but yer master’s in trouble! Get to work! Think ‘bout me later!”

Whether it was thanks to Ricardo’s call or not, the blue light pours its power into Julius’ dying body. When he was at least made safe from dying, Ricardo jumped out in frustration into the brisk situation after a good amount of break he had taken from the fight.

Roy: “Welcome back! Would you like to have a meal? Would you like to have a treat? Or perhaps, di-n-n-er?”

Ricardo: “Get yer tongue back inside your damn mouth, damn brat… I’ll teach you what happens when ya make fun of adults jus’ like the brats at our place.”

Roy: “Ohwellohwell, let’s not take it any further. We don’t want a dog as a meal anyway. If you don't want to play with swords or fists… are you fine with this?"

Alphard, with a smile, spreads his hands, and Ricardo immediately increased his alertness. Ricardo chews his teeth fiercely, and was unable to take off his eyes from that.

—In the waterway behind Alphard, a stream of water rises with a whirlpool which looked like the neck of a water dragon to Ricardo.

Ricardo: "Sword skill, martial arts, and this time, magic. Jus' what the hell are ya?"

Roy: "We are anonymous non-practicing magicians, who couldn't even be looked at with pride by our family. Something like that ~tsu!"

Immediately after Alphard rolled his tongue outside, the head of the water stream heads towards Ricardo.

Although that's just water, it's momentum and mass was enough to crush a living being's body. On top of that, there was Julius behind him, so he couldn't choose to avoid it either.

Ricardo: "Ya've done it now. Hah, hah—haa!!"

Opening his large mouth and his body clamped onto the ground, Ricardo released a roar wave.

Out of the three deputy commanders of the Iron Fang, two of them had already shown their ability to cooperate their attack of this roar wave. However, originally, Mimi had developed this technique by imitating Ricardo, and Ricardo argues that it is originally his.

However, compared to Mimi who reduces the burden by dispersing it, roar wave used by a single person is a huge burden to the body.

The destructive roar bursts out of Ricardo's throat as he felt muddy water fall on his body which was clinging onto the ground.

Roy: "Wow, amazing ~tsu."

Unable to hear the voice of admiration, Ricardo's roar wave crashes into the stream of muddy water.

The wave collides right from the front, and splashes the water away, and the water with a mass of several tons scatters and evaporates into mist. After a few seconds, the destroyed muddy stream hits the plaza like rain, flooding the stone pavement, and sends the leaning Ricardo crashing down.

Ricardo: "That, sure was somethin' … even the edge of my mouth, got a bit cut, huh."

The residual damage itself left Ricardo blank for a long time, which further burdened him after the roar wave. Breathing on his shoulder, Ricardo, however, still managed to get up because of his feelings.

Alphard was completely unaffected, without showing any signs of exhaustion, he was just dancing there.

Roy: "Amazingamazing ~tsu! It's been a while since we have seen someone endure that. So long that there is not a trace of it in either ours or our memory. How nice, quite nice, pretty nice, maybe it is nice, isn't it nice, possibly it is nice, perhaps it is nice, probably it is nice, because it is probably nice ~tsu!"

???: "Your repetitive speech ends here."

Roy: "Welp, it's nii-sama's grand return. Scarily, cutely, enviably."

In front of Alphard, who shook his head, Julius was standing next to Ricardo.

His face was pale, and his knight uniform was dyed in blood. His breath was even faintly stuttering, and it was completely impossible to say that he was in his top shape. Although that cannot be said,

Julius: "Thanks for the help, Ricardo."

Ricardo: "I sure did help ya. I'll have ya report my efforts properly to miss so that I get that temporary bonus."

Julius: “About that, I assure you that you can feel absolutely unworried about that from my side.”

Grabbing his knight sword, Julius tapped on Ricardo’s shoulder and subsequently glanced at Alphard. Sensing that gaze, the blasphemer smiled, with dyed cheeks, and twisted his lips irritatingly.

His facial expressions, actions, even his way of fighting, were all packed with a sense of creepiness and spook.

Or perhaps, that itself was related to his Authority of Gluttony.

Julius: “With such prowess in using swords, martial arts, and even magic, why did you align with evil. That power could have had been put to use for something else, something better.”

Roy: “Somewhere else huh. Giving some examples, what would nii-sama consider in that?”

Nii-sama, even his way of addressing was unsettling.

Every time Alphard’s tongue touches it, every time he says that with a flamboyant tone and stuck-up attitude, that word loses its value for Julius.

—Even though he has no family members that call him that.

Julius: “For example, a knight. For example, a mercenary. For example, a hero. Unkempt power easily falls into the hands of evil, and strength turns into forceful violence. That’s why…”

Roy: “We thought you’d say so ~tsu! We thought you’d say that, anii-sama! We thought that the nii-sama we know, that the nii-sama we trust, would say that. We thought so ~tsu!”

Abruptly putting a halt onto the conversation, Alphard jumps and approaches Julius.

He holds his knight sword vertically and slashes down that kick. As if he had plates of iron attached onto his heels, the slash fails to do any damage.

Alphard sharply turns and continues his barrage of kicks from a low angle, as he swings and dances on the spot, as he further pushes Julius to make him crash into the scaffold.

At his intense and strong moves, even Ricardo loses the track of his timing and becomes unable to interrupt.

Roy: “Do you remember, when we were kids! When we had gotten sick and broken down, we had asked nii-sama whether we could bring an Appa from the tree in the garden ~tsu!”

Julius: “Saying things on your own accord…! Why would I remember. Stop enforcing your own arbitrary delusions onto others!”

Roy: “Us and nii-sama were still small, and nii-sama first said that it was impossible, told us to give up ~tsu! Do you remember? Don’t you remember? But we, just because nii-sama had tried to stop us, ended up wanting that appa even more ~tsu! When we had done what nii-sama said was impossible, we thought that we did an amazing job! Our confidence increased! We really thought tha~t!”

Julius: “What are you, what are you saying?! I am unaware of any such thing… unaware!”

Julius accepts his kicks, his heel, his round kick, his straight kick, his high-jump kick, his somersault, his back-spin kick with his knight sword.

His arms were numb, his internal organs were scarred with pain, and he could feel the taste of blood in his mouth. No, it was different from the taste of pure blood, as this was his blood mixed with vomit. He bit his lips. He, just now, for some reason.

He could not help but listen carefully to Alphard’s delusion.

Roy: “Because of what happened afterwards, we are ~tsu! We are ~tsu! Nii-sama is ~tsu!”

Julius: “—hk!”

Roy: “We always, always thought about it ~tsu! We always, always felt it ~tsu! That it was different! That it was just some luggage ~tsu! How that used to be! How's that now! What a nice feeling! So it was such a feeling! A~h, this feels so nice! We finally get it!"

Julius: "I know absolutely nothing, nothing about you!"

Julius got pushed into becoming more and more violent.

Holding back his knight sword with immense strength, he tries to attack whenever he found a gap in Alphard's position. Striking down, piercing into, kicking in, pounding, entangling, dodging.

A slash dyed with anger and hostility cuts through the air, and Alphard's hair, which were too late to avoid it, get slashed off and fall to the ground. Even still, it was not just the slash which should be paid attention to.

Julius: "Ia! Qua! Aro! Ik! Nes! In!"

With the names of the quasi-spirits called out, they started spinning like a magical cast, and they were the spirits contracted with the Spirit Knight.

With their names called out, the six colors of the quasi-spirits increase in radiance, turning the mere affirmation of their existence into a powerful force and pouring it all onto the opponent of their knight.

—The six colored lights surround Alphard from all six directions, blocking any path to escape.

Julius: "With this, it ends—!"

Julius had firm belief in his victory as Alphard could no longer escape.

The power pushes straight through the middle of Alphard's chest,

Roy: "Ultimate Palm."

The dark palm in front of his chest collides with the knight sword in between and crushes it into pieces.

Debris scatters, and the deadly stab loses its effectiveness.

However, there was still the magic that was left—

Roy: “Twilight Mage.”

An unexpected and confusing magical power swells up behind Alphard and slashes down all six of the approaching magic.

The magic of one color clashes with the magic of that same color, and all magic gets cancelled out.

Finally, the eyes of Julius, who had supposedly sealed this attack’s victory, open.

Roy: “Snake of the Twin Swords.”

Alphard’s toes toss up a dagger which he was supposed to have had thrown away.

It got pushed into this place by Julius’ attack. Receiving the spinning blades with both of his hands, Alphard’s body rotates.

A storm of slashes blew up, and Julius used just his broken knight sword.

“…”

Roy: “Nii-sama threw that appa out. That’s why we hate nii-sama.”

An arm sharply cut from the elbow swings into the air and fell onto the cobblestone, making a sound.

Chapter 54:
The Combat Power of Non-Combatants

1

???: “Gluttony… ~tsu.”

Before the nightmare that stood in front, Otto could not help but have cold sweat run down his back.

The opponent who identified as a Sin Archbishop—the name of Gluttony had already been heard by Otto. However, that name was.

Otto: “From what I heard, the name of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony was supposed to be Roy Alphard though.”

???: “Arere, you have already met us before meeting us? If so, then, onii-san, to be left uneaten and coming out normally is quite impressive indeed. Especially when a~nything is a treat for Roy of Bizarre Eating.”

The boy, who claimed to be Lye Batenkaitos, smiled and laughed at Otto’s question. Hearing that laughter, Otto knew that his terrible idea was affirmed.

—There are two, Sin Archbishops of Gluttony.

Otto: “No, to be accurate, at least two of them…”

Lye and Roy, rather, the duo of Batenkaitos and Alphard? At worst, it may be necessary to assume that they were a nightmare like the great rabbit of the myriads.

Julius and Ricardo were supposed to go and capture Gluttony’s control tower, but if the one waiting there wasn’t alone, then, rather than a tough struggle, it would be an inevitable defeat.

???: “Hey! Is this the time to talk and get along with that bastard?! This isn’t the time for all that!”

Otto had the nerves of his guts seemingly sharpened accompanying a burning sensation on his forehead. What interrupted his thoughts at that moment was an extremely feminine voice.

Of course, Otto also noticed the owner of that voice. Because he had noticed that there were puzzles as well.

Otto: “Why is Felt-sama here? I’m sure Reinhard-san told you to stay quietly in an evacuation center!”

Felt: “When the city is in this condition, as if I would ignore that and go and sit in a small corner of the evacuation center!”

The girl with blonde hair and red eyes said bravely. A person who stood out, with there being no possibility of mistaking her for someone else, that’s who Felt was.

Otto: “With that restlessness, what you first see after jumping out is an encounter with a Sin Archbishop, huh. Now that that has happened, my defeat is inevitable because of my bad luck…”

Lye: “You don’t need to be so pessimistic, onii-san. Fo~r us, any encounter is a spice to gourmet. We are supposed to be Gluttony but, we co~mpletely understand the importance of preparation ~tsu.”

Batenkaitos was at the center, with Otto and Felt standing in a position that made a triangle. On the remaining vertice, stood another figure, with whom Otto seemed to be familiar.

Otto: “I am happy to see you again, Kiritaka-san…”

Kiritaka: “Quiet voice with dead eyes and unable to take things obediently, -kun! I don’t understand the feeling though!”

The figure of Kiritaka, who was covered in thin bandages and was in pain, stood in front of Otto. Despite his presence, Otto was not rejoicing at seeing him.

When Otto escaped the headquarters of Muse company, he ran into Gluttony, making his fate uncertain. He is happy to have had survived that, but the actors on the current stage still made things uncertain.

“…”

And that is, Otto, along with Felt and Kiritaka, got the same thought at the same time. —Proper combatants were needed here.

Otto: “There are three groups, all of which are non-combatants, who have encountered a main force among the enemy. What a bad joke this is. Please just stop.”

Felt: “I don’t think that my allies, would be coming anytime soon. Right back at you nii-chan, you rely on just yourself too much.”

Felt told Otto. Otto, as well, could not make any excuses at this point. Behind Felt is a humongous-looking servant who wore a tough appearance. Kiritaka also had some members of the White Dragon’s Scales with him. It was only Otto who was alone.

Lye: “We’re saying that it will be the same no matter how many people you gather. If it’s you guys, then this thirst of ours can never be healed ~tsu! A~h, where are you, we’re looking for you, we want to meet you, we want to meet you, let us meet you.”

Otto and the others were surrounded by pessimism regarding their fighting strength, but Batenkaitos arbitrarily displayed his selfish attitude.

Otto: “Want to meet? Just, what on earth are you saying.”

Otto tried to continue the conversation by picking up his words. On the margin of Batenkaitos’ reasonability.

If it came down to it, Otto could be knocked down in a moment. Buying even the slightest of time—there was a need to create that gap, at all costs.

Lye: “It would indeed be troublesome to explain it so many times, huh. We can’t afford to have our mouths broken by others either ~tsu. That’d be the worst, won’t that be the worst, it would be the absolute worst, wouldn’t that be the worst, isn’t that the worst is what we’re saying.”

“…”

With steep expressions, Felt and Kiritaka shook their heads at Batenkaitos’ words. Rather than being answered, it seemed as if they were being questioned by multiple people. And, as that conversation got unexpectedly established, Otto continued to stare as he was unable to talk to Gluttony.

But still, Otto, with his Divine Protection of Soul Language, could talk to even those beings which could not possibly have a human’s will.

Let’s negotiate. No matter what the challenge may be, it would still be better than the problem Subaru was surrounded by.

—Please, lend me your strength, Natsuki-san.

Otto: “By saying that, I might actually become stronger. Please, try and talk to me. The one which was mentioned in the request, could it perhaps be that you are talking about the Artificial Spirit?”

Quite a dangerous step. That choice of words, that stubborn tone could easily ignite Batenkaitos’ fuse. But, Batenkaitos swung his head.

When the young boy received Otto’s words with the intention of responding to the conversation, he laughed joyfully,

Lye: “Who we want to know is only one… the one, who did the broadcast from earlier. The hero who did it, is the one we are searching for.”

“…”

I take back those words.

After all, Subaru did not lend me his power, and neither do I want to lend away his name.

Lye: “That beloved, beloved hero seems to have come to cast his judgement upon us. This small chest, is hurting in search of hi~m ~tsu.”

Otto: “…The coming of a person of such a troublesome nature, can he even manage to do anything at all, that person.”

If he was really here, “keep on dre~aming!” is what he would have had said, but there is no point in citing curses on part those who aren’t present here in the first place.

At Otto’s reaction, Felt frowned,

Felt: “I told you that you will only waste time by talking! Who is going to sell away their family anyway. Even for my merciless self, there are no doubts in that, except for Reinhard, I’m not sure about him.”

Otto: “I am sorry to hear such an evaluation, but I won’t say anything because I saw Felt-sama captured in that descent!”

The rough Felt, did not say a word which answered Batenkaitos' query. The same went for Kiritaka.

Both of them immediately knew that Batenkaitos' request was Subaru, and immediately discarded it.

"…"

That judgment was good as a person, but was undoubtedly too hasty in this situation.

With this rapid exchange, Subaru ended up not being sold away.

Otto: "This person messed it up. This girl and the others are just impatient, and by hearing the speech of the hero you are looking for, got excited and jumped out of the evacuation center, it's all just mere impatience."

Felt: "Hu~h?!"

Kiritaka: "Shh—"

Otto's story made Felt float on the blue line. And, the one who quietened her was Kiritaka.

As expected of the head merchant of the Muse company, he immediately understood Otto's judgment. At the same time, their gaze and line of sight match.

On his gaze, Otto drew in his chin.

Otto: "If you don't want to answer any questions, then I shall guide you to the hero. I also want my life. I demand its security, however."

Lye: "Really! You know? You know it? The place where our hero is! The figure of our beloved hero! That weak and fragile, unable to help anything unless he is supported, that person!"

Otto: "—? Yes, uh, yes."

Otto nods, as he recognizes the sense of incongruity in the spirit of

Batenkaitos’ words.

As if he knew a lot about Subaru. Calling out for his hero, and also taking such deep notice of the person named Natsuki Subaru.

Otto: “No, I will guide you.”

However, Otto got confused about it. It was regarding Subaru. It would not be surprising if two or three Sin Archbishops already knew about his face. Maybe all the members should not be included after all, Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Wrath—they were all of them. But that was all of them in the first place.

Lye: “You have a face that is frowning badly, onii-san hu~h.”

Otto: “There is no need for you to care so much. Rather than that, what will you do. Killing every one of us at this place, or guaranteeing the lives of everyone here and encountering the hero in return. —What do you choose to do?”

Lye: “What a nasty way of talking, you are a dealer, aren’t you? Such kinds of things in which you have to use your brains, neither we nor us are good at it.”

Otto: “If that’s the case, then choosing what is recommended and seeing it for yourself isn’t so bad either. That is a saying among the merchants though.”

Lye: “…Hmm.”

There was initiative in the conversation. Batenkaitos was really obedient for a Sin Archbishop. It felt just like he was simply a child, and a distorted imbalance made him project himself as a monster. Maybe, he is just a pitiable young boy after all—.

Lye: “—Just now, you pitied us, didn’t you?”

Just when such feelings gathered inside the inner part of Otto’s heart, Batenkaitos said that with a brisk voice in a low tone.

Otto: “huh?”

Lye: “Those eyes, we remember them. Those are eyes which look down upon. Those are eyes which are scornful. With those eyes, thinking that we are some product… A~h, is that so. We were getting a nasty feeling since earlier.”

Otto continued to watch as Batenkaitos’ eyes became filled with complete disgust and hostility.

Lye: “You, are a merchant, right? Putting price tags on things, they are people who sell them to line their own pockets. Human values and opinions too, everything, everything! They are dead people who put them on a scale and calculate, aren’t they?”

Otto: “That is… somewhat, I think there is a little difference in opinions here.”

As clouds of doubt began to form, Otto, whose mind was already tightroped, also got blindfolded. Did he manage to get his message across—that was a question whose answer was clearly visible on the expressions of Felt and Kiritaka, who had done nothing but witness the discussion.

Lye: “Who the hell will listen to what you guys are saying ~tsu! After all, this world is gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! Until we have eaten it, licked it, swallowed it, we will not trust it!”

Batenkaitos shouted while stepping ahead, displaying his fangs.

The crisis could not be stopped. No explosion or word could get close to this explosive.

Felt: “So it did end up like this in the end, didn’t it.”

Saying this with dissatisfaction, Felt held her knife in her hand. Strangely enough, what Batenkaitos had were also short knives attached on both his hands.

Nonetheless, there would be a huge difference in the skill-level.

Kiritaka: “If it has come to this, the ones to rely on are everyone of the White Dragon’s Scales.”

???: “Heyhey! For once, I’m saying we’re also here!”

The fellow who was next to Felt raised his voice, but Felt swung her head. Which means, it will be quite a lively show.

Someone like Subaru would only prove to be useless in this scene.

Otto: “Just by thinking that, the value of that person gets significantly reduced, huh…”

Lye: “Is your talking, do~ne?”

Batenkaitos, slowly, looked at the faces of Otto and the rest. An expression of fighting was on everyone’s face. Looking at that, Batenkaitos nodded with satisfaction.

Lye: “In gourmet, preparations and ingredients are important. Starting from assembling the good ingredients available, only then will the virtue of the dish be eatable ~tsu!”

Otto: “I sort of get it, I sort of don’t get it…”

Lye: “It’s fine even if you don’t understand ~tsu! Neither have we ever thought, that our aesthetics can be understood by anyone except us ~tsu! No~w, well then, about time. —Let’s eat!”

The conversation cemented the fate. Batenkaitos, opening his large mouth, approached Otto with a tremendously powerful jump. Otto, who was standing next to water, pointed his finger towards the blasphemer.

Otto: “I am glad that the assurance has been given!”

Lye: “—Hu~h?”

Otto: “This is how it is—!”

Otto makes a high sound twice with his shoes in front of the doubtful Batenkaitos.

Hearing that sound, something was drawn closer–.

Lye: “—~Tsu!!”

Behind Otto, a flock of water dragons jumped out of the waterway and charged towards Batenkaitos in a single stroke.

2

—Otto had managed to brainwash the herd of water dragons, accompanied by the immense influence of the Authority of Wrath.

The Authority of Wrath, with its ultra-wide range, even if it didn’t cover the entire city, greatly shook the emotions of people, planting the seeds of faint spirit among the citizens, resulting in enormous disarray and suspicion.

Nevertheless, the recent speech by Natsuki Subaru raised the people’s morale, which was also the basis of Otto’s hypothesis of using the water dragons’ strength.

Lye: “Oh, o~h—~tsu?!”

Batenkaitos, mid-air, could not stop the largely numbered water dragons.

With their limbless and serpentine body structures, and weight that was not below a hundred kilos, the multiple bodies crush Batenkaitos. As they continued glaring with their blue and white scales, their fangs continuously aimed for the crushed Batenkaitos.

Lye: “Hunting water dragons is cruel.”

With their fangs on their prey, they spin and tear the flesh apart. That small body would turn into countless pieces of meat, even without such an enormous number of water dragons.

“…”

The aftermath won’t be good.

Due to the influence of the Authority of Wrath, the water dragons were in a strong and excited state, and were skillfully deceived by words with the Divine Protection of Soul Language.

Felt: “Amazing! This, was done by nii-chan!”

Felt ran up, as she rose to cheer.

Despite not moving a single eyebrow seeing this cruel scene, only now does it seem that she had been moved.

Otto: “What I did was to give just a pinch to the water dragons. Whether it’s a Sin Archbishop or not, he cannot win against nature.”

Kiritaka: “Possibly so but… you are, a person who can do much more horrible things than what I thought.”

Otto: “Anyway, I am glad we’re okay. Kiritaka-san too, to think that you survived…”

Kiritaka: “I did indeed get injured on my back but, White Dragon’s Scales, which is a famous mercenary group, helped me out with their expertise in medical treatment.”

However, it unquestionably looked painful. Still, what could be the reason for which Kiritaka was still on the move, even with such an injury. Understanding the meaning behind Otto’s gaze, Kiritaka put his hands on his chest with a look that reeked of seriousness.

Kiritaka: “It is decided, isn’t it. I have the position of executive in Priestella’s management. I heard the broadcast, but I cannot leave everything to it.”

Otto: “I believe that spirit is commendable but…”

Kiritaka: “Of course, there is a low possibility of me being able to fight properly and be of any help. But, for once, even I should be able to do something.”

Kiritaka shamefully made that remark after the effect of the Authority of Wrath and Subaru’s speech.

Indeed, it had been Subaru’s speech which provided a support to the citizens, and it was a medicine too strong for people who already had strong missions to complete. To the extent, that it disabled the fear and reason that would normally stop a person from doing such reckless acts.

Felt: "'That's just recklessness, don't go about thinking such things."

Reading Otto's thoughts, Felt said this with sharpened lips.

Felt: "Everyone has the right to fight for the things important to them. Nobody can stop the feeling of someone who wants to do something for those things, even if it is not backed by a great reason, can they."

Otto: "That is… an individual opinion, and such a judgment should not be taken by someone who is in a responsible position."

Felt: "It depends on the things! Also, I never said that this applied for this situation, did I. Both me, and those guys, came out only because we could win."

Otto: "Win, you say?"

Following Kiritaka, Felt rubbed under her nose with her finger.

Felt: "I also heard nii-chan's speech. That stupid Reinhard too, along with you, went to the city government building. Everyone except me, isn't that right?"

Unfairly enough, what Felt was feeling right now was a misunderstanding. In this world, just as there are right words to fit, there are also some things that can only be done by those humans who are apt enough.

Just as that theory, Otto stopped pursuing further, since he seemed to not know the reason why he was here.

Otto: "Is Heinkel-shi properly captured?"

Felt: "He is kept at Camberley's shelter. Me and Gaston were going back to take what was taken."

What was taken, saying that, Felt turned her jaw towards Gaston. Gaston held a white packet in his hands, and it looked like a long spear.

Otto: “That is?”

Felt: “Old man Rom… it seems to be a secret weapon that he kept in our staff’s bag. It’s a magic tool, I mean.”

Otto: “Magic tool?! How convenient for such a timing!”

Ideally, the intimidating power of the magic tool would make it possible to have results that would normally not be possible.

After hearing that it was a magical tool, one’s expectations were bound to increase.

Felt: “The conditions for using it are a pain, but it’s worth it for its power. Even so, this thing can come in handy in cleaning up the mess nii-chan is in…”

???: “—~Hk.”

Felt’s words may not have had, but what entered Otto’s ears at that moment was a scream.

Otto looks back to where it came from, and Felt and Kiritaka react by widening their eyes. They didn’t hear that scream anymore. It’s obvious. As it was the scream of a voice incomprehensible to humans.

Lye: “They seem to be a much more fun opponent than we thought bu~t… Mere water lizards are no food, are they. Whether it’s for us Gourmet or for any other gastronome, they’re une~atable.”

A voice was heard, a voice that seemed to be able to beat up and defeat anything in this world.

At the same time, the flock of water dragons which should have had been jumping around and preying upon that prey. Their figures, with their tails, torsos, heads now disheveled, were extremely excited at the time of the initial attack, but their painful suffering and their flowing blood conveyed the abnormality of the situation to everyone.

Otto: “Felt-sama, this magic tool… is powerful, right?”

Felt: “From what Old Man Rom said, even Reinhard can’t avoid it, you know?”

Otto: “I see. That is certainly assuring… Kiritaka-san!”

Kiritaka: “Wh-What is it?”

Felt, who received that answer, and Kiritaka, who had an expression of despair after seeing the water dragons. Him leaving behind the White Dragon’s Scales was still, for the non-combatant Kiritaka, very dangerous.

Otto: “Me, Felt-sama, and everyone of the White Dragon’s Scales will buy time. In that time, Kiritaka-san should go to the city government building… no, first go to the eight evacuation center of the town!”

Kiritaka: “Go there, is there something over there?!”

Otto: “—If you go there, you will understand everything. The one who can win, which Kiritaka-san will subsequently send here, is present there.”

Seeing Otto’s determined face as he made that declaration, Kiritaka, changing his expression, nodded powerfully. He then turned back towards his guards,

Kiritaka: “It’s just as you heard. I will, from now, just as Otto-shi instructed, head for the evacuation center. I want you to stay here, and fight along with them. To protect this city.”

???: “Our work is to be young man’s guard… that’s what it’s supposed to be, when did it become such a bothersome position.”

Kiritaka: “That’s wrong. Your job is not to be my guard. Help me with my purpose, was the first contract.”

In front of the bitterly smiling faces of the White Dragon’s Scales, Kiritaka answered with a face that showed utmost seriousness. The reason why his way of addressing his way of self reference became further polite, was because the city meant much more to Kiritaka than just having a responsible position in it.

Kiritaka: “Help me with my purpose, White Dragon’s Scales. To protect our important workplace Priestella, and let’s fight to save our beloved songstress, Liliana.”

???: “Even though turning back would be impossible.”

Kiritaka: “It has nothing to do with not being able to smile again, or what lies in my thoughts. I love Liliana, and I need no more reason to put my life in danger.”

Saying that, Kiritaka looked at Otto and Felt. At the same time, he lifted the bag he was holding in his hands.

Kiritaka: “Without fail, let’s show that we can do it. Because no one knows the navigation of this city and Liliana more than me.”

Felt: “For a moment, I thought it was cool but it’s all disappointing in the end.”

Otto agreed with Felt’s impression, but he did not mention it, he nodded silently seeing Kiritaka’s preparations.

Lye: “—About time, are you prepared?”

The movements of the agitated water dragons had stopped, and stripped of their white eyes, they were close to dying.

Through the gap in that group, Batenkaitos slowly appeared. The blasphemer shaped like a young boy, embraced his shoulders and happily asserted himself as an adversary, and glared.

Lye: “Wasn’t that nice, that counterattack. Recklessness and braveness are different, and abandonment and persistence too are absolutely unlike! That’s a face that knows about that. We’re glad. Finally, you guys too, got the qualification to be taken to our dinner table.”

Felt: “Till now everything we did was just worth going into the trash can huh, this guy, has everything messed up.”

Otto: “Whether being recognized as the enemy is good or bad is again different. Personally, I think that those who get disdained, can still do a lot.”

Did he get this idea by being around Subaru. Or could it be that his thoughts had been influenced by Subaru. How bad would that be. Anyway,

Otto: “Kiritaka-san!”

Kiritaka: “—I wish for good fortune in the upcoming battle for you!”

Following Otto’s call, Kiritaka ran to leave this place. Just one person, Batenkaitos, tilted his head after seeing the figure of Kiritaka, who was trying to escape from the battlefield.

Lye: “Just sto∼p. After how you’ve gently stimulated our motivation and this fee∼ling of hunger!”

Following the back of the escaping Kiritaka, Batenkaitos’ body jumped forward. Fully using his small body, his aerial speed in a single direction was unbelievably fast. With the same pace, Batenkaitos’ fangs pass straight through and reach Kiritaka—they were on their verge to do so.

Felt: “Gaston!”

Gaston: “If I die here, I’ll cry and come to haunt you after becoming a spirit!”

Felt’s voice ripped through the air and the giant, who jumped at almost the same time, interrupted Batenkaitos’ course. Crossing his arms in front of his face and curling his back, it was Felt’s servant, Gaston.

Lye: “Don’t get in the wa∼y—”

Swinging the daggers of his arms, Batenkaitos tried to cut down the hindrance. The steel blade shines brightly, and it’s blow struck Gaston’s exposed arm.

Sounds echoed, and Batenkaitos' dagger broke.

Lye: "Hu~h?"

"…"

Batenkaitos' questioning voice was accompanied by Otto's. They had seen what had happened.

Gaston's position did not change at all. With his arm, he broke Batenkaitos' dagger.

Felt: "My giant is pretty tough. Enough to be my guard."

The happy Felt, who seemed to think that they scared him off, threw the knife she held in her hands towards Batenkaitos. Batenkaitos avoided it with the same momentum as he avoided Gaston's kick. Just as he somersaulted backwards towards the open distance, the "White Dragon's Scales" changed their positions and blocked the road.

Kiritaka's retreat, had become a reality.

Lye: "Hmm, he~y. We see."

The overwhelming existence called Batenkaitos was outnumbered, but the pleasant smile that was sticking to his face did not cease.

With the same pace, Batenkaitos glanced at the opposing Otto,

Lye: "The number of people Louis is likely to be pleased with, is three huh."

Whispering with a trembling sigh, he removed the broken dagger from his arm. Now his left arm was bare-handed, and only his right hand was armed.

Otto: "For some reason, I feel the gap hasn't been filled at all."

As usual, Otto's warning bell continued to respond to this, the greatest of threats.

Ignoring that voice in his head, Otto looked at Felt. That unchanging face, determinedly, looked at the intense battle.

Let’s fight, without the option of running away.

Otto: “Considering the amount of opportunities of fighting I have gotten in the past year, what will I even do as a merchant.”

The voice that spilled from that mouth did not reach anyone.

Henceforth, no one noticed that the voice had a pessimistic tone not because of the content of the words in it.

Chapter 55:
The War God's Challenger

—The legends of the god of war, Kurgan, were widely circulated in the Vollachia Empire.

In the powerful and meritocratic Vollachian Empire, as long as one had the ability, the circumstances of their birth would be disregarded.

In comparison to Lugunica, which remained discriminatory against demi-humans, and the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, which barred foreigners, Vollachia adopted a system similar to the Kararagi City-States, one devoid of consideration for blood or appearance.

Therefore, among the four major countries, Vollachia was considered to be the best country of residence for non-purebred humans.

But on the other hand, that kind of cruel order, ruled by survival of the fittest, meant that there would be severe repression and oppression on those lacking power and wisdom. Naturally, personal evaluations and racial evaluations would be different.

In particular, the Multi-Arm Tribe had been wandering around for many years, as a nomadic race which never stayed in a single place. The appearance of the Multi-Arm Tribe was just as its name implied, and their aptitude at using magic was exceptionally low for demi-humans. In terms of a race, it could only be thought of as inferior.

The total population of the Multi-Arm Tribe was not large. If ever a dispute arose, they would be more inclined to relocate than to fight for the protection of their land.

It was inevitable that such a race, driven away from countless places, would come to the Vollachian Empire, where it would have only been natural for them to be swallowed up by the iron-blooded Empire and faced with decline.

—In this meritocratic world, a man named Kurgan shouted his refusal.

Although the characteristics of the Multi-Arm Tribe were that they had more than the two arms humans did, that number varied from person to person. Kurgan, who had eight arms where most had four or five, was a peculiar existence.

It had been the then-youthful Kurgan who had, when the local lord moved to evict them from his land, refused, waving his eight arms to drive the messenger back. Then, spurring his trembling brethren on, the lord's private army was driven back and broken through, time and time again, until finally the lord's mansion itself was attacked.

Although the barbaric attack had frightened the lord, Kurgan did not offer a violent solution.

He spoke that he and his people had proven themselves, and accepted a prized seat on the lord's private army. After that, throughout various battles, the name of Kurgan of the Eight Arms was passed down as a legend of the Vollachian Empire.

???: "…"

His whole body had been submerged in cold water, and he could still see the wavering moon through the water that flowed overhead.

The bone that supported his right eye had been broken, and the eyeball enclosed inside the socket seemed on the verge of slipping off. Instantly, he used his left hand to support the magical treatment and perform minimal healing.

His remaining left eye jumped around, surveying the red sediment flowing along with the water, his body arching back upward where it hit the bottom of the waterway.

???: "…"

Obviously, he lay submerged in the water, but he could feel no trace of its frigid coolness.

Emancipated from the heavy weight of gravity, strength slowly poured back into his hands and feet in a world where their burden had been lost. If only unloading the yoke of the heart could be as simple as removing the yoke on the body—right now, his heart was submerged in darkness.

That he could just keep sinking in this way, in no way was such a thought completely absent from his heart. However, drawing breath began to grow painful, and in the darkness, his eyes had not left him completely blinded.

The peach-haired girl, the orange-furred catgirl, and the black-haired boy emerged and ignited his waterlogged heart.

Maybe it was a flame that would disappear immediately. Earlier, that had been precisely the case, and his bravado had been entirely shattered, which proved so. Even so, no matter what,

—That was no excuse to be immersed in here forever.

Garfiel: “Phwah!”

Stretching to straighten his back, slamming hard into the water pushing himself up in one breath, Garfiel shook his head as it emerged from the water.

The vision in his right eye was still obstructed, and the lingering after-effects of the beating had turned into a tinnitus ringing ceaselessly in his head. His entire bloodied, wounded body was flooded with nausea, and the lack of sensation in his mouth had a discordant effect on his teeth.

Garfiel: “Fuckin’ shit…”

Grabbing the edge of the waterway to yank himself up, shaking his entire body like a wild beast to clear the water, Garfiel glanced around.

Earlier, Garfiel had been slammed into the waterway from that spot.

Nothing had changed, and the war god remained standing in place.

The position of his outstretched Demon Cleavers was the same, and with delay in his slight aura of battle, he maintained his stance, acting if there was not the slightest doubt that Garfiel would come back up.

Kurgan: "…"

Looking at the silent god of war, Garfiel began to think.

After all, the necessity of the class between Garfiel and Kurgan was small indeed. The task that Garfiel hoped to accomplish was to stop the surprise attack that Lust was likely to launch on the City Hall. Even if he fought with Kurgan here, he would not be saving the City Hall, where solely non-combatants remained.

At a glance, everything told Garfiel to avoid a fight with Kurgan here.

Garfiel: "But… no way, he'd let me escape."

A body so large that heads would crane to see it fully, and an overwhelming amount of muscle. Even if he looked incapable of agility, even if he tried to flee, he could not imagine that he could escape the reach of those swords.

From the very instant that this god of war had appeared before him, Garfiel had been rendered incapable of escape.

Now, there were only two choices that Garfiel was allowed to make.

—Fight to the death. Or die without resisting. These two choices only.

Garfiel: "Fuck… right now's not the time to think like that!"

Defeatist thoughts flashing through his head, Garfiel gnashed his teeth to drive them away. The fangs that had been urgently regrown to make up for his losses tinged with pain, but that pain drove negative thoughts of loss to deep recesses.

Any notion of the feeling of impending loss, of the harbinger of defeat, would be flattened. Self-satisfying words to justify his loss, were unnecessary!

—Win, win, win, win, win, win!

Seize victory, prove his own worth!

Garfiel: “UUUUAAAAAAaaaaaaah!”

Roaring loudly, driving away any weakness, Garfiel once again rushed forward. In the previous skirmish, a single blow that he had put his all into had been blocked.

However, if his weight were not enough, he could use speed to control him.

Using claws, using teeth, opening, tearing, biting, plundering.

Kurgan: “…”

The silent god of war greeted the rushing Garfiel.

A blow from a Demon Cleaver came from his shoulder.

Call it a sniping blow, but the penetrative force was too low; call it a crushing blow, but it moved too sharply. It belonged solely to Kurgan, this combination of swordplay and strength that would leave his opponents crushed.

The suddenly-approaching blade of the Demon Cleaver passed over the back of Garfiel’s head as he leaned forward. After that narrow miss, Garfiel’s thinking grew steadily more fervent.

If there were only one blow, Garfiel should be able to escape with ease. The speed of his small form, lithe as it was, was quite different from the speed of that enormous body with its equally enormous arms and weapons.

After avoiding his massive attack, sending a slashing paw towards his chest as a parting gift was easy. Or rather, should have been.

Garfiel: “—Guh.”

However, Garfiel, who had buried himself deep in those arms, was forced to dodge on the spot. One of Kurgan's giant side arms swept upward, threatening to send him flying with a blow to his chin.

This was also unexpected—no, his body's sense of balance was simply different.

Kurgan, born of the Multi-Arm Tribe, had trained relentlessly to find a style which suited his own body, wielding his eight arms. He honed frightening techniques of his flesh, which were entirely different from the maneuvers Garfiel knew for exercising four limbs.

Once his attack ended, his body would be left open, and weaknesses would be revealed, such common sense applied here.

If one arm were to be defended against, then it was common sense that a weakness would be borne by wrapping around to the side of that arm. But here, even if he could block one arm's fatal strike, he would still have the other seven to contend with.

If he could not manage all that, only a single dead end awaited.

Garfiel: "Gh, gaaaaah!"

In front of the shuddering Garfiel, the arm of the god of war seemed to be enough to shake the world. The roaring Demon Cleavers struck from all directions, crushing their opponent's body with violent force.

Blocking one blow with his shield, bending over to dodge another, darting backward to reduce the impact of the next, spinning to avoid yet another, offsetting one with all the force from his body, allowing the next to shatter his shoulder to avoid a fatal injury, deflecting one more with a beastified arm of his, then a single hit came through to make him fall on the stone steps.

Garfiel: "Gah, huu."

—Eight arms.

Just now, Garfiel had thrown his all against Kurgan, and had only barely survived the counter-offensive which followed.

Such an attack held the deadliness of a tempest, and yet, to Kurgan, he was merely swinging each of his eight arms.

If this were what it meant to be a god of war, Garfiel would be annihilated in moments if the fight continued. Right now, collapsed on the ground, the bloodied Garfiel still drew breath only because the still standing god of war had no intent to pursue him.

Kurgan: "…"

Assuming the same stance he had taken when Garfiel had clambered out of the waterway, he looked down at the loser in their struggle.

To be underestimated, no such feelings of frustration surged forth. The question now was of even occupying the same dimension.

Competing with each other, warriors on a battlefield.

The name of this god of war, Kurgan the Eight Arms, was a legend.

Garfiel: "Huu… Huu…"

He could not win. To win was impossible.

A legend that had passed away, a man who had become a hero, this war god.

Thriving in the imposing Vollachian Empire, even when his clan had been inferior and despised, was this man who had changed the destiny of his race on his own.

Garfiel was nothing more than a little kid who revered that legend.

Garfiel: "Huu… huu… huu."

Clearly that was so, but why did his body right itself? Even his inner self was so shaken, and yet his body stood upright.

Garfiel: "Haaaah… Noisy, noisy, fuckin' noisy!"

The rush of his heartbeat, it was now unusually loud.

The ringing of drums accompanying his ears, Garfiel stomped on the ground. The stone steps beneath his feet began to split, and the cracks stretched straight below Kurgan's feet.

The silent Kurgan and the bloodied Garfiel stood in confrontation. Swaying, Garfiel gathered power in his toes, once again slamming on the ground. Then, Kurgan moved.

No, he had been moved.

Kurgan: "…"

Through Garfiel's soles, the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits worked its power. That power moved from the newly formed cracks to Kurgan's feet, and the ground supporting the giant flew towards the heavens.

That enormous body floating in midair, honed though it was by a hundred battles, was still a slave to the laws of physics.

Losing the support of his lower body, he could no longer execute his powerful strikes.

Garfiel: "Haaaaaaaaaaa!"

This moment was the key.

Taking aim at where Kurgan hovered in midair, Garfiel swung his arm.

Part beast, an arm covered in the fur and muscle of a giant tiger struck Kurgan. Even the god of war had no means of resisting if he could not adjust his stance in midair.

With the sound of weapons colliding, the intercepting Demon Cleaver flew away, pulling Kurgan in its wake. And then, Garfiel's kick was waiting for him. Taking advantage of the first chink in his armor, his claws pierced those thick abdominal muscles.

Roaring, Garfiel ceaselessly pushed his opponent, who had bent over, pressing on with his attacks.

Chest, thighs, knees, and stomach, all took constant blows.

Suppressed by the force of the impact, Kurgan's numerous arms were unable to catch up to defend, and he could only take each attack in his splayed position.

Garfiel: "Gotcha!"

Garfiel, convinced that victory was in sight, cried out.

The slashing, bestial claws tore into Kurgan's chest, spraying Garfiel with dark blood.

Garfiel swiped the blood from his body, continuing to press forward. Confident that his opponent had been rendered helpless, Garfiel's eyes found Kurgan, skin carved from iron—and then cold washed over him as his hairs stood up.

Kurgan: "…"

The god of war's eyes fixed themselves on Garfiel, his demeanor exactly what it had been at the start, unchanged, not shaken in the slightest.

Garfiel: "—Huh?"

It was then, that Garfiel realized.

The god of war's delayed counterattack.

Two Demon Cleavers were swung, slamming into Garfiel's pair of hurriedly-raised shields, breaking both his arms, sending his figure crashing hard into the ground.

Garfiel: "Kuh—"

Not even a grunt could not be formed. In an instant, orientation vanished from his field of vision, and Garfiel's limbs were entirely controlled by the impact that had sent him packing.

All he knew, was what had happened.

In midair, without any grounding point, Kurgan gave a fierce attack with only his upper body. This method was simple and straightforward.

Grabbing the blade of the Demon Cleaver with both hands to increase the weight of the swing, the force had skyrocketed.

—That was the principle of a flick to the forehead.

Using two hands as a base to turn the attack into a fatal blow.

Sending him flying to reduce the force of his attacks— this method of combat had been thoroughly resolved by his opponent.

Garfiel: "—Hk."

Having his chain of counterattacks interrupted, Garfiel was struck by a foot from the huge body directly above him. Coupling the foot with his falling momentum, Garfiel's body squeaked and rebounded upward from the ground as soon as it made contact.

His thoughts occupied by pain and loss, what drove him to use his healing magic was solely his survival instinct.

Attaching the broken bones on his upper arm, elbow, and shattered shoulders, fixing his eviscerated internal organs. His ribs, waist bones and parts of his left thigh had also broken, but those would prove too difficult to recover in an emergency.

His Gate heating within the body, he drew upon all his magic, exhausting his Mana supply. Taking advantage of being able to draw strength from the ground, with his body pressed against it, he began to treat and repair himself from head to toe.

A few seconds, or tens of seconds, or possibly a few minutes.

Blocking out even the passage of time, Garfiel focused on the restoration of his flesh. Finally, reaching a point where he could just barely manage to move, he spat the blood from his throat and got up.

Kurgan: "…"

Calmly, the god of war regarded the bloodstained Garfiel. Seeing this gesture, the corners of Garfiel's eyes burned. The heat within had him bowing his head, teeth shaking.

Garfiel: "The fuck's this…?"

Since the beginning, Kurgan's stance had remained consistent. He would meet Garfiel's challenges, but he would not take the initiative to attack, nor would he rush at Garfiel with swords drawn.

Garfiel had been mercilessly defeated three times.

The feeling of defeat and humiliation in his heart had smashed through him, his warrior's conceit and arrogance.

He felt that he had to win against him. In a similar way, he also thought that it would be far cleaner to kill himself than to suffer this ridicule.

The god of war Kurgan, the hero of Vollachia. Being regarded as the peak of all the soldiers, asking him to understand the frustration in Garfiel's heart would be impossible.

Garfiel: "Might as well just…"

"Kill me", he could ask that of him.

Honestly admitting defeat, acknowledging the obvious disparity in power, asking to be allowed to die as a warrior.

Putting down his shields, spreading his arms, and forming an expression of bliss. To plead with him like this, would he be willing?

To fall in battle against the god of war, to a warrior, this was perhaps the proudest way to die.

Garfiel: "In this place…"

Wouldn't it be so easy, if it were all to end.

Garfiel: "It'd be too easy for it to be over, huh."

Equipped with his shields, tightening his arms to show hostility. Looking forward, as if intending to struggle.

Garfiel: “That kinda thinkin’ keeps lingerin’.”

Someone had said to him once, to not think so much when fighting.

You’re pretty strong when you’re not thinking about extraneous things, and just using your instincts to fight.

—Was that really the case?

Garfiel: “That sound won’t go away…”

How annoying, his heartbeat was. Every bone in him twisted and connected, and a sound began to form.

Annoying, annoying, annoying, annoying.

That extraneous sound, all of it, completely, in its entirety, was so annoying.

—The sound, could he not hear it?

Garfiel: “Can I hear… Always, of fuckin’ course my amazin’ self can hear it.”

Even if he avoided thinking about it, it would amount to nothing.

In Garfiel’s ear, or perhaps in some part of him separate from his tympanic membrane, that voice was still being accepted.

Someone’s voice, an intimate voice, a familiar voice, a heartwarming voice, a choked voice, a proud voice, a voice which could not suppress its rage.

All these voices, refused to let Garfiel go.

Even if he relied on instinct to fight, these incoming waves of sound would not recede at all, and Garfiel would not be alone.

The more he thought about it, the weaker he was, and the him right now was so weak.

It was different from when he had been in Sanctuary, playing at being the lone wolf. Now, he bore more humility, had seen more things.

The more people there were to someone, the weaker they would become. They would spend their entire lives growing weaker.

Garfiel: “How’s… that possible.”

Embracing those unfading voices, swallowing his sense of defeat, stirring up a desire for victory, and inserting his admiration and envy into all that.

—Garfiel, issued a challenge to the god of war.

Garfiel: “—Kuh.”

Kurgan: “…”

Garfiel’s gaze had changed. Kurgan, witnessing this, quietly moved.

Of his four Demon Cleavers, he sheathed two. However, this meant in no way that Kurgan’s strength had weakened. Instead, it allowed him more focus on just those two Demon Cleavers. Almost as if to explain, the god of war adjusted his stance.

The god of war, who had stood facing forward, balanced on his right foot, leaning in slightly as he faced Garfiel.

This, was a battle stance.

—Evidence, that Kurgan finally regarded Garfiel as an enemy.

Garfiel: “—So just now, ya really were just treatin’ my amazin’ self as a kid. ‘The osprey’s unsuited to child rearing’, does this happen to be the case here?”

Kurgan: “…”

In silence, Garfiel flew at the god of war.

Responding to this brutal offensive was a Demon Cleaver.

Suppressing the horrifying feeling of a wall of despair closing in on him, Garfiel rushed forward, seizing his opportunity with his all.

This was a misjudged tactic from his earlier attack. It had been caused by the aura that Kurgan gave off, as well as Garfiel's own imagined fearful admiration of the hero.

Garfiel: "Uuuuuuuaaaa!"

With a hook, he lashed out at Kurgan.

Although there was a heavy sound of iron on flesh, he had not hit where he had aimed, but an arm that had been extended to block.

Garfiel: "What kind of a joke's this!"

Seeing his fist blocked by that palm, Garfiel roared.

Drawing strength from the soles of his feet, he poured that power into his fist which met Kurgan's palm, allowing it to explode forward.

Kurgan twisted his fingers, turning himself around to avoid the sudden punching force, and Garfiel took the opportunity to land on the god of war's waist, and up his chest he ran, as if he were doing a flip.

Kurgan leaned back, lashing out with his Demon Cleaver at the same time. Reading the flow of the wind and atmosphere to predict the direction, Garfiel accepted the attack with his pair of shields. With a thundering sound, Garfiel's body flew backward.

Garfiel: "Haaaaaa—"

Slamming his limbs into the slate floor, he forced his body to stay in place. Looking up, the war god's pursuit had already approached.

Kurgan, who had yet to launch his own attack, now rushed forward to crush Garfiel.

Only one instant to predict, only one moment to react, only one second for the result to bear fruit.

Kurgan: "…"

Garfiel strained the arms he had embedded into the slate, lifting the ground before him. The rushing Kurgan shattered the wall launched at his shoulder, and lunged with the Demon Cleaver.

A cacophony.

Garfiel, taking a direct hit, was propelled backward. The heel that had tried to stand firm slid across the ground, and shards of teeth flew forward. But—

Garfiel: "Don't look down on me, bastard!"

He used his teeth to block the tip of the piercing strike of the Demon Cleaver. From his incisors, blood dripped to cover the Demon Cleaver, but Garfiel did not hesitate.

Garfiel: "…"

He strained the strength in his neck and jaw, and Kurgan's body shook. The latter grabbed hold of the bitten Demon Cleaver's handle with another arm, and strained to extract it in one motion, but the tooth piercing it would not give.

Not only that, but the force of his biting teeth yet increased. Garfiel's upper body swelled and began to perform a half-beastification.

Garfiel: "GHROOOoooooooa, GRAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

Transforming his head to animal form would lower his capacity for rational thought significantly. His reasoning would regress to the level of a beast's, and he had been told countless times that this was a double-edged sword.

But in this moment, that was Garfiel's choice.

The power of his abominable half was indispensable. Faced with the most powerful of the Multi-Arm Tribe, the god of war, how could he win, if he denied his own fundamental nature?

O tiger, o tiger, o tiger, in this moment, lend me your strength—!

Kurgan: "…"

The instant the golden tiger opened its eyes, the Demon Cleaver was torn.

The blade was shredded, and the force of the destruction moved from blade to hilt, shaking the giant's form as he suddenly lost his hold and balance.

—This, was truly an opportunity.

Garfiel: "Huu, haa, HAAAAAA!"

The beast swung its paws, beating at Kurgan's head. The giant could not catch his footing under the beast's repeated strikes. A slice and a bat arrived at the same time from the bestial arm, and Kurgan, dripping blood, was forced back.

Kurgan: "…"

Garfiel made to pursue further, but his nose was met with a fist.

The enormous tiger's face was smashed with an elbow, the bridge of its nose collapsing, and immediately following, from below, was a strike to his mandible.

His body fell, collapsing, and a punch from the front slammed into his face.

Blood splashed into his dimming field of vision. Orientation, control, these vanished from his mind.

Not that it had anything to do with him. What was important was all contained in his heart. Even without thinking about it, it would not vanish, and it would drive his bloody, battered body on.

The Demon Cleaver approached.

The remaining one of the pair, which had not been shattered.

Only one instant to predict, only one moment to react, only one second for the result to bear fruit.

Garfiel: “Guu, uu…”

The blade cutting towards his body scraped against his shield and met his stomach. Even had the impact been dispelled, this blow still had the power to slice through the thick abdominal muscles on his body.

However, faced with hair stiff as golden needles, and the swelling body of the enormous tiger, bisection was still out of reach.

At Kurgan’s feet, a stomp from Garfiel. This was an effect of the blessing of the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits.

Garfiel: “Uuuuuuuaaaaaah!”

The blade still lodged in his abdominal muscles, the god of war’s body still held it. In a grappling contest, Kurgan would come out ahead, but Garfiel could not sit still.

The lack of teeth, the arm that had been broken several times over, and the instinct overpowering his sensibility, had him catch Kurgan firmly.

Kurgan: “…”

Yanking on his cumbersomely large body, Garfiel threw Kurgan— into the waterway behind him. The instant he was thrown forward, Kurgan’s arm reached out to grab Garfiel, dragging the two of them down together.

Accompanied by a loud splash, the two plummeted into the waterway. Two huge bodies were scuffed by the current and each other, the blood which stained the water being swept away.

Kurgan: “…”

In the water, the two figures were still continuously attacking and defending. In the dark, vision-obscuring liquid, Garfiel and Kurgan continued to beat each other without regard to the resistance of the water.

Fists of a giant mangled his organs, excruciatingly expelling the oxygen from his lungs. Pain unto pain, suffering unto suffering, so the underwater battle continued.

Between that, Garfiel understood his own disadvantage.

For whatever reason, the god of war before him did not seem to breathe. He felt as if his opponent were a resurrected body.

Oxygen starvation brought lethargy, and Garfiel found his every action slow and stagnant.

The flow of the water gradually surged and swelled, and, again and again, the two figures fell from waterfall to waterfall. As his consciousness faded, his fingertips were sapped of their fighting spirit.

Garfiel: "—Haa."

—His breaths were not enough.

This would become the true cause of his defeat, as Garfiel's consciousness was leaving him. And victory was—

Kurgan: "…"

A heavy sound, that the muted, stagnant water carried to him.

Returning to his distant consciousness, Garfiel saw it within the murky water.

The Demon Cleaver sheared into the wall of the canal, and the god of war's strike created a divisive gap in the path of the water's flow.

He had neither the chance nor the air to ask what he was doing.

The sound of blades from every which way shook the flow of water, until finally the sound of breaking metal and a shocking rush echoed in tandem. In the next moment, a tremendous new stream was formed.

Separate from the waterway's true flow, it was another stream of water entirely. Garfiel's body, captured within this stream, was sucked and thrown clear from the waterway.

Garfiel: "—Puah, kuu, kuh."

The feeling of water around him disappeared, and Garfiel spat the volumes of water he had swallowed.

From his eyes, nose, ears, all the holes in his head, water poured forth, and Garfiel shook his head.

Just as he was wondering what had happened, he heard it.

???: "—Gorgeous Tiger?"

Amidst the sound of flowing water, someone called out quietly to him.

Chapter 56:
Signing of a Divorce

1

—The Authority of Greed associated with its star's name, the true face of its Invincibility.

The names of the stars that Subaru knew aligned with the names of the Sin Archbishops. The etymology of Betelgeuse, Orion's Hand, was quite fitting with the madman Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti's Unseen Hand.

Therefore, Subaru believed that the stars' sobriquets were closely related to the Sin Archbishops' Authorities.

And the Sin Archbishop of Greed was named Regulus Corneas. Regulus, his first name, had its origin in the Latin word "Leo", and was derived from the expressions "Little King", as well as—"Lion's Heart". Although he had once scoffed at the idea, Subaru realized that this notion was not meaningless and pursued this train of thought, thus arriving at a hypothesis.

In the first place, what is a King?

The Kingdom of Lugunica was currently in the middle of the Royal Selection, each candidate striving to show their Kingship. Although each Candidate's idea of Kingship would come to light sooner or later, Subaru wanted to bring up the concept of a King here, in this situation where it took a more general meaning.

This self-proclaimed King was a Kingdom's representative, who stood at its top.

Loosening the definition, a nation could be composed of anything, but a single individual could become no nation. A nation can only be a nation if there is a King, and Citizens who follow the King.

Following this line of thought, bearing a name with the meaning of

“Little King”, Regulus Corneas would probably also correspondingly have Citizens who could grant him the title of King.

Subaru: “Then, who are the Citizens of this Little Kingdom, with Regulus as its King?”

He did not even have to think about it.

Without bringing any mook Witch Cultists, they had attacked the city of Pristella.

Although this was a group of devils with such distorted personalities and malicious intents so sever they made people look away, the only one to go through the trouble of bringing unnecessary numbers had been Regulus.

Why would he need to do so?

Knowing Regulus, the possibility that he merely craved the limelight was not nonexistent, but what if that was not the case? What if that was necessary for him?

Subaru: “In order for Regulus to be a Little King, he needed to bring his wives, who are the Citizens. Although it’s unknown if the distance is relevant, it looks like Regulus had to bring along his fifty wives due to this restriction.”

Was the condition of his Invincibility based on the number of wives? Or his distance from the wives?

If Regulus’s identity as a Little King were truly conditional, the scope of what Greed could reach would potentially be affected by such limits. In short, Regulus’s wives were in no way irrelevant to his Invincibility.

Subaru: “But, this isn’t quite enough to unveil the secret to his trick.”

What Subaru had understood with his reasoning, was only the Little King part.

His other name, Lion’s Heart, had yet to be explained, as did the overwhelming power, both offensive and defensive, that accompanied his Invincibility. The fact that his surroundings had no effect on him also remained a mystery.

If it were a mere strengthening of one's body, it would not have been impossible for Reinhard to break through; However, Regulus's Invincibility clearly transcended the realm of simple super-strength.

Subaru: "It can't be a super-strong barrier. All the measures to stop an Invincible enemy have been tried already. On top of that, he definitely lacks a heartbeat and body temperature. Then—"

The name of Lion's Heart opened a thought, and the last piece of the puzzle fell in place.

Regulus's Authority of Greed was not Invincibility. The true face of the murderer's overwhelming Authority was Stillness of an Object's Time.

Already supplied, already appraised, without holes.

The words that Regulus always wore at his lips of distorted self-satisfaction were about how he was a man satisfied with his ideal existence, but at the same time he made no attempt to hide the nature of his ability.

Subaru: "The time of his physical body's frozen, so forget attacks; he won't even get wet. The time of the sand he throws is frozen, so it doesn't bounce off, it goes straight through."

Among the familiar superpowers found in manga, there was a similar one, Spatial Splitting.

This power, as its name suggested, created a literal crack in space itself, cutting something off from its surroundings, regardless of whatever may try to affect it. Regulus's existence itself acted thus, on some level.

Regulus Corneas, who could cut himself off from the flow of time, could be said to be the distortion of space itself. Indeed, he had said that he stood in an entirely different dimension—Invincibility was but a side effect of Stillness of an Object's Time.

That was to say—

Subaru: "—The secret technique of freezing time's your true ability!"

Regulus: "I don't care how enthusiastic you are, I have no comment on that! Are you that type? Who wishfully believes that you know something, so everyone around you should know that as well? Even pride should be measured, so show me a little self-awareness, you selfish bastard!"

Subaru's back was pressed against a stone wall, hiding his figure as he yelled, and Regulus rushed at him with ridicule.

Breaking through walls, cutting through the canal, a literal march of devastation—as a result of this, Regulus caught up with Subaru.

Right now, Subaru met all this alone. That said, in truth, this was not the exciting match the word "combat" implied.

Regulus: "Darting back and forth irritates me to death, you. Not running away makes you truly a man, did you think I'd say so? You and I can't compare at all. Though you clearly gawked as I sent the Sword Saint flying, you can't even understand something like this? No matter how you look at it, isn't this just looking down on me?!"

Subaru: "When it's someone you hate, anything they do is always irritating, right or wrong. If I ran, I'd only run into a future so troublesome it'd kill me. In addition… this choice is the right answer, that should be it."

Regulus: "Right answer my ass. Whether it's personnel selection or strategy, all of, all of, all of allofallof it! It can only amount to a twisted result, isn't that right? If you wanted to continue the fight, wouldn't it have been much better for that cheating whore to stay? An adulterer like you, is there anything you can do aside from sleeping with someone else's bride?"

Subaru: "That's one hell of a statement."

Subaru was not anxious in the slightest, even while bathed by Regulus's bitter words. Not anxious, not irritated; even his disgust had been watered out, as he relied on only his smart mouth to control the situation.

Now, Subaru had lured Regulus a distance away from the church, having parted ways with Emilia, facing off with the murderer alone.

“Facing off”, saying so seemed a touch inaccurate. Since Subaru was just trying to hide himself, he maintained his taunting demeanor, striving merely to buy time.

If Regulus noticed this, and attacked so destructively as to rend that entire section of the city from top to bottom, Subaru’s plans would be shattered in an instant. However, Subaru was sure that Regulus would never do so.

In this short period of time, with the hostile nature of their interactions, he had very accurately gauged Regulus’s character.

In short, Regulus was scum.

This simple statement could in no way explain all of Regulus’s problems, however. More precisely, Regulus was someone who put his own sense of values above all others’, and would certainly never be capable of ignoring the existence of others.

To be frank, calling him the incarnation of desire for approval and desire to show off would be the simplest way to put it.

Claiming that he possessed no desires and no demands with sophisticated words, treating his existence as one that had already achieved perfection, Regulus seemed unable to continue living without proclaiming his own value to others.

Repressing the feelings of others, imposing his own values onto them, using intimidation and violence to forcefully instate himself as supreme. This attitude was not how he treated just his brides, but how he treated the entire world.

Therefore, that was why Regulus attempted to meet everyone with his own kind of straightforward honesty. His battle of offense and defense against Reinhard served as perfect proof.

If Regulus was capable and willing of doing so, he could have completely invalidated Reinhard's attacks with his Invincibility, and gone on to kill the somewhat-troublesome Subaru and Emilia. Despite this, he had been deliberately eager to accept Reinhard's attacks directly, and thus was unable to put this acute plan into action.

Although, this was not to say that Regulus valued nobleness of spirit. Rather, this decidedly further proved the nature that he had supposedly cast aside.

—This man, Regulus, was a man who could not help but force everything around him to yield, by use of his Authority.

Therefore, he did not crush the meddlesome Reinhard, nor did he ignore Subaru's provocations. Those were not decisions he could make in battle.

Assured by the premise that he could be neither injured or defeated, he needed to force his opponents into complete surrender, leaving their spirits defeated and broken—Regulus was a man who knew only this way of battle.

Such a repulsive nature was truly unsightly to behold.

The reason behind this judgement was that everyone, with no exception, would to some extent hold the same feelings. Assuredly so. Even Subaru himself was aware of such ugliness in his own nature. Precisely because he forced people to gaze into this ugliness, this was why the existence known as Regulus was so hateful.

However, this exact reason was also what allowed a faint glimpse at a tiny chance of victory.

Subaru: "Your secret method of freezing time, fine, ignore it, but what about the first part? Was my speculation really completely off? If you would, even if it's just a rough idea, I hope you can outline it for me."

Regulus: "Why would I have to answer the question? It's nonsensical and not obliged of me. A matter of disclosing my own secrets isn't even about rights anymore. To what extent are you planning to look down on me? You bastard, are you incapable of understanding without having your bones ground to dust?!"

Falling for Subaru's provocation, Regulus stomped hard at the ground.

The tips of his feet pierced the stone road, as easily as if it were made of pudding, sending dirt flying everywhere. The ammunition it released randomly destroyed the area near Subaru's hiding place, as only the general direction of his voice could be used to ascertain his position.

Long before the bullets could find him, Subaru, who had read Regulus's actions, had fled from the wall. During his escape, he also toppled the stone pillars standing at the ends of the street.

And thus, the rope tied to the stone pillar came untied, and a series of slight sounds echoed.

Overtop the head of Regulus, who had looked up to see what had happened, countless shards of ice flew down. With Emilia's help, the street had been turned into a minefield of carefully lain traps.

Of course, the place where Regulus had been directly struck was unscathed, but—

Regulus: "This kind of thing! This is nothing but what you'd call idiotic!"

Regulus, without attempting to dodge the falling ice, spread his arms in order to accept it with his entire body.

Of course, without hope of piercing his invincibility, the shards of ice shattered into fragments, scattering to disperse into Mana particles. Including the parts that had failed to touch his body, as if to show off, Regulus stomped through all the scattered bits of ice, destroying them utterly.

Regulus: "What's this supposed to be? If your long rambling theory from just now is indeed correct, couldn't you yourself think of how meaningless this attack is? Look at it this way, isn't it that that girl's attacks are much more effective? Winding back and forth, just what do you intend to do?!"

Subaru: "I can answer what I intend to achieve by winding back and forth like this, if you answer my question. This should be an equal exchange, no?"

Regulus: "An exchange between me and you, what is this but sheer wild arrogance!"

Subaru pulled back quickly, putting distance between himself and Regulus.

Refusing to let him go, Regulus chased Subaru persistently, gently bending his knees and leaping in one motion. Moving forward with that explosive propulsion, in a blink of the eyes, the distance between the two shrank.

Like this, fingertips of death reached Subaru—almost, but just before that, Regulus lost his foothold.

Regulus: "Wha—?!"

Subaru: "This was truly outside my expectations, but since you're someone who only knows how to meet force with force, you're super weak against all sorts of tricks."

The classic pitfall trap. It was reliant on Emilia's magic to dig into the ground, a primitive mechanic which used a layer of ice covered with soil.

However, Regulus completely fell for a simple trap, the sort of which a veteran of hundreds of battles should have seen through. Although ironic, this also served as evidence that Regulus was incapable of doing anything but enforce victories with brute force.

Properly and uprightly, using his cheat ability to directly crush his opponent with brute force. Capable of nothing aside from this, evidently a man who would consider no other battle tactics.

Subaru: "Albeit it's different from nullifying your Authority, I can think of a million ways to pull these things off. If I keep repeating such a thing, it's gonna get hard to even tell who the antagonist is anymore, though."

Taking a shortcut to reach the church first, they had fought for every last second to turn this area into a minefield of traps.

Although Emilia had refused to leave Subaru until the last second, she could never use these dirty tactics with her guileless nature. And so, they allocated the right person in the right place.

Subaru: "…"

In the time Regulus took to climb out of the hole, Subaru surreptitiously glanced down at his right foot. Even after the strenuous parkour of his escape, it was still in excellent condition. In fact, he had almost forgotten that it had been turned to bloody ribbons and enveloped in this mysterious black pattern.

Perhaps this was the influence of the Dragon's Blood, which felt almost as if the blood were speaking to Subaru.

'This arrogant false King that is your enemy, show him the prestige of the Dragon Kingdom'.

Subaru: "In this case, I'll be asking you for more help. Though I'll be owing you lots."

Regulus: "You are so annoying, you fucking bastard!"

The ground erupted, fragments of stone steps and lumps of soil scattering with force.

Being influenced by Regulus's Authority, they caused further fierce damage to the streets. Despite this devastation, Subaru was not within its destructive reach.

Having jumped out from the ground, Regulus, eyes widened with hate, glowered at Subaru, who had put distance between them again. Very deliberately, Subaru raised his middle finger at Regulus.

Subaru: "Seems that someone once said this is idiotic, may I ask who said this, again? It's often said that 'treating others as a mirror can lead to an understanding of victory and defeat', but shouldn't you take a long hard look at a mirror first?"

Regulus: "Messing, messing with me, to such an extent, you..!"

After politely and carefully having his flaws pointed out, Regulus revealed a look of ferocity.

More than likely, his homicidal feelings towards Subaru had already easily reached a breaking point, and the flames of hatred had consumed his murderous, unchanging body.

Regulus seemingly had not noticed at all that this was all more or less within the scope of Subaru's expectations. Because, without sharpening his murderous intent, his loose and messy attacks would be ineffective. And that was a point Regulus had yet to notice for even the slightest of moments.

Subaru: "Though that's the case, I can't afford to take this lightly."

Wiping sweat from his neck, Subaru, with a flippant grin, also hid his readiness for death.

What he could not let Regulus see, was that his intent was only to buy time. And even if that were to be seen though, he absolutely must not gauge the reasoning behind it. This was the condition for victory of this battle, the task that Subaru, who had sent Emilia away, needed to accomplish.

This was what he and Emilia had sworn to each other, that they would fulfill their respective duties no matter what. And so—

Subaru: "Leaving it to you, Emilia—Be sure to pull out the wives' heartfelt feelings."

2

When Emilia arrived at the church, the brides were still where they had been left.

Emilia: "Excellent, everyone's still exactly—"

Looking at the faces of the wives lined up in attendance, Emilia blurted her feelings. However, she was struck silent, as the positions of the wives in attendance had remained quite literally unchanged.

If Emilia's memory served her correctly—they had not moved even the slightest bit since the moment they had left the cathedral.

Emilia: "Just because Regulus gave an order to keep still…?"

What Emilia understood, from what she had already been told by Subaru, was that the Authority of Greed had no binding force. Although he had stressed repeatedly, "This is just a hypothesis", Emilia had full faith and no doubts in his answer.

In order to defeat that murderer, what Subaru and Emilia had to accomplish no matter what had yet to be done.

Emilia: "Everyone stayed here… Then, the first issue isn't a problem."

The most frightening possibility was that the wives had scattered into hiding, or had fled the church in a panic to hide.

If things got out of hand, they would be forced to take a last resort. The plan that Subaru had so gravely proposed, Emilia wanted to avoid it if at all possible.

And so—

Emilia: "Everyone, let's talk about this."

There was no time. Although there was no guarantee they would even listen, Emilia had to overcome this obstacle now.

Number One Hundred & Eighty-Four: "—Husband-sama, how is he?"

In the half-destroyed church, standing in the middle and facing Emilia, the first to respond was a blonde-haired woman—No. 184 Unlike the other silent wives seated in neat rows, only she sat at the front near the collapsed altar.

Having helped Emilia change, offering her advice, with eyes as cold as when she spoke of the despair her future would hold, No. 184 questioned the returning Emilia in a voice devoid of inflection.

Emilia: “Regulus is outside… Sorry. We’re still engaged in battle. I couldn’t strike him down.”

No. 184: “Is that so… I am sure you are.”

The corners of No. 184’s mouth rose almost imperceptibly.

Such a tiny smile, as if she did not know why it was there. In addition, Emilia understood that this smile conveyed neither joy nor sadness, but something resembling ridicule.

Because, a smile like this, which existed to bring harm unto others, was one Emilia had encountered many times in the past. And so—

Emilia: “Such a cold smile. I don’t think it suits you, such an expression.”

No. 184: “…My apologies. Husband-sama forbids smiles, so I allowed you to see an undignified expression.”

Emilia: “Please don’t apologize. What I meant wasn’t that.”

At No. 184’s self-deprecating words, Emilia shook her head.

Inside her chest, heat began to concentrate somewhere that was not her heart. It was just as Subaru had told her, those words kept rising to the surface of her mind.

Intense to the point of discomfort was a fierce feeling, swelling unbearably inside her heart.

Closing her eyes, suppressing the turbulent emotions, Emilia glanced back and forth around the church before she spoke.

Emilia: “We’re planning to take down Regulus. To do so, we need everyone’s help.”

Wives: “…”

Emilia: “I don’t know what treatment you’ve suffered at Regulus’s hand up until now, but even I, who was only briefly in contact with him, can see that Regulus is wrong.”

Having been taken by him while unconscious, he had asked for her hand in marriage as soon as she had woken up. Then, she had immediately been overwhelmed by the wedding ceremony, and had been told of Regulus’s ideas on marriage and the way he treated his wives.

It was a far cry from the happy marriages Emilia had envisioned.

Emilia: “I don’t want to lose to Regulus. I understand that in battle, winning or losing doesn’t make something right. But right here, right now, I don’t want to lose to Regulus. If I lose… certainly, that important thing will be trampled upon.”

No. 184: “That important thing… huh?”

Emilia: “…”

No. 184: “If you do not wish to lose your life, you should have obeyed Husband-sama from the start, or you should have tried to flee without regard for anything else. Both were possible. Clearly, that would have been best for you.”

With a dark gaze, No. 184 answered Emilia.

No. 184: “What happened to the Sword Saint and to that Knight of yours, who were accompanying you earlier? They met Husband-sama’s counterattack, and fell in battle. And thus, you alone fled here.”

Emilia: “No. Both Subaru and Reinhard are still fighting Regulus. They believe in me and are waiting for my return.”

No. 184: “What could you accomplish by returning? And then, saying that you require our help and such… I do not understand what you mean.”

Emilia: “Do you truly not understand what I mean?”

No. 184: “—?”

Faced with Emilia’s interrogation, No. 184 raised her eyebrow wordlessly.

This natural reaction did not seem forced nor calculating in the slightest. Although she had slackened because she had resigned herself, No. 184 had never weaved words with the intent to deceive Emilia since the very beginning.

In other words, she truly had no idea.

—That Regulus’s Heart had been entrusted to his wives, her included.

Emilia: “And everyone else? Everyone, are you truly okay with this? Having wanted do anything at all, having wanted someone else to do something, is there no one who still thinks this way?”

No. 184: “Please stop. I will listen to you. If you have questions, please ask me. My answer is the answer of the collective.”

Facing Emilia who tried to take a read of those around her, No. 184 interjected with stiff words.

Stubborn, or maybe brave—Emilia recalled how, for her sake, the woman had even questioned Regulus, at risk of her own life. Although that had indeed been a form of altruism—

Emilia: “I get the feeling you’ve abandoned your own life, which is supposed to be the most important thing.”

No. 184: “…”

Emilia: “But in truth, you aren’t convinced by all this.”

Ever since the start of all this, No. 184 had been the one to speak with Emilia. Not merely because Regulus had ordered her to take charge of Emilia. In Emilia’s place, she had offered her opinions to Regulus, stood on behalf of other brides, and right now intended to accept the words hurled at all of them.

This kind of posturing placed her as Regulus's confidant—the suspicion that she was opportunistically manipulating Emilia and the brides was unavoidable.

Emilia: "But, I don't think that's the case. You aren't Regulus's Heart. I'd like to believe this."

Emilia had been saved numerous times by No. 184 Not sheltering her in a way that was visible to the naked eye, nor taking her hands to guide her.

Instead, in the face of incomprehensible malice, making sure that she would be prepared to proceed on. Someone so concerned about others—

Emilia: "Being the true bride of someone like that, I can't picture it."

No. 184: "…Perhaps it was because I wanted you to believe that, that I spoke to you, you know."

Emilia: "Yeah, I'm not very smart, so if you were trying to fool me, I may have been deceived instantly. But,"

Emilia did not know whether she had a gaze to discern that or not.

Currently, the comrades that stood by Emilia were not doing so because Emilia had chosen them and expected for them to eventually be her comrades. It had been because all of Emilia's comrades had chosen her.

But even with being chosen, she had never thought that she herself was amazing or anything like that. Rather, she had always felt uneasy, afraid of having to live up to expectations.

However, she wanted to respond to the expectations bestowed upon her, and she wanted to be able to respond to expectations herself. Always, she had prayed thus.

Emilia: "I want to believe in you. This is a choice I made."

No. 184: "…"

Emilia: “Why are you standing up for the silent crowd? Why, despite the surrender in your eyes, would you still help me? Why are you—”

No. 184: “All questions.”

Interrupting Emilia’s question, No. 184 shook her head.

Then, for the first time since Emilia had arrived here, she raised her face.

Frozen feelings on a stiff expression. Such dry eyes, and closed lips. This sense of sorrow took the woman’s already beautiful face to another level. However, what she was thinking was—

No. 184: “Please leave as soon as you can. If Husband-sama sees us, we will all die.”

Emilia: “Listen to me—”

No. 184: “I have no obligation to respond to your questions. You are no longer Husband-sama’s wife. You are not like us.”

Emilia: “—I’m a half-elf.”

No. 184: “Eh?”

Faced with Emilia’s confession, the woman was struck silent.

Realizing that she had done something unexpected, Emilia gave a faint smile. On the other hand, the woman also understood the meaning of Emilia’s confession.

She understood that, standing in front of her eyes, was a silver-haired half-devil.

No. 184: “Silver-haired… half-elf…”

Emilia: “In truth, up until now, you and I have been different. Different situations, different origins, different even in our most basic qualities. But I don’t think anything like ‘everything about us is different, so there’s no connection between us’ because of that.”

No. 184: "…"

Emilia: "The things you and I see are surely the same. When you're sad, you'll want to cry; when you are faced with something you can't solve, you'll be angry; when you encounter something happy, you'll laugh with joy. That's the same, right?"

No. 184: "What exactly… are you trying to say?"

Emilia, who had been talking in a rush, drew a sigh from No. 184

At the question, Emilia found herself confused. What exactly she wanted to say, and why she wanted to say it. She herself could not figure it out.

This went to show that she was talking based off of emotion, but that made her forget the topic and go off-track. She should learn from Subaru, and convey the feeling she wished to convey in a straightforward manner.

Emilia: "That is, I…"

There were things she wanted to know. There were things she wanted to inquire about.

Things about Regulus's Heart. Things about standing up and taking the lead role of the wives with her utterly defeated expression; having protected Emilia, who was about to lose everything.

All of this together, she hoped that the woman would answer. And one more thing, that she needed to know first.

That was—

Emilia: "Your name, could you tell it to me?"

No. 184: "…"

Emilia: "My name is Emilia, just Emilia. Although with circumstances different from yours, but surely sharing similarities with you, I'm a half-elf."

No. 184: “Hmph…”

Emilia: “If we can see the same things, feel the same things, share the same hopes… Certainly, talking won’t be without meaning.”

Once upon a time, her name had been requested of her like this.

When her heart had been ridden with loneliness, when she had been convinced that she had no one to rely on, when she felt as if endless floods were swallowing her.

Back then, her heart had been seized by those same words.

—Today, that was even more so.

At that time, she had been truly happy. The boy who she had never met before, recognizing her existence, had made her very happy.

Having grown used to being rejected for so long, there was nothing she could do when someone had thrown such words at her.

No. 184: “…”

Once again, she had to borrow Subaru’s strength.

Left and right, she was borrowing, and then desperately piecing it together. But that was fine.

No. 184: “Don’t, kid around… Why is it, now…”

Before Emilia, No. 184—the woman held her head, shaking it as she screamed with all her might. That expression was filled with agony, that voice with resentment, and those eyes with the feelings of gazing upon what she loathed.

This was, since the beginning, the first genuine emotion that Emilia had wrought from her—

No. 184: “Why, after all that, are you suddenly saying something like we can be human again?!”

As if to release the muddy flow of long-repressed emotions, she wailed.

No. 184: “Not that not being human matters, being a doll is just fine. That man is satisfied if we only act as obedient dolls. If we just act like dolls, our lives will remain safe and sound. Only because we could believe this, did we last until today… And yet!”

For the ruination of her efforts thus far, she clashed with Emilia.

An outsider who knew nothing, what could they know about people like her, desperately struggling to even stay alive?

No. 184: “What do you even know about us?!”

Emilia: “I know that you’re incredibly kind.”

No. 184: “What do you even know about us?!”

Emilia: “I know just how hard you worked to endure.”

No. 184: “What do you, even know, about us…?!”

Emilia: “I know that you’re all crying out to be saved.”

Hearing Emilia’s words, the woman suddenly raised her face, as if it had bounced on a spring.

With widened, round eyes, with struggling, faintly moving lips.

She could not utter even a single word. Because, up until now, if any of them had said it, their hearts would surely have given out.

Despairing for help, and the hope of salvation, were two sides of the same coin. Holding such hopes, until now, had not been allowed. In order to keep their minds from giving in, those thoughts were smothered, in their heart of hearts.

And that was how even the simplest of cries for help had been sealed deep within their hearts.

Emilia: ““I want to be saved”; all of you are saying that. So I’ll save you. I’ll free you from Regulus’s hands. And to that end—”

No. 184: “…”

Emilia: “Please lend me your strength. Please help the ones who, for me and you… those who are even now, still engaged in battle.”

She lowered her head. With sincerity, having stated her hopes, Emilia lowered her head.

She stared straight at the ground. Her heartbeat leapt painfully, and the faint, barely detectable atmosphere surrounding her felt as if it were a hurricane.

She held up her body, now on the verge of crumbling, clenching her teeth to steel her heart.

She was not the only one feeling afraid. Because, certainly, they had lived an unending nightmare, one they could never wake up from.

And then—

No. 184: “…Please, wait just a moment.”

Emilia: “…”

Towards Emilia, who had been keeping her head down, the woman spoke, biting her lip. Then, with a deep breath, she cast her gaze away from Emilia. There stood the gathered wordless wives, who observed the progressing dialogue.

No. 184: “I have a question, that I would like to ask. One that until now, I have yet to have posed to anyone.”

The woman paused for a moment, and the wives remained silent, wearing frigid expressions.

Emilia also could not form a single sentence, and like this waited for the result.

Bathed in a sea of gazes which could stop even breaths, the woman who had always stood up as the leader of the wives, spoke.

No. 184: “Is there anyone here who loves that man?”

The question that the woman posed, as she gently tilted her head, spread throughout the church.

The content shocked Emilia, and the brides who had remained silent only cast their gazes around at each other. Confusion accompanied the faint emotion that emerged in their minds.

And like a ripple, it spread,

Wife: "…Hate him."

The one who spoke this, was neither Emilia nor the woman who acted as the wives' representative. It was one of the wives seated in the rows, a woman with short hair.

Those words, which had barely been squeezed out, shocked not merely Emilia.

Wives: "I also hate him." / "I hate him too." / "I've always hated him." / "I hate him, I really hate him." / "What a weirdo." / "Messed up in the head." / "Has he even loved anyone before?" / "Only himself." / "I don't know how many times I've turned him down in my head." / "I want to cry." / "But I can't." / "Hate him." / "He should just die." / "I hate him more than anything." / "Hatehatehate, truly hate him." / "His gaze is hateful." / "The way he emphasizes words is hideous." / "The way he walks is hateful." / "His character is despicable." / "Unlovable by nature." / "I hate him more than yesterday." / "I'll hate him more tomorrow." / "Disgusting." / "Perverted." / "The brain of a child." / "Even a child would be better." / "Even a ground dragon would be better." / "No one could be a good match for him." / "Physiologically unacceptable." / "Hatehatehate." / "He makes me want to vomit." / "I don't know how many times I've thought about beating him to death." / "The worst." / "Worse than the worst." / "Being near him nauseates me." / "His touch makes me feel like I'm rotting." / "My heart died." / "My family's dead." / "How could I like him if he forcibly kidnapped me?" / "I can't even believe there's someone so unrepentant and malicious?" / "It hurts so much I want to die." / "He's long-winded and pompous, every time I talk to him I want to die a bit more." / "I hope his intestines rot." / "Give my lover back." / "I want to go home, I want to go home…" / "Screw rescuing us, just murder him instead." / "Scummy bastard." / "Truly hateful, I'll hate him forever!" / "A woman who would ever love him doesn't exist, does she?" / "Nor a man." / "No human would ever love him."

As if a dam had broken, the wives poured out the words that had been suppressed in their hearts until now.

The overflowing words were full of the resentment and disgust that had festered for too long in their hearts, stuffed with years of hatred and suffering, certainly not feelings that could bring joy.

—Even so, their expressions, as they spat those words out, became joyous and clear.

No. 184: "Looks like it is unanimous, but none could state their opinions for such a long time."

Emilia: "You, too, was there anything you wanted to say?"

No. 184: "Ah, there is."

After hearing the wives' admissions, the woman turned around to face Emilia.

Caressing her long blonde hair, then with a face full of smiles—casting aside the order that forbade smiling, for the first time she revealed her beautiful smile.

No. 184: "I hate that kind of man—Please by all means, help us."

Like this, the divorce statement was signed with a faint smile.

Chapter 57:
Where the Heart Lies

1

—About ten minutes had passed since Subaru had left his life in the hands of fate.

Regulus: “Come on already! Strive after something for once, how about obediently dying here?”

Subaru: “Uwaaah!”

Regulus kicked at the building, cutting into it with terrifying precision, and without its support, it toppled helplessly.

The cloud of debris accompanying the collapse filled the vicinity, and Regulus, whose own vision wound up clouded, clicked his tongue impatiently—listening to these tiny sounds, Subaru returned to the battlefield, having exhausted his improvised traps.

Regulus: “Restlessly moving about… do you have no notion of attacking straightforwardly at all? I couldn’t care less about your relationship with that whore, but is this any way to fight, for someone who claims to be her Knight or whatever?!”

Subaru: “Say whatever you like, talk until you’re satisfied!”

Regulus: “There you are!!”

If Subaru attempted to defend himself from Regulus, who kept muttering maliciously, he would receive in return a handful of sand that would end his life.

The instant after Subaru had escaped far away from the murderous dust thrown his way, the debris he had been hiding behind vaporized.

Being brushed would lead to fatal injury, a single strike would mean instant death.

So far, Regulus's attacks had all miraculously missed. As contact would instantly mean the end, thanking fortune for this would be a tad inappropriate.

Subaru: "Concentrate! Concentrate! Concentrate—"

Out of breath, wiping away sweat, he tensed all his attention to prepare for evasion.

The rising dust stained his face, and Subaru spat out a mouthful of saliva, tinged with the dust that had accumulated in his mouth.

He was putting the results of his parkour training into effect.

Unlike the days when his exercise had been without goal, the new sense of purpose and aspirations had an enormous impact on the state of Subaru's mind. In the forest near the new Roswaal mansion, repeated every single day, to the point of being sick of it—that time had not been for nothing.

Subaru: "Hah, no matter what, hah, I'm just a guy who can at most mess around with a bastard with the skill of an amateur…!"

Even then, he was a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.

Considering the battle's situation and Subaru's personal ability, to say that he was accomplishing something special would not be much of a stretch.

For Pristella to safely escape from the Witch Cult's sinister hands, no matter what, he would try to contribute just a bit more—

Subaru: "So…!"

Regulus: "Are you going to keep trying to kill time with this, do you seriously think that someone like you can manage to do anything at all? You're just someone who figured out a bit of the mechanism of the Authority of Greed, but don't mistake that for the ability to stand against me!"

Without even room to catch his breath, the enraged Regulus increased the scope of his destruction. Regulus no longer cared about how much collateral damage he would cause in order to kill Subaru.

The city of Pristella, which was famed for its beautiful scenery, was gradually losing those sights because of the violent crimes of the Witch Cult.

The stone bridge that spanned the waterway was shattered, the store meticulously decorated with glass was destroyed. Finding an odd feeling of beauty in the flashing of shimmering glass, so dissonant from the scene, Subaru believed in his right leg, and took the momentum of destruction as a cue to flee.

Ironically, from his right leg came a surge of power. Pitch-black, infected by something of unknown power, that right leg was currently Subaru's lifeline.

Lashing out with his whip, he latched onto the rain gutter of the building right next to him. Believing in the binding force of his whip, Subaru stomped hard on the ground, crossing the streets while running along the wall—he passed near Regulus's side as if to specifically force the evildoer to watch him with widened eyes, and he stuck out his tongue for extra provocation.

Regulus: "You!! You have no idea just what you're worth!!"

The stone thrown from his swinging arm flew far off, completely missing Subaru, who fled using the momentum gained from yanking his whip.

Without even considering an attack, just try to escape.

Those who had perished at Greed's hands, had died due to their excessive courage. Weak, fragile, and timidly insisting on escaping. Certainly, such a person could not lose.

Thus, that misfortune could be wiped clean here. For that goal—

Subaru: "Not yet, Emilia? —This guy's Heart!"

Emilia: “Someone with a clue… isn’t there anyone?”

Before the brides who she had asked for cooperation, Emilia bit her lip as she received an emergency report.

The fifty-three assembled brides all glanced back and forth at each other at Emilia’s question, before finally shaking their heads meekly.

???: “My most sincere apologies. Casting that man’s control aside and wanting to help you is certainly genuine. Only…”

Bowing her head with remorse, this was the representative of the wives—the blonde woman who had given her name as Sylphy.

Amongst all of Regulus’s wives, she was the one who was most well informed about their current situation, and so, she had become a representative of sorts.

Sylphy: “I can scarcely believe that that man would place something so important with us. Though he may call us wives and brides and whatnot… he has never once actually acted as if we were husband and wife.”

Emilia: “I can tell that Regulus is a reaaally problematic person, but what you’re saying can’t be it. Regulus’s… Lion’s Heart is definitely, definitely entrusted to you.”

Although Sylphy had begun to feel discouraged due to the lack of clues, Emilia would not be so easily disheartened.

At long last, Sylphy and the other wives, of their own will, had found their resolve to escape from Regulus’s grasp. This was only the beginning of their resolve. To become discouraged at this very first step was absolutely unallowable.

And as for Emilia, she believed in Subaru with nary a trace of doubt.

Subaru was amazing. Not only was he aware of so many things Emilia did not know, but he could apply knowledge and a lively attitude to a solution, no matter what adversity they had had to face in the past. And so, Emilia held no misgivings about his suspicion that Regulus's Authority was Lion's Heart.

This was not to say that she was acting thoughtlessly or with blind trust. It was not the case that it would be okay just because it was Subaru. Even Subaru would make mistakes, and on occasion he would fail.

However, that mistake could be corrected. Or she would take his hand, and become a force that could help him; this had become a source of Emilia's trust in him.

Emilia: "Subaru thinks that Lion's Heart must reside within the wives…"

Touching her chin as if lost in thought, Emilia remembered the mystery of the Authority of Greed that Subaru had shared with her.

—An authority that could stop the time of an object, that could leave it unable to be changed.

Although she had initially thought such a power inconceivable, she found that too much fell in place with that explanation.

Could it truly exist in reality? Rather than being an uncertainty, it would be better to say that—

Emilia: "There is a reaaally mysterious power at work."

Apparently, this was something even more irrational than a Divine Protection. Unfortunately, Emilia, lacking a Divine Protection herself, could not comprehend the unique power inherent to those blessed with Divine Protections.

However, in Regulus, she could sense something similar. These Authorities were something far more ferocious and ugly than a Divine Protection.

Emilia: "Heart, heart…"

To Emilia, the worst-case scenario would be if one of the wives were truly a confidant, connected to Regulus's true heart. This real bride would then be siding with Regulus and concealing her heart from Emilia.

Emilia: "…"

Leaving the contemplative Emilia aside, the brides congregated around Sylphy, scrutinizing their previous conversations for clues.

Emilia's amethyst eyes carefully scrutinized their faces, as they engaged in discourse with serious faces.

At the same time, she had directed the Micro Spirits to look for changes in their bodies. These Micro Spirits were not particularly sensitive to changes in people, so their behavior, as if to test those who had applied for cooperation, was decidedly unpleasant.

However, her misgivings had long exceeded the level that feelings such as "I don't want to doubt" could curb.

Spirits: "Mmm…"

The Micro Spirits gave a response.

There were no noticeable reactions to the wives, though she was not sure. As far as Emilia could tell, there were no wives who served as Regulus's confidant, at least outwardly.

In that case, the only other possibility that came to mind was—

Emilia: "Eh?"

Suddenly feeling as if her hairs were being tugged on, Emilia immediately raised her head.

Before her eyes, dancing in Emilia's line of sight, was a Micro Spirit glowing blue. The Micro Spirit that should have been attached to one of the brides, swayed in the air as if wanting to convey something to Emilia.

Her eyes tracing the Spirit's line of travel, she found that it now faced Sylphy. She too was currently working hard, as the lead singer of the chorus of the wives' revolt against Regulus.

The Micro Spirit wrapped around her back, fluttering as if bobbing up and down in appeal.

Emilia: “Hey, do you have a moment to talk?”

At Emilia’s greeting, Sylphy turned with an expression of surprise. Emilia walked over towards her, sneaking a glance at the Micro Spirit which emphasized its presence, level with the blonde woman’s chest.

Sylphy: “What is it?”

Emilia: “Excuse me for a second.”

No one present beside Emilia could see the Micro Spirits, devoid of physical form. So no matter how hard Micro Spirits tried to communicate, their desperate appeals could reach no one but Emilia.

So, when Emilia suddenly reached a hand to Sylphy’s chest, the latter looked back to Emilia in shock.

Sylphy: “Eh? Eheheh?”

Emilia: “Wait a moment, please stay quiet. I’m checking something right now.”

Sylphy: “What are you checking, hey, what are you checking…?”

Her cheeks reddening, Sylphy questioned Emilia without being able to mask her surprise.

Emilia then answered Sylphy with a serious expression.

Emilia: “The rhythm of your heart.”

Sylphy: “—!”

Emilia: “It’s because I’m a Spiritual Arts User. Though my original contracted partner is currently on leave, I can still communicate with the Micro Spirits. I asked those Micro Spirits to investigate everyone’s bodies, and received a response that only your heartbeat was strange.”

Sylphy: “My heart…?”

Sylphy swallowed a mouthful of saliva.

Her expression was entirely one of disbelieving surprise. Her shock was merely a matter of course. After all, she had only just heard a brief summary of Lion’s Heart, before being told that her heartbeat had changed.

And if things had progressed to this point, then there was only one explanation—

Emilia: “This is terrible… Regulus combines his heart together with the heart of someone who he claims to be his wife…!”

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???: “No matter how you look at it, although you’re wearing the image of virtuousness while reciting your respectable rhetoric, where the notion that your battle to buy time would actually bear fruit came from in the first place is a complete mystery to me. And although I don’t know how you could conceive of my Authority, why you would really want to keep fighting, now having clearly understood it?”

As he glanced down at the bloodied Subaru, Regulus’s cheeks raised, in boast of his victory.

Collapsed on the ground, lying by the side of a building’s rubble as he took pained breaths, half of Subaru’s face was stained with fresh blood.

Subaru: “Ah, guh…”

Regulus: “Although I’ve let you run about here and there, you’re really boring after having fallen. Well, that’s to be expected. It has to be like that. Considering the difference between you and I, this is merely reaping the crop when the harvest is over. With this, at last, without extraneous unpleasant moods, the end has come.”

Approaching Subaru, Regulus's heels crushed the rocks littering his path. His Authority was still active, as if he wanted it to be witnessed.

Regulus: "In summary, don't you feel that this is the fault of your excessively arrogant self? Up until now, there have been many like you, who wanted to beat me down or rouse a battle against me. But of all those people, not a single one has ever touched me. That is the fate of those whose desires are loftier than their abilities, an absolute law of nature. Do you understand?"

The Sin Archbishop of Greed, as he discussed the nature of desire, asserted his contempt for those who allowed excessive desire to immolate themselves.

To have desire would create struggle without meaning. To have desire would create starvation without boundary. To have desire would create ruthlessness without limit.

For this exact reason, to be without want and without desire was valuable. The optimal state of being would be to wish for purity and poverty, and to impose virtue on oneself.

Regulus: "Just being content with the present is enough, craving what is beyond one's own abilities will lead your own destruction. Gathering together one after another but refusing to learn, you really are a bunch of hopeless creatures."

With a sigh, Regulus slid a hand through his white hair, shaking his head as if he were drunk on the throes of a tragedy.

However, the sorrow in that voice was no act. Regulus was, more or less, from the bottom of his heart, mourning and sighing at the foolishness of Subaru and all others.

That was the self-righteous, undetectably lonely voice of someone omnipotent.

Subaru: "Before… I die… your… ability…"

Regulus: "Hah? Ahhhh, something to make you feel at peace as you die, is that how they put it? Trust you to know something archaic as that. You've bested me in an irrelevant store of knowledge, is that what you're trying to say?"

Regulus laughed as he watched Subaru, whose breaths looked to be on the verge of cutting off, wishing only for an answer to his final question regarding his Authority. Without a single route of escape, all that was left for his sorrowful existence was imminent death.

Regulus: "Well, you've already gotten this far. At the very end, I'll give your negligible self a reward for your efforts. I'll tell you, that all this time you struggled to your very last to buy, is all completely meaningless."

Subaru: "Meaningless… you mean…"

Regulus: "It's all really rather simple. My Heart, which you and that woman are searching for, is indeed carried by my wives—But, as to who is carrying it, neither I or any of them know. Equal rights, equally divided love, and equal responsibilities and obligations they bear, as well."

Towards the astonished Subaru, Regulus shrugged with a "Well, it's sort of like this?".

Regulus: "For those who have taken multiple wives, treating all of them equally is a matter of course. I am allowed to exercise my rights only because I can do just that, it's only somewhat logical. In other words, I'm risking my life by constantly manifesting my love for them."

Subaru: "And the wives are unaware of having this Heart?"

Regulus: "Not like there's a particularly complicated reason for that—There isn't anyone out there who is constantly conscious of the sound of one's own heartbeat, is there?"

Watching Regulus, who laughed with his mouth open, Subaru understood.

The method with which Regulus hid his heart, that vicious method.

Both simple and effective, and, above all, impossible to deal with.

Subaru: “With your Heart and your wives’ heart, you…!”

Regulus: “Managing the husband’s property is indeed one of the wife’s obligations. But you see, I am a selfless man. In the first place, I don’t have as many meaningless possessions as guys like you do. And so, what I have entrusted to my wives is my existence itself… Such magnificence, isn’t this the very essence of matrimonial love?”

—Disgusting.

Regulus’s consciously ruthless Authority. Without malice, without condemnation, he believed that was the natural order and process.

Subaru had come up with a number of theories on the methods through which Lion’s Heart had been hidden, before sending Emilia to the church. However, this had not been one of them.

Moreover, no one could break it—

Subaru: “Something so far beyond reason… Emilia, she couldn’t possibly do anything.”

Just now, if what Regulus had boasted of with a face full of pride was in fact the full extent of the power of Lion’s Heart, then there should still be a method of breaking through it. If that could be conveyed to Emilia, with her power, she could take care of it with haste.

The question was not one of possibility, but one of correctness.

—That was, the choice of life and death.

Regulus: “Hah? Hey, you…”

As he rose with a disgusted expression, Subaru stared at Regulus, the latter wearing an uncomprehending gaze as he witnessed the former’s action.

Having been caught up in the demolition of the city, Subaru, who had until now seemed to be on the verge of death, brushed the dust from his knees as he stood, still glaring. After a moment, Subaru raised his eyebrows with an “Ahh”, as he noticed Regulus’s incredulousness.

Subaru: “Playing dead… Ah, no. Playing to be on the verge of death. Since a flying stone happened to slice my forehead, I just wanted to give it a try, that’s all.”

Applying blood to his face and pretending to be in agony had led to this moment. With a face full of smiles, Subaru looked at Regulus, who had been in the palm of his hand all along.

Subaru: “I trusted in you. You’re definitely the kind who, having found a dying enemy, would arrogantly boast of your victory as you rambled on nonstop.”

Regulus: “—YOUUUUUUU!”

Subaru: “Whoa!”

Rising with a jump, Regulus’s body flew forward in a straight line.

With incredibly agile speed, and the movements of a filthy casual, he flew in a straight line. In this rare moment, Regulus could achieve acceleration that could shock even Reinhard.

However, the mechanism had not been understood until after the Authority was revealed.

Subaru: “Fuuu!”

Accelerating with his right foot, without hesitation his body flew toward the left. Regulus’s goal was to slam directly into Subaru, but he was thwarted by the limitation of linearity.

In summary, Regulus’s momentary superhuman ability was the result of the application of a temporal freeze on his physical form. His was an Authority that allowed the time of his body to be cut off from the world, and not be interfered with again. If he were to attack suddenly in this way, whether gravity, air resistance, or inertia, none could restrain him.

It was not always in effect, which should be because there were restrictions—

Regulus: "—Guh, you bastard!"

Subaru: "The one who wants to yell is me…! I have to find a way to reach Emilia, somehow…"

The whereabouts of Regulus's heart absolutely needed to be communicated.

To communicate it, and to make the choice. What method was there—

In order to save the city, Emilia was needed.

Subaru: "Emilia…"

In contrast to Regulus, who gathered momentum, Subaru looked in the direction of the church where Emilia should be.

In the midst of the ruined, collapsed city, there stood a half-destroyed church, where the aftermath of Regulus's actions had barely reached.

—And that place, in the next moment, was engulfed in a brilliance that shone blue and white.

4

The hearts of the wives had become one with Regulus's heart.

Emilia's conclusions caused tremors in all the surrounding wives who heard it. Most heavily affected was Sylphy, who had found herself the recipient of Regulus's shared heart.

Sylphy: "My heart… and…?"

After Emilia's hand fell back, Sylphy's face grew pale as she backed away step-by-step. The woman standing behind her, worriedly placed her hand on Sylphy's back,

Sylphy: "Do not touch me!"

In the next moment, Sylphy reflexively spoke as she swung out an arm. As if to keep the other wives away from her, holding this posture, she looked at Emilia.

Sylphy: “Are you sure there is no mistake?”

Emilia: “The Micro Spirit says it’s unnatural. I can feel a faint sense of overlap in the sound of your heartbeat as well.”

Sylphy: “…”

Sylphy placed a hand on her chest, closing her eyes as if to confirm what Emilia had just said. The speed, strength, and interval of her heartbeat resounding in her throat, she gave a deep sigh.

Sylphy: “I see… just how much, just to what extent does he want to trample upon others’ spirits, that man!”

Emilia: “Wait a moment, what are you doing?!”

Revealing an incredibly dry smile, Sylphy walked into the depths of the church. Half-destroyed from Reinhard’s attack, in a corner of the church were scattered shards from the skylight, exquisitely carved glass.

Sylphy plucked up a shard of glass, and turned back.

Sylphy: “You understand, right? That man’s nature. Imposing his weaknesses unto others, and then forcing decisions upon them as well.”

Emilia: “Decisions… what are you saying?”

Sylphy: “In order to stop that man’s heart, stopping my own is the only feasible way. As that man says, ‘until death do us part’, is this not one such case?”

As she played with the shard of glass, Sylphy spoke in a flippant voice. Emilia understood what she meant, and at the same time picked up on the underlying message. Sylphy’s epiphany, and Regulus’s malice.

Emilia: “Wait, you can’t! There has to be something, has to be some other way…”

Sylphy: “Such a convenient way, do you truly believe it exists? With our hearts already joined, stopping just that man’s heartbeat without stopping mine cannot be possible… and—”

Emilia: “Don’t give up so easily! If I could allow something like this, for what have I… Why did I leave that forest…?!”

Once again, there were going to be sacrifices.

Because of Emilia’s lack of power and knowledge, a sacrifice was once again about to happen before her. Just like everyone in the forest. Just like Fortuna and Juice. To make up for what Emilia could not reach, everyone except Emilia tended to use up their lives. “1”

Sylphy: “The days of being taken as that man’s wife… were truly arduous.”

Desperately, Emilia considered if there was any other way.

During this time, Sylphy’s heart gradually calmed down, and with the clarity of approaching her finale, she slowly began to grow more resolute.

Sylphy: “Merely in order to avoid triggering that man’s wrath, I desperately tried my best. Allowing whatever atrocities that man performed to slide, welcoming the new brides… those girls, who were in the same position as me. No matter what, I wanted to protect them. Just as the one I first met, just as the ones before me protected them…”

Acting as the representative of the wives, presenting herself before all the others no matter what, now Sylphy’s true aim had been made clear.

Before her had been others. Someone who had stood at the forefront of all these seized women had triggered Regulus’s temper. And then Sylphy took that will up, because even now these wives remained still.

Sylphy: “Even if our spirits were defiled by that man, because he would never touch our bodies… Certainly, if both had been defiled, we would have long been unable to withstand. So right until today, no matter the language or voice or behavior of that man, endlessly we endured and endured and endured and endured and endured and yet…!”

Having reached this point, Sylphy, who had been biting her lips, tilted her face upward. In her eyes were large, large drops of tears, as well as a scorching rage searing enough to evaporate even those tears.

Sylphy: “That man’s hand… It has tainted even my body! I had thought something of the sort, that at least I could protect my body, but even that something I wanted to protect so much had never been safe in the first place! We have always been that man’s servants!”

Tears flowed as a roar from her soul tore itself from her, and Sylphy’s hand wept blood. The glass that she had been gripping firmly had cut through the palm of her hand, and though she frowned at the pain, the corners of her mouth soon pitifully relaxed.

Sylphy: “Because women bearing injuries are atypical, even the slightest of bruises would mean death by that man… This wound, is my freedom.”

Emilia: “…”

Sylphy: “In no way is this your fault. I am incredibly grateful to you. Exacting revenge onto that man, for every single day until now, a better way could certainly never be found elsewhere.”

With a slight smile at Emilia, Sylphy looked towards the other wives—looked toward those who could be called her companions.

Then, clutching the glass in her right hand with her left as well, she pressed it against her chest.

Sylphy: “If I die, his heart will be transferred to someone. This is a certainty. That man would not use just myself alone as a shield for his heart. Just like that, everyone has no reason not to know that man's stubbornness."

Wife: "Surely, it will be so."

Which one of the brides had whispered that so softly was unknown.

As if assenting to what Sylphy had said, the wife who had answered emerged from the crowd. A woman with long chestnut hair, she too took up one of the shards of glass scattered beneath Sylphy's feet.

Wife: "I too have considered death a number of times. Like this, even if I'm living, I can't say that I'm truly alive. I'd rather reunite with my family in the afterlife…"

Wife Two: "My reason for not doing so was not wanting to die. Even if I were to be liberated from this pain, I wouldn't have any happy memories from life."

Wife Three: "But, if dying… If this life could exact vengeance on that man… If my death would not be something without meaning…"

One after another, the wives came forth and took up shards of glass. The brides looked at those sharp edges, as if looking upon their hopes. With Emilia's words as an opportunity, the wives had found their hopes, found something their lives could be spent on.

Sylphy: "Thank you, we are truly grateful to you—That man, aside from us, he truly has no other wives present. This is something I can absolutely guarantee. So then, I request of you."

Emilia: "…"

Sylphy: "Please be sure to help us speak. Our anger must absolutely reach that man—All we can do is trouble you, the only one to have been forced by that man, and to have rejected him successfully."

Sylphy's request was spoken with a voice full of warmth.

The wives all approached the shattered stained glass of the church that was to witness a marriage, holding the fragments in their hands as a symbol of the end they had chosen.

Pointing the sharp edges against their pale necks, with a breath they pushed it to commit suicide—

Emilia: “Wait.”

That action of certain death was stopped by Emilia’s words.

Emilia had fallen into silence until now. Power was contained in her words. Both in physical and metaphorical meaning.

Hands of ice reaching out from the ground sealed the wives’ movements. The movement of pressing the pieces of glass into their throats was successfully hindered, successfully preventing their suicides.

Sylphy watched Emilia’s actions with widened eyes, and then spoke with a trembling voice—

Sylphy: “I beg of you, please understand us! I am truly grateful for your sentiments, but this is the only method…”

Naught but death could serve as repayment.

Naught but death could strike a blow against that man, against Regulus.

That was Sylphy’s, and the wives’, conclusion.

This sorrowful answer of stopping their own hearts, Emilia also understood. So, to figure out how to reject it, thinking and thinking, all along she had been thinking of a way. And so—

Emilia: “I’m sorry. Not like this.”

Sylphy: “Eh…?”

Emilia: “If it were Subaru, he might have thought of another way. But my head is a bit slow, so no matter how hard I thought, I didn’t have a clue… So…”

Surrounding the muttering Emilia, brilliant lights of blue and white began to dance.

Gaining Mana, the swaying lights were the Micro Spirits which had entered a visible state. As if to engulf the entire collapsed building, the substantial gathering of Micro Spirits manifested itself—that was, in a sense, a sight as sacred as a dream, and Sylphy and the others held their breaths.

Emilia: “I want to make your heartbeats stop—Because if you stab your throats with a weapon like that, you won’t die such easy deaths.”

After Emilia lifted her hand, the Micro Spirits seemed to follow that movement as they shone, and blueish snow began to fall in the church. The snow layered thinly around the brides, and where it brushed their skin, it turned into white crystal.

This magic that Emilia was capable of, was both the gentlest and cruelest.

Emilia: “—Sorry. I can only use this method.”

Sylphy: “Please do not apologize.”

After realizing Emilia’s intentions, Sylphy breathed a sigh of relief. The hearts of the wives were in unison. They looked at Emilia, who was unable to form even a single sound, and spoke in agreement.

Wives: “Thank you.”

Emilia: “…”

Then, a brilliance that shone blue and white engulfed the church—

5

Icicles rose as if an assault from the sky had erected a frozen seal around the church.

It formed a sound so sorrowful as if to roll over the sky, as if the sky itself had turned white and died. Within the structure of ice that had risen, how much sorrow had gathered?

No one, save for the one who was responsible for this scene, could understand.

Subaru: “…Emilia.”

The ice created by the incomparably powerful magical vortex was peerless beyond measure, and could not have been made by anyone but Emilia.

Lion’s Heart… had truly been subdued—along with the lives of the gathered brides, their heartbeat had stopped. Subaru had already thought of this method. He could not think of any other plausible method.

And that method would have been impossible to actualize. He had even prepared himself emotionally that he would fail to reach Emilia at the church.

But, upon seeing this spectacle, the answer was clear.

—Chosen by Emilia, that answer.

Regulus: “Hey, hey, isn’t this a bit…”

Looking in the same direction as Subaru was Regulus, who could imagine the result of this ice structure, and his cheeks began to twitch. He of course understood that the place where the icicle had been raised was his wives’ current location. That also went for the meaning of that spectacle.

And so—

Regulus: “You two! Is this what you set out to do?! Is this something that humans are capable of?! Seizing another’s beloved, selfishly, without permission! Just… just how coldhearted can you be to do such a cruel thing! Huh—?!”

Regulus stomped at the ground as he shouted thus at the bloodied Subaru. His soles shattered the slate, and even distorted the earth enough to create an illusion that the city itself was shattering.

Rushing forward without a second thought, Regulus stabbed his fingers at Subaru.

Regulus: “Satisfied? Are you satisfied?! In order to kill me alone, you dared to snatch away the lives of all my faultless wives, and even felt happy to have done so, your humanity—”

His mouth spewing dirty curses, Regulus’s body, as he spoke of the sorrows of being plundered from, was suddenly sent flying.

The reason for that was the spear of ice sent by the girl who had emerged from the church’s entrance, on the other end of the street.

The spear of ice struck Regulus with astonishing momentum and rotation, ceaselessly striking the body of the standing Regulus in succession. His body was sent flying like a doll, and in the process, several more spears of ice flew towards him.

The momentum did not stop there, and like this, Regulus’s body was slammed straight into the waterway, and, with a loud crack, the waterway was frozen, becoming an ice sculpture in Regulus’s form.

Emilia: “—All that just now, consider it a divorce from your wives.”

Striding across the frosted street, Emilia returned to the battlefield in a flash of silver. She stood on the collapsed street, looking at Subaru as she ran up to him, whose pitiful sight made her narrow her amethyst eyes.

Emilia: “Subaru, that wound…”

Subaru: “I’m fine! It’s just something I cut so that it’d bleed more. More importantly, the church… what about the wives?”

Emilia: “…Everyone wished to defeat Regulus. That’s why…”

Averting her gaze, Emilia’s attention drifted slightly back to the glaciated church.

This reaction was enough, enough to convey that Emilia’s choice had not belonged to her alone. And the weight of that choice, Subaru would have to bear it as well.

Subaru: “B-But the effect of Lion’s Heart should have been interrupted. That man’s invincibility trick should have ended…”

Emilia: “No. It doesn’t seem to be something that’ll be so easily solved.”

Subaru: “Eh?”

“The sacrifices made as a result of our choices, should have been the price paid for the answer”, and as those thoughts flashed through Subaru’s mind, Emilia shook her head slightly.

Immediately after being astonished by her reaction, the ice filling the waterway behind them began to crack. The crack began to expand, affecting even the flow of the waterways which had been blocked off. As the collapse spread to where waterway met water flow, Subaru’s soles were immersed in water overflowing towards the streets.

Regulus: “Truly laughably ridiculous arrogance, vulgarity that is incorrigible, incompetence that brings speechlessness, shamelessness that brings disbelief, inferiority that is beyond salvation…!”

Leaving the canal, the murderer who was drenched but not wet in the slightest approached.

His white suit unstained, his white hair unshaken by the wind, his white face free of wounds, lacking even a drop of sweat. This existence was practically a daydream—No, better to call it a nightmare that appeared midday.

Regulus: “And now, what will you do? You two, how do you plan to take responsibility? Though you droned on and on like you’d done something great, in the end this was nothing but a failed miscalculation, in the end there were only sacrifices. How do you plan to recover from this situation?!”

In the form of this Regulus, who was enraged to the point of madness, the effect of Lion’s Heart yet lingered unchanged.

Emilia had made an assault at such a level, but forget being wounded, even a trace of what had happened could not be seen at all.

Subaru: “How’s this possible?! Even just now you were speaking of Lion’s Heart’s unending effects… How could someone like you have the presence of mind to bluff in a situation like that?!”

Regulus: “Do you think me so kind that I’d turn a deaf ear to that which can’t be ignored? I’ll say this first, isn’t the notion of not infringing on others’ hearts basic etiquette?! Clearly no one’s looking down on the rights of others, so how is it that you two are always doing something so mentally deficient? Conscience aside, are you lacking in even basic intelligence?”

Facing these unintentionally provocative lines from Subaru, Regulus looked down with an unimpressed expression, knocking against his head of white hair.

Regulus: “It seems that that contemptuous prostitute had counted them wrong, doesn’t it? Not remembering the number of lives she’s reaped, even though she’s the one who has done so, that’s a killer’s way of thinking. Certainly, there’s something wrong with it.”

Subaru: “Since when did you have the right to say those words…”

Regulus: “Don’t surreptitiously try to change the topic. Anything I’ve done to date, has absolutely nothing to do with that woman’s ungratefulness. Don’t turn your back on the sins you have committed. Don’t look away. Tossing your own issues aside to blame the other party, don’t you feel ashamed to call yourself a person?”

No matter where he went, carrying a vexing share of rage to impose on others, was Regulus. Carrying not a single doubt about his way of life was the foundation of Regulus Corneas.

How many contradictions would appear in his series of speeches before he was satisfied?

Discourse with Regulus was truly damaging to sanity. Faced with a

Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, it made one wonder if it was wrong to not be insane.

Regulus: “But… Look, you miscalculated.”

The substitutes for his heart, would even destroying all the alternatives of those be unable to lift Regulus’s invincibility?

There should have been no problem in theory. During his risky bet with his life, Regulus had proven that he was not so smart as to be able calculate with skillful words the way Subaru could.

Regulus did not have the ability to deceive or to rely on his eloquence to mislead others.

He was completely devoid of the ability to empathize. In his world, there was no one but him. Marriage was merely imitation, speeches were merely ideological, battles were merely conducted as an amateur. His way of being was merely pure malice—almost exactly like a Little King.

Emilia: “Fifty-three people…”

Standing next to Subaru as he trembled, Emilia muttered.

She had not, until now, towards Regulus’s fallacies, curses, and unspeakable complaints, shown any reaction whatsoever. Only one sentence, all she spoke was this one sentence.

Regulus: “Huh? What? Just now, what did you say?”

Emilia: “I said, fifty-three people. The number of women you forcibly brought to your side. Could it be that I’m wrong? That would be absolutely impossible. I could never miscount the number of lives.”

Regulus: “Hmmmm. And? So what? What are you trying to say?”

With a contemptuous attitude, Regulus dismissed Emilia’s quiet assertion as that of a fool. Digging a finger into his ear, his attitude was full of ridicule.

Even Subaru, with sarcasm as his strongest suit, wanted to clap in praise for his flippant manner. Just as Subaru was about to accept Regulus's provocation, Emilia looked straight towards him. Then she shook her head slightly at Subaru, who held his breath.

Emilia: "It's alright, Subaru. I understand it all now."

Subaru: "By understand, you mean…"

Emilia: "And, because I am incredibly angry right now… No longer, will I forgive him."

Feeling fear squeeze his chest, Subaru saw it.

Emilia quietly made disappear all feeling from her gentle expression, the tone of her voice dropping. She, having frozen her feelings like that, was the angriest he had ever seen.

A frigid flame rolling across her frozen eyes, Emilia touched her chest.

And then, spoke.

Emilia: "Regulus's heart is here—Right now, beating inside my chest."

Chapter 58:
—Faith

1

Regulus: “Fufufu.”

It was immediately after Emilia spoke, having placed her hand on her chest.

What rang out was a laugh that could not be hidden. Although what leaked out was at first only a breath, he soon could endure no more, and his voice gradually escalated in volume, until it became cachinnation.

Regulus: “Hahaha! Ahaha! Fufu, hahahahahahaha!”

Straightening his back, Regulus laughed loudly as if he had heard a great joke. Sticking a hand into his white hair and tousling it, the murderer was now immersed in a fit of laughter that no one else could understand.

Subaru could tell from his smug demeanor that Emilia’s speculation was correct.

Subaru: “You bastard, what’s so funny?!”

Regulus: “Of course it’s funny, isn’t it?! Or rather, you are, I really must suggest that, in this desperate situation, you should give up on trying to think and we can all laugh together. On that note, do you understand the current situation? You, with your own hands, pushed the most critical of critical points into this calamity!”

Subaru: “Guh…”

No words could be fitting. Only in this moment, was Regulus’s reply so perfectly reasoned that it could be met with naught but speechlessness.

Subaru turned his head to look to Emilia, confirming with her whether the speculation could be taken as proven.

However, towards Subaru's searing gaze, Emilia shook her head.

Emilia: "There's no mistake. I've had the Micro Spirits confirm, and I can feel it myself. Inside me, there's something extraneous that doesn't belong to me. It feels reaaally disgusting."

Emilia assertion brought with it a desperate presentation of the current situation.

The effect of Lion's Heart had moved to Emilia. In other words, the only way to stop Regulus now would be to stop Emilia's heartbeat as well.

Subaru: "In the first place, why is Emilia's heart… Could it be I made a mistake regarding Little King's effects? His heart… anyone he so wishes…"

If it were that kind of ability, there existed no loopholes in Regulus's Authority. If he could give his heart to even hostiles and strangers, that would mean that as long as the human race lived on, a way to kill Regulus would not exist.

Rather, if it was that his heart could replace that of any living creature—

Subaru: "Truly shameless."

Regulus: "The worthless howls of a defeated dog are pleasant to hear. Hahaha, it doesn't matter what you have to say. Just keep running with your temper; searching for some ridiculous excuse for your failure is the right of the loser. And enjoying superiority while hearing them is my right as the winner… Ahh, this isn't bad! Not bad at all!"

Emilia: "I don't meet your standards for a wife, you were saying that earlier."

Regulus: "So annoying. Going on and on arrogantly as if you're strong enough to speak of your own rights. More importantly, how are you planning to take responsibility for killing my wives? My ideal wives… How long do you think it took to gather such a group? How many years do you think it takes? Obviously of age, but lacking anything like a wife or lover, do you want me to be one of those garbage widowers who no one wants? Until I find a new wife, you have the obligation to join me!”

Regulus used stern words to smack at Emilia, full of spirit as he voiced his abhorrent rhetoric.

The violent reasoning that the murderer believed in, completely convinced that his heart was indeed within Emilia. If so, the possibility of removing Regulus’s heart from Emilia—

Regulus: “Would you like to try? To see if there’s somewhere else you can move my heart to?”

Emilia: “…”

Regulus: “The method is simple if you want to try it. Right now, just kill this girl before you. If you stop her breathing, you’ll naturally understand whether or not my Authority will stop. Very, very simple, effective, and reasonable… Hahaha! You can’t do it, can you? If you do something like that, with the motives and values that you’ve challenged me with in the first place, won’t you have lost your self-justifying reasons?!”

Although hard to admit, Regulus was right. Subaru did not possess the courage to sacrifice Emilia. Call him selfish, call him arrogant, only that could he not do.

In order to defeat Regulus, they had already tossed aside the lives of his wives. Even with the revelation that there had been no alternatives to those sacrifices, in no way could they compare with the life of Emilia or his other comrades.

Natsuki Subaru’s choices were, as always, selfish to a disgusting degree.

Regulus: “You see, someone like him could never. In that case, how about offing yourself in proxy? Simple, isn’t it? Just like what you did to the others. Or what? You can’t do it? You’ve clearly taken the lives of others without consent, but because you treasure your own so much, you can't do it? How amazing, and how repulsive, isn't it?"

Emilia: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "Wait, you can't. Seriously, that is unacceptable."

At Regulus's provocation, Emilia seemed to be calling to Subaru with a determined sound. Hearing the unsparing tone of her voice, Subaru hurriedly stopped Emilia in fear.

Even if she gave in to the provocation, surely she would not immediately make the choice to abandon herself.

However, Emilia had already done a good job of choosing the worst option if she did not have the means to win.

And so, Subaru had only the thought that he would absolutely not choose that path. In that case, they had lost. Calling Emilia's name had stopped her, but he could speak no further words.

Regulus: "Then, in that case, we're about ready to draw this to a close, aren't we? Although keeping a filthy woman like you isn't in my interest, for the time being, I'll compromise. Before finding my next wife, you'll join with me for a bit. Though, I'll just have to kill this guy. He's already infringed on my rights to this point… Ah, that's right. So, did you laugh earlier?"

Before Subaru, who clenched his teeth, Regulus happily turned the corners of his mouth upward.

A torrent of Mana welled around Emilia, as she planned to make her own decision. At the same time, Regulus, not caring at all, laughed.

Regulus: "You're that guy, aren't you? That loud voice in the city that yammered on right before my wedding? Killing a single Sin Archbishop or whatever… What a joke, right? My condolences if you really thought you could best me, just because you killed that disgrace. That man, both before and after becoming a Sin Archbishop, has never accomplished anything, he has always been a damn fool."

Regulus stood, giggling. What his words referred to was, without a doubt, the madman Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti, who Subaru found abhorrent as well.

Petelgeuse had been the worst kind of lunatic with no redeeming qualities. He felt not a shred of goodwill for the lunatic, instead hating him down to his bone marrow; he would never spare him, even were he to come back as a ghost. But nevertheless, seeing the Sin Archbishop ridicule Petelgeuse who was supposed to be his comrade, in Subaru's heart grew a terrible and primitive feeling of unpleasantness.

It compounded further into this extreme situation, with the possibility of defeating Regulus, with Emilia's life and death at stake.

Then again, Petelgeuse—

Subaru: "—Ah."

—Should have been a loathed lunatic of an opponent, mad bloodstained laughter appearing in his mind. While thinking back on him, he lifted his face. Then, something felt as if it began to stir within his chest, and he seized it, swallowing his breath.

Could it be, that something like that, was also possible?

Subaru: "Could it be done…?"

Incomprehensible.

Strictly speaking, no one could guarantee the possibility that had appeared within Subaru's mind. Just like bringing an empty table to a negotiation—or rather, it was closer to being the product of Subaru's delusions. Merely Subaru's own feelings.

But that was precisely why. That was precisely why only Subaru was able to arrive at this possibility.

That notion now, based just on intuition, even a god would not know if it could succeed—but,

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “…”

Feeling the Mana that seemed to have risen to its limit, Subaru called to her.

Emilia remained silent, only revealing the realization of a tragedy. Nevertheless, deep in her eyes, a hint of emotion flashed through. That was her expectation and trust in Subaru, who watched her.

As if to lend support to those feelings, Subaru asked,

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “Mhm.”

Subaru: “—Can you completely trust me, and leave everything to me?”

Emilia: “Mhm.”

Her response to this question came simply and without hesitation. Emilia placed a hand on her chest, and for the first time since returning to the battlefield, revealed a smile.

Emilia: “I believe that Subaru can do anything.”

Ahh, damn it, how despicable this was. A girl who he liked treating him with unflinching trust, how could he fail? Whether holding tight with hands or biting tight with teeth, he was not allowed to fail here.

Subaru slowly breathed deep, then slowly released the breath.

Then, he glanced toward Regulus, who watched them in silence. Regulus did not obstruct their conversation, just waiting leisurely with arms crossed.

Subaru: “Aren’t you a bit too relaxed?”

Regulus: “Aren’t I usually relaxed?”

Any trace of failure and the like, not even a speck remained.

Regulus had revealed all his preparations, and wanted to slaughter Subaru. In truth, Regulus’s Authority, Lion’s Heart, was perfect. Even after its mechanism had been clarified, victory was still placed somewhere nigh-unreachable.

However, precisely because he was convinced of his impending victory, he would watch Subaru’s struggles and efforts from the sidelines, without intervening, allowing others to worsen the situation.

He had no idea what was happening. And that point was true for Subaru as well.

Subaru: “…”

If Beatrice were here, there might have been another method. If that intelligent girl had been by his side, there would have certainly been a less risky way to win.

In the depths of his chest lay the connection with the girl who was his comrade. Certainly, after all this was over, he would be in for a scolding from her. Not being scolded would not do.

So now that he was alone, recalling the times when he had been alone, the memories remaining within his chest—those were certainly not ones which brought happiness, awakening only an initial landscape of terror and agony.

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Do it.”

Emilia’s call became strength, for him to make the decision.

Subaru violently seized his own chest, rousing something within him that was truly difficult to consider his, concentrating his consciousness on the center of the whirlpool where this chaotic black force swirled, liberating it—

In this moment, he would call it what it truly was. In order to have the murderer who had insulted the lunatic understand what was about to happen, only this once.

This power, this power inherited from that abhorrent madman would be declared by name.

Subaru: “Come forth… Unseen Haaaand—!!”

2

—Invisible Providence. Or rather, Unseen Hand.

The force that surged through his body, defined by Subaru as the power of a Witch, had its origins in the Witch Factor. He had heard from Echidna, in her Dream Citadel, that he had gained the Witch Factor upon killing the madman Petelgeuse—what detriments it had were yet unclear. However, the power which had bestowed an invisible, magical hand to Subaru undoubtedly had its origins there.

Therefore, until now, Subaru had never sought to use the Witch Factor as his own source of power.

The nature of this power being similar to that of the madman’s, was because the Witch Factor of Sloth inherently held this nature. That was what he believed. He did not even want to consider the possibility of Petelgeuse running amok within him.

—But if that were the case, what was this feeling?

Echoing, lively, silently cheering from inside Subaru.

Cheering for being called upon. Cheering for once again being able to use its power. Cheering for being requisitioned, being able to fulfill its goal. And then, there was only an unspeakable incomprehensible joy.

Accompanying the liberation of that power, that happiness and appreciation, as well as that feeling of gratitude. These incomprehensible waves of emotion were in no way a problem that Subaru himself could solve.

Regulus: “Huh?!”

Accompanying Subaru’s loud scream, was Regulus’s own astonished cry as he looked to the sky.

He should not be able to see it. Because this was an invisible, magical hand.

This dirty trick, perfect for assassinations due to its invisibility—Regulus had showered it in insults, scorning it as insignificant and a failure. Furthermore, yes; it was nothing more than a watered-down version of that failure of a power.

Only one in number, with an incredibly short range, and too many unknown factors.

As the key to breaking through this situation, there should have been a limit to its unreliability.

Subaru: “…”

The first step of summoning the magical hand had been passed. Starting now, he would move on to the unknown second step and the final, third step. With his own consciousness, Subaru commanded the fingertips to take action, infusing his own intention into the magical hand that seemed woven by shadow.

Subaru: “Emilia!”

And once again, he confirmed whether she was ready. Looking to steel himself.

Along with that sound, Emilia closed her eyes, nodding as if she understood what would happen after this.

Emilia: “It’s fine—You’re here, Juice.”

Emilia’s eyes were filled with warmth and understanding as she spread her arms.

Repeatedly preparing for what Subaru was planning, as if having foreseen what would happen, she shortened the distance to her heart. Subaru did not hesitate as he brought the magical hand into her chest.

Subaru: “…”

The invisible hand slid towards the center of Emilia’s chest. As the fingertips passed through her white skin without resistance, Emilia’s shoulders jumped as if she had felt something.

However, the hand did not hitch. Through the sternum, passing to the space between the lungs, finally it reached the pulsating source.

—The magical hand had arrived at Emilia’s heart.

The second step had been accomplished.

When the taboo was triggered, the Witch’s magical hand would easily phase through Subaru’s body, only causing his heart to ache. This was an application of that principle. The only way forth was to gamble on the fact that the Unseen Hand and the Witch’s magical hand shared that property.

However, so far, this bet had been successful. The problem was that, after this step, there was no precedent for that power.

If it were to just seize Emilia’s heart, he could do so in an instant. But that would make no sense. This power was not to be used for that.

So, what was this power for?

—Right now, in this moment, this power would be used to save.

Subaru: “…”

Was this really possible? With his mind drifting in a sea of confusion, Subaru took a deep breath.

Unseen Hand, could it really be used as a hand with which to save others? Wielded by the madman named Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti, how many lives had been stolen by this power?

Even though an ability was all about the way it was used, oftentimes, it would have a limited scope of application. Was Unseen Hand, too, the type of power that could bring naught but destruction?

This power, it was hard to believe it had been created for the sake of keeping someone alive, no matter what—

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Hesitating and doubting in that moment, Emilia’s voice, which he should not have heard, reached him.

Emilia: “It’ll be fine—Because, I have faith in the both of you.”

Who and what was she talking about? Emilia directed her trust to Subaru, and to another person he did not know.

But with ease, he accepted and believed all of it.

—This hand absolutely, absolutely, would not hurt Emilia.

Subaru: “Come, my third hand…!”

Within his heart, the undispellable doubts about this power dissipated.

How this power had originated did not matter anymore. This power, right now, was in Subaru’s hands, and Subaru had no intent of hurting Emilia, and perhaps, something existed within the power itself.

Inside Emilia’s chest, the magical hand weaved by shadow began to close.

Fingertips touched Emilia’s heart, beating like a metronome, and Emilia gave a slight gasp at the gentle grip on the surface of her heart. Rather than pain, it was akin to a slight itch.

Inside the chest of Emilia, whose cheeks were dyed red, the magical hand closed its fingers to seize something certain.

A heartbeat different from Emilia’s own, that little Lion’s Heart—

Subaru: “Gotcha—!!”

He could not afford to pull it out. So, with his magical hand, Subaru crushed that heart, that which so shamelessly continued to beat within Emilia.

Emilia’s heart received not the slightest bit of damage, merely defeating a parasitic organ; one which was harmful, yet sang odes to love.

Subaru truly did feel a solid sensation from that third hand that did not exist. And then,

Subaru: “Bwah!”

At that time, he experienced the cost of placing unprecedented concentration on a power that was not his own.

His organs feeling a pain as if being carved, what rushed forth was a sense of despair as if he had been tainted. Subaru immediately fell, wracked by harsh coughs tinged with blood.

Emilia: “Subaru!”

Emilia reached out a hand towards Subaru, who knelt on the ground still soaked with water, blood leaking from the corners of his mouth. He took her outstretched hand and placed it on his face.

Emilia: “Ah…”

Subaru: “Still… alive, right?”

Emilia: “…Mhm, I’m fine. My heart is perfectly fine, still beating inside me.”

Subaru used the touch and the feeling of coursing blood of the hand to reassure himself of reality, and Emilia used her empty hand to confirm her heartbeat. Without a doubt, in this moment, present there was a heartbeat that seemed to celebrate what had just occurred.

And then, Regulus alone wore an expression of being unable to comprehend the two he gazed upon.

Regulus: “Huh? What, what happened? Casting aside those around yo, for something only those involved with you can understand? What is this farce? Just what happened, you…” “1”

Subaru: “…You didn’t notice?”

Regulus: “Huh? What are you talking about? Having noticed what, when not a single change has…”

Subaru: “Your feet, they’re getting wet.”

Regulus: “—?”

Subaru pointed so as to instruct Regulus, who seemed to have succumbed to his anger. Regulus looked at his feet in suspicion, only to see them growing wet. He fell momentarily silent, widening his eyes in shock.

Noticing the reality that his white outfit—his white shoes and the hem of his clothing were being soaked through by the water at his feet.

Regulus: “You people—Kah?!”

Noticing this change with a response too slow, Regulus bared his teeth and waved his arm. But a slender white leg struck out, kicking the side of Regulus’s face and sending him flying.

Completely unprepared for this direct kick, Regulus gave a wail as he was kicked towards the ground filled with water. Half his body was drenched further by the water, and a shoe print remained on the side of his face that had been kicked.

Regulus: “Hk, huu… this, this kind of…!”

As if unable to comprehend this reality in the slightest, Regulus blankly lifted his face. Looking down at him, Emilia, who had performed the beautiful kick, tilted her head slightly.

Emilia: “I did it. I finally landed a hit.”

Regulus: “You, youuuuuuuu—!”

Emilia’s short sentence being filled with a sense of accomplishment made Regulus’s face grow redder and even more agitated. Using the motion of standing to gather water, Regulus scattered droplets of water at Emilia.

However, the pain of taking the kick prevailed, and his posture collapsed, the bomb of water flying in a completely wrong direction and instead leaving him wide open.

Emilia: “Ice Brand Arts!”

Regulus: “Hk—”

Creating a large mallet of ice in her hands, Emilia then slammed it directly into the center of Regulus’s body.

Receiving a swing that caused his bones to creak, the body of the murderer rolled atop the water. With unsuppressed coughs, slamming his fist into the ground many times without pause, Regulus glared at them with reddened eyes.

Regulus: “Why! Whywhywhywhy? You people, people like you, how, what, why, to the Authority of Greed! To my rights!

Subaru: “If you looked at all that and still haven’t figured it out, it’d be useless to explain it to you. Well, it’s simple, a very simple thing.”

As he pitied Regulus as the latter screamed, Subaru endured internal cries of agony from his organs, revealing a sneer.

Revealing a smile so vicious that it would not lose to Petelgeuse’s,

Subaru: “You were played by your opponents while you ridiculed them so much.”

Regulus: “—Hk!”

Even if he did not quite understand the meaning of those words, the intent to taunt would be clearly conveyed.

Regulus screeched with a sound that could not even be called a sound, ignoring Emilia, and taking a stance to launch himself at Subaru. However, he was cut off by Emilia.

Emilia: “Earlier, I attacked you in the stead of your wives—because that doesn’t seem to have worked, I still have to do land one properly.”

Regulus: “Stop kidding around—!”

Appearing over Regulus’s head, countless icicles had been created.

Each one varied in size, but if they all fell together, they would bring instant death. Emilia’s disgust of Regulus had reached a point that even her gentle self could not stand.

Climbing to his feet with a leap, Regulus struck at the falling icicles with water. Though the icicles shattered, the finer shards still had their uses.

Ceaselessly tossing out bullets of water as if in a storm, Regulus cursed loudly as his body was bathed all over by ice and rain while running across the water.

The snow-white crystals of ice turned to fog, then froze the streets that had been doused in water. For Subaru too, the water along his knees formed a film of ice around him, scaring him into hurriedly pulling his hands out of the water.

Even with consideration for Subaru, such destruction had befallen his surroundings. Of course, Regulus, the actual target at hand, was simply no match for this. But,

Subaru: “…Completely unhurt?”

In that scene of frost, after the barrage of ice had ended, Regulus remained, standing and alive.

Knees supporting his arms, spitting out uneven breaths, even though his entire body had been soaked by water, he still avoided meeting his end by being skewered by an icicle.

Regulus: “Absolutely, absolutely, haa, haaaaaa…”

Taking deep breath after deep breath, Regulus clutched his chest.

Looking at that demeanor, Subaru understood. The invincibility from Lion’s Heart could still be used even if the heart were inside his own body. However,

Subaru: “If you stop time to become invincible, you also have to stop the heart inside you—This is absolute invincibility, but with a time limit, right?”

Regulus: “Guh…!”

It seemed he had struck true, as Regulus displayed his rage all the while enduring the pain in his chest. With a time limit now in place, sooner or later, after repeated attacks, Emilia could land an effective one.

In that case, Regulus was now an army of one that had to put his everything into offense.

Regulus: “That, that’s… don’t you feel despicable in the slightest?!”

Regulus pointed a finger at Subaru, the latter analyzing his opponent’s strength. Additionally, he then pointed toward Emilia’s direction, looking back and forth between the two of them.

Regulus: “Two people ganging up on one person in an act that’s essentially extortion, do your consciences not ache? Isn’t there something wrong with your fundamentals as human beings? Do you truly hold no doubts about yourselves? Having doubts should be only natural, shouldn’t it?!”

Subaru: “…Man, you’re really something else.”

This was in fact the same mouth that had, under the advantage of Lion’s Heart, spoken nonstop. Having now lost that effect and being put in a disadvantageous position, he dared to use that shortcoming to request justification out of his opponents.

Subaru had already completely exceeded surprise, now on the verge of even wanting to respect him. Such an existence without a shred of human dignity had perhaps never been seen from antiquity unto now, and might never be seen again from now hereafter.

Subaru: “That is to say, this is what you believe? Because two-on-one’s too despicable, you hope to be able to fight an upright one-on-one battle. Because that’s the way battles should be. Is this the case?”

Regulus: “Exactly! You just take that for granted, eh? Who do you take me… who do you think I am?! I am Regulus Corneas, the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult representing Greed?! This world’s most satisfied, most resolute existence…”

Regulus spoke thus in a trembling voice, as he looked down at his hands.

Subaru was now completely speechless. So, in Subaru’s stead, Emilia spoke,

Emilia: “You go back on your word immediately after you say something, and your speeches are entirely devoid of actual meaning. I think… you are the most pitiful person in the world.”

Regulus: “—Hk! Don’t mock me! I… Mocking Greed, I’ll definitely make you regret this!”

Even shallow in his rage at the contempt of others, Regulus repetitively, endlessly repeated the drone of his curses.

Looking at that helpless demeanor, Subaru could finally feel fully relieved. Regulus was genuinely unable to win in any situation where he did not have the highest advantage.

If he could use Lion’s Heart for even a brief time, he still had a chance at victory. Clearly this was the case, but upon seeing a little bit of difficulty, he would immediately give up on the proverbial game without even bothering to look at the whole board.

Subaru: “Scorning progress in life will lead you to fall down in unexpected places.”

Regulus: “Hah…?”

Subaru: “Nothing, talking to myself. More importantly, we’ll accept your proposal of one-on-one combat.”

Regulus: “—! That’s more like it. This is how it should be. Of course, a Knight would not let their liege step up first?”

Smoothly going on-board with that convenient tale, Regulus immediately attempted to attach conditions that gave him further advantage.

Between Subaru and Emilia, their level of combat needed no comparison. As long as he first killed Subaru and caused Emilia to waver, there was hope for his victory. Straining that mind of his that did not exist in the first place, that conniving result seemed to suit Regulus’s tastes perfectly.

However, if he wanted to best Subaru in terms of unrelenting perseverance, he was hundreds of thousands of years too soon.

Finding a chance to win in a situation where victory was impossible, this was Subaru’s truest way of fighting. In terms of determining victory or defeat, the match between Regulus and Subaru had already begun long ago.

Subaru: “Indeed, having a Knight battle is the righteous way.”

Regulus: “In that case—”

Subaru: “So—Now that it’s come to this again, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

His feet still submerged in a shallow puddle, Subaru spoke after exhaling deeply.

At those words, Regulus tilted his head with a “Huh?” However, Subaru’s words were meant not for him, but for “him”.

???: “Ah, I see—The one-on-one duel you have proposed, I accept it as a Knight.”

What responded to him was a flame.

In these flooded streets, there stood a young man who caused not a single ripple as he strode across the water in approach. He, contrary to Regulus and his inexplicable mystery, possessed protections bestowed by the heavens on those they loved.

Reinhard: “Of the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Royal Guards, from the lineage of Sword Saints—Reinhard van Astrea.”

Standing before Subaru and Emilia, the Knight who reported his name pointed at Regulus, his sword sheathed. That demeanor of denomination was an invitation to begin a one-on-one duel. That was something even the Bowel Hunter, Elsa, would respond to, the well-established declaration of a duel.

In contrast, Regulus stood, stretching his hands before him.

Regulus: “Wait, waitwait! This, this is, this isn’t normal?!”

The Sword Saint would not show him any trace of tolerance, as someone who defiled the sacred duel, the very definition of a warrior.

The opening blow came from below Regulus’s underarm, vertically slashing across his body—Regulus had not even the chance to cry out before being slammed far into the sky.

Regulus: “—Hk.”

Before his eyes was the demolished City of Water—he had been sent flying to the sky, to an altitude such that he had a panoramic view of the entire city.

Whether a cry or a curse, a scream incomprehensible to all who heard it echoed.

Chapter 59: Regulus Corneas

1

It can’tbecan’tbecan’tbe. What the hell is this, I don’t get it. Why do I have to go through this. Who do you take me for. I am the Sin Archbishop “Greed” Regulus Corneas. The most satisfied existence in the world! The most indisputably asserted, an existence without any wavering aspects! It’s supposed to be like that, so why do I have to go through this?! Don’t mess around, this is no joke. Each and every one of them, what’s wrong with them that they accept such nonsensical absurdities as if they are a matter of course. That man, that woman, and that knight too, just because I showed a little mercy are getting too ahead of themselves, if I had been serious from the beginning then I could have had torn them apart in bits and pieces, but aren’t they misunderstanding their own power? That you can shamelessly make misunderstandings, that are from my point of view, hilariously wrong, is why I hate getting involved with others! Obnoxious, annoying, irritating, infuriating, vexing, dirty, unsightly scum. I’ve always always been doing well, for years, decades, centuries, this way for all that time, I have been faithfully serving as a Sin Archbishop more than anyone. When I was first chosen as a sin archbishop and received this witch factor, I killed them all, the father who despite his poor earnings was plagued with bad drinking habits, the mother who prattled on endlessly complaining day and night, and the greedy brothers who used to ravenously eye the portion that rightfully belonged to me, were all killed by me, the villagers who looked at me like I’m an idiot too, the people of the town who pushed me and my house into that hopeless village too, the inept heads of the country who carelessly abandoned the village and the town to that state in the first place too, I tore them all apart into bits and pieces, and when everything was gone I finally noticed a way I could live! I don’t need anything. Everything is just annoying. I am already satisfied. It’s not like I didn’t have it, I just didn’t need it. Unlike the intrusive scum, I’ve never needed anything. Despite that, giving me something, doesn’t that mean that from outside, from your point of view, that you looked at me and thought that I was a pitiful lacking existence. Everyone who wants to impose unneeded things on me should be killed, so only those who will leave the satisfied me alone should be allowed into this world. No matter who, just talking about their selfish nonsense, those shits. Who has the right to pity me. Who has the right to pity me and drive me to despair. As if I would let them. I don't need anything and neither did I ask for anything. A father who despite his poor earnings was plagued with bad drinking habits and yet still occasionally buys gifts for me is scum better off dead. A mother who prattled on endlessly complaining day and night while saying obvious things like "apologies I've troubled you" is scum better off dead. The greedy brothers who despite ravenously eyeing the portion that rightfully belonged to me used to divide my part of their bun when my food got spilled are scum better off dead. Stop you shits, being arbitrarily kind towards me. Being kind, it must mean that you think I'm low, that you're looking down on me. Someone who looks the goddamn down on others, especially someone who looks down family, It's natural that they would be hated. It's natural that they're dead. It's not my fault. I've done nothing wrong. It's your fault, you you pitypitypity me, treat me like I'm pathetic, and leave me all alone. Have a taste of what it's like to be made to feel like the most worthless person in the world. Surrounding me should only be those who do not pity me. Those who do pity me should disappear from the world. I hear laughter. You're looking at me, aren't you. You looked at me and laughed, didn't you. What's so laughable about me. What did you see in me that made you laugh. All of them laughing and laughing. A bunch of powerless scum who are only good at running their mouths. Why does my heart have to break so much because of them. Don't stand in my way don't obstruct me don't pity me I'm not the I'm not the pitiable one, it's you helpless and ignorant but still with "Greed"! You have to crawl throughout your entire life just to satisfy your incomplete selves, you're the pitiable greed! I'm different I'm not like that I don't want anything. The desireless me is better than your incomplete selves. Don't pity me. The truth is that you're jealous of me, envious of me, you admire me and because you can't reach me you're just running your mouth off. That's right that must be right it's obviously right. Wait, wait, just wait. Just stop. Don't look at me don't say my name don't talk about me. Good or bad, just stop it, don't pay attention to me, ignore me and leave me alone. Even though a complete existence has a heart that should not be able to be trampled on how come the likes of you are so insistent on interacting with me. I cannot comprehend it in the slightest. Both you and I are different people. Even thinking of getting a return by taking risks, no matter how you think about it, could never be reasonable would always be a mistake. You're sick in the head. Calm down and think about it and you should be able to understand. All humans except me are just floating in a fever. Asking of others, that very fact that it is understandable is meaningless, useless and irresponsible should be easy to understand. It is all a fantasy of yours which you call it love love is friendship and trust what foolish idiocy reproductive activities themselves are the utmost disgusting acts. I don't understand what it means. For what are you doing this. Whether it's for being a mother or a child, although it makes a family, even if it is decorated with such words, it will be different from myself, whether that thing dies out or not, what does that have to do with me. If they continue to live when I die, I'll be over. If they are dead while I live would only mean my continuation. Love and affection only makes it so that people cannot be independent. A person is independent in the first place. Out of concern for those who operate under such delusions, to be looked down by others is foolish and so I found companionship by gathering well looking women, and in order to not be betrayed I ask for only virgins, what more do you want of me. Don't skip such a selfish act. Infringing on me to this extent, but you still ask whether you can infringe upon me even more? To think you've hit this point! To think your thoughts could be so twisted! Inflicting all this upon me, what more could you even ask of me. Just what do I have to do to not be pitied. The most pitiful person in the world, or whatever! There is no way anything said by that a lady plagued with such vulgar "Greed" who wants to to connect with one she li~kes is justified!

2

Regulus: "Ra—ah!!"

Higher, higher, along with the wind, Regulus's body flew into the night sky.

The instant that his underarm had been struck, Regulus had activated Lion's Heart and stopped his heartbeat to enter a state of invincibility. As a result, though the damage from the blow had been counteracted—

Regulus: "Ku, ku—hk"

Regulus panted, groaning as his vision blurred with pain.

Regulus's stopping of time, alongside his heart, could last for five seconds maximum. Although during this period, he could hand Lion's Heart over to a wife without issue, going any further would mean that Regulus's body would be unable to recover.

In addition, once Lion's Heart was lifted, the ever present pain of the sudden release of a stopped heart was inescapable. Anything like pain and suffering, hadn't been tasted in more than a hundred years.

Regulus: "You're, kidding…"

Painfully coughing hatred as if it were blood, the rising Regulus could no longer speak comprehensibly. His flying body was stuck in orbit, infused with who knows how much momentum, reaching a height that offered a bird's eye view of the city of Priestella.

Watergate City Priestella—there, upon seeing the Gospel's writ that the empty wife's seat could be filled, clearly only fortune had been in his heart.

Regulus: "Such a… foolish unfoldingaaaaah!"

Losing those wives which had been collected with such hard work, even his status as Greed had been shaken, insulted by a damn kid whose only talent lay in his foul mouth, pitied by a shameful woman who had only just met him.

There was no greater shame. He couldn't remember having ever tasted such humiliation. Wasn't it precisely because he didn't want to taste this loathsome feeling, that he became an archbishop. Clearly still receiving this kind of treatment, wasn't this different from what had been foretold.

Regulus: “Enough, enough, enough… hk!”

No need to think about being merciful. The show of indulgence would end here. This had nothing to do at all with Lion’s Heart being seen through by an opponent, or with that extraordinary Sword Saint.

As long as he could stop his heart for five seconds, Regulus could kill them many times over. Because he hadn’t wanted to see the expressions of despair, hear cries of death, he’d refrained thus far.

Using Lion’s Heart’s effect of creating a state of invincibility, Regulus could ignore every physical law in the world if he so wished. Reaching speeds that could outpace the wind, in that logic defying moment, with power so overwhelming the denizens of this world could not conceive, he’d turn them into corpses.

If he used the authority of Greed to take him higher into the sky, it’d be easy enough to kill them by scattering sand into the city. Although the other Sin Archbishops had also come to the city, he couldn’t care less whether they lived or died. At the moment, washing his own humiliation clean was the priority. He would have the faces of those fools who boasted of victory be painted with horror.

Once this pointless momentum came to an end, his fall back to the earth would spell those guys’ death. Before that, at best they could be excited about a superficial victory—

Regulus: “—Aaaaah?!”

Regulus who continuously recited words of hatred, screamed as an attack collided with his back.

Looking from the side would determine that Regulus’s rising momentum had come to a sudden stop, having been forcefully nailed into the air. As if something from the heavens… had stepped on him to pin him in place.

Reinhard: “If this were a normal duel, I’d withdraw my blade once my opponent lost their will to fight.”

The owner of the voice was perched on Regulus's back in midair, leisurely saying so.

As to what the existence who stepped on his back in midair was, Regulus understood instantly. Shuddering as he came to this realization. He grasped just how high where he was right now.

Arriving faster than the Regulus he had struck, just how had he managed to reach such heights.

Reinhard: "Though I have no intention of boasting, I have quite the confidence in my jumping ability. I had once even leapt from the ground, to land on the back of a flying dragon."

Regulus: "Damned, monster…!"

Reinhard: "Indeed. I am a monster who hunts monsters. —For you too, the time to accept fate has come."

Reinhard's feet left his back.

As soon as the sound of his voice fell, Regulus felt a fighting spirit. In the course of his life, although he had repeatedly faced strong opponents, Regulus had learned nothing whatsoever.

Even the him who was like this, had greeted those powerful opponents who had come forth to confront him with a yawn, and his conscious memory was limited. Relying on this memory, Regulus tried to react.

—Lion's Heart was activated, in the same instant that an attack came.

Regulus: "Aaaaah!!!"

Toward the center of Regulus's back, Reinhard swung his hand like a blade.

Regulus received an attack even more piercing than an actual blade would deal, but he took the impact with his invincibility, and slammed downward in one motion.

Accelerating toward the ground, Regulus slammed straight into the slate. However, the effect of the Lion's Heart persisted, and his body continued to dig into the earth as if being swallowed.

Regulus's body penetrated the paving in a line, crossing a rigid sheet of rock to drill through the earth. While helplessly continuing to drill into the ground, Regulus suddenly noticed.

If this momentum were left untouched, his body would plummet to the lowest level of the earth. He'd never considered whether or not there was a lowest level before. But, the land of this world was not endless. Surrounded as it was by the Great Cascade, at the end of this would be where those falls flowed to.

If he kept falling like so, was that where he would wind up?

Regulus: "Something like this, how could I endure… guu?!"

Literally, the limitless horror had made Regulus hold his breath, reaching the limit of his heart.

Five seconds had passed. Sirens began to blare, as Regulus found himself confused over his judgment. Stopping his heart within his own body for more than five seconds wasn't feasible. The number of seconds that he could hold it at maximum, was perhaps less than ten. And even if he could extend it, that was just more distance he dug.

But here, what would happen if he dispelled his ability while drilling into the ground?

—There was no time to debate. Heart stopping or brain dying or whatever, stupidity should have a limit.

Regulus: "Uuuuuuuu—!"

Gritting his teeth in preparation for the shock that was about to meet him, Regulus strengthened his resolve.

Hearing the sound of his heart which demanded to resume its beat, Regulus lifted the effect of Lion's Heart, let go of his invincibility, and the laws of physics were restored—

Regulus: “Bu, ue—!”

His entire body, all his bones, shattered.

Regulus’s body was attacked mercilessly upon impact.

That was a matter of course. Regulus’s body had hit the ground with a much higher velocity than free falling, and the momentum continued drilled into the earth without loss. The reason his body hadn’t shattered in every which way, was that there was no space for it to scatter underground.

However, although it could not spread horizontally, vertically was a different story.

Regulus: “Aa, ue…”

With a hollow voice, tears of blood flowed from Regulus’s ruined eyes. The impact penetrated through Regulus’s body, rendering it completely destroyed.

Saying he’d received damage greater than a shattered body would be no exaggeration, even the organs within his stomach had been twisted together. Originally impeccable white hair was covered with blood and mud, and his incontinent lower abdomen had lost its function and freely released waste.

Existing here, was a slab of meat which had lost human form.

And what was most surprising was, that this slab of meat still clung to life.

Regulus: “Aa, au…”

Peerless persistence in clinging to life—or rather, this transcended persistence into a grudge.

This was not merely some attachment to clinging to life. Remaining was solely, a grudge against those above who remained alive. Still struggling in such a condition, was this empty vanity.

If I were to, get serious, you fuckers—merely this.

Regulus: “Au, uu.”

Yet, this fixation should not be sullied.

Having exhausted a lifetime in pursuit of being that would not be pitied, an evil whose root was unharmed after experiencing more than a century’s worth of attacks and beatings, making the most suitable judgements for his own survival.

Wretchedly, repeatedly using Lion’s Heart in short bursts, Regulus dug at the earth. If he entered a state of invincibility, his injuries became insignificant. In the absence of pain, he could exercise even his injured body without harm. With his empty hands, Regulus dug ceaselessly at the soil.

His body had been buried upside-down, and he adjusted it by digging in a circle. Once his head faced upward, he needed only to slowly work his way aboveground. And perhaps once he made it he would see those self-satisfied maggots, smugly celebrating Regulus’s fall.

Unforgivable. Could never be forgiven.

To be mocked, to be scorned, to be pitied, was a pain without parallel. That such injuries were impermissible in life went without saying, and even in death could not be tolerated. Aah, right. Directly acting was all that was needed. Whether those who saw him and those who didn’t, if he cleanly did away with them all no one would bully him anymore. If only he’d done so at the very beginning. This time he would certainly not make the same mistake. Returning to the surface, killing all three of them, that would be the end of this.

Regulus: “…”

No longer capable of making sound, Regulus turned his hatred into strength and continued to dig at the ground.

When he made it aboveground, he’d be sure to savor the sight of those guys pleading for their lives. Especially the woman who had continually scorned him, he would be sure to mock her in equal measure. The 79th wife, was the role she'd been meant to fill. Speaking of which, the woman who was originally supposed to fill this vacancy was that elf woman living in that forest, where the hateful Petelgeuse had been as well—

—

—

—

Aaaaaaah. Ah, ah, ah, ah. Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah.

He remembered. Now, he remembered.

That woman! Indeed, it was that woman. No, she had been a child then!

The little brat who'd been crying and yelling nonstop, when he'd gone to retrieve No. 79! The little brat from then, had grown into the woman of today!

He now understood, the reason for which he'd felt inclined to fill the vacancy with her the instant he'd laid eyes on her. A simple matter. Serving as a substitute for her mother, it would only be natural that the daughter takes up this position.

That was the little brat of No. 79 who scorned me, and that fool Petelgeuse. Why hadn't I realized earlier. No, thank goodness I'd realized it now.

If he'd killed them without having noticed, he wouldn't be able to derive proper joy from it. Precisely because he had now clearly realized their sins, would there be value in killing them. Would he feel the accomplishment of avenging his humiliation. Would he experience that long-lost feeling, of the significance of fulfilling a desire.

Watch me tarnish her, No. 79 Watch me snatch her, Petelgeuse.

The one you all cherished, who dared to pity me, that girl.

Regulus: “Aah, hehe.”

An impulse surging from deep within his throat, Regulus grew giddy with excitement.

With a mouth missing teeth and cracked lips, he smiled. A hope of survival emerged. Feeling joy, at the idea of brutalizing those who dared to insult him.

Climbing up, climbing up, climbing up, and then—

Regulus: “—?”

The upward striving Regulus, suddenly felt his fingertips come into contact with something. He withdrew the right hand with fingers no longer in comprehensible positions, and with a blinded eye tried to catch a glimpse. His bloodied and muddied form was faintly wetted by something other than blood.

He tried taking a lick at it. Although tinged with the bitter taste of mud, it seemed to be water.

Water. It was water. After understanding that it was water, Regulus immediately felt a thirst parch his throat. One drop was not enough. He wanted to soothe his throat, to fill his stomach. Lion’s Heart’s effect had been interrupted, and Regulus’s body having returned to the cycle of time, finally had the opportunity to ingest again after a century.

For now, water was fine. It tasted sublime. As he thought so, as if in accordance with his wishes, the water gurgled as it poured down from overhead.

He sipped this slightly muddied water. Even if all his teeth had fallen out, his tongue had been shredded, his blood spurted forth without cessation, this water tasted amazing. So satisfying. That feeling existed here.

—The flow of water pouring in suddenly grew, and Regulus’s body once again fell to the bottom.

Regulus: “Aa, uu, waaah?”

Flowing down. Flowing in. In this earth with nowhere to run, the water gradually rushed in.

This was the underground, without any extraneous space. In a blink of an eye, Regulus's body sank into the water where he lost his freedom of movement.

—Perhaps until this moment, Regulus still had not understood what was happening.

This water came from overhead in Priestella, where all the canals gathered.

Due to Reinhard's attack, Regulus had smashed through the street and into the ground. Between the underground tunnel that he had made with his body, and the path he had dug himself, the four currents of the canal had been blocked. It now rushed to Regulus without pause, submerging the murderer entirely.

As if expressing the fury over the destruction of the streetscape, from the city and its inhabitants.

Regulus: "Kuu, fwah."

Needless to say, Regulus who was busy drowning at the moment naturally did not notice.

Trapped by the soil, Regulus panicked from the pressure of the water that poured directly into his lungs, and began to struggle with desperation. However, he had no room with which to struggle within the earth. All he could do was curl up through the sludge himself and protect himself with Lion's Heart.

When Lion's Heart was active, he would be able to breathe freely. The same held true for the pain of his ruined flesh.

However, Lion's Heart could last for only five seconds. Once he felt his heart reaching its limit, fear of death would cause Regulus release the effect and once again be dragged back to hell.

His cause of death alternated.

No matter which, he could choose neither side. No matter which, neither side could not be eliminated. However, Regulus had no choice but to endure. All he could do was resent this unreasonable situation.

The time limit had disappeared.

Even if he could use Lion's Heart repeatedly, that wasn't the case for breathing. And to reuse Lion's Heart, he would need to wait several seconds.

Heart failure.

Drowning.

Heart failure.

Drowning.

Heart failure—

Drowning—

As if continuing without end, pain and suffering without end or pause.

Regulus opened his mouth, and water and mud are poured together into open mouth. With this repeated violation of his lungs and internal organs, Regulus cried out. With a voice that could not make sound, he continued to cry out.

No response. Around him, there was no one.

Even so, he continued to cry out. From his cries, spilled a hatred that hoped for all of mankind to die off.

After he died, mocking laughter would be begged leave of.

For that girl, rejoicing over the vengeance of her mother and Petelgeuse would also be begged leave of.

The mere thought of that girl's delight over Regulus's death, growing radiant with excitement, was vomit inducing.

A life's goal, a motivation to keep living, its consummation would certainly bring joy.

Her existence being moved by Regulus's death, giving off radiance, to say this significance was unknown would not be incorrect.

Because this was wrong, completely unexpected, unreasonable joy, the notion of satisfying that girl was unbearable.

His death, would greatly impact to the girl's heart—

3

Regulus Corneas shattered through the stone street, and was buried in the dirt.

Toward the grave dug by the murderer's body, water from the Watergate City gushed voluminously. How deep the murderer had sunk was unknown. However, considering the limits of his authority, crashing through to other side of the world—such a thing was impossible.

In all likelihood, the effect had been exhausted somewhere underground, and like that he had been crushed by the momentum. Even if he hadn't been crushed somehow, the water that poured in would never allow the murderer to escape.

The murderer who indulged in his powerful authority, had finally drowned as a tribute to the city he had destroyed.

Subaru: "…Emilia-tan, you look sorrowful."

Emilia watched the cave where Regulus sunk motionlessly. Seeing a trace of mourning on her face, Subaru spoke in response.

For that murderer, there should have been not a single hint of sympathy. Emilia was supposed to share that feeling, and not feeling badly about his underground demise should have been right —

Subaru: “Although Emilia-tan’s kindness is wonderful, I don’t think it should be wasted on him. A completely hopeless guy, really does exist.”

Emilia: “…Thank you for worrying about me. But, that’s not it. It’s not like that.”

Subaru: “Nn?”

Toward the concerned Subaru, Emilia slowly shook her head from side to side.

Then she fell silent for a long while, while casting low the eyes from which hung long lashes—

Emilia: “Regulus, seemed… When I first saw him, I felt like I’d met him somewhere before.”

Subaru: “So this wasn’t your first meeting? In that case, when?”

Emilia: “That, I can’t remember.”

Faced with Subaru’s question, tilted her head in doubt.

Miraculously, this coincided with the exact moment the buried Regulus screamed.

With a voice that could not reach, the murderer screamed for Emilia to not cheer for his death.

Her mother’s death and her benefactor’s madness, he’d been closely entwined in both. Toward a young girl this was perhaps a turning point that she could never forget, he did not want for her to find satisfaction upon his death.

Such was the murderer’s dying wish, which had no way of reaching the surface.

Emilia: “—Regulus, just where did you meet me?”

Regulus Corneas, had left no impression on Emilia.

In this ironic manner, it was precisely achieved.

Chapter 60:
One Ending, One Battle

1

The sight of a white light.

Warm, soft, a light which reassured one's heart.

To greet the morning with such a serene mood had been too long absent.

Always waking in despair, in never-ending everydays that were as nightmares, there had never been a trace of peace.

Gradually coming to firmly believe that for always and always, this darkness would never usher in the morning sun.

Precisely because of this, was perhaps why this this ray was so refreshing.

???: "—Hey, wake up."

Hearing someone's voice.

Beyond the white light, someone was calling for her. Guided by that voice like so, led by the hand like so, departing from this darkness.

That white light glimpsed in the distance, finally engulfed her vision completely.

Emilia: "Good morning. No matter how much of a sleepyhead you are, it's about time to wake up, you know."

Opening her eyes and gazing over, a shy silver-haired maiden laughed as she spoke such words.

—Those words made Sylphy's cheeks, become stained with tears.

2

Cerulean light flooded the sky, as the enchantment of ice lifted.

The ice that had engulfed the half-demolished church gradually turned to light, and the scattering mana was circled by the micro-spirits and disappeared.

The sight of one unfathomable fantasy being overtaken by another unfathomable fantasy, engraved an agonizing wound in the hearts of the viewers.

Although it wouldn't be strange to be moved to tears by such a sight, the reason why they cried and wailed, was certainly something greater than that.

From what overtook their lives, a nightmare which had bound the most brilliant and sparkling time of their lives—from that, they had been freed.

Subaru: "Speaking of which, Emilia-tan is pretty amazing."

Thoughtlessly loosening his lips, Subaru murmured absentmindedly.

In front of his eyes were Emilia, and the bride clinging onto her in tears—the former brides, in a healthy shape.

The number of women in dresses were precisely fifty, with not a single error in counting.

Subaru: "… When I informed her that his heart and the brides were integrating, I thought there wouldn't be a way to save the brides without having them die."

Taking away the lives of the brides, rendering Lion's Heart without a place to be in. Subaru had partly, seriously given up on there being another way to stop that abhorrent man. He had been prepared for victims.

However, unlike Subaru, Emilia had not given up.

It is true that in the fierce and life risking skirmish against Regulus, his thinking had come to a standstill. However, Emilia did not stop thinking.

With the cards she held, and considering what all would be possible for her, she had made her move.

Which is why,

Subaru: “This time, Emilia-tan completely carried us across, huh.”

Emilia: “It’s, not like that.”

Letting out an exhausted sigh, next to the wall, Subaru remarked on his own vanquish. Hearing his relieved exhale, Emilia came back to him. Her white dress was torn, and her silver hair, which overcame the struggle for life and death, was disheveled.

Even still, now after the fight had ended, Emilia looked beautiful.

Inhaling with that in his mind, Subaru jerked his chin.

Subaru: “Those people too, faces full of expressions of dissatisfaction that fail to sufficiently express their gratitude toward Emilia.”

Emilia: “Don’t use me to kid around. And I, am unable to explain some grand ideology to them. Even if only for a brief while… the choice of dying was forced upon them.”

Subaru: “But there isn’t anyone who died. Everyone’s still alive. — This point is more important than anything else.”

This result, was more perfect than anything else.

Having found the answer he was seeking, Subaru felt relieved. Emilia placed her hands on her hips, and raised her voice as she spoke to the Subaru who was still regarding himself too lowly and thus putting himself down.

Emilia: “Wounded all over, forcing yourself even so… if Subaru hadn’t worked so hard, everyone wouldn’t have made it so far. Lion’s Heart too, was all thanks to Subaru noticing it.”

Subaru: “Lacking a trump card is the usual thing… That said, all along it’s felt off. But, thank goodness it had been noticed. Freezing the wives, to place them into a death trance.”

Emilia: “I too, was frozen for a bit too long.”

Hehe, Emilia stuck her tongue out with that kind of feeling. Adorable.

Although, for some reason, this didn’t seem like content to be discussed while laughing.

Which was to say, Emilia’s actions and keenness to strike down Regulus, had yielded the greatest effectiveness without unnecessary sacrifice.

Fifty-three lives, of those precious wives’ had been saved.

Emilia: “Though as for whether or not I could do it, I was a bit lacking in confidence.”

Subaru: “But it was done even still. Emilia-tan, worked hard in order to improve your own skill and strength.”

Emilia: “But, that possibility that they would stay frozen like this also existed. To free everyone perfectly like this is what finally allows me to relax.”

And then as if to hide her shy smile, she touched her chest.

Underneath the palm of that hand, was seemingly to confirm that there remained only her pulse and heartbeat.

Emilia: “In addition, if Subaru hadn’t removed Regulus’s heart from my chest, I would have needed to use the same magic on myself. In that case, whether for Sylphy and the others or for myself, I think it’d be waaay worse than melting like this. Because then it could have taken another hundred years.”

Subaru: “That again—isn’t that exaggeration no matter how you look at it?”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “So this isn’t exaggeration?! Or worse, isn’t this completely unparalleled extremism!”

Watching the silent bitterly smiling Emilia, Subaru felt a sharp shock.

Due to Regulus’s provocation, Emilia had wanted to stop Lion’s Heart’s effect on her. If an eye hadn’t been kept on her, if the situation hadn’t been dealt with right then perhaps Emilia would have been parted from this life. Of course, notions of searching everywhere for a way to melt the ice in order to avoid this still existed.

Subaru: “Something like two sleeping beauties, my pestilent demon truly isn’t ordinary, please give me your forgiveness.”

Although complaining, Subaru’s heart had settled down.

In any case, Emilia had been rescued safe and sound, and the wives had been freed without harm. Although the battle against Regulus had yielded a scale of destruction beyond what one opponent seemed capable of—in summary, their side had sustained more or less no loss.

Even so, Subaru’s flesh carried all kinds of burdens, as well as an unnecessary fate shared with the Witch Cult.

And in addition—

Emilia: “Reinhard, leaving without even treating his wounds, I wonder if he’ll be okay.”

To Subaru who had been lost in thought, Emilia suddenly spoke thus.

Subaru raised his head, gave a wave with his hand.

Subaru: “It’ll be fine, since that guy, even if he leaves his wounds as is micro-spirits’ll come along and treat them. He himself said so.”

Emilia: “Ah, makes sense. Originally there had been quite the number of micro-spirits here, but as soon as Reinhard left, everyone went too… Reinhard, perhaps has the aptitude to potentially be a spirits arts user.”

Subaru: “My niche would be completely killed so that can’t be!”

And as for Reinhard’s circumstances, even without anything like that, he was strong enough. Although the one who had tossed Regulus to be dealt with by Reinhard was Subaru himself, Reinhard’s manner of battle in that final indistinguishable duel, to describe coldly in one phrase.

Could a human, leap with such ease above the clouds. Even if they couldn’t all be classified as human, they were all knights to a candidate of the king’s election.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, weak though I may be, please don’t cast me away.”

Emilia: “—? I am, especially dependent on Subaru?”

Subaru: “Is that right! That’s right! From now to the future I’ll also work my hardest!”

Emilia: “Apologies, your sudden rush forward of hard work is a bit confusing…”

In any case, best to stop comparing this to that. To do so, would be the same as Regulus who couldn’t act with the peace of mind without using others as a point of reference.

Though he’d always been thought of as a man without qualities to be admired, but unexpectedly treating him as a frame of negative reference worked out just fine.

Emilia: “…Everyone else, are they getting along fine?”

Subaru: “It’s for that reason that Reinhard was brought along. In all honesty, because everyone else is stronger than me.”

To entrust to one another, or rather for one to rely on the other, the awkward expression known as Faith would be the most suiting.

Despite differing factions, who would one day meet in conflict in the struggle for the throne, Subaru still believed in them. Even with the variance of personalities, abilities, and beliefs.

At least, he'd believe that he wouldn't lose to those despicable, hopeless guys of the Witch Cult.

"…"

Moreover, if anyone failed, if the lives of anyone who mattered—was to say that Subaru needed to consider using, Return by Death. The contract with Roswaal, even if it hadn't existed, as long as there remained any slight chance of salvation, they would certainly be saved.

Pain and suffering were worthy of his hatred indeed.

But tragedies were surely, even more worthy of his disgust.

Emilia: "Subaru."

Subaru: "…"

Unknowing of what the Subaru who was considering death saw, Emilia bent down from beside the sitting Subaru.

Her body rested against his left shoulder, as she gently stroked his lowered head. How itchy. But, it was hard to part with.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "Right now, I share the same sentiments as Subaru. Although I'm worried about everyone, my own strength is spent. Even reaching out a hand is impossible. So me too, allow me to pray with Subaru? In hope, that everyone will be safe and sound."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "Certainly there won't be any problems. Because everyone compared to us, is suuuper strong, suuuper smart, suuuper hard workers."

In order to reassure Subaru, carefully considering her choice of words was Emilia. Her use of phrasing sounded especially of her, and Subaru too was able to relax.

Faith. To have faith in everyone. And Reinhard who had already set off.

Immediately upon defeating Regulus, Reinhard had left to help their compatriots. A battlefield with him present would not be any cause for concern.

Without losing even a single person, welcoming the coming morning. In that case, capturing Subaru's worry, was only one remaining issue—

"…"

Alongside Subaru who looked toward the sky as if in prayer, Emilia as well looked through the ceiling of the demolished church to regard the night sky. As if to prevent Emilia from seeing, Subaru tightly grasped his chest.

—Alongside the moment of Regulus's death, it had felt as if something formless and black, had slid into his own chest, pulsating.

This must be, the same thing that had happened with Petelgeuse then.

So he would in order keep Emilia from noticing, merely keep quiet.

Pray to the heavens, come to an epiphany, merely keep quiet.

3

—Turn back time to just a little before Regulus had been defeated.

When Subaru and the others had left for the control towers, and Otto who had seen them off before leaving in order to recover the Book of Wisdom, even transpiring about a quarter of an hour after.

That was when Otto and Felt had encountered Gluttony and had begun to fight, was when Garfiel and Kurgan had just landed in the canal, was when Wilhelm had unveiled Theresia's cloak, was when Julius had frowned upon hearing discourse of hatred that he couldn't remember, was when the church where a bride had been on her way to being forced into marriage in a farce of a wedding had been half destroyed, was when the canals to the city's north had suddenly ignited at once—was the instant when City Hall with only non-combatants left inside were attacked.

???: "Kyaha! Time for this lovely lady's debut~!"

On the topmost floor of City Hall that stood five stories tall, a tremendous force shattered walls without any room for resistance.

The tremendous vibration shattered the architecture's windows, and combined with the damage to the building's foundations that had happened during the day caused lethal damage. Priestella's City Hall, a building which had once been the city's center had in the space of a mere single day turned to the verge of ruin, becoming unsightly to behold.

However, whether or not the curtain would close on only the verge of ruin, was dependent on what would happen here—would be decided based on those results.

???: "Four towers corresponding to four gates. No matter which opens the city would indeed be flooded… to not gamble on the possibility of retaking all the towers wouldn't do. Even if you rotten meats were unwilling you'd still need to disperse your forces, so using your total forces wouldn't do either."

Long-windedly, a voice which was an assault to the ears described the immediate circumstances of the city.

And then, echoing were voices opposite to this.

"Everyone! Be certain to survive, to protect this city!"

"Using our strength, let's take back this beautiful street!"

"We who stand with justice couldn't possibly lose!"

“Good is paid with good, and evil is paid with evil. This battle, will be the victory we await—!”

The stern voice of a young man.

The brave voice of a young woman.

A cry of a stern voice from a male soldier which had tangibly seen war, a cry of rational naivete from a young woman cheering everyone on.

In any case, only the innocence of these unrelenting and unashamed wills and proved these unyielding lines of discourse—only, the mouth which discussed this was only a single one.

???: “Why~ is it, this unwillingness to just think the slightest bit~?”

Then from the same mouth which spoke these effective words, as if betraying all the preceding remarks, insulting and taunting, a voice so rooted in malice to speak as if without even conscious malicious intent of smearing them away spoke thus.

And then the owner of the voice, hugged her own petite frame as if seeing something disgusting and began to shake back and forth at the shoulders.

???: “Kyahahahaha! Stopstopsto~p, please don’t do this! Why~ does this lovely lady have no choice but to greet thi~s justice that exudes the same stench~ as soil and sweat? Yo~u rotten meats, are you all gathered together so that your brains can boil beau~tifully?

Raising her voice high, producing a laugh piercing as a clamor.

Without capability of hiding, without intent of hiding malice was this sultry voice, and the source of this voice was a young girl who had yet to blossom into maturity.

Wide round eyes and delicate thin lips, blond hair riding to shoulders and faintly reddened cheeks, as if taking the form of the concept of cuteness, that face appeared inconsistent with the young girl’s luster and fierceness. Clad in pieces of cloth which were practically just lingerie, forget being a woman, for a young maiden whose human body's characteristics had yet to develop this outfit was far too exposed. Any normal human who saw this would hold a twisting sense of aversion.

The terrifying young girl—or rather, the monster's purpose lay here.

Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Lust, Capella Emerada Lugunica, a monster whose purpose was to ridicule morals and dignity of humanity as exceedingly as possible was present.

Capella: "That you would delusionally believe this lovely lady would be following decorum, and obediently wait in the tower is practically incomprehensible! Kind to the point of allowing you~ to pass these days, is already charity! What is called battle is about not allowing the opponent to do as they like, and then to do~ precisely what they don't want you to. This kind of principle is understood even by flowers in a greenhouse~, you trash trash trash trash meats."

In the midst of these coarse words of unbearable ridicule, was the monster that was only cute in appearance that was Capella.

Using fingers to poke at cheeks while twisting her body was this monster, who resumed human form immediately upon successfully infiltrating City Hall and entered a nearby room—meeting Capella there was a cat-eared knight who had been immersed in her abusive words earlier. And the long-haired woman lying on the platform behind him.

Here was the uppermost floor of the hall, the room that the pair of Ferris and Crusch occupied.

Felix: "You are, the Sin Archbishop of Lust…!"

Ferris cried out with a voice trembling with rage as he protected the bed while glaring at Capella. Capella tilted her head at the Ferris who glared at her, then looked toward the bed behind him and nodded with an expression of acceptance.

Capella: "Ah~ okayokay, your hatred is understandable. She di~d in fact lose to the blood. From the start it shouldn't have worked. E~ven though that was believed, actually seeing this failure is disappointing indeed. The most noble Lugunica blood~ mislead me to have just the slightest bit of expectation."

Felix: "For what purpose would you force something like this on Crusch-sama?! What has to be done to save Crusch-sama! Answer me!"

Toward Capella who sighed with something more like listlessness than disappointment, Ferris's cute face was dyed red in anger as he screamed. Wielded in his two hands was the soldier's short sword he'd been carrying until now.

That sword was engraved with ornate decorations and the emblem of a lion, more akin to a first-class ornament of favor than a weapon of combat. Aligning with Ferris's own immature skills, it lacked the ability to make effective attacks.

Capella: "Is that a toy? An important gift? No matter which, using your frail arms to wave something like thi~s is pretty da~ngerous, little girl… no, hmm?"

Capella who had stuck out her tongue to jeer, cut her words off midway with a sudden frown.

Capella: "Uwah, disgusting. Eh? You~ have a pretty unnatural body. Clearly a man but that body… Something that should have been removed wasn't so how~ did you become like that. From a glance it's fundamentally different from a simple change by dressing in women's' clothing, hasn't this lovely lady ruined your mood now?"

Felix: "—hk"

Not only did she see through Ferris's gender, Capella showed disgust at the unnaturalness. The monster carefully examined Ferris from top to bottom, looking as if it were unintentional.

Capella: "That manner of dress, is it to seduce other men? In any case, all it's worth is bringing understanding of the pointlessness~

of humans. Men are all fools, women are all sluts, and humankind altogether is utter trash… is what this lovely lady concluded from her preferences.”

Felix: “How noisy! Stop with the useless… answer my question already! What exactly did you do to Crusch-sama!!”

Capella: “Ah~ truly, how truly annoying.”

Toward Capella who hadn’t yet established dialogue, Ferris was unable to bear the insult and once again let out a roar of rage. Capella who heard this relaxed her shoulders, and after a moment the visage of the young girl dissolved away.

Felix: “—?!”

Before the Felix who took a stunned inhale, the young girl’s body began to dissolve and reform.

Short stature elongating as if in a nightmare, bright golden hair beginning to change in color. The tempting sweet face who would provoke in anyone a desire to protect it upon being seen became stern, and the lingerie-like clothing transformed into a blue dress.

Although having heard of it, this process of variation and change was still the first time it had appeared before Ferris. The body which was released conformed not in the slightest to others’ opinions, freely being changed as the architect of this nightmare liked.

And then faced with this scene as if a nightmare, Ferris was frozen with shock.

Felix: “Aa, uu…”

Capella: “—What’s there to be so surprised about?”

Saying so, caressing long green hair was the face that Ferris cherished most.

The figure of Capella who stood before him motionlessly, had become the very appearance of Ferris’s most beloved master. This made Ferris's face turn stark white, and even the hand holding the short sword had begun to tremble slightly.

Capella: "Look here, the ferocity from earlier has completely vanished. This face, this body, this voice, before your very eyes has become like this now."

The face of Crusch that he had never seen before laughed, and slowly Capella strode forward.

She reached Ferris's side, stopping when she reached a distance where she could touch him if she stretched out a hand. As if thinking of something, pointed the short sword Ferris was holding to her own chest.

The tip of the sword rested right at the center of Crusch's large chest.

Leaning just slightly forward would have it pierce through, was the position it was in.

Capella: "Your despised enemy is right before you. Avenge me. It hurts, it hurts. Even breathing brings me anguish. Eyes unopening. Flowing through my chest isn't blood. Flowing through my entire body is something that feels like poison. So hurry, avenge me. — She's saying so, like this you know~."

Felix: "Huu, huu, huu…!"

Capella: "Plunge the blade in with one breath, stir the wound around as you will and yank it out in one breath as well. Then the heart will be destroyed, the pulse will stop, the blood spurt forth constantly. You can kill her."

Ferris's breaths began to grow too rapid, gaze began to wander.

More prized than gold, the life of his master's enemy was being offered right before his very eyes. Just as she said, like this an attack could truly be effective. Could destroy her heart. Could kill her.

However, precisely because she wore that too familiar face.

Capella: “Stab down, stab down, stab down, stab down, stab down, stab down.”

Felix: “…”

Capella: “Stab down—!”

Felix: “Uu, aaaa!!”

Commanded as if by malediction, Ferris’s sword short stabbed toward that chest.

The blade pierced that body with ease, reaching between bones to destroy the heart within. With a twist of the keen blade, came the ruthless sound of muscle being severed, and finally along with blood that spurted forth the short sword was yanked out.

Ferris: “Ha, hah.”

Felix trying to avoid being stained by the gushing blood, with uneven breaths backed away. The short sword slipped from his hands to the ground, the floor wetted by the dripping blood.

Capella: “Hah, kah.”

And then, Capella who had been stabbed in the chest knelt on the ground, spitting vast quantities of blood from her mouth.

In appearance she still wore Crusch’s mien, a pained face stained with blood, amber eyes filled with disbelief fixing on Ferris.

Capella: “Hurts, it hurts… Why, why do something like…”

Felix: “It was you, who made me stab down…! Made me, injure Crusch-sama!”

Capella: “So uncomfortable, so very uncomfortable… Too much, unforgivable. Though clearly speaking of things like liking you, loving you… clearly loving each other…”

Felix: “—! Don’t say such ridiculous things! I don’t share that kind of relationship with Crusch-sama!”

Capella: “Ah, is that so? In that case, the interpretation of the script itself was off~”

With a frank expression, Capella used a sleeve to wipe the blood from her face while standing.

She casually brushed the wound on her chest, and the freshly made wound disappeared in an instant. The twisted expression of agony from before disappeared as well, leaving only a sigh.

Capella: “Indeed, playing around is meaningless if it doesn’t start from the ve~ry beginning, it’s something like that. Master and vassal who love each other, forcing one to kill the lovely lady who looks just like the other. And then to unfold the tale of the shaping of a love, was what had been planned on originally… a failure, failure indeed.”

Felix: “Putting on such a farce… just what do you intend. What do you want from us!”

Capella: “Nothing much? There i~sn’t much intent behind it, nor i~s there anything to really ask of you. Watching a husband kill his wife is something to kill time. Asking an adjutant knight to wear women’s clothing, something caused by a preference like that, just think of it that way.”

Felix: “My promise with Crusch-sama, isn’t anything superficial like that!”

Capella: “Putting proclivity and sexuality on the surface like that, this lovely lady finds that a rather frivolous performance you know~.”

Regarding the Ferris who couldn’t help but cry out, Capella tilted her head as she said so. Then Capella raised her right hand, and her external form once again changed drastically.

Her palm becoming like a flower’s giant petal, the tentacles that stretched forth sent Ferri’s body flying, before entangling him as they lifted him up, then tightened their grip as they slammed him against a wall.

Felix: “Kah, huu…”

Capella: “Whether seeing or feeling it’s the same, wha~t a body both so slim and so fragile. If you wa~nt to become a woman so badly, how about this lovely lady lends you a hand? In this lovely lady’s hands it’d only be child’s play. How about being given help for removing it and forming your holes in minutes?”

Felix: “My, body is irrelevant… More importantly, that Crusch-sama is…!”

Capella: “How ridiculous. Something like valuing another over yourself, how about you sto~p audaciously saying sweet nothings. And speaking of which you’re asking about how to recover a body infected by Dragon’s Blood to its original state? Hah, if such a method exists it should rather be said that this lovely lady wo~uld be more eager to know.”

The tentacle continued writhe forcefully, causing Ferris’s delicate extremities to begin bleeding. Widening his eyes in agony, the sound of twisting broken bones echoed throughout the room.

In comparison to the right hand which had taken the form of a carnivorous flower, the raised left hand took the shape of the scythe of a mantis. Maintaining Crusch’s mien, she had become a repulsive monster whose left hand was an insect’s and right hand was a flower’s.

Even so, that face bore no trace of change, all the more horrid for remaining adorned in beauty.

Capella: “Directly turning you into mincemeat would also be also pretty entertaining, and this lovely lady do~esn’t have much time to spare anyway. Before any unrelated others can appear, it wo~uldn’t do to not take care o~f you and your master.”

Felix: “—uu, kuu”

Capella: “That said, you really are some guy foolish beyond limit. Without expecting this lovely lady to show up here, even a strategy for counterattack i~s sluggish. Just what point will it come to before…”

Having said this, Capella’s once delighted face was now tinged with a touch of a frown. As if holding doubts toward what she had just said, she dragged the still gasping Ferris before her.

Capella: “No matter what isn’t this a bit too slow? Even given that this lovely lady infiltrated from above, it’s taking too long for any others to arrive on this upper floor.”

Felix: “…a”

Capella: “You have to be planning something, hurrying up and revealing everything is for your own good you know. O~therwise, your most treasured Master-sama, will undergo an even uglier transformation…”

Capella’s scythe extending from her left wrist reached toward Crusch who lay on the bed, and Ferris faced in incomparably cruel choice. Serving as a response to this question, was Ferris’s shaking voice that he squeezed out,

Felix: “—You,”

Capella: “Ah~? Which way of begging for mercy will you…”

Felix: “You, utterly… useless creature.”

Capella: “Hah?”

Yellow pupils bearing disgust glared at Capella, a sentence uttered as if spat.

Immediately afterward, the tentacles that bound Ferris began to spout smoke, and the petals discolored and rotted away. Regarding her own right arm that had been corroded away, Capella revealed an expression of surprise.

Capella: “A~rara? Just what happened to this lovely lady’s hand…”

???: “Well, just think of it like scummy personalities ain’t unique to yer side.”

The tentacles rotted away, and Ferris’s body was freed.

Another sound overrode that of Capella who turned her head at this. That was a cute voice with a unique cadence. Capella looked in the direction of the bed that had issued the sound—at this very moment, light flooded the entire room.

A white ray which practically created the effect of instantaneously spiking temperature. This energetic beam burned away at Capella’s face, destroying the entire left half of her face.

Accompanying the carbonizing half of her face was the stench of scorched flesh, and Capella retreated a several steps. Then reaching out a serpentine tongue to caress the surface of that wound, smiled.

Capella: “Standing against the face of an ally without even a trace of leniency hu~h… well, not li~ke this had much of an effect. The presence of someone here is well expected, so n~ot a huge surprise to wind up like this.”

???: “Something like ‘n ally is a misunderstandin’. We’re commercial competitors… nah, it’s more like competitive opponents. Moreover not like we’re livin’ such easy lives that we’d hesitate to attack upon seein’ the face ‘f an opponent like that.”

Capella: “A conditional ally will sooner or later become an enemy. In that case, was especially aiming at the face some deliberate~ preemptive scheme? If truly so, your personality might be a little too twisted too.”

???: “Ah’ve already said, there wasn’t any such confusion of private n’ public affairs. Aimin’ at the head was purely to see, ‘f destroyin’ it would prove fatal, hopin’ so for a moment ‘s all.”

Saying so, the person who clambering from the bed gave the sigh of betrayed expectations.

In place of Crusch, lying on the bed had been Anastasia.

She touched her own wavy hair colored with green dye, responding with a slight smile to Capella who had survived with even half her face burnt off.

Anastasia: “Though Ah’d clearly hoped for it, seems no death happened.”

Capella: “Even~ though you might be different from the type of woman who only smiles upon seeing mo~ney. But something like unhesitatingly scorching half the face of a woman, a personality surpassing a reasonable amount of self-interest, truly a female meat that this lovely lady would take an interest in!”

Anastasia: “Being taken interest in by a person like you, even us here would feel a bit of resistance. Y’ see, us here’s somethin’ beloved is with long fur that feels silky to the touch.”

With formality, Anastasia responded frankly to the monster Capella’s words. With a small cough she approached Ferris who was near the bed, taking his wrist and helping him up.

Watching the teary-eyed Ferris, Anastasia with “isn’t this enough” as a precursor,

Anastasia: “No information’s been gathered at all. At the very least, let’s set Crusch’s affair aside for now.”

Felix: “…I understand. You’ve accompanied me far already, in such a risky gamble.”

Anastasia: “For this situation, us here’s holds a rather large share of the responsibility, so let’s just call it that.”

Even the ability of Ferris who was the leading healer in the kingdom, could do nothing to heal the current Crusch.

To save her, there was no other way aside from finding the reasoning and a solution from the one who had done this to her.

As for what Ferris had prosed, Anastasia could not refuse.

Welcoming each candidate to the city of Priestella had been Anastasia. And then things had hit this point. Due to holding a share of responsibility for the matter, Anastasia was unable to refute Ferris’s plea.

Anastasia: “It’s something like this, call this completely fruitless and yet it still managed to betray expectations.”

Capella: “To be burdened by expectation like so, my deepest apologies~ but these feelings are truly, completely absent. But, there shouldn’t have been any guarantee that I’d show up at all?”

Anastasia: “Wasn’t there an announcement from Natsuki-kun? Seems that, you would have acted upon hearin’ it.”

Sending the main combative force away, leaving the base camp undefended would surely prompt activity from the enemy. In the first place the Witch Cult had no obligation to greet then with integrity. Truly this was just as Capella’s earlier speech had said.

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun there, grew naive at a critical moment.”

Although in no way was there a possibility of a guarantee, strictly speaking to consider from the nature of the Witch Cult, showing up to attack could only be one of either Wrath or Lust.

So Anastasia had laid a trap, and allowed City Hall to be attacked. The real Crusch had of course, fled to a nearby shelter with the other injured.

There would of course be no one who would step into this uppermost floor. People still remaining in this building, aside from those on the this topmost floor—

Capella: “…Hm~ph, he~h. People whose minds move a little too quickly, are just the slightest bit irritating to others. But then, aren’t you underestimating this lovely lady? That cat-ears over there, this little lady over here, nei~ther looks like someone who can hold their own in battle.”

Anastasia: “Bein’ called a little lady is really rather embarassin’. Though we here look like this, seems that I’m technically still a grown adult.”

At Capella’s remarks, Anastasia closed one eye in response.

Capella: “It’s been decided. That cute face of yours lovely face, is all that'll be when everything below your neck becomes a locust. After turning in to that do try again, to ba~ttle against me using that rude mouth of yours~."

Anastasia: "How rather horrid… in that case, best to bid farewell for now."

Capella: "…"

Anastasia's refusal, surprised Capella who had been the threatening party.

Anastasia tugged on her still green hair, glanced about the room.

Anastasia: "We here should have mentioned already, we've been awaiting you all along—in that case, we couldn't have been waiting without making any preparations."

As soon as the sound of her voice fell, Anastasia rapped gently against the floor with her fingers.

Two ringing sounds, as if some kind of signal—immediately afterward, cracks appeared in the floor by Capella's feet, and the broken body of the young girl plummeted downward.

Capella: "Oh, myyy."

The bottom of the floor falling away, and appearing in the floor she had plummeted to was a similar opening.

In this manner Capella continued to fall floor by floor, falling the height of four stories in one breath, landing directly into an underground chamber beneath the first floor.

Splat, with such a sound, Capella's body exploded.

Defenselessly slamming into the ground, the body of the young girl was completely flattened on the cold surface.

Blood gushed forth from her face, and her limbs were folded over and broken with a miserable appearance. But, the body that become a piece of flesh immediately began sluggishly move in hands and feet, and young girl's body stood in the form of an aqueous amorphous state.

Appearing there was, the figure of a seductive woman.

Clad in extremely revealing clothing, displaying her ample flesh without a trace of shame, the rare sight of black hair was done into a three-stranded braid. Exuding a somewhat dangerous aura, and a beauty that caused restlessness in its wake.

Whether Ferris or Anastasia, both should have no idea who this appearance belonged to. In any case, the two that remained on the fourth floor, shouldn't be able to see her transformation.

And so, there should have been no one who would react with surprise upon seeing this figure.

Capella: "Aah, aah, reallyreally… i~sn't this just going to make me so very delighted so very excited. Kyahahahaha!"

With the manner of an agonized death and a manner that couldn't feel agony, Capella let go her voice. That was a light and delicate sound incongruent with her mutated appearance, echoing throughout the entire underground chamber of City Hall.

In shadows, in air both cold and humid. This was not merely the landscape of a basement, it was part of the numerous waterways distributed throughout the city—part of the management facilities used to maintain these waterways.

From somewhere came the sound of rushing water, and from somewhere else overhead a breeze blew by.

Capella: "Receiving such a warm welcome and whatnot, allowing me to freely change the size of my chest is exciting i~sn't it. To return and embrace them tight, to have them rectify their upbringing from within this lovely lady's arms, to have them never love anything aside from this lovely lady…"

???: "Can't return."

Capella: "…"

Cheeks dyed crimson, Capella who was exhilarated to the point of trembling, was barred by someone unknown.

Sounding out was a deep voice, a man's voice muffled and sulking.

As she heard this voice Capella raised her head, and from the shadows underground emerged a person's figure.

The expression of Capella who saw him suddenly twisted. The absentminded expression that had been her face until now, immediately contorted to one of loathing, as she glared at her opponent.

Capella: "By this lovely lady's aesthetic values, the most intolerable are the ones who try to hide their ugliness are~n't they?"

???: "I see. Rest easy. By my aesthetic values, your feelings can't be tolerated either."

Responding to Capella with an apathetic manner, heaving a sigh as if something were weighing him down.

And then,

???: "Shouldn't you have heard from above? Your actions have been seen through by that wicked one on our side. Which is to say… in terms of wickedness, how could you hope to triumph against our princess?"

As he spoke, the heaviness that sat in his voice was still present.

The sword attached behind his side was drawn from its sheath, and sluggish light reflected onto it from the empty space above his head.

Standing there was a man with one arm. Was a shadow clad in a black helmet. Was a singularly dressed strange man.

The stranger facing Capella, pointed over with the single arm holding the Blue Dragon Sword.

Al: "Though I've only just greeted you, I'm in a terrible mood today.

—Before I die, hurry up and leave the hell away from here. Mollusk.”

Bonus Short Stories

Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle: Line 3

1

"Bweh?!"

Suddenly, Otto woke up to the feeling of his face being bathed in cold water.

The abrupt incident made him spring up and hurriedly check the state of his surroundings. To lower his posture and ascertain the position of the hostile presence would be the first crucial step to take.

From Otto's point of view, him being used to camping, failing to notice the imminence of the adversary before they could cause any harm would result in nothing but a formidable mistake.

If this was a witchbeast, his life was at risk; if this was a thief, his life was at risk; and if this was a pursuer from his hometown, his life was very at risk. In any case, his life was at risk.

Placed in that campsite combined with a life crisis, thinking about how, in the first place, he had never been given that many chances to let his guard down, Otto consciously braced himself for the crisis—

"…Mr. Otto, you're incredibly messy."

"Huh? Petra?"

Looking at Otto lying on the green grass was a young girl with deadpan eyes, Petra.

She worked at the Roswaal estate as a novice maid—though it could be said that, now that nearly a year since she started working had elapsed, both her experience and work habits made that title no longer appropriate for her.

Anyhow, while in that situation where she looked down towards him, Otto tilted his head greatly. Because in her hand was a bucket, leaving enough circumstantial evidence to determine that within her lied the cause of the impact that he had been showered with upon awakening.

“Uuuh… Petra, why have you poured water onto me? Did I do anything to make you angry, perhaps?”

“Who knows? It’s just that, when I came to see the flowers for the morning watering, I found you curled up in the garden and I was scared, it’s definitely not revenge or anything of the sort.”

“…Thank you very much for the polite explanation.”

“No, no,” Petra bowed politely; and, while watching her, Otto scratched his head as he fixed his wet hair. Then, he looked at the grass that seemed to have become his bed.

That green grass, although it was quite awkward to call it a campsite, Otto understood that he would not have woken up there until he had received Petra’s counterattack.

—Because, in a mansion full of unworried people, there was no way to keep one’s wariness going.

2

“I’ve heard it from Petra, Otto-nii, ya were sleepin’ in the garden, weren’t ya? Doin’ that ain’t gonna make ya less tired, and also, ya can catch a cold, y’know?”

When Otto had already returned to his room after getting that early morning act over with, Garfiel came to him. Listening to what Garfiel said with his sharp fangs clicking, Otto put his hand on his forehead,

“Things spread pretty quickly, I see… This is about what happened a while ago, right?”

“Petra was just grumblin’ about when she went ta water tha flowers. Damn tho, had I been a little quicker, I could’ve seen Otto-nii all covered in grass."

"You do not need to worry about those things, really…"

While organizing what was on top of his desk, Otto tiredly shook his head before the smile of the boy he saw as a brother.

Even though Garfiel and Petra had promptly exchanged information, it was still unexpected that the two got along well.

Garfiel was fifteen years old and Petra was thirteen, making them the closest in age within the youngsters of the Roswaal estate; and, recently, it had become it was frequent to witness Garfiel being fed by Petra, who was earnestly devoted to her progress in the kitchen. Since Petra especially adored Frederica, maybe she had good affinity with Garfiel due to him being her younger brother, or maybe she had good affinity with the blood of the lineage those siblings had.

"Well, Petra can get along flawlessly with anybody, so I do not think it matters."

"So, why were ya even sleepin' on top of tha grass, Otto-nii? Didn't ya say ya were goin' to take a bath and then sleep after playin' Shatranj with me?"

"And I did intend to do so, but I was caught by Ms. Ram's group when I finished bathing…"

The night before, since he had unusually finished all his work for the day, Otto felt pretty eager to jump into his bed after taking a bath. However, that was where he had been trapped by Ram and Frederica, received an invitation for an evening drink, and therefore gladly jumped at it without a second thought.

"I did not intend to have enough to get drunk, but you know…"

"Ah, that alcohol thin'. Even y'are all disastrous with that, Otto-nii. I don't get what's so enjoyable about drinkin' that stuff, but it seems like both Ram and Sis like it."

Placing his buttocks on the desk Otto was organizing, Garfiel empathetically shrugged his shoulders.

The drinkers in the Roswaal estate were Otto and Roswaal, plus Ram and Frederica.

Due to Emilia being horribly weak to alcohol, it was forbidden for her; and on the subject of Beatrice, putting aside her actual age, Subaru disliked it, so he did not let her drink it. The aforementioned Subaru, too, used “because I’m a minor” as his reason to refuse drinking, hence Otto found drinking partners valuable.

Being that the case, the combination of the feeling of liberation from having finished his work plus the chance to have the drinking partners he had missed for a long time arose, and as a result, Otto had ended up spending the night with the garden’s grass as his bed.

“Fortunately, I did not catch a cold, so there are no obstacles for my work. That is a relief.”

“I get tha feelin’ that’s not what ya should be worried about, but if y’are fine with that, Otto-nii, then it’s alright, I guess. ‘Now is when Hemuken rejoices,’ like they say.”

“What does the name of a millionaire famous for perishing after taking a wicked woman as his bride have to do with this…?”

Even then, since having the reason explained to him in detail would probably have been depressing, Otto did not inquire any further.

“Well, even Hemuken could be happy precisely because he did not know the details, and this is where I should follow his example… Oh.”

Piling up documents and matching their corners, Otto suddenly looked at the scene outside the window, and his gaze softened. When he saw Otto like that, “‘Sup?” Garfiel also watched outside next to him.

And then, he noticed the figures of three people doing an odd dance in the mansion’s garden below his eyes.

"Ah, tha Captain and Lady Emilia, plus Beatrice. They seem to be havin' so much fun every mornin'."

"Actually, radio calisthenics is becoming a custom, as you can see. It is something splendid, in the sense that it does not break one's daily habits. …Though it is not like I have any idea of how his plan to spread that through the whole domain even works."

From the dimensions of health and lifestyle, radio calisthenics spreading was a good thing, but Otto had a few reservations about the approach of announcing it as a public commitment for the Royal Election.

Leaving Subaru's banter aside, Emilia had zero bad intentions and a lot of goodwill, so getting her to make a change of plans through persuasion would prove greatly difficult. That was not actually a bad thing, though.

"Now that I remember, the Captain said we should help 'im announce that doin' calisthenics every day transforms ya int'a beauty."

"Isn't that just outright lying? Lady Emilia is more than one hundred years old, surely she was already a beauty a century ago. I sure hope he is not going to try something as unpersuasive as saying she has been doing radio calisthenics for one hundred years, since that would be pretty problematic if promptly spread…"

Wishing to be spared extra misgivings, Otto breathed out a sigh. And, after hearing that, Garfiel indiscreetly averted his gaze.

When he saw the reaction of the boy who was like his brother, Otto experienced a dreadful presentiment, and turned around to where his gaze was averted. His gaze turned away. It turned back. It turned away. It turned back—

"It can't be, has he already advanced with that rumor?"

"Nah, maybe he's just spreadin' it from time ta time, maybe even I helped 'im, or maybe it's already close ta bein' the vogue at Costuul…"

“H-How troublesome. First of all, becoming a beauty with radio calisthenics is a very… Huh?!”

Surprised at the unexpected hidden mechanism he had just uncovered, Otto remembered the latest incidence, and his shoulders rose. Now that he remembered, days ago, while in the Industrial City ‘Costuul,’ which was close to the mansion, he had been told by the citizens that had already become pretty familiar with his face.

“They told me: ‘Mr. Otto’s such a beauty, you see,’ and I thought it was some characteristic expression from Costuul, but… Is it really because of that?!”

“Aaah, that could be it… Uh, Otto-nii? Where ya goin’?”

Unwilling to let this happen, Otto scratched his head as he readied to exit the room; and when Garfiel made a question to his back, “I think it is obvious,” Otto turned back,

“I shall go and silence the foolish gossip Mr. Natsuki has perpetrated, right now! What would we do if the propagation of those strange rumors had a negative influence on the Royal Election as a result?! Besides, I am afraid the passing ladies might look at me and get weird expectations about radio calisthenics!”

“I feel like that last one is yer actual motive, tho… Wait! Don’t ya dare go without me!”

Otto walked lumberingly as his ponderous step sounded; and, while hurriedly following behind the man that was like his brother, Garfiel clicked his sharp fangs,

“Ever since the Goddess Statue incident, Otto-nii gets all sensitive when treated like a beauty, huh?”

And so he muttered.

3

“And for that reason, Subaru and Emilia both went to the city in order to clear up the misunderstanding, I suppose. Since Betty is a lady capable of showing consideration, I sensibly chose to let them go on their own."

It was a time period when breakfast was over and fire time had begun—there was Otto scanning the material, which he treated as a matter to be scanned anew, that had been brought into his room at some point, and before him was a cute young girl, well-behavedly sitting with her small chest thrown out. It was Beatrice.

Although she was Subaru's contracted spirit and always Subaru-bound, there were also rare occasions when, for reasons of consideration like she herself said, she separated from Subaru's side.

The one Beatrice was together with the most during those moments was Petra, who adored her, but there were also times, like this one, when she came to Otto.

Her main reason was—

"You're busy and therefore have no time to bother with Betty, which helps to make it easier to complain, I suppose."

"So you just couldn't wait one more second for me to come into the room for this?!"

"Don't be so noisy. This is the truth at which Betty, who has seen various types of humans for four hundred years, has arrived through her aesthetic sense, I suppose. An innate talent lies within you. An entertainment one."

"Entertainment?!"

Even though it was not a gratifying truth at all, he would take Beatrice's words with a grain of salt. Very recently, Beatrice was receiving a pretty strong influence from Subaru, to the point that her conduct was greatly close to Subaru's.

He used to think that, as long as nobody was harmed, it was something heartwarming; however, after noticing that, in essence, this could mean that Subaru was multiplying by one and a half, he could no longer think of it as heartwarming.

It was necessary for Beatrice to fulfill her duty as the one in charge of restraining Subaru whenever Otto was absent.

“In that sense, you have helped me by showing the actual contamination level received from Mr. Natsuki, thus allowing me to easily grasp the cause of my headaches. ‘…Helped?’”

“Soliloquies are a good opportunity to reflect on yourself, I suppose. And in your case, it would be more constructive to stop solely paying attention to others and to start thinking a bit more about your own happiness, in fact.”

“S-Such earnest advice… It doesn’t seem to be the same person that, just a while ago, was telling me that it’s easier to complain if talking to me.”

Thinking about how this was, probably, a sign that she worried about him, Otto awkwardly scratched his head.

The report of Otto sleeping in the garden had become known in the blink of an eye, and every person he had met since morning had, one after the other, shown concern for his condition. Petra, being the one who had poured water onto him, had served him, by own initiative, a refill of his post-meal tea; and Frederica, too, seemed fairly remorseful about the events of the previous night.

Early in the morning, the fact that Garfiel had prioritized Otto, over the radio calisthenics he would usually join, must have been because he was worried about him; and the documents he was given as the Internal Affairs Minister in his room, which were probably left there by Ram, were fewer than usual. That was a relative matter, though. When Otto wondered how much of Roswaal’s consideration had been included there, the crease between his eyebrows changed its depth.

Therefore, if even Beatrice bothered to come to his room—

“An incomprehensible consideration, isn’t that what this is?”

“…I don’t really understand what you’re saying, I suppose. However, I do know that if it was a comprehensible consideration, it would surely turn into a mess even you wouldn’t escape from, I

suppose.”

“—? What does that…?”

And, at the same time Otto tilted his head, the room’s door opened with a boisterous sound.

“Otto, are you here? Everyone at the city was surprised to hear you were sleeping in the garden this morning!”

The one who forcefully flew into the room was Emilia, who was supposed to be heading to Costuul along with Subaru. Since, supposedly, she had gone to correct the misinformation regarding radio calisthenics, he was surprised to see her come back this quickly,

“Why did you tell them I spent the night in the garden?! Isn’t that making more rumors?!”

“Frederica just happened to be talking to the store gentleman that brings everything to the mansion… But the important thing here is, if you were that tired you could’ve simply told us!”

“Who has their priorities backwards enough to go with the purpose of correcting a rumor, and then return after hearing another rumor…?”

Seeing Emilia pout at the fact that he had hidden his weariness from her, Otto pondered what excuse to tell.

However, before the answer to Otto’s concern could come out, the one who arrived after Emilia fell into the room.

“Y-You’re so fast, Emilia-tan, you’re an awfully fast runner.”

“Ah, Subaru, sorry, I didn’t mean to leave you behind. But I couldn’t contain myself…”

Looking at Subaru heavily breathe after catching up, Emilia gently caressed his back. While his respiration calmed down, “Haaa,” Subaru took a deep breath, “Emilia-tan, it’s an amazing thing that you’re attentive, but Otto sleeping in the garden isn’t anything worthy of surprise. That’s like his preference, right?”

“It is not a preference or anything of the like! Well, I must apologize for causing you to worry…”

“You don’t really need to apologize, I’d just like you to tell us that you’re not fine when you’re not fine. You know, since we’re all always relying on you when something happens, Otto…”

Despondently, Emilia raised her eyebrows out of concern for Otto’s overwork. At Emilia’s side, Subaru and Beatrice looked like they had just reflected on something.

Seeing their laudable aspect, Otto felt a very light tickling in the pit of his stomach.

“Certainly, it is true that all my days are busy with one thing or another. However, that is something I decided to do… because I know that there will eventually be time for me to relax.”

And that would be, for example, a day like this one, when he would wake up in the garden and receive consideration from everyone.

Even if only a little bit, a day when nobody brought favors for him felt healthy, yet at the same time unsatisfactory, but that was the work of his own troublesome nature.

“So, Otto, are you alright?”

“Yes, I am thankful for your concern. Now, I would not like to inconvenience you any further, but…”

Cutting his words off there, Otto glanced at the material on top of his desk—the mountain of papers that was very subtly lower than usual, and after that, he calculated the time necessary for the process and smiled.

“Since it seems that I can make room for tea time, would you mind if I join you?”

It never hurt to occasionally take some time, not for favors or for work discussions, but for nothing more than a friendly chat.

And that was how the Internal Affairs Minister of the Emilia Camp, Otto Suwen spent his busy daily life—his half-holiday that had suddenly emerged from only one of those days, the day he had woken up in the garden.

Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle:
Page 4
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

Griffith: “By the way, that phrase "I really hate you more than anything" is a really hearty expression.”

As soon as he sat in the dining hall, "Dairy King" Griffith Allen stroked his substantial stomach and said this with complete happiness.

Their current location is Viscount Talion Aluz’s mansion, which is also the venue for the meeting between the leaders of the Western Border.

…This is an important meeting that concerns the Royal Selection and will greatly influence the future of the Emilia camp.

All the people present here are famous and powerful, and getting their cooperation is an indispensable condition for the Emilia camp to be able to compete in the Royal Selection.

So what kind of debating talents will be displayed by Margrave Roswaal L Mathers during this meeting? This is something that has attracted much attention, but…

Petra: “I made you laugh…”

Gwen: “It’s not embarrassing, right? You did a great job in front of all the Oji-sans. Talion-chan thinks so too, right?”

Aluz: “Why even ask for my approval… However, this young maid really did not commit any particular faux pas. I admire her for being so dignified and calm in such a situation despite her young age…”

Gwen: “Petra-chan, Talion-chan already has a young wife, you should tread carefully.”

Aluz: “Gwen-dono!”

Viscount Aluz yelled with a bright red face, and Gwen Merret flashed a mischievous smile with one eye closed. The argument between the two caused Petra to ease the corners of her lips and her cheeks to start burning a bright shade of red.

Petra, who participated in this meeting as Roswaal’s attendant, her mission was no longer limited to the duties of being an attendant, but also shouldering a great responsibility.

The reason why the half-elf Emilia was recommended as a candidate for the Royal Selection.The explanation expected to clear the supporters’ blind prejudice was completely entrusted to Petra.

Being forcibly entrusted with such a large and heavy task, Petra was completely surprised by it.

The purpose of this is to allow Petra, who has no reason to favor Roswaal, to speak regarding Emilia’s character in order to produce effective persuasiveness. This is not difficult to comprehend. But what she doesn’t understand is why he held back on such an important thing and did not tell her in advance?

Petra: “Obviously, had I screwed up, the Master wouldn’t have anywhere to go…”

Roswaal, who has a truly rotten personality, never imposes tasks onto those he believes can’t complete them. In the end, everything he made her do was well within Petra’s capability and it frustrated her.

Therefore, even though Petra managed to claim victory over that sudden and critical battle, her anger will not waiver.

Therefore, Griffith’s words at the beginning were an insult that Petra directed towards Roswaal in front of the dignitaries as she was suddenly pushed onto the stage.

In addition, the shame that Petra felt was fully vented and removed by Frederica on Roswaal, so she felt very happy.

But no matter what…

Aluz: “It’s almost time for the banquet, so let’s stop talking first.”

Petra: “Ah, then I have to help out as well…”

Hearing the words of Viscount Aluz, Petra hurriedly left the dining halland went to meet Frederica, who was preparing for the banquet.

And just after Petra left…

Reynolds: “…Even that child’s struggle is a strategy to seek recognition from us, right?”

???: “…”

Reynolds: “Originally, I didn’t have any grounds to refuse the Margrave’s invitation. However, if power was used to incur obedience, there would be a possibility of creating a grudge. So, this is a necessary step…what’s wrong?”

Sitting at one end of the conference table, the solemn man expressed his opinions. The mayor of the industrial city Costuul, Reynolds Rex frowned at the gaze focused on him.

Seeing Reynolds’s reaction, Gwen rubbed his chin’s beard.

Gwen: “Ah no. It’s just been a long time since I’ve last heard Reynolds’s voice, and I was thinking about what he would say during such a rare occasion. I didn’t expect it to be this.”

Reynolds: “Hey, being introverted is just a matter of character. So, why did you say that?”

Keeping his poker face, Reynolds asked Gwen back. When he heard his question, Gwen shrugged, and Viscount Aluz and Griffith also sighed separately.

Then Gwen looked at the door that Petra had just walked out of.

Gwen: “Everyone knows that it was just an act. Forget Roswaal-chan, even Petra-chan who made those remarks herself knows it well.”

2

In the past, Petra had always considered herself a smart girl. Once upon a time, she even felt that she was the center of the world, but this illusion was on the verge of annihilation due to the occurrence of a certain event.

Having said that, Petra did not feel that she was worthless because of this, but instead, still believed that she was better than the average person.

It’s just that with such a firm belief, she’s not allowed to make any mistakes. Therefore, she will not start doubting herself now.

…Her own persuasion strongly touched the hearts of those adults and prompted them to change their minds.

Things are probably all developed in accordance with the plot set by the script. Even if some sudden changes were made, the results will not change. And so, a solid script like this was complete.

Petra’s struggle is nothing but an illusion that cannot get rid of the framework of the script. It is precisely because she knew this point that Roswaal was able to scheme with peace of mind.

Petra: “…Sure enough, I still hate the Master.”

???: “--Saying that out loud in front of your maaaster, you really aaare quite something”

Petra’s words made the corners of Roswaal’s lips rise.

After all the dignitaries went to the banquet, Roswaal stayed in the meeting room because he still had something to discuss with his relative Annerose. On the way to the banquet after the end of their conversation, the two ran into Petra in the corridor.

Annerose: “Eiya, isn’t this Petra? That was truly a wonderful speech just now that was not inferior to my uncle's provocation tactics. It seems that you have been watching Emily well."

Petra: "Annerose-sama…"

Saying that, Annerose poked her head out from behind Roswaal.

In Petra's view, although Annerose is only ten years old, she has a temperament and style not befitting of her age. She is an aristocrat who is more like a nobleman compared to the unserious Roswaal.

Although young, she deserves respect. So Petra bowed her head respectfully.

Petra: "Thank you, Annerose-sama. But…"

Annerose: "…No matter what the outcome was, the dignity of your behavior will not be belittled in the slightest. Lift your head, Petra. I allow you to do this."

Annerose: "I shall speak in my uncle's place."

Annerose said as she pinched Roswaal's armpit. Seeing this, Roswaal, who was regarded as an enemy by the two girls, couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

Roswaal: "Aaalthough I already knew it in my heart, I really aam being regarded as a total viiillain"

Annerose: "Of course. Uncle's only achievements today are allowing Petra to talk about Emily's charm and hiring the best chef, Dias."

Petra: "Ah, is it Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI?"

Annerose: "Does Petra know of her too?"

Petra: "That's because I saw her in the courtyard just now…"

Suddenly, the little girl who spoke exaggeratedly appeared in Petra's mind. Although her name is that convoluted, because her impression was so deep, she can just barely remember it.

Now that she thinks about it, she did seem to be the chef who had been invited to prepare dinner.

Petra: “Is she famous?”

Annerose: “She’s not just famous! She is the legendary chef who can stop wars with her cooking, and even make the “Divine Dragon” forget about its scales being touched because of its supreme deliciousness!”

If everything the passionate Annerose said was true, then she is not so much a great chef, but rather a mage. No, she has to correct that evaluation. Because the representative of the greatest mage is the most detestable person in the world for Petra.

Roswaal: “Actually, I have summoned her to the mansion befooore. Since it can make Annerose happy, then it was not a waste ooof effort to search for her back. You can enjoooy it.”

Petra: “…?”

Stroking Annerose’s little head, Roswaal’s voice sounded gentle. This is Roswaal’s way of pampering Annerose, and his attitude towards her has always been this way.

Petra sees it as something similar to his bias for Beatrice.

However, the awkwardness that Petra felt for a moment was not due to Roswaal’s twisted love…

Petra: “Why, does the Master speak as if such a matter is irrelevant to you?”

Suddenly, what catches Petra’s attention is Roswaal’s attitude towards it, as if that matter doesn’t relate to him.

At Annerose’s side, whose eyes were like dazzling stars with a delicious premonition, Roswaal said with an outsider’s expression and voice.

Roswaal: “Hmm? It’s very siiimple. …After all, I have no sense of taste. It is only natural that I can’t enjoy the taste of cooking.”

Petra: “…Eh?”

This is no longer a speech that can be described by the word "unexpected" alone.

For Petra, this is truly a literal shock that shook her world.

…No sense of taste, what does that mean? In other words, the Master can’t taste?

Petra: “Since, since when…”

Roswaal: “I’ve been like this a loooong time, before you were even booorn. This is something you don’t need to worry about. After all, you haven’t noticed this matter until nooow, right?”

Petra: “…”

Petra was speechless. He wore a straight face while spitting out absurd words.

Because not being able to taste means not being able to feel the happiness of taste. The taste of Frederica’s cooking, Ram’s steamed sweet potatoes, the taste of wine drunk at night, Garfiel’s meatloaf, Subaru’s mayonnaise, and all the other tastes of the world, he never felt it.

Roswaal: “This is something that ooonly Annerose and Clind know. Even Ram and Frederica were not tooold about it. You are now the only one who knows about it in the entire maansion.”

Petra: “What..! Why… would you tell me…about this…”

Roswaal: “Even if it’s just one, you want to know at least ooone of my weaknesses, right?”

Looking at Roswaal, who closed a single eye and looked at her with his yellow eye, Petra bit her lip. In an instant, Petra’s mind was overwhelmed.

The anger, towards Roswaal, that had been vented by Frederica was now filled in another form.

Petra: “Why, Master…!”

Why say that. Roswaal, why did you have to say it like that?!

Petra will not forgive Roswaal. Absolutely not. What is he saying to Petra like this? It’s really irritating.

Making a fool out of her by telling her a secret that neither Ram nor Frederica knew about?

…Treating people as if they were monkeys.

Annerose: “Petra, ignore my uncle’s wickedness…”

Petra: “…No, Annerose-sama, I have already decided.”

Seeing the change in Petra’s expression, Annerose touched her arm worriedly. Petra then gently joined her palms and placed them on Annerose’s hands, then shook her head.

Her course of action is already decided.. …Petra Leyte, is by no means a girl who will cry herself to sleep.

3

…At the beginning of the banquet, Petra couldn’t help being stunned by the richness of the dishes served on the table.

The table is full of dazzling arrays of delicious food. From the selection of ingredients to the cooking method of the food, it can be described as a gluttonous paradise that uses all kinds of high-quality ingredients to create a fusion of ancient and modern, motherland and foreign countries cuisine.

Dias: “This dish is the ultimate display of Moi talent, use all of your five senses to enjoy it.”

The one who was speaking pridefully was the loli chef, Dias. The table filled with dishes displayed a style that matched her and the fat assistant beside her’s overflowing self-confidence.

Even if this ultimate feast is called the supreme work, there is no exaggeration in the slightest. In fact, those influential people who must have been tired of so-called delicacies can hardly conceal their feelings of admiration in front of Dias's cooking.

Dias: "How's the taste of Moi's supreme dishes, little girl?!"

That's right, the person who Dias asked briefly about her taste is Petra, one of the guests at the banquet.

It can be said that this is the reward for breaking through Roswaal's unreasonable means, Gwen's request to Viscount Aluz, and Dias proposed the conditions for allowing Petra to participate in the banquet.

Petra gratefully accepted these kindnesses. …Also for Petra's own rebellion.

Petra: "…Mmm!"

With just one bite, the moment Dias's cooking was placed on the tip of her tongue, Petra's whole body was madly ravaged by its violent taste. Her small body trembled with ecstasy, her cheeks were flushed with wonderful pleasure, and her pupils were wet.

She had miscalculated how shocking Dias's dishes would be. It is precisely because Petra's cooking skills have improved by leaps and bounds during this year that she can deeply understand their vast difference in skill.

This is the pinnacle of deliciousness that no ordinary humans can reach. After accepting this bitterly, Petra smiled.

Petra: "Yes, it's very delicious. The sweet fragrance spreads inside my mouth, there is a delicious aftertaste left on my tongue and teeth, and the taste is absolutely wonderful. Because the taste is much lighter than it looks, it feels like you would never tire of eating it."

Dias: "Hohohoho, yes, yes. You understand little girl! You are a master in the art of flattery."

Hearing her thoughts, Dias leaned back with joy and danced. Petra watched her reaction while peeping at Roswaal's face.

Roswaal: "…"

Listening to Petra's eloquent words regarding the cuisine's cooking and deliciousness, Roswaal showed a thoughtful expression. …And Petra burned this image into her memory, feeling secretly delighted.

This is the taste of happiness that Roswaal has always ignored and hidden.

When making dishes, the cook will take into account the feelings of the diners. If the dish is the taste of happiness, isn't the cook the person who creates happiness? Roswaal has always ignored this point.

She did not listen to his explanation. Petra just accepted it. So, this is the revenge from Petra. An attack that conveys unknown joy to Roswaal, who has no sense of taste.

Tell him about the details of the taste as much as possible. And she must do her utmost best to describe the deliciousness of the food so that the listener is mouth-watering, to the extent that his stomach is groaning before he knows it.

Dias: "What's the matter, Margrave? Did you forget how to eat? Wasn't it you who called Moi over?"

Roswaal: "Ah, ahhhh, that's riiight Of course, I am also very much looking forward to iiit."

As he said, Roswaal looked dazed and picked up his dinner plate. Was the moment of hesitation sent to his lips the result of Petra's revenge?

That is…

Roswaal: "…Ahhh, it must be really deeelicious."

Roswaal squinted his eyes at Petra's posture as she was enduring the delicious impact and trying her hardest to describe its taste. That's what Petra interpreted from his current expression.

And in addition, even Frederica, after hearing Petra's praise of Dias's dishes, Frederica could not help but comment…

Frederica: "Petra really is skilled at flattery."

After that, Frederica began to demand feedback about the taste of her cooking no matter what kind of dish she made.

END

Joshua Juukulius's Third Careful Encyclopedia

1

The view outside the window always looked like an illusion that he could not reach. House Juukulius was of ancient origin and had produced knights for the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica for generations.

Through various events that happened in the Kingdom of Lugunica's history, the members of House Juukulius accompanied and solemnly supported it as knights.

It was not a role like that of the Sword Saint and Sword Demon, who lived in the spotlight for their extraordinary achievements at turning points in the history of the kingdom. However, just like a king was nothing without his vassals, there were always nameless ordinary knights hiding in the shadow of heroic achievements.

House Juukulius was also no more than a family that produced that sort of ordinary knight. They were the backbone of the kingdom, as people who swore their loyalty to it.

I have never doubted the way my family is. As I mentioned before, it is a necessity. There need to be ordinary people's stories behind the stories of heroes and other excellent people. It is just a matter of having the right people in the right place and deciding on their roles.

In other words, a main role and a supporting role. I thought there was no big difference between these two. If I had to name a problem, there is just one—

"—Cough."

He coughed as his body creaked and ached somewhere deep inside without any reason. His urge to cough could not disappear, and he kept coughing and breathing roughly, enduring the pain.

It was not anything unusual. It was just one of the pointless seizures that happened to him ten times daily. It was not an illness. He was just weak and fragile.

“—Cough.”

And the reality of that “weakness” was his inescapable sin.

In House Juukulius with generations of knights, the fact that the “eldest son” was born too weak to hold a sword was a very deep sin that could make him regret his own birth.

—Joshua Juukulius was born into this world a sinner.

2

“—This is Julius. He will live with us from today. You originally are cousins, but he will be your elder brother from now on,” I was told by my father who is the head of our family.

This was how I first met my “elder brother.”

Joshua felt miraculously good on that day and could eat together with his family for the first time in a while. The introduction above was done before eating.

“Julius is my younger brother’s son. He recently lost his parents in an accident, so I decided to take him in and raise him… Do you have any questions, Joshua?”

“Questions?”

“Yes. Julius is three years older than you… If I take him into our family, he will be in the position of your elder brother. In that case…”

I noticed how my father’s golden eyes looked away for a moment.

It was something like an expression of his guilt that was visible only for a brief second. Joshua fully understood his father’s unspoken words.

Joshua naturally caused a lot of trouble for many adults due to his weak body, especially his parents. Those kinds of kids also naturally got the ability to read adults' faces.

Joshua was no exception. That's why he could read his father's thoughts—he felt sorry for Joshua but also prioritized fulfilling House Juukulius's main mission. Joshua could guess the tension between his father and the knights, so he did not oppose.

I did not have the right to oppose from the very beginning.

My father did not need to feel all that guilt in the first place.

If I were born with a proper body from the very beginning, there would not have been a strange gap here.

Joshua chose to smile and nod as an attentive son would do in order to reassure his father.

"…"

You could see the relief in his father's face as he lowered his eyebrows in response to Joshua's reaction. He could not see Joshua's true feelings, but he could not be blamed for that.

Joshua was that good at hiding his true nature.

That was why—

"—Julius, you should introduce yourself."

"Y-Yes, Father!" said the boy as he was pushed by his father to go forward.

Julius stood in front of Joshua. He looked gentle and had the same hair color as Joshua and his father—proof of the Juukulius bloodline.

"My name is Julius Juukulius, and I will be living with the main branch of the family starting today. I know it's weird that I will be your elder brother even though I came here later, but…I hope we get along well," said Julius without hesitation, as if he had practiced these sentences multiple times before.

He then held his hand out.

Joshua looked at the handshake gesture and tried to play it safe. It was his first encounter with someone he was going to spend a long time together with.

“I am Joshua Juukulius. Nice to meet you too.” Joshua tried to give a neutral response, so as to not leave a strong impression.

He softly shook Julius’s hand and wanted to end the situation.

That’s what he thought—

“—Huh?!”

The second they shook hands, Joshua saw something unthinkable. The second after their hands touched each other, Julius knelt down in front of him.

Then, with one knee on the floor of the dining room, Julius gently brought the back of Joshua’s hand to his lips—that was a kind of courtesy that a knight would do towards a lady.

“I hope we will be together for a very long time.” Julius’s face turned red as he said those words while kneeling down.

It was not an act he was used to doing. His voice was shaking and his gaze kept going places, but he looked like someone who achieved his first goal.

Joshua caught his breath when—

“—Hahahaha! Ahahaha! Julius, this is a greeting a knight gives a lady. You shouldn’t do it with Joshua…ah…ahahaha!”

“D-Did I make a mistake?!”

While trying to endure the humiliation and follow courtesy, Julius was stunned as his mistake was pointed out.

It was the first time Joshua saw his father laughing so loudly and smiling so broadly. There were other servants in the dining room, but his father wasn't able to keep up appearances and hold the laugh in.

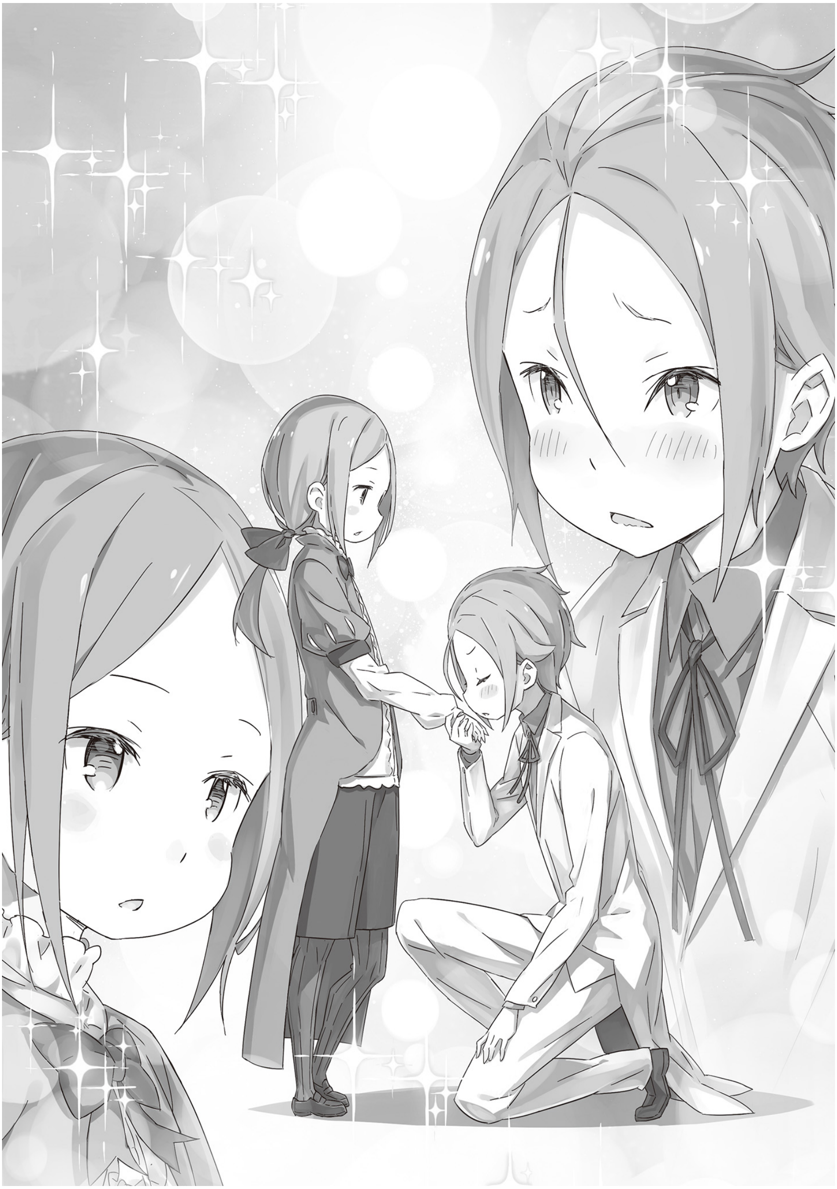

“D-Don’t laugh at me, please!” exclaimed Julius. “I thought about this a lot…”

“Ah, I know, I know,” his father responded, wiping away his tears as Julius desperately tried to resist. “It’s fine for you to learn etiquette from now on. I see that you have the desire to learn, and that is enough.”

Julius turned back to Joshua, seemingly saddened by his father’s reaction.

He then tried to apologize to Joshua for kissing his hand, saying that he had embarrassed him—

“A-Are you okay?” he asked.

“…Huh?” Joshua replied confusedly.

“You…you are crying…Are you in pain?”

Joshua’s body stiffened in surprise due to Julius’s words. Julius touched Joshua’s cheek with a “You see?” before continuing. “—These are tears.”

Joshua saw a few drops slightly shaking on Julius’s little finger.

The moment Joshua realized those were his own tears that were scooped up—

“—uh…u…”

His emotions poured forth so easily that he could not believe it. It was such a muddy stream of unknown emotions that even he was unaware that he had sealed away.

Joshua burst into tears, instantly being tossed about by the flow that came pouring out all at once.

“Oh! Ah! Ohhhh, Father! What shall I do?!” Julius exclaimed.

“J-Joshua, what’s wrong?!” his father shouted. “Tell me if something is wrong! What happened?!”

The father and Julius clearly panicked at the sight of the sobbing Joshua. His son was very easy to deal with apart from his physical condition. The father’s surprise was unsurprising considering this sudden change in his son’s behavior.

The servants’ reactions were no different. They mobilized all their forces to stop Joshua’s tears.

—In the end, Joshua stopped crying after a while, and his first encounter with his elder brother was engraved in his mind as a bitter memory.

3

“I hadn’t studied anything to become a knight in my family.”

That was how Julius started his story after he visited Joshua in his room a few days after their bitter first encounter.

Joshua’s father, who was now Julius’s father as well, switched easily from being a father to being the head of House Juukulius. He suppressed his guilt towards Joshua, and Julius started his special education as a knight.

That being said, it was the long-awaited knight education for the father—it was originally supposed to be taught to Joshua but was left in limbo, so it was understandable why he was so enthusiastic about it.

Of course, I can only imagine how hard it will be on Julius, who will actually be going through it.

“If I had known things would turn out this way, I would have been more serious about everything…”

“—What did you do in your family, Brother?” Joshua tilted his head lying on the bed as he called Julius his brother.

Joshua had a fever this morning, so he was told to rest in bed by his worried servants. But things got better by the middle of the day after lunch.

On days when he had a fever in the morning, Joshua tended to rest for the day. —It was a routine that Joshua had been doing for a long time in order not to bother other people in the house and make them worried.

That's why no one usually entered Joshua's room when he was resting. No one. Except for Julius who came to complain about his special daily education.

"I often used to help my mom and dad. Apart from that, I went out with my friends nearby… I had no idea I was related to a big House like this."

"Did your late father tell you anything about House Juukulius?" Joshua wondered.

"Nothing at all! I was very surprised when my current father came to pick me up."

Joshua squinted his yellow eyes as Julius exaggeratedly waved his hands. He had heard about his father's younger brother, who was also Julius's father and an uncle of his, multiple times.

He was an odd one even within House Juukulius. When his elder brother became head, he quickly married an ordinary woman and started a life outside the family.

He was the kind of person who preferred a simple and ordinary life over a noble family life in House Juukulius. It is not like we were strangers, but I never really interacted with him.

The reason for his and his wife's death was a flood that occurred in a town where Julius's family lived. They were apparently swept away in a flash flood while trying to help others.

"They were great people," said Joshua.

"…" Julius kept silent.

"Brother?"

If they died trying to help others, it meant they lived as righteous and good people. It was ironic that that was the reason for their death, but it made Joshua truly respect his uncle and aunt.

However, Julius just shook his head with a “No” in response to Joshua’s words. “My mom and dad weren’t anything special. But everyone says they did something great, including our father. But…” Joshua sniffled. He then continued with tears in his eyes. “But I don’t care if they were ordinary, I just want them to be alive. Is it weird to think that way?”

“Well, that…”

That was a question Joshua could not find an answer to.

It was definitely a difficult thing to discuss for two young boys who had just become brothers. Julius wiped his face with his sleeve in front of the silent Joshua.

“My mom and dad died,” he continued, “and I was brought here by our father. I got you as my younger brother, and a lot has changed, but…I am still worried.”

“…Worried…about what?” Joshua asked.

He had a body that could move freely; he could be taught all the necessary things to be a knight by his father. He was Julius Juukulius, who would now be walking the path that Joshua was supposed to follow.

—What on earth could you be worrying about, my new brother?

“I wonder what I should do. I wonder whether it is fine to just do as father says. If I do that…” Will I be able to become someone who can repay my dead father and mother?

Young Julius could not find the right words, but that was what he wanted to say. Joshua took his unspoken words and pondered.

He carefully thought about Julius’s concerns. At the time Joshua didn’t understand why. He just thought about it.

If Julius was supposed to follow the path of a knight as the eldest son of House Juukulius that was originally destined for Joshua, it meant that the concerns he had were also Joshua’s concerns.

There is me who was born in a knight family, and all that I have is a body unfitting for a knight. And then there is Julius who grew up as an ordinary person but is going to be raised as a knight in a knight family.

—His path would definitely lead to the unfinished path of Joshua Juukulius.

“Hero…”

“Huh?” Julius raised his eyebrows at Joshua’s mumbled words.

Joshua relaxed his lips as he stared at the slightly surprised Julius. “Your parents were great people. In that case, in order to be worthy of your parents, you definitely need to become a hero.”

“What…is a hero?” Julius tilted his head, but continued listening with a clear desperation in his eyes.

Joshua looked at the bookshelf in his room in response to that gaze. There were different kinds of books from all times and countries that his father had collected for him.

There was a book there that was Joshua’s favorite, and in it was the future ideal of Julius.

And so, let us hear those stories quietly and slowly. Let them be told in all sincerity for Joshua Juukulius’s wishes to be entrusted to his new ‘brother.’

—In order for them both to walk together on the path of becoming heroes as knights of House Juukulius.

END

Volume 20

Chapters 61-81

Chapter 61:
Victim of the Territory

1

Capella lightly tilted her head towards the man chattering without rest, dao wielded in his one hand.

A braid composed of three strands of hair, long and dark, spilled upon her white shoulder. With arms folded as if to emphasize her plump chest she bent forward, casting a mesmerizing gaze towards the helmeted man. Using that bewitching gaze to tempt a man's eyes, it would drive a man's instincts wild, even if he knew it was a trap.

However, whether such a demonic scheme would be effective would depend on the opponent.

Al: “That erotic pose is indeed quite something, but if your goal is to seduce me, it's useless, ya know. For a hardcore virgin… making me thirst after a passerby onee-chan's got such a high difficulty that I'm practically laughing.”

Capella: “Demeaning your own frivolous words and having moderate restraint… Setting aside whether this lovely lady's goals apply for you, you are a man who gives the impression of not gobbling this up. After putting on that harlequin act to catch me off-guard, just what are you going to do with that thick thing?”

Al: “Women shouldn't go spouting dirty jokes like that. It's a real turn-off.”

Capella: “…”

Capella's seemingly provocative gaze turned into an expression of speechlessness after the man's response. The aura of surprise quickly dissipated, however, and Capella laughed as if happy from the bottom of her heart.

Capella: “Kyahahahaha! What is that, that remark at that age, with that demeanor? The maiden of your dreams lives on only within your chest. You’re without doubt a flower in a greenhouse, with an entirely different perspective of things, aren’t you? Kya~a, how dirty.”

Al: “Though I apologize for interrupting your show, don’t make me say it over and over. I’m not in the mood today. Even if you asked, I couldn’t really tell you when it is that I’m in the mood, especially today, so.”

Capella tapped her feet with an attitude not befitting her appearance towards the posturing man—at that, Al’s attitude became extremely complex and irritated.

Rather than posturing, it seemed to be that he was dissatisfied with this task from the bottom of his heart. Being rather different from the two people from above on this point, this led Capella to become increasingly intrigued.

Capella: “Not in the mood, finding this a bother, and yet not clearing the way. Your words are truly full of contradictions. In that case, why the hell are you still in the company of a raucous maniac like myself?”

Al: “The nerve of you to say it yourself, you raucous maniac.”

Capella: “Of course I’d say it. In any case, from this lovely lady’s perspective, absolutely everything that exists in this world is just a way to pass time. You’re all, in entirety, ultimately, objects of this lovely lady. The lovely lady’s love is boundless, filled with mercy, because everything aside from seeking love from this lovely lady is unnecessary… Anything else, do with it as you like.”

Spreading her arms, Capella smiled with the sweet expression of a poisonous flower.

Al, looking at this smile, lowered his dao with a whoosh. Twisting his neck so that his bones made a crack, he spat out a long sigh, “Ah—”.

Al: “That’s it. You’re rather different from the other sins I’ve known.”

Capella: “Oh my, you’ve seen other meats rotted beyond rot? That perverted female meat who resents her own longing? That virgin bastard with miniscule ability? That low-life brat of Bizarre Eating with vile character? Or was it that sick in the head, sick in consciousness, sick in thought, self-entitled Spirit? No matter which, for companions, they’re the absolute worst choices! Haven’t your parents taught you? Choose your companions carefully.”

Al: “…Unfortunately, my current friends are the type my parents warned me about.”

Capella: “That still deserves condolences. Even if you’re like that, will you embrace this lovely lady’s august love? Remove that helmet and reveal your face, embrace and devote love to this lovely lady!”

No matter how contemned or rebuffed, Capella, who carried out the gestures of seeking love, was the epitome of a mind which sought love. Except that referring to her most extreme, forcefully plundering, one-sided love with no regard of others as “Love”, was a misnomer.

Of course, not a single person would answer to her love, which rather than being called awkward, would be better described as completely disparate from human nature.

Al raised the dao that he had just lowered, slowly shaking his head.

Al: “Apologies. I’m happy you feel that way, but the two of us are still unfamiliar with each other, and it’d be embarrassing if any odd rumors spread amongst my friends. Please accept my refusal.”

Capella: “Something like giving regard to the gazes of outsiders, don’t you still have quite the cute aspects. Is this lovely lady that lacking here—I didn’t think this would be outside the sexual preferences of a garbage, masochistic male meat who enjoys being ordered about by women.”

Al: "…Huh?"

Capella: "Disregarding of others, harsh eyes. A body which could even be said to be filled with both sensuality and violence. A stature shorter than this lovely lady currently is, showing plenty of lovely skin. One whose words changed along with mood, yet never grew meaninglessly arrogant. An inner character always held up with logic and self-confidence. One who handed many tasks over to subordinates, but rarely became reliant on them. Not likable but not dislikable, the position and the woman both."

While chattering on endlessly, Capella's figure metamorphosed.

Still maintaining her plump body, she shortened her height and transformed her clothing into a dress which boldly revealed her shoulders and back. Her eyes shifted from sleepy to sharp, and from her keen gaze overflowed an atmosphere of confidence. What appeared was a beautiful woman with long golden hair hanging loose.

Although not the appearance of any particular person among his associates in the city—to some extent, she resembled a woman whom Al associated with.

Al: "…"

Capella: "Oops, not blonde? If it's someone from Lugunica, this should be most likely… In that case, hmmhmmhmm, red—Hm, orange it is."

Observing Al's subtle reactions, Capella's hair color changed bit-by-bit. Testing black, brown, green, blue, hesitating for a moment when it became red, then becoming orange.

With just this, she had assumed an impression ridiculously similar to a very familiar woman.

Al: "How hair-raising… Where have you met Princess?"

Capella: "Never seen her, never spoken to her, never even realized her existence? I merely deducted the type of woman you like from your reactions. This lovely lady is a woman who will give her all, you know? I want you to like it, so it's a matter of course I'd do my best to be liked by the party I want to like me."

Al: "Speaking of reactions, my face is…"

Capella: "Voice, movements, speech patterns. Angle of neck and line of sight, attitude. From chatting, understanding your attitude, nature, preferences."

Al: "…"

Capella: "One twitch or one movement, not missing a single one. Putting in the entirety of her heart and soul to be loved, this is the way this lovely lady utterly devotes her all. This lovely lady has already utterly devoted her all like this so… Look at this lovely lady. Look only at this lovely lady. Don't look at anyone else. This lovely lady's face, body, voice, attitude, gestures, all of it, all of it! They should all be totally completely in line with your preferences!"

As she spoke, the voice of Capella—rather, of Capella who had assumed Priscilla's appearance, gradually grew rough. Her claims were a straight line of desire to please, but a line too straight would become a love that would pierce right through its target.

Al could not respond with a shake of his head or with words, instead only able to ready his entire body's will to fight as a response to Capella. At this silent answer, on Capella's face grew discouragement and contempt.

Capella: "You, a selfish scum male meat… which aspect of this lovely lady are you dissatisifed with?"

Al: "Don't misunderstand. I neither like you nor dislike you, either way is fine… Sorry, that's a lie. As expected, you're disgusting, so I really don't like you."

Capella: "—Hk! You adulterous, rotting male meat!!"

Stomping her feet, Capella's right arm began to transform into the huge head of a wolf, starting from her shoulder. The ferociously howling, beastly head flew towards Al, who was frozen in place, at speeds beyond what the eye could process. In a moment, the fangs of that head, sharp as blades, gnawed on the entirety of Al's upper body with a single bite—the instant before that could transpire, Al's body flew forward into the gap of the approaching canine fangs, flying horizontally to escape by a hair.

Capella: "Don't think you can escape with just that!"

Al: "Like I'd think that! The side! And next, the back!"

Over Al's head as he rolled on, a powerful attack from a hand slammed down. It was a giant hand, each of its five fingers comparable in size to a human torso. Being caught in its grip would be akin to being caught by a snake.

However, this attack too was evaded by Al with a backstep. And then the wolf's head returned, its fangs looking to crush Al's waist, but it was stopped by the dao, wielded behind his back.

Al: "Whoa, whoaaaa, Dona!"

Without completely dispelling the momentum of the attacking beast, and all the while maintaining his blocking stance with the dao, Al's body slid forward. Midway through the canto, a wall of earth rose from the ground, slamming directly from below into the right arm that had become a beast.

The wolf whose lower jaw had been struck let out a wail, and the shift in mass of her right arm led Capella's entire posture to collapse. Seeing this, Al, having dodged the left arm's onslaught as well, rushed forward.

Al: "Dona! This side too, Dona!"

Capella: "—Hk."

The Dona that Al so incessantly launched was the lowest tier of Earth Magic.

Whether in power or durability as a wall, both were perfectly aligned with its nature as the lowest tier of magic. Even so, Al still relied on this magic as his best tactic in life-threatening combat.

Forming obstacles, blocking field of vision, forming a foothold—exactly like he was doing in this moment.

Al: “DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

A solidly formed wall of soil hindered the movements of Capella’s distant right and left arms. In addition, Capella’s body itself was assaulted by a wall of dirt that obscured her frontal vision. Then, with the preparations in place, Al rose into the air—using the speed and momentum from the earth rising from the floor, he launched forward as if he had been ejected by a spring.

The moment she heard these shouts, Capella glanced overhead, and a flash appeared upon her slender neck, her head flying away.

A face similar to Priscilla’s own danced through the air, a tremendous amount of blood spurting from the wound. Capella’s blood seemingly possessed an unidentified poisonous effect, the very reason for Crusch’s suffering.

Of course, even having been warned to not brush the excess of blood—

Al: “Who do you think you’re fooling, you damn liar!”

Stepping into this pool of blood without mercy, Al stuck out his dao.

The tip of the blade did not hesitate in the slightest to reach through the back of Capella’s headless body, penetrating through her body and coming out through her cleavage, adding another fatal injury to an opponent who was supposed to have died. However, it could not stop at this.

Al: “Take this! El Dona!”

Sweeping up the pierced body, Al flew forward and incanted with momentum—one level higher than Dona, El-tier magic using the dao as a pivot was activated within Capella’s body.

Of course, Capella’s body was unable to suppress the mass that swelled from inside, and scattered in an explosion.

"Bang", with a foolish sound as if it were a joke, Capella's body turned to shreds. Hands and feet scattered and flew away, pink viscera and bright red staining the entire underground space. In that frigid air, those pieces of meat even seemed to give off warmth, finally resulting in a result that one could walk away from.

Al: "…How's, that! Hah, hah, this much should…"

Shoulders heaving as he caught his breath, Al spoke to Capella, who had become pieces of meat.

After this, after something like this, a creature able to survive after being destroyed to this point simply could not exist. Towards Al's declaration of victory, an existence that could respond did not exist. Or at least, that was how it should have been.

Capella: "Ah, how excessive—Ah. No matter what, ordinarily things wouldn't go so far."

Al: "Fuck."

The one that had received Al's insults of disgust, responded in that airy, yet wicked voice.

The voice came not from the dismembered flesh, but from the direction of the head that had been severed at the start—In other words, it came from the place where Capella's head had landed. Capella's head remained on the ground it had rolled to, joyously witnessing Al's reaction.

Al: "Sending your head flying and destroying your heart isn't enough. Isn't that breaking too many rules…"

Capella: "Head flying and heart destroyed would pose no problem to this lovely lady… But it is rare that you've suddenly become so devoid of a trace of tolerance. This lovely lady, right now, should be tempting you with your favorite face, could it have been a slip of the eye? Or could it be that you're the type who expresses love by inflicting pain?"

Before Al, who was revealing his feelings of helplessness, Capella's head righted itself.

The severed head moved sluggishly, black flesh that could not possibly have been present gushing out. Forming a neck as a pedestal, quivering flesh became limbs, the black surface hidden from sight by white skin, turning back to—No, completely transforming into a golden-haired maiden.

Al: "…And the pieces of meat scattered here?"

Capella: "Since they're unnecessary, they can dissolve."

Al looked on with amazement, as the scattered pieces of flesh that had formed Capella's body started dissolving with a noise. The organs and limbs became a substance like black mud, bubbling as they disappeared. Even their method of disappearing inspired disgust to the point of aesthetic fatigue.

Capella: "Anyway, no hesitation in severing my head, hmm? The one from above… seems to have been a fake, but wasn't there someone whose comrade couldn't fight anymore, after taking this lovely lady's blood? Soaking in it like that, wasn't it scary?"

Al: "It wasn't some kind of bluff. Though I didn't know what conditions needed to be filled, the knowledge that being dripped on wouldn't be my end is something I've already tested. It was a waste of time to dodge it."

Capella: "—? But you haven't shown even a trace of an attempt to avoid it."

Al: "It's something you couldn't know about. Head, heart, if both don't work, next time, that severed head will be crushed. No matter how many tries it takes."

Al's extraordinarily tired sigh was even more pained than it had been before the battle had begun. This should have been due to the effect of Capella's tricks, but it seemed that further burden had been placed upon his shoulders after this exchange.

In any case, not a trace of damage was left on Capella's freshly regenerated body.

In addition to variation and transformation, a regenerative ability to the point of immortality—with even the typically most fatal attacks on head and heart rendered ineffective, this was truly a genuine monster.

However, difficult to kill was not synonymous to undefeatable.

Al: “There are also methods like freezing the entire body to seal it, or some method like tossing it into the Great Waterfall.”

Capella: “With an unkillable opponent, despair is only natural, but you don’t give up at all. Aren’t you truly an incorrigible trash meat? Being motivated is well and good, but can you actually do it? Seems like you’re good at petty tricks like dodging and escaping, but aren’t you lacking a way to actually kill this lovely lady?”

Al: “Indeed, even if I died a hundred times, I wouldn’t be able to kill you. In fact, I’ve already gone half of the way… But, aren’t you forgetting something?”

Al placed the dao over his shoulder and gave a knock, his helmet making a clunking noise. Capella’s head swiveled at that question, and in that moment, the tip of the sword was pointed overhead.

He was pointing at the City Hall—somewhere outside of it.

Al: “You had originally intended to disrupt our home base, having deserted your control tower. Meaning that the ones who went to attack Lust’s control tower will rush back shortly. As long as I keep up these time-buying tactics, naturally you’ll be done with soon.”

Capella: “…”

Al: “For your information, my abilities are okay for buying time, no? I’ll try every means to keep you down, to trap you in here. So, if you’d like to run, your chance is now.”

Being locked in battle against Capella in solitude, Al used the imminent arrival of reinforcements to try to coerce his opponent into retreating. Upon hearing those words, Capella raised her eyebrow as if surprised, and towards her questioning attitude Al responded with a “Hmm?”.

Al: “What’s that, your reaction. Even if you have some complaint about my suggestion to withdraw from just now then…”

Capella: “Do you truly believe that this lovely lady, who bothered to come alone into enemy territory, wouldn’t have prepared measures against the troops you sent out?”

Al: “…Huh?”

Capella: “The muscle daruma and the swordswoman were placed along the way. Even amongst our puppets, those two are unparalleled in quality… Can your reinforcements really get away so easily?”

Al: “Gah!”

The unforeseen development drew a sound from Al, who looked at the large hole overhead. As if reading his expression through his helmet, Capella continued with a “By the way”,

Capella: “The Conversation Mirror you had on you is sealed, you know? So even if you hurriedly tried to establish contact with anyone else, you wouldn’t be able to reach anyone.”

Al: “How did you do something like that?!”

Capella: “The creator of those magical devices seems to have been a Witch. Rumors about such legends have long been passed down in the Witch Cult. Including things like disrupting the wavelength of the Conversation Mirror.”

Due to the nature of this unorthodox annoyance, the strategy behind Al’s words had failed entirely.

Although Al had no way of ascertaining the truth of Capella’s words, in truth, the two who had been sent from the City Hall to take on Lust—Wilhelm and Garfiel, would sooner or later clash with her minions. The possibility of returning from a battle between monster and man could only be said to be extremely low. Which was to say,

Capella: “If we’re stuck here with nothing to do, wouldn’t it be better to get it over with?”

Al: “…A stalemate, well, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it that.”

At Al’s vague answer, Capella revealed a faint trace of a smile.

And in the moment immediately after, that faint smile melted. Once again, the form of the young girl became an amorphous piece of meat, and just like that, Capella’s mass grew exponentially.

With a gurgling sound, Capella’s form broke the limits of a human form, growing huge. Delicate maiden, seductive woman, dignified young man, stern warrior—her flesh grew enormous with a momentum yet unseen, the underground space echoing with laughter.

And then, appearing after a moment was a dragon of black, whose body blended into the shadow.

Al: “…I see, you could even turn into a dragon.”

Considering the fact that there were no divisions of rooms, the underground was much more spacious than the City Hall had been. However, even a space like this could not accommodate the black dragon’s huge body so easily.

Hearing Al’s low voice, the dragon narrowed its golden eyes, and Capella opened her mouth as if to respond to Al. From that mouth, came a merciless scorching breath.

Al: “—Hk.”

The breath of flame seemed to ignite the very air of the underground, as a white light forced its way close to Al.

An incantation completely overpowered by the roaring sound created a wall of earth in the volume that breath occupied. However, faced with the overwhelming temperature, the wall failed to mount even a momentary defense before crumbling under the heat—however, Al’s purpose did not lie there.

Al: “Kah, huu—”

The jaw of the black dragon, from which the breath was being released, was hit by a suddenly rising wall of earth. The mouth that generated the breath was forced shut, and instead the black dragon scorched its own throat with its flame.

Even so, the flame that the black dragon had spat out before its interruption continued to burn. Towards his back as he tried to escape the range of the heat, green flame approached—

Al: “Damn it! Dona! Guh?!”

Issuing a canto alongside the stench of burning, a wall of earth suddenly slammed into Al’s side. Using the momentum, Al was launched into a nearby waterway as he was scorched by the flames. Then, the instant that his back brushed the bottom surface of the waterway, another incantation summoned a wall of earth that sent him flying out of the water.

Al: “—Shiii!”

Completely soaked, Al flew from the waterway. In an instant, the razor claws of the black dragon had swept across the waterway’s bottom. Splashing up water, the wall which had carried Al out of the water burst into pieces. Although an evasive maneuver, the ferocious attack on Al continued, as he endlessly avoided, avoided, avoided.

Using miraculous movements to evade in such an extremely small space, withstanding attacks from behind that should have been unforeseen, his body’s lack of ability was supplemented by his own magic, as he continually avoided fatal injuries.

Capella: “Gyiiiiiiii!”

Al: “D-D-D-D-Donaaaaa!”

The now-impatient dragon rotated its enormous body, mowing down with its tail.

Faced with this arcing blow that battered up a storm, Al used multiple incantations to create five earthen walls simultaneously in front of him—reducing the threat of this attack as much as possible, and using his dao to block it while jumping backwards, then hitting the ground to roll several times before staying down.

The dramatic rolling movements lessened the burden on his body, and Al stood with the dao as a crutch. However, the damage had not been completely offset.

Hurriedly, through the gap at the bottom of his slanted helmet, a large quantity of vomit spilled.

Al: “Kuh, kuh… Damn it, on the victim’s side this time… really outta luck here…!”

Capella: “Doesn’t seem that way though. Considering your abilities, there’s a kind of incomprehensible foolishness in staunchly standing with allies…”

Towards Al who sighed over his current predicament, the black dragon Capella gave a rather uncomprehending praise.

Even from her perspective, Al’s desperate defensive battle held an inexplicable sense of incongruity. Attacks that should not have been seen through, pursuits that should not have been imagined, Al had all along been using his own ability to survive as long as possible—As if he’d long known all those choices.

However, neither had the leisure to pursue those idle thoughts for now. As for why,

Capella: “…Has this been a bit too much?”

The reason why Capella who raised her head would say so, were the faint vibrations transmitted from the surface of the ground—and then, there were fatal sounds coming from the City Hall that had continually suffered damage.

The foundation of the structure which had seen too many large battles had already suffered a great deal of damage, and then the battle that had taken place underground had given the foundation one final blow. The result was the gradual widening of the hole that had served as the trap to send Capella down, and the cracks spread not only on that floor, but through the entire building.

The development after this, even a small child would understand—Collapse.

Al: “Stop kidding around! If this Territory comes undone I’ll actually die!”

Seeing part of the floor fall away from above, Al pushed through the pain, and with labored steps leapt into the flowing waterway.

Along with the sound of water, his body disappeared in the stream of water that flowed under the city. Seeing him off, as she maintained the form of a black dragon, Capella gazed upon the gradually collapsing ceiling.

Capella: “Yep, my interest is wilting. I’m tired from playing, so forget it.”

With murmured words that seemed listless, the black dragon yawned.

Like this, that unusual sight went unseen by anyone, being buried under the rubble of the collapsing architecture, pouring down like a landslide.

2

???: “—Uh.”

At the scene of the collapse, echoed a low moaning sound.

The sound accompanied the sound of rubble being shoved aside, with several slightly larger stones rolling down from a mountain of rubble. Thanks to this impact, the mountain collapsed, and from an opening created by the collapse a white hand protruded.

As if searching for something, that slender arm hurriedly attacked the mountain of rubble and made it cascade bit-by-bit.

And then, several minutes later, having finally succeeded in breaking free of the mountain of ruin, Ferris crawled out of the pile of scrap wood, his clothing having become ragged.

Ferris: “Kuh, kuh.”

As he coughed, Ferris spat out vast quantities of soil and blood.

Was it sand or was it blood, that remained in the gap between his tongue and teeth? No matter which, it did not matter at all to Ferris. Right now, he just wanted to rinse his mouth.

Ferris: “Didn’t expect the City Hall to collapse. Isn’t this another death for nothing…?!”

Ferris used the inside of his dirtied clothing to scrub the blood from his face. Wiping away what dirtied it, like that he would return his face its usual neatness and cuteness.

It was nigh unimaginable that a human being could be in this condition, just a few minutes after being caught up in the collapse of a five-story building, having been crushed, unable to do anything.

Ferris: “Something like that is… that’s right, Anastasia-sama!”

Cat ears pointing upward, Ferris shouted that name as he looked around him.

Anastasia had volunteered to appear in Crusch’s stead, assisting in this dangerous battle by acting as bait. Having successfully met Lust’s ambush as anticipated, the results could only be described as a tragedy. But a collaborator was still a collaborator.

And in the necessity of determining whether she lived or died, there also resided a level of emotional obligation to Julius.

Ferris: “If like me, she’d been directly crushed to death…”

Looking around, he started the search in the nearby rubble. In the moment that the building had begun to collapse, Anastasia and Ferris had been in the same room.

As it had been a sudden collapse originating from beneath their feet, she would end up the same way provided she had been caught up in it without any preparation. At the very least, if she had not died instantaneously, as long as she could be subject to Ferris's healing magic, she would be safe and sound.

Ferris: "This search would be much simpler with a single reply!"

Ferris's slender arms were ill-suited for anything of the sort of search and rescue.

Even if helping the injured was Ferris's very own specialty, the same did not go for the work that lay before healing. Because of the lack of information received from Lust too, Ferris felt an unprecedented sense of frustration. And it was precisely at that moment—

???: "Ah, Ferris, you too are safe and sound."

Ferris: "—!"

Hearing the approaching sound of footsteps kicking away rubble, Ferris, having jumped as if startled, turned to see a solitary figure. Tugging on the hair that had been dyed green and straightened, smiling slightly, was the Anastasia he had been searching for all along.

The hem of her kimono which seemed difficult to move in swaying, she approached Ferris with careful steps.

Ferris: "Anastasia-sama, are you unhurt?"

Anastasia: "It's as ya can see. In fact, we here should be saying that. Ferris, thank goodness you're unhurt from that collapse."

Ferris: "That's…"

Although strictly speaking, he had not been unhurt, Ferris suppressed his instinctive reply. There was no obligation to reply, and it would not merit a pleasant topic. Seeing Ferris closing his mouth without reply, Anastasia surveyed the rubble and scene of collapse of the City Hall.

Anastasia: "Tellin' everyone to leave for the shelters in advance truly was a correct decision. This was quite the grand happenin'."

Ferris: “A grand happening…”

Anastasia frowned as if incredibly troubled, and Ferris surveyed his surroundings as well.

Anastasia calling this a grand happening, but could this circumstance be called such with peace of mind? Although calling it a grand happening was not incorrect, it seemed to be missing a touch of seriousness.

Not to mention that the cause of this collapse was precisely—

Anastasia: “Seems to me, that the cause’d be the underground battle between Al and Lust…”

Ferris: “…”

Anastasia: “Bein’ completely buried, diggin’ them out like this’d be a bit difficult. If they successfully entered the waterways underground, seems to me there’d be a possibility of escapin’ alive…”

Of course, in that case, the possibility of Capella’s survival also needed to be considered.

As Ferris had observed, Capella’s capacity for regeneration surpassed human imagination. Having had half her face destroyed by Anastasia’s magic, she had not given any regards to that. It was truly beyond strange. Just like the outburst of Ferris’s lifeforce, it should not have been the result of some unnatural constitution.

Ferris: “Speaking of which, where did Anastasia-sama learn such magic?”

Anastasia: “…That, has it got anythin’ to do with this?”

Ferris: “Since I had heard you couldn’t fight, a little bit of surprise can’t be helped.”

During the discussion on how to distribute the combat forces, she herself had been the one who had said she did not possess any combat ability. Neither Anastasia herself nor the Artificial Spirit accompanying her had such powers.

However, if that was the case, what had been that magic, that which had ruined Capella’s face?

???: “—This topic, I’d also like to hear a bit about it.”

Anastasia: “…”

Anastasia kept silent in response to Ferris’s question, and just at that moment, the voice of a third person chimed in.

Before the eyes of the two who turned their heads, stood Al, soaked and kicking away at rubble. Twisting his head so that water poured from the opening in his helmet, he approached.

Anastasia: “Seeing ya safe and sound’s nice. A successful leap into the waterway?”

Al: “On three attempts, I felt I was gonna be crushed. Eh, not like it matters. More importantly, we’ve got something more important to talk about.”

Anastasia faced forward to welcome the laborer’s meritorious return, but Al unsheathed his dao as he spoke. Pointing the tip of the blade to Anastasia as well, she frowned.

Al and Anastasia stood facing each other, and Ferris was caught in between the two. The places where the three stood formed an exact triangle.

Anastasia: “What in the world are you doin’, exactly? If this a joke, then I ain’t laughin’.”

Al: “Not like I’m in a kidding mood. Setting aside that cat-eared bro for now, it really doesn’t make sense that you survived this destruction. In addition…”

Anastasia: “It’s merely that there were backup plans. Hiding those was indeed my fault, but as for that I can’t exactly explain it forthrightly…”

Al: “Sure, you can gimme that answer, but the problem here’s your attitude. Barely managing to escape from the collapsed building, then chatting idly with a familiar face atop the ruins… From your attitude, it feels like your expressions and feelings are completely out of place. Do you know what we call people who can chat like that?”

Anastasia: “…”

Regarding Al, who persisted with his hail of questions, Anastasia stopped replying. However, her expression now froze into a sly smile.

And then, as Ferris witnessed it, Al spoke a definitive, clarifying line.

Al: “Those kinda people, we call them Witches.”

Anastasia: “…Really now, that word is a little excessive.”

An incredibly philosophical tone of response, which gave the impression of being devoid of emotion.

Sly smile falling away, what emerged afterward was an empty smile, a smile only in appearance. As if that movement of skin was directed not toward another person, but toward one’s self in a self-deprecating manner.

Anastasia: “In my experience, Witch is by no means a term used in good conscience.”

Al: “Could it be that you’re under the impression that I’m lightheartedly dropping a greeting? Your first impression is right, swindler fox.”

Ferris: “What do you mean?”

Looking at the two people who had reached an understanding—Anastasia, who had changed her tone, and Al—Ferris sought an opportunity to interject. In response to Ferris’s attitude, Al shrugged with his armless left shoulder, his gaze still fixed in Anastasia’s direction.

Al: “It’s something like, the miss still looks like the miss, but she’s different on the inside. That fox with wicked character dangling from her neck… Echidna is inside her.”

“Anastasia”: “This is something that prioritizes Ana’s survival, it is just that the result ended up like this. It is really rather distressing that this affair is being spoken of as if I have some malicious intent.”

At Al’s hostile words, Anastasia—Echidna revealed a troubled expression as she replied. Then Al harrumphed into his helmet with a “Hah!”

Al: “Someone replacing another shouldn’t speak with such a righteous tone.”

“Anastasia”: “Replacing or whatnot is really quite the misunderstanding. From where did such a notion come from?”

Al: “Everything right down to that fake Kararagi accent of yours should serve as evidence. Unfortunately enough, I can see through the nature of a Witch that can’t comprehend humans.”

Ferris: “Act a bit more properly! Like this, the topic won’t progress no matter how long you talk!”

After Al’s systematically detailed response to Echidna, Ferris finally exploded.

Although it seemed that Al’s information did have a degree of reliability, what mattered most right now was the affair of Anastasia’s body. Her body right now, had indeed been taken control of by Echidna.

Ferris: “First of all, is Anastasia-sama alright? It isn’t something like merely protecting her body, but her consciousness flew off somewhere?”

“Anastasia”: “That is not the case indeed. It would not do to not have Ana healthy in body and soul. Because if that were the case, there would not be a need to use a forbidden technique.”

Ferris: “Forbidden technique?”

“Anastasia”: “It refers to this condition here. Since Ana’s Gate is a little bit complex, it cannot be used by itself. Even with me acting as a proxy, the burden is still incredibly heavy. It is something like that.”

Stroking her meager chest, Echidna made Anastasia’s expression turn gloomy.

Although Al still propped up his sword with a demeanor of intolerance, Felix forcibly stepped in front of the tip of the blade as he continued discourse with Echidna.

Ferris: “Then why did you pretend to be Anastasia-sama, to converse with us?”

“Anastasia”: “Would it not be more unnatural to abstain from a greeting upon seeing your ally safe and sound? Pretending to be Ana herself, was to keep you from spotting our weaknesses. Exactly as I just said, Ana’s body is quite unstable. So I wished to hide the fact that she had become one with me… and then was seen through too.”

Ferris: “Julius is also… unaware of this ability. After all, he had not even known about your existence before this. What do you intend to do about this?”

“Anastasia”: “That is an issue between Ana and Julius, and the Iron Fang as well. For your questions, I do not feel as if I have an obligation to offer speculation.”

Everything made sense. The sense of incongruity that Felix had felt from Anastasia atop the mountain of rubble as well, all stemmed because he was dealing with Echidna. The contents were different.

In addition to the fact that her magic had been her protection, was the fact that Anastasia’s body had indeed been protected from the collapsing building—with these two points, Ferris’s previous doubts had come undone.

Ferris: “Although, that person over there still gives an impression of being unwilling to lower their weapon?”

Al: “…Tch.”

As Ferris had asked, Al clicked his tongue as he reluctantly placed the dao within its sheath. Upon seeing this, Ferris once again looked at his bruised and battered body.

Burns and scrapes, his body looked like it was truly injured.

Ferris: “Alright, let me take a look and it’ll be healed soon. Uwah, this place’s been gouged…! Hya, this slash, it’s miraculous you didn’t die from it…?”

Al: “With my ability, turning a fatal injury to a serious injury is the limit. Though it’d be better if I hadn’t lost the gamble… well, whatever.”

Ferris: “—?”

The palm of Ferris, who tilted his head, healed all of Al’s wounds.

All that could be said was that, thanks to the healing properties of that pale blue light, in the blink of an eye, the numerous injuries on Al’s body had been healed. Having confirmed this, Al gave Ferris his thanks.

Al: “Like me, the miss ended up surviving. Without a doubt, that Lust bastard also’s got to be alive. I can’t rest easy even if she’s been buried by rubble.”

“Anastasia”: “About that.”

At Al’s voice which raised a warning, Echidna lifted her hand. The Conversation Mirror was held in its palm, and with her other hand she gently knocked on its surface.

“Anastasia”: “As a matter of fact, since before the building collapsed, the Conversation Mirror hasn’t made a single sound.”

Al: “I’d heard. Lust… or rather the Witch Cult? Within the Witch Cult there seems to be some way of crippling magical devices.

Presumably that suppressed communications with anyone on the outside…”

“Anastasia”: “That’s what I had thought. However, if it was due to the Sin Archbishop that that happened, it means we should have escaped that problem by now.”

Al: “…Talking in circles.”

“Anastasia”: “Apologies, it is a habit of mine. That is to say, the function of the Conversation Mirror has been restored.”

Hearing those words, Al and Felix were simultaneously shocked.

Al was surprised that the Conversation Mirror could reach others with a Mirror. But Felix was surprised at the cause of the Conversation Mirror’s malfunction and the possibility that the cause had been eliminated.

Ferris: “What do you mean? Lust’s interference ended… which is to say she’s dead?”

Truly, it was unbelievable that the monster who had ceaselessly boasted of her regenerative ability would have died from being buried by rubble. After all, just as Al had said, the three people present were all still alive.

Believing that the undying monster with extraordinary vitality would die like this was truly too difficult. If any possibilities aside from this could be considered—

“Anastasia”: “She received a wound to the point that her sabotage could not continue, or perhaps the interruption itself is meant to induce carelessness in us, and they’re lurking, awaiting for an opportunity…”

Ferris: “That… doesn’t feel like it fits with that awful character…”

“Anastasia”: “Indeed, I think so as well. It should be more daring than just hiding… Something such as taking the form of one of the three people here? With the original having already died, completely replacing that existence. That is precisely a tactic that

Lust would enjoy."

This speculation of Echidna's caused Felix to shiver.

He recalled that, before the collapse, the monster had assumed a form identical to Crusch. Having witnessed that transformation with his very eyes, there was no room for doubt that she had been a fake. Of course, even if she had become Crusch, Ferris was confident he would be able to see through her, but these two were another matter entirely.

This possibility made Ferris feel ill. However,

Al: "Don't get your kicks from spouting such disorienting stuff, what a wicked nature. The lack of reaction makes it a quick deal. She turned tail and ran, that's clear. Leaving after becoming bored of playing, that one is just like that."

"Anastasia": "To say that without basis or reason…"

Al: "Before being crushed, the monster wore a completely disinterested expression. That would be the reason."

The one who had faced off against Capella all the way to the end had been Al.

If the opponent had been another human, such a conclusion would have been astounding, but if their opponent were a Sin Archbishop, common sense could not be upheld. Of course, even assuming that, vigilance should not be dropped.

Al: "More importantly, if the Conversation Mirror is functional, couldn't contact with the Princess be established? That's what's most important. Hurry up and help me connect."

The teams that had left the City Hall with Conversation Mirrors had been team Wilhelm-Garfiel and team Priscilla-Liliana. Originally, Al should have been part of Priscilla's squad, but at his master's order, he had reluctantly remained with the team left behind. The desire of wanting to confirm his master's safety was painfully understood.

"Anastasia": "I see. You do not need to be in such a hurry… Hmm?"

Placating Al like this, Echidna who held the Conversation Mirror in her hands frowned.

Just as Ferris glanced over, intending to ask what had happened upon seeing that reaction, the Conversation Mirror in Echidna's hand gradually began to radiate a faint glow—This was an indication that a connection with another Conversation Mirror had been established.

And that which was reflected on the surface of the Conversation Mirror was—

Chapter 62:
Commend of the Warrior

???: "—Gorgeous Tiger?"

Garfiel's consciousness was shaken harshly the moment he heard that sound.

He coughed out the volumes of water he'd swallowed, shook all the moisture away from his body, sight beginning to return to his brain drowsy from oxygen starvation.

This place was an underground space both dim and frigid.

The rigid stone ground was still submerged by volumes of water flowing in. It seemed that the turbid flow had flooded the room from an indentation in the wall behind him, which had allowed a breath of fresh air.

He was currently showered by a great number of gazes. In them lay unease, vigilance, dread, opposition.

From the number of people before him and the myriad of feelings in their gazes, Garfiel blearily came to the conclusion that this was one the city's shelters.

The waterway he had plummeted into connected to the shelter, crashing through the wall led to this place. As a result, he'd been swept in along with the water.

Garfiel: "…"

At that realization, Garfiel's blurred consciousness received a shock.

Jerking his head up with a start, remembering the events that had transpired before he'd been sweat him erected the hairs on his body. He hurriedly spun his head around, rapidly searching for the giant who had plummeted into the water with him in a tangle —

Garfiel: "…ah"

His gaze overlapping with a young blond boy's green eyes.

He remembered this face. This face made his chest tighten, followed by memories which agonized his spirit.

He'd come face to face with him again, that boy who had a connection with Garfiel's mother.

He was a little brother, remaining where he'd wanted to be, accepting the love of a mother—

Garfiel: "—?!"

The sense of being startled away was once again buried under an excess of feeling.

And then, an enormous splash swept the water surrounding Garfiel, the form of a giant who'd a splash flying standing up in the shallow water. This enormous figure waved his arms, mercilessly slamming toward the blankly staring Garfiel.

Facing this attack, Garfiel's reaction was a beat too late.

And this beat, proved fatal.

The momentary carelessly offered the opponent a flaw.

And from the war god facing Garfiel came not an off-color attack.

In total, eight attacks swept toward Garfiel.

One or two were blocked. However, the remaining six slammed straight into Garfiel.

The face was hit and two attacks squirmed the body. Then the floating body was beaten to the ground by the fist, hitting the head of the water and eating the fist from the top.

Taking a blow to the face, two attacks to the side leaving his body in midair. And then his floating body was slammed to smack into the ground, his head which slammed into the water taking another hit from directly overhead. His face slamming through the water into the hard ground, his nose and teeth taking serious damage as well. The surface of the water stained with crimson, a string of blood flowed from Garfiel's mouth and nose as he leapt to his feet.

Garfiel: "Stop, kidding… arouuuuuund!"

A roar coming from the mouth which had teeth knocked loose, shaking away the ringing in his ears from blows to the head. A momentum of anger sweeping through this underground space, the war god positioned directly forward stepped forth as if this were the reason.

Fists overlapping. Garfiel turned his head, using his teeth to scratch at the fist which scraped his head, tearing it from wrist to elbow in one motion. his head and used his teeth to smear his fist across his face and tear it from his wrist to his elbow. Extending his right arm to grab his opponent's neck in the same instant, digging all the way to the lower abdomen.

Fresh blood sprayed from the sharp incision, causing no small amount of damage to the war god's body.

However, the war god's seven remaining hands continued to strike. In order to avoid them all, Garfiel needed to do his utmost to respond.

In one exchange of blows, he needed to use one hand to deal with eight.

Overwhelming disadvantages, overwhelming differences in ability, overwhelming differences in battle – this in fact ignited his will to fight.

Garfiel: "Aaaa, aaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

Attack, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack —

Block, deflect, avoid, evade, duck, kick aside, meet head on —!

Fist to fist, generating shock waves that caused evaporated the sweat dripping from the two.

Unyielding and steel facing off in collision, the staggering sound made it difficult to believe that this was flesh on flesh. The pair's bodies were unable to withstand this and flew outward in opposite directions.

Ferocious tiger and the enormous body were both tossed aside to cause giant splashes.

Kurgan's back collided with the wall, and Garfiel once again became intimately acquainted with the water. He immediately raised his head, his gaze overlapping with Kurgan's who was looking directly toward him.

Although without a single word spoken, mutual understanding was established in but a moment.

Garfiel stood, stepping into the water that now reached his ankles.

Garfiel could feel the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits beneath the soles of his feet, cutting a quadrilateral from the floor beneath his feet, allowing it to float upward. Kicking aside this floating piece of floor, the huge holes caused much of the water in the underground to flow into it all at once, drastically reducing the water level.

As Garfiel conducted the draining of the water, Kurgan approached the hole where the water flowed in.

The holes that had sent the two underground was enormous, vast amounts of water pouring from within. Left alone, the underground space would flood in a matter of minutes.

Kurgan yanked out a Demon Cleaver. Minus the one Garfiel had bitten to pieces, there yet remained three Demon Cleavers. Kurgan removed one to aim above, his target hanging directly overhead of hole – he hefted the exaggerated piece of iron at the ceiling, shattering it.

Using the vision of a warrior to see through the collapse, with roughness he filled the hole in the wall in with rubble. Of course, even blocked water would still leak in, but not the extent of instantaneously submerging the underground

The hole was plugged, the water was drained, water would no longer flood submerge ankles.

Checking the status of their surroundings wordlessly, the two warriors returned to their original positions. Face to face. Fists lifted with shields, Demon Cleavers drawn. The hero Eight Arm Kurgan, the challenger Golden Tiger Garfiel.

Subduing an opponent at peak condition. This was the implicit agreement between warriors.

"…"

Garfiel knew that this was not the time for such a thing.

His duty was to return to the high rise City Hall that was likely under attack, to rescue those who could not fight.

However, before any matter of facing or not facing, about what to face, Garfiel had long ago already faced this problem.

—This sentiment was out of place, but Garfiel felt excited.

His pitiful loss against Reinhard, sealing memories and feelings both for a mother, unable to avenge the kind girl who had protected him, leaving an ally in a dangerous situation when faced with an ambush.

So many important things snatched from his hands, leaving him to feel powerless and empty.

Leaving Sanctuary, seeing the world, Garfiel had recognized his own weakness.

The him that had remained in Sanctuary, would certainly have remained strong, for certain. Because then his metric of comparison was only himself, holding no doubts to the martial abilities he'd trained.

Leaving Sanctuary, seeing the world, Garfiel had recognized far greater strengths.

Compared his time in Sanctuary, his own power had not decreased. However, the his metric of comparison was no longer the him of his imagination, making him weak in relativity.

In a mere two days, a shift in consciousness made him clearly recognize this conclusion.

Powerlessness and loss had exposed Garfiel's inner self, forcing him to recognize he was merely a bluffing brat. His inner self had created hesitation, doubt, regret, the wavering of his heart turning him weak.

—And injected life into his wilted soul was precisely Kurgan.

The hero Eight Arm Kurgan, the Vollachian Empire's hero. The strongest man of the Multi-Arm Tribe.

He'd readied his Demon Cleavers, regarding Garfiel as a warrior to face. How important this was to the Garfiel who could not find his own value.

The two entangled men plummeted into the waterway, where Garfiel had lost his footing due to his inexperience in aquatic combat. The magically resurrected Kurgan had no need to breathe, and if he had wanted to decide the outcome could have merely waited for Garfiel to drown.

However, the war god had shattered the wall of the waterway, connected to a shelter, had let Garfiel survive.

For what purpose.

Garfiel: "Thought initially… that 't was yer show 'f mercy."

Kurgan: "…"

Before Garfiel had determined his epiphany, Kurgan had not regarded him as a warrior.

Flinging aside an attacking child, kicking aside a crybaby was not what a warrior would do. And thus facing Garfiel who had been throwing a tantrum, Kurgan had completely sidestepped him.

But, that was wrong.

Precisely because he'd stood, raised his shields, being regarded as a war god by Garfiel.

That was why he'd seen the famed Demon Cleavers being drawn, had met with the stance of greeting a warrior.

After seeing this demeanor from him, what he had shown to Garfiel was certainly no mere mercy or pity.

What Kurgan sought. Was the result of a decisive battle for victory against Garfiel.

—The battle between warrior and warrior can only accept a mutual blow as a conclusion.

Garfiel: "Yo, ya fuckers… how long 're ya goin' t' keep starin'?"

Garfiel checked the shields on his two arms, these words directed not toward Kurgan, but meant for the onlooking audience.

The ones who after the two men had been swept in, had silently regarded the battle between warriors—the refugees.

Gathered together though differing in clothing, and, and even race, all they had in common was their in ability to fight, they were a group of non-combatants who would be sent flying with a single attack.

If Garfiel fell here, there was no one here who could deal effective damage to Kurgan. Although difficult to imagine Kurgan committing atrocities against non-combatants, but likely the only one who knew this was the Garfiel facing him.

And so,

Garfiel: "Should be able t' tell 't a glance. Even 'f you spectate from over there, 's absolutely nowhere that y' c'n make a move. Hurry n' take th' chance to seek shelter outside…"

Fred: "—Gorgeous Tiger—!"

Garfiel: “Ah…?”

Garfiel’s words urged them to leave quickly were overwhelmed by a loud cry.

Calling out to the Garfield whose brows were knitted in pressure, using this phrase to call out to Garfiel happened to be one of those onlookers.

The boy’s eyes filled with tears, both cheeks crimson, gripping the hem of his clothing tightly.

Faced with Garfiel’s astonished sight, the boy’s watery eyes stared back. It held a will strong enough that Garfiel found it difficult to reply.

Garfiel: “Hey, lil’ brat… th’ hell ‘re ya, sayin’…”

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger—!”

Garfiel: “…”

Fred: “G-Gorgeous Tiger—!”

The quavering voice of the boy called so to the silent Garfiel.

As if unaware of how else to express his feelings, calling out this name.

This was the name of the golden tiger. This was the name that Garfiel Tinzel yearned for, the name of the strongest tiger.

Why now, was he calling this name. What did he want to convey.

Tears dripped down the reddened cheeks of the boy.

Spreading through the entire underground audience were the cries of the boy. So everyone shared this share of passion that was injected despite being inexpressible.

Garfiel: “Enough, y’ve said ‘t already now go.”

“Gorgeous Tiger—!”

Garfiel's sigh, was buried under their cries of calling for the golden tiger.

From behind the boy, a girl with the same blond hair embraced him. That was the boy's sister. As if to protect her younger brother, her gaze trembled as it found Garfiel.

Her lips also trembled without pause. In a voice without sound of silence, calling the name of the tiger of gold.

"Win for sure!"

Not from the boy, not from the girl, of course not from Garfiel.

Another man in the underground space, called out while raising a fist.

Garfiel: "Wait, told y' to run…"

"Fight, and then win!"

"Don't lose!"

"E, even if we can only… watch on!"

Garfiel was speechless.

The voice he used to urge them to flee was repeatedly buried under other voices.

Directing his attention back, the enthusiasm in the boy's voice reached the hearts of everyone underground, not a single person watching Garfiel and Kurgan's duel making a move to flee.

If using common sense, if calming down to think, how could anyone think staying was right. Everyone, was overwhelmed. Solely for the sake of this meaningless determination and faith, reaching a conclusion that was likely to end in self sacrifice.

Garfiel: "…"

The hell does this count for, was what Garfiel thought.

What was the point of staying here. What was making noise, showing support supposed to mean.

It would be much better to hurry to and run. He himself wouldn't have to worry about involving them. The likelihood that they'd be sacrificed even if he himself fell would reduce. This was much more reasonable.

But not a one of them fled, why was this.

Garfiel: "Cap'n… sure 'nough, your speech delivered effects too strong…"

From his mouth Garfiel called out his name for Subaru, remembering the words he'd conveyed to the entire city.

Subaru had touched the hearts of everyone in the city, the powerful broadcast that had been proclaimed as weak pulling together all the people that felt submerged by unease and horror. A flickering candlelight had been lit with the last bit of hope.

And fire burned out to leave heat in the peoples' hearts, waiting for the next change to reignite.

And for them, the moment of ignition, was now.

And the same went for Garfiel in this moment.

"Gorgeous Tiger—!"

The solidarity, did not stop.

The first to call out to the golden tiger was Garfiel's little brother whose birth he had been unaware of. And in order to protect her littlest brother, was the little sister whose birth had been equally unknown to Garfiel.

Little brother, and little sister, were looking directly at Garfiel.

The city that had accepted his mother after she had lost her memory, its residents were looking right at Garfiel.

Garfiel: “F’r a duel between warriors… compared t’ th’ usual, ‘s a bit too noisy.”

Kurgan: “…”

Garfiel: “Really, sorry. Been troubling you all along. Especially most troublesome’re my amazin’ self’s lil’ brother n’ sister. After this, they’ll get a proper scoldin’.”

Kurgan: “…”

Garfiel: “‘N so.”

Wordlessly the war god readied his fighting spirit.

Needless to say, his attitude was one of utmost power.

Garfiel clenched his fists, knocking the shields on his arms together.

The sound of the steel striking steel lit a spark, through his fangs Garfiel took a deep breath.

Garfiel: “Shield of Sanctuary… no,”

Kurgan: “…”

Garfiel: “Gorgeous Tiger, Garfiel Tinzel.”

The announcement of a name that was meant to initiate a battle.

To Garfiel’s announcement of a name, Kurgan remained silent. Merely scraped his Demon Cleavers, showing his opponent the utmost of will to battle.

This was, enough.

Garfiel: “Haaa, aaaaaaaah!”

Garfiel kicked against the stone floor, rushing forward.

Kurgan greeted him with the same, the distance between the two reducing to zero in a mere instant.

To say hit would be too sharp, to say slash would be blunt, the attacks that Garfiel made without pause leaving little room to breathe.

The air that Demon Cleavers touched was not whistled through or sliced so much as it was killed, every blade only being caught by Garfiel due to his warriors' instinct for danger.

In one exchange of blows he needed to content with eight hands, and those eight hands only needed to contend with one.

With the number of Garfiel and Kurgan's hands differing, to win against him was to Garfiel as difficult as scaling the sky/reaching the heavens.

However, without acting he could not reach it. And so he initiated this battle, gambling his all.

"…"

Faced with heavy blows which made his body their target, if hit directly even a blunt blow would be enough to sever his blood and flesh. Without the slightest of hesitation Garfiel lifted his foot, shattering a Demon Cleaver speeding toward him with a single step.

From directly overhead the heel broke the body of the Demon Cleaver, the thick body of the blade piercing through the stone floor, the roar of the splitting rocking creating an illusion that the entire city was trembling.

He'd first dealt with one, but couldn't let his guard down.

At the same time that the broken Demon Cleaver had pierced the floor, the second one cut an arc through the air from the direction of his opponent's left shoulder. Upon hearing the whistle of the Demon Cleaver with his right ear, Garfiel immediately defended his head with the shields strapped on his arms. The attack hit exactly in the instant he raised his arms, shaking his attention for an instant.

The impact from his right fractured his elbow, the wrist of upper arm shattering completely. Garfiel gritted his teeth, to the extent that his teeth dripped blood. That was the second hand.

The third fourth hand were empty, striking in the same instant.

The clenched fists of Kurgan with his giant form, were no smaller than the size of a child's skull. Explosive power paired with explosive size, the power of a blow could be said to equate that of a warship's.

Not to mention that one first felt capable of piercing iron plate, approached Garfiel whose mind had blanked after the impact to his head. One toward his body and one toward his head, either with a direct hit was capable of exploding a human.

The blow concentrated on Garfiel's body burned as it scraped across his abdomen.

The fist seared as if scorched in flame, with unnatural power.

Twisting across his body, this fist only scraped away the skin on the surface of his abdomen. The third hand.

A feeling as if having half his body plaguing his consciousness, with his right hand Garfiel blocked the punch headed toward his face. The already broken and shattered right arm, completely burst open under this tremendous force.

Elbow to wrist to tips of fingers, this hand no longer looked like a hand. The shield affixed to the wrist was sent flying as well. But losing a hand was hardly a fatal wound. Garfiel arched his body to meet the first with his forehead. Smashing Kurgan's fist with his headbutt, he avoided the blow from the fourth hand.

Remaining were the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth. Still distant. Too distant. Distant enough to make one laugh. To make one shiver to their teeth.

Garfiel: "—Aaaaaaaaaa!"

The fifth, the sixth hands were empty as well. One Demon Cleaver yet remained, and a fatal wound had not yet been made.

Both these hands were left hands, each protruding from under the shoulder and side of the body attacking at the same time. The right hand that he'd blocked with was now useless. His left hand couldn't make it in time. Garfiel unhesitatingly stuck his right foot forward.

Soles of his shoes drawing a splash, at the same time conveying his will to the earth.

On occasion the earth lent him strength, on occasion aligned with his whims, and this time too offered him its own power.

From a tilt under his feet, Kurgan's lower body lost its balance.

Even so, without pause the war god righted himself. His movements were without a trace of hesitation. However, in his unwavering attention there appeared a break.

In the instant that Kurgan's attention had shifted below to his feet, seizing this break Garfiel rushed forward.

Lifting his foot, with a twist of his body, shoving his head between the two approaching fists. As if in the eye of a storm, the two fists both swept behind his body.

The instant his feet were in place, Garfiel felt a shudder for his own judgements.

He himself unsure of why he would have made that judgment, a thought and a decision accomplished in a fraction of a measure of time. Brain scorching. Heart scorching. Life on the verge of bursting.

The fifth and sixth hands were thus dealt with. Afterward, the seventh and the eighth hands —.

"…"

Suddenly, Garfiel's hair stood on end at a chill.

Kurgan whose six hands had been dodged would want to use the remaining two to finish Garfiel. —A fatal blow approached.

—Skipping over the seventh hand, the eighth and last hand attacked.

He stopped an attack with one hand, using it to wield the Demon Cleaver.

Right hand holding the pommel of the Demon Cleaver, right shoulder's hand tightly gripping the body of the Demon Cleaver. A blow that surpassed powerful was about to welcome Garfiel from the ground.

Surrounded on all sides, such overwhelming presence that one would believe that they would die no matter they tried to hide.

This was a sight that made the wretched attacks of the previous six hands seem almost a waste.

Avoiding was unimaginable.

Backing away, leaping aside, or rushing forward, would all result in a direct hit.

An image of being turned into a slab of meat as the result of this attack appeared before his eyes.

Escape was impossible. Attacking would be even more reckless. — There was only one option, and so.

Garfiel placed his unbroken left hand on his head, dropping his waist.

In this moment, there was a voice that still remained audible. The sound of little brother and little sister, and a large crowd of people cheering.

Estimating was only in a moment, moving was only in an instant, the result was right there.

"…"

The instant when the Demon Cleaver moved, Garfiel had entirely left this world.

All encompassing silence, all encompassing formlessness. Extraneous surroundings vanished in an instant. In the attention of

Garfiel whose focus was sharpened to its absolute limit, remained only Kurgan.

With abnormal sluggishness, with the Demon Cleaver he slashed downward at Garfiel.

Garfiel raised his head, the movements he met the attack with equally slow. In a world so stagnant as to induce anxiousness, all Garfiel could do was tightly clench his teeth.

Wrong, there was still time to revolve around.

He saw Subaru. Saw Ram. Saw Mimi. Saw Frederica. Remembered Lewes, and Emilia, Otto appeared too, thought of that bastard Roswaal, saw Beatrice and Petra and everyone in Sanctuary, and then his mother Reshia and his little brother and little sister.

The battle that had happened at Sanctuary, had allowed Garfiel to realize his own weakness.

Realizing the breadth of the world, when he'd lost to Reinhard, Garfiel had adopted the wrong impression that he was weaker than he'd been before leaving Sanctuary.

—That was impossible.

If embracing more meant more weakness, then for what did people live on.

Being strong enough to protect everything you embraced was enough.

Garfiel: “Ah—feel refreshed.”

Suddenly, the irritation plaguing his heart fell away.

That instant, the Demon Cleaver struck the shield on his left arm, sending a jolt which felt like lightning throughout his entire body.

“—hk!!”

The defense mounted by his left arm, was in an instant cut through by the Demon Cleaver.

Just like his right arm, wrist, elbow, bicep, even shoulder were all twisted beyond repair.

Feeling the familiar pain of a shattered arm as if in a nightmare, agony dyed his vision red, thoughts sinking into complete blankness. Garfiel opened his mouth to form a howl.

The fangs that had been clenched all along loosened, beginning a chorus of despair for each accumulated wound.

The Demon Cleaver's assault did not end.

After shattering his left hand, the momentum that remained slashed at Garfiel's head. Such power would be enough to shatter Garfiel's small body, leaving him nothing but minced meat.

Just how did the war god regard this young warrior who keened agonized wails as if dying.

In his heart was compassion, or pity—was neither.

Unless one side stopped drawing breath, the principle of a warrior pitying a warrior existed not.

"—Aaaaaaaa!"

Garfiel howled from agony as he lowered his head. The sound of that heartrending sound persisted for a long time, and then.

Garfiel: "—aaaa, gah."

The howl stopped, Garfiel clenched his jaw. On the teeth that he clenched down on again, shone a radiance of silver.

That was the silver shield that had fallen from his ruined right arm, which Garfiel had caught in his teeth.

Garfiel: "Gaaaaah, aaaaaaah—!"

Whipping his head around, biting the shield Garfiel had met the

Demon Cleaver slashing toward his face, biting the shield had mounted his second defense, slamming it into the side of his face the instant the attack had reached. Blood sprayed from Garfiel's nose, his teeth sent flying, but, his knees did not kneel.

He supported the weight of the Demon Cleaver with biting strength and the strong neck.

The spark of the collision between steel and steel—created a flame, causing Garfiel's consciousness to flicker.

"…"

Even though the whites of his eyes had begun to show, just what kind of willpower was still even now supporting his neck.

Was it fighting instinct, or rather a beast's vitality and survival.

Suddenly, blood spurted out. Vast volumes of blood poured forth, crimson flowers of blood pooling in this underground space.

It sprayed from Kurgan's right hand, that last right hand that clutched the Demon Cleaver.

On it was a wound persisting from the last time he'd attacked Garfiel, deep enough that bone was visible from hand to upper arm. From this blow just now the wound had completely split open.

Kurgan's face bore no shock. Nor did his expression change due to the pain.

That was a matter of course. He was a corpse. Pain existed for the sake of urging people to live, to ensure that the candlelight of life still existed beyond the minimum limit—the deceased did not need such a tool.

And thus, Kurgan had ignored the effect of the injury on his right arm.

If truly wishing to perform the most perfect attack, the last blow should have been given up to his still functioning left hand.

Success or failure determined here at once—was not the right place to say.

However,

Garfiel: “—ah.”

Withstanding attacks from eight hands, Garfiel heaved a sigh with a bloodied face.

The shield clenched between his teeth clattered to the ground. Kurgan’s front was wide open. Yet Garfiel’s left and right were completely useless, muscle in both legs torn from insufficiently withstanding heavy blows. Even so, he could still leap one step.

After leaping over, what to do. Hands, could not be made use of. Then remaining was—.

Garfiel: “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Garfiel let out a cry, opened his bleeding mouth wide, rushed toward Kurgan.

Garfiel’s teeth sank into the neck of the stationary war god. Teeth piercing through tight muscles with easy, severing at the base those organs so vital to life.

Biting down like this Garfiel twisted his body, teeth shredding through muscle and sinew, tearing away a large chunk of neck, crunching with force.

Garfiel: “Hah, ah.”

Utterly defenselessly Garfiel collapsed on the ground, spitting out shredded flesh. He turned his head as he vomited, watching Kurgan’s figure as blood gushed from its neck.

Garfiel’s hands were gone, several teeth were missing, body remained stained in blood.

Having been mortally injured by the Garfiel covered in wounds, heroically Kurgan’s body remained yet standing with chest upright.

This was a hero's spirit, so moving as it was of the human heart.

"…"

Finally, Kurgan turned slowly, facing Garfiel.

Facing the warrior who lay on the ground gazing up at him, the war god crossed his arms over his chest with calmness.

And then,

Kurgan. "—Magnificent."

In a baritone low and heavy, commended the victor.

Garfiel: "Aah…"

Without, even allowing him time to reply.

Kurgan's body collapsed right before Garfiel's own two widened eyes.

Collapsing like sand was the figure so large one needed to crane their neck to see, alien face becoming stone and ash. Such an end inspired such grief, the deceased dying once more—this was the result.

This is ultimately the sadness of the people, the deceased once again changed back to the dead – this is the result.

Garfiel: "…What pleasant words."

Watching the war god crumble to ash as he died, Garfiel sighed discontentedly.

Not that he wished for him to live on so unnaturally, but after a mutual duel to the death, a feeling of emptiness at the end was natural.

And so, this was merely a grief that Garfiel had nowhere else to express.

Garfiel: "Ah, damn it… fuck, screw it…"

The flow of blood was too much.

Laying on the ground, Garfiel used his entire body to channel the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, into turning his gathered mana into healing magic to repair his body. His hands especially, and his face was a disaster too.

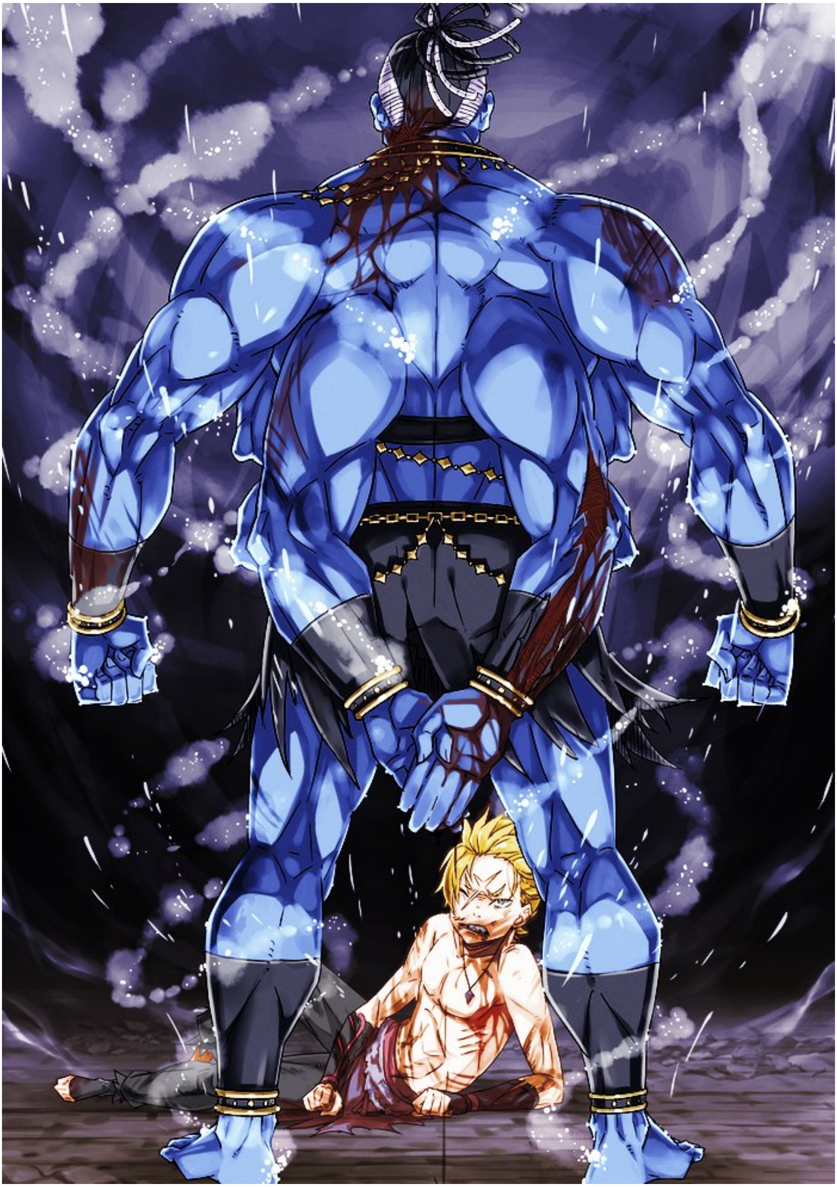

Wounds that had yet to be healed aboveground, immediately followed by such a number of attacks. Being left with heavy injuries was not such a surprise.

???: “Gorgeous Tiger!”

Garfiel who had been putting his all into healing heard a sobbing cry.

Treading puddles to approach were the figures of little brother and little sister. Others approached as well, but in Garfiel’s eyes were only those two.

Both looked to be on the verge of tears—no, they were already crying.

It couldn’t be helped. Even as seen by others, Garfiel’s condition was disastrous. And to someone familiar with this sight that he remained alive was practically unimaginable. If looked at by a healing expert their faces would surely be a terrified white, determining that emergency treatment would be needed.

This also served as proof of just how many hellish trials he’d overcome.

Of course, although he wanted to feel proud of it —

Garfiel: “Survived… but, couldn’t buy a bit ‘f time.”

Even having defeated Eight Arm Kurgan did not mean he’d succeeding in delaying.

This had been Garfiel’s battle, but it was not solely his battle. Right when he’d been dragged into battle, perhaps an ally had sunk into danger.

Needing to return to the city hall, Garfiel sat up.

Hearing his words and seeing his movements, the expressions of the little brother and little sister who had rushed over changed. Little sister especially wore a look of rage.

Sister: “Are, are you stupid?! Alright lie down already! Right away… yes, right away, right away I’ll go call a doctor over…”

Garfiel: “There’re other guys needin’ doctors. My amazin’ self’s got other things t’ do, kiddo.”

Garfiel nodded at the little sister whose face had turned bright red. But his face full of fresh blood perhaps didn’t look very convincing. Little sister ceaselessly wept anguished tears.

During this time, wretchedly broken bones in his arms reconnected. Although the flesh had yet to recover fully, running a few steps wouldn’t have him passing out. Garfiel stood after having reached this conclusion.

Sister: “Wai, wait a minute… Are, are you really going to go?”

Garfiel: “…Th’ broadcast, d’ya hear it too?”

Sister: “Eh… mm, mm.”

Garfiel with fingertips still dripping with blood, Garfiel’s words received a response.

The voice on the broadcast had given little brother and little sister courage, giving Garfiel his last shove here. And so, Garfiel needed to repay that voice on the broadcast.

He said it would be fine, Subaru said it would be fine, and so he had to make it so.

Garfiel: “‘N so, my amazin’ self—”

Sister: “Ah!”

With a stagger his blood deprived body knelt to the ground. Little sister hurriedly supported the body that appeared as if it would fall any second, and Garfiel clicked his tongue.

And then, standing before Garfiel now was little brother.

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger.”

Garfiel: “…What’s up, but sorry, ‘f you’ll say t’ stop ‘t won’t work.”

Fred: “That, that’s not it. Gorgeous Tiger, your clothes are glowing.”

Hearing little brother’s allegation, Garfiel looked down and finally noticed.

At the waist of his own ragged clothing, a piece of cloth gave a gentle glow.

Stowed there was the conversation mirror. Because it hadn’t been able to connect with the city hall, he’d shoved it there determining it was useless. Its shining right now meant,

Garfiel: “‘d thought, ‘t was broken!”

Sister: “I, I’ll pick up.”

Garfiel’s breath came quickly. Little sister reached toward his waist, pulled the conversation mirror out before she could be stopped. The surface of the mirror shined, which allegedly meant that another conversation mirror from elsewhere was calling here.

In other words, this was either the city hall, or the other group calling his side.

Sister: “What, what should I do…?”

Garfiel: “Bring ‘t here. —Who’s ‘t?”

Little sister carefully brought the mirror close to Garfiel. Garfiel looked at the mirror’s surface, called out.

The conversation mirror, slowly began to flash.

Chapter 63:
The Passion of Liliana Masquerade

1

Priscilla: “There seems to be some sort of unrest… Not following shall certainly bring regret.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Pulling on Beatrice’s hand and muttering something, Subaru-sama, for some reason, had left the park in a hurry.

The opening words were said by Priscilla-sama, who saw them off with her gaze. Because those were so sudden, Emilia-sama too widened her eyes. The meeting of tow beautiful women’s gazes created a beautiful sight.

Allow us to savor the atmosphere, as we admire the aura they give off with levity.

In their clashing gazes grew sparking petals of flame!

Slim red eyes both harsh and elegant, and gently sloped eyes of pale amethyst.

Caught in Emilia-sama’s gaze, Priscilla-sama’s graceful nose gave a huff, crossing her arms to emphasize her chest. At the sight of that large chest bouncing aggressively, I quietly stroked my own chest. I looked at my hands. Flat.

Emilia: “What does that mean?”

Priscilla: “Nothing, the meaning is literal. You should be able to see through something inconsequential to this degree. Or is your intent truly to question? In that case, it’s laughable to the point of hurting one’s sides.”

Emilia: “…”

Priscilla: “Even between master and servant, secrets are natural… to believe so is comedic. Servants need only hands and feet, there is no necessity for a head. If something like this is permitted, they will reveal attitudes unbefitting of the will of their master. That is precisely the situation you are in.”

Faced with a razor tongue lashing out without pause, Emilia-sama revealed a pensive expression. That dismayed gaze and silver hair swaying with the wind together, inspired a truly indescribable emotion… In truth, it would feel super nice to rub and pluck those cheeks.

Liliana: “Hehehe…”

Anyway, Emilia-sama’s thoughts were in accord. She nodded toward Priscilla-sama with “Understood” as a response.

Emilia: “Okay, I’ll do it… Although I believe what you’ve said is correct, my thoughts on being a master and servant are a little different.”

Priscilla: “How truly presumptuous to raise objection to my thoughts. And dullness and foolishness are of equal demerit. My tolerance for your disagreement runs thin, so with haste, take your leave.”

Emilia: “Thank you. I’ll catch up to him… Though I’m sorry to leave Liliana behind as well.”

Liliana: “Hehehe… Uwah?!”

While quietly listening to this story, Emilia-sama gave me an apologetic blink. Pondering what it meant, I raised a fist at Emilia-sama.

Liliana: “Please don’t worry, Emilia-sama. Songstress Liliana here! I believe in Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama’s return, so relax and leave protecting this park from harm to me!”

Although energetically speaking about being a Songstress, calling myself in this manner was truly embarrassing! More embarrassing then had been previously expected!

Emilia: “I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about, but I’ll leave it to you. Priscilla, don’t bully Liliana.”

Priscilla: “Refrain from carelessly calling out my name. My intent has already been conveyed. Leave at once, find that clown to play with.”

Emilia: “Really.”

Rather unfriendly terms, but Priscilla-sama seemed unbothered. Right until vanishing from the range of my gaze, Emilia-sama continued to glance at me with concern.

Ah, farewell, Emilia-sama. Although there were many more words that should have been said, merely being able to survey you from all angles was enough.

Liliana: “A flash. Please listen—To look up from under your feet.”

Priscilla: “You fool, if there remains time for levity, use it to seek the supreme melody. This world cannot match your talent, and everyone’s lifespan is equally limited… And so, the value of the same second differs greatly between you and one of the mundane. The leisure of squandering as one pleases is the privilege of those wealthy. But lacking the discipline to better yourself is the equivalent of flinging yourself into a sewer.”

Liliana: “Shamed by your praise, my spirits are rising rapidly, falling rapidly, too much for me to keep up with!”

Have I been praised? Scolded? Smart people are always disorienting and exceedingly incomprehensible when they speak.

I’m a wandering bard, rarely do I feel shame, without education and without family and without grave! Wandering without end and without boundary on this world is my guiding principle! The path of song!

Priscilla: “That others are incapable of understanding your quirks, looking at the world differently, cannot be helped. Even so, to be ignorant is undeserving of pride. This affects the quality of your beloved song.”

Liliana: “Nonono! Not in the slightest?”

Priscilla: “—Oh?”

Liliana: “Eek!”

At the instinctive retort, Priscilla’s voice lowered in pitch. Her narrowed eyes were both beautiful and terrifying, but this Liliana here was not one to immediately yield.

Liliana: “P-Please stop, Priscilla-sama… Defying Priscilla-sama wasn’t my intent…”

Priscilla: “Refrain from acting in a deplorable manner that does not befit your talent. To have your value decrease would be an insult to myself, who has praised your song. You are forgiven.”

As with lines on one’s palm, paths to happiness were not shared!

Uncertain of why Priscilla-sama would care about something like this, eh… Asking a little shouldn’t be such a big deal, right?

Liliana: “So… to Priscilla-sama, one’s education and their song are related?”

Priscilla: “Indeed.”

Liliana: “Well, I believe that a person’s education has nothing to do with the quality of their songs.”

Priscilla: “Oh, and why would you think so?”

Liliana: “—Because there is no requirement for a song to move people’s hearts.”

Songs are powerful.

It would be very arrogant of me to believe that my song possesses such power. I am still inexperienced, and though I am confident that my goals are lofty and that I am on the right course, I still have a long way to go.

Immature song, immature performance, but the heart that had been full of passion since youth was mature indeed.

Liliana: “Using song to express joy doesn’t require much learning; using song to express sorrow, merely a heart is enough; using song to express rage, naked rage is enough… it’s like that.”

The Lyulyre, and this tiny body, were more than enough for use in song.

Complicated words were unnecessary. Desire to learn was precious, but the chosen path of a bard was not one of being unable to enjoy song without it.

A bard lives for song. But the song does not choose an audience. And so, neither should the bard.

Liliana: “To have my song contain my feelings is enough, I don’t intend for it to express anything complicated. As for what’s left in the heart of audience, is for the audience to determine—song brings joy in such a way. Lingering in the heart, from time-to-time, subconsciously rising as a sudden hum… If something like that were to happen in my song, then this life was not lived for naught.”

Priscilla: “—Hmm.”

Liliana: “Hah!”

Noble bard full of energy, but the opponent was a Royal Candidate whose aura could strike a flying bird down in midair.

Among them, Priscilla-sama was especially famed for her troublesome character. With only a relationship of singing and dancing together, to attempt to get closer to her was too arrogant!

Liliana: “Eh, it’s fine, at this moment today I’ll agree with you… This is an exception, mm, an exception. Hehe, although sorry for intending to ignore…”

Priscilla: “Excellent, you… rather, you are truly a good child.”

Liliana: “Eh?”

The legs that had been intending to apologize and run, were caught by Priscilla-sama's words.

On that note, had Priscilla-sama smiled just now? In other words, just Priscilla smiled? A pure smile without hostility, something like that, it somehow felt cute.

Priscilla: "I was the unreasonable one, you are merely following your steps forward. Do approach me should you find trouble, for you have value enough to receive my regard."

Liliana: "Eeeeeeeeeh?!"

For some reason, this was an evaluation far higher than imagined!

Priscilla-sama then, unexpectedly and unhesitatingly, sat on the edge of the park's fountain with leisure. Boldly crossing her legs, and what long legs, looking even longer! Or not.

Liliana: "I… can keep my life?"

Priscilla: "Even should this world come to meet its end, I shall guarantee your survival until the very last."

Liliana: "I'm full of energy to live on with confidence even should the world be completely destroyed! Inspiration flashes, please listen —The Woman of Utter Despair."

Priscilla: "If this song is dedicated to mineself, surely it must be noble?"

Liliana: "…Bringing forth, a classic called the Record of the Blight Dragon Conquest!"

This refreshing atmosphere of being about to be beaten to a pulp amongst joyful sounds and laughing words, how lovely it felt.

Priscilla-sama sat before the rushing water, before a fountain that seemed as if it could swallow her up, as I tried my hardest, as if stepping on hot coals. Plucking the strings of the Lyulyre, immersing myself in the piece I had performed many times.

Raising focus to the extreme, this feeling of casting the world aside—I call it the Singer’s Realm, I want to be immersed in it!

Come, immersion! Forget unrest and terror, along with every trouble!

Hyahya, all those troubles!!!

2

Priscilla: “—Cease the performance.”

Liliana: “Hehehe, can’t be done… Eh? What did you say?”

If there were too many troubles, the Singer’s Realm could not be relaxedly entered, but just now the immersion had come without issue.

Then, even though the song had been executed perfectly, Priscilla-sama stood with a serious expression. Why? Did the song sound unpolished?

Liliana: “Priscilla-sama?”

Priscilla: “Have you yet to notice? The city is strangely loud… As I relaxed, something malicious began to foolishly stir.”

Liliana: “Eh…”

The words that had left Priscilla-sama’s mouth were confusing. What exactly had just happened?

Priscilla: “It seems that Pristella is facing a disaster. If it goes on like this… that clown’s intuition would have been surprisingly accurate. How unpleasant.”

The one called “clown”, was probably Subaru-sama. But what about intuition, what did it have to do with leading Beatrice away, and with Emilia-sama who chased after them…?

Subaru = “Lolimancer”, Beatrice = “Loli”, Emilia = “Amazing Lovely Girl With Magic”.

Liliana: “Oh no! What happened to Pristella?”

Priscilla: “Truly, for subjects other than singing, blood isn’t circulating within your head whatsoever. Unlike myself, exceptional in all regards, you are only exceptional in one. But I do find it to my taste.”

Priscilla-sama, who closed her eyes, began to fan herself with the fan she had taken out at some point as if she had a headache.

I would truly like to exchange more words with that Priscilla-sama, but this was not the time.

Liliana: “Indeed, everyone who was in the park vanished…”

Priscilla: “That was because you have revealed an uncouth attitude during your performance.”

Eh… I do hope you can forgive me for lying on the ground and playing the Lyulyre with my teeth.

Liliana: “However, should any incident occur, the broadcast of the magical device in the City Hall should immediately reach the entire city. Kiritaka-san reminded me too, this morning I…”

Priscilla: “That device can spread sound to an exaggerated degree? Indeed, listening to your song throughout the city is enjoyable… But what about it?”

Liliana: “—?”

In addition to the regular morning broadcast, the Watergate City of Pristella was a place with high attention to safety because of the presence of the large watergates. Shelters were located all throughout the city, so the citizens should be well-aware of those.

So why—

Liliana: “Ah… what’s this?”

My chest, what made it suddenly start to ache? How strange. On my chest was nothing so dashing as an old wound.

So, this feeling—

Priscilla: “…Do not approach.”

My smile faltered, an “Eh?” of consternation escaping my lips. Priscilla-sama suddenly raised her head to look toward the sky.

—Following immediately, was the sound of the city’s broadcasting device.

???: “Well then, all you trash, rotting meats, please take care to pitiably die off and rot away, kyahahaha! The person making this broadcast here, is a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Lust! Capella Emerada Lugunica-sama! Kyahahahahaha!”

The sharp, piercing voice cut off all of a sudden, quietness coming afterward. Leaving only the sound of the wind, and that of the water flowing from the fountain. That sound had appeared far too suddenly, unnatural enough to think it was a dream.

Priscilla: “Really now, quite the conceited words.”

Ah, that wasn’t a dream. Seems that wasn’t a dream.

The nearby Priscilla-sama’s tone grew terrifying, scaring me into turning my head to confirm her words. My keen survival instincts were informing me, “This turn of events is no good!”

Liliana: “Um, so, Priscilla-sama… so, perhaps it’s simply just an exercise… or maybe a malicious prank, that’s a possibility to. That’s what I think, but…”

Priscilla: “Desire and speculation are of different nature. If this were a malicious prank, who would call upon the infamy of the Witch Cult’s name? And in addition, the opponent claims to be a Sin Archbishop. You know those lunatics are a group who give no thought to time, place, or means.”

Liliana: “Uhh…”

Priscilla: “And within the city is that clown, the one who killed one such lunatic. That they would grow more frantic because of that is a matter of course. Who knows how many people are completely hopeless like you.”

Priscilla-sama’s words were still difficult to comprehend, but right now she seemed to be taking great pains so that I could understand.

With that, even someone like me with holes in their brain could understand. The attack of the Witch Cult led by the Sin Archbishop had already become reality, and in addition it was very likely the City Hall had been captured already.

In that case…

Liliana: “Is… is Kiritaka-san okay?”

Priscilla: “Well, that name is an unknown. If he is someone relevant to the city and, furthermore, dwells in the City Hall, there is no way to assure his safety. Seems that now is no longer the time to remain here and enjoy music.”

As soon as Priscilla-sama finished speaking, she took up her fan, marching forward with unflinching will. Ehhh, but, that was in the opposite direction of the shelter.

Liliana: “Then, then, don’t you want to find a shelter?! Choosing a path differing from what’s expected in an emergency will lead to disaster!”

Priscilla: “Hiding in a shelter with head bowed, waiting for the trouble to pass as if it is merely a stream of water, that is indeed fine. But the issue this time is a different matter. For if I do not act, this situation will not come to an end.”

Liliana: “Which is to say, you intend to kill a Sin Archbishop?!”

This Royal Candidate, who intended to slaughter her way into the City Hall—!

It was a matter of course that it was something to be witnessed, but to allow her to throw herself into a battlefield like this without a chance of victory would end only in tragedy.

Speaking of which, with Priscilla-sama so full of confidence, could it be that she was capable of doing battle?

Responding to my words so full of doubt, Priscilla-sama covered her mouth with a fan as she looked back, tilting her head slightly.

Priscilla: “No, before that, Schult must be retrieved. Al is fine either way, it doesn’t matter what becomes of that fool. But Schult’s adorableness is without substitute. If I do not take care to retrieve him, surely he will be crying somewhere.”

Liliana: “Eh? Eh?”

Priscilla: “As for the other one, presumably he followed what I decreed this morning, and is wasting his time at a tavern. A stroll in that area would perhaps locate him. Truly, what a troublesome man.”

As she rambled on, Priscilla-sama strode toward the park’s exit without hesitation. Though I clearly knew what was occurring, the way she looked at the situation, her decisions and actions were all too stunning.

Then, Priscilla-sama turned back,

Priscilla: “Though my request was not for you to follow, if you get too far from me, you shall no longer be in Sun Disk’s range. If you wish to refrain from mingling with frantic fools, you would do well to follow myself.”

What is this, it’s terrifying! Just what had happened?

Liliana: “Priscilla-sama?! What’s going to happen after you find the ones you are looking for?! Wait, Priscilla-sama!”

Hurriedly chasing the silent shadow of her back, paying no mind to those who were fleeing for the shelters, with dignity we walked about the city. The shadow of her back gave off such a sense of security, that perhaps even Sin Archbishops didn’t need to be feared…

—Thinking so was a mistake, was what I realized soon after.

3

I moved forward through the city according to Priscilla-sama’s words. What was curious was that despite being unaware of where exactly her destination was, at every fork in a canal or street, Priscilla-sama chose her path without hesitation.

Because of those correct choices, I, who should have been guiding her, had no chance to give my performance!

Liliana: “Isn’t this Priscilla-sama’s first time in Pristella? Moving with such ease that it’s startling…”

Priscilla: “No, this is the first time. Because its name is similar to my own, and because the sights of the Royal Capital of Water are famed, I had thought to visit one day. This development was not expected in the slightest.”

Liliana: “Is that so, this really is a shame. It was supposed to have been a much more tranquil, lovely city, without a need to rush like this.”

The Watergate City of Pristella was certainly a place most interesting for touring. For someone like me, who’d been staying at this place an awful lot of time for a bard, a leisurely stroll through the city was blissful. It seemed that the Muse Company, which had its roots here, had been making efforts in that direction, especially since Kiritaka-san’s generation.

Well, it’s hard to say, because Kiritaka-san is more likely to spoil me than to tell me complicated things like that. Kiritaka-san, please be safe.

Liliana: “Speaking of which, we happened across no one! A city where you’d find people walking on the streets, where water dragons’d be visible on every street with a canal, where singing’d lead to meeting Kiritaka-san, is in such a strange situation!”

Ever since the Witch Cult had first made a broadcast, no sound had been made. In addition to the people and water dragons all going missing, the only noises that stirred were the flow of water and wind.

How quiet. But, it felt like more than just quiet. This stillness, wasn’t it too ominous?

Priscilla: “Don’t wander off, it should be a right turn here. Do you understand? Follow my directions.”

Liliana: “Eh, don’t you want to take this path? It’s clearly a shortcut to that bridge and cross the waterway… Really, how scatterbrained of Priscilla-sama.”

Priscilla: “Oh—?”

Liliana: “Eep! Apologies, I misspoke!”

I wanted to decrease the distance by telling her of a shortcut, but it was a failure! Speaking of which that “oh” was too scary! The gaze of a beast… No, the gaze of a beast that hunts beasts!”

Priscilla: “Follow my instructions, and nothing shall go wrong.”

Liliana: “Hehe, this lowly one will now completely obey Priscilla-sama!”

Following Priscilla-sama’s directions, after this we took several winding routes. For some reason, during this not a single person was encountered. Time was running out!

Liliana: “Let’s be cheery as we walk and sing?”

Priscilla: “You said that song chooses neither place nor its audience. But even if you do not opt for others to listen, others have the right to choose the song.”

Liliana: “—?”

Priscilla: “Allow your throat to rest for a time… it shall not be long until your opportunity to sing arrives.”

Liliana: “Ahhhhh.”

Like that, Priscilla-sama’s eyes held a hint of having predicted something. That twisting and turning manner of talking felt suffocating to someone like me who took straightforwardness as a duty, but I shut my mouth and kept silent.

And so, this odd and silent tour through the city—

Priscilla: "—Here."

Having paused her footsteps, what Priscilla-sama was regarding was one of the shelters in the city—the Convention Center of Second Street. If the City Hall at the center was the a place of assembly for the entire city, then the Convention Center of each numbered street was where each of their standpoints would be discussed.

Kiritaka-san was not only the manager of the Third Street convention center, but he also had influence in the operation of the City Hall.

Liliana: "Oh, being unexpectedly taken somewhere safe! Quite honestly, I was even a bit scared on where I was going to be taken!"

Priscilla: "Hm? What are you saying? Hurry and get inside, blabbermouth."

Since this was a Convention Center, inside were probably one or several extraordinary people. Besides, because it was a place where the people living in the area had escaped to, it was at the same time place to heal the loneliness of not seeing anyone—

???: "You, the fuck are you saying? I'll kill you!"

This lovely daydream dissipated like fog after being met by a cry of rage.

An enraged roar filled with real murderous intent, with no intent of letting off those words as a simple strongly worded threat.

Those uncouth men had cast aside their usual frivolity, to exude genuine killing intent—I am a bard, but also a woman, and having wandered through so many places, taking not only safe paths, but having travelled dangerous ones as well… This was what was known as "rage".

That which could not remain unfaced, the Wrath that accompanied violence and murder.

Liliana: “P-Priscilla-sama…? This is…”

I was about to break down, and without being aware of it, I clung onto Priscilla-sama beside me, but she avoided my outstretched hand, glancing around the convention chamber with an extremely listless gaze.

On my knees, with disbelief, I surveyed the scene that Priscilla-sama was examining.

—The sound of a scream.

Inside the meeting room, the crowd shoved each other and flung insults, voicing loud words of hatred.

They must have numbered fifty… no, a hundred? Two hundred?

In summary, a mass of people pushed over those beside them indiscriminately, male and female and old and young together.

Insulting each other… those insults tinged with hostility and malice, displaying violent behavior, full of intent to wound and kill. Many had fallen and shed blood, and, in the corner of the convention chamber, there were the quivering forms of children.

What in the world was happening?

Priscilla: “Hmph… Amidst such a mass of random people, finding just Schult is indeed difficult.”

Casting me aside in my astonishment and sense of defeat, Priscilla harrumphed, face calm as ever in the face of those annoying screams.

…No, but, this situation was a disaster? Why was she so unaffected?

Priscilla: “It is certain that this kind of event has occurred through the city. Perhaps you may have been too slow to realize it—as I did avoid a path of trouble.”

Liliana: “Avoid…?!”

After saying it out loud, I finally understood the meaning of those words.

The reason that Priscilla-sama had gone out of her way to take the long way around—was to avoid those where people were coming into conflict with one another.

I alone had failed to notice, while leisurely complaining about things like the lack of people—!

Liliana: “Pushing and fighting each other like this… Does this have to do with the Witch Cult?”

Priscilla: “Were this just bickering because of their anxiety, I would have dismissed it as the extreme of the masses’ stupidity, but that is not the case. These people… No, the area of this entire city has been covered in some asinine power. This is the result.”

I couldn’t understand the most important parts of Priscilla-sama’s words. But at least I realized that the people hurting each other right now, were not doing so of their own intent.

Liliana: “Why, why am I untouched? Do I have the unique ability to counter something like this… Or rather, did I awaken in this moment?!”

Priscilla: “‘Tis the majesty of mine Sun Disk. Without it, perhaps you would have been swept along with it… But more importantly.”

Priscilla-sama narrowed her eyes, surveying those who shoved at each other. With the same gaze that she’d given me a “Oh—?” with. Which was to say that it was terrifying. Looking at those two eyes, her next words would presumably be equally terrifying.

That presumption was right.

Priscilla: “To find someone in this commotion, is practically the dream of a madman. With a small display of intimidation, they shall shut their mouths.”

Liliana: "…Eh?"

As her words fell, Priscilla-sama casually "drew a sword from the air". No, to say it like that was wrong. To be more precise, the light became a sword?

Priscilla: "Be enchanted by the brilliance of my Yang Sword—"

The sword which Priscilla-sama held was decorated with a beautiful floral pattern, dyed in red from pommel to blade. Radiating sunlight from within Priscilla-sama's hands, illuminating the entire convention chamber… How dazzling! How wondrous! A degree of illumination that regular light was incapable of reaching, scorching the eyes as if it were the sun. Kya, kyaaaaaaaaa—!

From up close, how damaging to my two eyes!

Ducking away to keep my distance, planning to raise a complaint to Priscilla-sama—And then I noticed it.

The convention center had grown quiet, the people fighting now focusing on Priscilla-sama. But of course, if such a blinding light appeared, it was only natural that everyone's quarrel would end.

And just when their hands and voices stopped,

???: "Priscilla-sama—Hk!!"

A boy who had been sobbing near the wall approached, running with cheeks reddened as he jumped towards Priscilla-sama. Priscilla-sama caught the boy directly from the front, stroking his peach-colored hair with gentleness.

Priscilla: "To be so troublesome, only you alone could receive my attention like this. Schult, have you realized what a fool you've been?"

Schult: "I-I… I thought I wouldn't make it…! But, Priscilla-sama… Priscilla-sama…"

Priscilla: "Well, crying easily is expected of children, they shall not be blamed for it."

The sight of the boy having his hair so gently stroked was surprising.

No, Priscilla-sama had come all the way to look for this child, so I'd assumed she cared very much for him, but witnessing this showed that it was not the case. It felt very uncomfortable, because Priscilla-sama's attitude was frigid. Thinking about it nearly made my neck twist.

However, it couldn't be assumed that with such a spectacle, it would be easy to escape. After all, we'd become the target of the attention of this convention center!

The enraged crowd was now focusing on the radiant Priscilla-sama. And in addition, they had just noticed that the shining blade had disappeared.

Liliana: "Priscilla-sama, where did the sword from just now go?"

Priscilla: "Its consumption is high. So when not in use, it must fade back into sunlight. Hmph."

Responding to my question, Priscilla-sama looked towards the ones who gazed at her. Her gaze was calm as always… Which was to say, apathetic.

Priscilla: "What are you lot staring at me for, you fools without reason? It is natural that you commoners worship my beauty, but understand time and place plus your own position. The first and most polite action would be to kneel."

Liliana: "Why are you provoking them—?!"

Pressing Schult into her chest, with a fierce expression Priscilla-sama pointed at the ground, ordering everyone present to fall to their knees. Although as expected, the crowd, much more short-tempered than usual, became enraged and rushed forward.

The ground rumbled violently, and I hurriedly dropped my bottom to the ground as I tried to curl up. However, Priscilla-sama remained standing there. No, wait.

Man: “This woman! What kind of joke…”

Priscilla: “First of all is you—At least soar with grace.”

The large man attempted to grab Priscilla-sama in a fit of rage, but she immediately dodged aside, shoving his broad chest away.

A man who seemed to have twice my weight was blown away like a leaf. No, really, that easy, not exaggerating.

Man: “—Hk?!”

The body of the man flew away in the direction of the mass of people rushing in, causing a dramatic and pitiful sight. One after another they were pushed back and knocked over, toppling like dominos.

And so, due to that initial loss, the crowd’s momentum came to a halt. The legs of those lined in front trembled upon seeing Priscilla-sama’s strength.

Priscilla: “As you can see, were it what I will, all of you could be cut down with ease. Although it is bothersome, if you desire to attack, approach in turn. For only today I shall spare the time to thoroughly respond to your desires.”

Refugees: “…”

Priscilla-sama spoke in a regal tone, glaring at those surrounding her.

That said, there was no one who would approach after hearing those words. The enraged demeanor of before went who knows where… Or rather, the rage lingered on in everyone’s hearts. It was merely that they had yet to lose their minds enough to direct it at Priscilla-sama.

Priscilla: “It appears that there are none. Well then, there is no longer meaning in remaining here. My attendant has been found safe and sound. You lot are free to enjoy yourselves, once I have departed.”

Liliana: “Eh?!”

As soon as Priscilla-sama finished speaking, she took the hand of the crying Schult, striding toward the exterior of the Convention Center with lavish steps. She’s on her way, but is this really how she’s going to go? Is this really okay?

Liliana: “Ah, but! Just leaving everyone here like this…”

Priscilla: “After my departure, the quarrel will start anew… It would not be surprising if it ultimately led to slaughter. However, do I have any reason to terminate it?”

Liliana: “That is…”

It might be the case, but was it really fine like this? No matter how you looked at it, just leaving them behind was far too terrible.

Liliana: “P-Priscilla-sama is a candidate in the Royal Selection…”

Priscilla: “Even for me, there are things that I cannot accomplish. Without question, I am indeed in that annoying position, but to use it as an excuse is too forced.”

Liliana: “Guh…!”

She stopped me before I could finish, and I was no longer able to raise voice to any retorts!

But, but, once we’re gone, the quarrel would start anew. Could I really do something so ruthless such as escaping?

Something like this, I—

Priscilla: “Or is that to say, you’ll solve it?”

Liliana: “—Eh?!”

Just as I was hesitating, Priscilla-sama murmured in a low voice. What did that mean, that, uh, rather appealing proposal?

Priscilla: “Before, you told me. To enjoy song requires no qualification. Not selecting place or audience is the essence of that which you give the moniker of “song”. If so, why do you not use your miraculous song to save that lot?”

Liliana: “…”

Priscilla: “You are within my Sun Disk. In addition, as I previously proclaimed, you are to approach me should you come across trouble. Although perhaps it may be early to play this card… But this is still a pleasure. Remaining here for nary a moment just to be able to hear your song would be acceptable.”

As if provoking me, Priscilla-sama folded her arms over her chest. Was it a quirk, to raise her chest like this?

That violent cleavage could be seen with ease. I brushed my hand over my chest. Flat. I stared down at that hand.

That palm was wet with cold sweat.

Liliana: “Is it… possible?”

Priscilla: “It matters not if you do it—If that is what you believe, then it shall merely amount to wasted effort.”

If you don’t have the ability to sing, but yet think you do, then, so be it. If thinking that songs had no power, such a line of thinking was not wrong.

I’m sure I do, I’m sure I do, I’m sure I don’t—!

Taking up the Lyulyre from my back, I gripped it tightly with both hands.

The people who had yet to become my audience, people who had stored all their rage in their core, were watching! How dare they! When clearly from now, I was about to sing!

—To hope that, when everyone savored the sound of song together joyously, that they would not fight!

Priscilla: “Schult, wait for a little. You shall witness something entertaining.”

Schult: “Understood.”

Priscilla-sama and Schult stood behind my figure as I held the Lyulyre.

I don’t need to see what they looked like, ugh, despicable, it was obvious without looking!

The girl, Liliana! Wandering the world with only a Lyulyre, a bard who forever held heroes in her heart! If she failed here, both the woman and her life would be ruined!

Liliana: “Inspiration flashes! Please listen—Ripples on the Surface of the Watergate City!”

Return to sanity, then show me a frenzy! If this takes away time that would be spent fighting, it’s all the more meaningful!

Chapter 64:
The Despondence of Liliana Masquerade

1

Liliana: “…”

Fingers sliding across the strings of the Lyulyre, reproducing a movement that was completely bound with familiarity. For many years, for many tens of thousands of times, for as long as I can remember, these fingertips have played these notes.

For me, to sing was as natural as drawing breath, as natural as exhaling laughter when encountering amusement, so it was far too difficult to remember when it had started…

Throat opening, diaphragm inhaling, rhythm intertwining with the melody I had started playing.

What I sang were all the words, all the feelings that emerged in my mind in the moment. All of those were overlaid atop the melody that would surface in my mind in a similar fashion.

Liliana: “…”

When creating a new song, although I would say “Inspiration flashes”, to truly say that it was inspiration flashing was rather absurd.

In other words, it was no sudden flash, but a discovery. Calling it that would perhaps be more suitable. In this instant, the melody and words emerging in my mind were things hidden within this world in origin.

Discovering a melody somehow forgotten by the world.

Stumbling across it by coincidence, taking it up by chance, as if a gift had descended from the skies—a tune concealed in the corners of the world. I have all along regarded it as such.

And thus I had told Priscilla-sama that even without learning anything whatsoever, music could be enjoyed. If one completely gave up all their wisdom, all their knowledge, it would be the same.

Because music was sung, even if not by a human being.

Ever heard birdsong? Ever heard a chorus of cicadas? Ever quietly listened to the wind sweeping across a stream, felt it raise a murmured voice?

Did they also have humanity? Perhaps, or rather, no, they shouldn’t have. At the very least I think they don’t! I don’t!

From the sun that illuminates all, from the moon that waxes and wanes, from the earth that diffuses its aroma, from the firewood that crackles, have you ever felt music? I have! I’ve felt it—that is proof that music permeates this world.

That is proof that the world is constructed by music, this world is filled with music, this world is connected by music.

Liliana: “…”

Us bards merely borrow songs from this world filled with music. Music that was originally present everywhere, can be made slightly easier to notice with a little meddling.

Without shyness, without apology, we selfishly enjoy this exquisite melody alone.

It doesn’t matter if you think of it like that. It doesn’t matter that we think of it like that.

However, isn’t this music something lovely?

There is joy in sharing with strangers that which is interesting, and that which is fun. There is joy in laughing out loud when something is funny and when something is amusing.

Music is like that. Music allows you to do that.

Because the entire world is singing, who would scold those who sing?

Come, immerse, immerse, immerse your all. Come, devote, devote, devote your all.

Submerge in joy, fill your heart with glee, be imprisoned by happiness!

Use not only your ears, but also your eyes, nose, skin, heart, soul, all of those to “join” with the “music”!

Frenzy swallowed the audience, washing away the extreme Wrath in one wave.

Swaying in dance, raising their voice, like that, they became one with the performance. Should their gazes overlap with those around them, they would notice they were now sharing the same feelings.

Of course. Music has always been by your side, an ever-present comrade, from birth to death. You’ve seen it, heard it, felt it.

We are always here, calling for such music—!

Liliana: “So, hell yeah! You weren’t quiet at all, but thank you for the attention—Ahhhhh!”

Singing on, uwaaaah!

2

E~h, so, how to put it, sorry for gleefully forgetting myself.

After the end of an extensive performance such as that, recalling the passionate demeanor I’d worn, my cheeks reddened.

Schult: “Um, onee-san was amazing! I was very moved!”

Teehee! How cute was Schult-kun’s cluelessly pure gaze! My heart was itching, aching! Those undirtied, wholesome, watery red eyes, made blood go drip-drip in my heart!

Ri~ght, this kid was completely without malice, so it wasn’t sarcasm. He merely expressed his childish feelings with earnestness. Though I was aware of this, his praise couldn't be accepted comfortably because he was too cute!

What a pity, Schult… As an adult, this purity would be dirtied.

Schult: "—? I couldn't understand some of it, so apologies for my lack of study."

Hya! That dejected expression was unfairly cute!

This child gives off an impression that makes you want to do something terribly mischievous?! A little, just a little touch… He~hehe…

Priscilla: "Liliana. That performance just now was not dreadful. You are worthy of my praise."

Liliana: "Gyobih!"

Priscilla: "What was that horrendous sound just now? A girl… especially one such as you, their throat cannot be making such noises."

Just as Schult was about to be reached by an adult's sinful demonic grasp, I was caught up with a trickster like Priscilla-sama. No, I had no plans to do anything deplorable, really, none whatsoever.

By the way, the moment he saw Priscilla-sama, Schult's face became sunny, sticking close to her waist. Though saying so, it wasn't tight clinging, merely lightly holding part of Priscilla-sama's red dress… the modest demeanor of an angel.

Now, we'd come to pick up this precious Schult-kun, and attempted to turn the Convention Center, about to become the very scene of a catastrophe, into a Festival Hall…

Liliana: "This result was unexpected… At some point when I wasn't paying attention, it seems I reached the pinnacle of music. Indeed, a goddess of music without parallel!"

Priscilla: "Foolishness. To be aware of the difference between the mundane and your own ability is imperative. But to evaluate one’s self so highly lacks elegance. Your song was indeed worth enjoying, but the time to call yourself without parallel is yet to arrive. You were merely lucky; that they immersed so early was solely because they were suggestible.”

Liliana: “Suggestible?”

What did that mean?

Priscilla-sama fanned herself with a listless expression as she scanned the faces in the Convention Center. I hurriedly followed her gaze, seeing many people.

People had finally been released by the sick feeling that had them insulting, attacking and fighting each other, had recovered their cool. Some extended their hands to those who had been shoved over, some offered apologies, some responded constantly with “It’s fine it’s fine”, some silently gave treatment to those who had been injured.

Oh, well then, my song was pretty amazing! The ones who had been arguing like that earlier, had in fact sunk into such a lukewarm state… Practically the talent of a master!

Priscilla: “Do not forget yourself with glee. The influence of unrest which played these commoners as if marionettes still persists. The sound of your song alleviated the commoners’ distrust and fear. However, without solving the root of the cause, they shall soon devolve to their previous state.”

Liliana: “Pfft?! Ah, no, but, think about it, every time their hearts are pulled into that tough spot, I’ll clean them away with my fervent…”

Priscilla: “In theoretical terms, that works. However, if you treat the symptoms, the root of the problem remains. And beyond that, this commotion is not occurring merely at this Convention Center.”

Liliana: “Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!”

This was the first time I was hearing of… No, earlier Priscilla-sama had said that such conflict had been avoided on the way here. Could it be that such disruption was occurring all throughout the city?! Isn't that really bad?!

Liliana: "P-P-P-Pristella, we have to do something about it."

Priscilla: "Well, that is how it is. To be frank, I do not possess any obligation to try to save this city…"

Schult: "Priscilla-sama…"

Once again, a merciless, cold-blooded, iron expression! With his gaze trembling, Schult looked towards Priscilla-sama as she spoke. How to put it, it was obvious upon a glance that Schult-kun seemed so normal next to Priscilla-sama. Perfectly perfect wholesomeness.

Ah, this child is hopeless, completely in line with my preferences.

Not receiving a response from Schult-kun, not knowing whether he shared my feelings counted as my loss. Priscilla-sama shrugged helplessly, breasts bouncing with violence. I gazed at my hands.

Liliana: "How old is Priscilla-sama?"

Priscilla: "Nineteen."

Liliana: "I see. By the way, just to mention, I'm twenty-two."

Priscilla: "No one asked."

I just wanted to mention it. What was this difference, something in diet? Did the disadvantage of being a wandering traveler, a bard, come into play here? Such suffering.

Priscilla: "Without even mentioning having Schult trapped here, daring to display such disrespect during my stay, I am hardly so generous as to forgive it. Without regard of which Witch Cultist is involved, their heads shall roll."

As my hands tightened, Priscilla-sama's decree seemed to have been settled upon.

Although many excuses would be voiced, I well understood that she was really thinking to Schult-kun's request.

Liliana: "Really, Priscilla-sama is truly, too, overprotective of Schult-kun♪ …"

Priscilla: "…"

Liliana: "Gyah?! Burning, burning, it's burning?!"

On fire?! Caught on fire just now?!

In the instant that I'd jabbed Priscilla-sama in the side with my elbow, fire had ignited over my head?! The tips of my hair were curling from burning?! There wasn't even a "Ho" this time!

Sudden brutality! Genuine panic! Unforgettable nightmare!

Schult: "O-Onee-san, are you okay…?!"

Schult ran over towards me in a shock as I rolled with my head burning. Perhaps to try to extinguish the flame immediately, he withdrew a bottle from the parcel, intending to tip its contents into me, struggling to pour its contents on my body. In the meantime, my head had been engulfed by flame.

Priscilla: "Halt, Schult."

Schult: "But, Priscilla-sama…!"

Priscilla: "This is my evening alcohol. As it my property, even a slight drop would turn the singer into a ball of flame. These sound like jests, but this is the reality."

Liliana: "Owowowowowowow—!"

Before I could be ignited, I rolled back and forth on the frigid ground. Schult tilted his tiny neck to ask, "Can alcohol catch on fire?"

Despicable, master and servant had collaborated to have me perish in flame… But! Even were I to die here, the soul of a bard would not rest, and my song would echo by your bedside nightly… Because song was everywhere in this world!

Priscilla: “If you would not mind it, doing so is fine as well by me. Speaking of which, kicking up such a fuss over singed hair tips, hurry and stand.”

Liliana: “Eh? Where’d the cursed flame go? I should be enclosed in scorching flame and turned to ash?”

Ah, for real, I wasn’t burning at all. That was so surprising that I completely lost it.

Laughing with embarrassment while wiping my clothing, feeling like people were staring at me, I walked to Priscilla-sama’s side. I had to talk to her directly.

Liliana: “Well then, Priscilla-sama! In order to save Pristella, please attack with a bang, gracefully giving your regards to the Sin Archbishop! I’ll be rotoing for you!”

Priscilla: “Do not speak as if it were another’s affair. I have already decided to take you as well.”

Liliana: “Uhhhhhhhhhh—?!”

Earth-shattering! Sky-flipping! Life-sucking beauty! Why nominate me at this moment?!

Liliana: “A bard like me, who only knows how to be cute, sing, and be cute… A bard without any specialties… Taking me could only satisfy your eyes and ears, you know?”

Priscilla: “That candidness is not unappealing. As I have said before, I am fond of you. It would be a shame if that singing voice were to be lost. Not to mention leaving you in the company of the rabble would perhaps lead to misfortune. You should stay within the reach of my Sun Disk.”

Liliana: “Which is to say… I’m so cute you want to protect me?”

Priscilla: “—Ho?”

Liliana: “Wah! Priscilla-sama is truly kind to beat me when angry!”

Compared with the attack of setting my hair aflame without indication, how kind was the Priscilla-sama who only set me on fire after giving warning. Huh, chest tingling. What kind of feeling was this… Heartbeat quickening, sweat dripping, breaths toiling, blood vanishing from face…

Priscilla: “There are other reasons to take you. That irritating lunatic’s declaration… Had you not stated that the magical device is in the City Hall?”

Liliana: “Huh? Ah, right, it’s in the City Hall. Every morning I get up early, rubbing my sleepy eyes to do as duty asks… Ah! That isn’t to say that I wouldn’t sing because I wanted to sleep in. It’s true that I am sleepy, or half asleep, or more than half asleep, right up until the last moment, but when it’s time to sing, my eyes are open! My eyes are open!”

Priscilla: “Knowing the location is enough. All I require is that magical device… and you.”

Liliana: “You want…”

Priscilla: “Your throat.”

A change in phrase. However, thanks to that, I finally realized exactly what Priscilla-sama had meant to say. In other words, she wanted to say,

Liliana: “To have what happened just now in this Convention Center, spread across the city using the broadcasting magical device…!”

Priscilla: “…”

Liliana: “Eh, hm, Priscilla-sama? What is it?”

Priscilla: “Daring to be so ostentatious before myself. You fool, what have you done with the real Liliana. That person could not possibly be so intelligent.”

Liliana: “A clever and cute me being treated as an illusion!”

The kind of impression she had of me was, in truth, very disappointing.

However, I understood Priscilla-sama’s thoughts. If commotions similar to the one in this convention center were occurring all throughout the city, then that would perhaps be where my song would come in.

Being able to tour the city to give performances would be something wonderful, but there wasn’t enough time to travel around like that! In that case, my mind was made!

Liliana: “Alright, understood! That certainly makes sense. If that’s the case, then it’s only natural that Priscilla-sama’d want to take me with her! In addition, the City Hall would be the place where the brains of the city would gather! Surely Kiritaka-san would be there, in an emergency like this, he can be relied on!”

Priscilla: “However, within the City Hall there certainly awaits a Sin Archbishop. Exterminating that pest is unavoidable. You would do well to avoid being caught in it.”

Liliana: “I’d forgotten!”

Right. Lust currently occupied the City Hall. Which meant that if the City Hall was serving as a base, the operation would have been stunted from the start.

Liliana: “No but, no but, no but! That Sin Archbishop might’ve emptied out the City Hall already! There are lots of rooms in there which are inaccessible for secrecy, so it’s not really a place to kill time. Maybe Lust got bored with waiting and left already.”

Fufu, indeed, a burst of divine reasoning. This was an idea unique to me, who was left there every morning after work.

In truth, everyone would be working hard in there, so there was no one who would deal with me. If someone didn’t understand numbers, they’d be kicked out, or something like that!

And so, certainly the City Hall'd be completely empty…

???: "Yahoo. Yahoo~. Yahohooo~."

And it was right at that moment that I heard the second broadcast.

3

After listening to the second broadcast, we left the Convention Center feeling depressed (Priscilla and Schult did not look depressed).

Leaving the Convention Center took a while, since the people became anxious again after the second broadcast, and they had to be calmed down with my song. Frankly, that performance could only be called unintentional.

No matter what was sung, any behavior lacking reason could not be included. However, at its basis, adding extraneous impurity to the song was not permissible.

Becoming intoxicated by the song, becoming immersed in the song —to sing with these feelings was what I had intended. But I didn't want to think of song as a way to counter the psychological attack which unsettled people. But if it turned out that way in the end, if I, the singer, began to think of song like that, I would no longer be sincere when singing. I could no longer believe that I could rapture someone's heart with song.

Priscilla: "Taking over the control towers and the watergates, leaving the demands to the next broadcast…"

After leaving the Convention Center, with steps which were as always self-assured, only I shakily followed behind. Rather than calling it a loss of assurance, perhaps it was a loss of identity?

Without doubt I existed for singing, but was it myself who was requested of by these circumstances, was it the song, or was it the consequence of the song?

Although all three originated in me, the three were not in sync. I couldn't help but feel that way.

Priscilla: “A third broadcast has to happen, before we have access to the City Hall’s magical device.”

Schult: “Why is that?”

Priscilla: “The Witch Cult needs use of the magical device only once, to send out their request. Afterward, they shall only need to oversee the four control towers they occupy, and remain far away from the City Hall, in which there is no rationale in putting their main forces. However, for the sake of playing their twisted game, there is the possibility they may continue seizing the magical device.”

Schult: “Why can’t we do it?”

Priscilla: “That is not the case, as long as the one operating that magical device is Lust… Although she wears quite the vicious skin, what lies beneath is quite cunning. What a lunatic would become if given the opportunity to be clever would look exactly like that.”

Schult took the lead in asking Priscilla questions, ones that I had myself. Schult had instantaneously figured out the secret behind not enraging Priscilla-sama (perhaps he himself was unaware!). And because he was so genuine, Priscilla-sama politely answered everything she had been asked.

Because it was an explanation meant for a child, I understood it easily as well.

Which was to say, was the situation progressing as the Witch Cult willed?

Priscilla: “And so, after the third broadcast, when their requests have been made, if the magical device is operable, your song shall join the playing field. Should the city be in a state of unrest, who knows where the pests among the lions will gather.”

Schult: “Before it becomes something that complicated, is there no chance for Priscilla-sama to regain control by using that bright sword to finish off the Witch Cult?”

Priscilla: “The control towers from all four sides, should a single watergate out of any of them be opened, the city would be flooded. Even I am a lone person. To raise a hand in counterattack is ineffective. In this city are a few capable others… they, too, shall try to recover the magical device.”

The capable others Priscilla-sama had mentioned were those capable of meeting the Witch Cult in battle.

As far as I knew, people who had extraordinary achievements against the Witch Cult were indeed in the city. Indeed, the Lolimancer, Natsuki Subaru-sama, and the Silver-Haired Witch, Emilia-sama, who accompanied him!

Liliana: “Oh, I get it! We’re waiting until the third broadcast before going to the City Hall.”

Fists clenched, breaths involuntarily growing wild.

In all honesty, to be unable to protest against it was a bit disheartening. However, not going to the City Hall, would mean being unable to assure Kiritaka-san’s safety… Or rather, even being assured of Kiritaka-san’s safety would not be useful as far as battle went…

However, if only for the sake of that person alone, I felt like I could sing even if devoid of feeling.

Liliana: “So until then…!”

Schult: “You’re going to go around visiting shelters with Liliana-sama!”

Liliana: “Yes, yes, take me to a shelter and—Wait, ehhhhhhhh?!”

Schult answered with frenzied enthusiasm, what was this about??!!

Priscilla-sama nodded with satisfaction. Seeing this, Schult grew happy, his entire face becoming bright red. Although clearly I had been named, I was left all alone by himself.

Even though I was so close, I was somehow left feeling lonely.

Priscilla: “Though I am aware of how your song has an effect on this unsettling wave, your mood should be calmed before asking you to perform… Though just then you had been at a loss, right now you have no leeway for such troubles.”

Liliana: “But, does this have anything to do with the shelters?!”

Priscilla: “Although using the magical device to dispel the curse is your duty, it shall be a while before you are able to do just that. In the meantime, the hearts of the commoners would be left in solitude, swaying with unease.”

Liliana: “Ah…”

Priscilla: “Before you can take your place and stand before the magical device, those who need your song are countless. To prevent this, you must meet their needs.”

Priscilla-sama’s proposal could finally be easily understood. Before the time for my song arrived, countless cases of people hurting each other, like the one in the Convention Center, would occur. By then, perhaps the delivery of a most valuable song of salvation might be too late.

I was certain that not all of them could be saved. But, to extend a hand to those who could would be no futile task.

Priscilla: “From my point of view, you have no small amount of courage on the stage. However, that wavering just now is somewhat dangerous. Perhaps it shall rear its head at a critical moment. Thus, you must increase the number of times you experience the stage.”

Liliana: “Times on the stage… is it?”

Times on the stage was already a countless figure. Although the phrase “courage upon the stage” had never been used, never before had the stage brought any feelings of shame.

What Priscilla-sama actually meant was—

Priscilla: “Your troubles are unknown. However, what is needed is not a song for yourself, but one for others. You must understand that your songs are for the sake of others. And thus, you must increase your number of times on the stage.”

Liliana: “…”

Priscilla: “To be prompted by me, to such a degree, truly is arrogant. Repent with the results you shall bring.”

With that said, as if having made a decision, Priscilla-sama folded her two hands over her chest, vigorously sticking out her chest—those large breasts bounced violently. My own, flat. I looked at my own hands, gripping them tightly.

Song was a presence different from the self. To sing in such a way—

Schult: “Priscilla-sama is as gentle as expected! I truly understand that!”

Priscilla: “Too noisy, Schult.”

It was an exchange that couldn’t help but feel a bit facetious, but with it I’ll steel myself to begin a battle of touring every shelter to perform. For Liliana-chan’s future, a bard of song and play and dance, who lives up to Priscilla-sama’s words!

—.

——.

———.

Well, while visiting the shelters with this enthusiasm, checking up on those who had succumbed to frustration or despair, there would be a third broadcast…

Priscilla: “—Hmm… someone else went first. How annoying.”

Priscilla-sama lifted her head to regard the darkened sky, murmuring to herself like this. As for what those feelings were directed toward, I had of course likewise heard.

Natsuki Subaru-sama had made a broadcast with the magical device.

Although those words had been clumsy and by no means could be called inspiring, perhaps they could have imprinted something other than anxiety and fear in the hearts of the people within the city.

The was the same as our desire to sing. In that case, it should be fine, no matter who'd done it.

Liliana: "Even if someone else went first, just as he said, the City Hall seems to be clear. For now, let's meet up with everyone, and begin the battle to retake the city! And I! Will sing my best!"

Priscilla: "Don't display such a relieved attitude."

Liliana: "No, no, no, I don't feel anything like safe."

To some degree there was a sense of assurance, but what was greater was a sense of shame. A chance being taken away, missing an opportunity to be the Songstress.

But in its stead, I had witnessed the place where a Hero was born, and that gave me satisfaction.

—But that feeling of satisfaction was short-lived, as the Hero's recklessness had led to a suicide mission with Priscilla-sama!

Yay! There would still be a chance to sing! Well then!

Chapter 65:
The Regret of Liliana Masquerade

1

Yay, this is Liliana, live from the scene!

Yesyes, currently we’re in the northern part of the City of Pristella! We’re engaging in a battle to capture one of the control towers—!

The four control towers were taken over by the Witch Cult! In order to recapture the towers, the most capable ones in the city have made their move, undertaking the challenge to capture all four simultaneously!

Amongst these warriors who did not pale in the slightest, for some reason, a mere cute musician such as myself actually joined the battle as well, how unexpected! However, retreat wasn’t to even be considered!

Well then, next up, introducing the crazy face who is going to be participating in this operation together alongside me, Liliana Masquerade—!!

Priscilla: “That face is just about sickening already. Present your neck beneath me. Once that head has been severed, that skull shall serve nicely as a candleholder.”

Alright, this is i~t! Merciless words and vicious tactics! But if that’s done, we’ll be finished too! I’ll die, so please have mercy!

Light dancing in those slender crimson eyes, the figure akin to a flame turning back! Even that difficult character was like the ever-changing form of flame, obviously dangerous to the touch!

Wielding the Yang Sword in one hand, was the champion of our offense and defense! Priscilla Bariel-sama!

Priscilla-sama crossed the ignited waterway by the side, in one breath waving the dazzling Yang Sword! Waving! Wavewavewaving!

Impact! Radiance! Sound! The one receiving it, was knocked back greatlyyy~!

But! Catching their step! And then glaring at Priscilla-sama!

???: “Aah, aah, aaaaaaaaaah! Really, really, really! Why is it that this one and that one and everyone are all bunched and coming together?! Do you mean to prevent me from encountering that person?! Agonizing, agonizing, how agonized I am! This heartbreak rends my chest! These violent feelings make my heart tremble! Such sadness cannot be contained—!”

What had appeared was—! A sobbing enraged lunatic wrapped in bandages, crying out while tears flowed and flowed!

Face covered in white bandages which looped and looped and looped and looped to cover eyes! Body completely covered in a cloak! In all honesty, their gender was indistinguishable, though from the voice, it was probably a woman! With that style of clothing giving away the identity of the woman, with dangerous thoughts she swung chains that looped and looped and looped and looped around her arms!

Both I and everyone else had already lost track of what that someone was saying, the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult representing Wrath, Sirius Romanée-Conti! Who had announced herself just now!

The covered face of the lunatic Sirius was overflowing with tears! Those tears seemed to be aflame, allowing tongues of flame to flutter around in the courtyard beneath the control tower! Such a connection! It was inexplicable!

And adding on to that, there was the presence of a white flame in the waterway, and people, people, people were crowding outside! A majority of the people who should have been hiding in the shelters on the north part of the city had gone out of their way, rushing to witness this battle—Sike! Because, right now, everyone was tumbling about on the ground and sobbing! Just like the lunatic, Sirius! This was the power of Wrath, that which had spread chaos throughout the entire city—!

In the eyes of everyone who was sobbing and screaming, there was no trace of awareness! Should they be said to have been poisoned by emotion, or intoxicated by emotion, or manipulated by emotion, or tormented by emotion as playthings, it was something like that! It's incredibly clear, watery, crystaline what would happen if they were left alone, so trying a little harder here would be good, wouldn't it?!

Liliana: "Uhhh, uhhhhh… Come, come on now, this certainly is a big stage, once in a lifetime!"

Atop a high platform! From above, I surveyed what lay burning below this stage, the still-sobbing audience, and the actors who sparked sparks as if driven mad, and again I raised and raised my voice on the stage.

In all honesty, because I had left the vicinity of Priscilla-sama's very powerful feeling, just now, my chest had been pierced endlessly as if attacked with sorrow and despondency and loneliness, but don't think that I'd stop my steps, smooth my fingers, or lose my breath to the burning flames for that sort of reason!

Being forced to feel something like agony happens all the time when exposed to such songs, so I was not going to be discouraged if the waves were a bit high!

Last but not least, I would like to introduce every last one of these people to the last member of this nutty group, to the one who played a leading ro~le!

Liliana: "Come, come, those far away, come listen to the sound! Those close by, come watch the dance! Those even further away, I'll raise my voice so you can hear! Liliana Masquerade is here to sing and dance and perform for you, so listen well! —The Sky Overtaking the Morning Glow!"

Placing delicate yet bold force into the fingers which played the

Lyulyre, throat opening to reach as far as possible, to have echoes reverberate close by, borrowing from the world sounds and rhythms, I started playing—!

But well before that! Let’s go back for only a fraction of time, to recall how this situation came to be!

2

Liliana: “So, sosososo, Priscilla-sama! Uh, is that really fine?”

Priscilla: “To what do you refer?”

As usual, Priscilla-sama’s steps did not slow in the slightest.

Chasing that figure, I hurriedly called out. No~, ri~ght. Although clearly the next step was to contend with a Sin Archbishop, the only one who had been brought alongside was in fact me!

Was this it? At the beginning of the beginning of the beginning, this wasn’t what I’d planned on.

After the Witch Cult’s third broadcast, Natsuki Subaru-sama had made a, how to describe it, not firm, yet leaving imprints in the heart, well, anyway, a broadcast with that kind of feeling. And we had regrouped with those in the City Hall!

There, I was told that Kiritaka-san’s safety was in an uncertain state, and something resembling worry formed in my heart, but something even more shocking was revealed there!

After all, Lust was not the only Sin Archbishop that had come to Pristella. Just one Sin Archbishop would’ve been enough of a disaster, and there were in fact four! And the four would each occupy one tower, that was already strange enough.

Who was it that’d spread some news such as the Witch Cult being a group of deviants without commanders and unable to function as a group? Wasn’t this a perfect example of teamwork? And wasn’t this the result of that?

Was the only fitting part the one about them being deviants? It can’t be~, that’s simply scary—!

Butbut, gathered on our side were the candidates of the Royal Selection!

Though some of those valuable people present had suffered injuries in a prior battle, in the eyes of those who were planning on retaking the city there lay no cloudiness! And because of that, all that remained was to send all those people filled with energy off.

Priscilla: "—With myself, and the singer as well, there is nothing to fear."

Suddenlysuddenly, as I had entrusted myself to the inspiration of Kiritaka-san's requiem, I heard myself being referred to by Priscilla-sama!

Wasn't it that I would be brought to the midst of the battle against the Sin Archbishop of Wrath?

Nono, I bravely argued for her to reconsider, that it would be very unreasonable—but with a frigid attitude, as if she'd forgotten those hours we'd just spent together, Priscilla-sama stabbed and stabbed at me with provoking words.

To receive words to such an extent, how could this be, I was merely a woman. A bard.

And what was more, shrinking back wasn't an option, having been told that this Wrath had been the one who had spread discord throughout the city.

Originally, Priscilla-sama had brought me to use the magical device in the City Hall to spread my song to all those in the city. But since that goal had been overtaken by Subaru-sama's speech, my turn to take to the stage was spoiled, and I was left with a feeling of defeat…

Should there be another chance to face Wrath, that would make the perfect opportunity to do battle once again. Rather, this was the re-opening of a war that had ended without battle, a battle of revenge that the opponent was unaware of.

Something like that, wouldn't it practically make someone ignite?

Liliana: "Excellent! This woman, Liliana! On the stage, under Priscilla-sama's order, with the Lyulyre and this throat, will sing with beauty!”

Tada~! And I made a big show of it.

As Priscilla-sama and Al-sama focused on the battle with Wrath, I would, from behind, immerse those who had been affected by Wrath’s incomprehensible power in song. A perfect setup!

That was what I had thought would be the case. Alright, and with that, the scene returns to the exchange from earlier. To Priscilla-sama, responding to my shameful voice with “To what do you refer?” Rightright, of course she’d say that.

Liliana: “Why did you leave Al-sama back at the City Hall? With only two women, one being the adorable me and the other being the beautiful Priscilla-sama, don’t you think this is too much?”

Priscilla: “It is not. I alone would already be surplus to begin with. After all, this is a state of affairs so lacking in available personnel that even I must act. To have me be pressed into making a casual effort, those of the Witch Cult must believe themselves to be on the verge of victory.”

Liliana: “…? I really don’t understand what you’re sa~—Hk! Priscilla-sama is amazing!”

Having only received a sideways glare from Priscilla-sama, the place that was glared at seared with pain! An illusion? Was it an illusion?! Was it from feeling Priscilla-sama’s burning passion from so up close that my body was already conditioned by her?!

Priscilla: “It should be as you have heard. As long as a signal is sent to the control tower, certainly one of them shall aim for the vacant headquarters. And when that happens, they shall be able to do whatever they may so desire to those left… Although that merchant seems to have realized so.”

Liliana: “Ah, and so you spoke to Anastasia-sama before leaving.”

Priscilla: “Although it appears that the option of taking only the magical device, and hiding in a shelter with the other non-combatants was considered… Since the Witch Cult will be arriving either way, to choose to greet them with battle would be best. The one to return shall presumably be Lust, but with Al around, something may be managed.”

Liliana: “Ah, so that’s how it is… Al-sama does indeed seem trusted!”

As I listened to Priscilla-sama’s words, after nodding another glare was given!

But just then I hadn’t done any wrong! Becausebecause, something like leaving an ally at a place where the enemy would try to force their way in was certainly something that couldn’t be done without trust.

Priscilla: “Do not carelessly speak of trust and reliance. Although I shall not deny being supported by Al and Schult. Although that man does indeed play the part of a fool, he is in fact a useful man. Although he is a card drawn in my hand for his eccentric exterior, placing him beside myself does not serve as an impediment.”

With a derisive sound, Priscilla-sama spoke in a low voice, as if bored.

In truth, such words should be directed toward one’s foremost Knight-sama, and in the end, the degree of warmth in the evaluation of a trusted partner was zero, but why was this? Those words clearly contained only their superficial meanings and feelings, but for what reason did it feel as if just that were enough?

Liliana: “Because evaluations for others are so low that those evaluated as normal feels like they’re evaluated greatly, is it an issue of distribution…?”

Priscilla: “You shan’t need to attempt understanding my mannerisms. Regarding solely the results is fine. Nor do I request of you to understand. What I do request of you, is solely what I acknowledge.”

Liliana: “S-Something of mine can be regarded as useful to the point of being acknowledged…?”

Priscilla: “It can be said to be useful to the point of being valuable enough to be brought alongside me. You have an obligation to respond to my expectations.”

Uhyiiii, merely being regarded like that made it a serious responsibility indeed!

Or, well, that is, in any case, setting that aside, I had just noticed something.

In the meeting in the City Hall just now, Priscilla-sama had indeed been referring to me as “you”, “you”, “you”, leading to a feeling of distance suddenly being drawn, but now her referral had changed back to “you”. Could this be…?

Liliana: “A special side you show only to those you deem amiable, ju~st kidding… Uhyiiiiiii!”

I clutched at my head, hiding from Priscilla-sama’s searing gaze. Hu~u, I had learned from these past several hours. How should it be put, that it was Priscilla-sama’s, something like the atmosphere? Such subtle changes in Priscilla-sama, were all keenly caught by my sensitive ears, skin, etcetera…

Liliana: “Hmm? The anticipated sharp rebuke did not strike? How is it possible, for this Liliana’s expectation to be off…”

Priscilla: “Despite still being in the middle of this small play, interest in your farce extends only so far.”

Liliana: “Ah, back to calling me “you”…”

Had distance once again been created with that? As I held such slightly despondent feelings, I raised my head to understand. Ah, understood, this wasn’t the time to play around with me.

At some point in time, we had reached our destination, the control tower. Well then, the control tower had a slight problem, it conflicted a tiny bit with what I knew—

Liliana: “Did you know, Priscilla-sama? According to my report on Pristella, the control tower shouldn’t be something that would randomly go up in flames.”

Priscilla: “Indeed. Despite being a decoration I do approve of, to one’s regret, the director of this performance is beyond crude. This burning, scorching and searing would indeed raise spirits, but enjoyment cannot be derived from such shoddiness.”

Although Priscilla-sama was the very picture of composure, I could not regard this so coolly.

The northern control tower, that stalwart tower surrounded by various waterways, its entire structure was at this moment engulfed in flame. Since the tower was made of stone, it wasn’t supposed to be something that could be so easily set aflame. Ah, inspiration was about to come.

Liliana: “Inspiration flashes. Baked Stone Tower and Baked Yams… Would you like to hear it?”

Priscilla: “If you would prefer having that as your last mark in this world, then by all means sing it. One slip-up, and that shall become reality. Mediocrity, banality, commonness, if my glory is being relied upon then treat it with proper care, a group of fools can accomplish nothing. Do not expect me to be so merciful as to treat fools who harm themselves with mercy.”

Suddenly showing a face of severity! Was this an indication that Priscilla-sama had entered a state of preparing for battle?

That’s right, that’s right. Watching the burning control tower made the pressure increase. Thenthen, welcoming the two of us, the one welcoming us, was a freak standing before the tower consumed in flame, arms spread open! With this, there was no possibility that we had the wrong person.

???: “—My apologies, for having troubled you to come all the way here. Thank you.”

The bandaged freak’s first sentence was unexpectedly placid, as if being considerate of us.

That combined with the hands, having been spread open from the beginning, and the manner in which it bowed its head, for some reason, gave off a rather charming air. Was this gap? Something like that?

Sirius: “Although this is perhaps a little too much for a landmark, but since the functions of the city were halted tonight, it feels as if there is a lack of light, does it not? To become lost in the dark, or to slip into a waterway by losing your footing, would be quite dangerous, and thus I tried to light a fire for light.”

That was an excellent idea, bandaged freak, nono, that was rude. Let’s go with bandage-san. Bandage-san informed us of the reason for that fire.

Mmm, so that was it… To be touched couldn’t be helped. The city known as the Watergate City of Pristella was certainly filled with waterways. And to be reminded to be careful when making nighttime expeditions was common. Especially when leaving to go to somewhere like a back alley. On the other hand, the main roads were equipped with backup illumination because of nighttime travel, but even so, the waterways held a high degree of danger.

Hu~u, that someone from elsewhere could in fact recognize that, and pay attention and care for such aspects of Pristella’s like this, led to some lingering feeling of happiness.

Ah, no, it wasn’t that Pristella was some kind of hometown to me at all, to stand as a representative of Pristella and feel grateful would be rather strange indeed. Eh, since I’d seen Kiritaka-san do a lot of things related to the management of the city, seeing the efforts of someone you’re acquainted with pay off wasn’t dissatisfying in the least. Fufufu~.

Sirius: “But, everyone within this city is pretty amazing. Although this perhaps sounds like a selfish opinion, the reaction to an emergency situation arising was truly excellent. Adults helping children, men helping women, husbands helping wives, elder brothers helping younger sisters, elder sisters helping younger brothers, even strangers helping those weaker than them. This spirit of mutual aid is ingrained deep in their bones. Upon seeing those figures rushing into shelters, I could not help but feel that the sight of mutual support truly is excellent.”

Clangclang. Upon closer inspection, those were sounds made by chains wrapped around Bandage-san’s two arms. According to Subaru-sama, those seemed to be Bandage-san’s weapons, but looking at them like this, weren’t they rather fashionable? The oversized coat that Bandage-san wore over her body… Thinking of it as a deliberate dress sense, it wasn’t that bad… Mhm, that wasn’t bad at all!

Bandage-san’s tone was very polite, but that voice was a little, what was it, strange? High though it was, there was a subtle feeling of fakeness that someone who worked with voices for a living couldn’t overlook, but that didn’t detract very much at all!

Looking at it realistically, well, couldn’t it be said that saying more was unnecessary?!

Liliana: “This is a relief, Priscilla-sama. Seems this is an opponent who can be communicated with smoothly. Considering the situation, if Priscilla-sama’s mood is poor, you would have a harder time communica—Ahhhh, my eyes, ahhhhhh—?!”

My eyes were burning! Ahhhh, fire spun into my eyes!

My eyes, my eyes would melt! Would melt and become incapable of seeing the lovely sights of this world!

Liliana: “Ahhh, damn it… If I’d known this would happen, I would’ve burned the look of those beauties in the City Hall thoroughly into my eyes…!”

Priscilla: “Fool. Raise your head. Do not become so casually engulfed and lead me to become disappointed.”

Hearing Priscilla’s warm voice that wasn’t warm at all, I tightened my face, blinked and raised my head. Ah, wonderful, eyes were still intact. I could still see the world, I could see it all. Could see the red Priscilla-sama, and the white Bandage-san.

Really now, Priscilla-sama was directing her usual severe expression toward Bandage-san. Bandage-san with gentle movements tilted her head to such a gaze. Ohhh, in this case Priscilla-sama was totally in the wrong.

Liliana: “Priscilla-sama, you can’t. You can’t treat everyone, no matter who, with that manner of regarding them as if they were an undisciplined dog. So, on account of my flat chest and face, on account, of, my flat chest… put on a manner of negotiation…”

Ehhhh~, why was this? For some reason tears felt on the verge of falling.

But that was fine. If this attitude of mine, facing the reality of my own flat chest, could become a bridge which connected Priscilla-sama and Bandage-san’s spirits, then I would swallow down my tears!

Liliana: “Come, on behalf of my flat chest, reach out your hands…!”

Sirius: “Indeed, this is something wonderful. I am in accord with that girl’s kindness. People are able to mutually communicate, mutually understand, mutually experience. Face warmth with warmth, kindness with kindness, love with love! Doing precisely that will yield happiness.”

Liliana: “I~! That’s what I was thinking too! Indeed, this is in fact love, isn’t it? Priscilla-sama, it’s love! Even though I can’t deny that I’ve been swept along by how it sounds, but going with the flow has its own flavor! Hey, this is the Watergate City, a city filled with flowing waterways! Hey, hey!”

Priscilla: “…”

Bandage-san’s words, one-by-one, struck my heart. Uwu, it stung, it stung.

Seeing that Bandage-san and I shared the same thoughts, Priscilla-sama’s stubborn determination accordingly crumbled, revealing to us… a sour expression?

Priscilla: “To reach such an extent, I must admit that I made an underestimation. There’s no other way.”

Liliana: “Huh—? Priscilla-sama, why would you have that expression…”

Priscilla-sama, who had placed a hand on her brow in thought, sighed. That sighing figure could have made a lovely portrait, but she immediately moved in front of me as if having figured something out.

Since my stature could be considered rather petite, and Priscilla-sama wore tall heels, I could only gaze upward at her as she stood before me. Oh, what’s with this sudden closeness?

Liliana: “Priscilla-safu~u.”

Priscilla: “…”

After feeling Priscilla-sama’s chest shoving from the front, those white fingers firmly grasped my neck and chin. Then, Priscilla-sama’s precious face, drawing closer, met mine. Or rather, lips met lips eeeeeh—?!

Liliana: “Mmh—! Mmmmmh—! Mmmmmmmmmmmh—!”

Slapslap, beatbeat, with face bright red I resisted desperately with all my might. But the force that held me down was overwhelming, and the pressing lips were too soft, really, what was this??!!

Ah, huh, waitasec, flowing in from Priscilla-sama's lips was something searingly lewd, ahi, hiii, ahu.

Liliana: "…Hk, ah."

The heat ceaselessly flowing forth led to dizziness, and before I knew it, I had already slumped to the ground. Priscilla-sama gave me not a second glance, as she ran her crimson tongue over her lips.

Priscilla: "Well, that should be sufficient."

Like this, like this, like this, speaking to, to provokeprovokeprovokeprovoke!

I forcefully rubbed my moist eyelids, placing force onto my waist that had been stripped of all its strength to stand. Really now, Priscilla-sama, just now, ahhhh, I want to lodge a complaint!

Liliana: "P-Priscilla-sama, just now, what was that?! Please, please take responsibility. To have been forced into such a thing, I can't be wedded off now—!"

Priscilla: "The same would go for I, who allowed our mouths to touch. Using your first time as an excuse is your prerogative, but is it not true that, thanks to this, you were given a chance to restore your sense of reason?"

Liliana: "Eh? A chance to restore my sense of reason…"

After, after trampling upon the purity of another, Priscilla-sama still had an air of indifference. Did she think that doing whatever to a bard was fine? Sob, sob.

Priscilla: "How effeminate. Well, raise your head, look at that person."

Liliana: “Sobsobsob, eh?”

With the weakness of a woman who would obey those words I raised my head, and saw, in their original positions, Priscilla-sama and Bandage-san, no, huh, Bandage-san?

Nonono, how was this possible? Why had I not felt any discomfort, so kindly calling that person Bandage-san? Inexplicable, utterly inexplicable!

Sirius: “Both women and yet they… Although, there are such forms. Although the form of everyone’s love differs, even if directed differently, they will still love the same amount. In fact, that is the splendor of the emotions that makes humans humans…”

Priscilla: “—Cease this ridiculous farce. How nauseous.”

Watching Priscilla-sama and I, that bandaged freak pressed her hands to her face as she droned on, but those words made me feel discontent rapidly.

Words, attitudes, gestures that up until now seemed to be trustworthy no matter the conditions, after having been able to accept with normalcy the situation that had been prepared by the bandaged freak, so suddenly were reversed.

No, setting the tower alight to serve as a light because of the darkness couldn’t have been possible, to regard those lightly dark-red and dirtied chains as fashionable was entirely an error, and lastly, the evaluation of those of the shelters truly evoked disgust! Just who did you think had made this happen?!

Priscilla: “Although there are many in this world who immerse themselves in the pleasure of enumerating exceedingly shallow theories, even amongst those your self-absorption is extreme. To call you a clown would not fit your repulsiveness, to call you a fool would not befit your strength… Value in your continued survival is impossible to find.”

Sirius: “Oh my, oh my my, oh my my my, is that so? Thank you for your consideration, my apologies? With gratitude, apologies.

Apparently, it is difficult for my words to reach you… But, this does happen from time to time.”

Priscilla: “My, rather reasonable. Are you willing to hurry and present your neck yet?”

Sirius: “Indeed, of course. Exhausting speech for the sake of mutual understanding is also an important ceremony for humans to establish relationships between them. Similarly, not long after, hearts will soften and merge into one. Love will thus become one, will become as one, will work hard to become one. Love is exalted, all along I have been taught thus, and all along have lived as thus!”

Liliana: “Uwaaah! Although the realization was a bit late, I just realized, that was the first time I kissed someone!”

Priscilla: “Solely the existence of this burning tower to welcome me is deserving of the merit of praise.”

Wow! Although to me it was a little bit eh, but now, dialogue hadn’t been established in the slightest bit!

Calling to the bandaged freak who all along felt like she was incapable of listening to reason, Priscilla-sama strode forth to make her own way, and I had been left disoriented from the attack on my lips! Hey, wasn’t I completely unnecessary?

Priscilla: “You are needed after this. The mouth-to-mouth was for that reason.”

Liliana: “Please stop reminding me of it! Also, please try not to glance this way. It somewhat feels like when Priscilla-sama looks over, my chest goes badump…”

Priscilla: “That the result was too effective can also be considered a problem. My beauty is indeed a thing of sin.”

Beside me as I tried to endure the thumping, Priscilla-sama sighed in melancholy. That profile felt lovely to the point of being painful… Eeeeeeh, it’s not the time to say such things. Priscilla-sama had from the start been filled with tenacity, yet the opposing bandaged freak showed no signs of backing down, and so, battle was certain! And were I to stay here, I'd be a liability!

Liliana: "Is-Isn't it best if I back away a little?"

Priscilla: "Well then, let us see."

Hey, why are you messing with someone to such an extent.

And then, as soon as I thought that, something happened. My keen and well-shaped ears caught sounds. Were those footsteps? Those were footsteps, without doubt. And not only without doubt, those footsteps were not only one pair, they were many… No, they went beyond many to excessive! Excessively excessive!

Priscilla: "So that's it, have you gathered all the humans nearby and converged them here?"

Sirius: "All those people are in accord with my love. Although sometimes there are stubborn people like you present, but as the saying goes, "once rainwater falls into a waterway, all differences vanish". If you surrendered your heart, your perspectives would change as well."

Were you to mix yourself with the rainwater, you would unexpectedly contaminate it—although the proverb meant something like this, now was not the time for such idle leisure!

The burning control tower! Surrounded on all sides by waterways! Facing each other in the square in front of the control tower! And the large crowd peering over at us from the other side of the waterway!

The number of people was really big. Certainly not on the scale of the Convention Center, which had merely one or two hundred people! This was a thousand, or perhaps even more? Indeed, that many people did surround us, and although saying this is very impolite, they glared at us with dangerous gazes! This was to say, was this the state of having one's soul completely overtaken by Wrath that Subaru-sama had described?!

Priscilla: "It should first be mentioned, that you, just now, were wearing the same expression as those commoners over there."

Liliana: “Uweeeh, really?! How terrifying! Ah! Butbut, in that case, if Priscilla-sama were to kiss each one of them, everyone would recover their consciousness, right?! If Priscilla-sama’s lips aren’t taken care of they’ll swell, ahhh—!”

Priscilla: “Who would give charity without regard to who is receiving it? Would you like to be burned away starting from your rear, you?”

A turn of events that resulted in being burned rear-first! To choose the wrong response would mean death! This condition was ridiculously disadvantageous to someone like me, who often ranted without thinking!

Priscilla: “In any case, that is your role. For what purpose did you think I brought you here? To forsake your own duties and beg assistance from me should yield shame.”

Liliana: “No, but, this is, I understand the reason, but—”

With this volume of people who had gone insane, without sufficient preparation a song could be sung. And if the performance took place before her, that bandaged freak would presumably try to put an end to it.

Priscilla: “Thus, I shall take the stage.”

As I retreated and squirmed, Priscilla-sama spoke as if exasperated.

No, although I would admit that Priscilla-sama was incredible, against such a crowd… Huh, wait, until now, somehow, I had this idea of “Priscilla-sama is incredible!”, but was Priscilla-sama truly so incredible?

Although I had seen the sight of her palm slamming away a fairly fit young man with a “pow”, but aside from that, there weren’t any such memories of such feats! Ehhh~, on that note, even if Wrath were the only opponent, had following along truly been the right decision?

Sirius: “You mustn’t. Clearly the relationship between the two of you is close to the point of sharing a kiss, so efforts to reach mutual understanding should take place to achieve greater closeness. As long as desires become one, thoughts will be able to connect. Just like the many people surrounding this courtyard, you will become one!”

As the bandaged freak stomped her feet, so did everyone surrounding the courtyard. This behavior, having been repeated by a thousand people without a sliver of disorder, was no different from the ground rumbling.

That was a force which made the courtyard quake, the surface of the water sway, the already ignited tower seem to tilt… Whether or not this was love could be contested, but this was without doubt a threat!

If that large gathering approached as one in an attempt to capture us—

Sirius: “Come. You, too, will be enveloped by love, will experience the ecstasy of becoming one—!”

Eh, gyahhh! As soon as I said it, it actually started happening! It’s over! A thousand people against two, this was a disparity in numbers that would be ridiculous even in a truly heroic tale…!

With a sound like a roar of rage, the crowd swarmed forth as one. Ignoring the borders of the waterways, like a horde of corpses they came for our virgin bodies—! Uwah! Father, Mother, Kiritaka-san, apologies! Places aside from Liliana’s lips would be deflowered now as well!

Liliana: “If I’d known this would happen, then I would’ve, unrestrainedly with Kiritaka-san…”

Priscilla: “Whether the pessimistic you, or that optimistic bunch, each and every one of you, just who do you think I am?”

Liliana: “Eh?”

Priscilla-sama moved to my front, as I despaired. Before it had even been noticed, wielded in Priscilla-sama’s hand was a shining crimson blade—the Yang Sword. That which had already been radiant enough when seen at the Convention Center during the day, in this nighttime, with the sun extinguished, exuded a shiver-inducing beauty.

Almost as if it had revived the sun that should have fallen—

Priscilla: “To tremble from my blade’s terrifying glare is correct. This is the original flame, the flame which had first lit the seat of the Emperor—Although my belief is that this scarlet radiance is not the same as what you lot recognize.”

Liliana: “…”

Having spoken solemnly, Priscilla-sama flew upward while wielding the Yang Sword.

That was an action which could only be described as flight. It had clearly appeared to be only a light leap, yet she moved with such agility that it was as if she had become the wind. Approaching the edge of the waterway before the crowd wildly surging forward, Priscilla-sama directed the tip of the Yang Sword to the water’s surface.

And following right afterwards,

Liliana: “—?!”

Before my eyes, a wall of crimson rose—No, that was flame, a wall of flame.

The licks of the fire were so red that they even appeared to be white. As if to reject any description of ‘wavering’, mournful light scattered forth, proving how terrifying that heat was.

That which was being scorched was the waterway, even the surface of the water itself. Water which should have been fire’s natural opposing enemy, water which should have been the opposite of fire, this was a sight which overturned such natural notions.

The flame of Priscilla-sama’s Yang Sword could ignite even water.

And in addition—all of the waterways surrounding the courtyard, simultaneously!

Sirius: “This is…”

Before the sight which did not belong to this world, the bandaged freak—No, let’s stop that at once. Wrath, indeed, even Wrath was lost for words. This couldn’t be described by words like “smoldering”, but flame did exist. It stopped the steps of the crowd attempting to cross the waterway, nailing them in place.

That was a matter of course. That moths fly into a flame was nature’s decree, but humans held wisdom and instinct that was capable of resisting such an end.

Priscilla: “Even if solely in form, your use of love as an excuse to name this not as dominance became a critical weakness. If this is a force that can be overcome by obeying one’s instinct, something of this degree could never stop someone in their steps.”

Taking anew a stance with the Yang Sword, like that, Priscilla-sama ridiculed the silent Wrath. Ridicule, mockery, derision, contempt—that was all I could say, you malicious expression of beauty.

Ahhh, something so important, I had overlooked. I had all along only been watching Priscilla-sama’s dashing expression of severity, although that was beautiful in its own right, indeed it could not compare.

Clearly, there could be nothing more beautiful than this malice, which yielded a beauty that caused shivers.

Priscilla: “Even if free will is curbed, if instinct is not restrained as well, this is precisely what you shall see. Seems as if no one is willing to go to the extent of being consumed by flame, which speaks loudly of the love that you speak of.”

Sirius: “…”

Priscilla: “This is the result of the cheap love that you have pronounced. Such a scene is precisely what is defined as “ridiculous”, Sin Archbishop. How truly incapable you are of measuring up to that exaggerated title.”

With mockery, with momentum, Priscilla-sama continuously chastised the silent Wrath.

My hands couldn't help but moisten with sweat, gaze flicking over to the scene. The thought of whether Priscilla-sama was truly so incredible, which had persisted until now, had been completely swept away.

Priscilla-sama was incredible! Priscilla-sama was powerful!

Priscilla: "In the end, expressions such as "love becomes one" are mere superficiality. My peerless self is at the very peak, and thus, no matter how much you struggle, commoners like you could never become one with me."

Wahhh, Priscilla-sama was amazing! Although she was amazing, but huh, wasn't this situation weird?

Priscilla: "Even if you are capable of approaching me, to catch up with me is absolutely impossible. The love that you speak of has already been defeated, has it not? And thus, ranting of becoming one is naught but wild words."

Liliana: "Uhm, Priscilla-sama, it's about time…"

Priscilla: "Even as a misconception, to become one is far too erroneous. Born as something else, and wanting to become one is a denial of the self. Why would something you yourself lack have any value when drawn closer? What is flawed is the entire premise, and to act according to this incorrectness is to exist in commonness—Something so vulgar."

Liliana: "Uwaaah! Why such an absolute rejection?!"

Oh no! Clearly because blood had rushed to the head! Clearly!

Even if Priscilla-sama's blood had rushed to her head, perhaps she was still able to do something, but for someone insignificant like me, the preference would be for you to refrain from doing this, and end it as quickly as possible!

Perhaps she had noticed, for Wrath, being faced with Priscilla-sama's words, had wordlessly bowed her head, immersed in silence. Well, to have been met with so many arrogant words, anyone would be infuriated. Talking back felt like it would bring a multitude of words in response, so even infuriated, silence would be kept.

It could be said this had turned to be entirely uncomfortable, so if possible, if Priscilla-sama could just beat down on Wrath-san and call it a victory, that'd be a relief.

Priscilla: "Fool. To do so would mean everyone but myself would be bisected, is that not correct? Although the sight of a city stained red with blood would be appealing to see at least once, there is no need to bring it about in my country. Well then, this first opportunity should be delayed, and likewise, you should fulfill your use."

Ah—right, that was the case. In the first place, that was my duty.

Being under the influence of Wrath, the pain and even wounds inflicted on that person would be shared by others. My song was required precisely for being rid of such a condition.

Liliana: "After seeing the actual scene, I've actually become quite unsettled, so who knows if my song will actually work!"

Priscilla: "If unwilling, your head, and those of that crowd, are free to fall alongside that being's. If you feel that such a scene is best avoided, without fail, place your heart into song."

I continued to clutch the Lyulyre, shrinking back now that such heights of responsibility had been cast upon me. The burning waterway was keeping the crowd away, yet the crowd remained as hostages, and the method to free them was my song! Priscilla-sama's duty was—?

Liliana: "So that's to say, that's to say, until I've used my song to sway the captivated crowd, Priscilla-sama's duty is to keep me from dying, isn't that how it feels?!"

Priscilla: "If you die, well, all that's left is to sever their heads as soon as possible. Best to think of it as all their lives being wrapped around your throat.”

Liliana: “Ukya—!”

Priscilla: “Such slow understanding. Now then… Hm.”

After I had covered my face and cried out loudly, Priscilla-sama’s expression changed. Priscilla-sama now regarded Wrath, who had maintained her silence until now, with brows frowned,.

With an uneasy premonition, I snuck a peek in that direction through the gaps in my fingers.

Sirius: “—How amusing.”

Liliana: “Eh?”

Sirius: “How amusing, such joy. Perhaps this should be called delight. No, perhaps it is not possible to name this ascendant feeling in my heart.”

Speaking with a low voice, languidly, Wrath raised her face. On that face obscured by bandages, impassioned and assertive eyes swept back and forth. They gazed at Priscilla-sama, at the wall of flame, at me, wait no, please, don’t look at me!

Sirius: “My apologies, I was scattered for a moment there. However, thank you. I have awoken. You are correct, expressions such as “desiring to effortlessly achieve understanding” were far too selfish.”

Was that a smile and laugh? The monster’s mouth split open horizontally, revealing a smile which showed white teeth, the monster laughed. Intimately, as if welcoming a friend or family, having been rejected like that, and despite that!

Sirius: “Please allow me to once more introduce myself. I am a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Wrath, Sirius Romanée-Conti. I do hope my affairs can be taken to heart.”

She bowed, politely giving a greeting.

And then the bandaged freak—the monster, Sirius, undid the chains on her arm. Rotating wrists, untying bondage, lengthening the reach of the chain, the chains rotated, slashing through air, layer upon layer of metallic sounds becoming malice itself, cutting through the atmosphere.

Even so, the monster wore a smile.

Sirius: “This is the Ordeal! Indeed, this is without doubt, the Ordeal! In this city, in which I reunited with my husband once again, to meet him once more, to express love in words, the Ordeal has descended upon me! The correctness of my love is proven by fate, which had me meet that person once more! You are the Ordeal that stands in the way of that!!”

With a ringing voice, with the flourish of a maiden in love, the monster ceaselessly waved her chains, shortening the distance to here in one breath. Ohno ohno, just being brushed would mean death for me.

Priscilla: “Quell the crowd, that creature’s opponent shall be me. At the very least, do not perform anything insolent.”

Liliana: “Uwah? Priscilla-sama?!”

Priscilla: “You are to prepare your song—Should a shadow fall across the Yang Sword, I shall, no matter what, sever that abomination’s head. And so, before that happens.”

Even the limit she gave was arbitrary—!

As if not hearing a trace of my words, Priscilla-sama and the monster Sirius exchanged opening blows, beginning their battle!

Listening to the fierce collisions of chain and sword, I thought that I had to at least do something. Rather than calling it a sense of responsibility, it was more like being urged onward by some indistinct feeling, but in any case I began running toward the wall of flame on the waterway. Hopelessly.

Run faster! Damn it, I hadn’t even though of anything!

Liliana: “And so for now, please listen for a moment—Hoshin of the Wilderness, uhhhhh, hot?!”

Nearing the boundary of the waterway, I had prepared to whisk those in hearing range into a whirl of song, but immediately upon drawing close, my face was destroyed by flame!

It can’t! Really can’t! Although forcefully trying to put on the air of a performance, Priscilla-sama’s wall of flame was beyond hot! Extremely hot! Hotter than was normal!

But without drawing close to this extent, no one would be able to see for real!

Liliana: “Owww, hothothot—! My hands will be scorched! If my throat or lungs are burned, this battle will be lost… Wait, huh?”

Having been licked by a tongue of flame, while regretting my carelessness for having gotten my face that scorched beyond repair, I discovered that the hands that should have been swallowed by fire were unharmed… Or rather, even the wooden Lyulyre hadn’t been destroyed by the blaze, which was to say?

Liliana: “This… is no ordinary fire…?”

Nono, from the start it’d been evident that this was no ordinary fire, but this seemed to be one which did not burn? Although the heat was scorching, it would not burn?

In that case, then this! Would be crossed through in no time, wouldn’t it?! What was this?! Was this a bluffing imitation of a fire, only meant to scare people off?!

Coming along was indeed a failure of a decision—Ah!!

Chapter 66:
Liliana Masquerade's Stage

Liliana: "Gah! What a disaster! This fire is way too hot! Way too, way too hot! Seven times hotter than regular fire! Being burnt by this would mean dying with seven times the agony!"

The white wall of flame now stood before me! Since it was a flame that would not burn me if touched, but miraculously appeared to only let off waves of heat, in truth, being able to withstand the pain would mean that it was possible to breach it.

And so, to keep the truth hidden from everyone, too scared to rush forth, I pretended to be someone writhing in agony because of the flames, to convey to everyone surrounding the waterway of the dangers of the flame!

Well, even with everyone's mental state being a tad insane, it seemed their instinct had left them with the notion that flames were dangerous. So my desperate act was perhaps not of much use, but even so, not performing it was something I couldn't justify.

Liliana: "It was easy for Priscilla-sama to order me to sing and dance to snatch the peoples' hearts back, but—"

In all honesty, snatching spirits back, rahhhhh! As a mood to sing with, it would completely serve as an obstacle, and it went against the principle of song in the first place.

As a result of frantic singing, to say that something airy would be left within the hearts of those who listened, that very something would be the natural intent of the heavens. And if they felt something in that intent of the heavens, and gave a tip because of that, the world would be so kind and gentle!

First of all, singing with the attitude of wanting to earn a tip would be an ulterior motive that would make its way into the song. A song with such a desire contained within was not what I wanted.

And so, couldn't this plan be said to be a losing battle from the very start?

Liliana: "Thinking back on it, although this life was short-lived, days filled with tumultuousness were experienced. Father and Mother, even though there was resentment when I cast myself into this cruel world at the age of thirteen after declaring my independence… Now I'm only grateful that I was born so cute. Although I was quite the unfilial daughter, the gratitude and wrath I felt towards the two of you was something integral to my every way… Guhhhh! Ahhhh, hothothot, a neverending summer, huhuhu!"

While speaking of gratitude toward parents and various other whims, I felt a sign that those on the other side of the wall of flame were about to approach, and once more put on an act of overheating. I was really hoping the bunch that was unable to read the atmosphere would react appropriately!

Butbut, no matter how realistic my performance was, it would fall through sooner or later. And then if it were exposed, there would be no way to contain Priscilla-sama's extremely limited temper.

And then, it'd be no good! It'd be over!

Sirius: "Oh my, oh my, do you have the leisure to see? The girl you have expectations of is wearing an expression as if there is no path forward, is she not? I can clearly feel the sorrow and exhaustion plaguing that child's spirit. Do you not feel sorry for her, weeping and aching?"

Priscilla: "Not in the slightest."

Without regard to me, who had begun to clutch my head and count down the seconds to the end, in the center of the courtyard surrounded by waterways that had been set alight, an exchange of dialogue between Priscilla-sama and that freak Sirius was in progress.

That said, the dialogue was entirely composed of Priscilla-sama mercilessly turning a deaf ear to Sirius's modest words! And setting aside Sirius's manner of speech for now, the figure now rotating the chains of both arms could not be called steady in the slightest.

Air being slashed, atmosphere being sliced, the path of metal chains being swung through the air changed freely! Tumbling, prancing, front, back, left, right, it struck toward Priscilla-sama like a metal snake!

The extending and retracting chain produced an ear-piercing level of sound, continuous to the point that it seemed to me that Priscilla-sama had been enclosed in a cage of iron.

The stone steps that took direct hits from the chain were exploded mercilessly, were caved in, were scraped, which spoke volumes of the power. If direct contact with the skin were made, the result would be hideousness akin to that caused by a snake's fangs and tongue! If the recipient were someone whose skin was white and delicate like Priscilla-sama, their cruelty would be even more pronounced!

Butbut, Priscilla-sama in fact ferociously attacked that metal chain—!

Priscilla: "Tumultuous and yet tasteless noise, the heedlessness which is projected indiscriminately, a base weapon from which even a hint of elegance cannot be felt, superficial and yet unseemly idle talk… Such a number of measures that incur my anger were prepared as entertainment. The disrespect you show me is rather admirable."

Liliana: "Priscilla-sama is awesomeeeeeee!!"

However, Priscilla-sama wore an expression of boredom, waving the Yang Sword to welcome the chains that approached from every direction. But, never mind front, side, top and bottom, how could a blow from somewhere unseen like the back possibly be intercepted?

In addition, perhaps this power was unique to the Yang Sword, but whenever the Yang Sword deflected the chain, the point of contact would be scorched white. That firepower did not seem negligible, and the chain would burn and become gradually shorter and shorter! If this were repeated, for sure, she would run out of chains!

Liliana: “Heheheh—! Priscilla-sama, please be rid of it, rid of it, rid of it—!”

Priscilla: “Regarding that, that is what is known as candid thoughts which forget to cover eyes. Although exposure of that level is presumably difficult for a commoner, it certainly inspires more pleasure than boring, twisted theory. Well, merely one person in this world would be enough.”

Liliana: “Ehhh~?! Just now, you praised me, that was a praise, right?! To consider that praise would be fine, right?! I’m about to feel happy you know!! Amazing, truly amazing. Yay!”

Even if I were to be told that it hadn’t been praise, I’d already felt happy, so it was too late!

Accepting my support, Priscilla-sama also gained more momentum. She continued to advance, ceaselessly burning the chain away. The imposing atmosphere seemed to overwhelm even the Sin Archbishop of Wrath, and I was now entirely just waiting! It was a yam in the oven!

Liliana: “No, wait a second, Priscilla can’t solve this so effortlessly! If that happens, we’ll also be offed effortlessly, ehhhhhh~?!”

Priscilla: “Mhm, that is indeed the case. Too fun a time was being had.”

How dangerous! If I hadn’t stopped her just now, she was going to go for it!

As Priscilla-sama stopped, Sirius, having been overwhelmed, took this chance to leap far backward. Although Priscilla-sama was out of the norm, the opponent that was meeting her match was none other than a Sin Archbishop, perhaps it should be asked whether or not humans were able to move in such a way?

Sirius: “It is rare for someone to be so stubborn in not opening their hearts even though I have spoken so much. For what reason is your soul so tightly closed?”

After gaining some distance, Sirius flickered her gaze to her two arms as she spoke. That chain had already been trimmed short, but as the freak yapped, she rotated her wrists to restore its length. It seemed that many chains were wound firmly on her arms, but whether they were cutting off circulation was unknown.

Sirius: "Everyone's hearts have openings, some greater, others smaller. To live means to have feelings, no matter the color of the feeling that peeks out from there, they are something every person possesses… Even a feeling you have staunchly bore all along can be understood, as long as it is revealed."

Priscilla: "…"

Sirius: "You too have a soul that can anguish, feelings that disorient. Although unwaveringly keeping weaknesses hidden from others is a condition to living strongly… there is only so much that can be reached on one's lonesome. What one person can achieve on their lonesome has a limit. After becoming one with other people, new peaks can be discovered. In order to allow others to see that place, mutual understanding and shared feelings are necessary."

Sirius swayed her body, speaking to the silent Priscilla-sama.

The sound of that voice seemed as if it permeated one's heart. That attitude seemed as if it was from someone truly close. That manner seemed tender as if it dissolved the guards of others. The content of those words seemed as if it enticed others.

Clearly as if a sweet poison that melted slowly, even my extremities felt numb.

Sirius: "Could you allow me to help you reach understanding with others? Truly your love is so deep, and loving of the world. Looking forward to be loved. Wanting it. I can understand this. And I hope that others can come to understand this. So that you are kept from spending a lonely night on your lonesome."

Priscilla: "Truly a shame to rely only on delusion and conjecture and prattle on without embarrassment. If you hold no doubts in your own words, you are precisely what is known as a lunatic."

Sirius: “Oh my, thank you very much. That is a title commensurate with my husband’s. Those are the delusional words of someone to be reprimanded, who cannot comprehend in the slightest how outstanding that person is, and spits wild words of admiration, envy, jealousy towards that person.”

Priscilla: “Cease speaking. What belongs to me belongs to me alone. Your narrative is the sole delusional, nonsensical thing here. Even the surface of my enigma cannot be skimmed by those alike you.”

Priscilla-sama, with self-assurance, rejected that sweet, enticing proposal beyond doubt. However, in terms of self-assurance, Sirius did not lose to her. The freak’s head tilted as if having expected Priscilla-sama’s rejection,

Sirius: “To say that even the surface cannot be skimmed, this is the epitome of stubbornness… is it not? In that case, how does such a significance sound? “Iris and the King of Thorns”.”

Priscilla: “…”

Sirius: “Or perhaps, “The Rose Knight of Tieros”? “Magrizza’s Guillotine”.”

I didn’t understand the significance of Sirius’s words, nor the intent behind the monster saying such words.

However, it prompted an immediate effect.

Priscilla: “—Better off dead.”

As I thought I’d heard a low murmur, Priscilla-sama’s figure vanished from sight.

As I expressed my confusion, the distance that had once existed between Priscilla-sama and Sirius became zero. Priscilla-sama swung the Yang Sword from above, arc mercilessly tracing towards Sirius’s neck. In an instant, the world slowed to an incredulous extent, and even I was able to see the path that Priscilla-sama’s blade followed.

Just aiming it, Sirius’s slender neck would be caressed and severed.

If that were to happen, my neck, and the necks of everyone nearby would break in the same way.

Could it be, that it was because I understood this, that it seemed to happen so slowly? Say, if a life-threatening danger were to approach, humans would, with great focus, see their perception of the world slowed down, right?

Although if that were the case, in a situation where the celestial scales of my own life were being tilted by others, what could I and the many people around me do about it?

The crimson radiance of the Yang Sword, with imposing manner, sliced through the atmosphere—

Liliana: "—Eh?"

Being unable to understand the sight before me, I couldn't help but let out the voice of a dazed fool.

Having made that noise, my neck was still firmly anchored upon this small body. That was a matter of course. My neck had not been severed. Neither my own, nor Sirius's.

In substitution, Priscilla-sama's body, which should have leapt at Sirius, had been flung backward forcefully. Having been intercepted by Sirius's metal chains head-on, she was hurled backward perilously.

Liliana: "Priscilla-sama?!"

I let out a cry towards that figure, which had obviously not leapt of its own will.

If Priscilla-sama were to be killed, the situation would become an irreparable wreck—I could hardly even think of such a thing, crying out solely because a sense of disaster dawned. And yet, Priscilla-sama suddenly spun back, still in midair, halting her momentum by stabbing the Yang Sword into the cobblestones.

Priscilla: "Cease the racket, the true damage is yet to come."

In reply to my wail, Priscilla-sama landed, the high-pitched sound of her footwear echoing. However, immediately after that, Priscilla-sama's necklace changed. It had originally been a necklace with three green jewels, but one of those had just shattered.

Almost as if it had taken the attack in Priscilla-sama's stead.

Priscilla: "The retaliation for my necklace shall have a rather tall cost."

Sirius: "So that's how it is. Is it that wounds you suffer are transferred onto what is valuable to you? That is truly a manner befitting Pride… Nono, that couldn't be, that couldn't possibly be."

Priscilla: "Deliberately putting forth demeaning speculation is malicious to the extreme, audacity to this this extent cannot be redeemed with even ten thousand deaths. A scorching heat that burns and burns yet never dies out is most fitting for the manner of your death."

Priscilla-sama's rage was directed at Sirius, whose attitude had not wavered in the slightest. Rather than to say that the Yang Sword in her hand had increased its radiance, perhaps it should be said that the heat was increasing? Priscilla-sama's regal attire, to me, appeared as if it swayed under the scorching rays of sunlight.

Though gazing at that, there truly was no way to think that Priscilla-sama was at a disadvantage… but there also was that incomprehensible happening from just now.

Sirius had taunted Priscilla-sama with words I couldn't understand. Priscilla-sama had seemed to rush forward as if falling for that provocation, and she had been intercepted because of such predictable movement—But that was not the case.

Rather, in my amateur opinion, in my eyes Priscilla-sama's movements had appeared to be fast to the point of disappearing from sight, but perhaps to Sirius this was not the case. Although this possibility couldn't be denied, that couldn't have been.

Because when the Yang Sword lashed out, Priscilla-sama's movements were stopped.

Appearing as if suspended, although such words did convey the general idea, what had happened was on a level different to that, more precisely, it was as if it had been completely frozen.

I didn't think that it was Priscilla-sama's intention to freeze in such an unnatural position, nor that it was something humans could consciously do. In that case, that stoppage should have been connected to some kind of incomprehensible ability, but what could it have been?

Sirius: "Please do not rage like that. Although you appear to be constantly raising your temper over something, such a thing will bring exhaustion and will only parch the soul? Something like Wrath is the tomb of the feeling that should be most shunned in this world. People's hearts are full of emotion… And so, they should be always filled by ecstasy and joy."

Liliana: "W-Well, even if you think that, the people outside don't look very happy, d-d-do they?"

Sirius: "Hmm?"

Huh?! Just now, could it have been a voice that had been audible?!

That freak Sirius looked directly at me, her eyes visible from a gap in the bandages coiling tightly around her body. Uhyiii, what a disaster, have I kanchou'd myself?!

Sirius: "Indeed, within the hearts of everyone outside, unease and lament reigns. Although this too is something tragic, this is merely the result of human hearts overflowing with tenderness and compassion."

Liliana: "Wh-What are you saying?"

Sirius: "Once under the influence of my Authority, people become capable of opening their hearts and resonate with one another. And so, feelings that cannot be put into words can come to light. To be human is to be able to empathize, a precious existence from which feelings can come to be. If the hearts of others are cherished, once sorrow is witnessed, in one's own heart sorrow will also bloom. And a new sorrow will also sprout in the hearts of those who witness that sorrow. As the cycle repeats, those drops of sorrow will become a pond, become a lake, become a river."

This person spoke such an outrageous thing.

In other words, the more people gathered, the worse it would get, because, with this person around, their emotions would be amplified to the extreme. Such a mechanism could rile up and spread suffering to everyone in the city… And it didn't just stop at creating unrest.

This person had referred to it as a connection of the heart.

Priscilla: "If this seems a tragedy, then, by all means, take the lead in saving everyone. Choosing not to do so and only voicing laments is but an irritating noise for the commoners."

Sirius: "Mhm, I can understand those words. I'm merely being overwhelmed by a one-sided attack by my own helplessness. However, I possess a means to save all those enveloped by sorrow!"

Sirius clapped her palms together, her demeanor like she had just had a wonderful idea.

Although it was doubtful that the freak's notion of a good idea could make the situation take a turn for the better, neither I nor Priscilla-sama spoke up. Although I didn't know about Priscilla-sama, rage boiled in my heart.

A feeling that could not be described with words was surging within my chest, was igniting.

Sirius: "A means to offer salvation to all those enveloped in sorrow… is to use delight, use joy to sweep away that sorrow. Which is to say that I, who is to be a conduit for such salvation, must find happiness!"

Priscilla: "…"

Sirius: "My, my, my. Within this city is the husband from whom I have been separated for quite some time. Confirming my love with my husband, with that person, having it returned. A happily married couple is the emblem of happiness. If my heart is filled to the brim with such joy, all those crying out in lament will be saved. By mutually enjoying happiness, the hearts of everyone will be saved—”

Sirius spoke her discourse, Priscilla-sama wore a completely disinterested expression, and I, who flickered glances at both, was thinking of many things.

I knew that this was the one time I couldn’t escape reality by pretending not to understand. Or rather, it could be said that now I understood. Thoroughly and completely, I understood the fact that this freak, Sirius Romanée-Conti, was our enemy.

Liliana: “…”

I raised my head and gazed across the surrounding waterways engulfed in flame. On the other side of the white-tinted wall of flame were the figures of people who stood in place, lacking a means to cross the waterway. They had all fallen under the charm of unwanted feelings, having lost their self-awareness.

I could hear the sound of their corpse-like voices.

Much thanks to my peculiar ears; as a bard, I was proud of my voice and hearing. To me, those voices seem to echo endlessly.

—So terrifying, so sad, save me, how painful, how, why, so unpleasant.

I could hear those kinds of voices, of resentment swept up as if in a vortex, of wails drawn out as if for eternity.

Was this the result of that so-called empathy, then? Was this the result of that so-called becoming one, then? That so called unity, was it something like this?

Liliana: “I have, to free…”

—Becoming one, and being the same as everything else, had to differ.

Men, women, adults, children, infants, elders, humans, demi-humans, were all clearly different.

To condense all that together, to blend it all up, and to say “like this, everyone will understand each other and become one”—such words were certainly nothing to joke about.

Nothing to joke about!

Priscilla: “There is no necessity for your happiness. Shut that pettily clever talking hole of yours while still able, and die on your lonesome.”

Sirius: “I don’t like that. Do not insist on using the loneliness of disconnect to comfort yourself. If you are one who cannot recognize the form of happiness, taking a look at my happiness and giving it a chance is not so bad, is it? Or perhaps, if you understand the joy of connecting with the one you love, then you have come to understand the joy of being a bride!”

Priscilla: “Unfortunately, I have already walked the aisle seven times. And on each of those, there was nothing approaching something like happiness. Apply not your paltry standards to me, for they are nauseating.”

Sirius: “Seven times… ehh…”

Priscilla-sama treated Sirius’s words as a jest, and brought the Yang Sword down from above. However, Sirius also commenced her own ferocious attack of steel chains. Sparks ignited and scattered, the burnt chains flew away, and the clash caused the figures of the two to be pushed away from the center of the courtyard.

Having been burnt off, that chain. Burning white, that inextinguishable flame. In a state of being unable to give voice, those people wailing in agony.

Within me, slowly it came together. Could it be accomplished?

If the situation that had been imagined was indeed reality, was indeed correct, in that case, it shouldn't be unachievable.

Sirius: "Even though I have clearly expended so much time on this, all for the sake of reaching the heart of that one person… You have had seven chances, and wasted all of them."

Priscilla: "Do not pin the blame for your own lack of allure on me. That is the reason as to why that pitiful man who has been imprinted on you refuses to even meet you—"

Sirius: "I and that person are intimately connected, and thus are deeply in love with one another—!!"

Suddenly, a voice of fury lashed out, one that inspired a jolt of terror.

Immediately after, bisecting the courtyard was a snake of flame which burned red! In the instant, Priscilla-sama blocked the chains that originated from Sirius's arms, and from there the flames followed the chains, the surging flame swallowing Priscilla-sama's body.

The snake of flame reared open its maw, consuming Priscilla-sama's slim body headfirst. Without a means to counter that fiery tactic, Priscilla-sama was swallowed and tossed outside of the courtyard now soaked by flame. Just as she was about to plummet, she suddenly stabilized herself with dignity using her sword. And yet, after being submerged in such flames Priscilla-sama's body remained completely unhurt.

But with a sound, a jewel from the necklace once again shattered. The two clasps of the necklace came undone simultaneously, landing on the ground with a resounding noise.

Sirius: "Me and that person share a deep love! That just and sincere person just cannot help that he has yet to finish what he began! Misconstruing that person's sincerity as pure love is just too obscene! Ahhhh! AHHHHHHH! How irritating!"

Priscilla-sama had once again survived at the cost of the necklace, but Sirius's demeanor towards her had entirely changed. The freak opened her mouth as if baring fangs, spitting ugly words as she violently expressed her temper. And her arms had swept up a vortex of crimson flame.

Sirius: “Why is it that you so inconsiderately shake my heart to this degree?! These violent emotions that shake my heart, Wrath, or in other words, passion! This quaking will give way to heat, burning away the accursed sinners! Is this what you want for yourself as well, you pretentious lonely wench, AHHHHHHHH!”

Priscilla: “With that mouth, with those eyes, such babble… Hk.”

A vortex of flame appeared over Sirius’s head as she raised her arms, immolating herself in that detestable Wrath. What had struck just now were a pair of slim twin snakes which emerged from her arms. And as those arms crossed, their forms merged into one singular powerful snake.

The arm struck vertically downward, and the enormous snake of flame rushed at Priscilla-sama. Rather than evade it, Priscilla-sama took a stance of meeting the attack.

The Yang Sword was swung from below to above, its tip lodging in the head of the giant snake. With a sound that was not of chain meeting sword, the flaming snake’s aim was strayed greatly!

However, Priscilla-sama was sent flying by the impact, making it impossible to follow up!

After Sirius summoned the snake in a fit of fury, the positions of offense and defense had suddenly reversed. Priscilla-sama had been forced on the defensive, and the metal chains and flames chased her retreating figure.

Why was that? Although it was clear at a glance that Sirius’s abilities couldn’t be underestimated, considering the earlier stages of the fight, I didn’t think that Priscilla-sama was inferior. Earlier in the day, she had said that the Yang Sword had poor consumption, but was that what was pressing her like this?

Or could it be, that, perhaps, merely as speculation. That Priscilla-sama was unable to attack—

Liliana: “Is it me?!”

A quick end, not just for me, but for everyone in the vicinity as well. In order to avoid such a result, was this a battle for buying time?! Wait, no, hang on, how could it be, that the arrogant Priscilla-sama, who thought the highest of only herself, would do something like that?!

Priscilla: “You are to prepare your song—Should a shadow fall across the Yang Sword, I shall, no matter what, sever that abomination’s head. And so, before that happens.”

At that time, something had shook my brain!

Right before the battle had started in earnest, Priscilla-sama had told me.

Before the Yang Sword met its limit, I was to prepare a song. And she had added that if that time were to approach, Sirius’s head would be mercilessly severed, and everyone else along with her.

But that meant that I shouldn’t wait around for the right moment, it had a much deeper meaning than I had thought initially, right?

If so, Priscilla-sama was waiting. Waiting for me to prepare a song.

At the very least, for the time that I took responsibility for those words.

Liliana: “Guhh, guhhhhh! Mmmm! Mmmmmmm!”

How bothersome! That person, so damn bothersome! If there are feelings, just confess to the feelings already! That person absolutely has feelings for me. No, I had been told I was liked, so it had definitely been said before. Ahhh, what a pain, screw this, this was terrifying, was there no other way—!

Liliana: “Priscilla-sama—!”

If the situation was as I suspected, then as she was fighting at a bothersome disadvantage, she must have understood what I was thinking right now. I pointed toward the stone tower that had been ignited by Sirius's flames.

Priscilla-sama turned her head at the sound of my voice, looked to the place I was pointing towards—

Priscilla: "—Hoh."

With terrifying expression and terrifying gaze, but despite such a terrifying visage inspiring a feeling of reliability, she smiled.

An expression so wicked which made it difficult to figure out just who the Sin Archbishop was here!

Sirius: "Stop looking away—!!"

Priscilla: "With the likes of you as an opponent, looking away is no distraction. Do not lecture me on my actions."

Priscilla-sama leapt back, while at the same time parrying an approaching chain with the midsection of her sword. Her body gathered momentum, moving with speed beyond that which one motion would allow, and landed by the burning tower. Priscilla-sama gazed up at the burning tower, and, directing the tip of the Yang Sword at its base, she stabbed.

Priscilla: "Such an unsightly flame. Truly beautiful light shines like this."

Differences in aesthetic between the lights of flame and such, were incomprehensible to an ordinary person like me.

Although incomprehensible, even a layman's eye could clearly make out that a decidedly different sort of flame now surrounded the control tower!

The rising, white-tinged flames that now shimmered there were of the same type that surrounded the waterways.

Even though the snakes of flame originating from Sirius's chains also burned crimson and scorched with bright and staggering heat, the flames emitted from the Yang Sword held a sort of sanctity that gave the impression of being untouchable.

Priscilla: “The stage is prepared—Ensure that you perform your utmost.”

Liliana: “Right, right! Understood!”

After smothering the flames of the control tower with another layer of flame, Priscilla-sama spoke one sentence. I replied with fervent confidence, rushing over to the control tower.

While watching the situation with an air of being set off by anything that happened, Sirius flickered her gaze towards this scene and extended both her hands in our direction!

Sirius: “What are you doing to the flame I lit as an emblem of my love for that person?!”

Liliana: “I think it’s best you don’t speak of outlandish ridiculous things such as setting an entire building on fire to flirt!”

I said it, I said it, I said it! Wa~hh haha!

Rushing towards my back as I spoke while running, I felt that Sirius freak’s chain coming after me in one smooth motion! Burning chains! A heat wave, heat wave!

I knew that before the flame burned me, my head could be sent flying the very instant I was attacked, but heedless of what was behind me, I ran! And the reason was—!

Priscilla: “This is a situation where I shan’t hold back until whatever that one comes up with is witnessed.”

Liliana: “Chiiiiiii!”

Taking the place of my fleeing self, Priscilla-sama landed where the chain would strike. The Yang Sword sliced downward, deflecting the licking tongue of flame!

Hearing the intermittent sounds of Priscilla-sama and that freak clashing anew, I finally reached at my destination, the burning stone tower.

Liliana: “Haaa, haaaaa…”

Although the distance covered hadn’t been too long, drawing breath grew laborious, and my body felt fatigued! In all honesty, right now, nothing would feel better than a drink of ice-cold water before collapsing on a bed. This was something not meant for a travelling bard, but after spending so long in greenhouse-like surroundings, anything but a soft bed wouldn’t work!

Liliana: “Ahh, really… isn’t this all Kiritaka-san and everyone else’s fault—”

Allowing me to reside in this city, showing me warm hospitality. Whether the Scales of the White Dragon or the citizens of the city, everyone had expressed their love, and the likes of Kiritaka-san with such enthusiasm that even I was taken aback, it was all their fault! Their fault for having me remain in this city, so that my ability to keep on the path of a travelling bard had been weakened!

Well then, just a bit of extra effort here—recall the ruthless determination of your waist and legs from before!!

Liliana: “Ihhhh, ihhhhhhh!”

Myself prepared, teeth clenched, I held my steady Lyulyre in my arms, and rushed toward the blazing tower! So hot, so hot, so hot, so damn hot—!

Liliana: “—Guh, giiiiii!”

Anticipation of the scorching pain sent a sharp jolt through me.

However, although I felt an overwhelming heat wave, neither my skin, nor my hair, nor the Lyulyre, had been burnt by the scorching flame. The heat of the flame could be clearly felt, but nothing had caught on fire.

Much alike the white flames that were rising in the waterways, there was painful heat, but no burning. And because of that, I recognized this flame as the Yang Sword's bluff.

However, it was different. Different indeed.

The Yang Sword wielded by Priscilla-sama had indeed burnt through the metal chains upon collision. Even though it was clearly the same sword, sometimes it burned through, sometimes it didn't.

Priscilla-sama's flame could choose what to burn. Which meant, that it could also choose what not to burn.

Liliana: "Ohhhh—!"

So that was why! The white flame enveloping this control tower definitely wouldn't burn me!

Even though it was hot enough to burn me, agonizing enough to seem fatal, painful enough to make whoever experienced it want to collapse and roll on the ground, it would not burn, it would not injure, it would not be deadly!

Eyeballs melting, tongue withering, hair alight, skin simmering, Lyulyre scorched, bones cracking, flesh burnt, consciousness eroding to nothing, was all an illusion—!

Not hot, so hot, so hot, so hot, not hot, not hot, so hot, craving death, not wanting to die, so hot, not hot, hothothot, even though it was so hooooot—!

Sprinting up the stairs of the control tower, first floor, second floor, just how many floors were there?! Where was the roof?! How far did the fire reach, where had the hands of the fire reached towards, looking left and right yielded only the sight of white fire, sohotsohot, how could such agony be, so hot, heat beyond heat, I—

Liliana: "—!"

Right now, I wanted to wail about the intensity of the heat, wanted to shriek until my throat burst.

Absolutely not. If this agony were given voice to, it would ruin my throat in one cry. This throat could absolutely not be spent. These fingers as well. I wanted to scratch, wanted to express the suffering no matter how. But no, absolutely not, if these fingers were damaged, they could not strum a melody.

Whether eyes, or skin, or hair, would be okay; it couldn't be helped if they melted. But this throat, these fingers, and these ears as well, were not okay, because they were all indispensable for what would come next.

Forcefully ascending the steps, slamming open the incredibly heavy door with a kick, appearing now before me was the night sky—the wind howling in frenzy, heat continuing to flow from beneath my feet, but there were no more walls. I wobbled along the cobblestone to the edge, where I could look at below.

The wind was blowing, and underneath, a red figure and a white figure were waving dangerous objects, amidst white flames surrounded by a wailing crowd.

I was so hot, so hot, I felt as if I would die at any instant.

Right now, I wasn't completely free from that heat yet, the soles of my feet were still burning, the white flames seemed to intensify when the wind blew, sorrow suddenly rose in my heart, and I wanted to squirm—

Liliana: "Eek, eeep… Alright, this is a once-in-a-lifetime stage!"

Reaching the place I had dashed for, through heat and agony that inspired a craving for death, from here, everything was visible, and could reach everywhere with sound.

I was dying to die, but before I died, there was still something left to do, and so—

Liliana: "Come, come, gather around, everyone far away, make sure you listen! Everyone close by, make sure you watch the dance! For everyone even farther away, I'll be even louder, so just listen!! Liliana Masquerade, is here to sing and dance and perform for you! So listen well! —The Sky Overtaking the Morning Glow!!"

—Just gather all those passionate feelings, and spit them all out at once!

Chapter 67:
Liliana Masquerade

1

In the end, Liliana herself did not remember when she had begun to sing.

Liliana's bloodline, since the time of her mother, of her mother's mother, and even of other mothers beyond that, had always been a bloodline that did not settle in one place, instead travelling the earth.

The vagrant occupation of a bard would naturally lead them to get bored quickly. They would not remain in any one place, but rather would continuously travel with only two feet along with the winds, along with their hearts' whims.

It seemed that many bards would gather together, to band together for performances. However, Liliana was not particularly fond of this nature of banding together. Although she did not dislike being with others, their interests were different. There was a palpable difference in sense of music.

Just like her line of mothers, Liliana trod alone onto a journey. However, even amongst the many bards that valued their freedom, it could not be denied that her independence had appeared rather early. She had been only thirteen years of age when she left her parents' nest.

???: "Hey, annoying! Can't you just sit here and wait?! Aren't you supposed to not do things without your father and mothers' assent?"

Although not over a trivial matter, at the end of that argument she fled with no doubts. Since the age of ten, Liliana had always wanted to live independently. Those were the heedless opinions of a daughter too deeply submerged in chasing dreams, and her parents, especially her mother, forcibly kept her from it.

However, at around the age of ten, the feelings of the young Liliana were already a tad more mature than those of other girls her age. That was, more or less, the result of her father's performances and her mother's singing of various poems. The influence of being familiar with those played no small part.

For young Liliana, the characters appearing in the music her mother sang were dashing. As she came into contact with their adventures, struggles, battles, romances, intrigues, Liliana had been forever unable to bear that her feet could not make their way forward.

—The people who had come to be famous through song, could so freely choose their way of living.

To the ten-year-old Liliana, the heroes that had appeared in the songs were friends. She was eager to savor the feeling of walking the same path, of witnessing the same sights, all underneath the same sky they all had raised their heads to see.

Clinging to such a feeling, she had been able to bear it for three years.

Liliana's single-minded passion and single-minded sense of companionship flared up. From her father she stole the skill of performing with a Lyulyre, and from her mother she stole the sound of her singing, along with several famed songs.

On the eve of turning thirteen, her mother personally handed her down the Lyulyre, a tradition of her bloodline, and after that grand argument between parent and child, she sprinted away from her parents' side, journeying away from home alone.

Liliana: "Hahahaha! Wait and see, Mother, Father! I'll be the king of bards…!"

Completely evading the pursuit of her parents, she, now alone, made a vow to the night sky. Liliana Masquerade's grand adventure would, from now on, commence.

—In hindsight, it was plain to see that their parent-child quarrel had been due to her parents' thoughtfulness.

Since the age of ten, her parents had deplored Liliana's recklessness. They complained that her skills had yet to mature, that she treated not learning melodies as a joke, and occasionally they even refused her food afterward.

Father: "Hehehehe! A little girl like you is ten years too early to think she can live independently! Leave it to this arrogant child to take care of the meat of the rabbits who've fallen into the trap!"

Mother: "My oh my, you poor thing! Today's rabbit meat seems to be so sloppily cooked, and now you say we have to wait? A child who doesn't listen to her father and mother really is pitiful!"

For better or for worse, her parents had a nature of chasing their dreams.

For a pair such as them, how heartrending the departure of their only daughter must have been. Surely, leading up to the departure, arguments would have been aplenty.

Father: "This lowers the cost of meals! We'll be able to eat three meals a day from now!"

Mother: "With Liliana gone, we can just have another child!"

Surely, there must have been arguments. Surely it had been painful. For sure.

And a parental argument was the last gift she received from them.

If Liliana's dreams were crushed, she would not return to her parents. To cut off Liliana's way out, they spoke such heartless words.

To weaken at the thought of an escape route was human nature. As long as a path of retreat existed, the flames of determination could not burn until their very last.

Especially for a travelling bard, who had no home of their own.

Family and hometown were typically notions that were merged into one. Reliance on family was a subconsciously overwhelming tendency. And so, the greatest obstacle standing in the way of independence was the act of cutting it off.

Thanks to her youthful recklessness, and her parents' shrewd manipulation, she had overcome such an obstacle.

While sipping muddied water, munching roots of grass, whimpering "I want to go home…" and having been overcome by starvation and weakness, only then did Liliana notice their consideration.

If her resolve had shattered then, perhaps she would have cast down her Lyulyre. She thanked her parents. That mutual parting had been the best for them.

Liliana: "—Oh."

Mother: "Ehhh?!"

Father: "Oh, eh?"

Years later, upon encountering them in another town, they had yet to settle their differences. On top of that, held in her parents' arms, was an unfamiliar infant.

Liliana initially assumed it to be her younger sister, but rather than speak to her parents, she merely stuck out her chest, straightened her back and returned the way she had come.

Years later, if she had achievements more worthy of pride, perhaps she could reunite with her parents and exchange smiles and happy words.

However, as of this day, she was sorely lacking. So, it should be left as that, for now.

Of course, after this meeting today, perhaps she would never encounter her parents again. And there was an even higher chance that she would never be able to introduce herself as an elder sister to the little sister whose name she had yet to learn.

However, that was fine. This was what Liliana had chosen, a way of life which relied on song.

And, one day, when Liliana eventually became a world-renowned bard, doubtlessly her parents would irresponsibly comment to everyone who would listen. The first victim would no doubt be her little sister. And thus, it was completely natural that she added another petty ambition.

Liliana: “Heheh, what a heart-pounding vision of a future. Even though it shouldn’t have been too much to ask for!”

It was around the time Liliana was seventeen, that she found her resolve anew.

Liliana, who was now twenty-two, had lived independently for nine years—it was a given that her life had not been smooth, instead riddled with tribulation.

Most notable among them, was that at the age of thirteen, right after she’d begun her journey, on the day immediately after declaring “I will be the king of bards!” she was already utterly close to death. If she had not been picked up by passerby merchants, and had not been allowed to save up some money working as a servant, surely she would actually have died alone, pitifully.

If not for a group of merchants, travelling across the lands to make their living.

Liliana had been picked up and taken care of, acting as a servant. It was a way of travel much safer, much more comfortably, than a true solo journey, because there would be meals and a bed.

Upon reaching towns, Liliana would also take up the Lyulyre, singing at the side of the road for coin. The first instance of having her performance recognized after leaving her father and mother’s household was unforgettable.

The merchants took care of her for around a year, but when their spokesperson settled in a town, having saved up enough money to acquire his own store, the group disbanded. Amongst the scattered merchants, several groups invited Liliana to come along, but solemnly she declined, continuing on alone.

Letting go of a safer and more comfortable journey, she renewed herself as a person and sharpened her fangs. The lukewarm days of the beginning had ended, and the legend of Liliana Masquerade began. This was, without question, a tale of such vigor.

The details of the following years of toil are to be omitted.

As part of a group of merchants, or of a respected house of bards, she would have been fine, but the ruthless world had no consideration for a little girl who sang.

It was then that she fully understood the consideration that her parents had shown before she left.

This was when Liliana realized that there was another great truth of this world. It was that the world she lived in and the worlds the characters of her beloved stories lived in were absolutely different, and she was in no way one of their companions.

The reason for that was hardly anything special.

On the night she had munched on roots of grass as usual and consumed untouched red fruits in the mountains, she suffered the agony of a stomachache and fever by her lonesome, and then, she realized.

The heroes of the thrilling stories she knew had never been like this.

Because those tales were done and over with. The days where they spat fresh blood, spoke their aspirations, cried out their hopes, and swung their blades were of the distant past. Liliana had only superficially tread through their footsteps and woven their tales for others to witness.

Liliana loved them, but they had never loved Liliana.

Her own thoughts had been completely one-sided, the kind of thoughts that would only lead to a dead-end set in the past and, ultimately, cause her to lose her way.

—Then, just what was a bard?

Her origin had been “I will become the king of bards!” and with that said, Liliana had taken up the mantle of bard for many years, before finally realizing how useless she was.

That was something she had never considered before, something that was akin to having slammed into a wall; Liliana tasted the feeling like having her nose and front teeth aggressively smashed.

For three days and three nights, Liliana’s pains, fever, and vomiting continued without cease. Amidst this nightmare, Liliana endlessly wondered what was dream and what was reality.

After the fourth day, Liliana awoke recovered, splashed her face in the stream, and drank its water. The self that was reflected there wore a different mien than the self of before.

The wind rustled the foliage, the gurgling of the stream was refreshing, and the calls of insects and birds could be heard.

And there, for the first time, she felt song.

Tears overflowing, Liliana could not help but leap into the stream. The insects, birds, and fish were all startled, their music flowing to the water’s surface where Liliana’s head emerged, heartily laughing, crying, laughing, crying out.

Liliana descended the mountain, body caked in dried mud and dirtied water, and stood on the streets.

Everyone found themselves disgusted by the young girl clutching an instrument, wearing a dirtied dress. The storeowner’s expression revealed disgust, and passersby on the streets seemed uneasy as well. Merely standing like that for a few seconds would perhaps result in being knocked over by some thoughtless passerby.

However, the Liliana moving through the streets moved with agility. It was not that she was thinking she would be knocked over if she did not start soon.

In this moment, her only desire was to sing as soon as possible.

Passersby: “…”

How many people had noticed the strings of the Lyulyre being plucked?

She was a dirty, muddy girl, the Lyulyre in her hands aged and withered, and yet the hands that were touching the Lyulyre were breathtaking.

It was unclear how many people had noticed it.

The only thing that was certain, however, was that the consciousness of those who had indeed taken notice had been immediately raptured.

Passersby: "…"

As soon as Liliana's performance began, the moment those graceful hands and delicate fingers weaved music, the footsteps of everyone on the streets paused, as did their breathing. In an instant, everyone realized there had been some sort of dramatic shift, confused by the tremendous wave that swept through their hearts.

Every gaze focused upon her, a dirtied, young girl standing in the street, the source of the sound.

Liliana felt attention falling upon her, and at the same time understood that she had become excited. The stage had been prepared, and she dashed on it in one breath.

As applause for her performance reached its zenith, Liliana's Song began.

From her throat flowed Song, to the extent of making her believe that the songs she had sung in the past were not of the same substance.

Her own knowledge and feelings for the famous melodies went back and forth, piercing her. With a clear heart, she watched them rise towards the heavens, the friends she had thought of as inseparable.

—Song was a gift, and to the friends of the past whose tales she sang of, she was nothing at all.

And that was fine, for Liliana understood that her own existence was that of a bard.

With this foundation of understanding, from hereafter she could continue to sing by herself.

Flaunt, that in this world such exemplary people existed. Flaunt, that she had held the misunderstanding that she had been friends with such exemplary people.

And one day, certainly, for certain, she would befriend such amazing people, and she would sing, proudly flaunting that such amazing people had been her friends.

Liliana: “…”

Finishing her song, Liliana shed tears.

The people there were struck speechless, shedding tears just as she did, wiped their noses.

Applause echoed like thunder across the street, and Liliana Masquerade had become a bard.

Since then, Liliana’s acquaintanceship with music had persisted.

2

Atop the burning control tower, Liliana sang, recalling the first time she had sung and the first time she had sung as a bard.

A feeling similar to the one from then danced in her heart.

What she wanted to sing, wanted to express with words, wanted to voice, was too much. Even in the midst of song, she could not resist the urge to sing it. To the point that it could be called an obsession.

The white flame that scorched only the prey it selected was still burning, its momentum showing no sign of relenting

Perhaps Liliana did not feel the heat that would scorch her, yet the heat that burned tormented her. Even now, blazing pain was transmitted starting from the soles of her footwear, the body that had scaled the control tower wreathed in flame continuously emitting out cries of pain. Pain that drove her to her knees assaulted her to the point of wishing to cry out immediately.

However, something like wailing was a waste. Something like rolling around was a waste.

Before her eyes was an audience who wanted song. This throat was not for crying, but for song.

Liliana: "…"

The song she sang was not one that had been passed down by her mother or family.

A bard's obligation was an obligation to inherit stories, and so perhaps for a bard this was a misstep, but this was the song that Liliana had received, as a gift, upon first coming to understand the world.

Upon the arrival of a new morning, the sky would be dyed a reddish yellow color.

The day Liliana loved to see chased off the night, signaling a new day. The break of day stained red and yellow, bringing a true morning to all.

—The sky that overtook the morning glow.

No matter what the night held, morning would always dawn.

The blue sky that oversaw the rise of the sun for everyone heralded the start of a new day.

Liliana: "…"

Right now, mayhem gradually permeated the city, and a great number of people had been overtaken by unease and sorrow, leaving them immobile.

In the midst of a night where neither looking forward nor backward was an option, every single one of them was struggling, struggling, that much was the reality of it.

But, even so, Liliana wanted to sing that the morning would nonetheless arrive.

Because she wanted to sing with that in her mind, she sang just that.

She herself would not survive the agony of holding back the song she wanted to sing. And thus, right now was the perfect time to use song to convey what she wished to.

At the top of the control tower, Liliana loosened the trembling throat, so carefully tightened, and continued to sing.

Fingers moved across the Lyulyre as if in dance, and in truth, she sang and danced simultaneously. Making full use of the peak of the control tower, hoping that a large number of those surrounding would listen.

And yet, how deplorable that her voice had no way of reaching everyone's eardrums.

The problem was not merely one of volume. There was an issue of distance. The hearts of her audience were troubled. No matter how much of her heart Liliana poured, the existence of physical and mental barriers that made listening impossible was an undeniable reality.

Liliana believed in the power of song. However, it could only be considered true song if it reached its audience, becoming song only when that was accomplished.

Spread every which way, just how many people had been overcome by unease and sorrow? Perhaps it reached hundreds, even thousands. Liliana had never had the experience of reaching such a wide audience on her own, without the aid of the magical device.

Whether a means to diffuse voice, or a means of reach so many simultaneously, a normal person would not be able to have such means.

Liliana’s battle was far too hopeless, her aspirations far too distant.

Back when she had been ten years of age, Liliana’s ambitions had been deemed by her parents to be far too reckless.

And right now, was it just as back then, was she still repeating the same things?

Even though the power of song was real, was the person delivering the song still a fake?

Was it this place where she wanted to end up at?

Liliana: “—!”

At such a thought that inflicted herself pain, her throat faltered. And in that moment,

???: “Liliana—lovely Songstress. That singing voice, I want to it to captivate me forever.”

A silly man, with such a silly pick-up line, appeared in Liliana’s mind.

He was an odd man. He was doubtlessly a weirdo. Perverted might have been more accurate.

Upon hearing Liliana’s song, there had been those who had approached her with evil intents in mind.

Liliana had remained distant from all of them. She could not lend her throat to those who were not sincere, attempting to use song for ulterior motives. That was the sense of duty of a bard.

???: “I fell in love with your beauty. Please stay by my side!”

And so, he had been the first to try to become close to her from his heart.

Awareness that Liliana was a bard was something that had only come to him after his declaration of love to her, made upon seeing her. The first time she had performed in front of him, rather than her song, his eyes raked over her face, chest, feet, honestly rather uncomfortably.

However, that was not to say that he did not find himself touched by Liliana's song, nor that his feelings for Liliana had been hiding via deceit.

He liked her appearance, understood her singing voice, knew that, as a person, leaving was impossible.

???: "The city of Pristella has four large gates. So, within the city are several shelters as an emergency measure. This magical device is used to encourage citizens to be aware of daily predicaments, and to help them make decisions on the event of an emergency."

Liliana: "Eh… So what's this for…?"

???: "I was wondering if it was possible to try playing Liliana's song through the broadcast. Within this city are many people who have yet to understand your song, so this is the perfect chance."

Singing through a magical device was, for Liliana, a bad idea.

Song should indeed be sung before an audience. And so, Liliana had begrudgingly refused. But he had laughed in a carefree way,

???: "I want to monopolize your figure. However, your singing voice absolutely cannot be monopolized. Songstress to everyone else, Liliana to me. Would that be possible?"

How had that weirdo dared to laugh in her face without malice? If this was how he wanted to convince her, she wanted to snort.

Liliana knew of many love stories of this world, having been chronicled in song.

In those love stories, their hearts swayed, became infatuated with love. She knew which kind of words would charm them, which kind of attitudes would make their hearts flutter, and which kind of love would be fulfilled.

And thus, Liliana was not innocent enough to be persuaded by such words.

Perhaps innocent, perhaps not innocent, but she did appreciate how "Songstress" sounded. It was an exaggeration such that she could not straighten her chest and say it suited her.

Kiritaka Muse expected Liliana to be a Songstress for him. Because that person had turned her into the Songstress of this city.

Liliana: "…"

To communicate, reverberate, tremble, this feeling—

No matter how dark the night was, even were it so pitch-black that seeing forward was impossible. Even then, morning would still arrive, as always.

More resolute than anyone, louder than anyone, she would believe in it and sing it.

The Songstress of the Watergate City of Pristella, Liliana Masquerade.

Liliana: "…"

With that sort of feeling, heat and pain could not be sensed anymore.

Everything of herself was being poured into the wrists that strummed the Lyulyre, the feet that danced in synchronicity, the throat that sang without rest.

Her whole being was being squeezed out, withering away. The entirety of her emotions, the entirety of her singing voice, everything.

Liliana: "…"

Singing, singing, singing, Liliana had not noticed.

That her ears no longer captured the lament of those whose hearts had been whisked away.

On the opposite side of the flaming waterways, those who had been sighing in lament now gazed upward, towards the empty sky.

No, not empty. There was the control tower wreathed in flame, from which a voice could be heard.

A miniature figure at the peak continued to cry out from a great distance.

Eyes could not leave her. Their complete focus was directed toward the ears, everyone holding their breath to listen to the song in rapt attention.

A song that should not have been heard was heard clearly by everyone.

This was no miracle, nor was it a simultaneous hallucination, nor was it the sharing of emotions provided by the Authority of the Sin Archbishop.

—This was the true blooming of the Divine Protection of Telepathy, the gift Liliana had been granted by the heavens.

A Divine Protection that had until now been subconscious, only at this moment was it capable of exerting the influence it was supposed to. Boosted by her singing ability, and by the realization of casting everything aside in this hopeless moment to help, it had become a tremendous force, flowing into the city.

Of course, Liliana was unaware of this. In addition, there was no one there to inform her of the situation.

Liliana only sang with all her heart and soul. Becoming a bard, putting her all into singing, turning everything into this instant.

Echoing here was, for certain, the music of Pristella's Songstress.

3

Priscilla: "—As expected, the arrangement I had prepared came to pass."

Priscilla laughed, holding a flaming sword of crimson, seemingly containing the very sun within.

The song had also reached Priscilla's ears. Liliana had taken center stage on the burning control tower, producing the most brilliant of songs.

Although the Yang Sword controlled what its flames turned to cinders, the heat they emitted was not fake. The inside of the control tower was hot enough to cook, and the stone tower would feel scorching. Even at this instant, certainly it was so hot that she would want to leap off.

Even so, from this song that transmitted all of Liliana's feelings, cries or complaints of pain were practically undetectable.

It was not that the feelings were not there. Rather, the undiluted pain was surpassed by song.

What a foolish conclusion. One which only a fool could reach, a most extreme foolishness. Proof that the zenith of foolishness could yield a foolish result which transcended reason.

Priscilla: "That one's foolishness is truly fascinating. Idiocy and foolishness are not alike. An idiot does not deserve a life, but a fool has the advantage of being amusing. And even more, she has demonstrated a worth beyond joy. Thus, she deserves my reward."

Before allowing Priscilla to finish her soliloquy, burning chains pressed close from overhead and to the left. The snake's jaw bore a flame, moving straight at the stopped Priscilla.

Priscilla snorted at that pinnacle of unsightliness.

Raising the Yang Sword, the crimson blade flashed in a slant. Interrupting the path of the attacks coming from above and from the left simultaneously, the approaching chains were forcibly severed with a single swing. The crisp sound seemed to ring twice nearly at the same time, and the freak's wicked tongue clicked at the sparks.

Sirius: "Both you and that girl are so damn annoying! What is so different about me and her?! The methods are different, but the essence is the same! It is proof that we can communicate with this one thing!"

Sirius shrieked loudly, drawing the burnt-off chains close.

Twisting her arms, angrily generating fire, the bloodshot eyes of the freak whose black cloak swayed violently were directed at Liliana dancing atop the burning control tower.

Liliana's Divine Protection of Telepathy was incredibly powerful, enough that it could affect the monster's perception. To the freak who was so perceptive to changes in the emotions of others, the effects of that song radiated without limit.

The citizens had been freed from that monster's curse of Wrath, which had taken root inside their hearts.

On the other side of the waterways still burning with white flame, within the eyes of the people who stood there were no traces of frenzy. What filled their eyes was not fervor, but only tears that fell gently.

It was impossible for the monster to capture the complex feelings from which those tears stemmed. Because rather than condensing into one feeling, it kept swaying.

Sirius: "That person, as long as that person is, it can be proven…! Why are you appearing before me to intercept my path?! Humans want to pursue, to become one indeed! This is how the world has continued on! And yet!"

Priscilla: "As is the nature of song, the accompanying feelings vary. When listening to a wonderful tune, even the meaning behind the word "wonderful" may differ. Screaming and yelling about emotions, yet displaying such a shallow understanding of what is most vital… This is what is referred to as "idiocy"."

Sirius: "EEEEEEEENOUGH ALREAAAAAAADY!!"

Sirius widened her eyes at Priscilla's merciless speech, and with a howl, her arms were put together. The colliding palms rattled the chains, and each arm violently unraveled the curled chains.

With the skin on arms being peeled off, the very flesh being scraped, with such painful deeds, Sirius spread her arms, forcefully swinging the split chains.

Flame travelled through the rotating chains, the whirling causing it to expand to the maximum of the chain's arc. The scorching flame became a round disk, and even Sirius herself caught alight because of the tremendous heat.

Priscilla: "Could it be, that the bandages are for such wounds?"

The bandages were for burn wounds. If the reason was as what had just been witnessed, then truly it was mere foolishness.

Faced with this greatest force, this greatest danger, Priscilla's attitude did not waver.

Two snakes of flame merged into one mighty flame, achieving greater firepower.

Priscilla gazed upon the vortex of flame that would not leave a shadow behind with an expression of listlessness.

Sirius: "Feelings trembling… these intense emotions of the heart, this passion, this Wrath!"

Leaving herself to hatred and abominated feelings, Sirius's flames turned into waves of heat.

The flames that struck with rotating momentum no longer gave off the appearance of iron chains. In the instant that the flame had blossomed, the role of the chains that had served as conduit had come to an end.

The chains that had performed their role had melted in a flash, and only a mass of fire flew at Priscilla. A mass of heat as if enveloping the entire world rather than merely line of sight, this was a ranged attack no different from a cloud falling from the sky.

Utterly impossible to dodge, the only defense was to be swallowed thus. And so, regarding the flame itself, there was only one option.

Priscilla: “—Should my decree be the decree of the heavens, the aurora of the Yang Sword shall follow as one.”

Faced with the wave of flame pressing close, Priscilla lifted the Yang Sword.

Not as if feeling uncomfortable with the situation, merely raising the blade high.

Sirius: “Disappear—!!”

Priscilla: “…”

In the instant of the collision, Sirius spat venomous hatred at Priscilla, on the other side of the flame.

Priscilla did not regard her fury. The only sound that reached her was the song.

The instant when the heat wave should have consumed her body, the Yang Sword changed.

From the sword which all jewels had previously shone, shine suddenly vanished. Only crimson light and crimson blade remained in Priscilla’s grip.

It was thus, that the sword without its light met the flame.

Priscilla: “…”

Without the radiance of the jewels, the sword became one of ordinary steel, losing its divinity. Therefore, it did not have enough power to repel the approaching flame. If there had been an onlooker at the moment, perhaps that would be impression they would have been left with.

—But the result was the precise opposite.

Priscilla: “—Devour completely.”

Priscilla murmured, sweeping the Yang Sword to the side. She would be consumed by the flames and vanish.

And yet, her existence had yet to vanish after her whisper. Not only that, her body bore no traces of the heat wave's aftereffects, beautiful and constituted as always.

Waves of fire that boasted such power had been swept away without trace. Almost as if only the Yang Sword, glinting with reclaimed light, knew where the flames had gone.

Priscilla: "Hm—"

Grabbing the Yang Sword once again, Priscilla's expression shifted. Where once there had been a confident smile, now were stiffened cheeks as she hastened her steps.

Right in her line of sight was Sirius, sprinting quickly. The freak's fierce sprint pulled her far from Priscilla. Clearly, she had begun running without ascertaining the result of the flame from earlier.

In other words, from the very start, Sirius's target had not been Priscilla.

Sirius: "Stop with that jarring song—! The Wrath I share with that person, you cannot deny it so arbitrarily—!"

Her eyes bloodshot, Sirius rushed straight toward the control tower from which Liliana sang.

The white flame surrounding the control tower was a flame that allowed only Liliana freedom. Once Sirius rushed in, she would surely be burnt by that fire.

Something of this degree, even the freak would understand. Then, the target was,

Priscilla: "Idiot, what are you forcing me to—"

Propelled with explosive momentum, Priscilla's form tore through the courtyard. Although Sirius was fast indeed, Priscilla was superior.

Sirius's initial advantage had gone to waste, and Priscilla directed the Yang Sword's swing at the monster's back. Even if she had wanted to, the freak no longer had a means to defend. Without the chains on her arms, she had no way to meet Priscilla's sword.

Priscilla: "Stop, commoner—"

Sirius: "So annoying, you stop already!!"

Priscilla: "—?!"

Just before the Yang Sword slashed Sirius diagonally, Priscilla's body was stilled in midair. Her entire body frozen as if forcibly fixed in place, Priscilla's throat was caught by the sudden force.

Sirius lifted her leg, and from the hem of her pants, came the sound of chains that had been so familiar during the battle—

Sirius: "RAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Priscilla: "Tch!"

Rather than from the arm, a strike from the chain wrapped around her legs lashed out towards Priscilla, who had been frozen in her tracks.

This time, with her entire body halted, the attack was impossible to defend against.

At the ferocious attack from the chain several times faster than the ones from the arms, the front of Priscilla's dignified visage burst. The sound of steel on flesh rang out, and the clasp which bound Priscilla's orange hair was sent soaring, causing her beautiful hair to scatter.

Her face was left unmarred. However, her pride had been wounded.

Unable to neutralize its power she was flung backwards, increasing the distance between her and Sirius.

During this time, Sirius had approached the control tower, using unconventional movements to shift her strength and body weight to the same leg that had struck its chain at Priscilla, and then released it.

The serpent of flame wrapped around the control tower with violent momentum, and the foundation of stone tower collapsed with a howl. Fragmenting, collapsing, the material of the stone tower's foundation was consumed by waves of fire, tilting from the impact of the huge flame.

—With Liliana still on it, in one motion, the stone tower tilted and collapsed.

Priscilla, with orange hair scattered across her shoulders, watched the tower's demise with widened eyes. Sirius's silhouette was visible. But atop the tilting tower, Liliana's silhouette was absent.

And yet, Liliana's song continued. Even now, after her feet had toppled, after she had been caught up in the destruction.

Liliana devoted herself to her duties, continuing to captivate the inhabitants' hearts.

Priscilla: "—Your devotion is for a great cause!"

And so, Priscilla strode forwards, towards Sirius, without hesitation.

If Liliana's voice were interrupted, the influence over the peoples' hearts would return to Sirius. Making a split-second decision, the Yang Sword shone brighter, and Priscilla split the ground with one kick.

Sirius: "You insensitive egoist! Do not justify your inability to empathize with others! You, who are unable to connect with people, are defective. The natural state of humans is to mutually understand, to merge with one another!"

Priscilla: "You commoner—"

Having chosen to rush forward, Priscilla was cursed by Sirius, the destroyer of the control tower.

She leapt, and with the force of her heel the iron chain stuck downwards. An impact, and flames moving belatedly created an explosion, reaching for Priscilla's body as she ran towards the blast. A pause, and then continued steps.

Bathed in that heatwave, Priscilla's eyes were unwavering.

The same could be said of Sirius's frenzy. The freak could no longer hear any other voice.

A conclusion. Both of them held different senses of value; hence, they were completely incompatible with one another.

Both: "…"

The tilting control tower made a splitting noise, stone blocks caught up in the destruction and scattered, smoke curled and flames spread, and the courtyard became a flaming hellscape.

Those standing at the waterway where the tower had collapsed to shrieked with tears in their eyes as they fled. But not tears of sorrow. For something else, for the sound of song.

Sirius: "To love is to be one—"

Priscilla: "No—To love is to tolerate and to accept differences. For everyone to look at the same person, to feel the same way, to share the same feelings, could be naught else but nauseating and disgusting…"

Priscilla bent down to sweep aside the chain, leaning to meet the rushing attack. Sirius clicked her tongue and created several walls of flame to block the way, yet the Yang Sword mowed them all down, the crimson blade drinking it all.

The distance shrank, the chain attacks increased in speed and number.

The sound of steel colliding with steel was swallowed by the roar of the collapsing control tower. Running through that pleasant sound, Priscilla's power finally reached Sirius's ears.

Priscilla: "It is over."

Sirius: "—Well, how about this?!"

The very same moment Priscilla raised the Yang Sword, Sirius opened her coat.

Around the freak's waist, much like her hands and feet, chains had been tightly bound, and bound by the chains around her torso was a young girl with curled blonde hair.

???: "Mmm!"

What Priscilla had no way of knowing was that name of the girl was Tina. Since the beginning of this turmoil, she had been held hostage by Sirius. Although Subaru had mentioned her during the strategy meeting for Wrath, this matter had been perceived by Priscilla's brain as trivial.

However, without hesitation, Priscilla swung the Yang Sword at the hostage before her.

The Yang Sword did not hesitate in momentum, and, slanted, it ran through Tina's and Sirius's bodies. The blade of the Yang Sword, which boasted fearsome heat, soundlessly cut through the protective chains around her body, severing them in half and achieving its purpose.

Sirius: "—Oh my, oh my?"

Priscilla: "My Yang Sword burns that which I want it to burn, and cleaves that which I want it to cleave."

The chain had been torn, the body of the bound girl freed. The girl who collapsed to her knees lifted her face, stained with tears, stunned by the feeling of the sword passing through her body.

But the result was that, upon the body of the young girl, no cruel wound from a blade could be seen.

Instead, it was Sirius who had been attacked, now retreating. The freak looked down at her wound, and slowly shook herself while looking back towards Priscilla.

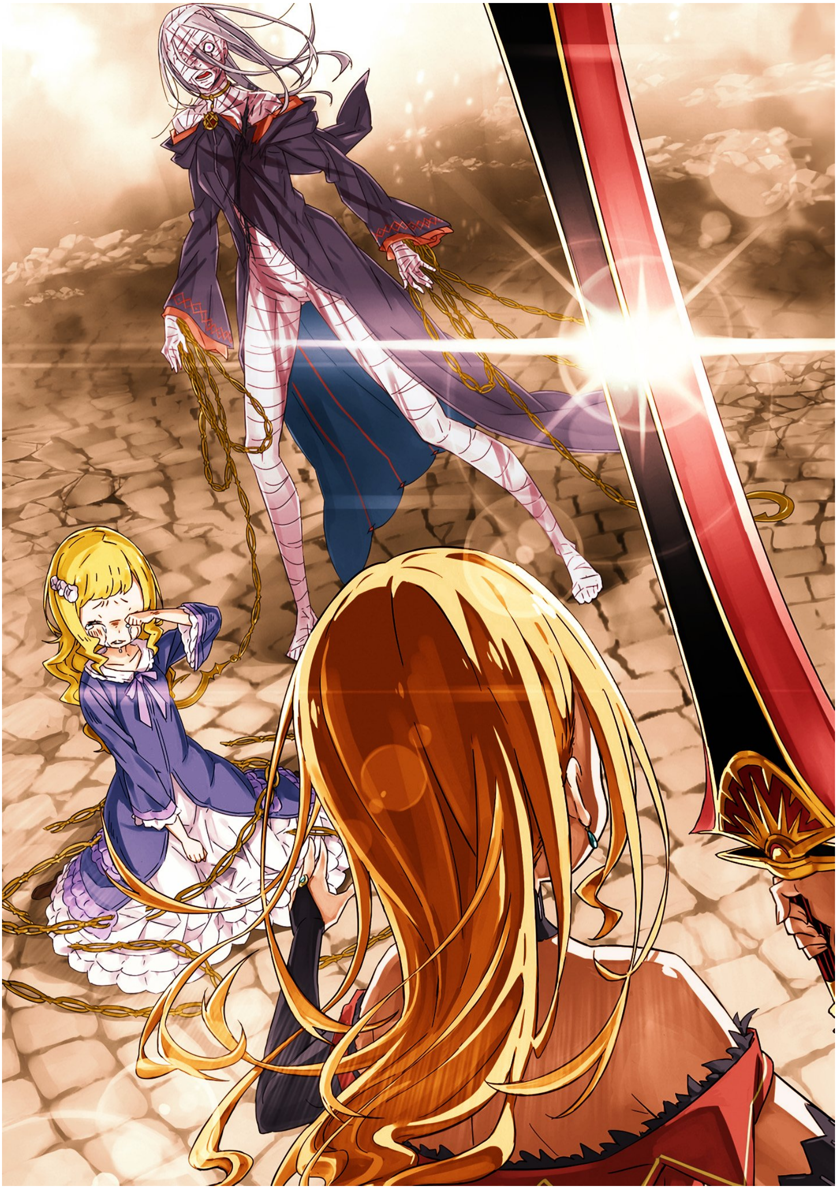

Sirius: “This agony… you…”

Priscilla: “Is there any reason as to why I would feel your pain? I care naught about becoming one. As you continue your delusions, you shall die alone.”

Priscilla struck with her sword again, now connecting sideways with the monster’s neck.

With startling sound and momentum, Sirius’s body convulsed on the cobblestones, sprinkling fresh blood, and was swept towards the waterway, falling in.

The sound of the water rang, and Priscilla looked at the Yang Sword.

Priscilla: “The sunlight has ceased and the sun has darkened? How so very troublesome.”

After she spoke, the collapsing control tower fell apart completely. Most of it became rubble, and the top-most floor where Liliana had been also felt the collapse, becoming rubble.

From the control tower that had toppled onto the waterway—Of course, no song could be heard anymore.

Tina: “…Ah.”

Looking at the pile of rubble, a youthful voice called to the squinting Priscilla.

Tina. Her expression was still one of disbelief at being freed, and Priscilla lowered her head, only to see Tina’s eyes tremble as tears began to drip down.

Priscilla released a sigh at that figure. The Yang Sword had already disappeared.

Likewise, the white flame that lit the waterways was gone, and many people approached it. A few seemed to be headed to the collapsed rubble, searching for the buried Songstress.

Priscilla: “Noisy night, and a noisy crowd. At the place where poem should take the stage, there is nothing but negligence—How tiresome.”

At a glance, that was the same listlessness as always, but some emotion peeked through that listlessness.

That Priscilla turned her back to the sobbing child, looking then at the waterway.

Priscilla: “But, not bad. Have praises.”

4

Slowly, slowly flowing along with the water.

My body was sluggish and my vitality completely drained, how to put it, a body covered in wounds? How can I say it, full of trauma? In other words, it was a feeling something like being unable to even move.

Liliana: “Oh—ah—”

My throat was utterly exhausted, even my fingertips were unable to budge.

Luckily, the outfit of a bard was exposed and had very little fabric, so even falling into and absorbing water did not mean that it would gain weight, increasing my odds of survival.

But right now, I had no physical strength to swim with, so just floating along was barely accomplished. Well, just floating along like this, sooner or later would mean growing cold, wouldn’t that be quite troublesome?!

A voice from within cried out loudly. I was going to fall asleep like this. I’d die.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Liliana: “Ah—eh—”

Burning control tower, powerful flames.

With my entire body seemingly in a state of being baked, at first, falling into the waterway had been pleasantly cool, but now it was growing cold. Ehhh, that was bad news.

Speaking of which, the attitude of not escaping, but staying in the collapsing tower to sing until it fell in the water, was probably more disastrous.

Because it’d felt nice. It was so powerful that it made me think I’d lived for that moment.

In fact, I hoped I was not mistaken and that everything’d worked out alright. At any rate, my head was still attached, so as long as Priscilla-sama hadn’t been killed, everything’d gone smoothly. If so, that was nice.

Yeah, well, that’s alright, then.

As a bard, I still had a lot of aspirations to fulfill, but in a sense it could be said that I’d been able to accomplish something I needed to accomplish.

Perhaps the goal of leaving songs to be passed down in history had not been met, but if everyone who had been there had indeed been saved, I hoped I had left enough of a mark to be a topic of conversation at a family dinner or something.

Liliana: “Uh—uh—”

By the way, the fact that I’d been repeatedly making strange cries since a while ago, this probably served as a signal that I was still living in this world. Also, because I felt that my whole body was about to collapse from exhaustion if I didn’t shake it off with my lungs…

The proof that I was still me was all in my voice, after all. Something like that. Anyway, it felt like it was about time for it to end.

Although so much had happened, overall it was a happy life.

Well, thank you for everything so far—UWAHHH??!!

Liliana: “Ow! Owwww! The top of my head hurts!”

???: “Ahh?! What was that just now?! Liliana?!”

My head felt as if violently struck, as if having collided with a boat floating on the waterway or something.

What was more, coming from that boat, was the voice of a familiar man.

Liliana: “Is it, Kiritaka-san?”

Kiritaka: “Is that, Liliana?! So glad to see you again! But why are you in the waterway?! No, I’ll pull you from there first. Please wait!”

The boat swayed and swayed as Kiritaka-san flailed about on the boat. To tell the truth, it hurt quite a lot, because the boat was blocking my body from riding the waterway’s current.

Even though it was horribly painful, I was so shocked I forgot to cry out.

Ack, speaking of which, it seems Kiritaka-san picked me up. There was nothing wrong with that, though, really.

Kiritaka: “Alright, almost… alright, got you!”

Kiritaka-san stretched both his hands into the water, pulling my floating form up. At that moment, his hand were touching my breasts, but, eh, there was no strength to be mad at him right now. It was fine.

Being pulled onto the boat, moving still felt sluggish.

Kiritaka: “Your body’s become so cold. Wait for me, Liliana. I’ll use a fire stone right now. Your body cannot be left soaked.”

With a towel, he wiped my hair and face.

His hands were unexpectedly gentle, almost gentlemanly. Suddenly a sense of relief rushed up, and I released a breath, suddenly sighing.

Liliana: “Kiritaka… what have you been up to?”

Kiritaka: “Me… You mean me? Well, there was a lot, but, hmm, playing an active part in retaking the city!”

Pushing back the bangs he was proud of, perhaps his teeth were shining. Since I didn’t have the strength to open my eyes, I couldn’t see it, but it seemed to surface to my mind’s eye.

I couldn’t help but laugh, which seemed to surprise Kiritaka.

I wanted to hear all sorts of Kiritaka-san’s problems, and I had a few things I wanted tell him too. Right now, I was really sleepy, but I just wanted to say this.

Liliana: “I’m really sleepy, so I’m going to sleep for a while, I…”

Kiritaka: “Ah, ah, alright. I’ll take you somewhere safe, don’t worry.”

Liliana: “If you don’t play any pranks on this sleeping me… Then from now on, let’s talk more…”

Kiritaka: “Uehhhh?”

I knew he wouldn’t, but I had to say it nonetheless. When I woke up, definitely some embarrassing words would be exchanged, so please stay troubled until then.

—”To be your Songstress is wonderful”, just preparing to say that much was fine.

Chapter 68:
Name Eating Gourmet

—The ruthless skirmish, which had broken out in the Watergate City of Priestella against the Witch Cult was, at last, approaching its finale.

In the east of the city, stood a single church covered in ice, where stabbing pillars of ice, tall enough to make one raise his eyes, had been erected.

In the north of the city, the waterways flared up at once, and the incandescent stone monument roared up and crumbled down.

In the west of the city, a part of the waterway got destroyed, and the water, flowing into the underground, resulted in flooding.

In the core of the city, the nucleus of the city's faculty, the city hall lost its foundation, and subsequently lost its shape.

The opening up of hostilities caused severe damage in various areas, and etched the menace of the existence known as the Witch Cult in the city. However, there were those who resisted and repelled away the malice, fighting a defensive battle with confined war potential, and tried to fulfill their purpose.

And, amidst the fight for the watergate city, if there was a battlefield to be named where things were not proceeding favorably, which one was it? That could perhaps, be said for this battlefield.

—Yes. Breaking out unanticipated and unforeseen, was the face-off and battle with the Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Lye Batenkaitos.

Lye: "Haha~! That, won'tdowon'tdowon'tdowon'tdowon'tdowon'tdowo~n'tdo~! What went wrong with you, what do you want to do, what are you going to do, what happened to you?!"

This place was commonly known as the Waterway Street, surrounded by slender and convoluted waterways.

In the open plaza of the Waterway Street, was a single petite phantom laughing loudly and jumping about quickly and keenly.

Using his short limbs and waving about his long, dark brown hair was a young boy.

The boy, in his mid-teens, had put on only pieces of rags on his body, such that it would not be strange to confuse him with a vagrant child at sight.

However, it could not be said that it was not difficult to dismiss his outward appearance as just a trait of his, but instead, that impression carried onto his true self as well.

On top of that, the very existence of the loudly laughing boy was heterogeneous, distorted, and abominable.

At a single glance, the sense oppressive pressure his entire body exerting could be understood. It was the fatal insanity calling upon parts of instinct which are chipped off and neglected in normal daily life by humans.

By just that, everyone carefully observed the abnormality of his existence.

He was a blasphemer who trampled upon the human realm, human wishes, and the human society.

He was a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, the great evil who kicked the human heart and humanity itself.

???: “The opponent is just one child! Surround him and don’t let him escape! Bring him down!”

???: “Yeah, it’s just lone brat! Catch him and tear him apa~rt!”

The commanding loud voice overlapped with the infuriating laughter of the youth.

While glaring at the men approaching him, Lye Batenkaitos of Gluttony stepped ahead and shortened the distance rather lightheartedly, instead of stepping down.

Lye: "—~tsu."

Putting a halt to their words, the white robed men leapt upon Batenkaitos.

Each one of the white robed men were mercenaries of the organization White Dragon's Scales which had been left by Kiritaka. Holding short swords in their hands, they struck Gluttony with their blades from all directions.

Against the synchronous offensive, which had no disorder in its cooperation, Batenkaitos,

Lye: "There are some frayed spots, that won't do."

Sliding into the gap of the "perfectly ordered" attack, he evaded four of the swords with minimal movement.

Positioning his body away and dodging the blades, he slashed one blade down using the dagger tied up to his right arm, and kicking one person's torso, he broke through the enclosure. In front of him, was standing someone with a huge figure, with his arms crossed.

???: "O-O~h! Such desperation, huh, yo~u!"

He was Felt's attendant, Gaston.

Having robbed away one of the Sin Archbishop's daggers using his secret technique, he now, with his physique, dashed towards Batenkaitos and tried to slam into him.

Seeing him, Batenkaitos rounded his eyes, and smiled shortly afterwards. It was a smile befitting his age, however, the sharp canines in his mouth induced uneasiness and anxiety.

Lye: "It seems you're doing well, uncle. Not so bad!"

Gaston: "I've still not reached the age to he called an uncle…

bo~y?!”

Batenkaitos jumped, and his right leg thrust into the side of Gaston’s face, who had come plunging onto him.

Receiving the blow on his cheeks, Gaston flinched, and gave a hateful look to Batenkaitos.

Just like the blow of the dagger, this attack did not pierce through Gaston either. Though the principle was ambiguous, Gaston’s body had been completely killing off the impacts of the attacks.

At the same pace, Gaston stretched his arms, grabbing the continuously moving Gluttony —

Lye: “Palm of the Fist King—”

Keeping his legs raised, Batenkaitos muttered something. His palm came in contact with Gaston’s torso. Compared to a kick, it had no might or velocity, it was a mere action of touching.

However, the moment he lightly pushed in his arm, his body curled and broke down.

Gaston: “Ugh, ghu~e?!”

Kneeling down, Gaston vomited out gastrointestinal fluids.

Walking by the side of the body who had broken down in front of him, Batenkaitos, who had broken through the enclosure, turned back and tilted his neck.

That’s all you’ve got? is what his gesture suggested, and the White Dragon’s Scales could not hide their severe expression seeing their pride get damaged.

White Dragon’s Scales: “You monster…!”

The word that had leaked out of someone’s mouth, was the clear proof of Batenkaitos’s ability.

The agonizing voice may have had dim jealousy mixed into it, or it was simply misheard.

???: "…We have much lower chances of being able to strike a decisive blow, than what I had earlier conjectured."

Observing the battlefield, which could not be called a competition even when painted under favorable light, Otto licked his dry lips and desperately rotated his head.

In the face-off with Gluttony, their war potential, which was directly conflicting with the enemy, was in no way dependable—of course, it was true that all of them were risking their lives, but it was also a fact that it was still lacking.

The White Dragon's Scales left by Kiritaka amounted to seven people, the two of Felt and Gaston in her company, Otto was a solitary force, this made for a total of ten people. If someone who had wrapped up their battle on an early note were to join up with them here, then that would make for a great turn of the tables– that would be absolutely ideal, but,

Otto: "I do not trust my luck enough to be expecting such good fortune to shower upon me."

The life of Otto Suwen, went hand in hand with hardship and unfairness. Otto believed that nothing known as good fortune existed, and the result could be derived only through one's own hard work, preparation and actions.

For him, good fortune would be having a nuisance Divine Protection and being born into an understanding home, and having his life saved by Subaru, who had killed a Sin Archbishop.

As he believed he already ran out of it, he did not get unnecessarily negative regarding his bad luck.

???: "That Water Dragon brought by nii-chan can't be used anymore, right?"

Standing beside Otto, who was sunk in his own thoughts, called out Felt who was also watching the same situation.

What her crimson eyes were glaring at, was at the other side of the sword fighting Gluttony and the others—lying abandoned on the stone pavement, with its long neck twitching, was the form of a dying Water Dragon.

The pitiable Water Dragons, who had been summoned by Otto but thrashed away by Batenkaitos, unfortunately, were unlikely to return to the front lines.

Otto: "Sadly, I don't think they can be pushed any further. These were all of the water dragons I had spoken to before coming here… I could speak to other water dragons and have them do the same thing but, would you like to use them and escape?"

Felt: "That joke hurt. Just that delusional diva escaping is fine, and our trump card isn't just one, it's in two parts. The second one is, well, I'm preparing it."

Saying that, Felt glanced at the long and slender package her petite body had grasped.

Wrapped in a white cloth, her Trump Card seemed to be the magic weapon her attendant had brought. She had stated that even Reinhard could not evade it, but a burdensome mechanism was required for its usage, and until that was fulfilled, it could not be put to use.

Felt: "On top of that, that delusional diva aside, nii-chan or I can't escape even if tried to. Because it seems that bastard is targeting us."

Otto: "If I may be honest, that's the thing I want to be excused from the most."

Otto dejectedly lowered his shoulders, at the words of Felt, who inhaled with her nose.

But, he was unable to deny her words, because he was able to sense the strength of the warm looks being given to them, even amidst the fierce battling.

Batenkaitos leaked out warm sighs, with moist eyes and blushing cheeks, and frequently turned towards Otto.

Though it was a gaze with the color suggesting a desire to harvest, but the true meaning behind it was only the lurking appetite of a hungry ferocious beast.

As per the taste of the beast of prey, drops of blood had realized into top-class flesh, was all there was to it. Though it was not honoring in the least, three people here had realized in the aesthetic-appreciating eyes of Batenkaitos.

Otto and Felt, along with a man with an unkempt beard, who was leading the White Dragon's Scales. Giving orders to his men, he repeatedly clashed with Batenkaitos and quickly returned back to his position here.

The man, with a serious face, jumped out of battle and gave thought to the fight's circumstance, all while taking swift steps around,

White Dragon's Scales: "It's Dynas. It's thanks to him our young master's escape was successful."

Otto: "Being successful in that is Felt-sama's group's achievement. On top of that, having Kiritaka-san escape was also to aid us for our victory. With this…"

If Kiritaka, who had escaped from this place, was to move according to Otto's instructions, a different possibility would rise. Unfortunately, though it was something more like a prayer and had no proof, but in any case, it should not go unfavorably.

Having more ways to win, to reach victory, can never be something negative. Once any of those ways are put to use, what is left is to simply wait for how it turns out.

"…"

Seeing Otto, quiet and shaking his head, the man—Dynas, made an astonished expression, but then changed it. It was the color of being convinced.

Dynas: “I see, it seems like it’s just as how I had heard. As expected of the internal affairs official of Emilia-sama’s place, who had sent one of the Witch Cult’s higher-ups to its death. It seems I can expect you to have your own dish for this Sin Archbishop to taste as well.”

Otto: “Thank you for such an inflated evaluation. Um, I’m sorry, by the way everyone, do you happen to know what kind of work the internal affairs official is supposed to do? I believe it is somewhat different from what I am doing…?”

Dynas: “Such politeness too, huh. Also, our internal affairs officials are going around visiting shelters and taking care of the victims. Isn’t that kind of work internal affairs officials are supposed to do?”

The damage he had done to the image of internal affairs officials was immense.

In the past one year, he had decided to give up on the post of internal affairs official, but he never came to terms with the changes that will result due to that.

Whose fault was it. Was it perhaps because such situations, like natural disasters, kept repeating? It was Subaru’s fault. Once he returned safe, he would definitely set things straight. That’s what he had decided.

Otto: “Well then—”

Let’s put things of post battle for later, and focus on the current situation.

Ahead of Otto’s sight, Batenkaitos repeatedly intermingled with the White Dragon’s Scales and Gaston, and making clear his extraordinary combat strength, he swept his feet.

However, what was utmost perplexing was him not even trying to swing his right arm’s dagger.

Lye: “Even though such nice adults are all ganging up, you ca~n’t even catch a single brat?! That won’t do, that wouldn’t do, will that do, can that do, that could never do!”

Unraveling his fangs, Batenkaitos dodged the men with just the handling of his feet. His free paced movements, with strikingly swaying movements of the upper body, and the swords eventually cut through the sky.

The movements of his upper and lower body were totally different, as if two separate systems entirely. As that eccentricity reflected in Otto's eyes, Dynas unintentionally gulped down his threat.

Otto: "Dynas-san?"

Dynas: "Ah, no… sorry. His movements are just a bit… O~h?!"

Felt: "Don't you get scared with such a huge figure!"

With his mouth shut, Dynas tried to deny the thoughts that were coming up in his mind. Standing behind him, Felt gave a kick to his back.

Dynas turned back, and Felt, who puffed up and reddened her cheeks, raised up her eyes at him.

Felt: "Once you put your hands in pocket, all that's left to do is to choose what to take and what to leave. If you'll be chased after either way, then it's better to just use whatever you got. You get it?"

Dynas: "Why are you using the point of view of a thief?"

Otto tilted his head at Felt's advice, while Dynas, who was right next to him, shook his head. He initiated his words by saying "I guess so", and looked back at Felt,

Dynas: "It's just how miss said. You just have to say whatever comes up in your mind, and find a lead out of it. For the moment, what I feel is just that all this is just odd but…"

Miss, which is how Dynas referred to Felt as, it seemed as if he had not noticed her being a Royal Candidate. But, though he judged the mistake here, Otto decided not to mention it. Subsequently, he carefully listened to Dynas' words.

Dynas: “That Sin Archbishop… he may just look like a brat, but his fighting is good, his movements are good, he has too much expertise, frankly. Leaving it to just our physical abilities… would, again, still not be the correct answer.”

Felt: “—? Isn’t that like being born with good fighting skills? Like how Reinhard was?”

Otto: “I would like to simply give up if he is comparable to Reinhard-san.”

Felt’s knight, the kingdom’s strongest sword, Reinhard.

Currently, he had accompanied Subaru and was supposed to have had been clashing against Greed, but his power was something Otto, who was only on the level of being capable of self-defense, had only felt upon his skin.

Just being beside him could make one feel a sense of absolute safety, and amazement at the same time. Kingdom’s strongest was no understatement. In fact, it would not be wrong to call him the world’s strongest.

On the other hand, a strong sense of revulsion and an unnerving feeling boiled up by simply coming in contact with Batenkaitos. It was unlike from what could be sensed by Reinhard.

Of course, his unnatural fighting strength was unquestionably undeniable.

Dynas : “It’s not like that either. I’ve lived enough, and faced enough battles to say… that brat’s fighting technique can’t be explained by just talent. His movements are that of someone who’s stacked them up for years and years.”

At Dynas’ words, Otto and Felt glanced at Batenkaitos once again.

At just that moment, Batenkaitos had received a short sword’s attack with his arm. Gripping the wrist of the one holding the sword, Batenkaitos gyrated his body, and turning him upside down, he threw his body to the ground.

Furthermore, as the men commenced their pursuit, Gluttony's feet glided on the cobblestone drawing a circle, and freely using his limbs, he destroyed their balance and made them fall.

Unquestionably, that fluent and elegant movement had the power to draw a line between being refreshing and the violent ambience Batenkaitos wore. His undeniable art of having a system of a variety of martial arts, had been cultivated into himself.

The young boy, who looked fourteen, had perfected such techniques which would take years and years to master—?

Dynas: "I suppose, someone called a martial arts genius may be able to do this but… I don't want to think that such a brat was blessed with that talent."

Batenkaitos' mastery was such that Dynas had to say that much. At that moment, Otto realized what the jealousy in the leaked words of one of the white robed men, who were fighting Gluttony, meant. They, who were fighting the battle, had realized this truth before Otto and the rest. That is why, they were—.

Otto: "Dagger handling, unarmed fighting skills, perfect martial arts techniques…?"

Saying that, Otto resumed to doubt the reason behind it once again. "Is that even possible?" was the only thought that came up in his mind.

"…"

He had heard of people being sent to colosseum at a very young age, and the ones who become swordsmen are taught and trained fighting techniques in the Vollachian Empire to the south. If Batenkaitos was to be in such an environment, it may not have had been impossible for him to acquire such skills at this age, but those skills in fighting techniques would again, be different.

The only way for him to learn and cultivate those would be to train under an equally and appropriately apt trainer.

Otherwise—

Otto: “To steal it away… No, to eat it like food?”

Otto had already heard Subaru mention that Gluttony was an existence who ate the Name and Memories of its opponents. The truth is, Otto had the knowledge of the form of a young girl who had both of those eaten, and had gone into a state of not being present in anyone’s memories. Hard to believe, but he surely did not eat something which was visible to the eyes. However, till now, what happens to that which gets eaten, was a thought that did not dawn upon him.

Possibly, Gluttony had been storing the eaten memories of his opponents and using them.

The techniques of a martial artist who had trained for over ten years, or the fighting skills of a warrior well acquainted with the battlefield, or even emulating the attack of a young girl, who had been by Subaru’s side and supporting him—.

Otto: “He’s using magic!!”

Felt: “Gaston!”

Lye: “El Huma.”

As the shocking attack commenced, Otto’s shout and Batenkaitos’ chant echoed at the same time.

A sound resonated in the area as the air crystallized, and the icicles subsequently produced, swiftly moving, aimed for the startled White Dragon’s Scales.

However, against the rain of ice, Gaston stood firm, with his arms spread. The giant, with his normal defense, smashed all of the ice that came in contact with him with his body. Against the destruction, the White Dragon’s Scales dove behind his back, in order to reduce the impairment being inflicted upon them. However, they were still unable to prevent the damage.

Lye: “Onii-san’s judgement was good. It seems it couldn’t become any more of a surprise attack than what we had thought.”

Watching the torment, Batenkaitos, who was behind the magic, raised the edge of his mouth.

Gaston, who had acted as a firm wall, sighed out a hoarse exhale, and the six of the White Dragon's Scales behind his back lay injured. With one bleeding heavily, and two crouching, who had been wounded on their legs. The other three could not be described as uninjured either. Their war potential had been halved, and on top of that—

Lye: "You saying this means, could it be that our trick became clear?"

Otto: "…Well, I wonder."

Lye: "Onii-san, we won't be fooled. Before suffering in pain, can't you stop acting like a merchant."

Responding to Otto, and threatening to make him suffer, Batenkaitos' form disappeared the next instant.

No, he dashed with his swift natural movements, fast enough to make one think he had disappeared.

His petite frame glided by Gaston, onto the side of the immobile White Dragon's Scales.

In the blink of an eye, the mobile three flew away from the spot, but the wounded three were unable to flee.

Lye: "Asta. Lookfelt. Hicks."

Leaking out a whisper, Batenkaitos softly caressed the shoulders of the three.

In front of everyone observing with widened eyes, wondering what he was doing, the bodies of three jumped, once they had been touched by Batenkaitos. And, Batenkaitos turned back, and raised his left hand,

Lye: "Lick."

And, he licked his empty left palm. At his action, Otto was immediately swallowed by discomfort.

What had happened, something had unquestionably happened. However, he was unaware of what had happened, and that was not all he was unaware of.

Otto: “The ones who are lying at his feet… Who are they?”

What Otto’s fingers were pointing at, were the feet of Batenkaitos, who had his lengthy tongue stretched out.

At the feet of the malice which had taken the form of the young boy, lay the figures of three people. Though they were lying there, their identities were unknown. Possibly, based on their clothing, they could be members of the White Dragon’s Scales, but when did they appear, and when did they get defeated?

Lye: “Sad, how sad, so sad, quite sad, pretty sad, because it is sad. Even if our reunion turns only unilateral, we can’t help bu~t want satisfaction!”

Otto: “Dynas-san! Those three are?”

Dynas: “I don’t know! I haven’t even seen them before! But—!”

Even if it was told that the ones wearing the same clothes were unknown allies, it was still not convincing. Even so, neither did Dynas’ voice have any deceit, nor did it have any composure. Charging ahead as if flying, he raised the short swords in both of his hands and slashed into Batenkaitos.

Lye: “Stop it, Dynas. It’s an old relationship. Hometown’s purification is one step ahead, so crossing swords with comrades like this is foolish.”

Dynas: “—?! You, from where did you, about that—!”

Carelessly trampling upon Dynas’ circumstances, Batenkaitos raised the edge of his right dagger. Lightening the blow of the two short swords with his dagger, Gluttony struck Dynas' chest with his knees, and at the same pace, he leapt backwards due to the resultant force.

Dynas coughed as he gripped to his chest, but managed to retrieve the collapsed three strangers.

Seeing Dynas in that shape, Batenkaitos let out a sigh.

Lye: "Don't stubbornly stick to the vessels. What is important is the heart and the inside, no? What lets a person be like that person isn't the outside, but the inside. We know about your hard work, Dynas. It wasn't your fault you couldn't protect Milian and Meili. Your luck was bad."

Dynas: "Shutupshutupshutupshutu~p! What do you! Know about me! Stop saying things per your own wishes! You rotten demo~n!"

Raising an enraged voice, and forgetting the damage's pain, Dynas charged at the enemy again. He angled his two short swords and aimed for Batenkaitos' face, but making a face as if he was acquainted with the attack, Batenkaitos dodged it with ease. At the same pace, Batenkaitos stretched his hand for Dynas' back.

Lye: "Woh?"

Gaston: "How long will you go ignoring us"

Felt: "Is what we're saying, you idiot!"

Gaston aimed directly for Batenkaitos' slim waist from behind. Batenkaitos' elbow thrashed into his nose, but Gaston did not fall back because of the hit's impact.

Furthermore, while Gaston stalled Batenkaitos, Felt jumped in. She crashed her long and slim package which she had gripped in her hands into the susceptible back of his head.

Lye: "Idiot huh, how hurtful. Perhaps we, actually know much more than you do, you know?"

Felt: "Argh!"

But, Batenkaitos bent forward at Felt's attack, and then subsequently received it with his right arm's dagger by raising it. The vigorous strike gave rise to a crushing sound, however, its aim mostly missed, and Felt's stance came to be unguarded.

Seeing Felt and Dynas could leave together, his hands could also reach Gaston—so Batenkaitos' devilish hand, at the same pace, touched the three,

Otto: "I will not let you, though!"

Just when he was about to reach, the cast red hot magic stone reached Batenkaitos' feet. The moment he saw that, Batenkaitos' movement stopped, and Felt and Dynas withdrew with urgency.

Felt: "Don't let go, Gaston!"

Gaston: "I won't forget this, you wicked girl…!"

Gaston, standing firm, was unable to escape from Batenkaitos and was caught up in the magic stone's range. As the magic stone's glowing intensified, and the next instant, it gave rise to an explosion powerful enough to tear off the stone pavement.

Red and white light illuminated, and Felt rolled away from the explosion to the other side. Otto somehow grabbed her, and then glanced at the explosion's span.

These magic stones are what Otto constantly carried "just in case". Ever since the fight with Garfiel in the Sanctuary, he determined it would be better do so for his own safety.

It may be a means painful on his wallet, but its strength was nothing to laugh at.

Otto: "Is your companion alright?!"

Felt: "Hah, don't underestimate my giant. He's my armor. He won't be hurt by a meagre and soft attack. But…"

Just when she said that much, a giant figure emerged out of the smoke. It was Gaston. With his body having taken a sooty color, he smacked his body making a desperate face.

Gaston: “Gha~a~a~! Hot! Hot! Hot hot! I’ll die!”

Otto: “Even if you may be able to take explosions, I guess you can’t stop your body from warming or cooling.”

Felt sighed, seeing the form of her attendant agonizing in high fever. Though he had bathed in the might of the fire magic stone from close proximity, Gaston’s life did not appear to be in a serious condition.

Confirming that much, Otto turned his eyes back towards to smoke. The black fumes were rising at a reasonably good scale, so there was no way Batenkaitos, who was at its heart, had managed to defend himself. On the other side of the black smoke, was Dynas, knelt down, but he seemed to be safe.

And,

Lye: “Bennett. Calcifs. August.”

Otto: “—?!”

A whisper was heard, and all eyes turned away from the hypocenter.

There were visible the forms of three collapsed white clothes, and Batenkaitos in perfectly good health. The youth, once again, raised his left hand’s palm saying “lick”, and inched it closer to his mouth and licked it.

What followed was beyond understanding. Once again, three more unidentified white robed people appeared.

The way he had escaped from the hypocenter, and the unanticipated appearance of three more victims, all of it was beyond comprehension.

Felt: “Shit! What’s with them! From where… no, when…?”

Standing beside Otto, Felt violently scratched her beautiful blonde hair. She also, once again, was beginning to lose understanding what was the meaning of what she was seeing.

What must be considered urgent, even that was something Felt, right now, did not know. However, Otto understood. This, mysterious state.

Otto: “This is, what it means when the Name is eaten—!”

Disappearing from everyone’s memory, and bode only within Subaru and no one else, was a young girl named Rem. That very same phenomenon, was transpiring in front of his eyes right now.

Possibly, the collapsed men, who are supposedly members of White Dragon’s Scales, had gotten their names eaten by Batenkaitos. The result of that, was the disappearance of the memories of them being Present from the minds of Otto and the others.

That was why, it appeared as if they had appeared suddenly, and they did not know who they were either.

“…”

Fright rose within him. Once again, he comprehended the viciousness of the monster in front of his eyes.

If he straddled into the hands of Gluttony Lye Batenkaitos, in the worse case scenario, if Otto and the others were to face complete annihilation here, all traces of this battle, along with the existing evidences, will all disappear.

Of course, all memories of the resistance put up by them, and the fact that they were here itself as well.

The possibility of oneself disappearing, and the disappearance of all people who would look back upon oneself—in other words, isn’t it the greatest fear in this world, far greater than any other fears.

Otto turned pallid. Even though they had not reached the same conclusion, Felt and Dynas’ face complexions were equally bad. He realized how ignorant they had been, and how recklessly they were acting.

It made him believe, that the real choice here was to escape caring for themselves or not—.

Felt: “Damn it, he pisses me off. Should we try the same way, one more time?”

“…”

Otto sighed weakly, while Felt leaked out those words. Without thinking, Otto turned his eyes towards her face.

Felt’s complexion was that of utter stupefaction, in front of the aberrant situation. However, she was not lamenting. As if continuing to strengthen her heart, until she is completely driven into a corner.

Feeling moisture upon his entire body, Otto slapped his cheek.

Just what, was he doing by becoming such a weakling. Even if he went bankrupt, he wouldn’t name it as defeat until he is kicked out of the job. This was the crucial moment, when his future would be determined. There is still hope.

Seeing the form of two, Dynas and Gaston also stood up, making expressions of readiness and determination. And seeing the four stand up with the fighting spirit of steel, Batenkaitos made a satisfied expression,

Lye: “How nice, so nice, very nice, possibly it is nice, isn’t it nice, perhaps it is nice, because it is probably nice! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! You all are worthy of our dinner table! Even if it’s only among the starters, we’ll elevate you to first-class, Gaston. Mo~reover, we’ll pe~rfectly savor Felt and Dynas.”

Clasping his hands, Batenkaitos awarded the three with an unpleasant evaluation. Afterwards, Batenkaitos, with the same look in his eyes, glared towards Otto. Inclining his neck, the blasphemer commenced to give his comments on Otto with the same flow, and contrary to expectations, he made a dissatisfied expression.

Lye: “Seems intelligent, bad at giving up, seemingly mellow onii-san… but even then, huh.”

Otto: “What are you… No.”

Saying that much, Otto understood the reason for Batenkaitos’ dissatisfaction.

As if admiring, Batenkaitos had tenderly voiced the names of Felt and the others. His unique trait of eating Names, and the content of his speech made him realize it.

Batenkaitos, could not eat the Name of an opponent whose Name he did not know.

Henceforth, Gluttony could not eat the Name of Otto, whose name had not been mentioned here even once. His dissatisfaction, was due to that.

Otto: “I have a request for all three of you. Please, absolutely do not call my name.”

If his name is not mentioned, then at the very least, Batenkaitos’ goal will not be achieved.

Or, in fact, the number of casualties at the hands of Batenkaitos till now may have had been his way to try and know his name.

Him allowing Otto and the others such free discussion, may have had been him waiting for them to call each others’ names, and henceforth prepare for his meal—.

Felt: “My bad, nii-chan.”

Hearing Otto’s remarks once he had reasoned, said Felt with a somewhat apologetic tone.

She made an awkward expression, something which had not been witnessed by anyone in the situation yet.

Felt: “I, don’t know nii-chan’s name in the first place…”

Dynas: “Sorry, not-on-first-list-official-dono. Your position aside, your name has slipped from my mind…”

Otto: “Yes yes, indeed! It’s not as if, I’m particularly close to everyone, and neither am I major personality! God, da~mn it.”

Of course, Gaston too, made an expression suggesting his own ignorance, and shrugged his shoulders.

With relief made of both happiness and sadness, at the very least, his fright of his name being revealed to Batenkaitos had been diminished immensely, with this. That alone was unmistakable.

Lye: “Dynas aside, aren’t you two just covering for onii-san. If that isn’t so then we~ll… it seems asking it out would become quite a bother.”

Otto: “Giving up for today and falling back, is also something you can do, you know? Come sometime in the future, one day again… I suppose so. By that time, we can also prepare to give you a warm welcome in Reinhard-san’s presence.”

Lye: “To turn away in front of a feast, don’t make us do something so outrageous. Until our belly is satisfied, we will we will not go back. That’d make Louis a~ngry.”

Of course, Batenkaitos could not be convinced. The battle could not be terminated.

Felt: “Gaston, absolutely don’t let go next time.”

Gaston: “Just because I don’t get hurt, using me how you like…”

Felt: “I’ll go with you next time, for sure.”

Gaston, who tried to state his discontentment for the order, widened his eyes hearing Felt’s words. He then proceeded to laugh rudely, and roughly rubbed Felt’s head and disheveled her hair.

Gaston: “Stop joking around. If that geezer got to know that I made master push herself, who knows what he’ll do to me.

Felt: “Don’t touch my head. The only one who can do that is grandpa Rom.”

Gaston: “That’s why I’m doing it.”

Felt snorted her nose, with her hair disheveled, and standing next to her was Gaston. Next to him was Dynas wielding his two short swords, and Otto counted the number of magic stones in his sleeves.

Three on his left sleeve, two on his right. They must be used carefully.

Otto: “He touches with his left hand, and then eats is what I think. If you get touched, please think that it’s all over.”

Gaston: “That’s, way too difficult even by just the sound of it, no?”

Dynas: “Even one slash at his any of his vitals with a sword should be enough. If we can do that, then it’s no big deal.”

Felt: “When you say it like that, I agree.”

With Felt’s statement conveying that she was convinced, their preparations were complete.

Courteously, watching their preparations end was Batenkaitos. Seeing his politeness, Otto narrowed his eyes, and the blasphemer subsequently laughed.

Lye: “Isn’t it common mannerism to await the finishing of setting up of the table? Roy of Bizarre Eating aside, we a~re Gourmet. We are particular abou~t meals.”

Saying that, Batenkaitos respectfully gestured and bowed.

That gesture, which seemed to put on airs, also seemed frightfully familiar.

Lye: “Well the~n, once again. Witch Cult Sin Archbishop, Lye Batenkaitos of representing Gluttony.”

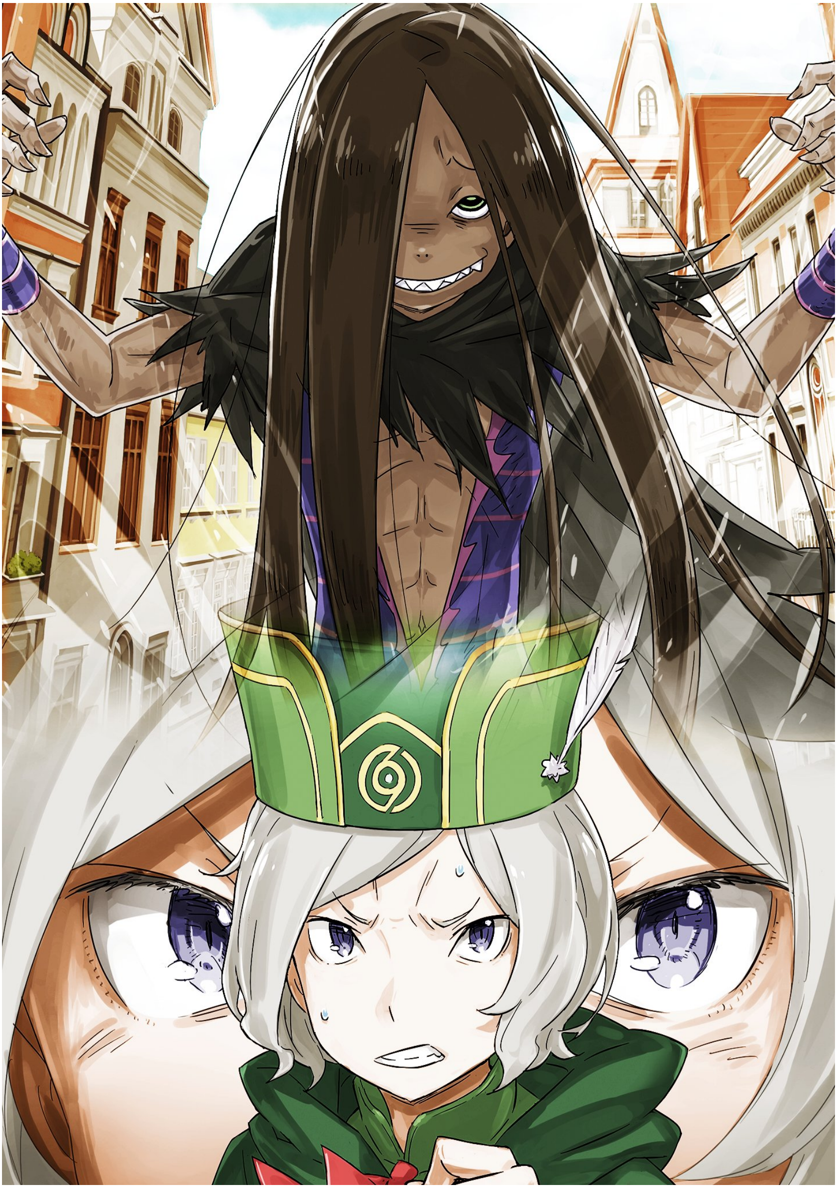

"…"

Lye: "Isn't it common mannerism, to return your own name when you are given the same?"

Felt: "After everything we've discussed, he'd be an idiot to return his name to you, you bastard."

Among warriors, it is a commonly obeyed custom, to return your own name when someone gives you their own name.

However, Batenkaitos may have had possibly utilized this method, and till now, gotten out the names of countless people, and proceeded to subsequently eat them.

They had no reason to abide by that custom right now. With that being rejected, Gluttony laughed,

Lye: "That's that. —Well the~n, let's eat!"

Signaling his meal, the petite frame leapt ahead, as if flying, and shortened the distance in between. This movement had not been seen before, it was like a strong gale flowing by. Batenkaitos, who had vanquished the offensive and defensive being put up against him till now by mere handling of his feet and dodging, now actually demonstrated his ability to hunt down his opponents.

Otto, a non-combatant, was unable to follow his movement, and respond accordingly.

The other three, however, were different.

Felt: "Don't think you can win in a race, against me."

Against Batenkaitos, who was racing like wind, only Felt was able to catch up comfortably. The moment she had lightly kicked the cobblestone and leapt ahead, she showed mobility, as if she was being carried by the wind at once.

Surprised by at least that movement, Batenkaitos' first slash swept through the air.

Lye: “—~tsu!”

At that point, Gaston and Dynas commenced their attack at the same time.

Dynas’ two single edged katanas, and the short sword which Gaston held, both of then clutched onto their respective weapons. Against the attack of the two, the vulnerable Batenkaitos opened his legs wide and dropped his stance.

With his arms on the ground, Batenkaitos’ body whirled with his legs stretched. The spinning kick swept the legs of the two men, and destroyed Dynas’ balance.

And there—

Otto: “Ua~a~a~—!”

Dynas: “Wa~h?”

Raising his voice, the fourth player, Otto grabbed him.

By coming there, Otto set himself up perfectly for close combat, and without anticipating this turn of events, Batenkaitos raised an astonished call, and successfully managed to wrestle with Otto’s body.

Bind him at this same pace—the very next moment he thought that, forceful pain assailed upon Otto’s guts. Batenkaitos’ left fist pierced in, and sent Otto’s body rolling.

Otto: “Ghue ~hk, gohogh ~hk!”

Lye: “At the right place, with the menu for your strong flavors and blandness available, the appropriate place for that, we must a~bsolutely find out about it, onii-san. Later, we’ll pro~perly partner you…”

When Batenkaitos blurted that out, the two, whose stances had collapsed, moved.

Dynas carried the tumbling Otto in his arms, and the one protecting the two was Gaston. Batenkaitos tilted his neck at that battle formation, and looked down upon what had come upon his tattered clothes.

—At the point where he had wrestled with Otto, two magic stones were dangling.

Lye: “Well we~ll.”

His movements for absconding were slow.

The very next moment of Batenkaitos noticing the magic stones, the two magic stones exploded immensely.

It was the collegiality of a fire magic stone and a water magic stone.

The red and yellow light, and the blue and white light proliferated, and Batenkaitos’ body was enveloped in the light and a shockwave was released.

Lye: “—~hk!!”

Receiving the light from a close distance, Otto also was subjected to harm.

Though Gaston, who was acting as a wall, shielded the majority of it, its impact could still be felt upon Otto’s skin. His skin scorched to the point of freezing, and chilled to the point of burning.

Once the shockwave came to a halt, the second hypocenter was a truly terrible sight to witness. The cobblestone had been torn off, the soil underneath was wide open, and scorched fragments of stone had been scattered across.

Lye: “A~h, that’s so cruel. Our only good dress got spoilt.”

And, once again, Batenkaitos had placed himself at a point away from the hypocenter.

However, it seems this time, at least, he was not undamaged.

The youth's long hair had suffered the attack heaped upon themselves as an aftermath of the blast, and he had a somewhat sullen voice.

It seems the youth had unmistakably gotten caught up in the hypocenter. He lost the rag that covered his entire body till now, and the skin beneath was now unconcealed.

Otto: "—Ugh."

Blurting that out thoughtlessly and reflexively, was Otto.

Gaston and Dynas were also speechless, grimacing while witnessing the same.

—The newly exposed skin of the young boy, was covered with wounds and scars.

Scars of a whip, scars of hot iron, scars carved by an edged tool, scars inflicted by a rough surface, scars of the skin being gouged out, scars of a beast's fangs, scars of repeated hits that had turned the skin bluish black, scars of an innumerable amount.

The youth who wore rags, now wearing only a waistcloth, turned around with his wounded body, and seeing Otto and the others grimace at him, he made a displeased face.

Lye: "Forcibly taking away a child's clothes, and then reacting like that is quite hurtful. Adults like all this, don't they?"

Otto: "…I don't know about the adults you are close to, but normally they do not."

Lye: "Hm~. So, you'll be all compassionate again. Changing your heart and attitude like this, it's because of things like that we can't trust you peo~ple!"

Spreading his arms as if showing his body covered with wounds, Batenkaitos yelled that.

Otto made a wry face at his words, and Dynas made a disgusted expression. Only the two of Felt and Gaston had no alteration in their expressions.

They gazed at the frowning Otto, and sighed.

Felt: “Heyhey, don’t go about thinking strange things. Those things can be anywhere, they’re just not on mine or your body, but can be anywhere.”

Gripping to the package in her hands, confessed Felt. Her eyes did not have even a fraction of compassion. Of course, Otto knew that their opponent was undeserving of that, but it’s not as if he was a Sin Archbishop and insane by birth.

At least, that was the impression Batenkaitos’ body gave—.

???: “—Just boring imagination will be fruitless, in fact. You’ll end up regretting it, I suppose.”

“…”

Out of nowhere, echoed the voice who had not been in the open plaza.

Everyone, including Batenkaitos, raised their heads at the sudden happening.

Everyone’s line of sight turned towards the waterway surrounding this large plaza– and lightly fluttering about midair, was a lone young girl, who then descended and stood.

In a frilled, spread out dress, with beautiful, round eyes and coiled, cream hair. Her clearly stinging attitude had become normal now, as she observed the situation with her large, circular eyes.

And once her eyes met with Otto’s, she sighed suggesting she did not have a choice.

???: “Subaru alone is sufficient for perverted games and sweetness, I suppose. The only one Betty will help is also just Subaru… This time is a special exception, at maximum, in fact.”

Otto: “Yes yes, my apologies, for making trouble for you like this. But, thank you so much.”

At the young girl’s harsh sounding response, Otto, however, tasted a sense of relief, so much so that he wanted to lie down in exhaustion.

The very existence of the girl was one of Otto’s “ways to win”.

???: “Well then, let’s clean up this fuss, and ask Subaru for a hug, I suppose.”

Saying this with a listless face, raising her hand, was the young girl.

No, the Spirit. That too, a Great Spirit among Spirits.

Natsuki Subaru’s Contract Spirit, Beatrice—finally entered the battle as backup.

Chapter 69:
A Repulsive Dinner Banquet

1

Everyone laid their eyes on the young girl who snorted her nose, as her dress' hem danced in the breeze.

The girl—Beatrice, looked around with her eyes, observing the situation. In this large plaza of the Waterway Street, present was the heavily scarred Gluttony Lye Batenkaitos, and Otto and the rest, opposing him.

Looking at Otto and Felt and the others, Beatrice blatantly let out a tired sigh.

Beatrice: "Those are rather pitifully poor faces, I suppose."

Everyone was too worn out to argue back Beatrice's comments, who let out a sigh. However, Beatrice partaking in the fight would surely be a turning point in this progressively worsening battle.

Naturally, feelings of relief were given rise to within Otto's chest.

Otto: "Bea—~hk."

As soon as he was about to call her name, Otto shut his mouth.

Batenkaitos was an existence who ate Names. He had just used to ploy of having Felt and the others not call his name by requesting them. There is no way he could go against that himself.

Batenkaitos' attitude for Otto, who was hiding the name. He was clearly irritated by him being an obstruction in his Meal. In other words, Batenkaitos, in order to eat his opponent's name, must know their Name.

Henceforth, he could not be allowed to perceive Beatrice's name. He positioned his hand, and suppressed his words.

However, Otto’s such forethought ended being futile.

For some reason—.

Lye: “—Beatrice-sama? Wha~t, are you doing outdoors?”

Because that was what Batenkaitos articulated, leaning his neck forward and eyes fixed on Beatrice.

Continuing to observe Beatrice, Gluttony continued his mysterious words.

“…”

Lye: “Even after disliking going outside so much. Aside from the times of meals, or when you were accompanied by the Great Spirit-sama… a~h, so there were so~me exceptions?”

Batenkaitos continued his words, against the quiet Beatrice.

Those seemed like words suggesting closeness, which would be inaccurate to say, but they were unquestionably words of a person having a sense of distance and relationship in the past.

Otto: “That means he’s your acquaintance from the past… Beatrice-sa—~hk.”

The relationship of the past, between Batenkaitos and Beatrice.

Losing understanding before being able to call her name, Otto’s throat choked midway. This time he unconsciously glanced at Beatrice’s face.

Biting her lips, and fury swirling in her large, round eyes, was Beatrice.

It had been rare for this Spirit girl, to show rage. In front of the astonished Otto, Beatrice inhaled very deeply, and scowled at Batenkaitos.

Beatrice: “—Your trick has been understood, in fact. So that’s how it is, I suppose.”

Muttered Beatrice, in a deep and heavy voice.

Her voice was not conveying hostility, but instead it was one suppressing her own emotions.

Hiding her rage from showing on her face, Beatrice locked her gaze into the interior of Batenkaitos' corrupted and muddy eyes, and distorted her lips due to the revulsion resulting from what she had laid her eyes upon.

And,

Beatrice: "You, how many people will you stockpile within yourself until you grow sick of it, in fact?"

Lye: "Who kno~ws? But, the quantity we eat is still better than compared to Roy. Roy is Bizarre Eating so he eats anything, but since we select carefully, the quantities are different ~tsu! We consider the quality of the lives we eat, and that's what conflicts us with Roy."

Eating Names and Memories, stating it to be his Meal was Batenkaitos.

Naming himself Gourmet, and calling someone close to him Bizarre Eating had a peculiar aesthetic sense, both of which were things Otto could never comprehend.

"…"

And, what Otto could not come to understand, was also Beatrice's attitude at that moment.

The young girl's revulsion did not seem to result from simply evaluating the confronting Batenkaitos. It seemed to stem a different from a negative conception, of a different root.

Perhaps that linked to Batenkaitos treating Beatrice like an existence he already knew—and, thinking that far, Otto noticed.

The possible reason, behind why Batenkaitos unilaterally knew Beatrice.

Otto: “…It can’t be.”

Batenkaitos’ combat power, lay in a territory which could be entered by only those who have trained tough and long. Otto had made a hypothesis based on Dynas’ factual remarks.

Otto: “I had anticipated the experiences of the body of an opponent whose Name and Memory had been eaten to be taken over. Your unarmed martial arts and dagger skills, attaining such an extreme level of prowess in them at your age would be difficult. If that’s how it is, then…”

Even the skills of an eaten opponent would serve as food for him.

If that is how it is, then it became conceivable how Batenkaitos had managed to learn abilities rivalling that of a master martial artist in a great number of spheres.

If that hypothesis was correct, not just correct, but held further meaning to it—.

Otto: “However, if what is taken over is not just experiences of the body.”

It meant that it was, something which was even further vicious, different from the threat of fighting strength.

After all, Batenkaitos had said.

—That he was, looking for the one whose speech echoed across the city.

That person, who was weak and fragile, unable to help anything unless someone stood by his side and supported him.

You could sense that and sympathize with that by being with the character of Natsuki Subaru for a long time. That youth had that mysterious part for him, which made those around him think this.

However, those thoughts were of that of someone who had dealt affectionately with him.

The fact that he was aware of Subaru's brittle strength and weak courage, was the proof of him having been close to him.

And if that proof was something which had been stolen by Gluttony at this time, then only one possible candidate, a single young girl came to mind—.

Otto: "—~hk!"

Finally, Otto arrived at the same revulsion which Beatrice was feeling.

Subjected to the changed color in Otto's eyes glaring directly at him, Batenkaitos smiled, and unveiled his fangs.

Lye: "The head maid of the household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers… wait wait wait, that's wrong."

Oscillating his neck while pronouncing that, Batenkaitos widened his arms.

On his scarred body, he caressed a single white scar lovingly. That scar, suspended on his shoulder, looked like it had received a sharp iron picket, and was painful to even look at.

Lye: "Now just a lone loved person. —Oneself's beloved person, who will be a hero someday, Natsuki Subaru's supporter, Rem… was it?"

"…"

Lye: "Let us meet him, tha~t beloved hero-sama! Our hero must have had come to cast his judgement upon us, till all the wa~y here!"

Stretching out his tongue, licking that wound, Batenkaitos guffawed.

Without thinking, Otto's blood rose up to his head. As he gnashed his teeth as they made a crackling sound, he was filled with rage enough that he wanted to punch him.

Gluttony’s attitude, tone, smile, everything was ridiculing the feelings of that lone young girl.

Without knowing how much that young girl must have had pleaded for returning safely, now she was only being trampled upon by mockery and scorn. That is what set ablaze within Otto’s heart.

This Gluttony, was an opponent who could never be forgiven—.

Otto: “Beatrice-san…?”

Beatrice stepped lightly and stood in front of Otto, who was counting the number of magic stones left in his sleeves with his finger. Otto was unable to understand why she had shifted towards him. And,

Beatrice: “Get your ideas corrected, I suppose. Good job calling Betty here, in fact.”

“…”

Beatrice: “He is… Only he is someone Subaru must not meet, I suppose. If Subaru meets him, he will be hurt. Certainly, to the point that wound will never heal. That’s why”

Otto: “Let’s stop him here, by just ourselves.”

Pronouncing the end of Beatrice’s words, Otto declared.

Though Beatrice did not turn back, her stance made it clear that she agreed. She was Subaru’s partner, who committed himself to oneself and others. Otto painfully understood how unpleasant it would be for him if the viciousness in front of his eyes was to get close to him.

Felt: “Waitwaitwaitwait, I’m telling you to wait!”

And, the one calling out to the two with a revitalized desire for taking their opponent down—was not Batenkaitos. It was Felt, who had been quietly listening to the dialogue till now beside Otto. She gripped her package, and pointed it towards Beatrice, Felt: “I heard you talk like some big shot, but what can this little girl do in the first place. Though I’ve heard you were a companion of that nii-chan.”

Otto: “Ah, um, I see. First, explaining that would be a bit tricky…”

Felt suggested her own doubts, to which Otto was unable to give a proper explanation.

She possibly already knew about Beatrice being a Spirit and being contracted with Subaru, since that was common knowledge. It was also true that Beatrice’s battle strength was uncertain in Subaru’s absence—.

Beatrice: “A pipsqueak should not call others little girls, in fact. If you have the free time to worry about Betty’s ability, you should better use it for worrying about that futureless deficient body, I suppose.”

Felt: “Quite a harsh brat you are, hey. Let me tell you, I’ve been eating and sleeping properly now, so both my back and my chest are growing. You should be the one worrying over your future.”

Beatrice: “Unfortunately, Betty’s mien is set firm to this design. So… Hmph.”

A conversation befitting the situation started, but Beatrice put a halt to it by pausing her words. What her eyes had caught onto, was the slender package in Felt’s hands.

Felt’s Trump Card was a magic tool, but Beatrice made a surprised expression upon laying her eyes on it,

Beatrice: “No way, is that Meteor, I suppose?”

Felt: “Meteor?”

Beatrice: “Mother… A revered magician a long time ago, used it to pester the Dragon, in fact. It’s whereabouts were supposed to be unknown, but this is fate, I suppose.”

Felt found Beatrice’s explanation, who had corrected a crucial part of it, debatable.

But from Otto's point of view, stating that the Mother Beatrice had mentioned and corrected later on, was a Witch who had disappeared from legends would make for a truly outrageous claim.

He still held his own doubts he wanted to ask about, but if the Witch had truly used it to pester the Dragon, the reliability of its potential was high.

Otto: "I had heard of its convolution in usage, but what can we expect in terms of its strength?"

Beatrice: "It is a staff which boasts having an anecdote of having made the Dragon halfway cry, in fact. It's guaranteed, I suppose."

Her claim was still difficult to believe. However, she had conveyed the authenticity of the weapon.

Though Otto had been swayed by Beatrice's words, Felt was yet unconvinced.

Felt: "I'll teach you about what the hell you're blabbering about later. Rather than that, this little…"

Beatrice: "Your conscience cannot rise above that level, in fact. But, your concern is futile, I suppose. After all"

Felt: "Ah?"

Beatrice: "The attack has already been set up."

In front of Felt, who tilted her neck, Beatrice sketched an enchanting smile upon her face. Her softly upraised right hand pointed towards Batenkaitos, and the throats of everyone were subsequently frozen.

—Violet crystals crystallized, and surrounded Batenkaitos' environs.

Lye: "Ah, Beatrice-sama is so merciless."

Beatrice: "Just holding back and mercy are things which do not exist anywhere in this world for you, I suppose."

El Minya.

A rare offensive magic even within Yin magic, was the reason behind him showing his fangs.

The moment Batenkaitos let out his complaint, the violet crystals did a boisterous dance, and aimed and rushed at his petite body.

The tough and pointed attack struck the thin body standing upright—the crystals shattered, the stone pavement fissured, and smoke was given rise to. This disastrous scene in this huge open plaza, had proved her might.

Beatrice: "Well, what do you think, I suppose."

Showing her magical power, Beatrice turned to Felt with a victorious expression. Though it was an immature gesture for a four hundred year old Great Spirit, but Felt was too speechless to point anything like that out.

Felt: "W-Well, not so ba~d, I guess."

However, despite her speechlessness, Felt refused to admit her loss and mistakes.

Gaston: "Y-Your voice, i~s trembling, Miss Felt."

Felt: "That goes for you too! Stop saying idiotic nonsense, and keep looking ahead!"

Yelled Felt at Gaston, whose voice was trembling, in order to hide the trembling of her own voice. But, not all what she said was deceptive.

After all, the figure of the defenseless Batenkaitos, who should have had received Beatrice's magical attack and had been caught up in its subsequent explosion, was not present where it should have been.

Dynas: "He's coming—!"

Dynas shouted, and everyone raised their eyes and looked in the direction he had his eyes fixed upon. There present was the form of Gluttony, with all four of his limbs on the ground, moving like a spider.

Gluttony smiled, displayed his fangs, as blood streamed down from his eyes.

Lye: “Haha~! As expecte~d of Beatrice-sama! How nice, so nice, quite nice, perhaps it is nice, certainly it is nice, isn’t it nice, surely it is nice, as it is surely nice ~tsu!”

Shaking his head about, disheveling his hair, Batenkaitos leapt from the ground and pounced, charging ahead once again.

Beatrice: “—Five shots, left.”

In response to his charge, Otto heard Beatrice mutter something unsettling whilst licking her lips.

2

The moment El Minya was used, and the attack commenced upon Batenkaitos, Beatrice felt a large Magic Stone shatter in her pocket.

The number of Magic Stones now left with her were six—in terms of Beatrice’s usage, only five could be deployed in the battle.

—In this battle in the city, the preliminary encounter with the Sin Archbishops of Wrath and Greed and the subsequent incidental fight against them in the square.

As a result of that battle, Beatrice had spent her Mana for healing Subaru and the people of the city, to the point that it disrupted her physical capabilities.

The Spirit Beatrice, is an Artificial Spirit created by the Witch Echidna.

Her strength is far greater than those of normal Spirits, but in return for that she has some troublesome downsides.

Even amongst them, her greatest weakness would perhaps be that the only way she could recover the Mana she lost was by receiving it through her contractor.

The Mana present in the atmosphere, or the Mana offered to her by humans other than her contractor, none of them could Beatrice reduce into her own strength. Consequently, the only means she had to refill her exhausted Mana was to take the time of receiving it from Subaru.

Her being mobile right now, is the result of a card being played which normally cannot be put to use.

—As of this situation, Beatrice held seven Magic Stones.

A large Magic Stone is one with Mana having been stockpiled within it over several years. Among them, one had already been shattered, and only six of them were left now. They had been given to Beatrice, who had plunged into a deep slumber, by Kiritaka—who was aware of the progressions in this large plaza, and his actions were for the purpose of providing aid to them.

Kiritaka: “Please, I request you from the bottom of my heart, Great Spirit-sama. Please lend me your strength, and use it to fight for protecting this city. In this city, there are those whom I love.”

All messed up and almost crying, but detachedly pleading to her was Kiritaka. Beatrice responded with no choice to Kiritaka, who had used an immeasurably priceless Magic Stone with no second thoughts in order to awaken from her slumber.

If she were to say the truth, Beatrice wanted to hurriedly reach where Subaru was.

The city’s situation had revolved, and Subaru, too, was under threat. If her self not by his side, Subaru is a hopelessly worrying guy, after all.

That’s why, now that her self was awake, she shall dedicate herself to Subaru—.

Beatrice: “Stupid, I suppose. No, stupid, in fact.”

Beatrice gave up on that desire of hers, once she felt the guilt after realizing her indulgence under the name of concern.

If Subaru had chosen to fight, that too without the presence of her self, then that means he has a way to fight without her.

Subaru does not overestimate himself. Rather, he tends to underestimate himself too much.

He would not recklessly get into a confrontation with an opponent he could not win against, and if he could win against the opponent without using Beatrice, he would somehow or other wake her up.

That's why in this battle, Subaru did not need her self, who had been left alone.

That is why, once Subaru has returned after the battle, she must also have a victorious record under her belt so that she can match up to him.

For Beatrice, who now stood as backup, Kiritaka had offered up seven large Magic Stones.

Unable to use the Mana from her surroundings, Beatrice now, was utilizing the mana of the Magic Stones like an inefficient conductor as a last resort.

In her dress' pocket, the seven Magic Stones were capable of miracles, but their potential was now being wasted on usage of mere magic.

You would normally believe that their strength could be used to invoke not ten, but even a thousand magic moves. However, though there are no limitations to the extent of the magic, but no matter how low scale the magic was, the Magic Stone will shatter at a single invocation.

As one of the six needed to be reserved, only five could be utilized.

—In other words, she must wrap it up in five moves.

Beatrice: "The reunion will Bubby will have to wait, I suppose.

Instead of that, you will be seeing hell, in fact.”

One of the large Magic Stones Kiritaka gave to Beatrice, was originally intended to be occupied by Puck. That was the original purpose of their trip, but now, that being shattered for the purpose of battle is nothing but ironic.

Lye: “We’re tired of seeing hell ~tsu! After all, the ones that got eaten by us, eve~ry one of them tasted tha~t in the end!”

Shouting that, Batenkaitos leapt towards them.

His movement was casual, but his cutting gaze was utmost cautious regarding Beatrice.

He was unaware of the fact that Beatrice would run out of gas after five moves, that she would run out of Mana. In order to give him that impression, she had commenced an attack of a powerful range in exchange of one Magic Stone, that strategy was the best faculty available, and it had passed its exam.

Beatrice raised up her left hand, and pointed its palm towards the mid-air Batenkaitos.

Beatrice: “Al Minya!”

Lye: “—~tsu!”

Beatrice: “Just kidding, in fact.”

At that moment, expecting the extremely high level magic, Batenkaitos toughened up his body. In front of him, Beatrice stuck out her tongue, and flew backwards.

At that point, Gaston and Dynas plunged onto the curled-up Batenkaitos.

Gaston: “U~o~o~o~h!”

Dynas: “Eat this too!”

The shouting two men launch their counterattack attack upon

Batenkaitos, with two blades and a fist.

The weighty and sharp hit struck Gluttony, but Batenkaitos dodged it with preeminent body handling, and in reverse, turned his own dagger towards the dominated two.

The edge of the oscillating steel, took a path which aimed straight for Dynas' neck.

Gaston: "It's dangerous… ghue!"

Dynas: "Sorry!"

Gaston obstructed into the dagger's path, shielding Dynas and taking the strike himself.

A wooden report echoed and the dagger's power was weakened, but Gaston, while drawing back, coughed violently, and red blood seeped out of those lips.

—It was the limit of his Mana-utilizing battle ability, otherwise called Flow Method.

Bearing his tough body, Gaston's way of fighting against blades and blows was his skill known as Flow Method, an alternate method of the utilization of Mana, which is otherwise used for magic.

It is a skill involving far less talent than compared to magic—only training and the amount of training mattered, and the user was required to shed blood for its usage.

Beatrice: "But, it seems he pushed himself far too much, in fact."

In Beatrice's eyes, Gaston's facets and talents were nothing beyond mediocrity.

Him being able to, somehow or the other, take the Sin Archbishop's spears with his partial Flow Method, could only be because Batenkaitos had been going very easy on Gaston.

Lye: "Ta~ke, this ~tsu!"

Gaston: “Ghou, agh?!”

Kneeling down, he kicked right into Gaston’s jaw in the upward direction.

Bleeding from his nose, and collapsing down, immobile, the giant was now unable to battle. With this, their war potential had been reduced by one more.

Lye: “You rea~lly worked hard, Gaston! Pre~tty bravely you fought. —You worked and you worked, but you fai~led! We evaluate such a guy to be worthy ~tsu!”

Felt: “—You, bastard!’

Seeing the form of Batenkaitos mocking Gaston, Felt’s blood rose up to her head, and she aimed the Meteor she held in her hand straight for his head.

If it was put to use the way it should rightfully be, its might was surely that one would expect of a Witch. But, if it were to be used as a mere slapstick, it could not possibly utilize its complete potential.

Lye: “Uh, o~h! Geez Felt-chan, yo~u’re do~ing i~t ~tsu!”

Felt: “Shut, up! Get away, you shit!”

While scuffling to handle the cane, Felt continued to use her physical abilities to try and land a sharp blow upon Batenkaitos. Batenkaitos dodged all of it, with just the elegant handling of his feet, as if doing a magnificent dance.

The Meteor did indeed come in contact with Gluttony’s hair, but it was not sufficient enough to cause any damage to him. There was an overwhelming gap of skill between them. He was completely treating her as a plaything.

Beatrice: “You! Get away now, I suppose! Our merchant has already recovered the big guy, in fact!”

Felt: “Do you think I came here just to mislead!”

The difference in their physical capabilities was evident, and it was certain that she would lose if she was counterattacked.

While Felt attacked Batenkaitos, Otto hurriedly drew the fainted Gaston out of the theater. Dynas too, confirmed the texture of his two katanas, was searching for a gap to break into Felt and Batenkaitos' fight but, there was no certain opportunity.

Even if an alteration arises, Batenkaitos fills in that gap completely. The approach of watching vigilantly for an opportunity and awaiting an alteration, signaled the reality to them that Gluttony, who was outnumbered and should have been at a disadvantage, was the one ruling this place.

Lye: "What, what is it, what is this, what could it be, why could it be, what could it perhaps be ~tsu! Even after jumping in for helping, will Felt-chan abandon this so pathetically?"

Felt: "So noisy! You too, you bastard, just stay put and get hit…"

Lye: "Is that so. —But we're getting bored no~w."

Felt: "Uh, ky~a~a?!"

As Felt yelled while swinging the Meteor, at that moment, Batenkaitos stepped ahead. The distance between the two of them became zero, and Gluttony's palm caressed Felt's svelte chest.

At that moment, the shock impacted the young girl's body and threw her backwards gently, and giving rise to a high pitched shriek, Felt rolled down the stone pavement.

The attack had strength enough to simply throw her body backwards, but that was not the problem here.

Otto: "Oh no! She has been directly touched!"

Otto raised his voice, seeing the coughing Felt, who had received the impact on her chest. Seeing the agony on his face, Beatrice understood the reason for his concern.

Gluttony's meal, had been prepared.

Lye: “Felt-cha~n. —Let’s eat.”

Following the unknown principle, Batenkaitos’ left hand, which had touched Felt, he licked its palm with his elongated tongue.

As if, there was something vital, like the young girl named Felt, present on it.

Placed it on his tongue as if loving it, caressed its rough texture, tasted each and every part of it as if harvesting it, and dropped it down to his breadbasket and mercilessly digested it.

At the moment that was completed, Gluttony’s meal came to an end, and the Name settled within the blasphemer.

And, all traces of the young girl named Felt disappeared from the world—.

Lye: “Ugh, ghue~… ~tsu.”

Felt: “Hu~h? What is it, you bastard. Just how rude can this guy get.”

Felt, shaking her head, was looking at Batenkaitos, knelt down and vomiting.

Of course, her existence had not disappeared, she only tilted her neck in rage.

—That was the moment, when Gluttony’s meal had failed unsightly.

Chapter 70:
Eclipsing

Batenkaitos, who should have had abraded away Felt's name and commenced with his Meal, vomited.

Moaning in agony, spitting out his gastric juices, Gluttony's attitude held no dishonesty. So, though he did not put something with a real form in his mouth, he still squeezed his stomach when vomiting.

It was a mysterious spectacle, which gave rise to that impression, which had no absurdity in itself.

Felt: "Shit, that hurt… Playing around with me…"

Caressing her scoured chest, Felt stood up in a grazed shape. Infuriation and displeasure comprised her expression, but she did not seem to have taken any lethal damage.

The ones she could see from the corner of her eyes, Beatrice and the others, too, had not forgotten about Felt.

Gluttony's meal had failed.

Lye: "Gha ~hk, ghehough ~hk, oghe~e~ ~tsu!"

Dynas: "Don't know the reason for it but… it's a nice chance!"

Dynas waged a raid against Batenkaitos, whose consciousness was completely outside of the battlefield, as he spilled out gastric juices from the edge of his mouth.

Two swords swiped across, and mercilessly plunged into Batenkaitos.

Towards the defenseless neck, the silver blade of the katana proceeded—.

Lye: "Gh, o~o~h!"

Raising the voice of a beast, Batenkaitos sidestepped the blade.

His dodge was slightly late and some of his hair was subjected to the slash, but it wasn't enough to pierce his skin. Rotating his petite body at an extremely fast speed, Gluttony escaped the attack's span with nightmarish behavior.

Beatrice: "Merchant!"

Otto: "I, know!!"

Responding to Beatrice's call, Otto swung his right arm. The two Magic Stones cast from his sleeves, came in contact with Batenkaitos, who had escaped the former attack.

At that moment, light burst through, and the current of magical energy it wielded blew off that body—however, Batenkaitos responded to it with miraculous nerve reflex.

Lye: "Huma~!"

As the rising light, amassed Batenkaitos within itself and its destructive might, at that moment, Batenkaitos cast magic, encasing the magical explosion within ice.

The explosion, resulting from the Magic Stones, lost its area to proceed, and ended up becoming a mere stack of shattered ice, falling down to the ground, giving rise to a noise. It was an extremely high class skill of obstructing colorless magical waves rapidly.

Perhaps even this, would be the ability of someone who was among those whose Names have been eaten by Batenkaitos till now. The mere thought of that Someone, who must have had learnt that ability, was now amassed within his stomach without remaining in anyone's memory was nauseating.

However, this was not the time for such feelings.

What was crucial here was—.

Lye: "Wa~h ~tsu! Dangerous dangerous… but we pulled through

~tsu!”

Kicking the ice that had trapped the Magic Stones, and dropping them straight into the waterway was the laughing Batenkaitos. He swayed around his stomach, as if adjusting the contents inside, and wiping his mouth with his hands, angled his neck forward.

What those corrupted eyes were observing, was Felt, who was swinging around her hands and legs to confirm the extent of her injuries. Noticing Batenkaitos look at her, Felt snorted her nose.

Felt: “What. Just like you, I’m also feeling angry, you bastard.”

Lye: “Nothing like anger at all ~tsu, instead i~t’s impressive. We’re so~rry, to have thought of you not being so capable of intelligence, by just looks.”

Felt: “Hu~h? What are you say…”

Lye: “We never thought, that you’d have the cleverness to use only an alias against us. We got completely deceived. We had intended to avoid devouring greedily until the Name got disclosed but… to~ thi~n~k, this unexpected twist would be harvested.”

“…”

Alias, hearing Batenkaitos say that, Felt went silent.

The reaction of Felt, furrowing her eyebrows, was one which suggested how much had she not expected to hear what she had heard. It could be understood at a glance, that she had no idea what Batenkaitos’ words meant.

Whereas Beatrice, after hearing this conversation, understood the reason behind the earlier failure of Batenkaitos’ Meal.

Batenkaitos held the Authority of being able to eat the Name of a person, whose name he already knew or had gained its knowledge, by touching them—however, it needs to be the person’s real name.

Alias, or nicknames, they do not suffice for its usage.

As just Felt's name did not fulfill the conditions for the Meal, Batenkaitos, who had tasted it, suffered.

With that being said,

Lye: "The onii-san over there and Felt-chan… there are two whose names are unknown, and both were determined to be eaten, how troublesome."

Otto, whose name was purely unknown, and Felt, who seemed to be utilizing an alias.

Dynas, whose name had immediately come to light, and Beatrice, who was known through Rem's memories no longer had any impediments, is what the conduct of Gluttony suggested, which was infuriating but, naming himself Gourmet and being fixated over eating Names, had its own disadvantageous gaps.

Felt: "Hey! I've had enough of listening to you, now shut up and listen, the hell are you saying?"

Beatrice, who was in her own thoughts, and Batenkaitos, who was continuing his torment. While Otto and Dynas were observing the situation, raising a loud and rough voice was Felt.

She had been irritated by the repeated conclusions passed regarding her, and aimed for Batenkaitos with the Meteor, trying to strike him.

Felt: "An alias or whatever, don't kid with me. I've already lived, for fifteen years, with the name Felt given to me by Grandpa Rom. Saying that's a lie is no joke."

Lye: "The type who is unaware of their own alias hu~h. That, means the parents that raised you up did a pretty good job, isn't it ~tsu. For us, it's a boundless nuisance but… In other words, a name before that one had been pro~perly given, to you."

Felt: "The name given by those shit parents who abandoned me in the back alley? Then I must be a "burden" or a "wasteful meal" or "garbage". With that being said, do you still want to stick out your tongue and eat and see it?"

Lye: “Don’t contradict Gourmet’s consciousness by calling it guesswork or something. —A~h, that’s it.”

Showing his protruding teeth, Batenkaitos raised his hand towards Felt, who expressed an enraged smile.

Lye: “After eating the rest beside you, we’ll take careful custody of you. And, how about we go to meet the one who gave you a fake name, Grandpa Rom? Grandpa Rom might know your true name. We are good at making people spell out what they know. You ca~n leave it to us.”

Otto: “…Taking your time out for even that. Do you not have the choice to give up?”

Otto thoughtlessly pronounced, at Gluttony, who spoke of an offensive schedule. Hearing that, Batenkaitos put his hands on his mouth, and ringed his throat, as if enjoying,

Lye: “If the number of lives in the world is finite, then the number of worthy gourmet delicacies is a~lso finite. Then, we won’t miss any chance of meeting these limited gourmet delicacies ~tsu. Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! Licking it chewing it slurping it, we will lick and taste unti~l the sauce on the plate lasts. Oops, of course onii-san is no exception either so why don’t you ju~st relax?”

Batenkaitos’ glare made it clear, that he had no intention of missing the four present.

Gluttony’s fixation over meals, was out of understanding for Beatrice and the others, who had been evaluated worthy of Gourmet. However, his look for vindictive impediments had no meaning more to it.

And, that blasphemer’s desire for eating continued to increase, and it brought Felt’s pique to itself.

Felt: “Is that so. I’ll have to do something here, otherwise you’ll ta~ke me to Grandpa Rom, huh.”

Saying that in a quiet voice, Felt swung her feet.

The shoes that she was wearing came off completely, and Felt was just like the other party now. Stepping ahead on the cobblestone with both her feet barefoot, she left the Meteor lying horizontally and drew out her dagger.

Lye: "—? That doesn't make sense, Felt-chan. That, isn't that the trump card?"

Felt: "Instead of devices that I'm not used to, this is much easier to use. There isn't that much difference, in the first place. Instead of devices troublesome to use, it's better to use those which are easy to use, okay!"

Her bare feet curled as if gripping to the ground, and the next instant, Felt's body launched forward. She had gained such speed in the blink of an eye, like wind.

At this, even Batenkaitos widened his eyes, and forgetting the attitude of this just being another blade being held aloft, responded. He fought back by pulling out a physical ability of swinging the arms, handling his body, which had been submerged in memories.

Felt: "Ra~!"

The barefooted Felt's speed was, surpassing any energetic dash by some agile young girl.

It was the support of a power beyond human intellect—unmistakably, it was a Divine Protection. She swung the dagger several times, but it was met by Batenkaitos' own dagger techniques.

Of course, Batenkaitos' tactics in that technique were overwhelmingly superior, but, what had prevented Felt from being overcome was only because Dynas was also backing her.

Dynas: "Don't push yourself too hard, with that vital body!"

Felt: "You too, uncle, just shut up, don't be tardy!"

Skillfully handling two swords, Dynas somehow filled the gap of Gluttony's counterattack. Within that time frame, Felt quickly positioned herself into Gluttony's blind spot, reports of steels clashing echoed, as the shadows of the three intermingled, as sparks danced across.

An exchange where, again, the decisive blow could not be delivered.

However, this time, the decisive blow had been formulated outside of the battlefield—.

Beatrice: "The attack… has passed, this will hit hard, I suppose!"

Otto: "Both of you, please get away!"

While being left out of the event, they had been composing an attack, taking all the time they required.

The operation, which would normally be unnecessary, lengthened their work schedule because of its requirement of meticulous caution, thanks to the attachment of an extra filter.

The result of that labor, was finally going to take form.

"…"

Hearing what Otto had shouted, Felt and Dynas got away from Batenkaitos' position.

Gluttony instantly reached for Felt, but even after touching her, he was not prepared to be able to eat Felt's Name.

Felt: "Let, go!"

Fiercely swinging her ankle, which had been gripped onto violently, and using a single foot, Felt flew backwards to a great distance. Dynas too, as if rolling, left the place, leaving only Gluttony in Beatrice's line of sight.

Aiming there, Beatrice invoked a magic which required the power of a “thousand”, and completed it while respecting the power of a “thousand”.

Beatrice: “This time it’s not a joke, really… Ul Minya!!”

Subsequent to the chant, a torrent of violet radiance glowed, and the light drew a circle with Batenkaitos at its core. Batenkaitos raised his face, to see what was coming up, but that reaction was late.

Not preparing, but escaping regardless of its form was the correct answer.

Lye: “—~tsu!”

In a single breath, the light converged, and shut Batenkaitos down by forming a ring around Batenkaitos’ torso and arms. The ring of light acted like a chain and continued to further lock Gluttony, whose movements of the upper body were in a bind.

At the same pace, if the entire body got encased by ring of light, he would no longer be able to escape Ul Minya’s might.

The crystallizing violet light continued to tighten its grip on Batenkaitos’ upper body. At the same pace, the ring’s control reached out to even his lower body, and Gluttony, who had been rendered immobile, collapsed on the spot.

And, the atmosphere made a noise, as if creaking, as humongous bluish purple radiance emerged overhead of the collapsed blasphemer, with its sharp tips pointing towards Batenkaitos.

Ul Minya’s might, to bind, and lash upon.

The attack Beatrice possessed slapped down in urgency, and the materialized destruction rained incessantly upon Batenkaitos.

Lye: “—!”

A roar could be heard, but in front of the destructive violet light, it had been muted.

The overwhelming light's might tore away the cobblestone, the wind produced by the blast engulfed the plaza in light and smoke, with the skirt of Beatrice's dress waving immensely.

Felt: "Did it do it?!"

Otto: "Did it manage to do it?!"

Dynas: "Did it really do it?!"

In the face of the explosion, the three, lying down, raised their voices at the same time.

Batenkaitos, at the very core of the hypocenter, had no ways of evasion. If he had truly taken the attack right now, then his body's traces will all disappear, not even leaving behind a fragment of his bones—.

Beatrice: "It isn't over yet, I suppose!"

With a loud voice, Beatrice warned them to be cautious, and the color of the faces of the delighted three changed. Beatrice noticing the fault that had occurred, before the other three, was nothing difficult to conceive.

She could sense it.

Beatrice: "—Four, left."

The large Magic Stone, which had been stocked over a long period of time, was unable to withstand the current Ul Minya, and shattered right before Batenkaitos could be crushed.

Although it had provided for the invocation, it had been incapable of its fullest utilization. The radiance had been unable to erode away Batenkaitos, and the body of Gluttony was—.

Lye: "The one right now has probably made us a bit impatient ~tsu!"

"—!"

Piercing through the plume, Batenkaitos flew towards Beatrice from a low angle. It must be the result of him judging who should be taken care of the first, based on the might of the magic just now.

Beatrice had exceptional ability as a magic user, but her physical abilities—just as how it appeared, they were nothing beyond those of a young girl.

She did not have the skills, only for fighting at a close range with Batenkaitos, whose abilities were those of geniuses.

Henceforth, against his charge, Beatrice instantly utilized her third magic stone.

Beatrice: "—Murak!"

Lye: "Another trick—"

Beatrice's chant barely preceded Batenkaitos' hands, who were on the verge of reaching her.

His upraised fingers only had one intention, to not let Beatrice escape, now that all obstacles were clear. However, it got missed yet again.

The instant he thought he had reached Beatrice's dress, Beatrice's body flew backwards, like a leaf floating in the breeze.

"…"

What Beatrice had chanted was Murak, a Yin magic which obstructed with gravity. It was a magic which hindered with the power which attracts one's body to the ground, or one's own body weight, however Beatrice utilized it to reduce her body weight to zero at that instant.

Thanks to that, she was able to levitate in the wind, and greatly avoid the fingers trying to touch her.

Lye: "This, little—?!"

As per she had intended, Beatrice's body distanced from Batenkaitos and jumped to the edge of the large plaza instantly.

Batenkaitos tried to follow her, but he then heard loud footsteps from the direction opposite to the one he was facing, and turned towards them immediately.

Swiping his dagger behind, he tried to slash down the inelegant intruders. However, that strike cut through the sky. For some reason, there stood nobody who could have had made a sound of footsteps.

Otto: "Garfiel or the Bowel Hunter, such people would totally get struck down!"

With the use of Wind magic, Otto had "sent footsteps flying" in an attempt to make Batenkaitos turn around, and he subsequently cast even more Magic Stones.

The exploding wave of heat produced by the Magic Stones was directed straight towards his exposed back, and unable to evade this time, Batenkaitos received an impact.

Dynas: "This time for sure, it's the end!"

Rolling down the plaza, with all of his limbs stretched straight, Batenkaitos collapsed. Swooping down upon that form, Dynas, who had prepared beforehand by tightening his grip onto his two katanas, intended to deliver the finishing blow—

"…"

In a scruffy shape, the collapsed youth whispered something.

Whether that was him pleading for his life, or words of regret, Dynas shall not hesitate. For him, who had lived through the life of being a mercenary, the scramble for life is the result of fierce competition.

There, the problem of being an adult or a child was trifle, and emotions of mourn and repent were feelings one could afford only after surviving, that was all.

Henceforth, it was clear. But, even though the movements of Dynas, who had that clear thought seated within him, held no hesitation, even still, he was unable to keep that mystery, which harbored in his chest, folded within it.

Because what Batenkaitos had whispered just now, sounded like this.

—Lunar Eclipse, and.

???: “—Oh?”

The moment subsequent to that sound’s echo reaching its righteous place, a voice, which had not been present in this interval, echoed.

The moment afterwards, the limbs of Dynas, who had been holding the two short swords aloft, spouted out blood all at once. On each of his limbs, a respective dagger was stabbing through extremely deeply, inflicting wounds, and the tendons had been accurately gauged.

Namely, it meant that the functionality of his limbs had been lost completely, and he was unable to prevent his body from crumbling down and falling.

Dynas: “Kuu, ah?!

Falling onto the cobblestone from his face was Dynas, with his head being stomped upon from above with all of its strength. With his nose crushed by the cobblestone, the consciousness of Dynas, who had gulped down the blow, was blown off.

Dynas was cut down and destroyed, and kicking his body, Batenkaitos stood up, and slowly, turned towards Otto’s position

Otto: “…Ah.”

It was not his first time, exchanging glances with those corrupted eyes.

However, in a single moment, Otto's spirit had been entwined and eaten up within those corrupted eyes.

Because the whirling insanity and resentment, had considerable difference from those which were previously present, and was now even more dusky.

"…"

It was a single moment.

The distance between them was diminishing in the blink of an eye, and when he came to notice, scorching heat pierced through both of Otto's legs. When he looked at it, at the frontage of both of his legs' thighs, were daggers, as if gouging out cruciform wounds.

Like peeling of the skin of a fruit, with his tongue sticking out, he exposed the skin underneath his trousers. The red cross-section and the pink sinews undersurface the skin, and the white nerves and bones creeping within, all of the green blood vessels, had all been exposed, unwounded, and Otto's throat became packed with out-of-place strong feelings.

He was dumbfounded. Till now he had never seen, a technique so beautiful.

The bleeding was minimal—no, there was no bleeding at all. This truly transcendent handling of the blade's edge, destroyed the human flesh with such aesthetical maneuver.

"…"

Crouching down, Batenkaitos kissed that wound. The rough sensation of that tongue underneath, licked all of the vital parts of Otto's leg which lied inside of the skin.

Sinews, bones, blood vessels, nerves, he shivered as he felt all of them get licked, and at the next moment, both, in terms of his sense of vision and his sense of touch, Otto felt a repugnance difficult to bear and violent pain boil up in his brain.

Otto: "Ah, gya~a~a~a~a~—~hk!"

No blood, was being shed. It was incomprehensible.

He could just feel the pain. That too, instead of blood gushing out, the naked bones or nerves were being brushed by the moist wind, and the extreme pain because of it, it felt as if his muscles were being peeled off violently by needles.

His vision flickered, and his brain burst open. The organ that was supposed to comprehend pain refused to comprehend it. The screaming throat trembled violently, as if vomiting blood, and with immobile limbs, he was unable to even agonize.

And, while Otto screamed, Batenkaitos, overlooking him, tilted his neck. With long, dark brown hair sliding down his shoulders, Gluttony sighed, as if tired.

Lye: “Just when we thought it was rest after the meal, this circumstance. Even though gourmet and bizarre eating don’t even matter… Really, nobody understands what eating is aside from us.”

Bringing a close to the insane smile and attitude, which had been there till now, it a voice terribly farsighted.

Batenkaitos slowly rotated his neck, and behaved as if he was mocking himself—just when that impression arose, he nimbly changed his expression,

Lye: “Don’t talk like tha~t. It certainly did get a bit problematic in playing around but, even still, a treat of Louis’ taste ha~s been found.”

Showing his fangs, Batenkaitos turned his neck around, and his line of sight was directed towards Beatrice. At that gaze, and Otto’s terrible spectacle, the two young girls thoughtlessly inhaled. But, seeing the reaction of the two, Batenkaitos’ expression, once again, changed into one that was empty and listless.

Lye: “Certainly it doesn’t look bad but… the vessel would be more guaranteeing than the insides, isn’t it. On top of that, the Gospel’s description hasn’t been read either.”

Lye: “Louis may not be able to see it but, the child inside us i~s informing us. The one over there, Beatrice-sama, is that, probably. If it’s done then both the mind and body will fill, isn’t she just the ideal opportunity ~tsu!”

Turning towards the right and speaking, turning towards the left and speaking, Batenkaitos exchanged words as if he was not talking within his self’s own chest, but with someone as if he could clearly see outside.

It seemed, as if he was conversing with someone else present within himself.

No, the truth is, that was possible.

Within the Name eating blasphemer, Lye Batenkaitos, present were an innumerable amount of souls. Then, it may be possible for him to converse with them, or even properly discuss.

If that was so, only then could his conversation with himself be somehow understood.

Beatrice: “Can you move, I suppose, pipsqueak?”

Felt: “Ah? Right back at you, I hope you aren’t scared, little girl.”

Calling each other out, Beatrice and Felt exchanged a few words. Glancing into the eyes of each other, they confirmed that the fighting spirit of neither of them had been shattered.

Felt slightly snorted her nose, and then glanced towards the edge of the open plaza. Beatrice confirmed the presence there, and reckoned their intents.

Beatrice: “…Now on, they will be coming after Betty, I suppose. They’ll be confined, in fact.”

Felt: “You’ll be stopping them? If it’s hurdling then I’d be…”

Beatrice: “You cannot have an idiotic expectation like making him vomit twice, I suppose. On top of that, regardless of determination, it’s something Betty cannot use. You must do it.”

Upon Beatrice's proposal, Felt showed an expression drowned in thought. But, the next moment, she raised her eyebrows and rotated her neck, swiping through her blonde hair, she let out a voice saying "Ah!".

And, she pointed her fist towards Beatrice.

Felt: "Don't fall through, little girl."

Beatrice: "You too, I suppose, pipsqueak."

Nothing in particular was returned to the pointed fist, they only exchanged insults preceding the accepted decisive battle.

While Beatrice and the other's conversation met its end, almost at the same time, Batenkaitos' self-discussion came to an end. Beatrice did not have the confidence, to collide head-on with the combat power that had slashed down and defeated Dynas and Otto.

Lye: "Well, have your preparations been complete~d, Beatrice-sama~?"

Beatrice: "If the answer is they haven't and you'll offer deferment for that, then that is the answer, in fact. But, if that isn't the case, then there's no point in that question, I suppose."

Lye: "That's exactly how it is. Hm, well then, once again—let's eat!"

From the other corner, with his eyes locked with Beatrice's, Batenkaitos flew straight towards Beatrice. His velocity, was not of the level of the nightmarish threat that had been witnessed earlier. Regardless, it was sufficiently threatening to Beatrice. Her disadvantage at close combat remained unchanged.

That's why, as an expert of Yin magic, it was a convention to not clash head-on.

Lye: "Ta~ke, thi~s—!"

Right before Beatrice, the body of Batenkaitos, who had his hands on ground, rotated vertically. The swinging launched heel drew close to right overhead of Beatrice, and the sharp strike pierced into the crown of her head.

Beatrice: “That won’t happen, in fact.”

—Right beforehand, Beatrice’s body, once again, tilted backwards thanks to the aerial force of the kick. It was the result of letting the effect of Murak, which had been invoked earlier, to continue.

With her body angled backwards, Beatrice then jumped straight up at that point. Freed from the effect of gravity, freed from the effect of weight, the young girl softly levitated.

Folding her dress’ skirt adroitly, Beatrice’s body floated in the wind, moving about.

Lye: “Magnificently done! Howeve~r, the coping is sweet!”

Batenkaitos, with his tongue stretched out, reached the spot of landing, and without waiting for her descent, went towards the mid-air Beatrice and tried to catch her.

With the vigor and accuracy of a bird of prey capturing its prey, those fingers reached for Beatrice. However, at the same time, it was also the proof of the opponent having ascent to mid-air, where there was no way to escape.

Above the remaining count of exercising magic being possible, this was an illustrious focus for striking.

Beatrice pointed her palm towards Batenkaitos, who was advancing from below, and invoked the magic she had been utmost accustomed to, throughout her life of four hundred years, and this one year.

Namely—

Beatrice: “Shamak!!”

Magic Stone shattered in her pocket, while following Beatrice’s chant, black haze effused—the leaping Batenkaitos met with it straight with his head, and got caged within a world of incomprehension.

Lye: “A~rgh—?!”

The black haze reached through, and Batenkaitos’ body fell onto the cobblestone, defenseless. He was supposed to be in a state where he was incapable of doing anything till it shook off but, Shamak’s effect was not so lasting.

The card left with Beatrice now—with the remaining one Magic Stone that could be utilized, if she were to land a fatal blow, he would not be able to take it. That is why, this was the moment of choice for Beatrice.

Lye: “A~h! Aren’t you doing it, Beatrice-sama ~tsu. As if, you are fighting just like that person… Did you receive influence or somethi~ng?!”

Shaking off Shamak, Batenkaitos showed his fangs, turning his body. Looking through the plaza, his eyes were directly upon Beatrice, as if fixed.

The memories of the young girl within him, mustn’t have witnessed the spectacle of Beatrice standing by Subaru’s side. That is why, even after seeing his influence upon her tough fighting form, he did not realize how immense of a meaning it held.

Beatrice: “Here, lavishly feast upon the last Magic Stone, in fact!”

Shaking free from her sentiment, Beatrice pointed her palm towards Otto, who was lying down, with his legs rolling up. Using the magical power of the final Magic Stone, a healing wave was directed towards the wounds of Otto’s legs.

It was far from healing it completely, but still, it just had receded the hopeless pain. The rolled down Otto, who was in tears, coughed violently mingled with sobs and groans.

Lye: “So useless, now, what will happen by reviving?”

Beatrice: “This will happen, in fact!”

Beatrice yelled the consequence of her action at Batenkaitos, who was laughing, saying that she had wasted her card.

The instant after he furrowed his eyebrows at her caustic words, at the rear of Batenkaitos' legs, something snapped its teeth. As fangs thrust deep into his left leg, Batenkaitos' stance crumbled.

Instantly looking down at his leg, seeing that, Batenkaitos widened his eyes.

Lye: "Ha~h?!"

Surprised by the thing beyond understanding, what was present there was a Water Dragon bathing in blood.

With its neck stretched out, the Water Dragon, having rushed madly across the cobblestone, crunched Batenkaitos. The Water Dragon, which had once been cornered into being unable to battle, was persisting to its final willpower.

Of the five Magic Stones, this is how the third one had been utilized.

The first one for the intense Ul Minya, which was unable to be completed, the second one for an urgent evasion through the use of Murak, the third one used for the recovery of the dying Water Dragon before the invocation of Murak.

The fourth one for using Shamak, and the fifth one for taking care of Otto's pain.

That is how Beatrice's five cards, her five Magic Stones for attaining victory, had been utilized.

Otto: "—A~h! Ithurtsithurts, it hu~rts!"

Crying such that his throat was seemingly going to explode, Otto, who had hid his call for the Water Dragon in his shriek, having fulfilled his role, now, finally, screamed for his own suffering.

Otto is truly sharp in things like this, the moment after he had received Beatrice's treatment, he immediately understood what he was supposed to do under the current situation. Only he was capable of serving as the internal affairs official of the Emilia camp, who were often unwillingly dragged out to the battlefield.

Beatrice: “Well done, I suppose, this is your vocation, in fact!”

Otto: “I don’t really understand but I’m not happy to hear that!”

That was the response Otto gave, in tears, to Beatrice’s unusual compliment. And then, before the eyes of the two, Batenkaitos, who had been crunched upon by the Water Dragon, tugged it to the ground and threw it down, and somehow unfastening its fangs, tried to stand up.

However, their reactions were just before the trump card made it in time.

Felt: “—Preparations, all set. You worked hard, little girl.”

A voice elated with success echoed, and the rear of the Meteor knocked the ground, generating a particularly loud noise.

The staff, fabricated to deceive as if it was the back of a cesspool, its tip was pointed towards Batenkaitos by Felt. In her hands, the Meteor got tinged by faint light, and its after-effect blew off its package.

With the white package having come off, the slender white staff was revealed from within.

Its handle was long enough to qualify being the length of a spear, with no exquisite designs, or any eye-catching mechanisms.

It could be said that its dedicated utility and structure was, truly reflecting its creator’s spirit.

The very spirit of the Witch Echidna, who sought no further value of a device any more than what it was supposed to possess as that device.

Beatrice: “Mother…”

They truth is, Beatrice had never seen Echidna use the staff. Even still, she was aware of its purpose, and its might.

To pester the Divine Dragon Volcanica—to think it was a weapon, capable of obstructing even the Divine Dragon.

With that being said, there are some conditions to its usage.

Either fulfilling those conditions could be difficult, or there could be problems with the user, so clearly showing all of its limitless specs was arduous—.

Felt: “A~ll right, the power which connected to even Reinhard, have a taste and see~!”

With the condition fulfilled, if Felt still had stock of Mana, the expected amount should be sufficient.

Sucking out Mana from the user, Meteor limitlessly continued to drain power, and the radiance lighting at its tip had its aim set upon Batenkaitos.

Lye: “—~tsu.”

Even Batenkaitos was unable to prevent the might from coming down upon him.

Judging that there was a possibility of it proving to be fatal, Batenkaitos instantaneously attacked the snout of the Water Dragon constraining his leg, and the moment its fangs loosened, he unbound his legs, and flew, while carrying the gash.

At that moment, the Meteor twinkled conspicuously and potently.

Felt: “Go—~hk!!”

Light distended at Meteor’s tip, and the corona was fired towards Batenkaitos.

Batenkaitos, who had escaped instantaneously from the restraint of the Water Dragon, somehow rolled away from its path with his injured leg. At the same pace, the light missed its aim, and collided with the Water Dragon—at that instant, its trajectory warped. The light drew a complex trajectory, and approached Batenkaitos.

Lye: "Wha—~tsu?!"

With his self escaping from the chasing light bullet, Batenkaitos raised his voice. At the same pace, with carriage and jumping of his sharp body, he got out of the trajectory of the light bullet progressively getting closer.

However, it was futile. Even if Batenkaitos escaped away, rolled away, leapt away, the light bullet drew arcs, drew circles, inched closer, and aimed for a direct hit.

That was the greatest power of the Magic Weapon Meteor, created by Echidna.

Once it had set its aim, it functioned so that it kept track of it.

The weapon created by Echidna to Pester the Divine Dragon Volcanica. If Echidna was truly serious regarding it, and wanted to engineer a device solely for the purpose of Pestering, it is obvious she would not allow for any compromises in it.

Henceforth, that magic tool was, incapable of missing its aim, did not let its aim escape, and became a weapon whose hit always landed.

Lye: "Nuu, ~tsugh… Then, how about this?!"

No matter how much he ran, the unbound light bullet continued its pursuit, and with some observations cooking up, Batenkaitos launched his counterattack. An upsurge of magical power, and Batenkaitos' environs froze.

Various levitating icicles formed, with their pointed tips facing the light bullet, and the stormy barrage rained upon the corona—

however, that opposition was a mistake.

The moment the icicles came in contact with the corona, they got reduced to mana starting from their tips, and before the could land a hit, they interspersed into smaller fragments and got swallowed up by the light bullet. Furthermore, the light bullet absorbed all of the magical interceptors that drew close, and as that power enlarged its own scale, it continued to approach the enemy.

Lye: “Shit, no way… no way ~tsu!”

Rolling, somehow getting out of its path, Batenkaitos let out the curse. However, the injury on his left leg was deep, and it did not allow for him to jump completely.

Otherwise, if could be agile enough, it may be possible for him to direct the light bullet towards Beatrice and the rest, or have it aim at Felt herself, but he did not have that much energy left.

The pursuing light bullet traced its path around the rolling Batenkaitos, and disabling the areas through which he could escape, it gradually enveloped the body of Gluttony in its destructive might —

Lye: “No way, by something that looks so stupid, we will we will —!”

Lye: “Shut your mumbling. Right away, Solar Eclipse should be started.”

At the instant of the strike, Batenkaitos raised a wretched voice, which got painted away by, again, a terribly cold voice. And, the light exploded.

“…”

The dazzling corona distended at the core of the open plaza, and gave rise to the largest crater till now.

The expanded light blotted the world in white, and the parts which got blotted vanished, as if losing color.

The open plaza had been hollowed out spherically, and the water flowing in the waterway streamed into it.

However,

???: “Whew, geez. Having an unskilled brother really causes troubles.”

Next to the destructive cataclysm, was a shadow peeping at the waterway.

Having lengthened brown hair, it was someone with a body covered in scars. Needlessly to say, the physical traits, were none other than those of the confronting Lye Batenkaitos.

How did he possibly, manage to evade the attack of the light bullet—however, what was utmost astonishing in this place was not that.

Beatrice: “What does, this mean, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s words, did not stem from the confound of the attack not striking.

First of all, the attack failing to strike was not the problem. As the light bullet was supposed to strike Batenkaitos, and nothing or nobody aside from Batenkaitos.

That is why, it was obvious that it would not strike the muscular and brawny giant man, who had his back turned towards them. The problem was from just where had that man appeared from.

Otto: “Is that… Gluttony?”

Said Otto, raising his agonized face and glancing at the same. Though she wanted to deny it, Beatrice, right now, did not have any words for that. At the gaze of the silent Beatrice and the others, the giant man abruptly turned back.

The one there was the giant man, with a grim countenance, which resembled yet did not match well with Batenkaitos.

With an appearance that suggested he was close to his forties, there were no parts of him that even slightly overlapped with that blasphemer. In front of Beatrice, who narrowed her eyes, that giant man put his hand on his chin,

???: “There is no need to make such a puzzled face. We just, did this.”

And, saying with feminine words, contradicting his appearance, the man relaxedly sliced away his long hair with his sword. As the chopped off strands of hair fell to the ground, Beatrice understood how the light bullet had been evaded.

The Meteor’s tracking functioned till it has established contact with its target.

That was its power. Even if it came in contact with a single portion of the body, its might would be sufficient to amass the whole body. That point had been used in inverse.

The man—perhaps Batenkaitos had, chopped off his hair, and made it seem to the light bullet that it had “come in contact with the body”. And, fleeing from the attack’s span with all of his strength, he had managed to evade the detriment.

On the other hand, the plan also had the potential to not be successful, but this time alone the result had been a perfect one.

By nature, for determining the Meteor’s target, it was necessary to align it towards what would become the target and Aim.

Though it was best to connect to the target’s Od or Gate, but in this case, being utilized as an emergency measure, it got applied to Batenkaitos’ hair, that had fallen amidst the battle. Result of which, the light bullet strayed towards the decoy of the hair.

“…”

Thinking that much, Beatrice gnashed her teeth at how unfavorable the situation was.

She had not expected, at all, that the trump card, Meteor, would get dodged through such a way. Her Magic Stones had been used up, the only one left with her now was the one she wanted to save for Puck.

Otto and the other men could no longer fight, and Felt too, who had gotten the bulk of her Mana drained out by the Mana, had crumbled, breathing hoarsely.

There was nothing left that she could do now—though that idea came up in her mind, Beatrice horizontally shook her head.

It would be better to die rather than accept defeat. Just as Subaru found a way out of even the most hopeless of situations, her self must do the same.

That is why, Beatrice raised her face, and set her eyes upon the man.

Facing the gaze, Batenkaitos rounded his eyes. He then put one hand on his hip, and covered his face with his other palm. And,

???: “Nice, how nice, isn’t it nice, certainly it is nice, perhaps it is nice, possibly it nice, because it is probably nice… we too, we too, see the value of Eating you.”

Beatrice: “—~hk.”

Before Beatrice could rebuke what babbling she had heard, Batenkaitos’ body started to change. His bones distorted, creating a particular sound, with blood gushing out that was painful to even look at, the body of the giant man wilted.

Shedding blood from the newly created wounds, regaining the form of a young boy, was Batenkaitos, breathing hoarsely.

Batenkaitos’ whole body was being wounded, however, he continued to express his insane smile. Gluttony, looking towards this side while ringing his lowered throat, spread his two arms, in seemingly happiness.

Louis: “Our name is, Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Louis Arneb.”

Beatrice: “Louis…?”

Lye Batenkaitos, that was supposed to be his name.

Without reading the intention behind suddenly giving a different name for himself, Beatrice furrowed her eyebrows. And, stitching that gap of confusion, Batenkaitos, with just his right leg, powerfully kicked the ground.

Beatrice toughened up her body, observing what he was going to do but, Gluttony flew to the edge of the plaza, recovering the tattered cloth that had fallen there, and wore it, as if hiding his scarred skin.

Above that,

Louis: “Unfortunately, that’s all for today. As both Lye and Roy are too exhausted. Any further will cause hindrances in giving birth. Let’s meet again, cute young miss.”

Beatrice: "—! Do you think, you will escape, I suppose!"

Louis: "Please stop acting strong. Though Eclipse cannot be handled decently in this body, it can still at least completely annihilate. The reason that won't be done, is because the dinner table isn't prepared."

Batenkaitos shook his head and pointed his finger towards Beatrice, who tried to step ahead.

A terribly feminine gesture—no, the truth is, the current Batenkaitos may possibly be a woman. At that part, there was the essence of something difficult to understand.

Batenkaitos nodded at Beatrice, who stopped her feet with unpleasant feelings and wariness.

Louis: "Both Lye of Gourmet and Roy of Bizarre Eating know nothing. After all. A meal is not "what you ate". It's "who you ate with"."

"…"

Louis: "Well then. Next time, come to meet us along with the person dear to you."

Beatrice: "Wai—"

Wait, just when she was about to call that out, Batenkaitos slid into the shadow of the open plaza and disappeared. Going after him was something Beatrice could not do, in this situation full of the injured.

Following him, and diving into a situation where Gluttony was at a clear advantage would be reckless as well.

There no longer was anything that could be done, now that even the trump card Meteor had failed.

Beatrice: "…It's about doing it, in fact."

Enduring her desire to speak out, Beatrice glanced around.

The pain had eroded away much of Otto's consciousness, the mercenaries and Felt's attendant had fainted, swooned. Felt was making a frustrated expression, but she was giving the impression that she could collapse at any moment.

And Beatrice, too, was no exception.

In accordance with Kiritaka's desperate appeal, its completion with no deaths, should only that be accepted as the result of Beatrice's participation in the battlefield.

Regardless—.

Beatrice: "It seems Subaru cannot even be asked for a hug confidently, I suppose…"

In the prey that was allowed to escape—in Lye Batenkaitos, slept the soul of a young girl.

Ascertaining the surety in that, how could it be conveyed to Subaru.

With terribly heartbreaking sorrow, Beatrice turned and stepped towards Felt, calling out to her faintly.

Ironically, the fight of this battlefield came to an end with the withdrawal of the Sin Archbishop—

Only a few battlefields now bequeathed in the Watergate City.

Chapter 71:
Sword Demon VS Former Sword Saint

The various battles across the span of the city, were gradually meeting their end.

The destruction caused in areas now altered into battlefields was immense, and the city's faculty had been greatly impacted.

This very fact, which conveyed the extent of the catastrophe that had transpired in this city of Priestella—could be labelled as the result of the malice brought forth by the Witch Cult into the city.

Within the situation of such devastation continuing to rise and be inflicted, there existed a single battlefield with a different hair color.

Rather, it may not even be appropriate to call it a battlefield.

Only the solemn sound of swords clashing echoed, with each of the coruscating swiping swords aiming for the other's life.

Present here was only the tactless wish of two swordsmen, with the tips of their swords pointing towards each other, shredding everything unneeded with their, what could be at least said, true desire upon them.

"…"

The swords' blades continued to gleam under the moonlight, and the swordsmen continued to exchange love over clashes of steel.

Sharp reports, scattering sparks, grey and red hair continued to dance under the rays of the moon.

A swords dance so magnificent and polished, it would indisputably steal the sights of all audiences, or rob them of their hearts, it was such that even the Sword God would ululate.

The unimaginably lustrous movement of the longsword, as though blading through water.

With a rebound, the twin swords swept through the breeze, striking the other like lightning.

"…"

As though dancing a performance of reciprocated fixation, the swords of the two continued to intertwine with each other.

Wilhelm accepted the sword slash of the one in front of him, of Theresia, who was still as beautiful as when she had been young, from the front, bathed in the sword slash with the same vigor, and woed at the reaction he felt in his palm.

Boiling up from the depths of his body, was the acclamation of his immature self's heart, despite his age.

—He was getting exhilarated.

—He was getting delighted.

—He was blooming.

With honesty, must he affirm.

The Sword Demon Wilhelm thought back to the days gone by, and yearned for a present where he could, once again, connect with his youthful wife. His heart had been scorched by that.

His mind was now occupied by the thought, by how much he desired and how he would willingly renounce everything, if only it meant for this exchange of swords, this tryst, to never come to an end.

Wilhelm: "But—"

Such greed was blasphemy, it was unforgivable for him to even bear it.

Blasphemy, to the untiring days the Sword Demon Wilhelm had dedicated to the sword.

Blasphemy, to his oath of taking away the sword from the Sword Saint Theresia, once he put her to defeat.

Blasphemy, to his sentiments of utmost dedication to his master, as a swordsman.

To detachedly follow the love that lit the chest of Wilhelm van Astrea, would be blasphemy to everything that was living in this world at this very moment.

—Henceforth, he must not defer the cessation.

—Regardless of how much these moments, had proven to be a delightful paradise for the Sword Demon.

Theresia: "…"

Wilhelm: "Hiy, a~a~a~a~!!"

A mute slash of the sword, swept through like a storm, to which he responded with his own barrage of innumerable sword strikes.

With long, deep red hair swaying, Theresia's movements, clad in white clothes, possessed no vacillation.

Like a leaf afloat a stream, the lethal sword was fired from the interior of her completely natural stance.

Up, down, left, right, her sword strikes had no particular angle.

However, as the attacks overlapped, Wilhelm felt something be slightly off. He felt this cogent discordance in her responses as well.

Theresia van Astrea's ability as a swordsman was exceptional.

Naturally, even when his body was at its prime, Wilhelm unmistakably failed to rival that territory in terms of pure swordsmanship.

Even now, that prowess remained abode in Theresia's blade, as she stood in front of him, silent.

The art of the Sword Saint, to mercilessly kill adversaries, that invited both relief and envy onto guardians.

—However, her current self and her self of those days, had a realm of decisive difference in between them.

Wilhelm: "—Light."

As the twin sword and longsword collided face to face and sparks scattered around, the Sword Demon remarked.

Locking swords, Wilhelm acutely stared into the blue eyes on the other side of the sword's blade.

Wilhelm: "Without even a need to compare, it's light, Theresia. —Your sword, which rid itself of its hefty burden, is it something so light."

Theresia: "…"

A certain tone, words mingled with disappointment, yet the eyebrows of her beautiful face let not even twitch.

Theresia, with perfectly clear eyes, lacking all emotion, was returning a look to Wilhelm.

No refutation, no revolt, they did not hold even enmity.

She used to be a woman who used to often smile, often get angry, often sulk.

She used to be a woman beautiful like the blade when she was silent, but the times of her being silent were almost none.

She used to be a woman like a spherical flower, blooming under the sun.

—Thus, her state now, was naught but tragic.

Theresia: "…"

Present there was only the shell of his silent wife.

As he exchanged slashes of swords with the figure he had continued to love, Wilhelm's heart shattered into fragments.

Prancing as if having returned to the days of the past, attenuating as if understanding the days of the past could not be returned to, casting aside the days of the past as if having a dream akin to a bubble on the surface.

—For fifteen years, what kind of a life must Theresia have lead.

When he thought back to the time he had lost her, and dedicated himself to vengeance, the incurable wound on Wilhelm's shoulder ascertained itself.

A wound inflicted by the Divine Protection of Death God, never disappears.

It was the Divine Protection aside from the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint bestowed upon Theresia by the Sword God, in order to bring cease to those days of war.

A single slit could generate a river of blood, a few slashes could pile up a mountain of corpses.

Henceforth, there lay no necessity of superficial cleverness and artfulness for her, in order to sever the thread of life.

Indeed, the only way of defeating Theresia, was through swordsmanship superior to that of hers.

Wilhelm of the past had shred himself to his extreme limits, with such austerity that converted his own self into a sword, by persevering till the very end had he truly managed to accomplish that.

There was no way of defeating Theresia, who, too, got her abilities boosted to their very limit through the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint.

And now, having exchanged swords with her youthful self, Wilhelm understood.

—Her abilities with the sword were transcendent, and lay in the territory of dexterity. However, there was one enormous shadow casted upon her swordsmanship.

Wilhelm: “Even if you felt troubled before holding the sword, you no longer felt troubled after taking hold of it. You were a woman, who knew that even better than myself.”

Theresia: “…”

Wilhelm: “Do you remember the day we parted. At the occasion of the Great Subjugation, you shook me up as I stopped you, and inflicted an incurable wound upon this shoulder of mine. —Your words back then, I have not forgotten even a single one of them.”

She gave no answer. He did not solicit one.

This was simply Wilhelm’s ceremony, looking back onto that day.

Along with the pain of this shoulder, the memory etched within also resuscitated.

Whilst she commenced with the Great Subjugation, a journey she could potentially never return from, Theresia had verbatim let go of herself from Wilhelm, and had expressed.

—When I return, that day, please let me hear the words I could not hear.

Wilhelm: “I have come here, to fulfill the promise of that day—!”

The twin swords roared, and Theresia’s longsword strummed.

The former Sword Saint swung the blade utilizing that recoil but Wilhelm, without even looking at that counterattack, dodged by fully reading through its trajectory.

He knew it.

Where the blade was going to come, so much so that he was in love with it.

Wilhelm: “Ru, o~o~o~o~!”

The habits were the same. The techniques were the same.

Scorched onto his soul, within the austerity of his former self, when he had shred himself, he had painted them in his mind, the sword techniques of the Sword Saint he was in pursuit of.

Defeating her, swearing to take it away from her, reaching that territory, he yearned, yearned, and they were scorched onto his soul.

It was the same, along with her figure, which warmed his chest.

Theresia: “…”

Even against Wilhelm’s implore, the ravishing face of rose did not flinch, even slightly.

As the sword aimed for its prey soundlessly, silently, emotionlessly, Wilhelm shot it down altogether.

He loved it so much, that he knew it even with his eyes closed.

That is precisely why, he now chose to love it without closing his eyes.

Wilhelm: “—~hk.”

—Above, countered the slash, exchanged swipes, raised the blade, slashed the sword diagonally.

Accepting the blade raining down upon him, and sinking the counterattacking strike, dodging the swipe then released, gyrating his body around the leaping point of the sword, both sides, who had slashed diagonally across each other’s shoulders, then entwined their swords as the key performers, and shifted the counterattack.

Surpassing the blows with an elegant safeguard, impossibility arose in Theresia’s swordsmanship.

Theresia, who had accumulated the blows, retreated, and Wilhelm plunged into that interval without any hesitation.

"…"

For a single moment, emotion arose within Theresia's eyes, who was looking at the Sword Demon.

No, it was his misapprehension. His effeminate heart, had pulled out the memory of a situation of the past, identical to this one.

—Within the sights of abundant citizens, Wilhelm had struck and defeated the lead actor of the ceremony, the Sword Saint, and robbed the youth named Theresia from the Sword God.

A facsimile of that situation, identical as this one.

Then, the conclusion too, would be identical once again.

Wilhelm: "Theresia—~hk!!"

Wilhelm attacked the longsword, flying towards her bosom.

The Sword Demon hoisted up his twin sword against it, and unable to bear the pressure, there occurred a fissure in the blade. But, at the same time the longsword repelled it by turning right overhead, and half of Theresia's body largely opened up.

Drawing a wide semi circle, Wilhelm's twin sword made its return.

Since the origin of this tryst till this point, Theresia, who was right before his eyes, produced the greatest interval yet. With the muscles of his arms swelling up, he gripped the handle of the sword, to the point it started creaking.

And wielding the attack with all of his might, now must he put an end to this inconceivable reunion—.

—He attempted to, put an end to it.

Wilhelm: "—~hk!"

Violent passion packed his throat, countless facial expressions levitating in his eyes.

Her face when she was crying, her face when she was angry, her face when she was sulking, her face when she was smiling, levitating were the beloved expressions, of the same woman.

Shaking that off in its entirety, Wilhelm shot down the blade.

The sword slice bolted, straight from the head till the torso of the woman—.

"…"

Before the slash could strike, a person's shadow emerged in the corner of Wilhelm's eyes.

At the utmost limit of focus, it was a fluctuation in his concentration originally impossible. However, that was all there was to it. Without any kind of influence, it was nothing beyond what he could simply ignore.

As a swordsman, with his life on the line, must he cross swords at the border of life and death, no bystanders could ever create any room of doubt in that.

Devoting his everything to the being in front of his eyes, he fulfilled his purpose with a sword slash befitting of the Sword Demon.

That was supposed to be what he was going to do. That was supposed to be what he could do.

—Had the shadow reflected, not been that of a person of red.

???: "—Father?"

There was distance in between.

The doubtful mutter was not at a distance where its echo could reach Wilhelm.

Yet, he felt the voice as though being whispered right into his ear.

Looking towards him, was a man with blue eyes and red hair.

Heinkel Astrea, was observing the final moments of this battle.

Simply dazed, at the denouement of the deadly swordsmanship of his father, Wilhelm, and his mother, Theresia, as they aimed for each other's life.

—At that moment, the glint of his sword became dull.

Wilhelm: "—~hk."

He was supposed to have fired a decisive strike.

Pouring himself into the trends of the fight, a sword strike that was supposed to bring an end to this long dream—the glint dulled, giving birth to a scope for counterattack.

"…"

Theresia bent her body immensely, and reversing her wrist, the rebounding longsword rejected the twin sword away.

The sound of the two blades colliding echoed, and she disarrayed down the strike that had promised to wound her, with her heart, technique, physique, and distanced his purpose further away from fulfillment, as sparks scattered about.

Wilhelm: "Kh… ~hk."

—Why, did he take notice.

Receiving the blow of the sword fluttering in the wind, sidestepping its weight, Wilhelm clashed head-on with his emerging doubts with all of his heart.

Had he not noticed Heinkel's presence, or had he ignored his presence, had he kept focus on Theresia, he would not be in the unsightly shape he was in now.

He had determined to dedicate his entire life, and take Theresia away from the Sword God.

The result of that aggrandized decision, did it have to be this predicament.

Once again, commenced the successive notes of light sword strikes.

However, the blade that had formerly turned transparent after the exchange of blows, had already lost its swords dance.

Foreign impurities had intermingled.

Using all kinds of strengths of all possible limits, further enhancing the purity of the blade, had all been lost by the edge of the sword, which was supposed to have been swung only twice, due to a single appearance on the other side.

All what remained was a solitary strike by the aged Sword Demon at his beloved wife, in front of their son.

Without becoming a sword, without living as a Sword Demon, he was far too immature, far too deficient, as a father, as a husband, as a swordsman, as a man.

Eventually being rendered incapable of a single swing, he realized his immaturity.

He was unable to stop foulness from intermingling with the essence of the swordsmanship pouring into the sword.

Henceforth, this result may have been inevitable.

Wilhelm: “—~hk?!”

Once the two blades were shot down, he then immediately jolted the longsword.

Receiving the power of the sword strike with tactless earnesty, their strengths were being compared within the interval created by Theresia halting her legs□ the moment he overcame the resistance and stepped ahead, the slender body in front of his eyes rotated, creating a vacuum around.

A leg appeared before him, halfway, and an interval was born.

"…"

Immediately afterwards, premonition of demise shadowed him.

He received the supremely mighty sword slash of indubitable coldness, by gyrating his sword towards the rear with not even a millisecond of delay.

Without being able to stop the shattering attack, his sword, that had accepted it, encroached deeply into his own shoulder. Stepping as if on a foot bellow, his body whilst bent forward spouted blood. His bones creaked, his muscles palpitated a lighting in his brain.

His right blade had accepted it. His left blade still remained.

With blood cascading from the edge of his mouth, Wilhelm, using his right blade, as if carrying it on his shoulder, once again deflected Theresia's longsword upwards.

Devoid of inaccuracy, Theresia's longsword was raised overhead.

At the same time, the sword fell from Wilhelm's right hand. He did not mind. If his right hand was now free, he must dedicate all of his strength into the remaining left blade and strike.

With his left blade, he hammered a blow into Theresia, behind him.

Carving a clockwise trajectory, a grim sword strike pierced upright into Theresia—

"…"

Sparks scattered.

A sound echoed, a high-pitched report.

The weight of the blade in his hand was halved, and Wilhelm, wielding his own errs, having innumerably recognized his own weakness, once again took notice.

The moment he struck Theresia with the attack, Wilhelm chose to act subconsciously.

The blade gripped in his left hand, whether he should strike it by gyrating it towards the left or towards the right.

A slight, mere, meagre difference.

But at the same time, it marked a lethal difference for those two, who had attained the extremity of swordsmanship.

If he chose velocity, left, or if he opted for strength, then right.

After getting caught up in that choice, if he managed to realize he had erred in that action, things could still be helped.

Wilhelm, whilst determining whether or not to look at Theresia straight ahead, in that single instant, lost his way.

"…"

Accepting the Sword Demon's attack, was a single swing released by Theresia's grip.

Catching hold of it while it was mid-air, Theresia cut into the trajectory of the attack.

The moment she accepted the sword, and engaged it whilst standing still, she swung it down with immense force. This cracked the belly of Wilhelm's sword, and rejected the steel, faced with no resistance.

The longsword fragmented his sword, and Wilhelm perceived the loss of his special weapon. Instantly gripping to the handle of the fractured sword, he prepared for the following attack, which was in his instinct as a swordsman.

However, that preparedness would bear fruit, only if he differed in the purity as a swordsman.

In that respect, her self, in front of his eyes, was the worst possible opponent.

The Sword Demon who lost his sword, and the Sword Saint loved by the Sword God.

That difference was clear, no necessity for even delineating it.

—During the juncture he forgot to even blink his eyes, Wilhelm saw the longsword pierce through his right leg.

"…"

It was a sword so beautiful, to the extent he was charmed by it.

The blade penetrated into the joint of the aged swordsman's right leg, and the edge of the sword was contaminated by minimal blood.

Without any unneeded destruction, right through the gap between muscle fibers and nerves, taking away only the functionality of the leg, it was the excellence of preeminent swordsmanship.

The lack of resistance was such that it seemed as if the blade was simply swiping through water.

With that performance being held upon his own right leg, Wilhelm's back shuddered.

Was his emotion that of admiration, vexation, infatuation, he himself did not know, which one complied.

What he did know, was only the truth of his defeat being thrusted into his face.

Wilhelm: "Gh, ugh… ~hk."

As the blade embedded in his right leg slid through, the height of his knees was divided.

Just as when the longsword had pierced in, his flesh was drawn out soundlessly, Wilhelm groaned upon the delayed pain and crumbled.

As blood flooded out of his leg's wound, his lower body was rendered powerless.

If the power of the Divine Protection of Death God was invoked, any type of healing magic may be used, but it shall not heal. The closer the distance with the wielder of the Divine Protection, the more its effectivity increased, no matter how marginal the wound, it became a curse that eroded away life and coerced endless bloodshed upon the victim.

"…"

The wound on Wilhelm's right leg, was not so slight as to be labelled a shallow wound. It was a gash that could be life threatening if it was neglected, and the Divine Protection of Death God was obligated to refuse all recovery.

It seemed as if the deadline for his life, had been set for a period excessively short.

Wilhelm: "…Regrettable."

As his brain was being scorched by the pain, he leaked out his grief prior to his anguish.

The sense of pain was stimulating an incessant screech, but Wilhelm revealed it on his face simply via furrowing his eyebrows and nothing else.

He was not frivolously holding it back, or affixing it to his willpower.

The sharp impetus upon his body, could not possible ever outstrip the darkness veiling his heart.

When despair, despondency, and his own cowardliness and worthlessness was being scorched onto his soul, what significance could physical ache possibly hold for this aged swordsman.

"…"

Dropping the sword in his hand, Wilhelm put his hand on the mouth of the wound.

The bleeding was supposed to leak away his life but the defeated had no intention of disgracefully maintaining distance. However, according to etiquette, he must not meet his end by something like blood loss.

He had fought as a swordsman, he had opposed as a swordsman, he had been defeated as a swordsman.

Then, the life of the defeated, was to be taken away by the sword of the victor.

Wilhelm: “Theresia, I am…”

Theresia: “…”

The female swordsman of rose, with her longsword being carried on her shoulder, was looking down towards Wilhelm.

In those eyes, truly, existed no deep emotion. Without remembering anything until the very end, and continuing to not remember anything, she was the death god of the sword who was going to reap Wilhelm’s life.

He looked up at the beautiful face, such that he was fascinated by it.

Theresia, silent, swung the sword before Wilhelm. Once her sword descended, Wilhelm’s life, too, would come to an end.

But—

Wilhelm: “All alone, never will I…!”

The instant of the longsword’s descent, Wilhelm extended his right hand. Lying there, was a fragment of the twin swords—the sword Theresia had cast aside.

Wilhelm picked it up with his fingers, and floundered, unable to accept the moment of his death, till the end of the end.

His defeat, that remained unchanged.

That could not be helped.

But her, in these moments, he must not render Theresia, her, alone.

Unable to stop his wife, who was being made to swing the sword against her will, he could not allow her to advance towards Crusch, whom he was greatly indebted to, or Subaru and the rest.

If his ignition of his life was insufficient, then he did not mind the destruction of his soul after death.

—However, the brandish of that resolution was.

Theresia: "…"

Wilhelm: "Theresia…?"

Keeping her sword held tight, Theresia leapt a great distance backwards.

The blade he held in his right hand, she was a distance that its swipe would not reach her. At a position that would be beyond Wilhelm's reach, whose leg had been injured, Theresia slightly inclined her neck.

Emotionless eyes, seeing a terribly empty color in them, Wilhelm, for the first time, experienced fright.

That fear, was a fear that arose in his instinct, in Wilhelm's instincts as a swordsman.

There lay no necessity to go out of the way and deliver a finishing blow, to a prey bearing fatal injuries.

With the pride of a swordsman long lost, this was the judgement which could only be cast by a calm death god.

Wilhelm: "Wait… Wait, Theresia!!"

Wilhelm shouted, at the dread of being left behind.

His leg did not hurt. Forgetting the ache of his right leg, Wilhelm tried to pursue the distant Theresia. However, the pain, or at the very least, the wound, was real. Without any strength, he tumbled. Potently striking his shoulder, the aged swordsman made an expression conveying how unforgivable this was.

Swinging about her long, red hair, Theresia became further distant.

Ahead of the path of her self's footsteps, was Heinkel, standing upright.

The longsword, with no decline in fighting spirit hitherto, established him as its next prey.

Slashing the man whom she did not know was her husband, she shall next slash the man whom she did not know was her son, for that purpose—.

Wilhelm: "Stop, Theresia! Do you think that is… that is forgivable?! Fight with me! Look at me… at me! Look at me, at me, Theresia~a~a~a~!!"

With a voice as though bleeding, Wilhelm called Theresia.

Innumerable times, innumerable times, that name which he wished to call whilst having her in his eyes, in a form utterly unalike the figure he had thought of innumerable times, rage in lieu of love, insanity in lieu of ardor, devoting it all.

However, the woman did not look back.

Gripping firmly the sword where abode the death god, the woman slowly resumed heading towards Heinkel. Heinkel inhaled at that figure advancing ahead, and unsheathed the knight sword with his own trembling hands.

Heinkel: "W-Wait, I said wait. Y-You… Theresia he said, no way? It can't be possible… It, can't be mother… ~hk."

Theresia: "…"

Heinkel: "No, even if it isn't mother… that's not it! Fa-Father had become like that, so… shit! What is this! Just what is this, what are you doi~ng!"

Looming before his eyes, was Theresia of her youthful days.

That form, and the form of her as a mother within Heinkel, shall never overlap. He shook his neck horizontally in repudiation, and desperately tried to deny the spectacle before his eyes, voicing words he failed to put a halt to.

His knees sneered, his line of sight disarrayed, and his figure, whilst wielding the sword, too, seemed frail.

Faced with the former Sword Saint, he had not even the slightest of chance.

At this rate, unquestionably, Heinkel shall get slashed to his death by Theresia.

That alone was something, which could never be allowed to happen.

Wilhelm: "Theresia! Over here! I am still alive! If you want to kill then kill me first! Heinkel, there's no way you can do it! Right this instant, flee!!"

Supporting himself with the sword, Wilhelm stood up feeling as though he was crunching stones. With no room for grasping his wound, with an increase in pressure further of his blood gushed out.

A cascade of fresh blood, the cobblestone subsequently metamorphosed into a hue of red, and whilst pulling the thread of that blood, Wilhelm pursued Theresia's back.

Distant. Too distant.

Slow. Too slow.

Once again, Wilhelm did not make it. Once again, Wilhelm could not reach it.

Wilhelm: "Hugh… ~hk."

Theresia: "…"

Theresia's longsword drew an arc, and the knight sword of Heinkel, who had tugged his shoulders inward, accepted it.

With not even the slightest stagnation, Heinkel's knight sword left his hands far too quickly, giving rise to a shrill note as it bounced on the cobblestone.

Heinkel: "S-Stop… Please stop, m-mom… ~hk."

Rendered unarmed, the frightened Heinkel fell on his bottom at that spot. Flailing around his limbs desperately, Heinkel tried to escape, as if crawling.

However, his quivering fingers, his terrified heart and Theresia's eyes devoid of emotion tethered his mind and body to fear, and he was rendered nearly perfectly immobile at his locus.

His throat was parched, wiping off the tremendous cold sweat he was perspiring, Heinkel made a pallid face.

There had possibly been some incontinence there as well. However, robbed of the composure to even feel embarrassed about that, Heinkel stared at the tip of the longsword hoisted upward.

—As though slicing the moon, the longsword extended directly towards the heavens.

At the brink of his life, Wilhelm could accomplish naught but witness the spectacle of his wife slash their son to his death in front of his eyes.

He raised his voice. It did not reach.

He stretched his hand. It did not reach.

Wilhelm: "Theresia—!!"

No strength remained in the merely hollering voice of the Sword Demon, who had been unable to dedicate his everything into the sword.

Heartlessly, the longsword was swung to cut off Heinkel's life—.

???: “—That’s as far as it goes.”

That voice suddenly, but distinctly, cut into the seemingly stinging tension.

With a dignified tone and not a single fragment of vacillation in it, it wielded no pardon. Those who heard it were struck with the aura of an overwhelming existence, it was simply natural to abide by its will.

Wilhelm, Heinkel, and even Theresia halted all movement.

Ahead of the line of sight of the three, stood a single youth.

Blazing red hair, like fire, perfectly clear, gleaming blue eyes which captured the blue sky.

Even with his white outfit contaminated by blood and mud, the figure, standing upright, was needless of any words to be adorned with except for heroic.

The youth, steadily, continued to advance towards the location.

In his hand, was a scabbard with the engravings of deep wounds, and a knight sword unsheathed from that scabbard.

A sword blade polished to an extent of aberration, he clutched to the Dragon Sword Reid.

—The voice of the laughter of the Sword God, resonated raucously in the ears of the Sword Demon.

Chapter 72:
Sword Saint VS Previous Generation Sword Saint

—The Dragon Sword Reid was a sword of multitudinous enigmas.

It was indubitable that, across generations, it was a treasured sword handed-down in the lineage of the Astrea family, which had given rise to Sword Saints one after another, but the origin of where that Dragon Sword had been granted to them was something that had not been passed down.

A treasured sword of a tenebrous past, and furthermore, the deviousness of being incapable of being unsheathed by anyone but the Sword Saint. To be precise, even by the Sword Saint, it was could be unsheathed only in times necessary.

The treasured sword that defeated the Divine Dragon Volcanica, by the hand of the first generation Sword Saint, Reid Astrea.

In the past, when dragons had advanced upon in immense numbers, this legendary sword slashed all of them down altogether.

Or perhaps it was instead but a simple, dull blade, a magical sword which augmented its might by breathing the blood of the enemy.

Countless were the anecdotes enshrouding it, all devoid of evidence, akin mere fairy tales.

Regardless, nothing was firm, neither existed any way to confirm anything.

If there was one thing, that could be asserted,

—The Dragon Sword Reid was a supreme sword that transcended treasured swords, legendary swords, or magical swords of any disposition.

—It was the extremity of the realization of steel titled the sword, there existed no steel surpassing it.

Even for Wilhelm, who had been bestowed with the honor of a swordsman, Van, this was only the third instance across the entirety of his lifetime that he was laying his eyes upon the uncontaminated white blade.

Wilhelm: "—Reinhard."

With the jet-black scabbard bearing engravings carved by the claws of the Dragon in his left hand, and the Dragon Sword gripped in his right hand, was he.

His red hair swaying in the wind, lording over the situation earnestly ahead with his blue eyes, it was nobody else but the current generation Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea.

Even Wilhelm was overwhelmed by the noble, majestically stood figure.

Inheriting Sword Saint, and becoming the sword of the kingdom as an imperial knight, was his real grandson—this in fact was Wilhelm's first time, seeing his form to step into the battlefield.

Upon losing Theresia in the Great Subjugation, Wilhelm left the Astrea family. His dispute with his son and grandson from back then, yet held sway even after fifteen years, unburied.

Henceforth, for these past fifteen years, Wilhelm continued to pursue his wife, and averting his eyes away from his family. Therefore, let it be the deterioration of his son, or the growth and accomplishments of his grandson, he had not been witness to anything.

—That is why, right now, he was overwhelmed by Reinhard's figure.

The one standing there, was the Sword Saint.

A being recipient of the love of the Sword God, blessed with the honor of possessing the ability to unsheathe the greatest sword, standing atop the wishes of swordsmen of all dispositions—that could only be, the Sword Saint.

Beholding that figure, Wilhelm remembered.

He had long forgotten his agony. What he remembered was a different emotion. The deep emotion Wilhelm had felt when far, far back in the past, he had been spectator to the swords dance of the Sword Saint, of Theresia.

Back then, Wilhelm felt a distance he would never be able to cover.

A territory he would, by no means, be able to reach, and Wilhelm lamented the trifling nature of his sword talents.

Yet, without decline, he swung the sword, continued swinging it, and at last managed to grasp the edge of that territory. No distance was too distant, that was what he was supposed to have proven.

—Such a tapered, puny outlook.

The qualities were different. The statures were different. The weights were different. The things were different. Anything and everything was different.

That was not an existence capable of being debated over whether it was within or beyond reach.

It was an existence verbatim residing in an entirely different dimension itself.

"…"

Theresia, gradually, lowered the hoisted longsword. The sword had been on the verge of slaying Heinkel, but stopped in face of the newly appeared enemy.

The heartless, mobile cadaver of Theresia van Astrea, had already lost the pride of a swordsman, the style of a warrior, anything and everything.

What she had right now, were only the orders of the caster who was moving her dead body via some secret arts.

The optimum judgement for executing them, and defeating those posing as obstacles, that was all.

And if those orders prioritized those who could prove to be a threat, her judgement was simply natural.

Robbed of his ability to resume the battle, awaiting only his demise through blood loss, was the aged swordsman.

Having lost all fighting spirit, unable to even flee, was the deputy commander of knights only in name.

Both of them, no longer registered as threats or anything in such wise to Theresia.

Therefore, turning her longsword, tilting her skills as the former Sword Saint, towards the present Sword Saint, was a judgement devoid of doubt.

Wilhelm: “Wait! Theresia! Look here, at me! Theresia~a~a~!”

Dragging his leg, pulling the thread of blood, wailed Wilhelm.

As though not hearing that cry, Theresia paid him no heed. As if the exchange of sword slashes until now had all been a lie, she treated him as something not even present.

It was humiliating. However, it was even moreso saddening.

However, he had no time to drown in grief. He would never forgive such stagnation, of his current self.

He must shout, now. He must stop her, now—.

Theresia: “…”

Ignoring Wilhelm’s racing heart, Theresia leapt at once and shortened the distance.

Establishing her aim at Reinhard before her eyes, Theresia cavorted, with her long, red hair waving in the wind.

The longsword sketched a semi-circle, painting an artistic diagonal across Reinhard—however, in the short interval wherein unforgivable was even the blink of an eye, Reinhard nullified the sword slash.

Reinhard, who was positioning himself backwards and sideways, was pursued by the tip of the longsword, as though it were a living creature wielding a definite purpose. As it slashed the air of its trajectory to its death, even against the advancing slashes, Reinhard's complexion did not manifest even the slightest of change. Simply taking distance with half a step, he remained unfazed.

"…"

Realizing how unfavorable her position was, Theresia silently flew towards the front. Confronting Reinhard with half of the body exposed, would be naught but suicidal.

Turning back, Reinhard looked straight at Theresia, whose longsword had set its aim at his eye.

Immediately behind Reinhard, was the form of Heinkel. Reinhard confronted his grandmother whilst seemingly shielding his father. Via that alone Wilhelm noticed this brief offense and defense had been for acquiring these positions.

Heinkel: "Stop it… what is it, just what is it… what have I, what have I done…!"

His countenance pale, clutching his own hair, Heinkel shan't notice.

It did not matter, if his own son was standing before him in order to protect him. The preceding truths he had faced, had already surpassed the capacity of his heart.

He could not possibly be expected to overcome the situation either. That was how it was from the beginning.

Hence, he had no choice but to raise his own voice.

Wilhelm: “Stop, Reinhard! Look at me! Theresia is in the middle, of fighting with me! You are not permitted to cut into a battle, between two swordsmen!”

“…”

Reinhard glanced sideways towards Wilhelm, who had hollered they were still in the midst of battle. With his blue eyes, he looked at Wilhelm’s right leg, yet bleeding.

Reinhard: “…With that state of your leg, you cannot continue to battle.”

Wilhelm: “What do you mean if my leg can’t move! These hands that grasp the sword, are still alive… if my hands die then my mouth! If my mouth will be ineffective then my soul! As long as I’ve not lost my life, I have not been defeated!”

Reinhard: “If you’ve not lost life… then, what do you make of her, who is in front of your eyes?”

Wilhelm: “—~hk.”

Upon Reinhard’s question, Wilhelm’s throat choked.

Theresia, expressionless, with emotionless eyes, with sheer silence, was looking at her opponents. Keeping her stance at the corner of his eyes, Reinhard sought an answer from Wilhelm.

Reinhard: “A dead body devoid of self-consciousness merely moving in accordance with the wishes of the caster—I do not believe there is any meaning in involving the styles of a swordsman with a deed seemingly toying with the dead.”

Wilhelm: “Styles of a swordsman you say… ~hk!”

Seeking to duel with a mobile cadaver, was foolishness.

Wilhelm was unable to refute, Reinhard’s reasoning. It was the truth that Theresia had already distanced away from Wilhelm, and the battle had come to an end.

No matter how much the loser, Wilhelm, may yowl, the swordsman’s wish shall not be granted.

Furthermore, neither could Wilhelm himself loudly assert being a swordsman at present.

Standing with support of the sword, the circumstance at hand entrusted to words instead of steel, wishes instead of sword might—where did the pride and dignity of the Sword Demon remain in this Wilhelm van Astrea.

Nothing in such wise existed anywhere. He was empty.

Reinhard: “—The deceased do not move. The deceased have no future. I will not forgive, that absurdity.”

Enunciated Reinhard before Wilhelm, who had lost his voice.

His eyes had averted from his grandfather, and now closely observed solely the cadaver of his grandmother, standing before his eyes.

In gentle motion, the Dragon Sword Reid was held to aim for her eyes.

Oddly, that stance was identical to that of Theresia’s, as she bore the longsword on her shoulders, as though a reflection in a mirror.

“…”

The unclouded blade of the Dragon Sword, was visible as inordinately shimmering with glamour.

That was the ovation of the sword. At having attained a chance to be swung, it felt deeply moved, felicity, and at having to oppose one who was its former bearer, the supreme blade was adorned with voiceless delight.

Reinhard: “…”

Theresia: "…"

Soundlessly, the blue eyes of the two swordsmen, intertwined.

The Sword Saint, wielding his sword, did not offer his name as he was originally supposed to.

It was natural. Since that sought an opponent with the value that they would pay back the pride of a swordsman, and the style of a warrior.

Against an opponent antithetical to that, against an opponent who did not possess the value to be equal, he shan't do so.

The atmosphere froze, tension donned with hue and weight crushed the world.

Feeling his entire body get heavier, dominated by a sense of compactness, Wilhelm opened his mouth.

Ignorant of the words he should pronounce, compelled by the sense of exasperation stemming from the feeling that he must interject.

—Ironically enough, that acted like a signal for the two swordsmen.

Wilhelm: "Stop—~hk!"

His voice did not reach.

Bequeathing even voice behind, the two swordsmen clashed.

"…"

Stepping ahead, swinging, Theresia's longsword roared and rended the atmosphere, as her greatest sword slash, at the perfect angle, assailed upon Reinhard.

In fact, this may have been the slash with utmost refinement and beauty coming from Theresia, amongst all which Wilhelm had seen till now.

Under normal circumstances, Wilhelm may have had been envious of the fact that his self had not been the one to hale out the entirety of the sword abilities sleeping within Theresia.

However, at this instant, the emotions distending within Wilhelm's heart were disparate.

And that volatile something weighing his chest, overflowed out by taking the form of certain words.

Wilhelm: "Don't kill her…!"

The emotions he had restrained, the passion he had suppressed, the things mustn't have wished for and the love he had admonished, rushed forth as though breaking Wilhelm's barriers.

Theresia, of the days of youth.

The woman who had caressed Wilhelm's heart, who had made him take notice of the world beyond the sword, the only one in his lifetime, one he won't give up on even in exchange for the world, was right there.

The beloved woman, to whom he had not conveyed his love to her even once, was right there—.

Wilhelm: "She is my, Theresia—~hk!!"

Words, he shouldn't have ever vocalized.

Should he become perplexed, in a state wherein he might forfeit his life, it would be inexcusable of him to prioritize his emotions.

It was a deed that polluted, the pride of a swordsman, the style of a warrior, the nobility of battle.

That was only, the voice of a man. Of a man only desperate, to not lose the woman he loved.

And, that call prepared for death was—

Reinhard: "—Grandmother, was killed by me fifteen years ago."

A voice, quiet and whispering.

A voice so soundless, uncertain whether it would even reach.

It was however, indubitably, naught but a response to Wilhelm's cry.

"…"

Theresia's sword slash, directly smited Reinhard.

The Dragon Sword, was yet to enter the trajectory of a swing.

It struck. It severed. That was how it would look to anyone, and yet.

Reinhard: "The one over here, is a mere fake."

—Dragon Sword Reid drew a locus.

A single swing, the Dragon Sword was soundlessly swung, and the clear sword blade, as though in flow, settled within the scabbard.

The guard of the sword came in contact with the scabbard, and only a faint metallic report was heard.

With just that, the battle came to an end.

It was the end.

Chapter 73:
Theresia van Astrea

1

Theresia van Astrea was twelve years old when she received the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint.

It was a sudden and unforeseen change that begat immense distress in her life.

In the midst of her ordinary, everyday life, it abruptly swooped down upon her.

“—? Could it be, that I got chosen?”

This was an honest emotion, the emotion she greeted the Divine Protection with.

And Theresia continued to keep this truth a secret for some time.

—The renowned Astrea family’s forte was the sword, and had given rise to Sword Saints for generations and continued.

Thanks to the achievements accomplished hundreds of years ago by the first generation Sword Saint Reid Astrea, the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica recognized the sword of the Astrea family as an indispensable existence and asset.

This tradition had been passed down for centuries, including in Theresia’s times.

Henceforth, it was halfway cemented that all those born into the Astrea family, regardless of possessing the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint or not, were to live a life of commitment toward the sword.

This of course, appertained to her father, her two elder brothers and her lone younger brother, the youngest sibling, as well. Regardless of becoming a swordsman or attaining the Divine Protection or not, they were supposed to acquaint themselves with the sword the moment they achieved awareness of mind per convention.

When it came to how Theresia, who was born into the Astrea family where this route of upbringing was natural, was maturing—she was spending her days utterly parallel from the sword.

Of course, those born into the Astrea family, regardless of gender, were supposed to take the sword in their hands.

There were days when Theresia and her brothers were all made to swing the sword under strict tutelage. There were such days indeed, but Theresia had absolutely no notable aptitude for the sword.

Rather, it would be more so precise to say she had not even the slightest orientation for facing the sword.

Like many girls, Theresia held no interest in the sword.

It was not a matter of competency. Unmotivated swordsmanship, shiftless training accompanied with a defiant attitude. It was unsurprising that her parents would eventually come to notice it was futile to make her keep swinging the sword if she continued to act like this.

—The Divine Protection of the Sword Saint was bestowed only upon those who had proven themselves worthy of receiving the love of the Sword God.

Generations were witness, only the members of the Astrea family were capable of inheriting the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint. At the very least, that was the common belief, since no actual details regarding the inheritance of the Divine Protection were known.

It was only when the swordsman faced the sword with absolute earnestness, that the Divine Protection recognized him and bestowed itself upon him.

A girl child, possessing no interest in the sword, the firstborn daughter who continued to avert her eyes away.

It was all an inevitable course of events that as the possibility of Theresia being the Sword Saint quickly diminished to abandonment, her greed of freedom was permitted.

Theresia forcibly snatched her freedom from the sword training, but she too, had her own respective say with regards to it.

Of course, both her absolute disinterest in the Sword Saint, and failure to devote herself to the sword were causes for the shiftlessness of her training, but her greatest cause was unrelated to these.

—Theresia was aware that she had been born with the Divine Protection of Death God.

The wounds she would inflict onto others would ceaselessly bleed, incapable of healing.

Upon realizing her forte lay in taking the lives of others, what took birth within a young Theresia, was the dread of what could result from her very palms.

Something like sword training was perfect for augmenting her horror.

Let it be simply practice or training, Theresia's Divine Protection, over which she had no control, would pay no regard to the situation. Even if the wound she may inflict were to be as meagre as a scratch, the fact that it shan't heal made it no trivial affair.

Especially considering that a wound which might accidentally get inflicted during sword practice could prove to be deadly.

Henceforth, liberated from the sword training, the secretive Theresia felt alleviated.

To live without hurting others, was something astoundingly difficult should one remain conscious of it.

Even if one were not to intentionally, actively seek to hurt others, accidental mishaps or unwitting deeds could be committed by anyone. How could she ever determine whether the Divine

Protection would activate or not, in case of getting a cut on the finger due to a piece of shattered dish.

The young girl named Theresia, inadvertently eluded from having relationships with people.

If she never made contact, if she never came close, she would not have to worry about hurting people. She naturally evaded gazes, she started spending more and more time with flowers.

Having attained the freedom to discard the sword, she made a flower bed in the garden of her mansion for solitarily herself, growing seasonal blossoms there, she became a girl who loved admiring them.

Her brothers who used to swing the sword in utter distress, were repeatedly subject to strenuous and agonizing training.

It wasn't as if she did not feel left out or sorry for them, seeing their figures. Merely unable to communicate about her Divine Protection, the only ones she could confide in were solely the flowers her own self had nurtured.

"I wonder, if someday, even I would be able to live by someone's side…"

Her distress, her doubts, the only ones she could confide such feelings of hers in were solely the flowers as well, as their petals danced to the rhythm of the gentle breeze.

Like many people, Theresia too was an ordinary young girl who desired to love, and to be loved.

However, days of soliloquy as she questioned whether her self, who had flouted the intents of her brothers or her parents, and had the awareness of a Divine Protection that may hurt and rob someone, had the right to stand by someone's side, met no end.

—In the midst of such days, the love of the Sword God was showered upon Theresia.

"—? Could it be, that I got chosen?"

Without warning, that cognizance dawned upon Theresia.

It enshrouded her far more akin to a sense of incongruity rather than consciousness like that of her Divine Protection of Death God.

It was natural.

To her, awareness of the Divine Protection she had been born with was a matter of course, like eyes providing vision, and ears providing hearing.

Something like suddenly gaining a new Divine Protection would feel something like the emergence of wings on her back. What could she possibly greet novel faculties that originally did not exist with, except for incongruity.

—I must not, take the sword in my hands.

So thought Theresia, harboring abhorrence and nausea towards her new Divine Protection.

She thought back to the times when she had been coerced to swing the sword. She realized how pointless, meaningless, senseless and aimless her actions had been back then.

She was now instinctively able to apprehend how to swing the sword the best, the optimum, the ideal, the finest way.

Her self, whose forte lay very much in killing people, now fully gained the proficiency in killing people.

"—~hk."

This was terror. This was despair. This was the day the world ended.

Kneeling down, she came to realize that she was a death god who had taken the form of a girl, and that her days of impersonating a young girl had come to an end.

Theresia did not tell anyone about the Divine Protection she had obtained.

She intended to conceal her possession of the Divine Protection of Death God and the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint for all eternity, and hide it within her heart that she was a monster whose only purpose was to kill others.

Imploring that she was unwell, she shut herself in her room in the mansion.

Forgetting to look after even her flower bed, Theresia hid within her shell. Doing naught but sleeping, painting a childish reverie that if only one day upon awakening out of breathlessness, that it would all turn out as a dream, she continued to enclose herself in her shell.

But that was ultimately, just the immaturity of a child, refusing to face what she did not wish to face.

—It immediately became clear, that Theresia had inherited the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint.

“Nii-san… The next Sword Saint, is your daughter. This child.”

The head house of the Astrea family—Theresia’s birthplace, and the base of the family line of Sword Saints.

Stepping foot into mansion, revealing that Theresia, curled up in her bed, would be the next Sword Saint was her uncle, the preceding Sword Saint.

The Divine Protection of the Sword Saint was an exceptional Divine Protection, capable of only being inherited by members of the Astrea family, with this trend continuing for generations.

That Divine Protection was inherited by the next Sword Saint from the preceding Sword Saint on a certain day without any prior notice. And once the inheritance was completed, the previous Sword Saint was freed from his responsibility, and lost the Divine Protection.

Once the current Sword Saint lost the Divine Protection, it was natural that the identity of the of the next Sword Saint would be searched for thoroughly by the kingdom.

And the previous Sword Saint could identify who the next Sword Saint was at a single glance.

Theresia's days of enclosure met their end.

"Take the sword in your hands, Theresia."

Having become dreadfully skinny, her hair in shambles, Theresia was dragged out into the garden.

Barefooted, in sleepwear, with her consciousness drifting between dreams and reality, yet there she was, dragged outside by her uncle by force, and coerced into holding the wooden sword.

With her now skinny fingers, she gestured her resistance along with shaking her head several times.

However, the protests of her opposed self went unheard. Her uncle made her regrip the wooden sword again and again, pushing Theresia's back once she clutched the handle in surrender.

Before Theresia, stood the eldest brother of the four siblings.

Her eldest brother, his features tender and amiable, stood there with an addled expression. His puzzlement could be understood at a glance, unable to accept the events transpiring before his eyes.

—Far too many unknowns.

Pondering so, Theresia was startled by her own self ruminating so.

That confoundment directly smiting her heart, Theresia simply kept her eyes open, speechless.

Ignoring Theresia and her condition, her uncle called to her eldest brother in a deep voice.

To hold the wooden sword, and clash with Theresia head-on, he ordered. To prove his abilities of swordsmanship by striking down and defeating his younger sister, he ordered.

There is no way he could do that, her eldest brother clamored.

Her brother was very kind. He had trained strenuously with the sword, and held no dubiety in the way of the Astrea family, but her brother could be nothing but kind towards his younger sister, Theresia.

She was afraid of hurting him, so she was never the one to initiate physical contact, but she loved being hugged and held up in her brother's arms and that large body of his. He was a kind, kind brother.

Then echoed the damning voice of her uncle, calling her brother a coward.

Upon the deriding of the preceding Sword Saint, her brother made an expression terribly hurt by his words, who admired his form. Theresia knew who it was that her eldest brother, her elder brother, and her younger brother admired and had thus continued to swing the sword.

Reviled by that person, her eldest brother was immensely wounded. Her two other brothers, standing at the edge of the garden having also come outside by hearing all the commotion, also made similarly hurt faces.

Ultimately, her eldest brother, preserving a wounded visage, wielded dreadful readiness in his eyes.

Straightening the wooden sword he held in his hands, ceding all his energy into it, he set his eyes upon his target.

Through the shivers in the tip of his sword, and a certain sharpness in her eldest brother's eyes, Theresia discerned.

Her brother, sought to knock down Theresia's sword using the wooden sword clutched in his own hands such that she would remain unscathed. His stance, his line of sight, and the essence of swordsmanship enveloping his body.

At her brother's level of skill, it would certainly not be a difficult task against an inferior opponent.

Ample to prove his ability as a swordsman and taking the sword away from Theresia.

"…"

Her uncle vociferated, marking the beginning of a spar neither side wished to partake in.

Her eldest brother bellowed vigorously, as the honed essence of swordsmanship slashed into Theresia.

Swordsmanship with solely the strength to dwindle the opponent and control their movements. If she were not to even upraise her sword, it would be a facile affair to knock the wooden sword down.

From the onset, the very foundation of this fight was erroneous.

Neither did Theresia possess any reason to fight, nor did her brother possess any reason to hurt Theresia. With the interests of both the sides aligned, there shan't be any discord.

Thers shan't be, yet—

"—That's it."

A wooden sword, that had been sent flying, landed on the garden some distance away, echoing a report.

Upon returning to the awestruck voice of her uncle, what was visible was the figure of Theresia, the wooden sword in her hand lunged forward, and its edge touching the throat of her staggered brother, who let out a hoarse exhale.

—She recalled intercepting her brother's sword strike descending upon her, and taking his wooden sword away.

She then appended the edge of her sword to his neck, conveying she could kill him at any instant, proving the disparity between their proficiency.

Overwhelmed by what had transpired, her eldest brother fell to his knees. Witnessing this, Theresia turned back, lips quivering, gazing at her second elder brother, her younger brother, and her parents who were watching the duel.

Expressions stunned, everyone was watching over the results in disbelief.

“The next Sword Saint is Theresia. Indeed, unquestionably.”

An aver, only the solitary voice of her uncle echoed, exceedingly unavailingly so.

“Ah… ah, a~h…”

Theresia dropped the wooden sword she held, glanced at her hand, and then proceeded to pull her red hair with the same. Pulling them off so violently that she would bleed, giving rise to a wail akin to that of a beast, she screamed.

Screaming, losing sanity, despairing to the extent of vomiting blood, regretting.

Theresia, became the Sword Saint.

2

The time her brothers had devoted to the sword, Theresia’s virtuosity with the sword had callously trampled upon all of it.

Things like time and effort dedicated held no purport whatsoever in face of overwhelming sword prowess.

In Theresia’s eyes, having become the Sword Saint, the flaws in her brothers’ swords were pellucid. She was now rather surprised, for failing to notice these flaws at an earlier note despite spending so much time with them.

Nonetheless, in spite of the manifest disparity between their strength and Theresia’s, her brothers continued to pitiably train with the sword.

Neither her eldest brother, nor her second elder brother, nor her younger brother possessed passion for anything other than the sword.

Because of having been born into the Astrea family, having grown up in a distinguished household esteemed for their swords, and having dedicated much of their life to the sword, thus even if their younger sister, his elder sister robbed them of their zenith, they had no choice but to continue resuming forth.

Despite knowing, that they could never possibly reach that territory.

—How, truly stupid.

She couldn't help but conceive that thought.

They could just do what they loved, and yet. Even though the sword did not even matter anymore, and yet.

Since they could no longer forgive Theresia, they could just live in worlds of their own liking, and yet.

"Theresia-sama, preparations for leaving are complete. It's about time, we ought to head out now."

As Theresia gazed out the window, observing her brothers swinging their swords in the garden below, a voice called to her.

Turn around and ahead stood a young girl of identical age as her, her beautiful blonde hair cut short.

She was Carol Remendis—a member of the Remendis family, acclaimed for its superlative knights, and acknowledged for her exceptional swordsmanship, she had been appointed as Theresia's attendant as one of close age.

Verily, her abilities as a swordsman were indeed exceptional.

Though a comparison she would rather not pronounce, her sword might could rival that of her elder brothers.

A solemn personality, and a devout of swordsmanship, she could not help but feel uneasy as a fellow female.

"Yes, let's go. For today we have the tutoring of the people of the castle, isn't it."

"Yes. Everyone in the castle also has their hopes up for being educated by Theresia-sama. Though of course, I also hold the same sentiment."

"…I think you are sufficiently strong, Carol."

"Not at all. Someone as myself, is incapable of even reaching the feet of Theresia-sama."

So elucidated Carol her own ability, as though denigrating herself.

An exceedingly idiosyncratic appraisal by Theresia's perspective. After all, Theresia had never even once, upheld the sword before Carol until now. No, that was far from everything.

Theresia's hands had last held a sword on the day she sparred with her eldest brother using wooden swords.

For more than two years since, Theresia lay not even a finger upon the sword.

Nonetheless, the responsibilities as the Sword Saint came to pass.

Her own self being the Sword Saint alone was a truth beyond veil. She couldn't go as far as to inconvenience the entirety of the Astrea family, so she was willing to perform solely her duties diligently.

"It shall be understood upon seeing what ought to be seen. Even if I have not gotten the opportunity of seeing that form, should Theresia-sama take the sword in her hands, she shall surely haul out strength unrivalled by anyone."

She gave a wry smile in response to Carol's conviction.

In her company, Theresia went to tutor on-duty soldiers. Even in the name of tutoring, she had not achieved anything remarkable.

She would simply go around and have them wield their weapons and train, and point out flaws in their battling as always, nothing unusual.

A fearsome aspect of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint was perhaps how it honed all instincts in battle. This did not pertain solely to swords. Let it be spears or axes, were they connected to battle techniques and maneuvers, Theresia was aware of the entirety of their strengths and weaknesses alike.

If the soldiers' mistakes were pointed out to them one by one, their movements would alter to an indiscernible degree.

However, from Theresia's perspective, though unmistakably conduct abound in defects, even that smidgen of an alteration marked an immense difference for those untalented. Theresia bore guilt when she was thanked, respected, esteemed.

I want to run away, right this instant.

I want to go away, from this place, a place where this power unwished for is requisite.

Just as when she had undertaken the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, Theresia despaired for the present.

She lapsed into shutting herself in her room, enclosing herself in her shell, seeking to hope for the tides of fate to change direction.

—It may have been punishment cast upon her, for weighing her own desires onto others, for escaping her liabilities.

In the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, a clash occurred with the great demi-human alliance.

Deeply tied to the custom of discrimination against demi-humans that remained pronounced within the kingdom, in but a heartbeat, it intertwined with multitudinous years' worth of discontentment of the demi-humans in the kingdom and flared up.

The greatest and worst civil war in the history of the kingdom, the Demi-human War broke out.

3

Originating from the east of the kingdom, this civil war worsened by the passing day.

A small force of demi-humans at first, one which seemed easily suppressible, but the kingdom made light of the depth of relationships between demi-humans behind closed doors.

Furthermore, there seemed to exist those acting as intermediaries between respective races lacking relations, and the blaze of the civil war distended its radius in an instant.

The flaring vortex of warfare ceaselessly permeated the kingdom, and after an entire year of fruitless attempts of extinguishing these flames, the kingdom acknowledged this was a situation unprecedented at last.

“Inform Theresia van Astrea, the current Sword Saint. Along with the knights and soldiers currently scuffling to subdue the civil war, great feats are expected by the lord as well.”

The higher aristocrats, who put together a force unlike anything before, having accepted it as a predicament of the entire kingdom, could not possibly save the strongest being videlicet the Sword Saint for last.

As a matter of course, Theresia was also informed of the orders for partaking in the civil war.

—Theresia attained unprecedented despair at the arrival of the conforming inevitable.

This was unlike her days of selfishly refusing to take the sword.

What was expected of her now was not to wield the knowledge as the Sword Saint, but to wield true swordsmanship and might as the Sword Saint.

She had no choice, but to grasp the sword.

This was also the first time she had been accorded the Dragon Sword Reid, which solely the Sword Saint was allowed to wield across generations.

"However, that sword can be drawn only when it is fit to be drawn. I believe you will have to carry another sword aside from that one too. You can choose one as per your suitability."

Her uncle, the former Sword Saint, gave her advice from seeming experience.

Her uncle, whose waist was once saddled with the Dragon Sword, was acquainted with the whimsical nature of the sword. Abiding by her uncle's advice, Theresia chose a single-swing longsword—one also favored and of habitual use by Carol, her attendant, after seeing through at once as having good compatibility with herself.

—In her first battle, Theresia's first unit consisted of Carol, along with her brothers and her uncle as well.

Theresia's first battle from her perspective, though she wouldn't go as far as to call it an opportunity for honor and altruism.

Even so, it was indisputably an event she mustn't avert her eyes from. An ideal opportunity to make the sword of the current generation Astrea family known across the kingdom.

No matter Theresia's state of mind and heart, her surroundings progressed capriciously.

Anyone and everyone nursed an arbitrary expectation, that defeat was impossible should the Sword Saint be there.

The unrestrained, insensitive faith by those surrounding her which fusilladed upon her, terrorized Theresia.

As always, divulging it to no one, repressing it within her heart, Theresia simply, earnestly trembled prior to her first battle.

And, in the midst of her plight—

"Are you scared, Theresia?"

Yes, the one to reach out to her with this benign voice was nobody else but her eldest brother.

As she awaited her first unit and battle in a tent, her tender brother's words rendered Theresia astound.

Theresia had purposively been avoiding contact with her eldest brother.

No, her eldest brother had not been the only one she had been avoiding. Her second elder brother, her younger brother, as well as her parents and her uncle, she had desisted from coming into contact with all of them.

After a span of nigh two years, she exchanged words with her kind, truly beloved brother.

Lost for words, Theresia could do

naught but resume looking downwards.

However, her brother sat down next to Theresia, a forlorn expression bedizening her face, proceeding to hug her and gently caress her head.

Her brother's palm, yet the same as before, confounded Theresia.

"I am well aware, that you harbor a feeling of indebtedness towards me or the rest of our brothers. It's not like I didn't think anything after losing to you that way either. But…"

Severing his words, her brother showed her a faint smile.

That was her brother's very smile, one which Theresia had continually looked up to, time and again.

"You are my precious little sister. So if you think you don't want to, if you are scared… then I must protect you. Because I, am your big brother."

"Ni… Nii-san…"

Tears overflowed. She mustn't leak any cavils.

More than anyone else, nobody else but him, solely the brother whom she had defeated with her own hands, mustn't hear it. So she believed, yet she made that brother repudiate it.

"After losing to you, it was vexing, there were times I even considered quitting. But, even still, I loved the sword after all. I am grateful that I was born into this family, I had our little brothers, and I had you, my little sister. I am grateful, to the sword."

"…"

"That's why I, am glad that I swung the sword."

How, truly foolish her thoughts had been, Theresia was enlightened to her own idiocy.

Watching her brothers pursue training with the sword even after their defeat against her, she thought that they had no alternative path, because they were ignorant regarding all else, they were swinging the sword and continued to cling to the sword since they had no choice, surmising so, she looked down upon them.

That he should just do whatever he loved, Theresia arbitrarily put her brother on her own scale and conjectured about him.

The brother she ought to have looked up to, ought to have esteemed and respected, whom she dearly loved, she mocked him on sole terms of swordsmanship.

Who was stupid here. She was far more stupid here. And, the Sword God himself was utmost stupid here.

Why, did he not shower his love upon the human, who loved him this much.

Why, did he bless a human like herself, who continued to avert from the sword.

Her brother, or other people like her brother were the ones upon whom that blessing rightfully should have hailed upon, yet.

"There is no need, for you to fight. —After all, you are a kind girl, who wouldn't dare kill even an insect."

Dreading the might of the Divine Protection of Death God, she had lived her life making certain she hurt no one or no thing.

Her brother's understanding was slightly unalike, but her brother had been kind enough to understand this state and way of his little sister.

This granted her such joyfulness, for her heart trembled the most in these past many years.

In the end, she presumed upon him. She cried to him, clung to him, in the end, she entrusted all up to her brother.

—In this first battle of Theresia's, her brother perished protecting their troop headquarters.

Not even once, did Theresia swing the sword. She could not.

And once again, for years to come, never did Theresia ever even so slightly touch the sword.

4

—It had been five years since the Demi-Human War started, and Theresia had turned nineteen.

The Divine Protection of the Sword Saint remained unvarying, resuming to silently breathe within her.

Yet the pivotal Theresia drifted away from opportunities of brandishing that force, abstaining from involvement with the civil war en route deterioration, spending her days sedate and lackadaisical.

Theresia's first battle, where she had been unable to battle.

The war front anticipating the Sword Saint's strenuous efforts utterly crumbled, and amidst martyred her eldest brother. Disconcerted by the impact of her brother's death, Theresia was thereon rendered incapable of touching the sword.

The actuality of the current generation Sword Saint having such a dishonorable first battle was entirely concealed from the public. The existence of the Sword Saint also stood as a spiritual pillar for the kingdom. They could not possibly reveal she had wept and cried on her first battle, and had enclosed herself away upon letting her brother die.

Henceforth, without letting the public be aware of it, Theresia's dishonor was erased from all records.

Furthermore, as Theresia enclosed herself without fulfilling her duties as the Sword Saint, her second elder brother and younger brother hurled themselves into the battlefield, seeking to battle in a way that shan't dishonor the name of the Astrea family, and perished.

Her eldest brother, kind to a fault, who would listen to any wish of her's with a troubled expression, as well.

Her second elder brother, who was slightly mean, but was always the first one to apologize when they made up, as well.

Her younger brother, adorable and endearing, a scaredy-cat and a crybaby who would always walk behind her, following her path, as well.

All of them lost their lives, fighting in Theresia's stead, who failed to do so.

"—I made you go through a lot of things you didn't want to, didn't I. Sorry, Theresia."

Her uncle, the former Sword Saint who was the source of motivation for their troops, also martyred.

Fighting battles after battles, pushing through his injuries, and finally acting as the rear unit guard of retreating friendly troops, martyring heroically was what it had been.

It was not as though she didn't hold anything against her uncle.

Had it not been for her uncle's revelation, perhaps nobody could have ever realized that Theresia had inherited the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint. Had that never been brought to light, her brothers may not have had to resolve themselves for their own deaths in this civil war, and may not have died.

In that course of thought, she surely did harbor a grudge against him. She did, but she also felt like she didn't.

Her uncle must have himself known better than anyone else, the weight of the title of Sword Saint. Since he was the previous Sword Saint, naturally, the same things must have been sought from her uncle as they were from Theresia.

In his personal way, he must have acted for the optimum operation of the name of the Sword Saint for both the kingdom, as well as Theresia.

Should that not work, then there were the words he said whilst parting ways when she met him for the final time.

Hearing those words, Theresia was no longer able to resent her uncle.

Thus, if she were to look for someone to resent, the only option left was solely herself.

Her weak self, doing naught but weep and cry, despite inheriting the title of something like the Sword Saint.

"Theresia-sama is someone who will surely stand one day. That time has simply not arrived yet."

Carol, her associate, never did once try to abandon Theresia, who was engulfed in the repeated deaths of her loved ones, her brothers and her uncle.

Baring her first unit and battle to unsightly defeat, proceeding to drift away from following opportunities due to childish selfishness, the now solitarily enclosed Theresia, within her shell, was someone Carol yet strived to have faith in.

Nowadays, there were even such instances that she undertook even the orders given to Theresia from the royal castle in her stead, exposing her own self to hazard.

Yet, despite knowing how perilous a bridge Carol was treading, Theresia failed to respond to her feelings.

Yet was her self, blessed with the talent of killing people.

Her self had never, ever even envisioned there shall come a day wherein she shall agonize over her inability to kill people. Nowhere could she find, a reason to fight. She couldn't possibly, fight.

"…"

Once away from Carol's monitoring, Theresia aimlessly left the mansion and started walking in the capital.

It had been five years and the civil war yet resumed without cease, and the capital's vibrancy too had been desaturated, as a somewhat dreary atmosphere proliferated across. With no bright topics about, neither shall any gleam glisten the expressions of people. Naturally, avoiding crowded locations, Theresia sought solitude.

The place which Theresia had recently taken a liking for and frequented her trips to, was an unfinished block of land in close vicinity from the capital.

A block of land whose construction had been thrown aside midway through the process with the onset of the civil war. Through aisles and paths befitting of the descriptor narrow, and through gaps of buildings suitable for being labelled ruins, she headed towards the area deep behind.

Faintly opening up, the space unworthy of even being categorized as an open plaza, was Theresia's favorite.

Her heart wouldn't become particularly ebullient. However, this bare space idly existing amidst all this desolation, felt alike and conforming with the state of her own heart and simply calmed her.

In the morning breeze, cool and fresh to an ironic extent, Theresia headed for the back of the area.

Sitting on a flight to stone steps connecting to no place, what could be seen on the other side was a spanning flower garden with abounding yellow blooms.

The rays of the sun shining in, and soil unnecessarily adequate for the growth of flowers.

In this clandestine setting beyond the calls of anyone, Theresia had deftly sown the seeds of these flowers. She was scarce of willpower to tend to the flower beds back in the mansion which had entirely withered.

But, she did solely bear at least the sentiment of watching over the results of the flower seeds she had whimsically sown.

“I haven’t even watered you… yet you have grown this much.”

Flowers, are strong.

Whilst Theresia reflected on her own weaknesses, the flowers, gazing only towards the sky, their petals unfurled, bloomed in arrant magnificence.

She formerly admired their splendor, but now harbored longing for their strength.

There were things in her heart that welled up, and she verged onto crying.

Her hand on the canthi of her eyes unwittingly warming, she frantically suppressed her tears.

—Such was the moment, when a honed presence drew close.

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

A swordsman, had barged into Theresia’s morning sanctuary.

Verging on showing her tears, Theresia articulated so, deliberately in an attempt to act strong. And then, she glanced at the one standing in the plaza.

She saw, and was completely wonderstruck.

Trimmed brown hair, elegant yet fierce eyes, a flexible, slim and fit body, and his brimming clear skin dazzling so bright to a frightening extent.

It was a fact that his attitude, affable by no means, possessed astonishing traits.

However, what had astonished Theresia at that moment was not anything so trifling.

—To Theresia, the youth was visible as though a single unsheathed sword.

She felt as if firm, sharp steel molded with heat itself had his eyes upon her.

In face of that phantasm, Theresia's heartbeats faintly tangled. Placing a hand on her chest, Theresia contemplated what had happened to her.

However, she simply thought she did not wish for the youth to discern this entanglement of her heartbeats.

Henceforth, in order to veil that, Theresia pronounced.

"So, there are people who would come here so early in the morning. All the way here—"

"…"

Quite the greeting, that was.

Theresia spoke to him sociably, but the youth narrowed his eyes, as though sharp, honed essence of swordsmanship piercing her. An essence of swordsmanship so stable and prime, that it did not seem like a threat.

Perhaps he perceived Theresia as unpleasant, an indication of his desire to repel her.

Abruptly, it became unentertaining.

If that was the card he was going to play, then neither would Theresia hold anything back. She shall forge it into him that the essence of swordsmanship he was so proud of, was kaput.

“…Did something happen? You’re making such a scary face.”

At Theresia’s words, the youth made an expression as if he had tasted an under-shoulder swing down.

He seemed to have judged Theresia as a laywoman at swordsmanship, and not just that, at fighting entirely and nothing more. The truth was, he was not wrong.

Theresia lacked any experience of actual fighting, nor did she possess any records of swinging the sword.

For she was a young girl inevitably a laywoman, supposed to be stronger than anyone else shall she fight.

“What’s a woman doing here so early in the morning.”

The youth responded, his words crass and insolent.

The voice of the youth, having heard it for the first time, was sullen yet simple and easy to listen to.

—And once again, she felt the rhythm of her heartbeats go a shade off-note.

5

Ever since, Theresia and the youth started seeing each other often.

It apparently seemed the youth used to come to the plaza on fixed holidays.

It did seem like he was bothered by Theresia’s presence, but never forced her to vacate nonetheless. Perhaps he regarded approaching her as being a greater bother.

Theresia used to walk up to the plaza, in order to view that yellow flower garden.

There were times the youth was the first one to arrive, whereas on other instances, Theresia came first. Whilst Theresia seated herself on the stone steps and beheld the flower garden, the youth devoted himself to training with the sword, his sword of prime quality, and these activities became the promise between the two, who used to spend time in that location.

"…"

A secretive glimpse at the swords dance of the youth.

Inadvertently, she verged on leaking a sigh. For Theresia to observe the swordsmanship of others, and feel this way, was something exceptionally rare—no, this may have been the first time.

She had initially bore revulsion toward the form of the youth gripping the sword.

Rather than the youth being at fault, it was an issue of Theresia's own disposition of heart. She shall get chased away even from the refuge of comfort she had finally gained. Such pathetic anxieties, were overwritten the day she first witnessed the swords dance of the youth.

The sword which the youth swung, couldn't be appraised as refined even for the sake of flattery.

In the eyes of Theresia, who possessed the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, there present were easily discernible imperfections in it as well. Being revolted by the far too many a blemish in the swords of others was also a bad habit of Theresia's, but in the youth's case, despite the presence of said flaws, his passion alone more than amply made up for them.

Theresia's brothers too, must have devoted their entirety to the sword as well.

Even when it pertained to the swords of her brothers, elder or younger, Theresia failed to remain without revulsion.

Yet, why did she not feel simply the same in the youth's sword.

The answer to that, was simple to a staggering extent.

"How stupid…"

—There were absolutely no impurities in the sword of the youth.

Dedicating, devoting everything, to the sword.

Easily put and expressed in words, and until now Theresia believed her brothers had done the same, truly outrageous.

Right here existed the fervor of the youth who, truly, possessed nothing but the sword.

He had naught but the sword. He loved naught but the sword. He shall love naught but the sword, a single swing of steel.

"…How, stupid."

Observing the youth's swordsmanship beside, Theresia felt warmth enter her cheeks.

Theresia was the Sword Saint. Immersed in the love of the Sword God, a being made to stand atop the pinnacle of the sword.

Ahead of his unrelenting goal, stood her.

Although it was unquestionably her own delusion, she felt as though he sought for her.

The Sword Saint Theresia, could comprehend everything about the sword with but a glance.

She could perceive its essence and quintessence, no matter what kind of treasured sword, magic sword, dulled sword, or even a Dragon Sword it was. She could freely maneuver them all. There existed no steel unbare within Theresia's hands.

He was the only one.

He was the only steel, who shan't bend per Theresia's free will.

He was a sword, yet his limits could not be determined by her self, who was the Sword Saint.

That was indubitably why, her self had grown to care so much about him.

“It’s Wilhelm Trias.”

Three months after meeting him, she had exchanged names with the youth—Wilhelm.

Even though they had happened upon each other on a multitude of occasions, never did they once inquire about each other’s names.

The truth was, Theresia had awaited the opportunity several times, but Wilhelm wholly failed to notice that wish. They had finally managed to exchange names solely because Theresia got impatient and initiated it, Wilhelm merely gave the appropriate response.

“I had called you the “flower woman” in my mind till now.”

Just how impolite could he be, this man.

His words had not a fragment of solicitude, nor his mind preoccupied with his own self possessing no regard for her, conversed for a bit and upon satisfaction arbitrarily returned back, so Theresia’s heart was nothing but toyed around with.

“Do you like flowers?”

“No, I hate them.”

This was his reply, despite seeing the magnificence of Theresia’s special flower garden so many times.

Undoubtedly, he was incapable of merely playing along with the other party or uplifting their spirits.

Despite feeling angst toward that, she could not help but ponder “But, this is precisely what makes him such a sword-esque person too…”.

During these times, the realization of the existence of her self who was saved, by the presence of a sword that shan't alter the way she wished it to, to whom something like the Sword Saint was nothing noteworthy, eluded Theresia.

"—Why, do you swing the sword?"

Ever since they exchanged names, the words they exchanged commenced varying as well.

They used to talk about flowers, followed by other miscellaneous topics, then parted ways. What conceived malaise in their usual exchanges, was surely due to the dolefulness on that day.

The attempts to subdue the demi-human war had failed, and Theresia had heard about the skirmishes on the battlefield.

Scattered across the kingdom, the demi-humans who were at the core behind all of the destruction precipitating were outstandingly strong, and among them was a Witch commanding immense supernatural strength, whose existence had also been confirmed, is what she had heard.

She abruptly became uneasy.

Long before, she had heard from Wilhelm that he was a soldier for the kingdom. He was, regardless, an extraordinary swordsman. In addition, his eyes seemed terribly starved for blood.

A kingdom jostled by civil war, he was truly suitable to be its soldier—regardless, he was not undefeatable whatsoever. He may cease coming to this morning plaza someday.

This disquietude, made Theresia enquire.

Putting a finish to his swords dance, the sweaty Wilhelm straightforwardly focused into Theresia's eyes. He then paused and contemplated for a brief moment, and shrugged his shoulders, gesturing how foolish he deemed her enquiry as,

"Because this, is all I have."

So he responded, befitting of a single swing of steel.

That was truly, the answer Theresia had precisely hoped for, and yet.

Theresia became cognizant, of the sensation of her chest being whittled by trepidation and isolation.

“Have you come to like flowers?”

“No, I hate them.”

“Why do you swing the sword?”

“Because this, is all I have.”

As time went by, it had become a solemn promise between the two, to assuredly reiterate this exchange alone.

Theresia herself, did not know what answer she sought to the unremitting, recurrent questions. She was unaware whether it was fine to be soothed by the answers remaining unchanged, or whether she ought to anticipate alteration in his self who resumed being like unvarying steel, she knew naught.

Imprudently leaving things she did not know the way they were, was the very essence of Theresia.

Just as how she, whilst entrusted with the title of the Sword Saint, had sent her brothers to their deaths, had saddled Carol with responsibilities, and now continued to live a time of indolence.

That is why, change always paid a call, all whilst ostracizing Theresia from itself.

6

The one to arrive at the plaza first, primarily used to be Theresia.

Wilhelm’s visits, formerly irregular, she had gotten a grasp on now and was fully equipped with what greetings and conversations to exchange when she met him.

Theresia also came about to realize, how she had been indulging in his being.

By exchanging words with Wilhelm, by having her eyes upon he who had dedicated his everything to the sword, Theresia was briefly able to forget the burden of the Sword Saint placed upon her.

Because she was the Sword Saint, she had been beguiled by him, and as he seemed to be telling her that being the Sword Saint was all guff, she was being saved by him.

Whether she wished to remain being the Sword Saint, or whether she did not wish to, that alone was mendacious.

Within the lukewarm water devoid of an answer, unabating, illimitable guilt submerged her.

His presence, made her forget even that.

"—Wilhelm."

As usual, sensing the presence almost easy to discern, Theresia turned backward.

Standing on the entrance of the plaza, was a youth of the sword.

Her lips unwittingly moved, manifesting a smile which Theresia cast toward him.

"…"

The moment of an unforeseen collapse of emotions, was then.

Eyes distended, lips quivering, Wilhelm concealed his face with a trembling palm. Theresia too was astonished by his dramatic response, undergoing shock.

Questioning where she erred, Theresia rushed over to him, as he covered his face. However, she was ignorant of what to say.

To this day, Theresia did her utmost to decline connection in order to not hurt others.

Thus even when she hurt someone’s heart, she knew no way of handling it.

She despaired. Toward her own self, who knew naught, and never endeavored to know.

Toward her own self, who failed to pronounce a word, before the distressed Wilhelm.

“Wilhelm…”

Unknowing of what to say, Theresia’s fingers reached for Wilhelm. Just how long had it been, since she had initiated physical contact with anyone.

Petrified of wounding others, she became incapable of touching anyone.

Yet in these moments, to walk away from him without touching him was far more petrifying.

Theresia touched Wilhelm’s hand, which was covering his face via her fingers. As he trembled terribly dishearteningly, tasting a sensation warm to an implausible extent, she noticed.

Sword, steel, when bathed in daunting heat then struck, metamorphosed into further strengthened steel.

Though Wilhelm was a sword of a single swing, he was not a perfected sword.

And now, having conceived heat, Wilhelm was now in the midst of metamorphosing after being struck as steel.

And the role of striking the steel for that purpose, was now solicited of Theresia.

—If the subject was a sword, then her self, the Sword Saint, must be au fait with it.

Pertaining to this person, pertaining to this sword, she surely wished to understand.

“Have you, come to like flowers?”

Spontaneously, she vocalized her usual question.

Had there perhaps been a bystander observing the two, they may have ruminated on how nonsensical a consolation it was. However, only between the two, this was for the better.

“…I don’t, hate them.”

And, came a different answer to her unchanged question.

This was what the former Theresia had thought, about this.

Someday, when Wilhelm’s answer shall change, would Theresia be once again left to taste dejection, despondency, and the dread of being left behind.

That did not occur. She simply loved his changing self.

Metamorphosing, the steel seeking to become stronger, the sword of solitarily a single swing, was dear.

“Why, do you swing the sword?”

Thus, surely, this question too had a different answer.

And possibly, that answer shall be the one that brings about salvation to Theresia—

“Because this is all… I could think of, for a way to protect.”

So responded Wilhelm, that he had naught but the sword.

Yes, this person, had naught but the sword.

It is alright, because that is how he is. This person.

—That’s all it was, their routine conversation, was no longer requisite between the two.

However, that did not mean they forfeited opportunities to exchange words at the plaza.

Rather, in terms of solely exchanging words, opportunities for that were

more than before.

Wilhelm, who visited the plaza for swinging the sword, came to kindly prioritize speaking to Theresia above swinging his sword.

As he sat on steps surveying the panorama of the flower garden, she inclined her ears to Wilhelm's words, unfailingly destitute of topics. Limitlessly maladroit art of conversation, yet listening to his voice alone soothed her.

"There was talk of conferral, and I became a knight."

The way he commenced the topic of the day, and his gaze vaguely conceived with heat.

Though Theresia was poor at socializing and had continued to maintain distance from others, she was so stupid as to not realize the meaning behind those words of the youth, who mustered up such courage.

A mere commoner, being deemed accepted as a knight for his labor on the battlefield, was exceptional.

Just how many feats the Sword Demon, Wilhelm Trias had accomplished, was something the worthless, cowardly, disenchanting Sword Saint was painfully aware of.

As well as for what he, having been bestowed with the honor of knighthood, had attained this status for.

"I see, congratulations. You've gotten one step closer to your dream, isn't it."

Because she was aware of his true intent, Theresia responded deliberately with a casual attitude.

Should she act casual, she could not help but blush for an instant. Devoting self-restraint into the entirety of her nerves, Theresia beamed a smile at Wilhelm, who had the expression of having tasted an under-shoulder swing down.

“Dream?”

“You clutched the sword to protect, didn’t you? A knight is someone who protects others, after all.”

Upon Theresia’s reply, Wilhelm nodded with a humbled countenance at once.

Even though he’s normally rebellious, he sometimes showed a childishly meek side of him.

—She wished her existence to be within what he wanted to protect.

Despite partly possessing conviction, she hated her self, who assured herself this way.

Despite knowing their sentiments were surely transmitting to each other, her self who abstained from undertaking action was truly, truly stupid, abhorrent, repulsive, irredeemable, henceforth yet again, Theresia erred.

To the extent she deduced that upon consideration, never had she done anything correctly, ever.

7

His hometown set ablaze, Wilhelm hurled himself into the battlefield all alone.

Carol’s report, out of breath, informing her of the unpredicted steadfast fight being put up by the Sword Demon, commenced pillaging Theresia of her body heat, nearly collapsing her to her knees at that very spot.

Theresia, her countenance paling by the second, could comprehend Carol’s swivet. She could comprehend it, but no vitality was incited within her. She knew, the situation was that hopeless.

"…"

Someone's inapposite voice entered Theresia's ears, who had her eyes focused onto the ground.

It was not Carol. Nor was it someone in the house. But, she was acquainted with the voice, as though it belonged to someone who had been close to Theresia for long, and hence she noticed.

That it was the voice of the Sword God's laughter, ridiculing her self who had always dissipated affection and love.

"—I have to go."

Whilst hearkening the Sword God's laughter, Theresia slowly stood up.

Even now, the derision yet persisted to echo within Theresia's small skull. However, whilst being mocked by the Sword God, she must not relinquish everything this way.

She had entrusted her elder brother with everything, and led him to die.

Bedeviling her second elder brother, younger brother, and her uncle by pressing her own responsibilities onto them, she had led them to die.

But, only him—only Wilhelm, shall I not concede.

Because that sword, that steel, only that person, belongs to solely me.

"Carol, prepare."

"Theresia-sama…? However, your body's condition is…"

"—Prepare."

Carol, anxious about Theresia's physique, straightened her back upon the second order. Moving quickly, she immediately made all preparations required for Theresia.

The battle suit which had not been worn ever since the time of her first unit and first battle, and the longsword stranger to blood.

“This time for sure, I won’t make any mistakes.”

Pledging an oath to the longsword she clenched, Theresia hastened Carol and jumped into the dragon carriage.

The dragon carriages heading for Wilhelm’s aid, were of a greater number than Theresia’s conjecture. These were many who were in the same unit as him, or those reciting debts of favor and gratitude towards him for having been saved by him.

Though he was an unsheathed sword, that nothing but stinging youth was nowhere to be seen.

By now, that youth had become a treasured sword, alluring many with his brilliance and sharpness.

—The front lines of Wilhelm’s hometown, had entirely crumbled by this point.

Screeches and bellows reverberating, the battlefield pervaded by the scent of blood and burn.

Amidst the far too ghastly, harrowing circumstance, Theresia’s chest nauseated. She had envisioned herself standing on the battlefield countless of times. How, the reality painted out the grisliness of her imagination with ease.

In the battlefield, where wounds were inflicted, lives were taken, as blood and death ran rampant, something like resolve stood worthless.

“At any rate, search for Wilhelm!”

The one to raise his voice was Bordeaux Zellgef, leading an army of veterans. Upon his roar-esque command, the unit, wearing armor akin to rock, commenced moving in unity.

“Theresia-sama! What should we…”

Carol's voice resounded, asking for instructions, yet Theresia did not hear it.

Bordeaux's group clashed with the enemy soldiers, who had laid waste to his hometown. Amidst the fearsome scrimmage, she faintly sensed him.

"Theresia-sama?!"

The instant she noticed, her legs moved.

Theresia's feet bolted the battlefield melded with warriors, with not a smidgen of incertitude. She need not even look to know, where to head.

Trode the soil, traversed through the heaps of corpses, and headed for the point where hollers of rage and wails of death converged.

And upon reaching the locus saturated by the pungent odor of blood, Theresia saw.

Right in those moments, before the collapsed Wilhelm stood a green demi-human, with a humongous sword upraised to be swung down.

His face drenched in blood, Wilhelm was glancing up toward that humongous sword. His lips moved. With a debilitated, weak voice, he muttered something.

"I don't want to, die…"

"…"

It's alright.

It's alright, I assure you.

"…"

No longer could she hear anything.

Theresia solely ruminated over what she had last heard, Wilhelm's whisper.

She swung the longsword gripped in her hand. It was light.

Making no sound, rather, making not even any impact, the demi-human was easily beheaded.

She kicked the gargantuan body collapsing whilst holding the humongous sword, such that it didn't fall on Wilhelm. At the same time, shots of animosity and bloodlust advanced towards Theresia's slender frame.

All of their trajectories, she could sense them. She could read them. On her skin, she could feel them.

Dodging them, Theresia followed a mysterious ray she could see, with her sword.

Unknowing of when they appeared, mysterious white rays levitated across the air. What was further mysterious, was that her instincts knew all she had to do was to trace those rays with her sword.

Tracing, tracing, her sword glided over the white rays.

Her sword glissaded like wind, slashing the bodies of the demi-humans atop the rays from next to the next.

Severing their limbs, decapitating their heads, stabbing their abdomens, reaping their lives.

The Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, the Divine Protection of Death God, detonated upon the opportunity attained at long last.

Upon losing the wrist, that wound shan't close.

Upon impaling the abdomen, the bleeding shan't cease.

Even the shallowest of wounds, their pain shall eat away and corrode for eternity.

"…"

A glance, from the corner of her eyes she glimpsed Wilhelm being held up.

A youth bearing a shield, and beside him stood Carol. They were seeking to shoulder the dazed Wilhelm, and withdraw from this theatre.

Yes, that's good.

Hurry, and please take Wilhelm away from a place like this.

"Theresia-sama… ~hk."

Carol clenched the pendant worn down her neck, beholding Theresia whilst she swung the sword. Her gesture, akin to prayer, verged Theresia to a little smile.

I guess so. It was just as Carol had said, isn't it.

I am indeed, stronger than anyone else, and better at killing than anyone else.

—If only, I had noticed this a bit sooner.

"…"

The youth hurriedly took Wilhelm away, who was writhing in an attempt to remain here.

Wilhelm, scraping the soil in resistance, failed to succeed due to the injuries veneering his entire body.

His presence faded. By which, she was relieved.

Whilst feeling relieved, she plundered the lives of one, two, three. Easily, effortlessly.

Gashing, rending, slashing, washing away the hollers of rage and wails of death.

Washing away the everlastingly irksome, loud voice of the God of the sword.

Just let me hear solely his voice, he, who desperately clung to life.

Kindly etch my reason, for fighting like this.

Please, make me believe, that my sword can save Wilhelm—.

8

The battle had come to an end.

Theresia's purpose for plunging into the battlefield was achieved, and Wilhelm had returned alive.

However, Wilhelm's goal could not be fulfilled, having fought to defend his hometown.

His hometown burnt to ash, lost of even his parental home, he was now all by himself.

Wilhelm, who had swung the sword retaining his rage, had a kill count of over three hundred.

An unforeseen and atypical count for a single swordsman, in a single battlefield.

—For that reason alone, Theresia's aptitude with sword, itemizing over a thousand heads, deviated from normalcy.

The existence of the Sword Saint, was here—.

Her disgraceful first battle covered up, this instance became etched into history as Sword Saint Theresia's first battle.

The battle itself may have amounted to unquestionable defeat, but she had managed to prove her overwhelming sword skill.

The name of Theresia van Astrea became widely known across the kingdom and potently boosted the morale of the warriors continuing to engage in combat on the battlefield.

Of course, the Sword Demon youth must have hearkened it as well.

"It's humiliating."

There had been no promise between them to meet again.

Yet, the two had conviction, should they head the square they would meet each other.

And as a matter of fact, it came true.

Wilhelm, having arrived at the plaza, swung his sword down with aim set upon Theresia.

Intercepting its trajectory with a hand, she halted it with three fingers.

The optimal angle, the optimal degree of strength, Theresia was aware of it all.

His sword strike arrested, what Wilhelm declared whilst crudely distorting his lips were words smeared in frenzied emotion unbecoming of this reunion.

"—Is that so."

"Were you, laughing at me?"

"…"

"Answer me, Theresia… no, Sword Saint!!"

She had no such intentions.

Neither was that excuse anything meaningful.

It was true that in a certain manner, Theresia had looked down upon Wilhelm's swords dance. She had seen through his flaws, never relayed them to him and shut them within herself, that was all true.

And it would be meaningless to discuss her intent.

"…"

She swept the lunging Wilhelm's legs, violently toppling him. He inched closer with an expression grown frantic, but Theresia evaded it altogether and counterattacked.

Before long, the struggle became one-sided, and in Theresia's hands was his treasured sword worn from use. The treasured sword which briefly unveiled the traces of his effort blotted by blood—a full swing, she had it glide upon the white ray, aim set at Wilhelm's torso.

The sword's pommel scythed his torso, and Wilhelm collapsed, his breathing clogged.

"I won't be coming here anymore."

She could not bear him looking at her, with hatred, with mercy, with earnest cynicism.

Theresia shook her head, and chose the option she had chosen countless times, to run away.

"With a face, like that… you shouldn't, hold a sword."

Face to the ground, Wilhelm frantically wrung out in a rueful tone.

The one to have espoused and believed in the beauty, the sublimity of the sword, was nobody but him. The ability of her self was to kick and trample upon his all.

"I am, the Sword Saint. I never understood the reason for it, but I understand now."

The congenital Divine Protection of Death God.

The bestowed albeit unwished for Divine Protection of the Sword Saint.

It seemed she had achieved a compromise as to why she possessed them.

"The reason…"

"To swing the sword to protect someone. I think that's nice."

To swing the sword, to protect someone.

She wished she had noticed something so simple much earlier.

Although even upon realizing that, she may not have been able to choose whom to protect.

Now, she could.

—Protect, Wilhelm.

With this might, with this abominable, dreadful might of slaughter, protect Wilhelm as much as possible.

Protect him, protect her family, protect Carol, protect a greater crowd, and ultimately protect something even as humongous as the kingdom, she shall become a fine Sword Saint.

Because I, am the strongest. Because the Sword Saint, is the mightiest.

I may trample upon his feelings, I may betray what he believed in, but I solely cannot abandon the fact that I am the Sword Saint.

“Just you, wait, Theresia…”

No longer present were any words to be exchanged.

The voice reached Theresia’s back, who stepped forth surmising this would be the last.

“…”

She verged upon halting her legs. She desperately withstood that emotion.

Whilst Theresia desperately withstood, Wilhelm’s voice yet entered her ears.

“I will, take away the sword from you. I don’t care, about the Divine Protection and duties bestowed upon you… swinging the sword… the blade’s beauty, don’t you dare look down upon them, Sword Saint!”

“…”

She was forewarned, it would be taken away from her.

And once again, echoed the voice of the Sword God's laugher within her skull.

As if to sneer at the youth, blazoning such abandon.

As if to sneer at the beloved child, heart cradled by such spirit of fleeting hope.

9

—A period of two more years had been needed to end the civil war.

Ever since her parting with Wilhelm, Theresia cast herself unto all kinds of battlefields.

And intently repeating perfervid and acute labor, she contributed to diminishing the Demi-Human Alliance's war potential.

The alliance too lost seniors who comprised its mainstay, its foundation weakening.

It could be stated they had no choice but to comply with the proposal for peace the kingdom had offered.

Henceforth, the greatest civil war of the kingdom, the Demi-Human War, diverged from its gruesomeness in its midst and ended identically exceedingly swiftly as how it had outbroken.

"It's… over?"

She was resolved to tackle the next battle, the battle after the next, the battles with no end in sight.

Thus, upon hearing the abruptly brought report of its denouement, Theresia lost her balance.

"Yes, it is over. The civil war has come to an end. —It is, Theresia-sama's achievement."

Catching the tottering Theresia in her arms, Carol pronounced innocently.

Having grown to display such tender expressions more oft lately, Carol firmly supported the bewildered Theresia and gently caressed her back.

"Achievement you say…"

Those words didn't really hit her.

All Theresia did was to continue nothing but slashing. Believing that it would consequently connect to protecting someone.

Believing it would save the youth who had arbitrarily left the troops by himself and gone to someplace.

Theresia's such actions devoid of self-awareness, however, just as Carol had stated, shall be commended as of greatest service to the kingdom.

A ceremony was held for her, wearing a formal dress with a sword of courtesy in her hands, Theresia failed to dispel the sensation that she was walking within a dream from the beginning to the very end.

No, if this was a dream, then Theresia had always been walking within a dream.

Ever since she had been blessed with the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, ever since she had first felt the Sword God's presence near herself, Theresia's heart had been within the dream shown by that great being.

Hence this too, was a dream. The dream shown by the love of the Sword God, sunless evermore, never to be dispelled.

Therefore, if there were to come a time she was liberated from this dream, then—.

"…"

A commotion splintered the wild enthusiasm of the excited crowd in the ceremony.

That being aimlessly stepped into the ceremony hall, in spite of all the voices calling for his restraint.

In his hands, an unsheathed, decayed, tattered, rusty sword.

He wore a dark brown, soiled tunic, the color of his visible skin also besmirched in dirt and filth. But before knitting brows to his state, there was something everyone could instinctively sense.

—Emanating from that being, the essence of dread.

—No, the essence of swordsmanship.

"…"

Before the being wordlessly bracing himself, Theresia too faced him with the sword of courtesy.

The king, standing on the same altar, halted the palace guards attempting to surround the outlaw. She was grateful for that. With this, no obstruction would come in the way.

Nobody would now get in the way, of her tryst with the Sword Demon here.

—No signals given.

However, as though arranged for beforehand, the blades of the two simultaneously eloped, giving rise to a shrill note.

The rightfully dull blade directly collided with the unmistakably holy sword, albeit one for courtesy. Sparkles danced exuberantly, slashes tore the air, and two shadows intertwined on the stage as though in dance.

"…"

Whilst swinging the sword, Theresia was struck with admiration. Her mind enlivened, her heartbeats hastening.

In Theresia's eyes, as ever, were the white rays concocted in the midst of battle. All she had to do was to trace those rays, all she had to do to kill was to trace those white rays, such guidance of the Sword God's could she see.

The itinerary to triumph shown by the pinnacle of the sword, forged by the Sword God, was being broken through by mere devotion and maddening ardor of the Sword Demon.

The floating white rays were rended by the rusted sword as though they were visible.

Intercepting every single one of the countlessly emerged white rays, the Sword Demon roared a war cry, and stepped towards the pinnacle of the sword he couldn't ever reach.

Heartbeats palpitated. Each and every time, each and every time, they exchanged blows.

Each and every time their swords overlapped, each and every time the contour of white rays was severed, each and every time their gazes entwined.

She was in love, with the demon of the sword before her eyes.

Each and every time, each and every time, each and every time, the Sword Saint fell in love with the Sword Demon.

She loved him. She loved him. She loved him to an unbearable degree.

—She was in love with this person to an unbearable extent.

"—~hk."

The ceremony utterly disordered, amidst the attentive gazes of a crowd so great, Theresia couldn't help but find it comical when she thought of what she was doing.

Her cheeks, hot. Her chest, palpitating. Each passing moment, her love aggravated.

The truth is, I want to throw away my sword right away, and jump to his chest.

There is nothing to take away from me. Ever since a long time ago, precisely when we first met, ever since my heartbeats first rose because of you, I have—

"…"

The option for her to run away into comfort, refusing to face him, was thwarted.

Not by the reprimanding voice of the Sword God, but the glint in the eyes of the demon before her, repudiated it with all of his soul.

That he shall take it away through his own strength, borrowing not the hands of anyone else, not even yours.

With solely his own strength, with his own tenacity, with all he had proffered to the sword, he shall take the girl away from the Sword God.

Just how much, for how long.

Just how many times, hundreds of times, tens of thousands of times, hundreds of millions of times, must he have thought of her self.

The sword slashes melded, locked against one another, their tips shimmered, and exchanged blows however many times.

And, the swung strike accompanied by the Sword God's enraged voice was—

"…"

The rufous blade fractured, its tip twirled into the air and bounced upon the altar.

The one to achieve this, with not a smidgen of uncertainty, was the Sword Saint's soulful strike.

All or nothing, the singular strike of the Sword Saint with nonpareil might.

However,

“My”

“…”

“My, win.”

The treasured sword, had been taken from Theresia’s hands.

Her palm numbed by the impact, the treasured sword fell to her rear with a shrill report. And, positioned by Theresia’s fair neck was the halfway broken dull tip.

The beautifully bedecked Sword Saint, lost, to the uncouthly trained Sword Demon.

That was the moment the treasured sword was defeated by the dull blade, and the phantasmagoria known as the Sword Saint was shattered.

“You’re weaker than me, so you no longer have any reason to wield the sword.”

The voice smote.

Upon consideration, it’s been quite a while since having heard his curt voice.

And to think his first words, would be this.

“If I don’t wield the sword… who will.”

“I’ll succeed your reason for swinging the sword. You simply become my reason for swinging the sword.”

His reason for swinging the sword, was to protect something.

You become that reason, whilst enunciating so, he took his tunic’s hood off.

As the sullied, sour face glared at her self, Theresia shook her head.

To take it away from her, to protect her, in spite of having come to say such cool things, he truly didn't understand the female heart. Although he's a sword, so it could not be helped.

"What a harsh person you are. To render all of someone's resolve and determination useless."

"I'll succeed all of that too. You just forget that you ever held the sword and carefreely… let's see. You just live in peace behind my back, raising flowers or something."

Ah, that is so, so—.

"Whilst being, protected by your sword?"

"That's right."

"Will you protect me?"

"That's right."

If he were to count her self amidst what he cherished, and, if he were to respond to her love.

Theresia smiled at the words of the Sword Demon, of Wilhelm.

Subsequently touching the sword at her neck, she took a single step forward.

By touching the sword blade, she felt Wilhelm's two years.

Pondering that all this time, if he had been thinking of her self, her chest warmed.

With the rise of emotions she could not bear, tears appeased Theresia's eyelids. They slowly brimmed over, and trickled down the smiling Theresia's cheeks.

"Do you, like flowers?"

"I don't hate them anymore."

“Why do you, swing the sword?”

“To protect you.”

Her patience, at its limit.

Ever since she had relinquished the sword from her hands, she could no longer hear the Sword God’s voice.

She saw nothing but Wilhelm.

She felt nothing but Wilhelm.

She had nothing but Wilhelm.

Gently nestling close to his chest, she faintly tilted her head upward.

Her eyes closed, Theresia’s lips imbricated with the lips of Wilhelm. Love surged upon the soft, warm sensation, and Theresia’s world revolutionized.

With her cheeks dyed, she gazed at the man, her beloved, before her eyes.

Wilhelm said nothing, silently awaiting her words.

Such odd conduct. She was the one waiting. He seemed to not understand that, so once again, just like before, she initiated,

“Are you, in love with me?”

“—You know that.”

A brusque reply, and he averted his face.

The moment she rounded her eyes upon the answer, in the world ensconced only by the two entered sounds. The temporal pause of the spectators came undone, and a large number of palace guards advanced towards them.

Present there were the figures of personnel well acquainted with Wilhelm.

“Goodness gracious.”

As Wilhelm formed a somewhat relieved expression upon seeing them, she puffed her cheeks.

To look someplace else when she is standing right before his eyes, just what impudence was this.

She had not even heard him say the words he ought to yet.

“There are some things I want you to express in words, you know.”

“Ah.”

Wilhelm turned his head, scratching his cheek as though to varnish the situation over. However, before long he yielded to Theresia’s gaze and sighed, embracing her slender waist closer to himself once again.

And gently drawing his face close to the astonished Theresia’s ear,

“Someday, when I feel like it.”

—It felt it would take a long time for him to feel like it.

Bearing such displeasure in her mind, she nonetheless avidly anticipated that day’s befall.

Her weakness being what she lost her heart to, Theresia forgave the words of the one she loved.

10

—After that, looking back on it now, a lot happened.

Welcoming Wilhelm as her husband, who had cut into the ceremony and had perpetrated unprecedented recklessness by asserting he would take away the leading lady was one tribulation.

Succeeding Theresia, who had quit being the Sword Saint, Wilhelm enrolling in the Royal Guard with the recommendation of Bordeaux and the others as well was one tribulation.

Having affirmed a lifetime of service to Theresia, Carol entered a relationship of love with one of Wilhelm's comrades and the question of whether she would marry him or not was one tribulation.

Having accumulated an exceeding number of large-scale feats in battle, Bordeaux being provided a seat in the committee that settled major political situations was one tribulation.

With so much, truly so much happening, those days were really fun.

"I'm in love with you, Wilhelm. What about you?"

"…"

In the end, never did he ever pronounce the words that followed. Though he did prove through his actions in his words' stead.

Only either a kind woman, or a woman who was head over heels in love with the man could have been swindled by that—since both held true for Theresia, she kept on getting swindled.

Their time as a couple, passed in tranquility and carefreeness.

Just as Wilhelm had promised Theresia, ever since that ceremony, never even once did he make her grip the sword. Neither did Theresia bear any lingering sentiments towards the sword. The Sword God's voice had long become inaudible.

Yet, the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint did occasionally come to surface.

For example, when cooking, upon gripping a kitchen knife she spontaneously understood the optimal angle for striking and such. Above all, having an ability to cut aptly comprised merely the first step in preparation, as she began to learn more about what followed she started to realize that being a housewife was much tougher than being a swordsman.

"…Ah."

In addition, this was also about the time she learnt how to control the Divine Protection of Death God. She accidentally cut her finger with the shell of an ingredient whilst cooking.

Voluntarily created wounds were anyhow subject to the Divine Protection. Pallid from the wound she had carved onto herself, as she panicked in an attempt to somehow stop the bleeding, the bleeding ceased immediately.

—Was it really so easy, she thought, nigh revolted.

Accepting the Divine Protections' existences, and controlling their power.

Despite of having been conferred a title so immense as the Sword Saint, in reality she was merely a little girl without even a grasp on the things she possessed.

If only, had this happened much earlier—such mighty emotions, brimmed her heart reminiscing the images of her brothers.

"Theresia."

"—Hm."

At such junctures, Wilhelm returned as though willfully.

And as Theresia concealed her deepest heart, he removed her tender robes, and domineeringly advanced.

On such moments, was she saved.

"Are you, in love with me?"

"…"

Only that question did he stubbornly refuse to answer, though.

11

After that, again, a lot happened.

Truly, a lot happened.

The couple’s son was born, Heinkel.

The lady whom Heinkel welcomed as his wife, and she gave birth to who would be Theresia’s first grandchild, Reinhard.

—Nobody at all, was to have been at any fault.

Not Heinkel, whom she proudly called her son, who devoted greater sincerity and endeavor towards the sword than anyone, with full earnesty and effort.

Nor the bride, who was afflicted by the illness called Sleeping Beauty, depriving Heinkel of any opportunity for vindication and left the child Reinhard all alone.

Nor Reinhard, who was blessed with talents capable of sending shivers upon a single glance, his childish frame crammed with preordainments of an unneeded extent.

No one was at fault.

That’s why the one at fault, just as always, was her self.

Heinkel distorted, the bride was taken prisoner to dreams, and Reinhard endeavored to be loved by such parents.

She found her self, having been the first one to take notice of this and fail to do anything, to be the utmost foolish and good-for-nothing.

“There’s a battle called the Great Subjugation… the battle to bring down the White Whale. Over there, I’ll…”

A knight of the Royal Guard only in name, and a weighty mission only in name.

The trembling voice of her son accreted upon the submitted proposition, and Theresia, alone and solitary, cemented a decision.

The longsword she once favored and habitually used, had since always been under Carol’s care, retained in condition identical to back then.

"I am against it. What are you thinking!"

Though she was well aware this would happen, Wilhelm was against Theresia's decision.

She was pierced by a sharp glint infused with will.

His hair mingled with white, his voice lost of its former youthfulness, even so, Wilhelm's foundation shan't change.

His dignity, his zeal, his clumsiness, everything continued to be the way Theresia had fallen in love with, and continued to love.

"—I, have made my decision."

"All arbitrary! Just who asked for something like… could it be."

Wilhelm realized on whose proposal Theresia's obstinate attitude came to be.

His face tinted red with fury, his insuppressible essence of swordsmanship split open.

"That idiotic buffoon… feel some shame… ~hk."

"Neither you nor I, have the right to say that."

"…"

Wilhelm identically lamented for their son. His furious expression fading, Wilhelm bit his lips.

His fury persisted, yet suppressing his anger and feigning composure was something he had become adultlike in.

"I too, will take charge…"

"You have your own duties to fulfil. You must be aware, Wilhelm. —It cannot be that you have forgotten, Ford-sama's grief."

"…"

The daughter of the king's younger brother Ford, had been kidnapped by someone who intruded into the royal castle. As the commander of the Royal Guard, Wilhelm had the duty of retrieving her at once.

It was impossible to have the Sword Demon travel alongside to the Great Subjugation.

The call made in substitution for him was for Theresia, the currently active successor of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, requesting her participation in battle.

She could not refuse. Her days of tranquility lived in relinquish of the sword were solely concocted upon her own selfishness.

She could not, presume upon that any longer.

“Theresia, something like this is…”

“Wilhelm.”

Theresia called her husband, who attempted to persuade her all the more. Before his face, his breathing faintly halted, she enquired with a smile.

A question, after a long time.

“Are you, in love with me?”

“Wha… ~hk.”

Unrest—the same emotion as the past, she saw.

Whilst smiling, Theresia used her hand like a sword and swiped Wilhelm’s shoulder. An attack that slashed the air, cleaved the skin.

Bared defenseless before his wife, Wilhelm was unable to react to the strike coming from beyond the bounds of his attention, as the wound on his shoulder started to bleed.

“Theresia… What are you doing?”

The power of the Divine Protection of Death God was activated on the shallow wound of his shoulder. It wasn't severe, but the bleeding shall subsist. As long as Theresia remained next to him like this, as long as she didn't take distance from him.

"Theresia?"

Her body gently leaned onto his chest.

Whilst feeling the sturdiness of the arms that caught her, Theresia placed her lips on the wound on Wilhelm's shoulder.

The blood dyed her lips in scarlet, she felt the taste of her husband's blood for the first time.

"With this, you can no longer come after me. Because if you're close to me, that wound will not close."

"You did something so stupid for something like that… Let me make it clear, even if the bleeding does not stop I will still"

"If you do then there'll be no point."

With a faint smile, Theresia let go of his body.

And, whilst pointing towards the wound on Wilhelm's shoulder,

"I shall leave that wound as is. So that you do not follow me. I will close it once both of our jobs are done."

"…"

"No need to worry, who do you think I am? I am the strongest swordsman in this world, the most powerful after you."

"Even if you compare yourself in your mid-forties to in your youth …"

"Don't say anything so redundant."

She flatly shut the mouth about to articulate discourtesy.

Geez, this was how it was after more than twenty years of marriage.

The steel remained yet unchanged. Hence,

“I’m in love with you, Wilhelm.”

“…”

“Yes, that’s correct. Answer that afterwards.”

“Afterwards?”

Wilhelm furrowed his eyebrows, to whom Theresia nodded.

And, whilst pledging their reunion upon her husband’s wound—.

“Upon my return, that day, please let me hear the words I didn’t get to hear.”

12

Her memories, were evanescing, dissipating.

Visibility disturbed within the sandstorm, sounds of the environs became sporadic and difficult to grasp.

“—!”

Someone’s wrathful roars, shrieks, screams, could be heard.

One plane of her visibility was saturated in verdant green—no, it was the ground. It was the hue of a grassland. Upon surveying the surroundings, a dense fog locked the world in its entirety less than ten meters from her.

The subjugation forces had suffered halfway decimation, and her unit faced annihilation.

A desperate stampede began, and failed to perceive which direction to run into amidst the thick fog.

However, solely a vague sense of titanic pressure from the other side of the fog could be felt. Hence, voices flew, fleeing to its opposite direction.

"…"

All of a sudden, she was unable to remember what had occurred.

Within the severe, violent clash, the engagement should have nevertheless progressed in their favor, and despite having long retired from battling, her might should have also served to be useful, that was how she ought to have felt—.

"—?"

Her thoughts went only so far before she took notice of faint malaise.

She glanced down to her palm. Something, was off.

There was no problem in her limbs, her eyes, her feet.

But she somewhat felt as though, she had lost her wings—.

"The Divine Protection…"

She realized.

No longer could she anywhere feel, the sensation of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint. All the same for the Sword God, who had remained beside her no matter how estranged and distant from the sword she was.

That scorn, was no longer anywhere either.

"Reinhard—!"

Theresia simultaneously had a hunch to whom the Divine Protection had gone after vanishing from her body.

Was this the same feeling her uncle got when he sensed Theresia had inherited the Divine Protection. Otherwise, it may simply be that Theresia was aware of Reinhard's limitless natural talent.

Whichever it may be, Theresia did not doubt that the generation of Sword Saint following her would be Reinhard.

That intuition was perhaps traitorous to her own son, Heinkel—but no longer remained either anyone she could put the blame on, or the time for her to put blame.

"—Oh my, for a lone lady to remain in a place like this, quite gallant indeed."

The graceful voice of a young girl, unbecoming for the time and space, resonated.

Turn back and Theresia saw a petite shadow within the dense fog.

White clothes, platinum tinted hair.

Intimate and affectionate, an amiable gaze imbued with sympathy boundlessly extolling togetherness towards the unacquainted—misdirected love, to an odious extent.

"…"

"It seems I have not quite been taken a liking to."

Bracing her longsword, Theresia stepped forward.

Had she been in peaceful times, she may have bore concern for the young girl. However, this was the world of death ruled by the dense fog of the White Whale.

A young girl emerging here, transcended mystery.

Even without the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, Theresia's body bequeathed part of a former genius with the sword. Manifesting adequate ability of the zenith of swordsmanship, the bolting slash rended the young girl's petite figure into two—

"—I wish to, understand you."

The young girl's voice tickled her eardrums, and her consciousness was impeded.

With a splintering sound.

Within the darkness, her consciousness descended.

As though sinking within lukewarm water with her limbs bound, Theresia's body submerged, wilting.

The future of her grandson, the heart of her son, the bride who connected the two, worries and disquietude ran past her as though in haste.

And, in the end,

"Wilhelm"

Calling the name of the man she loved, her consciousness ceased in its entirety.

And—.

13

Theresia: "A pathetic, face…"

Steadily opening her eyelids, there she saw a crumpled face

His head had become completely white, and more wrinkles of ageing had proliferated on his face, but she could not help but think that this was handsome in its own right.

There was no way she could have mistaken.

It was the face of her husband. Though it seemed quite some time had passed since that parting.

"…"

She inhaled, a deep breath.

There were others close by, could it have been Heinkel, and Reinhard. She could feel their presence.

All three men of the Astrea family had assembled here, perhaps gone out of their way just to meet her, just to give her a sendoff.

Because everyone, is so kind.

Wilhelm: “Theresia, I am…”

Wilhelm choked on his breath, his face etched with wrinkles.

Exceedingly unseemly before their son and grandson.

Just where did he forget his dignity and majesty. Above all, looking back at it now, such weaknesses of his surprisingly stood out always as well.

Theresia: “Listen, Wilhelm…”

Her voice was husky, yet peculiarly youthful.

As if it wasn’t hers—no, it was unmistakably hers, but she was supposed to be a proper grandma now.

It seemed like her voice back from when she had first fallen in love, how embarrassing.

“…”

When she had first fallen in love, she felt awkward upon feeling so.

There was not much time left, yet they wasted time simply gazing into one another.

But, even still, that’s alright.

Theresia had sufficiently conveyed the words she should have conveyed. Wilhelm, too, must realize that.

Therefore, the one in need of time, of opportunity, of words was him.

Theresia should simply, quietly wait for those words.

Albeit she will have to wait, her hopes will assuredly be fulfilled. That’s the kind of man Wilhelm Trias was.

That’s the kind of husband Wilhelm van Astrea was.

Wilhelm: “There is something I must tell… you.”

“…”

Wilhelm; “I-I am a poor speaker… I fail to convey my thoughts well, and caused hardship to you as well… that’s why even in more than twenty years, never even once did I…”

“…”

Wilhelm: “For twenty years, I may have made you feel distressed. But, I am…”

Theresia: “—A stupid person.”

Seeing him struggle to speak, as he clumsily fumbled to form words, she could no longer bear it.

Ended up laughing. Truly, just what was this man saying.

Theresia: “Did you really, never notice?”

Her hand reached for the cheek earnestly seeking heartbreak, the countenance verging on tears even now.

Her body was terribly heavy. There was not much strength left in her body, but pouring all of her remaining strength into her fingers, she wiped away the tears trickling down his face.

Theresia: “You had always, been saying it.”

“…”

Did he perhaps intend to hide it.

Did he perhaps intend, he could conceal it by simply never expressing it in words.

Theresia: “Your eyes, your voice, your conduct, your actions, had always.”

All of what Wilhelm, had directed towards Theresia.

Had been, more than anything, clearly conveying this person’s heart —.

Wilhelm: “I am, with you”

Theresia: “You are, with me”

That’s why, it was sufficient.

“—In love.”

14

From the beginning till the end, my life was surely one filled with blessings.

I had my brothers whom I was cordial with, I had a female friend who was always warm towards me and took tender care of me, I was saved by many people, I met Wilhelm.

I'm sure, lots of problems still must be remaining.

But I have faith, that you all will be alright.

But, the truth is, just one thing.

There was just one last thing, left in my heart that I regret I didn't get to ask.

—How surprised would you be if you got to know, that it was actually love at first sight?

15

Their exchange of words of love with one another, was the end.

Smiling in satisfaction, her cheeks dyed with the tint of love, and eyes glistened with tears, Theresia van Astrea's form lost its shape and crumbled in the blink of an eye.

Within the arms of the kneeling Wilhelm, no longer visible was the figure of a bloodied, gasping woman, what was bequeathed was only a wreath of ashes—and that alone, gave credence to the sentiment that she was here.

"…"

Her life incinerated within his arms, Theresia had become a wreath of ashes. Wilhelm looked down towards such vestiges of Theresia's, his gaze simply casted down, wordless.

???: "…Are you, satisfied now?"

And, instead of the silent, immobile Wilhelm, a man raised his voice.

The red-haired middle-aged man—Heinkel, aimed a glare pervaded with hatred at Reinhard, who was standing beside him.

Reinhard slowly met that gaze, and shed a sigh.

Reinhard: “Satisfied, what do you mean?”

Heinkel: “Don’t play dumb, it’s just as how we saw it! Are you satisfied? You must be satisfied now! Both in name and in reality, the position of Sword Saint is all yours now, congratulations! The rumors of you robbing it by killing the previous generation, are now true without a speck of doubt too. Tell me, aren’t you satisfied? Hey!”

Reinhard: “I don’t quite understand, what you are saying.”

Heinkel: “Don’t you make that blank face! You shitty brat!”

Exhaling a hoarse breath, Heinkel tried to grab Reinhard.

However, Reinhard avoided his fingers, and constrained the body of his real father through his palm, as the latter stomped the ground to a paining extent.

There remained not a scintilla of impact on the form of the current generation Sword Saint for slashing the previous Sword Saint to death. The truth is, it didn’t serve to be an opponent either.

As though that truth was shoved onto him, Heinkel’s throat faintly shuddered.

Heinkel: “Don’t get carried away, Reinhard… ~hk.”

Attempting to inveigle such tremors of his own heart, Heinkel grew further frantic, and spat out whilst pointing a finger towards Reinhard.

Heinkel: “No matter how many sweet nothings you line up, what I saw won’t change. It is fact that you slashed down mother…

Theresia van Astrea. I'll proclaim it. I'll spread the word, such that nobody approves of you as the Sword Saint anymore!"

"…"

Heinkel: "No matter how unconcerned you look, there's no way you'll let go of your honor as Sword Saint. You may have dubiously managed so far, but not anymore. The one slashing his own blood relative to death is the Sword Saint? The sword of the kingdom? Hah, don't make me laugh! You murdere~r!"

Reinhard: "Deputy Commander, no matter how many times you say it, I do not understand what you mean. —It is the Deputy Commander's misunderstanding, that I slashed the previous generation to death."

Heinkel: "Hu… h…?"

To Heinkel who argued vehemently, Reinhard gave a quiet response. Heinkel rounded his eyes upon those words, but Reinhard did not seem to intend deception or making excuses.

Reinhard did not seek to opine. Reinhard, was stating the truth.

Reinhard: "The enemy just now was merely a corpse mobilized via some secret arts. It could not have been the previous generation Sword Saint … grandmother. Did you not misconceive something?"

"…"

Heinkel made a stupefied expression at Reinhard's words.

He then rammed his hands into his red hair, tearing them off violently. A faint laughter leaking him, Heinkel, with an unhinged smile,

Heinkel: "Then, what was that at the end? When she was, talking to father?! When she was glaring so bitterly at you and me… what was that, if that wasn't mother!"

Wilhelm: "—Enough, now stop, Heinkel."

Canines bared, Heinkel burned with emotion transcending hatred. The one to halt Heinkel's fury was Wilhelm, having maintained silence until now.

The aged swordsman, remaining in his crouched stance, tore a sleeve of his coat and treated the wound on his right leg—the locus impaled by the longsword.

The wound that shouldn't close to due to the ability of the Divine Protection of Death God, had started losing its efficacy since the moment Theresia's being was lost. —No, prior to that, it had stopped from the juncture the sane Theresia had returned.

What ached instead was the wound carved onto his left shoulder at their parting.

The sane Theresia on his left shoulder, and the demised Theresia on his right leg.

With the loss of both, the wounds carved with the Divine Protection of Death God dispelled in their efficacy.

Heinkel: "Stop, you say… father! Are you fine with that?! This guy is…!"

Wilhelm: "Stop, Heinkel…Stop."

As Heinkel attempted to snarl again, Wilhelm forbade him once more.

Taking off his coat now lost of a sleeve, Wilhelm wrapped Theresia's ashen vestiges in the opened cloth. It would be far too lonesome to abandon her to the wind's mercy as is.

He believed he must, at the very least, return her ashes back to her grave.

Heinkel: "—~hk."

Seeing the state of his father, Heinkel gnashed his teeth in vexation and swallowed his words. And, retrieving the ashes, Wilhelm stood up on a teetering gait.

Even if his bleeding had ceased, his body had lost a considerable amount of blood. The wound on the joint of his right leg was deep, making it feel uneasy to let him walk by himself. Reinhard instantly attempted to support his tottering shoulders.

However,

Wilhelm: "—Stay away!!"

"…"

Wilhelm's bellow abjured those fingertips about to touch him.

Reinhard halted his raised arm, and Wilhelm did not attempt to turn towards his countenance. Gazes never intertwined, the Sword Demon inhaled silently.

Wilhelm: "Reinhard…"

Reinhard: "—Yes."

Contrasting Wilhelm's quivering voice, Reinhard's voice was confident and dignified.

Closing his eyes upon hearing his tone, Wilhelm articulated.

—It was, a question.

Wilhelm: "Do you regret, that you slashed your grandmother… Theresia to her death?"

"…"

A faint interval sojourned in the answer to the question.

Or perhaps, this dialogue may have gotten deemed meaningless, similar to Heinkel's earlier.

However, following a pause, Reinhard responded.

Reinhard: "No. —I did the correct thing. I, shan't regret it."

Wilhelm: "…I, suppose so. That's right."

"…"

Wilhelm: "You are correct. I am mistaken. —That is why, there is no longer anything to talk to you about."

Responding with a quiet voice, Wilhelm turned his back to Reinhard.

The grandfather and grandson, without ever facing one another, concluded the decisive dialogue.

And, with a single upraised finger Wilhelm pointed towards the city's center,

Wilhelm: "I am worried about the City Hall, to which Garfiel-dono is headed. If it would be possible, then I would request you to head there to provide support. Sword Saint Reinhard-dono."

"…"

Terribly formal and unduly distant, upon his polite words Reinhard looked in the direction his finger was denoting. He then nodded, and finally glanced toward Heinkel.

Heinkel, yet charred with hatred, faintly paused his breath to those blue eyes, but Reinhard let pass such trivial terror of his,

Reinhard: "The outdoors are dangerous. Deputy Commander, if it would be possible then head to a shelter. —Along with Wilhelm-dono."

Heinkel: "Y-You just shut the hell up! Hurry up and disappear!"

Hurled with the words of a seeming sour loser, Reinhard turned his face away. He then bolted towards the waterway, leaping as though to kick the water's surface, with momentum enough to bound over a building he disappeared in the direction of the city's center.

Witnessing his inhumane talent and ability, Heinkel spat. He subsequently rushed to Wilhelm, who was steadily dragging his right leg as he walked. However,

Heinkel: “Father-dono, going alone is…”

Wilhelm: “Please leave me alone. I don’t want anyone to see my face, right now.”

Heinkel: “Father…”

Wilhelm: “There is no need for you to worry about me. You should just worry for your own safety. Hide yourself in a suitable building or shelter… You, should be fine.”

Leaving solely his opinion behind, Wilhelm walked, deserting Heinkel.

His wife’s ashes wrapped in the coat he carried, he dragged his feet and faded into the distance.

“…”

Left behind, unable to call for his halt, or walk by his side.

Left behind, as Wilhelm dwindled out of view, Heinkel was—.

Heinkel: “What’s, your problem… what’s your problem, what’s your problem, what’s your problem, what’s your problem, damn it, what the hell is your problem!”

In the plaza bereft of anyone, glaring at the stone pavement, Heinkel spouted his fury. Tearing at his head, roaring his rage inexplicable in words, he hurled the sword fastened to his waist to the ground.

Strummed by the ground with a solid echo, the beautiful knight sword glided across the floor and fell.

Heinkel: “Shitshitshitshit, god damn everyone…! Everyone just go die…! Just go die~e~e~e~e~e~ ~hk!!”

In the deserted plaza bereft of anyone, only Heinkel’s bleeding screech resounded in solitude.

The screech, melding boundless, ceaseless resentment and grief, echoed far and wide—.

Grandfather, father, grandchild, the battlefield uniting the Astrea family, thus drew its conclusion.

Once a lady, a grandmother, a mother, a wife.

The end of Theresia van Astrea engraved wounds upon the hearts of the respective three.

—With this, all of the battlefields in the fight for the Watergate City of Priestella drew their curtains.

Chapter 74: Fruits of the Battle For Priestella 1

1

???: “The heinous Witch Cult, which had captured the four control towers and threatened the city, have been repelled. With this, the safety of the city is affirmed—The triumph goes to the Watergate City Pristella!”

Subaru heard the broadcast that resonated throughout the city as he hurried to the City Hall along with Emilia.

The cheerful announcement was transmitted through a magical device that conveyed one’s voice to the city.

Although there were parts where the sound broke, those were only the fluctuation of the voice of the person making the broadcast. There was no reason to doubt the contents of the welcoming announcement.

Emilia: “Subaru! Just now they said…!”

Subaru: “So it seems. Somehow or other, it seems like it’s over.”

In front of the suddenly bright-faced Emilia, Subaru relaxed his cheeks as he dropped his shoulders.

The reason for his listlessness was relief, and a little bit of anxiety.

Subaru: “…At any rate, it’s because the enemies are who they are…”

There was Capella of Lust who possessed the Authority of variation and change; in the worst-case scenario, there was the possibility of the broadcast voice being a ploy to cast false hope over the citizens. There was no guarantee they would not go that far, and that malice was what made the Sin Archbishops so frightening.

However, the voice of the broadcast—it had introduced itself as

Kiritaka Muse, and though the statement had been consciously respectful, faint emotions and joy both had not been concealed. Upon hearing that voice, one did not have any reason to worry about being fooled by such wicked trickery.

Subaru: “That means, that everyone did it…”

The broadcast had stated that the four control towers occupied by the Sin Archbishops had been recaptured.

At least, with this, it was safe to assume that the ending in which all the floodgates would end up being opened, and the city would end up being both flooded and annihilated, had been avoided.

On that point, they could be sincerely relieved. If there was one problem which fueled Subaru’s concern—It would be the victims.

Subaru: “Miraculously, Regulus didn’t end up causing any casualties.”

Although they had a somewhat powerful lineup as well, their enemies were Sin Archbishops with one or two peculiarities to them. The only reason they had overcome the crusade against the invincible Regulus was because he himself was lousy in battle.

There were the cunning Lust and Wrath, whose defeat he had not been able to witness. And Gluttony, with whom he was connected by fate; simply calling them difficult enemies or threats was simply not enough.

Even though they had won, the possible damage—it was frightful.

Emilia: “According to what Subaru said, there were also Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult in the other control towers. All the others, I wonder if they’re okay…?”

Those were the words of Emilia. Accompanied by the same unease Subaru felt, she could not put on a joyful face.

Subaru shook his head, biting his lip, in front of Emilia who had cast her gaze down.

Subaru: “I also feel troubled about that, but… All we can do is trust in the others. I want to confirm that they are fine as quickly as possible.”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right…”

He could not dispel Emilia’s distress with such simple words of comfort.

If they considered how powerful the enemies had been this time around, they could not avoid the possibility that there were victims among their allies. Still, it could not be said that the massive destruction to save the city was the result they had desired.

Thus, although it depended on the circumstances, considering the use of Return by Death as one of his options was a resolution which Subaru had held ever since the start of this operation.

Personally, Subaru did not like the strategy of relying on his Return by Death.

Of course, he was opposed to choosing his own death, but it was also related to the Trial he had witnessed at the Sanctuary, the world after Subaru’s death.

In fact, it was not known whether or not the world continued after Subaru’s death, but the Trials had revealed that such a possibility existed. So Subaru had firmly decided that he would not use Return by Death to increase the number of attempts.

Even so, if Subaru were to willingly choose Return by Death, it would be when the unacceptable result of having to continue with a loss awaited him.

And this time, Subaru was considering such a possibility.

Those who swore to recapture the city and challenged the Sin Archbishops, the Royal Candidates, their Knights, and their allies.

In order not to lose those he did not want to lose, he was prepared to repeat the pain and suffering.

Emilia: “…Subaru, your brow is reaaally wrinkled.”

Subaru: “Eh?”

Emilia was gazing straight ahead at Subaru, who had a grim and serious expression on his face. She had shot Subaru and his wrinkled brow a look, causing him to reflexively open his eyes up wide.

As her amethyst eyes filled with gloom, Emilia spoke to him,

Emilia: “After all, no matter what you do, you still care. I’m sorry. Although it’s a difficult time, thanks to those who captured me…”

Subaru: “No, it’s not Emilia-tan’s fault. Even without Emilia-tan, it was necessary to defeat Regulus. If Emilia-tan hadn’t been there, I don’t know if we could have saved the brides.”

To save the brides from Greed, they had to temporarily stop their hearts which carried the Lion’s Heart.

Emilia was probably the only one from their existing lineup who could have done it. Ferris perhaps could also have been a possibility. In any case, without her, it would have been necessary for the brides to become sacrifices to defeat Regulus in the worst-case scenario.

Subaru: “Well, I didn’t want to make that choice either, and Reinhard wouldn’t have allowed it.”

Even if it were a necessary sacrifice to face such great evil, he could not accept that.

That young man, who was a bundle of justice, could never allow even a few sacrifices. In that situation, the affair with Regulus might not have been resolved so quickly.

Subaru: “Or, I may’ve ended up dying half-way through, in the case I’d been the only one that’d end up getting involved.”

First of all, if Emilia had not been kidnapped, there was the chance that the formations of the teams to defeat the Sin Archbishops would have been very different. Since no one knew what the right answer was, it was useless to think about.

But, hopefully—

Subaru: “After we split up, Reinhard went to the others. That will lessen the damage… That is what I want to believe.”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s true—We have to make sure of that as soon as possible.”

In response to Subaru’s reply, Emilia nodded with a serious look on her face.

And, as he resumed his step towards the City Hall next to her, Subaru gently placed his hand on his own chest. He felt that his heart was beating slightly faster—There lied another concern that Subaru had apart from his preparation for Return by Death.

The sensation of a strange black force callously curling in the immediate vicinity of his heart.

It was a perverse impurity that had slipped into Subaru at the same time the death of Regulus was confirmed. Subaru vaguely knew the identity of that impurity.

—A Witch Factor.

That was the true identity of the impurities that connected Subaru to the Witch Cult.

Just after defeating Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti of Sloth, Subaru had felt the same discomfort inside his body. The identity of the foreign force he had felt was a Witch Factor, and the first person who told him that was the Witch, Echidna.

The Witch Factors had a profound connection to the Sin Archbishops and the Witches of Sin.

And for some reason, it also affected Subaru, as if it were consuming him. If so, this was surely related to the Witch of Envy who induced his Return by Death.

It was not something that could be considered positive.

Subaru: “No matter how many creepy things possess me, I’m me… That should be fine.”

No matter how much the influence of the Witch Factors increased, he would never let it affect him. Even if a Witch Factor consumed Subaru every time he took down a Sin Archbishop.

Plus—

Subaru: “If Beako wakes up, she’ll get mad at me for not having told her.”

No matter what the Witch Factors were, there was no need for Subaru to worry about them alone. He had companions who would work together with him to try to solve the problem if he confessed his concerns to them.

He was sure he would find a way to get over it.

Emilia: “Subaru? Did something happen?”

Worried about Subaru who spoke awkwardly, Emilia turned her glance to him. Subaru said “No”, and shook his head, and after thinking a little,

Subaru: “By the way, while listening to the broadcast before, I think Kiritaka’s doing all right. Liliana surely would be glad if she gets to know that.”

Emilia: “Kiritaka-san disappeared?”

Subaru: “He protected Otto and it was unknown whether he was dead or alive. For some reason it didn’t feel like he was dead, so I wasn’t that worried.”

Emilia: “Then cheer up more, or I’m going to end up feeling sorry for you.”

As if she were casting away the anxiety that hung over her, Emilia pouted at Subaru.

Instead of being anxious about the possibility that someone had been hurt, he should have been glad that someone had been saved.

Perhaps that was also a necessary attitude for his current state of mind.

2

And so, the two of them rushed on trying to avoid triggering each other’s anxieties as much as possible, but the scene that awaited them was not something optimistic.

Subaru: “…This is… terrible.”

Subaru was stunned to see that the City Hall before his eyes had collapsed and turned into a mountain of rubble.

The words that came from his dry lips gave off a candid impression of that scene.

The City Hall was a five-story tall building, something rare to see in the buildings of this world, but its greatness had crumbled without a trace. The marks of destruction extended as far as the foundations of the building, the center of the plot of land where the City Hall had been located had been crushed thoroughly, the large sunken hole looking like an open mouth.

This collapse likely would not have happened unless the foundations of the buildings had received a major blow.

Subaru made this assumption from the remains of the building; Emilia, who witnessed the same thing, gazed around with a restless expression on her face.

Emilia: “The broadcast from before, it should’ve used the magical device in that building, no? Yet, with the building in this state…”

Subaru: “—! Now that you say it, that’s right…”

Faced with Emilia’s concern, Subaru looked around his surroundings in a hurry.

The collapse of the City Hall was not an unimportant matter. It was undoubtedly the result of having been breached by the evil grasp of the Witch Cult. In addition to that, in the City Hall there was not only the magical device, but Otto and the others who did not join the groups to recover the control towers, as well as the victims of Capella's Authority.

Since the City Hall had suffered so much damage, it meant that there had been a battle. If so, what had happened in the City Hall, where only the non-combatants had stayed behind?

Kiritaka's transmission, even the fact of that matter had become suspicious.

But, Subaru's concerns—

???: "Ah, the moment I think there's someone coming, it finally ends up being Subaru and Emilia, in fact."

Subaru: "…Beatrice?"

The girl's familiar voice reached Subaru and Emilia who had frozen in their tracks.

When he looked up, Beatrice was at the top of the rubble looking at the two of them, and she walked down holding the hem of her fluffy dress. She went down to Subaru's side who opened his eyes in surprise, and looked at him from top to bottom to check the condition he was in,

Beatrice: "Hmm, you don't seem to be injured. I'm relieved, I suppose. If you'd been hurt while Betty was absent, I wouldn't have been able to leave you alone even to go to the bathroom, in fact."

Subaru: "I'm not a kindergarten-age kid who needs that much care… Or rather, what I should be saying is, Beako, why are you here?"

Subaru was surprised by Beatrice, who had crossed her short arms and held her head high with an aloof expression of composure on her face. That flippant attitude was exactly the same as always.

Subaru: “Weren’t you supposed to have spent all your Mana and left the frontlines? At least, you shouldn’t have been able to participate in this battle.”

Beatrice: ““Spent” sounds like you’re blaming Betty for doing something wrong, so stop, I suppose! If it weren’t for Betty’s devotion, your leg would be a little thinner now, in fact. Your thanks, your appreciation, and your hugs aren’t going to be enough, I suppose!”

Subaru: “I know, I know.”

Subaru gently stroked the furious Beatrice’s head the way he always did. Beatrice puffed her cheeks in dissatisfaction, but even so, she took a step closer to Subaru, quietly enjoying his caresses.

And, following this interaction between Contractor and Spirit, Emilia gently butted in.

Emilia: “Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “…Thank goodness, Emilia seems to be fine too, in fact. If something had happened to you, Bubby would’ve been distraught, I suppose. Thanks to that, Subaru risked fighting without Betty, in fact. If you’ve learnt anything out of this, don’t let yourself be captured again, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Mhm, thank you. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

Beatrice: “In particular, Betty was only a little bit worried for you, in fact!”

Emilia looked at Beatrice, who had moodily turned her face away, with a smile on her face. Then, Emilia gazed over Beatrice’s entire body, and gently narrowed her widened eyes.

An ornate dress, and carefully manicured curled hair. Both were slightly stained with mud and blood. This was the proof that this Spirit-girl had not recently woken up from her peaceful dreams.

Subaru’s absence, and the collapse of the City Hall.

Beatrice waking up was certainly not unrelated to these unexpected events.

Emilia: "…"

Emilia directed her gaze, which was full of such thoughts, and Subaru tucked his chin in. And, whilst looking down at Beatrice, whom he was still stroking, he said,

Subaru: "Thank you, it seems like you were hard at work during my absence. I'm sorry for everything. I only ever cause you problems."

Beatrice: "I'm pretty used to Subaru causing me problems, so you don't have to worry about that, I suppose. No, do worry a bit about it still, in fact. Worry about it, and give me your thanks, I suppose."

Subaru: "Yeah, yeah… But, even if you were hard at work, it was a bit over the top. Crushing the entire building is a bit too much."

Emilia: "Huh, Beatrice did this?"

Emilia looked at Beatrice in bemusement whilst she pointed at the mountain of rubble.

Emilia: "I wonder how much it'll take to repair a building like this… Subaru, do you know?"

Subaru: "With Beako's pocket money, I know it'll be a big project that'll take a few decades."

Beatrice: "What are you two saying with those serious faces, in fact?! What Betty did is different, I suppose! Betty saw this building only after it became rubble, in fact!"

Subaru: "I know, I know. If you'd struck it, we'd be able to hear it from really far away. Such a cute girl."

Subaru cackled as Beatrice tried to defend herself from the false accusations. At this exchange, Emilia said, "Eh, eh, which one is it?" They were unsure what to say, but that was fine for now.

If they'd encountered Beatrice near the remains of the City Hall, then…

Subaru: “At least, it seems like we won’t have to worry about the Witch Cult trying to get up to no good around here. So, what happened to Otto and the others who were supposed to be in the City Hall?”

Beatrice: “Hmm, explaining that will be complicated, I suppose. But, those who were in the City Hall are…”

???: “We were able to escape as well, so ya don’t need to worry.”

A voice with a Kansai accent, or rather, more accurately, a Kararagi accent, jutted in between Beatrice’s reply.

As they turned around in response to that, they saw a petite figure which was walking around the mountain of rubble. For a moment, they felt something peculiar about that person’s appearance, as the color of their hair that she was adjusting with a hand comb was of a different color than the one they were used to.

Subaru: “Is that you, Anastasia-san?”

Anastasia: “What’s up with the doubt in the way you’re callin’ me… Eh, ahhh, must be this, right? It’s ‘cause my hair color’s different right now.”

Her soft light-purple hair was now dyed dark-green.

With Anastasia in her kimono, their impression changed a bunch. She looked at Subaru and Beatrice, and then, when she looked at Emilia, she gracefully nodded in satisfaction.

Anastasia: “Seems like ya were able to get Emilia-san back without any problems, Natsuki-kun. The Sword Saint told me, so I wasn’t too worried ‘bout that.”

Subaru: “So Reinhard was able to rendezvous with the others without any issues?”

Anastasia: “He came whooshin’ outta the sky. Right now, he’s lookin’ for any stragglers from the Witch Cult… Or rather, I should say that he's taken Ferris-san to visit the evacuation shelters."

Subaru: "Visiting the shelters… That sure is the duty of a Healing Arts User."

Even if they'd repelled the Sin Archbishops, considerable efforts would be needed to repair the damage the city had received. Ferris's role would be quintessential for the quick recovery of the functions of the city. It looked like Reinhard was being used in place of Ferris's own feet to get about.

Emilia: "I'm sorry, I also caused him a lot of trouble… But, what happened to you, Anastasia-san? Like, with the color of your hair, or with this building."

Subaru: "Indeed, indeed. Did you have a makeover, changing your hair to a color more pleasing to the eye? I think it suits you as well, but knowing the original Anastasia-san, it feels strange after all."

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun, you're pretty skilled at spewin' out nonsense. However, I only dyed it for a lil' strategy. Besides, it didn't pay off… On the contrary, it went bad as far as I could see."

Anastasia sighed as she twirled her hair around her finger, and looked on at the remains of the City Hall. From the words she was saying, it seemed like she had been involved in the collapse of the City Hall.

Subaru: "Ferris is fine, right? What happened, and what happened with the others?"

Anastasia: "The story's simple… After everyone left to defeat the Sin Archbishops, a bad guy attacked, takin' advantage of yer absence. They screwed things up a bit."

Subaru: "It doesn't look like they screwed things up only a bit…"

It was clear that it'd been a ferocious battle, quite in contrast to Anastasia's lackadaisical tone.

The attack on the City Hall—a malignant trick that took advantage of the departure of the combatants, he felt like it was probably Lust or Wrath who had been behind this, however, the one he felt was most likely was…

Subaru: “Was the one who came here Lust?”

Anastasia: “She was as I’d heard; her personality’s the worst. My encounter with her gave me the willies.”

Her opponent should not have been so frivolous tantamount to only giving someone the willies, but Anastasia’s attitude did not show any signs of fear or shock. It took real guts to have encountered a Sin Archbishop.

He wanted to flatter her with an “As expected of you”, but more pressing than that, Subaru had something gnawing at his mind.

Subaru: “I’m sorry. We left for the control towers, and after that there was a surprise attack on the City Hall… I should have taken more care.”

Anastasia: “Don’t worry ‘bout it. We just did as we fancied while Natsuki-kun was missin’. Moreover, it’s embarrassin’ that we didn’t get anythin’ out of it.”

According to Anastasia’s words, it seemed like she had been expecting a surprise attack, that was what Subaru felt. She had probably dyed her hair green as a strategy for that.

When he thought to the relation between dark-green hair and the person Capella was likely interested in, he could vaguely understand the strategy they had devised.

Subaru: “Anastasia-san, you dressed as Crusch-san and dangled them the bait, is that what you mean? If just you and Ferris managed to repel Lust, then that’d leave us in a fix.”

Anastasia: “It would’ve been cool if we did that, but we had someone else there. Priscilla-san’s esteemed Knight.”

Subaru: “…Al?”

On hearing the unexpected name come out from her mouth, Subaru widened his eyes in surprise.

Al had been the one least interested in the battle to recapture the city. And to begin with, he was supposed to have gone with Priscilla and Liliana to defeat Wrath.

If he had indeed stayed to defend the City Hall, the Wrath capture team would be in a state which invited uncertainty and anxiety about their combat force and combination.

Anastasia: “Just so ya know, the team that faced Wrath came back safely.”

Anastasia explained this to Subaru, seeing the doubt etched all over his face. Whilst giving a wry smile, she looked over in the direction of the control tower that Wrath had occupied, and said,

Anastasia: “Priscilla-san came back unharmed. The Songstress Liliana came back along with her prince, to everyone’s surprise.”

Subaru: “Her prince… Do you mean Kiritaka? Those two went to battle, and came back with a guy who we didn’t know whether he was dead or alive; what happened?”

There were too many mysteries, like Priscilla coming back unharmed from the battle with Wrath, and Kiritaka and Liliana reuniting. He would have liked to hear more details about that story, but he had to put the general gist of things at a higher priority than that.

Subaru: “Can I believe in the broadcast from Kiritaka before?”

Anastasia: “…”

Subaru: “The recovery of the control towers was a success. What follows that is the status of everyone who fought. What happened to them?”

The City Hall had collapsed, but they had probably taken the magical device out from it. So, it did not mean that he had to doubt the possibility that the broadcast was a trap. The other problem was that in the end, they had only considered the damage to things from the start.

And, to Subaru's question, Anastasia said,

Anastasia: "You needn't worry. Natsuki-kun, you 'n y'all were the last to come back."

Subaru: "We were the last ones… And what about the others?"

Anastasia: "Don't worry."

Emilia and Beatrice anxiously watched along with Subaru, who was showing slight traces of impatience. In front of those three, Anastasia nodded her head whilst smiling, and said,

Anastasia: "Everyone came back safely. Not a single person was missin'."

And that was her response.

3

Garfiel: "Captain! Ya came back safe!"

The nearest evacuation shelter had become the new rally point, in place of the City Hall that had collapsed.

A blond boy came running and called out with a cheerful voice as he looked at Subaru and the others who had joined him—It was Garfiel.

Subaru: "Oh… Garfiel… Eh."

When he tried to raise his hand, he was surprised by the figure that came running.

Though Garfiel's upper body was naked, his whole body was covered in blood. Nonetheless, his expression was somewhat radiant; it seemed that even though he had had a rather difficult battle, he had fulfilled his duty.

Just by seeing that, Subaru immediately changed his expression from surprise to a smile,

Subaru: “Heya, it’s you who doesn’t seem well. Your face looks terrible.”

Garfiel: “Don’t wanna hear that from ya, Captain… But that’s somethin’ I can’t say. But Captain, ya were the one who showed his guts. Ya rescued Emilia-sama without any problems.”

Subaru: “Of course.”

When Subaru proffered out his fist, Garfiel bumped it with his own. That was enough to honor each other’s good fight.

Subaru: “But, I heard Lust showed up at the City Hall. You, where and with whom were you fighting?”

Garfiel: “‘Tis obvious, with Kurgan, the Eight-Arms… Although, dunno to what extent he can be called by that name.”

Subaru: “—? What do you mean?”

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self was fightin’ only with a dead-body. Surely he wasn’t like that back when he was alive. That’s why I don’t feel like I won.”

It was a secret technique to manipulate the bodies of the dead and use them as warriors.

There was no doubt that this time, this secret technique had been used in the secret maneuvers of the Witch Cult. However, it seemed that the warrior’s ability was in a deteriorated state compared to when they were alive. Perhaps warriors like Garfiel were able to perceive that difference.

Whether that was bothering him, as apart from the victory itself, it somewhat seemed like Garfiel felt as if he had failed to obtain the desired result.

That feeling, it was not something Subaru did not know about.

Emilia: “The enemy wasn’t strong, is that why you’re down?”

Emilia, who had been listening to the conversation, tilted her head, as she did not understand the feeling.

At her words, Garfiel first gave a “Good thing yer safe”, glad that she was back, then he violently scratched his short blond hair.

Garfiel: “To be down ‘cause he wasn’t strong… That ain’t it. Somehow, I can’t explain it. ‘Cause Emilia-sama’s a woman.”

Emilia: “It’s something women don’t understand? So, Subaru understands?”

Subaru: “Just a little, though. But, even for men there’s something like an unknown barrier between the strong and the weak… But, I think the result is that Garfiel’s strong. Aren’t you overthinking this?”

Garfiel: “Am I… overthinkin’ it?”

Emilia had a face that showed her lack of understanding, and Subaru’s response was not entirely positive. At that, Garfiel nodded with a sorrowful look on his face.

Garfiel already had his head full of worries in respect to Strength. There was the question of having challenged Reinhard to a duel, and also that he had received a painful initiation in the way of the Witch Cult afterwards.

Even if he mulled over it, no matter how much he thought, the answer to his problem would not come into view. It was possible that it was something like that. That was why, in regard to that—

Subaru: “Hey, Garfiel. If you think about it…”

???: “Oh! There’s Gaaarf~! Itzuuuuu!”

Garfiel: “Guahhh—!”

In front of Subaru who was trying to give him some advice, Garfiel’s body fell down with a loud thump. He barely noticed the little figure colliding against Garfiel’s waist, but his hand did not come out in time to stop him from letting out a groan of pain and tumbling down.

Subaru gazed at the collapsed Garfiel; the one who sat on his unguarded chest was a feline girl wagging her tail.

The girl pricked her ears up as she put on a cheerful and adorable expression on her face,

???: “Fuhaha! You let your guard down, Gaaarf~! Your real enemy’s in your heart! And within your heart, you already have important people in there! I mean, it’s filled.”

Garfiel: “Yer knockin’ and climbin’ ‘n a person’s chest…”

Mimi: “Hehehe, the lady told Mimi! That slapping a man on the butt can attract love… Or something like that? The lady said that it’s attractive or something! Slapping him on the butt is what the lady said!”

Mimi squealed with laughter, on top of Garfiel.

She was no longer in a state where she was losing blood from a deep wound that could not be healed. Before the face of the girl who had completely recovered, Subaru touched his chest and bent down.

Subaru: “You look lively, Mimi.”

Mimi: “Oh, onii-san, welcome! Welcome! It seems like a lot of complicated things happened while Mimi was sleeping, goodjob! Mimi slept very soundly! But it seems that Gaaarf~ also tried very hard, didn’t he? Goodjob!”

Subaru: “Y-You don’t seem to have changed, that’s the most important thing. Isn’t that right, Garfiel?”

He had heard that Mimi’s wounds had been sustained from protecting Garfiel.

Garfiel had been shook to the core by the wound that refused to heal, and he had carried her back on the verge of death. He wondered whether he was relieved to see Mimi better or not.

But, at Subaru’s call, Garfiel, who was still sitting on his butt, rubbed his nose.

Garfiel: “Haa, it would’ve been problematic if she changed too much. I’ve said it many times, but makin’ a fuss while yer recoverin’…”

Mimi: “Hm, what? Did you say something, Gaaarf~?—Ah!”

Mimi, who brought her face close to Garfiel’s, raised her voice and glanced down at her own chest. Mimi checked the inside of the white robe, and, opening her eyes wide with surprise,

Mimi: “Gaaarf~, this is terrible! The wound’s reopened! Blood’s streaming out!”

Garfiel: “Idiot! That’s why I told ya, again and again! Damnit, if I don’t bandage it again and apply healin’ magic, it won’t heal! Ay, come here!”

Mimi: “Ukyaa! It huuuurts~! It huuuurts~!”

Due to the wound getting worse, Garfiel, who remained composed, took Mimi’s hand and took her to the inner part of the shelter. Faced with this exchange as noisy as a typhoon, even Subaru remained speechless.

Emilia: “Pfffft… But, if Garfiel stays like this, he may not have time to worry.”

But, next to Subaru who remained stunned, Emilia placed her hand on her lips and said that suddenly. Whilst gazing at the back of the pair walking away, she referred back to Garfiel’s prior worries.

“I see”, thought Subaru, in agreement with that opinion.

Subaru: “Despite everything, they make a good pair. Those two, that is.”

Emilia: “Mimi is cute, and it seems she reaaally likes Garfiel… It seems that Garfiel likes Ram, so I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

Subaru: “Yeah, for sure… Wait, did Emilia-tan make a comment about love between men and women?!”

Even though the example was easy enough to understand, Subaru was surprised that she could make that kind of conversation. Emilia, who even before Subaru’s confession had been in a state where she did not understand the love between men and women, had been able to comment on the love of others.

Emilia: “Hmph, Subaru, I feel like you just said something reaaally rude.”

Subaru: “Alright, though I’d thought that was an accurate recognition… No way, did Emilia-tan change without me noticing? And she’s dressed in a wedding dress!”

Emilia: “Even though it’s ended up very much in tatters.”

Due to the fact that it was difficult to move around in, she had torn her wedding dress; it seemed like she did not need to worry much about that around here.

Beatrice: “My my, in fact. They’re all a bunch of children, it seems like they only grew up in size, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I don’t want to hear that from you, who most resembles a child here.”

When Beatrice threw out her jape to cap things off, Subaru cleared his throat. Then, if Mimi had recovered, that meant that—He looked around the shelter in search of the answer.

Subaru: “…”

In a corner where there were people rejoicing at their reunion, he found the figure of the elder swordsman standing in silence. Subaru held his breath for a moment at the figure of the Sword Demon who had his eyes closed in silence.

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “Sorry. I’ll be right back.”

Replying back to the anxious-looking Emilia, Subaru left both her and Beatrice there, and slowly walked up to where he had pointed his gaze to.

First of all, what should he call out to him? However, that worry ended up being unnecessary.

Wilhelm: “—Is it Subaru-dono?”

Subaru: "…Yeah, it is."

Wilhelm, who opened one of his eyes, caught sight of Subaru, who had approached him, hesitant to speak out first. Seeing those silent blue eyes, Subaru realized that keeping his silence was pointless.

Wilhelm was resting his back against a cold stone wall, blending into the landscape. Subaru stood beside him and saw his figure from the corner of his eyes.

A figure full of wounds, that made him feel the echoes of a violent battle.

There were traces of cuts all over his light garb without his jacket, and the grey hair that he kept tied back had come loose and was flowing down his back. What looked more painful was the bloodstained cloth that was wrapped around the top of his right leg —That was enough to know that it was a deep wound that threatened his life.

But what caught Subaru's attention the most, was not Wilhelm himself.

It was the jacket that was right next to him which had something that seemed important wrapped inside it.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san, that is…"

Wilhelm: "…"

He had tried to check what was wrapped up in his jacket, without giving it any thought. Receiving Subaru's words, Wilhelm directed his gaze to the bundle.

The wisened swordsman kept his silence for a moment, and then moved his parched lips,

Wilhelm: "…It is as you have guessed, it is my wife."

Subaru: "…"

Wilhelm: "Immediately after she lost her life, her body turned into a pile of ashes. It would have been too wretched to leave her exposed to the wind this way, even though it is shameful that I put her in my jacket… Even if she has been reduced to mere ashes, I want to place her in a grave, and mourn her.”

It meant that—the secret technique that moved the corpses of the dead, the corpses turned into ashes upon their demise.

It was a sacrilege towards one’s soul after death, and the impact it had on the people who had ended up being the target of this secret technique was immeasurable. He could not even imagine what was going on in Wilhelm’s heart if he gave it some thought.

Wilhelm: “I am really sorry. It’s a rather unmanly, meaningless attachment.”

Subaru: “Don’t say such a thing!”

Wilhelm: “…”

Subaru immediately raised his voice on hearing Wilhelm’s self-deprecating tone.

Whilst unaware that he had gotten himself worked up, Subaru looked straight ahead at Wilhelm. Wilhelm opened his eyes a crack, and looked over at Subaru as well.

Subaru: “I don’t think you’re wrong, Wilhelm-san, not now, nor back then against the White Whale. You’re an incredible person whom I respect. What’s so wrong about appreciating the people you care about? There’s nothing to be ashamed of, thinking like that is no good.”

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono…”

Subaru: “You’re incredible, Wilhelm-san. Your wife… Placing her in her grave, mourning her, those thoughts are no mistakes. I can’t really express myself well, but you’re amazing.”

Those were his true feelings.

Those were, without a doubt, Subaru’s true feelings, his true thoughts that he did not wish to be denied.

Back at the time of the White Whale, and now, during his sorrowful reunion, destiny had been really cruel to Wilhelm.

Yet even so, the Sword Demon had gone against destiny to his utmost; he had traversed it with his own willpower, and tried to reach love. Not all results may end up being rewarded.

His repentance and remorse might remain sempiternally. But, that should be correct.

Wilhelm's love in loving the one he loved, it all should end well.

Subaru: "It's nothing to be ashamed of. Please, duly place her in her grave. And, if the opportunity presents itself, and it's not too much of a nuisance, please let me visit her grave as well."

Wilhelm: "…"

Subaru: "I want to do so, I think that's what a person ought to do."

He was not wording himself well, and furthermore he was getting emotional; Subaru grew vexed at himself. In pushing his own egotistical feelings, he would not be able to help it if Wilhelm burst into laughter. It would be quite natural for him to say that it was none of his business and refuse him.

However, Wilhelm abruptly let his lips slacken before Subaru.

A small gap broke through on his stiffened, tense face. And, he said,

Wilhelm: "…Yes, please do, Subaru-dono. I also want you to dedicate some words to my wife, I think. If it's you…"

Subaru: "—! Y-Yes, I will. I'm honored."

He had gotten his permission; or, more accurately, it was thanks to Wilhelm's generosity.

After hearing Subaru's egotistical wish, Wilhelm let out a soft sigh. Guessing by his face that he did not want to talk anymore, Subaru bowed his head down.

He should leave Wilhelm alone with his wife for a bit.

But before leaving this place, he wanted to make sure of one last thing. And that was,

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san—About your wife, uh, did you manage to?”

Wilhelm: “…”

Had he reached closure with her? Had he ended up reaching a result he had not sought?

Naturally, confronting his dead wife could not have been the result he wished to acquire. Even so, no one other than Wilhelm could have been permitted to face her; after having took in that situation, Wilhelm had sought closure.

Thus, Subaru should not be the only one who wanted that at least.

Wilhelm: “My wife…”

Wilhelm started to speak to Subaru, who had stopped in his tracks to look at him. But, his words stopped there. Wilhelm’s gaze moved slightly away from Subaru. He directed his gaze to his jacket that had his wife’s ashes wrapped up within.

For a split second, a huge swirl of emotions floated through his irises. And, he spoke out,

Wilhelm: “—Yes. I exchanged words with my wife, and certainly, I said goodbye.”

Words, it was a figurative expression, most likely.

Wilhelm’s wife had been the prior Sword Saint. Clashing swords with her was a conversation like no other for the Sword Demon. Their blades of closure themselves should have been their final words of goodbye.

That was why, surely that closure had been the result of Wilhelm’s choice—

Wilhelm: “I love my wife—I should have gotten that across.”

Subaru: “I see.”

Wilhelm’s quiet confession of love.

In contrast to the modest tone in his voice, there was a zeal which scorched the hearts of those who listened to it, and Subaru’s chest grew hotter. Taking a deep breath, Subaru closed his eyes.

Pouring out of him were raging billows of emotions. Keeping each one in check, he opened his eyes.

Wilhelm, who was in front of him, had a lonely smile on his face. However, since he had allowed himself to break into that smile, it felt as if he had been saved, and Subaru too allowed his lips to relax.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san. Thank you for your hard work.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Subaru: “Perhaps everything will get hectic very soon I think, but until then, please rest. I’ll go around a little more to see what happened.”

Subaru spoke too quickly and was not sure whether the last words were right or not. He scratched his cheek with one of his fingers, and felt embarrassed as he turned his back on Wilhelm. Behind his back,

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono—”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

As he was called while he tried to leave, Subaru stopped and turned around. Then Wilhelm, who had a slight trace of surprise on his face, immediately said “No”, with a shake of his head.

Wilhelm: “My apologies. It is something trivial… Please do not fret about it.”

Subaru: “Is that so? No, when you say it like that, it makes me feel the opposite… But well, right, yes. I’ll see you later.”

Subaru walked away from there, with a bitter smile adorning his face due to Wilhelm’s atypical reaction.

Seeing what Subaru looked like when he returned, Emilia and Beatrice seemed to express relief on their faces. In that regard, Subaru’s expression had probably changed quite a bit between the time he’d left and the time he’d come back.

Subaru himself was well aware of that.

Since reuniting with the dead was not something to be happy about.

But at least, Wilhelm had ended it with his own hands, and he was satisfied with the result. He felt that that fact was a modest salvation.

4

As he narrowed his eyes, the Sword Demon stared at the back of the dark-haired boy who walked away.

His lips were firmly pursed together so as to hold something back.

It was a breakdown in his camouflage, which until a little while ago had masked his real intentions with firm willpower. A frenzy of emotion which was likely to gnaw through his pursed lips if he were to disregard it, even now.

Surely, what he kept hidden from that boy in his chest until then was—

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono… You are…”

Only within his mouth, whispering in a hoarse voice, did the Sword Demon say the boy’s name,

Wilhelm: “You could be, my—”

Having said that, the Sword Demon closed his eyes as if his own feeble heart were closed off. The continuation that made no sound was never heard by anyone.

It was also something that would never come out of the mouth of the Sword Demon.

That was the only thing, which the Sword Demon would never allow.

Chapter 75:
Fruits of the Battle For Priestella 2

1

After ending his conversation with Wilhelm, Subaru quietly felt relieved.

Along with Garfiel, the two of them that should have been tasked with Lust—They were supposed to be the combination which should have had the most difficult fight.

In actuality, Lust had abandoned her control tower, and it had been Wilhelm’s wife, Theresia, along with the former hero, Kurgan, who had ended up blocking their path. However, it was already confirmed that there were no casualties in these three spots.

Subaru: “…”

Of course, Garfiel and Wilhelm should have much to reflect on.

In fact, Garfiel had spoken about the reservations he had left, and it was easy to imagine that wounds too difficult to express in words lay within Wilhelm’s heart.

And yet, even so.

Subaru was happy that the two of them had returned safe and sound after finishing up their battles.

If there had been casualties amongst his acquaintances, Subaru had resigned himself that he may have ended up having to use his Return by Death. That was why he had been relieved that the two of them had survived without him needing to use it.

However, the sense of relief he had gotten from the fact that they had not died was also connected to another conviction of his.

Namely that he would not have to once again depend on an unnatural power like his Return by Death.

He had made full use of his Return by Death, and challenged things many times to try and secure a better future. After depending so much on that power, at this point, maybe he could not speak ill of it, however it was for this reason.

It was a conclusion that only Subaru could reach, precisely because it was Subaru who had died many times, and each time, he had overturned the future.

To begin with, something like Return by Death should have been unnecessary.

Surely there was a way to secure the future he wanted, even without his Return by Death. Like right now, a time when everyone had worked with each other for the same objective, as to secure that.

Emilia: “Subaru, was Wilhelm-san okay…?”

Coming out to greet Subaru, who had returned, Emilia asked about the wisened swordsman who had been standing in a corner of the shelter. To her words, Subaru jerked his chin into a nod, without looking back,

Subaru: “Yeah, I think he’s alright. He’s wounded quite a bit, but… it seems like he managed to take care of the wounds within his heart, which were the most alarming.”

Emilia: “I see… Although it’s obvious, he’s a strong individual, isn’t he?”

Subaru: “Indeed. He’s a strong individual for sure. That’s why he’s okay.”

Subaru nodded his head up and down multiple times at Emilia’s prior statement. Emilia opened her eyes wide upon seeing Subaru’s gesticulation, and then burst into a smile.

Seeing Subaru frown at her unexpected reaction, she placed her hand on her mouth, and said,

Emilia: “I’m sorry. Subaru’s behavior around Wilhelm-san’s reaaally different compared to when you're with other people. How can I put it, in truth, I think you act with every fiber of your being."

Subaru: "Who even says "every fiber of your being" these days…"

After a long absence, Emilia's antiquated words from the Showa Era made their reappearance, to which Subaru gave a wry smile. Following that, he scratched his cheek with one of his fingers.

Even if it appeared like he was teasing her, he understood what Emilia was trying to say. And that was plenty enough for Subaru himself to be aware of it.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san is, how should I say it, special. Because he's an amazing person whom I can sincerely admire, well, that's what I feel anyways."

Emilia: "I know that he's an amazing person too, but that being the case, Reinhard and the others have to know that too, right? And yet, despite all that."

Subaru: "The perspective changes between someone of the same age and someone from a different generation. The disparity you feel with those of the same age has rather large implications on you that end up making you feel miserable. But, the differences you feel with those older than you can be set as a goal for yourself. Someday, when I'm a sullen old man, I want to be as imposing as Wilhelm."

Emilia: "…Hmm, I get you. Hehe. If you say so."

Emilia nodded, her face full of understanding, at the frivolous manner Subaru had adopted to hide his embarrassment.

Subaru felt defeated by that attitude. Speaking seriously about it, not even Subaru knew how he should express the deep emotions he felt in words.

Though, probably, almost certainly, he thought that it was a good thing that he did not need to put them into words.

Beatrice: "Betty believes that growing out his beard wouldn't suit Subaru, in fact."

Subaru: “I didn’t think it was this sort of conversation, but well, whatever, it’s okay too. I’ll grow out a beard when Beako deems it appropriate.”

Beatrice: “…Well then, if such a time comes, I suppose. The elaborate co-existence between furriness and adorable-ness is an area that cannot be sustained without Bubby’s elegance, in fact. Devote yourself to it, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Yeah, yeah, I say.”

Emilia and Beatrice exchanged their feelings in a manner that was typical for them, but at the same time—Subaru pointed his eyes over towards a corner of the shelter which had suddenly grown noisy.

The evacuees who were gathered in a corner of the shelter, all the individuals there had been released from their fear and unease that had been born from the city being occupied. However, they had inexplicably cheerful looks on their face. And that was because—

Liliana: “Well then, well then! Allow me to sing again! Please listen to my new song—The Burning Song of the Flaming City!”

Subaru: “That racket is Liliana, huh?”

There was a short, young girl with brown skin in the middle of that kerfuffle. He could see the lively figure of the bard strumming her Lyulyre, shaking her blonde hair.

Her appearance had caused an unmistakable impact, it had an originality to it that shot out so askew that he did not think even Lust could imitate; it was Liliana without a doubt.

Beatrice: “She’s a truly strident girl, in fact.”

Emilia: “But, Liliana was also one of the people who fought against a Sin Archbishop, right? Erm… I can’t imagine at all how she managed to fight…”

Taking notice of the same thing as Subaru, Emilia and Beatrice relaxed their shoulders too.

If she was acting so lively, then no doubt Liliana had made it back with no injuries as well. Her, and the others' battlefield—Their battle against Wrath was a place which he could not imagine, neither the strategy nor the fighting strength needed, or the most proper result.

Subaru had already considered the possibility that Liliana's song would have been useful for confining Sirius's Authority, however, it was unknown how they'd been able to put it into practice. He was determined to hear what the hell had actually happened in their place of battle.

Subaru: "It won't be easy to get close to Liliana right now. Let's postpone it for later."

Emilia: "Yeah… Besides, now's definitely the time where Liliana's songs are most necessary. Us taking that away wouldn't be good. Let's postpone talking to her until much later."

Beatrice: "I agree, I suppose. Betty would like to pass on talking with that irritating girl, in fact."

Subaru and the others made this conclusion whilst they watched Liliana strumming out a tune, singing at the top of her lungs with utmost passion. The song that slipped into his ears was soothing, seemingly permeating his wounded heart.

In reality, if they only took into account her singing voice, she was worthy of the title of Songstress. He concurred with Emilia's opinion that, right now, the city needed her.

???: "…"

Then, he noticed Kiritaka's figure right next to Liliana as she delivered her performance.

His expensive suit was covered in mud and blood everywhere, and there were also traces of rips left on it. It was the outcome of having fled through scenes of carnage, and according to Otto's story, it had been unknown whether he was dead or alive.

Subaru: "No one's ought to have had a comfortable scene of battle…”

Taking note of Subaru’s gaze, Kiritaka bowed in his direction. Subaru waved at him, and started to walk further into the shelter once again, in search for the next of his companions.

Then, Beatrice, who was walking right next to him as he broke into a walk, said,

Beatrice: “It’s not too important, but it was that man who woke me up when I was sleeping, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Kiritaka?”

Beatrice: “That man even went as far as crushing some of his precious Great Magic Stones, in fact. Betty doesn’t care if it was down to his sense of responsibility, or if it was for someone, I suppose. But, that’s what happened, in fact.”

Subaru: “…I see, I see. That’s great, Beako. You did well to say it.”

Beatrice: “Hmph, I suppose.”

Having heard this story that help had come from this unexpected source, Subaru stroked Beatrice’s head. Beatrice puffed out her cheeks, seemingly in dissatisfaction, but it went without saying that this was just a facade.

According to the story he’d briefly heard from Anastasia, Beatrice’s actions after she had woken up had also been an indispensable contribution in regard to the current results. If Kiritaka had truly been the one to play a role in that, then it could be said that he had fulfilled his duty corresponding to his position as a city executive.

Emilia: “Subaru. It seems like those who got injured are in the furthest part of the shelter.”

As she gazed at that part of the shelter, Emilia spoke towards Subaru as he chatted away with Beatrice. Upon looking towards the dingily lit area she was pointing, there, in the middle of the bustle, was an area that was being used as a field hospital.

There were mats and blankets spread out directly on the ground, and several injured people were laying there. This was supposed to be the first evacuation center which Ferris had visited, so even though the people lying down had yet to completely recover, their lives probably were in no danger.

Subaru: “Does that mean that treating so many people to their full is difficult, even for someone like Ferris?”

Beatrice: “It doesn’t matter how skilled you are at healing magic, there’s a limit to the amount of Mana a person can hold, in fact. If you go around healing everyone you see, then you’d run out of it pretty much at once, I suppose. It was a wise decision, in fact.”

Beatrice, who had replied, looked faintly vexed as they gazed at the rows of the injured. Even though she hid it on the surface, she was a tender-hearted Spirit whose feelings ran deep. Beatrice’s healing magic was quite effective, even if it didn’t even get close to Ferris’s. But, even if you were to say she had any Mana, the quantity which Subaru supplied would never get anywhere near that.

It was inevitable that she was vexed, and lamenting her lack of strength.

Emilia: “In truth, I would also like to go around helping everyone with my healing magic, but…”

Subaru: “You have another role, Emilia-tan. That’s why you need to put that aside for now.”

Emilia: “Yeah, I know.”

If they let themselves be carried away by the emotions of the moment, they wouldn’t be able to reach their goal, and would end up losing everything. Subaru called out to Emilia so she’d restrain herself, and as they walked in between people who were groaning in pain from their wounds, they searched for their companion amongst them. And soon after, they were able to find the guy they were searching for.

???: “Natsuki-san, over here!”

Subaru: “Heya, Otto!”

In the last row of the injured, there was a person who waved his hand. Noticing the young man’s familiar figure, Subaru and the others approached him with a sense of relief.

Lying on a ready-made bed, a faint smile on his pale face, was none other than the proud Warrior-Grade Internal Affairs Minister of the Emilia Camp, Otto Suwen.

Otto: “Though now, it feels I was given an evaluation that I really cannot let slide by.”

Subaru: “That’s your imagination, Warrior-Grade Internal Affairs Minister. It’s the same ol’ story all over again, wandering around the city seeking blood, in search for foes. You love doin’ that, don’t’cha.”

Otto: “And yet again starting with the strange rumors, will you stop with these completely false claims?!”

Instead of a greeting of reunion, Subaru exchanged jokes with Otto, who was lying down. Otto shouted and dropped his shoulders in resignation, and Subaru crouched beside him to check his condition.

He did not seem to have lethal injuries, but both of his legs looked painful. They must have been sealed up with the application of healing magic and then bandaged, but despite that, the thigh area had red dampness soaking through.

Emilia: “Otto-kun, how’re your wounds?”

Otto: “It seems that walking will be a little bit difficult until I have recovered, but apart from that, there is no visible trauma… When it comes to these situations, Emilia-sama’s should have been more difficult, so it is rather pathetic of me that I have been severely injured.”

Emilia: “That’s not true. It’s proof that you fought with all your strength, isn’t it? Otto-kun’s job isn’t to fight, so it’s good that nothing terrible happened to you.”

Otto: “So far, Emilia-sama is the only one who has decent common sense regarding the work of an Internal Affairs Minister.”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Before Otto who murmured deeply, Emilia tilted her head with a confused look.

Putting that aside, Subaru asked Otto for an explanation of the situation in which he got injured. Initially, Otto was supposed to stay at the City Hall, and await the reports from various places at their headquarters.

Subaru: “You didn’t get this injury because you got caught in the collapse of the City Hall, right? According to what Anastasia-san said, those who stayed at the City Hall were Anastasia-san, Ferris, and Al.”

Otto: “I do not know exactly what the three who remained have done. When I left the City Hall and went through the waterways of the city… I bumped into Gluttony. This is why I have ended up like this.”

Subaru: “Gluttony… That bastard. Damn, there’s also Lust, how much more do they intend to mock us…”

Subaru’s heart started boiling once again when he heard the name of his despised enemy.

The wickedness of the Witch Cult altogether had derided and undermined every preparation and every assumption they had put into place. Their behavior in ignoring the control towers was a mockery towards those who had gotten onto the stage.

Otto: “Fortunately, thanks to Felt-sama, and the people of the Scales of the White Dragon, we managed to oppose them somehow. However, without the help of Beatrice-san, I do not know what the outcome might have been.”

Beatrice: “Despite us outnumbering them, I couldn’t bear to see it, in fact!”

Emilia: “Yes, yes. I’m reaaally thankful.”

Emilia gently stroked Beatrice, who had puffed out her small chest.

That exchange was pleasant, but what interested Subaru were Otto’s actions. Leaving aside the result of the meeting with Gluttony, why had he left the City Hall in the first place?

Even if he had been out of the formation to intercept Lust, he should have stayed in the shelter and nothing more. It should not have been necessary for him to leave the shelter and traverse the city.

Otto: “There was a request from the Witch Cult… Priority was given to a certain book’s safety.”

Guessing Subaru’s questions, Otto spoke quietly.

He spoke about the book requested by the Witch Cult rather hazily, probably as a consideration for the fact that Emilia was listening in behind Subaru. Subaru nodded at his concerns,

Subaru: “The restoration specialist, what’s-his-name’s place?”

Otto: “It’s Mister Darts. No one should know that it was commissioned to be restored by him… But, to make absolutely sure, I tried to collect it. In the end, I encountered Gluttony before I met up with Mister Darts, and this is the result.”

He understood the reason why Otto had left the City Hall and walked about the city, in spite of the threat of the Witch Cult. Again, it looked like he had tried to fill a gap Subaru had not been attentive about.

The attack on the City Hall, and the recovery of the Book of Wisdom, were not things that he had even thought about.

Subaru: “At least consult with me first. We’re friends, right?”

Otto: “Emilia-sama was kidnapped, and you also carried the fate of the city on your back like a hero, did you want me to put yet another annoying burden on top of that? Sorry. But I did not intend to pressure my friend with these stupidities.”

Subaru: “Keh.”

Though he had intended to joke around, he had unexpectedly ended up reciprocating with happy words, making Subaru grunt. Seeing their exchange, Emilia and Beatrice exchanged glances and gave a deep sigh.

Beatrice: “These guys aren’t honest, I suppose.”

Emilia: “I think it’s normal for them. But, then, that book…? It’d be better if we collected it. Erm, where…”

Subaru: “Ah, I’ll take care of that. Or I’ll get Garfiel to do it. Emilia-tan doesn’t have to worry herself too much about that book.”

Emilia: “Yeah?”

He did not wish to let Emilia get involved much with the Book of Wisdom.

It had backwards compatibility with the Gospels, and was also a sort of relic that a Witch had left behind. Keeping Emilia away from it as much as possible was one of Subaru’s silent resolutions.

Subaru: “But, those who met Gluttony were Felt and the Scales of the White Dragon, right? Leaving aside the mercenaries in white, shouldn’t Felt have been hiding somewhere?”

Emilia: “But, I can’t really imagine that girl staying quietly in one place…”

Subaru: “Agreed.”

Felt and the others had arrested Reinhard’s father—Heinkel, and he had heard that they were standing guard over him. Therefore, they should not have participated in the recapture of the control towers, although there was probably no one to communicate that decision to.

Subaru: “So, what about Felt?”

Otto: “She was exhausted, but she did not really sustain any injuries like these. She went rushing out of the shelter just now, to pick up the subordinates she had brought along.”

Subaru: “Tonchinkan, right? I heard about that, it seems like those guys are doing surprisingly well.”

He had both a good and a bad impression of the trio, but it was best safe rather than sorry. They had an acquaintanceship, and he had been killed once by them, but instead of taking revenge someday, he had tried to leave it in the past.

In any case, it was a good result that he was able to confirm the safety of that camp. After that, they would take care of the task related to the Book of Wisdom, so the next issue was—

Otto: “Natsuki-san—Be careful in the adjacent shelter.”

Subaru: “In the adjacent shelter…?”

With a low voice, Otto spoke to Subaru, the latter immersed in his thoughts. To the turbulent emotions in his speech, Subaru’s voice also naturally lowered in response.

Otto gave a small nod on hearing Subaru’s reaction. And,

Otto: “One of the Sin Archbishops is being held there.”

2

???: “What is it, commoner? How dare you show your wretched face in our presence. That impudence is worthy of admiration beyond awe.”

He had left the shelter that had been made into a field hospital, and headed to the next shelter following Otto’s words. Compared to the shelter from before, the scale of that shelter was quite small. If the previous shelter was like the parking lot of a shopping center, this one was like a bicycle parking lot at best.

Immediately after he had gotten the vague impression that despite it being likewise a shelter, it probably had a different purpose, the woman in red who had set herself up at the entrance of the building called out to him.

The woman's name was Priscilla Barielle.

Among the candidates of the Royal Selection which had gathered in the city, she was someone who completely lacked a cooperative personality.

Even so, even someone like that had undoubtedly been a reliable ally in this situation. After all, it had been Priscilla in charge of the unknown monster, Sirius of Wrath. The ability to destroy that threat ever-so-splendidly and make it back, that was a result that had to be praised sincerely.

Subaru: "That you don't like my face is your personal opinion, so that's okay. For now, good work to the both of us. I'm relieved that you came back safe. I'm not flattering you."

Priscilla: "My personal opinion is the aesthetic sense which must be revered most in the world. It is not even worth evaluating what words you might utter… Well, it is. However, there are no words you can say in defense for your blindness in saying "safe" upon seeing me."

Subaru: "Ah? Are you injured or something?"

Priscilla was sitting on a chair at the entrance of the shelter, fanning herself. Looking at her upper and lower extremities, he could not find any injures or anything like that.

No, it was not about whether she had injuries or not. Priscilla's white skin did not have even a single scratch on it, even the dress she wore did not possess a speck of dust or dirt. If there were any differences before and after the battle, those would be the ornament around her neck, and the fact that her hair had come loose.

Emilia: "Your necklace and hair clip, have you lost them somewhere?"

Priscilla: "Hm. So even a commoner with such an undiscerning eye shall take notice of it, if it's a woman? Even so, I do not enjoy that boorish manner, calling it a necklace. It seems to bring resentment.”

Emilia: “You were actually talking about your accessories when saying you weren’t safe…”

To Emilia’s naive and innocent words, Priscilla snorted in response.

Certainly she had now lost her luxurious gem-encrusted necklace, as well as the hair clip which kept her orange hair in place. The aroma of her charm increased, having let loose the hair that was normally held in place, what a sinful woman she was.

To being with, Priscilla’s radiance was rather like that of a poisonous flower. If one approached, they would end up getting stung.

Subaru: “So, I’ll pass on getting stung. Why are you bothering to stay at this shelter? I didn’t think you had such an admirable personality as to volunteer to keep guard.”

Priscilla: “Foolish japes. I should not be forced to engage in the sort of tasks performed by commoners. It is not my actual intent to be in a place like this, but I cannot allow others to gaze upon my sense of beauty now. So I am avoiding the public’s gaze as a compromise. Besides, Al insisted.”

Subaru: “I think he’d try to quickly deny that if he were here.”

Whilst he imagined the exaggerated motions of denial from the iron helmet, Subaru directed his gaze towards the shelter’s entrance. He did not catch any glimpse of said iron helmet, but he had heard that he was in this shelter. In other words, he was not outside, but rather inside the building—next to the Sin Archbishop.

Subaru: “Is Al keeping guard inside?”

Priscilla: “‘Tis so. We don’t know what an evil thing like that would do, were we to leave it alone. Hence why Al is keeping guard over them. When it comes to him, he ought to do a good job.”

Subaru: “…You didn’t think he’d try to kill them. That’s unexpected.”

Priscilla: “He is permitted to do so if he so wishes. I would not stop him.”

Had she felt bored answering him? Priscilla yawned whilst covering her mouth with her fan. That seemed to be her way of expressing indifference at Subaru’s question.

She had no intention of stopping him from entering the building. Subaru gazed at the entrance of the shelter, and placed his hand on his chest, where his heartbeat had gotten slightly faster.

Emilia: “Subaru, if you’re too scared to go in, you don’t need to force yourself to…”

Beatrice: “Indeed, in fact. I don’t think we’ll get anything out of it, I suppose.”

Emilia and Beatrice both gently expressed their opinions to Subaru, who had stopped in his tracks. He felt like he desired to let himself be coddled by their concerns. However, as soon as that thought popped into his head, he noticed Priscilla’s cruel gaze looking over him from the corner of his eye.

It was a gaze that regarded all of Subaru’s doubts and hesitation as a boring farce.

Whether he went forward or backward, Priscilla’s evaluation of Subaru likely would not be altered. For Subaru, who had still been given a completely unsparing, lowest evaluation, that was fine. He did not care about it, but he regretted that the two accompanying him had also been evaluated that way.

Subaru: “I’m going. In any case, it isn’t a problem that I have to escape from.”

Emilia & Beatrice: “…”

Subaru made up his mind, and the two of them did not present their opinions for or against it. They just stood by his side, so as to respect his will.

Then, with the two of them accompanying him, Subaru stepped into the dark shelter. Priscilla was not even looking at their backs anymore. It was rather like her, he would say.

With the parched pitter-patter sound of their footsteps, they moved forward into the stone building. Soon, they could see the end of the passageway, ahead of the path which turned to the left,

???: "—Is that you, bro? I heard the Princess's voice, so I thought she was talking with someone."

Crouched down in the passageway, carrying his dao on his shoulder, the iron helmet—Al awaited them. Upon seeing Subaru and the others heading towards him, he turned his attention to Emilia.

Al: "Oh, it seems like the miss is alright, too. Good work, bro."

Subaru: "It's because Emilia-tan's well-being was my minimum requirement for victory. Moreover, regarding you, I've heard you ran into many problems. Priscilla's irrationalities in particular were crazy."

Al: "Ah, you're being completely serious. Still, I too was wondering what was going on with her this time. Well, no, I'm almost always wondering what's going on, so I've got no persuasive power."

Emilia: "But, it doesn't seem like Al dislikes that…?"

Al: "…"

Al, who had grumbled out something like a complaint about his mistress Priscilla, was hit right on the nose by Emilia's innocent words. Subaru could not see that which was concealed behind the helmet, but he felt like Al had shaped his lips into the form of a arc on the other side.

In reality, he was a man that was always dragged around everywhere by Priscilla, and despite that, he still wished to be her servant. It was to be supposed that they possessed a relationship others would not understand.

For a little while, Al twisted his neck in an environment which felt like it had devoured him, he clapped his shoulder with the ridge of his dao and abruptly directed his gaze towards the back of the passageway,

Al: “It’s a little bit late considering you’ve come this far, but… Did you come to speak with the Sin Archbishop?”

Beatrice: “Do you think there would be another purpose, I suppose? Do you think we’d bother coming to chat with the guard, there’s no way we’d waste our time, in fact.”

Al: “This little girl sure is scathing, huh? Don’t get yourself so worked up, uh… Beako, was it?”

Beatrice: “…”

Before Beatrice’s cold, sharp gaze, Al deliberately shook his head. Keeping Beatrice in check, who seemed like she was about to grab him regardless of their difference in height, Subaru glared at Al who had started with the unnecessary provocations.

Subaru: “I more or less get that you’re upset, but please, don’t provoke her. Beako, you too, don’t fall for them. Deal with it with the dignity of an adult.”

Beatrice: “Betty will only allow Subaru to refer to her that way, I suppose. The next time you call me that, extremely terrible retribution awaits you, in fact.”

Al: “Yeah, yeah, I understand. You couldn’t be any colder.”

As he spoke, Al moved closer to the end of the corridor, making way for them. A door came into view ahead of them upon them moving further into the passageway. Most likely, the Sin Archbishop had been locked up there.

Suddenly, the back of Subaru’s neck started to tingle, complaining out of a tense feeling.

Al: “The Sin Archbishop is within. They’re restrained so that they can’t get up to no good, so for now, I don’t think it’ll end up becoming a massacre—Also, I’ll give you just one piece of advice.”

Subaru: “Advice?”

Al: “Bro, the miss and that Spirit too. It’d be better if you went back home without talking to them. Nothing good will come from getting involved. Leave this be, and go home.”

Subaru: “…There’s just no way we can do that.”

Dropping the tone of his voice, his opinion was an earnest one, his tone serious as he spoke. Denying those words with a shake of his head, Subaru replied that he could not do so, and rejected the suggestion.

And, to Subaru’s reply, mingled with a sigh, Al spoke “I guessed as much”.

Al: “No matter what I say, I don’t think I ever get much credibility. This time, my behavior here was in the wrong, I ain’t got any excuse for it.”

Subaru: “That’s really not the reason why. Well, it’s true that you weren’t cooperative, but that doesn’t mean I’m saying I won’t listen to you. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

Taking into account Al’s terrible words of self-castigation, Subaru pointed at the door at the end of the passageway. The task he had at hand with the person within, was one that was Subaru’s problem alone.

Perhaps his intentions had been transmitted, as Al sat down with a plunk on that spot. And, whilst he pointed to the door at the end with merely his head, voicing,

Al: “I hope you don’t lose sight of yourself whilst you speak.”

Subaru: “OK, don’t hesitate to help me if something happens.”

Al: “If that comes to pass, I’ll send in the Princess, so no matter what happens, she’ll send them straight up to heaven.”

Exchanging a final conversation, Subaru and the others said goodbye to Al and headed towards the door. There was something drifting about, something that made them feel a strange sense of oppression in regards to the door leading to the closed room.

With the determination after deciding it was no use getting cold feet after having arrived here, Subaru grabbed the doorknob and forcibly pushed the door open.

—It was a narrow room; the air within smelled of dust.

Its light source was small and dim; even for a shelter, it only had the barebones. It was a narrow room that could fit at most five or six people in it, if you jam-packed it; the lack of air could be felt inside it. And, in the middle of this room,

???: "—Aha. So you came, my dear. My apologies for the inconvenience? Thank you."

On top of an old chair, with her whole body completely bound by chains, was the monster—Sirius was awaiting them.

Chapter 76:
Fruits of the Battle For Priestella 3

1

The Sin Archbishop of Wrath. A bandaged monster who claimed to be the wife of the madman, Sloth.

Sirius Romanée-Conti had her entire body tied up with the chains that had been her own weapon, and she was locked up in a room of the shelter, unable to move about.

Sirius: "I was bored because no one came, nor would they come close. But, they went to call you, my dear. Thank you, my apologies? Thanks to everyone, it seems like we can have a happy reunion… Even though it appears like there are some nuisances as well."

Upon seeing Subaru enter the room, Sirius's voice called out in greeting. However, the final words of that statement were filled with an intense anger towards Emilia and Beatrice.

Subaru: "…"

As always, it seemed like Sirius was mistaking Subaru for a body possessed by Petelgeuse, or something like that. Of course, that was just what she wanted to believe.

Whilst overwhelmed by the monster's powerful gaze that radiated with madness, in which she had clearly lost her marbles, Subaru shrugged his shoulders so to mask that, and said,

Subaru: "You're quite composed for someone who's been captured. I don't know if Priscilla thought to try and capture you on some whim of hers, but we definitely won't be releasing you safely."

Sirius: "Even if you say that, they cannot get rid of me so easily either, right? Thank you. I know you care about my well-being. But, my apologies? You took the trouble to worry, but that makes no sense to me. Because that is correct, is it not?”

With this peculiar thought, Sirius interpreted Subaru’s threat as a positive. The monster kept its quiet posture on the chair, and only let its slightly cracked voice quiver,

Sirius: “So long as there is Love with which to think of others and want others in everyone’s hearts, no one can deny me. Even for that prideful girl, the same applies.”

Subaru: “…Your Authority should not have worked with Priscilla and Liliana. It’s not like there’s no one capable of hurting you.”

Sirius: “But that someone is not you. Whatever does not come from you yourself, no matter what it is, ultimately makes no sense to me. Thank you, my apologies?”

Subaru: “—Tch.”

He gritted his teeth at Sirius, who had relaxed her bandaged lips into a smile. It seemed like a conversation had been established, but in reality, there was no mutual understanding between them.

The resolute values within Sirius did not accept even a modicum of external stimuli. The more it struck him, the more the stricken Subaru got hurt.

Beatrice: “Subaru, it’s pointless, in fact. It’s meaningless to expect human emotion like introspection or empathy from such people, I suppose. These guys are nothing but malevolent, in fact.”

Sirius: “…Spirit in the form of a girl, do not get closer to my precious Petelgeuse.”

When Beatrice pulled Subaru’s sleeve as he clenched his teeth, Sirius bluntly began to take a sullen attitude. Beatrice snorted her small nose to the words of that monster, and tugged Subaru’s arm even closer to her.

Beatrice: “That’s too bad for you, I suppose. Betty belongs to Subaru, I was needed here, and here I am, I suppose. Don’t you call Subaru by that disgusting name, in fact. You don’t even know the true meaning of holding that name.”

Sirius: “Do not get carried away, little brat. That person’s side is the place which I snuggle up to in heart and flesh. Do not dare to point your mistaken, arbitrary devotion to that person. I will set your backside on fire, burn the inside of your belly to cinders, and turn you into fertilizer for Od Lagna.”

Emilia: “Both of you, don’t get worked up and start fighting. It’ll make me angry too.”

After the creation of a stormy atmosphere by Sirius and Beatrice, Emilia intervened, gaze sharp. Subaru was in a situation where he was surrounded by three women, being pulled by his arm, but he did not have the liberty to joke about it right now.

Such was the strong feeling of oppression he felt in his soul by being next to Sirius. He was not sure if it was caused by the Authority that monster possessed.

Subaru: “Emilia, Beatrice, step back. Perhaps she’ll only talk with me. Although, regardless if there’s someone here or not… I have doubts as to whether that’ll happen.”

Emilia: “But…”

Subaru: “Please—An unexpected chance to speak with the Witch Cult has come around.”

If it were not for this situation, he would not have had the opportunity to sit down and talk with the Witch Cult.

Emilia let out a sigh at Subaru’s request, and both she and Beatrice exchanged glances with each other; they took a step back so as not to interfere with his conversation with Sirius.

Then, Subaru, who had been entrusted with this situation, turned to face the bound monster once again.

Subaru: “As you wish, I will speak with you. So, you’ve been making your chains creak since a while ago, stop moving. If you slip free from your bindings, we’ll be forced to beat you down.”

Sirius: “You too have your standpoint. I understand that. That is fine. These chains will not come loose or break so easily. Thank you.”

The captive Sirius was delighted with the attitude of Subaru, who was attempting to converse with her.

It was not that Emilia and Beatrice’s figures were out of sight, but it seemed like she had completely expelled them from her awareness.

Sirius: “So, what should we talk about? Because of your relationship with me, there is hardly anything to say between us… We can just exchange Love, do you not believe likewise? Just kidding, my apologies?”

Subaru: “Your purpose… Yes, your purpose. The purpose behind why all of you Sin Archbishops attacked this city at the same time. You don’t need crap like the book or the Artificial Spirits. At least, we know quite well that all of your purposes weren’t really to steal them.”

Sirius: “It is a misunderstanding that we really did not intend to create. Though, it is certainly true that I personally did not wish them here. I do not know about the others, but I was just following the Gospel’s writ.”

Subaru: “The Gospel… That again? It was the same with Petelgeuse as well. Why do all of you follow that strange book? Petelgeuse followed it as well.”

And as a result, he lost his life.

The Gospel’s writ showed the path of the future that an owner must follow—Even knowing such circumstances, it was not omnipotent, that much was clear if he thought about the final moments of that lunatic.

Subaru knew that the path of the future which could be seen was not absolute. Yet even so,

Subaru: “Why does the Witch Cult follow exactly what the book says? Is it because that book will help with the resurrection of the

Witch… Of your beloved Witch of Envy?”

Sirius: “—Please do not misunderstand, darling.”

Subaru: “Misunderstand?”

Sirius’s emotions of joy suddenly disappeared from her voice on hearing Subaru’s accusatory voice.

Whilst the monster looked into Subaru’s eyes with her glittering eyes, on her face which was wrapped in bandages, she twisted her lips so as to bare her yellowed teeth.

And then, she spoke.

Sirius: “You are the only one I love. The only one. I do not care about the Witch. Everything, they are all just necessary steps to get to you.”

Subaru: “…”

Sirius: “The other Sin Archbishops are similar. All of them have worthless, insignificant, repulsive desires, and merely cling to their Authorities. For me, my only reason is Love, and for my beloved dear, it is different. My apologies? It is different in every way.”

—The Witch Cult’s purpose was the revival of the Witch of Envy.

Subaru had believed without any doubt that it was so, considering Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti’s behavior and utterances, and in addition, the creed and acts of barbarism he had heard about the Witch Cult up until now.

However, that principle—the very foundation for the existence of the group known as the Witch Cult had been shaken here.

Of course, Subaru had also met Regulus Corneas, and they had exchanged words too.

As soon as he thought on whether that conceited and egocentric man, who looked down on everything besides himself, would have idolized the Witch, the sense of incongruity rapidly became stronger.

Now that he mentioned it, it was obvious. The more he thought about, the more he could come to a better conclusion. But, if it was like this, then what purpose did the Witch Cult have in existing?

Subaru: “Then, why the hell are you all in the Witch Cult…”

Sirius: “Because you are.”

Subaru: “…”

Sirius: “That is my sole reason. I am here to exchange my Love with you. I do not know about the others. If we become one, I think you would understand.”

Becoming one, in brief, probably meant melding their hearts with each other with the power of her Authority.

But that was not understanding, it was forced conformity. It was not possible to call forcing a heart against its will by binding it to the same emotions a way of understanding each other, let alone becoming one.

Subaru: “What are the purposes of the other Sin Archbishops? What is the ultimate goal of the Witch Cult?”

Sirius: “Well, who knows? My apologies. Regrettably, it’s something that doesn’t interest me.”

Subaru: “In general, where does the Witch Cult meet? Is there a leader?”

Sirius: “…No. Especially such established routine. You know it too.”

Whilst still putting on a crazed smile underneath her bandages, Sirius avoided Subaru’s questions. No, she probably did not even intend to dodge it.

The monster would sincerely answer in a monster-like way to her husband, “Petelgeuse’s” questions. Due to her behavior so far, there was no reason to doubt that Sirius was aberrantly devoted to

Petelgeuse, on top of her dependance.

In other words, just like the monster had stated, she really did not know anything.

Sirius: “—At any rate, in the end, it seems it is like that?”

Subaru: “—?”

Sirius grumbled that out whilst looking at the pensive Subaru from below.

Subaru reacted a little slowly to the frigidness of those words. The monster took advantage of the momentary gap born from it.

The small chair creaked as it tilted, and Sirius’s face drew close to Subaru’s visage. From up close, her bloodshot eyes stared at Subaru, who held his breath reflexively.

Sirius tilted her chair, still bound up to her ankles, and balanced herself up using only her toes which hung barely free. Her body fell forward with an injection of momentum so to lean against Subaru.

Subaru: “…Oh.”

Sirius: "I had thought something was strange ever since the time we reunited back at the clocktower, but I am sure of it now. The passion of that day is nowhere to be found in your eyes—My dear, are you being swallowed?"

Subaru: "…"

Sirius: "You are being eaten up by a soul, by a body which was supposed to be a temporary abode, and you have ended up unable to move about… Really, you are such a useless person without me."

Sirius's long tongue suspiciously licked Subaru's cheek as she breathed out a fevered sigh. Feeling the rough tip of her tongue on his skin, every single hair on Subaru's body stood on end.

A growing sense of discomfort erupted within his chest, and the back of his eyes became dyed in deep red. It was crazy to think that this phenomenon had simply been caused from her vile action.

It was crazy to think, but he did not feel like he could consider anything else. And then—

Emilia: "ICE BRAND ARTS!"

Sirius: "Guh—Pffff."

The blow of an ice hammer came swooping diagonally and struck Sirius's body, who had been clinging to Subaru, and launched her to the back wall along with her chair.

The sound of an impact was raised, and Sirius, who had received this icy blow while defenseless to stop it, fell down. Dust blew up across the narrow room, and bits from the ceiling came pattering down.

Subaru: "Oh, oh…?"

Standing next to Subaru, who had ended up falling to his knees, Emilia dematerialized the ice hammer she had created. Subaru, slow to notice that it had been Emilia to let loose that blow without any forewarning, let out a long sigh.

He really could not comprehend what had happened at this moment.

Beatrice: “Subaru’s such a big idiot, I suppose.”

Subaru: “—Tch. Beako?”

Amidst the impact and the parched sound, Subaru blinked, noticing that his cheek had been slapped. The one who had struck his cheek was Beatrice, who had nestled up close to him. She looked at Emilia out of the corner of her eyes, and said,

Beatrice: “If Emilia hadn’t interrupted that now, Betty would have done the same, in fact. You were too careless around someone like that, I suppose. In the worst case, she could have ripped your throat apart with her teeth, in fact.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru became aware of his own carelessness thanks to Beatrice’s words. It was no exaggeration or something he could laugh at. In reality, Sirius had licked Subaru’s cheek with her tongue.

Putting to one side the repulsiveness of that action, if that tongue had been a fang, and if instead of his cheek, it had been his neck, Subaru would not have been able to stop it.

Emilia: “Don’t try anything strange. I’m a little scatterbrained, so I can’t hold myself back very well. The next one will surely be a reaaally painful blow.”

Emilia declared that she did not intend to go easy, whilst keeping her guard up against the collapsed Sirius.

Sirius was completely bound, such that she was incapable of moving about—The excessive precautions they had ended up taking against this opponent, kept as a prisoner in this state, were proof of the monster’s fiendish being.

It seemed like he had forgotten about it, putting the threat of its

Authority at a higher standing, however, this Sin Archbishop of Wrath stood out from the rest, even in looking at its combat strength alone. At a first glance, one would think that the strongest in the Witch Cult would be Regulus the Invincible, but in reality, since Greed relied entirely on his Authority, his threat had been low.

A strength that did not depend on an Authority, along with the threat of an Authority—In this sense, the other Sin Archbishops were much more powerful than Regulus.

Beatrice: “Subaru, you should have already known this, I suppose. You won’t get anywhere, even if you talk to this person, in fact. She’s not the type that you can have a proper conversation with. I don’t know what she knows, but even if you wish to get something out of her, you aren’t going to be able to have a sane conversation to find out what she knows, I suppose.”

Subaru: “If it’s impossible to converse with her…”

Beatrice: “Pose the queries to her body, what I mean is torture, in fact. Though that isn’t something which Subaru should do, I suppose. It’s something which the Kingdom does sometimes after having caught someone, in fact.”

Beatrice tugged at Subaru’s arm to get him to stand up as she expressed that cruel point of view.

Torture, Subaru felt an indescribable feeling of uneasiness in regards to that word. Along with death and brutality, they were not words which were heard or spoken in his everyday life.

Although he did not know the actual situation, he knew how such gruesome things were practiced, because they were within reach of his imagination. Along with the anguish of the people who were exposed to that.

Subaru: “I don’t think it’s what they deserve.”

Subaru’s mentality was not so naive to believe that human nature was fundamentally good.

He did not think that everything had to end up with death when it came to settling a battle; the thought of wanting to finish things up without killing as much as possible had always been in his nature. That was a moral value which he had brought in from his original world, and that in itself was a naivety which Subaru could not detach himself from.

—But, even so, there had always been a conclusion that had stepped past the boundaries of those morals.

He would have preferred to finish things up without killing if he could. In the end, that thought meant that he would have to kill any opponents that necessitated it.

That had applied to both Sin Archbishops, Petelgeuse and Regulus. And the other Sin Archbishops, Sirius, Capella and Alphard of Gluttony, would be no different when push came to shove, as well.

He felt hatred, and a lust for revenge. But in a different sense, there was an intent that had determined that those guys were people he would have to kill.

Subaru: “I’ll be excusing myself from talking with you anymore. When we separate here, I probably won’t get another opportunity to talk with you. I don’t think that’s a pity, nor commiserable. But, hurry up and spit out what you have to say, and then you can rest in peace… That’d always be helpful.”

Telling someone to die right to their face had brought him a difficulty breathing.

Subaru said merely that, and made a motion to leave the room since there was nothing else left anymore. As Beatrice had mentioned, if they wished to try and get information on the Witch Cult from Sirius, they had no other way but to pose the questions to her body to get more out of her. That was a different task, one which Subaru could not do.

When Subaru showed his intention to leave, both Emilia and Beatrice’s faces broke into relief. Both of them had been against entering the room from the start. It was a regrettable situation, in that they had just been put in a foul mood without reaping any results. However, thinking about it in a positive light, it had become clear to them that the way those guys thought was incomprehensible; it seemed they should be content with that.

Subaru: "…"

There was no telling what would have happened if he had gotten close.

Subaru and the others made their way to the entrance without bothering to lift Sirius back up, who still lay toppled over thanks to Emilia's blow. It definitely was not a laudable attitude, but, with that—

Sirius: "…"

Subaru: "…Wait up."

Subaru stopped in his tracks due to an unpleasant sensation that grated against his skull just when they were about to reach the entrance. Then, he looked down at Sirius who was lying on the floor. The source of that unpleasantness came from over there, from the collapsed Sirius.

The monster was lying on her side, breathing crudely from her nose whilst pressing her face against the cold floor. Her breathing was so awfully ear-piercing that it had drawn his attention to her.

—Just before leaving the room, he had realized that she was humming a tune.

Subaru: "Stop that song, what are you trying to do?"

Sirius: "…"

She was out of tune, her pitch and rhythm were both in a state of chaos. This dissonance did not come to a halt there. It was nothing else but a declaration of Sirius's intent, regarding Subaru's words.

In other words, a refusal, a rejection.

Subaru: “I told you to stop! This song is grating through my head!”

Sirius: “—My apologies? Ah, but songs sure are great, are they not? They taught me that songs are wonderful. That’s why I wanted to try and sing all of a sudden.”

Subaru: “Liliana…?!”

Sirius should have heard the song while squaring off against Priscilla and Liliana. He had no idea how Song had managed to seal her Authority during their fight.

In the midst of battle, the monster had not hated the song, and instead she had learnt something from it. However, the monster’s understanding of the song definitely was of different strokes to the feelings which Liliana had put into hers.

Hers was something more eerie, and distorted.

Subaru: “Don’t compare her song with yours. Yours is different, it’s something else.”

Sirius: “—I could say the same about you. You are different. You have changed. You are definitely different from that person whom I love. Even if you are the same, you’re different.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Sirius: “Petelgeuse is inside you. Soul and soul shall melt together, flesh and flesh shall become one, and like that, that beloved person shall surface, though it shall take some time. What I ought to do is help that. To see that person’s awakening, by your side.”

Still collapsed on the floor, Sirius twisted her neck and looked up at Subaru.

An endless swirling storm of emotions surged up in her crazed eyes. Anger, joy, sorrow, and a longing that she was unable to conceal, all continued to swirl in Sirius’s eyes.

Sirius: “I will drag that person out from inside of you—Thank you, my apologies? Please, until that day arrives, take care of your mind and body.”

Subaru: “—Tch.”

Sirius certainly understood that Subaru and Petelgeuse were different things.

She should have understood that, but yet the monster hid under a convenient fantasy, such as overwriting him. Petelgeuse, who slept inside of Subaru, would someday come out to greet him, she had stated.

There would be no such thing. That would be impossible.

It was likely true that Petelgeuse’s Witch Factor, which he had absorbed, was inside him. However, there was no way that Petelgeuse’s soul would be safeguarded. Where did this monster find these similarities between Petelgeuse and him, to have repeated such bullshit?

—Or was it that Subaru and that lunatic had some similar parts when seen from the outside?

Sirius: “One last thing, I am going to give you some advice so that you do not end up doing something unnecessary.”

Subaru: “…Advice? You, to me?”

Sirius: “Yes, so that I do not lose my beloved darling—Be careful around Gluttony. Bizarre Eating, Gourmet, and Satiation will eventually try to snatch you away. If that happens before he wakes up, no one will be able to remember my darling.”

Subaru: “…”

From the place he had least expected, Wrath had mentioned the name Gluttony and given him information on them. Although, the content itself was nothing unusual, it was just information which he already knew, but—No.

Subaru: “Wait. Gourmet, and who else?”

Sirius: “Gourmet, Bizarre Eating and Satiation. Being eaten and taken in without anyone noticing what was lost is an act of barbarity against Love which must melt together, blend together, and become as one. If you get the chance, please kill Gluttony. Since they are a obstacle.”

She had revealed the secrets of Sin Archbishops in the same position as her and, moreover, had indifferently wished for their death. It was great that, in this case, there was a fatal discrepancy in the relations between the top brass in the Witch Cult.

The issue was what Sirius had said about Gluttony—No, about the Gluttonies.

Subaru: “I totally thought that the Gluttony which Otto came across was the Gluttony who’d been in the control tower, since they’d been prowling about like Lust, but…”

What if that was not the case, and it was just one of the Gluttonies from the two additional ones. What if all three Gluttonies had been lurking in the city, and not just that one?

And what if the Gluttony in charge of their control tower had continued to protect its post?

Subaru: “—Tch. Shit, I need to make sure…!”

Subaru clasped his head in dismay at his own stupidity, kicked the floor and headed towards the entrance. Now was not the time to continue talking with Sirius.

Subaru had to ensure, with his own eyes, the safety of everyone who had participated in the battle to defend the city. He had to make sure that no one had disappeared because their names had been devoured by Gluttony.

Subaru: “Emilia! Beatrice! Go straight back to the shelter we were at before. I’ve got to make sure of something.”

Emilia: “Subaru? I don’t know what’s blown into you, but calm down…”

Subaru: "WHEN THIS IS OVER! I'll calm down all you want. I'll calm down, so please let me do what it takes for me to calm down. It's something urgent."

Subaru hurriedly replied that to Emilia who had touched his shoulder. Emilia gulped seeing Subaru's behavior, and then nodded saying "I understand."

From the start Beatrice had not intended to interject in Subaru's behavior, looking shocked. Subaru had already forgotten about Sirius, and had hurriedly jumped out of the room.

Emilia: "Wait up, Subaru. I'll go too."

And so, Emilia hurried after him, and both of their sets of footsteps moved away at a quick pace.

As she listened to them, Beatrice turned her head back at the door, pointing her gaze at Sirius, who was still face flat to the floor, and then pointed her palm at the monster.

Beatrice: "To tell you the truth, it's not like I don't think turning you into smithereens here would be proper, I suppose."

Sirius: "—So, why do you not do so? Spirit whore. It would be most welcome for me as long as that person's awakening is hastened."

Beatrice: "…"

Beatrice let out a sigh at the provocative Sirius's manner of speech, and then lowered her palm. The little girl held the hem of her dress with the hand she had lowered, and her eyes became filled with strong emotion,

Beatrice: "If you make Subaru sad, Betty will definitely kill you, in fact."

Sirius: "Of course. My beloved Petelgeuse's resurrection should only be welcomed by feelings of joy."

It was uncertain how much she understood, or if she was done here or not, but regardless of that, the doddering conversation ended, and Beatrice left the room, closing the door behind her.

Just before she did, Sirius's distorted hums slipped into Beatrice's eardrums.

A harassment and severity of sound that grated against one's sense of hearing with its distorted rhythm, like trampling the concept of music underneath it. A completely new kind of music that planted unpleasant feelings in others—It was the "Song of Resentment".

The door was closed, and the Song of Resentment was cut off.

But, no matter where she was, that distorted rhythm remained in her ears. Beatrice chased after Subaru and Emilia at an adagio pace, whilst tasting that unpleasant sensation.

2

After leaving Sirius's prison, Subaru rushed over to Al who had stayed in the corridor. Al, on standby with his dao held in his one hand, was taken by surprise by Subaru's fierce attitude as he stormed his way over.

Al: "Hey, bro. I heard a super loud noise, you didn't kill her, right? Punching and kicking also counts as prisoner abuse, so they ain't things you can really praise."

Subaru: "I didn't kill her, afterwards I'll give you a proper explanation about the prisoner abuse, but more importantly, I need to confirm something. Al, no one died where you were, right?"

Al: "—? Well, if you're asking about the whole city, I don't know. But at least, me, the cat-eared sis, and the miss with the Kararagi accent are all fine. I thought you already knew?"

Subaru: "I know, but… Ahh, shit. I won't get anywhere like this!"

It was natural that it had been an inconclusive answer.

Following with Subaru's concerns, on the chance someone had ended up as one of Gluttony's victims, that person would have disappeared from others' memories, just like Rem. Asking "Is there a person you don't remember?" in such a situation was completely senseless.

The easiest way would be to tell Al and Emilia everyone's names, one-by-one.

Subaru: "—Tch."

That was scary, that was terrifying.

Although this was not the time to cower, it would be terrifying to hear it from someone's mouth. It would be much more reassuring to go back to the shelter, and check the safety of everyone with his own eyes.

Subaru: "I'll go back to the shelter. Please keep an eye on it until Reinhard comes back, for whatever reason."

Al: "Alright then, but… Well, no. I won't ask the details about what went on inside. Gives me the chills."

Shaking his hand, Al avoided pursuing the real meaning behind Subaru's behavior. Rather than being considerate, it was about avoiding trouble; and so Subaru went back through the passageway, and left the shelter.

Looking at Priscilla from the corner of his eye, who seemed bored as ever, "That's the second one," he counted.

Priscilla: "Ha. Commoners sure are of small caliber, hence why your hearts get perturbed by such trivial matter, such a hassle. If you are going hither and thither, at least focus your attention like you are sightseeing as much as you can."

Subaru: "That you haven't changed doesn't relieve me one bit. See you later."

Without time to stop, Subaru quickly passed by in front of Priscilla. It was an attitude, or rather, a disrespect which might have fouled Priscilla's mood, yet she stayed silent on that matter, and only muttered "How boring", whilst fanning her skin.

Emilia: “So Subaru, what do you want to do? What is it that you have to make sure of?”

While returning to the shelter full of injured people, Emilia called out to Subaru, the latter restlessly looking around. To her call, Subaru hesitated for a moment on whether to ask for her help.

Recalling Rem’s case, Emilia did not possess any resistance in regards to Gluttony’s meals. Subaru had yet to forget the shock upon learning about the loss of Rem’s Name from her mouth.

He had resigned himself to the possibility of that wound reopening once more, and held the courage to explain the situation to Emilia. Because this was an unconscious blade, one which Emilia was unable to take into account.

Subaru: “…”

Till now, Subaru had confirmed the names of several of his companions who had fought in the defensive struggle.

Beatrice and Anastasia first. Then Garfiel and Mimi were added to that, then Wilhelm and Otto, Liliana and Kiritaka as well. Felt’s being was confirmed too from Otto’s words. According to the girls’ story, Reinhard and Ferris should also be fine. And Priscilla and Al, whom he had been with just a little while ago.

In other words, so far, it had yet to be possible to check the safety of—

???: “—Subaru, it seems we have met up safely.”

Subaru: “Reinhard?”

A refreshing voice called out to Subaru, whose thoughts were spinning around rapidly, from his side. When he turned around, there was a red-haired young man raising his arm in greeting: Reinhard.

Only a scant few hours had passed since last Subaru saw him, who, after Regulus’s defeat, should have gone around to provide reinforcement to the other camps. Nevertheless, now that he was looking around for his acquaintances, he felt honest relief in being able to see his face.

Reinhard: “It is a relief that both Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama also reunited safely.”

Emilia: “Thank you, Reinhard. You should have been running around the city, right? Thank goodness you’re alright. Yeah, truly.”

Reinhard: “No, it is no big deal. Besides, even without me, everyone fulfilled their roles steadfastly. My modest power was only a little bit useful.”

Reinhard replied politely back to Emilia, and then looked at Subaru. Reinhard narrowed his sky-blue eyes, and as if seeing through to the depths of Subaru’s heart, he said,

Reinhard: “So, Subaru, did something happen? Right now, you look like you are in a hurry.”

Subaru: “Right now I just want to check if something happened—Reinhard, have you met with Felt? Felt, and the others… Well, Rachins and the others, that is.”

The trio of Tonchinkan—now that it had come to this, they also belonged in the framework of comrades. He had heard from Otto that Felt was fine, he had also heard that her servants were safe, but that did not mean he had mentioned the names of the three servants as to confirm them. He was not able to feel relieved.

To the desperation of Subaru’s question, Reinhard gently placed his hand on his chin, and said,

Reinhard: “Yeah, they are fine. Felt-sama, those three, Rachins, Gaston and Camberley are all safe and sound. Rachins and Gaston have injuries, but those are not serious enough to cause worry. In regards to Felt-sama having acted independently, I think she will have to reflect on this later, do you agree?”

Subaru: “There seems to be a pretty big chance that our Internal Affairs Minister was saved thanks to Felt, so do take that into account, I beseech for a lenient punishment… Anyways, there wasn’t anything else in addition?”

Reinhard: “Anything else?”

Subaru: “Anything else… No, sorry. It wouldn’t really be a specific question. So, hmm, after we separated, did anything happen? Any problems, or anything that worried you.”

Even if he thought about it again, he still had no specific question to ask; Subaru felt miserable. However, Reinhard did not laugh in reply, instead, he quietly mulled it over and shook his head.

Reinhard: “No, my apologies, but nothing is coming to mind. Nothing particularly problematic happened after I left you and Emilia-sama, that I can think of.”

Subaru: “I… see. My bad. It’s not that. Well, erm… Yeah, there’s a lot I’d like to talk to you about, so when you can, can’t you go fetch Felt? I’d like to consult with the people involved about what happened now, and what will come after. May I leave that to you?”

Reinhard: “—Sure, since it is a request from you. Right now, I just asked Felt-sama to stay quietly in the standby area once again, so it will probably sound sarcastic to her, though.”

Subaru: “…Yikes, that’s bad. Afterwards I’ll apologize as well, so for now, I’ll rely on you.”

Giving a wry smile at Subaru’s words, Reinhard looked around his surroundings a little, and then quickly left the place. Upon jumping out to the outside of the shelter, his figure was barely visible, leaping over buildings in one bound; he would soon meet back up with Felt, it seemed. The problem was,

Emilia: “Subaru, Ferris is here. You want to hear his story, right?”

Subaru: “Hmm, ah. Yeah, I also wanted to talk to Ferris.”

Called by Emilia, he looked in the direction she was pointing at. There, he was able to find the figure of Ferris, restlessly letting his gaze wander to-and-fro in a corner of the shelter.

The cat-eared Healing Arts User was staggering about, and his complexion looked awful. Most likely, it was the result of his healing voyage that he had been taken on by Reinhard. Because of the full use of his healing magic, it seemed like he had sustained a considerable burden. Even so, he was walking around looking for his next patient without rest—Or rather, it seemed like that was not the case.

Ferris: "—Ah!"

Ferris, who was looking around his surroundings, noticed Subaru and Emilia, and raised his voice. He hastily tottered over to them, and caught ahold of Subaru's scruff as if he were going to collapse.

Propping his light body up, Subaru called out to him with an "Hey?" and then,

Ferris: "Tell me…"

Subaru: "Huh?"

Ferris: "The Sin Archbishop! They were caught, right? I'm going to make them spit out everything they know, I'm going to ask them how to treat Crusch-sama! So, tell me where they are….!"

Subaru was paralyzed by Ferris' gaze, glaring with eyes wide open into Subaru's own at point-blank.

Ferris's fury was like that of a raging fire; he was merely concerned for the well-being of his beloved master. And when it came to saving her, he was prepared to show no mercy to those who know how to make that possible.

Subaru: "F-Ferris, calm down. I understand your feelings, but even if you hurry it up, you won't achieve any results. For now, let's talk…"

Ferris: "Don't say convenient things! Do you understand my feelings? There's no way you understand them, it seems?! Whilst you're speaking so calmly, Crusch-sama is suffering so much, you know that… If you truly understood, you wouldn't be able to remain calm! Stop being so irresponsible!"

Subaru: "…"

Having been jabbed in the chest, and a finger pointed at him, Subaru kept his mouth shut.

Having been assaulted by irrational comments, Subaru was unable to even reply back. Crusch's condition had not changed, she was still infested with Capella's—Lust's blood. But more than anything, Subaru felt relieved by Ferris's comments just now, realizing that Crusch had not been forgotten.

That black corrosion had also set itself into place in Subaru's right leg, and the palm that he had touched Crusch with.

However, there was no way that would bring relief to Ferris's heart.

Ferris: "I must save Crusch-sama. I can and will do everything that is necessary for that. If I have to torture the Sin Archbishop, I will do that too. I know how to cure people. That's why even if I break them, I can heal them. That's why, that's why…"

???: "Ferris—That is quite enough already."

Subaru's words did not come out towards a Ferris feverish in frustration. And then, the one who had called him from behind to stop, was the wisened swordsman, unable to bear witness to this situation.

Calling out to the Knight who served the same master as him, with a voice devoid of all emotions, Wilhelm spoke.

Wilhelm: "I fully understand how you feel. But this behavior is nothing more than an insult to Crusch-sama, more so than to anyone else. First calm yourself. Do what you must after you calm yourself."

Ferris: "You're saying you understand how I feel like as consolation…!"

Wilhelm: "—I understand."

As Ferris started to flare up at him, Wilhelm forcibly stopped him in his tracks with a low tone of voice. And then, Wilhelm looked at the jacket he was hugging against his chest, the ashes wrapped within it.

Ferris immediately bit his lips, his face immediately guessing who it was that slept there.

Ferris: “It’s… not fair. It’s not fair, it’snotfairit’snotfairit’snotfair. Wil-jii…!”

Wilhelm: “I know. It is poor of me to impose on your generosity and kindness. Forcing that on you, who opposes the pain of others more than anyone else. You should blame this old man.”

Ferris: “Uhhhh, uhhhh… Kh.”

Ferris held back his tears and hung his head down. Wilhelm embraced his head and nodded at Subaru. It looked like that meant that he would take over. Ferris too would have to take Crusch’s place in future discussions once again after calming down.

It would be necessary to discuss the handling of Sirius then. But for now, what they should do was to exchange words so that they got to know each other’s circumstances.

Wilhelm’s serene eyes communicated that to Subaru. Taking advantage of that pity, Subaru bowed his head and left the place.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san, must want to cry too…”

Why did everything go wrong?

Was there no way to achieve joy for everyone, acquaintances and strangers alike? How much did Subaru have to fight, strive and struggle in some way to choose the best option, to arrive at that outcome—It was something that he did not know.

He had recently confirmed the safety of Reinhard and Felt, and also Ferris and Crusch. The ones that remained missing were Julius and Ricardo, who had gone to recover the Gluttony’s control tower. In addition to those, Priscilla’s servant, Schult, and although an unpleasant person, Heinkel, too.

Speaking of which, Julius's younger brother, Joshua, ever since the turmoil began, he had always been—

Subaru: "—Ah?"

Just as that thought flashed through his mind, Subaru saw the shadow of someone walking into the shelter from the outside.

He wore well-tailored white garb, and had a slender Knight's sword holstered at his waist. A handsome and tall profile, along with lustrous purple hair that was almost flashy—There was no way to mistake him.

It was Julius. Right now, the guy he wanted to check the safety of, was here.

Subaru: "Hey, Juli—"

Julius: "…"

He quickly lifted his hand and raised his voice to try and greet Julius, who had let half of his body peek through. But, when Julius noticed that Subaru's eyes were looking at him, he quickly turned around and left at hastened pace.

Subaru: "Huh?"

Faced with Julius's unexpected behavior, Subaru let out a stunned voice.

That reaction was completely unexpected. His opinions had been divided regarding whether Julius would have obediently replied to his voice, but even so, he would have never imagined this reaction.

Not an obedient answer nor sarcasm, he had simply ignored him.

Subaru: "Is that bastard kidding me?"

Having spouted out all the irritation boiling within so far, Subaru chased after him.

It was not that he was worried. It was not that he was worried, but he was looking for him to confirm his safety, so that attitude was out of order.

What was he up to? He had to catch him and find out. It was necessary to mention that this was not the time to joke around.

Emilia: “Hey, Subaru? What’s going on?”

Subaru: “That pretentious bastard Julius was there, and ignored me just now. I’m gonna go get him!”

Emilia: “Ehh?”

Leaving behind Emilia’s voice of surprise, Subaru ran and chased after Julius. After he flew out of the shelter’s entrance, he caught a glance of his back, about to disappear across the street. Those were clearly movements to avoid the gaze of the public. However, if he were not running, it would be easy to catch up with him.

Subaru: “If you’re okay, just hurry up and say you’re okay…”

Cursing, Subaru ran to the corner of the street. With one walking swiftly and the other running, the distance inevitably shortened. As soon as he turned around, now able to see his back, Subaru raised his voice.

Subaru: “Hey, you bastard! You, why the hell are you running around when everyone’s so busy? If you don’t show your face, I’ll be worried. No, people in general will.”

Julius: “…”

Upon hearing Subaru’s violent voice, Julius stopped. Julius turned his face only, and calmly gazed at Subaru with his yellow eyes.

Subaru frowned at the silent glance, but Julius did not change his posture,

Julius: “—My apologies. I was looking for someone, but it looks like that person was not inside. I would like to make my way to another shelter. Please excuse me.”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait wait, what are you saying? Who you’re looking for surely has to be Anastasia-san, right? If so, she was in that shelter. You just didn’t realize it because you were impatient. It’s not like you.”

Julius: “—Tch.”

Calling out to his back, he stopped the other from leaving, who had left behind merely words of courtesy. Then, Julius showed a dramatic reaction to Subaru’s words.

He made his shoulders spin and turned around with a surprised face.

Subaru: “Eh, ehh? What’s up?”

Subaru reflexively reacted with a shrill voice. The reason was obvious.

Julius’s expression, as he turned, was tinged by an astonishment he had never seen before. No, astonishment was not the sole thing in his expression. What was there, was a gleam, as if he had been clinging onto something.

Faced with an emotion that did not suit Julius at all, Subaru was at a loss for words. Gazing at Subaru in that manner, Julius gulped, and, with an expression of anguish,

Julius: “…Subaru. You, are referring to me?”

Subaru: “What kind of question is that? You don’t have a personality unassertive enough to be forgotten in just a few hours. Finest of Knights, Julius Juukulius-san, what nonsense are you…”

Shrugging his shoulders, Subaru responded as if making fun of Julius. And in the midst of that exchange, he stopped talking when he realized his own stupidity.

Julius’s question right now, meant that something had gone wrong. That wrongness should have been grasped by Subaru; if only his imagination had taken him one inch closer to the worst possible scenario.

Beatrice: “Subaru! Don’t run off on your own!”

Subaru, whose throat had frozen, and Julius, faced each other.

Both Emilia and Beatrice had come chasing after them, and joined the scene of the two in front of one another, in the street. Upon witnessing the two leering at each other in silence, their large eyes flickered,

Emilia: “Well… You’re in the middle of something, right?”

As she noticed the strange atmosphere and tension, Emilia anxiously tilted her head. Subaru had a bad presentiment at her reaction, especially from her gaze, directed at Julius.

Thus, Subaru pointed to Julius,

Subaru: “…Yes, that’s right, but it’s not that. Emilia-tan. Beako, you too, well…”

Emilia & Beatrice: “—?”

Emilia and Beatrice raised question marks at Subaru’s awkward words.

He had to do something, perhaps a definitive question. Subaru swallowed his saliva, and took a glance at Julius. Before Subaru’s gaze, Julius prepared himself and lifted his terribly hollow face,

Subaru: “I found Julius. So, I can take him to the conference, right?”

Beatrice: “—Julius.”

Upon asking, Beatrice gazed at Julius. Then, Emilia spoke doubtfully in a low voice,

Emilia: “Julius-san, is he an acquaintance of Subaru’s?”

And, as if to repeat the nightmare of before, she spoke.

Chapter 77:
A Nameless Knight

1

Receiving the jolting impact, his body got out of the dagger’s trajectory.

Not being in a position to sharpen his blade, and even if he did accept it with his broken knight sword, he would not be able to evade the severe wound. Was the conclusion that anyone would realize at a glance, henceforth, Julius was able to notice that he was being shielded.

However, it was, again, a different subject whether he should express relief or gratitude for it—.

Julius: “Ricardo—!”

Ricardo: “Shit, he got me… ~hk!”

With an anguishing voice, Ricardo, who had pushed Julius aside, narrowed his eyes. When he called out that name, at the same time, a spout of blood clouded Julius’ vision.

The blood had sprouted from, the rough, bulky right arm of Ricardo—having lost everything from his elbow, it was a gash exposing the soft cross section.

The arm covered in bestial hair gave rise to a sound and fell onto the cobblestone, and the big hatchet it was gripping, too, made a dull sound and rolled on the ground.

Julius: “How did such… ~hk.”

Ricardo: “Argh! This ain’t the time for sayin’ that, Julius! Raise your head and look towa~rds…”

At Julius, who was breathing heavily, Ricardo slammed a loud yell. However, that was abruptly obstructed by the attack of the dagger he suffered on the abdomen, and his nose was smashed and broken by the solid knee’s direct hit.

Throwing him aback, and as Ricardo flopped onto the floor, with his limbs stretched out, Gluttony sneered.

Roy: “Haha~! Aren’t you going to, completely say it ~tsu!”

Julius: “—~hk.”

The form of Alphard, who was shouting out his delight, and Ricardo, who had collapsed. Seeing the figures of the two, two choices came up in Julius’ mind.

Which one of the two should he give precedence to, a seemingly instantaneous gap had been produced there.

And, the appetite of Gluttony would never overlook that gap.

Roy: “To look away in the middle of the meal, you really don’t have manners, nii-sama—!”

Julius: “You bastard…!”

Like a springed doll, Alphard leapt trickily. At that phantasmagoric movement, Julius’ reaction got faintly delayed.

The outstretched palm and, the broken knight sword entangled, and the feeling of his chest being traced by the palm—with his slash being dodged, what followed immediately afterwards was an inexplicable sense of loss.

Roy: “A~h—thank you for the treat ~tsu.”

At the end of that voice, for some reason, his consciousness distanced further, and further, and—.

2

Julius: “Though it is pathetic, in the midst of the battle against Gluttony, my Name was stolen. Perhaps, that is what this current situation is.”

Based on what Emilia had said, that truth had been brought to light.

Expressing a cynical smile on his face due to the truth of being forgotten by his acquaintances, Julius shrugged his shoulders.

Subaru: “Name got eaten… is that what you mean? But.”

Eating the Memories and Names of people was the blasphemer, Sin Archbishop Gluttony.

The threat of getting the Name eaten, and having all connections cut off—Subaru was well aware of its fearsomeness. However, looking at Julius now, who seemed to be in a healthy shape, he could not help but feel his understanding was frivolous.

Subaru: “His victimization is, like Rem or Crusch-san…”

Having her Memories eaten, and completely forgetting her own former self, was Crusch.

Having her Name eaten, and vanishing from the memories of people with not a single exception, and continuing to be in a deep slumber in that state, was Rem.

Victims of Gluttony, the two young girls were sufferers Subaru was well acquainted with.

However, coming here, Julius had been trapped in a state different from those two. His own memories having not been lost, nor did he lose consciousness.

—However, from the memories of his surroundings, his existence had disappeared.

Subaru: “Really, does nobody remember? If you attempt from one side…”

Julius: “I have already met with Anastasia-sama and Ricardo. For some reason, they treated me like an unacquainted person, I have endured that experience. Being unable to thank the one who shielded you, is displeasing, isn’t it.”

"…"

Julius, reflexively, killed his sentiments and replied but, his smile which faintly had too much energy being put into it, or the tone of his words, naturally, were difficult for Subaru to behold. No matter how strong Julius' consciousness may be as a knight, there is no way he could bear such mental stress with ease.

With the ruin of the relationships he had compiled, the fear and despair of losing the days he had lived personally.

That was the sense of loss Subaru had tasted, to the point of it being painful, when he had arrived into the different world at first.

Subaru: "Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "What Subaru wants to say is understandable, in fact. But, unfortunately, even Betty does not remember that man, I suppose. Betty, is already outside of the Forbidden Library, in fact."

Sympathizing with his intentions at a single call, Beatrice, with a difficult face, horizontally rotated her neck.

At Beatrice's point, the confirmation Subaru had picked up—that was, whether she remembered Julius or not.

As Emilia did not remember, naturally, there is no way Beatrice would remember. That was how it was supposed to be, but there was a possibility that Beatrice was an exception.

For some reason, Beatrice was—.

Subaru: "Even though you remembered Rem."

Beatrice: "It can be said as many times as you'd like, but rather, that case itself should be thought of as the exception, I suppose. And now, it should be thought that it has been proven with the man in front, in fact."

Subaru: "In the end, that is the inference regarding your memories, huh."

It had been some time ago.

Some time ago, Beatrice, in the Forbidden Library, had once referred to Rem after her name had been eaten by Gluttony. Subaru had questioned that after she had formed her contract, after the Forbidden Library had been lost but, this was one conclusion they had reached after their exchange.

Subaru: “When isolated from the outside into the Forbidden Library, Beako does not get affected by what is outside of the room. That’s why the moment Rem’s name was eaten, no effect was taken… is what I had thought, isn’t it. That’s why, once exited from the room, special treatment would not be given… huh.”

Beatrice: “That tone, seems like there is a problem with Betty leaving the Forbidden Library, I suppose.”

Subaru: “N-Nothing like tha~t! I, am mammoth happy to be able to walk under the rays of the sun with you!”

Beatrice: “Eh, in fact.”

And, within that short back and forth, lay the truth.

And, in fact, Beatrice exhibited no peculiarity regarding Julius. Beatrice’s inference was surely, that the barriers to her memory served their purpose only in the Forbidden Library.

Rather, in this case, the problem here was not Beatrice’s distinctiveness—

Emilia: “But, why does Subaru remember Julius-san? Just like, the time with that Rem-san.”

Subaru: “That’s it.”

The question, that would dawn upon everyone, was finally spoken by Emilia.

The sole person in the entire world who remembered Rem, whose Name had been eaten, Subaru.

Forgotten even across the preservation of the memories of Ram, who was her twin elder sister, however, Emilia and the others did not make a reference.

That must also be because, looking at Subaru connect to Rem with such devotion, they could not randomly speak regarding the memories, or make any implicitly believing rash remarks.

But, not just that, the ability to refute Subaru's memories, could only be done by nothing else but having definite proof, which not a single one of them possessed.

However, it was different this time.

In this case, the concerned party who also remembered aside from Subaru—in brief, Julius, who had been forgotten since his very beginning by the world, retained consciousness.

Naturally, the reconciliation of that mutual recognition and, the reason for Subaru being treated as the exception of the Authority of Gluttony gave rise to doubts.

Emilia: "Does Subaru have any idea? No holding secrets, okay."

Subaru: "I don't intend to hide anything at all but… I think I sort of do, I won't say that."

Emilia: "That, isn't that a secret?"

Subaru: "If you can't confirm it don't declare it, I don't think that's secret keeping."

Conversing with Emilia, Subaru investigated the possibility of him being an exception.

The feeling that had uprisen in the very beginning, was the influence of the Witch Factor sleeping inside of Subaru. If the

Authority of Gluttony of eating Memories or Names was the power of the Witch Factor then, it was conceivable, due to a certain cause, it may not apply upon Subaru, just like Unseen Hand.

Perhaps, Subaru could Return by Death through the power of the Witch of Envy. With the power of that Witch invoked, it may have had cancelled the effects of the Authority of Gluttony.

And there was the remaining feeling of the exceptionality like that of Beatrice's Forbidden Library.

That was, because Subaru belonged to a different world. Subaru was a human whose origin was from a different world, and not an existence who belonged to this world.

Not being an existence of this world, he doesn't fall under the effect of the Authority which interfered with the concepts of this world—how was this hypothesis.

Subaru: "However, if it's the latter, then the way to confirm it is easy. Julius just has to meet with Al."

The sole person in this world, who was under the same circumstances as Subaru, was Al.

Regarding the exception of the Authority, if the latter hypothesis happened to be correct, Al must also be remembering Rem and Julius. Above all, the Al of this world and Rem had no acquaintanceship with each other, henceforth, it could not be confirmed.

Subaru: "There's no way he can say that even this time, huh."

Emilia: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "It's regarding Emilia-tan's question but, there's something I want to confirm before answering that. Julius, you'll have to come with me."

At Subaru's voice, who cut short the chase, Emilia made a somewhat discontent expression.

He was keeping secrets, is what could perhaps be thought as well, but this was a measure necessary for attestation.

Above all, in the case if the hypothesis' correctness being proven, what both Subaru and Al held in common—the part of both of them being trippers from a different world would be obscure, the ones whose hometowns lay beyond the Great Waterfall do not fall under the effect of the Authority, that absurd explanation would be the only option left.

Subaru: "Don't tell me, you won't refuse, will you? It is regarding you, after all."

Julius: "—I must state that I have no choice. It seems, under the present circumstance, you are rather knowledgeable regarding the condition inflicted upon me. I shall follow you."

Subaru: "Why do you have such a delicately large attitude, you."

Whether the calmness had been restored through the conversation till now, the attitude of the elegant appearing Julius, with his jaw pulled in, returned. Regardless of appearances, the uprosen situation was too tough on his mind and heart. Not charming at all, was another way to put it.

Subaru: "Suddenly getting absorbed in appearing admirable and increasing problems for the party in contact, huh… Anyway, let's go back to the shelters. I think now it's the suitable time for all the people concerned to assemble too… that's it, what about Ricardo? He had taken part in the suppression together with you. He's fine, right?"

Julius: "…He did get injured whilst shielding me, but it should not have an effect on his life. He is currently being properly diagnosed by Ferris."

Subaru: "…Is that so. Then, that's okay, I guess."

At Julius' reply, Subaru innermost thoughts were half relief and half reflection.

To dissect, the relief of Ricardo's safety, and the reflection of Julius' insensitivity, who had directly inquired from the ones he had fought alongside with.

And at Subaru, whose voice diminished, Julius sighed,

Julius: "I do not expect you to show friendly concern. If you conduct yourself the way you always do, it would be more comfortable for myself, after being in such perplex because of the environment. Well then, let's return to the shelters."

Saying that, Julius, friendly, patted Subaru's shoulder.

Julius: "Though it's not something too pleasant, there is no choice but to leave my introduction to you. The fruitless effort of the display in the hall of the royal election, it would help if you would withdraw that at this occasion."

Subaru: "Don't go about digging up people's guiltful history! Shit, worrying for you was a mistake."

Pushing away the hand on his shoulder, Subaru turned towards Julius while stepping towards the shelter. Of course, he would not misunderstand by thinking that Julius' reply just now were his true feelings.

Moderating Subaru's feelings of guilt, he has simply given his reply in the need of a smart response.

He knew that. As he knew that,

Subaru: "Am I, an idiot. No, I am an idiot."

Why must he now, uphold an attitude, of giving salvation to Julius' heart.

He, who lost all others, above all, must be feeling the helpless anxiety of solitude, how could he mistake on his words and his judgements.

His own insensitivity was terribly irritating, and Julius was almost just as irritating as well.

In the situation where anxiety was natural, acting as normal was a strength of his as well.

That strength was surely, something which Subaru could never attain, despite his desire.

Until Julius were to be left as is, Subaru would certainly harbor his own sense of responsibility.

3

Looking at the back of Subaru, who was heading towards the shelter, after having angered him, Julius' lips' edges curved into a slight smile.

It was a powerless smile, one which he could never let Subaru see, who had his back turned towards him.

Emilia: "That face, do you intend to not show it to Subaru?"

In that dim gap in his heart, a silver bell's chime pounced in between. Turning back, there lay the line of sight of amethyst eyes towards Julius.

At that gaze, wearing gloom, Julius concealed his smile and shook his neck horizontally.

Julius: "Meagre disposition, futile resistance of the defeated, that is what it is. Please do not point it out."

Emilia: "Defeated you say…"

Julius: "Perhaps we, were the only ones who missed among those who headed to capture the control towers. Fully realizing our great insufficiency, I now live in disgrace, and have been left alone in a prohibited state. Completely defeated."

With a stubborn attitude, Julius strongly brought attention to their defeat.

At his attitude, Emilia's eyes wavered heartbreakingly. Emilia, at this moment, may have had been able to find the powerlessness of

Julius' heart.

Emilia: "I'm sorry."

However, Emilia's utterance was different from what Julius had been intending for.

At Julius, who raised his face, Emilia embraced her slender shoulders,

Emilia: "The truth is, I don't know what should I say to you, right now. I'm sure I must have had known you but still I cannot remember, and I can't be reliable like Subaru."

Julius: "…In Subaru's case, he should not be referred to much. He is the one that is the exception, isn't it."

Emilia: "Even still, I know you are being hurt. That's why I cannot do anything but apologize and… in regards to Subaru, thank you."

"…"

The fact that she thanked for Subaru, was unsettling.

Emilia sighed, at Julius, who furrowed his eyebrows.

Emilia: "Julius-san's current face, if Subaru saw it he would certainly be pained more. That's why, thank you, for hiding it. I'm really sorry."

Julius: "Please stop, Emilia-sama. It is not something to be thanked for, and furthermore… furthermore you are making too much out of me. There is no need, for such consideration."

It was true. Julius, subjected to Emilia's gaze, filled with innate kindness, could feel the inappropriate comfort.

With such admirable consciousness, it was not as if he had confirmed Subaru's innermost thoughts. It was something much simpler, a much more uninteresting reason.

Julius: "I don't want him… Subaru, to pity me. That is all there is to

it.”

“…”

Up front, drawing closer, gazing at Subaru’s stature, Julius declared. Pulling Beatrice’s sleeve, who was close to him, with a difficult expression, was Subaru.

At such a figure of Subaru, Julius was unable to discard his own powerlessness.

Why those thoughts, that reason was—.

Emilia: “Just now, I feel I heard Julius-san’s true thoughts for the first time.”

Emilia, continuing her steps, commented that about Julius’ words. Julius thoughtlessly rounded his eyes, and Emilia raised a single finger,

Emilia: “It may not be of too much help but, I will also talk to everyone to try and convince them. That’s why, along with Subaru, trust us as well. Let’s go.

Julius: “…Yes. Also, Emilia-sama.”

Emilia: “What?”

Calling a halt to Emilia, as she turned back, Julius elegantly bowed.

Though it may not be in her memories, it remained inside of him as if carved deeply, that courteous etiquette as both a knight and a noble.

Julius: “Being called Julius-san by Emilia-sama, gives rise to a helpless sense of unpleasantness. Please refer to me as Julius, that way of reference.”

Emilia: “I, used to refer to you like that, isn’t it. …I understand, Julius.”

With a finger on her lips, Emilia consented. After that, Emilia drowned in thought, and shortly glanced at Julius, then proceeded to face towards the empty sky. And,

Emilia: “Can I, ask something too?”

Julius: “What might it be.”

Emilia: “Right next to you, Minor spirits… no, maybe Quasi Spirits. Those children, are flying about in seeming uneasiness… did you know that?”

Julius: “—Yes, I am aware. Because they are, buds that, being close to me, will eventually bloom.”

Julius closed his eyes, at what Emilia has pointed out.

Right beside him, when he closed his eyes, he knew there were the Quasi spirits, wielding the power of six colors, flying about. However, those buds had no knowledge of why they were there.

That is why, for them,

Julius: “My current self’s words will not reach them. Just like, the words for my master or my comrades.”

Chapter 78:
The Remaining Ripples in the Watergate City

1

Reinhard: “Ah, Subaru. Thank goodness we did not miss each other. I have returned.”

Subaru: “Reinhard? How quick, you only just left.”

When Subaru and the others returned to the shelter after picking up Julius, they came across Reinhard, who had just gone back to the same shelter.

Subaru gave a surprised response to his speedy work, and Reinhard, who had slightly raised his hand up as he walked towards them, suddenly broke into a frown. With a face that felt Subaru’s awful complexion and the unease in the somewhat anxious attitudes of the four of them, he said,

Reinhard: “What is the matter, Subaru… Is there something wrong?”

Subaru: “There’s definitely something wrong… But, it’s difficult to choose the words. There’s something I want you to confirm, too.”

Reinhard: “If I can be of any help, you may ask for whatever you want. What is it?”

Reinhard’s response to Subaru, who had dropped the tone of his voice, was as sincere as ever. That was why he wanted to trust in his extraordinariness, much like he had done so far, starting with the battle against the Bowel Hunter, all the way up to the battle against Greed.

However, that line of thinking, of attaining salvation by divine grace, was—

Subaru: “—Do you know anything about the person who’s standing next to me?"

Reinhard: "…You don't mean Beatrice-sama, right?"

Reinhard said this whilst looking down at the little girl in the dress that snuggled by Subaru's side. In silence, Subaru did not reply to Reinhard's words. He merely kept staring at the Sword Saint, praying that the answer he desired would be returned.

To the fervor of that gaze, Reinhard looked at the other person standing next to Subaru, and slightly narrowed his eyes as if he were thinking. However,

Reinhard: "—My apologies. He is someone I don't know. Judging from his aspect and appearance, I believe he is one of the valorous individuals of this battle, though."

Julius: "…"

Julius' cheeks stiffened at Reinhard's reply.

The two of them were supposed to be close friends, companions from the Order of Royal Guards—with his Name eaten, that connection of friendship also ended up being severed.

Julius cast his eyes down gloomily upon hearing that reality, and Subaru, looking at him from the side, was feeling dejected too.

The Sword Saint, as the strongest in the Kingdom, was the most skilled swordsman, one who cut apart even the Witch Cult. Even so, not even Reinhard van Astrea could escape the influence of the Authority of Gluttony.

Or perhaps, to have thought that it was possible if it were Reinhard was only a baseless wish. That wish was cruelly broken, and only confirmed his own shallowness.

Reinhard: "My apologies. I do not know the reason why, but it looks like I was unable to meet your expectations."

Julius: "…Huh, it should be us who say that. From your point of view, that question must have seemed like an accusation. It is us who should apologize for presuming upon that consideration."

It was Julius himself that took responsibility in replying to Reinhard's apology.

He masked the shock of being treated as a stranger by a friend. He looked around the shelter as he covered himself with words of calmness. And then,

Julius: "It seems like it is almost time for the important people to have gathered. It is high time to start the conference that shall include future actions."

Reinhard: "…I understand. You mean to say, that we shall talk about you there, as well?"

Guessing the intentions behind Julius's words, Reinhard lifted his chin. In fact, the valorous individuals of the defensive battle from earlier—those involved in the Royal Selection, along with the city officials, were beginning to gather inside the shelter.

And right then, a young woman dressed in a kimono came back from outside that very shelter.

Anastasia: "Hmm, it looks like they've gathered before we told 'em to. How convenient."

Anastasia, who had finished looking around the outside, said that with a smile as she tugged on her scarf, Echidna. From within the surrounding shelter—in her field of view, she obviously must have seen the figure of Julius standing next to Subaru, but it did not look like she was going to mention him.

Anastasia: "It seems like, with Emilia-san and y'all and Felt-san, we're nearly just about complete. If Priscilla-san comes after, then that'll be enough. Then, I reckon we can start the conference."

Anastasia made her suggestion as she clapped her hands together.

She said it with an air of composure, without even calling out to her one Knight, who should have been reflected in the corner of her eyes.

2

The place that had been designated as the conference room in place of the lost City Hall was a meeting place near the shelter.

This meeting place was also a shelter, but due to its poor provisioning against flooding—Out of fear of the very disaster that had kept the city of Pristella on high alert, it seemed that this particular shelter had not been used during the turmoil.

Anastasia: “To start things off with, it oughta be a good time for the people in the other shelters to start goin’ back to their homes, don’t’cha think? In truth, we also wanted to go back to the inn… But, it seems like the cleanin’ still hasn’t ended.”

When it came to tidying, was she referring to the inn itself or the people involved in the current turmoil?

Anastasia had probably made that comment so it could mean either one, so to take the initiative amongst those who had gathered at the meeting place.

Anastasia: “First of all, let me thank y’all for yer hard work. Luckily, the amount of damage caused by the Witch Cult’s grand offensive was extremely low… Includin’ both the people here and those who aren’t, I believe. It was a battle like no other.”

Others: “…”

Anastasia: “Even without those grim faces, I too, understand. The damage was low, but yer faces say that y’ain’t convinced by those words.”

The looks on those unsuspecting silent faces became harder at Anastasia’s words, who in some regards seemed unconcerned. At that, Anastasia shrugged her shoulders and looked around the room.

At the meeting place, not only were the original members who had undertook the battle to defend the city assembled, but also the other collaborators, those who had gotten involved, had joined.

From the Emilia Camp, there was Emilia, Subaru and Beatrice. Both Garfiel and Otto were absent due to the gravity of their injuries.

From the Felt Camp, there were Felt, Reinhard and Camberley, whose face was pale because of how out-of-place he felt. Gaston and Rachins were absent due to their wounds and exhaustion.

From the Crusch Camp, the most important member, Crusch, was still lying in bed. So, Ferris and Wilhelm were participating instead of their mistress.

From the Priscilla Camp, there was Al and Priscilla, the latter's face seeming bored. Next to them was their attendant, Schult, safe and sound. It seemed like Heinkel's safety had been confirmed, but he was an absentee.

And from the Anastasia Camp, there was Anastasia, who was standing in the center like she had taken the reins. Tivey and Ricardo were both participating as well, the latter of whom had white bandages wrapped all around his body. And Julius, who was seated away from them, was on the Emilia Camp side.

Finally, Kiritaka and Liliana were in attendance, as well as the Scales of the White Dragon, who had joined due to their involvement.

Nearly twenty people in total, who were involved one way or another, had gathered in the room to carry out the post-war conference on the defensive battle.

And the one who got the ball rolling and spoke out a rebuttal against Anastasia's initial speech was Ferris, his attitude unsettled. His yellow eyes shook with irritation as he raised his hand up,

Ferris: "The post-conference is important… I understand that. I understand that, but I wish to speak about how we're going to deal with the Sin Archbishop. In the end, one of the top brass of the Witch Cult was captured alive, right? There are many things that we need to ask. I want to hurry that up."

Anastasia: "…Well, I knew Ferris-san was goin' to say that. By the way, what's Crusch-san's current condition like? Has there been any change since?"

Ferris: "—I can just say she's stable. We couldn't get any information out of Lust, so right now she's recovering her strength with my healing magic, and relying on her willpower. For a moment, her symptoms were relieved a bit thanks to Subaru-kun's help, but…"

Being looked at out of the corner of the eye by the frustrated Ferris, Subaru fixated his gaze on his own palm. A part of his palm had turned black, and it was in a state where it exposed an unseemliness like that of a burn or birthmark.

A similar change had occurred in Subaru's right thigh, which was covered by his trousers. Subaru did not feel any pain or the feeling of anything foreign in it, but it was not like that for Crusch. The removal of that which was definitely eating up her strength was a matter of the highest priority to save her life.

That, and it was also rather tough for a woman to bear those black veins on her skin. That a beautiful woman like Crusch had been affected made it stand out all the more painfully.

Anastasia: "If I'm to speak honestly, I ain't in agreement with keepin' that Sin Archbishop alive. That thing's a being that brings only trouble. If it's possible, killin' 'em in a hurry would definitely be for the best."

Ferris: "—! But then our leads would disappear!"

Whilst Subaru worried about the black veins, the argument between Anastasia and Ferris was reaching a boiling point.

In regards to the captured Sin Archbishop's treatment—Sirius, Ferris stubbornly shook his head at Anastasia, who had suggested execution. It was natural from his point of view.

However, Anastasia merely shook her head at Ferris, who was getting fired up.

Anastasia: "I think what happened to Crusch-san is a pity. But, they're different matters. Besides, that Wrath even knows anythin' about Lust… No, I don't think they do in the long run. To me, it seems very unlikely that the Witch Cult was cooperatin' with each other."

Ferris: "If they're not connected, then why?! Why did something like today happen?! The Sin Archbishops all gathered and came to attack the city, and yet, they're not cooperating?!"

Anastasia: "Of course, even I ain't sayin' that their actions overlapped by happenstance. But, their aims, retreat times, 'n dispersion don't match. It'd be a little weird to call that cooperation… The Witch Cult doesn't have any awareness of stuff like cooperation."

Ferris: "That's just a deduction, right?!"

Raising his voice, Ferris completely denied Anastasia's words. It looked like Anastasia as well had realized that her suggestion was difficult to accept, and it did not seem like she was going to give a rebuttal to that, which had been denied by Ferris' sentimental arguments.

Thereupon, Subaru slowly raised his hand up.

Subaru: "May I say something? I also have an opinion, but if anything, an opinion that's close to Ferris's. I don't think it's pointless getting information out of Wrath."

Ferris: "…What do you mean?"

Subaru: "It isn't a story I'm proud of, but a little while ago, I was allowed to speak with Wrath for a short amount of time, and there I was able to hear a little bit about Gluttony. Even if it was only about the length, depth and closeness of their relationship, it's too hasty to say we can't get any information out of them."

In fact, Wrath had thrown some words similar to a warning at Subaru about Gluttony.

Thanks to that, there was a part in which Subaru had realized the possibility of Gluttony actually being several individuals, and had ended up not overlooking Julius when he had tried to distance himself from the shelter. He could not close his eyes to this. Nevertheless, within Subaru's true feelings, he also had a part which agreed with Anastasia.

Subaru: "But, leaving aside whether we can or can't use them as a source of information, I also have a bad feeling in regards to keeping them captured… Though all the Sin Archbishops are like that."

Right now, so that they could partake in the conference, Sirius's guard duty had been entrusted to the Scales of the White Dragon.

She was in a condition where she was bound in chains without quarter, and had even been gagged to stop her from talking. They had also been instructed to take turns keeping guard, as their hearts had the potential to be manipulated were they to stay near her for too long. Nothing should happen during this conference, but his anxiety was unending.

Subaru: "It's necessary to feel this anxiety whilst they are captured alive. I can't unconditionally make a decision about what to do about that."

Ferris: "Which side are you on…?!"

Ferris pointed his eyes, which were full of hatred, towards the fence-sitting Subaru. Subaru grimaced at the heat of his gaze, and said,

Subaru: "I'm not taking sides. Honestly, I think both of you are right… In the worst case, I will do something about the black veins in Crusch-san's body using the parts of my body which haven't turned black. If that solves the issue, then I think that'll be no issue."

Ferris: "—Ha."

Emilia: "Subaru."

Subaru's own judgement was a fairly extreme conclusion for the topic of Crusch's black veins. Upon hearing those words, Ferris's face became flabbergasted, and Emilia looked at him, her eyes rebuking him.

Everyone else also turned to look at him with shock, and complex emotions in their gazes.

Emilia: “I also heard about that, but that’s truly as a last resort, right? We don’t know what will happen in the future even if it’s nothing right now, but, acting like this is normal is…”

Subaru: “Well, it’s not like even I want to put that seemingly unhealthy ink in my body for fun. But, we have a precedent with Crusch-san that it relieved her symptoms a little.”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “What I mean to say is, don’t rush to draw conclusions. I understand the feelings of impatience, but even if my back or my butt turns black, given that they’re out of sight, I’m not reluctant to help out. That’s what I’m on about.”

Despite there being a way to be able to do something, letting it go by due to his own cuteness would leave him a bad taste in his mouth.

Crusch was a valued benefactor to him, and more importantly, there was a solution that did not involve his, nor any of the others’ lives. He would try and help as much as he could, if it was up to something like darkening his out-of-sight skin.

Wilhelm: “Ferris, seat yourself. For the time being, Subaru-dono is right.”

Ferris: “…I know. I really know.”

The one who pulled Ferris’s sleeve, who was lost for words, and made him calm down, was Wilhelm. Ferris looked down and attempted to say something to Subaru, but sat without saying anything in the end.

Subaru let out a sigh on seeing his state; the mood around the tense meeting area went back to normal. Even so, the situation from before still continued.

Anastasia: “In any case, I understand that everyone’s opinions regardin’ the treatment of the Sin archbishops are divided. It’s worryin’ to keep ‘em alive, and even the limits of mine ‘n Natsuki-kun’s instincts are comin’ out… In truth, if they’d killed ‘em instead of capturing ‘em, our talk would have gone all the more quicker.”

Priscilla: “—What, has this worthless spiel ended? No matter how much you gaze upon me, no rewards shalt be given to a show that lacks value. Cease that beggar’s look immediately.”

Priscilla replied with a yawn to the bantering Anastasia’s look.

That misplaced reply was proof that Priscilla had not been listening to the conversation properly up until now. Her participating in this conference must also have been some kind of whim of hers.

Anastasia: “Don’t speak so slyly. That attitude is unbecomin’ for one who captured someone from the Witch Cult alive, but out of all people, why did ya capture ‘em? What led to this bizarre turn of events?”

Priscilla: “As if I knew whether she would live or die. As the final blow was dealt, the Yang Sword clouded over and its sharpness disappeared. Thus, she survived. The one who dragged her out from the canal was one of the rabble, who had drained the water in search for the Songstress. It has nothing to do with me.”

Anastasia: “It doesn’t bother you that the one you’d tried to kill didn’t die?”

Priscilla: “On the contrary. I drove the sword solely to kill. If she did not perish by that, then I have no intention to kill her again. Though she did not expire by my hand, it seems to be all the more convenient as far as I am concerned.”

Anastasia: “Haaa, I don’t understand, but aight.”

Anastasia seemed to have given up trying to understand Priscilla, who as ever, had elaborated on her enigmatic theory. Subaru did not know her intentions either, but Priscilla’s thinking probably was not understood by anyone else.

It was dubious whether even Al and Schult, who stood by her side, were able to make heads or tails of it.

Reinhard: “At the least, I am against judging Wrath in this place. I do want to respect Ferris’s feelings of course, but it also poses a unique opportunity for the Kingdom. On top of strictly keeping guard of them, I think that we should make an effort to get what they know out of them.”

Felt: “…I think it’s better to kill them. Even just remembering those Sin Archbishops makes me sick to the stomach, I don’t think they’d say anything that half makes sense. It’s better to kill them before being dragged into something problematic, so that they won’t cause any problems in the future, probably.”

Reinhard: “Felt-sama…”

Felt: “For your information, I ain’t saying this to get on your nerves this time, at all.”

And, coming from a different place, the opinions were split between master and servant. Reinhard, who had advocated that they should keep Wrath alive, and Felt, who had denied that. Although, Felt’s opinion was not well-grounded.

Felt herself did not seem to think that her opinion would be accepted. In the end, it looked like Wrath would be given into custody to the Kingdom.

Reinhard: “I shall be the one responsible for escorting Wrath to the Royal Capital. In the case Wrath is scheming something, I would be the person most able to deal with it. And in the worst case, there is the eventuality that a conviction might need to be carried out too.”

Anastasia: “When it comes to bein’ suitable for that, you’re it, apparently. But in this case, will Felt-san follow ya to the Royal Capital too? Or shall master and servant go their separate ways…”

Felt: “If Reinhard’s going, I’m going too—This time, it can’t be helped.”

Reinhard’s face changed to one of astonishment, on hearing Felt’s words. Felt caught a fleeting glimpse of his face from the side, and plastered a deep scowl on her lovely face,

Felt: “Don’t get the wrong idea. The fact that I can’t stand you ain’t changed. It ain’t changed, but there’s times when I ain’t gonna do that.”

Reinhard: “There are times where you aren’t going to do that?”

Felt: “I don’t know. Try asking that to your own chest. My chest ain’t soft enough to reply back to you.”

Sticking out her underdeveloped chest, Felt stuck her tongue out at Reinhard. He cast his eyes down upon seeing his master’s attitude, and then quietly lifted his chin up.

Only they themselves knew what feelings there were between master and servant. At any rate, it looked like the Felt Camp, too, was not the same as it had been a year ago.

Camberley: “W-Well, in that case, I’ll…”

Reinhard: “Camberley, look after Rachins and Gaston. Once they can move about, they may first return back to the mansion. Bring them only in contact with Rom-jii.”

Camberley: “Y-Yessir, I understand.”

A look of relief came over the uncomfortable-looking Camberley on receiving his orders.

For now, thanks to Reinhard volunteering, they could feel at ease regarding Wrath’s escort. What came after, that which they could get out of Sirius, would be the duties of the Kingdom’s experts.

???: “Then, may we move to the next issue? Ladies and gentlemen.”

The one who had raised his hand up after seeing the matter of Wrath’s treatment decided upon had been Kiritaka. He gazed at everyone’s faces while he adjusted his slightly messy hair with his hand. And then, he spoke out, Kiritaka: “First of all, regarding the battle to protect this city… I would like to thank you all, on behalf of all citizens. If it were not for all of you, the city of Pristella would likely have fallen into the evil clutches of the Witch Cult. I offer my deepest gratitude for that.”

Kiritaka hung his head low, and bowed, having taken responsibility for speaking of the general consensus of the city. Liliana, who was by his side, with a look of panic on her face, also bowed her head like Kiritaka had.

Putting Kiritaka aside, Liliana’s earnest reaction was quite unlike her. Perhaps her fight against Wrath, or something after that, had caused a change in her attitude. In any case,

Subaru: “We were already in the city, and involved. We didn’t have the option to just watch on as a spectator, so you don’t have to thank us to this grandiose extent. Don’t you think?”

Emilia: “Yeah. Besides, maybe the Witch Cult taking over the city was just a bonus for them, judging by their aims. Whether we saved them, or they saved us, maybe we don’t know which one it is.”

Emilia and Subaru insisted that it was hard for them to accept the praises at face value for the Witch Cult’s attack. Certainly, the greatest part of repelling the Witch Cult had been down to the merit of the members gathered here. However, in the first place, the Sin Archbishops’ aims were Emilia, the Artificial Spirits, and the Book of Wisdom.

All those things had been brought in by those involved from the outside, and the Emilia Camp had been responsible for gathering them all. They could not accept their praises with full sincerity.

Felt: “Wait up. It bothers me that you’re saying that freely as if it were the consensus. Are you really saying that if we hadn’t been here, they would’ve slammed the door shut on those Witch Cult guys? I reckon we need to talk more clearly about that.”

Priscilla: “‘Tis vexing, but I am in agreement with that beggar girl. Do not drag us into all of your commoners’ self-convenient diffidence. Do not be so conceited, you half-devil and you philistine."

However, the harsh duo stated their rigid opinions on hearing the words of Subaru and Emilia.

Felt and Priscilla looked at each other after they finished speaking, and immediately looked away, their faces looking disgusted. From the start, those two had not gotten along with each other. Only those in her camp were close to Priscilla, so it was a pretty normal reaction.

Kiritaka: "Please settle down. I am gladdened by Emilia-sama's words, but as Felt-sama and Priscilla-sama said, the city's defense was all of your merit. This I vow as a representative of the city—In the meantime, I would like you to lend your strength just a little while longer."

Subaru: "By strength… You mean the next issue you mentioned earlier?"

Kiritaka: "Indeed. About the inhabitants who were transformed by that wicked power."

Everyone: "…"

Everyone there went silent at hearing Kiritaka's somber tone.

What he was about to point out—it was something which everyone here understood. The staff of the City Hall, who had fallen into the evil clutches of Lust, had been transformed into inhuman forms.

One had been transformed into a black dragon, and the other dozen or so had been transformed into huge flies.

They still were completely unable do anything about the effect of the Authority of Lust, Transmutation and Transfiguration For now, they ought to have gathered them in one place and concealed their existence, though.

Kiritaka: "The culprit, Lust, has fled… No, even if we could catch Lust in the first place, it is doubtful they would have any intention of restoring them to normal.”

Subaru: “That’s for sure… But we can’t just leave them, right? Is there anything at all which we could do? Isn’t it even impossible for Ferris?”

The changes to the people who could not turn back to their original form were fundamentally different from injuries or disease. Seeing Subaru’s gaze, Ferris shook his head, and then bit his lips,

Ferris: “Even I simply can’t cure that. No, it isn’t about whether I can cure them or not. It isn’t an injury or disease, they were just transformed into those kind of creatures. Healing magic can only help you get back to being right as rain if you’re injured or sick. That’s why healing magic is futile against those transformations.”

Kiritaka: “To be frank, I cannot tell whether the people that have been turned into flies possess any sense of awareness. I cannot distinguish them, and a fly the size of a person cannot even fly to begin with. They have not learnt how to move their wings properly, lying in an incomplete state. But, if they have awareness…”

Subaru: “If they clearly understand their circumstances, they’d end up going crazy I guess…”

They had lost their own figures.

It was a frightening change, even just thinking about that. However, considering that they had been changed into something inhuman—into something repulsive, it made it all the more worse. With one’s body not being freed, even losing the means to express one’s own will, it was pretty easy to imagine what they would be thinking in the end.

For sure they would…

Priscilla: “Those who were transformed into vile insects would want to die, I would imagine. If there is no chance to turn them back, then would it not be merciful to bestow that?”

Al: “Princess, that’s…”

Priscilla: “Be silent, Al. There is no meaning in mere wishful lip service. I hold no mercy to dish out to slothful pigs, but killing those who revile fate by being trifled with to absurdity is also a kindness. In short, that is all it means.”

With her harsh view, Priscilla dismissed Al, who had instinctively voiced his opinion. However, the reason why Al did not make any more objections, was because Priscilla’s opinion was also correct in some sense.

Of course, he did not believe they should die. But, they had been transformed into flies, and there was no known way to get them back to normal; it was perfectly natural that they would want to die.

Subaru: “It’s impossible to negotiate with the culprit, Lust. Healing magic doesn’t fix them. What do we do?”

Kiritaka: “I wished to ask everyone about that. It does not matter, even if it is a shot in the dark. Does no one have any idea on how to cure them?”

Still seemingly clinging on to hope, Kiritaka’s question was drenched in both expectation and resignation. No, the amount of resignation was stronger. And that was natural. If there had been any possibility to cling onto, someone would have been bound to have suggested it by now.

In other words, at this point in time, without any allusions to a solution having been made so far,

Kiritaka: “—I understand. I profusely apologize for the inconvenience. Dealing with them is an issue for the city, so we shall take the responsibility afterwards.”

Subaru: “Take the responsibility? What will you all do?”

Kiritaka: “We will consider the possibilities after this… We have to check the will of those involved, and see each of their conclusions. No matter what the final opinions are, we shall see it through until the very end.”

They sounded like strong words that implied an end in which their lives would be ended, instead of the one where they could return back to normal. Kiritaka's conclusion was inevitable in a sense.

It was inevitable, but it was too soon for that conclusion.

???: "Wait—Erm, wouldn't you be able to leave it to me?"

Kiritaka: "Emilia-sama?"

Having realized that their discussion on that matter had reached its end, Emilia quickly raised her hand. She looked straight at Kiritaka whilst feeling his anxious and expectant gaze converging on her, and said,

Emilia: "A way to return them all back to normal right now… Sorry, that I don't know. But, I want you to not make any hasty conclusions. We need more time."

Kiritaka: "I understand your feelings, Emilia-sama. But, the topic is about whether they have that time in them. The big issue is for how long their spirits can maintain their equilibrium in their transformed bodies…"

Emilia: "Yeah, I know. That's why I will make time to protect their minds—It may be a crude method, but it'll surely be able to do the job. A way of putting them to sleep."

Subaru: "I see… cold sleep."

Realizing Emilia's true intentions, Subaru snapped his fingers and then raised his voice. As he felt the people around him tilting their heads quizzically due to the unfamiliar words, Subaru nodded at Emilia, who was looking at him,

Subaru: "In other words, you mean the same way as with the brides in the church, right? With Emilia-tan's magic, we'll put the transformed people into a state of suspended animation. It may end up just postponing the inevitable, but it's sufficient to put off making a conclusion. In the meanwhile, we should find a solution."

Kiritaka: "Freezing them, and keeping them sleeping… Is that possible? But, will they not end up freezing to death in their sleep?"

Emilia: "They'll be fine. It was for a short while, but I used this on the brides, so I understand the effects on one's health, and besides, I also slept for around a hundred years by myself."

Kiritaka: "You yourself slept…?!"

Although an undesired commotion spread throughout the meeting place, Subaru clenched his fist at Emilia's words.

It was unusual that Emilia was being positive about her magic and that she had insisted on trying to use it this way as well. That, and it was a fine play that even Subaru had not thought about.

It certainly was no drastic solution to the problem, but they just needed time to find a solution from somewhere other than Lust. At least, their possibilities should be increased by removing the set time limit.

In the worst case—yes, it was the worst case, but there existed a possibility.

Subaru would defeat Lust with his own hands, and plunder the Witch Factor of Lust she possessed. Or perhaps, being that it was him, it might not be possible that he could return them back to normal using the power of that Witch Factor.

He had just taken in the Witch Factor of Greed, and it was possible that reproducing the Sin Archbishop's Authority was merely a pipe dream.

Kiritaka: "…If that is possible, by all means, I would like to ask that of you, but…"

Emilia: "Let me do it. You won't regret it for sure."

Emilia repeated her request to the hesitant Kiritaka, at a loss for what to think. Kiritaka agonized about it before her earnest attitude. However, Liliana, who was at his side, tugged at the cuff of his suit.

The brown girl looked up at Kiritaka and then flared up her nostrils,

Liliana: “What are you worried about, Kiritaka-san? Why not? Let her try! After all that Emilia-sama said. It’s natural that there’s a chance of success!”

Kiritaka: “Of course, I want to believe that too, very much so, Liliana. However, this is something that involves many lives. We cannot arrive at a conclusion so easily…”

Liliana: “There’s no need to worry! Emilia-sama will not fail. Because, be~cau~se~! The great heroes of the future can all surmount such tribulations without difficulty! Those heroic tales where they surmount any wall standing in their way, no matter how tall or thick it is! Blood boiling and flesh raising, a tale which fascinates everyone is created like so!”

The gentle strum of the Lyulyre, unsuitable for the meeting place, resounded throughout.

None of Liliana’s idealistic notions had any basis, but for some reason, they did have a strange persuasive power to them. Of course, it was not so simple to make their conclusion based just on that.

Subaru: “At the least, let’s ask their families. If the staff of the City Hall are the victims, then their family should be in the same city, right? We should try and hear from them whether they leave open that possibility.”

Kiritaka: “…In regards to that question, there was not anyone who seemed to have abandoned their family.”

Subaru: “Then we can talk later about whether we will leave this to Emilia or not. And, regarding whether they will believe Emilia or not… Well, I’d like to hear about that specifically from the consensus of the city.”

Kiritaka directed his gaze towards Emilia, showing signs of hesitation. If Emilia had cowered from that look, then perhaps the debate would drag on even further.

However, Emilia nodded without fear at his clinging gaze.

Emilia: “Leave it to me—I will do it without fail.”

Confidence and conviction—even though it was somewhat of a different feeling, Emilia had shown her willingness to face her own deeds with a strong sense of self-awareness and preparedness.

Kiritaka: “…”

Kiritaka was speechless in seeing the gaze in Emilia’s eyes, and in hearing her assertion.

And not only that, the gazes of the people around which were pointed at Emilia also showed an infinite variety of reactions as if they were swaying in a wave of emotions different to the ones so far.

Finally, Kiritaka let out a deep sigh.

Kiritaka: “I un… derstand. For sure, I reckon we should endeavor to make our wishes come true rather than jumping to hasty conclusions. After all, the battle to protect Pristella, too, had seemed reckless at first.”

Emilia: “Yeah. I’m reaaally thankful.”

Kiritaka: “It is me who should be thanking you…”

Kiritaka smiled wryly at having lost his position. After the conference, and after they got permission from the victims’ families, it seemed like the cold sleep from Emilia’s magic would be realized.

Subaru replied to Emilia’s nod by giving her a thumbs up.

Having cleared up the second point of dispute, what came next was their last topic on the agenda. And that was—

???: “So, the last issue… There have been many reports of unconscious people of unknown identity that were found one after the other in various parts of the city. I would like for us to discuss this matter.”

Most likely, for the Knight who had been forgotten and had remained silent until now, it was the most important issue.

3

???: “Right now, the number of Nameless people is reported to be thirty-six. Amongst them, there are six people who appear to have been part of the Scales of the White Dragon. Furthermore, it’s very likely that the number of Nameless people will increase in the future.”

The one who led the debate and gave the report was Dynas, the representative of the Scales of the White Dragon. With his fingers, he touched the dragon crest that was embroidered on his white garb, a strong expression of regret adorning his face.

Most likely, that was the crest that denoted that they were Scales of the White Dragon. The ambiguous testimony that he had given, “Who appear to have been part of”, must have been related to that crest as well.

Felt: “It’s okay to say that the guys who were attacked by that Sin Archbishop are Nameless, right? Like, the guys who popped up out of nowhere all of a sudden, defeated.”

Kiritaka: “Taking into account the situation, it’s reasonable to think that, I’d say. Their uniforms have matching embroidery sewn in… It’s really frustrating that their identities are completely unknown.”

Dynas: “What’s more is that there are thirty more people in a similar position… It’s a complete mess. It’s unclear whether they were there all along or not, it’s difficult to judge what the best thing to do is.”

The victims of Gluttony—The people who had had their Names eaten, in some sense, were harder to deal with than the victims of Lust. After all, the victims had completely disappeared from the memories of those who knew them. On top of that, if the people in question were not conscious, then there were no clues left to find their identity.

Even with the people from the Scales of the White Dragon, while it was great that their affiliation was known, no one knew more than that. They did not know who they were caring for, or such.

Felt: “All of the Nameless that you found were unconscious, right? What was the Healing Arts User’s chic… No, guy’s prognosis on that?”

Ferris: “…It’s the same as with Lust as well. I don’t know why they’re unconscious. The result of my prognosis is that I think they are just sleeping. But this too isn’t a certainty. Those who just sleep should keep getting weaker and weaker, but then there’s the case of Rem-chan.”

To the words of Felt, Ferris looked over at Subaru and then spoke.

A year ago, having suffered the same damage from Gluttony, Ferris had given Rem a diagnosis similar to the Nameless people. The result of the prognosis had been exactly the same. And still, up until now, Rem had not woken up, and yet her health had not deteriorated.

Even though she seemed asleep, it should be said that her body was not carrying out its functions for life support. Her hair was not growing, and there was not even any excretion. She was in an unfathomable state.

Subaru: “Putting aside knowing their identities or not, the care of those people is easy. It’s better to deal with bedridden people since they’re bedridden, we can just leave them sleeping in their beds… Even though in truth, I’d like for someone who knows them to be by their side.”

Ricardo: “Since that ain’t possible, that’s the issue, ain’t it? It’s somethin’ arduous.”

Even though he knew saying that had been half-meaningless, Subaru had done it for Rem. In the real meaning, he had no other choice but to defeat Gluttony for Rem.

Even if he knew that, having offered a little bit of opposition was

Subaru's self-satisfaction.

Subaru's naivety was denied by Ricardo, who had raised his voice, his face showing no traces of ill will. Upon turning to take a glimpse at his profile, Ricardo was sitting on two chairs set side-by-side, having crammed his huge body in, and was taking part in the conference.

His spirited attitude still seemed unchanged, but there was something that was different in just one place. And that was the hefty mass of bandages wrapped around him, and his right arm missing from the elbow down.

Ricardo: "Don't make such a miserable face, bro. It's true that I screwed up, but I'm alive. When ya think about what happened now, it's by far the most preferable damage."

Noticing Subaru's gaze, Ricardo raised his severed right arm up and bared his fangs. It seemed like Ricardo had lost his right arm due to an attack from Gluttony during the fierce battle of the control tower.

He'd heard that from Julius, who had been fighting at his side. Julius had also told him that Ricardo had lost his arm protecting him, and that Ricardo himself did not remember it.

As if proving that, Ricardo shifted his gaze to Subaru's side, and said,

Ricardo: "By the way, I see that handsome guy next to ya's an acquaintance of yers, bro? Looks like ya met the guy ya were searchin' for, that's a relief ain't it? Truly, thank ya for helpin' me earlier."

Julius: "…"

Calling Julius a handsome guy, Ricardo acted as if he was talking to a stranger. From the flow of the conversation, it seemed that Julius had exchanged with Ricardo the same words as back when he had tried to smokescreen Subaru at first.

Julius should have carried the injured Ricardo to the shelter, so it could be presumed that Ricardo's thanks in the end were for that.

Nevertheless, leaving this misunderstanding as-is was far too agonizing.

Besides, they had arrived to the topic of Gluttony. It was time to cut to the chase it seemed.

Subaru: "I have something which I want to talk to everyone about. It's something important that's related to the Nameless."

Standing up, Subaru got the attention of everyone in the hall to himself.

Right now, the one who had the most information on how to deal with the Nameless was Subaru. He felt everyone's gazes naturally filled with anticipation of a solution for this state of affairs, however he shook his head.

Subaru: "I'm sorry for having caused anticipation, in all honesty, this isn't something which will yield hope immediately. But I have to talk about this."

Anastasia: "Ya know, if ya give it such an extravagant preface, yer bound to make us fret. What are ya plannin' to say?"

Anastasia threw in a few joking words to Subaru to try and relieve some of the tension in the place. However, it was her who should be the one most prepared for this. Otherwise, the fact had the potential to turn her current state of mind inside out from the roots.

Subaru took a quick breath, and then looked at everyone's faces. And finally, he looked at Julius, who nodded despite looking tense.

Seeing that, Subaru then pointed to the neighboring Julius with his hand, and asked his question.

Subaru: "Is there anyone here who knows the name of this man?"

Everyone: "…"

Silence prevailed in the meeting place to Subaru's question.

The time that was kept in silence was not borne out of a lack of understanding, though. It was because everyone sensed the intent of Subaru's question, and were contemplating about Julius's position.

And on that basis, if nobody said a word, it meant that there was no one with any idea about Julius's identity.

Subaru: "Al! What about you? Don't you remember his face?"

Al: "Ah? What's up, bro? Why are you nominating me all of a sudden?"

Having had his name abruptly called out, Al raised his voice in sheer surprise. That behavior was enough to prove that he had memories of Julius inside of him, but, even so, he had to make sure.

Subaru placed his hand on the roundtable and posed his question to Al, whilst leaning forward towards him.

Subaru: "Do you really not know why? It's what you and I have in common. So, do you not remember this guy? Well? Reply to me."

Al: "…Ah, so that's why. Sorry, bro. I know what you mean, but I don't think I can help you. That guy's nowhere to be found in my head."

Subaru: "Are you completely sure? If you think a little more seriously…"

Julius: "That's enough—That's plenty enough, Subaru."

As someone summoned from another world—Al presumed the intention behind those series of questions based off of that, but he had not nodded his head. Nonetheless, it was Julius himself who stopped the unrelenting Subaru.

Julius clapped Subaru's shoulder with a forlorn smile on his face, and bowed at Al.

Julius: "I over-expected, I apologize. We apologize for our impoliteness."

Al: “You have no reason to apologize. I don’t know… If there was such a reason to or not, but you don’t need to apologize to me.”

Waving his sole arm, Al turned his gaze away from Julius.

There were no signs of falsehood in his reaction. It was probably true that Al did not remember Julius. Then, that meant part of Subaru’s conjecture was incorrect.

The world one originated from had nothing to do with the effect of the Authority of Gluttony.

In that case, then, the most likely reason after all was the Witch Factor inside Subaru’s body. And it seemed to be limited to isolation with the outside world according to Beatrice’s Door Crossing.

Wilhelm: “Judging from the story, Subaru-dono. This young man was involved with us… And in addition to that, I also think he is someone who was in a fairly important position?”

Wilhelm spoke out towards Subaru, sharing his deduction after observing the trio’s exchange. Others would have most likely come to the same conclusion which the wisened swordsman did.

Subaru nodded at Wilhelm, and then he turned to look towards Julius,

Subaru: “This is Julius. Julius Juukulius. Like all of you guessed, his Name was eaten by Gluttony, and he ended up as one of the Nameless people. But the process is different than the others who were unconscious—His consciousness remains.”

Ferris: “We have such a case? He’s forgotten by those around him, but he himself remembers… So, is this person one of ours?”

With disbelief on his face, Ferris swept his gaze from Subaru to Julius and then back again many times over. To the shivering Ferris’s words, Reinhard tucked his chin in and said, “It seems so”. The Sword Saint gazed at Julius with his tranquil eyes, and said,

Reinhard: “Before the conference, Subaru asked me the same question as well. He… Julius was likely an acquaintance of mine or Ferris. Or maybe the word “acquaintance” is insufficient to describe our relationship. A friend, perhaps.”

Julius: “…At least, I thought of you both as friends. If you both considered me a friend in the same way, nothing would make me feel more honored.”

Ferris: “Friends… Then, Julius, you’re a Knight as well? One of the Royal Guard?”

Both Reinhard and Ferris were bewildered at having been called a friend by a stranger. Their reaction could not be avoided, thus Julius corrected them half in resignation.

Subaru’s insides were burning in anger as he watched the trio’s exchange.

What a warped, nauseating scene it was.

Subaru was not privy to the details on how the three of them had met, how they ended up becoming friends, and what their friendship was like. Even so, as colleagues, as friends, the three of them should have interacted with each other in a close, naturally familiar manner. Now there was nary a trace left of those certain bonds.

When Rem’s Name had been eaten, and everyone had forgotten her existence, Subaru had thought there was nothing that existed in this world that was more sorrowful than that.

But, what about Julius’s current condition? The sensation of complete loss that invaded him from being abandoned by everyone in the world; if that were not sad, then what was?

Sadness was not something you could compare. But, even if it was, this was far too cruel.

Anastasia: “…I guess it ain’t somethin’ like him bein’ a plain ol’ Royal Guard.”

Out of the blue, Anastasia’s words butted in between the painful first meeting of those friends.

She put a thoughtful expression across her gentle features, and licked her lips as she touched her jaw. Then, she pointed at Ricardo before then pointing at Julius,

Anastasia: “Julius-san was the one who brought back, on his shoulders, the grievously injured Ricardo. Straight after, we talked a bit about Ricardo’s treatment, then he immediately left sayin’ that he had to go and search for someone… I guess that’s why you reacted the way ya did, right?”

Julius: “Anastasia-sama…”

It was the second time master and servant met for the first time, a meeting that should not normally occur. Recalling the bitter memories of that time, Julius spoke out the name of his master with anguish on his face.

However, Anastasia did not even take notice of the presence of the quivering devotion that had been put into those words. She thought for a moment, and then raised one of her fingers.

Anastasia: “Julius-san’s Nameless case is a rather unusual one. We don’t know how many people in the city are in the same state, but mayhaps there’s a possibility that other people are like the unconscious Nameless, still yet to be identified. There’s no doubt that this, too, is a serious situation. Ain’t that right?”

Moving her gaze away from Julius, Anastasia directed the theme to the outline of the debate. It looked like the matter of Julius’s identity had been postponed as one of the problems that could not be resolved.

That was pretty unjust treatment for the current Julius, but Subaru was the only one in this place who could feel outraged by it.

Anastasia: “In light of these problems… I have a proposal, though, is that okay?”

Subaru: “A proposal?”

Subaru's innermost feelings were put aside, and the attention of the conference was once again directed at Anastasia. Being the center of attention, Anastasia looked around the surroundings, before finally settling her gaze on Subaru and Julius.

Anastasia: "The victims of the Witch Cult… The victims of Lust, and those Nameless from Gluttony. Askin' the Sin Archbishop in question for a solution for each of these is hopeless, are we in agreement with that?"

Kiritaka: "It would be difficult to force them to speak, in that sense, you are correct, I guess. But, an overly-pessimistic opinion could, on the contrary, result in clouding our view."

Anastasia: "That doesn't mean I'm thinkin' about the worst either. But, there ain't just one way to get an answer, I just wanted to say that."

Subaru: "There's a different way to get an answer?"

Subaru ended up parroting back Anastasia's words without comprehending their meaning.

A different solution to asking the corresponding Sin Archbishops, who were the culprits behind the damage—if such a way existed, it would probably be close to a Witch's deal.

For a split second, a choice which Subaru must not make crossed his mind, in that, if it truly were the Witch of Greed, she would perhaps know the answer.

Emilia: "So, what do you mean? Please tell us clearly."

However, Emilia asked Anastasia about the true meaning of her words in place of Subaru, who was busy shaking his head denying that idea. And then, whilst drumming her head with her fingers, Anastasia said,

Anastasia: "If we can't get the information out of those crooked Sin Archbishops, then we oughta ask it to another person who may know—such a person exists. Someone from this country, who may know a way."

???: “There’s no way…”

Having guessed the meaning of Anastasia’s words, someone spoke that out in a hoarse voice.

However, unlike everyone else around him, who had realized what she was on about, Subaru had no idea what her statement meant.

Felt: “I don’t understand. Don’t put on airs, and say it clearly.”

Felt sulkily demanded that from Anastasia, her understanding the same as Subaru’s. Anastasia gave a wry smile to Felt’s words, and apologized with an “I’m sorry, I’m sorry”,

Anastasia: “—The Sage Shaula.”

Felt: “Ah?”

Anastasia: “The Pleiades Watchtower, if it’s the Sage who should be there… If they’re the person of legend who sees everythin’ in the world, it wouldn’t be strange if they knew, right?”

So she spoke, revealing the true intentions behind her proposal.

Chapter 79:
The Sage's Watchtower

1

Anastasia: "The Sage Shaula…"

When Anastasia mentioned that name, a stir spread throughout the meeting place.

Whilst everyone exchanged glances with each other and put on expressions like they could not believe what they had heard, only Subaru was left behind from this situation.

Subaru patted Emilia's shoulder beside him whilst he put on a troubled expression and said,

Subaru: "Uh, is this Sage Shaula someone famous?"

Emilia: "…Subaru, didn't you read the story of the Witch when you studied the alphabet? I thought that nursery-tale was in the book that you were reading a lot."

Subaru: "The nursery-tale's Witch… Ah, that picture book. Now that you mention it, I'd thought that the Witch's story was listed as well for sure."

That which was pointed out by Emilia brought up old memories of a year ago in him.

Though he had been buried by the memories of those hectic days, a year ago, he had studied the alphabet in a picture book for children —At the time when he had just started to help out at the Roswaal mansion.

It was a collection of classics that compiled the popular nursery-tales in this world; amongst them, there had been an illustrated one about the Witch of Envy for sure. However, in that tale…

Subaru: "In all honesty, its contents weren't that detailed, so I didn't fully understand everything. The most I got out of it was that long ago, at a certain place, the Witch did something terrible.”

Emilia: “Was it really that vague… Hmmmmm, let me think.”

???: “—The symbol of terror that once brought chaos and ruin to this world, the Witch of Envy.”

When Emilia sank into thought, pondering how she would explain it to Subaru, who had displayed his ignorance, it was Julius, who was sitting opposite to her, who opened his mouth instead of her.

Julius: “All that was recorded was that she was a half-elf with an infinitely cruel and ruthless personality, and that she had tremendous magical power with which she controlled shadows. Other than that, her name… We only know that her name is Satella. Even now, the scars that being left behind on the world remain strong.”

Subaru: “…Ehhh.”

Subaru lifted his chin up at Julius’s explanation, who had kept his emotions in check as best as he could. He focused on giving a neutral explanation, but the change in his state of mind was painfully shown regardless, even though no one around them mentioned it. In the meantime, his explanation continued.

Julius: “At the Great Waterfall, at the far east of Lugunica, there lays a shrine made from Magical Sealing Stones. Even now, that Witch is sealed up in that shrine. All the while, she spews out a huge amount of Miasma.”

Subaru: “…I heard that she couldn’t be destroyed. But, how did they manage to seal such a powerful Witch?”

Julius: “That is where the name of the Sage from before comes into play.”

Julius nodded after hearing Subaru’s question. The Knight touched the sword at his waist, and looked towards the end of the roundtable—Right at the red-haired youth.

Julius: “Four-hundred years ago, three great heroes contributed to the sealing of the Witch of Envy. One of those was the Sword Saint, Reid Astrea—The sword’s heaven-sent child who was the first to acquire the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, and the title which Reinhard inherited.”

Reinhard: “There are also records that show that Reid Astrea, the first Sword Saint, did not possess the Divine Protection. Not all known legends are unconditionally true. Of course, it is a fact that Reid-sama created the current Astrea family and the name of the Sword Saint, though.”

Reinhard, who was said person’s descendant, supplemented what Julius, who was looking at him, had said.

However, considering it regarded his ancestor, who had accomplished great deeds that had been left behind in history, Reinhard’s expression when talking about it was somewhat brooding. He also seemed to be worried about Julius when it came to that. It did not look like he was going to insist on the subject regarding the inherited Divine Protection.

In any case,

Subaru: “So, the Sage was a companion of that Sword Saint, that’s the gist I’m getting.”

Emilia: “More accurately, the Sage Shaula, and the Divine Dragon Volcanica… You know, the dragon that protects the Kingdom of Lugunica. It’s said that it started with a promise whereby Volcanica joined forces in battle to seal the Witch of Envy, and now, even to this day, still watches over the Kingdom.”

He had heard the name of the Divine Dragon Volcanica many times, back at the place where the Royal Selection candidates expressed their determination.

In his memories, the Dragon’s Blood had always been heralded as something able to bring fertility to ravaged earth, let one overcome any disease, and make one either immense or unrivaled.

Julius: “It is customary to refer to the Sword Saint, the Sage, and the Divine Dragon as the Three Great Heroes. You ought to remember that.”

Subaru: “Whoaaa, don’t get fired up… I get it, thank you for the explanation.”

Subaru raised his hand at Julius and Emilia, before then taking a glimpse at Beatrice. Upon noticing Subaru’s gaze, she slowly shook her head.

Unfortunately, Beatrice did not seem to be familiar with the legend from four-hundred years ago.

Beatrice was an Artificial Spirit created by Echidna, but other than the necessary information to maintain the Forbidden Library, she had been completely estranged from it. He got the impression that she was unaware of the circumstances behind-the-scenes around that matter, because she had been fairly impervious to the ways of the world, as she had shut herself in for such a long time.

Subaru: “I’m sorry for bringing the debate to a standstill. Let’s continue talking. But, this Sage Shaula…”

After he apologized for interrupting the discussion, Subaru took the initiative to try and bring the conversation back to its original course. But, he noticed something strange whilst he talked, and he could not help but tilt his head at it.

He understood the background of this Sage, Shaula, a hero from four-hundred years ago, but—

Subaru: “Ehh, what? They’re still alive? After four-hundred years?”

Emilia: “Is that so strange…? I’m around a hundred-years-old as well, in truth…”

Everyone Else: “—?!”

On hearing Subaru’s mutter, a mystified look appeared across Emilia’s face as she put one of her fingers to her lips. The meeting place stirred a little at that murmur, but Subaru on the contrary only replied with a “You’ve got a point”.

If he slowed down and thought about it, the half-elf Emilia’s real age was in excess of a hundred years, and Beatrice was a loli around four-hundred-years-old. It felt to him like Puck, too, had mentioned that he was four-hundred-years-old; in that case, did that not mean the average age of the Emilia Camp was about a hundred-years-old, perhaps?

Subaru: “Putting aside that pretty shocking fact… What about the Sage’s current state?”

Julius: “They are alive—On that, it seems that there is no doubt.”

Subaru: “Seems…?”

Subaru frowned at Julius’s unclear response.

But, Julius was not the only one unable to answer clearly, everyone around was the same. Especially those of the Royal Guards, Ferris and Reinhard, who looked troubled.

Subaru: “Well, what does that mean?”

Julius: “Their whereabouts are known, and I dare say that them being alive is confirmed too. However, no human being has managed to exchange words with the Sage… That is its meaning, I guess.”

Subaru: “Once again, what does that mean?”

They knew their whereabouts, and even though it was vague, they had been able to confirm the person as being alive. But, getting into contact with them was impossible. He thought he could put all of those impressions together, but…

Julius: “Currently, the Sage Shaula is in the tower near the Witch’s Shrine, and has always secluded themselves there so as to stop those who plan to revive the Witch of Envy. Always, since that time.”

Subaru: “…For all of four-hundred years?”

Julius: “For all of four-hundred years.”

It was an absurd story.

Beatrice, who had kept herself secluded in the Forbidden Library for four-hundred years, was already quite the case, but that Sage Shaula, or whoever, was also quite a stubborn individual.

Ferris: “The tower in which Sage Shaula lives—That’s the Pleiades Watchtower, right? There, the esteemed Sage continues to toil night and day to prevent the Witch’s revival.”

Subaru: “…Mhm, the tower’s name makes me think of something, but it’s of no importance, do continue.”

Ferris: “Even if you’re telling me to continue, that’s pretty much it, you know? The Sage Shaula gives it their all and continues to watch over the Shrine to ensure the peace of the world, that’s what is said.”

“And that is that”, Ferris said whilst clapping with a sullen look on his face.

Even if he said that that was the end, it was clear from his attitude that the story had not completely finished there, considering that what he had said could not explain the funeral-like mood around the meeting place.

Naturally, there must be some reason why they were like that—

Subaru: “Then, by any chance are they a troubling individual?”

Anastasia: “To ensure peace in the world, the Sage Shaula continues to watch over the Witch… Their name’s known far and wide throughout the world. I’ve known about ‘em too, since the time I was in Kararagi. But, at the same time, the Sage Shaula’s also known in this other way.”

Subaru: “—?”

Anastasia smiled gracefully, pausing between her words for a second.

And then, whilst looking at Subaru, who had a bad feeling about this, she spoke.

Anastasia: “The Sage Shaula’s someone with extreme trust issues who can’t trust a single soul—No matter what the purpose of those approachin’ the Watchtower and the Shrine may be, they massacre all of ‘em, or so I hear.”

2

—According to Anastasia’s explanation, they were like that.

Sage Shaula had built the Pleiades Watchtower and continued to watch over the Witch’s Shrine.

So far, there had been many people who had tried to get in contact with the Sage, but all their plans failed, causing them to give up.

That was because of the interference of none other than Sage Shaula themself.

Anastasia: “The Great Waterfall at the far east of Lugunica… It seems that the Witch’s Shrine and the Watchtower are ‘round there, but the Sage doesn’t know which of the two aims people approachin’ have, wouldn’t’cha think?”

Therefore, the Sage killed indiscriminately, regardless of whether it was a wretched Witch Cultist who was trying to find the Witch’s Shrine, or a person who was trying to get in friendly contact with the Sage of the Watchtower.

The subject’s good or evil, their likes and dislikes, their righteousness or malintent, none of that mattered, since that was the best way forward.

As a result, there were no reports or records left behind of anyone being able to get in contact with Sage Shaula, in all of these four-hundred years.

Ferris: “Buuuut, since the situation where they attack anyone approaching has been going on and on, we can at least be sure that Sage Shaula is still in the Watchtower even nyow.”

Subaru: “They sure are a damn annoying Sage…”

Ferris: “It’s nyot like that. In fact, there are many Witch Cultists who try to get near the Shrine, more than you can imagine, Subaru-kyun. The Sage-san deals with every single one of them, they’re just steadfastly keeping by their goal of preventing the revival of the Witch of Envy.”

Even though he had stated his positive opinion, Ferris’s expression did not clear up. All the members of the Royal Guard had the same unrestful look on their face; for that to be the case, there may have been an experience where the Sage had dished out a painful lesson to the Royal Guard.

On the other hand, Subaru nodded at Ferris’ sugarcoated opinion.

Certainly, if one were to look at it from the “do whatever it takes to achieve the goal” point of view, it would be incredibly annoying, but if taking into account the evil nature of a Witch Cultist, it was a natural precaution.

Rather, it was because there was someone who continued to keep guard over the Witch of Envy that it was conceivable to even think that this world had some sort of security system in effect against the Witch of Envy.

Priscilla: “Fleeting is the night, I care not about the true colors of the hermit who lives in trepidation insofar as time permits them to. What is important is the fact that they are borrowing my limited time. I shall return post-haste to the inn if you continue with this useless prattle. I must get Schult to massage my feet.”

Schult: “Y-Yes ma’am. Priscilla-sama has worked hard and is greatly fatigued! I appreciate that with all my heart.”

Having been embraced and buried in her huge breasts, Schult replied with a red face. Priscilla, who stroked the boy with the smile of a villainess on her face, had not found much worth in this conference in the first place.

It was something of a miracle that she had come all the way here without throwing a tantrum.

Felt: “Even though like I’m not on that Princess’s side, I also agree that we gotta get back on topic soon. Tell us about the Sage.”

Felt demanded that they cut back to the main topic, a look of impatience adorning her face. Agreeing with that state of affairs, Subaru turned to look back at Anastasia.

Subaru: “Though we’ve kept interrupting you over and over, what did you say is up with this reclusive Sage?”

Anastasia: “Sooo, the story finally goes back to the start.”

Anastasia clapped her hands. Then, she looked over at the faces of everyone who sat at the roundtable while still gently touching her fox scarf,

Anastasia: “—Like everyone knows, the Sage Shaula helped with the sealin’ of the Witch of Envy with their unparalleled wisdom and magical power. As well as a wide range of insight that’s said they see through the world with, and knowledge that’s said they know everythin’ about this world. If both of those are true without exaggeration… Then don’t’cha think they should know someway to do somethin’ about what the Witch Cult left behind as well?”

Subaru: “…But, isn’t what you’re saying just wishful thinking really?”

Anastasia: “Does that mean yer against it, Natsuki-kun?”

Even though it seemed like she had returned his question with another one, an answer for Anastasia’s was difficult.

Trying to rely on it by simply looking at their title of Sage was the honest recourse. In respect to that, Subaru did not think it was a bad idea, even. If they were someone who had accomplished achievements that went as far as remaining in legend, then maybe they really did know a way to counteract the Witch Factors of Sin.

But, a different anxiety had taken ahold of Subaru. The name of the Sage, Shaula, and the Pleiades Watchtower where they lived. Those two keywords refused to allow him to obediently accept her proposal.

Because “Shaula” and “Pleiades”, were both words which Subaru was familiar with.

Subaru: “…”

According to Subaru’s modern knowledge, “Shaula” was the name corresponding to the second brightest star of Scorpio.

The “Pleiades” from the Pleiades Watchtower was far more explicit, in that it was the name of the star cluster known as the Pleiades Cluster—Its name in Japanese, was “Subaru”.

Of course, he did not think it was anything that denoted “Natsuki Subaru”, but the name of the celestial bodies which he knew about cropping up in this world was enough for his alert levels to rise to the MAX.

The Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishops—Petelgeuse, Regulus, Sirius, Capella, Alphard, Batenkaitos.

Currently, all the Sin Archbishops whose names had come to light bore the names of stars from Subaru’s world in their own names; it was impossible to not hold preconceived notions towards Sage Shaula and the Pleiades Watchtower.

Ferris: “Putting aside Subaru-kyun’s dissenting opinion…”

Ferris cut into the conversation in place of Subaru, who remained taciturn without coming up with a successful objection. He placed his finger on his cheek, and whilst he assumed his normal attitude with the exception of a stern look in his eyes, he said,

Ferris: “The view itself of visiting the Sage Shaula may be good, but isn’t there an issue on how we’ll do it? Is there any way? Even when no one has managed to reach the Watchtower?”

Felt: “The reason no one has is ‘cause the Sage is too strong, that’s how it goes, yeah?”

Felt raised a question at Ferris's tantalizing words, whilst she crossed her legs on top of her chair. She gave a fleeting look in Reinhard's direction.

Well, if it was simply a matter of not being a match for the Sage's powers, then—

Felt: "We could manage it if it's Reinhard, right? He's got no other use except being strong, but when it comes to just that, he's insaaaane~."

Reinhard: "It's unusual that Felt-sama gives me praise, thank you very much."

Felt: "This is what I meant."

Felt sullenly tch'ed at Reinhard's response. However, immediately after that, Reinhard lowered his eyebrows as if he were troubled.

Like that, he spoke out with a "But," prefacing it apologetically,

Reinhard: "Unfortunately, I was unable to reach the Watchtower. I lacked the strength."

Felt: "…This guy lacking strength, isn't that a lil' alarming?"

Julius: "He does not mean a lack of combat power, Felt-sama. There is no area in this world where Reinhard's true strength would be incapable of reaching, I would say. But, the Pleiades Watchtower is a different problem to such impediments."

Ferris: "So you know the details… Though, if you were a Royal Guard, that's natural, I guess."

Ferris's face turned to one of discomfort on hearing Julius's follow-up to Reinhard's words. Looking at the strained relations between the three Royal Guards from the corner of his eye, Subaru spoke out to Reinhard, and said,

Subaru: "What was your purpose in trying to meet the Sage?"

Reinhard: "It was an order from the Kingdom. For a cure for the disease, that it was—It was about two years ago.”

Subaru: “Two years ago…”

The phrases “disease” and “two years ago” allowed Subaru to understand the circumstances.

Two years prior from today, the members of the Royal Family had fallen ill one after the other to an unknown disease, right at the Royal Castle. It was an epidemic for which no cure was known—Most likely, they had ordered Reinhard to get in contact with the Sage to learn a cure for that disease.

But he did not accomplish it, that explained the gloomy faces of the three Royal Guards.

Reinhard: “The Watchtower and the Shrine, they are located at the Great Waterfall, at the eastern edge of Lugunica—surrounded by the Augria Sand Dunes. The Watchtower can be seen in the distance from the entrance of the sand dunes. So you should not lose sight of that place, but…”

Subaru: “But?”

Julius: “There are many strange phenomena that occur frequently in the sand dunes, so that you cannot get closer to the Watchtower. One theory says it is because of the Miasma that is seeping out from the Shrine.”

Reinhard: “On top of that, the Augria Sand Dunes have turned into a haunt for Witchbeasts who are drawn in by the Miasma. In that land full of Miasma, the ferocity and strength of the Witchbeasts is off the charts. Even in that sense, going there in the first place is considered to be suicidal.”

Subaru: “So it’s a wayward desert, with a haunt for Witchbeasts. For sure it’s hell…”

In addition to the troublesomeness of the Sage themselves, there was a desert which not even Reinhard could cross, and a metric ton of Witchbeasts which roamed the desert—Regarding this, the factors for abandoning the ploy were too many.

It was understandable that getting in touch with the Sage had not been achieved even once over the period of four-hundred years.

Anastasia: "—Yes, but what if there was a way to cross that hell?"

Everyone: "…"

Everyone raised their faces up at her sudden words, just as a gloomy atmosphere had begun to enshroud them.

Anastasia smiled in satisfaction on account of having butted in at precisely the right moment. Then, she nodded so that everyone could see,

Anastasia: "There is, that's why I even bothered mentionin' the Sage's name."

Ferris: "Anastasia-sama from Kararagi, you know a means to reach the Sage who has been in seclusion for four-hundred years, at this time…? What sort of means is it?"

Anastasia: "You'll ruin yer pretty face. I'm goin' to explain it to ya even without that bristly face."

Carelessly turning aside Ferris, who had gotten himself worked up, Anastasia removed her scarf from her neck. And then, she unrolled her scarf on top of the roundtable and lifted the head part,

Anastasia: "I mentioned her before the defensive battle, my Artificial Spirit, Echidna. This little one knows a way to the Pleiades Watchtower—That's why we can go and meet the Sage of the Watchtower."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru's breath caught on hearing Anastasia's declaration.

The Artificial Spirit Echidna, that being which disguised itself as a fox scarf, was the key to reaching the Sage.

???: "—I am receiving so much attention, huh. You are making me blush!"

Saying that, the fox Spirit lifted her neck.

Subaru did not know how much he could trust her, much alike the Witch which she had borrowed her name from.

Chapter 80:
Leaving Behind Ripples on the Water's Surface

1

???: "—So, let's start, shall we."

Emilia let her beautiful, crystal-clear voice echo throughout the room as she tensed her face slightly.

She spoke to everyone in the room with her silver bell-like voice—Or perhaps she had said it to persuade herself; either way, she raised both of her slender arms.

Emilia: "…"

Closing her eyes, Emilia began to concentrate her Mana to both of her raised hands.

Great magical power swirled around, and she mustered the utmost concentration to handle it with precision. If she lacked either power or precision, she would be unable to achieve her goal; this was an endeavor which only she could pursue.

Emilia: "…"

Countless gazes poured down on Emilia who met her great sorcery head-on with a serious expression on her face. The women and children were huddled together, watching over her actions with bated breath.

Some were holding each other's hands, while others had closed their eyes as if in prayer or wishing; they shared only hope and anxiety as they trembled.

Subaru: "…It must be tough on them."

And, at the tail end of the same room, Subaru was silently observing Emilia, who was being showered in many complex emotions.

The area they were in was a part of the underground facilities of the city of Pristella.

Originally, it had been a cellar that had stored emergency provisions. Its current almost-empty state was ideal for their intended purpose. Nothing was placed in the stone cellar, and its spaciousness seemed to emphasize its bleakness and chilliness.

But, it ought to be suitable for their current purpose, precisely because it was that kind of place.

Subaru: “Though, I wouldn’t say that’s a good thing.”

Beatrice: “Quit muttering sentimentalities, I suppose. It wouldn’t be good if someone heard you, and you’ll also end up messing up Emilia’s concentration, in fact.”

Standing beside Subaru, who had let that mutter accidentally slip out, Beatrice gave him her advice.

The girl, who held Subaru’s left hand with one hand and played with her drill curls with her other, stared at the white ritual that was being held in front of her eyes. Her pale blue eyes seemed like they were holding back pain in some respect to Subaru.

Subaru: “Since it’s Emilia, it will be okay. Don’t worry about it so much.”

Beatrice: “…Don’t get the wrong idea, I suppose. Betty is not worried about Emilia, but about Subaru, in fact. Empathizing with the emotions of literally everybody is a bad habit, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I see.”

The strength of her hand holding his grew stronger, and Subaru bent his lips into the shape of an arc at the girl’s concern.

He knew what Beatrice wanted to say, as well as what she was worried about. However, his decision after he had understood that was based off of his current determination.

On that point, he could not yield. Even though he knew that it would just amount to trouble.

Emilia: “…”

Away from Subaru and Beatrice’s hushed exchange of words, Emilia’s ritual continued on.

Emilia, who was concentrating with all her might, had beads of sweat trickling down her forehead as she panted out misted breaths. She was giving it her everything in mind and body to control the enormous amounts of Mana.

A pale-blue light, originating from in between Emilia’s hands, began to faintly envelop the cellar. Although the cold air was cold enough to fog up his sight, the chill did not pierce into his skin, it was gentle as if it were embracing his exposed heart.

He had heard that people who fell into hypothermia and were on the verge of death forgot about the cold. Extreme cold took away from people the ability to tell the temperature correctly, and granted them warmth as a parting gift before snatching their lives away, this he had learned.

Subaru vaguely thought about whether something akin to that was happening in this white world, but he immediately shook his head, dismissing it as plain stupid.

Pale-blue light filled the room, and the cold air converged to its center. And, in the middle of the light, there was—

???: “…”

A huge black creature, curled up with its wings folded—A black dragon that was lying down.

The strange creatures did not stop there, there were also flies roughly the size of people gathered around the black dragon. In all, they would give the impression of a nightmarish scene.

However, Subaru did not feel any revulsion at this scene.

—No. To be precise, he was strongly aware that he should not feel revulsion towards the black dragon and the human flies.

They were victims, innocents without any fault. They were victims of the malice of the Sin Archbishop of Lust, victims who had been transformed into inhumanities.

Subaru, and everyone else, currently did not know a way to restore their mutated bodies back to normal. That was why they had chosen this measure.

Subaru: “It may be that we’re just postponing the inevitable, but…”

Beatrice: “It will get us time, and even just that can be a salvation, in fact. Since you’re trying to hurry things up, your outlook is getting narrower, so you can’t see the options that you’d normally be able to. Not being aware of that, or realizing it later… both of those are cruelties, I suppose.”

Beatrice replied with something of a monologue to Subaru’s mutters. Her small, feeble sigh contained an insightfulness and sentimentality which only those who had spent a long, long time thinking could have.

Feeling that at the end of her words, Subaru just silently stroked her head without saying a single word back.

Beatrice: “…What is it, in fact.”

Subaru: “It’s nothing.”

No matter how much time they took, they would not necessarily be able to make the right choice. Sometimes, even if time were to be given, there were cases where one would be unable to make the right choice.

Nevertheless, they could act so that the option chosen would be the best one.

The answer which Subaru had produced to Beatrice’s four-hundred years had been like so.

And so, he hoped that the time brought to the tragedy that struck the city, would also be like so.

Subaru: "…"

The climax of the cold air that filled the cellar overlapped with Subaru's strong emotions, and finally a sound like the air cracking, or so he thought, resounded throughout—

Emilia: "…It ended up going safely."

Emilia turned around whilst breathing out misted breaths.

She quickly bowed her head at that place, a little out of breath—behind her, with their whole bodies covered in white crystal, were the lives of all of the souls who had been encased inside of ice.

Subaru: "—Tch."

The members of their families were weeping, and their significant others were sobbing in tears.

Their sorrowful wails came out before any thanks, and they cruelly echoed throughout the cellar.

For a very, very long time, their wails continued to echo throughout, as if their sorrow had no end to it, being separated from their loved ones until goodness knows when.

2

???: "For now, it seems like Emilia-sama's proposal turned out well… Would I be okay to feel relieved by that?"

Having been informed about the conference at the meeting place, as well as Emilia's subsequent work to freeze the mutation victims—Otto nodded, looking relieved.

They were somewhere away from the shelters, in a private room at a hospital, where he had been carried to.

His condition on top of his bed still had not changed, with both of his legs painfully wrapped in bandages. Even so, at least he had managed to leave the field hospital's treatment, and it was possible to say that his cramping legs looked like they had improved quite a bit.

In fact, Otto's position was that of one of the valorous people who had contributed to the city's defense, so it would have been nice if he had gotten higher quality medical treatment. However, Otto had not told them that, so Subaru opted not to say anything, since Otto had probably been considering those around him.

Subaru: "Hospitality that is presumed without saying anything… That's the true meaning of wabi-sabi."

Otto: "Although you are here, Natsuki-san, your mind is elsewhere; that's the same as always, so it is fine, but anyways… Thank you for your hard work, Emilia-sama."

Disregarding the nodding Subaru, Otto thanked Emilia for her hard work, who had come to visit him. She drew her eyebrows down on hearing his thanks and said,

Emilia: "Nah, it's alright. More importantly, I'm sorry for going through with it on my own without consulting with Otto-kun. But, it was because I'd thought it was something only I could do."

Otto: "Ah, it's fine. I'm not angry since your actions were undoubtedly precious, good deeds. Besides, they were very valuable actions even in a calculating sense."

Emilia: "Calculating…?"

Otto: "It probably would have been better if you understood what I meant, but if you do not, even if you do not… No, how can I put it? Regarding that, honestly, it's really difficult for me to decide which would be better."

Subaru: "Don't think about it, feel it. That is EMT."

Emilia was not quite aware of the result of her own actions. With some magic words, Subaru serenely brushed Otto aside, who lay perplexed at Emilia's attitude. He then continued by saying "More importantly", Subaru: “Your legs, they seem like they won’t be usable for a while, right?”

Otto: “With Pristella’s current state, it will be difficult to treat them more than this, right? The number of Healing Arts Users in the city is not enough to take care of all the injured. I think it may be better to move to a hospital in another city, but it seems that Kiritaka-san sent out as many messengers as he could to the neighboring cities, and requested for Healing Arts Users. That is why quietly waiting here for healers from one of those places to come by, would perhaps be more prudent than going back to the mansion.”

Laughing weakly with a “Haha”, Otto would be forced to withdraw from the frontlines for a while.

Wounds as severe as Otto’s could not be so easily cured without a mage fairly proficient in the use of healing magic. They had to be at Ferris-level, or Beatrice’s when she was in the Forbidden Library.

Subaru: “Ferris is constantly tending to Crusch, and our Healing Special Attack Corps Leader is going around Pristella… The reason being is that family of course.”

Emilia: “Those three, the mother and two siblings, right? That person who had the form of a dragon is the father, so it was a family of four, I think.”

Their Special Attack Corps Leader was not present, right now—No, he should not refer to him like that, Garfiel is what he meant.

Currently, he was going around the city which was short of working hands, and working as hard as he could on the repair work. By nature, Garfiel was a kind, well-put-together young man. Even if he felt nothing for the city, if there were people in need, he would end up helping them without hesitation.

But, even so, his commitment to Pristella was second to none. And Subaru could more or less imagine the reason why.

Subaru: “That he didn’t tell us must mean that there are various complex circumstances, I guess.”

Emilia: “Yeah, that has to be it… Indeed, changing the subject, but don’t you think that Garfiel and that family resemble each other a bit? Their hair color and eye color are completely identical.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, you know that the subject hasn’t changed right?”

Emilia: “Eh?!”

Putting the surprised Emilia to one side, Garfiel was in such a condition.

Under normal circumstances, he himself should have sustained damage that would not be possible to call minor throughout his body, but due to his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits and his boundless physical strength, he had no intention of resting.

In addition, Mimi, who had been a pain to her little brothers with her wounds reopening and what-not, was also tagging along with him, so there had not been any ruckus around.

Otto: “Well, in regards to Garfiel’s true feelings, I would imagine one day he will reveal them on his own. We do not need to try and pry it out of him. More importantly…”

Emilia: “Hmm?”

Otto: “Ah, no, since both of you did not mention it at all, I did not say anything either, but why does Beatrice-san look so moody?”

Inclining the top half of his body, Otto turned the flow of conversation to a corner of the hospital room—Beatrice was there, puffing out her red cheeks, visibly shaking her head from left to right with a sullen look in her eyes.

Subaru nodded and responded with an “Ah” to that question.

Subaru: “It’s because of that, you know. She’s in a bad mood because we went to the Restoration Master on your errand and ended up being turned away… When you look at it from multiple perspectives, wouldn’t that be your fault?”

Otto: “No! You are going too far there… Right, Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “Mhm, you’re right. It’s a Contractor’s natural obligation to take care of their Spirit. So, the one who needs to cheer Beatrice up has to be Subaru.”

Subaru: “You mentioned cheering up, but even when you say that, I don’t have many memories of Emilia-tan taking care of Puck.”

Emilia: “Don’t nitpick with that! Besides, I’ve done tons of stuff when Subaru wasn’t there to see. Like grooming his fur, cleaning his claws, cuddling him to sleep…”

It was doubtful whether that could be referenced as a format on the way of associating with Spirits, but Emilia’s expression when talking about Puck had turned cheerful.

Ever since his sudden parting back at the Sanctuary had stabbed her, she had had a strong expression of grief whenever she recalled Puck, but it seemed that stage had passed too.

—A crystal stone made of colorless, great magic ore adorned Emilia’s chest.

The same design that she always wore before she was separated from Puck, combined with the beauty of her expression; she had gone back to looking like the same old Emilia.

She traced the crystal stone with one of her slender fingers, and said,

Emilia: “I still don’t have enough power to bring Puck back right now, but… Mine and Puck’s Contract hasn’t been severed, so we can meet again when I accumulate enough Mana so that he can manifest. So, just a little bit more patience, eh.”

Subaru: “That, too, was thanks to one of Beako’s achievements, and… Well, thanks to Kiritaka’s kindness.”

The reason why Subaru and the others had come to the city of Pristella in the first place had been to obtain a great magic stone.

The reality should have been that he would turn it over or not after some negotiation, but the negotiations had ended up taking an inconceivable detour. In any case, they had received one at present, and were very satisfied.

Subaru: “So you cheer up too, Beako.”

Beatrice: “I’m not moody, I suppose. It’s your misunderstanding, in fact. Hmph.”

Emilia: “Oh, Beatrice, how adorable…”

Going all the way to letting out an easy-to-understand sound effect, Beatrice turned her face away from Subaru who was trying to get her to cheer up. Subaru was in agreement with Emilia, who was feeling the butterflies behind him; however, whether they could talk about her cuteness or not was yet another matter.

Otto: “It seems that Master Darts is a person with a craftsman’s temperament, doesn’t it? He cannot leave a job half-done once undertaken, I understand that sort of thing.”

Subaru: “But, still, let’s think about how his professionalism has been taken to too much of an extreme. It seems like this guy was working in his workshop all throughout the chaos, doesn’t it? He’s too much of a workaholic.”

Otto: “That is the craftsman in him, you see.”

Subaru: “The craftsman in him, huh?”

He really did not know why Otto seemed to be proud, but when he said that, it seemed to make him feel good; boys were such simple creatures. A craftsman’s temperament was cool.

However, Beatrice directed an angered look at the nodding Otto and Subaru, and said,

Beatrice: “Yes, but that doesn’t mean he should completely ignore his client’s words, I suppose. Even when I said I’d pay him double, he didn’t say a single word, in fact.”

Subaru: “Giving any indication of listening to what a little girl is saying as she slaps your cheeks with a roll of bills would only work as a reward for those who aren’t professionals well-versed in their trade. You tell her too, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Yeah, you shouldn’t think like this, Beatrice. If you’re going to waste money, I’m going to have to end up confiscating your pocket money.”

Beatrice: “What rude treatment I’m getting from both of you, I suppose!”

The indignant Beatrice grabbed one of the curtains, wrapped herself in it and hid herself behind it.

Following that, Emilia could not resist anymore, and hugged Beako IN the curtain, making her yell out, “GNNNYYYA, IN FACT!”

Putting aside their cheerful intermezzo, it was not like he did not understand Beatrice’s feelings.

That which Otto had commissioned to the Restoration Master Darts, and Subaru and the others had tried to recover, was the damaged Book of Wisdom. It was the origin as to why its owner, Roswaal, had tried so hard to interfere with the future ahead of Subaru—It was natural to be interested in its contents.

Subaru: “Although his interference’s subtle, the slippery nature of that guy goes hand-in-hand.”

Even though his act of sabotage had been discovered, Roswaal’s attitude on the surface had not changed from before. Of course, since he had schemed behind that easygoing attitude, remaining alert was essential. However, it was also true that he had an air to him that seemed like the poisonousness had slipped out.

Nonetheless, it was not the same, he would not go as far as being able to call him a collaborative ally who would take the role of a bystander.

Subaru: “If we can at least see what’s lying ahead with the Book of Wisdom…”

If they were able to hold belief that Roswaal was not planning anything, regardless of the past, it would be safe to walk the road ahead together. It would probably also have a bit more of a positive effect for the future of the Camp.

Subaru: "That's why I want to insist on it."

Otto: "Even when I don't endeavor to make such excuses, I and Emilia-sama have more or less the same opinions as Natsuki-kun, so on that point we're fine. Just Garfiel, well… He has his personal enmities, so even if he knows the facts, his attitude may not change."

By personal enmities, was he really referring to the Sanctuary, or Ram?

Without touching that subject, Subaru gazed over at Emilia and Beatrice, messing about…

Subaru: "That book is no stranger to Beatrice either. So, I think I would like to confirm it if it's even possible. Taking her out from the Forbidden Library and leaving the past behind are different problems."

Otto: "Did you know that on many occasions, I thought about trying to consult with you?"

Subaru: "I'm not blaming you for that, y'know."

He thought that recovering the Book of Wisdom, and attempting to restore it back to normal, while doing all this on his own, was a good judgment on Otto's part.

And fundamentally, it was hardly ever that Otto's considerations failed. He was fully aware that he was not a person who acted in self-interest.

Subaru: "You really aren't suited to be a merchant…"

Otto: "Could you leave me alone?! More importantly, what about Master Darts?"

Subaru: ""It may be my greatest job yet", he said. "You can defer the fee, so I would like you to let me work on this properly until the end", he said."

It was worrying that the deadline had not expired, but that guy was a craftsman, so he could not possibly say it was impossible.

He wanted to believe that he was not the type of craftsman who would grumble even after the deadline passed.

Otto: "So in the end, I will also have to collect the Book of Wisdom, I feel like me staying behind in Pristella has already been decided, right?"

Subaru: "Garfiel also plans to stay for a while for the reconstruction work and the city defense. Them having been driven away is settled, but what if that's a feint for them attacking again! Since they never quit, those shits."

They looked like the sort of guys that would make the same mischief over and over.

It seemed like Subaru was not the only one who had recognized that, everyone who was involved had not let their guard down either. It was also possible that their aims were to force unnecessary feelings of tension to torment them.

Subaru: "Even if I bring that up, nothing more can be done about it."

Otto: "In any case, I think we need to wait and see how things go. As soon as my legs are in a better state, I will go around to check up on various things. However…"

Otto broke his words off there, as he discussed his future plans.

He strenuously lifted the upper part of his body up from the bed, and looked up at Subaru, who had closed one of his eyes. And, as he struck his temple with one of his fingers, he said,

Otto: "I shall say this clearly, I am against this."

Subaru: "…Well, I thought you'd say that."

Subaru gave a wry smile at Otto's declaration. That he would say that and be against it, was an attitude which Subaru had predicted.

After all, Otto Suwen had evaluated Natsuki Subaru correctly.

Subaru himself was more aware than anyone of his own helplessness, but there were not many who clearly understood his shortcomings.

At best, those were Beatrice and Otto. Perhaps Patrasche a bit. And although now was not the time for him, Ferris mayhaps too.

Therefore, he had anticipated that Beatrice and Otto, from their Camp, would be against it. He believed if Patrasche could speak, then she would have probably been similarly against it. However,

Subaru: "If you know me that much, then you should know my answer."

Otto: "…In truth, Beatrice-san's moodiness isn't only because of Master Darts, right?"

Subaru: "Weeeell~, I'm not so sure. As you might expect, even I don't understand what's in the depths of Beako's heart."

When Subaru feigned his innocence with a shrug of his shoulders, Otto's face turned into one of exasperation.

Of course, when it came to him and his sharp hearing, he should not be lacking in knowledge of legends nor rumors. He must know all too well the riskiness of Subaru's choice.

Adding onto what he had said, Subaru prefaced what he was going to say to Otto with an "I'm sorry",

Subaru: "I will go to see that Sage or whatever they are, with that white fox guide for a little while."

He smiled as he said that.

3

???: “—Come in.”

When he knocked on the door as a courtesy, just in case, a calm voice replied to him from the inside.

It was a familiar voice, but one that lacked in spirit. Subaru felt excessively annoyed at it.

???: “Is that you, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Is it bad that it’s me?”

???: “It is strange, now when I see your face, I feel terribly relieved.”

Subaru: “Blaaargh.”

He walked into the room, wrapping up the reproachful words that he had exchanged at the start with that action.

Even while he showed that attitude, there was consideration in the way Subaru closed the door behind him. Closing the door without making a sound was the minimum amount of courtesy for those who slept inside.

???: “If they would wake up because of the noise, that would be so much better.”

Subaru: “If that happened, would you give me a round of applause or something? That’d be a priceless scene. Gluttony, who was let to be at large, would get more and more pissed off.”

???: “Hmph.”

Giving a relaxed smile, Subaru inclined his head without meeting his eyes. Then he looked around the room and narrowed his eyes at the row of beds.

A simple bed and a thin blanket; that was all the charity given to the people who slept there. And Subaru knew that more than that was not even necessary.

The people who slept here were forgotten from memory, cut loose from daily life, and only remained left behind as imperfect beings that just were not dead.

Subaru: “Julius. I’m not one to talk, but you shouldn’t spend so much time here.”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “Even if you keep looking at them, you can’t remember that which you can’t remember. That applies to both a beloved little sister, as well as someone who is truly like your other half.”

Subaru called out to the young man—Julius, without using any words of comfort.

He was sitting at a corner of the bed rows, at one of the bedsides located the furthest away. He lifted his face up, still full of sorrow which he was unable to conceal from his handsome features,

Julius: “Knowing that in my head and knowing that with my heart are completely different things. I do not mean to be conceited, but so far, I had never thought of myself as an emotionally-driven, big-headed person. Me not realizing that until this happened is a lack in my self-awareness.”

Subaru: “…”

Whilst he spoke, Julius looked down at the bed right next to him.

Naturally, one of the victims of appetite who had lost their Name was sleeping there as well, and their consciousness and memories had been completely cut away from the world.

That was why Julius Juukulius did not remember this person—The slender-faced young man with long purple hair, who was his own little brother, Joshua Juukulius.

Julius: “Joshua, eh?”

He could call his little brother's name because Subaru had told him his name, and the relation he had to him.

The victims of the Authority of Gluttony—When it had been reported that many unidentifiable, comatose people had been found, Subaru had been convinced that they had suffered the same damage as Rem.

And he himself may have not forgotten those forgotten. Relying only on that slim hope, he had gone to the hospital room and discovered the sleeping Joshua.

Julius: "It is strange. Although there is enough in common to be able to conclude he is definitely a blood relative after listening to your story, within me there lies not a single memory of my little brother."

Julius closed his eyes without showing any emotion on his face.

Joshua was the only one he knew amongst the victims of Gluttony. He could not find the other thirty-plus victims even in his memory, and thus they continued to sleep without anyone even mourning for them, or worrying about their well-being.

If one gave it some thought, it was possible to say that Joshua, who had his big brother worrying about him, was one of the lucky ones.

Even in these circumstances, where he was forgotten by the big brother he loved so dearly, said big brother had gone to the hospital room to cling onto his brotherly love in name only, and called out to his little brother without true emotion.

Even if he were forgotten, even if he had forgotten him, even if he was not there in his memories, even if there were just facts, it was just heart-wrenching.

Subaru: "…Fucking hell."

He should have known. He really should have.

That the Authority of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony was the most despicable evil in this world.

Along with Wrath, who twisted people's emotions at will. Along with Lust, who broke people's dignity as well as their form, before then trampling over them. Along with Greed, who denied everything besides himself, imposing his egocentric sense of omnipotence. Along with Sloth, who indulged himself in using the word "diligence" to paint over the lives of others with his selfish love.

They were the worst evil without doubt, not a single one of them deserved to live. How could he stand those beings that profaned the lives of absolutely everyone like Gluttony did?

Subaru: "—Staying here will only make you feel depressed. Don't make me keep saying it."

Only unpleasant things passed through his mind.

He had put that irritation into words, and called out to Julius. When he heard those words, Julius stood up, and touched his forgotten little brother's slender chest, and said,

Julius: "He is… breathing. He is alive. It is strange."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's right. But he doesn't eat, nor does he need to go to the bathroom. He also doesn't need to take a bath… He doesn't laugh either."

Julius: "He does not feel the sorrow of being forgotten, either—That may be a blessing."

Subaru: "A blessing…?"

Subaru raised his eyebrows in response to the word that spilled out from Julius.

Looking back at him, Julius slightly curved the crooks of his lips up, and whilst giving a weak smile, he said,

Julius: "If you do not realize you have been forgotten, you need not fear the anxiety of being left behind. It is really hard to bear having what should have been close relationships with people… being cut off one-sidedly."

Subaru: "…"

Julius: "Subaru. Being forgotten, and forgetting… I wonder, which of those is the most painful?"

Subaru: "How…"

Subaru's throat clogged up at that question.

It did not clog up due to the answer. The answer had been readied in an instant. So what had obstructed Subaru's words had not been bewilderment. It had been fury.

Subaru glared at Julius, who had a cynical smile on his face.

Subaru: "How would I know? Don't mess about, stop absorbing yourself in these things."

Julius: "…Subaru?"

Subaru: "Forgetting, being forgotten, TO HELL WITH BOTH! Don't try and order such painful things, are you that negative?! Making that damn face, like you're the most unfortunate person in the whole world. Want to try and compare your misfortunes with mine so far? Whatever the case, I would win?!"

Julius: "…"

Julius became speechless at the sudden change that took over Subaru, who had raised his voice, jabbing his finger at him.

Opening his eyes wide in surprise, he could not say anything to this Subaru, who had suddenly become enraged. And as he looked Julius keeping his silence, Subaru lowered his finger and shrugged his shoulders,

Subaru: "Don't make such a despairing face. I know you're suffering, and I know that you were forgotten and you have nowhere left to go… But, I'm sorry, but I won't let you show your weak side."

Julius: "…"

Subaru: “Have you forgotten, Julius? —No, do not forget, Julius.”

Subaru glared at Julius whilst he bit his lips in frustration. He placed his hand on his chest, and once again made a declaration like the ones he had done.

Subaru: “My eyes know your strength. My shame knows it. Even if everyone has forgotten.”

Julius: “…”

He could not breathe, the feeling of his blood going up to his head had yet to vanish.

Really, how long had it been since he had gotten this pissed off? Since Regulus. He was astonished that not even half a day had passed since then.

How much had this turmoil in Pristella burdened his heart and lungs? And then,

Julius: “Ha, haha…”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Julius: “Haha… No, you truly are a one-of-a-kind man. I have realized that once more…”

Getting rid of the startled face he had had up until now, Julius suddenly bent over in laughter. Giving in to the urge to laugh, Julius continued to laugh before the disgruntled Subaru. And when the urge gradually settled, Julius let out a long sigh.

Julius: “I see, you are right. It does not mean that absolutely everything was left behind, right?”

Subaru: “Rather than saying “left behind”, I’d say you’re in front by around three horse lengths.”

Julius: “Is three horse lengths enough?”

Subaru: “I’m gonna fucking beat your ass! With me and Beako as a team, it’ll be completely different from before!”

He flipped him his middle finger, and spat at Julius who was starting to get back to his usual manner. Julius gracefully dodged his spit, and gave him a bow, whilst saying “I see”,

Julius: “Then, I will try to have faith in those big words.”

Subaru: “…Mhm, do so. As much as you can, too, do great deeds, so that you surprise everyone when their memories come back.”

This time, at that haughty attitude, Subaru raised his thumb up and then turned it down in provocation. Faced with that coarse gesture, the Finest of Knights that only Subaru knew smiled gracefully,

Julius: “—So, first of all, more so than anyone else, I will try to strive to surprise you. You, who remembers me.”

Saying that, he fortified his intent of accompanying him to the Pleiades Watchtower that awaited them.

Chapter 81:
One Who Fills the Vessel of Greed

1

—A series of Witch Cult Turmoils had transpired in Pristella, the Watergate City.

The scars of the battle remained throughout the city, along with the tragedy that struck its inhabitants. There were numerous functions of the city that had yet to be fully restored, to compensate for the loss of personnel.

Those problems still remained, yet the situation was settling down and beginning to move towards the next story.

For Natsuki Subaru, too, the many problems of the city ached his heart.

Nevertheless, as he observed the city after the withdrawal of the Witch Cult, he felt that he could presume that perhaps he had been able to contribute a little to that conclusion.

Subaru: “Although there are still many unresolved problems…”

The scars that were left by the Sin Archbishops, especially those left by Lust and Gluttony, were enormous.

The inhabitants who’d had their bodies mutated by the Authority of Lust—their bodies had been placed in a “Temporary State of Death” by Emilia, and were now awaiting the moment to awaken in a shelter deep within the city.

And most of the people who had been attacked by the appetite of Gluttony, even now, found themselves in an endless sleep, and even their bonds with those who would expect their awakening from the bottom of their hearts had been snatched away.

Emilia’s expression, who had proposed a way of postponing the solution to the problem of the transformed citizens, was painful.

Julius's anguish, who had lost his place and was troubled because of the way things ought to be, was beyond imaginable.

And there was no need to mention the wounds in the hearts of the city's people, who were the ones most affected.

Everybody had been hurt.

It was Subaru's duty to do everything he could to heal those wounds. And so,

Subaru: "There are still problems I have to take care of."

To solve the final unsolved problem, Subaru nodded.

Only this, was what Subaru had to do.

2

Subaru: "Julius will go with us."

???: "I see, then I can feel more relieved as well."

After he'd finished with his various discussions, Subaru returned to the conference room and was welcomed by Anastasia.

Anastasia was the only one left at the roundtable in the conference room. The discussion on the main topics had been held there several hours ago.

Some of them had already returned to the inn, and others were preparing to leave Pristella. Even without that, it had been a tiring day. There was no need to rest on the hard roundtable and spend your time in the darkness of the empty shelter.

Subaru: "—What?"

And yet, she had stayed here, waiting for someone to arrive.

It was not that he had been sure of it. But, Subaru too had vaguely thought that she would have been here. After all, right now she should not have felt comfortable anywhere.

Subaru: “With this, those who are aiming for the Pleiades Watchtower are Emilia, me and Beako. In addition to that, if we add Julius and you, there are five of us in total.”

Anastasia: “Aren’t’cha makin’ a mistake in the number of participants? After all, there aren’t five of us, there are six of us. It’d be a problem if you forgot my adorable Echidna.”

She unrolled the scarf from around her neck and spread it over the roundtable whilst making her dance. The white fox scarf was obedient towards her master’s harmless game, just like a doll.

She did not just look like it, though.

Subaru: “I didn’t forget—That is why… we’re five.”

Anastasia: “…”

As he leaned his back against the door of the conference room, Subaru spoke thus to Anastasia, who was hoisting out her scarf.

Hearing those words, Anastasia’s smile froze. Her elegant smile vanished as if it had melted, and then she tilted her head slowly.

Pulling the scarf to her lips, accompanied by a mystified look on her face,

“Anastasia”: “Oh, that is weird. How did you know my identity is not that of Ana?”

Anastasia’s tone changed completely, so much that it was clearly noticeable.

Subaru: “If you want to hide it, you should do a better act of doing so. Surely, as far as I know, Anastasia is the most rational and realistic of the candidates, but… she doesn’t have an attitude as lacking in humanity as you do, nor is her way of speaking like that.”

“Anastasia”: “I have been observing Ana for some time, so I should have been able to imitate her, but it did not work as well as I had thought. You are the second one to notice.”

Subaru: “The second?”

“Anastasia”: “Al-kun also noticed. He called me a Witch, how could he do such a cruel thing?”

Subaru: “That’s…”

That was quite the fitting term; Subaru felt admiration for Al.

Anastasia’s Echidna, and the “Witch” Echidna, were essentially different, but it was impossible that they were not related, there was no doubt in that.

Perhaps it had been Al’s insight, something only he could have noticed.

He was someone summoned to this other world, just like Subaru. If the power of the Witch of Envy was connected to the other world summons, Al could also be related to the Witch. Usually, he would have talked to him more about it, but—

Subaru: “Anyway, that doesn’t matter now. The most important problem is you, who hijacked Anastasia’s body and tried to make it yours.”

“Anastasia”: “Saying hijacked sounds pretty drastic. At a glimpse, the current situation is bad, that appears to be a fact, but I must say that it is unfortunate that you misinterpret it that way. Seriously, it is painful.”

Subaru: “That way, you make it sound like it’s not the case.”

“Anastasia”: “In actuality, it is not true, even if you cannot see it. I only borrowed Ana’s body, it was inevitable. Had I not done that, it would have been the end for the both of us. After that, I continued to use Ana as a vessel, not out of my free will.”

It was terribly amicable and familiar, but the essential part was completely vacant. Although her voice was the same, it was clearly different.

Subaru: “Too long. In summary?”

“Anastasia”: “It was fine to borrow her body, but I cannot get out…”

I see, this is Scarfdona—On this occasion, he would put it as Eridna, but he had never thought that Eridna was unrelated to Echidna, yet in their interaction just now, he had sensed no clear traces of Echidna.

Even though the way she approached things in a roundabout manner was the same as the original.

Subaru: “For now, I’ll try to listen to your story.”

Moving his back away from the door, Subaru positioned himself to talk with Eridna. Now that he had uncovered her identity, she could not leave him alive; it seemed safe to assume that the danger of her setting that sort of trap had passed.

Subaru sat on the other side of the roundtable, facing Eridna.

Subaru: “To begin with, borrowing her body? What kind of situation is that?”

“Anastasia”: “To put it simply, I overwrite my existence in Ana’s Od, and I borrow her freely, that is the situation. In this state, I am able to control Ana’s body at will, and I can also manipulate Ana’s Gate, which is defective from the start, and use magic that way.”

Subaru: “What do you mean it is defective from the start?”

“Anastasia”: “You are quite curious, aren’t you? I understand the greed of wanting to know something, so I won’t blame you, but wanting to know so much about another girl and another Spirit, won’t it make your Emilia-sama and your Beatrice jealous?”

Subaru: “I don’t need your concern, even if they get jealous, they’d be cute anyways, so that’s fine. Stop stretching things out and tell me.”

When Subaru tried to slam the roundtable with his fingers in displeasure, Eridna shrugged. Then, she folded the removed scarf carefully and said "Ana is…"

"Anastasia": "A girl who was born with a defective Gate. I believe you already know that the Gate is an organ that absorbs Mana from the atmosphere and expels the Mana from the body, but the ability to absorb Mana is functioning in a deficient manner in Anastasia. She is someone who suffers from chronic Mana deficiency. There is a person who has this defect of not being able to release Mana, although you should already have an idea of who I am talking about."

Subaru: "I don't know if that's bad or not, and I don't know who you're referring to either."

"Anastasia": "Oh, really? That is unexpected. By the way, the one with the deficiency of not being able to release Mana is the descendant of the Sword Saint. Although in his case, the amount he absorbs is unusual, and it adds to his physical ability apparently, so there is no real harm."

Subaru: "Reinhard?"

Subaru raised his eyebrows in surprise at the words of Eridna. But, on second thought, he also felt that Reinhard had said something like that somewhere before.

Reinhard could not use magic, only in that aspect was he inferior. But instead, the power of his Gate to absorb was strong—I see, so that was the reason why it was bad for him to approach Spirits, including Beatrice.

Subaru: "Well, even without magic, it's not that he doesn't have ways of attacking from a long distance to begin with, in his case it wouldn't be surprising if he defeated his opponents with the pressure of his sword, so it doesn't seem like a disadvantage at all. But, let's talk about Anastasia…"

"Anastasia": "I am not attempting to pull the wool over your eyes, but it is my habit to want to talk about what I know. So, the conversation… Right, it was about Ana's constitution. When it comes to Ana's Gate, its function to draw in is underdeveloped and does not function properly… Therefore, she can only use magic by absorbing the Mana that was initially in her body. In a situation in which she is exhausted, she would have to use her Od, which is the source of life. I cannot allow her to commit such madness, can I? That's why Ana cannot use magic."

Subaru: "But, that you can use magic after borrowing her body makes no sense. The fact that the Mana that originally was in her body was scarce doesn't change. Or is it that you can use minute amounts of Mana?"

"Anastasia": "…"

Subaru: "Don't be quiet, answer."

"Anastasia": "I could not save her life in the first place without cutting down her life, I had no choice. However, the discussion between Ana and me on this matter is over. Someone like you, who has nothing to do with it, has no right to say anything about it. You would not wish me to say anything about your Contract with Beatrice either, would you?"

She had hit the mark.

Subaru and Beatrice's relationship, along with their Contract, belonged only to them. He did not want others to intervene in that, and even if they did, he would reject them.

If Anastasia and Eridna claimed the same condition, Subaru could not say anything.

That was an absolute connection between the Contractor and the Spirit, one that must not be disturbed by others.

"Anastasia": "On this occasion, I borrowed her body based on Ana's own will, it was an emergency after all. You know that a Sin Archbishop came to the City Hall, right? To drive her away, it was necessary for Al-kun and me to use all our strength. It was necessary to make a decision under pressure."

Subaru: “And what’s that about you not being able to get out?”

“Anastasia”: “Yes, that is the current problem…”

At Subaru’s words of concern, Eridna clapped her hands and smiled. Although her appearance was that of Anastasia, her smile clearly showed that her contents were different.

What a strange thing, Subaru thought, but he immediately put that sentiment behind. At last, their talk was about to cover the main question.

In front of Subaru, Eridna touched Anastasia’s thin chest.

“Anastasia”: “This is not the first time I have borrowed Ana’s body this way. It has not occurred many times, though. Ana and I do not have a formal Contract. That is also because of the problem with her Gate, I did not wish to put a constant burden on Ana. Although even among Spirits, I pride myself for being someone who consumes little energy. When it comes to just being there, I do not require Mana from a Contractor.”

Subaru: “I see. My Beako wants to hold my hand three times a day.”

“Anastasia”: “Two of the times is just because she wants to take your hand, probably. It is all about intimacy—So, about our talk, the occasions in which I borrowed Ana’s body in such circumstances. At most, this must be the fourth or fifth time. My relationship with her has lasted for almost eleven years now, so it is rather unsurprising, is it not?”

Subaru: “Well, who knows? Considering that you say it’s at a pace of once every two years, isn’t that as low as the rate you catch flu at?”

“Anastasia”: “So harsh.”

Eridna let out some stifled laughter; her laughter was the same as that of the Witch Subaru knew. In that moment, he became scared that Anastasia’s figure seemed like a double of Echidna’s.

Echidna’s existence had left a weight inside Subaru that would not disappear. If possible, he never wanted to see her again because of Beatrice. In addition to that, to learn that the real Anastasia had disappeared would hurt Julius quite a lot. He also wanted to avoid that.

Subaru: “Then, what happened, Echidna-san, who’s as annoying as a flu?”

“Anastasia”: “I do not know what that flu you are referring to is, but in any case, I do not have much experience. So, without any precedent, I do not know why this happened either… I cannot separate my consciousness from Ana’s body. As a result, Ana is sleeping deep within her Od.”

Eridna spoke as she touched her chest, as if the Od were inside her, and then she looked at the scarf lying limp on the roundtable.

As long as Eridna’s consciousness was inside of Anastasia, her scarf should truly just be a fox pelt, but…

“Anastasia”: “I was able to do pretty well as a puppeteer in the conference room, wasn’t I?”

Subaru: “There were many people who were deceived by the impact of your appearance. Though, there were also several people besides me who thought it was strange…”

Or so he thought. Perhaps only Subaru, who was familiar with Artificial Spirits, had felt that strange sensation.

Subaru: “Even if they didn’t notice it in that place, people deeply related to her will immediately realize that you’re not Anastasia.”

“Anastasia”: “And yet, only people with a superficial relationship like you and Al-kun could tell. Does that not mean that my imitation of Ana went well?”

Subaru: “Right now, Ricardo and the kittens are busy with their own problems. Julius too.”

“Anastasia”: “…”

At those words, Eridna narrowed her eyes. In response to her reaction, Subaru made a suspicious face, but Eridna sighed immediately,

“Anastasia”: “After all, Julius is Ana’s Knight? From the flow of the conversation in the conference room, I thought it was most likely, but… the Authority of Gluttony is terrifying. It could even steal my memories, and I am supposed to be an existence that’s outside the norm.”

Subaru: “You… What do you want to do with Anastasia?”

“Anastasia”: “—?”

Subaru: “On the question of whether or not you intended to hijack Anastasia’s body, honestly, even if we talk about it, nothing can be done, so I won’t hound you about it. I will say it clearly, even if you say it’s not like that, I have no basis to believe you, but…”

That she could not return Anastasia’s body… was unacceptable.

For the finest of Knights, it meant losing one of his hopes.

The spiritual death of a candidate—He did not want to use that in the battle for the Royal Selection.

Subaru: “I won’t give up on bringing that person back to normal, Echidna.”

“Anastasia”: “You can rest assured. I am not so arrogant as to think that I can take over Ana’s body and live in her place.”

Faced with an enraged Subaru who moved forward with determination, Eridna said that with pessimism. With a sad expression, she embraced Anastasia's small, thin body.

"Anastasia": "You know, I like Ana. The more-than-ten-years I spent by her side without a Contract were not mere observational cravings. I do not know if these are the right feelings, but I have feelings similar to that of a guardian or family, I am aware of that. If possible, I wish for her to be well, and more than anything, to be happy."

Subaru: "…"

Eridna spoke fluently and indifferently as always, but, as she spoke and touched Anastasia's delicate body in which she now found herself, in her appearance, there seemed to be affection.

Just as Puck felt love and affection for Emilia, and Beatrice for Subaru, Eridna might feel the same for Anastasia. If so,

Subaru: "So, that's your real reason for wanting to meet the Sage."

"Anastasia": "That is very perceptive of you—I do not care about the people that had their Names eaten by Gluttony. I only wish to learn a way to return this body back to Ana. That is why, for that, I will make use of you all as well."

Subaru: "Is there even a guarantee that the Sage knows a way for that?"

"Anastasia": "There is no guarantee. But, when it comes to the Sage which is said to see everything, and to know everything, there is a chance. I will wager that the chance that they can is the most likely, that is all."

No words of immediate rebuttal came out from Subaru to Eridna's words, full of iron-clad determination.

Without a doubt, it was a terribly egocentric, selfish conclusion she had come to. However, Eridna was acting to attain her goal in her own Eridna-like way. Thus, what Subaru needed to confirm was—

Subaru: “Do you really know a way of reaching the Sage in the Pleiades Watchtower?”

“Anastasia”: “Of course.”

Subaru: “You ought to have a character description saying you have no memories of the past. Why does someone like you know a way to get to the Watchtower that no one else knows? It makes no sense.”

“Anastasia”: “I know only what I know. It is bothersome that you ask me for a basis for that, but this is how it is. If you want to adorn those words, then it is because getting there is fate, I guess.”

Subaru: “Fate? Fate decided by whom?”

“Anastasia”: “My creator, perhaps.”

Eridna’s reply was lofty, but as far as Subaru was concerned, it was the worst kind of reply.

If the creator she spoke of was Echidna, then the one who had scorched the way to the Watchtower into the Spirit’s memories could only have been Echidna. That meant that there was something related to Echidna in the Pleiades Watchtower.

For sure, that gave him a bad presentiment and a certain expectation towards the Sage’s knowledge.

“Anastasia”: “I wonder, did that convince you?”

Eridna inquired this of Subaru, who had remained silent, having come to that one conclusion.

Whilst hesitating on whether to agree immediately, Subaru let out a long, deep sigh.

Subaru: “Not that I’m extremely convinced, but at least I do understand. You have your own goals and things you need to do, and it doesn’t interfere with our own goals.”

"Anastasia": "Indeed. We both have things we want to ask to the Sage. That is why we will cooperate in getting to them. There is nothing strange about that."

Subaru: "Stop it. You became sketchy as soon as you said that."

"Anastasia": "That is rather harsh."

It seemed like he would go crazy if he kept talking with Eridna in Anastasia's form for any longer.

In any case, they would end up having plenty of time to keep each other company whilst they headed off to the Pleiades Watchtower. The Augria Sand Dunes, where the Watchtower was located, were at the eastern end of the world map—it was a long journey.

Subaru: "I'm slowly getting used to you, so give me a bit more time."

"Anastasia": "It's aight, even if ya don't like this. Really though, Natsuki-kun is too cold around such cute girls. You've hurt my feelings. Jeeeez."

Wrapping the scarf around her neck, Eridna mimicked Anastasia's behavior. Indeed, it was a performance well done, but,

Subaru: "Your intonation of "I" is wrong. Also, your Kansai dialect is too smooth. Compared with the people that I know from Kararagi, it lacks authenticity."

"Anastasia": "Authenticity?"

It was an extremely small difference. Eridna rightfully croaked out those words to confirm what Subaru had told her, and eventually let out a sigh as if she had given up.

From Subaru's side, there was nothing he needed to confirm to Eridna. And, concerning the return of Anastasia's body back to the owner, that would depend on the Sage of the Pleiades Watchtower's attitude. However,

Subaru: "Don't tell Julius… or any of the others about the fact that you’re borrowing Anastasia’s body.”

“Anastasia”: “…I don’t mind, but Natsuki-kun’s request’s unexpected.”

Subaru: “I don’t want to cause an unnecessary uproar in this situation that is already enough of a mess. Also, if they find out it was really you, and not Anastasia, who proposed this idea, Ricardo and some of the others may oppose it immediately. It’ll be a bother for me, too, if we can’t go to the Watchtower. Albeit the selfishness of it.”

There was a chance that Ricardo, Mimi, and the others would be anxious about Anastasia’s body and stop her.

In that case, they would be forced to give up their journey to the Watchtower, even if it was an excellent solution to their problems. That would be a problem for Subaru and his group as well, as they wanted to save the victims of the Authorities.

Subaru: “It would be great if the victims of Gluttony, Lust, and, of course, the issue with you and Anastasia, could all be solved by the Sage. If all goes well, then Ricardo and the others won’t be able to complain afterwards. No, even if they do complain, I won’t listen to them.”

“Anastasia”: “Like Hoshin’s sayin’, “The account books are balanced in the end”.”

Subaru: “I agree with Hoshin-san on that.”

As expected of Hoshin, who may have originated from the same place as he did, he spoke finely.

Subaru: “Well then.”

On that note, their discussion was over for now.

In the worst case, if Eridna had intended to exploit Anastasia’s body, there would have been the chance that a last battle in Pristella would have unfolded here; that such a thing did not happen made him relieved.

It was for that reason alone that that question came at the time which Subaru had let his guard down.

“Anastasia”: “By the way, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “Hmm?”

Subaru turned around just as he had put his hand on the door to try and leave the conference room.

Still leaning on the roundtable chair, Eridna cutely tilted her head like Anastasia would towards Subaru.

“Anastasia”: “—There’s someone else, isn’t there? Someone else, who ya wanna ask the Sage regardin’ a way of getting’ them back.”

Subaru: “…”

“Anastasia”: “One way or another, in Pristella there are people with similar symptoms, right? It’d be best to take about one person along who exhibits those symptoms, so we can inquire on how to get them back to normal.”

With his hand still on the doorknob, Subaru’s throat, Subaru’s breathing, froze.

Eridna, in the end, continued to look on indifferently at Subaru, whose expression had stiffened, his eyes wide open.

“Anastasia”: “What wouldja like to do? This depends entirely on ya, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “I…”

“Anastasia”: “In any case, we’re stoppin’ by Margrave Mathers’s mansion, right? If we don’t prepare for the trek across the Augria Sand Dunes, we won’t get the approval to be able to go to the Watchtower. When we do that, your sleepin’ princess oughta be there.”

Subaru: “…”

"Anastasia": "I don't think it's a bad thing. We'll save everyone, it's just about who'll be the first amongst 'em… It'll be okay if Natsuki-kun allows this sorta luxury."

Eridna's indifferent voice, for some reason, seemed like a terribly demonic temptation for Subaru.

He understood what she was trying to say. And though, without a doubt, he wanted to follow up on what she had said, he was not able to reply back to her immediately.

Surely that was because—

???: "Subaru!"

Subaru: "—Hk!"

On hearing his name being called out, Subaru looked up in surprise.

Emilia and Beatrice stood in front of Subaru, whose breath had caught inside his throat. The two of them widened their eyes at Subaru's reaction, and Emilia tilted her head and asked him, "What's the matter?"

Emilia: "You said you would go and see Julius-san… You said that, but since you weren't at the hospital ward, I ended up getting worried. What have you been doing?"

Subaru: "No, nothing really… You know, with that guy, he was pulling such a long face that I couldn't bear to see him for long. So, it wasn't a change of atmosphere, but a change of view."

Emilia: "Really? I think Julius has a handsome face though…"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan thinks that too?"

Emilia: "Ah, but, Subaru's face is great too, I think it's a fine face. You know, the kind where the more you look at it, the more you like it, or, yeah, I think that sort of thing."

Subaru: "That follow-up is so painful!"

Emilia fretfully corrected herself, but the way she had worded it was an issue too. With a bitter smile, Subaru dropped his shoulders. This time, Beatrice, who stood silently by Emilia's side, had something on her mind.

Beatrice kept looking behind Subaru, towards the shelter behind him. Just as if she had an inkling about the conversation that had happened there.

Beatrice: "Subaru, if you're going to do something dangerous, you should call Betty, I suppose. If I were to leave you alone and it got dangerous, Betty would be beside herself, in fact."

Subaru: "That's the same affection I always feel for you. Since you're so cute, I get uneasy thinking about how long it'll be before you are carried off by a kidnapper offering you some candy."

Beatrice: "Betty is not such a cheap-looking Spirit, I suppose! Don't make fun of me, in fact!"

Getting rather angry, Beatrice approached him to slap him over and over again. As she did, Subaru hoisted Beatrice up into his arms, who let out a surprised "Fwaaaah!", and then walked towards Emilia.

Beatrice: "R-Release me, put me down, I suppose! Ah, but, put me down without scooting off, in fact."

Subaru: "That's pretty difficult, so you'll have to stay like this for now."

Beatrice's body was light, but strangely warm. It was the prevailing view that children had higher body temperatures, but with Beatrice being a little girl, was she also like that? Even though she was a Spirit.

Emilia, who was by his side, stared at Subaru's face from the side, who was smiling wryly in that manner. As she watched him with upturned eyes, Subaru asked her, "What's up?"

Subaru: "Is it so unusual that me and Beako are playing?"

Emilia: “No. In this last year, it’s no longer unusual at all, but… I think the current you is making a disconcerted face, one that was pretty unusual for this last year.”

Subaru: “—Is that so? Although I can’t say that everything is OK, most of the problems have been resolved, and for me now, my facial muscles have relaxed well enough, or so I think.”

Emilia: “If you say so, I’ll believe you, but…”

Emilia cast her long-eyelashed eyes down at Subaru, who was molding his cheeks into shape as if they were like rubber. Then, she slowly continued her words that she had cut off.

Emilia: “When you decide what to do, absolutely let me know. And, if you don’t find the answer, make sure to consult with me no matter what, okay? It would be nice if you promised me just that.”

Subaru: “A promise, huh?”

Emilia: “Yes, a promise. Subaru’s not good at keeping those. You’re good at making them, no?”

Subaru: “Woah, that’s unusually venomous for Emilia-tan.”

He received a scathing evaluation from Emilia due to the results of his past promises up until now.

Then, Emilia, with a faint grin on her face, held out her pinky finger. Seeing that, Subaru instantly slung Beatrice across his shoulder, and joined his own pinky finger with hers as Beatrice screamed out, “What are you doing, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Pinky promise, cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a thousand needles in my eye.”

Emilia: “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Their fingers separated from each other’s. Whilst sticking out her finger, Emilia grinned at Subaru,

Emilia: “Subaru, how many needles will it be in total with this?”

Subaru: “Well, I don’t think it reaches up to ten-thousand.”

Emilia: “In which case, make sure you really don’t get up to ten-thousand of them, okay?”

Subaru replied with a curt “Yeah” to Emilia’s prayer-like words.

With that answer, she would feel an absolute sense of security—Such a thing for Emilia would probably be impossible. She had not even planned to make the promise in the first place.

That was why her promise now was a warning to Subaru.

“Anastasia”: “—It’ll be okay if Natsuki-kun allows this sorta luxury.”

Eridna’s final temptation floated back into his mind. Could Subaru allow this sort of luxury, could he really allow it?

Who would allow that to him? To him, who depended on such things.

Subaru: “I will have an answer—By the time I return to the mansion, I definitely will.”

Even so, that was what one would expect from someone who shared its name with that Witch.

In truth, taking advantage of the weakest parts in people was her forte.

Subaru: “Truly, how odious…”

Beatrice: “You said something right now, I suppose?”

Subaru: “No, with the way I am carrying you, I can touch or slap Beako’s bum as much as I want.”

Beatrice: “KYAAA, IN FACT! L-Let go of me, I suppose! Put me down, in fact! Slowly and gently, like you were admiring a flower, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Hahahaha!”

Beatrice: “Stop slapping my buttocks whilst laughing, in fact—!!”

With Beatrice kicking up a fuss over his shoulder, Subaru set out after the slender back who had gone up ahead of him. Turning her face back every so often, Emilia seemed like she wished for them to join her.

Although he had been blessed, although he had been saved.

If only she were here, he thought, marveling at his own Greed.

The curtain fell on Natsuki Subaru’s battle in the Watergate City.

—And now, it silently turned to the next story that led to the Tower of Sand.

Interlude I:
The Couple’s Requirements

1

Garfiel felt as though there were far too many unanswered questions. In his chest, laid simultaneous feelings of satisfaction and unfulfillment.

It was not in his nature to think. It would be far better if he could move simply through instinct, without a single, solidified thought in his mind. Perhaps this was Garfiel’s punishment for thinking too much.

Kurgan: “Magnificent.”

Garfiel did not know how to respond to the legendary hero’s final words.

In the end, Garfiel felt incomplete, as that moment had a sentimentality to it that made him want to cry.

2

Garfiel lightly kicked the ground, sending him sliding into a nearby collapsed building.

Forcing his body to twist and turn, Garfiel noticed that the building had already been thoroughly looted and ransacked. He could not recall this building being involved in the Battle of Pristella, which meant that this scene was, most likely, the result of pragmatic thieves taking advantage of the citizens’ distress and confusion.

Garfiel: “As expected, there’s not much left of their smell left.”

Sniffling, Garfiel looked around the room. Here and there were revolting traces, marks of blood and some damage to the walls, but strangely, neither vestiges of visceral scenes nor the pungent odor of blood remained.

Garfiel: “—Eh?”

Unable to find anything of significance, Garfiel began to get up to leave, then stopping in his tracks. Off in a corner of the room, a small object had caught his eye.

As he walked towards the object, he realized it was simply a small doll. It easily fit into the palm of his hand, yet miraculously considering the place, the doll was neither dirty nor broken.

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel picked up the doll, and while he was lightly dusting it off, he looked around for its owner. Despite knowing full well that the owner should not be present. It was merely a doll, so even if it were missing, it would not make a difference—

Garfiel: “Tch.”

Letting out a sound with his tongue, Garfiel shoved the doll inside his pocket and left the building. He leapt out of a shattered window and nimbly descended to the ground, holding his fingers and feet against the wall of the building.

Garfiel: “Hey! I’m back!”

???: “Really, bro, that’s amazing.”

Noticing Garfiel’s descent via the side, several people gathered around him. They all had expressions of anxiety and anticipation on their faces, and he found it excruciating to not be able to answer any of their questions.

Rescuer: “Bro, how was it inside?”

Garfiel: “Sorry, but nothin’ to be found. There’s no one left in there, and I couldn’t find anythin’ we were lookin’ for.”

Rescuer: “Really…”

As he landed with knees bending, he replied to a person who had rushed to him. For a moment, the man frowned at Garfiel’s answer, but he quickly nodded with a reassured face.

Rescuer: “Well, the fact there was no one inside means that we can put this building aside and focus on other areas. Thanks for all your help, bro. The staircase collapsed, so we couldn’t even check inside.”

Garfiel: “Standin’ by and watchin’ ya guys do all that dangerous work’s a no-go. Your guts to climb a wall with a rope are pretty admirable ‘n all, but it’s all for naught if ya fall and go splat!”

Rescuer: “That’s what I’m talking about! You’re a lifesaver!”

The man happily patted Garfiel on the shoulder, and raised his hand to say a final “Thank you”, before heading to the next building. Garfiel watched as the man and a few collaborators headed off, and pondered on what he should do next. When,

Garfiel: “—Hmm.”

???: “…”

What had caught Garfiel’s eye was a small figure, looking up at the building he had just emerged from.

A teary-eyed girl quietly held her mother’s plump hand. When the mother told her daughter what was going on, she looked down towards the ground and shook her head over and over again.

He did not know what they were talking about, but he knew that this environment was not safe for families. Garfiel moved to try to convince them to leave the area, and then, he suddenly realized something.

Garfiel “…”

Sniffing the air, he noticed something familiar.

Garfiel reached into his pocket for the doll he had just picked up from the building. He lifted it up and sniffed it, and sure enough, it held a faint resemblance to the scent in the air.

Garfiel: “Is this thing what you’re lookin’ for, perhaps?”

Little Girl: “—!”

Garfiel walked up to the two, and gently held out the doll.

The girl, who was initially surprised to be approached, opened her eyes wide upon noticing the doll. The girl’s hands slowly reached out to grab the doll, and her crying intensified.

Little Girl’s Mother: “Thank you. My daughter had been looking for that doll…”

Garfiel: “Ya don’t need to worry ‘bout it. My amazin’ self’s just happened to find it.”

The mother thanked him and he shook his head, denying her praise.

In fact, Garfiel did not believe that he had done much at all. What was a happy event for the girl who was in search for her doll, was a minor trifle when compared to the scale of human lives, and human hearts.

What was required of Garfiel now was a larger role, and—

Garfiel: “I dunno what it is.”

Muttering, he absent-mindedly stroked the head of the girl holding the doll. He then lifted his palm from the little girl’s head, who stared at him.

Little Girl: “—?”

Garfiel: “It’s nothin’. Don’t lose it again.”

Her luck was not going to last long enough for her to find it again.

Thinking this, Garfiel Tinzel gently smiled at the girl, as if to show off his fangs.

3

Three days had already passed since the turmoil had ended in the

Watergate City of Pristella.

As a result of the Witch Cult’s attack, the city had been left with many scars, both large and deep.

These scars were caused by the Authorities of the Sin Archbishops of Lust and Gluttony. The problem of the mutated residents and of the Nameless people, was a particularly large issue. The solution to this matter was expected to be found from the Sage Shaula.

Garfiel, who did not attend the meeting, was not certain about the details. He was sure that they would be able to find a way to make it work. However, he was moved by the mention of the Sage, one of the Three Great Heroes inscribed upon the history of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

It was Garfiel’s nature to want to know the stories of amazing people, be they legends, folklore, or heroes who had left their mark on history.

Naturally, his knowledge included the Three Great Heroes. He strongly admired the Divine Dragon, the Sword Saint, and the Sage, but he was particularly conscious of his interest in the Sage.

This was because, of the Three Heroes, there was hardly any information available on Sage Shaula.

In the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, the existence of the Divine Dragon was revered and told as a popular fairy tale. The title of Sword Saint had been passed down for generations and remained a legend even in present times. Compared to those two, the stories surrounding the Sage were lacking.

What kind of appearance, what kind of origins, what kind of claims did they have to their name?

Everything from their personality to their history was vague. It was public knowledge that they stayed in the Pleiades Watchtower, wishing for world peace while watching over the Witch’s Shrine, but Garfiel was not sure of the truthfulness of those claims.

So, of course, he would have offered to accompany them on the journey to visit the Sage. There was no way Garfiel would want to miss that kind of opportunity.

However, considering the purpose of that journey, it was probably best for him not to express his interest in going. He would have asked Garfiel to accompany him if necessary, that much was certain.

This time however, Garfiel could not think of partaking on that journey in the first place. Perhaps, because Garfiel had too many regrets about this city.

Garfiel: “The Captain’s must’ve been aware of my worries.”

His current task was to protect Otto while they both recovered from the injuries they suffered during the battles.

Subaru: “There’s no guarantee that the Sin Archbishops won’t come back to attack this city. If that happens, you’ll be the only one strong enough to defend it.”

Subaru: “Don’t force anything onto Otto. And don’t do anything crazy with him, either. It might be useless to say this, but…”

Subaru: “Don’t look so worried. Just wait for the good news—Well, I’ll be off.”

Before leaving on his next journey, he had left those words behind for Garfiel.

As Garfiel saw off Subaru and Emilia leaving the city, he pretended to be okay on the surface, but on the inside, his confidence had taken a great hit.

In the end, for various reasons, it was decided that Garfiel needed time to recover, and so, he was left behind.

If Subaru deemed it necessary, he would have brought Garfiel, even if he were badly injured. Garfiel held enough trust in Subaru to help him, even if he was in tatters and dying. It was a good thing that was not the case, because that would mean…

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’s not gonna be of any use to ya—Captain, it’s gonna be rough.”

Natsuki Subaru, a master of psychological warfare in his own right, had seen through Garfiel’s guise. He belated realized that his innermost thoughts had been noticed; no wonder he had been left behind.

Garfiel: “Well, what should I do… I just can’t seem to find the answer.”

Garfiel was aware that he was stamping his feet in frustration. He had a rough idea as to why he was doing it.

However, Garfiel was not aware of what the right thing to do was. That was why Garfiel’s legs remained immobile.

Garfiel: “…”

So, with that in mind, Garfiel decided that the least he could do was help in the city’s recovery.

Both of Garfiel’s arms had been severely injured during his battle with Kurgan. Luckily, they were showing signs of recovery, perhaps to near-perfect state, thanks to his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, and the application of his own healing magic.

In his current condition, it was not possible for him to fight in an all-out battle, but it was possible for him to help clear debris and use his nimbleness to get to places others were not capable of reaching.

However, Garfiel knew that this was merely an act of escapism.

As long as he moved his body, working for someone else, he would not have to realize that his feet were not moving. People would not think that he was standing in place.

Garfiel was doing this because he had noticed his weak self.

—What Garfiel Tinzel did not know, in fact, was that Natsuki Subaru had realized some time ago that such acts were all in the name of covering up one’s own weakness.

Drawing a comparison to Natsuki Subaru, who had been aware of it and nevertheless turned away, Garfiel was very much attempting to confront himself, all by his lonesome.

He did not know that, without even a single word being spoken, Subaru had figured out that Garfiel would overcome it.

Garfiel did not know, but—

???: “Oh! Garf! Awesome energy! Mimi loves high places, Garf!”

Subaru knew that there were many people who could make Garfiel realize that, too.

That was why, Garfiel was not the stupid bastard he thought he was.

4

Mimi: “Fufufufufufuun, fufufufufufuun…”

Garfiel: “You’re in good spirits, aren’t’cha?”

As Mimi walked next to him, Garfiel let out a sigh.

Mimi had come to invite Garfiel to lunch during the city’s reconstruction efforts. Initially, what Garfiel really wanted to do was to move his body to shake off his worries. But in the end, Garfiel was forced to go along, as he was unable to think of an excuse to refuse the girl’s pushy invitation.

Mimi: “Hmm, you feel the same way, Garf? Mimi thought so too! But you know, both Hetaro and Tivey can be so annoying when they’re quiet. The Captain’s also missing a hand, so he’s more of a Vice-Captain now?”

Hearing Garfiel’s sigh, Mimi swooped in with a bright face. With her cat ears twitching, she stretched out her chest, and thrusted out her fist with a “shush”.

Garfiel: “Don’t get carried away so quickly!”

Mimi: “Pheeew!”

With agile movement of her fists and waist, her nimbleness caused Garfiel some apprehension.

Mimi was lifted off the ground, and started meowing like a cat. As soon as she made eye contact with Garfiel, she began laughing with a joyful look on her face. Seeing the carefree look on Mimi’s face, Garfiel felt somewhat asinine for worrying about her.

Garfiel: “I’m sure you’re goin’ through a lot of trouble, but ya don’t seem worn down at all.”

Mimi: “Fufufu~, Mimi can’t show you any weakness! Mimi guesses that’s what Mimi’s selling point is, she’s a tough giiirl~! Did you fall in love? Did you fall in love?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t fallen in love.”

Mimi: “Is that sooo~.”

Mimi swayed back and forth without showing any disappointment. She was not very heavy, but it would not be a good idea to keep swinging her around in case it became too violent in addition.

With Mimi’s hand in his own, Garfiel walked towards the eatery he had been assigned to. Incidentally, Kiritaka had guaranteed food and shelter to those who had helped protect the city.

However, since there was a shortage of manpower and goods in many parts of the city, Garfiel did not intend to take advantage of his graciousness. It was what Subaru would often dub as a “win-win situation”.

Garfiel: “Hey midget, how’s yer stomach?”

Mimi: “Hmm~, Mimi’s hungry! Comecomecomeon, let’s eat!”

Garfiel: “Not yer appetite, yer wounds.”

Mimi: “Ohhh~, that’s it! Yeah, maybe they’re feeling good? Mimi’s wounds are nothing to worry about. But Hetaro and Tivey don’t feel alriiight~? Mimi’s wounds were quite tiring, so the two of them can’t be helpeeed~.”

Crossing her short arms, Mimi nodded with a huff and a snort.

During battle, Mimi had shielded Garfiel and as a consequence suffered a deep and incredibly dangerous injury. A serious, life-threatening wound had been carved on her body, one that even healing magic could never seal.

That which had kept Mimi barely alive had been her two younger brothers, who, together with Mimi, were triplets. Due to the effect of the Divine Protection of Trisection, in which the siblings would share their wounds and fatigue, the two brothers took on the burden of the older sister, and the three of them survived, despite the extreme exhaustion.

After that, it was just a matter of resting and waiting for healing magic to take its course. It was ironic, however, that the sister of the three siblings recovered much faster than her two younger brothers.

It was terrible of their sister to appraise them like that, after all they had done.

Garfiel: “Yer brothers don’t deserve that either. Ya should be more grateful, don’t’cha think?”

Mimi: “I understand that too~. I know what Garf wants to say, but Mimi’s still the older sister. Hetaro and Tivey need to be angry at heeer~.”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

Mimi: “Mimi’s so happy, but Mimi doesn’t want both of them to die because of her. Life’s important! Very important! Those two lives are special! So, don’t waste your money on Mimi! The lady said she couldn’t waste her moneeey~!”

Garfiel: “…”

While in Garfiel’s grasp, Mimi wagged her tail in order to balance. The girl crossed her arms and made an unusually difficult face. Garfiel, in turn, rolled his eyes at the girl’s words.

He was expecting another incomprehensible theory to pop up.

Garfiel: “Surprisingly, you’re thinkin’ straight.”

Mimi: “Naturally! Gorgeous Mimi’s smart! Brave! The superior article! Did you fall in love? Did you fall in love?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t fallen in love.”

Mimi: “Aww, disappointing.”

While being shaken, Mimi giggled at Garfiel’s answer. Faced with such an open-minded smile, Garfiel scratched his cheek and sighed.

Garfiel: “But then ya couldn’t say the same thing to yer younger brothers!”

Mimi: “Hmm?”

Garfiel: “If my sister was dyin’ ‘n the means to save her were there, I’d try. So that she could get angry later.”

Mimi: “Hmmm.”

Of course, Garfiel understood Mimi’s reasoning.

If someone you loved risked their life to save you, it would be a joyful thing, yet terrible at the same time. Garfiel could not say that he wanted his loved ones to die for him. Garfiel had a feeling he would never be able to say that, even if it took him the rest of his life.

He suddenly wondered what Ram would do. Garfiel believed Ram would accept the idea of dying with or for the person she loves. The person she was looking towards was that bastard, though. Which inevitably meant that the other party in the arrangement would be that bastard.

Mimi: “Hmmm! But they’re still dummiiies~! After all, Mimi’s very angry. It’s decided!

Garfiel: “Really?”

Mimi: “Don’t say «Thank you» and be peshy about it. Mimi’s sure Hetaro and Tivey know that Mimi would say that, so if they know that and still did it, then Mimi’s sorry. Mimi can’t help it that they love her so much!”

Garfiel: “…”

Mimi: “Maybe dying together means you want to live together, right? So, if that’s the case, your sister will just be your sister, and Hetaro and Tivey are just going to be Hetaro and Tivey.”

Clearly, Mimi had found her answer to the devotion of her two younger brothers. It was an answer that seemed rather simple, so much that it might seem unaffectionate, but it still resonated within Garfiel.

As if a finger had been mindlessly thrust into the labyrinth of heart and prodded around, he felt a disgusting feeling forming in his chest. It was very much like that which had settled deep inside him, was once again spreading throughout his body.

Garfiel: “Then…”

Garfiel tried to use words to best address this feeling that was building up inside him. Glaring at the dangling Mimi, Garfiel bit down on his regenerated sharp teeth.

Garfiel: “Then why did’cha protect me back then? Ya got injured, ya could’ve died…”

To be struck like that, to be hurt in such a way, so much that she might have died; how could she have done that when his own mind was scrambled by the powerful events that had taken place?

Why would she do that for Garfiel, a stranger whom she had met only a few days previously, if she was angry that her two brothers would do the same thing for her?

Garfiel did not possess the words to express his thanks to Mimi for saving his life.

Mimi: “Well, that’s because Mimi’s in love with Garf. Mimi’s so embaaarrassed~.”

Garfiel: “—! It’s only been a few days, right!”

At Mimi’s words, Garfiel bit his lower lip, as Mimi stroked her head in embarrassment.

Yes, only a few days had passed. There was no need for Garfiel to take Mimi’s love declaration seriously. How Garfiel would respond to this confession was not important. What was important, was the strength and depth of those feelings. Only a few days had passed, so what?

He had been thinking about Ram for seven years—about half his life. That was how long he had been in love with that girl. For all those years that he had been in love with her, he had been rebuked by her, but he had never given up on her. He wanted her, he pined for her, he expressed his love for her in word and deed both.

That was why—

Garfiel: “You’ve only known me fer a short while, so why did…”

—You risk your life for me?

Even though Mimi’s two younger brothers loved her so much that they risked their lives for her own, how could Mimi direct such love towards Garfiel?

Mimi: “It’s like Roshi used to say!”

Garfiel: “…Huh?”

Mimi: “Pair of Jokers!”

Garfiel raised an eyebrow in suspicion at the unfamiliar words. Mimi suddenly turned around and let go of Garfiel’s hand, then landing on the ground. Rolling forwards and leaping in front of

Garfiel, she then pointed at him with both of her hands.

And then,

Mimi: “The pair will be together for years, decades, even centuries, right?”

Garfiel: “Hundreds of years is too special of an example…”

Mimi: “If the thought is eternity, hundreds of years will be nothing! Although they’ll be together for a long time, they’ll probably have lots of fights over food, right?”

Garfiel: “…”

The scale of their disagreement felt small, but Garfiel listened quietly. He did not want her to get too excited and open her wounds. He would let Mimi do what she wanted to do, and then Garfiel could try to calm her down—

Mimi: “Wouldn’t it be nice to have a partner who would enjoy fighting? It’s also said that you can usually tell who you should be with at first sight!”

Garfiel: “Ya can tell at a glance…”

Mimi: “Mimi, when she took a glance at Garf, she got thinking! The fact we just got together is like a margin of error for if we’ve been together for hundreds of years, right? It’s forward advance! Yeah, just like the lady told me about! Advance! And then, collecting interest!”

Garfiel: “Ah…”

Garfiel was taken aback by Mimi’s heart-pounding words.

He did not know what she meant by “advance” or “collecting with interest”. What did it mean? Like borrowing on a bond with a partner, that would last hundreds of years?

Was that the reason why she had done what she had? Was that her argument?

Garfiel: “…But ya could’ve died.”

Mimi: “Hmm~?”

Garfiel: “If you’re dead, I don’t owe ya anythin’. And yet…”

Mimi: “Aaaand~? Garf, is your head okaaay~?”

As Garfiel painfully stuttered, Mimi tapped his head with her finger. Garfiel was astonished to be told this by someone he would prefer not to tell him this, if possible. Mimi then crossed her arms, and,

Mimi: “If we could’ve died together, doesn’t that mean we could live togetheeer~? Mimi and Garf are both alive, so why are you complaining about iiit~? Going baaald~?”

Garfiel: “…”

Mimi: “Oh? Garf, did you just laugh? Heyyy~, did you laaaugh~?”

In Mimi’s round eyes, she could see Garfiel’s fangs click. The interval between the clicking of Garfiel’s fangs gradually narrowed, and the clicking soon turned into laughter.

Mimi: “Oh! Garf has a big smile! What’s funny?”

Garfiel: “Oy, you’re funny. Ah, shit, damn it!”

Mimi: “Mimi is! Well, Mimi doesn’t blame you. The lady usually says that when Mimi’s around, there’s no choice but to laaaugh~.”

Mimi’s attitude of not understanding caused Garfiel to laugh more and more. No, it was not Mimi who didn’t understand. It was Garfiel himself who didn’t understand.

It was probably the most important thing to Mimi, but she just was unable to put it into words. What was clear to Mimi, was not so clear to Garfiel. Maybe that was why, right now, Garfiel was so frustrated.

Garfiel: “…But ya know what? The reason yer two brothers risked their lives for ya is because they want to live together with’cha, yeah?”

Mimi: “Mimi’s fine! Hetaro and Tivey aren’t fine! That’s what I’m sayiiing~!”

Garfiel: “What do ya mean?”

Mimi, who wielded the jurisdiction that came with being a sister, never stopped smiling until the bitter end.

Looking back on it, Garfiel felt that Fredrica, on occasion, had also been reckless with her position as his sister. Well, that was only natural. A sister was forced to love her brother.

Mimi: “Hmmm~, Garf, you’re looking good now, Mimi will compliment you!”

Garfiel: “Yeah, yeah.”

Mimi: “Did you fall in love with Mimi after she complimented you? Did you fall in love?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t fallen in love.”

Mimi: “Is that soo~. But Mimi’s in love. Rest assured!”

Garfiel: “…Oh. Thank ya.”

Mimi lined up next to Garfiel as they walked, smiling as if she were about to pounce on him. When Garfiel stroked her head, Mimi’s tail twitched and began to sway happily from side-to-side.

So far, Garfiel was not convinced by Mimi’s attitude about the consequences of her self-sacrifice. Garfiel’s convictions and Mimi’s convictions were far too different to have a consensus. However, Mimi was already convinced, at least judging from her words.

Garfiel’s answer had yet to resolve any of the lingering questions that appeared as ripples in the Watergate City.

However, Garfiel now felt as if a ray of light now existed.

The light that illuminated the path to the answer that Garfiel sought.

Mimi: “We’ve arrived at the diner! Garf! Mimi, comecomecomeooon~!”

Garfiel: “Hey, don’t open yer wounds back up!”

Mimi quickly rushed into the building, and Garfiel followed her in dismay.

The dining space was not very large, but at the moment, it was packed with people involved in the reconstruction process. Since it was lunchtime, it was hard to find a vacant seat.

Mimi: “Garf! Over here! This spot’s empty! Can we sare this tabble, pleeease~!”

???: “«Sare this tabble», ah, you’re sharing the table. I understand.”

Mimi, who ran around the store energetically, had quickly secured a seat for two people.

As Garfiel headed to the back of the store, he saw that two of the four seats at a table were empty. Seeing Mimi sitting down with her tail wagging, Garfiel also arrived at the seat. He then attempted to warn the people sitting in front of him, as a noisy Mimi would probably annoy them.

Garfiel: “Oh.”

???: “This is an odd coincidence, Garfiel-dono.”

Garfiel came face-to-face with a grey-haired old man—Wilhelm, seated opposite of him. Facing the quiet eyes of the old swordsman, Garfiel gasped faintly.

Many of Garfiel Tinzel’s regrets remained in the Watergate City.

The second of the solutions, and an encounter that was not unrelated, occurred here.

Interlude II:
Unfulfilled Talent

The menu being served in the diner was so big, that it was hard to imagine that the entire city was currently rebuilding from an attack by several Sin Archbishops.

Incidentally, the same went for the food at the healing facilities; the wide variety of food listed made Garfiel's stomach grumble with anticipation. That was great for the still-growing Garfiel's sizeable appetite, but it also made him question: in their situation, was such a luxury allowed?

Wilhelm: "Even though most of the city's faculties have been halted in some way, aside from some human casualties and the collapse of a few buildings, the scope of the damage is limited. The inhabitants' hearts would succumb before full reconstruction, if a quality-of-life decrease were to happen because of this terrible situation… This is what seems to have been Mister Kiritaka's thoughts."

So Wilhelm spoke to Garfiel, who had raised his eyebrows in response to the food that had been brought to them.

They happened to be sharing a table at the diner, eating quietly, face-to-face. The old swordsman's words made Garfiel's eyes widen, as the latter pictured the thin man in his head.

If Garfiel was to be honest, he didn't think much of Kiritaka. However, he had heard of all the hard work that he had put in protecting the city during the Witch Cult's their attack.

It had not been seen, but he was a person who probably had worked hard. That was why Kiritaka seemed to have something in common with Subaru, in that their normal behavior and their attitude in times of emergency had stark contrasts—Ergo, he felt a lump.

Mimi: "Mmmm~! Yummy yummy! Mimi thinks that it's great that the food tastes sooo~ good, because that means you'll feel happy!

Free food is the best food, that's what the lady saaaid~."

Garfiel: "Ha! Good thing you're energetic. Yer manners… So respectful 'n proper! I should get'cha to help me with 'em later."

Next to Garfiel, Mimi was smiling and spoke just before she began eating. Surprisingly, Mimi seemed to be well-versed in eating etiquette, knowing how to properly handle eating utensils.

Wilhelm: "Garfiel-dono, you…"

Garfiel: "Don't expect too much from me. Been tryin' to fix a few things my sister told me to, in the last year."

Wilhelm: "To strive for it is the correct choice. As long as you continue attempting, until it bears fruit."

He nodded, and, witnessing the fruits of Garfiel's labor, he also appended the second half of his words.

In his hands, the knife and fork were being held in an incredibly shoddy manner. That had not bothered him back when he was living at the Sanctuary, but in the past year of living in the Roswaal mansion, Garfiel had grown ashamed of his whole life.

Table manners were not the only thing he was working to correct, there were several other aspects as well. However, it was difficult for him to say that he had succeeded in correcting many of them.

Garfiel: "It's true that it's lackin' in comparison to the midget here."

Mimi: "Mimi's been doing this since she was a little girl. Both the lady and the captain really love eating! Thanks to that I became berry gud!"

Garfiel: "All the others in our lot are real proper, ain't they? Not only those who had to study proper etiquette, but the Captain and Ottobro're great at it too."

Because of their position, it made perfect sense that everyone from the Roswaal mansion, including Roswaal himself, had mastered their formality and neatness. Despite their origins, Emilia and

Beatrice were adept at it as well. It seemed like it was easy to learn with proper practice.

But in that case, how did Subaru and Otto get so good at it? You could say that Otto would have learned it, being from a respected family of merchants, but Subaru was a complete mystery. Then again, Subaru was known to have learned many random skills, so that made a modicum of sense.

Garfiel: "I think the Captain bastard'd be able to eat the rice with these two sticks, tho'. What do ya call 'em… clorsticks, was it?"

Mimi: "Clopstiiicks~, and they're really difficult! Everyone in Kararagi uses them, but Mimi can't handle them properly since Mimi's hands are too small!"

Wilhelm: "Chopsticks, huh? How nostalgic. It is true that they are tricky to handle."

Even Wilhelm acknowledged the high level of difficulty of using this mysterious tool, the chopsticks.

In Garfiel's point of view, it was amazing that Subaru was able to use these to bring food towards his mouth. Ram, too.

Albeit in her case, it was probably because she had always been unusually perceptive at these things.

Garfiel: "Wilhelm-jiisan ain't very good with chopsticks either."

Wilhelm: "I have been to Kararagi a few times, so I have attempted to use them at those opportunities. However, I believe it is a rather difficult tool for everyday use."

Garfiel: "To Kararagi…"

Wilhelm: "Yes, a few times—Such as when I was chasing down the White Whale."

Garfiel: "…"

Wilhelm narrowed his eyes in nostalgia, and Garfiel was at a loss for words.

Albeit he grasped only the broad strokes of the story, and was not sure about the details, Garfiel did indeed know about the connection between Wilhelm and the White Whale, one of the Three Great Witchbeasts. On the surface, the elder had traveled to several countries, in pursuit of clues to avenge the death of the Sword Saint of the previous generation.

After having overcome years of hardship, Wilhelm had finally been able to defeat the White Whale. However, the old swordsman, who had supposedly accomplished his revenge, encountered his wife whose soul had seemingly been brought back, and crossed swords with her—

Wilhelm: “Was the use of chopsticks the only thing you wanted to ask me about, Garfiel-dono?”

Garfiel: “Oh, uhh…”

Wilhelm: “Of course there are some things I cannot tell you, but I owe you a great debt for yielding me the chance to face my wife. If there is anything this old man is able to answer, I will do so.”

Garfiel: “…”

Regarding his wife, Wilhelm stated assertively.

By now, it was well-known that the two dead people who had joined the Witch Cult, were the previous Sword Saint, and Kurgan the Eight-Arms. Unquenchable rage flared at the thought of those deeds of mistreating the dead, but that feeling would be put aside for the moment being.

If there was one thing he had to ask, that would be—

Garfiel: “Are ya sure that what my amazin’ self fought was really Kurgan, the Eight-Arms…?”

Wilhelm: “Hmm… What do you mean?”

Garfiel: “Well, couldn’t it be some other guy who looked like him?

If not, then what?”

Wilhelm: “You are saying something does not seem right, hm—I see, I understand.”

Wilhelm nodded at Garfiel’s mumbled, clumsy words. Halting his meal, his piercing blue eyes looked directly at the young boy in front of him.

Wilhelm: “Does the fact that you managed to win make you doubt yourself?”

Garfiel: “…My amazin’ self’s the strongest, I’ve trained to be the strongest, ain’t gonna stop now. That’s what needs to be done, that’s what my amazin’ self’s gotta do for the Captain. But it’s not like this. The peak my amazin’ self’s lookin’ at ain’t this.”

The hero. The God of War. Kurgan, the Eight-Arms. A legendary being, the strongest and most powerful of the Multi-Arm Tribe, he was a legend in the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

During the battle, there had been many times where Garfiel had thought he was sure to lose, where he had thought he was about to die, only to survive by the skin of his teeth. He had challenged Kurgan to a one-on-one battle, and had throttled his neck.

Garfiel agreed that coming out of the fight alive was a great achievement. Because of this, the people surrounding him had a favorable opinion. Even by a Sin Archbishop, his oppressive strength could not be ignored. Defeating him single-handedly, had undoubtedly been his contribution to the defense of the city.

But Garfiel’s conviction, and what had actually happened, did not match together, in his mind.

Garfiel: “Wilhelm-jiisan, the Sword Demon Wilhelm knows first-hand how it’s like to fight Kurgan the Eight-Arms. What did’cha think of it, old man? Was that the real deal?”

Wilhelm: “…”

With a look as if he were clinging onto something, Garfiel chose to rely on Wilhelm's memories.

Garfiel was not sure of what answer he wished to hear. Would he be satisfied if Wilhelm denied that he was wrong?

But even if Wilhelm denied the fact that Garfiel was wrong, would he still be able to believe that denial?

Wilhelm: "Indeed, it is true that nearly thirty years ago, I became acquainted with Kurgan. We fought each other a total of four times. I chopped off his arms and he slashed my guts… You could say it was a relationship based on piling up life-or-death battles."

Not long ago, the relationship between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Sacred Vollachia Empire had been at its worst in hundreds of years, and a fierce clash took place in a city near the border.

To avoid the intervention of the Divine Dragon, Vollachia had invaded a city only using a small number of troops. Wilhelm, the Commander of the Royal Guards at the time, had been the one to fight them at the time.

The fight that followed had been a fair one, with both sides fighting each other to a standstill. It was said that after four battles between the two forces, the dispute was settled with the retreat of the Vollachian party.

Wilhelm: "It was a good fight. With eight arms and four Demon Cleavers, attacking and defending against all eight attacks in one blow was a matter of life-and-death…"

Garfiel: "Aye, that's how it went. In fact, almost died to it."

Wilhelm: "It was one move against eight of them. So I had to choose whether to reduce the number of moves available to him first, or to deal a fatal blow with my one move, all while evading all eight of his attacks."

Garfiel: "…Oy, not askin' for a lecture on how to beat him…"

Garfiel would have been interested in a discussion about tactics, but now was not the time. Right now, he was more interested about the answer to his question.

At Garfiel's words, Wilhelm shook his head horizontally, prefacing with "I apologize",

Wilhelm: "As you get older, one cannot help but reminisce over past memories. Especially in the past few days, I have found myself doing so very often."

Garfiel: "Don't like lookin' at the past myself. Can't speak for others, tho'."

Wilhelm: "Rather than gazing at your back, it is more like looking back at your footprints to see how you have ended up in your current position. However, I do agree it makes me seem emotional —But more importantly, you were talking about Kurgan."

Wilhelm's face turned serious when the turn came to answer Garfiel's question. From the look in the young warrior's eyes, the old swordsman could see the worries that troubled him.

It was completely natural, as hesitation and worry were walls that all combatants would encounter at least once.

And the answer to that problem was—

Garfiel: "…"

Wilhelm: "My apologies, but I did not exchange words with Kurgan during our battle the other day. It was probably him, but I could not afford to let my attention waver during my own fight. Therefore, I do not possess enough evidence to say with full confidently that the one Garfiel-dono fought was really Kurgan the Eight-Arms."

Garfiel: "No evidence…"

Wilhelm: "The answer should be exactly as you feel, Garfiel-dono. But I do understand why you might be dissatisfied with it. Because of this, I shall tell you my personal opinion… The two we faced, both my wife and Kurgan, were not really those two people."

As Garfiel raised an eyebrow, Wilhelm let out a long sigh. The subject at hand was too heavy to end without a clear explanation.

Noticing the confused look on Garfiel's faced, Wilhelm prefaced with "May I?", before continuing his statement,

Wilhelm: "There is no doubt in my mind that what we fought were corpses that the Witch Cult shamelessly defiled, having been made into their puppets. However, I believe that in their last moments, they were able to regain control of themselves, and truthfully speak their minds."

Garfiel: "…"

In his final moments, or rather, when the battle had been settled.

After all his eight moves had been evaded, Kurgan had been dealt a fatal wound from Garfiel's fangs, and so arrived his end. The words that Kurgan had uttered right before disappearing still lingered in his ears.

Kurgan: "—Magnificent."

Leaving merely a single word, the God of War then turned to ash and was scattered by the wind. At that time, in the moment of victory, in his mind there had only been the joy of being recognized by a legend.

However, as time passed, negative thoughts had begun bubbling up. How had he been able to defeat the God of War of legends so easily, when he himself had yet to reach his full potential, had yet to face the tiger that laid inside of him?

Sure, it had been an extreme situation, he had staked his life, behind his back there had been his younger siblings, with whom he had not exchanged nearly enough words—Was that the only reason why he had been the victor?

Wilhelm: "Kurgan was a very quiet man. It would not surprise me if, even in his last moments, he had not been willing to leave more than a few words."

Garfiel: “Ohh, there was one word. He told my amazin’ self one word…”

Wilhelm: “Then do not tell us that one word—It was the commend of Kurgan, the Eight-Arms, to the warriors who bested him in battle. It is something not to be shared with those uninvolved in the battle.”

Garfiel: “…”

When Wilhelm cut him off, Garfiel held his tongue.

Praise, coming from a god, to a warrior. Was he worthy of it?

Garfiel: “Don’t get it.”

Wilhelm: “Hmm.”

Garfiel: “Those two, weren’t really those two. Ain’t in the mood for riddles. Tell me. I dunno what you’re thinkin’.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Garfiel voiced his displeasure, his tone becoming raspy. He was fully aware that he was being rude.

Behind Wilhelm’s eyes, there was the slightest change of emotions. Garfiel leaned forward, as a means to get the other to reveal the answer to his own troubles. But,

Mimi: “Garf, you’re being a bad boy!”

Garfiel: “…Ahh?”

Mimi: “Ojii-san, did that make you feel loneli? So Mimi thinks it’s a bad, bad idea to be so pushy? Also, the look in Garf’s eyes look suuuper~ bad too! That’s not good!”

Mimi, who was sitting next to Garfiel, jabbed her finger into his side. Being poked by the touch of her finger, Garfiel raised an eyebrow wondering what it was all about, then quickly came to his senses.

Garfiel: "…"

Wilhelm's eyes were full of kindness as he watched Mimi's antics, the same expression that he had shared with Garfiel just a few moments ago. And there was something more to it.

Only then did Garfiel realize how he had unknowingly and unreservedly gouged Wilhelm's wounds.

Garfiel: "…Sorry. Was only thinkin' 'bout myself."

Apologizing, he bowed his head.

Wilhelm had had an unexpected reunion with his supposedly-deceased wife, which had ended with swords. The Sword Demon then exchanged his last farewells—and devoid of consideration for his spirit, violent, selfish words were piled upon this.

To the boy bowing in front of him in shame, Wilhelm shook his head.

Wilhelm: "No, I am very much in the wrong for being pretentious. At your age, it is only natural to display such rashness for an answer. I would have done the same. But as we get older, we tend to forget that."

Garfiel: "…Can't even imagine Wilhelm-jiisan actin' like that."

Wilhelm: "It is not so strange. It pains me to say this, but I was more impatient and foolish than most young men of the time…"

After the old man's calm demeanor and consolation was presented to him, Garfiel still felt bad.

The Sword Demon was famous for his deadly skill with the sword, yet there had never been any talk of him having a vicious personality. The reason Garfiel had started his self-reflection was because of the elder's kindness. Anyhow,

Wilhelm: "They were both themselves, and yet, they were not. I am not trying to make this a riddle nor being evasive. It is exactly as stated."

Garfiel: “Exactly as stated… Not sure if I’m getting’ it.”

Wilhelm: “In his last moments, while on the verge of death, it is certain that his own will returned. But before that, those wicked scoundrels were using him as a puppet, and so he was not able to exercise the full extent of his swordsmanship.”

Garfiel: “…”

Wilhelm: “In other words, neither the Sword Saint of the previous generations, nor the Kurgan the Eight-Arms, possessed the level of ability they originally did.”

Wilhelm told the speechless Garfiel his observations. That his opponent had not shown his full strength, albeit he himself had battled with such brutality, was not an assertion that he could just accept.

With his life on the line, he had won in a fight of life-or-death. However, it was the answer he was looking for, because the question on his mind, was whether he had been an opponent that required him to put his life at stake to defeat.

There was that, but…

Wilhelm: “If I had faced my wife in her prime as I am now, I would have been defeated within the first few strikes of her blade. I was only able to finally best her by throwing away everything else except the blade, while in my prime—It is impossible that was its level.”

Garfiel: “If the same applied to both, then…”

Wilhelm: “Kurgan’s skills were degraded compared to their previous state, merely a shadow of his former self. I apologize for saying this, but… I believe that, had your opponent been the real Eight-Arms, it would be unthinkable that you would not have been reduced to a corpse on the ground. He was quite the fighter.”

Garfiel: “Oh, so my amazin’ self’s…”

Wilhelm: “—Do not be so prideful, young man.”

Immediately after, Garfiel's hair stood on end with the realization of a stinging battle aura, and he instinctively kicked his chair away and jumped back to the entrance of the diner.

With the other people in the dining hall startled because of the sudden situation, only the figure of Garfiel was different, as he stood on all fours and breathed heavily. Meanwhile, Wilhelm and Mimi were still seated as if everything were normal.

Garfiel: "Ha, haaa…?"

Wilhelm: "I have the impression that Garfiel-dono has a large vessel, but it has yet to be filled. Although I am already in the realm of antiques… I can still recognize a real deal when I come across one. If a part of it can be felt now, then it means it shall be worth the effort."

Having said that, Wilhelm stood up and wiped his mouth. His plate had been emptied. And his demeanor showed that he had said what needed to be said.

If there was still something missing, it was not on Wilhelm's part.

The missing part was in Garfiel's heart. And because part of the vessel donned a hole, the conviction it possessed was now spilling out.

Wilhelm: "That conviction is what you require to become even stronger. Do not lose sight of it."

Garfiel: "Gonna keep that mind… Quite the bad person, aren't'cha."

Wilhelm: "We are not exactly on the same faction, you know. There should be some level of caution. But—"

Wilhelm, who had finished his meal and was getting ready to leave, looked at Mimi and stopped mid-sentence. Mimi was humming happily while stealing her favorite pieces of food from Garfiel's plate and continuing to eat.

That Mimi, then noticed Wilhelm's gaze,

Mimi: “Hmmmm~? What is it, ojii-san?”

Wilhelm: “It is amazing that you were capable of seeing through the hostility of a battle aura in a split second’s time.”

Mimi: “Ojii-san doesn’t have any reason to be bad to Mimi or her friends, though?”

Wilhelm: “You have a good eye—With you by my side, straying from the beaten path would not be a worry.”

Nodding to Mimi, who answered as though it was obvious, Wilhelm then turned his focus to Garfiel. While heading to the eatery’s exit, the elder swordsman indicated Mimi with his hand.

Wilhelm: “You would be wise to care for her, as the opposite gender will become a treasure later on in life.”

Garfiel: “—Hk! What’s wit’cha! My amazin’ self’s already in love with someone else!”

Wilhelm: “Whatever you choose to do, do your best to not get lost along the way—Lest you end up much like this rotting demon.”

Having said his final words, Wilhelm walked out of the dining room.

Watching while unable to say anything back, Garfiel clacked his fangs in annoyance. He walked back to his seat, and gobbled up the remaining food in one go.

Mimi: “Oh, Garf, that’s bad maneers!”

Garfiel: “Don’t wanna hear that from someone who was stealin’ food from others’ plates a second ago. Ah, shit! Even more pissed now than I was before, like this.”

Rather than feeling the release of his doubts, he only felt more and more troubled.

The path ahead had been illuminated, but the guidance had been so difficult to understand that Garfiel was still unable to piece together the clues.

It was a frustrating feeling, to be just one step short of being convinced of his own strength, despite having all that was necessary.

Garfiel: “Damnit, what should be done now?”

Mimi: “Garf, are you bothered? What’s bothering you?”

Touching the white scar on his forehead, Garfiel blurted out his thoughts, putting a concerned expression on Mimi’s food-stained face. The girl delicately wiped her stained mouth with her sleeve,

Mimi: “If something bothers you, talk. Mimi will give you the answer!”

Garfiel: “…My amazin’ self’s not sure on what the hell he’s supposed to do now.”

Mimi: “When you’re done eating, you should take the plates off the table! Here!”

Garfiel: “That’s not really what I was talkin’ ‘bout.”

Having said that, they both took their empty dishes to the kitchen, and left the diner.

Their stomachs had been filled. So should they continue working on the city’s reconstruction during the afternoon? If working meant he would be able to avoid thinking about it, he would do it.

Garfiel: “Ahhhh, my belly’s all full. Should we continue the reconstruction in th’ afternoon? My amazin’ self can’t imagine workin’ feelin’ like this.”

Mimi: “Aaalright~, let’s gooo~, Garf!”

Garfiel: “You’re quite the energetic gal, aren’t’cha. So where are we goin’?”

Mimi: “It’s obviooous~, to Garf’s brother, siblings and mother’s house!”

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel had been walking behind Mimi’s leisurely gait, but when his brain processed what the small girl had said, he stopped dead in his tracks.

His fangs gnashed together, and Garfiel’s eyes widened, as he turned his head away. He struggled to keep his inner thoughts from being laid bare on his face as much as possible.

Garfiel: “What’cha say?”

Mimi: “Right now, Mimi’s going to Garf’s family! That’s what Garf needs right now!”

Suddenly, Mimi puffed out her small chest and raised her tail. Then, she pointed to the surprised Garfiel and exclaimed.

Mimi: “Talking with your family is beeest∼! That was Roshi’s lesson!”

Interlude III: Name of Warmth

1

No matter what, in the end, his nature had not been corrected.

Even if he knew a problem stood in front of him, he would shy away from it. Even if he knew a solution existed, because he was aware it would be accompanied by pain, he would shy away from it.

Garfiel wondered if he was facing the same problem he had encountered in Sanctuary, if he was still the same person as back then.

Had he really changed at all, compared to those times he spent confidently boasting inside the confinements of his old home?

???: “Ah! Gorgeous Tiger!”

Garfiel: “Oi… that’s dangerous!”

The boy’s expression lit up upon laying his gaze on Garfiel visiting his home. As the boy ran up to him with all his might, Garfiel simultaneously felt a sense of danger and relief at his sudden appearance.

Garfiel: “Don’t want’cha fallin’ ‘n hurtin’ yerself. If ya fall down ‘n get hurt, ya’ll look like an idiot.”

Mimi: “Ohhh~, it hurts when you fall, doesn’t it? Mimi used to fall down when she was a little girl too! And as soon as Mimi did, Hetaro looked like he was in paaain~. But Mimi was fine. Strange!”

Mimi laughed innocently, but that her younger brother had taken on her pain and wounds was a no-brainer. As a result of being overly pampered, someone clumsy even after growing up, or that is, a careless sister, was created.

Regardless—

Garfiel: “Things settled down at home since then?”

???: “Yes, it’s okay. Mom and nee-chan have calmed down too, haven’t they?”

Garfiel: “…That’s right.”

Patting the boy’s head—the one who was presumably his brother, Garfiel looked up at the large mansion.

For Garfiel, it was a place that brought mixed emotions alongside.

In the Thompson mansion, the family’s mainstay, Garek Thompson, was long absent.

It would have been a relief, were he merely working at the City Hall, too busy with the reconstruction efforts to go home, but unfortunately, that was not the case.

Garek Thompson had lost his human body, his appearance now mutated into that of a black dragon. That fact had already been confirmed by Garfiel himself.

Although Garek was now a dragon, he was still capable of speech, as his vocal organs were still intact. In this respect alone, he was much more fortunate than the other victims in the Town Hall. As for those, the people who had been turned into flies, they had been rendered unable to communicate, let alone speak. However, many people felt as if that was a blessing.

It was easy to imagine what thoughts the people who were turned into flies would utter while despairing about their transformation, if one could communicate with them.

Fred: “Hey, Gorgeous Tiger. I wonder when Dad will be back…”

Garfiel: “…”

Fred: “He’ll be back, won’t he?”

Again, Garfiel stroked his brother’s anxious head with his rough palm.

It would be easy to utter words of encouragement devoid of any basis, but even if he did, they would lack any warmth. Upon considering what kind of scars those unhopeful words would leave on the boy, Garfiel adjudged it to be something that he could not do lightly.

If the boy were a person with whom he had little to no connection, would Garfiel have encouraged him irresponsibly? Was their connection the reason as to why Garfiel did not do that? He himself, did not know.

???: “Fred? How long will you stay outside…?”

Garfiel: “…Yo.”

While he was talking to the boy, a blonde girl showed her face from inside the house.

She was the boy’s sister, and presumably Garfiel’s sister too.

When the girl noticed Garfiel, her expression brightened, and then immediately reverted to her previous awkward face. The change in expression would normally be described as cute, but now, catching a glimpse of her complicated emotions was just painful.

Sister: “Well, you came all the way to our house again? Gorgeous Tiger sure has a lot of free time on his hands, doesn’t he?”

Garfiel: “Ah, just restin’ now, ya know. Been wantin’ to see yer faces. But if I ain’t welcomed, I’ll just leave immediately… Oi!”

Mimi: “Garf, look at people in the face when you’re talking to them!”

Garfiel was reluctant to talk to his sister too, as he noticed her turning away weakly. As he announced his intention to not force it, he was pinched on the waist by Mimi, who was standing behind him.

He reluctantly turned to the girl, and sure enough, his sister looked somewhat tearful.

At least, he now felt that he had not been rejected by his family.

Garfiel: “Supportin’ Mom and takin’ care of yer little brother… Pretty hard-workin’ sister.”

Sister: “—! Yes, yes. So, hm, I don’t mind having a little chat with you. One more person to talk to won’t change anything.”

Mimi: “There are two people, not one!”

Sister: “Two more people won’t change that!”

As the young girl turned red and shouted at them, Mimi and Fred looked at Garfiel with an expectant look on their faces. Garfiel was not a bad enough person to be able to disregard their request.

Rather, Garfiel loved to respond to such looks in the first place, despite his current state of mind being one of being unwilling to talk. Especially if it were about his younger siblings.

Garfiel: “Well, lemme in for a moment. If I’m botherin’ your Mom, I’ll just go away.”

Fred: “That sort of thing…”

Sister: “Mom wouldn’t do that.”

The two siblings looked at each other and smiled confidently.

And yet, in fact, they were right.

2

???: “I’m sorry. You came a long way, but I wasn’t properly prepared for your visit… I just wish I had done a little better.”

Garfiel: “No problem. We’re the ones who popped up all of a sudden in the first place.”

???: “You don’t have to look so anxious, you’re not being a bother.

It's very encouraging that you found the time to visit us."

Garfiel: "—Hk."

Garfiel's throat froze as his secretive inner thoughts were unintentionally revealed.

However, the one who had done it, Reala, possessed no ill intent. Of course. Reala—she was a person who was truly free from malice.

The more Garfiel interacted with her, the more he felt that even though she had lost her memory, that part of her was still the exact same.

Garfiel: "…But even so, the house's strangely deserted."

Mimi: "Hmmm, that's how it feels? When we came here earlier, it was kind of messy, but now it feels like it's clean and tidy."

Mimi, who was bouncing on the sofa, looked around the house unhappily while agreeing with Garfiel.

Once again, Garfiel and Mimi had been invited into the family's living room, and on Reala, serving tea at the table, giggled at their impressions of her home.

Reala: "Fufu, I'm surprised that you noticed. Maybe it's because it's the house I spend every day in, but it doesn't feel too different…"

Sister: "No way. I have a very strange feeling about it too. Mom just doesn't care about it."

Fred: "Onee-chan, you're so annoying."

Sister: "What was that?!"

The sister angrily chased after her younger brother, after the piercing stab that escaped his lips.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw them noisily running around the house, then turning his gaze to Reala, silently asking her about the meaning of their last exchange.

Reala: “—?”

Garfiel: “Ah, no, what do ya mean by that? What’s goin’ on?”

It was useless to ask his question with merely a gaze, so Garfiel queried again, this time properly, with words. In response, Reala clapped her hands, prefacing with an “Oh”,

Reala: “Oh, it’s nothing so big. Now is the time when everyone in the city needs to work together to support each other… We can give away some of our household goods to those in need, or donate some of our savings, and so on. That’s all there is.”

Garfiel: “…So, you’re missin’ a lotta stuff.”

Reala: “There was a lot of stuff in this house to begin with. It’s not so much that we had tons of stuff, it’s just that I’m not one to throw things away.”

Reala playfully stuck her tongue out at him, but it was not all that simple.

Of course, there was the principle that people should help each other. The Thompson family, however, was a little different. After all, the family now went without one of its main pillars—the father.

So rather, in this environment, if they decided to help others, they would soon become the ones in need.

Reala: “My husband… Garek will be back soon. I believe in that, so you don’t have to worry about me like that.”

Garfiel: “—Tch! But…”

Reala: “I’ve… been thinking about this for a long time. The more anxious you are, the more happiness will slip away. This is something from a long time ago, just over a decade. I don’t remember anything from those days… Oh, did I scare you?”

Garfiel: “…Might be a joke that always gets people, but this villain here’s already heard it from yer husband.”

Reala: “Oh, I see… Hmph, that guy.”

It seemed that amnesia was an easy way to surprise others, so Reala looked a little disappointed with the fact that it had not worked this time around. He believed it to be a very optimistic use of amnesia, but had it been said back when he was unaware of her condition, it would have devastated Garfiel.

It felt like he was taking it a little bit better now, but it was because he had taken time to process his thoughts, and had received a lot of help from many people.

And most surprisingly, what struck him more than the subject of amnesia was the fact that his mother’s thoughts, the very foundation of her being, had not changed despite having lost her memories.

—Because that was the origin of his mother’s actions, that tomorrow may be better.

Reala: “It was Garek who gave me these ten or so wonderful years, at a time when I had nothing. He made me, an empty person, what I am today and gave me the opportunity to have a lovely daughter and a lovely son… So what would I do if I didn’t believe in Garek?”

Garfiel: “…”

Reala: “So you don’t have to be more concerned about it than you should be. I’m not trying to be tough or anything, but I believe in Garek… If Garek didn’t mind, I would’ve been happy with him coming back in that form.”

Garfiel: “No, that guy, it’s just that even if yer husband said it’s aight, the others’d stop him.”

Reala: “Really? I thought it was cool…”

Reala put faith in her husband, whose form had been morphed into that of a black dragon, while gazing towards tomorrow.

However, as it was only a change in appearance, Garek still had the faculties to exchange words. Nevertheless, the couple had debated it, and their joint decision was for him to sleep in ice.

Garfiel was not as tactless as to try and listen in on that, nor had he witnessed the actual freezing.

It was due to none other than Reala, that Reala's heart had steeled itself.

Garfiel: "…You're strong, ain't'cha?"

Reala: "Yes, of course. Because I'm a mother of two children".

Reala smiled as she said it, throwing out her chest.

The fact that she was not the mother of two, but the mother of four, only lent proof to the statement of her strength.

It was a different kind of strength, from the fighting strength that Garfiel was knowledgeable about. That which was present in Subaru and Otto, was the same that was present in his amnestic mother.

Surely, that part of Garfiel, that untrained strength of his, laid right in front of him.

Reala: "Oh, yes, I actually have a question for you too, Gorgeous Tiger-san."

When Garfiel gave her a distant look, Reala suddenly clapped her hands. Listening to her unchanging tone and manner of speech, Garfiel nodded casually, letting an "Ah" escape through his lips.

Garfiel: "Ah, say whatever ya want. To be honest tho', the important part of the discussion doesn't really concern my amazin' self. Don't think I'd have much to say too."

Reala: "Nono, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about you, Gorgeous Tiger-san."

Garfiel: "'Bout my amazin' self?"

Reala: "Yes—Gorgeous Tiger-san, why do you care so much about us? That’s what I’m curious about.”

The sudden and unexpected blow hit him at a moment he had put his guard down.

His fangs literally trembled, and the resolve that he was supposed to possess, cracked.

Garfiel: “…”

Reala, in front of him, and Mimi, beside him, were silently waiting for Garfiel’s response. As he watched them, Garfiel’s thoughts spun.

When Mimi brought him here, he should have been prepared to a certain extent. However, now he was now being reminded that, in the end, his resolve was vague.

Did he wish to tell Reala about her lost memories? Did he wish to come forward and tell his two younger siblings that he was their brother, at least? Or did he intend to leave quickly, only relaying them his concern for Garek?

Now, even remembering was something he was incapable of doing.

Garfiel: “The reason that my amazin’ self’s comin’ to yer home’s that my amazin’ self’s got a bit of a relationship with ya guys, ‘n I’m anxious, so I wanna keep an eye on ya. Y’all’re missin’ somethin’, yeah?”

Reala: “Well, it’s pretty hard indeed. You’re right, so I can’t say anything about that.”

Mimi: “Oh, you’re out of it? What’s missing? Ah, hair? You know, when it’s Fire Season, Mimi also loses a lot of hair and stuff! But in the Ice Season, she gets a little fluffy! Mamechishiki!”

To the unclear wording, Reala and Mimi reacted in a typical way.

Seeing this, a blatant sense of relief swept over Garfiel’s chest. Given the personalities of the two, they should not press him for any clarification. Garfiel could now leave this place, without expressing the indescribable emotion in his chest. He thought it was a subject a matter that required time. Yes, time.

This was the kind of thing that should be done calmly, and with time, to seek the right answer. That was exactly what he was going to do, he was going to ask Frederica, he was going to check with his sister, and then—

Garfiel: "—Uh."

Reala: "Is everything alright? Gorgeous Tiger-san?"

Garfiel: "Why…?"

Reala: "I don't know why, but you look like such a fragile, little child."

Garfiel was shocked, thin white fingers in contact with his head.

Reala had leaned over, stroking his head. The softness of her touch was terribly gentle, full of compassion, as if he were her own beloved child.

Reala's memories, which were supposed to be lost, and Garfiel's memories, which he had started to forget, overlapped.

It must have been like this someday, being held and having his head patted, in the arms of Reala—Reshia Tinzel.

At this moment, the physical memory of that time had been revived, coming back to haunt Garfiel's heart. And without having been given a moment to think about it, to endure it, his feelings broke down.

Garfiel: "…Mom."

Reala: "…"

Garfiel: "Mom… Mom, Mom… Hk!"

With her caressing fingertips still touching his hair, Garfiel called out to Reala in front of him. His eyes were teary, his voice trembled, and Garfiel looked so thin and frail that his petite body seemed to get smaller and smaller.

No wonder. No matter how strong he is, no matter how hard he tries, everyone is a child in front of their mother. No matter how brash he can be, he is just a stubborn child.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’s… My amazin’ self’s, Mom… Hk!”

He had so many things to say. He had as many things to say as there were stars.

The many thoughts that he had given up on thinking, the ones that he had not been able to communicate, shone brilliantly in Garfiel’s mind, and he rejoiced at the opportunity that had presented itself to him.

He wished to be held in his mother’s arms, to be forgiven, and to cry out in peace.

???: “…Garfiel, right?”

Garfiel: “…”

Teary-eyed and downcast, Garfiel’s voice was strangled.

Next to him, Mimi suddenly spoke Garfiel’s name. Garfiel did not know to whom it was addressed. But then he heard the sound of a gasp in front of him, and the sensation of fingertips leaving his head.

Garfiel: “—Ah.”

Her fingers moved away, his mother’s precious warmth was lost, and Garfiel’s throat rumbled weakly.

But that sentiment was soon replaced by another one.

Reala: “Garfiel, come here.”

In front of Garfiel’s raised face, Reala spread her arms and smiled. The gesture and the words froze over Garfiel’s thoughts.

But even though his brain had stopped, his body, his soul, knew what to do.

Garfiel: “I’m sorry, Mom… I’m sorry…!”

Sobbing like a kid, just like a child, Garfiel jumped towards Reala—towards Reshia, burying his head in her chest, and shouted.

A gentle, soft palm stroked the weeping Garfiel’s head.

Reala: “Okay, okay… Garf, good boy, good boy. You’ve been working so hard all this time.”

Garfiel: “—Kh! That’s right! My amazin self’s been trying so hard! But I made so many mistakes, and still… everyone is… Hk!”

Unable to speak properly, Garfiel continued his incoherent speech in Reshia’s arms.

What overflowed now, were all fifteen years that encompassed Garfiel’s life.

He had lost his mother, been separated from his sister, resolved himself to not lose any more family members, and then had the next decade of his life shattered by Subaru and the others.

In that period of time, how many times had he almost been crushed by the very things he was holding on to? How many times had he grieved?

How many times had he trampled upon feelings, in his desperation to regain the love he had lost, to not let it go?

Back when he was much younger, he had taken advantage of his father and mother, clinging onto them while leaving the walls confining his heart intact, something which he should have overcome.

Knowing that the walls were there, he got used to slipping through the side streets to avoid them, while taking notice of that high wall looming behind him.

Garfiel: “…Mom, hk!”

Reala: “It’s okay, Garf. Mom’s here for you.”

Being comforted by her kind words and compassion, entrusting his heart to his mother’s love, which he had asked for, but had not been given.

He remembered being loved by his family. Garfiel knew that he was loved by his sister and his grandmother both. He also was aware that his mother loved him.

However, Garfiel, who had felt the love of his sister and his grandmother, for the first time in his life, at this juncture, now felt his mother’s love. Now that he was getting what he had sought, Garfiel sobbed.

He had not learned the answer to the feelings that welled up in his chest.

Their name had yet to be made known to Garfiel.

But the very thing he felt right now, that which made his heart tremble, his fangs snap, and his soul quake, was the answer.

He was sure everyone already knew the answer, but only now, Garfiel finally had it at his fingertips.

—This passionate feeling as it was, was the answer.

3

Mimi: “Ohhh~, Garf, did you stop crying? Did you cry a lot? Garf’s such a crybabyyy~!”

As Garfiel’s fretful, sobbing rage settled down and Garfiel frowned in embarrassment, Mimi opened the door, returning with his younger siblings.

It seemed that she had left the sobbing Garfiel alone with Reala while he was in his mother’s arms, which made Garfiel feel even more uncomfortable. How much time had passed since he had left his seat?

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger, are you alright?”

Sister: “I can’t believe that you’d cry out in public even though you’re a man. You’re just like Fred.”

Even though he had not been directly in sight, he had been crying out, loud enough to be heard throughout the house. Mimi had taken his younger siblings outside, but the effort would be in vain.

Garfiel: “Sorry ‘bout…”

Mimi: “Hmm, what? No matter what, Mimi is wondering if Garf’s happy. Also, she’s wondering if there will be anything sweet for snacks!”

Garfiel: “Oh, yeah. Damnit.”

As Mimi laughed with a gleeful, natural look on her face, he wondered just how much thought she had put into that action.

Garfiel pondered if it had been an instinctive actions from her after laying her eyes on him. If so, her instinct was not something to be scoffed at.

Mimi: “Hmmm~? What’s up? Have you fallen in love? Did you fall in love?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t fallen in love.”

Mimi: “Is that sooo~.”

It was hard to believe that he was actually thinking about it, but the fact was that Mimi had saved his life many times.

Not only his heart, of course, had been saved, but his very life had too been saved by Mimi. And as a result, by complete chance, Mimi ended up not expiring. Garfiel should have been the one to come out victorious from that battle, but the credit for that achievement went to Wilhelm. And so, he had nothing to do with Mimi’s salvation.

He was borrowing and borrowing, but he had yet to be able to do anything to pay his debt back.

Mimi: “So, how was Garf?”

Reala: “Well, you’ll have to check with him. I’m sure he’s okay now… I think you’re Gorgeous Mimi-san’s favorite, Gorgeous Tiger-san.”

Mimi: “Weeell~, maybe. Garf, Mimi’ll do it if Mimi has to.”

Garfiel could not help being struck by that embarrassing conversation. To take his mind off things, he just stroked the heads of his younger brother, who was giving him a worried look, and his younger sister, who was glancing at him.

Upon touching his brother and sister, he felt even more love for them than before. Perhaps it was because of the fact that they are siblings. He had not really felt or understood love as an emotion before, but now it had become a reality.

Garfiel: “…”

As soon as he realized that, another wave of anxiety arose.

This time it was a straightforward concern, a very straightforward concern. It was whether he possessed the qualifications to be recognized as an elder brother by these two, his younger siblings, or not.

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger?”

Sister: “Hey, why are you frozen? Ehh, it’s not like you have some weird disease or something, is it?”

Comparing the gaze of his siblings, Garfiel’s thought whirled.

They probably didn’t hate him. It was easy to understand the favoritism of the younger brother, and the younger sister was hard to understand, but despite that, she likely wasn’t malicious.

And besides, he had used his strength in battle in front of them as

Gorgeous Tiger—To be honest, his display had been less-than-impressive at times, and he could not renege the feeling that he would have lost if not for the supporters, but he would put that aside for the moment.

Mimi: “Garf?”

Garfiel: “Shut up. Come on, do somethin’.”

Feeling like Mimi could be of assistance to him, Garfiel bit his fangs and took the lead in restraining her. When Mimi pulled away from him, a grin plastered on her face due to his words, Garfiel’s brain began turning at high speed and blowing heat.

Coming forward, that in itself was possible at this very juncture. Of course, “possible” here meant that it was “an action that was feasibly achievable”, and with emotional conditions involved, it would be a little different.

He was not scared, not by any means, but everything required preparation. When tackling a strong opponent head-on, he would not be victorious if the enemy were challenged, and he lacked the preparations to win. No matter what the situation, no matter how difficult the enemy, he needed to practice and train his body every day. And that was exactly what was required for him to win here.

In other words, being prepared was still required of him for this challenge. And if he were to be sincere, he could not say with certainty that he was ready for that right now. If that were the case, he should just back off for now—

Sister: “Wait wait, are you sure you’re okay…? Your eyes are flitting here and there, and your face is turning red…?”

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger?”

Garfiel: “I’m fine, of course. Gao.”

Mimi: “Mimi’s never heard Garf make a «gao» sound or anything like that before!!”

Mimi teased him, but Garfiel did not boast the energy to riposte verbally.

And so, with his younger siblings worrying about him, Garfiel's brain churned in circles with his confused thoughts—

Reala: "You can't do that, Garfiel. You've been holding everything in, and that's what you're doing right now."

Garfiel: "Oh, Mom…"

Reala reminded him of this, as she saw Garfiel averting his eyes. With those words spilling out of his mouth, his younger siblings looked at him with a shocked expression.

Fred: "What? Why is Mom Gorgeous Tiger's?"

Sister: "No, no, no! This is mine and Fred's Mom, not yours…"

Reala: "—It's okay. Both of you, it's okay?"

Reala spoke softly to his surprised brother and snappy sister. Perhaps vulnerable to their mother's words, the younger siblings reluctantly fell silent. Then, looking at Garfiel, whose mind was not yet prepared, let alone his heart, Reala spoke.

Yes, she spoke.

Reala: "I'm sure Garfiel's been separated from his mother. And maybe I'm like his mother. I guess that's why he got lonely like that."

Garfiel: "—Ah?"

Sister: "Huh, your Mom and our Mom look alike?"

Garfiel: "Uh, what's that… Shit, that's embarrassin'."

When Reala gave her explanation, each of her three children reacted differently. Garfiel was taken aback, but Reala's confident demeanor did not show any signs of lying or deception.

In other words—

Mimi: “Garf, haven’t you said enough?”

Garfiel: “…”

Figures that Mimi had summed it up pretty nicely.

In spite of all his shameful, pathetic, and emotional crying and screaming, ultimately, Reala was not aware of any part of the truth.

Such a brave thing to do, wasn’t it?

Garfiel: “It’s natural, it’s natural.”

If she had no memory, that means she had no idea. In such a state, there was no way she could realize the truth by simply listening to Garfiel’s incomprehensible string of words.

Immediately after that, he lost his strength. From his fangs, from his body.

Garfiel: “What the hell… Haa, what the hell.”

He wondered if the words that spilled out were words of relief or disappointment.

Probably a bit of both, only Garfiel realized.

4

He was disappointed in many ways, whether it had resulted in anything was dubious, but he figured it was time to move on.

With that decision made, Garfiel and Mimi left the Thompson residence.

Reala: “Sorry I couldn’t do anything for you yet again.”

Mimi: “It’s okaaay~! Mimi’s sorry, like, Mimi’s sorry Garf cried a lot? Something like that!”

Garfiel: “Shut up, don’t bring it up again!”

As Mimi replied to Reala seeing them off, Garfiel grabbed Mimi by the scruff of her neck. He lifted Mimi's light body with a "Nyah" and looking at Reala and the siblings, who clung to their mother with a sigh.

Garfiel: "Ya don't hafta worry 'bout me takin' yer Mom."

Fred: "I think so too, but…"

Sister: "Don't let your guard down, Fred. After all, you've got Mom to look out for. Just because Dad's gone for a while, doesn't mean you can have Mom being full of openings!"

Garfiel: "Can't'cha see there's a lot of openings?"

On the contrary, Garfiel titled his head toward his younger siblings, who were now on MAX alert. As a result of Reala's strange explanation, his younger siblings seemed to have mistakenly thought that Garfiel had come to steal their mother.

He did not mean to do that—but even if he did, if his mother actually remembered him, he would like her to give him a little retrospect. Upon pondering about it, he did not feel it was something he could reject outright.

Sister: "Hey, hey, let's get the bad guys out of here."

Reala: "Please come back anytime. Whenever you want to cry, I will lend you my chest."

Garfiel: "Don't want'cha to see me in such a pathetic way."

Reala: "Only for me then… just like your mother?"

Garfiel: "Hm, tsk… Tch."

At a loss for words, Garfiel decided to walk away.

With Mimi hanging, Garfiel turned his back to the three of them, to the family that he had not been able to call a family so far.

Seeing Garfiel turn to walk away, Reala clapped her hands. Then, with the children clinging to herself, she pushes the children's backs moving them forward.

Reala: “Come on you two, say a proper goodbye.”

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger, see you later.”

Sister: “…”

His younger brother obeyed his mother’s words, but his younger sister remained silent.

Can’t be helped, Garfiel thinks. However, Reala’s thoughts were not the same.

Reala: “We have to see our guests off, right?”

Sister: “Hmph.”

When Reala, who was surprisingly stubborn, spoke, his sister still did not nod. Reala looked a little troubled by her daughter’s obstinate attitude.

Sister: “No, you don’t have to worry about that.”

Reala: “That’s not going to happen. Come on, sister. Already, Rafi! Rafiel!”

Rafiel: “…”

With a frustrated look on her face, Reala finally called out her daughter’s name. The moment he heard the name, the sound of that name, Garfiel twitched as if struck by a bolt of lightning, and was rendered unable to move.

Garfiel: “Ra… fiel?”

Reala: “Yes, Rafiel. Come to think of it, have I never introduced you? This is the name of this child. My two children are Rafiel Thompson and Fred Thompson.”

Rafiel and Fred.

He had heard his brother’s name a few times before in the past. He had not paid much attention to it, probably because Garfiel did not care much. Or rather, was it because he was afraid of noticing it?

Rafiel and Garfiel. Fred and Frederica.

Reala's two children, and Reshia's two children. They sounded somewhat similar, for whatever reason.

Rafiel: "You think it's a strange name because it doesn't sound like a girl's. I'm aware of that, too!"

Misunderstanding the reason for his silence, his sister—Rafiel, spoke with a pouting face.

In response, Garfiel, who had been overwhelmed for a while, shook his head and prefaced his answer with a "No".

Garfiel: "My amazin' self thinks it's a good name."

Rafiel: "Even if you're flattering me like that…"

Garfiel: "—Serious. Totally serious, yeah. Think it's a good name."

Rafiel: "That's right!"

When Garfiel spoke from his heart, Rafiel felt a little overwhelmed. And then Reala interrupted, beaming,

Reala: "I named them both. For some reason, I wanted to use this name… So yeah."

Garfiel: "Both of them? You?"

Reala: "Yes. They're nice names, aren't they? — —I've always wanted to give my beloved children these names."

Garfiel: "…"

It was the best proof of love that he could ever have.

A mother who had lost her memory, who remembered nothing of her past, but who had never lost her kindness and generosity, who had bestowed her love for her child that should have been there, on her newborn children.

Garfiel: "…"

Garfiel could have been angry about this. He could have hated it, he could have yelled at it with all his heart, he could have sunk his fangs into it unreasonably.

But such a thought never crossed his mind. With this, Garfiel was thoroughly overwhelmed.

By the love of his own mother, Reshia Tinzel. By the love of Reala Thompson, the mother of his brother and sister.

—So that was enough.

Garfiel: "Ha, haha! Hahahaha!!"

He laughed.

The sense of weakness that had lingered in his heart until just a moment ago disappeared.

The shame he felt for not being able to say what he needed to say, for not being able to convey what he needed to convey, for not being able to say it fully, for ending it halfway, disappeared.

That was all he needed for now. Because he could feel that they were all connected.

Garfiel: "So long, Rafiel, Fred. See ya again."

Fred: "—! Yeah, Gorgeous Tiger!"

Rafiel: "Try not to cry this time."

Garfiel patted roughly his younger siblings' heads. This time, his palm was filled with a different kind of love. He did not think it was half-hearted.

Then finally, Garfiel raised his hand to Reala. To his mother.

Garfiel: "Thanks, Mom. Gonna come to bother ya again."

—He'd be there a few times while he remained in the city.

—And once that was done and dusted, he'd come back after returning to the Roswaal residence.

Once that was done, he was sure he would bring my sister and grandmother along. Once that was done, they could talk about the past decade.

Unlike before, he remained quiet about it, because this time he felt positive. Family talk was for family members, that was what he believed in.

Garfiel: "Until then, take care!"

Garfiel shouted emphatically and raised his hand.

5

Fred: "Mom, I'm glad Gorgeous Tiger's feeling better."

Reala: "Yeah, you're right. I'm… really glad."

Rafiel: "… Mom, don't you look kind of lonely? Do you really not want him to leave that badly?"

Reala: "I'm not sure. It's not that I don't want him to leave. It's not that I don't want to leave him, it's just that I'm sad to see him go."

Fred: "When do you think Dad'll be back home?"

Reala: "I don't know. But, I know he'll be back."

Rafiel: "…Mom, why are you crying?"

Reala: "—Maybe it's because I found something I forgot."

Reala: "I'm sorry, but thank you—I love you, Garf."

6

Grabbing Mimi by one hand, they entered a small rest room in the treatment center.

Amidst the numerous beds, Otto's bunk was placed at the far end of the room, near the window. While walking towards that place,

???: "Oops!"

???: "Ah! I'm sorry, bro! Hey, Tina, wait for me!"

Tina: "I'm not going to let you catch me just because you said that. Come on, Lusbel!"

Two noisy children, a boy and a girl, ran through the hospital room. The girl was dressed in hospital clothes, and the boy was apparently visiting her. The girl looked full of energy, and given her condition, she soon would be able to leave the hospital. Normally, Garfiel would have warned them not to make noise in the hospital room, but,

???: "Sometimes a child's frolicking voice can be a lifesaver. That is why no one pays attention to those two when they are like that."

Garfiel: "Well, ain't'cha sayin' somethin' carefree, Ottobro."

Garfiel saw the children off and headed to the back, where he was greeted by Otto. Upon seeing Garfiel with Mimi, Otto, who still had the same painfully bandaged leg, raised an eyebrow, synchronized with an "Oh".

Otto: "You look a little sunny, somehow. Did something good happen to you?"

Garfiel: "Ah… it's difficult to know if it's a good thing or not."

He could not shake his head in agreement to Otto's question with honesty.

It had been a series of complex, complicated, and convoluted attacks on his values. However, he was sure that every word and every encounter had turned out to be positive in the end.

Otto: "But you must have been happy about it?"

Garfiel: "Hmmm…"

Mimi: “Garf, you’re looking better! Something happy and something like that happened, happi! That’s all right, Mimi thought to herself! She did!”

Mimi laughed childishly, her face brimming as she dangled. The volume of her voice drew the attention of the entire hospital room, but they soon dismissed their gaze.

The reason was the same as the one for the commotion of the boy and girl from earlier. There was no way they could interrupt the emotions of someone who was smiling happily and sincerely, from the bottom of their heart.

Garfiel: “I dunno, man.”

Mimi: “Ohhh~, Garf smiled too! Have you fallen in love? Did you fall in love?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t fallen in love.”

Mimi: “Is that sooo~.”

Garfiel: “Ain’t fallen in love… But.”

The exchange had repeated several times. But finally, Garfiel appended a few words to his statement.

Mimi rounded her eyes, and Otto witnessed the conversation.

To his mother, his sister, his brother, and to Subaru, who was not here.

Garfiel: “—Thanks!”

He felt like he had moved on, just a little bit.

Garfiel displayed his fangs and smiled at that.

Bonus Short Stories

Otto Suwen’s Internal Affairs Struggle:
Line 4

1

The moment he lost his sense of balance and realized what a pinch he was in, it was too late.

He experienced a weighty feeling, as if the land below his feet and everything at his hands’ reach overturned at the same time, and then heaven and earth switched places.

“Adaaagh…?!”

An inane cry rang out, overlapping with the sound of a collapse, and a cane went rolling over with a hard sound too. In the end, the bedsheets he grasped on the spur of the moment fell off, dumping the books, materials, et cetera that were on it.

“…”

He lay spread-eagled on the floor, completely stupefied as he looked up to the ceiling.

Making things this worse through chain reaction was not really something he had a knack of. —No, it actually was not anything rare or unexpected for him, specifically, to have done this, but he wished that such malicious accidents would take the fact that he was currently recovering from his injuries into consideration.

“Well, now that I am at this point, I guess I can laugh. Hahaha… ouch.”

When he tried to, at least, laugh off the situation, he was hampered by the delayed pain on his legs.

While being robbed even of the choice to just laugh, he massaged his legs, which were wrapped in bandages, and breathed out a long sigh.

"—Woah there, be careful, 'ey. Otto-nii, ya' fine?"

Having heard the commotion, somebody opened the room's door from the outside. The one who calmly showed his presence was a golden-haired youngster, who lowered his eyes, saw him lying on the floor, and tilted his head.

"I came 'ere thinkin' ya might be gettin' bored all by ya'self, and ya turn out ta be playin' some weird game."

"…I am not playing at all. Anyway, it is a good thing that you did, Garfiel."

He smiled spiritlessly at the boy who came into his inverted field of vision, Garfiel. Then, the fallen man—Otto extended his hand towards Garfiel,

"Could you lend me your hand for a little? Since it does not look like I will be able to stand up on my own."

And so, massaging his battered legs, he begged for rescue.

2

"So ya' telling me ya thought ya'd do fine with just a cane? …Otto-nii, within all those thoughts ya have, there's the occasional dumbassery too, huh."

"What I find frustrating is that, since it is exactly as you say, I have no words to reply with."

Replying that, Otto, now back on the bed, averted his displeased face from Garfiel. Seeing the man he saw as a brother act like this caused Garfiel to make a sound with his fangs, a hint of a smile.

On top of the bed was Otto, both of his legs stretched out and completely wrapped in bandages. The damage on his legs came from honorable injuries which he had sustained during the fight that had occurred in the Watergate City. In his current position, Otto was receiving special attention, completely catered to him, in his hospital room, in order to recover from these injuries.

“It is true that I am being given everything here, but I feel like I might die from boredom in exchange…”

“Whatcha mean, boredom? Didn’t ya say y’were gonna take this opportunity ta read some book ya wanted ta read before, or somethin’? And even I’ve been comin’ to kill some time with ya, Otto-nii.”

“Regarding that time killing, it has been a great help, indeed, but…”

He directed a glance at a corner of the room, and there was the Shatranj board with which, under the pretext of time killing, Otto and Garfiel competed incessantly.

Being unable to move because of his leg injuries made Otto an easy prey for Garfiel.

There were a lot of times when he had been busy with work and said he had no time, and therefore could not accept the other’s challenges. Since, in his current situation, he had no reason to refuse a challenge, maybe things were not going so badly for Garfiel in that respect.

“Come to think of it, there was a time when Regin went through a phase like this too, wasn’t there?”

He remembered those days when he lived in his old home, and the time spent with the little brother that demanded his attention was recalled.

Even his brother, who was now a splendidly astounding man, had been a huge spoiled kid once. When Garfiel looked up to Subaru or Otto, he could see things in common with his brother during that time.

Although this was why Otto himself ended up spoiling Garfiel without realizing it.

“—. Garfiel, you know it, right?”

“Huuuh? It’s time ta clean this messy room, ain’t it? I kno’ it’d be unreasonable ta make ya do it with how ya're now, Otto-nii. So I'll be tha one…"

"I am talking about Mr. Natsuki, Lady Emilia, and the rest."

"…"

Otto suddenly lowered his voice, making Garfiel's lax expression become tense. "Oooh," he sharpened his gaze and answered shortly,

"That thing 'bout that 'Sage' at tha Sand Tower? Man, I wanted ta go with them if it was true…"

"I am wounded, and you are not in your normal condition… Our only merit is to be a burden. To be frank, this incident has left us with no merits. You are aware of that, right?"

"Aaah."

Listening to Otto's words, Garfiel lowered his chin and breathed out a sigh of self-admonition.

Hypothetically speaking, had Subaru been listening to their exchange, perhaps he would have interrupted them with something along the lines of "Huh? What're you two talking about?"

However, Otto and Garfiel's self-assessment was absolute.

Certainly, there were a lot of aspects that had improved thanks to the actions of the two. They had nothing to be embarrassed about when it came to their accomplishments. They also knew that they were aspects that it would be pointless to avert their eyes from.

But Otto was the camp's Internal Affairs Minister, and Garfiel was its Military Officer.

In the end, they had been able to fulfill their main objective for coming to Priestella—to acquire an achromatic magic crystal. However, this had not been the result of his negotiations, but a product of Kiritaka's kindness.

Just something Kiritaka had gifted to the Emilia camp, as a token of gratitude for their contributions when repelling the Sin Archbishops that had attacked the city. —Where could Otto's contribution be seen there?

And Garfiel's power insufficiency, him being the Military Officer, was an even graver case.

"Mr. Natsuki and Lady Emilia have gone to the Auguria dunes in search of a way to save the citizens. And Garfiel, the one who should display his power the most, you are unable to accompany them."

"…"

"We are both fully aware of what we are lacking. And it feels terrible."

What the silent Garfiel felt on his chest, Otto understood to a painful extent, for he harbored the same emotion.

To summarize, both Otto and Garfiel had gotten carried away back there.

During this year, they had been acting as members of the Emilia camp, and being blessed with good results to a certain extent. As a consequence, they had developed the conceit that they were doing everything fine, and that had become their mistake.

Those who overestimated their own strength were destined to commit mistakes from which they would not easily recover. And even though Otto probably knew that better than anybody else, he had messed up.

Therefore—

"—I'll never be strong then."

"Garfiel…"

It was a phrase with no concreteness. However, since its principle was correct, Otto stared at Garfiel.

The boy who acted like his brother clenched his fist and his trembling fangs as he stared back at Otto.

“It’s as ya say, Otto-nii, we couldn’t do anythin’ this time. And we couldn’t even go with tha Captain either. So…”

“…”

“So we gotta become stronger fo’ the day tha Captain and tha rest come back. I, tha camp’s stronger shield, gotta be tha spear too. I won’t be losing ta anyone ever again. —Not even ta tha ‘Sword Saint.’”

“…That escalated quickly.”

Listening to the manifestation of Garfiel’s resolution, Otto let out a whisper.

Such a frank and unclouded manifestation of a decision. Listening to it made him feel uneasy, yet at the same time refreshed. —This trait was one Otto did not have at hand.

In Garfiel’s case, he did not declare that just because he wanted to spout out some cool words. There he was, completely serious, prepared to arrive at his goal.

“I see. …Then do that, please. Meanwhile, I will…”

“C’mon, Otto-nii, let’s turn ya too into a militant Internal Affairs Minister who won’t lose even ta tha ‘Sword Saint.’”

“Now, I do not think that is something I can just nod to, you know?!”

Whether he was serious or joking, a comment so difficult to interpret was not something Otto would nod to. Though, when the other smiled with his fangs sounding, it seemed to imply it was some kind of joke.

In any case, Garfiel’s resolution itself was genuine. Therefore, giving an answer was Otto’s duty.

Because that was what Otto, who had, although unexpectedly, assumed the position of an older brother, needed to be prepared for.

3

“You heard that? Strong enough to not lose against our Reinhard, really?”

“…Please stop, my life span is being shortened.”

“Haan! So the guy who’s volunteering to be that mad bastard’s restraint suddenly cares about his life span? Don’t make me laugh, Internal Affairs Minister.”

Said the guest as she heartily gnawed the appa in her hand with a huge smile.

Originally, that appa was in a fruit basked that had been brought as a present for Otto, but he would not be able to digest all of them, so he was actually thankful that she ate it.

“Still, Garfiel does the same, but don’t you think it would be more logical to, at least, ask for permission first…?”

“Huh? Who gives a damn about logic and such trifles? I mean, we’ve been on the verge of death together. You too, feel free to eat as many appas as you like if you ever come to visit me.”

“Will such limited chances ever come, though?”

Tilting his head, Otto bitterly smiled at what the guest—Felt said. Seeing Otto like that, Felt proceeded to give the appa one more bite, no shame whatsoever.

“Lady Felt, I kindly ask you to stop crossing your legs when sitting on a chair. Also, as Otto said, you might be a little light-fingered.”

“Shut up.”

Beside Felt, a red-haired youth criticized her manners; he was Felt’s knight, Reinhard van Astrea.

Observing the master-servant duo that had come here, Otto scratched his cheek with his finger.

By having both a Royal Election candidate and the ‘Sword Saint’ come to him, he was left in a quite odd position. He himself was out of place.

“Oh? What’s that smirk for?”

“No, I was just thinking this is a little odd. Supposedly, I was just a humble merchant before… And it is not like I have forgotten that ambition at all, but it feels like I have gotten awfully far from it.”

“Heeeh, that feeling, I know it too. If I had the choice, maybe I wouldn’t be standing in a place like this. But duty has called.”

“…”

“So, for the sake of that duty, I gotta fight. I’m sure you can relate, Internal Affairs Minister.”

As if rebelling against Reinhard’s instruction, Felt swayed her body back and forth, still with her legs crossed.

When he saw her smile, in which a sharp fang stood out, Otto smiled back even more bitterly.

Just like when they had fought together against ‘Gluttony,’ her insight was pleasant to hear. Apart from Otto, there were probably a lot of people who felt the same.

“On a separate note, what have you two come to my place for? You have not actually come just to assist me by reducing the number of appas, have you?”

“Why else then? And while we’re at it, I’mma be reducing the number of orengs and stiroberries too, ‘kay?”

“I am actually thankful for that.”

Otto did not have a strong preference for sweet food, so it was more helpful for her to reduce them than for him to keep the excess.

However, while they were having such trivial exchange, Reinhard directed his sight towards Felt. Being stared at by his blue eyes, “Yeah, I get it,” Felt nodded,

“All jokes aside, I came here to say thanks. Internal Affairs Minister, I think you’ve saved us this time.”

“If by that you refer to what happened with ‘Gluttony,’ the feeling is mutual. Had you not brought that ‘Meteor’ with you, Lady Felt, we would have been annihilated.”

“You’re right there. Also, it was thanks to this Reinhard guy that you could get your kidnapped lady back, so it’s a tie. But.”

Ending her sentence there, Felt scratched her head violently,

“I still owe you one for that time before, when Reinhard’s father had me captured, right?”

“—. Ah, I do not remember that very well.”

“Miss me with the unnecessary drama. We’re here thanking you in all honesty.”

Otto’s unnatural reply caused Felt’s crimson eyes to sharpen. That strained the atmosphere to the point it no longer resembled a scene of simple gratitude.

“Lady Felt, please calm down. Otto, I don’t want you to feel uneasy.”

Reinhard intervened once more, in an attempt to soften the stiffened atmosphere. He touched Felt’s shoulders, her being with her arms crossed, and gently calmed his master down,

“Otto, I don’t want to alarm you too much. Like Lady Felt said, we are here to thank you. Who knows what’d have happened to the city if you hadn’t entered that place.”

“We share an opinion on that subject. Actually, the truth is that a great part of the problems in the city were solved thanks to you, Mr. Reinhard. Including the sweeping of those pitiful demibeasts.”

"…"

"And that is why I think that I got paid too much just for simple achievements, but…"

"So you too know what it's like to have bugs raising a ruckus on your stomach?"

Despite her crude figure of speech, Felt's direct negotiation technique made Otto lower his chin.

Unfortunately, Otto and Felt both had their own positions, and their paths were split by them belonging to different camps. The world was complicated place where nothing was simple.

They were different from Emilia, who thought that, when it came to helping people, compensation was not necessary.

"Back then we were all tangled up in our own problems. And it's a fact that it was an outsider from another camp who helped us. So this is a debt."

"I do not dislike, at all, people who are faithful."

"If we put that Internal Affairs Minister thing aside, you're essentially a merchant, right? You can't just let a merchant manage your loans, it's too scary."

Felt's ideas were quite visionary for someone her age. And the strong caution she bore against merchants was also correct.

"Of course, even if that weren't the case, we still don't want to get hostile with you guys. It's just that I think it's obvious this is a debt. You better remember that clearly."

"Well, certainly…"

"—And it's not with that lady or that lad. It's with you, as an individual."

"Hm…"

That phrase made Otto experience a feeling of being cornered, shutting his mouth. Instantly, “Hah,” Felt laughed as if sighing when she saw his reaction,

“There you go, this is my revenge. You looked like you were taking everything however you wanted. And that made me feel like hitting you all over the face.”

“Was my face that terrible? Uh, don’t tell me the margrave’s habits are contagious…”

That was a thought Otto really did not want to have, but Felt showed indifference to his fears. She quickly got off the chair, stretched her body, and turned her back to Otto.

“So, now that we’ve said everything that had to be said, should we head back? You gotta rest all you can.”

“Otto, what you’ve done was truly a great help. May you get better soon. And let’s fulfill the roles we’ve been assigned, both you and I.”

“I think the weight of our duties is too different to wish each other good luck equally, though…”

Despite this, Otto waved his hand and watched as the two took their leave.

He knew that Felt and Reinhard, just like Subaru and Emilia, had things to do. Those duties were pretty heavy by themselves. And he wanted them to accomplish everything without any trouble.

“I am still irritated, though. As expected.”

Spending his time here as a wounded man, fighting against boredom and unable to do anything, made him feel restless.

He did not remember being this much of a workaholic before, but, for some reason, he had ended up becoming one.

—However, while Otto thought he would have to continue fighting against boredom, visitors came to him, incessantly, one after another.

Sometimes it was somebody related to a Royal Election candidate; sometimes it was Kiritaka, an executive of Priestella; sometimes it was the Master Restorer to whom he had entrusted an important task; and sometimes it was the laudable boy he saw as a younger brother.

During the time he spent with them, he ended up talking about work and only work on his bed.

“Aaah, I better get to work, or else I will only cause everyone trouble, won’t I?”

With a mutter, as if poisoned by the lack of self-awareness about his working habits, Otto’s recovery life went by.

Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle:
Page 5
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

Roswaal: “Theeen, an agreement has been reached. Nooo objectiooons, right?”

As he spoke, Roswaal clapped his hands and was taken in by the eyes of the audience.

Although the people in this meeting were all powerful and high-ranking dignitaries, it was Roswaal who led the meeting from beginning to end. The title of being the head of the Western Borders is not just for show. Even at the Western Border Leaders meeting where many big names were gathered, he still had been in the leading position.

No one dared to raise any objection to any of his remarks. After scanning the room with satisfaction, Roswaal nodded deeply.

Roswaal: “Wooonderful, thank you all for coming to this meeeeting. I’ll be sure to prepare an opportunity for everyone to meet Emilia-sama in persoooon, next time…”

Dignitaries: “…”

In contrast to Roswaal’s smirk, there was a profound silence from the audience. Although their thoughts seem to be complicated, the topic itself has been discussed properly.

Patting her flat chest, Petra accepted that fact with peace of mind.

Petra: “It’s finally over……”

Realizing that she had inadvertently expressed her inner thoughts out loud Petra hastily covered her mouth.

Although it was just a whisper, it was still a disrespectful way of speaking. If people heard this, even if the Emilia camp was not damaged, it would become a source of ridicule.

And on this point, Petra had intended to spend time getting to know the character of these attendees better.

But after traveling for two and a half days, the opportunity for Petra, the maid-in-training to debut, was lost once the meeting began. And accordingly, the waiting time for her debut became even longer, and for Petra's physical sense, it felt as if it's been many more days.

The meeting between the leaders of the Western Border, which had felt exceptionally long and stressful, had finally come to an end.

Although the most memorable thing from the beginning was Roswaal's troublesome and problematic behavior, however…

Annerose: "You had a hard time, Petra. That was quite the performance."

The only person in the room, the only one that Petra can consider to be her friend, is the one who said that, as that person walks towards the relieved Petra, who is at the corner of the meeting room to give her condolences.

A young but elegant noble girl with a delicate blue bun, Annerose.

Petra: "Annerose-sama……"

Turning around towards Annerose who had come over to speak with her, Petra was immediately captivated by her standing. She then realized the fact that she was being questioned, and Petra straightened up in a hurry.

Petra: "Ah, Annerose-sama, you had a hard time too. I'm very sorry for the trouble that Master caused you."

Annerose: "Eiya, speaking ill of your master, what a bad child you are. …Although I understand why you want to say that, you shouldn't say that to anyone else other than me, of course."

Petra: “Sor.. I’m sorry. Okay, I understand.”

The Annerose’s words brought Petra back to her senses as it eased her.

Hearing Petra’s words of reflection, Annerose relaxed her face and said to Clind, the attendant standing beside her,

Annerose: “Oi, Clind. With this being her debut, her performance should be considered effective, right? As a steward, why don’t you give Petra some tips on how to serve?”

Clind: “Me…? Understood.”

With a slight nod, the dark blue-haired young attendant gazed at Petra.

He is flawless, it can be said that he is the ideal model for servants, and at the same time, a man whom Petra respected.

However, Frederica, who is more respected, has always resisted contact between Clind and Petra for a long time, the two have never had the opportunity to communicate in-depth.

Petra: “What do you think, Clind-niisama? Have I completed my work well?”

Clind: “As Annerose-sama said, it is passable. Praise. However, there are still many shortcomings that need to be diligently remedied. Diligence.”

Petra: “Yes, I understand.”

Clind: “Frankness is the source of growth. Virtue. Although in the past, Frederica was as likeable as Petra… Pity.”

Lifting his monocle, Clind sighed while looking up towards the sky.

Frederica and Clind’s evaluation of each other is tit-for-tat. Although in Petra’s view, both of them are excellent and respectable seniors.

Annerose: “Really, you didn’t say anything useful… Petra, even that useless attendant of mine has given you a good evaluation.”

Petra: “Thank you, Annerose-sama. And, Clind-niisama.”

Annerose smiled when she heard those words, and then Petra raised her head to look at Clind’s face.

Petra: “However, please allow for me to express my opinion. Frederica-neesama is still very cute, even now.”

Clind’s eyes widened slightly when he heard Petra’s remark. Then, he relaxed the corners of his eyes again and showed a rare soft expression on his always firm face.

Annerose: “Petra, about what happened at the banquet.”

Petra: “Eh, woo… yeah, that thing, I did something disrespectful, I’m very sorry…”

Before the meeting started, at the banquet where the world-renowned chef Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI displayed her talents, Petra did something immature.

Although she was upset and angry at Roswaal, it is understandable why she was scolded for it.

However, in Petra’s eyes, as she was ready to accept admonition, Clind’s eyes were soft.

Clind: “I believe that your master should be very happy. What a role model maid you are. Praise.”

With a touch as gentle as the wind, Clind rubbed Petra’s little head.

2

Dias: “Hoho, found you, little girl. It’s great to be able to find you before Moi leaves.”

Petra: “…? Dias-san?”

After preparing to return to the mansion, and after waiting for Roswaal to say goodbye to everyone, Petra met Dias, who appeared at the entrance of the hall.

It sounded like she had been looking for Petra, and she let out a "humhum" as she puffed out her flat chest.

Dias: “Moi is glad to be able to see you again, little girl. The blunt remarks that you made at the banquet made Moi feel fired up. Sure enough, using Moi talent on such pretentious fools made it easy for Moi to forget Moi’s role as a chef. It’s you who reminded Moi of this.”

Petra: “That, did I really do anything so exaggerated? I just said that Dias-san’s cooking was extremely delicious…”

Dias: “That is very important for cooking!”

Petra: “Yiia!”

Her thunderous shout made Petra’s shoulders jump. However, Dias squeezed Petra’s tensed shoulders slightly, her eyes gleaming.

Dias: “No matter what, there is no hope of progress as long as Moi is inert. Moi has travelled a long way to the apex of this road. Therefore, sometimes Moi feels very empty.”

Petra: “Emp, empty…”

Rodriguez: “A single person, walking alone in a wilderness where no other has ever set foot before, it’s kind of sad.”

Behind Dias, who was confiding in a low voice, was her assistant, a male cook. Listening to his master’s painful confession, he looked as if he didn’t know what expression to make. So pitiful.

Then, pretending not to notice the fact that the disciple behind her was depressed, Dias raised her head in a slightly imposing manner.

Dias: “It’s because of you, little girl! Your tongue is blunt, and the most important thing about it is that it’s cute. How about it, why don’t you come with us?”

Petra: “Huh, eh?! Me?!”

The unexpected request made Petra’s eyes widen. Dias’ disciple received the same shock and was also dumbfounded and let out a small, "Huh?!"

Facing the reaction of these two people, Dias nodded vigorously.

Dias: “Hmhm, that’s it! If you go with us, even the dream of endlessly eating will become a reality. The satisfaction of taste is closely linked to happiness. Little girl, don’t you want to understand the taste of happiness? “

Petra: “That is…… “

Dias’ flowing words touched Petra’s heart.

That’s because Petra also understands the meaning of her words. …Speaking of taste, satisfying the tongue is indeed a kind of happiness.

Therefore, the path that Dias planned to pursue must also be a very remarkable path.

Petra: “But, I’m sorry. I have already decided what I want to do.”

Being invited by a master in a field or something, such glorious opportunities should be rare. However, Petra shook her head at Dias’s invitation.

This was not for the disciple behind her who was in tears. Although there is indeed sympathy for his current state, it is very rude not to respond with your own words.

Petra: “I am very happy to be invited by you. The dishes you make are really delicious!”

Dias: “…Really”

For an instant, Dias looked farther down. However, that was really only a momentary matter.

In the next second, she immediately embraced her short arms and laughed.

Dias: “Ha! Moi doesn’t mind! What Moi is doing is just a pipe dream after all! Moreover, the bliss of showing people the joy a dish could provide is Moi way, and Moi is already used to walking alone.”

Petra: “Then, the Disciple-san behind you…”

Dias: “Although I missed the opportunity to accept a disciple, listen little girl. Accept this.”

What was readily ignored was Petra’s words and the disciple’s tears.

Regardless, Dias slipped out a small box from her pocket to give to Petra, while wearing a cheerful expression. Since this slightly warm thing was delivered by the chef that can make the “Divine Dragon” forgetful, there is no doubt that this is food.

Petra: “What’s this?”

Dias: “Little girl, at the banquet, your frank and honest thoughts moved Moi so very much… But, was it really just to make Moi happy?”

She hit the nail on the head. Petra’s excessive thoughts at the banquet did contain compliments to Dias, but it had another purpose.

But this chef saw through it clearly, and above that,

Dias: “Moi shall do you a favor. And this is Moi’s gratitude.”

As she said this, she smiled brightly.

3

Roswaal: “That was a gloriooous invitatiooon. Won’t you regret refuuusing it?”

On the return journey, Petra frowned when she looked at Roswaal’s mischievous smile sitting opposite of her.

How could he know that Petra and Dias had a conversation when he was obviously not present at that time? Regarding this person, you really can't be careless around him.

While raising her vigilance meaninglessly, Petra responded.

Petra: "That's fine! I have decided to help Emilia-neesama and Subaru. Therefore, I will give up on the dream of becoming the cutest chef in the kingdom."

Roswaal: "Eiyaya, you gaaave up on a higher level of opportunity than I thooought. Subaru-kun truly is siiinful."

As he said this, the corners of Roswaal's lips curled up while holding his chin. Petra sighed briefly when she saw the expression that seems to be neither calculated nor intended.

Originally, Petra didn't want to react like this to Roswaal's every move and act fearfully.

Petra: "However, the Master really doesn't let me feel reassured…"

Of course, even if Roswaal has reformed, it is another matter of whether he actually did. Even if he really did reform, Petra could not forgive him for the crimes he committed before reforming.

No matter what, this kind of relationship will always exist. but…

Petra: "Master, I am so grateful that you brought me here on this occasion."

Roswaal: "…Fufu, interesting. Including this time, I have forced all kinds of unreasonable problems on yooou. I didn't think that you wouldn't complain, but instead be grateful for it."

Petra: "To say whether there is resentment or not, I really hate the Master enough to wish that you would receive routine misfortune, but it is the truth that I am very happy, both physically and mentally."

Roswaal: "…"

He closed one of his eyes, and Roswaal looked at Petra with his blue eye. In the gaze of his blue eye, Petra quietly turned her face and looked out the window of the dragon carriage.

During the meeting, Roswaal did impose several unreasonable and difficult problems onto Petra.

The biggest of these was to pass on the matter regarding Emilia to the dignitaries through Petra's lips. Although that incident itself made Petra physically and mentally exhausted, the purpose behind it is not difficult to understand.

Roswaal entrusted Petra with a mission in an unreasonable way.

It gave Petra the feeling that she was deeply involved in the Western Border Leaders meeting.

It was really, really infuriating.

Petra: "Master is truly a despicable person"

Roswaal: "Is it okaaay for you to tell me, your employer, that directly?"

Petra: "It is, because Emilia-sama and Frederica nee-sama would never tell you."

Therefore, Petra will take this task upon herself. This was Petra's stance all along.

However, because she went with him to this meeting, although she did not want to admit it, it was thanks to Roswaal entrusting the task to Petra, she had felt something real.

By now, Petra finally felt that she had officially become a member of the Emilia camp.

Petra: "So, just this time, I will say thank you to the Master. There won't be a next time."

Roswaal: "Oiyaoiiiya, that's a precious oppooortunity that I've just been given blaaandly. Perhaps I should have savored this viiictory in an emotional way?”

Facing Petra, who turned her face away, Roswaal’s throat trembled as he cackled. Petra, who heard Roswaal’s words, suddenly screamed "Ah!" as if remembering something.

Petra: “Speaking of which, Dias-san gave me a souvenir.”

Roswaal: “Heeee, she quite likes yooou.”

In front of the wide-eyed Roswaal, Petra opened the parcel given by Dias. Immediately, the fragrance overflowed. Petra was silent.

What was sitting in the middle was a round baked bun that seems as if it would shatter as soon as it is touched

Petra: “Master, you eat too.”

Roswaal: “Petra, didn’t I say before…”

Petra: “Even so, please taste it”

Petra wouldn’t let Dias’ feelings to be ignored. Overwhelmed by Petra’s persistence, Roswaal reached out and took the baked bun.

Then, Petra and Roswaal put the baked bun in their mouths at the same time. In an instant, the fragrance broke through her small nasal cavity and Petra almost burst into tears from the joy of its deliciousness.

How many chances does one have in their life to taste this kind of delicacy? Thinking of it this way, it was indeed a great loss to reject Dias’s invitation.

Petra: “…Eh?”

What Petra felt was annihilated into nothing in the next moment.

Roswaal: “…”

Right across from Petra, Roswaal’s expression, who also ate the baked bun, changed suddenly. Roswaal’s mask that had always shown himself to be calm, was taken off, and he was speechless with his hands covering his lips.

Because he does not have a sense of taste, he can’t perceive the taste of Dias’s cooking. Roswaal, who had revealed such a secret to Petra, was clearly shocked by the "deliciousness" at this moment.

Roswaal: “…Food not only satisfiiies the tongue, the smell and taste are also one of the satisfaction poiiints.”

Slowly, Roswaal analyzed what had happened to him, and then let out a long sigh of relief.

After carefully figuring out the meaning of this sentence, Petra quickly understood it. …Sure enough, Dias noticed the fact that Roswaal had no sense of taste.

Moreover, she couldn’t bear this fact.

Petra: “Ah!”

Petra couldn’t help laughing. Smiling like this, she handed Roswaal the remaining baked bun in the parcel. Seeing this scene, Roswaal’s eyes widened in surprise.

How long has he not tasted delicacies?

Watching Roswaal slowly take the baked bun, Petra thought.

…Sure enough, it was great that she participated in this meeting.

END

Joshua Juukulius's Fourth Careful Encyclopedia

1

Joshua's eyes were burning in the blinding sunlight as he stood by the window looking outside. He took a short breath, feeling the slight pain that was sinking in.

"I guess…I'm feeling good today?" he whispered to himself, touching his chest to check his heartbeat.

It's important to check to what extent I can move every morning. People often make mistakes if they do not check this. In my case, any mistake can be a risk to my life. I cannot make irresponsible judgments.

His health had gotten a lot better recently. There was a period of time when he could feel Death's cold touch just by breathing, but his condition was no longer that serious.

There are people who laugh when they hear that one's mental state influences one's physical body, but at least I know it to be true.

Thanks to that, he could continue living healthily for a while.

"…"

He opened his eyes after taking his time to carefully check his physical condition. His eyes were again met with dazzling sunlight and he heard a pleasant sound from outside. It was the sound of two hard objects striking against each other. It would probably sound ugly to an outsider, but not to him.

It sounds as beautiful as heavenly music to me… A view of the garden unfurled from the open window.

In that carefully organized verdant garden full of colorful flowers shimmering under the morning sun, a certain sight caught his eye. But it was not the plants, trees, or flowers that drew his attention. It was the juvenile that was struggling in the midst of all that beauty.

That juvenile was a young boy.

The boy had violet-colored hair and yellow eyes that burned with determination. His serious profile could even be described as still young, yet one could see glimpses of innocent beauty.

He had the type of face that could attract many members of the opposite sex, but it was now glowing with an unbridled sense of adventure.

The boy had his sleeves of well-tailored clothes roughly rolled up as he was holding a short wooden sword. He wiped the sweat from his chin with his other hand and stepped forward with a swing of his sword. He then boldly continued his challenge.

"…Gh." With a short breath, the sword was knocked out from the boy's hand.

Julius's eyes instantly followed it. The next second, the tip of the opponent's wooden sword was at the defenseless boy's throat.

"You got distracted. You've still got a long way to go, Julius."

"I…wa…de…defeated." Realizing his defeat in the duel, the boy's voice trembled in frustration.

The boy's father—his opponent—relaxed his lips, noticing the deep sense of disappointment in the boy's words of surrender. "You truly are a great person if being defeated by me saddens you so. I am a Kingdom Knight, after all. I have polished my swordsmanship to protect this country, so don't think you can outdo me that easily."

"I…I know that! But it's still infuriating. If I lose this sense of frustration, I will not be myself anymore."

"…I see. Well, perhaps you are right. In that case, you should treasure that feeling," the father replied, squinting his eyes at the boy's words for a second.

The boy raised his eyebrows at what his father said next.

"There may be times when you lose the meaning of holding a sword after admitting defeat to a rival…” The father nodded deeply at the look in his son’s eyes. “I too was once like that. I wonder when those feelings of frustration began to fade away.”

“Father…”

“Ah, it doesn’t matter. Pick up your sword now. Change your clothes, and let’s have breakfast,” his father said with a shake of his head, ending the morning practice.

“…Understood!” The boy nodded at those words and ran to pick up his wooden sword, which had bounced away to the corner of the garden.

As he picked up his sword, he noticed someone watching him from a window above him.

His eyes widened in surprise as he shortly exhaled. “Ah.”

He had felt a small tingle in his chest at his reaction. But before he could respond, the boy’s expression softened and he said:

“Hi, Joshua. Did you sleep well this morning?”

The boy, Julius, smiled and waved to his younger brother.

2

Joshua Juukulius and Julius Juukulius were not real brothers.

Joshua was originally the eldest son of the main branch of House Juukulius. His father was the head of the house, and when his younger brother—Julius’s biological father—passed away, Julius was taken into House Juukulius since he had nowhere else to go. That was the beginning of their relationship as brothers.

Julius was older, so Joshua took the position of his younger brother. Since then, Julius began receiving different forms of education as the next successor of the House.

It was the education that Joshua was originally meant to receive as the eldest child of the family.

However, his body was weak from birth. Joshua was worried about inheriting the house of knights and could not demonstrate results worthy of the title. Thus, that role naturally was relinquished over to Julius.

It was exactly that, handed over. Never stolen.

Experiencing such treatment, one wouldn't have blamed Joshua for forming a sense of resentment towards Julius. But Joshua welcomed his newfound situation. All his life, he felt that he had been a burden and nuisance to his family.

In the end, the house that had existed for generations might even have lost its status in the kingdom due to Joshua's failures. But it was saved from such a fate thanks to the existence of Julius, its savior.

"Brother, what I'm saying is that I want you to become a fitting person for House Juukulius."

"Hmmm, what do you mean exactly?" Julius wondered.

"I have told you this multiple times—a hero," said Joshua as he pushed a thick book into Julius's chest.

The two were sitting together in Joshua's room on top of his bed.

Julius had a lecture waiting for him after lunch so he gave the book a sour look at first, but his eyes started glowing as soon as he read the title.

"Joshua, isn't this…?"

"Yes, I finally got hold of the sequel. This is the follow up to the great epic about the life of the first Sword Saint, Reid Astrea," Joshua explained.

"Yay! I was wondering what happened after he beheaded the evil dragon!" Julius exclaimed as he hugged the book.

Joshua smiled at the sight of Julius trembling with excitement.

Julius had steadily been taking in the excellent education that had been planned by Joshua. Even though he was unfamiliar with what a “hero” was, he had learned a great deal in a short period of time.

Needless to say, Julius was a man of high aspirations. He just hadn’t had the opportunity to exercise such qualities. However, as soon as his brother had turned his fate towards the path of a hero, Joshua also felt overwhelmed by his newfound situation.

He was now able to write his own destiny on the white parchment that was his life.

Julius was getting closer day by day to becoming the ideal heir that Joshua had imagined. He was Joshua’s hope. Their story truly was straight from a tale of adventures.

Joshua felt like Julius’s growth was his own.

“…Hm? What’s wrong, Joshua? You have a weird expression on your face,” Julius raised his head from the book he was so passionately reading.

It seemed as though he had noticed that Joshua was looking not at the letters but at him.

“It’s nothing,” Joshua replied. “I’m just happy you’re so interested in this book.”

“That’s because the people in it have achieved great things,” Julius said, looking away while rubbing the tip of his nose, as if embarrassed.

Joshua gave a bitter smile as he watched his brother’s reaction and squinted his eyes. “Is it tough for you?” he asked.

“Tough? I mean, it is hard, but not tough. Yeah, it’s not tough. And also, not to brag, but I think I’m good at remembering things,” Julius continued proudly. “Father also praises me for that.”

“I see,” said Joshua, nodding slowly.

Julius had just learned a lot of new things, so he was absorbing knowledge and experience like dry sand did water. Nevertheless, he still had a long way to go and the road was steep.

But Joshua wasn't one to bring down his brother with the realities of such a difficult journey.

Even though Julius was older, it was Joshua who had spent more time longing to be a knight. He wanted to help his elder brother walk that path slowly and carefully.

Heading down that long and treacherous path was something that knights of House Juukulius had to do. As brothers, it was something that Joshua and Julius had to do…

I realized that I had been taking things too lightly the moment I saw that red-haired boy.

"…"

He was walking majestically, stepping on the red carpet floor. He was a young boy less than ten years old, walking with what could only be described as grandeur.

His hair was as red as flames, his eyes were clear blue. Everyone was completely fascinated by him, and his sense of presence was so strong that no one could underestimate him, even as a child.

It happened when we went up to the royal palace and had an audience with the king.

For houses of knights and nobles that served the kingdom, there was a ceremony held for their children who had reached a certain age. There they would meet the king and swear their future loyalty to him.

Joshua and Julius went up to the palace together with their father on that day.

The opportunity to debut was meant only for Julius, but Joshua wanted to witness his brother on his big day, so he came along.

A lot of people gathered around, all paying attention to the kingdom’s future loyal subjects. Joshua was proudly waiting to see what the country’s leading figures and the king himself would think of Julius.

The boy shattered that young and sweet idea with his presence alone. Gallantly walking, he was the embodiment of perfection.

He was younger than Julius, around the same age as Joshua. However, the unimaginable strength he was hiding within completely crushed Joshua’s heart to pieces.

While Julius admired heroes as he continued his growth, Joshua always thought he had been a step ahead when it came to his feelings towards “heroes.”

But what about this? What can you say about this fierce boy?

“…Ah.” The red-haired boy’s eyes looked in Joshua’s direction for a moment.

That look was directed towards Julius, who was waiting for his turn to introduce himself to the public, and Joshua, who squeezed himself in nearby, as well.

Joshua forgot to breathe as he looked into the boy’s big blue eyes, which seemed to reflect the entire sky. He hurriedly looked at his elder brother. He was afraid that Julius would be as shocked as he was. He feared that the will that he had been polishing in Julius so hard would be overshadowed. However…

“…He…is a real one.”

Joshua could not sense any humiliation in his elder brother’s face as he mumbled those words. Humiliation. Joshua was astonished at his own thoughts.

Exactly, humiliation. What Joshua felt looking at that boy was unmistakably humiliation. Everything he had studied up till this moment was completely denied by that boy. While Julius, who should have been in the same kind of shock, had sparkles in his eyes—as if he had found a dream different from his own.

"Gh…"

"…Ah, Joshua!"

By the time he realized, it was too late.

Joshua choked and could not breathe anymore. He collapsed, clutching his chest. Julius instantly caught him, but Joshua's consciousness started fading away while his vision darkened. One's mental state had an influence on one's physical body. He strongly felt that again now.

With that feeling, the day was engraved into Joshua's mind as his worst memory.

3

Joshua's physical condition got worse, although it had never been that bad after he and Julius became brothers. He could no longer get up from his bed and spent his days dealing with a high fever and the feeling of being suffocated.

He was told to rest well by his family and doctors, but he could not. As soon as he closed his eyes, images from that unfortunate event that had occurred before the court rushed to Joshua's mind and pierced through his soul again and again.

The sound of his rough and hot breathing filled the room.

Joshua was ruminating on that nightmarish scene.

The more he recollected it, the more pain he felt around his chest. It was not because of that red-haired boy. What had torn Joshua's heart apart in its fullest sense was not that red-haired boy…

"…Joshua, how are you feeling?"

"…Brother."

Julius opened the door and looked over at Joshua with concern. Julius lowered his eyebrows as his worried eyes reflected Joshua as he scratched his frail arms. He did not want his brother to look like that. He wanted Julius to look more gallant, powerful, and fierce.

“Today is not that bad…How are you, my brother?”

“I…I’m fine. Father is also shocked, since he doesn’t understand what happened.” Maybe it was to calm Joshua down, or maybe it was the truth, but Julius looked at him fearlessly.

That kind of confident attitude was completely different from that vague stance towards his goals from earlier. The way Julius looked at him was a sight one had when they saw a clear road ahead of them.

Joshua saw the moment when that change happened. Joshua and Julius were supposed to walk the same path and aim for the same peak. But what about right now? he thought. Julius’s eyes were looking at a peak that Joshua could not see.

“Joshua, do you have anything you want me to do for you?”

“…to do…for me?” Joshua pondered.

He looked quickly out the window, still thinking.

There was a garden outside that window where Julius trained in swordsmanship every morning. There was an abble tree in the corner of that garden that looked out of place but stayed in Joshua’s mind because of the bright red fruit on it.

“…Abbles…”

“Hm? Abbles?”

“Yes. I saw there are abbles on that tree,” Joshua said.

Julius looked outside the window. He saw the tree Joshua was talking about and gave him a quick “Got it,” before continuing. “Leave it to me. Your big brother will make you happy!” Julius dashed out of the room as soon as he said those words.

“Ah.” Joshua reached out with his hand but it was too late.

Julius did not even notice his hand.

Joshua clenched it into a fist. “I’m such a fool.”

I was mistaken to believe that we shared the same qualities. How ridiculous of me to think that I could ever be like him. What was I thinking?

Julius skillfully climbed up the tree in the garden and easily plucked an abble. Joshua struggled to look at his brother; he hid his face with his hands.

It was a harsh reminder that the figure as thin as a dead branch was none other than himself. He realized that he and his brother were aiming at different targets.

In that case, then my brother is the one who is set on the right path.

Because Joshua Juukulius was a sinner from birth.

“…Ah, why am I even alive…”

As soon as he admitted to himself that he was foolish, his chest area suddenly became calm. Joshua laughed. He laughed as the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Laughing was the only thing he could do.

END

Comic Alive Collection 5: Translation Pending

Short Story Collection 5

Royal Selection Prequel: The Successor of Blue (Edited Machine Translation)

1

—In the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, there are titles bestowed only upon special magic users.

They are titles of six ‘colors’ that correspond to the six attributes of the magic system.

‘Red’ for Fire, ‘Blue’ for Water. ‘Green’ for Wind, ‘Yellow’ for Earth. Finally, with ‘Black’ for Shadow and ‘White’ for Light, the titles of six colors were bestowed upon those who have reached the pinnacle of their attributes.

However, the history of these titles of ‘color’ is still relatively new, as the system has only existed for only about thirty years.

About thirty-five years ago, a civil war known as the ‘Demi-Human War’ occurred in the kingdom, during which the efficacy of magic had been underestimated by people. The perception and treatment of magic changed significantly due to this war.

Since then, the kingdom has reviewed its records and research related to magic technology and changed its approach.

The six titles of color are part of this initiative, and despite their short history, they hold significant authority.

However, they are currently only spoken of by experts, and it will take much more time for the value of these titles of ‘color’ to be widely known.

Therefore—

"—Professor Garitch, why do they sometimes call you 'Blue'?"

The one tilting his head in curiosity was a disciple of the person currently holding the title of 'Blue'.

In other words, even his student didn't understand the value of the title. It was quite amusing.

"Hehehe! That's hilarious! Why, it's hilarious, Ferris!"

"Hmm, hilarious… I don't really understand, but that's good to hear."

Praised with a distinctive laugh, a complex expression formed on the face of a girl— or rather, a boy with the charming face of a girl. With his light brown hair and matching set of cat ears, he was an impressive beauty.

Felix Argyle— that was the boy's official name.

Those close to him called him Ferris. The elderly man was among those who used this name.

However, it wasn't just because of their closeness—

"Also, the way you call me 'Ferris', it sends shivers down my spine, so I'd like you to stop."

"Seeing your displeased face is this old man's pleasure. Hehehe, don't take it personally."

"That's distasteful! I wish people like you retired soon. The kingdom must be seriously short-handed."

Ferris sighed as he organized the cupboard, while the face of the man behind him twisted into a smile.

He was a thin, white-haired old man. His pale complexion and sunken cheeks led people to sometimes call him a Skeleton Healer based on his appearance. In fact, he had a reputation for being more like a sick man than an actual sick person, even though he was actually Garitch Fabless, the kingdom's top healer. He was the person holding the title of ‘Blue’, approaching the age of seventy.

Not knowing the position of his mentor, Ferris frowned at the amused Garitch.

“……Professor? Why are you making such a creepy face?”

“Well, you’ve become much more assertive, and that makes me happy. Initially, you behaved like a stray cat, but now you’re like my own little house cat.”

“Calling me a house cat is a bit much. I wasn’t exactly praised upon our first meeting.”

Pouting, Ferris sat on a nearby chair, resting his cheek on a wand.

“But, but, we’ve been together for much longer than expected, right? My purr-fect charm is starting to show its claws. Please send me back to Lady Crusch already.”

“Oh, don’t say such sad things. Between me and your master, who do you think is more important?”

“There’s no need to hesitate, it’s Lady Crusch.”

“Hehehe! Good to know! It would be strange to choose me! Please, no.”

Clapping his knees, Garitch burst into laughter, leaving Ferris taken aback.

—The two were conversing in a room of the Royal Treatment Center in the noble district of the royal capital Lugunica.

The Royal Treatment Center was a large facility where excellent healers from all over the country were gathered, and most of the kingdom’s healers belonged to it, dispatched to various cities and regions.

Additionally, the Royal Treatment Center also focused on discovering and nurturing talent, providing educational opportunities to those with healing magic abilities.

Ferris was one of those invited to the treatment center for this reason.

However, because Ferris was recommended by one of the royal family members, and originally served as the attendant to a duke's daughter, he was given careful consideration at the treatment center.

They didn't want to incur the displeasure of the royal family or duke. In the midst of this, Garitch took him in.

"If Professor Fabless is in charge, there should be no complaints. In fact, the child should be grateful."

This was the final remark of a participant at the meeting. The others all nodded in agreement, but if they saw the current relationship between Garitch and Ferris, what would they think?

After all, Ferris was unaware of Garitch's position. He suspected that his mentor, who was celebrated as a national treasure, was just an ordinary old man.

"Well, it is fun to see their astonished faces."

"Huh? Did you say something weird, professor?"

"No, not at all."

"Huh…"

Sighing, Ferris cast a somewhat disrespectful gaze at his merry mentor.

Garitch didn't comment on his disciple's attitude. Not because he was laissez-faire, but because he considered Ferris's circumstances.

—Ferris possessed an exceptional and unparalleled talent as a healer.

His latent talent far surpassed that of Garitch, acclaimed as the kingdom's best.

In a few years, Ferris's healing abilities would reach their pinnacle, surpassing even the kingdom's best, and possibly becoming the best in the world. Without this awareness, Ferris had no choice but to undervalue his own abilities, as well as those of Garitch.

Ferris's naive and shallow insights made Garitch find him irresistibly endearing.

"So, that's why I play pranks and tease you."

"Why are you saying scary things? Oh, come on! You never teach me seriously, so it's hard to stay on topic! This lecture will never end!"

"Hey now, don't blame the teacher. You're a troublesome student, you know!"

"Okay, okay, sorry, sorry. So, why exactly are you called 'Blue'?"

"Is it because my face is pale and blue? How about that?"

"Got it. I won't ask the teacher again."

Dismissed by his disciple, Garitch chuckled in a hoarse voice and resumed the lecture.

He taught the boy not only the applications of healing magic, but also how to treat wounds and illnesses, along with various prescriptions. Regardless of talent, there was much Garitch could teach Ferris with all his accumulated knowledge.

"Even without going through all this effort, can't you heal everyone through the use of healing magic?"

"Maybe you can. But if you casually abuse it and run out of mana when it matters most, what will you do then? At that moment, your knowledge might save someone's life. We healers should have as many skills as possible to save lives."

“Hmm, you’re right… You make a valid point sometimes, Professor Garitch…”

“Heh heh! Well, I’m an old man! It’s my last chance to do some good deeds.”

Despite his discontent, Ferris was still focused on the lecture and was learning quickly. Garitch smiled sincerely, feeling fulfilled by both teaching and nurturing the young Ferris.

“If Professor Fabless is in charge, there should be no complaints. In fact, the child should be grateful.”

Those words came to mind, but the old man shook his head.

At his age, he had found hope. It is not the boy who should be grateful, but himself.

“…”

Amidst these reflections, Garitch continued the lecture, all the while playfully teasing his beloved disciple.

2

“Now, it is the disciple that remains unaware of the mentor’s parental love.”

“Ah, come on! When will I be able to go home already!”

His flaxen cat ears trembling, Ferris erupted in his room with uncontainable anger.

It was already nighttime when he returned to his room after completing his classroom lectures and practical training in treating the wounded. After finishing his bland meal, Ferris collapsed into bed without changing his clothes.

“Oh, Lady Crusch, Lady Crusch, Lady Crusch… I just can’t get enough of you, Lady Crusch…”

Pressing his face into the pillow, he called out his beloved master’s name multiple times. His vision was filled with an image of a gallant figure that never fades, an honorable person he wanted to be with every day and every hour, having been separated for ages—

In the first place, training at the Royal Treatment Center was not something Ferris wanted.

However, he couldn’t betray the hopes of his master, who had sent him with high expectations.

Every harsh treatment and every frustration was proof that his dear Crusch believed in him.

Despite these encouraging thoughts, the training had far exceeded his expectations, and Garitch was not letting him go easily. It was enough to break his spirit.

Sighing with weariness, Ferris turned his cloudy face towards the bedside, muttering.

“—Your Highness, Ferri-chan is about to die from a Crusch-deficiency.”

“Just when I thought you got distressed, what is that disease containing such heart-throbbing words!”

“It’s a disease where the longing to see Lady Crusch builds up until you explode and die.”

“That’s not a heart-throbbing disease! Ferris, are you okay?! Don’t die, okay?!”

Taking Ferris’s joke seriously, the boy who visited the room turned pale.

The boy with a refined face was the same age as Ferris. He had shoulder-length golden hair that shone brightly, curious, gem-like red eyes, and a protruding tooth that peeked playfully from his mouth.

His name was Fourier Lugunica, the fourth prince of the Lugunica Kingdom and, to Ferris, his dearest friend after Crusch, despite the difference in their status.

“However, His Highness is the cause of the current division between Ferris and Lady Crusch…”

“Hey, stop talking like that! I understand how you feel, but I didn’t expect it to go on this long! It’s for the best! I thought…”

“Ferris has already spent eighty-six days and seven hours without seeing Lady Crusch.”

“Sorry! I’m really sorry! So stop looking at me like that! It’s scary!”

Ferris’s resentful tone had Fourier scrambling to explain himself.

The fourth prince, Fourier, was head over heels for Ferris’s master, Crusch. This affection was apparent to everyone except Crusch herself, but due to Fourier’s amiable personality, Ferris also came to recognize him as a suitable match for his beloved Crusch.

In essence, they both adored the same person. Their friendship was natural and expected.

“With that being said, Your Highness is being unfair—”

“I’m still not forgiven?! What more should I do?!”

“If you spin around and bark like a dog…”

“Is that what you want? I’ll do it then? Even though I’m royalty?”

“O-kaaaay! You really are unfair.”

Ferris couldn’t help but laugh at Fourier’s feeble threat.

Then, Ferris turned on the bed, folded his slender legs, and embraced his knees. Fourier, noticing Ferris’s actions, started coughing.

“Oh, Ferris. While you and I are indeed friends, you must exercise decorum and discretion.”

“…Did I do something to upset Your Highness?”

“Don’t make such a face! I’m not saying that. It’s just. You’re a young lady, so you shouldn’t relax so freely in public. Even if it’s with me.”

For a moment, Ferris became nervous, but Fourier’s words quickly dispelled the misunderstanding. However, another misunderstanding lingered between them.

“You’re a delicate maiden. You were entrusted to me by Crusch. It would be a shame if I didn’t return you safely… no, even more radiant than you were when I took you in.”

As Fourier rushed to explain himself, Ferris smiled, feeling relieved.

Fourier’s earlier words caused Ferris to freeze because of his true feelings.

Ferris didn’t care about others’ opinions. With that mindset, he didn’t have to continue cross-dressing as a male servant to Crusch. He didn’t have to keep himself strong as Crusch’s follower.

But Fourier was different.

He didn’t want to be disliked by Crusch, Fourier, Crusch’s father Meckart, or the servants of the Karsten ducal family, who had all taken care of him.

That is why, after several years, Ferris is still keeping his gender hidden from Fourier. He wasn’t afraid of opening up. He was afraid of the potential change in their relationship.

Crusch and Fourier were like the sun to Ferris.

Imagining a change in their relationship was as terrifying as a cataclysm.

“Ferris, are you listening? This is a very important topic to me.”

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. If it's about something important, I wasn't listening."

"What! Oh well, I'll explain it again. As a delicate and beautiful maiden, it's not good for you to be too defenseless…"

"Oh, that conversation? I heard that already…"

"Isn't this an important topic?! It's supposed to be helpful… right?!"

"Pfft!"

Ferris couldn't help but burst into laughter in response to Fourier's earnest efforts.

"Hmm… I don't know why, but I'm fine with it if you're laughing."

Although bewildered at first, Fourier quickly accepted the situation.

Ferris wiped away the tears that had welled up from laughing so hard at Fourier's attitude.

"Hah, that was funny. Since it was so funny, I'll forgive Your Highness. Can't help it."

"Oh, good. I'm forgiven… Although something feels off, but oh well!"

Fourier's ability to not dwell on minor details was one of his strengths.

He cast off his doubts with a clear mind and turned directly to Ferris.

"I understand your complaint. Indeed, I too am troubled by the prolonged training."

"…Though, I'm not saying that I hate studying, you know?"

"I don't doubt that. You're as serious as Crusch. Perhaps Garitch has something in mind. The title of 'Blue' is more than just a decoration."

"Oh, that 'Blue' again…"

Now, the word 'Blue' came from Fourier's mouth. Garitch hadn't given a serious answer, but perhaps Fourier would.

"Hmm? You don't know about the titles of color?"

"I'm just asking if it's something impressive. Even when I ask the teacher directly, I just get brushed off."

Also, at the treatment center, Ferris didn't have to option to ask anyone but Garitch.

Ferris hardly had any contact with other mages apart from Garitch. It seemed that Ferris was seen as trouble by those around them and was kept at a distance.

The reason was Ferris's cat ears—prejudice against demi-humans was still strong, and people weren't receptive to Ferris's ancestral lineage. On top of that, Ferris was close to Fourier, a member of the royal family. Many people didn't find this amusing.

Of course, Ferris had no intention of sharing such stories with Fourier.

"You're surprisingly shy. Alright then, let me explain."

Unaware of the circumstances, Fourier calmly accepted it and began his explanation as if nothing happened, raising his finger.

"Garitch's title of 'Blue' is an honor bestowed only upon exceptional magic users. It's recognition of mastery over the pinnacles of each of the six magical attributes."

"…Then, is Garitch at the pinnacle of Water magic?"

"Yes, exactly! So, you've received instruction from the most capable instructor in the kingdom…"

"Nyaa, come on. The title of 'Blue' isn't all that impressive. Disappointing…"

“You sure are saying something, aren’t you?”

When Ferris revealed his true feelings, Fourier widened his eyes in surprise.

“Oh, that’s not it. Um, I think the teacher’s healing magic is amazing. I really respect it. But, when you say it’s the pinnacle, that has me shaking my head…”

Ferris carefully chose his words, reflecting his true feelings.

Garitch’s healing magic and knowledge were astounding, and there was much he could learn. However, when it came to healing magic alone, Ferris didn’t think there was a big difference between them.

“To be honest, if I had healing magic as good as the teacher’s, I don’t think it would be that impressive.”

“Well, that’s quite a bold opinion. But, Garitch’s power is recognized by everyone… If you can match that, I’ll be proud to call you my friend!”

“It’s a relief to hear you say that, Your Highness.”

“Haha, right?”

With arms crossed and chest puffed out, Fourier received modest applause from Ferris. Then, Ferris suddenly became curious about the titles of other ‘colors’ aside from his teacher.

“By the way, what kind of people hold the titles of other colors?”

“Oh, the others? Um, let’s see. Garitch is the ‘Blue,’ and as for the other titles… Ah yes, ‘Red’, ‘Yellow’, and ‘Green’ are all held by a single magic user.”

“Really, all by one person…? In that case, what about Shadow and Light?”

“The remaining titles of ‘White’ and ‘Black’ are vacant… I think?”

“…”

Upon Fourier's somewhat uncertain response, Ferris felt disheartened.

It seemed like the titles were assigned quite arbitrarily. Thanks to this, Ferris started to feel like they had misjudged Garitch a bit.

"Ah! Ferris, are you doubting me with those eyes?"

"Oh no, not at all! Oh, Your Highness, would you like some tea? We've been talking for so long, you must be thirsty. I also have some snacks."

"I'm not going to be distracted so easily! But yes, I would like some tea!"

Ferris diverted Fourier's attention to tea, giving up on serious topics.

The conversation between the cat-eared youth and the prince continued late into the night.

For Ferris, it was the only solace during the days when he couldn't see his master.

3

"—?"

Witnessing a strange scene, Ferris suddenly stopped in the hallway.

At the end of the hallway, an elderly man in a white coat was exchanging words with a tall young man. One was the familiar skeleton healer Garitch, but the other was an unfamiliar figure, whose appearance was out of place in the clinic.

Clad in purple garments with a mottled cape, and with long indigo hair, the figure's back was oddly conspicuous.

This was the Royal Treatment Center's research building, and outsiders were strictly forbidden.

The treatment center was divided into the research and treatment buildings, and encounters with outsiders mostly took place in the treatment building. The figure's strange appearance did not seem to fit the research building—

"—Ah, Ferris. Perfect timing. Come over here. Let me introduce you."

Just as he was starting to ponder, Ferris got called over by Garitch. For a moment, Ferris considered feigning ignorance, but then made his way to the instructor.

And immediately regretted it.

"Oh-hoo~. Is this the special student Garitch was taa~alking about?"

Saying this, the figure turned around, and Ferris froze upon seeing his face.

This was because the person's face was painted white, and adorned with inexplicable makeup that resembled a monster. Their almond-shaped eyes were mismatched in color, and the blue and yellow irises seemed disturbing.

Overwhelmed by the young man's eyes, Ferris found himself unable to speak.

"Mmm, that is a nii~ice reaction. I doo~ love seeing this from someone I've just met."

"That's quite tasteless. But…"

"Not baa~ad, right?"

"Heh-Heh-heh! Exactly!"

Responding to the young man's provocative words, Garitch slapped his knee in agreement. In front of the two laughing men, Ferris felt utterly humiliated.

"Um, can I go now that you've had your fun?"

"Oh, not yet, not yet. I haven't introduced you yet. Ferris, this is Roswaal L. Mathers… quite an exceptional magic user."

"Oh, come on. Just the best in the kingdom, that's aa~all."

"Ha-Haa, the best in the kingdom…"

Introduced as Roswaal, the young man placed his hand on his chest and spoke solemnly, yet confidently. Honestly, it was hard to tell if he was serious or joking.

However, the title of the kingdom's best magician did ring a bell.

"Could it be that you hold the titles of 'Red', 'Green', and 'Yellow' all at once?"

"Oo~oh, as expected of the beloved student of Mr. Garitch the 'Blue'. You are studying well, aa~aren't you?"

Impressed by Ferris' question, Roswaal closed one eye and curled his lips into a smile.

"That's correct. I am the magician who holds three titles of color in this kingdom. You wii~ill give me the utmost respect and loyalty."

"—Unfortunately, my respect and loyalty are already dedicated to someone else."

"Oh, no hesitation in your response. I see, I see… That's actually the kind of answer I like."

Though it was a reflexive retort, Roswaal seemed pleased rather than offended.

Sensing something inexplicable in Roswaal's attitude, Ferris glanced at Garitch. Honestly, he didn't want to linger. What was Roswaal's intention?

"In short, I'm here to borrow something. I came here to ask for a textbook on healing magic."

"A healing magic textbook…? For the best magician in the kingdom?”

“That is a sore spot. Unfortunately, I have absolutely noo~ aptitude for healing magic. As a result, I’m quite unfamiliar with those kinds of techniques. Soo~, I’ve come to borrow a textbook.”

“Ah, I understand. I, too, have no aptitude outside of healing magic…”

While Ferris possessed an aptitude for water-based healing magic, he lacked proficiency in any other form. He could heal wounds for Crusch, but couldn’t fight for her. That was Ferris’s nature.

It was hard to say which was more suitable for Roswaal.

“But really, to revisit the basics of healing magic now… Does this mean you’re trying to steal the title of ‘Blue’ from me? Heh-Heh-heh.”

“Oh no, not at aa~all! It’s actually because I have a student with an aptitude for water magic, and I want to teach them proo~operly. So, I thought I’d secretly brush up.”

“If they have an aptitude for healing magic, why not send them to the clinic?”

Actually, Ferris was admitted to the treatment facility for this exact reason. If the person had a genuine desire to learn, it would be a much better solution.

However, Roswaal slowly shook his head at the suggestion.

“It’s some children who absolutely haa~ate being separated from each other. I can’t bear to split them up. Wee~all, I just want to indulge their cuu~ute little whims.”

“I get it! I totally get it!”

“I understand your situation, Ferris, but your resolute nodding makes me feel conflicted!”

“If you don’t like it, then please finish my training quickly.

Seriously.”

Understanding the difficulties of separation anxiety, Ferris expressed his feelings rather forcefully. Then he turned to Garitch with a sharp glance, voicing his discontent.

Garitch had the authority to end Ferris’s training. The extension of nearly two months was due to the professor’s decision. Ferris was starting to seriously regret his choice of mentor.

“You seem to get along wee~ell.”

“That’s right.”

“No, we do not!”

After giving a reply, Ferris turned his head away. Because of this, he didn’t notice. —Roswaal was looking at their interaction with a hint of admiration.

And in that fleeting moment of sentimentality, unnoticed by anyone…

“—Master, I’m finished. All done.”

“Meow?!”

Startled by the sudden voice and presence behind him, Ferris jumped. He quickly darted behind Garitch, and noticed an unfamiliar figure in the hallway.

A handsome young man with deep blue hair and a resolute expression was standing there. He sported a monocle over one eye and was dressed in a sleek black butler’s outfit. He appeared to be around twenty years old.

“I apologize for startling you. It was just a bit of mischief, a childish prank.”

“Just a bit?!”

With a serious face and a perfect bow, the young man gave an honest confession.

Sensing a foreboding in his demeanor and posture, Ferris glanced at Roswaal, who nodded.

“As you imagined, he’s my stee~eward. —Clind, it must’ve been a loo~ot of work for you.”

“No, the archive was well-organized, so there was no problem. I believe I have found the book you requested, but please inspect it. Visually.”

Addressing Roswaal respectfully, Clind handed over a book he held. Roswaal checked the spine and nodded. Ferris glanced over and confirmed that everything seemed to be in order.

However, if there was a question left…

“I was in charge of organizing the archive until just now…”

After he finished sorting through the archive, Ferris joined Garitch and Roswaal in the hallway. If that’s the case, then Clind shouldn’t have had time to look for books in the archive.

“Yes. So, to avoid inconveniencing you, I retrieved the book quietly. Thoughtfulness.”

“You were right behind me the whole time?!”

Ferris was taken aback by the outrageous statement, and for some reason, Clind appeared satisfied, raising his jaw. Without commenting on his servant’s demeanor, Roswaal turned to Garitch.

“Wee~ell then, I would appreciate it if I could boo~orrow it. After I finish reading it… I’ll come back next in a month or so.”

“There’s no need to rush with a copy of the textbook. Instead, make sure to properly mentor that pupil of yours. That way, they won’t have any regrets.”

“—I would never slack off when it comes to magic.”

Roswaal bowed respectfully as Garitch patted his waist. He then turned to Ferris with a changed expression, a smile showing on his face.

“It’s been nice to meet you. With a child like you around, I’m sure Garitch will feel relii~ieved.”

“…That seems like a bit of an exaggeration.”

“Not at all. Learn carefully. —Don’t have any regrets.”

“Huh?”

Ferris felt a sense of discomfort from Roswaal’s heartfelt words. However, Roswaal then turned away from Ferris, not allowing the conversation to continue.

“See you. Lee~et’s go, Clind.”

After waving lightly and saying his farewells, Roswaal started walking. Following suit, Clind solemnly trailed behind the tall figure. However, as the steward passed by Ferris—

“There is no distinction between sexes in the heart of innocence. Please, be as you are. Craving.”

“…”

At the same time as the whisper, something was inserted into Ferris’s hair. Instinctively reaching for it, Ferris felt the sensation of petals on his fingers.

He was given a flower. By the time Ferris realized this, the clown and steward had disappeared down the corridor.

Watching them leave, Ferris let out a tired sigh.

“How should I phrase it… They had very strong personalities.”

“What, there’s no harm in meeting new people. Roswaal is one of the most respectable nobles in the kingdom.”

"Respectable, meow?"

"That's right. He judges people by their character. Blood and appearance don't matter to him. Respectable, right?"

Ferris bit his tongue at Garitch's toothless grin. Indeed, Roswaal's attitude seemed genuine. Ferris even forgot to keep up appearances.

"This training in the capital is valuable. It's better to have something to show for it besides healing magic."

"…You always have such a strange way of looking at things."

Ferris looked awkward because of Garitch's rare consideration.

His mentor had a point. While it was inevitable that Ferris had a small circle of friends, it was essential for both Crusch and himself to expand on their allies.

Knowing Garitch, it was likely half consideration and half teasing.

"But it feels like you're offering a memento, or settling affairs."

"What a loud, unappealing disciple. Despite having flowers on your head."

"The man from earlier did this on his own—"

Puffing out his cheeks, Ferris removed the flower still in his hair. It was a small yellow flower. No matter where it was picked, the stem and petals were still lush and vibrant.

"They mistook you for a girl. Not unreasonable."

"Hmm— I wonder."

Ferris felt like Clind had seen through his gender in the end. While he wasn't bothered by being found out, he wasn't sure of the true intention behind the flower. Either way—

"I don't want to receive flowers, so I'll give it to my teacher."

"Ho-Ho, flowers definitely suit me more than you… Actually, do they?”

“Please don’t question yourself, it’s tiring.”

Laughing profusely, Garitch inserted the flower forced upon him by Ferris into the pocket of his white coat. Then the old man patted his exhausted student on the back.

“Well, I’ll accept it. I’ll consider it your gift to me.”

“But that’s not the case at all, neither in source nor sentiment. Like I said earlier, doesn’t it literally feel like we’re settling affairs?”

“Well, that’s right. It’s about time to put your training to a proper end.”

Walking alongside Garitch, Ferris widened his eyes at those words. As Garitch continued, he touched his cheekbones.

And then—

“The handling and application of healing magic, knowledge of injuries and diseases. I’ve instilled in you the basics that I can teach you. The rest will grow within you. Discovering better ways to save people will be the work of young people, not old men like me.”

“That might be true. So, what’s next then? What should I do?”

Completing his training was necessary for Ferris to return to Crusch’s side. Ferris felt anxious in the face of this. Garitch narrowed his eyes at his student.

“Teacher?”

Suddenly, his mentor stopped, and Ferris took two more steps before turning around.

In the corridor, empty except for the two of them, the professor and apprentice quietly faced each other. Garitch’s expression was unusually serious as he looked at Ferris.

“Um, Teacher, what…”

"I've taught you the wonders of healing magic, the means to heal and save people. So, to conclude."

"To conclude?"

After a brief pause, Garitch continued.

"—I must also teach you the limitations of healing magic."

4

Early the next morning, Ferris accompanied Garitch to visit a mansion in the noble district.

"…"

Garitch rang the bell on the gate with a solemn expression. Standing beside him, Ferris silently fulfilled the role of an attendant. He hadn't heard anything about the situation.

It wasn't unusual for a practitioner to make house calls outside of their clinic. Some individuals couldn't visit due to severe illness, or simply preferred to keep their ailments hidden. This was especially true for nobles.

However, despite these considerations, Ferris couldn't shake off his mentor's words.

"…the limitations of healing magic."

Learning not only the potential of healing magic, but also its limitations.

Ferris had been pondering the meaning behind the words of Garitch Fabless the 'Blue'.

"—Thank you for waiting, Mr. Fabless."

Before Ferris, who was lost in thought, the iron gate swung open with the call.

Standing beyond the gate was an elderly woman who appeared to be a servant of the mansion. She bent at the waist and raised her head. However, Ferris was surprised by the sophisticated gesture.

With an inscrutable air surrounding her, the woman straightened her posture and narrowed her blue eyes.

“The mistress is waiting for you. Please, come inside.”

With a voice that displayed no emotion, the woman invited them into the mansion.

The mansion’s scale was moderate, neither particularly outstanding nor conspicuous in the noble district. However, the garden trees and flower beds were well-maintained. They likely had a skilled gardener.

Passing through the serene front yard, Ferris followed the woman leading them into the mansion. Like its exterior, the interior was immaculate, devoid of extravagance yet adorned with tasteful furnishings.

Without a word, the woman guided Ferris and Garitch to a room at the end of the corridor.

“—Please go ahead, Mr. Fabless.”

Stepping aside, the woman bowed deeply to them. Observing her gesture, Garitch raised his hand towards the door. Slowly, he opened the designated room.

“—?”

The first thing they perceived was a strong scent of alcohol.

They often encountered such odors due to their involvement with the treatment center. Alcohol was famous for its healing properties, preventing wounds and abscesses from worsening without the use of magic.

However, the smell of alcohol in this context was a foul stench unrelated to healing purposes.

"…Yo, welcome. I've been waiting for you. Mr. Fabless the 'Blue'."

"…"

As Ferris traced the scent of alcohol, a rather sarcastic welcome was given simultaneously.

Turning towards the low, hoarse voice, Ferris spotted a middle-aged man seated in the corner of the room.

He had fiery red hair, blue eyes, and a flushed face adorned with unkempt facial hair. Empty bottles of alcohol were littered around him, and he cradled another half-filled bottle in his arms.

Uncomfortable with the sight of a typical drunkard, Ferris furrowed his brows.

"Huh? I'm not used to this unfamiliar brat tagging. What's the deal?"

"…He's my apprentice. He's been assisting me for the past three months. Today is no different."

"Assisting? Hey, have my ears or brain gone rotten from all this booze? Or has the reputation of 'Blue' lost its color, Mr. Fabless? What nonsense am I hearing?"

While exhaling boozy breath, the swaying man stood up and glared at Ferris and Garitch. Ferris felt a sense of dread from the intense malevolence in the man's eyes.

It was almost like a physical disgust.

"You can't do anything useful, yet you've got an assistant? This isn't a sideshow or a playground for kids. Don't mess around."

"—Teacher, I agree. I don't think this man needs a healer."

Taking advantage of the man's scolding remarks, Ferris tugged at Garitch's sleeve.

Although it was just Ferris's opinion, he couldn't see any need for treatment in front of him. There was no sign of illness or injury. A twisted personality couldn't be fixed with healing magic.

However, Garitch shook his head at Ferris's opinion.

"You're wrong, Ferris. Our patient isn't that man. She's lying on the bed."

"Huh?"

Surprised by Garitch's words, Ferris looked towards the back of the room. Ferris was aware of the bed's presence. However, there was a man with a bottle of liquor right next to it, and most importantly, there was no sign of life on the bed. That's why he hadn't noticed.

A blonde woman was lying on the bed so quietly that he couldn't even hear her breathing.

"That's absurd, teacher. You're letting your assistant help without even informing him about the patient."

With a flushed face, the man clicked his tongue and kicked an empty bottle away with his foot. Then, he leaned against the wall and started gulping down more alcohol.

"…"

Ferris couldn't really argue against his blunder. Garitch gently patted his shoulder and approached the woman lying on the bed. Ferris took a deep breath and followed behind.

Then, he looked down at the woman lying next to him on the bed—

"…What, this is, what?"

He was confused by the lack of presence of the woman.

She was definitely right in front of him. However, her presence was weak. She was visible, yet it felt like she wasn't there.

"Her breathing, heartbeat, body temperature, they're all weak but without abnormality. At least, that's my assessment."

“Me too… I feel the same way. There’s nothing wrong with her gate either…”

Following Garitch’s quick palpation, Ferris fulfilled his duties as an assistant. He repeated the same actions as Garitch to ensure that nothing was overlooked.

“Truly, she has a healthy body with no problems… However.”

The diagnosis was made. Still, Ferris couldn’t accept the results of his own diagnosis.

Her health was unquestionable. However, there was no response typical of a living person. Neither during the palpation, nor at that moment. —She was present, yet she was ‘absent’.

“‘Sleeping Beauty.’”

“Huh?”

“This woman’s condition… You can’t really call it a disease. She’s perfectly healthy. Yet, she just keeps sleeping, unchanging. She has had no need for food or movement, for many years.”

“For many years… Can such a disease even exist?”

“Indeed, her appearance hasn’t changed. She continues to sleep at a different pace of time than her husband.”

With a lowered gaze, Garitch’s words helped Ferris understand the relationship between this woman and the middle-aged man. At the same time, Ferris became aware of how cruel it was to see a woman who appeared to be around twenty years old.

If this explanation was true, the woman and middle-aged man had been separated for a long time—

“—Stop it. Sympathy makes me nauseous.”

The budding sympathy in Ferris’s heart was roughly rejected by the man.

Though the conversation between teacher and student was hushed, the man seemed to grasp the gist of their discussion from their demeanor. The man glared at Ferris with a fierce glare in his blue eyes.

"Sympathy like…"

"Shut it. I don't want your usual cheap consolations. I only expect one thing from you guys. Anything else just gets in the way!"

Slamming his elbow against the wall, the man blocked Ferris's words, opinions, and compassion. As Ferris fell silent in response to the angry outburst, a malicious grin twisted the man's cheeks.

"And? I guess this time, you won't be able to deliver that one thing either? Even though I've been graced by the esteemed Fabless the 'Blue' countless times, I apologize for having such an inadequate wife. Ah, I'm truly sorry."

Speaking insincerely, the man staggered towards Ferris and Garitch. He stood in front of the silent Garitch with a bottle of alcohol in hand, tilting it over the teacher's head.

"…"

"Your way out is the same as always. The quack healer and his beastly assistant."

The mixture of alcohol and profanity had Ferris boiling with anger.

However—

"I apologize for being inadequate."

"I didn't expect anything from you."

Grumbling at Garitch's apology, the man sat down on the floor next to the bed. Flicking his hand carelessly, the man's demeanor left Ferris and Garitch with no choice but to leave the room.

"T-Teacher, how can I wipe you down…"

“I’m not that wet. He must’ve been stingy with the alcohol… He’s a hard man to deal with.”

“Have you known him for a long time?”

“Do you think I had a choice? …It’s been over ten years since I started making house calls like this.”

Garitch wiped his face with the cloth handed to him, and Ferris was left breathless by his answer.

Over ten years of house calls. This meant that the onset of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ must have occurred before that. The woman had been asleep for over ten years.

It was indeed a terrible situation worthy of sympathy, but—

“Even so, I can’t forgive that attitude. He was speaking such vulgarities to a practitioner trying to heal his wife…!”

“I’m sorry for making you feel uncomfortable. I didn’t think it would escalate to that point, but I underestimated his immaturity. I apologize.”

“I’m not angry about that! Please take this more seriously!”

Feeling like the conversation was being derailed, Ferris raised his voice to the insincere teacher. Smiling bitterly at Ferris’s childish demeanor, Garitch let out a deep sigh, his expression gone.

“I told you, Ferris. Today, I wanted to teach you about the limitations of healing magic.”

“…Are you talking about the ‘Sleeping Beauty’? Certainly, such a disease—”

“No, it’s different. It’s true that I’m powerless against ‘Sleeping Beauty’. But the true powerlessness I wanted to teach you about is reflected in that man’s attitude.”

Garitch shook his head, and Ferris was left stunned and speechless.

"Healing magic is not omnipotent. But even though it's far from omnipotence… It remains a source of hope for many. I myself take pride in having saved many lives. Whether I possess skill befitting the title of 'Blue' is something I'm still unsure of in my old age."

"…"

"However, hope can sometimes become a double-edged sword. The power that should bring salvation can instead become a poison, causing wounds and spreading toxicity to those it failed to save. There are limits even to healing magic. But I suspect your limits are higher and more distant than mine, or anyone else's. I know that."

As if trying to persuade the silent Ferris, Garitch earnestly repeated his words.

It was the kind of statement that Ferris would usually laugh off as excessive praise. But now, he couldn't do that. —It carried an undeniable weight, an echo that could not be ignored.

"You are destined to become worthy of the title 'Blue' someday. The weight of expectations and hopes upon your young shoulders exceeds anything I've known. That's why I wanted you to know this beforehand."

"The powerlessness of healing magic?"

"Knowledge is a form of preparation. Just as knowledge of healing techniques saves lives, the memory of this day might save your heart. Always be prepared for anything. That's what I wanted to teach you."

Ending the serious talk with a playful wink, Garitch returned to his usual demeanor. Ferris finally relaxed in response to his aloof behavior.

"It's true that I've learned a lot… However, deciding who becomes the 'Blue' is up to the kingdom, isn't it? I don't think it's something you can just casually declare—"

"What, it's the recommendation of the current 'Blue', you know? It's pretty much a done deal."

"I already hear a lot of gossip about me being Fourier's pet, will that include you as well now, professor Garitch?"

Living in the atmosphere of the capital was already suffocating, adding Garitch's jokes to the mix was just too much to handle.

However, Ferris tried to accept the teacher's concern and consideration in his own way.

"I never thought that healing magic was omnipotent."

It was important not to misjudge the scope of one's abilities. And diligence should never be neglected.

In the end, it might sound like a generalization, but that was the essence of it.

"Oh my, the elderly can be quite long-winded, meow—"

"Hehehe! That's what they say!"

To match Ferris's light-hearted tone, Garitch flashed a smile, revealing his missing teeth.

Half of Ferris's response was sincere, while the other half was consideration for Garitch after facing the 'Sleeping Beauty' condition. The teacher and student respected each other's thoughts, trying to return to normal.

"But, feeling discouraged. I can understand feeling that way after ten years of trying…"

"You said something heavy in such a casual tone."

"No matter how many times you lose, never give up on winning in the end. I know someone close to me who has been losing in sword fights to the person they love for years, and Ferri-chan thinks that's precious."

With a slight but proud smile, Ferris envisioned the candid grin of a blonde boy behind closed eyelids. Alongside him, the image of a kind-hearted master with long green hair emerged, and a genuine smile bloomed deep within Ferris's heart.

Yes, that's right. The two people most precious to Ferris were individuals of high caliber. That's why Ferris wanted to keep up with them and not fall behind.

"Teacher emphasized the powerlessness of healing magic, but Ferri-chan felt differently. In fact, I thought it had large potential."

"—. Potential, huh."

"Even the 'Sleeping Beauty' that can't be cured right now, it might be curable someday… right?"

Even if the disease is currently incurable, it will be fine if research advances, if a talented healer worthy of the title 'Blue' emerges, or if healing institutions undergo tremendous growth.

Roads that seem to be blocked now will surely open someday.

"I'm sure that Ferri-chan's loved ones would say the same."

"…"

Garitch silently watched Ferris, who spoke with confidence. The unexpected comment left the teacher momentarily speechless, blinking in surprise.

But soon enough, Garitch's face wrinkled with amusement, and he laughed heartily.

"Are you referring to yourself as Ferri-chan?"

"Eek! Y-You're bringing that up now?!"

Ferris inadvertently spoke like he did in the Crusch mansion or in front of Fourier. Embarrassed by being called out, he touched his blushing cheeks.

As he traced his hardened cheekbones with his finger, the old man narrowed his eyes.

“Potential, potential… I was going to teach you about that, but I learned it instead. Embarrassing, isn’t it?”

“You might be getting senile. You’ll have to be careful not to make any mistakes at the next house call.”

“Remember what I told you…”

As the two continued their conversation in the hallway, a guide approached them. She seemed to have come to escort the two after the house call. Garitch went to inform her of the diagnosis.

His posture was apologetic, expressing his regret for not being able to help.

However, Ferris felt like Garitch’s back had straightened slightly. He hoped that his words might have had some impact, however small.

“I wonder if I managed to imitate Lady Crusch and Lord Fourier a little.”

Saying it out loud made Ferris cringe at his conceited self-assessment.

It felt presumptuous to think that he could even come close to the two people he admired. Ferris needed to focus on doing his best at what he could do as Ferris.

Therefore, for now—

“—I need to finish my training properly and get praised by Lady Crusch.”

With his initial determination returning, Ferris followed the professor ahead of him with light steps.

In his stride, there was no trace of their recent conversation— the fact that he was named the next ‘Blue’ by Garitch Fabless, the current ‘Blue’.

Speaking so casually about such a heavy responsibility led to his carefree attitude, as if taking it for granted.

—Because of this, in later years, Ferris would find himself reflecting on these days over and over again.

It all began just ten days after these events, when Ferris, having completed his training at the clinic, and about to return to his beloved master, received the news of death—

—The death of Garitch Fabless, the ‘Blue’, from which the story of the Successor of Blue would continue.

5

—The emaciated old man lying on the bed seemed as if he were just sleeping.

Because he was, wasn’t he?

His usual pale, anemic face. A lifeless appearance, like that of a skeleton, clad in the familiar white coat that he always wore.

Because he was like a withered old tree, it was difficult to quickly distinguish between his face while sleeping and his face in death.

“That’s why, if you were just sleeping now… I wish that were the case, professor.”

Gazing down at the lifeless body of an old man lying there, Ferris muttered in a voice devoid of emotion.

This was the treatment building’s mortuary, a room within the Royal Treatment Center. Here were placed the bodies of patients who had passed away despite their treatments, and arrangements were made for their families to pay their respects.

Therefore, family had the right to be the first to face the deceased in this room, but—

“Lord Fabless had no family. His wife passed away several years ago, and they had no children.”

“…He had a wife. That’s a bit surprising.”

Beside Ferris, who was staring at the deceased body, a person with a determined posture lowered their gaze.

Crusch had almond-colored eyes and long, beautiful green hair. Despite being the same age as Ferris, her eyes harbored a strong and sharp conviction. It was a presence reminiscent of a sword—but her expression became slightly clouded as she gazed at Ferris’s profile.

“—It’s alright, Lady Crusch.”

Seeing the girl’s gaze, Ferris spoke in a particularly cheerful voice.

“I’m sorry for causing you worry. To be honest, it was surprising… but after spending three months at the treatment center, I’ve experienced many times where I couldn’t save or help people.”

“Ferris.”

“And besides, Lady Crusch, you probably don’t know this, but Doctor Garitch was really eccentric! Even in this situation, he might say, ‘Consider this your graduation exam!’ while laughing loudly…”

“…”

“…Lady Crusch?”

Crusch suddenly embraced Ferris, who had been speaking rapidly.

Startled by the action, Ferris stiffened. He didn’t dislike it. He was just surprised.

Being embraced by Crusch meant a lot to Ferris. —It was like he was being rescued from darkness, like the day he decided to dedicate his life to her.

“Don’t pretend to be strong in front of me. You are gentle, devoted, and sometimes even try to hide your true feelings from me. That’s why you try to disregard even the most important moments, like this one.”

“…”

“I’m glad you want to be my attendant. Thanks to that, I will always remember my shortcomings. Your existence is the most precious treasure in my life. —That is why I want to repay you with even more than what you think of me.”

While held in her supple arms, Ferris was enveloped in the warmth of the words pouring into his ears. Crusch’s calm yet passionate voice always sparkled in the deepest part of Ferris’s heart.

Even now, while wearing a mask of bravado, Ferris felt it in his heart as he tried not to worry his master.

“…I’m sorry for being a weak, pathetic, and shameful attendant.”

“Mourning and grieving the death of a respected mentor. If that is considered weak and shameful, then I am happy to have such a weak and shameful person by my side. I, too, want to be pitiful.”

“I-I understand. Please don’t tease me anymore…”

Crusch’s integrity did not allow her to let Ferris off the hook. As a prisoner of her unwavering beliefs, Ferris could only tremble.

Gently holding back his reluctance, Ferris moved away from Crusch’s chest.

“Yes, I admit it. I’m sad that Doctor Garitch has passed away. It hurts.”

“That’s okay. As a person, that’s the right reaction. It’s natural to be hurt when you lose a mentor. —Especially when it’s caused by someone else.”

Crusch spoke in a low voice to Ferris, who nodded slowly with teary eyes.

Garitch had taken his eternal rest. —But he did not die from illness or an accident, much less natural causes. The old man had been stabbed in the back with a blade, his life forcibly taken away.

Garitch Fabless, the renowned healer known as the ‘Blue’, had left his mark in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica.

His death came too suddenly, both for him, and for the people of the kingdom.

“For the healer who had saved many lives in the past, it’s hard to accept such a sudden end.”

“He was the one who kept saying, ‘When will I die, when will I die’…”

Despite being hailed as the kingdom’s greatest healer, he had a habit of playing with the ideas of life and death.

While he was diligent in wanting to save others, he was indifferent to his own well-being. So even facing his lifeless body now, it was hard to say whether Garitch felt regretful or not.

“But at least, he didn’t suffer in the end… That’s a relief.”

The cruel blade didn’t torment Garitch before taking his life. He must have lost consciousness and his life in an instant, without realizing anything.

That thought was a comfort to those left behind.

But instead, they wondered.

“Who, and for what reason—”

—Who killed Garitch Fabless, the healer who had been saving people his whole life?

6

The news of Garitch’s death reached Ferris two days before he was set to leave the capital, having completed his training.

After three months of training, he could finally return to his master, Crusch. Ferris's plans were disrupted by the sudden death of his mentor.

When Crusch came to pick up Ferris in the capital, there was no emotional reunion.

Their reunion was instead marked by the confirmation of a painful truth. This was the exchange that took place in the mortuary earlier.

"—It's clear from the fact that nothing was stolen that theft wasn't the motive."

Crusch speculated so, holding a bag of coins as she inspected his personal belongings in the mortuary.

The belongings had been discovered alongside Galic, who had collapsed on the street. He wasn't the type to carry around a lot of belongings. To Ferris, who had served as his attendant for three months, it seemed unlikely that anything had been stolen.

"I'm glad he was found in the commoner's district… and not in a dangerous area. I'm glad his belongings weren't vandalized… But if it wasn't a theft."

"There are many reasons why people harm others. If money or goods are not the reason, then matters of honor or resentment are possible… I'd rather not dwell on it, there might not even be a reason.

"So killing was the sole purpose?"

"That is difficult to say… However, would such a disorganized killer happen upon Lord Fabless by chance? I believe there must be a reason behind these events."

Crusch focused on practical aspects, ruling out the possibility of an accidental tragedy. Ferris agreed with that. —He wanted the culprit to have a reason.

Though he knew that there could be inexplicable malice in this world—

“If the goal was to disrupt the capital, could it be the work of the Witch Cult?”

“I understand what you’re suggesting, but that’s a leap in logic. Certainly, if it’s those ruffians you mentioned, they might target Lord Fabless the ‘Blue’ to stir up chaos in the city. However…”

At that, Crusch paused and glanced at Ferris, hesitating for a moment.

“Rather than malevolent scheming, it would be more realistic to suspect personal resentment against Lord Fabless.”

Crusch did not mince her words despite the painful subject.

Though it was brief, they had a mentor-student relationship. Ferris wanted to believe that Garitch wasn’t the type to be disliked by others. He wanted to believe, but…

“Resentment…”

Uttering that one word, Ferris placed his hand on his thin chest.

Garitch had saved countless lives as a user of healing magic. His achievements were well-known, and he was recognized as worthy of the title ‘Blue’. But at the same time, Ferris knew. —He knew about Garitch’s regrets and the limitations of healing magic.

In the face of an incurable disease, healers without a cure could even be despised.

If that were the case, could the culprit be—

“—A patient that Garitch couldn’t cure?”

Or perhaps the relative of a patient who died despite Garitch’s efforts.

If resentment was indeed the motive, that was the only possibility that came to mind. And as far as Ferris knew, there had been countless such cases in the past three months.

Ferris pondered, hoping to find an answer among them.

"—It's about time we prepared the late Fabless's remains."

The mortician called out to Ferris as he entered the morgue.

The mortician was responsible for preparing the appearance of the deceased and ensuring that they were in a suitable state for burial. It seemed that the mortician was being considerate of Ferris, Garitch's personal student, and had waited outside for him.

"Did you exchange your farewells?"

"Farewells for the deceased? I don't have any of those."

Ferris reflexively retorted, and immediately regretted venting his feelings. However, the mortician seemed accustomed to such responses, and proceeded towards the deceased without showing any concern.

Leaving it to the dark-skinned mortician, Ferris moved to exit the mortuary with Crusch.

Then, before leaving…

"—Please take care of the professor."

With a bow, Ferris bid farewell to Garitch's remains.

7

"I think the suspicious one is that drunken redhead!"

Exiting the clinic, Ferris energetically shared his thoughts with Crusch.

Then, as Crusch tilted her head inquisitively, Ferris explained the events that led him to this conclusion. After hearing the explanation —

“I see, a family member of a seriously ill patient… that makes sense.”

“Yes! And that man… he really seemed like he was holding a grudge!”

Hearing Crusch’s agreement, Ferris clenched his fist even more tightly.

In his mind was the image of the red-haired drunkard who had been hurling insults at Ferris and Garitch during their recent house call. While he sympathized with his plight, waiting for his unresponsive wife, it was still too much.

“So, who is this man?”

“Well, you see… actually, my teacher kept his name a secret. But! I know the location of the mansion we visited for the house call! If we hurry there with the guards…”

“That might be a bit premature. We should investigate a bit more thoroughly before jumping to conclusions. Besides, we’re not the only ones trying to track down whoever harmed Lord Fabless, right?”

Hearing this, Ferris realized that he was rushing things.

As Crusch had said, all the guards in the capital had been mobilized to track down Garitch’s killer.

Furious guards patrolled the streets, and the clinic was busy with people besides the usual patients. Ferris himself had already been questioned so many times that he was sick of it.

Garitch’s death was a significant event for the kingdom. If they didn’t identify the perpetrator, the kingdom’s authority would be compromised. Everyone was taking this seriously.

“Even so, no one is as desperate as I am…!”

"Ferris."

"Please, Lady Crusch. I know I'm being selfish. But I owe a lot to Lord Garitch. Please let me at least follow up on this lead."

Bowing his head, Ferris earnestly pleaded with Crusch. It was the first time he had gone against his master's wishes and insisted on his own opinion.

"…"

Ferris didn't understand why his heart was in such turmoil.

He couldn't say that he particularly liked Garitch as a person.

Garitch was always joking around, never took things seriously, and because of the extension to his training schedule, Ferris had days when he couldn't see Crusch. Their time together had been quite trying.

But still, he had improved a lot as a healer, and had actually learned quite a lot from him. It was thanks to Garitch that he could meet Crusch with pride, knowing that he had grown under his tutelage.

—For that reason, he wanted to repay Garitch's kindness.

"Goodness, you're stubborn. Has some of His Highness's attitude rubbed off on you during these three months in the capital?"

Suddenly, the sound of laughter reached Ferris as he raised her head in surprise. In front of him, Crusch stood with a hand on her hip, shaking her head with an exasperated look.

"I have a soft spot for clear, determined eyes. Especially when it comes to you and His Highness."

"Did His Highness ask about anything?"

"It happened often during the three months that you stayed in the capital. It seems he had frequent business to attend to near our house at this time. I was grateful for it."

Smiling wryly, Crusch seemed oblivious to Fourier's muddled feelings of affection. Though Fourier was diligent and earnest, it seemed his efforts had yet to bear fruit.

In any case, Crusch's smile disappeared as she gave a firm nod.

"It's your earnest wish. I couldn't bear to refuse and still call myself your master."

"I love you, Lady Crusch."

"And I, you."

Having been deeply moved by unexpected words, Crusch nodded confidently, unfazed.

Receiving reassuring words from his master, Ferris wiped away the tears welling up in his eyes. Then he and Crusch set off towards the mansion that they suspected.

Soon, without any problems, they arrived at a nobleman's mansion on the edge of the aristocratic district— "—This place."

Despite it being past early morning, they arrived at a mansion on a deserted street, and Crusch furrowed her shapely eyebrows. Seeing his master's reaction, Ferris tilted his head in confusion.

"Lady Crusch? Is something wrong?"

"Are you certain the person you suspect is from this mansion?"

"Yes. Most likely, he is the master of this mansion… I think."

During their house call, the 'Sleeping Beauty' in a coma had been referred to as 'Mistress' by the mansion's staff. Therefore, her husband was undoubtedly the master of this mansion.

In response to Ferris's answer, Crusch crossed her arms, her expression troubled.

Then, in front of the suspicious Ferris, she began to speak. It was—

"—The Astrea family."

"Astrea…could it be?"

"Unless there is another Astrea family, you and I have the same idea."

At Crusch's stern nod, Ferris felt a great disturbance.

The Astrea family—the lineage of the 'Sword Saint', who had repelled a great calamity that befell the kingdom in the past, and was one of the Three Heroes.

A family that produced generations of the kingdom's strongest swordsmen, linked to the 'Sword Saint'.

Naturally, their prestige surpassed even Garitch's title of 'Blue'—

"Why is the mansion of the 'Sword Saint' located in such a desolate place?"

"Well, hmm. I suppose it is well-known that the current head of the Astrea family is a problematic person. Still, I hesitate to think he's become so deranged as to rebel against the kingdom."

After exchanging their doubts at the gate, Crusch proceeded toward the mansion on behalf of the flinching Ferris. Eventually, she reached out to the bell mounted on the gate and paused.

"…"

The cause was the elderly gardener who had appeared near the gate.

Dressed plainly, he seemed to be tending to the garden. Ferris, who had not noticed his presence, was startled and astonished. He was sure that nobody had been there just now.

"Sir, are you the gardener of the Astrea family?"

"…"

Crusch, who must have shared the same moment of surprise, posed the question without fear.

The elderly gardener, appearing to be in his sixties, remained silent in response. However, the reason became clear soon enough. Gently, the gardener pointed to his own throat, revealing an old white scar.

“Lady Crusch, this man’s throat…”

“I understand. —Sir, I am Crusch Karsten, daughter of Duke Meckart Karsten, head of the Karsten family. I apologize for the unexpected visit.”

Bowing to the silent elderly man, Ferris followed his master in a polite greeting. The elderly man watched the two with a calm gaze.

“Today, I came to see the master of the mansion, Lord Heinkel. Is he available?”

“…”

In response to Crusch’s question, the elderly man placed his hand over his chest and bowed his head. Then, he retrieved a piece of paper from his pocket and began to write. —This written communication was a substitute for not being able to speak.

After he finished writing, the elderly man handed over the piece of paper. On it was…

“…The name of a tavern. If we go there, will we be able to meet him?”

“…”

“Thank you. Let’s go, Ferris.”

“Huh? Ah, yes!”

Tucking the folded paper into her jacket, Crusch briskly walked away. Ferris hurriedly followed behind, stealing a glance at the elderly man silently bowing as they left.

“Although he didn’t confirm the purpose of our visit, he didn’t seem like the type to sell out his master without a second thought.”

Stopping a short distance away from the mansion, Crusch turned back towards Ferris. Ferris widened his eyes at those words, and she handed him the note she received from the elderly man.

On it, written in neat handwriting, was the name of a tavern, ‘Casks’—

“Let’s go meet this drunkard you spoke of.”

8

They quickly found their target at the ‘Casks’ tavern.

“Uh… ugh.”

“This is the person we’re looking for, Ferris.”

Fanning away the lingering fumes of alcohol, Crusch asked Ferris for confirmation. Ferris, who inherited an excellent sense of smell from his ancestors, nodded in disgust.

“Yes, he is definitely the right person. But… ugh, the smell of alcohol.”

They were not inside the tavern, but in an alley behind it. Apparently, he had been thrown out by the staff due to his drunken behavior. Nevertheless, he continued drinking from the bottle in his arms.

This man is Heinkel Astrea— the head of the Astrea family and the drunkard Ferris remembered most vividly. Crusch’s opinion was undoubtedly correct.

“He is in no condition to talk right now.”

“If I manipulate mana, I might be able to break down the alcohol and sober him up…”

“It might antagonize him. Besides, I don’t want you to get too close to this man.”

His suggestion gently dismissed, Ferris blushed at the implication that he was highly valued. Ignoring the embarrassed Ferris, Crusch crouched down next to the man.

“Sir Heinkel. Heinkel von Astrea—”

“—I ain’t got no ‘von’. I’ll kill you, idiot.”

“I know. You don’t like being called that, I understand.”

In response to Crusch’s call, the man who had been groaning with a flushed face suddenly emitted a menacing aura. Despite the man’s aggressive tone and scent of alcohol, Crusch remained unfazed.

Scratching his head in response, the man finally noticed Ferris holding his breath.

“You, you’re that brat from the other day… The useless brat with that useless old man.”

“I apologize for my terrible first impression. But, considering I also remember you as a drunkard, it’s best to skip the insults. Sorry.”

“Heh, you’ve got a lot of hostility. I heard. That old man, he kicked the bucket, didn’t he?”

“…”

Hearing the words the man spat out, Ferris narrowed his eyes. The man let out a satisfied sigh at the pointed reaction.

“The greatest healer in the kingdom, unable to cure a single disease in over ten years. When I heard he couldn’t even heal his own wounds, I was convinced. It was all a waste of time.”

“What do you know about Professor Garitch…?”

“He was just a swindler trying to get people’s hopes up. At least, that’s how he seemed to me.”

The man's sneer made Ferris's vision turn red. Regardless of his involvement in Garitch's murder, he wanted nothing more than to choke the man right then and there.

Even though it was against the principles of a healer— a philosophy he was taught by Garitch.

"—That's enough, Ferris. There's no need to talk to him anymore."

But his anger was quelled by Crusch's intervention.

Crusch nodded reassuringly at the red-faced Ferris, and fixed a sharp glare at the man.

"I sympathize with your situation and emotions, but I won't allow you to hurt my attendant out of spite."

"Out of spite? What are you…"

"With Lord Fabless's passing, you lost the healer who tended to your wife. Therefore, you drown yourself in alcohol to forget your grief. Am I wrong?"

"Damn it! Don't act like you understand!"

In response to Crusch's decisive words, the infuriated man tried to stand up. However, his intoxicated body staggered, causing him to hit the wall and collapse back onto the ground. He couldn't get back up no matter how hard he tried.

"Ferris, let's go. This man posed no threat to Lord Fabless. He had no reason to."

"Wait… Dammit…"

As they left the man groaning on the ground, Crusch didn't spare him a glance. After his master's brisk departure, Ferris hurriedly followed.

"—I'm sorry. I lost my composure for a moment."

Crusch apologized to Ferris as they emerged from the alleyway onto the street. Seeing his master's face grow stiff, Ferris hurriedly waved his hands in denial.

"I'm the one who should apologize for causing you distress, Lady Crusch…"

"I thought I was prepared, yet here I am. I'm appalled by my own pettiness… But your suspicions have been answered. That man is not the culprit."

"Did you find that out through your divine protection?"

"Yes. Regardless of the reason, that man is mourning the death of Lord Fabless."

With amber eyes showing conviction, Crusch asserted herself with confidence.

Crusch's conviction was based on her 'Divine Protection of Wind Reading'. This divine protection allowed her to literally see the wind, and she even perceived the emotions of people she met as wind.

For this reason, it was very difficult to lie to Crusch.

Of course, Crusch was not constantly using her divine blessing, and those close to her could sometimes bypass her blessing's insights, but— "That person wasn't doing either."

Disappointed by the result, Ferris let his shoulders slump. He had no reason to doubt Crusch's eyes or exalt the man's acting skills. There was no causal relationship between the man and Garitch's death.

"There are other relatives of the professor's patients, though…"

"We should inform the guards and have them investigate. We seem to be lacking in expertise."

Although the idea of revenge had not disappeared, it felt less believable after this misstep. After all, the motive of the culprit behind Galitch's death remained unclear— "—Don't look so down.

Evil deeds will be punished. The killer of Lord Fabless will be as well.”

Crusch comforted Ferris by embracing his shoulders. Resting his head on his master’s shoulder, Ferris nodded quietly in response.

However, despite Crusch’s words, the culprit behind Garitch’s death was never found.

—And as the case remained unsolved, the day of Garitch’s state funeral arrived.

9

“Garitch’s passing is unfortunate. I am heartbroken as well.”

Fourier, whom Ferris had not seen in a few days, spoke these words in a somber tone.

Even the ever-positive and persevering Fourier could not help but be saddened by the death of an acquaintance. The grief shown by the emotional Fourier was a powerful reminder that Garitch had truly passed away.

—Garitch Fabless’s state funeral was carried out on a grand scale, contrary to the modest nature of the deceased.

It was a gesture of the kingdom’s goodwill towards Garrich, who had no family to see him off. From a cynical perspective, perhaps it was the desire to finally give a minimal amount of status to the man who had been awarded the title of ‘Blue’.

“If he saw this, he’d probably be uncomfortable and tell us not to make such a fuss.

“Hmm, definitely. As one would expect from his apprentice, you’re very observant, Ferris.”

Not wanting to dwell on dark thoughts, Ferris tried to make light of the situation, and Fourier joined in. Crusch, who was also present, smiled faintly at them.

The three attending the funeral were dressed in black formal attire. Fourier, usually dressed in flamboyant clothes, was transformed into a handsome young man with a charming face.

“It’s nice to see Your Highness dressed up now and then.”

“Is that so? I don’t feel very comfortable, though… What do you think, Crusch?”

“I understand what you mean. Your Highness always looks splendid, but I also feel more at ease with your usual attire.”

“I see! So you prefer my usual self! Well, I’m relieved!”

In front of the satisfied Fourier, Crusch and Ferris were also smiling at one another in formal clothes— however, their outfits were reversed considering their gender, with Crusch wearing men’s clothes, and Ferris in women’s clothing.

“…Shouldn’t Crusch have worn formal women’s attire on an occasion like this?”

“I don’t want to deceive myself, especially at a time like this. Besides, I want to approach the funeral with a clear heart and mind.”

“…The one who hurt Garitch hasn’t been found yet.”

Fourier’s troubled expression and the furrows between his brows indicated that the culprit was still unknown.

According to Ferris’s deductions, interviews were conducted with Garitch’s patients and those involved with them, but no significant progress had been made.

Ultimately, if even the motive was unclear, the likelihood that it was a random act of violence increased.

“In that case, we might just have to admit defeat…”

“Don’t get so overwhelmed, Ferris. Garitch wouldn’t want to see you so downtrodden.”

"Your Highness…"

"I won't ask you to smile right away. But if you keep your head lowered, Garitch will feel hurt… No, it's cowardly to use the dead as an excuse. I'm the one feeling hurt. So, lift your head."

Truly, this Fourier guy had a strange charm about him.

If he always acted like this, there would be no need to worry about his romance with Crusch. What an idiot.

"…Your Highness, you really are a wasted talent."

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?! A wasted talent?! What kind of riddle is this?!"

Because of Ferris's casual remark, the wide-eyed Fourier started to panic. Seeing Fourier return to his usual self, Ferris felt even more grateful to him.

"—Your Highness, Fourier. It's time you returned to the waiting room."

Just as the exchange came to an end, a stern male voice came from outside the room. At Fourier's command to enter, a tall man appeared in front of them.

Giving the impression of a rock, the man was wearing a rugged set of full-body armor and a helmet. Ferris had been introduced by Fourier once before. In truth, he was a member of the knights—

"—Marcos. Is it time already?"

"Yes. Everyone, including His Highness Zabinel, is already here. I'm afraid I must ask Your Highness Fourier to return as well."

"I know, I know. I wouldn't want to anger my brothers. I shall return as well."

In response to Fourier's answer, the knight Marcos Gildark bowed his head. Since the incident with Garitch, all important people were assigned bodyguards, and it was Marcos who stood by Fourier's side.

He was patient with Fourier, who was free-spirited, to say the least.

“I’m surprised your brothers could make it, given the short notice.”

“That is because of the great accomplishments of Lord Garitch. His Highness Zabinel had also urged the dragon carriage to arrive quickly. Otherwise, it would take a rare opportunity for everyone from the royal family to gather.”

“Yes, that’s correct. —Right. Crusch, would you like to come greet my brothers?”

“No, I think I would only bother them before the funeral service. If possible, after the funeral.”

“Yes, you’re right. That was foolish of me. Well then, I will let them know.”

With those words, Fourier left the room with Marcos. As he was leaving, Marcos took a bow and closed the door, leaving Ferris and Crusch alone in the room.

“Wouldn’t passing along your regards be the same as going to greet them purr-sonally?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve met His Highness’s brothers. I’m sure His Highness was just being considerate.”

“I think you might be overestimating His Highness…”

While Fourier certainly had great potential, whether that potential could be realized was another matter. Rather, his personality was why they eagerly anticipated the realization of his great potential.

Chuckling at Crusch’s assessment of Fourier, Ferris waited for the funeral to begin.

It was an hour before it began, a grand funeral attended by all members of the royal family, including Fourier. Garitch himself would probably hate it. But there was no stopping it now.

The death of Garitch Fabless the ‘Blue’ had a special significance—

“…”

Suddenly, Ferris frowned.

For a moment, a sense of unease passed through his mind. Holding onto the vague feeling, Ferris gathered the scattered pieces of information in his head and pieced them together.

The death of Garitch. Not a robbery, it was an unreasonable conclusion to the life of the ‘Blue’. A random murder was inconsistent, and there was no pain that would suggest a grudge. Then, its aim was—

“—Not the professor’s life, but something created by his death?”

Garitch Fabless the ‘Blue’ had no close relatives. His death became a national funeral, attended by royalty and dignitaries across the kingdom to mourn him.

If that situation itself was the culprit’s aim—

“—Ferris?”

Seeing Ferris’s ears perked up, Crusch lowered her voice. Ferris looked up at Crusch and wet his pink lips with his tongue.

“Lady Crusch, will you believe what I’m about to say?”

“Of course.”

Having his question answered without hesitation, Ferris widened his eyes.

Then, with a slight smile, he continued.

“Lady Crusch, I love you.”

“As I love you.”

The two reaffirmed their bond as master and servant, rising from their chairs with determination.

The venue of the funeral had a unique atmosphere.

With the coffin on the platform at the center, the hall was filled with a peculiar blend of sanctity and grandeur. It caused people to naturally straighten their spines and clear their minds.

“This is a funeral. What is going on?”

“It is a mandatory check before the state funeral. We will return immediately upon completion.”

The staff that had been preparing the funeral protested against the sudden appearance of the group. However, they were easily repelled by the imposing figure of Marcos at the front.

After silencing the people in the hall, Marcos turned to Ferris behind him.

“Despite Lord Fourier’s words, if nothing comes of this, it will become a problem.”

“If nothing comes of it, shouldn’t we be happy? His Highness would certainly say so.”

Ferris pursed his lips in response to the warning, and Marcos made a sour face.

Indeed, he might have pictured Fourier making such a statement. If so, he was one of the many who had been poisoned by Fourier.

“But if there really is nothing, then I apologize, Lady Crusch.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I responded to your request. At that moment, all decisions fell under my responsibility. Don’t try to take my responsibility onto yourself.”

Encouraged by the steadfast Crusch, Ferris flipped up the hem of his skirt and ascended the platform.

The casket containing Garitch’s lifeless body was placed at an angle on the altar adorned with serene stone statues and flowers. Opening the closed lid would allow for a face-to-face encounter with his mentor's death.

"…"

After a moment of hesitation, Ferris opened the casket with slender fingers. Inside was Garitch's corpse, exhibiting a slightly healthier complexion thanks to post-mortem makeup.

"Teacher, you look better than when you were alive."

Perhaps it was thanks to the skill of the embalmer that Garitch's expression appeared peaceful in death.

His back wounds were sutured, and his organs, prone to decay, had been removed before the funeral. Touching the corpse, which seemed more vital in death than in life, Ferris breathed a sigh.

Then, he began infusing his water mana into Garitch's remains.

"What are you doing to the deceased…"

"Quiet. Let's leave this to Ferris."

The dark-skinned embalmer widened his eyes at Ferris's actions. Crusch had stopped him, and Ferris tried to live up to her trust.

—If Garitch's death was orchestrated in anticipation of the state funeral that followed, then the motive behind his murder lies not with him, but in creating the circumstances of this state funeral.

This situation, with royalty and dignitaries from across the kingdom in attendance, was the killer's goal.

In that case, there must be a trap inside the venue. It must be in a place that the perpetrator approached at least once—

"—Attendees will all leave flowers on the professor's casket."

Therefore, Ferris reasoned that if there was a trick, it had to be either inside Garitch himself or his coffin.

Ferris extended his consciousness to every corner of Garitch's corpse, where the circulation of mana had already stopped. Tracing the dried-up veins of life, Ferris examined the deceased thoroughly.

As a result—

"—It's over. There's nothing abnormal with the professor's body."

As Ferris spoke with sweat covering his forehead, he sensed a commotion behind him.

It could be resentment from causing a commotion and yielding no results. Or it could be anger from disturbing the casket of the deceased, desecrating their dignity as a result.

However, among all of that—

"—Why is it that you exude a wind of relief, unlike the others?"

"…"

Pierced by an amber gaze, the dark-skinned mortician's expression grew stiff.

Neither this reaction nor the release of tension just before escaped the gaze of Ferris's amazing master.

"A wind of relief? What exactly are you saying…"

"There's no need for petty lies. I can see your true intentions."

As the embalmer recoiled, Crusch approached. At her side, Marcos slowly drew his longsword, instructing other people in the venue to step back.

"Si— Sir Gildark! Such baseless accusations will not be tolerated!"

"If you are truly innocent, then surrender yourself gracefully. Despite Lady Karsten's kindness, I will show no mercy towards enemies of the kingdom."

"Fear not, Lord Marcus. My sword is just as merciless to the kingdom's enemies."

Crusch, who arrived without a sword, grabbed hold of the wind and relaxed her expression.

With steel swords and invisible blades of wind pointed at him, the mortician froze in place, and then— "—That earlier statement was a lie. You embedded something strange inside the professor's body, didn't you?"

"Wha—"

"You seem to have done quite thorough research on the professor's body and gate. Anyone other than Ferri-chan might have missed it… How horrible."

Sticking her tongue out at the mortician, a surge of mana flowed from Ferris's palm into the old man's corpse. Deeper and deeper into his teacher's remains it flowed— where he grasped something dark and foreign.

"Teacher, if it hurts, you can cry, okay?"

Half-joking and half-serious, Ferris said this as he forcefully pulled the dark foreign object from Garitch.

A gruesome sound, akin to peeling skin, reverberated, and everyone around grimaced. Only Crusch and Marcos maintained their composure. —Then the foreign object was torn off.

"This mana is woven in such a disgusting way… Are you a user of curse arts, rather than a healer?"

"Wh-What, saying I use curse arts?! I am a healing practitioner! A first-rate one at that!"

Ferris disintegrated the curse he had removed, dispersing it into harmless mana. The mortician became enraged, and howled with bloodshot eyes.

"You're a demon, a child of a demi-human! Your impure blood had driven Lord Fabless crazy! The true successor of 'Blue'… It should have been me!”

“…”

“Yet the kingdom, and even Master Fabres, misjudged my talents. A practitioner who deals not with the living, but the dead? And that the peace of the dead is also a healer’s duty? What stupid, what stupidity!”

Stomping his feet, the mortician— a man— spewed forth a string of childish arguments, pleading with a serious face and voice. He lamented his misfortune and the mistakes of the kingdom and Garitch.

“There is no value in a man who overlooked the ‘Blue’ of the next generation and had no future. That is why I asked Master Fabless to serve as a stepping stone for the rightful succession!”

“The rightful succession?”

“During the state funeral, a poisonous wind would suddenly spread through the venue crowded with numerous dignitaries! The poison gradually invades the throat, robbing the lungs of air. When breath grows thin, on the brink of death… if someone were to appear to save them, would anyone doubt the skills of that practitioner?”

With grandiosity, the man laid bare his magnificent and proud plan. Even Crusch was left speechless as he puffed his chest out, and Marcos shook his head.

In essence, the man was dissatisfied with his circumstances, blaming Garitch and the country. To prove his own competence, he had infused poison into Garitch’s remains, intending to purify the poison himself and bask in the limelight— “—All for such a stupid idea.”

“Fear not. Master Fabres was foolish, but I am forgiving. I did not inflict suffering upon him. Of course, I have no intention of letting anyone die at the venue either.”

With a faint smile, the man heartily nodded at Ferris’s trembling voice. His demeanor was not mocking, and he appeared to be genuine.

The man’s mentality had already transcended that of ordinary people.

“—Surprisingly, there’s no sign of a lie.”

Crusch, who had been silently listening to the man, blurted this out. With a hint of surprise in her otherwise dignified and sharp gaze, Crusch narrowed her amber eyes.

“These eyes read the emotions of people I face like the wind. Therefore, I am sensitive to lies. Yet, there is not the slightest hint of falsehood in your words.”

“Of course not. —What reason would there be for deception at this point?”

The man’s anger toward his misfortune, and the actions he took to relieve it, were all justified in his eyes.

Therefore, even in Crusch’s eyes, the aura surrounding the man was that of a saint—

“—You stubbornly believe your delusions to be the truth. I have no more room to listen to you.”

There is no room for leniency. For the sake of Garitch and the kingdom, this man should die here.

“…”

With that assertion, Crusch and Marcos moved simultaneously to cut down the man. However, the man was prepared for this. He placed his hands on his white coat and opened the front— “A true medical practitioner never neglects preparations. This is also from the book of Master Fabless.”

Taking advantage of the situation, the man quoted these teachings as three black spheres rolled out from his white coat. Three fist-sized sphered bounced with a thud— “Now, taste the essence of poison that eats at the body from the very core!”

The poison spheres burst open, releasing an evil mana that was toxic to human bodies. It was a poison just as potent as the one implanted in Garitch, and it was capable of knocking out everyone at the venue.

If exposed to it, even Crusch and Marcos would—

“—Unfortunately, I am immune to poison.”

However, the man’s trump card could not penetrate a knight of the Royal Guard, whose conviction was as strong as a rock.

Immediately after his solemn declaration, he emerged from the poisonous smoke in the venue. —To Ferris, he looked like a lump of rock. In fact, his entire body was clad in gray rock, resembling a suit of armor.

As a giant of stone in thick armor, he looked ridiculous holding a knight’s longsword.

—This was Marcos Gildark, ‘The Rock’, showing his true colors.

He was clad in armor composed of stone, so no amount of raw poison would work on him. Of course, even if he himself was safe, it didn’t mean that the people in the venue were immune to the effects of the poison.

“Poisonous smoke, huh. —You have misread the wind.”

Using her ‘Divine Protection of Wind Reading’ to grab hold of the wind, Crusch unleashed invisible wind blades with her technique—facing this, the poisonous smoke was meaningless. The wind wound the poison around itself, and instead of covering the venue, it gathered all in one place. Ferris then approached the poison.

“Honestly, this isn’t a deadly poison. How could claim to save everyone.”

“—Well, even if you can’t do it, I can with enough time.”

“I see. —I’m already finished, though.”

Raising his hand and sticking out his tongue, Ferris neutralized the poisonous mana, breaking it down and rendering it harmless.

It was likely faster, easier, and more straightforward than what the man had planned.

"—Ah."

"I don't care who the next 'Blue' is, but there was nothing wrong about Professor Garitch's judgment, teachings, or methods."

His beliefs shattered, and the man looked aghast. Ferris glanced at him from the side as he took hold of Crusch's arm.

"Lady Crusch, please allow me a bit of rudeness from now on."

"—Permission granted."

When Ferris asked for permission, Crusch granted it without hesitation. Smiling at his master's kindness, Ferris turned towards the man with a cruel gaze.

"—Die, you delusional bastard."

"…"

The man tried to utter words of anger at Ferris's proclamation.

However, his attempt was intercepted by a massive boulder that charged forward, shaking the venue. The rock did not slow down as it collided with the man's body— "—A traitor who draws his bow against the kingdom. Get crushed along with all your shallow ambitions."

Marcos's exclamation was not wrong, as the man's final words of resentment were swallowed in the impact without even so much as a scream, and he burst into a bloody mist, disappearing.

—This was the end of the pitiful man who killed Garitch Fabless, the 'Blue'.

"Oh, come on! You're so bad at organizing! I can't believe this!"

The voice echoed from Garitch's private room in the research building of the treatment center, in the late afternoon.

The laboratory was deserted after the loss of its master, and the tools used by the deceased had already been taken over as shared equipment at the treatment center. What remained in the room were the personal belongings of the deceased—though there weren't many, as he was not the kind to leave behind lots of things.

"The books on the shelf aren't even in order! Ferri-chan hates this sort of thing! I hate it! He's harassing me even after death!"

"I highly doubt Lord Fabless would have such intentions. You're jumping to conclusions."

"No. Even with all due respect to you, Lady Crusch, Ferri-chan is right about this. That man would definitely do it. That's the kind of annoying person he was."

Crusch was taken aback by Ferris's confident assertion and chuckled.

The funeral had concluded smoothly, and Garitch's coffin had been laid to rest in the kingdom's cemetery. The murderer had already been executed, and now they were here to tidy up the private room of the deceased healer, which was no longer full of guards.

As mentioned earlier, the tools used by Garitch during his life as a healer had been taken over by the treatment facility following his wishes. —This was likely a better outcome for Garitch than to be buried with them. Instead, what was left for his disciple, Ferris, was — "This disorganized bookshelf and all these strange documents…"

With pursed lips, Ferris kept alternating his gaze between the stack of papers on his desk and the haphazardly packed bookshelf. Both were in such a messy state that he hesitated to touch them.

"But staring at them won't make it go away. It's time to make up your mind."

“…Fine. Ugh, being a disciple doesn’t mean I’m a purr-sonal maid.”

Grumbling to himself, Ferris began tidying up the desk. Seeing this, Crusch took off her jacket and helped with organizing the bookshelf.

“During the state funeral, was it really okay that your name wasn’t mentioned?”

As they tidied up, Crusch asked Ferris a casual question.

“You prevented an incident before it happened and identified the culprit. Both I and His Highness Fourier think you should be properly recognized for that.”

“It’s fine. Ferri-chan… I’m not particularly interested in honor, and just avenging my teacher was enough for me. After all, it was that huge guy that did it.”

He remembered the image of Marcos, clad in stone armor, slaughtering the evil man in a single blow.

That was not a man who would end up just as an ordinary knight. In fact, they heard that he’s being promoted for his achievement, which is an appropriate evaluation.

“Ah, but if Lady Crusch insists, I’ll definitely go and receive a medal or something, okay? Well, at least if I don’t end up being detained in the capital again.”

“I can’t say that it won’t happen…”

Crusch’s voice became slightly clouded, as if something had just occurred to her. Then, unusually, Crusch chose her words for Ferris with extra caution.

“In truth, the practitioners who saw your work at the venue said that your abilities are far above average… In other words, there seems to be a clear push for you to become the next ‘Blue’.”

“Does that mean… that if things go wrong, I might end up stuck in the capital forever?!”

At that hopeless possibility, Ferris let out a shriek.

Putting aside the prestige of the title of ‘Blue’, he knew the trouble that came with it from his time helping Garitch. If he were to receive that title, he wouldn’t be able to continue being Crusch’s attendant as he was before.

—For Ferris, it would be the end of the world.

“Hey, is there anything you can do about it…?”

“—Ferris, I really am sorry. But, His Highness Fourier is in the capital. I’m sure you won’t be lonely.”

“—Agh, High Highness alone won’t do! I can’t live without Lady Crusch! Please, take me and His Highness and escape with us!”

Clutching Crusch’s arm, Ferris pleaded with a tearful face.

If the kingdom wouldn’t allow the two of them to be together, he was willing to abandon everything and run away. If they could take Fourier with them, it would be a dream come true for Ferris.

“Ferris…”

Hearing Ferris’s plea, Crusch’s eyes grew slightly larger. Then she let out a small sigh, and a guilty look appeared on her resolute face.

“…Forgive me. I got a little carried away with teasing you.”

“…Lady Crusch?”

“The reports from the practitioners, we suppressed them with His Highness. For now, you are still my attendant. Hopefully, it will stay that way forever.”

“L-Lady Crusch… When did you become such a mean person…”

“It’s been three months since we spent time like this. During that time, as you’ve improved yourself, I also thought of making some changes…”

"I'm happy to see the different sides of Lady Crusch, but that one was bad for my heart."

"I see, I'm sorry. I'll try to do better next time."

Crusch was ambitious, but Fourier was negatively influencing her direction. Ferris sighed in relief, deciding to complain directly to Fourier later.

He respected Garitch and was eternally grateful for his teachings over the past three months.

However, the most important person to him was Crusch, followed by Fourier. That was something he wouldn't compromise on. No compromises. —No matter the reason.

"So, I'm sorry, but I can't be the successor of teacher's 'Blue'."

Apologizing to the absent professor, Ferris returned to tidying the desk once again.

After compiling the medical records into one pile, Ferris finally noticed an envelope. The envelope, mixed in with the stack of papers, was bulging and full of letters.

"…These are letters from patients."

Inside the envelope were letters Garitch exchanged with his patients. The messages varied wildly, from good news about recovery, to thanks from families of deceased patients for his efforts, to bitter strings of complaints that went on for years.

All of them testified to the life of Garitch Fabless, the 'Blue'.

"—. Lady Crusch, will the professor's patients be taken over by other healing practitioners?"

"Ordinarily, yes. However, even at the Royal Treatment Center, one cannot expect practitioners of the same caliber as Lord Fabless."

"The same caliber as teacher…"

As he listened to Crusch's response, Ferris opened the files of patients he had just organized. It was a kind of hand-me-down, with no particular purpose. Then he found the deciding factor.

"—Ah."

Something fell onto the desk from the stack of papers. Following it with his eyes, Ferris let out an involuntary cry. —It was a yellow flower.

The pressed flower, sandwiched between the documents, was familiar to him.

It was the flower Ferris had received from a suspicious man, which he then forced onto Garitch.

"He really did keep it. That skeleton healer…"

Picking up the pressed flower, Ferris muttered with regret.

Then, he refocused on the patients— the work that Garitch had left behind.

"Lady Crusch, Lady Crusch. Ferri-chan is wondering, perhaps, if Ferri-chan works hard as a healing practitioner, could it also be considered the achievement of his master, Lady Crusch?"

"—? I suppose some would see it that way."

Crusch frowned at Ferris's statement and replied with a questioning look on her face. Ferris nodded in agreement and traced the names of the patients with his finger.

Many of his patients were important figures from the kingdom. Some have regular check-ups or have received treatment from Garitch for many years.

"Isn't Lord Bordeaux Zellgef a prominent member of the Council of Wise Men? It might not hurt to do him a favor!"

"Ferris, what in the world are you thinking?"

“Well, Ferri-chan always puts Lady Crusch first!”

Above all, it would benefit Crusch. At the same time, it would help continue Garitch’s legacy.

Although he didn’t want to get stuck in the royal capital, he would be happy to go there regularly and visit the patients left behind by Garitch. It would be the best way for Ferris to honor his kindness and goodwill.

“But I absolutely refuse to become the successor of ‘Blue’.”

Sticking out his tongue, Ferris rejected the ill-fitting title of Garitch.

Unfortunately, several years later, Ferris was recognized for his sense of duty in taking over Galich’s patients, and ultimately inherited the title of ‘Blue’.

—His only condition for accepting the title was that he would never be separated from his master, Crusch.

That was the sole wish of Ferris Argyle, the ‘Blue’, who became the kingdom’s best healer.

12

And this is a marginal note in the story of the successor of ‘Blue’.

It’s a scene from a conversation between minor characters in a certain tavern.

“—Congratulations. I heard your latest achievement has promoted you to the position of captain, right?”

“…Do you think I’m happy about that? I didn’t come here to hear your sarcasm.”

“Oh, so scary. You’ve still got that mad dog vibe from before. Did you become more round… no, more square? No, no, you’ve always been like that…”

“I’m heading out.”

“Wait, wait, you don’t get jokes, huh? We’ve been friends for ages. Russell never shows up when I call him. Let’s catch up a bit.”

“—. You’re the one who hasn’t changed his stubborn attitude. Why can’t you be honest about your grief?”

“Grief? Me? It’s funny to suggest that I’m grieving. This is a toast, you know?”

“A toast?”

“For your promotion and the defeat of an enemy of Lord Garitch.”

“…”

“Marcos?”

“Are you happy about that? About Lord Garitch?”

“—. Well, some things are better left unsaid.”

"…"

"Besides, you know. It was you, his friend, that avenged Garitch by killing his enemy. And that child was there too… Garitch's beloved disciple, wasn't she?"

"Yeah. If she hadn't been there, the damage could have been unprecedented…"

"I could have done something about that myself. I just didn't want to get in the way."

"You really are something else… And what do you mean by getting in the way?"

"It's obvious. The desire for revenge."

"—The student had to avenge his teacher. That's why this is a toast."

"…"

"To the future 'Blue'."

—The gentle sound of glasses clinking echoed briefly through the tavern.

END

Kararagi Girl & Cat's Eye
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Girl: “Enough already! What's yer deal, so mean! I'm beggin' ya this hard, ain't I!”

Under a sky so blue it seemed to go on forever, the high voice of a girl lodging her complaint rang out.

Her voice was earnest, her anger was real, and with a strong will in her light blue-green eyes, the girl stared straight ahead in all seriousness.

However, for all her seriousness, one had to admit her protest lacked a bit of bite. After all, she was only eleven or twelve. Her features were so adorably well-formed that even her anger came off as more endearing than intimidating.

Old Man: “—Oy-yo, don't make me say it over and over, abacus girl.”

Facing that adorable girl, the reply came in a rasp from an old man like a withered tree.

His limbs were thin and his stature short. His hair—full, not thinning—was white as snow, and several teeth were missing inside his open mouth. The clothes he wore were shabby rags, far too fitting for both the man himself and this place.

That was only natural, for this was the so-called “Slums” on the outskirts of the city—no homes, no jobs, no future. It was where the homeless huddled together and lived out their days in resigned gloom.

In a place like this, the old man's appearance was what looked natural. Rather, the girl—properly dressed in a *kimono*, already showing the first hints that she would grow into a breathtaking beauty—was the odd one out.

Glaring peevishly at that oddball girl, the old man scratched at his chest, ribs showing beneath the skin, and then,

Old Man: “No matter how many times ya come, my answer ain’t changin’. This ain’t a place for girls in pretty dresses like you to be comin’ and goin’. Off with ya, off with ya.”

Girl: “Oh, c’mon! Why’re ya so impossible to talk to?! For starters, I’m from the slums to begin with, so yer worry’s way off the mark! Yer ten years late, too!”

Old Man: “Kakakaka! Mouthy little miss, ain’t ya. How ‘bout I just eat ya up myself!”

Girl: “Do it if ya can! Lemme tell ya, if ya try anything to me, my scary, scary guard dog’ll take a great big chomp outta yer head from the top down!”

At first glance, it looked like a childish spat between an overgrown brat of an old man and a cheeky girl—and that was, more or less, exactly what it was.

A quarrel between two people with more than fifty years between them—

Beastman: “—Cut it out already, Ana-bo.”

Girl: “Eek!”

With a booming voice, someone seized the girl by the scruff, drawing a yelp from her. Dangling with her feet off the ground, she looked back at the one who had grabbed her and pouted.

Girl: “Uncle, what d’you think you’re doin’!”

Beastman: “Don’t go “what’re ya doin’” on me. Who said I’m yer guard dog? I ain’t gone and decided I belong to ya yet, Ana-bo.”

Girl: “Oh, sayin’ that now! If ya go ‘n become mine, I ain’t gonna take off yer collar for ya, y’know.”

Beastman: “I put this collar on myself, y’hear. Whether I take it off or not ain’t for you ta say.”

Girl: “Mmmmmm… Hk!”

Before her eyes, the dog-faced beastman opened a mouth lined with sharp fangs and narrowed his eyes in exasperation.

His nearly two-meter frame was covered in dark-brown fur, and a rugged collar was fastened around his thick neck. The difference in size was such that he could have swallowed the girl whole, but there was not the slightest fear in her eyes as she regarded those fangs. On the contrary, her sulking gaze, expression, and tone overflowed with affection, and it was the dog-faced one, bathed in it at close range, who scratched his head in embarrassment.

Sympathizing with the dog-face, the old man called out, “Oy-yo,” and,

Old Man: “Sir Dog, from the looks of it ya got yer hands full, don’tcha. With that big mouth o’ yours, ain’t a girl like that just one bite? I’ll shut my eyes for ya, so hurry up ‘n put an end to it.”

Beastman: “Quit yer jokin’, old man. Do I look that hard up for a meal to ya?”

Girl: “Yeah, yeah! Don’t talk nonsense! Like Uncle would ever eat me…”

Beastman: “Besides, what’s there on Ana-bo to eat? Skin ‘n bones, flimsy as—ow ow ow! What the hell! Who just up ‘n yanks a man’s whiskers like that!”

Girl: “Dummy Uncle!”

As he started to heckle the old man back, the dog-face protested when she plucked out one of his whiskers. But the girl hopped lightly down, then spun toward the old man with a brisk, “Anyway!”

Girl: “Anyway!”

Amid the little commotion, she stood at its center, tossed the fistful of fur to the wind, and instead stabbed a finger straight at the old man.

And—

Girl: “I’ll say it as many times as it takes! Those cat siblings at yer place, gramps—I’m gonna make ‘em mine, absolutely, absolutely, so ya better be ready!”

Old Man: “…”

It was a threat so brazen it was almost refreshing, and the old man’s eyes widened a fraction as he took it. The girl, satisfied after getting it out, looked pleased with herself, while behind her the dog-face had a palm pressed to his own face.

Looking back and forth between the two, the old man gave a deep nod and then,

Old Man: “—Scram already, cat thief!”

2

Anastasia: “Seriously, what was that attitude! Even Hoshin only had to pay three visits to woo allies, but how many times have I gone to woo ‘em and…”

Ricardo: “Aaah, I got it, I got it. Ana-bo sure is a patient kid, huh.”

Anastasia: “That ain’t the kinda comfort I want! Proprietress, another milk!”

As she said it, the *kimono*-clad girl slammed her glass hard onto the tavern counter. With the girl’s mouth ringed in white, the proprietress cautioned her with, “You’re drinking too much.”

Anastasia: “Hmph, what’re ya sayin’. We only just started. Even you oughta be happier when customers drink a lot, Proprietress…”

Ricardo: “Don’t be sayin’ such pigheaded things, Ana-bo. The proprietress is worryin’ about ya.”

Anastasia: “Then you shoulda helped me more, Uncle!”

Ricardo: “Now how’s the blame jumpin’ to me!”

Wearing a sour look, the dog-faced beastman lamented how opening his mouth had only backfired. Beside him, the girl put her lips to the fresh milk that had just been brought, and kept on grumbling under her breath.

Proprietress: “Ana-chan, you’re awfully riled up, aren’t you. I can tell it went south again, but Ricardo, ain’t you gonna help her out?”

Ricardo: “If I butt in, she’ll absolutely get mad, Ana-bo. So for now, I’m just taggin’ along on her ins and outs of the slums so nobody interferes.”

In answer to the proprietress’s question, the dog-faced—Ricardo—shrugged with a weary “good grief” and gave a low rumble in his throat.

Proprietress: “Hmm. …Well, no doubt you dote on Ana-chan.”

Saying that, the proprietress narrowed her eyes and murmured about Ricardo and the girl—Anastasia.

The proprietress of this tavern and Ricardo had known each other for a fair while. To Anastasia as well, the proprietress was the manager of the first place she had ever worked, and someone she could rely on.

In other words, from the proprietress’s point of view, this dog-man and girl were tied by an old, inescapable bond.

Proprietress: “But don’t go overboard, okay? Ana-chan’s so cute it’s almost scary.”

Ricardo: “Even Ana-bo was just about sold off not long ago, so she’s reflectin’, I reckon. I’m keepin’ my eyes peeled, too. Don’t you worry.”

Proprietress: “And you let her keep goin’ to the slums? I don’t quite get your fatherly heart, Ricardo.”

With equal parts exasperation and trust, the proprietress said, “Take your time,” and returned to tending customers other than Ricardo and his companion.

Left at the counter were just the two of them—Ricardo and Anastasia.

Anastasia: “Uncle…”

Ricardo: “Yeah, Ana-bo. Why’re your eyes goin’ all dead-stare on just milk—scary lass…”

Anastasia: “I’m tryin’ this hard, so why ain’t it workin’?”

Ricardo: “Why, you ask? You make it sound all noble, but if that old man gets told, “I’m definitely takin’ your family,” he’ll get mad, won’t he. Think how you phrase it.”

Anastasia: “But it worked on you, didn’t it, Uncle?”

Ricardo: “No it didn’t. Don’t go sayin’ like I got sweet-talked by ya.”

Poking Anastasia’s forehead with a finger as he said it, Ricardo earned a sulky glare and a drawn-out, “Eeeh~.”

Anastasia: “You’re real mean, Uncle… I’d make Mimi and the others happy, too.”

Ricardo let one corner of his mouth soften at Anastasia’s grand ambition as she pouted and muttered.

This girl truly believed she could make other people happy. And she spared no effort to make that happen. —What a hopelessly greedy one she was.

The reason she kept grumbling traced back to an incident that had involved Ricardo and Anastasia not long before.

In short, Anastasia had been caught by a slaver and nearly sold. The slaver’s crimes were exposed, and the ringleaders were crushed by Ricardo and the others, but during that affair there had been a pair of kittenfolk siblings who worked together with the captive

Anastasia.

There were three siblings in all—an older sister and two little brothers—and after the incident, Anastasia took quite a liking to them. Greedy as she was, she wanted to bring the trio under her wing. And so she had paid repeated visits to the trio's guardian—an elderly gentleman of the slums—to try to persuade him.

For the record, she'd already gone more than ten times, but the truth was, there had been no results.

Ricardo: "I ain't stoppin' ya—your grit's a good thing—but why so desperate? Ain't no need to make it a "right now" deal, is there?"

Anastasia: "Sigh, you really take things too easy, Uncle. Listen? I ain't sayin' everything's first come, first served, but earlier is better. If you hadn't found me in that alley back then, I wouldn't be sittin' here drinkin' milk like this now, would I?"

Ricardo: "…"

Anastasia: "If some other kid had been attacked in that alley before me, you'd have saved her and you and me never woulda met. Then by now I'd…"

Ricardo: "Now that's a fool worry if I ever heard one."

Anastasia, who had been holding a finger up and waxing heatedly, went "Eh?" and widened her eyes. Ricardo clamped one big palm over her head and—

Ricardo: "I don't go helpin' just any ol' body willy-nilly. Sure, slavers piss me off, so maybe I'd have socked 'em, but I don't reckon I'd stick around to handle the aftermath."

Anastasia: "…So that means I'm special?"

Ricardo: "Yeah. Specially grubby—ow ow ow!"

Anastasia: "You idiot, Uncle—!"

Ripping out a tuft of Ricardo's chest fur, Anastasia screeched and bolted out of the tavern. Seeing her off with a pained expression, Ricardo grumbled, “What the hell was that…”

Proprietress: “Aaa—my my, you really did it, Ricardo.”

Ricardo: “Proprietress, I’ll pay for Ana-bo’s share. Don’t fret.”

Proprietress: “That ain’t what I’m worried about, honestly. I sympathize with Ana-chan.”

Leaving only that behind, the proprietress cleared away the glass Anastasia had left. Ricardo tilted his head at her words, his expression growing even more troubled, but—

Reisel: “—Tch tch tch. Havin’ yourself a good time there, ain’t ya, brother.”

Ricardo: “Huh?”

Suddenly, a man slid into the seat where Anastasia had been. Suspicious of the overly familiar tone, Ricardo turned, was briefly perplexed, then his eyes flew wide.

He was a *tanuki* beastman with long brown fur, notable for black only around his eyes and ears. His build was small even for his race, but that did not equate to frailty. Rather, a cunning gleam born of overcoming that flickered in his eyes—an opponent one could not afford to underestimate.

But Ricardo’s surprise was not at the man’s appearance. It was because this was someone tied to a memory Ricardo would not soon forget.

Ricardo: “…Reisel.”

Reisel: “Tch tch tch, honored ya remembered. —Still got that collar on, do ya?”

Called by name, the *tanuki*—Reisel—clicked his tongue in a laugh and said that while looking at Ricardo’s thick neck. Around that neck, the heavy, cold collar was still fastened.

3

Banan, a city of the Kararagi City-States, holds the position of the Second City among its ten great cities.

Situated roughly at the center of Kararagi's territory, Banan is the hub of a city-state rich in every kind of distinction—in good ways and bad, a place where many cultures flow in.

Among those are the house-building style found in no other land, known as Wafuu architecture, and the Wasou culture typified by the *kimono*.

Through that streetscape—a hotchpotch of cultures unseen in other countries—the girl who had stormed out of the tavern, Anastasia, walked along with her cheeks puffed out in a pout.

Anastasia: "Honestly, Uncle just doesn't understand a maiden's heart at all…!"

Seething, Anastasia's heart was roiling with grievances against Ricardo.

All their talk in the tavern had done was pour more fuel onto the fire of her dissatisfaction. She wanted him to think a little more before he spoke. The trust she offered and the credit he extended weren't balancing out.

Given her present abilities, perhaps that couldn't be helped—but—

Anastasia: "That's why, unless I keep up a quick pace, I'll never catch up. …Uncle and the others have already started walking on ahead."

She wouldn't say life was first come, first served, but it was a fact that, in many things, being early gave you an edge. Just as she'd told Ricardo at the tavern—that was Anastasia's philosophy of life.

And she knew she herself had started walking late. Even when she tried to move her feet faster on purpose, the gap refused to close. Still, she didn't want to think the ones who had started earlier were being unfair. That would be to demean herself.

Anastasia: “I’m my very first piece of capital, so if I fumble that, there’s no going forward…”

Staring at her own palms, Anastasia bit her lip. They were small. She had tried it before, but her little hands couldn’t hold even ten coins clenched tight.

For Anastasia—who had many things she wanted to grasp and nothing she wanted to let go—the outlook was worrisome.

Anastasia: “That’s why I want Uncle and Mimi and the others to be mine…”

Mimi: “Ooh? Were ya talkin’ about Mimi? What’s up? Somethin’ happen?”

Anastasia: “Ah.”

The instant she pulled her gaze from her palms, a cute kittenfolk girl with orange fur—Mimi—popped into her field of view with a smile.

At her sudden appearance, Anastasia went wide-eyed, and Mimi wagged her tail with a “Oh yeah—,”

Mimi: “Like, you went to Roshi’s place again? I smelled it, so I was like, maybe so?”

Anastasia: “Ah—yeah, that’s right. I’ve been goin’ to ask him, “Please give me Mimi and the others, ‘cause I want ‘em,” but he just won’t nod along…”

Mimi: “Dehya-hya-hya-hya! Wantin’ Mimi ‘n the others is amazin’! Young lady, you sure got a good eye! But Mimi and the others ain’t cheap! Ten bowls o’ food!”

Anastasia: “Cheap! I’ll buy!”

Mimi: “Sold!”

Mimi threw both hands up, and Anastasia hugged her head-on. Mimi hugged her back, and if they could have, they would have called the deal sealed then and there, but—

Hetaro: “N-No, you can’t, Sis. If you go doin’ that on your own, Roshi’ll get mad at us…”

Tivey: “Yes, yes. Big Brother’s right.”

—came the voices of two kittenfolk with faces very like Mimi’s—Hetaro and Tivey, Mimi’s younger brothers.

These three—Mimi and her brothers—were the kittenfolk trio Anastasia desired. The three of them, scampering adorably about the city, would sometimes run into her like this on the street. Each time, she would keep at her wooing without learning her lesson, but without their guardian’s permission, the negotiations kept running aground.

With the three siblings gathered like this, Anastasia tightened her hugging arms in defiance of the two brothers’ objections.

Anastasia: “Mmm… So you two are on Gramps’s side, huh. The only one on my side is Mimi~”

Mimi: “That! Mimi, weak-weak one’s ally! Also Hetaro and Tivey’s ally! Roshi super strong so dunno! Toasty!”

Anastasia: “It’s Roshi who’s the real tough customer. Say, do you three know any weakness Roshi’s got?”

Hetaro: “Wouldn’t it be kinda wrong if we told you that…?”

Anastasia asked with a face innocent of ill intent, and Hetaro gave a wry smile. A bit of the fierceness faded from Mimi’s face, and a touch of softness slipped in. Cute.

Beside them, sharp-eyed Tivey crossed his short arms with a, “That’s right.” Cute.

Tivey: “There’s a lot about Roshi we don’t understand either. Seems like there are stories he doesn’t want us hearin’ too…”

Mimi: “Yeah—that! Like, kinda feels like that today, too? So, since someone's comin', he's like "go somewhere," and kicked us out! Makes no sense!"

Hetaro: "Ah, Sis, that's—"

Mimi picked up Tivey's words and curled her lips while still in Anastasia's arms. Hetaro tried to stop her, but he was a step too late.

Anastasia: "—Hmmm. So Roshi's meetin' someone he keeps secret even from you three."

Mimi: "…"

Anastasia: "And that's why he tried so rough to shoo me off today. I see, I see—makes sense. But if that's how it is…"

Mimi: "Ooh? Kinda feels like you're thinkin' lotsa things?"

Twisting around within Anastasia's hug, Mimi ended up being embraced from behind. Unaware of the change in posture, Anastasia was wrapped up in some sort of contemplation.

At the way her light blue-green eyes flashed brilliantly, Hetaro and Tivey involuntarily caught their breath. It felt as if they had carelessly opened a door that should have stayed shut.

Tivey: "Um, truth is, we've got someplace to be. Right, Big Brother?"

Hetaro: "Y-Yep! So, uh, we'll be takin' our leave now. Come on, Sis."

Mimi: "Huh? Did we have somethin'? We can go after talkin' with the young lady, right?"

Hetaro & Tivey: "S-Sis!"

Hetaro and Tivey flustered in turns, but Mimi only tilted her head at their suggestion. And so their little scheme failed, and—

Anastasia: "Could I borrow you a moment? —I've got a favor to ask of you three.”

—smiling sweetly, Anastasia spoke, and Hetaro and Tivey’s shoulders slumped.

For they knew all too well—

Mimi: “O-kay, got it—! Mimi’s the weak-weak one’s ally, so it can’t be helped—yes indeedy!”

—that Mimi would never refuse a request.

4

The high, clinking ring of colliding glasses sounded lightly from a secluded table at the back of the tavern.

Facing each other were a dog-man and a tanuki-man. Thanks to having asked the proprietress to clear the area, their talk wouldn’t reach other ears. In that setting, the tanuki-man put his lips to his glass, and his mouth softened at the taste of liquor and reunion.

Reisel: “Been what, five years since we split up? We both did real good stayin’ alive, didn’t we?”

Ricardo: “Reckon so. You were always the type to do reckless, troublesome stuff. I figured once you got out, you’d drop dead in a month, tops.”

Reisel: “Tch tch tch, listen to you! Says the guy who was gettin’ on the guards’ bad side and beaten half to death.”

As he spoke, the tanuki-man, Reisel, smacked Ricardo's shoulder roughly. There was nearly a twofold difference in their builds, but Ricardo didn't rebuke the unrestrained rudeness. Only, at the uncharacteristically quiet way he lifted his drink, Reisel's black eyes narrowed.

Reisel: "You're awful quiet. The name "Hound" is gonna cry for shame, Ricardo."

Ricardo: "When the mood's sunk, a drinkin' table gets quiet, too. There ain't no way this is some chance meetin' here. What d'ya want from me."

Reisel: "Helps that you're quick on the uptake, but you sure turned into a dull bastard, brother."

Draining his drink in one pull and setting the glass on the table, Reisel breathed out liquor-scented air. At the displeased attitude of an old acquaintance, Ricardo followed with, "Naturally."

Ricardo: "If it was just old pals shootin' the breeze, the drinks'd go down easy."

Reisel: "Heh, who's got time for games like that. You got it right, though. The way you even had the place cleared out—guess it's still ingrained in ya."

Ricardo: "…"

Reisel: "Tch tch tch. Slave mindset. Well, anyone could tell just lookin' at that neck."

Grinning vapidly, Reisel pointed at Ricardo's collar and spat the words out. But there was an irksome cast in his eyes, making it obvious the grin wasn't his true feelings.

No wonder. This collar was the mark of a slave—a "Meteor." Reisel, too, had once worn one.

A slave's collar was a Meteor that forbade disobedience to the owner. The one on Ricardo’s neck had already lost its binding force, but Ricardo himself kept it as a reminder.

Naturally, to a freed slave whose purpose had been to get rid of collars, it wasn’t a pleasant sight.

Reisel: “Secrets to whisper, tools to loan ‘n borrow—you gotta do it so the watcher don’t catch you. That’s why a lone wolf can’t live in the doghouse. You remember that, don’t ya?”

Ricardo: “If lookin’ at this collar makes it seem like I forgot, you’d best swap your eyes out.”

Reisel: “—You remember, don’t ya? Huh?”

Ricardo: “…”

Pressed to repeat himself, Ricardo let out a breath. Then he turned his whole body toward Reisel.

Ricardo: “I remember. You’re talkin’ ‘bout how I owe you.”

Reisel: “Ahh, good. That’s a relief. Otherwise comin’ all this way’d be for nothin’.”

Ricardo: “…What d’ya want me to do?”

Reisel: “Nothin’ complicated. In a few days, a certain piece o’ cargo’s gettin’ hauled outta this city. We hit the wagon carryin’ it and take the load. I want your help with that.”

At Reisel’s crooked-lipped request, Ricardo squinted one eye and snorted through his nose.

It was more or less what Ricardo had expected. If he’d been wrong, that would’ve been happier for him, but—

Ricardo: “You’re still doin’ that kinda thing, huh. If they catch you this time, it ain’t gonna end with just a collar.”

Reisel: “Didn’t ask ya for extra worryin’. So? You in?”

Ricardo: "…Why use me? I dunno the details, but even if it ain't me, you'll find folks who'll help. Goin' outta your way to ask an old pal don't sit right."

Reisel: "Tch tch tch. Don't go wearin' out a brain you don't need. What I'm expectin' from you is muscle. Truth is, I've teamed up with all kinds, but there ain't anyone on your level."

It wasn't a compliment Ricardo welcomed, and he fell silent for a beat to think.

Boiled down, Reisel's invitation was a joke of a proposition to join a robbery for old times' sake.

Naturally, a normal man would refuse. Freed from slavery, Ricardo worked an honest job; right now he even served as a guard for the Chuden Trading Company in this city.

There was no reason to throw that away and become a rootless bandit.

Thinking normally—

Ricardo: "—All right."

Yet Ricardo drew back his chin and accepted that ridiculous invitation.

Reisel: "Ohh, that's my brother! I figured you'd say that!"

Ricardo: "Ain't you a smooth one. You knew I couldn't turn you down, that's why you brought it up."

Reisel: "'Course I did. Who volunteers to fight a losing battle. But I'm relieved—real relieved."

Clicking his tongue in a laugh, Reisel waved a hand to call the proprietress. He ordered two fresh drinks, all set to toast.

Ricardo: "So, "cargo" could be a lotta things. What's the target?"

Before the proprietress came over, Ricardo put the question to

Reisel's side profile, bright with good cheer. Narrowing his eyes, Reisel answered, "Yeah."

Reisel: "—We're after "Meteors" a rich man's been hoardin' for a hobby."

The seat across from him now empty, Ricardo knocked back what might've been his umpteenth drink. It was tasteless liquor—or rather, the liquor wasn't at fault. With the drinker like this, the drink itself could only suffer.

Even after Reisel left, Ricardo remained in the tavern, licking at his dull drink.

Proprietress: "Didn't get a very nice feel off that friend o' yours."

Taking his empty glass, the proprietress murmured in a voice only Ricardo could hear. The place wasn't exactly packed, but if you strained your ears, conversations drifted in from all around.

He appreciated the thoughtfulness. For that very reason, he couldn't burden the others or the proprietress.

Proprietress: "Where'd you get acquainted?"

Ricardo: "Where they hand out matching collars. Unlike me, it didn't suit him none."

Proprietress: "…I see."

She didn't press the joking Ricardo, who had flicked his collar with a finger. Leaning on that consideration, Ricardo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and rose.

Proprietress: "Your companion paid your tab."

Ricardo: "Figures. Well, he'd at least do that much."

Proprietress: "But Ana-chan's milk still ain't paid."

Ricardo: "He didn't cover that…?"

A bit wrong-footed, Ricardo paid the bill with coppers from his pocket. Then, lifting a hand to the proprietress, he made to head out just like that, when—

Proprietress: “I ain’t gonna stop you from pullin’ somethin’ dangerous now, but think about Ana-chan.”

Ricardo: “What’s this all of a sudden. Strange proprietress, you are. …Ah, but.”

Smiling bitterly at her words, Ricardo stopped and turned back at the door. Narrowing his eyes at the proprietress inside, he added,

Ricardo: “Keep this from Ana-bo, would ya. —Couldn’t handle it if she took a bite outta me.”

5

Mimi: “Roshi’s like, super—I dunno—some kinda geezer I totally don’t get! But he’s reaaally strong!”

As they walked, Anastasia asked about Roshi, and Mimi answered by flailing her hands and feet with an explanation that wasn’t helpful at all. Hearing it, Anastasia smiled with a, “That so.”

Anastasia: “And in practice, how is he? Hetaro, Tivey.”

Hetaro: “Y-You know, Sis didn’t get it wrong? Roshi really is a mysterious person, and…”

Tivey: “He’s the benefactor who took us in, yes yes. But he hasn’t told us details either. It’s been three years now. Since we’re five years old…”

Anastasia: “So you’ve been in Roshi’s care for more than half your lives.”

At Anastasia’s confirmation, the three of them nodded together.

Kittenfolk like Mimi and her brothers grow fast. From what she’d heard, in just one year after birth they were almost the same as adults and stayed that way thereafter.

They said Mimi and the others met Roshi when they were two, but even then the three of them were already the same three they were now.

In other words, it wasn't like it was a memory from before they were aware of things.

Tivey: "Roshi taught us how to live. We were abandoned by our parents, and not getting caught by slavers in the slums was thanks to you, Miss, and to Roshi."

Mimi: "Weeell, Mimi worked hard! But she got stabbed in the tummy and maybe died! So danger!"

Anastasia: "Doesn't sound like a tale we can celebrate without reservations, huh…"

Mimi rubbed her soft belly and said it like it was nothing, and Anastasia smiled wryly. But the two little brothers walking to either side of their sister looked at her gently.

It must really have been a serious situation, but the three of them had gotten through it in their own way.

Anastasia: "So the one who saved Mimi when she was in danger was Roshi?"

Tivey: "Yes yes. After that, Roshi took us to his house and taught us lots of things."

Mimi: "Mimi's power! Tivey's study! Hetaro's chicken!"

Hetaro: "C-Cautious, Sis!"

Hearing Hetaro hastily correct it, Anastasia nodded in understanding.

Apparently Roshi had looked at the three siblings and raised them to cultivate each of their strengths. In that sense, the upbringing was a success. Mimi had grown sturdy, Tivey clever, and—

Anastasia: "And Hetaro, cautious to the point of being a scaredy."

Mimi: “That! Scaredy-cat!”

Hetaro: “Sis…”

Called a coward again and again, Hetaro drooped his shoulders. As Mimi poked him with innocent “what’s wrong?” taps, the sharp-looking Tivey folded his upright ears and said,

Tivey: “I think you’ve noticed too, Miss Anastasia, but Roshi isn’t just anybody. I didn’t understand before, but now I realize he’s strange. Because…”

Anastasia: “If you’re gonna teach this and that, you gotta know this and that in the first place, right?”

Tivey: “…Yes.”

Anastasia got ahead of him, and Tivey made a troubled face at those words.

An old man who picked up the three kittenfolk siblings, educated each of them in a way that fit, yet continued living in the slums—Kararagi City-States’ underbelly—just who was he behind the scenes?

Anastasia: “Well, I don’t really care who he is. What I need is a way to put the squeeze on him.”

Tivey: “Eeeeh?! Blackmail?!”

Anastasia: “Ah, “blackmail” sounds a mite harsh! I mean stocking up on cards for a peaceful talk.”

Hetaro: “Uh, “peaceful talk,” you say…”

Knowing Anastasia’s policy, Tivey and Hetaro grasped the situation precisely. However, it was already too late; they were nearly at Roshi’s home where Mimi and the others lived.

And just like that, the four of them headed for Roshi—

Anastasia: “—Pardon the intrusion!”

Roshi: “Wha—whoa whoa whoa! What the hell’s goin’ on?!”

Sliding open the plank-like entrance, Anastasia marched into the house with Mimi and the others in tow. Roshi, who’d been sitting cross-legged on the earthen floor, bulged his eyes at the force of her entry.

But the moment he realized his visitors were Anastasia and the kittenfolk, he went,

Roshi: “Hey now, partin’ ways and then another suicide charge right after? There’s a limit to how damn persistent you can be.”

Anastasia: “…Hmm. Looks like your guest is already gone.”

Roshi: “A “guest,” huh? Where’d you hear—hey, you brats! You go ‘n blabbed, did ya!”

He barked at Mimi and her brothers when Anastasia glanced around the cramped house and muttered so. The little brothers stiffened, but Mimi stuck out her lips in a peeved pout.

Mimi: “Eeh, it’s fine-fine! And what’s that—hush-hush? A seecwet? Nobody told me that!”

Roshi: “Ahh, damn! I didn’t say it, huh! But do I gotta say it every time? That’s a pain in the ass. And it’s “secret,” not “seecwet,” you blockhead girl.”

Mimi: “Whoever says “blockhead” is the blockhead! Roshi’s a blockhead! Ah—now Mimi’s a blockhead too! Ahahaha!”

Before the head-clutching Roshi, Mimi kicked her feet and rolled around. Leaving the noisy girl be for the moment, Roshi turned his gaze to Anastasia.

Roshi: “You got some nerve stickin’ your nose in another man’s household, little rascal.”

Anastasia: “I was gonna say it’s ‘cause my parents raised me wrong, but I’m a foundling, and I didn’t get no raising from my folks. So this is just my nature.”

Roshi: "…"

Anastasia: "Truth is, I would've loved to hear from the person you were meetin', but seems I was late to the party. Still, looks like it wasn't a wasted trip."

Saying that, Anastasia narrowed her eyes and pointed at Roshi's hands. Spread out in the old man's hands where he sat cross-legged was something like a written order. He'd been focusing on it—that was why he'd been slow to react to Anastasia and the others coming in.

Anastasia: "What's written on that?"

Roshi: "—My job."

Roshi answered Anastasia's question shortly.

He could have dodged, but it seemed he chose not to lie on purpose. So Anastasia, too, asked bluntly:

Anastasia: "I dunno what kind of work it is, but can you do it? With your body the way it is."

Roshi: "…"

Hetaro: "B-Body…? What do you mean by that?"

Until now, Hetaro had been silent, but at Roshi falling quiet he blinked. Tivey wore the same uneasy face as his brother, and only Mimi tilted her head.

Receiving their gazes, Roshi let out a short breath and—

Roshi: "You're a nasty brat. Where'd you twig to it?"

Anastasia: "It's a common tale in the slums, and you're old, and also I can tell just by lookin'."

Roshi: "I'll rephrase it. You're a brat with nasty eyes."

Clicking his tongue, Roshi glared into Anastasia's round eyes. But

Anastasia didn't flinch in the least; she silently took that stabbing gaze head-on.

He clicked his tongue again, taking that as well. Then, at his profile —

Hetaro: "Roshi! Don't dodge the question! Your body—what do you mean?!"

It was Hetaro who closed in on him with a voice cracked high. Always quiet and reserved, the fact that he acted so was proof of just how desperate he was.

Roshi looked back at the pressing Hetaro with a calm gaze and said,

Roshi: "I taught you a buncha times to follow your gut. What you're thinkin' is on the mark. I ain't got long."

Hetaro: "…"

Roshi: "Knowin' that and still comin' around over and over. You really are a nasty brat."

Ruffling Hetaro's head, Roshi threw a barb at Anastasia. But she didn't cut in here.

Mimi: "Hey—Roshi, are you gonna die?"

The one who did cut in was Mimi. At her straightforward question —very like her—the little brothers started, but Roshi broke into a grin.

Roshi: "Ohhh yeah. I'm gonna die. Sorry 'bout it—looks like the call came earlier than I thought."

Mimi: "I see—can't be helped. Hetaro and Tivey are still teeny, so if Roshi dies I'll be suuuper worried."

Roshi: "You're the same age as them!"

Staying smiling, Roshi retorted to Mimi's conclusion after she'd put herself on a high shelf. Then he tapped a finger on the written order he had spread out.

Roshi: “This here’s gonna be my last job. I ain’t lettin’ anyone complain. Abacus girl, I don’t wanna have to ask you for somethin’ like this, but…”

Anastasia: “Mm, I’ll take good care of Mimi and the others.”

Roshi: “Don’t go sayin’ it before I do.”

With her thin chest thrust out, Anastasia answered proudly, and Roshi’s cheek twisted. Then he looked at the two who still couldn’t quite grasp things—Hetaro and Tivey—and spread his arms.

Roshi: “C’mon, get over here, you runts.”

Called, Mimi took her frozen brothers by the hands. Tugging them forward, she leaped all three at once into Roshi’s chest. Roshi hugged the three kittenfolk tight and—

Roshi: “You three are my pride and joy. —Really, my real pride and joy.”

Mimi: “Mm. …Hey, Roshi.”

From within his chest, Mimi looked up at him as he spoke softly. With himself reflected in her round eyes, Roshi asked, “What is it.”

Receiving the question, Mimi prefaced with a, “Um, see—” and—

Mimi: “Sorry, ‘kay?”

Roshi: “Huh? Gah-gu—!”

In a flash, Mimi’s tail whipped up and smacked Roshi hard at the nape of his neck.

It was so sudden he reacted a beat too slow; Roshi let out a strangled groan and toppled with whites of his eyes showing. Seeing it, Hetaro and Tivey sprang back and briskly produced rope.

Then, working in swift coordination, they threw the rope over Roshi and bound him up.

Anastasia: "…The way you three breathed together was amazing, but what exactly is this?"

Unable to keep up with what she'd just seen, Anastasia muttered in amazement. Hearing her, the three siblings, after confirming Roshi was fully restrained, said—

Mimi: "'Cause if we leave him be, Roshi'll push himself and die, right? That's no good, we won't let him."

Tivey: "Even if it's not long, we still want to be with Roshi a while yet…"

Hetaro: "I figured Miss wouldn't be that obedient, yes yes."

I see—given how deep the little brothers' bond ran through the Divine Protection of Trisection, they understood their wild sister's thinking very well. On that point, it couldn't be helped that Roshi fell a step short.

—And this situation suited Anastasia just fine as well.

From the start, Anastasia had no intention of letting Roshi die on some last "job."

Anastasia: "I'm just surprised I wasn't the only one thinkin' I'd swipe the job while he wasn't lookin'."

Hetaro: "Eh? Then, Miss Anastasia, you…"

Anastasia: "What? You weren't thinkin' of just tossin' the job in the trash either, were you, Hetaro?"

She didn't think they should simply throw away his so-called duty. It was true that this job weighed on Roshi more than appropriate—enough to balance against time with Mimi and the others.

In that case, rather than removing the scale without leave, they'd take it upon themselves to handle its contents.

Anastasia: “What is it…”

Mimi: “Ooh, what’s it say? Can Mimi and the others do it? Can we pull it off?”

Mimi rested her chin on Anastasia’s shoulder as she picked up Roshi’s document and checked the contents. Feeling that light weight, Anastasia ran her eyes over the lines.

Then, wetting her lips with her tongue at what she read—

Anastasia: “Looks like what Roshi was told to do was to recover some weird “Meteor.””

6

—When Ricardo first met Reisel, he was sprawled on a cold, hard floor.

The slave pen where slaves were crammed was something like a prison. If there was any difference from a prison, it was that inmates were criminals, while slaves were just folks whose luck had run out.

Ricardo, unlucky enough to become a slave like the rest, was rebellious, and he frequently drew the wrath of the watchers who oversaw the pen. He couldn’t stand their overbearing attitude, and they apparently couldn’t stand that even after falling to slavery, Ricardo refused to lose his fire.

Called out for the pettiest reasons, he’d be wracked with pain all through his body by the collar’s function each time, then beaten to their hearts’ content and thrown into solitary.

The watchers’ violence grew worse by the day; a new wound would be layered over the old before it healed. That had gone on for more than two months, and he was just about ready to accept death when—

Reisel: “—Tch tch tch, you’re somethin’ else. After takin’ that much, you’re still alive?”

Peering in from outside the punishment cell was a tanuki-man—Reisel—and their eyes met.

—It seemed Reisel had managed to play things quite cleverly inside the slave pen. He was in the watchers' good graces, and thanks to him the beatings on Ricardo stopped right away.

From then on, though still a slave, life in the pen got a lot easier. Of course, there was still harsh, grueling labor, the meals were never enough, and some died when they couldn't endure the drudgery.

But Ricardo's tough body and spirit didn't bow to life as a slave.

Ricardo: "Why'd ya help me?"

Once, during a break while they were digging into a wall in the mountains, Ricardo asked Reisel that. Reisel's face went blank for a heartbeat like he didn't know what he meant, then he nodded with an, "Ahh, right," and said,

Reisel: "As ya can see, I'm a scrawny tanuki-man. I needed muscle to live on here. On that point, I'm plenty satisfied with you, brother."

Ricardo: "…That so. Then fine."

He was grateful. Thanks to Reisel, it was true that Ricardo hadn't died. Still, apart from any sense of obligation, Ricardo just couldn't bring himself to like Reisel.

Like stagnant pond water, the man's eyes looked murky. Maybe it was a conviction that Reisel had never once shown his belly—his true self.

And in fact, that was true. In the middle of that very digging work, Reisel incited multiple slaves and pulled off a jailbreak from the slave pen.

Ricardo wasn't invited to the breakout. But the watchers surrounded him, insisting he had to have known about Reisel's scheme, and they beat him within an inch of his life. He endured that hell on his own, took off his collar, and worked properly until he earned the status of a freed slave.

And now—still wearing the collar he'd earned the right to remove, sitting at Reisel's side like back then—

Reisel: "I heard you had it rough after I was gone?"

Sitting on the ground, looking down on the mountain road, Ricardo heard Reisel toss that out.

The question lacked a subject, but Ricardo understood immediately what it meant. He scratched his own head with a thick finger and exhaled, "Reckon so."

Ricardo: "It was real bad. They said, "You were friendly with him, so you must know somethin'," and they beat me to a pulp."

Reisel: "My bad, my bad. Never thought they'd turn their eyes on you. I was in a rush back then, and kinda clumsy 'bout it."

Ricardo: "Nah, don't pretty it up. You figured the watchers'd glare at the one left behind—me. That's what I was there for, wasn't I?"

Ricardo's low question made Reisel narrow his eyes and choose silence.

They were in the mountains away from the city of Banan. A mountain path traced the edge of a sheer cliff, and the Falo cart with their target cargo was slated to pass along it. Blended into a stand of trees overlooking the road, they were lying in wait to ambush and spring a surprise attack.

Killing time with old stories was just part of whiling away the wait.

Ricardo: "…Oh, rare bird flyin' up there."

He lifted his gaze toward the call overhead and murmured in a dazed tone.

Reisel: "Why?"

Ricardo: "Huh?"

Reisel: “If so, why’d ya take my invite today? You coulda just brushed me off sayin’ you didn’t owe me nothin’. Wouldn’t be strange.”

Reisel was eyeing Ricardo—who was looking at the sky—with a gaze like he was watching something uncanny. Ricardo shrugged at that stare and clicked his fangs.

Ricardo: “What’s there to explain. You usin’ me as a decoy and you helpin’ me in the punishment cell are separate. A debt’s a debt; I’ll pay it back. But you keep the promise.”

Reisel: “No bodies, grab the goods, ‘n beat it—right?”

Ricardo: “I ain’t puttin’ lives on the line for some dumb reason. I got a place in the world now.”

Ricardo glared, drawing a firm line. Reisel lifted both hands and nodded with a, “Hey, hey.”

Reisel: “Whatever form it takes, long as ya neutralize ‘em, no problem. Luckily the cargo’s escort ain’t much. We’ve already got the driver wrapped around our finger.”

Ricardo: “Thorough as ever. —’Bout time?”

Catching a subtle change in the air, Ricardo snorted and swung his head around. The rumble of wheels on the mountain road reached them, and in the far distance the Falo cart eased into view.

Falo were mild-tempered animals with greater endurance than ground dragons and ligers, prized even outside Kararagi. But their temperament made them that much more skittish.

—For example, a dog-man dropping down from above could spook them so badly their minds just shut down.

Driver: “G—aaAAAA—!!”

Ricardo sprinted down the cliffside to block the path, hefting a great cleaver, and let out a roar. At the sound, the Falos drawing the cart froze up, cried out in fear, and couldn’t move.

All that was left was to leave the cart to Reisel and the driver he'd bought off, while Ricardo peeled off the escorts—

Ricardo: "—!"

In the next instant, a flash grazed his face, and Ricardo snapped his whole body back hard.

An utterly blindsiding strike—if he'd been any slower in dodging, his head would've flown. Fur bristling with danger, Ricardo turned his gaze toward the one who'd just attacked.

His foe spun the thin blades gripped in both hands, tilted his head, and glanced back.

???: "What now, ya dodged it, did ya. Figured ya were just some death-wish bandit, but looks like ya got some spine, don't ya."

Looking up at Ricardo slowly as he spoke was someone of small stature.

With swords near as long as he was tall in both hands, red eyes fixed this way, he was a white-furred rabbit-man. Clad in a *kimono*, a leaf between his lips—those features told Ricardo who he was.

So much for "the escort ain't much." The fool Reisel had been tricked by false intel.

A twin-sword style with white scabbards—this rabbit-man was—

Ricardo: "—The "Beheader," Shiroro Tonerico!"

Shiroro: "Ohh? So ya know me, do ya. Knowin' and still comin' at me—ya done a mighty stupid thing, haven't ya."

With a slicing whirr in the air, the rabbit-man—Shiroro—only about a meter tall, flaunted a gust from his blades. Half Ricardo's height he might be, but his mastery left no doubt—he was the real deal.

Say "Beheader," and you meant one of the captains of Scratch of

Silver, the mercenary band with many beastmen. His legends were countless; rumor had it he took ten heads in a single clash. Hopefully that was an exaggeration, but sadly, that first stroke didn't feel exaggerated at all.

Shiroro: "Thought ya were the sort to hide yer face like a coward, but seems ya're a man who can do a little. Why don't ya strip off that constrictin' thing and show me yer manly mug."

Ricardo: "…"

Pointing his blade this way, Shiroro threw his words at Ricardo. Reflected in the steel of the sword in his grip was Ricardo's face hidden by a mask.

Since the goal was to keep the body count at zero, he had to avoid having the involved parties see his face. That was why the disguise—but at this rate, the original goal was looking shaky.

Of course he had no intention of taking lives, but right now he was more worried about becoming a corpse himself.

And naturally, under these circumstances, Reisel's aim—the attack on the Falo cart—was—

Shiroro: "—Oh?"

A small sound escaped him as Shiroro sprang sideways. What he'd dodged—quick as he was—was a wheel grinding furiously through the dirt and, right behind it, the Falo cart barreling straight ahead.

Naturally, Ricardo, who'd been facing Shiroro, also leaped aside to avoid being run over. He rolled, the Falo cart thundered past him—and up on the driver's seat—

Ricardo: "…"

For a split second, his eyes locked with Reisel's up on the box, and then he was left in the dust. There wasn't a trace of concern in Reisel's eyes as he went.

Spitting out the grit and bad taste in his mouth along with his saliva, Ricardo realized.

Reisel hadn't been duped by any false intel. From the start he'd known the target Falo cart would have a top-tier escort—and that was why he'd picked Ricardo.

Not because he believed he'd win for sure, but because he needed someone who could buy time—just enough.

Shiroro: "Well now, I dunno the what 'n why of it… but if I'm to believe my driver showed some wit, it felt a tad too strange."

Ricardo: "…"

Shiroro: "Which is to say, sorry, but I can't spend long on ya. I gotta knock that thick neck o' yours clean off and hurry after that cart. If I don't, the captain'll pitch a fit."

Cracking his neck, Shiroro leveled the guardless, white-sheathed blades. The sword aura bathing him scorched through Ricardo's whole body, and he tore his focus from the cart and poured his all into the foe before him.

He had no time to be angry about being used yet again. He threw everything he had, in the little time he had, into bringing down this enemy.

And then—

Shiroro: "—That thick neck looks worth the cut."

Two silver flashes burst forth, rending the wind straight for Ricardo's neck to cleave it clean.

7

Reisel: "Some things never change. Big lugs don't use their heads. They think that's fine, and that's why they're useless. You think so too, don't ya?"

Coachman: "…"

Reisel: “Ahh, right. You can’t talk anymore.”

With a vicious grin, Reisel kicked the coachman beside him. The coachman’s neck had been slashed clean through; his life had already run out.

The body he’d kicked toppled, tumbled off the Falo cart, and dropped over the cliff. Without even seeing it fall, Reisel’s lips eased in satisfaction at his own handiwork.

He urged the Falos faster, putting distance between himself and the fight he’d left behind—Ricardo versus the escort. He had a fair grasp of Ricardo’s skill, but there was no way he’d beat the “Beheader.”

At best, Ricardo would buy a little time, and that would be enough for Reisel’s side to silence mouths.

All that remained—

Reisel: “—Hand over the target, and my end of the job’s done.”

Fishing in his breast, Reisel drew out a scroll. It was the inventory he’d obtained beforehand of the goods to be carried by this Falo cart, and what he wanted was a single item among them.

Of course, he intended to make practical use of the rest as well, but not getting too greedy was the trick to long life. There were other tricks to long life, and by those lights he couldn’t tell how Ricardo had managed to live this long.

Reisel: “Whether it’s ill luck or plain misfortune, either way, since he’s gonna die here today, it don’t mean much.”

He had no interest in a dull debate over what one lives for, but if he had to answer for Ricardo’s life, it was for this day.

—Today, Ricardo’s life existed to grant Reisel’s wish.

Reisel: “Tch tch tch, thanks, brother. Thanks to you, my life’s gonna shine.”

Clicking his tongue, Reisel guided the Falo cart onto the route he'd planned, confirmed there were no pursuers, and moved to inspect the cargo.

Unable to wait, he checked the inside of the bed—and—

Reisel: "—Huh?"

He stood frozen amid a load bed full of nothing but empty wooden crates, a dumbfounded sound slipping out.

8

Hetaro: "B-But, it really went this well, huh?"

Anastasia: "Turns out folks don't look around as much as they think they do. Well, I'm relieved it all went smooth-like for us, too."

Patting the jittery Hetaro on the head beside her, Anastasia smiled sweetly.

The two of them sat on the driver's bench—the driver's bench of the dogcart pulling the freight wagon. Steering the dogcart drawn by several ligers, Hetaro kept glancing back again and again.

She understood how he felt, worrying they might be chased, but—

Anastasia: "Ain't no need to fret so much; they won't be after us that quick. We're runnin' the opposite way, so they won't catch up before we swap wagons."

Hetaro: "Maybe so, but…"

Cautious by nature, Hetaro still couldn't shake his unease. In any case, this was a moment when they were counting on how alert he was to his surroundings. In fact, if Hetaro hadn't been ratcheting up his vigilance at every step, they weren't sure this plot would have succeeded.

—Anastasia and the others had decided to restrain Roshi and carry out his charge in his stead.

It seemed the objective was to recover the "Meteors" riding on the wagon being transported, but Anastasia and company didn't try to fulfill it the easy way.

Anastasia: "If we wind up in danger instead of him, Roshi'll get mad, y'know."

Their aim to begin with was to keep Roshi from doing anything reckless, so if the end result was that the stress took a toll and brought his time sooner, there'd be no point. "Time of death"—not words she wanted to dwell on.

Anyway, given a few such conditions, the method Anastasia came up with was very simple—namely, swapping the wagons.

Anastasia: "We check out the target Falo cart ahead of time and prepare a wagon that's the spittin' image. Then just make the inside look the part, and swap it cleanly right before departure."

Hetaro: "That alone wasn't exactly easy either, though…"

Anastasia: "That's where Mimi and Tivey did real nice, huh? They distracted the driver, then lured the rabbit guard away, and while they were gone we quietly… big success."

Mimi and Tivey, not present here, had supported Anastasia and Hetaro's actions in directly swapping the wagon. They were to regroup with the two at the rendezvous point and trade kudos anew for pulling the plan off.

That said, whether the rope was thick or short, it was still a tightrope they'd walked. If that fact itself was Hetaro's complaint, there was nothing Anastasia could do about it.

Only, that was just Anastasia's needless worry—and—

Hetaro: "Back when we got caught by the slavers with you and drew a map with our wounds, it was like this too, but…"

Anastasia: "…"

Hetaro: "Miss Anastasia, you're amazingly outrageous. Kinda like my big sis."

At that, Hetaro smiled at Anastasia. She blinked for just a second, then smiled faintly.

Anastasia: "That so, that so. Then mind holdin' the reins a bit? I'll go check the cargo. If Roshi's prize ain't there, that'd be a real mess."

Hetaro: "Okay, got it. Be careful."

Leaving the reins to Hetaro, Anastasia crossed the swaying dogcart and slipped into the wagon. The tarpaulin-wrapped bed looked for all the world like it was crammed with a rather atmospheric assortment of goods.

Peering over the likely collection of art pieces and bolts of cloth stuffed into the bed, Anastasia roughly estimated the total and held her head. For the money needed for what she wanted to do in the future, these could be a key that brought her much closer—but—

Anastasia: "Nope. Everything but the target item's gotta go back to their owners. Hoshin's saying: "Cheap means make life cheap." Cutting corners to take a shortcut's the worst."

If you learned ways to make money the easy way instead of sweating for it, people would drift that way in no time. Anastasia could easily picture herself turning out like that.

Precisely because of that, she wouldn't walk that road by choice. That was Anastasia's pride.

To state that resolve, Anastasia patted her own soft cheek with her palm. Then, as she looked around the bed for the target—

???: "—I see. For someone so young, you're a child who thinks very admirably, aren't you."

Anastasia: "…"

Startled by an unfamiliar voice, Anastasia's eyes flew wide, and then she sprang around toward where it had come from. Whoever had slipped into the wagon bed—stowaway or thief—could only be someone with ill intent, whichever it was.

She thought she had to call for Hetaro at once and deal with it.

However—

???: “Hold on, hold on. I don’t mean you any harm. I just, you know, wondered what kind of party had come to ruin me, and before I knew it I was checking for myself.”

Anastasia: “…Who are you?”

The breath she’d drawn to scream, Anastasia spent on a question. Taking that as willingness to talk, the owner of the voice let out a faint chuckle.

Then, before the fearful Anastasia—who still couldn’t see the speaker—a lid on one of the wooden boxes stowed in the corner of the bed was knocked from the inside. Knocked, knocked, knocked—

Anastasia: “…Won’t it open?”

???: “Seems not. If you could open it, that’d help. I’m rather feeble, you see.”

Anastasia: “I ain’t much for showin’ off my strength either, though…”

Muttering that, Anastasia crept up to the wooden box and gingerly hooked her fingers under the lid and lifted it off. —In that instant, what was inside slipped out and alighted on the wagon floor.

She snapped her gaze that way, and Anastasia’s light blue-green eyes opened wide.

???: “Phew. It wasn’t much time, but freedom’s still better than being boxed up.”

Anastasia: “…What are you?”

???: “Oh my, from “who” to “what,” is it. Hard to say whether that’s a demotion or a promotion, but in deference to the whirl of questions in your heart, I'll prioritize an answer."

With that roundabout phrasing showing no consideration at all for prioritizing an answer, the speaker stood on all fours on the bed's floor, a fox shaking out its white fur—and—

Echidna: "—I'm Echidna. For the moment, a humble, short-lived spirit. Pleased to meet you."

9

At the presence that had alighted onto the wagon bed's floor, the young Anastasia frowned.

Slender body twisting under a coat of fluffy white fur, black eyes narrowing impishly—the creature was a white fox with a charming face. If it had been merely a fox, she could have accepted it as some rare animal taken by poachers or the like—but—

Anastasia: “If it talks, that’s another story… uh, so, what are you?”

Before a white fox that understood human speech and could converse, Anastasia tilted her head. In response, the fox seemed to chuckle deep in its throat.

Echidna: “I just answered, didn’t I? I’m Echidna, a spirit. If that doesn’t get through, then…”

Anastasia: “If it doesn’t?”

Echidna: “Would you be satisfied if I said I’m one of the dangerous legacies you came to destroy?”

Even as the question marks refused to leave Anastasia’s face, the fox—Echidna, as it had named itself—washed its face with a forepaw and spoke.

That faintly provocative wording carried a sense of pride and stubbornness—like a final bit of spite at someone who had come to kill her.

However—

Anastasia: “Even if you get all fired up like that, it doesn’t ring any bells for me at all.”

Echidna: “…Eh? Don’t be ridiculous.”

Folding her short arms and again tilting her head, Anastasia left Echidna wide-eyed.

Echidna: “No, no, I’m the one you’re after, aren’t I? Not to be immodest, but I doubt there’s anything in this cargo more valuable than me. You even crossed a dangerous bridge to swap wagons—masterfully, I might add. So this is where you finish me off… isn’t it?”

Anastasia: “What I heard was it’d be something you can tell at a glance is dangerous. As for you… Echidna, I don’t really get you.”

More crestfallen than taken aback, Echidna spoke, and Anastasia only shrugged.

In fact, this wasn't a lie.

Anastasia and the others planned to take on Roshi's so-called final errand, but the written order Roshi had received didn't spell out the target in detail.

There had been only a single line—"Evil, obvious at a glance."

Anastasia: "It said to burn it after reading, so I burned it. But a letter that short, I'm not gonna misread."

Echidna: ""Evil and obvious," huh. Then it can only be me after all."

Anastasia: "How so? You don't look evil to me, Echidna. Just a pelt—no, since there's meat on it, not a pelt. Just a white fox."

Echidna: "…"

At Anastasia's casual reach of her hand, Echidna went stiff.

Anastasia: "…"

Anastasia recognized that reaction.

It was the reflexive behavior of a victim used to being harmed—bracing in an instant. In the slums there were rules of a sort; the young and weak were made to obey the older and strong. Under the name of discipline, violence was common.

Before she met Ricardo, Anastasia herself had suffered that sort of thing.

So she couldn't blame Echidna for bracing herself.

Anastasia: "Relax. I only wanna touch that white coat of yours."

Echidna: "…"

Anastasia: "See, it's fine—wait, I'm not fine! What is this feel?! It's insanely nice!”

Echidna: “C-Could you exercise a little restraint…?”

The reassuring smile Anastasia had been wearing took on a breathless excitement.

A supreme softness that her fingertips sank into—the highest-praise handfeel, which Anastasia, who’d had her share of contact with Ricardo and Mimi and the others, could recognize at once—

Anastasia: “This—this is truly demonic…! So this is the true nature of the dangerous legacy…!”

Echidna: “No, not in that sense. …You’re coming off quite different from at the start.”

Anastasia: “Aahn.”

With an exasperated murmur, Echidna slipped neatly out from Anastasia’s hands.

Deprived of that supreme feel, Anastasia looked after her with lingering yearning. Reflecting the girl in her round black eyes, Echidna let out a long, deep sigh.

Echidna: “Seems it’s not an act to make me lower my guard. In the first place, you wouldn’t need any silly tricks to ruin a frail thing like me.”

Anastasia: “I told you, my target ain’t you, Echidna. If you can’t listen properly, don’t blame me when you get scolded, okay?”

Echidna: “You’re the one not really listening to me…”

Echidna muttered sulkily, then went on, “Anyway—”

Echidna: ““Catch me and treat me like a child,” you say. I’ll have you know I’m a true spirit who’s lived for centuries.”

Anastasia: “Echidna, you’ve been here this whole time, right? Then don’t you know which box has what I’m after? Opening ‘em all is a pain.”

Echidna: “Would you please listen properly!”

A spirit, not a beastman—the expressions of Echidna’s purely animal face were hard to read.

Even so, they were ruffled enough to raise her voice, and Anastasia waved a hand with, “Kidding, kidding.”

Anastasia: “Don’t worry, I ain’t that airheaded. …I took a proper look at the box you were in. What is this?”

Echidna: “—It means it needs to be that secure.”

Lowering her voice, Anastasia spoke—and Echidna’s tone shifted to meet it. The focus of their talk was the contents of the crate Echidna had been sealed in.

When little Anastasia stood on tiptoe to peep inside, the box’s interior was tightly packed with a great many magic stones. The quality seemed none too good.

Anastasia: “For a trade in magic stones, they’re handled sloppy, and normally you wouldn’t pack ‘em in a crate with an animal. Isn’t this to get someone sick-drunk?”

Grimacing at the scheme, as if smelling something foul, Anastasia waved her hand.

Magic stones were a catch-all for things where the mana floating in the air had crystallized.

Like gemstones, the fewer the impurities, the higher the price. From that angle, every magic stone in this crate was a failing grade—junk unfit for any proper trade—yet, even junk became a threat in numbers.

Living beings were equipped from the start with an organ that circulated mana inside and out—the “Gate.” While the circulation varied by individual, even someone with a robust Gate, if exposed to mana beyond their capacity, would fall into poor condition called mana sickness.

Unlike drunkenness from alcohol, mana sickness wasn't something that wore off if you just gave it time.

For that reason, it was sometimes used to deliberately induce mana sickness, pacify dangerous criminals, and transport them safely.

Anastasia: "Even with things like that, you seem fine, Echidna."

Echidna: "Luckily, my Gate is a special make. It's very picky about mana."

Anastasia: "Meaning you can choose what mana to absorb, so you don't get sick-drunk?"

Echidna: "—. I see. Seems you're not just a sly little child."

Echidna let out a breath of impressed surprise at Anastasia's characteristically digestible understanding.

As praise it was a bit ambiguous, but if she'd caught this bizarre being off guard, that was enough to soothe her feelings for now.

All the same, problems abounded. For example—

Anastasia: "How far we should follow Roshi's letter…"

Echidna: "—Unfortunately, it doesn't look like we've time to discuss that."

Anastasia: "—? What—"

She couldn't finish.

In an instant, the dogcart carrying Anastasia and the others surged forward, the lurch sweeping her feet out from under her.

Letting out a small "Kya—!" Anastasia pitched onto the wagon floor. A moment later, the lid of a crate that had come loose slammed down with force. It would hit—she squeezed her eyes shut.

But the expected pain didn't come. When Anastasia opened her eyes, timidly—

Echidna: "…I'm not cut out for manual labor. I'd prefer you protect your own body, if you please."

Echidna, who had blocked the falling lid with her body, was giving Anastasia a resentful look as she spoke.

Anastasia caught her breath at Echidna's action. In that instant, she didn't know whether to voice "why" or "thank you" first—and got out neither.

Because the situation moved before she could.

Hetaro: "—Miss Anastasia, sorry!"

Anastasia: "Hetaro?! What happened?! Why'd you suddenly push the dogcart so fast…!"

She hurled the question at the boy gripping the reins of the great dogs on the driver's bench that had just accelerated. The boy—Hetaro—answered in a voice that couldn't hide his panic.

Hetaro: "—There's a whole bunch of pitch-black shadows chasing us from behind!!"

10

Reisel: "Oi, oi, someone really pulled a fast one on me—who the hell was it?"

Forcing out a curse steeped in grudging rage, the tanuki beastman—Reisel—muttered with bloodshot, pitch-dark eyes.

In his hoarse voice and the way he savagely clawed at his own head was a clear intent to kill.

It was a pure animal impulse—unlike when he'd drunk with Ricardo, unlike the instant he abandoned him before the enemy, unlike the moment he exulted at having seized the target goods.

It was nothing but the eruption of his beast nature at having his prey stolen from him.

Reisel: “Tch tch tch. —You know how much prep I sunk to pull this off? And you call it poachin’ my take? Not a chance I let that slide.”

Clicking his tongue as if it were a tic, Reisel yanked some of his own fur and flung it from the Falo cart with a sweep of his arm, scattering it through the air.

Short and wiry as wire, his hairs spun on the wind and drifted—only for, at the instant they touched ground, each hair to swell, and jet-black shadows to rise up.

The shadows had no faces—no front or back. It was truly as if shadow itself had crawled out of the earth: human-shaped silhouettes welling up in numbers matching the hairs that had fluttered down.

Apart from the cart’s path, Reisel had been repeating the act over and over, and already birthed a countless host of these shadows. The newborn shades scattered in all directions, fanning out as scouts to hunt Reisel’s quarry.

The thief who’d poached his prize and was having a fine laugh about it—

Reisel: “—Found ya.”

With a twisted grin, Reisel worked the reins, driving the Falo cart toward his aim.

He burst through the smoke plume and shot out into open wasteland. His view opened up, and what leapt into sight was a dogcart far off, kicking up a trail of dust—that was the target.

Around was a stretch of rough, barren plain, no cover whatsoever, and the fleeing dogcart’s speed matched the Falo cart’s. So what would be the greatest factor to run the enemy down?

The answer was plain and simple: numbers.

Reisel: “Don’t think you can get away from my shadows, you stupid monkey.”

Before him, the dust cloud ringed the fleeing dogcart.

It wasn’t a smokescreen the dogcart raised by tearing across the wastes at full tilt. It was the work of the countless black figures swarming after the fleeing dogcart.

Reisel’s precious pieces, obeying him, working to fulfill his purpose —

Every one of them was an avatar of Reisel wrought from pitch-black shadow.

Reisel: “—If you can get away, go on and try!”

Baring sharp teeth, Reisel howled like a beast.

In the tanuki-man’s mind there was nothing but brutal reprisals for the enemy who’d pulled this stunt on him.

His avatars, the shadows, had substance—they could harm the foe.

He could have them seize the limbs and tear the four apart. Or else, let the shadows pile on one by one, adding weight until the victim was crushed to death.

The possibilities thrilled him; his heart pounded. And right before his eyes, the dogcart, beset by a great many shadows, slewed violently and nearly flipped.

Don’t you go gettin’ thrown off and dying on me—Reisel, savoring the excitement of the hunt after so long, offered up a prayer. And indeed, that prayer was heard.

Except—

Reisel: “Wh—?!”

—what answered was a series of vividly colored blast-winds that blew the shadows clinging to the dogcart clean away.

Magic stones were scattered from the dogcart’s bed, and the blasts chained one after another.

In the next moment, she saw the countless silhouettes clinging to the bed swallowed by the blast wind and blown away as if torn to pieces.

The identity of the figures was unknown; their numbers were a menace, but each one was quite brittle.

Anastasia: “Good thing Mr. Chuden’s place deals in magic stones, too—saved our hides.”

Tapping the side of an empty crate, Anastasia let that slip after finishing the job.

What they’d used were low-grade junk magic stones prepared to get Echidna sick-drunk. They tipped the box and dumped its contents, and with that, they quelled the abnormal situation outside in one go.

Of course, it wasn’t as simple as the words made it sound. Using poor-quality stones, it wouldn’t have been strange if destruction had begun in ways that didn’t match their intent.

That she’d ignored that risk and still managed to set them off exactly as she wished was thanks to luck—and guts.

Echidna: “You really don’t seem to be a girl who’s as she appears.”

Anastasia: “Rude way to put it, when I just did what you said. But looks like those toy-like explosions blew ‘em off… so those are…?”

Echidna: “Ah, no doubt—”Meteors” I know. “Void Garb.” That’s one of the very legacies you’re supposed to destroy, isn’t it?”

Anastasia: “That’s why… oh, fine, whatever.”

She shook her head, refusing to engage with Echidna’s teasing turn of phrase.

In truth, it was thanks to Echidna's advice that she'd thought of using the stones to repel them. Without that, their dogcart might already have been flipped.

That said, the situation hadn't improved dramatically.

Anastasia: "…Still plenty coming after us."

She poked her head out from the bed, glanced behind the dogcart, and grimaced.

Figures racing across the wide-open waste, trying to catch the dogcart—here she ought to call them "shadow-men" instead—their numbers were only increasing. The first salvo had shaved them down somewhat, but at a pace that would count as a rounding error; she couldn't help breaking into a cold sweat.

Anastasia: "Hetaro, can't we shake 'em?"

Hetaro: "Don't say impossible things! The ligers are doing their best! I'll try to find us a way out, but…"

Anastasia: "So that's a long shot, huh. Echidna, if it's come to this, then together with us—"

Echidna: "—Before that."

Anastasia had concluded they should link up with Hetaro on the driver's bench and talk through a breakthrough—but Echidna was the one who called a halt to that conclusion.

For convenience, let her be "she": she slowly shook that slender neck from side to side and said,

Echidna: "Could you not tell the cute kitten on the driver's bench that I'm here? You don't seem to feel it at all, but my existence is abnormal."

Anastasia: "Still with that…?"

Echidna: "This isn't like my jokes from just now… well, those weren't jokes either, but in any case this is different. It's a more serious matter.”

Anastasia: “…”

Echidna: “And earlier, I advised you because of how things unfolded, but I’ve resigned myself to being destroyed in the first place. So I don’t intend to struggle desperately against fate.”

With that world-weary murmur, Echidna curled her tail around herself and lay down on the floor. There was no lie in that posture; she had abandoned the rights to her own life.

Thus, she regarded Anastasia and the others from a detached vantage, as if to say there was no reason to resist the oncoming shadow-men.

That stance—

Anastasia: “—Really ticked me off.”

—was an act that touched Anandstasia’s one reverse scale no one should touch.

Anastasia: “…”

She hated the idea of not clinging to life, of denying life’s value.

Not because life was dear or noble. Because it was the very first asset a person possessed. Whatever the person, at the very least, they had themselves.

Even without talent or pedigree, everyone had themselves from the start.

Anastasia: “Hoshin’s saying: “Even if you start with nothing, look at the palms of your hands first.””

“Hoshin of the Wilderness,” a byword for rising in the world, built his own country from nothing. Even Hoshin proclaimed: know your own worth.

Know what you can do, and what you must never sell cheap—

without that, nothing begins.

Therefore, Echidna deciding to end things on her own was intolerable to Anastasia.

Anastasia: “—Echidna. You said you were ready to toss your life down the drain, didn’t you?”

Echidna: “If I’m to drown, I’d prefer a tidier watering hole, but yes.”

Anastasia: “Then I’ll buy that bottom-priced life of yours.”

Echidna: “—What?”

With a dubious look, Echidna stared at Anastasia standing before her. Met head-on by those light blue-green eyes, the white fox’s slender throat tightened.

It was from surprise—and from a feeling close to a faint joy.

Anastasia: “You’ve got a beautiful coat, you’re incredible to the touch, you’re a bit of a cheeky chatterbox, but you’re smart and you know where the toilet is. —For such an Echidna, I’ll put a price.”

Echidna: “Are you serious? Me? Me, whom many will be aiming to destroy? I simply can’t believe you can protect me to the end.”

Anastasia: “If it ain’t enough, then it means my vessel was lacking. In that case, sooner or later, you and me will die together. But…”

Breaking off there, Anastasia extended a hand to Echidna.

Looking at the outstretched hand, Echidna fell silent, and Anastasia smiled at her.

Anastasia: “—Even if we die someday, that day is not today.”

12

Shiroro: “Is today a fine day to die, hm? Eh? How ‘bout it, you.”

Ricardo: “…”

Shiroro: “Playin’ silent now—ya makin’ fun o’ me, are ya.”

Contrary to words that almost sounded leisurely, silver flashes were swung without mercy to reap a life.

Chuckling raspily in his throat, the rabbit-man Shiroro wielded his twin longblades as if they were his own limbs. Ricardo skimmed away from that terrifying swordplay by a hair’s breadth and sprang far back.

—On a narrow mountain path, the wolf and the rabbit crossed blades with ever-mounting ferocity.

But at present, Ricardo was on the back foot. Failing to fully evade the slashes of those blades, multiple cuts scored across his body were bleeding.

His foe Shiroro was small—barely half Ricardo’s height. But differences in build or the size of their weapons weren’t an excuse for a close fight. Ricardo’s great cleaver was a hefty weapon, but each of Shiroro’s longblades was near as long as the little rabbit-man was tall.

It was sheer skill as a swordsman that had driven Ricardo this far.

Only, that wasn’t the only reason for this disadvantage.

Shiroro: “Seems bein’ tossed aside by yer own’s got to ya. Tryin’ to match me with yer mind wanderin’—I’m honored. But heart, skill, ‘n body lined up—that’s the basics. With that all in disarray, how much longer d’ya think you can manage?”

Ricardo: “…Would’ve been nice if I could say you were way off the mark.”

Bitterly, he had to admit Shiroro’s read was mostly right. In truth, the lack of sharpness in Ricardo’s movements came from his mind being on the absent Reisel.

Not because he was worried about that cold-blooded old acquaintance—the opposite.

Ricardo: “The reckonin’—I’m the one who’s gotta settle it.”

Shiroro: ““Reckonin’, reckonin’,” says you. I like reckonin’ myself. There’s honor seepin’ through it. Which is why I gotta take yer head.”

Ricardo: “Sorry, but this neck with the collar’s already promised out. —I ain’t givin’ it to anyone else. ‘Pologies.”

Shiroro: “Like hell that line’s gonna fly!”

Shiroro’s red eyes sharpened and he leaped as Ricardo flicked his collar with a finger. A slash came straight for Ricardo’s thick neck.

With a flash of silver worthy of the nickname “Beheader,” it bore down to take Ricardo’s life—

Mimi: “Ukyah-ooooo!”

Ricardo: “What the—?!” Shiroro: “Hah?”

A shrill cry cut across the duel, and both mercenaries’ focus flicked aside on reflex. In the next beat, Shiroro raised a white scabbard to intercept a little flying kick that came in at blistering speed.

With a “Wahya—!” the intercepted something bounced along the ground. Curling into a ball to soften the shock, it was an orange-furred puff—no, a kittenfolk girl.

Ricardo: “You—you’re the little brat who plays with Ana-bo!”

Mimi: “Ah—! That’s the bad thing where if Mimi gets found out before she gives her name, it ruins the bit! The customary thing! Uncle does not get it at allll!”

Ricardo: “To hell with “customary”! It’s dangerous—stay outta this!”

Mimi: “What a way to talk! That means—total war!”

Plopping down cross-legged on the spot, Mimi showed a mulish attitude. She was the eldest of the kittenfolk siblings Anastasia wanted so badly, and Ricardo had met her a few times.

Unlike her two very capable little brothers, it was also well-known she didn't listen to a word anyone said.

Ricardo: "What're y'all doin' out here?! This is way too far to be out just playin' around!"

Mimi: "We're not playin' around! Mimi and the others got a super-duper important du-tee? Du-mee? Job! We're in the middle of it! So Mimi can't play with you, Uncle!"

Ricardo: "C-Can't even have a conversation…"

Turning her face away with a pout, Mimi left Ricardo's fangs trembling. At this rate, only a fruitless back-and-forth would continue to no effect.

However—

Shiroro: "—Ahh, havin' my fighting spirit killed? Same here."

Folding one ear deftly, Shiroro cut into Ricardo and Mimi's exchange. He flicked a pebble up with his tip and then batted, batted, and sliced it to pieces midair.

As a mere diversion of the hands, the display was far too advanced; after showing it, Shiroro sighed.

Shiroro: "Bringin' a brat to a place like this—what are ya thinkin'. Thanks to that, now I gotta do a job that'll leave a bad taste in my mouth."

Ricardo: "Hold on. This little one ain't got nothin' to do with it. Yer enemies are me and the gutless one who ran first."

Shiroro: "After all that talkin', "nothin' to do with it" ain't gonna pass. I don't wanna do it either. When I cut a kid, that cryin' face sticks with me a while."

Ricardo: "…"

At Shiroro's voice dropping to a growl, Mimi edged a step back, tilting her head with an, "Oh?"

She likely wasn't aware she'd been cowed by Shiroro's sword aura. Given Mimi's youth, it was no surprise. Firstly, if you could survive being bathed in this killing intent, that would take either ridiculous luck—or—

Ricardo: "One hell of a tactical win. Hey—you really, what'd you come here for?"

Mimi: "Mm—ah! That! Important! See, the young lady and Hetaro 'n them are in trouble! Like, sooo many pitch-black things! Tons!"

Ricardo: ""Young lady"… you mean Ana-bo?!"

"Lots of pitch-black things" sounded like being swarmed by Zodda-bugs, but despite the wording, a stark urgency colored Mimi's attitude.

Two—no, three—pressing situations.

The Shiroro before him, the Reisel who fled, and Anastasia in dire straits.

It would be hard to deal with them all. If so, there was no need to hesitate over priorities.

Ricardo: "Whichever I pick, the one I gotta deal with first don't change."

Shiroro: "—Ho. You're makin' me see you in a new light."

Exhaling hotly, Ricardo turned to face him, and Shiroro's cheek twisted in a grin.

It was the smile of a battle-madman welcoming the flowering of a worthy foe. In just this instant, Ricardo had changed; to put it in Shiroro's way of speaking—

Ricardo: "Looks like heart, skill, 'n body lined up."

Shiroro: “Fine look on ya now—but what changed you? A woman? It’s a woman, ain’t it?”

Ricardo: “—Yeah. A woman.”

He gave the answer Shiroro wanted—though with a meaning somewhat different from Shiroro’s intent. Hearing it, the rabbit-man laughed in a rough voice that canceled out his cuteness.

Shiroro: “Then you won’t mind losin’ ‘n dyin’, will ya. —There’s a woman who’ll cry for ya.”

Ricardo: “Too bad for you—she’s the kind of sturdy lass who’ll come shake me down that much harder if I make her cry.”

With a slicing whisper of wind, the twin blades eased into their guard.

To face them, Ricardo hefted his great cleaver up onto his shoulder.

Shiroro: ““Beheader” Shiroro Tonerico.”

Ricardo: “…”Hound” Ricardo Welkin.”

Shiroro: “Kah! That foul-mouthed brat, is it!”

With warriors’ names exchanged, Ricardo—who had been hiding his identity—pulled off his mask. Shiroro clacked his teeth and cried out in delight as he matched the face to the name.

In the next instant, both launched at once, plunging into the range where one strike would decide it.

13

—Can’t press the attack.

Grinding his molars at that fact, Reisel kept the fury in his chest penned and seething.

The excitement of the hunt after so long had burned off in the first few minutes of this chase. What remained was only the anticipation of brutal reprisals. But even that didn't last long; it was steadily drowned out by a rising impatience.

Reisel: "What the hell is goin' on…?"

A voice leaked between crooked teeth as impatience gnawed at his heart.

In step with it, his claws raked at his own body more and more. The fur that came away became avatars by the power of the "Meteors," and shadow-men sprang forth one after another to hound the enemy before him.

Yes, they were hounding them. Overwhelming numbers robbed the enemy of any route of escape and threatened to crush them.

The shadow-men and the original shared their senses in a hazy way, and what those eyeless heads "saw" was, dimly, visible to Reisel as well.

Using that power, he had succeeded in finding the dogcart that had butted in. So the strategy wasn't wrong. It wasn't wrong—so why—

Reisel: "If so, how the hell are they slippin' outta the net?!"

The shadow-men headed them off, laid traps, funneled them onto roads with no way out, and tried to run the dogcart down. Fearless resolve and infinite numbers made it possible.

Yet the dogcart kept slipping past their strikes by a hair's breadth.

Picking out only the shadow-men's moves that could turn fatal, and repeatedly choosing the best line to snuff those options. As if viewing the whole board from the heavens and placing pieces unerringly.

—And right enough, Reisel's imagining was correct.

Hetaro: "…"

On the driver's bench of the hurtling dogcart, drawn by four great dogs—ligers—the hands clutching the reins were those of a young boy, Hetaro, whose awareness was watching their route from the sky.

—No, to be precise, not the sky, and not Hetaro's own eyes.

Hetaro was taking in the feel of what his younger brother, Tivey, was seeing from a far-sight platform as he observed them, and choosing his path from that.

Hetaro, Tivey, and Mimi, the three siblings, were linked by the "Divine Protection of Trisection."

By nature, that divine protection's greatest effect was thought to be sharing one's physical and mental burdens with the other two to lessen the strain. However, by heightening the divine protection's sensitivity, they could to a degree adjust the ratio of influence they received from the others.

And now, more than ninety percent of Tivey's senses were flowing into Hetaro.

Hetaro: "Run straight for a bit, then…"

In Hetaro's vision, he could see their dogcart in a flickering bird's-eye view. The shadow-men chasing it, the schemes trying to block the road—everything.

—They had, to begin with, taken out insurance for the wagon-swap plan, and it had paid off.

Far-sight platforms across the Kararagi City-States were facilities with "Meteors" installed that observed specified coordinates from directly overhead. There were limits to the distance that could be observed, and by the nature of specifying a position, it was difficult to keep eyes on a moving target. —Hetaro and the others were the exception.

The plan worked only because they could constantly and accurately pinpoint their other selves' positions.

Even so, that heaven's-eye method couldn't remain perfect.

Hetaro: “Miss Anastasia!”

With a cry like a scream, Hetaro called the name of his partner in the wagon bed.

In Hetaro’s sight was the desperate situation Tivey’s observation showed. The shadow-men had moved around in front, linked shoulders, climbed atop each other, and built a bulwark of shadows.

The fan-shaped wall of pitch black couldn’t be avoided even if the dogcart changed direction. The only gap was to the rear, but there a host of shadow-men were in full pursuit.

All is lost, Hetaro’s throat froze, and he calculated a breakout in an instant.

Just the two of them, himself and Anastasia—abandon the dogcart and use the ligers as decoys, and—

Anastasia: “—Hetaro, straight ahead.”

Hetaro: “…”

Hetaro, who had started to calculate an escape, was called back by a voice from the wagon. He held his breath at that voice and asked, “Miss Anastasia?”

Hetaro: ““Straight ahead,” but there—”

Anastasia: “Have I ever told you wrong before? …Trust me.”

At Anastasia’s calm reply, Hetaro had no words. Instead, he closed his eyes and counted his heartbeats.

And then—

Hetaro: “Straight ahead. —Because big sis believed in Miss Anastasia.”

To Hetaro, the one who made the right choice in this world was his big sister, Mimi. Without her, he and Tivey couldn’t have lived through this harsh world.

So he believed what his sister believed. He would support that choice with everything he had.

Hetaro: “…”

When he clenched the reins hard, that intent carried to the ligers too. Ahead, the shadow bulwark crept into view, slowly, and the four great dogs charged without flinching.

If they slammed into that wall—or if it toppled over on them—the dogcart wouldn’t stand a chance.

But Hetaro had already chosen to believe.

Hetaro: “Miss Anastasia!”

Not a scream this time—he called the name full of trust.

In that instant, as if bursting through the wagon’s wall, a white heat ray swept sideways across the dogcart’s path.

—A tremendous heatwave turned the black bulwark to dust in one stroke.

14

Echidna: “Your Gate is defective. This isn’t something that can be handled properly at all.”

Anastasia: “My, what a thing to say.”

The moment Echidna said that upon touching the hand Anastasia had extended, Anastasia pouted. But Echidna lightly placed a forepaw on Anastasia’s hand and slowly shook her head with, “This isn’t a joke,”

Echidna: “It’s probably a congenital defect. In your Gate, the mechanism for taking in mana is incomplete. Your body can expel mana, but it can’t take it in. Therefore…”

Anastasia: “Therefore what?”

Echidna: "—If you were to use magic, you'd be consuming Od. It depends on the Gate's sturdiness, but unlike mana—which in a sense can be supplied without limit—Od is finite. It doesn't recover. In other words, it's equivalent to shaving away your life."

Anastasia: "Mm, I get it. It means I'll have to stake it even knowing the danger."

Hearing Echidna's explanation, Anastasia drew up her slender chest and answered. At that answer, Echidna fell silent for a moment, then—

Echidna: "You're not death-seeking, are you?"

Anastasia: "Me? I've never once in my life thought I wanted to die. I haven't got a single thing I want yet. So I can't die in a place like this."

Echidna: "…"

Anastasia: "Echidna, a match won't wait on you. From here on, you've got no choice but to fight with what's in your own wallet."

To set up this position, Anastasia had spared nothing and used up everything she had on hand. Since it still wasn't enough, there was nothing left but to shave away life or whatever else it took.

That was the sort of decisiveness needed to keep it from being fatal in the truest sense.

Echidna: "—I'll say this first: this isn't a contract. I'm defective as a spirit, too."

Anastasia: "Really? How so? When you're this fluffy."

Echidna: "I admit I'm proud of my coat, but that's irrelevant. …As a spirit, I can't enter into a contract. So what I'm about to do is one-sided extraction."

Whether because it pained her, there was a bitter note to Echidna's words. But Anastasia thought. She didn't know how contracts differed between humans and spirits, but—

Anastasia: “I don’t know the spirit style, but I do know human-style contracts.”

Echidna: “…”

Anastasia: “Only, it’s Kararagi merchant-style, so it won’t be lenient, okay? Think hard about the contract.”

At Anastasia’s words, paired with a wink, Echidna’s eyes went round. Then the white fox let out a short breath and laughed.

Echidna: “To think a spirit like me would be lectured on contracts by a human. Heh heh, amusing. It’s worth living long. Not being destroyed was the right call.”

Having changed her mind, life surged into Echidna as she met Anastasia’s eyes. Then Echidna hopped up onto Anastasia’s shoulder and buried Anastasia’s slender neck in fur.

A soft, overwhelmingly fluffy feel wrapped around Anastasia.

Anastasia: “Paradise…!”

Echidna: “I’d rather you didn’t ascend. —Abnormal situation ahead of the dogcart.”

At the warning, Anastasia turned her gaze toward the front of the bed, to the driver’s bench.

Hetaro: “Miss Anastasia!”

She heard Hetaro’s scream-like cry.

Hearing it, Anastasia drew a breath. This was the crucial moment, the big scene of this stage.

Anastasia: “—Hetaro, straight ahead.”

Tossing out a word that could sound cruel, Anastasia slowly stretched a hand toward the front.

And—

—A sweeping white heat ray burned away in one stroke the bulwark formed by densely packed shadow-men.

There was no sound to the destruction, and even the shadow-men that turned to dust left not a trace. In stark contrast to the sight of white light swallowing the inky shadows and the spread of ruin, the devastation advanced far too quietly.

Reisel: “G-Gggoaaaaaaa—!!”

As a pursuer, Reisel witnessed that scene of ruin with a scream.

It wasn’t a cry born of anger or humiliation. The scream was caused by unbearable pain.

—The shadow-men shared their senses with Reisel to some extent.

That was why they could share vision, and he could move countless shadow-men with a single will. But the flip side of that was that it also meant sharing pain and the sensation of annihilation.

Each annihilation was no more than the pain of being pricked by a needle. However, what if it became a hundred, a thousand—nearing ten thousand? If stabbed by needles ten thousand times, the agony would defy imagination.

Reisel: “Gah— ggo…!”

Drool dripped from the corner of his mouth, and bloody tears flowed from Reisel’s eyes.

His instincts told him that any further was dangerous. But he couldn’t withdraw. Reisel had his own reason he could not retreat.

Reisel: “Not yet— n-not yet…!”

He hadn’t actually suffered wounds to the flesh. There was no bleeding, no shattered bones. If his mind could overcome the pain, then pain that felt like it was burning his body wouldn’t hinder movement.

From that mental depletion and from continually yanking out his fur, Reisel's features had changed drastically.

Reisel: "Don't think you're gettin' away like this, tch tch tch."

He tore more fur from his cheek and sent the shadow-men he birthed to chase the dogcart. With the jet-black bulwark gone, the dogcart burst through the cloud of shadow-dust, and the distance closed greatly.

Glaring straight ahead, he moved to feast his eyes on the faces of the enemies riding that dogcart—and—

Reisel: "—ah."

Into Reisel's field of view fell a large figure standing all alone in the middle of the wastes.

Scorched-brown beast fur, a wolf's visage that could only be called downright ferocious. An old acquaintance of a big man with an orange kittenfolk girl on his shoulder had his great cleaver buried in the ground and his jaws opened wide.

They went way back. Which was why Reisel understood at a glance what that meant.

Casting off all kinds of feelings, Reisel was struck dumb.

—Around the Falo cart were shadow-men in numbers equal to, or greater than, when he'd created the bulwark.

Reisel: "W-Wait, Rica—"

Ricardo: "Wa—ha—!!"

—The roar swallowed Reisel, Reisel's shadows, everything—and the world exploded.

16

Ricardo: "…So, how'd it end up, Ana-bo?"

Anastasia: “Um—promise you won’t get mad?”

Ricardo twisted his cheek at Anastasia, who was pressing her index fingers together and looking up at him. Then he patted the girl’s head with his big palm—

Ricardo: “‘Course I’m gonna get mad! What the hell were you thinkin’, you blockhead!”

Anastasia: “Owowow! See! See, I knew you’d get mad! I knew it!”

Her head roughly waggled, Anastasia teared up and wriggled out from Ricardo’s hand. At the girl’s unrepentant attitude, Ricardo let out a long, deep breath.

Having ended his fight with Shiroro, Ricardo had rushed to the scene per Mimi’s appeal. If it was Anastasia in dire straits, it was only natural to put off settling accounts with Reisel.

So he hadn’t imagined for a second that both problems would get wrapped up at once.

Ricardo: “That damned fool Reisel…”

Reisel had dragged along some uncanny beings with creepy little tricks. It seemed to be a trump card Ricardo hadn’t known about, but Ricardo’s own trump card had blown the lot of it away.

The Falo cart they were riding had been pulverized along with it; he likely hadn’t survived. And even if he had, there was no avoiding a near-death state.

Shiroro: “—So that “reckonin’” falls in our purview, then. No complaints, brat.”

Ricardo: “…Could ya not call me “brat.””

Shoulders sagging in exasperation, Ricardo glanced back. Shiroro, who’d been watching his back-and-forth with Anastasia, chuckled low, the leaf at his lips bobbing.

The one-on-one between Ricardo and Shiroro had ended with neither taking the other's life. The plan had been from the start to avoid needless deaths; to Ricardo, that outcome was only natural.

Shiroro: "Both my blades're snapped, 'n I ain't got a chance. If I can't be content with not gettin' chomped in one bite, I ain't fit to keep at the merc trade."

Between a hirer and the hired it was money, not a bond of life—that was the iron rule for mercenaries like Shiroro.

Thus, the moment the tide turned and Ricardo proposed a truce, he'd sheathed his broken blades at once. That clean break had saved both Ricardo and Anastasia.

Had he resisted to the end, there would have been no grand happy ending here.

Mimi: "Maaaan, Uncle was amaaazing! Voice so looooud! At the end you went, "Gaooon!" Mimi wants to do that! Really really wants to!"

Hetaro: "I-I'm just glad you're safe, sis. B-But, calm down, okay…"

A little ways off near the great cleaver buried in the ground, the reunited kittenfolk siblings were making a racket. Mimi seemed utterly taken with Ricardo's trump card; her eyes sparkled with emotion.

With her being that delighted, it was hard to raise his voice and scold her.

—In truth, he had at least one complaint about having let Anastasia be put in danger.

Ricardo: "…But I reckon it was Ana-bo who suggested it first, huh?"

Anastasia: "As expected, you really get me, don't you, Uncle."

Ricardo: "Idiot! Reflect on what you did!"

Clutching her head in an exaggerated pose, Anastasia paid no heed to Ricardo's bark.

That said, Anastasia and the others' contribution wasn't something to scoff at. In fact, had they not butted in, Reisel would've easily achieved his objective and gotten away clean.

That it hadn't gone that way was due to a pileup of coincidences—but it was to their credit.

Thanks to that—

Ricardo: "Shiroro, we'll return the cargo. My goal from the start was to settle things with an old acquaintance. I figure that's done. How 'bout we call it even here."

Shiroro: "That's a mighty convenient tale for us. If you had a mind to, you could kill us 'n run off with the cargo. Why not do that, eh?"

Anastasia: "Ah—so that was an option. Didn't think of it. Shall we do that now?"

Shiroro: "Kakaka! You sure do talk!"

Shiroro tipped up his face and laughed, his red eyes staring fixedly at Anastasia. Under the swordsman's sharp gaze, Anastasia ducked behind Ricardo.

Anastasia: "Wh-What?"

Shiroro: "Nothin' but gettin' a look at the face o' the one who played us for fools. Now then—am I just gettin' rusty, or else…"

Eyes narrowing, he measured her up; under that appraising look, Anastasia straightened her back.

Shiroro: "By the by, little miss—the fur scarf on yer shoulder…"

Anastasia: "—This is mine."

At that answer, Shiroro's gaze flicked to Ricardo. But before Ricardo could respond, Anastasia went on with, "And this,"

Anastasia: "I'm givin' to you. The inventory list of contraband in the cargo."

Shiroro: “Hoh?”

Anastasia: “You probably bribed the checkpoint clerk to get it through. If you show this, won’t they write off the failure of the job?”

At the black-hearted proposal from the little girl, Shiroro’s red eyes went round. Beside them, Ricardo put a palm to his face and looked up at the sky as if lamenting.

Bearing the wolf and the rabbit’s stares head-on, Anastasia stroked her own neck—her fluffy fox scarf—and said,

Anastasia: “If they still give you grief over the job, you can come to my place. —I’ll take care of you too, Uncle Rabbit, all together.”

17

Roshi: “So? Abacus girl, what are you gonna say to apologize to me, huh?”

Anastasia: “Me, to Gramps? Do I got anything to apologize for?”

Roshi: “Kakakakak! Of all the dumb things to say—what, you got a screw loose in that head o’ yours?”

Having returned with the three siblings after wrapping up that so-called “duty,” Anastasia was greeted by Roshi, the master of the ramshackle house in the slums, who ran a hand through his white hair and snapped that out.

At Roshi’s line, Anastasia puffed her cheeks with a “hmph” and said,

Anastasia: “What kinda way is that to talk. I just did exactly what you said, Gramps.”

Roshi: “What I said? And when did I tell ya to tie this old wreck up and leave ‘im, huh. The brats sure got good at trussin’. Took me a while to slip the ropes, it did.”

Anastasia: “Don’t remember? —You told me to take your duty in your place.”

At that brazen claim, Roshi’s cheek stiffened. Dumbfounded by Anastasia’s total lack of fear, he shook his head.

Roshi: “You tryin’ to forge my words now?”

Anastasia: “Gramps, you said you had a favor to ask me. And from how the talk was goin’, I figured that was it. ‘Cept, before you finished sayin’ it, you went and fell asleep.”

Roshi: “That weren’t sleepin’, that were me bein’ put to sleep—ah, hell! So that’s how it is.”

Roughly scratching his age-dried skin, Roshi clicked his tongue.

He’d clearly decided he wouldn’t be able to break through Anastasia’s specious argument.

Anastasia: “Gramps, give it up and spend your old age quiet. … Then when you die, Mimi ‘n them’ll properly be mine. That’s fine, isn’t it.”

Roshi: “Looks like yer makin’ it sound like a compromise, but that’s just how you wanted it, ain’t it, little rascal.”

Anastasia: “And what’s the problem with that?”

Tilting her head, Anastasia asked.

Roshi: “—Nothin’. There ain’t nothin’. And that’s what pisses me off.”

Shaking his head, Roshi answered.

Answering thus, he looked out the broken window at the sky, blue, blue, and muttered,

Roshi: “Damn, what un-cute brats. Can’t hear a thing an old man says.”

Anastasia: “…Well then, I’m goin’. Be nice to Mimi ‘n them, okay?”

Roshi: “Hold it, girlie. If you took my job, what’re the results?”

Anastasia: “…”

As she stood to leave, Roshi asked.

Roshi’s duty—the disposal of the dangerous article that should’ve been mixed in the cargo—only once that was carried out would he reach satisfaction.

So—

Anastasia: “—There wasn’t any such thing in that cargo. Nothin’ evil you could tell at a glance.”

She answered while stroking the white fox scarf at her throat.

18

Echidna: “Was that really all right? Did that old man accept it?”

After leaving the ramshackle house and stepping out into the slums, the scarf spoke to Anastasia.

Looking around restlessly and confirming there was no one nearby, —

Anastasia: “If Gramps said that, then that’s Gramps’s conclusion. More importantly, don’t just start talkin’ all of a sudden. If people see, it’s big trouble, right?”

Echidna: “Well, depending on the case, I’d be confiscated and you’d be subjected to a harsh interrogation. They’d use drugs, magic—anything—and your personality could be broken. Refrain from careless acts.”

Anastasia: “I don’t much like bein’ the one told that, y’know.”

Puffing out her cheeks as she answered, the scarf—Echidna—laughed.

So long as she settled at Anastasia’s neck like this, Echidna could pass as a scarf of unknown origin. Fortunately, she seemed confident in that kind of concealment.

Echidna: “It’s one of my traits as a spirit. Think of it as constantly projecting “Cognitive Disruption.” It’s only a faint interference—just enough to keep others from feeling doubt.”

Anastasia: “But it doesn’t work on me?”

Echidna: “That, too, is likely a side effect of your Gate being defective. …Ana, your body—are you all right?”

Being called “Ana,” by nickname, tickled both physically and emotionally.

Still, Echidna’s concern was only natural. In fact, some effects had already shown.

—To break through the shadow-men’s bulwark, Anastasia had lent Echidna her body. As a result, Echidna had used what they called Anastasia’s Od to cast magic, but—

Anastasia: “Maybe there’s just a little effect?”

For example, though today’s weather blazed down mercilessly, she didn’t feel the heat at all. Even with Echidna wrapped at her neck, not a drop of sweat ran.

Anastasia: “Is this gonna be forever?”

Echidna: “…I told you. Od that’s lost doesn’t return. The side effects are the same.”

Anastasia: “I see. —Then I’ll have to get creative so folks don’t find it strange.”

She would have to be careful in the fire season or the ice season—times when temperatures swung to extremes. It wasn’t as if anyone would say anything just because they found out, but causing worry wasn’t what she wanted.

And it also felt wrong that Echidna would be treated like the villain because of it.

Anastasia: "—? What's wrong?"

Echidna: "No, you're so composed I was at a loss for words. Normally, anyone would panic that such a thing shouldn't be."

Anastasia: "What happened happened. And it was my decision. I won't lie about that."

Life was a string of gambles; all you could do was stack victories and defeats and move forward. And Anastasia had chosen to pay a price in order to win, and stepped into the fray.

If the result was that there were things lost and things gained, it was more meaningful to talk about the things gained.

Anastasia: "What about you, Echidna—are you fine with me? I'm a defective product, ain't I?"

Echidna: "…Don't hold it against me. Those were words I chose to make you let go of me. For now, I've decided to go with you. For the time being, anyway."

Anastasia: "It's fine, it's fine. All I gotta do is make it so you can't bear to leave me."

Making that forward-looking declaration, Anastasia looked straight ahead.

Down the street she could see Ricardo standing with arms folded, and Mimi and the others hanging from those arms and playing. It seemed this incident had brought them all much closer.

Echidna: "Ana, about my existence…"

Anastasia: "We keep it secret from Ricardo 'n them too?"

Echidna: "—. Yes, that would be best. My existence makes you an accomplice who knows, and you alone."

Anastasia: "Why d'ya gotta put it in such scary terms?"

Echidna gave no answer to Anastasia’s tilted-head question. At the attitude of this “accomplice,” Anastasia shrugged and winked as if to say it didn’t bother her.

She didn’t expect they would open up to each other right away. Just as she had taken time to open her heart to Ricardo, Echidna would need time as well.

Anastasia: “So I’ll wait till we go from “accomplices” to “family.””

Echidna: “…”

Echidna still didn’t answer Anastasia’s call. But it wasn’t because she preferred silence—rather, they had come within earshot of Ricardo and the others.

Ricardo: “Ana-bo, how’d it go. The old man gave you a real good scoldin’, yeah?”

Mimi: “Oh—did Roshi get mad? Was he mad? Are Mimi ‘n them gonna get super scolded?”

Anastasia: “Mm—hard to say from me, but…”

At Ricardo and Mimi’s concern, Anastasia smiled gently. Her hand softly stroked Echidna’s fur.

Then, to Ricardo and the others, who tilted their heads in unison, she went on.

Anastasia: “Whatever the problem is, we’ll solve it together. We’re pretty much family, after all.”

19

—And thus, under the same Kararagi sky, at the very hour a single family was born…

Reisel: “Hah, ha… hah…”

Clinging to life, Reisel crawled along the ground in tatters, dragging his ruined body.

His ragged breathing alone sounded painful—he was half-dead, half-alive.

—Bathed in Ricardo’s howling shockwave, all of Reisel’s shadowmen were wiped out at once. The backlash, no less than what he’d suffered when the white heat-ray mowed them down moments earlier, crashed over him.

Ten thousand needles stabbing into him; the terror of being ground down by sheer mental wear shredded Reisel’s heart to pieces.

So, on pure reflex, he put survival first.

Reisel: “D-Damn it… b-but… this means… I blew it. I gotta… get out… fast…”

In the breast of the man crawling away, the Meteor that had filled Reisel with invincible omnipotence had lost its shape, its effects gone—the spent remains of the “Void Garb” that birthed his countless shadows.

At the last instant—before the recoil of all those vanishing shadows came roaring back—Reisel smashed the Void Garb himself, cutting the damage to the bare minimum.

Thanks to that, he avoided dying on the spot. But a different problem reared up.

The Void Garb had only ever been on loan to Reisel—entrusted for this job. He’d lost the borrowed piece and botched the work besides. Unforgivable, by any measure.

The one who’d issued Reisel his orders was merciless. He had to vanish. Now.

Ricardo, and the meddlers who’d butted in—he’d caught the briefest glimpse at the end: the brat he’d seen in town with Ricardo. Meaning he’d been taken for a ride—no, a hundred rides—by that mutt who didn’t even know how to use his head.

That big dumb dogman, who had no idea the guard a greased palm had set upon him in the slave pens, who’d been beaten, who’d been “rescued” so Reisel could stick him with a debt—all of it, and he still got played.

Reisel: “That brat… and Ricardo… I’ll kill ‘em both. …Next time, for sure—”

???: “—Think you’ve got a “next time,” you third-rate little snipe?”

Reisel: “—Hk!”

???: “If you do, you’ve got one hell of a rosy brain in there! If you don’t use that head to think, doesn’t that mean you don’t need a head at all? Kyahahahaha!”

A foot slid into view and barred the path of the man crawling across the dirt. An ice-cold terror seized his heart as Reisel slowly raised his eyes.

He met a pair of red irises that housed cruelty beyond words, framed by golden hair.

Reisel: “W-Wait… listen, I was just on my way to report—”

???: “No, no, no, I don’t need your report, like, at all? I was watching every last bit myself! You burned through my collection piece and wound up like this? I’m so exasperated I don’t even know what to say! Kyahahahaha!”

Smiling as she spoke, the girl with red eyes and golden hair—no, “Mother”—laughed. Hearing that laugh, Reisel’s instincts screamed louder, higher.

Words, action, pleading, honesty—every option stampeded through his skull; his thoughts caught fire.

But before he could put any of them into motion—

“Mother”: “Too slow. I called you a wonderfully hard-to-kill little thing—but I guess I overestimated you.”

Reisel: “Ah…”

“Mother”: “Good-bye, my cute little son! But bad children have to be pruned, you know. Flowers and grass are the same, right? That useless head of yours—Mommy’s going to put it to good use!”

The “Mother” who’d borne such a fool of a “son,” who had failed his role, lightly thrust out a hand. The moment her small palm pressed to his brow, Reisel’s awareness warped.

—No, not his awareness. His very being. His limbs vanished; with a wet crunch his body changed. It split, was crushed, was remade; his brain, his guts, were churned.

Reisel: “Abu… abubu… abubububu…”

“Mother”: “Ugh, I was so excited to add to my collection, and now I’ve lost a piece and a son? I’m the picture of misfortune! A tragic heroine!”

He could still hear “Mother.” Still—how? He had no ears, no eyes; he no longer had the shape of anything living. And still—his awareness, himself, what “himself” even meant, whether it had meaning—thinking, thinking requires a head, what is that, what is “what”—

“Mother”: “Kyahahahaha! You shitheads! Die, every last one of you!!”

She laughed and howled.

If she was laughing, that meant Mother was pleased, so he should be pleased, too.

As that twisted compulsion rewrote his brain, Reisel—what had once been Reisel—was dutifully, meticulously pruned.

“Mother”: “Someday, someday—I’m absolutely going to make it mine. —Say, “Witch’s Legacy.””

—Pruned.

The Three Idiots Set Out!
Earth Spider Episode
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—The forest was shrouded in gloom, a stagnant air spreading through it.

Wiping the sweat beading on his brow, he drew a deep breath to steady his ragged breathing. The stale, fishy humidity filled his lungs with discomfort, yet he deliberately ignored it and faced forward.

Thick greenery walled off his vision; even objects mere inches ahead were uncertain.

Extending a hand to confirm his position, his fingertips met the rough bark of a tree. Relying on that for the moment, he slid his hand along it—and suddenly felt the warmth of human skin.

Garfiel: “…What the hell d’ya think you’re doin’, ya punk?”

Otto: “I wonder what it might be. Where, exactly, am I touching?”

Garfiel: “That’s my amazin’ self’s gut, ya hear?! Oi, get the hell offa me, now!”

With a rough voice and movement, the extended hand was slapped away. His right hand tingled from the impact, yet he seized the other’s shoulder with his opposite hand, saying, “Please wait.” A click of the tongue followed.

Garfiel: “Ya messin’ around at a time like this…?”

Otto: “I am not joking. Unfortunately, I cannot see anything at all right now. There is too much noise here for me to find a breakthrough by conversation. Therefore, I must rely on your nose.”

In the green darkness, the clack of bared fangs rang out.

That sound signified both irritation and consideration; the lack of rebuttal meant the idea had not been rejected. Relieved by that, Otto shrugged in the darkness he could not see.

Otto: “Let us cooperate. Left as things are, Natsuki-san will die lost out here.”

Garfiel: “Tch, that damn Captain’s gone and dragged us inta somethin’ real bothersome.”

Otto: “I am in complete agreement on that.”

Agreeing with his disgruntled companion, he probed their surroundings, yet the person they sought was nowhere to be sensed.

Their missing third member remained thoroughly lost.

They had to regroup somehow and escape this forest safely, but—

Otto: “I was supposed to be on vacation, was I not?”

Placing a hand to his head, the young man—Otto Suwen—let out a deep sigh.

The beginning of the affair traced back a few days earlier, to that sigh of Otto’s.

2

Subaru: “Come to think of it, I never did ask where your hometown is, Otto. Are you a born-and-bred Lugunican?”

Otto: “And there he goes again, springing questions out of nowhere.”

With Subaru’s usual sudden curiosity, Otto could only shrug in exasperation.

Their setting was the new Roswaal Manor's dining hall, the very moment when everyone was gathered around the table.

The mansion had burned down, the grounds and the interior were now entirely different, yet some things remained unchanged—one of them being this mealtime scene.

At Roswaal Manor it was customary for the entire household to share their meals together.

Subaru had always approved of that tradition, and it was alive and well in the new residence. The headcount had nearly doubled, the bustle doubled with it, and the sheer liveliness made every meal delightful.

Subaru: "Even Beako—who used to skip meals all the time—shows up for all three these days."

Beatrice: "Hmph, naturally. Betty has a duty to supervise you, Subaru, lest your picky self leave anything behind, I suppose. That is part of being your… p-p-p-partner, in fact."

Subaru: "You're adorable, you know that?"

Unable to say "partner" smoothly, the blushing Beatrice received a gentle pat from Subaru.

One month had passed since the two formally forged their contract and became partners in both name and deed; the fledgling duo still kept an undeniably fresh distance.

That sweet awkwardness was part of their new life's charm, and it was not limited to those two alone.

As Subaru ruffled Beatrice's hair, his gaze swept over the assembled Emilia Camp.

Someone was usually absent for work, but today saw a rare full attendance. Thanks to that, the table was more vibrant than usual, and the eagerness of Frederica and Petra radiated throughout the hall.

There was the shameless Roswaal at the head, tended dutifully by Ram; Petra, rushing about to serve the large group, quietly supported by Frederica's warm smile; Garfiel devouring his food with characteristic gusto while the adjacent Ryuzu stealthily distributed vegetables onto his plate. To Subaru's left sat a satisfied Beatrice—and on his right…

Emilia: "Now that you mention it, Subaru might have been right. It does feel a little odd."

With a finger to her lips, Emilia tilted her head cutely. Subaru nodded solemnly.

Subaru: "Right… though which part of what I said was right again?"

Emilia: "Otto's story. You were just asking him, weren't you?"

Subaru: "Was I? Guess the chatter was so purely small talk it slipped right out of my head."

Scratching his cheek, Subaru offered a sheepish grin. The sight before him had been so precious he had drifted into it unawares; shaking himself, he refocused.

Subaru: "Anyway, Emilia-tan's curious too, so—what's the answer, Otto?"

Otto: "Answering after that extremely half-hearted segue does not appeal to me, you know?!"

Faced with Subaru's careless inquiry, Otto, seated opposite, let his voice crack. Hearing that squeak, Emilia poked Subaru's shoulder with a chiding "Hey."

Emilia: "Quit saying weird things. Honestly, Subaru, you contrarian."

Subaru: "Yeah, yeah, sorry. For some reason I can't be straightforward with Otto. Bear with me."

Otto: “You’re a troublesome person!”

Otto slumped, while Emilia gave a thin smile.

Emilia: “Alright, that’s enough. So, Otto-kun, where are you from?”

Otto: “Goodness. I could ignore it from Natsuki-san, but even you, Emilia-sama…”

Subaru: “Why’re you dodging so hard? Heavy backstory? Destroyed your hometown yourself?”

Ram: “I see.”

Otto: “It is not “I see”! Ram-san, what kind of light are you casting me in?!”

Ram snorted “Ha!” at Subaru’s banter, piling on, and before long the dining hall’s attention had drifted toward Otto. Under the gathering gazes, he brought a hand to his forehead uneasily.

Otto: “…Well, it is not an interesting tale, so there is little to tell.”

Roswaal: “Oh, no, no, everyone is sooo interested. The second son of the Suwen Company in the Commercial City of Picoutatte, what colorful history might he regale us with, I wooonder?”

Otto: “And with that you have exhausted everything I could possibly say!”

Half resigned, Otto suffered Roswaal’s critical interjection and fell in rhetorical battle. Roswaal, pleased by his mischief’s success, hummed, while Subaru frowned.

Subaru: “So the Suwen Company wasn’t just some figment of Otto’s daydreams.”

Otto: “It is a respectable firm, thank you very much!”

Frederica: “The Commercial City of Picoutatte is a real metropolis in the south of the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

Raising a finger, Frederica offered a calm explanation, then placed a hand on Petra’s shoulder beside her.

Frederica: “The rest, Petra will explain. You can, yes?”

Petra: “Y-Yes, Nee-sama! Picoutatte lies on the border with the Vollachian Empire to the south, and it's said to be one of Lugunica’s five great cities. It’s always been a bustling center of trade and commerce, and it’s even been fought over with the Empire several times.”

Frederica: “Very well done. Excellent, Petra.”

Petra: “Ehehe.”

Displaying her newly learned knowledge and winning perfect marks, Petra beamed brilliantly. Watching the heart-warming scene from the corner of his eye, Subaru folded his arms.

The city was Otto’s birthplace, and the Suwen Company his family business.

Garfiel: “So, that Suwen Company—how big’s the place, huh?”

Otto: “It has some history, but it is not exactly a giant. At best a mid-sized firm, conducting stable business, neither bold nor reckless.”

Subaru: “Huh… that does sorta sound like your family. Though, really? If you were that stability-oriented, you and I would’ve been dead ages ago…”

Otto: “Drag me into that with you after Natsuki-san if you must, but leave me out alone, please!”

Subaru and Garfiel eyed Otto’s protest with skepticism.

The Sanctuary had been one life-threatening tightrope after another, and some of those rope walks had been ones Otto chose himself. His excuse, therefore, carried no weight.

Otto: “Anyway, that is quite enough about my family. …Yes, enough.”

He settled deeper into his chair and sighed. Emilia tilted her head.

Emilia: “Otto-kun, are you alright?”

Otto: “—Yes, I am fine. I merely drifted into a little reflection. I have always caused trouble for my parents and siblings, and I have not contacted them in quite some time.”

Showing a wry smile, Otto sighed again. Emilia brushed that sigh away with a hand and nodded firmly.

Emilia: “Roswaal, I have a request. —Could you give Otto-kun some time off?”

Roswaal: “Ho.”

Receiving the proposal, Roswaal narrowed his heterochromatic eyes meaningfully. The surprise was not his; it was the man in question —Otto—who nearly leapt from his seat.

Otto: “E-Emilia-sama? Why would you bring that up…?”

Emilia: “Because of what you just said. If you’ve worried your family that much, you should meet them and talk properly.”

Otto: “I do appreciate the concern, but…”

Emilia: “You traveled alone before, but now you’re with us, helping with the Royal Selection. We ought to let your family know you’re safe.”

Pressed by Emilia’s earnestness, Otto shrank a little under the weight of her concern. Then she delivered the clincher.

Emilia: “Family is something you should talk to while you can. … It’s reaaally important.”

Her quiet words shook him hard; Otto swallowed a lump in his throat and looked around for help, but—

Subaru: “She’s right, Emilia-tan’s exactly right. Gotta talk while you can…”

Subaru rubbed his reddened nose, fully backing Emilia. Even Beatrice at his side and Garfiel with folded arms nodded in agreement. For this group, the topic of “family” struck all too deeply.

Subaru: “Roswaal, I’m asking too. Give Otto some leave and let him visit home!”

Otto: “Uh, a letter would surely suffice…”

Subaru: “Idiot! How could a letter possibly convey all you feel? March back home in triumph and spread your wings—let’s do this!”

Emilia: “Yes! I think that sounds reaaally wonderful!”

Subaru leapt to his feet and thrust a fist skyward, Emilia following suit. Their raised hands met in a high-five, sparkling eyes turning on Otto.

Overwhelmed by the twin force of two people pierced hardest by “family,” Otto faltered. Roswaal, wearing the air of a sympathetic benefactor, nodded.

Roswaal: “Very well. I shall arrange the time. After all, Otto-kun will be working most diligently for me from now on. Familial understanding is sooo important, I do believe.”

Otto: “There is absolutely no sincerity in that, is there?!”

Otto’s cry rang hollow—alas, not strong enough to overturn the decision of his homecoming.

3

And so, Otto’s vacation—doubling as a trip back to his hometown—was settled in a flash, but…

Otto: “Why, exactly, are you and the others coming along with me, Natsuki-san?”

It was the morning of departure. Having finished readying the dragon carriage, Otto posed the question in a hopeless tone.

His two companions, Subaru and Garfiel, tilted their heads in perfect sync.

Subaru: “Don’t be so cold. What if we let you go alone and then lost contact with you? That’d be bad, right? Plus, I kinda wanna meet your family.”

Otto: “The second part is definitely the real reason. So why is Garfiel coming?”

Garfiel: “I’m the trip’s bodyguard, obviously. Forget my amazin’ self—if somethin’ happened to the Captain, the Royal Selection’d be in trouble. I’m taggin’ along as hired muscle.”

With a thump, Garfiel struck his proud chest. Otto answered with a weary “Haah,” then leaned close to whisper so only Subaru could hear.

Otto: “So… what did you say to talk Garfiel into this?”

Subaru: “Nothing crazy. I just said “bodyguard on a journey” sounds super cool. I mean, doesn’t “yōjinbō” feel way cooler than plain old “escort”?”

Otto: “Hmm… I can’t really relate to that feeling.”

Still, Otto let out an inward sigh of relief; traveling with just these two was an acceptable compromise.

At worst he had feared the entire camp might insist on tagging along—an unlikely but not impossible suggestion coming from that group.

Fortunately, only these two would accompany him. Garfiel’s protection on the road would be welcome. As for what Subaru would contribute… that was anyone’s guess.

Subaru: “I’m the official witness, see? If you turn up alone saying, “I’m working for a Royal-Selection candidate now,” your family’ll never believe you. I’m here to save you from getting branded a liar!”

Subaru was fired up, but Otto already carried a handwritten letter from Roswaal guaranteeing his position and everything else. Subaru’s presence was, strictly speaking, unnecessary. Yet—

Subaru: “…Huh? What’s wrong?”

Otto: “Nothing; I’ve resigned myself. I’m just surprised Beatrice-chan agreed to be separated from you.”

Shaking his head, Otto masked his feelings by shifting the topic.

Ever since sealing their formal contract, Beatrice had been glued to Subaru; they acted together as though she could not bear a moment apart.

The sight was as endearing as a chick following its mother hen, which made it all the more surprising that Subaru had been allowed off on an all-male trip this time.

Subaru: “Well, I’d have loved to bring Beako, but the romance of a laid-back guys-only journey won out—and Beako’s got another job.”

Otto: “Another job… you mean?”

Lifting an eyebrow, Otto turned to Garfiel. The tiger boy clicked his fangs with an “Oh-yep.”

Garfiel: “Granny’s copies—the nameless bunch—there’re twenty-four of ’em. Before teachin’ ’em everythin’ proper, they need their core mana or whatever stabilized. Beako’s the best one for that.”

Otto: “Right, a spirit like Beatrice-chan knows that field better than anyone. Makes sense.”

Twenty-four copies: girls who looked exactly like Ryuzu, born of the Sanctuary’s tangled history. Setting those girls free from their ancient shackles and returning them to everyday life was the dearest wish of both Ryuzu and Beatrice.

Given that, it was perfectly understandable for Beatrice to weigh her dream against traveling with Subaru and choose, tearfully, to stay.

Subaru: “Anyway, everyone else is busy with their own jobs. Just accept this line-up. No glitz, super man-musk, but we’ll have fun all the same!”

Otto: “I don’t mind that, but… Natsuki-san, you seem awfully excited.”

Subaru: “C’mon, an all-guys trip is thrilling! I love Emilia-tan and Beako, sure, but until now it’s been girls, girls, girls. With you and Garfiel on the team, I’m honestly the happiest guy around!”

Subaru flashed a thumbs-up and a sparkle of teeth. Otto scratched his neck; such candid words left no room to turn him down.

Otto: “Garfiel, don’t you want to stay and watch Ryuzu-san’s big project up close?”

Garfiel: “Granny and Sis kicked me out: “Go on, do the Garakwan Waterfall Climb.” …Plus I wanna see the town that was the stage for ‘Silver-Blossom Mayhem.’”

Otto: “Ah, that’s why…”

Hearing Garfiel mumble his true motive, Otto sighed.

Garfiel loved hero tales and old legends. Otto’s hometown, Picoutatte, held several famous stories from decades past—clearly the real draw for him.

Otto: “That makes me feel a little guilty, but…”

Subaru: “Otto, how long you gonna mope? Let’s get going!”

Subaru called from the passenger compartment of the dragon carriage while Otto scratched his head.

They had said their farewells the night before and, considering the route, chosen to depart at dawn. It was merely a short excursion: Otto’s own beloved land dragon would pull the wagon.

Naturally, Subaru’s own Patrasche had protested fiercely, and Otto had apologized profusely to the offended mare in the stables—something Subaru never even noticed.

Otto: “Honestly, some people—some people and some dragons—have no consideration.”

With a weary “good grief,” he pressed a hand to his brow and sighed.

Sighing was an old bad habit of his; he wondered how many he would utter during this journey.

As those thoughts crossed Otto’s mind, only his land dragon, Frufoo, answered with a loud snort of agreement.

4

—The journey of the three men progressed exceedingly smoothly.

The highway linking the cities was well tended, and their land dragon sped along, scenery flying away behind them. Now and again they exchanged nods with passing dragon carriages—an idyllic, peaceful pace of travel.

Subaru: “Riding this dragon carriage with this bunch kinda… reminds me of that wild dash a month ago, y’know…”

Otto: “Wild dash… ah, the time we were racing toward the previous manor. Looking back on it, we were doing some prrretty reckless things then, too.”

The two sat side by side on the driver’s perch as they chatted.

What they were recalling was the Roswaal Manor, assaulted simultaneously during the Sanctuary incident. To prevent the tragedy awaiting at the mansion, Subaru’s group had raced down the road in a dragon carriage.

Save for Patrasche, the lineup now was identical to that ride—quite a nostalgic feeling.

Subaru: “I mean, it’s rare to be riding slowly in Otto’s carriage. Whenever I’m aboard with you, aren’t we usually doing something crazy?”

Otto: “I believe that is less my fault and more a problem with the fellow passengers. …Well, this time no such trouble seems likely, so I am relieved.”

While shifting blame back and forth, Otto idly gazed down the highway.

Otto: “At this rate we will arrive in about ten days… Counting the return, roughly a twenty-day trip.”

Subaru: “Whoa, that sounds like a turn-and-burn. You’re seeing your family after ages—staying a week wouldn’t kill you, right?”

Otto: “That would leave the manor short-handed for nearly a month, and I dread how the work would pile up. Lady Annerose’s butler is helping, apparently, but even so…”

Subaru: “Dude, fretting over work on your vacation? That’s full-speed corporate slave…”

Otto: “It is my nature.”

At Otto’s powerless reply, Subaru gave a wry grin and gazed up at the clear sky.

Thus, the hours of travel and boredom were being consumed in good order. Enjoying the journey exactly as hoped, the easygoing fun wafted a cool breeze through Subaru’s heart.

Subaru: “Still, a solo trip must’ve been rough. Didn’t you ever have nights of tears for company?”

Otto: “Why phrase it like poetry? …Well, loneliness is part and parcel of a traveling merchant’s path. I would be lying if I said I never felt it.”

Staring off into the distant sky, Otto spoke with quiet feeling.

Otto: “However, as you know, I possess a Divine Protection. Thanks to that, I could converse with my partner Frufoo during the journey, so the nights were not that lonely.”

Subaru: “Heh… whoa!”

The land dragon pulling them gave a low whinny the moment Subaru nodded, perfectly timed—like an aizuchi thrown into the conversation.

Subaru: “True, looks like we won’t be as bored as I thought.”

Otto: “Frufoo and I have been together a long time; I no longer find companionable silence awkward.”

With that, Otto’s faint smile held clear trust in the dragon.

Satisfied by the sight, Subaru pondered deeply in the gap left by the conversation.

What he mulled over was an important matter of the trip that even Otto did not know—indeed, not the true purpose, but the second objective behind arranging this journey.

Subaru's hidden aim was, plainly, to advance the relationship between Otto and Garfiel.

Subaru: "Well, "advance" might be the wrong word, but…"

It had been about a month since the two joined the Camp, and in that time Subaru had acutely felt the frustration of the subtle distance Otto and Garfiel kept between them.

Little wonder: in the Sanctuary the pair had clashed head-on. From what Otto claimed, he put up quite a fight despite Garfiel's dominance—Subaru half believed, half doubted.

Regardless, that history left a set space between them.

Subaru and Otto were friends; Subaru and Garfiel were practically brothers. Knowing the good in both, Subaru wanted them to stand with no rift. With the men of the same Camp together, deeper camaraderie could only help—

Subaru: "Yeah, Roswaal aside…!"

Otto: "What's wrong all of a sudden? Did Lord Roswaal do something again?"

Subaru: "Funny you say "again"; shows the trust you've got in him. It's nothing big."

Otto faithfully reacted to the context-less mutter; Subaru laughed it off vaguely. Best if this goal were met quietly, without anyone noticing.

Garfiel: "Yo, weren'cha bad-mouthin' that bastard Roswaal just now?"

Garfiel leaned out from the passenger compartment, planting his upper body atop the driver's seat back and clicking his fangs.

Subaru: "Thought you were napping—what a topic to perk up to."

Garfiel: "You guys're the cold ones. If it's trash talk 'bout him, let me in; I got heaps stored up."

Otto: "I have my doubts about the morality, but it has been a long relationship."

Apparently harboring much pent-up grievance, Garfiel was keen on the Roswaal gossip. Truthfully, bonding over a common enemy was a quick path to human unity.

Subaru: "Guess we'll swallow our tears and cast Roswaal as the villain… Not like he isn't one."

With conscience silenced for the moment, Subaru decided to mix oil and water.

Subaru: "Alright then, I've got a failsafe funny story—"

Garfiel: "Hold it, Captain."

Just as Subaru steeled himself to speak, Garfiel cut in. Thinking he could not wait for a gem of an anecdote, Subaru looked over—only to see Garfiel's gaze fixed not on them, but leftward. There, trees lined the road…

Subaru: "Garfiel?"

Garfiel: "…Somethin's rank. Real stinkin'."

The instant Garfiel said so, Subaru felt gooseflesh race across his body.

Subaru: "Uh…"

Otto: "Frufoo!"

Sensing the same abnormality, Otto urged the dragon on; mighty limbs pounded earth as the carriage shot forward—and in that instant, the forest exploded.

Subaru: “Wha—”

With a blast of wind and roar, the woods burst apart and something leapt onto the highway. It was the very space the carriage had occupied a breath before; had they not sped up, they’d have been swallowed.

Subaru’s eyes widened, fixed on the thing that tried to engulf them.

It looked like a grotesque, writhing mass of flesh.

A mound the size of a small hill—parts black, parts red, parts sheathed in white hide, with tufts of beast-fur sprouting here and there. Limbs—if they could be called that—gouged the ground, not in fours but tens, perhaps twenties.

No discernible head, yet facial organs dotted the mass at random, mismatched in number and size like a game of pin-the-face on a god gone mad.

A monster: a ludicrous god’s fukuwarai made out of bizarre biological parts.

That abomination mounted the highway and gave chase from directly behind.

Subaru: “Dashdashdashdash—!”

Otto: “Wawawawawawawa!”

Subaru, half-deranged, shook Otto’s shoulders violently, but the carriage was already at full speed—no further flight was possible. Behind, the lump of flesh plowed the road, closing faster than their dragon.

Subaru: “It’s faaaast! It’s gaining! What is that thing?!”

Otto: “No idea! Only that getting caught is absolutely bad!”

Subaru: “Don’t hafta tell me… Hey, wait?!”

In the racket on the driver’s seat, Subaru noticed one voice missing.

He glanced back—Garfiel, who should have been behind them, was gone. Searching frantically—

Subaru: "…That idiot!"

Behind the fleeing carriage, Garfiel stood spread-legged in the highway's center.

Fists clenched before his chest, the boy faced the onrushing flesh head-on. The meat-hill barreled on without slowing, intent on flattening the small figure—

Garfiel: "Raaaaaah!!"

Subaru: "No way?!"

With a single roar, Garfiel's strike pulverized the charging mass from below—

Or rather, the ground he stomped erupted upward in a titanic blow. Blessed by the Earth Spirit, Garfiel could bend the very land to his side, letting a single stomp deliver a titanic counter to a foe more than twenty times his size.

Hit by the upheaved earth, the monster's advance halted. Countless limbs dug in as myriad eyeballs writhed, glaring murder at Garfiel.

Garfiel: "What're ya starin' at! Come at me if ya're comin'!"

He jabbed a fist forward, voice like thunder. From the stopped carriage, Subaru looked back at Otto.

Subaru: "Could he be… stupid?"

Otto: "Too soon to relax. The situation's improved, but still…"

At least, Otto judged, it was not an unstoppable natural calamity. Yet its ghastly first impression lingered.

Subaru: "What is that, a witchbeast?"

Otto: “Told you—never seen or heard of it… And the stench is awful.”

“Fishy” had been too mild. A corrosive mix of rot and filth invaded their sinuses; foul juice dripped everywhere from the mass, befouling the earth each second.

Subaru: “Otto, how ’bout using your silver tongue to ask it to leave nicely?”

Otto: “Plenty of mouths, but I doubt any head understands words. Ha-Ha.”

With a dry smile Otto rejected negotiation. Truth be told, Subaru felt the same. If words failed, only Garfiel’s brawn remained.

Garfiel: “That’s right. Your opponent is me. Silver-Blossom Mayhem, Unclouded—gonna bust it loose!”

Leaning forward, he beckoned provocatively. Whether it felt provoked was unknown, but the flesh mass slowly undulated toward Garfiel—

Garfiel: “Huh?”

Garfiel’s green eyes widened, mouth agape upward.

The mass vaulted clean over his head, bounding back into the forest whence it came, rolling furiously deeper, deeper within. On innumerable limbs it was far faster than running—soon it vanished into the woods.

Subaru: “Eh? It ran?”

Otto: “It ran… yes.”

Stunned by the unexpected retreat, Subaru and Otto traded bewildered voices. Surprise one: it chose to flee. Surprise two: it had the wits to flee.

Most shocked of all, though, was the fired-up Garfiel.

Garfiel: “Don’t yaaaaa screw with me! Ya pick a fight ’n run off?!”

He stomped the ground, damning the cowardice. Left unchecked he looked ready to dive into the forest after it.

Subaru: “Hold it, hold it, calm down, Garfiel! If it’s gone, fine—leave it!”

Garfiel: “But, Captain! That thing’s bad news if we let it go!”

Subaru: “Yeah, I don’t doubt that, but…”

With Garfiel breathing hard against him, Subaru mulled their options. The creature was clearly dangerous; if it attacked travelers indiscriminately, casualties would mount. Yet chasing it down carried its own risk.

Otto: “Let us head to the nearby town of Pappelt.”

Otto offered a lifeline. At the unfamiliar name Subaru tilted his head.

Subaru: “Pappelt? That’s a town, right? Why there?”

Otto: “Our fear is lack of information on that creature. That’s why neither you nor Garfiel could agree. So—let’s gather information.”

Garfiel: “Ya got some lead that says we can learn in that Pappelt place?”

Otto: “Something that conspicuous? At least one or two sightings must be on record around here. If this was the first, our luck is abysmal.”

The thought was frightening, but Subaru shook it off. Otto’s reasoning held.

Subaru: “I’m in. Not warning people about that monster’d be basic apathy. Let’s head for Pappelt.”

He nodded while surveying the shattered forest. One concern remained—

Subaru: “This throws our plan to visit Otto’s home a bit outta whack.”

Otto: “Ah—about that.”

Scratching his head over the itinerary, Subaru saw Otto pull a bitter face. Furrowing his brow, Subaru listened as Otto slumped his shoulders.

Otto: “I kept meaning to say… but our destination this time isn’t Picoutatte. It’s, well, Pappelt.”

Subaru: “Hah?”

Perplexed words left Subaru; beside him Garfiel too growled low, snout wrinkling.

Garfiel: “Oi, that ain’t what ya told us. I heard we were goin’ to Picoutatte…”

Otto: “Indeed, which is why it was hard to bring up with you. Since we have come this far, I must confess…”

Seeing storm clouds gather around Garfiel, Otto exhaled a long sigh. After a brief hesitation—

Otto: “The truth is, back home, there is a hitman after my life.”

5

The explanation of the tinder Otto carried was more or less finished on the road to Pappelt.

All three men had squeezed themselves onto the driver’s seat, Otto in the middle for a forced excuse session; when Subaru at last heard it through, his impression was—

Subaru: “You’ve got plenty to say about other people, but you can’t talk about yourself at all, huh.”

Otto: “Eh? That is going too far, surely. I am not that strange.”

Subaru: “Don’t call me strange! Getting dragged into someone else’s love mess by false accusation, winding up target-marked by a hitman—if that ain’t trouble-maker material, what is?!”

He laid into Otto, who remained blissfully unaware of his own disposition.

Otto’s tale, put simply, was a man-and-woman mess he had stirred up back home—no, a mess someone else stirred that splashed on him.

Suspected of involvement with a certain woman, young Otto had used his Divine Protection of “Soul of Language” to clear his name by exposing that the woman was eight-timing. But she happened to be the daughter of a local notable, so—bang, he was a wanted man.

Lighting the fuse of his own bomb, he ended up hunted.

Subaru: “Listening to that, feels like you became a traveling merchant because you had to.”

Otto: “How can you say such a thing! I chose the merchant’s path of my own will, for my dream! True, the departure was unforeseen, but what matters is the result, not the process.”

Garfiel: “Ya got no results, tho. Ain’t that “wake up an’ you’re in Ramba”?”

Otto: “Nnnghh…”

Otto groaned at the unwanted turn, while Garfiel only clicked his tongue. Having looked forward to Picoutatte, Garfiel’s disappointment and irritation were enormous.

Given the circumstances, Subaru had quickly forgiven Otto, but—

Subaru: “At this rate we’ll lose the trip’s first objective and watch the second one crumble…”

No greeting Otto’s family, and instead carving a fatal rift between Otto and Garfiel—the journey could end like that.

Emilia: “Enjoy yourselves reaaally lots and bring home loads of stories, okay?”

Emilia’s words on the eve of departure flashed across Subaru’s mind.

She had been fresh from her bath, clad in a negligée, impossibly cute—but that was not the point. Well, it mattered, but the important point now was that they would betray Emilia’s expectations like this.

Subaru: “Can’t have that—my heart would die!”

Garfiel: “Captain, what’ve ya been mutterin’ this whole time?”

The imagined sight of sad-faced Emilia hurt his chest; Subaru looked up with renewed resolve. Addressed by Garfiel, he shook his head.

Subaru: “Just confirming where I stand. Anyway, let’s fix the immediate issue. Otto, about that Pappelt… Why was that our destination in the first place?”

Even without the flesh mass, Otto had aimed for that town. Asked for the true reason, Otto gave the reins a light tug.

Otto: “Simple. My younger brother lives there. As I said, I cannot return to Picoutatte, but I can meet my brother.”

Subaru: “So the original goal is sorta met. Fine by me.”

Accepting the explanation, Subaru murmured, “A brother, huh,” then—

Subaru: “Roswaal called you the second son, right? How many siblings?”

Otto: “Three. I’m in the middle. I’ve always troubled the family, so honestly I’m scared stiff this time too.”

Subaru: “Always, huh. I get it.”

Otto: “What d’you mean, “you get it”! What exactly do you get?!”

Surely Otto’s trouble magnet had long tormented his kin.

While they talked, the rumble of wheels changed; the carriage left the maintained highway for an even firmer surface—sign that a town was near. Soon a wooden gate came into sight.

Subaru: “So this is Pappelt… Pretty heavily fortified.”

Facing the gate, that was his first thought.

A stout log palisade ringed the town, watchtowers dotted along it—defenses unmistakably strict.

Garfiel: “More a fort than a town.”

Otto: “Strange. Two years ago it was nowhere near this strict.”

Subaru flinched at the grim air; Otto frowned at the change. Paying them no mind, Garfiel jerked his chin ahead.

Garfiel: “Yakkin’ here won’t help. ‘Sides, looks like we got a greeter.”

Indeed, a figure appeared on the watchtower. An ordinary townsman, yet visibly tense even from afar.

Guard: “T-Travelers! Pappelt is in an extremely dangerous state right now! I recommend you turn back immediately!”

At the trembling shout, the three exchanged looks.

Subaru: “Ah—thanks for the warning! But we’ve business inside, and we need to make a report too. Can you open the gate?”

Guard: “Eh… I-I wasn’t told how to answer that…”

Subaru: “Uugh, frustrating.”

Seeing the man flounder for an un-manualled response, Otto raised a hand.

Otto: “May I? I’m the elder brother of Regin Suwen, the town physician. Relatives of residents should be allowed entry, no?”

Guard: “Doctor Regin’s…?”

At the familiar name, the man peered hard at Otto—up and down for a moment—

Guard: “Ah, you do resemble him. Very well, come in.”

Subaru: “That’s all it takes?”

Otto: “It is. Say no more and accept the invitation.”

Clamping Subaru’s mouth, Otto smiled at the guard.

The gate creaked open, and they rolled the carriage inside.

Garfiel: “Huh, inside ain’t that different from the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “The depopulation wave’s got to be lighter than there, surely.”

Looking about, Garfiel muttered; Subaru, while retorting, felt an odd discomfort. The town lacked vitality grossly out of proportion to its size and population. Older folks dominated, hope thin on the ground—neck-and-neck with the Sanctuary, which was… bad.

Subaru: “Why’s the mood so dark…?”

Otto: “First, we should find someone informed. Or at least tell whoever’s in charge about that flesh mass—”

They were discussing the next step when—

Frufoo gave a low whinny. Patrasche almost never voiced herself; likewise, Otto’s dragon rarely called. All three turned at once.

Beside Frufoo stood a single young man.

Young Man: “Hey, Frufoo. Glad you’re well. Grown even bigger, haven’t you?”

He tickled the dragon's neck and ears with slender fingers. Gray hair tied at the nape, a threadbare white coat, tall and lanky, a gentle face, something like a cigarette between his lips—a look somehow familiar.

At that, Otto leapt from the carriage.

Otto: "Regin! Long time no see, it's me!"

Smiling, he ran to the youth—so the man was Regin Suwen, Otto's brother. Younger in years, yet exhaustion etched his side profile beyond age.

Regin, hearing Otto's call, sighed lightly and—

Regin: "Open up now, Frufoo… Mm, nutrition looks good. They're feeding you properly. I'm relieved."

Otto: "Uh, um, hello? Regin? It's me, your brother?"

Regin: "Haha, don't lick me that much. If you get Frufoo's scent on me, the other dragons'll wonder what's up, right? Ease up, okay?"

Otto: "Hey, Regin! That attitude is unacceptable! Treating your brother like dirt… Are you mad? Because I never wrote? You are mad, aren't you?!"

Otto's plaintive cry rose, but Regin ignored him, continuing his bonding with Frufoo. Watching, Subaru crossed his arms and nodded.

Subaru: "Kinda get where he ranks in his family now."

And so the farcical little drama continued, to Subaru's rather fresh enjoyment.

6

Regin: "Once again, welcome all the way out here. I'm Regin Suwen—thank you for looking after my good-for-nothing elder brother."

Seated at last in the clinic's reception room, Regin served tea and smiled as he spoke.

At the introduction Subaru glanced toward Otto, who had been relegated to a corner of the room.

Subaru: “Good-for-nothing elder brother,” huh.”

Otto: “What’s with that face? For the record, my heart is already in tatters.”

Garfiel: “Ain’t much to brag about, ya know.”

Garfiel snorted while Otto tried to put on a brave front, sipping the tea.

They were in the Suwen Clinic near Pappelt’s front gate—Regin’s own practice. This reception room, part of the living quarters, was neat and white throughout, exuding the cleanliness of a hospital. One look at the orderly interior and Regin’s gentle features made it plain they were brothers.

(For the record, the little farce in which the younger brother ignored the newly reunited elder lasted a full ten minutes before Regin's irritation cooled enough to invite them inside.)

Subaru: "I'm Natsuki Subaru, and this is Garfiel Tinsel. We're… coworkers of your brother? Does that describe us?"

Otto: "Coworkers" will do for now."

If it were just Subaru he might have said "friends," but Garfiel complicated things—especially since the tiger-boy was still brooding over Otto's destination switch.

Subaru: "Still, a merchant family's son becoming a doctor—that's quite a path. Didn't you ever think of following your two elder brothers into the trade?"

Regin: "Well, no. The eldest kindly took over the family business, and the second showed me exactly what not to do with one's life, so I decided to live sensibly."

Subaru: "Perfect negative example—looks like you're a pretty good big brother, Otto."

Otto: "You can't possibly mean that?!"

Regin's barbs at Otto were razor-sharp—proof enough of the worry he'd caused. Otto: guilty.

Subaru: "Anyway, enough about our "good-for-nothing" Otto. Let's get to the point."

Regin: "Right—the lump of meat you encountered… the Earth Spider, yes?"

Straightening his posture, Subaru nodded; Regin lowered his chin and spoke the term.

Earth Spider—apparently that was the creature's name, learned only because Otto, driven to desperation while being ignored, had blurted it out during his recap.

Regin lowered his eyes, drew a green stick—a plant stem—from the breast of his white coat, and set it between his teeth. What had looked like a cigarette was in fact that stem. When he bit its tip between his molars a faint sloshing sounded, and a fresh fragrance —almost minty—filled the room.

Regin: “Stem of mimir. Calms animals—and works on people too.”

Subaru: “If it’s non-addictive, sign me up. Definitely a vet’s touch.”

Regin: “Definitely a vet, eh…”

Regin gave a wry smile; he was indeed a veterinarian by trade. Sensing a shade of darkness in that smile, Subaru frowned.

Subaru: “Sorry. I’m just… frustrated at being useless lately. Over this Earth Spider stuff.”

Garfiel: “Spill it, then. “Cross the Albis River”, right?”

Regin exhaled.

Regin: “…The Earth Spider was first sighted about three months ago. A townsman who’d gone into the forest reported a disturbing lump of flesh—child-sized at the time.”

The account was dismissed as illusion or mistake. Had a crowd gone in to exterminate it then, things might have turned out differently.

Regin: “While it was left alone, sightings gradually increased. And more than that—the Earth Spider—still unnamed then—began to cause actual damage.”

Subaru: “Damage? You mean people were attacked?”

Regin: “No. It preyed on land dragons and livestock.”

Pastured dragons and household animals began falling victim, and the creature's existence became undeniable once its feeding was seen.

Regin: "It swallowed a land dragon whole. By then it was already larger than a house."

Otto: "Swallowed… Then its grotesque shape is because—"

Regin: "It seems to incorporate whatever it eats into its own body."

Regin's polite tone slipped only in answering Otto, but revulsion outweighed noticing the lapse. The thing grew by absorbing its prey.

Subaru: "So what is it? A witchbeast?"

Regin: "We have no idea. At that size, of course its horn—if it has one—isn't visible; it could even have been broken off. If it is a witchbeast with a broken horn, the damage so far was man-made, but we have no culprit."

He raised both hands in defeat, yet his lip-chewing frustration bled through.

Subaru: "And the victims—land dragons and stock—that's all your field."

Regin: "Clinic's practically closed; I spend my days cleaning while grinding my teeth."

With a mint-scented sigh, Regin spat out the chewed stem. It missed the waste-basket and rolled across the floor.

Subaru: "So the heavy stockade and gate are a response to that Earth Spider."

Regin: "On the lord's orders, more or less. They even built watchtowers, but as you saw it's all amateur. Besides, the Earth Spider's hardly going to stroll in through the gate."

Garfiel: "That's for sure… but still."

Garfiel, listening, clacked his fangs and slouched deep into the sofa, tossing his boots up onto the table.

Subaru: “Hey—mind your manners, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “What’s the point o’ manners, Captain? ’Stead of building fences ’n whining, there’s somethin’ they could do.”

His sharp stare fixed on Regin.

Regin: “And what might that be?”

Garfiel: “Simple. Get everyone in town, march into the forest, an’ smash the Earth Spider. If that ain’t enough, hire mercs. Quickest way there is.”

Regin: “…!”

Regin’s cheek twitched at the blunt suggestion.

Otto: “Garfiel, don’t make it sound so easy.”

Otto answered in his brother’s stead, gesturing out the window.

Otto: “Ordinary people can’t face an enemy that huge. All they can do is fortify and brace for attack—it isn’t easy to gather fighters.”

Garfiel: “Nice excuse for doin’ nothin’. What d’you know anyway, brother-boy? How d’you know the town’s givin’ it their all?”

Otto: “Because Regin’s here. If my brother’s involved, there’s no way they’re not doing their utmost.”

Rising with the heat of his words, Otto made even Garfiel falter. His proof was merely that his family was trying—but even so—

Subaru: “Give it up, Garfiel. Otto’s right—this is all the town can muster.”

Clicking his tongue, Garfiel swallowed further argument. With this group, the word “family” carried heavy weight; that was clear from the start of the journey.

Seeing him back down, Regin exhaled deep relief.

Regin: “Y-Your coworkers are terrifying, brother. I’ve met many people, but they don’t look like merchants at all.”

Subaru: “Ah, we are Otto’s colleagues, but not in the travelling-merchant sense—”

Otto: “W-W-Wait! Hold on, please!”

Otto frantically cut Subaru off, then cast about the room as if remembering something.

Otto: “The clinic aside, this room is very tidy, isn’t it? You used to be terrible at cleaning, Regin—you’ve grown.”

Regin: “There isn’t much difference between us there. And, well, truth be told, the neatness is thanks to someone who helps me.”

Subaru: “Someone helping?”

Otto’s clumsy topic-shift didn’t bother Regin, who answered plainly.

Subaru: “Not to pry, but that’s fine by you?”

Regin: “Brother’s stories always go off the rails. Um, well…”

Subaru: “Hm? Is it about your Divine Protection? Otto told us, and Garfiel and I both know, so no need to hide it.”

Regin: “Eh…”

Eyes wide, Regin turned to Otto.

Regin: “You told them?”

Otto: “Ehh, it sort of happened along the way.”

Subaru: “That sounds pretty reluctant…”

Otto’s half-hearted tone earned a pout from Subaru, but Regin’s shock dwarfed their byplay.

Garfiel: “Oi, that kid brother o’ yours okay? I’m gettin’ worried seein’ him so spooked.”

Otto: “Just leave Natsuki-san as he is. Really, it’s fine.”

Something in Otto’s calm gaze sapped further argument. The reception room lapsed into a lull—until…

???: “—Doctor Regin, are you in?”

A jaunty knock and a bell-like woman’s voice came from beyond the door.

The three visitors exchanged looks; the voice belonged to no one they knew. Regin, however—

Regin: “Ah, yes, I’m here. Come in.”

The door opened slowly to admit a beautiful woman.

A proud figure with striking red hair tied behind her head and resolute eyes; her posture straight, her feminine curves clear. Surprise melted quickly into a charming smile.

Woman: “Oh—I’m sorry, Doctor. I assumed you’d be idle again today and… eh?”

She began an apologetic grin toward Regin’s guests—only for both words and expression to freeze, wide eyes staring at the man who had just turned from Regin’s side—

Woman: “Number Two?”

Otto: “Miss Marone?”

Her startled call overlapped with Otto’s gasp of recognition.

An unexpected reunion with an unforeseen acquaintance sent the tale rolling in a new, unanticipated direction—

For now, let the surprise of that meeting linger, carrying us into the next act.

7

—Southern town of Pappelt, inside Regin Suwen's veterinary clinic.

In one of its rooms, a man and a woman stared at each other, bodies frozen in surprise.

Locked in place were Otto and the woman called Marone. Subaru, quick-eyed as ever, noticed how the woman's large, round eyes welled not only with shock but with other emotions as well.

By contrast, Otto's face showed nothing but astonishment—hardly entertaining.

Subaru: "Nice little reunion in an unexpected place, but how long are you two gonna stay petrified?"

His prompt shattered the tense silence; the pair seemed to remember how to breathe and their expressions finally moved.

Otto: "R-Right. I was just a bit surprised. Long time no see, Miss Maro—"

Marone: "Number Two—!"

Otto: "Uwaaah?!"

Smiles failed to align with actions. Otto, who had begun a gentle greeting, suddenly had to catch the leaping Marone, bending backward so far it was a miracle he did not topple. His waist and knees were bent to the danger point, Marone clinging to him all the while.

Garfiel: "Huh. Didn't think he'd hold out—color me impressed."

Otto: "Is that all you've got to say?! H-Hey, M-Miss Marone! A-A-Ah, s-sorry… If this keeps up we're both going to fall…"

Marone: "Number Two, Number Two, Number Two—! You, you impossible man, honestly, you're just—!"

Otto: “She’s not listening! I really am about to—about to—”

Garfiel folded his arms with no intention of helping; Marone was far too swept up in emotion to notice. Otto, lone warrior, could only sweat.

Subaru, watching the struggle, set a hand to his chin.

Subaru: “Can’t quite grasp the whole picture, but judging from her reaction you two are pretty close, huh? Even I can’t misread that. Looks like—”

Subaru: “A spring squall’s blowing in…!”

Otto: “Whatever dumb thing you’re muttering, could you please help me?!”

Otto’s shrill cry finally spurred Subaru to step forward. Behind him—

Regin: “…Number Two?”

Regin’s low, curious murmur reached none of them in the room.

8

Marone: “Um—sorry for getting carried away. I’m Marone Lisbon. I help out Doctor Regin here at the clinic.”

After the excitement had calmed, Subaru’s party took time to re-introduce themselves.

Seated on the reception-room sofa and watching Marone’s gentle smile, Subaru tucked his chin.

Subaru: “Hard to believe that’s the same person who was bouncing around a moment ago.”

Otto: “Natsuki-san.”

Marone, cheeks reddening in embarrassment, cast a glance at Subaru; Otto shot Subaru a glare while shielding her.

Otto: “Please stop teasing Miss Marone the way you do at the mansion. Beatrice-chan isn’t here to keep an eye on you.”

Subaru: “Yeah, my bad—though why’s Beako the chaperone? I’m the one who looks after her, right? Hey, Garfiel?”

Garfiel: “Looks-wise the Captain is, sure—but with Granny like that it’s hard t’answer.”

Subaru’s appeal for support failed; Garfiel, grandson of a girl-bodied elder, was no ally here.

Subaru: “Guess we’ll leave who outranks who till the mansion decides…”

Otto: “Yes, yes; just don’t make trouble.”

Letting Otto’s weary sigh slide, Subaru backed off. When the conversation paused, Regin—chewing a second mimir stem—spoke up.

Regin: “I can guess, but… You two knew each other already, right?”

Marone: “Y-Yes, Doctor Regin. Remember I told you? About that awful time in my hometown, when—”

Choosing her words, she glanced at Otto; seeing Subaru and the others’ questioning faces, she mustered a brave smile.

Marone: “A well-born boy in town had teamed up with a band of bandits hiding nearby. In exchange for them not raiding the town, he’d periodically hand over girls to be sold as slaves.”

Garfiel: “That’s “bad deeds can’t hide on the wind,” ain’t it?”

The vile tale made Garfiel bare his fangs in disgust; Subaru felt the same, but now grasped the link between the pair.

Subaru: “So Otto slaughtered the bandits bare-handed. Got it.”

Otto: “Of course not! What on earth do you think of me?!”

Subaru: “Combat-ready civil-affairs officer.”

Otto: “Only you call me that—and you know I’m not that strong!”

Denying while hinting at some rough-and-tumble, Otto rebuffed Subaru. Marone covered her mouth with a small laugh.

Marone: “No, no. Number Two was caught as a bonus on the way—after I’d been taken. I was Slave Number One, so—”

Subaru: “Otto became Slave Number Two, hence your calling him “Number Two.”

With that, their circumstances were finally clear, and Subaru mused:

Subaru: “So… you get trussed up by bad guys once or twice a year?”

Otto: “Can’t deny it—and I resent my merchant’s life for it…”

Though their “first meeting” of one loop lay erased, Subaru had first rescued Otto from the Witch Cult. Truly, Otto the kidnap magnet.

Otto: “I chose the merchant’s road knowing it was risky.”

Regin: “Sorry, but the risks you face don’t seem normal to me.”

Otto: “Et tu, Regin…”

His brother’s comment crushed Otto’s attempted self-defense. Marone pressed a hand to her shapely chest.

Marone: “Anyway, I and Number Two wound up slaves. But right before we were sold, the bandits lost control of their dragon carriage on a rough road and plunged into a ravine. Only me, Number Two, and his land dragon survived, and we parted vowing to live bravely. That’s my story till now.”

She ended with a polite “thank you for listening.” Her narrative almost drew instinctive applause. Still—

Subaru: “Bandits missing a turn by a cliff, huh…”

Pretty convenient, Subaru thought, glancing at Otto. Otto pressed a finger to his lips and winked—creepy. Clearly he’d had a hand in the bandits’ fate. He was sparing Marone the burden—or was too shy for gratitude.

Garfiel: “Never thought ya’d meet again out here.”

Otto: “Indeed. I never imagined Miss Marone would be with Regin.”

A curious bond, sure—but Subaru’s take was different. If it’s chance, isn’t it also fate?

Looking again, the two matched well in age and impression.

Since a month earlier Subaru had advanced his own relationships; feeling like a “human-relations pro,” he slipped into matchmaker mode.

Subaru: “You two must have lots to catch up on. Why not talk outside, bring Frufoo too? Don’t mind us.”

Otto: “…Why are you talking like that?”

Subaru: “Go on, go on!”

His busybody act sped along; hearing Frufoo’s name, Marone brightened—“Number Two’s dragon’s here?”—sealing the deal.

Subaru (aside): “Heh-Heh, perfect. Time to watch the fireworks…”

Garfiel: “What was that dumb play, Captain? What’re ya schemin’?”

Subaru wagged a finger.

Subaru: “That, my friend, is called adult consideration.”

Regin: “Feels more like nosy meddling to me…”

Subaru: “Pipe down! You’re always—oh, wrong brother.”

Realizing his mix-up, Subaru bit back his retort; the brothers’ voices were alike. A thought struck him: sending Marone away—how did Regin feel? Would this spark some sibling melodrama? His worry came late.

Subaru: “S-So, Regin—what kind of adult do you want to be?”

Regin: “What’s with that clumsy probing? My life’s goal is exactly what you see, Natsuki-san.”

“San” and all—he was very much Otto’s brother. Leaning on the wall, Regin gazed out the window toward the stable where Frufoo stood, Marone hugging the dragon while Otto watched.

Regin: “I owe my brother. He deserves happiness.”

His voice held a faint, tragic shade. Subaru and Garfiel exchanged looks.

Subaru: “Gonna ask straight: what’s your relationship with Marone?”

Regin: “—A veterinary doctor and his helper. Nothing more.”

Unsmiling, Regin answered. Subaru put a hand to his chest.

Subaru: “Oh, good—what a relief! I thought I’d stepped on a landmine…”

Regin dropped the mimir stem from his mouth; Garfiel caught it.

Garfiel: “Here—didn’t hit the floor.”

Regin: “Ah—th-thank you…”

Taking it back, he bit down again; minty scent filled the room as he pressed a hand to his brow—the spitting image of Otto.

Regin: “As expected of Brother’s friends… hard to grasp, all of you…”

He sighed, fragrant and weary.

Marone: “There, there, good boy. Do you remember me? Thank you for saving me back then—”

Frufoo: “I remember, young lady. Who would have thought we’d meet in a place like this—what a coincidence.”

Wrapping her arms around the ground dragon’s thick neck, Marone poured both words and an embrace into her gratitude. Behind her Otto watched as his beloved Frufoo rubbed his nose against her.

Thanks to the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, Otto could follow their exchange perfectly. Happily, the feelings between the two were mutual; no interpreter would be needed.

Otto: “I never did tell Marone the truth about my Divine Protection, after all.”

Scratching his cheek with a finger, Otto recalled their very first meeting.

By and large, the tale he had given in the reception room covered everything, yet one detail lay hidden in his own chest: he had lied about the nature of his Protection.

At the very least he had not confessed to Marone that his gift was the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language. That was a survival tactic anyone blessed with such a gift learned naturally.

Honestly, even if Marone found out, nothing bad would happen—but the awkwardness of having lied on purpose lingered. If possible, he would rather steer the conversation away from it.

And yet—

Otto: “What on earth is Natsuki-san scheming…?”

Subaru’s affected tone and pushiness, driving him and Marone outside, bothered Otto.

Reading other people’s faces was his trade; a man harboring an ulterior motive stood out at a glance. Subaru’s was the face of someone with a shallow plot.

That shallowness was the problem.

Otto: “I could ignore it, but with Regin and Marone here I’d rather not let him do something stupid that makes them worry…”

Marone: “You’re making a hard face. Something on your mind? You look like someone with plenty of worries.”

Turning back to the brooding Otto, Marone spoke. Pressing her cheek to Frufoo’s face, those clear eyes and candid words drew a wry smile from him.

Marone was perceptive and stout-hearted; even on the verge of being sold into slavery she had remained dignified—a woman most admirable.

Marone: “Number Two? Why are you smiling?”

Otto: “Oh, nothing. It’s just funny seeing you get along so well with my Frufoo. Working with Regin aside, have you always loved ground dragons this much?”

Marone: “If you mean “from the start,” then no. I only grew to love them thanks to this boy.”

At Otto’s casual remark, Marone gently stroked Frufoo’s thick neck. Her fingers hit every spot just right, and the dragon’s breath quivered with pleasure.

Marone: “Remember, when those bandits were about to throw us into the ravine, this boy shook them off. I never forget grudges, but I don’t forget favors either. And so—”

Otto: “…So you help at a veterinary clinic where you can care for ground dragons?”

Marone: “I actually thought of going all the way to Flanders, the so-called City of Ground Dragons. But, well, that felt a bit too far.”

Otto: “—?”

The intent behind her words was hard to grasp; Otto frowned.

Seeing him, Marone dropped her shoulders in frustration.

Marone: “Number Two, you were peddling near my hometown of Gineb, right? If I went too far away, the chance we might meet again would disappear.”

Otto: “A-Ah—ah…”

Marone: “What kind of reaction is that?”

She laughed at his slack-jawed answer, while Otto, facing her smile head-on, was utterly at a loss.

Otto: “…It’s a lovely thought, but you didn’t have to cling to such a slender thread. You had every right to choose full freedom.”

Marone: “If freedom is the currency needed to do what I love, I spent it on this—and I won the bet. Praise me more.”

Otto: “When you put it that way… yes, this one’s my defeat.”

She thrust out her ample chest; Otto lowered his head in surrender.

Only, if he could add one thing to that surrender—

Otto: “Still, what comes of meeting me? Frufoo aside, our survival was pure happenstance—”

Marone: “—Number Two.”

Her serious, taut voice cut off his self-deprecating excuse; Otto could only fall silent.

Marone’s red hair swayed in the warm breeze. Staring straight at him, she said:

Marone: “I’m not stupid. I know it wasn’t an accident—and I know there was no bounty on those bandits. I know, Number Two.”

Otto: “…Ah.”

He looked to the sky, unsure what to say.

Using the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, he had sent the bandits plummeting into the ravine. Afterwards he'd claimed they carried a reward, handed Marone part of his stash, and told her to use it for her future before they parted.

Otto had thought he'd pulled it off unseen, but—

Marone: "Your follow-through was sloppy. Show-off. If you're going to show off, do it in front of the woman."

Otto: "Technically I was in front of a woman…"

Marone: "Yet you didn't tell me. Was someone else there?"

Otto: "Uh, well, Frufoo was…"

Frufoo: "And now you drag me into it, sir!"

Dragged into a poor excuse, Frufoo whinnied low in protest. Marone widened her eyes, pointed at the dragon, and asked:

Marone: "I think he's on my side. How about that?"

Otto: "…No comment."

The more he spoke, the worse it got. Otto, proud of his silver tongue of late, felt his nose broken.

Seeing him so deflated, Marone sighed in exasperation—when a sharp voice cut in from the side.

???: "Lady Marone!"

The force of it made Otto twitch; Marone, equally startled, turned toward the voice—and her cheeks tightened.

The uncharacteristic expression was caused by a figure striding their way: a short, wiry young man with a keen face.

Lightly equipped yet girded with a longsword at his waist, bow in one hand and quiver on his back—he came armed for war. The sight stunned Otto; in the space that took, the youth reached

Marone.

Youth: “The lookouts say the Earth Spider appeared—true? Then why have you not sounded the alarm and gathered the townsfolk in the hall? Do you even understand the procedure?”

Marone: “Uh, w-well, about the Earth Spider…”

Youth: “Your sense of danger is lacking—or perhaps you lack awareness altogether? Until now this town was peaceful and uneventful. Yet the moment outsiders, you, arrived, this happens. How do you account for that?”

His rapid-fire accusations drowned Marone’s reply. Beaten down by the barrage, she fell silent.

Seeing her mute, the youth’s expression grew more severe.

Youth: “Silent now, are we? Counting on men like Doctor Regin to shield you? I suppose you’ve been spoiled your whole life.”

Otto: “—That is far enough.”

He could stomach no more. Stepping before Marone, Otto faced the youth head-on.

The youth looked puzzled—apparently Otto had truly been invisible to him until then. Whether impulsive or narrow-minded, his insults to Marone were intolerable.

Youth: “Who are you? By what authority do you stand there?”

Otto: “I didn’t know one needed authority to help a friend. And since you also seem to have opinions about my younger brother, I believe I have brotherly authority to ask in detail.”

Matching the sharpness of the youth’s tone, Otto answered. Realizing the barbs, the youth stepped back, eyeing Otto and Marone in turn.

Youth: “Inviting outsiders at such a time—do you grasp the gravity of the situation at all?”

With a sigh he shook his head in dismay.

Youth: “I am Bungam Eastern, knight dispatched by Lord Cerlein, liege of this region. And you are?”

Otto: “Surprised you can hold a conversation.”

Bungam: “Surprised-you-can-hold-a-conversation,” eh? Unusual name.”

Arms folded, face solemn, Bungam’s reply made Otto narrow his eyes. Bungam tilted his head.

Bungam: “What is it, Mister Surprised? May I ask your reason for coming to this town?”

Otto: “I appreciate your eagerness to proceed but… well, he is like this, you see?”

Confirming Bungam’s stubborn mis-naming, Otto glanced at Marone; she nodded with a troubled face.

Marone: “Bungam was sent after the Earth Spider began appearing. He’s the one who put up the palisade and watchtowers.”

Otto: “I see. As the lord’s knight he’s done what he should…”

His sense of danger and duty could not be faulted. Against lesser witchbeasts or bandits, the defenses would work.

The question was how well they would fare against that colossal Earth Spider.

Otto: “If I may ask—have you seen the Earth Spider yourself, Sir Bungam?”

Bungam: “Hmph. I would rather be the one asking, but very well. As it happens I have yet to lay eyes upon it. No doubt the creature senses the difference in might. Faced with me, it would be helpless.”

Though he admitted “no,” Bungam puffed his chest with confidence. Whether warranted or not, Otto could not dismiss it outright; after all, the Earth Spider had fled from Garfiel.

Otto: “Then, Sir Bungam, to the first question: what brings me to Pappelt?”

Otto: “…On our journey we encountered the creature. We came to the nearest town seeking information.”

Bungam: “Oh! Then you—no, you, sir, are the one who warned us of the Earth Spider’s appearance! My apologies.”

His attitude softened at once; seizing Otto’s hands, he bowed repeatedly. Startled, Otto listened.

Bungam: “I assumed you were here to take Lady Marone away… alas, my hopes and wishes ran away with me.”

Otto: “…You seem awfully harsh toward Marone. May I ask why?”

Still holding Otto’s hands, Bungam composed his face.

Bungam: “Perhaps you should ask her heart?”

The sharp look he had yet to show, and those words, drew a gasp behind them.

Knowing a thorn had struck true in Marone’s heart, Otto tightened his grip on Bungam’s hands and started to swing him toward the ground—when a loud voice rang out above.

Subaru: “Gooo, Garfiel!!”

Garfiel: “Oryaaah!!”

Before Otto could throw, a vigorous shout split the sky.

A plume of smoke roared up in front of the stable where the dragon carriage was tied.

A cloud of dust billowed thickly, and in its very center Otto spotted a familiar back, letting out a weary sigh.

Otto: “What on earth are you two doing all of a sudden?”

Garfiel, rising from the haze with a thuggish scowl: “Hah? I only did it ’cause the Captain told me to. ’Sides, ain’t your fault for lettin’ some weirdo pick a fight with ya?”

Coughing behind his sleeve, Otto glanced down at Bungam, whom he had yanked to the ground.

Bungam, flat on his back and blinking: “Wh-What happened…?”

Otto felt a small relief—at least the clash of tempers would not explode further.

Subaru (dashing up, thumb raised): “Yo, Otto, you okay? Close one —but your cavalry’s here!”

He noticed the prone Bungam and muttered, “Aw, missed.”

Otto: “Missed?! Subaru, Garfiel—what’s with the instant hostility?”

Subaru: “You looked like he was hassling you from afar. Marone had a pained face, and that guy’s face ticked me off.”

Otto: “Depending on which of those is your real reason, I’ll either thank you or be offended!”

Subaru: “They’re all real. Anyway, who’s the stiff?”

Now that the joking tone had drained from Subaru’s voice, Otto sighed and gestured toward the man on the ground.

Otto: “A knight dispatched by the local lord. He’s supposedly in charge of dealing with the Earth Spider.”

Subaru (eyeing the garb): “Knight? In that get-up and with that face? Really?”

Garfiel: “Captain, ya ain’t one t’talk. Look at yer get-up.”

Indeed, Subaru’s trademark tracksuit was hardly knightly attire, though he was a knight in name.

Otto: “Anyway—Marone!”

The chaos had pushed her from his mind. Otto turned; Marone stood clear of the dust, Regin supporting her.

Regin: “Marone, are you all right?”

Marone: “I’m fine, Doctor. Just… surprised.”

Regin bit down hard on his mimir stem, a fresh scent sweeping the dust aside; calm returned to Marone’s face—and, it seemed, to Bungam’s as well.

Bungam (springing up): “Wh-What? Why was I lying down?”

Marone: “Sir Bungam—”

Bungam: “Oh! Doctor Regin! How shameful of me!”

He dusted himself off, then eyed the newcomers.

Bungam: “More unfamiliar faces… Doctor, as I keep saying—”

Regin (firmly): “They’re my elder brother and his colleagues. And this woman—Marone—has no link to the Earth Spider. Please, don’t chase rumors.”

Bungam: “Those rumors began with her own words, did they not?”

Regin winced, but kept his stance beside Marone. Bungam sighed.

Bungam: “Very well. Still, we cannot ignore the rising frequency of attacks. It is time to send the militia into the forest.”

Marone (near a shriek): “That’s reckless! The townsfolk could never manage it!”

Bungam spread his arms, indicating the palisade and watchtowers.

Bungam: “Preparations proceed apace. The enemy will not wait for our courage. Even in the worst of spirits, a knight must strive for the best battle.”

Marone: “Except you’re the only knight…”

Subaru (cutting between them, arms wide): “Okay! Time out! Mouths shut, both of you!”

Startled, the pair stared at the black-haired boy grinning back.

Subaru: “I get both sides. Bottom line—the Earth Spider’s the bad guy. Kill it, no more arguing, right? Capisce?”

Bungam: “Capi… sce…?”

Subaru: “Means “got it?” Anyway! Good idea to beat the thing, but worrying the townsfolk can’t fight makes sense too. So, compromise:”

A mischievous smile crept over his face—Otto felt a chill.

Subaru: “How about us passers-by take down the Earth Spider for you?”

Bungam: “You can do that?!”

Subaru: “Wouldn’t say it if I couldn’t! ’Cause my name is Natsuki Su—”

Otto (arm-locking him from behind): “Emergency strategy meeting! Now!”

Hauling the squirming Subaru away, Otto drew Garfiel and Regin close—Bungam excluded.

Otto (hissed): “Subaru! What are you thinking?!”

Subaru: “Gah, warn me! And don’t interrupt a man’s intro! Ever heard of stage etiquette?!”

Otto drove a finger into Subaru’s nose.

Otto: “That man holds the lord’s authority. If we, retainers of another lord, act on our own, it’s overstepping—makes trouble for Lady Emilia.”

Subaru: “Ooh, that is bad. Sorry—panic averted.”

Garfiel, arms folded: “But the knight has a point. Better t’fight than gripe. If the townsfolk can’t, somebody’s gotta.”

His sharp eyes bored into Otto.

Garfiel: “Somebody’s gotta take a risk.”

Otto lowered his gaze. Hot-blooded, yet not wrong. And indeed, the threat already loomed.

Otto: “Regin—why is that knight so hostile to Marone?”

Regin faltered, but Marone lifted her head, wearing the brave smile Otto had once seen in a dark cell.

Marone: “I… told everyone about my past. How trouble followed me. I joked I might be cursed…and that rumor reached Sir Bungam.”

Regin added bitterly: “And so the suspicion…”

Otto pictured her cheering worried townsfolk with a self-deprecating story—only for it to twist back on her.

Marone: “Maybe… bad luck suits me, Number Two.”

Her voice trembled, yet no tears showed. That look lit a fire in Otto Suwen’s soul.

Otto (calling out): “Sir Bungam!”

Bungam (brightening): “Have you reached a conclusion, Mister “Surprised”?”

Otto: “We have. The Earth Spider—would you entrust its extermination to us?”

Regin: “Brother?!”

Marone’s eyes widened; but Subaru and Garfiel showed no surprise at all—enough for Otto to trust his own words.

Bungam: “Your offer is heartening, but… can you truly face that terror?”

Though he’d never seen it, his worry was genuine. There were no villains here—only people wanting to protect the town.

Otto: “Yes, we can. Because I have a reason to fight.”

He glanced back at Marone; she coloured and lowered her gaze—understanding.

A hand clapped Otto’s shoulder—Subaru, thumb up.

Subaru: “Well said. That’s the model combat-ready civil-affairs officer!”

For once, Otto could find no comeback.

Thus, the secret Emilia Camp’s Earth Spider Hunt began in earnest.

11

Subaru: “Man, I knew you were a doer. That speech of yours—gave me chills. Bet it hit Marone hard, too. Seriously cool, dude.”

Otto: “Er… well, thank you—though I’m not sure that’s the right response.”

Despite Subaru’s high spirits, Otto answered weakly, shoulders drooping and face clouded. Subaru tilted his head.

Subaru: “What’s with that reply? Where’s the firebrand from a minute ago?”

Otto: “I wish I knew where he went… Honestly, I can’t believe I blurted all that out with no plan. Just imagining the fallout makes my stomach hurt.”

He clutched his belly, complexion pale. Behind him Garfiel clicked his tongue in small irritation—he had just begun to respect Otto after that bold promise, and now he had to revise his opinion again.

At present the three men were deep in the forest around Pappelt, searching for traces of the Earth Spider and gathering intel before attempting a kill.

“First collect clues, raise our Investigation Level, then engage—that’s the smart play,” Subaru, evidently used to this sort of quest, had said. Garfiel did not quite grasp this “level” business, but from context it seemed to be a measure of strength. He decided to remember the word.

Subaru’s strange vocabulary sat well with Garfiel—an oddly pleasant ring. Their “senses” matched; Subaru had taught him that phrase, too. Which made it all the more bothersome…

Garfiel (muttering under his breath while eyeing Otto’s back): “Can’t get meself to like that guy.”

He knew one could not befriend everyone, yet his fangs itched. Granny Ryuzu had told him to get along with his camp. So he had tried—watching Otto from treetops, tagging along at work, sitting opposite at meals, syncing bath times, even giving nightly greetings.

After a month of effort Garfiel had learned only one thing: Otto Suwen and he were fatally incompatible.

The man spent his room time buried in paperwork rather than training, bowed and scraped to Roswaal at work, preferred vegetables over meat, washed his hair first in the bath (Garfiel started from the feet—felt better that way).

Thus Garfiel’s evaluation remained complicated. He disliked many parts—yet he had once lost to Otto.

—In the Sanctuary he considered that bout a defeat. He’d danced in Otto’s palm the whole time and finally muscled out a win; he refused to boast of such a fight. He accepted it as a loss—yet…

Garfiel: “If that’s the case, at least let me acknowledge it honestly, you bastard.”

But Otto’s current gloom made that impossible. Even now he was stewing over his words in town, rubbing his stomach in regret.

A decision had been made; from Garfiel’s view a welcome one. All that remained was to give it their all.

Garfiel clicked his tongue again just as Subaru, head buried in a bush, voiced another question.

Subaru: “Still, where’s a monster that big hiding?”

He scoured the ground.

Subaru: “A walking mountain oughta be obvious.”

Otto (looking about uneasily): “Agreed… On that note, may I ask something? Why are you in the forest at all? Wouldn’t it be safer to stay back?”

Subaru: “Straight to the point, huh?! Sure, waiting for luck is fine, but I’m not dumb enough to hang around town in that situation.”

By now Bungam was surely whipping townsfolk into a militia—arming them and gearing up for a forest hunt. Garfiel had no objection; letting locals fight for their own peace was just. If anything, having only outsiders venture into the woods felt off.

Subaru: “Anyway, you can’t talk—if safety’s the issue we coulda sent just Garfiel.”

Otto: “After I asked for help? Hardly proper.”

Subaru: “Then leaving me to sip tea at the clinic isn’t proper either!”

Their bickering resumed. Garfiel cut in.

Garfiel: “Keep yer yappin’ down—if the bug gets spooked by yer noise we’ll have trouble.”

Subaru: “Spooked by noise? That huge thing?”

Garfiel: “Size ain’t guts. “Mythos fled a hundred fights.” Thing ran once already, didn’t it?”

He cracked his knuckles, recalling the earlier encounter. Cowardice and power did not correlate.

Just then he sniffed—still no stench. That blood-reek should linger, yet his sharp nose caught nothing. Some trick was at play.

Garfiel: “Not losing to cheap tricks—that’s my challenge.”

Otto: “Garfiel, something up? Found anything?”

Garfiel: “Shut it! You find somethin’, talky-talky merchant!”

Otto: “Why are you suddenly mad…?”

He faced away with a sigh, then frowned at the surroundings.

Otto: “Honestly, I’m finding… nothing, and that in itself feels odd.”

Subaru: “Odd how?”

Otto: “My Divine Protection works like hearing voices, right? Same as sound: if nothing talks, I hear nothing. But in this forest? It’s noisy. Like standing amid countless Subarus.”

Subaru: “Even I find that scary.”

Subaru: “But “too noisy” might be a clue. If a magic beast’s around, animals go silent—so if it’s noisy, maybe the spider isn’t a witchbeast.”

Otto: “Which raises a scarier question of what it is…”

Subaru: “We’ll untangle it step by step.”

Their private brainstorming left Garfiel restless, but he tried to follow.

They continued: livestock victims only, no humans—that seemed deliberate. Perhaps the spider targeted stock. Could some house profit? Unlikely—if it wasn't a witchbeast and no one controlled it, then… what?

Just as Garfiel thought to speak, a jolt ripped through them. He crouched instinctively; Otto clutched his ears in pain; only Subaru stared blankly.

Garfiel: "Captain! Under our feet—!!"

His Earth-Spirit blessing screamed danger from below, but the enemy moved first.

The ground exploded. The burrowing Earth Spider hurled forest and men skyward.

Even Garfiel couldn't keep footing when the earth itself launched him. He seized a single shard of ground—enough for one leap. Now he had to choose.

Otto and Subaru spun helplessly in the air—who to grab? Voices overlapped:

Otto: "Save Subaru!"

Subaru: "Grab Otto!"

Both shouting to rescue the other. The decision fell to Garfiel alone. Images flashed—Regin's face, left in town—

He kicked off, snatched Otto.

Otto: "Garfiel?!"

Garfiel: "Shut up! Dunno myself, damn it—Captain…"

He searched for Subaru. If the boy awakened some hidden power mid-air, maybe—

And then they saw.

Otto & Garfiel (simultaneously): "What the—?!"

A fleshy tendril from the Earth Spider coiled around Subaru's body, reeling him toward the giant mass.

The youth screamed—a mix of terror and outrage—but instead of swallowing him, the flesh slapped Subaru against the sticky surface and held him fast as the monster began to burrow again.

Garfiel: "Tch! Eat this!!"

He kicked a fallen tree—thicker than Otto's torso—like a bolt toward the beast; it speared into the flesh beside Subaru, spraying noxious fluid.

The spider's response was immediate: a massive sweep of tendrils, not a capture but a kill strike.

Garfiel shielded Otto; they were sent flying through the forest. Subaru, still plastered to the monster, sank into the earth.

Garfiel: "Captaaaain!!"

He roared to the heavens as branches shattered around them. Far away, Subaru's mouth moved, shouting something lost to the wind.

Then darkness—branches, soil, and shock swallowed Garfiel and Otto.

—So the Emilia Camp was cleanly split apart, and the Earth Spider hunt plunged into blind confusion.

12

Evening had long since slipped past the promised time, and in the east the curtain of night was slowly descending.

Regin: "…They said they'd just scout a bit and be back for supper."

In the examination room of the veterinary clinic, Regin, face clouded with worry, fretted over Otto and the others.

The three had marched into the forest, eager to slay the Earth Spider. Eager, at least, were the two who were not his eldest brother; still, if Otto had not strongly tried to stop them, he must have had confidence of success.

Just as much as he trusted his elder brother's steady reliability, Regin trusted his younger brother's shrewdness. Yet that same younger brother was forever toyed with by fate, which meant Regin worried just as strongly.

Had it been their family at home, a lack of news would simply mean Otto was busy and the household would let him be; Regin, however, could not think that way.

He felt anew that, for many reasons, he never could have become a merchant. For Regin, Otto was the benefactor who had given him the impetus to study veterinary medicine—burned into his memory was the image of his brother using his blessing to speak with animals.

Marone: "Doctor Regin, have Number Two—have your brother and the others come back yet?"

Regin: "Marone."

Marone, likewise waiting for the men's return, called his name. Normally so lively, her expression was stiff, and that pained Regin to see. The righteous anger that welled inside him was for his own powerlessness—he could not remove the cause of her suffering.

Regin: "No, not yet. My brother's hopeless with letters; he always leaves everyone on edge."

Marone: "Ah—yeah, I get it. He sorta looks the type. I bet you and his friends have a hard time."

She offered a faint smile at Regin's forced calm. Such stilted conversations had become frequent since the Earth Spider trouble turned serious.

Treating livestock and animals was the clinic's calling; the days were never all joy, yet Marone's bright, tough presence always helped Regin. All the more frustrating now, when he could aid neither her nor the patients—and if something befell Otto in the forest on top of that—

Bungam: “Doctor Regin, are you here!”

An unceremonious shout and footsteps barged into the small silence. Marone’s cheeks tightened; Regin instinctively stepped in front of her.

A moment later the small-statured knight—Bungam—strode into the room.

Bungam: “So this is where you were, Doctor Regin. …And you as well, Lady Marone.”

His reaction changed openly between them, stirring Regin’s indignation; he stepped closer.

Regin: “Storming in like that, Sir Bungam? What is this about?”

Bungam: “What is this about? That sounds complacent. The appointed hour is past and your elder brother and his companions have not returned from the forest… they were brave men.”

With a gloomy shake of the head, Bungam had apparently concluded the three had fallen victim to the Earth Spider.

Regin: “Please do not give up on my brother so easily. I believe in him.”

Bungam: “Feelings rarely sway results. Therefore we stake life and limb each day. …I failed to dissuade your brother’s reckless venture and needlessly increased the toll—my own folly. This time I shall fulfill my duty as the people’s knight.”

Brushing aside Regin’s words, Bungam tapped the hilt of the sword at his waist.

Bungam: “At dawn I will muster every able man, march into the forest, and mete out judgment on that abhorrent creature. Doctor Regin, skilled in healing arts, is indispensable and one of our people. And you”—he looked at Marone—“will accompany us to avenge your Number Two.”

Having stated this flatly, Bungam turned his back. He would begin rousing the townsmen, readying for battle come morning.

As he left he cast Marone a sidelong glance. Emotions flickered in the knight's eyes—Regin sensed the faintest disquiet—

Marone: "…I've had enough."

Regin: "Huh?"

An angry tremor in the voice behind him; Marone, gripping Regin's coat, was shaking with fury.

Regin: "Ma-Marone? What—?"

Marone: "I said I've had enough. I'm sick of it—of doing nothing, shut indoors, just praying things sort themselves out… sick of myself!"

She jabbed a finger beneath his nose; Regin reeled, Bungam gaped.

Bungam: "Wh-What has happened? Please, calm yourself, Lady Marone!"

Marone: "Happened? You ask what happened? I told you—I'm sick of myself! Shouldering guilt for things I never did, shrinking smaller and smaller—is that me? I'm no princess! I don't care for that feeble female logic!"

She barked, then marched toward the door—toward Bungam, really.

Marone: "Out of my way!"

Shoving aside the short knight, Marone strode from the room; the two men scrambled after her.

Marone: "Come on, Frufoo. We're going to find your master."

Outside, she called to the tethered dragon. Frufoo stared; Regin hurried.

Regin: “Marone, this is madness! I can’t let you—”

Bungam: “He’s right, Lady Marone! Night is falling—wait until dawn to—”

Marone: “I will not wait till dawn! What if something’s happened to Number Two!”

She whirled—the tears brimming in her eyes stopped Regin’s words.

Marone: “I spoke carelessly and frightened everyone; that’s my fault. But the spider coming has nothing to do with me—I kept telling myself. Even so!”

She drew breath, voice firm.

Marone: “If something happens to Number Two—Doctor Regin’s brother—that will be my fault, because he went into the forest for us.”

She vowed to take responsibility. The declaration struck Regin like lightning—Marone, fierce as flame, clear as water, noble as wind, steadfast as earth.

Regin: “…Frufoo’s a Suwen-trained dragon—you need skill to handle him. It’ll be tough for you. I’ll go with you.”

Bungam: “Doctor Regin?!”

Bungam cried out, but Regin’s resolve was set. Marone said nothing; she only drew herself straight and nodded deeply.

Regin: “Sir Bungam, we’ll search for my brother. If we aren’t back by dawn, don’t send a search party—focus on the spider.”

Bungam: “W-Wait—why speak in extremes? I cannot let just the two of you—!”

Bungam barred the stable door, arms spread. Regin considered forcing his way past—

Bungam: “I’ll gather men at once! Do not rush ahead!”

Instead of stopping them, Bungam said he needed time to fetch aid. Regin and Marone stared.

Regin: “We’re outsiders, Sir Bungam. You’d risk the townsfolk for us?”

Bungam: “I said I would fulfill my duty as their knight. Doctor Regin, you are indispensable to this town—one of us. And…”

Regin: “And?”

Marone: Lady Marone took responsibility. To choose willingly to suffer is the highest human dignity. As a knight, I respect it.”

Speaking solemnly, he saluted his sword and bowed deep, then dashed toward the town center. He would rally people and aid their search.

Marone: “Amazing… Bungam’s a lot more decent than he looks.”

Regin: “I agree—but he moved because of you, Marone.”

Perhaps his actions would ripple back and help the three in the forest.

Regin: “I hope so… Huh? This is…?”

Petting Frufoo’s neck, Marone noticed something. Regin gasped: a white gem—a twin-stone magic crystal. Split from a single gem, each half glowed to guide its partner to the other.

Merchant houses, Suwen included, often equipped their dragons with twin-stones so they could locate one another. Costly, and useless once reunited, it wasn’t employed lightly, but—

Regin: “As expected, Brother leaves nothing to chance.”

Proof of Otto’s cunning twisted Regin’s lips into a smile. Marone blinked, then let her own soften.

Marone: “Doctor Regin, you just smiled exactly like Number Two.”

Thus she bestowed a rather unflattering observation upon him.

13

Otto: “…It feels as though I’ve just been accused of something terribly unjust.”

Garfiel: “Quit yer bellyachin’, ya twig. Keep them eyes peeled—Captain’s in trouble.”

Standing at the head of the improvised trail, Garfiel ploughed through the under-growth with his boots, the emerald of his eyes flicking left and right. The bristling irritation in the boy’s tail-swing said everything: hours had passed since Natsuki Subaru had been ripped away by the Earth Spider, and the forest still refused to give him back.

A cloying, death-sweet scent drifted on the evening air.

Garfiel: “Tch. Necrosoul flowers—that rot’s so strong I can’t tell one stink from another.”

Otto: “At this time of year the necrosoul blooms, yes. Beasts crawl here to die, and the blossoms drink their remains…”

Garfiel: “I know what they are. How’s yer Soul of Language doin’? Hear anythin’ useful?”

Otto shook his head; his temples hammered with the effort of listening.

Otto: “Regrettably, no. The forest is—how shall I put it—too loud. It is as if I were surrounded by a thousand Subarus, all talking at once. My head feels ready to split.”

Garfiel: “Useless, the lot of it… Dammit, is Captain even alive?”

Otto: “Were the creature intent on eating him, it would have done so upon capture. It seized him—and then slapped us aside. Its behaviour suggests that mere feeding was never the objective.”

The merchant raised four fingers.

Otto: “First: Subaru was not absorbed immediately.

Second: it repelled us with force rather than attempting to devour us.

Third: every confirmed casualty thus far has been livestock or ground dragons—never a human.

And fourth—Sir Bungaum told us he has never once crossed paths with the creature.”

Garfiel’s lip curled.

Garfiel: “Ya sayin’ that fat little knight scared the big bastard off?”

Otto: “I doubt it was fear. The pattern implies the Earth Spider selects its encounters—twice it has fled from you, twice it has sought out Subaru. Therefore the only reasonable conclusion is that Subaru, not we, is its true goal.”

A silence fell as the pieces clicked. Garfiel’s ears flattened.

Garfiel: “…Ain’t a witchbeast at all, then. We’re dealin’ with an—”

Both men spoke in chorus:

Otto & Garfiel: “An evil spirit!”

The instant the words left their mouths, Garfiel’s hackles rose. He grabbed Otto by the collar and hurled himself backward.

The earth before them ruptured—meat-red feelers, slick with ichor, scythed through trunks like grass. Bark and loam exploded; air filled with fetid breath.

Otto: “The Earth Spider!”

Garfiel: “Bring back the Captain, ya sack o’ guts!”

The grotesque bulk erupted into view, a living hill of flesh and fangs. Otto’s gaze darted over its surface, searching for the black-haired boy—but the monster moved first.

All the creatures of the forest screamed.

A tidal wave of voices—inaudible to any but Otto—slammed into his mind. Blood burst from his nostrils; the world lurched and somersaulted. Consciousness frayed.

Through the blur he felt Garfiel catch his collapsing body.

And, just before darkness closed, Otto understood:

those countless voices were not shrieking in anger.

They were begging for help.

14

Otto's body collapsed, blood gushing from his nose; supporting him, Garfiel bared his fangs.

Garfiel: "Hey, hey, hey, hey, you gotta be kidding me, hey!!"

Before him stood the Earth Spider that had carried Subaru off. With Otto unconscious in his arms, Garfiel again faced the very same two-way choice he had suffered several hours earlier. Subaru or Otto— which life to save?

Garfiel: "—Tch! This is a damn pain in the neck!!"

A roar burst from his throat and bestial claws flashed. In the next instant a mass of flesh was severed, a tentacle torn free and sent flying, its putrid ichor splattering through the forest.

The severed limb exposed a repulsive wound, yet the Earth Spider still tried to envelop the area with writhing tentacles. Garfiel sensed its fear first-hand. At its core lurked the malicious spirit that had stolen Subaru. That same presence was now trembling before him like a child throwing a tantrum.

Garfiel: "Ain't pickin' one! I'm the strongest! I'll just take both!"

Power that only the strong could wield broke the dilemma as Garfiel charged. His left arm locked Otto against him; his free right arm and bared fangs shredded each tentacle that dared approach.

The onslaught of flesh crashed upon him like a dark tide, yet Garfiel's fury repelled it. One step, then another—

Garfiel felt a snag. A severed tentacle had coiled around his left ankle, and another had already begun to wind itself about Otto's torso.

Garfiel: "Not satisfied with the Captain, now ya want him too?!"

Strictly matching Garfiel's raw power, the Earth Spider lashed out to drag both prey away. Otto's unconscious body creaked under the pull; for an instant Garfiel tasted panic.

???: "—Release! Do not let it escape!"

Spears rained down, thudding into the Earth Spider's hide and spraying more corrosive fluid.

Bungam: "So this is the infamous Earth Spider! Hideous to behold, and vicious besides!"

The small knight rushed in with blade and bow, cleaving the tentacle binding Garfiel and freeing his movement.

Marone: "Two-Go!"

From behind, Marone and Regin hurried over. Regin: "Brother, thank the gods you are safe." Removing Otto from Garfiel's arms, he sighed in relief. Marone, initially pale, wiped the blood from Otto's face.

Behind them came yet more reinforcements: the townsfolk of Pappelt, weapons in hand, led by Bungam.

Regin: "Brother's safeguard led us here. Without any one of us, this scene would never have come to be."

Garfiel, however, could not share in their elation. Though the townspeople had risen— had vowed to protect their own sanctuary — he felt strangely left behind.

Bungam: “It’s burrowing— everyone, brace yourselves!”

Seeing the townsfolk’s assault, the Earth Spider attempted to sink back into the earth to flee. If it escaped now, Subaru’s fate would grow all the more dire.

Garfiel: “Like hell you will!”

Snatching Regin’s Mimir stalk, he hurled it with all his might. The stalk struck true, piercing the monster’s flesh. It did not stop the descent, but Garfiel grinned.

Garfiel: “‘Thrice you face Helga and live…’— there ain’t a fourth time. I’ll finish this, no matter what.”

15

Blood gushing from his nose, Otto toppled; Garfiel caught the limp body and bared his fangs.

Garfiel: “Hey— hey-hey-hey, you gotta be kiddin’ me, hey!!”

Before him towered the Earth Spider that had stolen Subaru. Otto unconscious in his arm, Garfiel once more faced the very same choice he had wrestled with hours earlier—Subaru or Otto, which life to save.

Garfiel: “—Tch! This is a damn pain in the neck!!”

He roared. Bestial claws flashed; a tentacle tore free, hurled aside with a splatter of putrid fluid.

Ripping open the ugly wound, Garfiel spat at the false dilemma.

Garfiel: “Ain’t pickin’ one! I’m the strongest! I’ll just take both!”

Left arm locked around Otto, right arm and fangs shredded every tentacle that struck. The meat-tide crashed, but it was not enough—never enough.

Garfiel: “…Dammit, trickery now?!”

A severed tentacle coiled about his ankle; another crept to bind Otto.

Garfiel: “Not satisfied with the Captain, now ya want him too?!”

He strained—flesh against flesh, impossible leverage—and Otto’s limp frame began to stretch between the two forces.

Voice rang out:

???: “Release! Do not let it escape!”

Spears hailed down, thudding into the monster’s hide and splashing more corrosive ichor.

Bungam: “So this is the infamous Earth Spider! Hideous to behold, and vicious besides!”

Knight’s sword flashing, Bungam carved away the tentacle at Garfiel’s ankle, severing the bindings.

Marone: “Two-Go!”

Marone and Regin ran up, leading the ground dragon. Regin took Otto, sighing in relief; Marone wiped the blood from the merchant’s face.

Behind them poured townsfolk of Pappelt, weapons raised—rallied by Bungam. Garfiel could only stare, half amazed, half unsettled.

Regin: “Brother’s safeguard led us here. Every piece had to fall in place, and everyone had a hand in it.”

Why, then, did Garfiel feel so left outside the circle?

Bungam: “It’s burrowing— everyone, brace yourselves!”

The Earth Spider, riddled with blades and spears, sought once more to sink into the earth. If it escaped, Subaru’s danger would only deepen.

Garfiel: “Like hell you will!”

Snatching Regin’s mimir stalk, Garfiel hurled it; the stalk stabbed deep into the spider’s flesh, scenting it. The brute still sank, but Garfiel grinned.

Garfiel: “‘Thrice you face Helga and live…’— there ain’t a fourth time. I’ll finish this, no matter what.”

Subaru’s consciousness floated in a drunken fog.

Subaru: “U… bu… eh…”

His body was bound; he could not move a limb. Even prying open his eyelids felt beyond him, as though all his strength were being siphoned away—much like when Beako drew mana from him (though nowadays she held his hand and used far gentler care—so cute when flustered).

Subaru: “Bea-ko… lovely…”

As he mumbled that useless praise his mind slowly clawed back to reality. Convenience-store, another world, et cetera—captured by the Earth Spider, and now this.

He was not being eaten, that much he knew, though not why. No—probably he had a reason. Something like the relentless interference of od coursing through him—a sensation akin to a spirit’s touch—that half-told him the true nature of the Earth Spider.

Not a normal beast: an aberrant spirit. It seemed to want to convey something to him, yet Subaru could not grasp it. If only those emotions came in words he could understand…

Subaru: “So kidnapping Otto next was pretty short-sighted, huh…”

He saw it from within: the creature surfacing, stretching a tendril toward the two men in the forest.

Subaru: “Ouch! I said it hurts, damn you, Garfiel!”

Blocked at every turn: the watchdog tiger refused. Reinforcements rained spears; the spirit fled.

Its wounds knitted; flesh rearranged itself. Subaru sensed each patch and suture as if it were his own body. Thin, distant, pieces of himself were shaved away—hope receded.

Subaru: “Emi—”

He felt himself thinning… fading…

Voice: “Like hell I’ll let that happen!”

A crash—Garfiel’s blow rammed through the monstrum. Mouths all over the meat-hill shrieked in chorused animal voices; a hundred rolling eyes now showed only dread.

The spirit tried to flee—only to find itself surrounded.

Garfiel: “Townies’ve got the perimeter. No more runnin’. Try ’n disappear, we’ll dig ya up.”

The stalk’s scent clung to the monster, betraying every path of escape. Panic beat within it: no routes above—only downward. It began to burrow—

Garfiel: “Told ya—there ain’t a fourth dance with Helga.”

The ground bucked; Garfiel up-ended the giant. Toppled, the flesh-mount thrashed, limbs tangled in its own confusion.

Garfiel: “Hand over the Captain. Otherwise I’ll carve ya down to scraps.”

Right arm lengthened, cloaked in golden fur; claws glinted. No answer came from the monster—only trembling and a fresh wash of fetid stench.

Garfiel raised his claw to begin—

Marone: “Wait! Please—wait!!”

She dashed in, arms spread, shielding the creature. Garfiel snarled in disbelief; not only he—Bungam, too, cried out.

Bungam: “Lady Marone! What madness is this? Now is our chance to end the evil that tormented Pappelt!”

Marone: “I said it—my responsibility! But this is Number Two’s request!”

Bungam: “N-Number Two…?!”

Garfiel glanced back: Otto, barely conscious, leaning on Regin, blood wiped from his face.

Garfiel: “Woke up just in time, huh. And now you’re stoppin’ us from pullin’ the Captain out?”

Otto (hoarsely): “Let’s just say… I don’t want you to regret your next move.”

Garfiel bared his teeth; Otto exhaled.

Otto: “Please. Let me speak. We need to separate the Earth Spider and Subaru the right way.”

16

—The very moment it first gained self-awareness, “it” was at a complete loss.

With no path to follow, no tracks to retrace, no reason for being to lean on, “it,” manifested as one of the world’s commonplace miracles, was overwhelmed by the vastness of a world that offered no refuge.

Knowing not the slightest thing it ought to do—for there were no signposts at all—it wandered the forest of its birthplace.

In that birthplace countless “voices” whirled. The owners of the voices were diverse, yet the messages they carried were always the same, and for the first time it felt interest in something.

Drawn by the scent of flowers, the owners of the voices came, bodies already weakened. Only later did it realize they were creatures wounded, diseased, seeking someplace to die.

Those voices were last wills heading toward death, or the final futile struggles clinging to life.

Intrigued, it wondered what death, what ending, what disappearance truly meant. Newly born, it overlapped with one of the dying voices and became one with it.

—Tasting the terror of loss as its very own, it came to know emotion for the first time.

At the same instant it pictured, vividly, insistently: I want to be saved. I must be saved. I must.

If this terror was what every voice on the road to death experienced, then they had to be saved. They had to cross that dark, bleak world and step into a place of light.

To begin, it started absorbing, one after another, the owners of voices in the same plight. To vanish was ever lonely and sad; perhaps sheer numbers might compensate.

Impossible. Merely absorbing them was not enough; with each life snuffed out, the terror only swelled.

Then if the dying voices were insufficient, why not gather voices far from death? In its birthplace there were owners of voices still distant from dying. It sought them out and absorbed them.

That worked—yet only as a stop-gap. The time it bought was brief. Once time passed, need returned. There had to be another way.

—In the intervals while it searched for that method, many were swallowed by death. There was never time enough.

Did no one know a way? The owners of the voices knew no means to escape. While it kept buying time, it learned of that place and understood.

At that place, those who raised cries of pain had the pain removed, were drawn away from death. That was what it wanted—that was the way to save them.

It was a place where many strange beings gathered. Wounded voices, voices ravaged by illness—were saved. They could be saved. They would be saved.

To save them, wills must be exchanged. For that, it needed the owner of a particular voice.

With that one, surely it could rescue the voices of its birthplace from that lonely world.

—Then no one would have to vanish alone ever again.

That, it knew, would be salvation.

17

Otto: “The necrosoul flowers blooming in this forest lure in animals that have sensed their own Death.

That was the very first feeling the spirit born here ever knew—so, to escape that fear—”

Garfiel: “It started attacking healthy livestock and passing ground dragons, then stuffed ’em inside itself.”

Everyone bowed their heads once they learned of the lonely struggle waged by the spirit called the Earth Spider.

It was a tragic collision of fate. Having tasted the terror of Death, the spirit heard the cries of the dying and kept flailing in its wish to save them.

Because a spirit has no concept of lifespan, it even tried to rescue those who simply reached the end of their natural lives—a naïve idea born of innocence.

Earth Spider: “Teach me how to save them.”

In a voice no human could truly grasp, the spirit pleaded its wish.

Carrying those words back and forth was Otto's task. That was why the spirit used Subaru's captured body, continuing the macabre conversation through his up-turned whites.

Earth Spider: "Teach me how to save them."

Again and again it demanded the same thing. There was no thought of compensation, no room for negotiation; such notions had never been allowed to grow inside the spirit.

It simply wanted to know—a way to save every being from Death.

Garfiel: "There ain't any way. Why don't ya just tell it straight?"

Arms folded, Garfiel—still worried for Subaru—spat out the words. Given the situation, he felt no need to spare the Earth Spider's feelings, and he was right: the spirit's wish was impossible.

Yet blunt truth alone would solve nothing.

Otto: "Right now this spirit stands at a crossroads—whether it can remain a spirit, or fall and become an Evil Spirit."

No certain method exists in this world to escape Death. How could they convey that to a spirit who did not know it?

Otto pondered. If it learned the truth, the Earth Spider might tumble into true evil, becoming a lump of carrion that devoured the living in search of salvation that did not exist.

Should that happen, the only path left would be extermination—and Subaru, still half-absorbed, might not survive it.

Otto was prepared for that worst-case scenario; Garfiel was here, and if strength alone could solve it, they had the means.

They could trick it into releasing Subaru, then slay the pitiful spirit, but—

Regin: "Brother… I'd like to speak with that spirit. May I?"

Otto: "…Regin."

The younger brother tapped Otto's shoulder and made the request. Otto hesitated for a heartbeat—because the Earth Spider had—

Regin: "It watched my clinic and thought there might be a way to save them, right?"

Otto: "Probably. But that isn't your responsibility. It's just another unfortunate coincidence."

Regin: "Unfortunate? I don't think so."

Shaking his head, Regin stepped forward, crouched, and sat facing the Subaru-Earth Spider, smiling gently.

Regin: "I'm Regin Suwen, a beast healer. By your reckoning, I'm someone who knows ways to ease suffering."

Earth Spider: "Oh… oh… You can save them? Save them. I want you to. Teach me."

To relay the words, Otto invoked the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language. The strain was heavy—he had only just recovered from the earlier collapse—but when a younger brother relied on his elder, quitting was not an option.

Regin: "Your wish to help the suffering is noble. I feel the same. If it pains you that you can't save everyone, then you and I share the same resolve. That's why telling you this is my duty."

The road of a beast healer had let Regin touch countless lives. What he had felt along that road was something neither Otto nor their family could truly understand, and that resolve now shone in his eyes as he prepared to deliver a cruel truth.

Regin: "Comrade who shares my resolve, it is sad, but we cannot save everything from Death."

Earth Spider: "…"

Regin: "Death presses on life in many forms—sudden accidents, incurable illnesses, and the Death that comes when one's time is fulfilled."

Earth Spider: “That… is not… the answer I need.”

Borrowing Subaru’s body, the spirit shook its head. It had not yet learned the emotion called rage.

Earth Spider: “Want to save them. Must save them… or they’ll disappear, all alone…”

Garfiel: “Hey, don’t stand up!”

Unsteadily, Subaru’s body rose. Seeing the movement, Garfiel’s golden eyes flashed with vigilance. The townsfolk held their breath. Otto worried for Subaru—and for Regin.

Regin also stood, matching the spirit’s height. Then, to the spirit who had just been told of an unavoidable end, he gently held out his hand.

Regin: “Death cannot be avoided. Yet it doesn’t prove our lives are meaningless. If an unforeseen Death is an incomplete ending, our fight is to guide lives that meet Death to completion.”

The sentiment was hard to grasp even for Otto and Bungam; yet Garfiel, realization striking, grit his teeth, and—

Marone: “You don’t have to shoulder this alone. Come to our place and think it through with us, okay?”

From behind she wrapped the spirit in a hug, pressing its head to her ample chest and speaking with eyes full of kindness.

If the Earth Spider had seen hope of escape at Regin’s clinic, then both Regin and Marone had surely been there.

Earth Spider: “Can… we be saved?”

Regin: “We’ll lift what’s within reach—together.”

Regin clasped the spirit’s stiff hand.

Cradled by Marone and holding Regin’s hand, the Earth Spider’s face softened, as though it had finally been allowed to set down a burden carried far too long.

A pale light then drifted slowly out from Subaru—no, out from the spirit itself.

Subaru: “Wh-What?”

Garfiel: “Captain?”

Blinking rapidly, Subaru found himself hugged by Marone, holding hands with Regin, and watched by Otto’s relieved smile.

Tilting his head at the baffling scene, he muttered,

Subaru: “…Uh, what’s going on?”

Alone, he had been left completely out of the loop.

18

Bungam: “Mister “Surprised”, I am deeply grateful for your efforts in this affair.”

Otto wore a rather complicated expression.

One night had passed since the Earth Spider incident, and matters were already winding down. The spirit once dubbed the Earth Spider would never again cause harm. That alone was a great result—but an even better one had come about, namely—

Garfiel: “Never imagined all those critters stuffed inside that slab o’ meat were still breathin’.”

Otto: “From the spirit’s point of view, it makes sense. A being desperate to prevent death wouldn’t want a mass casualty on its conscience… though I was scared half to death they’d melted beyond recovery.”

Bungam shivered at the very idea.

The happiest outcome of all was that every animal absorbed by the Earth Spider—thought hopeless—had returned alive. Each creature that had once been sewn into the mass of flesh was reborn, as if dropped whole from inside the corruption.

(Subaru—half-dissolved at one point—also came back safe, to Otto's immense relief.)

Otto: "Now let's hope life in Pappeltt gets back to normal."

Bungam: "Rest easy. Any road-worn ground dragons taken on the highways will be returned to their owners by order of my liege, Lord Sellrain… and above all, everyone survived."

He sighed, visibly relieved.

Otto found himself re-examining the knight he had once dismissed as an unpleasant fellow; Bungam's image had changed greatly over the course of events.

Otto (muttering): "…Seems my eye for people still needs work…"

Bungam: "Hm? Is something the matter, Mister "Surprised"? Are you uneasy about something?"

Otto: "Ah—no, not exactly. …Well, perhaps a little. How much longer will you be staying in Pappeltt, Sir Bungam?"

Bungam: "Once the post-incident formalities are settled, I shall withdraw to my lord's seat. Worry not, Mister "Surprised"—there will no longer be any need to make a villain of Lady Marone."

Catching the subtle change at the end of his sentence, Otto saw Bungam shrug.

Bungam: "A knight dispatched by the lord singles out a woman rumored to be the cause. If he is harsh enough, people will naturally side with her. One way or the other, once the uproar ends, the knight departs and the discomfort passes. It was necessary."

Otto: "…So you protected the townsfolk from the Earth Spider, and Lady Marone from the townsfolk?"

Bungam drew himself up. "That, sir, is a knight's duty."

Recognizing total defeat, Otto could only tip his head. He had never imagined he would end up so thoroughly played.

Bungam: “Accept my thanks, Mister “Surprised”—and convey my gratitude as well to that fierce boy and to the knight Natsuki Subaru. …I look forward to the deeds of the lady you serve in the Royal Selection.”

With that, Bungam Eastern returned to his duties, leaving Otto with a fresh appreciation of how completely the knight had seen through everything.

Subaru: “Hey, Otto, everything okay? He didn’t give you any weird trouble, did he?”

Otto answered by simply pushing Subaru’s clueless face away with his palm.

Regin: “Brother—are you leaving already?”

In front of the Suwen Healing House, where baggage had been loaded onto the dragon-carriage, the younger brother’s voice held a faint loneliness. Otto smiled softly.

Otto: “Yes, time to go. You’re going to be busy treating all the animals freed from the Earth Spider, right? It wouldn’t do for the elder brother to keep getting in the younger’s way.”

Regin grinned. “Too bad. With you around I could hear every patient’s voice and make you work for free.”

Otto: “Show some respect to your brother, would you!”

Regin’s teasing sounded just like their days back home. And indeed, the clinic was now swamped: deciding triage alone for the myriad rescued beasts was a monumental task.

Obstructing his brother any longer would only be a burden.

Regin: “Being busy is a blessing—that’s why I chose this job.”

Otto: “…Yes, I’m glad. You always did love animals, after all.”

Regin's expression held some hidden meaning, but Otto merely tilted his head.

Seeing the younger's bright face after so much darkness was satisfaction enough. Whatever terrifying detours they'd taken, it was worth coming to Pappeltt.

Before leaving the town—

Regin tapped Otto's shoulder. "Marone wants a word—this time you're not allowed to run."

With that, Regin headed off to bid farewell to Fluhu and the others already aboard.

Inside the doorway stood the red-haired woman, smiling gently.

Marone: "Always in a hurry, aren't you, 'Number Two'? Busy busy."

Otto winked. "Indeed. And if I stay any longer, my desk back at the mansion will eat me alive. Those two with me are busy men as well—especially Natsuki-san."

He laughed at how naturally he thought of the mansion as "home."

Otto: "…At least you've found a place to settle. Just be careful handling the Earth Spider."

Marone: "Leave it to me—I'll play mom. A single, but capable, mom."

She puffed out her ample chest. On her left shoulder sat a small, round, furry spider-shaped spirit.

Having been persuaded by Regin and Marone, the Earth Spider had chosen to remain in Pappeltt, helping at the clinic.

Training and nurturing it would be Regin and Marone's new task.

Otto: "That won't be easy… but if anyone can, it's you."

Marone: "Oh? Because a tough gal like me can raise a kid alone?"

Otto: “If ‘tough’ counts as praise—yes. But you won’t be alone; Regin will be there.”

Marone fell silent, stroking the spirit on her shoulder. The breeze played with her red hair. She closed her eyes, breathed once, and opened them.

Marone: “You really are unfair, ‘Number Two.’”

With spirit in hand she stepped forward, eyes glistening softly.

Marone: “I’m Marone Lisbon, first slave. And you are?”

Otto pinched his cloak theatrically and bowed.

Otto: “Otto Suwen—Number Two, at your service, senior.”

Marone: “…Thank you for everything, Number Two.”

Thus came the quiet conclusion of Otto and Marone’s story.

19

Subaru: “I still say Marone would’ve been perfect for you, Otto…”

They were on the homeward road in the dragon-carriage. Subaru lounged at Otto’s side on the driver’s bench, elbow on the rail, muttering with an oddly grave face. Otto, reins in hand, stared back in exasperation.

Otto: “We did get along. She’s a pleasant woman, and I’m sure life would be fun around her. Plus she clicks with mild-mannered Regin just fine.”

Subaru: “…If you’re satisfied, fine. I just worry you blew your shot and now you’ll die alone in forty years—that’d break my heart, man.”

Otto: “That is not your concern! I never said I wanted to stay single forever!”

He snapped, palm to forehead—but added after a beat:

Otto: “Anyway, right now I’d only make any woman miserable. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t put her first.”

Subaru: “Whoa, grown-up view. Yeah, you gotta put the other person first. Like me—I’m always thinking about Emilia-tan, and Rem, and Beako, and then there’s—”

Otto: “Come back once you can count, please.”

He sighed at Subaru’s breezy reply, then glanced upward. Garfiel sat cross-legged atop the carriage roof, and had been silent a very long time.

Ever since the Earth Spider affair ended, the tiger-youth’s words had been few.

Otto: “You’re unusually quiet, Garfiel. Something wrong?”

Garfiel: “…Go on, laugh. I was bloody useless this time around.”

The voice sounded half sulky, half ashamed.

Garfiel: “I’m supposed ta guard the Captain, an’ he got nabbed. If Bro hadn’t been there I might’ve killed the spider and the Captain together. Townies only caught up ’cause Bro stuck a twin-stone on his lizard… Mouth’s all I got, huh.”

Subaru: “Hey, me getting grabbed was actually a save. If it had caught me after Otto, our merchant would’ve splatted on impact, remember?”

Otto: “Right. And without you we’d never have cornered the spider. Even with Bungam’s net we couldn’t have blocked its burrow without your Earth-Spirit Blessing… not to mention tracking by the mint scent was your job.”

Subaru: “Only thing purely Otto’s merit was giving Fluhu that beacon-stone. Face it—without you, he’d have kidnapped both interpreter Otto and me for good measure… we’d be a gross Natsuki-Suvat-o now.”

Otto: “Can we not fuse with me as the minor component, please?!”

Subaru added, sotto voce, that Beako would probably scold him for getting his mana drained by another spirit… but that was tomorrow’s problem.

Despite the jokes, Garfiel’s grim mood didn’t lift.

Otto: “So what do you want, Garfiel? Brawn plus omniscient eyes plus top-tier paperwork chops?”

Garfiel: “…Skip the last one.”

Otto: “Pity—that’s the one skill I’d like you to master, though it’d put me out of work.”

Garfiel murmured, eyes lowered.

Garfiel: “What do I wanna be…?”

Otto flashed a little grin.

Otto: “How about learning shatranj? Strategic board game—move pieces in turns to capture the other side.”

Subaru: “Ah, like chess. Hard pass. I’ll play Othello.”

Garfiel sniffed.

Garfiel: “Any use in that?”

Otto: “You’ll learn there’s yet another thing at which you can’t beat me. Critical for reaching that lofty place you aim for.”

Garfiel’s fangs showed. “You’re on—I’ll wipe that grin off ya.”

He still carried some haze of doubt, but he’d bounce back soon. Otto found it oddly nostalgic: teaching someone shatranj again.

He’d learned from big brother Oslo, then taught Regin. Now the board would accumulate yet more memories.

And though work was sure to be piled on his desk when he got home, reins in hand, Otto Suwen found himself almost looking forward to returning to the mansion.

END

Arc 6:
The Corridor of Memories

Volume 21

Chapter 1-18

Chapter 1:
The Dragon Carriage's Way Back

1

—Natsuki Subaru's group continued to head directly east upon leaving the city of Pristella.

They were heading towards the eastern edge of the world—the area in which the Augria Sand Dunes were contained, a plot of land with a rich history of having the Witchbeasts that have existed there for hundreds of years reject every existence from stepping foot onto their territory.

It contained Miasma that would cause travelers to lose their sense of direction and gnawed at their hearts.

It contained groups of Witchbeasts as evil vanguards, who would indulge themselves in devouring human lives.

And then, there was the person who sought world peace—the person at the Watchtower, who determined each and every one of the successes and failures made by those who came close. This person was the Sage, Shaula.

???: "Knowing that alone, it feels like we're lining up for suicide."

Just being reminded of the obstacles that were ahead was enough to cause dejection.

In reality, those that journeyed towards this place, while fully knowing what awaited them, were perhaps beings like suicidal people, or perhaps Witch Cultists. At any rate, it seemed like they were nothing but people with brain abnormalities.

However, these people were neither of the above, and possessed no intention to die. It was rather the opposite; they intended to live.

They would provide a path of life, to each and every one of the people who had lost their way of living.

They had begun this expedition in order to obtain this seed of hope.

???: "…Nevertheless, it's strange."

While imagining the swaying of the dragon carriage, Subaru whispered these words to the faces in front of them. When the people in the guest room heard his whisper, every single one of them had their eyes turn towards Subaru.

A total of four glances came his way—adding in Subaru to the other people in this carriage, would make for a final sum of five passengers. This was what the situation looked like.

???: "Strange? Did something happen?"

Subaru: "No, it's nothing important, Emilia-tan. It's just, wellll~, it's just that I feel it's quite unexpected all these faces to be sharing the same dragon carriage and getting along so well."

Subaru responded this way as he brushed off Emilia's question.

To Subaru's right and left, securing both his sides, were Emilia and Beatrice. These were his allies. It was a given that these two would be with Subaru, but still, the question at hand would regard the two people up front.

???: "Well, it may be normal for ya to feel like that. Actually, I thought it was really surprisin' too. So it'd be natural for Natsuki-kun to feel uncomfortable, huh."

???: "…Ahh, that is correct."

The person who let out a high-pitched laughter and spoke with a Kansai dialect, or rather, Kararagi dialect, was Anastasia. After her reply in fake Kansai dialect, she gazed towards him with a meaningful look while feeling her hair.

Anastasia: "Though, if we're gonna talk exclusively 'bout bein' uncomfortable, I ain't so sure ya can beat Julius-san here."

Julius: “How harsh. However, please do not worry—I am also a Knight at heart. Just a single night is enough for me to adjust my heart. Not to mention that a few days have already passed… I promise to never to show a sight similar to the shamefulness I displayed the other day ever again.”

Anastasia: “So graceful. I’ll be takin’ ya on yer word, then.”

The manner in which Julius bowed in reply to Anastasia’s banter-like remark was much like how he acted previously.

But of course he would. He had sustained damage incurred by the Authority of Gluttony; but to be specific, it had borne effects on everyone around his person, rather than on himself.

Thus, the people that had changed their behavior had been his friends, rather than himself. He could not conceal just how upset he was upon receiving these reactions. But as he himself had just stated, he seemed to have accepted it with ease.

Subaru: “…You’re outrageous.”

Albeit he would not let his voice carry such praise, it was a pretty big deal.

That weak part of his heart was not able to clearly express great praise. It was not as if Subaru was unfamiliar with that feeling as well—the feeling of having your own existence being left behind, having nobody around that shared his own memories.

Natsuki Subaru, able to go back in time with Return by Death as he was, definitely possessed recollections of worlds that nobody else remembered.

If he were to recall a single experience in which he had built up relationships only to have them lost, that would perhaps be the initial days at Roswaal mansion—those repeated days of his beginning at the Roswaal mansion.

He had been summoned to another world, had struggled at the Royal Capital with the objective of helping Emilia, and then as a result, he had been invited to Roswaal’s mansion. He then proceeded to experience four iterations of events before stepping foot into the fifth world.

The memories of the four worlds up until then, were held within Subaru and nowhere else.

Even now, it was difficult to forget the shock he had experienced from being treated as a stranger by the very same people with whom he had built relations with during those days at the mansion.

That pain and sadness would never fade away.

???: "…What is it, I suppose? Subaru, why have you suddenly started petting Betty's head, in fact?"

Subaru: "Don't worry about it. It's just, I'm deeply emotional by the fact you seriously saved me back then. Thankyou thankyou."

Beatrice: "I don't understand, I suppose. Also, my hair is getting messed up so sto… you don't have to stop, but pet it just a little softer, in fact."

Beatrice tilted her head towards Subaru as she occupied the seat half-an-ass away. Just like she had requested of him, Subaru delivered some pats to her head, not allowing him to forget his state of mind at the time he was truly saved.

The only person whose feelings towards Subaru did not change during the loop of days at the mansion, was Beatrice. They had met before Return by Death's save point. So after that, she remained as the one person whose manner of coming into contact with Subaru did not alter.

Moreover, the way he had been saved would also stay a secret to her, for a long, long time.

Subaru: "After that, Emilia-tan saved me, huh."

Emilia: "—?"

Emilia made a curious face in response to Subaru's reminiscence.

Subaru was right here, right now, because he had been saved by her kindness, voice, attitude, as well as the warmth of the lap that she had lent him.

Subaru: "…"

That was why Subaru was able to recognize how impressive it was that Julius had actually accomplished it all on his lonesome. It had taken so much help, and so many times, four times' worth of time in fact, for Subaru to overcome what Julius had.

Or maybe, it was because a certain someone was there to lend him a helping hand.

A certain someone that was forgotten by Anastasia; a certain someone that did not seek for help from anyone in his own camp; a certain someone who had his ties severed with the Quasi Spirits whom he contracted with; a certain someone that did not recall his blood brother either.

If that were the case, then he would be grateful.

Julius: "Staring at people's faces for quite a while now… Is there something wrong, Subaru?"

Subaru: "I'm doing nothing wrong. I was just thinking that it's not pleasant to see you smiling with such elegance after someone calls you graceful."

Julius: "Beautifully elegant, that indeed has a splendid sound to it. I had never expected that I would receive praise from you. I am pleasantly surprised… Or well, that may be an exaggeration. Well, is it not a given?"

Subaru: "I didn't mean to praise you, and it does piss me off to hear you put it like that!"

With his same manner from the past—Or rather, with his reaction that made it seem as if he had become even more skilled with his tongue slips, Subaru ended up being the one annoyed.

The evident frailness on his face back when in his brother's hospital room at Pristella had been hard to digest. Subaru had recollections of that time, when a lack of satisfaction was evident in his expression prompting Subaru to complain. However, all of that seemed like completely forgotten history now.

Emilia: “You and Julius, get along. Hmm, were you like this before the way you are right now?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, you got it wrong. There is no way me and this guy get along well. Did you see my face? My eyes had the scariest look ever. Although, that’s just my viewpoint.”

Emilia: “Really? I don’t think you’re right, but… Ah, I’m not talking about the look you had in your eyes. I’m talking about you saying that you two don’t get along well. Subaru’s eyes were the same as ever, they were reaaally scary.”

Subaru: “The same as ever, reaaally scary?!”

Emilia: “Well for me, I like Subaru’s eyes. I’m being truthfully truthful.”

Subaru: “Ah, dammit. How I wish that part about my eyes was cut out from the audio recording…”

Emilia let out a wry smile as she filled Subaru with regret. She then turned towards Julius with an inquisitive look, causing him to take a glance towards Subaru.

Julius: “I myself have no room to deny those words. In reality, to say that me and him are close… would not be the most correct statement. Although in my eyes, we are compromising with each other, despite how things may look.”

Subaru: “To put it as compromising, that’s already condescending. Humble down there a bit… it’s going to piss me off even more.”

Julius: “What an abrasive point of view. Can you tell him that too?”

Julius sought Emilia’s agreement on the matter, but she reacted to their exchanges by brushing up her hair and, Emilia: "Just as I thought, you are reaaally close, right…?"

Subaru: "Come on, it should be already clear."

Emilia: "Eh? Well, I guess you are close then…"

There was a slight disagreement with Emilia, but Subaru and Julius acted as if nothing had happened. This made Emilia become more and more baffled. Anastasia tried to restrain herself from laughing, letting out chuckles with a smile.

Anastasia's reaction caused Julius to suddenly loosen his lips, as if indicating that he had calmed down—That transient master-servant relationship was hardly strange to Subaru, being someone who was familiar with the other side of it.

The Anastasia at hand differed from the genuine Anastasia Hoshin, and was a fake, merely a fake.

Anastasia's body was currently being used by the Artificial Spirit Echidna—otherwise known as Eridna. This so-called Eridna had no intentions of taking over her body, but he was unsure of how much he could trust her. Being someone who was aware of this situation, the one thing that Subaru did not fail to do was to prevent those unaware of the situation, like Emilia and Julius, from realizing it.

Beatrice: "…Subaru, cut it out, in fact."

Beatrice called out to Subaru, who was surely in a state of deep thought. This girl's hair was in a messy state, as Subaru was petting her head all throughout this period of silence. Her cute face had a sour look.

Subaru: "Ohhh?! My bad, Beako! Your cute appearance is a mess… your hair's all messed up now."

Beatrice: "Perhaps you shouldn't make it sound like Betty's cuteness is ruined from just her hairdo, I suppose! Moreover, your face is starting to look scary, in fact."

Half-an-ass away from Subaru, Beatrice spoke while frantically fixing her messed-up hair with her hands. Subaru let out an "Oh", preventing himself from talking, as Beatrice held a face that made it look like she thought him helpless.

Beatrice: “There’s no point in making such an excessively worrisome face, I suppose… Betty will take care of it, in fact. If something happens, Betty will notice it much faster than Subaru, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…Yeah.”

Beatrice spoke these words in response to Subaru’s anxiety. Beatrice—the other person besides Subaru who was aware of Eridna and how she was replacing Anastasia.

Originally, Subaru had promised to keep it a secret for two reasons: first, to avoid causing any unnecessary commotion about it; second, because Eridna had claimed to have no intentions to snatch control of Anastasia’s body. However, Beatrice would be the only one to realize if something happened, albeit belatedly.

They both were the same type of Artificial Spirit, two beings sharing a relationship with the Witch Echidna. If it seemed like Eridna was planning something, Beatrice would surely sense it.

Although, if he were to consider Beatrice’s emotions, he did not feel like it was very advisable for Beatrice to get involved with Echidna, but,

Beatrice: “Putting your unnecessary suspicions aside, it’s fine that Subaru acted like Subaru and sought help from anybody without caring about who it was, just like you always have, instead of worrying about it alone, in fact. Though, you came to Betty first, I suppose. I’ll give you my praise this time for that, in fact.”

She replied with this, so that was the end of that.

Emilia: “—I see it.”

Just when he thought that the dragon carriage had fallen into a state of silence, Emilia suddenly whispered these words.

It seemed that Emilia had seen their destination afar, as she gazed out the window of the dragon carriage. Subaru also understood that the view out the window was changing into familiar scenery.

Subaru: “What a nostalgic road. We’ll arrive at Roswaal’s mansion soon, huh.”

He murmured these words, first making sure to restrain his feelings from being near their first checkpoint, remembering their original goal.

This group’s destination, as mentioned before, were the Augria Sand Dunes—the place where they would seek to consult Sage Shaula. However, they had already arranged to stop by Roswaal’s mansion on the way, as so to prepare for their trip and to make a stop in their long expedition.

There were many things that they wanted to talk to the fellow member of their camp about, including the incident at Pristella and the occasion of getting to speak with the Sage.

Also, moreover—

Subaru: “It’s not just a simple stop.”

There was meaning in dropping by Roswaal’s mansion before beginning their expedition to meet the Sage.

When looking at the big picture, its meaning would be meager, and small to the world. However, through Natsuki Subaru’s small human eyes, it possessed great potential.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru squinted his eyes to envision the Roswaal mansion, so distant that could not yet be seen.

Each of the four people inside the dragon carriage were looking at Subaru. Various emotions were held by the colors of their eyes, but Subaru had no composure to take notice of any of their glances.

When the dragon carriage arrived at Roswaal's mansion, more than one hour had gone by past noon.

The long migration from the city of Pristella, which had taken about ten days, went on a temporary hold.

???: "Subaru!"

Subaru: "Ohh, Petra, woahwah?!"

They rode the ground dragons towards Roswaal's mansion, gave their thanks to the coachman, and then got off the carriage. A petite maid rushed towards Subaru from the mansion, and jumped at him with unrestrained force.

She came into his chest with might and force, and Subaru somehow managed to catch her while backing up. He then petted the head of the girl who had flown into his arms.

Subaru: "Petra, if you do that so suddenly, you'll startle me, you know. I've been gone for nearly a month now, but have you been doing well?"

Petra: "I've been fine, as you can tell. However, Subaru…-sama has been having it rough, right? I've been worried ever since that letter came in two days ago. You were injured so much again, right? Can you handle the pain?"

Subaru: "Embarassing, embarassing."

Petra touched Subaru's body to confirm his pain as her reddish brown-colored hair swung back and forth. As subaru reacted to this with a wry smile, other people got off the dragon carriage.

Subaru: "Hey, Petra. Do your job as a maid of the mansion properly. If you don't, Ram and Frederica will get mad at you."

Petra: "…Okay. Tell me about what happened later."

She returned promptly, but it seemed like Petra's trust had been thoroughly damaged.

Petra's worry would be inevitable if he told her about how he got involved in what seemed to be a city-wide uproar to try and obtain the crystal. Though, it was not something that Subaru intended to cause for the Witch Cult. However, that excuse would also be meaningless.

It would be pointless, considering the truth was that most of the Witch Cult's purposes were related to Emilia's camp.

Petra: "Welcome guests. Compliments to your efforts to make this long trip. I am Petra Leyte, a maid of this residence. I will be your guide towards the mansion."

Subaru's recollections were put aside, and then Petra let out a vocal message coupled with a dignified gesture.

Julius took Anastasia's hand to help her descend the carriage, and they both had looks of admiration on their face. Also visible was a somewhat prideful look on Emilia's and Beatrice's faces.

Anastasia: "Quite the well-behaved child, even though you're little, huh. You're being thorough with yer trainin'."

Julius: "It certainly seemed like she was a completely different person, with her attitude of jumping at Subaru upon first sight."

Petra: "—How embarrassing."

Julius agreed with the smiling Anastasia, and then Petra's face grew redder and redder from their remarks. Julius looked down at her, then proceeded to look at Subaru, and,

Julius: "I see… I understand the reason why you are given the moniker of Lolimancer."

Subaru: "I'll have you know, Petra isn't as small as a little girl, and even if you call me that, the only loli I will «mance» is Beako. Get your facts straight."

Beatrice: "Betty also isn't a girl that works hard to be used by Subaru at his convenience, I suppose. Subaru, you should get your facts straight as well, in fact."

Subaru replied to Julius's banter in a cold way, and then Beatrice rebuked Subaru in an even more glacial manner.

Subaru's mouth turned into a frown, falling silent, and Beatrice let out a sigh. She then looked at Petra's lower area. She stood aside her, and then made a slight movement to grab onto the edge of the skirt of the latter's maid outfit.

Beatrice: "Also, look, not much has changed throughout Betty and Petra's time, I suppo… Wait a second. Betty feels like Petra has grown a bit, in fact. Her hair has grown a bit too, I suppose…!"

Petra: "It's because one month has passed, and it's also my growth period right now. I will grow, and my hair will grow too, if I don't cut it. Beatrice-chan will stay small, though."

Beatrice: "Wh-What in tarnation, in fact…!"

Petra smiled as she hugged an astonished Beatrice tightly. Continuing to embrace the pouty-faced Beatrice for a sufficient amount of time, she then walked away, speaking, "Well then, allow me to guide you all".

Subaru: "Alright, we'll finally be going to the… Mmgah."

He sought to follow her, but then someone's hand grabbed onto the back of his collar. Upon raising a choked voice, he looked back, only to be surprised by the fact that Emilia was the one who had reached out to his scruff.

Emilia jerked Subaru's chin while holding onto the back of his neck, and directed him towards the dragon carriage behind him.

Emilia: "Subaru, Patrasche doesn't seem to be happy."

Anastasia: "Hm… 'Tis has become a selfish affair, huh."

If one were to throw their gaze towards the ground dragons as per Emilia's point, out of the two ground dragons that they traveled with, it would be noticeable that the beautiful, jet-black ground dragon was glaring at Subaru with frightfully piercing eyes.

That was Subaru's beloved dragon, Patrasche. When Subaru tried to return her look, she turned away bluntly, then letting out a light but very displeased sound.

Emilia: "You seriously weren't able to make up with her, even though you had ten days, huh."

Subaru: "Yeah, I know, but I really don't think it's my fault this time…"

Subaru scratched his head as he thought of what to do about Patrasche, who was leaning onto his belly.

Ever since they'd left the city of Pristella, Patrasche had been giving Subaru the cold shoulder—or rather, a bit before that. When he went to the ground dragon's stable to pick her up, after the defensive battle against the Witch Cult was done and dusted, she was already in a bad mood.

He didn't talk to Patrasche, as Otto was out-of-commission because of his injuries. However, he had a long-standing relationship with Patrasche. It was about time that Subaru found out what this beloved dragon was so angry about.

Subaru: "That's, well, I know I neglected her during the uproar, and that I even made her feel lonely, but… Guh, foahhh?!"

Emilia: "Subaru?!"

Subaru was on the very end of his statement when Patrasche lashed out her tail at him, causing him to become covered in dirt after taking a direct hit. As expected, Patrasche had no mercy in her aggressive response. If he were to reply to her in a deceitful way, she would come to strike him without any hesitation.

Subaru: "I would've never expected it… To think that I was able to avoid Regulus's attacks before, but can't avoid this, is just…"

Emilia: "Are you alright? Patrasche decided to suddenly wave her tail again, doesn't this mean that you'll get hit once more if you don't say the right thing?"

Emilia made that terrifying point as she went on one knee to lend him a hand. He looked at Patrasche, and she certainly was there, shaking her long tail. She sliced through the air with the end of her tail as if to threaten Subaru. It felt like she was saying that she'd double the power for each mistake he'd make.

He unconsciously lost the ability to speak properly, and his throat became cramped as he realized that he couldn't afford to reply carelessly.

Julius: "Even if you're careless like that, your ground dragon has an overwhelming amount of sympathy towards you anyway."

However, that statement made by Julius, who was disheartened by the guidance's lack of success, would cause the undesirable effect that she would come at Subaru. Subaru pointed at himself and Patrasche in response to Julius's argument, and,

Subaru: "Really? I'm kinda covered in all this dirt, you know? You call this sympathy?"

Julius: "Can you not even feel the proof of deep affection with your own eyes? She is a kind-hearted ground dragon. She is mostly aggravated that she was unable able to help you during that turmoil, and she is mad at you for not seeking for her help. So it might just be indignance, rather than anger, towards you."

Subaru: "What are you saying? Just how high are you going to make her heroine power? Stop it."

The level of correctness of Julius's points was unknown, but at the very least, his words made Patrasche's tail swinging come to an end. Subaru looked at Patrasche once again, and she turned away, just like always, but—

Emilia: "Looking at her now, it seems like she's somewhat embarrassed after hearing that."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, you noticed that too? I also noticed that. It makes my heart flutter, so don't do that too often please, Patrasche."

He said these words, reached out nervously with his hand, and then Patrasche finally lowered her head, allowing Subaru to touch her body covered with tough scales. And with this, it seemed like the cold war where he had 10 days to make mends ended on a good note.

Petra: “Isn’t that enough? Is everything fine now?”

Petra was letting her impatience show through her shouts, as they continued to remain at the mansion’s front garden without paying attention to the time. She had come out here having been instructed to guide them, and yet they were still taking so much time.

Petra: “If we don’t return soon, Ram-neesama will get mad again and…”

Ram: “—If you can worry about such thngs, that means you were just a little bit short on your efforts.”

Petra: “Kyaaa—?!”

Petra, who had been making light sounds with her footsteps, let out a shriek and then straightened her back due to that voice. Upon turning back, she saw a pink-haired maid far away, coming from the direction of the mansion.

It was Ram, no mistake nor doubt about it. Ram slowly turned her gaze towards Subaru’s group and the guests after Petra became as still as a stone statue because of her glare, and—

Ram: “Even when I thought that Petra had gotten better at her tasks, seeing this situation on the cusp of recognizing your efforts… Ram is really disappointed.”

Petra: “S-Sorry Ram-neesama… about my work, you were about to recognize me?”

Ram: “Yes. Your cooking is better than Ram’s, your cleaning is more sensible than Ram’s, you’re better at doing laundry than Ram; and you wake up earlier than Ram, so I was close to recognizing you.”

Subaru: “You should have more self-doubt when you point these things out!”

Just how bad was this veteran maid in comparison with this girl who held one year of experience as a maid under her belt? Even if one were to take Petra’s ability to learn quickly into account, the hurdle was so low that it wasn’t even worth considering.

In response to his shout, Ram snorted her nose with a “Haa”, in a way that Subaru was completely familiar with, and,

Ram: “How does one proceed to have doubt about oneself? Ram only holds expectations and self-confidence for herself.”

Subaru: “I always felt like that part about you is the one thing that really deserves respect.”

Subaru thus responded to Ram’s majestic declaration while being astounded.

In reality, there was reason to emulate Ram’s optimism—or rather, there was reason in emulating her fortitude. He just wished that she would be a bit more reflective of herself, but,

Subaru: “If you did that, I guess it wouldn’t really feel like you’d be the real Ram, huh.”

Ram: “That is a scary thought. Moreover, I do not think it would be ideal to leave guests out here for so long. Let us hurry up and enter the mansion.”

Subaru agreed with Ram’s dismissive words.

They had taken too much time outside the mansion. It wouldn’t be surprising for Frederica or even Roswaal to show up eventually, if they wasted any more time.

The Royal Candidates and the Margrave were all to gather here, to talk about what they would be doing.

Emilia: “Is Roswaal at the mansion proper, right now?”

Ram, who had begun walking to guide the others, tapped Petra’s shoulder to relieve her stiffness. At Emilia's call from behind, Ram replied with a "Yes" without taking a look back.

Ram: "Fortunately, he was sojourning at this residence when the letter arrived, so he has remained here. There was a summary in the letter about the Pristella affair… and there should be details to discuss."

Subaru: "Yeah there should be, considering a lot of things did happen…"

Ram: "The number of people here now in comparison to when you first left has changed, huh—Did Garf and Otto die?"

Subaru: "Like hell I'd let them die! They aren't dead! They're just coming back home later because of their injuries!"

Just as Subaru was about to breach the topic of the letter, his charge was countered. Ram let out a shrug with an indifferent manner in response.

Ram: "I am all too familiar with the depths of men who lack composure. Barusu's especially is one that has an open hole from which his contents are being poured out, so you should be careful. To have people become aware of your depths and then finding out you are empty inside is the worst."

Subaru: "That really hurts, so cut that out! Also, moreover…"

If the letter that had been sent to the mansion before their departure from Pristella—if those details were written in the letter, they should understand that this was no simple trip back for Subaru and the others.

Therefore, when Subaru attempted to confirm the contents of the second half of the letter, and upon settling the words he would speak, Ram readily raised her finger.

Ram: "I told you, didn't I? Rest assured. Roswaal-sama is at this mansion… Also, preparations have been made for both the Sleeping Beauty and the Confinement Room. Although—"

Ram cut off her words towards Subaru at the end and then gently licked her lips.

She wet her lips with the red tip of her tongue, with a gesture that had a sense of gracefulness embellished somewhere in it, and said this,

Ram: “Although, neither of them were Ram’s doings. It was Frederica and Petra’s job.”

Subaru: “Why did you make a prideful face there?”

Anyhow, even though a whole month had passed until he had met her again, she still remained to be the same.

Chapter 2:
His Way of Providing a Warm Welcome

1

Albeit this is late in saying, but the base for the Emilia Camp, had been moved to the main residence of the Mathers Territory, different from the mansion that had been burnt to the ground in the past.

However, the layout of the mansion didn’t differ from the layout the past one possessed, as it was formatted in a familiar way; the main building was placed in the center, and the west and east wing buildings were established to the left and right. It was also formatted this way so that the spaciousness would be just about the same, so they would seldom become confused when roaming it.

The only problem was that it was just a tad too similar, making it much easier to forget Arlam Village was no longer located nearby. There had been several occasions where Subaru would wake up energetically, seeking to perform radio calisthenics in the village, and then somewhere along that long road, he’d realize he didn’t know which way to turn next.

Beatrice would subsequently catch up to him in a fuss, and she would be really angry.

Anyhow, they had arrived at Roswaal’s mansion, got welcomed by the same old Petra and Ram, and entered the parlor where Roswaal, the owner of the mansion, awaited them, but—

Roswaal: “Ohhh~, welcome baaack~. It’s great that you came baaaack~ safe.”

Roswaal sat on the couch as he clapped his hands, welcoming them on their return. Subaru and Emilia were reflexively taken aback by Roswaal’s smiling welcome.

They looked at his excessive and amicable smile, and then they looked at each other.

Subaru: "…Emilia-tan, was anything weird written in the letter?"

Emilia: "I-I don't know, okay. Moreover, you didn't even go as far as to prepare a weird gift? Because, you know, Subaru and Roswaal have secret talks sometimes, so…"

Subaru: "N-No way! And even if I were to plan on giving Ros-chi a gift, I'd put in my usual gratitude and consult Emilia-tan, Beatrice, Petra, Frederica, Patrasche, and maybe even Ram to help me think of a way to reduce the amount of time and money needed for the gift."

Beatrice: "Those were only names of girls, I suppose."

Subaru: "Isn't it embarrassing for me to ask people like Otto and Garfiel about a gift from a man to another man?!"

Subaru responded to the displeased Beatrice, and then sent a wry smile in response to Emilia's scornful eyes.

Incidentally, he had deliberately left out Rem's name in order to avoid causing anxiety for the others, so not for anyone to misunderstand, he did feel guilty about it. Anyhow, Roswaal, who was witnessing the whole exchange, shrugged his shoulders.

Roswaal: "Whaaat~ a surprising reaction. I worry about you guys' safety, so I wonder what's so weird about me being glaaad~ that you're all safe. It's natural, right?"

Emilia: "That's, true but… Roswaal, you haven't really showed that side of yourself to us that much until now, so…"

Roswaal: "It meaaans~ I've had various changes in my way of thinking this past yeeear~. Shouldn't Emilia-sama be a bit happy about me becoming cooperative?"

Emilia: "Hmm, you're right."

Emilia responded to Roswaal's brazen rejection in a way that was typical of her tolerant self, accepting his change of mind. He nodded his head at Emilia, and just seeing her waving her palms back and forth made Subaru unable to leave it at this inadequate level of trust, but—

Beatrice: “Even if you were to try to understand his way of thinking, it wouldn’t be possible because it’s too odd, in fact. Subaru… Subaru is also a bit like that, but the like of that is more, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You’re being too vague with your words.”

Stroking the head of Beatrice, who seemed to have chosen to put in vague and senile words into her remark, Subaru now stepped into the parlor, following Emilia.

The cheery Roswaal—they were skeptical about him, but were somehow aware of his ulterior motive. In reality, he actually had just spoken of his motive himself just a moment ago.

Roswaal was seriously glad about Subaru and Emilia coming back safe.

Now that his Book of Wisdom was no longer in his possession, being amiable was the best move he could take in order to fulfill the purpose that he had yet to reveal. His only objective was to have Subaru’s actions break the obstacles that stood in the way.

Subaru: “If you feel that way, then that’s fine. Though, it’d be helpful if you were a little cooperative.”

Roswaal: “You will reach your goal with or without my help. That’s why I believe my cooperation is an unnecessary portion of your power. It really isn’t an eeeeven~ relationship.”

Subaru: “It feels like I’m suffering an arrangement in an RPG where I can’t use a support character normally, it does.”

It was an arrangement where the extremely powerful support character would do anything but participate in the battle.

Roswaal avoiding from participating in battles was much like such a condition; in his case, he would become more and more entertained while he continued to sit back and watch Subaru, someone who believed in his own power to change fate with his ability Return by Death, take desperate measures, continuing to drive himself deeper and deeper into predicaments.

He was a cunning fellow, which made Subaru want to click his tongue.

Anastasia: "—Ain't it 'bout time ya introduce us as well?"

Subaru: "Sorry to keep you guys waiting. Roswaal, they're visitors. Allow them to seat themselves."

Roswaal: "I'm listening. Nevertheless, those are some interesting faces."

The girl who was waiting out in the corridor spoke out to the people having a conversation at the entrance. Subaru let out a light apology to them, and then made a hand gesture towards Roswaal, who was sitting at the couch, signaling him to let them in.

Roswaal stood up and then sat back down in the chief seat with dead silence, then directing the two guests over to the visitors' sofa. Subaru and the others slowly took their places on the sofa that faced Roswaal.

Roswaal: "Welcome, from so far you have come. The last time we spoke to each other face-to-face like this was at the Recognition Ceremony."

Anastasia: "That's true. Also, it's not like we'd spoken to each other in a proper conversation before… This essentially feels like the first time we'll be speakin' to each other."

The Recognition Ceremony that had come up in this conversation was the formal recognition of the suppression of the White Whale, accomplished by a combination of the Emilia Camp, Anastasia Camp, and Crusch Camp, where they had been evaluated.

As the small-scale ceremony had been carried out in the Royal Castle located at the Royal Capital, naturally, every member available immediately after the resolution of the Sanctuary affairs had been present, as the representatives of each camp were to gather.

He had vivid memories of Otto having a tense, pale face, and of the castle shining within Garfiel's eyes, and Roswaal had nonchalantly decided to participate, even after all the trouble he had put them through. What a guy.

Well he'd been nervous, yeah, but he couldn't say Emilia was any better than him in nervousness and fidgeting. It made sense, considering how she was being praised for achievements she didn't even have memory of achieving.

Anyway, that was a meeting from the past. Mutual greetings were carried out in a hurried manner.

And so, the conversation would immediately move onto the main topic, a report about the the city of Pristella—

Roswaal: "—And just like the letter said, Otto-kun and Garfiel have withdrawn because of their injuries. I see, undeeerstood~. These achievements are truly promising."

A sigh of admiration escaped Roswaal, after hearing the report. This made Emilia raise her eyebrows, voicing a "Hey" with a slightly stern tone.

Emilia: "They were injured so badly they couldn't even return. Yet, you still put it like that. What are you trying to say?"

Roswaal: "Let's refrain from jumping toooo~ any hasty conclusions. Yes, it is heartbreaking that they were injured like that, and yes, their forced, temporary withdrawal is no less heartbreaking than their wounds. However, on the other hand, no one in the camp has suffered fatal damage. If you consider the other camps, and taking into account you have encountered multiple Sin Archbishops… Indeed, this outcome really is miraculous."

Emilia: "…"

Roswaal: "Naturally, the scars caused by the Sin Archbishops should be treated promptly, but Emilia-sama and everyone else who endeavored to protect the city did their best so that the damage was kept to a bare minimum. I think that you ought to recognize that for yourseeelf~.”

Emilia: “…Oh, thanks.”

Her face one of someone who had not been convinced, Emilia delivered her thanks.

In actuality, his words should have sounded like a sound argument. However, it was important to consider the impression one had of the speaker. Subaru had the thought that he was shady, and so all the others probably followed suit.

Roswaal: “Weeell~, putting the question of people’s thoughts on me aside, shall we move onto something else—Incidentally, the person who summoned Emilia-sama to Pristella where such a ruckus occurred was Anastasia-sama, was it not…? What do you have to say about that?”

Anastasia: “It’s inexcusable that she was dragged right into that hubbub. If ya want me to apologize, I’ll do it properly, as I’m mentally prepared to do so.”

Roswaal: “And if you sincerely bow your head, this would end without having you paying back a single diiime~… Oh, but you do not need to apologize to me. Emilia-sama has already turned you down, correct?”

Emilia: “Because, shouldn’t the blame be put on the Witch Cult if they were the ones to cause mischief? Anastasia shouldn’t be responsible for anything, because she merely invited us there. Also, it’s not like we didn’t accomplish the goals for which we were summoned out to Pristella…”

Roswaal cast a side glance, to which Emilia responded by feeling the pendant worn on her neck.

A brand-new, large spellstone was attached to the pendant. At this very moment, a fast-asleep Great Spirit was quietly awaiting for its revival. Obtaining this highly pure crystal gem, which would become Puck's Anchor—that was something the camp had set as their goal, and something that had been achieved.

Emilia: "Also, isn't it possible that the Witch Cult was driven back simply because we happened to be there? If you think about it that way, it should be seen as Anastasia's achieveme…"

Anastasia: "To think of it like that'd be too favorable to another camp, so I'm gonna stop ya there."

For some reason, Anastasia was being rescued by Emilia's words of optimism.

However, Roswaal's current questioning was just an attempt to keep people in check. In fact, it was plausible that most of the Witch Cult's targets had been brought into Pristella by Subaru and the others. If that were to be pointed out, there was no doubt the atmosphere would become heavy because of the evil of the Witch Cult.

Thus, it would be in their best interest to solidify the opinion, "Let's work together. The Witch Cult blows!".

Subaru: "The other three camps have already agreed on that. One Sin Archbishop was killed, and one was captured… Man, one thing was happening after another with the witch's cult."

Roswaal: "Though, their organization skills are a bit dubious. In their case, they're a group of outlaws that have nothing to do with words such as «cooperation» and «unity». Even if one of them was the last to stand having lost aaall~ of their allies and, that lone lunatic's morale wouldn't be damaged in the slightest."

Subaru: "…I can agree with that."

Roswaal's opinion was the same as Subaru's, so it was probably the correct one.

The so-called "organization" of the Witch Cult was now more of a ragtag gang of lunatics rather than an actual organization. They could not bring themselves to be naive now that they thought lacked organization; they would not be obedient from now on, simple as that.

The remaining Gluttony and Lust's brutality would never be stopped.

Subaru: "That's why we need to find a way to resist them. The next thing I'll talk about is related to that."

Roswaal: "…Coming in touch with Sage Shaula, hmm~."

Subaru: "I know that it's not gonna be easy. But there's no choice but to try it as long as we can't come up with any other measure. Finally, an omnipotent and omniscient… Or well, let's say omniscient. If the Sage's really like that, there's no harm in just trying to talk to the person, right?"

Roswaal: "Aaalthough~, everybody in the past couple hundreds of years who's tried that ended up suffering a big loss by paying with their liiives~."

He presented this common knowledge, and it certainly was a disturbing view of the situation. However, they had something up their sleeves for that reason.

When Subaru exchanged looks with her, Anastasia replied with a gesture of slight acknowledgement using her chin. Then,

Anastasia: "There's where I come in. Fortunately, I've got a way we can make it to the Sage's Watchtower safely. So there ain't a reason to worry about getting lost. Does that calm yer worries?"

Roswaal: "Well, should I truly believe your words just becaaause~…? First of all, if you do have this method, the people who would pay a great sum to know such a thing are many. So why are you the only one aware of it?"

Anastasia: "Money's certainly important to me, as a merchant—However, there are things in this world that money can't replace. This is one such thing."

Hand upon her thin chest, Anastasia—Eridna proclaimed that with pomp.

Despite the fact she was pretending to be Anastasia, her word had a wondrous power; a power that astonished even Subaru, one who was aware that it was not her true self at this moment.

Being faced with that Anastasia, Roswaal responded by closing one of his eyes. Glaring at her for a brief period with only a single yellow eye,

Roswaal: “Ohhh~ myyyy~. This is why it’s difficult to deal with those who are cognizant of both fighting and gambling. Moreover, I am sure Emilia-sama has already agreed to this, anywayyy~.”

Emilia: “I’m sorry for making these decisions all by myself, okay?”

Roswaal: “But you won’t stop taking these decisions of your own accord. It is fine, however. You’ll dare to proceed in choosing this thorny path. That’s where he comes into the frame as well.”

Roswaal retorted in a half-hearted manner, though he was interested in how they would get there after all.

The height of the hurdle Subaru had to climb over would become be correspondingly higher, based on the difficulty of the road Emilia had chosen. This was, because he was now the hope that replaced the Book of Wisdom, for Roswaal.

Subaru: “Anyways, as per Anastasia’s information we’ll come across some sort of desert. Although it’ll take a few days.”

Julius: “It is not «some sort of desert», it is the Augria Sand Dunes. You have had this mistake corrected so many times so far, so how about you hurry up and remember it accurately already?”

Julius presented an input of his own as he let out a sigh in reaction to Subaru’s vague memory.

The person that had been watching in silence while sitting on the sofa next to Anastasia the whole time directed his intellectual gaze at Roswaal, and continued,

Julius: “I do believe that this might be a very difficult proposal to accept for Roswaal-sama. However, in the city of Pristella, there remain many who have been exposed to the Witch Cult's barbarism, and the number of people who are still wounded both mentally and physically is vast. If we could somehow take any action that may pose as salvation, then I would like to wish to have permission to do so."

Roswaal: "You have quiiite~ the graceful way with words. It appears that you are an owner of extraordinary abilities… But it makes no sense how I have no recollection of that. Which means, that. Riiight~?"

Julius: "…"

Roswaal understood the situation based off his non-existing memories of Julius's being. The gaze of Julius turned downcast, at which Roswaal rested his chin on the hand of the arm he had placed on the armrest.

Then loosening his lips with a sense of cheerfulness, he—

Roswaal: "You've been forgotten by everyone because of the Authority of Gluttony. It feels like you've been left behind by the world. In order to break out of the conundrum you find yourself in, you're looking to pursuit the thin amount of hope that is Sage Shaula. You do not need to make excuses on how it's for everyone else, you knooow~."

Julius: "—Kh. By no means am I doing this for selfish reasons!"

Roswaal: "I'm not blaming yooou~. It's actually a natural thing, and so, I find that way of being preferrable. Doing anything for yourself over doing basically anything for someone else's sake is a desperate act. Even if other people were to be saved as a result with your actions, while feeling satisfaction and feeling achievement from doing so, there'd be no need to deny your condescending heart."

Julius' face stiffened as Roswaal continued slamming him with word upon word.

Under his clown makeup, the smile on his face turned even deeper.

Roswaal: “And even more, if you save yourself, then there’s a high chance that other people will be similarly saved as well. You even carry a just cause to act upon, so there’s no need for you to take a little blame, riiight~?”

Julius: “I…”

Anastasia: “—Margrave Mathers, may I ask ya to stop there?”

Anastasia restrained Julius with her voice, taking his place in confronting Roswaal. She let out an elegant smile and then tilted her lovely head. And then,

Anastasia: “I also ain’t got memories of him, but… even then, this boy seems to be my Knight. That’s why it doesn’t feel to watch him getting bullied while unable to do anythin’ ‘bout it.”

Roswaal: “You’re saying that the bond between a master and a servant still exists between you two, even when he has disappeared from your memories…?”

Anastasia: “I wonder. I ain’t too certain ‘bout that either. Though it did feel natural and pleasin’ that Julius cared for me during the trip… Moreover—”

Anastasia gently raised her finger and pointed towards the sofa facing her and,

Anastasia: “I wanna prevent ya from tearin’ your camp apart if ya keep doin’ that, yeah?”

Roswaal: “—My, oh my.”

In response to Anastasia’s point—he looked at Subaru, who was on the verge of eruption, and then promptly shrugged his shoulders. Subaru was on the verge of shouting. Naturally, Emilia and Beatrice were on the cusp of doing so as well.

Raising both of his hands in surrender, Roswaal made his statement.

Roswaal: “Okay, okay. I’m sorry about this. Thoooough~, I do think that I was just pointing out the possibility of a certain aspect.”

Subaru: “That was unnecessary. You really need to stop fucking around.”

Roswaal: “Was it though? You will most likely come across people who don’t care about how many people benefit from the outcome, and distrustful comrades who bring you down with abusive complaints. It seemed like you weren’t aware of that possibility, so I just thought to advise you to anticipaaate~ it.”

Not doing this for someone else’s sake, but for one’s own.

As a matter of fact, Subaru was experienced in being berated for such actions, which remained in the form of a painful wound.

That had been what he had told Emilia at the Royal Castle; that he was acting for her sake, but her response was that he was acting for his own sake. As a result, he would never be able to forget the heartache that ensued. That was a definite truth.

However, whether that had been the truth or not, there often would be times where people would mention it with the intent of hurting him. But that did not mean that—

Subaru: “It’s not as if the feeling of accomplishment decreases depending on the amount of people who approve of one’s actions. As if this person is like that. Stop it.”

Roswaal: “It cannot be helped, riiight~? Because unlike you, I’m not familiar with his personaliiity~… Although your relationship with him doesn’t seem like the sort a person would have after a few days on a trip.”

Roswaal turned to Subaru, who was about to lose his temper. In just this moment, Roswaal’s eyes, bordered by his long eyelashes, became overcast with a full-blown sense of tragedy. Then,

Roswaal: “This means that you’re the only one who remembers again. Just like in Rem’s case.”

Subaru: “Though, I do wonder what kind of fate this is.”

Roswaal: “It is proof your existence is a special one. You should care for it. You should treasure iiit~—Because there are many things out there that cannot be obtained even when one wished for them.”

Nobody besides Roswaal himself followed the second half of his emotionful statement.

However, even if he were to continue tp ask him questions until he shed light on it, Roswaal would not let out the truth; henceforth, Subaru quickly gave up on the situation. Anyhow, the things that needed to be said should have been said by now.

Next would be—

Subaru: “Just like the letter said, the Confinement Room and…”

Roswaal: “And the Sleeping Beauty will be taken out, yes. What a drastic measure. I was sure that you really hated people touching her, after all.”

Subaru: “A way to wake her up might be found, so I’ll try it. Isn’t that a given?”

Roswaal: “I was surprised to find out that you’d first try this measure with that girl. You give off the impression of a selfish person, but in reality you punish yourself. Somewhere in your heart, somewhere in the corner of your mind, ever since the onset, you believe that she should be the first to be saved?”

Subaru: “…”

He had hit the bullseye, and Subaru reflexively sunk into silence.

Ever since they had set out on their journey towards the Pleiades Watchtower and up until the time they arrived at the mansion, Subaru had been constantly wondering if bringing Rem along as one of Gluttony’s victims was indeed the right approach.

Of course, he was not averse to waking up Rem, not at all. If there was the possibility that she would wake up, he wished that she would awaken as soon as possible, even if just for a day, even if just for a single second.

However, the certainty of Natsuki Subaru being the one to do it was a different matter.

All those people in the city of Pristella were suffering the same kind of damage as Rem. A situation where those who were sleeping were not even taken into account by their own families, unaware their existence had been stolen.

The more Subaru thought about it, the more he felt the piercing of a strange wedge in his haert.

It was the feeling of guilt from saving her first over a multitude of other people. This was why he had hesitated this time around, on the subject of bringing Rem out, but—

???: “I’ve already convinced Subaru, so there’s no problem.”

Roswaal: “…My my, this is quite surprising.”

In the place of the stricken-silent Subaru, the one replying to Roswaal was Emilia.

Turning his gaze to Emilia, her chest puffed up with pride, Roswaal quizzically closed one of his eyes,

Roswaal: “You say that, but wouldn’t her awakening be troublesome for Emilia-sama? Subaru-kun has strong feelings for that girl, no matter how you look at it. In fact, they’re as strong as the feelings he holds for Emilia-sama…”

Emilia: “Yeah, I think that’s right. Subaru will devote himself to that girl for a while, and he might stop caring about me as well.”

Subaru: “No, under no circumstances would that…”

Happen. It should not happen.

His feelings towards Emilia had never wavered, and he swore they would never either.

However, a different part of him possessed intense feelings for Rem. That was a fact, and just like Emilia said, if she were to wake up, there was no doubt that he'd become devoted to her.

However, Emilia turned to Subaru with a "It's fine", then resuming her words,

Emilia: "If it makes Subaru turn away from me, that just means that I'll be the one this time to do my best for him to turn my way. I'm going to be troubled if Subaru isn't here after all that. Therefore, I'll also have you come my way, no matter how madly in love you are with Rem with how cute she is."

Subaru: "Eh? Emilia-tan?!"

Emilia: "That's my resolve and that's what I have decided. And nobody will complain about you saving her—So it's fine. Let's wake up Rem."

Emilia supported Subaru's decision with her strong words.

Those words somewhat sounded like a confession. It surprised Subaru and caused his knees to shake. On many occasions, Emilia had told him things that sounded like affection. That had indeed happened, but in none of those times did she go over the level of deep affection—

Emilia: "Me, Rem, Beatrice, Petra, Patrasche, Otto-kun, Garfiel, we all want you to be reaaally reaaally happy!"

Subaru: "Though you did mix a ground dragon and men at the latter half of your statement."

She had mixed in a loli at the middle too.

Anyhow, he accepted this, and then Beatrice, who was sitting beside him, poked his shoulder. An "Oh, eh" escaped Subaru's lips, looking towards his side right after. Beatrice had her usual indignant look plastered on her face.

Beatrice: "It's not like I'm going to complain about Subaru's tendency to fool around with girls… But one of his hands should be always free, I suppose. This is Betty's exclusive special privilege, in fact."

Subaru: "…You're ridiculously cute."

Beatrice: "That's a given, I suppose. Betty's adorableness resounds to the gods of heaven and earth, in fact."

He didn't go as far as to care about what the gods of heaven and earth thought of the issue, but it did resound in Subaru's heart.

Backed by both Emilia and Beatrice, Subaru would endeavor to wake Rem up.

—He longer hesitated about doing this.

Subaru: "So that's that, Roswaal. Sorry for being loved so much. Rem will be taken out."

Roswaal: "You'll just surprise Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama when you make them sound like alternates like that. It's fine, do whatever you want. I never planned on stopping you anywaaay~."

Subaru: "Alrighty, then about the talk from before."

Roswaal: "I was feeling concern and just wanted to make sure that you understood the meaning of those actions. I also hurt your guys' incredible, nameless Knight, so my apologies."

Subaru: "It's okay."

Roswaal spoke in a way that felt like banter til the very end. Julius on the other hand inhaled slightly, and took turns exchanging looks with Anastasia and Subaru,

Julius: "I am Julius Juukulius. This only remains within his memory as of right now, but I am an Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica. I am not so inept that my heart would be perturbed by something of this caliber."

He makes his declaration in such a manner, a splendid job of brushing aside the pestering from the wickedly evil mage.

Subaru: "…Not very firm."

Julius: “Just whose side are you on, really? I feel like I have been stabbed in the back just now.”

He sneaked in his last statement just after their conversation had been brought to its conclusion.

2

The conversation had ended, and Subaru and the others had left the parlor.

They were heading towards the Confinement Room that resided in the east wing of the mansion. Over there, they would come in contact with a person who was possibly one of the key factors in reaching the Augria Sand Dunes.

A year prior to this or thereabouts, a person had been brought along with the residents of the mansion’s migration and had been kept inside the Confinement Room ever since then.

That really was not the type of acquaintance one would wish to come in contact with, nor was it really safe to do, but—

???: “I’m really wondering what kind of results they’ll bring. Making me having that sort of expectations, I wonder if theeey’ve~ perhaps influenced me yeeet~ again.”

Roswaal rested the weight of his back onto the sofa, sinking deeper and deeper into it as these words trickled out of him.

One person was left in the parlor. The sorcerer thought over the lingering memory of the previous discussion, had someone come to mind, and then let out a slight laugh. Then,

Roswaal: “Does this mean that I’m becoming one of his favorite members too? What do you think?”

???: “…You sure say some disgusting things I suppose, is what I think, in fact. You really have no limits to the point it’s frightening, there’s no other way to put it, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “It’s not like I lack principles to go as far as to get close to him with thiiis~ body.”

???: “You were a woman before as well, in fact. Betty is just adequately staying on-guard, I suppose.”

Roswaal made an increasingly cheerful smile, and then the little girl who had responded to his statement—Beatrice, began playing with her own hair by pulling on it, keeping a composed expression.

It was possibly because she was bored, or perhaps it was a habit she would adopt when starting to get irritated.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun and the others are going to the Confinement Room, you know? Don’t you think it’s unsafe without you byyy~ his side?”

Beatrice: “A stray that bares its fangs is less troublesome than a pet dog that polishes its fangs, in fact. Which is why I thought to keep that in check properly, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “Calling him a pet dog is truly cruel. But being Teacher’s dog would be something I’d yearn for.”

Beatrice: “You are a deviant beyond saving, in fact… Roswaal, don’t test Subaru too much, I suppose. Betty won’t allow you to provoke him too much, in fact.”

Roswaal let out a smile containing a hint of obscenity, and was properly rebuked by Beatrice and her bitter face. Roswaal removed his smile afterwards, and just like always, he closed his one eye—his blue eye, returning Beatrice’s look solely with his yellow eye.

Roswaal: “You and I view things a different way. You act carefree, while I act with a single purpose in mind.”

Beatrice: “That would mean that you see a side of me that is completely different from Mother, the Betty that holds Subaru’s hand is several hundreds times better than that, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “That is what I’m refeeerring~ to. It’s fine for you, who put on the airs as the Guardian of the Forbidden Library, to becooome~ as happy as possible.”

Beatrice: “That’s a given, in fact. Which is why I’ll have you allow me to act in order to protect that happiness, I suppose.”

Roswaal, still seated on the couch, and Beatrice standing right before him; with the two’s line of sight at the same height, sparks flew in all directions. Roswaal squinted, as if to attempt to peek into the heart of that round-eyed girl, and,

Roswaal: “With one of the Sin Archbishops being killed, a second one should’ve entered Subaru-kun.”

Beatrice: “…There should be candidates other than Subaru, in fact.”

Roswaal: “But none of them come close to him nor do they overlap with him. Which one will be chosen is a matter-of-course, between the one who only grazes him and the one who overlaps. Cease with the dull pretenses.”

Beatrice: “—I won’t let you say much more, I suppose.”

Beatrice responded to Roswaal’s argument with a voice coated with determination that she had previously hidden.

She grabbed tightly onto her arm’s sleeve, then glared at Roswaal.

Beatrice: “Betty is Subaru’s, in fact. Therefore, Subaru will remain Subaru, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “I don’t mean to hinder yooour∼ efforts. The lower the number, the more convenient it is more me. That’s aaall∼.”

Beatrice: “—Tch.”

At the very end, Beatrice sent a scathing look towards Roswaal, heading towards the door.

This was the end of the discussion.

Roswaal: “Beatrice.”

Roswaal called out to the girl’s back as she moved away.

Beatrice stopped walking, but did not turn around.

Roswaal: “I want you to be happy, at least much more so than the others. You are… like a younger sister to me, that’s why.”

Beatrice: “—A pretty disgusting thing to say, in fact. Also, you’ll never be like Mother, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “Isn’t that what love iiiis~?”

There was no rebuttal.

There was merely the sound of the door opening and closing, echoing quietly in the parlor.

And after that, there was no further sound being made within the parlor.

Chapter 3:
A Little Girl’s Cell

1

???: “How did your talk with Master go?”

Subaru: “You could say that it went the same as usual, and that he irritated me more than usual. You get the point.”

???: “Well, I understand what you mean.”

Subaru’s group had left the parlor, and Frederica had been entrusted with guiding them towards the mansion’s east wing.

This scary-faced woman with her beautiful, long blonde hair and courteously-worn maid outfit, finally exchanged polite greetings with Anastasia and Julius as one of the mansion’s honest maids—and then spoke to Subaru, who was walking away discouraged.

Frederica: “Was Garf useful in your journey and in the city? For him to get heavily injured to the point of not being able to come back, even when I told him specific instructions… I am worried about him causing trouble for Emilia-sama and the others.”

Emilia: “No, don’t worry about it. Garfiel worked reaaally hard, after all. He’s resting along with Otto-kun right now, without causing any trouble… Well, I’m not so sure about the «without causing any trouble» part. I hope that’s not what’s happening. But anyways, we did request that they rest.”

Frederica: “My apologies for having my foolish younger brother cause you trouble.”

Emilia didn’t finish her follow-up much due to the fact she half-doubted it, while Frederica offered her apologies.

Anyhow, Garfiel’s behavior worried Petra, Ram, Roswaal, and Frederica, but his mentality had changed in some way or another during the incident at Pristella—one could say that he had matured. No doubt about it.

To begin with, for a fifteen-year-old boy, Garfiel's strength was already outstanding.

Even considering just how fierce the battles with the Bowel Hunter and the Eight Arms had been, he was still far from being able to boast himself as the strongest. But even then, he certainly possessed a level of strength that contended with not just the Emilia Camp's, but the whole continent's top ranks as well.

His biggest problem? Perhaps his immature mentality, still. Once that mental frailness were overcome however, he would go a level beyond.

Well, there was still a ways to go. That was something that shouldn't be rushed. Steadily and assuredly becoming stronger, stepping firmly on each step of the stairs before moving on to the next stage, was the appropriate way a fifteen-year-old should mature.

And in addition—

Subaru: "There's another reason for him not coming back right away this time."

Emilia: "Is it Mimi?"

Subaru: "There's that too, but."

Emilia cut into the conversation as if through sharp hearing, and he smiled wryly.

Even Emilia, someone whose knowledge of romantic relationships between men and women, seemed to be curious about the love affairs of other people to some extent. She was very interested in Garfiel and Mimi's relationship.

Of course, Garfiel should feel something for Mimi, who had risked her own life to guard his, and she was not shy in proclaiming her affection for him both before and after the battle.

Frankly speaking, there was no man out there who would not waver upon being struck with affection from a girl he didn't hate. Subaru too, was also no exception. He was unable to say anything about that phenomenon, considering he was one that had experienced it before.

He would have to wait and see how Garfiel would respond to Mimi's feelings, considering the fact that his fondness for Ram was clear.

But that was a concern different from the one Garfiel had left in the city of Pristella.

Frederica: "—Subaru-sama? Do you need to ask me something?"

Subaru: "No, nothing in particular. It wouldn't be right for me to talk about this matter."

He looked at Frederica's profile with a profound look, and was questioned about its meaning.

Taking Garfiel's true feelings in mind, Subaru dodged her question. At Pristella, a family that Garfiel worried about—a family of golden hair and green eyes, traits that would remind anyone of Frederica and Garfiel, who were brother and sister.

Garfiel's relationship with that family was like his relationship with Frederica. It was certain that relationship was something Garfiel wished to report to his family, Frederica and Ryuzu, himself.

Subaru: "So I won't say anything. Natsuki Subaru will leave it at that in a choukou suteki way."

Emilia: "Oh, speaking of Garfiel, at Pristella there were some children that were reaaally friendly with him, and they were…"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, Emilia tan, you're gonna make my monologue go to waste!"

His mediation was about to go to waste, so Subaru literally covered Emilia's mouth to stop her from talking. The synergy would be scary if he were to leave it as it was, so he decided that he would make the time to properly explain the gist of the setting later to Emilia.

Subaru waved his hand with a forced smile at Frederica, whose face became more and more puzzled.

Frederica: “Sorry to interrupt you guys while you’re happily heating up your intimacy, but do you have any idea of where you guys are headed?”

Subaru: “Oh, that place called the Confinement Room. That person we talked about before’s there.”

Julius: “Hmm, that person, huh—I wonder if the conversation will go well.”

Subaru: “It’s something that hasn’t been done before, so, dunno. Anyways, I’ll at least try asking to make sure.”

Julius responded to Subaru’s explanation by going into deep thought, his face complex as he follows the latter’s back.

In reality, Subaru was also aware of the many problems this proposal had in store. However, if all went well, then they would lower the risk of their journey by a considerable amount.

Emilia: “Also that girl’s rather fond of Subaru, so shouldn’t it be fine?”

Subaru: “That girl’s fonder of Garfiel than she is of me. Maybe she likes him more because he’s feline… Hm, we’ve arrived.”

While he was replying to Emilia’s optimistic words with a strained smile, Frederica stopped walking. Subaru and Emilia too halted their movements, having entered somewhere with a view and atmosphere distinctively alien in the mansion.

The floor layout was roughly identical to that of the previous Roswaal mansion, however, the basement part of the eastern wing —this was the only place that was starkly different.

In the central building of the mansion, there was the main center wing that concentrated the facilities needed for daily life. The west wing contained multi-purpose facilities, such as the maids' rooms and the guest's rooms. And then there was the eastern wing, a place that acted as a storehouse/safe for the history and heritage of the ancient Mathers bloodline, such as books.

However, the only place that was different was the eastern wing's basement. There was a clear goal set for the cold, stone room in the basement of the noble mansion.

Anastasia: "Quite the unpleasant atmosphere floatin' 'round this place, huh."

Anastasia snorted her nose, complementing her brief comment on the different atmosphere.

There was no denial to her view on the mood, so it was indeed a clear assessment that everyone agreed with. The atmosphere that drifted about in this level of the mansion could not be described in any way other than "unpleasant".

Anastasia: "It's still different from Miasma it seems, but my body ain't feelin' too good 'bout it for sure."

Julius: "The matter of the building's structure and this facility's purpose in the first place… It may be completely unrelated to that, but I do believe that this structure was ultimately erected due to the presence inside."

Anastasia and Julius looked down at the continuous stairs leading down to the basement of the mansion filled with darkness, as they exchange these words.

The Confinement Room had already been brought to their attention. It seemed that both of them had correctly imagined the sort of establishment that existed in the basement. Or were as close to the right answer as possible.

Frederica: "Well then. I shall be guiding you all, now. Please be careful to avoid having your feet slip."

With those words, Frederica led them down the stairs. Subaru and the rest followed her tall back, headed for the basement. Julius's face indicated that he had steeled himself for what laid ahead.

The footsteps they made while walking down the stone stairs resounded very clearly throughout the space they were in. A cold breeze blew upwards from the basement, causing his bangs to shake slightly, which got on his nerves incomprehensibly.

Frederica: "I am going to open it."

Having descended towards the basement, they were blocked by an iron door standing right in front of them. The door had many solid locks installed onto it. Frederica released several of them, one by one.

The key to the door made a sound, the locks were undone, and then the door opened with a creaking noise. Beyond that gate, a stone pathway laid in front, with yet another door to be found deep inside this place, at the back.

Frederica: "The person you are looking for is beyond this door."

Frederica stepped to the side of the door, making way for them to enter, and then bowed. They gave acknowledging gestures with a nod of their chin in response, and the four people headed straight towards the door, with Subaru in the lead.

—The door at the deepest part of the basement had no lock.

He reached for the doorknob. If he were to push it open, they would surely meet what was inside.

Upon having come in contact with the door, Subaru looked back with baited breath.

Everyone: "…"

Emilia, Julius, and Anastasia all stared at Subaru's actions. The three nodded their heads at Subaru, and he took a deep breath, then putting strength into the hand that gripped the knob.

And with a sound, the door was pushed open—

???: “Roaar, roaaar! I’m gonnaaaa~ eaaat~ yooou~!”

???: “Kyaaa~, help me, nooo~.”

???: “Hehehehe. Nobody will come to save you even if you cry for help.”

With the door’s opening, a lovely voice was heard as the pathway became bathed in light.

On the other side of the open door, a lone girl was to be seen inside the room, a multitude of dolls placed around her. Her back faced the others, as she continued to play with the dolls in her hands.

She changed into an imitative voice, though it was unclear just what exactly she was imitating. Nonetheless, she was pretty into it.

???: “Nope, he’s coming. Because he promised to come to me if I was in trouble, after all… Hmm?”

Holding a doll representing a little doll, the child stood up, having suddenly noticed something. Looking back timidly, she sees Subaru and the others standing still at the entrance dumbfounded, and then opened her round, large eyes.

She had braided, light-brown hair, and had simple but lovely facial features.

Subaru: “Sup, how are you?”

Addressing her, Subaru raised his hand, as if nothing had happened at all.

???: “O-Onii-san, you idiooot! At least knock before you come iiin!”

Unsurprisingly, he was yelled at as a result of his little prank.

2

Subaru: “So yeah, this is the prisoner of this mansion. Meili here will advise us regarding to Witchbeasts.”

Meili: “I’ve been disgraced, onii-san hurt my feelings… Sniffle sniffle…”

Subaru introduced the depressed girl, who was crouching at a corner of the room, surrounded by stuffed toys—Meili, Julius shook his head, putting his fingers between his eyebrows.

While keeping the girl at the corner of his vision, he spoke this as if blaming Subaru, who had gotten carried away.

Julius: “It was a bit clumsy of me to not have gotten more information about this beforehand… But the poorness of your character is showing. It is inexcusable that you pull these pranks at every opportunity.”

Subaru: “I don’t think I’m playing around that much, though… Or well, I do agree that it’s in bad taste. Also, she really was someone dangerous before, you know?”

Julius appeared to have misgivings of Subaru’s justifications. Ignoring those all-suspecting men, Emilia and Anastasia lined up and spoke out to Meili.

Emilia: “Sorry, Meili. We’ll scold Subaru later for this, so don’t worry.”

Anastasia: “My, what a cute girl, ain’t she? Beatrice-chan, Petra-chan, ain’t this quite tellin’ of Natsuki-kun’s tastes?”

Subaru: “That’s a ridiculous opinion of me. Mind saying something more fitting?! I thought to gather people, and not specifically lolis!”

There was suddenly some sense of grounding to his nickname “Lolimancer”, so he wished she wouldn’t say such frightening things.

Putting that aside, Meili hadn't listened to Emilia and her words either, as she was indignant in earnest. In that sense, there was an imbalance in that she possessed child-like sensitivity.

Subaru: "Meili."

Meili: "Can't hear you."

Subaru: "Meili, come on."

Meili: "I don't care."

This was the situation. She was a nuisance, having entered a mode in which she'd refuse to listen.

Thus, Subaru decided to hurry up and bring out the last resort as quickly as possible. Subaru reached around his back, and then showed Meili the ace up his sleeve.

Subaru: "Look Meili. It's a present, take it. It's a new stuffed toy, Darepanda."

Meili: "—! Wow! It's cuteee!"

What Subaru presented Meili with was this stuffed toy, one that he had fixed up during the dragon carriage trip back from the city of Pristella.

As someone who had improved his skills in domestic assistance this past year, Natsuki Subaru's sewing skills had become twice as good as before. He could now produce stuffed toys, and if he so wished, he could maybe even create women's clothes now.

Anyhow, this new stuffed toy was an innovative work, that had merged the panda theme with a "lazy from the heat" taste. He more-or-less felt like he had seen something akin to it before, but since that was something from beyond this world it wouldn't be a big deal, so whatever.

And so, he presented the new piece that had this and that to it, and Meili accepted it with glimmering eyes.

Meili: “Cute! It’s a new animal! Wonder what I should name it… Okay, I’ve got it! I’ll call this one Big Panda!”

Subaru: “I see you’ve named it what it literally is.”

Putting aside her naming sense, she was extremely skilled at understanding the essence of things.

Hugging the stuffed panda in a loving way, she looked at Subaru and the others with a face that indicated that her mood had been salvaged.

Meili: “By the way, welcome back onii-san, onee-san. Looks like you guys have been away for quite a bit, huh. Petra-chan missed you, you know?”

Subaru: “We were gone for a whole month, after all. And we’re going to be away for a while again, so I don’t really wanna think about how it’ll probably anger Petra, but…”

Meili: “Petra-chan does love onii-san, after all… Hm, new people?”

As she was lining up her scattered plush toys onto shelves, Meili suddenly noticed Julius and Anastasia, which showed on her face. Julius became surprised at that change in mood, but Anastasia simply gave a nod with a composed look.

Anastasia: “Compared to Mimi, it’s like the feelin’ of bein’ manipulated’s just the surface.”

Julius: “…Now that you say it, I agree. Let us give our thanks to Mimi.”

Master and servant display a strange scene of agreement, and after that Julius’s eyes swiftly dart around the room. After briefly taking a look at that underground space,

Julius: “Nevertheless, I had assumed that it would be a harsh environment after hearing that it was a Confinement Room… But contrary to my expectations, it seems to be a peaceful place to spend time in.”

Emilia: “The person in here is a little girl, so it’s not like we wanted to torment her…But, she can’t go outside either, so it’s complicated.”

Emilia lowered her eyebrows, her visage complex.

Just like she had stated, the Confinement Room—or rather, Meili’s living space, to put it bluntly, gave off a very lenient feeling for a place of incarceration.

It did seem cold precisely because of the stone pathway, but there colorful wallpaper and carpet decorated this girl’s room, and she was free to do whatever she pleased with how she wasn’t even restrained. On the shelves, there were countless stuffed toys that had been crafted by Subaru’s hands, along with many books and play equipment.

She was being given food, and there wasn’t any problem with bathing or going to the bathroom. In short, it was a place where a Hikikomori could live in peace. It was so comfy that even Subaru wanted to be confined in it. However—

Julius: “It seems that there is a peculiar air, similar to Miasma, leaking endlessly.”

Anastasia: “It also seems to be comin’ from that girl… is that it?”

In response to Anastasia and the others’ look, Meili nodded with a smile on her face.

She had an honest smile, but something emanated from that girl, so dreadful and disgusting that it could not be hidden. That was the biggest reason as to why Meili had been confined here, and was not released.

Subaru: “I did talk about it on the dragon carriage, but this girl actually aimed for Emilia and us others before… Hmmm, so she’s like a killer-for-hire. Guess you could put it like that, right?”

Julius: “I feel that is wrong already at that point, but please, continue.”

Subaru: “Feels like you’re implying something with the way you say that… Anyways, she’s a professional killer. So, as for what Meili’s small body can do, in short, she can manipulate Witchbeasts. She is a Beastmaster.”

Meili: “Yep, me and the bad animal-sans get along preeetty well.”

Meili said that with an “Ahem” as she puffed up with pride, but the contents of her words were shocking.

Witchbeasts were harmful threats to mankind and were never friendly with humans in the first place. It seemed that there was one exception, an arrangement in which Witchbeasts would obey the person who had broken their horn, but—

Subaru: “In Meili’s case, the presence of the horn is irrelevant. I’m not too good with that theory so even if I explain it you wouldn’t understand.”

Meili: “From what Mama said, I play the same role as a Witchbeast’s horn. Sooo, I can be friendly with the Witchbeasts.”

Fulfilling the role of a Witchbeast’s horn—the meaning of that was obscure.

That being said, it seemed like there had never been any type of research done on the ecology of Witchbeasts. Of course, there was the possibility there were people who hunted Witchbeasts for a living, but even if they held information about their traits, they would not be looking at them from a research point of view most likely.

Emilia: “Initially, Meili came to attack us with one more person. Garfiel defeated that person, and this girl was caught. Ever since then, this girl’s always been sheltered by this mansion.”

Anastasia: “Why did ya do that much? No matter what’cha say, if she was an enemy before, ya should’ve dealt with her quickly… Or wait, it doesn’t seem like this child can be dealt with.”

Emilia: “…There’s no way we can even think of killing her. But at the same time, we can’t expel her either. Because this girl says that if she gets released…”

Meili: “Mama’ll get mad at me. Elsa died, and I failed, so she’ll definitely kill me if she finds me. So, staying here is the safest option.”

Meili answered with a calm tone, but it seemed like her expression had become clouded.

Meili had lost Elsa, who she worked with, and had failed in carrying out her task. Their guardians were most likely something like professional killer managers, and their failures would definitely never be allowed.

Banishing her, would mean she would receive punishment—those would be her own personal affairs, and even though Subaru and the others were completely unrelated to that,

Subaru: “It certainly is a nightmare to deal with.”

Julius: “This is not the first time Emilia-sama’s and your ideations have been brought up. It was out of line for us outsiders to utter such nonsensical things… Incidentally, who is this Mama of hers?”

Subaru: “We don’t know. Any other thing besides this mother’s name, Mama, is an unknown. Based on what Meili said, she doesn’t even know what her face looks like. What kind of family environment is this?”

But, considering the professional killer business, perhaps that grim way of life was unavoidable. It seemed difficult to figure out who this mother was based off the content of Meili’s statements, so they could shake off anxiety about the future.

Subaru: “That Roswaal bastard was also useless after Elsa died, since there was no one like an intermediary.”

Julius: “Did you say something?”

Subaru: “Just talking to myself.”

The Insignia incident that occurred on the very first day, the day

Subaru had been summoned, in the Royal Capital, had been orchestrated by Roswaal. Of course, Elsa, who had attempted to reap Emilia's life, was also the one who he had commissioned to do so. Considering the flow of events of that request, it should have been easy to draw that conclusion.

However, the intermediary of that communication line had perished somehow, and it seemed that they were unable to contact the person. If Roswaal's words were anything to be trusted, Elsa and Meili's subsequent attack was unrelated to his intentions—This was where this Mother or whatever had become a concern.

Subaru: "Anyhow, that's our relationship with Meili. This girl's here out of necessity. It's not to spoil her, at least for now."

Meili: "Considering that, Subaru and everyone are being a little too nice."

Subaru: "In regards to that, it's our dreamy good virtues taking over!"

Because after all, it was painful seeing this small, youthful girl being confined to a cold basement. It was not something they could just decide to forget, and if they attempted tried to disregard it, they would end up getting bad dreams.

So, it's not like he had any grudge against her, and so he was better off being in a good mood with her.

Anastasia: "…Wouldn't'cha normally have a grudge against her?"

Subaru: "…Should I?"

Anastasia: "I mean, didn't'cha say that she tried to kill you? So…"

Subaru: "There's a thing such as idle malicious intent, although a crime is a crime regardless of age."

In response to Anastasia's question, Subaru went into thought while scratching his cheek. Once he took a peek at Meili to the side, Subaru noticed that she was looking at himself with unreadable emotions in her eyes.

He wasn't really concerned about her, but he spoke his thoughts honestly.

Subaru: "If someone orders a person who doesn't know any better to commit a crime, then the person who made the order should be blamed. Even more so if it's a kid. If they're capable of thinking for themselves and do it regardless, I think there's no difference. «An eye for an eye», I think the Hammurabi Code is nothing but negative."

Anastasia: "That's some lip service. Then do ya think the people this girl has murdered would agree with that that?"

Subaru: "I don't think so, they're free to want revenge on Meili. As for myself, had I died, even I don't think I'd state my forgiveness like I did now."

In the end, Subaru's opinions and thoughts would change depending on first impressions.

If he were told things such as that he wasn't right in the head, or that he was being ruled over by his emotions, then so be it. Actually, that was probably true.

Subaru: "Back when I was a kid, my parents and other adults would take responsibility for me. So, I thought that if the kids near me do something that they can't take responsibility for, how about I take them up instead? That's all."

Anastasia: "…A valuable opinion, thanks."

Anastasia cut off Subaru's words, as she had lost interest halfway.

Of course, he felt like that was a typical reaction, so his feelings hadn't been hurt. In an organization where clean judgement was not taken into consideration, then any crime would be judged to as a crime, regardless of age.

A grace period, however, was given because this camp a lenient one. Subaru didn't dislike that atmosphere and environment.

Julius: "I…"

Subaru: “—Hm?”

Julius: “I believe what Subaru is saying makes sense.”

Subaru: “…Thanks.”

He had not been expecting completely positive reactions, but words such as those were akin to salvation for him.

Then turning to Meili, who had been forgotten even though the conversation had her as the topic, Subaru matched his eyesight with hers.

Subaru: “I have something that I need your help with. Mind coming along with me?”

Meili: “…Okaay. I’ll go with Onii-san.”

Meili quietly nodded at Subaru’s request.

Subaru, nor anyone else, pointed out how they felt like they could witness slight tears from the girl who had hidden her face with the panda in her embrace.

3

Meili: “I’ve only been to the Augria Sand Dunes twice.”

Subaru and the others’ explanation ended, and Meili said those words while fiddling with her braided hair. She closed her eyes as if looking back at her memories before resuming,

Meili: “I visited to replenish the Witchbeasts in my control. There are lots of Witchbeasts there, so a lot of progress was made, but…”

Subaru: “But?”

Meili: “Onii-san, are you really going there? Everyone besides me will probably die, you know…?”

It seemed that their actions were seen as reckless, in the eyes of this girl who was devoid of morals. The Beastmaster’s opinion carried quite some weight in regards to just how much they were striving for.

Subaru: “I really want to use the expertise of those with experience as a reference, but the idea that we’ll die if we go’s been thrown around a lot already, so it’s a bit late for that. Also, if it’s just like a maze in the desert, then we have preparations to break out of it.”

Anastasia: “Yes, that’d be me.”

Anastasia waved her hand, emphasizing her role as a guide.

However, avoiding getting lost on the path in this endeavor to conquer the desert to get to the Watchtower was only worth thirty points—failure would be inevitable with this score. Or rather, as long as they remained unable to find an answer worth a perfect score, they would probably have difficulty getting out alive.

The three problems were the Desert Labyrinth, the Witchbeast Den, and the Sage’s Eye”.

The Desert Labyrinth would work out with Anastasia being Eridna, and as for the counter for the Witchbeast Den, this is what they wanted to prepare a measure for.

That was why he wished to hear more details from Meili, but—

Subaru: “How should I put it… Don’t you know any way to avoid the Witchbeasts? Or on the contrary, ways to lure them away from us?”

Meili: “Onii-san, if you run on by yourself, a looot of them will definitely chase you, you know?”

Subaru: “I’ve already done that a few times and they were painful experiences.”

It had happened once a year ago at the mansion, and once again a little after that by the Whale on the plain. He felt like it was about time to stop this.

Of course, he wasn’t reluctant to do it if there was no other measure to take, but Subaru wanted to avoid being the only one left behind in the middle of the desert if possible.

Meili: “If onii-san doesn’t want to do it, then maybe you could prepare a lot of decoys for it. All Witchbeasts jump at living things over normal food, so maybe something like that.”

Emilia: “That’s definitely a no! I’m against it! I am against it!”

Subaru: “You don’t have to disagree so frantically. Nobody will be chosen, so it’s fine.”

That being said, it seemed like no useful opinions were coming up.

Or at least, as far as the Witchbeasts’ ecology was concerned, with Meili, someone who was better at handling them than anyone else, incapable of coming up with an effective plan, they were helpless.

Subaru: “Yep, guess we’ll have to beat the Witchbeasts that come at us one-by-one. Gonna expect a lot from Emilia-tan and Julius.”

Julius: “I am wondering about your self-appraisal, considering how you were not included there… But do you think it’s possible?”

Julius reacted to Subaru’s proposal by asking Meili about its feasibility. Upon hearing that, Meili looked at Emilia and Julius in turn, and,

Meili: “Probably not. Can onee-san use magic for about a week without rest?”

Subaru: “You want us to have something like a final fight in a trench?!”

Emilia: “I-I’ll try…?”

Subaru: “You don’t have to! This is the flow of an unreasonable conversation! Emilia-tan’s hair and skin will dry up, so let’s not! Okay, rejected!”

It seemed like the plan to break through by force already had some unreasonable details to it.

Just how much of that scenario Meili had actually seen was unknown, but if there no such thing as childish exaggeration in her statements, then they could never perform the unreasonable.

Emilia: “How about smearing Witchbeast blood on the dragon carriage and fooling the other Witchbeasts’ sense of smell?”

Subaru: “No, the ground dragons won’t be able to fool them, and there’s the possibility that the Witchbeasts won’t band together. Something like hiring guards… How about hiring a big army for this, much like what was done for the White Whale?”

Julius: “That will not be possible either. That was done before by other people who challenged the Pleiades Watchtower. Even though it was not as big as an army, it was still a big group. Feel free to guess the result. How about breaking the horn of a powerful Witchbeast and use it to fend off other Witchbeasts?”

Subaru: “If it’s not as overwhelming as the Whale, then we’ll be overrun by their numbers. It ‘d be nice if avoiding them were simple, such as using something like insect repellent spray.”

Subaru’s odor—or rather, the Witch’s Lingering Scent, was a spray that brought insects towards him, so he was useless.

Roswaal was the one responsible for constantly managing the barrier that separated Arlam Village from the Witchbeasts’ habitat. Something like creating a barrier around people, one that moved together with them—It seemed like that sort of thing was not possible.

Subaru: “Perhaps we should have Roswaal hold onto us, and attack from the sky.”

Julius: “If we could slip by the Sage’s Eye, then that may have been an option.”

Subaru: “Ahh, damn, right. We have to consider the Sage too.”

His unrealistic viewpoint was denied by a realistic one.

Even if they could evade the Witchbeasts and the desert, there was still the Sage to worry about. Just how had nobody ever been able to slip by this person, it was honestly the only thing they were completely in the dark on how to handle.

Subaru: “If we could at least narrow it down to one problem…”

Meili: “—Geeez, I guess I’ve got no choice.”

Subaru: “Oh?”

Subaru and the others all sat in a circle in the room, getting headaches from thinking about the way out of this conundrum, and then, finally, Meili spoke. She stood up, shaking her small head at Subaru and the others.

Meili: “I can go with you guys. If I’m there, the Witchbeasts won’t care what you do. You’ll be free to keep away from them, make them pets, make them kill each other, or make them eat the Sage person.”

Subaru: “We won’t do the second half! Or anyways…”

He opened his eyes wide at that fairly extreme remark, but the proposal shocked him even more.

Not only was Meili being cooperative, but she was willing to go out on her own, an opinion he thought she would never express.

Subaru: “Aren’t you scared to go outside? Is that alright?”

Meili: “It’s not like I’ll be found by Mama right after I leave the mansion, you know? I’m scared of being found, but I can’t just stay in here my whole life.”

He was surprised with Meili being conscious of the fact that, sooner or later, she would have to leave.

But, that may have been natural. He had been taking turns checking on her whenever the chance presented itself, but even then, the time that girl spent confined in her room by herself was multitudes larger. Certainly, she had had so much time to think, that the silence would become scary.

Being confined in a room, alone, was both relaxing and terrifying. And even if those sensations evoked lethargy in her, one day, her heart would be tortured suddenly.

Emilia: “Subaru…”

And while Subaru was feeling unusual sympathy for Meili’s heart, Emilia gently pulled on his sleeve. Subaru knew what she was thinking, as he agreed with it as well.

Subaru: “This isn’t just a fun walk outside. We have a guide, we’ll be crossing the desert, and even though we have you, we’ll have to get through the Witchbeast Den. To make matters worse, some scary Sage guy might be on the watchout too.”

Meili: “Isn’t it nice taking a walk after a while?”

With those bullish words, Meili replied to Subaru. Just how much of it was a bluff was unbeknownst to him, and likewise, just how much of it was her telling the truth was too, but—

Emilia: “She is the trump card for the Witchbeasts, right?”

Subaru: “Ahh, yeah that’s right. We’ll be counting on you, Meili.”

Meili: “I’ll try my best even if you don’t.”

Emilia and Subaru exchanged gazes with each other, and then nodded to Meili. The girl, the receptor of their words spoke as if she would push herself beyond her own utmost abilities, and hugged the panda tightly.

And so, this became a single step forward towards accomplishing their journey, at which Julius folded his arms, some words spilling from his, his face one of admiration at the result he had just witnessed.

Julius: “I really wish that I would not utter these words, but persuading little girls really is one of your strong points… Although, I do not believe that this is not a good ability to be renowned for.”

Subaru: “It’s because you guys are steadily treating me like a little girl user! I'll have you know that Meili isn't as small as a little girl! She's not a little girl!"

Subaru pointed at the room's entrance in frustration in response to Julius's useless words. Right as he did however, the door was opened, and a person showed up on the other side of the door,

???: "—I was wondering what was so noisy, only to find out that it was just Subaru making a racket again, I suppose."

Having finished her private talk with Roswaal, yet another little girl had joined them. Another fuzz was made again, but that was an incident to be put aside as something not worth bringing up, so that will be left as that.

Chapter 4:
The Reason to Bring You Out

1

The conquering of the deathly Augria Sand Dunes in order to reach Pleiades Watchtower.

The Beastmaster, Meili, joined Subaru's group as a member that would boost their confidence in escaping from the sandy labyrinth—a maze in which laid a Witchbeast Den.

However, even though it had been settled that she would be brought along, this girl had been the sole resident of the mansion's Confinement Room for a long period, one year to be exact, because she had assisted Roswaal. She had an history of cooperating with the Bowel Hunter in attacking the mansion, and naturally, Subaru had thought that arguments about releasing Meili from her solitary confinement would be natural, but—

Roswaal: "There's nooothing~ wrong with it, is there? If Emilia-sama and Subaru-kun have decided to let you out, then there shouldn't be any problem with that? Even if their judgement turns out to be inaccurate and she indeed has bad intentions, you guys are the ones that she'd aim for, youuu~ know."

Roswaal readily gave Meili permission to leave. The contents of his reply were truly Roswaal-ish, but what mattered was that she had gained his permission for the moment anyway.

And thus, Meili was finally allowed out of her year-long confinement.

Meili: "Mmmmm~! Just as I thought, the atmosphere outside is sooo different. Being in that cramped room for soooo long made it hard for me to breathe."

Subaru: "But still, we tried doing a lot of different things to make you feel otherwise, huh. It wasn't as bad as you say it was, you know?”

Meili: “Reaaaally? I welcome the concern, but being able to freely move your body is a whooole different feeling. Onii-san, if you don’t learn to appreciate the small things, you’ll be hated by onee-san and ojou-chan long before you know it, you knooow.”

Meili’s lips aligned in a pout while holding her plethora of stuffed animals.

Incidentally, the person Meili was referring to as “onee-san” was Emilia, while the person she was referring to as “ojou-chan” was Beatrice. She would refer to Petra as “Petra-chan”, Garfiel as “fanged onii-san”, and thus she’d reasonably refer to Otto as “weakling”.

Meili: “Can I rest in this room?”

Subaru: “From what I’ve been told, there shouldn’t be a problem. Someone came in to clean this place, despite it being a room that isn’t used very often, so you shouldn’t feel uneasy about it being dirty or anything like that. Frederica should have come to clean the room right around the time we were bringing our luggage out as well, so.”

Meili: “…Okay.”

Within the western wing of Roswaal’s mansion were many private rooms for servants—The inside of one of them, was currently being inspected by a curious Meili.

Meili had been freed from the Confinement Room. However, her position remained complex. Naturally, expelling her was out of question, as she needed to be taken care of at the mansion. But what exactly was her role? Was she a guest? Was she a maid? She couldn’t be pushed away to the point of calling her a guest, but she wasn’t as close as to be labelled a maid.

Thus, they had settled on branding her a cooperative worker of the mansion, as it would have been insufficient to call her a maid, and it would have been insufficient to call her a guest, and was assigned a room on the servant's floor.

Her belongings, that were kept in the Confinement Room, would be brought over, making it seem as if this bland room had been dyed with colors of her choice.

Meili: "Even if I've been freed, I don't know how long I'll be staying here, you know. Once something that seems like an opportunity to live peacefully appears, I might immediately run away, after all."

Subaru: "Well, what's most important is that you don't cause trouble nor go back to that Mama of yours. You can do whatever you want other than that. Oh, but, I'll make sure you carry out this duty properly. After that, then you can do whatever you want."

Meili: "You're saying that, when i-i-i-it's all taken care of, I can die wherever I want?"

Subaru: "I have to even hear about stuff like that? Why would I care about where someone dies…? That's what the cynical, pretentious me of the past would say, but I won't say stuff like that now."

After Subaru had set down all her belongings into the room, he petted Meili's head as she stood still at the window. This girl with braided, chestnut hair twinkled her eyes as Subaru continued to pet her head.

Subaru: "I want the gang to live decently, and die decently, no matter what. You're free to leave if you want it, but at least send us back a letter or something. Just enjoy this time as genuinely as you can."

He gave a light pat to her head at the end of his statement, then brought his hand back. After receiving that tap to her head, Meili glared at Subaru with scornful eyes, putting her own hand where Subaru's had been.

Meili: "…Onii-san, did you win over ojou-chan and Petra-chan like that? Jeeez, even being in constant caution of you isn't enough."

Subaru: "That aaactually wasn't my intention, you know."

Scratching his head, Subaru then finished helping Meili bring her personal belongings in and headed towards the room's exit. He did not have any intention of helping with the rearrangement of the room upon completing the task of bringing in her stuff. On top of that, there probably was a helpless wall separating Subaru's sense of remodeling and Meili's own.

Thus, he decided it would be best to depart before doing anything unnecessary that would cause her to dislike him.

Meili: "Well, I'll take your words with a grain of salt. Besides, you're going to be throwing your life away soon at the Augria Sand Dunes anyway."

Subaru: "We aren't going to throw away our lives; we're going to assemble our lives. And that's where we'll be heavily relying on your powers, so we'll be counting on you."

Meili: "Okay, okay."

Swinging his hand back and forth to the girl who was blowing him off so that he would leave, Subaru went out the room. She brought out each of her belongings out from a box, all while wearing an indifferent face as she avoided looking at Subaru, and her possessions were displayed in a first, tentative manner.

Just like Meili had said, this was a room that made her feel like she didn't know how long she would be staying, nor that she knew if she'd return.

Meili: "I'm having fun, ahhh."

This girl indulged herself in her own room, as she walked around with a gait that exemplified unrestrained enthusiasm. And as she went around arranging her favorite stuffed animals, the happiness of the young girl, having obtained her own room for the first time, was plain for all to see—it would make anyone feel pleased, to see such a spring in the step of a young girl.

2

With the decision of adding Meili to the group, the participants in the Exciting Tour to Inquiry the Sage would include this group of seven—Subaru, Emilia and Beatrice, as members of the same organization, and Julius, Anastasia, and Meili, as outsiders-made-collaborators. And, another girl would be taken out. Rem.

The aforementioned were the seven members of the party who would face the Augria Sand Dunes located at the eastern end of the world.

The Augria Sand Dunes, a place located at the edge of the world, laid in a straight line east of the new Roswaal mansion—but, as the path they would travel was longer than the one leading to the Watergate City of Pristella, it would take close to twenty days for just a one-way trip.

In other words, just the roundtrip journey would take a total of forty days. They would safely arrive at the Watchtower, and considering they would be staying there for a couple of days, the length of this large expedition could very well turn into something close to two months instead. The problem with this was—

Subaru: “Heyy, Petra. Sorry for leaving you alone, but let me at least brighten your mood.”

Petra: “Don’t worry~. I’m not angry, it’s fine. Subaru-sama can go to as many faraway, dangerous places as he wants, just like he always has, right?”

Petra was yielding to the harsh depression that resulted from having to stay behind during the Pristella affairs for a whole month, which would soon become a period of two months.

This girl walked impetuously around the mansion with a cold, clear face, as she waved around her maid outfit, an outfit that was befitting for her petite body. As for Subaru, he was following her back, showering her in apologies, in the midst of trying his best to repair her humor.

Anyways, why was it even necessary for Subaru to be this frantic in fixing Petra’s mood? Well, the common assumption was that, in all times and all places, whenever a girl became displeased in such a manner, it was usually the guy's fault.

In reality, Petra was the girl with the most prominent girl power in the mansion. She would proudly display this girl power as the representative for the girls. In this mansion, the only possible unfortunate men that could have possibly harmed her mood were Subaru, Roswaal, Garfiel, Otto—Wait a second, isn't that a lot of people? And wait… Weren't all guys unfortunate when it came to power? Once he was revived, Puck would probably join the ranks of these bad boys. It was beyond pathetic. But anyways—

Subaru: "I know that leaving you behind with Ros-chi at the mansion for a month would stress you so much to the point it'd be hard for you to breathe, but if just reason that it's just part of your job and can't be pick ab… Guh!"

Petra: “I don’t get mad over things like that! I’m not a kid! Stop saying weird things like that when I have Ram-neesama and Frederica-neesama.”

Subaru: “To think a girl who headbutts the pit of a man’s stomach would claim she’s not a child is just…”

Petra, having caused Subaru to collapse in agony with a strike to a vital part of his body. truly resembled anger.

She stuck a prideful pose as she held her waist with both of her hands, and she stuck out her chest to insistently convince him that her appearance was indicative of anything but a kid. However, a lady’s essence was something that would be reached before her body. As for Beatrice, her body’s growth rate would not catch up at all, so it felt like her attitude was being dragged along as well, but…

Subaru: “But Petra, wasn’t this headbutt from a higher place than your previous one? Well even then, it felt like there was a small moment at the start of your previous headbutt where you were on your tiptoes before you came flying towards my chest.”

Petra: “…I’m dumbfounded. Didn’t I tell Beatrice? Hey, look! I’ve grown up in this past month, my back has grown, my legs have grown, and hasn’t my face become cute as well?”

Subaru: “Ah, I guess you did grow a bit? Your back and your hair I mean. Although, your face was cute from the beginning.”

Originally, Petra was the beauty of the Arlam Village. Having been lured away by the mansion to serve as one of its maids had caused a great fuss, as Petra, being the village’s boys’ dream girl, was the one girl everyone wanted to marry.

To be more specific, you could cause a sumo wrestling tournament to unfold in the center of the plaza if you challenged these crybabies. The adults would barge in at the end, and the celebration of lifting the somehow beaten-up Subaru into the air would reach its end. It would be an enigmatic rite of passage.

Anyhow, Petra was this girl who was loved by the villagers. She was a girl who often expressed her sorrow about helping with the mansion. He wanted to use the convenience of having her in the mansion as much as possible, for the sake of the extraordinary future potential Petra had in store. That being said, at the same time, Subaru held no power within the mansion, so he would cherish these days to an extent so that he'd continue on without forgetting this type of ordinary life, although—

Subaru: "Also, you weren't able to be the extremely playful girl that you are. As for neesama and her well-known temper… I am aware of how you feel suffocated from having her tell you to work all the time."

Petra: "It's not like that, though…"

Subaru let both of his arms open to console the pouting girl. Petra showed a slightly hesitant gesture, and then she jumped into Subaru's arms. He hugged her small body, and then petted her head as to reward her.

Petra: "Subaru… I mean, Subaru-sama, you're going to do something dangerous again?"

Subaru: "It's not as if it's completely settled that it's going to be dangerous, you know? Actually, it kinda sounds like I'm saying you shouldn't consider the possibility of it being dangerous, but the truth is, it really might be a reasonably safe expedition."

Petra: "What's the probability of each outcome?"

Subaru: "I guess it would be a ratio of eight-to-two, with the safe outcome being the lowest, maybe?"

Petra: "To me, that sounds like it'd be pretty dangerous then."

Not being able to lie in a meaningful conversation was one of Subaru's bad habits.

Subaru felt like Petra had begun to becoming displeased while being held in his arms. He then he let out a sigh, as he did not understand what was wrong with her. Suddenly, Petra started to rub her forehead against his stomach.

Petra: “I’m worried. Subaru-sama is always like this, ever since you first came to the mansion, and ever since I met you at the village. You’ve been through so much, and going all over the place diligently, without even taking a break… It would be nice if you would learn a thing or two from my lazy Master.”

Subaru: “Nah. Even though Roswaal gave his stamp of approval, he probably has some sweat rolling down his forehead whenever we’re somewhere he can’t see. I agree that he’s useless when it comes to life-threatening matters, though.”

Petra: “It was rough with the Witchbeasts, it was rough with the Witch Cult, it was rough with the Earth Spider, it was rough with the Goddess Statue, it was rough at the Great Forest of Elior, and it was rough cleaning the graves too. Despite all that, you still fought with the witch cult at Pristella, and then Otto and the others died… Well, almost.”

Subaru: “Otto nearly died us back then.”

Otto dies too much.

Amazingly enough, Subaru was in complete agreement with this notion, but he wished that he wouldn’t simply die. If Otto died, Subaru would not be able to avoid dying himself as well.

Not to boast of it as a friendship that not even death would tear apart, though.

Petra: “Why can’t someone other than Subaru-sama do it? Someone, another person… You should just leave it up to someone stronger or something like that, like Master, since he has the time.”

Subaru: “I… I understand. I understand just how much frustration you’ve had piled up because of how Roswaal wastes his time so often. Stop trying to drive Roswaal off to his death every time you can. There’s way too much friction in this camp.”

It wouldn’t be a problem if it were just things like Roswaal not noticing how Petra would put squeeze juice out of her cleaning cloth into his tea. However, it would obviously be bad if she started showing her hostility and malice in clearer terms.

Before it turned out like that however, Subaru let out a commanding voice, but Petra eyed Subaru with a serious look. It seemed like half-assed deception and insincere words would not be able to convince her. Also, above all, Petra was seriously worried about Subaru's safety.

Saying anything unnecessary and careless in this situation would be disrespectful to Petra's feelings of anxiety.

Subaru: "Well, I get your point. I really do. It's true that there seem to be Witchbeasts on the way to the Sage's tower, it's true that the desert's maze is rumored to be ridiculous. And I know how ridiculous it is in the first place to aim for a Sage that'd get mad at us for coming close to the tower… But even then, there's no way in hell I'd leave this up to someone else."

Petra: "…Why? Subaru-sama, aren't you perhaps overestimating your own strength? Just let Garf-san make an embarrassing assumption like that."

Subaru: "Petra's grading is seriously strict to the extreme! There's no way in hell I'm going to let Garfiel hear that!"

Petra's critical standards were so harsh that it would make many men tremble upon hearing them.

It would be appropriate to characterize Garfiel's attitude towards his weakness as one of making false expectations while being unfazed. However, Garfiel made sure to put in earnest efforts to change these false expectations into reality. Also, in this case, the problem was probably the fact that he would be stronger when holding these erroneous beliefs.

The matter at hand thus could not be heard by Garfiel, considering his interpretation of his strength and his actual strength.

Subaru: "Well, putting aside Garfiel's impression and his way of thinking… It's not like I… It's not like I think there's no one out more suitable for the task. And first of all, leaving everything up to Reinhard would be safer in all kinds of ways as a preparation to escape the sand maze.”

Petra: “Then why don’t you let him do it?”

Subaru: “I wonder why. Despite being someone who’s fond of being pampered, I thought I was someone that didn’t yearn for honor.”

In actuality, he really did not understand why he desired to do it like this. However, if he were to dare and put it in words, perhaps these would be how to best put it?

Subaru: “—No, never mind, this is something I want to do myself, after all. Even if there’s someone more suited for it out there, even though I know there’d be a higher chance of success that way, I still want to do it.”

Petra: “Why?”

Subaru: “It’s embarrassing but… It’s because I want me to be the first person she sees when she wakes up.”

Petra: “…”

He did not specify who. But even so, Petra understood who it was.

If a way to wake up that girl—the girl that laid in a state of continuous deep slumber, were to be found at the Sage’s tower, he wanted to be the one to seize it.

Even if there was someone else out there more suitable for the endeavor, even if someone other than himself with a higher chance of success existed, this was the sole thing he would not give up. He did not want to give it up. This was Subaru’s ego.

Subaru: “If I were to disregard my feelings and think of it from a rational viewpoint… Anyone could be the one to wake her up. If something like a ridiculous disease of never being able to wake up were to spread, and were this only about saving them, I wouldn’t care about anyone else developing a vaccine or a wonder drug to cure it. I wouldn’t care about the process, if it meant saving them.”

Petra: "…Yeah."

Subaru: "But if I allow my feelings to come into the picture, I want to do things myself. I want to be the one to help them. I want to be the one to wake them up. I want to give it my all and save everything."

—Thus, Natsuki Subaru would be the one to go.

There were countless others who were stronger.

There were countless others who were more reliable.

There were countless others who were wiser.

There were countless others of class who were more wonderful.

But Natsuki Subaru's own ego would ignore all of that, and so, he would be the one to go. Only because he wanted to be praised by this girl after saving her.

Subaru: "Sorry for disappointing you with my selfishness."

Petra: "—You really did disappoint me. Nothing you said changes anything for me."

Subaru: "Hmm?"

After Subaru's own acknowledge of hiss shamefulness, Subaru petted Petra's head, bracing himself for her hatred. But after Petra let out an unclear voice, she lifted her head from Subaru's arms.

Subaru was surprised that her round, large eye had become clouded by giant teardrops. And then—

Petra: "Ey!"

Subaru: "Another headbutt—?!"

Petra swung her pointy head downward, and then her forehead caused great pain to the pit of Subaru's stomach.

She had aimed at Subaru's defenseless vitals, making him fall to his knees, promptly escaping from his arms with an anticlimactic leap, then closing one of her eyes and sticking out her tongue.

Petra: “Subaru-sama, you idiot! You’re selfish! Why don’t you just go do whatever you want?!”

Subaru: “Guh, oh…”

Petra: “Because when you return after two months, I’ll surprise you by becoming a really beautiful girl. Feel free to regret not being able to see that growth up close!”

Subaru: “Mhm, there’s really something unfortunate about that.”

It would not be unusual for a kid to change during their growth period so suddenly. Petra was a glamorous thirteen-year-old after all, so after two months she might give out a completely different impression.

Subaru: “To tell you the truth, I also grew nineteen centimeters between the seventh and eighth grades…”

Petra: “Huh? That seems a little impossible…”

Well, Subaru’s case was rare; he had only grown so much because he was originally short. Although Petra almost broke down due to the size of the expectations he had of her, this girl clenched her fists soon after.

And then, thrusting both of her fists towards Subaru, she declared.

Petra: “Anyways! What Subaru-sama should do is to go ahead and travel to whatever dangerous places he wishes. worrying everyone and troubling everyone, and after that, come back like you always do.”

Subaru: “It sounds like I’m a pretty big nuisance to others when you say that…”

Although, looking at it that way, the way she had described him surprisingly did not sound far from the truth. Anyhow, Subaru pushed out both of his hands as well, and then matched Petra’s fists with his own.

Subaru: “It’s always troubling for Petra, but I’ll carelessly head towards dangerous places like I always do, and you just wait for me to return after all those things are done and dusted like you always do. It’s Petra’s own special right to welcome us back once we return from our journey.”

Petra: “…You won’t let Frederica-neesama or Ram-neesama say it before me, right?”

Subaru: “Yeah. I promise.”

Petra: “Including Master?”

Subaru: “Don’t worry about that, if Roswaal is the first one to appear after we come back, I’ll smack him.”

Petra: “…Mhm, I understand. Alright, that convinces me.”

She pulled back the fists that were matched with Subaru’s, and then that triumphant spirit started to flow out of the sighing Petra. Largely because he had let Petra take over the flow of the conversation, though.

Petra: “Jeez, Subaru-sama can’t be helped…”

Somehow, it felt like her statement had been delivered in a way that made it seem as if she were talking to everyone. Subaru thought that he couldn’t wrap his head around that.

3

Although he was not worried to the point of anxiety, in order to settle an uncertain matter that lied within the mansion, Subaru finally stepped inside that room.

Subaru: “…”

Entering this room was the only time Subaru would naturally hold his breath and lighten his footsteps. But even if he were to enter the room while singing loudly and tapping his feet, the situation within the room definitely would not change.

Still, perhaps he unconsciously decided to keep silent within the room simply for the sake of the girl who was laying on the bed within the room, whose figure would cause pain to swell up within his chest if he were to look at it excessively.

It was a deep sleep. If she were able to wake up, he would wish for her to wake up right this instant.

However, he felt that disturbing her deep sleep would be akin to blasphemy. This girl, who had sunken into a deep sleep of everlasting dreams, was precious to him to such degree.

Subaru: “I say that but, that of course is just my own overly subjective belief, huh…”

Saying those words with a tone of dismay, Subaru pulled out a chair aside the bed to sit on. Just like that, one month had passed since he last stepped foot into this room, and he reunited with the face of a sleeping Rem, whose state showed no change, still in a state of deep slumber—ever since a year ago.

Subaru: “I’m back, but I’m sorry for coming to see you so late. I had some business to take care of… and on top of that I showed a bit of hesitation, making this visit very last-minute.”

Rem: “…”

It was obvious but, of course, there was no response from the sleeping Rem. Subaru reached out with his voice, despite knowing that there would be no response, and held a calm expression even then. Natsuki Subaru had an expression that he would expose only to this specific girl.

He owned this determined expression, indicating he was ready to throw away his own life in earnest, that he would only show to Emilia.

He owned this trustful expression, that made it seem as if he would be able to entrust his life, that he would only show to Beatrice.

And then he owned this expression that exposed his weaknesses which he so often tried to conceal, the expression that he would only show to Rem.

Subaru: “What should I tell you… Actually, there’s so many things I can talk to you about, you know? While I couldn’t come here, I was at the Watergate City of Pristella, and a lot of things happened there. It was such a big uproar that, even if I talked to you about it all night, there’d still be more to tell you about… But even then, I have plenty of time in the world to talk to you about all that.”

Subaru gently slipped his hand within the bed, searching for the hand of the girl who had a towel blanket up to her chest, and began speaking upon grasping Rem’s hand.

Within her long fingertips, with her slender, pale arms, her gentleness and existence of her warmth were evident, but for some reason there was the mysterious sense of bloodflow—No, a sign of life within her was missing.

A lone force within her was preserving her life. However, there was no force within her that simultaneously preserved her life and made it whole.

Rem’s life, with this contradictory situation, had her time frozen even now, trapped within a state of deep slumber. However—

Subaru: “I might finally reach you.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “Of course, it’s also possible that my expectations are too high and I’ll end up not being satisfied. Of course, it’s also possible that, in the end, the Sage will fail to live up to their name and end up with nothing, only to have them apologize for the inaccurate information.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “But.”

A clear path to a solution, other than defeating Gluttony, finally was coming into sight.

Although the fact that the path he had followed to reach this answer had been shaped by others was a source of disappointment, even so, it resembled a ray of light, one that seemed like he was finally able to grasp—

Subaru: “Because I was too busy freaking out to ask Echidna.”

Within the Sanctuary, within the Witch’s Tomb, back when he had been invited to a Tea Party in a dream, he confronted Echidna, the Witch of Greed, and in rejecting her, Subaru escaped her control. It was a choice taken to protect Natsuki Subaru’s fragile soul, but at the same time, it was a decision that distanced himself from the one person who might have assisted him in finding a way to save Rem (possibly).

Of course, it was hard to gauge just how much insight Echidna, a Witch most knowledgeable of the past, could lend about an Archbishop brandishing their power in the present. But maybe, had he revealed the situation to her, listening to the Witch’s input might have been helpful.

Right after determinedly rejecting the Witch’s request, he had been confident that the right decision had been made. But as time went on, he became aware that it felt that the passing seasons and the relationships’ development were leaving Rem behind, he became worried about whether his decision was the correct one after all.

Even if he had promised from the bottom of his heart that he would save her, he himself had yet to take any definite action for that end. But finally, he was now able to do something for her sake, having slipped out of the deadlock that had stagnated every time.

In the city of Pristella, a multitude of people had suffered the same type of fate as Rem—and for the purpose of saving them, they would embark on a journey to the Pleiades Watchtower. However, if he were to point out his real motive, the real reason that drove Subaru towards the Watchtower was of Rem.

Even while understanding that it was both unreasonable and inappropriate, Subaru—

Subaru: “I will save you, Rem. That is the oath I made.”

Just like she had been there for Subaru in those fragile days, in those times. Now, in these times where Rem needed someone’s hand the most, was when Subaru wanted to be the one there for her and offer his hand.

???: “—Hurts.”

Subaru: “—?!”

Subaru, who had his eyes closed tight while speaking words of determination, heard a voice which made him raise his face abruptly.

He took a look at Rem with inconceivable surprise within his eyes, only to find that she was laying there, quietly, her eyes closed, holding onto Subaru’s hand in silence. Then whose voice was—

???: “Let go of her hand, Barusu. Just looking at how strongly you are holding her hand brings me pain.”

Subaru: “…Oh, it’s Ram.”

Looking back at the entrance of the room, Subaru saw Ram standing there, her cold look shooting daggers at him. After being relieved by her gaze, Subaru hurriedly released his hand—the one that had been holding to Rem’s own, having realized that he had been grasping it with more strength than he thought.

Ram: “I cannot bear watching Rem’s whitebait-like fingers being violated by Barusu’s sexual desires.”

Subaru: “Can you not say it like that? That’ll make me feel like my previous determination has turned into something completely loathsome.”

After Subaru let go of Rem’s hand, Ram, who had stepped into the room, took her hand instead. The older sister gently caressed the slender, white fingers of her younger sister, then regarding Subaru with a side glance.

Ram: “Was your determination really that pure? Carefully reflect on yourself a bit more and make your speech again… If you lust after me instead, someone who looks extremely similar to Rem, Ram will also get down shivers up her spine and run away.”

Subaru: “Calm down. Even though your physical appearances are extremely alike, I will never confuse you two because of the differences in your inner selves’ radiance. I am not a half-hearted man who judges only the outside.”

Ram: “Is that so? I guess that is fine, then. Even if you have found a way to wake her up, it is hard to imagine how Rem would feel if Barusu had forgotten her during this year. It would be surprising if she does not hold any detest for you, if your depictions of her during our idle conversations were not just wild fantasies, that is.”

Subaru: “Just how little faith do you have in me… We’ve known each other for a long time now, you know?”

Ram: “Haa.”

Snorting with her nose like she always did, Ram’s movements indicated that she was about to leave her seat. Along with getting up from her seat, she looked around the room and then,

Ram: “I need to get ready to leave so, someone also needs to prepare a second set of clothes for Rem. She doesn’t sweat, so changing her clothes really is unnecessary but… her body still requires being wiped off.”

Subaru: “…”

Ram: “Something’s widening below your nose, disgusting.”

Subaru: “I didn’t say anything because there wasn’t really anything to say but, even when I don’t say anything this is the treatment I get?!”

Taking care of Rem’s body—Rem, fallen in slumber due to having both her Name and Memories eaten, was basically unreactive to any physical stimulus. There was no real practical reason for doing things like wiping her body and changing her clothes.

The reason of those around her for doing such things was no more than to simply feel some comfort occasionally, that her existence was not being left behind.

Subaru: "…"

Only considering the practical aspects of doing all this, actions like Subaru making a speech and Ram taking care of her younger sister's body, neither did anything positive for the situation.

Yet, despite that, the reason why neither attempted to stop such pointless actions, was because everyone realized that even if they did not say it out loud, they knew that people still acknowledged the fact their actions would not be accompanied by actual consequences.

Subaru: "Isn't about time for you to start feeling as if Rem is your real sister?"

Ram: "…"

Subaru asked this question unexpectedly to her as she was looking down at the figure of a sleeping Rem, lending her own hand, with a gentleness that did not befit the girl named Ram.

Even though Ram bravely took care of Rem, no memories of this girl who represented her other half remained within her. The girl was so similar to Ram, it was impossible for anyone to claim that they were unrelated. But if one were to solely consider Ram's true feelings, Ram's relationship with Rem was a weak one.

Still, days like these passed by for a whole year. Even though she had lost her memories, it was possible for new, different ones to form. Perhaps, right now, definite memories were taking form within Ram.

Ram: "Earnest feelings such as those do not sprout that easily. No memories of her remain in me and I have never witnessed this girl in an awake state. Although I could imagine that she was probably someone of excellence and dignity, similar to Ram."

Subaru: "Sure she was excellent, but I don't really have any memory of her being that dignified. Rather, I've had my fair share of worries because she would be in such a hurry to the point of being reckless."

She did blow away half his body, well, there were circumstances.

Ram responded to Subaru with an "I see", her voice listless, similar to the wind.

Ram: "Speaking of memories that I do not remember, even if just for amusement, is nothing more than moving backwards. It is something Ram is not very fond of, Barusu."

Subaru: "Is that so? If you say so, then I'll stop."

Ram: "…After she wakes up, if I regain my memories of her then, we can talk about plenty of things. But even if they are not restored, as long as she wakes up, then you may talk as much as you wish."

Peeping into the face of her younger sister, Ram played with her bangs with an unchanging expression. Rem's hair freely drifted down from above her pale forehead, Ram let out a small sigh.

Her profile looked cruel, yet gentle, to Subaru.

Even if she remembered nothing, even if memories of her had been lost, it was not as if their bond had disappeared. And even if it had indeed vanished, that did not that they could not be forged anew. Those were his thoughts.

Subaru: "Well, leave all that to me. I'll conquer the Sage's watchtower and then definitely make Rem wake up. And then you two sisters will have your emotional reunion."

Thus, Subaru said these words in an excessively bright manner, with a deliberately loud voice. If anything, this moment between Subaru and Ram did not befit the quiet atmosphere within the room.

However, Ram looked back at him after his remarks with an extremely confused look.

Ram: “What are you saying, Barusu?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

After that, Ram looked at Subaru with a look like that of looking at an idiot.

Ram: “Ram will also accompany you on this next journey, so putting it that way is pretty condescending. If it is going to be an emotional reunion, Ram will be having it herself.”

Subaru: “That’s news that I haven’t heard before, you know!”

In response to Subaru widening his eyes in surprise, Ram looked at Subaru with a look even more full of spite.

However that gaze was unreasonable, for he could not know what he had not been told about, and he could not be aware of things that he had not heard about.

Ram: “…”

In response to Subaru asking what she was talking about, Ram held a manner of blocking her ears from his words, rejecting him.

And after that, this day of preparation would go by, and the two would not be able to have a straightforward conversation.

—Ram and Rem, the sisters, had been confirmed to accompany them.

A journey to the Pleiades Watchtower, to meet the Sage, Shaula.

That was the type of situation that seemed to lie ahead, for a total of eight participants, a large group.

Chapter 5:
Each of Their Unease

Various discussions were had, along with some confusion when taking a decision on the travelers; many problems arose when bidding the people left behind farewell, but still, the morning of their departure had finally arrived.

Subaru: “It turned out to be a bigger group than I thought, but…”

Folding his arms, Subaru gazed at the people who would travel alongside him in the “Tour to Conquer the Sage’s Tower”.

The two camps to participate were the Emilia Camp and Anastasia Camp. The Emilia Camp was represented by, of course, Subaru, Emilia, and Beatrice, along with Rem, the perpetual sleeper, and Ram, who accompanied her. There was Anastasia, the guide for the Augria Sand Dunes, and her Knight, Julius. Including Meili, who was brought along as the Beastmaster so they could pass by the hordes of Witchbeasts that lived in the dunes, that made up for a total of eight people.

If their aim was to have a simple plan for their movement, then they had a lot of the people involved in reclaiming Pristella, and in regards to commanding people, Subaru had experience with the subjugation of the White Whale, as well as the battle against Sloth.

However, when it came to moving towards that faraway land—these eight key people, despite being a large number of people on the road, no experience.

Subaru: “Wonder if it’ll actually be fine…”

???: “Worried about something, Subaru?”

He twisted his neck while imagining the distant future, and saw Emilia pop up in his vision. Subaru cleared his throat with a “Ahem”, directed at the girl wearing a lightweight dress for traveling afar and spoke, Subaru: “When I think about the place we’re going to, I can’t stop being nervous. Other than that… I feel afraid about going to a dangerous place with such a large group, since it’s hard to protect so many people.”

Emilia: “You may be right. Rem and Ram are coming along too. Subaru will have to be protected by Meili and Anastasia.”

Subaru: “What the?! I’m already being treated as a non-combatant?!”

Emilia: “Come on, Subaru. Obviously it’s just a joke. You’re being taken seriously, after all.”

When Subaru suddenly screeched at Emilia, whose fists were balled up, she began laughing, being unable to contain it. Subaru too laughed after that reaction, but the stiffness of his slight smile was forgiving of her joke.

To tell the truth, Subaru’s combat ability was overwhelmingly inferior to Emilia’s. From Emilia’s point of view, Subaru was the one who should be protected— Of course, she didn’t mean to think of him only as that.

Subaru: “The next specific thing to feel uneasy about would be…”

When Subaru took a breather from his conversation with Emilia, he turned his attention towards the front.

They were already at the Roswaal residence’s front garden, and the preparations to depart were going swimmingly. Beyond Subaru’s line of sight, was a passenger carriage, large enough to carry ten people or thereabouts. The heads of two ground dragons were connected, for the purpose of pulling the dragon carriage. Both were races that were adequate to travel long distances.

The problem would be the situation next to the dragon carriage. There, was a jet-black ground dragon, casually standing still, and a small silhouette that had come face-to-face with the ground dragon’s snout, the latter glaring at the former.

Exhaling a stunned sigh at the situation, Subaru cut in between the two staring at each other.

Subaru: “You’ve been exaggerated as a Witchbeast user, but you can’t even get along with ground dragons?”

Meili: “Come on, onii-san. Can you not misunderstand me? The only animals I can discipline are ones that are bad and have horns. Any other animal won’t like me, as I smell like those children.”

Subaru: “So that’s how it is… Isn’t it rough like that?”

Subaru shrugged his shoulders at Meili’s explanation, and stroked Patrasche’s snout, still glaring at the girl. When Subaru touched this very prideful female ground dragon, it took a blunt sniff of his hand’s stink.

It was as if she was doing this to override the stink of the girl in front of her with Subaru’s own stench.

Subaru: “It’s really unusual to see Patrasche be this blunt, as someone tolerant and good at being considerate… Seems like you’re really incompatible.”

Meili: “I can be kinda friendly with other animals, but that ground dragon is too attached to onii-san. She’s so attached that it feels like if I let my guard down, I will get bitten. Onii-san, if you don’t discipline her properly, I’ll become that animal’s food, so be careful.”

Subaru: “Don’t say such scary things like it’s nothing… Here, Patrasche, go with her.”

Calming down the slightly agitated but very loving dragon, Subaru quickly put Meili on the dragon carriage. Furthermore, this Beastmaster, who would travel along, had little luggage. She was a girl who rarely carried any belongings to start with. But even then, she had brought the stuffed panda Subaru had craft. The childish charm she had was indeed lovely.

???: “Looks like you’re havin’ trouble Natsuki-kun, always tryin’ to put girls in a good mood.”

Subaru: "…If you think so, then it'd make me happy if you didn't bother me."

As Meili was pushed onto the dragon carriage, Anastasia called out to him with a teasing tone. Anastasia—However, inside was the white fox, Echidna.

In the twenty days from Pristella to the mansion, most of the differences had been smoothed out. If she resumed playing the role of Anastasia, it seemed like it would eventually become hard to tell them apart.

Anastasia: "I'd appreciate it if ya wouldn't doubt me like that. Didn't I tell ya that I've got no motivation to do it? That's why I've volunteered to be ya guys' guide for a dangerous path."

Subaru: "That bit too, considering your creator, my stance's that there's a possibility of you having various plans. I've said this many times too, so remember it. It's not like I don't want to believe you. It would make me feel a lot more at ease if I could believe you."

Anastasia: "It is not amusing, being at such a disadvantage because of someone I do not recall. It seems like this creator, of whom I have no recollection, has quite displeased you."

Subaru: "…"

Anastasia: "Don't get so mad at me. Geez, how frightenin'."

When he glared at Eridna, she went back to disguising herself as Anastasia and pursed her lips, returning to her original state. With that, she passed by Subaru and stepped into the dragon carriage. After that, the number of people was—

???: "Subaru-kun, can I speak to yooou~ for a bit as weeell~?"

Having been beckoned verbally, he turned around, witnessing Roswaal at the mansion's entranceway.

Next to the Margrave dressed in a clown outfit, were two people, Emilia and Julius. Thinking about the oddness of the combination, Roswaal turned to the three people as he closed one eye.

Roswaal: “First off, I imagine that this journey will take almost two months. Because of that, I’m thinking that there might be some unforeseen situations along midway. Emilia-sama and Anastasia-sama surely shall be able to deal with each of the problems that arise, buuuut~…”

Emilia: “Mhm, you can count on me. It’s not like I sat around being idle either, after all.”

Roswaal: “Those words are reassuring. I’m honestly pleased with Emilia-sama’s growth… Alright, putting aside the anxieties of the journey as something to be taken care of by each of you, there is one importaaaant~ thing to note—It’s Ram.”

Everyone: “…”

Roswaal said that with a lower voice, and it made Subaru and the others’ expressions changed.

Emilia’s long eyelashes twitched, while Subaru’s cheeks stiffened as if sinking into deep thought. And then Julius, the only person unrelated to the camp at this place, frowned slightly.

Julius: “Regarding what you are saying, is it truly fine if I am present? Mathers-kyo, as Anastasia’s Knight, to discuss the state of camp affairs is… Although I am a mere servant, you should understand that revealing them would not be a good idea.”

Roswaal: “It’s not like I proposed the idea without caring about anything and anyboooody~. Julius Juukulius-dono. After seeing your behavior at your mansion, and the way you behave with Subaru-kun, I have come to understand that you are a reliable person. I would like you to believe that, and so that’s why I am requesting a favor of you.”

Subaru: “This is the shadiest you’ve sounded in a long time, Ros-chi.”

Emilia: “Sorry, I kinda thought so too…”

When Roswaal replied to Julius’s worry with a serious voice, Subaru and Emilia both raised their hands up almost in tandem and teased him.

Even ignoring his past criminal offenses, what Roswaal had stated was too uncharacteristic of himself. He said “It’s not liiike~ that”, perhaps because he himself was aware of how atypical he had been. Sending a wry smile at Subaru and the others’ way, he then continued,

Roswaal: “Weeell~, maybe my lack of persuasion just can’t be helped. Julius-kun is doing everything he can so other camps can find faults… I really do think you do not possess a lowly personality. That’s why I want you to listen too. This is a life-threatening matter, after all.”

Julius: “Life …”

When Julius whispered that with an extremely serious face, Roswaal said “Yes, life”, and nodded.

Roswaal: “As Subaru-kun and Emilia-sama know, Ram’s constitution is just a little special. Her body cannot withstand the talent that was poured onto her. Or perhaps, you could say that her body cannot provide the fuel proper for the flame called talent.”

Subaru: “…You know, I’ve never heard about it in such detail.”

Roswaal: “Is that so? Theeen~, how about her being an Oni?”

Subaru: “Well, that’s…”

Of course, he knew that Ram and Rem were both Onis.

More than twice now, he had been saved by Rem, who could exert her Oni power to her heart’s content by growing her horn. He had also heard from Ram herself about how she lost her horn and was “hornless”.

Therefore, Subaru thought that it really was not something surprising,

Julius: “—An Oni, you say?”

Subaru: “Julius?”

The person who lowered his voice and revealed his astonishment was the person next to him, Julius. On his handsome face, his eyebrows had been lifted, a disturbance visible in his yellow eyes.

Julius: “I have heard that the Oni Clan has been destroyed.”

Roswaal: “About ten years ago, their last settlement was burnt down, and Ram was the last survivor… Sorry, including Rem, the two sisters are the last survivors.”

Subaru: “…”

It was a loaded statement, but Subaru did not butt into the conversation. He was more surprised at how those sisters were part of a rarer species than expected, more than irritated.

Emilia: “Is there a reason as to why the Onis have perished?”

Roswaal: “…Rest assured, Emilia-sama. The downfall of the Onis was inevitable because of natural selection. It was a result of them not going along with the flow of the times and clinging onto old customs. They didn’t lower in numbers because of discrimination and prejudice, consequently being destroyed, assuredly.”

Emilia: “…I see.”

Emilia made an understanding, melancholic look at Roswaal’s explanation.

She too was of a rare birthplace; Emilia was a half-elf. It was natural for her to feel unease and some sympathy for the Oni Clan that had perished, having left the two of them behind.

Subaru: “We get that those two are all the members of the Oni Clan. So what?”

Subaru sensed the conversation starting to stagnate, so he moved the conversation with an intentionally loud voice. When Emilia and Julius lifted their faces in response to that voice, Roswaal touched his chin and spoke, Roswaal: “Putting aside Rem, whose bodily activity has ceased, there is a deficiency in Ram’s body, just like I said earlier. Thiiis~ is because she lost an organ that is important for the Oni Clan. That organ is the horn. Essentially, the enormous amount of Mana that powers her body, which should be supplied by her horn—isn’t readily available, and so her body is constantly plagued by pain and fatigue.”

Emilia: “That’s how it is…?!”

Roswaal: “It’s no wonder that Emilia-same is surprised. That girl is too strong. Not once has that caused her to have a frown on her face, after aaall~.”

In response to Emilia, whose throat had caught, Roswaal shook his head slowly.

Emilia’s shock was shared by Subaru. He was aware that Ram had no horn. From Rem’s words, he also knew that Ram had possessed outstanding abilities before losing her horn.

It was just that, he had not realized that there was a penalty for lacking a horn beyond the decline of ability and that it was eroding her, even now.

Julius: “—I see. I have come to understand Mathers-kyo’s thoughts.”

Then, Julius suddenly spoke, having only heard the conversation until then, and nodded. Roswaal raises his eyebrows and hummed in response to that, and then Subaru and Emilia looked at each other as well.

The flow of the conversation had only them confirming Ram’s constitution. Julius adjusted his bangs in front of Subaru and the others, who were shocked, as if he understood Roswaal’s request.

Julius: “The Oni Clan possess traits like the ability to manipulate an enormous amount of Mana, and possess a strong body boasting quite the fighting strength. The essential thing that supports those two traits is the horn, which no other species possesses—If an Oni’s horn fails to fulfill its role and they suffer for it, there must be a replacement that fulfills the role of a horn.”

Roswaal: “I can only lament not knowing your name, seeing how intelligent you are. Being seen through that much from so little is a gooood feeling.”

Emilia: “Oh, so that’s how it is…”

Roswaal admired Julius for his explanation. Emilia also clapped her hands from achieving understanding. On the hand, Subaru was the one person still perplexed and left behind. When the situation came to magical powers, Subaru was nothing but slow to understand them, as he was an amateur.

Subaru: “Don’t just understand it by yourselves like that. What exactly does this mean?”

Julius: “It is a simple affair. Miss Ram’s body is seeking the same amount of Mana from the outside as it did back when she had a horn. She lost her horn, and as she cannot find the Mana, then someone else is required to provide a means for an external source… That is where we may come in.”

Roswaal: “Although, normally I would take that role and supply her secretly at niiight~.”

Subaru: “…Ah?!”

Inside Subaru, Julius’s lecture and Roswaal’s words allow the cogwheels of his brains to catch.

Every night, he would see Ram rush to Roswaal’s location with excitement. To be honest, Subaru looked away from the vividness of the suspicious relationship between a master and a maid.

After understanding the circumstances, thinking back on it, perhaps this was all there was?

Roswaal: “Something come to your mind, Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “N-No, nothing important. Go ahead and continue.”

Roswaal: “You sure?”

Even though the misunderstanding he had held for over a year had been cleared up, it still was not enough to correct it.

In the first place, Roswaal’s family were a bunch bursting with shadiness, with how they had tried to meet with the Witch Echidna for generations and generations. Roswaal himself was remarkably attached to Echidna, something that was difficult to forget. Upon finding out that he was not cheating on her with Ram, he became even more convinced of his obsession.

Julius: “Though, there is one caveat, Mathers-kyo. Regarding that request, I feel like I am not competent enough to take it up.”

To Subaru’s side, who was having useless thoughts, Julius shook his head apologetically. That action made Roswaal squint his eyes.

Roswaal: “It doesn’t seem that it is not a reason borne of humbleness, or out of a wish to not support people from a different camp… Offering Ram Mana would require Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth attributes. Just from those, you would be more fit for the job than Emilia-sama.”

Julius: “Mathers-kyo, you probably hold these expectations because of these girls around me.”

With that said, Julius loosened his lips with a frail smile. Then, the man who had responded revealed faint lights flying around, six kinds of light being visible.

They were known as the six Quasi Spirits that Julius had contracted with—However, as of right now,

Julius: “About my buds… As of now, their connection with me is gone. Though, if their original titles still remained, I would not have any qualms in accepting a request.”

Roswaal: “Your Contract with the Spirits has been severed from having your Name taken away… huh. That being said, it seems like the Spirits aren’t trying to leeeave~ you.”

Julius: “Perhaps there are remains of the lost connection inside of them. Or perhaps it was bleached over, and the Contract is still there, albeit invisible… Either way, I am only being saved by these buds’ kindness, with how they are not abandoning someone unskilled like myself. There is little left in this body, so I wonder if my poor abilities would be able to help.”

Julius exposed the connection with the Quasi Spirits, and sighed. After that, he looked at Subaru for nary a second. Subaru could not instantly figure out what he wanted with that look, so all he could do was to look troubled.

Julius: “—As of right now, I am merely a devoted Knight. My apologies.”

Roswaal: “I seeee~. That’s too bad. It is serious damage, but…”

Emilia: “It’s fine. If Julius can’t do it, then leave it up to me.”

Roswaal also lowered his tone due to Julius’s sadness, but the person who took his place, puffed up with pride, was Emilia. Energetically moving forward, she brought out her own Micro Spirits around her.

Emilia: “They’re a little different from Julius’s Quasi Spirits, but I can borrow the powers of the Micro Spirits too. The Fire attribute is too strong with just my magic, but if the Micro Spirits can lend me their powers, then I can use magic of different affinities too. How’s that sound?”

Roswaal: “Of course, I had thought of asking not only him but Emilia-sama as well, so there shouldn’t be a problem if you are willing to do it. Hooowever~, I believe there will be extreme trouble at first with stabilizing your magic. For assistance with that, please borrow Beatrice’s abilities for help.”

Subaru: “Beako’s?”

Roswaal: “Beatrice really is excelleeeent~ with magic theory and employing it, wouldn’t you agree? Right now she is connected to Subaru-kun, so I feel like there is some wasted talent, but things are working out despite the lacking magical power, right? In regards to that knowledge, I would like you to refer yourself to Emilia-sama for that."

Subaru: "Don't call it lacking magic. But, I understand."

There was no problem if Ram's burden became lighter through Emilia and Beatrice's cooperation. Subaru had begun to be convinced, but right after he nodded, he cocked his head in puzzlement.

Subaru: "No, wait. If that's the case, then why are you telling me this, instead of saying it directly to Beatrice? I mean, I want to listen too, but it would be logical to tell this to Beako."

Roswaal: "Because if I talk to Beatrice, obviooously~ she will say it's meaningless and refuse. Beatrice is more bitter with me than you think. Perhaps you could tell her to be a bit mooore~ lenient with her criticism towards me?"

Subaru: "Ah, not happening. If I had to say which side I'm on, I would say that I'm completely on Beako's side, after all."

He declined Roswaal's request with ease, who had a pitiful look on his face.

Things were done and that fact could not be changed. It was no trench that would be filled up in just a year, give or take. The times were not so nice that she would simply open her heart with someone who would have had her killed, had the events been a bit different.

Subaru: "Now that I think about it, isn't it a bit troubling how I am doing things with people who've killed me and people who've beaten me up…?"

Emilia: "Ah, Subaru, you've got that look like you're getting carried away with yourself."

Subaru: "Do I really look like that sometimes?!"

Anyhow, he had accepted Roswaal's request.

As for Ram, Emilia and Beatrice would handle her. Emilia was motivated to do it, so there shouldn't be any problem if Subaru talked to Beatrice later.

Roswaal: "I'm counting on you, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "Huh, this really is special. You rarely ever say things like that."

Roswaal: "You are becoming admirable—This is the first time Ram has requested to leave my side, after all."

Subaru: "…"

That was the only thing Roswaal said that didn't give off a joking feeling, instead speaking with seriousness.

Removing his gaze from Subaru's face, he looked up at the blue sky.

Roswaal: "Ram and I have no memory of her younger twin sister. But, I suppose the people involved still hold some feelings. Seeing Ram emotionally going against my opinion like that is chilling—So, I want to ask you guys to talk to her."

Subaru: "…Yeah, I'll remember that."

Even after the incident at Sanctuary that had taken place a year ago, Ram devoted herself to Roswaal. Despite Roswaal saying that anything and everything came second after the one and only thing that was most important, he still held a soft spot for Ram, as someone who had gone to such lengths to devote herself.

If that could be called a change, then by no means was it a bad one.

Or at least, it was far better being human and worrying with unmanageable emotions, than it was burdening friends as an incomprehensible monster.

Roswaal: "—Seems like it's time."

Before he could speak further, Roswaal turned around.

The mansion's door opened behind him, and four girls appeared on the other side. All of them made up for the entirety of the maids of Roswaal's mansion. Seeing them all together was a pretty magnificent view.

That being said, one of the girls was sleeping, and another girl, who looked extremely similar to the sleeping one, had an appearance of having prepared for a journey, so their beauty was slightly lacking.

Frederica: "Master, the preparations for the two are set."

Roswaal: "I appreciate your diligence—Ram, be careful on the trip."

Roswaal replied to Frederica, who had given her report very quietly, and called out to Ram, who was equipped for the journey. Upon hearing that, Ram pinched the edge of her skirt and bowed politely.

Ram: "Roswaal-sama, thank you for granting my selfish request. I will definitely bring back results you deserve."

Roswaal: "I'll be looking forward to it. Although, make sure you don't do anything unreasonaaable~. Also, make sure the two of them, Emilia-sama and Subaru-kun, don't do anything unreasonable either. That is also part of your role as well, after aaaall~."

Ram: "I am fully aware of that."

He wanted to retort to those words, but Ram's glare silenced him. Subaru gave in to that look, and looked at the short figure next to Ram.

There, was Rem. She was in clothes suitable for the trip, and was now being carried in a wheelchair driven by Petra—Subaru had relied on his memory to replicate something from his original work.

A model of the wheelchair already existed in this world, but quite an amount of work had been put into remodeling it; it possessed caster-like front wheels that wouldn't pose a hindrance when changing directions, along with a scaffold and a modified seat. Of course, seat belts and cushions to protect her head had been implemented as well.

It was a one-of-a-kind wheelchair that Subaru had had Roswaal produce by spending Subaru's own salary.

Subaru: "I'm worried about the maintenance when we get far, but…"

Frederica: "Subaru-sama is clever, and the materials are what they are, so I believe it could handle being used for two months. Of course, please do not do anything unreasonable."

Petra: "Please be careful, Subaru…-sama."

Receiving Frederica's endorsement, he took over the wheelchair's handle from Petra. Accepting it, and going behind Rem, he felt a lot more ease this way compared to carrying her on his back.

This was because the road was pavement. It wouldn't be effective in the desert, on grass, or on gravel.

Subaru: "Yoshi, looks like it'll work. Petra, Frederica, you guys take care too."

Frederica: "Please leave the Master to us."

Petra: "We'll be taking care of Otto-san and Garfiel-san too."

Petra and Frederica replied to Subaru accompanied with a nod while he moved the wheelchair.

Even if the trip were to take a couple of months, Otto and the others at Pristella would probably be healed up, and so they should be coming back to the Roswaal residence.

He left that up to the maids, who would take care of stuff while they were gone. Subaru pushed the wheelchair and turned towards the dragon carriage.

Subaru: "Alright then, it's a shame, but I guess we should depart now."

Ram: "Why must Barusu boss people around? Don't get so full of yourself."

Subaru: “I’m not bossing you around, though. How about you take over then?”

Ram: “Does Ram appear to have such ill manners to you? Ram would appreciate it if you don’t make her behave like that, as a maid who needs to be graceful and considerate.”

Subaru: “What’s up with you? Are you at that age where you can do nothing but complain?”

Ram: “It is not the case. It’s just that…”

Then, she cut off her sentence, and Ram threw a meaningful look at Subaru’s hand. As of right now, Subaru was pushing Rem’s wheelchair. He guessed the meaning of that look, and let out a deep sigh.

Subaru: “If you want to switch places, then just say so…”

Ram: “Given the meaning and purpose of Ram coming along, it is only natural to give that up to me… As for guessing what Ram wanted without having her put it into words, you are now seen in a better light.”

With Subaru reluctantly giving up his position, Ram took his place and pushed the wheelchair. She showed care for her sleeping sister sitting on the wheelchair as it slowly headed forward toward the dragon carriage.

Subaru opened and closed his hand for no reason as saw their backs take off. Then, a small hand gently grabbed his own from the side.

Subaru: “Oh, it’s Beako.”

Beatrice: “You don’t have to make a pathetic look like that, it’s not that you have to worry because your feelings for that girl are weaker than the feelings her sister has, so you don’t have to worry, in fact. Subaru should just be himself, and do what he can do, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That’s not quite… Or well, that’s how it is?”

It wasn’t as if he felt like his role had been taken away from him, but looking from the outside, perhaps the look on his face could be understand in such a manner.

Subaru touched his cheek with his free hand, pulled on it, and pinched it. Then, this time his hand was snatched away by a different white hand.

Emilia: “Yeah, yeah, I’ll take that hand.”

Subaru: “Oh, Emilia-tan…”

Beatrice: “After that girl wakes up, we’ll have to see what Subaru will do with both his hands taken, in fact.”

Emilia: “Ah, I might be interested in that too.”

Subaru had been caught in between Emilia and Beatrice, looking at them with embarrassment. However, he was only returned with two things, a serious look and an anticipating look. To make matters worse, Petra’s own gaze was piercing him from behind, and even Ram was throwing him a cold, scornful look, having turned around in front of the dragon carriage.

He was being unbelievably surrounded on all sides—Then, Julius let out a “Hmm” accompanied with a nod, while witnessing that. In response to that craving for a reaction, Subaru’s lips slanted grandly.

Subaru: “What is it? If you have something to say, say it. Go ahead!”

Julius: “Really? Alright then, I shall say merely one thing—You really could not be more blessed as a man, being surrounded by beautiful girls like that. I cannot help but feel a lot of doubt on whether your hands are able to satisfy all of those flowers.”

Subaru: “What’s this, I’m being blamed?! Did I do something wrong?!”

Julius shrugged his shoulders with a shocked face, as the pathetic shout Subaru replied him with soared towards the heavens.

Unfortunately for him, at this place were neither the Internal Affairs Minister nor the Head Military Officer to follow up on his statement.

Subaru had no choice but to fight alone in this upcoming two-month journey.

Understanding that reality, he felt the trust and the deep affection of the warmth being transmitted into his hands fill up his chest. He felt anxiety in his chest about not falling behind. That was the type of morning it was, the one they had departed on.

Chapter 6:
The Juukulius Inscription

The journey had begun with a morning filled with unease, and the journey, which had lasted for about a month, had been long. However, no significant accidents happened along the way.

They went straight along the main road towards the east. It was a boring journey, in which nothing had happened.

Subaru: “It was like that with the round trip to Pristella, and it was like that with the Lifaus Plains… But Kingdom of Lugunica’s pretty safe when on the road, eh?”

Julius: “Maintaining the roads and patrolling them to maintain the public order is essential to protect the Kingdom’s peace. Lugunica is particularly thorough with such aspects, even when compared to other countries. There should be low rates of damage from groups of bandits and Witchbeasts.”

Subaru: “Are you saying other countries aren’t like that?”

Julius: “In the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, being always covered in ice and snow, it is impossible to properly maintain the roads in the first place. The roads are deep in the snow that was there from the start. As for the Vollachian Empire and the Kararagi City States, there are many people of all sorts of different races and customs. Such cultural differences may lead to quarrels. In that sense, it may be hard to say that public order is kept there.”

Subaru: “I see.”

As Subaru and Julius had their conversation, the two ground dragons’ were running energetically, their heads side-by-side as they cut through the wind.

Subaru’s Patrasche and Julius’ blue cavalry dragon were leading them ahead, the two pulling the large dragon carriage.

Everyone in the dragon carriage would be late to react to the occasion of emergencies. That was the arrangement they had, but as was noticeable from the conversation they were having out of boredom, the journey was peaceful.

Subaru: “Ahh…”

Julius: “Subaru.”

On top of the journey being boring, with how the scenery wasn’t changing, he started to yawn. Subaru put his hand on his mouth and became full of drowsiness, as Julius gave him a blaming look.

While entrusting his weight to his beloved dragon, he quickly lifted his bangs that were kept from swaying through the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion.

Julius: “I understand that you want to get rid of this feeling of tension, but the moments you loosen your stiffness are the most dangerous ones. I am not saying that you are allowing your mind to wander off, to act in a way that anyone witnessing would perceive as lazy is unacceptable.”

Subaru: “Just how much are you gonna say just because of one yawn? Even you at least yawn too. Right?”

Julius: “Of course I have those kind of bodily functions. But, if you possess the self-consciousness of a Knight, then it should be possible to hold it in when in front of other people, you know? That is what you still lack.”

Subaru: “Yeah, yeah.”

He was pressing for a reaction with piercingly sarcastic force, but Subaru was already becoming a master of parrying it. It was already nearing twenty days in this journey accompanied by Julius. From Pristella to the mansion, and now on their way to the Augria Sand Dunes, they had been making the ground dragons run side-by-side. And so, he had learned how to deal with him.

Julius: “I thought it was a part of manners to look at the person you are talking with when having a serious conversation?”

Subaru: “The person is looking away during the serious conversation because he hadn’t asked to have said conversation. You should take it easy too. You’re straining yourself too much.”

Julius: “You and I are on watchout duty, that is why…”

Subaru: “You don’t have to be so nervous; they won’t attack us just like that. If anyone tries to jump us, they’re not gonna do it in the middle of nowhere.”

Julius: “…”

Subaru interrupted him, speaking as he cracked his head. Julius blinked his eyes, as if Subaru had said something unexpected. After that, this handsome man let out a small sigh.

Julius: “Is it clear that I am impatient right now, in your eyes?”

Subaru: “Yeah, I have a feeling it’s a shot in the dark, though. But, I feel like everyone thinks you’re straining yourself. More than usu… Actually, you might just be acting like your usual self…”

Julius: “As of right now, you are the only person who knows that I am being my usual self, after all.”

Subaru: “…Yeah.”

When Julius’s lowered his tone, Subaru also naturally dropped his.

They couldn’t hear the girls’ conversations back in the dragon carriage, so the girls should not be able to hear their conversation either.

It was a complicated relationship between two men, but as of right now, they were working together. Perhaps this was a time when they should speak a little more frankly.

Subaru: “It’s been talked about with Roswaal before, but how are your Quasi Spirits?”

Julius: “It is as I have stated previously. The buds are gathered around me, but they will not rest their feathers on the arm I hold out as a perch. It seems my words do not reach them either."

Julius raised his arm in response to Subaru's question, and the Quasi Spirits came into view.

The six Quasi Spirits shining faintly still remained floating around Julius, as he made the ground dragons run. However, they flickered on the hand he had held out as if in confusion, and attempted to move away.

Indeed, it seemed that the bond between Julius and his Quasi Spirits had been severed.

Subaru: "Can you not contract them yet again? You're attracting them somehow, so doesn't that mean your Divine Protection is working?"

Julius: "It seems like my Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits is still going strong. And in turn, it contributes to these girls' incomprehensible awareness. It is like certain large, incomprehensible, unmanageable emotions are present."

Subaru: "Not sure if I should say it like this, but how about taking measures through other Spirits?"

Julius: "I would have considered that idea, were I a Spiritual Arts User that could borrow the powers of Micro Spirits present everywhere, much in the vein of Emilia-sama… But I cannot bring out the Spirits' utmost abilities in such a way. I needed a few years to bind with these buds too, after all."

Subaru: "…Well, it is true that Emilia-tan can't bring out Puck's average power from other Spirits too. I guess becoming aikata with a Spirit is a special thing after all."

Julius: "Emilia-sama and the Great Spirit. And like you and Beatrice-sama."

It was rough. As a fellow Spiritual Arts User, Subaru was unable to say something like "Go find the next Spirits" right away. It would be like asking him to let go of Beatrice even after their bond had been cut off. Of course, he would raise his middle finger and refuse as a response. As for Julius, his relationship with the six Quasi Spirits was the exact same thing.

Julius: “Therefore, as of right now, I can only use swordsmanship to fulfill my duties as a Knight. Of course, I do not believe the sword inferior to the Spiritual Arts, but it is true that my abilities make it insufficient.”

Subaru: “This is also a journey to get that back, and with your sword skills you saying that is mere sarcasm. And if it’s me who you’re fighting against, it’s even more sarcastic.”

As Julius had mentioned, there was his insufficient ability aside the Spiritual Arts.

A year ago, at the Royal Capital’s Training Ground, that ability had been the one that had ravaged Subaru. Subaru did become better compared to back then, but it did not feel like the distance had been fully covered. From Julius’s point of view, fighting Subaru at that time was like taking candy from a baby. The current Subaru was as difficult as dealing with a five-year-old. That was just about how different they were.

Subaru: “Reinhard is also like that, you guys have a bad habit of underestimating yourselves. Too much humility turns into poison! I think that type of words is used everywhere.”

Julius: “I want to return the same phrase to you, but hmm—You and I aside, Reinhard most likely is not being humble or underestimating of himself.”

Subaru: “Not being humble or underestimating…?”

That instant, he imagined the redhead hero, but he cocked his head at the difference in his perception of the man.

He had never thought that he would run into differing opinions on Reinhard, because from anyone’s perspective, he was the strongest, completely peerless, a superman.

In response to Subaru’s doubt, Julius spoke a “No”, shaking his head.

Julius: “In regards to Reinhard’s true strength, you and I both rate it highly. Most likely, everyone who is aware of him shares the same sentiment. They all think that that he is the peak of humans, or that perhaps that he transcends humans.”

Subaru: “It’s amazing how that isn’t an overstatement.”

Julius: “Not only his real ability, but his way of being has likewise been perfected. I first met him when I was around ten years old… But it has never changed.”

Subaru: “Ever since you were ten? Are you for real?”

As he gripped onto Patrasche’s bridle, Subaru was astonished by Julius’s recollections.

Just when had Reinhard become the person he was now? He thought it was quite the philosophical question, but at the very least, it seemed that the version of himself from about a decade ago had been completed.

Which meant, that boy had carried a very heroic fate on his shoulders.

Subaru: “Reinhard has been the Sword Saint since then?”

Julius: “He was five years of age when the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint was inherited by him. The previous Sword Saint was Thearesia van Astrea-sama… Reinhard’s grandmother. She passed away in the Great Subjugation fifteen years ago, and the Divine Protection was transferred to him.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I was aware of that.”

The previous Sword Saint, who had perished in battle with the White Whale, yet still was humiliated after death. Reinhard’s grandmother, Wilhelm’s wife, but this time, at Pristella, the soul of that woman finally returned to the heavens.

However, fifteen years ago, Reinhard had inherited that Divine Protection.

Subaru: “How does he feel…”

Julius: “Hm?”

Subaru: “He received his grandmother’s Divine Protection at the age of five, and to make matters worse, he is descended from the blood of a legendary hero? I can’t imagine how he feels.”

—Subaru somewhat understood the weight of holding up to parental expectations.

Subaru could empathize with the the pain of being crushed by the weight of the expectations of those surrounding him.

Of course, the weight and the responsibilities Subaru and Reinhard carried were extremely different, so comparing himself to Reinhard may have been rude in itself.

Subaru: “I honestly am so weak. I’m so weak that I’m always frustrated because I’m weak and not good enough, there’s not a night that goes by without me wishing to be strong enough to hold my own.”

Julius: “I feel like that’s pretty groundless.”

Subaru: “Shut up.”

In the middle of his important speech, Subaru was made fun of, causing him to click his tongue.

Subaru: “Anyhow, I personally feel his worries despite being on the polar opposite. I don’t think Reinhard is the same as he was when he was five, but I do wonder how he felt back then.”

Julius: “As you would expect, I also do not know what he felt back in those days. But…”

Cutting off his words, Julius then lifted his face. Gripping tightly onto the bridle, looking in front of him, Julius squinted at the sunlight that bathed him in a daze.

Julius: “—The time I first saw Reinhard was the big turning point for me.”

Somewhere from those words, pride was oozing out. Julius was squinting from the sunlight, but perhaps he may have not been squinting because of the sun.

Perhaps, back then, he had gazed at Reinhard in the same way.

Subaru: “Which means that you and Reinhard have known each other for about a decade, I guess. I do think that barely satisfies the requirements for you guys to be childhood friends, but is that right?”

Julius: “No? Yes, that was when I became aware of Reinhard, but he only found out about me long after… When I was appointed as a Royal Guard. That happened when I was sixteen, so I have known him personally for six years.”

Subaru: “…That’s a very big empty period of time, isn’t it?”

Julius: “At the time, I was not qualified enough to stand alongside someone who had just taken over as the Sword Saint. The fact that he was younger than me too was a painful reminder, and that was my beginning.”

Julius said his words quietly, while his tone of voice was passionate on the contrary.

In response to the distant look his yellow eyes contained, Subaru nodded at that one word, “beginning”.

Despite the vague wording, that day was probably vivid within Julius. If that was Julius’s beginning, then it was a given for it to be clear in his memory.

Subaru’s memory of his own beginning was hot in his chest, seared into his soul.

The time he was saved by Emilia in a different world, the time Rem supported his back about to collapse, the time he took Beatrice’s hand amidst the flames, all those times, to Subaru, were “beginning”.

Subaru: “When you say that was your beginning, does that mean you were surprisingly naughty as a kid? Like debauched aristocrat or a son of loose morals.”

He went against the flow of emotions in the other person’s affair, and spoke with an intentionally teasing voice.

There was no way that was Julius’s case, but upon first meeting him, he really did think that the latter was a young gaudy noble. And if it were to be a story, it was seemingly a given that this young noble had lived a haughty life in his boyhood.

With those feelings in mind, Subaru changed the topic to alter the flow of the conversation, which made Julius suddenly loosen his lips,

Julius: “I would prefer if you changed the way you express it. Just a little… but there are parts that I cannot deny.”

Subaru: “Seriously?! You really were a gaudy noble?! Did you kick commoners from the top of a horse, and persistently pressure servants by bullying them?!”

Julius: “I cannot help but wonder as to why you are expressing such glee.”

Julius sent a cold look at Subaru, who got excited. After that, Julius peeked behind himself.

Perhaps he was concerned about not only the dragon carriage, but the girls in it as well. Of course, to go to such lengths to confirm that they were uncapable of hearing their conversation was unnecessary, but it was a matter of him feeling like doing it.

Julius: “How much do you know about the Juukulius Family?”

Subaru: “Nothing at all.”

Julius: “You answered so immediately that it seems you feel pleased about it.”

He really did have zero background knowledge.

Subaru threw out his chest, dexterously on top of the dragon, and Julius displayed a strained smile. After that, he felt his Knight's sword on his waist. Perhaps it was handed down through Julius's family. From his face, it was plain for all to say that he felt some trepidation about having the qualifications to wield it himself at this time.

Julius: "—I am not the original heir of the Juukulius Family."

Subaru: "…"

Julius: "To put it more accurately, I should say that I am not the official heir. Alviero Juukulius is the current Head of the House of Juukulius. My father, Klein Juukulius, was his younger brother. As he has already passed away, I have been adopted by the Family Head."

Subaru did not respond to those words, as they had been more surprising than expected.

It was difficult to say how much the structure of this world's noble society meshed with Subaru's knowledge of the society he knew, but Julius's position definitely was complicated.

Also, in that case, then what was the position of his younger brother, Joshua Juukulius? That young man, who adored his older brother Julius, was now lost from the memories of the world.

Julius: "I do not know what is the actual natural of the relationship I have with Joshua, left back at Pristella. Is he my own younger brother that has inherited the blood of my real father, Klein Juukulius? Or is he a true, legitimate child that inherited the blood of my foster father, Alviero Juukulius?"

Subaru: "…What's the difference?"

Julius: "«Siblings» is merely a figure of speech, so perhaps our relationship would essentially be cousins. In that case, the position of Head of the House of Juukulius would be inherited by Joshua Juukulius, most likely."

Subaru: "…"

Julius had delivered those words in a flat manner, and just from that, he was convinced of their veracity.

Even though this pertained to himself, this conversation was complex because Julius himself was unaware of his position. If Julius and Joshua were real siblings, then Julius would be the one in succession for the House of Juukulius. However, if Julius and Joshua were not blood brothers, then it would be correct to say that Joshua would be the one in succession for the House of Juukulius.

And then Julius did not know how to confirm that; Joshua's existence had been wiped from the world, and Julius had lost his memories of his brother. For that reason, he was cognizant of where he stood.

Julius: "It is somewhat unavoidable, but when I think about it, my position has become very complicated. Not knowing about your own tomorrow is not very appealing, although as of now, I should worry more about myself being unable to ground myself, than I should about the House of Juukulius's leadership."

Subaru: "…"

Julius said that in a seemingly joking way, perhaps because Subaru had received a surprising shock.

Subaru's mouth was dry, grinding his teeth while feeling irritation in his stomach. He was ridiculously worried about Julius, with how he was right now.

Julius: "Because of my upbringing, at the time, I was unconfident. My foster father led me to the Royal Castle, and that was when I showed the poor etiquette I had been taught just as we were about to depart. There, I laid my eyes on Reinhard, who was an eight-year-old—That's all there is to it."

Albeit forcefully, Julius chose to end the conversation.

There was no courage to deliver a retort or even some sort of clever remark. Subaru saw Julius look ahead in a lonesome way, and he stopped biting his molars.

And then, what came out right away was a question.

Subaru: “Why’d you suddenly feel like telling that to me?”

Julius: “I believe you were the one who enquired. Perhaps I was mistaken?”

Subaru: “No, that’s true and all… that’s my bad, but that’s not where I’m getting at. Isn’t it weird for you to have this kind of talk with me?”

Julius: “No, it is not. This affair was common knowledge for Reinhard and Ferris… For people among the Royal Guards. Of course, Anastasia-sama also knows too. It’s nothing special.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru did not understand one bit, as his face turned into a frown.

Even if he said that it was something everyone was aware of, that did not mean it was something he could spread around. After all, those words sounded unnatural.

Perhaps Julius understood Subaru’s discontent from his frown. He pulled onto the bridle, and quickened the beloved dragon’s pace just a bit.

Julius: “Yes, it is something everyone is aware of—So that was why I might have wished for you to know about it just now. You, the person who remembers the most about me in this world, right now.”

The blue ground dragon accelerated while swinging its tail, and Julius’s expression could no longer be seen.

That being said, he was not going so fast as to leave him behind in the dirt. It was his way of smugly declaring the end of the conversation, as usual, simple as that.

???: “…”

Subaru: “Hmm, it’s fine. Thanks for the concern, Patrasche.”

The running jet-black ground dragon had raised her head, glancing at Subaru. In response to her gesture, which said “Shall we rival the ground dragon ahead?”, Subaru showed his thanks and petted the head of that lady.

Subaru: “…That was uncharacteristic of me.”

Those small, sullen words poured out from his mouth.

Was he becoming weak? Or perhaps, was he putting on airs as a protagonist of a tragedy?

As a matter of fact, “irritating” was the only word his feelings could be expressed.

Subaru: “Ahh, dammit. Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot…”

Subaru scratched his head, and he released his irritation only from his mouth.

In the end, he had not found any accurate response to what Julius had spoken this time.

And he would have no accurate response until they had just reached the Augria Sand Dunes.

Said answer would not come, even after the party had arrived at the town of Mirula, the nearest one to the Sand Dunes.

Chapter 7:
Aim for the Desert

1

The town nearest to the Augria Sand Dunes, Mirula, truly was a deserted inn town.

The town was of a reasonable size, but of course, it paled considerably when compared to places such as the Watergate City of Pristella, Industrial City of Costuul, and the Royal Capital of Lugunica.

The roads that stretched all throughout the Kingdom were well-kept. It had been steady trip on the dragon carriage all the way to Mirula, but that final destination of the east end was as lacking as it could've been.

Emilia: "But perhaps that just can't be helped. Looking at the map, from here on out towards the there's only the Augria Sand Dunes… and the Kingdom's biggest forest to the south, right? We're far away from the five major cities, and we can also see that there isn't much pedestrian traffic."

Emilia let out that impression while looking around the town, walking besides Subaru.

She was wearing a white robe that covered her head, her beautiful silver hair and face concealed. A beautiful girl like Emilia appearing at a rural area would be a blow to the townspeople's sense of beauty—that was Subaru joking, but she did also have a position of high standing. That was why she showed slight consideration to avoid any trouble, not just for her appearance, but for her identity as well.

That being said, those weren't the only reasons as to why her head and her mouth were hidden by cloth. The other reason to conceal oneself, other than her identity, was Mirula's renowned disaster, the Sand Wind.

Subaru: “It can’t expand to the east nor south, and on top of that, there’s always this Sand Wind. That’s rough.”

Emilia stood downwind, while Subaru stood upwind to act as a slight resistance to the wind while he pulled up the cloth he wrapped around his face, murmuring those words while covering his mouth. Whenever he moved his tongue, he would feel sand rubbing between his teeth, and it made him feel quite sick.

This sandy wind came flowing into the town, as if blowing down from the sand dunes to the east. It seemed that the Sand Wind would blow against the town continuously on days of strong wind, and for that reason it was imperative to wear sand-protecting fashion like this, just for the purpose of walking through town.

Emilia: “—? Subaru, what’s wrong?”

Subaru: “It’s nothing. I was just thinking about how this turned out different than what I had imagined when I heard it was a desert.”

Emilia tilted her head at Subaru, glancing at him sideways.

Her bare body was concealed to the utmost limit, covered from head-to-toe in a cloak. Subaru’s thoughts were basically that beautiful girls should please the eyes of the people around them with various outfits. However, they couldn’t be eye candy with outfits of such high defense.

Speaking of the desert, that dancer-like outfit to protect against the sunlight—what was it called?

Subaru: “Nevertheless, perhaps we should’ve listened to the innkeeper’s advice.”

Emilia: “It’s Sand Time right now, right? There’s no one in the streets, after all.”

The wind wasn’t very strong, but perhaps because it was light, a small dust cloud had formed. In this yellow, hazy field of vision, nobody besides Subaru and Emilia could be seen in streets of this town.

The townspeople, completely accustomed to this environment, would shut themselves inside during Sand Time, that was, when the Sand Wind blew, and even the gaps in the doors and windows of the buildings would be sealed.

In truth, within the Sand Wind, not only being able to see but being able to breathe too took considerable effort. It was so bad that the innkeeper had stopped them, saying that they shouldn't go out during Sand Time.

However, there was a reason as to why they had disregarded the innkeeper who had halted them, and went outside anyway.

Subaru: "This is how it is in the town. The Sand Wind at the sand dunes isn't like this, right?"

Emilia: "…Mhm, I think so."

It wasn't a dry run per say, but they had purposely gone outside during Sand Time to prepare themselves mentally.

Outside of Sand Time, the circumstances of the sand dunes, which had Sand Wind blowing and sand spread in every direction, were not ideal for travel. They were distant from the sand dunes, and they couldn't see well in this town dense with buildings.

They had to prepare themselves at once for the severeness of the sand dunes' path.

Emilia: "Anyways, how about we enter a shop somewhere? Since Subaru and I will turn into blocks of sand at this rate."

What Emilia pointed towards while swiping away the sand that clung onto her, a the building at the other side of the road. A place that appeared to be a bar or something of sort, it seemed to be a temporary refuge shelter. It felt like the other stores were refusing visitors, but the entrance to this one was open, at the very least.

They hurried over to that building just like Emilia had suggested. They removed as much dirt as they could from the door, and after that, they slowly entered the bar.

???: “…Welcome, you from the Sand Wind.”

Upon entering the bar, the shopkeeper at the other side of the counter who was polishing a glass looked at them, and greeted them with a low voice. He sounded unwelcoming with his low voice, probably because, with a single glance, he had noticed that Subaru and Emilia were smeared with sand.

They did remove as much sand off themselves as they could, but there was still a huge amount sticking onto them. Although they did feel bad about it, they scattered the sand and set foot into the store.

Shopkeeper: “What would you like to order?”

Emilia & Subaru: “Cold milk.” / “Hot milk.”

Shopkeeper: “…”

In response to the two people who sat down at the counter and said their orders, the shopkeeper squinted his eyes but remained silent. Incidentally, Subaru had ordered cold milk, while Emilia had ordered hot milk.

Subaru: “Doesn’t feel very prospering… Is business terrible during the Sand Time?”

Subaru took off the hood he covered himself with, and asked a question of the shopkeeper while tasting the milk he had been brought. The unsociable shopkeeper responded with an “Ahh”, before continuing,

Shopkeeper: “Even at the best of times, very few outsiders come and go, at this town. Running a shop during sunrise is just like a hobby.”

Subaru: “I see. Then as outsiders and customers we must be regulars, eh?”

Shopkeeper: “You can’t just go to a bar, ask for milk and act all proud. Here, this is yours, Miss.”

Emilia: “Oh, thanks.”

The shopkeeper held out the hot milk to her. Emilia grabbed onto the ceramic and took a breath. Subaru bent forward onto the counter, gazing at the girl blowing on the milk.

Subaru: “There’s no other customers, so do you have a little free time now right? Mind hearing me out for a bit?”

Shopkeeper: “Even if I did, it’s taboo to start talking to someone in the middle of working while, saying that they have time… What would you outsiders like to know?”

Subaru: “I’d like to know about the Augria Sand Dunes.”

With his finger raised, Subaru thrusted an enquiry to the shopkeeper. Once he had heard it however, the shopkeeper had his expression collapse for the first time.

The rough shopkeeper with short gray hair squinted the eyes under his dark eyebrows in suspicion. After that, he sized up Subaru and Emilia and let out a slight sigh.

Shopkeeper: “I don’t know what kind of joke this is, but don’t bother going if you’re gonna treat it like a picnic. You’ll just end up dying.”

Subaru: “Hey hey, what are you saying? Do we really look like we’re fooling around to you?”

Shopkeeper: “What else did my warning just now seem to you? That place is a sand sea of death , everyone who goes there never comes back, and dies. It’s not a place to have a date with a woman.”

Subaru: “I certainly do think that the suspension bridge effect is a valid approach, but I’m not that cornered. Emilia-tan, you tell him too.”

Emilia: “Fuu~ fuu~, hothot… Eh? What was that? Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

Subaru: “Behold, the ways of EMT.”

Shopkeeper: “I’m gonna give you some useful advice. Go home before you die.”

Witnessing Subaru and Emilia’s interactions, the faith the shopkeeper had in the two got worse and worse.

That being said, it was not like the shopkeeper was saying this out of spite. He actually did know about the danger of the Augria Sand Dunes from its reputation. However—

Subaru: “We don’t have the option to retreat. We only have the path to move forward and on top of that, the only thing we can do is pick the safest path possible. You understand, right?”

Shopkeeper: “You’re the ones who don’t understand. Listen up. Those sand dunes are hopeless. The Witch’s Miasma drifts about in the Witchbeast Den, and you can’t get close to that tower you see faraway.”

The shopkeeper began speaking of the threats of the Sand Dunes, while Subaru’s persistent behavior began to irritate him. Pointing at the window that was closed to prevent the sand from coming in, towards the east side of the town, he curled his lips.

Shopkeeper: “Every year there are people like you guys who make a reckless attempt at the sand dunes. They aim for the Sage’s tower at the sand sea… but no one has ever reached it. They’d be lucky to come back alive, but the majority either end up drying up at the sand sea, or they become Witchbeast food.”

Subaru: “Has no one really reached it before?”

Shopkeeper: “I believe the sand sea’s tower was built hundreds of years ago. The number of idiots that have tried to go there hasn’t decreased. If a person did reach it, there’d be no way they wouldn’t come forward and boast of it. Don’t you know? That even the Sword Saint failed that achievement.”

Subaru: “…”

Even Reinhard had failed the challenge to conquer the Pleiades Watchtower. Reinhard himself had conveyed him that tale, and he had also mentioned the abnormally high difficulty of conquering the Watchtower.

But even then, the people who had to overcome it were Subaru's current group.

Subaru: "Of course, we won't do something stupid like tackling it without any plans. That's why we're gathering information. Doing that in a bar is a basic step, don't you think?"

Shopkeeper: "Is it really? Why do it at a place where you drink alcohol?"

Subaru: "If you ask me to explain in detail, I probably can't, but isn't it because everyone gets talkative after drinking alcohol, and then they'll end up pouring out various rumors?"

Shopkeeper: "So basically, you're looking for drunken ramblings. It's unacceptable to go in there without any plans, but leaning towards stupid plans is bad too."

Subaru: "Guehh! Your sound argument is piercing!"

Subaru got knocked down head-on by the truth and promptly sunk as he ingested his milk.

Usually whenever Subaru talked with proper adults, his normal conversational pace would be overwhelmed. The shopkeeper also was used to talking to people like Subaru, with the goal of challenging the sand dunes recklessly. As a matter of fact, it wasn't as if Subaru's challenging of the sand dunes was reckless, but the shopkeeper did not know the reality of the situation, and as such, he would be treated the same way.

At this rate, they would end up returning without gaining a single clue and—

Shopkeeper: "Anyways, for you to even bring a girl to a hell like that is…"

Emilia: "Sorry, Shopkeeper-san. You've been showing care for us, and yet Subaru is doing nothing but complaining."

Just when Subaru was about to give in to the stalemate, Emilia stopped the shopkeeper, his sermon about to begin. The shopkeeper widened his eyes at Emilia's words that had been prefaced with an apology.

With the shopkeeper like that, Emilia quickly bowed her head.

Emilia: "Thank you for all the help you've given us, even though we aren't even acquaintances."

Shopkeeper: "I'm sorry too for nagging. However, I don't think I've said anything wrong. I come across youngsters like you constantly."

Emilia: "Are there really that many people that have tried to see the Sage?"

Shopkeeper: "Well, there's really not that many people with will strong enough to meet the Sage. The majority of people trying to conquer the Augria Sand Dunes just want the honor. Sure, there are people who say they'll obtain wisdom from the Sage given that things go well, but the idea that they'll get a reward if they make it to tower is a bit of a stretch."

The shopkeeper dropped his shoulders and sighed with what you could call a fed-up look.

Just like he had stated, he had probably seen off many people who had gone to challenge Pleiades Watchtower. Perhaps he looked kind-hearted even with how his face looked, something that brought him shame.

Emilia: "Does that also mean that people haven't met the Sage…?"

Shopkeeper: "Never heard of anyone getting that far. According to rumors, the Sage is still watching for anything below, in the dunes, from the top of the tower, punishing insolent people… But it's not like I've witnessed it. I can't help thinking that the sand dunes themselves are a bait, a trap for hunting prey."

Emilia: "You mentioned the Witch's Miasma. What is that?"

Shopkeeper: "It's as I said. There is a Witchbeast Den … All over the

Kingdom, you’ve got all shapes and sizes of Witchbeasts. But, those sand dunes are a special case with all sorts of beasts.”

The shopkeeper quietened his voice, yet he was talkative, perhaps getting carried away with the fun.

When Emilia gulped and nodded, the shopkeeper’s gaze turned distant.

Shopkeeper: “Spotted Rex and Blackwinged Mice have their charm. Unicorns and Sand Earthworms are endemic species, only seen here. Also, if you find a flower garden on the sandy soil, that’s a Courtesan Bear’s hunting place. Think of it as a nightmare.”

Emilia: “Courtesan Bear…”

Shopkeeper: “It seems that they’re only found at Kararagi. They’re Witchbeasts that have bloomed flowers all throughout their body. Once you are fooled by their appearance and approach them, they’ll slurp on your guts.”

Subaru: “As expected, Witchbeasts sure are… nasty…”

Who was it that had informed him that Witchbeasts had the purpose of killing humans?

The shopkeeper snorted his nose at Subaru, the latter frowning while listening attentively, as if saying “Told you so”.

Shopkeeper: “But the danger you must watch out for the most, even more than the Witchbeasts, is the Miasma. Yes, there are dangers like the Sand Wind and the changes in environment, but your biggest concern should be the Miasma.”

Subaru: “That Miasma doesn’t seem makes sense to me.”

Subaru titled his head towards the shopkeeper, who had lost his voice again.

Subaru heard the word “Miasma” many times before, and he could even imagine what it was like based off the impression the word gave off. Basically, it was bad air, which had bad effects on mind and body alike.

He felt like it was different from a noxious gas, but perhaps it was something akin to it.

Emilia: “Hmmm, Subaru. If described, Miasma is sort of like Mana that was polluted by bad things. You can’t see it, but it’s something that’s everywhere, don’t you know?”

Subaru: “Eh, so Mana is Miasma?”

He was surprised at what Emilia had pointed out. The explanation was easy to understand, but the implications were a bit different from what Subaru had imagined.

Mana truly did influence magic users and Spirits alike to an extreme degree. However, he’d thought that it would not pose much of an issue for just existing, or moving about atop a dragon.

But, as if she could see through Subaru’s disappointed inner thought, Emilia slowly shook her head.

Emilia: “You can’t take Miasma lightly. Normal Mana is something that’s pure, has no color and no directivity. But Miasma… Mana that has been polluted by bad things can be absorbed via the Gate, and can corrupt creatures from the insude. Considering how gate is an organ that naturally takes in Mana, that’s something that can’t be avoided.”

Subaru: “Can’t have your breathing stop for good, after all.”

Shopkeeper: “The lady’s interpretation is correct, but the Miasma drifting about at the Augria Sand Dunes is even worse—The Miasma over there ruins not only living being, but also food and.”

Subaru: “You mean food becomes inedible?”

Shopkeeper: “I mean that once you eat it, the Miasma’s pollution will progress fast. You’ll go crazy just from taking even a little bit of it through your Gate. Try taking it in directly through your stomach. The pollution will swallow you whole.”

Subaru: “What happens then? It won’t stop just because I’ve gone insane?”

Shopkeeper: “People commonly say that you’ll die from madness. To tell you the truth… Well, I can’t deny it.”

The shopkeeper spoke succinctly, shaking his head. His complexion was terrible.

He had probably seen it before, although he was not relating it directly. He had seen people’s last moments, being violated by the Miasma and going crazy as a result, arriving at their death.

Shopkeeper: “It’d be far better for you guys to not go over there. Do that.”

Emilia: “—Thank you for the milk. Thanks for the talk too.”

Emilia gobbled up her hot milk and expressed her gratitude towards the shopkeeper, who had concluded the conversation.

The shopkeeper was probably aware of how they had begun prying out information from his conversation halfway through. To pile on further, he had also continued to speak until now, attempting to change Subaru and the others’ plans.

He simply felt sad for them. But even then, Subaru and the others would still go towards the same place.

Emilia: “I’ve paid. Subaru, let’s go.”

Subaru: “Hmm… let’s go then.”

Pulling onto Subaru’s sleeve, Emilia placed some silver coins onto the counter. She had given him way too much for two cups of milk, but it did also include a tip for the information and his care.

They got up, conveyed their thanks to the shopkeeper, and moved to exit the shop.

Shopkeeper: “—For about a year now, people have noticed there are birds flying towards the sand dunes.”

Emilia & Subaru: "…"

They covered themselves with their robes again, preparing themselves for the Sand Wind, and a voice called out to them from behind. When they turned back, the shopkeeper had already turned his own back, and continued speaking as if having a monologue while wiping a glass.

Shopkeeper: "The people that saw them say that the birds are flying towards the tower, and it spread as a joke. It's a story without any legs to stand on, but…"

That, was when the shopkeeper cut his sentence and put down the glass. And then,

Shopkeeper: "If you ever become lost in the sand dunes, try looking for a bird. If you're lucky, it might lead you towards the tower."

Emilia & Subaru: "…"

Shopkeeper: "Though, if you're lost amidst the sand dunes, your luck is already at its worst."

Subaru and Emilia left the shop without replying to the Shopkeeper's words.

Upon going outside, they noticed that the Sand Wind was now considerably weak. Emilia looked back at Subaru, confirming that her vision was now better to some extent in comparison to the time they entered the bar.

Emilia: "For now, let's return to the inn and meet up with everyone else. Anastasia and the others might also be back now."

Subaru: "Yeah, sounds good. I'm also interested in the results they've obtained too."

Standing in front of Emilia, who had covered her face again, he began walking while posing as a windbreaker.

And then, once they reached a point where they could no longer see the bar, Emilia murmured quietly.

Emilia: “The person from the store just now was missing a leg.”

Subaru: “…I didn’t notice.”

Emilia: “I don’t know where he was injured… But I wonder if it was because of that.”

Subaru could perceive what Emilia wanted to say from her thoughtful words.

The shopkeeper had nicely and warmly expressed his strong feelings on the dangers of the sand dunes to the two strangers.

If that was indeed a warning based off his experiences, then they were terrible people to have shaken off that care and head towards the dunes nonetheless. That was what he felt.

2

???: “Looks like Natsuki-kun and Emilia-san’ve returned safely.”

They had returned to the inn. The person that greeted Subaru and Emilia was someone who should have been outside, just like they had been. Anastasia.

She had changed from her outside clothes, a gorgeous and elegant smile on her face as she sat down on the bed.

The inn the group was staying at was a first-class inn at Mirula.

It was still unfair to compare it to Pristella’s Water Plumage Pavilion, but there was no other reasoning other than the qualitative difference between both cities.

Subaru: “Where’s Julius?”

Anastasia: “After droppin’ us off at the inn, he said he was gonna take a look ‘round the town for a bit. Perhaps he’s getting’ used to havin’ sand in his eyes. Just like Natsuki-kun. How was it?”

Subaru: “I really do wish we had goggles to protect against dust. They’re made of transparent glass, and they cover this part of the face as protection. Can’t we make some of those?”

Thinking of underwater goggles, Subaru asked while pointing to the area around his eyes. Anastasia tilted her head at those words and voiced an “I see” as she nodded.

Anastasia: “We’d have to worry ‘bout things like glasswork and durability, but it’s somethin’ worth considering… perhaps. The Sand Wind problem ain’t a matter unrelated to Kararagi, so it might be a useful idea.”

Subaru: “I’m not talking about patents far into the future. If we don’t have those things… Well, as long as we avoid Sand Time, I don’t think we’ll be incapacitated.”

Emilia: “It seems like the bigger concerns are the Witchbeasts and the Miasma, as opposed to the sand. Beatrice and I can try dealing with the Miasma with Micro Spirits… but we’ll have to depend on Meili for the Witchbeasts.”

Emilia said those words, and looked towards the room next door, which laid on the other side of the wall.

Right now, Beatrice should be monitoring Meili in that room. He wanted to be sentimental and believe Meili would not betray them, but a previous offense was a previous offense. They could not trust her, and they could not state with complete confidence that her connection with her mother had been cut. Likewise, there was no guarantee that her mother would not attempt to silence her.

Subaru: “So we’ll be relying on Anastasia to guide us. It’s pretty risky.”

Emilia: “Although it’d be valid to call it the usual.”

Subaru: “You’re not wrong.”

Subaru loosened his lips at Emilia’s rare interruption and then looked at Anastasia. She straightened her back while still on the bed, and continued the conversation by saying “But well”.

Anastasia: “Don’t’cha worry, we’ve fulfilled the purpose of our trip.

The dragon carriage's wheel adjustments 'n the way to enter the sand dunes should be as we requested."

Emilia: "Right… Sorry. We're somewhat having you do everything."

Anastasia: "It's aight, it's aight, since in return, we'll be countin' on Emilia-san when it comes to fightin' power."

Anastasia calmly waved her hand.

The goals she had spoken of—one of them was tuning the dragon carriage they'd enter the sand dunes with. Usually, dragon carriages would only travel along a well-maintained road, or at least, a road. However, the road this time was mostly a sand road, so an ordinary dragon carriage would be unable to move properly.

Ditching the dragon carriage and riding the dragons would have been a good choice—were there not many women and children. Considering how there was also Rem, unconscious, the option was not viable.

Thus, it was necessary to adjust the dragon carriage to suit it for desert areas, and it was also necessary to make some changes to the ground dragons.

Subaru: "Can't leave Patrasche behind. Leaving her behind would be ridiculous."

Emilia: "That girl is reaaally smart. If he told her she'd be left behind, she might bite Subaru…"

That actually could happen, so he could not give a response. Plus, he was unable to leave her behind.

Emilia: "So, other than the dragons, about the discussion …"

Anastasia: "It was no discussion, really. All I did was try to placate their fears 'n make 'em listen to me."

She showed an adorable smile, but, sensing that it was not what it seemed, Subaru's back began to get some chills.

There was the dragon carriage and another matter to be taken care of. Simply put, it was the rite of passage to deal with the sand dunes. That was, if the Royal Candidates Emilia and Anastasia were lost in the Augria Sand Dunes, who would be responsible?

As of now, it was possible to say that these two held the most important position in the Kingdom. If both were buried under the Augria Sand Dunes, it would be quite a big deal, and naturally there would be confusion over the person responsible.

The Augria Sand Dunes—never mind the one who managed the sand dunes themselves, the weight of responsibility would be unbearable for the Lord that governed the area around Mirula, their last stop.

Thus, Anastasia had gone to write a letter to the Lord beforehand to convince them with “No matter what happens, it’s the Candidate’s own responsibility”.

Anastasia: “But still, they might be blamed for not stoppin’ me… our lives ain’t just our own. It’s a big responsibility, don’t’cha think?”

Emilia: “That’s been true from the start. Not because of things like the Royal Selection or being a Candidate, but there will be a lot of people that won’t be saved if we don’t meet the Sage and find a way to get those things back. It’s not something that has come up now.”

Anastasia: “Ya sure are being as dependable as ya can.”

Anastasia looked back at Emilia, who had declared so, in what appeared to be a happy way in some respects. After that, she tilted her head, looking at Subaru with a “So,”.

Anastasia: “Did’cha guys get any results from yer stroll? There’s no way ya guys actually went out to simply get used to havin’ sand in your eyes, right?”

Subaru: “Well, it’s not like we went out on a date in the middle of Sand Wind. We got the chance to listen to someone informed for a little bit.”

Emilia: “The store person being informed was just a coincidence, though.”

Subaru: “My foresight is on point for choosing that bar.”

Emilia: “I have a feeling that I was the one who chose the shop…”

Anyhow, whatever the flow of events was and whose achievement it was, were both irrelevant. Anastasia had a pondering look after they had finished telling her about the bar.

Anastasia: “Catchin’ sight of a bird… Hmm.”

Subaru: “Really, that’s what you’re curious about?”

Anastasia: “Well, the other parts are just things like challengin’ the Augria Sand Dunes ‘n stuff that’s just half-a-step up from common knowledge. Anyways, the very interesting part is that change. Stuff like birds oughta be the most sensitive to wind mixed with Miasma.”

Emilia: “Now that you say it, that’s right…”

In response to Anastasia’s words, Emilia went into deep thought while caressing her hair. Glancing sideways at Emilia pondering, Subaru gently brought his face close to Anastasia.

Subaru: “—There’s no way you actually do have something in mind, right?”

Anastasia: “Nothing special’s come to mind. However, that really was somethin’ very interesting to me.”

Subaru: “…”

Anastasia: “Don’t make such a doubtful face. Look, she’ll get suspicious.”

He could see Eridna’s true feelings on her face slightly, but he had no choice but to withdraw after she had pointed that out. Fortunately, Emilia had not seen the interaction just now as she was in deep thought, but for some reason, in Subaru’s heart, it felt like he was an adulterer frantically hiding his cheating.

Subaru: “When should we leave?”

Anastasia: “The sooner the better, right? The worryin’ conversation about the dragon carriage’s been settled already… Perhaps we should leave immediately after we’ve loaded on supplies again.”

Subaru: “Tomorrow would be too quick, how about around the day after?”

Anastasia: “Guess we’ll go with that.”

When Anastasia voiced her agreement, Emilia also gave an acknowledging nod. After that, she directed her gaze towards the room’s window, that had been shut tight as to keep the sand out, squinted her eyes.

What Emilia’s amethyst eyes were looking at, was the view of the east, on the other side of the window.

A very long shadow, standing conspicuously tall, its height taller than the stores and houses on the streets, was present there.

Emilia: “The Pleiades Watchtower.”

A voice like a silver bell called upon the building’s name.

The tower that was their destination was so high that it could be seen from Mirula.

—Was it even possible to lose track of something that big?

Before they had even set foot in Mirula, with the appearance of the Pleiades Watchtower during their journey, that question had been present in Subaru.

What could have gone wrong, to not be able to find such a large landmark?

But, on the other hand, as he thought that, the bartender’s warning also pierced him.

Subaru: “Having no plans is out of the question, and a stupid plan is a poor plan, was it?”

Whatever the case, they did not have the option to back out from the challenge.

That was exactly why they had chosen the means that would increase their chances, means that were available to them. They should be different from the adventurers the shopkeeper spoke of, unprepared with their stupid plans. That was what he believed.

And that was why Subaru did not realize it. And he would not realize it.

—Whatever the case, they did not have the option to back out from the challenge.

He did not notice that, at this point, he had already closed off the first path for himself.

Chapter 8:
The Sand Dunes Initiation

1

—The morning of their departure had arrived.

One day had been allocated for rest, and it was now two days after the prior arrangements and the information gathering.

At the entrance to the town of Mirula, Subaru and the others had gathered with their respective equipment on, having finished their preparations to cross the Sand Dunes with their respective equipment on. Gazing at the dragon carriage, Subaru let out a sigh of admirable

Subaru: “Wow, this is…”

Julius: “A ground dragon to cross the Sand Dunes—the Gyras species is a species that shines on sandy soil. Their species is adapted to Sand Wind and dryness alike, characterized by large figures and gentle demeanor. You will find that this endemic species has an easy-to-handle nature.”

As Subaru looked at the ground dragons tied to the dragon carriage with eyes widened, Julius added an explanation.

They had to break through the Augria Sand Dunes, so that they could reach Pleiades Watchtower. The legs of a typical ground dragon would not be capable of dealing with the difficulty of treading that path filled with sand.

Therefore, they had exchanged the ground dragons that had brought them this far via the road, and now would have to use the Gyras species of ground dragons, endemic to this land, to carve open a path.

Subaru: “Endemic, huh. There were water dragons in Pristella too, but wow, the world is big.”

Folding his arms, Subaru gazed at the yellow-skinned ground dragon connected to the dragon carriage right in front of him.

Subaru had already spent more than a year in this world. His initial surprise towards the ground dragons had faded, and thought he would never again feel a breed of excitement similar to what he had felt at first, but he'd been too narrow-minded.

Subaru: "…"

A yellow ground dragon, with thorn-like scales all over its body, its head flat. They had a physique similar to Otto's beloved dragon Frufoo, which was of a species with excellent stamina even among ground dragon; its owner had boasted that it was capable of travelling for three days and three nights. It would perhaps be similar to the triceratops that Subaru knew.

On the other hand, attempting to compare the ground dragon in front of him to similar knowledge would have a person find them rather resembling an ankylosaurus. However, their tails were short, so it seemed like their tails could not be used as weapons, unlike the original's. Also, what was more characteristic of them, more so than their skin and general looks, were their feet. —Every end of their four thick, short legs were round, and their sharp claws acted like spikes which moored their bulking bodies to the ground.

Subaru: "It sure does look like their hooves can cause unrecoverable damage to anything they step on."

Julius: "The grains found in the Augria Sand Dunes are fine particles. Without feet like this, there would be the possibility of slipping off slopes. People say that the Gyras species' feet changed to adapt to that."

Subaru: "So they adapted to the desert areas, eh. They are replacements for horses and camels, but what about water dragons? Thinking hard about it, it's not like I've seen animals pull boats back at the original world."

He went into deep thought and a swan boat came to Subaru's mind, but that was just a boat imitating the form of a swan, and ran on man-made power. However, he'd never heard of a custom in which crocodiles or hippopotamuses pulled on boats, so he couldn't think of any replacement for water dragons. Even beyond that—

Subaru: "These dragons adapted to sandy soil are going there, but can we really bring my Patrasche to a place like that? Can't do anything unreasonable with the lady of the camp."

Julius: "Your beloved dragon belongs to the Diana species, which is considered the ancestor of all ground dragons. The founding forefather dragon, dominant on land, sea, and air is present in her lineage… It has excellent adaptability, no matter what the environment is. Unfortunately, my Shaknar will be left at the town."

Julius answered Subaru's question, then looked upwards towards the inn with lonesomeness.

Shaknar was Julius' beloved, beautiful blue-skinned ground dragon.

It was a loving dragon, but it had forgotten about Julius, who had had his name eaten by Gluttony. However, this well-trained dragon would be polite to anyone that rode it, at all times. Even at their one-sided meeting at Pristella, it had been accepting of Julius from the beginning, and it seemed that during this trip that had lasted about a month and a half, an intimate bond much like the one from before had been formed.

For that very reason, he had what you could call feelings of shame for leaving that beloved dragon at the town.

Julius: "Nevertheless, for your beloved dragon to be the lady you use the most out of all the people around you… I do not know if I should praise you for knowing how to use your ground dragon, or if I should complain about your evaluation of the women around you."

Subaru: "…Actually, you shouldn't make light of how high Patrasche's girl power is."

Julius had an emotional look for a second, so he immediately covered up his feelings with some banter. Subaru also sensed those thoughts of his and went along with it.

Seeing that, Julius went to greet the ground dragon of the dragon carriage whose reins he would be holding. As a response, Subaru looked towards the dragon carriage, stepped towards it, and knocked on the door.

Subaru: “So the inside of the dragon carriage will be left as-is, but the wheels have been replaced and…”

Subaru inspected the remodeled dragon carriage before there was an answer to his knock.

Having said that, the changes that stood out were in the carriage’s inferior structure—the wheels, and the window frames had installed with sand protection for the Sand Wind.

This dragon carriage, which had been devised for long-distance journeys, was something like an RV with its multipurpose features. Inside and at the front of the carriage, there was a row of seats, and the middle and backsides were exceptionally good to simply chill.

On top of it ensuring comfort, it could hold up to ten people at max. Subaru was honestly surprised by how the dragon carriage easily surpassed his expectations on first sight.

Subaru: “Without electricity and electrical appliances, those tools can be replaced with magic stones. Humans really are creatures that seek convenience anywhere.”

???: “—I do not know what you are talking about so seriously, but are the preparations finished, Barusu?”

While he was puzzled at the exterior, the dragon carriage’s door opened, and a cold voice poured down at the same time.

Turning around, there was Ram, standing up from the seat closest to the door, looking down on Subaru.

Subaru: “Well, the previous preparations were finished yesterday, so it’s ready. Next, we’ve got to prepare our hearts and bodies, but

I'm also done with that. How about you?"

Ram: "Let's see. Considering how many days we will be in this carriage, no amount of care will quell this feeling of lack of safety. Ram will not cry for help as a delicate person in the middle of the sand dunes, even if attacked."

Subaru: "—It'll be fine, don't worry."

With Ram narrowing her eyes meaningfully, Emilia then made her appearance having heard them talk. Emilia seemed to have been tidying up the back of the dragon carriage. She then stepped up to Ram's side, tapping on her shoulder.

Emilia: "No matter what attacks us, I'll protect everyone in here. There's Subaru and Julius outside too, so we've got everything covered."

Subaru: "You are as reassuring as always. See, look, Ram. Emilia-tan is saying this too, so don't worry."

Ram: "Yes, Emilia-sama. Ram is very reassured as well. However, it will not be just malicious beings that will attack us. Among us there are also those with evil intentions…"

Ram spoke meaningful words, while directing a meaningful look at Subaru.

Once Subaru understood Ram's look and the underlying meaning of her words, he frowned immediately.

Subaru: "You're still doubting me like that, even after spending close to one month of peaceful nights?! There's no way I can do something like that with you around! I don't have that type of courage!"

Ram: "It is pathetic how you are insisting that with a loud voice, it is not unthinkable for you to lose control of yourself because of how beautiful it is in this carriage. Ram is always afraid. Sympathize with a maiden's heart."

Subaru: "Always afraid? Not always threatening people?"

Ram basically repeating the saying that boys and girls should be separated once they turned seven, had caused Subaru's voice to shake. Incidentally, Emilia did nothing but tilt her head in confusion.

It was Emilia's usual EMTness, and Ram's insolence. However, as there was something bothering him, Subaru scratched his head unenergetically with an "Ah",

Subaru: "Nee-sama, how's your physical condition?"

Ram: "…Weird of you to ask that. Why do you wonder?"

Subaru: "Your worry is unnecessary, but is mine unnecessary? I just want to know the answer to that."

Ram: "Barusu, you sure are cheeky with how attentive you are."

She did not have a pale face, and it did not seem like she was having trouble breathing, and albeit Ram appeared to be acting like her usual self, she had not denied Subaru's words.

She did not act tough, nor had she attempted to hide it. In that sense, Ram was being surprisingly sincere.

Subaru: "Looks like your wicked tongue doesn't have its usual sharpness. If your body's condition really is bad, then…"

Ram: "After having spent twenty days to reach this place, you expect me to stomp my feet with the objective at hand? It is the same as usual, but today you are being particularly ridiculous."

Emilia: "Ram, don't speak like that."

Ram interrupted Subaru, directing him an even fiercer look. Emilia raised her eyebrows at that girl's behavior, putting hands on her hips like she was angry.

Standing next to Ram, she pointed her hand towards Subaru while being next to Ram and spoke,

Emilia: "Subaru is worried about Ram. I'm also worried about you.

Everyday I'm giving the treatment Roswaal told me about, but…"

Subaru: "Still unsure if you can call it treament, but it's not like it's your specialty. Even if Emilia-tan and Beako both do it, they can't do it as well as Roswaal."

Ram: "…Not trying to use that as a reason. I do not want to be a bother."

Subaru: "We are worried, you know?"

Ram: "If you were the usual Barusu, then I could fool you."

Subaru: "You aren't the usual Ram, so you can't fool me."

They weren't inflammatory tit-for-tat words, nor were they comebacks.

Anyhow, there was a quiet exchange of words, and Ram bit her lips in a seemingly displeased way at the way Subaru spoke. However, there was a lack of vigor in the eyes she stared at him with.

She probably was aware of it herself. Ram let out a sigh and looked inside of the carriage. There was a wheelchair right next to her seat, a single girl placed on it.

The space had been remodeled to allow the wheelchair to be placed there, by removing the dragon carriage's seat. Their interactions did not disturb the sleeping girl, and so she remained there, in slumber.

Ram: "I shall not be left behind. Also, not like my pain will improve if I do get left behind. Actually, being separated from Emilia-sama with how I am now would put my life at risk. You trying to kill me?"

Subaru: "Calm down. I've never even said a single word about leaving you behind since the beginning. Also, if you were to be left behind, Emilia-tan would be too."

Emilia: "Hmph! Subaru, there's no way I'd let that happen."

Subaru: "Liiiike I saaaaid, it's fine! I just want to check on Ram!"

Emilia: “What do you want to check?”

Subaru: “Didn’t I say it…?”

Subaru gave a wry smile, as his earlier words had been forgotten because they had repeatedly jumped to conclusions. Seeing Emilia and Ram exchanging doubtful glances, Subaru continued,

Subaru: “Ram. We can tell that you aren’t your usual self, so if there’s something wrong, say something. Don’t try to hide stuff and fool us. Even if you do stuff like that, we’ll still help you, even if you don’t like it.”

Ram: “…”

Emilia: “Hehe.”

After he pointed his finger at Ram and affirmed that, Ram made a rare look of shame.

Emilia put her hand on her mouth at her side, and let out a smile unintentionally, unable to contain. That first urge to laugh however was warded off, and Emilia merely relaxed her lips, looking pleased.

Emilia: “I think that side of Subaru is reaaally nice.”

Subaru: “…Eh?! Did you just fall in love again?!”

Ram: “Don’t talk like that with Rem sleeping in front of you, women’s harmful enemy.”

Subaru: “Women’s harmful enemy, not just women’s enemy?!”

Ram snorted her nose with a “Haa”, prompting Subaru’s voice to trail off into the distance.

After that, stretching her slender legs, and she recklessly tried to kick Subaru off of the dragon carriage’s steps.

Subaru: “Oh, h-hey! What are you doing, I’m going to fall!”

Ram: “Putting aside you falling, Barusu should normally be outside, not inside. Mount the prideful ground dragon, and frantically guarantee our dragon carriage’s safety. Do it, quickly.”

Subaru: “What do you mean quickly, listen to what I have to…”

Ram: “—I have listened to what I must. So, go.”

Ram asserted with an even sterner voice, and delivered an even sharper kick.

Having gotten a punt to the thigh, Subaru descended in dejection, and just before he went away from the dragon carriage, looks were exchanged with Emilia. She responded to that look by giving an acknowledging gesture with her chin, which had an “I know” underlying.

Subaru: “Guess that’ll be fine for now. But, anyways you should… Gah.”

Ram: “Go.”

A kick that felt like a surprise attack connected with his solar plexus, and Subaru fell off the dragon. Then, Ram hurriedly shut the carriage’s door, suddenly looked at Emilia as she let out a sigh. Then she spoke,

Ram: “…Emilia-sama, why are you making that look?”

Emilia: “No, it’s nothing. But, I just thought about how you’re kind of cute.”

Ram: “That’s a surprising opinion. How cheeky of Emilia-sama.”

Emilia: “Hmm.”

Due to being teased Ram’s tongue slipped, eliciting a rare sight of her cheeks being stiffened to be seen. Emilia witnessed that change in Ram’s facial expression and smiled, appearing to become more and more happy.

Emilia: “Finally feel like showing that face to me too, the one you always show to Subaru?”

Ram: “…It was a slip of mind. Please forgive my impoliteness.”

Emilia: “I’m not really angry. I’m actually a little happy, it somewhat feels like you’re giving me trust when you do that. I was a little jealous of Subaru.”

Ram kept silent for a bit in response to Emilia’s innocent reply. Immediately after that, with a dumbfounded look while smoothing her hair, Ram—

Ram: “Emilia-sama, you have changed as well. When we first met, you only seemed like someone with resolve that was hard, but fragile, like glass.

Emilia: “Do I look a little stronger now?”

Ram: “And now, I think… You are like sweet glass turned into candy.”

Emilia: “Wow, Ram, you’re harsh.”

Emilia was smacked by Ram’s abusive words, and her voice finally boomed from being unable to bear it.

And in that manner, the girls resumed talking with each other inside the dragon carriage.

2

—After a few hours, the conquer of the Augria Sand Dunes began.

They had become acquainted with the sandy soil after one hour in the dragon carriage; they were approximately ten kilometers east of the town of Mirula. With the dry sand and Miasma-laden wind growing stronger, and the prairie at their feet changing to desert, they had finally entered the Augria Sand Dunes proper.

???: “…”

Their setup was made up of one dragon carriage, and a ground dragon of the Gyras species to pull it. Running off to the side, was Subaru riding Patrasche, trekking along the sandy soil.

The flat-faced ground dragon wasn't fast, but its heavy pacing gave off a feeling of stability. At first, Patrasche had seemed wary of her weird companion, but after a few hours of traveling together, it was as if she'd found a compromise with her partner, and dissatisfaction was not to be found on her highly prideful face.

???: "If I had to describe it, then I'd probably say that the dissatisfaction of this ground dragon is because of Betty, in fact."

It was Beatrice, completely settled in Subaru's arms. While holding the bridle and onto the curled-up girl, Subaru said "No no" as he shook his head.

Subaru: "That's not right. Patrasche isn't such an intolerant dragon."

Beatrice: "…Subaru, it'd be wise of you to be more careful of how you perceive those around you, I suppose."

She let out those words, grabbing onto the edge of her skirt as she sat sideways on the jet-black ground dragon.

Subaru's dragon-riding skills were a lot better than they were before. Up to this point he had been simply spoiled by Patrasche's consideration, but now he was at the level of a dragon-rider apprentice.

He sat on the saddle and held onto the bridle. Beatrice was in front of him, and he made sure to hold onto her from behind; they almost looked like experts at riding together.

Of course, the only ground dragon Subaru would ride was Patrasche, and this wasn't the first time he rode her along with Beatrice. Thus, Beatrice was being too paranoid, no matter how he looked at it. That's what he wanted to say.

Beatrice: "Very prideful ground dragons don't want to let anyone other than their owner ride them, in fact. This ground dragon of Subaru's is extraordinary, one-of-a-kind, I suppose. If I were alone, she definitely wouldn't let me ride her, in fact."

Subaru: "Isn't that just because you're bad at riding ground dragons?"

Beatrice: "If that was the reason, then you getting close with this ground dragon wouldn't make sense, I suppose."

It was just as she'd said.

If Patrasche liked a person based on their dragon riding skills, then Subaru should've failed the first test. Since that had not come to pass, there was a reason as to why this lady approved of Subaru.

And, in truth, Patrasche's actual treatment towards everyone but Subaru was relatively harsh.

Subaru: "Well, not knowing why you're liked really is a bad thing."

Beatrice: "True, in fact. Subaru doesn't have the looks to be liked for no reason, I suppose."

Subaru: "…In other words, you have firm reasons to love me."

Beatrice: "Of course, Betty is… Just what are you trying to make me say?!"

They were glued together, so he couldn't dodge Beatrice's assault, her face beet red. While getting struck lightly by her weak palm, Subaru said "Whoa, whoa" in an attempt to appease Beatrice. Then, Patrasche raised her upper body and shook them, as if displeased with the behavior they were displaying on her back.

Subaru: "Oh, what the?!"

As she had set her posture in a way that was like doing a wheelie on a bike, Subaru reflexively held tight onto Beatrice.

Normally they would not feel any swaying from the dragon or even the wind because of the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, but certain extreme movements like the one just now would have effect, as well as things like angle changes from sudden turning.

The harassment was based on an understanding of those characteristics.

When Subaru put in his objection and glared at the back of Patrasche's head, the ground dragon looked at Subaru and Beatrice for a second, squinting her eyes as if saying "You'll bite your tongue".

Subaru: "She's kinda like Ram just considering how haughty she is. Seems like they'd get along, surprisingly."

Beatrice: "Or maybe they'd clash with each other, and they wouldn't come to an agreement at all, I suppose."

Subaru and Beatrice exchanged deep thoughts and nodded at each other. Then,

???: "Subaru, Beatrice-sama. It is splendid seeing you guys being friendly with each other, but this would be a good time to put yourselves together in earnest."

A voice speaking out from the side was sent towards the two who acted relaxedly.

At the driver box of the dragon carriage travelling alongside them, there was Julius, in charge of the reins. Rather than the fact that he was not alone, it seemed that the role of coachman was unpleasant and not very fitting for Julius, but he didn't act like he cared about it.

That being said, perhaps he did not have the time to worry about that. Either way, at his side there was,

???: "I don't mind onii-san and Beatrice-chan being friendly with each other, but if I'm ignored too much, I'll pout."

Having stated those words, giving them a look that didn't fit her appearance—Meili, sitting.

Meili was an essential member to deal with the Witchbeasts, and they would have to always use her for conquering the Augria Sand Dunes. Thus, as a lookout for the Witchbeasts living at the Sand

Dunes, Meili was at the place where it would d be easiest for her to deal with them—in other words, she was standing by at the driver box at the front of the dragon carriage.

Julius took up the role of staving off her boredom.

Subaru: "You have the Knight next to your side to escort you. He's much more smart, stylish, and elegant than me."

Meili: "I didn't get more than half of what you've said. Plus, I'm fine with Knight-sama. I'm unhappy with Onii-san."

Subaru: "With me?"

While playing with her braided hair, Meili glared at Subaru, her cheeks swollen in a pout.

Meili: "Onii-san made me come along, and so he must be forced to deal with me."

Subaru: "Don't say such unreasonable childish things. As you can see, that place is filled with Beako. Right?"

Beatrice appeared to shrugher shoulders in resentment, and Subaru looked at Meili again.

Pouting was a suitable action for her age, but her mood would have a big influence from now on down the road. Considering that, it would be bold to make light of Meili.

However, saying that really would make things unmanageable.

Subaru: "You're quite right, however, we'll have you fulfill your role first before you can say if it's a right or a duty."

Meili: "My role, hmm."

Subaru: "We'll be entering the most favorite Augria Sand Dunes soon. I don't think the Witchbeasts will suddenly roar when we enter them, but when it does happen, calming them down will be up to you, Meili. You get that, right?"

Meili: “…Yeees. For someone who spoils Beatrice-chan, onii-san sure is a bully.”

He wasn’t being a bully to her, but even if he was taken as one, he would just have to cajole her.

Subaru felt like Beatrice seemed satisfied, looking at her with a side glance, and then raised his hand at Julius. After that, Jullius quietly acknowledged, gesturing with his chin.

Unfortunately for him, he would have to be the little lady’s sycophant. Moreover—

Beatrice: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Ahh, I see it.”

Beatrice called out to him quietly, while Patrasche gave a faint neigh, as she glared at what laid in front. Those actions brought back his focus, and Subaru squinted.

He saw the tower, its contours so clear that it would be impossible to miss them from Mirula—likewise, surface of sand surrounding that tower was visible.

Their magnificent arrival to the maze of sand surrounding the Pleiades Watchtower, the Augria Sand Dunes.

3

In the Augria Sand Dunes, there was a particularly famous Sand Time, in which the Sand Wind would blow particularly strong.

The Sand Wind that would blow three times a day, morning, afternoon, and night, would carry sand and Miasma from the east towards the west, a disaster that would silently creep on people. This Sand Wind would be especially strong in the midnight hour, and it would continue to blow for a few hours.

As it was pretty much midnight, so at this time when the Sand Wind blew, their movement would be stifled.

Thus, they would conquer the Augria Sand Dunes during the day, little-by-little, with a few hours of break in the morning and afternoon, at the times the Sand Times would blow.

The grains of sand that fully covered the ground were miniscule, and just like the rumors had stated, it was terribly difficult to keep their footing, causing them to trip. Their march was slow, slow as a crawl; an irritating situation all around.

There was something about that situation which disappointed Subaru. That was—

Subaru: "There's the pain of this Sand Wind and the poor footing, but… it isn't as bad as I thought."

Turning his face away from the wind blowing from windward, he pulled up the mouth cloth to secure his breathing. He faintly felt his teeth biting the sand, but this type of baptism was not very different from his time at Mirula.

The flying sand created a view of yellow, and he felt the sand tickling him in his clothes, but that was as far as its effects went. The fury of the dunes was insignificant.

Subaru: "When I first heard about the dunes, I even prepared myself on the assumption that it'd be deathly."

Beatrice: "It's because of the natural environment that there's nothing green in here, in fact. The Miasma kills anything and everything, so it only has this sort of scenery spread out, I suppose. That is why rain even pours on these sand dunes, and the temperature doesn't go extremely out of control, in fact."

Subaru had a strong impression of the desert being a red-hot hell. He'd never stepped foot into a desert back at his other world, but in mediums like games and manga, the deserts all yielded impressions of hot sand.

For that reason, the severity of the Augria Sand Dunes was pleasant, in comparison to what he had initially imagined.

Subaru: "It wasn't hot or cold at the nearest town, so I guess it'd be weird for the sand dunes to be an extremely hot hell. So, we only need to be careful of the wind and the Witchbeasts.”

Beatrice: “As well as getting lost… I suppose.”

One worry had disappeared, and Beatrice stifled Subaru’s feelings of optimism to stiffen up. In response to the point made by the girl in his arms, Subaru looked forward while being careful of the wind.

The Watchtower, its existence ever-present, loomed still in Subaru’s line of sight.

Subaru: “You bring up the question of getting lost, but it seems unnatural to miss that thing.”

Beatrice: “Betty thinks so too, in fact. However, it wouldn’t surprising if something happened, I suppose. I don’t know what type of cheat this Sage is, but the fact that nobody has ever reached them is proof, in fact.”

Subaru: “…”

Of course, Subaru had no intentions of underestimating things.

Realistically speaking, it would be unlikely that they would miss their target considering it was a structure that huge, never mind getting lost. However, any prior challengers would have most likely thought the same thing.

Despite those thoughts in mind, he figured there should have been a reason as to why they had still not reached it.

Anything could happen. Just like Beatrice had pointed out, this was that sort of devilish place.

Subaru: “About that, I guess it’s about time we make the next backup.”

Holding his breath, Subaru looked back at the terrain they had just traversed.

On the sandy soil, the footsteps of Patrasche, on whom Subaru and

Beatrice were riding, had been left behind, one-by-one. However, only the very latest ones would remain. And in time, too, they would be washed away, replaced, and hidden by the sand.

Nature itself had concocted such a natural trap.

Never mind the Watchtower at the front, the path they had traveled thus far would be hidden from them in eximious fashion.

However, that would only be true if these people were only able to take ordinary measures.

Subaru: “Seems like the previous one’s gone from sight. Alright, this is a good time.”

Subaru pulled on the bridle, directing Patrasche to veer towards the dragon carriage running parallel to them.

The wheels of the dragon carriage also left traces, as did the ground dragon’s spike-shaped footprints, but those were subjected to the same conditions as Patrasche’s. Thus, they had to devise something as a marks to follow.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, please!”

Emilia: “—Okaaaay, got it.”

When he knocked on the dragon carriage from the outside, Emilia answered and showed up on the other side of the door.

Emilia’s whole body had been covered with a white robe for the sand, and Subaru, behind her—was gazing and pointing at something in the far distance, a certain “something” that was faintly reflected in his eyes,

Subaru: “I’m sorry for having you work so much, but please, Sensei!”

Emilia: “Well, I’m having Subaru watch from outside. It’s not a big problem… What do you mean by «Sensei»?”

Subaru: “It’s the template when a request is made. Alright, alright,

alright, please.”

Emilia: “Okay, I’ve been requested—Hey!”

After that brief light-hearted exchange, she looked to the place Subaru was pointing towards. Emilia raised a listless shouting voice, the look in her eyes too cute to call a glare, and her magical power surged.

Immediately after, an enormous amount of Mana swirled in Emilia’s palm, and the magical power dashed swiftly through the sky, giving off the sense that its power increased as it accelerated. The sound it produced was like the very air had exploded, and it resounded throughout the vicinity.

—And then, after a few seconds, a huge ice tower stood on the path of the sandy plain.

Emilia: “Yeah, that was good.”

Confirming that the task was finished, Emilia smiled, looking somewhat satisfied with herself.

It wasn’t comparable in size to the Pleiades Watchtower, but it was still a very conspicuous silhouette for the Augria Sand Dunes. And so, an ice tower had been erected here and there along the route Subaru and the others had taken inside the Augria Sand Dunes, in successive intervals such that they would not lose sight of the path.

Subaru: “The footprints can’t be marks, but marks can be made with a more conspicuous method. This is the application of magic, eh.”

Emilia: “Even so, Subaru’s craft is very impressive. Nice thinking.”

Subaru: “This method won’t be any good if the sand dunes were hot.”

The ice Emilia created with her magic was fragile to temperature, perhaps because it didn’t go against the laws of nature. Based off that knowledge, were this a genuine desert, then maybe such a forbidden move would not have worked. However, it was a valid plan in these Sand Dunes.

Emilia's standing ice tower was functioning as a landmark without a hitch. Worst-case scenario, if something really did happen that would force them to withdraw, they should be able to follow them and retreat.

Subaru: "This tower… yeah, it looks alright underfoot. I'm still scared of it possibly toppling over, though. Since its foundation seems to be on something fluid."

Emilia: "I think it's been pinned to the ground as hard as possible, so it's all hunky-dory. You're worried?"

Subaru: "Who even says «hunky-dory» these days… Ahh, alright."

Subaru put aside his worry by teasing Emilia, and raised his head. Emilia seemed a wee bit displeased with that response, but for the time being she would just put a sarcastic smile on her face.

After that, he looked over Emilia's shoulder; towards the inside of the dragon carriage behind her. For everyone inside, it should be the same as usual, but there was one person that he would rather not see remaining the same.

Subaru: "Where's Anastasia?"

???: "What is it, Natsuki-kun? Lookin' for me?"

Immediately after his gazed had wandered, Subaru jumped upon being called by a person's voice.

Cutting into his line of sight, Anastasia peeked out from a bit to the side of Emilia. She looked down on a surprised Subaru, her teal eyes squinted ever so slightly.

Anastasia: "No need to get startled that much. Ain't I deliberately stayin' inside?"

Subaru: "I know that you are inside, but it was shocking because I didn't expect you to appear from Emilia's armpit like you're growing out of it."

Emilia: "…Hey, Subaru. I reaaally didn't like the way you said that."

Anastasia: "Unusual for me too, to be annoyed by somethin' like that. What a coincidence."

With both Emilia and Anastasia showing some dislike, Subaru got back on track. There was Beatrice shrugging her shoulders in his arms, but he turned to Anastasia for now.

Subaru: "We'll be relying on your knowledge to conquer the Sand Dunes. Please guide us well, okay?"

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun sure is a worrywart. I'll be with'cha, so the outcome of this journey's the same for us two… There's no way I'd try and cut corners, ya know? Don't'cha worry."

Beatrice: "…Is it possible for someone to believe a fox so nonchalantly, I suppose?"

Replying to Anastasia's words, Beatrice spoke with a voice so low that it could only be heard by Subaru. He was in complete agreement, but it would be wrong to provoke her by using that basis.

If he was going to say that, then opting to go on this campaign towards the Watchtower would have been a mistake in the first place. As of now, they should be using up all their strength to fulfill their respective roles without complaining.

Subaru: "Right, Anastasia."

Anastasia: "Yes, Natsuki-kun. If somethin' happens, I'll let Julius know, and once we come near the place Echidna spoke about, I'll report that too. Don't worry, yeah?"

Anastasia—Or rather, Eridna, did not seem displeased by Subaru's cynical beckoning. It seemed like there would be no problem moving forward like this, for the moment being.

Emilia: "It seems like the wind has gotten stronger. Subaru, if there's nothing else, then I'm going to close it, but…"

Subaru: "…Ahh, go ahead. Emilia-tan, I'll leave the people inside up to you."

Emilia: "Yeah, leave it to me. Subaru, you be nice to Beatrice, too."

Beatrice: "No need to worry about that, I suppose. I'm satisfied, in fact."

Emilia put her hand on the door, and after an exchange words, she went back inside and left. Beatrice responded to Emilia's last joke with a light remark, the latter's smile disappeared, blocked by the door.

Subaru now went around to the front of the dragon carriage, appearing next to the driver's box.

Julius: "It appears like Emilia-sama's landmarks are working proper. You are as clever as always."

Subaru: "You can call it guile, you know."

Julius: "I shan't. I am jealous of your adaptability, being able to come up with ideas myself and others cannot with such ease. I really cannot craft these sort of evil ways."

Subaru: "Guile sounds cuter than evil ways!"

Julius sat on the driver's box, and he had a faint smile on his face, so faint that it was barely visible.

A white cloth was wrapped around his handsome face, so his expression couldn't be seen. But even then, as they had been talking with each other in this past month, and Subaru could understand how much he was joking based off the tone of his voice.

Subaru: "Meili, how about you? Doing your job?"

Meili: "You're gonna ask me that? Onii-san hasn't run into bad animal-chans even once, and neither has the dragon carriage. That's not proof of me wooorking."

Upon peeking into the driver's box, he saw Meili's arranged in a pout, just as he expected. She was also wearing a cloak around her head because of the Sand Wind, and she answered Subaru's question with a displeased-sounding voice.

In reaction to Meili's answer, Subaru wiped off the sand off his head while regarding the path ahead.

Subaru: "Even if you say that, it's hard to see the results of your hard work. I don't know if the Witchbeasts haven't showed up because of you, or if they just aren't around here…"

Meili: "…Hmm, so that's what you're gonna saaay."

Subaru said a careless thing, being disappointed by the high anticipations he possessed, as so far they had not faced any obstacles other than the sand and the wind. Immediately Meili spoke with a low toned voice, putting her cheeks in between her hands as if thinking of something as she sunk into silence.

Subaru honestly had a bad feeling about that.

Julius: "Subaru, apologize to her. It is clear that you have just said something improper."

Subaru: "Y-You don't have to tell me, I know. Uhh, Meili? I kinda was a bit mean now. Well, not kinda, but completely. Please don't be in a bad mood. I wasn't trying to be mean."

Meili: "…Okaay, it's fineee. It's not like I'm mad or anythiiing. But, I think there's a reason for what onii-san said too."

Subaru: "O-Oh. That's good. Thankfully, you are much more mature than you loo…"

Meili: "—So I'll make it clear why I'm here."

Meili interrupted Subaru's explanation and apology, and uttered some extremely disturbing words.

The unsettling sound caused Subaru and Julius to look at each other, and hurried to form a sentence that would appease her—It was immediately after that.

???: “…”

Patrasche and the dragon carriage’s ground dragon both stepped hard on the ground, halting their movement moving. The ground dragons’ instincts had rapidly sensed something approaching them, alerting their master, the one holding the reins. Then, Subaru and Julius opened their eyes at the same time. There, they saw it.

Subaru & Julius: “…”

In front of their eyes, the sandy surface suddenly began wriggling as if it possessed a will of its own, and something wriggling immediately came crawling out from beneath the sands. A terrifying animal, with a large amount of sand clinging onto its whole body, let out an unbelievably piercing cry es its gigantic mouth.

Neither arms nor legs were present on its body, and the way it bent its long and fat body back and forth was reminiscent of a snake. However, it had slimy-looking skin, its color similar to that of the sand, patterned with carved, equidistant lateral stripes, carrying along a horrible stench. Subaru only noticed its true identity once the head of the thing lowered.

It was no snake—This, was an earthworm.

Its torso was so massive that Subaru could not wrap his arms around it; in fact, it seemed that its head and mouth were large enough to swallow four or five humans whole. The stink surrounding it was similar to a rotten smell, and the saliva, dripping from its oral cavity lined with fine teeth, made noise as it evaporated the sand.

Earthworm: “…”

The eyeless head turned towards them, acting as if it was sniffing a smell.

At this moment, Subaru had completely forgotten about breathing. He also felt Patrasche’s thoughts blanking, being transmitted across the bridle, and Beatrice grabbed strongly onto Subaru’s clothes while still in his arms.

As soon as he thought of its sense of smell, Subaru remembered the smell of the Witch that he carried. If the Witchbeast reacted to that, or something else reacted to it, this group would be—

Meili: “Ahh geez, you stiiink. Hurry up and leave. Get looost.”

Subaru: “…”

In the presence of Subaru and the others who could not avoid letting their fear show, Meili let out an adequate voice.

Those words caused the gigantic earthworm to turn towards Meili, but it immediately listened to that little girl’s orders, and the giant body crawled back into the hole it had dug. A few seconds later, the hole that the earthworm came from had been completely covered with sand, and only silence reigned within the area.

Julius: “…That was a Sand Earthworm, most likely. It is a Witchbeast that prefers to lurk beneath sandy soil, but it was a little bigger than I thought.”

Subaru: “A little? How little?”

Julius: “To my knowledge, I thought they would have been as big as a male adult’s arms.”

Even if the Earthworm that had appeared was of that size, it would still be big enough to pose a grotesque threat. But, that Sand Earthworm was hundreds to thousands times larger than the ones in Julius’s knowledge.

It was said that the Witchbeasts native to the Augria Sand Dunes were more ferocious, but perhaps they should have considered the difference in scale as well. Anyhow,

???: “Wh-What was that loud voice…?”

A small window belonging to the dragon carriage’s opened, and Emilia showed her face from the window that connected the driver box to the inside of the carriage.

Even if she had not witnessed that Sand Earthworm, she would have heard that Witchbeast’s roar. Emilia looked worried, but Subaru was incapable of speaking right away.

Then, Meili took Subaru’s place as he tensed up, and faced Emilia.

Meili: “No need to wooorry. I just wanted to let you guys know how blessed you are because you don’t have to worry about that thiiing.”

Subaru: “Ahh geez, we really can’t thank you enough, Meili-san!”

He loosened up thanks to Meili’s words, and Subaru gave her a generous compliment that came from the bottom of his heart. Emilia seemed astonished at that change; after Meili’s own surprise, she immediately appeared to be satisfied.

Meili: “Reeeally? You sure? Does onii-san see me in a new light now?”

Subaru: “Yeah, I seriously respect you. I sincerely felt just how dangerous this place would be, had you not come along. The Augria Sand Dunes are scary! Scaryyyyyyyy!!”

He now understood one reason as to why the many reckless adventurers had not come back after daring to conquer this place. Indeed, it was certainly a place for reckless people.

It was the absurdity of fooling themselves by believing that the baptism of the sand dunes would be easy. Hooray for peace. Peace is the best.

Beatrice: “You’re flattering her quite a lot, I suppose. Disgusting, in fact.”

Subaru: “Shut up! Weren’t you scared out of your wits too?! Ahhh, scary!”

Beatrice: “B-Betty was only going along with Subaru because you were nervous, I suppose. Don’t get the wrong idea, in fact.”

Subaru: “Don’t act so tough. You pissed yourself a little just like I did, right? I can tell.”

Beatrice: “Piss, I suppose?!”

Their quarrel started like a comedy episode, but nobody could blame them for it at the time.

It seemed like Witchbeasts would approach them if they caused a fuss, but the power of the being who countered that had been adequately proven. Thus, even Julius did not attempt to stop their quarrel.

However, he simply readjusted his consciousness, realizing that the ice they were walking on was thinner than he had imagined.

That was the first day of the conquering of the Sand Dunes, to which they could look back as having been worth it.

4

Suddenly, light ran through the sky, and penetrated the wind.

???: "…"

With a violent sound, the ice tower shattered in half and crumbled, having been hit directly.

The pulverized ice tower immediately returned to Mana, and every little bit of it that fell onto the surface was swallowed by the sand, disappearing from the world without any ruin, without a trace.

The light continued several times more, darting through the sky in succession.

Coincidentally, the number matched the number of times the silver-haired girl had established the ice tower.

Nobody knew what that meant, at this point of time.

However, the conquest of the labyrinth of sand was by no means a simple matter. That much was an established fact.

Chapter 9:
Break Through Sand Time

1

The first day of the Augria Sand Dunes conquest finished immediately after sunset.

Once the dead of night arrived, the longest of the three Sand Times that blew per day would arrive. If they forced their way through that Miasma-laden sand, their bodies would be ruined, and there was the possibility of losing their path.

If they were even unable to see the landmark that was the Pleiades Watchtower, then it would be wise to sit back, spending a peaceful night regaining their strength, restoring their spirit for the following day.

???: “Now that I think of think, will the Witchbeast countermeasures work while you’re sleeping too?”

???: “Of cooourse. Having your butt chewed by animals you brought is such a stupid thought that it’s not even fuunny.”

Aware of the menace the Witchbeasts of the Augria Sand Dunes presented, Subaru was somewhat, or rather, quite unsure of them. Laughing at his timidness, Meili was proud.

She appeared to be in a good mood ever since the Sand Earthworm incident, perhaps because she had proved her worth. Subaru understood that getting her in a good mood had benefits to their lives’ safety, so from here on out, he wished to be serious about dealing with that too.

Anyhow, night had fallen.

Subaru and the others had positioned themselves in the middle of the Sand Dunes, in a sandy plain with a good field of view, and had begun the preparations against the sand, with the dragon carriage at the core. Having said that, they did not need that many preparations.

Putting aside how the responsibility weighed on one person, the method really was simple.

Subaru: “Alright, Emilia-tan. Sorry for always relying on you, but please!”

Emilia: “Okay, make sure to move away a bit—Take this!”

Emilia let out a listless yell and used her magic, just like when she had erected a tower of ice. Then, an wall of frost formed on the east side of the halted dragon carriage as cover, which would act as defense against the Sand Wind, shutting out the sand entirely.

There was no worry about the ice melting, and it would likewise protect them against petty Witchbeasts. It looked and felt cold, but after their eyes were closed, it would work well enough.

Julius: “I cannot help feeling uncomfortable because we are always being spoiled by Emilia-sama’s powers.”

Emilia: “It’s fine. I said it before, didn’t I? Subaru and Julius will be the ones doing their best while we’re on the move. Also, I’ve said this too, but I am in reaaally good condition.”

Subaru: “Seems like you’d usually start to feel chest pain, that sounds dangerous to me.”

Looking at the icy wall, Julius sighed as Emilia flexed her bicep. Gazing at Emilia’s soft, white upper arm by his side the side, Subaru thought that he should pay attention to Emilia’s condition.

In fact, the Miasma-laden air drifting about in the Sand Dunes did have a particular “heaviness” to it.

That heaviness had a vague effect on Subaru’s body, and it seemed to also have an effect on Beatrice and Julius, both taciturn. It could be possible that Anastasia and Ram being quiet inside the dragon carriage was not unrelated.

On other hand, Emilia and Meili seemed to be in good condition, Meili being the same as before.

He did not believe they had common traits, but he should be vigilant for the appearance of any extreme effects. Although, truth was, he wished to get out of the sand dunes as fast as possible.

Julius: “Impatience is forbidden. Although I cannot say I understand why you want to rush over the path.”

Subaru: “…”

Beckoning a silent Subaru, Julius gazed up at the eastern sky blocked by ice. Subaru felt like he had been seen through, so he snorted his nose and turned away from the ice wall. Then, Patrasche came near Subaru, pressing her snout on his shoulder.

Subaru felt her doing it over and over, and he gave a bitter smile.

Subaru: “So, are you going to try and calm me down, too?”

???: “It’s not like I want to, in fact. It’s not like the initiative has been taken, either, I suppose.”

Beatrice pushed his back and turned away, although previously she had been looking up at him meaningfully.

Subaru scratched his head, wondering if his irritation was plain for all to see. Looking over, Subaru found Emilia, looking at him with kind eyes; as their lines of sight crossed, she waved towards him ever so slightly.

Suddenly embarrassed, Subaru clapped his hands.

Subaru: “Alright, a place to sleep has been secured thanks to Emilia-tan, so let’s get ready for tomorrow. The Sand Time will end at dawn, so until then let’s…”

Emilia: “Before that, Ram needs her treatment.”

Subaru: “Ah, true. That’s right. Okay, then I’ll be depending on Emilia-tan and Beako for that.”

He attempted to go through the topics quickly, and was halted by Emilia, trying to follow the daily routine. Emilia and Beatrice nodded at Subaru's anticipations, and the treatment began with the men being put outside.

Also, as for why Subaru and Julius had been put outside once the healing begun—

Ram: "—Hmm~."

One could tell that it had started because of the voice that could be heard faintly, even through the door.

Ram's enthusiastically quivering voice sounded like she was enduring pain. A faint light arose inside the dragon carriage; the treatment was being administered with the use of Mana that combined four attributes.

Mana was being poured into the wound inflicted from having lost her horn, Ram's appearance pitiful. On one hand though, it really did feel like something erotic, somehow.

Therefore, after the treatment had been witnessed the first day, they refused to have the men with them during healing.

Subaru: "I don't get what Roswaal was thinking in wanting you do that repeatedly."

Julius: "In a way, it is definitely an honorable role. Miss Ram is charming and pretty. However, when I think about the obvious matter of who she has eyes for, I honestly cannot be pleased with it."

Subaru: "Roswaal should know that too, so I don't know why would he be doing it still… In that case, why would he still say that about Ram, if she's so far gone?"

Julius: "People's relationships, even more so when speaking of a relationship between a man and a woman, cannot be assessed from the outside. To put it another way, I am pretty sure the first time you and I met as not an enjoyable experience. Or at least, I did not think I would be going alongside you on this life-threatening journey.”

Subaru: “…Well, I guess so.”

Hearing the lovely voice from behind him made Subaru’s face faintly turn red as he scratched his nose.

Julius had a nonchalant face, but despite that it was still a very strong stimulus to any innocent youth. But still, they could not get away from there and get sniffed out by dangerous Witchbeasts. They had no choice. It was necessary.

???: “Ya look quite conflicted, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “Uwaaah?!”

While Subaru was quietly listening, the breath that blew against his ears made him jump. He lost his posture, and tumbled onto the sand, then seeing the figure of Anastasia coming around from the other side of the dragon carriage. Julius, who had been alarmed by Subaru’s panic, lost his composure at the sight of Anastasia, and he looked at the rolling figure.

Julius: “You got a little too surprised. It was as if you were thinking of something evil.”

Subaru: “Huh? It’s not like I was thinking of something evil or anything, you know? Yeah, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about. Not at all. Not one bit. So, what do you need, Anastasia-san? I’ll listen to anything!”

Anastasia: “Ya really are bad at foolin’ people, aren’t’cha? Well, it’s fine. Natsuki-kun may be interested in what’s goin’ on inside, but I’ve got somethin’ important to talk about.”

Subaru shook off the dark disdain in Julius’s eyes, shot a thumbs-up towards Anastasia. Anastasia smiled lightly at that reaction and trekked over the sand in boots, and,

Anastasia: “Wow, it’s hard to walk. Ya ‘n Julius seem fine, eh.”

Julius: “I have trained, although I would not go as far as to say that it was for this specific occasion."

Subaru: "When you feel unsure of your footsteps, don't walk slow in attempts to check them, leave it up to the firmness of your shoes' soles and take relatively hard steps. That is the Clind Style."

It was the basis of the rough road running style he learned from the all-purpose butler, Clind, back when he was learning parkour.

Anastasia gave an admiring nod at those words, and after that, she lowered the neck of her robe, the lower part of her face now showing. She took a deep breath.

Anastasia: "I don't get this sand, but it seems like it's chokin' me out. I'd like to go somewhere safe from this Sand Wind as soon as possible 'n breathe as much as I want."

Subaru: "Agreed. I'd like to take a bath too. My head's already smeared with sand."

He could now understand the reason as to why people in desert areas would wear turbans on their heads. Countermeasures for sand, heat, and cold. It was a reasonable yet inevitable way of life people living on rigorous land had to follow. Subaru too was moderately wrapped in cloth, but it was not enough to protect him from this type of conditions.

Anastasia: "A bath sounds good, yeah. It'd be nice if there's a bath at that Sage-san's place."

Subaru: "…Of course, I don't know that much. Is it like that?"

Anastasia: "Even if Echidna knows how to get there, it's not like we've ever been in it."

Anastasia pulled down the neck of her robe even further, the scarf that she always wore now in display. A major premise of this whole deal was that Eridna was the guide for their journey.

There was no point in doubting her, but he wished to work out the details.

Subaru: “I can assume that you’re going to tell me important things here on out, right?”

Anastasia: “Of course.”

Julius: “I shall listen gladly.”

Anastasia puffed out her slim chest, and Subaru and Julius got ready to listen. In response, Anastasia looked back at the dragon carriage pompously,

Anastasia: “We’ll be stayin’ the night inside the carriage startin’ today… But ya boys need to sleep at the front seat. Can’t have ya getting’ carried away with the women ‘n children in a small room, after all.”

Subaru: “That’s enough of that!”

Anastasia: “Hey, I just thought I’d loosen the tension… Ah, oh well.”

It didn’t matter at all that they would stay in the same room in the first place. His own lack of courage and the wariness of the other parties were enough for him to understand that.

Anyhow, Subaru screaming his inner thoughts was put aside, and Anastasia went into the main topic.

Anastasia: “After a full day of movin’ towards the Watchtower… How’s it lookin’?”

Subaru: “Even if you ask that… To be honest, the results weren’t anything special.”

Subaru was puzzled by her question, reflecting about the day that had passed.

After arriving at the Augria Sand Dunes around noon, letting the morning’s Sand Time pass by, and after that, Subaru and the others spent nearly half the day moving. The Sand Time that happened during the afternoon was now behind them, and it was now sunset. As for the results that were had up to this point, they would be—

Subaru: “The tower is perfect as a landmark, and we’ve got the mark for the way back that I requested of Emilia-tan. Also, Meili was more effective than expected. Those were the results, I guess?”

Julius: “The preparations we had beforehand and Subaru’s quick thinking were perfect countermeasures against Sand Time. But, the problem is Pleiades Watchtower, and why we cannot see the route up to there… perhaps.”

Subaru: “Can’t see the route?”

Subaru frowned at Julius, him having taken over speaking, but having reached a different conclusion. Julius sighed at Subaru, prefacing his speech with “Have you not realized?”.

Julius: “It is true that we have gotten this far in our journey without any noticeable flaws. I am also in agreement with the opinion that nothing has gone wrong thus far.”

Subaru: “Don’t beat around the bush. It’s a bad habit. Say it more directly.”

Julius: “Then I shall make it concise—Subaru, have you not noticed anything peculiar about the tower?”

Subaru: “…”

Julius asked him a question quietly, and Subaru gasped.

After that, looking at the Watchtower—a mighty majesty that could be seen on the other side of the ice wall, even in the night asserting its presence.

Even after Julius had pointed out something was wrong, Subaru did not notice any abnormality in the Watchtower. Nothing should have been different about the tower at which he had stared at the whole day, compared to how it had been upon first arriving at the Sand Dunes.

—Nothing should have been different, surely.

Subaru: “—?!”

Julius: “It seems that you have noticed. That tower clearly is not getting closer, nor is it getting any farther. We have aimed at that tower, walking towards it this whole time… but the gap has not closed even slightly.”

Just like Julius pointed out, Subaru finally understood that abnormality.

The faraway-looking Pleiades Watchtower remained there, faraway, without change, its size such that it felt like it could not be overlooked. There was no sort of change in its appearance.

Subaru: “No way…”

Julius: “Subaru, I understand your frustration. However, we must be careful…”

Subaru: “So, after all the trouble we’ve been through today, being smeared with sand, and the distance we walked were all a waste?! Conquering this place is such a pain in the ass—!”

Julius: “…Yeah?”

Subaru kicked the sand at his feet, raising his voice, and Julius was at a loss for words. Squatting on the ground in front of a bewildered Julius, Subaru scooped out sand with his palm with his lips pursed in a pout.

Subaru: “Hey hey hey hey, you for real? I’ve suddenly become tired after finding that out. Saying that those efforts were a waste seriously just sucks ass. Wow, this is the worst.”

Anastasia: “Yer mental fortitude’s weaker than I thought.”

Subaru: “What are you looking at?! Don’t you see me suffering this much?! I’m extremely depressed, and I feel extremely awful. You should’ve said something earlier, you know, once you’d noticed it!”

Julius: “I thought to not say anything until I was sure. I did not wish to discourage you.”

Subaru: “This is how you people…”

He threw away the sand he had scooped up, and stood up while clapping his hands. Glaring at Julius from below, Subaru acted indignant.

Subaru: “Can you stop speaking in insinuations? It’s not like I’ll get mad if you talk about something that came to your mind! Rather, we might find a clue from it. Do you guys have a «I’ll just keep this inside of me» sort of mentality? Has that really made the situation better at all? Not once have I thought that I should have kept quiet!”

Julius: “Ah, ahhh, sorry.”

Subaru: “Speak up immediately, even if it’s something trivial. This is something I told Ram as well, a disabled character in this conquest. Do I need to say it to everyone, man?”

With Subaru becoming dumbfounded by the incompleteness of the three Ts, “Told, Tell, Talk about”, Julius also made a reflective look. With a rare assertion of dominance over the Knight Impeccable, Subaru took that something, which he barely considered a good thing, among the many troublesome things, and turned to Anastasia.

Subaru: “So, I guess it’s safe to assume you know what’s up with this phenomenon.”

Anastasia: “I apologize that I didn’t explain anythin’… Or rather, I felt confident ‘bout my suspicions all day. It’d help if ya thought of it like that.”

Subaru: “Start from when you had those suspicions. That’s all. So, what’s going on?”

He stuck his tongue out at Anastasia, who had stated her justifications, and prompted her to continue. When he did, Anastasia preceded with “Please don’t get surprised when ya hear this”, and—

Anastasia: “This sandy plain between the Dunes and the Watchtower, the space’s prolly distorted.”

Subaru: “The space is distorted…?”

Anastasia: “In other words, contrary to what it seems, it ain’t connected to land. We continue walkin’ straight ahead, and no matter how long we walk, we’ll never get there.”

Anastasia nonchalantly clarified the shocking fact, and Subaru could not keep his jaw from dropping in shock. Anastasia, or rather Eridna, should have known it from the beginning, considering how it sounded like the matter had been relayed by Eridna.

Subaru: “So I guess that’s why Reinhard and all the other challengers couldn’t reach it.”

Anastasia: “The destination itself can be seen there. All ya need to do is close the distance… Especially if they’d been frantically attemptin’ to escape the Witchbeasts Den along this path, they’d prolly want to go further.”

Subaru: “…”

For some reason, he thought of the regret of those adventurers that had broken down halfway through their journey, their goal in plain sight, just in range.

This obstacle, which hampered those with the Watchtower as their goal, was an obstacle that even Reinhard had given up on conquering. The distortion of space and the end of the sand sea that actually could not be reached—perhaps that was how it worked.

Subaru: “How do you defeat that?”

Anastasia: “…Ain’t’cha kinda missin’ the point by askin’ ‘bout defeatin’ and not defeatin’ it? This is a natural trap created by the Miasma. There’s no kinda unnatural power goin’ on here.”

Subaru: “A natural trap?! This?!”

On rare occasions, nature would set up traps that seemed to have an intrinsic murderous nature to them.

The frequently-seen mirages at deserts, and the snow-covered roads that bordered the cliffs of areas with heavy snowfall. Thinking about it generally, humans could get killed by things like bottomless swamps or even being pulled in by rising tides.

However, as one would expect, the existence of this Watchtower was—

Subaru: “This is a trap made by nature? That’s an exaggeration, isn’t it?”

Julius: “Well, Pleiades Watchtower was originally built at a place where this phenomenon occurs. If you think about it that way, it is not unnatural. Also, it makes sense.”

Subaru: “It makes sense? In what way?”

Julius: “You cannot forget. Yes, the Sand Dunes lead to the Watchtower, but you must not the tower is not the only location beyond the Sand Dunes. Why do you think the Watchtower is there in the first place?”

Julius chided Subaru’s rude tone, and urged him to think. An answer came to mind immediately after that question. The purpose of the Watchtower they were targeting, was to serve as a seal for the Witch’s Shrine.

Likewise, these Sand Dunes’ unsurpassable trap would be highly effective in deterring the Witch Cult, with their aim to revive the Witch of Envy. He really could not blame anyone for that.

Subaru: “…Hk! Fine. Anyway, forget the details about why and how that tower was built there. I’m concerned about something else. It’s how we’re going to break through that distorted space.”

Anastasia: “Ya know we can’t remove its source, right? This is the land we’re on.”

Subaru: “Daijobu. I’ve understood the terrain and its peculiarities. Next, let’s look for a weakness. Since you volunteered to be a guide, naturally there’s a way out, right? A loophole.”

Anastasia: “I wouldn’t be talkin’ if there weren’t any… Puttin’ it as somethin' like a loophole is sketchy, though."

Anastasia smiled wryly at Subaru, who continued to pressure her, the former displaying a pompous sort of attitude. After that, she nodded at Subaru and Julius, who gazed at her, and spoke,

Anastasia: "During Sand Time, there should be a moment when the space connected to the Watchtower collapses. We'll go through there, and enter the real sand sea. That's the condition of breakin' through, ya see."

2

—The attack on the Sand Dunes that started on the following day had a series of consecutive, difficult situation.

The condition for the path to the Watchtower that Anastasia had disclosed must be shared by everyone on the crew. In other words, most of their traveling would be useless until Sand Time, and meanwhile, the expectation would be too much for them.

However, that anxiety was—

Anastasia: "Even when that key Sand Time comes, whether we can reach the opening'll depend on luck. Thinkin' 'bout it that way, stayin' still doesn't sound like a bad idea."

Meili: "Also, if we alwaaays~ stay at one place, the animals around it might remember our smell. I'll be fine, buuut~ if by any chance you lose me or something, then they'll chase you everywhere."

Those were Anastasia and Meili's opinions of how to survive without problems.

The former's opinion was somewhat unreliable, but the latter's opinion touched on the fact their life was on the line. It was not something he wanted to think about too much, but turning away from danger would be mere cowardice. Daring to be truly courageous, facing fears and nonetheless fighting, was something invaluable.

Subaru: "Right, Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "—? Yeah, right."

Subaru: "Emilia-sama. You shouldn't take it so seriously. This is the time to make a face for a stupid occasion."

He talked with the face inside the dragon carriage periodically, but his motivation did not diminish, even after hearing that the previous day of travel had turned out to be a waste.

They had quite a lot of flexibility with things like the food and water procured at Mirula. He wanted to believe that there was nothing to be anxious about, since the Miasma's effect was being mitigated by Emilia and Beatrice's Spiritual Arts ability.

Subaru: "Actually, I'm getting stressed out from not knowing how many days we'll have to work at this."

???: "Subaru, spit out the sand in your mouth, don't swallow it, in fact. Even if it's not a lot, it's sand with Miasma, I suppose. If you deal with it improperly, you'll have a painful experience later, in fact."

Beatrice warned Subaru, who had become completely used to the feeling of tasting sand in his mouth and therefore less cautious. In Subaru's arms as was usual whenever they would ride dragons, Beatrice took out a water container from his pocket,

Beatrice: "Look, I'll rinse your mouth, I suppose. You can't bathe, so at least clean your mouth, in fact."

Subaru: "Hey hey… Come to think of it, you're clean even without taking a bath."

Beatrice: "That's because Betty's body is made up of Mana, I suppose. So Betty is always clean, in fact. Betty being pretty anywhere at any time is a given, I suppose."

Subaru: "Yeah, yeah, cute, cute."

Beatrice pouted at Subaru's apathetic response, but he patted her head, and he played with the drills that had been pushed into his robe. They were done in braids, today.

Subaru: “Oh, we’ve discovered a group of Witchbeasts again… They only seem like mere animals when they keep away from us like that.”

Meili: “If you move away from me and come close to them, people like onii-san will get bitten in a flash. It’s strange, but aaall the animals around here stare at onii-san.”

He brought Patrasche near the dragon carriage, while looking at the group of Witchbeasts that were gathering at a place off to the side of their path. Meili, while looking at Subaru with a curious expression, murmured “That’s weird”.

It seemed like the girl did not know about the Witch’s Lingering Scent that surrounded Subaru. Subaru thought that it was of the same nature as the Miasma, but it looked as if like he would never be able to understand its true essence. Anyhow, it appeared that the scent had not faded away from Subaru, nor had its property of luring Witchbeasts disappeared.

Subaru: “Oh, could that be a nostalgic Witchbeast? Ram, take a look!”

Ram: “It’s really discomforting how you talk about that, like it’s a part of Ram’s memories. They’re nothing but painful memories to Ram, as well as to you, Barusu.”

The pack of devildogs that were looking at them from afar were the same kind of disastrous Witchbeasts that had attacked the former Roswaal residence. Ram acted harsh towards Subaru, who got enthusiastic unintentionally.

Subaru: “Don’t say that. If I were to depict what they are to me, you, and Rem, I’d say that they built the bridges between us. If they weren’t there, maybe I wouldn’t even be here right now. When you think about that, we don’t have a bad relationship with the… Wait, it is bad! It’s shit!”

Ram: “Stop killing your own enthusiasm by yourself. Watching it elicits pity, listening to it elicits pity, and just thinking about it elicits misery.”

The stress caused by the pack of Witchbeasts a year prior had been revived. Sighing at an heated-up Subaru, Ram quickly shut the dragon carriage's window, thus concluding their conversation.

Unfortunately, it could not be helped. That incident from a year ago, inside of Ram, had been painted over into a state in which it had been resolved in cooperation with Subaru, with the absence of Rem's existence. In truth, it was unclear how would they be able to take on the Witchbeasts without Rem, but it seemed that the amnesia was something she did not feel uncomfortable with.

If the memory of Rem inside of Ram were revived, then the missing parts would be filled, and topics would mesh well too. He would think about it once the time came, although he felt like he'd only get insulted.

Subaru: "Wooow! Sand Time is dangerous! Sand Time is ridiculous! Sand Wind is dangerous!"

Emilia: "I-I made the ice as clear as I could, but if it's no good, then tell me, okay?"

Subaru: "It's already pretty bad! The Almighty Ice Theory's collapsing!"

The crucial Sand Time had arrived. They rushed into the Sand Wind, piercing it, looking for the distortion of space that would lead them to the tower, but they were being struck by the sand's unimaginably overwhelming fury.

What had been a particularly bad miscalculation, was that the ice wall had been utterly defeated, despite having supported Subaru and the team's venture with an imposing performance thus far.

Subaru: "It's an ice wall, and yet the absurd sand is sticking onto it, so I can't see what's in front of me at all! Or rather, receiving such a strong wind with this wide area of ice is beyond suicidal!"

Emilia: "Eh?! What?! Subaru, did you say something?! I can't hear you at all!"

Subaru: "The wind is too strong, and this is beyond suicidal!"

Emilia: “Eh?! You want to die?! No, you can’t! Don’t lose courage!”

Subaru: “Tell me about… Guwaaaah!! Sand violently went into my eyeeee!”

Emilia: “Eh?! Did you say something?! Say it again! Subaru? Subaru—!”

Subaru: “I’ll say it again, such a spartan act is… Guwaaaaah!!”

Emilia: “Subaru—?!”

The Sand Wind was already a gale, was now already close to being a sandstorm.

Although Subaru and the others were serious challengers, their interaction sounded more like a comedy act.

Even having a thin plate of ice with the sole purpose of protecting themselves against the thin sand blowing against them from head-on was nothing but suicidal. In fact, it would have been better to cover their entire body in cloth and make themselves small, to mitigate the wind striking them.

However, the bottleneck in that strategy was—

Subaru: “Keep going! Hang in there, Gian! We can only rely on your horsepower!”

Gian: “…”

The ground dragon took the the Sand Wind head-on as it charged it down. They had already spent a few days conquering the dunes, and the bond that had been forged between them was expressed in the name it was being called.

To put it briefly, the ground dragon of the Gyras species pulling the dragon carriage was named Gian. Its tenacity held the key to break through the Sand Wind. After all, the dragon carriage the girls were on did not have any way to diminish its size against the wind.

As a result, there was no other choice for Gian but to pull on the dragon carriage with all its strength towards the wind.

Julius: “Doing nothing but forcing ground dragons does not suit my style… But we depend on you now.”

Meili: “Heeey, hang in theeere! I don’t wanna go back to that unending sandy plain again!”

Julius cheered on Gian, him holding onto the bridle, as well as Meili, who sat next to him.

Precisely because they were the ones viewing its tenacity closer than anyone else, they could believe in that underlying strength, sending words its way.

???: “…”

Emilia and the others could not even open the small window in the wind, but that they were praying with worry inside the dragon carriage was a sure bet.

As one countermeasure for the sand, Emilia had been asked to tamper with the dragon carriage with ice. Even though a sand-protective board of ice had been stuck onto the front, it could not handle the fierce onslaught of the wind.

Thus, Subaru brought out his last resort, a form somewhere in-between a wing formation capable of directing the wind, and a sharp shape—A spear that would pierce fiercely into the Sand Wind had been fashioned.

Subaru: “It’s an application of a mini four-wheel drive. Reducing its weight to make it light would be fatal, so I couldn’t do that, but I did what I could. Alright, go, Gungnir—Penetrate!”

Gian: “—MM!”

Gian stepped forward with fierce footsteps in response to Subaru’s shout. The dragon carriage that had become a spear bit and tore through the wind closing in on them with a frontal assault, escaping, moving forward, and forward.

Before long, the dragon carriage crowned with the name of the spear of a God burrowed into the scar of the bitten and torn wind, gouged out the sand's tyranny, and then it breaks through—

Subaru: "…"

The moment they escaped the Sand Wind, what swept over Subaru was extremely sharp silence.

The wind that had made such an intense amount of noise close to their ears, the sand that struck them as if to shave their whole bodies, and the Miasma that excited activity from the Witchbeasts; all vanished as if it were all an illusion.

Subaru: "…"

The Sand Time had certainly had an abrupt ending, but it was even more resonating. The vigor of the wind intermingled with sand gradually weakened, and before long, it slowly dissipated like being pulled in by waves, and nothing but the peculiar smell of the sand was left.

However, only at this instance did that occur. In other words, that was proof that the ending of this Sand Time was a special case.

Subaru: "…"

Feeling thirst in his mouth, Subaru gyrated. Upon doing so, he laid his eyes on Julius and the others, who, much like Subaru himself, were dumbfounded on having escaped the Sand Wind. Of course, them being there meant that Gian and the dragon carriage were likewise.

Subaru: "—Julius."

Julius: "Ahh."

Subaru called out to him, and Julius, all tensed up, gave him an acknowledging gesture with his chin. After that and before any other thoughts, they both raised their hands at each other, clenching their fists, and displayed their mutual admiration for breaking through Sand Time.

To Julius's side, Meili was seen wiping the sand off her body, then thanking Gian. This journey's Most Valuable Player was definitely Gian.

They had to show their gratitude to their hearts' content, their appreciation, and reward it as much as possible—but,

Subaru: "Leave that for later! We broke through! We did it! We d—"

Beatrice: "What the! You're always, always being so loud right in my ears, I suppose—Kh!!"

Amidst Subaru's display of joy, his chin got pushed up by the bottom of Beatrice's palm coming up from below.

The excellent blow caused Subaru's head to spin. Toppling over from Patrasche like that, Subaru fell defenselessly onto the sand. Subaru's head was buried in sand, a large amount of sand entering his mouth, and so, getting up immediately, he lashed out at Beatrice.

Subaru: "Why'd you do that to me out of the blue?! What's up with you, people were trying to be joyful! You scared me and made me swallow a bunch of sand!"

Beatrice: "Getting excited by yourself even while holding onto Betty is annoying, in fact! I don't understand things like downshifts, off-roads, gene shifts, burning souls and all that, I suppose! My ears were on fire this whole time, in fact!"

Beatrice turned to Subaru, and she complained to him vehemently while mounted on Patrasche.

Subaru had various things to say about it, but he certainly could not deny the feeling that he had gotten a bit excited and shouted a bunch of random terms. What the hell was a Gungnir?

Subaru: "Ahem… A-Anyways, we broke through the Sand Time safely. First, let's celebrate that. Come on, banzai!"

Beatrice: "…Banzai, I suppose."

Putting aside Beatrice's sulky attitude, they certainly had broken through the sand obstacle.

Giving a few pats to Patrasche's neck, as she had done her best, he showed his gratitude for the braveness of the beloved dragon that did not show tiredness on her gallant face.

After that, Subaru rushed up to the dragon carriage, and to share his delight—

Meili: "—Onii-san."

Subaru: "Ah? What's wrong? You can be a little happier too…"

Meili: "Shut up."

Meili stopped Subaru, him trotting, her sharp words flying towards him as she turned around and looked his way.

What was included in them, was a clear warning about danger.

—Subaru was not enough of a fool to mistake what that meant.

Subaru: "…"

In response to Subaru's silence, Meili nodded while putting a finger on her mouth, and she slowly, slowly, pointed towards the front with her free hand.

Subaru, Julius, and Beatrice were lured by that movement, and gazed on ahead.

Beyond the Sand Wind they faced during Sand Time, the distorted sand sea up to the Watchtower had been cleared. Thus, the Watchtower's silhouette, looming before them, was evidently clearer and larger in comparison to how it had been up until now.

It was possible to think that now there was a definite distance until their goal. However—

Subaru: "…What's that?"

Colorful flower beds were spread in front of Subaru and the others, covering the sandy soil that led to the Watchtower.

Chapter 10:
As if a Flash

—Jumbled together with the vast land of sand dunes, was a flower meadow with a variety of colors.

It was nighttime, and mysteriously, the light of the stars in the sky of the sand dunes was not visible.

The reason why the look of the sky could not be perceived despite there being no gathering of clouds was that the miasma enshrouding the space above ground covered this vast sea of sand, was the explanation given beforehand.

It was not clear to Subaru, whether the one to give that explanation had been Beatrice, or Emilia or Julius.

But, now, what was clear was, rather than the imperceivable look of the sky, the alarm bell of caution directed from the ground, the ominous bloom of the flower meadow undefeated in front of the darkness of the night.

The vivid, rather venomous flowers were, excessively mismatched in the sea of sand.

Subaru: “The sand dunes’, flower meadow…”

Sensing the unsettling feeling while voicing it as well as he pronounced that word, there, Subaru had already been aware.

Emerging at the back of his mind, was the information gathered in the bar of Mirula. The bartender there, who had lost one of his legs, had spoken of the flower meadows that appear in the sand dunes.

If flower meadows are spotted in the sand dunes, run away at full speed, is what he had said.

—Because those are the turfs, of the ferocious, ugly witchbeasts, courtesan bears.

Subaru: “But, even if you say run away at full speed…”

Pointing out the weakness in those words, the muttering Subaru, while gazing ahead, stepped back.

The flower meadow was the territory of a witchbeast, that information was beneficial. There was also the mention of immediately running from the, henceforth, ferocious and atrocious witchbeast. But, if there was a problem, it was its scale.

"…"

Keeping their silence, Subaru and the others, who were lined up in a row, held their breaths. In front of the row, having surmounted the menace of Sand Time, broken through the distortion of space, what had appeared was the continuous desert leading to the watchtower—those lines of sight, were now filled with the stretching flower meadow.

It was, quite literally, dense enough for there to not be a single spot to step on.

Springing forth all of a sudden in the desert, was the paradise of the flower meadow. There were limits even when it came to shadiness.

It was something that would they would have avoided even without the warning of the bar's bartender.

That is precisely why, if flying through the sky was an option, then they would have had chosen that and avoided this without any hesitation whatsoever.

Subaru: "Avoiding it, is impossible, you know."

Murmuring it such that there was no difference between it and a hoarse sigh, Subaru aimed his voice towards Meili.

Under the present conditions, regarding their countermeasures against witchbeasts, relying on Meili was of an unexpected benefit. What she judged controlled their path, but the complexion of her face, glaring at the flower meadow, was quite pale.

With the formation of cold sweat, blood vanished from her light-complexioned skin. Without the need of any words, she understood the negativity of the emergency, as if having picked it up with her own hands.

"…"

Slowly, Patrasche, with her large build, drew closer with unbelievable silence. On her back was Beatrice, seeing the instruction in her eyes saying "Jump on, in fact", Subaru placed his foot on the saddle, and while doing so, silenced all sound and once again positioned himself on top of the dragon.

Whether it was for continuing ahead, or for returning back, it would not be possible for Subaru's legs, who would get swallowed by the sand.

Even if their judgements were made through the reins, they would have to rely upon the well walking legs of Patrasche for fast movement.

Meili: "…For now, it seems everyone is sleepi~ng."

"…"

Holding his breath, how much time had it been since Meili's judgement had been awaited. As if ten seconds had passed, or to him it felt like it'd been nearly an hour,, Meili spilled that out, as if whispering.

Receiving that, Subaru, with energy draining from his shoulders, brought Patrasche closer to the dragon carriage.

Subaru: "That flower meadow is the turf of the Courtesan Bear… that would be correct, right?"

Julius: "In addition to the received prior information, for now that doesn't seem to be wrong. But… it is just that, the scale is larger than what even I had thought."

Beatrice: "That difference in scale, is addition of something as cute as it being twice or thrice, I suppose."

Letting out a single sigh, Subaru and the rest, facing each other, exchanged their thoughts.

Julius and Beatrice too, at the great reception surpassing their expectations, were in a state of having lost their voices. The ones inside the dragon carriage, Emilia and the rest, their voices of delight after having broken through Sand Time too, had come to a halt, as they were showing their faces through the small window, wondering what had occurred.

Emilia: “Subaru, did something happen? The sound of the sand breeze can’t be heard anymore…”

Subaru: “We did a splendid job clearing Sand Time. And, just when I thought we had cleared the first barrier, we’re now standing, expecting the next, second barrier immediately. As you can see.”

Emilia: “As you can see you say… Ah.”

Seeing the clearly visible flower meadow at a single glance through the small window, Emilia’s throat froze in shock. She had also heard what the bar’s bartender had said. Of course, the information she recollected must also have been the same.

Emilia repeatedly blinked her eyes, and beside her, Anastasia and Ram also showed their faces. The two also gazed at the flower meadow, and grimaced at the cruelty of the trials to reach the tower.

Subaru: “Even after passing through the sand wind and Sand Time, the obstacle this time are the flower meadows, huh. Regarding the territory of these courtesan bears, does Anastasia happen to know something?”

Anastasia: “Guidin’ is my business, expectin’ anythin’ more than that’d be a problem. That bein’ said, this seriously is a bit of a problem. What should be done.”

Holding expectations from the opinion of the unexpressed Eridna, she, while shrugging her shoulders, did not seem to possess a plan to overcome the obstacle. Subaru let out a long breath from his nose, and looked at Meili.

Subaru: “Meili, with your physical constitution, you can draw in the witchbeasts, right? courtesan bears too, can’t you pull them out from the flower meadow?"

Meili: "…That's difficu~lt. If it's ten, twenty, or even if it's hundred, I ca~n, but a number more than that and there'll be some children to whom my instructions won't rea~ch."

Subaru: "There's a limit to the number, huh."

Meili: "There's also a limit on the quality~. Even I, can't tell arou~nd the White Whale or the Great Rabbit. The Courtesan Bear is at that point, it's compatibility with me is ba~d. Very different from the Shadow Lion."

Subaru: "Shadow Lion… Ah, that large one who showed up at the mansion, right."

Putting a limit to their conversation about old memories, Subaru considered Meili's opinion and glared at the flower meadow.

Countless, a vast paradise of flowers—just as expected, even the estimate of the number of witchbeasts could not be determined. But, it was clear that it was easily more than a hundred, which was Meili's limit.

Julius: "In the present situation, it could be said that the choices we have are to either Continue or Return."

Facing Subaru, who had drowned in silence, the driver Julius said that lifting two of his fingers, and tilting his neck.

Seeing Julius' fingers, Subaru inhaled.

Subaru: "The choice to return wasn't there from the beginning, you know. It'll be a waste after clearing Sand Time but, with that, nothing of the problem will get solved. Going ahead is meaningless too."

Julius: "If we get under a different Sand Time, or if we take a different path entirely we may able to challenge the watchtower. Putting a halt to consideration and plugging up its path, isn't that simply drawing a hasty conclusion?"

The Sand Time that occurred thrice in the day, amongst them lay the correct answer, and that was Julius' insistence. What Subaru and the others had escaped out from was the Sand Time of late night. Others were the Sand Time of morning and afternoon but, was it possible that the place that would be reached through would differ as different Sand Times were chosen.

No, gesturing that, Subaru shook his head.

Subaru: "For argument's sake, even if a different path was to be taken, I don't think it can possibly guarantee the safety of the path all the way to the watchtower. Here are the flower meadows but, there's the possibility of there being a different obstacle someplace else. Probably, no enjoyable path has been arranged at all."

Julius: "…Certainly. Slightly, excessive hopeful observation, huh."

Subaru: "On top of that, possibly, the situation of Meili being there and the turf of the courtesan bears. This one is actually the best path, that's also a possibility, you know?"

Julius: "This time, excessive pessimism, huh. As always, it is your forte to denounce and uplift, isn't it."

Subaru: "I don't remember ever aiming for that. All right then, Meili. What about you?"

Harshly telling Julius, who rounded his eyes at how unfavorable the situation was, Subaru turned towards Meili.

Silent, gazing intently at the flower meadow, Meili, at Subaru's words, said "Hm…" with her gaze cast downwards.

Meili: "The number is painful, but if you tell me to do it then I'll try doing i~t. It's not like I have to listen to everything which all of the animal-san's have to sa~y."

Subaru: "You don't need to for everything, you say…?"

Meili: "For passing through the flower meadow, it would be fine if just the minimum number of courtesan bears are quietly gotten rid o~f. If a path is opened up, for the rest I'll have them obediently sleep. If they're not attacked then it can be somehow managed with tha~t."

As if gaining certainty in her thoughts while answering the doubt, strength returned to Meili's voice.

At the very least, she had a stance of respecting Subaru's chance of Continuing. That was something to be genuinely grateful for. Subaru nodded to Meili, and then looked at everyone's faces.

Subaru: "I think we should continue. Regardless of what's chosen, there can be no return without jumping into the risk. It's about there being some solution to the problem rather than just running away from it."

Ram: "Even though you rely on others to attain your own objectives, isn't that quite something to declare with that mouth."

Ram fired bitter words at Subaru, who'd suggested to proceed.

Receiving her "typical" words, Subaru let out an "Oh" and raised his thumb.

Subaru: "Ultimately, it's no mistake that we have to rely on Meili. By any chance, if it ends up being that we have to attack the witchbeasts, then we'll have to rely on Emilia-tan or Julius, or Beako. How wicked."

"…"

Subaru: "Oh, also, Patrasche too. My bad, my bad."

He caressed his beloved dragon's head, who'd raised her neck up as if discontent at having her name absent as one of the members he could rely on.

Against that pathetic declaration of Subaru's, Ram, with a frankly astonished expression, shrugged her shoulders.

Ram: "Having self-awareness will be of no help. At best, in that unlikely scenario, fulfill the role of a decoy."

Subaru: “Hearing that is also pretty nostalgic. You may not remember it though.”

“…”

At the words somewhat pertaining to the past, Ram made an anxious face.

Those were words like those in the forest of the witchbeasts, or on the morning of the day they headed out to the capital for the Royal Selection, which he had been slapped with by Ram. With Rem’s existence disappearing from her memories, and accompanying memories altered, now, where must have the back and forth of that day vanished off to.

Subaru: “Let’s go, to take it back. I don’t want to backtrack for even a second, anymore.”

Emilia: “—Hm, I guess that’s so. I also think it’s just as Subaru says.”

At Subaru’s decision, who hardened his fist, consented Emilia with a gallant expression.

She touched the pendant on her neck, and stole the feelings of the Spirit sleeping within the Great Magic Stone into her fingers. And, her amethyst eyes earnestly focused on the flower meadow.

Emilia: “Beyond this flower meadow, is the key to precious memories. Let’s go without stopping. For sure, I will make sure to protect everyone.”

Anastasia: “That, isn’t it a bit too uncool coming from a girl?”

At Emilia’s majestic declaration, Anastasia said that as she looked towards Subaru.

Keep quiet, he wanted to return that as response but, the truth is, if it turns out just as how Emilia says, he thought that that would be the best, as there would be nothing to worry about left.

The distance till the Pleiades Watchtower, gauged with his eyes, had roughly decreased several kilometers.

Before crossing through Sand Time, when they had recklessly proceeded through the Augria Sand Dunes, the supposedly visible distance to the watchtower, seemingly of ten kilometers, had not reduced by even a single one.

Compared to that, this reduction of distance was overwhelming, and it could be said that their arrival was right before their eyes.

Subaru: “But anything and everything, comes after escaping away from this nest of the courtesan bears.”

Completely filling their field of vision, the flower meadow, on top of the sea of sand enshrined majesty, strongly abhorrent.

The plants having their roots embedded into the ground, such natural ecology was nowhere here. The slightly floating stems or roots were, not growing from the ground, but from, none other than, the bodies of those repulsive brutes.

“…”

Around when they would be escaping the territory of the courtesan bears, what Meili had instructed to Subaru and the others was simple—to be as silent as possible.

According to her remarks, the courtesan bears were currently lying dormant. They would not thoughtlessly wake them up, but in exchange for that, it seems they would not be able to get an idea of the ferocity of the witchbeasts getting up after continuing to lay down.

Meili: “The bad animal-san’s being active is the most brutal thi~ng. The exterminated White Whale, when appearing immediately after the fog used to be the most enraged and seemed to be most troublesome too~.”

That was the digression Meili spoke of regarding the White Whale.

Thinking about it in accordance with that exposition of hers, the exact moment when Subaru and the rest had encountered the White Whale at the Lifaus Highway. In other words, immediately afterwards it had woken up, it had been the worst timing.

Memories of suffering resuscitated, he painted his own praise for himself for having that desire of his fulfilled.

Regardless of that—

Meili: “Being angry when woken up goes for everyone, humans, animals, and bad animal-san’s. That’s why~, stay co~mpletely quiet. If you can do just that, I’ll somehow manage from my side.”

Abiding by the remarks of Meili, who possessed such strong will, thus commenced the march of the row who’d clamped down their breathing.

Their battle formation was a substitute for the occasion of capturing the sand dunes, the style of the dragon carriage proceeding further. Sitting as the driver, conveying the intents of the courtesan bears was Meili, and in accordance with those aims Julius drove the dragon carriage further. Patrasche, on which Subaru had a good grip on, attached and detached to the rear of that dragon carriage and raced in a single line.

“…”

Feeling himself bend, Subaru, holding his breath, clutched onto Beatrice’s petite body. Her body temperature could be felt, it seemed that she had stiffened her body and was feeling nervous.

On the side of the dragon carriage, upon the roof of the dragon carriage was present a figure. A figure who need not be suspected, for the familiar silhouette was that of Emilia.

“…”

Noticing Subaru’s gaze, Emilia aimed her amethyst eyes towards him and raised her hand.

The reason why Emilia was lying in ambush like that upon the roof, was so that she could move instantly in case an issue of some sort rose. Though Subaru would have liked her to quietly stay within the dragon carriage, but with the support of Julius' Spirit Arts gone, the only ally capable of long range attacks was Emilia. Though it wasn't as if Beatrice could not do it if she pushed herself, but with a single large blow, Subaru would exhaust his gas.

It was a part of Subaru's inferiority complex that, in terms of strength, he had to depend upon others, for protecting him as well, if he was present.

If that wasn't so, if he did not have to do that, perhaps even Rem would—.

The weakness of thinking in that direction, was always present within Subaru.

Subaru: "—~hk."

"…"

With the rise of such uncompromising emotions beyond his control, the back of Beatrice's head pushed up his jaw. At Subaru's surprise, Beatrice snorted her nose.

Focus on what is in front of you right now, is what she must have had meant. Looking overhead once again, Emilia, too, had pointed her finger towards Subaru, and he understood that she was urging for similar caution.

"…"

Unable to express either compromise or understanding, he exchanged a deep sigh.

The truth was that he wanted to slap his cheek and alter his emotions, but that could put his life at risk, an action that could prove to be deadly.

And, as Subaru's usual detour of thoughts gave rise to his resolution, the party's forefront arrived at the flower meadow practically at the same time.

Meili: “Move.”

At once, Gyan halted pulling the dragon carriage, and Meili’s faint voice slipped into the creaking sound of the wheels and was thrown towards the flower meadow.

At first, there being no response to Meili’s call, Subaru gritted his molars.

Meili: “Move.”

Once again, Meili called out the order.

Even still, indeed, no change was born in the flower meadow. In the vexing duration, Subaru’s stomach lining started to grumble with something similar to itchiness.

And—

“…”

With that distortion, the ground, as if truly being stripped off, the flower meadow “arose”.

“…”

Without thinking, looking straight at the form of the witchbeast, Subaru’s throat seized up.

The witchbeast called the Courtesan Bear, befitting of its name, possessed a figure like that of a bear.

The height of the Courtesan Bear, was perhaps around two meters to three meters. Short legs, in exchange for that, arms long enough to drag on the ground. Its arms visibly concealed under black fur, and claw-like nails growing at the ends, is what he understood.

From the rear to the armpits of that body, the vivid flowers swaying was the sort of impression it projected but, observing that witchbeast from close proximity, one’s eyes tended to turn towards the front rather than the rear of that body.

Though its physique was concealed by black fur, creeping about that body was not body hair. Closely packed, wrapping the body were the finely jumbled together roots of the flowers. They appeared as if blood vessels that were floating on the skin, the minute roots were covering the body of the witchbeast.

Subaru: "—~hk."

On the body covered with closely packed roots, the parts which the roots did not reach were abnormally parched, and both the flesh and skin had withered. Its facial features, its cranium had reached the limit of dehydration to the point where it was visibly obvious, and its circular protuberant eyeballs were bloodshot, wielding hatred for everything in this world.

That seemed to be, as if it was slurping the life of the flowers whose roots it had pasted upon its own body.

The courtesan bears could not co-exist with the flowers. Clearly, they had taken away the lives of the flowers.

"…"

The witchbeast, which gave off an unbearable feeling of revulsion by merely looking at it, followed Meili's words with sluggish movement.

Slowly pulling out its body from the ground, as the roots got uprooted from the desert from which nothing could be absorbed, a thousand sounds of snapping limitlessly chained.

For opening up space just so that the dragon carriage could pass, the moving courtesan bears reached a hundred in count. And as if knowing no end, their numbers continued to increase.

Julius: "Hugh."

Faintly, Julius' sigh was audible, as the dragon carriage resumed proceeding.

Julius, in that state, with his body hair standing up due to the spectacle in front of his sight, must have failed to put up with it.

Attached to the rear of the dragon carriage, Subaru and the others as well entered the path bloomed open by the courtesan bears.

Subaru: "…Ugh."

At exactly that instant, when Subaru's sense of smell crossed the threshold of the courtesan bears' turf, a violent aroma of flowers could be felt.

It seemed to be different from the stench of the time of confronting the Sand Earthworm, with respective difference in quality from that, the sweet scent jumbled together in the situation did not mean that the sense of violence had changed.

Their nostrils were invaded, their intracerebral gears simply acquired the hallucination of the sweet scent.

"…"

Developing serious dizziness, the repulsive stench awakened a headache.

Something so exasperating, that he would not mind the sand gusts at all compared to this. This toxic aroma coiling up within his whole body must be driven away, is what he thought with utter seriousness.

Such wishes of Subaru were fruitless, and in the absence of any flow of wind, the party proceeded towards the interior of the interior of the flower meadow.

Subaru: "—~hk."

As if having noticed something, Beatrice pulled Subaru's sleeve. Looking at her wondering what had come up, she was incessantly concerned regarding something behind them.

Turning around at that gesture whilst keeping that repulsive premonition in mind, the meaning of Beatrice's reaction could be understood.

The space in the flowers that opened up in accordance with Meili's instructions, looking at the passage of the dragon carriage and Patrasche, from the close proximity to that till the very end, the scenery was steadily returning to how it originally was.

Meili's orders came true, and the dragon carriage being able to pass at this particular point in time according to the instructions had been achieved. Returning to their original positions, and entering into the state of lying dormant, could that be their plans.

Even if they did not intend to return, they were still unable to stop mid-way. Of course, taking a break in the midst of this nest of these witchbeasts, such jokes needed to be refrained from as well.

Subaru: "—?"

The moment immediately after he'd thought that, the dragon carriage's advance came to a pause.

Looking at the front wondering what had happened, the reason behind the dragon carriage's halt was explicit. A lone Courtesan Bear, in front of the dragon carriage, got up and stood still, and turned those hollow eyes towards the two drivers.

"…"

With that one alone making suspicious movements, the movements of the courtesan bears in the vicinity too, started to change. The feet of the courtesan bears, who had, till now, stolidly and obediently made way, stopped, and as if tracing the actions of the one staring at the dragon carriage, their gazes accumulated on the dragon carriage.

—This is bad, was the intuitive realization Subaru had.

Looking back, they had already covered several hundreds of meters since entering the flower meadow. With the pathway behind plugged up, it was clear that they had been surrounded by the courtesan bears from all directions. Their numbers were in the hundreds, or possibly even in the thousands. A violent difference in numbers.

"…"

Thinking that far, his gaze entwined with that of Emilia’s, who was on top of the roof.

Emilia was looking down onto the Courtesan Bear in front, and was puzzled over what kind of judgement she should deal it. If the outbreak of a fight, just as till now, could be avoided, then clearing the frontward of the dragon carriage with Emilia’s magic, and running through was the optimal way.

However, she did not want to mistake the timing and rush things too fast.

Meili: “Shh”

”□□□”

And in front of Subaru and the rest who were puzzled regarding their judgement, the one with utmost composure was Meili.

Putting a finger on her lips, she calmed the indecisive Subaru and the others beforehand. Following afterwards, she pointed the finger she had on her lips towards the front, and scowled at the Courtesan Bear looking at her.

Meili: “Tch tch tch.”

A finger pointing outwards, and a sound, as if flicking her tongue, leaked out of Meili’s lips.

That was a sigh, like what humans made to soothe kittens. If the subject truly was a kitten then it would give a pleasant impression as well, but with the fiendish witchbeast as the subject, there was no mitigation whatsoever.

However, all of Meili’s fingers jolted at her tongue’s sound, and gradually, the Courtesan Bear’s line of sight shifted, from the two drivers, to Meili alone, and then moved to Meili’s fingers.

Meili: “Tch tch tch… tch~.”

At the same pace, obtaining certainty that the Courtesan Bear’s focus was on the finger, Meili slowly swung her hand, which had her fingers pointed towards the right of the dragon carriage. Lured to the movement of that arm, the Courtesan Bear, which had brought the dragon carriage to a standstill, turned its face towards that and moved, taking a single step in that direction.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

At the Courtesan Bear’s conduct, of distancing itself away from the dragon carriage, a reflexive sigh of relief leaked out of Subaru’s throat.

Emilia or Beatrice too, who had stiffened their bodies up, too, loosened their shoulders in relief. When the one who had caused a standstill moved, the other courtesan bears too, tried to return to their own movements of distancing themselves.

At the same pace, the march through the flower meadow resumed—was how it was supposed to be.

“—~hk!!”

At that moment, the thread of tension snapped, and nobody could be condemned for raising their voice.

Suddenly, in the situation of enduring under compulsion of utmost limits of the stalemate, the thing known as the heart could not stand strong. That goes for humans, and for Ground Dragons as well.

Showered upon with the pressure of losing to the Courtesan Bear, Gyan, gave out a short growl, and stamped its feet on the ground, as if enraged.

Subaru: “Oh sh—~hk.”

At Gyan’s roar, which abruptly cut off the silence, the courtesan bears, which were in a state of lying dormant, reacted altogether at once. The one attempting to distance itself away from the dragon carriage turned back, and that reaction infected the environs as well—the witchbeasts rose, and leapt upon the dragon carriage with their bare fangs.

Immediately before—

Emilia: “—El Huma!!”

The mana materialized rapidly, and the spearhead of the formed ice lance penetrated through the witchbeast’s cranium.

The sharp vanguard of ice pierced through its large mouth, infringing upon its oral cavity and broke through its nape. Its brain churned, the Courtesan Bear, without raising its voice, collapsed backwards as it faced annihilation. Caught up in that vigor, several courtesan bears, without pause, toppled sideways.

Subaru: “Run—!!”

Shouted Subaru, instantaneously after witnessing the attack by Emilia, who was on top of the dragon carriage.

Concording to that call, Julius operated the reins and the dragon carriage started running fiercely at once. Of course, Patrasche, too, followed that, jumping away from the side of the witchbeasts standing stock still, and broke off in a savage sprint.

“—~hk!”

Subaru: “They’recoming-they’recoming-they’re-comingthey’re-coming-they’recoming-they’recoming-they’recoming—ing!!”

Delayed by a single beat, the cutthroat, fierce voice tore apart the night of the Augria Sand Dunes.

The vast flower meadow was shredded apart at once, with fangs and unsightly appearances naked, the flock sloth of courtesan bears advanced on, aiming for the dragon carriage fiercely plunging its way through.

Beatrice: “Subaru! Firmly grip on or you will get thrown off, in fact!”

The hallucination bathing in strength, was the pressure of the thirst for blood and appetite of the innumerable courtesan bears.

With thick arms endowed with claws turned overhead, their merciless attack struck Subaru as well, who was riding the dragon. A direct hit and his body would get torn off easily, with strength that could assuredly force his internal organs to protrude outwards.

However, just when it was on the brink of striking, a bluish-white glimmer cut in between, and pierced through the witchbeasts.

Emilia: “Hiy! Yah! Alright ~hk! You… these, Huma~!”

As always, with the Mana forming a whirlpool and her voice coming from her heart, giving the impression that the bluish-white light was performing a boisterous dance in the dark sky, that was the transformation of countless sharp spearheads pointing above the ground into blades of ice.

That was, immediately after the stagnation of a single moment, firing as if having acquired the propulsive force, tearing the craniums, the arms, the torsos, the legs of the courtesan bears swarming upon the dragon carriage into shreds, giving rise to spouts of blood.

Subaru: “O~o~o~o~h! As expected of Emilia-tan! I’ve fallen for you again!!”

Emilia: “This is not the time for saying such things, is it! Run!”

Subaru: “Yes!”

Having his life saved by Emilia’s follow-up, Subaru further accelerated Patrasche.

And with the sudden exchange, Emilia was coping with the fight with such composure that it was surprising. In retrospect, even if Emilia had shirked from fighting, it was not as if fighting intimidated her. The tendency to avoid fighting within her was, the indecision that had been erased once that battle had broken out.

Ram: “Barusu, run till you die. If you do not wish to die!”

Subaru: “Yeah, of course—eh, Ram?!”

The tough fight being put up by Emilia, the bluish-white light mowed down the frontward of the dragon carriage altogether, and the group of courtesan bears, who had taken a roundabout path, were frozen all at once.

Within Gyan’s rush and breaking through the ice sculpture, sitting on the driver’s seat gripping to the reins, was suddenly now Ram, having moved from the passenger compartment. At Ram, who was skillfully handling the reins, driving the earth dragon which was in an agitated state, Subaru peeled open his eyes and let his gaze wander around.

Subaru: “What about Julius?!”

Ram: “Even if there are no means for a long range attack, it seemed it would be unhelpful if he were to be the driver. That’s why.”

At a glance, Ram looked towards the rear at Subaru’s call. Lured to that line of sight and looking backwards, Subaru thoughtlessly felt dumbfounded.

Biting the sand, beside the dragon carriage with its wheels roaring, clinging onto one of those ornaments, waving about the grasped knight sword, was the form of Julius, clearing away the approaching witchbeasts.

Julius: “Burdening Emilia-sama with responsibilities and such, cannot be done either, you see.”

Subaru: “Was that directed at me!”

Julius: “That would be—”

”□□□”

Putting a halt to his words there, Julius had his knight sword meet with the claws of the approaching witchbeasts. The decapitating slash weaved through the gap of those claws, and deeply gorged into the arms of the courtesan bears. At the same pace, the dancing tip of the sword pierced through the throats of the witchbeasts, who let out screams, and as if a flash, it granted death by destroying their brainstem.

That dance, with minimal destruction, was truly debonair.

Julius: “Wrong.”

Successively crushing the witchbeasts, Julius voiced what remained of his reply to Subaru while dusting away his sword. Subaru made a bitter face at that gesture, tasting reassurance and a sense of defeat.

Simply, having put Emilia in charge of the long range, clearing away the close range was down to Julius. If that structure were to continue, the concern regarding the dragon carriage could be saved for later.

Rather, the problem was, instead of other affairs, but in this course.

Subaru: “Beako, can you go for it?”

Beatrice: “Subaru too, be careful that you don’t run out of gas, I, suppose—!”

Above Patrasche, raising his body, Subaru held the reins with one hand, and the armed Beatrice with the other, and made her small body stand on top of the dragon.

And steadily clasping each other’s hands, something throbbed in the interior of Subaru’s guts. That something, as if seeming sediment, wielded heat, and slowly streamed from Subaru’s body into Beatrice’s.

Beatrice: “Minya!”

The crystals of violet materialized with the chant, and aimed for the witchbeasts blocking the path ahead of the Ground Dragon’s nose. Accurate aiming, momentary advancement, the outcome visible immediately afterwards.

Raising a sound as that of shattering glass, the magical attack directly struck the witchbeasts, and the crystals fragmented. However, the following moment, the bodies of the witchbeasts fragmented similarly as well.

Subaru: “Alright, good going, Beako!”

Beatrice: “But, reckless firing cannot be done, in fact! Cautiously saving… Minya!”

Subaru: “What about the cautiously saving?!”

Beatrice’s battle strength, depended upon the mana left within Subaru.

In order to oppose the overwhelmingly advancing threat, even Beatrice was unable to compromise much. Tasting the seeming sense of loss, as if his soul was being curtailed with every single attack of magic, Subaru, talkative and composed, abated Beatrice’s nervousness.

Of course, such consideration was clearly visible to Beatrice.

Meili: “A~h, enough enough! Why did it turn out like thi~s! This, could have been taken awa~y!”

And, the one who had been keeping their silence till now, the final ordnance stood up and trod.

A driver, having been sat beside Ram, Meili, with her eyes tearing up, surveyed the swarm of courtesan bears crowding around their surroundings while making a red face. And, she pointed a finger towards the witchbeasts who would not obey her.

Meili: “I’ll give a scolding to the bad, bad animal-san’s! Come, Sand Earthworm!”

Subaru: “—No way?!”

Immediately after Meili pouted and declared like a child, the desert that had been turned up thanks to the rise of courtesan bears, and with the underneath of that sand being stirred up subsequently, a big frame rushed out.

Swallowed within the vigor of the gigantic beast pushing its whole body out from the underground, the countless courtesan bears dragged within were launched up into the sky. Falling on the sand from a high altitude, the witchbeasts had their bones broken, and the unfortunate courtesan bears directly above that humongous mouth, got chewed up.

Thrusting out while tearing apart the desert, the one laying devastation upon the repulsive flower meadow was that Sand Earthworm.

Wafting the stench, raising a strange voice slashing through twilight, the Sand Earthworm determined the courtesan bears clinging onto the dragon carriage as its prey, and leaping with that big frame, minced and destroyed them at once.

Meili: “Go~, Sand Earthworm! Crush everyone, everyo~ne!”

Subaru: “Are you serious, hey! Areyouseriousareyouseriousareyouserious, heyheyhey!”

The weight, capable of creating rumbles in the ground, writhed through the sand sea, and the wails of the courtesan bears being crushed by the pressure of the humongous frame echoed. courtesan bears too, did not possess a petite build whatsoever, but they could not possibly compete with the figures of Sand Earthworms, whose overall length could be even above ten meters.

The overwhelming masses turned into the outcome of collisions, and the courtesan bears got successively turned into corpses.

At the circumstance which was a decisive battle between monsters at this point, Subaru had no words appropriate for it.

Emilia and Beatrice’s magic, Julius’ swordsmanship, Meili’s unusual talent narrowly cleared the way, and the dragon carriage and Patrasche rapidly proceeded through the flower meadow.

Meili: “A~h! The Sand Earthworm i~s!”

Meili’s shriek was heard.

Observing it, the Sand Earthworm, possessed by a great number of courtesan bears who had their claws gouged into that humongous frame, was shedding large quantities of bodily fluids from its entire body, and collapsed on the ground.

The outer skin of the slimy and soaking wet Sand Earthworm was not something as sturdy as that of snakes or insects. The skin sustaining the soft body easily fell prey to the claws, and a wail of agonizing death reverberated through the sand sea.

Meili: “Next! Nextne~xt! Keep coming fa~st!”

Once a single giant collapsed, Meili clasped her hands with a pallid face. And, lured to that, once again the sand was uplifted, and a different Sand Earthworm made its appearance.

This time there were six at the same time, however, compared to the first one, they were twice as small, and if they were to get enclosed by the swarm of courtesan bears, they would get hunted down in the blink of an eye.

Subaru: “At this pace… ~hk.”

They would get out-pushed in the amount of violence. With a sense of terrible hopelessness, Subaru desperately looked at his environs in search of something that could help them break out of this deadlock. And, he noticed.

The watchtower that had been so distant, was close enough to be said that it was right before their eyes.

Subaru: “Just a little bit left! If we can follow up to the watchtower at this pace—”

”□□□”

It was not as if the witchbeasts would withdraw with this, but it appeared likely that there may lie some fearful power there.

At that moment, it was not as if he had thought something special.

However, if they were to follow up to the watchtower, he felt there may be the strength to break free of the deadlock of this situation.

The spirit of hope was like clinging onto straws. And in reality, that was no mistake.

Subaru: “At this rate—”

”□□□”

However, that strength was not something so convenient.

It was the iron hammer which rained incessantly without bias upon all insolent comrades approaching the Pleiades Watchtower.

“—?”

Pushing open his eyes desperately, supporting Beatrice while clinging to Patrasche, Subaru scowled at the watchtower visible in front of him.

Sweat dripping along, the moment he dimly narrowed his eyes, Subaru felt a faint sense of discomfort.

The core of the tower, something was visible there, as if shining.

Subaru: “What’s…”

That, he was unable to resume onto the final word.

“…”

—The luster bolted through the sky, and its aim unchangingly landed a direct hit on Subaru’s cranium.

At that moment, everything above the neck of Natsuki Subaru was blown off by the attack and evaporated with the same unconsciousness.

"…"

There present was nobody who could observe and raise their voice, at the tragic scene of a single moment.

For some reason, those who would have had observed it, and those who would have had screamed at it, had been thoroughly pulled up by the root and branch.

The Earth Ground Dragon which had lost its head, giving rise to a report, collapsed.

Caught up within the vigor of the dragon carriage toppling sideways, the human bodies who had indeed lost their craniums were pulverized, shattered under the pressure, turned into chunks of meat.

Only the pond of blood lay upon the sand, and the parched sand gulped down the blood spilt from the bodies.

Before long, gradually, slowly, the fine particles of sand dragged anything and everything rotting on the sand sea down to their belly, and concealed them.

The flowers of blood, as if the only visage of their journey, bequeathed the vivid colors.

However, even those flowers of deep red, disappeared within the evermore swallowing sand.

—Here, the party greeted annihilation.

Chapter 11:
The Audible Tearful Voice

1

—What had been visible was the luster, nothing but that.

He remembered, he had tilted his neck upwards.

Also the moment initially afterwards, one section of the tower in front, white luster, and him narrowing his eyes at that dazzle.

However, what lay in his memories was only till that point. He did not remember anything thereafter.

Neither ache, nor impact, nor terror, he did not feel a single thing.

For Natsuki Subaru, these were all indispensable retinues in the advent of Death.

Neither did he have the ache to make him wail in tears, nor the impact that would scatter his body into a thousand fragments, nor the terror of losing everything.

Otherwise that Death, may have had been a much more kind-hearted Death than what Subaru was normally acquainted with.

Above all, Subaru, who had died and gotten his brain evaporated, did not have any free time whatsoever to think about it, nor could he merely think back to it and absorb himself into it.

As if in the blink of an eye, the moment immediately after he thought his field of vision had been caged within darkness, the lost Life of Natsuki Subaru was resuscitated, regurgitated, and once again, into reality, was abandoned.

—Was abandoned.

2

???: “—Tch tch tch.”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

For a single moment, feeling the weight of gloom upon his five senses, as if clogging up his breath, Subaru opened his eyes.

Discerning the clamorous sound of the whole body of the dragon carriage, his contracting muscles screamed out in pain. The reins he had clenched so tightly that his nails could eat away into his palm, and the warm temperature insisting their existence, Beatrice.

Subaru: “…Ah?”

Within his faint field of vision, he looked down at the back of Beatrice’s head from close proximity.

The violent sweet aroma sliding into his nostrils, was again, different from the one when he had hugged the young girl. Beatrice’s scent was like that of freshly prepared sweet confectioneries, but what wafted in the air now was, as if adhesive toxicity, self-assertive sweetness.

He had memories of this sweetness. It was natural. It was what, just recently, he had continued to smell ad nauseam.

Rather, even if it was only for a limited number of minutes, what was special was that it had been interrupted.

???: “Tch tch tch tch.”

Upon Subaru’s dusky consciousness, reached a rhythmic sound, as if the clicking of a tongue.

In front of his eyes, was Beatrice with her body stiffened up, and Patrasche who was holding her breath in, watching over what lay ahead of its nose, the dragon carriage carrying Emilia and Rem, and standing ahead of that dragon carriage was a repulsive witchbeast.

With fine roots stretching across its entire body, the truculent witchbeast starved of blood—it was a Courtesan Bear.

For a single moment, unable to express it as a déjà vu, the fresh sense of reality returned to Subaru.

That feeling was not to be doubted. It was Return by Death.

Natsuki Subaru had just now, experiencing Death, returned to this moment in time.

Subaru: "—~hk."

—But, of all things, returning to this moment?!

Rather than the moment of transpiration of Death, he cursed at how unfavorable the timing he had Returned by Death to was.

Inviting the interest of the witchbeast by the sound of clicking her tongue, the one trying to remove it from the front of the dragon carriage silently, was Meili. That scheme was only barely successful, however, and it fell through in the end.

The Ground Dragon pulling the dragon carriage—Gyan, was unable to bear the pressure of the witchbeast, was the reason for it.

"…"

While being aware of that, Subaru instantaneously hesitated in making a judgment.

The state of the vital Gyan was invisible from the rear. But, Julius, who had clenched the reins, would not encourage the unusualness of the Ground Dragon. There simply lay nothing special there for him to turn his eyes towards.

Each one in the dragon carriage was praying for the success of Meili's contact with the courtesan bears.

However, unfortunately, that was—

Meili: "Tch tch tch… tch~."

Meili's voice wielded a faint sense of stress, and her finger pointed towards the right of the dragon carriage. Lured to that movement, the Courtesan Bear slowly stepped its feet ahead in that direction.

An ambience of solace originated within the dragon carriage, and for Beatrice as well. However, Gyan was unable to stand up to the slicing of the thread of tension.

Subaru: “Juli…”

“—~hk!!”

Without being able to make the correct judgement, his call was obstructed by Gyan’s roar.

As if going through the recent progression once again, Gyan stomped the ground while letting out a roar, and at that wail and rumbling, the courtesan bears’ consciousness was awoken at once.

Further exposing their bloodshot eyes, the courtesan bears leapt with their drool dripping down. Bluish-white radiance perforated through those craniums, the flow had been completely the same until the blast.

Emilia: “El Huma!!”

Emilia, standing on top of the dragon carriage, turned over both her hands, as if fluttering in the wind, and created a maelstrom of ice blades in the sky, with movement like that of an elegant dance. The revolving blades of ice successively were fired, with their aim set above ground, as if the encircling notes of a musical saw, the sloth of courtesan bears was swallowed within the lethal weapons of ice, as they raised their death wails with their limbs being slashed away.

Subaru: “R-Runrunrunrunrunrun—~hk!!”

Pulling the reins and speeding up Patrasche, the dragon carriage, too, moved when Subaru raised his voice.

He glanced sideways at the driver, Ram, who had suddenly appeared, having exchanged the position of driver with Julius, and at Julius, wielding his knight sword, who launched sword slashes upon the approaching courtesan bears, along with a barrage of kicks, that was what he was able to understand.

—Completely, the same.

Having gone with the flow, Subaru strongly, strongly gritted his molars.

His consciousness being unable to catch up, due to the sudden Return by Death would not make for an excuse.

Putting off the impact of having passed away, Subaru's heart covered his remorse.

It could be said that ever since he became aware of Return by Death, up until now, this had been the first time for Subaru that he had wasted Return by Death.

Missing out on the information received through Return by Death, the result was that he was simply heading for another death. However, this was the first time he was tracing the very same situation, despite Return by Death, without even any establishment of a trick of some sort. Subaru's own puzzlement, unrelated to his intentions while thinking that, the rail of destiny was yet the same.

Beatrice: "—Subaru! There is no free time for you to be spacing out, in fact!"

Subaru: "—~hk!"

Lying face down in regret, tightly gripping to the reins was Subaru, and Beatrice struck her back on his chest. Looking ahead at the light impact and voice, he was able to see the truculent witchbeasts advancing speedily.

At the same time, grasping the small palm reaching out, making Beatrice stand on top of the dragon, thus commenced the counterattack.

Beatrice: "Minya! Minya! One more time, Minya, I suppose!"

Through the palm, the aimless Mana within Subaru's body, was absorbed and resolved into power for Beatrice. The materialized crystals of violet pierced into the bodies of the witchbeasts obstructing their path, and as the crystals shattered those bodies, Patrasche proceeded while stepping firmly onto the scattered fragments.

Meili: “Held in rese~rve, Sand Earthworm!!”

Hearing Meili’s shout, who had grown desperate, the sand at the corner of his vision spouted up.

The desert covered by courtesan bears, making its appearance from further below that, the Sand Earthworm tossed several numbers of the witchbeasts within its huge jaws, and putting together its humongous frame enough to make one look upwards, proceeded to crush its enemies.

The second great decisive battle of monsters, but Subaru was aware of how unfavorable this was.

Ram: “—Barusu! Run till you die! If you do not want to die!”

At Subaru, who was grilling in formless restlessness, a seemingly reprimanding voice was launched.

Controlling the reins at the driver’s position, driving the agitated Gyan, was Ram. She was driving the dragon carriage fully in control with her handling of the reins no inferior than that of Rem but, at this pace, this was no good.

Subaru: “It will be no good if you keep going straight ahead at this rate! Ram, change direction!”

Ram: “——~hk! What are you trying to say? The watchtower is right in front, the surroundings are all territories of the witchbeasts!”

Subaru: “That is plausible but still, that won’t be any good!”

Patrasche lowered her head, and pierced right through the torso of the Courtesan Bear in front. While having the writhing witchbeast right in front of her nose, the jet black Ground Dragon rushed ahead madly while using the body of the witchbeast as a shield. The continuous slashes being hammered in tore apart the body of the witchbeast, and its dancing fallen petals and fresh blood soaked the sand sea.

Ram: “Barusu, what did you notice! Say it clearly!”

Subaru: “There wouldn’t be any problems if I could explain clearly! At any rate, it’s a change of course!”

At Ram’s words, which had a tone of irritation, all Subaru could do as well was to yell violently back. He himself realized it was a terribly absurd response, but he had no measures other than that.

After all, the current Subaru was unaware of the cause of his death.

His Return by Death was unquestionable, and yet, he could not remember the reason for his death.

Noticing it, regarding the point of Return by Death, this time it was close to how it felt when he had met Death for the first time in the Roswaal mansion.

From the point of confirming the cause of death, and eliminating that problem.

Subaru: “The time for that, is nowhere here!!”

Having been caught up by the witchbeasts, he had fallen prey to those slashes. Just as how the bar’s bartender had warned, had he become the cruel bait of having his intestines slurped on. Otherwise, inadvertently falling from Patrasche, he may have unfortunately fractured his neck. It was a thought really, truly difficult but, he may have broken down due to Beatrice utilizing his mana excessively, that was not impossible either.

Subaru: “Whichever it may be, the memories haven’t cleanly, suddenly stopped till now.”

Even if his guts were cleaved open, even if he was put down in ice, even if his head was crushed by a morningstar, even if his whole body was devoured greedily by rabbits, even if he was eaten away by entangling with an absurd Authority, Subaru did Return by Death.

And regardless of what the cause of death may be, eliminating and defeating what had occurred right before his own Death which was stalemating him, it had been used as a method for that.

That fragile string of fate, was nowhere visible this time.

And the time to search for that fine string, was not bestowed upon Subaru and the others.

—This was simply, the worst entrapment of Return by Death.

In the scenario where he possibly passed away by the same method, it would be a completely fumbling restart.

Before that happened—

Subaru: “Move from here! Whatever you do, don’t get close to the tower!”

Ram: “Again, why so…”

Subaru: “The tower will shine! Probably, that light is dangerous!”

Ram: “Hu~h—?!”

In the situation where they had been nothing but cornered, even Ram did not have the time to varnish the blades of her words with poison. While clashing with the voice possessing a frank tone of repudiation, Subaru pulled the reins and conveyed that to Patrasche.

To not go straight ahead, but divert their purpose at any rate.

Subaru: “The tower may be visible, right in front but…!”

Right in the middle of the advancement of the courtesan bears in great numbers in the sand sea, the watchtower right in front of their eyes was clearly getting closer. However, what awaited them if they truly got close to it was only the scorch of before.

For that to not happen, what Subaru had to choose was—

Subaru: “Run backwards! It would be better to pass through Sand Time one more time! Let’s go back to that earlier sand dune!”

Ram: “What nonsense have you been…”

Emilia: “Ram! Do as Subaru says!”

At the determination where it could not be helped but think he had lost his mind, Ram raised a voice of repudiation, which Emilia detained. While she purged the witchbeasts with countless ice shards, she nodded at Subaru.

Emilia: “Because there’s no way Subaru would say something weird without giving thought to it!”

Ram: “Barusu ordinarily lives by wetting his pants with thoughtless words and nonsense.”

Emilia: “Because there’s no way Subaru would say something weird without giving thought to it in a dangerous situation!”

Subaru: “Thank you for going out of your way and correcting it!!”

Whether he should lament being treated as a young wolf in sheep’s clothing, or be delighted that he was a man who could be relied upon in times of a pinch.

Keeping both introspection and conceit for later, Patrasche, moving according to Subaru’s intentions, thrust her feet on the sandy soil and suddenly turned round. Her tail cutting through the air mowed down the abdomen of the witchbeast, and kicking down one of the courtesan bears with her leg, she ran backwards.

Ram: “—~hk! The two of you on the top and side! Make sure you don’t fall off!!”

Seeing their sudden turning around, Ram, too, had Gyan turn around by skillfully handling the reins. Naturally, the dragon carriage, having to eat the centrifugal force at that moment, inclined greatly and turned sideways but—

Julius: “Emilia-sama! The foothold!”

Emilia: “Eh? Ah, is that so! Yes!”

Thrusting his sword fiercely into the body of the vehicle and supporting his body, Julius brought aid to Emilia’s attention to the inclining dragon carriage. Emilia rounded her eyes at those words, and magical power headed instantaneously towards directly underneath the dragon carriage. As if assisting the wheel that had tilted due to the inclination, a slope of ice was born, and the dragon carriage, as if painting a semi-circle, rushed and evaded toppling sideways.

Furthermore, at the same pace, without killing off the vigor, commenced the backward dash which followed Patrasche.

—Immediately afterward.

Subaru: “Wha… ~hk?!”

The moment following the commencement of the backward dash, echoed a metallic shrill as if slashing one’s eardrums.

Thoughtlessly shrugging his shoulders was Subaru. From the rear, a sudden gale was born.

Subaru: “The one right now was… eh, heyheyheyhey!”

Beatrice: “What, I suppose… huh?!”

Sensing the enigma arise behind, Subaru and Beatrice, turning back at the same time, expressed astonishment.

On top of the dragon carriage racing immediately behind them, Emilia and Julius, too, widened their eyes.

Meili: “Sand Earthworm, -chan is… ~hk.”

Leaning forward her body on the driver’s seat, with her throat trembling in astonishment, was Meili.

In front of her eyes, in that shape, a visage behind the dragon carriage, as if concealing it, with the large build of the Sand Earthworm being thrown up. With the frame of a span over ten meters, with thickness of body such that two men may not be able to rotate it with their arms. Protruding its head above the ground, the form lording over its prey seemed as if it was the ruler of the sand sea.

The body of that Sand Earthworm, receiving the direct hit of that something, was blown off into fragments.

That slimy body skin suffered a thousand pierces, and the thick body of great length was splendidly divided into two. The body that had lost its head toppled sideways, and the head, having lost its support, slowly, slowly, headed towards them, trickling—.

Subaru: “Get aside, dodge i~i~i~t—!!”

The fallen head of the Sand Earthworm had excess mass which could crush the dragon carriage under its pressure.

With the death agony of the witchbeasts crushed under the pressure of the body that had, just now, fallen behind, Subaru and Ram subsequently transmitted instructions to the ground dragons, overbearingly averted their routes and escaped the course of the Sand Earthworm’s direct hit.

“—~hk.”

Raising a shrill tearful voice, the Sand Earthworm’s head fell onto the sand sea with great vigor.

The sand whirled up, the bones of the courtesan bears, injured while escaping, crumbled into fragments and fell and their limbs, having been caught up in the impact, were blown off. At the same pace, the head of the Sand Earthworm bounced, while entangling with the inevitable future of the witchbeasts, tumbled, and finally suffered countless slashes, quickly turning into fragments of flesh.

Subaru: “Danger, danger, ous, ous!”

Beatrice: “Subaru, this was a mistake, in fact!”

He’d felt relieved for evading the crisis of the moment but, instantaneously, Beatrice rejected that relief.

Looking at the young girl at his chest wondering what had happened, she cleared away the fallen, fluttering petals with a troubled expression, and surveyed the rear,

Beatrice: “From the one just now, the dragon carriage on the other side has gone astray, I suppose! There is only Betty and you!”

Subaru: “What did you say?!”

Pursuing her gaze in panic, Subaru confirmed the absence of the figure of the dragon carriage in the surroundings.

Only the distant radiance of bluish-white mana and roars of witchbeasts, furthermore, discovering a place slightly exposed to the sandy gale, he was able to understand from his view through the immense distance, the hard fight being put up by Emilia and their new servant, Meili.

However, even if they tried to meet up with the other side, the space between them was overflowing with a countless number of courtesan bears. And for Subaru and the rest, with diminished number of moves, there were no indications that the fierce attack of the witchbeasts had been weakened.

Subaru: “Simply, half the war potential! The number of enemies are double!”

Beatrice: “Compared to earlier, it has increased to four times, I suppose!”

Brandishing the claws, at the face of the courtesan bears attacking, the cusp of the whip let out a roar.

The striking impact, fortunately, crushed the eyes of the witchbeast and breaking through the one trembling in violent pain, Patrasche dashed once again. However, that course of direction had a different direction than that of the dragon carriage of Emilia and the others.

Subaru: “Patrasche! Not this way…”

Beatrice: “It is this Ground Dragon’s own judgement to be left alive, in fact. Rather than Subaru or Betty, leaving it to its instincts would be better, I suppose!”

Interrupting Subaru’s outcry, Beatrice kicked and dispersed away the witchbeasts standing in their way with magic. Patrasche marked the points where the tight besiegement and broke through them, risking her own life for protecting the two on its back.

Subaru: “Shit! This again… this shape again! What am I doing!”

Swinging the whip, he struck the faces of the witchbeasts trying to get closer. However, with this, he would not be able to stop the power of the witchbeasts, having an expression of having lost reason.

Inflicting fatal wounds with the saber, he sharpened their dynamism with magic. —The power Subaru chose, even with any of those, it would not be even remotely attainable. All craftiness, would get crushed under the pressure of overwhelming power.

Doing what he could do, augmenting whatever he had the ability to do, it had become slightly easier, is what he had thought, and yet.

The mere superficial cleverness of Natsuki Subaru, was fate only going to exhale a laughing sigh at it and trample upon and crush it.

Subaru: “I had somehow managed better at the time of that shitty bastard Regulus…!”

Beatrice: “There is no time for such deep thinking, in fact! Are there any ways to…”

Subaru: “Beako, Murak on Patrasche! Lighten her weight, then we can cross over the swarm!”

Beatrice: “—! Murak!”

Accepting Subaru’s directions, Beatrice used Murak on Patrasche—a magic that abates the effect of gravity, and the speed at which they ran further accelerated. Stepping and racing ahead, the distance doubled, and the leaping Patrasche used the witchbeasts as a place to stand on, and tried to withdraw from the writhing flower meadow.

But—

Subaru: “The li—?!”

In close proximity to his eyes appeared a white purge, and the moment he turned his voice inside out, That dashed through the sky.

The white purge above ground ran through, and the sand sea was blown off by the terrific force. Facing the swift bolt of the purge, the bodies of the witchbeasts were torn apart, spouting out blood, as they leapt, leapt, leapt.

And that aftermath swooped down upon Patrasche as well, agitated by the wind pressure of That which was closing on the large build of the ground dragon, and got easily flipped.

Subaru: “Beatrice! Hold tight!!”

Beatrice: “Subaru too, make sure you’re hugging firmly, I suppose!!”

Patrasche: “—~hk!”

Patrasche neighed, and Subaru hugged and clung to Beatrice’s body.

Spinning and revolving in the air, the large build of Patrasche pranced overhead of the courtesan bears. As if pursuing that Patrasche, the corona continuously downpoured incessantly.

The sand was burst open, the witchbeasts who got dragged into it and had to receive it were burst open, and the appearing and quickly disappearing Patrasche raised an echo of distress.

Subaru: “O~a~a~a~a~a~h—?!”

In the midst of the attack, the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion failed, and Subaru tasted that impact altogether.

Grasping the reins and Beatrice, he had firmly interposed both his feet in Patrasche’s saddle but, rubbed by the force, with his body being struck hard in parts here and there, he barely managed to grasp to his consciousness.

However, regardless of even that state, the pursuit of the claws of the courtesan bears under his eyes continued to shoot.

Swallowed in the terrific attack, he floundered without being thrown off. Now, if he were to fall, no way would he be saved. What barely connected his life, was precisely because he had not given up.

Subaru: “But, at this rate—”

”□□□”

Beatrice: “Not good, in fact… ~hk!”

Subaru: “—Patrasche?!”

With the remarkably strong impact, Patrasche’s roar of anguish pulled back her tall tail.

Looking at it, at the side of Patrasche, who was flipping around lightly through the effect of Murak, had been exposed to the claws of the courtesan bears and had been slashed. With the scars of the claws etched into the jet black scales, painful to even look at, from the mouth of the deep gash flowing and spilling was fresh blood.

Subaru: “—~hk, kh, ah?!”

Tumbling down with the same pace due to that force, Patrasche suddenly fell on top of the desert. At the same time, Subaru and the others were thrown onto the sandy soil as well, and were left behind on the feeding ground of the courtesan bears crowding their surroundings.

Shaking his head, his body rose. While continuing to hold Beatrice’s hand. She, too, dusted off the hem of her dress and stood up, and quickly observed the surroundings with no negligence in her eyes. However, their advantage was undeniable.

Subaru: “You bastards! Don’t you dare lay a single finger on

Patrasche!”

Beatrice: “Minya!”

Wounded, Patrasche groaned in agony, as magic pierced through the witchbeasts flooding towards it. Subaru pulled Beatrice’s hand and rushed over to Patrasche, and kneeling down, touched the wound.

The claws had not reached her intestines but, if she pushed herself, her guts might brim out. She could not be allowed to push herself. He also needed time to heal it.

Subaru: “Beatrice! Shamak! Deceive the perceptibility of the witchbeasts around!”

Beatrice: “Now?! Even if that’s done, it’ll do nothing but buy time, in fact! On top of that…”

Subaru: “That time is needed for now! Hurry!”

Bending their stance with bloodshot eyes, the witchbeasts awaited for a gap to swoop in.

Coping with them would be impossible if they assailed from all directions. The witchbeasts eventually became impertinent, and what would be their cue depended on their patience. That could perhaps, not be expected.

Beatrice: “——~hk! El Shamak!”

Beatrice joined both of her hands together, and something entirely fell out of Subaru’s interior.

It rolled towards the whirlpool within the hand of the girl beside, becoming quiet power it swept through the sand sea, and with Subaru and the rest as the center, tens of meters in its radius, were wrapped up in black mist.

With the foundation of Shadow Magic, this was the invocation of Shamak.

Producing discord in perception, the expanse of Shamak, brought the courtesan bears' conduct to a standstill. Conception vanished beyond understanding, and even the instinct to chase after prey gets forgotten.

Of course, it did not show effect on Subaru and the others, who had executed it. However, it did not last long.

Beatrice: "If the ones beyond the scope of efficacy get in, it would eventually be laid to waste, I suppose. Before that, escape along with that Ground Dragon!"

Subaru: "I know! The effect of Murak is still left, right? If that's so then I'll carry Patrasche on my shoulders, at any rate, continuously fire Shamak and joining up with the dragon carriage on the other side is what we should—"

”□□□”

Withdrawing from the gambling room, judging to prioritize that, he extended his hands to Patrasche.

Normally its large frame would weigh several hundred kilos, but in the interval it was adhering to Beatrice's Murak, that body, like a feather—would be an exaggeration, it had become light. Not enough to be able to shoulder it and run.

Her yellow eyes were intently looking at Subaru. The emotions passing by in those eyes were complex, eloquence such that nobody could ever imagine being a Ground Dragon's expression.

Those eyes, were telling them. —Please leave.

Beatrice: "—Subaru!"

Immediately after his eyes were robbed by the glint in Patrasche's eyes, Beatrice raised a sharp voice.

She, rushing over, aimed for Subaru's palm, the surging magical power took form of a shield, and right next to Subaru arrived a magical wall of violet—and it, averted the fired white luster.

Subaru: “Gho~ah?!”

Reverberated the sharp sound as if an exchange of blows of steel, and Subaru’s body, receiving the impact, flew backwards. Tumbling over and falling with limbs stretched out on top of the sand, the violently coughing Subaru noticed after trying to lift his body up.

Blood was dripping out of his right side, which had suffered the impact, and that it had his right leg thickly soaking.

Subaru: “What did I, receive…?”

Grasping the side overflowing with blood, exhaled Subaru reflexively with one of knees knelt down.

At that moment, the impact which had ransacked his internal organs gives rise to vomiting, and gastric juices and blood ceaselessly gushed forth out of the edge of his mouth.

Air exited out of his fissured abdomen, and a goofy sound like that of fart leaked out along with the foaming blood.

Subaru: “Ah, hf…”

Beatrice: “—baru! Subaru!”

As he exhaled hoarsely, his field of vision simultaneously inclined right beside him.

Toppling sideways, he understood he had lost the ability to move his body. He had understood, but nothing more than that could he continue. The wound on his side heated up, and there lay the pain as if his body was melting away.

Desperately, he heard the voice calling for his self.

Beatrice: “Subaru! Subaru, don’t I suppose! Dying is… don’t, don’t die… don’t leave Betty, alone… ~hk! Sto~p… ~hk.”

His shoulder was being shook. At the audible tearful voice, he wanted to stretch his hand out, but he could not move.

His brain tissues were burning, he became unable to remember the young girl in front of his eyes.

An adorable face, but it was crying, she shouldn't make a crying face, is what he thought.

"…"

On the other side of that, a large, large lizard lay collapsed.

Black, it was a lizard with a beautiful appearance. In that body, a white long and narrow something of an unknown source, unknown origin was lunging through, with no movement whatsoever, it was clearly dead.

Perhaps, his own self had received the same thing, is what he thought.

???: "Don't leave Betty behi~nd, plea… ~hk!"

Sobbing, the young girl desperately hugged Subaru's body.

With that petite frame, Subaru's body, who had lost his strength, would be too heavy.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. He wanted to at least wipe away those tears.

He searched for a part that was still mobile in his body, but he was unable to find anything. That is why, he hauled something mobile from someplace else, not in his body.

Subaru: "—~hk."

???: "Subaru?"

Invisible to the eyes, the Hand only his self could see, wiped the tears on her cheeks.

Black fingers caressed her teardrops, and the girl looked at him, making an expression as if she had noticed something. The strength to smile and reassure her, even that, he did not possess.

???: “Suba—”

”□□□”

For a single moment, the young girl tried to say something.

However that was, interrupted by the white purge that came flying behind her from a distance.

”□□□”

The second attack, lunged through Subaru’s chest.

Slowly turning his gaze towards that, it had perforated through the back of the young girl, furthermore, piercing through Subaru’s chest, it came out from behind.

???: “Ah.”

Leaving behind a dusky sigh, the form of the young girl, hugging Subaru, disappeared.

As if she did not belong to this realm, the form of the young girl was rendered invisible.

Losing support, Subaru collapsed on the spot. He could not move. He did not have the reason to move.

Subaru: “Kh, oh.”

His weakly moving fingers scratched the sand, that was all.

Losing its caster, the black fog which was interposing the environs and space, was dispersed by the breeze.

Divulging from the magic that deceived perception, all what remained was only the corpse of a Ground Dragon and a young boy on the verge of death. The flock sloth of witchbeasts slurped on their tongues, and advanced closer to that prey.

“…”

His breath stopped, the focus of his eyes blurred.

Excessive blood loss, was not how it felt. Something, which felt fatal, poured upon him.

He was rendered unable to understand, anything.

In close proximity to him, the courtesan bears, with their claws sharpened right overhead, he could hear their roars.

Those claws had swung down, and his cranium had been crushed.

Or instead, now, on the edge of his field of vision, which was on the verge of vanishing, That, which had faintly shined, was the one to blame.

Despite not knowing which one of the two was the reason, Natsuki Subaru’s life came to an end.

Chapter 12:
Baptism of the Watchtower

1

In an instant, the throbbing and burning pains dissipated, and Natsuki Subaru returned.

Subaru: "…"

He wanted to praise himself for not screaming at the scene before him immediately.

Upon his second Return by Death, Subaru returned to the flower meadow, beset on all sides by Witchbeast; closing his mouth with his hands, his thinking became serious.

???: "Tchtchtch."

In a place dominated by the violence of the flowery scent, what could be heard was the sound of Meili clicking her tongue.

By gently moving her fingers and letting out this sound from her lips, she was stealing the attention of the Courtesan Bear standing in front of the dragon carriage. A gamble that robbed the breath of everyone witnessing it.

He had been brought back yet again to the scene he had experienced just a few minutes ago, making it the second time.

—Are you kidding me?

Subaru's brain kicked into high gear while trying to get the picture of the events that happened to him.

He needed to switch his focus immediately. He had to forget that just a moment ago, countless Witchbeasts were chasing after them with an outcome of bloodshed and so, before that happened, he had to deal with the problem at hand.

The problem, the problem that was in front of him right before his eyes. What would happen next?

He could hear something that sounded much like someone calling a kitten. The actual situation was totally different from that cute imagery, but that thought was hindered by the smell of flowers.

Smelly, sweet, persistent, annoying, itchy, painful, hot, which one was the correct word to describe it?

Subaru: “—?”

The more he thought about it, the more it stressed his brain, but no concrete solutions came to mind.

His brain could not keep up with the discrepancy between the current situation and the situation that he had been experiencing up until now. Subaru desperately tried to adapt to the present, then feeling a light push against his chest.

???: “…”

Looking down, it was Beatrice’s small body leaning on his chest.

As Subaru completely embraced her against his chest, she looked up slightly to show that he should be gripping the reins instead of her. Perhaps she had caught what he had dropped during his immediate shock after Returning by Death.

—He remembered the last Death, he remembered Beatrice’s crying face and tears.

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Yes, that was it. That really was it.

This made it the third time Subaru had reached this situation.

Twice, he had died here. He had no clue how he had died the first time, but the second time, he could picture that death to some extent. But what he had suffered at the moment of death was not clear.

Feeling like his internal organs were melted after simmering in a pot—that feeling.

—No, that should not be the priority. Now, the priority should be,

Meili: “Tchtchtch… tchhh.”

Just as Subaru’s thoughts caught up to his second Death, Meili successfully drew the attention of the Courtesan Bear. Following the clicking of her tongue and movement of her fingers, the Witchbeast slowly diverted its gaze from the dragon carriage and was guided to its right side.

There would be no problem if the Courtesan Bear just left in this manner. However, Subaru was aware that it would not be the case.

Subaru: “…”

Right next to the Courtesan Bear who was moving away, stood a ground dragon—Gian’s breathing was going wild.

The pressure of facing an Witchbeast from so up close, and the scent of flowers that continued its violent spread—two kinds of pressure tormented the calmness of the ground dragon, which would make that tense thread snap.

If the ground dragon made a noise, the swarm of the agitated Witchbeasts would attack suddenly and simultaneously. If so, it would result in nothing but a repetition of the previous two Deaths.

Subaru: “…”

However, except for Subaru, no one could notice Gian’s agitation.

Even Julius, who held the reins, also had his attention diverted from the ground dragon unconsciously, concentrating on the threat of the monsters before them. Therefore, Subaru was the only one who could take measures.

But how to deal with it?

He was unable to speak. It was impossible to quickly approach and touch it.

There was a big risk in beckoning Julius and making him calm it down. Before that, if he could not make a call right now, he would not be able to make it in time. What should he do—?

Subaru: "…"

Then, in the last seconds, Subaru closed his eyes.

If nothing came to his mind in this moment, he would go full "all or nothing" and call upon Julius. He recalled the two previous Deaths, the onslaught of the Witchbeasts and the light of the Watchtower coming alive again inside his mind.

At the moment of the second Death, there was the fact that a crying Beatrice had clung on to him, pleading "Don't leave me alone", which drove a deep thorn into Subaru's chest—And then he realized.

Subaru: "Beako, I love you."

Beatrice: "—Hk?!"

He hugged her small body from the back and whispered those words in her ear. Beatrice was surprised at the sudden expression of love, but the hand over her mouth did not allow her to shout.

Instead, Subaru extended his "hand" towards Gian, to the front and to the side.

The "hand" which had gently caressed and wiped Beatrice's tears just before his Death.

—Invisible Providence.

Though, as his mouth was too busy confessing his love with a whisper, the name of that technique was chanted only within his heart, unfortunately.

Just then, in the center of Subaru's body—a different sensation from when the link with Beatrice drained his Mana permeated from him, something dark being summoned, arousing a silent cry.

Asserting its gratitude at being summoned aloud, that which accomplished the lazy Natsuki Subaru’s goals on his behalf, arrived the Unseen Hand that was not of this world.

Subaru: “…”

With Subaru’s chest as its pivot point, the black hand that had been created slowly manifested itself in the world. Of course, its existence could not be seen by anyone except for Subaru. As he was embracing Beatrice, the Unseen Hand just went through her, and it seemed like it did not make any unintended contact.

While admiring that fact, he could feel that something in him was being drained away each second. Whether it was his soul or sanity, Subaru did not know. However, he could not afford to take too much time to avoid reaching out to Julius.

The black magic stretched to Gian’s neck, who seemed like it was about to roar at any moment. The palm slowly stroked its thick neck coated by bulky scales.

The large ground dragon trembled from being touched by someone, but somehow, its instincts probably felt that there was no hostility in the touch of the palm. And so, the ground dragon’s rough breath calmed down, its body relaxing.

Julius: “—Huh?”

Then, also noticing Gian’s reaction, Julius pulled the reins and soothed the ground dragon in earnest. As expected from Julius, he skillfully handled the ground dragon, noticing its agitation, with what could have otherwise been devastating.

Confirming that, Subaru immediately cut off the connection with the Unseen Hand. With the black palm deprived of freedom, it dissipated in an instant, fading away into the parched wind of the sand sea, as if nothing had happened.

Subaru: “Ha, fuuu…”

After dodging that bullet, Subaru took a long breath of relief.

At the same time, he felt like a dark black cloud was stuck in his chest, and he wanted to retch. Of course, things would not be so easy. That sense of loss was the price to pay for using the Invisible Providence, and it remained engraved in the soul.

Thus, Subaru thought about the feeling of loss being gouged in his chest.

Invisible Providence—the cost of employing the Unseen Hand, the feeling of loss and breathlessness it caused, were certainly easier to deal with than before.

The first time Subaru used the Invisible Providence had been when fighting Garfiel back at Sanctuary. At that time, Subaru had unleashed his power in a feverish manner, and was assaulted by a sense of loss and intoxication that caused a feeling like half his body was gone, causing his consciousness to wobble.

Perhaps it was disgust for the opponent who had utilized that very same power before Subaru, and it was no excuse that the incident happened after Garfiel had beaten him to a pulp in the first place.

It was a strange ability—rather, Authority, that endlessly intrigued Subaru with the dangers of using it, as well as the circumstances that made it available to him. Therefore, he had never thought to actively use this force until now.

Subaru's Invisible Providence none of the power or flexibility of the Unseen Hand originally wielded by that madman. At best, wiping away tears or stroking the head was all he could muster.

To pay with the whittling down of his soul was a cost too prohibitive. With that in mind, he thought the only means was to meet it halfway.

Subaru: "It's not like I've gotten used to it."

Shaken with a feeling of loss and disgust, Subaru felt more anxiety than relief.

What Subaru believed, was that it was always good to hold more cards in one's hands, but that did not mean that possessing multiple pairless jokers in Old Maid would do him any good.

Of course, it would serve as a powerful hand in games other than Old Maid—

Subaru: "Uh, uh, uh."

Beatrice: "…What have you been doing for a while now, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Oh? What…"

As Subaru let out a small shriek amidst his worries, a grumpy voice suddenly appeared. Upon opening his eyes to see what was happening, he found his eyes meeting with Beatrice's own, staring at him.

And that Beatrice looked quite unusual.

Subaru: "Beako, what happened to your head and dress?"

Beatrice: "—It's the result of Subaru being glued to Betty's hair and clothes all the time, in fact. Why do I have to suffer such a humiliation, I suppose!"

Subaru: "Huh, me?"

In front of Subaru, who was tilting his head cluelessly, a furious Beatrice was attempting to hide the anger in her voice.

Her splendid drills were jumbled, and both the delicate dress and the white cloak to protect the dress from Sand Wind, were arranged eccentrically and running at the forefront of fashion. It was a state-of-the-art pattern that no one had ever thought of.

Beatrice: "—Your lack of self-awareness is irritating, in fact! You were very worried so I overlooked it, but then it went on and on and on and on and on… And on top of that, do you… even remember saying those words of love, I suppose?"

Subaru: “No, I remember that. I really mean it when I say I love you, Beako.”

Beatrice: “Hmph!”

To those candid words, a red-faced Beatrice completely covered her head with her cloak. He really wished to admire that unfamiliar cute appearance, but right now he could not play with Beatrice.

As a result of Subaru’s unspeakable efforts, Gian would not make a fuss and would attempt to resume the march of the dragon carriage by relying on Meili’s ability. However, as Subaru went through the gulf opened between the courtesan bears, he brought Patrasche close to the coachman’s spot.

Subaru: “Julius, Meili. Let’s make a temporary retreat—Things are bad.”

It was because of the two Deaths, that he proposed a rework in their strategy.

2

Meili: “I’m disappointed in you, onii-san. It was only a bit tense, I didn’t want to run away so soooon.”

Ram: “After all, Barusu is still Barusu. I thought that after becoming Emilia-sama’s Knight, he would be a little better. But I guess a person’s character doesn’t change that easily. Pulled out too soon.”

Subaru: “There’s no harm in just re-enforcing a safety measure!”

After managing to turn back from the flower garden and returning to the meeting place which they had set up after breaking through Sand Time, Subaru was being stabbed with strict criticism for making the decision to withdraw.

Meili, who had successfully tamed the courtesan bears and opened the way towards the tower, and then Ram, who had been stuck by the window in the dragon carriage, prepared for any emergency situation.

Subaru, who had stopped the march of the dragon carriage and requested a face-to-face meeting on the sand, was shrinking as he was cornered about stopping their progress based on just his own opinion.

Emilia: "But, I don't think that Subaru's judgment was wrong. Even if we got reaaally far through the flower gardens, I think that it's still the same situation as a little while ago. If we did that, you wouldn't have been able to get out like we did now."

Meili: "Onee-san doubts my ability? You believe onii-san more than me?"

Emilia: "We've come this far. I believe in both of you, but my opinion is that I especially want to believe what Subaru says. Sorry."

Subaru: "EMM…"

It was Emilia-tan Maji Megami, that who fought against Meili's childish rebuttals while putting her heart into it. As if in prayer, Subaru brought his hands together, and beside him, Beatrice fixed her disorderly clothes and hair.

Beatrice: "So what do you intend to do after all, in fact. If the Witchbeast girl's Divine Protection is not to be trusted, it's too reckless to pass through this flower garden, I suppose. If Bubby were here, it wouldn't have been difficult to annihilate a whole herd of Witchbeasts, but that's not the case, in fact."

Emilia: "If only Puck were here, oh well. I guess I'll try my best?"

Subaru: "I really want that to be the last resort. And even if you completely annihilate the courtesan bears here, I feel that other Witchbeasts will fill the gaps and it'll become an infinite loop. What do you say, Meili?"

With the flow being directed towards her, wearing a pout on her face, Meili averted her face. The girl crouched down, putting her chin over her knees, displaying the attitude of a child,

Meili: "Whaaaat is it?"

Subaru: “It’s weird that the flower gardens would be a territory for only courtesan bears. To put it bluntly, if the courtesan bears weren’t around, it’d be a home for other Witchbeasts, no?”

Meili: “…It may be right, or it may be not right.”

Subaru: “Which is it?”

Meili: “Yeah, what onii-san said is right. But what are you gonna do?”

While affirming Subaru’s point of view, Meili questioned him back. Receiving her dissatisfied look, Subaru frowned, and Julius shrugged his shoulders.

Julius: “I understand Miss Meili’s point. Subaru’s worries are justified, but there is nothing to be gained just by fretting over unexpected situations. If we could predict what would happen and deal with it accordingly, we would not dub it «unexpected».”

Subaru: “Even so, just leaving it all in the hands of a Divine Protection and rushing in without thinking, is a different thing. Or maybe I should say, that proposal would be very unlike you. That’s more like Garfiel’s role.”

Julius: “Naturally, I would never suggest such recklessness. We should decide what to do after a constructive discussion. Whether we proceed or return, that is.”

Just like before entering the flower meadow, Julius said this, raising his two fingers.

As Subaru snorted at the gesture, everyone began thinking about the situation.

Ram: “What if Barusu acted as a decoy to lure out the Witchbeasts? Then while they chase after him, we find a gap for us to break through.”

Subaru: “United we stay!”

Ram: “Ram and the others will be safe, and any nefarious insects can be kept away from Rem. It is a great idea."

Subaru: "I'll be devoured!"

Emilia: "Still, I'll work reaaally hard to fight for everyone and such…"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan comes to such unexpectedly meat-headed conclusions at these times."

Emilia: "Meat-hee… Huh, what are you saying suddenly? I'm humiliated."

Subaru: "It's unusual to me, this isn't an unconditional compliment to Emilia-tan, okay?"

Julius: "Leave it to Miss Meili's Divine Protection, and we will advance through the flower garden until we can no more. Once we have reached the limit, we shall launch a preemptive attack and rush to the Watchtower. It is a powerful gamble."

Subaru: "I can't explain it, but it'll fail. I can't explain it, but I'm sure."

Julius: "Hmm. You say this as if you possess an absolutely certain basis."

Subaru: "Ah, I don't know. It's hard to explain."

It was tough to dismiss the progression strategy without touching on the forbidden subject of Return by Death. And, during the strategy meeting that seemed somewhat lacking in progress, Subaru noticed something, and tried his luck.

Because he had to give first priority to Gian's shock, then afterward the retreat from the flower garden, he had forgotten to sort out the cause of those two Deaths which had actually triggered his return in the first place.

The first time around it had occurred too suddenly, and the second time around, it was a mess, so it was not very clear to him—but the cause of both of Subaru's deaths was related to the fact that the tower in front had been glowing.

Subaru: “That tower glows, is there anyone else seen that?”

Everyone: “The Watchtower glows…?”

At Subaru’s question, everyone tilted their heads with surprised faces.

Subaru groaned at the poor response and that no one saw it. It was somewhat natural. In honesty, Subaru had witnessed that light at more-or-less the same time of his Death. If that light really possessed an intent to kill, then all those who laid their eyes upon it would not live to tell the tale.

An attack that would materialize certain death, that was what he should regard it as.

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun, ya saw the tower glowin’?”

Subaru: “Huh? Ahh, I don’t think I’m mistaken about it, I think it might’ve shined.”

Anastasia: “When was that?”

Subaru: “…When I was in the flower garden, I believe?”

He replied to Anastasia’s inquiry in the form of another question.

However, because the situation in the flower meadow meant that he could not speak out, it did not seem suspicious that he had kept quiet about the light at the tower. Since Subaru had seen the tower’s light both times Return by Death was activated, it was possible that the taboo would be considered as violated.

For a second, he felt sorry that he was able to report the truth only in in irregular bits—

Subaru: “If the tower lights up, doesn’t that mean the Sage-in-the-Tower-san was watching us?”

Anastasia: “Not necessarily, it’s nighttime too, it wouldn’t be strange to use a light.”

Emilia: “I see. If the Sage has noticed us, it may be a good idea to let them know that we don’t mean any harm.”

Except, since Subaru’s argument had been blurry and ambiguous, Emilia’s thoughts went in a completely different direction. Of course, it was a journey to seek friendly contact.

If the cause of the light was indeed the Sage, it was only natural that such an opinion would arise.

But to Subaru, who was aware that the light was anything but friendly, this would be the same as running towards a cliff.

Subaru: “Wait, let’s try to sort out our information for now. And then let’s decide whether or not to get in touch with the Sage.”

Emilia: “Sort out our information?”

Subaru: “Yeah, organize. Because, you know, it’s all there. That light’s not necessarily a sign of life from the Sage. It’s more, uh… There’s possibility of it being a dangerous thing like a searchlight, isn’t there?”

Emilia: “Seershlite…”

Anastasia: “In other words, Natsuki-kun’s suspectin’ that the light he saw’s like a defense mechanism set up by the Sage?”

Subaru: “Exactly!”

While Emilia had a question mark hovering over her head because of the unknown Western characters used, Anastasia, or rather, Eridna, understood the true meaning of Subaru’s words. And hearing that and pondering over it, was Julius. The Knight murmured, “Is that so?” under his breath, and,

Julius: “I do not know whether the Sage has been alive for hundreds of years, or if it is merely exaggeration. Is it possible that the Sage has left behind his legacy, still working as a device to protect the world?”

Subaru: “Oh, oh… I didn’t think so far ahead, but it’s possible.”

Julius: “If that is the case, it would assume for convenience that everyone approaching is one who schemes to resurrect the Witch of Envy, even the Kingdom’s envoys. It has been a long-standing mystery as to why the Sage, who was supposed to be friendly towards the Kingdom, would display such violent conduct as told in reports.”

Seemingly relieved, Julius spoke, spurring Subaru’s admiration with a “So there’s also this way of thinking?”.

Indeed, it was plenty common to find defense systems having been prepared and left behind by great men in the past that, even after the death of their master, would still remain in place, driving away intruders. In a world where magical devices were rife, it was not so strange for such a system to exist.

Subaru: “If that’s the case, I want you to give me a break because it means this trip will be a waste.”

Ram: “With the Sage dead, it is merely a matter of collecting any documents left by the Sage. It’s still too early to leave the world in despair, Barusu.”

Subaru: “I’m not gonna let nee-sama’s bullying manner get to my head.”

If Julius’s speculations were correct, the whole foundation of the journey would be undermined. But even against such a possibility, Ram’s determination would not waver nor change. As one would expect.

Anastasia: “In any case, keepin’ watch for hundreds of years without rest… it may be possible, altho’ it ain’t realistic. Besides, I don’t think there’s such a need to be disappointed ‘bout whether Sage Shaula’s dead or alive.”

Emilia: “Really? Why?”

Anastasia: “It’s not particularly surprisin’ that they’d be alive even now, if they’re from a long-lived race. My Echidna’s birth itself was hundreds of years ago.”

Pulling out the white scarf from inside her robe, Anastasia smiled. In response to that, Emilia stare absent-mindedly, and immediately touched her pendant, thinking of Puck.

Emilia: “Oh, my Puck also lives a long time. I’m not losing to that Echidna.”

Subaru: “Why are you competing with each other, Emilia-tan? Well, my Beako is quite the loli-granny too. Right?”

Beatrice: “Do you think Betty will just laugh and answer that, I suppose? Disgusting, in fact.”

As Beatrice sneered with anger, Subaru shrugged. With the conversation having diverted from the main subject, Ram clapped her hands.

Ram: “The Sage being dead or alive is irrelevant to the discussion. Leaving that aside, the problem is the true identity of the light that Barusu saw. Whether that is dangerous, or just Barusu’s delusion, we have to reach a conclusion.”

Subaru: “It’s about time our relationship develops to the point you don’t doubt whether what I report is true or false, you know?”

Ram: “It is not about deciding whether it is a lie or not, Ram will concede on this matter.”

If they did not reach a consensus, it was likely that there would not be any progress. In any case, the discussion ended up returning to the subject of the true identity of the light.

Subaru: “I… think it’s dangerous. At the very least, it’s not friendly.”

Julius: “And the basis is, just intuition?”

Subaru: “…Well, that’s right.”

Julius: “Right—that’s troublesome.”

The light of the Watchtower—Subaru was convinced that it was the cause of both of his Deaths, but to convey that fact was a difficult task. So, he thought it would be impossible to use “intuition” as his reason, but surprisingly, Ram took that reply seriously.

And not only Ram, but Emilia and Julius too.

Subaru: “Eh? Just based on my intuition? You don’t have any more doubts about it?”

Emilia: “If this were only a hunch, I’d think so, but it’s Subaru’s intuition, right? In that case, it makes more sense to think about it than to doubt it suddenly.”

Julius: “Do not be so self-deprecating. You have been through this kind of hopeless situation already, have you not? There is a certain kind of intuition that only works for such a person. To put it in other words, it is somewhat alike a rule of thumb. It is by no means something to make light of.”

Ram: “Like when field mice change their territory before heavy rain. Barusu’s intuition cannot be fooled.”

Subaru: “It’s just stupid enough… Is that what you’re saying?”

Like a reflex reaction to the poisonous remarks thrown his way, Subaru’s shoulders relaxed a tad.

Not being able to reveal the source of his information, even to those close to him, was an absurd reality. Subaru had come across the same situation many times, but each time he was saved by the concern and trust of the others around, in the same way, over and over again.

Rem in the Royal Capital, Otto and Ram in Sanctuary, Emilia and Beatrice in the city of Priestella. They all believed in Subaru, in what he was.

Subaru: “There’s no way to catch their attention in a friendly way. If you even make a loud voice, Bear-san will come to welcome us before the Sage does.”

Julius: “That is something I wish to avoid. Then, the realistic means should be sending Emilia-sama’s magic… Or so it seems.”

While looking towards the Watchtower, Julius stretched his right hand and closed one of his eyes.

It was a gesture akin to a painter attempting to get a sense of distance. Then staying like that, silently thinking for a moment,

Julius: “Roughly, from here to the Watchtower is around ten kilometers—it is not a realistic range for Emilia-sama’s magic, if produced from the front of the flower garden.”

Subaru: “By the way, how far can you cast your magic Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “How far? Well, I haven’t tried to measure it before, so I don’t know. But I don’t think it can reach the tower from here. It’ll disappear before it hits.”

The silhouette of the Watchtower at their current location was clearly closer than the silhouette visible before the Sand Time. In fact, on their trip through the field of flowers, they had come very close.

Even so, the plan to aim at the tower from the edge of the flower garden was not practical.

Subaru: “If passage were granted by simply informing them of one’s existence, Reinhard would’ve been able to get through. Being that guy, it’s like… couldn’t he make a magical attack that could cover a distance of about ten kilometers?”

Julius: “There is no way of knowing that, except asking him, but it is likely that Reinhard did not get through Sand Time when challenging this trial. We have only reached this far because Anastasia-sama… No, because Echidna knew the way.”

Subaru: “Got a point there… Ahh, shit. Don’t you know anything more?”

As the proposal was rejected, Subaru pointed to Eridna with a melancholic voice. Then, playing her part as Anastasia, Eridna appeared skillfully handling the muffler concealing her state,

Echidna: “I do not like you putting it like that. Just being able to claim the existence of a path to be found after Sand Time is an achievement that had yet to be accomplished. Should you not give me more credit?”

Subaru: “We’re the first to get here, is that it? Claiming to have the way there in memory, but you’re actually a newspaper man on delivery duty with only a faint recollection. You’re not doing your job.”

Echidna: “Hmm, got a point there.”

Despite Subaru’s theory being rude, Eridna did not attempt to refute it. The scarf kept silent, and that pondering attitude also passed onto Anastasia. Then, suddenly raising her face, Anastasia,

Anastasia: “That’s right. But now, looks like it’d be better to sum up the things we know at the moment.”

Subaru: “The things we know—So.”

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun’s light of the Tower, as well as its supposed danger, the Witchbeasts’ flower garden present in front of the Tower, the three Sand Times, ‘n… Is there somethin’ else?”

The information that Anastasia listed had all been established so far.

It was important to build a path and pave the way to a conclusion. Subaru folded his arms and recalled the journey thus far and the dangers he had witnessed, for a while.

Subaru: “Now, this is the place that we came to after choosing to cross the Sand Time of the night. Then there’s the fact that it’s too much of a burden on the ground dragons to pass through that flower field. Also, I’m pretty sure Meili brought a Witchbeast alongside us without telling anyone.”

Meili: “Ehh?!”

Subaru spoke while counting on his fingers, and Meili's shoulders hitched in a panic. Everyone's eyes turned to the little girl, having seen her blatant reaction.

In response, Meili hurriedly shook her head and,

Meili: "Wha, wait, wait. Yes, onii-san is right, but… how does onii-san know that?"

Subaru: "Guesswork. It was just a trick question."

Julius: "Still, it seems that Subaru's imagination was right—What will you do?"

Julius, in a quiet voice, questioned what should be done regarding Meili's betrayal. Hearing that attitude, Meili's face turned pale, but Subaru did not wish to make matters worse.

Stopping Julius with his hand and fixing his eyes on Meili,

Subaru: "Don't worry. I'm not talking about scolding her. I understand it's just your insurance. Still, it was just a suspicious factor."

Meili: "D-Do you want me to let it go? Then, you won't be angry?"

Subaru: "There's no need to release it. If you think you need one, please keep it. If we're being surrounded or chased by a group of courtesan bears, it'd be a great help."

Meili: "…"

Thinking he must be joking, Meili widened her eyes and just nodded. Just to be sure, Subaru stared back at Julius, who had yet to loosen his vigilant eyes,

Subaru: "That's what children do. Let's give her a pass."

Julius: "If that is the appropriate handling of a child growing up, then I shall do my utmost to do likewise. However, the girl's power is too strong to simply trust in her openly. Even more so in the land of Augria, which can be said to be the garden of Witchbeasts."

Subaru: “Even so. We’re all sharing the same dragon carriage, so please get along.”

With that statement of Subaru’s, Julius hesitated a bit and then ceased reaching for his sword. Then, instead of the silent Julius, Emilia raised her hand.

Emilia: “So, Subaru. Let’s continue the talk from earlier.”

Subaru: “Yes, yes. Let’s move on.”

Emilia: “When it comes to passing through the flower garden… What do you plan to do? Do you want to try the same thing with another Sand Time and see if it goes to a different place?”

Subaru: “That’s one way, but… There’s something I’d like to try briefly.”

Emilia: “Something you’d like to try?”

Having no clue as to what Subaru was thinking, Emilia tilted her head in confusion. Copying that from Emilia, Subaru turned his eyes toward the edge of the flower meadow—the sea of flowers that filled the area up to the Watchtower.

Of course, it was not possible to see its end—

Subaru: “If the flower garden comes to an end somewhere, we won’t have to worry about being targeted from all sides at least. It’s worth a try checking whether there is an edge like that or not, right?”

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—And so, their plan had all the participants verifying the edge of the flower garden.

Julius: “If moving in separate groups, getting lost would be devastating. Besides, it would not be sensible to advance in the immediate vicinity of monsters without Miss Meili’s assistance.”

Julius’s point gained unanimous approval. Subaru also agreed on this, and decided to give priority to safety rather than convenience alone.

Subaru: “Well, I’d like to start departing soon, but.”

Everyone prepared to depart, getting on their respective dragon carriage or ground dragon.

With the rule to always keep the Watchtower’s silhouette on their right side, and with the direction they were heading towards was to the left, the party would make sure they were heading north.

However, whether the rules of east, west, north, and south still worked in the Sand Dunes, was a different affair altogether.

Subaru: “Thinking calmly about it, this whole place’s also a strange case of space-time distortion. If by going through Sand Time you arrive here, it’s somewhat similar to Door Crossing…”

Beatrice: “I don’t know what Subaru is trying to say, in fact. It’s true that distorting space and making physical distance vague is one application of Door Crossing, I suppose. Betty set up Subaru into it once too, in fact.”

Subaru: “You did, to me? When?”

Beatrice: “…I’ll never forget it, it was on our first encounter, I suppose.”

Subaru: “First encounter… Oh! In Roswaal’s mansion, when I completed that infinite loop corridor in one try! I’m sorry about that. Even though it was so hard for you to prepare it, I’m sorry for tramping all over your hard work… Sorry?”

Beatrice: “You seriously apologizing for it is seriously frustrating, in fact! Forget it, I suppose!”

Subaru: “You reminded me…”

Beatrice: “Hmph! That’s it, in fact!”

Riding with him, Beatrice was getting somewhat angry, so Subaru had no choice but to take on the difficult task of handling the peculiar girl. For the time being, he held her in his arms and soothed her, commanding Patrasche to walk towards the dragon carriage. And then,

Subaru: “Are you ready there?”

Julius: “Without a problem. Now all we need is for Emilia-sama to perform her task.”

Emilia: “That’s right.”

Nodding to Julius, who had finished his preparations on the carriage’s coach, Subaru looked up at the roof. Much like in their march into the flower garden, Emilia’s position was still fixed on the roof of the dragon carriage.

Subaru raised his hand to Emilia, who seemed enthusiastic while standing high, and asked her to create a landmark as she had before.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, please here. For the time being, this is our base camp. Be as quiet as possible… like, so you don’t disturb the Witchbeasts.”

Emilia: “Okay, understood. If I wake up a Witchbeast with this, all the trouble we went to being all quiet back then would be meaningless, right. So, quietly, quietly, quieeetly.”

Subaru slowly moved his hand gesturing to go slowly, and Emilia mimicked it while, before their eyes, a tower of ice emerged from the sand.

It seemed like they were right in their judgement that it would proceed quietly; in fact, the ice tower was built slowly and gently, so the usual tense sound in the air went unheard. A few parts had come out looking a bit weak, but it had a fine finish, and seemed to be able to fulfill its role safely.

Emilia: “Is it okay?”

Subaru: “Alright, no problems. As expected, Emilia-tan!”

Giving the anxious Emilia a big “O” and “K”, Subaru peeked in the direction of the flower beds.

There were concerns regarding the Witchbeasts, namely if they would be able to sense Mana activity, but fortunately, there was no sign of anything other than the sweet scent of nectar flowing from the flower gardens.

Actually, it seemed quite dull.

Subaru: “Even now I wonder, why are they pretending to be a flower garden…? If they want to camouflage themselves, don’t you think a desert is a strange place to do it?”

Beatrice: “Witchbeasts aren’t expected to have that much intelligence, I suppose. They’re simple, can’t do anything except what is carved into their instincts, and they think of nothing else, in fact. Animals are just like this, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I see. Very interesting—”

Beatrice, held near his bosom, gave a bitter evaluation. Nodding at those words, Subaru diverted his gaze to the flower garden and aimed to give the order to their departure—and he noticed.

At the edge of his field of vision that contained the flower garden, a change took place, somewhere different from the flower garden.

The Watchtower glowed.

Subaru: “—Emilia!!”

Emilia: “—?!”

Immediately, Subaru raised his voice and called out to Emilia on the roof. Hearing the urgency in his voice, Emilia stiffened. But, the effect of the light exceeded that.

Subaru: “—Hk?!”

Making a violent sharp sound, the ice tower took a direct hit from something, and smashed it to pieces.

The large, slender ice tower, its height ten meters, was nothing but fragile. However, as if destroying a sandcastle, the attack broke the ice with ease, and reduced it to Mana.

—Again, he had not been able to see it. But, he understood.

Subaru: “I knew that light was an attack—”

Beatrice: “Subaru! Next one is coming!”

While his body was bathed by fragments of shattered ice, Subaru turned his neck to Beatrice’s call. Immediately after that, the Watchtower shone again, as per his intuition.

The light’s next blow was aimed at Subaru.

—The light would approach at a speed that did not even allow them to blink, and it would target his vital points with its single blow.

Its devastating power was already known to Subaru, who had died from it.

Therefore, the moment his brain detected that it has been targeted by the light, Death had already been determined.

Subaru: “…”

The light attacked, aiming straight for Subaru’s forehead.

It was Death itself, killing its prey without a sound, only leaving behind a skewing wind. Natsuki Subaru was once again about to be killed in cold blood, with no assistance possible.

Subaru: “—E · M · M!”

Beatrice: “I suppose!”

—In this case, Natsuki Subaru was not the only one being aimed at.

A pleasant sound echoed, and the attack that should have hit Subaru, missed. The cause was simple. Subaru’s strength surpassed that of the attack.

E · M · M was one of the three original spells Subaru had developed with Beatrice.

This particular one was Absolute Defense Magic.

During the activation of E · M · M, Subaru would not receive any interference from the outside world, being rendered unable to move. It was the result of applying all of Beatrice's Yin magic skill and knowledge into manipulating time and space in a limited area around Subaru.

Subaru: "It's a bit weird realizing that the effect is similar to that asshole's—Guah?!"

The Sin Archbishop of Greed, Regulus, could stop the effect of time on his body by transferring his heart.

E · M · M could be said to be a downsized version of that ability. However, there were no harmful side effects like one's heart stopping, so a person would become invincible as long as their Mana was not exhausted.

In this situation, though, it was nothing more than buying some time.

Subaru: "But, ugh?! Just buying time?! I've got important things to do??!!"

Beatrice: "Hey! Subaru, what are you screaming for, in fact?! Are you okay, I suppose??"

Behind Subaru, Beatrice's worried voice yelled as she used his body as a shield. It was like this because even though they were protected, sound and shock were still being transmitted.

After E · M · M activation, the light of the Watchtower seemed to wonder why Subaru was not dying even after being hit again and again, so it kept bombarding him with consecutive attacks.

Subaru: "Guh?! Gah?! Ugh?!"

Its rate of fire, and the accuracy of its aim, were both extraordinary.

Although the pain and the force of the blow was one that Subaru's body did not suffer, unfortunately, it was human reflex to react with a yell upon being hit by something.

Emilia: "Subaru—! Geez… Ehh!"

Watching Subaru being showered by a concentrated attack, Emilia attempted to support him from atop the roof.

Looking to protect Subaru from the Watchtower's attack, a thick and enormous ice barrier was erected from the sandy ground. Perhaps, the toughest defensive wall Emilia could create in an instant.

It was well-intentioned, a shield from the attacks targeted at Subaru, but—

Emilia: "No way?!"

Julius: "Even the ice walls do not stand a chance!"

Emilia let out a shriek and Julius a startled cry; as they could see, the ice wall was crushed in one shot.

That unbelievable power—was not the only reason. The ice wall was struck, but somehow weakened the light enough to avoid having it hit Subaru. Much of it rebounded and struck the sand, which kicked up a white smoke.

Looking at it closely, the marks of the destruction of Emilia's ice wall showed that it had been melted, rather than pierced.

Emilia: "Heat? Did the heat, melt the ice?"

Julius: "Something fell to the ground… a needle?"

Looking at the effects of the attack, Emilia and Julius simultaneously reached different conclusions.

In the meantime, the assault resumed. Subaru was struck by a staggering number of attacks, and even though he was in an invincible state, it was exceeding their limit.

Beatrice: “Subaru! There’s a problem, in fact!”

Subaru: “I’m listeni—Ah! But I can’t—Ugh!”

Beatrice: “If things keep going the way they are, we’ll be running out of Mana very soon, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Already?!”

Beatrice: “It’s almost over, in fact!”

At Beatrice’s cry, Subaru bit his molars while still under fire.

Of course, what Beatrice meant to say was not “Since Mana is running out, you should supply more, I suppose”, but “Since Mana is running out, we should counterattack, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Can you do it?”

Beatrice: “What a foolish question, I suppose!”

Beatrice did not answer his question by saying she could not. Hearing the response of his trusted partner, Subaru loosened his jaw, relieving his molars, and steeled himself.

Subaru: “The third one’s incomplete… Let’s go with the second one!”

Beatrice: “I’m going to deactivate E · M · M right after it hits!”

There was no time.

Subaru looked at Emilia, Emilia looked at him and nodded. There was no time to discuss concrete measures. But he believed it was conveyed.

Subaru: “—Guah?!”

The light set off, and again Subaru suffered a direct hit. Because E · M · M had been activated, the attack would not reach him—it would be canceled.

Each of the original spells was a trump card that could only be used once a day. With the release of E · M · M, Subaru would lose its protective function against that light.

And they would have to fight back before the next one arrived—

Subaru: “The light—”

As if it could read Subaru’s actions, the next strike of light was even faster.

Thus far, the speed, power and frequency were obviously meant to finish off Subaru. Naturally, with Subaru’s paper-thin defense, only one direct hit would be enough to send to the other side. And so—

Emilia: “Stop—Hk!”

A vortex of magical power was deployed in multiple manners in front of Subaru, creating walls of ice standing on the sand ground. This time, the defense was not limited to only one wall; instead, six sheets of ice walls had been conjured at the same time.

The light struck straight into those six lines of defense. It went through the first one without a hitch, the second one with ease, the third one like it was nothing.

However, there was a slight resistance on the fourth sheet, and the fifth one could endure it for only a bit. By the sixth and last one, the speed of light was clearly dulled—but could still go through it.

The light penetrated through the sixth ice wall, and was about to pierce through the forehead of the defenseless Subaru.

—Just before it hit, a Knight’s sword drew a semicircle, catching the light that had lost its speed and cutting it down.

Julius: “Unfortunately, there would be a number of women who would grieve if he is hurt—”

Rushing from the dragon carriage to this place and striking the light with a slash of his sword without minding the danger, was Julius.

Emilia’s defense had weakened it, and Julius had stopped it. Even though he was slightly jealous of that combined strike, Subaru’s preparation was complete.

Subaru: “Let’s go! The second! Absolute Invalidation Magic, E · M · T!”

Lifting the hood that protected him from the sand, Subaru opened his mouth wide and chanted.

Then, hiding behind Subaru’s back, Beatrice drained Mana from Subaru and multiplied it with her own magical power to cast new magic.

Subaru: “…”

In the next moment, a light expanded around Subaru and Beatrice, forming a spherical field of about ten meters, also encompassing the dragon carriage.

The result was the equivalent of having wrapped themselves in a transparent, invisible sphere of light.

However, the effect was tremendous.

Julius: “This is…”

In front of the astonished Julius, the Watchtower once again radiated light. Noticing it at the corner of his eyes and immediately grabbing hold of his sword, the next second, he opened his eyes wide.

The light went straight ahead, aiming directly for Subaru, but the moment it entered the field, it simply lost all its momentum. The overwhelming speed that seemingly surpassed even bullets disappeared, and the only thing remaining after it had lost its velocity and power was a strange white object, both long and slender.

It was easily brought down by a swing of Julius’s sword, falling on the sand and scattering away.

Subaru: “A needle, huh?”

Julius: “Something like that. No, more than that, Subaru, this magic…”

Subaru: “Wait, wait, wait! There are heaps of things I want to talk about, but for now we have to withdraw! Get in the dragon carriage right away! Let’s get out of here! We can’t take too long!”

Julius: “—! Understood! Let’s hurry!”

With the call of urgency, Julius jumped into the dragon carriage, taking back his questions. He took the reins immediately, and the dragon carriage turned its front towards the Sand Time.

It would be a suicidal act to go towards the Watchtower now. This was the right decision, there was no choice but to believe it.

Subaru: “Let’s go! Don’t get too far from me! Stay within the light!”

Emilia: “Wah, Subaru, wow! Even though there’s so many lights being fired…”

Clinging on to the roof of the running dragon carriage, Emilia watched Subaru with astonishment.

It seemed like even though it had no effect, the light continued to target Subaru. But no matter how many attacks it launched, the light would simply lose its power as soon as it entered the E · M · T field, and fall into the sand as was. The invalidation is absolute.

Julius: “At any rate, it is a terrific power. Is this yours and Beatrice-sama’s trump card of some sort?”

Subaru: “One of the trump cards! I’m not going to spoil it! For now, our priority should probably be getting away from the Watchtower!! No, definitely!”

Julius: “I believe it is an application of Yin magic, invalidating the effects of Mana within the range? If that is the case, it is the natural enemy of mages… No, you are a formidable opponent for anyone who uses Mana to aid their skills.”

Subaru: “I would say, it only seems to give a relative advantage, it doesn't make me stronger. I'll still lose in a fair fight against a strong guy. This is the ability that I developed thinking of when I'll give Ros-chi a black eye."

It seemed Julius had genuinely praised him, so he felt a little better. Of course, escaping from the attack of the Watchtower also brought him relief, but in any case, it was nothing more than letting his guard down.

However, it was probably impossible to predict what letting his guard down would bring right now, even for Subaru, so no one could be blamed.

Emilia: "Subaru! Are we going back to the dunes in front of the flower garden like this?"

Subaru: "For just a short time, but yeah! We need to polish and refine our countermeasures anyhow—"

While voicing such voice, on their retreat to the swirling sandy breeze of Sand Time—On the moment the E · M · T field touched it, the World broke.

Subaru: "Huh—?"

Beatrice: "Oh no, I suppose!"

Until then, Beatrice had been clinging to his body with relief at getting through the attacks.

Right in front of her eyes, the view of the nightly sand dunes was torn apart, causing her voice to tremble.

Beatrice: "The distortion of space is invalidated by E · M · T, in fact!"

Subaru: "Eh?"

Beatrice: "It's like you said, I suppose! The distortion here is similar to Betty's Door Crossing in that house. In other words, the distorted space will return to its original state!"

Subaru: “What does that mean—?”

Subaru’s question did not reach its end, only the feeling of Beatrice clinging to him remained.

Just like that, the World was torn and unraveled like paper, coming apart, and the crack in space swallowed up Patrasche with Subaru and Beatrice, and the dragon carriage with Emilia and the others.

Subaru: “Not good… Emilia?!”

Emilia: “Subaru—”

Thrown into the darkness, Subaru cried out the effect of gravity lost its hold on him.

He could not tell top from bottom from left from right. He did not know where the dragon carriage was. But he could hear Emilia’s voice echoing in response to Subaru’s cry.

Subaru: “This is—”

Bad, before he could say it, he was thrown out into the other side of the broken space.

4

???: “…”

The boundary between the flower field and the sand sea was crumpled and broken, and it was seen that a small group had been swallowed in it.

???: “…”

From far, very far away, witnessing that, a shadow wriggled inside the tower.

It walked away from the window, stepped onto the cobblestones, and went down a spiral staircase.

Its steps were slow, but gradually became faster and more impatient.

Shadow: “—Found him.”

And, as if it had not spoken in many years, let out a musky murmur.

Except, no one who heard it would be mistaken, that it sounded absolutely delighted.

Shadow: “Found him.”

That much was certain.

Chapter 13:
Ridicule of the Sands

1

—Space distorted, the world broke, and they fell straight into the rift in reality that resulted.

As if it was made of fragile thin paper, the world was easily torn apart.

Swallowed by the distorted space, Subaru's eardrums heard no sound, a stark contrast to the magnificent visuals around him.

He only heard a voice screaming, as if someone were calling him.

Even that voice faded away as well, and before long, he could not hear it.

The feeling of someone holding his chest also disappeared, and the fingers pulling onto him detached, drifting away from him.

With no one around, abandoned in this empty place, it seemed like he had become completely alone.

While being tormented by such loneliness and sadness, Subaru's consciousness began slowly emerging.

And then—

2

???: "—How long are you going to sleep? Get up, lazy Barusu."

Subaru: "Ahhk?"

Feeling something sharp poking at his side, Subaru got up screaming in pain at the shock.

Having jumped up reflexively, the sand clinging onto his body fell to the ground. Coughing, he spat out dirt which had gotten into his mouth.

Subaru: “Ahk! Thu! Pthu! Huh! What? What happened??”

Rubbing his eyes, he checked his surroundings as he rose to his feet. With shaky knees and a poor foothold, he got up comically. Beneath his feet, a sea of fine grains of sand yet remained.

As his consciousness returned, Subaru could determine that this was an extension of the Augria Sand Dunes. However, the view around him was not clear. Because it was dark, far too dark.

Amidst a darkness where gazing at his own hands was not possible, Subaru’s eyes caught the presence of a small artificial light.

???: “You can sleep so well in such an emergency, it is amazing. No words.”

A stern voice hit him, and the owner of the light snorted.

That which emitted the light was a type of magic stone, processed Lagmite ore had been fashioned into a tool like a lantern. Looking at the face illuminated by the light, Subaru raised his eyebrows.

Subaru: “—Ram, is that you?”

Ram: “Who else can you see? Rem? I did not expect such a lame answer.”

Subaru: “…You and Rem look alike, but it oozes from that inside that you’re not her.”

In response to Ram, who seemed harsher than usual, Subaru gives a bitter reply. Receiving the lantern from her, he looked around the area, illuminating it.

Subaru: “This place, where is it? What happened?”

Ram: “Ram also wants to know the whereabouts of this place. As for what happened, it is three times worse than what Barusu can imagine.”

Subaru: “Does that mean you expect me to be an optimist? Do you look down on pessimists?”

Ram: “In this case, I wonder which is better.”

That reply was probably accompanied by a shrug.

Even with her right next to him, it was hard to tell Ram’s appearance in the darkness, as the space illuminated by the light was awfully large. It seemed that they were in some sort of hollow space.

There was a slightly tall ceiling overhead, joined with walls that indicated the extent of its depth.

Subaru: “Can’t feel any air flow, can’t see the sky. You mean we were sent somewhere…?”

Ram: “If Beatrice-sama’s words before we were separated are true, the space distortion is the cause.”

Subaru: “Separated… That’s right, separated! Where are the others?!”

While listening to Ram’s disinterested and emotionless demeanor, his understanding caught up with reality.

Subaru moved the light from right to left, seeking figures other than Ram’s in their surroundings. However, as he searched the illuminated space, the light was not reflected by the silhouettes he so desperately wanted to see.

Ram: “As you can see, we were separated. Barusu’s magic nullified the Watchtower’s deception… The result is not clear, but maybe instead of going into the right path, we were trapped in a distorted space-time where we will wander forever.”

Subaru: “What are you saying?! Why are you so calm? This combination of us two… it’s totally random?!”

With Ram’s calm explanation, Subaru’s face turned pale and so he raised his voice.

Beatrice's cries, space breaking apart right before his eyes; he was instantly reminded of it. The rift had swallowed the entire party consisting of Subaru and the others, and dragged them into another space.

At that time, Subaru and Ram were both travelling along, but they should have been in different groups. Subaru was riding Patrasche, and Ram was in the dragon carriage.

Ram: "It seems that this separation did not take into account who was in contact with who, to determine who accompanies who. At the moment we entered the rift, Ram should have been hugging Rem… But it turned out like this."

Subaru: "I was also supposed to be clinging to Beako. And yet I can't find her… I can't see her… No way, there's only Ram here with me? What kind of grouping is this."

If the condition of that separation was not contact, then was there any other reason?

Their group was composed of eight people. There was no particular common feature that only Subaru and Ram shared. Again, was the grouping completely random?

Subaru: "No, I'll postpone guessing the conditions for now! More than that, we have to hurry and join up with everyone… No! There's something even more important! Rem!"

Ram: "…"

Subaru: "You and I are two, so it's still good. If any of the others who were separated are with someone else, there's still hope. But if there's someone who's alone, and if that's Rem… That's awful."

Emilia and Julius, the only two people responsible for making up the fighting power in this party, were of no concern. Meili and Beatrice could also manage to get by alone with their respective abilities. As for Anastasia or rather Eridna, probably there was her trump card that had been used to fight back against Lust.

Although less honorable than other ones, Subaru and Ram's combination was still manageable.

—But, Rem was a different story.

Unlike the others, Rem was unable to perform any independent actions by herself.

Even if someone was alongside her, protecting the perpetually sleeping girl would turn any kind of undertaking into a next-to-impossible task. And the worst of all, if Rem were to be completely isolated from the others, then Death would be the only thing awaiting her in this lonely sand sea.

Subaru: "It's important for us to meet up with everyone else, but the top priority is securing Rem! I can't leave her in such a lonely place. That's the one thing that's absolutely… Absolutely not good. It absolutely cannot…!"

Ram: "…Barusu."

Subaru: "Because I said I'd bring you here… I thought that you might be able to wake up if you meet the Sage, so I did that. It's useless. Absolutely, shit, just Rem…!"

Ram: "Barusu, calm down. Even I will lose it now…"

Subaru: "Why are you telling me to calm down? Are not you worried because Rem is missing from your memories?!"

Ram: "—Hk! There is no such thing!"

Imagining the worst possibility, Subaru started mumbling desperately about the future, and enumerating his regrets. Hearing Subaru speak, Ram could not stand it and exploded.

She grabbed the confused Subaru by his collar and pressed him hard against the sand wall behind him.

Ram: "Do you think you are the only one who cares about Rem? Do not push it too far, Barusu. Even without my true feelings, Ram is still Rem's older sister. Do not make a fool of me."

Subaru: "…"

Ram: "…I can still slightly feel my connection with her, so at least for now she is safe. That much is certain, so settle down for the time being."

It was not as if that face expressed any emotion. However, seeing the unbearable unease and distress in her eyes as she tried to appear calm, Subaru loosened the tension in his shoulders. Seeing that, Ram also moved her hands. Released from being pushed on the wall, Subaru looked down in shame.

Subaru: "…My bad. I'm sorry. Really, I was the worst idiot right now."

Ram: "That's just as usual. If Barusu starts reflecting on his life, it'll take a whole day. Stop wasting our time."

Subaru: "…Uh, my bad."

Experiencing Ram's sharp tongue and emotional testimony, Subaru finally let out a single apology. Then he slapped his cheeks with all his strength, regaining his fighting spirit.

Although Ram had assured him that Rem was safe, the fear of her being alone could not be dispelled. Their situation would not change if they did not reunite with the others soon.

Subaru: "Anyway, let's rush this reunion. Ram, can't you use your connection with Rem to work out her location?"

Ram: "It's difficult. That girl is asleep, so the only thing transmitted is her heartbeat. There is another means, Clairvoyance, but… that's not too reliable."

Subaru: "Why?"

Ram: "These Sand Dunes, it's full of Witchbeasts, and there are almost no ordinary animals or plants around. Clairvoyance is not able to borrow their sights if their wavelength does not match with Ram's. It does not synchronize with the Witchbeasts. At this time, Ram is only able to borrow the eyes from Barusu's ground dragon."

Subaru: “Patrasche? No, that should be enough. I want to check if Patrasche and Gian are with someone. It’d be helpful if they were with everyone from the dragon carriage.”

Ram: “…That would not be very useful.”

Subaru felt frustrated at Ram’s disinterested attitude, tilting his head in thought. Now was the time to collect as much information as they could to get reunited again.

And yet, he was unable to understand why Ram was hesitating here.

However, before he could touch on what she had truly meant, the answer appeared in front of them both.

Subaru: “—?”

What had suddenly passed by in the corner of his eyes, was a light. A light different from the lantern he was holding.

Immediately shivers ran through Subaru’s body, as he had had a bad experience with light moving through the edge of his sight, but the light that appeared was shaken by a gentle movement, totally different from that.

The light gradually came closer, and slowly the figure became clearer,

???: “Ram-san and Natsuki-kun, it seems that yer discussion’s over?”

Subaru: “—Anastasia and Patrasche?”

Hearing the familiar Kararagi dialect, Subaru’s head slightly lifted in surprise. In front of him, holding a lantern apart from the one held by Subaru, and riding Patrasche’s back, was Anastasia.

In response to Anastasia’s question, Ram bowed while lifting the hem of her robe on the spot.

Ram: “Thank you for your consideration, Anastasia-sama. May I ask, how are the surroundings?”

Anastasia: “I just checked all the way back, but I couldn’t find anyone else. Only the three of us are out here… ‘n this sort-of-girl.”

Ram: “Is that so?”

Anastasia: “Gotta keep yer spirits up. Might not be much comfort, tho’.”

Ram: “Thank you for your concern. Oh, I see… I shall do so.”

To Anastasia on top of the dragon, Ram responded politely. From the course of the conversation, Subaru vaguely understood that Anastasia had been searching around.

But that was the extent of his satisfaction, for the lack of explanation left him displeased.

Subaru: “Hey, Ram. Weren’t you and I the only ones here? What does this mean, can you explain?”

Ram: “I do not remember telling you that Ram and Barusu were alone. Barusu was the one who made that rash judgment of his own accord. Unsightly.”

Subaru: “It’d be much more endearing if you said you were so worried about Rem you failed to mention it, nee-sama.”

Ram: “Haa—”

Hearing Subaru, Ram snorted her nose with her usual tone.

Feeling relieved with that attitude, Subaru then walked towards Anastasia.

Subaru: “Regardless of any deception, it’s good news that Anastasia is safe. I’m relieved.”

Anastasia: “Aren’t’cha confusin’ this deception of yers with a misunderstandin’? I’d be relieved to learn that I’m not alone. Besides, Natsuki-kun’s ground dragon, Patrasche-chan, was very helpful, a very good girl."

Stepping on the saddle, Anastasia carefully attempted to get off Patrasche. And Patrasche immediately crouched down to help her descent.

As expected, she was a proper ground dragon. A handsome ground dragon. A female, however.

Subaru: "No one else is hiding, right? It's genuinely just the four of us?"

Anastasia: "Includin' Patrasche-chan, there's no doubt that it's the four of us. Emilia-san and Julius'd have no reason not to come forth… but, I don't know about Meili-chan."

Subaru: "She might've taken advantage of the commotion to run away, huh… You don't have to say it."

Picturing the girl with braided hair in his mind, Subaru thought about Meili's options.

Just before being separated, Meili's secret insurance in having a Witchbeast accompanying them had been exposed by Subaru. Subaru, who had Returned by Death, actually knew that Meili's Witchbeast served to protect the dragon carriage, both from the Watchtower and flocks of attacking courtesan bears.

However, since that was an event that had not occurred in this loop, essentially, the only one who knew Meili's reason for having the Sand Earthworm follow them was the girl herself.

In this particular situation, having Meili escape the group and try to leave the Sand Dunes alone would not be strange.

Subaru: "But, she won't do that… that's what I want to believe."

Anastasia: "Expectations? Or should it be trust?"

Subaru: "Make what you will of it. Leaving that aside, how are the surroundings?"

Setting aside his stance on Meili, Subaru asked Anastasia to be briefed on her inspection. She put her hands in the sleeves of the robe and tilted her head, saying, "'Bout that, huh."

Anastasia: "Judgin' from what I saw, we're certainly in the Sand Dunes, but… Mayhaps this place could be underground."

Subaru: "Underground? How could there be an underground in the Sand Dunes?"

Anastasia: "Under the sand of the dunes. A cave… More of a cavity, so to speak, but the temperature's obviously lower than above ground, and the air's also feelin' kinda heavy."

Subaru nodded as the girl swung her robe in an appealing gesture, joining the front parts to keep out the cold.

Certainly, the atmosphere here felt far colder than in the earlier setting. Considering the space had a tall ceiling with the sky left unseen, it was a suitable guess.

Subaru: "Underneath the dunes. I've got a bad feeling about this. I pray that this isn't a Sand Earthworm's lair."

Anastasia: "Uh… That's…"

It was a plausible scenario.

In fact, they had witnessed the existence of Sand Earthworms inhabiting the ground, and given the enormity of the individual used by Meili, this cavity was just large enough for it to be possible. Considering the ecology of the eyeless Sand Earthworms, this dark space devoid of any light would be a perfect match for them.

Subaru: "I mean, this team seriously lacks combat power… Me, Ram and Anastasia, is this a special front of non-combatants?!"

Ram: "Emilia-sama's own Knight, proudly describing himself as a non-combatant… How hopeless."

Subaru: "I'm just stating the reality. Without Beatrice, I can't be so conceited as to rely on my whip skills alone."

In terms of everyone's self-defense measures, this really was a group that lacked fighting power. Ram had restraints of her own, and Subaru lacked Beatrice, to name a few.

Ram: "By the way, what about Beatrice-sama? Do you feel any connection relating to your Contract?"

Subaru: "Unfortunately, my and Beako's heart are strongly tied, but not in a realistic sense. No, Beatrice told me before that she could feel me, but I can't."

Ram: "Useless."

Subaru: "Shut up."

As Ram sighed and looked away, Subaru discreetly zoomed his face closer to Anastasia. As he murmured towards her calm profile,

Subaru: "So, can you fight? What do you say?"

"Anastasia": "—If it comes to it, of course I will fight no matter what. But it will shorten Ana's life. I would prefer avoiding it as much as possible. I will be relying on you guys."

Subaru: "Those expectations probably won't be met. I don't know if that's a good thing or bad."

For a moment, Subaru snorted at Anastasia, who appeared as Echidna.

Then, looking at Patrasche, who quietly waited for instructions, Subaru stroked the tip of her nose with his palm. The jet-black dragon kept silent and, leaning forward, nuzzled Subaru with her hard scales.

Subaru: "It hurts, it hurts, but… it's a relief. Emilia and Beatrice aren't here… but I'm relieved to have you. Except, it still doesn't make a complete group reunion."

Ram: "—Barusu."

As he was sharing his anxieties with Patrasche, as Ram was beckoning him, he looked back at her. Then, Ram crossed her arms while facing Subaru and jerked her chin towards Anastasia.

Ram: “We cannot stand here forever. Let’s move to meet up with the others. Fortunately, thanks to Anastasia, we have light. We will be moving onwards.”

Subaru: “Ohh… I didn’t know that the light was brought by Anastasia.”

Anastasia: “Just before the dragon carriage was swallowed, I could only grab the emergency bag that was prepared by Natsuki-kun. Thanks to you, I was able to bring in the light, a knife, and some emergency food.”

Anastasia pointed at Patrasche, where a small emergency bag was hanging on the saddle. It was the equipment that Subaru had prepared for the dragon carriage as a literal emergency kit.

Even if an opportunity did not occur in which its use was necessary, he felt relieved that he had thought of it.

Subaru: “You shouldn’t make fun of the wit I have in hand, after all. From now on, let’s not forget to check the emergency door at any place we stay in for the first time.”

Ram: “Jokes aside, it is Barusu’s credit. So, a light will be given to you as a reward, so go ahead and lead the way.”

Subaru: “Huuuh~… This is a reward?”

Passing him the lantern, both Ram and Anastasia got on Patrasche’s back. This scene, regardless of how anyone saw it, put Subaru in the position of a servant.

Anastasia: “As a matter of fact, three people’d easily fit… There’d be plenty of room if Ram-san and I cramp in, wouldn’t it?”

Ram: “Please stop there, Anastasia-sama. You can imagine Barusu would happily try to touch our bodies were he to be so close to them as to be able to touch them.”

Subaru: “Off you go imagining stuff without a reason to, but if you want to be like that, I’ll imagine a lot more than that! Don’t mess with me! I’ll give you a taste of puberty!”

Raising his middle finger, he argued back, prompting a wry smile from Anastasia. Ram reacted as usual, as Subaru continued walking into the cave with a lantern in his hand.

Subaru and Ram’s light skirmish made it seem like they had forgotten the circumstances—but it surely was a way to hide the anxiety in each respective heart, and brought just a bit of relief to their minds.

Perhaps they had both realized it, but they kept quiet.

3

Although walking was a struggle, Subaru and the others were advancing through the large cave in the sand.

As expected, Patrasche was used to it, and there would not be any problem with her movement even if two heavy stones were to be put upon her back. Subaru had learned the technique for walking in the desert these past few days, and was able to proceed without much difficulty. Albeit there was the feeling of sand entering his boots.

Subaru: “The wind… I can kinda feel it, and also can’t.”

Ram: “I feel it. But given how thin this wind is, it’s still a long way from being connected to above ground.”

Along the way, wetting his finger on his tongue, Subaru tried to examine the airflow, but it was not quite clear. On the other hand, with the wind-sensitive Ram feeling it out, she concluded that the exit was still far ahead.

The way to this exit was what he wanted to give priority to, looking to meet up with his companions. Unfortunately, though, there was no indication that the signs of wind would be very reliable.

Ram: “Emilia-sama and Julius-sama should not get lost due to the guidance of the Micro Spirits. And that is why I doubt that there is a malicious intent in the selection of this grouping.”

Subaru: “Well, it’s quite useful to be guided by a Micro Spirit. Damn, in my case, Beako’s so strong that she keeps the Micro Spirits away. She’s far beyond their capacity.”

To be clear, this was something beyond Emilia and Julius’s exceptional fighting power.

When setting out to look for a lost member, the search may not go as smoothly if they are left to do whatever they feel. They could only try not to overlook anything around them as much as possible while proceeding.

Anastasia: “Before Natsuki-kun woke up, Ram-san… seemed considerably shaken. She could not find Rem-san, but seems to be hiding it behind her attitude now.”

Subaru: “…Is that so.”

Secretly, Anastasia shared this anecdote, which made his fight with Ram after waking up feeling more and more awkward.

Subaru had spent the past year alongside Ram, after she had the memories of her sister completely erased. Any connection those two previously had must have left behind some remains after being wiped. If no one else, Subaru at least had to believe so.

“Anastasia”: “Well, it is not fun seeing you huddled up all gloomy and miserable like that, so why not look ahead if you are so down about it? If you do not, you might miss something important.”

Subaru: “…Don’t throw me off like that. You, stop giving me those nice words. You’re taking after your creator, enticing people like that.”

“Anastasia”: “Sooner or later, I wish you would start thinking of me separately from my creator. Girls will not like you if you are so insistent. This is something I have picked up with time.”

Subaru: “I don’t know any other approach. I’ll keep it in a corner of my mind.”

The tongue-in-cheek talkative exchange seemed to distract from the impatience and anxiety of not making any progress.

In the midst of that conversation, the party advanced through the large cave. Nothing really changed about the sand path and the sand walls—while walking along that path, there were a few things to think about. That was,

Subaru: “Even though I said to be wary that this might be a Witchbeast nest… We have yet to run into a Witchbeast.”

Ram: “That is what Ram is concerned about.”

Kicking the sand under his feet, Subaru grumbled at Ram as she expressed a similar opinion.

They continued into the large cave, and soon an hour had already passed. With no one and nothing around, their anxiety, impatience and bad premonitions continued to grow.

Of course, not having enemies show up was a welcome situation, but the extensive silence could not be of any help in wiping out the bad feelings regarding this place—It was much like being detached from the whole world.

Subaru: “No way, we couldn’t have been swallowed by a hyperspace that does not connect to anywhere, right?”

Anastasia: “Well then, would’cha tell me where the wind we’re relying on’s comin’ from? Do ya think it’s the heavy breathing of an unusually big and ferocious Witchbeast who owns this cave?”

Subaru: “That’s not even funny, it’s rather scary.”

In fact, it would not be surprising if that happened. They had already seen it with their own eyes that even the world could be broken apart. Whatever this rift was connected to, it would not be worth a surprise.

Ram: “Regardless of the maliciousness of this selection, it is hard to believe that whoever set it up had considered it could be broken. We were not aiming for such a thing with the negation spell, it was just a coincidence."

Subaru: "What do you mean, precisely?"

Ram: "It is useless to imagine the worst scenario that this road, as it is, is connected to a Witchbeast's stomach—Look, observe."

The lack of progress was leading to pessimistic theories, which Ram rationally rejected. Then, at the end of the explanation, she urged Subaru to look ahead, him having stopped.

Following her indication, Subaru held out the lantern to look forward. Then, the illuminated passage of the cavity became narrow, in front of their eyes—

Subaru: "It's a fork."

Anastasia: "Right or left, we gotta make a choice. What do we do?"

Subaru: "From what I know, Kurapika said to choose right when the time called for it."

Anastasia: "Who's that?"

Looking at it in practical terms, he remembered hearing that people tended to unconsciously choose to proceed left when they got lost. Perhaps it had to do with dominance, such as the dominant hand, dominant leg, and other complicated factors like those; that was said to be one way of thinking about it.

For that reason, Subaru wanted to follow the theory of an intellectual character he once knew and chose the right path which he thought was correct, but—

Ram: "So, Barusu, which way do you want to go?"

Subaru: "…Honestly speaking, left."

Ram: "What happened to Kurapika?"

Anastasia: “Who’s that?”

Subaru replied, Ram asked question after question, and Anastasia just poked fun.

If the words were taken at face value, then the exchange could be interpreted as such.

—But in reality, the three people who exchanged words had a stiff expression and worrisome looks on their faces. On top of that, even Patrasche, unable to speak, was staring at the right path with stern eyes.

The cause was the overwhelming negativity they were feeling from the right path. Abstractly speaking, they felt a detestable premonition. If more words were to be used, what they felt was more like dread.

Their instincts were ringing the alarm bell. Selecting the right path, would be deadly.

Subaru: “The right… I think it’s dangerous. I have a feeling it’s not going to be pleasant.”

Ram: “Surprisingly, I agree with Barusu. What you think Anastasia-sama?”

Anastasia: “If done the Kararagi way, majority wins, by the support of two votes… Besides, I’m honestly lackin’ the courage to choose the right side.”

As no sleeves would swing, Anastasia made the gesture of swinging both hands as the answer for everyone.

Subaru was not the only one. Ram and Anastasia both felt a strange sensation from the right path; Patrasche did as well. Therefore, the right road could not be chosen.

Subaru: “Then, left it is… that also feels like choosing a terrible option though.”

Ram: “So, turning back? There is nothing to gain in such a manner.”

Subaru: “There’s nothing to lose, that’s what you’re saying, I might just be overly negative.”

As Subaru failed to make a decision, Ram and Anastasia seemed ready to jump in.

Reluctantly shrugging his shoulders, Subaru stepped forth, walking in front of Patrasche. Straight towards the road on the left.

Despite his hesitation, by proceeding in that direction, the path on the right would deviate greatly from the large cavity. He found that the pressure that he felt through the walls of sand kept disappearing further and further, and the stiffness in his shoulders was naturally released.

Ram: “—What an unpleasant place.”

She felt the same thing, and as he heard Ram murmuring, Subaru agreed in silence.

At this crossroads, the right path caused overwhelming negative thoughts. They chose the left road out of something like instinct to avoid the other, but there was one more reason.

—Inside his chest, Subaru felt the presence of something shouting in joy towards the right path.

It would be dreadful to obey what it declared.

It was also undeniably a major factor as to why Subaru did not opt for that road.

4

Team Non-Combatant traipsed through the cave, and a few more hours passed after that fork.

Subaru: “…”

Anastasia: “…”

Ram: “…”

As they slowly advanced their search in the great cavern, the number of words spoken between the three dropped drastically.

With their fatigue, and not to mention the darkness, any sense of time was fuzzy, but what was truly wearing down their spirit along the walk was silence.

In fact, Subaru felt like several hours had passed, but he did not know if that was true. There was the possibility that they had utilized the time better than they thought, or even that they had completely squandered it.

What they knew for sure, was that there was no progress, no more than that.

Subaru: "…At that split, I wonder if we should have gone right."

Ram: "After that much silence, you can only think to complain? Stop it. It's shameful."

Murmuring, he moved his dry lips to complain, and Ram bitterly delivered a stab.

However, her poison also lacked ambition. Not being able to find anything, it caused her to also be slightly dominated by anxiety.

Although the foothold along that path of sand was shoddy, there was some confidence that they had already walked for a few kilometers. So with no end to the cave in sight, it could not be helped that they would be swept over by a bad feeling. It was natural that one would doubt that the wrong choice had been made.

Even more, if they reached a dead end, they would give up and turn back.

Subaru: "The barrage of lights above ground… What do you think it was?"

Subaru changed the direction of the topic, for fear that the negative conversation would continue as it was.

The topic that turned up was the light of the Watchtower that had triggered this situation in the first place—the defense mechanism of the dunes, which was believed to have been prepared by the Sage.

Ram: “It was a needle.”

Subaru: “A needle?”

To that question, Ram responded curtly. She spilled a sigh at Subaru’s follow-up question and gently stroked her pink hair,

Ram: “I do not know its principle in detail, but long and narrow needles enchanted with magic were being fired. The needles carried high heat, probably the effect of firing magic. But the needle itself seemed to be of special manufacture. As it was repelled and fell on the sand, it disintegrated and disappeared.”

Subaru: “…You got such a good glance at it, during all that uproar.”

Ram: “A quick glance would tell you that much.”

Without a doubt, it seemed Ram’s observation power was not as ordinary as she claimed it to be. In fact, with Subaru just staring at her, Anastasia shook her head in amazement.

In Ram’s case, she was aware of her own talents, but was still speaking sarcastically. Despite that, it was quite the analysis.

Subaru: “What do you think was the purpose?”

Ram: “Kill those approaching the Watchtower… it is a mystery why it relentlessly aimed at Barusu. It’s standard practice to take down the weaker enemies first, so that might be it.”

Subaru: “Crap, I can’t deny it!”

It would be only natural to arrive at the same conclusion when taking a bird’s-eye look at it. Nonetheless, thanks to that, there had been no casualties among those of the party.

The conclusion to be reached here, was that it was good to have a weak Subaru donning invincible magic. But in that case—

Subaru: “It means, a friendly encounter with the Sage would be difficult.”

Anastasia: “I think it’s premature to say so. Lookin’ at it from their point of view, they didn’t know who we were nor what we wanted, right? There’s a chance for a discussion to occur, it’s what I think.”

Ram: “At worst, our business is with the Sage’s knowledge, and not their personality. If they do not speak, you can just tie them up and make them taste an adequate level of pain until they do.”

Subaru: “Nee-sama, was that your villainous side talking?!”

Ram: “If there is something you want, take measures. This is not mere child’s play.”

Ram remained strangely calm in the face of Subaru’s astonishment. Just hearing those statements, he felt he was being reminded of how innocent and shallow his own resolutions were.

Regardless of whether it was actually put into practice, there was no doubt that Ram was prepared for it. That was naught but proof that she was serious about Rem.

Subaru: “…”

To touch Ram’s resolve, Subaru would be required to make some decisions regarding his own resolutions.

He had not thought of getting his hands dirty for Rem. Rem was not to be blamed for that either.

What he had to do was to be prepared to reap the results.

When confronted with the existence of the Sage, no matter what kind of opponent that is, he must be absolutely determined—He must be resolved to that degree.

Patrasche: “…”

Subaru: “Patrasche?”

At the same time Subaru bit his lips with those thoughts, Patrasche held her breath.

The ground dragon was glaring at the path with squinted eyes and neighed a little. Having noticed that stare, Subaru also stopped his feet and returned to soothe the ground dragon. He stroked the back of her neck and called out, “What’s wrong?”.

Subaru: “Did you see something? What…”

Ram: “—The reason would be this.”

On Patrasche’s behalf spoke Ram, interrupting Subaru. Anastasia frowned and looked at the passage, imitating Patrasche.

Of course, nothing could be seen anything within the extent of that darkness, but a different feeling was being stimulated rather than sight—Seeping into their nasal orifices was a smell of something burning.

Anastasia: “…Don’t’cha think it smells like fire?”

Ram: “I cannot think of anything else. But I do not think something like a kitchen could possibly be here.”

Subaru: “If this is fire… The reason for this smell is civilized people, right?”

Ram & Anastasia: “…”

At Subaru’s clinging question, neither Ram nor Anastasia could just easily nod.

He could also understand the girls’ judgment. But the smell that was drifting was clearly a scent of something supposedly burning. Ram said it was something like cooking; the aroma wafting through the air was similar enough.

A bonfire, or a stew for a meal. If that was the case,

Subaru: “Do you think there’s a possibility of that being Emilia and the others?”

Anastasia: “Assumin’ they were sent to the same place, there’s enough possibility. Nevertheless, whether it’s rational or unwise to use fire in such situation, I’d leave that judgement up to the others.”

Subaru: “…”

Even if discussed here, the answer regarding who aid ahead of the road would not arrive.

The idea of beckoning and checking the intents of the other party came to mind, but—

Anastasia: “Even if they’re at the end of the path it doesn’t mean they’re friendly.”

Supposing it was not Emilia and the others, could it be the Sage? It was hard to believe that the Sage who should be in the Watchtower would come down, but it was not unlikely.

In that case, if the Sage continued to be hostile, a corresponding assault was also to be expected.

Subaru: “…Hide the light and move forward? What I mean is, if they’re using fire then there’s light on their side. We, at least, should hide.”

Anastasia: “It’s strange to keep speculatin’ about it. We also gotta check what’s the cause, so I think it’s a reasonable idea.”

Anastasia nodded to Subaru’s proposal, and after that, Ram also quietly agreed with it.

When the lights of the two lanterns were turned off, the party went back to the path where the smell of fire was drifting from, relying only on Subaru’s light.

Ram: “Barusu.”

Subaru: “What?”

Ram: “If anything happens to you, we will leave you here and run away. Try not to hold a grudge.”

Subaru: “If you do that I’ll curse you.”

Ram’s words were those of encouragement, perhaps because she knew he would be fearful.

In the light held by Subaru, Ram slightly loosened her lips, and Subaru went straight through the passage. Feeling Patrasche’s breath behind him, the scent of the fire gradually grew more intense,

Subaru: “—! It’s the light.”

Beyond the passage, he found a slightly shimmering red light.

Subaru immediately darkened his own light and instructed the three behind him to be silent. Then he squatted down and stepped on the sand stealthily to confirm the existence of the light.

One step, two steps—as he moved forward, he could see that the light was on the other side of a corner. The passage was slightly bent to the left, and the fire was just beyond there.

Subaru: “…”

Quietly reaching the bend, he took a peek of the other side ever so slightly while leaning against the wall. At that moment, a wind carrying a slight heat tickled Subaru’s forehead and he unintentionally closed his eyes.

—Immediately after, Subaru’s footing dug into the soil unexpectedly, the sand slid, and his body rolled down.

Subaru: “Wha—?!”

Incapable of withstanding that surprise, Subaru forgot to hold on and rolled down the slope. The fine particles of sand were hard to grab on to, and so he slid all the way down to the bottom.

Plunging head-first into a pile of sand after rolling down a steep incline of about ten meters of height, Subaru again spat out sand and raised his body.

Subaru: "Ugh! Thu! Again sand… No, that then…"

Subaru shook his head and looked around. With the shock, he had dropped his lantern. As it was nearby, he started searching for it, stretching his hand, and he touched something hard.

For an instant, he thought he had found the lantern, but it felt different compared to the hardness what he had held. The surface was crisp and pleasant to touch, like a wooden stick. Despite its thickness and length, he judged it light when lifting it up.

Subaru: "What is it…?"

In that pitch-black darkness, even getting closer to it and straining his eyes would not relay to him its identity.

Smelling it timidly, the smell of charcoal was felt—

Subaru: "…"

The very next moment after he thought that, a light appeared behind him suddenly.

The wisps that appeared in the background were red, shimmering and primitive, and they were called flames. Then, as the flames began to light up the world, Subaru saw the true identity of the thing he had grabbed.

—Probably, it was a creature's foot.

Something that had once been an animal, burned until it turned into charred remains.

And around the place where Subaru was sitting, the remnants of former creatures that had become lumps of charcoal were scattered; Subaru had slipped right into the middle of countless, burned, dead bodies.

Subaru: "Ohh! Ah! AHH?!"

Throwing away the charred waste in his hand, Subaru aimed to retreat. However, a terrible flame existed at his rear, and his neck was burned by the heat wave, and this time, he fell down just on his face. And finally, he turned back and looked at it directly.

???: "—KSHEEEEEEGHHH!"

Subaru was thrown out of reality, facing a tremendous roar from his front.

Why were all the Witchbeasts' roars so disgusting as to irritate human beings to the limit of their disgust?

With such a high-pitched roar, it was like countless babies were crying all at once.

It was a blasphemous creature that Subaru had never seen, it burned red in a place full of burned bodies—it truly was a Witchbeast, but the color of its fur was different from what he had seen in the past.

As far as Subaru knew, all the Witchbeasts were distorted and ugly, but they were often in a form such that they bore a resemblance to an existing creature somehow.

That applied all the same for the White Whale or the Great Rabbit. For all cases, there was a basic foundation of an animal.

However, this time, he did not wish to apply the same concept to the Witchbeast that existed in front of him.

Witchbeast: "—KSHEEEEEEGHHH!"

The Witchbeast, once again, cried out. At first glance, some similarities could be found with a horse.

Thin, but strong legs of a quadruped, that existed to charge over the earth. It was the same as a horse, in that it possessed a trunk supported by its four legs and a long tail swaying from its rear.

However, there was a human torso in the part where the horse's neck should normally be, leading to the head. Compounding on the four legs, the human torso possessed two further arms. And there was no head above the neck of the human torso. As from the neck to the top, a Horn protruded.

It was the mark of a Witchbeast, a mark that branded it as something decisively different from other animals.

In place of its head, a horn grew. It possessed a head not. But if that were the case, where was the mouth from which its cry was raised? From the chest till the belly of the human torso, was a vertical gash, and inside the oral cavity, were fully-grown fangs aligned horizontally, asserting their existence.

Subaru: “…A monster.”

Even calling it a Witchbeast was somewhat absurd; rather it was a blasphemy of life.

To Subaru’s knowledge, it was close to a creature of fantasy called Centaur, half-man and half-horse, but that was a distorted figure, as if its production had been abandoned half-way.

From the back side of the human torso of the Centaur grew a mane of flame torso searing the sand cave with incredible power, red light urging forth.

Considering the strength of that blaze, who had created all the charred carcasses that lay around the place became clear. Using fire meant civilized people or whatever; it had been a mistake to embrace such expectations.

Subaru: “…”

The arms of the human part of the Centaur were that of a human, with five fingers.

The legs of the horse part of the Centaur were that of a horse, with hoofs having been formed.

The figure was about six or seven meters long, just about the right size to pass through the cavern—that was to say, the master of the cavern was this being in front of him—

Subaru: “…It was, a trap.”

Holding his breath, Subaru despaired.

There was nothing he could do. He quickly turned his hand to the back of his waist and grabbed the handle of the whip, but he did not believe he could do anything with it.

And to that breathless Subaru, the Centaur tilted his eyeless head. From its mouth was hurled a bellow, inciting fear.

Witchbeast: "—KSHEEEEEEGHHH!"

At that moment, Subaru moved to create a gap.

He turned around on the sand, roughly kicked one of the charcoaled debris onto the Centaur. Having been cooked to a crisp on the inside, the corpses had no power to them, even if they connected. But still, it was good to be in control. Clinging to the steep slope, he attempted to return to the upper passage. He would go back the road he came, but he did not mind it. The problem was, how far this Centaur was going to give chase was unknown. Given that it burnt its prey in this manner, it was dubious whether it had an appetite. Of course, this was not necessarily a good thing, as he had heard that Witchbeasts possessed an instinct to hurt and murder human beings. Still, if there was a possibility that the situation to look up for a little bit, it would—

Subaru: "Kafuu—"

While thinking so much about it, Subaru noticed that his body was not trembling.

Trying and creating a diversion by kicking a piece of charred debris, and climbing the steep sand slope and turning back, and reaching out to his whip, Subaru could do none of this.

—Because before he could get to it, the breath of the Witchbeast burned Subaru.

Subaru: "—Ah."

As soon as the conception reached that his whole body was being burnt, Subaru screamed in pain and suffering. However, perhaps because his throat was being burnt, his lungs were having their oxygen burnt, not a bit of his voice could be raised.

Where the burned skin formed bubbles, they swelled and burst instantly. The fluids that had flown inside the body, which he had never seen before, instantly evaporated, his blood actually boiling.

Subaru: "…"

Never mind rolling over on the ground in this suffering.

The muscles and fat had been burnt, melted and charcoaled. The pain disappeared to a place far away, and Subaru experienced an illusion of being drowned in flames.

Burned. Yes, burned. He had read somewhere about burns in-depth.

He had learned that there were several stages of burns, and that once the third stage was reached, the scars would remain, and a skin graft would be necessary. He also had learned that if thirty percent of a person's body were burnt, breathing would be made difficult, leading to death.

Subaru: "…"

Body hair burnt till the follicle, eardrum and brain matter alike melted and flowed out the earlobe. Lips and gums evaporated, exposing the teeth, and the tongue was gulped by the suffering of the heat wave. It did not matter. He had already drowned. These burns, could they be healed? Even though he was not confident regarding his face, if it got burnt, would they like him less? Emilia, Beatrice, Rem.

???: "—rusu!"

Burning, his field of vision was burning. Everything was burning, turning red, and going white. Blood was eradicated by the tremendous heat, the eyelids melted away, the fluids of the eyeballs evaporated, it turned white and cloudy, and nothing could be seen.

He had just heard something. He had heard someone calling. He had heard babies crying. Someone came down beside him. Idiot.

Why had they? They had said they would run away. Why had they come down here? But he did not know what going down meant. Moreover, what was left or right?

A horse, a human. Different. Hot. It melted, it burned, sleepiness.

Melted and disappeared—

5

???: “—How long are you going to sleep? Get up, lazy Barusu.”

Subaru: “Guah uh?!”

Subaru was pulled back to reality with a sharp poke, his limbs unable to move, and his scorched thoughts crumbled away.

Suddenly raising his body, Subaru wiped cold sweat from his sand-laden forehead.

Subaru: “Eh, oh… eh?”

Looking around. Dark, he was unable to see anything. There was something that evoked fear just a few seconds ago.

Subaru: “Hii?”

Ram: “…I am stunned. How can you be frightened from mere darkness? You are not a child.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Cowering, this small Subaru’s eyes widened at the sound of that voice.

Her face illuminated by the lantern she herself carried, from Ram spilled a slight exhale. Then, she quietly knelt down on the spot, and stroked Subaru’s cheeks with her hand.

Ram: “What a pitiful face.”

Subaru: “…Has my face melted?”

Ram: “—Except in front of Emilia-sama, I have never seen such a pitiful sight.”

The heat of the palm touching the cheek was so warm, but it was not even close, compared to what Subaru had just experienced.

Thanks to that feeling, thanks to the sensation of flames and the warmth of another, Subaru understood.

Again, he had Returned by Death. And here was another save point, different from that of the two Deaths he had met in the Sand Dunes.

So it had been said, that to conquer the labyrinth of sand one had to put their very lives at stake.

—He felt like the cold sand flowing on the sand sea was silently ridiculing the scorched Subaru, watching.

Chapter 14:
Faith Built atop the Sand

1

The warmth coming off from Ram's palm contrasted with the scorn of the cold sand. Both of those were the realities which Natsuki Subaru was faced with now; that was the present that he should accept.

Subaru "…Ram."

Ram: "What?"

Subaru: "Your fingers sure do feel nice and smooth…It's as—bbubeeeeh!"

Ram: "This Barusu sure pushes his luck, doesn't he?"

Subaru: "Will you ever stop using people's nicknames as curses?!"

Subaru voiced out his complaints with tears in his eyes after having had his cheeks slapped in recompense for his careless remark. However, Ram, who held a lantern in her hand, did not reply to him. Instead, she hurriedly moved off, keeping her distance away from him.

It was something cold from her, even though up until now, she had shown him a kindness which was seldom seen. —Though, if things stayed like this, since Subaru would be unable to even have an awkward conversation about it. Part of his true intention had been to go back to how they usually interacted.

Subaru: "Right here, we're…"

Ram: "It's pitch black absolutely everywhere. You remember the crevices opening up in the sand sea, and our dragon carriages being swallowed up by them, I presume? I don't want to have to explain more than that."

Subaru: “Nono, I’m fine with hearing just that. I get it.”

Ram: “…Okay”

Subaru received an outline of the current situation from Ram as he took a deep breath. He understood that he had Returned by Death and that his Returned by Death point had been changed already.

—Subaru had met death three times in these sand dunes with this.

Twice he had been killed above-ground by the flashes of light, which had likely been fired from the Watchtower. However, this time, this third time was far different to the other two. He had died from being attacked by a monster at the underground.

He could barely keep his body from shaking as he recalled the manner of his death that he’d experienced just a minute ago.

Subaru: “I never thought I’d die like that…”

The manner in which Subaru had died now was what you would call a fiery death. His whole body had been scorched by crimson flames, and he had been burnt to death still without understanding everything that was going on. It was hard to forget that his whole body had been licked by red-hot tongues, and that every part of him had melted rather than burnt.

He knew from knowledge that the human body was a lump of fat. However, was it really something that melted away so easily and runnily like that? That his burnt remains were tragic, was something which he would indeed agree with.

Ram: “Barusu, have you calmed down yet? If you’ve settled down, we need to talk.”

Subaru: “Ah, aah. Yeah, I’m okay…Is it just me and you here?”

Ram: “If that was the case, Barusu, I would be ditching you and running away for my own safety. Since I haven’t…well you understand what that means, don’t you?”

Subaru: “Did you just show a Part Two to the kindness you seldom show?”

Ram: “You sure do say a lot of disrespectful things towards the bundle of love and compassion which is me, don’t you? —She came back whilst you were spouting out nonsense.”

Looking to his left at the lantern—and then looking at where it was pointing from Ram’s right, he saw the glow of a lamplight approaching from deeper within the cave. The lantern was swaying back and forth at around head-height; and just as he expected, the source of light was held by Anastasia who was riding Patrasche.

Anastasia: “Ram-san, Natsuki-kun, ‘t seems yer conversation’s finished, right?”

Subaru: “…Anastasia, Patrasche, is that you?”

Anastasia, who was riding on Patrasche, spoke out the same greeting as she had before as she flashed him a grim. And, to those words, Ram pinched the hem of her skirt like before and bowed.

Ram: “Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Anastasia-sama. May I ask, what do the surroundings look like?”

Anastasia: “I jus’ went ta look a lil’ further inside, but I couldn’ find any of the other young’ens. It’s jus’ the three of us who were hurled down aroun’ here… ‘n this young’en lookin’ one.”

Ram: “I see.”

Anastasia: “Ya gotta keep yer chin up, though mayhaps that in itself ain’t gonna be of any use ta us.”

Ram: “Thank you for your concern. Indeed, I understand… I’ll make sure to do so.”

Anastasia voiced her apprehensions from dragonback. To which, Ram replied in the likeness of how she would usually speak, different to how she spoke to Subaru. Anastasia’s face was clearly visible this time since Ram was the one holding the lantern.

Everything Anastasia had said was exactly the same as last time.

The fact that Ram was upset at being separated from Rem was clearly shown from her face in profile, in which the slight exhaustion therein could be seen.

Subaru: “So for now, the only ones that were able to join up is just us four? …Pretty damn awful that we have no fighting strength.”

Anastasia: “We ain’t as scattered as we thought, eh, Natsuki-kun? What special good luck charm did ya even get Ram-san to cast us?”

Ram: “Unfortunately, nothing would happen even if it has to decide between just me and Barusu. Only Barusu would end up dead when he would be found the next day.”

Subaru: “What do you mean? Do you mean like the werewolf in a game of werewolf? Scary.”

Their comments were not meant as a show of bravado, but rather, Anastasia and Ram exchanged words in such as way as to calm Subaru, who had just woken up. Though his grasp of the situation was quick since it was the second time around, they were still in a place where it paid dividends in getting a move on immediately, even now.

Subaru: “Ram, just to make sure, you don’t know where Rem is using your synesthesia, right?”

Ram: “That’s correct, it’s no use. Since I feel the link, I have no doubt that at least she’s alive… But, I don’t know any more than that. All we can do is pray that she’s not alone.”

Subaru: “Given that my everyday deeds are tied to fortune and misfortune, Rem’s deeds will just be good ones, make no mistake in that… I absolutely believe in her safety.”

If this theory was right, it was entirely because of his own deeds that he was going through an absurd amount of suffering and death. He wanted to go and close his eyes to that.

Subaru “On top of that…”

Subaru absolutely couldn’t let Ram and Anastasia know; that was his greatest anxiety. It seemed like everyone he wanted to save had been scattered away from him thanks to his Return by Death point having been updated. It was just like when he couldn't use his Return by Death to get Rem's name back.

What if tragedy had struck his companions due to his Return by Death updating now?

Subaru: "I absolutely won't allow that…!"

For those who weren't here. Emilia, Beatrice, Julius, Meili. And Rem. He prayed that nothing disastrous had happened to them. Natsuki Subaru prayed that they weren't hurt, even if they weren't in his reach.

Ram: "Barusu. —Aren't you connected with Beatrice-sama?"

Subaru: "I've tried, but it's no good. As long as there's a path between us, Beako herself should be able to sense me… But even if I try to call her, the connection is pretty weak."

Anastasia: "Might be due to the miasma. Even spirits can't keep their breath held long, even my Echidna's grumblin' every so often…It was jus' Emilia-san who was fine ta it."

Subaru: "I guess it was the same for you as well, eh, Beako?"

Beatrice, stout-hearted as she was, probably wouldn't let out any complaints even if she was in a bad state. Were that to happen, Subaru would have absolutely noticed it. Beatrice being in a bad state would influence everyone else's safety as well. When they safely reunited, he'd have to tell her off.

Subaru: "That's why, for that too, we need to rejoin with the other guys. —Let's go deeper into the cave!"

It was likely that they'd come across the monster which had burned him once again if they went towards its depths.

But, even so, there was no other way but to go forward.

So to reunite with his precious companions as well, there was no other way but to go forward.

2

Anastasia: “Yer the only one walkin’ Natsuki-kun, ain’t yer footin’ gettin’ worse?”

Subaru: “I’m fine. Do take care though since Patrasche won’t welcome anyone with open arms except me. Every time, it seems like she’s about to bite off one of Beako’s drill curls.”

Anastasia: “Ahahaha, what a great joke. Patrasche-chan is a good girl, she wouldn’ do that. Ain’t that right?”

Patrasche: “…”

Patrasche gave a quick grunt at Subaru, who was leading them with his lantern whilst they made their way deeper into the cave. Her grunt was the sort she made when she had no complaints.

Patrasche was still a hard-worker, even in spite of her carrying other people who weren’t Subaru, since she knew it was an emergency. As expected, she was a woman worthy of being part of the Emilia Camp.

Having placed Ram and Anastasia on Patrasche, Subaru was the only who traversed the maze of sand on foot. They followed the same way as last time, with the four of them moving forward towards the depths of the cave. They may have left dozens of minutes earlier than last time, but since he didn’t know when that monster would appear down here, it’d all be down to nothing more than a margin of error.

Subaru: “Its lair is way over there…Maybe it’s its feeding ground, or its playground…”

What couldn’t be called “Feed” was the sheer amount of burnt corpses which had littered that area. The charred corpse which Subaru had accidentally grabbed had probably been an animal’s—From its shape it seemed like he’d grabbed the hind-leg of a four-legged creature, but there weren’t any indications that it had been eaten. The amount of charred corpses over there had been countless.

He could even have appreciated its cuisine as being Simply Gourmet Witchbeast if it was using fire to just prepare its meal. However, it merely burnt its prey and left their corpses behind untouched. That monster possessed a cruel nature that delighted itself in burning its prey to death; it made sense that it had a way to capture it and a place to burn it.

It was a grotesque figure, munitioned with abnormal amounts of heat. Subaru also feared the Witchbeast itself which existed with a wrong form as a living creature, at the same time as he recalled the moment he had burned to death.

Anastasia: "…From what I can see, we should still be in the san' dunes aroun' here, but maybe underneath it. What'dya think, Natsuki-kun?"

Subaru: "…"

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun?"

Subaru: "Eh? Ah? Aah, that's right. I think so too."

Ram: "Did you actually hear what she said? You're being rude if you think that response adequate."

Ram swiftly exposed Subaru's mindless agreement. However, Subaru hastily shook his hands and head in denial.

Subaru: "No way, I heard everything properly. And what's more is that I'm sticking with my stance of absolute agreement."

Ram: "Really, when you take off your bra when you go to bed, your breasts don't sag an inch, is that what you're saying? You're affirming it? Disgusting."

Subaru: "Isn't the way you're bringing that up to me disgusting?! Or rather, it's not like what she's saying, don't you agree with me?!"

Subaru, in a state of disbelief, turned towards Anastasia for help. She gave him a wry smile, and then spoke out saying, “You shouldn’ worry”

Anastasia: “Ram-san was messin’ about jus’ now. I don’ think it’s proper to speak like this in this terrible situation.”

Subaru: “Y-Yeah? Yeah, that’s right. I was in a hurry. And in the first place, neither Ram or Anastasia’s breasts would sag, nor do they have enough to even notice…”

Anastasia: “Whoopsy, sorry Natsuki-kun. My hand slipped.”

Subaru: “Why the past tense, and why so hot?!”

Her lantern was pressed to the nape of his neck, and the heat coming off from its Magical Ore burnt his neck. With the sensation of his fiery death resuscitated within him, he shuddered and rolled down onto the cold sand, shouting and screaming as he relieved himself from the pain. And as he did so, still collapsed with the back of his body lying on top of the sand, he glared at the two of them on dragon-back.

Subaru: “I-Isn’t that cruel doing that all of a sudden? I would have liked at least a chance to explain.”

Anastasia: “You can’t go criticizin’ people’s physical characteristics ‘n then showing contempt for ‘em. You absolutely can’t do that unless yer masochistic. If this was Kararagi, yer’d lose all yer reputation ‘n become broke. Don’t ya agree, Ram-san?”

Ram: “I don’t mind. Besides, Rem’s are bigger, so we keep the balance between us. It’s no issue for me.”

If he went and spoke out on their beautiful sisterly love which complemented each other, he’d once again provoke their ire. Thus, he kept quiet. Subaru grimaced, his nape tingled in slight pain. He stood up and coughed, brushing away sand.

Subaru: “Anyways, let’s get down to business. We’re underground here, that’s what you said right?”

Anastasia: “What, y’actually heard me? That’s right, I think so. The reason why is ‘cause the air is heavier than above ground, ‘n the temperature is lower. Don’t ya agree?”

Ram: “Underneath the sand dunes… We’ll have to pray that this isn’t a Sandworms’ burrow.”

Subaru: “…It could also be worse than that.”

Anastasia pulled her robe in tighter, appealing to the chill, a gesture which Ram followed suit in. Subaru subtly weaved in the reality of the situation, while he agreed with their opinions.

Of course, even if there were Sandworms here, it would be a herculean task to beat them back with the meagre fighting strength they had available amongst them. Even so, Sandworms were still better as they somewhat had a strategy to deal with them.

That Witchbeast—which for now he’d call a Centaur for convenience, was something which Subaru had no idea of how to deal with in battle. He had come across it and been immediately burnt on the spot.

He was sure he’d meet the same manner of death, if he bumped into it like last time.

Subaru: “Practically, it’s likely we’ll come across Witchbeasts other than the Sandworms. Even though they’re Witchbeasts which roam these sand dunes, I think it’s a good idea if we came up with a plan for them for later.”

Ram: “Yes… Nonetheless, I can only say that I just know what I heard Meili speaking about on the way here. And other than that, perhaps how a typical Witchbeast lives.”

Anastasia: “The Witchbeasts of the Augria Sand Dunes are far more aggressive due ta the effects of the miasma, and there are also Witchbeasts that shouldn’ be livin’ here in the first place. Even so, knowin’ is better than not knowin’.”

When Subaru put out his suggestion, Ram and Anastasia both nodded in agreement. As a result, they talked about the Witchbeasts whilst they continued their search forward into the depths of the cave.

Ram: “Sandworms stand out due to their stench and ugliness, but in contrast to their aggressive nature, their bodies aren’t that strong. Even if their bodies are large, my magic can kill them easily…If anything, your whip may actually be useful, Barusu.”

Subaru: “Seriously? My whip would damage them?”

Anastasia: “It’s said they tend ta be cowardly and if they feel pain it’d seem like they’d back away. It’d depen’ on the type of pain they’d feel, but at least the chance ain’t zero, wouldn’t ya think?”

Ram: “I don’t want to come across a Banassi, if possible.”

Subaru: “Is that a vicious witchbeast despite it having the name of a rodent?”

Anastasia: “Nah, it ain’t got any fighting strength. Buut, it fights dirty. It puffs itself up until its body goes Kapow, blowin’ up anyone near it. An’ with that, its blood ‘n guts will shower its enemy. “

Subaru: “…Then, is its blood poisonous or something?”

Ram: “It’s not like that. It’s just pestering…But, once one of them does that and their stench pours out, other Banassi flock over and do the same thing. You end up becoming smeared in blood.”

Subaru: “Scary!”

As expected, there were a lot of Witchbeasts which were unfamiliar to him, and there were many things which made him want to frown when listening to their composition. After they finished their discussion on those Witchbeasts, Subaru felt like the time had come, and chose the topic.

Subaru: “So, the next one is about a Witchbeast I saw in the distance back at the sand dunes… Do you know about a Witchbeast which has a human body attached to the body of a horse that spouts flames from its back?”

Ram & Anastasia "…"

Subaru told them about the Centaur, keeping in tune with the discussion which they'd had so far regarding the mode of life of Witchbeasts. It was a distinct Witchbeast. Even if this Witchbeast was one of the more aggressive varieties which were native to these sand dunes, if there was an origin to it, he should be able to make a breakthrough on it. It'd be ideal if there were weak points to it which were easy to understand, such as being weak to water due to its fire—.

Anastasia: "…Sorry, but I ain't got a clue. What about ya, Ram-san?"

Ram: "I'm sorry as well, but this Witchbeast invites only revulsion even in just listening to this. "

Subaru: "You both don't know, huh…"

However, he only got those answers from both of them. It seemed that neither of them had any knowledge of the Centaur or a different kind of them with those abnormal characteristics.

But, that was the Witchbeast they'd likely first come across. He didn't want to give up on finding a breakthrough with only the answers he'd received now.

Subaru: "You really don't know? Like, part of Patrasche's head becoming a human body, and two arms sticking out from there. And a mouth stretching vertically across part of its body. And finally, a horn growing from its neck of its human body instead of a head…"

Anastasia: "Eeeh… What the hell. That's soo gross…"

Ram: "Honestly, that's so off-putting."

The more details he put into his explanation, the more he put off the women. Seeing even Patrasche's face looking disgusted after she received Subaru's semblance of an explanation, Subaru dropped his shoulders in defeat. It genuinely seemed like they all had no clue about it.

Ram: “If you happened to catch a glimpse of a Witchbeast like that in the first place, you needed to report it back then. Why did you let such a seemingly dangerous Witchbeast go by?”

Subaru: “No, that’s not… It’s because it was nighttime. Maybe it was because Meili’s Divine Protection was active, so I just saw it in the distance not approaching us from all the way over there. It was like, when you were being treated by Emilia-tan inside of the dragon carriage.”

Ram: “Disgusting.”

Subaru: “So that’s all you’re gonna be saying?”

Subaru was discouraged by the lack of a response as he fumbled around for a suitable excuse. With it ending up like this, they had no means capable of striking first against the Centaur. All he could do was search for a plan to avoid meeting the real thing whilst he spelled out its danger in anticipation.

Subaru: “For now I’ll call it a Centaur, but… I reckon it’s a really dangerous thing. A mane grew from the back of its human body, and it was burning like fire. It had quite a tenacious look to it… I don’t know how since it didn’t have a face, but that’s the feeling it gave off, so it’s likely that if we don’t take care, it’ll come and chase us.”

Ram: “Then why did you ignore it? Do you have a death wish?”

Subaru: “I think there were misleading words in the explanation right now as well.”

He couldn’t deny that his explanation had become fairly absurd in wanting to let them know of the danger. However, by telling them this as a precaution, the girls would likely be able to keep themselves on guard for danger in regards to an encounter with an actual Centaur.

That’s all he had managed. He hadn’t managed to tell them about when he had really met the Centaur, and they had no counter-measures against it. Subaru thought about a more fundamental approach as well. That was—

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun, Ram-san. —Can ya stop the chatter for just a mo’?”

Anastasia said that, and motioned for Patrasche to stop. The clever Earth Dragon had stopped before she had been told to, but she drooped her head as if she understood what Anastasia meant. And then, Anastasia held out her lantern in front of her and said,

Anastasia: “There’s a fork ‘n the road”

—Before his eyes was the first part of his plan to avoid meeting the Centaur.

3

As before, a dread hung in the air at the fork, enough to make one grimace. And, that dread came clearly flowing in from the right path.

Anastasia: “Left or right, which way do ya want ta go?”

Subaru: “If we follow Kurapika’s theory, going to the right is the correct option.”

Anastasia: “Who’s that?”

As before, Subaru’s knowledge was nothing but foreign in this other world. Subaru had already experienced it with his body, so his words weren’t unsubstantiated.

Subaru: “In times like these, people tend to unconsciously want to pick the left side. Though various factors are at play like one’s dominant hand or eye, ethology has shown actual evidence of that, especially when there are no additional conditions attached.”

Ram: “Ethology… What a smart word came out of your mouth… However, are you ignoring this horrible presentiment which you can feel coming from the right path? Isn’t this a condition?”

Whether it would be correct or not to take the right path—this time, they had to take it. Having deemed so, Subaru would have to try and persuade the others with logic, however he felt a strong feeling of aversion to the horrible sensation that was drifting in from the right path.

If they could, both Ram and Anastasia, didn't want to take the right path; he could see that from the look in their eyes. Persuading them and making them take the right path was what Subaru had to do. He wouldn't let them go towards their death so easily after getting the chance from Returning by Death.

Subaru: "It's true that a blatantly horrible atmosphere is coming from the right. But, I think it's just a little too blatant. It's as if it's saying, don't come here, right?"

Ram: "…"

Subaru: "It's exactly like the mechanism which breaks through that Sand Time and the flower garden of Witchbeasts before the Watchtower. They're far too intricate to be something that cropped up naturally. Didn't you think so?"

Anastasia: "'n other words, Natsuki-kun, ya want to say that the San' Time, the Flower Garden and this cave as well are things of artifice?"

In contrast to Ram who had sunk into silence, Anastasia followed what Subaru had been trying to say. Subaru cracked his fingers at hearing her response and voiced his agreement with a "That's right."

Subaru: "They've set a bunch of traps since they want to keep us away. Why haven't we come across a single Witchbeast here in nearly an hour if this wasn't something artificial? We all seem to agree that this is part of the Augria Sand Dunes. And though Meili's not here, we haven't encountered any Witchbeast lairs. That's unnatural."

Ram: "So, here we're in a place where someone's hand… No, where the Sage's hand came into play."

Subaru: “With that, we know that the Sage’s personality isn’t very pleasant.”

Ram: “…”

Although it was an opinion which was half coated in truth, Subaru admired that even if he spoke himself, it didn’t mean that he hadn’t been able to sound persuasive. In fact, when he looked back on the journey through the Augria Sand Dunes up until now, there had been many things set which could certainly be called traps that were there to impede their journey towards the Watchtower—It could even be called a Trial. And, it was a fact as well that they hadn’t come across any Witchbeasts yet in this cave.

Of course, Subaru’s thoughts were incorrect in the end as he knew that they would come across the Centaur at the end, however—No, perhaps that Centaur was the last guard. There was a chance that its presence was a mechanism that denoted a last show of strength to those who came to enter the Watchtower.

In that case, he just had no way to express the malice in their choice of guardian; however.

Ram: “…There’s certainly logic even in Barusu’s point.”

Subaru: “—! Seriously?”

Anastasia: “Why are ya actin’ so surprised? ‘s it strange?”

Subaru instinctively reacted with surprise at Ram’s words, who had sunk into pensive silence. And after that, Anastasia, who had seen that response, gave a wry smile and lifted up the pom-poms on her hat with both of her hands.

Anastasia: “To tell ya the truth, I really don’t want ta go to the right. But, now that ya said that our opinions have been induced ta form up ‘n pick the left… I don’t want ta go with it anymore.”

Subaru: “That’s an opinion that doesn’t seem like you, who lived by your do-or-die intuition. You sure have been swept away.”

Anastasia: “Are ya jus’ sayin’ even I’ll do it if yer opinion becomes approved?”

The wry smile on her face grew deeper, which as a matter of fact, probably indicated that Eridna was unable to imitate the vital point that had been Anastasia’s Do-or-die Intuition. This was a last resort for her too. She should have had a difficult time deciding whether or not to get on board with Subaru’s point.

Subaru: “So, what about you Ram?”

Ram: “It’s as I said. I can understand Barusu’s point too, considering how things went in the Sand Dunes up until here. We can just agree that apart from the Sage’s wicked disposition, there’s also the harsh environments that those who can’t reach the Watchtower are subject to one after the other… That’s why it’s obvious that someone has meddled.”

Subaru: “Mhm, I sure don’t agree with calling them natural things…”

Ram: “So, although I don’t fully agree with your point, Barusu, it doesn’t mean that I don’t agree with some parts of it. With that said, there’s no hesitation in checking the right path.”

Subaru: “…What do you mean?”

Anastasia: “It’s annoyin’ for her ta do what Natsuki-kun says, but she’s goin’ to go along with it, is what she’s sayin’.”

Anastasia politely interpreted what Ram had meant to say. In fact, it seemed like it was the correct interpretation considering that Ram didn’t correct any of it. In short, it meant that both Ram and Anastasia had accepted Subaru’s cajolery.

Subaru: “—Alright! Excellent, muchas gracias. I won’t make either of you regret it.”

Ram: “I will take at least some share of the responsibility in my choice. Don’t you go trying to carry my share of the burden on your back as you please. Focus your useless resourcefulness only on Rem.”

Anastasia: “Ah, if you make me regret it, I’m gonna let ya take the responsibility for it. If that happens, we’ll hafta consult with the abacus for how much it’s gonna be, don’t ya think?”

Subaru: “Both of you are so damn scathing!”

His delight was short lived, and his speech in which he had taken responsibility for the choice was quickly assailed by the both of them. Although he didn’t know how serious Eridna’s trace of Anastasia was, Eridna was putting in great efforts so that things wouldn’t end up in regret. Only that feeling was genuine.

Subaru: “Plus, it’s not like the obstacles end with just their persuasion.”

Indeed, that was right. In the end, all Subaru had got was the right to make a challenge. The challenge against the real hurdles started from here on out.

—The fork in the road awaited their decision as it exuded an overwhelming negative atmosphere out.

They were going to take the right path where the air lay thick and visible, ever worsening. If this was a trial which the Sage had prepared, he wondered what they were thinking by opting to make this path its start.

Subaru: “If he’s waiting for us beyond this point, then let’s give him as much of a surprise as possible. —I’m gonna slap his face and make him apologize over and over, and after that, I’m gonna make him find Emilia and the others.”

Determining that, Subaru turned towards the right path and brandished his lantern there, having declared that. And then, Ram gave a soft sigh, behind Subaru’s back,

Ram: “I agree with you, but there’s still a chance that Emilia-sama, along with everyone else, will make it to the Watchtower before us.”

Subaru: “Honestly, wasn’t this a good spot to show off…?”

Subaru, whose spirit was being strained even before the challenge began, voiced out his disgruntlement.

4

After those exchanges, the three of them and their earth dragon—the group of four went into the right path. He still had a bad feeling, even now. That feeling seemed to make even the sand underneath his feet feel different. Whilst tasting this discomfort, Subaru wiped the cold sweat that trickled down his forehead and grinned at Patrasche.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, I was wrong to decide which way to take without hearing your opinion.”

Patrasche: “…”

Subaru: “Huh? Where you’re going is the road I will take? And whatever road it is, no matter how harsh, you’ll believe in me since I always weather through? Heyhey, you’re way too handsome, I’m falling in love!”

Ram: “He’s being nonsensical, but he doesn’t seem to be doing it by mistake, so he’s being sinful, don’t you think? What good do you see in him?”

Ram muttered that out as if she were shocked when she saw Subaru rambling on about Patrasche’s feelings as if he was her, whilst she remained taciturn. Though Patrasche would usually immediately rebuff such talk, right now she had remained composed as if he hadn’t said anything wrong. Or, she had thought it foolish to waste strength doing that, so she was saving it for until they reached a safer place. One of the two. Likely the latter.

Subaru: “Even if so, can you go easy on me, if possible?”

Patrasche: “—)”

Subaru: “Was that a voice of denial just now?”

Despite having chosen silence until now, she abruptly let off an impatient bark of denial at what he’d said. But then, having the mettle to first of all escape safely from here before berating him was quite the good thing. Because that meant Patrasche believed that they could get out of here safely.

"…"

They kept on walking without any change, with Subaru at the head, and Patrasche at the back. The lantern's light illuminated the way several meters ahead; making sure to tread carefully, their exploration continued.

Their pace, however, had definitely slowed down compared to their way here. It was even slower than when they'd taken the left road before he had Returned by Death. The reason why was simple.

Subaru: "My body… is so heavy…"

It wasn't that his weight had increased, or that an invisible Yōkai had climbed onto his back. And, in practice, it definitely wasn't any sort of issue that affected his actual corporeal self.

That both his body was heavy and his feet unmoving was entirely a mental problem.

Sure enough, the right path was brimming with a negative sensation that had caused his feet to seize up. He hoped this was one of the Sage's detestable trials, and that if they came out of the forked road, they'd find a safe spot awaiting them ahead—Of these hopes, he didn't hold a single one. But unfortunately, even those hopes were fleeting and quickly turned. Rather, his negative thoughts, which felt like a curse, grew ever stronger.

Subaru: "…"

Gulping down some saliva, still keeping his silence, Subaru took a step forward so to move his leaden feet from the sand. His feet were frozen in place; he wouldn't move. Even if in his heart, Subaru knew just how weak and fragile he was, he shouldn't have felt like cowering in this passageway of sand, where nothing had happened yet. Indeed, he felt no fear at heart, and even his head felt clear.

Just, his limbs didn't try to move in line with that purpose. His flesh and body, only, were acting against his reason and the course of his soul. His body instinctually rejected it, and tried to stop him from moving forward.

It cost Subaru twice as much time, strength and willpower to move forward. And even he couldn't help but feel tired.

Subaru: "Fool. Can I really whine this much?"

Violently shaking his head, Subaru tried to forget the feeling of tiredness that ladened his body. Choosing the right path had been no one but Subaru's decision. Even though it had been, he couldn't permit himself to try and whine, or such, before the two behind him did.

Subaru: "Well, this walk sure may be a little difficult, but it's no big deal. Surprisingly, our goal may be getting closer…"

Ram: "Barusu"

Subaru: "Oh, what's up?"

Ram: "Shut up."

Subaru: "Ah, Oh…"

His attempt at trying to drive away his whining with a show of bravado was shot down by Ram's curt toxicity. Their pace had fallen drastically, and their fear of the surroundings had also only increased. It seemed like probably even Ram was being taxed mentally. That her words were more toxic and curter than usual was proof of that.

Subaru: "Heey, I get what you're feeling, but I think I suck at walking in silence."

Ram: "Are you walking to enjoy yourself? Remember why we're doing this."

Subaru: "Well, no, but like…"

Ram: "Be silent and walk."

An unapproachable, obstinate attitude. Of course, though Ram's opinion was correct, Subaru had a point as well.

Right now, the weight of his body was pulling into sync with the weight on his mind. In other words, it had become a vicious circle where the heavier his mood got, the heavier his body became. He'd wanted to take their minds off it a bit so that things wouldn't end up like that.

Keeping on guard was important, as well as wanting to show some consideration, but he wanted them to show that they'd understood that and taken it on board. Or rather, Ram especially should take it on board. She always showed consideration. Still, she might be really struggling.

Subaru: "Do you reckon we should move faster?"

Ram: "…"

Subaru: "Ram?"

Subaru called out trying to determine how urgent the conditions had got, but Ram didn't bother to reply to his words at all. The light from the two lanterns, one of which was illuminating the path ahead of Subaru, and the other which was illuminating their surroundings from Patrasche's neck, didn't allow the particulars of Ram's expression to be seen.

With her hood pulled over her head, Ram cast her eyes down to look at Anastasia's back. Her face wasn't visible.

Subaru: "Ram?"

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun, is that quite enough?"

Subaru: "Ah?"

Stopping in his tracks, Subaru turned his head around to try and look at her expression. But Ram, stubborn as she was, didn't let him see her face, and on top of that Anastasia had defended her. Seeing Subaru's lips bend in frustration, Anastasia scratched her cheek, with a troubled expression adorning her face.

Anastasia: “I hadn’ mentioned it but, Ram-san was considerably flustered after she woke up in the undergroun’. Her composure seemed ta have come back because of how plucky she is, but I guess it still looks like she hasn’ fully regained it.”

Subaru: “—tch! You’re saying too much…!”

Anastasia: “Look, will ya leave this ta me?”

While Anastasia had put some consideration to Ram’s feelings, her words lacked in it. Having just had her hidden innermost thoughts divulged, Ram gritting her teeth could be heard all around them, but Anastasia took no notice of it. She raised one of her small hands and pointed it in front of her so that Subaru could see it.

Anastasia: “We shouldn’ talk right now. When yer nerves are frayed ta the limit, no matta’ who says what, nothin’ good will come out of it. Isn’ that right?”

Subaru: “…”

Anastasia: “Isn’ that right?”

Though it annoyed him, Anastasia = Eridna had a point. He had put too much priority in trying to move forward and getting out of the cave safely. Subaru this time definitely hadn’t been able to consider Ram’s feelings much. The price for doing that had come to bite him back here, and mayhaps had ended up expressed in Ram’s attitude. Now that he thought about, it was overly hasty of him to assume that there was a problem there because of Ram.

Subaru: “…You’re right. You’re definitely right. It was my bad.”

Ram: “Reflect on it.”

Subaru: “—tch! Hey, you!”

Anastasia: “Stop that, no fightin’. C’mon, Natsuki-kun, keep movin’ forward, keep movin’ forward.”

Subaru’s nerves had become frayed on seeing Ram’s attitude, which gave no signs of letting up. However, Anastasia had gotten in between them and somehow stopped him there. She then pointed at Subaru motioning him to move forward. She nudged the lantern that was fastened around Patrasche's neck with her feet, rocking it about.

Seeing the silhouettes of the passageway of sand flickering across his sight, Subaru clicked his tongue.

Although he couldn't stomach her attitude, there would be no point in them falling into strife here. Fortunately, he could excuse it as the unpleasant atmosphere influencing the highs and lows in their mood. While he could lay the blame on something, there was no need to worsen their relations with such an unnecessary thing. They could talk about their current foul attitudes when they made it safely out from here.

Subaru: "…Let's get going."

Once again, the search spearheaded by Subaru resumed. However, their pace was still slow, and didn't get any faster. In the end, his so called attempt at picking up their spirits and removing the loads from their body had failed. Since nothing had changed for the better, the chances of the situation improving had naturally become zilch.

Even so, when it came to change, there had been some. And it wasn't a change with Subaru and the others, but rather a change with the maze of sand itself.

Subaru: "No matter how you look at it, the path has become narrower."

They had probably spent nearly an hour steadily advancing through the right path. The pathway of sand was narrowing from the left, right, top and bottom. The height and width of the path was reaching a size that would make it impossible for large Witchbeasts to pass through. There was just enough space for Patrasche to squeeze through.

However, it was at a size where it wasn't wide enough to accommodate the Dragon Carriage which Gyan pulled. Likely, it was impossible for Sandworms and Centaurs to pass through too.

At least in other words, when it came to the worst situation, i.e. a Centaur lying in wait ahead on the path—that situation seemed to have been avoided. Compared to that, no matter what was awaiting ahead, at least they seemed to have avoided going towards that terrible direction.

Subaru: "But, it looks like we'll have to be more cautious since the path's become narrower. We'll probably end up unable to move without any warning; you guys will need to be on your guard too."

Ram: "…tsk"

Subaru: "—Hey"

Subaru, who had said that thinking about what would happen soon, raised one of his eyebrows at the sudden sound. Turning his head back, he looked at the two on dragonback who were illuminated by their lantern. No one responded to his shout. However, he knew that Anastasia, who was sitting at the front on top of Patrasche, had covered her face with the palm of her hands.

That seemed natural for Anastasia who wanted in one way or another to move forward and keep things rolling along smoothly. Anyway, what Ram had done now was that she had tsk'ed at Subaru's words.

Subaru: "What have you really been planning from the start?"

Ram: "Nothing."

Subaru: "It ain't nothing! I asked you what have you been planning!"

Raising his voice at the limit of his patience, Subaru kicked at the wall of sand beside him. Part of the surface of the fragile wall came loose, but Subaru didn't care at all about the sand which sprinkled down on him. All that Subaru saw right now was the insolent Ram.

Subaru: “All I can hear is you butting in over and over again when people are walking in silence. It seems like this isn’t the first time you clicked your tongue at me, isn’t that right? Hey, OY, what are you planning!”

Ram: “Nothing in particular. I have nothing at all to say to you, Barusu.”

Subaru: “Nothing at all, and yet aren’t you clicking your tongue at me year after year going tchtchtchtchtchtch? Aren’t you doing that? There’s got to be a reason for you to be saying that you aren’t doing that, even though you are, hasn’t there?!”

Subaru’s fervor continued to grow stronger than before, in contrast to the cold Ram’s attitude. It seemed natural. Everything which Ram had shown was cold and one-sided in contrast to the exertions which Subaru had made up until now. Subaru did not know why he was being looked down upon and rebuked.

Subaru: “If there’s something you want to say, then say it! Go and say it since I’ll listen!”

Ram: “—That’s why I have nothing to say.”

Subaru: “LIAR! ARE YOU STUPID? IF YOU FEEL LIKE HIDING STUFF THEN HIDE IT ALL! NOW THAT YOU’VE SLIPPED UP, FLAUNT IT ALL OFF… YOU SAY THERE’S NOTHING? THAT’S A FUCKING IDIOT’S EXPRESSION, HUH, DUMBASS!”

Ram: “…”

Ram’s mood changed at seeing Subaru hurling insults at her, spittle flying from his mouth. Sat behind Anastasia, she leaned her body out and glared at Subaru. He was unsatisfied with where she sat as well. Hiding behind others, looking down at him from above.

Was she planning to rise above them all by borrowing something’s strength?

Ram: “It seems like you’ve really gotten yourself all worked about moving forward, haven’t you, Barusu?”

Subaru: “THAT’S TO BE EXPECTED THOUGH ISN’T IT! WHAT DO YOU THINK WE CAME HERE FOR? WE CAME TO MEET THE SAGE, DIDN’T WE?! ALL THE HARDSHIPS WE FACED FOR THIS, AND ALL THE PROGRESS WE MADE, WHAT’S SO FUNNY ABOUT IT?!”

Ram: “You’re wrong. —We didn’t come here to meet the sage.”

Subaru: “Aaaah?”

Ram: “We came here to return Rem back to how she was.”

Ram clearly asserted this, all the while glaring at Subaru. Overwhelmed by the sharpness and pressure that emanated from her eyes, Subaru (who had been seething)’s conviction weakened a little.

Saving Rem = Meeting the Sage, wasn’t it like that?

Subaru: “IT’S THE SAME THING, ISN’T IT?! MEET THE SAGE AND THEN SAVE REM! IT’S CONNECTED!”

Ram: “IT ISN’T. SAVING REM COMES FIRST, AND MEETING THE SAGE COMES AFTER THAT. YOU’VE GOT YOUR PRIORITIES WRONG…Yes, you’ve got them all wrong.”

Ram’s voice trembled as she spoke the last of those words. The fury she had voiced was a wrath that burnt like an unquenchable raging fire that brought together everything the emotionless girl had felt up until now. In the underground area of these cold sand dunes, Ram continued to speak, her words still full to the brim with the fever of wrath.

Ram: “I came here for Rem, I came here to remember my little sister. And yet, what are we doing now? Rem isn’t even here… so stop messing about idly in this place.”

Subaru: “No one’s messing about…! Because things ended up like this; now that things ended up like this, there’s nothing else we can do at the time it did. Am I wrong?”

Ram: “Yes, maybe so. But, before we make sure of that, Barusu, have you ever worried about Rem even once?"

Subaru: "…Ah?"

Ram: "Ever since you woke up below ground, Barusu, have you ever worried about Rem? Or about Emilia-sama? Or about Beatrice-sama? Have you ever at all worried about those who are missing?"

Ram showered those questions at him, but he kept silent, speaking not a single word in return. Certainly this time around, unlike the last, Subaru hadn't tried to check how everyone else was doing, after he had woken up from Returning by Death.

However, this absolutely wasn't because he wasn't worried about them, but rather because he knew that Ram and Anastasia didn't know anything about them. It was Subaru's consideration. It was care. And despite that,

Ram: "No, you never did, did you. You never did, Barusu. You don't care at all about Rem, Barusu, because your head is full of Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama. Well, so be it, you're just that kind of man. But, I feel bad for Rem."

Subaru: "…Shut up."

Ram: "Didn't Rem believe in you, Barusu? Ah, though I don't know since that too is a convenient story which I've just heard from you, Barusu. Maybe you were just saying whatever popped into your head. You only say what's convenient in front of women. I feel bad for Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama as well, deceived by such a man!"

Subaru: "SHUT THE HELL UP!"

Ram: "No, I will not. How many times must I repeat myself. — Barusu, you don't care about Rem at all. Even if she isn't found, you would just feel glad."

Subaru: "—DON'T YOU MESS ABOUT WITH ME!!"

His field of view was died in crimson, and his nerves had flared up hearing her vent those thoughtless remarks. His anger at the arrogant woman, who had vented out those selfish words whilst looking down upon him from her perch, exploded.

He would grab her and drag her down—Though the time it would take to do that wasn't quick enough.

Subaru: "INVISIBLE PROVIDENCE—!!"

Ram: "—KH, AH?!"

Subaru dropped that darkish sensation which swirled through his brain down to his chest, and let it loose. The black palm which had come into being cried out in joy and smoothly stretched itself out. It crept up to the rear of the Earth Dragon's back, where it threw down the pink-haired girl who had denounced him.

Letting off a shriek, Ram wildly tumbled onto the sand. Confusion racked Ram's face, indicating she had no idea what had happened after she had been hit by the demonic hand which wasn't visible to the naked eye. Subaru rushed over next to where Ram was lying down atop of the sand. And then,

Subaru: "Don't you mess about with me."

Saying that he didn't think at all about Rem, saying things like that, was no joke. Consumed by anger, everything had become like whichever way he looked at it from, following his overheated thoughts.

Ram: "—urkh"

—Subaru leaned down over the supine Ram and began to strangle her slender neck.

Creak, Creak.

Creak, Creak, Creak.

Chapter 15:
Scattered to the Sand

1

Subaru’s fingers wrapped around the slender, white neck. As Subaru tightened his hold using all of his strength and felt their neck bones creaking underneath his palms, he felt like something was quite out of place—like it was a girl’s slender neck.

Ram: “…a, ukh”

Ram was being straddled, and her neck was being strangled by someone with all their might. A groan escaped from her lips. Her noble features were warped in agony, and drool could be seen dribbling down from the corner of her rosy lips. Her red tongue danced from side to side searching for freedom inside of her mouth. She thrashed her arms and legs about, desperately resisting him.

Ram: “…”

Subaru couldn’t possibly put up a fight against Ram if she put up a serious resistance. She had managed to strike Garfiel down for a bit back at the Sanctuary by herself, and even if she hadn’t, she was a woman that should be well acquainted with the art of self-defense. It would be reasonable to assume that she should possess multiple ways to restrain him and deal with a situation of this ilk where she was seized from above by a man like this.

However, that would boil down to whether she could at least get one of her limbs free or not.

Subaru: “—Invisible Providence”

Ram: “…gh”

Subaru set free the dark emotions within his chest as he strangled her neck with a Creak-creak. The dark, invisible sediment took shape and helped keep Ram’s arms and legs firmly pinned down now. With her limbs pinned down, Ram was unable to struggle about effectively. Her breath would soon stop so long as he continued to put his strength into strangling her neck.

Ram, too, would have regretted her reckless remarks from earlier if she stopped breathing. Subaru would be able to make her pay with her life for having wounded his heart with her misdirected callous remarks, and for her ungrounded thoughtless remarks which had been spurned by her selfishness, and for having spoken light of Rem, for thinking he never cared for her.

Subaru: “It’s you who’s at fault. It’s you, you, you!”

Ram was detestable. Ram was detestable. Ram was detestable.

All of those little things that piled up poured out one after the other. He put his hatred into the fingers which were strangling her neck; his nails dug into her pale skin, and blood trickled down.

Ram: “Hhh…hk”

Ram turned her eyes full of hate at Subaru who was breathing heavily and relishing the touch of hot blood at the end of his fingernails.

What was with that inflexibility in her light pink irises that gazed at him while the light of her life was about to be snuffed out? It’s as if they were complaining saying: “I won’t truly die by having my life taken.”

He decided that he would gouge out her eyes after he strangled her to death.

Subaru: “Gonna rip you apart piece by piece, bitch…You, when I think of you looking at me with that face which is a spitting image of Rem’s, it makes me wanna hurl.”

Ram: “……”

Subaru: “Ohh? What is it, I can’t hear you. If you got something to say, then say it clearly—"

Ram: "…la"

Ram wheezed something out that overlapped with the last syllable of Subaru's abusive tirade. For a split second, Subaru narrowed his eyes to the echo of that sound. Then the sand beneath Subaru, who was pushing Ram down, exploded and both of their bodies were blown away.

Subaru: "WH…A?!"

Ram: "Ghha…!"

Subaru was showered in sand by the sudden blast which got inside of his mouth and eyes. He toppled down towards the back to the taste of sand and pain. Ram too had been caught up in the explosion, and her small body had taken the brunt of it as she tumbled away from him.

Bearing cuts from the explosion, the blood Ram spilled had spattered across the sand. However, Ram had escaped from Subaru's clutch. That was the fact of the matter.

Subaru: "Ram! You used fucking magic…!"

Ram: "I had enough time… To take a gasped breath. That's all I need… to be able to, chant…gh"

Ram picked herself up from her knees, her breathing was in a feeble state. She had barely managed to chant out her Fula wind magic whilst her neck was being strangled. Unable to afford to miss, and unable to aim accurately, she had instead aimed underneath her. As a result, she had dragged both herself and Subaru into the blast and escaped from danger—.

Subaru: "Tch—!"

Ram: "…"

As soon as he came to that realization, Subaru turned his hand to the back of his waist and pulled out his whip. At the same time, Ram pulled out a short wand from her bosom, letting her fighting spirit well out showing that she was prepared for battle.

Ram as a magician had the capacity to deliver one strong blow, but even Subaru wouldn't be bested when it came to the speed which he could attack at. The swift nature of the whip was one that was favored even by the big guns of this world.

He should crack his whip straight at her unperturbed looking face so to make it one that he'd never have to see again.

Subaru: "Even if you start crying and apologizing, it's far too late!"

Ram: "That's my line. There's no value in letting an uncaring sex freak like you Barusu meet Rem. Turn to pieces and wither upon the sand."

Subaru: "Whatever you say!"

Subaru's resolve in dealing with Ram, who had softly let her murderous intentions flare up, stiffened as well. Making use of the light of the lantern which had dropped down between them, both Ram and Subaru continued to glare at each other, moving around each other in a circle as they slowly tried to get within striking distance.

And just as the lid was about to be blown off on them slaughtering each other—Just a few seconds before that happened.

???: "—Alrigh', that's enough!"

Subaru & Ram: "—?!"

The sound of violent applause echoed throughout, and both Subaru and Ram's faces jerked up on hearing its withered timbre. The one who had interrupted them, Anastasia, was looking down on them from dragonback.

She glared at the two who had been on the verge of trying to kill each other in turn, still sat alone on top of Patrasche.

Anastasia: "That's enough. I don't think it's acceptable that yer both glaring at each other with such angry looks on yer faces despite us all bein' on the same side. There oughta be limits no matter where ya are."

Subaru: "Limits? AAH, OF COURSE THERE'S LIMITS. AND THE ONE WHO STEPPED OVER THEM AND SAID SOMETHING THAT SHE NEVER SHOULD'VE IS THAT GIRL THERE, ISN'T IT?! THAT'S WHY I'M MAKING HER PAY FOR IT!"

Anastasia: "Ugh, since I ain't getting through to you, what about you, Ram-san?"

Anastasia looked on in shock at Subaru as he jabbed his finger at Ram, and spoke with spittle flying out of his mouth. She had turned her flow of talk towards Ram, but the response she received from the pink haired girl wasn't all that different from Subaru's.

Ram still warily kept the tip of her wand pointed at Subaru, keeping herself on guard for battle.

Ram: "What a foolish question. It's Barusu's attitude that's intolerable… I'm rather at the limits of my patience. If all he cares about is himself, then why don't we go and drop him in the pitch black darkness alone just like he wants."

Subaru: "I HAVE NO WORDS FOR THIS BULLSHIT, FUCK OFF!"

Anastasia: "No good from her too, huh? Jeez, why. 'T seems like I've got too much on my shoulders…"

Seeing Ram's attitude, whose anger remained unrelenting, Subaru's anger also showed no signs of disappearing. Anastasia shrugged her shoulders with a gesture that indicated she'd given up on the two of them, who continued to exchange sharp looks of murderous intent.

Looking at her from the corner of his eye, Subaru began to feel irritated at Anastasia as well.

In the first place, why was Anastasia alone making a face that looked just like she was an outsider?

He wondered who the hell it had been that was behind everything that had happened. He wondered who the hell it was that had first told him to travel to the Augria Sand Dunes and aim for the Sage's Watchtower.

Who the hell did they think they were leaving everything to others despite unmistakably having the strongest incentive for setting out to the Watchtower?

And on top of that, they were sitting alone, even now, looking down from the top of his Patrasche—

Subaru: "HEY, YOU. WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU PREACHING TO ME FROM UP ABOVE. GET DOWN. "

Anastasia: "…Huh, it's come to that?"

Subaru: "Get on the same level as me before you run your mouth with your arrogance. I'll hear what you have to say after that. I ain't gonna let you run your mouth at me unless you can do that!"

He swung his whip down, scattering sand up with a woosh. His whip caused skin to split open if it hit its target; even by looking at it, his whip was a weapon designed to inflict cruel wounds. It probably wouldn't matter if he hurt her host body regardless of whether Eridna was inside of it.

As a matter of fact, Anastasia complied with Subaru's orders and slowly climbed down from Patrasche's back. Right after she landed gingerly onto the sand, she cocked her head and asked: "Now what?"

Anastasia: “There, I got down too, but… Natsuki-kun, what is it that ya want ta do?”

Subaru: “That should be obvious. I’ll let that idiot take back what she said before and if she doesn’t want to, then there’ll be just one thing left to do.”

If Ram changed her attitude and apologized from the depths of her heart, taking back everything she had said up until now, then Subaru would consider taking into account the extenuating circumstances.

However, Ram’s reaction, who’d heard what he’d said, was something that was easy enough to understand.

Anastasia: “Well, that’s what Natsuki-kun’s sayin’, but, what do ya think of it, Ram-san?”

Ram: “That’s out of the question. You’re leaping to conclusions, for I have nothing that should be taken back. I’m having a hard time understanding what on earth I’d be saying differently.”

Ram snorted, declaring that with an attitude that looked like she was making a fool out of them from the depths of her heart.

That was her answer. Thus, with that, she had forever lost her chance to be forgiven.

Subaru: “You heard her. Back off. I’m gonna make it so that there’s only one face which is the same as Rem’s in this world.”

Ram: “…”

Subaru: “AAH, HEY? You got nothing to say?”

Ram: “I’m talking to myself here, but idiocy is a contagious thing when speaking with idiots. That’s why I am not say anything.”

A vein bulged across his forehead, Subaru’s remaining patience got closer and closer to its limit. In that state, Subaru gathered his strength and tried to get to where Ram was (straight ahead of him) so he could tear her limb from limb. Anastasia rushed out spreading out her hands in front of Subaru.

Anastasia: “Whoawhoawhoa! Hey, calm down! You’re jumping to conclusions again.”

Subaru: “Get out of my way! Do you want me to pummel the life out of you first?!”

Anastasia: “Ya left this to me. Remember? Hey, Ram-san, just a sec’…”

Holding Subaru back, who was trying to step forward, Anastasia turned towards Ram. The taciturn Ram glared at Subaru, before reluctantly moving her gaze slightly towards Anastasia.

However, it didn’t seem likely that she would change her opinion. In fact, the look in her eyes betrayed that she had no intention to do so. It seemed like she had stepped towards Anastasia just out of obligation.

Anastasia: “Look, Ram-san. I get that ‘cause the air’s bad ‘n such, various feelings end up gettin’ frayed, but…”

Ram: “Such talk doesn’t matter right now, don’t you think? More than that, go say it to that idio—”

”□□□”

Anastasia: “—Alrigh’. It doesn’ matter, jeez”

Giving off a fidgety impression, Ram tried to end her conversation with Anastasia as well. For the first time, she had moved her face away from Subaru and looked dead on at Anastasia.

The reason was because she’d felt a sudden impact. The impact which had pierced into her body, more precisely, the left part of her chest was—Was due to the thick knife which Anastasia held in her hand.

Ram: “Ah, gh…?”

Anastasia: “I had ta eyeball a decision of which of ya would be useful. Can ya forgive me?”

She twisted her knife and pulled it out from the wound. Ram looked down at the fatal wound that had been birthed on the left side of her chest as blood tricked out from the corner of her lips. Then, she looked up at Anastasia, who had raised her hand up with a smile on her face, and collapsed in front of her.

Ram feebly fell down onto the sand. The blood that gushed out of her continued to be soaked up by the parched sand.

Subaru: “H-Hah?”

Subaru looked at the scene with his own eyes, at a loss at what had occurred. His palm which he held his whip with trembled and his molars creaked in anger.

Subaru: “WHY DID YOU…!”

Anastasia: “Since ya were goin’ about it slowly Natsuki-kun, didn’t it seem like ya’d have ended up killin’ each other if Ram-san’s vigilance couldn’ be loosened? What would I do if both of ya got injured, or both of ya died? I can’t escape from this place all alone, y’know?”

Anastasia cocked her head at the angered Subaru, her face showing no ill will. Her words made logical sense, but what could he, who was crushed by logic, do about this fury of his? His urge that he should have attacked Ram was still uncontrollable, and his rage was still bottled up.

Anastasia: “Or… Are ya feelin’ like takin’ out yer annoyance on me?”

Subaru: “…”

Anastasia: “Don’t ya think it’s stupid to get seized up by yer current rage and lose sight of the goal? I think that’s enough of gettin’ rid of companions for the time bein’.”

Anastasia’s words continued to quench his fury as if she was slowly pouring water on them. It was certainly as she said; continuing to get rid of the thinking minds which had come this far was foolish. Moreover, Anastasia = Eridna was their guide for their journey to the Pleiades Watchtower. It was dubious whether her knowledge had come in use, but casting her aside would be regrettable.

She was different from Ram. The latter's words only made him sick to the stomach and had no use to him. Anastasia was a piece that would be bothersome to lose; yes, that's how it was.

Subaru: "…Alright, I'll get on board with your persuasion for now."

Anastasia: "Mhm, that's great with me. No, thank goodness. What a relief"

Making a show of patting her chest in relief, Anastasia smiled from ear to ear. And then, she stepped through the sand, giving off a perilous impression, and came towards Subaru, proffering her hand out.

Perhaps she wanted them to shake hands?

Anastasia: "A reconciliation; a handshake, ta show that from here on out, we'll treat each other well, won't we?"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru faltered for a moment in thought as he looked at the hand she had offered out to him, her face showed no traces of maliciousness. Anastasia's true feelings—Or rather, right now it was Eridna's true feelings. He didn't truly know what she was scheming. He was neither comfortable or optimistic enough to think that everything she'd spoken was the truth.

To start with, Anastasia had killed Ram with the knife that she'd kept concealed, whilst she expressed the same smile as she was showing now. Indeed, with a knife that she had kept concealed.

The thick knife she was holding looked like it could cut all the way to the bone depending how it was handled. Since it had been put in their survival kit along with their lanterns, the kind of utility of an item that was presumed to be for survival was pretty high. However, she had kept it concealed all this time, and had used it in self-defense at her time of need. —No, it may not have been self defense.

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun?”

Subaru: “…”

Anastasia: “Ya ain’t takin’ my hand?”

The hand she had offered out, her right one, was empty. However, her left hand was still holding the knife, even now. The range at which he’d be able to shake her hand was also the range at which the knife would be able to reach him. At least one of his hands would be occupied if he took her hand. He didn’t even need to consider which out of his whip and her knife would be more effective at this distance. Taking her hand: “wasn’t that in itself a trap?

—Shouldn’t he kill her before he was killed?

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun?”

Subaru: “Don’t worry, it’s nothing.”

Subaru gave a weak smile and reached out for Anastasia’s right hand. The moment in which she lowered her guard completely would be his chance, after they took each other’s hand.

—Invisible Providence.

He once again invoked his Unseen Hand, and the black hand slowly fixed its sights onto Anastasia’s slender neck. He wouldn’t make the same mistake as he had with Ram. Next, he would make the black palm mercilessly crush her throat. He would teach a lesson to the woman who had kept belittling him ever since she had managed to secure the upper hand with her knife.

Although, even if he wanted to show her, this palm wasn’t visible —.

Subaru: “…”

Then, Subaru slowly took her outstretched hand with his own whilst he put the fingers of his black hand around Anastasia's neck. The touch of slender fingers; Anastasia's smile's grew deeper. And at the same time, Subaru's lips broke into a sad smile too.

Anastasia: "Well then…"

Right here. Thus, he believed.

He would use the strength of his demonic hand before Anastasia could finish speaking and raise her knife. He would grasp her slender neck with his black fingers, and crush her neckbones in an instant—.

—Just before that happened however, a blade of wind came streaming in and cut Anastasia's body in two from behind.

2

He felt like he'd hallucinated that a wind had blown, straight after that.

A spray of red gushed out right in front of his eyes, a daft voice let out an "Eh?" and Anastasia's body was cut in two across the middle.

A heapload of blood was strewn out onto the white sand. Steaming shit and warm guts mingled in with the cold air, leaving behind a putrid smell to hang over the inside of the cave.

Pink small and large intestines, along with many other internal organs that still showed faint traces of activity rolled onto the sand. The sand itself had turned into a showcase of organs, in which the items on display were the raw ingredients that made up a young girl.

Subaru: "—Ah?"

Seeing the spectacle in front of him, Subaru cast his gaze down to his own hand. What he saw there was Anastasia's upper body swinging about; she was still firmly grasping Subaru's right hand with hers. She opened her eyes and speechlessly looked up at Subaru.

Behind her, the lower part of her body which had been cut at the waist, was flopping about. Her legs were convulsing like a marionette, and pee was pouring out everywhere as her muscles had relaxed.

Subaru: “A-AHHHHHHHHHH—?!”

Subaru let out a scream at Anastasia’s horrific condition. He immediately tried to shake her arm away, however she was holding on with inordinate strength. Unable to shake her off, Subaru just swung the now half in weight Anastasia about. More blood spewed out of her as she was swung about, and the intestine that still connected the upper half of her body with her lower jolted about, scattering body fluids everywhere and emitting a foul odor.

Subaru: “Hah, LET GO! LET GOOOOOOO!”

Anastasia: “NOOOOO! I DON’T WANT TO DIE…!”

Subaru: “YOU’RE ALREADY DEAD! CAN’T YOU GRASP THAT YOU’RE BEYOND SAVING?!”

Her vivid laments were far more clear than imagined, leading Subaru to scream in return. The upper and lower half of her body had now separated and so much blood and guts had flooded out. It was wrong for her not to have died immediately. It was also wrong for her to still keep grasping his hand. It was all so ridiculous.

Subaru: “LETGOLETGOLETGOLETGOLETGO”□□□”

Anastasia: “NO, NOOO! I WON’T, I ABSOLUTELY WOOON’T…hk”

Subaru: “EVEN IF YOU SAY THAT NOW, I CAN’T DO ANYTH—… GHAA?!”

The upper half of Anastasia clung to his arm, and pain shot through Subaru’s shoulder as he tried to throw her off. Anastasia was still holding the knife in her left hand, and had thrust it into Subaru’s body in an attempt to hold on to him.

The sharp blade easily pierced through Subaru's left shoulder, and cracked his collarbone beneath it. Bleeding and scorching pain caused Subaru to scream.

Subaru: "GHAAAAAAAAA—?! FUCKING IDIOT, HURRY UP AND DIEEE!!"

Anastasia: "NOOOO…hk"

Subaru fiercely grabbed Anastasia by the face and forcefully tore off her body. With great difficulty, he held the girl who had shouted something out whilst in tears, and threw her away.

From the start, Anastasia's body had been quite petite. And now that she had become half, and with all the blood she had lost, she felt as light as a feather.

Subaru: "Haaah, haaah, haaaaa…!"

Without taking any notice of that, Subaru put his hand on his wounded right shoulder. His sight flickered in pain, and his heartbeat accelerated like it was going to explode. However, it wasn't a life-threatening wound.

Subaru sluggishly reached into his thoughts whilst besieged by an unchanged sickening tension.

The blow that had killed Anastasia before was—.

???: "—Barusu."

Subaru: "Gh-a"

A shadow swayed up in front of Subaru, who had fallen onto his backside and was gasping in pain.

A slender girl with blood covering half of her body came into view from the dim light of the lantern which was half-buried in sand—Ram.

Since she had been stabbed in the chest by Anastasia's knife, he'd taken her for dead. Yet, the girl still breathed. And keeping ahold of her tenacity, she had killed Anastasia with her magic.

Subaru: "…This fucking idiot. If you're gonna die, then fucking die on your own."

Subaru declared that with annoyance in his voice as he looked up at the staggering Ram. It wasn't as if Ram wasn't covered in wounds. Anastasia's attack had been fatal for sure. The bleeding from the wound in her chest hadn't stopped, and even now, blood was endlessly soiling her skirt all the way down to its hem. It looked like she'd soon die due to blood loss.

However, before that happened, she could take Subaru with her.

Subaru: "Sh…it…"

Subaru looked around his surroundings, trying to find his arme de guerre, his whip. However, even if he located it, his right arm which he used to wield it was injured from the shoulder. He couldn't wield it with his left arm like he did with his right.

Then, he had just one choice left.

Subaru: "INVISIBLE PROVIDENCE…?!"

His trump card, which he'd already relied on many times in this short period of time. Once again, Subaru's brain throbbed in burning pain the moment he tried to unleash the strength of his invisible black palm. An agony like his skull was being bored through by a drill exploded within him.

Subaru: "GHA! AAH?! GHHHUGH?!"

Puke trickled out from the corner of Subaru's mouth due to the agony that visited him in waves.

In exchange for trying to use his trump card past its limits, his consciousness was broken up by the hellish banquet that had woken up inside his skull, starting from his cranial nerves. The pain of his right shoulder and such wasn't even comparable to this.

Whittling at his brain and skull, the sense of loss froze Subaru's will like it was gnawing at his soul.

Speaking nothing of the resistance he offered with his crappy whip, Subaru, who was writhing in agony, was prime prey. The dying Ram moved her body fueled only by hatred and slowly made her way towards Subaru, raising her bloodstained wand.

Ram: “Fuuu”

Subaru: “AAAAAH! GHAAAA! OOOOAAAAAAH?!”

Subaru rolled over to where Anastasia lay in her pool of blood, still holding his head. Looking down at him, Ram’s lips stirred, and she began to chant her spell. And then—

Ram: “la—”

”□□□”

Subaru: “…”

She completed her chant, and the blade of wind which she created hewed Subaru down. But before that came to be, the sound of something hard being chewed echoed out across the cold cave of sand.

That horrible grating sound continued, and it changed into the sound of flesh and water being chewed.

Subaru: “AH…Ah”

That he would die, that he would be hewn down; Subaru had been convinced of that. However, the Death that should have come to him didn’t come at all. Finally, Subaru (who had been breathing heavily and rolling around)’s headache and feeling of loss slowly started to subside.

Subaru: “AH, HAH, ah, AH?”

He covered his face with his left hand and briskly shook his head which was drenched in cold sweat. Though a dull ache remained, the sharp blade-like agony had faded. Taking deep breaths, he lifted himself up using the strength of his entire soul. Subaru wiped his moistened cheeks whilst he foolishly took the time to raise only his upper body.

He noticed that his palm was covered in bright red, the source of which came from his own eyes—It seemed like he had shed tears of blood.

A lot of blood dripped from his nose as well; the lower half of his face was probably in a horrific state. There was likely no doubt that the drilling pain which pierced directly to his brain was in recompense for his Unseen Hand. It was a familiar story. The feedback from having used his special superpower had come.

Subaru: “What happ…”

Briskly wiping his face with his sleeve, Subaru looked around his surroundings. He had no idea how much time he’d spent in agony. Nevertheless, he had hardly even thought it possible that he had it in himself to spend his time like that.

Something had happened, and with that he had been—.

Subaru: “Patrasche?”

Patrasche: “…”

Subaru’s jet black Earth Dragon nestled up beside him as he sat in blank amazement. Crouched down on the sand, she heard Subaru’s call and shook her long tail, indicating that she was in good health.

Subaru: “So you were uninjured? Hmm, let me think…”

Just now, he recalled what had happened before. He recalled the scene in which Anastasia had been cut in two by Ram, and the latter aiming down at him. Subaru should have been ripped to shreds by Ram’s doing.

Subaru: “And yet, why… Did Ram…?”

Perhaps she had used up all her strength and collapsed?

Though it was a really convenient development, Ram had been bearing fatal wounds. It wouldn't be farfetched to think that she'd collapsed.

Subaru: "Is that lucky, or unlucky….."

He didn't want to say that he was lucky since she had been no less than almost dead. However, if he thought about it, he still couldn't say he was unlucky since he ought to have been dead if things had gone south.

In any case, now wasn't the time to go on about these things. Given that everyone who had gotten in his way was gone, he had to get out of this place as soon as he could and make his way to the Watchtower.

Subaru: "Patrasche…Sorry, let me hop on."

Patrasche: "…"

Subaru: "Patrasche?"

Subaru called out to her and touched her back, but the Earth Dragon didn't obey his instructions. On the contrary, Patrasche, who had crouched down, still didn't make any move to show her face to him.

She was sitting next to him on the sand, looking rather at peace, merely breathing heavily over and over.

Subaru: "Hey, Patrasche. Are you listening? HEY."

His irritation slowly started to increase. It was a spiral of negative emotions which built up at supersonic speed, similar to those which he had felt against Ram and Anastasia. He felt like he wanted to teach the unresponsive Earth Dragon her place.

Subaru: "HEY, PATRASCHE, YOU, LOOK OVER HERE! HEY! "

Patrasche: "…"

Subaru: "BASTARD, LISTEN TO WHAT I'VE BEEN SAYING FROM

THE START…”

Patrasche lifted her head up at Subaru, who had raised his voice and furiously slapped her back. He realized that she was trying to come face to face with him to try and express her words, breathing heavily out of her nose.

Patrasche’s mouth looked far from normal and was dyed in red.

Subaru: “…”

That crimson color was one that he had become used to seeing already in this short period of time. That color coated parts of Subaru’s body as well, and still streamed down from his right shoulder even now. The foul smell which drifted around the area lay thick in it, along with that of piss and shit; there was no mistaking it.

However, he hadn’t wanted to notice something, he shouldn’t have noticed it.

Subaru: “…”

Pink Hair innumerably entwined itself between the fangs that lined Patrasche’s mouth, who had now turned his way.

Subaru: “Eep”

On the other side of the crouched Patrasche’s large body, Ram, whom he had lost sight of, fell down to the ground. Though the body of the girl fell, he couldn’t tell whether she was lying face up or face down. Checking that would be easy to tell if he looked at her head, but it was precisely because of that which he couldn’t. He couldn’t assess that because everything above her neck was chewed and its original shape was lost.

Ram’s skull had been crushed by vicious fangs and her brain juice had spilled out leaving her dead. Just like Anastasia who’d had her guts spilled out before dying, Ram had had the contents of her skull spilled out.

And, the one who’d done that, Patrasche, was staring intently at

Subaru now.

Her yellow eyes which resembled that of a reptile were sharply and cruelly tinged with madness.

Subaru: “—Sto”

The last thing he saw was her maw opening up millimeters from his eyes.

All that Natsuki Subaru heard was the sound of his own body being chewed up all the way until just before he slipped out of consciousness. Even after his head was crushed and his ears stopped working, the sound continued.

He almost ended up laughing, wondering where he was hearing the sound from. However, he had no mouth to laugh with, no life that he could merely laugh at, and nothing which he could laugh at.

He was chewed up by his companion, and died.

Chapter 16:
Chewed Remains

1

—The sound of something breaking, only the consciousness continued to hear endlessly.

Bones were being chewed, gray matter being flattened, eyeballs cracking, the liquid therein contained overflowing.

The cranium, the bones of the head were being crushed. The important part on the inside was thoroughly overwhelmed by the pressure of sharp fangs, and it was clear that it was all turning into a pulpy mess.

Gray matter and spinal fluid flowed out together, mingling with an unknown yellow liquid pooling on the forehead, where blood vessels with the appearance of a thin mesh were torn apart, causing red blood to gush forth.

With all of that joining together, consciousness and memory transformed into flesh-colored vomit.

Pain, there was pain. Trouble breathing, too.

The pain in his head creaked like it was splitting his head apart—and thinking so, his consciousness bitterly smiled.

That splitting was not what this was all about.

There was nothing left to split, and everything important was already smashed. Besides, even with the part that registered pain having been squashed, so what was left to say, even?

The organ that accumulated memories and was used for thinking, the brain, had been destroyed; the parts necessary for maintaining life in the first place, had been completely ravaged. What would occur after that happened?

Once such a thing took place, humans would experience Death. So, naturally, him too—

???: "—rusu. Barusu. Get yourself together."

Grabbed by the scruff of its neck, the intensely muddled consciousness was forcefully brought into light.

The first thing he felt upon returning was someone's voice close to his ears, scolding him with a stern face. The voice was not only accompanied by the trembling of sound, but also by a slight feeling on his face as if it had been slapped.

???: "Barusu, if you do not get up, I will burn off your eyelids."

Subaru: "—Hk."

With his sleeping mind hearing that terrifying statement, his consciousness rapidly rose to the surface.

As the voice called and dragged it out of that dark world, his consciousness passed through a suffocating environment that appeared like the surface of water. And so, opening his eyelids before they were scorched by flame,

???: "—Barusu, are you awake?"

Subaru: "…"

Immediately he encountered Ram's face in front of him, her light-crimson eyes narrowed.

He could hear her breathing, her face was so close that he could touch her lips if he raised his mouth a bit. Of course, such colorful situation could not exist. The reason Ram was leaning down so close was because the surroundings were so dark that they could not see each other's faces unless they looked at one another from close-range; that was all there was to it.

Upon becoming aware of Ram in front of him, his sense of touch began registering the feeling under his buttocks immediately, among others. Fine particles of sand rolled out from atop his body.

Subaru had been lying spread-eagled on the sand sea.

With a breath, air leaked out of Subaru's mouth, and Ram seemed to stare deep into his eyes for a short moment, and then slowly with the other hand she shined a lantern upon his body. From the girl's hand, an orange light cut through the darkness, and Subaru understood that he was still trapped in the labyrinth of sand—No, he understood he had Returned by Death.

Subaru: "I'm…"

Looking around the darkness, Subaru gradually remembered what happened.

The shock at the moment of death was always vivid, and there was nothing to indicate he had gotten used to shaking off the memories at all. Immersed in the trembling field of his memories, he struggled to remember the meaning of his certain death, and Subaru's last moments grazed past his fingertips as he remembered it.

Subaru: "…"

Recollecting the awful situation, the image of Ram's expression of hatred illuminated by the lantern appeared yet again in his mind with a tremendous impact.

And then, the murder spree that had originated from the insults and abuse he had hurled at her, a killing rampage with no meaning nor significance, and the horrendous conclusion of it all.

Subaru: "Ubu… Hk."

Ram: "Barusu?"

As Ram displayed a confused expression, Subaru involuntarily put his hand over his mouth.

Remembering the reality of Ram's death that had occurred just a couple of minutes ago, and the desire to scream—was not it. In fact, facing Ram and remembering her gruesome last moments, caused a vomiting urge.

Subaru: “Ugh, eh… Geh.”

Subaru’s deaths had already exceeded the number that could be counted by the fingers on both hands.

And in this world with Return by Death, it could be said that the experience of losing a close friend like Emilia or Beatrice was nearly the same as his own death.

However, Subaru himself had never got used to death. For his own, or the death of someone else, was one and the same. The fear of being dead himself, or thinking that someone close to him might die, shredded his heart.

—Indeed, in the last loop, the tragedy of Ram’s brutal death was a shock he had experienced for the first time.

He had seen her figure having had its stomach cut open, its neck severed, her whole body mercilessly wounded, and then dead.

Each death was full of anguish and grief, and Subaru was unable of putting people’s deaths on a scale and compare them. It did not feel right.

However, it was the first time he had had his head crushed, chewed up and ruined in that manner.

He had also witnessed Ram’s beautiful face being crushed by fangs without mercy.

That was also a tragedy enacted by Patrasche, one of the beings Subaru most trusted.

Subaru: “…Oh, geh. Geh, gah.”

Desperately attempting not to remember it was no different from remembering.

The more he tried to forget Ram’s miserable end, the clearer the pink hair and the remnants of her head in the mouth of the ground dragon were carved into Subaru’s head.

As a result, it was not possible to get over the urge to vomit, so Subaru turned toward the sand.

However, his throat and stomach had yet to recover from the impact of having Returned by Death, and so they just cramped, not obeying Subaru's will.

Subaru: "Geh, eh…"

Ram: "…Is this just because you woke up suddenly? Miserable."

Tackling the ground, desperately attempting to vomit the contents of his stomach, but nothing exited. That his throat was dry and that not even a drop of saliva had come out was vexing.

He could not gaze at Ram's expression looking at him with a lantern in one hand, but the surprised tone in her voice was easily conveyed to the panting Subaru.

Naturally, the coldness reminded him of the events just before that death.

The violent passion that led to the murderous intent was rising for no reason, as did the abuse that had triggered the emotional outburst—the impulse that had driven him to do so urged inside his chest, it was dreadful. However,

Ram: "—Do not bite down."

Subaru: "—Hk."

With that sentence of preamble, Ram sat down beside Subaru and lifted his chin.

The kneeling Subaru was surprised for a moment, and Ram opened Subaru's mouth with no worry as to his reaction, with the same uninterested look as always—then thrust her own white fingers into the back of Subaru's throat.

Subaru: "…?! Oh, ehk."

Ram: "That Barusu is this severely inept was already known, but this is at the level of a baby.”

Having someone else’s fingers entering his throat, Subaru felt like his esophagus was being rudely violated.

But then, his stomach and throat, which had resisted vomiting until then, accepted that surprise. This time, both began pushing out gastric juice and saliva at once in a desperate action.

With tearful eyes, Subaru got rid of his urge to retch by letting out his stomach’s content on the sand. Only gastric juice and drool had been vomited, but it was still much better than it had been before.

Subaru: “Eh, geh… Haa, buh… Sorry, I’m fine… Hk.”

Ram: “So? I’m happy that you’re pleased.”

Subaru: “You…”

Subaru wiping his mouth with a sleeve, Ram shrugged her shoulders and replied with childish language.

Despite her attitude, it was true that he had made an impression that was roughly at the level of a baby. There was no room to refuse that, and Ram's palm was still gently stroking Subaru's back.

It was hard to understand, her scathing thoughtfulness.

Subaru: "The hand, it's all right. More than that, this place…"

Ram: "You remember that the barrier got broken and the sandy sea cracked in front of us? The dragon carriage was swallowed up, and as a result we got thrown in here."

Ignoring Ram's consideration, Subaru spoke while looking at his surroundings. In response to her remark, Subaru was hesitant as to whether he should be relieved or anxious that the Return by Death point had remained the same.

However, in either case, action must be taken quickly.

According to that judgment, he tried to continue speaking—

Ram: "Ever since you woke up below ground, Barusu, have you ever worried about Rem? Or about Emilia-sama? Or about Beatrice-sama? Have you ever at all worried about those who are missing?"

Subaru: "—Uh."

What resuscitated in his mind were those bladelike words of Rem, both terribly sharp and heart-rending.

The discord that had invited the previous end—the situation where allies killed one another, was obviously abnormal.

He must come back to his senses, but recalling the situation, it was hard to imagine that he had been in a normal state of mind. In the first place, the trigger was abnormal. It was absurd that something such as negative emotions had been amplified and evolved into the exchange of insults and then into mortal combat.

Ram: "Barusu?"

Ram tilted her head at Subaru's visage, as his words would not come out.

The last time they had talked, discord sowed by an aberrant situation had followed suit. So of course, there was no meaning in being concerned about the words Ram had spoken in such a state— But it was inaccurate to say that everything that had been said was a lie.

The fact was that the dissatisfaction and indignation Subaru had felt towards Ram had not been fake, but true. Even though they had been augmented to a point that they would not have in normal circumstances. But it was not that everything had been untruthful.

Then, it was also true that Ram had held some inexpressible discomfort over the fact that Subaru's attitude seemed like he had no concern regarding about Emilia and the others. If consideration were given to that feeling, Subaru should be worried about Emilia here in any shape.

Actually, he was worried, so it was not a lie to act that way.

However, he just knew that he could not do anything about the target of his worry.

Subaru: "…"

At this time, yes, at this time, did Subaru realize that he was at a loss for words for that.

He knew it was necessary to avoid conflict, but still hesitated to deceive Ram by lying. Worrying about his peers and deceiving others by being calculative—disgusting, it was.

Naturally, that hesitation had to be swallowed down. It was not worth getting someone displeased for that reason.

Subaru: "That… everyone…"

Ram: "—It is useless to blame yourself so much. There is no point in pursuing who is responsible. There should be something else to give priority to, rather than wasting time like that."

However, before Subaru could speak his words of worry, Ram reached her own conclusion on Subaru's feelings. That being said, she had misread the serious expression in Subaru's face.

That was something rare, for Ram's insight. She would say and do things as if she could see through people's hearts; her error here was evidence that she was impatient deep down inside.

Ram: "Besides, we have already wasted time with Barusu's vomiting."

Of course, Ram would never display such stormy behavior of her own heart.

Because of Ram's attitude, which could not be described as headstrong but rather as a bluff, Subaru was at a loss for words. After that, Ram moved first without saying anything.

While she wiped the finger which had been jabbed into Subaru's mouth, she turned the lantern towards the back of the labyrinth.

Ram: "We cannot stay here, Ram must be with Rem and… we have to join up with Emilia-sama and the others."

Subaru: "I know… Who else is here?"

Ram: "Besides Ram and Barusu… it seems like they have just returned."

With Ram glossing over that confirmation, she turned back, and he followed her words and gaze.

Coming from the other side of the maze with a swaying flickering light, were Anastasia and Patrasche. Subaru's eyes shook slightly, as he gazed at the jet-black dragon that melted into the dark.

That dignified and ferocious beautiful face, illuminated by the flickering orange light.

A row of fangs that could be mistaken for blades were present within that closed mouth, which had crushed the girl's head, which had even crushed Subaru himself all of a sudden—

That would not occur in normal circumstances.

Subaru: “Am I an idiot…? No, I am definitely an idiot.”

Clenching his teeth, Subaru tried to stifle his fear.

In that abnormal friction, the murderous intention that had been directed could not be genuine. The experience of being killed by Patrasche was carved into Subaru’s heart, as a scar that could not be healed.

Still, Subaru had supposedly been faced with existences that had murdered him time and time again.

Subaru: “Yeah, even Rem and Ram, at first…”

Even Ram, who had just now displayed her affection.

Even Rem, who had supported and forgiven Subaru with her devotion.

His relationships with them had been the worst at first, there had been times his life had been targeted, there had been times he had been deprived of it.

Compared to that, the events from just before, which had not been intentional, were adorable.

Subaru: “That’s right. That’s very right… It has to be, right?”

He embraced his shoulders and grabbed his skin as if feeling cold.

In the basement of the sand sea, in this place dominated by sand and darkness, it was certainly cold. However, the reason as to why he felt those chills was different from the ambient air.

Anastasia: “—Natsuki-kun, ya seem to have woken up.”

Ram: “—With some assistance. So, how is the vicinity?”

In front, Ram and Anastasia were talking.

They should be fine-tuning a strategy for conquering this labyrinth of sand based on the information they had just obtained. Originally, Subaru had blended in there, with many things he had to communicate.

But now, the priority was to calm his mind and to stop the quaking of his knees.

With Return by Death, the events and impacts immediately before death should have been left behind. But even if he tried to quench it, the fear emerged, and the passion of that moment revived.

Subaru kept resisting, endlessly so, as to disperse those feelings.

Subaru: "…"

With Subaru in such a state, the jet-black ground dragon seemed lonely as it watched him attentively.

2

—The heart of Subaru, who had supposedly Returned by Death just now, had yet to be restored wholly.

Apart from that particular aspect, the four-person exploration of the sand maze proceeded in almost identical fashion as before.

In search of their allies, the group headed by Subaru slowly moved in the cold darkness. With the lantern lighting up the corridor, the journey was slow and frustrating, keeping an eyes for any shadows lying along the road.

Subaru: "…"

Truth be told, Subaru wished to skip this checking process.

Subaru had gone through this way twice already. There was no way Emilia and the rest were strolling in the area that he could see. However, there was no point in appealing to the two people behind him. There was no defense to the argument that it was something that had been overlooked.

As a result, the frustrating march did not pick up its pace, Subaru's impatience only rose as time went by.

Anastasia: “Everyone else’s prolly okay… In our case, we’re just barely in luck to have Patrasche-chan here.”

Subaru & Ram: “…”

Anastasia: “If ya think ‘bout it, it’d be hell to have no ride in the sand sea. As expected, the only thing to be worried ‘bout’s the lack of strength…”

Subaru & Ram: “…”

Anastasia: “If push comes to shove, I won’t hesitate to use my trump card, but if I don’t use it sparingly, I’m afraid we’ll end up havin’ our backs to the wall. So can I rely on the two of ya?”

Subaru & Ram: “…”

Anastasia: “…Hey, are ya listenin’ to me, Natsuki-kun, Ram-san? For a while now I’ve been talkin’ to ya all by myself.”

As their search journey resumed, Anastasia chatted continuously, but she seemed to become cross with them. Subaru stopped and looked back at her, who had complained about getting the silent treatment.

Then brightening Anastasia’s face with the lamp, he took a deep breath, and spoke,

Subaru: “How can you go on and on without running out of things to say…? For now, we are sort of desperate to find the other guys. We don’t have time to chatter uselessly.”

Anastasia: “There’s no waste nor anythin’. I’m talkin’ ‘bout things related to our future plans. ‘Sides, it’s usually Natsuki-kun’s role to continue chattin’. Without that, the two girls… No, us four’s anxieties’ll be goin’ up.”

Subaru: “Four, huh?”

As Subaru pouted his lips, Anastasia’s mouth went on and on.

The “two girls” here referred to Ram and Anastasia, but with it being rephrased to “four people”, it would result in adding Eridna and Patrasche. Strictly because Anastasia was Eridna, that should be rephrased as “three people”—but it was not something to correct in the first place.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru thought, narrowing his black eyes at Anastasia, who was puffing her cheeks.

The real Anastasia was dormant, and now, Eridna was donning her appearance. Even so, her behavior had become so familiar, it seemed as if she had blended in.

It was unfortunate that, independently of which one of them was in control, it was still impossible to see through her facial expressions, words, and behavior to see her true intentions.

—In the disagreement that had culminated in them killing each other last time around, though he was conscious about Ram and Patrasche because of how horrifying that ending had been, Anastasia’s attitude also brought forth a sense of discomfort.

Ram’s enmity and Patrasche’s attack were easy to understand; the two had apparently gone crazy.

However, at first sight, it was hard to judge whether Anastasia had fallen into insanity, and whether what had laid within her heart had been indiscernible until the very end.

Of course, due to their difference in strength, Anastasia had been slain by Ram, but her cunning was dangerous. She had concealed a knife in an emergency bag, and had looked for a weak spot by feigning mediation. If he were not wary, he could be caught and murdered in his sleep at any time.

Subaru: “…Whatever it takes.”

—He wondered, had they always been hostile to him?

Subaru: “—Kuh.”

Facing ahead, Subaru struck his cheeks in a way that was invisible to Ram and Anastasia.

His mouth was cut with that unrestrained blow, and he felt a sharp pain as the tip of his tongue became acquainted with the taste of blood. He would hurt himself to correct the cloudiness of his consciousness.

Ram and Anastasia, they were not acting abnormally.

It was Subaru, who was not able to let go of the abnormality now.

Subaru: “Great, understanding that I’m being weird all by myself, I’m shuddering.”

Had he gone insane, or was everyone else insane?

There had been a time when Subaru had become so conceited as to believe that everything except him was wrong.

Ultimately, of course, it had all been a mistake. Subaru himself, a lost cause as he was, had tasted the foolish experience of arrogantly assuming that he was in the right, and in the process, he denied all that surrounded him.

He had known all along that he had been in the wrong, and in the end, he was able to indicate that and admit it. It was an accurate, vivid memory.

However, the current Subaru acknowledged his own abnormality in normalcy. On top of that, it was terrible that he was not managing to tame his abnormality. Just awful.

At this point, Subaru remembered.

This desolate sensation in his heart, where the loneliness would drive one into craving madness.

This was the horizon that the madman, Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti, had reached. Being aware of his own madness, recognizing his abnormality with normalcy, this was what that madman had gazed upon.

Ram: “Barusu, what’s wrong?”

While he was feeling disgusting empathy, Ram’s voice fell upon the trembling Subaru’s back. Subaru swallowed the blood mixed with saliva and looked back at those two, acting like nothing happened.

Subaru: “Nothing, just sand in my shoes making me feel uncomfortable.”

Ram: “…Ram’s heart doesn’t care even a bit about you in particular being silent, Barusu, but Anastasia-sama’s words do also have a point.”

Subaru: “What do you mean?”

Ram: “Even if you are the one shutting up, holding back something will not ease a woman’s anxiety. If you wish to do so, then hide it better.”

Subaru: “…”

To those words, Subaru once again bent his lips.

The meaning of Ram’s words was obvious, difficult to be mistaken about. Then he also noticed that Ram’s words were translations of Anastasia’s hard-to-understand words.

It seemed as if he was being seen through, and his heart rather began to scatter.

Subaru: “It’s vague, I don’t think I can explain by saying it.”

Ram: “It is too late for incomprehensible statements like those from you, isn’t it, Barusu? If there is a matter of concern, it is normal that arrangements are made regarding it.”

Anastasia: “Ram-san’s really an unforgivin’ opponent for Natsuki-kun.”

Tutting at Subaru’s words, Ram’s usual sharp tongue struck back. With bitterness and sharpness close to being poisonous, Anastasia gave a bitter smile.

To Anastasia's calm composure, Ram shrugged her shoulders,

Ram: "Please be relieved, Barusu is pretty happy, because he is a deviant who enjoys suffering."

Subaru: "The fuck are you talking about? Why on earth are you judging on what I am? Don't turn me into a punching bag so freely, okay? You know what? You can only hit someone if you're prepared to be hit yourself, yeah?"

Ram: "Hmph."

Snorting her nose, Ram's attitude was almost that of her usual self.

Unlike Subaru's mood, that she had already been able to return to her self-indulgent self was envious and hateful. He felt disgusted just for thinking so.

However, even though they were having the usual chit-chats, the shade of the shadows of discord would be dimmed like this. During his daily life with those girls, that had undoubtedly been the light that Subaru had created.

Subaru: "If I somehow explain something that's difficult to explain… I'm just a little paranoid now."

Ram & Anastasia: "…"

After putting into words, it sounded more futile than he had imagined. It was no wonder that Ram and Anastasia both had bent their lips in response to that.

Patrasche: "…"

Looking at her, even Patrasche seemed to be somewhat taken aback.

For Patrasche, who was clever and able to discern the reason behind things, it was possible that she regarded Subaru as good-for-nothing now. Rather, if she gave up on Subaru and replaced him with a proper owner, it would be way better for her.

Actually, he felt like even Ram and Anastasia were better at handling Patrasche. If she believed him to be a hindrance, it was only natural that she would open her fangs wide towards Subaru—

Subaru: “Stop, stop…”

Anastasia: “I understand it’s more serious than first thought, given how stupid it sounds.”

Anastasia commented on Subaru’s self-deprecation as he stared at Patrasche. Upon their realization that the reason was ridiculous, relief and anxiety simultaneously increased.

In other words, one of their options was to eliminate Subaru. Before that happened, still—

Subaru: “I, really am a pain in the ass.”

Anastasia: “Perhaps it’d be easier if we tied him up and carried him for real, no?”

His face turning red then pale as his face contorted into several different expressions on its own, Anastasia threw in the towel regarding Subaru. Ram curled her eyebrow at Anastasia’s observation, thinking out loud, “However”,

Ram: “Even if we do tie up Barusu’s hands and legs, it would not solve the situation at its core.”

Subaru: “Don’t use such strong words. You might make an enemy out of me.”

Ram: “It is not that much of a big threat, but Ram does not wish to turn herself into an enemy of Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama… I would not be able to face Rem again.”

As Ram was ruminating, Subaru struggled not to harbor any hostility towards her. While fighting such emotions, there was in fact something he was wondering about.

In reality, there was nothing to think about in this situation.

However, now that they had embarked on a journey to reach Pleiades Watchtower, having Returned by Death twice now in that maze of sand, a question had to be asked.

—When it came to the matter of Rem, Ram reacted awfully sensitively.

Subaru: "…"

Of course, for Subaru, it was a good sign that Ram cared about Rem.

For Rem, who had been erased from everyone's memory other than Subaru, only Subaru held a two-way bond with her. Although, it certainly caused a special feeling in Subaru, but it had no meaning in a practical sense.

As for Rem's circumstances of isolation, Ram was trying to get closer to her family as much as possible.

Of course, no memory of Rem remained in her. That sad fact, he had come to learn over the past year. On the other hand, however, there was no doubt that Ram accepted the existence of another girl like herself, Rem, more seriously than "the truth Subaru had informed her of".

And apparently those feelings were so much "beyond Subaru's imagination", that perhaps the actual feelings were being brought back to Ram.

That could be seen from the explosion of discontent in the previous loop within the labyrinth—which had triggered the outburst for Subaru's lack of consideration.

She did not remember. Yet, Ram's feelings were comparable to what he could remember.

The feeling was deeper than what Subaru had believed it to be.

—But in reality, was that all it was?

Ram: "…Disgusting."

Subaru: “No, it’s not disgusting. Not looking at you with those eyes. You’re being paranoid!”

Ram: “Have you gotten yourself up on a pedestal? There is no use.”

Subaru: “If I’m on a pedestal, aren’t you putting yourself on a kamidana and looking down on others?”

Ergo, it was safe to say that the relationships had not deviated from their routine of light-hearted conversations.

Even though the mood could change instantaneously, and those warm feelings could turn into cold-hearted hostility.

For the time being, they could not help but not hate the other.

Anastasia: “Be careful ‘bout Natsuki-kun’s behavior. I wonder what’s the cause?”

Ram: “Did you also notice that, Anastasia-sama?”

Anastasia: “Well, seems that Natsuki-kun’s obviously affected to some extent. I think.”

Subaru was being invaded by the paranoia of suspecting anything and everything, Ram and Anastasia looked at each other as if they had an inkling of what was going on with him. Rather, only Subaru knew the real reason.

With the perception and insight the two had, they were becoming even more wary. Alas, it was clear that Subaru’s every move was being carefully observed to an annoying extent as they were conversing.

Subaru: “Annoying… I’m an idiot.”

Anastasia: “Did’cha say somethin’?”

Subaru: “Just the extent of my stupidity. So, what do you think?”

As he wrapped his head about his own sensibilities, Ram and Anastasia’s heads puzzled over it. Then, in response to Subaru’s question, they both turned towards the front.

By looking ahead according to that movement, it was plain to see what was meant by that.

—A fork had appeared in front of their eyes.

Anastasia: “I’ve felt a disgustin’ wind flowin’ in for a while now… Now I realize why.”

Ram: “This bad wind invokes discord. As Meili described it, Barusu’s body odor seems to summon Witchbeasts. And by nature, their affinity is bad… No, I wonder if it’s good.”

Subaru: “Do you know what this disgusting feeling is?”

Ram: “Multiplying Barusu’s present condition with Barusu’s body odor would yield the same.”

Subaru: “Don’t say «body odor» so many times.”

In the past two loops, they had unanimously agreed on the “bad feeling” subject. Then, Subaru’s current physical condition and present circumstances were intertwined. Thus, a different opinion was born.

Ram and Anastasia looked at each other and nodded together,

Ram & Anastasia: “Miasma.”

Subaru: “The Witch’s, huh. Then, going ahead would mean…”

Anastasia: “Tho’ I ain’t sure, it’s a well-known fact that the Witch’s Shrine lies beyond the Sand Dunes. Oh, and since the distortion of the sand sea’s been solved, and it’s now connected by some accident…”

Ram: “It turned out to be an unexpected shortcut, something like that. And because of that.”

It had been determined that the cause of their souls becoming corrupted, and the discord that was stirred up, concluding in having them killing each other, was the Miasma.

On top of that, Anastasia pointed at that way with an ironic smile, speaking of the possibility of a terrifying existence.

A two-way fork, with Miasma drifting from the right, and the Centaur's lair on the left.

Of course, he intended to smoothly explain the threats lurking in the left road after this—But for the time being, which way should they go?

Anastasia: "So, which way do ya think is the right answer?"

At Anastasia's question, Subaru and Ram exchanged glances.

But, without the slightest deviation in their voices' synchronicity, they spoke.

Subaru & Ram: "—Left."

That was how it went down.

Chapter 17:
The King of the Desert

1

The Non-Combatant Team unanimously opted to take the left path in the fork.

It was evident that if they progressed down the right path, they'd end up being swallowed up by the miasma, resulting in discord arising that would develop into them killing each other. That's why there was no mistake in that choosing the left path was the most natural thing.

That, and for Subaru, the questions were providing him answers too. Though, since the left path wasn't exactly a safe bet either, the one who was setting him those questions was of ill nature.

If he labelled the right path as an emotional snare, then he'd have to label what awaited them on the left path as a physical snare. That grotesque Witchbeast clad in flames—He would prefer to avoid meeting the Centaur, if possible.

Even if he engaged in battle with it, his odds of success were slim, that much was obvious. Their difference in strength wasn't the only issue. The reason being that when the time came to encounter the Witchbeast in his current emotional state, he didn't hold any belief in himself about whether he could fight alongside Ram and Anastasia.

Subaru: "To tell you the truth, there was a time back at the sand dunes where I saw a damn weird Witchbeast in the distance. It had a human body sprouting up from the neck of a body that looked like Patrasche's, and it had a huge mouth gaping from abdomen to chest there. And finally, a huge horn sprouted up from its human body, where the head should be…"

Anastasia: "Eeeh… What the hell. That's soo gross…"

Ram: “Honestly, that’s so off-putting.”

They followed the same flow of Witchbeast-related talk as last time in which he naturally included his explanation about the Centaur’s particularities. The reactions from the two female members of the group in response to his description—Three, including Patrasche, were once again unpleasant.

It’s not as if Subaru wanted to give this explanation because he wanted to. Nevertheless, he had to consider that there was a 70% chance that they wouldn’t be able to avoid an encounter with that thing now that they were going down the left path.

Subaru: “I’d expected all of you to be charmed by it, but in any case, it definitely seems like a dangerous creature. For the time being, I’ll go ahead and call it a Centaur, but it ain’t just that its appearance looks disgusting, the mane on the back of its body burns up into flame… It seemed crazy strong. To say the least, it doesn’t seem like we’d be able to beat it.”

Ram: “Why did you ignore a Witchbeast like that after spotting it? Do you have a death wish?”

Subaru: “Aaah?”

He had explained it whilst keeping his emotions from billowing out as much as he could, however anger had welled up in him the moment Ram had replied in her usual frivolous manner. Despite him having expressly warned her, who did she think she was?

She always arrogantly looked down on others, thinking that, he felt his anger morphing into hatred. Subaru took a deep breath. He did everything he could to keep his violent emotions in check, to settle himself down.

Subaru: “Damn this…! This place is the worst.”

Ram: “It sure is demanding, isn’t it? Even I have to pay attention to the words I choose.”

Subaru: “If you’re going to choose them now, then you know, perhaps, they ain’t gonna make anything better”

Both Ram's voice and expression were tinged with sympathy for Subaru who was overwhelmed by his emotions. However, as her sympathetic attitude kept irritating him, he had to say that what she'd done too had ended up producing the opposite effect.

Anastasia: "It's easy ta talk about the effects of the miasma, but that's all that's scary about it, don'tcha think? In reality, me 'n Ram-san ain't affected."

Subaru: "What do you mean by that? If you're thinking flowery thoughts like only we will be okay, then you'd better stop. If we scratch off the surface, me and you are the same."

Anastasia: "What haaarsh words. I didn' mean that even I've got that much self-confidence. One's capacity for judgemen' and determination, and so on, are different issues ta the strength of one's mind and body… Hooowever, goin' about it like yer completely paralyzed by the scariness of the miasma is pretty bad, don'tcha think?"

Anastasia offered her candid advice to him, phrased with an air of superiority. Though her words were rational, Subaru grew irritated that she hadn't gotten the point. Standing at the head of the group, Subaru had pressed his prior point to her as he marched on through the passageway of sand.

On hearing that, Anastasia cleared her throat with a small Hem-hem, and said,

Anastasia: "What I have to say is related to the miasma…Though since it's not like even I know too well about it, can ya forgive me if what I say is gonna be rough?"

Subaru: "I imagine the only ones who really know all the details about it are the Witch Cult, right?"

Anastasia: "Indeed, but in the world, there's also the kinda people who like ta poke into things which people despise. For example, there's the weirdos who go aroun' studyin' stuff like miasma, eh? Though, what I know about it is somethin' which barely resembles the truth from a rumor of a rumor of a rumor."

Was what Anastasia had brought up surmised to be a Witch Researcher?

It had a strange ring to it, but it would be pretty silly to presume they didn't exist, if he thought about it.

This world likely had people like researchers too. And of course, all such individuals who possessed this thirst for knowledge would rationally avoid searching for taboos and keep in line with the flow of the world—No, there was no way they'd have such an upright, pious nature.

There would be incarnations of curiosity who wouldn't fit in with the mold, whatever world or era it may be.

Anastasia: "Though before I dive straight inta what I know from that rumor, we hafta ask first of all, what is Miasma ?"

Ram: "It's… the contaminated mana which the Witch and Witchbeasts let off, right? I've also heard that Witch Cultists let off the same thing like that."

Anastasia: "Ram-san's answer is the prevailin' view. The miasma's somethin' which the Witch gives off, so even the Witchbeasts which were created by the Witch emit it in a similar fashion… However, have ya heard of this?"

Ram: "…"

Anastasia: "Have ya heard that Witch Cultists 'n Witchbeasts in fact really detest each other."

Anastasia = Eridna spoke without pause. Knowing what the creator was like, they were fond of flaunting off their own knowledge, perhaps. It looked like Anastasia's gilded plate had been torn off and underneath it, the white fox's true nature had showed through.

Ram's eyes widened at Anastasia's words, in stark contrast to Subaru, who had harbored that impression. Both Witchbeasts and Witch Cultists were creatures that she thought were lead to the Witch of Envy. Perhaps she was surprised to learn that in the truth they didn't get along.

Ram: “I can barely bring myself to believe that… But, is this for real?”

Anastasia: “Unfortunately, I don’t know for sure since I ain’t acquainted with either any Witch Cultists or Witchbeasts. That’s why I introduced it as somethin’ from a rumor. But, don’t ya think it’d be interestin’ if this was a true story?”

Subaru: “Interesting…?”

Subaru responded, having gotten the impression that she shouldn’t have described it that way to begin with. Anastasia replied to him with a curt nod, saying “Mhm”

Anastasia: “Everyone in the world thinks that the Witch ’n the Witch Cultists ‘n the Witchbeasts are good friends, right? ‘N yet, it ain’t known that in fact, the two of ‘em under the Witch are hostile with each other. This misunderstandin’ has gone on overlooked for 400 years… No one knows the actual truth. “

Ram: “Surely that’s…”

Anastasia: “I apologize for bringin’ this rumor forward too, but it seems like there’s many misconceptions about the miasma too. For example, the relation between the Witchbeasts and the miasma is the exact opposite than what is known, in that the Witchbeasts loathe it. ‘N it’s said that they hate the Witch in their true feelin’s as well.”

Ram: “—No way could it be like that”

Ram kept piling Anastasia with her doubts, drawn in by her story. Behind the two of them immersed in this exchange, Subaru grasped that Anastasia = Eridna’s words were substantiated by a rather undeniable factor.

The relations between Witches and Witchbeasts were in fact poor, and Witchbeasts do hate the Witch.

That possibility made complete sense to him, considering how much he’d made use of the Witch’s Lingering Scent until now. If it wasn’t like that, then why would it have made the Witchbeasts seethe so much, making them frantically pursue him, who was covered in the Witch's Scent.

He had used his lingering scent against the first Witchbeast Invasion after he had been summoned to this parallel world. And he'd even used it against the White Whale. It was impossible to disregard the relatedness between the Witch's Lingering Scent and the miasma if he gathered all the evidence he'd seen up until now.

—The Witch's Lingering Scent that surrounded him seemed to be miasma itself.

Subaru: "There's no way that all of these Witchbeasts would have Petelgeuse-like yandere attributes. He wouldn't be able to allow the Witch's scent from these creatures, other than from the Witch. It'd be like having another woman's scent."

It was disgusting to think about, if that was the case, but the aforementioned possibility was suitable in regards to a logical explanation. In other words, the Witchbeasts hated the Witch's miasma and strongly looked on at it in hostility.

And to start with, most people shouldn't know that the theory which stated that The Witch of Envy created the Witchbeasts was actually incorrect.

The one who created the Witchbeasts wasn't The Witch of Envy but rather The Witch of Gluttony.

Since that hadn't been circulated around, it seemed like nobody noticed the relations between the Witchbeasts and the miasma as well. Anastasia's source of knowledge—Rather, he didn't know whether there really was a researcher who studied the Witch but if they did exist, they sure did make a good point.

Subaru: "…What a complete farce, huh?"

Subaru sighed at his own lack of concern, having thought about it to this extent. It was more natural to think that she'd just spewed out the knowledge that Anastasia = Eridna had known from the start, rather than doubting whether said researcher existed or not.

When Subaru's train of thought moved to that, a different form of anger gradually started to take root in him.

Why did Subaru have to hide the circumstances around Anastasia being Eridna like this? There was his consideration towards Julius and the Iron Fang. In particular, Julius in his current state had completely slipped out from the memories of the world.

Julius tried to act his same old self as much as he could, but even in him, there was a part that was careless about it. Taking that into consideration, Subaru had decided that he should avoid any extra mental burdens.

He should avoid them, but why was it that he had to bear the burden instead?

Subaru: "…"

Everybody was selfish.

Why was it just him who had to do everything to cover those guys' asses?

It was irritating. It was annoying. He might as well just spill the beans about everything, shouldn't he? He might as well tell them about Anastasia's spirit, his Return by Death, everything—.

Ram: "…Barusu. Stop sticking your head in the sand all of a sudden, it's strange."

Subaru: "It's just my natural defensive reaction to stop our relations from getting any worse. Phaaah."

Since Subaru's anger was reaching its boiling point, he had stuck his face into the wall of sand before he hurled abuse at them. The wall of sand was unexpectedly brittle, and it appeared like he'd be able to dig through it with his hands.

In return for finding that out, Subaru spat out sand from his mouth. There was something to think about in Ram's cold expression, but since he was responsible for his own actions, he kept any retaliation to himself.

Anastasia: “Could Natsuki-kun’s eccentric behavior also be from the miasma’s influence… perhaps?”

Ram: “Nope, Barusu’s behavior is as usual.”

Subaru: “It ain’t as usual! It’s just an aftershock from the miasma’s influence!”

Anastasia: “Well, regardin’ the authenticity of things there, if we get back to what we were talkin’ about whilst ya were cryin’ out… The Witchbeasts in truth hate the Witch. If we presume that, then there’s gotta be an explanation for the Witch Cultists ‘n the Witchbeasts bein’ hostile with each other, no?”

Anastasia, who deliberately found a lull in their conversation to shift the topic back to the main point, ponderously inclined her head. However, Subaru’s like-minded opinion didn’t reach her words. Instead, Ram nodded, and said,

Ram: “Whether they’re hostile with each other or not, I’ve never heard… of the two of them acting together. To begin with, there’s also that rumors of the Witch Cult don’t spread.”

Subaru: “I see…Then it’s really the type of secret organization where those guys keep it hidden and move about in secret. I wonder why they don’t leave any impressions at all, though.”

Ram: “Barusu and Emilia-sama come across those guys far too often.”

All the Witch Cultists which Subaru knew strongly craved the limelight, and were absorbed in an inflated sense of their own self-worth. He couldn’t even say that Petelgeuse’s movements had been kept surreptitious, and what’s more, the other Sin Archbishops had went all the way up to making a broadcast after having hijacked one of the Great Cities.

How could those guys claim that they were an evil organization that operated in the shadows?

Subaru: “Ah, but wait up. What about the White Whale? That thing was cooperating with the Witch Cult…Though now it’s a bit suspicious whether it was or not, there was still that time.”

Anastasia: “Hmm? Even though I know that the Witchbeasts definitely do hate the Witch Cult, I’m not too sure whether the Witch Cult hate the Witchbeasts…Though, either way, even if it’s not like that, I ain’t gonna fuss over it.”

Subaru: “That’s what I’d told you.….”

Providing a suitable rebuttal to Subaru’s objection, Anastasia threw down her personal opinion straight away. That she didn’t cling to it was perhaps indeed proof that she’d heard it from the rumors of another’s opinion.

However, she’d thoroughly used it as the basis of her conversation. In the end, Anastasia closed one of her eyes, and said:

Anastasia: “In the end, we can just put it as that we don’ understand the connection between the miasma well. There’s also the way Ram-san looks at it, in which it’s like contaminated mana…But, well, doesn’ it seem like there’s no one aroun’ who can explain what goes on for the mana to get contaminated like that?”

Ram: “…”

Anastasia: “Mana is mana, regardless of whose body it goes through. Even if its nature changes in magic or when ya craft with it, it ain’t possible for anyone to add a lil’ extra to the mana itself.”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Anastasia: “Why is it that the mana can jus’ get contaminated with the Witch of Envy? And also, why da heck do Witch Cultists acclimatize to that contaminated mana?”

Quite unusually, Ram kept her mouth shut as Anastasia launched this barrage of questions. It was rather strange that she didn’t raise any words of objection and kept silent. At the same time, Subaru was experiencing a sense of déjà vu along with his feeling of revulsion.

The way she had presented it made both her point and conclusion vague. Everything about her attitude felt like she was speaking in riddles. That she seemed to overlap with Echidna left him quite the sour taste.

Anastasia: “Alright, alright, alright, it seems like we’ve spent too much time idly gossipin’, don’tcha think?”

Anastasia suddenly spoke out without any consideration for Ram’s silence or Subaru’s cathexis. The tone she’d been speaking in up until now suddenly changed, leaving them behind with the abrupt change of subject. Leaving the two of them in her wake, Anastasia shone her lantern at the front part of the passageway. Subaru also stopped in his tracks, imitating her. And as he held his lantern up, he noticed what was up.

Subaru: “…”

In front of them, the passageway gradually turned to the left, and a faint breeze blew towards them. The wall of sand still hadn’t changed in any respect, but he vividly remembered that Smell of Burning that mingled with the breeze, along with that sudden bend in the path.

Ram: “It smells like something burnt, like grilled meat, doesn’t it?”

Ram let out her candid impressions about the breeze which carried a tinge of hot-air to it. The smell of over-cooked, charred flesh streamed in from the depths of the passageway. Maybe it was possible that this aroma was proof that there was someone cooking, and that they’d be able to meet a friend party up ahead —However well-intentioned his thoughts were, they were tantamount to ignorance.

Ram: “Emilia-sama and the others carelessly set up a fire and are taking a break… I think something along those lines?”

Subaru: “I do agree that Emilia would be the one that’d seemingly set up a fire without any care, but with me mentioning the Centaur, I can’t at all imagine it being that. You too have to believe that this isn’t your head filling up with overly optimistic thoughts, right?!”

Ram: “I’m looking forward to how you’re going to come up with excuses for all these reckless remarks after the influence of the miasma is gone.”

Every time he replied in a snappier manner than was necessary to Ram’s questions, he’d get toxicity scathingly thrown back from her too. Letting out a snort to that, Subaru reassured himself that the one he needed to turn his hostility to was not her.

There was no doubt about that, considering they’d already made it here. There would be a large cave up ahead, and right there, the blasphemous Witchbeast clad in flame would be awaiting them.

The time they’d spent getting here seemed to be a little quicker compared to last time. Nevertheless, considering that they were going to encounter it, perhaps that place was the Witchbeast’s burrow. He held no fleeting traces of hope that it would’ve moved from there. If possible, they would have to—

Subaru: “We’ve got no choice but to kill it to get past, huh?”

Ram: “I think it’d be productive of us to come up with a plan that can be put into motion with our current fighting strength.”

Anastasia: “We ain’t got any fightin’ strength even if I use my trump card…and even then, I want ta keep that gruellin’ thing as a last resort if possible, since I can’t undo its effects.”

Both Anastasia and Ram opposed Subaru’s course of action. Though Subaru was annoyed that he’d been denied, even he had no intention of pushing his own opinion on them. In fact, it would be absurd. He hadn’t dubbed their group as the Non-Combatant Team for nothing. All the choices which entailed confronting the Witchbeast would probably end up being reckless.

Subaru: “On the other hand, there’s no way we can go back and take the right path.”

Ram: “After looking at all the different faces you’ve made up till now, Barusu, I can see that you wouldn’t have the guts to go down the right path, isn’t that right?”

Anastasia: “But, by sayin’ that it means we’re cornered. It wouldn’ work ta do such a laudable thing as ta go back to where we started from ‘n wait for the others to come look for us… Right?”

Ignoring Ram’s flippant reply, Anastasia’s reply hit the nail on the head. If he still feared the Witchbeast enough to turn back, then he should have resorted to spinning those words from the beginning and stopping back there. Since he hadn’t, his conclusion had left him with just the option of passing by the Witchbeast.

Thus, that didn’t mean they couldn’t find a way to accomplish that.

Subaru: “First things first, we need to gather information on our opponent. If everything goes to plan, we have a chance.”

Subaru spoke out, reaching a conclusion before the other two, who were puzzling over a plan, did.

2

—Subaru hardly knew anything about the Centaur Witchbeast’s mode of life.

That was due to the fact that he’d come across it for only a few dozen seconds before being burnt alive. All that remained pitifully carved into his soul from that experience was that its grotesque-looking figure made him feel sick to the core, and that it had tremendous firepower. If he briefly thought about it, his manner of death had been such that it felt unavoidable to perceive it as anything other than having been a death in vain.

However, it’d be bothersome if he got worked up about it over that. When it came to unexpected Deaths Natsuki Subaru was a veteran. By now, he’d cultivated enough experience to not treat the phenomenon of Death as just Death.

Subaru: “First of all, we need to pay attention to the Centaur’s appearance.”

Its repulsive appearance was something which you couldn’t forget once seen. Though he’d seen it only for a few seconds, its grotesque appearance was seared vividly into his mind. That would give him a helping hand in his reflection.

It had a human body on top of a horse body, with its head transformed into a horn. In addition to that, it had a gaping maw across its body. It looked shoddy, like something half-assed a child would have made out of clay whilst playing. However, there was something he'd taken notice of when he racked his brain without averting his eyes from his memories.

Subaru: "It definitely didn't have eyes."

In essence, it didn't have a head in the place where you'd usually find one. Thus, he was certain that there hadn't been any organs on that Witchbeast's body that provided it with a sense of vision.

Or, since there was no light down in the cave systems underneath the sand dunes without being in possession of a lantern, perhaps the negative effects of moving about down there had caused it to de-evolve.

Subaru: "Something like a mole? It adapted to living underground and lost its eyesight."

Or, he wasn't sure whether it had an eyesight to begin with; but at least that Witchbeast probably didn't rely on it and went on about its business without it. Back then, the Witchbeast didn't seem to have noticed him due to the lantern light. It had noticed him from the noises and indications he'd let off from his own carelessness.

Namely, from either a sense of smell or hearing which the Witchbeast would have developed instead of eyes.

Subaru: "If I'm recalling correctly, I once heard that moles have a good sense of hearing to make up for their rather poor noses."

It wasn't something he'd heard from Anastasia earlier, but rather surely some odd knowledge he'd picked up somewhere. However, Subaru's guess ended up far more useful than what he clung to in his groundless thoughts. The Centaur's forte was in its sense of hearing; having come to that conclusion, Subaru sprung into action.

Thus…

Subaru: "…"

Without uttering a single word, Subaru swung his arm up and down as quietly as he could. From the moment he'd stepped onto the sand, he'd taken care so that his footsteps wouldn't make any sound from crunching against the sand.

The thing he'd thrown from the extremity of his arm was one of the flasks of water that they'd put in their survival kit. Without any particular aim, the flask flew straight forward to the end of the large cave—Drawing the attention of the fiery Witchbeast in the middle of the cave to where it had landed.

Centaur: "—ヲヲ!!"

As soon as the flask of water landed on the sand with a quiet clunk, the reaction of the Centaur, who heard it, was dramatic. Shaking its blazing mane, the Witchbeast leapt up with its horse body and galloped forward to the source of the sound. It ferociously rammed its body there with no trace of hesitation.

Centaur: "—ヲヲ!!"

Sand billowed up, and flickering sparks flew about around the cave. Thrashing about violently, the Centaur skidded around. It gnashed the fangs inside its huge gaping maw together and continued to let out a shrill yowl which sounded like the cries of countless babies crying.

It stamped on the flask of water, crushing it flat, and set it aflame over and over again. Once the Centaur reduced its original shape to nothing, it let off more flames which were brimming from its mane onto the sand. And when everything other than the parched sand had been burned to a crisp, the Witchbeast stopped in its tracks with a hint of satisfaction.

It did seem to look satisfied. Whilst looking at its handiwork from the corner of his eye, Subaru shook the string he had attached to his waist and motioned them forward. The sound of them carefully stepping on the sand was drowned out by the shrill cries of the Witchbeast that permeated all across the cave. Taking absolute care with each step, they crept on forward one step at a time—

"…"

Subaru tugged at his string, indicating a halt to their march, stopping his advancing Earth Dragon in its tracks. To his surprise, the Earth Dragon, who shouldn't have been able to understand human speech, had faithfully followed his instructions. It had slowly trodden along the sand with a prudent gait that was not befitting of its large build.

—Subaru and the others were conducting a march along the precipice of death in the cave that was coated in darkness.

Come to think of it, the width of the cave was probably around the size of a school gym, or thereabouts. They were in an area where the charred corpses of the creatures that had been incinerated by the Witchbeast had fallen just about everywhere.

Subaru and the others were trying to move across and get past the Witchbeast by trying to silence their footsteps and breathing.

"…"

The area wasn't such that only quietude like that of the grave would descend upon. The Centaur's ridiculously large maw was panting wildly over and over again. The sound felt like the awkward sort you'd get from air coming out of a balloon.

It wasn't just its appearance, but also its behavior that was repulsive—Nevertheless, he was thankful that it was behaving so plainly right now. Thanks to that, he'd managed to come up with a plan that wouldn't involve fighting.

"…"

Once again, Subaru took out another flask of water and threw it behind the Centaur. The simple-minded Witchbeast reacted to that sound and once again fiercely assailed the empty flask.

Flames and the cries of babies permeated the cave, and the flask of water burst open thanks to the Centaur's immense heat. With a parched sound, the flask turned to black charcoal.

Regardless of that kerfuffle, Subaru and the others moved forward and managed to shorten their distance to the passageway during that time.

—This simple diversion was the conclusion Subaru had reached from observing the Centaur's mode of life.

Having deemed that it didn't have an eyesight, Subaru determined that the Centaur relied on its sense of hearing. Leaving Ram and Anastasia behind him, he'd attracted the Witchbeast's attention by using the same method of throwing stuff. He'd repeated this demonstration a few times until he won over their confidence.

The Centaur was a Witchbeast that sought its prey using its sense of hearing. And on top of that, it was a simple-minded creature that could be tricked a bunch of times with the same method.

So long as he'd been able to ascertain that, the rest came easy. He'd made Ram gather the items for the diversion as well as made her read where the exit was using the wind, for after they made their escape past the Witchbeast. After that, he'd scrupulously told Patrasche about their covert plan, and the need to keep a strong heart so not to succumb to stress or anxiety, and to just put her game face on.

"…"

In actuality, Subaru's tactics were working really well to the point that it felt anti-climatic. The distance between the cave and the passageway had already been half-cleared, and the time they'd spent stressing wasn't all that much. Since it had no capacity for intuition, the Witchbeast would probably be clearable by repeating the same thing over and over.

"…"

Of course, they had dropped the lantern-light, and the only thing they could see was the Centaur's blazing mane that was crackling in the distance.

The lantern-light likely wouldn't have affected the sightless witchbeast, but still, they'd made the bourgeois decision of narrowing down anything which could trigger its senses as much as they could.

"…"

Feeling the string being pulled, Subaru's attention, which had wandered off in thought, was brought back to the present. He was holding two strings as he put the diversion into effect. One of them was fastened to Patrasche, whilst the other was held by Ram who was riding on her.

The instructions he'd set to Patrasche were "Stop" and "Go". However, its connection between him and Ram hadn't been particularly well stipulated. It was just there to get each other's attention.

Even so, their connection using the string that merely conveyed their presence, without being able to look face to face or exchange words, was something that settled Subaru down a rather surprising amount.

Having this for now made it so that Subaru wouldn't bear any ill feelings towards Anastasia or Ram. He was in a state of mind where it felt easier for him to not look at someone else's face.

On the other hand, it didn't mean that there wasn't any anxiety in his heart, which had grown at ease to such solitude. Subaru had convinced himself that it was partially due to the miasma's influence—However, many parts of the story which Anastasia had told them earlier regarding "What Miasma is" had become cloudy.

Would he be cured from its effects when they left this place? In truth, that also felt doubtful now.

Supposing he wasn't cured from it, would he end up being unable to get rid of these unpleasant feelings even when he met Emilia and Beatrice…

Subaru: "—?!"

The string was suddenly pulled with strength, causing Subaru to unintentionally pitch back. The string that had been pulled was the one that was fastened to Patrasche. The Earth Dragon had made a snap decision to stop him by force.

And right as he lifted his face up, he immediately saw why—

Subaru: "—ukh"

A clump of fire hurled past a step ahead of Subaru. The clump of fire was approximately the same size of a football, but it hurtled past spraying waves of heat to its surroundings. It crashed against a wall of sand a few meters away, letting out a violent booming noise, followed by an explosion.

A hot wind gusted out that scorched Subaru's cold body; he barely managed to stop himself from screaming.

It would definitely have landed a direct hit if Patrasche hadn't stopped him. He didn't know whether it had enough power to kill him, but he was sure that it had enough firepower to injure him. Subaru gritted his teeth realizing that he'd barely escaped with his life as a shiver ran down his spine.

Why had the fireball been thrown at him?

Subaru: "…"

Subaru reflexively turned to look behind him. The Centaur should have been deceived by his diversion, and should have been messing around with the water flask on the other side of the cave. However, the Witchbeast now had turned its horned head to where they were, snarling.

Just like it knew that Subaru and the others were standing there.

Subaru: "…"

No way could that be it, Subaru shook his head.

Subaru unfastened a water flask from his waist and took hold of it so he could set up the diversion again. The string which connected him with Ram was constantly being tugged, calling him, but he took no note of it. His highest priority now was to lure the Witchbeast's attention away from them.

He swung up the flask of water into an arc and threw it far to the left of the Centaur, where it dropped onto the sand. And just as he'd expected, the Witchbeast's attention turned to that spot and the clumsy beast was attracted to the obvious diversion.

Once again, flames gushed out and the lament of crying babies echoed out. And whilst the shrill echo reverberated across the cave, Subaru urged Patrasche onwards towards the exit.

They just had to keep repeating this predetermined routine over and over again. With just that, they ought to be able to break past, however—

Subaru: "—hk!"

Once again, the fireball thrown by the Centaur hurtled past next to where Subaru was walking. It had gotten even closer than last time, with the shot being so accurate as to graze his skin.

Subaru's breath was instantly taken away from him by the fireball's explosion, and he was buffeted by the wave of heat.

Subaru: "…"

Bathed in the illumination of the newborn orange light source ahead of him, Subaru locked eyes with the Witchbeast in the distance. Their eyes didn't actually meet, through, so saying they locked eyes wasn't quite right.

However, the Witchbeast's attention was clearly focused this way. The Witchbeast had no way to track them except by sound, so why was it able to find them in the middle of its own cry—

Subaru: "Its own… cry…"

Ram: "Barusu, the echo…"

As the question and answer came together in Subaru's mind, Ram, who was still pulling the string, finally called to him and made a sound. At the moment they both came to the same conclusion, the Centaur kicked the sand.

Its hooves kicked the surface of the sand, and the Witchbeast, which was so large they had to look upwards at it, flew lightly through the chilly air. The heat of its blazing mane increased as it moved, and all at once was streaking towards Subaru's group.

The human torso attached to the horse's body raised its arms, and pulled away pieces of its own flaming mane. While held in its hands, those pieces changed into balls of fire, and after the blink of an eye, became explosive flaming bullets.

Subaru: "…! Runrunrunrun!!"

At this point, avoiding a fight with the Centaur was no longer possible.

Discarding the plan to move with as little noise as possible, Subaru slapped Patrasche's haunches, ordering her to run immediately to the corridor.

Subaru's group was currently in the exact center of the cave, far from both the corridor they entered from, and the one they were moving towards; a position so advantageous for the Centaur that it seemed likely this had been the Witchbeast's plan.

Subaru: "Was it playing about with us…?!"

Ram: "…!"

Subaru's mind froze in amazement, but the Witchbeast didn't let up. Hurling the fireballs as it created them, the Centaur blew clouds of sand into the air around its fleeing targets, as if playing with them.

The Witchbeast had expected that they would run straight for the corridor. Having said that, even if they tried running a zigzag course to confuse it, its hearing captured every sound, and wouldn't fall for such a trick.

Subaru: "Woah! Wah!"

Grazing their lowered heads, the fireballs were thrown one after another.

Out of sight, the Witchbeast ran circles around them as they fled, not letting up with its explosive barrage, hurling bursts of sand into the air.

Subaru: “Gah—?!”

The heatwave of an explosion at his feet lifted Subaru easily into the air, and sent him flying.

He quickly protected his head with both arms, but the rush of hot air burned the inside of his nose and throat. Breathing was painful, and with the inside of his nose scorched, he temporarily lost his sense of smell.

He rolled on the ground from the agony in the center of his face, then raised his teary-eyed face.

The mouth in the Centaur’s torso was open wide, and the toothy maw was emitting an ear-splitting noise, almost looking like it was laughing. No, it was actually laughing.

Laughing at the weak human plaything, that couldn’t even win a battle of wits with a Witchbeast.

Subaru: “Damnit, argh…!”

Hatred boiled in him, and gave Subaru the strength to stand.

Compared to suspicions and mistrust, what a wonderfully healthy feeling it was to hate the vermin that opposed him. As he was swallowed up in a blackness of distilled fury, Subaru snorted at the Witchbeast that looked so pleased with itself.

Acting like it had won was laughable.

How could a lowly miasma-hating Witchbeast think it could ever hope to beat Natsuki Subaru?

Subaru: “…”

Putting a hand to his waist, he took out his whip.

Letting his hand remember the feel of the handle, he lightly flicked the sand with the end of the whip; the Centaur immediately stopped its roaring laughter, and intently turned its ears towards the crack of the whip.

Most likely, it was the first time it had ever heard that sound.

However, that wasn't Subaru's real plan. The whip was nothing more than a diversion.

Subaru: "—Invisible Providence"

In response to the Witchbeast's violence, a roiling, seething black emotion formed in Subaru's heart.

Given direction, it turned into strength to tear the Centaur limb from limb. Using it this way made him look like a one-trick pony, but he didn't care. It was a trick that would work on anyone.

Subaru: "…"

Swinging the whip above his head, he let the Witchbeast listen to the sound of it splitting the air.

Taking care not to alert the Centaur, which was paying close attention to the first sound, the invisible magic hand advanced like it was slipping through the darkness, infiltrating the Witchbeast's shadow, aiming for the horn atop its human torso.

Between the human body and the horse body, he couldn't tell which one had vital organs. With its head being a horn, if there was a brain stuffed inside it or not was a mystery. Despite that, there had to be a vital organ of some kind inside. With that decided, he would crush the horn in the palm of his invisible hand.

If the loss of the horn happened to make the Witchbeast obedient, he'd simply have it kill itself. That would be much more pleasant…

Subaru: "…?! Gu… agh… Gah?!"

With that thought, it happened just as he was about to carry out his plan.

Focusing on the Centaur, his Unseen Hand reaching for its head, Subaru’s own head was filled with a burst of unimaginable pain. Feeling as though something had stripped away his scalp and was drilling directly into his skull, his eyes rolled back and yellow foam frothed from his lips as he fell to his knees.

Subaru: “Gah…ah?! Guh…Agh!!”

Bringing both hands to his head as he knelt, he struck himself on the side of the head to try and fight off the pain. Rubbing his head, holding his head, nothing else helped with the pain. To fight the pain, he tried to inflict a sharper, stronger pain. He struck himself again, and again, but no matter how hard he hit himself, he couldn’t overcome the pain.

He rolled on the sand while his head felt like a hell full of thorns piercing his brain, and nearly fainting from pain, he ended up swallowing sand without understanding why.

Subaru: “It hurts! Augh! It hurts it hurts it hurts! It hurts!”

He shouted like he was spitting blood.

With a mouth full of sand, chewing it with his back teeth, Subaru thrashed on the ground, fighting against the mysterious pain to keep it from blocking his throat. He couldn’t fight it, he was losing.

Of course, Invisible Providence had vanished instantly.

With that dispersed, he had no way of affecting the Centaur. The Witchbeast, as though disappointed with his lack of resistance, prepared to turn him into a smoking corpse.

A huge ball of flame drove away the chill in the air as the explosive heat warmed the world around them.

Just like that, Natsuki Subaru would be changed into charcoal…

Patrasche: “—ッ!”

At the last moment, the jet-black Earth Dragon charged in fiercely, tearing away the Witchbeast's arm.

Patrasche: "…"

With a body color that blended into the darkness, the Earth Dragon had soundlessly approached the Witchbeast, and landed a biting attack. Losing its balance along with its arm, the Witchbeast dropped the fireball it had raised above its own head.

In other words, the heat of the fireball the Witchbeast had created exploded at its own feet, and the point-blank blast wave blew it into the air.

As it was thrown away by the explosion, blood dripped from the Centaur's wounded arm, and it fell over on its back. Without sparing it a glance, Patrasche sprinted over the sand, and, holding Subaru's clothing with her teeth as he thrashed in pain, she immediately began a sprinting retreat.

Held by Patrasche's teeth near his waist, swinging left and right as he dangled, tormented by poor circulation and the continuing headache, Subaru looked behind him.

Behind Patrasche, the Centaur unsteadily rose to its feet.

The wound on its human torso foamed, and the left arm that had been bitten off grew back in an instant. Its monstrous regeneration ability was at work on its other injuries as well. The wounds all over its body, inflicted by the explosion moments ago, closed one after another. The Centaur returned to full health in a matter of seconds.

With that done, there was nothing left to slow it down.

Screaming viciously at Patrasche, who had struck it by surprise, the Centaur sped up to pursue the madly fleeing Earth Dragon, and its mane blazed brighter as it leapt.

Patrasche's running ability was impressive in even the worst terrain, but the Centaur's was in its own habitat, and its acceleration was a step ahead. Along with their difference in size, Patrasche was weighed down by Subaru, and the Witchbeast was soon running side by side with her.

A burning fireball appeared in the Witchbeast's hand, but this one was stretched tall. Looking closer, the fireball changed in the Witchbeast's hand to a long-handled weapon, and in the blink of an eye, it had become a spear, covered from end to end in flame.

Centaur: "—ヲヲ!!"

Raising the flaming spear, the Centaur drove the tip towards Patrasche. The black Earth Dragon ducked as the spear approached, almost diving into the sand to avoid the attack and using that as an opening to speed up further.

However, just when it looked like they could get away, the Witchbeast's hoof drove straight into the Earth Dragon's torso from the side. The force of the attack passed through her hard skin, and she cried out as the impact smashed into her guts. Even then, she refused to drop Subaru, still dangling from her teeth. The heat he could feel near his waist was from the blood Patrasche was coughing up from her internal injuries.

That was the only sign she was badly injured.

However, she still wouldn't let Subaru go, and Subaru had no way to care for his loyal dragon's wounds. All he had was the seemingly eternal torture of the unending pain in his head.

Ram: "…EL FULA!!"

Anastasia: "JIWALD…!"

A second strike from the flaming spear was aimed at Patrasche, who was clearly slowing down.

However, before it reached the Earth Dragon's body, it was interrupted from two different directions.

From one side came an invisible blade of wind, from the other was a convergence of white-hot rays of heat.

Both of the incantations came from familiar voices, but that was all Subaru could say for sure.

Both spells landed direct hits on the Witchbeast, blowing holes through its body and cutting through the human torso at an angle… those wounds, too, closed instantly.

Ram: “Barusu…! Oh, fine, if you’re dead, you should say so!”

Anastasia: “That’s a nasty one, that Witchbeast…I won’t be able ta do much ta that thing.”

Even though it sounded normal, one of the girls’ voices carried a trace of desperation. On the other hand, despite being in a desperate situation, one of the girls’ voices lacked any sense of stress.

Feeling his loyal dragon’s breath and blood on his skin, Subaru was on the verge of falling unconscious. If he was going to go through this much pain and torment, maybe dying wasn’t so…

Ram: “Don’t you dare die, Barusu! Rem would cry!”

Subaru: “…oh”

That voice, shouted right in his ear, cut through the pain and reached his brain. What the voice awakened was a hatred no less than the one he held for the Witchbeast.

They had forgotten.

Not a single one of them remembered that girl.

…Don’t talk about Rem and I like you know anything about it.

Subaru: “…INVISIBLE PROVIDENCEEEE!”

Releasing his feelings of anger towards the Witchbeast passing through the edge of his tear-stained vision, Subaru struck at it with a pitch-black magical hand in an outburst of rage.

Partway there, another raging pain tore at his skull—before he was swallowed by it and lost consciousness, Subaru’s Unseen Hand hit the Witchbeast’s spear head-on, breaking it as a token act of defiance.

…That was all the resistance he could muster.

Centaur: “—ｯｯ”

The reward for his angry counterattack was another burst of furious pain.

The Centaur planted its front legs in the sandy ground and pivoted on them, turning itself around forcefully, and then its rear legs lashed out like a catapult.

Its solid rock-like hooves kicked sand into the air as they sped towards Subaru’s group—himself, Patrasche, and Ram and Anastasia who were likely nearby as well, intending to tear through them all at once.

In an explosion of leg strength sufficient to bring down part of the cave, everyone was sent flying different directions by the wave of sand. Subaru was even torn away from Patrasche’s jaw, rolling helplessly on top of the sand, and thrown by the aftermath of the impact against a destroyed, burned body.

Subaru: “Ah, uh…”

A headache that couldn’t be described, and a body trampled by the Centaur’s kick.

Assaulted by continuous pain from the inside and out, Subaru could no longer hold on to his consciousness. Somehow, as he rolled loosely on the sand, he could feel the approaching darkness of death.

Destruction, annihilation, futile death, death in battle.

Heartless words like that roamed the back of his mind, but…

Subaru: “…”

In a situation where his lungs had forgotten to even breathe, Subaru saw someone standing in front of him.

It was a small, delicate shadow. In a world with too little light, he couldn't see it clearly. Even then, it was a familiar shape that he knew immediately. It was Ram. She was wobbling as she stood.

She had both arms outstretched, to protect Subaru.

Stop it. It's stupid, impossible, useless…

He tried to say it, but his throat would no longer listen to him, as though it was filled with sand. —No, it actually was filled with sand. Because of the sand he'd stupidly swallowed trying to fight the pain in his head, Subaru could no longer even speak clearly.

Subaru: "…wh…y?"

With all his strength, Subaru managed a weak cry. Despite all the pent-up dissatisfaction and anger he had felt towards Ram and his other friends, that surely they must have known about.

Ram: "—Rem would… cry."

Ram made only that quiet response to Subaru's words.

For the little sister she couldn't remember, for the person most dear to that unremembered sister, Ram stood.

What pushed her to go that far, Subaru couldn't understand.

He couldn't understand that, but there was one thing he did understand. At this rate, Ram was going to die. Subaru would die too. There was no way to avoid it.

Subaru: "…"

The Centaur bellowed, swinging both its arms and creating a blazing sword in each of them. They didn't really look like swords, though, so perhaps it had meant to make hammers or axes.

Regardless, they were both weapons wrapped in flame. It stood on the verge of using them to cut Ram's much smaller frame into pieces, and roast Subaru as well.

Subaru: "…come, come on. There's gotta be…something."

Staring death in the face, Subaru reached down through the depths of his pain.

Fighting against the relentless pain was like diving deep into himself. Looking outside himself – to Ram, Patrasche, or Anastasia —was unrealistic.

Even if it would be derided as a dream or delusion, Subaru looked inside himself for something, anything. This unrealistic approach was the most realistic hope he had left.

Diving inside, reaching into the murky depths of his body, pulling aside the writhing black thoughts, Subaru looked inside himself for anything that could help. Not the Unseen Hand he had overused. Something different, something, something new, some way to pull through this mess.

His last-ditch search yielded…

Subaru: "—ah"

Nothing, and Subaru watched as the Witchbeast in front of him raised its swords. The flames crossed above the Witchbeast's head, and after a moment's pause, descended towards Ram.

Burning the very air, the oncoming slashes would heartlessly cut a burning path through the girl's slender body, burn her away, leave nothing of the path she had walked, the memories she had held, or anything at all except black charcoal…

At that scene, Subaru cried out against his own powerlessness.

"…"

The next moment, white light unleashed with tremendous speed blew away the Witchbeast's upper body.

The body of the Witchbeast which had wielded those swords of flame vanished from the world thanks to that tremendous light. The light didn't bring forth such simplicities like crushing or severing its body, but rather it was the literal meaning of annihilation.

"…"

The Centaur was a monster that had a human body on the head part of a horse's body. And the light had blown away, the part which was construed as its human body from chest up. Of course, that included the arms on its shoulders, the horn which was in place of a human head, and the fanged maw that gaped across its chest.

Blood soundlessly gushed out from the Witchbeast's wounds from the impact—And immediately after, its wounds started to foam, readying itself to use the same hyper-recovery technique it had used thus far.

Its squirming flesh swelled up, and its obliterated human body re-formed anew. The human body regenerated right away and explosive balls of fire quickly surged into life on both of its arms.

Centaur: "—ℨℨ!!"

The Centaur roared, and the alluring voice of countless babies filled the chilly air. Turning its body around, the Witchbeast paid no heed to Ram or Subaru, and instead leapt straight up towards the dangerous enemy that had blown away its upper body.

The witchbeast summoned a heap load of fireballs on its arms and cast them one after the other as it rushed forward. Consumed by its heated frenzy, the Witchbeast prepared to unleash its own battle cry. However—

Centaur: "—ℨℨ?!"

The fireballs brought into existence by the Witchbeast were all intercepted from in front of it one by one. The things responsible for that were the flashes of white light that pierced the fireballs head on with tremendous accuracy. The speed of the flashes of light were out of the ordinary, and its strength was clearly superior to that of the fireballs.

The lumps of flame were struck by the light dead on, pulled in by the power of it, and clashed against the body of the Witchbeast itself. Immediately after Subaru had thought the Centaur had ended up like a hedgehog with quills of white light, the flames exploded all around the Witchbeast's body.

The Centaur's arms were obliterated to nothing, its maw was torn to shreds, its horse body was burnt and finally it had collapsed. It thrashed about on top of the sand, letting off a shrill cry in sheer anger.

However, the Witchbeast's wounds squirmed over, and it refused to die. It was as if it was telling them to grow stronger, to change their approach, and that they should evolve their manner of bestowing death, since they couldn't achieve it by blowing away parts of it into nothing.

"…"

The Witchbeast's appearance transformed as it regenerated its lost parts.

The human part of its body changed, now its arms had increased from two to four, and sharp, long fangs jutted out from its maw. Its lower horse-half also had more legs, numbering eight in total. Doing a simple calculation, they had doubled in quantity.

As well as that, its charred skin had hardened, now shining with a black luster to it. At a glimpse, it maybe looked like a being that was clad in armor.

And it held an axe, a hammer, a spear, and a sword of flame in each of its newly added arms. The Witchbeast had managed to evolve itself in an unbelievably short period of time, all to alter itself so it could face the being casting the white rays of light.

"…"

Raising its four forelegs, the Centaur thunderously let out a roar. It clacked its raised hooves together with a piercing clang and began to spur forwards.

Its huge figure was similar to that of an armored train decked in steel. Its weight and acceleration would easily turn any opponent to mincemeat, causing them to meet a vicious end.

The being that had put the Witchbeast to shame would end up being completely annihilated if it was treated to a fiery finishing blow.

Centaur: “—ℷℷ!!”

Kicking sand up into the air A white light pierced it and trailing up A white light pierced it a plume of fiery heat, the Witchbeast fiercely A white light pierced it broke through. A white light pierced it The heat of its flames A white light pierced it had flared up A white light pierced it hotter than ever before, it was like A white light pierced it the hellfire A white light pierced it of the abyss. Its grotesque and atypical figure A white light pierced it made it so that you couldn’t avoid A white light pierced it breaking into shudders when A white light pierced it you caught a mere glimpse of it, A white light pierced it regardless who you were; A white light pierced it that was what the King of the Sand Sea was. A white light pierced it A white light pierced it A white light pierced it A white light pierced it A white light pierced it A white light pierced i A white light pierced i A white light pierced i A white light pierced A white light pierced A white light pierced A white light pierc A white light pierc A white light pierc A white light pi A white light pi A white light pi A white light A white light A white light White light —

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Subaru: "…"

There was nothing left behind anymore right after the crazy amount of light had streamed out. The Witchbeast, which had wielded such menace, had been completely obliterated by the light all the way up to the smithereens of its flesh. The Witchbeast had completely been blown away somewhere far out of this world.

The only thing that was left on the sand was the countless number of light rays which had been fired at the Witchbeast to erase its existence—The source of that came just from those white, elongated stingers. Those too instantly turned to powder as if they'd effloresced away.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru had even forgotten his headache as he gazed aghast at the spectacle with his own eyes. He realized that a feverish, slender body had happened to leap in between his arms. It was Ram. He didn't remember what had happened, but it seemed like he'd been embracing her body in their final moments.

Though it should've been a meaningless gesture, it looked like Ram wasn't conscious.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru could hear the sound of someone stepping on the sand. That someone was ever so slowly approaching Subaru and the others; they were definitely approaching them.

The inside of the cave was still enveloped in darkness along with a frigid silence.

The only source of light came from the scattered fiery scraps that had been spewed out by the Witchbeast earlier. There was one such fiery scrap right next to Subaru that allowed him to look around a few meters.

Someone’s foot entered the very edge of his field of vision.

Subaru: “…”

Lifting his face up, Subaru looked up to where the owner of those feet—And perhaps the one behind that light was. Gradually lifting up his field of vision, what he saw reflected in his bleary eyes was… a human being.

Subaru: “…”

It was… a woman. A woman with a rather queer air to her.

Her legs were audaciously bare all the way up to her thighs, and the only thing that covered her crotch was the hem of her shorts that were just barely cut down for that task. Above that, her waist and belly button were exposed. A piece of cloth was wound above her slender waist like a muneate to keep her breasts concealed.

However, she wore something akin to a cloak from her shoulders which barely protected the greater part of her body (exposed from her pale shoulders) from the wind.

Her hair was a brown that was closer to black to the point that it seemed to blend in with the darkness around them. Her long hair was tied into a ponytail that collected all of it together.

She gazed at Subaru and the others with moist eyes which were chock-full of thick emotion. Her thin lips curved up, breaking into a rather bestial smile.

???: “—I found you.”

At least I can understand what she’s saying, Subaru thought to himself. And just as he thought that, his consciousness reached its limit.

Tasting the feeling of sand, Subaru let go of his consciousness still without uttering a single word. At least, it didn’t seem like he’d have to let go of the girl wrapped inside his arms; he held her tight.

He only had enough willpower left to persevere to that point.

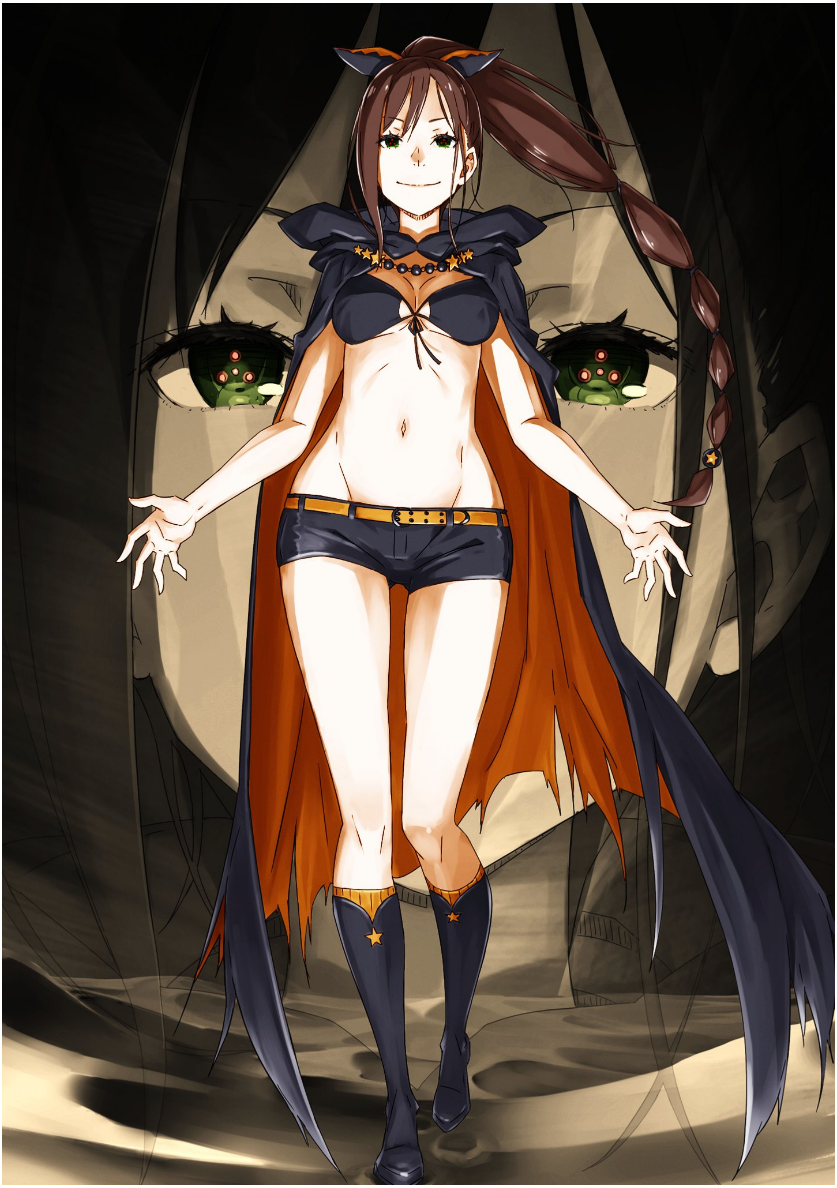

Chapter 18:
The Keeper of the Sand Tower

—Amid the dregs of murky darkness, there was consciousness.

It had been a long time since Natsuki Subaru visited this place. Like the several previous times, it was a dark world where sky and earth had no end, and only darkness resided. It felt like he had been forcibly summoned to this place just like when he Returned by Death.

If he were to think about it, this too was a truly mysterious place. At any rate, it wasn't like Subaru could pull out his memories of this place, and bring them to the outside. Despite it not being his first time visiting this place, he would forget entering it after leaving.

A transient feeling, just like as if he was a mere bubble floating by in a dream.

Within this pale darkness, in the narrow gaps of his faint recollections, the consciousness known as Natsuki Subaru on the outside floundered through the air, and slowly swam amidst the jet black darkness.

With only his consciousness, he rose to the surface; of course when it came to his body he had gotten used to the feeling of not having his limbs, his eyes, his ears, his mouth. As well as that, the fact that he didn't know what was top, bottom left or right, and the anxiety towards not being able to see anything, including the depths below. All of that didn't matter to his consciousness, which was dominated by just one thing.

There was an unbearable, unending passion at the core of his consciousness, or perhaps within the formation of his consciousness itself—no, more so, it was dear love, adoration, deep unconditional love.

When he comes here, he can be with the source of this love. His consciousness had learnt just this thing, and he was delighted that he could visit this place once again. Before he began to even relish that long awaited encounter, the feeling pounded in his rightfully nonexistent chest was one of such joy that he wanted to open his rightfully nonexistent lips to sing.

However, the passion of his consciousness was—

Mysterious Voice 1: “He seems to have arrived in… HIGH SPIRITS.”

Mysterious Voice 2: “It’s really nothing to joke about. Acting all smug due to just a bit of luck. Have some restraint, even shamelessness can go so far, how unbearable. Do take a long, objective look at yourself; maybe then, you will see just how far your impudence has gone.”

Suddenly, he heard them; he was disturbed by voices which by all rights he should not be able to hear.

???: “…”

His consciousness turned to look behind. If neither face nor body exist in this directionless world, then what’s the significance in the act of looking behind, was there any? It was not to find a meaning in this, rather it was an act for the sake of giving meaning to it. You needed a body to look behind. If he consciously thought so, and acted, then the jet black darkness has no choice but to give that to the nothingness that was Natsuki Subaru.

Thus, the consciousness which looks back became Natsuki Subaru, now bestowed with vision so he could look around his surroundings, and a body which he could turn back around with. Yet, that alone was still insufficient, and his body was far off from being complete. This Subaru was an imperfect recreation; the real Natsuki Subaru couldn’t be reproduced at all.

Would it be better if he had hands, or legs, or perhaps a nose and mouth? —No, making and manifesting a human being out of nothing was not that easy.

Natsuki Subaru didn’t know nearly enough about himself to recreate himself. It wasn’t easy for Natsuki Subaru to complete himself using only his own memories and knowledge.

Therefore, it was impossible currently to make Natsuki Subaru more than this. However, in that lacking state, the incomplete Natsuki Subaru wasn’t even able to recognize this. And that was why the incomplete Natsuki Subaru who'd only gave his transient body some transient eyes, whilst existing in a state in which he can't even place a foot down onto the ground, spun around to look at his surroundings, and noticed something.

There was something other than the "consciousness" of Natsuki Subaru coming to the fore within the depths of the darkness.

Mysterious Voice 1: "Disgusting and shameful, nothing more than the result of self… CONCEIT. Yes, how very sinful, how dirty you are! Just so so so so worthy of… DISDAIN!"

Mysterious Voice 2: "Subpar, way off from a human, we could say we have the ultimate imperfection here, doesn't it feel like that? What were they even thinking, that a guy like this would kick the satisfied me to the curb? Shouldn't it have been obvious from the beginning if you knew your place? Who are you to stand in my way, a nuisance! A hindrance! Pretty much everything! So lacking! Not enough! Liiike, if you think like a logical, human being…! Even with you being a subhuman, liike the likes of human cattle."

His "Consciousness" rose to the fore in the darkness, where jeers rained down upon the very much imperfect Natsuki Subaru. On one side was insanity, and on the other was annoyance, both respectively venting out their hatred towards Natsuki Subaru.

However, unfortunately for Natsuki Subaru, being a mere speck of consciousness, he could not comprehend that hatred.

The heart, the brain of this Natsuki Subaru were not prepared at all to comprehend it. If he were to try and gain an understanding of those words which the "consciousnesses" uttered, then just like he materialized some flesh, and just like he created a sense of sight, he had to create organs to allow him to understand them.

???: "…"

—But, somehow, those organs felt unnecessary.

At least, in order to grasp what those two "consciousnesses" were saying, the meaning behind trying to produce such a thing was weak, above all, he didn't feel the urge to do so. It was not easy to drag out the material from the immaterial. At the very least, if Natsuki Subaru's consciousness didn't truly wish for it, then he could neither create nor acquire it.

So as things were right now, he couldn't help but to postpone bringing forth a mind to understand them, as well as words to reply to the "consciousness" of those two. No, actually, there was no ulterior motive behind it.

Mysterious Voice 1: "What insolence! What contempt! What disdain! Here I am, preaching with such diligence, and yet you don't even bother to consider… CONTEMPLATING IT. How very… how very, aah, aah, aaah…! Slothful. You are truly… slothful!"

Mysterious Voice 2: "How far will you go in making a fool out of others until you're satisfied, damned human cattle…! Listen well, just who do you think I am? I am the most satisfied man in the world, one who worries about nothing and only wishes to pursue his simple joys and live a fulfilling life, undisturbed and free of greed, and yet you would interfere with that? This is a violation of my rights. An act of wickedness. One such as you, who would crush the dreams of others so easily, must be stopped…!"

Feeling that he wasn't making any progress, he turned his back to the "consciousnesses" of the two. It was convenient, having this body, to indicate that he has no intention of talking to them. Behind the scenes, he felt that their abusive words would still echo, but he didn't mind because if he showed that he cared, it would be plain enough to them.

His sense of vision worked without even needing to turn back. Right now, what he would probably need was not "A sense of vision", but "eyeballs". Should the chance present itself, he would remember to make them.

However, right now, he had no time to deal with such trifles.

???: "…"

Because, right in front of Natsuki Subaru's consciousness, the shadow whom he aimed for was showing herself.

???: "…"

In the jet black darkness, where nothing should have been visible, the silhouette clad in deeper black than the midst of the darkness he was in was far more vivid.

Sometimes, she would freeze Natsuki Subaru's heart, with those arms with such graceful fingers would dangle loosely. Though slender, those limbs possessed such tenderness, garbed in a dark dress. As usual, her features are unclear, as everything above her neck was covered by a thick mist. But, Natsuki Subaru understood deep within his soul that there was "someone" there that inspired such deep emotions of love.

Her appearance was far more clear than the previous encounter, and he was far closer to her, distance-wise. In his previous encounter with her, only her arms and body could be seen, a silhouette, but now she was wearing a dress, and he could see up until her bare feet peeking out from underneath the hem of her long dress. Nearly all of her body was perfectly reproduced; what wasn't visible to Natsuki Subaru was just her face hidden by the darkness.

How irritating. But for now, that was okay. Stronger than before, he felt her presence ever nearer. However, Natsuki Subaru, though clearer she may be, was not yet prepared to go out and meet her.

Right now, he should simply rejoice that he was so close to her. One day, he would definitely reach out and touch her fingers, embrace her slender waist, and make love with her.

???: "—I love you."

Faced with this confession, Natsuki Subaru gave his newly manufactured chin a nod in response. Through that mere action, the shadow's delight could be felt; accompanying it, an apologetic feeling sprang up.

Next time, a "Mouth" and "Tongue" would be necessary so that he could express his words of love from there. While feeling these profound emotions, Natsuki Subaru's consciousness started to leave this shadow garden, and—

4

Though Subaru knew he was good at getting up from sleep, on the flipside, he also knew that he found it hard to get asleep.

For Subaru, waking up from sleep felt as if he were raising his face above the water's surface. No matter who may be submerged underwater, if their face breaks up to the water's surface, they will not forget how to breathe. For Subaru, that breathing signifies the waking of his consciousness, it's fairly natural that he can "breathe" when waking up.

Emilia: "Ooh, you get up so well, I'm jealous. I… am reaaaaaaally bad at getting up."

This had been Emilia's comment from when they had this conversation before. Incidentally, when it came to Emilia getting up, there was no exaggeration or humility when she said these words, it really was that bad. Just as you would imagine, Emilia did have very low blood pressure, it took her about an hour to wake up and get herself out of bed.

When she wakes up in her bed in the mornings, in her drowsiness she waits for to get back to her senses and then finally gets out of the Futon, washes her face and fixes her hair—that's her style. And on the other hand, unlike Subaru, she slept as well as a child. A stark contrast.

Emilia: "When I was in the forest, and I only had Puck beside me, since Puck didn't come out much at night… I could only do stuff like sleeping…"

This had been Emilia's comment from when they had this conversation before. And regarding the details of how Subaru had replied to this, he would leave those turned over. But now that she has someone to keep her company late at night, she should forget about how the past was.

In any case, Subaru was honestly quite envious of her quality of sleep. No matter what, when Subaru gets into bed and closes his eyes in the middle of the night, he can't stop thinking about all kinds of stuff. In particular, what he thinks about includes all the things he could have done differently, and all the regrets he has. Whether it was about what happened during that day, and sometimes as well what happened days long before, regret torments Subaru without any heed for either time nor means. When fighting with stuff like that, he can't fall asleep at all. That's the source behind his poor quality of sleep.

—So, even the events which happened beneath the sand sea became a newly planted seed of regret as far as it concerned Subaru. It's practically assured that this would become something that would greatly disturb Subaru's sleeping quality from now on.

Subaru: "…where… am I?"

At the moment he woke up, Subaru understood that his waking had differed to the usual one from Return by Death. First of all, there was light in the surroundings. Quite unlike the underground area beneath the sand sea that he had awoken in submerged by darkness, the fact that he can look around his surroundings serves as evidence of things having changed. In addition to that, the chilliness had also faded, and his body was embraced by a feeling quite different to that of lying on top of the sand. The soft feeling against his back was perhaps that of a bed. Below his head there was also something like a pillow there, in other words, Subaru was —

Subaru: "I'm lying down in a bed…"

If he were to check and say it out loud, resting on top of his body was a white cotton blanket. The feeling of a bed with a pillow was not a feeling he wasn't familiar with if he were to really check. Rather, he was really familiar with it, he immediately realized that it was the bedding that came from the dragon carriage. Thus here, he was inside the dragon carriage that they had used in their attempt to seize the Pleiades Watchtower.

Subaru: "What's this doing here…?!"

Subaru sat himself up, understanding that he had been laid down within the dragon carriage that was supposed to have veered off course. In that moment, he noticed that someone was clutching his right hand. If he were to turn to face his right hand side—there was a young lady kneeling on the floor right next to the bed, her body sprawled out across the bed, sleeping. It was the silver-haired Emilia who was clutching Subaru's hand, with somewhat of a look of relief on her face.

Softly breathing, with warmth radiating from the palm of her hand. Subaru let out an exhausted, hoarse breath seeing that she was definitely here.

Subaru: "Ah, ahhhhh…Emilia, that's you right? Safe and sound…"

Emilia's form, nestled beside him, left Subaru puzzled, with it not having sunk in yet. Since his right hand was being held, he stretched out his left hand and placed it against her cheeks. Her pale cheeks were hot, as if she was developing a fever; her skin was absurdly soft and smooth. Just by touching them, it felt like love and affection are about to burst out of them, touching them as much as he dared, just to make sure.

Subaru: "Oooh, there's no doubt, it's Emilia… Cute, delicate, warm."

???: "—You wouldn't be happening to be doing something inappropriate, in fact. Emilia was terribly worried for you, I suppose. She didn't sleep for two days, in fact."

Subaru: "Huuuuuuh?!"

When stroking Emilia's cheeks, having his fill of her soft breathing, Subaru had reflexively flinched at the voice that had abruptly interrupted him. And in a panic he tried to turn his head around; standing by the door which connected this living space with the bed he found the little girl leaning on it, with a look of disgust on her face.

Subaru: "Bea—"

Beatrice: “Shhhhh, I suppose. I dislike this unreasonable Subaru, in fact.”

Subaru: “…”

Instinctively, he had almost raised his voice, delighted in seeing her again, but he had been interrupted by Beatrice just before. Subaru placed his hand over his mouth, and quietly looked down below at the still sleeping Emilia. Whilst letting him chew on his words, her stiff expression loosened, leading her to look somewhat more happy.

Subaru: “That sure was a close one…Beako. Come over here. Let me hug you.”

Beatrice: “What a foolish thing to say…well, it can’t be helped, I suppose.”

If he can’t show his happiness at this reunion using words, then he has no choice but to show his happiness at this reunion using actions. With Subaru beckoning her, Beatrice sighed and drew closer to him. The little girl was indifferently playing with her drill curls, and when she came beside him, Subaru hugged her with his free left arm, firmly embracing her against his chest.

Subaru: “Thank goodness… seriously, thank goodness. I was really really worried.”

Beatrice: “…That’s Betty’s words, in fact. We couldn’t find Subaru or the older sister anywhere, and we were all frightened to the core, I suppose. We feared you weren’t alive, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Is that so. Were you worried to death about me?”

Beatrice: “Not entirely like that… I suppose. That’s right, I was worried, I suppose. Really, really… really… “

While embracing Beatrice’s light body, the little girl cast her gaze down and her words faltered mid-sentence. He continued to stroke Beatrice’s hair who nuzzled her head against his chest and cherished her reunion with him in silence for a moment. And after a little bit of time, the silence was broken; Beatrice moved her face up away from Subaru's chest, with a feeling of relief traced across her features and hopped off of the bed with a boing.

Beatrice: "Anyway, other than to the sleepyhead Emilia, we've got to tell everyone that you've woken up, in fact. We were all worried, thinking it was your last, I suppose."

Subaru: "Everyone… Oh yeah, is everyone safe? Even those who got separated from me, and those who were with me?"

Beatrice: "You can rest assured, in fact. Everyone is safe and sound, I suppose."

Subaru: "I see… I seee!"

Subaru's unease faded as he heard Beatrice's guarantee. He had heard that everyone was safe, her unexpected answer had set his heart at ease. But, straight afterwards, Subaru jerked his head up, an unpleasant feeling of deja vu resounding from that guarantee.

Subaru: "Wait, Beako. I'm sorry for how short-lived my happiness is. But, is everyone really all right?"

Beatrice: "Gnh, it's upsetting being doubted by Subaru, in fact. There would be no sense in Betty deceiving Subaru like this, I suppose. I am not joking, in fact."

Subaru: "I get that you're in a huff, but this isn't the reason why I am doubting you. Even if you weren't looking to deceive me, that doesn't mean that I haven't been fooled, …didn't we just experience that rather painfully in Priestella?"

Beatrice: "…"

Hearing this, Beatrice seemed to notice the source of Subaru's concern. Even in the battle against the Witch Cult in Priestella, after their battle Subaru had received an identical report. He had been told that everyone was safe, in fact, that been a correct presumption to make, but—

Subaru: "Let's confirm it. There's me, Emilia and Beatrice. In addition there's Rem, Ram and Patrasche. Anastasia, Meili, Gyan, and finally… Julius. This is everyone.”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru: “You’re saying that everyone… that everyone is here?”

Beatrice: “Don’t worry, I suppose. That’s everyone, in fact. There’s no one that I’ve forgotten, and that Subaru only hasn’t, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I see… I see. Then I guess I can really be delighted by it…”

Having confirmed that everything that was necessary, Subaru carefully thinks about whether there are any more pitfalls remaining. He determined that he hadn’t overlooked anything, and finally he found strength in those words which had said that everyone was safe.

Subaru: “Thank goodness. Oh, thank goodness…!”

Beatrice: “Good grief, you sure like to over-exaggerate, in fact. In the first place, when we found out that you, the most likely to attract danger, was okay, we guessed that everyone else was too, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Idiot! That’s not always true y’know! Even if I know that’s so, anxiety is still anxiety, and worry is still worry. You were crying after finding out I was safe, no?”

Beatrice: “I wasn’t crying or anything, in fact. Just because Betty was pressing her face against your chest, it doesn’t mean you should look at it like that, I suppose. You can’t prove it, in fact.”

With a hmph, Beatrice puffed out her delicate chest, however her words seemed to be brimming with emotion to the contrary. On top of that, there were traces left on the bed that someone other than him had slept there at a space of the lower part of the bed which took up about half of its size—Subaru pointed at it and said:

Subaru: “There’s evidence right here that someone crawled in next to me and fell asleep, but even with seeing this dead giveaway are you still going to say that you weren’t worried? “

Beatrice: “That wasn’t Betty, I suppose! This is completely a false accusation, in fact. I have no idea what you’re talking about, I suppose.”

Subaru: “No one but you would act like this! Don’t feel embarrassed.”

Beatrice: “You’re wrong, in fact! Ahh, jeez, we’re gonna wake up Emilia, I suppose.”

Beatrice forced a change of subject as they exchanged such frivolous conversations in their usual manner While giving a wry smile at her flushed face, Subaru let out a long, truly long, deep sigh.

Everyone was safe, he was relieved for now to hear those words. When they were at the sand dunes, they had been pursued by a herd of Witchbeasts and they had split up, Subaru had repeatedly Returned by Death in the underground area of the sand sea. He had no clue how Emilia and the others were doing and what would have happened if he couldn’t have undone it—

Subaru: “…now that you mention it, it’s like feeling suspicious about everything will only raise bogies, is that what it is?”

Beatrice: “—?”

Looking dumbfounded, Beatrice cocked her head at Subaru who had placed his left hand on his head. For Beatrice, the meaning of that behavior felt cryptic, but to Subaru there was a meaning to it. No, there was no meaning to this behavior itself, but it could be said that the subjectiveness of it all was the greatest factor.

Subaru: “Beako… you’re the same as always, Beako. Emilia as well is as cute as always.”

Beatrice: “What are you even saying…”

Although she fixed him with a deadpan gaze, Subaru felt no extraordinary sense of discomfort or irritation at her words. Toward the sleeping Emilia as well, he felt nothing but trusting love to the two of them. Not a trace of the inexplicable hatred that had tormented him underground was left.

Subaru: “Guess I’m alright now, since I’m far away from the miasma. Though it makes me sick to even leave such a strange thing, of unknown cause and treatment, as is…”

Beatrice: “Subaru, if you still aren’t feeling well or you feel anxious about your health, it would be better for you to lie down, I suppose. There’s no need for you to get up all in a hurry for now, in fact. In one way or another, just Betty and everyone else will manage to undertake the trials, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…huh?”

Placing her hand against his forehead, Beatrice had showed concern at Subaru, his eyes downcast. Amidst the concern in those words, was something that he hadn’t heard before. Subaru interrupted her without thinking.

Subaru: “What did you just say now?”

Beatrice: “So you can rest, I suppose. It’s not like you’re taking the day off with no good reason, Betty won’t get mad at you when it’s about you not feeling well, in fact.”

Subaru: “Though I remember saying such terrific stuff in this feverish talk, it wasn’t that part I was referring to y’know? After that… you said something about a trial?”

Beatrice: “Ahhh, yeah, I did say that I suppose.”

At having heard Subaru hounding her, Beatrice slipped out a “Damnit” in response. It’s not like she had really wanted to hide it from Subaru, rather, it more so came from her concern from worrying about wanting Subaru to rest for a bit. However, it wasn’t enough to make him have peace of mind, having heard that much, since Subaru was not much of an obedient person, and Beatrice knew that well enough.

Subaru: “Beako”

Beatrice: “I know. I will give you a proper explanation, I suppose.

Really, I thought that it'd be better to talk about it after you settled down… despite that, my mouth slipped."

Subaru: "It's one of your cute points that you can't hide stuff like this. —In the first place, I've looked the other way on stuff that I ought to have asked you from the start."

He flashed a faint bittersweet smile at Beatrice who had admitted defeat, though the smile quickly disappeared from his face. Subaru more or less lowered his voice and opened his mouth, and naturally questioned her with:

Subaru: "Where are we? And don't go butting in saying something silly like inside the dragon carriage."

Beatrice: "Subaru, I think it's no long stretch of the imagination for you too, I suppose"

Beatrice gave a weary sigh, putting her arms together. And so, with a click of her heels, she looked up to the other side of the room—the little girl looked up to the ceiling.

Beatrice: "—Pleiades Watchtower."

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "The watchtower at the end of those sand dunes, we are in it, I suppose."

And that was what she said.

2

He carefully let go of Emilia's hand; she was lying down on the bed, fast asleep since she had stayed up for two days. Subaru slipped out of the dragon carriage after giving her forehead a quick stroke.

Within the dragon carriage which they'd spent over a month in, it seemed like there were no changes to it from before it had veered off course. Without so much of a scratch on its body, it looked just as if it was new.

Beatrice: “Unlike those who were with Subaru, the ones who were with Betty, swallowed up by the Sand Wind chasm were safe, I suppose. We were hurled away to a different place from that flower garden… everyone with us turned pale when we realized that Subaru and some of the rest had been separated from us, in fact.”

Subaru: “You as well?”

Beatrice: “Emilia and Julius too, I suppose. Betty isn’t the only one, in fact.”

With a hmph, Beatrice pouted and turned her eyes away from him; she opened the door that led to the outside of the dragon carriage. The sensation of the wind outside felt rather like the one present in the sand dunes, the darkness outside was close to that of the one in the underground area of the sand sea. However, unlike back at the sand dunes, there’s no sand mixed in with the wind, and the darkness was less profound when compared to the underground area. The cause of this came from some magical lamps which had been installed all the way around the area, as well as some densely packed luminous moss which lined the walls around them. The moss near him certainly reminded him of the kind he had seen inside Sanctuary’s graveyard. It grows quite superfluously wherever he may go, it’s certainly quite a handy piece of vegetation to have around.

Subaru: “This place is…”

Beatrice: “The sixth floor of the Pleiades Watchtower… well, the lowermost floor, I suppose. From looking at the tower from the sand sea, it looks like the sixth floor seems to be partially buried beneath the tower, in fact. The fifth floor is above the sand… although you might say it’s hard to tell, I suppose.”

Looking over the circular area, Subaru widened his eyes at hearing Beatrice’s explanation. The reason why he can’t really get the gist of her explanation was probably because Subaru was completely unfamiliar with the interior and the structure of the Pleiades Watchtower.

As far as he can see, the inside of the Pleiades Watchtower was fairly vast and spacious. In the place Beatrice had mentioned as being called the sixth floor, the floor was on one side made of stone, and right in the middle of it rested the dragon carriage. The circular area that spreads itself around from where the dragon carriage stood was probably about 200 or 300 meters in radius. If the tower was built exactly in the shape of a circle, rather than something more crude like an ellipsis, then he can hardly believe it, mouth agape, at the enormity of the handiwork it would have taken to construct it.

Subaru: "…Thinking about the pointless work done back in the olden days, doesn't this remind you of stuff like the pyramids? It's such a massive waste for just one person's tomb. Hmm, wait, no, I've heard some stuff about how they were kinda used as public enterprise, and the unemployed being super grateful for them…"

Beatrice: "I really don't get what you're muttering about again, in fact."

Subaru: "I'm talking about tombstones. Even burying people alive was once popular, thinking they were taking preventative measures about what would happen to them after death, that's how they thought back in olden times, the idea is similar"

Beatrice: "…Stories about what happens after death aren't good omens, I suppose. Ridiculous, in fact."

Hearing Subaru's thoughtless remarks, Beatrice turned her eyes away from Subaru, as if in a sulk. Stroking his cheek, Subaru realized that he had said something he shouldn't have, and so he started petting Beatrice's hair. Suddenly, he wrapped back around to the front of the dragon carriage, as if having remembered something.

Subaru: "Ohh, Gyan! You're also safe and sound! Gyan, you aren't dead!"

Beatrice: "Why are you saying such inane things all of a sudden, I suppose?!"

Subaru: "Huh, no, I just felt like I needed to do it. But, I am really glad that he's safe heh."

At the front of the dragon carriage, reined to the carriage itself, was the reliable earth dragon, Gyan. Of the Gyrus species which are adapted for the desert, resilience was their strong suit. Gyan had splendidly managed to survive the difficult circumstances, showing a particularly shameless obstinance to those words.

Subaru: "That said, disregarding the others, you're the first one confirmed alive! "

Gyan: "…"

Subaru: "Oyoy, don't make such a long face. I said I'm glad. Hey, I will give you a larger share of food later, so cut me some slack."

Gyan: "…"

Subaru: "What is it? Look, I'm a money-on-hand kind of guy."

Beatrice: "It'd be high time for you to calm your little act down any time now, in fact. He's tired, so we're heading off, I suppose."

The look on Beatrice's face was one indicating she didn't want to have anything to do with this, as Subaru had his little joke alongside Gyan. In response to Beatrice's reaction, Subaru with a twist of his neck said "My bad, my bad."

Subaru: "Come now, I didn't mean to embarrass you, but there's something I wanted to check. "

Beatrice: "What is it?"

Subaru: "Well… even though Gyan's here, Patrasche is still nowhere to be seen."

His fellow earth dragon, Patrasche, it would be normal for her to be reined here to the carriage if she was safe. However, even when he checked the other side of the dragon carriage her jet-black beautiful figure could not be seen anywhere. Subaru was uneasy at the fact that her figure, which should be there, wasn't, but, Beatrice: “Don’t jump quickly to conclusions, I suppose. That earth dragon… Patrasche, as we couldn’t keep her on the sixth floor, she’s on the fourth floor, in fact.”

Subaru: “Fourth floor? Is that above? Why?”

Beatrice: “She’s getting treatment for her wounds, I suppose. The younger of those sisters… Rem’s figure shouldn’t be there in the dragon carriage either, in fact. Everyone in a poor state was brought up to the fourth floor, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Getting treatment… will… Rem be cured?!”

Subaru jumped at Beatrice’s unexpected words. A faint look of surprise flitted across Beatrice’s face as she saw how forcefully Subaru had reacted, but she kept him at bay by pinching his nose as he drew near to her.

Beatrice: “Ca… calm down, in fact! Don’t be so impatient, I suppose!”

Subaru: “As if this is the time to be calm! Will… Rem be cured? Also, you said Patrasche is getting treatment as well, what sort of state is she in?”

Beatrice: “Let me start from the beginning! I can’t just say everything all at once, in fact. Just, we put her in place that is better than just laying her down, I suppose! The earth dragon is like so, too, in fact!”

Subaru: “…Ohh, I see”

Subaru, having tried to press for answers, hung his head down despondently, seeing the energy sap out of him, even Beatrice gave him a sad look. But, the little girl clenched her small fist, and said:

Beatrice: “Look, this isn’t a situation where you should feel down, I suppose. Surely, there has to be a way to manage it, in fact. In order to check that, everyone will challenge the trials of the watchtower now, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…”

In order to cheer up the downcast Subaru, Beatrice clumsily attempts to urge him into rousing his spirit. Seeing her attempt, Subaru was taken aback, and he jerked his chin up with a: “That’s right.”

Subaru: “My bad, I’m really sorry in retrospect. I’m sorry about worrying you.”

Beatrice: “If this worry is from Subaru, then for you I’ll allow it, in fact. But at least let me worry in a place where Betty can keep an eye on you, that’d be a great help, I suppose”

Subaru: “I’ll consider it.”

Subaru ruffled Beatrice’s hair and expressed his gratitude at hearing her sympathetic words. Beatrice’s hairdo was completely unyielding, and even his attempts at ruffling and disturbing it in this manner were in vain, such was its strength. In any case, under the encouragement of Beatrice, Subaru turned his eyes towards the top of the tower.

Subaru: “This is the sixth floor… at any rate, we can just go up, right?”

Beatrice: “Perhaps, Julius and the others are in the middle of the trial right now. So, beforehand, it’s best if we meet with the Sage face-to-face and ask them for some more details, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Sage…? Huh, now that you mention it…”

In the middle of Beatrice’s words, Subaru caught hold onto the word, Sage. In spite of in the first place having come to this watchtower to meet with the Sage, Beatrice hadn’t mentioned anything to do with the Sage up until now.

Subaru: “Beako, I guess you already met the Sage? What sort of guy was he? Did you talk to him and complain about the white light beams which zinged towards us?”

Beatrice: “…I don’t really want to talk about the Sage too much, in fact. Well, no, I suppose. Perhaps, when it comes to the sage, it’ll be simpler if you met them in person, I suppose”

Subaru: “Y’know… I don’t remember ever having met face to face with any normal guy with the way you’re speaking about them. If I recall, I feel like I was told something similar by Emilia-tan when I first met with Roswaal.”

It had already been more than a year ago, but he remembered the conversation back then vividly. He remembered that she had explained it like this: “I think meeting and talking to him will be easier to understand him than talking to each other about him in relation to Roswaal. In reality, she thought that he wouldn’t have received the impact unless he met with him in person, and he’d be on the same wavelength if they spoke, but, well, it was far too late now for what happened back then.

Beatrice: “If you meet them, you’ll understand, in fact.”

Subaru: “…Understood. In any case, we should go and try and meet them. How do we get above?”

Beatrice: “Stairs, I suppose. If you look closely, there are stairs by the wall, in fact.”

If he squinted his eyes to where Beatrice’s words had pointed him to, he can just about make out that there’s something like steps—a staircase, on the outer edge of the circular room indeed. However, there were a huge amount of steps forming a spiral staircase that wound its way around the big, circular tower.

Subaru: “Eh…? Does this lead up?”

Beatrice: “Climb up this, I suppose. If you keep going up, it won’t take too long, in fact.”

Subaru: “Even if you say to keep going up… how many steps is it until the top?!”

Subaru shrieked this out, as it looked likely that he’d be made to get some heavy exercise, being made to go up and down all over again. His voice echoed around the tower in vain, most likely it echoed all the way up until to the top before sorrowfully fading away. Beatrice shrugged her shoulders uttering a Good Grief at Subaru’s lamenting.

Beatrice: “It can’t be helped, I suppose. If we could use something like a bit of magic for this, it may be possible to fly upstairs in some shape or form, but…well, Subaru you have no other choice, in fact.”

Subaru: “No, look, we can like use Murak here. How about we use something like that to climb all the way up to the very top without stopping with ease?”

Beatrice: “It’s not like we can’t, but when push comes to shove, I feel we’d be in danger… like of running out of mana, in fact.”

Subaru: “Even if we go up the stairs normally, when push comes to shove, won’t we be running out of steam, physically?!”

Even though Subaru’s physical strength compared to back when he had been a hikikomori was stronger, he was still a feeble boy who still has some ways to go before he reaches the standards of strength of this other world, and thus he can’t escape from it. He didn’t know how high above the fifth floor was from the lowermost floor, i.e. the sixth floor, but at least when he looked above at he couldn’t even see a ceiling. With how high he thought it is, climbing up would be a deed on the level of mountain climbing.

Subaru: “Damn it! Even so I have to go up and make sure that the likes of Rem and Patrasche are safe. I have to. Ah, goddamnit.”

Beatrice: “That’s the spirit, I suppose. Good luck, in fact. Betty will cheer you on, I suppose. It’d be really helpful if you call out to me when you reach the top, in fact.”

Subaru: “A shortcut?! I ain’t gonna let you! You come along too with me. Walk! Break into a sweat!”

Beatrice: “I’m sorry, but Betty is a cute spirit and sweating would be —”

Subaru steeled his resolve to tackle the stairs, left with no choice, as Beatrice almost dampened his enthusiasm. But, in the middle of their argument, Beatrice suddenly broke off mid-sentence, and looked up overhead.

Subaru: “Beako?”

Beatrice: “Oh no, I suppose. Subaru, get down in fact—!”

With her sudden change in attitude, Subaru’s voice trailed off, as both Beatrice’s expression changed as well as coming to jump up to him. Catching Beatrice by her chest, he lifted her up into his arms. And, Beatrice was open-mouthed, and then she beat at Subaru’s chest.

Beatrice: “Idiot! That doesn’t mean you can pick me up like a baby, I suppose! Get down, in fact!”

Subaru: “It was just on the spur of the moment…”

As he held Beatrice within his arms, Subaru gently leaned his body back. He doesn’t know what’s happening, Beatrice’s alertness was the only thing he had to work from. In preparation for that, he tried to think, but it was too late.

—Immediately afterwards, a terrible sense of pressure emanated from above them; Subaru held his breath.

The source of that pressure came ever closer with ferocity, and in the next moment something blasted towards Subaru, right in front of his eyes—a violent quake shook the enormous tower, Subaru was almost blown away by the shockwave which raised sand and dust up. He would have probably been thrown about over and over if not for Gyan’s enormous frame just behind them. Protected by the weight of the earth dragon and the dragon carriage, Subaru desperately pushed his eyes open in the midst of the sandstorm that was blowing against him.

And then, on the other side of the smoke plume, from where the impact had been which had been, the cloud of sand and dust that had risen up abruptly cleared. Something like a gust of wind tore through the smoke, and soon after from the other side, a majestic figure of a person could be seen. Tearing through the dense sandy haze which had enveloped them, the person’s figure started to become visible. Subaru’s cheeks stiffened, he was frozen in place.

That figure, their appearance, he recognized it.

Subaru: “Are you…?”

A tall woman was walking briskly across the hard floor, stepping ever closer to him. Her brown, moreso black, hair was tied up into a ponytail, she was marching forward boldly, her limbs, belly and back were exposed by her clothing, it’s safe to say that she was half-naked. Her chest and crotch area were just barely covered up, and she donned a black mantle over her clothes. She was a person who wore rather odd clothing.

In Subaru-speak, she looked like a nympho who was donning her mantle over a black bikini top and hot pants.

Long, slender, white arms and legs, along with large breasts which were liberally swinging about. She was around the same height as Subaru, maybe a little taller. A handsome face sat on top of her white shoulders, she was quite the looker, with eyes that albeit languid, were rather striking.

—That was definitely the last thing he saw before he had lost consciousness.

She was the one who had attacked and slaughtered the centaur without mercy. And those countless flashes of light that she had launched towards the centaur was something Subaru knew only too well.

Subaru: “…Are you the Sage?”

???: “…”

Feeling how parched his throat was, Subaru hoarsely raised this question to the woman who was approaching him in silence. However, the woman did not deign to answer Subaru until she came right up to where he was stood, she stopped herself in her tracks at a spot where if Subaru were to stretch out his arm he’d be able to touch her, she was just… looking at him intently.

Her gaze felt as if she was scrutinizing his entire body, honestly, it made Subaru feel quite uneasy. He hadn’t even heard the voice of this person, but her strength was such that she had made short work in burying the centaur that had attacked him, it was at an inhumane level. Make one bad move and this peculiar person would instantly turn you into nothing more than charcoal. He can't really figure out what her attitude was showing, all he knew from that was that the only emotion he can feel about her right now was fear.

???: "…"

In Subaru's arms, Beatrice's body remained unchanging, as she clung onto him tightly. Even in her, anxiety starts to seep throughout her small body. At least, he was lucky enough for the circumstances to have allowed him to come across Beatrice. In the worst case, it wouldn't be impossible that they'd have to get into another fight. Of course, there was no need to come to the point of initiating a fight for the sake of it. He shouldn't be all willy-nilly about such an exertion.

Subaru: "Are—Are you… listening? Hey, um, I heard my friends are being looked after, you don't intend to become hostile or stuff to us… right?"

???: "…"

Subaru: "Um, your silence is making me anxious, if you could say something… or perhaps do you communicate with something like telepathy, rather than words? If it's that, that's gonna be a bother! Hahaha."

???: "…"

Staring at him, the presumed Sage did not reply to Subaru's words, she just continued to stare. He felt extremely uneasy. The extent to Subaru's bewilderment and confusion could be seen from the confusion in his way of speaking. If things stay like this, they'd end up being killed by the uneasiness itself.

—Suddenly though, Subaru's anxiety was torn away.

???: "…Three"

Subaru: "Eh?"

???: "…"

While staring at Subaru, the woman suddenly muttered something that way. Her voice was a little husky, but if he could continue to listen to it, he could probably say that the huskiness in her voice was quite beautiful. However, it was relatively mysterious, with unreadable emotions coming from the voice of the woman who stood in front of his eyes; he thought there was a faint charm to it. In front of Subaru, the woman sighed quietly,

???: "Well, that's no problem. More importantly, I found you."

Subaru: "Uhh… Eh?"

Swiftly, the woman's expression changed, and she blurted out something. Her serious attitude had looked, until then, as if she was trying to peer inside of Subaru, but slowly, and steadily, time passed, as if it something frozen was melting away. The woman's lips then spread to the sides, forming a shape which you could call a smile. The woman stared at Subaru and said…

???: "—Master."

Subaru: "…Wha?"

She uttered a word which he had never heard being said to him before, and emotions which seemed to come out of absolutely nowhere. Subaru turned to look behind him, in mute astonishment at her unexpected outburst. As expected, there was only Gyan's figure there. Then… was Gyan the aforementioned Master?

Subaru: "Did you come here to suddenly setup important character flags?!"

Beatrice: "I don't think it's that, I suppose! Look at the facts, in fact!"

Subaru drew nearer to Gyan as Beatrice grew angrier, still in his arms. Even though her words were reasonable, Subaru couldn't wrap his head around it. Instead, he turned around to face the woman, still standing there as if nothing had happened, without having a clue what had been said, Subaru: “Wait, no, my bad, but perhaps you’re mistaking me for someone else or something like that… mmmmph?!”

???: “Master! Jeeeeeeeez! I have beeeen waiting∼!”

In the middle of his words, the woman jumps emotionally and embraces him with her arms. Rather than receiving her tackle in full as she came barging in, he was pushed down. Letting out a shriek, “Mkyaaaa”, Beatrice fell from his back, onto the floor. The woman, bouncing in joy, doesn’t detach herself from Subaru, who was darting his eyes back and forth in confusion.

The woman swished her long ponytail about, and while hugging Subaru with unnatural strength, she kept repeating over and over with delight in her voice:

???: “Master! Master! It has been so long! I missed you so much! I thought that my life was gonna be just meee shooting those approaching here!”

Subaru: “W-Wait! Wait wait! What?! What are you talking about?!”

Shaula: “How crueeel! Master ordered me, no? You said to stop anyone from getting near to the shrine… well, as for the means, well, that’s a different matter, buuuut”

Subaru: “Not that… I’m your Master…? What are you insinuating?!”

He was pressed against her soft skin, but he had no time to enjoy that lucky lewd encounter. Subaru desperately tried to escape from her clutches. However, there’s a saying that goes that women will always be women after all, and she doesn’t let go of Subaru. As a result, Beatrice ended up being sandwiched between Subaru and the woman on the floor.

Subaru: “Anyways, let go of me, you… This is ridiculous…!”

???: “No way! There’s absolutely no waaaaaay! As soon as you say that, you’ll disappear again as soon as I lose sight of you! Master hasn’t chaaanged at all!”

Subaru: “I don’t know what you’re on about!!”

The stubborn woman clung to Subaru as if she had gone through some sort of trauma. Whilst he roughly pushed her face away, trying to keep her away, Subaru snapped back at her.

Subaru: “In the first place, who are you?! What’s with all this!”

Shaula: “What are you even saying?! I’m Shaulaaa! The Star-Keeper of the Pleiades Watchtower! I am Master’s cute apprentice, Shaulaaa!”

Subaru: “I don’t remember you what so ever—!”

A woman—called Shaula, who’s name was supposed to be that of the Sage of the tower. The great so-called Sage in the Pleiades Watchtower could not be such a strange woman who doesn’t know such thing. Subaru firmly objected to this idea. However, in this place where there was no such thing as progress, a sudden interruption came about. That was…

Emilia: “—Oh no! Oh no! When I woke up Subaru wasn’t there! I need to hurry and tell everyone, we have to go look for him…”

Subaru: “Ah.”

Having said that, a sleepy-looking Emilia jumped out of the dragon carriage’s door. Exiting the carriage, she found Subaru and Shaula entwined with each other. Of course, Beatrice was there too, her eyes widened as she saw the two.

Subaru: “Emilia…Tan! Thank goodness you woke up! This is actually…”

Emilia: “Hey!”

Subaru: “That hurts?! Emilia-tan, what was that kick for?!”

Emilia: “I really am not sure, but I was reaaaaaally upset there!”

With Emilia awake, the shouting and yelling continued for a while —. Eventually, when Julius noticed the noise and joined up with them, the hard battle with the (assumed) Sage of the Pleiades Watchtower continued.

Bonus Short Stories

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number One
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

Otto: “So, is the rebuilding of the collapsed city hall urgent?”

???: “Yes, I think so. Of course, this is only after the food, clothing, and shelter of the residents are in order, but it is not good for public image if the heart of the city remains in ruins forever. One thing that cannot be ignored is the anxiety of people’s minds. Just having one big pillar makes a big difference.”

Otto: “So that is that how it is?”

???: “That’s the way it is.”

And with a meek smile, Otto Suwen shrugs his shoulders. It’s Kiritaka Muse who responds to Otto with, “I see…”. Currently, Kiritaka is the head representative of the Watergate city… the young man, who has taken the position of the mayor of the city, repeatedly responded to Otto.

Kiritaka: “Thank you for your help. Originally, I was the youngest member of the Council of Ten, so I was unfamiliar with this kind of thing and couldn’t handle it. I’m hurrying to choose the next candidates, but …”

Otto: “It’s going to be difficult, considering that the other day the Council of Ten were targeted.”

Kiritaka: “You’re right.”

As Kiritaka bows his head with a worried expression, Otto looks out the window in the distance. The sky was lush and painfully clear. Under the clear, cloudless sky, the reconstruction work of the destroyed city continues, and in the past few days, aid from other regions has finally started to arrive. Thanks to this, they have been able to avoid having to worry about food and other basic necessities.

Otto: “I guess it’s a blessing in disguise. The time was right, to a certain extent.”

Kiritaka: “If this had been the fire season or the ice season, the damage would have been much worse. I don’t think the reconstruction work would have gone smoothly. That’s why we have to move quickly.”

Otto: “I agree.”

Even if the current season is good, over time the seasons will change. This advantage must be used effectively to prepare for when the weather actually becomes harsh.

Otto: “The current situation must be difficult, though. I’m grateful for all the support…”

Kiritaka: “There is no shortage of people who would like to take this opportunity to take advantage of the five major cities. I’ll keep that in mind. You warned me about this.”

After saying that, Kiritaka gave a deep breath to express his determination and then stood up. The young man, who carried the fate of the city on his shoulders, held out his hand toward Otto. In response to his request for a handshake, Otto shook the other man’s hand back.

Otto: “I’m sorry to say this, but I wish you the best of luck, Kiritaka-san.”

Kiritaka: “Thank you. I’m glad I was able to help you with your consultation. Besides, I’m sorry to have made such a request…”

Otto: “It’s okay. Please come again. After all, with my legs like this.”

Laughing, Otto pointed to his own legs, which were…wrapped tightly in bandages and strung above the bunk. Seeing this, Kiritaka gave a wry smile and…

Kiritaka: “From what I heard, your wounds reopened up from moving too much. Please take care of yourself.”

Otto: “It would be nice to have something to do here that would let me do that.”

Otto replied, half in dismay and half in concern, as he maligned himself.

2

And so, as the visiting Kiritaka, left the hospital room…

Otto: “Why don’t you come on in, Garfiel?”

Otto called out from his bunk towards the door that had been closed by Kiritaka after he left the room. Hearing Otto’s call, the door slowly opened. Not the door of the room, but the window.

Garfiel” “Not over there. This way, Otto-Bro.”

Otto: “What?! The window is not the entrance. Why are you coming in that way?!”

Garfiel: “That’s because you can hear what’s going on in the room better through the window than through the door.”

As he said this, Garfiel grabbed the window frame and slid lightly into the room. For a moment, Otto’s eyebrows furrowed, and he was about to complain about the look of his feet.

Garfiel: “Don’t worry. Took off my shoes before climbing the wall.”

Otto: “That’s not what I’m worried about… and eavesdropping on people’s conversations, too.

Garfiel: “Sorry. Got to do my duty as the camp’s military officer, you know.”

Garfiel dropped the shoes he had tucked under his arm and replied while putting them back on. The reason why Otto made a bitter face at his reply was because his excuse was the orders of none other than Otto's. Garfiel and Otto, who hadn't been good to each other in the battle for the Watergate city, vowed to become stronger and more useful. Garfiel as a military officer and Otto as an internal affairs officer, for the benefit of everyone in the camp.

Garfiel: "That's why I got to keep an eye on Otto-Bro's social life."

Otto: "If we start to spy on the private relationships of the members of the camp, it will give us a sense of the end of the organization. Doesn't it? Wasn't there some story about that?"

Garfiel: "Ah, "Magrizza's Guillotine" was a story like that."

Magrizza's Guillotine, one of the most famous stories passed down from generation to generation, is the story of royalty vying for power. In that work, there was a development in which the father-king, who had grown old and suspicious, began to control the actions of his family and entourage, and was finally forced to leave his throne.

Garfiel: "But it won't be like that. My amazing self is not doubting you, but believing you."

Otto: "I think that's also the logic of the so-called Mad King…"

Garfiel: "…My amazing self's just worried about you."

Suddenly, Otto fell silent as Garfiel lowered his voice like that. Narrowing his green eyes, Garfiel stared at Otto sincerely. Then, Garfiel's hand gently reached out to Otto's suspended leg.

Garfiel: "The day after making such a huge decision, my brother forced himself to open his wounds. I'm sure my brother is not too happy about it."

Otto: "Idadadadadada! Ouch, ouch, ouch! Wait, Garfiel?"

Garfiel: "Lately, been wondering if Otto-Bro likes pain as much as the captain does. Please be more careful."

Otto: "Ahhh! Your finger's in the wound! It's stuck inside! It hurts! It hurts!"

Garfiel was talking seriously, but it didn't enter Otto's writhing head. However, his younger brother's anger was justified, so he would have to accept the pain. A somewhat deadpan Otto, his attitude caused Garfiel to exhale long and hard.

Garfiel: "After all, Otto-Bro likes to feel pain…"

Otto: "After all the pain you've caused me, I refuse to accept your assessment!"

Garfiel: "Isn't that what they call a "Hot night in Mary Grey"?"

Otto: "Such is the list of people who are famous for dying because of their peculiar proclivities…"

It was the end of a nobleman who died in his private chambers at night due to a rather sinister hobby. For many years, the cause of his death was unknown, but it seems that the owner of a Divine protection that allows one to see the memories of objects revealed the truth. Afterwards, the owner of the blessing was said to have fallen into a life on the run due to the resentment of the man's family who were ashamed of his dishonorable behavior. Strangely enough, this is a story that Otto can relate to, but it was indeed unwelcome to be mentioned alongside that nobleman. Otto's disapproval was brushed aside by Garfiel with a curt, "Alright, alright". And then…

Otto: "So? What was your true motive for eavesdropping?"

Garfiel: "…No, just thought it would be a bad idea to interrupt."

Otto: "Garfiel"

Garfiel: "That's the truth. I'm depending on Otto-Bro. It's not right for me to interfere."

Crossing his strong arms, Garfiel spoke with a serious face. This was unmistakably Garfiel's true intentions. For the past few days, Garfiel has also been going around and lending his support to the reconstruction of the city. However, the most Garfiel could do was physical work. He has to carry piles of rubble out of the way, or carry safety equipment into broken buildings. As Garfiel labored, he realized how long the road to rebuilding the city was.

Garfiel: “My amazing self is strong, but I can only do the things that I can only do.”

Even if you work ten times as hard as a normal person, in the end it is only ten people. However, the number of people Otto, Kiritaka, and the others that are involved with the reconstruction of the city is not enough for ten or even a hundred people’s worth of work. Garfiel felt uncomfortable interrupting that with his concern for Otto.

Garfiel: “Besides, if we don’t let Otto-Bro do his job, he’ll do something stupid like make a fool of himself?”

Otto: “Isn’t that also misleading?!”

Responding with a shrill scream, Otto then let out a deep breath. The reason for Garfiel’s concern made sense to Otto… It reminded him of the decision he had made the other day when Garfiel and Otto had talked and vowed to each other. Garfiel had promised himself to be strong, he was determined to be strongest. However, this is probably a sign that he is struggling to find strength in his own way, something other than just his physical strength.

Otto: “…Garfiel, why don’t you ask Frederica-san and Ryuzu-san to join us?

Garfiel: “…”

Otto: “Of course, I won’t force you to.”

At Otto’s suggestion, Garfiel’s eyes widened. Seeing his reaction, which was all surprise, Otto loosened his lips at his brother’s ease of understanding. The true meaning of Otto’s current proposal stems from a change that occurred in Garfiel’s mind a while ago. Garfiel didn’t say much, but this made Otto sensitive to the subtleties of other people’s emotions. Otto knew exactly what Garfiel was going through.

Garfiel: “Otto-Bro, why…?”

Otto: “Did you notice that? I’m the kind of merchant who needs to be quick on the uptake. I’m always watching my surroundings, even more so when it comes to my younger brother.”

Garfiel: “Seriously…”

Otto: “It felt like it would be cool to say that…”

In front of the flustered Garfiel, Otto scratched his head and smiled. When Garfiel raised his eyebrows in suspicion, Otto said, “No”.

Otto: “Actually, this morning I had a visitor who came to visit me. They were very polite and took good care of me.”

Garfiel: “A visitor for Otto-Bro? Who the hell is this curious fellow.”

Otto: “I’d like to complain about the tendency that only people who want things will visit me, but the woman who visited me came with her children, including a lovely sister and brother.”

After a few moments of silence, Garfiel looked at Otto. Looking at Otto’s face, Garfiel was silent for a while.

Garfiel: “I should have never talked about what happened in the hospital room.”

Otto: “I heard that her husband worked at the city hall, and he told her about you and me through Kiritaka-san… She was very easy to talk to.”

Garfiel: “Otto-Bro”

Otto: “I didn’t say anything unnecessary. That’s not my role.”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Otto made a promise, at least verbally, that he would not go overboard. In response, Garfiel coughed, “Role, huh?”.

Garfiel: “That scrawny city mayor is counting on Otto-Bro, right? What about Otto-Bro? Maybe he’s going to join the Ten…”

Otto: “My goal is still the same: to be a merchant and own my own store. If one detour is enough for that. Even if someone else thinks I'm better suited for it"

Garfiel: "I guess that's right."

Garfiel patted his chest in relief, and Otto was pleasantly surprised by his honest reaction. It is true that the road may have many branches. The place where we are now must have been chosen by Otto from the countless forks in the road…

Otto: "If I had two lives, it might not be a bad idea to live the life someone else wants, but I only have one life. I'll do it without any regrets on my part."

Garfiel: "I have regrets, don't you?."

Otto: "Yes, I do… Garfiel, what are yours?"

There was no real subject of the question, but the truth of it pierced Garfiel painfully. Garfiel knew what Otto was talking about. There are things that are lost by putting them off.

"…"

If you look up at the sky, you will see a clear sky. But where is the certainty that the sun will rise again tomorrow? People believe like a monk without reason that they will see the sun again tomorrow. That unconscious indulgence leads to decisions that postpone the situation. So…

Otto: "Yeah, I know. I've already written it down and sent it to them…"

Garfiel: "You sent it? As in a letter?"

Otto: "It's not something I'm going to talk about in a letter, so I just wrote and sent a note asking them to come."

Otto looked lightly into Garfiel's eyes as he assured him. Otto did not know everything about the troubles surrounding Garfiel. Even so, just from what he could see, he could tell that it was a decision made after much anguish. Just before, Otto had suggested it as a way to show that he had a choice. But Garfiel was willing to jump over even that, to jump on the problem himself.

Otto: "…Speaking of Natsuki-san, I think he's the best cut-throat captain of the camp."

Garfiel: "You're right. Otto-Bro, you're the one who reminds me of the captain."

Otto: "That's not very nice!"

When Garfiel gave him the thumbs up, Otto fell back on his bunk. They have been talking a lot and using their brains a lot. Maybe Otto was getting a little tired.

Otto: "Hmm, I feel like I'm fading. Like, I've been talking to people for a while…"

Garfiel: "You're not in top form, so it's only natural that you should be. Go to bed, Sleep, Sleep. You don't have enough blood, so sleep and make some."

Otto replies pathetically as his head is pushed forcefully into the pillow. Hearing this, Garfiel decided not to stay much longer, and looked out the window.

Otto: "Garfiel, make sure you walk out the door when you leave."

Garfiel: "…It's a shortcut, okay?"

Otto: "If you want to be strong, in other words, you want to change. The first step is to do what you can. Start with what you can do."

It sounded like a sermon, and Garfiel scratched his head and had no choice but to follow it. And when he reached the entrance to the hospital room.

Otto: "Garfiel… Great, I think it's a great decision."

When he said that, Garfiel stopped in his tracks. He stopped, but didn't look back. He just waved over his back and walked away, closing the door roughly behind him. Laughing at his clumsy embarrassment, Otto crawled under the covers and closed his eyes. A drowsiness soon set in, and the busy internal affairs officer's consciousness drifted off into a dream.

END

Beatrice’s Everyone is Bothersome, I Suppose

1

“—Beako, I have something a bit important to talk about, do you mind?”

As she’s being called in that tone, Beatrice stops what she was doing and turns around.

In her line of sight, stood a boy with short black hair and characteristic sharp sanpaku eyes. At a glance, you couldn’t not get a sharp impression from just looking at his face. But in actuality, that was most definitely not the case, his character had a softness unrelated to that sharpness.

And that very soft him, was the great spirit Beatrice’s partner, Natsuki Subaru.

He wasn’t “They” who came before Beatrice who holed herself up in the archive for four hundred years. Choosing this gentle person—Choosing him was the single greatest joy of Beatrice’s spirit life.

“Beako? Heeey, you hear me?”

Doubting the unresponsive Beatrice, Subaru who was tilting his neck called her a second time. At that call “ahem” she cleared her throat. Just now, she could feel her habitual gratitude welling up at that loveliness.

But, Beatrice deliberately constructed a stiff tightened up expression,

“I hear you, I suppose. Though Betty may not seem so, she’s very busy with many things to do, in fact. Unless it is it is a matter of great importance, I do mind, I suppose.”

Replying with a cold and unconcerned attitude, Beatrice walks over to Subaru. At Beatrice’s attitude, Subaru gives a “Sorry sorry” while scratching his own cheek.

"I know my Beako's so pretty she's in high demand, but I at least want me to be thought of as number one there. C'mon, that partner trait thing."

"Good grief, in fact. Geez, it can't be helped since if Betty wasn't around Subaru couldn't manage anything for himself, I suppose. I will leave those who can manage for themselves to hold on for a while, in fact."

"Ooh, thanks"

Giving a broad smile at the lamenting Beatrice's response, Subaru pats down his chest with relief.

Different from their spirit and contractor relationship, Beatrice felt her heart at ease with Subaru's relief. She wanted for Subaru to be as healthy as possible.

She could wish for nothing more than if he could continue through each day with the tranquility of a nap, without a scratch.

Nevertheless, seeing as that boy had a personality that of his own volition chose to thread through the thorny path, that wish would not come to be.

And that's why—

"Betty has to do her part as well, I suppose. Otherwise, Subaru won't stop diving head first into bottomless swamps, in fact."

"Why did you say something so scary all of a sudden?!"

"Just talking to myself, I suppose. Subaru, eavesdropping is bad manners, in fact"

"You say something that scary to yourself?! You shouldn't pick up some weird habits while I'm not around you know?!"

At Subaru's bewildered response, Beatrice's lips slowly broke into a smile. Beatrice's one and only partner, had a bit too much of an overprotective side for Beatrice.

In age Beatrice boasted over four hundred years, though she's lived twenty times what the boy has, his approach towards her was almost like he was politely treating her like a frail and ephemeral dear child.

She realizes the fact that she's being treasured, so she will never particularly blame him for it.

"And so? This conversation isn't moving forward so I will move it forward, I suppose. Now what unreasonable problem could Subaru be bringing Betty this time, in fact."

"With that phrasing, it makes it seem like I regularly ask Beako for nothing but the impossible right?"

"In actuality, they're nothing but things that if Betty wasn't around no one would hear you out on, I suppose."

"It's just as you say."

With Subaru gesturing so by dropping into prostration, Beatrice pulls her chin in generously. And then, Subaru slowly bends his knees, and puts his lips close to Beatrice's ear.

"The truth is, Anastasia got possessed by an artificial spirit, what should we do though?"

"…"

And as she's truly being brought an impossible problem, Beatrice's lovely face furrows into a heavy frown.

2

Currently, the group Beatrice and her partner Subaru belong to, are in the middle of preparations for leaving from the Watergate City of Priestella to The Roswaal estate.

Since the great crisis that struck the watergate city, the attack from the witch cultists, several days have passed. Little by little, signs of the reconstruction efforts for the city are beginning to be noticeable. However, the scars left by the terrible believers run deep, the wounds that would not heal if left to be are not few by any means.

Seeking a method to deal with those wounds, they will travel to the land of the east, with Subaru as their core member. —Their goal, the tower of the Sage that resides at the easternmost edge of the world.

Foreseeing that this journey will be their most difficult one yet. literally, the members are in a situation in which they must tackle this problem together as one. —That said.

“Seriously, Subaru is so troublesome, in fact.”

Touching her own broad forehead, Beatrice grumbled a long, weary sigh that was uncharacteristic of her appearance.

Having heard Subaru’s shocking confession—that Anastasia had been replaced by an artificial spirit, Beatrice waveringly went directly to observe in great detail Anastasia’s condition.

In all honesty, Beatrice doesn’t know what Anastasia’s usual attitude is. They don’t interact, and so she wouldn’t have anything to compare even if her behavior or actions are unnatural. Because of that, she changed what she’ll have to see.

Her actions and personality, her way of being, those will not do. She had to keep an eye on the flow of the mana surrounding her.

The result of that is, she was able to perceive a faint interference with the gate that is invisible unless consciously focused on, she proved that what Subaru said was not the result of some bad dream.

“Most likely, there’s a problem with the girl’s gate itself, I suppose. That’s why, not just Betty, but nobody else could’ve taken notice of this, in fact.”

It’s not just her trying to make excuses, this is the sensation she acquired from observing Anastasia’s condition. A gate birth-defect, the humans carrying such deficiencies are not few.

Being that it was an organ that wasn’t there to begin with, it was a defect that ultimately arose from having the Gate added afterwards. For better or for worse, it wasn't stable, That precedent was well known by Beatrice.

"Between that girl and Roswaal, Betty can't judge which of the two is better, I suppose."

Being unable to use magic, or overusing it, which one would have a greater impact in one's life?

Beatrice as a spirit was closely tied with magic by nature. To begin with, conveniently, since her birth mother was a Witch, she couldn't fathom a life divorced from magic.

Magic, had given Beatrice a bountiful life. And at the same time, it also pushed her into loneliness.

In the end of it all, how you use it, and how you take it is what it will depend on, or so she thinks but—

"Overthinking each and every thing won't help anything, in fact."

"—Overthinking in what way?"

"Unkyaan, I suppose-!"

Right after whispering gloomily, a voice coming from right behind Beatrice made her jolt. Turning around with that momentum, standing there was a girl, staring in wonder with bluish purple eyes, Emilia.

She gave a light laugh with a "So sorry" at Beatrice shrieking and jumping away.

"I didn't think you would be so surprised, it suuuuper scared you."

"It- it's bad for the heart I suppose. It's not like Betty would be troubled if her heart stopped though, but if you continue you'll stop the heart of someone like Otto, in fact. Be careful, I suppose."

"Mmh, You're right. I'll be careful for Otto-kun's heart."

Taking a breath to calm herself, Beatrice having said so gave Emilia a very serious nod. Fundamentally, she was a girl who honestly lent her ears to what others had to say. Though she also had a side that was a bit too honest.

“That’s, Bubby’s raising at work there, in fact. As expected of Bubby, I suppose…”

“So then, what were you looking at so much Beatrice? …Ah”

Absentmindedly from above Beatrice’s head, Emilia who was peeking at the beyond raised her voice. What she saw in her line of sight, was the figure of a girl in a kimono with light purple hair.

—Anastasia Hoshin. Currently, a person whose flesh is being taken over by a different existence.

Beatrice, on Subaru’s advice, had gone directly to confirm the veracity of what he said. To do that, she had unexpectedly ended up taken to tailing Anastasia, but—

“Beatrice, why were you looking at Anastasia?”

“That’s, ummm, that, in fact. A reason taller than a mountain. deeper than the great waterfall, I suppose.”

“That response, it somehow seems suuuuper subaruish.”

With a hand to her mouth, Emilia snickered lightly. By themselves those were words of praise to Beatrice, but meeting Emilia here complicates things extremely. From the way Subaru spoke of it, it seemed like he didn’t want the situation with Anastasia to spread too much.

In the first place, for the coming journey Anastasia—was to be their guide to the Pleiades watch tower in the Augria dunes, the journey could not occur if she was missing.

It would mean, that in this case, the one in charge of guiding them would not be Anastasia herself, but the artificial spirit.

“…”

Artificial spirit—Beatrice held complicated feelings for even that title.

Of the artificial spirits that were created by the Witch, Echidna, in which Beatrice is included, only 3 exist in this world. The first of which is Puck, and the last is Beatrice.

Which would mean, the one inside of Anastasia, would be the third yet unseen one.

—The last of her kind, of whom her mother Echidna did not talk much about, and even Beatrice didn't know.

Different from Puck for whom she held strong feelings of affection for since birth, strangely, the last of her kind did not elicit any feelings of fellowship or familial bonds from her.

Or perhaps, that may change if she meets them in person—She did not have the courage to confirm.

And Beatrice was having great difficulty coming up with an excuse for that abundance of circumstances. Of course, with Emilia a simple excuse would be easy enough to fool her with, but she didn't really want to.

Fooling an honest, quick-to-believe girl with a lie would tug at her conscience.

"Grrrrr, in fact…"

And so, she was searching for a breakthrough while growling, however—

"—Geez, Beatrice you're so obstinate."

"Eh?"

"Don't frown like that. Y'know, I don't always need to be sheltered. I'm not as unperceptive as Beatrice worries I am."

"Emilia…"

Looking at the fretting Beatrice, Emilia began to say that. While putting a hand to her chest, her bluish purple pupils were staring fixedly at Beatrice who felt shame for herself.

In this year, Emilia who struggled earnestly in pucks absence, had shown Beatrice a growth above what she had hypothesized. Particularly, when she was taken away by an archbishop, and she still didn't give up, and eventually defeated a formidable opponent together with Subaru.

"Bubby's girl, has grown this much, I suppose…"

"Fufu, that's right. Because I am way taller than Beatrice."

"Don't you get carried away, in fact. Betty's looks have just been molded by hand by Mother into a perfect appearance, I suppose. This is my final perfect form, in fact!"

"Alright alright. —So then, should we go?"

And so the smiling Emilia grasped Beatrice's hand. That happening caused Beatrice's eyes to widen in awe, she looked up at Emilia's clasped hand and her smile.

"…Go? Go where, I suppose?"

"Geez, don't be stubborn. We're going to be traveling together to a far away place, and yet you haven't properly talked with Anastasia-san so you're nervous right? I'll come along with you so we gotta go get along with her."

"You absolutely did not understand, in fact!"

It wasn't to the point that you could call it a waste to be moved, though that she misunderstood made Beatrice irritated. However, Emilia tilted her head with a "Is that so?" and,

"So then, why were you looking at Anastasia-san?"

"Urgh, in fact."

Questioned by Emilia's round pupils, Beatrice was once again at a loss for an answer.

She couldn’t come up with a good excuse. That said, she couldn’t decline Subaru’s request. At the edge of that dilemma, Beatrice drooped her shoulders crestfallen.

“A-As expected of Emilia, I suppose… It seems you saw right through Betty’s thoughts, in fact.”

“See, I was right. Don’t worry. Anastasia-san is a suuuper good girl.”

At the innocently smiling Emilia, Beatrice returned a smile with tense cheeks. And then, dragged by her hand, she was taken to Anastasia who she had been tailing.

“…Seriously, every single one of you would be completely useless without Betty, so bothersome, I suppose.”

While anxiously thinking about her future, Beatrice weakly muttered so.

3

After that—

“But really it was quite unexpected. Who woulda thought Beatrice-chan wanted ta get buddy buddy with me. You’re so stuck ta Natsuki-kun after all.”

“The thing is, Subaru also talks about it a lot. How he wants Beatrice to make more friends outside of the mansion. That he wants to see her making mud cakes.”

“Heeh, that sounds nice don’t it. But, ya know that kinda, sounds like a married couple talkin’ about their daughter don’t it.”

Anastasia nodded as if moved by Emilia’s story. The way Emilia went “Married couple?” at that reply that went right over her head, made Subaru’s daily efforts clear.

In contrast, Beatrice who was being treated like a daughter by the two had inscrutable emotions.

“Beatrice, you’ve made yourself so small. Are you perhaps nervous?”

“Nervous? Those words would be the words most unrelated to Betty, in fact. In the first place, in this situation Betty would have no reason at all chu feel nervoush.”

“Ya fumbled a lot there at the end didn’t ya.”

Anastasia gave a wry smile at Beatrice who was hiding behind Emilia while hugging her arm. Looking closely at that smile, Beatrice continued to keep her guard up.

While patting Beatrice’s head, Emilia gave an apology with “I’m sorry”

“She talks a lot more usually, but she has a bit of a shy side…”

“Hmmm, Emilia really does seem like a mother don’t she.”

“Really? Is that so? Fufu, a mother. She says I’m a mother, Beatrice.”

Emilia relaxing her cheeks as she appears happy, Beatrice seeing her reaction breathes a heavy sigh.

If she was going to act like a mother, Beatrice wished she could consider her feelings more. Though, if she did, it would be an injustice to Subaru, so in the end she wished she wouldn’t after all.

And then, while Beatrice was having internal turmoil, Anastasia slowly bent her knees. Then, having met eye height with her she gave her a slight smile.

“—looks like ya spoke with Natsuki-kun, but don’t doubt me that much aight?”

“nurgh, in fact…”

“Personally, I want ta get along with Beatrice-chan. We’re comrades ain’t we.”

Anastasia’s slight roundabout manner of speech, left Beatrice with her mouth gaping open. Emilia was heard giving out a “Comrade?” after that exchange, but she brushed it off with some appropriate words.

Taking in that feeling of being cornered in its entirety, Beatrice once again, put a hand to her brow.

“The future, is worrisome, I suppose…”

And, as she polished her forehead, she looked up to the sky.

END

Julius Juukulius’s Promise Keeping Notebook (Edited Machine Translation)

1

…Forgetting or being forgotten, which one is more miserable?

Even if he pondered intently on this question, it would be meaningless, yet he can’t stop himself from thinking about it. It has been pointed out to Julius by others that he overthinks things too much, but it was a habit deeply rooted in his heart.

This is a habit that gives others a headache. However, while he had thought that he might have gotten over this habit, he was still somewhat grateful that it was not the case.

Even though he himself knows that he is in an extremely unhealthy state, but sure enough…

Anastasia: “…Natsuki-kun, do you recognize any of these children?”

Anastasia stood in the middle of the room and asked after taking an all-round look in the room.

The woman in a kimono asked the black-haired teen, Natsuki Subaru, who was also looking around in the clean and white room. He rested his chin and muttered in a low voice after thinking for a bit.

Subaru: “…No, sorry. Looking around this time, I didn’t see a familiar face.”

Anastasia: “Oh? This child looks like a dogman, not even him?”

Subaru: “I don’t remember how everyone looks, but I don’t think every demihuman is involved with Anastasia-san…probably.”

Anastasia: “…Hmm, that so? Thank you very much.”

Subaru scratched his cheek unconfidently, and Anastasia thanked him. However, this phrase of thanks made Subaru's expression grow even more tangled.

It is natural for him to be confused. After all, there was nothing gained at all right now.

However, persisting like this will definitely yield positive results. …Just like how he was saved by Subaru's memory.

Julius: "…"

Julius held his breath in deep concentration and looked around the room like Anastasia and Subaru.

This is a ward of a treatment hospital, housing a large number of wounded patients. There were only narrow gaps between the beds, and it was no exaggeration to say that the whole room was completely filled with people. However, the patients did not voice discontent. …No, it wasn't just complaints that weren't audible.

Compared with the numerous patients on the hospital beds, the whole room is eerily quiet, so quiet that it made other people's ears feel uncomfortable.

This is not because the patients were sleeping late into the night. The sun was already shining outside their window, and it's nearing the end of the day.

However, the patients in the hospital bed are indeed still asleep.

They were asleep, unable to wake up. This difficult to understand state is due to…

???: ""Sleeping Beauty" caused by the Authority of "Gluttony"…"

Anastasia: "This is a sickness that has been discovered all over the world for many years… I never expected the true cause to be the Witch Cult's doing. Even with the truth out there, it's hard to tie it with good news."

Hearing that unintentional murmur, Anastasia sighed without hiding her resentment.

As she said, the patients in this ward… No, most of the patients accommodated in the entire hospital are victims of the Authority of "Gluttony".

The "Name" belonging to them was taken away by "Gluttony". Moreover, the person whose name got taken away would fall into a deep sleep, and would not be able to regain consciousness, nor would they be able to wake up.

Whether it was calling out loud to them, or reaching out to shake their bodies, they showed no signs of opening their eyes. The disaster that has come to them is not only that.

Anastasia: "The people whose "Names" were stolen are forgotten by those around them… This feels extremely cruel, just thinking about it… Even I have forgotten, absolutely terrifying."

Julius: "…"

Anastasia: "Ah, I'm sorry, Julius-san. I didn't mean to sound… malicious?"

Julius: "…It's okay, I understand."

Anastasia turned around and frowned as she apologized, and Julius shook his head slightly. The moment of hesitation was not because of the pain of his wound, but because he took notice of what she called him.

The last time he was addressed respectfully like an outsider by her was when she first met him.

And this slightly alienated call, as what she said just now, did not contain any malicious intent. Julius knew that in his heart that she was being considerate of him.

However, the helpless reality slammed coldly before his eyes.

Julius: "But, we are not completely helpless. …His existence is ironclad proof."

Julius said to Anastasia, who was still being apologetic and pointed at the teenager standing next to her.

Natsuki Subaru… The only person who is not affected by the Authority of "Gluttony", is standing on a unique vantage point. Only he remembers the people who were plundered by the Authority of "Gluttony".

Therefore, the two of them accompanied him like this, looking around for the people in Priestella who have become "Nameless". In order for the pitiful victims forgotten by everyone and who remain in constant sleep, to not be left behind.

Anastasia: "Although it has caused a lot of trouble to Natsuki-kun, I hope you can understand. No one can do this other than Natsuki-kun…"

Subaru: "I don't find this troublesome at all. There must be people around with the opportunity to be reunited with their family… If only I had seen more people earlier."

Julius: "No one expected it to turn out like this. You have done your best, and there is no need to feel regret about it."

Subaru: "…If you were in my position, would you let it go if you heard that?"

Subaru did not accept this empty platitude and stared at Julius with his black eyes. This gaze made Julius take a short breath, then he slumped his shoulders and sighed.

Julius: "Indeed, this is something I didn't think about. If I was in your position, I wouldn't be able to relax."

Subaru: "Then it's the same for me. Even if I know it's too late to regret it…"

Julius: "…I want to do as much as possible."

In unison with Julius, Subaru nodded vigorously.

Julius truly understood the regret felt in Subaru's heart deeply. … That is the sense of failure, one that he has to grit his teeth and swallow because of his weakness. As long as he was lamenting that this is beyond their ability, they could definitely feel the blood-stained distress felt in Subaru.

However, Julius didn't want to lick each other's wounds like this, so he did not state that deliberately…

Anastasia: "…Okay, let's stop looking so gloomy. We should head to the next ward now."

Unwilling to let the atmosphere become heavier, Anastasia clapped her hands and proposed the next step. Neither Julius nor Subaru had any reason to oppose her, and they obeyed her obediently.

Just when the three people walked out of the silent ward.

???: "…Excuse me! Please give way!"

A young healer dressed in white panicked, leading the men carrying stretchers behind him, and approaching the group standing in the corridor.

Half a day after repelling the Witch Cult, reports of wounded and "Sleeping Beauty" continued to appear throughout the city. Especially for those with "Sleeping Beauty", there is no way for them to call out for help, and as long as people nearby didn't notice, there is no way to easily find them.

Even though the hospital is reaching max capacity, there is still a steady stream of new victims being found.

The person on the stretcher seems to be a newly found victim as well…

Subaru: "Joh…, wait!"

Subaru stepped aside to give way, but when he saw who was on the stretcher passing by, he cried out in surprise. He stopped the stretcher and stared at the person lying on it.

Julius and Anastasia stared at each other because of Subaru's shocked face.

Julius: “Subaru, have you seen him before?”

Subaru: “…”

Asked by Julius, Subaru slowly raised his head. The emotions in his black eyes turned from surprise to anger, and from anger to sadness.

Julius was confused and could not understand the reason for the series of changes in Subaru’s face.

However, the answer was quickly spoken by Subaru himself.

The exact answer is…

Subaru: “This guy is, Joshua. Julius, he is your brother.”

2

…Forgetting or being forgotten, which one is more miserable?

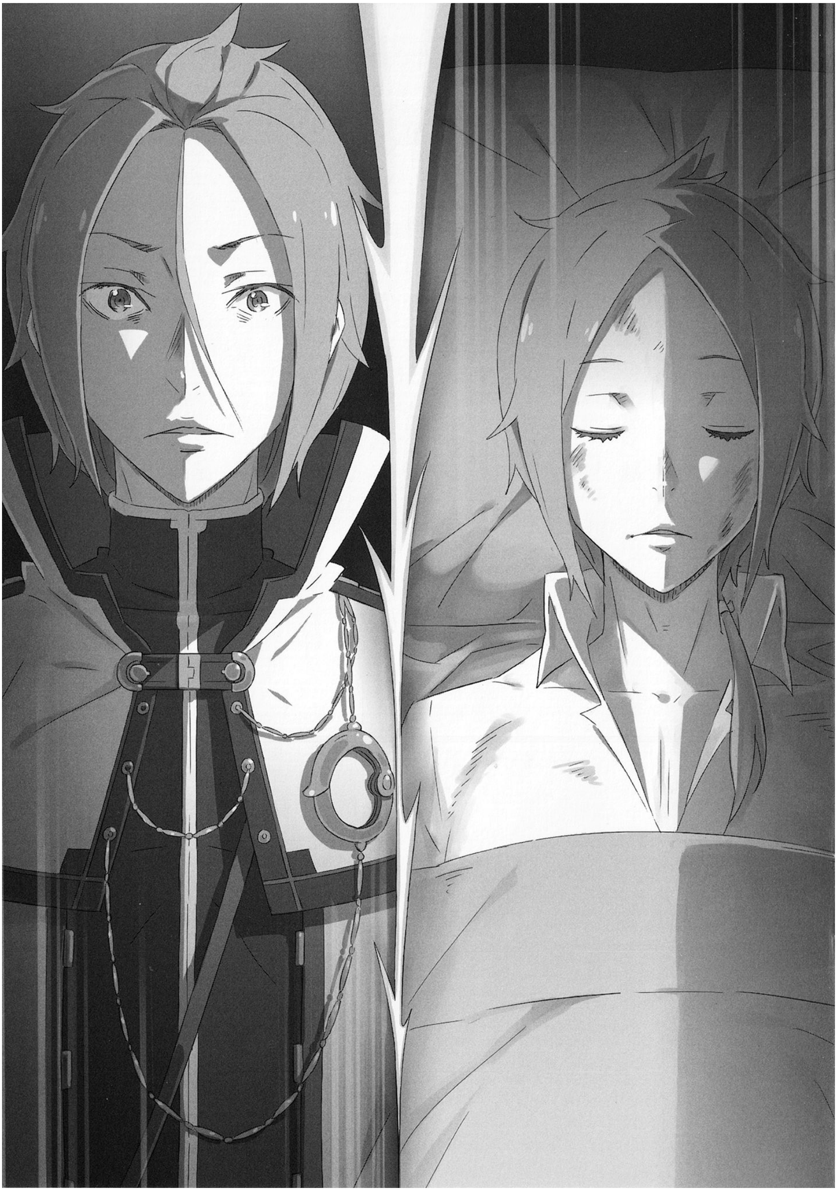

Even if he pondered intently on this question, it would be meaningless, yet he still can't stop himself from comparing the two.

The pain of being forgotten, and the pain of not even knowing that you have forgotten, which one is more miserable?

Julius: "My disgrace, I forgot how strong you were…"

After being smacked in the head by Subaru, Julius smiled bitterly, ruminating the pain.

In fact, when he felt that he was saved, his heart was indeed deeply wounded. …As if he was the most unluckiest person in the world. Even though he did not feel that he had positioned himself to be that way.

Julius: "What is the truth? If that's the case, how funny would I be… For you to be embarrassed by your elder brother making a fuss by your bed, I am truly sorry"

As Julius said that, he bowed his head to the sleeping face of the young man who was lying quietly on the hospital bed… To his younger brother who he had no real attachment for.

Joshua Juukulius. This seemed to be the name of Julius's younger brother. To be honest, this fact caused severe damage to Julius's spirit.

Julius was robbed of his "name" by the Authority of "Gluttony". Although he kept his consciousness, his existence was completely forgotten by those around him. But his memories of those were not and he still has the consciousness of others.

Moreover, the forgotten party was his brother, which was beyond his imagination.

This was too shocking, and Julius's heart was exhausted and sentimentally criticized…

Ricardo: "…What's wrong, got scolded by the little bro?"

Julius: "…It's you, Ricardo."

When Julius laughed at himself, it was Ricardo, the gigantic dogman who accosted him.

He walked silently into the ward and sat side by side with Julius, who was sitting next to his brother's bed. Then, shrugging his nose…

Ricardo: "So that's how it is. He smells like you. It seems that you two are indeed brothers."

Julius: "You can smell it?"

Ricardo: "My nose is not so convenient that I can make a reliable judgment out of thin air. But because you two smell alike, I can only judge that you both have the same blood and ate the same things growing up."

Julius: "No, being able to get such an answer is already good enough…Thank you."

Ricardo's words caused Julius to accumulate a certain sense of camaraderie in his heart.

In Julius, as well as his brother who can't wake up, they had an invisible connection as brothers. Julius wanted to collect these broken shards of glass and convince himself that there was a definite bond between the two.

Ricardo: "This is not a problem that can be solved by collecting pieces to change the quality."

Julius: "…You saw right through me. You treat me…"

Ricardo: "I've forgotten you. Since for me, this is the first time we've met, please take care of me in the future. I was also your age when I met Anastasia, though I've grown to adulthood since then. I can tell you're one of us even though I have no memory of you."

As Ricardo said so, he stretched out his wide palm and placed it on Julius's head.

Julius couldn’t react for a moment, just like that, letting his firm palm rub his head roughly for a bit.

Julius: “…Ricardo, this is?”

Ricardo: “Your head is just about the right height, and your expression is just right for me to do this. In my opinion, the young lady and you are similar brats.”

Julius: “That way of saying it is a bit extreme.”

Ricardo’s rough words made Julius smile wryly, but he didn’t think about waving his hand away.

His head being touched in this way, Julius glanced lightly at Ricardo’s other arm, which was not on his head… That right arm was empty below the elbow.

Because his right arm lacked a portion, Ricardo looked asymmetrical. It was the moment when only Julius himself witnessed the severed arm. …This is an injury he suffered to protect Julius.

Even this sad fact was unnaturally blurred in his memory.

Ricardo: “Stupid boy. Why are you wearing such a face because of something that doesn’t matter? Can’t you think more positively? Even I forgot about my right arm being related to you. Isn’t it lucky?”

Julius: “That would be closer to irresponsibility than positive thinking, right?”

Ricardo: “Really? My arm is my own problem, right? If you want to talk about irresponsibility, in the end, if you think that you were responsible for my arm, then wouldn’t I be the one that’s irresponsible?”

Julius originally intended to tell him that his logic was too extreme, but then it was completely justifiably refuted.

Ricardo smiled boldly at the wide eyed Julius…

Ricardo: “Ghahaha! How about it? This is how an adult fights, scary right?”

Julius: “…You really haven’t changed at all. Even if you lost your arm, even if you don’t remember me, you’re still the same.”

Ricardo: “When people live a long time, naturally they can think like this. The same is true for you. Although it may be a little difficult, it is not good to always be immersed in troubles. After all, Ana-san is entrusted to you.”

Ricardo sharpened his sharp fangs and his eyes were full of seriousness. Bathing in the demihuman’s smileless gaze at close range, Julius nodded vigorously.

Ricardo said this because he knew that Julius was heading to the Pleiades Watchtower with her. It was a journey to borrow the wisdom from the “Sage” in order to save a large number of victims in the city.

The Iron Fang is full of seriously wounded members, they are unable to follow their master, Anastasia, on this dangerous journey.

Therefore-…

Ricardo: “I will never forget the entrustment I just made. You mustn’t forget it as well.”

Julius looked straight back into Ricardo’s eyes and exhaled.

Perhaps this is the first time he has talked with Ricardo seriously and face to face like this. He was always calm and was convinced that he could protect Anastasia.

Now, he has to delegate this responsibility to others. Entrusted to a stranger of a knight who does not exist in his memory.

He must also respond to this sincere wish. …As long as he is still called the “Greatest Knight”.

Julius: “Your trust, I sincerely accept it. Although it is not very pleasant to say comparatively, but…”

Ricardo: “Take care of your brother? We will stay in this city, so you can rest assured.”

Julius: “Hmm, you truly are reliable.”

Even if he didn’t say finish his sentence, the other party can understand the meaning and give a response. Julius savoured this happiness and took out a notebook from his arms.

Ricardo: “…? What is that?”

Julius: “I intend to take notes on the things I have experienced and the words I have talked with… After being stuck in such a situation, I’ve realized for the first time how noble those passing times were.”

Julius answered Ricardo while writing words on the white paper.

It sounds ironic because he has been forgotten, and does not wish to forget any more things. However, if one just stares at the negative side of things, then it’s just like standing still.

He will no longer choose to stop moving, He will no longer suffer from deep distress, He will no longer lament himself. …As early as more than ten years ago, He decided on that.

Julius: “So, well, this is a kind of promise keeping notebook that belongs specifically to me.”

Ricardo: “Aye, this is not a joke?! Seeing you like this, makes me feel like I can relax.”

Seeing the corners of Julius’s mouth raise slightly, with firmness in his words, Ricardo also smiled and rubbed the hand that hadn’t been removed from his head again. Julius let his hair be tossed around by the big hand and lifted the quill in his hand.

He must write down his thoughts of this moment as an unforgettable experience, so that he will not forget it again.

END

Ex 4:
The Great Journeys

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Two
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

…It was an unexpected request that came to Garfiel.

Garfiel: “You want my amazing self’s help?”

???: “No! That’s right! The famous master of the Vollachian Empire, the Kurgan of “Eight Arms” has been successfully defeated! A man of valor who still devotes himself to the reconstruction of the city! Let’s meet Garfiel Tinsel-sama, the cloud-bearer of the new age who heralds the dawn of a new era! By all means!”

Then she clasped her hands together, bowed her head, and asked for help in a flat-footed posture. Garfiel frowned and touched his sharp canine teeth with his fingers as he thought about it… It’s been ten days since the important events surrounding the Watergate city of Priestella came to an end and Natsuki Subaru and his party left for the Far East. Garfiel, who had stayed behind in Priestella, was helping with the reconstruction and sharpening his sense of smell in order to protect the peace of the city.

Even now, Priestella has many of her residents needing protection, including Otto. If they followed Subaru’s concern, there was no guarantee that the Witch cult would not come back to haunt them. In this sense, Garfiel, while contributing greatly to the city’s heavy lifting, remained vigilant in the shadows to prevent a stronger malice from turning its poisonous fangs on the city again. Nevertheless, contrary to Garfiel’s determination, most of the disturbances that occurred in the city were small, and could be settled by discussion among the city people. There was nothing to complain about. If nothing happens, it’s for the best, that’s what Garfiel thinks.

But on the other hand, if nothing happened to Priestella, Garfiel wanted to accompany Subaru and the others who were tackling a dangerous journey… There was definitely a part of Garfiel that felt that way. As Garfiel was struggling with the anguish of his situation and his own role in it…

???: "…Garfiel-sama"

And the person who looked up at Garfiel dexterously with her head bowed and her hands together… Liliana, the "Diva" of Priestella, had a request for Garfiel. Carrying her beloved instrument, the lyulyre, and encouraging the people of the city with her voice, Liliana is very busy, and is needed throughout the city in a different way than Garfiel. No matter how gloomy the faces of the people, when they hear her songs, they are instantly soothed. Garfiel was impressed by her performance and her solid voice, and he couldn't help but listen to her. When she wasn't singing, however, he was still dismayed at how poorly Liliana handled herself. Anyway, what Liliana brought to him was very welcome to Garfiel, who was searching for his role in this city. Anyway…

Liliana: "The remains of the witch. In order to preserve them, they are enshrined underground in the city. Please, please, please help us, Garfiel-sama! If you could lend it to us, it would be a tremendous help!

Liliana asks for help with a low-key attitude, and Garfiel ruminates on her words. The "Witch's remains" are said to be the remains of a real witch who died in this city hundreds of years ago. It was thought that even the existence of the remains was a myth, but one of the purposes of the witch cult's attack on this city the other day was to take the "Witch's remains". Fortunately, the Witch's remains were not stolen, but their existence and the fact that they were being targeted became clear. It is the foundation of the Watergate city, and if it is taken away, the city will be in danger of being destroyed.

Garfiel: "So I understand why you want to make it safer for everyone. "Abirabi's kneecap" is important for everything, you know."

Liliana: "That's right! That's why I went up to ask for help directly on behalf of Kiritaka-san, who is having a hard time deciding on replacements for the Council of Ten."

Liliana bites her tongue grandly in front of Garfiel, who is convinced of the purpose of the request. While the diva was writhing in agony, Garfiel twisted his neck and said, "But is it okay?".

Garfiel: "The witch's remains are the most important treasure in this town. My amazing self is a stranger mixed up in the handling of such an essential treasure."

Liliana: "Then there's nothing to worry about. Garfiel-sama and the other candidates for the throne have done their best to protect Priestella, and it would be pointless to doubt them now. If you try to hide it and do it within your own family, and it fails and the town goes down, you'll have no face to save!"

Garfiel: "Well, that's a nice, clean story."

Worry is just a hole in the ground when it goes too far. Liliana's answer and Kiritaka's idea of instructing her to do so were both correct. Then, Garfiel's answer was obvious.

Garfiel: "All right. Aside from visiting Otto-Bro, I've been doing little more than cleaning up debris and stuff. I'll do it."

Liliana: "Oh! That's what I'm talking about! Good answer! Thank you very much!"

Garfiel: "So what exactly do you want me to do to help?"

Liliana: "Mmm-hmmm. It is…"

Hearing Liliana's praise of his good form, Garfiel snapped his fangs and asked. In response, Liliana puffed out her nose and gently pointed to the ground. Then, in front of a quizzical Garfiel, she says it proudly.

Liliana: "Underground, in the depths of the canals, in the Great Temple there… it's there that we'll open the way to the "Witch's Remains". It's the beginning of a great adventure!"

Garfiel: "…So this is the entrance to the Great Temple."

Garfiel's green eyes narrowed as he looked at the iron door embedded in the wall at the end of the huge pile of rubble. It was the basement of the city hall, which had collapsed and completely lost its shape. Priestella was a city of water, with waterways running throughout the city, and this scene was supported by the existence of underground canals. Many of the shelters that were used to evacuate the city's residents during the Witch cult's attacks were also built during the construction of these underground canals, indicating that the city had been prepared for flooding from the beginning. In other words, the doors and passageways leading to the depths of this underground canal have also been in place since the city was first built…

???: "According to the literature, this city was built more than 400 years ago… when witches were still rampant throughout the land. However, at that time, the understanding of magic was not as advanced as it is now, and moreover, the building techniques were not yet mature. And yet, this design is marvelous."

"…"

???: "Mmm, what's with the face? Do you not understand the beauty of the design concept of this city? If so, I must say I'm saddened."

And then, behind Garfiel, who was clearing away the debris around the door, there was a terse, logical muttering. When he turned to listen to it, the person who had been muttering raised a shapely eyebrow. It was a small figure… a "Dwarf", even shorter than Garfiel, though Garfiel was not a tall man. The man with long green hair and a black cloak was Ezzo Cadner, one of the people who would accompany them on our journey to the Great Temple. Originally, he was from Felt's camp, one of the candidates for the royal selection. He was not in the Watergate City at the time of the recent incident, but he seems to have come to the city's aid, replacing his master, Felt, and Reinhardt, who had gone to the capital to escort the Sin Archbishop.

Garfiel: “I’m not sure what you can do, though.”

Ezzo: “…Are you sure you don’t want me to take that as a challenge? I’ll tell you what, I, Ezzo Cadner, the “Gray”, try to act like a gentleman all the time, but I don’t want you to think I’m so weak that I can’t smile at an insult.”

Garfiel’s cheeks twisted as he met Ezzo’s gaze, who stared at him with a strong will despite his childish face. Their gazes crossed each other’s, and a sense of urgency built up in the cold underground where the sound of running water dominated. However…

???: “…What’s the matter with ya two, you’re so tense. Get along better, little ones.”

Ezzo: “But”

Garfiel: “Ugh”

And then a slap struck both of them on the head as they stared at each other, and each of the two people who were struck let out a cry of pain. As they stared at their opponents to see what they would do, the vicious dog face opened its big mouth and laughed.

Ezzo: “What are you doing.”

???: “What the hell are you doing? Don’t get mad at me for fighting at work. And don’t bite the little guy’s hand when the kid says something.”

Ezzo: “Gu… you too, if you insult me about my size…”

???: “No mercy, huh? If that’s the case, Sensei, you have to be even more firm. You may be able to make your way to the remains in question, but beyond that, it’s up to you.”

Ezzo: “Mmm, hmm… mmm.”

When he said that, Ezzo fell silent with a difficult frown on his face. The person who can do this to Ezzo is Ricardo Welkin, a huge beast-man who looks down at him. Ricardo is carrying a large machete on his back and scratching his bare chest. Like Ezzo, he too is accompanying them on their journey to the great temple in the underground canals. Of course, Garfiel knew that he could count on him if it got rough. However, there was one element of anxiety that put a crack in that trust. It was…

Garfiel: “It hasn’t been long since you lost one of your arms. Can you keep up like that?”

Ricardo: “Oh, my, you’re worried about me? You have a kind heart, don’t you? Did you use that kindness to fool around with my Mimi, brother?”

Garfiel: “I’m not nice to her, and I don’t even like her!”

When he bit into the mocking remark, Ricardo waved his arm and said, “Just kidding, just kidding.” The waving right arm… from the elbow down was missing, and a metal hook had been attached in its place.

The wound on Ricardo’s right arm was also an honorable injury he received during the recent battle with the witch cult. However, the term “Honorable injury” is no consolation to those who have actually been injured. The fact was that he had lost his arm and could no longer act the way he used to. Garfiel could only imagine how much of a blow it would be for a mercenary, whose profession was to fight for a living, to no longer be able to fight the way he used to. Garfiel was really anxious to accompany him on the journey, not knowing what to expect.

Ricardo: “Brother, That thinking of yours is not anxiety, it’s worry.”

Garfiel: “Because…”

Ricardo: “Idiot, I’m not kidding. I mean it. I mean it.”

When Garfiel tried to argue with him, Ricardo dared to block his mouth with the hook of his right hand. The dull, rugged metal was no less fierce than his strong arm. In other words, he claims he can fight.

“…”

Garfiel fell silent as he realized his intentions. In fact, no matter what Garfiel said, it was only an outside opinion. If Ricardo himself insists that he can fight without being dragged down by the loss of his arm, that is all that matters. Ricardo has been a mercenary for a long time, and he knows what he is capable of.

Ezzo: "…I was absent from the city at the time of the recent battle. So, I will defer to both of you on this occasion."

Then Ezzo, who had absorbed the conversation that had just taken place, nodded calmly to him. Seeing his attitude, Ricardo's smile deepened, saying, "Please, Sensei."

Ezzo: "I'm not used to being called "Sensei," but I'll get used to it. More importantly, if you're worried about Ricardo-dono's arm, don't you have another problem to worry about?"

Ricardo: "Ah, well, that's right. That's a bigger problem."

Short arms and thick arms, Ezzo and Ricardo, each with their arms crossed, made the statement. Under their gazes, Garfiel looked at the pile of rubble that had been moved with a sigh. Then, there was a girl sitting on the rubble, playing with the strings of her tools of trade in a single-minded effort.

Liliana: "I'm filled with energy! I can feel my imagination and creativity fluttering inside me. I have a feeling that a mysterious, special, money-scented excitement awaits me ahead! Listen to me… Hold me! Great Temple."

Garfiel: "Shut the hell up."

"Huh?"

Liliana was about to get excited and start playing her lyulyre when Garfiel walked up to her and flicked her forehead with his finger. Liliana recoiled from the blow and turned her teary eyes in protest to Garfiel.

Liliana: "What, what, what, what are you doing? Sudden violence! That's violence!"

Garfiel: “You haven’t changed at all, have you? You’re not really going to follow me, are you… Diva-san?”

Liliana: “No! Of course not! A great temple that exists beneath the city! The importance of it, and the expectations and fears of the legend, there’s no choice but to go!”

Waving her hands, neck and feet dexterously from side to side, Liliana pleaded for desperate accompaniment. Garfiel looked at the two behind him for help with her attitude, but Ricardo and Ezzo shrugged their shoulders. Garfiel sighs as he realizes that he is alone. Anyway…

Garfiel: “My amazing self, Ricardo, the little wizard, and the diva… that’s the group that is going to face the underground, right?”

Ricardo: “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I feel like we’ve got a lot of colors…”

Ezzo: But Garfiel-dono and Ricardo-dono are in the vanguard, I’m in the back as a wizard, and Miss Liliana is in the… back, and Miss Liliana is the chronicler? If you think about it, we’re not a bad force.”

Liliana: “Yes, leave it to me! I’m going to feel your activities with my eyes, ears, nose, and my whole body, and I’m going to make it into a poem that will be sung for generations to come!”

Garfiel stroked his fangs at the impetus of Liliana’s coughing, slapping her thin chest forcefully. To be honest, Garfiel was uneasy about taking someone who is not equipped to deal with the situation underground, where you never know what might happen. However, the fact that Liliana would be accompanying them as a representative of the city was a natural outcome considering that what lay ahead was Priestella’s most important secret. Also, Liliana’s declaration that she would write a song about them had an irresistible appeal to Garfiel, who adored heroic tales and biographical literature.

Ricardo: “Well, you don’t have to worry about that. Even though it had been closed for a long time, it was still in the basement of a city where many people live. It’s not like some villain’s hideout deep in the mountains.”

Ezzo: “I agree with you. I’m probably the only one who has a job. The witch’s remains… if true, could be considered a catalyst of tremendous power and value. Considering the impact on the city’s water quality and geology, it’s really a challenging task.”

Ricardo and Ezzo also expressed their own views on this task. At the moment, neither of them seemed to have any intention of turning Liliana away, and Garfiel’s mind was made up.

Garfiel: “All right. Let’s go. The captains are still working hard. Let’s get some work done so our amazing self’s don’t get laughed at by the returning captains.”

Liliana: “No! That’s the spirit! That’s the spirit! Let’s get out there!”

Liliana called out, and Garfiel pushed open the closed iron door. The door opened with a rather vigorous creaking sound, and the four were greeted by a passage leading to the great underground temple. And just when Garfiel thought the dusty air was blowing in from the back of the passage…

Garfiel: “Huh…?”

…The four of them were sucked headlong into the darkness beneath their feet, leaving a stupid voice in their wake.

To Be Continued

Beatrice's Everyone is Bothersome, I Suppose!

1

"Beatrice, could you tell me everything that happened in Priestella?"

And so, having readied tea and sweets in her private room she broke the ice with that. "So it indeed came to this" saying that Beatrice made a twisted face.

In front of Beatrice's twisted face, sat Petra holding a tea cup with a serious face.

This is her personal room in the mansion where, tonight, Beatrice had been invited to Petra's room for the purpose of a sleepover. Usually, at night she sleeps together with Subaru more often than not, however occasionally when she's invited by Petra or Emilia, she has changed the bed she sleeps on.

This time, Beatrice had been back at the Roswaal estate for a month, and so she couldn't find a real reason to decline Petra's slightly overbearing invitation. But somehow or other, she had a feeling that as a reward for their hard work in their journey they'd absolutely have to sleep together, and she was right on the mark.

"Beatrice?"

"…It's nothing, in fact. It was quite hasty of you, I suppose."

"I mean, we've been apart for a month. This much should be normal."

Turning her face away in a huff, Petra brings her own tea to her lips. Seeing the young girl's lovable jealousy, Beatrice's small lips break out into a smile, and she as well brings some tea to her lips.

She moistens her tongue, and notices how fragrant the taste is. Her skills have gotten better once again.

"In just a simple month, you've done well to change just this much, in fact."

Grumbling so, Beatrice was moved.

A single month, from all the time that Beatrice has lived through, was miniscule. To Beatrice who had spent most of that time in wasteful idle, a human's growth was remarkable. She felt that especially when in close proximity to Subaru and Petra's persistence.

"Well, Petra, I will repay you for brewing such delicious tea, I suppose. So then? What did you say you wanted to hear, in fact?"

"Alright! Then, tell me about Priestella. From the start, and then what happened after. I did hear that Mr. Otto and Mr. Garf had it rough but…"

"—I see, I suppose. Subaru is, really quick to try to hide his own troubles, in fact"

Having guessed the source of Petra's worries, Beatrice also agreed.

After the havoc in Priestella, Beatrice and the others were in the middle of their journey to the Augria dunes at the easternmost edge of Lugunica to visit the Sage seeking a solution to their problems. On the way, having returned to the Roswaal estate they gave them a letter—In there, the details of Priestella were not outlined.

Of course, Subaru wouldn't be so stupidly honest as to write everything that happened himself and worry Petra and the others. It was because she knew that, that she was worried.

Unsaid and unheard it goes unknown. And should Subaru want it that way, no matter what absurd, impossible, reckless actions he'd take Beatrice wouldn't know. That's why she treasures Subaru, he needs to know how important he is to the people he treasures.

Because she understands that feeling, Beatrice relentlessly, spilled everything about the events in Priestella. What happened to Subaru, how much he did for the sake of that city, and how he overexerted himself.

And, while listening to the stories, Petra who had turned pale and red as she swung from joy to sorrow said this in the end.

“Ok. And then, what happened to Beatrice?”

“…Betty?”

“That’s right? I mean, I know Subaru had it really rough but… If Beatrice was with him, he should’ve worked harder to reunite with her right? But even then, Beatrice never came up, I was just wondering what happened?”

“Th-That’s…”

“Mhmm, that’s?”

Having that interjection right at the end of her well told story, Beatrice was lost for words. Meanwhile, Petra’s wide eyes caught onto Beatrice, keeping her from escaping that question she just posed.

Petra’s questioning was a rude awakening to Beatrice of her own cowardice, which she reflected on.

In reality, Beatrice believed her own work in Priestella to be worth 0 points. She couldn’t be by her partner Subaru’s side at a crucial time, Emilia and Otto, and Garfiel’s family too had been all thrown into danger. So, it was a matter of course that Petra would criticize her for it, and though she had resigned herself to that so she intended to accept all her anger—

“C’mon! That’s not it! I’m not angry at what Beatrice did, it’s because of Subaru who forced Beatrice to do the absurd even after you got together!”

Being rebuked by the red faced Petra, Beatrice’s round eyes blinked in surprise. Then, Petra gave a great sigh at Beatrice who was making a face like she didn’t understand what was said to her.

“You know, Beatrice …Using a lot of magic and falling asleep for a long time… Fighting a really dangerous person together with Otto… From those, it wasn’t just Subaru who had it rough, but

Beatrice too… I’m also worried.”

“Worried, you mean for Betty, I suppose?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying! Beatrice, you have no self-awareness!”

Being told something unexpected、Beatrice was pointing at herself while Petra was indignant at her. She shook her auburn hair, puffed her cheeks and glared at Beatrice,

“Lately, Beatrice is just like Subaru. I understand you wanting to imitate him since you’re always with him, but imitating Subaru is dangerous! You know that right?”

“Th-, that jab came from a completely unexpected angle, in fact…”

Having intended to sympathize with her regarding Subaru’s bad habits, Beatrice was aghast having had that cross over to worrying about herself. And at the same time, It was the truth that she considered it embarrassing that Petra’s worry was directed at her. But, beyond that、

“Petra…Betty is worried that if you keep worrying about everything around you, you’ll be too exhausted to properly sleep, I suppose.”

“Then stop making me worry! Geez! C’mon, come over here! Let’s sleep together! Don’t leave my side tonight!”

“G-Got it, in fact…”

Petra’s passion exploded, Beatrice did as she was told while being overpowered. They cleaned the tea up, ate the snacks, and having finished brushing their teeth she headed to bed with Petra.

While wrapped up together in the sheet, Petra held the hand of Beatrice who was laying on her side. Glancing at her, she gave a coy “Ehehe.”

"Beatrice's hand, it's so small and cute."

"…Alright then, don't you get too full of yourself just because you grew a little in this one month, I suppose. If you're going to tease me like this, then I won't sleep with you anymore, in fact."

"Ah, don't say that. But, I can't help the fact that I'm growing. Because I too, will grow big and pretty, like Big sis Frederica and Big sis Emilia."The drowsy Petra, who was lowering her voice. The fact that she didn't include Ram in her envisioning of the future, Beatrice didn't interject with the many reasons that could be for.

In any case—

"Geez Petra, you're such a worrywart, I suppose."

"I think Beatrice also has that side to her."

And so, exchanging smiles within the same bed, the girls fell to a slumber.

2

"…"

Night, Beatrice having remembered the dryness in her throat, quietly slips from the beddings, and exits the room.

Within the dark halls of the mansion, Beatrice touches her own pale throat, as she walks stepping on the rug, even she herself thought it odd that she remembered her throat was dry.

Beatrice is a spirit, one who needs neither food, nor drink. Of course, It's not that she could not break down what she ingests, then store it as mana, but it was awfully ineffective, and compared to the mana she collected from her contractor, it really was no more than an insignificant amount.

That's why, remembering this dryness in her throat, is simply a habit she has acquired.

She had been staying at this mansion with Subaru and the others, continuing life eating meals and drinking tea like it was obvious, having acted like a regular human, it has turned into a habit for her.

"—Oh my, is that Miss Beatrice?"

While holding onto that feeling, a voice called out to Beatrice who had stepped into the kitchen. Beatrice's eyebrows twitched up at the figure of this unintended previous visitor.

At the back of the tidy, well kept kitchen, the one who turned around was the maid with long blonde hair Frederica. She was out of her usual maidservant clothing, she stood there, a nightgown wrapped around her graceful figure.

"Frederica…It's not good to be up so late, in fact. You'll stunt your growth, I suppose."

"You need not worry on that front. For in my case, I don't wish for any further height… Rather, I even think I'd like to try shrinking a little, there are all kinds of people…"

"—?"

At Beatrice who was still ruminating on the exchange she had with Petra a few minutes ago, Frederica tilted her neck with a question mark over her . So she responded"Nevermind, I suppose"to her、

"Betty's throat was parched, in fact. I'll be taking, one glass of water, I suppose."

"Ah… In that case, would you like to accompany me, Miss Beatrice?"

Saying that, Frederica pointed out the existence of a pot placed atop the kitchen fire. A bubbling noise coming from the boiling contents of the pot, made a slightly warm and sweet fragrance waft around.

"What is that?"

"It's boiled Styroberry, dissolving this into tea makes a very sweet drink. This is something I learned from Master Subaru. It is called Roshan tee."

"Hee, Subaru did."

In front of Beatrice who was impressed, Frederica was briskly preparing their shares of tea. Slowly she lowered a spoonful of the Styroberry boiled in the pot, into the tea.

"Here, have some, Miss Beatrice. It is quite sweet and delicious."

"Since you've gone to such lengths, I will have some, in fact. But still…"

"—?"

"I heard from Petra, I suppose. That Frederica occasionally, ate sweet things in secret… I'm a little moved that I came across that right away, in fact."

"L-Miss Beatrice…!"

Cheeks turning red, Frederica got embarrassed at what Beatrice had pointed out. Her cheeks loosening at that response, Beatrice mouthed out "Roshan tee". Atop her tongue, the soft boiled jamew dissolved lightly, tasting that her gaze slackened absentmindedly.

"Certainly, it's delicious, I suppose… as expected of Subaru's selection, in fact."

"Yes, truly. Subaru is quite knowledgeable, I've also been surprised to no end…that said however, I try to be careful not to make it too sweet."

Similarly Frederica, while she had her mouth to the tea, grumbled while agreeing with Beatrice. That somewhat earnest surprise, made Beatrice narrow her eyes.

Frederica gripped the cup with the slender fingers of her hands. When out of her maidservant clothing, her usual air of a can do, graceful maid was toned down, she looked slightly unreliable, and wrapped by anxiety.

“I have heard what happened to Garf and Sir Otto. The events at the watergate city, how horrible they must have been, I can imagine a part of that, especially because of that, I think.”

“Imagine what, I suppose.”

“How much peril Lady Emilia and Master Subaru, must have been in”

Lowering the tone of her voice, Frederica met her gaze with Beatrice’s. Her beautiful verdant eyes, they were just like the eyes of her brother Garfiel. And so, when Beatrice was looked at by those same eyes as Garfiel’s, she expressed an honest sentiment.

Beatrice was weak, to those eyes. Those sincere eyes made Beatrice’s nature suffer. That her following words correspond to that, Beatrice could imagine so with ease.

“As far as I have known, Garf was built sturdier than a castle. While Otto’s astuteness could not be treated as that of a common man’s. That is why, that both of them would suffer such great injuries that they were rendered immobile, is evidence of how important that was”“…Well, Betty has no objection in fact”

“Having settled matters, you immediately rush to solve the next issue without break… What’s more, your next objective is that questionable land, Auguria Dunes. —Your hardships, are quite easy to foresee.”

“…”

“That is why, Miss Beatrice. I once again ask that you take care of those two”

While saying so, Frederica lowered her head deeply. Shutting her eyes at her bow, Beatrice breathed a sweet, warm sigh.

Frederica’s concerns likely echoed the mansion’s—Nay, the entire populace of the city of Priestella’s feelings as well. Subaru and Emilia, and Anastasia and Julius who are accompanying them as well. The bravery of overcoming the fierce fight at the Watergate city, then immediately jumping onto the next issue, while it was reliable, it also felt horribly dangerous. Somebody has to watch for that.

In that regard, Beatrice must indeed display the wisdom that comes with her age.

"—And also, Miss Beatrice, please take care of yourself as well"

"Myu-"

When she was resolving herself to do it, that one extra sentence struck her by surprise.

Beatrice who was stirring the tea with a long breath, became flustered and returned her gaze to Frederica. So, she engaged those serene verdant eyes. She was weak to those eyes. It was just like she said it was.

"Y-You're… that's cowardly, I suppose."

"Well. I'm worrying for you, Miss Beatrice, and you're calling me cowardly…"

"That's, that's now how I meant it, in fact… not how I meant-"

Her words of resistance losing all strength to them, Frederica crooked her neck at Beatrice's feebleness. Simply, That attitude of hers made Beatrice sorrowful. —It was those, straightforward eyes she was weak to.

"Don't make the same eyes, as Ryuzu, I suppose…"

A long time ago, there was a young girl who gazed at Beatrice with the same earnest eyes, and made of her a straightforward plea. That was to Beatrice, the reminder of the one repayment she regrets being unable to do for her first unforgettable friend. That is why that same plea, Beatrice could not turn down.

And besides, wasn't Frederica's concern, in the same vein as Petra's?

"…If that's case, you're the same vein of human that thinks Betty is in danger, in fact.”

“No, not at all. Simply, I believe you will be put into the danger with Master Subaru, and Lady Emilia getting involved as well will not be much remedy, is all.”

“That is the same, I suppose!”

At Beatrice’s rebuttal, Frederica placed her hand atop her mouth, and laughed elegantly. Turning her face away from that smile of hers, Beatrice put the sweet tea to her lips, and sated her thirst.

While sating, she ruminates over, Petra’s, and Frederica’s words each, and sighs sweetly, “…Geez, Everyone is so bothersome, I suppose”

Subaru, Emilia, and Beatrice herself too in there, the people she has to look over are too many.

END

Julius Juukulius’s Promise Keeping Notebook II (Edited Machine Translation)

…After the battle in the Watergate City of Priestella ended, several days have passed since their departure from the Watergate City.

Driving the dragon carriage, Natsuki Subaru and his party’s goal is to head to the Augria Sand Dunes, which is located at the easternmost edge of the Kingdom of Lugunica. Their objective is to borrow wisdom from the "Sage”.

As the aftermath and effect of the fierce battle still remains, the journey will be correspondingly long. Of course, there may be various problems on the road ahead, but for the time being, the most urgent problem at hand is.

That is…

Julius: “…Anastasia-sama, please come this way. There are steps there.”

Anastasia: “…Hmm, thank you. I’m saved.”

Julius: “…Anastasia-sama, are you tired? I’m going to prepare some tea now.”

Anastasia: “Ah, really? I’m just about thirsty. How intimate.”

Julius: “…Anastasia-sama, it is a little windy, please walk behind me.”

Anastasia: “Ah, you’ve really been watching out for me, I’m really sorry.”

From anywhere, you can see the figures of Anastasia and Julius, who are in a state of constantly talking no matter what they’re doing. Subaru squinted his brown eyes, and stared at them with a complicated expression.

From the current situation, the communication between the master and servant seems very smooth, and there aren't any particularly large problems. Although they weren't explicit, various ideas were intertwined behind their conversation.

Emilia: "Anastasia-san and Julius-san are already so close. It's great."

Saying that, Emilia looked at them along with Subaru and smiled. Of course, the reason why she had such a reaction was that some complex circumstances hadn't been disclosed to her. However, as far as Emilia is concerned, even if the truth was told to her, she would react in the exact same way.

Subaru: "Hmm, this aspect is also very E·M·T… Thank you for being born."

Emilia: "Hm? Subaru, did you just say something?"

Subaru: "No, I am just very grateful for the fact that the being known as Emilia-tan exists and is breathing here, and calling my name. I am really moved."

Emilia: "Sorry, I don't quite understand what you're trying to say."

Although she frowned inadvertently, these were Subaru's candid words. In any case, let's not talk about Subaru's numerous attempts at flirting every day. From Subaru's point of view, the dialogue between Anastasia and Julius is really disturbing.

As if perceiving Subaru's inner thoughts…

Anastasia: "…"

For a moment, Anastasia's eyes met Subaru's and she gently waved to him. After seeing that gesture, Subaru pulled his chin, coughed and said…

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, although it's a little sudden, can you call Julius over there to you?"

Emilia: "Huh? I can, but, what should I do?"

Subaru: “That guy, doesn’t he often frown and stiffens his face? If this continues, sooner or later, he will have permanent wrinkles, so I want Emilia-tan to clear them all with her hands.”

Emilia: “Julius has that many wrinkles between his eyebrows…? Well, I understand. If there are permanent wrinkles on someone’s face, it would be troublesome. I will try my best.”

After listening to Subaru’s request, Emilia walked towards Julius with an energetic expression. Subaru looked at her reliable back and winked at Anastasia.

After pulling her away from Emilia and Julius…

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun… Julius is far too intimate.”

Anastasia’s previously soft expression and comfortable Kararagi tone disappeared, then she softly complained with a serious expression.

If this was the usual Anastasia, she would never have such an accent and attitude. This is a matter of course, because she is both Anastasia and not Anastasia. Strictly speaking, although the physical body belongs to Anastasia, its interior is inhabited by another existence.

That existence is called "Echidna". The same name as the wicked witch known to Subaru, but she denies having a wicked personality and claims that she is a kind-hearted artificial spirit.

This spirit has borrowed Anastasia’s body and was acting as a kind of accomplice with Subaru. They mainly share a relationship of sharing this secret.

Anastasia: “But, the ill-effects of this situation have been transferred to me so quickly…”

Subaru: “You say that as if it’s someone else’s business. This situation is not good for you. In order to avoid unnecessary confusion and suspicion, you and I have established a secret relationship.”

Anastasia: “Can you think about the way you phrased that? It sounds too suspicious.”

Subaru: “Oh, sorry, I will be careful.”

Anastasia lowered her voice while reverting to her original way of speaking. However, Echidna’s attitude always gets on Subaru’s nerves this way. If her wish for Subaru to believe that she has nothing to do with that devil comes true, then his attitude would change.

Anastasia: “Even if you say that, I don’t know anything about the creator that you’re speaking of. If we are like that, the foundation of my individuality will be shaken.”

Subaru: “Although your words were exaggerated, even your foundation is really shaky. Can’t you get along with Julius more naturally? It’s creepy to watch.”

Anastasia: “Isn’t it impossible? I’m also trying to recall everything I can about Ana, paying special attention to her etiquette… But I still don’t know how to get along with Julius.”

Facing Echidna, who lowered her head to argue, Subaru scratched his head.

Indeed, as she said, the current situation is very complicated. Affected by the authority of "Gluttony", one of the Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult, Julius’s "name" disappeared from this world. As a result, Julius, like Rem, was in the state of being forgotten by everyone.

Now the only ones that can remember Julius in the whole world are probably Julius himself and the foreign entity of this world, Subaru. Therefore, it was difficult for Echidna to decide what kind of attitude she should treat Julius with.

Subaru: “If he knew you were in Anastasia-san’s body, I doubt he’d have the confidence to convince himself…”

Anastasia: “I also want to avoid injuring Ana’s body unnecessarily. However, I don’t know Julius’s flaws. This is where I have expectations of you."

Subaru: "…You, aren't you actually enjoying this?"

Anastasia: "Of course not? I'm serious, very serious, very very serious. It's really quite a pity to be suspected."

The more one argues, the more suspicious they seem, it's because the other party is Echidna. Without receiving a decent answer, Subaru sighed loudly.

Subaru: "I know, I know. First off, I will take a good look at the matter between you and Julius. Anyway, I will tell Julius after a while…"

Anastasia: "I'm sorry. But I can only rely on you."

Subaru: "You really are Echidna and not Echidna, right?"

Anastasia: "Your contempt towards my creator is really serious!"

Tolerating his casual doubts to her limit, Echidna raised her voice. To Subaru, that kind of emotional response feels very unlikely for the witch who doesn't understand the human heart, so he can dispel his doubts for the time being.

Then, under the weight of Echidna's gaze and expectations, Subaru turned over to the problematic Julius and called him over. From Julius's perspective, because he shouldn't remember ever being called like this, their conversation will be a little unreasonable, but how well Subaru can speak depends on the following question.

Subaru: "Hey, Julius, I have something to say…"

Julius: "Hmm? Subaru? Can you tell Emilia-sama to stop worrying about my face…?"

Julius, who said this, asked him for help with a troubled expression. In front of Julius, Emilia is wearing an expression filled with determination and is trying to get closer to Julius. Julius stopped her advances, and the two held hands, as if they were dancing.

Emilia: “Please don’t be shy, Julius. I won’t do anything bad! I just want to rub away the wrinkles between your eyebrows!”

Julius: “No, Emilia-sama, why on earth would you want to do something like that… Hey, Subaru, you tell Emilia-sama to stop too.”

Subaru: “You! Julius, you bastard! Why are you dancing with my Emilia-tan!”

Julius: “I am the one that doesn’t want to dance, isn’t your anger unreasonable?!”

Hearing Julius’s troubled words, Subaru quickly squeezed between the two. In place of Julius, Subaru took up Emilia’s hands.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, calm down. Just leave Julius to me… Wow, your hands are so small! Your fingers are so thin! So cute!”

Emilia: “Ah, eh? But, Subaru said between Julius’s eyebrows…”

Subaru: “Ah, that was a mistake. Take care of Anastasia-san for me. She seems a little tired. Help her relax her shoulders.”

Emilia: “…Is this really all right? How should I put it… Subaru, are you hiding something?”

Subaru: “Exposed?! Actually…, I really like Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “That…, that I know. I know it well… Subaru is truly a dunderhead.”

Emilia’s face flushed slightly, she turned her head and left in a hurry. She will probably run to Echidna’s side. After entrusting Echidna to her, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief.

Subaru: “Fuu, I kind of passed the round by misleading her…”

Julius: “You truly did your very best. And, although I know how you think, to think that you can confess so effortlessly…”

Subaru: “What’s the matter, is it unexpected? You think I don’t know my place again, right?”

Julius: “No, I admire it. I can say that this is respectable. You truly are outstanding.”

He commented this way with a serious expression, and Subaru’ mouth puckered as he said nothing.

After being praised by him, instead of being happy, he felt very uncomfortable. Probably because Julius can truly understand the meaning of his confession better than Emilia.

Subaru: “Ah, forget about my passion for Emilia-tan. I have something else to say.”

Julius: “If it’s the matter of Emilia-sama just now, it seems that the cause was you…”

Subaru: “You’re annoying, don’t always just stick to the past. The most important thing is the present and the future… Uh, sorry, I didn’t mean that just now.”

Stabbing at his sore spot, he apologized for what he couldn’t help but blurt out. In response, Julius frowned his handsome eyebrows, while shrugging his slender shoulders.

Julius: “No. Actually, I think you are right. Even if I recall the past, I can’t get back what I lost. I can’t just stop walking just to get back to the things I want.”

Subaru: “…Well, if you can think of it so positively, I won’t say much. I am trying my best to not tell you, but I still have something that I noticed.”

Julius: “What is it that you noticed?”

Julius narrowed his yellow eyes and urged Subaru to speak. Just now, Subaru just chose the wrong wording. He chose his next words carefully while saying:

Subaru: “That is the sense of distance from Anastasia-san. I know that you and Anastasia-san have a master-servant relationship, and Anastasia-san also knows this information.”

Julius: “…Sure enough, did it seem unnatural to your eyes as well?”

Under Subaru’s accusation, Julius took the lead as he knew it. Facing this answer, Subaru frowned, but he quickly changed his way of thinking.

This is the relationship between Julius and Anastasia. In this case, although the other party is Echidna it is impossible for him to not notice the trouble in her heart. Even if he is in a difficult situation, Julius will not change the quality of how much he cares about her.

Subaru: “If you understand, then I didn’t have to say it. Your relationship with Anastasia-san needs to be rebuilt. When the foundation will be unstable, if you build strenuous blocks atop of it…”

Julius: “A collapse is inevitable. …I understand your opinion, Subaru.”

Subaru: “So…”

Julius: “However, for me, there is indeed a path I have travelled. Even if it disappeared briefly, only a part of it is in me and you.”

Speaking in a calm voice, Julius, who seems to be reexamining himself, weaved words. Savoring the color of grief contained in his echo, Subaru could not continue and say the second sentence.

Subaru thought about Echidna. Given the situation between her and Anastasia, his priority was not to create unnecessary confusion among the group. Although the result of this behaviour is forcing Julius unreasonably. To Subaru, this is far too unreasonable.

Julius is also fighting a lonely battle that no one else knows about and is in a state of being injured.

And Subaru who knows his situation very well, if he forgets to be considerate for him, then who else will actually remember the fact that the existence known as Julius Juukulius certainly existed.

Julius: “If it makes Anastasia-sama feel troubled, it is due to my incompetence as a knight. But even if the people around me forget how they used to treat me, I will remember how I treat the people around me. I thought… I won’t lie about this feeling.”

Subaru: “…Even if it turns out to be blunt?”

Julius: “Even if the result of the behaviour appears to be blunt… I respect Anastasia-sama, have pledged my allegiance to her, and believe that I have established an amicable relationship with Ricardo and Mimi. I am reluctant to let go and turn a blind eye to all this… Is this greed?”

From his attitude towards this question, Subaru could feel Julius’s honest thoughts.

If Subaru calls it "greed" to Julius here and makes him pay attention to his behaviour, Subaru thinks that he will probably accept it sincerely, and choose to leave after careful consideration.

Concern about one’s surroundings and restraining oneself. Moreover, what is the correct way of existence for a knight to serve his master to the best he can?

And so…

Subaru: “…No, it’s not greed. Of course you can want more.”

Julius: “…Is this true?”

Subaru: “Of course. You are right. Why do you have to listen to the words of someone who is inexplicable and accept the loss you don’t want to. That’s unreasonable.”

Facing Julius’s question, Subaru finally decided to answer with his own feelings. Hearing these words, Julius opened his eyes slightly, then nodded deeply. Then…

Julius: “If you say that to me, I would think so too. …This is my wish.”

Subaru: “I feel like you’re trying to put the responsibility on me? I am not responsible for your memory.”

Julius: “I don’t want to hold you accountable. It’s just that I want to remember what happened today.”

Julius said this while writing smoothly on the notebook he took out from his pocket. That thing is a "notebook" that Julius uses to record various things recently.

Subaru: “I heard that you are writing a notebook. It feels strange. What did you write?”

Julius: “Indeed… Your appearance frequency is quite high for the time being.”

Subaru: “You’re not the kind of person who would describe a roast book as a notebook or something like that, are you?!”

Julius smiled faintly, and did not respond to Subaru’s cry, and jotted down in his notebook. Seeing his somewhat happy look, Subaru stopped scratching his cheeks in protest and sighed.

Although he feels sorry for Echidna, it’s best to let her suffer a little. …Subaru will also work hard.

END

Volume 22

Chapter 19-33

Chapter 19:
Whereabouts of the Sage

1

At the unforeseen fight against heavy odds, spread out were the winds of the aftermath of the battle at the sixth floor of the Pleiades Watchtower.

An enshrouding cloud of dust, the man and woman grappling with each other were covered in sweat and mud.

And, looking at those two with cold eyes, from every other direction—.

Subaru: "What's with that look in your eyes?! You're saying that I've… That I've done something wrong?! I've done nothing wrong, I've done nothing wrong—!!"

Julius: "Subaru, don't try to fool us so much."

Ram: "There are some good sides to him is what Ram thought, but in the end, Barusu is Barusu."

Those were the comments made by the newly-arrived Julius and Ram in regards to Subaru, who had been grabbed by Shaula.

Regardless,

Julius: "We were fortunate to be able to reunite safe and sound. It's also good news that you woke up, but… the situation is difficult to comprehend unless you explain it with words."

Subaru: "I would if it was something I could explain… shit! Let go!"

Shaula: "No~pe~!"

Seeing Shaula clinging to Subaru's arms, Julius, whose hand was at the grip of his sword, shrugged his shoulders. He must have perceived that she didn't have any intentions of attacking them.

Even Subaru understood that point, but it was true that he was having a hard time trying to get her away.

Subaru: “Don’t just watch, help me get her off…! She has goddamn super-human strength…”

Ram: “Your lips are curving into a smile, Pervusu.”

Subaru: “They’re not, don’t team up with her! Don’t take it at face value! Emilia-tan, that hurts! I don’t think it’ll be too much of a help if you pull my hair?!”

Emilia: “Ah, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to help you, at all.”

Subaru: “You’re apologizing for that?!”

The stubborn Shaula did not let go of Subaru’s arm, and Emilia, with a somewhat blank expression, continued pulling Subaru’s hair. Aside from that, Beatrice, who got trapped between the jostling Subaru and Shaula, was turning her eyes in all directions, in a state of being crushed, saying “Kiyyuu”.

Anastasia: “What’s this… Even after all that trouble, seems it’s all been changin’ into a pretty good mood.”

Meili: “What’s onii-san doing just after waking u~p? I don’t do well with noisiness, but I’m gla~d onii-san woke up.”

Having slowly come down the stairs, Anastasia and Meili had also joined up with them. With this, all except Rem and Patrasche, who were supposed to be undergoing their treatment, had gathered here.

It was all well and good that they’d been able to reunite, but at this rate they wouldn’t be able to calm down and have a proper conversation.

Subaru: “A-ny-way! Everyone, calm down!—Let’s talk!”

2

Overworking his throat after just waking up, Subaru managed to get everyone to follow his lead, as he tried to take control of the situation.

With that being said, within the group sitting in a circle, Shaula kept latching onto Subaru's right arm, and on his left was Emilia, sitting seiza style, at a distance enough to make him shiver. And Beatrice was settled on his lap; it would be an extremely extravagant battle formation in the eyes of an outsider.

Ram: "Repulsive."

Subaru: "Did you even see the disaster a minute ago? Does it look to you that I wanted this to happen to my right side? My bones hurt real bad. At this rate, my arm's gonna necrotize."

Saying that to Ram, who'd spat those words out, Subaru looked at his constricted right arm.

Being hugged by a half-naked girl, would be a dream-like experience for many, but in reality, rather than experiencing the softness of her skin, the flesh of his arm that had been squeezed and the pain of his joints that went to the limits had a scary effect on his bones and nerves. Frankly speaking, they could have been torn off.

Subaru: "Well then, before my arm gets torn off from its roots I would like to proceed with the conversation, but… before that, first of all, everyone, thank goodness you're all alright. Though it's scary that Patrasche and Rem are unconfirmed…"

Beatrice: "You're still being doubtful, I suppose. It's alright, in fact. Everyone is alright, I suppose."

Julius: "It is just as Beatrice-sama says, though your uneasiness and concern are justified. You can properly visit them afterwards. —As you'd expect, this time we were all scared to death."

Beatrice and Julius nodded at Subaru, who was delighted at their reunion.

Julius, once again, put on a grim expression on his face, as if reflecting back upon the moment straight after they had been separated back at the sand sea, Julius: “Immediately after the space fissured, all of us, except for you, Anastasia-sama and Miss Ram, fell onto the other side into the flower garden of the witchbeasts, you see. There, after many twists and turns, we arrived at the Watchtower and were able to get shelter.”

Meili: “Bu~t, onii-san and the others weren’t there, and since we knew they couldn’t fight, we were worrie~d.”

Julius traced Beatrice’s earlier explanation, and Meili agreed as well, pouting.

Their uneasiness was only a matter of course as well. When they had fallen into the underground area of the sand sea, Subaru and the rest had been outside and disappeared, which had made them worry, though that went for both sides.

Meili: “Onee-san really lost her composure. We had a tough time when she snapped a~t that Sage-san. Such that, when thinking back to it now, it sends shivers down my spi~ne.”

Emilia: “Hey, Meili. You don’t have to say all that.”

At Meili’s flirtatious glance unsuitable for her age, Emilia objected, her face going red. Her comments were no exaggeration: that could be easily understood by looking at Emilia, who was blushing all the way up to her ears.

Though imprudent, he was genuinely happy to see her worry for him.

Subaru: “I see~ I see~, so Emilia-tan was worried. It looks like Beako was worried to the point of crying her eyes out as well, I’m such a lucky guy.”

Emilia: “Geez, Subaru, joking about again like that… Also, Beatrice wouldn’t have cried her eyes out. Just around half of that. Yeah that’s right.”

Beatrice: “If you want to look out for others then do it properly till the very end, in fact, you natural airhead…!”

Emilia: "—?"

With the truth that she'd been driven to tears exposed, Beatrice pouted while Emilia remained clueless. Loosening his cheeks at that pleasant exchange, Subaru looked up at Julius.

Subaru: "If that's so, then you must have had gotten pretty worried too, isn't it. It's unfortunate I couldn't see that expression of yours."

Julius: "Of course, I was greatly agitated. Regardless of you, because of Anastasia-sama and miss Ram. It was regretful to lose the two frail ladies somewhere beyond reach. Without showing you all my form of having a pale face and walking about in worry, currently I am only experiencing relief in my fragile spirit."

Subaru: "Why'd you make a conversation about you getting scared so graceful?"

Subaru twisted his lips at Julius, who was touching his bangs as if out of habit, with a bittersweet smile on his face.

Without him putting up a strong front, and without even showing a weak side of his, it was an absolutely boring result. With that, Meili started laughing lightly at the exchange of the two.

When they questioned her by merely gesturing through their eyes, she placed her braided hair against her mouth, and

Meili: "Oh it's nothi~ng."

And, she deceived them with a smile which seemingly held deep meaning.

Subaru: "Well, from this I get that everyone who got separated was worried for us. Nobody is missing in the end, so it's something which we can look back on and smile now."

Ram: "Only Barusu can be so boldly shameless. Even now, Ram's petite figure and soft heart is about to break apart with uneasiness and fear just by thinking about it."

Subaru: "Is the nee-sama who, among all the people I know, the one which seems to have the toughest heart, saying something?”

The truth is, amongst all of Subaru’s acquaintances, Ram was the one who wielded the utmost mental strength. Her remarks seemed to be a silly joke as if a matter of course, but he ended up intently looking at Ram’s face, who was sitting right in front of him.

White skin with light crimson eyes. And of course well ordered facial features, along with refreshing beauty. Beautiful facial features like a suspicious berry found in the valley of sweetness and elegance. No matter how you look at her, she was the same Ram as always.

Ram: “—Put an end to that unpleasant gaze. Looking so intently, what do you want?”

Subaru: “Well, I was just thinking that you’re really Ram.”

Ram: “This is totally hopeless now, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “Stop making judgements without any proper subjects! Not that, I mean…”

Subaru replied in a flummoxed manner back at Ram who’d cut off and cast aside Subaru’s words.

The incident that had occurred just before he had lost his consciousness in the underground area came up in his mind—Ram had protected Subaru with her injured body by standing in front of the Centaur.

Her delicate figure seen from the back, which had been peppered with wounds, had faced that formidable enemy without any prospects of victory. Back then, he’d felt the terror of losing her, seeing her figure that showed no fear of being wounded; and now, both of them had made it back alive safely.

He’d realized that fact by talking with the usually fearless her.

Subaru: “Sure enough, there’s still this sense of distance between us. It did get strangely loathsome and worse, but when I think back on it, that too was…No, that still shouldn’t be a good memory to reflect back on.”

Ram: “I don’t understand what you’re trying to grumble out. Spit it all out. Like a man.”

Subaru: ““I’m glad we’re both safe” is what I mean. Plus, I’m also glad you protected and saved me at the end there.”

Ram: “…That was a waste of time.”

Subaru: “How can you say that?!”

Even though he’d honestly expressed his gratitude, it meant absolutely zilch to her.

Following that, Emilia let out a stifled giggle seeing Subaru get miffed like that.

Emilia: “It’s okay, Subaru. It’s just because Ram’s a little embarrassed.”

Subaru: “Nee-sama’s embarrassed…? Wouldn’t the heavens and earth switching places be more believable?”

Emilia: “N-Not really. Perhaps it’s because you kept hugging Ram till she woke up, so she’s like to be embarrassed. Even when separated, ‘twas rough.”

Ram: “Emilia-sama!”

Emilia, had secretly whispered that into his ear, but Ram had reacted angrily to her words. She raised her eyes up unusually in anger as if she’d read Emilia’s lips or something,

Ram: “I think it would be better that you didn’t judge things using your own criteria. Because I don’t think I want to work for a dunderhead who doesn’t understand people’s feelings.”

Emilia: “…When you say “dunderhead”, you aren’t referring to me right?”

Ram: “I’m not. Emilia-sama, you do properly think about people’s feelings, if there's anyone who's got nothing to do with being a dunderhead, it would be you; it'd be so ridiculous of me to say otherwise."

Emilia: "I see. Erm, wait up, let me think for a bit."

Emilia began to brood in earnest thought at what Ram had said, whose words had been plastered with great sarcasm. Meanwhile, Ram glared at Subaru with a glint in her eye as sharp as a blade, and then stirred her lips into speech, saying, "Forget this."

Subaru reflexively nodded at her threatening attitude. When he'd woken up, he remembered that there'd been the traces of someone who'd been lying on the bed together with him. He'd thought for sure it'd been Beatrice, but it seemed like according to what she'd said now, it—.

Subaru: "Uh-oh, I've forgotten it, I've forgotten it. I said I've forgotten it."

Ram: "Good. You're not a dunderhead… Emilia-sama. Let's leave it here."

Emilia: "Ergh, has it come to Ram gradually becoming more outspoken about me….?"

Emilia looked at her with reproach, but Ram turned her aside with a look of feigned ignorance.

In any case, Subaru turned his eyes away from Ram, who seemed like she didn't want to touch on this subject anymore, and looked towards the last of his companions, at Anastasia.

She sat beside Julius, fiddling with her Pon-Pons that adorned her hat as usual. But, when she noticed Subaru's gaze, she gave him a graceful smile.

Anastasia: "Aah, so yer done talkin'? Natsuki-kun, I thought yer'd forgotten about me."

Subaru: "I hope you can forgive me for my ego in prioritizing my own. I'm glad that you're safe too. Speaking of the last battle in the underground area, I haven’t got a clue about what happened after”

Anastasia: “Are you goin’ ta make me remember those scary thoughts where I too was thrown down into that pitch black darkness? Natsuki-kun ‘n Ram-san, ‘n… Ah, ‘n Patrasche-chan were fightin’ their damndest, so the witchbeast was ignorin’ me. I wasn’t of any use there, but I was goin’ to be of use for the negotiations.”

Subaru: “Negotiations?”

Anastasia: “With the “Sage-san” who helped us, ya know.”

Anastasia pointed at Shaula, who was still nestling her face against Subaru’s right arm.

When he heard negotiations with this, Subaru frowned, but Anastasia gave him a wry smile.

Anastasia: “Ahnono, we’re also quite confused. ‘Cause, she wouldn’ answer anythin’ till only a few minutes ago regardless of me pushin’ ‘n pullin’ her, but with you Natsuki-kun, she’s madly in love.”

Subaru: “She wouldn’t speak with you? This thing?”

Shaula: “It’s not this thing, it’s Shaula. Master~”

Subaru: “Shut up…”

Subaru responded dejectedly at Shaula getting miffed, and Anastasia shrugging her shoulders.

Certainly, when he only looked at the situation, she had barely said a single word to Anastasia and the rest. However, she’d been nattering away at Subaru. So in reality, just about everything of this situation was unexpected.

Subaru: “When someone suddenly nestles over to you with 100 Favorability, even if they happen to be a beautiful woman, this one’s Favorability is zero, so it isn’t something worth me getting perplexed over…”

Shaula: “—! Just now, did you say that I’m a beautiful woman?!”

Subaru: “You sure have sharp ears when it suits you, HEY!”

Once again, Subaru tried to push Shaula’s head off with his empty left hand. However, the more he struggled to do that, the more Shaula’s strength increased, eventually leading Subaru to give in.

In the end, the out of breath Subaru shook his head, saying, “It can’t be helped” with Shaula still clinging to his right arm.

Subaru: “For now, let’s put off all these trivial matters and talk about what should be talked about. I don’t want us to keep going around and around in circles with a lack of explanation. I want you to tell us about various things.”

Shaula: “Suuuuuure thing, if it’s something Master has to say, then let’s hop to it!”

Julius: “Indeed, your collaboration is a great help. So, I wish to ask about this. You are the “Sage” who retired to this Pleiades Watchtower… Is my understanding correct?”

Shaula: *Turning away SFX*

Subaru: “Answer him! Didn’t you just say you’d talk!”

Quite in contrast to her friendly smile, Shaula turned her face away sharply from Julius’ question. Straight after Subaru got pissed off at her poor attitude, Shaula turned her pouting face towards him.

Shaula: “Mymy, what happened Master. Master didn’t you hammer it into me not to tell, speak or say anything unnecessary to anyone no matter what they ask. I’m just loyally abiding by what you told meeeee. I can’t believe you’re angry! I’m gonna file a case against you!”

Subaru: “Your Master is absolutely awful!”

Shaula: “Yeah, yeah. Master’s suuuuch an awful person. I should demand an apology from him, and for him to deeply reflect on himself.”

Subaru: “So, calling people Master Master as you please is just…

Huh, Emilia-tan, what's with those eyes?"

Emilia had narrowed her round eyes at Subaru and Shaula's strange spiel. Subaru braced himself in case it was another inexplicable outburst, but Emilia continued by saying, "Well,"

Emilia: "It may not really be a big deal, but… How can I explain it. Isn't the way you both talk quite similar?"

Subaru: "Does it look like I'm talking with such a chavvish tone?!"

Emilia: "That's not what I mean, the expressions you both use is what I meant. You see, you always joke about even during serious conversations, right? That's the feeling I'm getting."

Subaru: "You think of me like that?!"

Subaru was horrified by that completely unexpected evaluation of hers, but Emilia paid no heed to him. On the contrary,

Julius: "Hmmm…Surely now that you mention it."

Ram: "Barusu's typical conversational ability? There's trouble lying in wait ahead, then."

Meili: "But I really li~ke Onii-san's way of talking?"

Anastasia: "Though, everyone's got some manner that sits heavy on yer stomach, dont'cha think?"

Subaru's mouth gaped wide open as everyone appended their own evaluations on top of each other. However, a little girl had furiously lost her temper in Subaru's stead—And that girl had been Beatrice.

Beatrice: "Really, don't go saying just whatever you feel like, I suppose. Not only are all of you acting way too familiar with Subaru, you're also acting far too clingy ever since a while ago, in fact. How hard you think this is for Betty, despite taking Subaru's hand, I suppose! It's unfair, in fact!"

The topic had changed quite a bit midway, but Beatrice's had a gleeful disposition to her. However, Shaula turned Beatrice's protests aside, with a look on her face that a beautiful girl shouldn't be making.

Beatrice's already lacking amount of patience reached its limit when she saw Shaula's complete lack of concern completely expressed on merely her face.

However, before that, Subaru's karate chop hit Shaula square on her forehead.

Subaru: "That's enough!"

Shaula: "Ow… Though it doesn't actually hurt, isn't that abuse?! It is abuse…! Master used violence against meeeee! I'll be seeing you in court!"

Subaru: "Pipe down! You can speak with other people properly from now on! Or this talk will go nowhere!"

Shaula: "…Would that be okay?"

Subaru: "Yes it would! Rather, I recommend it! It's about time for you to start speaking seriously!"

Shaula's face turned to one of complete surprise towards the frowning Subaru's complaints. And then, little by little, her facial expression changed, first surprise, then comprehension, then assent, and finally deep gratitude.

Then, she said,

Shaula: "Yippeeeee! Yaaaaay~! I got permission to taaalk! Now I don't have to play the act of the deeply mysterious femme fatal anymore~! Hip, Hip, Hoooooray!"

Subaru: "Now not even a fragment of it is left behind when it comes to that factor!!"

Her face was lit up in a deep smile, if she had a tail, she'd probably be wagging it around in full swing.

Though as a matter of fact, Shaula's ponytail was swinging about in delight as she still held on tightly onto his arm, with her ponytail smacking against his forehead, his cheeks, and god knows what else repeatedly.

3

Subaru: "—So, it's okay to say that you're the "Sage" from the rumors, right?"

The racket had died down for a bit, and finally, they'd truly reached the discourse that they should have undertaken before said racket.

Shaula, who'd let go of Subaru's right arm, was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the group, now sat in a circle, surrounding her. Incidentally, his right arm had become numb, and he couldn't raise it. Nor would it move.

Shaula: "…"

Subaru: "Answer me. You're the "Sage" right?"

Shaula: "Hmm~ The answer to that question is difficult."

Having been greeted with silence to his question Subaru had once again repeated the same query. Following that, Shaula replied vaguely, putting on a sour expression as if she'd ate a pickled plum.

Subaru frowned on receiving that answer, revealing his bewilderment. However, it was Emilia who raised her hand up, in place of him. She spoke out, prefacing her words with, "In which case"

Emilia: "Setting aside whether you're the "Sage" … The one they say guarded the Sand Dunes all this time inside of this tower would be you, right?"

Shaula: "Ah, that's meeeee for sure. For 400 years, every single day forever and eeeever guarding the midst of this sand, and each barren day I've spent would be something that would make both the one reciting it, and the one hearing it cry….!"

Emilia: "Poor thing…tch"

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, don’t get affected by it. And you as well, don’t go exchanging unnecessary feelings.”

The empathetic Emilia’s eyes teared over at Shaula who gave her response as she shook her fist. As he calmed Emilia down, Subaru, based off Shaula’s current answer, exchanged looks with Julius.

Julius gave a nod at that exchange of looks, and took charge of the conversation, speaking out a: “So,”

Julius: “Would I be right in recognizing you as having bore the burden of working as a “Sage” for 400 years, as is typically well-known? Shaula-sama.”

Shaula: “You’re making me blush, attaching stuff like “Sama”. I’m not used to it, so you can address me without using any honorifics like normal. Using Shaula-sama…Dhehehe”

Julius: “Then, I shall correct myself. Surely the one that is typically known as the “Sage” is you? Shaula.”

Shaula: “Weell, I’m not so sure about that? Even if that’s what’s typically said, I don’t ever leave the tower, so I don’t know anything about rumors from the outside. It feels unexpectedly strange, doesn’t it? Like I’mmmmm being called a “Sage.””

Shaula’s facial expression, which had been completely at ease, completely changed to one tinged in thoughtfulness, and the atmosphere did too. Julius also narrowed his eyes, facing the depth of her gaze which seemed like it was searching for that.

Her current remark wasn’t the kind which you could ignore, even if you weren’t Julius. Because, what if Shaula’s words were the truth…

Julius: “If you aren’t the “Sage”, then it’d turn out that the legend of the “Sage” Shaula is a completely incorrect rumor. Or, is it saying that there’s a Shaula who’s considered to be a “Sage” besides you?”

Shaula: “The “Sage” Shaula from those rumors is someone I’m not aware of, buuuuut, as far as I know, there’s no acquaintance of mine named Shaula other than meeeeee. I was given this name from Master as well, so Master must've given it just to me…Buuut."

Shaula's gaze had fleetingly turned towards Subaru, but Subaru hadn't ever named anyone Shaula in the first place, nothing nor nobody.

However, it was a fact that there was a certain ring to the name, "Shaula". Shaula too was the name of a star, it was the star name that formed Scorpius—and its meaning was "The Stinger".

Naturally, his thoughts extended to the true colors behind the white rays of light which had been fired from the Watchtower, however, when it came to getting that information out her, he wouldn't mind postponing it until later. Right now, what had to take priority was a different issue.

Shaula: "Since Master seems like he has no clue, Shaula is just myyyyyy name of course. Master gave that name just to meeeee… There's no need for any other Shaulas."

Julius: "I see. You seem to be really fond of that Master. —Must've been a sinful guy, huh."

Subaru: "Quit looking at me when saying that. Those are false accusations. Innocence presumed."

Ram: ""Guilty as proven"… That's what I think."

Subaru: "Don't you take pride in being a lawful nation?!"

Setting aside the interruption, he couldn't catch any glimpses of there being a lie in what Shaula was saying. If that was the case, then was she different to the one from the legends?

Suddenly, Anastasia started to rummage through her chest pocket, without any consideration for the individuals conversing with each other. Then, lo and behold, she pulled some coins out from her purse for some reason or other.

Subaru: "Don't tell me… you're suddenly counting your money?"

Anastasia: "Even though it's my hobby, 'n feelin' my change makes me work better when I'm deep in thought… That ain't my intention. Here ya go, you'll get what I mean when ya properly see the coins of the Kingdom."

Saying that, Anastasia tossed the coins on her palm over at the befuddled Subaru. He hurriedly caught them; what she'd thrown over to him were 4 coins: a copper coin, a silver coin, a gold coin and a holy gold coin.

There was probably no way that it could be something like a bribe for Shaula, or an alternative of a tip. Making sure to check the coins as she had told him to, Subaru noticed the designs engraved into them.

He hadn't really taken a good look at their money up until now, but —.

Subaru: "So it's common just about everywhere to engrave pictures and designs and stuff on money. How strange."

Anastasia: "I don't see what's strange about it? We've gotta know from where the money comes from… Besides, it's 'cause money always comes with the history of its country. That's why stuff that's intrinsic ta the country's history is engraved on it."

Subaru: "Hmmmm…?"

Subaru turned his attention to the engravings on the coins whilst he listened to Anastasia's explanation. And when he looked closely…, I see, the coins each have different designs engraved on them—.

Emilia: "The Holy Gold Coins have the "Divine Dragon", the Gold Coins have the "First Generation Sword Saint", the Silver Coins have the "Sage" and the Copper Coins have "Lugnica's Royal Castle" on them. Didn't you know?"

Subaru: "E-Emilia-tan is speaking like a super-learned character with what she's saying…!"

Emilia: "Or more so, it's obvious stuff I'd say. Were you so unaware when you were shopping that you never looked at the money properly?"

Subaru whistled innocently, covering his tracks, at Emilia's painful inquiry. And just after he checked them as he did that, the engravings on the money were exactly as she'd seemed to explain them.

A Dragon was engraved on the Holy Gold Coin, a man with a sharp look was engraved on the Gold Coin, the Royal Castle was engraved on the Copper Coin, and finally, engraved on the Silver Coin was a…

Subaru: "A young, handsome dude, I guess. They don't bear the slightest resemblance to Shaula."

Beatrice: "But, the guy on this drawing is what appears as Shaula to the world, in fact."

A handsome man with long hair, and intrepid features was carved there on the coin. Naturally, even if you were to try and change the angle of it, it seemed unlikely that they'd be mistaken as a half-naked hottie of a woman.

Shaula herself was pestering him with a "Lemme see!", so he handed the coin over to her. When he did so, she gazed at the Silver Coin close up, and said,

Shaula: "Heeh, rather well made huh? It looks exactly like Master."

Subaru: "Where are you seeing that?! Ah, no, if the "Sage" that's engraved there is your Master, then what do you mean by me resembling the Master inside your memories?"

Shaula "Geez, what are you talking about? Myyyy Master is the only Master."

Subaru: "So, let me restate myself once again. WHERE ARE YOU SEEING THAT?!"

He cleared his throat, and shouted at the top of his lungs at Shaula, who was comparing him with the design that was engraved on the Silver Coin. Even if they differed in hairdo, their expression and in the first place even their race seemed to be different. The thing they matched in was their gender it seemed. Were he to judge it only by the category of having a good-looking face, then Julius would be much closer than Subaru was to it.

However, Shaula looked at him with dissatisfaction, saying "Eeeeeh" to Subaru's opinion.

Shaula: "Looks fairly accurate from what I can seeeee. You have hair, two eyes, two ears, and a nose and mouth."

Subaru: "That sort of level?! Aren't you complimenting it like a preschooler's portrait?!"

Emilia: "I guess that I too still don't think that Subaru and this Sage resemble each other…"

Though Shaula had grown sulky, Subaru's verdict, and of course, Emilia's outed it. Their verdicts were reasonable. However, Shaula still didn't look convinced,

Shaula: "It's because I'mmmm not very good at comparing people's faces. Men and women are just about different, but after that, isn't stuff roughly the same? … After that, it'd come down to size, wouldn't it?"

Beatrice: "She looked at Betty right now and came out with that, I suppose, this woman."

Subaru: "It's okay, since Beako being cute and small is unique. Putting that aside, you have such a sense of telling beauty and yet you call me, out of all people, your Master. You're mistaking me completely for someone else!"

Taking advantage of Shaula's excuse, Subaru shook off some of the dishonor he'd accrued so far from the false accusations. It had been a ridiculous suggestion in the first place. Of course, he didn't even need to consider it, Subaru had nothing in common with Shaula, and that was a relief.

Or so he thought, but Shaula shook her head at that, and said,

Shaula: "Ah. Meeee having found Master wasn't a question about appearance, so there's no issue with that."

Subaru: “Not about appearance, you say, then how did you find out? By aura?”

Shaula: “Your smell.”

Subaru: “…”

Shaula: “Well no, I mean, I can’t think of anyone except Master who’d let such a dark, pungent smell, to the point that my nose seems to scrunch up, hang off from them.”

Subaru: “Honestly, that the first time I’ve had my feelings hurt like that! What, am I that bad?!”

When that keyword, smell, had come out, Subaru had readied himself up for just a moment. However, his readiness was shattered in one blow by Shaula’s choice of words straight after.

Shaula had a mystified look to her set towards Subaru, whose face had turned red at her unexpected evaluation.

Shaula: “Why did you get mad? Ah, is it because I said “pungent”? It’s fine! Master’s smell is really bad, but it’s the type of smell I wanna keep smelling and smelling! It’s that of the unusual cooking variety, not the sort that makes you spew, so it’s cool!”

Subaru: “Girls don’t say “spew” and “it’s cool” together! You didn’t need to follow it up after that!”

Subaru covered his face with his palm, about to break down crying on the spot, feeling rather ashamed.

Subaru: “Urghh… I thought I’d just about gotten used to people saying that, but being humiliated like this is far too much. What did I ever do to you…”

Emilia: “I-It’s okay, Subaru. I perfectly understand. So, shall we bathe properly afterwards? “

Subaru: “Perfectly understand it my ass!”

The anguishedly, dented Subaru had become useless. Beatrice let out a sigh as she looked at Emilia consoling him from the side. And then, she grabbed ahold of Subaru's underarm, and leaned her weight on his back,

Beatrice: "I understand the reason why you mistook Subaru as a complete stranger, I suppose."

Shaula: "I haven't mistook him. You sure are impertinent for a lil' ankle-biter, arentcha?"

Beatrice: "Sorry, but that lil' ankle-biter is your precious Master's partner, in fact. Oops, you mistook him for someone else, so he isn't actually your master or anything. Pardon me, in fact."

Shaula: "…"

Beatrice: "…"

Silently, sparks from their gazes flew up between Beatrice and Shaula.

The subject of their talk had ended up completely scattered all over the place, but even if they tried to get it back on track, the people they had who'd put the conversation back on course were too few. Given the situation, the face of common sense would get the short end of that stick.

Ram: "Beatrice-sama, let's leave the strife until after we're done. After our important discussion, you'll be free to decide who owns Barusu."

Beatrice: "Subaru isn't owned by anyone, I suppose. That is the point, in fact."

Ram: "…Yeah, yeah."

Ram let herself take in Beatrice's anger whilst her eyes filled with shock. And after she replied, Ram narrowed her eyes and called out to Shaula, who was still looking at Beatrice with a thorny look in her eyes.

Ram: "In any case, if you could speak to us, then that would be a godsend. Up until now, you couldn't go along with having a serious conversation with us, but don't you think now would be okay to do so?"

Shaula: "Mhm, I have Master's permission, so that would be OK. Saying that though, even I'mmmm not so nice as to answer absolutely everything. Or rather, I should say I don't know that much stuff."

Ram: "Merely that answers makes it clear to me that you being called the Sage is a mistake."

Proudly puffing out her ample chest, Shaula unabashedly declared her ignorance all the more. Ram puffed out her small chest as if she were rivalling Shaula's. She snorted her nose showing an air of superiority more than anyone else here.

Ram: "You're Shaula, but not the "Sage". Then, I wonder, do the "Sword Saint" and "Divine Dragon" ring a bell?"

Shaula: "Sword Saiiin' and Divine Draagon?"

Ram: "Their names are Reid and Volcanica."

Shaula: "Ewwwww!"

Shaula stuck her tongue out at Ram's question with a face that looked like she'd chewed something sour.

It was easy enough to understand from her response that both of those names rang a bell. When Ram silently urged that knowledge out of her, Shaula rocked her body from left to right, still sat cross legged, and said,

Shaula: "I know them. The Stick Swinger Reid, and the Cynic Volcanica are old friends of mine. I haven't at all seen them since we parted, but they must be doing great, right?"

Ram: "One of them… Reid is dead; a long time ago."

Shaula: "Seriously?! He's dead, even though he was a guy who was nigh unkillable?! How did he die?! Did he eat something strange?!"

Ram: “His lifespan. No one can go against the decree of the heavens above.”

Shaula: “His life span… Ah, I see. That’s right. Reid was a human being, wasn’t he?”

Having been told about the “Death” of her acquaintance, Shaula had cast her eyes down with a solemn attitude to her. She seemed somewhat sad, having dropped her shoulders, drooping down in dejection all over all the way to her ponytail.

Regardless of what she’d been saying and her behavior up until now, her figure mourning her friend’s death was neutrally, a sad thing.

Whilst he finally regained his footing, Subaru too felt something panging inside his chest when he looked at Shaula’s face from the side.

Shaula: “So, Volcanica is doing well?”

Subaru: “It’s because they’re a Dragon.”

Shaula: “Aah, a Dragon, huh. Though, it would have been better if Volcanica had died rather than Reid~”

Subaru: “Those words seem to be way too much, Hey”

Having shown only a mere touch of sadness, Shaula quickly went back to herself. Her face had gone clear, as she bitterly spoke about her other acquaintance.

To that, Ram closed one of her eyes in thought, and said,

Ram: “You remember Reid and Volcanica… In that case, you should know your Master’s name, right?”

Shaula: “…”

Subaru and the others all held their breaths on hearing Ram’s question.

Only the questioned Shaula's face remained blank, replying with an "Obviously."

Ram's question was indeed quite effective at unravelling the mystery of the "Sage".

The "Sage" = Shaula system had collapsed now, so if there was someone who had accomplished the deeds required to be called a "Sage" other than her, naturally, they would need to meet that individual.

Shaula mistook Subaru as that individual for some reason, but a name probably wasn't something which could be falsified. Subaru prayed that a miracle where a "Sage" with the name Natsuki Subaru wouldn't come out of her here.

And, his prayer would be fulfilled. —In a strange way which he couldn't possibly imagine.

Shaula: "That's weird that Master's name is on your mind. Considering he's right there, and though all of you are Master's companions, you don't know it?"

Ram: "I'm sorry, but your Master hit his head on the toilet bowl, and forgot a bunch of stuff."

Subaru: "Is there a meaning behind having restricted it to toilets?"

Shaula: "Master, you did it again…?"

Subaru: "Again?!"

With Shaula looking at him sympathetically, Subaru tasted humiliation which he shouldn't have received. However, she hopped up as if she'd understood that reply, and said,

Shaula: "Then you'll hear it from meeeee. Master's name… That's right, even that name is that of the famed Great Erudite. Certainly being called something like a "Sage" is only befitting of Master!"

Subaru: "Get to the point!"

Shaula: “You’re so impatient~ But, that too is like Master.”

Shaula gave off a gaudy gesture which contained irritation, but she stuck her tongue out with a pouty face at Subaru’s demand. And then, she placed her finger on her cheek, and said with an awfully childish gesture,

Shaula: “Flugel”

Subaru: “…Huh?”

Shaula: “Master’s name is Flugel. The Great Erudite Flugel, Shaula’s Master.”

Shaula’s whole face lit up into a smile and she delightfully puffed out her chest the moment she spoke those words.

There was no shadow of a doubt that Shaula was putting deep love, gratitude and pure respect into that, and held reverence and affection towards Flugel.

However, Subaru and the others’ reactions varied in respect to that name.

At any rate, he knew that name.

Subaru: “…Isn’t that the name of the person who planted the tree?”

Saying that, Subaru craned his neck at hearing the name of that historical figure whose fates had crossed only once before.

Chapter 20:
Shaula ≠ Sage = Flugel

1

—The eminent “Great Erudite” Flugel.

As soon as Shaula had mentioned his name with a proud puff of her ample chest as she gave them an open-looking smile, Subaru and the others had exchanged looks with each other, wrapped up by an uncomfortable feeling in the air.

Shaula: “Huh? What’s up with that response? Did I say something weeeeird?”

Subaru: “No, it’s because, what the?”

Shaula widened her eyes blankly on hearing Subaru and the others’ dismal response. He felt bad for her, who was the very picture of confidence, as if to say that there was nothing mysterious to her words. However, the emotions that Subaru and the others harbored towards the name of that “Flugel” were rather complex.

“The Great Erudite” Flugel.

Though the title she’d given him was unfortunately different, Subaru was familiar with that name.

It was the name of that individual whom he’d crossed fates with just once ever since he’d been summoned into this different world. However, he didn’t have any acquaintanceship with that individual, he only had a one-sided “Debt” with him.

In any case, the reason he knew his name was down to the fact that he’d had an experience where his life had been saved thanks to that individual’s deed.

Subaru: “Flugel’s Great Tree…That Flugel-san, right?”

Everyone except Shaula gave a curt nod at the keyword that slipped out from Subaru's mouth. Although, Meili had inclined her head in doubt as if she didn't know, saying: "Wh~at's that?"

Meili: "I've never hea~rd that term before. "Great Tree", does it just mean tree?"

Subaru: "Yeah. Right, there's a damn huge tree that grew on the Lifaus Plains in the Kingdom of Lugnica, and it was called Flugel's Great Tree. It's so huge that it's said that it may have almost reached past the clouds; it was something that could really tickle at your male instincts."

Meili: "Heeh, I se~e. When you say it like that, I'd very much li~ke to see it."

Subaru: "Sorry. About that, I cut it down."

Meili: "Onii-san's so mean!"

He'd ended up swiftly shattering Meili's wish, and as a result, treated as something less than human.

Strictly speaking, cutting down the tree hadn't been Subaru's responsibility. However, it had been Subaru who'd proposed cutting it down and using it, so when it came to talking about who was the most responsible, Subaru was the one.

—Flugel's Great Tree had ended up being his trump card a year ago during the "Battle to Subjugate the White Whale".

The Great Tree's existence had been cardinally important in subjugating that witchbeast of "Fog", the White Whale, considering that the tree was larger in size than that colossal beast. In the end, he could say that they'd cut down the Great Tree, pinned the White Whale underneath it so it couldn't move, and finally delivered to it its finishing blow.

Subaru: "I do feel bad for Flugel-san, who they say planted it, but… In no shape or form did I ever think I'd hear his name in a place like this."

Emilia: "It's the spot where you can see the stump where the negotiations that followed the subjugation of the White Whale took place, right? I’ve heard that they used the chopped tree for various stuff, though…”

Julius: “At the present, only the stump is left there known as the “Vestiges of Flugel’s Great Tree”. It’s in a status-quo where it’s protected as an important historical landmark, but after several 100s of years, it ought to go back to how it was before, one should think.”

Emilia and Julius replied about what had happened after following Subaru’s wonderment.

Straight after the subjugation of the White Whale, they’d subjugated “Sloth” as well, and the attack of the Sin Archbishops that had dragged Crusch and Rem into it had overlapped with that. And to make matters worse, straight after he’d joined back up with the Emilia Camp, there had been that commotion that he’d ended up right in the middle of in the “Sanctuary”. However, after all these unfortunate series of events, the spoils of war negotiations had taken place.

There, a discussion regarding the great deeds against the “White Whale” and Sloth” had been the pièce de résistance, but naturally they’d also ended up discussing compensation for the damage they’d incurred. One of the matters they’d discussed was Flugel’s Great Tree, namely taking care of the remaining stump and effective uses of the felled tree itself.

Incidentally, they’d deemed the White Whale as having no practical use, so its huge carcass had been cleaved up by a bunch of people and incinerated. Only its skull had been presented to the Royal Castle as evidence of its subjugation.

In any case, setting aside the Great Tree’s treatment, and moving back to the more crucial Flugel-san.

Subaru: “Come to think on it, I’ve definitely heard him referred to as the “Sage” Flugel.”

Beatrice: “But, he’s a “Sage” who no one really knows what he’s done, in fact… So, speaking of strange to begin with, it's strange that he's being treated as a "Sage", I suppose."

Ram: "When you consider his achievements alone, it's true that his accomplishments pale in comparison to the title of "Sage". Perhaps he liked to toot his horn too much on his achievements… A guy just like Barusu, eh?"

Subaru: "When have I ever exaggerated my achievements?!"

Subaru grew rather sullen at having received that unexpected evaluation. However, Ram's faced remained nonchalant.

And whilst listening to that exchange, Anastasia spoke out with an: "I see." She was the only one whose face showed some understanding,

Anastasia: "Certainly, from what the story that circulates aroun' says, Flugel-san may be lackin' in bein' called a "Sage", but… I wonder if things ended up bein' like what I suspect now that Shaula-san, whose been treated as the real "Sage", turned out to be a person like this."

Emilia: "What do you mean by "Things ended up being like what you suspect?""

Anastasia: "The achievements that are circulated are the opposite… Hmm, no that ain't right I suppose. They're weighted ta one side, rather than bein' the opposite. I reckon it may be very likely that they were more or less pushed onto her on purpose."

Emilia: "So, in other words, you mean that it was made to look like Shaula-san did those things that Flugel-san actually did?"

Emilia opened her eyes in surprise as she heard Anastasia's hypothesis. After Anastasia nodded at her understanding, she turned around to face Shaula once again.

Anastasia: "I've got my suspicions about this, but Shaula-san, what do ya think? I wonder, was yer Master the sort ta try 'n do these sorts of things, Shaula-san?"

Shaula: “Yeah~, though I don’t quite understand this difficult talk.”

Subaru: “You better not be…”

Shaula: “Nonononono! You’re jumping to conclusions! Let me continue properly with what I was going to say!”

Right after Subaru narrowed his eyes at her vague reply, Shaula shook her head as if in fright. And then, she lifted both of her hands up and as she nonsensically blinked her palms open and closed, she said,

Shaula: “If I’mmmm being honest, there’s much that I don’t understand about Master’s thinking. But, when it comes to Master, he was a person who didn’t really like to stand out. So, I think~ it’s quite like Master to aim the brunt of the annoying gossip onto meeeee and run away.”

Subaru: “I don’t think a person who didn’t want to stand out would’ve planted a tree called the Flugel’s Great Tree, though…”

Julius: “Subaru, you’ve got the wrong idea. It’s not like Flugel’s Great tree was a Great Tree from the moment it was planted. Many months and years passed by, until finally it attained its majestic appearance from its growth into full bloom. Given that the name of the person who planted it was left behind, it’s not that strange that future generations began to call it like that.”

Subaru: “…I don’t even know what to say to that.”

Subaru’s face grew sour as he comprehended Julius’ explanation.

Indeed, back then, it would have been one of many, but after many long years, it had ended up growing into a magnificent Great Tree. They’d probably wanted to give it a name, and when they came to do so, they’d gone with the: “Then, let’s name it after the person who planted it” option. That felt like what would’ve been natural.

If that was the case, then he felt like it had been an oversight of Flugel’s to have left his name behind.

Subaru: “If he feels like hiding, then I feel like he should’ve avoided leaving the name Flugel behind in the first place. Isn't there something missing here?"

Julius: "I read this in a book, but if I'm not mistaken, the reason why we know Flugel-san's name is… because "Flugel was here" was carved onto that Great Tree, right?"

Subaru: "As if there's something missing! He's like a student on a field trip?!"

Subaru was taken aback by this episode where it seemed like he had craved the limelight more than expected.

He recalled that he'd wanted to do something similar back when he'd been standing next to the Great Tree, however when it came to him actually putting that into motion, well, that was another story. When Flugel would have carved it in, the Great Tree still shouldn't have been a Great Tree in the first place.

Julius: "That name stood alone, and thus, the "Sage" Flugel ended up being passed down in legend as an enigmatic historical figure that has next to no information about him other than having planted the tree."

Subaru: "So, isn't the belief that Flugel was the one who planted the tree unclear too?!"

Julius: "With that, time passed, and it was verified as being correct from the mouth of a different "Sage". Now that I think about it… Hmmm. We're standing in a place which is chock full of missing history, doesn't it make your heart leap just a little?"

Subaru: "Don't start talking as if you're a history otaku…"

Being acquainted with obscure historical facts from several centuries, Julius was deeply moved.

Julius had the tendency to speak too much when explaining things regarding magic rather than him having deep insight into it, however perhaps he did have a knowledgeable otaku side to him here.

Emilia: “But, even though I get that the “Sage” of antiquity was actually Flugel in reality… this still doesn’t change much, right?”

When their opinions came to match each other in regards to Flugel doing that, Emilia diffidently glanced over everyone’s faces. Receiving her gaze, Subaru nodded his head in agreement.

As Emilia said, the fact that it had actually been Flugel who’d really been behind the legendary exploits of the past didn’t hold much meaning for them at the present. —No, that wasn’t true at all.

Subaru: “Nope, Emilia-tan. This fact is a pretty big problem.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Subaru: “I mean, shouldn’t it be? Our purpose from the start was to come here to hear various things from the famed “Sage-san” who is said to be omniscient. But, since the “Sage-san” from the rumors has turned out to be a different person, and all he’s left behind is this obviously air-headed girl, we…”

Shaula: “Oooh, Master~, I want you to not shake my head. You’re making it go clatter-clatter.”

Shaula gave off that reaction, full of jest, as he shook her shoulders.

If he put it without mincing his words, she was far off being omniscient by any stretch of the imagination.

Subaru: “To start with, our original purpose can’t be fulfilled. —If the “Sage” isn’t here, then it means we came all the way here for nothing.”

Everyone: “…”

Emilia and the others kept their mouths shut at Subaru’s conclusion. Subaru gritted his back teeth at his own conclusion whilst he looked at everyone’s reactions.

Over a month had passed, and Subaru had already died four times.

Only a guardsman who was a “Sage” in name only had been left behind in the Pleiades Watchtower, which they'd surmounted so much hardship to get to. They wouldn't be able to bring back any results due to this.

The reality of history, the true state of the "Sage". Those things weren't of any value to him.

Since Subaru only desired for a way to save the people important to him.

Subaru: "Shaula. This may be a long shot, but just tell me this. Your Master… The one who should be the real "Sage", Flugel, where is he?"

Shaula: "Right now, If I were to answer with… "Right in front of myyyy eyes", I get the feeling you'd be mad at me! But, I gotta answer it! The one right in front of myyyy eyes is my Master, Flugel!"

Subaru: "I thought you'd say that."

Subaru could merely sigh at Shaula's undiscouraged response.

In fact, Subaru's current feelings were similar to that of a barren wasteland, overwhelming any urge he had in wanting to burst out in anger at the upbeat Shaula. Their circumstances were such that they could say their leads had come to nothing.

The glimmer of hope which had been the "Sage" had blinked out, and it looked like things would just go back to them fumbling around blindly. However, the subsequent darkness that came after they had seen a dazzling glimmer once in the dark had a different weight to it.

Hope gave people the strength to step forward, but perhaps the dark when hope covered it was something which dyed people's vision in black, rather than always being in the darkness.

Either way, for Subaru it meant that—

Emilia: “Subaru, listen. It may surely be like that, but in truth it doesn’t mean that we’re at an impasse.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Emilia placed her hand on Subaru’s shoulder and spoke out to him from the side of his face, which had been drooping down gloomily. Turning his face to look at her, he saw that Emilia’s amethyst eyes were full of unwavering hope.

Giving Subaru a short nod whilst she still touched his shoulder, Emilia continued speaking, saying “Isn’t that right?” to Shaula.

Emilia: “Although you’d barely spoken anything to us until a little while ago, the current you should be able to speak to us in a quite a bit more detail, right?”

Shaula: “Sure thing. I dislike it when Master’s feeling down tooo, but also I was all alone for such a long time, so I’d love to chat.”

Shaula replied to Emilia’s meaningful questioning with a genial look to her, keeping her attitude unchanged. She sat cross-legged, swaying back and forth; then, she moved her right hand up, and pointed it up overhead.

Shaula: “I said a bit of this to the others, but we’re on the bottommost floor of the tower here. This is the Sixth Floor, “Asterope”. As you go up, there’s the Fifth Floor “Celaeno”, then the Fourth Floor “Alcyone”, and at the tippy-top there’s the First Floor “Maia”.”

Subaru: “You named each of the floors? Wasn’t that a hassle?”

Shaula: “Didn’t you name them Master?”

Subaru: “I ain’t got such bad taste, but I don’t want to talk about that right now. So?”

There was hope in Emilia’s eyes, and Subaru’s mood grew in impatience at the flow of Shaula’s conversation that promoted that. Shaula broke into a delighted smile as if she’d perceived that change in his expression.

Still pointing up above, she stuck out her other hand, her left hand, and showed him her five fingers,

Shaula: “The Fifth Floor “Celaeno” is straight above, on that floor you’ll find the doorway that leads outside. The Sixth Floor “Asterope” is underneath it, so in fact it connects straight to the underground area. If you hit it in the wrong place, you’ll end up buried alive, so It’d be best that you don’t do anything reckless like trying to break the wall.”

Julius: “Incidentally, the wall and floor seem to look like they’re made out of stone when you first look at them, but they have an unusual strength to them. Let me just say now that they wouldn’t be chipped even a bit with either Emilia-sama’s magic, or mine of course.”

Of course that probably didn’t mean he’d tried to destroy them, but Julius nevertheless supplemented Shaula’s explanation. He didn’t have any intentions of destroying the tower at all, but he nodded with an “I see”, just to be safe.

Subaru: “So, I get that the Fifth Floor has the doorway, but what about above that?”

Shaula: “The Fourth Floor “Alcyone” is like myyyy dwelling area, a simple place for my ins ‘n outs. I like to leave it messy, so I’m gonna get embarrassed if you look at it too hard∼”

Subaru “…”

Shaula: “Master, your eyes look serious. How scary…U-Usually I stand watch over the Sand Dunes from here. And, then I take aim and fire fire fire at anyone who gets near to the tower!”

Subaru: “So it indeed was you then.”

He’d already half-guessed it before, but he could be fully convinced now thanks to her testimony. White light from that Pleiades Watchtower had killed Subaru twice in the Sand Dunes, and it had also been the cause behind their team being separated into two after—The culprit had been, as he’d thought, Shaula.

Subaru: “We went through so much suffering thanks to that, how the hell do you plan to make up for that?”

Shaula: “Sorrysorry, I was juuuust following Master’s instructions, when you say that, you’re just fussing about what I’ve been doing here for the past hundreds of years~”

Subaru glared at her, speaking in a harsh tone, causing Shaula to quiver back, her face growing disheveled. There was no ill will showing on her face, and moreover, she showed no signs of remorse either.

Rather than lacking in a sense of guilt, she didn’t seem to have one in the first place.

It wasn’t an issue where she lacked emotions, but rather…

Beatrice: “Subaru, there’s no use in this, no matter what you say, in fact. There’s no sense of remorse or guilt in this one, I suppose. They just do as ordered…It doesn’t make sense to ask a tool their uses, in fact.”

Shaula: “Yepyep, I’mmmm Master’s tool! The lil’ ankle biter says it well!”

Shaula had a big smile which said “That’s exactly what I thought” all over her face as she heard Beatrice’s savage opinion.

Her moods and facial expressions changed fickly, and with that, his understanding of her current way of being—Perhaps Shaula just had different values. That was probably why they seemed to keep conversing as if they were on different wavelengths.

In other words,

Subaru: “It’s getting real tiring talking with you.”

Shaula: “You used to say that all the time before! It’s been aaaages.”

Subaru: “Is that so? Y’know I used to say that all the time, donkey years ago.”

He felt like he still did now, but Subaru brushed aside that point.

In any case, he understood that the white light that had come from the Watchtower had been Shaula's doing, as well as that he'd never get any kind of apology or remorse from her.

In that case, there was no meaning in cutting their conversation short. He'd just have to move the conversation forward.

Subaru: "About the Fourth Floor, your dwelling area… Like, your living quarters. What's above that?"

Shaula: "The examination hall from the Third Floor "Taygeta". —To test one's rights to enter the library."

Subaru: "…The library?"

Subaru frowned, repeating the word back to her as a question. Shaula calmly nodded back at him saying "Yeah" without paying heed to Subaru's change in attitude.

Shaula: "A library. From the Third Floor "Taygeta" and up, there's trials, and each one has a corresponding library. If you fulfill the conditions to enter the library, then you can read the books inside at your leisssure."

Subaru: "What's written in those "books inside"?"

Shaula: "Errrrr?"

Subaru: "Errrrr?!"

It was frustrating that she'd finished with an "Errrrr" considering that she'd told him this much whilst assuming an air of importance. Shaula reluctantly shook her head, along with her hair, at the frowning Subaru, and said: "It's because∼"

Shaula: "I can't read the books 'n stuff, I've not been told more than to guard the tower."

Subaru: "Was that from your Master… From Flugel as well?"

Shaula: “Yeah!”

It would be impossible for Subaru to answer, regardless of how she had put it so proudly.

Though Subaru had only inclined his head in doubt at Shaula’s words, Emilia and the others’ still kept serious looks on their faces, the hope they held in their eyes was still there.

Beatrice: “Subaru, what lies inside the books of the library is knowledge, I suppose.”

Subaru: “By “knowledge” you don’t mean it in a literal sense, right?”

Subaru asked the obvious back after he heard Beatrice’s expression.

Typically, what was written down in books was knowledge, barring fiction of course. What you got out of books was either a wealth of knowledge, or deep, moving impressions.

But that probably wasn’t the meaning behind what Beatrice was trying to say.

Beatrice shook her head on top of Subaru’s lap.

Her long drill curls traced her head’s movement, she spoke out to Subaru, who was following that motion with his eyes.

Beatrice: “This is the place where the knowledge written down by the “Sage” known as being omniscient sleeps. I’ve heard that the Pleiades Watchtower is a name used in the outside, in fact.”

Shaula: “Yeah. Since Master’s came back inside, the tower will go back to its original role. A Great Library where you can search for anything you like, be it something you want to know or something you’d like to be aware of—You can do that in Pleiades.”

2

Subaru: “So that means the Third Floor is at a Beginner Level. The Second Floor is at an Intermediate Level. And that you can get access to the top class information on the First Floor, I think. So it must mean that the Trials are Qualifications Trials to obtain the clearances, right?”

Shaula: “Ohhh, as expected of Master! Even I keep getting more and more confused with what you’re talking about! But perhaps it’s Mucho mejor that you keep it simple.”

—The Great Library Pleiades.

The name of the Watchtower had gone from something quite affable to something quite suspicious. Subaru and the others, line astern, had left the Sixth Floor and had started climbing the stairs up towards the upper floors.

The spiral staircase carried Subaru and the others up towards the upper floors, coiling around circularly within the tower. However, since there was no manner of railing, the higher he got, the more his blood ran cold.

Subaru: “This is scary.”

Emilia: “Subaru, if you’re scared, then hold my hand? Since you still haven’t fully recovered, and you’re unsteady on your feet, you might actually fall off….”

The ground of the Sixth Floor was getting far in the distance, and Gyan along with the Dragon Carriage looked pretty small down there. Emilia called that out to Subaru, who had looked down below, holding his breath.

To tell the truth, he wanted to take her hand and enjoy the feeling of her pale fingers, but…

Subaru: “Thanks, Emilia-tan. But, I’m alright right now. For the time being it doesn’t seem like I’ll fall off since the stars are fairly wide, that, and I’m also still full of vim and vigor, don’t you think?”

Emilia: “Really? But, if you think it’s getting tough, you’ll tell me straight away, right? I can carry you on my back if it comes down to it.”

Subaru: “Is that so… Then I won’t make it come down to that.”

The impression of being carried up the stairs on Emilia’s back was as expected too horrifying. He would rather make that loan out to Julius, were he to make such an unmanly move.

Julius: “What is it?”

Subaru: “That’d just be the worst way too though. Oh, it’s nothing in particular. Keep moving, keep moving!”

Noticing Julius’ eyes on him, who’d just turned his head around, Subaru shook his hand at him. He shrugged his shoulders and continued to lead them up the stairs, still holding Anastasia’s hand.

Right now, they had their eyes set on the upper floors of the tower, progressing on foot. They weren’t in a rush, so they went about it at a leisurely pace, which contrasted their feelings of apprehension. Julius and Anastasia were at the front, then after them came Ram and Emilia line astern, with Subaru and Beatrice walking behind them. And finally, Shaula and Meili were bringing up the rear.

Meili: “Who~a there, naked Onee-san, don’t shake about so much.”

Shaula: “Huuuuh, you sure are a bossy lil’ ankle-biter for someone whose riding on my shoulders~”

Meili: “Be~cause, I’m sle~epy. We’ve been wa~lking for ages, and I can’t make it up and down the stairs with how many stairs there a~re.”

Shaula: “Yes, but why do I have to carry you….! Quit pulling on my hair!”

Fussy as she may be, there was no sharpness in their exchange.

The Shaula/Meili group bringing up the rear was, rather incredibly, such that Shaula was carrying Meili on her shoulders as they climbed the stairs. Initially, when they’d decided to move up, Meili had taken the opportunity to complain that her feet were tired. However it had been Shaula herself who had said she’d be okay with carrying her on her back, so he’d left it down to her.

Subaru: “When it comes to actual physical strength, it looks like Shaula is likely the strongest…”

Beatrice: “That’s for sure, I suppose. —Subaru, don’t let your guard down, in fact. Despite her appearance, we don’t know when she’ll show her fangs, I suppose.”

Subaru: “This woman? You get that impression from her?”

Beatrice: “We don’t know how she will react if it comes to light that you’re not Flugel, in fact.”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Subaru ended up stammering his words as he heard Beatrice’s response, her having urged him caution in a low voice.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t thought about it, but he didn’t think it was a problem if he left it at the edge of his thoughts. In fact, Shaula was acting pretty friendly towards his group—No, towards Subaru, and that was only because she kept mistaking him as being her Master.

And, Subaru and the rest knew that his relation with him was something she was completely misunderstanding. He’d denied it to her many times till now, but Shaula would just smile and disregard it. Actually rather than disregarding it, it was more like she didn’t care at all no matter how many times she heard it. But, in any case, it hadn’t gotten through to her.

Therefore, Shaula’s attitude hadn’t changed, and he could even consider it a security—

Subaru: “That means that we won’t know what trigger will bring everything crumbling down.”

Beatrice: “There’s no doubt that things will end up quite worrisome if she were to become hostile, I suppose. We’d have no choice but to combine mine and your strength, as well as Emilia and that knight’s… Julius’, in fact.”

Subaru: “Shaula’s strength, huh?”

He took a quick glance back at Shaula messing about with Meili.

She had a friendly, and defenseless look to her improper appearance—Ever since their first encounter, all the way to their conversations afterwards, she had been an individual that had been difficult to judge in every manner.

However, although Subaru currently couldn't decide what attitude to hold against Shaula, there wasn't any harbored animosity which stood out in her, that much is what it looked like.

Although she was acting friendly to them due to mistaking him for someone else, and although they'd been met with such an unguarded reception from her, it was more difficult to dislike her than be bewildered by her.

However, he mustn't confuse such touchy-feely emotions with there being a lack of looming danger.

Subaru: "…"

Turning his eyes at their defenseless limbs whilst sneaking glances at Shaula's condition, Subaru broke into thought.

She'd confessed that it had been her who'd set her aim on Subaru and the others back at the sand dunes and thrown those flashes of light at them from the tower. The speed of those flashes of light, along with the accuracy of their aim had been unnatural, they'd been plenty enough to give him an impression of the height of Shaula's true strength. Right now, Subaru didn't even know whether those things had been magic or not.

And to add on top of that, there'd been those final moments back at the underground area of the sand dunes.

That which remained in his awfully turbid consciousness, just before he had lost it, must have been Shaula who had come to blows with that repulsive-looking Centaur.

That monster was one which could only be thought of as being either the embodiment of absurdity or outrageousness was abruptly torn to pieces by a more powerful force, and he witnessed it being blown away out of existence with his own eyes.

He didn't want to admit it, but if he ended up in direct combat against Shaula, any visions of being able to win against her were all but gone.

Regulus, Petelgeuse and such had been far easier opponents.

Subaru: "…Urgh I don't know why I start to pretty repulsed whenever I recall those guys. No, feeling that is perfectly reasonable, but it's a familiar repulsed feeling that I'm getting."

Beatrice: "I don't know what you're thinking, but we need to be careful, I suppose."

Subaru: "Yeah. If that's the case…, then I guess asking her is quicker."

Beatrice: "Huh? In fact."

Straight after Beatrice replied in confusion, Subaru turned both himself and her around at the same time. Whilst swiveling his feet around on the stairs so they faced back, Subaru faced straight towards the double-stacked Shaula and Meili.

Shaula stopped in her tracks and tilted her head.

Shaula: "What's up Master? It couldn't be that Master's also tired right? It wouldn't be an issue for me to carry you, but my back is already taken by this girl who acts like a little princess, you know?"

Subaru: "That in itself would make quite an impression, so I'll pass. Ah, though I'm sorry to get in between you happily playing with your ponytail with Meili…"

Shaula: "It's not a ponytail, it's a scorpiontail."

Subaru: "…"

Shaula: "It's a scorpiontail."

Shaula repeated herself to the taciturn Subaru as if she was a broken record.

Grabbing ahold of one of her ponytail’s tufts, Shaula readily moved it in front of her face, and said,

Shaula: “A scorpiontail…”

Subaru: “I understand! What’s up with this insistence! Anyways, I’m sorry to get in between you making friends with Meili, but there’s something I want to ask you.”

Shaula: “Mhm! If it’s something Master has to say, I will listen to anything! I’mmmm glad that you’re speaking to me like this, Master~”

Shaula swung her ponytail… Er, rather, her scorpiontail about delightedly.

As a result of that, Meili, who was on her shoulders, was hit by one of the tail’s swishes. Subaru had already experienced that unexpectedly soft, good feeling tail, but putting that aside,

Subaru: “You’ll listen to what I say right?”

Shaula: “Not lewd stuff, right?”

Subaru: “Don’t even begin to go there. What are you braindead?”

Shaula: “It’s pretty dumb of Master to say so, isn’t it? Now we’re even!”

Subaru was left floored as he couldn’t keep up pace with Shaula who’d had a comeback to spare. Usually, most people ended up getting thrown quite out of sync when they mixed in with the pace of Subaru’s conversations. Because of that, suitably finding a thread to start a conversation came down to Subaru, but it would be tough to do this time.

The difficulty in this line of approach would still be different than with aberrations like the Sin Archbishops. In their case, it was difficult to establish a conversation with them in the first place, but it was different in Shaula’s case.

He felt a delay in proportion to not understanding his opponent whatsoever, whilst she understood him.

Truly as if Flugel, Subaru, and god knows who else had a lot of points in common.

Subaru: “Anyways, I have a question and a request. I need you to answer them as honestly, and obediently as possible.”

Shaula: “That doesn’t seem like a request. They could be an order, though.”

Subaru: “I ain’t that bossy. So, about the question… You attacked us from the tower, right? What the hell was that?”

Shaula: “It was Hell’s Snipe, a sniping attack used so that pesky flies don’t get near to the tower.”

Subaru: “…What?”

Shaula: “Hell’s Snipe.”

With her having said it in English whilst beaming, Subaru’s face grew sullen.

Well, uhm, it was a name he knew.

Shaula: “Thooough, if I think about it now, I’m so glad that Hell’s Snipe didn’t hit Master. If the Dimension Gate didn’t get lifted, I may’ve flung blow after blow until they struck Master.”

Subaru: “Waitwaitwaitwait, there’s too much new vocab! Dimension?”

Shaula: “Dimension Gate. It’s a trick to prevent people from reaching the tower.”

From Shaula’s way of talking, Subaru grasped that this Dimension Gate, and whatever else, had cut off their path to the Flower Meadow thanks to that “Sand Time”, but even so, the space distortion had been lifted by the efforts of E□M□T in the end.

Shaula: “But, thanks to that, I knew that Master was actually Master, so everything turned a’ight in the end. If Master’d been struck, Master would definitely have been mad at meeee, wouldn’t he?”

Subaru: “Uh huh, yeah, probably. I hope you’d get away with just me being mad at you.”

In actual fact, he had been struck and died twice, so he was uneasy about whether he could even get up to those anger levels.

It was rare for his anger to not spike up rapidly when meeting the culprits who killed him. Part of the reason why it hadn’t now was because he understood that it had been some kind of accident, and that it was pointless even to pursue Shaula’s responsibility.

Meili: “Bu~t, if you’d managed to strike him, Onii-san would’ve ended up dead, wouldn’t h~e? If that happened, then I don’t think we’d be talking about getting mad or not he~re.”

Perched on Shaula’s back, Meili interjected into the conversation in place of Subaru, who was half embroiled in his forgiveness. Upon hearing her words, Shaula let out a fit of rather unlady-like, uncontrollable laughter.

Shaula: “What are ya saying lil’ ankle biter? There’s no way myyyy Master would die from something like that? Cuz’ from the start, Master’s always been someone who you can never tell whether he’s dead or not dead.”

Meili: “Butbu~t, Sandworm-chan got hit so much, and he ended up dying, s~o…”

Shaula: “I don’t really give a damn about stuff like Worms or Bears ya know. Myyy Master wouldn’t die, that is what’s important. —If he’d died, then it’d just mean he’s not my Master.”

Smiling absentmindedly, Shaula gazed at Subaru with delighted looking eyes. Subaru’s spine shivered when she’d turned her innocent, smiling face towards him.

Innocence like that of a child’s, and faith tantamount to defenselessness. That which she put into Flugel was an ideal that she'd rigidly built up at her core more than he'd dared to imagine.

In accordance with Beatrice's worries, if there ever came a time where she'd come into disagreement with the current Subaru, then…

Shaula: "I apologize that I was late in picking you up from the Sand Palace afterwards. Whilst I let in the other group into the tower, Master and the rest with him ended up advancing into its depths, so I was all in a fluster."

Subaru: "Aah, no, it's fine… Though, wait, you said "Sand Palace"?"

Shaula: "Indeed. It's really dangerous over there, so it's better if you don't go into it. It's reckless to approach without having all the keys, even if it's you Master. There are Hungry Horse Kings prowling about there too."

Subaru: "Hungry Horse Kings…You mean those horse-like monsters?"

Sand Palace, Keys, Hungry Horse Kings. There were a lot of words which were weighing on his mind, but his mind wandered to the last one of them, the Hungry Horse Kings.

Perhaps it referred to that Centaur.

Shaula nodded at his question.

Shaula: "Those things weren't here around the time Master was here, so I thought you'd be surprised. In essence, they just prowl about inside of the Sand Palace, so you won't come across them unless you go to there. But once in a while one of those guys will venture outside, so I go and destroy them without any mercy."

Subaru: "Is there a lot of them?"

Shaula: "There's tons and tons."

Subaru felt truly revulsed from the bottom of his heart hearing Shaula confirm that without any hesitation.

The Centaur = Hungry Horse King's fighting strength, and of course it's appearance and ecology were all things which brought feelings of indescribable unpleasantness. He'd hoped that there'd been just one specimen of them if possible, but that didn't look like it was the case. She'd told him that from using the expression "tons and tons".

Meili: "Hungry Horse King… I'm also not familiar with that na~me. I'd like to see one, ma~ybe."

Subaru: "Stop it! That's not something a kid needs to see…"

Meili: "O-Onii-san…"

Subaru gave Meili a very stern warning, who'd spoken out those rash words. Maybe those words had tugged on Meili's heartstring who was something like a witchbeast Collector, but he wouldn't recommend her trying to get in contact with them to fill them in for a picture book.

Shaula nodded in agreement at Subaru's words.

Shaula: "I think it's best not to. The Hungry Horse Kings are a witchbeast with the concept that their horns can regenerate over and over again, so you can't make arrangements with them like with other witchbeasts. Kill all enemies on sight, this is their justice."

Meili: "Blegh, I understa~nd."

Pouting with a gesture appropriate of her age, Meili retracted her curiosity.

Whilst feeling relived by that situation, Shaula once again spoke out to Subaru, saying "So,"

Shaula: "Master, was that all you wanted to talk about?"

Subaru: "Aah, for now that's a-… No, wait, that's not all."

Shaula: "—?"

With her head still inclined, Shaula prepared to receive his question with a “Bring it on!” attitude. Considering that she had opened her heart to them till now, it was quite insincere of him to continue keeping his guard up. But sometimes you had to steel your heart no matter how painful it was.

If he could change something by just saying one thing in preparation for the future, then doing so would be fortuitous.

Subaru: “Shaula, this is my request. Don’t cause me, or my companions any harm.”

Shaula: “…”

Subaru: “Your Master’s order was to attack anyone who approached the tower…So I would think? Since we’re inside, we are not covered by that. So, there’s no need for you to attack us anymore. Don’t cause us any harm. Absolutely none.”

Shaula: “…”

Shaula narrowed her eyes at Subaru, who’d repeated his words once more to make absolutely sure.

As he looked on at her narrowed eyes, he saw that their color was of a deep green hue. Shaula, whose expression had been pretty much all smiles since they’d met her, had stopped smiling as if she was in deep thought for the first time.

For a while, there was silence. Subaru, who’d been holding his breath due to this strange tension, couldn’t stand it any longer, and let out his breath. Then,

Shaula: “Mhm, OK. I’veee memorized it word for word as a new command from Master~”

Subaru: “…”

Shaula: “Master?”

Immediately after she decided to accept it, Shaula’s features changed, turning back to her frivolousness. Shaula brought her face super close to Subaru's, whose eyes had widened without following her sudden change in attitude.

Their eyes stared at each other's at point blank range, but he couldn't find any deception or dishonesty in her green eyes. At least, as far as Subaru could see.

Subaru: "Is it okay with you?"

Shaula: "I have no choice. It's what Master's said. It's not particularly hard. Non-violence, non-obedience."

Subaru: "Since you're going to follow the order, don't you mean that you'll obey?"

Shaula: "Even if you could do as you pleased with my body, I wouldn't let you snatch away my heart!"

Subaru: "What a pain in the ass you are…!"

He prodded Shaula in the forehead, whose face had tensed up, so to make her take a step back. Shaula fell back letting out an "AAUUUUH", causing Meili to panic on her back, even though she was safe.

In any case, Subaru's request somehow looked like it had been readily accepted. It wasn't clear how effective it was going to be, but, at least…

Subaru: "Like, as long as I don't let her down, the promise should be kept."

Beatrice: "If that's the only requirement, then things will be fine, in fact. You expect to let her down, but you won't, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm really grateful for being held to that high esteem, but in this case, isn't that part of your expectations where you think I won't let her down being far too optimistic? What would Flugel do? Should I grow wings? He sounds like he's German."

On that topic, to Subaru it felt like Flugel was a German word that meant "Wings".

He'd never expected that he'd be pulling stuff out from there, but that was suspicious as well. At any rate, this Flugel, altogether with Shaula's name smelled fishy as hell.

Subaru: "That's right, Shaula. I've got just one last question to ask you."

Shaula: "What is it~?"

Shaula's cheeks were getting pinched by Meili, her face looked completely vapid.

With his back still turned to Shaula, Subaru spoke with a casual gesture,

Subaru: "Maia, Electra, Taygeta, Alcyone, Celaeno, Asterope."

Beatrice: "…Subaru?"

Beatrice, who was beside Subaru, had a puzzled look on her face as she heard Subaru reciting those words out.

They were just a string of words which should have no meaning when hearing only their sounds.

Of course, they had just heard about four of those words a while ago, but they wouldn't be words which were so easy to remember as to recite them from memory. —Given that they were unfamiliar words.

Subaru: "All of those, in order from top to bottom, are this Pleiades Watchtower's…Err, I mean this Great Library Pleiades' floor names right?"

Shaula: "Correct~"

Subaru: "So, where's Merope?"

Shaula: "…"

Shaula once again kept her silence on hearing Subaru's question. However, this silence was different to the one before, it was a silence of surprise like she'd been caught completely unaware.

You could faintly hear the sound of her breath being taken away; Subaru deemed that he'd managed to touch on the truth.

Beatrice: "Subaru, what did you ask her, in fact? What does Merope mean, I suppose."

Subaru: "It's the name of the last one of the seven sisters. It'd be strange to not have seven in Pleiades."

The floors had been allocated six names from the first floor to the sixth. However, the names that followed that motif were from the start, the seven sisters—A floor with the seventh name attached to it should exist.

Subaru: "If it's not the Seventh Floor…, then I guess it would be a Floor Zero."

Shaula: "There's a Floor Zero. Master named them, so it's natural… However, the place was made after Master left, so you shouldn't know where it is."

Shaula replied to Subaru's guesswork with a hoarse voice. Subaru felt Beatrice beside him startle in surprise, but he licked his parched lips and narrowed his eyes.

He felt no sense of achievement at having found something hidden. After all, it was because it wasn't something that was hidden for Subaru.

Subaru "If the First Floor is the highest floor, then Floor Zero must be the super-highest floor? In regards to entering it, h-……"

Shaula: "—No."

Shaula quickly interrupted Subaru's words, who was about to ask her how to enter it. Feeling the strength in the tone of her voice, Subaru took a quick glimpse back at her. When he did, he saw that Shaula's facial expression hadn't changed.

She was still smiling with a look of honesty about her. However, there was a faint look of loneliness plastered around her eyes.

Shaula: “You haven’t fulfilled the conditions yet. Master came back to see me in the middle of his journey, and I’m satisfied with that. That’s why Floor Zero is a No.”

Subaru: “…”

Though her tone of voice still hadn’t changed, it instead felt like a firm wall to the point that it felt queer.

The promise they’d exchanged a few minutes ago, and the pervading danger that was quite capable of shaking him even at his core, strongly appealed to him of the sense of danger that was drifting off her.

Thus, Subaru gave up on inquiring her further about this place.

Subaru: “Gotcha. I won’t speak such nonsense anymore. We’ll just keep to our earlier promise.”

Shaula: “Roger Roger~ I shall keep it~ I shall super-keep it~”

Shaula broke into a broad smile, in high spirits as if she’d forgotten their current exchange. Subaru let out a deep sigh as he listened to her upbeat voice from behind him.

Beatrice: “Subaru, if it gets too much, you’ll say so, right?”

Subaru: “Mhm, it’s alright. Just so much stuff is on my mind.”

He gave a weak smile as he heard Beatrice’s words of worry, before then affectionately patting her head. When he did so, Beatrice couldn’t say anything, but this was also a rite for Subaru to settle himself down.

Flugel’s abnormalness had become apparent in his conversation with Shaula. It was no big deal. He too was the same as Subaru.

Subaru, Al, Hoshin, and Flugel.

A person who’d craved the limelight who’d brought knowledge that shouldn’t be in this world, and ostentatiously left it behind. He had no more doubt, Flugel was a person from the same place as him.

Subaru: “Centuries ago, huh?”

After reflecting back on that for a long, long time, Subaru violently scratched his head.

What had he felt in this different world, what had he thought, what had he aimed for, what had he sought for—.

What had this man, who seemed to have renounced the name “Sage” and planted the tree, desired?

Whilst he thought about those kinds of things, he wondered whether he still lived on in this world.

Then, coming from Subaru’s back, was—

Shaula: “Master”

Subaru: “Mhm?”

Shaula called out to him casually. Without stopping in his tracks, Subaru just turned his face around to glance at her. Shaula looked up at Subaru looking a little bashful.

Her expression was adorned by a truly delightful looking smile,

Shaula: “Welcome home again, Master. —This Shaula has been awaiting the “Great Erudite” Flugel’s return with all her heart.”

Chapter 21:
Monolith's Trial

1

Regarding Shaula's welcoming words—While Subaru did understand that they'd been misdirected to a different person, he decided that he'd receive them without denying them in the end.

There was also Beatrice's advice.

There was no doubt that in practicality allowing Shaula to mistake Subaru as Flugel was rather convenient for them. With this in place now it meant that an outcome where Shaula became hostile and commenced battle wouldn't necessarily end up in them being scattered about by her overwhelming strength.

Since she was treating them favorably for now, Subaru could at least dullen his hand of attack. Though if he were to do that, considering that he lacked in actual strength even under the best of circumstances, it'd probably be enough to end up as a main factor in him making a colossal blunder.

Emilia: "You needn't worry, Subaru. Even if Shaula realizes that in truth you're not her Master, I'm sure she wouldn't do anything awful."

Those were Emilia's words, who seemed to have been eavesdropping on their conversation behind them.

Emilia, who had her silver hair styled in long braids, confidently assured that to Subaru, whilst she fiddled with the end of one of her braids with her fingers.

Subaru: "I'm glad of Emilia-tan's seal of approval, but…What's the rationale behind it?"

Emilia: "I don't really fully understand what you mean by the expression "What's the rationale behind it", but, Shaula's a good girl, isn't she? She saved you, and us as well, so I can say that we will all get along. If we do, there shouldn't be any need to fight, right?"

Subaru: "…Right."

Her opinion was a little too optimistic, but he could say that being too pessimistic was also enough of a bad habit.

Even if Shaula found out the truth, it didn't mean that she'd get aggressive straight away. Even if the facts came to light, Shaula should keep herself from coming to blows at her own judgement. So, Emilia's thoughts that they should all get along weren't so misguided, at least he could allow himself to think so.

The reason behind that intent wasn't a calculating goal like appealing to one's emotions, but rather because he didn't want to fight against her.

Ram: "Don't take Emilia's rough ideas word for word, Barusu. We're in the "Sage's" Watchtower here, and we need to challenge it to even make our way back to the sand dunes. We lose nothing by keeping our guards up as much as possible."

Emilia: "Jeez, you sure were quick to put it like that, Ram. You should really loosen up a little…"

Ram: "The result of having let down my guard was that I ended up being thrown down to the underground area with Barusu and Anastasia-sama. With how delicate I am, that feeling of despair was unbearable…perhaps that's why Emilia-sama you have no clue about that."

Emilia: "Mhm, I guess so. But, surely if it's an underground area around this place you're talking about, then shouldn't it be no big deal for you? I don't know why, but I've been in reaaally good shape since coming to the Augria Sand Dunes, ya know?"

It seemed like Emilia had replied to the sharp Ram's words in a rather relaxed manner. Emilia and Ram's relationship as master and vassal had been pretty good since a year ago. The way Ram spoke and behaved towards Emilia showed a little lack of respect, but Emilia looked like she couldn't help but be happy receiving that treatment.

Emilia, who should have experienced the trauma of discrimination and contempt, may have contrarily felt that Ram's words didn't contain that sort of animosity.

Subaru: "At any rate, Emilia-tan, what do you mean by you being in good shape?"

Emilia: "How should I put it, the air goes well with my skin, I guess. Mana too has a slightly different tone to it depending on the country or region you're in, so I think something like that's happening, but…The mana in this place especially seems to go well with my skin. Though I guess I shouldn't be very happy about that."

Subaru: "Well, I suppose so. But considering that this is the place where the Witch is sealed, full of these witchbeasts…"

Emilia had clenched her fist as if she'd felt a surge of strength go through her. However, straight after, a bitter looking smile appeared on her dismal-looking face. Her opinion had been an emboldened one, for sure, as he sympathized with the mood she was in.

Following what he'd mentioned above, he was silently grateful that Emilia's strength had grown in this area they were in, which was chock-full of danger with the Witch and the witchbeasts. Yet even so, the figure which Shaula had defeated had been engraved in Subaru's mind, so that wasn't a reason that could end up giving him some optimism.

Subaru: "Though, the conditions have changed. Unlike before where she could attack us from the tower without us being able to do anything, now that the distance is such that you can see each other's faces, Emilia-tan shouldn't end up losing against her."

Shaula: "What is it? What is it?"

Subaru: "Nothing, was just talking about how you have crazy good eyesight. You managed to throw attacks at us from the tower with pinpoint accuracy when we were really far off, didn't you? How the hell does that work?"

Shaula: "Ohhh, that's just done by linking myyyyy aim and myyyy stingers with mana, and that makes it so it's pulled to where you are. Hell's Snipe was Master's invention, ya know?"

Subaru: "…I see, you didn't even have to train her, eh, Flugel."

He'd gone through hell and back again thanks to that. He'd probably never get a chance to talk to Flugel, but if he did get a chance like at the tea party, he'd definitely be giving him some very colorful, choice words.

Subaru let out a sigh as he heard the upbeat Shaula humming. Then—

Julius: "Sorry to interrupt you in the middle of your chat, but we've arrived."

Subaru: "Oh?"

On the spiral staircase which led to the upper floors of the tower—He heard Julius' voice, who'd been at the front of the group, leading them up.

Lifting his face up at the knight's words, who was escorting Anastasia by the hand, he could suddenly see the ceiling from the other side of Julius who was standing diagonally up from him.

Subaru: "No, it's not the ceiling, but the floor part of the floor above, I should say."

Beatrice: "We must be on the Fifth Floor, "Celaeno", I suppose. All there is here is a door to the outside, Betty and the others first entered from here, in fact."

Betty, who was next to him, commented that to him just as they neared the Fifth Floor. As he nodded in agreement to her words, Subaru immediately noticed that something was out of place, and said, "Uh?"

If she was implying that after they'd been separated Emilia and the others had entered the tower from the Fifth Floor, then…

Subaru: "How did the Dragon Carriage and Gyan get down to the Bottom Floor? I mean, there's no way that this staircase is wide enough to let a Dragon Carriage roll by, right?"

Spreading his arms out across the spiral staircase he'd walked up, Subaru checked its width. The width of the staircase was reasonably wide, but even so it wouldn't fit two Subarus with arms stretched out abreast. It might have been barely possible to let the huge body of an Earth Dragon pass down it, but there was no way that the carriage part of the Dragon Carriage was getting through.

And of course, letting the Earth Dragon walk down this long staircase itself was a path which really shouldn't be trodden even if it was theoretically possible.

Subaru: "Is there some sort of contraption like an elevator poking around here in fact? If there is, then we need to use it next time. Keeping healthy is great and all, but it ain't good to always disregard modern conveniences."

Emilia: "Sorry, I don't really get what you're saying… But, how the Dragon Carriage got down there is simple. Shaula lifted it up and carried it down."

Subaru: "…Pardon?"

Subaru felt like he'd missed something, and so he asked her again. Emilia frowned at his reply which had been said in English, but she nevertheless grasped that he seemed to have asked her to repeat herself, so she continued her words by saying, "So,"

Emilia: "Shaula effortlessly lifted the Dragon Carriage along with the Earth Dragon up, and simply brought them down to the bottom."

Subaru: "Nonononononono, there's no way. Wouldn't a Dragon Carriage weigh over a ton with how huge it is? And you said she did it as a set with the Earth Dragon too…"

Subaru peeled his eyes wide open at those horrifying remarks, but no one from his companions denied it. Finally, Shaula puffed out her ample chest in pride, and flared out her nostrils.

Shaula: “It’s as she said, the one who carried them down was meeee. Oh man, it was a piece of cake. If I’d left the lizard near the doorway, he may have ended up becoming loopy due to the miasma streaming in from the outside, dontcha think? I was just a lil’ worried. You can praise me you know!”

Subaru: “I do feel grateful, but now I know that your slender arms aren’t actually slender arms, and it weirds me out. A person with superhuman strength… I imagine even Reinhardt wouldn’t be able to do this!”

Though in Subaru’s mind the most frightfully-shocking human was indisputably Reinhardt, but wouldn’t it likely be impossible even for him to lift up something that weighed over what you’d expect a human could lift?

Even if he could cut the world into ribbons with his sword pressure, even if he could walk on water, even if he could revive himself again, carrying a Dragon Carriage with one hand for him would be —

Subaru: “I guess he’d be able to do that. That makes me feel just a bit uneasy. Is that guy really human?”

Shaula: “Hmmph, despite myyyy story, Master’s thinking of someone else. Jealousy.”

In any case, he now understood how the Dragon Carriage had been carried to the bottommost floor. He hadn’t in actuality seen her carrying it, so the impact of the scene was diminished, but he had to take it as a new threat potential in the eventuality that the enraged Shaula problem cropped up.

And, just as they’d finished talking about that, the group arrived on the Fifth Floor. “Celaeno”, as had been pointed out many times, was where the entrance that led to the inside and outside of the tower was.

A huge door was built in one place at the back of the tower which was cylindrical in shape.

It was large enough that you had to look up at it, and its width was easily close to 10 meters. It was an unnecessarily huge door, but how much strength it would take to open it, that too was an issue —.

Subaru: “Doesn’t it look difficult to enter this via the trial doorway?”

Julius: “At least, when I tried pushing it, it wouldn’t give an inch. Thanks to that, we weren’t able to search for you, Anastasia-sama, and the others.”

As he gazed at the super-huge door, Subaru let out a sigh, and Julius nodded at him. With it being as heavy as it looked, it seemed like this door would stop any challengers in their path.

Opening it may have been possible for Shaula, who could easily carry a Dragon Carriage in one hand, but for the average Joe it would have been impossible. Therefore Emilia and Julius had ended up being unable to leave to search for Subaru and the others, and that looked like it had ended up worrying them a lot.

Beatrice: “But, it sure does look like it’s a bit creaky here and there, I suppose.”

Anastasia: “I think it’s ‘cause the Sand Wind’s kinda strong, the sand that gets blown up by the wind must be streamin’ in, don’cha think? When ya take a bit of a deep breath, it immediately feels like the inside of yer mouth is fulla’ sand, ‘n so it’s darn unpleasant.”

Sticking her tongue out, Anastasia traced it with her finger and cleaned some sand grains from it. Just like she had said, the inside of Subaru’s mouth too felt like it had sand in it. He’d taken notice that minute grains of sand always whirled around the Fifth Floor that led to the outside.

Julius: “The sand from the sand dunes is full of miasma. If you don’t take it seriously because you think it’s just a small amount, it could end up eating into your body from the inside. We should move away from here as quickly as possible, so long as we have nothing to do here.”

Subaru: “In that case, let’s hop to it! My goal isn’t here, but rather on the Fourth Floor “Alcyone”… Though yet more stairs sounds exhausting.”

Shaula: “The same ol’ weakness~. But, you needn’t fret. The staircase between the Fourth and Fifth Floor is way shorter than the one between the Fifth and Sixth Floor. If they were too far apart, even I’d feel tired going back and forth, so that was taken into consideration~”

Meili: “Stop shaking me abo~ut.”

Shaula, who’d spread her arms out wide inside of the sand cloud and ran about in it, was met with a karate chop to the back of her head from Meili. Looking at that scene from the corner of their eyes, the group went through the Fifth Floor and headed to the staircase that led up to the Fourth Floor.

The breeze gently streamed in, and through his sight that was clouded over in a yellow haze by the gloomy above, where he looked up, there was a ceiling that didn’t look so far away—He could see the floor of the floor above, and it looked like her opinion had in fact been true, in that it wasn’t too far away.

And so, as they set their sights on the Fourth Floor “Alcyone” whilst chatting, the group continued to march on upwards—And before long, they reached their target floor.

The constitution of the Fourth Floor itself wasn’t too different from the Fifth or Sixth floor.

The cylindrical constitution of the tower hadn’t deviated from what it had been, and even its size hadn’t changed dramatically.—Nevertheless, there was still an obvious change of atmosphere.

First of all, the size of the floor that went up the stairs was quite different to that of the lower floors.

The circular floor had become much narrower compared to them. And that wasn't too surprising, because a circular wall had been built up as a partition like the main one of the building, and it used the space differently compared to the lower floors which had just been one big floor with nothing else to them.

The spiral staircase from the lower floors had connected straight to the heart of the Fourth Floor, and a great number of doors were dotted across the wall that encircled the surroundings, indicating that there were multiple rooms on this floor.

Shaula: "This is the Fourth Floor, "Alcyone", that I use as myyyy dwelling area. And, the "Green Room" which I think is what Master came here for is right here."

Subaru: "The Green Room…?"

As Subaru stood in bewilderment looking on at the Fourth Floor's new look, Shaula, who was standing on the floor after having come out after him, pointed out one of the doors in front with an overly-dramatic gesture.

The doors that were on the Fourth Floor were all of a normal size compared to the doorway on the Fifth Floor. It didn't look like they'd need any special powers to open them, but there was a strange feeling floating about the door she had pointed out.

Just like the name "Green Room" implied, the door was covered in countless green ivy, and it had ended up in a state that looked similar to what an unexplored region of a jungle might look like that had been left untouched for centuries.

Subaru: "By saying this is what you think I came here for, do you mean that Rem and Patrasche are here?"

Shaula: "I don't know their names, but the girl and the lizard are here."

Ram: "You needn't worry. You can rest assured that Rem and that Earth Dragon are inside."

For the hesitant Subaru, Shaula's testimony felt like it had lacked in reliability just a tad. Ram snorted her nose at them as if looking down at them like idiots, cut into the lead of the group, and headed towards the Green Room.

She stretched out her hand over to the door that was covered in ivy and pushed it (which looked like it was made of stone) without any hesitation. Even with how thin her arms were, the door opened readily as if gliding open, and therefrom the Green Room came into view.

Ram: “Aren’t you coming in? Barusu.”

Subaru: “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

Subaru let go of his apprehension when he heard Ram’s question, which had felt like she was testing him, and moved forward. Then he confidently entered inside of the Green Room, following Ram who’d entered ahead of him.

However, straight after Ram and Subaru entered inside, the door slammed shut. Subaru turned to look behind him in surprise.

Subaru: “Oy, we’ve been split up.”

Ram: “There’s no need to be scared.—This room seems to have a limit on how many people can enter it. The proprietor of the room seems to hate having more.”

Ram said that about the debacle that had happened behind them, and brisky kept on moving forward. Subaru scratched his head at her explanation, and then immediately set out after her.

The Green Room didn’t betray the bizarreness of that door, its interior was covered in a copious amount of green. Wriggling plants stretched out just about everywhere you looked, across the ceiling, the walls and the floor. Every so often, he would need to stoop down to avoid the dangling ivy that got in his way, and side step it.

And, laying at the depths of this room dominated by such greenery was—.

Subaru: “Rem… And Patrasche.”

There was a small plant-free space at the far back of this room immersed in greenery. Green grass grew dense and thick there, and some beds had been made, covered in small flowers that had taken bloom there.

Rem, her sleeping face ever the same, lay on top of the bed which was made up from greenery and flowers.

Her white cheeks hadn’t changed in color, and neither had her sleeping face. Her chest was rising and falling with each faint breath, but when it came to proof that she was alive, those were her only vital signs barring the warmth she gave off.

Yet even so, he felt a great sense of relief to the point that his strength fizzled out of him.

Subaru: “She really was safe huh…”

Ram: “I did tell you so. Or, did you think that I’d lie about Rem or something? What meaning would I have in doing that.”

Subaru: “I ain’t saying that, but I couldn’t help worrying until I saw her with my own eyes you know… And Patrasche, I’m glad that you’re safe too.”

Subaru gave a faint bittersweet smile as he heard Ram’s words, and then he walked further in towards where Rem was sleeping on her bed of grass and Patrasche sat crouched down.

She too was lying sprawled on a bed of green, just like Rem. The situation wasn’t all too different than when she’d lie down on top of her rushes in a barn. However, one thing was definitely different—

Subaru: “…This grass is different to ordinary grass, isn’t it?”

Patrasche: “…”

Patrasche nuzzled her nose against Subaru’s palm, who’d stepped over to her to make sure she was alright. Whilst affectionately receiving his beloved dragon’s response, Subaru felt a faint surge of warmth coming from the sprawled bed of greenery which Patrasche was on—he cocked his head in thought.

Ram: “It appears like the Spirit’s power can speed up the healing process.”

Subaru: “There’s a spirit here? Where?”

Ram: “You’re a Spirit User and you don’t know? This whole room is the Spirit.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru briskly looked around the room at Ram’s words as he stroked Patrasche. He couldn’t see the Spirit’s existence reflected in his eyes amongst the moss that grew on the walls or in the overgrown ivy, however straight after he’d been told that by her, Subaru took notice of the overwhelming amount of Mana there was.

His breathing and body felt at ease as if he was in an area which was rich in oxygen.

There may have been a similar effect to that in the Healing Mana. Even the uninjured Subaru felt like he was receiving that grace when he relaxed himself and took deep breaths.

Subaru: “I think I get it. This is the Spirit for sure… Can’t it talk?”

Ram: “The Spirit here is of a different kind… Though, I guess you could easily say that there’s no such thing as spirits who don’t differ in some capacity. Emilia-sama’s esteemed Great Spirit, and Beatrice-sama…They’re special, it doesn’t seem like the Spirit over here has any sort of volition. It just tries to cure the wounds and illnesses of anyone who enters inside.”

Subaru: “H-eehh.”

Ram: “What’s the matter?”

Subaru: “It’s nothing important. I just thought that sounded like a Witch I know of.”

Ram snorted her nose at that, as if she’d thought hearing the word “Witch” was just some nonsense of his, then she walked over to Rem’s side. Following that, ivy started to grow right behind her, rapidly knitting itself together until it became a green chair that propped her body up, as if it had been cognizant of the elder sister's intentions to watch over her younger sister.

Ram bowed her head in consideration for the Spirit, and said: "I really appreciate it" as she let herself slump on the chair.

Subaru: "Whooooa, awesome."

Ram: "At least they're certainly the most gentlemanly amongst the Spirits I've known up until now, don't you think? You too should follow their example just a tad, Barusu. From both this Spirit, and that Knight Julius."

Subaru: "I'd rather not from either of them."

Subaru drove both of those individuals away from his head, and stroked Patrasche. He stroked her head, and tickled underneath her chin with his palm, before slowly letting her drop her raised head.

Subaru: "Get some rest now. You saved me once again, and overworked yourself. There's no drawback in taking some paid leave every once in a while ya know."

Patrasche: "…"

Patrasche curled her body up, closed her yellow eyes and fell asleep after she heard Subaru's gentle words. She'd brought them all the way to the tower, and they'd been able to confirm each other's safety.

Just that had been plenty, Patrasche's work had been plenty.

Subaru: "Any changes to Rem? If curing people is this room's raison d'être, then I wonder if it can have that sort of intervention on how Rem is right now…."

Ram: "I'm sorry, but that's a slim hope. It's neither good nor bad… But there's been no progress in her treatment. It can't cure something which is neither a wound or an illness. Seems like that sort of judgement, doesn't it?"

Subaru: “…I guess so.”

Even so, it didn’t look like the Green Room’s spirit was unwilling to take care of the still sleeping Rem. It was also devoted towards Ram, who watched over the sleeping Rem.

Subaru: “In the end, this means nothing’s changed still, doesn’t it?”

Ram: “…If we want things to change, then we have to fulfill the aim that came up in the tower, don’t you think?”

Subaru: “The Great Library Pleiades, its trials, huh?”

Their original purpose had been to get in touch with the “Sage” who was in the Pleiades Watchtower, borrow her sagacity that had been stipulated to be omniscient, and save Rem and the victims of “Lust” and “Gluttony” that they’d left behind in Priestella.

However, Shaula, the “Sage” of the Pleiades Watchtower had been one in name only, and in actuality what they’d encountered was just one weird girl who’d mistook Subaru as the “Sage” Flugel. The Pleiades Watchtower had turned out to be the Great Library Pleiades, and the knowledge that had been stipulated as Shaula’s omniscience was sleeping inside countless books that were kept in the libraries, or so had been said.

That’s right, their purpose had become really distorted, and their end-goal had shifted in a direction which they couldn’t even predict.

Subaru: “I’ll get ahold of this knowledge and get Rem back.—I haven’t wavered in that purpose.”

Ram: “…Yeah. So I hope.”

Ram cast her eyes down at Subaru rotating his shoulders, and nimbly stretching. With that, she tenderly took ahold of the sleeping Rem’s hand without glancing at Subaru.

Closing one of his eyes at Ram’s attitude, Subaru pointed his finger at the ceiling.

Subaru: “I’ve decided to challenge the trial above. What about you?”

Ram: “Don’t you think it’d be too much of a cause for anxiety if no one is looking after Rem? Considering that, I will take on that duty. Since from the start it was for watching over Rem that I came on this journey and even went as far as asking such unreasonableness from Roswaal-sama.”

Subaru: “That’s, well, yeah I guess so. In that case I’ll entrust Rem to you.”

Ram: “I can’t really do much other than watch her, though.”

Subaru: “You watching over has meaning you know.”

Saying that to Ram, who had unusually disparaged herself, Subaru looked over at Rem’s sleeping face just before he exited the room. She was in a dream where her facial expression had been extinguished, and he couldn’t say she looked either peaceful or anguished.

He stretched out his hand to her forehead which her fringe rested against, and gently touched it as if he were tickling her.

Subaru: “Well then, I’m off, I’ll see you later.”

Rem: “…”

Of course, she didn’t reply.

Ram understood that he’d been talking to himself as well, so she didn’t callously interject. Satisfied with that, Subaru turned towards the room’s exit.

He couldn’t help himself from stretching his hand out to the wall, and as he touched the ivy, he asked the spirit, “Please take care of Rem and Patrasche”, lest the Spirit forget.

Then, just before he exited the room, he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

Subaru: “By the way, you said something like you couldn’t leave Rem alone, but just now you’d left the room empty. Why did you bother to come downstairs?”

Ram: “…”

Subaru: “No way, could it be that when you heard that I’d woken up, you came to see me as quickly as you could? If there was something up, then please let me know…”

Ram: “Get a move on and leave.”

Subaru: “Huh? No, but, if there’s something on your mind, then won’t you tell me.”

Ram: “Hurry up and leave.”

Overwhelmed by the ghastly aura that was spouting up from her, Subaru couldn’t say anything more to her, and thus was left with no choice but to flee from the Green Room crestfallen.

2

Subaru: “I never really get what Ram thinks about, but I especially don’t understand her well as of late.”

Emilia: “Hmm, I don’t think so, Ram is surprisingly open with that sort of stuff. I find it cute that she tries to hide that open part of hers.”

Subaru: “It’s quite rare for you to speak as if you’re her elder… Though I guess you really are her elder.”

Emilia: “Yeah, it’s a little bit like I’m her big sis. I’m older than anyone else here…Oh, wait.”

Beatrice: “Mhhhm, Betty is definitely the big sis here, in fact. That’s carved in stone and no one can paint over it, I suppose. You should all adore me, in fact.”

As soon as he’d left the Green Room, he’d joined back with everyone waiting outside, which had led to this conversation.

Emilia looked a tad frustrated at having had her seat of being the oldest in the Team taken away from her, whilst Beatrice puffed out her flat chest in satisfaction. Though, to be honest, neither of them had big sister like demeanors.

Besides, a conversation of who the oldest was in light of their circumstances was in fact quite a delicate matter.

Anastasia: “Hmm? Natsuki-kun, what is it? D’ya have somethin’ ya want ta tell me?”

Subaru: “Not really. Just meant to say that there’s many faces here that don’t match their real age in appearance.”

Anastasia: “Oh? I get told “You look younger than you actually are” quite often. It’s a lil’ hard for me ta take ‘em as a compliment, but I look down on bein’ looked down on, so dependin’ how they say it, I may accept it.”

Though Anastasia smiled with a strong look of business about her face, how she was really feeling was unclear.

Anastasia was just over 20 years old, but she looked about 14 or 15 However, what Subaru had wanted to point out wasn’t what lay on the outside, but what lay on the inside. Anastasia still had her body hijacked by Eridna currently.

If Eridna’s birth had been the same as Beatrice, then it wouldn’t be difficult for her to enter into the race for the oldest. However, it’d be impossible for him to reveal what he’d concealed up until now over such a trifling matter, so Subaru didn’t say anything else.

Moreover, there were other prominent candidates for the race for the oldest when confined to the present.

Shaula: “Hey, what’s up Master? Uh huh, hm, didn’cha like the grassy smell of the Green Room? I get that. I toooo find that room nasty and dislikeable~”

Subaru: “Didn’t you say there was a pungent smell coming from me too? You’re cool with mine?!”

Shaula: “Master’s is a smell I’ve gotten used to. Truly. This time it ain’t no lie!”

Subaru: “Shut your trap.”

Keeping Shaula away from him, who had nestled up close to him and sniffed him, Subaru looked up at the floor above. Those left on the Fourth Floor would challenge the trial above barring Rem and Ram—.

Subaru: “What about you? Are you coming with us?”

Shaula: “Meeee? Weell, I don’t particularly need to, but since it’s been so long, I do think I want to come with you. Cuz it gets lonely not being able to talk despite being perfectly able to. I’ve been cooped up in silence for centuries, so I want to talk and talk and taaaalk~”

Subaru still couldn’t get cold at her with her having said such a heartrending thing with a friendly smile plastered on her face. He imagined that Emilia and Beatrice both knew that sort of loneliness all too well. His feelings towards Shaula were deeply tinged with sympathy, so he didn’t really have any intentions of actively keeping her away.

Meili: “I rea~lly like this Onee-san, so I thi~nk she should come with us.”

Julius: “It’s only natural that the examiner is present there if we’re going to take the trial. It’s just for her to accompany us to make sure that we don’t commit any irregularities.”

Support for that came in an unexpected form from Meili and Julius. With them having done so, it meant that the majority of them backed Shaula accompanying them.

Lastly, Subaru looked over at Anastasia, who hadn’t made any comments about it, so to unite their consensus.

Receiving that gaze, Anastasia tilted her head and said “Me?”

Anastasia: “I don’t think there’s any meaning in just me opposin’ this here, ‘n I ain’t got any reason ta oppose it in the first place, ‘n it’s not particularly a problem? Besides…”

Subaru: “Besides?”

Anastasia: “That girl seems way too attached ta ya Natsuki-kun, so if we take her with us, she may tell us stuff about the contents of the trial. She may inadvertently come ta our side.”

Shaula: “I’m sowwy, but I haven’t the foggiest about the contents of the trials, so I’m gonna have to let you down there.”

Subaru: “Jeez, did you really have to say it like that.”

Anastasia laughed with a Tahaha, and Shaula looked smug as if she had been praised.

It was questionable whether Anastasia’s anticipations boded good fortune or bad, but for now, no one seemed to have any objections to Shaula accompanying them.

Although he couldn’t deny that it was a little careless, leaving her alone was also an anxiety in itself, so the only difference came from leaving the danger far away or near at hand.

Subaru: “Okay. We shall go together. It doesn’t look like we can count on you, but I have high hopes of you coming up with ideas.”

Shaula: “He’s talking to you, lil’ ankle biter. Do your best!”

Beatrice: “He’s talking to you, I suppose! What were you listening to, in fact!”

Shaula curled her lips with a look on her face of having brought up a topic that she shouldn’t have. Whilst listening to Beatrice’s angry yells, the group opened the door of a room opposite to the Green Room—and when they peered inside, they found the stairs that led up there.

Subaru: “We’re done with spiral staircases?”

Shaula: “The Fourth Floor “Alcyone” and the Third Floor “Taygeta” are directly connected. I don’t really go up unless I got business, so I’ve seldom been.”

Subaru: “What this business you refer to?”

Shaula: “It’s a young maiden’s secret.”

Moving his gaze away from Shaula as soon as she started to show signs of her inanities, Subaru looked over at Julius. Him and the others should have already challenged the Third Floor whilst he’d slept.

He expected that he’d be able to hear something useful out of him, but that knight calmly shrugged his shoulders.

Julius: “I apologize for this when you have expectations, but we understood very little about it. Immediately after you climb up to the Third Floor, you’ll come across the room that’s referred to as a trial, but…”

Subaru: “But?”

Julius: “What lies there is an unintelligible enigma. The honest truth is that we weren’t able to find any clues to solve it, and we ended up having no idea what to do.”

Subaru: “An unintelligible enigma…?”

Subaru shifted his attention to the top of the stairs without getting the point in Julius’ words. The floor above was dark, and he wasn’t able to tell how it looked from below. However, that stillness made it look more sinister.

Emilia: “But, it doesn’t look like you can just enter and see what to do. Nothing really changed even when we went in and out… We were simply just given the cold shoulder.”

Beatrice: “It makes me so irritated when I think on how we were ignored, I suppose.”

It seemed like Emilia and Beatrice also agreed with Julius’ impression.

In reality, although it was said to be a trial, none of them had been able to challenge it. His levels of wariness had just shot up as the word “Ordeal” closely resembled it.

Subaru: “Well it can’t be helped. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. —Then let us go?”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s the spirit.”

Beatrice: “That’s the spirit, in fact.”

Shaula: “That’s the spirit.”

Receiving all three of their affirmations each in their own manner of speaking, Subaru took the initiative and put one of his feet on the stairs. Then, step by step, he headed up towards the floor above— Unlike the spiral staircases from before, the number of steps to get to the Third Floor was about the same as an ordinary building.

Thus, in contrast to his preparedness, Subaru stormed straight into the Third Floor “Taygeta” to the point that it felt he’d gotten there way too quickly.

Subaru: “I’m in a…”

Immediately after he entered, Subaru felt an overwhelming sense of unease. A clump of unease, or rather should he say that it was an expanse that invited nothing but unease?

—It was a white, white expanse.

Although it must be an extension of the tower that had up until now been cylindrical in shape, what greeted Subaru after he’d climbed the stairs was a strange expanse completely dyed in white in every direction.

The expanse-like vastness shouldn’t have been that different in size to the tower so far, but neither its walls, nor the end could be seen in this incredibly white expanse. When he looked up above, he couldn’t tell where the ceiling was, when he looked down at his feet, only the part where the stairs were was a slightly ajar black. Other than that, the floor was so white that it made him scared to walk on it.

He couldn’t tell that the floor was the floor, or he’d end up being hit by an illusion that felt like he was in continuous free fall just about everywhere. The ceiling and the walls were the same—Subaru felt like he’d probably end up going crazy if he lost sight of the stairs that led downstairs here

And, at the front of this white expanse—right in front of the stairs, there was a strange object floating up.

Subaru: “A stone slab…?”

That was the impression that slipped out from Subaru’s mouth when he looked at that object. In fact, the object was such that it could only be expressed like so.

It was a single, black slab, that had been built in the shape of a quadrilateral, and had an incredibly smooth feeling to it.

He couldn’t call it a “Stone slab” if it wasn’t built from stone, but he had no other way of calling it considering that it wasn’t metallic as well.

If he really had to call it something else that was more flashy, then he’d probably use the term “Monolith”.

The silent Monolith had acquired a strange floating power and was floating up dozens of centimeters above the floor.

Or at least it should be. His eyes were thrown completely out of whack in checking how far it was off the ground due to the whiteness of the floor, and it became more and more unclear to him. However, the Monolith that was floating in mid-air was there cool as you like.

It was roughly the same height as Subaru, and its width was about the size of two people lined up together—If he had to put it as something that was similar in size to it, then the impression he got was like as if a tatami was floating up.

Subaru: “What the heck is this strange thing?”

Julius: “If I were to try and put it into different words, I’d say this is the contrivance that stuck out this enigma before us.”

Julius glared at the Monolith, standing beside Subaru, whose awareness had been gripped by this strange spectacle.

Julius’ face looked sterner than usual, as if he’d been already made to experience great hardship by the Monolith many times over. The rest of them had made it up to the Third Floor now, and were huddled together in an effort to ward off the indistinct atmosphere present inside of the white expanse.

Subaru: “This ain’t a room I want to stay long in.”

Julius: “That I agree. If we stay here too long, it’s quite likely that we’ll lose our sense of balance. And if you end up running towards the stairs and your feet slip, I imagine your life could end up being cut short, wouldn’t you think?”

Anastasia: “Yoohoo, Julius. Stop with the unnecessary prattle.”

Anastasia puffed out her cheeks in protest at Julius’ prattle. It looked like she’d slipped on the way back before, which is what Julius was referring to.

However, Subaru had no intention of laughing at that mishap. In actual fact, this room had been clearly made with the goal of putting people’s senses out of whack. The room seemed like it embodied the wickedness of the nature of the person who’d made it.

Subaru: “So, what should we do about the main mystery?”

Beatrice: “You should touch that slab, in fact. The trial begins if you do, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Should I really touch the Monolith?”

Julius: “Monolith? That’s a name that fits quite well with its mysteriousness. Let’s call it like that from now on.”

Subaru stepped away from Julius, who was in admiration of that strangeness, and moved forward on their behalf. Since no one stopped him he walked all the way over to the Monolith.

He'd expected the Monolith to let off a strange, ominous feeling when he approached—But it wasn't like that, it was pretty much just a plain old slab of stone other than the fact it was floating. When he thought of it like a tatami floating about, he felt the fear he'd had at first fade just a little.

Subaru: "Anyways, so I'll go ahead and touch it? Can I get a countdown?"

Emilia: "Ah, right, I'd like to do it. Three, two, one…"

Subaru: "So damn quick! I got this, though. "

Emilia raised her hand up and volunteered to Subaru's appeal; then her countdown began. As she counted down, Subaru panicked and turned around to face the Monolith.

And then,

Emilia: "Zero—!"

Subaru touched the Monolith at the same time she counted zero—And the next moment, the surface of the black slab glowed from the inside. Just as it did, the scene in front of his eyes grew blurred.

No, it wasn't exactly blurred.

The Monolith which Subaru had touched started to grow in numbers whilst glowing with a black radiance.

The Monolith shot out replicated Monolith after Monolith from its back whilst making their surface glow. They were all hurled across the room at an incredible rate of knots, scattered in strange positions, all floating.

Countless Monoliths had been strewn out across the white expanse, and Subaru had been taken by surprise by that change. Then, passing through the awestruck Subaru's eardrums—straight to his brain, a voice echoed.

???: “—Touch the brightest of the hero destroyed by Shaula.”

Subaru: “—hk?!”

Subaru jerked his hand away from the Monolith in surprise when he heard that voice ring out so abruptly. And, as he staggered back, someone propped his back up from behind.

He turned around to look at them. There, he found Julius’ face. Julius touched his fringe with his left hand as he propped Subaru up with his right, and said,

Julius: “Well look at this. Our first surprise, can I count on you sympathizing with it, I wonder?”

Subaru: “What an assholish thing to say—!!”

Subaru’s protests only made Julius’ sardonic smile grow deeper.

In any case, the “Trial” had genuinely started now.

The trial of the Great Library Pleiades, Third Floor “Taygeta”.

Time-limit: “No Restrictions”. Number of attempts: “No Restrictions”. Challengers: “No Restrictions”.

—Trial, start.

Chapter 22:
The Asterism of the White Starry Sky

After he untangled himself from Julius, and stood unaided, he turned to face the “Trial”.

In front of Subaru’s eyes, the figures of countless replica Monoliths were spread out across the white expanse from the heart of the Monolith he’d touched. To be honest, there were so many of them that he’d get sick and tired were he to count them.

Subaru: “This would be the “Trial” you meant… right, Shaula?”

Shaula: “Looks like it right? I wanna see Master flaunt his forte!”

Subaru: “Don’t start saying stuff like a band would at a drinking party…”

He wouldn’t know since he’d never been to one, but that was probably how things went there.

Subaru looked around the room behind Shaula, who’d cheered him on with her easy-going manner. The floor was still enveloped in white, with everything from their ability to tell distance to their ability to tell height going haywire.

The only change that stood out were the Monoliths that were dotted about the place, but those too weren’t particularly different from the first one. There seemed to be a bit of a difference in size between them, but other than that, they were the same in that they both floated in mid-air and were made of a strange material.

Subaru: “Speaking of stuff that we were given as a clue other than those, there’s still that thing from before.”

What he’d recalled was the voice that had echoed inside his brain when he’d touched the Monolith.

???: “—Touch the brightest of the hero destroyed by Shaula.”

The sound hadn't come through his eardrums, but rather it'd been whispered straight to his brain inside his skull; it'd been closer to that. The voice he'd heard hadn't been a sound, so the general concept of it being "Someone's voice" couldn't be applied here.

If he were to put it in other words, it was like the words had been jammed into his brain like a sentence that he'd thought of. There was no sound in his thoughts. Thus, you couldn't comprehend who the voice belonged to. If anything, it was from himself.

Subaru: "That voice which could be heard was the trial question, you reckon? If that's the case…"

Julius: "Subaru, I'm sorry to interrupt whilst you're thinking, but there's a few important things I have to say. I don't think it'll hurt to go ahead after hearing those."

Julius, who'd played a practical joke on him earlier, said that to Subaru whilst he racked his mind. Nearby the stairs which led down, Emilia and the rest of them were circled around the Monolith frozen around it. Everyone of them looked puzzled. Subaru shrugged his shoulders in appreciation of Julius, who was beckoning them to his side, and said "Oh?"

Subaru: "Is that so? All of you challenged it before whilst I was sleeping. Did you make any progress?"

Julius: "I guess I can't really call it progress. Anyways. Subaru, please try and touch the stone slab… I mean, the "Monolith" that's right here."

Subaru: "Does doing this please you that much? Well, sure whatever…"

Subaru narrowed his eyes at Julius, who'd stuck to referring to it as a Monolith, and walked over to the Monolith that was on his right hand side. The slab was one of the replicas of the original Monolith. As he got closer, he could see that this one was just a little smaller than the original.

Subaru: "What if it's a trap, where the moment I touch it my arm gets swallowed up?”

Beatrice: “It’s okay, in fact. If something like that happened, Betty would become your right arm for the rest of your life, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Ah, then I’d become Subaru’s left hand. You can rest assured.”

Subaru: “Both of my arms would be gone if we suppose that though!”

Thanks to Beatrice and Emilia’s reassuring pledges, Subaru summoned up his courage and stretched out his hand to the Monolith. He wasn’t really worried about the act of touching it in itself.

So long as his companions had recommended him to do this, and didn’t try to stop him, he had no reason to doubt his safety. The issue was simply the chance that they were concealing the truth as with the Monolith’s replicating themselves—.

Subaru: “Oh?”

Still full of anxiety, as soon as his fingertips brushed against the Monolith, the black stone slab shone so brightly that it almost scorched his eyes. In fact, its radiance had caused Subaru to hold his breath and immediately cover his face with his arm.

Then, after the light faded away, what remained in front of Subaru’s eyes was…

Subaru: “Huh? Where did the Monolith go?”

Shaula: “Hehehe, behind youuu Master.”

Subaru: “Behind me…?”

After that flash of light, Subaru affirmed that the Monolith that should have been in front of him had disappeared. Surprised by what had happened, he turned to look behind him at Shaula who had nonsensically shouted out in triumph.

When he turned around, at the front of the stairs—In other words, at the place where the original Monolith had stood, the first Monolith stood alone. All the rest of them had disappeared from the room.

Subaru: "So, in other words… this means?"

Julius: "That everything went back to its original state. To put it shortly, it looks like we've been deemed to have messed up by the "Trial". Of course…."

Stepping away from the dejected Subaru's side, Julius carelessly approached the original Monolith. And then, immediately after he stretched out his hand and touched its surface, that voice echoed out through his mind—.

???: "—Touch the brightest of the hero destroyed by Shaula."

Once again, at the same time which the challenge was posed to them, Monolith after Monolith were replicated from the original and scattered all around the room with the same force as before. The "Trial" was distributed around therefrom.

In other words, they could call this a "Retry".

Subaru: "I see. It must mean we can think as much as we want until we find an answer."

Julius: "That's our guess right now. There happens to be this Monolith, but I can say that even when we went around touching Monoliths at random… We couldn't find an answer."

Subaru: "Ah, so you've already tried brute forcing it?"

Subaru broke down Julius' mild manner of speaking to the bread and bones of it. Emilia and Meili, who'd heard that explanation, were patting their heads with what seemed to be a look of embarrassment about them.

Just try touching and checking every single one of them, certainly it looked like they'd tried to carry out that tactic. Nevertheless, it didn't seem to have done the trick.

Subaru: “It’s a “Trial” after all. It means we have to solve the problem and answer it.”

Julius: “It looks like our examiner doesn’t appreciate answers that are just given out at random.”

Subaru: “Yeah, seems so. So like a Sensei who doesn’t give you credit unless you write down all of your working out, and doesn’t allow you to just put answers in the test’s answer column. The anti-cheating measures sure do appear quickly though.”

Reaching an answer without showing how you derived it could only come as a result of cheating or a hunch. Often times, till Primary School, he’d come across problems which he’d find answers to using his hunches, but the main point to Mathematics was to learn how to derive the problem, not to regurgitate the problem willy-nilly on the spot.

One time during Primary School, when he’d been marked down for the lack of clarity in his working out, he remembered how resentful he’d been about it, but—

Subaru: “After all this time, it looks like my Sensei was right…”

Anastasia: “I’m sorry ta butt in when yer still absorbed in yer thoughts, Natsuki-kun, but rather yer turn ain’t from here. Come on, snap back to reality, snap back.”

Subaru: “Huh, ah, oh, my bad. But, what do you mean by my turn?”

Anastasia called Subaru, whose eyes had glazed over, back to reality, and then clapped her hand on his back. As Subaru tilted his head at her appeal, everyone looked around at each other, and broke into mutters.

What they were saying was the same thing, so combining it and paraphrasing it into other words—“It’s down to Subaru to find out who the hero destroyed by Shaula is”.

Emilia: “We challenged the “Trial” many times over until Subaru woke up. However, that girl wouldn’t even tell us whether or not she was Shaula when we did.”

Beatrice: “As far as we were concerned, Shaula was the “Sage”, in fact. We thought they were the person on the drawing engraved on the Silver Coin, so we didn’t connect this woman with Shaula, I suppose.”

Those were Emilia and Beatrice’s replies, both of whom hadn’t been able to hear Shaula’s story till then.

Ever since Subaru had woken up, he’d seen Shaula communicate with him with an air of over-familiarity that was way off the marks of typical friendliness, and because of that it was hard to believe for him that she’d refused to say anything to them. However, her not telling them anything more couldn’t be helped since she’d kept her mouth shut towards those in the tower.

Having said that though, Subaru was still worried.

Even if Shaula had had her tongue unsealed, and became able to talk about that…

Subaru: “I guess it doesn’t hurt to ask. Hey, Shaula. If you know anything, please tell me everything about the hero you destroyed.”

Shaula: “Leave this to me. Remembering stuff like each of the names of the guys I’ve killed is second class work… For a first class individual like meeee, I don’t remember past the 100 mark.”

Subaru: “Of course you’d say that!”

Shaula gave him a thumbs and then winked. Receiving that vigorous response, Subaru slapped his knee.

Just as he’d expected and feared, her reply was an air-headed Shaula-like one.

He had suspected that was likely going to happen with how she’d acted and talked till now. There was the chance that she, who would seemingly know the answer to “The hero that Shaula destroyed” didn’t remember it anywhere in her head.

Julius: “However, we won’t make any progress if we end it with that. Miss Shaula, do you really not remember anything? It doesn’t matter even if it’s a tiny little detail.”

Shaula: “That’s easier said than done. I juuuust Hell’s Snipe everyone who comes near to the tower, and their corpses end up being cleaned up by the witchbeasts outside.”

Anastasia: “Okay, but isn’ that strange? Could it be a “Trial” ta see whether we can reveal the tower’s knowledge in the first place? It’d be a strange sequence of events for it ta require us ta show somethin’ that happened after Shaula-san’s tenure in protectin’ the tower started.”

Shaula had pouted, saying she didn’t have any clue, but Anastasia pointed out the out of place feeling in what she’d said. Everyone other than Shaula had agreed with her opinion with an “I see”. For sure, it was difficult to imagine that the problem posed inside the tower came about after her tenure in the tower had started. Then naturally that meant the period of time which “Shaula had destroyed the hero” came before the tower’s construction.

Beatrice: “In other words, that means it’s from before you started firing at people at random, in fact. Come on, remember, I suppose. It’s like all of your nourishment ended up just in your buttocks and breasts, so your memory’s become poor, in fact.”

Shaula: “This appearance was chosen by my Mother~. Butbut, even if you say “Remember”, it’s not gonna honestly come out. Before the tower was built, right?”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right. Before the tower was built. During that time, do you happen to know of anyone that you kille…I mean destroyed?”

Gathered near the stairway with Shaula in the middle of them, they desperately tried to awaken her memories. However, Shaula, who was basked in everyone’s expectations, gave no signs that they’d been successful, and she groaned out with an “Ahiiin”

Subaru: “Is it true or not that you’ve been around since 400 years ago? If I name a bunch of the noteworthy people around that time, you wouldn’t happen to have killed 2 or 3 of them, would you?”

Shaula: “Master, are you thinking that about meeee? I’m a maiden who likes to dabble with flowers ya know.”

Subaru: “That’s no maiden, more like a caterpillar.”

Emilia: “Subaru, I think your way of speaking just now was ever so rude. If she doesn’t want to remember, then don’t push her and force her to…”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, your kindness is your super-virtue, your best feature, but this woman is the more you pamper her, the more useless she becomes type, don’t you think?! I can tell! ‘Cause I’m the same!”

Emilia had firmly puffed out her chest and declared that. But, it wasn’t that Shaula couldn’t remember because she didn’t want to in the first place, but rather that her memory was so poor that she just couldn’t.

The topic was one which he’d wanted to handle delicately since one of his members had a bunch of difficult problems in regards to memories, but it was a different matter when it came to Shaula.

Subaru: “Practically, it’ll be no problem if I fire off some random names, right? I don’t know how one of them striking the answer would react with the Monoliths, though.”

Anastasia: “It’s definitely gotta be as Natsuki-kun says. I wonder though, even if we find out the answa’, how can we then touch “The Brightest”?”

Considering that the Monolith he’d touched had disappeared, and the “Trial” seemed to have adjudicated them as having messed up, he could predict that their answer’s final form would probably be to “Touch the correct Monolith”.

The issue then was how they would find the “Correct Monolith”. Even if they chipped at Shaula’s memories he didn’t get the feeling like it’d become clear, one could say.

Meili: “Bu~t, even if we think forever, we won’t make any progress, ri~ght? Since Naked Onee-san is pretty cooperati~ve, I thi~nk we might as well ask her.”

Still holding onto Shaula’s bare shoulders, Meili butted in between the adults who were stumbling over what to do. She looked at the group of Monoliths with a look of boredom on her face as she fiddled about with Shaula’s scorpiontail.

Meili: “There’s n~o ickle witchbeasties around, there’s n~o progress, and it’s really not fun he~re. Speed things up, I wanna go back to the Mansio~n.”

Everyone: “…”

Everyone was at a loss for words at the words which Meili had uttered. Following straight after that, Meili said ““What is i~t?”, as Subaru patted her head.

Meili: “What is it I wo~nder?”

Subaru: “Nothing, I just think it’s as you say. You’re right. This place is sandy as hell, and on top of that, there’s a bunch of scary witchbeasts prowling about outside. We’ll quickly take care of things here, settle all our problems… wake up Rem, retrieve a means to save the people in need, and then we shall skedaddle out of here.”

Treading around things with anxiety before attempting them was a waste of valuable time. It felt to him like the “Trial” had been set up by someone rather ill-natured and that he was playing right into their hands.

Shaula: “Master, Master. You do know that there’s an easy-to-stroke head right next to that lil’ ankle biter.”

Subaru: “I said this already. You’re the same as me in that you’re the type which when pampered falls unendingly into corruption. That’s why from here on out we’re doing this the Spartan way. Hurry the hell up and remember.”

Shaula: “Do I have toooo?”

Puffing her cheeks out in dissatisfaction, Shaula seemed to be in full-pout. However, she'd be easy to handle since after a few dozen seconds she'd start humming with a face like she'd forgotten.

Julius: "Well then, our young lady requests it too. Shall we try and get on with testing out the possibilities we have in front of us without dithering about?"

Anastasia: "Mhm, that's probably a good idea. It's relievin' that it's okay even if we fail a buncha' times. In most cases in human life, things are decided in just a single bout… So, this is quite a generous problem don'cha think?"

Although Meili had set things off in motion, Julius and Anastasia had also came into agreement with her. Thus, it was time to make her remember "The Hero destroyed and forgotten by Shaula" once again.

Subaru: "For now let's go with a name that you remember…Yeah. Ah, how about Reid? That dude was the first ever "Sword Saint"; You killed him, didn't you?"

Shaula: "AIIIIIIIIIIIIEEEEEE!!"

Meili: "GYAAAA!"

Subaru: "Third Base Cleanup."

Straight after he'd nonchalantly pulled out that name, Shaula let out a high pitched shriek and leapt backwards. Subaru performed a diving catch on Meili, who'd been dropped having been unable to withstand that injection of momentum.

After he safely brought Meili back to the ground, Shaula, who'd jumped up and fled far away into the room, had gotten smaller in view.

Subaru: "Hey! I'm sorry! I don't really know why you're acting like that, but get back here!"

Shaula: "P-Please don't say such scary stuff. Master's a real mean guy. The absolute worst. A maiden's distress. A liability issue."

Even though she spoke frivolously, Shaula’s voice as she skulked back was shaking feebly. She sure did act tough, but she wasn’t all that. Unmistakably, fear and dread had caused her to react like that.

Naturally, the reason behind her fear could only be but one.

Subaru: “Huh, is the First “Sword Saint” such a scary person?”

Julius: “How foolish. Reinhardt, Wilhelm-sama and such are esteemed individuals worthy of the forefather of the Astrea family. He definitely wasn’t just skilled with the sword, but a man of character as well. Certainly, there are some parts sprinkled into the anecdotes that were left behind as rumors that indicate that he was rather strong-willed which don’t overlap with Reinhardt and the rest, but… If it’s not like that, then wouldn’t that’d mean the history of the Astrea Family has been twisted till this current generation?”

Subaru: “Not really, but when you unravel history, and the viewpoint of prominent statesmen also changes, you’ll find that Japanese History is sufficiently cruel too. If we compare it to that, then I mean we can’t really start speaking about definites here…”

Julius: “Dear goodness, let’s not delve into this sort of talk. It’s alright. We can get a clarification to the story if we get her to talk as she’s a living witness here. Come now, let’s listen to her.”

Julius started to ramble on with tremendous vigor at Subaru, who had hazarded a guess at Reid’s temperament from Shaula’s reaction. And to make matters worse, he’d handled things by dismissing Subaru, who’d tried to defend his point, with a laugh.

After so long, Subaru could once again see a glimpse of the figure of that gaudy knight which he’d first seen at the Royal Selection. He now knew that his attitude back then had been down to him playing the villain. Though, whenever he saw him like this, he sure did get the impression that he still was like when they’d first met.

In any case,

Julius: “Your impressions regarding The First “Sword Saint”, Reid

Astrea. Miss Shaula, I'd like you to tell us your candid impression of him."

Shaula: "He was human garbage."

Julius: "I'd like you to tell us your candid impression of him."

Subaru: "Don't pretend like she didn't say anything!!"

Subaru shoved Julius' shoulder, who'd tried to ignore that inconvenient tidbit, and made him face the facts. Pointing his finger at Shaula, who had a troubled look on her face, Subaru continued.

Subaru: "Hey, listen up. The truth about the history you wanted to know about is right here. She's a living witness to it. Go on, tell me as many anecdotes about Reid Astrea as you like, of that magnanimous man of character skilled in the sword."

Julius: "…Those who hold exceptional talent end up having confidence in themselves, more or less. That shouldn't be chastised, rather, it should be something you take pride in. If you end up becoming the greatest swordsman recorded in history, even acting like such is, yeah, when you take into account how things were back then, it would be suitable—"

Subaru: "It's the first time I've seen you so desperate."

Julius too became flustered as if he was considering just how unconvincing he sounded.

Setting Julius aside, who'd been betrayed by the history which he ever so loved, Shaula's "Truth of Reid Astrea" was pouring out of her without an end in sight.

Shaula: "Well, anyways, he was a nasty guy. His personality was like that of an unruly brat's in adult-form, and he loved to bully the weak. Or I guess if we look at it from that garbage's point of view, almost all of his opponents were weak, so he'd be bullying the weak no matter who he fought against. He did that a lot to meeee too."

Emilia: "But, he was able to keep doing that to you even though you're so strong? Ah, since it happened over 400 years ago, you must've still been small then too?"

Shaula: "I'veeee been like this ever since I was born. So, between now and back then, I'veeee not changed, however… That thing was just out of the ordinary. A total piece of shit."

Garbage, piece of shit, the hero of yore had been harshly evaluated as such.

The darkness wasn't vanishing from Shaula's attitude, as if many hateful memories had come flooding back to her. It was the same as when a person who'd been bullied recalled what the bully had done to them.

Shaula: "You should always keep that piece of shit in mind. Even if the bully forgets, the one bullied absolutely never will, and that's a fact…"

Subaru: "I'm not really surprised since there's a precedent in Reinhardt, but it'd take quite a monster to knock you down a few pegs, and Reid Astrea's one too."

Shaula: "He really was the worst. But, I was able to get him to use both hands once every ten times we fought."

Subaru: "…I see."

He could only answer with that. Had she set her goals high or low in making him use both of his hands once every ten times, and not to gain victory once every ten times?

Subaru felt like he wouldn't be able to make Reinhardt use both his hands even once every hundred times, so he could admit that her putting up a fight like that had been plenty enough.

Subaru: "Well, we can put off asking about Reid. It's pretty pointless for us to ask if you didn't destroy him."

Julius: "—. —. I agree. There's other things we ought to prioritize right now."

Subaru: "Didn't you waste time doing that just now?"

Subaru couldn't tell whether he had a scholarly interest in it, or it was a curiosity spurred from a simple hobby, but he judged that for now, perhaps Julius wouldn't be of any use.

Although he felt sorry for Julius, who'd had his illusions shattered, unfortunately for him, Subaru had no reason to care about Reinhardt's ancestor right now. To begin with, Reinhardt himself was already more than plenty enough amazing no matter how amazing his bloodline was. At least considering his "Father's" nature, he was sure that Reinhardt had been abounding in it.

Subaru: "Then, let's leave all speculation about who the hero is to the guy who knows best."

Julius: "Gotcha. I shall humbly accept."

Subaru: "I still wasn't talking about you, but sure. Go for it. Beako, help him out with it."

Beatrice: "Gotcha, in fact."

He left the task to Julius since he was willing to do it. And getting Beatrice to assist him as a helper, who boasted 400 years of knowledge, was ideal.

Emilia: "Then what shall we do?"

Subaru: "We'll take a closer look at the surroundings."

He'd leave the hero-related stuff to Julius and Beatrice, who'd remain by Shaula, and meanwhile he wanted to take a look at the arrangement issue.

Namely, how the replicated Monoliths were arranged—If there was some significance to their uneven arrangement, then taking the time to search for the pattern behind it probably wouldn't be a waste.

Subaru: "First of all, the first one… is in front of the stairs."

Emilia: "It's the Monolith that hands out the question, right?"

The Monoliths weren't lined up in a narrow enough space to the extent that they had to be careful not to bump into them, nevertheless, Subaru took Anastasia and Emilia and looked around the Monoliths inside the room.

There was a surprising difference in size between the scattered Monoliths when he double checked. However, there wasn't a single one of them that was as large as the series of original Monoliths, the figures of countless Monoliths which were one or two times smaller were scattered about after them.

Subaru: "When you take a look at it… I guess there's about 7 or 8 Monoliths that are about the same size as the first Monolith?"

Emilia: "I guess so? Yeah, I think so too. I think the ones that are reaaaally far away are all quite small. We'll end up restarting things if we touch those too, though."

Subaru: "From the way you're talking about it, it looks like you've done that before… Ah, Sorry. Nevermind about that."

Seeing sadness build up in Emilia's eyes, Subaru caught himself before he said too much. Returning back in front of the first Monolith, Subaru turned to face the two girls and plunged into thought.

Subaru: "Touch the brightest of the hero destroyed by Shaula…I feel like it's trying to say something 'cool'."

Anastasia: "I guess it must be sayin' somethin' abstract. Unfortunately, we can't go overlookin' the question when we take into account what comes out of relyin' on Shaula-san's memory."

Subaru: "Well, I suppose so."

In essence, relying on others, or on the being that had been left behind in the tower as its warden, to get that answer was really unfair with it being labelled as a "Trial".

Subaru and the others hadn't expected friendly contact when they'd made it to the tower—However, they ended up making it into the tower without coming to blows with Shaula; if it hadn't ended up like that, they would have fallen into a quagmire of massacre. Even if they'd successfully made it into the tower in that case, they likely wouldn't have been able to defeat Shaula.

Emilia: "If we do that, passing the "Trial" is going to be forever impossible, right?"

Subaru: "That's correct if you're saying they have no intention of letting us solve the "Trial". They could put a strong Guardian as a defense mechanism, and worse, were we to kill said Guardian, they could put a terrible barrier that wouldn't let us pass...."

Emilia: "But, you don't think that... You think it's different to that?"

Subaru: "Mhmhm."

Emilia turned her eyes in anticipation towards Subaru, who'd touched on this issue of security. Receiving her gaze, Subaru confirmed her thoughts with a chuckle.

Those eyes were Subaru's weakness. Subaru grew weak whenever Emilia and Beatrice gave him those looks. Rem, Garfiel and Otto would occasionally look at him like that too. Coupled with Petra, that made far too many. The only ones who didn't look at him like that were Patrasche and Ram.

Subaru: "Ahh, it somehow feels like I could see a trend."

Emilia: "—?"

Subaru: "It's nothing, just talking to myself."

Subaru's bluff wouldn't have worked against those who could see through him. Of course, he was bailed out thanks to Emilia not being one of those who'd question him about it.

Anyways, putting that aside and going back to the problem of the format of the "Trial"—

Subaru: "Exceptions aside, fundamentally the problem was constructed with the assumption that it can be solved. If you really wanted to hide things properly, it'd be smarter not to leave them somewhere where there’s a chance of finding them.”

Anastasia: “But, Natsuki-kun, yer’ve eyeballed this place as not bein’ like that?”

Subaru: “What was it that the keeper of this place, Shaula said? She said this is a Great Library where you can get all the knowledge you desire. I don’t think Shaula herself could come up with such a fancy-looking phrase, so I think she’s splurging out words that were told to her by someone else. Meaning that “Flugel”, who built this library and entrusted it to Shaula, intended for it to be used.”

The more he unraveled the possibilities, the more unnatural the current situation became to him.

The creator of this Great Library Pleiades must have taken steps to set it up so that the purpose of the building worked. He’d left behind the “Trial” and Shaula here as a means to screen people for that.

Subaru: “Does this mean that no one but those who get along well with Shaula can use it to begin with?”

Emilia: “But Shaula said that she attacked everyone who approached the tower, right?”

Yeah, that was right.

The command that had been given to Shaula was to “Eliminate anyone who approached the tower without any exceptions”, and Subaru and the others coming into friendly contact with Shaula had just been a stroke of luck. If he recklessly concluded that people wouldn’t get the qualifications to challenge the tower unless they abounded in fortuity, then…

Anastasia: “So what ya need is strength, luck, ‘n charm so that yer able to make friends with Shaula-san? I think our lineup is pretty unfit for that challenge.”

Subaru: “…It sure is.”

If they’d been defeated by Shaula, killed by her, or been unable to get her to cooperate with them, then they'd have lost the qualifications to challenge the Great Library Pleiades…

Although it was irrational to think so, if he listed all the conditions up till now, he could only come to that conclusion.

However, Subaru couldn't help but have a bad feeling in just accepting that.

And,

Emilia: "Hey. Heey."

Subaru: "Emilia?"

Emilia: "I'm feeling quiiiiite a bit uneasy. I've got a real bad feeling in and around my chest."

Emilia placed her hand to the pit of her stomach and anxiously spilled that out. As he was about to draw his eyes to that, Subaru restrained himself before he ogled her pale skin.

Clearing his throat with an Ahem, he frowned at Emilia and said, "A bad feeling?"

Subaru: "Huh, is something on your mind?"

Emilia: "To tell you the truth, there is. But, this may have nothing to do with everything, and even if I say it out loud, I think only you would understand me…"

Subaru: "I think I'd like you to say whatever's on your mind right now, so you can say it to me. My thoughts aren't necessarily correct, and it's honestly a good thing to think about things from multiple different angles."

Emilia: "Really?"

Having been immersed in her thoughts about what she was holding back, Emilia's face brightened a little as she heard his words. Then she continued speaking saying "In that case," Emilia: “When you touched the Monolith, you guys could hear a voice inside of your head, right?”

Anastasia: “Yeah. It’s an uncanny contraption, but I wonder what the heck it is.”

Emilia: “It’s that voice but… Isn’t it similar to the one back at the “Ordeal” of the Sanctuary?”

Subaru & Anastasia: “…”

Subaru and Anastasia both kept their silence when they heard Emilia’s suggestion. However, even if both of them had ended up staying silent, the reason why they’d done so had been different.

Anastasia had plunged into silence because she had no clue what those words meant, but Subaru’s silence had been because he’d been taken by surprise and understood her words.

The “Ordeals”—Those had taken place at the Witch Echidna’s graveyard, who’d lived in the “Sanctuary”.

Those mystifying phenomena that made you confront the past/differing presents, Subaru didn’t know the full details of them as he’d retired halfway through, but according to Echidna back at the graveyard, there’d been a third “Ordeal” too, which Emilia had overcome.

No, in this case the details and hardships of that “Ordeal” weren’t what was important here.

What was important was that refrain that had informed them about the details of the Ordeal using “Their own voice” was pretty much the same as when they’d challenged that “Ordeal”.

Subaru: “Now that you mention it, you’re right. Why did that slip out of my mind… I guess ‘cause they’re bad memories?”

Emilia: “Subaru, that’s because you reaaaally dislike Echidna, no?”

Anastasia: “—hk”

Subaru: “Going through an experience where a savior turns out to actually be an éminence grise is gonna end up making you look like me!”

Since the “Sanctuary”, Emilia and Subaru had spoken about the “Witches” only once or twice. Even after they’d touched on the subject of the Ordeal, Emilia liked to skirt around it, so he hadn’t pursued the topic too much.

The point that they both shared in common was that they thought “Echidna was an ill-natured fiend.” Emilia sugarcoated it more when speaking, but Subaru spoke about her as it was.

Anastasia: “Why, ya freaked me out ‘cause ya mentioned Echidna’s name.”

Emilia: “Ah, I see. Anastasia’s Artificial is called Echidna too… She does speak in a reaaally similar manner, right? ‘Tis strange.”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s strange, but let’s settle this another time, alright? So, it’s similar to the Ordeal…”

When he’d heard the word “Trial” mentioned, he’d thought that it sounded similar to “Ordeal”.

When it came to the parts that resembled the “Ordeal” till the start, this was probably one part of a system, or perhaps it was a great part of it that resembled the one at the graveyard.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, the “Ordeal” too was practically unlimited in how much you could challenge it.”

Emilia: “And what’s more, about the “Trials”, there’s the Third Floor, the Second Floor and the First, totaling three here too, right?”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru and Emilia looked at each other as if they were saying Yeah, it’s definitely like that.

The “Sage’s” name, and the 400 years time period. When he looked back on it, it felt inevitable that history overlapped with the period of time of those “Witches”.

Emilia: “Yeah, though I’m sorry. Even if we know that much, it still doesn’t bring us any closer to the answer, huh.”

Having thought all the way up to there, Emilia cut her story short with a flustered look on her face.

Just as Emilia had concluded, even if there was a chance that this place had some relation to the graveyard, it still had nothing to do with the “Trial” of “Taygeta”.

The name of the “Hero who was destroyed by Shaula” was still something that they had to rely on Shaula for—.

Subaru: “…Actually, isn’t it not like that?”

Emilia: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “If we presume this place is something that’s supposed to be solvable, then isn’t saying that it can’t be captured unless Shaula manages to a mistake in the first place?”

This was the tower of the “Sage”, and that had been the graveyard of the “Witch”.

Both of these examiners shared in the same wicked disposition, but if that wasn’t only what they had in common, they had a conceivable chance to overcome them.

The “Witch” had tested people out in her “Ordeals” but she didn’t give them any hardships that couldn’t produce results.

Then if the “Sage” tested people in his “Trials”, then he shouldn’t give them any hardships that couldn’t produce results.

Subaru: “A chance for us to be able to capture the tower without needing Shaula…”

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun, what did’ya think of…”

Emilia: “Shhh”

Plunging into his thoughts, Subaru placed his hand on his chin, closed one of his eyes and sunk into speculation. As he did so, Emilia waved her hand and silenced Anastasia, who’d seen a ray of hope glimmering in what was occurring and spoken up.

Emilia put her finger to her lips and made a shushing gesture at her telling her to stay quiet, and after that, she turned her head back to look at Subaru. Her amethyst eyes sparkled with anticipation.

Not taking any notice of Emilia’s anticipation, Subaru’s head spun in thought.

In this “Trial”, “Shaula’s” presence wasn’t important. Perhaps there was even a chance that those challenging the tower could destroy Shaula were she to attack them. If he presumed that they still didn’t even know Shaula’s name…

Subaru: “Even if we didn’t know that Shaula is Shaula, if we assume a Shaula was involved…”

Emilia & Anastasia: “…”

Subaru: “We mistakenly believed that Flugel’s achievement had been Shaula’s. The “Sage’s” achievement was that he sealed the Witch with the help of the First “Sword Saint” and the “Divine Dragon”. However, “The Witch of Envy” ain’t something that we’d ever call something like a “Hero”, nor was she ever destroyed.”

He cut out that possibility as being an incorrect hypothesis right here.

Maybe there’d been another heroic tale which the “Sage” Flugel had forced on Shaula that he just didn’t know about. However, it didn’t make any sense that Beatrice and Julius hadn’t recalled something like that—An inevitable possibility floated up in his mind.

Subaru: “Even if we didn’t know that Shaula is Shaula, if we assume a Shaula was involved… that’s it.”

He once again repeated what he’d said.

That didn't mean his thoughts were going around in circles. It was the opposite. He'd cut out one of the possibilities, and another one had surfaced. And, what that meant was—

Subaru: "Beako! Come here for a sec!"

Following the possibility that had struck him, Subaru lifted his face up and called Beatrice over.

Julius was trying everything he could to try and pry open the lid on Shaula's memories. Next to him, Beatrice sprung up when she heard Subaru's voice that indicated he'd managed to find something. She rushed over to him, and said,

Beatrice: "That face is Betty's favorite Subaru face, I suppose."

Subaru: "Shouldn't all of them be your favorite?"

Beatrice: "This one especially, in fact."

Beatrice said that without any traces of embarrassment to her, and Subaru stretched out his hand over to her as she stood in front of him. Beatrice took his hand and looked at him with her round blue eyes.

Her eyes were asking, "What do you want me to do?" Thus, Subaru nodded, and said,

Subaru: "It's quite simple. —I'd like to jump a bit higher with Murak."

Beatrice: "…Don't tell me you're going to say "I've given up, so let's break the ceiling and go up that way", I suppose."

Subaru: "Don't be so shocked. Of course not. I just want to look down on the Monoliths from above."

Emilia: "Look down on the Monoliths…"

Behind him, Emilia turned around to look at the Monoliths and muttered that out.

Even if she didn’t know what he expected to get from it, Beatrice didn’t show any intent of wanting to ask anymore about it. She let out a small sigh and gripped his hand more tightly,

Beatrice: “Murak, in fact.”

Pale, light purple waves faintly wrapped themselves around Subaru’s body following her incantation.

Murak was magic which kept the effects of gravity at bay and made you far more agile. Just by jumping lightly he’d be able to float up by about one meter, and if he kicked off from the floor with all his strength, then…

Subaru: “Up we go!”

Still holding Beatrice’s hand, Subaru leapt up towards the top of the tall room. Although he’d made it up by 6 or 7 meters, his body didn’t crash into the ceiling as he’d expected.

The layer had expanded as if there’d been no ceiling at all inside of this endless white expanse. Thus, Subaru was able to look down on the entire room from above.

Subaru: “—It’s as I thought.”

Beatrice: “Were you able to find what you were looking for, I suppose?”

Subaru: “Of course. This place is the absolute worst.”

Subaru frowned and nodded seeing Beatrice’s gaze who’d heard his mutter wrapped inside of his arms.

The two of them turned towards the ground and dropped down; their lightness of body that had helped them leap up also helped grace their landing. They landed without any issue, and he lowered Beatrice, who he’d been princess-carrying, down to the floor,

Subaru: “I know the name of the Hero.”

Emilia: “Really?!”

Subaru said that with conviction to Emilia, who'd seen him muse about it and then leap up. Emilia reacted in surprise to his words, and Anastasia rounded her eyes as well.

Hearing them speak, Julius and the others with him who'd been captivated by their talk gathered over to where Subaru and the others were.

Meili: "Onii-san figured it ou~t?"

Subaru: "I solved it. Along with the line of thinking of this errant examiner, for now."

Shaula: "That's Master for you! You're makin' me feel all tingly! Oh how I yearned for this!"

With Meili on her back, Shaula gave him a thumbs up and replied, then she shook her head vigorously. Looking at that from the corner of his eye, Julius looked over to the group of Monoliths, and said,

Julius: "I don't mean to doubt you right now. But please tell me how you managed to get the answer."

Subaru: "It's nothing spectacular. Y'all needn't feel bad for not solving this. Because in the first place, the people who have a chance at solving this are few."

This problem was the most contemptible in that sense.

The challengers had to overcome the obstacle that was Shaula, understand the details of the problem and yet from the start, they'd been narrowed down by the "Likelihood of knowing the answer to the problem."

Subaru: "The hero destroyed by Shaula, his name is Orion."

Everyone: "Orion…?"

Everyone looked at Shaula in confusion after they heard the word that Subaru had spoken out. However, Shaula vigorously shook her head as everyone's gazes converged on her and said "I don't know them!"

Shaula: “Nopenopenope, I’ve no idea who that is. And even if for a sec we assume I did kill them, what sort of person who can’t even make it all the way here gets called a hero, it’s totally ridiculous. Soooo, I don’t think I’m the one to blame here. How you may ask, well by this argument from theory! I’m suuuuper smart!”

Subaru: “As you can see, this woman’s not smart at all. At first, I’d suspected that she may have actually forgotten, but that’s not the case. Reason being that the “Shaula” from this problem isn’t this woman in the first place.”

Shaula: “I’mmm the only Shaula! I got this name from Master!”

Subaru: “Even the name that your Master gave you came from someone else.”

He prodded out his finger to the tip of the protesting Shaula’s nose and pushed her away before she could get closer. Following that, Subaru walked over to the original Monolith and stood in front of it.

Emilia: “Maybe once again… only Subaru knows the origins of Shaula’s name?”

Subaru: “It isn’t just me who knows, though I suppose not everyone would know. —The name of a star in my hometown is called “Shaula”. The meaning of its name is the “Stinger”, but if I had to specify which kind of stinger, then it’d be the “Scorpion’s” stinger.”

Shaula had insisted on calling her hairstyle a scorpiontail, had that been a hint of some sorts, or was that some natural airheadness of Shaula’s? Whichever one it was, there’d been a few things that had made him recall that “Shaula” = “Scorpion” = “Stinger”.

Subaru: “According to legend, the Hero Orion was stung by a scorpion which had been sent out to besiege him due to his boastfulness, and he ended up dying. After his death, he became a star. So, the scorpion that killed Orion also became a star due to its deed, and it’s said that even now in the sky Orion lives in fear of the scorpion …”

Beatrice: “Now that you’ve explained things, this legend has a pretty depressing vibe to it too, in fact.”

Subaru: “Anyways, think of it as having constellations where stars are illustrated by the figures of animals and people and such. You can even think of them as an asterism. —So, that’s how it looks when you look down on the Monoliths from above.”

Becoming practically weightless as a result of Beatrice’s magic, he’d jumped up and looked down at the group of Monoliths.

The scattered black Monoliths in this world of white—Although their colors were inverted, a series of black stars floated about in this white world, forming a pattern which he was familiar with.

There were eight Monoliths in total which had the same size as the original one.

The number of major stars as well as how they were laid out both matched with how the constellation of Orion was shaped.

And when he linked it to the last part, “Touch the brightest”…

Subaru: “The original Monolith is right in the middle. Well, I just gotta keep my eye on Alnilam and if I keep following the shape of the constellation… If I keep following Orion, then…”

Emilia: “Then?”

Subaru: “The phrasing ‘The brightest’ is a bit of a roguish expression. In actual fact, stars shine in various different ways, sometimes they’re always bright, other times they shine brighter only every so often. Considering that, there are two stars that fit the bill for the brightest in Orion…”

When viewed from above, the two stars that fit the bill were the right shoulder of Orion located in the upper left part, “Betelgeuse”, and Orion’s left knee located in the lower right part, “Rigel”.

“Rigel” was always invariably bright, whereas “Betelgeuse” was a variable star that sometimes shone brighter than Rigel.

Solving the problem by picking both of them wasn’t a pretty one, but…

Subaru: “I guess I’ll go for “Rigel”.”

He had bad memories of a name that was similar to “Betelgeuse”.

Subaru: “…”

Setting his answer in stone, Subaru touched the Monolith on Orion’s left knee, “Rigel”.

This wasn’t necessarily the only answer. But, most likely it should be the right one.

And at the same time he realized that, he readied himself for the precipitousness and difficulty of the obstacles that awaited them on the Second and First Floor, when considering the maliciousness of the person who'd cooked up these "Trials".

Subaru: "…"

The white room was filled with a dazzling light.

Both sound and landscape were left behind, everything was blown away, before finally—.

Subaru: "…Whoa."

When the light died down, Subaru and the others were left standing in a room made out of stone—in the middle of a room that was encompassed by countless bookshelves.

Chapter 23:
The Third Floor Library, Taygeta

1

The surrounding world of white evaporated, leaving behind a room carved of stone and uncountably infinite shelves.

Feeling the stone he had been touching disappear, Subaru took this to mean that his answer had been correct.

Then in that case—

Emilia: “Amazing! Subaru, good—”

Subaru: “The examiner’s personality, is just too wicked!!”

Emilia: “Eeeeh?! That’s your first reaction?!”

Ready to celebrate the solving of the third floor Taygeta, Emilia was stunned speechless. Echoing through the tower, was Subaru’s vitriolic cry.

Looking back to the surprised Emilia and everyone else watching him, Subaru gave a “my bad” as he continued to talk.

Subaru: “Although it’s as everyone suspected, and I’ve indeed solved the riddle… but that it was solved like this is a huge issue. Or rather, it’s unfair to all of you.”

Emilia: “Is that so? Subaru used esoteric knowledge to solve the riddle… is how it seems to me.”

Subaru: “Rather than saying I solved the riddle with my own knowledge, it’s more like only someone specifically like me can solve this, is the issue here.”

Tilting her head in confusion, Emilia faced Subaru as he scratched at his head.

To consider it in detail the best way to explain this, turned out to be a bit of a problem.

The Exam of the third floor Taygeta, was just as Subaru had answered, the myth of the Orion. The notion he had set aside was “the person who riddled this might have been an astronomist or a romantic”, with the reason being that the myth of Orion did not exist in this world.

Whether Orion or the celestial name of Shaula, or any of the other constellations, all of them were astronomical knowledge from Subaru’s original world.

And this current world, perhaps was the far future, set after the civilization of Subaru’s original world had long been lost to the past. Subaru had long affirmed that this world’s night sky contained different stars than the ones he had known.

Subaru: “So, the passage of time completely changed the layout of the stars… in that case there’s no option but to just wave your hands in surrender, since Orion or whatever doesn’t exist anymore.”

After an extensive period of months and years, Orion had long since vanished from the night sky, and anything like his myths had disappeared too. If this were the case, one conjecture could be made.

The poser of the riddle, was someone who knew the same sky as Subaru.

Furthermore, all those aside from those who knew the stars of the previous world, were born naturally defeated by the Exam’s riddle.

And the one who had designed the riddle, according to Shaula’s report, was without doubt the Sage Flugel.

Subaru: “Your master, seems to have been a guy with a decidedly wicked personality.”

Shaula: “Nononono, why would you say that ~ssu. It’s unlike Master to be self-deprecating ~ssu! Although the wicked personality bit can’t be denied ~ssu, it’s still reasonable for the riddle to be solved ~ssu! If it were Reid it would indeed be unsolvable… something about revealing another self and being unable to pass without victory in battle?”

Subaru: “That’s horrifying, either way the tests would go nowhere…”

All in all, the heroes of the past who had subdued the Witch of Envy all had terrible personalities.

With this person, using knowledge from another world would probably work better.

Anastasia: “Alright, and now.”

As Subaru sighed over Shaula’s explanation that wasn’t an explanation, Anastasia interrupted the pair to glance around. Stroking her scarf, she examined the shelves crammed with books.

Anastasia: “Thanks to Natsuki-kun’s labors, the “Exam” was solved… That’s excellent, but what’s the point of the library? What kinds of books does it have? I find this quite curious.”

Julius: “According to Shaula-san, this place is a trove of knowledge without bound and without break (unironically considered “lacuna” here)—is what she had said.”

Nodding in accord with Anastasia’s words, Julius glanced toward Shaula. Bearing an expression as if she had forgotten her own earlier words, Shaula had her skin pressed against Meili’s as she played with her.

The expectations hadn’t been high to begin with, but it seemed that Shaula’s explanation of this Taygeta library was not forthcoming.

Beatrice: “From that reaction, it seems that this is the first time Taygeta’s been opened, in fact. Let’s walk around and take a look, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Indeed. Hey you… could it be that you can’t hold back anymore?”

Beatrice: “That… might be the case, in fact.”

Clutching her dress from beside Subaru, Beatrice seemed to be speaking a tad faster than usual.

Eyes gleaming softly, gazing about the library with fascination—upon realizing the reason, Subaru forgot their circumstances and began laughing.

Subaru: “Seems like, the Forbidden Archive wasn’t some unpleasant memory to you.”

Beatrice: “…it’s not a particularly pleasant memory, I suppose. However, in any case, it’s a place where Betty spent four hundred years, in fact. In addition…”

Subaru: “In addition?”

Beatrice: “It’s where Subaru told Betty to ‘choose me’, I suppose. It’s not a place that can be so easily forgotten, in fact!”

“…”

The unexpected words had Subaru’s eyes go round, and Beatrice’s turned her face away. But even from behind her reddened ears were plain to see, a clear sign of embarrassment.

Subaru: “Saying words that would embarrass you of your volition, just what are you trying to achieve?”

Beatrice: “Betty remembers everything about the Forbidden Archive, that is proof of memories of Subaru… is all, in fact.”

Subaru: “You are… too cute!”

Beatrice: “Kya—I suppose!”

At the sudden declaration of affection, Subaru gently began stroking Beatrice’s head. Beatrice’s feline cry gradually softened, and Subaru saw an expression filled with satisfaction. The scene had Anastasia and the others glance at them with amazement.

Subaru: “Alright, enough of the idle chatter, let’s check out the library now.”

Anastasia: “What a sight for sore eyes. It really seems like a gentle exchange between parent and child, doesn’t it…”

Subaru: “It’d at least be considered brother and sister, wouldn’t it.”

Sticking his tongue out at Anastasia’s opinion, Subaru straightened and glanced about at his surroundings.

Where Subaru and the others were located, was the center of a stone carved circular room. The structure itself was an extension of the tower, and the expansive design created a feeling of being left without boundaries.

Aside from the large spiral staircase, the fifth and sixth floors had no particularly striking features to fill the vast empty spaces. And the fourth floor was in fact divided into several rooms, what Shaula had described as a versatile nest.

Yet the third floor filled the same empty space with rows upon rows of shelves, each tall shelf crammed with countless books. The circular room was designed to form small floors. Subaru’s group was located on the lowest, surrounded by layers raising outward.

The books were so numerous as to be uncountable. Beatrice’s Forbidden Archive was also fairly crowded, but in terms of solely counting books, this place was by far victorious.

Subaru: “In order to find the book you want, it’d be nice if you could search with a computer.”

Beatrice: “Within in the Forbidden Archive, Betty knew exactly where every book was, in fact.”

Subaru: “Amazing, you. A genius!”

After praising Beatrice’s little show of smugness, Subaru approached the bookshelf beside him.

Looking over, Emilia and the others drew close as well, although it didn’t seem as if anyone felt daring enough to pluck a book from the shelf.

Emilia: “Wasn’t Subaru was the one that solved the riddle? Maybe something would go awry if it wasn’t Subaru that touched it.”

Subaru: “Ah, indeed anything could happen, but if only the one who had answered the riddle were allowed to read anything, wouldn’t it be off that Emilia-tan and the rest were even allowed into the library?”

Emilia: “Ah, right. Then it seems like entering this place is akin to permission.”

Subaru: “Mm, that’s what I think—hey, Emilia-tan?!”

At Subaru’s theory, Emilia who had kept her guard up nodded in understanding. Then, letting down her guard, she immediately pulled a book from the shelf.

Then she began flipping through the contents of the book, right before Subaru who had been struck speechless.

Emilia: “Hmm, it’s just a normal book… Subaru, what is it?”

Subaru: “No, nothing, it’s just that Emilia’s boldness was shocking but quickly became mesmerizing. I only said that ‘that’s what I think’ is all.”

Emilia: “—?? Subaru said so, so wouldn’t it be fine? Eh, is saying so that odd?”

Emilia’s conscientious expression bore a confusion that left Subaru speechless. With complicated feelings, Subaru brought a hand up to cover his face with an “uwah—”.

Subaru: “It constantly feels like, that piercing gaze of trust is painful.”

Julius: “You built it up bit by bit, is how it is. Furthermore, that you solved the riddle of Taygeta which no one else could is fact. Such an achievement is undeniable.”

Subaru: “That was like a blind cat swatting a dead mouse. That I solved it was just coincidence.”

At Subaru’s bewilderment, Julius shrugged his shoulders, the knight’s words causing Subaru to avert his gaze.

Emilia’s faith, Beatrice’s closeness, Julius’s sincerity—each one of them, did not align to Subaru’s expectations, and each of those words conveyed an inexplicable sense of wariness.

Subaru often doubted that kind of value being placed upon himself.

Anastasia: “Just as Emilia-san said, it’s just an ordinary book. It’s not some strange object that would immediate set your body on fire upon contact.”

“What the book is made of… is difficult to discern. As is its age. As for the content…?”

Inspired by Emilia’s proactive attitude, the others too had begun picking up books one by one. Even so, to skim all of this myriad of books, was hardly such an easy task.

Anastasia and Julius both examined the book’s composition and binding and the like.

Subaru: “Beako, what do you think?”

Beatrice: “It seems that the composition of the books are identical. Only the titles are completely different. This is Noah Libertas. This is Libre Fermi… They don’t seem to follow any particular pattern in their ordering either.”

Her librarian soul dripping blood, Beatrice expressed dissatisfaction with the one who had arranged the books so haphazardly. The absence of any memory of her sorting through the Forbidden Archive, suggested that it had been organized long ago.

Putting aside Beatrice’s indignation for now, Subaru sudden noticed something about the spines of the books.

Subaru: “The titles of these books… could it be, that they’re all peoples’ names?”

“Mmm… it seems to. This is Palma Eule, and here’s Coyote.”

Julius “All these names from the past, aren’t familiar ones. Not that I hold any wealth of knowledge, but none of these names are ones I know. Of course, looking around more closely might yield some kind of discovery…”

“If you don’t recognize them, it’s likely that no one here would.”

Whether that was true or mere humbleness, of late Julius had been revealing more of the historical pedigree of his house.

If these names were not in his knowledge, perhaps they were just randomly given ones.

Subaru also offhandedly grabbed a book to leaf through. The text written inside was composed of the common イ(I) glyphs, ロ (Ro) glyphs, and ハ (Ha) glyphs, the unique language of this world.

Had it been a gospel, no one aside from the owner should be capable of reading it, and only text composed of what seemed to be pictographs would have been visible, but this book did not seem to use such petty tricks.

Since the text was miniscule, and the content itself was too boring, it would not register in the brain even if read properly, a common issue with uninteresting books.

Subaru: “Once again, to check with Anastasia-san… are there any names you recognize?”

Anastasia: “Mm, nope?”

Subaru sought confirmation from Anastasia. Or course, rather than from Anastasia herself, it would be better to say he sought confirmation from Echidna who held control over her flesh.

Echidna should be possessed of more knowledge than Julius. And though it was possible she was concealing the truth, from the very beginning the spirit had not shown any hints of hostility.

Believing her answer for now, Subaru began to feel rather impotent.

Subaru: “Out of tricks already huh. A tree hidden in a forest… it could be that a vitally important book is hidden somewhere in these shelves, this really is troublesome.”

Emilia: “Giving up halfway through won’t do. Facing an unsolvable problem means that you have to try even harder. Work hard!”

Faced with a vast amount of books, Subaru who had already felt uneasy had his soul assaulted by exhaustion. Emilia raised a tiny fist for Subaru to cheer him on.

The encouraging pose that Emilia struck grew more and more accurate, and Subaru turned to face the shelf. The titles of these books all contained unfamiliar names. At the very least, should he come across a name he recognized, he would look into it with care—thinking so, Subaru brushed his fingers along a row, book by book.

Subaru: “…?”

Suddenly, Subaru’s fingers came to rest on one spine.

Grabbing the spine of the book, then easing it out from the stuffed bookshelf. The book’s title was a name that Subaru knew.

Subaru having reflexively grabbed the book flipped it open. Then, the familiar name of the book met his eyes—and afterward, it came.

—A dimming of the consciousness.

2

—A woman, a sole woman existed.

A woman so young, one would hesitate to call her a woman.

Humble clothes upon a skinny figure, green hair along with a skin tanned in the shine of days.

The woman seemed to be at an age to be a called a little girl, however, her heart was commanded by unending distress.

Unable to find the answer for it by any means, for the woman, it was an inborn argument.

“…”

Evermore troubling her mind with it, was the unending supreme argument.

It was the logic omnipresent in the world, that contrast of white and black—namely, good and evil.

Righteousness, deeds of err.

Though there were innumerable choices in the world, all deeds are eventually decided to be on either of those positive and negative poles.

For the yet youthful woman, there was a reason to continue to anguish over that logic. It was inevitable for her.

The one who had divided the woman’s world into white and black, good and evil, the righteous and the sinners, was the woman’s father.

“…”

The woman’s father decapitated the necks of sinners, and made a living by delivering punishment appropriate for the errs.

Delivering the end of their life, the punishment suitable for their err, upon the sinners who had sinned, meant livelihood to her father.

“—Executioner.”

The woman had seen the actions of her father, who was named that, and the state of affairs of the execution site, before even the days of youth.

The repulsive and cruel deeds, the death wails of the sinners granted quietus, the execution site ruled by blood and death.

—What made the woman witness Death there, was none other than her father's own will.

Punishment casted upon the committed sins, evil deeds met their result through the means of evil deeds.

The father attempted to convey the rightful state of affairs he believed in, of the world's good and evil, as an executioner, to the woman.

Noble was her father's will, a pure ideology without question.

However, keeping the mind the woman's youthfulness, it seemed to be conceited, it was yet too early to seek ideals.

The woman saw the deaths of many with her own eyes, scented the odor of blood, and burnt the punishment casted upon sinners into her memory.

The result, the woman, before she could study in depth the value of life, and the principle of life and death, learnt punishments befitting the sins.

Benevolence gave birth to good cause, wrongdoings called upon roots of evil, the souls of sinners were corrupted, worthy of punishment.

Comprehending the teachings of her father through that interpretation, the woman desired the rightful state of affairs for Punishments Befitting the Sins. For that she sought something which would become her guiding principle, the balance of virtue which would establish evil deeds as evil.

"…"

However, the balance which the woman sought, existed nowhere within her sphere of search.

The good and evil of affairs had no simple answer, but the correction, sin and punishment possessed many factors determining

them.

"…"

However, the woman, yet youthful and unknowing of compromise or resignation, did not to come to a halt.

She must obtain the answer. She must conceive the balance befitting good and evil in her heart.

She must present the answer to the undissolving doubt present within the interior of her chest.

"…"

Days of agony continued, however, she gained the answer suddenly, as if a blessing had been granted to her from the heavens above.

Shattering her father's vine cup, the woman was greatly frightened by the sin she had committed herself.

Preparing herself to face beheading, the woman confessed her own sin to her father.

"—Speaking up your own sins, and apologizing for them is correct."

Said the woman's father while expressing a smile, forgiving the woman's err.

At the smile of her father and the sensation of his palm patting her head, the youthful woman came to understand.

—The balance for measuring the weight of the committed sin was nothing else, but present within the heart of the sinner himself.

Even if nobody lies witness to it, the heart of the sinner himself knows of his sin.

Good and evil, she did not understand. They're complicated. Corrections, have no certain guidelines. They can't be found.

However, the consciousness of the sin is within one's self.

There are no standards for punishments befitting the sins. However, the consciousness of sins deserving of punishments is within one's self.

The woman understood, she was satiated, and finally obtained the balance.

Remaining ignorant of the value of life, and the principle of the life and death of people, the youthful woman disclosed punishments befitting the sins.

"…"

Under the light of days the woman walked, learning through observation from her executioner father, for delivering punishments befitting the sins.

For disclosing the hearts of those sinners, who had been judged worthy of punishment.

"…"

For the woman, the division of good and evil, corrections, sincerity and falsehood into two halves, was the natural order of things.

At the question the youthful woman asked, some smiled, some were troubled, some were bewildered.

However, the result of the answer to the woman's question, was the same for all.

—The sins worthy of punishment, lied within their selves.

She looked around. Nobody was there. There no longer was anyone present here, aside from the sinners who had received punishment.

Trampling over the people who had been torn into tiny fragments, and finally over the fragments of her father, for the sake of fulfilling the longstanding desire bestowed upon her, the woman continued walking further, seeking sins worthy of punishment.

—The Witch of Pride questioned sins, delivered punishment, and cast judgement upon sinners.

Upon seeing the beginnings of the Witch he recognized, Subaru's consciousness returned alongside a pain.

Subaru: "Aaaa—!!"

Subaru's consciousness was ejected from he the book with a snapping sound. Accompanied by a feeling of having blood drained dry one the one hand, and a feeling of being externally torn into bits on the other.

Pain resonating not from the head or body, but the soul.

The soul entering into the book, then painfully torn away from it.

Emilia: "Subaru!"

Subaru: "—Aaaa!"

At the same instant that a cry came from beside him, his wrist took a fierce strike. That was Emilia knocking his wrist with a karate chop.

Subaru's hand shook under the impact, and the book he held fell to the ground. It landed spread facedown on the ground, and Subaru stumbled into a bookshelf.

Subaru: "Oh, ah?"

Emilia: "Are, are you okay? Just now, you looked suuuper uncomfortable…"

Subaru: "Somehow, it's over… right? I don't get it either."

Nodding at Emilia who supported him with unease in his eyes, Subaru caught his breath. Although he hadn't done any sprinting, his heartbeat was in a frenzy.

Pressing a hand against his chest to feel the jumping of his heartbeat, Subaru breathed deep. His gaze swiveled around, finally landing on Emilia.

Emilia: “Is everything fine?”

Subaru: “Gazing upon Emilia-tan’s face puts me at ease. Could you give me a hand?”

Emilia: “Alright. What is it?”

Accepting Subaru’s flattering words, Emilia supported his shoulder and asked. As she queried on, Beatrice reached a hand toward the book on the ground.”

Beatrice: “Just now, your expression grew odd after touching this book…”

Subaru: “Wait, Beatrice! Don’t touch it!”

Beatrice: “—?”

Wanting to call Beatrice to a halt as she reached for the book, she had taken it into her lap before he could. Casting her gaze downward, Beatrice read the book’s title aloud under Subaru’s furious gaze.

Beatrice: “—Typhon. Is this the name of someone Subaru knows, I suppose?”

Subaru: “It is, could it be that you…”

At Beatrice’s question, Subaru wanted to ask, ‘Could it be that you don’t know’. However, whether her answer would be in the affirmative or negative was already obvious, and Subaru frowned as he considered what should be said next.

In that period, Beatrice had already opened the book to check its contents.

Subaru: “Idiot—!”

Beatrice: “Idiot is a rather rude thing to say, in fact. There’s nothing special about this book, it’s just the same as the others, I suppose.”

Beatrice would have the same shocking experience that Subaru had

—although that was what had been expected, the girl had no reaction whatsoever to the book's contents. She disappointedly shoved the book back at Subaru. she was dissatisfied with the book and sent it back to her.

Beatrice: "However, Subaru hasn't read any of the other books… is how it seems, in fact."

Subaru: "…Right. But why is it just me?"

Emilia: "Could it be, that just like the riddle of the room, only Subaru can see it? Or, that it only works for Subaru, who solved the riddle…"

Subaru: "If that's so, that personality just seems more and more wicked huh…"

Considering Emilia's words, Subaru shook his head as an unpleasant hunch came over him. In any case, he had no courage to peruse the book that had been shoved at him once more.

—Swimming through his mind, all too vividly, was a firsthand experience of the woman's memories.

The scents, taste of the air, tread on solid ground, as well as the weight of shattering a life.

To awaken after such immersion in the memory of a person, was truly a miracle.

It felt as if drinking down another person's life.

That terror and disgust beyond imagining, had come into existence through experience.

Emilia: "Subaru, where is this Typhon?"

Subaru: "It'd be hard to explain properly… or rather, it may not be so hard if it's Emilia-tan? Maybe you saw her in the tomb?"

Emilia: "Tomb—"

Upon hearing that word, Emilia and Beatrice froze simultaneously.

Tomb was to Subaru, and Emilia and Beatrice in addition a place laden with significance. Thus, considering the Tea Party of Witches that had been held in that ancient tomb, the other two knowing of Typhon would not be so odd.

That said, perhaps Echidna wouldn't have been so candid with Emilia, and as for Beatrice, she had probably known a different Echidna than Subaru had.

Subaru: "Typhon was one of the historical Witches. The Witch of Pride who looked like a loli like Beako with dark skin. However, she was a child who could reify innocently cruel words."

Hearing Subaru's explanation, Emilia and Beatrice both shook their heads after considering.

It seemed Echidna's display of witches, had been reserved especially for Subaru. Although it had just been to make use of Subaru, there had indeed been much preparation but into it.

Subaru: "Innocently cruel, huh…?"

As he spoke, Subaru recalled that he had only had a brief period of contact with Typhon himself.

Although it hadn't happened in the physical world, the sensation of his arms and legs being shattered by her was unforgettable. Although it had been subsequently fixed, the impact of his limbs being taken had still hit at full force.

However, after catching a glimpse of her abnormal origin through reading, the reasons for such behaviors could be explained. Of course, to instantly understand the complex and nuanced reasoning, was no easy feat.

Subaru: "In any case, that book I read just now, were that child named Typhon's… memories? Life? Origin? In summary it was the experience of her entire life. Hardly something easy to come to terms with."

Emilia: “It’s clear from seeing Subaru’s reaction… experiencing the memory of another. This is feeling more and more like some kind of Trial.

Subaru: “In that case, it was just a struggle with your own memories. We~ll, hardly anything so difficult.”

Emilia: “Ri, right. An easy victory.”

As for sobbing cries, countless failures one upon another, body and mind collapsing under pressure, Subaru and Emilia both nodded and chose not to mention them.

As she rolled her eyes at the pair’s attitude, Beatrice wiped at the book’s stains.

Beatrice: “A book showing experiences of another’s memories… in other words, it’s a way of accessing the past, I suppose. In that case, what we need to know is likely contained in the library…”

Subaru: “Beako, have you thought of something—”

Hearing Beatrice’s murmurs, Subaru rose and prepared to ask her for her thoughts. However, before Subaru had a chance to speak, someone else’s voice rang out.

Julius: “…”

The sound had come from the direction of Julius’s group, who had been examining the other bookshelves. Following the direction of the cry, was the sight of Julius kneeling on the ground, with a book in hand.

From beside him an alarmed Anastasia shook the knight’s shoulder, snatching the book away.

Anastasia: “Julius? Julius, pull yourself together! Can you hear my voice?”

Julius: “…Anastasia, -sama.”

Anastasia: “It’s me, good. Slowly, deep breaths… Are you alright?”

In precisely the same way Subaru had just been, Julius's awareness returned to the present. Gazing at Julius's form that was elegant even in weariness, relief shown on Anastasia's expression.

Calling out 'is everything okay?', Subaru dashed toward the pair.

Subaru: "Is your head's spinning after reading a difficult book? I get it I get it."

Julius: "Certainly, of late I have not read anything. A deplorable state for a knight who must be versed in civil affairs and warfare I ought to learn from you who managed to solve the riddles with such ease."

Subaru: "What words, delivered like that…"

If he had felt what Subaru had, his spirit would have borne quite the burden. As such, that he could maintain such elegance afterwards was just uncool.

At the extraneous thoughts contained in Subaru's heart, Emilia knocked at the back of his head with a karate chop.

Subaru: "Gah!"

Emilia: "It won't do to say naughty things on reflex. Julius, is everything really fine?"

Julius: "My sincerest apologies for having worried you. Such an exaggerated reaction truly cannot be excused… Even so, this is truly an unpleasant experience for the heart."

Hiding his internal weariness, Julius's response to Emilia was elegant. However, a thin film of sweat coating his forehead was evidence of a shock that could not be concealed. Anastasia stood on her tiptoes, pressing a handkerchief to Julius's forehead, while Julius hurriedly lowered his head with an air of consternation.

Anastasia: "Although stubbornness is a boy's nature, speak up when you're feeling poorly, won't you? If you insist on doing something beyond you, you'll cause trouble for everyone else too."

Julius: “Right. My gratitude for your attentions.”

Emilia: “Mmm, it’s just as Anastasia-san says. Right, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Though I don’t know why you need me to agree, that’s how it is!”

The exchange between master and vassal of two factions coming to a close, everyone’s attention turned to the book in Anastasia’s hands.

Julius had looked over the contents of the book, and perhaps had had the same experience as Subaru. Looking at the spine, the title inscribed upon it was—.

Emilia: “—Balleroy Temeglyph. Someone you know?”

Subaru: “It’s not a name I’ve heard. For certain.”

Subaru glanced at Emilia who read the title aloud from beside him, then responded confidently.

Indeed, Subaru was confident in his excellent memory. When it came to remembering relationships in this world, from Arlam Village to the fruit stall owner in the capitol, not a single one was missing.

Contained within the list of memories, was no such name as Balleroy. However, Anastasia swiveled her head after hearing the name, wearing a thoughtful expression.

Anastasia: That name, is one I’ve heard. Perhaps… hmm, that’s right. be… um, right. Isn’t that the name of a General of the Vollachian Empire?”

Julius: “—More precisely, he is a former General.”

At Anastasia’s answer borne from vague recollections, Julius added a supplement. Hearing such words, everyone would guess that was someone who Julius had a relationship with.

Only, the distance of that relationship had Subaru frowning.

Subaru: “Vollachia, is the country to the south? You even know a General from there?”

Julius: “Once more, he is a former General. Is that so odd? I am after all one of the royal knights. Since Lugunica and the Vollachian Empire neighbor each other, it shouldn’t be unexpected that I one-sidedly know the name.”

Subaru: “So that’s the case, someone known one-sidedly… huh.”

Accepting Julius’s explanation, Subaru nodded. Then he exhaled lightly and suddenly reached a hand out to snatch Balleroy’s book from Anastasia.

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun?”

Subaru: “Sorry to startle you. But there’s something that ought to be checked.”

Having had the book snatched from her, Anastasia widened her eyes. Subaru checked the cover of the book, then flipped the book open with a snap to read its contents.

In that moment, Subaru had prepared for the realizing of living vicariously that may have followed. However, he also considered the idea of perhaps it won’t happen. The correct answer proved to be the latter.

Subaru: “I also tried to read the book after one-sidedly hearing the name, but nothing happened.”

Julius: “…Subaru.”

Subaru: “Right now, what matters most between us is trust, no? The trust you and I share… wouldn’t be nonexistent, and only I had thought it was there?”

Julius: “—What a horrid way of putting it.”

Toward Subaru who glared fiercely at him, Julius closed his eyes and answered thus.

He stroked his bangs as he spoke.

Julius: “Compared with the people here, I currently have no one else I can trust more. The support of Anastasia-sama and yourself who provides what even Reinhardt cannot, I would of course accept.”

Subaru: “…To be spoken of like that, can’t help but feel disgusting somehow.”

Julius: “Saying so makes my tongue itch as well.”

Subaru scratched as his nose, and Julius continued to finger at his bangs with eyes his eyes closed. Then he loosened a high, and proceeded to formally bow to Anastasia and Emilia.

Julius: “I apologize for my thoughtlessly offensive behavior, Anastasia-sama, Emilia-sama. Just now, I allowed my own feelings to cloud answer. In these circumstances, the contents of the book ought to be shared by us all, and so my behavior is unforgivable.”

Anastasia: “Whether or not you’ll be forgiven depends on mine and Emilia’s tempers. What do you think?”

Emilia: “What I want to say, has already been said by Subaru and Anastasia-san. So, think about what you should do now. That’s all.”

After Emilia and Anastasia readily accepted his apology, Julius once again bowed low. Subaru knew exactly what lay within his heart.

After making a mistake, taking mitigation from those who accepted an apology, was a weakness that could be forgiven. Subaru well understood this feeling, which he had experienced before himself.

Julius: “Balleroy Temeglyph, General of the Vollachian Empire… is a dead man. And, the one who took his life, is none other than myself.”

Anastasia: “To have killed another country’s General. This is quite a shock to take in.”

Julius: “Anastasia-sama is… no, please forget what you just heard.”

Anastasia: “…”

At Julius’s frankly described recollections, Anastasia narrowed her eyes.

Based on Julius’s reaction just now, it seemed that this had been something he had already shared with Anastasia, before his memory had been taken, and before Echidna had assumed control of her body.

Naturally, that Anastasia was the first to know was unsurprising, and instead Subaru and Emilia were quite shocked.

Emilia: “That’s, if what I recall from my studies is correct, I know that the relationship between Lugunica and Vollachia is su~per poor, but…”

Subaru: “Shouldn’t killing the Empire’s General, have started a war or something?”

At the pair’s candid and simple questions, Julius’s expression became more assured as he nodded lightly.

Julius: “This was the result of a very delicate situation. Reinhardt and Ferris were also dragged into it, to put it directly, the General had prepared to launch a revolt in the Empire. And I had met him face to face, and stayed in the Empire for a brief period.”

Subaru: “So those two were there too. Isn’t Reinhardt banned from being exported?”

Julius: “Since the foreign emperor wanted to meet him, he was granted permission… moreover, don’t you think the words exporting Reinhardt are off?”

Subaru: “Just a slip of the tongue. What else should I call it. Smuggling?”

Something that couldn’t be exported, such phrasing wasn’t wrong in usage. In truth, after having felt Reinhardt’s logic defying combat ability in Priestella, it wasn’t difficult to imagine that Reinhardt would be a nightmare for the forces of other countries to contend with.

Not allowed to approach the border, was a perfectly understandable stipulation in international treaties.

Julius: “In short, that General’s name was Balleroy Temeglyph. My apologies. Due to the sensitive nature of the issue, details of the incident cannot be shared, and in addition the memory is painful to myself as well.”

Subaru: “So it’s something that can’t be discussed openly huh. Got it. I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

Emilia: “Mm, understood. I’ll also keep it a secret.”

With Julius’s circumstances clarified, Subaru and Emilia swore themselves to secrecy on this shared confidence.

And, what allowed Julius to live vicariously was also clear—

Beatrice: “It makes sense now, in fact. The books here, are books that allow a reader to experience the life of someone familiar, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I had the witch, and Julius had the General. Sounds about right.”

Anastasia: “It feels as if, I’ve heard words I can’t quite let go. Natsuki-kun, are you acquainted with a witch? They’re no good, such relationships. They’re all related to the witch cult.”

Subaru: “I’m beyond scared myself, but the relationship with that one is shallow so please rest assured. Recently there hasn’t been much contact to be a bother.”

Subaru shrugged at Anastasia’s words. However, Emilia and Beatrice, and finally even Julius’s expressions looked as if they had just eaten something sour.

The unexpected reaction left Subaru frowning, as Anastasia deeply sighed and continued, Anastasia: “The meaning of the books and this library seem clear now. To share it I’ll have to say something scary, is that okay?”

Subaru: “Hearing it would be really off-putting, but what do you want to say?”

Anastasia: “Every book in this library, is inscribed with a name, yes?”

Saying this fact that everyone knew, Anastasia looked to Subaru for permission to continue. As Subaru nodded in assent, he thought that what would be coming next were those scary words.

Then, Anastasia leveled a finger at Balleroy’s book and Typhon’s book, currently held by Beatrice.

Anastasia: “The Empire’s General, and Natsuki-kun’s witch friend.”

Subaru: “Hey not a friend here!”

Anastasia: “The common point with that witch friend’s book, is that it’s the book of someone deceased.”

Subaru: “…”

Having Typhon be referred to as deceased was actually a little off-putting, but the place where the witches’ tea party of the tomb had been held was no more, so she could be thought of as completely gone.

As for Echidna, since many doubts yet rested on ScarfdonaFoxdona, Subaru couldn’t feel at ease about her.

Setting aside Subaru’s internal thoughts for now, Anastasia spread her hands to gesture at the entirety of the library as she continued.

Anastasia: “The books here, include the names of every single person from past to present in this world, indeed? If so… to find one specific book, how long would it take?”

—Correction. The one who had made this library, did not have a poor personality.

—Rather, they had the worst.

Chapter 24:
The Perverse Examiner

1

—There was a woman, all by herself.

Sensitive to pain, she was always crying, always emotional.

The sole reason for her grief, was that she could not forgive her own lack of strength. All around her, was always a world full of strife, of violence, of war.

No matter how much she pleaded, no matter how much cried out, no matter how much she tried, no matter how much she prayed, the sorrow never ended. So, she began to curse fate.

While cursing it over and over and over, she noticed; It was pointless, no matter how many tears she shed. And when she realized, she began wishing for something else.

Raw power.

To obtain power that would let her throw all away, that would let her overwhelm all others, she struggled to her limits and ran, heading towards the power she so desired.

She was not chasing after the power to harm, nor the power to take. She had no use for that.

She chased power no one could catch up to, which she believed she could use to put an end to violence.

The woman who cried so much, wanted the power to stop crying.

She knew she that if she remained powerless, she could never stop a fight where power was pitted against power.

Her voice remained silent. Her wishes went unfulfilled. Even if her own sorrows were kept distant, sadness still clouded the sky.

How could they be okay? How could they hurt one another? How could they think to live with those scars? How, how, how? Why could they not realize they have other ways to live?

Woman: “Children are crying. The elderly are crying. Men are crying. Women are crying. Everyone is crying. Then, why—!!”

To stop exactly that, she solely desired for power.

Training herself, she endured all pains to finally obtain an iron—clad will.

Eventually, she found the end of her path. The pinnacle of strength where none else could reach.

Standing on the battlefield, she shouted to stop the fight.

To overwhelm all other powers with her own, to crush all grief, shatter all malice and to stop before her, the endless stream of tears, she struggled to her utmost.

Punching those who brandished their swords, kicking those who flung magic, breaking those who bared their fangs, she pulverized all and any who came to seek battle.

But, the more the woman fought, the stronger became the swordsmen, the mages and the bearer of fangs, ever increasing their numbers.

As if she had entered a never—ending spiral of violence.

No one knew how to save themselves other than to answer violence with violence. That was why, no one knew of a way to save themselves aside from victory in battle.

Woman: “Why—!!”

In the end, the woman herself, despite knowing this, also answered with violence. Lowering her fist that dripped crimson, she turned her blood—smeared face to the sky, and wailed.

The fighting would not stop. Her efforts, her hard work, all had been in vain; neither others nor her own tears would stop flowing.

Finally, in the chest of the woman who had been ceaselessly running, despair crept in.

Dripping down her cheeks, tears overflowed.

The tears that continuously streamed were not warm, but rather cold, the tears of someone powerless, drowning in despair.

However, alongside them flowed out a different, deep emotion.

Dyeing her heart pitch black, her vision red and her mind white, a tempest awakened within.

Face still wet with tears, the woman came to know of that emotion.

As she came to know its name, its origins, she came to understand it.

She had not been shedding tears of sadness.

She had merely been drowning in the madness of rage.

People called that emotion Fury—no, they called it Wrath.

To this world that forced others to tears, to those who refuse to stop fighting, to the absurd unfairness that is the end of life.

—Let them, have a taste of my iron fists.

At some point, she stood up, wiped the dirt off her knees, and took off running.

Diving into the fray of the still ongoing battle, she punched everyone's faces whilst shouting.

Stop fighting. Look at the sky. Feel the breeze. Smell the flowers. Live, with your families and loved ones.

For the first time, the woman's voice swept unrest throughout the battlefield.

Fists that could break apart the Earth, kicks that could cause the heavens to roar, all only to let others live.

Wounds closed, screams silenced and knees bent in the face of the spreading warmth as battle lost its meaning.

Soon the voices that wept disappeared from the battlefield, life returned to the mundane.

When the people’s tears stopped, they felt gratitude towards her. They raised their voices, waved their hands and smiled.

However, the woman was suddenly no longer there.

That was only natural.

The woman still had things to do. She had no reason to turn back, no reason to stop walking.

To fulfill her desire to create a world where no one cries, where there is no conflict, where no one has to take from one another, she ran, and ran, and kept running, as she threw around her fists.

Till the day everyone stops crying. Till the day the warm droplets rolling down her cheeks stop.

—The Witch of Wrath, who had declared war on sadness itself, continued to run ever, evermore.

2

“…”

Yet again, after finding a Book of the Dead and gaining the knowledge it held, Subaru returned to reality.

From within the confines of its bindings had poured out the name of whose life it recorded, the many battlefields she had crossed through, and the conviction she once held when she was alive, albeit, all of it being only a drop in the ocean of her entire life.

Even though he understood that—

Subaru: “…that was heavy.”

He felt as if a lump of dense, heavy lead was clogging up his chest.

For humans, no matter who, a second is a second, a minute is a minute, a year is a year. There is no scale that can measure the weight of a life differently, and thus time flows equally for all.

Such a scale of time, could not simply be contained within such flimsy paper, nor could it be transferred to the mind from it, no matter how special the technology.

Still, even though he had simply touched it, Subaru had to clench his teeth to keep his mind, so as to not be swept away by the rush of memories that flowed in.

The footprints of their lives that one left behind, were indeed great and heavy.

Emilia: “Subaru, are you okay?”

Subaru: “…ah, yeah, I’m fine. Feeling okay. My head just took a spin, that’s all.”

Emilia: “That’s not what feeling okay means…”

Closing the book in hand, he returned it to the shelf as Emilia watched. Meeting her gaze with one eye closed, Subaru pointed to the book he just put back,

Subaru: “I found another volume of the Witches’ books. This time, well, it was one of the better Witches, if that’s possible. She was still a little weird, though.”

Emilia: “The weird one… Sekhmet?”

Subaru: “Hey, that’s one of the weirdest of the bunch. Wait, you know Sekhmet?”

Back at the Tomb of the Sanctuary, Emilia was supposed to have met Echidna in the Witch’s Tea Party, but Subaru never asked if she had met the others. He had assumed Echidna made an exception for him, and so, had not allowed Emilia to meet the other five Witches. So it startled Subaru when Sekhmet's name slipped from her mouth.

The Witch of Sloth Sekhmet, was a woman with long, flowing magenta hair, owner of a deeply self—indulgent personality. Putting that and her demeanor aside, she was the most reasonable person among the Witches.

Subaru: "If you know Sekhmet, what about the other witches? Like, the one from this book, Minerva, or something."

Emilia: "Er, no, sorry. I didn't meet anyone else but Echidna and Sekhmet at the Tomb. I didn't talk to Sekhmet all that much either."

Subaru: "That so. No, it's fine either way. Even if you did know her, this wasn't something you'd enjoy seeing anyway."

Flashing a dry smile at Emilia who hung her head, Subaru tapped the side of the bookshelf lightly.

The shelves that stored the memories of the dead were made of a strange material. Under his palm was not the sensation of wood, nor of iron, and the bookcase itself refused to budge when pressed.

Currently, while going through the Library on the 3rd Floor Taygeta, Subaru and co. came to understand that the numerous books that were stuffed into the bookshelves both recorded and invoked the memories of the dead. Despite that, they steadily continued their search for something very simple.

Emilia: "That aside, I wonder where the stairs to get to the upper floor are?"

Subaru: "Right now, I have zero leads on that."

Emilia tilted her head, deep in thought, while Subaru stood opposite, gazing downward as he sighed.

At present, everyone was worrying their heads over, not on how to get past the 3rd Floor Taygeta 's next Trial, but on where the location of the stairway that led to the 2nd floor would be.

The white area where the Monolith was had faded, leaving open Taygeta ‘s Great Library.

Thanks to that, they now had access to the memories of the dead, a concept that was surely very desirable, which was good and all but,

Subaru: “Well, for now, we don’t really have a use for this place.”

To search for the information everyone wanted by digging through the memories of the dead would be a herculean task, given its nature, as one could not even choose the memories they wanted to see, due to the absurd amount of time, and even luck, it would take.

Neither of those could be spared at the moment. Time was obviously short, but also that Subaru did not have enough faith in his own luck, no matter how much he was blessed with it.

Subaru: “So that’s why the info we want might be on the upper floors. It’s supposed to be.”

Emilia: “But, there’s no way to get upstairs. I tried to get on top of the bookcases, but it didn’t work out.”

Subaru: “You’re pretty bold, aren’t you, Emilia-tan…”

Emilia pointed to the ceiling while recalling what she had tried to do.

In the midst of their brain—wracking search for the staircase that led to the upper floor, she had climbed up on top of the tallest bookcase there was in the Library. The cases were arranged in a circular fashion, with small steps elevated to lead inward, placing the tallest bookcase at the center. However, even that had not reached the ceiling of the room.

It should be noted that, despite how Emilia had climbed the bookcase, and despite how her short skirt was waving about boldly during the action itself, her movements were such that nothing was visible underneath, strangely enough.

When Subaru poked at it in a roundabout manner, Emilia simply touched the hem of her skirt and, Emilia: “Puck taught me. Um, what was it again? A lady must always act with beauty and grace? I’m always careful about it, don’t worry.”

Subaru: “I feel kinda conflicted about this. I want to praise him, but I want to blame him too… Anyway,”

Emilia had already failed in her attempt to physically force a way to the next floor.

In other words, there was a hidden gimmick to the appearance of the staircase. This was not only limited to the appearance of the Library, but extended to the process of going up further.

If it were too hard, the challenger’s motivation would likely fall, but the creator of the Watchtower, Flugel, must have taken that into account as well. The nerve.

Subaru: “Man, I really wanna see this guy’s face… But how he looks is a mystery too, damnit.”

Julius: “—Subaru, can you come here a bit?”

While he grumbled, a voice called from behind him. On the opposite side of Subaru and co., rummaging through a separate bookcase, was Julius. Seeing him approach with Anastasia in tow, Subaru raised his hand.

Subaru: “Sure, what’s up. You found something?”

Julius: “Unfortunately, nothing worth mentioning. I have not been able to find a single volume with a name I know, since that first one. Your side seems to be in a similar situation as well.”

Emilia: “That’s not really accurate. Subaru did a good job, he really did find another volume, then looked through it and started looking kinda wobbly. Right, Subaru?”

Subaru: “I’ll take Emilia-tan’s praise to heart, but that’s how it is.”

Julius: “I see. Please take care of yourself.”

Subaru knotted his brows as Julius turned away from him, disinterested. While watching the two from aside, Emilia spoke,

Emilia: “But, Julius and the others haven’t found the stairs too, huh. We’re really in trouble.”

Julius: “I understand where Emilia-sama is coming from. However, if we are to believe that this Library does indeed record the names of all the dead, from the past to the present, although it is quite hard to digest, I’m afraid we alone cannot make much progress. We need many more people, like the entire population of a country, or so.”

Julius proposed with a serious face. Subaru had no objections with the proposal’s idea, feeling that such a number was more or less necessary. The Augria Sand Dunes have already been conquered, and if one needed to only reach the Watchtower, one only had to avoid the nest of witchbeasts. That alone could be a great adventure by itself but—

Julius: “Unlike before, the way to the Tower is as good as open. I believe that it is worthwhile to report the existence of this mysterious Library to the capital. We could make much more effective use of it that way.”

Subaru: “The value of this information is definitely nothing to joke about… But I’m also pretty sure a lot of history buffs just like you will be born from this, eh.”

At Subaru’s rapid fire words, Julius stopped, and after a moment, shut his eyes and sighed,

Julius: “…to say I am not expecting that, would be a lie. Apologies. I had a selfish motive for that proposal.”

Subaru: “Come on, don’t get down like that. What’s wrong with being self—centered? If you’re feeling so sorry for that, what are you gonna make of me? I’m working just for my own sake, 100% of the time.”

Never truly acting out of duty, always expecting some kind of reward, that was how Subaru behaved. It was already his way of life, his philosophy.

That was why he could not compare to knights like Julius or Reinhardt.

Subaru: “Anyway, there’s no point in keeping yourself from it. I mean, the reason Anastasia-san herself wants to become the Monarch is pretty self-centered, right?”

Anastasia: “Yup, that’s right. I want to become the Monarch because I want to satisfy my greed. If I do, I can profit a lot more. That’s all there is to it.”

Anastasia laughed at Subaru’s crass remark, then softly patted the white fur of her scarf.

Anastasia: “That’s why I think it’s so amusing that Julius became my Knight. At least, I think that way. Is that so for Emilia-san too?”

Subaru: “Personally, it’s better for us if you guys’ paces don’t match, so just go along that and fall apart—Ouch! Emilia-tan, it hurts!”

Emilia: “Don’t say mean things—I’m personally not acquainted with Anastasia-san and her faction from before, so I can’t say anything carelessly. But, no matter how better my opponents are, I’ll win my way, alongside my knights.”

At the part about her knights, Emilia tugged at Subaru’s sleeve and puffed up her chest. Looking at that face from the side, Subaru exhaled a long sigh.

Emilia: “We might be greenhorns, but we won’t lose!”

Subaru: “No one says greenhorn anymore these days… Ouch! It hurts!”

Emilia pinched Subaru’s arm for making fun of her, so he quickly bounced away to escape the punishment. Looking at the two’s behavior, Julius and Anastasia’s expressions relaxed.

Especially Julius, who looked to have dropped his air of self-reflection.

Julius: “Sometimes, I truly do feel afraid of you two. How much is an act, and how much is genuine, I can never tell.”

Subaru: “My case aside, Emilia-tan is always serious. That’s what makes her so cute, right?”

Julius: “I’ll take it to heart.”

As Julius pulled in his chin, the derailed conversation came to a stop. Instead, Anastasia clapped to bring everyone back on topic.

Anastasia: “Anyway, bringing it back to where we were… We’re short on people, so there was talk of bringing in others from the outside, right?”

Julius: “Yes, that is so. Right now, as there are few things to worry about for the Dunes, I believe it would be possible to bring a large investigation team into the Tower. It would not only help with solving the mystery of this Library, but also further in as we go above…”

Anastasia: “That’s right, but I feel a tad bit anxious.”

Julius: “Anxious, you say?”

Cutting off Julius’ fervent speech, Anastasia nodded. Julius frowned as she raised her finger to point.

Anastasia: “I’d welcome an increase in helping hands, been wondering about that myself. Going around this Library’s taking a toll on my neck. Ya know, I’m small and all, so it’s a real pain.”

She spoke as she rubbed her nape,

Anastasia: “But, in the first place, I’m wondering if it’s possible to even fit a lot of people into the tower.”

Julius: “…”

Anastasia: “Thinking about what’s in it for the other party’s one of the basics of business. Well, I might be calling it business basics, but it'll come in handy no matter where you are in life. So, let's start thinking along those lines."

Julius: "Think about where the other party stands? But, who's that?"

Anastasia: "The one who built this tower and set up the Trial, and left behind Shaula-san… That one. Let's think about being in his shoes for a moment. You'll see."

Subaru: "That, his personality's crap?"

Anastasia: "Yup, I think he's completely out of it."

As Subaru's lips twisted, Anastasia nodded in affirmation.

Upon hearing those words, the always—serious Emilia and Julius became stiff. But, with how twisted Subaru and Anastasia's personalities were, they both seemed to be in perfect sync.

Anastasia's opinion seemed to be the most apparent case, if the person with the awful personality really did try to raise the difficulty of conquering the Tower.

Subaru: "Shaula! I've got something to ask. Come here."

Shaula: "Master? Aye, aye—! Coming right away!"

Once called, Shaula hopped over from the other side of the large bookcase, her figure leaping up.

Arms outstretched, her long ponytail waving in the air, she grinned as she jumped towards Subaru's chest—

Shaula: "Ma—s—ter!"

Subaru: "Nope."

Shaula: "Ughyah—!"

With a nimble step, Subaru dodged the incoming glomp. However, as Shaula was still going, she dove face—first onto the floor, her arms splayed across. She quickly turned to shoot a glare at him.

Shaula: "Uu—Master is super mean."

Subaru: "No, no, I didn't move away because it was you, but because you were gonna crash into me full force, so my reflexes kicked in."

Shaula: "So you'll let me hug you if I come at you slowly?!"

Subaru: "Eh? Don't wanna, though."

Shaula: "Why not! What part of me is lacking! Even though I look this glamorous! Even though I'm this bitchy!"

Subaru: "You're bitchy, huh… Then that's why."

Whining at the top of her voice, Shaula boo-ed at Subaru's cold attitude. And, while she pouted, two small girls came around from where she had jumped.

Beatrice and Meili, foregoing their appearance, were an uncommon pairing indeed.

As if noticing Subaru's thoughts through his gaze, or maybe having realized it on her own, Beatrice put a bit more distance between herself and Meili.

Beatrice behaved that way with Petra as well, even though they were around the same age (outwardly). She maintained a clear line between herself and Meili.

Of course, it would be impossible for her to treat Petra and Meili in the same way. Petra was an ally from the same camp, while Meili was originally sent as an assassin from somewhere, who was even involved in the burning of the Forbidden Library and the Roswaal Mansion.

Subaru: "If you keep shying away from people like that, you're never gonna make friends, you know."

Beatrice: “What are you spouting all of a sudden, I suppose. Anyway, Shaula disappeared in the middle of talking, so we quietly came back, in fact.”

Subaru: “Ah—I ruined the convo over there, my bad my bad. Well, did you guys find anything good?”

Beatrice: “…There was nothing in particular, I suppose. And, thinking back, it might’ve not even been worth calling a conversation, in fact. Yup, that’s all that was, I suppose.”

Subaru: “—?”

Snapping away her face, Beatrice cut off answering Subaru’s question.

Before the alienated Subaru could further question her cold response, Shaula had gotten back to her usual self.

She stood upright by the strength of her abs alone and,

Shaula: “Well, Master being mean isn’t anything new. I can pull myself together alone. Getting back up fast is one of my selling points.”

Julius: “That, alongside your cooperation, Miss Shaula, is something that helps us. By the way, may I ask something?”

Shaula: “What’s up? I’ll warn you beforehand, I won’t fall for someone who’s not Master.”

Julius: “I admit that you are an attractive woman, but I’m afraid I’ll have to take a rain check on our date for now. —I would like to ask and confirm a few things about this Tower.”

Julius elegantly added in a few sweet words but tastefully avoided the topic altogether. This surprised Shaula, who lauded herself as being stubborn as a bitch. As she was not expecting such an answer, her eyes widened, something that was very unlike her usual self, and meekly gave a “Um, sure,”

Julius: “My thanks. Then I begin. Firstly… Do you know the location of the stairs to the 2nd Floor?”

Shaula: “The stairs to the 2nd Floor, Electra ? No clue. Never went up beyond the 4th. So don’t know.”

Julius: “That by itself is quite the shocking statement.”

If she was to be trusted, then Shaula had been at the Watchtower for about 400 years.

If, within that time, she had not once gone off to explore the Tower she lived in, but instead focused on keeping the Sand Dunes under her observation, then she was just too loyal to the one she followed.

Frankly, Subaru felt very conflicted about being mistaken for that same Master.

Anastasia: “Julius, if you’ll let me interrupt for a moment.”

This time, replacing her knight was Anastasia. Standing in front of her, Anastasia’s light blue eyes reflected Shaula’s figure.

Anastasia: “Shaula-san’s position is that, right? To be accurate, you’re the watchman of the Watchtower… No, of the Great Library Pleiades, right?”

Shaula: “Eee~xactly.”

Anastasia: “I see. Then, according to my calculation… It’s four, no, five?”

Anastasia lifted her right hand up to show five fingers. Shaula, who could not grasp what she was getting at, simply stared down at her and blinked.

However,

Anastasia: “—the secrets Shaula-san was told to keep, to protect the Tower, there’s five of em, right?”

Shaula: “…”

Anastasia beamed widely as Shaula fell silent, coming at a loss for words.

As the two stared at one another, eye to eye, all it took was but a slight jerk of her shoulders to tell Anastasia that she was completely correct.

3

Shaula: “In the first place, I wasn’t really hiding anything. I just didn’t say anything because I wasn’t asked. I want that on paper, please.”

Subaru: “Just spit everything out already.”

While Anastasia brought her secret—keeping to light, it was Subaru who crushed what few excuses Shaula was trying to make.

In response to his forced demeanor, Shaula pressed the tip of her fingers together and answered,

Shaula: “Like, for example, if Master and everyone secretly tried to get out of the Tower, I’d have to kill everyone, no mercy.”

Subaru: “The hell, what’s with you suddenly?!”

Shaula: “I wouldn’t do it because I wanted to! We’re just talking about what-ifs. In the first place, I can’t even go against that order.”

At the sudden revelation of hostile intentions, Subaru intently stared at Shaula, who shrunk back as she shook her head. Her bountiful chest pressed against her knees, she cradled herself into a ball.

Shaula: “I can’t even kill you in the first place, Master. I’d get killed before that even happens, and it’ll be over with that, so the whole order’s messed up…”

Subaru: “If you’re really that against it, why not just… not…? Unless, wait, you’re not gonna say it’s a Contract, right?”

Feeling something off, Subaru brought those words to his lips.

In the first place, if one thought about Shaula's identity, then it would be very clear. For 400 years, in place of the Sage, she lived at the Tower, looking over the Witch's Seal as the Tower's watchman.

Given such a role, and actually having acted upon it for the past several centuries—Neither her lifestyle nor her lifespan were humane.

Subaru: "You, are you a spirit just like Beako?"

In lieu of a fake promise, Beatrice was locked up inside of the Forbidden Library for 400 years.

If, just like her, Shaula had spent the past 400 years shooting down any who dared approach the Watchtower, waiting for those who would fulfill the conditions, then possibly, she and Beatrice were the same kind of existence—.

Shaula: "No way. Not gonna stand being compared to those fluff—ball things called spirits. I absolutely refuse… Everyone's eyes are looking pretty scary suddenly!"

Subaru: "That's because 80% of everyone present here is related to spirits!"

As it stood, counting the amateur as well, there were three Spirit Users. Furthermore, one particular young girl was a Spirit herself, and another who was possessed by an Artificial Spirit herself. The only ones unrelated to Spirits were the Oni sisters who waited downstairs, and the small girl who was looking at Shaula with a mischievous expression for some reason, Meili. None of what Shaula said had sat well most with those who were present.

However,

Subaru: "Let's leave that at that, anyway, what the hell are you. If you're not a Spirit, then I don't see why you'd so desperately keep up your Contract."

Emilia: "What are you saying, Subaru. Even if you are not a Spirit or a Spirit User, if you make a promise, you have to keep it. Promises are important. Now, repeat after me."

Subaru: “No, wait, that was my bad just now. It was just a figure of speech and…”

Emilia: “Promises are important. Three times.”

Subaru: “Promises are important. Promises are important. Promises are important.”

Getting unexpectedly rebuked by Emilia, he repeated her words three times to get forgiveness.

Either way, both Emilia’s and Subaru’s unwitting charade, and Shaula’s strictly obstinate attitude, were difficult to understand by outsiders.

It was not simply a matter of messed up sense of duty, too.

Julius: “Right now, what is important is to learn more about the orders Miss Shaula had received. It’s a bad habit of yours to derail the conversation. Be aware of it.”

Subaru: “Like all of it’s my fault… Fine! That was my bad, all of it was my bad! I’ll admit it was my fault, so just leave it at that, damn you!”

Shaula: “Wow, that’s totally a big outburst, but that’s just expected of Master! I’ll talk.”

To Subaru who approached with a pathetic and sour face, Shaula beamed and dealt her hand. Then, she cleared her throat, and in a strangely decent manner, “Now then,” she opened her mouth,

Shaula: “I humbly present that, I will now speak of the orders I was given. First, I am to never let the challenger of the Great Library Pleiades get out.”

Subaru: “We’re suddenly stuck here!”

Shaula: “It’s alright! There’s a proper way out! As long as you properly clear the Great Library’s Trial, and reach the 1st Floor Maia, there’s no problem. It’s all OK.”

Shaula said as she gave a thumbs up.

Shaula: “By the way, if this condition is violated, then I’ll turn into a cold—blooded killing machine pretty quick, so it’ll invalidate my promise with Master. I’ll get in the way.”

Subaru: “That’s got a bigger priority than my promise, huh? Kinda hurts.”

Shaula: “Ooo—to think I’ve managed to hurt Master, I must’ve gotten stronger~! This is clearly an evolution! The fruits of 400 years!”

Subaru: “I’m joking!”

Shaula: “Me too~!”

After indulging in the fast back and forth, Shaula raised a second finger and waved around her hand and spoke,

Shaula: “Continuing, well, I’m getting tired of this, so I’ll rush it. First, it’s forbidden to leave without completing the Trial. Second, it’s forbidden to break the rules of the Trial. Third, it’s forbidden to disrespect the Library. Fourth, it’s forbidden to try to destroy the Tower itself. Fifth, ah—fifth was… Oh. There’s no fifth.”

Emilia: “All of that makes four rules… but,”

Somewhat taking in Shaula and her butchered explanation, Emilia turned towards Subaru and the others. The anxieties and fears she embraced, were ones Subaru understood too.

The rules Shaula spoke of were, roughly, easy to stand by, but there were several curious statements mixed in. The problem was especially with—

Subaru: “I’m really curious about the ‘It’s forbidden to violate the rules of the Trial ‘ bit.”

Julius: “Seems like it is a hidden rule we are unaware of.”

Julius agreed with Subaru, who touched his chin, lost in thought.

At least, for the Trial of the 3rd Floor, Taygeta, Subaru and co. had not received any information about the Rules during it, and had not faced any problems with the Monolith and its Asterism.

Speaking of which, the moment anyone touched the wrong Monolith, they were disqualified.

Anastasia: “Rules, regulations… they all sorta sound like bad news, at least to me.”

Emilia: “…The Ordeal from back at the Tomb would close down for the day if the challenger failed to pass it. It somewhat seems quite similar to how we redid the Trial from earlier, so maybe—”

Emilia stopped herself at that point, and bit her lip. Her trembling purple eyes darted to Subaru, who gave a slight nod.

Subaru: “If you’ve got anything on your mind, now’s the best time to speak up. Don’t worry, I won’t make fun of you, no matter what you say.”

Emilia: “Mmh, I know. Um, you see, Subaru and Anastasia—san were saying that, the person who made this Tower is reeally mean… right?”

Subaru: “Your choice of words is turning pretty cute, but that’s right. What about it?”

Emilia: “Thinking from the point of view of the other party is also important. In other words, if you try to look at what Shaula said, while imagining how that reeally mean person felt, it’s kinda like —”

As everyone’s gazes turned to Emilia, she licked her lips, then she clapped together her hands, and pointed to the ceiling.

Emilia: “There are rules we have to follow, but we don’t know what those rules are… That’s really mean, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “…in other words,”

Emilia: “We have to imagine what could be the possible rules, and go on without breaking them.”

“…”

Everyone’s faces tightened with anxiety at Emilia’s words.

To their response, Emilia’s long eyelashes fringed as she looked down.

Emilia: “I feel like, Echidna would do something like this.”

Subaru: “…Emilia—tan, to think we’d think of the same person when it comes to crappy personalities. We think alike.”

That one sentence lent a bit more credibility to Subaru’s own thoughts, at the very least.

The owner of the malicious personality Emilia mentioned—He felt it was close to being right.

Establishing rules that were not meant to be broken, but not telling the Challenger themselves the contents of the rules.

It was quite the distasteful disposition.

Subaru: “By the way, are you the one who’s going to judge whether the rules are broken or not?”

Shaula: “You’re coming to get the hang of it. All the stuff I just said, I’m supposed to just get it if there’s any violation of them. Absolutely no way to trick me. Goes for both Master, and his friends.”

The meek voice expressed a mysterious power in the latter half of her words.

That was not the physical prowess of Shaula, but rather the opposite.

—That there was someone much stronger than Shaula, who could make her act like that.

Subaru: “It was already a bad joke, but now another bad joke got piled on top of it. Too late anyway.”

Julius: “At times, I feel envious of the frivolous way you speak.”

Julius sighed as he spoke. Looking at his handsome profile, Subaru shrugged.

Julius: “Perhaps it is because of how you’re always looking up, that you developed such a persona. If that is so, then I am afraid I will never be able to gain such an experience.”

Subaru: “You need to be more afraid of what’s around your feet. You’ll stub your toe on the corner of a desk. I really hope you do.”

Anastasia: “Yes, yes, good friends getting into arguing’s fine and all, but let’s not be forgetting our main topic.”

Splitting Julius and Subaru up, Anastasia stepped up to gaze down upon Shaula.

Subaru: “That’s all there is? It’s all fine till now, right?”

Shaula: “Cross my heart. Not lying this time. Besides, so long as the rules aren’t broken, my body’s still gonna be mine. No wait, that’s wrong. It’ll still be Master’s.”

Subaru: “Don’t want it.”

Shaula: “I got rejected! But, my heart’s always with Master!”

Subaru: “Don’t want that either.”

Hands on her waist, Anastasia reconfirmed everything Shaula had spoken of in short, with a few unnecessary words added by Shaula, alongside her own position in recent events. It took a while, but she managed to confirm that Subaru’s promise with her—To not harm him or his comrades, remained intact, and she planned on keeping it.

Of course, with the condition that none of the rules have yet been broken.

Emilia: “Either way, to think we can’t get out unless we complete the Trial … It’s coming to look pretty similar to the Ordeal from back at the Tomb.”

Subaru: “Nah, worst case scenario, so long as we beat this here, we all get to go home, right? That’s a lot easier than the one at the Tomb.”

Shaula: “Master would never do anything like that! He was the kindest ever! Had the biggest heart ever! Uwah, my body’s itchy because I lied!”

Shaula fluttered around, reaping what she sowed, as Emilia and Subaru looked on with disappointed expressions.

For the time being, that was all they got from Shaula.

Meili: “Are you all finished talking? Can I go get on the barely clothed Onee—san now?”

Subaru: “We’re done, we’re done. Go ahead. Do what you want. Wait, you’ve already gotten super attached to her.”

Judging that the talk was over, Meili, who had been staying out of the conversation, ran up to Shaula and climbed on top of her thin shoulders.

That was the place Meili felt most comfortable, ever since arriving at the Tower. To Shaula, who had lifted the dragon carriage like it was no big deal, Meili ought to be as light as a feather.

Meili: “Whenever I’m with Onee—san, I feel kinda safer.”

Shaula: “Well, I don’t think much of it. I can look after ankle—biter number two just fine.”

Subaru: “Number two?”

Shaula: “Ankle—biter number two’s this one here, and number one is that one over there.”

With Meili still on her back, Shaula pointed to Beatrice as number one.

Beatrice made no comment on Shaula's belittling remark. Normally, considering her personality, she would have snapped at her at full force, face red and puffy.

Subaru: "Wait a sec, she hasn't been talking for a while now. Is everything okay?"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "Beako? Oii, Beatrice. Pay attention, come on. I'll kiss your forehead if you don't."

Beatrice: "…do what you want, in fact."

Subaru: "…"

As if barely listening, Beatrice answered. Finding it unamusing, Subaru frowned.

And then,

Subaru: "Mwah—"

Beatrice: "Ngyah—I suppose?!"

Feeling somewhat annoyed, he really kissed her forehead. Immediately, Beatrice came to her senses, covered her forehead and leapt away. Then tripped. Then got up. Then tripped again.

Subaru: "You're overreacting…"

Beatrice: "Wha, wha, wha, what are you doing all of a sudden, in fact?! Your train of thought makes no sense, I suppose!"

Subaru: "My train of thought makes perfect sense. I even got permission from you. Are you really okay?"

Feeling a little hurt at how she desperately scrubbed the part where he had kissed, Subaru worried about the little girl.

Putting in a little thought, this Tower, a place with a shady backstory, was in the middle of the Sand Dunes. Subaru did not understand it very well, but there was some kind of Miasma flowing through here, so that might be the cause.

Subaru: "If you're not feeling good, just hold my hand. You get better that way, right."

Beatrice: "That's impossible, it won't happen, in fact! Give me a little time to calm down, I suppose!"

Her face beet—red, Beatrice squealed at Subaru, so he turned away with a shrug. That she refused to hold hands came as a bit of a shock, but the rest of her attitude was that of her usual self.

If there was something really worrying about her, he would just ask again later.

Subaru: "Now then, the problem is…"

Julius: "That in the end, we have no choice but to fumble through the unknown in search of the stairs to the 2nd Floor, is it."

Julius finished Subaru's sentence as the two turned to face the bookcases once more.

The reason they looked a bit down was that, they needed a bit more manpower to tackle this, but because of the orders Shaula had been given, they had to relinquish the thought.

If they did not clear the Trial, they would not be allowed to get out of the Tower. Naturally, one could not go out to beyond the Sand Dunes to call for help.

Ultimately, there was no choice but to continue the search with the members present.

Subaru: "Will you get it if I say, 'It's like looking for a single grain of gold in a mountain of sand.'?"

Julius: "Speaking in such poetic words is unlike you. However, I can honestly agree with them."

Rare as it was, faced with the great hurdle that obstructed them, Subaru and Julius got along.

Nothing could be accomplished by dawdling, so they prepared to dive once more into the sea of books to find a way to the next floor, or so they had decided when,

Emilia: “Heey, I put a little thought into it, and,”

Emilia interrupted the two who were going back into the Library with a slightly raised hand.

She tilted her head towards them, put a finger to her lips, and spoke,

Emilia: “I thought about how the person who built this tower, his personality is a little dishonest, right?”

Subaru: “Your word choice is turning adorable again, but that’s right. So?”

Putting together everything that was discussed from the previous conversation, Emilia added “So,” and continued,

Emilia: “The staircase, I think it might just be at that spot—”

4

Subaru: “I’ll say it again. The guy who made this Tower has the shittiest personality ever!!”

Standing in front of the long and winding staircase that led to the 2nd Floor Electra, Subaru spat out various colors of abuse.

The staircase that led to the 2nd Floor, the location which Emilia had thought of, was—

Emilia: “I thought it’d be in the places where we hadn’t looked, like maybe on the 4th or 5th Floors.”

Emilia spoke, feeling elated, yet somewhat perplexed.

Her guess had hit the nail squarely on its head. The staircase had appeared right beside the Green Room, where Rem and Ram were waiting, in a previously blank space.

Chapter 25:
The Man Who Waits on the Second Floor, Electra

1

—There was a woman, all by herself.

Oppressed was the woman; by her family, her clan, by her race who should have loved her. All saw her with disdain, all ostracized her.

Prior to being born, expectations were laid upon that woman. Alas, her birth turned her traitor to them.

What remained was dejection and disappointment, what bestowed upon her was only scorn and ridicule. Those were the sole possessions of the woman.

There existed a dearest wish of her clan. To bring back the symbol of their former glory and prosperity, the second coming of their founder whom they called god.

All kinds of secret arts and all types of inhumane atrocities, unfathomable, the number of taboos committed, all of its fruits was the woman.

However, the birth of that woman betrayed their dearest wish, and the clan abandoned the woman with disappointment and despair.

Clansmen: “Go somewhere and live and die. For that is your sin.”

Abandoned by her family, by her race, she was released into the fields as a child.

Cast away with no means of survival, the child was not supposed to survive.

However, even if she lacked means of survival, she possessed the strength to survive.

Ironically enough, it was the feast of what betrayed the dearest wish of the clan, the taboos and offences they had committed.

Unknown to words, lacking all wisdom, merely abiding by her instincts, the woman survived to live a long life in the fields.

Killing beasts, sipping on their lifeblood, crawling on the earth, tasting muddy water.

Before a long time passed, the child became a young girl, the young girl became a woman, and it became difficult to live in the fields.

Hearing the rumors of a woman laying waste to the mountains as if it were a beast, men aimed for that life, and the woman was captured.

The captured woman appeared beautiful, the men abstained from taking away her life, and the woman was proceeded to be kept by them.

While becoming a yes—man of the men, gradually the woman's consciousness descended onto a human environment from the fields.

Losing the indispensability of struggling to survive, exposed to the desires of the men, days of merely living.

Eventually the woman, upon the bed, came to acquire things unacquainted from the men.

Words, wisdom, way of life, and emotions.

Eventually her treatment altered, conferred with things to adorn her body, the woman was treated like a precious jewel.

Among those days, the woman embraced queer thoughts for the men.

Whether that was something resembling gratitude or obligation, the woman then had no lead to understand that.

While embracing those thoughts, the woman snapped the necks of all the men dwelling in the residence.

Easily, in one breath, without making them suffer, in an instant, grouping them all together, she consigned them to oblivion.

Sneaking away from the residence, proceeding towards the fields, lacking all doubt, the woman returned to her own hometown.

The woman attained queer thoughts regarding the race residing there, the clan possessing the same blood as her, the people who had bodies distantly larger than hers.

That they were feelings of hatred and desire for revenge, the woman then did not realize.

Merely, their weeps and wails, voices begging for forgiveness were quite thrilling. For the first time, the woman smiled from her heart.

Woman: “Fall apart here and die an unsightly death. —Because that is your sin, you see.”

For the sake of attaining that felicity, from one after the other, the woman pulverized the dearest wish of her race, her blood relatives, her clan by herself.

Politely and courteously, not leaving a single one, not sparing a single one, taking her time, one by one, with certainty.

Before long, when all of her race died out, when anything and everything had come to an end, the woman returned to the residence where she had lived with the men.

Though she had abandoned the corpses of her race, she buried all of the corpses of the men courteously.

And once merely she alone was left in the residence, the woman took a deep, deep breath.

That was relaxation, tranquility, the woman, for the first time, experienced utter bliss.

Nobody would interfere with her now. Thinking and taking action, both lay in futility, so she will merely fall asleep.

—The Witch of Sloth continued to indulge in everlasting inactivity, untiring peace.

2

—The stairway that led to the 2nd Floor Electra ought to be called the Great Stairway, because of its grand presence.

Compared to the spiral stairway used to get from the 6th Floor to the 5th Floor and furthermore to the 4th, the Great Stairway was much much wider, and much much longer.

As it took the space of an entire room, the intimidating feel it gave off was a given.

What was supposed to be an empty room, was now the Great Stairway.

With it in front, Subaru folded his arms and sighed. Then—

Subaru: “It kinda feels like it’s been a long time since we last came here.”

Emilia: “Eh? We just found the stairway. What’s wrong all of a sudden?”

Emilia’s eyes widened with surprise at Subaru’s remark.

Subaru shook his head and turned to his companions, with whom together they had experienced the general nastiness the creator of the Tower gave off.

He recollected a bit of peace at the sight of their unchanged faces.

Beatrice: “—? Subaru, why are you wrapping your fingers around Betty’s?”

Subaru: “Kinda wanted to feel like I’m really here… Ahem, I’m good. My bad.”

Faced with a rising suspicion in her face, Subaru forced a smile at Beatrice, but still kept her hand in his.

Then, he turned around and pointed to the Great Stairway.

Subaru: “Now then, getting back on track… The Great Stairway was always here, and no one just really noticed, is not what the case is here, right?”

Julius: “I believe it is quite unthinkable to have not noticed such an obvious spectacle. —However, if it were to be limited to only this room, then I cannot deny that possibility.”

Subaru: “Say what?”

Anastasia: “That uncertainty in the middle of exploration, huh? I get that.”

Taking Subaru’s doubt in stride, the Master-Servant duo of Anastasia and Julius nodded in agreement. Seeing that, Subaru tilted his head slightly, while Emilia raised her hand,

Emilia: “About back when Subaru was still sleeping, we all gathered at the 4th Floor. Rem and Patrasche were resting in the Green Room, and we were challenging the puzzle on the 3rd Floor, so, we were walking around to see where we could put our luggage…”

Beatrice: “We were all unconsciously avoiding this room. Looking back…”

Subaru: “So maybe, something from the outside was blocking this room out of our minds, or something like that?”

What Emilia started was continued by Beatrice, while Subaru brought it to its conclusion. Both Emilia and Beatrice nodded to that theory, and Anastasia and Julius agreed to it.

Once the Great Stairway was discovered, everyone thought about the room, and noticed the mind block—If that were the case, then maybe the Great Stairway was always present in this room, and there was some kind of magic that camouflaged it so it could not be noticed.

Subaru: “Well, if not for that, when we finished solving the slab puzzle of the 3rd Floor, if there was anyone in this room, they might've gotten flattened by the sudden appearance of the stairs."

Julius: "Subaru, it is not a slab, but a monolith. Let us refer to it the same way. I would like to avoid confusion."

Subaru: "Monolith monolith monolith! Satisfied? Let's continue."

Although Julius looked dissatisfied with Subaru's apathetic response, Subaru was fed up with it, so he ignored him. He turned to the two who had not taken part in the conversation till now—Shaula, who was playing around beside the stairway, and Meili, who was on her back.

Shaula: "Mn? Something up, Master? Ah! Could it be, it's my turn to be useful?! I'll do anything for Master! I'll even become your co-endorser!"

Subaru: "You, you don't get what you're saying at all, do you! That's not something you should become, even if it's your mom, dad, sibling or even friend telling you to do it. Just in case, I'll ask, so, did you know…"

Shaula: "Definitely, I've been living here for a few hundred years now, but this is the first time I'm seeing these stairs!"

Subaru: "Meili, it's fine to play around. Pull on the scorpion tail hard."

Meili: "I'd do it even if you don't tell me, onii-san."

Shaula: "It hurts it hurts it hurtsss"

As usual, Shaula was useless when it came to conquering the Tower. Leaving it to Meili to punish her accordingly, Subaru looked up to the Great Stairway again.

Unlike the pair that led up to the 4th Floor, the Great Stairway was not spiral-shaped. Normally, a stairway would be a singular path leading up to the next floor. However, for this particular one to cross the 3rd Floor, and lead directly to the 2nd, was something that would look weird for the Tower, given its shape. One would think that, subsequently, the structure would cause the floor to protrude outside of the Tower—

Subaru: “Maybe it’s making up for that using the power of mystery…”

Emilia: “Or maybe it just looks like it leads up to the 2nd Floor, but it goes to a completely different place… Would that be too mean?”

Subaru: “I’m scared that Emilia-tan’s pureness will get tainted by the Tower creator’s awful personality. I wanna conquer this place faster.”

Emilia: “—?”

Emilia tilted her head to the side, not quite understanding. However, it was Emilia who found this Great Stairway, and it was also her who uncovered an important hint in solving the mystery of the 3rd Floor.

The building called Watchtower Pleiades, or rather, Great Library Pleiades, had a number of very nasty gimmicks that reflected the designer’s personality.

While being very reliable with her solving obstacles one after another, Subaru, who wanted to spend his days in peace with her, worried that her personality might get twisted because of this.

Subaru: “Saying that, our pace’s been pretty nice so far. I cleared the 3rd Floor’s Trial on my first try, and we’re already 1/3rd done with conquering the Tower in under just three days too.”

Beatrice: “Compared to how there was no progress in 400 years, this would be a great pace, I suppose.”

Subaru: “It’s pretty damn lit, thinking that way… But then, I’m the kinda amazing guy who’s moving forward history that’s been stalling for the past hundreds of years. As a history-mover, my power word game’s strong.”

In the recent past, he had gathered the participants in the White Whale subjugation, crushed the Witch Cult’s Archbishop of Sin Sloth and annihilated the Great Rabbit, helped partly in clearing the

Ordeal at the tomb of the Witch of Greed, defeated the Archbishop of Sin Greed, and finally, set foot on the never before explored Watchtower Pleiades, cleared one of it's never before challenged Trials and was now on the way to challenging the second of those Trials—.

Subaru: "If I'm just listing all my achievements and skip the process, I'll only look like an idiot…"

He had died several times to accomplish all that, so at the same time, he could not exactly puff his chest. Despite that, history had indeed advanced a bit too far in the past year.

He had not intended this, but at the very least, he had to settle things with Archbishops Gluttony and Lust, so the world better be prepared for it—Is how he felt about the matter.

Subaru: "Whe—what? What's up, Emilia-tan, holding my hand suddenly. Something wrong?"

"Emilia: …no, no. It's just, I think Subaru should be a little, little bit more nicer to himself."

Subaru: "Yeah, no, you'll have a hard time finding someone who's as soft on himself as me. It's enough with Emilia-tan and Beako, any more's just too much."

Rem would be added to that list, whenever she wakes up. She would be a bit strict, but kind nonetheless.

And adding Petra, Patrasche, Garfiel and even Otto to that would leave no room for Subaru to go easy on himself.

Emilia: "…"

Emilia's lips shook faintly, as if trying to search for some way to respond to him, but she only kept on looking at Subaru.

Lightening his grip on her hand, Subaru cocked his head.

However—

Anastasia: “At this point, I think this here’s a problem of the root of Natsuki-kun’s being. It’s not something that’ll get better in a day or two. I suppose it depends on how Emilia-san goes about it, though.”

Breaking into the conversation with a clap of her hands, Anastasia shot a glance at Emilia. Emilia looked back, her expression earnest, but it seemed to not be the reaction she had intended, so,

Anastasia: “—My, I feel like there’s very little hope for that. Not that it’d suit you.”

Emilia: “—? I don’t think I understand, but if you show me how, I’ll try my best?”

Anastasia: “I’m afraid I’ll have to refuse… I’m not too fond of getting kicked by an Earth Dragon.”

Subaru: “Getting kicked by an Earth Dragon… I wonder if it means something like getting kicked by a horse.”

Setting aside Garfiel’s weird phrases, Subaru added in a new phrase that might be common in this isekai.

In any case, for Subaru, that was not the end of the confusing info being thrown around in Emilia and Anastasia’s conversation. At one point, he and Emilia both kept tilting their heads at every other line, to the point that Anastasia sighed, and pointed to the Great Stairway.

Anastasia: “Heey, when are we going to quit dawdling and go up? Whatever’s waiting might be harder than the 3rd Floor… Or maybe Natsuki-kun will end up clearing it right away.”

Subaru: “To tell you the truth, if it’s something as annoying as the puzzle on the 3rd Floor, I’m not feeling too hot about it.”

To be honest, the only reason Subaru was able to clear the 3rd Floor Taygeta ‘s Trial was because knowledge about stars and constellations was critical to clearing it.

Constellations—That too, knowledge from Subaru’s original world, was required to solve the puzzle. In fact, Subaru believed that the constructor of this Tower was from another world, modern times at that too, just like him.

In that respect, it was highly likely that the 2nd Floor's Trial required modern knowledge as well, where Subaru's presence would prove useful, but—

Subaru: "Things might be different compared to the 3rd Floor, I mean, I can't do much if it's something I don't know. The name Flugel's Germanic, and I dunno much about Germany's history anyway."

A vague anxiety swirled in him, but he could not voice it, so to keep everyone's expectations. In both Emilia and Beatrice's eyes, Subaru was weak.

Thus, he wanted to do whatever was possible by dragging out whatever little knowledge he had of Germany.

Subaru: "Can't help it. The stairs up are literally right in front. I can't call myself a man if I step back now. Let's just pop in there and breeze through the challenge."

Julius: "Unfortunately, aside from you and I, there are only women here."

Subaru: "It's just a saying, don't put a damper on it, you! Alright, let's go, Beako!"

Beatrice: "Ngyah- in fact!"

Julius dowsed the burning spirit Subaru had in his clenched fist, but Subaru simply stuck his tongue out to him and pulled Beatrice into his arms and ran straight up the stairs.

Emilia: "Ah, Subaru, wait!"

Seeing his enthusiastic jump up, Emilia clambered behind him, while Julius and Anastasia slumped their shoulders in unison, and followed after.

Meili: "Barely-clothed Onee-san? Aren't you going?"

Shaula: “Yap it with the barely clothed already, ankle-biter number two. I’m properly clothed, you see. I’ve got an ero-kawaii thing going on, see. Master chose this for me, so stop complaining about it.”

Meili: “I’m not really complaining, you know~ Just hurry up, come on, come on, or we’ll get left behind.”

Shaula: “You’re really bossy even though you’re just riding on my bad, ankle-biter. I’ll tell on you to Master later! Actually, I want to just teach you some manners myself~!”

Shaula put her foot on the stairs as she shook her reddened face, scorpion tail flailing about. With vigor unseeming for a person carrying someone on their back, she jumped from the first step of the Great Stairway, to the fifth, and kept running.

Shaula: “Dadadadadadadadada–!”

Ignoring what was happening behind, Subaru kept on running up the stairs with Beatrice in his arms. In the middle of it, Beatrice had skillfully changed her position to that of a princess carry and narrowed her blue eyes at Subaru.

Beatrice: “As I thought, there is something tweaking the sense of space here I suppose. We haven’t gotten out of the Tower even though we came so far in a straight line, in fact.”

Subaru: “Maybe we couldn’t just tell from the outside, but the Tower might really be shaped like that too.”

Beatrice: “For just this one stairway to be jutting out? If that was so, then there needs to be something that makes the Tower look tower-like. Otherwise, there is no point in hiding the stairway, in fact.”

Subaru: “I guess so. I just felt like saying it out loud.”

Subaru sighed as he agreed with Beatrice’s reasoning and looked overhead.

Strangely enough, even though he was running up the stairs, the floor above seemed no closer than before. No matter how much he ran, it felt like he was going up using a down escalator.

Subaru: “No way, to think that the harassment Emilia was talking about would actually happen…”

That there was only a stairway prepared, and it actually did not connect to the 2nd Floor—As Subaru gave this theory more thought, the space overhead opened up at the same time.

Subaru: “Oh, oooh—?!”

Beatrice: “Hya”

Faced with sudden bright light in the poorly lit stone-cut stairway, Subaru and Beatrice shouted at the same time.

At some point, while continuously moving forward, the stairs had ended, and they had stepped onto a new floor.

Which was—

Subaru: “A white room… again, huh.”

Beatrice: “I suppose.”

He stopped and carefully put Beatrice down from his arms.

It was a surprisingly long climb up the stairs. Despite his stamina having improve, he could not stop himself from crouching over his knees and breathing heavily.

While stroking his back, Beatrice tapped the floor with the tip of her toe and looked around the room. Subaru gulped and did the same.

To the two who had reached the top of the stairs first, the room was a spitting image of the 3rd Floor Taygeta ‘s Trial, a white expanse. A mysterious structure where both the floor and the ceiling extended far beyond the reach of the eye, and the basis of distance itself seemed to be skewed.

No doubt the only reason this white space was registered as a place was only because of the small space with the stairs that was open on the ground leading to the floor below, just like it was on the 3rd Floor.

Emilia: “Ah, this room again?”

And from that same open space popped up Emilia and the others, all bearing similar reactions to the scenery of white, and all dropped their shoulders in dejection.

It was obvious with the presentation, that another Trial was about to commence.

Subaru: “Any chance we just came to the 3rd Floor again by mistake?”

Emilia: “I don’t think so. There were 54 steps in the stairway between the 4th and 3rd Floors. This one here had 444 steps. That’s almost ten times more steps we needed to get here, right?”

Subaru: “You, you were counting, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “Fufu~, the truth is, counting the number of steps is a secret hobby I recently picked up… Why are you patting my head?”

Subaru and the others took turns in patting Emilia’s head after she boasted about her hobby. Even Julius and Meili, who refrained from doing so, looked on with delicate pity.

Emilia: “It feels kinda, reeally weird, you know…”

Subaru: “W-We really couldn’t have done it without Emilia-tan. Thanks to you, we know we’ve gone up ten times higher than the 3rd Floor. Kinda makes you think if we’ve just jumped way up to the 1st Floor. I’d like to go with that, but, for now, I think we should consider that this is the 2nd Floor…”

Beatrice: “The Trial is supposed to begin, in fact. That over there might be how, I suppose.”

Putting away Emilia’s doubts for later, Subaru looked to where Beatrice pointed—Straight ahead from coming up the stairs, there was a spectacle that caught one's eye.

Even on the 3rd Floor Taygeta, there was something similar in the center of the room. And upon touching it, the Trial would commence. If the case was the same here as well, then—

Julius: "It's not a Monolith, but—A sword."

Narrowing his golden eyes, Julius spoke as he gazed upon It, which stuck out of the ground.

Exactly as he stated, within the white expanse stood not a Monolith like the 3rd Floor, but It.

—It was a sword.

Without sheath, it stood straight, tip pierced into the white floor.

The way it stood absolutely straight, hilt facing up, was a terrifying beauty that reflected in Subaru's eyes.

It was not as if there gorgeous decorations, nor did Subaru know its material was of high quality.

Only that, in its non-decorative simpleness, in its making of minimal use of steel, there was something beautiful.

Subaru: "From the looks of it, it's supposed to work like a Sword of Selection …"

Julius: "…"

Subaru: "Yes, yes, you were really patient. Good boy, good boy."

Julius held back his words when he noticed the picturesque scene of Subaru whispering to a sword. Putting aside Anastasia's silent praise for Julius who was watching, Subaru set his eyes on Shaula. She had her arms crossed and her chest puffed, face brimming with confidence.

The kind that read, 'You can ask me whatever you want, I'm completely ready to say I have no clue!' So, Subaru, without having asked a word, was forced to finally stepped towards the sword.

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “I think it’s fine. It’s not a trap that casts Instant-Death on you, if it’s anything like the 3rd Floor.”

Nodding his head to a distressed Emilia, Subaru took a step towards the Sword of Selection. Of course, Emilia and Beatrice tagged along naturally. The rest remained on stand-by at the mouth of the stairs, ready to react in case anything happened.

Subaru: “Careful about making a get-away road for Anastasia. It’s a pretty long way down, so if she trips, she’ll keep on rolling till she dies.”

Julius: “I will keep it in mind. Rather, you ought to be more mindful of Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama’s warnings.”

Emilia: “It’s okay. I’ll protect Subaru.”

Subaru: “Ahh, alright, I’ll let myself be protected.”

Watching Subaru flashing a thumbs up to a very enthusiastic Emilia, Julius sighed. After seeing it through, Subaru faced the Sword of Selection in front.

A distance where if he just reached out, he could touch it. At that point, the presence of the sword brought out a certain sense of reality. That, like the Monolith, there was no mysterious feel to it.

Subaru: “That said, it’s a sword that has been stuck here since the tower was built. That there’s not even a speck of rust on it is itself pretty weird.”

Subaru whispered in front of the Sword of Selection, then took a light breath—breathed out—then stretched his hand towards the handle.

Wrapping his fingers neatly around it, he felt it was slightly resisting him, but he still put strength into pulling it up.

For a moment, doubt flashed in everyone's minds about whether Subaru would be able to pull it out, if it truly were the Sword of Selection—but, the thought turned out to be in vain.

"…"

Upon applying the slightest bit of strength, the sharp edge that was stuck in the floor came out easily.

It truly was with as elegance as a sword could have, as if it were thrust out of its sheath.

At that immediate moment, it echoed.

—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword.

"—tch!"

A voice that bore through eardrums and resonated directly in their skulls told them of the details of the Trial.

It was an expected turn of events, so he had not done something as unsavory as dropping the sword, it was nonetheless an unpleasant experience.

After all, the voice that echoed in his head was very much like Himself.

Subaru: "Feels like getting car-sick… I guess everyone feels that way too…"

Did everyone hear, or was it limited to Subaru, who had pulled out the sword? Everyone had heard the voice when someone touched the Monolith.

So, this time too—Subaru turned around with that thought, and noticed.

"…"

—That everyone's breaths were caught, and they were looking at a single point.

"…"

Following their line of sight, Subaru also looked. The place they were all looking at was a point further ahead of the Sword of Selection—At a place that coincidentally equaled the distance between the sword and staircase.

And at that place, the shadowy silhouette of a person had appeared.

Voice: "—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword."

A voice that was supposed to be whispering, suddenly sounded very loud to Subaru.

A voice that repeated the same words he had heard when he pulled out the sword. However, it was nothing like his own voice that echoed in his head, but undoubtedly was being spoken by the silhouette with a different voice.

Voice: "—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword."

The voice, as if it were an idiot taught to repeat only one sentence, spun the same words again.

Whether the voice seemed mechanical, automatic or even instinctual, could not be determined.

The subtle tremble of the voice was apparent in the repetition of those eerie words. They were terribly direct, as if an edge of a sword were tickling the silhouette's heart.

"…"

Whether the tremble was from fear, or from passion, or from pleasure, or from grief, could also not be determined. For it to play around with others emotions so well, was proof that there was a distinct gap between it, and a living creature.

At this distance, from just being a voice, it played with lives.

"—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword."

—It was a man with simple yet long, red hair, that flowed down his back.

He was quite tall. A full head above Subaru, the man's body was adorned with thick muscles befitting his height.

He wore not armor, but a casual crimson robe that contributed nothing in protection—From his right side down to his arm, his chest lay exposed, and his waist was bound with a white sash.

His flaming red hair reached up to the middle of his back, and his left eye was covered by a shoddy black eye-patch. Finally, the right eye that remained uncovered, was a blue reflection of an unreachable sky.

Surely, it was such a well-ordered beauty that would make anyone and everyone turn around and take a look, a sight fit for a painting —That savage, cruel smile filled with insanity, spoiled it all.

It was a most exceedingly beautiful, ferocious beast.

The most beautiful beast that existed in this world—To the point that Subaru forgot to breathe in its presence.

Shaula: "Hii…"

The illusion of the stillness of time was broken by a soft whisper.

Swiftly he heard a girl's voice squeak out a "Kyaa-". At the edge of his eyes, he saw the figure of the girl whose black hair reached her backside, at his side—Shaula dropped to the floor, while Meili's eyes darted around, confused.

Shaula: "Hii, hiii…"

If anything, Shaula was so upset that she could be incontinent.

With her eyes open wide, her face twisted in a way unbefitting a girl as beautiful as her, the depth fear she madness of the fear she felt was expressed clearly.

If it were possible, she would have left the room according to her instincts.

Only, her trembling legs did not permit it.

—The very Shaula who utterly destroyed the Centaur creature, was stiff with fear?

Man: "—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword."

Even with the frightened Shaula in sight, the voice continued repeating those words.

At first glance, it seemed to be a situation that rose in eeriness levels—However, there was something else he noticed.

The man did not move a single step, only ever exerting pressure from where he stood. —No, the man did not even try to exude pressure. He simply stood still.

Just by being there, his existence gave off the same presence as that of a Witch.

Subaru: "—tch."

Holding his breath, he forced his eyelids, that had forgotten to blink, to close and took a moment to calm down.

And then, without taking his eyes off the man for even a second, Subaru took a step backward. In his right hand was the Sword of Selection, in his left was Beatrice's hand held firm, he pulled her stiff form back.

Subaru: "Eh, Emilia…"

Emilia: "I, I know."

Knowing he could not leave her behind, Subaru called out Emilia’s name, knowing she was still petrified. Even so, Emilia nodded in response. Matching his movements with her shaking knees, Subaru shrunk away slowly.

Man: “—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword.”

The distance widened. Even so, the man remained unmoving. Only, he repeated the same words.

Man: “—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword.”

He poured his all into his nerves, and finally arrived at where Shaula was lying. Shaula’s face was stiff with fear as usual, and Meili had grabbed onto her arm, unable to move.

To take the girls and retreat from this place. Would that even be possible? Subaru’s hands, both the one that held the sword, and the other that held Beatrice’s hand, were stiff, with no signs of being able to move them. He could not even imagine being able to force up Shaula and Meili by grabbing their arms. In the first place, would that man allow that? What was that man’s objective? What was the trial for, and what purpose did the sword have—

Man: “—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword.”

The words that were being repeated, the phrase, that was the proposal of the 2nd Floor Electra ‘s Trial.

What meaning could there be in the man repeating those words. The contents of the Trial he had heard about the moment he pulled out the sword, the man who repeated those words, the fool, and forgiveness, what exactly—

Man: “—gain, forgiveness… heavenly sword… fool…”

Subaru: “—huh?”

Quickening his thoughts, the feeling that something terrible is going to happen kept rising in Subaru, and at the same time, the man whose voice kept resonating without stop, came to a swift halt.

Subaru instinctively groaned, a careless act that made Emilia and Beatrice a bit more nervous, but that had no effect on the change taking place.

—More than that, the changes the man underwent were becoming much clearer.

Man: “Heavenly Sword, fool… his forgiveness… o, ooh, oooh, oh—oh—”

Subaru: “Whu-what? What what, what’s gonna happen?”

Man: “Ah, ah, aaaaahh—!!”

Shaula: “Pigyiii!”

Subaru: “Dowaaa?!”

Stopping was far from it.

Rather, there was a strange string of sounds at the end of the standing man’s words, and in the next moment, the man put a hand on his hair, began scratching, and pelted an explosive shout.

Suddenly unable to stand it, Shaula squealed like a pig and leapt to Subaru. Naturally, he could not keep standing. Her arms coiled around him with all her strength, and unable to take evasive action, Subaru tumbled to the floor with her.

Subaru: “—tch!”

In the instant of the explosion, sparks flew in his eyes, while both the man’s shout and Shaula’s incessant crying, who still clung to his waist, pounded his eardrums.

Man: “Aaaaaaaaa—!!”

Shaula: “Hyaaaaa! Mastermastermaster heeeelp! I don’t wannaa! Help meee!”

Subaru: “Wh-What’s with you for the past few minutes—”

Man: “—Shut up already!! My head’s already killin’ me as it is! Stop shoutin’!”

Shaula: “Afuu…”

Right before his words of comfort could reach, Shaula’s spirit crumbled.

Despite having been thrashing about for some reason, she quietly stuck to Subaru's waist and stopped moving, and losing her consciousness, she collapsed to the floor.

"No way, you…"

"Bukubukubuku…"

Shaula swiftly and gracefully departed from the battlefront via fainting. Although help from her when it came to conquering the Tower was close to nil, even from the examiner's point of view, this was supposed to be completely unexpected.

For a woman, whose brute strength deserved a certificate, if nothing else—To be this afraid of this man, things would certainly be precarious,

Julius: "I take it that you are by no means, a simple existence."

Man: "Aahn?"

The man groaned in displeasure when a footstep echoed.

With a clack of his pair of white shoes, stepped forward the Excellent Knight—Julius twirled around and picked up the sword Subaru had dropped.

Watching him, the man's lips curved down, a scowl plastered his face.

Man: "Hell's up, you. And what's with this place? Ya fuckin' around here, you?"

Julius: "No, we are doing nothing of the sort. We too, are of a similarly confused standing. You appeared here all of a sudden—We cannot help but be on guard, is what I would like to convey."

Man: "Hell's up with you. Don't be talkin' weird, you. Don't ya be talkin' like my follower, you. Ya my follower? Ya ain't, right? Since ya ain't, don't be talkin' like him, making all this shit confusing."

The man's mood kept turning sour each time Julius spoke with an expected respectful yet careful tone.

Though it was becoming clearer that the man was human, whether conversation with him could be established, was an entirely different topic.

Man: "—pretty lookin', pretty lookin', hot stuff, runt, runt, follower, small fry."

Julius: "Unfortunately, I am not your follower."

Man: "Kah! The way ya talk, it's just how my follower talks. Stop copyin' it."

The man belched out a good-humored laugh at Julius' objection.

Coupling unusually white teeth with an oddly handsome face, his shark-like smile reeked of madness.

"…"

Finally, a bit of humanity was found within the smiling man. Or rather, finding out that the man was an intelligent being capable of conversation, would be more appropriate.

Man: "Oi, you. Explain what's happenin' here, you. The hell'd ya do to me, you. Don't ya be hidin' stuff, you. Get to it, you."

Subaru: "Appearing out of nowhere, acting like you're hot shit… What's up with that."

Man: "Aahn?"

The man thrust his hand into the open part of his bare chest and scratched carelessly. Subaru, who finally raised his body, squeezed out what words he could muster and spat them at the man.

He simply glared at Subaru with his right eye, who was lying on the floor and,

Man: "Hell's with ya. Why're you sleeping, you. Ain't that a real nice place, you. Getting that hot a woman to be ya meat bed, you. Switch up with me, you."

Subaru: "Sadly, with respect to the person herself, I refuse…"

Somewhat stopping his shaking feet, Subaru stood. At the same time, he pried the clinging Shaula off. It was a careless act that made her fall to the floor face-first, but there was no time to consider that.

But—

Man: "Anh-, anh-, aahn? What, it's you. You doin that? Fucking 'round, you?"

Subaru: "…the hell yous pulling that rude shit for, you."

Man: "Kah!"

The man bit clenched his molars and roared a hearty yet violent laughter.

Ignoring Subaru who was clearly confused, the man looked over the white room and nodded to himself, "Oh- ohh- righty," then spoke again,

Man: "Gotcha. —So then, let's start."

Subaru: "Start… Wait! Why do you keep on running the conversation all by yourself?! It's really too much to take!"

Man: "Zip it, you. Keepin on yappin over and over, already explained while I was sleep-talkin, didn't I? Pay attention to what I'm sayin, you."

Subaru: "What's with this for the past few minutes…"

Man: "Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword."

Unable to keep up with the situation, Subaru's eyes darted around, while Emilia repeatedly whispered the sentence, word for word, to herself.

Slowly, the girl started de-petrifying. Following Julius and Subaru, out came Emilia and Beatrice from the stillness of time, and Anastasia and Meili right afterwards."

Only Shaula remained unconscious, however—

Man: "Kah! That beauty over there's different from this here small fry. If I'd been alive, I'd be bedding you tonight, you… Looking close, ya real sweet, you. What's with that face. Ya real damn frizzlin', you."

Emilia: "Frizz—…?"

Subaru: "Hey, you! You're the guy! You're the examiner here, right?"

From looking at Emilia, a lust awakened in his eyes. Putting himself between those two, Subaru stood and pointed at the man.

The man smiled like a shark at the statement and,

Man: "—No clue. Ain't interested in some title someone's put on themselves. I'm me, you's you. Nothin' more to it than that. Ya wanna talk with me proper? Get me to move even a step from here, you."

Julius: "…"

They were the words of a man standing defenselessly, calmly.

As for why he had not laughed it off, it was the very condition that needed to be fulfilled to clear the Trial. Thus, it was a task worthy of being called as such.

—Gain his forgiveness, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword.

If the man who stood in front were to be this Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword, then the method to get it was clear. What was left was to see if that method was indeed even possible.

Julius: “Knight of the Imperial Order of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Julius Juukulius.”

Before the fight—nay, the Trial began, Julius offered his name as an act of courtesy.

It was an act of the greatest honor, declaring the other as their equal, regardless of position or gender.

In response, the man’s one blue eye narrowed with excitement, and brought forth an unusual sword spirit and,

Man: “Ain’t got no name worth givin’ ya, just a mere Stick Swinger, I am.”

Trial of the 2nd Floor Electra of the Great Library Pleiades:

Time Limit Condition: Unlimited

Number of Challenge Attempts Condition: Unlimited

Challengers Condition: Unlimited

—Trial, initiated.

Chapter 26:
Stick Swinger

1

—There was a woman, all by herself.

The woman's spirit had been violated. The woman lay deep in the abyss of insanity. The woman was standing upon the farthest land of starvation.

Growling in the solitary castle, gnawing the unoccupied throne, breaking her teeth, ripping up her mouth, starving.

The woman had been a human when she was born, but at that point in time, she no longer remained human.

It all began a few years ago, when the man governing those lands fell victim to an incurable illness.

Weakening by the day, the man, frightened of his approaching death, stretched his hands to all kinds of means in order to prolong his life.

Before long he attained techniques which were taboo, and gathered a large number of lives for an outrageous immorality for the purpose of attaining a long life.

Abundantly, lives were sacrificed, abundantly, lives were rendered idle, and among those sacrifices was the woman.

Who she was, what her name was, what her birthplace was, who her family was, such memories of hers had already been burnt away.

Merely a tool was the woman. A seedbed, for the man merely awaiting his death, having been eaten away by the demon of ill health.

Idle lives only to be wasted, that was how it was supposed to be, yet the woman survived.

A body ruined, power gushing forth, the lamp of a life ostracized by what is called time.

The hopes, dearest wishes of the man trespassed by the demon of ill health, materialized upon the woman's body.

The man was delighted at the fruits of his labor, postponing the memorial for those sacrificed, overbearingly unfastened the woman's constraints.

—When she came to notice, the woman was alone, in the uninhabited solitary castle, anguishing and suffering with starvation.

Thoughts disappearing with cruel hunger, memories devoured into a void by violent thirst.

She had nothing in her memories. She had nothing within her understanding. Merely, her entire body had constraints, so she possessed no freedom either.

Eating away all food within the castle, vomiting out the content of her stomach, chewing and digesting them once again, she continued to repeat.

Ultimately for what remained of her starvation, she bit into the stone walls, crunched the throne, ate the carpets.

At that pace, she would starve to death. Her body, which cannot die, would starve to death.

"Grrgrr, grrrr. Grrgrr, grrrr…"

At the extremity of starvation unable to obtain trance, the woman finally saw an illusion.

Inside the solitary castle, bustling about with willful freedom was a horde of dogs clad in bestial hair.

Even if it was a hallucination, she did not mind. If she was unable to be satiated physically, she desired to satisfy merely her heart.

With such wholeheartedness the woman crawled, devouring the beasts. Devoured the beasts. Ate them away.

She was being satisfied. The following instant, she vomited. She licked what had been vomited. She chewed. Vomited, ate.

In the illusion, in the mirage, in the hallucination, in her desire, there present was taste. There present was form. She could feel it on her tongue.

When she came to notice, the interior of the castle had become a den of repulsive beasts.

“Aha, ahaha, ahahahahahaha∼.”

She was greatly delighted. Buried in days of eating and getting eaten, she was satisfied after she ate, and she vomited after she was satisfied.

Stuck between starvation and refusing food, the woman ate and vomited, slurped and spilled.

Given birth to by the empty skies—no, given rebirth to, were the beasts with a repulsive presence.

Before she noticed, the woman’s constraints were exposed to the battle for devouring between the beasts and her, came loose, and she was freed.

Attaining freedom, the woman crawled, exited the castle.

The beasts as well, following the woman, exited the castle. Upon the earth, in all directions, they scattered around.

Hunger, starvation, unable to endure them, the woman devoured, and kept the castle she had grown tired of eating for later.

To visit it, when the day of the satisfaction of her hunger and thirst arrives.

—The Witch of Gluttony gave birth to the horde of witchbeasts, and continued to starve from inexhaustible starvation.

2

—On the 2nd Floor Electra of the Pleiades Watch Tower, in the room white as chalk, the Trial began.

The examiner stood in the corner of the room, a man with red hair and the smile of a shark plastered on his face.

Introducing himself as naught but a Stick Swinger, the man's aura overflowed with an unusual sword spirit.

The way he appeared was in itself complicated. Even Shaula herself, who was the supposed caretaker of the Watchtower, had fainted the moment she laid eyes on him. As such, he was obviously no one ordinary.

Thus—

Julius: "I will, from the first moment, fight at full power—!"

Man: "…"

Leaning forward, Julius spoke as he took a step forward.

The blade he softly threw towards the man, was the same Sword of Selection that had been stuck into the floor of Electra. The sword spun in the air, flying in an arc, before it stabbed the ground near the man's feet.

So that the man may simply stretch out his hand to take it.

Man: "Hell's you doin, you. Throwin' me a sword and all, ya got a death wish?"

Julius: "Unfortunately, as a knight, it is most shameful an act to swing a sword at one unarmed!"

Man: "Kah! Makin me laugh. —Ain't empty-handed, take a closer look, you."

The man roared with laughter, teeth bared, at the advancing Julius. And while laughing, he casually raised his foot in the air and gave a wild kick to the sword. The Sword of Selection gave a shrill wail as it flew off.

It screeched inches past Julius, who had lunged towards the man—

Julius: "—tch! I hope you bear no regret for speaking those words!"

His thoughtfulness coldly cast aside, Julius' face cheeks stiffened as he swung out his Knight's sword.

The slender blade he raised in a straight line, as a hammer to strike at those insolent enough to disgrace the grounds of a duel.

It pierced forward, swift as lightning but—

Man: "Don't be shoutin' all cutesy there, buffon. Ya got a nice damn face. Wouldn't ya be troubled if ya get off on ol' me cryin?"

Julius: "Wha… tch"

With a thunderous boom, the tip stopped before reaching the man's torso.

Of course, Julius had not slackened his hand. He always tried to the best of his abilities, regardless of the situation. Thus, it was not him that stopped the blade, but rather the man bearing the smile of a shark.

Julius: "Impossible!"

Man: "Gotta believe what ya see. It all starts from there, ya know."

Cackling with joyous laughter, the Stick Swinger raised his right hand and scratched his chest. It was the same behavior as before. Just like the time he was piling up on a nonsense conversation.

However, his left hand pinched the tip of Julius' sword, with frightening accuracy.

That too, with—

Julius: "—a pair, of twigs?"

Man: "Look here, it's not even close. What, ya eyes bad or somethin', you. Chopsticks, its chopsticks. Pretty nice for grabbin' snacks, them chopsticks. Is why I keep 'em on me."

So slender, one had to squint to properly see the pair of wooden sticks—the Stick Swinger held them in his left hand and used them with grace and dexterity, similar to how Subaru knew them to be used, who had reflexively groaned upon seeing them. Chopsticks indeed existed in this world, as he had witnessed and experienced during his stay at Priestella, but to witness one use them with such finesse, was a first.

—No, regardless of the finesse one possessed in their use, to stop the swing of a First Class swordsman using a pair of chopsticks was absolutely an inhuman feat.

Man: "Hah? Don't be makin' me laugh, you. Swingin' at the best angle, with the best speed, with the best feelin', in the best way—Be chopsticks or whatever, there's nothing it can't cut."

Julius: "Gu…tch."

Rolling his eyes over the awestruck faces, the Stick Swinger yawned, then spoke with a stab of sarcasm. But while it was normal for everyone to be silent when shown such a spectacle, Julius, the concerned party, could not.

He put strength into his arm and pulled to pry away the Knight's Sword that remained stuck between the pair of chopsticks. However, no matter how much strength he put in, the sword would not budge.

Man: "Lemme tell ya though, this here ain't made outta somethin' funny. Bad material's just bad for the skin, so. Got nothin' mixed in, just your everyday pair, made from some tree somewhere."

Julius: "Kh…"

Man: "Let it out, let it out… Best be laughin', you. Whoever's laughins more of a looker. Not that it matters, you bein' a guy."

Suddenly, the block he felt at the tip of his sword was gone, leaving Julius bewildered. In that instant, the man turned his body and leapt into the air with his two bare feet. With tremendous force, he landed a kick right above Julius' slender waist, sending him flying.

???: "Julius—!"

Subaru did not know who raised their voice in a scream, but they had no choice but to watch his flight, as everyone had to put in much more thought before making any kind of sudden movement.

And now, following him as he soared across the air, unable to fix his posture,

Man: "Kah!"

The Stick Swinger 's figure shot off like a bullet, chasing right after Julius. With unbelievable physical prowess, he stopped right above Julius and took stance with a chopstick in each hand and released a flurry of slashes aimed at Julius—Whether they could be called slashes was up for debate, but regardless, the man unleashed a violent flurry of strikes with the chopsticks.

With movements so fast, each separate strike seemed to disappear. It appeared the same way to everyone, and Julius was already helpless mid-air, so he had no way of dodging.

With his Knight's Sword as his only ally, Julius met each chopstick slash with his own. However, the chopsticks slipped past, as if sneering, and stabbed into Julius, again, and again, and again, and again, and again—

???: "Jiwald—!!"

A ray of heat shot across the air, aimed towards the engaged duo.

White light, in its most simple form, can rip through the world with its dreadful edge. In other words, it can become an invisible blade that tears, cuts and burns through everything in its path.

It went straight, and was as such, easy to dodge—However, the shimmering rays travelled at the speed of light, crashing straight into its target.

Even so, the Stick Swinger cut away the rays of light fired by the third party with ease—

Man: "—My sword can cut even light, you."

Faster than his own gruff voice's echo, the chopsticks struck and sliced through the ray of light.

An impossible spectacle that pulled in the attention of everyone present. Only the man sneered, as if he had done something ordinary, and continued jabbing at Julius with his free hand.

As if making light of him—No, the truth was, he indeed was making very light of him.

???: "—tch! Jiwaaaaaald—!!"

In response to that, his eyes turned red, overlapping with the chant —.

With both arms spread wide, chanting for the magic that shot rays of heat, her graceful composure painted with panic, was Anastasia. Hands open, all fingers poised—Ten fingers in total shot out ten Death Rays simultaneously, all danced in the air as they approached the Stick Swinger.

—And the Stick Swinger himself took just as an amazing measure.

Man: "Kah!"

The Stick Swinger faced the dancing beams head on and sliced through them with his chopsticks just like before, then he pounced up by kicking off of thin air and made a nosedive—Taking Julius, who was right below, along with him, dragging him across the white floor as he ran, Julius was pinned by the chopsticks in his solar plexus.

Man: "Kakakakakakah! Aim well, you. Can't even swat a fly like that. They don't call me a lady-killer for nothin', you. Kakakakah!"

Anastasia: “Jiwald! Jiwald! Jiwaaald—!”

Anastasia still chose to continue her attacks against the cackling man. Unfortunately, regardless of its firepower, if the magic does not hit, it has no meaning.

Even with her firing them all over, the man simply cut through, at times ducked, and at times made a sharp spin by putting his weight on Julius.

His overwhelming physical and battle prowess in full display, clashed against Anastasia’s clearly poor aim.

In this case, technically it was not Anastasia whose aim was poor, but Echidna’s, who was currently inhabiting that body. Despite wishing to aid Julius with a surprise magic attack, her actions severely failed her intentions, leaving her unable to even get a scratch in.

Soon—

Anastasia: “—a, kh.”

Man: “Aahn?”

Her time, it would seem, would run out first.

The Stick Swinger who was gleefully dodging the heat rays, stopped and raised his eyebrows when the rays halted their pursuit. At the end of his gaze was Anastasia, who had collapsed to the ground.

Blood flowed from her nostrils, a sign that she had overworked her own body. She had stated it herself earlier. She could not rely on her trump card, as it would shave away her own life—.

Julius: “Anastasia-sama—!”

Man: “Ooh?!”

Vigor instilled by the sight of his falling master, Julius broke free of his defense-only stance, free from being slid around on his back, free from the relentless blows of the chopsticks of the Stick Swinger.

He had taken took off the button near his chest and flung away his knight's mantle, forcing the direction of friction to change, allowing him to get out of the cycle.

From his position on the floor, he aimed a circular kick at the man's head, cursing his own foolishness. The man moved his chin away slightly, escaping the blow, but Julius repeated his kicks two more times like a breakdance. After a few rounds of kicks and dodging, he stood back up.

Man: "Ya really pulled a good one, you. Felt that good, you."

Julius: "I don't have time for your nonsense! Move it—!"

Their absolute difference in ability, was something Julius understood too well, yet still roared at him. His knight's sword, even after the countless blows he had taken, had not left his hand.

So the sword flew, slithering through the air in a show of swordsmanship of the utmost grace and elegance, even while being worn down with righteous cause and a sense of duty—It may have been the finest display of a knight's swordsmanship.

A countless number of days, of months must have been spent, shed tears and blood training to refine his technique.

And yet—

Man: "Playin' with me, you? Ya playin' me? Don't be goin' light on me, you."

Julius: "—tch."

Man: "What's this. Don't make me laugh, you. Don't be holdin' back, give me all ya got, you. Are ya serious 'bout this? If this' all ya got, man, what a let-down, you."

His thrusts were stopped, slashes, blown away, barrages, shot down and his one-shots, parried.

The technique Julius had built up, his own essence as a knight, were all denied by the swaying pair of frighteningly beautiful, violent and powerful chopsticks, wielded by a man who kept yawning, who named himself only as a mere Stick Swinger.

Half his life, was being trampled over by a pair of measly twigs—.

Man: “Ya ain’t like this usually, you. Why’s ya fightin’ all lonesome, that ain’t how ya fight, is it? Ya ain’t used to it—That’s why all this’ borin’ me, you.”

Julius: “I am…”

Man: “If ya wanna tend to ya girl, I’ll let ya. Borrow a pair of ‘em thicc thighs and get babied, ya ugly failure of a swordsman.”

That which flashed across his face, was it wrath? Pain? Regret? Despair?

In any case, one can never truly know what lies within others.

Julius: “…”

Julius’ sword flashed, his thin knight’s sword, as it did likely millions of times before, tracing across the air.

Anyone watching, even from the sidelines with untrained eyes, could tell it was a swing full of faults.

The chopsticks dove into the flash from the side.

In the next moment, sailing through the air, the wood tore through the steel of the knight’s sword—With a faint cry, Julius’ knight sword snapped in two.

His yellow eyes could only widen and follow the sight of his beloved sword’s tip as it spun across the air. How long had he been using that sword? What history did he share with it? None knew.

Only, what broke hadn’t been limited to his sword.

Man: “Off with ya.”

Accompanying the spat out words were giant fists that were thrown at his face.

It was the most unrefined and primitive kind of violence. A violence that was prevalent from a time long before man had any kind of tools, that utilized one's own flesh.

Man: "…"

The merciless strike broke Julius' elegant profile. The blow took his consciousness and sent his body flying across the room, where it followed the laws of inertia and crashed, rolled, then finally remained still, body splayed across like a broken doll—Right beside Anastasia.

Like master, like servant, the unconscious duo were lined up. It was the beastly man's misplaced sense of consideration.

Man: "Well, well, next up's…"

Snapping his neck like he just finished warming up, the man turned to them.

In truth, it was a warm-up to him. In only a few tens of seconds, Julius had dashed across the battlefield, got beaten in a one-sided fight, Anastasia tried to help but the two ended up only collapsing together—Within that time, Subaru had not a single chance to cut in, and could only stand and watch.

And just like him, there stood still—

Emilia: "—Ice Brand Arts, Icicle Line."

Man: "…"

—Absolutely none.

As if to prove it, white particles danced around her.

Pale blue specks of light, barely noticeable in that they were actually fragments of ice—Birthed by Emilia's absolute magic, Hyousetsu Kekkai1: Icicle Line.

Emilia: “I want to ask one thing before we start.”

Mixing her own magic energy with the Mana of her surroundings, she put up a kind of barrier with the man in the center as he scratched the place above his eyepatch, then called out to him.

Man: “Aanh? Lemme hear, frizzlin’.”

Emilia: “I’m Emilia. Just Emilia. —Wasn’t the condition, to make you take just one step? You ran around a lot just now though.”

After giving her name, she asked a natural question.

Before the fight started, the Stick Swinger had indeed stated that while laughing. Let’s see ya get me to move even one step. If that were to be taken as the condition, then it had obviously been broken.

To say they had been flying across and all over the room during Julius’ fight, would be grossly understating everything.

However, the man shrugged and spoke, “Oi, oi.”

Man: “Don’t be takin’ that stuff seriously, you. Just made it up on the spot. It happens, right? Ya wanna be lookin’ cool from time to time, right? It’s that stuff. Geddit? Ya don’t? Well, ya bein’ a woman an’ all. Bein’ a frizzlin’ one an’ all. Be with me tonight, you.”

Emilia: “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what you mean. Besides, I don’t think I can win, even if I fight you.”

Subaru: “Eh, Emilia…?”

With magic ready at hand, her posture saying she was completely ready to fight, Emilia boldly proclaimed her powerlessness. The Stick Swinger ‘s eyes widened at that remark, and Subaru, who was standing stiff, blurted out something.

Emilia responded to him with a small, “Really sorry”, then turned back to the man,

Emilia: “You’re reeeally strong. I can see that. But we have to pass this Trial. So please, give us a way to win.”

Man: “……”

Emilia: “If we manage to make you move even one step, it’s our win. Let’s base our match on that… Can’t we?”

She lowered her brows, then asked the silent man. At the end, she added something with a little bit more confidence, which stunned Subaru.

It was an absolutely ridiculous proposition, one only the greatest of idiots would accept.

The Stick Swinger had remained silent for a good moment after hearing that flimsy proposal, but then—

Man: “Kah!”

He bared his teeth in laughter, then looked at Emilia through his bright, blue eyes. Those eyes washed over her frame, as if licking her from head to toe, and then,

Man: “—Real fine stuff ya made of, can’t say I hate it, you. Showed lotsa guts, sayin’ all that to someone like me. Biggest idiot I’ve seen since Trisha, you. I’ve taken a liking to ya.”

Emilia: “So, I’ve passed the Trial ?”

Man: “I ain’t gonna treat ya that much, you! But alright. Already showed off in front of a nice lady. Gotta keep it up. Gonna turn even in my grave if I step down here. —I’ll make it like ya want.”

Emilia: “I’ll pass if…”

Man: “Ya win if ya can make me move even a single step!”

The Stick Swinger with a softened expression, called out to the crestfallen Emilia, who immediately looked up and nodded, then turned to Subaru,

Emilia: “I’m leaving Anastasia and Julius to you. Please tend to them.”

Subaru: “T-Time! You saw what happened just now, right?! Going in without a plan’s…”

Emilia: “Its okay. He doesn’t seem like he’s aiming to kill… And I’ll give my everything, too.”

Brimming with confidence, Emilia cut off Subaru’s attempt to stop her and took a step forward. And then, while still wearing her dignified look, raised both her hands towards the Stick Swinger.

With that much distance put between them, she could one-sidedly snipe him with her magic.

Man: “With a face that frizzlin’, ya pretty stubborn, you.”

Emilia: “Do what you can the best you can, is what I’ve learned from my great Knight!”

Even in such a disadvantageous situation, the man simply folded his giant arms and laughed fiercely.

With her sights set on the man’s smile, Emilia put some force into her words—Right away the air popped and snapped and droplets of pale light fluttered about, then formed into weapons of ice one after another.

Swords, lances, spears, axes, arrows, and many, many more weapons formed.

Ice Brand Arts: Icicle Line—A technique that used the giant reserves of magical energy inside Emilia to create a limited-area boundary of destruction, a special technique forged through Subaru’s otherworldly inventiveness, had activated.

Emilia: “Ei, ya!!”

She raised her voice in a warcry, but it had no effect on the man.

Accompanying her cry, the weapons that had their tips pointed towards the Stick Swinger shot off from all directions at the same

time.

Multiple weapons that struck even from one's blind spots, it was indeed an unblockable attack.

Faced with this, the man once again took one chopstick in each hand, and released a raging flurry of strikes, starting the tyranny of chopsticks.

Art unfolded in the spectacle of a single man ripping through ice.

Subaru: "…"

Following Emilia's instructions, Subaru dashed to where lay Julius and Anastasia, checked their condition and sighed in relief when he realized they were only unconscious.

Anastasia's case was, as Echidna had worried, likely to be the result of her forcibly using magic by shaving off her life force. While not completely in the clear, her nosebleed had stopped, and she seemed to have simply fainted. As for Julius, even though he had been assaulted by chopstick-fu, which had likely hurt, but retained no more than a few bruises to his body.

If he were to, say, have been struck one hundred times, if it were a sword and not chopsticks, he would have died a hundred times over, but he was likely shown consideration, so the end result was by no means a minus.

Beatrice: "Both of them are doing well, I suppose. But…"

Subaru: "I know."

Beatrice, who had come beside Subaru to check on their wellbeing as well, was cut off.

They were done checking the duo's condition. As for the beast that did this in the first place, Emilia was busy clashing with it head on —

Man: "Kah!"

Ice sprayed and shattered, and the overjoyed man crushed their fragments under his teeth while swinging his chopsticks. With just that one swing, a hatchet and sword of ice that had come bearing down on him at the same time, were cleaved right in twain.

The shattered weapons of ice turned into bubbles of pale light, which fell and scattered around the raging wild man, a fantastical spectacle that repeated itself endlessly.

However, even while doing so—

Subaru: "—He won't budge."

Man: "Started with flashin' my cool side, so let me keep bein' my coolest till the very end, how boring can ya get, you."

Upon hearing Subaru's groan, the Stick Swinger began humming some kind of tune while intercepting the many ice weapons. Even then, while his upper body swung like he was doing some kind of tempestuous dance, his feet remained cemented in the ground, like a pair of immovable mountains.

Against someone like that, even firing off magic like a hailstorm was doing little. That sense of frustration not only festered in Subaru, who had a bird's eye view of the fight, but also in Emilia, who was directly involved in it.

So, to break this stalemate, Emilia stepped in—.

Emilia: "—Uu—, ya!!"

Silver hair fluttering in the air behind her slender body, Emilia pounced into battle. Raising both her arms, she grasped the hilt of a great battle-axe.

She turned herself full circle and brought it down straight towards the man's head.

Man: "Kakah!"

The man casually thrust up his chopsticks to intercept its trajectory. The chopstick only slightly changed the falling battle-axe's trajectory, but it grew in size as it fell, the edge finally managing to gaze past his kinagashi's3 sleeve, and pierced into the ground.

The violent blow raised a blast of wind, and unable to withstand the shock of its own power, the battle-axe of ice shattered into millions of fragments. However, she let go of the handle and immediately took in hand a lance that was being launched from behind her, then turned her body a full circle turn to land her next attack.

Emilia: "Ei! Ya! Torya! Urya! Uryaurya! Uyah!"

The thrust of a lance, the flash of twin swords, the swing of a longsword, the slash of a katana, the smash of a hatchet, all and any forms of attacking, were all meaningless when pit against this man.

Of course, Emilia was not lacking in any skill.

Her physical strength was in no way lacking and the Ice Brand Arts was, as Subaru would usually say even though he came up with it, the one and only one technique that brought out the best of her abilities, utilizing both her physical prowess and enormous magical reserve to the greatest effect.

Beatrice: "—Subaru."

Beatrice gripped his hand tightly. This grip filled Subaru with much needed composure, but he continued to desperately strained his eyes at the battlefield.

He could not find a single chance to break into the fight. Emilia was fighting up to that extent, where she kept swapping between weapons she was good with, always playing to her strengths, continuing her physical attacks, as well as firing off her storm of magic. The center was indeed, a point which was being consistently carpet-bombed.

And the man who stood at the dead center of that, dealing with everything without taking even a step, the monster who'd named himself as nothing more than a mere Stick Swinger, was a complete abnormality.

If he carelessly dove in, Subaru may only prove to be a distraction to Emilia. He could not deny that.

He could do nothing to remove his anxiety. Beatrice, who held his hand, too stood in silence, fully understanding that she was the same, in being able to do nothing but watch over the battle with clenched teeth.

Could the situation improve before Emilia’s stamina ran out?

Just then, an unexpected change occurred in this situation. That too, suddenly.

Emilia: “Huff! Ei! Terya!”

Both her hands grasped a pair of swords and swung them from both sides, aimed at his neck to decapitate. The man quickly lowered his head to avoid the blow, while both swords slipped out of Emilia’s hand and flew away. But, Emilia immediately created another pair in her palms and swung her crossed arms outwards—The man dodged in a much fancier style, leaning so much that his body went parallel to the floor.

Man: “Kah!”

Emilia: “Wha-”

Knees bent, body almost touching the floor, the man held this position with the inhuman strength of his ankles. On the other hand, Emilia lost to her own momentum, letting her arms fly through nothing, leaving herself wide open and with a step in front, leaning back.

This was the first big, even life threatening, mistake Emilia had made in this fight—The man might have seen even more, but this moment must have been the biggest chance he had seen.

Right then, the man straightened his bent knees, popping back into position. Emilia was left off-guard, and bit her molars.

In that moment, the man bared his teeth the most he had, then leaned forward with his shark-like smile.

Man: “Ya wide open.”

Using the chopsticks at hand, he brushed over Emilia’s twin peaks in a scooping motion.

Emilia: “Wh—”

Emilia was dressed in her usual white outfit, where parts of her white and smooth skin were visible. The chopsticks streaked over her chest, making her abundant swelling jump about obscenely, which made the man’s vile smile deepen.

The man groaned in satisfaction at the results of his obscene act.

Man: “Good, real good stuff. But don’t be gettin’ mad over somethin’ so small…”

Emilia: “Torya!”

Man: “Goah—?!”

Her hands crossed together above-head, encased in gloves fashioned from ice, came down on the man’s head, who was busy ogling her with a vile smile.

The blow landed so hard that the ice shattered, the sound of its hard impact resonating. The man yelled in pain, then dropped to the floor with his head held, and began rolling around.

Man: “Guoooooooh! It hurts daaamnit! Wh-What the hell were ya thinkin’, you?! Usually, a woman’s gonna hesitate if someone does that, but ya didn’t even blink! Hell’s with you?!”

Emilia: “—? But, you just touched my body, right? Plus, you were completely off-guard.”

Man: “Don’t fuck around! The hell’s with your upbringing! The hell were ya parents doin’!”

Rubbing his beaten head, the Stick Swinger sat on the ground with his legs crossed, shouting out his complaints. Emilia blinked in surprise at his shout, then touched the part of her chest where the chopsticks had brushed passed,

Emilia: “…Did I, say something strange?”

Man: “Oi! Do something about this frizzlin’ beauty! Get her walking out or somethin’! Small fry! Ya supposed to be attendin’ to her! Make somethin’ of ya-self, do it proper! It hurts, goddamnit…!”

Subaru: “I-I’m in no place to be taking this from you. That aside…”

Man: “Aaahn?!”

Despite being overwhelmed, Subaru somewhat managed to talk back to the raging man. Once he managed to swallow his own anger at how the man stretched out an obscene hand towards Emilia, he pointed to him, and spoke.

Subaru: “To hell with just one step, you moved a whole lot away.”

Man: “…”

Emilia: “Ah! It’s true! I did it! I won!”

His mouth shut when Subaru pointed it out, and in exchange, Emilia started jumping up and down.

And in accordance to her feelings, flowers of ice began blooming in her immediate surroundings, as if to celebrate her own victory.

The man had declared it himself, the condition was to make him move even a step from where he stood, which had been achieved.

That fact was as clear as day to everyone, and unless the man made things harder, it would be accepted.

Subaru: “Well, how about it?”

He felt bad for Emilia, who was celebrating her own victory over the Trial, but Subaru did not fully trust the man. From all the exchanges they had, to expect sportsmanship from him was difficult.

To invalidate his loss, declare the last Trial as void, and rush them with everything he had, would not be too unlikely.

A single drop of sweat rolled down Subaru’s brows and across his cheeks.

Man: “Aye—, no helpin’ it. My word’s my word. This kinda defeat’d make me a laughin’ stock, lecher soul be damned, but I ain’t got a choice.”

Subaru: “Y-You’ll approve …?!”

Man: “You, the hell ya thinkin’ of me. If I ain’t keepin’ my word ‘ere, all of my posin’ cool’s gonna get shot, you. Gonna flip everythin’ I worked on over, you. Ain’t gonna be able to take a step towards women no more, ya see.”

Subaru: “Yeah no, with the way you lost right now, your worth was already at rock bottom…”

Man: “Shut it, small fry! Heck, ya ain’t even a proper fish, ya just a tadpole. Don’t be throwin’ round weight, tadpole. Anyway, that frizzlin’ beauty over there wins. Ya get a pass. That’s the condition.

No helpin' it."

Scratching his head violently, the Stick Swinger admitted his defeat.

While it had spiraled into a situation where it was hard to tell whether those actions were sportsmanlike or unbecoming, Subaru had no intention of prying further into those matters, not when the announcement had already been made.

Although both Julius and Anastasia lay fallen as victims of battle against the man, they would likely bounce right back up if left to recover in the Green Room.

Despite being the 2nd Trial, it seemed to be too small an obstacle but—

Man: "—Well, who's gonna be next? The tadpole? Or is it gonna be one of them brats."

Subaru: "Eh?"

They could advance upward.

Subaru, who had been caught by that thought, became guarded once more at the man's words. The man slowly stood back up at that response, left shoulder covered by cloth—He bared it as well to match his right shoulder and turned to them.

—The air flooded with a burnt stench.

It surged from the man's unimaginable sword spirit. —A dramatic change that made everything from before seem like child's play, Subaru noticed too late.

Man: "There's 'round, seven people in this tower… Your girl's the only one to get past."

Subaru: "…"

Man: "Well, who's up to get past me next?—Tell me, you."

Trial of the 2nd Floor Electra of the Great Library Pleiades:

Time Limit Condition: Unlimited

Number of Challenge Attempts Condition: Unlimited

Challengers Condition: Unlimited

—Has cleared: Emilia.

—Yet to clear: Subaru, Beatrice, Julius, Anastasia, Meili, Ram.

—The Trial, continues.

Chapter 27:
Electra’s Wall

1

—A woman, a sole woman existed.

The woman was a commonplace village girl, one with an ordinary birth and growth. Loved by her parents, loved by her siblings, the woman too loved her family, she was an extremely normal woman.

With a fiancé decided by her household, she shall end her established lifetime in a corner of a poor village, identical to many other village girls. For the woman, that meant life, the paved order of things having no room for doubt.

Such ordinarity of the woman was crushed at the hands of sleazy powerful men who appeared in the village. What made her fit, or was it merely the vice of humans, unknowing of the eventual truth, the woman was coercively desired by the powerful men.

No matter it being a poor village of a small country, there existed a disparity impossible to eliminate with the powerful men. The woman was unable to oppose the demand of the powerful men. She had no choice but to yield to the irrationality of fate.

However, the woman was loved. By her family, by her fiancé, by the people of her village.

Braving the oppression of the powerful men, the people’s rage flared up, giving birth to flames of war before long.

The fire spread, the residents of the village organized into an army, and at last, the powerful men along with the small castle were scorched to the ground.

In naught but a single evening, the woman’s position changed vastly.

A mere ordinary village girl, her fiancé the ringleader of a single group of troops.

The raging of the unremitting blaze, the surrounding ones who regarded that as hazardous turned to their own troops from one to the next.

That proved as being beaten at their own game for those who roused themselves claiming it was all for the sake of the woman.

The fire spread whilst the flames of war coruscated, burning the small country, neighboring countries, and the great country to nothing before long.

The existence of the woman, who was made to be the origin of it all, was renowned, the people rumored her to be a beautiful maiden of the heavens.

Illusions piled over illusions, and due to the interest and expectations, the woman's petite body was about to shatter.

Nobody took notice of that. Neither her family, nor her fiancé, nor the people, no one was looking at the woman.

Cheers when she moved a hand, stampedes when she walked a street, tears of joy when she spoke a word, were all turned towards the woman.

The Woman: "This, is… strange. Y-You're, wro… ng…"

Shrouding her face, she denied. That this wasn't possible, that this wasn't supposed to be.

Her self was a mere village girl, neither a beauty of the heavens nor a charming siren, but a single meagre village girl.

Where in her lay such worth.

The people were intoxicated with dreams. Misled by illusions, dancing with ideals.

Before long, without adhering to any curtailments, even the great country was burnt to ash with the woman at its origin.

The ruined great country, the robbed castle, at its summit the fiancé knelt before the woman. And, informed her.

???: "—I love you. This triumph, the smiles of the people, are all things given by you."

The flaring capital city, heaps of corpses, the people trembling moved with ecstasy. The villagers she lived with too, the family who loved her too, the fiancé who wished for well-being too.

No longer was anyone anywhere.

—Without responding to the fiancé, the woman left. Abandoning her family, the villagers, anything and everything.

She was not supposed to have been bestowed with it. Never had she wished for it. The woman merely lost everything.

Having lost the days she was loved which certainly existed, the woman, alone, proceeded to the burnt fields.

Yet, the dreams, the illusions, the ideals did not let the woman escape.

Wherever she proceeded to, anyone and everyone loved the woman, crushed by the woman, desired the woman, everything was brought to ruin.

Anyone and everyone loved the woman. Like a curse. Whilst unaware of true love inside.

The Witch of Lust sought the love she lost, and continued to be loved by the love summoning ruin.

2

—The swordsmanship brimming out of him pierced without restraint towards Subaru and the others who had challenged Electra.

The man was garbed in a crimson robe with both of his arms outside of his sleeves, and his upper torso lay bare other than the sarashi wrapped around it.

There was a glint of madness in the Stick Swinger's eyes after he'd given them that dire proclamation.

The Trial of the Second Floor—Which in short was making their examiner, the Stick Swinger, recognize their qualifications to proceed up to the upper floor. That had already ended up with two people dropping out due to the atypical skill of the man.

Even under these conditions Emilia had somehow managed to snatch away victory thanks to her fighting strength along with her characteristic pluckiness, tenacity and use of numerous weapons. However—

Subaru: "—Don't the conditions say that it's fine if just one person clears it?!"

The Stick Swinger: "Huuuh? Who the hell said that, stop pullin' stuff out of yer ass, ya prick. Why would it be that if one person can go up, then all the rest of ya can. Use yer common sense, use it! Is the inside of yer head also like that of a small fry, ya prick."

Subaru: "Y-You're making this point to the guy who doesn't wanna be told the most in the world about common sense…!"

Subaru groaned at the perfectly reasonable point which the man had made, who'd now crossed his chopsticks over, one held in each hand, with a clack.

In actual fact, the one who'd jumped to conclusions about the clear-conditions of the Trial had been Subaru himself.

The Trial on the Third Floor had involved solving a puzzle and when it had been solved the structure of the room itself had changed; so it was possible to say that he'd jumped to that conclusion. He'd incorrectly assumed that a new Library would materialise if one of them cleared the Trial of the Second Floor.

If his assumption had collapsed and clearing the Trial would require each of their strengths in battle, then it was pretty safe to say that beating this Trial would be futile.

The condition which Emilia had managed to achieve—Namely, To move the man even one step, they'd seen now just how hard achieving that was in stark contrast to its seeming simplicity.

Speaking clearly about it, Emilia was currently the strongest amongst everyone who'd come to challenge the Pleiades Watchtower along with Julius—Though as long as Julius' contract with his Quasi-Spirits was gone he could objectively say that she was the strongest amongst them.

The man had been extremely negligent in their first bout, and that had ended up allowing Emilia to defeat him.

In summary, they'd pitted their strongest vanguard against their enemy when he was at his weakest.

They had managed to beat him once, but now that it had become a tournament where everyone had to beat him they would have to pit everyone else, who weren't as good at fighting, against this man who had no more chinks in his armor.

Move the man one step—Were they really going to be able to achieve a victory like the one Emilia had snatched away from of a combination of good fortune and an attack of that caliber?

Beatrice: "—Wait up, in fact. There's a key mistake in what you're saying, I suppose."

The Stick Swinger: "A mistake?"

Shuddering at the prospect, Subaru tried to look for a glimmer of victory amidst their terrible predicament. Beatrice, who was right beside him, firmly squeezed his hand so to calm him down and spoke out to the man.

The man grew sullen as he heard her words and pointed his uncovered eye towards Beatrice,

The Stick Swinger: "What'rya sayin' ya twat. Yer've come 10 years too early ya twat. No, at least 5 ya twat. Ye can come here after yer legs, arms ‘n body grow ‘n after y’get some tits ‘n ass ya twat.

Beatrice: “…I never had any intentions of playing along with your crap, but right now you’ve made me part with those intentions completely, in fact. That’s why I’m going to knock this into that thick skull of yours, I suppose.

The Stick Swinger: “My thick skull…, The hell you mean?

Beatrice: “It’s already been decided, in fact.—Emilia told you if you were moved even one step then it’d be our victory, I suppose. In other words, Emilia’s victory was a victory for all of us, in fact!”

Subaru: “—hk!”

Subaru held his breath and instinctively looked over at Emilia.

He’d never expected that she would’ve planned that far ahead during their brash negotiations; he was surprised by the shrewish nature she concealed underneath. From the corner of his eye, Emilia placed her hand against her mouth and said, “Oh.” No she wasn’t shrewish. She was pure. She was EMT.

Emilia: “Yeah, now that you mention it, I did say that! I did say “our”! How about it? When you take that into consideration doesn’t that mean that we’ve all passed your Trial ?”

The Stick Swinger: “That’s an issue of semantics ya twat. It doesn’ mean that at all.”

Emilia: “Oh… I see. Subaru, Beatrice, I’m sorry. He said it’s not going to work…”

Beatrice: “You’re giving up far too quickly!!”

Beatrice yelled out at Emilia, who had dropped her shoulders in a crestfallen fashion and signaled her giving up with a meek look on her face. Although, Subaru too had thought it an unreasonable turn of wit when he stopped to think about it.

And that was because he’d been in so much despair about the height of the wall in front of them that he'd wanted to cling onto the possibility.

The Stick Swinger: "Well, there is some sense to what that runt is sayin'. I also seem to recall it at first bein' that you can take on as many people as you like so long as you try 'n get past me.—Though followin' the rules is kinda borin' so I had to drag myself awake."

Subaru: "When you say you had to drag yourself awake… You mean that stuff at the beginning was you hacking the system?!"

The Stick Swinger: "I dunno ya prick. Use words I can understand ya prick. We ain't talkin' like that person with white hair at a young age, ya prick."

The man kept flitting back and forth between good and bad moods. As Subaru nodded lazily at the man's words to show he was paying attention, he managed to deduce something about the system part of the Trial—Something about the man's true nature.

His deduction came from observing the Trials on the Third and Second Floor, and then from observing the stuff which the man, who seemed to be devoid of sanity, said following his appearance and his behavior after. His inference was drawn from the things that felt out of place from each of those points.

In short, there was a vital discrepancy between the original Trial and the Trial that was going on now.

Subaru: "In truth it should have been a Trial where things would have been fine if everyone worked together to fulfill its condition, but because you "Woke up" it's now become that we each have to fulfill the condition?"

The Stick Swinger: "Kah! Hell as if I'd know, ya prick. But, I ain't got a clue which one of 'em would've been easier. No idea which out of killin' me using all your combined efforts or lettin' me fondle yer tits 'n hittin' me once would've been easier…!

Subaru: "—Don't you go saying such careless things, you perverted bastard. I'll shut you right up.

Subaru reached out for his whip so that he could lash out at him in anger for his callous words. He pulled it out from the back of his waist and cracked it as fast as he could using only his forearm. However, the man easily caught the whip, which should have been travelling nigh at the speed of sound, in between his chopsticks and gave it a shake.

The chances that he would've been able to hit him had been low, but his surprise attack had ended up failing so spectacularly—

The Stick Swinger: "Kah! I didn't think you were the type to be swingin' sticks, but really, a whip, ya prick? What kinda taste is that, ya prick. Whip lashes're only good for yer enemies 'n yer woman."

Subaru: "It sure as hell looks like you're my enemy though! Besides, I plan to go up the bases properly when it comes to Emilia, and that leaves me no options for using whips before going through them all!"

Beatrice: "Subaru, Subaru, calm down in fact. I can barely understand what you're saying, I suppose. And what's more you're getting swept up by the enemy's pace, in fact!"

Emilia: "That's right Subaru! You mustn't get so upset! He just touched my chest, it's not like he did anything weird."

Subaru: "That is something that's weird Emilia-tan!"

The Stick Swinger: "In general it is somethin' to get upset at smokin' hottie"

Both the man and Subaru replied to Emilia, who had been trying to calm them down, at the same time. Emilia widened her eyes at their in-sync-suggestions and Beatrice gave a deep sigh.

???: "—I wo~nder, may I say something really quickly?"

After keeping her silence for so long, someone finally spoke out in a trembling voice over to the four of them who'd been caught up in their exchange, now all looking rather taken aback.

???: “…I don’t like say~ing this but I thi~nk we should turn back.”

The little girl who had spoken out and lifted her tiny hand up had dark blue braided hair—Meili. She slowly shook her head, still perched on Shaula’s shoulders (who had crumpled down to her knees fainted).

Meili’s olive green eyes were full of unmistakable fear of the man reflected in them who stood further back, but yet she spoke.

Meili: “I don’t know how you can speak so fluidly with that guy Onii-sa~n… Our knightly Onii-san, our scarf-wearing Onee-san and even our naked Onee-san have been hurt by him.”

Subaru: “Out of those Shaula did collapse because of other reasons, but… it’s definitely weird.”

Though Meili’s view was pessimistic, her assessment was natural when taking into account their current fighting strength. Rather, it was Subaru that in trying to remain here and continue their challenge had completely lost his composure. They’d been completely flattened by the Stick Swinger’s swordsmanship.

He hadn’t been able to remain objective with how much influence Anastasia and Julius’ collapse and Emilia’s sexual harassment had had on him, however—

Subaru: “—This is just hypothetically speaking, but if we were to leave and come back again later would you still recognise her victory?”

The Stick Swinger: “…”

He could even say that his sportsmanship in having recognized Emilia clearing the Trial was unretractable—But, even though he had shown as much the other parts that came with it weren’t so easy to understand.

Even in carrying out Meili’s reasonable conclusion, if their opponent didn’t accept it then they wouldn’t be able to avoid having to fight. Up until a short while ago their opponent had taken care not to kill them. But now that he was behaving like he’d just shifted up a gear they had no surefire guarantee that their lives wouldn't be in danger the next time they challenged him.

If it came to that then challenging him would be out of the question. Instead, he would have to use every last inch of his strength to get them out of here.

Without any exaggeration, the Stick Swinger's true strength approached cataclysmic levels.

He'd made short work of Julius with his chopsticks, fought with Emilia and still had plenty of energy left to spare—His true strength was without exaggeration Reinhardt-grade.

What sort of intention did this tower's overlord have in placing such a monster here?

It seemed to him like they had no intention of letting it be cleared when taking into account the solution to the Constellation themed puzzle of the Third Floor as well.

Subaru: "Well, what'll it be?"

Shifting his heels as he showed signs of his patience running out he approached the collapsed figures of Julius and Anastasia. Taking notice of what Subaru was doing, Beatrice and Emilia subtly took up their positions as well.

If the Stick Swinger bared his fangs, Emilia would once again instantly cast her Icicle Line and they'd have no choice but to pick up the three which had collapsed using Beatrice's Murak and sprint away. In the worst case, he'd have to consider casting the yet incomplete third trump card with Beatrice as well—

The Stick Swinger: "—Enough"

Subaru: "Huh?"

The Stick Swinger: "E-N-O-U-G-H! EnoughEnoughEnoughEnoughEnoughEnoughEnough! I ain't in the mood for this!"

The man abruptly spat that out at them as they'd set their mind and body wholeheartedly onto their escape plan. As they goggled at his childish attitude, the man put his arm back in his left sleeve again and straightened up his Haori back to how it was when he'd first wore it. Then he started to walk away moodily, away from Subaru and the others who remained on their guard—He grumpily made his way to the Sword of Selection which had been kicked away.

The man stepped on the fallen sword, flicked it up and lazily took hold of it. Then he vigorously thrust its tip down onto the white floor and the sword returned to the same state it had been when the Trial had started.

And then—

The Stick Swinger: "I'm closin' up shop. Scram ya pricks. I'm tired of this. Hurry the hell up."

He flumped down on the spot with a thunk and spat those words out, sitting with one knee raised up.

Subaru: "—. W-Waitwaitwait! You're freewheeling far too much, what the hell's this about?! Are you really going to haphazardly decide the particulars of the Trial depending on your mood?!"

The Stick Swinger: "You sure are noisy ya prick. The discretion here has been left to me from the start ya prick. If I say no, then it's a no."

Subaru instinctively became speechless at hearing his arrogant manner of speaking. At Subaru's surprise, the man continued and said, "Besides."

The Stick Swinger: "—When I don't feel like doin' something I don't mess about. So, ya prick, are ya gonna do what I said?"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru's whole body was bathed in chills from an intense gust of wind whooshing by.

The man had cast aside all of his weapons and even tucked away his chopsticks in his bosom pocket; and, his lips had curled. It did certainly look like a smile, but it was of a different nature to the one which he'd been showing so far.

Ferocious as it was, it wasn't a smile that gave off a sunny atmosphere. Rather his smile was like that of a crazed beast exuding a dark, sanguine, gruesome intent to kill.

Emilia: "…ah"

A small groan could be heard.

Not from Subaru, but from Emilia who should have been by his side. She had one of her hands against her pale throat and her jewel-like eyes were widened in surprise.

Her knees fell from beneath her and she sunk down onto the floor. It was as if she had noticed in that moment that she was unable to stand up by herself and forgotten how to breathe—

Subaru: "Hh—"

And it was the same for Subaru as well, who'd suddenly become "Aware" of his breathing as soon as he saw Emilia's reaction. Before he could even notice, Subaru had dropped to his knees in pain and his whole body was drenched in sweat.

He was in the same state as Emilia—No, he was worse off than her; he'd been completely daunted by the man's presence.

It's as if he'd started to forget even that his heart was beating, and that he was starting to be killed.

If there'd been no one around him to make him remember about that in the surroundings he would have died from the power in the man's eyes alone.

The Stick Swinger: "Go rack your brains 'n see if y'can find a way to win ya prick. The same trick the smokin' hottie used ain't gonna cut it. Not even from the sleepin' hot stuff. Now get out of my sight, I'm going to bed."

His voice grew low indicating he was not messing about when he said that, and following that, his head dozily jerked down. After a little bit, they could gradually hear the man's snoring which sounded as deafening as him when awake.

In that sense his loud snoring wasn't at all contrary to his personality—However, none of those who were left standing here were able to laugh about it.

Meili: "Let's turn back from here as quickly as possi~ble"

He wanted to leave this place as quickly as possible.

Making good on Meili's words who'd insisted they do just that, Subaru and the others slowly grabbed their fallen members and were forced to retreat from the Trial.

3

???: "—I see. So that's the reason why you scurried back looking so glum from the Second Trial "

Subaru: "…As harsh as ever, eh, Nee-sama?"

Ram: "Stop talking like that. Every time you do, the "Master-sama Theory" of the sleeping woman holds more weight to it."

Subaru: "That's crazy talk! Mind what you say."

Ram gave a short sigh as he feebly shrugged his shoulders at her unappealing warning.

They were on the Fourth Floor, in the room adjacent to the Green Room. Subaru and Ram were vis-a-vis with each other, and Emilia, Beatrice and Meili were there too. The number became 6 when you included Shaula, who they'd rolled in here as the final member.

The group had climbed down the long, long staircase and fled from the Second Floor. The first thing they'd done was carry their wounded to the Green Room and entrust them to the Spirit's treatment.

Their diagnosis on the way was that Julius had simply only fainted, whereas with Anastasia the underlying reason was exhaustion due to having used too much magic; in all, their lives weren't in danger.

Therefore he'd placed them in bed and moved rooms with Ram so that he could explain the situation to her, that and to get around the room's people-limit as well. However—

Ram: "I heard that there was a ridiculous Examiner too, but… It was just Emilia-sama that was acknowledged by him, right? Was it not possible for just the one person to see the library?"

Subaru: "That's…"

Emilia: "Oh, I hadn't thought about that now that you mention it. Right, I may have been able to go up to the First Floor if it was just me… Should we try asking the Stick Swinger-san if I can…?"

Subaru: "…No, let's not. I don't want to stir up the hornet's nest and risk him getting irritated again; and even if he told Emilia-tan that she can go up by herself, that… That would be dangerous."

Emilia: "I'll be reaaaally careful you know?"

Subaru: "It's dangerous."

Ram: "It is dangerous."

Beatrice: "It's dangerous, I suppose."

Subaru, Ram and Beatrice immediately put a damper on Emilia's determination. Emilia dejectedly stood down after she heard their concerns, but it wasn't like Subaru had been stamping out her willingness out of being overprotective.

Right now he didn't want to aggravate that Stick Swinger for no good reason. This he was absolutely sure about.

It's true that he felt like he wanted to say something to that untrammeled individual, but it would be suicidal to challenge him when he was in a bad mood regardless of when the Trial would recommence.

And the fact was right now they weren't even seeing the man taking up the sword.

Even if only Emilia had been able to get past that man—

Subaru: "I'm doubtful about whether The Trial of the Second Floor truly is just the one part. He could easily be playing us the foo… No, it may just seem like that to me because Emilia-tan overcame it without much issue but I wonder if that's truly the end of it; that's what's weighing on my mind"

Emilia: "I think you're thinking too much about it. That individual… Though the things he says may be a little strange and rude sometimes it doesn't seem like he'd lie. No, it's because it seems like he's a person who can't lie."

Subaru: "The jury's split right through the middle here on whether it's just you having faith in him or good shrewdness being the reason he can't tell lies…"

Whatever the case may be he had no grounds to brush aside Emilia's point. If anything he agreed with the assessment she'd given regarding that Stick Swinger.

Were he to look at it from a different angle, the reason she'd overcome the Trial so readily could also be because Emilia was the strongest out of them. So when it came to Julius right now, the fact that he'd collapsed meant that—

Subaru: "I hope he's not depressed as hell about it…"

Emilia: "Are you worried about Julius?"

Subaru: "I'm not entirely sure. You see, when it comes to being worried, I guess I am… But, it's not as easy as that."

Julius' duel head on with the Stick Swinger, his subsequent defeat and his beaten figure had been seared into his mind. He probably wasn't overthinking his anxiety when he looked back on how Julius had looked in his last moments.

His skill with the sword had been nowhere near his opponents, he'd been toyed with like it had been child's play and finally even his Knightly Sword had been broken—

Subaru: "There's another sword in our Dragon Carriage, but that isn't going to be the issue here I imagine"

Beatrice: "Swords can be reforged. I really don't get all the fuss, I suppose."

Subaru: "But Beako, don't you take good care of the Handkerchief, Mittens and Apron I made you? What I'm saying is that those things are more special, and it's as if they were torn."

Beatrice: "…I apologize for saying something so stupid, in fact."

Beatrice meekly took back her callous remark and Subaru stroked her head, letting out a sigh.

It was hard to imagine how Julius would react when he'd wake up in the Green Room. Even though he didn't know whether he'd get depressed (unlike his usual self) or whether he'd try act strong like he usually did, Subaru had no clue what he'd say to him when he eventually did; for that reason he was feeling quite downhearted.

And when it came to things to worry about, that didn't stop only with Julius.

Subaru: "Anastasia… Echidna's…, That desperation, what on earth was she thinking…"

One doubt that firmly clung to Subaru's mind was Anastasia, aka Eridna's decision when she'd butted in Julius' duel with the Stick Swinger and provided him support.

There was no question that in that moment she'd been providing backup for Julius. The reason why she had tried her utmost to help him when he'd been overwhelmed like that was one which everyone, including Subaru, would have been feeling as well.

Nevertheless touching on the matter briefly, that which Echidna had done, considering that she was moving about using Anastasia's body who'd remained a bystander in all this, went beyond being surprising and more so warranted fright.

Even during their journey and after arriving at the Watchtower Echidna hadn't forgotten to behave like Anastasia; she'd kept asserting that she'd do her very best to act with due consideration for her body. He'd figured that at least in his eyes that she wouldn't have turned against that.

What meaning did she have in coming here and all of a sudden behaving like that—?

Beatrice: "That girl's indisposition is gravely different to a little overuse of magic, I suppose."

Subaru: "—Then what is it?"

Beatrice was the only one who shared knowledge of the situation regarding Anastasia and Echidna, and she quietly whispered those words into the brooding Subaru's ear.

When Subaru posed his question, Beatrice continued her words by saying, "To put it simply,"

Beatrice: "Bubby, Betty and that Scarf are special among Spirits, in fact. We're all more powerful than lots of other kinds of Spirits, but we make up for it by having other restrictions instead, I suppose. I needn't have to explain it to you now, in fact."

Subaru: "Mhm. Since you want me all to yourself by me signing a contract with you I cannot sign a contract with other spirits. You can rest assured that I'm yours, Beako."

Beatrice: "It's, It's nothing as cheerful as that, I suppose. This is more about that Scarf-Spirit, in fact. It's true that she's borrowing that girl's body… But, I realized something as we made our way here, I suppose. That girl has no magic to her which she can use other than her Od, in fact."

Subaru: "None other than her… Od?"

Beatrice: "She's the same as you, there's a defect in her Gate, I suppose. Its valve is broken and its ability of drawing in Mana from the outside is kaput, in fact. So she can't use magic unless she whittles down her own life, I suppose."

Subaru: "Then that means…"

It can be fatal, Subaru gulped at that realization.

Subaru was in shock of the problems which Anastasia's body bore. They would be severe handicaps in a world like this. He recalled the words which Anastasia a.k.a Eridna had said before, "My trump card whittles at my body." She'd meant those words literally. And now that this fact had become clear, Subaru had ended up becoming more and more bewildered.

If in fact Echidna's misuse of Anastasia's body had been for nothing other than to shorten her host's life, then—

Subaru: "Why did she always try to help Julius?"

It didn't look like this was something she'd done out of some intricate plan. Undoubtedly taking this risk from worry of Julius' condition must have been behind that act of desperation.

Was Echidna attracted to Julius? Was that one of the powers of his Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits as well?

Ram: "—I'm worried about Anastasia-sama and the Knight Julius as well, but we have other issues that we need to deal with, don't we?"

Subaru: "I guess you mean that Stick Swinger "

Ram: "That's right. It may seem cold hearted, but for me what we'll do about the Trial is more important.—If we can't get past it then we aren't going to find a way to get Rem back."

Ram interrupted Subaru's thoughts and, in a sense, voiced quite a cold hearted opinion.

Just as she'd acknowledged, her words were a little lacking in consideration. But, Subaru wasn't going to blame her for that.

Ram: "…"

He couldn't see it, but he could feel a tinge of irritation concealed behind Ram's stiff expression. That was because she was frustrated that she had the possibility of getting back her lost little sister and she was now an arm's reach away but yet still so far; Subaru could sympathize with that.

Emilia: "He dressed casually, had an eyepatch, red hair, blue eyes… He had an awfully self-assertive, violent physique though."

Subaru: "Did anyone familiar come to your mind? If you don't see the real thing you probably won't be able to imagine him, but he's with no exaggeration strong as a monster. Maybe around Reinhardt-grade."

Ram: "A real nightmare, huh."

Emilia: "Though what Subaru's saying is no lie. I've never seen Reinhardt's true strength… But, well, I think he was as strong as that."

Emilia followed up Ram's words, detailing her thoughts having actually fought the man.

There was no benefit in telling lies here. From her judgement, Ram wearily placed her hand against her forehead, and said,

Ram: "If we put confidence in Barusu and Emilia-sama's words then our enemy is of the same caliber as the Knight Reinhardt… If as said they truly are equal to the world's strongest man, then there's one that's at least close to his level in every part of the world."

Subaru: "So essentially Reinhardt is the strongest in the Kingdom and each of the other three countries have their own strongest."

Ram: "In the Vollachian Empire there's the First General, the Blue Lightning Cecilus Segmunt; in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko there's the Crazed Prince ; and in the Kararagi City States there's the Admirer Halibel. But each have different traits to them."

Subaru: "None of them have long red hair?"

Ram: "I'm not sure because we only don't know what the Holy

Kingdom of Gusteko's Crazed Prince looks like"

Subaru: "Prince, a prince huh…? I guess he didn't give off that kind of feeling?"

But then, he wasn't so sure if he was a complete mismatch with that individual when he took into account the Crazed part. Although he had quite handsome features he couldn't say he had any royal elegance to him.

It was the sort of beauty you'd find in the plains, the kind you'd find in the wilderness so it was a work of art of the kind that was permitted.

Subaru: "And to add to that, he's a master of martial arts whose name isn't known in the world…"

Beatrice: "The clothes he was wearing were the Kararagian native dress, in fact. He was using chopsticks too, I suppose."

Subaru: "Oh boy was he using them, though way too differently to the way they're supposed to be used…"

Besides, no matter how much Subaru strained himself, he was unlikely to find a connection between "A master of martial arts who was unknown to the world" and that man.

The man was a bit older than Subaru—Most likely in his mid-twenties. However he felt that something was not quite right in regards to there being such a skilled man of that age with such a twisted nature ending up being unknown, and that feeling took precedence.

Moreover.

There was still a doubt troubling him regarding whether the man who'd been placed there by this Pleiades Watchtower's strange mechanism was really just some randomer—

Meili: "Ah, Onii-san, can I butt in for a se~c?"

Subaru: "Hm?"

Meili: “Doesn’t it look like naked Onee-san’s about to wake u~p?”

Meili, who’d been busy giving Shaula a lap-pillow, raised her hand up from a corner of the room. And just as she’d said, Shaula, with her head still resting against Meili’s lap, captivatingly stretched out her body and started to groan. ”Ummph, auuun.”

Then she slowly opened her eyes as everyone else looked on at her —

Shaula: “Maaaster… Don’t leave me alone please… I don’t wanna be alone anymore…”

Subaru: “Stop acting so miserable from the get go! You were up all along weren’t you!”

Shaula: “Jeez. In a strange way I thought you might show your affection Master, but it turns out you’re meeeean as always. Butbut, I loooove that part of you too.”

Subaru: “Looks like I was worried for nothing…”

Shaula lifted her long legs up, swung them down and nimbly got up. She shook her so-called Scorpion Tail about and looked around the room; then she cocked her head and said, “Oh?”

Shaula: “Huh? Why are we here? If I’m not mistaken we got through the Trial with one of Master’s dramatic flashes and made it up…”

Subaru: “Oy this isn’t a dream. This is reality.”

Shaula: “You were hugging meeeee Master and you started to laugh, telling me to not let go again…”

Subaru: “That was a dream! You fainted straight after the second Trial started!”

Subaru shouted that at Shaula as she recited the contents of her horrifying dream. Then he tried to remind her about what had happened just before she’d fainted. However Shaula snorted her nose and said, “Fainted~?”as if she was playing dumb, Shaula: “Meee, faint? There’s no way I’d do something so shameful. Even after I reunited with you Master after so many centuries I didn’t end up fainting ya know? Meee, fainting, you’re gonna reduce me to tears sayin’ something so absurd!”

Emilia: “Um, I get that you’re tempted to doubt this, but you really did faint. Subaru and Meili were reaaally worried about you. Believe you me.”

Shaula: “Huuuh! Master worried about me?! Dhehehe, I believe you.”

Subaru: “That was easy…”

Meili: “Me being tacked on like an extra, now that’s a li~ttle unexpected.”

Both Subaru and Meili looked troubled as they witnessed Shaula fawningly express her opinion as she slackened her expression. Nevertheless, after she acknowledged the reality of the present, Shaula cocked her head the other way and said, “Huuuh?”

Shaula: “But what caused me to faint? It ain’t usual for meee to collapse. In those kinds of situations it wouldn’t be strange if everyone ended up dead other than Master…”

Ram: “I get that you’re pinning too much hope on Barusu… Sorry, on your Master, but that’s what I’ve heard really happened. Take your time and think back to earlier… Picture the long, long staircase in front of your eyes”

Emilia: “The long, long staircase…”

Was Ram trying to get her to follow her memories and recall what had happened? She spoke in a hushed voice as if she was hypnotizing her. There should have been a hitch in Ram’s plan in that she hadn’t witnessed that scene but she slowly unraveled Shaula’s locked memories as if she’d been there to see it.

Ram: “You’re greeted by a white room with a steel sword thrust down into the floor. The moment someone lays their hands on it a strange voice echoes in everyone’s minds who’s there—”

Emilia: “My heart’s pounding…”

Both Shaula and Emilia were reliving the experience thanks to Ram’s emotional recitation. Setting Shaula aside, Emilia ought to know about what had happened in detail; but Subaru didn’t interject in fear that he’d break the mold of the conversation.

Finally, her recitation approached Shaula’s sealed memories—

Ram: “Right then, the silhouette of a person materializes at the back of the room. A man with red, long hair, blue eyes and dressed in exotic garb…”

Shaula: “AAAAAAAAAH!!”

Shaula jumped back and let out a shriek the moment Ram reached that crucial scene. She turned to face Subaru, preparing to jump towards him; however he’d anticipated it. He bent his knees and caught her. This time he didn’t fall.

Instead he was pressed against Shaula’s soft skin as if he were in a vice.

Subaru: “OWOWOWOW! I, I guess you remembered! You remembered right?!”

Shaula: “Wh-Wh-Wh-Why is that guy here?! In spite of all of you telling me he was dead! He survived! I knew he was a guy who’s nigh unkillable!”

Subaru: “Huuuh?! What are you sayi…”

As his eyes teared up in pain, Subaru tried to ask Shaula what she was talking about—And then, it dawned on him.

He realized what Shaula’s words meant.

The person in question that corresponded to what she’d said since they’d come to the tower was only one.

And that person was—

Shaula: “The Stick Swinger ! The Stick Swinger Reid! That savage! That demon! He’s come back to life to fondle my chest again—!”

4

—Reid Astrea.

That was the name of the swordsman who’d gone down in legend. A great swordsman who was said to have killed witchbeasts, master swordsmen, dragons and finally even Witches.

He was the first person to have received the name Sword Saint and was also one of the Three Great Heroes who saved the world.

He’d kickstarted the glory of the Astrea family, lineage of the Sword Saint which Reinhardt van Astrea was a part of; even now he was the highest aspiration of those who lived by the sword—.

The situation was hard to believe. His name was the name of a life that should have perished 400 years ago. He probably would have laughed at the possibility existing if this place hadn’t existed for centuries with a tower that had been built by those connected to the Witch.

Nevertheless, there was a living witness who knew about 400 hundred years ago here.

Nevertheless, they were in a tower that the Sage who’d lived 400 years ago had built here.

When he took into consideration his poor character, didn’t he seem to be saying something like “I’ve placed the First Generation Sword Saint as The Strongest Guard here, now surpass him.”—.

Subaru and the others hurriedly went back to the Green Room with the facts they’d gathered.

They would have to come up with a game plan now that they knew that their enemy was Reid Astrea. Luckily he’d heard that that particular Sword Saint had been a man who wasn’t lacking in anecdotes.

And luckily they had a talented person in their group who was well read on the greats of bygone days.

Of course he would imagine that the aftereffects of his defeat lingered within him. But once he found out about his opponent's identity the shame he probably harbored should vanish too. After all their opponent was to blame for this.

At any rate, their enemy was the Sword Saint—A man who held the same family name as Reinhardt and became its founder, building the name up.

When you think of it like that, he should be able to easily digest even his defeat to him—

Subaru: "—That dumbass"

Subaru had made his way back to the Green Room harboring those words of comfort. But when he got there he spoke those words out in a hushed tone.

There were beds of grass at the back of the room which the Spirit had laid out for the wounded—There were four of them in total, and laying in them were Rem, Anastasia and Patrasche in the backmost one.

Only one of those beds were empty, the one between Patrasche and Anastasia.

And on top of that ivy-woven bed, lay merely his broken Knightly Sword.

5

—The man slowly opened his eyes to the sound of footsteps clambering up the stairs and the aura of a man readying himself to fight piercing through his skin.

He felt no anger at having his sleep interrupted. After all, life was a constant battle.

When you come to the resolution that your flesh and blood is always walking the tightrope between life and death, you end up living without any turmoil in your heart no matter what transpires.

???: “…”

Gradually the figure of the man who was climbing up the stairs came into view. He could remember that man’s swordsmanship. He could even remember that man’s footsteps and his footwork. It had only been a short while ago. There was no way he could forget.

Only, that should have been the same for his opponent too, so he thought it was strange.

He’d thought that his opponent was a little smarter than this, nevertheless—

???: “…”

The Man: “Kah!”

He lost that impression as soon as he looked at his opponent’s eyes. An impulse had surged through him that had led him to scoff instead.

He sumptuously let it echo on top of his tongue and then briskly scratched his red hair.

The Man: “I ain’t gonna be jus’ playin’ about this time ya prick”

???: “…”

He didn’t think there’d be any meaning to saying that but he cast his words out of courtesy, just in case. When his opponent received them, he closed his eyes for a moment and instantly threw away all of this emotion.

Then, his opponent stretched out his hand without any hesitation—And pulled out the sword that had been thrust down into the floor and held it out in front of him.

Julius: “Knight of the Royal Order of the Kingdom of Lugnica—Julius Juukulius.”

The Man: “…”

After he gave his name, the Knight broke into a fierce run as a result of his own eyes narrowing. The man—Reid Astrea bent his lips into a twisted smile.

Reid: “You couldn’ even hope to be my playmate s’long ‘s you keep usin’ that borin’ title.”

Chapter 28:
Julius Juukulius

Picking up the Sword of Selection from the ground, he felt it fit so perfectly in the palm of his hand, very much so that the urge to break into tears arose within him for some reason. It was almost as if he truly were under the delusion that the sword had selected him in particular.

Even though, in this instant, there was absolutely no reason for him to be feeling so proud in such a manner, within his own self.

Julius: “Sh—hk!”

Compared to his broken beloved sword, his new blade felt a smidgeon thicker, the tip heavier. However, if he based himself on that and swung the blade, he would be able to more or less get used to the differences immediately.

Not all battles could be handled with only the usage of a weapon one was accustomed to. It was a source of pride for him, that he had trained himself to imagine all possible situations, and that he was able to do battle with any sword at hand.

Reid: “Really boring, haa, you”

His sharp thrust was carried by said pride, and it was aimed right between the yawning man’s brows. However, the man just tilted his head, the tip of the blade merely coming close to its target. As soon as the red haired man noticed a few hairs having been severed, he jumped back.

He pressed his weight hard against the ground and jumped back, thanks to his heels remaining hot due to the footwork.

He formed some distance between the two of them.

In a battle, evaluating the sword skills of your opponent is not the only essential thing. Neither is it about just the sword in the hands.

The rhythm of the feet and the pace of the legs are also extremely crucial.

Of course, the swordplay matters as well. To get the optimum position, to get the fastest pace, in order to maximize your potential, you musn't just use your hands and legs; instead you have to use every part of your body.

Therefore, it's imperative that beginners in the art of swordplay learn proper footwork first.

Truly, he believed he was fortunate to be blessed with a great teacher. Although that teacher's skills were now below his current skills, this was due to age, a factor that no one was able to circumvent.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt that he was quite a skillful person in teaching things to his students even beyond their own strength.

It wasn't just putting practice into his sword art, but also where those arts had come from, and in what form they had been passed down. He was a well-liked person who spoke about such things.

Naturally, he too enjoyed listening to tales of others about it, and he deemed it an honor to be able to practice it.

Julius: "…"

Catching up towards him with a leap, he aimed his sword down to where he was about to land.

Up, down, left, right. Three of those directions were guarded, and the one with the highest probability to deliver the killing blow was from below.

Reid: "You, this again?!"

Julius' sword, which swung towards the man's chest from below, was parried with ease by the man's stick. The stick was unbelievably sturdy, and easily deflected his sword.

The sword swing took less than a second; even if he saw it coming, to be able to do that meant he was exceedingly skilled and had fine-grained control over his power to the extent that he could even thread a needle with ease.

Julius: “…”

Julius gasped in surprise as his heavy swing brought his sword over his head. It created a small opening as he stumbled slightly and broke posture. he thought to use a blade of wind, but right now he didn’t have that choice.

The magic which he could use as a diversion, did not release.

Instead, he just created a gap between them.

Julius: “Kaaagh!”

He ate a front kick to his side, and the barefoot’s nails dug into the gaps between his organs inside his body. In the moment where he felt that his body couldn’t take any more pressure and would break, the foot that had been stuck inside him twisted, causing him excruciating pain from inside.

He was blown away. In an instant, he went flying from the impact, seemingly defying inertia.

However, even that wasn’t enough to absorb the force of that kick. As his surroundings spun, the impact he received on his body reverberated to his head and made him want to vomit. Even so, he kept his eyes on his opponent and slammed his feet on the ground as he landed, maintaining his posture.

His breathing was rough.

It would take him some time to recover and catch his breath.

Julius emptied out the contents of his body, and after having done so, he forcibly reminded his body to breath slowly to calm his ragged breath.

Reid: “…”

He spat, and spat it all out.

After that, he would continue the battle, because he had to continue this fight.

Julius: “…”

About ten meters in front of him, he saw the red-haired man standing with a smile plastered on his smug face.

Again, he dashed forward, towards the grinning man. The edges of the wooden chopsticks and the steel blade collided, everything to peel that calm smile off his face. From there, the real battle—

Reid: “So pretentious. You, there are truths and lies in a battle. Are ya really readin’ it out of a picture book?!”

Julius: “—Ah…”

The distance between him and the man shrunk in the blink of an eye. The man’s incredible speed left him stunned.

To be precise, it all actually happened in the blink of an eye. The man closed the distance of ten meters in a mere moment. A simple stick appeared in front of his eyes. In order to protect himself, he immediately raised his blade, though while making that important action, he left the rest of his body unguarded. This resulted in the man delivering two blows against him with his sticks, one in the side of his head and one to the chest.

A piercing shock hit him. The sharpness of that blow would make his consciousness fade faster than the actual pain. He clenched his teeth and stomped the ground vigorously, so he could desperately scrape back together his own fading consciousness.

Julius: “Oh… Agh!”

The scream he uttered left him hoarse, and he swung his sword down in a crescent-form arc towards the man. The man jumped up, as if he was avoiding the graceful dance until death and struck his side with his elbow.

His consciousness was shaken again. He was shaken off his feet, and his fighting spirit was curbed by the pain that gradually spread out in his soles.

The simultaneous chants of fire and water, and the three way attack of the sword—all missed their mark.

Unrelated to the fire and water, this was only an artistic mistake which he had repeatedly made when he was training to become the Greatest Knight. If his opponent was to be a normal one, this surely would have had sufficient to bring him down.

Reid: “Bang!”

The highest peak of a Knight’s sword art, it was easily blown away by the chopsticks in the hands of the man.

The sticks struck his knee, and stabbed his stomach, making him vomit up gastric juice; it was quite the unpleasant sight. His body was about to collapse, as it has been continuously struck down by the stick from all directions.

Reid: “O…Oh?”

He fell down instead of forward, and kept his body up by quickly extending out his arm. Taking advantage of this moment, he swung to the rear with astonishing momentum. The man left out a sound out because he did not expect it, and jumped back.

He continued to move backwards, and opened up a greater distance between the two of them. Blood started to pour out of his nose. He wiped his bleeding nose with his white sleeve. His uniform was stained by bright, crimson red paint.

He did not care. He let out a sharp breath and put his whole spirit into the blade in his hand.

To reach it, is to keep going for it.

To be strong, is to stay strong.

Reid: “Yer fucking pathetic, you. Can you even lift ya sword? You. I haven’t lifted my sword for anything other than three months straight, you. I’ve cut light down, what the fuck have you cut down?”

Julius: “You, right here, right now—”

Reid: “You, the fuck does that mean?! The fuck can you do to me? You can’t do shit. No swinging at it ‘till you reach it. Don’t swing at it ‘till you reach it. ‘till you can, no swinging. Don’t swing ‘till you can. Stop talking ‘bout all the shit ya wanna do when you can’t even do ‘em, you.”

Instead of a refutation, he utterly destroyed the sword’s blow with immense, immense strength.

As a response to this action, the man struck ten more blows down onto him.

Julius: “…”

His consciousness was swaying, but he was not falling. Why wasn’t he falling?

It’s because—

Reid: “You lackin’. You ain’t enough. This ain’t a place for you to be comin’ to. Yer outta yer element. You ain’t the one for the job. You weren’t invited.”

He just has to be strong. He just has to prove it with his sword.

A name, a house, a family, a master, a companion, a friend, spirits bound to his soul, he lost all of it.

The only thing that is left for him is this. All that he has left, is himself.

What he himself accumulated, shapeless, that’s all that remained.

This was the only proof of his sole, own being.

Reid: “Disgusting, you. Are you tryna put up a front? you? Are ya satisfied just bein’ a cheap imitation of others, you? You and your sword are both fuckin’ boring.”

There was a time that he aimed for the peak of swordsmanship.

He wondered if he could aim for that place, it was something that was stuck on his mind.

Soon, he realized that the bar was too high, and gave up.

When he saw him, that man with hair of crimson, the boy gripping a sword in his hand, he discovered he carried something so selflessly grand as to inspire admiration.

Reid: “Ain’t nobody looking at you. Ain’t nobody got expectations on you. Yer naive if you thinkin’ I’m playin ‘round. yer punches ‘n kicks are easy, you.”

He too had once yearned for it, for his life to be filled with tales of grandeur.

To stand shoulder to shoulder with those people, was not to be for his current lacking self.

That is the reason why he must risk his life. So desperately, wretchedly, that dream which he had then cast aside, he remembered.

Julius: “…”

His blue eye, not covered by the eyepatch, along with his disheveled long hair of flame, overlapped with the youth who had been the impetus behind him desisting of his dream once before, as well as with one of his many aspirations he held thereafter.

Diligently endeavoring in the hopes of one day reaching it, that was how he believed his life to have been spent.

Reid: “Ain’t enough, you. You ain’t enough at all—Have you been skippin’ life day?”

His yearning towards that what he craved for, was knocked out from him by the beating of the stick.

He couldn’t do it by swinging his sword; it was impossible to hit the one facing him with a sword. The efforts to keep fighting were meaningless. The blood and sweat that were shed were worthless. In the life of his, the life that was collapsing… There was one thing. But even that one thing he believed in—was trampled down.

"…"

Slowly, something was welling withinside him.

That thing, it completely eliminated that what was emerging from his heart.

Reid: "Gggrr! Can ya bear this? You, I'm getting more and more bored."

Along with a click of his lips, a light gushed out and pierced through his limbs. He collapsed like a marionette who had its strings cut. However, violence did not allow that.

The wooden sticks struck into his chest, resulting in the oxygen in his lungs being drained to the verge of asphyxiation. Then, he was grabbed by his hair and swung around like a ragdoll. He was slammed to the ground, and the moment that he bounced back up, he received a kick to the face and was blown away.

In this matter he slid across the ground as if he were a Frisbee, spinning endlessly in this white world with no boundaries

He was knocked to the ground.

His body jumped up and looked at the direction where he received the kick from. But then, the man, who suddenly dashed like a gale towards him, hit him in the face with his knee. In the moment of the impact, the knee clashed against his forehead, and as his forehead split; he was flicked away.

A gap between them was formed.

Reorganizing his posture—that's what he should have done, but, his body did not stir.

Julius: "Fh…Khhh…"

His whole body was screaming like a siren, especially as the damage to his head was very serious. Even the consciousness inside his own skull was in a state of fluctuation. He was afraid that if he would relax, if only for a little, he would lose his consciousness that very next moment.

The sword… Where was the sword? As if to ascertain it, he made his own strength flow into his own right hand and tried to slowly touch it.

There, there was indeed the touch of the hilt. He felt relief.

He couldn't let go. It's only this. He doesn't know what there is left to lose if he even loses the sword.

—In other words, what was in his hand was something else in the shape of a sword just now.

Julius: "…"

He did not make any mistakes in his own state of life. He always believed that it was him being on his own path.

He was so convinced, even now.

Even now, to be able to change this, he had supposed would be impossible in his life.

Henceforth, the problem here was not finding a solution for all the things that had slipped out of his hands and disappeared.

—Or… Was it simply a mistake?

He lost his own way, he walked down the wrong path… all because he misunderstood what he believed in?

His name, his house, his family, his master, a companion, a friend, spirits bound to his soul, he lost all of them.

What if, what was only left with him now, was just a make-believe, incapable of offering any actual help, incapable of relying upon, incapable of any support.

—He would maintain his strength; that's what he swore to his Master.

—He would remember his strength; that's what his last remaining friend told him.

In a world where everything is lost, there's only Strength which would assist him.

Although, this Strength was the only thing his frail and fragile self was Certain wouldn't disappear.

Reid: "—You! The hesitation is finally gone from yer sword!"

Julius: "—?!"

How much time was wasted by asking himself how to answer that question? Probably not even a second. However, for a man—for a Sword Saint, such gap in the moment is like having the chance of killing the enemy.

He was desperate to raise his sword, to defend himself against this rapid, impending attack. A very sharp, shrill noise rang out. The only way of knowing that the sword's steel edge crashed upon the floor, was by actually seeing it happen.

Finally, he was parted from even the sword that slipped out from his own hands.

Losing my name, losing my reputation… Now that I even lost the sword, is there any reason for me to still stand here?

Reid: "Without the qualifications to reach at the Heavenly sword—You! I cannot stand such a henchman like you."

The parched voice coldly announced that, and the Sword Saint held his sticks out forward, bending his knees down.

—For the first time, the Sword Saint put out an attacking posture.

Then, the stick was raised, and a strike—There was no way for it to be mistaken, it was a Sword Attack.

He released an absolute sword strike, and he was wrapped in the powerful shockwave of the strike, and blown away.

Julius: "…"

Whether it was punching or kicking, this blow was completely different from all the attacks so far. This wasn't an attack. This was the zenith of the sword, the highest peak the sword can reach, the true Power capable of a sword.

Engulfed by the light, his consciousness was blown away. Did he see death? Did he see something that surpassed death? He didn't understand it at all.

However, at the moment of being blown away, he heard a faint voice.

???: "Julius—!!"

A voice was screaming, it was full of melancholy. Desperately, the voice had dashed up the long staircase, as if just to witness this decisive moment alone. Since there was a voice calling for him, a very untimely smile was formed on his face.

The Greatest Knight from the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica. A Royal Guard of the Kingdom's Knights. The eldest son and the heir of the Juukulius family. The Knight of the Royal Election Candidate, Anastasia Hoshin.

—Julius Juukulius.

Julius: "Awgh…"

I wonder, am I even worthy of being called by that name anymore?

Finally, with such doubts on his mind, Julius' consciousness, interrupted with a swoosh, was thus swallowed by the light.

Chapter 29:
Loser

1

—He'd ran up the long, long staircase to reach him, but by the time he did it was already too late.

???: "…"

He'd forced out a shout despite his heavy panting, overworking his already strained lungs.

But neither his voice or his words held the power to change the situation. The lack of power words held here was growing into more of an issue, especially now where the two of them were pitting techniques of the sword against each other.

Though he didn't even know if he could call it something like "Pitting techniques of the sword against each other".

Because things had been so one-sided, and no matter how much he embellished it, the weapons that one of them wielded were naught but sticks.

—The white light spread out, dying the already white room in a more brilliant white.

What was causing it wasn't clear. Regardless of whether it was something sired from the nature of this aberration of a Swordsman or down to it being a swing which he'd boasted could even cut light, the blow brought a shockwave along with it that swept across the room.

The individual caught in the attack's line of fire was engulfed by the light as well and blown away without being able to do anything about it.

Then literally in the blink of an eye, the light vanished and the tall figure of the one-sleeved red-haired man filled the room—Along with the figure of the purple haired Swordsman who'd collapsed like a corpse.

???: "Hey, aren't ya that small fry, ya prick."

The red-haired man called out casually to Subaru who was at a loss for words at what he'd just witnessed. Without missing a beat, the man smiled at him like a shark as if he'd forgotten all about the duel he'd just been having.

Then he pointed at the fallen Swordsman—At Julius.

???: "Yer too late ya prick. I've already cleaned up here, 'n I'm gettin' the whiff that you're gonna be a pain in the ass, so hurry 'n pick him up 'n get yer ass out of here."

Subaru: "…Reid Astrea"

Reid: "The hell, ya prick. Don't go stickin' your nose into people's names ya prick. Don't rain on my parade, it's way cooler to not give out names ya prick."

The Stick Swinger—i.e. Reid's mood had taken a turn for the worse when he'd been called by his name.

Though Subaru felt annoyed at how completely beside the point his remarks were, he didn't dare take any rash actions. He instead slowly moved his gaze away from Reid towards the still collapsed Julius.

Reid: "I ain't gonna grab ya and gobble ya up ya know, ya prick. Ya don' have to keep starin' at me."

Subaru: "I'm sorry but it's common sense where I'm from to not look away when you've ran into a bear. As for Julius…"

With his gaze still set on Reid and his guard up, Subaru leaned down and made sure that Julius was still breathing. He'd lost consciousness but he could feel him breathing on his palm when he'd placed it just above his mouth.

It looked like he was still alive despite taking that sword slash full-on. Subaru was relieved by that.

Subaru: "Isn't this pretty kind of you, considering you'd said that the next time you wouldn't be going easy on us."

Reid: "Not really. Bein' defeated by chopsticks 'n scurryin' back home is lamer than being killed by 'em, don'cha think? That's what I think. I'd rather die than show my miserable self to anyone. So I defeat 'em with my chopsticks 'n let 'em scurry back home."

Subaru: "Let me take back what I said about you being kind, fucking asshole."

Reid: "Kah! Y'never make any sort of impression, no matter what it is ya say small fry. Besides, I have no intention to test y'all anymore today. Though, I'll beat ya up if ya wanna try me. Like that guy below ya."

Reid scratched his abs with his right hand and pointed at Subaru and Julius respectively with the chopsticks in his left.

Regardless of how angry he was at Reid's attitude right now, Subaru didn't have any way of making him take back his rudeness.

Subaru: "Damn this."

Reid: "Oh, ohh, go on. Don't just stay silent while carrying your comrade, go ahead 'n behave like a sore loser. That's the smart 'n easy thing to do if it makes ya feel any better. As bad as it is though."

Reid narrowed his cold blue eyes and spat that out as he sat himself down with a thunk. Meanwhile, Subaru somehow managed to hoist the collapsed Julius up whilst being subjected to the victor's delight.

Subaru was forced to carry Julius on his back just like he'd had to an hour ago. His unconscious body was quite heavy, not to mention he was taller than him. It was a complete mess but in times of difficulty you have to make some sacrifices.

Because leaving Julius behind here by himself wasn't an option.

Reid: "—Next time, bring one of those good lookin' women along, ya prick. Like that smokin' hottie even for example."

Without mentioning any of their names even once, Reid waved them goodbye.

Faced with Reid's flippant attitude, Subaru could literally do nothing more than just retreat from here wordlessly.

2

Subaru: "…*pant*, *pant*"

One foot after the other, step by step, Subaru went down the staircase whilst taking care of where he was placing his feet.

Though the staircase was fairly wide he still felt quite claustrophobic with being surrounded by the stone walls. This was the second time he'd gone up and down this particular staircase, but he still had no clues which would help him shed light on the unnaturality of the staircase's structure in regards to why it didn't shoot out of the tower despite them being straight.

Subaru: "Why did you even consider doing such a stupid thing… I'm at my breaking point here…"

It went without saying just how tough it was to carry him on his back down the long staircase.

Especially since there were 444 steps to this long staircase (by Emilia's count). It's not like Subaru held any animosity towards Emilia for telling him that, but in times like these where the actual number of stairs kept popping into his head, he did feel an urge of wanting to pinch her cheeks and tell her off.

Of course Emilia would definitely look cute if he tried to pinch her cheeks—

Subaru: “Both Emilia and Beako are gonna be worried… if I don’t hurry up and get him back”

They had noticed Julius’ absence in the Green Room and they’d all ended up going around the Watchtower to look for him. They’d gone to the Third Floor as well as the rooms on the Fourth Floor whilst they’d made Shaula go downstairs to check on Gyan and the Dragon Carriage on the Ground Floor.

Everyone was worried about Julius. Worried about what he was feeling in his heart due to his defeat to Reid and having vanished leaving behind his broken Knight Sword,

For sure, they were all the types to worry themselves sick with that anxiety weighing on them.

Subaru: “But, you know…”

—Nevertheless, only Subaru differed from them. Only Subaru was able to immediately understand what lay in his heart.

Where had Julius gone without his Knight Sword, and for what purpose?

Only Subaru had known the answers to those questions for sure—

Julius: “—Everything’s shaking about.”

Subaru: “—tch! Did you just notice?!”

Subaru stopped mid-step when he heard the voice coming from his back. Julius, who was being carried by him on his shoulders, stirred at his voice and said”Aah”

Julius: “Where are we…”

Subaru: “Vaguely speaking, we’re halfway down some stairs, a bit more precisely speaking, we’re halfway down a long staircase, and even more precisely we’re halfway fleeing down the staircase between the Second and Fourth Floors.”

Julius: “You’re being pretty vague about it, aren’t you… You’re carrying me on your back?"

Subaru: "Yes I am. And let me just say that this is the second time this has happened in this short period of time. I'm having to do this again 30 minutes after I'd thought I'd never like to do this again; do you get how I am feeling about this?"

Julius: "It's no wonder that the ride's been a bumpy one…"

Subaru: "Do you want me to throw you off?"

Subaru could sense Julius' wheezed laughter coming from his back. He ignored the sarcasm in his words and untensed himself a little.

In all honesty Subaru hadn't gandered any predictions at what Julius' first words would have been when he woke up. He wouldn't be exaggerating if he said that he'd even been fearing what he would say, truthfully speaking.

That's why Subaru had been relieved that the sort of conversation he'd gleaned from Julius' first couple of words after he'd woken up hadn't been the despair-filled sort.

Subaru: "Do you remember what happened?"

Julius: "…Sad as it is, I do. I was easily defeated by our enemy, and in the end I was still shown sympathy, causing trouble for you, Anastasia-sama and everyone else."

Subaru: "…I ain't some kind of demon who'd blame you for losing against an opponent like that."

Julius sounded awfully like himself, and for that Subaru let out a sigh and started going down the staircase once more.

Having regained his consciousness, Julius was much easier to carry than before. He'd also cleared up some of his anxieties which had been ladenening his step, so thanks to that he could tackle the remaining steps with renewed vigor.

Julius: "…Anastasia-sama is out of harm's way, right? I saw that she'd collapsed and now that she's being treated in that Spirit's room."

Subaru: "The present diagnosis on her is that her life isn't in danger. You on the other hand were pretty close to dying. That guy… That eye-patched bastard, I'd be surprised if you knew who he is."

Julius: "—Reid Astrea"

Subaru: "…"

His voice was brimming with confidence in his response. Subaru was so surprised for a second that both his feet and breath caught in their tracks. However, he quickly brought both his feet and breath back into motion so to not let him onto his surprise.

Subaru carefully chose his words so that Julius wouldn't sense his flustered state.

Subaru: "So, so you knew all along? He's that thing. Shaula said she knows him. Makes sense that she does 'cause she seems acquainted with him from 400 years ago… But, it looks like she was telling the truth when she alluded that he's someone that's hard to deal with. I say that since she fainted right after she saw his face."

Julius: "Huh, there were a ton of things which tipped me off. He has flaming red hair and blue eyes. His technique with the sword really stood out… If you can even call it a technique with the sword. He didn't even let himself swing his sword against me. I should just simply say he's a powerful person. Even the term Stick Swinger is one that denotes him from what I've seen in literature"

Subaru: "So he's been called a Stick Swinger since olden times because he fights with those chopsticks?!"

Julius: "Actually, the nuance of it is that he didn't choose a weapon he specialized with. I had my thoughts about him when he introduced himself as a Stick Swinger … But, I wasn't sure. I apologize for not mentioning them to you."

Subaru had no reply for Julius' apologetic words. Though he'd said that there'd been tons of things which had tipped him off, Subaru thought he was stretching it too much.

Reid Astrea, the man who was known as the First Sword Saint, should have died 400 years ago.

Just because some of his features matched doesn't mean that you can easily come to the conclusion of having encountered that hero of yore whose name had gone down in fairytale and legend.

If there'd been a chance that he could have noticed that, then he, Subaru, should have been able to come to that conclusion. After all he and Emilia had agreed that the Trials which had been put forward by this Watchtower were similarish to the Ordeals they'd taken at Echidna's graveyard.

With that said, Subaru should have given more thought about the contents of the Trials set out by this tower and raised as many possibilities as he could.

Neglecting that had led to their defeat on the Second Floor, Electra

Julius: "Hmmh. How on earth did we end up coming across this Swordsman of legend brought back from the past…? Originally, I would have been delighted in having been granted this boon, but all things considered…"

Subaru: "I get how you feel. These heroes of legend are all good at being disappointing in reality. This Watchtower is full of let downs like with Shaula who'd been judged as a Sage. "

Julius: "…You get… how I feel…?"

His voice was cracked and it felt full of self-derision. Subaru inconsiderately gritted his teeth when he heard close up what Julius had moaned out. But he chose not to touch on that, opting instead to say,"Even so,"

Subaru: "If I'm recalling correctly, the First Sword Saint is engraved on the Gold Coins, but there's a pretty big difference between that and the actual guy. Shaula also differed in her gender, so even though we can't do much about it, there's a considerable gap between them two too. The guy on the Gold Coin looked more like a middle-aged dude…"

Julius: "Just a quick historical tidbit, it was when he was older that Reid accomplished his deeds that led him to be counted as one of the Three Great Heroes. The figure depicted on the Gold Coins is probably correct. The him up above is younger than the one from recorded history."

Subaru: "Come to mention it, Reid didn't seem like he recognized Shaula…"

He'd planned to change the subject, but they'd per chance ended up touching on another issue.

Compared to what Julius had said, there'd definitely been too much of a difference of hot and cold between the two of Reid and Shaula for there to have been some sort of friendship between them. If he assumed that "This guy was the Reid before he'd met Shaula" then there'd be some parts he could agree with regarding the two's differences in recognizing each other.

But, when he took into consideration Shaula's overreaction and the high likelihood that Reid hadn't remembered her name or face due to how he was, the basis of his hypothesis weakened.

Subaru: "If we take that as correct, doesn't that mean that they would have fought against the Witch after their prime days? Meaning we'd have to beat Reid in his prime."

Julius: "Feels to me like that's going to be really though, or nigh impossible."

Subaru: "Yeah for sure it's gonna be an exhausting mess. But I'm sure that there'll be some way of getting around this if we come up with a plan. As things stand…"

Subaru hesitated as he looked for anything that could help them against Reid.

Right now, at this moment, he should have told Julius what was weighing on his mind, but he hadn't because his heart had stopped him in his tracks.

Yet he'd been a little too slow.

Julius: "As things stand… What do you mean?"

Subaru: "Ah, it's nothing…"

Julius: "Subaru"

If he made any excuses saying that he'd observed Reid and noticed a chink in his armor they'd be immediately spotted by him. In actual fact, right now, he hadn't found anything that'd let them get past Reid or anything that looked like a weak point; that was for sure.

Thus Subaru had resigned himself when he'd had his name curtly called out.

Subaru: "…Emilia passed the Trial after you and Anastasia lost consciousness."

Julius: "…"

Subaru: "That's all. The reason why she beat the guy down wasn't due to her being stronger than him. Let's just say that lady luck was at her side… Because Emilia is well, unique like that."

It was a bit difficult to call the end result a mere victory.

Emilia had just barely had her resolve and ability recognized by their examiner, Reid, in the Trial. However, the circumstances that had led to her achieving that were hard to explain to anyone who hadn't witnessed them.

Because, even if they tried to beat him in the same way, it wouldn't be possible by anyone other than Emilia.

Subaru: "Anyways, as a result of having various complex stuff click into place for her, Emilia cleared the Trial. Despite that, the guy said that he'd only let those who cleared the Trial pass through, so all of us will have to beat him to go upstairs… Rather wicked of him.”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “So we’ll need to work out a battle plan. Regardless of fighting dignity, I can’t even talk unless I force him to recognize the fighting duo that is me and Beatrice. And as for Meili, she has no reason to take the Trial in the first place. I guess she’ll understand after we talk about it… Though I guess she’ll be bummed out.”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “That’s why, well, you too won’t be going in blind when we rematch him. I’m not stretching things here, I mean it. We won’t tackle him like we did this time around. We’ll work out a plan and mode of approach after we have a far clearer picture of him. This time one which is in my style…”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “…Hey, are you listening? Hey, Julius?”

Subaru felt suspicious that Julius hadn’t replied to any of his rapid-fire explanations. When he called out to him (Julius still being slung over his back), Julius paused for a moment, and then said,

Julius: “Yeah, yeah, everything’s alright. I’m listening of course… I see, Emilia managed it”

Subaru: “Well I mentioned that slightly earlier… But yeah. Since that happened this means clearing the Trial isn’t a futile hope. Aren’t you going too hard on yourself?”

Julius: “Too hard on myself? Huh, you really needn’t worry so much. —Everything is exactly as you say. If Emilia’s been able to pass the Trial then he’s… Then the Sword Saint Reid is not an insurmountable obstacle. Us knowing that is incredibly beneficial.”

Subaru: “Y-Yeah, right. That’s right… I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

Julius had unexpectedly accepted the fact that Emilia had passed the Trial rather flexibly. Subaru had nervously explained it to him, but he sensed that Julius was sidestepping his question from his reaction. —No, things were fine.

Julius had been informed that someone had cleared the obstacle he'd slammed face first into before him.

But it was pointless for Julius to worry himself sick over that. Subaru could say that he was taking a bit too much of a naive look at him. Or by his own measure, he guessed that he shouldn't have leapt to conclusions about the Knight named Julius Juukulius.

As Subaru found himself embroiled by these profound feelings, Julius let out a long sigh and casually spoke out saying, "So then,"

Julius: "Isn't it high time you put me down? I'm going to get motion sickness if I keep staying on your back. It's not like you have the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion like Earth Dragons do, right?"

Subaru: "Be patient with the breeze and all the shaking, and be grateful that I'm carrying you. It's certainly tiring work, but I can't be so coldhearted as to make you walk on your own when you're injured. Emilia-tan would tell me off."

Subaru shook his head at Julius' proposal and jiggled his body, readjusting Julius on his back.

Julius wasn't at all in a good condition right now. No matter how skilled the room's Spirit was at its work and how much treatment Julius, whose whole body had been knocked about, had been able to receive, he'd only spent a few dozen minutes in the Green Room.

That, and he hadn't been able to receive any treatment from his second defeat.

If he was suffering from stuff like cuts or fractures then Subaru could have put his skills into work with the first aid treatment techniques of the Clind variety; but, unfortunately, Julius didn't have any such obvious wounds.

Reid's blows had been the kind that had been designed to tear through Julius' heart.

Of course, there didn’t seem to be any doubt that he’d accumulated damage that wasn’t visible on the surface, but that was no excuse to make him do anything that would exert him.

That’s why Subaru had resolved to go down the whole staircase with Julius on his back, with half of it remaining – probably about 200 more steps; yet despite that—

Julius”—No, I can’t keep causing you trouble. It’d be fine if I was still fainted but luckily I’ve woken up. I can go down the rest of the stairs by myself.”

Subaru: “Don’t be so ridiculously stubborn. It’s too late for that, even if you insist. If you’re saying you’re embarrassed at being seen carried on my back, everyone who was with me already saw that… Only Shaula and Anastasia didn’t on account of having fainted.”

Julius: “Then that’s the reason why. There’s no way I can show myself like this to those two… Especially to Anastasia-sama. Put me down”

Subaru: “Don’t say such forced things. To start with, you…”

Julius: “—I SAID PUT ME DOWN!”

—His outburst was quite abrupt.

Subaru: “Whoa?!”

Subaru’s shoulder struck against the staircase wall straight after Julius’ strained voice had thudded against his earlobe.

That was thanks to Julius twisting himself off by force from his back. Subaru had immediately turned to face the wall so that he’d keep himself safe, but it wouldn’t have been unlikely if he’d ended up nearly falling down the stairs.

However, he’d avoided that fate thanks to his quick thinking—

Julius: “—kh”

Subaru: “You fucking idiot! What the hell were you thinking?!”

He leaned against the wall and when he turned around, he found Julius lying down a few stairs below him. He'd fallen from Subaru's back and slid down them.

He was lying face down, propping himself up on his elbows, wheezing in pain with a deep look of agony about him. Clearly not only from falling down the stairs.

Subaru: "I told you to quit it! HEY, stay right there you dumbass. I'm coming over to you…"

Julius: "You don't need to!"

Subaru: "…"

Julius: "…I can stand by myself. I don't need you to help me"

Subaru had tried to run down to him as quickly as he could, but he was stopped in his tracks.

Julius had stretched out his hand in front of him as he propped himself up against the floor and stopped him from running over. Still panting heavily, he scrunched his face and managed to raise his body up.

He leaned against the wall and slowly lifted his lower back up, stretched up his knees and stood up, though still using the wall to prop himself up.

Julius: "See, didn't I tell you so? That it'd be easy for me to stand by myself."

Subaru was at a loss for words at what Julius had said, who in some respects sounded like he was casting everything aside. Julius turned himself around and with the right side of his body pressed up against the wall, he began to slowly climb down the stairs at the same speed that a baby crawling along the floor would.

One step at a time, as if he was forcing himself—.

Julius: "It looks like it'll take me a bit more time, but this way I won't cause you any trouble. More importantly, the girls downstairs are worried. I'm grateful that you seem to be looking past what I've done, but it wasn't just you who went out looking for where I was, right?"

Step by step.

Julius: "If possible, would you be able to go downstairs before me and explain to them what happened? Though I think it's probably best you leave the full story and apologizing to me. You just need to tell them that you found me and try to make them feel less worried"

Slowly, slowly, one step at a time.

Julius: "…I admit that apologizing is going to be pretty depressing, but avoiding that is a road I can't walk down. After you calm the waters down, even if it's just by a little, I'll really owe you a huge debt of gratitude. You know, you may even want to think about adding to the debt I owe you."

Julius continued to speak without looking over at him as he tried to make his way down the stairs by himself. Indeed, a gap had started to form between him and the immobile Subaru despite how slow he was going about it.

He could close the distance between them immediately if he so desired. If he were to grant his wish, he still needed to walk past him once. —So Subaru set his feet into motion.

Subaru: "I guess I should speak to Emilia's side first."

Julius: "…Yeah, oh, that's right, if Anastasia-sama's woken up… Ah wait, no, let's not. Anyways, I'd like to depend on you."

Subaru hurried down the stairs and easily caught up to Julius. He let out a sigh that resembled one of relief as he heard Subaru's footsteps echoing around the staircase and encouraged him to vamoose off ahead.

—No, not "vamoose off ahead." More like he'd encouraged him to "not wait up on me."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru could understand a little about what lay in Julius' innermost thoughts with what he'd said. The reason why he was able to was the same one why only he, and no one else, had immediately gotten the hunch that Julius had gone to challenge Reid—.

There was unmistakably something in common between that which Subaru had felt back then and this somewhat similar incident. That's why, back then, Subaru had—

Subaru: "—tch! God damn this! Damnthisdamnthisdamnthis! Dumbass! We're both huge dumbasses! For fuck's sake!"

Subaru spat out his frustrations, kicked the staircase and then made his way towards Julius.

He was not going to walk past him (now flustered, leaning against the wall), instead he grabbed his left arm and propped him up by unceremoniously draping his arm over his shoulder.

Julius: “Hey…Subaru, what are you…”

Subaru: “SHUT UP! What are you doing, standing up by yourself! It’s plain as day that you’re struggling to stand up straight! Like I’d ever be able to let myself prance off and leave a guy in your state here! I’d be first in line to say just how disgusted I am at myself before Emilia even has a chance to tell me off!”

Julius: “But I’m…”

Subaru: “THIS IS ME WE’RE TALKING ABOUT, I wouldn’t lend you a hand if you didn’t really need one. Even under normal circumstances, my hands are always filled with this, that and the other. If you seriously don’t want to borrow my strength then quit hobbling about so miserably, it’s really trying my patience!”

Julius: “…”

Julius remained silent as Subaru shouted at him with spittle flying out from his mouth.

As soon as Subaru saw that Julius had hesitated in going against him, and that, for now, he’d lost the strength to shake him off as he’d been doing, he started to walk again whilst still lending his shoulder to Julius whether he liked it or not.

Julius had no time to go against him, now that he’d set the pace like that.

Subaru: “I’m not going to act like I know or understand what’s going through your heart.”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “But, right now, you needn’t walk down these stairs, these long-ass stairs alone, all by yourself. I will lend you my shoulder and I won’t think of it as a debt either.”

Talking about lending, borrowing and debts was ridiculous.

If he put it like that, then how much did he owe Julius?

Surely his first debt to him would have started in the Training Ground at the Royal Castle.

—He knew the reason why Julius had challenged Reid even though he knew he couldn't win.

He'd… he'd acted the same as Subaru back then.

Back then, Subaru had challenged Julius even though he knew he couldn't win. No matter how many times he'd been knocked down, no matter how many times he'd been struck, he'd picked himself up without learning his lesson and kept challenging him.

Because he'd had no other way to hurl out the tempestuous emotions that had built up inside his heart other than by doing that.

And, back then, Subaru had ended up "Alone" at that place where everything had ended for him, at that place where he'd argued with Emilia and she'd said goodbye to him. That had been agonizing. That had made him want to cry.

—So how could he leave Julius all alone on this staircase.

Subaru: "…"

His heart must be set ablaze. Just like him back then. But unlike him, he still didn't know where he could hurl out his tempestuous emotions.

Julius: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "What is it."

Julius: "…I'm sorry."

Subaru: "Shut up."

He replied with that, hoping he wouldn't perceive it as a fit of anger.

And like that, the two of them slowly climbed down the stairs and made it back to the Fourth Floor.

—Emilia found them a little over ten minutes later, clasping her chest in relief.

Chapter 30:
The Second Floor's Capture Strategy Post-Mortem

1

—There was a woman, all by herself.

This woman worried about everything; about each and every struggling person in the world.

Nothing in this small world was hidden from her view. To her, everything, everyone, was a child who needed protection.

Such a fragile world, with such fragile people, would be so easy to subjugate.

But the woman sought not to control this world. Instead, she sought to shelter it from harm.

And thus, her wretched war of trial and error began. But protecting and advising and saving the entire world proved to be too heavy a burden, for the woman's lonely hands could not reach everyone.

Although she could see every solution, she lacked a way to solve every problem.

For the first time, the woman cursed her own inadequacy.

Even if she saw a calamity, she was short on helping hands.

Even if she was immersed in a building crisis, she could do nothing to prevent it. She could never do enough.

She could reach what was in front of her, but she couldn't cross an impossible distance. She could deal with pressing affairs, but she couldn't turn back the unforgiving wheel of time. There was no life to deal with the faraway calamity.

There was so much beyond her reach.

Her supposed power had not granted her wish. Her arrogant wisdom lit no path to hope.

And thus, even as she cast warding spells, the woman fell into despair. Submerged by an endless sea of regret, each sorrowful wail she could not prevent shattered her broken heart afresh.

Finally, the woman understood.

I can’t. There’s no way. It’s impossible.

This exorbitant, lofty wish was unattainable, especially for one lonesome woman.

She knew. She realized. She understood. Her wish was impossible. But. Even so…

If her own vigilant hands weren’t enough, she would find more. Simply by not being alone, by finding others who shared her wish, she could reach everyone.

Her mind felt cleansed. The once hazy path had finally become clear.

Her wish could finally reach her once inexorable lament, those once inevitable tragedies.

She joins forces with the instigator, bequeaths the battlefield to the Heavenly Sword, makes a deal with the Dragon and pushes forward towards her greatest wish.

Surely, she could fulfill it. Surely, it would come. The promised denouement of her great wish.

No matter what, at any cost, soon, maybe tomorrow. It was, of course, on its way—.

“Saved. They’ll all be saved. The way to save them, I can see it.—The path to salvation.”

Even if there were a price to pay in blood, she needed to prevail, for leaving her struggle unfinished would render it meaningless.

Even if her instigator were to disappear, even if her Heavenly Sword's smiles were to vanish forever, even if her dragon were to levant to faraway skies, she could not surrender.

Even if her first allies left her side, she lost her way, for the once lonesome woman was no longer alone.

"It has to be there. I know it was there.—I need to know."

She walks a road paved with corpses, designating countless lives as sacrifices, all for the sake of grasping her greatest aspiration.

One day, with a sufficient amount of knowledge, her hands could reach each and every tear.

For the first time, she truly believed that she could reach it.

So, consumed by that sacred wish, the woman struggled through excruciating despair.

The Witch of Greed bled avarice in the wake of her yearning.

2

Emilia: "—Julius has to properly rest here, until all of his wounds heal! This is the most absolute of the most absolute!"

Practically throwing a very worn-down Julius into the green room, Emilia scolded him. She had gone to meet them and had heaved a sigh of relief when she saw Subaru, with Julius supported by his shoulder, coming down the long stairs connecting the 2nd Floor Electra and the 4th Floor.

To be able to switch between emotions quickly was indeed a virtue, and they were thankful she did not pry into the matter further. It was a clever move, as there was no reason to prepare an excuse if one did not ask for reasons. Even if, in truth, she had a mountain of things to ask—

Emilia: "—Even if I don't, I'm sure Subaru will ask all the important questions anyway. So, I'm going to have you rest properly, and everything can come after. Right?"

Subaru: "…Ah—, yeah, pretty much. There's nothing I can say against that, and I don't plan on going against Emilia-tan's opinions. Get some sleep."

Subaru put Julius down on a bed of ivy near the entrance of the green room. Beside him, both hands on her waist, Emilia proudly puffed air through her nostrils. That too was a cute gesture.

After hearing what the two had to say, Julius brushed over his bangs and sighed.

Julius: "Naturally. I am already but putting a burden on you and Emilia-sama. Even after all this, I can no longer act with such shamelessness. I will follow."

Subaru: "Man just a simple 'Got it' would be enough here…"

Emilia: "That's right! There's no need for that formality stuff. You're injured, so it's just a matter of you staying put until your injuries are healed! It's completely fine to be a burden. We're friends, after all."

Julius: "…"

Emilia: "Patrasche, I'm leaving Julius in your care. If there's anything wrong, just cry out loud. We'll come running, okay?"

Slashing away Julius' roundabout way of showing gratitude, Emilia called out to the corner of the room, beyond the ashamed Julius—Where Patrasche was healing her own wounds.

The headcount of the green room increased to three people and one animal—The unconscious duo of Rem and Anastasia, and the wounded duo of Julius and Patrasche. Because of how the green room had a limit on how many people could remain present at a time, Subaru and Emilia could not remain to keep an eye on them.

Thus, it was better for one of the injured members to keep an eye on everyone else. Normally, that job would go to Julius, however.

Julius: "To have Emilia-sama insist this much, I have no face to show. I will quietly do as told."

Subaru: “Its kinda tough to get back trust once you’ve lost it. So in that respect, it’s kinda hard to get past Patrasche, who’s always kinda scoring full points for trust. If there’s any funny business going on, it’s fine to not hold back and bite him, Patrasche.”

Patrasche: “…”

She snorted as a sign of accepting Subaru and Emilia’s words—Or at least, it could be taken as such.

The best girl of the Emilia camp, their own Understanding Lady Patrasche, seemed to feel a sort of responsibility towards Julius for letting him leave alone just now.

Her eyes shone with a strong will, as if to say that there won’t be a next time.

Subaru: “Look, look. Even Patrasche is going Thou shall not pass the next time.”

Emilia: “You know what, it’s very strange but you’re right. She does look like she’s saying that.”

Subaru: “But, according to our bilingual Head Internal Affairs Official, more or less, the nuance is right. But, since she’s a lady, she might end her sentences with a Desu wa, ya know?”

Sometimes, whenever Otto translated for her using his Divine Protection of Soul Language, Subaru almost always found Patrasche’s high level of tolerance towards his actions to be astonishing. Recently, he felt that even without Otto’s presence, the two could communicate what was on their minds. But whenever that fact was brought up, Patrasche would beat him with her tail. Indeed, the mind of a woman is complex.

In any case,

Julius: “I will quietly allow my wounds to heal here. Recuperating while being surrounded by such beautiful girls in a serene environment is a luxury one can rarely afford after all.”

Subaru: “I’ll let ya know beforehand, all the girls here except for

Anastasia belong to me.”

Subaru pointed out, starting with the bedridden Rem, then Patrasche, then to Emilia who was right beside him, in a retort to Julius’ impudent statement.

Upon hearing that, Emilia’s cheeks puffed up and,

Emilia: “I’m not Subaru’s yet… But I did give it some thought, and since Subaru is my Knight, wouldn’t that just make him mine?”

Subaru: “That makes me really happy but also really embarrassed!”

Emilia put her finger to her lips while Subaru gave a celebratory dance, but after all that, he looked back towards Julius.

It would take time for him to overcome his anguish. But, at the very least, he ought to have the heart to take the first step up that long hill.

Subaru: “Well, anywho, while you’re resting, you might wanna hold your head and roll around while thinking over the stuff that just happened, but don’t forget that Patrasche’s watching.”

Julius: “You may be at ease. I will not display such shamelessness. —It would be very inelegant of me.”

Subaru: “…Feels like you’re already getting better.”

Julius: “Hm.”

With the answer being very like him, Subaru’s cheeks loosened with a soft smile.

He bore two defeats, where he could not accomplish a single thing.

That fact should have brought him intolerable humiliation and helplessness, but he seemed to have come past that first wave of emotions.

Subaru felt glad to have not let him be alone on that long stairway.

If it could give him even the tiniest bit of salvation, it would mean that Subaru had truly learnt something from his time of being publicly humiliated at the castle from that time.

Subaru: “—Patrasche, I’ll leave this in your hands.”

At the very end, Subaru gave his beloved dragon a reminder, before both he and Emilia exited the room.

Upon their departure, Patrasche got up and took a seat nearer to Julius, in a position to better keep him under her watch. Seeing that, Julius put on a bitter smile.

Indeed, Patrasche was a wise dragon, faithful to her instructions.

Considering her spirit, and Julius’ mental condition in mind, it was safe to assume that the members of the Green Room would be okay.

Emilia: “…Should I freeze the door just in case?”

Subaru: “I’m always pretty amazed by Emilia-tan’s imagination, but let’s leave that as a last resort thing, yeah? Don’t wanna anger the spirit in that room either.”

Emilia: “Nn, you’re right. Fufu, I just wanted to see what you’d say. I was just joking.”

Cutely sticking out her tongue, Emilia apologized. Seeing that, Subaru pursed his lips, deciding not to tell her that he’ll keep that as a possible option.

—Worst case scenario, he would consider keeping Julius put with force.

In that case, the best person to stop Julius would still be Emilia, speaking both from her position, and from a power perspective. Fortunately, because Julius’ mental state was stabilizing, Subaru felt relieved that there was no need to take such measures.

Subaru: “Anywho, let’s leave the matters of the Green Room to its resident spirit. From what I saw, Patrasche’s wounds seemed to be healing really nicely, so Julius will get back up soon too.”

Emilia: “Un, that’s right. Julius’ injuries… They weren’t as bad as they looked. I think he’ll be back to full health in no time. Reid made it like that, I guess.”

Subaru: “…Good at going easy, huh. Can’t really let Julius hear that stuff, eh.”

Subaru agreed to how Emilia worded her guess while scratching his head.

While having absolute mastery over chopsticks sounded like a bad joke, to be able to play around in such a way with someone strong as Julius, Reid’s battle prowess needed no explanation.

The first generation Sword Saint, the man who defeated the Witch of Envy alongside the Sage and the Dragon—In the face of such a legendary man, one had no choice but to nod their heads and accept things as they were.

But whether his personality was befitting someone bearing the title of Legendary Hero was a different matter entirely.

Subaru: “For now, our first topic would be…”

Ram: “—To find a way to clear that pesky 2nd Trial or whatever, before Knight Julius’ wounds heal, right?”

Subaru: “…”

And, cutting into their conversation with a cold voice was Ram. She stood with her back leaning against the wall of the hallway.

Caught out by the limitations of the Green Room, she had been waiting outside for the two to return. Having his innermost concerns spilled by her, Subaru rubbed his cheeks.

Subaru: “Is my face really of the variety that gives away everything I’m thinking so accurately?”

Ram: “I just put together whatever worries were on your face. Right now, the things Barusu would be worried about are all inside of that room. That’s all there was to it.”

Subaru: “Hell, that’s not even close. I’m worried about everyone, obviously including Emilia-tan and Beako, but I’m also concerned about you, dearest sister. It ain’t limited to the people occupying that room.”

Ram: “Hah!”

Ram ridiculed his thumbs-up with a snort.

Subaru looked on, lips pursed in a pout, as Ram began walking away with her back to him. Emilia covered her mouth as she giggled right beside him and,

Emilia: “It’s okay. Ram just got a little flustered. She’s just not really honest.”

Subaru: “I feel like you’re really biased here, but if Emilia-tan says it, well.”

Watching her from the side, Subaru turned and cracked his neck, before chasing after Ram. Ram was headed towards one of the smaller rooms of the 4th Floor.

Upon stepping inside of that room,

Beatrice: “…You’re late, I suppose. Kept us waiting for too long, in fact. Julius is doing fine, I suppose?”

Her voice came from the dead center of the room, where she was sitting. Looking straight up at Subaru and Emilia, she showered light abuse, with a bit of a worry for Julius mixed in. Subaru bitterly smiled at that dishonest attitude of hers.

Subaru: “Don’t worry. Seems that worst is past him for now. He’s got a pointlessly strong sense of responsibility, so he’ll be reflecting on what he did, I’m sure… Well, he won’t be causing any problems anytime soon.”

Beatrice: “If Subaru say so, I’ll take those words at face value, in fact. That way, our problems can be narrowed down further, I suppose.”

After discerning Julius' condition, Beatrice pulled in her chin. Nodding at her words, Subaru moved his eyes over the room.

The small room was one of the many on the 4th Floor of the Watchtower, and it was also one that held all of the group's hand luggage. They all sat down in a circle, with Subaru and Beatrice facing Emilia and Ram respectively. With that—

Subaru: "I need you to tell me more about that guy, Shaula."

Shaula: "Uhii, Master's looking really sscary! But, but, I don't hate it when he's tough on me like that either. It's a love-hate thing."

Ram: "As she says, Master. Disgusting."

Subaru: "I object!"

Wrapping her arms around her voluptuously feminine body, Shaula squirmed with Meili sat atop her lap. Ram took her crazy behavior too literally, but to Subaru, those false charges were too much to take.

Anyway,

Subaru: "First of all, I'd like to thank everyone for helping with looking for Julius. Even if we don't want it, the guy will likely come around later to apologize himself, so for now, he's fine."

Emilia: "It's fine. I told Julius too, but I'm just glad we found him safe and sound. I'm sure everyone else feels the same way, right?"

Ram: "I would prefer to not have my opinion be the same as Emilia-sama's."

Subaru: "Eh?! Say what now?!"

Subaru had tried to lead the conversation forward, but it quickly seemed that there was a difference of opinion between Ram and Emilia.

Ram pointed a finger towards a surprised Emilia and started, Ram: “Please listen carefully. As far as I have been reported, the 2nd Trial needs to be overcome by everyone present in the tower. And yet, Knight Julius took matters into his own hands without consulting any of us and made a second attempt by himself… If there was a single misstep here, it could have broken down the cooperative relationship we have built between the Anastasia-sama’s faction and ours.”

Emilia: “Because, from his actions alone, all of us could’ve been disqualified?”

Ram: “If that were the case, our entire journey would have been for nothing. It is also uncertain whether the 2nd Floor examiner would even let us go safely… That includes that fake Sage over there.”

Ram’s eyes took a glance at Shaula while she was explaining everything to Emilia. Perhaps she had not considered to be a topic of conversation, so she pointed to herself and asked,

Shaula: “Me? Does fake Sage mean me? That’ss really unthinkable, calling me that! I’ve never called myself a Sage! The only name I give is the only one Master gave me, and that’s Shaula! I’m devoted to my one and only Master!”

Ram: “Disgusting.”

Subaru: “Stop looking at me and saying that! …I won’t deny what you’re saying.”

Putting the excessive things aside, considering what could be the worst case scenario, Ram’s assumptions could not be put to rest. Julius’ actions put everyone at risk.

Even if he had not completely grasped the gist of the 2nd Trial,—Or rather, because he had a complete understanding of the situation, that his actions were even more careless.

Ram: “That it was unlike the Knight Julius, is something I, who barely knows the man, cannot say. But, taking even Gluttony into account, I thought of him as a person who would not do such things.”

Subaru: “Well, I do agree with that… But my line of thinking’s a bit different than that, since I know the guy. I chalk it up to being Manly Measles.”

Ram: “Measles?”

Subaru: “Should I have said chicken pox instead?”

Ram: “…”

In any case, it had the nuance of A disease everyone had caught at least once in their lives.

As such, measles or chickenpox could easily be compared with Julius’ actions and would be more easy to digest, but getting them when one is an adult can have serious consequences.

Especially as it can be fatal when it appears.

Subaru: “That it wasn’t fatal this time… Let’s just be happy with that and let him off.”

Ram: “—I just don’t want to be pulled back by others.”

She looked away from Subaru and whispered.

Seeing her cheeks stiffen, Subaru raised his eyebrows.

Beatrice: “The elder of the sisters hasn’t been feeling too well ever since she came to the tower, in fact. Maybe the fatigue of a long journey has finally caught up to her, or maybe the horn therapy is not working as well for her, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Or maybe, there’s something else that’s bothering her… Heck, that’s probably it.”

Sitting right next to him with hands held, Subaru and Beatrice whispered to one another.

To take out her frustrations of Julius’ actions and irritation of being unable to see a way to clear the trial, on Subaru and Shaula, was very far from Ram’s usual behavior.

It was likely that the source of that frustration came from looking at the method of saving Rem in the face, yet being unable to reach for it.

Of course, it would be wrong to say that the fatigue or the injured horns pointed out by Beatrice were unrelated to that.

Both mind and body were unwell.

All of those were the likely factors working behind Ram's outburst.

Meili: "We~ell, do you guys just wanna fight here~? Or would you guys want to get the convo moving~? If you don't decide soon, I'm not gonna be taking part, ya know~."

In an instant, Meili put a stop on the worsening condition of the place.

Snuggling beside Shaula, fingers playing with her braids, she lazily scanned everyone present in the room,

Meili: "Please stop fighting if you can, kay~? I don't like it, getting hurt or being afraid~"

Subaru: "You… No, you're right. That bystander position of yours saves us a lot."

Meili: "Is that so~? Ufufu, then please be grateful, kay~?"

In the face of his gratitude, Meili smiled innocently like the young girl she was.

However, that smile of hers also had a bewitching allure to it, subtly describing her dangerous nature.

Even in the face of that smile, Subaru offered his gratitude to her. Thinking back, it was also Meili who had suggested retreating from the Trial from before.

Having someone as a companion who was able to tell when to retreat depending on the situation was a big plus.

Subaru: “Keep it up, alright? It’s important to look at things with composure.”

Meili: “You’re really feeling good, huh~. Even if you say things like that, my job’s done when we get out of the desert, right~? I’m not good for anything else anyway~.”

Subaru: “Not how I see it, though? Having more heads thinking helps a lot, and combined with us getting out of the desert alive, while in the tower, we all gotta share our lot with each other. Just think that you’re outta luck and get depended on by me.”

Meili: “…”

Amazed by Subaru’s outright declaration of imposing on her, she let out a long sigh and,

Meili: “…I’m starting to get why Petra-chan doesn’t feel at ease with you~.”

Subaru: “—? Petra’s what now?”

Meili: “It’s no~thing. That aside, don’t you wanna ask the naked Onee-san some stuff~?”

Turning her face away, Meili stood up and began shoving Shaula’s back. Probably not because of the strength of her tiny arms, but Shaula cheerfully came forward and took a seat right in front of him and slightly bowed down her head.

Shaula: “I may be sslightly inexperienced, but I leave myself in your care.”

Subaru: “That’s a very admirable attitude you have there. Well, now moving on to the matter of wedding gifts… Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Emilia-tan?! Beako?! Why are you two pinching both of my sides?!”

Emilia: “No reason.”

Beatrice: “It’s nothing, in fact.”

Even if they said it had no reason, they both wanted to do something more than just pinch his sides, but hesitated to escalate things further.

Anyway, Subaru coughed to get everything back on track, then approached Shaula again,

Subaru: “The guy from above is unmistakably Reid Astrea. The man himself admitted it so. So, I ask you, a living witness from that time, to enlighten us. What kind of guy was he?”

Shaula: “Human trash.”

Subaru: “I heard you the first time, and heck, I even saw it in action.”

Twisting her lips, she displayed an expression unbecoming of a lady as beautiful as her as she reminisced about her deceased ‘friend’. Putting aside that that same deceased ‘friend’ was sitting around in the same building, just on the floor above, the memories she had of him seemed to definitely be not pleasant.

Well, she did faint at the very sight of him, mouth bubbling and all. So that came as no surprise.

Subaru: “We gotta get past him, no matter what. I’d love to get even a single hint on how to get past the 2nd Floor’s Trial.”

Ram: “So please tell us anything and everything about him. The Sword Saint Reid’s personality, habits, relationships, likes, dislikes, weaknesses. That’s right, we want to know his weakness. Talk.”

Shaula: “Woah you’re coming onto me really fasst! If I knew what his weakness was, I’d be stabbing back at him! In other words, he doesn’t have a weaknesss!”

Ram: “Tch, useless.”

Shaula: “You little girl, acting like you’re hotter stuff than Master…”

Maybe she did have pride as a Sage, but she seemed to take offense to Ram’s high and mighty attitude.

Subaru: “The hell you doing, hiding? You’re definitely stronger than her.”

Shaula: “It’s not about who’s strong or who’s weak. Somehow, my instincts are telling me to do thiss. Maybe, it’s Master who’s scared. That scared feeling’s getting to me, because we’re one mind one body.”

Subaru: “Don’t blame your lack of nerves on me.”

Unable to calm down because of feeling something soft press against his back, Subaru grabbed Shaula’s neck and pulled her unwilling body back to where it was.

And thus, the Q&A session resumed but—

Emilia: “Umm… In the end, Shaula doesn’t know much about the Trial, right?”

Shaula: “It’s not that I don’t know. I jusst know it’s not time to tell everything yet. I think everything’s gonna be revealed when the tower is conquered.

Emilia: “Is that how it is… I feel reeally excited.”

Subaru: “Don’t play around with the naive Emilia.”

Ram: “Even if you don’t know the Sword Saint ‘s weaknesses, he has habits, right? If he has a fighting pattern, for example, we might be able to come up with a way to fight against it.”

Shaula: “Habitss, huh. Ah, that’s right, whenever I tried to kill him for sexual harassment, he had the nerve to scratch his ass while defending hisself! Isn’t that a pattern?”

Emilia: “He’s just jibing at you, huh…”

Beatrice: “In the first place, the condition for clearing the Trial is vague, I suppose. There is no doubt Emilia was acknowledged, there must be another condition… The fulfilment of which gains acknowledgement as well, in fact.”

Shaula: “I think he’s weak to pretty girlss. I guess if a pretty girl passes by, it might help.”

Subaru: “That means, Julius and I’ll have to be left behind, huh… That’s a pretty tough condition.”

Beatrice: “S-Subaru might be able to get by, if he tries his best, like by blinding him, definitely, that way, I think he might maybe really get through, I suppose…!”

Subaru: “You’re so damn cute, you.”

And, amidst the many unnecessary and unhelpful questions and answers, Subaru caught up Beatrice in a hug and was presently patting her head.

Whilst in his arms, letting herself be spoiled by him,

Beatrice: “In any case, Emilia just happened to succeed, in fact. A simple coincidence. That man just happened to let his guard down, and she just happened to have been able to hit him, I suppose.”

Subaru: “And how do you suppose that happened?”

Beatrice: “If Emilia was looking to kill, that man would have not gotten hit, in fact. Thus, it was that man’s carelessness, which led to Emilia’s victory, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Huh? Just now, was I praised?”

Beatrice: “I did praise you, in fact.”

Emilia: “Ah, just like I thought. Fufu, thank you. It makes me reeally happy.”

Emilia rejoiced at Beatrice’s compliment, while Subaru began stroking her head even more.

It was a rather messed up situation, but still there was something to laugh and be happy about.

Subaru: “Man, anyway, it’s pretty cool to think that your ability to counter depends on the amount of intent to kill. The reality of it is like that, huh. How serious you are about it, that.”

Ram: “…you should put it the other way around. Just as Barusu says, you won’t understand how serious an enemy is, but it’s best to not let them get serious.”

Subaru: “You shouldn’t make them get serious?”

Picking up on her mutterings, Subaru frowned at Ram. Upon questioning her, she fell into deep thought for a while before answering,

Ram: “That’s right. Emilia-sama was acknowledged because she forced the conditions out of him and met them… The condition for clearing this Trial is quite the hurdle, isn’t it.”

Subaru: “I feel the same about the fuzzy details of the conditions. The examiner’s disposition here’s coming out well.”

Ram: “That is why, I believe it is best to entertain the examiner, and while doing so, present conditions which could be used for the Trial. On top of that, one has to defeat the examiner to advance to the 2nd Floor.”

Subaru: “…”

Taking in Ram’s words, Subaru felt he understood it a bit better.

Emilia had proposed the condition of Without moving a single step, then through a hefty load of effort coupled with a tiny sprinkle of luck, she had grasped her win—Factoring in Reid’s carelessness, it was a victory with the most loose conditions. To gain victory through physical prowess, should be considered to be impossible after this.

Subaru: “Even if I go with that, it’s not like he’d agree to fight me in a match of rock-paper-scissors, huh…”

Emilia: “Umm, so we’ve got to find a condition that’ll convince Reid to accept them, and then do our best… Just as I thought, this Trial is a really hard exam you’ve got to really think about, huh.”

Subaru: “Rather than being hard, I’d say this is a different kind of harassment compared to the 3rd Floor’s one.”

The first was the test of wisdom (of an otherworldly kind), and after that came the test of strength(on the level of the world’s strongest), was contrary to their conclusions, so there must be something else that is the main topic of this Trial 。

In other words, while the 2nd Floor’s Trial was different from the 3rd Floor’s, it was indisputable fact that the nature of these two Trials showed the depth of the wickedness of the Watchtower’s creator, the elusive Sage.

All that was left was—

Shaula: “—Issn’t fine and all this way. Just take it easy. No need to be going in such a hurry.”

Subaru: “Even if you put it that way, ya know.”

Shaula looked over everyone busy with their own thoughts, then while sitting cross-legged, leaning left to right, she spoke in a casual way. In response, Subaru and others frowned at her, but she took it all in stride while indulging in the fun feeling that showed on her sparkling eyes,

Shaula: “I’m hoping Master and everyone else just stays here for ever and ever and eveeer. I’ve been waiting for Master to come back home for hundreds of years, so.”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Shaula: “You guys can take as long as you want, as long as you like, to clear the Trials. I’ll be watching over you always.—No matter how many days, years, or even hundreds of years it takes.”

Those were words that could not be laughed away, because of the weight they carried.

In that light tone and soft smile, she gave to everyone—No, to Subaru alone, for whom she bore a heavy, heavy love, the weight of hundreds of years.

The weight of being told by the Sage to live in the Watchtower, and to protect it.

Shaula had said.

It was forbidden to leave the Tower without finishing the Trials. And if that were violated, then she would, even if it were her beloved Master, the current target of her affections, Subaru, she would show no mercy.

Even if they proclaim words of love, even if they maintain an amicable relationship, that did not mean they would be allies.

The Stars Keeper of the Pleiades Watchtower, Shaula, was yet but another—

Shaula: "—It's fine to just stay here and have fun with me!"

—As one realized from her smile, obstacle for the ones who wished to clear the Trials.

Chapter 31:
An Encouragement of Cooperating in the Tower

1

—In the end, it was decided via meeting that the conquest of the 2nd Floor Electra would have to be put on hold.

Although they failed to come up with an idea that would allow everyone to break through their current situation, the biggest factor in their decision to postpone everything was but one—Subaru's stomach had begun growling.

Subaru: "Looking back, I was unconscious for two entire days before I got up, and immediately got to tackling the tower's trials… No wonder my stomach was almost touching my back."

It was only when the conversations died down that Subaru's stomach roared, and for the first time did he realize exactly how famished he was.

To be unable to fight on an empty stomach, was not actually true, but what was true was that it affected one's ability to think properly. As a result, once Subaru's stomach started growling to make its dissatisfaction known, everyone took it as a chance to sum up their discussions for the time being.

Subaru: "Honestly, some part of me feels kinda relieved because of that…"

Leaving aside the breakthrough plan for the 2nd Floor, there was a certain pattern observed in the questions proposed by the Trials of the Watchtower.

Alongside the realization of the pettiness of the questioner, the exact nature of the danger Shaula posed also came to light—From the start, everyone was supposed to be wary of her because of her fighting prowess, but because her head was empty and she was overly clingy towards Subaru, no one stayed on guard around her.

—It's fine to just stay here and have fun with me!

No matter how many days, years, or even hundreds of years—.

Indeed, Shaula's audacious declaration had reminded everyone of exactly what danger she posed. As it likely should be.

Subaru: "It's not like I'm planning on it or anything, but if we make a break for it in the middle of our tower conquest, it seems like there's a rule to make it so she'll definitely become our enemy, right…"

Sifting through his mind, he recalled one of the many rules Shaula had spoken of.

Dropping out in the middle of the Trial, violating any of the Trial 's rules, disrespecting the Library, and destroying the Tower. If any of these are broken, then Shaula will once more become the enemy she was when they first tried to enter the Watchtower.

Subaru wanted to avoid that. Be it in terms of war tactics or out of simple sentimentalism.

Subaru: "But, you know. Just sticking around here for years on end like how Shaula put it, doesn't seem really realistic, so I'd really like a pass on that but…"

Once he looked straight at the tower conquest, all sorts of anxieties will naturally rear their ugly heads from a lot of directions.

Everyone had already spent over a month on their path to get to the Pleiades Watchtower. Even if they clear the Trials one after another without a hitch and conquer the Tower, and if they take that same amount of time to get back to Priestella, it'll become a journey of around three months.

Of course, withdrawing halfway was, because it would make Shaula an enemy, an undesirable decision to come to, but the Royal Election deadline needed to be kept in consideration as Emilia and Anastasia were participants.

Three years in total—A bit over one year had already passed, leaving only less than two years at hand.

Of course, the time one can accumulate and the time one can spend, were in fact both impossibly limited.

Beatrice: “But if you keep worrying about tomorrow’s tomorrow, you won’t get anywhere in fact. For now, the tomorrow that is based on today is important, I suppose. For that…”

Subaru: “I gotta eat till I’m full now. Right.”

Beatrice: “That is so, in fact.”

She pointed her finger at him as he spoke those words.

As the discussions were halted in lieu of preparing their meals, Subaru took this chance to go and stroll through the various parts of the Tower—Spending his free time wandering through the area everyone designated as their residential quarters.

And accompanying him, holding his hand as tightly as she could, was Beatrice.

The reason they held hands every now and then was because Subaru’s gate was busted, and as his contracted Spirit, Beatrice collected his pent up mana. But even putting that reason aside, Subaru wanted to hold Beatrice’s hand, and Beatrice herself never refused.

Subaru: “Besides, you were really worried about me when I was out cold for two whole days, right? So just relax for today and let me spoil you.”

Beatrice: “Stop it with your stupid comments, I suppose. I’m only collecting the Mana I didn’t bother collecting when you were sleeping, in fact. Betty wants to always be at her best, especially in this Tower, I suppose. I want to avoid a lack of preparation, in fact.”

Subaru: “You say that, but weren’t you the one in the end who held my hand while I was sleeping, even though you didn’t collect my Mana?”

Beatrice: “That was indeed unrelated to Mana but acts that are for the purpose of recharging Betty’s heart are always so, I suppose.”

Subaru smiled as Beatrice puffed her chest as she proudly stated her Mana-unrelated intentions, and decided not to point out how it was a much more embarrassing thing.

In any case, Subaru raised his hand in agreement with her.

They had to keep the 2nd Floor Trial in consideration. By no means did he want to think that the 1st Floor’s Trial also required heavy combat power, but he could not exclude the possibility.

Moreover, the Subaru and Beatrice duo had functionality even outside of battle. And for that, he needed Beatrice to be at peak condition at all times.

Subaru: “Alright, Beako! I’m good now so you don’t have to mind me. Just keep on sucking out my Mana till you’re round and plum…!”

Beatrice: “Betty’s not going to puff up like a ball even if I collect a lot of Mana, in fact! Moreover, I wonder if you are aware of how much Mana you have even if you are feeling good, I suppose. I can’t have you collapsing again because I took from what little Mana you already have, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Oi oi, if that’s the case, what’d you suggest doing?”

Beatrice: “Just listen-to-me! At the very least, you need to eat your fill, rest up, recover your strength and Mana, and also work hard and keep Betty company. That is your mission, in fact.”

Subaru: “I’m pretty sure I’m all good now, and I’m also pretty sure you just want me to keep you from feeling lonely… ah.”

He deftly bore a complicated mix of chagrin and charm on his face. He stopped walking when he heard the footsteps of someone coming from further back in the passage.

Noticing Subaru and Beatrice there, Emilia approached, surprised.

In her hands she held a metal container painted silver—A bucket.

Subaru: “A bucket, huh. Even at times like this, Emilia-tan’s giving her best, eh. Gonna practice singing?”

Emilia: “Fufu, what are you saying, Subaru, you. I sure do get a lot of help from Bucket-sensei when I’m practicing singing, now’s not really the time for it, you know?”

Subaru: “Right, right. So what’s with the bucket again?”

Emilia: “Well. I’m getting Bucket-sensei to do his usual job, of course.”

Smiling at Subaru’s question, Emilia thrust the bucket to him. And, it was full of water, so indeed, Bucket-sensei was doing his usual job well.

However, even if the bucket fulfilled its purpose, there rose a question in that itself.

Subaru: “Uh, but, where’s the water from? The Tower is surrounded by desert, right?”

Emilia: “Oh, no no, that’s where you’re wrong, Subaru. If you go past the Tower, really reeeally far, the Great Waterfall’s supposed to be there. And there’s a looot of water there, so…”

Subaru: “You went all the way, just for a bucket of water. All for me.”

Emilia: “If it’s for you, Subaru, I wouldn’t mind doing that at all, but that’s not it. To tell you the truth, the spirit in the Green Room can give us fresh and clean water.”

She wore pride on her face as she spoke for some reason, but Subaru felt giddy for that little bit of what she said before giving him the truth of the situation.

That if it were for Subaru, she would go fetch water from even the Great Waterfall. It made him incredibly happy.

Subaru: “While we’re at it, happy and all, ya know… Those spirits are really something. Going all the way even outside of healing injuries and all, aren’t they.”

Emilia: “If it’s just making water, Beatrice and I can do it too with magic but…”

Beatrice: “The Miasma is too thick around the Sand Dunes and the Tower, I suppose. It would be much wiser to avoid drinking the water created from Mana affected by it, in fact.”

Emilia: “That’s how it is.”

Subaru: “I see, I see.”

Beatrice weighed on Emilia’s reluctance, and Subaru recognized the problem.

The problem of securing a source of drinking water for the journey up to that point, which should be regarded as important if it were a normal journey, had been cleared more or less by relying on magic.

As long as one had Mana, there was no need to carry a large amount of drinking water as it could be produced as much as needed, only the containers. Magic made things extremely convenient in this case.

Subaru: “It’s not air pollution, but more like Mana pollution, huh. So it’s like, bad for you? Drinking that water?”

Beatrice: “I do not know if any immediate changes will be seen in the body, I suppose. But the more you drink, the more that much Miasma enters you, in fact. If that happens, at the very worst, developing a physical condition like Subaru and earning special attention from witchbeasts may be possible, I suppose. I’m getting shivers just thinking about it, in fact.

Subaru: “It’s weird coming from me, but it really is kinda hard, living with it and all…”

He often made use of this specific property of his at various times, but it was more of a last resort and not something that could be used often. Even beyond that, if he went hiking in the mountains for whatever reason, there would be a risk of accidentally getting surrounded by Demon Beasts.

If given a choice, not having such a physical condition would be much better than having it.

Emilia: “And so we’re using the Green Room spirit’s purified spring water as much as possible. We did the same thing when Subaru was sleeping for two days straight.”

Subaru: “Hmmm—, so that’s how it was.”

He felt impressed by the living conditions of the Pleiades Watchtower.

And, as he mulled over the talk of spring water, something hit Subaru. It even had to do with the caution he felt towards Shaula from just before.

Subaru: “Putting aside the water stuff, how’re we doing with the food? We did fill up on supplies at that city beyond the desert, but we did have a hard time with it.”

Emilia: “You can relax, Subaru, no need to worry about that. Even if it was a little bit of a hassle, the food didn’t just fly off somewhere. All of it is still in the dragon carriage. But, um…”

Subaru: “No matter how you cut it, it’s not gonna last maybe even a month, is it.”

Even if drinking water was put aside, there was a weight limit on what could be carried on the dragon carriage. Moreover, food needs were not limited to Subaru and the gang. Their partner dragons, Patrasche and Gyan needed food as well. Keeping that fact in mind, they had stocked up on a month’s worth of food.

To escape only with their lives in hand, was not the goal they were aiming for with the Tower’s trials. Thus, they had only a month’s time to properly conquer the Pleiades Watchtower and head off to the nearest town.

Their deadline was just that one month.

"…"

Subaru: "That said, I really don't plan on being here for the whole month."

Emilia: "Subaru…"

Noticing a hint of worry in her eyes, Subaru smiled.

They had a deadline and their challenges were many, but if they shied away from them, nothing would start.

Subaru: "Anyhow, in just one day… Ah, well, I got us off to a late start, so to be fair, it's the third day since we got to the Tower but, we've already cleared the first Trial and Emilia-tan easily nabbed her victory in the second."

Emilia: "It, it really wasn't 'easily nabbed', though…

Subaru: "You're supposed to season this part with a good bluff, so it's completely fine."

He pointed his finger at Emilia, arrogance at full throttle, then pulled Beatrice closer to him and placed his chin on top of her head.

That way, both Subaru and Beatrice were looking up at Emilia.

Subaru: "Doesn't matter if the opponent's the former strongest Sword Saint or whatever. Beako and I are gonna lambast one-eyed skirt chasing chopsticks bastard's face in with our brilliant strategies.

Beatrice: "That is so, I suppose. Lambast his face in, in fact."

Emilia: "Lambast…"

Subaru: "No one really says lambast anymore these days."

Emilia: "No count! That's so unfair! You two kept saying it so.!"

Having fallen into their trap, Emilia puffed up her red-dyed cheeks.

As they added in a new pattern to their usual back and forth, Emilia sighed as her worry faded a bit more.

Emilia: "Un, fine I get it, I get it just fine. Hearing it coming from Subaru makes it feel like it was really easy. But that makes you sound just as reliable."

Subaru: "Yeah, just have faith, keep on hoping and keep on loving me. That's why I'm your knight, after all."

Emilia: "That's right, isn't it? I'll be in your care, then, my dearest knight."

Subaru: "Uh, just now, you didn't deny the love part so I'm kinda giddy…"

Emilia: "—?"

The whisper of love he had mixed into their usual banter seemed to have slipped off, so he felt slightly disappointed. Well, even if he had been properly answered, his feeling of being flustered would not have gone away, so it was actually better this way.

In any case—

Subaru: "I know it's a bit late to ask, but isn't it kinda weird that Emilia-tan's the one who was told to bring the water? This is the kind of work that's supposed to be… not really done by your Knight but, isn't it supposed to be the kind of work that underlings do?"

Emilia: "It's really fine. You might be my Knight, but I don't want our relationship to be that of a master and servant's. I just want you to keep this in mind, so just quietly be spoiled. You're recovering right now."

Subaru: "What's up with that, Emilia-tan?! If you're gonna pamper me so much, I'm gonna die from happiness!"

Emilia: "Besides that, I'm in charge of today's dinner! I want to do everything by myself!"

Beatrice: “It seems like she is serious about both statements. That is what makes her so hard to read, I suppose.”

Beatrice let out a short sigh at Emilia’s statement. And then, as Subaru kept his chin on her head, she waved to Emilia,

Beatrice: “Look, Emilia. Subaru isn’t going to relax as long as you’re here, in fact. You’re delaying preparations for our meal as well, so hurry and be off, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Really? Okay. I’ll see you later then. Look forward to it, kay?”

Beatrice: “We’ll be waiting with glee.”

Beatrice sent Emilia off in spineless Subaru’s place. Her response to Emilia’s words reflected a subtle difference in their perceptions.

Emilia: “I’ll call you when it’s done, so don’t go off too far, okay?”

Beatrice: “We’ll be going to the 4th Floor, I suppose. As for if we can hear your calls or not…

Emilia: “Gotcha. I’ll use a louder voice.”

Beatrice: “…okay, okay in fact.”

After exchanging smiles, Emilia went off on her way, bucket in hand, waving her hand as she disappeared around the corner. Once she was sure Emilia was gone, Beatrice looked up to Subaru, who was still resting his chin on her head.

Beatrice: “Now then, I hope you have calmed down, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…Yeah I’m good now. I don’t really get it, but I suddenly thought Emilia-tan was really cute, ya know. Like everything else but Emilia doesn’t have color anymore, so I feel all better now that I got to see her really smile.”

Beatrice: “I don’t understand a word of what you’re saying, it’s worse than usual, in fact! And besides that…”

Subaru: “Besides that?”

He had told Emilia his true feelings in poem format with a straight face. So Beatrice pressed her back against Subaru’s chest and,

Beatrice: “It’s unfair you’re so full of Emilia, I suppose. Your partner is Betty, in fact. Please act with awareness of this fact, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You, you’re really a cute little thing aren’t ya.”

Beatrice: “Mmgyah-! In fact!”

As she seemed too sweet all of a sudden, Subaru picked her up and spun round and round as he rubbed his cheeks against hers.

Subaru: “It’s fine, relax. You’re really important to me too. How do I put it, uh, right now, everything around me looks so beautiful, but you’re looking particularly spectacular. I love you, Beako!”

Beatrice: “W-Wawa-Wait! I get it, I get it okay? So let me go already! Let me down, I suppose! I got it already, so let me down, in fact!”

But even as Beatrice shouted, her face beet red, Subaru would not let her down.

And so, he wandered around the halls of the 4th Floor, spinning through each space available, Beatrice still in his arms, with glee.

There was still plenty of time till Emilia would call them for their meal, so their voices would continue painting the halls with cries of joy for some time more.

2

Now then, the total time before their meal was not literally spent spinning.

Subaru took his chance to learn from the 4th Floor graded course, presented by Beatrice. She was his senior here, having spent two more days than him actively living in the Tower, so he had a lot to learn.

Though as it may be, in the first place, this place was called a 'Watchtower'.

However, there was no need to be concerned about it's habitability, and in fact, nothing extra needed to be done to improve the comfort of living, even in the 4th Floor residential area. The only special rooms were the Green Room, which had become their treatment facility, and the large room which housed the stairs leading to the 3rd and 2nd Floors

Apart from the large stairs leading to the floor below, there were many smaller rooms scattered here and there, with no visible pattern to them.

Subaru: "It feels weird to not have a map, but I'm sure I'd feel even weirder if we had one. This Tower definitely has a creepy design, I'm absolutely sure of it. Really not a fan of these kinds of rattled arrangements of buildings."

Beatrice: "I wonder what you are even talking about… Usually one would assume the worst of everything, seeing as how distasteful the contents of the Trials are, I suppose. Condemning the soul of the creator is a given at this point, in fact."

Shaula: "Ah! That right there, that's talking bad about my Master! You ankle-biter, you're badmouthing my Master! He's the one who built this Tower, you know! Are you okay with this, Master?! If you're spoiling her just because she's little, she'll grow up all rotten, you know! This' one of the times you scold them silly! And then, and then, you can spoil me as much as you want after! Come on over here!"

Subaru: "Just shut it already…"

Running her mouth as if she'd slain an ogre(1), Shaula tried finding fault in Beatrice. But in fact, Beatrice said nothing particularly bad, but he felt it was a pain to explain.

There was no point in trying to differentiate between the Subaru, her Master and the Sage each and every time. Even more since they were using that misunderstanding to their benefit.

Emilia: “Heeey, stop fooling around all the time. Shaula too, please, be quiet.”

Shaula: “Ee—, I can’t take thiss. This is disscrimination. Discrimination between ankle-biterss.”

Emilia: “If she really does something bad, Subaru will properly scold her and not just spoil her. And since he’s not, it means Beatrice did nothing to get scolded. And besides, it’s only natural that the younger ones are treasured more. We have to be patient, Shaula.”

Beatrice: “Even though Betty is older than everyone else, it does not sit well with me that I am always treated as a child, I suppose…”

Subaru: “Yeah, yeah, just show off how old you are.”

He smiled as he petted Beatrice’s head to calm her down.

In response to Emilia’s call for their meal, all parties concerned gathered in the large room on the 4th Floor—The place where the dragon carriages and their cargo were being kept.

Everyone but Rem and Anastasia, due to both being unconscious, were present. All sat facing each other.

Everyone except those two, which meant—

Julius: “—Before we begin, would it be permissible for me to speak for a bit, Emilia-sama?”

He said, being the last one to arrive at the room.

While Julius had been practically thrown into the Green Room to recover from his injuries, his reason for appearing was definitely not limited to partaking in the meal.

He had refused the proposal of having his food being carried to the Green Room.

And to his answer his question, Emilia, who was managing the place, nodded, Emilia: “Of course, by all means. But, you don’t really need to ask for my permission, you know.”

Julius: “As Anastasia-sama is currently absent, the one who ought to be respected the most is Emilia-sama. Moreover, my selfish attitude has already inconvenienced you. That it is only limited to this occasion, is something I cannot certainly say.”

He responded to her, everything articulated elegantly as he shook his head.

His humble mannerisms and his honest disposition were both part of his usual nature. However, individuals who would not take his speech in a favorable manner were present as well.

Ram: “How admirable. If you only acted as such beforehand.”

Subaru: “Ram…”

Ram: “We have enough recklessness and stubbornness with Barusu over there. In fact, it is far more natural to be disappointed in a person who seemed sane. I hope you will take care not to repeat this in the future.”

Ram sharply evaluated Julius’ arbitrary actions.

A chill in her voice and eyes were her usual features, but this particular time, Subaru felt her expression was much more stiff. Even if she was harsh as usual, there was a certain hint of concern mixed into her words.

Emilia: “Ram, you went a bit too far this time.”

Ram: “…please accept my sincere apologies, Emilia-sama. From hereafter, I will take more care.”

She immediately apologized for her bitterness, then gave a fleeting nod to Julius. As such, there was no point in further pulling this topic around.

Besides, it wasn’t right to blame Ram for not being as level-headed. He held no grudge, nor felt any hate for Julius. She simply wished to save Rem, and was doing everything in her power to do so.

Julius: “My sincerest apologies to both Madame Ram, and everyone else. I have caused everyone much worry.”

Understanding fully well that Ram’s words were only him reaping what he sowed, Julius bowed his head and dropped the matter from his side as well.

This was what Julius wanted to do before starting their meal.

Subaru did have an inkling for Julius’ previous behavior. So he had already forgiven him for it, but whether Julius forgave himself was an entirely different matter.

This was the first step he took, in order to start the ritual to absolve himself.

Emilia: “Okay! Julius apologized. I accept that apology. With that, I’m all done with this matter.”

Clapping her hands together, Emilia summed up her feelings on the matter. Subaru, followed by Beatrice, nodded.

Subaru: “Well, I’ve already let him have it from my part, so any more would be an embarrassment to our samurai ways.”

Beatrice: “Betty is, I have a similar opinion as well, in fact. It is fine if you simply regain face with future actions, I suppose.”

Julius: “—My thanks.”

He whispered under his breath.

Meili suddenly responded to his whisper of gratitude. While sitting on the floor with her legs stretched out, she fiddled with her braid as she spoke,

Meili: “Isn’t it fine~? He didn’t die after all~ And I’m not particularly concerned about Mr. Knight either way~”

Shaula: “Master’s saying no problem ‘ere, so I’ve got no problemss either. No-pass~”

Subaru: “Yeah no, no pass is something entirely different…”

Meili’s thoughts were likely exactly as she put them, rather than consideration for Julius. Shaula, who agreed, was in the same boat.

Apart from Shaula, who was affiliated with the Tower and whose true standing was still a mystery, Meili’s position in all of this was vague as well.

And so—

“…”

Only Ram did not respond directly to Julius’ apology, not saying a word about whether she forgave him or not.

She simply put her white robe over her head and stared down at her meal.

Julius wordlessly accepted that. Everyone did the same. This alone was a personal matter, everyone felt it would be best to leave it at that.

Emilia: “—Well then, let’s dig in. Ram and I were cooks for today.”

Ram: “We couldn’t use fire, so we put a bit of our manliness into it. Otherwise, it should be decent.”

Emilia: “Hmm, that’s right. It’s reeally decent… Doesn’t decent sound a bit weird?”

Her voice reminded everyone of their current state. Even though she tilted her head to pose the question, neither Ram nor anyone else followed up on it.

Anyhow, following this exchange, everyone sat to have their precious meal.

Most of the food being carried in the dragon carried were either smoked or dried rations, so naturally, the food would be coarse and tough—However, magic proved to be of great use here as well.

Through the use of Emilia's special Ice Magic, it was possible to create a pocket refrigerator in the dragon carriage, allowing fresh ingredients to be stored for long periods of time.

Because of this, the party was able to have plenty of fresh fruits, balancing their diet with the steady slew of dry meat.

Emilia: "We still have to use the foodstuff that spoils easily fast."

Subaru: "We're really lucky to even be able to worry about that, you know. Really, you're E-M-S (Emilia-tan, Maji Shoku no Megami)! With this journey and all, I'm sure your cooking's gotten even better, so maybe make miso soup every morning for the rest of my life?"

Emilia: "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're saying."

It was true, however, the rise in Emilia's cooking skills.

At the request of Emilia herself, cooking on this journey, was being done in rotations. Of course, it was a given that Emilia never cooked by herself, instead learning by following another cook's footsteps.

Thanks to that, there was no one who kept burning their daisukiyaki platter pitch black.

Because she was put in charge of the part of cooking that did not involve platter.

By the way, the only people who could actually cook, among the members partaking in this journey, were Subaru, who picked up this skill over his year of being a servant at the mansion, Julius, who apparently could do whatever he set his mind to, and finally Ram, whose cooking was surprisingly decent.

Even on their way to Priestella, the only people who put themselves on cooking duty were the male trio of Subaru, Otto and Garfiel, who then decided their order through rock-paper-scissors.

Leaving that aside—

Ram: "—staring at me like that, do you have anything to say?"

Subaru: "…nah, like, I know it's been over a month now, since we've started this journey and all but, I still can't really believe it. That Ram can cook."

Ram: "I was wondering what you were going to say but this is just…"

Using his meaningful stare as an excuse, Ram sighed, unwilling to hide any of her distaste for him.

Ram: "The only reason Ram doesn't go near the kitchen is not because Ram can't cook, but because she doesn't want to. I'm not going to touch any kind of cooking that does not involve steamed sweet potatoes."

Subaru: "So that's why… Well, that's that then."

Ram: "Hmm, that's that… I wonder why I make an exception just for steamed sweet potatoes though."

Her face crumbled into a complex expression as she questioned her own preferences herself. As Subaru gazed at her profile, he let out his own sigh.

No matter what household chore it was, Ram was always behind Rem.

Now, as all traces of Rem was erased from the world, Subaru observed that their sisterly bond might have not been the same as their face-value.

In truth, Ram was supposed to be able to perform any kind of task assigned to her, regardless of whether it was present in her list of duties as a maid. Thus it may be that Rem's absence has nothing to do with her abilities in the first place.

In other words, if Ram thought about doing it, she could do whatever she wanted when Rem was still in good health. The reason she did not was most likely related to—Not her laziness.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru felt like he should not dig up those particular things.

The present Ram certainly knew nothing of that. And if Rem returns, he felt it would be unnecessary to bring it up anyway.

When she returns, that is.

Subaru: “I kinda guessed that’s how it’s gonna be, but you really have no table manners, do you?”

Shaula: “*munch, munch*… Huh? Master, Did you just say ssomething?”

She blinked a few times at Subaru, who looked at her with a scowl.

In this world, there were not few in number, top-class beauties who completely wasted their good looks. Shaula had to be the top-class of that top-class, to the point that she was on par with Liliana.

As she brought food to her mouth, Shaula scratched her head with her other hand.

Subaru: “Oi, don’t talk with food in your mouth. Eat or talk, do one.”

Shaula: “Okaay, then I’ll talk with Master! I can talk to my Master for all eternity.”

Subaru: “Who’d wanna get into a chat with you like this…! Just be quiet and eat.”

Shaula: “Okaaays.”

While he had to feel a bit of respect for her level of loyalty, wanting to prioritize talking to Subaru above eating and such, he also felt that precisely because she was so ready to obey that her risk level was actually so low.

Indeed, her nature as a person and her ability in every other respect and the level of danger she posed to everyone was in utter imbalance.

Meili: “Say, barely-clothed onee-san~ You really have a, um, voracious way of eating, were you really that hungry~?

Shaula: “Nah, it’s just that this food’s ssuper tasty! I didn’t really think eating’s that big of a deal, just get something in and be done with it if I get a say, but if it’s really this tassty, I wouldn’t mind becoming that half-devil’s disciple!

Emilia: “Eh? My disciple? As in, in cooking?”

Instead of stopping at Meili’s point, she went beyond the topic and snapped her finger to Emilia as she swallowed down whatever she was munching on. Emilia jumped, startled, while Shaula continued to shake her head up and down,

Shaula: “This cooking’ss pretty good. You can’t fool me. I’m gonna take up cooking too, get good at it right away and make my way into Master’s heart through his stomach, and not let him get any sleep tonight!”

Meili: “Your real intentions are leaking there~”

Emilia: “Shaula, I understand your feelings. But you know, the way of the cook is a hard-trodden path. If you’re really ready, I’ll put some serious thought into taking you in as my disciple.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, you’re really cheeky about the weirdest things, ya know.”

Besides, 70% of today’s cooking was likely the result of Ram’s work. So it was hilarious to watch Emilia act like she had figured out everything there was to cooking, and Shaula who was a bit too taken in by amateur-level cooking.

Subaru: “I feel like I gotta get this out here, but there’s a lotta tasty stuff out there. Emilia-tan’s cooking is, uh… Well, it gets full marks just because she did it but, putting that aside, it’s pretty average. What are you usually eating anyway?”

Shaula: “Thank you for asking me, Masster. My eating habits aren’t really anything special. I’m usually filling myself by roasting whatever I take down.”

Subaru: “Whatever you take down… Eh, wait, do you mean those Demon Beasts from outside?”

Shaula listened to Subaru’s question, then folded her arms under her voluptuous mounds and nodded repeatedly.

To have a steady diet of Demon Beasts was too weird to be a normal thing. So to take the advice of a specialist, Subaru turned to Beatrice and posed the natural question with his look.

Subaru: “I know we just talked about not drinking water that’s mixed with the Miasma a while ago but,”

Beatrice: “I don’t even want to think if Demon Beast meat is good for the body or not, in fact. It’s only that, it’s not something that’s so dangerous, that it’ll have an immediate bad effect, I suppose.”

Julius: “According to certain records, there were a few researchers who had set out to eat Demon Beast meat in the past.”

As Subaru undid the wrinkles between Beatrice’s brows with his fingers, Julius brought up an interesting piece of information.

As everyone’s expressions urged him to continue after he stopped, Julius closed one eye and began anew,

Julius: “As we are already aware, Demon Beasts have a habit of attacking people. Be it in the middle of their march or during a long journey, if one were hard-pressed enough for food, they could find Demon Beasts aplenty, wandering within restricted territories. After all, they never think of hiding. Demon Beasts will always come to attack. If one defeats them, then it was obvious that a good source of food would be obtained. There should be no doubt that there were individuals who truly thought this."

Subaru: "Well, did that go end well for them?"

Julius: "To improve their situation for nourishment, they had apparently faced many twists and turns, gone through many trials and errors. However, no such improvement was found. Of course, those who ate it found it to not be poisonous but…"

Subaru: "But?"

Julius: "It seems there is a problem with the taste."

Subaru looked amazed, that it turned out to be a problem of taste.

If it tasted bad, then it was fine to cover it up with various spices or other condiments. It was true that the meat of wild beasts had this raw and earthy taste, but if it wasn't poisonous, then they ought to have at least tried a bit harder.

Julius: "That was as far as it was recorded in literature. Miss Shaula, what is your personal experience with it?"

Shaula: "It tastes like sand that's been rinsed in ssewage water. Totally."

Subaru: "Ah, it's the kind where spices won't help."

Shaula: "If Master wants to try some, I'll whole roast a Hungry Horse King. It's so disgusting, you get super addicted. I'm lying."

After finding out what unimaginable thing her 400 year diet was, everyone unanimously decided to no longer blame her poor table manners.

Subaru politely declined the whole roasted Hungry Horse King offer. In the first place, that particularly disturbing Demon Beast was already on fire.

Subaru: “I thought having to worry about food was an actual problem, but…”

He popped himself down and covered his face.

At the end of his vision, there was Shaula, her entire face lit with a smile so bright, it could bring tears to others as she stuffed a variety of food into her mouth, and Emilia, who looked on as Shaula ate, her feelings of motherhood being further stimulated, which could potentially lead her to further improve her cooking.

One month, that was the amount of time left to them, which accounted for all of their food, including their excess.

And if Shaula kept up the pace at which she ate, their time limit might just decrease even further, Subaru thought.

3

Once their meal was over and they had their baths in the spring water (consisting of mainly wiping their bodies), the day was over and it was time to go to bed.

In light of their present situation, it could be said that the Tower Conquest Team ought to spend the night trying to come up with a plan to break through their current stalemate, but at present, everyone felt that it would not work like that.

To expect tomorrow’s matters to be solved by their tomorrow’s selves—Might have been more appropriate than given credit for.

Subaru: “Not like we’re just gonna get smacked in the face with it. Let’s take a bit more time.”

Given what the contents of the 2nd Floor’s Trial was, worst case scenario, they might have to go in again the next day without a plan at all.

Instead of thinking up a workaround, hit it with all you have—Though in truth, they all wanted to avoid actually breaking him apart. At the very least their examiner, the First Generation Sword Saint, had no intention of killing them.

Or maybe they could even find a way to overcome this particular obstacle simply from conversing with him. Just like how Emilia had pried out her winning conditions from him simply by talking.

Subaru: “Well, gotta do what I gotta do to keep my head straight. So I have to eat well, rest well, and always be at peak performance.”

He thought as he pinched both his cheeks, then put all his worries away for the day.

For the most part, Emilia and the others agreed with Subaru’s point—or rather, they were so demotivated, they had no choice but to.

And with that, the night’s meeting was over. Each left for a dragon carriage, which they were using as a makeshift bedroom, to rest and prepare for the next day. At least, that was supposed to be the case.

Beatrice: “Subaru, Betty will be with Emilia and the others, in fact.”

Subaru: “O-Oh, gotcha. Sorry for making you worry, Beako. Don’t stay up too late. You’ll stop growing and get stuck in your small size… Wait, that’s pretty cute. Alright, Beako, remember to stay up late.”

Beatrice: “You don’t have to worry, Betty won’t grow any taller than this, I suppose. I’ll be cute forever, in fact. So I’ll be like this even if I sleep early, I suppose.”

After yawning, Subaru waved to Beatrice before she parted, led by Emilia as she held her hand.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, take care of Beako. See ya tomorrow.”

Emilia: “Un, see you tomorrow… Subaru, don’t stay up too late either, okay?”

Instead of directly telling him not to, Emilia said her piece and headed down the Great Stairway to the lower floor. Once she was out of sight, Subaru stretched a few times, then walked down the 4th Floor’s passage.

His destination was obvious. A door that was covered in ivy, the entrance to the Green Room.

And there—

Julius: “Is that you, Subaru?”

Subaru: “…ah, it’s you.”

In front of the room, Subaru ran into Julius, who watched him with eyes wide.

Just when he was about to enter the room, Subaru arrived, so he squinted at him for a good moment, then immediately pulled back his chin knowingly.

Julius: “I understand. It seems we share the same reason for entering this room.”

Subaru: “I’m pretty sure we have different people in mind… So, should I give it up to you tonight?”

Julius: “No need…”

Shaking his head at Subaru’s proposal, Julius looked to the closed door. A moment of silence followed, then the pair of yellow eyes were once again pointed at Subaru.

And then he took a step back from the door.

Julius: “This time, it is I who ought to give it up for you. Thinking back, you were unconscious for two entire days until this morning. I did inform her of your well being afterwards, but I’m sure she yearned for your presence at night nevertheless.”

Subaru: “…yeah, well, if you’re giving it up for me, I’ll just gladly take you up on your offer.”

Imitating his elegant style, Subaru scratched his head while stealing quick glances at Julius.

He found no signs of displeasure in Julius’ expression, but Subaru was bad at trying to find out someone else's feelings in the first place. That went double for anyone who hid their true feelings. It was practically impossible for him at that point.

Subaru: "You okay? I'm pretty sure you want to tag along."

So he sighed and simply spoke what was on his mind.

Julius gave a thin smile,

Julius: "If possible, I would most definitely want to be at Anastasia-sama's side when she wakes up… It's only that, I feel I will be unable to find the words to speak to her when she does. It is true that I am feeling lost about this aspect. It is most deplorable."

Subaru: "It's fine if you open with 'I was very worried, so I'm glad you've awakened'. The problem is with what comes next. That… uh, well, I'll leave that to you."

Julius: "Pfft-"

Subaru: "Oi, why'd you laugh. I'm being pretty serious ya know."

Even if he was being serious, it seemed that Julius did not take too fondly to it. He then turned on his heels, turning his back to Subaru, who wore a surprised expression.

Julius: "You're able to freely say what you want. —I envy that."

Subaru: "Kinda feels more like you're calling me an idiot. Oi, where're you going."

Julius: "I'm relinquishing my time to you. I'll return to the dragon carriage and take rest. I feel slightly worn-out from today's activities."

Raising his hand while keeping Subaru at his back, Julius told him before leaving.

Whether he felt well enough to joke about the Trial tiring him slightly, or whether he was simply putting up a front, was something Subaru could not tell.

He couldn't tell but—

Subaru: "—Julius, it's better if you're there when Anastasia wakes up after all. When I'm done with my stuff, I'll head over to get you, so you better do just that."

Julius: "…"

Subaru: "I'll let ya know beforehand, but I'm pretty sure I've got a lot more regrets on my back than you. So this is my advice. Just take it."

He shouted at the back that disappeared into the hallway. Whether Julius heard or not, he was unsure as there was no reply. However, Julius would definitely not take it the wrong way. At least, Subaru believed that.

Subaru: "I'm coming in."

With a shake of his head, he threw away all considerations he had for Julius, Subaru pushed the door open and took a step into the Green Room. The room, illuminated by a dim and faint glow, still remained dominated by greenery, with two girls who lay asleep on a bed of ivy.

Anastasia on the bed near the entrance, and Rem on the bed further back.

Subaru: "And you're at the back too, huh."

Patrasche: "…"

She let out a low growl for the visiting Subaru. As if the jet-black dragon knew he would come.

Maybe she did know. Spontaneously, she moved away to make space for Subaru to sit on her bed of ivy.

Subaru: "Really, you're one hell of a girl… Those wounds are healing up nicely too, eh."

With a bitter smile, Subaru traced her black scales with his hands.

The wounds she had received during the time they were fighting against the Hungry Horse King underground had healed nicely over the past three days. Normally, she wouldn't let Subaru know the true extent of her injuries. Now, however, she was genuinely focused on recovering instead of putting up a strong front.

Subaru: "Really, can't thank this spirit enough. If it weren't for this room, who knows how hard this whole thing would've turned out to be."

Even at the risk of losing his life, Subaru would never voice that it was good Patrasche got off with shallow wounds. No wounds would always be the best outcome, but he did feel lucky that that was the extent of injuries anyone had received during their ride through the Augria Sand Dunes.

The only ones injured in that event were only Subaru and Patrasche. That they were able to come back up to above-functioning standard was all thanks to this Green Room.

Adding the injured duo of Julius and Anastasia from the 2nd Floor's Trial, the existence of the Green Room was indeed miraculous. As if someone had known this might happen and left it prepared beforehand.

Subaru: "Well then."

Once he was done affirming his love for Patrasche, Subaru took a deep breath before heading towards the bed further inside the room —Towards Rem.

When there, the ivy shifted like flowing silk, gathering into a spot to make a sort-of chair for him to sit on.

Subaru: "Really, man, there should be a limit to how nice you can be."

Even though he had just expressed his everlasting gratitude for the Green Room's spirit, he felt like it was taken as flattery for even better treatment.

That was far from his intention, but he took the offer anyway.

Subaru: “Julius did mention Rem’s been missing me at night, huh…”

That was his mistake.

That wasn’t the case at all. Because, the one who was waiting to speak late at night, when no one would bother them, wasn’t but Rem, but it was surely Subaru.

4

—Subaru noticed something was off when he felt his shoulders being lightly shaken.

Subaru: “—uh?”

Raising his face from the bed, he blinked several times. Contrary to physical reactions, the mind was usually much slower to react.

And slowly, his mind returned to him. Then he noticed.

Subaru: “Did… Did I fall asleep?”

Hand on his chin, Subaru pondered the surprising fact that he actually fell asleep.

It seemed that he was still in the Green Room, still sitting on that ivy chair right beside Rem’s bed, and it seemed he had fallen asleep in that very position. However, he felt that the shape of his chair was somehow different from what he remembered.

The chair in his memories had no backside. But now, the chair had a large backside to support him in his sleep, and it had taken an almost egg-like shape to conform to his comfort as much as possible. The spirit was just too damn nice.

It was so comfortable, it turned yawns into actual sleep.

Subaru: “Means I was pretty tired too… Eh, Patrasche?”

Muttering about him dozing off, Subaru turned to Patrasche—The kind lady who had nudged him with her long tail to wake him.

Curled up over the ivy bed, his beloved dragon likely woke him to alert him to something. Subaru squinted at where she was staring and…

Subaru: "—uwah, no way."

…jumped off his chair and rushed over to the bed that was by the Green Room's entrance door—The one Anastasia was supposed to be occupying.

It's 'supposed to be' because she was not there. And once it hit Subaru, his face lost color.

Subaru: "E-Even though I gave Julius an earful about this…"

Only because he dozed off, Julius could not greet Anastasia when she woke up. He couldn't even face him if he wanted to with this.

—Unfortunately, that was not the only problem.

Subaru: "She got up, and then…? Where'd she go? The toilet? Without waking me?"

It wasn't really a matter of whether she had actually gone to the toilet. It was that Anastasia—No, more like Echidna, had woken up and snuck out of the room without so much as a word of notice to Subaru, who was right there.

To think she disappeared right after the 2nd Floor Trial—Did she go to challenge Reid again, just like Julius? Man I don't wanna imagine that.

Subaru: "The bed's still warm… Gotta go look for her."

Her bed was still slightly warm. There was the fact that Patrasche had woken him up as well.

Meant it hasn't been too long since Anastasia left, most likely.

Subaru: "Patrasche! I'm leaving Rem to you! And, right, thanks for waking me!"

Patrasche: "…"

Shortening his reply as much as he could, Subaru waved to Patrasche before heading out.

Unable to figure out where exactly she could even go, his heart throbbed faster. If it were Subaru in her place, he'd first want to make sure Emilia and Beatrice were okay—If so, then naturally, she would be heading towards where Julius was.

Subaru: "No, wait, it's Scarf-Dona who's inside her right now. No way it's gonna be anything simple. But then…"

He did not have enough manpower to tackle this problem. Even if it meant exposing his embarrassment of dozing off to others, for now, he needed to reach out to the others and get their help in finding Anastasia—.

Subaru: "—huh?"

And on his way down the stairs to call the others, he stopped.

He was dumbfounded. He found something incredibly abnormal, something that should definitely not be inside of the tower.

Subaru: "…"

That something swiftly flew across Subaru's stunned face.

With white wings spread wide in the narrow hallway, a bird attempted to find it's way out.

Subaru: "Why's there a bird… inside the tower?"

The words rolled out of his mouth at the sight of a bird, an existence that shouldn't be inside of the tower.

The Watch Tower Pleiades had no windows. It was a building that was completely closed off from the outside world, with the only connection being the giant door on the 5th Floor.

At the very least, Subaru thought as much, and his guide for the 4th

Floor, Beatrice herself had said she could not even sense the presence of a window that could lead outside.

Subaru: “—tch! W-Wait up!”

Feeling something was very off, right before he started rushing after the bird, for a moment, he hesitated. Should he follow after the bird, or should he call someone and find Anastasia first, then discuss the bird issue?

He chose to follow the bird, however. To lose sight of that bird here, he felt, might lead to an even greater danger down the road. Simply put, it was a gut feeling.

Subaru: “…”

Of course, birds were not such gentle creatures, to listen to Subaru and stop flying simply because he called after them. Gently it flew away from Subaru, further and further, deeper into the hallway.

He chased and chased and chased, and before long—.

Subaru: “—?! It disappeared?! Wh-the hell!”

He shouted when he reached the end of the hallway.

The hallway itself was circular, taking after the shape of the tower. However, it was not connected like that, because at around half-circle, a wall stopped further progression.

It was like a clock. If one started at 12: 00, they could go till 6: 0 both clockwise and counter-clockwise, but no more than that either way.

Subaru knew that, and as long as none of the doors were opened, he was certain he could catch the bird, but—.

Subaru: “Doesn’t look like it slammed into the wall and fell. What the hell’s going on here?”

Confused as to where that pair of wings had disappeared, he surveyed his surroundings over and over.

Unfortunately, there were no open rooms the bird could enter. It appeared suddenly and disappeared just as suddenly. He felt like he was wrapped around the smoky veil of a dream.

But he soon confirmed he was not dreaming.

Subaru: “These—These are feathers, right?”

On his way back out of the hallway, he found white feathers fallen on the ground. While he still held his doubts, looking at it from a situational perspective, these white feathers definitely belonged to that bird he was chasing.

They were proof the bird definitely existed. He could very well take them to Emilia and the others and say ‘There was a bird inside of the tower!’, but it would ultimately lead to nothing.

Most of all, it wouldn’t lead to where Anastasia disappeared off to—

Subaru: “Wait, wait… If there’s feathers lying around here, then-”

There should be something here.

He searched the wall and floor around the place where the feathers had fallen while thinking that. He examined the stone floor and ceiling, checked the nearby rooms, and even pressed the stone bricks of the walls.

However, nothing came of it, and he only felt his pulse quicken with each passing moment.

I should really go get help—

It was precisely at that moment,

Subaru: “Ah—?!”

It was when he was moving his palm over the place the feathers had fallen. His fingers had brushed against the wall right beside there, or so he had thought. In reality, he realized his fingers had slipped through the wall, as if it were an illusion.

Even when he carefully tried to press his fingers against it, they went through, so he wasn't seeing things.

Subaru: "But, I'm pretty sure I've checked the walls around here pretty well."

That was not to say he had failed in searching properly, but only that the wall above his waist, from where it was an illusion, was solid.

An illusionary wall that covered up the entrance—The last time he saw something like this was back when Petelgeuse and the Witch Cult were hiding in that cavern.

Subaru: "Risk it all to win it all, huh."

If one went into a crawl, they could pass through the illusionary wall.

After a good moment of hesitation, he decided to crawl through and get to the other side. The bird had gotten in through this way, most likely.

If this led to the outside of the tower, or maybe to another part of the tower, then—.

Subaru: "Puah!"

The darkness beyond the wall did not last as long as he expected.

He dove out of the illusionary wall and took a deep breath, like someone coming back up from a dive underwater. He was holding his breath while inside that darkness for no apparent reason.

He quickly noticed the outside air—A cool breeze flew across his face.

Subaru: "—woa-"

He opened his eyes, slowly adjusting them to the darkness of the outside world.

Spreading out in all directions over the vast horizon was a sea of sand, the Augria Sand Dunes, seen from a height unfathomable by Subaru. And watching over this spectacle was the dark sky, spotted with countless twinkling stars.

And there—

Subaru: “…”

In the place that was supposedly the Tower’s balcony, her purple hair shining under starlight, surrounded by flocks of birds, was Anastasia.

Chapter 32:
Who

1

—Before the unforeseen spectacle, Subaru couldn't be anything but dumbfounded as he gazed in amazement.

It was a night wherein curious occurrences were happening consecutively.

Starting from him unintentionally dozing off, to running about in search of Anastasia = Eridna who had disappeared from the Green Room, catching sight of a bird which was not supposed to be inside the tower and chasing after it. Losing sight of that bird at a dead end, and finding a concealed passage by investigating the familiar walls and floor—

Subaru: "—After emerging from the tunnel, what lay before was a country of snow."

The persiflage he spilled out made no contribution to explain this queer spectacle.

What Subaru had passed through was not a wall or a tunnel, and neither what lay before his eyes was a snow country, a night where the wind was blowing through the sand sea.

Twinkling stars emerged in the dark sky, and the dim scenery of sand dunes stretching afar was visible from the watchtower's balcony.

Nothing corresponded with Subaru's words. Instead of that—

???: "Natsuki-kun?"

Hearing Subaru's husky mumbling, a person's shadow, with hair dancing in the wind, turned towards him.

The young girl held her purple wavy hair down with her hand—

spherical pale cerulean eyes, skin so fair it was distinctly visible in the darkness, possessor of a lovely appearance.

It was Anastasia, whom he had been searching. Subaru hesitated for a single instant upon her call,

Subaru: "…It sure is the ideal spot with a picturesque scenery in the middle of the night, huh."

Hiding his initial astonishment under his tongue, Subaru shrugged his shoulders before Anastasia. Upon his gesture and the topic he brought up, Anastasia smiled faintly saying "Sure 's."

Anastasia: "'s true the view's great. But, it sure's sad that the scenery's all black. Would've been different had jus' the town been visible far away too."

Subaru: "That's true, but the charm of glancing into the sea of night isn't so bad either, you know. Besides, even if you say that…"

Saying so, Subaru pointed his finger towards the sky, instead of the unbroken view. Hooked by that, Anastasia too looked up into the sky—visible was the entirety of the starry sky.

Subaru: "The air is cold and clear, and stars are really visible. It sure is romantic, isn't it?"

Anastasia: "'s true the stars are pretty, n' I agree the air's clear… but it makes you feel somethin' aside from jus' viewin' the stars, no?"

Subaru: "And that something would be?"

Anastasia: "The fact that the stars're visible itself. Was there ever a night where the stars were visible in the desert up till now?"

Told so by Anastasia in seeming amazement, Subaru clapped his hands saying "A~h".

What she had pointed out, it was indeed marvelous to be able to view the stars from the balcony like this should the journey through the sand sea up until now be taken into consideration. It was impossible to spot the glitter of stars from the areas surrounding

Pleiades Watchtower.

Because—

Anastasia: “The miasma’s dark n’ thick, and must’ve spanned across the sky like clouds, after all.”

Subaru: “For that to not be here means that just this tower alone is unaffected by the miasma… or perhaps, it may be at a height above the enshrouding miasma.”

Anastasia: “At this height, well, that ain’t impossible.”

Though he noticed only after viewing the scenery from the balcony, their current altitude—the level pertaining to the fourth layer of the watchtower was not at an height of a few dozens of meters above ground but at an altitude of several hundreds of meters. Though it did not actually feel that way, the stairway from the fifth layer up to the fourth layer was of that length is what it meant.

Subaru: “…But still, I don’t know if it’s accurate to judge distance in the middle of the tower from this spot.”

Standing parallel to the outer wall, Subaru looked up towards the tower instead of the scenery from the balcony and sighed.

If his conjecture was correct, regardless of being at a position above the miasma, the summit of the tower, seemingly piercing through the clouds, could not possibly be seen. It was far too high up, regardless of the darkness.

That is why the stairway to the second floor had greater than four hundred steps. Therefore it was unquestionable that the tower was wasteful with regards to the outside.

Anyhow—

“…”

Restraining his thoughts regarding the stars and the tower’s height, Subaru had his eyes glance towards Anastasia. Elegantly having her lips smile, with her hands behind her hips, Anastasia made no suspicious movement.

All signs of vigilance or hostility were nonexistent as well.

At the very least, he confirmed she possessed no unconcealed animosity—

Subaru: "—So, what's your excuse for this situation?"

Anastasia: "Excuse?"

Subaru: "Stealthily leaving the bedroom late at night, going through a secret passage nobody knows about, playing with birds in the night's breeze… way too suspicious."

Subaru raised his jaw and questioned Anastasia, who had a mystified expression.

Birds—yes, birds.

In this place, the two of Subaru and Anastasia were facing each other but multiple other spectators crowded the balcony aside from just those two.

With not the slightest movement, they were birds which continued watching over the situation like artificial articles.

"…"

Not one or two birds, they were not in such gentle numbers at all.

The number of birds halted on the outer edge of the balcony with their wings resting was lower than fifty. Numbers which would make one think it was an entire horde, but the reason he hesitated to label it as a horde was because the variety of the birds was not uniform.

A white bird, a blue bird, a black bird, a spotted bird, a large bird, a tiny bird, a slim bird, a plump bird, birds of mixed variety with no sense of oneness had assembled as a single set.

That truth alone was quite bizarre, but what made Subaru feel even more ominous was the behavior of the birds which had constructed this spectacle.

—Despite such a multitude of birds present, not even a single flap could be heard, let alone a chirp.

It was not confirmed if birds had the intelligence to mutually understand each other’s will.

But at the very least, these birds without any sense of oneness, had their intent determined as one.

Anastasia: “It can’t be helped that Natsuki-kun’d feel uneasy like this but…”

Regarding such suspicion of Subaru’s, Anastasia had her hand touch her cheek.

Anastasia: “Secret passage, that’s really an exaggeration, ain’t it? After all, Natsuki-kun managed comin’ here too.”

Subaru: “That’s… well, the bird sort of led me, you know.”

Anastasia: “In that case, that’s the same for me too. I was just strollin’ inside the tower at night. Then a bird jumped outta nowhere. I got curious wonderin’ what was up with that, n’ ended up gettin’ here.”

“…”

Anastasia: “Why, won’tcha trust me?”

Anastasia straitened her eyes, as she let a bird she was holding with both of her hands fly freely into the sky.

Though obvious, it was not a convincing explanation. He had no basis to deny it, but there’s no way something so convenient happened. Pigeonholing himself, that was the conclusion Subaru arrived at.

Subaru: “This bird is…”

Anastasia: “I wonder, what’s up with these kids.”

Subaru: “——~hk. That’s, what I want to ask.”

The gaze of the birds watching their exchange from a distance felt apprehensive, though the same also went for the evasive Anastasia’s attitude.

It was difficult to read emotions in the eyes of birds, or perhaps they truly wielded no emotion, he could feel the alienation which would make him think that way.

Just what are these birds, this balcony, this Anastasia thinking.

Subaru: “Knowing nothing like me… that is way too convenient a story for me to swallow.”

Anastasia: “I’d also like to say somethin’ about Natsuki-kun not knowin’ anythin’… but, it’s really troublin’. Everythin’s been so confusin’ ever after comin’ here.”

Dear oh dear, saying so whilst putting one hand on her eyebrows, Anastasia displayed behavior of drowning in lamentation. Looking at that Anastasia without letting his guard down, Subaru suddenly remembered something about birds.

—That birds fly over Augria Sand Dunes, in the direction of Pleiades Watchtower.

He had heard that in the bar they had stopped by to prepare for crossing over the sand sea in order to head towards the tower. The bartender told them to look for birds in case they get puzzled over the way through the desert.

Fortunately, Subaru and the rest did not make a blunder like being stranded in the desert so it turned out to be a warning he almost entirely forgot about but—

Subaru: “Looking at this now, makes me think that was not necessarily just some rumor.”

Despite receiving Subaru’s whispering, the birds gave no response.

They merely had their wings folded silently, and were letting their wings rest as if they despised flying in twilight.

Despite being exposed to the chilling breeze, they did not huddle close to each other and refrained from sharing warmth. They merely had their gaze towards Subaru and Anastasia like exquisite dolls.

Anastasia: “These kids’re always like that. I’m at a loss too.”

Subaru: “Judging from my experience that’s a bit impossible for me to believe.”

Anastasia: “Judging from experience, you say?”

Subaru: “Based on my experience, upon heedlessly coming across a scene like this, it’s generally promised that your life is in danger.”

Subaru had an abundance of near-death experience due to his heedless behavior.

Starting from being beaten to death by Rem, when he was loitering around the old mansion at night.

A lot of stuff happened back then which is being left out, but Subaru’s experience taught and made him conclude that heedless behavior = death in its essence.

And judging from those experiences of his, he thought of this situation to be quite dangerous—

Anastasia: “If that’s so, then better add a new pattern to those judgements based on experiences of yers. That won’t be happenin’ this time.”

“…”

Anastasia: “For the cowardly Natsuki-kun, the worst probability is if I’m plottin’ somethin’. So I lured you to this tower and spun up some outrageous conspiracy, to harm Natsuki-kun or Emilia-san and the rest beyond repair is what you thought… isn’t it?”

Having gotten struck at the bull's eye, Subaru slightly stiffened himself up.

Looking at how Subaru was acting, Anastasia smiled saying "Easy to get".

Anastasia: "Relax. I'm not thinkin' about somethin' so roundabout, n' I've no hostility against Natsuki-kun. Nor for anyone else, in this tower… ah, not countin' the trial takers."

Subaru: "Shaula and Reid, huh."

"…"

The moment he voiced those names, Anastasia silenced herself with a bitter expression.

Looking at that response, Subaru spilled his voice saying "Ah".

Subaru: "You didn't hear about it cause you were sleeping, right? About that guy who newly appeared for the Trial of the second layer… he is Reid Astrea. The first generation Sword Saint. It seems like the arrangement was to have him appear from the past."

Anastasia: "This tower, has a questionably outrageous layout… I wonder, just what was it's creator thinking."

Receiving Subaru's explanation, Anastasia lowered her voice and added one more thing at the end of her repulsed comment. Sensing the omission of the Kararagi dialect's accent in her tone, Subaru halted his breath.

Up until now he had intended to treat her and deal with her as Anastasia. But after all, the true nature of her, who was before his eyes like this, was—

Subaru: "—Right now, only you and I are here. How about talking your heart out frankly?"

Anastasia: "Wh…"

Subaru: "To be honest, I can't make any progress with you, who is wearing the mask of someone else. No matter what I'm told, it's impossible for me to trust you down to my very core. That's why…"

???: "—You say that you want to exchange words with me, not the me who acts as Ana."

That instant, Anastasia's presence changed as if responding to Subaru's proposition.

The mood surrounding her completely changed, though her form didn't change, the sense of existence he was standing off against definitely altered. The emotions dwelling in her eyes, the expression interweaving her thoughts, had changed completely.

"…"

And, before Subaru who halted his breath witnessing this transformation, Anastasia—no, the Artificial Spirit Echidna who had been acting as Anastasia, slowly turned towards the outer edge of the balcony.

With not a railing to prevent falling, only a fence of a pathetic height is all that the outer edge possessed. She slowly placed her hips on that fence and gently caressed the head of the small white bird standing still right beside her.

And—

Echidna: "—It is indeed the first time, we've exchanged words with just the two of us all alone here."

Saying so, she accepted Subaru's proposal with a fleeting smile.

2

Echidna: "Won't you come here?"

Subaru: "No, I mean it doesn't have a railing, and my counter plans for safety are way too incomplete so nope."

Echidna: "Not at all, I won't push you off even if you get closer with your guard down, you know?"

Subaru: “No way am I trusting that tone. You’re just like the original, when it comes to stuff like that.”

Subaru distorted his lips before Echidna, who was sitting at a boundlessly hazardous spot and invited him without any malice. But, perhaps she did not like the way he phrased his refusal, and furrowed her eyebrows frankly.

And then, she said “You see?” and raised a single finger as if lecturing him,

Echidna: “I’ve told you several times, but how about you stop viewing me together with that original Witch or whatever? To say it clearly, it is nothing but unpleasant to be compared with someone unknown. That is, even if it is my own creator.”

Subaru: “That goes for this manner speaking too, but… I guess so, my bad. I’ll be careful.”

Echidna: “Kindly be.”

Echidna appealed to Subaru, with the same appearance and voice as Anastasia.

In all honesty, from what he had pointed it was truly just like the tone of the ill-natured Witch Subaru was acquainted with, her insistence comprised of a circumstance whereby he must earnestly nod in assent. The truth is, if Subaru was told he was an existence similar to Echidna it would be an opinion that would make him respond with something that would be terribly dishonorable as well.

Anastasia: “With that being said, your worries are quite right. Seeing someone night after night head to a place noticed by nobody all alone would naturally make one suspicious. However, on top of accepting those misgivings as a matter of course, I shall deny your misgivings once again.”

Subaru: “You, sure are bold to be touching that bird without even being vigilant.”

Anastasia: “…Did you hear what I said just now?”

Subaru: “I heard it indeed.”

Immediately, their comments were at crossing paths with regards to each other.

However, it couldn’t be helped that what was far more mysterious to Subaru was the small bird—how she was caressing the ominous small bird’s head like it was some artificial article than what she was saying.

Things would’ve been different had this been a park in the afternoon and the birds gave a further spirit reaction, though.

Subaru: “Aren’t you afraid that you’ll get killed if they, like, swarm together and peck your entire body?”

Echidna: “Well, your imagination is far more frightening. You won’t say that this is another one of your judgements based on experience, would you?”

Subaru: “You see, something happened where cute-looking rabbits jumped on me with all their energy… and things turned out like that.”

Thus ever since he had been nervous of a large number of animals gathering at one spot.

Piling up multiple experiences of Return by Death, he had confirmed and could claim that there existed no easy death, but that memory was a remarkably awful manner of dying.

Anastasia: “…You’re actually making a pale face, so I won’t put pressure on you. It’s not as if I am affectionately familiar with these birds, either.”

Perhaps due to seeing Subaru’s face get increasingly pale, Echidna promptly retracted her hand from the small bird. And then putting both of her hands on her knees, she once again gazed towards Subaru saying “Well then”.

Echidna: “You suggested me, to let my heart out frankly… I wonder, what do you want to talk about with my self who has forgotten about behaving like I was Ana?”

Subaru: “For now, your relationship with this place, and these birds.”

Echidna: “Regarding that, I can only respond with what I had answered as Ana. I was led to this place by a bird, as well. Until then, I had not the faintest clue. Just…”

Subaru: “Just?”

Despite the dejection for lack of substitution of that response, Subaru raised his eyebrows in pursuit of the faint catch to it. Slightly hesitating upon his reaction, Echidna continued.

Echidna: “To be completely honest, I was thinking of asking you the same thing.”

Subaru: “Asking me, the same thing?”

Echidna: “I was intending to be Ana so it may have come off as a joke, isn’t it. I found myself here as if I was led to this place. And now, I am having dialogue with you in this place… with you, who is standing in front of the entrance to return to the tower.”

“…”

Echidna: “You are an acquaintance of Shaula’s, the keeper of this Tower. At the very least, she treats you with that conviction completely. Taking that into consideration, being informed on top of just the two of us being in this place does seem cowardly to me but…”

Engulfed by the words Echidna voiced, Subaru was unable to interrupt her comments. Before that Subaru, Echidna cut her words off once, and whilst retaining Anastasia’s face, presented a question.

That question was—

Echidna: “—Natsuki Subaru, just who are you?”

Subaru: “Just who you say, but…”

Echidna: “Let’s go back to the time before heading to Priestella. After the ceremony of conferring honors when you fulfilled the White Whale subjugation, and the subjugation of “Sloth”, one year ago. Ana, conducted an investigation regarding you.”

That which Echidna had revealed, perhaps had been one of the plans in Anastasia camp’s strategy for the Royal Election.

Investigating Subaru, who had accepted the conferral of decorations as the knight of the rival candidate Emilia, must be something which can be called theory in a fight of this type.

But, the great merchant Anastasia Hoshin, who led the Hoshin company was—

Echidna: “Your background could not be gained knowledge of. Ana complained that investigating the most minimal information alone was extremely difficult. Regarding that, I believed that perhaps the people around you know something rather than you yourself, that’s what the result was.”

Controlling the information regarding Subaru, if there’s someone doing that who has a deep connection with the camp then the first one on the list would be Roswaal, followed by Otto and Clind, perhaps.

Anyhow, it would not be strange of them to be doing that. And they were either far too unkind or far too boorish to go out of their way and refrain from informing that truth to Subaru.

Echidna: “After all, what could be reached was only around the little happening you got involved with in the Capital right before the commencement of the Royal Election. When knight Reinhardt discovered the candidate Felt, there is evidence that he happened to catch sight of you. But, that is all.”

Any records prior to that were not supposed to exist.

Henceforth, Echidna—though it’s Anastasia in this case, Anastasia’s investigation had followed up Subaru’s footsteps nearly perfectly.

Excluding the fact that that was an insufficient result for them.

"…"

Echidna narrowed her eyes, as Subaru silently wondered how he should respond.

Until now, he has had multiple experiences of being unable to convey the information from Return by Death and burying it within himself, and subsequently suffering due to being unable to share the information. However, this was a first-timer for him.

For the question to be just who Natsuki Subaru was, and the unidentified nature of his origins acting as chains.

Subaru: "I am…"

Echidna: "—And, that's how I just lined it all up."

Subaru: "—Ah?"

Echidna unfolded both of her arms before Subaru, who tried to somehow wring out some words with a serious expression. Her tone was far too indiscreet, as Subaru stood dumbfounded.

Receiving Subaru's reaction, Echidna nodded saying "Hm" with a satisfied expression.

Echidna: "Ana and I recognized you, as a newcomer knight with a pile of extremely meritorious deeds, with that kind of an unknown background… that was, until Priestella. I have no words for how that impression changed with the fight against the Witch Cult in Priestella… but I am aware that it is again changing slightly after coming to this Watchtower."

"…"

Echidna: "I felt anxious for being with you alone late at night in a space beyond the sights of anyone, so even if I was on guard against you, I want you to forgive it as something which could not be helped."

Folding her open arms, Echidna tilted her neck whilst smiling.

And taken aback by the words he had heard from her, Subaru mumbled and moved his dry lips and earnestly pondered over how he should react.

However, during the time he was pondering he suddenly noticed.

—That the fingers in Echidna's hands atop her knee, wielded so much strength that they would turn white.

Subaru: "…You, don't tell me, are you seriously scared?"

Echidna: "—That comment, is slightly upsetting. Just as an example, what kind of a relationship do you actually have with Shaula?"

Without responding to Subaru's question, Echidna fired back a separate question.

Subaru: "I, met Shaula for the first time here. I don't know anything."

Echidna: "The Trial of the third layer, was it a coincidence that you cleared it so quickly?"

Subaru: "…It was a coincidence."

Echidna: "In that case, what about you going through the secret passage camouflaged in such a way that it cannot be noticed at first glance, and calling out to me in a situation where I happened to be alone?"

"…"

What resumed persistently, was Echidna's bitterness directed towards Subaru.

By stockpiling questions before Subaru, she was conveying this.

Subaru: "How about you, try imagining being in my position…"

Echidna: "But still, due to various factors I estimate you as an existence who has a low possibility of being hostile. And I want you to think of me revealing the depths of my heart as a proof of my good faith."

With her hands on her slim chest, Echidna demonstrated that she had voiced her true mental state through her attitude.

From Subaru's perspective as well, he very much wanted to agree with Echidna's words now that he once again looked back onto his origins and the suspicious nature of his actions.

Very much so, but—

Echidna: "—It rather seems like my creator left deep wounds upon your heart, isn't it."

The behavior of the Artificial Spirit Echidna indeed closely resembled that of the Echidna who was the Witch of Greed, so no matter how much good faith she devoted it was difficult to truly trust her.

This itself, could precisely be called as the lingering scent of a Witch.

Subaru: "I get, what you're saying. I'm, convinced. Keeping whether I'm able to trust or not aside…"

Echidna: "Your troubles have been conveyed quite well."

Subaru: "That is, even if you and I meeting here is a coincidence. Then, what's this place? What do you think this balcony-like place was made for?"

As a matter of fact, even if this Echidna was plotting something, there existed no evidence that would make her open her mouth. He complied with her not because he trusted her, but because he considered it an inevitability.

However, that and the fact that this place was a concealed space are entirely different subjects. Due to being concealed and everything, there must be some kind of worth to its existence.

Echidna: "I have a hypothesis regarding that. Do you remember what happened three days ago… in the desert?”

Subaru: “Three days ago, that’d mean before we reached the tower, some totally messy stuff comes to my mind.”

Echidna: “At the occasion of that ruckus, a white light attacked us when we were being pursued by the Courtesan Bears. —It rather seems like that, was Shaula’s doing. Then, this place is.”

Subaru: “—Her scaffold, for observing the desert?”

Before Echidna’s hypothesis reached its end, Subaru clicked his fingers.

Her conjecture was convincing. The truth is, she had continued to snipe those who approached the tower with what she calls Hell’s Snipe from a long distance. He had wondered how she did that with there not being a single window or way to view outside of the watchtower—

Echidna: “Perhaps, there are places like this connected through the circumference of the tower. From what it seems, this space is not in the direction from which we approached the tower.”

Subaru: “What about the birds?”

Echidna: “The birds are an enigma. Even if they are touched like this, they give no response. It’s just that they still perhaps do have warm body temperature, they are not actually artificial. If possible I’d like to dissect them…”

Looking down onto the birds beside her, Echidna straitened her spherical eyes with cruelty. However, as she drew her finger back, she stared intensely at that finger.

Echidna: “Unfortunately, I do not want to put any more burden upon Ana’s body. Things would proceed faster if you would dissect the birds…”

Subaru: “Well, I’ll do it if it’s really needed no matter what…”

In the one year he had spent living in the different world ever since being summoned, Subaru had gained some experience of hunting birds or hare. Of course, killing for the sake of eating and killing for the sake of experimenting felt way too different—

Subaru: “After killing it, as for eating it…”

Echidna: “Yes, there was also the problem of remaining food supplies. Then, I would like to request around twenty of them.”

Subaru: “Bloody bastard! Don’t you know about The Legend of Zelda?!”

Indifferently requested to take the lives of a large number of birds, Subaru raised his voice harshly. Echidna rounded her eyes having been yelled at over knowledge she had no way knowing.

That aside, killing twenty would indeed aggravate his spirit.

Subaru: “Besides, upon killing there would also be some movement in these countless birds too, you know?”

Echidna: “…That, seems undeniably frightening.”

In response to Subaru’s distress, Echidna also put her hand on her mouth.

The birds gave no reaction to the perilous conversation of the two, but their gazes alone were unchangingly fixed upon the outsiders to this place, that is, Subaru and Echidna.

With the words sky burial accidentally appearing in his mind, Subaru detained Echidna’s prompt judgement.

Subaru: “If we’re going to do it, then let’s do it after making some preparations. For the time being, let’s keep it for later.”

Echidna: “No attitude of running away either, huh. Got it, very well… the truth is, it’s difficult to even think about what could be gained from investigating these birds.”

Subaru: “Um, please stop with an atmosphere of stuff like the spirit of inquiry or comments on the success of thirst for knowledge.”

Echidna: "—?"

He thought that Echidna, despite truly not knowing the nature of the Witch, maintained a behavioral style similar to the original and resultantly he never let his guard down.

Henceforth Subaru ignored that aspect, and threw a question towards the spirit aspect of Echidna, which was unlike the Witch.

Subaru: "I didn't really confirm it properly, but how's Anastasia-san?"

Echidna: "…Just like earlier. Even now, Ana is continuing to sleep within the depths of this body. I've never dwelled in the body for this long, so I would be lying if I said I'm not getting impatient."

Subaru: "Impatient?"

Subaru considered the nuance and thought she must be talking about wanting to return to her former body, but Echidna shook her head left and right saying "That's not it".

Echidna: "So far as it goes, Ana and I have a contracted relationship of a Spirit and a user. Though it's an imperfect relationship… an imperfect Spirit, along with an imperfect user. I believe I have spoken about Ana's body."

Subaru: "Ah, about there being some defects in the gate, and stuff."

Echidna: "That is close to the relationship between the present you and Beatrice. What's different from you two is that Ana's body has no receptacle to receive Mana at all. In order for her to maintain her contract with me she has no choice but to spend her Od."

Subaru: "Hm, hm?"

He thought of that explanation as roughly the same as what he had heard before. However, Echidna believed Subaru's understanding was rather shallow, so she put a finger on her chest and,

Echidna: "This state is equivalent to me manifesting in Ana's stead. Which means Ana's Od is being eaten up at an increased rate. Even now, moment by moment, Ana's Od is being grated."

Subaru: "I believe Od was, like, the soul itself of the person… which means."

Echidna: "On top of assenting the dangers of having a contract with me, Ana took my hand. Ever since then, I hypothesized that some day the end would arrive… but now is, rather soon."

—That is why, the body must be returned to Anastasia as soon as possible.

That is how Echidna brought explaining the situation Anastasia and her had been placed into to an end. Upon hearing what she said, Subaru realized that he had been taking their circumstances far too lightly.

Subaru: "With that body… in that tattered state, can she really become something like the king?"

Echidna: "Do you mean that in the sense that you want Ana to abandon that privilege for the sake of your own master?"

Subaru: "—~hk! Don't joke around! Nothing like that! I was…"

Echidna: "Ana will not draw back, no matter what. Nor will she give up. I know that."

Echidna asserted flatly before Subaru, who stepped ahead trying to raise his voice.

Overawed by that vigor, Subaru blinked his eyes. And then timidly had his lips tremble,

Subaru: "…Does Anastasia-san, want her own country so badly. Even though if she gets her hands on it, she might have to immediately let go of it."

Echidna: "Though perhaps shorter than what normal people have, Ana herself will utilize that short span of time ways better than the others. Besides, Ana has a reason to not give up the throne."

Against Subaru's powerless voice, Echidna declared putting her trust in Anastasia into it.

And recited, her reason to not give up the throne. It was—

Echidna: "—Because she wished for it."

Echidna, who had already stood up, conceded towards him and faced Subaru head-on from the center of the balcony.

Gazing into the black eyes right ahead of her, as Subaru stood immobile at the words the pale cerulean eyes had conveyed to him.

A heaviness unlike that of Pleiades Watchtower, of the Trials, pressed Subaru down.

"…"

Immobile, speechless. Nor did Echidna say anything.

And instead of the motionless two, only the sound of flapping wings slashed through the chilling night. The sound of flapping wings came from behind, as it was appended to the flock of birds who were resting their wings.

Once again a single bird, flew towards the balcony—

—From behind.

"…"

Just as before, Subaru had been standing with his back turned towards the outer wall of the watchtower. If a bird flapped its wings behind him, then it unquestionably came from the interior of the watchtower.

Echidna, Subaru, had reached this place, upon being led by birds.

Then, naturally, that was also the case with the flapping of the third bird.

???: "—What is the meaning, of what you were saying, right now?"

A voice, somewhat astonished, somewhat in disbelief, echoed in the balcony.

The birds spread their wings wide at once, upon the voice of the standing man. And, giving rise to a terrible sound of flapping wings like a cloudburst, the birds attained flight lacking all vacillation.

Towards the night sky, towards the desert enveloped in the dusk.

Leaving Subaru, Echidna to seemingly drown in an ocean,

—Along with Julius Juukulius.

Chapter 33: ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■

1

Left behind by a myriad of fluttering feathers, abyss descended on the balcony in the night.

Fearless birds spread their wings and took to flight into the murky night sky.

One could almost say that falling from that lonely sky would have been easier than remaining in this place.

If only that were true, Subaru would have wholeheartedly embraced that notion—at least, aside from this suffocating situation, that would have been the next-worst thing.

"…"

The location was the Watchtower, on a balcony hidden by the night.

Julius stood there, blocking the doorway, with doubt carved into his handsome features and rigid cheeks. In front of his line of sight, were Subaru and Echidna, who had been secretly conversing in the night—to Julius, she would have been Anastasia, since they looked exactly alike.

Julius: "—what you said just now, what did you mean?"

In that tense, congealing space, Julius repeated this over and over.

The bewildered content of his words was no different from the moment before, but his voice sounded weaker with every repetition, like proof of the of the depth of his sorrow.

—When, did you start listening to the conversation?

"…"

Faced with Julius' question, Subaru forced his halted thoughts to move, and landed on this question. When did he start listening, that's the most important thing.

The content of that conversation with Echidna＝Anastasia just now, was definitely not something he should have been allowed to hear before he had been prepared. For in this Watchtower-expedition, the secrets kept by Subaru and Echidna were simply far too deep.

Things ranging from Artificial Spirits, Witch of Greed, Authority of Gluttony, and their various implications…

Subaru had hidden them all from Julius, having judged that they would only complicate things, and bring him nothing but suffering.

More than anything, was the fact that Anastasia's spirit was sleeping, and that right now, the one inhabiting her body was the Artificial Spirit of Echidna.

In other words—

Anastasia: "—Ah~, come on, Natsuki-kun, stop looking like that."

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Suddenly, lightly poking the stiff Subaru in the chest with her finger, Echidna put on a charming smile.

Her tone and attitude were so perfectly like Anastasia's, that for a moment, Subaru bulged his eyes in stupefaction and could not be entirely certain what was happening.

Leaving Subaru behind, as if dancing, Echidna did a turn on the spot, and,

Anastasia: "I'm sorry, Julius. But it's not like we're leaving you out of the loop, you know. I just thought I'd talk with Natsuki-kun about some of the important things that'll be happening after we leave the Pleiades Watchtower, that's all."

"…"

Anastasia: “We had to leave the green room since Rem and the baby ground dragon were there, you know? It’s not like we’re afraid of any special secret leaking out, but I was just in the mood for something extra secretive. So we moved around… and this just happened to be only suitable place we could find. That’s all.”

Clapping her hands together in front of her chest, Echidna slightly tilted her head as if to say “Forgive me?”

That adorable gesture appeared to be just the kind of thing Anastasia would think of. But, unlike the one trying to distract away from the vital part of the story, Anastasia would never sink as low as this.

As if trying to cover up an unfavorable scene after the other person had already seen it, the words only came across as barren and superficial—actually, one might as well replace the “as if” with “certainly” there.

It was a very undesirable situation. Having been caught off-guard, Echidna probably shared Subaru’s opinion. The only difference was that she just happened to be quicker than Subaru in taking action.

And then—

Julius: “—You are not Anastasia-sama, are you.”

“…”

Julius: “Echidna, I want you to tell me. Even when it’s already come to this point, the fact that you are still trying to hide it from me, tells me you probably weren’t a bad person before you died.”

Through a faint glimmer of hesitation, Julius asked Echidna to her face. Hearing this, Echidna muttered “Why that’s just…”, and for a moment, appeared to be preparing to refute him, but,

Julius: “Echidna.”

Once again, Julius stopped her with his call. And, just like this, she turned Anastasia’s face toward Subaru with an indescribable emotion stirring within those light onion-green eyes.

But at this point, even Subaru couldn't think of a way to salvage this.

Subaru: "Julius, where do you want us to begin?"

Julius: "…From Anastasia-sama's body."

In response to Subaru's question, Julius replied in a choked voice.

That much was more than enough to discern his disturbed emotional state. But even so, it must be said, that only a man like Julius would have been able to remain calm at a time like this, even if only on the surface.

Or perhaps, it may simply have gone too far beyond his limits, and too far beyond what emotions can convey.

Echidna: "Ever since the battle with the Witch Cult in Priestella city, Ana's spirit has been sleeping deep inside her body. So, right now, the one moving her body isn't Ana herself. But I, playing her role in her stead, until today."

Echidna probably thought it was no longer possible to go on pretending.

Plainly, without any set-up, she simply spoke as if laying out the facts.

In the middle of defending Priestella against the Witch Cult, Echidna took Anastasia's place, and dueled with the Witch-Cultists —After that, Anastasia's spirit had been asleep ever since.

They had hidden this from Julius and Ricardo, and all the members of the Iron-Fang before they set out for the Pleiades Watchtower.

—This fact, was only shared between Subaru and Echidna.

Julius: "Why, would you only share this information with Subaru?"

Echidna: "He was not under the influence of the Sin-Archbishop's Authority, and so he was the only person outside the chaos of the situation. Besides, I, an Artificial Spirits of the same roots as

Beatrice, have sealed a contract with a Spirits-Arts user as well. I must confess this was not my original intention. Only…”

Julius: “—. Only?”

Echidna: “Only… he saw through my act as Ana, so I had no choice but to tell him.”

Hearing this explanation of why only Subaru came to know that it was Echidna inside Anastasia’s body, Julius’ eyes began to tremble beyond control.

Of course. Because Subaru saw through Echidna’s performance—

Julius: “Someone who barely knows her, something even a stranger should notice… I call myself her Knight and I didn’t even notice it…”

Subaru: “Stop, you dumbass! You can’t say that!”

Julius: “…”

Subaru: “Your situation… you were just in a bad situation! There was a huge thing that just happened to you, tying you down! And it wasn’t just you, there’s Ricardo and Mimi as well, wasn’t there? I only noticed because… anyway it just happened by chance!”

Listening to Julius mocking himself with those words, Subaru tried to put a stop to his self-injury. However, in his failure of his duty as a Knight, there were no words that could console him.

In reality, just what could Julius have done? Was he really to blame for this?

The Lord he devoted his loyalty to, his comrades with whom he swore his oath, his fellow Knights that have always been his companions, and all the many, many more, everything he had accumulated up to now in his life as a Knight, had collapsed like a wall of sand. How can he stand before them again?

Stalwart. Elegant. A Knight. How could he ever be called that again.

If being a Knight meant never permitting oneself to succumb to one’s pain like a common human being, then being a Knight was a curse for Julius Juukulius.

Julius: “It is the duty of a Knight to eliminate chance, and be certain at all times.”

Subaru: “—! Then a Knight is… nothing but a troublesome title isn’t it…”

Julius: “Take back those words, and do not say them to me again. I… right now I, I’m afraid I’ve lost some part of myself…”

Subaru’s consoling rationalization simply bounced off in the face of Julius’ Knightly convictions. Watching as Subaru fell speechless from the emotions clogging up his throat, Julius shook his head.

Julius: “Let’s get back on topic. —Echidna, what is your intention?”

Echidna: “…To return this body to Ana. That, is the reason I brought you all to the Pleiades Watchtower, even more importantly than the victims of Gluttony and Lust.”

Julius: “In other words, you mean to say you never wanted this. And you have no way to restore Anastasia-sama… even if I slay you.”

Placing his hand on the Knight’s sword at his waist, Julius narrowed his eyes and threw her this perilous question.

Receiving this, Echidna cast down her eyes, and gently touched her own chest.

Echidna: “That I am an evil spirit, and have taken over Ana’s body for that reason… I cannot give you any evidence to refute that speculation. So, if you are convinced that I am lying to you, even if you choose to destroy me, I cannot stop you.”

But, at the end of her last syllable, Echidna continued after pausing only a beat.

Echidna: “But in that case, any possibility of restoring the consciousness of Ana's empty shell will be extinguished by your hand… In the worst case, it will become difficult to even preserve her life, and there is a chance that she will die."

Echidna cut down Julius' suggestion, and laid out her thoughts. Then, having said this, she softly lifted up her hands,

Echidna: "Of course, this is only a nonsense possibility I had no choice but to come up with because I want to live. Even I, cannot say for sure whether my death would be the solution. If I must die so that Ana could live, I feel like I would be alright with that. Though I really don't want to die."

Julius: "And why, would you be willing to do that for Anastasia-sama?"

Echidna: "The relationship between Ana and I are not complete. Therefore, perhaps it would not be right for a common spirit to take a Spirits Arts user's rightful place…"

Cutting off her words there, Echidna looked at Julius and Subaru in turn.

It seemed almost as though she was admiring the odd-looking pair who shared a bond quite different than that of a Spirit and a Spirits Arts user.

Echidna: "I like Ana. And I have been at her side ever since she was a young child. So I do not wish to abandon her, and I want her to be happy. —That, is my reason."

Julius: "…"

Echidna: "Julius, I did not reveal this fact to you because it would have only lead to unnecessary confusion. Ana herself had wanted to keep my existence secret, if possible. In fact, she was the reason I had remained hidden all the way until what happened in Priestella. It was all thanks to that child."

Even back in Priestella, Julius would have been quite shocked if Anastasia announced that Echidna had been hiding inside her all that time.

Subaru, who had prioritized retrieving Emilia above all else, could not possibly imagine what storm must be churning within Julius' chest at that moment.

Only, in such a short span of time, what his Lord had kept hidden—as well as the secret pertaining to the fundamentals of Anastasia herself, were all revealed to him at a time when they should not have been revealed. Just how much must all of this be weighing on Julius?

Julius: "…I can understand your relationship with Anastasia-sama. It is difficult to believe everything. But, I have no choice but to believe you. At least, in that it would be thoughtless to do anything to you right now."

Echidna: "Oh, is that so? I am glad you chose rationally, Julius. I'm sure Ana would be glad as well."

Julius: "…"

Letting go of the hilt of his Knight's sword, Julius did not respond to Echidna's words, and only remained in silence.

But he was far from having understood it, and it left him a sense of shame to think about it. Yet, in the blink of a moment, Julius cast this out of his mind, and,

Julius: "I just want to confirm this. Anastasia-sama's Od is the price for your ability to continue to manifest yourself… so naturally, the more you strain yourself, the heavier the burden on Anastasia-sama's body will be. Is that correct?"

Echidna: "Correct. That's the right way to understand it. If I eat well, sleep well, get some moderate exercise… take a generally healthy approach to life, it'd be just enough to counteract the toll on Ana's Od."

Julius: "If that's the case… then why did you pull that stunt on the second level?"

Just as Echidna was slightly recovering herself, lightheartedly joking in between her words, Julius struck her with this unexpected question.

Considering what happened on the second level, it's only understandable that he would point this out—

Julius: "During my fight with the second-level examiner, Reid Astrea, Anastasia-sama… using Anastasia-sama's body… you casted magic… to assist me."

It was at the time of the first clash between Julius and Reid.

Faced with the overwhelming power of Reid's swordsmanship, when Julius was helpless and on the verge of defeat, Echidna casted her enormous magical power toward Reid.

Far from being a decisive strike, instead, the load on Anastasia's body went over her limit, and she fainted. But the problem was not the result.

It was why did she do it. Just that.

Julius: "The burden of that act on Anastasia-sama's body could not have been light. After saying so much, your actions are still conflicting with your claims. So why?"

Subaru: "That's…"

What Julius pointed out was also what Subaru had been wondering.

Back there, Echidna acted when Julius had been beaten, and carrying an expression as though he was prepared to die. There seemed to be a lie somewhere, yet it didn't feel like it was precalculated.

It must be pure speculation. But could Echidna have chosen to help Julius simply because, living inside Anastasia, they had already spent so much time together—could it be something as simple as that?

However, to Subaru's doubts, and to Julius' question, Echidna only replied "I'm sorry", and deeply bowed on the spot, Echidna: "Even I feel like a failure there. How should I say this, to a bystander, it might just seem embarrassing, but I made that decision from a strategic point of view."

Julius: "A strategic decision?"

Echidna: "At the time, I had no idea whether the examiner of the second level had intent to kill. If I did not do it, we might have lost the fighting power of Julius. Of course, I wanted to avoid it, for Ana. Besides, Reid Astrea had his back turned… and so it seemed a perfect opportunity, in my eyes. But not only did it fail, I've caused you trouble."

Apologizing, and adding one more at the end for good measure, Echidna slowly raised up her body.

There were no contradictions within her explanation. While it was true that to a bystander, it would have looked like foolish behavior, Subaru couldn't find any basis to refute her reasoning. Emotional ones aside.

Could such a story really be swallowed so easily?

But, before Subaru could pursue the point any further,

Julius: "—Alright. But please be careful not to do anything rash in the future. Not for anyone else, only for Anastasia-sama."

Echidna: "Understood."

Subaru: "Wha-?!"

Julius gestured that he had understood and accepted, and nodded back at Echidna. Watching their exchange, Subaru kicked at the floor as if he wasn't sure if they were joking.

Subaru: "How can you be convinced by that…"

Julius: "Subaru, I am convinced. Echidna will refrain from doing anything rash in the future. What else is there to say?—This is a matter between Anastasia-sama and Echidna, and between Anastasia-sama and myself."

Subaru: “…”

Julius: “It seems you have been caught up in this by some strange mistake. But, this is an internal matter within the Anastasia camp. This is not your pain to bear.”

Listening to Julius trying to distance him from the problem, Subaru clenched the back of his jaw.

It’s not as if Subaru was carrying this pain because he one-sidedly wanted to.

Subaru: “I, whether or not I take this upon myself is my own business isn’t it!”

Julius: “So you can take this upon yourself, yet deny me the right to face my own problems? …I don’t seem to recall you ever telling me about Anastasia-sama and Echidna.”

Subaru: “—gh.”

Julius: “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said it. …But it is the truth.”

Wrenching this out in a choked voice, Julius turned his eyes away.

Within that voice, that stubbornness, Subaru finally noticed it.

Julius had not remained calm at all.

Far from hiding the tempest raging in his heart, he could not even keep it from seeping through to the surface.

Having lost his own existence, even the one thing that remained to him, his loyalty to his Lord, was a lie, and their promise to tell each other every concern had been broken.

Even so, the man named Julius was not supposed to be subject to emotions.

Julius: “I don’t intend to argue. For Anastasia-sama, we must find a way to deal with this situation as soon as possible. Echidna, I hope I can count on your sincere cooperation.”

Echidna: “…Of course. Since you have already found out, I suppose there is no reason for me to continue playing Ana anymore. Well, if you can tolerate me in the form of Ana, that is.”

Julius: “That is fine. I must restore Anastasia-sama to the way she was, and looking at this form will remind me of what I must do.”

Hearing of his intention to hurt himself to strengthen his resolve, Echidna put on a sad expression. But Julius had already turned up to the sky, without seeing her face.

As if noticing for the very first time that the night sky from atop the balcony was untouched by the Miasma, he squinted his eyes under the radiance of the stars.

Julius: “There is no reason to stay here for long. Let’s go back inside. As for Anastasia-sama’s body and Echidna… let’s tell Emilia-sama and the others tomorrow.”

Echidna: “Ohoh, alright. I will prepare for it as well.”

Saying this, Julius gently took Echidna’s hand and began to walk. Surely, it was exactly the same as what he had always done for Anastasia.

Whatever was inside, his loyalty to Anastasia will not change. — Even if she was sleeping deep within her body, even if she had forgotten Julius.

Subaru: “Julius!”

Feeling something painful at the sight of his figure, Subaru shouted out to him.

Having been abandoned by memories while he still remembered everything about the others, having nothing left except to struggle, desperately relying on that sentiment—Having been there himself, he understood that pain.

Even if he was forgotten, he cannot forget. That thought alone gave him the impulse to move.

Julius: "…"

Julius halted his steps, and, still holding onto Echidna, did not turn around.

The fact that his back remained perfectly straight, in spite of all the turmoil within his heart, was just totally frustrating.

Subaru: "You… isn't there something you want to say to me."

Regarding Echidna, regarding Anastasia's body, he had kept it all from him.

Tonight, he had promised to take over for spending time in the green room, but Subaru broke that promise, and secretly met with Echidna on the balcony.

He could make excuses. There were reasons. It's not that he meant to…

But, regardless of what he meant, or whatever his reasons, or excuses, his heart could not pull free.

So why won't you raise your voice to shout at me? Swear at me, and just let out your rage?

Subaru couldn't be sure whether it was his own sense of guilt, or whether Julius truly thought this.

Surely, Julius wouldn't.

Raise his voice, or spit out abuses—

Julius: "—There is."

Subaru: "…"

Julius: "I understand. Why you thought you should hide this truth from me. You meant no harm. It was only out of concern and consideration. I agree with your apprehensions. If we switched places, I would have kept my silence as well"

Subaru: “…”

Julius: “—But, even so.”

Looking up to the sky. With a voice as if wrenching it out.

Julius: “Whether it is myself, or Anastasia-sama, or you, I don’t want to be thought of as someone unworthy of being a Knight.”

2

He didn’t need any special procedures to get back into the tower.

Just like the way he entered the balcony, he only had to crawl down below waist-level to get through the hidden passage and come out inside the tower. While crawling on his knees, the pointless thought suddenly occurred to him that Julius must have crawled through here in the exact same way.

Unfortunately, since he had already crawled back earlier, Subaru lost his chance to record this into memory.

It was because he was so overwhelmed by Julius’ last words, that he remained there speechlessly for a while.

Subaru: “…”

If he didn’t say anything, then he wasn’t dishonest, he thought. —Except, that wasn’t the case.

Most likely, Julius believed that even if he had shouted and sworn at Subaru who was plagued by guilt, it would not have brought him any comfort. And since his virtue would not allow it, he could not throw his rage and complaints, but only swallow them silently on the spot.

But, that was not the case.

The words Julius left behind in the end, had stuck into his heart like a thorn.

Perhaps, Subaru would have felt better if he had been yelled at. But since he did not want to feel better, perhaps it was best that Julius hadn't said anything.

However, the reality was not like that. The thorn left by Julius insisted on pain, and blood continued to flow from its piercing wound. Deep enough to make him hesitate about pulling it out.

Subaru: "I can't… go back to the green room anymore."

Chances are, Julius had already escorted Echidna back to the green room by now. After that, it would be unlikely that he'd go search for a bed in the dragon carriage left in the lower levels.

This deep-rooted problem—the sheer depth which was the fault of Subaru's own poor judgment, was not something that can be cleared up overnight. At least, it would take time, and simply holding calm discussions will not be enough to resolve it.

Thinking about it that way, he felt a little embarrassed about going back to the dragon carriage. Even though he knew Julius would not go back there, he would still feel somewhat guilty about tugging himself into a warm futon right now.

However, at this late hour, there was no one Subaru could spill his heart to.

The sleeping Rem and Subaru's best-buddy Patrasche were both in the green room, where he was too afraid to approach because of Julius and Echidna.

And he couldn't exactly wake Emilia and Beatrice up to make them listen to his whining.

So, at this point, there was no one Subaru could—

Ram: "—Barusu?"

Hearing that voice, Subaru made a quiet sound with his throat and halted his steps. Turning around, surprised, in the middle of the fourth-level passageway—where footsteps struck on the stone floor, he saw the form of the pink-haired girl, Ram.

Ram's light-red eyes were wide open, looking over Subaru from head to toe.

Ram: "It's been a while since I've seen you make that face. Disreputable."

Subaru: "…why're you immediately saying that right after we meet. Come to think of it, what're you doing here this late?"

Ram: "I could ask you the same thing… although, what Barusu could be up to at this hour would be unimaginable."

In front of Ram, who crossed her arms as she approached him, Subaru tightened his cheeks at her words.

Just the thought of what she might actually be imagining pulled a shadow over Subaru's face. Seeing Subaru do this, Ram shrugged her shoulders sadly,

Ram: "Anyway, you were bothering Rem with your whining again, weren't you? Even though Ram's little sister is cute and forgiving, don't be too unreasonable."

Subaru: "…Ah, yeah. Well, you're right."

Ram: "—?"

Seeing Ram's eyes slightly widen as she heard this, Subaru let out a bitter smile.

He didn't tell her his true feelings, but only what she might have guessed based on his daily activities. It was true, just as Ram said, that Subaru often spent his nights at Rem's bedside.

In fact, he had already done so tonight. And it was only natural that Ram would think he had just left.

But today, it was not only that—

Ram: "Stop making that miserable face."

Subaru: "Oogh."

Ram: “With that pathetic, miserable expression, you look even lower than a base manservant. Looking like that, people will begin to suspect Emilia-sama’s character for taking a Barusu as her Knight. Please revise.”

He felt Ram’s finger flicking his drooping forehead.

Subaru’s eyes teared up from the force, and just as he was about to protest, Ram disinterestedly humphed through her nose, shutting him back up. All the while, she herself seemed perfectly at ease.

Subaru: “…Gees, really, ane-sama is ane-sama, after all.”

Ram: “Hah. Please don’t disgust me with your thoughts.”

Subaru commented while stroking his forehead, and Ram put on an expression as if disgusted from the bottom of her heart. To be consoled by such an attitude, he really must be pathetic.

No part of what she said had carried any expression of warmth or sympathy, but, somehow, that was what it meant to him.

Subaru: “Ram, what were you doing at this hour anyway?”

Ram: “Disgusting.”

Subaru: “Don’t just suddenly end the conversation like that! We only just started…”

Hopelessly shrugging his shoulder, Subaru let out a quiet sigh, and turned his eyes to the passageway behind Ram—where she had come from.

Although the fourth floor was very wide, there was nothing particularly remarkable here. There was a green room, and the luggage they brought up from the dragon carriage. And—

Subaru: “…The staircase to the second floor?”

Ram: “…”

Subaru: “Unless, you went up there. Alone?”

Ram: “Don’t worry. I’m not as reckless as him. It doesn’t seem like it, but I’m not conceited enough to think I can do anything with Reid Astrea alone.”

Imagining something he’d rather not think about, Subaru twisted his lips, and Ram laughed through her nose as she denied his suspicions.

Hearing her subtle reference to Julius’ stubbornness hidden within her words, the mere thought of it twisted at the thorn in Subaru’s chest.

Ram: “It seems, something happened between you and Julius. Had a fight?”

Subaru: “Am I that easy to read?”

Ram: “Barusu is as easy to read as Ram is intelligent. The latter has more to do with it, but it’s nothing to worry about. …No, of course the former has plenty to do with as well. It won’t take long to get everything out of you under torture.”

Subaru: “The fact that you’re assuming I’d be placed under torture is kind of frightening, you know.”

Watching Subaru pick at his own cheek, Ram just squinted her eyes. Seeing that she wasn’t kidding, Subaru shuddered a little.

It’s true, that considering Subaru’s position, it was not entirely unlikely that Emilia’s enemies in the Royal Selection might resort to this kind of barbaric measures. Maybe it would be a good idea to watch out for that, after all.

Subaru: “In that case, what were you doing here…”

Ram: “—I didn’t go up to the second floor. I only tried to go up.”

Subaru: “…I thought you just said you weren’t that reckless. Unless… were you thinking of attacking him while he’s asleep?”

Subaru had no qualms about using any means necessary to win. It might be understandable if Ram thought the same and planned to stealth attack Reid in his sleep.

The question was whether this Reid, which appeared to have been reproduced from the records of the past, really slept. And, even if he did sleep, could she really manage it?

Ram: “Unfortunately, it’s impossible to attack him while he’s sleeping. I turned back halfway up the stairs. He really is an abnormal monster. He’d almost make Garf look cute.”

Subaru: “Although, after getting to know Garfiel, he is pretty cute…”

Ram: “Not his antics, I meant the level of danger he poses.”

The way she put it, she didn’t actually deny that Garfiel’s antics were cute, but since they were in the middle of something more important, Subaru squeezed his brows and forgot about it.

Ram: “I am convinced now. If one side has no qualms about using any means necessary, then the other side would use any means necessary as well. Like we’ve discussed, in order to beat him, we must not let him take it too seriously, and only then satisfy his conditions.”

Subaru: “…Just to make sure of that, you went up to the second level alone?”

Ram: “Do I have to say it again. I didn’t go up to the second level. It’s too difficult for Ram at this moment.”

Confirming that they simply weren’t strong enough, Ram warned of the need for preparations before challenging the second level again. Speaking of needing more time, the thought of his argument with Echidna and Julius resurfaced once more, and Subaru couldn’t help but take on a difficult expression.

Ram: “Barusu?”

Subaru: “N, no, it’s nothing… Well, it’s not totally nothing, but it doesn’t matter right now. Most likely, we’ll have a proper talk tomorrow.”

Ram: “A remarkably ambiguous statement.”

Subaru: “That’s kinda what I was going for, but, it’s not what you think. As expected, even here, I’ve done something ungrateful, and it’s a bit hard to recover from it this time.”

He’s done enough for now. It was a strange crack that he wasn’t sure if he could completely mend, and he wouldn’t want to complicate it any more and spread the crack even wider.

Watching Subaru go limp, Ram still wasn’t convinced, but decided to let it go.

Ram: “In any case, conquering the second floor… defeating Reid will require more time and effort. At least, it would be nice if we could count on Shaula’s support.”

Subaru: “Well, it wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that she couldn’t exactly be counted on. Although, if she didn’t help us earlier, we’d all be charred black under the sand right now.”

Without Shaula, they would never have been able to reach the exam on the second level in the first place. But even with that in mind, she had been a disappointing Sage ever since they entered the tower.

Of course, if they could borrow the examiner’s own hand to pass the exam, it would be quite exceptional indeed.

Ram: “If we only ever take the high road, we’re bound to get stuck in a deadlock here.”

Subaru: “It’s not like I think it’d be better to take a more innocent approach. But, purely on a case by case basis… it just wouldn’t work this time.”

Ram: “You say that so effortlessly… Ram, doesn’t have that kind of leisure.”

Dissatisfied with Subaru’s answer, Ram shrugged her shoulders. And, while slowly turning her back, Ram: “If you don’t go to bed soon it’ll hurt your performance tomorrow. I’ll head back to the dragon carriage as well.”

Subaru: “Aahh, yeah. I, uh…”

He wanted to explain why he couldn’t go back, but it was too difficult. On the other hand, looking back and seeing Subaru mumbling this way, Ram spilled a small sigh.

Ram: “As you like. But if you drag us down because you didn’t get enough sleep, I’ll twist it off.”

Subaru: “Aah, no… twist what off?!”

Ram: “I’ll leave that to your imagination.”

With a wave of her hand, Ram headed in the direction of the stairs to the lower levels. Without touching on what he didn’t want to touch on, leaving him to stand up by his own efforts, could that have been her consideration?

Watching the thin back walking into the distance, even know that she won’t see it, Subaru raised up his hand.

Subaru: “Good night, nee-sama. See you tomorrow.”

Ram: “…Ram is not Barusu’s ane-sama. Stop calling me that.”

Her last denial carried no strength within it, as if she had already accepted, and only resisted for the sake of it.

Watching Ram’s figure disappear after leaving those words behind, Subaru clicked the bones in his neck and whispered “Ah, what am I gonna do now”.

He can’t go to the dragon carriage anymore. And it’s too difficult to return to the green room. In that case, he could either find some other place to rest until the morning, or find a place where he could do something meaningful with his time.

Subaru: “If I just want a place to sleep, I could find a suitable room…”

The top candidate would be the room where they stored their luggage.

The dragon carriage's cargo and food supplies have all been moved into that room, though it'll be hard to find something he could use as a pillow. The bottleneck was just how to find some way to reduce the pain on his body while sleeping on the floor, aside from sleeping in the dragon carriage.

Or—

Subaru: "Think about how to conquer the second floor, how to defeat Reid."

Honestly, that would be the most constructive choice.

Most of the problems surrounding their current situation were about capturing this Watchtower. Though it can't be said with certainty, it would nevertheless play a huge role in improving their situation.

That evening, the consensus they reached on how to defeat Reid was to make him not take something seriously and then seriously satisfy his conditions, or something vague along those lines.

At the very least, if there was a chance he could reduce some of that vagueness—

Subaru: "—That's it."

And, coming to this point, Subaru snapped his fingers.

As the idea flashed through his mind like a lightning strike, Subaru changed the direction of his steps with a bash.

Subaru: "If this goes well…"

Though he cannot say for sure, it should be a move that could greatly advance the situation.

Setting his heart on that thought, Subaru sprinted toward his goal.

—In the Watchtower in the night, loud, spirited echoes of Subaru's footsteps rang out.

—Only the lonely echoes of a single person's footsteps.

3

—The sensation of waking, was like the moment of emerging out of the water's surface.

Pulling the dreaming, unconscious body upwards, using a breath to restore the entire body to reality, the consciousness slowly reawakened, and, breaking through the water's surface, he was born.

If sleep was death, and wakefulness was life—then that description would not have been far off.

Anyways, such poetic sentiments aside, he gradually began to wake —

???: "—Subaru! Hey, Subaru, are you alright?"

Subaru: "Th-The wha?!"

The moment he opened his eyes, immediately stricken by the beautiful face in front of him, Subaru rolled to the side.

And, not rolling very far before running out of surface, he dropped a short distance and landed on his shoulder.

Subaru: "Ngya!"

???: "Eek! Subaru, you alright?! Why did you start rolling all of a sudden?!"

Subaru: "N, no, it's not like I willing decided to roll or anything…"

Squeezing his banged-up shoulder and lightly shaking his head, he pushed himself up. And then, in the blink of an eye, Subaru was confused.

It was a green room.

The entire interior of the room was covered by sprawling ivy that completely hid the walls behind them. If he was told that the whole outlandish-looking room was made of ivy, he probably would've believed it.

And apparently, Subaru was lying on the floor beside a bed woven from ivy at the very center of the room. That was probably what he rolled off of… would be his analysis of the situation.

It was funny that Subaru could make such judgment so calmly, but there was reason for that.

???: "Hmm, it looks like you didn't hit anything too hard. That's good. But I got reeeaaaally worried, you know, you shouldn't scare me like that."

????: "Emilia, if you say it like that, Subaru won't reflect on it, I suppose. If you don't say it more severely, Betty's worries won't get through to him."

???: "I guess you're right. But I'm surprised Beatrice would be saying that. After going into such a panic when you couldn't find Subaru, you were almost in tears when you found him lying there…"

????: "You don't have to mention that part can you not mention that part, I suppose!"

In front of his eyes, the conversation started going out of control.

Nodding stupidly to the rhythm of the bickering that made him want to smile, Subaru turned around. Sitting on the floor and breathing behind him, was some kind of huge animal.

Subaru: "…"

There was, a giant lizard. With black scales covering all over its skin, it was a huge lizard the size of a horse. The strangest part was that it was gently snuggling up to Subaru's neck with its nose.

Seeing that it was friendly, Subaru gently petted the lizard on its head.

And then, he let out a sigh.

Subaru: “In other words, this is it.”

Calm, and collected, slowly, he breathed out these words.

Seeing Subaru like this, the two girls in front of him tilted their heads.

??? + ????: “—Subaru?”

And, like two sisters speaking with the same breath, they simultaneously called Subaru’s name.

A silver-haired girl who was so beautiful that his eyes wanted to explode, and a fairy-like little girl in a pretty dress.

A beautiful silver-haired girl, a drill-loli, a giant lizard, and a room made of ivy—

Subaru opened his mouth wide, and shouted it out.

—Because this is, this is, this is.

Subaru: “I’VE BEEN SUMMONED TO A PARALLEL WORL—D?!”

Bonus Short Stories

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Three (Edited Machine Translation)

1

…The Watergate city of Priestella, a great temple, is said to be located deep within its underground canals.

In the Great Temple, the existence of which is usually kept secret, the remains of a witch are stored, a relic from four hundred years ago and an important heritage that relates to the foundation of the city. The remains belonged to the witch who inspired the construction of this Watergate city, and were also one of the objectives of the Witch cult's attack that hit the city so hard the other day. In other words, the remains have attracted attention, both good and bad, and it is no longer safe to simply keep their existence a secret as before. Therefore, in order to ensure the preservation of the remains, which could not be moved from the city, personnel were selected to go to the Great Temple to investigate. These people were part of the camps of the candidates for the royal selection surrounding the kingdom of Lugnica, who also made a great contribution to the recent battle against the Witch cult, and the rare "Diva" who is the Watergate city of Priestella's pride…

???: "Whoa, whoa, whoaaa…!"

???: "What the hell…? We' re falling, we' re falling, we' re falling!"

The moment they opened the great secret door hidden in the underground channel and challenged the underground temple, Garfiel and his companions felt a sense of floating as their feet fell out and they tumbled down. It wasn't that the other side of the door was a big hole. As soon as the door was opened, it was a mechanism to open from underneath… a trap, in short. Garfiel has done it, Garfiel bit his lip.

Garfiel: "You're good, you bastard…!"

His throat quivered with anger at the architect of the contraption as he savored the feeling of floating with his whole body. A moment later, Garfiel stretches his arms and legs as far as they will go and makes contact with some part of the wall as his body falls. Garfiel felt a slight snag and rammed his claws into the wall without holding back. However, it was assumed to kill the momentum, but it did not.

Garfiel: "Oioioioioioioioi…!"

The surface of the wall, where Garfiel had stuck his claws, was slippery as if it had been greased. The speed slows down, but the fall doesn't stop. Garfiel was still falling. He looked around to see if there was anything else he could grab…

Liliana: "Ahhhhhhh, I'm falling, falling, falling! This floating feeling! The feeling of desperation! It's like a flash of inspiration…."

Garfiel: "Shut the fuck up! Calm down!"

Liliana: "Ah Fu!"

As Garfiel fell headlong, he grabbed Liliana in the air, still in good spirits. Garfiel couldn't choose where to grab her, so he had to grab one of her two strands of hair. He pulled her in and managed to hold her under his arm…

Liliana: "G-Ga-Ga, Garfiel-san? I just heard a terrible noise in my neck!"

Garfiel: "It's better than being crushed underneath and having your whole body fall apart! This is no time to be talking about "Ororon's bad habits!" As for the others, they're at…"

Overhearing Liliana's ugly protests, Garfiel glanced into the air.

???: "…Don't make such a fuss, there's nothing to worry about. Well, I can't say that!."

The vigorous voice came directly underneath Garfiel, who was in free fall, and saw Ricardo, who was also falling. He, too, had stuck the hook of his right arm into the wall to control the speed of his fall. And in his strong, thick arm, he was also carrying a small shadow, just like Garfiel.

Ricardo: “Got Sensei, and Garfiel got the singing girl! Just barely made it!”

Ezzo: “Well, I thank you, Ricardo-dono. But your voice is somewhat loud. It’s… being shouted in my ear.”

Ricardo: “What? What is it? I can’t hear you, Sensei!”

Ezzo: “No! It’s nothing! You and Garfiel-dono up there, brace yourselves for impact! We’re about to reach the lowest level! But first…”

The figure in Ricardo’s arms, the wizard Ezzo Cadner, cautions them. The lowest level, caution, what awaits them?

Liliana: “Ken, Kenzan mountains, scorching lava, and the big Witch beast of Priestella with her big mouth!”

Garfiel: “Ha! I don’t care what’s waiting for me! I’m going to Knock ‘em all down.”

Garfiel laughed viciously at Liliana’s pessimistic imagination. But right underneath Garfiel and the others who were preparing to do so…

Ezzo: “…No, don’t worry about that. Women are meant to be treated more respectfully.”

Ezzo said quietly, and unleashed some kind of magic from his hand down below. Immediately, a light appeared at the lowest level of the approaching world, and it was coming closer and closer.

Ezzo: “Everyone! Once again, brace yourselves for impact.”

The words of caution were interrupted, and the invading team collectively sank into a mass of mud.

Ricardo: “Ha-Ha-ha! You’re good, Sensei! You turned the ground where I fell into a muddy pit and made it okay! I hate you!”

Ezzo: “Ouch, ouch, ouch! Ricardo-dono, take it easy on me!”

Ezzo protested loudly as he was patted on the shoulder by a laughing Ricardo. The two of them were covered in mud, having been immersed from head to toe in the mud. Of course, Garfiel and Liliana were no exception.

Liliana: “It just hit me. Please listen… I’ve got an idea.”

Garfiel: “No, no, no, stop it, You’re depressing me.”

Liliana tries to play a new song with her lyulyre in hand. Waving to the mud-blackened Diva, Garfiel scraped the mud out of his ears with his fingers. Garfiel did not complain because he was saved from a close call, but…

Garfiel: “Couldn’t you have done better?”

Ezzo: “That’s a bit of an amateur view, Garfiel-dono. Let me tell you, under the circumstances, this was the best decision I could have made. There is a limit to the number of techniques that can be deployed in a limited amount of time. Of course, we had the option of using wind and water to soften the impact, but if there was ground, the most appropriate thing to do was to turn it into mud…”

Garfiel: “If it had been that Roswaal bastard, he would have just flown to safety.”

Ezzo: “Just so you know, the art of flying is not something you can just pop up and do!”

The scowl on Garfiel’s face was followed by an even worse scowl and bite from Ezzo. He turned his neat, almost childlike face red with anger.

Ezzo: “Fire control to avoid the effects of the climate, and the wind attribute to let your body fly freely. Of course, you also need to control the earth attribute in order to land safely on the ground so you don’t break your legs… Despite its cool appearance, it requires precise magic control! That man…!”

Garfiel: “I wonder, do you not like this Roswaal bastard by any chance?”

Ezzo: “Oh, I hate him! You can say you hate him too! I’m not jealous of you or anything, so please don’t misunderstand me.”

Garfiel: “Oh, yeah? My amazing self doesn’t like the bastard either. We get along well, don’t we?”

Ezzo: “Oh! You too? Yeah, yeah, that’s me!”

As fellow Roswaal haters, there was a sense of empathy between Garfiel and Ezzo. The stinging atmosphere of the previous moment vanished and the two men walked up to each other and shook hands. As he watched, Ricardo skillfully scratched his own head with his hook.

Ricardo: “What an awkward way to reconcile.”

Garfiel: “Ha-Ha-ha, that’s good, isn’t it? Good friendship is a beautiful thing… Ha-Ha-ha.”

Ricardo: “And what about you, young lady? I thought you were supposed to be always cheerful.”

Liliana carried such a gloomy air that Ricardo couldn’t help but feel concerned for her. She held out her lyulyre forcefully in response to Ricardo’s question, “Look at this…”. Her partner and workhorse, a stringed instrument called a lyulyre, was soaked in mud, with sludge stuck here and there, and was no longer visible.

Liliana: “M, m, m, my lyulyre that has been passed down in my family for generations…! There was a story about a man who risked his life to get it back from under the feet of a Witch beast…!”

Ricardo: “Oh, that’s terrible. So it’s been handed down from generation to generation. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Liliana: “If I could forget it with such a word, that wouldn’t come to my mind!”

As Ricardo lowered his eyebrows in sympathy, the barking Liliana made the lyulyre chatter. It was a terrible sound.

Liliana: "I can't believe that my partner, who returned safely from the burning control tower, fell into the mud in this way. Tragedy, Tragedy, Tragedy. I'm still in shock… If the world is an impermanent thing… I will drown out all unreason in this world. And then I'll disappear again…"

Liliana, who has begun to hope for the end of the world, her sorrowful speech is interrupted, literally, as if she were sprayed with water.

Liliana: "W, wh, what a tragedy! What a tragedy I am in right now…!"

Ezzo: "All right, all right, all right, all right. Look, it's water."

Liliana: "Huh? What's wrong with water? I know water when I see it, and I know it better when I lick it! Here, lick, lick, lick, lick…! Water?"

Liliana, who had been slurping up something that had been splashed in her face, darted her eyes when she heard it was water. In front of her, Garfiel squared his chin at Ezzo in disgust.

Ezzo: "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you, Miss Liliana. I will have some water for you in a moment. It will only be a first aid measure, but it should help to wash away the mud from lyulyre."

Liliana: "God, Is here…!"

Garfiel: "He's the one who got us into this… muddy mess."

Liliana: "Yeah, shut up, shut up! How dare you speak to God, unbeliever! If you say such a thing to Ezzo-sama, I'll have no mercy on you!"

Biting her tongue and bleeding profusely, Liliana rebuked Garfiel. Then, with a quick movement, she used the spring water that Ezzo had created with his magic to wash away the mud from the lyulyre. Garfiel looked at her and sighed, and Ricardo tapped Garfiel on the shoulder.

Ricardo: “Well, that was a disaster. But this is going to be a pain in the ass.”

Garfiel: “Well…”

As they said this, Garfiel and Ricardo both looked up at the large hole they had just fallen through…and then at the wall that had remained in a horribly slippery state. Garfiel’s claws and Ricardo’s hook only served to slow down the fall, and even when you touch them, they feel unusually smooth to the touch and sloped slightly.

Garfiel: “It’s so that if you fall, you can’t get back up. That’s pretty ingenious.”

Ricardo: “It’s a little hard to climb, even for me and Garfiel. I’m pretty sure we’ve fallen a bit, and it’s only fifty or sixty meters.”

Ezzo: “…No, more. we didn’t reach over a hundred meters, though.”

Ezzo then joined them as they talked while looking at the wall. A dwarf, crossed his short arms, a stern expression on his childish face.

Ezzo: “I’ve flown from heights many times to make my flight magic work. That floating feeling was close to the one I had when I flew off a hundred meter cliff. No doubt.”

Ricardo: “…You have a very primitive way of training, even for a wizard.”

Ezzo: “People under extreme conditions show more of their true potential than they have at their base. Let me tell you, I chose a place where there is a river under the cliff. I don’t want you to get me mixed up with a suicidal person.”

Ricardo: “You also need to know what you can do with your current abilities. Yeah, good story!”

Ezzo stomped on the ground and pointed his finger upward with a snap.

Ezzo: “Anyway, the important thing is that there is no going back the way we fell. And to my horror, this great temple is apparently set up with traps to prevent intruders. In other words…”

Ricardo: “In short?”

Ezzo: “That means you’ll need all the help you can get!”

Ezzo said strongly, a red ball of fire appearing in his hands. It dazzlingly illuminated the surrounding space, and in front of the astonished people, a “Ha!” and a fireball was thrown in front of the surprised group. The ball passed over Liliana, who was washing her lyulyre. The long passageway that was ahead was revealed in a red glow.

Ricardo: “A passage leading to the back. Normally, you wouldn’t give a fallen man another chance, but what does this mean?”

Ezzo: “There’s nothing to it. Go on, I suppose. It would be a shame to not follow the wishes of the architects of this great temple, but it is also true that there is no point in not continuing.

Garfiel: “I’d like to see the face of the guy who made this. Must have been a man with bad character.”

The three of them exchanged opinions as they crossed their arms and stared at the passage leading to the end of the trap. In the first place, it is the worst type of character to drop a trap on the first step to challenge the Great Temple. Garfiel can sense a similar malice in the way they also smeared something like oil on the walls.

Liliana: “Oh, hey, hey, hey, guys! I don’t mind that you’re going deeper, but…”

Garfiel: “Oh? What’s wrong, Nee-chan?”

Liliana looks like she’s come to her senses after cleaning off some of the dirt from the lyulyre. Garfiel frowned as she looked back at him, teeth chattering. However, the reason for Liliana’s attitude soon became apparent.

“…Tsu”

A low, growling cry is heard, and Liliana screams, “Wapya!” Then she quickly jumped underneath Garfiel and the others. Behind Liliana, from the shadows of the passage illuminated by the fireball, a strange shape slowly appeared.

Garfiel: “That’s not a Witch beast… What the hell are they?”

It was a distorted looking creature that looked like a bunch of rats gathered together. It has a stubby, swollen, round body with several heads poking out from various parts of its torso. All of them seemed to have a will of their own, as their eyes moved with a gleam and their mouths gaped open.

Liliana: “Ugyaa…! I, I, I feel sick!”

Ricardo: “Hey, Sensei! You know what that is?”

Ezzo: “No, and don’t make a scene! It’s probably some kind of guardian for the Great Temple, but what the hell is with that kind of odd shape? Even Witch beasts don’t look like that…”

Garfiel: “Ha! Don’t care!”

Claws poking out, Garfiel pushed Liliana’s panicked head back and walked slowly toward the apparition. There is only one way forward, and that way is blocked by the enemy…

Garfiel: “They say “facing the Dragon, Sword Saint Reid laughs and draws his blade”!”

Ezzo: “That means you’re a crazy lunatic!”

With his allies cheering him on from behind, Garfiel rushed towards the strange being.

…Priestella, the city of water, the attack on the great underground temple had now begun in earnest.

To Be Continued

Beatrice’s Everyone is Troublesome, I Suppose! In Fact!

1

“Hmm~, this is a problem, in fact…”

“Hmm~, you’re right. What should we do about this?”

The two people standing together, arms crossed while tilting their head, racked their heads over the same problem.

One was a beautiful girl, with long grown silver hair and amethyst eyes. The other, a girl with cream-colored hair that was extravagantly rolled up, and eyes with an inlaid characteristic pattern.

These girls, whose names were Emilia and Beatrice respectively, were puzzling their heads like a pair of sisters. Although, their opinion over who was the older sister would probably differ between the two.

The place these two were in, was a blank room—it could really only be called that, this strange place.

From floor to wall to roof, all of those were entirely lost in the pure white of this space. Messing up one’s sense of perspective, whether this place was wide or tight, or even what was up and down or left and right, was vague.

If a single thing, was to be out of place in this space, it would be that—

“There’s a bunch, of those stone slabs, isn’t there?”

Grumbling so, Emilia looked at the floating stone slab in front of her. There were several of these floating in this white space, giving a strange sense of intimidation.

“Poke.”

"Ah! Hey, Emilia! What are you doing, I suppose!"

On one of those stone slabs, Emilia casually placed her finger. Then, witnessing that, Beatrice widened her eyes, and then began to huff in anger.

She drew closer to Emilia. who was substantially taller than herself, and reproached her rashness.

However, it was too late.

"…"

From the stone slab Emilia had touched, shot out a white light, which completely covered their field of view.

Then, the next moment, the several stone slabs scattered about the white space disappeared, and only a single stone slab remained.

"Hmmm, seems like it didn't work."

"Don't give me that, in fact! Just, why do you have to be so reckless, I suppose! Seriously unbelievable, in fact!"

"I… I'm sorry I guess. But look, you can try it again as much as you want."

While apologizing to the red-faced angry Beatrice, Emilia lightly turned to the stone slab. Towards this now single stone slab, Emilia extended her hand and—touched it.

"Touch the brightest of the Hero destroyed by Shaula."

Instantly, that voice rang out, and a white light enveloped the space.

Then—Once more, just like before, many stone slabs filled the space.

"Look, see?"

"Don't you "look" me, I suppose! I'm telling you to stop these careless actions, in fact!!"

Raising her voice at the strangely proud-looking Emilia, who was looking over with one eye closed, Beatrice howled.

Within the seemingly endless white space, Beatrice's sermon resonated endlessly.

2

"Lookie here, onee-san, did you get scolded by Beatrice-chan agaain?"

Seeing Emilia who came trotting down the stairs, the braided girl at the bottom of the stairs, Meili, covered her mouth as she snickered.

"Ah, Meili…Yeah, that's right. I'm suuuper reflecting on it."

"It's natural that you'd do as much, I suppose. Geez, Emilia is definitely not thinking enough about just where we are right now, in fact. Huff huff, I suppose."

"Fufu, when I see you like thaat, you look just like a pair of sisteers."

Looking at the huffy Beatrice, and at a now-dispirited Emilia, Meili made that type of teasing remark. Hearing that, shouting "What!" in surprise, both Emilia and Beatrice reacted in completely opposite ways. Emilia's eyes shone, while Beatrice made a displeased face.

"Betty, would be very troubled if she had such a laborious little sister…"

"Whaat! In the first place, I'd be the older sister, and Beatrice would be the little sister right?"

"Cease the jests, I suppose. Even in actual age Betty is the older one, and the aura exuded by me is on an entirely different level from Emilia's, in fact. I could not be anything but the older sister, I suppose."

Looking at the proudly triumphant Beatrice, Emilia puffed up her cheeks in anger.

While visually Emilia looked like the elder, Beatrice's dignified presence was a step above hers—but, as Meili saw it, she'd call both of them a pair of kid sisters who got along with each other. Which one of them was older, was just trivial.

"But, you're really rattled after aall. Is this also, because onii-san isn't around, I wondeer."

"—. Hm. you're… right. Beatrice being so on edge, might also be because she's worried about how Subaru won't wake up…"

"What Betty is angry at is how Emilia is being so careless, in fact. I may worry about Subaru, but I think separately about this problem from that, I suppose."

Warning Emilia, who had nonchalantly attempted to deflect from her own negligence, Beatrice sighed in lament. Within that small chest of her's, the seed of anxiety had certainly stingingly budded.

—Presently, Beatrice's group had entered the interior of Pleiades Watchtower.

Possessing the great achievement of conquering the Witchbeast Den of the Augria Sand Dunes that were said to be difficult to traverse by foot under their belt should certainly in itself be a thing to celebrate, however, right now, they were definitely not in a situation in which they could rejoice without reserve.

Right before arriving at the tower, at their final obstacle, their group had endured a heavy blow, and, as a result, they had been put into a position where they could have lost half of their personnel.

"It was thanks to her, that it thankfully did not come to that though…"

Emilia placed her hand on her cheek, hearing that murmur from her, Beatrice scowled.

The subject that just entered the conversation, was the single individual in this tower who was not part of Beatrice’s group, a woman who had been in the tower prior to them. Not talkative nor expressive, she was a person who had not answered a single one of their questions, in all honesty, while she made Beatrice’s anxiety and irritability reach its peak—

“She did save Onii-san and the others, that naked ladyy. I understand Beatrice-chan’s irritation, but it’s true you knoow?”

“I- I understand that, in fact. That’s why, I didn’t set anything up, I suppose.”

Her anxious inner thoughts being guessed by Meili, Beatrice puckered her lips. After that, Beatrice took a deep breath, and set to change her mood.

“We’re not gonna make any progress just staying here, in fact. I’ll go see how Subaru is doing, I suppose.”

“Ah, then, I’ll go too. I’m worried about Ram too. What about you Meili?”

With Beatrice suddenly standing up, Emilia also proposed going together. At Emilia’s question, Meili tilted her head thinking as she said “Weell.”

“That strange mechanism, at the top of these stairs… you still haven’t solved it riight? Since it seems like there’s no problem no matter how many times you touch it, is it fine if I just try it at random?”

“That’s fine by me but…will you be okay alone?”

“I’ll be fiine. Besides, if we don’t fulfill our objective in this tower then I can’t go home anyways riight? I don’t want want to stay in this sandy place eitheer.”

Waving her hand flappingly, Meili said so and headed up the stairs. Seeing that small back leaving, Emilia turned to Beatrice saying”Was it alright?”

“I’m suuuper glad that Meili is being cooperative, but…”

“In that space, there are no contraptions which could hurt us…That, was the conclusion from both Betty and Julius, in fact. So, there should not be any problems with that girl, I suppose.”

“I see… huh? So then, why did you get angry at me before?”

“Knowing there’s nothing, and doing something reckless despite not knowing whether there’s anything are entirely different things, in fact! I take it then, that you have not reflected in the least, I suppose!”

“T- that’s not true! Ah! C’mon, Let’s hurry down! Subaru and Ram will get tired of waiting for us, hurry hurry.”

“Ah, hey, Emilia!”

Avoiding the topic in a frenzy, Emilia plucked up Beatrice and carried her, taking off. While shaking between Emilia’s arms, Beatrice’s cheeks puffed out.

“In the end, no matter how you look at it, Betty is the older sister, in fact.”

3

“Hm? Emilia-san and Beatrice-chan comin’ down as well, I see.”

“Ah, Anastasia-san. And Julius too”

Down a long and big set of spiral stairs, Emilia still carrying Beatrice made her way. On the bottom floor, she noticed the figures of Anastasia waving at her and Julius.

Without stopping, “Ei!” declared Emilia, jumping down the remaining set of spiral stairs. —Being wrapped in that forceful wind, she had taken a shortcut of nearly ten meters.

“Yosho.”

“Siigh, quite the dangerous landin’ there. I’d reckon that’d be way too scary for me to try.”

"You're wasting your breath telling her that, I suppose… Emilia doesn't have a single thing she fears, in fact."

"Hmph, that's not true. Even I, have some things I'm scared of. Like uuh, yeah. I'm thinking right now, wait a sec."

In order to recall the object of her own fear, Emilia began to hum in thought. Giving up on that pointless trial and error, Beatrice squeezed out of her arms, springing onto the ground of the bottom floor, and looked at the dragon carriage—that which their group had come riding in.

Inside the dragon carriage, Beatrice's contractor, Natsuki Subaru, was sleeping.

"…Soon enough, it'll have been around a day, I suppose."

"—Are you worried about Subaru?"

Beatrice, as she gazed at the dragon carriage, had Julius' voice call out to her from the side. Turning to look at Julius, Beatrice, narrowing those blue eyes of hers—

"Julius, don't come too close, in fact. Betty already has a contractor, I suppose. That propensity of yours to seduce others, is awful, in fact."

"…I apologize. Simply, this is the effect of my Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits, it is something which is active without my own permissiveness. Please, I ask for this to not create a misunderstanding."

"Sigh, it was just a little joke, I suppose. You're just taking it too seriously, in fact."

She sighed at the fact of her joke not getting through, but just now, Beatrice's side had been the more malicious one. Having that self-awareness, Beatrice did not say anything beyond that.

Subaru's group had become separated in the accident that had transpired in the Augria Sand Dunes. Despite the fact that, in terms of time, they had reunited in just a few hours, her anxiety was immeasurable.

At least, if they could have witnessed a reunion with him in good health, this anxiety could have been healed but—

“Geez, what a tremendous sleepyhead you are, I suppose.”

Beatrice whispered so, at her contractor which had not once opened his eyes within the dragon carriage, ever since their return.

Due to feeling her connection to Subaru, she understood that he was not in critical condition. However, there was the precedent of the Sleeping princess. —Even though there were no issues physically speaking, they still wouldn’t wake up, she couldn’t view this optimistically.

“Thus, seems like Beatrice-chan’s deep in her worries, how’re ya, Emilia-san?”

“Me? Of course, I’m also worried about Subaru but… But, from what I heard from Anastasia-san, he was working suuuper hard underground. Subaru is fine, I’m sure.”

“What kinda faith is that?”

“What kind…? Subaru’s my knight, so isn’t it obvious I’d believe in him?”

Confused, in that manner Emilia tilted her head, at which Anastasia gave a dry laugh. That understated trust, was also something Subaru struggled to no end to gain.

And so, as everyone present talked with one another—

“—hk!”

Suddenly, from the dragon carriage in front of them, sounds could be heard. Beatrice and the others were surprised by that, and in the next moment—The doors of the dragon carriage opened, and out tumbled a figure from the inside.

It fell onto the floor of the bottom floor, and with a shocked expression its movements stopped. —Ram.

“Ram! Thank goodness, you’re awake!”

“E- Emilia-sama…?”

Ram, who had tumbled out of the dragon carriage, looked at the approaching Emilia with trembling lips. While Ram had always given a strong impression of being firm and inexpressive, only in this moment did her perturbation peek out.

However, not long after making a surprised face, Ram—

“Emilia-sama, that you are safe is above all. However, is Rem together with you?”

“Yes, she’s fine, you can relax. Rem’s having a rest in a safe place right now.”

“Is that, so…”

Her body loosening in relief, Ram lightly relaxed her lips. Gently embracing Ram, Emilia softly pats her back.

Seeing that, Beatrice and the others felt peace of mind for the time being.

“It seems, there are no particular issues with Madame Ram.”

“She was simply greatly exhausted in the first place, in fact. There shouldn’t be any issues after waking up, I suppose.”

“Ya say that, but Beatrice-chan’s also got a relieved face, ain’t cha?”

“…Annoying, in fact.”

Glaring at Anastasia holding back a chuckle, Beatrice shrugged her small shoulders.

With those relieved gazes directed at her, Ram stood up with a “Well then.”

“It would seem, we are in some odd circumstances. Would you allow me to hear in detail?”

“Of course. But, is your body alright?”

“Yes, it is fine. Since it would seem I slept for quite a long time…”

“Yeah, that’s right. Since Subaru was hugging you tightly…”

“—Wait a moment.”

At Emilia’s innocent remark, Ram said that with cheeks stiffened. Emilia tilted her head saying “Eh?” at those words—

“About, what transpired in the dragon carriage…”

“Ah, yeah, it was such a surprise, you know? When you reunited with us having been separated, Subaru’s arm was already tight around you…Ram must have been considerably worried.”

“…”

“Huh? Ram, what’s wrong? That way’s the dragon carriage…”

With unsteady steps, Ram attempted to return to the dragon carriage. Then she drew her own wand from her breast pocket, and with a faint chant wind began wrapping around her. That was—

“I shall erase Barusu, and it will be like nothing happened…”

“Wait wait! That’s dangerous, Ram! Calm down!”

“Please do not stop me, Emilia-sama. Ram must, wipe out this stain or else…!”

Emilia fretting at the attitude of the forceful Ram, grabbed her body and held her back by the shoulders. Ram, who despite that would not halt, caused Julius to fret and move to stop her as well.

Seeing all this, Beatrice put her hand on her forehead.

Then—

“Everyone is bothersome, I suppose… If you don’t hurry and wake up, Subaru, it’ll be trouble, in fact.”

Thus, she whispered so, while feeling worn out from the absence of their main pillar.

Julius Juukulius’s Promise Keeping Notebook III
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

The moment he was thrown onto the sand, Julius immediately adjusted his posture and was on guard of his surroundings.

Although it happened suddenly, the knight luckily still hasn’t lost his edge. However, he no longer felt the dragon carriage that he should have been holding on to. At that time, he probably got blown away along with the carriage and the people.

Julius: “Cgh, Cgph…”

His vision was also obscured by the plume of sand dust in the air, and Julius could only clench his teeth in frustration.

This is an accident. However, he should have been able to do something more. Unable to deal with his regret, he swung his sword to disperse the sand that blocked his vision.

Julis: “Anastasia-sama…!”

He called out the name of his master who was missing, seeking her response.

Of course, he knows the risks associated with doing so. This place is the Augria Sand Dunes where countless fierce demon beasts live. Not long ago, the group had just seen demon beasts mimicking a flower field. However, rather than avoiding the risk of attracting demon beasts, it is more important to look for his companions who were sucked in by the cracked sky and were scattered everywhere.

At worst, he might have to kill hundreds or thousands of demon beasts by himself. For this, he has cultivated a skill. Rather than being afraid and worried about danger, he should think of how to act.

In this world where almost everything lacks a certain piece, he can no longer lose anything any more…

???: “…lius!”

From a distance, someone was calling his name. Julius watched in the sand, lowered his breath. He then stepped firmly on the sand, and ran towards the large shadow looming on the other side of the dusty sand… the dragon carriage.

That is the dragon carriage that has been with him all the way during the long journey, sitting in the front of the carriage is…

Julius: “Emilia-sama! Are you alright?”

Emilia: “Well, I’m fine! Beatrice, Meili… and Rem is inside and safe!”

Julius: “That’s truly…”

As soon as Julius was about to finish his sentence with "great" to express his peace of mind, Julius’s thoughts suddenly halted.

There was a sense of contradictory feeling in Emilia’s words. Since she specifically listed the names of those present, there’s the implication that some people are not present.

They are exactly the ones who were not mentioned by name--

Julius: “Anastasia-sama, Ram-san… and Subaru are not present?”

Emilia: “…Also, Patrasche-chan is also not present.”

Including Subaru’s beloved ground dragon, there are three fewer people here, plus one ground dragon. Upon learning of this, Julius had an illusion as if the world itself was spinning.

It just had to be those three who were missing.

Beatrice: “Emilia! They’re really not around here! The distance I perceive is very far in fact!”

Meili: “Also~, the demon beasts are also getting closer. What are we go~ing to do~?”

Julius continued to bask in his regret, and the two girls walked up from the back of the dragon carriage and entered Julius’s field of vision. Beatrice and Meili gave their reports from their respective standpoints.

Beatrice is Subaru’s contractor, and Meili is in charge of dealing with the demon beasts.

Emilia: “After being scattered, we were all close to each other. So, Subaru and the others…”

Julius: “No, Emilia-sama, we haven’t found anything around. Moreover, the cracks in the sky and the distortion of the space became visible to the naked eye. In that case…”

Emilia: “Maybe they were thrown even farther away? But if everyone was really scattered, everyone should’ve been farther apart …Subaru and the others might be together.”

Emilia looked down, her thoughts are filled with hopeful observations, but if it’s true, it can be said that the situation is slightly better. For some reason, the ones that were scattered are those who have low combat prowess, but Anastasia and Ram are careful and good at using their wits. The power that Subaru can muster in a crisis should also not be underestimated.

Having said that, the situation is still very urgent…

???: “-…Em!”

Emilia and Julius who were anxiously judging their situation raised their heads at the same time.

The two felt a powerful,sharp, and oppressive aura. Before the two could realize what it was, they were hit by the impact.

After the loud bang, the impacted dragon carriage drastically flipped. Emilia, who was in the driver’s seat lost her balance, and Beatrice and Meili also screamed due to the sudden rise of sand dust caused by the impact.

However, it was Julius who saw the impact first.

Julius: "…"

The real cause of the impact is a black-haired woman on the roof of the dragon carriage.

She had tied up long black hair, a thin cloak and clothes that boldly exposed her white skin. The woman slowly turned her head and looked at Julius and the others who stood around the dragon carriage.

A distinctive red pattern appeared in her green pupils, and caught in her gaze, Julius couldn't help but hold his breath.

He had never seen such cold and dry eyes before. She had absolutely no interest in anything reflected in her eyes.

…What can possibly make someone have such an empty state of mind?

???: "……Ah…"

Facing Julius who had forgotten to breathe, the woman's head tilted to one side . What came out of her throat was a high but hoarse voice that was the opposite of her beautiful impression.

However, there was no friendliness or hostility in her voice. …No, there is still a bit of emotion that can be distinguished. It's… disappointment..

???: "…Frustrating."

Julius: "What?"

When the woman's head was so crooked that it could no longer be crooked, the woman finally made a sound that had meaning. However, before asking the true intention behind these words, she turned her back to Julius and others. Seeing her knees slightly bent, alarms went off in Julius's mind.

The impact just now proved that she jumped here from an unknown place. No, it’s not that where she jumped form is unknown. In this situation, her starting point is obvious.

She jumped from the destination of their journey, the Pleiades Watchtower. In that case…

Emilia: “Wait!”

???: “Ahhh!”

It was Emilia who grabbed the woman’s legs as she was just about to take off. Obstructed from using her legs, the woman let out a short scream and fell off the roof. The woman fell face first into the sand, and Emilia also rolled into the sand with her.

Julius: “Emilia-sama?”

Julius failed to keep up with this series of unfolding events, and he ran to the place where the two of them landed. As he looked, Julius gasped.

Julius: “…”

The two who fell into the sand, Emilia and the black-haired woman, faced each other. The woman held her palms at Emilia’s face.

Julius instantly saw through the danger. The black-haired woman will release "death" from her palm. It would only take an instant, and Emilia’s head would disappear from her neck.

Therefore, Julius should have rushed in immediately to stop…

Emilia: “…Please, listen to me. Our companions are lost.”

???: “…”

Emilia: “They’re all veryyy important people to me. So, I want any clues that can be used to help find them. If you know anything, please tell me. You…”

Emilia desperately and sincerely conveyed her request. The woman looked back at her with her cyan eyes, and the expression on her face changed a little. She frowned slightly and sighed.

Then, she slowly lowered her arm that was aimed at Emilia,

???: "……Coming soon."

Emilia: "Eh?"

Julius: "…"

The woman stood up, said a short sentence and fell silent. She turned her back without looking back and walked towards the wind and sand on the other side.

Upon seeing this, Julius relieved his tension and walked quickly towards Emilia. Beatrice and Meili came here as well, but Emilia quickly stood up on the sand.

Beatrice: "Emilia! Are you okay…?"

Emilia: "Everyone! Get in the carriage! We need to catch up to that woman right away!"

Meili: "…? Is it okay to ignore Onii-san and the others?"

Emilia: "No! Of course not, but that woman seems to know something! So…"

Julius: "In order to ask her clearly, we can't afford to lose her. That's what I felt as well, let's hurry up and chase after her."

Julius chose to believe Emilia's claim and quickly stepped onto the driver's seat. Emilia then picked up Beatrice and Meili and one by one they got into the dragon carriage.

Julius drove the carriage that was fortunately not separated from them. He then chased after the incredibly light-footed and unfathomable woman in the desert. And then…

2

Anastasia: "…Julius! And Emilia-san, you all are safe."

Julius: “Anastasia-sama!”

In the Pleiades watchtower they managed to reunite with Anastasia and her party. Julius felt relieved and took note of that fact.

A few hours ago, Julius chased after the black-haired woman to the Pleiades Watchtower.

Opening the huge door leading to the tower, the black-haired woman placed the dragon carriage along with Julius and others into the building, she then disappeared, and no one knew where she went. After investigating in the tower for a few hours with caution, the woman appeared again in front of Julius and others.

Moreover, along with the missing Anastasia, Subaru, Ram, and Patrasche.

Julius: “Fortunately everyone is safe…”

Anastasia: “I’m sorry for making you worry. That said, my side also got pretty dangerous. After all, a group of people who couldn’t fight were gathered together…but.”

Anastasia, covered in grit, talked with Julius while glancing behind her… Glancing at the dark-haired woman who guided her here.

There wasn’t a change in her smart and beautiful appearance, and she didn’t care about the glances and consciousness casted on her. To say the only thing that there is a sense of discomfort:

Julius: “She……”

Anastasia: “…It seems that something happened between her and Natsuki-kun.”

Julius: “And Subaru?”

Following the woman’s gaze, in her eyes she only focused on one thing. There was a man and a woman, Subaru and Ram, riding on Patrasche’s back. The two were completely unconscious and hugging each other, to be more specific, it was Subaru who was hugging Ram tightly.

There were signs of injuries on both of them. Apparently, they had experienced a fierce battle during their separation. At that time, Subaru supposedly wanted to protect Ram, and it turned out to be like this.

Anastasia: “It probably came about while we were underground. We encountered an incredible demon beast there. Natsuki-kun and Ram-san fought hard, but as they were about to lose… At that moment, that woman appeared.”

Julius: “We also came to the tower under her guidance… Have you talked to her?”

Anastasia shook her head as a reply.

Anastasia: “Although there was dialogue similar to negotiations, it was only a one-sided offer. That woman was only planning to take away Natsuki-kun, but I stopped her. I told her that if she doesn’t bring me and the others along with her, Natsuki-kun would feel very sad.”

Julius: “So she agreed to help?”

Anastasia: “Strictly speaking, she guided me. Anyways, she helped a lot…”

Anastasia’s attitude revealed her extreme exhaustion. Seeing this, Julius once again felt ashamed that he had not rejoiced for their reunion, but instead had asked questions.

Julius: “Anastasia-sama, your safety is better than anything else. Although I have wanted to go outside the tower several times to search for you…”

Anastasia: “Ah, that’s great, got it. You don’t need to explain, I already know that Julius would’ve acted that way. Now that we have successfully reunited, don’t sweat about the details. More importantly…”

Anastasia paused and looked up at the ceiling, and took in a breath:

Anastasia: “We were able to successfully set foot into the Pleiades

Watchtower which no one has done before… It's not bad to have a taste of this sense of accomplishment, right?"

Julius: "…That is true. This is a great achievement that even Reinhard failed to achieve. If only we could've figured all of this out earlier."

Anastasia: "Alright, no more assumptions. Julius, that's a bad habit of yours. It is true that everything has a good side and a bad side… but you always only look at the bad side. That's no good."

Julius recalled the journey, regretted the actions he chose, and wanted to apologize for his incompetence, but was interrupted by Anastasia's words.

Her cute face was stained with seriousness, and her finger pointed at Julius's nose.

Anastasia: "If you are like this, even good signs will turn bad. And… not even I can figure out the attitude and actions of that woman. The two people on Emilia-san's side are also in that state…"

Julius: "…We need to keep our stance even harder, right."

Anastasia: "Yes, that's the saying."

Anastasia nodded in satisfaction. Pulled by her attitude, Julius bowed towards her. Then, Julius walked towards Subaru and Ram …To be precise, towards the woman looking at Subaru.

Perceiving the approach of Julius, she glanced at Julius. Julius knelt quietly in front of her:

Julius: "Thank you for your assistance. Thanks to you, we were able to reunite with our separated companions. I also reunited with my master, I would like to express my sincere thanks to you for all of this."

???: "…"

Julius: "If possible, I wish to know your name…"

Julius spoke carefully. However, the woman remained silent, responding to Julius with her back.

It’s not that she won’t speak. It’s just that she doesn’t intend to speak with him. …Unless one of the participants of the conversation is Natsuki Subaru.

Julius: “…If it was you, you would be able to pry her mouth open.”

Julius turned to look at Subaru who was focused on by the woman. Emilia and Beatrice are currently rejoicing at their reunion with Subaru and Ram.

Emilia: “Ah, Julius! Come and help. I want to check if they are injured, but Subaru won’t let go of Ram…”

Beatrice: “There are no major problems with the injuries of these two. However, his strength is far too great in fact…!”

Emilia: “Subaru’s chicken arms usually don’t have any strength to them, but now he is holding her so tightly… I can’t pull them apart.”

Emilia and Beatrice were extremely troubled by this. Julius went to help, and at the same time sealed his feelings of inadequacy into the bottom of his heart.

Even in this scenario, even after he lost consciousness, Subaru still does everything he can to protect someone.

Julius: “Right now, between you and me…”

Who is more worthy of the title of Knight? Such doubts were also deeply engraved in Julius’s heart.

END

Volume 23

Chapter 34-54

Chapter 34:
Coming Out of the Convenience Store, There Was a Wondrous World

1

Natsuki Subaru was born into the lax educational environment of the Heisei-era Japan.

If we were to tell the whole story of the entire 17 years of his life, it would probably take all 17 years to do it.

So, if we omit those parts and just briefly explain his current position, it would be along the lines of “A Third-Year Highschool Hikikomori”.

Or, in a little more detail, it would be “A Hopeless Shit Who Goes Against His Parents’ Expectations And Shuts Himself In His Own Shell At A Time When Exams Are Coming Up”.

He had no particular reasons for withdrawing himself.

One ordinary weekday, the thought just occurred to him, “it’d be a pain to get up today”, and from there, his absenteeism was under way.

Slipping further and further like this, the amount of time he stayed away from school grew longer, and, before he knew it, he had become a shut-in who made his parents cry.

Day after day, he spent in indulgent slothfulness, cutting off all communication, languoring on in this state, until—

Subaru: “In the end, I got summoned to a Parallel World…huh”

???: “Subaru?”

While he was busy muttering to himself and trying hard to organize some understanding of the current situation, two white hands grabbed onto his cheeks. Looking up, there was a beautiful silver-haired girl in front of his eyes.

—Honestly, a very beautiful girl.

With long silver hair that gleamed like moonlight and violet eyes like embedded gemstones.

Her long lashes were trembling as she watched him with a worried gaze that took her beauty beyond the natural order of the world, such that it gave him the illusion that he was seeing some divine art-piece magnificent enough to make all the artists of the world give up their pens.

And then, there was the question, why would such a beautiful girl be squeezing his face in a close enough range that they could feel each other's breaths?

Subaru: "Nnnnnnnn?"

Her smell is super nice.

???: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "I-I'm Natsuki Subaru."

His name being called once again by that voice like the ring of a silver chime, Subaru spasmed out a smile in reply.

Not just his face, but even his voice was shaking, and it wasn't entirely clear whether that could be called a smile. And, for reasons Subaru could not understand, this girl seemed to be especially close to him. Otherwise, she wouldn't be talking and staring at him in such a super-close distance like this.

???: "Umm, Suba…ru. Sorry, but… you're acting a little strange"

Subaru: "S-Strange… ? What, like my eyes, or something like that?"

???: "Uuuh, no. Your eyes are still reeaaally scary-looking like usual, I guess it's nothing"

Subaru: “My eyes are usually reeeally scary-looking?!”

Trying to calm himself down by joking around a bit, he instead got hit by that totally unexpected comment. Watching Subaru recoil from that remark, the girl stuck out her tongue a little with “You’re always like this”.

So cute. What’s going on with this girl? Why does she seem so terribly close to him?

And just, what did she mean by “always like this”, and acting so worried—

????: “—Emilia, you might have come to that conclusion too rashly. In fact, something does seem off, I suppose”

???: “—? But, Subaru’s eyes just always look like that, I think”

????: “I’m not talking about Subaru’s scary eyes right now! I don’t really care if his eyes look scary, I suppose!”

Subaru: “What’s with this about my eyes being scary-looking! It’s a bad hobby to be picking on other people’s weak points, you know! What’s with you guys… ah, no, I mean, you two are, kinda cute and all…”

Subaru jumped himself up with great force and started blowing up in front of the beautiful girl and the one she was talking to—cute and fairy-like, a little girl in an extravagant dress, sporting a pair of no less elegant swirling drill-curls… but his voice quickly trailed off.

Inherently blunt, he had started blurting this out without thinking, before he realized that on the other end were two girls he had just met. Shutting himself up, he seriously recognized that he shouldn’t have snapped.

—But the situation was too strange.

If what Subaru imagined was correct, these two girls must be important KEY-PERSONs, like the villagers of the first village or something like that.

So, Subaru should straighten himself up and focus on first impressions.

Subaru: “Ahem”

Coughing once, intending to start over, Subaru turned to face the two in front of him.

Taking the two shocked-looking girls and the giant black lizard curled up behind his back into his gaze, Subaru took a step back, and,

Subaru: “—Let me introduce myself again. My name is Natsuki Subaru!”

Jabbing a finger toward the ceiling, he held his waist with the other hand and struck out a POSE.

Sadly, there was no shiny reflective ball or Disco music, but Subaru sparkled his teeth as he said this and tried to make the most of it.

Subaru: “Shamefully ignorant, blown here by the immortal winds of Gods and Demons! An uncouth vagrant, but nonetheless pleased to meet thee!”

???+????: “…”

Listening to him proclaiming this at the top of his voice, for a moment, the other two could only stare at him stupidly.

Getting no reaction at all, Subaru only continued maintaining his pose. As if whoever moves first would lose, he decided he was in it to win it.

And so, after about ten seconds had passed in silence, the two girls looked at each other, and then,

???: “Well but… we already know… you?”

????: “This is way too late for self-introductions isn’t it”

Subaru: “Whuaa?!”

And just like that, yanked out of his high-spirited self-introduction, his thoughts spilled out into that groan.

2

—It was only a little later when the seriousness of the situation became apparent.

He was rather proud of that self-introduction, but seeing the way it was received, Subaru couldn't help but bend his neck. But, after that, hearing it again from the two girls, it was clear why they were so surprised.

Subaru and the girls' memories were different—while Subaru was supposed to be meeting them for the first time, they already knew who Subaru was.

Of course, there were no such memories on Subaru's side. So then—

???: "In other words, Subaru… you don't remember anything? About this tower, about what happened in Priestella… and, even, about Ram, and Beatrice… and about me too?"

Subaru: "Uuum… yeah, that, seems to be, yes"

???: "…"

Seeing Subaru with his knees neatly folded and stuttering out his reply, the beautiful girl widened her eyes. The sight of her pupils violently trembling sent an sense of intense guilt into Subaru's heart.

But she was not the only one who was shocked by Subaru's reply.

????: "Your memories… are gone? No way, there's no way that could happen…"

Muttering this in a whisper, was the pale-faced little girl.

Even more confused than the pretty girl, the younger girl was not spared from the shock.

Sitting on the side of the ivy-bed, the little girl sitting beside him was softly tugging on his sleeve. Seeing her delicate fingers lightly trembling, Subaru felt a pain inside his heart.

Subaru: “…”

Facing the two girls, shocked and lost in front of him, Subaru tried to think of something to say, but unfortunately, nothing came to him. Honestly, there was so much cold water dumped on him at once that it would’ve been enough to drown in.

—Initially, what Subaru thought had happened was him “Just getting summoned to a Parallel World”.

While getting summoned to a Parallel World, even with the “Just” attached to it, was already far beyond what would be considered common sense, it turned out to be even further away than he had imagined—Although, one could say, he almost had the right answer.

As far as Subaru was concerned, this was not the familiar world he had lived in for seventeen years.

It was clearly evident just by looking at the outlandish clothing, and the inhuman beauty of these two girls. If that still wasn’t enough, the giant black lizard the size of a horse should also be submitted to the court as evidence.

He had heard of Komodo Dragons that were supposed to be pretty big, but that would be nothing compared to the stature of this black lizard. And with the organic bed and chairs made out of ivy added to that, we have a pretty clear case on our hands.

—In other words, this was a World outside all common sense. An alternate, Parallel World.

Belonging in the so-called Fantasy-genre, a world wholly unknown to Subaru.

Then the next question would be, why was Subaru summoned here, and which sorcerer had summoned him.

At first, he thought it was the two girls in front of him, since that's just how stories usually pan out, and he figured they were probably the main heroines here—but following that train of thought would be a little strange.

As previously mentioned, the girls knew Subaru, yet Subaru had no memory of this. Their understandings were at odds.

Subaru: "Then I've met them already, but I just forgot about it… that's…"

Trying to process the new information from their latest exchange, Subaru made a difficult face.

At the very least, Subaru's CAPACITY was already quite overloaded when it dawned on him that he was summoned to a Parallel World. If he were to also understand that he had actually been active in this Parallel World for quite some time before this, Subaru's plate was really in no condition to take this on.

Frankly, Subaru would've been more inclined to say something like "Is that even possible?" and laugh the matter off.

But the girl and the loli seemed dead-serious, and didn't seem to be lying, either. Of course, Subaru had no memories of the things these girls were talking about, and he would have stubbornly denied them if he wasn't feeling so guilty about the look on these girls' faces.

In fact, if he had to pick between his own opinions or the girls', he'd probably believe the girls since he wasn't even close to trusting himself enough.

Of course, that wasn't his only reason. —A stronger clue would be the changes to his body.

Subaru: "…Yeah, this doesn't seem to be the same body I came out of the convenience store with"

Mumbling this, Subaru held up his right arm and opened and closed his fist.

It might have been psychological, but his arm felt a little stronger than before. And on his palm, there seemed to be a few more calluses that he didn't realize were there. These weren't calluses that came from swinging bamboo swords, because, after all, he hadn't practiced with bamboo swords for over a year now.

Also, those weren't the only changes to his arm.

Subaru: "GUROTESQUE?"

Turning his arm over, Subaru frowned up his face when he saw its backhand side.

His arm not only felt slightly stronger, but its appearance had become grotesque as well. From his right elbow, all the way up to his wrist, there was a long pattern of black spots—they bulged out like veins and covered over his arm like a tattoo someone with rather bad taste might've gotten.

If it didn't seem so organic, it might have been mistaken for a tattoo, but no matter how he picked at it, it was just a part of his arm. Undeniably grotesque.

???+????: "…"

So he scratched at it even harder.

When tracing it with his fingers, the texture felt no different from his skin. It didn't hurt on its own, and there wasn't any strange numbness either. And, digging his nails into it, the corresponding sharp pain came just as he would expect.

If he scratched to his heart's content, he wondered if the black skin would break and bleed.

—And if it did bleed, would the blood be red?

???: "Subaru…"

Subaru: "Huh! No no, nothing? I just, thought my arm got sunburnt to WELL-DONE and was a little bothered by it. That's all"

Although he was a bit shocked by the change, when he heard the pretty girl's worried call, he immediately tried glossing it over with a joke.

One could say it's fortunate, but Subaru wasn't someone who balked at the sight of wounds on his own body. It's not that he wouldn't feel guilty about damaging the body his parents gave him, but even without this, his sense of guilt towards his parents was already piling on over and over at this point.

Still, this was a pretty wide area. If he wore long sleeves and maybe some gloves he could probably keep it from ruining anyone else's mood.

Subaru: "I usually wear long sleeves anyway, and it's not illegal to equip some fingerless gloves too. If I ever get into a dangerous situation, I can just yank off the glove and show them the black arm… and they'll be like "No way, that guy's got BLACK ARM…!" Isn't that just exciting to think about?"

???+????: "…"

Subaru licked his lips and swooshed his arm around like crazy.

Considering the changes to his arm, as well the strangeness of the whole situation, the believability of the girls' explanations were very high.

In the first place, Subaru's most recent memory was "Immediately after shopping at the convenience store".

Subaru was definitely wearing his jersey when he finished shopping, but, right now, far from his favorite old jersey, he was wearing some sort of dirty worn-out travelling clothes. Nor was he wearing sneakers on his feet, and his WELL-DONE over-sunburnt arm wasn't holding a shopping bag either.

Indeed, he had not only jumped Worlds, but had leaped through time as well.

Coming out of the convenience store, the moment he blinked his eyes, he woke up here—that was Subaru's understanding of it.

If so, then at which moment did he lose consciousness? By the time he realized he had been sleeping, he was woken up by a call. So then, what was the blank void before this?

—He was summoned to a Parallel World from outside the convenience store, and after some time had passed, he lost his memories.

“Summoned to a Parallel World”, sounds like the unraveling of a dream he had dreamt who knows how many times before—yet he could not simply be pleased to accept this terrible, unexpected gift.

Unbeknownst to Subaru, Subaru had lived for a time in this Parallel World, and it was a fact that over that time, Subaru had interacted with and gotten know these girls he couldn’t recognize.

Would it really be alright to believe them, believe in their good will, and stay here with them?

???+????: “…”

Subaru: “Ah, aaaahhh, uuuuuhhhh, that, that’s right! I can understand why you’re feeling down, but I’ll just say one thing, let’s pull ourselves together and GET OUR SPIRITS UP!”

After thinking long and hard about it, Subaru suddenly puffed up with spirit and shouted that out of the blue.

Beside him and in front of him, the downcast expressions on the two girls sent his heart into a passionate boil.

Without a doubt, they were confused and heartbroken about this situation.

While it was still a bit hard for Subaru to accept that he was the primary cause of this, he knew he was the only person who could fix it.

So, extending out a hand to each of the astonished girls in a deliberately flashy gesture,

Subaru: “As far as I know, these cases of ACUTE ONSET AMNESIA usually get better due to some sudden plot development so there's no need to be too worried. If it's anything like in movies, it usually gets resolved in one or two hours and then everything goes back to normal for some cliched happy ending. Tragedy is the best SPICE to lead up to grand happy endings, after all!"

???: "Sorry, I kind of have no idea what you're talking about…"

Subaru: "Ouggghh kay…?"

???: "But…"

Immediately after Subaru laid down his rapid-fire delivery full of bravado, the beautiful girl informed him that she didn't understand any of that. Subaru felt like deflating at those words, but the girl quickly shook her head.

And then, lightly scratching the corner of her eye, with a sudden smile,

???: "Subaru is still Subaru, after all… Mn, I'm relieved"

Subaru: "Eh. I-Is that right? If you say that, then I guess I feel a little bit relieved as well…"

???: "Eiiiiii!"

Subaru: "Wh-What did you suddenly do that for?!"

With a spirited cry, the pretty girl slammed her palms onto her own cheeks with a force that cannot be overlooked. Clapping down with both hands at once with a crisp sound ringing out, the girl's cheeks turned bright red.

Seeing Subaru thrown into complete disarray at the sight of that gesture, the pretty girl lightly shook her head, and,

???: "There, I got my spirit back. Being like that is no-good, is it? How could we keep making that troubled face when Subaru must be feeling even more troubled than we are"

Subaru: "It may not look like it, but this girl is crazy ferocious…"

???: “Quick, Beatrice too!”

With her cheeks still bright red, the pretty girl’s dashing declaration stunned Subaru into a state of shock. And then, with the same fervor, she called to the now petrified little girl sitting beside Subaru.

In front of the pretty girl’s intimidating presence, the little girl in a dress shriveled back a bit, but,

???: “I’m shocked too, and I also understand the sadness… but right now, we have to think about the one who’s taking this the hardest. We have to do something for him, don’t we?”

????: “B-Betty is…”

???: “…”

The little girl closed her mouth as if searching for what to say.

Seeing her child-like indecision, the pretty girl didn’t say a thing, and only watched and waited for her response.

She could have continued on and pressured her to change her heart. But the girl didn’t do this. And the reason, was most likely because she had faith in the little girl.

Unable to remember them, Subaru couldn’t possibly understand the trust that existed between these two.

????: “Subaru… must be very distraught right now, I suppose”

Subaru: “…Well I, didn’t really, say that?”

Making an ultra-small effort to salvage some dignity, Subaru quibbled. But seeing that the loli wasn’t convinced by this, Subaru ended up scratching his head, and,

Subaru: “Aaahh, honestly, yeah. Yes, I want you to please help me!”

????: “…”

After being pushed into a corner, he admitted to the true state of his mind. Seeing this, the little girl's eyes widened. In her thin, pale blue eyes, were a pair of the strangest pupils—that is, for some reason, Subaru seemed to be seeing the wings of butterflies.

????: "…aaaauuggghhh, just, really! Subaru is just the most hopeless Contractor in the world!"

The next moment, as if those butterfly wings had fluttered up a tornado, the loli's attitude took a 180-degree turn. Crossing her short arms, the little girl shouted this out in an exacerbated voice.

Seeing her like this, the pretty girl smiled, and Subaru's shoulders jumped up. And then, pointing a finger directly at Subaru's nose,

????: "All the time, you're just throwing up all sorts of trouble to annoy Betty, I suppose! If you don't stop it with these, these sloppy, irresponsible shenanigans even Betty is not going to love you anymore!"

Subaru: "Ooh, ooooooooh…th, then, th-that means?"

????: "But since you're sincerely begging for Betty's help, I'll let this one go, I suppose. —At any rate, without Betty, Subaru will just be a hopeless lonely wimp who can't go on living."

Subaru: "Did you have to put it like that?!"

The incredible rate at which the loli escalated the conversation knocked Subaru straight into shell-shock. Without this girl, would he really get so lonely that he couldn't go on living anymore? How exaggerated could it get?

????: "Hmph, even if you tell me you've forgotten, I'll make you remember, I suppose. —Betty's Contractor is just a mopey, fussy guy who, no matter what happens, is never going to take on any sort of sepia-colors in my reminiscences or anything like that"

Subaru: "There was a lot in there I didn't understand… but was all that supposed to be talking about me?!"

Setting "Contractor", or whatever words he felt like he couldn't ignore, aside, the downcast expression on the little girl's face seemed to have lifted. And so he decided to resist the urge to object for now.

Frankly, it was still quite difficult for Subaru to just calmly accept the current situation.

The mess in his head still hadn't been sorted out, he still hadn't completely come to terms with reality, and he couldn't exactly swallow all the explanations as fact.

But even so, for now, the girls' feelings had been conveyed to him.

Subaru: "My name is NATSUKI SUBARU. I just got here and don't even know the left from right yet, but I assume we're probably friends. And I realize this is a bit brazen, but, I'd like to ask you two a favor"

Jumping up once more, Subaru jabbed a finger toward the ceiling and announced his name.

And then, shooting his arms toward the two girls in front of him, he tilted his head, and,

Subaru: "—Would you mind… telling me your names please?"

???＋ ????: "…"

Hearing those words, for some reason, the pretty girl's throat froze up, and the little girl blinked her eyes.

But this only lasted for a moment.

Then, setting that aside at once, smiles gradually emerged on their faces.

Emilia: "My name is Emilia, just Emilia. Nice to meet you, Subaru"

Beatrice: "Betty is the Great Spirit Beatrice, and Subaru is Betty's Contractor, you know"

And, just like this, they told him their names.

3

So, after all that, Subaru managed to complete his self-introduction to Emilia and Beatrice for the second time. But—

Everyone: "…"

Over the breakfast table, after explaining why everyone had to reintroduce themselves again, the general mood was like sitting on a mat full of needles.

Naturally, Emilia and Beatrice were present. And aside from those two and himself, there were five other ladies and gentlemen in attendance—the ratio between gentlemen and ladies was a bit skewed, but at least both genders were represented.

Emilia explained that they had all followed Subaru to this Tower—(which, from the inside, he didn't even realize was a tower), and that they were his companions currently putting their heads together to capture this Tower.

If we were to describe each of these fabulous members in turn, it would be—a glamorous busty young lady in a sexy outfit, a pretty little girl with a bewitching aura unbefitting of her age, a cute-faced girl with peach-colored hair and an enchanting gaze, an elegant girl with youthful features and a gentle air about her, and, lastly, a handsome young man with upright features surrounded by an air of nobility.

"Everyone is physically attractive," was Subaru's miserable realization about this Parallel World at this point.

Subaru: "Well… just from personal preference… I still think the beautiful silver-haired Emilia-chan takes first place…"

Everyone: "…"

He whispered that random unnutritious thought out loud and met an extremely cold reception in return.

Well obviously. After all, they've just been told that Subaru lost his memories—and had forgotten every single one of them. It was inevitable they'd be as stumped as Emilia and Beatrice were.

Emilia: "So, I guess everyone is pretty shocked… Subaru is in quite a situation right now. But, even in a situation like this… no, precisely because the situation is like this, we should give him our support"

Saying this, Emilia pitched in to help Subaru sum up his situation.

Nonetheless, even in the short time that he's gotten to know her, he could already tell that she wasn't very good at public speaking. It was only when Beatrice spoke her piece that they able to take control of the conversation that was rolling all over the place.

Thanks to that, Subaru's condition was just barely communicated to everyone present, when—

Peach-Colored-Haired Girl: "—Emilia-sama, may I?"

Raising her hand, the girl with peach-colored hair asked Emilia for permission to speak. Emilia, who was addressed with the respectful "sama", nodded "Mmhm" as a matter of course.

Emilia: "That girl is Ram. She's a maid from the Mansion… maid, do you know what that is?"

Subaru: "NO-PROBLEM… but, a Mansion-Maid, you say. Mn, I think I got it"

The pretty peach-color-haired girl named Ram—according to Emilia's supplementary information, was apparently a Maid. Judging from the fact that she had a maid with her, Subaru could more or less imagine what Emilia's identity might be, while Ram, who couldn't care less about that train of thought right now, shot a pale-red, piercing glare at Subaru,

Ram: "Is this some kind of prank, Barusu?"

Subaru: "I know I can't help but come off as suspicious here, but that's the truth. Also, what's with turning my name into a Blinding-Curse, oy. …And, the sleeping girl back there, are you her older sister?"

Ram: "…"

Being called by that blockhead name, Subaru frowned up his face and objected. Hearing this, Ram narrowed her eyes.

His question was about the girl in the green-colored room he had woken up in—who was not among those present here.

With bright, light-blue hair, and facial features identical to Ram's—she was sleeping, and no matter what kind of commotion was being thrown up around her, she went on sleeping as though it had anything to do with her. After introducing himself for the second time, she was the first person Subaru asked Emilia and Beatrice about.

According to them, finding a way to wake her from her unwaking slumber was one of the primary reasons they came to capture this Tower.

Subaru: "Sorry I caused all this trouble when you're trying to wake up your sister. But I honestly have no idea what's going on with a lot of things right now. So please insult me all you want once I get my memories back"

Ram: "…The way you said that… you really don't remember? That frivolous attitude and tone doesn't seem any different from regular Barusu"

Subaru: "When you put it like that, it almost sounds like I still got all my good qualities from before. That's good news, right? Well, like they say, "a man's nature doesn't change so easily", so please treat the new me the same way you treated me before!"

Subaru puffed himself up with spirit, and Ram only stared at this irresponsible attitude in disbelief.

Like nothing changed at all. Subaru was so much like his usual self that she couldn't help but have such doubts. Apart from the memory loss, it was true that it didn't seem all that bad.

At least, in terms of interactions, there was no need to worry about anything feeling off.

Subaru: “So that’s basi… Uuoouuhh?!”

Busty Girl: “Teacher-sama~?”

Just as he was about to take a breath after Ram’s questioning, Subaru almost flipped upside down when he felt a sweet breath blowing into his ear. Completing his emergency sideways-trajectory, he looked back and saw the glamorous black-haired girl standing in a position close enough to lick his left ear.

Wearing a black bikini, hot-pants, and a cloak—the girl seemed to be aiming for a rather specific fetishism. But, what freaked Subaru out wasn’t her clothing, but her movement.

Only a moment ago, she was sitting cross-legged across from him on the floor. How did she manage to get up and sneak beside him?

Subaru: “Uh, the uhhh…”

Shaula: “It’s Shaula! Teacher-sama’s favorite disciple, and the Stars-Keeper of this Pleiades Watchtowerrrr!”

Subaru: “Stars Keeper…? Also, by Teacher-sama… you mean me…?”

Shaula: “Yessu!”

Beaming a smile that could outshine the sun at Subaru, who was pointing a finger at himself, the beautiful girl—Shaula nodded. The sight of that carefree smile completely turned Subaru’s impression on its head.

In terms of outer appearance, she seemed to be the girl closest to marriageable age in the group, and, combined with that fashion choice, he originally thought there was an especially mature attractiveness about her. But her attitude was like a ten-year-old. Or rather, like a puppy that’s overjoyed to be noticed by its master, or something like that.

In fact, not too far from Subaru’s impression, Shaula was wagging her black ponytail behind her like a dog wagging its tail.

Shaula: “Say, Teacher-sama… you’re still not tired of playing around like thisuu? Just how many times do you have to forget me before you cut that outtt?”

Subaru: “It’s not like it’s a matter of having had enough or not! Actually, are you telling me my memories get blown away very often?! Did crossing dimensions make my memories easy to blow away or something?!”

Hearing Shaula’s air-headed comment, Subaru looked around at the others to make sure.

Although Subaru had been barely able to accept the reality of his memory loss, having it happen frequently was a whole other story. That’s not just acute anymore, that’d be a chronic condition. If he’s constantly losing his memories because of some endemic Parallel World disease, that’s quite a bit more serious than just making daily life inconvenient.

Subaru: “What is it? Do I really lose my memories that often?”

Beatrice: “No, of course not. Calm down, I suppose. Shaula, don’t make Subaru more confused than he already is. He’s just finally settled down too…”

Holding Subaru’s left hand, Beatrice, who was sitting beside him all along, sighed. She shot Shaula a piercing stare, and in return, Shaula stuck out her tongue with “Wleh~”,

Shaula: “I wasn’t trying to trouble Teacher-sama, you knowww. Ah, but then, if that makes Teacher-sama’s head filled with Shaula, then that’s ok too isn’t itttt. Oooh I’m such a fiendish girllll. Teacher-sama, do you like fiendish girlsuu?”

Subaru: “At this point in time, fiendish just means confusing, so no thank you. Right now I only want help from Angel/Goddess/Fairy-types, so I’ll leave half-naked older-sister-types for another time”

Shaula: “Tchiiiii, that’s so meannnn! Even though my boobs are so big, Teacher-sama’s so meannnn~”

In front of Shaula’s ever-escalating affection towards him, Subaru declined her offer with an awkward smile. Honestly, he didn't dislike her at all, but he could tell that her affection was not directed at the Subaru of this moment, but at the "Teacher-sama" Subaru of her devotions.

In fact, Emilia and Beatrice's fondness of him must have been the same as well—

Little Girl With Indigo-Blue Hair: "Really, Onii-san is such a headache-san"

Regardless of Subaru's inner thoughts, the little girl commented in her sweet voice.

She was a little girl who appeared to be about the same age as Beatrice, but unlike Beatrice's fairy-like features, her face was still within the realm of human cuteness. Her indigo blue hair was tied in a French braid, and a rather unbecoming seductive gaze was being sent out from her eyes.

Subaru: "I should like to have a word with your parents, bei-bee~"

Little Girl With Indigo-Blue Hair: "—. It'd be better if you don't. Onii-san and mommy won't get along, you know. Also, aren't we talking about Onii-san's memories right now?"

Subaru: "Even if you say that, there's no way to get them back right away… For now, let's just start with your name. Tell me that, and we'll have taken the first step in our friendship, you know!"

Indigo-Blue-Haired Little Girl: "Pffu… friendship"

Not sure what was funny, but the little girl covered her mouth and quietly snickered. It was like a snicker somewhere in between mocking and speechlessness, and yet, it was neither of the two.

Subaru couldn't understand why she was laughing like that, but,

Meili: "I'm Meili, Onii-san. If you haven't forgotten your sewing skills along with your memories, I still hope you could make me stuffed animals again"

Subaru: “OooOh, my hidden power has already been revealed? Sounds like I’m pretty fond of Meili, huh. Are you also my little-sister-protegee like Beatrice?”

Beatrice: “That girl was an assassin sent to murder Subaru and Betty in our house, I suppose”

Subaru: “What kind of joke is that?!”

Beatrice dumped a rather heavy-weight joke on him, but, for some reason, no one else was denying it. Unless… Subaru looked at Meili, and she gave him a little smile and waved her hand.

Subaru had no idea what actually happened, but this little girl being an assassin—still sounded a bit unrealistic. Although, maybe it wouldn’t hurt to stay on the safe side.

Subaru: “So then, Ram and Shaula and Meili have all introduced themselves. Then the next would be…”

Setting his various questions about Meili aside for now, Subaru turned his sights on the remaining two people—to the light-purple-haired girl in a scarf, and the handsome-featured youth.

Of all those present, only these two hadn’t uttered a single word since they explained Subaru’s situation. And, to Subaru, with the gender ratio excessively tilted towards females, that youth was the only person of the same gender as him. So he was quite looking forward to what he had to say, but,

Handsome Youth: “…”

The silent youth’s yellow pupils were trembling, and a ghastly aura was emanating from him as he sat there. It was an atmosphere that made one hesitate to speak to him, and Subaru couldn’t say a word.

Even for Subaru, who was universally recognized for his inability to read the mood, seeing the youth like this made him reluctant to set foot into his world.

Perhaps, out of all the people in this room, he was the one whom this had hit the hardest.

Light-Purple-Haired Girl: “Just…”

Handsome Youth: “…Gh”

Light-Purple-Haired Girl: “Just, give him a little time. That’s fine, right?”

In that youth’s stead, the pretty girl in a scarf lightly raised her hand and said this. Her clothing seemed to be quite a bit warmer than the others, and, contrary to her cute appearance, her tone was a tad tomboyish—somewhat reminiscent of what they call a Boku-ko back home. And just like this, she sliced through the congealing atmosphere.

Either way, her words salvaged the conversation. Although, for some reason, Emilia and everyone else seemed terribly confused about something just now.

Subaru: “Aah, yeah, of course. It’s my bad for suddenly shocking everyone with this…”

Light-Purple-Haired Girl: “The way I* see it, it’s not only that…” (*’Boku’, the masculine ‘I’)

Subaru: “Ooooh, it is a Boku-ko?”

So this girl who gave off the impression of a Boku-ko, actually did refer to herself with “Boku”.

With a thoughtful expression, the girl played with her scarf and wryly smiled at Subaru’s words,

“Anastasia”: “For now, you may call me Anastasia. In fact, if it weren’t for your shocking revelation, it would have been me in your place, making a shocking revelation of my own. But it seems, there’s been a mixup”

Subaru: “A shocking… revelation…?”

Unsure what kind of revelation she was planning to make, Subaru seemed perplexed by her words, but Anastasia only lightly smiled, and did not answer him. All the while, watching their exchange, the expressions on Emilia and Beatrice's faces also seemed as though they were puzzled by something.

They didn't know what Anastasia was going to confess either—but there appeared to be something else that was bothering them.

Ram: "In any case, it seems Knight Julius needs some time to settle down… so let's prepare breakfast in the meantime. Emilia-sama, can I borrow Barusu to fetch some water with me?"

Subaru: "Eh?"

Standing up from her seat, Ram patted her knees as she said this.

Instead of indulging in the stagnancy of the situation, she suggested making use of the time. It made sense, yet something about it felt off as Emilia's face seemed surprised by this unexpected request.

No matter what, to ask an amnesiac Subaru to accompany her would just be—

Emilia: "Subaru's memories are muddled up, maybe it's better to let him rest…"

Ram: "Even if we let him rest, there is no way for him to recover his memories right away. Barusu said this himself. Besides, whether or not he has his memories, Barusu is still a servant under Roswaal-sama's employment. He's just a bit more forgetful than usual, to use that as an excuse for slacking off is unforgivable"

Subaru: "That's pretty harsh, Ram-chan… Ram-san?"

Ram: "…"

Ram shot him a glare, and Subaru's shoulders shriveled up into a ball.

Even so, perhaps Ram was right. Although Subaru was currently in a difficult situation, he wouldn't feel comfortable being overly pampered because of it.

Besides—

Subaru: "…"

Watching the downcast youth supported by Anastasia, Subaru felt that he shouldn't be there, at least until the youth had settled down.

Or maybe it was because she noticed this, that she wanted to bring Subaru out of the room.

Subaru: "If that's the case, I shouldn't underestimate you, Ram…"

Ram: "…Anyways, let's go, Barusu. I don't expect other capabilities from you, but at least you should have no problem drawing water"

Emilia: "Oh, then we could…"

Ram: "You shouldn't spoil Barusu, if you want what's best for him"

Perhaps calling her name without any suffixes was the correct answer, since Ram didn't object that time. Instead, she stopped Emilia, who wanted to come along.

Just as Emilia was about to argue, Subaru cut in, "It's fine it's fine",

Subaru: "Ram's got a point. Aside from what's in my brain, my body is fine. I heard that I'm supposed to be a servant? Like a scullery boy? Seems like it I guess, so in that case I should go draw some water and resume my duties"

Emilia: "…Subaru you're not a servant, you're my…"

Subaru: "I'm your, what?—! Unless uh, I..I'm, your lll…ll..l-lover or…"

Emilia: "No no, it's absolutely totally not that at all"

Subaru: "It's absolutely totally not that at all?! Well, yeah I guess…"

Breathing heavily through his nostrils, asking this full of hope, he was immediately shot down by Emilia.

She was definitely his type all the way, but this highborn flower was too far out of his reach. Memories or not, how could Subaru possibly hope to come within reach of such a cute girl like her?

Subaru: “Anyways, don’t mind me, go take care of your end. Hopefully by the time I come back, he’ll feel a little better…”

Emilia: “…Mn, you’re right. I understand. I’ll… try to talk to him somehow”

Putting jokes aside, Subaru lowered his voice and whispered this to Emilia while pointing in the direction of the young man. The youth seemed to be exchanging words with Anastasia, but for some reason, he didn’t appear to be feeling any better.

It would be great if Emilia and Beatrice could slightly lift his spirits.

Either way, he wasn’t expecting Shaula or Meili to be of much help in the matter.

Subaru: “Of course, the most dependable one here is Betty. I’ll leave it to you, Contract-ko”

Beatrice: “—. I’d prefer if you don’t call me that”

Subaru: “—? Aw really? Then, just Beatrice?”

Beatrice: “…That’s… good enough for now. Subaru can leave it to Betty”

Still holding his hand, Beatrice slightly objected to what Subaru called her. Seeing her reaction, Subaru got the feeling that he made the wrong choice in the end, but still didn’t know how to fix it.

Then, Beatrice let go of Subaru’s hand and turned her eyes toward Ram,

Beatrice: “Older twin-sister, I’ll entrust Subaru to you, I suppose”

Ram: “Understood. But we’re not going far, I doubt it will be dangerous?”

Beatrice: “It was precisely in that kind of un-dangerous place that Subaru dropped all his memories, you know”

Ram: “Good point”

Subaru: “Uugghh, no counter-argument at all…”

Listening to the exchange between Beatrice and Ram, Subaru was stuck with this unpleasant consensus. Just then, Emilia brought back a water bucket from the edge of the room.

Handing the bucket to Subaru,

Emilia: “Just go slowly with Ram and take your time. I’ll try my best to calm him down before you get back.”

Subaru: “Ah, alright, do your best. I’ll leave it to you, Emilia-chan”

Emilia: “—. Mhm.”

For just a moment, there was a pause before she replied, but Subaru didn’t pursue it.

Ram: “Barusu”

Ram called for him to hurry up, and Subaru took the bucket in one hand and followed her out of the room. As he left, he stole a glance in the direction of the youth, but he still didn’t appear to be in a state to talk.

Subaru: “…So uh, would it be alright if I ask what the problem was?”

Ram: “You mean Knight Julius? That is quite cruel of you, Barusu”

Subaru: “It’s, cruel…?”

There was now only the two of them. Walking down the hallway side by side with Ram, Subaru asked about the youth who seemed to have been more shocked than anyone else in the room.

Her reply was that he was cruel, and he had picked up that the youth’s name was Julius, a name that gave off quite a smart impression, he thought.

Subaru: “I guess we can leave him to Emilia and Beatrice, that’s why you brought me out here, isn’t it. It wasn’t just to fetch water, right?”

Having put a little distance between the room and themselves, Subaru got straight to the point.

Ram: “…”

Subaru: “Not talking, huh. I mean, I’m not saying that for sure, I could be wrong and it could turn out to be really super embarrassing for me maybe”

Ram: “…”

Subaru: “…Unless, it was really just to get water? Um uh, if that’s the case please forget what I said, uhh, now that I think about it, all that smug-faced “Something must be up?” was just totally cringey right now”

Ram: “…”

Subaru: “Ah?”

Thinking he probably got it wrong, Subaru’s face was starting to tense up from the lack of a response. But, just as he was trying to find some way to smooth it over, Ram stopped in her tracks.

Going ahead for two extra steps before realizing that she had stopped, Subaru stopped as well and turned around towards Ram.

She lightly brushed her peach-colored hair, and,

Ram: “—That’s enough, dumbass, you can drop the act now Barusu”

Then, with a slight tinge of anger in her light-red pupils, she spoke.

Subaru: “Eh? The act…?”

Ram: “That’s the whole point of changing locations, you understand that don’t you? You didn’t have to make a girl so embarrassed. Disgusting”

Subaru: “Disgusting!”

Not understanding what she was trying to say, Subaru furrowed his brows. But in the meantime, Ram hugged her own elbows, and shook her head at his stupid-looking expression.

Ram: “Anyways, Barusu must’ve come up with some kind of half-assed plan again, didn’t you? Nevermind the indiscrete Emilia-sama, the opposing faction Anastasia-sama, and the untrustworthy Shaula… at least tell Ram what you’re thinking”

—That way, they can better coordinate in case something goes wrong.

With that as the subtext, Ram plainly said this to Subaru.

Receiving this, Subaru’s eyes drifted for a bit, before bringing up his right arm and scratching hard at his hair.

Subaru: “About that, um. Ram, what you said just now. It’s not that I don’t understand, but…”

Ram: “But?”

Subaru: “Sorry, but, this is really not an act or a prank or anything. I really don’t remember. Sorry I can’t live up to your expectations”

Ram: “Stubborn. I know Barusu always likes to go at it alone, but this time it concerns me as well. Ram has a stake in what happens to Rem. So I’m afraid you have to let me in on this”

Subaru: “No, but I mean…”

Who’s being stubborn here? Subaru felt himself at a loss with Ram insisting like this.

No doubt she couldn’t accept the fact that he had lost his memories, but seeing her so obstinate, Subaru didn’t know what to do. In the end, how would pretending to lose his memories help capture this tower, anyway?

Ram: “Even though Ram doesn’t understand… If it’s Barusu, Barusu always has a plan. So, come clean with me. I will keep it secret”

Subaru: “Although sharing a secret just between the two of us sounds enticing and all…”

She didn’t know the details, but she was certain Subaru had a plan.

The way Ram said this made him so surprised that he stood there stunned for a moment. But even if she questioned him with this flimsy logic, Subaru wouldn’t know what to tell her.

Come to think of it, she said “If it’s Subaru”. Just how much faith did she have in him?

But, while Subaru was busy being occupied with these thoughts, Ram—

Ram: “Barusu”

Subaru: “Hm? …Egh, oy?!”

Suddenly taking a step forward, Ram closed in and swung her arm, and the bucket flew from Subaru’s left hand. Metal struck upon the stone floor, and its high-pitched noise rang down the hallway.

Shocked, Subaru was about to raise his voice to ask her why she did that. But—

Subaru: “Uuogh”

A hand clenched onto his collar, and by the time he noticed he had lost his balance, he was pinned against the wall.

Letting out a small cry at the pain of his back striking against the wall, Subaru realized it was because of the small statured girl in front of him.

He realized it, but he didn’t know why.

Subaru: “What, what’re you doing…”

Ram: “Tell me. If you don’t cut this out, Ram also has some other ideas”

Subaru: “—T! What the hell’s with you! Didn’t I tell you I got nothing?! I’m not lying to you! I…”

Faced with her quiet threat and use of violence, even Subaru’s patience had reached its limit. How many times did he have to say it before she believed him?

Just like this, he tried to grab of Ram’s wrist that was clenching onto his collar, when—

Ram: “—That’s enough! Spit it out!!”

Subaru: “…”

Hearing this up-close bark, Subaru’s anger scattered away through his ears.

Perhaps it was the shock—but it was not only that. There was shock. But after the shock of this sudden scream, he felt her strength falling away.

But, aside from this, there was still something else stopping him from moving.

Ram: “Spit it… out…”

Her voice was trembling.

Hearing this, even without his memories, Subaru nonetheless felt its impact.

The impact was not only because she had betrayed his impression of her, but because of another, indeterminate reason as well.

Ram: “…Please, spit it… out”

Subaru: “r…am?”

Ram: “…please”

Softly, leaning her forehead against his chest, the girl spilled this out in a trembling voice.

Having lost all of the force of a moment ago, the only thing that remained was sorrow.

She wasn't crying. Because she wasn't so fragile.

She wasn't grieving. Because she wasn't so kind to herself.

—Only, held within that voice, was a sorrow that had no place to go.

—To whom, or where, or what was it pointed?

Ram: "If even Barusu has forgotten, then Ram is…then Rem…"

Subaru: "…"

Ram: "Then Rem… she…"

Rem, was the name of her little sister.

Sleeping in a bed in the Green Room, a sleeping princess who looked exactly like her.

That girl, and her older sister in front of him, just what must have happened between Subaru and them? It was not something Subaru could imagine at this moment.

All Subaru knew was that Ram was truly relying on whatever he had forgotten.

Subaru: "…I'm sorry"

Dropping down his arms, watching her as she pressed her forehead against his chest so he could not see her expression, Subaru quietly apologized.

Was it an apology for what he had forgotten, or an apology because he couldn't answer her?

It was probably both, and some other emotions mixed in as well.

"…"

Other than that, Ram didn't say anything more.

Subaru didn't say anything either. Only, feeling Ram grabbing tightly onto his shirt, he closed his eyes.

—Only the bucket that had rolled onto the floor was staring at the two, helplessly leaning against each other.

Chapter 35:
Thin Ice Relations

1

???: “Subaru knows how painful it is to be forgotten. So… forgetting someone… he would never joke about something like that.”

“…”

On their way back to the room, Subaru inadvertently held his breath when heard the voice from inside.

Even though he couldn’t see who was speaking, he knew from the voice, beautiful like a silver chime, that it was Emilia. Listening to her say his name in her slightly tense voice, Subaru couldn’t help but strain his cheeks into an awkward smile.

Carried within that voice was a powerful trust, and an equally powerful plea.

It was from Emilia to “Natsuki Subaru”, and certainly not to this Subaru. He acutely understood this.

Ram: “…would never joke about something like that. Yes. Never thought I’d say this, but Emilia-sama is right.”

Also hearing that voice, Ram, who accompanied Subaru, whispered this self-derisive comment under her breath. Unlike Subaru, who was carrying the water-filled bucket, she was empty-handed and holding her elbows, her nails digging into her white skin.

Almost like a reminder to herself, a regret, and an extension of the pain of an unfulfillable vow.

Subaru: “Ram…”

Ram: “It was just a pointless joke, forget you ever heard it. It’ll only worry Emilia-sama if you bring it up. So for the sake of Ram’s impeccable reputation, keep it to yourself. If you dare mention it t…”

Subaru: “…”

Ram: “…It seems you, really don’t remember”

If he dares mention it, something scary will happen. That was probably what she was trying to say. Or perhaps, she was expecting Subaru to counter with a quip before she did so.

Just like before, when the connection between her and her younger sister was brought up, he thought he saw a glimpse of disappointment flashing across her pale-red eyes. But that sadness disappeared in an instant.

The fact that she wouldn’t let him tell anyone, was it because Ram was too strong for that, or because she was too weak?

He didn’t know what lay in the depths of her heart.

Only, faintly, on the center of Subaru chest, there was still a lingering trace of where her head had rested.

Ram: “—Sorry to keep you waiting. We’ve returned”

Without giving him any time to think, Ram resumed her steps and headed into the room. That stubborn attitude might just be Ram expressing her insistence on the matter. Seeing this, Subaru had no choice but to respect her feelings and not mention the matter.

Subaru entered a few steps behind her, a more or less strained atmosphere spread throughout the room.

But even so, it was still somewhat better than immediately after Subaru made his shocking revelation.

As proof of that, after Emilia greeted the returning Subaru with “Thanks for the hard work”, the next voice that followed was,

Julius: “…Earlier, I showed you an unsightly side of me. Is it alright if we start over?”

Subaru: "Oh, ohh. I should be the one t… I mean, I'm the one who surprised you w… Ahh no, I shouldn't have interrupted you. Please go on."

Julius: "There is no need to be so restrained. If you're so formal with me, I wouldn't feel at ease."

Saying this, a faint smile emerged on the purple haired youth—Julius's face.

Earlier, he was the one who had turned pale at Subaru's revelation. Subaru didn't know what Emilia and Beatrice might've said to him while he was gone fetching water, but he seemed to have recovered enough strength to speak.

Only, there were still the words Ram said to him in the corridor. —When he asked her about Julius, she told him that he was too cruel. Just what could she have meant by that?

Julius: "Let us start again, I am Julius Juukulius. This is Anastasia-sama… I serve as her Knight. And you… are like a friend, of sorts."

Subaru: "I see, nice to meet you… but, why did that last part not feel very confident there?"

Julius: "Unfortunately, we might have had a slightly different understanding of our relationship. I myself think of you as a friend, but as for what you think of me, it's…"

Subaru: "Literally… lost to memory, huh"

Julius: "—. That is, quite true."

Picking up a certain elegance in his words and conduct, Subaru bent his lips.

According to Emilia, he was the only other male member of their company on this journey into these treacherous environments—so, naturally, there must have been considerable trust between them.

But then again, considering Julius' knightly air and their exchange just now, even without memories, Subaru could imagine his previous-self having made a terrible first impression.

Emilia: “It’s alright, there’s no need to worry. Subaru and Julius are reeeally good friends. We were there, so we can all attest to that.”

Meili: “That’s right. There’s no reason to be so worried about this, is there? Knight-Onii-san’s already got plenty of other problems to worry about”

Watching their exchange, Emilia cut herself in with her hands on her hips, and Meili mockingly concurred with a mischievous look in her eyes.

Whereas Emilia’s words were purely out of concern for Subaru and Julius’ first meeting, Meili’s seemed to be insinuating something entirely different altogether.

Subaru furrowed his brows when he heard this, while Julius nodded as if having understood her meaning.

Julius: “Why, yes. What Meili said is true. Subaru, although we do need to discuss what happened to you, it is not the only problem we are presently faced with. In this regard, please allow me to explain.”

Ram: “This, would it be related to Anastasia-sama’s strange behavior this morning?”

Julius: “…Your observation is correct, Miss Ram.”

Ram said this, leaning against a wall, and Julius slightly cast down his eyes in reply. Seeing this, Ram narrowed her eyes towards Anastasia, and let out a small sigh.

Ram: “Barusu, give me the water bucket. I will begin preparing the meal.”

Subaru: “…Aren’t we about to discuss something important?”

Ram: “I will be still in the same room. So I can still hear everything. …Working will help take my mind off of things.”

Brusquely saying this, Ram snatched the water bucket from

Subaru's hand and headed towards the luggage-filled corner of the room. Then, they saw her slender back setting about exactly that task.

Emilia: "Sorry. Ram… she isn't usually like this…"

"Anastasia": "Of course, there is no need to mind. It is understandable that she would feel this way. —Seeing the desired information one couldn't wait to pull out of the other person's throat suddenly fly so far away, anyone would feel this way"

Anastasia calmly shook her head to Emilia's apology. And, hearing Anastasia's reply, both Emilia and Beatrice made a difficult expression.

Subaru didn't know what might have crossed their minds—but the answer to that soon came from Anastasia's own mouth.

"Anastasia": "Now then, even though after all the confusion this morning, I would honestly do not wish to burden you with any more surprises… I do think that keeping it hidden would only sow the seeds for discord down the road. Therefore, if your accepting soils would permit it, allow me to confide something in you."

Beatrice: "…Such an arrogant and roundabout thing to say. Hurry up and get to the point, I suppose."

"Anastasia": "There is no need to be so frightened, Beatrice. —One could say we are as close as sisters, you and I. In fact, it is just as you guessed."

Beatrice: "…"

Beatrice's cheeks froze at Anastasia's words. Standing beside Subaru, as if naturally seeking something to rely on, the young girl's fingers lightly grasped onto Subaru' sleeve.

Subaru cast her a side glance, and after some hesitation took her hand. The tips of her fingers were faintly quivering from the shock, but soon, the small palm accepted this warmth in turn.

"Anastasia": "…Your relationship with your Contractor is indeed amicable and ideal. I wish I could have had the same perfect relationship with Ana, but unfortunately, it is not going so well.”

Emilia: “You are addressing Anastasia-san like you’re talking about someone else. So that means, you’re…”

“Anastasia”: “Ah, yes, you guessed correctly. —Right now, the consciousness inhabiting this body is not Ana’s. Anastasia Hoshin is sleeping deep inside this body. And the one addressing you now would be something of a deceased ghost that has temporarily taken over this fleshly form.”

Emilia’s breath choked up, and Beatrice held tighter onto Subaru. Julius’ face wringed with pain at her confession, and Meili still looked bored as ever. Only Shaula, sitting cross-legged beside Meili, was completely aloof to the conversation, with her attention solely focused on Ram who was preparing the meal.

With her back turned, no one could make out Ram’s expression as she continued about her work.

Lastly, for Subaru—

Subaru: “…What’re you guys talking about? I didn’t get any of that.”

Left all the way behind, naturally, he could only make a difficult expression.

2

—The body of the girl named Anastasia Hoshin was now dominated by another existence, while her own existence was soundly sleeping.

Simply put, that was what “Anastasia”—or, the spirit by the name of Echidna, had explained.

It seemed that fact was quite shocking to Emilia and Beatrice, while for Subaru, rather than shock, it only served to exacerbate his confusion.

Subaru barely had any impressions of Anastasia in the first place. Imagine someone came up and told him right when they first met that “I used to be Anastasia, but now I’m actually this other person”.

Subaru: “…I-Is that so… That’s uh. That’s… pretty big news, huh.”

He couldn’t exactly react except like it was someone else’s affairs.

No doubt, it was only from the reactions of those around him that he figured that this was a pretty serious situation. After all, they came to this tower for a reason.

It was in order to find a way to save the girl that kept on sleeping, and to help those people struck with some unknown disease, that they came here. —Or at least, that’s what he had been told.

Ram: “We barely just got here and the key people are already falling apart… Barusu dropped his memories somewhere, and Anastasia-sama’s consciousness is deep in the abyss…”

Subaru: “Ugh… doesn’t look good at all, huh…”

Listening to Ram’s blunt remark, Subaru dejectedly held his head.

The problems were just piling up—Subaru hadn’t even sorted out his own mess, and more difficulties just kept coming. They were going nowhere.

In that case—

Emilia: “Everyone, I think even if we hang our heads like this, we won’t solve anything. I understand the frustration, I do… but, we can’t let our spirits down”

“…”

Emilia: “A lot of people’s hopes are riding on us coming to this tower. What happened to Subaru and Anastasia-san, that is a big deal. But…”

Emilia clapped her hands together and gathered everyone’s attention to herself.

Then, after pausing a beat, she scanned her amethyst eyes over everyone present,

Emilia: “We can’t stop here. —We musn’t give up, that’s what I’ve always been taught.”

Emilia said this firmly as she looked at each member’s face in turn. Her gaze finally fell on Subaru, who held his breath as he was pierced by their amethyst charm.

Naturally, his chest heated up. He didn’t know what to say, but he could see the expectation in her eyes. Receiving it, and feeling like he must do something, Subaru tightened his fist.

Beatrice: “Ow! That hurts! Oy, Subaru!”

Subaru: “Ah, my ba…no, not bad! Because this is proof of my determination!”

Beatrice: “Even if you say that with a straight face it still hurt when it hurt, I suppose! Reflect on your actions now!”

Subaru: “S-Sorry. Hurting you was my bad. But my determination was not! Yeah, that’s right!”

Subaru apologized to Beatrice’s protests that her delicate wrist was being squished, but he quickly shook his head.

He could see that the situation as worrying. But simply worrying about unsolvable problems wouldn’t move anything forward at all. Subaru knew this from personal experience, in fact.

If Subaru was alone, he would certainly have lost his way. But, he wasn’t alone. Even if he had forgotten everything on his end, there was still Emilia and the others. And so—

Subaru: “It’s true, my memories slipping away all of a sudden has caused you a lot of trouble, I’m sorry about that. But that doesn’t mean it’s hopeless. Think of it another way. Who knows, maybe now I’m freed from the unnecessary fetters and ready to burst out with new ideas like a fresh spring or something. Then that means we're ready to break out of this mess, doesn't it?"

"Anastasia": "…that's… quite a progressive take on it."

Subaru: "Would you rather go backwards instead? All the important things are ahead of us. They say the Goddess of Fortune only shows her bangs, you know? Besides, when it comes to capturing this tower, maybe we'll need to come up with a more flexible idea. One that isn't confined by the conventions of this world, like, AN IDEA FROM ANOTHER WORLD!"

"Anastasia"—or rather, Echidna, wryly smiled at that momentous remark, but she was pushed back by an even more momentous retort. Even though he was just bluffing, what he said was right, and there was a need to break out of the current atmosphere.

Listening to Subaru's thoughts, the difficult expressions on everyone's faces began to change.

Emilia: "…Mmn, that's right. Subaru has always gotten over all sorts of trouble like this. So, this time, you'll definitely get us through it too."

Subaru: "Oooh! That's the spirit! Though that kinda sounds like I'll have to do all the work here… but since you're counting on me, I'll do my best. Such a cute girl is asking for my help, after all!"

Emilia: "Thank you, Subaru. —Hm, I'm glad. Subaru is still Subaru, after all."

Subaru: "…"

Hearing Emilia's whisper as she put a hand to her ample chest in relief, Subaru was almost caught off-guard.

—"Subaru is still Subaru, after all"

Hearing her sigh of relief from the bottom of her heart, Subaru felt relieved as well.

"I guess that's enough", he thought.

Little by little, this self would be able to fill the hole left by the Natsuki Subaru she knew. If he could do just that, then he should be able to smooth over all the jumbled relationships here.

Julius: "…Well well, that sure is optimistic"

Subaru: "Huh?"

Just when Subaru was relieved by Emilia's words, Julius suddenly cut in. Sensing Subaru's gaze, he shrugged, and loosened his lips with "Nothing",

Julius: "I just thought, memories or not, it's still as impossible as ever to tell whether you're brave or reckless. On the other hand, perhaps you would only think this because you've forgotten the enormity of the obstacle we are facing."

Subaru: "Oy, why's there always something annoying about the stuff you say? Unless… no way, is that just your true nature? Julius-san… I mean, just Julius."

Julius: "…I see. It's just as Emilia-sama said, memories or not really doesn't matter. One's nature is not so easy changed."

Subaru: "I guess I can kind of imagine what kind of relationship we have now. We must be more comfortable with each other than anything else, huh."

They were not harsh words of malice, but an exchange of friendly jabs. Nevertheless, Subaru was convinced that there was a certain sense of distance between them.

His initial impression wasn't wrong. Subaru and Julius mustn't have liked each other very much when they first met. But afterwards, through various things they've experienced together, their relationship must have improved to the point where they could travel to this tower together—

Subaru: "Then I'll be counting on you, Julius. Until I get my memories back, I'll trouble you for a little longer."

Julius: "Yeah, it can't be helped. Then I will resignedly accept this as my duty. —Memories are just a trivial matter. I see. …That’s right.”

Julius quietly nodded to Subaru’s friendly address, and the topic ended there.

His memories were lost, and the problems just kept coming. This definitely wasn’t something one would meet with a bright face, that was a fact, but to face it nonetheless was a testament to his strength.

Julius: “When the person in question isn’t all that concerned, perhaps that is a grace as well”

Subaru: “I just don’t show it. There’s actually a whole storm churning in my chest right now. But, I’ll take the opportunity to get healed by some alone-time with Emilia-chan later”

Emilia: “—? You want a lap pillow?”

Subaru: “Auhm, no. I’m sorry. Isn’t that uh… a bit rushed?”

After saying it with his chest pumped up and his spirits high, Subaru suddenly shrunk. Not expecting Emilia to be so willing to give him such tender healing, his heart started cowering in fear.

Moreover, it’s a lap pillow. Naturally, his gaze fell onto her soft white thighs—

Ram: “It’s ready. Come help carry it, Barusu-pervert.”

Subaru: “OW?!”

Feeling something kick in back of his knees, Subaru let out a wail on the spot and collapsed to the floor. All the while, Ram looked down on him with a look of disdain, as if chastising him for his indecency.

Ram: “Your useless positivity is one of your only virtues, Barusu. Use that positivity to set up the food. As well as for cleaning, tidying, and various other chores”

Subaru: “You just want to slack off, don’t you…”

Shaula: “Ooh! Teacher-sama, I’ll help as well-su~! F-o-o-d! F-o-o-d!”

Just as Subaru was protesting Ram’s forceful transfer of responsibilities, he was immediately cut off by Shaula’s pressing desire for sustenance. Seeing Shaula beginning to carry out the plates, Subaru had no choice but to join in the preparations.

Subaru: “Let’s see the menu… that kinda just looks like preserved rations”

Ram: “In fact, it is precisely preserved rations. The few fresh foods Emilia-sama brought over have already ran out. So the diet will be quite bland in the foreseeable future”

Subaru: “Well, hopefully we can capture this tower quickly and get back to somewhere more populated”

He had heard it said that people’s hearts are only at ease once there are ample food and clothing. In that sense, he wasn’t sure just how long they could last in this tower.

Particularly in regards to food, in the absence of his memory, Subaru’s only impression of the “Taste of this Parallel World” was the taste of preserved rations. Which was rather miserable.

Echidna: “Sorry to bring this up while you’re eating, but there is something I want to confirm with you, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Hungry… starving… What, me? Something you wanted to ask me?”

Roleplaying as someone who has been treated like a slave and given nothing but miserable scraps ever since he was summoned to this Parallel World, Subaru protested against the injustice. But he stopped eating when he heard Echidna’s words.

Echidna: “It’s nothing, but while I apologize for bringing this up this when everyone is united against our situation, I would like Subaru-kun to share a bit more with us about what happened to him. After all, your memories were the only ones that has been affected by this tower. Conversely, who knows if the same thing might happen to any of our memories as well?”

Subaru: “Right, makes sense. Even though having the person involved do it might be a bit difficult… amnesia can be pretty inconvenient, you know.”

Beatrice: “The way you said it make me wonder if you really see yourself as being involved, I suppose…”

Seeing Subaru nod in agreement, Beatrice could only manage a baffled expression.

But, Echidna’s concerns were reasonable. And the truth is, Subaru also needed to know how he lost his memories. The clues to restoring his memories must be tied to how he lost them in the first place.

“…”

At the table, to Subaru’s right was Beatrice, and to his left was Emilia. Those two were at his side when he woke—he wanted to know just what kind of memories could have prompted them to sit there of their own accord, and to place in him such baseless trust and warmth.

—Or rather, it was that he needed to remember, because it was his duty.

Subaru: “But still… I woke up without remembering anything, so I don’t really know what happened. …Emilia-chan and everyone, where exactly did you guys find me?”

Emilia: “Well…, You were nowhere to be seen in the Dragon Carriage this morning, and we couldn’t find you either in any of the rooms on the fourth floor, so we got pretty worried…”

Subaru’s curiosity was piqued by the word dragon carriage, but he did not open his mouth in fear of interrupting Emilia’s story. Perhaps, the lizard who stood in the Green Room was related to Earth Dragons in some way. They did look like the type you’d see from a horse-drawn cart. He'd have to put off his curiosity in wanting to see the real thing though.

Beatrice: "Betty was not at her wit's end as much as Emilia was, in fact. I was just bothered that I couldn't figure out where you, my contractor, was within this strange tower, I suppose. That's why I went with her to search around the tower for you, and after that…"

Subaru: "…And after that?"

Emilia: "We found you collapsed in the white library on the third floor, and then brought you to the Green Room."

Subaru breathed out a "Ahh" after hearing Emilia and Beatrice's joint explanation.

Julius: "The third floor is one of the floors within this tower. We're on the fourth floor right now. We're going through them trying to reach the first floor, which is the topmost floor. It was thanks to none other than… your knowledge that we already made it through past the third floor."

Subaru: "Thanks for explaining… Did you say thanks to my knowledge?"

Julius filled in for the missing details. Even so, for Subaru, the contents seemed to be quite lacking in credibility. Nevertheless, Emilia continued where he'd left off with an "Yeah"

Emilia: "That's really how it happened. All we heard was gibberish, but you were able to solve it all by yourself Subaru… you were reaaaalllly amazing."

Subaru: "Hahaha, thank you… Hey, no one says "gibberish" these days anymore."

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "Did I say something weird?"

Though Subaru had tried to awkwardly compliment Emilia, she remained silent as if something was up with her. For a split second, he could see the traces of some strong emotion flicker across her eyes, yet he had no idea what it meant.

At any rate, he couldn't keep up with them, as if they were ripples rippling through a pond.

Subaru: "By the way, you said that I collapsed and that you brought me to that grassy room…"

Beatrice: "That room is protected by a special spirit. That spirit has the power to heal people's wounds… That is why we've laid Rem down there too, in fact."

Subaru: "Okay, okay, gotcha. So, that's why you also brought me there… By the way, what are the chances that I lost my memories due to that room?"

Emilia: "Well, umm…"

Subaru batted one of his eyes shut as Emilia faltered in response, looking like she hadn't thought about that.

Though this was only a hunch of his, regarding the intentions of this Spirit or whatever, while those may be unknown, if it took the form of a plant, then he couldn't discount it having some kind of cruel nature.

Flowers are pretty and filled with sweet nectar to get insects to carry their pollen. But they can also be like carnivorous plants who camouflage themselves to snare in insects to slurp the life out of them.

It could have slurped his memories out of him instead of healing him… There was a chance of that.

Echidna: "It's quite a wild idea, but I heavily doubt that. In that case, something weird would have happened to me first far quicker, considering I've been in that room far longer than you have."

Subaru: "…That something strange hasn't got anything to do with the original body's owner not waking up?"

Echidna: “Regarding Ana, that happened before we came to the tower. Her condition has nothing to do with the Green Room. And also, that’s right… the Earth Dragon who was in the room hasn’t forgotten about you, right?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Echidna: “That Earth Dragon is awfully attached to you. Suppose, for argument’s sake, that the Spirit in the room had a bad habit of slurping out people’s memories, don’t you think she would have probably given you the cold shoulder?”

Subaru recalled the Earth Dragon that had nestled up to him just after he’d woke up.

For sure that Earth Dragon had been extremely friendly towards him. If the reason behind that was because she’d originally been his Earth Dragon, then that made complete sense. Though, what she’d said also surprised him.

Subaru: “That Earth Dragon is a she…?”

Echidna: “Let’s get back on topic. The chances of that room working such wickedness on you are not high at all. As far as I am concerned, it’s the room you collapsed in that’s far more of a problem. Y’all said he came to in the Taygeta Library on the Third Floor, right?”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right. Subaru collapsed on the white floor in that room…”

Emilia gripped her wrist tightly as she reflected back on that moment.

Emilia: “I carried you to that room all in a rush, and then tried to go call everyone, but…”

Beatrice: “Subaru woke up during that time and found himself in this condition, in fact. Therefore, it would be difficult to imagine that the Green Room did this, even time-wise, I suppose… It happened in that library, as I thought.”

If something had happened, then this library or whatever was the source behind it.

It seemed like they'd reached a common point of view, but Subaru didn't really get it. Perhaps because it was hard for him to imagine what kind of room this room they called a library really was.

Subaru: "Erm, Taygeta? What kind of room is this Taygeta library? The name sounds somewhat familiar…"

Julius: "That library is a room containing the Books of the Dead."

Subaru: The Books of the Dead… Hey, that also sounds like some chuuni schtick"

Putting aside his interest for the name Taygeta, Subaru sunk his teeth into how he'd used the term Books of the Dead. Seeing his reaction, Julius gave a curt nod and then continued to speak, saying: "We have no concrete confirmation…"

Julius: "But in this library, there are a myriad of books bearing the names of people who are now deceased from all around the world. To read the books, you have to be qualified to do so. It's most likely the kind of thing where you can only read the books about the deceased you had some connection with."

Subaru: "Again with the bad taste… What is written in those books?"

Julius: "The life of the respective deceased, more or less. Intense thoughts swoop through your mind, as if they're being scorched in. It's really not a matter you want to put yourself through over and over deliberately."

There was a weight to Julius' words in his explanation, which could only have been expressed by one who had personally experienced this sensation. It seemed to Subaru that the memories of the dead were not something he wanted to have scorched into his mind. To say it frankly, experiencing this sort of shock was not something he was keen to do. Then, if he had collapsed in a library where such experiences were possible…

Subaru: “Was I reading one of those books too when I collapsed? No way, so could something like that have damaged my mind?”

Echidna: “I can’t completely rule out the possibility. About that Sage, what do you think?”

Shaula: “…Are you perhaps talking to meee?”

While nodding at Subaru’s guess, Echidna turned to face Shaula with a meaningful look in her eyes. As well as that meaningful look, Sage was a really disproportionate way of referring to her.

Were he to speak without restraint, Shaula looked like the furthest thing from a Sage in this room.

Shaula: “No matter how many times you say that my answer’s not changin’! I don’t know anythin’ about the tower, except its ruuuuules! I was just told to be strict with rulebreakers. No matter what Master does in the tower, I ain’t got nothin’ to do with it!”

Subaru: “I don’t know why Shaula’s calling me something like Master in the first place, but…”

Ram: “Don’t worry. Your answer to that Barusu was the same as before you lost your memories. You’re just using this without saying anything because it’s convenient for you… So gross”

Subaru: “You can’t just jump to such a convenient conclusion!”

Faced with Shaula’s gaze, Subaru couldn’t help but express his bewilderment, which with no word of exaggeration showed a level of affection that was maxed out.

Sure, it might be nice to get close with such a glamorous beauty when he thought about it ordinarily, but not knowing where her favor was coming from only created more confusion in him.

Besides, her affection and favor made him feel strangely uneasy. It was something fundamentally different to the sincere feelings Emilia and Beatrice showed him.

Though he didn’t know currently whether this was a harmful effect of his memories being gone.

Subaru: “In any case, that library you mentioned feels suspicious. If you’re saying there might be clues in there that will get my memories back, then I reckon it’s worthwhile going there to check.”

Julius: “Yes, we should. Our situation is one that even in the best of times we’ve had one problem after the other. The problems that plague us have seldom been few. Besides, with the circumstances becoming like this, you must honestly realize…”

Subaru: “Realize what?”

Julius: “…Just how much you’ve been making up for us”

With his eye still closed, Subaru let out a small snort at Julius’ words. His laugh hadn’t been out of awkwardness, but a strained one that came from deep within how he felt. They were really overestimating him. The Armageddon must be coming for them to be relying so much on Natsuki Subaru.

Bad things came in threes, once again Subaru had been made aware of how much of a hindrance he was, a trait he’d averted his eyes to; it was as if he were saying, “You’ve become a considerable burden.”

Subaru: “Anyways, I’d like to go to the library after we finish eating and if the memories that I lost are scattered about there, then I’d like to go pick them up and stuff them back in my mind.”

Emilia: “Jeez, that’s an odd way of putting it… It’s really just like you.”

Subaru: “I’m guessing the way you’re saying “It’s just like me” isn’t really a compliment, right?!”

Emilia gave the flustered Subaru a small smile as she said that. The atmosphere around the place relaxed just a tad as he received it.

They’d come up with a plan and it felt like they were, in true sense, moving forward a bit.

Echidna: “I am sorry to interrupt you when the mood’s like this, but there's just one more thing I want to ask you Natsuki-kun."

Subaru: "Well, you can go on ahead now that you've said this much. What is it?"

Echidna: "Well, this is just a curiosity of mine which isn't at all related to your memories, or capturing the tower, but despite that… "

Echidna began to stroke her wavy hair, and with an adorable look on her face, compounded by a look of deep intelligence in her turquoise eyes, she asked:

Echidna: "What does that term you speak quite often of, "Parallel World", mean?"

Chapter 36:
A Place of Relief

1

…What do you mean when you say 'Parallel World'.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru felt as if his breath had been knocked out of him as he heard Echidna's question, sinking into silence as a result.

During that time, everyone's gazes turned towards him. Although the emotions varied across everyone's faces, many of them showed tangible signs of doubt.

Everyone was treating the term "Parallel World" as something of an unknown.

In other words, that meant the Natsuki Subaru before losing his memories had never bothered to explain it to them.

Emilia: "Parallel World… Come to think of it, you used to say that before from time to time, didn't you Subaru?"

Ram: "It does ring a bell. Though from the way he acts like on a daily basis, I'd not paid any attention to that kind of nonsense"

Subaru: "Putting Emilia-chan aside, it's incredible how indifferent Ram acts towards me…"

She came as a stark contrast to Emilia, who was adorably immersed deep in thought, a finger of her brushed against her lip.

Ram had coldly snorted out a Ha in response to Subaru's wry-faced remark. However, their initial surprise had been softened thanks to having left this one cushion behind.

The previous Subaru had never bothered to speak up about the "Parallel World", not to Emilia or Ram, nor even to any of the others whom he'd supposedly adventured together with. He didn't know for sure what that meant, but…

Subaru: "Were there some kind of restrictions to it? When I was thrown into to this world, was I sworn by a God or Goddess into not speaking about it, or the like… And first things first, what kind of mission am I here for?"

He cocked his head, however, not even the "M" of the mission he'd been entrusted with came to his mind.

Presumably, Subaru was summoned into this parallel world by someone working behind the scenes that had some expectation of him.

By Subaru's reckoning currently, the likelihood of this someone being sort of like a "God" was very high.

This "God" or whatever that he didn't remember had given him some kind of role and sent him to this parallel world. —Thinking about it, this was the sort of promise you'd find with these Parallel World thingamajigs.

So, if losing his memories was something that this "God" found inconvenient, he could hopefully expect some follow-up to improve his situation. Subaru wants to believe this "God" is not the cruel sort who would just throw him into this fantasy world without giving him some generous benefits.

Or perhaps…

Subaru: "…I'd better find out if it's actually something I can't touch on, huh"

Beatrice: "Subaru?"

Subaru licked his parched lips and searched for a response for this situation. He winked at Beatrice, who was looking at him with unease, having caught ear of his muttering. He decided that he would address the question that had been posed to him—about this "Parallel World".

Even if by some chance speaking about it was forbidden by this “God” being, it was difficult to imagine there’d be some sort of drastic penalty that he couldn’t recover from where he touch on this taboo.

Surely, as soon as he would have spoke of the taboo, there wouldn’t be anything drastic that would happen, such as being assailed by unbearable pain.

With a little bit of anxiety, Subaru gently got his breathing under control.

And…

Subaru: “Well about this “Parallel World” I spoke of, the word itself is written as from like “Different” and “World”… In other words, I mean that the place we’re in right now is in a separate world.”

Emilia: “In a separate world, a “Parallel World”…”

Subaru: “Uh-huh. That’s why I say “Parallel world”, yet…”

Following Subaru’s explanation, Emilia mulled over what he’d said, rolling the words out on her tongue. She was not the only one who had reacted like this—the others in the room were also pondering over that word.

As it was from the pronunciation: “Isekai”, they’d received the word itself as something of an unknown.

Though he’d presumed that from how low their comprehension of the word “Parallel World” was, apparently, it seemed like the idea of a different world wasn’t a common one in this world.

Coincident with that, Subaru slapped his body to check for any changes.

Subaru: “… Nothing seems to have happened to me.”

Putting it into words, Subaru ensured that nothing untoward had happened to him.

As far as he could tell right now, there were no signs of any abnormalities having occurred. There was neither pain nor numbness. Nor was there a strange voice sadly addressing him with "You've violated your instructions" or the people in his surroundings transforming into a flock of cranes, saying, "I did tell you to not to do that".

He'd managed to deal with all the worries he'd had without any issues arising.

Subaru: "This isn't what I expected…"

Certainly, he'd thought that he hadn't talked about the Parallel World due to having some kind of reason; however, nothing really came to his mind, that'd be something that he'd get caught up in, when it came to this.

Subaru cocked his head to the side at the sensation of having parried that. Then, Julius raised his hand up and said: "Alright,"

Julius: "I now know what the word "Parallel World" means. I can take it as a term you yourself have coined, but there is a part of me that's thinking about its implication. Why do you reference that Parallel World so often?"

Subaru: "Oh? Oh, oh, that's right! Just explaining the meaning of the word "Parallel World" isn't much of an explanation. Then um, in other words…"

Julius: "In other words?"

Following Julius' questioning, Subaru realized he had cut his explanation short. And, clearing his throat he went on to say,

Subaru: "I come from this "Parallel World" thing. I wasn't born and raised in this world, I'm some alien who got mixed up into this world halfway through. —That's why for me this place is a "Parallel World."

Indeed now he had clearly explained his position and circumstances.

2

I am someone who came to this world from a parallel world. Nice to meet you.

Roughly speaking, this is what Subaru had told them.

It was easy to imagine Emilia and the others to have been shaken by that bold confession. After all, it must have been a bombshell to them, since they didn't know Parallel Worlds existed.

It really was no surprise that all the common sense they had up till now had been thrown out of whack, along with the shock they felt along with it, like their world had been turned upside-down.

After finishing his confession, Subaru took note of their concerns, and cursed his own heedlessness.

If he had made Emilia and Beatrice feel as if they'd been engulfed by a maelstrom of confusion—if he had made them do something like grieve, then he was responsible for having brought that about.

How would he comfort such beautiful girls if they were to break down into tears? He had no experience with this.

So, with a few seconds passing, feeling these anxieties, he glanced his eyes towards them.

Subaru had imagined that he would find them looking pale, blood drained from their visage, with confusion etched on their faces. However…,

Emilia: "… Uh, so you mean you're from beyond the Great Cascade?"

Subaru: "Eh? The Great Cascade?"

Subaru's eyes widened at Emilia, who had timidly asked this question whilst frowning in though.

They were words he hadn't come across before—"Cascade", he thought must have been a waterfall or something, but this great cascade must be a big version of one. Perhaps he could think of it as a huge waterfall.

…Actually, no, what sort of connection did this big waterfall have with the parallel world in the first place.

Subaru: "No, definitely not. Nothing to do with waterfalls. I'm talking about a world that's completely different from this place and what your common knowledge is and stuff…"

Ram: "So, then you're from beyond the Great Waterfall. How do they call it in your hometown, Barusu… Actually, no, I guess it's probably the other way around given that it's your hometown. The countries here surrounded by the Great Waterfall would be a "Parallel World". Your wild behavior makes sense to me now as well"

Echidna: "That's right. That must be the reason why I couldn't find anything no matter how much I investigated Natsuki-kun's origins—because he is from beyond the Great Cascade."

Subaru: "Well, hey, hey, how are you all so quickly convinced with that?!"

It wasn't just Emilia who had agreed with this conclusion—even Ram and Echidna, who both appeared to be quite intelligent, had agreed with it.

For Subaru, their levels of belief towards this mysterious waterfall were nigh incomprehensible.

The thought that there was a parallel world beyond a great cascade—on the other side of a waterfall—where the heck was this tunneled wonderland?

Beatrice: "You may have no idea about it considering you've forgotten so much, in fact. But regarding the Great Cascade… It's at the far reaches of the world, and there are a few stories left behind from people coming from beyond it, I suppose."

Subaru: "I do quite like the sound of that… at the far reaches of the world."

Beatrice: “The Great Waterfall is said to be impossible to cross over, with the exception of dragons. It’s the border between here and there. There’s no one who knows what is on the other side of it… So, on the rare occasion that someone crosses over from that world, no one holds any basis to deny the words they spoke as lies or falsehoods, I suppose.”

Beatrice explained it for him, on the basis of the assent of the people listening in, who were showing their acceptance for it.

The contents were iffy, there were some things that were difficult to imagine for Subaru with him not being an expert in the circumstances of this world. However, thinking about the term “Great Cascade” and its present explanation now—

Subaru: “So this place feels like a floating continent, something like you can’t cross over to another continent without a dragon?”

Ram: “Haa”

Subaru: “Quit with those horribly disgruntled sighs there. You’re gonna hurt my feelings.”

Ram looked at Subaru, who’d been trying to justify it best as he could, with a sense of staggering disappointment.

However, the others also seemed to be regarding Subaru’s talk the same way, pretty much. In the end, his floating continent theory was likely incorrect.

Subaru: “If I’m off-base, then I’m off-base, I get it…. But I was sorta hoping to have a great Eureka moment riding on dragonback, if say my theory now had been correct.”

Meili: “If you keep talking about it like that, Onii-san’s adorable Earth Dragon is gonna start sulking, isn’t sh~e”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah. That black Earth Dragon is mine right. Let me have a ride on her later.”

Shaula: “I’m gonna be as weeell! I’m gonna be sulking too! Master, I think you should take better care of meeee, and appreciate me better and loooove me more~. Now that you have lost your memories, let our relationship restaaaart! From zerooooo!”

Subaru: “You’re noisy, and damn clingy! Also, don’t be so quick to poke fun at me losing my memories like you’re talking about someone else!”

Shaula noisily joined in the conversation, with Meili sitting clutching her own knees.

Though Shaula had intruded rather brusquely and said that, that was something which Subaru now was actually really grateful for—of course, fretting too much about it was tough.

“…”

From there, Subaru shifts his attention with a glance towards his surroundings.

In his original world, though depending on the situation, Subaru had a reputation for not being able to read the mood from the people in his surroundings. However, no matter how unsuited he was at it, if the emotions were strong enough, then they could be easily read or seen.

Not just Emilia and Beatrice, but also Ram, Julius, Anastasia (i.e. Echidna)—their expressions were all showing worry towards Subaru.

For better or for worse, before losing his memories, Subaru would have been doing pretty well with the ladies. How enviable. How he would like to be told what kind of magic he’d used.

Even if they did, he didn’t at all believe he could put it into practice now.

Subaru: “Anyways, to sum up everything that’s been said…, at the edge of this world there’s a waterfall called the “Great Cascade” and occasionally people come from beyond it. And so you’re saying I’m one of them as well.”

Emilia: “From what I’ve heard from you, I can only assume that’s the case… No?”

Subaru: “Hmmm…”

Subaru exchanged looks with the wondering Emilia, his arms were crossed by his side as he painstakingly hmmed.

To be precise, it was not Subaru’s intended course of action to run counter to the general understanding which everyone had of the world. Nonetheless, even if Subaru thought that the ‘Parallel World’ and the ‘Great Cascade” were unrelated, he knew that he wouldn’t make any progress in this situation if he continued to talk about it.

Subaru: “To make a long story short, it is.”

Within this world there was no concept of “Parallel Worlds”.

He didn’t know whether this “Beyond the Great Cascade”, as Emilia and the others recognized it, suggested the existence of another world, or the world Subaru was in. In actuality, there may be other continent-like stuff across from the waterfall, and from there, there may be records left behind, of a figure like Columbus who made it there, taking him as a “weirdo”.

If so, he could safely say that a correct understanding of “Parallel World” for them was already a lost cause.

Subaru: “By the way, did I never mention anything about the Parallel World, back when I had my memories?”

Emilia: “Thinking back to then, once in a while you’d make some mention the word “Parallel world”… but this is the first time we have really talked properly about it.”

Beatrice: “Betty agrees with Emilia, in fact.”

The others affirmed the answer to his question with gestures whereas Emilia and Beatrice with words.

The prior Subaru hadn’t spoken to them about the “Parallel World”. Perhaps, he’d deemed that they wouldn’t make heads or tails out of it, if he’d spoken about it like he had now.

Or…,

Subaru: "… I guess because I had been stopping myself from talking about it, huh"

Julius: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "Huh. Uh, no, nothing. Hey, if I'm not the only so-called Parallel Worlder there's been then do you know anyone else? A person from the other side of the Great Cascade, or castaway—whichever."

Perhaps there were a lot of people drifting in from different worlds; maybe there was a community of sorts where such people gathered. However, Subaru's hopes were denied by a shake of the head from Julius.

Julius: "Sorry, the existence of a castaway, as you call it, is very rare. Most people who claim they are from beyond the Great Cascade are lying. What they say are generally pipe dreams or fabrications, some of them set their sights on trying to extort people out of money whereas others are simply trying to influence people of their fanciful beliefs."

Subaru: "Oh, well, yeah I can see that happening…"

As much as you would like to believe such stories, the majority were the works of fiction or embellished rumors, given that there was no way to make sure. Once ones imagination/creation was set loose with these dreamy stories or ennui tales, they became a breeding grounds of reverie.

Even if people, like Subaru, who were genuinely from another world existed, their existence would be buried under countless falsehoods.

Echidna: "Honestly, my interest in the Great Cascade is never-ending, but it seems it really has no relevance to our current situation. It would be a good idea to simply end this with establishing that Natsuki-kun's unknown home-town, and the knowledge he has, have been settled."

Echidna had broken what had been an awkward silence that had been forming. Originally she had been the one asking Subaru about it. Although there were still parts unfamiliar to her and she was most likely unsatisfied, Subaru welcomed her ending the conversation there.

Besides, the more he talked about his original world, the more he would have to face the problems that he had left behind. That made his heart heavy, and ache.

By concentrating on the situation in front of him, he could try and distract himself from these feelings.

Subaru: “That’s it about me. I understand that you all care about me, and love me, but I feel like we aren’t going to make any progress talking about this leisurely. Why, first things first…”

He didn’t know what had directly caused his memory loss.

But, the place where the Subaru with his memories intact had supposedly last ventured—he wanted to check what had happened there.

Beatrice: “You will want to check the Taygeta library, I suppose.”

Subaru nodded at Beatrice who had beaten him to voicing out his thoughts out loud.

3

So, with all that said and done, the group headed out towards the Taygeta library.

Subaru was feeling quite nervous about what would be awaiting him there; the way there wasn’t free of its troubles though.

That was because,

Subaru: “Um, Emilia-chan, why are you holding my hand so tightly?”

Emilia: “Eh? Well, it’s because I’m worried about leaving you by yourself, Subaru. I need to keep you in arm's reach… So, I came to conclusion, given that, that it'd be good to hold hands from the get-go."

Subaru: "I mean, I like the simple, quick nature of that conclusion, but like this, it's way more embarrassing!"

Subaru lifted up his hand that was being held by Emilia, aware that his cheeks were getting flushed.

Her slender, cute fingers were gently holding his hand and he worried about whether his palms were sweating. In reply to Subaru's words, Emilia raised her eyebrows in a huff and said "Jeez,"

Emilia: "Don't be like that. Beatrice is also holding your hand, so it's not just us two together!"

Subaru: "There's a difference between holding the hands of a child, compared to one of a beautiful woman! There's a big difference between them, like that when cold rain is falling again on this day too, or the difference between the heavens and earth, or night and day!"

Emilia: "I'm sorry, I don't really get what you're saying."

Emilia spared Subaru no quarters, what with him having a record for losing his memories as a result of being left to his own devices, even with all the excuses he was spouting out. God damned you, memories. And me for having lost them.

Beatrice: "Now, that statement is unpardonable. But, it's as Emilia says. Subaru ought to follow along obediently and be well cared for by Betty and Emilia, I suppose."

Subaru: "Oh yeah? This is where we put Beatrice in the middle, and I and Emilia hold hands with you from both sides, young couple style! I'd be down for that, but wouldn't that not be uncool?"

Beatrice: "Subaru isn't Subaru unless he's uncool, in fact"

Subaru: "What kind of assessment is that?!"

He ended up taking that scathing evaluation right to him from Beatrice as well, who was holding his other hand.

Julius, who was leading the way ahead, looked back towards Subaru a few times, and Echidna, who had been following right behind him would explain to them, one by one, what lay around each corner.

Ram was sharp-tongued whenever she spoke out; however, Subaru was the only one who knew that despite her outward appearance she was suffering inside. He wondered if he should talk to someone about her, but he doesn't know who he could possibly talk to regarding what she was experiencing.

In a way, it was only Shaula and Meili, who were chatting together with each other at the back of the group, who were mentally soothing for Subaru right now.

Subaru: "Well, they're not really going to be useful for anything…"

Meili: "… Somehow I don't think you are being polite right now, Onii-san."

Shaula: "Master's mind is always like that. It would be a waste to dwell on it. You'd be shocked if you all peeked inside, it's all pink anywaaays, makes me want to pull away. Pink braaain, Shaaaameless School~"

Subaru: "Doubt we'd find either shame or schooling in you…"

Shaula: "Master's doooing—my entire knowledge—Master's doooing~"

Mere conversation with her made his head ache.

Whilst they had been exchanging these bouts of conversation, the party had gone up the stairs and arrived at the Taygeta library on the third floor. It was quite expansive, almost as if it transcended time and space.

Subaru: "So this place is Taygeta … There are quite a lot of books in here, just as I'd heard."

Subaru breathed in awe as he looked around the Taygeta library, marveling at the sheer number of books there.

Indeed this was a sight that was beyond anyone's imagination.

Subaru was quite the avid reader (reading Light Novels, Manga, Strategy Guides, etc.), but he had never been surrounded by so many books. Naturally, compared to the National Diet Library or something, those would probably win out, however, they would only gain that due to the difference in space there was.

Either way, the meaning behind the picturesque scenery in front of him wasn't just down to the sheer amount of stuff there…

Subaru: "If The Books of the Dead are here… then wouldn't that mean that there are as many books here as people who have died? If it has been recording nonstop since the time of the Homo Sapiens, then there literally must be an overwhelming amount of records here."

Subaru didn't know the scale of this world, but if the records of the dead were books, then the quantity of books would be immeasurable. Even if he tried to find a book, such as one with the name of a deceased person he knew, he would not be able to physically find it.

Subaru: "In a modern day library, a lookup function is indispensable… but here?"

Beatrice: "Um, I don't know what you mean by lookup function or whatever, I suppose. However, there is no one else more similar to a librarian here than Betty. Got no choice but to start checking, I suppose."

Subaru: "This is like looking for a 100 Yen coin in the middle of a desert…"

Warily, Subaru placed his hand on the spine of a book.

Pulling the tome from the bookshelf, it easily fit into his hand, and he didn't feel like it was anything special when he looked at it. It was just a plain old book. There was no design to it on the cover, other than its title. In all, it could be mundanely described as being a very plain book. When it came to the issues he had with it…

Subaru: “Damn it! I can’t read the title.”

The title was written in illegible squiggly characters.

From what he had heard from Emilia and the others the title of the book was meant to be the name of someone who had died. If the dead was someone you shared some connection with, then apparently you could read over their memories in life; However, Subaru could not even comprehend what the letters meant in the first place. With his memories now at jeopardy, he doubted that having such connection would even make sense.

Subaru: “Well… this may be difficult…”

Emilia: “SUBARU!”

Subaru who had been lost in thought, looked around in surprise at hearing Emilia abrupt shout. In an instant, the book he had picked up was wrenched from his grasp by Emilia. She stepped back from him, holding the book to her chest.

Subaru: “Huh…, Emilia-chan?”

Emilia: “Don’t be so careless! Subaru, do you understand? You must have lost your memories here, you get that right?”

Subaru: “No, wow, that’s overblowing it…”

Emilia said that as her complexion changed; to that Subaru gave a scratch of his cheek, accompanied by a strained smile. However, it seemed that only Subaru was taking the situation lightly.

Beatrice: “Subaru, listen to Emilia—refrain yourself from acting so impulsively, I suppose.”

Julius: “I agree. You should be careful and refrain yourself from performing such a rash action.”

Subaru: “Mh…”

Both Beatrice and Julius had beseeched caution from Subaru. His throat had seized up, unable to reply to either of them.

It wasn't animosity that welled up in his heart, but rather shame from his awkwardness. Certainly he may have been acting a little too carelessly.

Shaula: "Pfffft! Master is getting aaangry! You look so sad! Butbut, I don't mind even if Master's actin' like a pitiable naughty kid!"

Subaru: "Shut up! Don't poke fun at people who are reflecting on themselves!"

Echidna: "Alright already. It'd be a bother to be interrupted like that again. In truth, Natsuki-kun's actions were a little rash, but… We've also already established that."

With her hand covering her mouth Shaula was laughing away at Subaru's mistake. Echidna had forced herself between Subaru and Shaula as the former snapped at the latter.

Then, whilst gently stroking her scarf she said:

Echidna: "Natsuki-kun, you were unable to read the title of the book, is that right?"

Subaru: "…? Oh, yeah, that's right."

Echidna: "What you can see here is that losing your memory as he has will interfere with your cognitive abilities such as your literacy skills. That is why he was speaking of parallel worlds…"

Beatrice: "Sorry, but Subaru began to study the alphabet when he arrived at Roswaal's mansion."

Echidna: "…"

Echidna, who had tried to speak confidently about it was left dumbfounded by Beatrice's retort. Not paying any regard to Echidna's lack of response, Beatrice crossed her small arms.

Beatrice: "Subaru could not read or write the I-Alphabet until he came to the mansion, I suppose. The elder sister of the two sisters, who served as his instructor, should know about that too, in fact."

Ram: "Yes, it is exactly as Beatrice-sama says. From the start, Barusu couldn't read or write, so I dedicated myself to teach him… it seems my efforts were wasted, seeing him in this current state."

Subaru: "Sorry! I wasn't aware there was such an episode!"

Subaru raised his voice in apology in reply to Ram's resentful complaint. Taking a sidelong glance at the occurring exchange, Echidna cleared her throat.

Echidna: "Ahem, it seems I was way off the mark. You can forget what I said."

Julius: "No, it's not as off the mark as you may think. At least we have discovered that Subaru's memories were lost after coming to Lugunica."

Ram: "In other words, Barusu is just useless baggage that doesn't serve any purpose in this library."

Ram scathingly added to Julius' confirmation—Subaru remained silent as he didn't want to stir up any more trouble upon himself. However it was Julius who spoke with a short nod, saying "Miss Ram's words are correct,"

Julius: "Her manner of saying it aside, that's how it is. In any case, we can't let Subaru relive what happened the night before. We should be the ones to look for clues in here."

Echidna: "Yes, that would be safer."

Ram: "I don't have any objections. Are Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama okay with it?"

Beatrice nodded back towards Ram, saying: "I understand, I suppose." Emilia turned towards Subaru, looking at him with quite a serious expression in her eyes.

Emilia: "Subaru, please wait here without doing anything rash…

The memories you lost, me and the others… we will find them.”

Subaru: “Oh, okay, okay, understood. It feels annoying not being able to do anything, but I believe in Emilia-chan and everyone else! I will wait here quietly.”

Emilia: “Can you really wait here quietly? You won’t wander off as you please?”

Subaru: “I don’t need reminding! I’ll be fine! I am not a 5 year old kid, I can wait here quietly—I can promise it if you want.”

Emilia: “So maybe you’re not going to be quiet after all…”

Subaru: “What do you mean?!”

Granted he had brought out that promise to make her feel peace of mind, however it had ended up in only sowing more mistrust. Looking around his surroundings he saw that, Julius and Echidna aside, Beatrice and Ram were merely shrugging their shoulders in reply as if to say That’s how it is. In any case…,

Emilia: “Subaru is going to quietly wait here at the front, okay?”

In response to Emilia’s sincere appeal, Subaru decided that he would reluctantly wait for them at the front of the Library. He sat down hugging his knees watching over the party who had begun to split into two separate groups to search the Library. In one group were Emilia, Beatrice and Ram. In the other there was Julius and Echidna. Looking on with an air of confusion, it seemed that Emilia and Echidna respectively were leading these uneven teams.

Meili: “Teaming up to search must be sorta like insurance so they don’t end up like Onii-san. After all, Onii-san’s strong point is that he attracts trouble.”

Subaru: “I may have no memories… Having no memories is an issue, so obviously I cannot even answer back to that… No, I don’t want an assassin of all people, to tell me this.”

Meili: “Because I am totally concerned about trifling matters like that…”

Subaru: “I don’t think you can call that a trifling matter?! In the first place…”

She had clicked her tongue at Subaru, interrupting his train of thought. He turned to face her. The voice had come from far away from the bookshelves, next to the wall which Subaru had been standing at. Meili was standing there with a coquettish expression on her face not at all appropriate for her age. Her braided hair was arranged so that it dangled down to her shoulders. “What?” she asked him, cocking her head to one side.

Subaru: “I thought you had joined the search… are you not going to?”

Meili: “Yeah, I won’t join it, after all, I am not really a proper companion of Onii-san and Onee-san’s friends.”

Subaru: “Not really a proper companion…”

Meili: “I told you so, didn’t I? I’m an assassin… well, as I failed my mission it’s more like former assassin. Originally, I was sent here just to help out, not bothered about anything more.”

Subaru: “In other words, I get the feeling like this was your bail condition… Whether a former one or whatever, ’tis quite the drastic decision to take to adventure along with an assassin among your compatriots.”

Meili: “—Yeah, that’s exactly right! I suppose there really is something wrong with them.”

Meili giggled and placed her hand on her mouth as she said this. Subaru snorted at her attitude and—

Subaru: “I get why Meili wouldn’t go with them; what about you?”

Shaula: “Huh, meee~? I cannot read and write anything, so I am of no use whatsoeveeerrr. I’m with Master, so the books’ contents are all gi-bbe-rish to uuuussss.”

Shaula was leaning against the wall, on the opposite side from Meili, laughing as she responded. She proceeded to move over and pulled Subaru by his left arm towards her voluptuous body.

Such a soft, warm feeling… instinctively, he untangled himself from her.

Subaru: “Uwoaa!”

Shaula: “Whaaa, Master is such a meeeeany~”

Subaru: “I’m not a meany, stop that! It’s improper for a girl to have done that… such things should be reserved only for the guy you like… No, don’t do that because even a guy you like would be turned off if you came at him like that so abruptly. You’re doing yourself absolutely no good by behaving like this.”

Shaula: “Pfffft. Talking about a girl’s sense of dignity again? Master seriously never changessss.”

Shaula pouted at Subaru as she protested against his attitude. However, hearing her words had made Subaru look down in embarrassment.

Shaula: “Master?”

Subaru: “You think I haven’t changed as well?”

Subaru blurted this out to Shaula almost instinctively. He had heard this phrase several times over the course of the few hours he had been awake. It had seemed like a salvation to him to hear this… but also at the same time, a curse.

—He could be pleased that he had not changed, or he could lament that he had not changed.

Shaula: “Hmm, I’m not so sure.”

Nevertheless, despite such turmoil brewing inside Subaru, Shaula had said that so readily. He was, as expected, astonished at her reply. Perhaps it had been a mistake to have let her hear some of his more delicate worries.

Subaru: “You… No, it was idiotic of me to have asked you that.”

Shaula: “Gha-. Master is not an idiot! When you say it like that, I’m gonna get angry, Master or not! My Master is a wonderful person. I want you to be confident in yourself!”

Subaru: “I really don’t understand your position in all of this.”

She would point and laugh at a depressed Subaru, and then get angry when Subaru mocked himself. The only thing that stayed consistent was the topic related to him.

Hearing Subaru’s question, Shaula pushed her ample-sized chest forward and smiled with her hands on her hips.

Shaula: “Whether you’re changed or not, Master is still Master, so I don’t really give a toss! So long as you do as you please Master, I will always follow you.”

Subaru: “…Even if it results in crazy stuff?”

Shaula: “Well! Even if we end up in strange situations, I can always pry things open by force! Master may have forgotten, but that is the relationship between Master and meeee!”

Subaru: “…”

All of her candid words, everything Shaula had said, showing nary a trace of duplicity, or anything like that, struck him they had, many times over, causing Subaru to give a faint gulp.

He turned his face away, so that Shaula wouldn’t be able to see it.

Meili: “Onii-san?”

Subaru: “…!”

Seeing Meili looking at him there, he turned his face away back to the opposite side again.

Shaula: “Master, what’s wrong?”

Subaru: “…Gha, jeez!”

Subaru couldn’t escape to the left of him, or to the right. He could only kneel down, and look down at the floor holding his head in his arms so nobody would see his face now.

Subaru got the sensation that Meili and Shaula were looking at each other with him curled up in between them.

They wouldn’t understand… no, he doesn’t want them to understand.

He felt like he’d been saved by those vapid, vacuous, gap-filled words. He felt like “You needn’t get worked up” showed through more eloquently in her attitude than in her words.

Meili: “Onii-san, you’re strange.”

Shaula: “Master was strange from the very beginning, but I love him for that too!”

Subaru had nothing he could say in response to the exchange of those girls, that went way over what he could comprehend.

He merely felt like the feelings of tension rushing through his mind had eased off, if only a tad.

It was a few minutes before Emilia and the others came back sans results that Subaru somehow warded off his impulses and stood up.

Chapter 37:
A Papier-Mâché's Dream

1

The search of the third floor library, Taygeta had ended with absolutely no results.

Emilia: "I am so sorry… We tried reaaally hard to look for clues…"

Emilia bowed her head in apology towards Subaru after bringing him those fruitless results. Subaru politely accepted the apology; but in all honestly, he wasn't that disappointed.

Of course, it certainly would have been for the best if he could have regained his memories here. Nevertheless, he was lacking in awareness in having lost his memories in the first place, so Subaru did not feel overly emotional that the search party had yielded unsuccessful results.

Shaula: "…? Master, what's up~?"

Subaru: "Huh, Oh… it's nothing."

Shaula glanced towards Subaru, cocking her head at him with a happy-go-lucky expression on her face. Subaru shrugged his shoulders, feeling a bit uneasy at the sight of her and her long, jet-black braided hair swinging about.

There was no ill-will, malice, or even any profound meaning to her.

In the end, it meant she wasn't really thinking about anything, but her attitude being like this appeared as a relief to Subaru right now.

At least it was better than seeing the others always looking at him like he's always done something, constantly worrying over him, and watching over every single step of his.

Julius: "Apparently, there doesn't seem to be a pattern to how the books are arranged. It would have been too much to ask to have found them lined up ordered by their titles or in chronological order. And on the flipside, books which we would have found yesterday on one bookshelf cannot be found today on the same one."

Subaru: "So yet another troublesome and unfriendly library, huh."

Subaru wrinkled his nose at Julius' remarks.

Not only did the library boast an overwhelming collection of books, but the books happened to move around scrambling themselves on their own accord, giving him absolutely no hope as a library-user.

Even if there happened to be the book they needed, they would never find it.

Subaru: "Why can't we just pull out each book one by one and stack them onto the floor? There ain't no end bookshelf at the back, since the bookshelves all go around the room in a circle, but say we pick a starting point and go through them one by one, surely we'll find something somewhere?"

Echidna: "In my opinion, it'd be wiser to not. Probably doing that would be prohibited by the tower's rules. It would probably be considered as disrespecting the library."

Echidna, cocking her head to the side, dismissed Subaru's suggestion. Beatrice crossed her arms and agreed with Echidna with a curt "I suppose".

Beatrice: "Betty being an experienced librarian could never overlook leaving a book on the floor. You cannot show such disrespect to books like that, I suppose."

Ram: "Beatrice-sama, I feel like you often left a large amount of books stacked up on the floor."

Beatrice: "Those were the ones that instructed me how to correctly arrange the library in fact!"

Ram narrowed her pale crimson eyes at Beatrice's awkward excuse, though she didn't bother to reply back to her. She merely let out a deep sigh, to which Beatrice’s expression turned to one of shock.

Alongside this librarian-talk, Subaru butted in and said: “Prohibited?” with a puzzled expression on his face.

Subaru: “I am sorry—it looks like this is something I’ve not heard of again… what is prohibited?”

Emilia: “Oh, I am sorry; it looks like I didn’t explain it properly.”

Emilia raises one of her fingers in answer to Subaru.

Emilia: “In actual fact, there’s a bunch of rules that we can’t break in the tower. Like, such as: “don’t leave this tower until we finish its Trials, don’t do anything bad to the library, don’t damage the tower, those kinds of rules.”

Subaru: “I see. Who would have guessed that putting books on the floor in this library was a bad thing… By the way, who judges whether we’ve broken any rules?”

Shaula: “Oh, that’s where I come in! Me, the Stars-Keeper, shall! Meaning, if a rule violation happens, I’ll kinda end up freaking out ‘n I’ll become a cold-blooded killing machine! That’s why I’d prefer if you did your best not to!”

Subaru: “You…? A cold-blooded killing machine…?”

Subaru could only laugh dubiously at Shaula who’d cheerfully lifted her hands up whilst making this proclamation.

No matter how much you believed Shaula’s frivolous speech, he thought it unlikely that she could ever transform into a cold-blooded killing machine. In the first place, how much damage could she really do with the slender arms of a woman? Even that should not apply in a magical fantasy world.

In fact, Subaru had heard that Shaula was not his or Emilia’s ally, but rather was the Stars-Keeper—Warden—of this Pleiades watchtower.

She held a different position compared to how Meili had found herself here. Supposedly, she was here to aid in advancing the Trials inside this tower. Yet he had no such impression of her actually doing this.

Subaru: “If you seriously hold such an important position, you’re going to have to let us off the hook for the sake of our friendship.”

Shaula: “Oh, you are such a baaaad guy! Master is quite dirty! But, I can’t get enough of that sliiightly wicked side of yours! There’s tons and tons of stuff I’d like to hear from you, were it one of your wishes Master, but that is irrelevant to my will! Give up on that hope and show good sportsmanship—act fair and square and give it your all!”

Subaru: “You’re no use!”

Shaula: “Hn-”

His strategy of trying to bring her to his side ended with unexpected failure as her supervisory authority wasn’t enough.

At the same time, he had to keep Shaula’s forehead away with his finger as she kept trying to bring her face close to his in the middle of the conversation, forcing her charming face back. And while doing that, Subaru let out a feeble sigh.

Emilia: “…It really kinda seems like Subaru and Shaula are both really good friends.”

Emilia whispered this just after Subaru had finished talking with Shaula.

Hearing Emilia whisper it to him, Subaru turned to face her and awkwardly stammered a “No, no, no, that isn’t so!” to her.

Emilia: “…”

His attempt to lighten the mood of the situation was not working; Subaru immediately stopped when he saw Emilia’s expression, her eyes downcast.

Emilia was not smiling. Merely, her eyes, framed by her long lashes, were cast down, and wavering within her amethyst eyes, was a seeming sense of loneliness.

Subaru's face sunk at seeing her expression—immediately noticing his reaction, Emilia frantically waved her hands back and forth at him in denial.

Emilia: "Oh, no, it's reaaaally good that you're both friends! Such a gloomy face does not suit you, Subaru… yeah, it's okay."

Feigning a smile, Emilia somehow blurted those words out to herself.

Subaru: "Ah, Emilia-chan, you know, I…"

Subaru holds his head as he struggled to find anything he could say to say to Emilia.

He felt like he would be saying the wrong thing no matter what he said.

Likely the only way he could find a correct answer would be amidst his vanished memories. He was in a nightmarish situation where all the options that were presented were probably false answers.

Under these circumstances, saying anything to the sad girl sitting in front of him would be—

?: "Hey, so what are we going to do now?"

A soft voice broke the awkward silence. It had been Meili who had asked this from where she sat on Taygeta's floor, resting her chin in her hands. She looked up at the adults in the room from her seated position and spoke,

Meili: "We can't find any leads to recovering Onii-san's memories here. It's a shame, not that I particularly care, but I wonder what we should do next… are we still trying to find clues on how he lost his memory? Or…?"

Meili cut her words off there; instead turns her face upwards and pointed at the ceiling with her right hand, smiling quite provocatively.

Meili: “Let’s go upstairs? Let’s postpone finding Onii-san’s memory for a short while.”

Echidna: “…Yes, that seems like something to consider as well.”

Having heard Meili’s suggestion, it was Echidna who had responded with a thoughtful look on her face. Emilia’s eyes widened at hearing her agreement.

Emilia: “Wait… I feel the same sense of wanting to hasten… but I can’t leave Subaru like he is.”

Echidna: “I understand your view. It would be certainly preferable for me, Julius and everyone to return Natsuki-kun’s memory… However, we can’t ignore the current situation either. Natsuki-kun’s memories ceasing to exist may be linked to the tower’s Trial.”

Emilia: “Subaru’s memories are linked to the Trial ?”

It wasn’t just Emilia who had reacted like this; the others had all turned their heads in surprise towards Echidna as she said this. Realizing she had the attention of everyone, Echidna closed one of her eyes and said: “May I?”

Echidna: “There is no doubt that common sense barely applies when it comes to this tower, however, it would be foolish to think what happened to Natsuki-kun is unrelated to the tower. That’s why we all went to Taygeta in the first place—to put it broadly, we’re thinking that his memories were taken from him by the tower.”

Subaru: “I think that sounds chuuni ‘n cool, that memories can be stolen by the tower. If it wasn’t me who was experiencing this I would be excited to hear more of the story… but, to begin with, Taygeta’s Trial is complete—isn’t it strange to try and pull out my memories from here?”

Echidna: “Yeah. Therefore I think that your memories weren’t stolen because of the Trial , but rather because you must have broken one of the rules. Even if the Trial of Taygeta is over, the functions of the entire tower haven’t been carried out. It’s just like taking out a book or disrespecting the library.”

Echidna had explained her reasoning and Subaru was left to puzzle it over in his mind. In conclusion, Echidna’s reasoning alluded to this:

Subaru: “So you’re saying yesterday I must have broken one of the rules of this place and bam, my head went kerplow. To be honest, trying to search for loopholes sounds like something I would do. I am not able to make any objection to her reasoning.”

Emilia: “But, wouldn’t that have made Shaula angry?”

Echidna had nodded at Subaru acknowledging his conclusion; however Emilia had butted in and pointed towards Shaula, clearly remembering their previous interaction.

Emilia: “If he had violated any rules, won’t that have made Shaula angry? It should be a completely different story to what we are experiencing here with his memories.”

Ram: “That’s right. I understand the possibility that Barusu foolishly broke the rules, but Shaula has not bared her fangs yet at Ram or any of you. What do you make of that?”

Ram glares at Shaula with her pale, red eyes. Beholding her gaze, Shaula leapt up with an “Eeep”, and hid behind Subaru.

Ram: “No way would you have seriously abandoned your role because of Barusu?”

Julius: “That is very optimistic of you to say for sure. However, as Miss Shaula said some time ago, she’s barely aware of her being the one who actually carries out the punishments in the tower.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Julius stands next to Echidna and supports her opinion.

Julius: “If we are presented with the four things which are prohibited, and you break one, the given penalty may not be equal for us. Miss Shaula could turn into our enemy and in some cases attack us, for example desecrating the Library in some way could result in having your memories stolen…”

Julius cut his words off there and promptly turned his yellow eyes towards Subaru.

Subaru: “…”

There were some really complex emotions swimming inside Julius’ eyes which Subaru could not distinguish. Julius continued his speech with: “Although,”

Julius: “We do not have any time or actual proof to test whether this guess is correct.”

Ram: “There is a way to check. If it’s truly just losing your memories, then we can just sacrifice the 4 or 5 hours of memory that Barusu has had since he’s been awake. That ensures that the damage will be minimal.”

Subaru: “Stop using people’s memories as guinea pigs! Memories still shape that person! Even if it’s only 4 or 5 hours, I am still myself! I’m not a bad Natsuki Subaru!”

Ram: “I was joking.”

Subaru’s entire body shivered at Ram’s blunt remark which she had said behind his back. Whether it had been a joke or not, Subaru had no clue. It was likely it was, dare he say that her lofty attitude was probably just a façade. It is in her nature that she does not want to show any weakness to people, after all could it be related to what had happened a short while ago. In the end, it wouldn’t surprise him if she just wished to erase her embarrassment from the time when Subaru had seen her frail side.

Anyways, other than whether Echidna and Julius’ reasoning are correct or not, one possibility was worth considering. Regarding his memory loss, that…

Subaru: “To put things plainly… both of your opinions, regardless of whether they have a nugget of truth within it, maybe we’re all grasping at straws here, in that I am against. Even if we’re like sorta just floundering around, I don’t really get the feeling that the memories I lost are gonna be found ya know.”

Emilia: “Does what you’re thinking have any basis at all?”

Subaru: “Just a hunch. Besides, if this is really part of the tower’s Trial then maybe if we clear ’em I’ll get my memories back, right?”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru wagged his finger left and right as Emilia and the others exchanged looks in response to his words.

However, they hadn’t reacted negatively to his thoughts. Rather, there was a trace of hope beginning to appear on their faces.

Firmly, placing her palm on her chest, Emilia began to rapidly nod.

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right! If Subaru’s memory has been slurped up by the tower, then surely they may be returned after completing its Trial ”

Subaru: “The expression you used, “being sucked up”, I get quite the super-cute feeling from it, but that’s the spirit, that’s the spirit!”

Emilia: “Mhm, that’s the spirit!”

Subaru smiled in relief at Emilia as she had jumped up and made a cute triumphant pose. Beatrice, who had been looking on, shook her head in exasperation,

Beatrice: “Jeez… I really don’t understand which one of you is the one being encouraged, in fact.”

So she let that out like that.

Certainly, with this, their positions were opposites—However, Subaru thought that was fine.

After all, he had found some hope in this situation, and some of the vigor had returned to Emilia’s eyes. For that, Subaru had felt quite a great sense of relief.

Such a gloomy face did not suit a young lady like her. Besides, she had been worrying about Subaru from the depths of her heart. ‘Twas quite painful to think that he’d been the reason behind making her look so gloomy.

Subaru: “And I was the one who showed such a move on a woman way out of my league…”

Beatrice: “I have no idea what he is saying—for now we will adjourn finding Subaru’s memory, I suppose. So if we are to complete the tower’s Trial , we should do as Meili suggested and go upstairs.”

Subaru: “Upstairs. So you said we are on the third floor now, so the next floor up is the second.”

As he said that, Subaru looked around the library. A room that he’d surveyed more than plenty, even when he hadn’t actually walked around it.

A room with nothing in it except bookshelves. Meaning there were no stairs that led up.

Subaru: “Where is the staircase that leads to the second floor?”

Julius: “It’s located on the fourth floor—there’s a staircase there that leads up to the second floor from there…”

Emilia sneaked a look towards Julius with a concerned look on her face. Seeing her, Julius knitted his eyebrows and said “Worry not,”

Julius: “I will not act rashly without consulting any of you like yesterday. It is as I promised at breakfast. However, even if I hadn’t…”

Ram: “Reid, the first Sword Saint , is a very tough opponent. Now then, what do you suppose we should do?”

Julius and Ram exchanged bitter looks. It wasn’t just those two that seemed to share this feeling, but everyone around him had a similar look on their faces. That is, other than Shaula, who had grimaced like she’d put something in her mouth, that wasn’t just bitter, but poisonous.

Subaru: “Ah, sorry. What do you mean, Reid?”

As usual, it was Natsuki Subaru that had been left behind in this situation.

2

The first Sword Saint, Reid Astrea.

That was the name of the man who guarded the second floor of the Pleiades watchtower as its examiner.

In the first place, the title of Sword Saint was something Subaru had heard for his first time. However, when he had heard that he was of the first generation of this lineage, he got the premonition that this man could be likened to a powerful fictional character from his knowledge of these subcultures. His prediction was quite accurate, in fact these Sword Saints or whatever were extremely powerful people, and such.

It seemed that yesterday, the party that had challenged Reid had experienced the difference in strength between them, rather like the difference between an adult and a child. Amongst them, it was only Emilia who had achieved some sort of victory through both skill and luck…

Subaru: “The problem is that I’ve lost my memory and I can’t even do anything useful…”

At the breakfast table where everyone had been trying to distract themselves from their uneasiness, he had tried to think of a novel idea to clear the tower with a bang. As far as he knew the Trial on the second floor seemed to require pure strength. In this situation, there was no place at all for his guile or knowledge of the modern world.

Subaru: “I guess scattering some flour about and attacking him with a dust explosion or something like that ain’t gonna cut it…”

His strongest signature ability: “Dust Explosion”—he would need to fine-tune quite a large amount of flour to activate it. In the first place, Subaru imagined there wouldn't be an abundant amount of flour lying around in this place where food was scarce.

In fact, it was unknown to him whether there was any flour at all here.

Subaru: "Hm, then I hope I can activate the secret cheat ability that I must have gotten from being summoned into this world."

Subaru punched the wall next to him with his palm, yelling out a "HA!" in an attempt to see if he could activate it. There was no shockwave emitted from his palm, nor had the stone wall he had punched shattered into little pieces. The only thing he felt was the roughness against his palm, and a somewhat hollow pang in his heart.

Unfortunately, the secret cheat ability that had been given to Subaru seemed to not be related to great physical strength. In a last attempt, Subaru places his hands on the wall and kicks it with all his might. All that resulted was that he left a footprint on the place he had kicked the wall—as well as a stubbed toe.

Subaru: "Well it must be magic! Beatrice, tell me how to use some magic."

Beatrice: "Magic… Subaru can never use that ever again."

Subaru: "Ever again?! Why?! Did I dabble into a forbidden spell or something?!"

Beatrice: "You used too much beginner's magic despite being told not to use it and it broke your gate, I suppose. That's why you will never be able to use magic again, in fact."

Subaru: "It broke from using beginner's magic?! So lame!"

Subaru had the urge to cry out to the heavens, having heard that he indeed had possessed magical powers, but could not use them anymore to live life as a mage—and worst of all it had been him casting beginner's magic that had destroyed his magical gate. Regardless of his loss of memories, Natsuki Subaru's life in a different world had started from the very bottom.

Subaru: “Guess at least my saving grace is that I’ve been blessed with people.”

Clenching his hand into a fist, and then unclenching it, Subaru felt these emotions along with a profound sigh.

Even if it was rather one sided, it was relieving that there were people here who knew him. Without them, he would have been alone in this unknown world without any special abilities. To be honest, he did not think he was skillful enough to survive without any support. So, finding himself here was a salvation… even if it had made someone’s face sink.

Subaru: “…”

Gulping, Subaru bent and stretched on the spot. He had checked the condition of his body, of his magic, and whether he had any special abilities.

They were in some impromptu free-time before they went up to the second floor. Whilst Emilia and the others were making the arrangements to challenge the walls of the second floor, Subaru was busying himself in checking whether his body had been endowed with any special abilities.

After punching and kicking the wall, after being indignant about being told that his magical ability had ran dry, after running around the tower’s insides, after thinking on how to test for special powers from various directions, Subaru had realized one thing, and that was—

Subaru: “That maybe, I haven’t received anything…”

After sprinting through the hallway, whilst slightly out of breath, Subaru had accepted this fact. He felt like he possessed more physical strength than he did before. Even when he kicked the wall he felt as if he was far more agile than he remembered. However, it was not to be confused for special powers—rather it would be more accurate to say that it’s the same consequence of the scars on his body, and his grotesque looking arm. That is to say, it was probably due to what had happened during the year which Subaru could not remember.

The only ability he possessed was the one where he was just an ordinary person who could not even respond to his parent's expectations. An ability on the levels that an ordinary person would have attained after suitable amount of endeavor.

He couldn't feel the grace of special abilities granted to him by a so-called "God" there.

Subaru: "At first, I'd tried to do some transformation poses…"

He had tried Super Senshi poses, then Kamen Rider poses, Pretty Cure poses, and even Sailor Senshi poses—but they had all been ineffective.

Meaning that, in the end, he was a Parallel World Visitor who'd been thrown in here with nary a thing.

Subaru: "After all of that… my only hope is that my powers awaken when I am in trouble… fuck."

Scratching his head, Subaru bit down the seed of anxiety that was starting to grow in his heart. In front of Emilia and the others, he would have steeled himself and pretended that everything was okay. However, when looking at the situation anew, there was nothing but anxiety regarding Subaru's position.

His memory was gone. There was no longer any doubt about it. There was too much evidence pointing towards it. And to be honest, he really wanted to believe it. He couldn't not believe it and continue to stay in this place. He wanted to stay here. Here in this world, only here right now. So, he wanted some powers to do that.

Subaru: "In the end, I have to depend on the bonds I have made with the people I don't remember. Makes me wanna cry."

Natsuki Subaru, who was always mooching off stuff, did not have any changes to him, even in this parallel world. The more Emilia and the others showed how earnestly they were worried about

Subaru, the more Subaru cursed himself for being blessed with his borrowed position.

Subaru: “It’s not like when I go to the second floor I’mma be able to do anything there…”

That was why, in his heart, he had refused to be left behind.

After they had explained to him about the guardian of the second floor, Reid Astrea, they had argued whether to bring Subaru along to the Trial . It had been Emilia who was the most concerned about bringing him along. Others were a bit reluctant but had not protested as strongly as Emilia. Subaru on the other hand wished to accompany them. It seemed that they had thought that he would be unlikely to be of much help to them in conquering the second floor. They also mentioned that Reid Astrea’s temperament would be harmful towards him. Therefore, although if it had kept like that, Subaru was going to be left behind, he had—

Subaru: “—Still, I had insisted on going with them.”

The reason why they had tried to leave Subaru behind was because they were worried about him.

Being treated so gently with concern always on their mind felt delightfully poisonous to him. If he had been the Natsuki Subaru with his memories intact, he was sure that he would have accompanied them and that there would never have been such a discussion on whether he was coming or not.

It would be unlikely that his amnesia would influence his abilities. In other words, except for the lack of knowledge, Subaru had thought he would be able to fight just like before he had lost his memories. Hence, he had tried one way or another to prove it to them, but in the end he hadn’t gotten any results.

Subaru: “Although I asked Beatrice to leave me alone, from here on out the going’s going to get tough.”

In seeing that Subaru was about to be left behind, he recalls Beatrice’s sullen face. However, he had still asked her to leave him be after he had tried to ascertain whether his secret cheat ability was something physical, magical or skill based. After she had left, Subaru had tried out the transformation poses. After all, it would have been extremely embarrassing to test these poses in front of another person. Beatrice of course had been quite unyielding and Subaru recalled how he had argued back and forth with her…

Beatrice: “When I leave you alone, you’re gonna end up losing your memories, nothing good will come of it! Betty will not move from here even with a lever, I suppose!”

Subaru: “I am glad you feel that way, I’m totally grateful, but I’m about to do some stuff that I can’t show to anyone!”

Beatrice: “Between Betty and Subaru, we don’t need such distance!”

Subaru: “No, I will be getting naked to put on my makeup by the moonlight!”

He had tried to break through to her with a brute-force approach, zealously appealing her to leave the room. Eventually, seeing how nothing was working, they had managed to sort out things, with Beatrice receiving his strong, strong appeal, that he wouldn’t do anything unnecessary, and would without fail, join back up with her.

Subaru: “Although it doesn’t ring a bell, I was told I was her contractor, on that point, it seemed like it was going well with Beatrice. Doesn’t sound like me… was that actually really me?”

Grimacing a little, Subaru pulled out the whip that had been holstered at his waist. He tried to hit the tip of it against the wall, but instead only succeeded in hitting his own leg.

Subaru: “Oww…! I guess my body doesn’t remember how to use it… or, maybe I didn’t master how to use it before I lost my memory…?”

Having hit his own shin, Subaru’s eyes began to tear up in pain as he rubbed it.

In the first place, why had he chosen a whip as his weapon of choice? It was not a sword, or a gun… was he trying to be cool and unique picking a whip as his weapon?

Subaru: “If I’d been able to use it, then I guess it must mean that it’s not just the stuff inside of my head that’s gone missing?”

While rubbing his shin, Subaru mulled this over as he knelt, his face twisting into a scowl at the chance that it really would not be salvageable.

If his current reasoning was indeed correct, what was left for him, here?

He had lost his memories, made those he was supposed to accompany worry, lost everything he had worked towards, and became useless. Ultimately, with only history having been etched onto his body, and merely the outer shell was set in place.

Guess he was just like papier-mâché.

Subaru: “Ha.”

With a short sigh, Subaru got up. Those words that were floating in his brain were so silly that he wanted to guffaw at them.

What are you going to do now, you papier-mâché…

When wasn’t Natsuki Subaru a papier-mâché?

Subaru: “Ah, I give up, I give up. I’m an idiot. Maybe I’m just unmotivating myself…”

Subaru brought his fist to his forehead in frustration and sighed again, bending over to pick up the fallen whip. He did not understand how to put it back to how it was—struggling a bit he finally managed to somehow put it back on his waist.

As he did so, there he saw a blister on the palm of his hand—one that was different from those he got from swinging a kendo sword, one that made him feel the year that had gone by. For some reason, he traced it with his tongue. It felt tough. It felt bitter.

Subaru: “I wish I’d kept a diary for this occasion. This is no use.”

Subaru started to walk away from the scene, fuming at his past self in irrational anger. He couldn’t confirm the presence of any secret cheat abilities, but in a sense he could say the fact he couldn’t was a trove of information. With this in mind, he concluded that he shouldn’t rely on something that did not exist. In a way it was a little bit positive but way more of a negative.

Subaru: “Well, this is not the right way…”

Subaru had gone the wrong way and found himself on another floor. In front of him was the large spiral staircase that leads to the lower floors of the tower. He had heard that the tower was made up of six floors. To go up from the sixth floor to the fourth floor, one would have to climb up the stairs which went up for probably over 100s of meters high.

Subaru: “Thinking about it, the way this tower is structured is peculiar… it’s like being in a fantasy world story now.”

It was a world where foliage can treat your injuries just by being within. Besides, in his original world, there had been some buildings which had seemed to be beyond human understanding. Pyramids were one example of such a phenomenon. If you think about it, then maybe there was not much of a difference between this tower and the pyramids.

Subaru: “I’m looking for things in common between this world and my original world, did the past ‘me’ do this too?”

Subaru began to feel ridiculous at having referred to himself as the “past me”.

He felt as if he has slowly been going crazy ever since he’d lost his memories. In essence, there hadn’t been a Subaru ‘before’ or a Subaru ‘after’ losing his memories. The past and the present too, his-self was all one continuum. So, here too, Natsuki Subaru was—

Subaru: “—Oh?”

Subaru shook his head as if he was trying to shake off the thoughts that had clouded his mind—he let out a small sigh. It was truly a nonchalant sigh.

He had let it out completely unintentionally, in spite of having received something much more unexpected. It was no more, and no less than that.

However, at the same time he had let out that sigh, he had felt a slight push on his back.

Subaru: “…”

And as he let out that sigh which was tantamount to no more than that, the world was flipped upside down.

Subaru: “Ah?”

His feet were off the ground—no, not just his feet… his whole body was. His whole body was overwhelmed by a feeling of weightlessness, he was falling down mid-air, losing sight of what was up or down.

Engulfed by the sensation of weightlessness, Natsuki Subaru continues to fall.

Subaru: “Wha-?”

The sound of the wind whistled through his eardrums. He didn’t get it. He didn’t get anything. Right now, Subaru was falling. He was falling. Spinning round and round in mid-air as he falls down head-first.

Falling, falling, falling—as he falls his thoughts caught up to him—still falling.

Subaru: “Waaait, wait, wait, wait—”

The world was spinning around his eyes. His limbs were flailing in mid-air. He does not know how many seconds had elapsed, but finally Subaru understood what had happened.

Falling, he was falling. He was going to crash. He would hit the ground after falling down from above. He was swallowed by darkness as he fell past the spiral staircase. As he looked around desperately to all of his sides, Subaru could only see the tower’s stone walls flowing past him. No, the walls were not flowing past him. It was Subaru’s field of vision that was inverted as he fell down head-first—so it was in fact him who was sweeping past them. The sensation of tumbling down caused him to retch, chunks of vomit flying out from him.

Subaru: “…ghrkh”

Subaru couldn’t even breathe, his throat was clogged with vomit. His nose stung, tears of pain were streaming out of him and his organs felt like they were all in the wrong place. His whole body felt like a chaotic mess. His face, clothes, and surely the floor would have ended up flecked with vomit.

Emilia would be shocked. Beatrice would get angry at him. Ram would just coldly stare at him. Julius would give him a tired sigh. Echidna would shrug her shoulders. Meili would laugh. Shaula would point at him.

With such a feeling of frustration, Subaru had completely lost track of his own reality. Even if I search everywhere, I cannot find it. It’s not up in the sky. It’s not within me. Where did it go? Where is it? As well as his memory, Subaru had also lost himself.

Subaru: “Mommy.”

Natsuki Subaru fainted just as that acrid mutter escaped from him. His consciousness halted, his thoughts were becoming fuzzy, and then—

And then—

And then——

And then———

And then————

Hard ground.

3

?: “…Subaru! Hey, Subaru, are you okay?”

As he woke up, the first thing he heard was her chiming, silver bell voice. He could feel her breath near his face and her fingers on his arm. Sensing this, Subaru roused himself into consciousness, and slowly opened his eyes. In front of him was a frighteningly good-looking fairy of the moon.

Subaru: “Is this Emilia-chan…?”

Emilia: “Oh, Subaru, thank goodness. You woke up. I was really worried about you.”

Hearing Subaru speak, Emilia stroked her chest with a relieved look on her face. Subaru looked around the room in shock.

He was in a room that was completely covered in ivy, even the bed he was lying in was woven from ivy. The beautiful girl next to him, Emilia, was gently patting her chest in relief. And right next to her stood a drill loli.

Beatrice: “Emilia, if you continue to be so gentle to him, Subaru will not reflect on his actions, I suppose. If you don’t act tougher on him, he won’t understand just how much he worried everyone.”

Emilia: “That’s right, though Beatrice why do you say it like that? Subaru was missing, so we hurried to find him… when we did, he was collapsed, and you were about to cry…”

Beatrice: “It would be nice if you didn’t say the unneeded, I suppose!”

Beatrice turned away from them, her face turning red in anger. Subaru who was watching this exchange looked on in confusion.

Subaru: “Eh? What? Was it a dream?”

“……………?”

At hearing Subaru say that, both Emilia and Beatrice turned towards him.

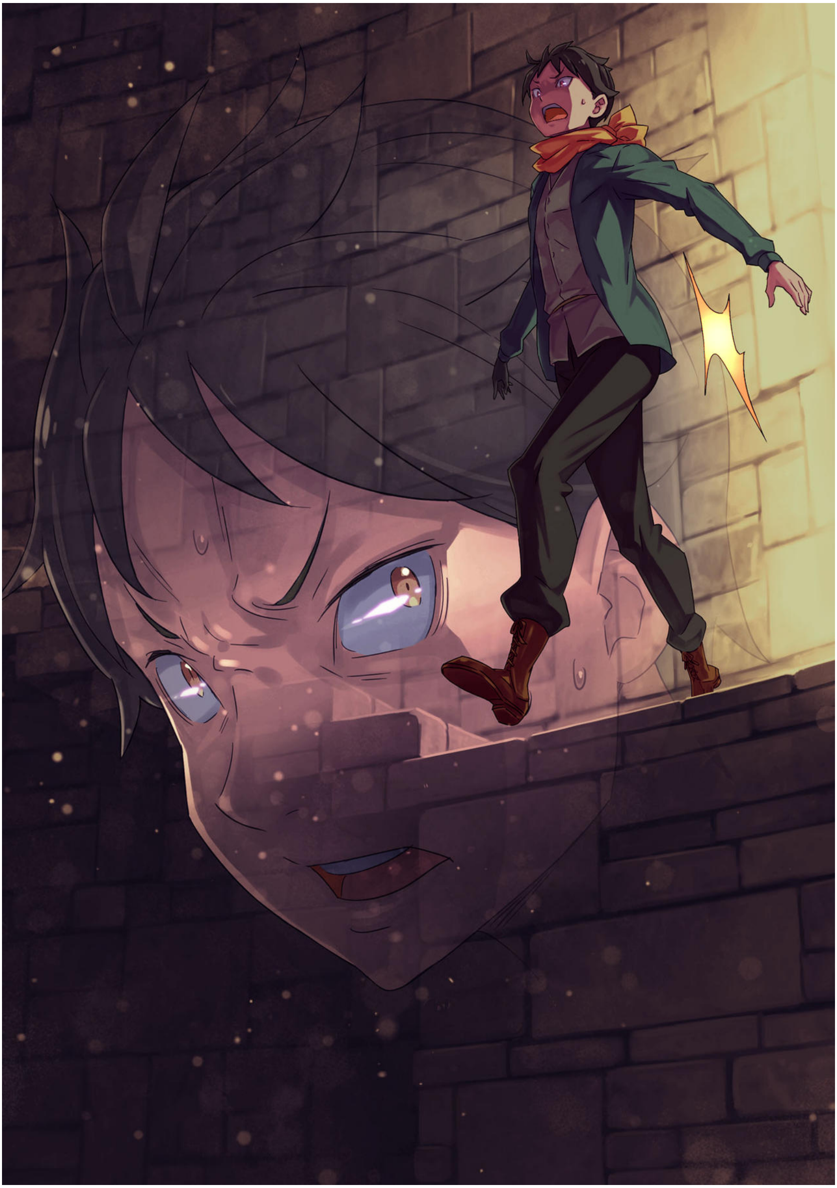

Chapter 38:
Who Are You

Subaru gazed around the room, not knowing what had happened to him. He could not comprehend a shred of the situation.

Subaru: "…"

It was the room that he had gotten so used to seeing now, even if he would hesitate to call it "familiar". The walls, floors and ceiling were covered in ivy, even the bed he had woken up in was woven with ivy.

In front of him stood two girls—a beautiful lady and a beautiful little girl—both were craning their necks to look at him. A huge lizard was kneeling down beside his bed. On the other bed within the room, a girl with blue hair and closed eyes was lying there. There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary; this was the green room of the Pleiades watchtower.

Subaru: "But… Huh? Why am I here again?"

Subaru didn't know if he had even woken up.

With his hands on his head, Subaru recalled what had happened just before. They had talked about challenging the second floor trial whilst he had tried to confirm whether he possessed any special abilities. After all of that, Subaru had walked through the tower to join with Emilia and the others after he had confirmed that he didn't possess any abilities—

Subaru: "Errr? What happened after that?"

His memory of what had happened afterwards was unclear. He had woken up on this bed all of a sudden, that impression had been strong. And, whilst he fumbled to straighten his mind, a voice broke his train of thought,

Emilia: "Hey, Subaru, are you feeling okay?"

Subaru: "Uhh-aaah! Emilia-chan, you're so close!"

Emilia's beautiful face had suddenly popped up right next to his; she was so close to him that he could feel her breath against his face. In seeing her amethyst colored eyes, bordered by long eyelashes, approaching out of nowhere, Subaru scooted back to the opposite side of his bed.

Emilia's eyes widened in surprise at his overreaction.

Emilia: "You don't have to look so scared… Besides, it was me who had been scared earlier…"

Subaru: "Scared…?"

Beatrice: "Certainly. We thought that you had disappeared. We searched for you and found you collapsed, I suppose. It would be improper to not be worried."

Subaru: "Seriously? I collapsed again?"

Beatrice crossed her arms and snorted in exasperation. Subaru was caught by surprise by her words—he stood up and patted his body to make sure it was okay. Yet, he couldn't feel any abnormalities. Though it was dubious whether he would notice any differences considering his amnesia, there were no obvious signs of trauma.

Subaru: "Still, it's pretty dangerous to collapse twice in such a short time… although it has only been a couple of hours, should I feel lucky that my memories weren't blown away again?"

Beatrice: "What are you grumbling about… Subaru should have something to say to Betty and Emilia, I suppose."

Subaru: "Something to say…?"

Beatrice threw these words at him as he was staring at his outstretched arms. Subaru turned around to see both Emilia and Beatrice staring at him. He was a little bit worried about what would he have to tell these two individuals.

Subaru: "Well, I'm sorry. I apologize for worrying you all. You both saved me again."

Beatrice: "You're doing fine so far."

Emilia: "Heh, you are most welcome. But, I am quite glad that nothing happened to you. I'm so relieved."

Subaru: "Ah, yes. I'm sorry to Emilia-chan, it's inexcusable for me to cause you so much trouble all the time."

Raising his hand in apology, Subaru expresses his gratitude towards Emilia. However, when Emilia heard Subaru's words, she furrowed her shapely eyebrows. Her amethyst eyes looked positively bewildered.

Emilia: "Well, would, wait… Subaru, what happened just then?"

Subaru: "What happened… that's a vague question. What's the issue?"

Emilia: "Well, just now you called me Emilia-chan. Somehow, being called that makes me feel a little bit uneasy."

While saying this, Emilia began to fiddle with her long silver hair as she nervously looked at Subaru. Her gaze seemed to be filled with loneliness, Subaru involuntarily let out an internal yelp.

Open and friendly, her appearance had struck Subaru's taste. However, in regards to her current emotions, Subaru felt like there was a deep gap between them.

Beatrice: "Subaru's pranks are starting up again now, I suppose. More importantly…"

Beatrice's mood was starting to get worse after hearing the exchange of those two. Shaking her splendid drills, she snapped her fingers at Subaru. And, with a puff of her red cheeks, she said:

Beatrice: "I want you to tell Betty and Emilia now. Why did you go to the Taygeta library last night, I suppose? Why did you collapse there?"

Subaru: "Wait, wait, wait, wait! Wait, what, I collapsed again in Taygeta?"

Beatrice: "Again?"

Subaru: “Seriously, Taygeta is such a dreadful place… I don’t know what I was doing there again. After all, it’s a place with such a shady history, it was reckless of me, I guess.”

Subaru had been told of an incident which his own memory did not recall; he was bewildered by this fact and started to feel a little bit unsettled. For sure, he could not recall anything before and after he had slipped out of consciousness. Still, there should be no reason for him to have visited Taygeta again. Rather, it’s more likely that someone must have found him collapsed elsewhere in the tower and brought him to Taygeta. Though, he didn’t see what the point of that would be.

Beatrice: “Wait, I suppose. Subaru.”

However, Beatrice had told him to wait up, as he began to feel confused.

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Beatrice: “Somehow, I think we’re not on the same wavelength. Subaru, tell us the story accurately, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Accurately…? What do you mean?”

Beatrice: “Try telling us about the situation you’re in right now.”

Patiently, Beatrice slowly spelled this out to Subaru. He nodded his head as he sensed the intimidation in her tone as she spoke those heavy words. And, whilst Emilia looked at him with a worried expression on her face, Subaru strained his memory in thought.

Subaru: “Well, I think I told you… when I woke up I had no memories. Though it doesn’t mean that they are completely empty. My memories since being summoned to this parallel world are…”

Beatrice: “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait?! Memories? What do you mean by memories, I suppose?!”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Beatrice’s usually dignified manner was abruptly shattered as

Subaru had begun his explanation. He was surprised by her unexpected reaction. Emilia had placed her hand on the panicked Beatrice's shoulder to steady her. But Emilia wasn't calm either. She was also looking at Subaru in astonishment.

Emilia: "Subaru, I am sorry, I don't know what you're saying…"

Subaru: "No, I'd feel bothered if I stop here, I have you two here…"

—He was supposed to know what to say next, he tried to continue, but his words trailed off.

"…"

Both Emilia and Beatrice looked at Subaru with sheer bewilderment in their eyes. It was plain to him that they were not acting. And because he thought they were not acting, that made it all the more terrifying to him.

Why were they forgetting about when he had told them about his amnesia?

Surely, the tower hadn't sucked up the memories of those other than Subaru. A terrifying thought rose to his mind. Namely, this tower was an awful one, sucking out everyone's memories to some degree, making conversation impossible.

Then, Subaru realized.

Subaru: "When I woke up, and when talking to those two…"

And on top of that, he may have remembered something. No, not may have. He had definitely remembered something.

The first time he had met Emilia and Beatrice, when he was told he had lost his memories… the conversation had sounded exactly like the one now.

To put it more plainly, waking up in the Green Room, lying on the ivy bed, was that not a carbon copy of the situation earlier when he was told he had lost his memories?

Subaru: "…"

Thinking about this fact, Subaru gulped loudly.

If you look at Emilia and Beatrice, both of their behaviors had not changed. However it is not from distrust that they were glancing at Subaru in sheer bewilderment, rather it's from concern in their heart towards "Subaru". The fact that there was no deception in their gazes made Subaru feel much more calm at heart.

In all honesty, Subaru's heart had been undulating under great turmoil. But, having made this guess at the current situation—

Subaru: "I am seeing the same events again. I must be experiencing precognitive dreams."

Given his situation when he woke up, is it not reasonable to think this? If so, when he had lost consciousness, should he rather say that he had woke up? In that moment just before he woke up his memories had been incredibly hazy. Dreams did, for some reason, slip through the cracks between ones fingers when trying to keep them jumbled together. Or maybe these precognitive dreams were a special ability Subaru was given when summoned into this world—

Subaru: "It's difficult to make use of—it's a pretty selective ability…"

However, there's no doubt that if he could master it, then it would be quite a potent ability. In the end, a precognitive dream would let him foresee the future. The longer it would show him the truth for, the greater chance of finding a clue to overcome the situation. Unfortunately, he did not think that he got much useful information out of this precognitive dream—

Subaru: "—you two, I need you to calm down just a little and hear what I have to say."

Sitting up straight, Subaru now had an understanding of the ability he possessed. He turned towards them and said that. Emilia and Beatrice both look at Subaru and nod, with serious expressions on their faces. Looking towards them, Subaru said with a slight hint of hesitation:

Subaru: “I don’t know if you can believe this, but I seem to have lost my memories.”

2

—Subaru had awakened at the Taygeta Library and lost his memories.

It took as much time as it had in the precognitive dream for Emilia and Beatrice to digest what he had confessed.

Emilia: “Aieee!”

With an air-splitting sound, the girl slammed her palms onto her own cheeks with all her strength. Her anxious eyes widened up in pain, and at the shock, as she motivated herself with an “Alright”

It was a brave, almost manly way of accepting it—something he had also seen in his precognitive dream.

Emilia: “I’m fine. Being like that is no-good, is it? How could we keep making that troubled face when Subaru must be feeling even more troubled than we are… look, Beatrice too!”

Having rallied her strength with a vigorous speech, Emilia shook Beatrice’s shoulder. In front of Emilia’s geared up presence, Beatrice looked at her, unable to hide her confusion.

Emilia: “I’m shocked too, and I also understand the sadness… but right now, we have to think about the one who’s taking this the hardest. We have to do something for him, don’t we?”

Beatrice: “Be-Betty is…”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru fought back a pang in his chest as he watches Beatrice struggle to get her words out. Subaru knew exactly what Beatrice would say, and what sort of face she would make. But he was quite wrong in thinking that it would bring him some peace of mind.

Having to betray someone's feeling of hopes was tough, rather it was terrifying. No matter how many times he had to do it, regardless whether it was the same problem for the second time, it was all the same. And now, Subaru knew Beatrice much better than the first time he met her. That was why it was tougher for Subaru than the first time.

Beatrice: "aaaauuggghhh, just, really! Subaru is just the most hopeless Contractor in the world!"

With that said, Beatrice broke through her embarrassment—the pattern of the butterfly wings that adorned her irises started to flutter in her eyes. While he was relieved by that, Subaru felt a strong sense of self-hatred.

…Was this right. Was he satisfied with this? Yeah, Natsuki Subaru…

…Could he really erect a castle upon the sand, on top of the bonds and faith he'd already built up?

"…"

Subaru gritted his teeth together as he saw Emilia and Beatrice's heart wrenching, albeit gentle, determination.

Subaru had not confided to them that he was able to experience precognitive dreams. The conversation after he woke up, and with remembering their names, he pushed the fact that not all of his memories had fallen out. In fact, besides his memory loss of course, Subaru's report had also been about the allocation of his missing memories. He couldn't afford to doubt the two people with him, and furthermore, Subaru himself didn't want to engage in any unproductive conversation.

Above all else, he wanted to figure out how far his precognitive dreams would show the truth correctly for. For this reason, he did not want to create a situation which would deviate from what his precognitive dream had shown him. Although some changes had occurred at the start, they were not anything too big.

However, this was not the only reason that he did not mention his precognitive dreams.

Subaru: “…”

Neither Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Julius, Echidna nor even anyone had explained to Subaru that he had this Precognitive Dreams ability. Shaula and Meili also hadn’t. It’s difficult to imagine that they intentionally hid it from Subaru. Even under the prior circumstances it’s difficult to believe that they all had the same intention; it made no sense.

Then it was inevitable that there was only one reason why they wouldn’t know of his Precognitive Dreams—that is, Natsuki Subaru had never revealed to them his ability.

Subaru: “… what were you thinking, Natsuki Subaru.”

Subaru calls his name out as if he was referring to a different person… No, saying as if he was referring to a different person was wrong. It was a different person.

To Subaru, “Natsuki Subaru” is an unknown person who doesn’t exist. He can’t guess what he is thinking and he can’t interact with him. There would be no chance of getting to understand him.

Why did “Subaru” not tell Emilia et al. about his power?

Was it because he didn’t want to change the development of these precognitive dreams as much as possible? Even if it was due to that, surely once the situation had been overcome there would have been time to confide this? Was there a reason why he couldn’t say it?

A distrust of the old “Subaru” was steadily growing within him.

Subaru: “You…”

…what were you thinking, “Natsuki Subaru”.

3

—After that, the events took place as expected, roughly following what he had seen in his precognitive dreams.

Emilia: “So, I guess everyone is pretty shocked… Subaru is in quite a situation right now. But, even in a situation like this… no, precisely because the situation is like this, we should give him our support.”

Emilia explains to the others how Subaru has lost his memories. Although it wasn’t the greatest of explanations, it was now impossible to make a follow-up in case he drastically changed the events. Thus, in place of Emilia, who sucked with words, Beatrice ended up taking on the struggle.

And then—

Ram: “Is this some kind of prank, Barusu?”

Ram had suspected that Subaru’s situation might have been a prank —

Shaula: “Say, Master… you’re still not tired of playing around like thissss? Just how many times do you have to forget me before you cut that outtt?”

Shaula had indifferently accepted that he had lost his memories as if she thought it was something that couldn’t be helped—

Meili: “Really, Onii-san sure looks like really troubled, doesn’t he”

Whether disinterested or not, Meili smiled at the prank, as if enjoying the atmosphere of confusion—

Echidna: “Just, let’s give him a little time to settle down. That’s fine, right?”

Worried about Julius as he’d became extremely upset at hearing that Subaru had lost his memories, soon after Echidna suggested for them to take a brief interval to collect their thoughts. He accepted Ram’s invitation and left the room to fetch some water. Then when they were alone with just the two of them, Ram grabbed Subaru by his collar and pushes him against the wall.

Ram: “…Please, spit it… out”

He’d parted with some of his saintliness. However, that’s not to say that he wasn’t shook to the core. After hearing Ram’s quiet sobs, Subaru returned back to where everyone was with this conviction…

…The precognitive dreams are accurate. They are terribly accurate and foreshadow the events completely.

Subaru didn’t know everything they would say and do, but the impression that they had given was pretty much unchanged. If there was a problem—

Echidna: “Natsuki-kun is quite calm despite the situation.”

Re-introducing each other, and both revealing their bombshells, with that Anastasia’s consciousness was currently overwritten by Echidna’s, Echidna said that to Subaru.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru felt his mouth dry up after hearing Echidna’s words. To be honest, Echidna’s observation was understandable. Subaru himself couldn’t really do much about it.

Everyone was shocked and in a state of panic. Still, whilst seeing her trying to smooth over the absurd situation, he couldn’t help but not feel much empathy from within his heart for them. It’s like when you watch a movie for a second time—the emotions you experience are not as strong as the first time you watch it.

That which he felt even stronger, was a flurry of negative emotions, namely sympathy towards them for putting on such a brave face, guilt for leaving them as is despite knowing that, and a feeling of revulsion towards “Subaru” who’d probably continued to do such.

It was no wonder that Subaru bore a dark expression on his face coupled with a taciturn attitude—even though they had thought that was him remaining calm. In any case—

Subaru: “I am happy that things have settled down. I was the type of kid who’d always get “He never settles down” written down in his report card."

Echidna: "Reeport caaard, I don't really understand that that means… is that something of the 'parallel world'?"

Subaru: "Yeah."

Narrowing his eyes, Subaru nods his head at Echidna's question. The way he answered the question about the meaning of "Parallel World" did not change again. He explained how he was summoned to this different world and found himself in this place. And the same understanding came from Emilia, Echidna and the others who concluded that he originated from beyond the Great Waterfall.

Perhaps, even if he could not fully reproduce the events of his precognitive dreams, events that hold some sense of importance would still be realized with some slight changes to them. It's something typically found in Subaru's future prediction line of games and manga.

Though the response to a sudden situation may change, what you decide to do doesn't disappear so easily. A person who has decided to ask someone out on a date goes and asks the person out in a completely different way than before, where there now are some notable obstacles in the way—that is the feeling he is getting from this. In other words, Echidna was going to ask about the different world, regardless of whether he had lost his memories.

Subaru: "Even though I didn't explain it up till now, was I still careless in mentioning the word 'Parallel World' … I don't even know what to think anymore."

Due to the nature of his precognitive dreams, confiding his ability was difficult, and rather than that, it was incredibly strange that he hadn't talked about the different world. It was almost like he'd just given up, deeming it pointless to confide it.

As if he were afraid to.

Echidna: "After all, it's odd that you sound the least confused amongst us. We are all growing uneasy here, thinking we must do something about it.”

Subaru: “Maybe this is what they mean when they all talk about everyone being in a panic, but the person in question instead grows calm. Even I’m nervous, thinking we oughta do something about it. So rest assured there.”

Emilia: “I feel like we can’t feel relieved with that at all…”

Both Echidna and Subaru shrug their shoulders at each other. Emilia’s looked quite dispirited as she spoke those words, the mood was somehow still hitting rock bottom.

After all, Subaru’s attitude was growing. He had tried to mimic his precognitive dream as much as possible; however, how attempts at mimicking his attitude had been quite poor. It was very difficult to imitate the confused self he had seen in his dream. So, before he spouts out additional nonsense—

Subaru: “Anyways, I understand the situation we are in. I know that there’s a lot of confusion, but let’s overcome it together. Let’s do something about it.”

Clapping his hands together, Subaru tried to progress the conversation ahead. Beatrice nodded in response, and as if obeying the precognitive dream, she said:

Beatrice: “You will want to check the Taygeta library, I suppose.”

4

Shaula: “Ueeeh~”

With a loose-lipped smile, the glamorous, beautiful woman let out a shriek. If she would just straighten herself out and start to look more dignified her beauty would surely captivate the hearts of many men. Her face relaxed though, as she tried to snuggle into Subaru.

Shaula: “Master, Master. I’m haaappyyy~. I swear I’ll make you haaappyyy!”

Subaru: “Hey, don’t say that. Don’t hug my arm. You’re frighteningly soft!”

Shaula: “Ah! I just wanna have it so those means parts to you are smushed you know.”

Subaru continued to push her away by her forehead whilst Shaula tried to desperately cling onto his arms. In all honesty, being clung onto by a beautiful woman who from the start took on a tempting appearance, was a sense of distance that he wanted to restrain himself from, both in terms of Subaru’s strength as a human, and as a boy.

Subaru and the others had arrived now at the 3rd floor of the watchtower, where the Taygeta library was. As it had been in his dream, they would search the library in an attempt to find out how Subaru had lost his memories, and if possible, get them back.

However Subaru knows that their search will be ineffective, and that they will bring back no results. It was going to be an irritating time for him now, since he was not allowed to participate in the search. Though to him, it looked like Shaula was acting way too over-familiar than his dream had shown—

Shaula: “After all, Master, you chose us over that chibi-ko, didn’t youuuu?”

Subaru: “It’s not like I specifically chose it! Due to what’s happening, I couldn’t help but be stuck with you!”

Shaula spoke this with a ditzy expression, talking about their approach to Taygeta.

Although the distance to the library was not long, Subaru had arranged it so that he wouldn’t have to hold hands with Emilia and Beatrice.

His intention behind it had been out of pangs of conscience towards Beatrice and Emilia.

Given that he knew what was going to happen thanks to his precognitive dream, he didn’t reveal the fact that it was probably going to be a waste of time, and putting it like that, with a birds eye view of the situations, Subaru treat the two girls like so.

Therefore, he was now sitting next to the air-headed Shaula whilst waiting for the party to finish searching Taygeta.

Shaula: “Finally, Master recognized how charming and attractive I am! I had to wait 400 years for this! I’m so happy, I’m so happy! I will give you such a passionate kiiiisss!”

Subaru: “That’s not what I was implying! That’s scary! Really, stop it!”

Shaula was pressing her body down onto his; Subaru tried desperately to push her off, but she had unusual strength, and thus he found himself pinned against a wall. This wasn’t even a kabe-don, it was a kabe-gowaa! That’s how intense it was!

And, just before the virginity of Subaru’s lips, which had never experienced the love of a woman, was forcefully taken away—

Meili: “Hey, hey, onii-san seems to dislike this. Quit fooling about.”

Shaula: “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!”

It had been Meili who had dragged Shaula off him by pulling her back by her ponytail.

Shaula twisted her neck, took back her ponytail from her, and carefully cradled her long, black hair against her chest.

Shaula: “What did you do to my hair?! What did you do to my precious hair, you horrible little giiirl!”

Meili: “I don’t want my silver haired onee-san or Beatrice-chan to be angry. I was keeping watch to make sure that my half-naked onee-san didn’t do anything bad to my onii-san.”

Shaula: “Grrrrr! So annoying! Master, please do somethiiiing!”

Subaru: “Shaula, don’t you dare come within two meters of me. You’re scary.”

Shaula: “Master’s such an idioooooot.”

Shaula turned her back from Subaru, feigning a break down to tears.

Subaru scratched his cheeks in confusion as he looked on at her exposed back, then he turns around to face Meili who was holding her hands behind her back.

Subaru: “Ah, you were a great help… now that’s a strange thing to say to a killer.”

Meili: “Don’t worry. This killer has gone out of business, now I do what onii-san, onee-san and her friends tell me. Onii-san and the others can make good use of me, like when I help out with the wicked animals.”

Subaru: “…”

She spoke with no malice or ulterior motive, that’s why Subaru didn’t react to her words. Meili did not seem to be especially affected by any particular pangs of conscience as she spoke. Those were difference between the values of his world and this one.

Meili: “…”

She said nothing in response to Subaru’s silence. She just looked at him silently with an unfathomable expression on her face. Meili now turned to gaze indifferently at the direction which Emilia was searching the library. The girl was quite short, had a youthful face, her arms and legs were still tiny, and there was still quite a way to go before she reached womanhood. In the end, she was still a child. It was unbearable to him that she held such broken values about herself.

Subaru: “Maybe, even in you, there’s still plenty we can rely on, so I’m counting on you!”

Meili: “…? Eh, so this is what you’re saying? “Make good use of me”.”

Subaru: “No, not use. Rely. We’re not tools that can be just used, think of it like a… friendship?”

Meili: “… Hmmph.”

For a second Meili had regarded Subaru’s words in shock. Though it had only been for a fleeting moment, she had quickly averted her eyes afterwards. Subaru was relieved that she had not reacted in discomfort; rather it had seemed like a faint glimmer of comfort had flitted across her face. Even if within her heart she held broken values about herself, it didn’t mean that everything she could feel would end up being out of sync from that which Subaru knew.

The fact that they both could compromise about these unknown circumstances made Subaru feel a little bit better.

Meili: “… Onii-san really doesn’t remember anything, right?”

Subaru: “Yup? Unfortunately. Was something on your mind?”

He had unexpectedly shaken something about his memories from Meili. Subaru tried to ask her what she had meant by it. Hearing his question, Meili just put her fingers to her lips and gave a very sweet smile: “Oh yeaah.”

Meili: “Petra-chan would cry if she heard it.”

Subaru: “Ugh… I don’t even know who that is.”

Meili: “Petra-chan is a girl that love’s Onii-san. She was worried about you going all the way out here; It felt almost like I could hear her say “Look, I knew it”.”

Subaru: “God damn that me from yesterday, what thoughtless things he did…”

Subaru looked on bitterly, thinking in distress about this young girl, Petra that he had not yet seen. How much would he end up learning about the footprints that the “Subaru” unknown to him had left?

Meili: “Really, I honestly think that my opinion of Onii-san from yesterday is that he was quite careless as well.”

Meili was stretching as she said this, ignoring the turmoil she had left in Subaru's heart. In his mind it had sounded like what she had said had been accompanied by a very strange emotion.

In any case, Emilia and the others would come back before he could quickly confirm it. If they had found no clues, it would only reinforce how accurate his predictive dream had been.

5

Since the search of Taygeta ended with no success, they would now prepare to go up to the second floor.

Ultimately, from now on the scope of the precognitive dreams would stop around about here—Subaru had until now not doubted the accuracy in his future prediction ability at all.

The events had transitioned just as Subaru had experienced them before. If any issues were to occur at this point, he would not be able to respond by using his knowledge of the future that his precognitive dreams had shown.

Subaru: "I am able to predict the future, isn't it insane that I managed to confirm it?"

However, it was also strange. In the first place, Subaru didn't know how what conditions were needed to activate his precognitive dreams. If he fell asleep, would it activate, or did it need some sort of trigger—or was it just completely random? It would be unlikely that there would be time to find a place to sleep due to the urgency of the current situation. However, he wanted to depend on the power of his foresight—certainly, he would need to find out more details about this. He would need to investigate thoroughly what he could do with his foresight.

Subaru: "For now, just as in my dream, I managed to force Beatrice to leave me alone, but…"

Subaru had asked Beatrice to leave him alone as he tried out via trial and error the transformation poses. It had seemed that Beatrice had been trying to remain more attached to him than he had seen in his dreams. That was probably as a consequence of being around her less than he had been in his dreams, such as on the way to Taygeta. In any case he had a reason for being alone.

Subaru: “I have to find out why I woke up and what happened to me just before I woke up.”

It may be that he just happened to wake up normally. However, it could also be that there was something within his dream that had caused him to wake up. Something like encountering a horrible experience, or a painful one.

Subaru: “I’m a little freaked out right now… what if I start to have precognitive dreams-ception; it’s spooky, it’s like as if I was dreaming of being a butterfly.

Dreaming of being a butterfly is the situation where you dream of physically being a butterfly, but when you awake you aren’t really sure whether you are a butterfly dreaming of being a person, or a person having dreamt of being a butterfly. It felt like it would become a vicious, never-ending loop, like a self-fulfilling prophecy that would drive the footholds of his own self to a corner of uncertainty, as something unreliable.

Subaru: “… in order to avoid this, I need to go past where my dream ended. If I can do that, then I should be able to tell Emilia and the others about my precognitive dreams.”

The “Subaru” before losing his memories had unfortunately avoided confiding his ability to Emilia and the others. However, Subaru now was anxious to change this situation and confide to everyone what he could do.

He didn’t know what would become, if he were to do such a careless thing, frightened by this anxiety, he didn’t want to bring a situation about where he’d delay it now.

Subaru … I have decided.”

Looking back to re-evaluate his position, Subaru had finally decided that he would tell them about his precognitive dreams. Nonetheless, what was coming up ahead was an unknown to him. After the point at which Beatrice had left, his memories including those of having performed the transformation poses were quite fuzzy. Therefore, showing proof that he could experience precognitive dreams would be quite difficult to do. In addition he didn't know how to activate them. He would need them to cooperate with him when he tried to explain his ability.

If he could master his dreams, it would become an extremely powerful weapon at his disposal. Or perhaps it was a necessary weapon that would allow them to conquer the Pleiades Watchtower. With these thoughts in mind—

?: "—As for Natsuki-kun, is it not dangerous for him to accompany us in the crazed state he's in right now?"

In the distance: "…"

Having arrived in front of the hall, in an attempt to join everyone, Subaru held his breath at hearing those words.

The intelligent voice he had heard was Echidna's. For some reason in in his mind, Subaru had hesitated to announce his presence, and had decided to hide behind the wall. The conversation in the hall continued.

Emilia: "Echidna, what do you mean by dangerous?"

Echidna: "There's nothing else to say right? Considering the state he's in right now, it's certain he has lost his memories. However what he said afterwards was truly crazed. The way he explained the term "Parallel World" is proof."

Emilia: "Parallel… world…"

Julius: "You don't truly believe he came from beyond the Great Waterfall?"

Julius and Emilia seemed shocked at hearing Echidna's words. Subaru's heart lurched, what did Echidna's remarks mean now? He wanted to jump out from his hiding spot and ask her, but for now he would suppress that emotion. Even if Subaru didn't ask, surely someone else would—

Ram: “It was certainly an absurd explanation.”

Emilia: “Ram…, you too doubt what Subaru said?”

Emilia reacted in surprise at Ram’s cold, indifferent tone. In response to her question, Ram said: “Emilia-sama”

Ram: “It’s not like I doubt Barusu’s argument from the start. Indeed, Barusu’s knowledge, behavior and strange customs are things which are unknown to us. It is clear that he may indeed come from a place which none of us here know about.”

Emilia: “Well, in that case—”

Ram: “But, where he came from, it’s limited to this world. I am sure being from beyond the Great Waterfall could be tailored to mean Barusu’s term: “Parallel World”, but I can’t believe the existence of such a place… there is no reason to believe him now at all anymore.”

Emilia: “Ram…”

Emilia’s voice faintly trailed away as she heard Ram’s explanation, which felt like she was enduring bitterness in it. But, there was no reply; Emilia quietly cleared her throat,

Emilia: “I believe in Subaru, Beatrice too, so, please, please, try to believe what Subaru said.”

Julius: “… Emilia-sama, Echidna is not suggesting that Subaru is trying to deceive us on purpose. She is just saying that he’s in a terrible state of confusion.”

Beatrice: “In that statement, you still agree with that spirit, I suppose?!”

Julius tries to rationally explain their thoughts to Emilia. However, Beatrice was having none of it, as she was intent on remaining on Subaru’s side in this matter. Her temper had flared considerably. At that moment, an unnerving silence had fallen within the room;

Subaru's forehead had started to sweat.

Shaula: "Heeeey, it's best if you all quit fighting and settle dooown. Even if y'all are at each other's throats arguing here, right now, Master's not here, so no way he's gonna be pleased."

Meili: "I don't think it's quite a discussion on that scale yet… but, what yeah, right."

He heard the voices of Shaula and Meili, who were still seemed to be bystanders. Laughing rather superciliously for a short while, Meili continued her speech with: "Going crazy,"

Meili: "Why don't you ask Onii-san directly? Onii-san, are you going crazy?"

Subaru: "………hk"

Subaru gritted his teeth to those venomous words. He had remained surprisingly calm when he had stood against the wall; he carefully left the room without making any footsteps.

"…"

After putting some distance between them, his prudent footsteps quickened in pace, which then turned into a run. Then, arriving at a passageway where no one was present, he pressed his forehead against the wall.

Subaru Damn it…"

Not knowing what he should say to whom, Subaru struck the wall, letting out the feelings that were smoldering inside him. The discussion that had taken place in Subaru's absence was an unexpected shock to him. He wasn't conceited enough to think that he had gained their full confidence. Rather, he could safely say that such a point hadn't been in his thoughts.

Subaru had thought that trust was such a basic pre-principle. Emilia and Beatrice had been too kind and thoughtful towards Subaru. Whilst insisting to himself that it had felt far too uncomfortable, he had tricked himself into believing that it was true. There was no doubt that being from a different place would have helped them conquer from the tower.

With the handicap of losing his memories and his calm and collected thoughts, he had lost all his usefulness. Looking at it objectively, he realized just how shameless he was. What was trust in this tower in the desert? He himself couldn't understand it much. He wondered if he could ever handle what "Natsuki Subaru" had gained.

Subaru: "In this state, it's no use telling them about my precognitive dreams."

The fact that they believed in his memory loss was proof of these people's virtue. At the same time however, they were sensible people who did not believe in a "Different World". Therefore, he didn't even have to think about what response an explanation of his precognitive dreams would provoke.

Subaru: "From the start, I bungled it up…"

Messed up, he had messed up.

In the meanwhile, how would Subaru overturn their evaluations of him, showing that he could be dependable at this point. What was sought now, what was needed now was "Natsuki Subaru". Not Natsuki Subaru.

Was it alright if he feigned ignorance and went back down to them? Also, in a state which he didn't know what kind of exchange had taken place, would it be okay if he shamelessly joined the capture of the second floor? Or would Emilia and Beatrice veto that, and have him left behind.

And who would be keeping an eye on him there.

At least he'd like to hope for Shaula or Meili, given that conversation with them was no issue.

Subaru: "…Fuck, I'm such an idiot."

Whilst saying those words out loud, Subaru abruptly came out of the passageway he was walking through. He had come across the great spiral staircase which connected the fourth floor to the floors below—a gaping hole stretched out from the middle of the watchtower to its lower half. It was truly colossal.

Subaru: “Spiral, staircase…”

Suddenly, laying his eyes on that scene, Subaru started to ponder. Including his dreams, this was his second time he had come here. Both in dream and reality, Emilia and everyone else had guided the amnesiac Subaru around the tower. So, recognizing this place was not a mistake, but—

Subaru: “No, apart than that, I feel something strange…”

Goosebumps coursed down his body, he felt the hairs on his back stand on end. The blood in his whole body felt cold, and the ringing in his ears was awfully loud. His heartbeat had accelerated, his breathing became rough and his knees began trembling for whatever reason. His teeth had begun making an uncontrollable chattering noise. Subaru became aware of these abnormalities.

However, they were not caused due to any changes in temperature or any external causes. This abnormality, this unusual phenomenon, had been caused by Subaru’s own body. To say more about it, the influence on his body was as if it was Subaru’s spirit or something from a deeper place—

Subaru: “—ah.”

With a faint tap, Subaru felt a slight impact just as he was stepping forward.

—No, it couldn’t be said that he stepped forward.

To step forward is a term which presumes there is some solid ground which can be stepped on.

Stepping ahead, his leg had come out.

And his foot had scratched the air.

And so he,

Subaru: “A

ICANRETURA

NBYDEATHHEA

LPMEPATLASHMA

YFRIEND.ALSOEMILA

IAIWANTTOCONFESSTA

HATIMGAY.ANYWAYSIFYA

OUAREREADINGTHISTHENA

ITSJUSTAJOKE.AWAYFORMETA

OFORMATTHISSTUPIDLINEONNA

WORDPRESS.ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ-?!”

Falling, falling—he was plummeting.

His whole body was overwhelmed by a feeling of weightlessness; he was falling down mid-air, losing sight of what was up or down. A tremendous gust of wind was hitting his eardrums. Subaru understood what was happening. He was falling.

No, there had been a light impact back then. But, that didn’t necessarily indicate that he’d fallen.

He’d been pushed dow-

Subaru: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!!”“

Screaming his lungs out, Subaru desperately stretched out his hands—searching for somewhere, anywhere to hold on to. There was nothing. There was nowhere he could hold on to. The world around him was spinning around so much, that he couldn't comprehend the world around him.

A desperate feeling of wanting to vomit overpowers him as all the contents of his body are pulled from bottom to top. Chunks of yellow vomit overflows from his mouth, spilling out right into the air around him.

This sensation… he remembered it. In the midst of his pain and vomiting, the memories that had once been ambiguous had suddenly sharpened.

Yes, yes, that was it. Before he had woken up, the end of his precognitive dream, Subaru had been experiencing the same thing.

He had fallen, lamented his futile situation, and then he had lost consciousness. And after that, he had woken up from his precognitive dream and found himself in the Green Room—

Suddenly, Subaru experiences a great impact on the right side of his body, shattering his bones into pieces.

CRACK"

The sound of something breaking filled the air, his right side felt like it had been hit by lightning—Subaru's cries were silenced. And, right after, even if a bit belated, a severe pain coursed through his body.

Subaru: "GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

His right arm was sticking out at an odd angle, completely broken from the elbow with the bone protruding out from his skin. He was covered in blood, his jacket was torn, and he could see his own pinkish muscles and white bone from underneath his torn skin.

He crashed. Subaru's body crashed against the spiral staircase whilst he fell down towards the bottom. As it is now, his uncontrolled spiraling descent would end up destroying Subaru's body, and still he didn't stop.

No, it was far worse.

Subaru: “GHA! GHHH! GHHUU!”

His body that had tumbled downwards and had struck one of the lower steps of the spiral staircase, spraying blood everywhere. It was bad luck that his head hit the next step. His forehead cracked. He felt as if things were spilling out from the insides of his skull.

Instantly, he lost consciousness—where it seemed like it had all ended, his body collided with another step, and the pain from his broken right arm woke him up as his body continued to lose its shape.

Subaru: “AHHHHHHHHHH!!! GYAAAAAA!!”

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

Pain, anguish, vomiting, burning, Natsuki Subaru was being shattered into small pieces.

Arms, feet, face, every part of him was thrown and scraped against the stone staircase, broken, crushed, making it so he no longer resembled a person. No longer a person, into something that no longer was “Natsuki Subaru”.

—Memories are what shape people.

Subaru: “*Blurb*”

Whilst a spattering out a vast amount of blood, Subaru suddenly heard this voice.

Who had said such a silly thing, saying it like they understood him? But, it was a good thing to say. Memories are what shape people.

It was a good saying.

If so, what the hell does that make someone who’s lost his memories, and is no longer who he once was?

Subaru: “…”

Blood was spewing out of his mouth; quite literally, a scream that spewed blood, his throat was completely crushed. Natsuki Subaru was falling apart, crumbling away until he reached the distant, distant ground.

There is no waking up from this dream. Natsuki Subaru had failed.

There would be no more second chances to try again. The end dew near.

Slowly, darkness, darkness… the world around him was being dyed black.

—Who are you.

And finally, after all of his anguish and hot blood, Natsuki Subaru's crumbled out of existence.

Chapter 39:
Ruins

Repeatedly, over and over, a scorching heat filled his very being.

His skull, his limbs, his torso, his organs, his flesh and blood. Every single thing in his body was crushed, smashed, twisted and broken. His mind was set alight by the anguish, it was as if every single one of his nerve-endings were being plucked right now, his soul on fire, burning away. The screams he let out were racked with unimaginable fever and a sense of loss.

Pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain pain pain pain pain pain pain painpainpainpainpainpainpainpain. He is in pain.

There was only pain. There was just pain. The world around him was filled with pain. Even just thinking this caused more pain to cloud over him.

His thoughts, his very existence were painted with pain. Anxiety, confusion, nervousness, sorrow, anger, despair, all of these emotions were meaningless in front of pain.

They were meaningless, yes, they were meaningless.

Thoughts, actions, pondering, opinions, hopes, memories—they were all equally meaningless. When it came to those things which were the very embodiment of worthlessness, what was there to value when they were crushed, smashed and lost in the end?

Only the endless pain inscribed within his soul makes him aware of his existence. Then suddenly, the never-ending pain… started to fade…

Subaru: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

He woke up screaming. Right now, even the fact that his screaming throat had been crushed, drowned amidst welling blood, was naught but a memory.

Subaru: “AAAAAAAAAAAAH!! AHHHHHHHHH!!”

Whilst shouting, he tried to protect his body from being crushed using his arms and legs. His arms should be broken, completely unusable—yet they moved. Although they moved, he lost his balance as his body was still overwhelmed by the sensation of weightlessness and he fell and hit the floor.

Subaru: “………………gh”

He tried to speak, yet nothing resembling speech came out. He rolled onto the floor. The feeling of the floor was strange; he felt a sensation which was like that one of a rope against his body. He opened his throat, which was screaming for oxygen, and immediately felt a pungent pain strike it, resulting in a coughing fit. Unable to bear it, he vomited. His stomach had been mostly empty. Foul smelling watery chunks of vomit were spewed out of his acrid mouth onto the floor.

Subaru: “Blurgh, Bgh! Gh, ghrgh! Gbruuuugh!”

Coughing violently, and spitting out a bit of bile, tears and snot caked his crumpled face. Cowering and covering his face, he feebly smacked his forehead against the floor over and over again. Repeating this motion, he finally noticed it.

…That overwhelming pain which he had suffered as his body had been crushed had vanished.

Subaru: “… ah?”

He had been surprised by how suddenly his pain had vanished, that he hadn’t until now realized that someone was gently patting his back.

???: “Is everything better now?”

Reflected in his tear-encrusted eyes he could see the person who had been patting his back. Even with his blurry vision, the image of the girl was quite vivid despite his blurry vision; she had beautiful silver hair and amethyst eyes—on her face was an expression of worry whilst she patted his back. Subaru let out a wheeze.

???: “Suba…”

Subaru: “AHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

He twisted his body and shook off the pale hand that had been touching his back. As he did so, a trace of surprise flitted across the girl’s eyes who had until then been patting him. But the one here whose soul had been more seriously damaged was him.

His back. She had been touching his back.

Now and before, someone had touched his back, and after that… agony…

Subaru: “Ah-”

He jumped back, in an attempt to escape her—he felt the hair on his back standing on end. However, his legs crumpled beneath him and he fell flat on his backside. As he fell, his blow was softened by a rough, black presence underneath him.

Subaru: “…”

Looking down, he saw the eyes of the reptilian creature staring back at him as he reacted in fright. Looking at its sharp, long fangs that lined up its mouth, he suddenly realized that they could easily be used as a weapon to chew him up.

Subaru: “AHHHHHHHHH!!”

Again, he screamed. He tried to escape forward this time. In front of his eyes now, he could see someone’s leg; he didn’t dare to look up and instead pushed away the small silhouette blocking his way.

???: “Beatrice!”

With a high-pitched shrill, her chiming silver bell voice frantically cried out something, but the meaning did not reach him as he covered his ears up. Immediately, he headed towards the gap which lay in between the foliage of the room. With his legs shaking, he leapt out of the room. Stepping into the stone passageway and without stopping his body crashed into the stone wall. Stopped in his tracks, pain coursed through him. His sight was dyed red, in his mind he imagined an echo of his bones breaking.

Subaru: “Aaaah—”

His bumped right arm moved as normal. He pounded at the wall to check whether it really did move as normal. He felt pain again. He screamed again. Steadying himself against the wall, he broke out into a tottering run.

Subaru: “Ha… hff… *puff*… *pant*”

He was out of breath, drooling from his mouth, with sweat dripping from his forehead—he continued running down the passageway as fast as he could. Behind, he felt as if someone was following him, and many times he resisted the urge to look behind him. If he had looked back, and decided that someone was following him, it would have been too much to keep a check on his heart that felt like it was about to burst.

He felt as if his heart is about to rupture, as if the blood within his body was rotting, and as if his body was about to shatter from its feet, like a glass sculpture. Whether it was a premonition or the truth, there is one thing that was clear—the absolute, unwavering fact that if this went on, he would die.

People are born to be ruined. Every second you grow older, every second you head towards eventual death, every second you fall towards the end. Though, he wasn’t applying this metaphorical meaning of “Death” to himself right now. “Death” was approaching him with a steady gait. Cornering the unsightly, shameful him, who was struggling to flee, as if making sport of it.

He ran, he ran away. He ran away anyway. “Death” was following him. He would be killed. He would be killed. At this rate, he would be killed. Although he had already been killed, he was going to be killed again. Or, given such sheer agony, could it be possible to not die from it? Was that a mystery of life? That’s rather sickening.

Embellishing it as “mystery” was rather disproportionate. It was a repulsive, unseemly attachment.

Rather, shouldn't he be dead…?

HK"

The beating of his heart felt like an explosion that shook his eardrums; his sight was flickering on and off. Even how he breathed resembled how a baby would take its first breaths. It was completely absurd how he looked like when escaping from his fear of death. Yet, as comical as it is, there was no laughter. Everything to him was something that would cause him fear.

All around him: "…"

Almost to the point he was losing track of where he was running through, all of the stone passageways he had been going through looked the same to him. If there was one thing he understood, it was that he should not go back from where he came from. Though, if he continued to escape in this directionless fashion he would gradually lose his way. If he lost his way, someone would catch him. If someone were to catch him, he would lose his life. Why, why his life? Such a question now was useless.

He had no time to wonder whether to go towards the left or towards the right. Whilst escaping from "Death" which may catch up even at this very moment, he placed his right hand on the wall, relying on it, as he frantically panted for air, completely out of breath.

It felt like he was drowning. It's as if he was struggling to break above the water's surface even though here on the ground there is no water anywhere.

Drowning, drowning, struggling as he drowns, heading towards the water's surface, kicking and struggling, kicking and struggling, kicking and struggling, floundering, floundering, floundering, before finally—

???: "YOU, the hell you doin' here so early in the morning, OY!"

Subaru: "………………………"

He felt his feet stop as he sensed a monstrously huge presence right in front of his eyes… No, his feet weren't the only thing that had stopped.

His breathing had stopped, his noisy heartbeat had stopped, and his knees which had been trembling with fear and fatigue had stopped. It felt like all of his vital signs had stopped, grasped by the scruff of the neck.

—Before his eyes there stood a giant-like being, an illusion like that. But after a few seconds, he slowly began to understand, that even though he was tall there was no chance that the person upon the stage had the constitution that transcended what humans could have. At the same time, the fact remained that there was a human being who could clad himself in such a ferocious, demonic aura.

???: "A person all alone? Yer just a lone small fry that's not even worth talking to. Small fry, so instead of person, should I go with critter? Even as a critter, yer not even worth considering. Go fetch those people ya were with yesterday, and that sexy girl. Are you listening, hey! You, OY, YOU."

The figure that was standing still in front of him was rambling on. He showed the signs of being an extremely violent person, and his manner of speaking felt really vulgar, as if each word was being beaten into him.

His breathing which had stopped before, as well as his silenced heartbeat and his trembling knees suddenly started up again.

—He had entered inside of the ferocious beast's cage, the very place where he mustn't tread.

He had just kept running and running for his life.

He had ran along the stone corridors and tried to keep away from any places he had found familiar. He had followed a stairway which he had found within a strange room which had led him upstairs. Maybe he had been told about the staircase yesterday, or was it something like yesterday, maybe some few hours ago? It was all but lost to the oblivion of his memory.

He went up the long, long, long, long, incredibly long stairway, short of breath, up he went, and then… Then, when he reached the end he had found himself being glared at by a most terrible beast.

???: “Are ya even listening to me?”

Subaru: “……hh—”

Suddenly, his breath was knocked out of him and just before his eyes he noticed he was looking right at the other person’s face. He had long, red hair, with a black eye patch covering his left eye. He wore a kimono that exposed one of his shoulders and part of his chest. White linen cloths were wrapped around his exposed chest. Just underneath his nose, this man was jabbing at him a thin, wooden stick. Though the tip of it wasn’t at all sharp, yet he still perceived what was thrusted before him as “Death” too.

Subaru: “……hk”

???: “Hey, don’t ya fucking ignore me.”

Subaru: “Wha, ah, eh?”

Without hesitating, he had obeyed his instincts and had tried to escape him. But the moment he had tried to run back out of the room, he had crashed straight into the man’s chest. The man had then pushed him down using his wooden stick, causing him to fall down. The back of his head bumped against the floor, bright flashes flew around his vision. Tears of pain started to flow out of his eyes. The pain of bumping against the floor, the pain of his head banging against the floor… it reminded him of the pain of being crushed.

Subaru: “aa, aaa, aaaaaaaaah…”

???: “OYOY, c’mon are ya crying? Why’d ya start crying? Did you fight with yer boyfriend downstairs? Are ya crying ’cause I talked you down?”

Subaru: “Gh…hh…uuuuu!”

???: “Good grief, what a hopeless bastard, OY!”

Whilst lying flat on his back, tears had started to pour out of his eyes as he slowly relived the horror he had experienced. Looking at this spectacle, the long haired man roughly scratched his head. He crouched down beside his head, and,

???: “C’mon, tell me what happened. If you’d like to ask somethin’, then I’m all ears.”

Subaru: “… uh, ah?”

???: “You ran all the way to this place. Must be a real big deal, ya prick.”

He spoke those words with a sigh. The meaning of them was incomprehensible to him, and he simply reacted by blinking rapidly. Just then, he felt like the being who’d seemed vicious beyond compare slowly took on a more definite outline. Not only did it take on the shape of a person, but the emotions of a person and quintessence, began to tie together an actual image.

In his vision blurred by tears, the face of the man looking down in his direction gradually became clearer—

???: “No matter what ya say, yer a fool!”

Subaru: “Gh- gha- aaaaAAAAAA?!”

—With a cruel appearance, reminiscent of a bloodthirsty shark, the man had shoved the wooden stick right into his chest. He had slid in between his ribs the pointed end of the stick. He poked around and tickled the delicate internal organs behind his bones as if he was making sport of it. Sheer agony pierced his entire body, making him feel like wanting to vomit up blood.

???: “The fuck you doin’ runnin’ away ya prick?! Even worse, what were ya tryna to pull, if before ya made a leg for it, ya came to me, ya prick. I ain’t your guardian, nor yer mate, ya prick. Aren’t ya the one choosin’ who to flock with, ya prick. Do you want to fucking die?”

Subaru: “Gh… Gah… Aaagh… Gghhhgya”

???: “Don’t reckon we have the sort of relationship where we get along by talking to each other, ya prick. If things would end up hunky dory with that, then it’s not like I’d have been called to this place from square one. Come at me like ya feel like killin’ me. I’ll play about with ya. Finally.”

With evident irritation and hostility, the degree of his anger increased with every word he said. The hands of the man that was fiddling with his organs had a certain delicateness to them, and boasted exceptional precision. He had been taught the importance and value of his organs with sharp, unbearable pain, so he well understood that.

If the man had been someone who was on edge and had the tendency to let his emotions get the best of him, or if his arms had been something other than precise and gentle, his guts would’ve exploded a long time ago.

That it hadn’t ended up becoming like so, was down to the man’s awful talent.

His overwhelming resourcefulness as one who oppressed, being extremely blessed with violence, along with the talent necessary to exert it.

It was only thanks to that, that this act of barbarism was able to be carried out so properly.

—No. This place differed so much compared to the place he knew about.

???: “Beat it small fry.”

Subaru: “GH—”

The poking sensation in his guts faded away, and was quickly followed by the man’s foot violently kicking his side. Rather than having kicked him with the side of his foot, he had punted him like as if he was a football. His body spins and tumbles around mid-air, and emerged out of the large room he had been in. However, what was welcoming him as he was flying out of the room was…

Subaru: “NO WAAAAAaaaay…”

He was tumbling down the stairs. Seeing that scene in his mind, he instinctively dug his nails into the floor. With a terrible screeching noise, the nails of his right hand, belonging to his middle and ring fingers were torn off their root. The nerves behind them became exposed and red blood wet the floor, but somehow he managed to stop himself from falling down.

Subaru: “GH, GHHHHH…!”

Immediately following the brief moment of relief, as he somehow escaped the fall, he was assaulted by a sensation of scorching heat at the base of his nails. When he looked at the hand with the sharp pain, he saw his fingernails torn off like the open lid of a box; the nail on his little finger was also coming loose as well. Seeing this pain spurred his brain into overdrive.

Subaru: “It hurts… it hurts, it hurts, it hurts…”

Grasping his left hand with his right one, whose nails had been torn off, he applied pressure to ease the pain, even if a little. Coming in drops, the blood flowing from his wounds flowed down his wrists, and left behind a trail of blood on the stairs as he stood himself up.

There was no courage in him to look back behind him anymore. There was no sign that this ferocious beast, was turning its attention over to him. If, to say, he had caught even a glimpse of it, he would have fallen down the stairs this time for sure, unable to put up with it.

He had stopped himself from experiencing the worst situation, but had now settled into the second worst case. So, what was he going do to do now?

Subaru: “Wh…y?”

Why was he in a place like this?

He’d forgotten how to flee,, his heartbeat engulfed by dread and paralyzed, and finally, his mind had turned to the wonders and nonsense of why he was here.

Though he should have been smashed up, he was here. Though he should have been engulfed by scorching heat and vanished, he was still here.

It would have been nice if everything had been a dream or an illusion or the likes of that.

Subaru: “Precognitive… dreams…”

He had assumed that was what he had been experiencing. The spectacle he had seen, the people that he had talked to, the conversations that had proceeded exactly as he remembered them, the events that should have occurred… because they had seen them with his very own eyes.

Thus he’d thought, that he’d try and straighten out a theory as to why it had occurred in his own way.

For sure, in some respects, he’d even thought about it with such vagueness, as if it were none of his business, as if it were no skin off his nose.

He hadn’t known that the way he would be rewarded for such impudence and shallow thinking would have been experiencing such intense pain.

Subaru: “…”

Noticing that he had crouched down on the spot, he could see drops of blood dripping down from him and soaking the stone staircase beneath him with a hue of red.

A feeling of wasted effort, a feeling of loss, a feeling of dismay… generally speaking, a lot of negative thoughts were spinning around his head. Even if he investigated the conclusions which were spinning around in his head, he would find that they would all result in the same thought—He didn’t know why he had experienced such things.

Subaru: “…”

Just a few hours ago, he was comfortably living his boring daily life. There was no danger there, at the worst, he was worrying about his future. There was no one around threatening him, nothing to actually be taken seriously.

—He had just been in a place where he at most he only needed to face down at his mother and father's gaze.

Was that so wrong, he wondered.

He had continued to be an inconvenience to his mother and father. He had continued to disappoint them. He hadn't been a good son. And thus, he had tasted the pain of death. Nevertheless he had been driven to a situation now in which he hadn't died. The nails which had been peeled off were hurting him, he had been tortured by a strange man, he had been left all alone on this stairway… was he crying?

In retrospect, if he had thought about it… He would have done it more properly.

Subaru: "… I should have at least said "See you later.""

It had been a life full of regret. Everything had gone wrong, resulting in only failure. If he thought back on it, the things he wanted to redo had once seemed impossible to have been done with his own hands and feet. For the first time it had occurred to him that…

—When I left home, I heard mom's voice saying "Take care" and I didn't reply to it. Why?

—Because I didn't wash the cups left in the kitchen sink.

Subaru: "Gh, ff…"

I didn't wash the cups. I didn't care to wash the brown stains that were stuck to them after drinking that hot cocoa. If I'd responded to mom's voice, if I'd started a conversation with her, I might've been told to wash those cups.

I ignored my mom's words because I didn't want to wash the cups. I didn't say anything. I left the house without saying anything and went to the convenience store and spent money that I did not earn. Then I noticed that I had ended up here.

I didn't say anything to mom or dad, I didn't wash the cups, and then I ended up here.

Without washing the cups, without even saying a word to my kind-hearted mother, I may die in this place. I will die, having always caused trouble, without giving anything back, without even washing some cups.

Die, I'll die. I will die. I will most definitely die. If I fall from that height, there'll be no saving me. I will definitely die.

Subaru: "…I'll, die."

I'll die. Everything that lives eventually dies, and I am going to die here. Alone in this place. Without my mother or father, surrounded by complete strangers, I'll end up becoming a filthy, bloody lump and die.

Subaru: "I'll die. I'll die. I'll… die. Die, die, die…"

He muttered this. As he muttered so, albeit strange, it felt like it became a little more distant. It was just a temporary peace of mind. He was distracted. When put into words, it's not like anything would dramatically change.

"Death" would not change, loitering about while smiling so as to catch up with his fate.

Just now, it appeared to be taking the shape of a person. A dark shadow rose up, laughing at him as if it were mocking him.

That face, which was stuck to the dark shadow was a face which seemed familiar. Whose face was it that he recognized in this place? Thinking this, he noticed…

"Death", with his face on it, was laughing as it pointed at him as he trembled.

Subaru: "Don't laugh."

He glared at the shadow, and said this with a dark hatred. The shadow continued to smile. It hadn't stopped pointing its finger at him.

Subaru: "Don't laugh. Don't laugh at me! This is no laughing matter…!"

Standing up and grinding his teeth he approached the shadow that was standing against the wall. The shadow still continued to smile. It still hadn't stopped pointing its finger at him.

Subaru: "Quit laughing. I will die. But not to you. You will not kill me."

The facial expression of the embodiment of "Death" changed for the first time. It seemed like it had gotten angry that his own thing hadn't done as he'd said. It seemed like this was the shadow's weak point, it is here that he will launch an incessant onslaught against it.

Subaru: "I will not be killed by you. I will die. It's certain that I will die! I will die! I'm dead! I'm already dead! I died and came back here, but I—"

—won't be killed by you.

In that moment he had tried to clearly speak those words out loud.

Subaru: "…"

His lips had stopped moving to his will. The next thing he noticed was that his eyes which had been glaring at the shadow seemed frozen, and the sensation of being completely separated from his body. Why, even his ability to question it had been sealed, he had simply just succumbed to this sudden transformation in his body.

He can't move. His body… No, it isn't his body that had stopped moving. It was the world around him. The black shadow that had stood in front of him had also stopped moving, its distorted expression of anger remained frozen on its face.

In this world where he couldn't move, there was only one thing that moved. And that was—

???: “—I love you.”

—It perhaps looked like a woman in black.

Darkness, it was a woman with slender limbs whose whole body was entirely dyed in black. He doesn’t know whether this woman’s figure was made of darkness itself or whether it was a woman that was dressed in black. He wasn’t certain which one it was—it didn’t seem to make any sense to choose one. In any case, it was a woman in black. It was as if she was wearing a black wedding dress, with a black veil that made it impossible to see both into it and out from it. This black veil completely concealed her face.

???: “—I love you.”

However, the words which emerged from the lips of the woman who was shrouded in darkness contained an unimaginably strong emotion. Just how many emotions he could concentrate within, to get close to the words that slipped out from her lips.

In those words there was quality, there was quantity, there was the sensation of time passed, there was weight, there was worth, and that was just the general concept. He doesn’t know approximately how many people have uttered “I love you” in the world—but if you were to take all of those “I love you’s” and put them together then it would surely be akin to this woman’s “I love you”.

And slowly, the woman who had been gently whispering her words of love moved her black arm towards his chest. Slender fingers passed through his chest, his skin, his flesh, right through his bones and caressed his beating heart.

Subaru: “…”

Several minutes, dozens of minutes, he doesn’t know how much time had passed. His heart had been made aware of her presence ever since awakened—but, in that moment he hadn’t ever thought that he found her presence annoying. Because—

???: “—I love you.”

She had caressed his heart with the same passion that was found in her whispers. But suddenly, a great shock passed through him, his body, fearing pain, was completely succumbed by it. His body being crushed by his fall, his soul burning and being scorched out of existence, even the pain of his guilty heart when he had thought back to his mother—all of those pains seemed insignificant compared to this pain.

He wanted her to let him scream. If he could shout himself hoarse, he could alleviate the pain a little. Rather than be faced only with pain, he was able to escape some of the pain by thinking of things other than the pain he was in. Now he couldn't do that. He could only face his pain.

???: "—I love you."

Her love will not let go of his heart. It's like as if she had an everlasting desire to not allow him to turn his attention to things other than herself.

—It was as if she was envious of everything around him.

Subaru: "—Haa"

He had been suddenly set free.

Subaru: "…"

Gasping, he collapsed on the spot. With tears overflowing from his eyes, he couldn't keep hold of his continence. He feels a warm, wet feeling around his crotch, and urine starts to drip down the stairway. The dark shadow that had stopped, continued to point at the shameful sight in front of it, and was laughing loudly.

As he watched the figure that was laughing he realizes that he had been deceived. Since he had displayed behavior which had indicated weakness, he had been deceived into stepping on the tiger's tail that shouldn't be stepped on.

Subaru: "I…"

He couldn't continue his words. He was holding his head, completely at his wits end. Blood was still flowing from his wounds where his fingernails had been ripped off. Even his tears and the urine that was dripping from him seemed like punishment for his weakness and stupidity.

—Just kill me.

He voiced this out inside his head. As for having been killed, would he really be “killed”?

He heard the sounds of footsteps going up the stairs, and the sounds of anxious voices running up to where he was. Until then, he continued to cry like a foolish child, smeared in his own filth and disappointment.

The ruins of Natsuki Subaru kept on crying.

SETOWI

Chapter 40:
Abandoned by the Stars

1

Everything is messed up. Literally, so messed up.

He was found, brought back and questioned about what had happened. Bit by bit, he found that the situation would get worse every time he would say something.

???: “All right, so Subaru really doesn’t remember anything?”

As he was clutching his knees, the girl with the silver hair gazed down at him with a gloomy expression. Next to her stood a young, sweet little girl who couldn’t come to grips with what he had said and reacted with shock.

???: “We were at a complete loss when we heard that we couldn’t find you… by no means, did I think the situation would end up like this. It looks like we’re faced with a very difficult problem.”

The girl, who had a white fox scarf wrapped around her neck, grumbled this in a stiff tone. The knight with the handsome face nods and mutters the occasional “Yeah, that’s right” as she speaks.

???: “For how long are you going to be satisfied in exposing that unsightly appearance, Barusu.”

Scowling at him as she said it, was the girl who had cleaned up the mess that had been caked on him. But, there was no great animosity in her words, moreover, there seemed to be a forlorn expression hanging over her.

???: “Master, Master. Something in the air seems to have become remarkably more gloomy eh~? You need to smile mooore… Huh, what is that? You stink of piss!”

The black haired woman was laughing in good spirits without seemingly understanding the situation here. At the side of the black-haired woman, there stood a young girl who was stroking her braided hair. She gives him a sidelong glance which seemed to show barely a small glimpse of interest at the situation he was in.

Subaru: "…"

All of these reactions, if he were to broadly speak about them, every single one of them he had let go by. Once, twice… thrice. He had disappointed them three times. However, this time, he had soiled himself after he had tried to escape from this place. He had been found alone, huddled up and crying. There was no room for doubt that it had been the worst situation so far.

—Even though he is the only one aware of the real facts behind this truly dreadful situation.

Subaru: "Heh."

It makes him laugh. The fact that he had repeated this same situation—No, not just repeated once, but three times.

He had seen the same scene a second time. Then on the third time he had revisited this scene, he had finally grasped what sort of situation he was in.

—He had died twice.

Both times, most likely, from falling from the same place—the first time he had lost consciousness on the way down and because of that, he hadn't tasted the moment of death. However, it had not been like this the second time. As he fell down, he hadn't died quickly and had tumbled and crashed against the staircase having his whole body destroyed.

He then finally died, but came back. At the moment of death, he would return back to the Green Room and once again he would wake up and redo the day.

Die and return—Return by Death. That was the blessing which the God had given to Natsuki Subaru in this parallel world.

Subaru: “Heh.”

For the second time, laughter had leaked out of him. Whether objectively one could call it laughter is left to discussion, suffice to say that for Subaru it was laughter.

There’s nothing else he could do except laugh. He felt as if his tears have honestly dried up. Crying also wasted his physical strength. He had died and then returned, it seemed like the physical strength he exerts before dying is given back to him when he returns. This time he had literally soiled away his strength on awakening.

???: “Anyways, let Subaru rest until things settle down. Over time, we may see some change.”

At hearing the girl with the silver hair’s proposal, he knew that his treatment had already been decided like so. Was she thinking that he would lash out violently? Subaru’s persona had been exaggerated. He had been brought back to the Green Room under everyone’s supervision.

???: “I’m afraid we can’t leave Rem here with this current Barusu. I oppose it.”

???: “…But, apart from finding out what caused this, our best bet at helping Subaru recover would be to rely on the spirit of this room.”

???: “If that’s the case… if that’s the case, we will move Rem to another room. Ram will stay with her and look after her. Ram seems to be the only one now who is worried about her.”

He wished he was in a place where there were no quarrels or clash of opinions. Whatever it is, he has no options. Taking the initiative and having the willpower to do things such as resolutely overcoming this situation, the current Subaru didn’t have that within him.

???: “…Poor Rem.”

She uttered this so Subaru could hear her, just before she carried the sleeping girl out of the room. It was remarkable how much they resembled each other, like two peas in a pod.

Subaru had no idea about the true meaning behind her words. Nor did he want to.

Beatrice: “Subaru, stay quietly here. Betty will surely find a way to return your memories, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice: “I won’t let you cower here all alone.”

Just before she leaves the room, the young girl speaks those gentle words. Her voice is tinged with grief, yet there is also a hint of noble determination within it. The voice is strong and doesn’t doubt what she says. In that way, in response to her voice showing that she is concerned for him—

Subaru: “…Ahh!”

Subaru shrunk back in an attempt to avoid her outstretched arms. Seeing his reaction to this, the eyes of the little girl swayed with hurt.

Beatrice: “…”

They were strangers. No matter what, they were strangers.

But for Subaru, they weren’t strangers. For the girls, the Subaru here was a stranger.

Their familiarity, their worry, and their deep affection was directed at the original “Natsuki Subaru” and not at his current ruins. And, at the same time—

Subaru: “I have no reason to be killed…”

He had been left behind in the Green Room, alone. Subaru grinds his teeth as he mutters this. It’s still not yet a good thing to turn towards those good feelings of comfort, or to blow off the bonds that he had supposedly accumulated over time, and the trust and deep affection he has no memory of. However, why does he have to bear the consequences of the murderous intent that “Natsuki Subaru” had accumulated towards him?

All the good things and the bad things, everything that was jumbled together was not his own. Despite this, why must he struggle and drown in this place?

…

Subaru: “I’m sorry…”

After a few hours of being alone, Subaru pushes his back up against the wall, and steadily gets up. Having bitten down on his lips too much, he spat out the mixture of blood and saliva that had piled up within his mouth. Then slowly he starts to walk towards the Green Room’s exit.

???: “…*Tsssssssss*”

Behind Subaru, the only presence that he could hear was the black lizard’s cries. The cry sounded somewhat feeble, as if it was crying out in loneliness. Subaru shakes his head at that thought. It’s just a big reptile feeling loneliness, even for him, there was a limit to his stupidity.

Subaru: “Somebody will bring you food. Shush now.”

The lizard continues to give out its feeble cry despite what Subaru had said. Without listening to it, Subaru shakes off his reluctant thoughts, and steps out of the Green Room. He checks to his left and right, making sure the coast is clear and starts to stealthily walk away.

Subaru: “Water, and where they keep the food…”

He knows where those things are. As he had accompanied her to draw water, he knew where he could find it. He also knew where he could find food. The only other question he had was how much of it should he bring?

Subaru: “…”

To be honest, there was something Subaru didn’t know. What on earth had pushed Subaru down those stairs and robbed him of his life.

However, there was something that Subaru clearly remembers. Back then, at that place, someone had pushed Subaru's back. It wasn't due to some ridiculous reason such as being clapped on the shoulder from behind or being blown off by a strong gust of wind. He was certainly pushed. He had been on the receiving end of definite, murderous intent. Natsuki Subaru had been killed.

The suspects were seven: "Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Anastasia, Julius, Meili and Shaula—Subaru doesn't know how many of them are his friends, and how many of them are his foe. After all, Subaru now had no way to deem if all of them were truly his acquaintances.

—In reality, couldn't they all be assassins gathered here at this tower to kill Subaru?

Subaru: "If that's true…"

Even if he brings out only a bit of food, he can't feel guilty about this. However, at the same time, the first and second time he had met them… Emilia had called out to him in the same manner, and Beatrice had told him that they would look for a way to return his memories, and Ram had cried out refusing to believe that he had lost his memories. He doubts that they were acting.

Subaru: "…"

It was impossible.

Having gone through all that horrible stuff, he had been killed not just once, but twice. Subaru doubts the girl and the others from the bottom of his heart, and yet, he couldn't run away just for his own safety.

Subaru: "Shit, shit, half-assed son of a bitch…!"

He swears at his own disgraceful behavior, unable to chose, as he starts to secretly pack away food. So to speak he was collecting emergency rations, he was putting no consideration into what it would taste like. Of course, what was important now was that the food would fill him up, other particulars like taste were secondary, no, tertiary. He had roughly taken enough food to last him three days. He had in a similar fashion drawn enough water and placed it in leather drinking pouches to carry along with him.

Subaru: “There’s a desert outside, but…”

He donned a cloak that had been stowed in the same place as the food. In terms of size and design, Subaru immediately noticed which one was his. The cloak is designed so when you clasp the front together it can be pulled up to cover his mouth. It seemed like a perfect countermeasure against breathing in the sand of the desert. And after collecting food, water and tools to help him in the desert, his preparations were complete.

Subaru: “I guess it is past the time where I’ve twice died…”

If he thinks about it, the time he had spent huddled up in the Green Room should mean that he had perhaps already approached the time in which he had been pushed off last time. The effectiveness of Return by Death had immediately demonstrated its power. Like this, one by one, he could overcome his own death flags and continue walking the tightrope of life and death.

Subaru: “…”

He doesn’t want to do that. It would be better for him to not be in this place, if he were to have to go through something like that. Subaru jumps out of the room and starts to jog, he heads towards where the spiral staircase is located using the mental map he had drawn in his head of the area. Twice he had been pushed down from this place. Naturally, his mind was screaming at him to get out of there. However—

Subaru: “…………!”

Immediately after arriving at the spiral staircase and being momentarily enraptured by the scene in front of him, Subaru looked back behind him and carefully examined whether the assassin was hiding somewhere behind him. Luckily, because the time was different to last time, or because the assassin did not know where Subaru was, he couldn’t find any trace of an arm stretched out preparing to push his back.

About now, everyone was probably at the library where the memories of the dead sleep, or they had headed upstairs and are waiting to face that arrogant examiner—the memory of having his internal organs messed with by this man resurfaced, and a feeling of wanting to vomit wells up within him.

Subaru: "As if you can challenge a guy who's like that…"

He wasn't human. Both in skill and personality. By no means at all does it seem likely to win against such an opponent, were you to challenge him. If that's the case, what's it to him to overlook the fact that they had gone to face a fight they know they couldn't win.

Subaru: "Hell if I know!!!"

Since a little while ago, this enigma had kept popping up in his mind and had been trying to stop his feet. So what. He doesn't care.

Although she may have been gentle and kind, it may have all been a lie. She may have acted worried, but behind her back she may have been sharpening the blade of murderous intent. At least she could have warned him of the possibility that a dangerous individual was lurking somewhere in the tower.

Subaru: "Well, what if the person they told me about an enemy?"

Enemy, enemy was a word of ridicule. In his everyday life in his world which was relatively unaffected by conflict, the opportunity to utter a word like "Enemy" only existed within games.

This world was one where you were forced to say that word, as if it were only natural.

No, that is wrong. He doesn't want to be in this place. He doesn't want to stay here.

Subaru: "………!"

Subaru runs, biting down the unbearable irritation that was boiling within his chest. He runs down the spiral staircase, heading down towards the fifth floor that was out of sight. There are many steps spiraling endlessly down the wall, and he cannot see the end of them as he goes downstairs. He frantically ran down as fast as he could, puffing and panting, to the point that it almost seemed comical.

Still, he didn't want to die.

Subaru: "I made it…whew…"

He had made it down to the fifth floor. Unlike the fourth floor, the fifth floor wasn't divided into various rooms. Rather, it was like a single hall that occupied the entire space of the floor. The only thing that was noticeable within the fifth floor was a set of stairs that led downwards to the sixth floor and—

Subaru: "A huge door…"

Looking up at the huge door, he sensed a terrible feeling of oppression emanating from where it stood.

Subaru: "…"

Standing in front of the door, it felt like a strange overpowering sensation was clogging Subaru's throat. He feels a slight sandy breeze blow through. Perhaps the wind outside was blowing some sand into the tower through gaps within the door. In the end he was certain that this door connected to the outside.

Subaru: "If what Emilia and the others said was true…"

Using this door, he should be able to go to the desert outside. Desert—he had forgotten its official name, but nevertheless he will follow the sandy road and head towards civilization. That way at least, there should be no worries of having his life threatened by this cruel assassin.

The basics to crossing a desert are to travel at night, avoid sandstorms, and try to move towards one set direction—this was the only knowledge he possessed on the matter.

Subaru: "I would bet that it is far more likely that I will survive there, than in this place where it's certain that I am going to be killed."

It could be said that this wasn't quite a normal decision to make. However, whether or not this was an abnormal decision to come to, he doesn't think making it is a mistake. Under these circumstances, if he can't believe even in "Himself", then only darkness would await him.

He would never do such a thing like sitting in the dark, waiting for death. Since his death, he had decided to fight back.

Subaru: "…"

He placed his hand on the huge door which was in front of him, and slowly pushed it with all his strength. The door was more than ten times larger than Subaru himself. By all rights, even if Subaru were to push with all his might, it should be that due to its weight, the door should not budge at all.

However, when he had pressed the palm of his hand against the door, it had easily pushed open as if it was mechanized.

Subaru: "Eh."

Subaru let out a flat sigh and stops pushing the door open. Even if now they hadn't noticed Subaru trying to sneak away, if he left the door completely open, then he can expect the girl and the others to notice.

Even if Subaru slips out and manages to get away, he wants to make sure to put in enough distance between them so they couldn't catch up to him.

Subaru: "……………"

Quietly, Subaru looked out from the gap in the door to the outside. As soon as his eyesight adjusted, he saw a vast sea of sand which was swallowed by the creeping darkness of nightfall.

Subaru: "…It really is a desert, eh."

He tries to squint his eyes so he can see what is beyond the horizon, but he can't see anything beyond it. In this environment where there are no signs of any shelter, what is at the end of the horizon cannot be seen. There is no way for Subaru to know how far it stretched. However, no matter how far this desert went on for, it certainly couldn't go on forever.

If he were to take a step forward, it would be one step closer to the outside world. If he were to get closer to the outside world—wouldn't that be a step closer to his original world?

Subaru: "…"

For a moment, Subaru's legs remained glued in the tower. He will probably, surely, leave this place. It made him feel a bit guilty to do this, as he would be leaving behind those without any ill intentions towards him. Subaru shakes off these feelings. His attachment to go outside, to his original world, made him do so.

He doesn't want to be here. Natsuki Subaru will return back home because that is where his mother and father await him.

Subaru: "So…"

With a firm step forward, Subaru passes through the gap he had opened in the door. Stepping on the sand, he notices that his feet sunk into the sand more than he had thought they would. Taking his initial steps with quite a lot of force, Natsuki Subaru had firmly stepped outside into the outside world. And—

Subaru: "…huh?"

A violent explosion from underneath his shoes suddenly launches Subaru high up into the air.

2

He had been thrown from his back onto the ground, making him black out. He was in a complete state of panic—Subaru now no longer knew whether being in a state of panic was more normal than being in a state of normalcy.

Subaru: "What the…"

…hell happened. While spitting sand from his mouth, Subaru hadn't the leisure to continue those words.

This was due to the imposing figure that was now standing right before his eyes, presenting an answer to what the hell happened.

Subaru: "………..."

Right in front of Subaru's eyes, a huge shadow is looking at him against the background which was dyed by the night. The shadow had a huge, limbless body, with slimy skin. It looked ferocious, with cruel fangs lining its mouth—it seemed to look like an earthworm to Subaru. A terrible, gigantic earthworm. In length, it stood not less than ten meters tall—it was an earthworm-monster.

Subaru: "W…"

Was this a world full of monsters? Every single scene he had seen had been disconnected from reality, and had not given Subaru's heart a chance to calm down. And now, the latest crisis was drawing near to him, not giving him any chance to crouch down and lament his fate.

Subaru: "This, fucking… hk—"

Picking himself up, covered in sand, Subaru shakes his head. Most likely it had been this earthworm who had struck him earlier and blown him away, because he was standing on its territory. That, or he had simply been standing in the place where it had emerged to take a breath. Either way, the earthworm had knocked Subaru down onto the sand, and moreover—

Subaru: "It's not going to leave me be…!"

Understanding that in this situation he was at an overwhelming disadvantage, Subaru looked around his surroundings. He had barely taken four steps since leaving the tower. Although it was cowardly, there were plenty of options to pick from, such as jumping back into the building and living.

However, as he looked around, Subaru cursed his luck. He had been blown away by the earthworm's blow and had rolled across the sand, away from the tower. The huge earthworm stood in between

Subaru and the tower, so if he were to try and get back to the tower, he would have to go past the earthworm's huge body.

Subaru: "So…"

Even if he were to run into the desert, he expects that the earthworm will eventually catch up with him. Firstly, this may not be the only earthworm; there's a decent chance that this earthworm is the lord of the desert with how big it is, although even one that's half of its size would be quite a threat too. Not to mention, if he were to be attacked by a herd of them…

Subaru: "In fact, was the option of escaping not even realistic?"

He hates the kindness which this world quickly teaches. And, it seemed like the earthworm had decided what to do about Subaru, who had been busy trying to puzzle how to get out of this situation.

Slowly, the earthworm turns its eyeless head towards him and opens its gaping maw. There was a curved horn on its head—it was quite a surreal sensation.

Subaru: "One shot, I just need to get in one shot on it. Just one shot, one shot, one shot…"

Pulling up his anti-sand cloak to his neck, Subaru keeps an eye out at what the earthworm was doing. He pulls his arm to the front, and calculates the timing of when he should deliver his blow. He suddenly notices that the wound where his nails had been ripped off on his right hand had clotted, and that the nails had started to regenerate. Had it been healing magic, or the effects of the Green Room?

And while he was distracted by that…

???: "……… KRUAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!"

The gigantic beast had let out a terrible, shrill cry which he could have never imagined coming from such a thing. The earthworm had then leapt, almost as if it was flopping, towards Subaru. When Subaru had heard its roar against the howling of the wind, for a split second he had felt a strange sensation, like as if his body was acting on its own accord.

Subaru: "………………"

The earthworm had leapt at him, however he had rolled towards his right side and dodged its attack. He hadn't been thinking of anything else. It's as if he could see an illusion of himself of what to do next. He had simply followed what the illusion had done and moved his body like it did. And just like that, he had moved out of the earthworm's attack.

Subaru: "…Shiiiii—!!"

A large amount of sand mushroomed up into the air, followed by a shockwave right beside him. Whilst experiencing the aftermath of its attack, Subaru rolls over the sand, still following the illusion of his own consciousness.

Subaru: "…hhhfffff!"

His body was far more agile than he remembered it to be. A split second after, "Natsuki Subaru's" year crossed through his mind was, which Subaru had no recollection of. There is a trace left of the experience "Natsuki Subaru" had accrued surviving in this harsh environment.

Right now, he wasn't thinking anything about the fact he'd made full use of that.

Subaru: "At this rate…!!"

Rolling forwards, with the nimbleness and vigor his precursor had left him, Subaru rights himself up and runs as fast as possible towards the tower's front door. In this moment, it is all about clinging onto what is in front of his eyes.

If he makes it back to the tower, he knows that he will return to an environment of shadows and suspicion, as well as that he will be tormented by the fear of death. But still, he would rather chose that than ending up becoming this huge earthworm's poop.

Subaru: "…"

He cannot afford to look back behind him, but it should be that the earthworm should not have enough dexterity to be able to switch over and catch up with him immediately. He was only a few meters away from where he was running to—

Subaru: “Rh—”

Just now, instead of the earthworm’s head, the earthworm’s tail had broken through and appeared from underneath the sand at Subaru’s feet. The sand underneath him violently exploded and the momentum from the tail striking his feet hoists Subaru’s body up into the air again.

Subaru: “Oh, ah.”

Whilst revolving around in mid-air, and flailing his limbs about, Subaru sees what is underneath him. Beneath his eyes, he sees that the earthworm was opening its large mouth, preparing itself to greedily devour his body.

—He’d underestimated it.

He was naive to think that he could outsmart the wild animal that had lived in this harsh environment and gotten so huge, just like as if it had been living in a greenhouse similar to his world. Reckless, he had been reckless. He will pay the price of his own impudence with his life.

Subaru: “NO!”

Whilst falling, he shouts this out, like a trapped insect struggling to escape a spider’s web. Die, would he died again? If he dies, he doesn’t know if he will even remain dead. If he is to die and it end here, what would happen? Could he bear it? If he were to be thrown forever into the never-ending darkness like this. Could he bear it?

Subaru: “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

He screams and stretches his hand out to the night sky for help. There is nothing to reach out to. Even at the ends of the sky, which was blurred behind some wispy clouds, he couldn’t see the stars that were supposed to be there—Subaru was falling alone. He had been abandoned by the star with his own name, about to be swallowed into the monster's belly; to blink out and disappear. Such despair—

—Suddenly, a surge of white light appears.

Subaru: "…"

A surge of white light rushes forward and blows away the face of the earthworm that had opened its large mouth. Literally, the impact had pierced the earthworm's face, with its large head being warped in such a fashion that it almost looked like it had been turned into Amezaiku. And then, in a split-second, it blows up. Chunks of dirty flesh and blood spray out of the earthworm's head as it flies off.

The head that should have been swallowing Subaru is gone, and the earthworm's huge body shakes violently. However, before its body toppled over, Subaru's own body crashed off the top of the headless worm.

With a heavy shaking movement, it had felt like as if he had fell onto a hamburger patty just before it was going to be cooked. Its gaping wound, its internal organs, and its flesh and blood were the things that had cushioned Subaru's body. He had been given his life in exchange for the discomfort stuck in his hair. He coughs and splutters violently, he realizes that inside his mouth there is some foul liquid within it which is making him want to vomit. Meanwhile, the earthworm's remains were slowly starting to topple over—wait, no!

One after the other, the light flashes across his field of view, end every time it does, the earthworm's remains are shot through. Its shot through, burst open, segments of it are sliced off, bits of it fly about: "the earthworm is cut into ribbons. It was only by coincidence that none of these flashes of light hit Subaru, which you could say was a stroke of luck in such a bad situation. However, eventually—

Subaru: "—Ah"

Subaru notices that its body which had been shook by these impacts had now been strewn across the sand. Subaru was now lying with his back on the sand, his whole body stretched out.

Subaru: "…"

Up above him, he sees the same starless sky just like when he had been flung up by the earthworm. By some twist of fate, even now that he had managed to cling onto his life, the sky hadn't changed, "Subaru" had still been abandoned.

Being amazed, being wanted, being abandoned, being hated, being befriended, being kept away. Does he want to live? Does he want to die? Does he want to be here or not?

Subaru: "What should I do…! If you know, tell me…!"

There is no one around. Covering his face, he shouts this out at the empty sky. He received no reply. Who was it that Subaru wanted to hear the answers from the most? It was probably—

Subaru: "…Answer me, Natsuki Subaru."

Saying this in a miserable voice, Subaru sighs and turns his body to the side. There had been no particular reason why he had happened to turn his body.

—But that tiny movement had barely saved Subaru's life from the white light which had grazed his ear and struck the ground next to him.

DZZZZZZ"

Something had grazed past his right ear with tremendous force. He clasps his hand to the ear which was throbbing in pain, and rolls to the side. As the blood was dripping out from his ear, he saw what had caused the pain.

A long, narrow, glowing object, reminiscent of a stinger, was stuck in the ground.

Subaru: "What is…"

This.

As soon as he had reached out to touch it, the white stinger had turned into dust. And, right after that, Subaru’s field of view shook.

Subaru: “…”

It shook greatly—from top to bottom. Whether it was because of an earthworm wriggling, or whether it was because the last stinger had stabbed into it, the ground underneath Subaru’s buttocks was collapsing. He was sinking down along with the surrounding earth.

Subaru: “UAAAAAAAAAaaaaa!!”

His fingers slip through the sand as he falls, trying to find anything to hold onto. Rather like an insect falling into an anthill, Subaru’s body sinks to the bottom of the sandy floor, unable to do anything about it.

His arms and legs are buried. He cannot move them. Turning his head up, he desperately gasps for air. His whole body was being swallowed by the sand, he frantically tries to fight against the premonition that he was about to be buried alive.

Subaru: “Someone, someone, help me…”

He couldn’t say what he wanted to say next. Subaru’s entire body was being swallowed by the sand, sinking, sinking.

And the stars do not even take one single notice at the miserable, struggling “Subaru”

Chapter 41:
The Scent of Peace

1

—His consciousness returns, the first thing he feels is a difficulty in his breathing.

Subaru: "*Cough, cough, hack*"

Feeling something unpleasant collected in his mouth, he coughs violently—spitting out sand and forcing open his heavy eyelids. He had lost consciousness.

He feels sand trapped within his eyelashes. While fighting against that, Subaru wonders what had happened and tries to recall what had occurred to him just before.

If he remembers correctly, there had been a terrible confusion, and after that he had attempted to leave the tower. There was no doubt that he had managed to leave the tower without being disturbed by anyone, but—

Subaru: "The earthworm… the white flash of… light…"

Recalling the terrifying incident that had happened just after that, and recalling how the impacts had continued to rain down—one after the other—Subaru seemed quite suspicious at whether he was actually alive. Had it only been down to luck that he had survived all of these abnormal events that he had been dragged into? However, even if he were to die, it was doubtful that he'd truly remain dead. Though that was how the current Natsuki Subaru was, an unwanted foreign being.

Subaru: "After the stingers, I fell right into the termite nest…"

He remembers that the ground beneath him had collapsed and he, along with the earthworm's gigantic carcass, had been swallowed by the Earth. He had managed to stretch out his head to secure some oxygen, however even his head had been swallowed up by the sand, and he had faded out of consciousness. It seemed as if he should have died of suffocation, but that hadn't been the case.

Subaru: "This place… is this underground area beneath the desert?"

Looking around, he couldn't find a source of light in this room; the darkness was so thick that he could barely see anything nearby. Opening his heavy eyelids, he takes the palm of his hand out of the sand and pushes it forwards in front of him. Only barely can he see that it's there. The world around him was too vague to let him see the existence of this life line.

—It really seems as if he just barely remains in the world of the living.

Subaru: "…This ain't appealing, damn idiot."

Thinking that much, Subaru tries to slowly move his arms and legs in an attempt to release his body, which was trapped in the sand, from the heavy pressure around him. The feeling that he couldn't breathe was due to the bed of sand that had swallowed him from his waist down. He was quite lucky that his upper body hadn't been buried. You could say that this process of extraction could be likened to trying to raise up a flag on a sand dune without causing the flag to fall over. Subaru carefully extracted himself out from the sand, moving it away, making sure not to make any poor movements to avoid burying himself in the sand again.

Subaru: "…"

After barely escaping from the sand, he felt a great sense of fatigue overpower him. It was likely because his body temperature had been sapped by the cold sand along with the continuous pressure it had exerted on him. The fact that he couldn't grasp how long he had been out cold was horrible.

Subaru: "Guess I was lucky that when I was out cold another earthworm didn't come and munch on me…"

Whilst speaking, Subaru becomes aware that his throat is parched, and he moves his hand to his waist. When he had escaped from the tower, he had fastened some leather pouches containing enough water to cross the desert there. But, his fingers which had been trying to grab that water closed around thin air. Despite fumbling around several times for them, he couldn't find the leather pouches.

Subaru: "I should have expected this, considering I was buried from my waist down…"

It seemed like the water pouches had come off when he had been swallowed by the sand. As well as that, it looked like the bags filled with his emergency rations had also come away. Although it indicated he was in a fatal situation, he remained calm at heart. Already, his heart had been paralyzed by this cruel situation; it was perhaps becoming absurd to react every single time like this.

Subaru: "At least, it's gotta be nearby… eh?"

Getting on his knees, he fumbles around the bank of the sand mound that he had just gotten out of. It is quite a large amount of sand. He didn't expect to find it, but as if it was just mere consolation, he feels something soft exactly where his body had slipped out of. Confirming it with his fingers, he was surprised to find that it was the leather pouch that he had been looking for. But,

Subaru: "It's empty, so why am I even surprised by this again…?"

Feeling the pouch with his hands and gauging its weight, he realizes the contents are empty. Just in case, he places the opening of the leather pouch to his lips, but only a few drops trickle onto the tip of his tongue. Even if it was just a little bit of water, now every drop of it was precious. He was thirsty for more. Subaru places the leather pouch to his waist and decides that he will feel around his surroundings again.

Subaru: "………..?"

If he had found his drinking pouch, there could also be a chance that he'd find his food. But such an expectation had been betrayed, just like when he had found his water.

—His food had fallen out and was now scattered all around the mound of sand he had been buried in, almost as if it had messily eaten it up.

Subaru: "…"

Due to it being dark, he can't see around the sand-bed properly. However, he can recognize that the food that he had brought now lies scattered around it. The crumbling pieces left on top of his palm have not maintained their original shape—if he were to speak truthfully, he recognizes that the food is now inedible and leaves it scattered there.

Gulping, Subaru's throat ached in thirst. Subaru's food was scattered around his surroundings. This fact clawed at Subaru's mind, as if it was scratching him with nails, as he desperately tried to remain calm. Subaru starts to sweat profusely, wasting precious water, as fear fills his hearts as he thinks of being preyed on by earthworms.

Originally, this huge earthworm had crawled out of here, so to speak this was the monster's habitat. The earthworm who must have been the chief among them had died; but it would be no surprise to him if there were other monsters inhabiting this passageway which it had cohabited with.

Subaru: "I need to leave this place…"

As soon as possible.

However, he knows that he can't see his surroundings well. He starts to crawl using his hands and knees, relying on feeling his way using the ground beneath him, nevermind even the walls. He could merely flee crawling on his hands and knees, making sure to check for ground, walls, a path, his own being.

Subaru: "Ow, it hurts… shit, ouchhhh…"

His right ear had been grazed by the white stinger, the fingernails on his right hand were still halfway through regenerating, and the organs in his body were still aching him. While suffering from all this pain, Subaru was crawling out, trying to escape this place. Even if beforehand he didn't know exactly what the heck he was running away from, now, he must do anything to get away from this strange being.

Anyway, in order to get away from this unfamiliar being which inspired such fear in him now, he had no choice but to continue his escape.

2

Subaru: "…"

Smelling something, Subaru moves his hands and feet forward towards it, as if he was being guided by it. The smell gradually became stronger, eventually becoming strong enough to be regarded as a reliable sense. It guides Subaru deeper within.

—It had been a little over an hour since Subaru had begun to crawl out of this place.

Whilst escaping, Subaru had accidentally slid down the sand-bed quite a few times and had also been obstructed by walls in his way on this trackless path. Sometimes, sand had rained down from above which had caused him to react by rolling over in fright.

Whilst doing that, Subaru realizes that he's within a cave underneath the desert. Although it hadn't really been any great salvation that he had noticed this, it did bode an omen to its real meaning.

—A strange, yet alluring scent suddenly drifted into his nostrils.

By no means could he call such a strange thing sweet-smelling.

In a typical situation, smells are generally considered to be of lower priority and have less value when trying to figure out a situation. However, considering that his sight was sealed by darkness, and he couldn't tell what was happening in the world around him, this sudden stench felt extremely fresh to him.

Therefore, Subaru started to crawl using the wall to feel his way towards the source of the scent, it looked just like when a young child first starts to learn how to walk using walls. Sniffing with his nose, he looked exactly like a dog who was following a trail towards the depths of the cave—No, to the depths, or maybe the entrance of the cave, he cannot be sure where this scent is leading him to.

Subaru: "*Pant* *Pant* Pant*…"

Without even noticing, Subaru had stuck his tongue out and had started to pant heavily, exactly like a dog would.

He had heard that dogs would stick their tongues out and pant in an attempt to cool their body down, but Subaru didn't really equate this comparison to his current gesture. The reason why Subaru had lolled his tongue out, imitating something that a dog would do, was because he wanted to increase the amount of knowledge he could obtain from his surroundings by sensing the flow of the air on his tongue.

Subaru: "…"

In just a few hours Subaru had applied the methods that creatures use to move about in the dark. Naturally, his half-baked attempt was completely different to how it occurs in reality. The darkness was unchanging and didn't provide Subaru with any hints of what was around him. In this lonely area, all he can hear is his own breathing and the faint scratching noises of himself paddling across the sand—But, this felt comfortable to Subaru now.

—It was terrifying, it was horrible, but one way or another he must manage it.

It was the first time he had naturally embraced this natural human feeling. Right now, Subaru loved this silence and this darkness and this "Lonely" space where no one was around.

Right here, no one would hurt him. Right here, all he needed to do was keep floundering around to try and escape. Right here, even if he needn't think about anything, there were things to do.

A feeling of complacency, similar to the feeling you would get if you let a muddy river sweep you along, embraces Subaru's heart.

If he could just melt away into it, that'd be no problem, wouldn't it.

—In this manner, he had submerged himself in thought about it whilst escaping from his fatigue and habit.

Subaru: "Damn it, what is this…"

Subaru had steadily crawled through the dark cave. On his way, he had come across a fork in the road with a path going left and the other one right. He anxiously deliberated on which path to choose, in the end he decided on the right path. From then on, there was a long, long journey whereby he followed the scent. Would there be a place where he could find relief at the end? Would he reach somewhere which had light? Even though such a prospect was not necessarily true, Subaru pushed forward without any concern for this. However—

Subaru: "There's a dead-end right here…"

The path that he had followed had steadily narrowed. After going up a slope, Subaru had found a narrow path awaiting him which could only be traversed by literally crawling; at the end of it was a wall of sand—ultimately, it was also where the source of the scent ended.

Subaru: "Why did I even come all the way here… No, wait a sec."

Angry at the blockage in his path, Subaru had been about to strike the wall of sand, but caught himself. He racked his brains at the current contradiction in front of him, having followed the scent all the way here.

Subaru had unmistakably arrived here by following the scent which was lingering in the air. The scent had been wafted in by a draft and had certainly arrived all the way to Subaru who had been quite far below. In other words, if the drafts had flowed from here, it meant that this wall of sand could not be a dead end. The draft had surely flowed into the cave from the outside.

Subaru: “If that’s so…!”

Frantically palming his surroundings, Subaru shuffles back a bit. He fumbles around the dead-end path for anything. He hadn’t missed anything on the left, right, front or bottom. Then, where had he not looked?

—He had been abandoned by the stars, had he been afraid to look up?

Subaru: “—There it is.”

After more than an hour of backtracking, his hand that had been touching the ceiling brushes against the air and Subaru’s eyes sparkled. Standing up, he puts his arms up, and even when he puts his shoulders up they don’t hit the ceiling. There is a hole. The hole is more than twice as large as Subaru’s waist, and his body would fit through it easily. In other words, if he were to push up using his back and legs, he should be able to climb out.

Subaru: “…”

A gentle breeze was flowing into the hole. Until now, Subaru had clung on only to the target that he had been pursuing: “that is, the scent. It was flowing in from the wind above to the underground area below that he was in. There was no choice now but to climb up as Subaru had sniffed to make sure of it.

Subaru: “Ghh… Nhhh.. Fffff.”

Placing his body by the hole, he pushes his back against the wall. Of course, because the wall was made up of sand, if he makes even a slight mistake in the angle in which he applies his body weight, he risks the wall collapsing and his plan failing. Being careful not to do just that, he places his feet against the wall too. Subaru thrusts his feet and buttocks up, and slowly starts to climb out of the hole.

Subaru: “…”

Fortunately for him, the wall has some grooves embedded within it in some places, which to an extent help Subaru support himself as he makes his solitary climb. Perhaps, if you happened to be a person possessing superhuman physical ability, you could simply put your feet on one of the grooves and get out of the hole just by jumping.

Subaru: “*Puff*”

But, Subaru does not possess such physical abilities, thus he has no choice but to continue steadily climbing up. Still, it seemed like his body had been trained in the time which was unknown to him and was suited to withstand activities like this. He gradually adapts to his body having a new engine, just like as if he was getting used to driving a new car. He had gotten the hang of it by the time he had managed to pull half of himself out of the hole, and had established that he was a pretty good climber.

However, before being able to show the full extent of his strength—

Subaru: “—I’m out.”

He doesn’t know roughly how many meters he had climbed up the wall, but if he were to take a look, he had climbed up to such a height that if he were to fall down he would die from the resulting fall. Finally, Subaru had succeeded in climbing up the wall.

Subaru: “…”

He didn’t feel any great emotion about it as he thought he would have. That wasn’t down to him thinking anything tedious like “When you go and do it, this is how it is.”

“Climbing all the way up the wall was a piece of cake when faced with this”, that’s all he thought.

Pulling himself out of the hole, treading onto the fresh sand, Subaru stands up. And, taken aback, he mutters a brief word about the majestic structure that was standing in front of him.

Subaru: “—A door.”

—Right there in front of him, there was only a strange door standing there without relying on anything else for support.

3

—Subaru was at loss at what to do about the door that was standing right in front of him.

Subaru: “I can see it.”

It seemed that the hole Subaru had gone through did not lead towards the surface. He was most likely still inside the cave—if there were different tiers to the cave, then the place he had probably dropped down to was B2F, and now he was at B1F. Rather than it being a large-scale area, the room was hidden by the means of something that you could call a stopgap. The room had nothing that resembled walls or floors, it only had a single door which was standing there stock still.

Could there be anyone at all who could fathom what this meant…?

Subaru: “—Other than me, that is.”

Whilst looking at the door, Subaru announces this with extreme arrogance. Placing his hand on his chest, and widening his eyes, he was clearly aware of what the door he had suddenly encountered was—it was his door.

He had a strange confidence about it. He was confident that this door was his own.

The draft that had flowed to the underground area he had been in, the scent that had been carried in by the breeze, he had followed it all the way here. Everything was bringing Natsuki Subaru to this place.

And now, the door that stood in front of his eyes was glowing. Even in the darkness it was asserting its presence; it was longing for the moment when Natsuki Subaru’s hand would open it.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru walks up to the door with a spring in his step, as if he was about to go and caress something beloved, like a sweetheart. It looked like a set of wooden double-doors that were about twice as high as Subaru. Straining his eyes, he can see that at the center of the double-doors there was a doorknob that allowed it to be opened. He can also see a strange pattern in that particular area.

—He can see seven jewels there.

Subaru: "—Wha."

Whilst looking at the jewels, Subaru touched the door. And just as he did, the jewels on the door started to shine—four of them.

Four of the seven jewels were shining brightly, welcoming Natsuki Subaru's visit—

—The door's master did not admit the visit of those who didn't possess the keys.

4

…

—In the wink of an eye, after he blinked, Subaru did not know where he was.

Subaru: "Wha."

Breathing a sigh like as if he was stunned, Subaru looks down at his hands. He can see. Of course. There was light here, there was color. He can see where he is standing. He is standing on a stone floor—there's stone, on the floor.

Subaru: "—Tch"

Subaru's body stiffens as he looks around his surroundings in confusion. In his surroundings, there are reddish-brown walls, walls, walls—they were the walls of the circular tower. The huge door behind him leads to the outside. He was inside the tower—he was on the fifth floor of the Pleiades watchtower.

He had come back to the very place that he had tried to leave with determination.

Subaru: “There’s…”

…no way. He can’t continue. His words never come out. It must have happened just after he had blinked. In a split second, Subaru had ended up standing stock still in this place. He cannot break out of his shock, he feels dizzy and his feet start to wobble. He was barefoot, his shoes had come off. Subaru grinded his teeth together.

It isn’t the case that he is completely stunned by this place. He could run away right now—No.

Subaru: “Why should I run away?”

Subaru looked up above him with extreme fury, murky feelings were boiling up inside him. A burning hate like molten magma was zealously whirling inside Subaru without him even being aware of it.

His time alone had ended, the peaceful darkness had ended, clinging to that scent had ended—His hatred was one without rhyme or reason, towards the fact that everything he’d had there, had been wrenched away from him.

Subaru: “…”

Why does Subaru have to run away? Someone plans to kill him and had once, no twice taken his life. Why would he want to be in place, where they shamelessly masquerade as good people, hiding that fact under a guise of tranquility.

—There are only suspects inside this tower.

Does he want the culprit to be inside? Did he escape because he couldn’t do it? He had been an idiot, he had been an idiot, he had been an idiot; he didn’t know anything.

—If whichever one of the suspects was the right one, then he could just crush them all until he found the right one.

Subaru: “…”

Luckily, all of those bastards were careless around Subaru. He would find out whether it was only the culprit that would show caution around Subaru—though, the culprit has no way of knowing that he is suspected by Subaru. That is the advantage Subaru has here, having once died.

Once he had realized that he had died, he knew that someone was trying to kill him. The only thing he has to do is kill them before they commit that act of murder again.

Subaru: “Hah—”

A wicked smile appears on his face, and Subaru covers his mouth with his hand, stifling his laughter. The idea for his gratification had just suddenly leapt out from inside his head. Subaru had received a blessing from the heavens to pick up and rescue himself.

Subaru: “…”

Then he needed some sort of weapon to set things straight swiftly.

Subaru rushes down the spiral staircase—he was going down towards the sixth floor below him.

The sixth floor was fuzzy in his memory, but he recalls that it is the lowermost floor of this tower. When Subaru and the others—No, when the original “Natsuki Subaru” and the others had come to the tower, they had borrowed on the strength of lizards to cross the desert, using things that looked rather like horse-drawn carriages. Of course, if there are such things lying about, they may come in useful for an “emergency.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru, had arrived at the lowermost floor and found the carriage he was looking for, however his feet had stopped there. The reason that he had reacted like that was because just beside the carriage—collapsed there was a huge lizard, already dead.

Its head was missing. Its body from the neck down was lying on the floor. Had the blow that had decapitated it been that powerful? The head that had been blown off was nowhere to be seen nearby. Instead, blood had flowed out of its huge body, staining the ground below. He found that a considerable amount of time had passed since this tragedy had occurred, since the blood had dried already.

Subaru: "—the stingers."

What Subaru had thought about in this moment was that it looked a lot like how the mysterious white stingers had blown up the head of the earthworm which had battled against him immediately after he had left the tower. This impression was consistent with the remains of the lizard that had collapsed here. Then that attack was from someone inside the tower—it was highly likely that it was one of the suspect's attacks. Thus, the lizards themselves had been treated just like cattle, in their pitiful lack of burial too—

Subaru: "—Does this mean they are not trying to hide their true colors anymore?"

It seemed like his opponent had been quick tempered, and rather than giving Subaru a chance to escape, they had instead delivered a decisive blow. Whilst trembling at this fact, Subaru went inside an intact carriage—it showed signs that it had been used as a place to sleep. Tearing through the inside, Subaru finds a big knife inside one of the baggage.

Dare he say it had some purpose; was it something similar to a survival knife? Rather than it being an all-out weapon, the large knife was probably good for cutting through obstacles—but, in this situation, it would still be a splendid weapon that would fulfil Subaru's aims.

Subaru: "I don't know who the enemy is, but…"

—He will show them.

With his body burning with dark feelings, Natsuki Subaru heads upstairs, knife in hand. A twisted smile curves across his cheeks, boosted by his hatred. If he wants to be saved, if he wants to escape, he must believe that anything he murders is justified; with that, he will go forward.

—Below his smiling cheeks, he doesn't notice the tears of fear that are streaming down his face.

Chapter 42:
The Tower of the Dead

1

Natsuki Subaru slowly continued up the stairway, stepping firmly as he continued up. With madness filling his eyes, fury raging in his chest, and a knife in one hand, he continued to walk up.

Subaru: “Kill, kill, kill, I’ll kill you. Definitely gonna kill you…”

That whisper, rather like a rasp, were the words of an endless curse. If power dwelled in the might of words, then the sheer amount of curses Subaru was spewing out would indeed bolster his deed.

“Kill”, each time he said it aloud, he felt as if the power lodged in his knife increased.

Subaru: “Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill…”

While muttering this, his sight would occasionally blur over.

Maybe it was a combination of his exhaustion from spending hours crawling around the area beneath the desert, and his fears. For a moment, Subaru’s head felt strangely heavy, making him shake his head a few times.

Now was not the time to collapse in a place like this, after all the place he was in was an environment full of people who were a danger to him. It was the sort of environment where he couldn’t tell between friend or foe. It was already an enemy’s den.

In order to protect himself, Subaru had to kill them. Otherwise, they would come to kill him.

Subaru: “Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill…”

He didn’t want to kill them… he had to kill.

If the langage de l’âme here took the condition of using words correctly, then it was likely that the word “Kill” coming from Subaru’s mouth was not quite right.

If it truly reflected his feelings at heart, then the right word he should be using here wasn’t “Kill”.

—Rather, “I don’t want to die” would be more correct.

That’s why he’d made up his mind that the first thing he would do was kill anyone who appeared before him.

Natsuki Subaru reached the 4th floor of the tower.

And there he laid his eyes on that.

Subaru: “Hha”

He let out a short gasp.

His knife fell on the hard floor with a shrill clatter. his body was trembling. His fingers were stiff as rocks, unmoving. Subaru shrunk back, able only to shake his head slowly.

The smell of blood brimmed in the air, and the traces of a terrible fight that chilled even him.

The stone walls and floor were broken and smashed up; and standing there in the area that housed the lingering remains of such destruction was Subaru.

He looked at that, frozen in place.

—Shaula, her head crushed, was sprawled down on the floor, with her body a complete sight for sore eyes.

2

Shaula’s corpse was in such a terrible state that it made him want to cover his eyes.

Her long brown hair which had been tied up was now was sprawled untidily across the floor. Her limbs were flumped about to her side energylessly, and what's more, one of her arms had been sliced off at her elbows, the other at her wrist, with the severed parts nowhere in sight.

Her lustrous pale skin bore countless wounds, and a large amount of blood had been splattered nearby. The trail of blood continued further back down the aisleway and ended where she'd met her end, proving that the battle had been long fought and changed places many times.

Most likely it had been the wound to her head that had settled the fight and killed her—Wound was too light of a word to use; that which had laid waste to her life was a lethal hole.

Maybe it could be said that someone had swung down a great hammer on her head.

He couldn't think of any other barbaric way that her head would have been smashed in, scattered about, throwing its insides just about everywhere around. A tremendously huge blow from something had smashed up her head.

Shaula's head had been smashed apart and completely destroyed. Though it had only been for a short while, he remembered how she'd unhesitatingly gotten closer to him and turned her genuine open smile at him…

Subaru: "… Bh"

Subaru sunk to his knees where he was, as he gazed at her remains aghast, in shock, in disbelief. The urge to vomit was unbearable, unable to stop himself, Subaru puked up the contents of his stomach. The contents of his stomach which had turned to gloop, mixed in with his gastric juices, splurged out of his body with an acrid smell to them. They even got onto Shaula's remains further humiliating her in after-death after having died in such a gruesome manner.

Subaru: "Uu! Ghhh, Ghuuuu, blergh..."

Despite that, Subaru, while hunched over, continued to vomit, having no composure in himself to pay attention to how he was desecrating the dead.

He could do nothing more than let his throat open as wide as it could and spew out the burning sensation that pervaded him as he felt the pain of his stomach tightening and the unceasing feeling of wanting to vomit.

Finally, when he finished puking his guts out, Subaru threw himself down to the floor. He lay spread-eagled, staring up at the ceiling with his hands over his face.

It was the first time he'd seen someone's death.

"…"

It was the first time Subaru had ever come face to face with a person's corpse.

For most people, the first time they'd encounter someone's death would be when an elderly relative would pass away. However, Subaru had never been to a funeral before, as his grandparents on both his mother's and father's side were still in good health.

He'd never come across anyone's death in any other case either.

So, seeing someone else's death like this for the first time was a real shock for Subaru. Even more so when the manner of her death had been so gruesome.

There are people who can have their lives taken away from them as cruelly as this as well, he thought.

Subaru: "Me too, huh"

Subaru muttered this to himself, and lifted his body up. He wiped away the vomit that was caked around his mouth with his sleeve and shook his head as his ears were ringing hard; then, using the wall to steady himself, he slowly stood up.

Subaru had been pushed in the back, knocking him far down the stairs.

His corpse too must have turned into a lump of grizzled meat, one which surely no one could bear to take a second look at. He himself had been unable to see his own corpse, and for that, he was slightly relieved.

There'd probably be no way he'd keep his sanity were he to see his own death with his own eyes, or the like.

The mere realization of the fact that he had died was enough to shock him to the point where it felt like his heart was about to burst apart and shatter into tiny pieces.

Subaru: "Any…ways…"

Cutting his train of thought short, Subaru gained belief from the fact that she was dead, all the while trying his utmost to keep Shaula's remains, who was strewn near him, out of his sight.

The fact was, there was still some terrible strife lurking within the tower. And at the same time, he understood all too well that this strife wasn't aimed only at him, but also at some of the other members inside of the tower.

"…"

He felt sorry for the deceased Shaula, but he could also say this bode good news for him.

Now that he didn't know who'd been the one that had killed him, Subaru wouldn't be able to rest until he struck out all the suspects inside the tower. But, with her dying, that allowed him to strike off one of the names from his seven suspects.

Yet at the same time, the one who'd killed him was hostile with someone other than himself—Or at least, he could be sure that they were a dangerous individual who was trying to kill everyone in the tower.

In other words, there was a chance that someone other than him would kill the murderer who'd killed him.

Then all he ought to do is kill everyone who was left; then he'd be able to acquire some peace of mind.

If he were to kill the culprit who was trying to kill him, along with the potential candidates who might try and kill him, then, with only Subaru left behind in the tower, he should be able to indulge himself in some peace and respite.

Subaru: “In that sense… The ones in the way are Ram and Echidna, huh. It’d be easier if that damn Julius was dead too…”

With Meili and Beatrice being children, it would be pretty easy to off them, so he didn’t need to think too hard about them.

Emilia and, although she was dead, Shaula as well, should have been easy to catch off guard and kill in the sense that they never had their guards up around him.

However, Ram, who was always contrarian around him, and Echidna with how shrewd she was smelled like more trouble. Even if he did catch them off guard and killed them, those two would be the hardest to aim at: “that was the impression he got.

It was tough to say about Julius, but in his case, he was worth his utmost vigilance considering he was the only other man. As cheesy as it was, it was indeed a problem that he carried a sword at his waist.

However on the flip side, there was also a chance that he’d be cornered down were he to take his sword. Subaru did Kendo, so it could perhaps be said that he’d have an advantage assured were he to snatch it away.

Also…

Subaru: “Above there… that fucking bastard.”

Subaru shook his head straight away having thought about eliminating that red haired man who was sitting on the upper floor of the tower under the guise of being an examiner.

It would be impossible to eliminate him. That thing was an untouchable superhuman being who lived outside of all reason.

By Natsuki Subaru's common sense, it would be definitely impossible to beat him.

There were people here too that just couldn't be killed.

The only saving grace was that it was hard to think that he'd be the being who'd pushed Subaru off. If it was him, he wouldn't have tried to kill him in such a dull manner; that was the kind of pessimistic faith he had.

"…"

Subaru picked up his fallen knife, stepped over Shaula's remains and turned towards the back.

For a moment, Subaru was at loss at whether to investigate her body for any clues, but he doubted that he would find anything that would be useful hidden inside her clothing as she was very scantily dressed. At the same time, his conscience was screaming at him on the matter of further disgracing the dead.

She was dead. The dead were no longer his enemies. She just had no luck. —That's all there was to it.

Subaru didn't even bother doing anything as admirable as clasping his hands together in prayer for her.

He left her behind there, and slowly walked further into the tower, masking his footsteps as he made his way deeper into the Fourth Floor, following the trail of destruction.

The tower had fallen into a deep silence, to point which not one sound could be heard; he however found that stillness rather noisy.

A high-pitched ringing noise was tormenting his mind, and he felt as if he could hear the sound of his blood flowing through his body. But, strangely enough, his heartbeat was steady, as if his initial agitation had been a lie.

Whilst going up the 4th floor, the dark hatred that had boiled inside him still lay stuck to his chest like dirt that wouldn't come off.

Even now, for the sake of his own survival, his willingness to murder everyone was unshaken.

He'd stab, gouge and take the life of the first person he would lay his eyes on. He was prepared to do that. Yet…

…Just after he turned around the corner, he found Echidna's corpse with a diagonal slash across it; now he had no idea just how useful his resolve was going to be in this hellscape.

3

Echidna's body bore a wound from her right shoulder to her left side, as if she'd been cut down in one stroke with some sort of large blade.

"…"

And as he came to that conclusion, the first thing that popped into his mind was the sword Julius carried.

It was a cheap-looking, likely mass-produced sword, but certainly it ought to be plenty to have slashed through the body of a woman as delicate as Echidna. The question remained, he had no idea what reason Julius would have to kill Echidna.

When he had been introduced to them, Subaru had heard that Echidna and Julius had a relationship quite like one of a master and a dedicated servant. He'd heard there were some complicated circumstances involved, but in any case, they should have been quite close.

Of course, if Julius was some sort of psycho killer who wanted everyone in the tower dead, then perhaps those circumstances meant nothing at all.

Subaru: "Ua… ah… hgh."

Using the wall to steady himself, Subaru once again succumbed to his stomach's complaints before then lifting his head up.

The condition of her corpse was somewhat in a better state than

Shaula's. Even so, it was a sight that required nerve to witness without looking away; yet the way she'd died gave off a completely different impression to Shaula's.

While it had seemed that after Shaula's death her corpse had been abandoned, Echidna's body left him with a sense that respect had been carried out towards the deceased.

Putting it bluntly, there was a white cloth that had been placed over her and her eyelids had been closed as well.

"…"

Considering the differences between the ways they'd been killed, there was a big discrepancy in the way the deceased had been treated afterwards.

Even just thinking which one of these was more normal in this situation made him feel like he was going to be driven crazy.

Subaru: "Echidna's gone too…"

Subaru's breath quivered, his voice went hoarse, and he couldn't stop his arms and legs from shaking; in that state, he made just a mental note of the facts in front of him and plunged deeper into the tower in search of survivors to kill.

Though perhaps even the reason whether it was the living or the dead he searched for, or for what sake he searched for, had already become nebulous for him; yet, he walked on.

—Further inside the corridor, Subaru found Ram, her body having been blown away from behind.

Her body was in a wretched state, with a gaping hole between the 'neath of her chest and her lower back. Her wound looked rather similar to that which had killed the Desert-Earthworm.

She'd probably ran down the corridor and been struck in the back as she'd tried to make her way elsewhere. He could sense a hate-tinged curse coming from her dead face, with her lips which were bitten, leaving behind regret.

Subaru vomited again.

In the hall where they'd explained the morning's situation to him and eaten breakfast lay the dead bodies of Meili and Julius.

The state in which Julius had perished was one of the most striking ones yet. Traces of blows and cuts inflicted by incredible sharpness were plastered around his entire body. His left arm had been blown off at the elbow, and his wound had been crudely wrapped up and treated using a piece of a cloak. He couldn't find a direct cause to his death. From the wounds across his body, he'd probably died of blood loss.

And had the reason he'd fought so desperately until that been for the sake of the little girl who'd collapsed behind him?

Subaru vomited yet again.

Meili, who had been slumped against the wall, with her hands around her belly, was the only one who had died with a peaceful expression frozen on her face.

On her abdomen which was covered by her small palms was indeed a gash that was wet with bright red blood. Her cause of death was also probably due to blood loss. She'd been wounded, and subsequently lost her life whilst awaiting for salvation in this place.

And yet, the seemingly peaceful look that had adorned her face in death caused him to refuse to understand even a single bit.

Once again, Subaru vomited.

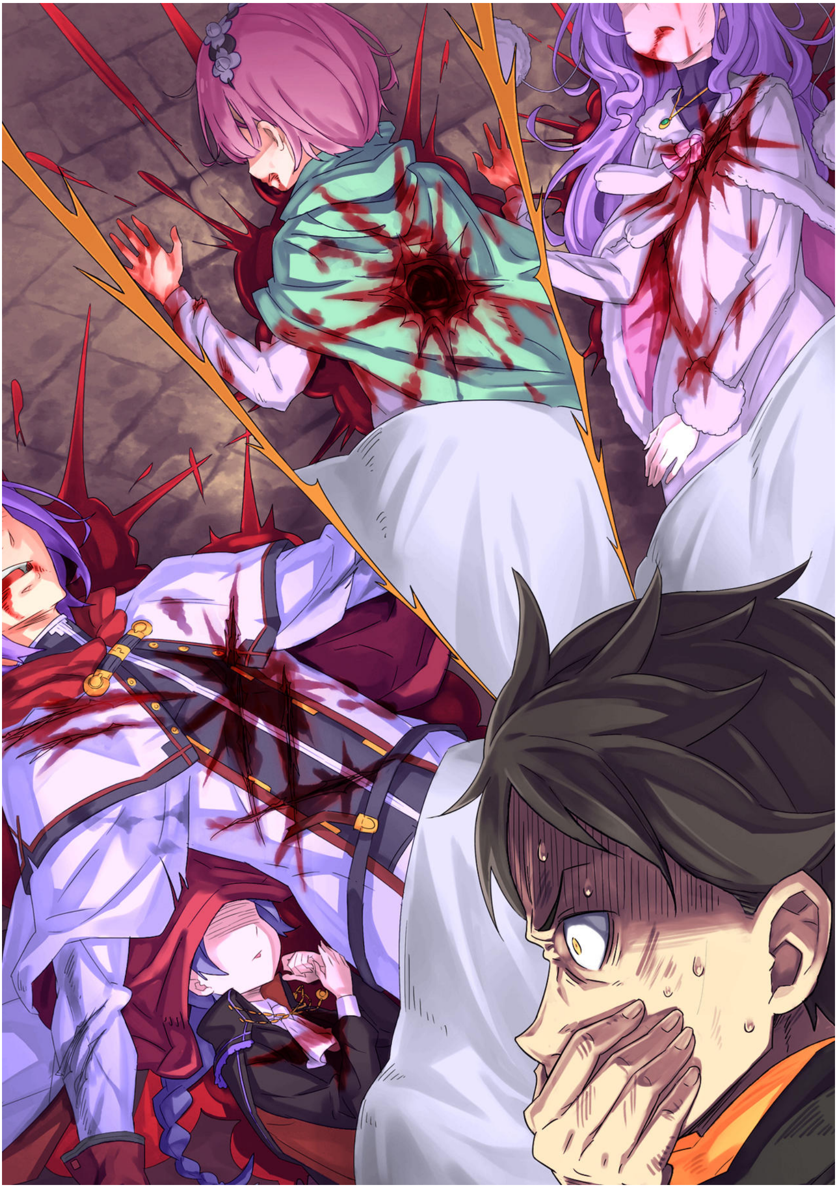

"…"

A corpse, another corpse, another corpse, another corpse, and yet another corpse.

There were corpses around. Only corpses. Only corpses lying around.

He couldn't fathom what was going on.

The truth behind what was going on was unclear.

Ideally speaking, everyone other than Subaru dropping dead should have been the conditions that allowed him some repose. However, he couldn't fathom why everyone was dead when he hadn't even been around.

Poor Shaula with her head crushed and her whole body sliced up.

Echidna who'd been sliced from shoulder to side, had fallen due to a terrible blow.

Ram, whose body had been blown off from the back, died leaving behind her regret and curses.

Julius, who'd been left with scars all over his body of the fierce battle that had unfurled, and had eventually lost his life.

Meili, who'd just lost blood from her stomach wound, yielded peacefully to her slow death.

What must have happened for this to occur?

Would he even be able to accept this situation if someone was behind it?

Subaru: "Emilia, and Beatrice…"

He'd found five dead bodies, yet there were two suspects he hadn't found. Had one of them, or both, conspired to make this happen?

Those two, who'd worried about Subaru when he'd woken up with no memories, at the very beginning; had they concealed killing intent and madness behind their demeanor and thus carried out these acts of murder?

He had found five dead bodies, white sheets covering four of them, with the exception of Shaula.

All of their bodies, bar Shaula's, had been carefully lain to rest on the floor, and they'd even closed their eyes. Respect towards the dead had been shown there; only Shaula's body didn't have that.

In the first place, when the hell could this massacre have taken place?

Subaru: "The blood…"

Had dried up, he thought.

Barely keeping his footing, Subaru looked around for Emilia and Beatrice's presences, which he'd yet not found in the tower, with each of the circumstances of the dead bodies popping up in his mind as he contemplated.

The choking stench of their blood along with the states each of their corpses had been in came back to him vividly.

It pierced through to the depths of his mind, causing his stomach to heave in pain; however, he was running out of stuff to hurl up. He was so parched that he couldn't muster any spit to spit out the dregs of vomit inside his mouth and nary even a bead of cold sweat appeared.

Subaru's body was completely parched—dry, just like their blood.

There'd been a ton of it, despite blood being harder to dry than water.

It would take blood several, or even dozens of hours to dry, so he could consider that such an amount had passed already since the tragedy broke out. He himself had no idea how much time he'd spent wandering around beneath the desert, but enough time should have passed for that, or well, he wasn't extremely sure.

Confusion and chaos.

The shackles of his marred awareness screamed at him to do something about this out of control situation.

He needed to earn his repose, he needed to find it; for that, he needed to reduce the number of suspects.

From the remaining two, if any of those criminals who'd brought this situation about were to die, he would be freed.

"…"

…He entered the Green Room. The black lizard caught eye of Subaru and gave out a cry.

It was the first time since he had came back to this tower that he had found a living creature.

Subaru: "Huh. What's with this lizard"

Seeing that the lizard had survived, Subaru let out a parched smile.

He'd hoped that if he was going to meet someone, that it would be a corpse were possible; however, what damned use was it that the survivor he'd met here after all this was the lizard.

He gave a click of his tongue and turned around so to leave the room. He didn't have anything to do in rooms where only lizards remained. However…

Subaru: "Quit following me!"

"…"

The black lizard, having shrunk down its massive body, had tried to follow in Subaru's wake when he'd left the room.

It was surprisingly large when it stood up, as big as a horse. It plodded along, moving its sharp, clawed feet, following in Subaru's wake. Unable to bear the tension, Subaru waved his arms and threatening it with spittle flying from his mouth.

Subaru: “It’s not like I’ve got the time to play with you right now! I need to kill all the damn survivors in this tower! If you get in my way…”

Whilst gripping the large knife in his hand, Subaru stared straight at the lizard. The sharp-featured lizard looked at it in his hand, but quickly turned its gaze back towards him.

Subaru: “Hh…”

Subaru’s voice shook at the way they were ignoring his knife and instead were staring at him.

It’s as if they were undaunted by Subaru’s murderous hostilities. And that roused the animosity that had been uncomfortably smoldering inside his chest…

Subaru: “Don’t you fucking screw about with me!!”

Subaru swung his knife up and plunged it into the lizard as he cried out.

The tip of the knife plunged into its jet black scales. Though at first, the knife encountered a bit of resistance, he was able to easily push through it, thrusting it deep into the lizard’s body.

The lizard stood there, unmoving, with the knife stuck through the left side of its body. The blade dug into its flesh all the way to its hilt, with fresh blooding spilling out from its clearly serious wound.

Subaru: “How about…”

Subaru tried to continue by saying “this”, however he involuntarily let out a thin, ragged sigh.

For the first time, he had taken the action to try kill a living being. And although he felt excited by that fact, and the fact that his heart beating wildly had caused that, there’d been a different reason behind why he hadn’t been able to finish what he wanted to say.

"…"

Subaru: "Ah… uh…"

Even though the lizard had been stabbed by his knife, it remained unmoving, merely staring at Subaru.

It hadn't reacted at all at having been stabbed deeply by his blade. Neither in pain, nor surprise. Merely the lizard's sharp eyes stared at Natsuki Subaru's handiwork.

Those lizard eyes, which he couldn't read the emotions therein, were blaming Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "Shit… Shitshitshitshitshit! Whatthehellwhatthehellwhatthehell!"

Scratching his head, Subaru couldn't stand it any longer and lost his shit.

Whilst shouting, Subaru took a step back, forgetting even to retrieve his knife that he'd stuck in the lizard.

—No, he didn't have the courage to touch that knife. The lizard's eyes were terrifying.

Subaru: "You, those guys except you… and those corpses! As well as those guys still living! Those guys who I don't even know if they are alive or dead! What on earth are you all cooking up, what are you trying to do?!"

Despite knowing his words were pointless, Subaru still blurted them out to the lizard standing in front of him.

As he'd wandered throughout the tower, as he'd wandered through the pitch-black darkness of the underground, as he'd anguished at the fact that he'd been thrown into this world where he couldn't make heads or tails out of it, his gloomy emotions had built up.

Subaru: "I'm gonna kill every single one of these guys who tries to kill me! I'm gonna deny every single one who tries to depend on me! Don't get me wrong! Don't push your luck! It ain't a damn joke… acting like you’re so close to me as you please!”

“…”

Subaru: “As if I give a damn about any of you! As if I give a damn about what every single one of you are thinking! Every one of you is pushing their own damned agenda on me…! If you all have your hands full with your own selves! Then I’ve got my own hands full with myself as well!”

Shouting and screaming, Subaru began to shed tears without him even realizing, falling down to his knees on the spot.

In front of him, the lizard wordlessly looked at him as his body shook and let out of ragged gasps. Subaru had crouched down and pressed his head to the floor, unable to see them.

Subaru: “Like just leave me alone… Leave me be by myself…”

Subaru’s choked sobs vacantly echoed through the silent corridor.

How long had he spent like this? Several seconds? Dozens of seconds? Several minutes? He couldn’t find it in himself to move. But it was with his face pressed to the floor that he suddenly noticed—faint, really faint tremors, drawing near to him through the floor.

Subaru: “Ah.”

Lizard: “—ﾐ) ﾐ)”

Subaru lifted his face a moment later, seeing the lizard’s gaping maw in front of him. Lined with sharped fangs, her maw inched closer towards him. He looked at her, as if it wasn’t him in this situation, wondering whether they were going to chew his head up…

Subaru: “Huh…?”

The lizard picked up Subaru by his left shoulder using her mouth, and without wasting a moment, started to run. His body had been forcibly pulled up from the ground and lifted up. The lizard’s sharp fangs had bitten into his shoulder, causing a shriek of pain to escape his mouth.

Subaru: “Gh-, hyaaaaaah!”

They were going to kill him. He was probably going to be killed. Those were its intentions.

However, now that it had practically sunk its fangs into his shoulder, the fear he had towards the pain it brought was readily painted over by a feeling of cheap resignation. He was going to have his shoulder eaten, then his body, chewed up like that, and left to die.

To die being eaten by a living creature was one of the worst deaths Subaru could possibly imagine.

It was just after Subaru’s body began to tremble in fear at that presentiment, that…

“…”

The hallway that Subaru had just been in was blown away from beneath by an astonishing amount of black haze.

He hears a heavy impact which causes dust and debris to scatter around, the fog was overrunning the hallway, engulfing the ceiling, the walls, the floor… reaching out towards Subaru and Patrasche as if hunting for prey.

Made up of black shadows, it even looked like it had arms.

Subaru: “Shadowy Arms…”

In his mind, he briefly recalled the shape of the woman who had tormented him by the stairs. A woman who was drenched in shadows, her face was hidden by a black veil, had thoroughly played with his heart, engraving fear in him. The shadows that had been engulfing the room were akin to the ones that the woman wore.

It was laying waste to the tower’s passageway as it pleases—chasing after the fleeing lizard and Subaru.

Subaru: “You…!”

The lizard didn’t answer, but with Subaru held in its mouth, it ran through the passageway at full gallop.

Subaru, who was looking in the opposite direction to where they were headed, could not see where they were desperately trying to flee to. Instead, he could only look straight at the menace of the looming shadow, making the blood inside his body freeze.

So it was either be devoured by that shadow, or meet a fate that would be more terrible than death.

Intuitively making his mind up, Subaru pushed himself further into the fangs of the lizard which were digging into his shoulder. His throat quivered in pain, but if he were to be shaken off, he’d be done for.

At this point, his hatred for the lizard, was no more than a pointless obsession.

Lizard: “—))”

They heard the sound of the passageway exploding as the shadow blocked their way.

Taking a snap decision a split second later, the lizard turned back down the aisle, diving into a side-corridor just before they could be swallowed up by the shadow. They galloped at full-speed, trying to shake off the shadow that was surging towards them with the force of a muddy stream.

However, as they kept running away from the shadow, the area that appeared in front of them was…

Subaru:… tch! The spiral staircase…!”

The huge spiral staircase which connected the fourth and fifth floors of the tower. Subaru was lost for words as they emerged there, in that area.

Naturally, he could see the fifth floor far off down below from the height they were at—He did feel some of the fear of witnessing the scene where he'd fallen to his death before, but not only that.

Right below him, the staircase was being engulfed by the shadows of black, and was beginning to sink down. Meaning that the lower half of the tower was in the process of being enveloped by these colossal amounts of shadows, sinking it.

Subaru: "There's no escaping down there… But there's no escaping behind us as well…"

The bottom of the tower was already under the shadow's control. The dark, muddy stream was looming towards them from the insides of the passageway that they'd fled from.

They were absolutely, completely cornered. All that was left, was the absurd choice of whether he'd be devoured by the shadows, or killed in some other manner.

Subaru: "…"

For a second, the idea of suicide flitted across his mind.

Wouldn't it be much better to chose how he died, rather than be swallowed by those shadows. Perhaps for him, there was still possibilities remaining even if he were to die.

Subaru: "Ah, -urgh"

As soon as he thought about taking his own life, Subaru's body started to tremble.

What if by some chance, choosing to kill himself would it end it here? What would he do then? He did sort of believe now that he was redoing things, but did he really have a guarantee that this would keep holding true?

Or, how could he say that this wasn't a precognitive dream just like he'd thought at first. All the way up to the last time, he'd had some painful precognitive dreams. So, if this was his last one, then things would end for him here.

Why did he even have to die in the first place? He hadn't done anything wrong. Why was he paying with his life here? Why he?

Subaru: “NO… I DON'T WANT TO DIE!”

Subaru yelled that out without any shame. There was no one in the tower who could hear him. Only the dead and the missing were here.

So, the only one who heard him was this jet-black lizard, who wasn't a human being.

Lizard: “—ッ ッ!”

Whilst holding Subaru by its fangs, the lizard gave a choked, almighty roar.

Immediately, the lizard broke into a fierce sprint and leapt towards the void of the spiral staircase, so to give the muddy stream of tendrils looming behind them the slip.

“…”

Naturally, no matter how much momentum the leap carried, they would eventually lose it, with gravity catching them into a free-fall, to be swallowed by the shadows below. However, the lizard had come up with an ingenious idea to overcome this desperate situation.

“…”

The lizard dug two of its pointed feet into the tower wall. Of course, even if they were clinging to the wall, sooner or later they would fall… That is, if the wall was vertical.

The lizard ran frantically across the wall, letting out a roar.

The colossal tower was starting to tilt due to the shadows engulfing it from its base. The lizard scaled its way across the wall, which was lurching to its side, practically perpendicular.

Subaru: “N…No way…”

What was going on? Everything was swaying, Subaru could not make sense of what the complete picture here was. However, it was clear that this black lizard was spending its remaining strength trying to survive. He could clearly tell that they were giving it their all for that.

Subaru: “You…”

Suddenly, the dark stream of tendrils completely enveloped the place where the lizard had just been. It searched for signs of its prey that it had failed to swallow, and realized that they were running up the wall. It rushed towards them.

The lizard dodged aside a split second later, barely managing to avoid its attack. A violent shockwave and a fierce howling wind accompanied the attack, leaving behind a large hole in the side of the tower.

“…”

Without hesitating, the lizard slipped into the hole that had opened up in the wall.

Subaru was violently jolted left and right, losing his sense of balance, no longer able to perceive the world properly. Though, even among all this, he knew that the lizard’s drastic maneuvers were to make sure that Subaru wasn’t hit by any of the shadow’s attacks. He also knew that they weren’t showing any consideration to the fact that their own body was being whittled away by the shadow.

They came out of the large hole. A sandy breeze immediately greeted him after, with darkness filling his field of view. He could feel the outside air against him. Had they have jumped out of the tower? Once again, the lizard ran up the tilting tower wall, frantically, frantically trying to escape from the shadow…

Subaru: “… Uwa?!”

The lizard’s thin neck was stooped over, and the next moment, a strong breeze buffeted them.

The lizard let go of Subaru, pulling its fangs out of his shoulders. Subaru's eyes flashed in pain as he felt the sensation of the fangs being removed from his flesh. However, he ignored his pain, as well as the strong wind which was blowing against him. His body had been struck by something hard.

After being bumped around, tumbled about and thrown down, letting out a winded breath, Subaru opened his eyes.

He caught a glimpse of the night sky flickering in front of him.

Subaru: "Ah, Eh…?"

Subaru lifted himself up from the floor in a panic, the view he was seeing was far beyond what his imagination could comprehend.

He looked around at his surroundings. He was in an area that was made from the same stuff as the tower. Despite that, he was definitely outside. —He could see that this space was attached to the outer wall of the tower, resembling something like a balcony.

They had gone through the hole, rushed up the wall, and thrown him here.

Subaru: "The lizard…!"

Shuddering, Subaru rushed over to where he'd tumbled down and looked beneath him. There, he witnessed the last moments of the lizard, who'd thrown him here.

…The falling lizard was swallowed up by the black shadows, which were even darker than its scales, and vanished from sight.

He had stabbed them with his knife due to his crazed anger, yet they'd not even cared about their pain and fear. They had brought Subaru up to this balcony, only to then be swallowed by the shadow.

Swallowed by those shadows, where a fate worse than death awaited.

Subaru: "What, what the hell"

What the hell. What the hell. What the hell.

Subaru had no idea what was going on anymore.

Subaru: "…"

He watched the bottom of the tower gradually get engulfed by the shadows, up on the balcony. Suddenly, a white bird perched itself at the edge of the balcony beside him.

The white bird looked at Subaru with unfeeling eyes—At the presence of the large bird, Subaru gasped out a "ha".

The suspects who had died, the suspects who were nowhere to be seen, the lizard that had helped him at the cost of their life, and now, a white bird had suddenly appeared in this place—Little by little, the tower was being swallowed by the shadow, disappearing in front of his eyes.

"…"

Feeling that the end was approaching, Subaru sat down in exhaustion.

He now understood that the lizard had been ever so desperately trying to save him. Even so, their expectations had been in vain… They'd just bought him a little more time before death dawned on him.

"…"

Still slumped down, Subaru suddenly lifted his head up. There was someone behind him. It wasn't the bird, or the lizard, or the shadow.

The sign of someone living was standing there.

Subaru: "…The hell are you?"

Subaru asked this in a very faint tone of voice, having nary even the strength to look back behind.

The one who stood behind him laughed in response. Then, in a voice he'd never heard before,

?: "… next, try guessing, hero."

For a second, Subaru heard a whooshing noise. Then his field of vision jumped up, and started to spin rapidly in front of him.

His body felt awfully light. He was soaring up into the sky like a bird. And then he realized what had happened.

The someone from behind had decapitated him.

4

Emilia: "… Subaru! Hey, Subaru, are you okay?"

The connection between his head, that should have been lopped off, and the change in his consciousnesses happened in an instant.

Subaru woke up on a soft ivy bed. He was greeted by the chiming voice of a silver bell, along with its owner, having not found her, no matter how hard he'd searched.

Subaru: "Emi… lia…"

Emilia: "Oh, Subaru, thank goodness. You woke up. I was reaaally worried about you."

Subaru opened his eyes slightly. In front of him, there was Emilia, a relieved expression resting on her face. She had her hand to her chest seeing Subaru wake up, with a smile grooved in her lips.

"…"

He looked at Emilia, her beautiful, slender neck was frightfully dazzling.

Feeling rather parched, Subaru wordlessly stretched out his hands over, around Emilia's slender neck. It easily fit between Subaru's hands.

Emilia: “Subaru, what’s the matter?”

Emilia was staring blankly, her eyes widened in surprise, with her neck having been grabbed by Subaru.

She was surprised by Subaru’s reaction, but she didn’t make any movements to try and get him off her. If he’d felt like it, he could have definitely ended up breaking her neck with ease, were he to just put some muscle into it.

Even though her life was held within Subaru’s grasp, Emilia’s reaction was awfully slow, moreover-

Beatrice: “Emilia, apparently it seems that Subaru is still half-asleep, I suppose. He’s acting all easy regardless of worrying us, in fact.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru let go of Emilia’s neck immediately as a voice called out to him from right beside him.

He glanced over, his eyes meeting Beatrice’s as she folded her short arms together by his bedside, her nostrils flaring in absolute shock. Emilia gave her a strained smile, and said, “Yeah,”

Emilia: “Though, it’s better for you to be half-asleep than it being anything else more serious. When I found you collapsed on the ground, Beatrice was nearly in tears.”

Beatrice: “You didn’t have to go and say that, I suppose!”

Beatrice’s face grew red, angered by Emilia’s unmalicious comment.

The two of them locked in that exchange had absolutely no idea what kind of urge had caught hold of Subaru just a moment ago. Before that, they’d shown no recognition of the situation being dangerous.

This was also evident in their attitude towards Subaru—

Subaru: “…Meaning that I’m…”

Immediately after Subaru, after “Natsuki Subaru” had lost his memories—That’s to say, as soon as Natsuki Subaru had realized that he’d been summoned to another world, he’d came back to this very place.

And, at the same time…

???: “—ッ“

Subaru: “…! It’s you…”

Subaru hastily turned around at the sound of her whinny and breath, her figure coming into view.

Sitting docilely in one corner of the Green Room, was a large black creature—The lizard, who’d done so much for him as he’d been on the verge of being swallowed by the shadow was sitting there, cool as you like.

Beatrice: “…I’m a little unsatisfied, in fact. Finding you should have been mine and Emilia’s exploit, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Hehe, no need to sulk about it. It’s great, isn’t it? Subaru and Patrasche get on reaaaally well.”

Behind him, Subaru could hear Beatrice and Emilia talking to one another.

Subaru did not care to join in; he was too busy tightly embracing the large body of the lizard in front of him, immensely thankful that they were here.

He was eternally grateful that back then they’d been the only one who had not tried to hurt Subaru.

Chapter 43:
The Tower of the Living

1

—Think.

Think, think, think, think, think, think, he must think.

Subaru: "…"

Natsuki Subaru kept thinking as he wrapped his arms around her whole body, which was lined by hard, rough scales. The things that had happened in his own body, the ridiculous events inside the tower, the people who were attempting to kill him, the people who were attempting to kill ones other than himself, distinguishing between friends and foe, and—.

Beatrice: "Subaru, is that enough, in fact? Have you calmed down, I suppose?"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru turned his head slowly towards the voice he had heard from behind him, which had interrupted his thoughts. Beatrice, the one who had called out to him, was sitting upon the ivy bed. The girl, who seemed to be making a pouty face was dangling her feet. Her hand was connected with Emilia's who sat beside her. She was glaring at Subaru. —Seeing that look, Subaru's face stiffened a little.

Emilia: "Heeey, Beatrice. Don't speak like that. I guess Subaru felt surprised when he woke up. I think it's inevitable that he'd go hug Patrasche."

However, Emilia smiled as she denied Subaru's misguided thoughts. Hearing her point this out, Beatrice proceeded to suddenly turn away from Subaru and Emilia.

Beatrice: "It doesn't mean I am angry, in fact. It's not just to do with your sudden awakening, I suppose. Betty and Emilia were also worried for Subaru; the Earth Dragon isn't the only one that worries about you, in fact."

Emilia: "Hehe, yeah, I was really worried about you."

Stroking Beatrice's head with her still facing away from them, Emilia looked at Subaru and raised her eyebrows. Subaru held his breath as he looked into Emilia's amethyst eyes. His chest gave a sharp pang to the deep, deep affection in her look. —And at the same time, a strange sense of irritation grew in him.

He was reminded. They were hoping in "Natsuki Subaru", the one that was here. He would feel uneasy were he not able to shoulder that burden. But, However…,

Subaru: "—Errr, I am sorry to worry you all. I'm sorry, I heavily apologize. It is not like me to hug a girl that is half-asleep and this even, is a thing to hide my embarrassment."

Relaxing his stiffened face, Subaru replied, whilst easing his face into a smile. To that answer, Beatrice and Emilia exchanged looks, and,

Emilia: "But… Patrasche is a girl as well you know?"

Subaru: "Eeeh?! Hey, wait, Patrasche is quite the special entry, or rather, the sort of target which we are bonded by different sorts of bonds, or rather, the top seed in an unconditional second round entry."

Beatrice: "Hmph, that is unpardonable, I suppose. I don't get why you're only giving special treatment to that earth dragon. I would like an explanation, I suppose."

Subaru: "Hey, don't try to stand in the same ring as her! That Earth Dragon…"

Subaru returned his answer whilst looking carefully at Beatrice and Emilia's reaction, as Beatrice's face was growing ever more in displeasure. Receiving his answer, it seemed that the two of them did not feel like anything was out of place. Feeling relieved about that, Subaru turned his head to look towards the lizard—No, to Patrasche, who he had been stroking.

Subaru: “Truly, only you are special, Patrasche.”

Patrasche: “…”

The black ground dragon closed its eyes, while letting out a small neigh, as Subaru placed his forehead against her head.

2

Emilia: “So, Subaru, are you really feeling okay?”

Subaru: “Ah, yes, yes, I am okay, I am okay, no problemo at all. I’m sorry for worrying you all. I think perhaps the exhaustion got to me, and as things are rather the case with that, I must have accidentally fallen asleep.”

Emilia: “Yeah… but you’ll tell us if you are tired, right? Because, you can take it easy.”

Emilia brought this reminder to Subaru who had answered in tune whilst rotating his arms. Subaru answered back to those words with a lackadaisical “OKAY, Captain!” whilst immersing himself in full thought.

Subaru led Beatrice and Emilia now, and kept walking through the fourth floor of the tower. They were going to the fourth floor hall, their purpose was to dine—In brief, the three of them were walking with their bodies not holding any urgent issues.

This time Subaru was determined to take a different approach from last time. That is… he would not confide to Emilia and the others about his amnesia.

“…”

In other words, the situation would require Subaru to act as if he were impersonating another. Wetting his parched lips with his tongue as his strain exacerbated, Subaru had kept observing how things were around Emilia and the others.

Subaru had still not figured out what kind of character the “Natsuki Subaru” for the others was. It should be impossible to do something like tracing a stranger in such circumstances, but by all rights it should be a different story to “Impersonate Himself” in conditions that would otherwise not be established.

No matter where he went, “Natsuki Subaru” is simply just Natsuki Subaru.

Even if he had spent a year in this parallel world, Subaru knew that the fundamentals of human nature would remain unchanged in himself. Then, if he just paid heed to the relationship afterwards, then he should be able to trace the same sort of character to a good enough extent. And then, whilst tracing “Natsuki Subaru”, he would see what would happen now.

What happened in this tower? Who would kill him? And who was killed by who.

For now, Subaru would verify the likelihood of the trigger that drove him to his own “death” by hiding his amnesia. In other words, would his opponent kill him because of his amnesia, or did it have nothing to do with that? Be that as it may, in all honesty, he didn’t have much expectations. Subaru’s lost memories—it’s hard to imagine the situation with our without some troubles cropping up. However, of course there are exceptions.

Subaru: “The case in which the criminal would be a guy who would be troubled if my memories were to come back.”

Subaru remembered seeing it in a movie before. Eyewitnesses who had witnessed the murder scene lost their memory due to some sort of shock. The criminal who could observe the scene would be in trouble if their memories were to return. That’s why in the movie the criminal tried to kill the witnesses as well. It can definitely be thought that a similar situation was occurring to Subaru currently. Foremost, the circumstances in which Subaru had lost his memories were unclear—

Subaru: “Emilia, did you find me collapsed in the third floor the library?”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right. You were on the floor of the library… Beatrice and I carried you to the Green Room in a great hurry.”

Beatrice: “Well, since it was Emilia that carried you, Betty was just there to help out behind her, in fact.”

Subaru gazed at Emilia’s slender arms as he received Beatrice’s supplementary explanation, laced with a sigh. If he were to settle down and think properly about it, it was a mystery to Subaru how these two people had carried him all the way back from the library to the Green Room. Beatrice didn’t give a single fragment of indication that she was suited to do any heavy lifting, and from what he had been told at face value, he was also wondering how this Emilia that believed in a fake had carried Subaru so easily.

Emilia: “What’s wrong?”

Subaru: “Eerrrr, nothing. Well, in any case, you were a great help. I’ve said it many times, but sorry to have troubled you.”

Emilia: “Not sorry, A thank you would be nicer.”

Bowing his head in apology, Emilia placed her palm on Subaru’s forehead as he tried to lower it. Subaru’s eyes widened at the touch of Emilia’s smooth fingers, hastily muttering out an: “I guess you’re right”.

As Subaru had thought so far, the feeling of distance between him and Emilia was a little too strong; therefore, he did not hesitate and let her touch him. Come to think of it, when Subaru had woken up, he had also placed his hands around her neck. Nevertheless, she was looking at Subaru with a peaceful expression.

Subaru: “No matter what kind of livelihood, I will always feel a great sense of distance with this girl…”

Or perhaps, Emilia, contrary to her awfully well-prepared appearance, was just all too used to strangeness? Surely, she is gentle to everyone as well, and probably she didn’t feel any barriers between anyone as a result of brought up and loved.

She was likely a girl who had been sheltered as a child, unaffected by any significant hardship—with this impression, Subaru was satisfied with this sense of distance.

If someone isn't burdened with even one regret, then they can believe in only the virtue of others, and keep your eyes all the time prim and beautiful. —Or… was even that all just an act?

"…"

Whilst looking at Emilia and Beatrice side by side, Subaru was deeply immersed within his thoughts. Simply, when he deconstructed it down to the bare-bones, when it came to Subaru's last moments and tragedy in the tower within the last loop, the suspects most worth keeping an eye on were Emilia and Beatrice.

Subaru had seen the corpses of Shaula, Echidna, Ram, Julius and Meili. He had been saved by Patrasche and brought out of the lurching tower; however he had had his head lopped off by someone standing behind him, and lost his life. —He had yet to see Beatrice or Emilia die.

Of course, even if the two of them had conspired together, then he didn't know if the possibility of the killing of the five people still remained. Subaru's diagnosis was that it was difficult. But, if for argument's sake, another person existed—if the number had increased to three, then the story probably changed.

???: "Next. Try and guess, hero."

Subaru had no memory of the unknown voice which had spoken those words at the end. In the midst of the chaos, in the midst of the swirl of confusion, in the midst of despairing of wanting the end to come already, he had heard this voice. That, a third person cooperating with Emilia and Beatrice—could that be the identity of an unseen third person that carried Subaru from the library to the Green Room? That's why these two were spouting out such codswallop—

Emilia: "Uh, Subaru, you are going too far."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Apparently, Subaru had walked past the room whilst he was immersed in his own thoughts. Emilia had stopped in front of the room and had placed her arm on Subaru's shoulder to prevent him from walking too far. In an instant, Subaru felt a peculiarly uncomfortable, and he looked at Emilia's arm which had grabbed his shoulder. And then, he took her hand and shook it.

Beatrice: "Subaru? What on earth are you doing, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Ah, just a little experiment… Emilia, won't you do a contest of strength with me?"

Emilia: "Eeh, but I think we'd better have it stop from being dangerous…"

There had been no sense of resistance when he had shook her hand itself, and Emilia had shown a sense of denial to the contest of strength. Seeing this behavior, Subaru became more convinced and strongly said: "I ask this of you." If Emilia's arm indeed did not have the strength to carry Subaru, then his deduction from before would give him a fairly strong guarantee. So now, Emilia should not think that she is suspected. He would need to make best use of this advantage, a chance like this only existed right now.

Subaru: "I ask this of you, because it's of utmost necessity."

Emilia: "… Since Subaru sounds quite serious, it must be quite the important thing, right?"

Receiving Subaru's supplication, the worried Emilia pursed her lips, and gave a nod with a determined look. Seeing that, Subaru clenched his fist with all his heart, saying: "Ready". If after, he proved her weakness, then Subaru's deduction would progress far further.

Beatrice: "Well, do something different like an arm-pull match instead so that it doesn't become dangerous, in fact. is that okay, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Ah, that's OK!"

Emilia: "Okay, got it!"

In accordance to Beatrice's instructions, Subaru and Emilia shook hands, and made some space between them. They took each other's right arm, and then the two of them stared into each other's eyes.

And then—

Beatrice: "Ready, go, in fact!"

On Beatrice's signal, Subaru pulled Emilia's arm with all his might.

Subaru : "Ooooooh!!"

His grip strength could crush apples, his grip strength could keep swinging a Kendo sword even with no target, his grip strength could keep on doing push-ups. The strength of a man against that of a woman's—he poured all of this into this battle.

—Yet, Emilia's arm did not move an inch.

3

Subaru's deduction in which he doubted Beatrice and Emilia was set back to square one.

However, Subaru had only confirmed that Emilia and the others had carried him without the help of a third party. It didn't mean that the suspicions of the two girls had been cleared away. Subaru had still yet to have seen the two girls' corpses. The tower's mass killings—that situation's criminal being different was something that was still not decided.

Subaru: "After all, is it purely the guy who came out in the end the one who is the criminal?"

They had certainly killed Subaru. But was that guy a criminal insofar to have carried out everyone's mass-murders by those hands? As well as the shadows which had engulfed the tower? All the ones killed were each killed in different ways. What becomes of that explanation. The ways they had died in was easy to understand merely from glimpsing. Echidna had suffered damage from a single stroke from something sharp. Julius had had several wounds piled up on him. And hadn't Meili died from blood-loss?

There was no doubt that everyone had died in different manners, fighting someone. That should be it, but.

???: “So what the hell was that prank about?”

A voice called out as if amazed to Subaru who was deep in thought. That voice was Ram’s, who was finishing preparing breakfast. As she set up the table with water and preserved food, she demanded an explanation on the contest of strength with Emilia—Subaru’s experiment which he had carried out.

The contest of strength which had been for determining proof of Subaru’s deduction had its curtain closed by the shape of his defeat to Emilia. It was Ram joining up with them in front of the hall which had given an impetus for its end. When she saw Subaru’s struggles, red in face, she had put an end to things with a curt: “Are you stupid?”

Emilia: “I was asked by Subaru, I don’t quite understand why but I am sure it had some reaaaallly important meaning to it. Isn’t that right, Subaru?”

Ram: “Is that so? The reason given to Ram, all I could see was wanting to hold Emilia-sama’s hand.”

Subaru: “You’re overthinking it! If you want, next time do you want to do a contest of strength with me?!”

Ram: “Disgusting”

Subaru: “Why?!”

Ram spoke her awfully cruel impression of him to Emilia who had tried to stick up for him. If he tried to dispel it, in an instant his position would get considerably worse. An undoubtedly vicious cycle.

Ram: “Hah!”

Giving a scornful laugh, Ram diverted her attention back to setting the table. Seeing her retreating figure, Subaru was secretly relieved that it seemed as if his current behavior was did not give off anything that would feel out of place. It seemed as if he hadn't yet taken an attitude which separated him from the "Natsuki Subaru" known by the girls. This made him feel relieved, and also amazed. Doing this, he mustn't tip his awareness towards a different bearing, not even by a little—

Subaru: "Urp-!"

In an instant Subaru bore the vomiting sensation that suddenly welled up in him. Subaru put his hand to his mouth. Its cause was Ram who was diligently working with her back turned towards them. —The girl's retreating figure caused him to keep blinking with the manner of death scorching his eyelids.

Ram had received a blow from behind, in which part of her stomach had been blown apart, killing her. The shadow of her death were coated with regret and anger, distorting and cursing her pitiful facial expression. A lamentation was etched into her soul which would attempt to tear any who witnessed it from limb to limb. The owner of that corpse moved right before his eyes, and certainly was alive.

In all honesty, from the moment he first came across her at the hall, he had been desperate to accept a contradiction between reality and that uncomfortable feeling. He felt more or less relieved that he could use the lapse of dizziness he had experienced as an excuse thanks to his exertions in the contest of strength with Emilia just before.

But, he had overlooked Ram's facial expression.

"…"

Grinding his teeth together, Subaru directs his awareness into getting back strong self-control. From then on, all of the people related to the tower one by one filed into the hall. He mustn't overlook each of their expressions. —Because that in itself would be the key to breaking the situation.

???: "Wooooah, what a nice smeeell~! A meal fit for a king in this refreshing morning! IIIII sure know I'mm living for this~!"

The first one of them showed up in the hall whilst saying out this stuff noisily. A beautiful woman whose long black braided hair was swinging about, who was unabashedly exposing most of her huge breasts—Shaula showed up in the hall still with her head definitely attacked to her body.

She was looking at the meal which had been prepared by Ram, but, then she noticed Subaru within the room, and she spoke:

Shaula: “Master! Good morning! Did you sleep well yesterday~?”

All of a sudden, her facial expression lit up, and she rushed over towards where he was with the vigor of say, a puppy. And then, grabbing Subaru’s arm, she tightly embraced his chest.

Subaru: “Uh…”

Shaula: “By the way, IIII slept incredibly well! After such a long time, I had dreams and such from the former days~. Meeee and Master, and mother, and then and then.”

Subaru: “Aah, I getcha… wait. I will give a good listen to the story about your dream sometime… But, did you happen to see me this morning?”

Shaula: “Eeeeh, again with the awfully weightless questions? How typical of Master!”

Disentangling himself somehow from her arms which had embraced him, Subaru inquired this as he escaped from Shaula. In response to that, Shaula gave a cheerful laugh.

Shaula: “Honestly, what Master sees is no big deal! Just like the olden days, to me you’re always the sexiest guy! It’s a marriage proposal awaited for 400 years!”

Subaru: “Talk about patience. …Generally speaking for that joke it’d be good if it is nothing.”

Shaula: “—? Is that so? If so, I dooon’t mind as well~”

Without a desired response, Subaru withdrew his doubts regarding

Shaula whilst sensing some relief mingled with some traces of discouragement. And, as he did, the next suspect, Meili showed up in the room.

Meili: "*Yaawn*… Good morning. I'm feeling sleepy this morning to~o"

The girl who came through the entrance gave a sweet yawn, covering her mouth with her hand. Even so, she had taken great care to upkeep her personal appearance, and he certainly admired the little girl's sense of beauty. Greatly different to Subaru who was just content in ruffling his hair up, and washing his face. In any case—

Subaru: "Good morning, Meili! You overslept this morning, huh?"

Meili: "When slowing down and thinking about it, I feel like I have no reason to get up at the same time as Onee-san and the others. This tower doesn't really have anything to do with me."

Beatrice: "A girl whose proposing such ill-natured things, in fact. In general, unless Betty and the others complete the trials so to leave the tower, then you can't leave this tower either, I suppose."

Meili: "Well, that is true… but…"

Having a bone to pick with her yawning excuses, Meili pursed her lips at Beatrice's opinion. As she said that, she shifted her attention to Shaula and Subaru who were near the wall. She gave a wave, accompanied by a smile. Seeing that, Subaru raised his eyebrow, and then he returned the wave.

Subaru: "Am I overthinking it as usual in having doubting even as far as a dead child…?"

Shaula: "Master, when troubled, you return back to the basis. Staring with from how you jab."

Subaru: "…What is that teaching?"

Shaula: "It's Master's teachings."

Subaru: “It’s no wonder I thought it was useless.”

Listening to this monologue, Subaru dodged Shaula’s frivolities as he shuddered in his heart. In any case, he couldn’t get a response he desired even from Meili. Then, the only things which remained were just two more people who could test to see whether this plan was at all fruitful—

???: “—Good morning.”

With that, the last two people missing entered the room together. Echidna and Julius. Echidna, who was wrapped in a white fox scarf walked into the hall with Julius beside her. They each in turn greet Emilia, Ram and the others, and exchange words of good morning. Meanwhile.

“…”

Julius who had been walking behind Echidna saw Subaru standing near the back of the room, and his face stiffened. He suddenly averted his eyes and drove Subaru out of his awareness.

Subaru: “—You?”

Julius’ reaction was quite close to one Subaru was seeking. And, as no one other person had shown such a reaction, it was very likely that he had no choice but to say that it was him who had displayed the most blunt reaction.

Subaru: “Shaula…, I have a small favor to ask you.”

Subaru faintly muttered this. The remains of hatred as if boiled with the flames of anger that would not extinguish were there.

4

—The breakfast at the hall started and ended with the meeting regarding the explanation that Echidna = Anastasia.

As he made his face into something like as if hearing it for the first time to the surprised reactions of Emilia and the others, Subaru was impressed with the way the world had went ahead like so when he hadn't talked about his amnesia. So far, mistaking what is reality and not had been piling up, and Subaru almost can't comprehend his own special characteristics which make him "Return by Death." However, just the same as time leaps that are often in fiction, the problems which do not involve Subaru will proceed the same as usual. He understood that changes in the affected problems were born.

In other words, up until the last time he had been involved in the core of their discussions due to his "amnesia". The reality in which the individual called Echidna lodging in the body of the young girl called Anastasia had by no means been delved deeply into during their talks.

Even this time around, there would be no such thing like finding the problem's solution or something that would reveal new facts. The changes are considered to occur only in Subaru's actions. If he wanted to dramatically advance the situation, Subaru would need to proactively do stuff.

Therefore—

Subaru: "—Julius, I'd like to have a couple of words with you"

Breakfast ended, and as they all tried to file out of the hall, Subaru called out to Julius so that he'd stop. Julius stopped in his tracks at that call, turning his head to look at Subaru. Subaru craned his neck up to look at him when they were facing each other, as Julius was quite tall. However, if he were to lose to that intimidating presence, Subaru would stick his chest out all the more as he and Julius glared at each other. Perceiving his disposition, Julius spilled a weary sigh from his thin lips, and said,

Julius: "What is it? Shouldn't you rest until noon, as Emilia-sama suggested?"

Julius' words were something he had gotten from Emilia's proposal back at breakfast. Apparently, it seemed that Emilia had been worried about unseen fatigue wearing everyone down, and had taken up the opinion that Subaru had been exhausted and had slept in the library because of it.

In fact, although this wasn't in Subaru's memories, this party had just managed to cross the desert a few days ago. Though Subaru had failed to cross the desert in just a few steps, it would have probably relatively difficult to fulfill that. This too could be said to be a change caused from Subaru's speech. Even trivial words sometimes can derail that day's schedule. He must take care in what he says and does.

With that in his chest, Subaru would confront Julius head-on. And, tucking his chin in response to his words, he said.

Subaru: "I want to talk about last night."

The effect of these words was immediate.

"…"

Receiving Subaru's words, great emotions floated in his yellow eyes. Seeing the immediate effect his response had brought, Subaru deepened his belief in his own deduction.

Subaru: "Come. Let's change location."

Julius: "—All right."

Julius followed along with a look of resignation at Subaru's invitation, which he gave whilst jerking his chin. Just like that, Subaru led Julius and brought him to a suitable place for conversation in a room on the fourth floor. Naturally, it was a secret talk in which others couldn't be allowed to but in.

Subaru: "Well, I wonder where shall I start from…"

Inside this cramped room, Subaru turned his head around, and confronted Julius. There was a slight feeling of tension, but he didn't want to make a mistake such as revealing that. The thought that he should to some extent stand emotionally superior allowed him to show his boldness. On the other hand, the way Julius looked was complex, reading what lay in heart was difficult. But, it seemed to be something that mustn't be a feeling of composure, that had persisted from the place of breakfast before.

Subaru: “First of all, about last night”

To start things off, Subaru abruptly cut to the main point in an introductory manner. Currently, he has the emotional upper hand, but his opponent has an overwhelming advantage with what he knows. In the first place, Subaru didn’t really know all too much about what had transpired the night before. Nevertheless, perhaps last night, Subaru and Julius must have done something in the library. As a result of that “Something”, Subaru thought that perhaps he had lost his memories because of that.

Julius: “About last… night”

Repeating Subaru’s words, Julius closed his eyes, which were bordered by long eyelashes. Subaru consciously kept breathing out deep, long breaths as he stood in front of the handsome man. He mustn’t be overwhelmed. At least, it’s that his feeling was to not lose.

Julius: “When it comes to that talk, we said it was a thing that ended at that place. At least, that’s what I was thinking, but is it different for you?”

Subaru: “—. Aaah, not quite. I mustn’t have grasped it.”

Seeing Julius join in the talk, Subaru replied in turn. Julius’ voice was devoid of any intonation, and so to speak he was careful so that he didn’t reveal more emotions than necessary. Of course, when it came to Subaru receiving that, he chose the option of snapping at it.

Julius: “Grasped it…? I see, well, that sounds just like you. In short, you’re saying you want me to postpone the feelings I hold, and solve the issues of your own self, is that? Isn’t that… a little too selfish?”

Subaru: “That’s a little off, and that’s not what we’re talking about. I’m certainly not happy with it, but are you trying to look happy about it? We’re both walking around with anger in our hearts, and you’re saying I have to look like nothing’s wrong? You think I could do that?”

Julius: "…Well then, exactly what other option is there?"

Julius had been quietly keeping a check on his emotions. But, little by little, emotion started to flow out from his voice. Subaru could feel Julius staring at him, with a furious gaze, Subaru of course was still unaware of the details behind Julius' outburst.

What choice did Subaru want to hear? What kind of choice had Julius taken regarding Subaru with him holding such fury? And when it came to Subaru, how did he let Julius choose that choice.

Julius: "My feelings are as I said last night, and I am not going to keep mentioning it, since I hadn't even noticed you and Anastasia-sama… and your connivery with Echidna."

Subaru: "Me and my connivery with Echidna…?"

An unexpected fact had leapt out, and this time it was Subaru who had been caught unawares. By the information he had at the present, Subaru was supposed to be part of a group with Emilia at the top. Julius and Echidna—in their situation, he had been in a master and servant sort of role with Anastasia who was the original owner of Echidna's body. He also heard that they were in an opposing sort of relationship with the girls, if he looked at the big picture. But, he had said Subaru had been conniving with Echidna.

Julius: "I know you did not have bad intentions doing that. Even if it's Echidna, I can't say it's enough, but we spoke. She can be trusted… No, there is no other way but to trust her."

Subaru: "… "

Julius: "I have nothing except for pursuing that possibility in order to save Anastasia-sama. …Even if we get her back, and even if that lady doesn't remember me."

Julius uttered these words, an awfully lonely tone of voice tinging his expression.

Subaru had heard about his circumstances as well. Just like Ram's sleeping younger sister, and many people from many different towns, Julius too was afflicted by this. He had been told that they had faced an awful experience similar to a curse in which they are forgotten by others. Even if Echidna returned control to the rightful owner of the body, it would be highly unlikely that Anastasia would remember her knight, Julius.

Even so—

Julius: "—I haven't changed what I've set out to do, I don't know what on earth you want to drag out from me, but let me tell you just this beforehand."

Subaru: "What is it?"

Julius: "For goodness sake, please do not make me miserable in front of you again."

As soon as Subaru heard Julius's feeble voice, no words escaped him.

"…"

However, in the back of his chest, there was just a feeling of discomposure. Subaru kept silent. Julius took a look at Subaru, loosening his lips so that he could let out a faint sigh,

Julius: "It seems apparent this will be a barren exchange from here."

Saying that, Julius turned to face away from Subaru and was about to leave the room. Then, just before leaving the room, Julius stopped just once. And whilst still not turning his head, he said:

Julius: "Last night's talk that was said left me quite shocked. —What ought I do, if you were to speak an apology?"

Subaru: "If I were to apologize…?"

Julius: "Back then, I wonder how I would've replied back to you. Though even that is something I don't know anymore."

Julius left the room, leaving behind the echo of self-derision in that mutter. After making sure that he wasn't in sight, Subaru let out a long sigh. He suddenly felt exhausted, as if a great stone had been placed on his back. He was sweating copiously. He felt like he had become a vehemently detestable person.

Shaula: "—Master, was that okay with you?"

Shaula showed up and peered into the room. Subaru let out a "Hah" seeing her quite indifferent manner. And then, placing his hand to his forehead, he nodded his head with a: "It was okay."

Subaru: "In that state he is in, perhaps Julius didn't have anything to do with the library. …But the distrust in myself sure grew still a little bit stronger."

Shaula: "I don't really get it, but was I useful for you Master?"

Subaru: "—. Aah, indeed. Thanks to you, I was able to face Julius, and get some peace of mind."

Shaula: "Hehehehe, That's good~ Then, then, then, Master, Master…"

Shaula was delighted, she was making her body squirm, and her cheeks were blushed in red. She was making her way towards Subaru. And then, she nervously stretched her hands out,

Shaula: "I want a really tight hug as a reward!"

Subaru: "No way!"

Shaula: "Eeeeeeh?! How mean! Master, didn't you say you'd listen to what I'd say if I didn't deviate from the reward level?!"

Subaru: "That wish goes far beyond my pure, and innocent heart…"

Subaru bluntly rejected Shaula's excessive hopes and dreams for close skin-to-skin contact. Nonetheless, it was true that Shaula had been lying in wait, giving him enough composure in his heart to confront Julius.

When he had called out to Julius, Subaru had kept Shaula in wait in the adjoining room as backup. The reason he had chosen her was because between all of the other girls, she seemed to have the best athleticism, as well as that she seemed to listen to favors due to her likeability of Subaru. It was as a result of calculation that she seemed willing to help him without asking too many questions.

Other than that, from amongst the suspects, the girl, whose dead body he had found first, was the least likely to pose a danger from all of them.

In any case—

Subaru: “My thoughts that it was Julius who was the opponent who stole my memories at the library was way off the mark…”

This morning, he had thought it was almost a certainty from his reaction when he’d seen Subaru. But, those line of thinking had been off. Despite what happened at the library, the Julius of some time ago didn’t really touch much on the incident in which his memories of him had gone. Having said that, his emotions were all too natural for an act.

It was quite uncertain what thing of speculation the connivery with Echidna was due to “Natsuki Subaru”. But, at least, it was a good enough reason for Subaru now to harbor distrust to the him of last night. Before his memories had been lost, it seemed like there’d been quite the exchange of tempestuous words between him, Echidna and Julius,

Subaru: “You… what on earth were you doing, and who on earth targeted you, “Natsuki Subaru”…”

Shaula: “Maaaster, how about you jump to my chest? Come hug my busty body, Master.”

Subaru: “That wish is beyond naïve!”

Shaula: “Master is mean~!”

Speaking of things he had no clue about, Subaru also had no clue why Shaula showed him such a strange affection. Why did she dearly love Subaru to this extent? It appeared that Emilia, and everyone else around her, also had no clue why she did. It was said it was something to make convenient use of—But, was it really like that?

His connivery with Echidna, the blurriness of last night's deeds, and in the first place, his relationship with the girls—And now, the being Subaru least knew of as far as he was concerned was "Natsuki Subaru". What kind of speculation did he face against the girls and guys?

—Was "Natsuki Subaru" even truly associated with them?

Subaru: "Crap, my thoughts have come to a dead end… Let's go where Patrasche is for a bit?"

For the time being, he wanted to go to place where could settle down and think. When thinking that, the first thing that came to the current Subaru's mind as his greatest ally, was most certainly that jet-black earth dragon. There was no choice but to put his faith in the one who had staked their life protecting him, regardless of whether he had his memories or not.

Shaula: "Eeeh, that earth dragon~? That earth dragon… isn't really my cup of tea since it keeps glaring at me."

Subaru: "You… insults against Patrasche are unforgivable! Even if this world became a world in which anyone's insults were permissible, I won't forgive any insults at Patrasche."

Shaula: "Master, how whipped does that dragon have you?!"

Shaula raised her voice into something like a shriek, but Subaru took absolutely no notice of it. In any case, it was because he now wanted to be lost in his thoughts in peace, by Patrasche's side. At any rate, their original aim, the tower's capture, would begin straight after lunch. Since he had concealed his amnesia, there would be no way of stopping it.

Subaru: "That's why we're parting here as well. See you in a bit."

Shaula: "Uwaaah, you were colluding even for the reward. But even so, I caaaaan't bear it. I'm a woman for Master's convenience, that's the meaning of my life."

Subaru: “…”

As he tried to leave the room, Shaula spoke this out, and gave him a cold goodbye. Receiving her words, Subaru held his breath. Whilst still keeping his back turned away from her, Subaru hung his head down, and closed his eyes.

Subaru: “Where in Natsuki Subaru is the worth in going that far?”

Shaula: “—Master?”

Subaru: “—hk! Ah, damn it!”

Unable to bear the irritation welling up in him, Subaru roughly scratched his head, and turned around so he was facing Shaula who was inclining her head. And then, walking towards the immobile girl, he stretched out both of his hands and with all of his might, he embraced her slender body.

Shaula: “—hk”

Subaru: “You shouldn’t think of yourself as just a woman for convenience, or things like that. It was my bad.”

Subaru was going to end up becoming the same as “Natsuki Subaru” were he to just make a one-sided use of her. Shaula’s breath hitched and her body stiffened at the Subaru’s comportment who had refused to become like that.

Shaula was tall, approximately the same height as Subaru. But even so, her body which he had embraced was slender, supple and soft. There was quite the difference between her body, and that of his own body.

Shaula: “Ma… ster…”

Subaru: “You helped me out by being there. …That is all.”

Shaula: “…”

Around 30 seconds had passed hugging Shaula. Subaru slowly let go of her body. In all honesty, he felt awkward, but his sense of achievement was stronger. If he were to become a guy who just handed out gifts like that. If he were to become the same as "Natsuki Subaru"—

Shaula: "Maaster…"

Looking at the pensive Subaru, Shaula dizzily walked towards him, her cheeks fiercely blushing. Her eyes were wet with tears, her breathing was somewhat feverish, and she was gazing at Subaru's lips,

Shaula: "Master, finally you've shown me some love…"

Subaru: "Beyond naïve!"

Shaula: "Gueh!"

Pushing her face away with his palm, Subaru snapped Shaula back to reality.

5

Subaru: "Whether or not I reward you, you get carried away… What a difficult character…"

Subaru had somehow managed to calm down the aroused Shaula, and extracted himself out of the situation. He sighed. Eventually, Shaula had left, still in a dreamy state of mind, with the words: "It's the mark of a good woman to see when it's time to leave as well. A secret makes a woman a woman." In all honesty, even though he had no clue what the meaning of this was, meddling into it would be all too bothersome.

Subaru: "Since sometimes, there are things that you need not know in the world."

In any case, contrary to such a careless act, Subaru's situation was not looking great. At least, he expected what happened in the library to come to light if he pecked at Julius. But, as now it had missed its mark, he had once again returned back to square one. Or, as he had first posited, were the others not at all involved in Subaru's missing memories? Though, it was just Ram's facial expression that he hadn't been able to check—

Subaru: "She looked like she was in tears… but, I don't know anymore if they were just crocodile tears…"

It had been Ram who had tried her hardest to not believe the story that Subaru had really lost his memories. Of course there was still the possibility that she had been acting; it's not a possibility that she hadn't been able to recognize some sort of participation happening, but there are no limits to these sorts of suggestions. If he doesn't place his trust in something, then it's certainly a fact that he can't even start to doubt something. As far as Subaru is concerned, that basis was—

Subaru: "—That means Patrasche now"

After asserting that, he was shocked at himself for being the conclusion of a person who fell into a pitfall of bearing complete mistrust for everyone around him. But in fact, it was true that that side of him was quite prominent. His "complete mistrust for everyone" was indescribable tantamount to it being deeply ingrained. And it wasn't just to others, but now, he also couldn't believe in himself.

Subaru: "Still, it might be more a blessing if I got to spend some time in a paradise in which just Patrasche and Earth Dragons are…"

???: "—Ahh, I heard th~at!"

Subaru: "Wooah?!"

At the very moment in which he had been voicing these thoughts out loud, a young girl nimbly rushed out from the corner of the aisleway. The little girl was Meili, her blue braids swinging about as she stifled a giggle. Subaru wearily dropped his shoulders at the figure of the young girl when she had heard his dull thoughts voiced out.

Subaru: "It's just something like a joke or nonsense. Surely you didn't get that?"

Meili: "I'm su~re. But, I don't particularly intend to laugh at them even if they’re Onii-san’s true feelings y~know. Because if there’s a place where you can just live with some bad animal-chans, then I think it’s something that one wouldn’t mind living there.”

Subaru: “…Huh”

Whilst hearing Subaru fumbling excuses, Meili held her skirt by the hem in a gesture which Subaru cannot tell whether it’s meant to be elegant or wild. Even if he’d gotten an answer from that, he didn’t really know what sort of reply to give. However, it didn’t seem like she was pleased by that reply.

Meili: “Ah, si~nce I gave a vague answer. Since a person took the trouble to diligently give a speech, I thi~nk that not listening to it properly is the mark of a naughty child.”

Subaru: “That’s not much of an apology. … You’re alone? You aren’t with Beatrice?”

Meili: “No chance! Why would I be with Beatrice-chan? Bu~t, I think that is a question I’d rather ask of you, Onii-san.”

He had thought that the girls who were of a similar age would be hanging out together, yet it seemed that it was not so. Certainly, the times in which Beatrice had acted together with Emilia were many. —That’s why he treated his misgivings for the two of them as a set; he wasn’t able to think of them separately.

Subaru: “Well, still, that’s fine. Though, just so you know, I don’t have time to play with you. I’m sorry, but look elsewhere if you want to speak to someone. Shaula’s back there for example.”

Meili: “I could talk to my half-naked Onee-san, bu~t right now I have stuff to do with Onii-san.”

Subaru: “With me?”

Though Subaru didn’t want to be disturbed during the time he had set to plunge into his unavoidable brooding, in his secret “date” with Patrasche, he couldn’t help widen his eyes at Meili’s unexpected introduction. Thinking about it, the little girl was quite similar to Shaula, in that she was easy to talk to compared to Emilia and the others. Even in her last moments in the last loop, her corpse hadn’t been left in a mutilated state as far as it being too painful to even look at. Since she had looked as if she had died in her sleep, the shocking images don’t overlap with each other even when he’s directly opposite her. His heartbeat had calmed as well.

Subaru: “What is it? Is it quick?”

Meili: “Yeah, it wo~n’t take particularly long.”

Subaru felt an overwhelming sense of security; he lent out an ear to listen to Meili’s story. And then, seeing Subaru adjust his posture to indicate he was willing to listen, Meili placed a finger to her lips and licked the fingertip with her tongue. This somewhat alluring gesture did not fit her childish appearance. Subaru frowned at it.

Meili: “—I wo~nder, just how seriously should I take what we talked about last night?”

This is what the little girl said to Subaru, whilst still smiling sweetly.

6

Subaru: “—Wh…a?”

Suddenly, Subaru was set free from the strange stoppage in his consciousness, and grasped his own neck. There was something in his throat like a feeling of acridity and breathlessness. He launched into a coughing fit.

Subaru: “Ack, Ack…”

Whilst touching his throat, Subaru coughed over and over again as he relished a sensation which felt similar to parched pain. And then, he suddenly took notice.

Subaru: “Huh… I…”

—What was it that he was doing?

Just before, he had for sure talked to Julius, then there had been that farce with Shaula, and after that he had tried to go to where Patrasche was. And, finally, he had met Meili halfway there—

Subaru: “OW…”

Subaru had been rubbing his arm as he was immersed in thought, he clucked his tongue in sharp pain. Looking down at his hand—both of his hands. A bunch of scratch marks were carved on the wrists of both his left and right hand. He realized that blood was oozing out of them.

Subaru: “TCH, What the hell is this…”

The wounds were relatively deep, but, the wounds themselves were irregular. Them being scratch marks was not a bad guess, they could not be from a sharp blade. They were wounds which had been caused by someone digging their nails deeply into his flesh with all of their might. Where on earth had he got these wounds from—

Subaru: “—Ah?”

Subaru looked around his surroundings to see if there was anything he could use as a bandage whilst grimacing in pain. And, he noticed that he was in a similar stone room like many of them on the fourth floor. And then, he finally noticed it.

“…”

White feet were strewn on the floor. The feet were unmoving, the strength in them had fizzled out. He slowly shifted his gaze up from their feet; there was a skirt, and the upper part of their body… and then.

And then—

Subaru: “—Wha?”

And then, right there, the figure of a little girl who didn’t even twitch had collapsed in front of him.

—Meili had collapsed in front of Subaru’s eyes, and she wasn’t breathing.

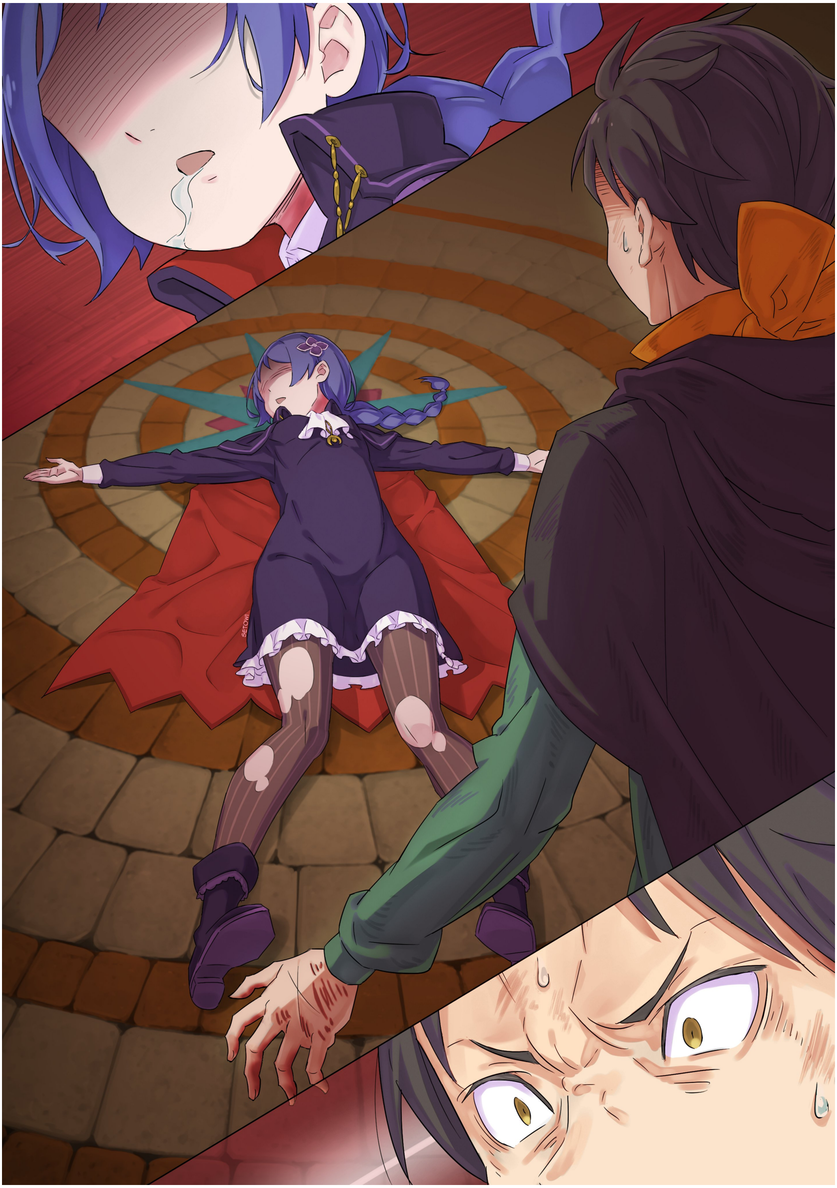

Chapter 44:
Medal of Blood

Within the stone room, Subaru was gazing down at his hands in shock at seeing the small girl who lay limp just beneath his eyes.

Subaru: "…"

He could not understand what had just happened. His wrists were wounded, his throat felt acrid, and his heart was racing. However those things did not seem to be linked with his memory, he could only think of them was like glitches that had been born within the voids of his mind.

Apart from the physical evidence that remained, any traces of anyone had vanished. Only one thing was certain, only one thing—

—The light within the little girl's eyes that lay in front of him had been extinguished.

Subaru: "… gh, it's still too early to give up."

Subaru shook his head and rushed over towards the girl who was lying face up. His feet, with each step he took, were heavy, and his movements were sluggish, as if the soles of his shoes were glued to the floor. Somehow he managed to peel his shoes off the floor and stooped down beside the girl—Meili.

Subaru: "…"

Meili lay there motionless, in spread-eagled fashion with her mouth half-open. She had an expression that seemed like one of shock frozen on her face and her lightless eyes seemed to be out of focus.

The girl had always given off a hard to figure out impression, however her figure now only made that impression stronger…

Subaru: "Mei, Meili… oy, Meili!"

He called out to her. But there was no reaction.

Since his appeal had not roused her, Subaru shook her shoulders and tried to lightly slap her face in the hopes of seeing a response. But yet again, there was no response from her. Her eyelids which had remained open did not even blink.

Subaru: “Me…”

Stopping himself, Subaru took a deep breath and decides that he will try to resuscitate her using what he recalls. Putting his hands on her chest, he remembered learning about how to administer emergency chest compressions. He remembered that the heart’s position was about two fingers length away from the top of the stomach and such. With this in mind, he started to push his palms down on her chest.

Subaru: “Haa… haaaaa…! Meili! Hey, Meili!”

“…”

Subaru: “Fuck!”

There was no reply. With a pale face, her body feebly shook. Cursing the situation he was in, Subaru brought her head up and secured her airway in preparation for giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The process of CPR included administering both chest compressions and performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Subaru: “What next. There’s something else. What is it, what is it, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!”

Desperately clawing at his memory, Subaru searches for anything else that he could do. However, he had obtained this smattering of knowledge from watching TV; in the end it was only half-complete. The more desperately he tried to resuscitate her, the more Subaru’s arms succumbed to fatigue and the more it started to feel like a fruitless attempt.

Simply, in the end, he was repeating over and over again the actions of chest compressions, followed by mouth-to-mouth. He could not feel any trace of a heartbeat against his palms whilst he pressed down on her chest. He could not get any response from the girl's body even when he was breathing air into her lungs. Continuing to administer CPR to the limit of his strength, he—

Subaru: "Damn. It."

Subaru fell back towards the ground, breathing in exhaustion and sweating profusely from his forehead.

Subaru: "Aaah… aah… fuck, fuuuck…!"

Clutching his fringe in frustration, Subaru could only swear. Meili had not shown any signs of breathing. His first impression had been correct. The light within this little girl's eyes would never shine again.

…Meili had died.

Ruthlessly, fate had snatched away this young girl's life so cruelly. Such an expression was mere consolation and was not suitable in this place. It hadn't been fate that had killed her. She had been murdered by someone.

Meili's neck was blemished by a series of bluish-black bruises, serving as proof.

Subaru: "…"

Catching his breath and filled with regret, Subaru looks towards his hands. Until now both of those hands had been used in an attempt to save Meili's life—on his wrists, both his left wrist and his right wrist there were numerous amounts of scratches grooved into them as if done by fingernails. Quite entirely as if someone had scratched and clawed at them with all their might as if it was a life and death situation. He wasn't so ignorant to not understand what it meant.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru gets up and goes to fix Meili's disheveled appearance. He adjusts her clothing, crosses her arms across her chest, and closes her eyelids. And, whilst he was paying his respects to her corpse, he gently placed his hand against her thin neck.

Sensing a bad feeling about this, he traces his fingers against the bluish-black hues left on Meili's neck.

Subaru: "… a perfect match."

His parched muttering came without any strength or surprise, and it only reaffirmed this fact. The bruises left on Meili's neck looked like they had been caused by fingers—and the shapes of those fingers matched exactly with Subaru's fingers to the untrained eye.

No longer would he doubt the facts here.

Meili had been strangled to death—

And the culprit was no other than—

Subaru: "…u, gha"

As soon as he had realized this fact, the feeling of wanting to vomit ran up his throat. He turned his face quickly and rolled to the side so he could avoid befouling Meili's body. It had only been a short while in which Subaru's breakfast had been in his stomach, and that was what came out. Emptying his stomach's contents onto the floor, he vomited until his stomach is completely empty.

Subaru: "I'm. really. done. puking."

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he mocks himself. In fact he couldn't remember how many times he had vomited now. This may have been the first time today, but the day last time had been a terrible amount of times. He felt that as of now he wouldn't be able to stomach any food anymore. Subaru felt like apologizing with all his heart to all the farmers around the country.

His mind would likely crack and break into little pieces if he wasn't conscious of thinking such absurd thoughts.

Subaru: "…"

The circumstantial evidence present matched too well. There had been two people in the room, and the bruises on Meili's neck matched Subaru's fingers. Subaru isn't optimistic enough to believe that he could escape the blame in this situation.

He didn't even think someone had framed him.

You don't need to add another person's hands to create this situation. If someone had framed him here, then this place transcended all known dimensions. If hands are needed to create this nightmare, then it is only two you need. Since Natsuki Subaru possesses two arms, then surely that is enough?

Subaru: "… I don't understand the meaning of this."

Having accepted this reality head-on, Subaru put his lack of understanding into words. Inexplicable, baffling, incomplete, regardless of the term used to describe this scene, it would be impossible to reproduce it—he can only conclude that the crime was done by Natsuki Subaru. However, Subaru did not hold such a memory within himself.

Subaru: "What happened, what happened? Remember. Remember, remember, remember…"

He stood up and walked around the room, trying to wrench open his memories. He had died, then woke up and seen Emilia, Beatrice and Patrasche. He had hid that he had lost his memories from them and then eaten breakfast. He had tried to interrogate Julius whilst Shaula secretly kept an eye on them, before then hugging her. Then he came across Meili in the corridor.

Finally, Meili said she had some business with him, and wanted to talk to him about something…

Subaru: "Last night, she mentioned last night…"

Subaru frowns as he vaguely recalls Meili's words. However, shortly after she had tried to talk about it, Subaru had slipped out of consciousness. The words she had said had shattered into a thousand pieces just like the thoughts that you can get whilst you are on the verge of falling asleep.

Subaru: "Night, I was asked about the night. On that I am sure. Before I woke up or before I went to bed? Either way, she asked me about one or the other… and then?”

From there, he doesn’t know anymore.

The only thing he can fathom about the contents of what Meili had asked Subaru was that it was related to his “Evening Excursion.” Something he too wanted to know about.

Emilia and such had told him that this morning Subaru had been found collapsed in the library. Subaru’s behavior in the night before he had collapsed was completely unknown to him. At least now there was no doubt that the incident was related to his memory loss. And surely, Meili remembered what Subaru had forgotten; there happened to be some connection, on that there was no mistake—

Subaru: “She’s dead. And I strangled her…? Why did I do such a thing…?”

If he looked down at both of his hands, although not present in his memories, he felt that it revived a raw sensation in his palms. Both arms had squeezed her neck until her breath had stopped. There was evidence on his wrists that showed that Meili had desperately tried to resist. If he looked carefully, on Meili’s fingernails there was blood left in them, and the evidence of a fight. Very deep fingernail marks had been left there on his arms; he couldn’t help but feel like this had been the echo of deep-seated resentment that the little girl had left behind.

Subaru: “… ah?”

Subaru’s thinking which had been gripped by the reins of delusion —suddenly he let out a hoarse gasp. He had gasped as if he’d been taken aback by something. The cause was due to his arm. It was not the wounds at the vicinity of his wrist which he was staring at. He was looking at his right hand’s fingernails.

Just like Meili, his fingernails were jam-packed with blood and skin as if he had scratched someone.

Subaru: “…”

With these baffling bloodstains in mind, Subaru turned to face Meili's corpse again. Showing respect to her death, he had fixed up her disheveled appearance. It wasn't a great consolation, but except for her bluish-black bruises on her neck, the little girl's corpse still looked cute just as she did when she was alive. At least there were no traces of any fingernail scars visible on her body. Subaru's fingernails were unkempt and hideous, and there were no traces of such pitiful gouge-marks on her body.

Then the remains of skin and blood left stuffed inside his nails—What were these vestiges of harmful intent?

Subaru: "… no way."

He looked down at the arm that had been hurting him; Subaru's lips quiver as he gets a bad feeling about it. Fresh in his mind was the fact that from the elbow of his right arm, there was a grotesque black coloration to it. But it had been his left arm that was throbbing in pain.

Subaru starts to slowly roll up his sleeve, unrolling all the way up to the inside of his elbow, where the source of the pain was coming from. He feels the fabric trying to stick to his arm as dried blood peels off as he continues to unroll his sleeve. Taking a sharp breath, Subaru finishes unrolling his sleeves all the way to his shoulder. There he saw his own left arm bleeding quite a bit. Subaru let out the breath he'd taken.

Subaru: "…"

He scrapes away the dark-red blood that was dirtying his arm with his fingers, and gazed at the wound that had been bringing him this pain.

As he had imagined, there were scratches in his skin, as if it had been carved by his own right hand. From the inside of his elbow all the way to his upper arm, there was a wound which had been painfully carved into it. However, it was not merely just an ordinary wound.

There are characters.

Carved there on his flesh by fingernails are some crudely etched characters.

Engraved there, it said:

—“Natsuki Subaru was here.”

Subaru: “… ahh”

It was as if his breath had been knocked out of him. Subaru wiped the scar left on his left arm with his fingers to see if he had been mistaken. Over and over again. Once the flow of blood had stopped he rubbed the wound once more and confirmed it.

There was no other way of reading it. No matter how he looked at it, it was written as “Natsuki Subaru was here.”

The handwriting was messy, written in Japanese, and said: “Natsuki Subaru was here.

It was easy to understand. It was a very easy to understand self-assertion. It was like when the criminal left evidence at the scene of the crime as proof of his own crime. Leaving behind the name had clearly conveyed who had committed this crime. How kind of him, what ambition, oh how must he have craved being in the limelight —

Subaru: “You… What is it with you?!”

In the face of such unacceptable facts, Subaru’s voice shook as he shouted out in grief. Shaking his left arm, and keeping it far away from him whilst turning his face away from it, his feet ended up getting tangled. He fell flat on his backside. Subaru’s left arm hit the floor and his teeth clattered together. Many, many times he banged his arm on the floor over and over again. He bit his lip as the pain in his bone resounded, blood starts to pool out of his mouth.

But even so, the reality of the situation will not change. The wounds on his arms will not disappear.

Subaru: “This wasn’t there! There was no such wound here!”

Shaking his head in refusal, Subaru cries out this appeal that his wound was something after he lost consciousness, in the room where there only the motionless Meili lay. The wound on his left arm had been newly created—he had never noticed it before. Someone had strangled Meili, and had scratched him as well—no, it wasn't that.

No, no! That was absolutely wrong. It's all wrong. Admit it. Understand it. He ought to know. It wasn't someone else. It wasn't performed by another being—this crime had been committed by Natsuki Subaru.

It wasn't Subaru, it was "Natsuki Subaru" who killed Meili and carved this medal in his arm to show off his achievement.

Subaru: "Cr…azy."

Insane. Crazy. It seems he is going insane… is "Natsuki Subaru" the name of a monster that he just couldn't comprehend.

Subaru: "…"

This was not the first time Subaru had held great distrust of "Natsuki Subaru".

"Natsuki Subaru" obviously repeats actions that make no sense, starting with his unusual behavior of the night before which still hadn't been answered.

When he had ended up questioning Julius, he had heard from him of Echidna's misdeeds with him and how those actions had driven Julius into some sort of mental anguish… The Subaru that came back from the convenience store and the "Natsuki Subaru" here no longer resembled the same person. As if it was a counterfeit version of him.

Subaru was seriously convinced that his body possessed a completely different being inside it.

Subaru: "But, that's not right…"

Although it annoys him to, if he pays close attention to the scar engraved on his left arm, he can't deny his suspicion. His name was engraved on his arm. Of course, it was quite different from how he'd write it using a pen or a brush. However, there was a certain peculiarity within how the letters were written. Specifically, there was a certain habit that Subaru had when writing his calligraphy. Unless you were to deliberately copy them, it would be practically impossible for someone else to have coincidentally written it like this.

In other words, it was unmistakable that Subaru's handwriting and "Natsuki Subaru's" handwriting had the same origin.

As soon as he had noticed that, the facts had become clear.

That is—

Subaru: "—when I lost my consciousness, was "Natsuki Subaru" returning?"

And then that "Natsuki Subaru" had had some form of argument with Meili and ended up killing her. He had then left that fact behind in his arm and then hidden back in the confines of his consciousness…? Just that, he truly did not understand.

Subaru: "Why are you using my body when you have your o… why… my… no, what on earth am I? What are you planning to do?! Who the hell are you…"

Clutching his face, Subaru's voice trembles as he mutters this. In this different world in which he has no allies. In this different world in which he doesn't know who the enemy is. In this different world where he can't tell between friend and foe. In the end, Subaru had removed even himself from the frame of innocence.

Subaru: "…"

He was staggering around, barely able to keep upright as the feeling of anxiety overwhelms his heart. Subaru tries to take long, deep breaths to ward off this overpowering feeling.

He can't remain calm. His mind was in complete disarray. But, as it was currently, he didn't want to be brandished about by whatever intentions “Natsuki Subaru” had without knowing about them.

So—

Subaru: “—who are you?”

Whilst muttering words of hatred at the impossibility which was reflected in his arm, Subaru placed his left index fingernail against his right arm. He placed it right against the grotesque looking skin and started to scratch that into his arm.

Red blood droplets were oozing from his black skin. He thought that it was ironic that the blood that flowed from his black skin was red.

Chapter 45:
Embrace of the Guilty

1

—A painful red drop of blood drips down his right arm with the black spots pattern.

Call it fortune or whatever you want but his wound had stopped bleeding faster than expected, but still, if he applies force to it, his wound will open again, but he didn't care about that too much.

Dig your nails in, and you'll feel pain. Do it hard, and you'll tear the skin, and blood will flow. Even though it felt like the blood from that wound had stopped quickly, it really didn't feel that different.

Subaru: "…"

Without paying much attention to the fresh, self inflicted wound on his right arm, he proceeds to wipe the blood from his palm and then pulls down his sleeve to conceal the hideous message carved on his left arm.

Subaru: "In any case, I need to hurry…"

Already he had wasted quite a lot of time in this room. Meili's corpse was still lying in the middle of the room, but at least there no longer was any trace of what he had done to her.

If he could he would have liked to avoid defiling her corpse even more but…

—There is still one last thing he must do.

Subaru: "…"

Using both of his arms, Subaru drags the girl's light body to a corner of the room.

There, he finds what could be called a table made of stone, or maybe it might have been beddings. For now, he gently hid Meili's dead body behind where the hewed square stone slab was placed.

—Sorry, though apologizing to Meili from the bottom of his heart, Subaru concealed her fate.

After all, how would he explain that it wasn't him to everyone and that the culprit is 'Natsuki Subaru' and even if he could, who would believe such a thing?

Subaru: "I can't defend myself or do anything, even if I wasn't the one who… killed Meili. The murder was carried out with my own hands."

He's not aware about how criminal investigations are handled in this world. but if someone were to see Meili's nails and the wounds on Subaru's wrists, no one would doubt that he was guilty and trying to appeal would be futile.

If it ever comes to that, the only thing he can do is try to avoid the trial—No, he already covered up the crime.

He was aware that the course of actions he took isn't the right one. However, he had no other option. —He no longer knew who he could trust, who could he doubt.

However if there is a single thing that he is convinced of, it's—

Subaru: "Next time we meet, Meili… you will be the only one I won't suspect."

Crushed, then strangled. This is the second time Subaru finds Meili already dead.

Aside from a few others, she was the least suspicious. But it doesn't matter anymore, Subaru won't be able to get any kind of information from her.

The Closed Circle Mystery, in other words, it is known that the criminal is one of the people present, and the crime could not have been committed by some outsider, what a cliché…

However, as a detective, Natsuki Subaru is equipped with an illegal power: Return by Death which causes time to be rewound whenever he is killed. Anyone, no matter how useless, could become a renowned detective capable of dealing with any tragedy with this power.

Subaru: “Though the Detective being the culprit is also something predictable of these mystery tropes. “

It’s regrettable, no matter how great Return by Death might be, probably ‘Natsuki Subaru’ is just waiting to make his next move, even if the situation gets redone many times, stopping Him may prove a very difficult task.

The detective having a different personality in which he is a criminal, is a pretty tired mystery trope. But you would think that in real life if the detective just threw himself off a cliff the problem would be solved right?

Return by Death and The detective himself is the culprit, when both of these met the situation became unsolvable. A so called, inescapable helix maze.

“This isn’t the time to be talking…! In any case, right now I gotta buy time.”

It’s not a problem that will be solved with time, there’s definitely something that brings back time.

Believing in that, Subaru wished to be freed from this dead end, and then stood up.

“…”

Leaving those circumstances aside, He caressed Meili’s forehead just one last time. Surely, she wouldn’t want him to touch her anymore.

Her forehead felt cold to the touch, as if she was rejecting Subaru.

2

And, after despairingly concealing Meili’s murder, Subaru leaves the room. Then, looking at the right and left of the aisle, as he left the site slowly—

???: "—Ah, Subaru! Thank god, so you were here."

Subaru: "—tch?!"

It was Emilia's sudden voice that made Subaru's shoulder shiver, as he turned back to look at her. She was just taking a stroll, and she tilts her head to Subaru whose cheeks had turned rigid,

Emilia: "Sorry, did I scare you?"

Subaru: "—I-I was surprised, that's, we~ll, that's, you know. It's just because it was so sudden. What happened, Emilia-chan?"

Emilia: "—? I was just walking around the tower, to see whether I could do something. Rather than that, Subaru."

Subaru: "Yeah?"

Emilia: "Just now, were you playing around again?"

Subaru inhales sharply at hearing Emilia's mysterious question.

Her amethyst eyes were staring right at Subaru, but Subaru didn't know the meaning of her question.

It was true that his voice was shaking, but what he said was supposed to be an incomplete answer that would still suffice.

"…"

Well, rather than Emilia's gleeful eyes, Subaru tasted a sense of uncomfortableness, and gulped down his bitter spit.

In the room behind them lies Meili's dead body, cold and lifeless. Although he made sure to keep it out of plain sight, were someone to search through the room, her body would be discovered within minutes.

So, leaving this place was his top priority.

Subaru: “Sorry, I need to go the washroom for a second.”

Emilia: “Ah, sure.”

Hurriedly leaving the room, Subaru left words that could easily be misunderstood. He must get away from Emilia as soon as possible and kill time as much as he can.

From there, he could take care of the wound on his right arm—

Subaru: “Eh, Emilia-chan? I am going to the washroom. Why are you coming with me?”

Emilia: “Eh? I mean, we all will get together for lunch anyway, so don’t you think it would be nice if we’re together for a while? Don’t worry, I’ll be outside the door.”

Subaru: “I’m not worried about you hearing the sound of peeing but…”

Emilia stands in front of Subaru, who wanted to part ways with her, and looks at his face.

Speaking of justice is just an argument, and the side which deserves justice always goes through pain. In this case, it was no exception, Subaru had said all that without even once thinking of justice.

However, concerning that other side which had been struggling, Subaru carefully hazards a guess towards Emilia’s feelings.

—For what purpose does Emilia want to accompany Subaru?

“…”

“—?”

Still, Emilia looked completely plain to Subaru who was looking at her from the corner of his eyes.

She doesn’t look like she has any plan in mind, but, in fact, she is one of the enemies he suspects.

Subaru did not see Emilia's and Beatrice's dead bodies the last time when everyone had been killed.

Although it was true that "Natsuki Subaru's" intentions were unknown from the wounds on his arms, no matter how much chaos "Natsuki Subaru" could cause, it was not possible to produce such a situation alone.

Killing Shaula, Echidna, Ram, Julius and Meili, and eventually tearing down the tower with the power of shadows, and finally beheading him, that someone.

There still existed someone in this tower who Subaru was not aware of.

Emilia: "Subaru, are you okay? Actually, you still aren't back to normal, are you?"

Subaru: "—tch, I-I'm fine. I just got lost in my thoughts for a bit."

Emilia: "Really? But, you don't look too well."

Suddenly, Emilia reaches out for Subaru.

He couldn't give up so quickly, but Emilia makes his cheeks redden in embarrassment, and Subaru senses a ticklish feeling in his eyebrows.

Subaru: "…You're looking quite closely now, aren't you."

Emilia: "Mhm, that's right, I am looking closely. It feels like lately, I've been following you around with my eyes a lot… I don't know why, but it's strange."

Subaru: "—I guess so, it's really strange, isn't it."

He was carefully keeping an eye on any sudden movements from Emilia.

The smiling Emilia's hand was touching Subaru's face. The situation would drastically change if Emilia's hand were to slit Subaru's throat in the blink of an eye, no guarantees she wouldn't. Or otherwise, she didn't even need to do that, with the strength of Emilia's arm, it would be easily possible for her to break Subaru's neckbones.

However, her hands did not feel malicious or hostile, and Subaru is at loss on what to think.

After all, Subaru—he was only a Japanese student who had come from a convenience store, so it was only natural that Subaru would not find these feelings reliable. Things like people's hostility or malice, he had almost no experience with these things.

Subaru's familiarity with the atmosphere, of making people awkward even from big distances and silence of apathetic indifference that could not even be called cold disdain—neither of these can hurt the loner Natsuki Subaru.

Henceforth, he does not know the feeling he was getting from the girl's amethyst eyes in front of him was genuine or fake.

But, if he doesn't know—

"…"

He wonders what kind of face she would make if he were to confess everything. How great would it feel if he were to screw up that beautiful face she had that made it seem like she grew up only ever seeing splendid things, as if there was nothing to worry about in the world?

—The Natsuki Subaru you are worried about is nowhere to be found.

—No, that's not it. If he were to say that he is a cruel, crazed murderer.

Emilia: "—come to think of it, Meili… you know"

Subaru: "—hk"

A strangled noise emerged from his throat as his eyes opened wide.

Why was Meili's name mentioned here? He couldn't in the slightest hide his exclamation of surprise, it had been a complete surprise attack. If it was Emilia's aim to gauge Subaru's reaction, he had fallen hook line and sinker for it.

However, Emilia had her eyes off of Subaru, her gaze had dropped down towards the floor. She wasn't looking towards the aisleway where he had come from, more so, it felt as if she was just looking around the whole tower. And following from that, Emilia showed a slight hint of hesitation, and said,

Emilia: "I wonder if I was too short-tempered with her. When we return back safe and sound from this tower, we can see what we can do about Meili."

"…"

Emilia: "Of course what she did a year ago was terrible, and I understand Otto-kun's point that we shouldn't believe her so easily, but… it was thanks to Meili that we were able to cross the sand dunes, and if she had been plotting something against us, I think she would have done it before we reached this tower."

Pinching the cuffs of her clothes, Emilia carefully states her thoughts. Although it feels as if he should take her story with a grain of salt. Amongst the people in this tower, Meili's position was special. She had apparently originally been an assassin hired to take Emilia and Beatrice's lives.

She had failed her duty, leading to her being their captive. However, she had made full use of her special ability, which she had been born with, accompanying them on their current journey, thus contributing to the objectives of her former targets.

Subaru: "A Pardon, I guess?"

Emilia: "Even if I were to let her free, I think everyone would oppose it. But, maybe we can find some other place to put her in outside of her gloomy prison cell, right?"

"…"

Emilia: “Of course, we’ll talk to Meili herself, and see if she wants it. It would be hard if I got ahead of myself and ended up being hated by her.”

Hurriedly shaking her hand, Emilia insisted that it had just been one of her opinions. Perhaps, she had put enough thought to hold and convey this story out to its fullness. At every turn, there’s a glimpse of the argument being rebutted.

—Were these Emilia’s true intentions?

“…”

Would it be okay to believe her? At least until now, there hadn’t been a single time which Emilia had been hostile towards Subaru. —No, if he were to say it, no one had shown any hostility towards Subaru. Beatrice, Echidna, Ram, Julius, Meili, none of them had shown any hostility towards Subaru.

The only certain things were that a criminal had killed Subaru by pushing him from the top of the staircase, and that a criminal had slaughtered everyone in the tower, and a criminal had lopped off his head. —And that “Natsuki Subaru” had killed Meili. Only these evil acts should be held in contempt.

Then, could he trust Emilia? Could he believe in her purity, which was like that of fresh snow, that did not know of impurity? —Emilia had put so much enthusiasm in her speech whilst he had been fretting about Meili, which his hand had killed, still he wonders if she would believe him.

Subaru: “…so stupid.”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Subaru: “I said such bullshit. I should have known. Short-tempered? Indeed. In… in these situations, can we really be talking about future prospects.”

It feels like a stalemate in all directions, he has no room to worry about anyone else. And that especially applies to hearing the future plans of the girl who had already died. Even if he closes his eyes pretending not to know about her “Death”, would it really comfort him?

“…”

Cursing, Subaru bit his lips right after he had uttered those words. He had said such stupid things. He couldn’t help having said things such as all the remarks of suspicion that he had thrust upon Emilia due to the emotions of this place. There was no justification for his actions. He had just been venting his anger, just like a child’s tantrum. That—

Emilia: “Subaru!”

Subaru: “Bu…”

Emilia: “What happened to you so suddenly? Even if you’re in a bad mood, it’s no good to speak like that!”

“…”

Astonished and shocked, he hangs his head down as his emotions gnaw at him and tears start to pour out of him as he sobs. Emilia however, having anticipated such a reaction, vigorously clasped Subaru’s cheeks with both hands and looked straight into his black eyes.

Subaru: “—Ah”

Emilia: “If you are going to be sulky and emotional like this, speak up! Either to me or Beatrice. If Subaru is in trouble, I will be in trouble together with him. But, don’t carry it all by yourself, quit moping around by yourself, stop trying to do be alone. That’s something similar to what Roswaal would do in bad times. Don’t copy him!”

Giving it her all, Emilia turns towards Subaru and continues to speak. And just after that, she took her hands away from Subaru’s face, who had been really taken aback, and suddenly pulled his head over to her chest. She held Subaru’s head against her chest in an embrace and started to gently stroke him.

Emilia: “Do you understand? In my heart, I am not mad at you at all. I won’t be disillusioned with whatever it is. So, you can tell me.”

“…”

He was pressed against the feeling of soft, warm skin. Beyond that feeling of warmth, the rhythm of life was steadily ticking away in her. It was quite gentle, rather like a lullaby which a baby would listen to. Subaru let out a strangled sob. In that moment, Subaru’s heart had lurched with a feeling of intense shame.

Having done all these things until now, having said such terrible things, still she was gentle towards him. He had doubted her, he had blindly hated this poor girl, what had been the point of it all?

—Do they really exist? The one who had been planning to kill Subaru.

—Had plunging to his death really been a simple accident?

—It had not been something somebody did on purpose, maybe someone had inadvertently tripped and pushed him.

There was no evil person inside this tower. The only one who had a heart that was foul, ugly and dangerous was Natsuki Subaru, and “Natsuki Subaru”. Properly speaking, wasn’t he just an insolent outsider to this world that should have never been?

Subaru: “Emilia, I am…”

Emilia: “—Hm?”

Subaru: “I am…”

He doesn’t know how to tell her. He had thought that he would be able to confess everything to her… Losing his memories, what had happened to Meili, returning back in time every time he died. Everything he says may not be believable. But, she may believe some of it. If she believes him, a way to break out of this deadlock may be found. If just that is found, Subaru will—

???: “—Emilia-sama! Barusu!”

That was the moment when he had tried to somehow squeeze his thoughts out of his shivering head.

A sharp, imminent voice comes from the side, as if filling over Subaru’s anguish. Subaru could not see the owner of the voice at that moment due to Emilia’s embrace. Then, he heard Emilia who confirmed that person’s identity by murmuring “Ram”.

Emilia: “What’s wrong? I’m talking to Subaru about something which is ve~ry important…”

Ram: “That is, something Ram understands just by looking at it… but kindly stop it. This is an urgent matter.”

Emilia: “O-Okay…”

The sound of footsteps drew closer, and as soon as they did, Emilia nervously let go of Subaru. Subaru aggressively wiped away at this face with his sleeve, getting rid of the distant feeling of warmth and the zeal in the corner of his eyes.

After that, both he and Emilia turned to face Ram.

Whether it was the thing she saw which was bad, or whether her timing was the worst, he wanted to strike Ram with such feelings that were coming up in his mind.

Even though he just reflected on it, he felt sorry for himself for not being able to stand straight again immediately.

However, Ram’s appearance said that she could not afford to do things like teasing them for them embracing one another, or thinking about Subaru who was having mixed emotions, after seeing them.

Emilia: “Ram, what’s wrong?”

Ram: “…It is an urgent matter. Please come to the third floor library immediately. Beatrice-sama found something terrible.”

Emilia: “Beatrice did?”

To the surprised Emilia, Ram briefly nodded as “yes”.

Then, as she turned away from Subaru and Emilia,

Ram: “Anastasia-sama… no, was it Echidna? Anyway, Ram will go search for her and Julius. Barusu, you go with Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “Y-Yeah, got it…”

Subaru nodded his head whilst being unable to form a reply.

Without even waiting for an answer, Ram kicks the door and runs away from the two. Surprised from the situation, Subaru turns to Emilia.

Subaru: “Um, Ram, said that…”

Emilia: “—Let’s hurry. Ram sounded really serious. Something terrible must have happened.”

“…”

Emilia: “Subaru, I won’t forget about what we talked earlier.”

Subaru: “…yeah.”

Subaru weakly nodded and listens to Emilia, who was the only one thinking about that.

Already, from his guilt towards Meili, to his sense of urgency regarding the situation, all of Subaru’s thought process had been torn down.

With that, Subaru took off with Emilia, heading for the third layer Taygeta at a brisk pace. Welcoming them after running up the long staircase, was the library of the Dead which boasted a huge collection of books.

Beatrice: “—So you’ve come, I suppose.”

Beatrice, who was standing in front of the stairs behind the bookshelves which had the countless Books of The Dead fitted in them, welcomed Subaru.

The girl, with her short arms, and a peculiar pattern in her eyes, breathed out a tired sigh with a frown.

Emilia: “Beatrice, Ram told us to come. You have found something terrible is what she said.”

Beatrice: “Certainly, it cannot he said that it’s good news. Rather, it is something bad I suppose.”

Saying that, Beatrice swings roundly around to Emilia’s question.

Then, she turns her blue eyes towards Subaru,

Beatrice: “Betty had been looking into the Taygeta library since this morning. Whilst Subaru was out cold, Betty was trying to analyze this room, though its mechanisms are nothing like the forbidden library’s I suppose.”

Subaru: “Well, regardless of the introduction. What happened? Please tell.”

Subaru, who ran up the stairs and was lightly panting, urges her to get to the point.

Hearing those words, Beatrice shut her eyes for a moment. And, she slowly, pointed towards one of the bookshelves which was diagonally behind her,

“The third row from the top, the book on the far right.”

“—the rightmost of.”

“—The third row.”

In accordance with what Beatrice pointed out, Subaru and Emilia came to the bookshelf after she had spat out those words.

The bookshelf was packed with books, and Subaru could not read the characters which were written in a foreign language on the black covers. As usual, he could only think of them as hieroglyphs.

So, even the title of the book which Beatrice pointed out to Subaru and the others, was not known to him.

At least, as all books were in this library, it was certain that it was a Book of The Dead—

Emilia: “No way…”

Emilia, who had been standing right next to him, spilled these words out. Looking at that, Subaru’s cheeks stiffened at hearing her stunned reaction.

Such astonishment had delayed the sadness which was to come straight after. Just, what was it that had punched her heart with such force?

Shivering, her lips tremble right next to Subaru, clearly in shock.

and Emilia said,

Emilia: “—Meili Portroute.”

Chapter 46:
Meili Portroute

1

—Meili Portroute

Staring at the binding of the book, as Emilia said that, Subaru became shocked. His eyes shot open, He glared at the binding of the book. The letters written there, Subaru couldn't read them at all. However, here now, there is no reason for Subaru to put on a pretext and think that Emilia was shaking without meaning.

Then why was there a Book of the Dead with Meili's name in the title? There was no room to doubt this fact.

Subaru: "…"

He still couldn't talk, Subaru with stiff cheeks had his back break out in a cold sweat. Inside his skull, his brain was desperately screaming one thing and one thing only: "Why."

Why is there a book with Meili's name here? Why did this library that kept records of the dead have the girls book ready that quickly? Why is it that in a library this vast that they found Meili's book so easily? Why was it that the moment Subaru felt like he could trust Emilia out of everyone in the tower this had to happen? Why was it that fate just couldn't forgive Natsuki Subaru? Why Why Why Why Why Why Why Why Why Why Whywhywhywhywyhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhyw
hywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy

Emilia: "—Beatrice, did you check the contents of the book?"

Subaru: "—hk"

While forcing himself to bury the incredible amount of "Why's" in his head, those words rung awfully clearly inside of his eardrums. Raising his face in a snap, Emilia was the one who probed Beatrice.

She asked Beatrice whilst continuing to lay against the bookshelf, glaring at the book in question.

As far as Subaru had heard about the Books of the dead found in this library, if you are acquainted with the person in the book, and touch it, then the memories of their life will pour into their head. Though it’s a magical book with unwavering powers, it is not the fantasy-tone part of the story that becomes a problem in this place, it’s a more realistic problem.

Looking at the records of Meili’s life means that they will supposedly see the records of her last moments. In other words all that they will see who it was that strangled her.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru had killed Meili with his own two hands in these circumstances, he does not doubt that it was ‘Natsuki Subaru’ that had carried it out. But, it’s only Subaru who can come to that distinction. The memories act sort of like video footage, such as the ones you could get from crime prevention cameras around potential crime scenes. He won’t be able to expect them to follow such a distinction. In addition, Subaru in this loop had concealed his memory loss from Emilia and the others.

Subaru’s crime would become clear to them from the memories, and it very much would reach the stage where it would reveal his memory loss. If the others had acted ad-hoc already, then it would only sound like a bad excuse. Naturally, Emilia and the others seemed to be on the same level as Subaru. But if Beatrice had anticipated this and had already referred to the memory about Meili’s death—

Beatrice: “—I haven’t checked yet, I suppose.”

Subaru: “—hk, oh, is that so?”

Beatrice: “It’s natural that I didn’t, in fact. I have no choice but to handle it carefully, I suppose. In fact, to begin with, we don’t even know whether this Meili’s book is about the one we know. If it really is that girl’s book…”

Emilia: “Meili’s inside this tower… oh no! We have to look for her right away!”

Her complexion changing, Emilia tries to breaks off into a run at hearing Beatrice’s words. However, Beatrice cuts in front of Emilia and shakes her head.

Beatrice: “Wait, I suppose! If it really is that girl’s book, then searching for her all in a hurry is meaningless, in fact. You know what happens when a book is added here, I suppose.”

Emilia: “…so because of that, Ram went searching for us and Julius’ group.”

Beatrice: “If in the middle of this, Meili waltzes in looking all innocent, then you can take this as being Betty’s childish misunderstanding.”

Emilia’s strength steadily drains out of her as she listens to Beatrice calmly pointing these facts out. Still, with a fretful look across her pale face, Emilia clasps her hands against her chest, as if she was praying. She hopes that the book that had come from the bookshelf was not Meili’s one; she clings onto the hope that it belongs to someone who had happened to have the same name as her.

—But, Natsuki Subaru knows that hope will never come true.

“…”

Subaru was frantically turning his head back and forth between Emilia and Beatrice as they spoke. His thoughts were spinning around in circles; for the most part he was thinking on how to get out of this situation and whether to keep the truth only to himself.

As he had simulated before, he can’t let Emilia and the others see Meili’s memories. It was a stroke of good luck that Beatrice hadn’t seen them, even so, it was only a matter of time until one of them would. It’s a fact that Meili is dead, she will never appear in this library again looking all innocent. So of course, they will eventually get a chance to check the Book of the Dead. Before long they would do it.

If they look at the book, everyone will accuse Subaru. Then, should he do something like disposing of Meili's book?—No, he wants to avoid that. It's true that this situation was exceedingly difficult, however, Subaru's feelings had become more problematic—Subaru also has a great interest in the contents of the book.

Subaru currently believes with certainty that it was 'Natsuki Subaru' who had killed Meili. If he were to look through Meili's records, he may be able to see 'Natsuki Subaru' there. He could conceivably look at the literal form of the potential "Enemy" that was lying inside him. If that was possible, Subaru's situation would change drastically. At least, he should be able to come up with a resolution.

Hence, he cannot let Emilia or anyone else read the contents of the book. Subaru must be the only one to experience the book's contents—

Shaula: "Now this is what you call a commoshun, did something happen?"

Emilia: "Ah, Shaula, you've come."

In the meanwhile, Shaula had showed up at the Taygeta library. Craning her neck, her black hair swinging about, Shaula greets Emilia and Beatrice. She then notices Subaru at the back of the library and waves her hand at him. In this moment, he thinks that her appearance overlaps with how Meili had entered the breakfast room this morning. Subaru turns his face away and resists the urge to vomit.

Shaula: "Oyo, what a cold response from Master! After spending such a passionate time together with meee."

Beatrice: "I am quite interested in what happened between you and Subaru, but, for now I will postpone it, I suppose. Speak up if you've seen Meili anywhere. You were good friends with her, I suppose."

Shaula: "The chibiko… umm, Number Two? Her? Hmm, now that you mention it I haven't seen her for a while. I don't know what happened to her after this morning's breakfast."

Shaula answered Beatrice by shaking both of her hands. Then, she placed her waving hands against her cheeks, and cocking her head she said: “What’s wrong with Number Two?” At hearing Shaula’s question, Emilia cast her gaze down in unease,

Emilia: “To tell you the truth, we found a book with Meili’s name in the library. We haven’t looked inside it yet, before doing that we wanted to check whether that child was okay… “

Shaula: “Ah, I see. Number Two ended up dying? That’s troublesome to think about, there are many ways you can die; things like that may just happen, noo?”

Emilia: “—hk”

Beatrice: “…you”

Looking quite indifferent to what was going on around her, Shaula states her opinion on the matters of life and death, paying zero consideration towards the distressed Emilia. Hearing what Shaula had said, Emilia’s cheeks stiffened, and Beatrice glared at Shaula with an expression of anger. However, Shaula did not pay any attention to how the two had reacted,

Shaula: “So, where is this important boook? Once you look inside, you may find out how and where Number Two died, indeeed.”

Subaru: “That’s, that’s enough from you! Always talking like this…”

Subaru was unable to look on without doing anything, he flares up at Shaula’s reckless remarks. Now Shaula’s behavior showed heartlessness too. Up until now, by no means could Subaru tell Emilia his thoughts, he has just about enough discretion to not open his mouth. As for Shaula, she has no—

Shaula: “Don’t get maaad, Master. I didn’t mean any offence! But, but, practically, the book is here, so shouldn’t we do that?”

Subaru: “At… least, after we all get together…”

Shaula: “Even if you don’t do it leisurely, is it not worth a shot to read the boook? If it’s about Number One’s worries of not knowing what'll happen after reading it, then…"

Subaru falters, the strength of his rebuttal weakens as Shaula presses for an answer from him. She cuts off her speech and quietly sends Beatrice a sidelong glance, and then once again she cast her gaze at Subaru. Her face continued to have a unreserved, but not malicious look on it.

Shaula: "—Master should read the book."

Subaru: "…"

Shaula: "When you first saw this library, it was Master and that other pretty boy who first experienced what was in it, no? Afterwards, there were no negative effectssu coming out riiiight?"

Her ample-sized breasts shaking, Shaula takes a step forward and brings her face right next to his. His breath was taken away by the woman's suggestion, and Subaru's brain started to once again think carefully.

Shaula's suggestion is extremely reasonable for a woman that has such an attitude. Naturally, it's not known to him what sort of effect the Books of the Dead have on people once you read it. At least, there had been two people who had already experienced it. There should be enough value in trying to read it.

Of course, it was entirely possible that this experience of Subaru's had snatched away his memories, triggering the separation between "Natsuki Subaru" and his current self. If that really was the case here, it would be odd that Julius had not experienced any of these unusual phenomena. By no means would he conceal his memory loss like Subaru had done; it was a great leap of imagination to come to such a suspicion.

There is no relation between the influence of the Books of the Dead and his loss of memories. Making this conclusion was no issue at all in this situation. Thus, with that being the case, her suggestion had come as a lifesaver—

Subaru: "—Certainly, what Shaula said may have a grain of truth in

it.”

Beatrice: “…Subaru, are you really going to do it, in fact? Up until this time you shared meals with that companion, I suppose.”

If he were to take advantage of Shaula’s words, for the time being, he could break through the first obstacle. Becoming the first one to read Meili’s Book of the Dead, and making sure he is the last and only one to read it, then what Subaru had done would remain hidden inside his mind. However, that is where Beatrice’s genuine worry for him entered into the fold.

She is concerned about Subaru’s soul being damaged. Until now, the dead that ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had seen here had only had a shallow relationship to him. There was a big difference between that and Meili.

They had journeyed together, they had talked to each other, they had shared meals with each other; she was that kind of comrade in arms. Beatrice had been concerned about what sort of mental trauma would befall Subaru if he were to see her Death with his own eyes.

Subaru: “…I’ll be fine, don’t worry. As Shaula said, I am most likely the best person to do it.”

To Beatrice’s concerns, Subaru straightens his cheeks so that he looks serious, and nods. Certainly, looking at the memories of a deceased person whose face you know could very likely cause someone to have mental trauma or abnormalities. If you happened to be a good person, then maybe it would be unbearable.

—But that’s not the case with him. It isn’t so.

For Subaru now, the journey with Meili, the words he had exchanged with her, the meals he had shared together with her, by no means was she that kind of comrade in arms to him. For these few hours, he had behaved as if was acquainted with her. They had shared two or three meals together, and sometimes she had helped him reassure him a bit, but that was the extent of their relations. She was just an unfamiliar little girl to him—He would not receive any mental trauma by seeing her death.

Emilia: “I am still against this. If we really really have to, then it shouldn’t be Subaru, but me…”

Beatrice: “If Emilia wants to look at it, Betty will oppose it, in fact. If someone has to look at it… it’s frustrating, but Julius or Subaru are our best bets for it, I suppose. But, if you had seen how Julius looked like this morning, you’d probably want to erase him from the list of candidates here.”

Emilia: “Beatrice…”

Emilia, who looks quite dispirited, trails off into silence at hearing Beatrice’s reasoning. At least, Beatrice seems to have chosen to respect Subaru’s will. However, due to what had happened just before, Emilia knows that Subaru’s condition is quite unstable. Therefore, Subaru nodded at Emilia whose amethyst eyes showed deep concern that did not disappear.

Subaru: “—I will look. Perhaps, what if it’s only a misunderstanding, and if you read it in high spirits then maybe nothing will happen?”

Emilia: “…if anything happens, I will tear the book from you at once. I’ll pull your hair as well…”

Subaru: “I would prefer much more if you’d call out to me and shake my shoulders instead.”

With Emilia’s superhuman strength, if she were to pull his hair, the back of Subaru’s head would become a permanent desolate wasteland. And then, after retorting with such false words, Subaru faces towards the bookshelf. Unchanging, Meili’s book was still there, emitting a strange presence. From the beginning, at the times he had happened to catch a glimpse of it, he had seen it as just an ordinary plain book. But now, from this strange aura the book had, it felt as if he could instinctually recognize the name. At any rate, he couldn’t rely on just his senses.

Thus, Subaru picked up the book to search into what he can’t rely on in himself.

Subaru: "…"

Behind him, Emilia and Beatrice are holding their breaths. Shaula puts her hands behind her head, watching over Subaru's decision with a carefree expression. Whilst taking a look at these three individuals, Subaru takes a deep breath, and he places his hand on the thick book's (which looked rather like a dictionary) front cover.

Subaru: "—Let's go."

As if he was trying to persuade himself to do it, Subaru mutters this and opens the book—his senses blackout.

2

—Ever since the woman had been aware of what was around her, there had been nothing.

There had been no one around. There were no men, women, adults, children, elders, babies, no one at all. Alone in the dark, dark, black, black forest, the woman was all alone.

Being able to stand up and walk. Being able to speak. Being able to cry out in order to live. The woman was not able to do any of these things; all of these things were far away, unknown to the woman, vanished beyond oblivion.

"…"

If she doesn't how to speak, she cannot know how to mourn. If she doesn't know how to walk, she cannot know how to resist. If she doesn't know how to live, then there is no reason for her to know about dying.

Therefore, the woman had no choices, the meaning of both life and death were not brought to this woman—she had been snatched away by the fangs of a beast. The beast had a horn on its forehead, and this hideous beast of slaughter was continuously engaged in ferocious slaughter—

The woman did not know why this beast hadn’t crushed her throat with its fangs and had instead dragged her by the nape of her clothing back to its lair.

However, choices, which were not supposed to exist, were born, and the woman’s fate was decided under the beasts.

She did not know any words, so she didn’t know how to mourn. She did not know how to walk, so she didn’t know how to resist. However, as she knew the way of living, she didn’t think she would die.

Taking notice of what had happened, the woman had followed the murderous beasts and had become their queen, and had dominated the entire area.

Assailing their prey however she wanted, eating whenever she felt hungry, killing whenever she felt like it, sleeping whenever she wanted to sleep, living the way she wanted to, killing the way she wanted to, and she was raised amongst the motherhood of slaughter.

In the past, she lost the memory for the reason for her existence. She had been reduced to something like nothing, something that had no need for anything like a symbol, that sort of stuff. At this rate, she believed that for better or worse, she would die alone, as one of these beasts.

???: “—This welcome is far warmer than what I thought it would be. However, I do not mean to hurt you.”

It was a girl in black. Covered with a blood-reeking devilishness, it was a girl in black. The woman who led the group of beasts with a mere action of her hand was deprived of everything she had, by that girl in black.

Blood and flesh overflowed, dying throes scorched the sky, and the smile of the girl in black began to be coated in their jets of blood.

Without knowing how to do anything, the woman, once again, was in a position where she had nothing.

Girl in black: “I’ve been told to take you back with me. That’s why, I shall have you accompany me.”

The girl in black forcefully took the woman who had nothing. She took away the place where she had lived for a long time, the beasts she’d spent so long with, the place where she’d been herself.

Even after all that, the woman still could not do anything.

She did not know any words, so she didn’t know to mourn.

She did not know how to walk, so she didn’t know how to resist.

She lost the way of survival, so this time she may have no choice but to die.

???: “How to mourn, how to resist, how to live, you lost all of those? No way, no way, I couldn’t care less for however many dull excuses you come up with.”

That made her regret of not knowing how to mourn.

???: “Mourn, for my sake. Resist, for my sake. Live, for the sake of loving me.”

That made her regret of not knowing how to resist.

???: “If you’re saying that you’ve lost everything, forgotten everything, parted with everything, then I’ll just have to discipline you, won’t I? —That’s a “Mother’s” Duty after all.”

—That made her regret of forgetting how to live, and her inability to think about how to die.

More hellish than hell, more nightmarish than nightmares, more evil than evil—

As for that, Mother gave all sorts of discipline, not for the sake of the woman, but for the sake of herself.

Mother did not lie.

Mother was impartial.

Mother used every possible means to be loved.

Mother, however, just used distorted version of those means.

She remembered words. How to mourn got peeled away. She remembered how to walk. How to resist was painted away. She remembered how to live. It was etched into her, that there would be no more hope to be had of a way of dying.

Girl in black: “Please stop being under the complete control of that person. Because, except for me, surely, no matter how many lives you get, they would end up being insufficient.”

Suddenly, when she had remembered the way of words, and the way of walking, and the way of living, she had met again the girl in black. The girl in black had often shown her face to the woman. Before she even noticed, she was acting in accompaniment of the girl in black much more than before.

Before meeting Mother for the first time, she remembered when she was thrown into warm water. Covered with blood, mud, and dirt, the merciless girl in black had sloppily rinsed her of the irremovable dirt. Or perhaps, that had been the last sense of freedom the woman had felt.

Mother's intention made it clear that she wanted the woman to be aligned with the girl in black.

The girl in black was abnormally strong. Her way of killing was amazing. She knew more about how to kill rather than how to live. Everything else except for that was estranged in her.

???: "■■■■ is here. Well, it's better to leave it to you."

A single event would shape everything else that had happened, or that's how it felt like. She was undisciplined. She wasn't strict. She was quite a handful as a companion. She couldn't take her eyes off her companion. She was not faithful to Mother. Not just in how she killed, but also in how she lived, there was freedom therein.

She had seen hell. She had seen nightmares. She had seen evil. For her whole life, the woman thought she would never forget the Horror. While she was together with the girl in black, while she went along and helped this undisciplined girl, it felt like what was engraved in her would fade away. But—

The Woman: "—Elsa… Died…"

Died. She died. She turned to ashes and died.

The girl in black who never dies even when she is killed—No, towards the end that girl was Elsa.

Died. She died. She turned to ashes and died.

She had a spear stuck into her belly, she lost both of her arms from her shoulders, and she also saw her with a broken neck. Still Elsa did not die. She thought she would never die.

Died. She died. She turned to ashes and died.

She had also endured Mother's training. She had also endured the hell, and the nightmares and the Horror. But, Elsa had died. She was going to go back being alone. She had lost her herd, she had lost Elsa. She was all alone.

Died. She died. She turned to ashes and died.

Killed. She was killed. She was turned to ashes and killed. Those who had turned Elsa to ashes had captured the woman and imprisoned her.

—Alone, inside a dark room, the woman questions the void around her.

Hate, Hateful, Hatred? The feeling of Hatred, what does it feel like?

Sad, Sadness, Sorrow? The feeling of Sorrow, what does it feel like?

She doesn't know how to mourn.

She doesn't know how to resist.

Even for herself, she doesn't know the value of life.

It was like this from the beginning. Before Elsa had died, before she could recognize that the girl in black was Elsa, before meeting Mother , before beginning her training, before her herd of beasts had been destroyed by the girl in black, before she had begun to lead the herd of beasts, before her life was saved by the whim of a beast, ever since the time she had been torn away from those who were supposed to be her real mother and father, the woman had been a defective product.

The woman was set adrift, living. When she had been a beast, she had imitated the way of living of a beast. After being trained by Mother , she had done exactly what she told her to do. And even after she started to spend time together with Elsa, she had imitated the way she spoke, she had imitated her, imitated.

From the beginning, this woman was that kind of creature. A humanoid creature that imitates people. She had behaved as others desired.

The woman was capable of imitating others, she was a mere sham of the people she imitated, she had the form of a person but was nothing like a person—

Kill the bastard, she wonders if that is what she is thinking. Pursue him, she wonders if she is thinking of that in that manner.

She wants to imitate someone that knows Elsa's death, she wants to precisely know what to do in regards to Elsa's death. She wants to imitate. She wants to see what is the correct norm.

What should she do. She had lost Elsa—who should the woman imitate now?

Time had passed and still she didn't understand. Meanwhile, while keeping up her appearances on the outside, the woman is a woman who continues to exist for the desires of those in her surroundings.

She wished for change. If the events change, if her situation changes, she may come to an answer. That, or Mother may want her to die—that also may be okay.

She had let herself be shaped up as requested, as they desired, as if she was adrift. Then, if Mother desires it, she can also take her life which she can't find any particular value in.

—.

——.

———.

————.

——————She hated it.

She hated ending it right there, ending here, she hated it. A feeling of impatience burned her heart. Her desiring soul, demanded her own desires.

At the very least she wanted to know the answer. The answer to what she should do, now that Elsa had been murdered would do.

???: “—Oh so you came here too, ■■■■■?”

At night. In the library inside the Tower of Sand, in the place where the Books of the Dead were. A voice came from behind her. Around there stood a familiar black haired boy who she knew well. Her heart jumped in that instant. She noticed it herself, deep down that she was afraid. If he were to ask why she was there, she couldn’t answer questions like whose book she herself was looking for that she secretly came here?

The Boy: “I just kinda had a book I wanted to look for. I really should’ve asked the others for help though, I couldn’t stand the feelings of restlessness and…”

The boy is saying something. With a smile and a head tilt, she hides her exalted heartbeat. Pretending as always.

The Boy: “—Don’t stay up too late, ■■■■■”

As she was told that, she left the library. Slowly walking away, then quickening her pace, and in the end, running. He saw what she was doing, he knows what she was doing, he realized what she was doing.

Biting her nails and furrowing her brow, the woman squatted and calmed her breathing. He didn’t see, He didn’t know, He didn’t realize anything.

But she abandoned everything and started again. The woman understood why it was that she came all the way to this place. And it was all the more reason to change everything she knew and start all over again abandoning anything and everything.

The urge controls her head. As her repressed emotions are left to grind on her molars, the woman turns around. Going back through the road she just ran through. Her legs gradually relax and she eventually starts walking slowly. Finally walking so gently so as to eliminate the sound of her footsteps, she returns to the library where the Books of the Dead are.

With his back facing her way, the black haired boy was sitting on the ground. With how many books are scattered around the ground had he already found the Book of the Dead he was looking for? Already guessing that, she felt jealous. But before he notices her she definitely has to—

The Boy: "—You're so damn shallow."

Letting herself be controlled by feelings of desperation, she felt like blaming her impulsive actions. As she stops her feet all that is before her eyes is the black hair on the back of the boy's unturned head.

She was supposed to be coming back without making a sound and holding her breath. It's true that she doesn't hold a candle to Elsa, but even then, she could at least erase the sound of her footsteps. Then how did he find out?

"…"

All of her thoughts become jumbled. She just came here while eliminating the sound of her footsteps, and he still saw through her with his back to her, what kind of explanation can she give now.

—No, even then, she should have said something. taking her training into account. It would've been fine if she had just come here. No matter what, the woman was brought by the boy. She was also supposed to take that into consideration. With a timid smile and a head tilt, she hides her exalted heartbeat. Pretending as al—

The Boy: "Don't try to suck up to me it's disgusting. Nobody would want you doing that to them."

Cutting off her train of thought and shutting her up as she was pondering and going around in her thoughts. What did the black haired boy mean?

The Boy: “Don’t give me that composed face. Submissive little doll. Are you going to ignore that desire in the depths of your own heart?”

Desire in the depths of her heart. Why did hearing him point that out weigh on her so awfully heavily?

The Boy: “Devote yourself to listening to your desire. If you do so, you’ll see yourself a little more. And when you see yourself a little more, you’ll know what you want to do.”

To know. what she wants to do. to see herself. What she wants to do, what she desires, that is—

The Boy: “—Now that’s a nice face. Looks rich.”

When she noticed, the black haired boy had turned around and was standing right before the woman. The Boy’s hand grabbed onto one of the woman’s hanging braids, and stared at her with horrible eyes that held a perverted pleasure. She couldn’t take her eyes off of those dark pupils in front of her…

The Boy: “If you understand your desire and began to see who you really are, then you’ll begin to act more like ”Yourself.” Your boring worries and anguish. I’ll make sure to remember them.”

Selfishly deciding what another person wants, the boy declared so while putting the woman’s hair tips to his lips. This filled her chest with a feeling of dread, however, a slight pain burned in her chest.

The Boy: “—I’ll make sure to remember them.”

If she understood her own desires. If she properly came to see who she really was. Could the woman become more like ”Herself” like what ■■■■■ was supposed to be?

The Woman: “—I wanted to talk about last night. I’m wondering, how seriously should I take what we talked about last night? “

The sun rose, she finished her breakfast, and before they moved to the next trial in the tower, she contacted the black haired boy. She thought about it so much she couldn't sleep. She thought thought thought, but no matter what she couldn't come to an answer.

The boy greeted the woman in the morning almost like his attitude last night never happened or something. So she had to make a special chance, she called out to him. Unable to control her restless feelings, at the very least she needed to get him to a place where no one else could hear them, then it might be better.

The Boy: "Not here. Let's change places."

That suggestion came from the boy. They changed places. As they entered the room, she wanted to question him about the meaning of his words from last night. —Come to think of it, in the library last night, the boy had said something about going to talk with everybody else.

The Boy: "Sorry, ■■■■■"

As those words were whispered into her ear her light body was pushed down into the floor. Falling down. she hit her back on the floor yet couldn't scream. Just as her field of vision was flickering like that, she saw the face of the boy getting on top of her. —The smirk on his face was the most disgustingly fiendish thing she had ever seen.

The Boy: "Asking that directly is against the rules."

Her neck was gripped with a strong force. Her mouth was opening and closing but the air that was so important for her body wasn't coming. Writhing. Struggling. She grabbed the hand on her neck and dug her nails in. Desperately, she kicked her legs.

She can't move or push him off. But if she was Elsa she could deal with him.

The Boy: "This time it was a loss because of breaking the rules, but I hope you'll act even bolder next time. Do your best as you always have."

She didn’t understand what he meant. What was he talking about? What was he saying? What was he telling her?

The Boy: “My oh my, this is going to be very interesting—The Natsuki Subaru murder mystery.”

I’m being killed. The reasoning was nothing but flawed. I’m going to be killed. In the end could I do anything at all? Killed. When I was hunting in that forest, what did I. Killed. Meaninglessly unable to do anything. Being killed. It was fun. Killed. It was enjoyable. Be Killed. Like I was part of some childish game. Being killed. Killed. Killed. Killed. Killed. Killed. Killed.

—I’ll kill you.

3

Subaru: “Uh, AAAAAAAAAAAAHHH?!”

In an instant, his head jumped back as if he was being flicked away. ■■■■■■ fell backwards, dropping what he was holding in his hands. He saw the world go around in circles. He took a pained breath. His lungs were having panicked spasms at his labored breathing.

Emilia: “Hey, Subaru?!”

As he was remembering the painful shock, the silver haired girl rushed over to ■■■■■■ who was screaming in pain. She was followed by a girl with light colored hair. Both of them came and propped him up at the same time.

Subaru: “I- I am… ah. eh? I? w-w-wwwhat just. how. wh-. eh?”

Beatrice: “Deep breaths! Take deep breaths, in fact! You don’t need to force yourself to talk, I suppose! Emilia, do not touch that book under any circumstances, in fact!”

His eyes were going in circles and foam was sprouting from the corners of ■■■■■■’s mouth as the girl—Correction, Beatrice desperately called out to him. Beatrice called out to the silver haired g—Emilia who was reaching for the book. Yes, Emilia once again nodded and retracted her hand away after all.

Emilia: “But Beatrice, Subaru is looking weird! this book is…”

Beatrice: “That’s exactly the reason why, It would be troublesome if Emilia were to fall into the same condition, I suppose! It’s probably quite likely that he ended up diving in too deep, in fact. He is confusing how he talks, I suppose.”

At Beatrice’s analysis, Emilia’s cheeks stiffen and she gulps. Following that, she swiftly comes to ■■■■■■’s side and holds on to his cheek, meeting his eyes with her own pupils.

Emilia: “Subaru, Remember. You’re ok, you are Natsuki Subaru, my knight. You’re clueless about the world and broke beyond compare, You get along with everybody and…you’re. You’re…”

Emilia starts picking through her memories, hysterically bringing up everything she can. While hearing her say all of that, ■■■■■■ begins to. ■■■■ru begins to. Su■■ru begins to

—Subaru begins to recall himself.

Subaru: “I- I…ah, Emilia, Beatrice…I am, me, right? I’m not her I am… Without Elsa, err…”

Emilia: “You’re doing fine, stay calm. everything is fine… slowly. Slowly, okay?”

Beatrice: “Like a splinter, slowly pull out those lodged memories, in fact. And then, you’ll be able to come back to the normal Subaru, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Ugh, hk…”

Emilia and Beatrice, Talk to Subaru—Yes, Subaru. They talk to Subaru. While those words are reaching his ears, somehow, he sorts through all he saw just now.

Sorting through them. Doing it somehow. Down to the very end. The memories. The moment his life was extinguished.

Julius: “Emilia-sama, sorry I made you wait. I heard about it from Madame Ram on the way—”

Echidna: “Is it true that you found that girl’s named book?”

Then, Julius who was running up the stairs arrived. Julius, Echidna and Ram arrived and were caught up with the fact that Meili was absent. To those three people, Emilia and Beatrice started explaining the current situation

“…”

Shaula was silently staring, she was staring at a book, lying at her feet to which she was indifferent. She narrowed her black eyes. There wasn’t a single hint of emotion in that stare. She was simply, silent.

—Silently staring.

Chapter 47:
I Won’t Forgive

A dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark place.

In the back of his head, the back, back, back, back, back, back, back.

Myself, I, I, who, you, you, Natsuki Subaru, Meili Portroute.

Natsuki Kenichi, Elsa Granhiert, Natsuki Naoko, Petra Leyte, Emilia, Shaula, Beatrice, Frederica Baumann, Anastasia Hoshin, Garfiel Tinsel, Julius Juukulius, Otto Suwen, Ram, the blue hair, who is, I am, you are, I am, myself is, the others are, I, you, you, me—

—Myself, I… Natsuki Subaru. Myself, I… Natsuki Subaru.

—Who, I… Meili Portroute. Who, I… Meili Portroute.

“…”

These thoughts spin round and round and round in his mind, blurring the lines between what is reality and what isn’t. They are fused together as one, blending as one, becoming entwined as one, feeling affection as one, hating as one, suffering as one, loving as one, desiring as one, killing as one, wishing as one, destroying as one, threatening as one, understanding as one, crying as one, laughing as one, not understanding as one.

“You can only be yourself. Others can only be themselves.” There’s no room for compromise, no compromise out of pity, no chance to engender a compromise, no being considerate to each other; there’s nothing, nothing at all in the end.

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “…”

Shaking his head back and forth, he exerts himself in trying to extract the thorn of the so called Other Person from inside himself with utmost effort. Emilia and Beatrice both gently hoist him up by his shoulders, and prop the struggling boy up from his left and right. Whilst feeling traces of the two's worries on their cheeks, the boy—the individual that should be called Natsuki Subaru is trying to determine the boundary between his own self and others. He is struggling trying to regain himself.

A swirl of thoughts clouds him, the correct answer disappears due to the whirl of emotions which were melting together inside him. His lungs were convulsing; if he were to feel his throat now, he would realize that his breathing had become painful. From within his neck, he was experiencing a severe difficulty in his breathing that had come to life just now. A fear that he would suffocate was slowly attacking him. The sensation of impending Death once again revives within him, the feeling of wanting to vomit surfaces inside him and causes tears to stream out of his eyes.

Subaru: "…"

Whilst confronted by this horrible feeling, Subaru slowly and carefully tries to excludes things which would don't define him from within him, struggling to establish his own personal identity. First person pronouns, second person pronouns, memory, recollections, impressions, feelings… identify which belong to the other person, and distinguish between them.

Just like that, if he sifts through what is not his and removes the stuff that got blended together, he will go back to as he was. Otherwise, this state where they are fused and blended together will never peel off. It was himself, and the little girl who had been killed by his own Hands that were mixed together into a hodgepodge of—

Echidna: "—Natsuki-kun, what on earth did you see? Are you able to tell us?"

Subaru: "Uh, ah? "

A voice had called out from in front of Subaru, as he was immersed by his current identity crisis. He looks at her. Right in front of him, at the same level he was crouched at, a person with pale, turquoise eyes is squinting at him: "Anastasia—No, now it's Echidna, right? In any case, it's that girl. Despite Subaru having such recognition, Echidna's eyes remain quite serious, and she continues to speak.

Echidna: "I sympathize that you are in a tough spot. But, the current situation we are all in is quite grave. If you are able to, we need information as soon as possible. That way we don't make any mistakes when dealing with this."

Emilia: "Wait, Echidna… Just now, Subaru experienced something terrible…"

Echidna: "Of course, I know that. I also appreciate that his recklessness was something he did for us, you know… That is why we ought to have a duty in responding quickly to his judgement."

Subaru can only let out a hoarse breath, as Echidna's assertions pierce through Emilia who had tried to defend him. Whilst talking, Echidna's gaze for a moment turned towards the fallen book on the floor behind him. Taking a look at the thick black binding of the book, Echidna continued her speech with a: "Because,"

Echidna: "The little girl who accompanied us is missing. Furthermore, we found a book which seemed to match with the little girl's name in this library that records the memories of the dead… This situation is serious. We can not afford to be treading water here."

Emilia: "That's… Yeah, but…"

Emilia can't find a rebuttal against Echidna's low, insisting tone of voice. In fact, Echidna's complaint was justified. In this messed-up situation, the only one to possess such vital information is Subaru. Taking everyone's feelings into consideration, it can be said that everyone here has no time to spare to calm down. As she knows that, Echidna is prepared to be blamed, so with a steeled heart, she raised her questions at Subaru.

At hearing her resolve, Subaru grits his teeth again and places his hand against his throat. With all his strength, fighting against the feeling that he can't breathe, he shut his eyes and—

Echidna: “Let me try asking again, Natsuki-kun. What did you see inside the bo—”

Subaru: “—I saw… Meili’s… memories…”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru responds with perfect honesty to Echidna’s questions without attempting to deceive her. Just as he said that, next to her, Emilia held her breath, and in front of him, Echidna closed her eyes. Next to them, Beatrice, Julius and Ram each respectively have expressions of worry and grief floating across their faces.

The Book of the Dead had shown Subaru Meili’s memories. There isn’t a single person here who wouldn’t be able to understand what that meant.

Could there have been a mistake and the memories in Meili’s book had been laid out there by some error? How easy would it have been to comfort oneself by clinging onto such futile hope. However, in this place, he isn’t alone in not wanting to surrender himself to this deception and escaping towards the more comfortable option. Especially for the girls right next to Subaru whose cheeks had stiffened in distress trying to bear this.

Beatrice: “Calm down, Subaru, in fact. Calm down, and focus on regaining yourself, I suppose.”

Subaru”…So… rry”

Beatrice: “It’s okay, in fact. Right now, you can rely on Betty, I suppose… This isn’t just your fault Subaru, in fact. Don’t beat yourself up, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…”

Beatrice had stood up and hugged Subaru’s head as he breathed unsteadily. The little girl was gently stroking his black hair with her hands. Whilst checking on Subaru’s wellbeing, which was scattered into thousands of little pieces, he notes the irony in it.

Beatrice had so benevolently said that it wasn’t Subaru’s fault. But, this was no one's fault but Natsuki Subaru's who had committed this crime. Not knowing this fact, Beatrice was speaking gently to him and treating him kindly; it was so absurd that it was almost comical, yet harrowing.

Julius: "—Miss Ram, what do you think?"

As Beatrice and Subaru had been giving this exchange, Julius, with a serious look etched on his face had turned towards Ram and tried to get her input on the matter. Compared to the others, the complexion of those two had not paled in shock to the same extent. Following Meili's memories, it's known that these two had been the most wary about her. At least, Meili had felt that both Ram and Julius had never lacked in vigilance towards her, as she had once been an assassin. Conversely, she had certainly taken note of Emilia and Echidna's carelessness towards her.

Julius: "If you believe the words that Subaru just spoke, Miss Meili has already…"

Ram: "There's no way Barusu would be skillful or cold-hearted enough to conjure up a lie in this situation…I'm certain that the book is Meili's. To make sure, we could have someone else check it?"

Holding her slender arms, Ram glares down at the book that was still lying on the floor. Following that speech, Julius frowned in thought and said:

Julius: "—If I were to…"

Ram: "Would there even be any leeway for you, since you'd be reading one these books for a second time? So to speak, what if doing it a second time you end up in the same state as Barusu. Of course, we could also presume that it has only resounded to this degree in Barusu due to him being immature and inexperienced…"

Julius: "…"

Ram: "But unfortunately, when it comes to your mindset now, whether it can be said to be more stable than Barusu's, Ram hasn't evaluated it as being any better.”

Standing up stiffly, Julius held his breath as he heard Ram’s words, who had narrowed her light-pink eyes. However, he quickly shook his head and said: “That’s reasonable…”

Julius: “…It’s bitter, but, I have no basis to reject the words of Miss Ram. Yesterday, when I acted in this predicament so selfishly and arbitrarily without consulting anyone… I’m definitely not qualified to do this at all.”

Echidna: “I am sorry, but I also agree.”

Echidna raised her hand up and barged her way into the conversation after hearing Julius’ self-deprecating words. And, whilst fiddling with her white scarf which was wrapped around the base of her neck, she said: “

Echidna: “However, the basis of my argument is not about the state of mind which Julius is in. Purely, I am only stating my opposition to this from looking at the state Natsuki-kun is in and saying that it’s too dangerous to try this!”

Ram: “It’s pretty much a fact that it’s dangerous. It’s quite obvious that this situation is pretty messed up.”

Julius: “Indeed. Since the last time, it seems that the influence from reading the book has come out more strongly. The only question is whether this is down to reading the book more than once or whether it’s due to the specific book you read.”

Ram: “Maybe it’s both the number of times you read it, and who the book belongs to?”

As Ram and Julius wrack their brains, Echidna nods at the two saying: “Aah,”

Echidna: “Simply put, could there be a mechanism where your burden increases the more books you read? …Or, perhaps, could it be that it warps your mind due to seeing the memories of a person that was close to you? I think the possibilities are divided into two.”

Ram: “A person close to you, huh?”

Echidna had raised her fingers up, and to her conjecture, Ram turned towards Subaru. Whilst seeing her glaring at him, Subaru desperately tried not to scream from where he was, his face pressed against the middle of Beatrice’s delicate chest.

Most likely, Echidna’s guesses were correct. The reason why Subaru’s heart had suffered so much damage was due to her latter guess—the cause of this burden was likely because he had looked at the memories of someone he was quite well acquainted with.

People involved in closer relationships—Those fresh records of Life bring a greater impact.

It’s natural that people are more interested in closer companions than people they have more distant relationships with. Subaru also wished this as a fact. As a matter of fact, Subaru… and Meili’s minds had almost merged together and he was coming to grips with that he wanted to know her.

As a result, Subaru had come to face the unfathomable emptiness in the depth of Oneself. That young girl had been carrying this feeling of emptiness for all of her life—

Emilia: “—Anyways, we can’t sit still without doing anything. Let’s go and search for Meili.”

A strong feeling of silence echoed across the room. It had been Emilia who had looked up firmly with both of her hands placed upon her chest and said this. Emilia had gained everyone’s attentions in the library, Subaru widened his eyes at her words.

Subaru: “Search…?”

—Search, searching… what the heck. What is the meaning of this?

—Meili, she, damn but I am already dead.

—Even though they never even cared about her before she died.

Emilia: “Even if we find her, it’s probably too late. If only we had been together with that girl, but probably we couldn’t have. But, at the very least, we need to find her body.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “So, no one at all knows where that little girl could have wandered off to? First of all, we shall find her… And after that, we will see what we can do. Let’s go search for her.”

Emilia’s words weren’t concrete, they were far off from being reliable and wise. What was the point of this? The insistence of the Me inside Subaru remained unchanging. Moreover, it should have argued that it was a useful way of using time, if it was being a realist.

However, no one in this place opposed Emilia’s suggestion. There wasn’t a single person who’d flatly deny her and say that was erring.

Therefore, what followed Emilia’s proposal was a realistic discussion on how to go about searching for Meili. She announced that they would split into groups to search for her.

Emilia: “We have no choice but to change our plan for today. We need to split up and search for her.”

Ram: “Before we do that…Ram will go and check to see if Rem is safe. Before I went out to call for Emilia-sama, Barusu and everyone else, I was with her in the spirit’s room… I will go back now, once again.”

Julius: “That’s okay Miss Ram. …Subaru, it seems like a cruel thing to ask, but I want to make sure. Did you also happen to see Miss Meili’s last moments in her Book of The Dead ?”

Subaru hesitated to answer Julius’ carefully worded inquiry. The answer to that question on whether he had seen Meili’s last moments is a Yes. Subaru had experienced the very moment in which Meili’s Life had been snuffed out. Her neck had been strangled, her consciousness had slipped away as she was being choked, her thoughts had been filled with hatred and despair, and then it had stopped abruptly—it must have been in that very moment that her life had ceased.

It was Natsuki Subaru who had experienced this and had been complicit in hiding the girl's corpse. Natsuki Subaru is helping the man who killed me. The Natsuki Subaru who knows me, was helping none other than 'Natsuki Subaru', the most detestable in this world.

Echidna: "—Natsuki-kun, I want you to answer. Did you see her last moments? Where is she now? Did you see what on earth caused her death?"

Subaru: "…"

Echidna had kept hounding Subaru with questions to as he remained speechless. It felt like the emotions in her words indicated that she was feeling suspicious on her pretty countenance. Her words made him feel on edge. His heartbeat quickens, his back starts to sweat. He fears that Beatrice, by his side, could notice this.

—In fact, Subaru wonders if everyone knows that he had some involvement in Meili's death.

Subaru wonders if they already know and are feigning ignorance in order to draw out a confession from him by cornering him with devious tricks. These crazy ideas cross his mind. But, each time these ideas had come to his mind, the look in their eyes denied these thoughts as being plausible.

Emilia, Beatrice, Echidna and Julius' eyes had turned towards Subaru. His hands stained with blood, his thoughts scuzzy, Subaru is only struggling to frantically protect himself. He possesses such an ugly, rotten heart; that's what it seems like. Then, better yet, listen to my desires—

Subaru: "—I didn't see up until the point where she died. There's no doubt though that she's inside the tower though."

Subaru bit down firmly the temptations brought by her. Dangerous feelings are sprouting up deep down inside of him—she was trying to convince Subaru to confess to his crime. That was the sweet curse left behind by Meili Portroute.

These thoughts are certainly newly born within Subaru. They want Emilia and the others to find Meili's dead body. Find her, mourn her, repent for what had happened, make him feel sorrow; the thoughts inside of him want to relieve the emotions coiled within his heart.

He was getting to the point where he too no longer knew who out of Natsuki Subaru, Myself, and 'Natsuki Subaru' desired what.

Echidna: "… Do you have any strength left to read the book again?"

Beatrice: "Echidna!"

Echidna had thrown out a suggestion at him which you could call completely ruthless, as he struggled to decide on what he wanted. For a second, Subaru tried to reply with a "If you say I have to do it", but before he could, Beatrice had snapped at her. While still hugging Subaru's head, Beatrice's round eyes sharpened.

Beatrice: "What name does Betty have to shout out, in fact…! In any case, I won't let that happen, I suppose. Past this, I oppose it, for both emotional and other reasons, in fact."

Echidna: "Given the risks of being joined together as one, I would never have seriously recommended it. I wanted to make sure he was prepared just in case, that's all. Y'know, It wasn't my intention to make him do it even if he insisted."

Beatrice: "…let's pray that was what you were really thinking, I suppose."

Beatrice speaks angrily over his shoulder to Echidna who was hastily taking back her words. Immediately after this exchange, it was Emilia and Julius simultaneously who broke the awkward silence that the two had left behind.

Emilia: "Stop this now! I also don't agree with making Subaru do more reckless things. I also don't want us to be forever discussing this here. …we need to start moving quickly."

Julius: "I completely agree with Emilia-sama. —In these circumstances, we can assume it's very likely that an accident befell Miss Meili. Something may have happened like slipping off the balcony or off the stairs, or she could have gone outside the tower…"

Shaula: "—That's not what haappened."

Out of nowhere, Shaula who hadn't participated in the conversation until then, had interjected to deny the concerns that Julius had blurted out. She had picked up Meili's Book of The Dead that had fell down underneath the woman's feet. Whilst picking it up by its spine, she was shaking it from left to right.

Shaula: "Beeecause, if Chibiko Number 2 had gone outside the tower, I would definitely have turned into a killing machine! What I mean by that is that no one went outy-side~"

Emilia: "You sure are quick to touch the book that we hesitate to touch, for some reason."

Shaula: "Leaving it out on the floor makes me feel kinda anxious. Like, what if someone thinks that it's disrespectful towards the library…I don't actually want to be a presence kill-'em-all, you know?"

Whilst saying this, Shaula was throwing the Book of The Dead around her hands as if she was juggling it. Her attitude seemed to be one born out of fear of disrespecting the library, however, it felt more unscrupulous in effect than anything. Julius scowled at her attitude.

Julius: "Miss Shaula, I would like for you to stop messing about with the book. You're…"

Shaula: "You guys think that my heart isn't filled with grief or something like thaaat? I'm not sure I said such a thing. For sure Chibiko Number 2 clung to me quite often. I also didn't dislike Number 2, but… ultimately, except for Master, I don't give a fig about anyone elseee!"

Looking quite indifferent, Shaula smiled and disregarded Julius' words. He couldn't catch a glimpse of any evil intent in what she had said. It was undoubtedly what Shaula really felt, at least, that's how Subaru perceived it.

In brief, she's a person who also finds it hard to comprehend certain emotions within her heart, compared to ordinary people. —Actually, no. Ever since he came to this place Subaru, has only had a limited amount of contact with them; it's no wonder he isn't able to comprehend their true feelings.

He wonders what complex emotions could be hiding on the other side of the mask of her smiling face.

Though, that was just something he'd came to realize all too well now, after assimilating my life.

Emilia: "—Let's split up, we'll look for Meili. Subaru, you stay here with Beatrice."

In between Subaru's self-condemnation and the awkward atmosphere left behind by Shaula, Emilia raised her voice and cuts in with a few words to urge them all into action. Subaru's heart panged with shame at hearing the girl's instructions. They want to find me—

Emilia: "Beatrice, I'm leaving Subaru to you, ok? I'm going to go look around where Reid is."

Beatrice: "Very well, in fact. —Emilia and everybody else, Be careful, I suppose."

Exchanging these words, and placing him under Beatrice's care, Emilia and Beatrice sort out everyone's roles, praying for some stroke of luck in this situation. Emilia took Ram, Echidna and Julius with her, and went back into the tower to search for Meili. As he sees them disappearing out of the library, Subaru can't find any words to see them off—

Beatrice: "—Well then, I guess you aren't thinking about going with them, in fact."

After seeing off the search party, she had been left behind next to Subaru. Whilst glaring at Shaula, Beatrice had bluntly said this. At receiving Beatrice's scathing glance, Shaula replied in an exaggerated tone: "Buuuuuuut"

Shaula: "You gotta remember my role here is just as Stars-Keeper, nooo? So, given that I've taken that title, my body and soul belong to Master… so if Master was to wish for it, I would follow his requests with all I haaave."

Beatrice: "If that's the case, then you must also go and search for Meili, I suppose. Don't just dawdle here."

Shaula: "Hm, reaaally, is that so?"

Shaula had craned her neck and looked towards Subaru with a look on her face that looked almost coquettish. Looking over Beatrice's head, she questions Subaru about it directly. There's something bewitching about her appearance—rather than the usual nonchalant appearance on her face, for the first time her facial expression showed signs of something else other than the usual youthful demeanor she has.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru's heart once again leapt at seeing the charm in her face, it was as if he had been surprise attacked. He reflexively raised his face up and looked back into Shaula's black irises, in which he couldn't read anything from. Face-to-face with Subaru, Shaula's lips relax, and showing no traces of malintent she holds the Book of The Dead in front of her ample breasts.

Shaula: "If Master wished me to do so, I would even knock down the moooon. That's why I want to hear it from Master, not from the half-witch, or from Chibiko Number 1 or from the pretty boy."

Subaru: "I…"

Shaula: "Master, what should I dooo? Do you want me to look for Chibiko Number Twooo? Or…?"

Shaula trailed off her words, choosing not to say anything past that point. However, while looking for Subaru's decision and while she held the Book of The Dead by her breasts, Shaula refrained herself from saying any more. Subaru reflected but couldn't come up with anything to say to her unwavering attitude.

Where was the right answer deep down in himself?

Subaru: "…"

His conflicted emotions towards what Emilia and the others had suggested were proof of Natsuki Subaru's current contradictory existence.

—Meili Portroute… her life, which by no means could be said to have been long.

By having read the contents within her Book of The Dead, it had snatched away at him as it liked, as if digesting parts of him; blasphemously chewed, swallowed, and digested with an invisible stomach. 'Natsuki Subaru' had fully savored the life of me in twice the meaning of it.

As a result, the mixed consciousnesses of Natsuki Subaru and 'Natsuki Subaru' were divided into something which half resembled schizophrenia, having also now taken in the little girl.

—Subaru wants to conceal the manner in which Meili had died.

—Subaru wishes them to find Meili's dead body that he himself had hid.

—Subaru hates 'Natsuki Subaru' who killed me.

And thus, contradicting wishes were born inside of Subaru, spurring him in trying to make their desires come true.

Subaru: "—Shaula, go and search for Meili. Please go and help Emilia and everyone else."

Before he could even notice it, Subaru was issuing out something like an order regarding what to do about Meili. Receiving his instructions, Shaula raised her eyebrows and straightened her body into a salute.

Shaula: “Roger that! If that’s what Master wishes, I will do whateeever you desire!”

Winking at him, whilst giving him a loving salute, Shaula held out the book towards Subaru. He received from her the book which felt like a black weight in that moment; Shaula stuck out her tongue at Subaru whose face had scrunched up into a frown. She looked somewhat mischievous, just like she was getting her own back; she turned away from Subaru and she jumped down the library stairs with one giant leap. He sees her swaying black hair gradually disappearing from his sights. Feeling as if he had been released from a great tension, Subaru let out a sigh of relief.

Subaru: “Such strange things…”

—The falsely accused Natsuki Subaru, who doesn’t want to divulge his participation in the crime, or let them find her dead body.

—I, the victim, wish for them to find my body and clear the anger and regret from myself.

—‘Natsuki Subaru’, the perpetrator, who murders people and piles up acts of wickedness one after the other.

All of these thoughts exist alongside each other in one body; all of them loom over and try to press Natsuki Subaru into selecting one of their choices. If he truly only cared about his own skin, he would have shut his mouth regarding Meili’s life and death; he would have worked his brain harder to falsify the contents that he had seen within the Book of the Dead.

In fact, he couldn’t really have done that, Subaru wouldn’t really have the intelligence to do such an act, but more than that, he felt hostility towards ‘Natsuki Subaru’ and emphasized towards My own regrets—there was anger towards himself, in letting such a wicked being do as it pleases.

It’s true that last time, and the time before that, and even before that, that someone had been behind Subaru dying. But even that seems like as if it's a plot set up by 'Natsuki Subaru' lurking inside of Subaru. It seems likely that it's a trap setup to make Subaru act rashly and hate the others.

After all, what he had thought before reading the Book of The Dead was right, wasn't it. Emilia, Meili and everyone else, not one of them was truly evil… the only one who is evil is Natsuki Subaru, isn't it.

Beatrice: "Subaru, it's not good for you to be languishing in thought, in fact. It'd be better if you let go of that book, I suppose."

Subaru: "…"

Just noticing her, Beatrice was kneeling right beside him, looking at him with a look of concern in her eyes. Right in front of him, she was giving him a look of concern—It resurfaced in his mind that Emilia had looked at him in the exact same way. A sense of discomfort takes hold of Subaru's heart.

The emotions that Beatrice was letting off—they weren't directed towards Natsuki Subaru himself, rather, they were directed at 'Natsuki Subaru.' It seems like such a terribly dishonest thing to do in having received this himself after having hidden the fact that he'd lost his memory, and on top of that, having kept his silence about the true nature of 'Natsuki Subaru.'

Shouldn't he tell them? Before he knew it, it had been the current Natsuki Subaru who had snatched Meili's Life from her. If that's what was going to happen, then, before that danger is once again turned towards Emilia, Beatrice and the others—

Subaru: "…Why are you so kind to me?"

Beatrice: "—. Wait, that's such a sudden question, in fact. What's the matter, I suppose."

Subaru: "No, nevermind…"

As a final word on this matter, if he is to crack the meaning behind these relationships that he had borrowed, maybe he needs to hear what had happened before becoming like so—their real opinion. He needs to know the real meaning of why Emilia, Beatrice and everyone else have such so much faith and are always turning towards 'Natsuki Subaru.'

Subaru: "…"

The moment he had tried to put some deep thought into it, a feeling of hesitation arises inside of Subaru's heart. That which I had turned towards Elsa. Emilia and the others, who in this world treat Natsuki Subaru as someone close to them, that which they turn towards 'Natsuki Subaru.'

A gemstone that only Natsuki Subaru could have, that only he could gaze upon. The traces, the lingering scent, the remnants, the warmth that should have been there, why was it that only Natsuki Subaru was exposed to it in such proximity?

Subaru: "…"

Why, such a man…

Why, such a cruel human being…

Why, a man with such a cruel smile…

Why, this man involved in the death of Elsa…

Why, this man who laughed as he murdered Meili…

Why, this man who tried to conceal My death…

Why, is such a man, this man, this man—so loved?

Subaru: "…"

I want to know. I don't know. I want to know. I don't know. Only me, only Subaru, only I do not know the reason. I don't know. I don't understand. It's all so one-sided.

Subaru: "…"

If I ask, will I understand? If I ask, will I be able to call it into question? Can you tell me?

Did you think it was genuine? The smile I expressed… the smile I showed was a fake… there was emptiness in my heart. That’s because everyone wears masks, even you, Natsuki Subaru. Even despite you not having wanted to show it to your mother and father outside the house.

If there’s a way to know the truth, then where is it. What do they all really think of me, what are their true feelings, why do they all believe in ‘Natsuki Subaru’?

I can give that to you—A way to know about this.

Subaru: “…”

A voice resonating in his mind cruelly seduces him. And he realizes that the solution to the problem that had dominated his thoughts for so long was close by.

Hadn’t there been up until now a way to know the answer to this resting in between his arms?

Beatrice: “Subaru?”

Staring at the silent Subaru, Beatrice narrowed her eyes with uneasiness. Without returning her gaze, Subaru simply looked down between his arms.

Subaru: “…”

—A black, heavy tome, it seemed like it was offering a gruesome welcome to his curiosity.

Chapter 48:
Murder Becomes a Habit

1

Subaru: “…”

Subaru was silent whilst he looked down at the black cover of the Book of The Dead which he held in between his arms.

Beatrice nestles closer to him, and feeling her worried and strange gaze, Subaru doesn’t dare to move.

Until now, what had dominated Natsuki Subaru’s mind were questions he’d ask himself without any particular answer, as if engaging in zen dialogue.

The truth is, what had occupied Subaru’s mind were just shallow thoughts that could be discarded as just wasteful thinking. They were the laughable, vague questions of a child.

—Everyone, no matter who, always has an inner face which others would never see.

This was an obvious truth which everyone learned as they come of age. The expression of hatred behind a smile, the sorrow and tears behind their anger. It is human beings that can pretend that these emotions don’t exist, While hiding their true feelings.

It is impossible to fully understand the true wishes, the true desires, the true intentions, of those human beings.

Brothers, sisters, parents, children, spouses, family members… you can never fully come to understand any of them. Friends, childhood friends, best friends, lovers… no matter how close your relationship becomes, by no means is it ever possible to uncover what is hidden deep inside them.

What they love. What they desire. What they prefer. Who they let their guard down around. Who they feel comfortable with. These were completely different problems to those various connections of mind and body.

Indeed, he knows that. But, still, he doesn't want to abandon these thoughts just for the sake of it. He wants to know, he wants to understand it, he wants to hear it, he wants them to reveal everything. That is his arrogant, but desired wish. Even more so, when it involves both his own and the others lives hanging by a thread. Even if there is absolutely no way to do it, nor would one come to be.

—No, there was supposed to be absolutely no way to do it.

He laughed at the thought of it, sure there was supposed to be absolutely no way to do such a thing. But, in this Taygeta library, Subaru ended up finding out how.

"…"

Meili Portroute. By reading her Book of The Dead, Subaru vicariously experienced Meili's life, understood what she thought and felt, and who she hated at the time of her demise.

Of course, this extremely short experience did not define Meili entirely. The time she had spent alive was too long to even accept all her individual events into his brain. Even if it had been a short life that she had lived, he could by no means have absorbed into him all of her memories.

Eagerly gnawing away at the key points, drinking them in with the intention of understanding Meili. Those were how Natsuki Subaru felt right now, such was painfully clear to see.

However, but, even so. By comprehending that he didn't understand even a bit of the girl, Subaru now had a deeper understanding of Meili than ever before.

—There was a person whom I cherished. Her life was stolen away from me, and, now alone, my heart continued to wander. Being with Subaru and the others, who were the ones responsible for that, I struggled to understand what exactly my purpose was. I went to the library to find her Book of The Dead, and I felt ashamed and in despair when I was discovered.

Meili, whom Subaru knew absolutely nothing about. He had discovered the girl's innermost feelings and desires without even expecting it, and thus he had realized.

This Book of The Dead itself was the means to truly find out the true intentions of others, without any falsehoods between.

Subaru: "…"

It was just that he wants to know, that's the only thing he desires. The real intentions of Emilia, Beatrice, and the others in the tower is what he wishes to know. He wants to know why they put so much trust in 'Natsuki Subaru.'

Why do they believe 'Natsuki Subaru' who was responsible for killing Me? And now, what do they think of Subaru who desperately pretends to be the despicable 'Natsuki Subaru' ?

Intimacy is just camouflage, hatred is the reality, and feelings like anger, sadness and joy are temporary. Hostility and malice, aren't those their true feelings?

I don't know. I want to know. I want to trust them. I can't trust them. Are Emilia and the others allies, or are they enemies; are they enemies who killed Subaru, or are they allies that want him to live? Can he love them, or can't he? Can he hate them or can't he?

—Won't he obtain that answer by reading their Book of The Dead ?

Beatrice: "…Subaru, you really look terrible, in fact. If you are feeling uneasy here, it'd be better if we went somewhere else for you to rest, I suppose."

Touching Subaru's shoulder, who was immersed in thought, Beatrice gives her suggestion. Subaru was rendered breathless for a minute, being trapped by the gaze of her characteristic blue butterfly pattern in her eyes. Looking at it, the girl's tiny, tiny palm rested on Subaru's shoulder.

What would happen if he took her hand, grabbed her head and smashed it on the floor with all his strength?

Subaru: “How, small…”

Beatrice: “Wh… what are you suddenly starting to say in fact? This smallness is exactly the reason behind Betty’s loveliness, I suppose. Subaru has also said that in fact.”

Subaru reflexively relaxes his cheeks, as Beatrice sullenly blurts this out. Certainly, if Subaru was in his normal state, it wouldn’t be weird for him to have said that. Noticing the similarity between himself and ‘Natsuki Subaru’, he smiles bitterly.

Small. Truly, Beatrice was just, a small child. Her neck was thin and her bones fragile. The hand that rested on Subaru’s shoulder was small enough to be fully covered by his palm. If he put even a bit of strength into his arms whilst hugging her, it seems like her fragile body would break. If these thoughts are turned to actions, he should be able to easily kill her.

—If he kills her, if her life blinks out of existence, will her book appear in the library?

???: “Just like you did with me, n~o.”

Subaru: “…”

Suddenly, Subaru hears a voice from his subconscious, one which would be impossible to call his own. It is somewhat sweet, glossy enough to sound adult, but it was a strangely familiar voice. In that short period of time, the voice became familiar enough that he could call it his own.

The voice inside him was that of the dead little girl who mocks Natsuki Subaru’s intentions.

Subaru: “…”

However, Subaru discards this event, concentrating on the matter in front of him. That is, whether the Book of The Dead could be realistically utilized.

If so, then how would he go about making this come true—

Beatrice: “Your face looks really pale, I suppose. Indeed, we should go somewhere else in fact. But before that…”

Subaru: “—ah”

Beatrice: “I must return that where it originally was, I suppose. It’s no good for Betty too, to be in the haze, in fact.”

Saying that, Beatrice takes the Book of The Dead from Subaru’s stiff hands. She holds it cautiously to ensure the book doesn’t open, and places it where there was an empty gap in the bookshelf; the place where it originally was.

Beatrice: “It’s easy to understand and remember where I positioned it, I suppose. However, it’s possible that the books in this library will just start moving on it’s own…”

Subaru: “A safety measure, huh… that’s, mhm, yeah, I suppose that’s right.”

Beatrice: “You ought to think that bringing it out is pretty dangerous in fact. This is safer than throwing them out onto the floor because Shaula is worried about that, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I feel like being in this library is a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Subaru dryly spits these words out as he replies to Beatrice.

In reality, even in the world which Subaru knows, it’s said that opportunities like coming across a book which has been published a number of years ago only come once. Just like coming across a second-hand bookstore whilst travelling, if he misses out on this opportunity, he may never find the book ever again. This speculation may also apply to this library.

Like usual, had he been overthinking this? No doubt that this thought is bothering him.

Either way, whilst warily looking at Beatrice’s back as she struggles to arrange the books, Subaru immerses himself deeper and deeper into his sea of thoughts.

Awfully realistically, counting backwards the lives from the warmth he'd felt, he searched for a way to kill her. Although, Beatrice isn't the only one he should think about. Every single one of the members who are inside the tower are in a position to becoming a target to Subaru's plan involving the Books of the Dead.

Meili: "So you want to try and kill them because you want to check if they can be trusted, or if they should be doubted; Onii-san truly is wa~rped."

The voice of the little girl interrupted him, causing Subaru to inwardly click his tongue.

The first thing he wants to say back to her is that he thinks that this is a necessary thought-experiment. By no means is Subaru a psychopath that is dominated by homicidal impulses, he isn't controlled by such abnormal urges whereby he must take pleasure in deeds like that. But, right now, when he was thinking this through, this had been the only choice that had come to his mind. It seemed rational.

Meili: "Enough with the excuses… I wo~nder, can't you just tell me what you're going to do?"

—It would be very easy to get rid of Beatrice.

This is because Subaru can see her back… unprotected, defenseless, completely unguarded. It can be clearly stated that Beatrice's life is precariously balanced by a thread which depends entirely on Subaru's flawed reasoning. When that "rationality" surpasses reason, Subaru will very likely take the girl's life quite easily. When it comes to Beatrice, the only options he has are to do or to not do. It seemed possible to entirely disregard the countless other possibilities that branched off as an alternative from his standpoint.

Meili: "We~ll, what a~bout the half-witch Onee-san?"

The likes of Emilia would be even easier… a piece of cake. Once, he had even seized her by the neck after he had woken up. In the past, she hadn't shown any signs of resistance. As long as Subaru put all of his strength into his arms, he could easily break that fragile neck of hers. Certainly he can say that she has strength similar to that of a pro wrestler, but it means nothing unless she is prepared to use it. If in an instant, he strangles her neck with all his strength…

Meili: "Hee hee hee, it's your specialty, e~h?"

—Ram, despite her sharp tongue, is in essence also merely a weak girl. It reminded Subaru about the time she cried while pressing her head against him, entreating him for his memories. With her thin arms desperately embracing him, weak, she was just a girl after all. Echidna is also the same way. Come to think of it, they're all weak girls. He really made the wrong selection of people if the mission was to cross the desert. As much as he would have liked to have more suitable people with him, there really just weren't enough people to go around.

Therefore, even though Subaru could take advantage of that chance, the last obstacle in his way is a different story.

Subaru: "—Julius."

The only man who is the same as Subaru, until even now this character which carries a sword in hand, is an obstacle that stood in his way. It'd be impossible for him to say that it would be a good idea to strike at him head-on—you could also it's a suicidal act to strike at Emilia head-on, but that's a whole other story.

In any case, if he was to implement the Book of The Dead plan, he will be the biggest wall in his way. In other words, Julius is the one he should beat first.

Meili: "With the amount of time it takes to search for the books, however much time you have, it's not going to be enough r~ight?"

According to the words of the girl, Subaru's purpose isn't simply "kill and be done with it". Rather, killing is a necessity, a passing point that must be cleared—as his desires lay in front, on the side of the Books of The Dead obtained in exchange for death.

For that purpose, it is necessary to be certain. He had killed, he had failed, so he could not let it end like this. Beyond this, he has a goal.

Beatrice: “Subaru, that’s enough books for the moment, in fact. Let’s get far away from here… like the Spirit’s Room or somewhere like that, I suppose. You should calm down there, in fact.”

Subaru: “Spirit’s… room…”

Beatrice, coming back, taking Subaru’s hand helps him to stand up; Subaru is reminded of the room with the spirit, and his restart point came to mind. That place is the green room, and at that place—

Subaru: “Patrasche…”

Beatrice: “…You’re saying that earth dragon’s name again… Jeez, there’s no point worrying about a partner like you, I suppose. I was the worried one…I cant believe this, in fact.”

Subaru: “… So- sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

For a moment, the figure of the black earth dragon brushed his mind, and his lips softened. As Beatrice watched, Subaru hurriedly came back to his senses. However, even in this scene, Patrasche remains the only one who Subaru can put his trust in.

Actually, only Patrasche who ran the risk of death to defend Subaru, regardless of its true intentions or feelings, a being who remained by the side of Natsuki Subaru—

Meili: “Really? If she knew that Onii-san isn’t ‘Natsuki Subaru’, I still wo~nder if she would do the same thing.”

Subaru: “…”

Meili: “After all, on Onii-san’s side… there isn’t anyone, is there?”

Resonating in his mind is a smiling voice, mocking Subaru. Haunting him, an existence that differs from Natsuki Subaru tries to break his optimism.

It was a silly point, and he would've been better off laughing it away. However, at this moment, Subaru couldn't afford that. His heart came to half-agree with the girl's words.

If they were to discover that even the kindness that made Patrasche throw her everything at him, that which was directed at "Natsuki Subaru", and that the current Subaru was a fake, he reckoned she would come to disregard him.

Beatrice: "Hey, Subaru, give me your hand, I suppose."

Subaru: "A, sure…"

His brain being toyed around by the girl's voice, Subaru grits his teeth with emotions that were hard to accept.

Consequently, his vision started to shift out of focus. Holding out her hand, in an attempt to hold his, suddenly she made a face indicating that she had noticed something. Her gaze staring at Subaru's wrist—she noticed it.

Beatrice: "There are scratches, in fact… and, so many…"

Rolling up the sleeve of Subaru's right arm, Beatrice furrowed her eyebrows at the scratches, pathetic and painful to look at. Even if it seemed she did not notice the scratches deeply bored further up in his arm, just the forearm is enough.

Subaru: "…"

At the moment, Beatrice does not know how Meili had died. She therefore shouldn't be able to immediately connect these scratches with Meili's death. But, even discounting this, she should be wondering where on earth he got these scratches.

If Meili's corpse is found, she will inevitably be suspicious.

Subaru: "…"

His unprepared heart began beating like an alarm bell going off.

Before his eyes, laying her eyes upon his hand, Beatrice did not notice that expression of his. With instant action it would be possible to take care of Beatrice.

Meili: “What are you gonna doo? Shouldn’t you get started already?”

As if playing with his self-confidence, the voice urges Subaru to a decision. His temple throbbed from the blood circulating through it, along with his pounding heart. As things were, depending on what Beatrice continued with, he’d have to…

Beatrice: “It seems you scratched your arm again. A bad habit, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…ah?”

Beatrice: “This isn’t good, in fact. If Emilia had noticed it, you would have made her really worried, I suppose. Even Betty can’t overlook this when it’s this bad, in fact.”

Tracing Subaru’s scars with her fingers, Beatrice painfully cast her eyes down. Following those remarks, Subaru was unable to move from the unexpected impact of her words.

It was almost as if Beatrice was familiar with the scratches that covered Subaru’s arm.

Even so, supposing the others notice the scratches on Subaru, it is still completely different from the horrible situation, for entirely different reasons—there’s no mistaking that this time the arm is scratched in self-mutilation. She had even said that she had concealed this from Emilia, which in itself was shocking.

Beatrice: “If you go to the room with the spirit, these wounds will be healed as well, I suppose. But still, because Betty cannot bear looking at it, Betty will heal it even if a little bit.”

As she says so, Beatrice wraps Subaru’s wrist with a pale light. The cozy sensation that came about, warm was it was, was perhaps the twinge of his wounds healing up. Healing magic is what is being shown before his eyes.

Subaru: “…”

At the same moment, any hostility that Subaru had for Beatrice inside was rapidly swept away. Along with this warmth, the humanity of Natsuki Subaru, which had ruptured along with the wounds on his wrist, certainly seemed to be restored as well.

Meili: “Boooring.”

The little girl grumbled In Subaru’s head, as if her hopes had been betrayed. Whilst listening to her directly in his skull, Subaru swallowed down the evil environment that had taken root in his head.

Certainly, it had been an option. But, it had been nothing more than an option. There is no need for him to lead himself in the direction that longs for their Book of the Dead. Especially in a situation where he hadn’t any preparation.

Subaru: “…”

Inflicting harm on Beatrice right now is not a good idea. His preparations are not ready yet. Even if he takes the worst possible means, it must be done after thorough plans are made. As such, now, this place—

Beatrice: “Come now, let’s go, I suppose. Subaru. Betty will eventually talk about it to everyone afterwards, in fact.”

Subaru: “—Alright. Sorry to bother you, Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “Promise not to speak about this, I suppose.”

Although he did not know whether the concern of the girl before his eyes is genuine or not, Natsuki Subaru thought that he ought to listen to her.

2

—Firstly, though this is unrelated, there exists a phrase.

—Murder becomes a habit.

That is one of the phrases the famous detective, Hercule Poirot, left the world with.

—Murder becomes a habit.

The meaning of this phrase doesn't refer to a person who has killed a human being and then suddenly wakes up with a preference for murdering people, who then repeats the crime to satisfy their cravings.

—Murder becomes a habit.

It refers to someone who solved their problem once by murder, for them, whenever another problem arises, they will think about trying to break through the problem through murder again.

—Murder becomes a habit.

By the time they start to consider that murder is not one of those options, the utmost important thing would have had already changed.

—Murder becomes a habit.

The truth is, even if there was a single murderer who didn't commit a crime by his own will, even if he dislikes the act, even if you see a glimpse of the memory of the one who had been harmed by such an action, that habit does not go.

—Murder becomes a habit.

That habit… it does not go.

—Murder becomes a habit.

Chapter 49:
To You, the Worthless Excuse

1

Gradually, he becomes aware of a sensation of numbness coming out from his arm. Slowly but steadily, the scratch marks of Meili's dying throes were starting to vanish and heal. Realizing that he was being healed, Subaru turned his eyes away from his sleeve.

Subaru: "…Well, this room was certainly the big deal it was made out to be."

They'd said that the Spirit who resided in this ivy-filled room healed the wounds of living beings, here in this room. That said, Subaru hadn't had the experience of visiting the room with any trauma up until now, had doubted how effective it would be. While relishing the sensation of his wounds actually being healed, he was being made to reconsider that he'd been unnecessarily suspicious.

Meili: "Despite it being my dying message, Onii-san is sti~ll being awful."

Subaru: "…"

Meili: "But, Beatrice-chan's judgement was terribly helpful, r~ight? Thanks to her, the evidence left around your wrists will disappea~r."

The shade of the little girl who is incessantly speaking inside his head annoys him. What really anguished him, was that the girl's words really struck deep into his heart, to the point it was impossible to say that they didn't reflect Subaru's inner thoughts.

He doesn't know whether this little girl's shade is running rampant due to being part of Subaru, or whether it had been because of her ghost literally possessing him after reading her Book of the Dead.

Whatever the reason may be, he mustn't bend his ear to what the little girl is saying. He mustn't listen to her. Just that fact brought his sense of annoyance.

Thus, Subaru consciously closes his mind to the sound of these incessant hallucinations. However, the more Subaru tries to seclude himself in his own shell, the louder and more talkative her shade becomes, growing more impish in poking fun at Subaru. The most annoying thing was—

Meili: "Right now, you don't have Beatrice beside you anymore, do yo~u? Since there's no one in your way, why don't you just get rid of that sleeping gi~rl?"

Subaru: "—hk"

Meili: "Hehe… don't start looking like you're about to cry. I know you're trying to ignore me, but you can't, ah, Onii-san's such an adorable guy!"

The little girl's voice, which had no corporeal presence, was heard by Subaru as if it was a whisper in his ear. If he closes his eyes, it feels like the little girl's gently leaning on his back, her figure spitting out these sweet words to his ears accompanied by sweet sighs; it almost feels like he is able to see her hallucination.

She had been brought to the spirit's room for rest, and once again Subaru was presented with the same choice as when he had held the Book of the Dead. Beatrice was on her way to tell Emilia and the others that Subaru had left the Taygeta library and that she had brought him to this room. Right now, Subaru had procured some time where no-one would be able to see what was going on. And, right in front of him lay the girl who is sleeping on the ivy bed just as if she were an offering to him… all alone—

Subaru: "…Rem"

Even if he tries to say the name of the comatose girl out loud, no emotions rise within Subaru. He has no memories known of her, he only knows her name. All he knows is that she's Ram's twin sister, and that she was one of Emilia's companions. And that they had come to this tower looking for a way to wake her up from her long slumber.

—Beyond that, he wants to know more.

Meili: “The means are there. It’s either you do it or you don’t do i~t.”

The sweet girl’s temptation reminds Subaru, whether he is willing or not, about the Books of The Dead plan. Even though now she had fallen into a deep sleep, there must certainly have been a relation of some sort with Subaru around the time when she had been in good health. By borrowing the powers of her Book of The Dead, he can find out what kind of relationship and feelings she had towards Subaru.

Above all, he would be able to take that life far more easily than Meili’s. The likes of this girl who is in a comatose state could even be suffocated by just smothering her face with a damp cloth. He must do it quickly, quickly, quickly, quickly, quickly, quickly…

Subaru: “… Am I being stupid? No, I’m definitely being stupid.”

Restraining the feeling of impatience brimming in his arm, Subaru rethinks his foolish idea. Immediately carrying something out like that wouldn’t be good. Jumping at the situation in front of his eyes, as if drooling, would have no meaning if there wasn’t a continuation.

Killing is the method. Subaru desires to find out what everyone truly thinks of him. As far as it comes to achieving that result, this was also a good moment to screw up how he’d do it, and rush the killings.

Even at the Taygeta Library, hadn’t he thought the same way? If he is to carry out his Book of The Dead plan, he needs to carefully choose the right order to eliminate them in.

Subaru: “Julius, Emilia, Shaula, Ram, Echidna, Beatrice, Rem…”

Counting them on his fingers, Subaru lists the people who remain inside the tower, excluding Meili—namely, the order in which he’d prefer to get their Book of The Dead if at all possible. This order should enumerate who'd become most likely to become a hindrance to his execution of the Book of The Dead plan. Conversely, unless he followed this hit-list he had come up with, if he were rush into it and act then it wouldn't work out—he doesn't want to screw up.

Meili: "If you don't, then you'll end up missing out on killing them. How scary."

Subaru: "…"

He keeps his silence with the talkative shade. She seemed to give off quite a strong hint of displeasure towards him. Nevertheless, even if he tries to speak to her, her behavior doesn't change. It remains the same.

Subaru doesn't necessarily want to kill Emilia and the others. But still, if he has to kill them, he wants to go through with that once. Only once, only once is fine. And only if he has a complete plan.

Subaru: "…"

And thus, with that in mind, Subaru sighs as piercing yellow eyes gaze at him. Noticing them, the gaze came from the figure sitting right next to the sleeping girl in this spirit room—the gaze had come from his jet black Earth Dragon, Patrasche.

Patrasche's gaze seems like it's filled with worry and gloom as she looks towards the exhausted Subaru. She may have worked out that before leaving this place for a while, Beatrice had said "Keep an eye on Subaru" to her. As long as Patrasche's eyes are focused on him, no matter how frustrated he gets, he will be unable to commit any violence towards the sleeping girl. In that respect, he would like to thank Patrasche for having made him not make a premature decision in this matter.

But, after reading the Book of The Dead, Subaru was becoming unable to direct solid trust towards anyone, even to Patrasche who he had felt a great deal of affection to.

Subaru: "…I wonder… is this all going to your plan, 'Natsuki

Subaru' ?"

He wants to believe in them. The more he ponders about their true intentions, the more Natsuki Subaru isolates himself within this different world where he has no one to turn to. Isn't this clearly because of the game presented by the wicked 'Natsuki Subaru' ?

Subaru: "…"

Bit by bit, the scratches that had been caused by Meili continue healing. Whilst savoring the feeling of his aches and pains fading away, Subaru rolls up his sleeve to where the painful scars showing "Natsuki Subaru was here" were carved in. He traces his nails above the scabs, and realizes they are also being healed.

He doesn't mind that the scratches which served as proof of his horrible criminal acts were fading—No, not his, he hadn't been "himself" then. However, the message that indicated the self that wasn't his self, only that could he not erase.

Subaru: "This message as well."

The wound that had been carved into his left arm, and the one in his right arm too, had both been scratched in a similar manner. On his still unfamiliar black arm which is mottled by black spots, there is a wound that at first had not been there. He had carved this wound there as if he was returning the favor for the wound that had been carved into his left arm by his other self.

—Who are you? He holds that serious question engraved into him as a wound.

Subaru: "…"

And so, while injuring himself without giving a toss about his own body, Subaru, at the same time, was unable to recognize something.

Subaru: "—hgh"

The fact that Patrasche gazes pitifully at the wound left behind on Subaru's arm, as a result of his own self harm. Even if the scratches Meili had given him were to disappear, if they were to look at

Meili's own hands, they would find it clear that she had died trying to put up a fight trying to desperately ward off the one who had killed her. The logic of thinking that he had concealed Meili's murder from everyone was based entirely on his terribly sloppy cleanup afterwards.

All it would take is for one gear to collapse to set everything into motion. He feels like a marionette being dangled from the top of this tower, standing on thin ice, turning his face away from the root of his problems, an amusing clown desperately fighting to keep his balance… that is what Subaru has become.

However, this amusing clown's performance will finally earn itself a curtain call without encountering any more obstacles in his way. And that is because—

Luckily for him, Meili Portroute's corpse had not been found anywhere.

2

Subaru: "…"

The atmosphere around the dinner table was awfully heavy between everyone as they looked at each other. This was due to the dangerous circumstances that they had found themselves in—half of them had recognized that their desperate search for Meili's body had been fruitless and that they had already been far too late.

Although they were too few to call their search an "All out frontal assault", they had still split into groups and mobilized everyone so that they could search for her. As a result, they had spent almost half a day trying to find her without even finding a trace of her. The feeling that it had all been for nothing had grown, it was understandable that many of them were experiencing immense levels of stress.

Ram: "Everything's just been going wrong since we came to this tower, huh?"

Subaru: "…No need to put what was left unsaid so clearly, even if we're thinking that."

Whilst munching on his dinner which consisted of something like dry bread, he mumbles this, staring at Ram, with a growing feeling of lethargy. Receiving Subaru's protests, Ram shrugs her shoulders, a blank look adorning her face. However, even for her usual calm and composed self, an aura of fatigue was coming off from her. And it wasn't just Ram, everyone in the tower was in the same state as her.

Emilia: "For now… I first went to ask Reid about her, but he said he hadn't seen her. He said that no one had come there since yesterday and that he was getting bored… I don't think he was lying. Since Meili had seen what Reid's like, I don't think she'd have gone there alone…"

Beatrice: "It's hard to imagine that even that arrogant man would harm such a little girl… though, I can't say that for sure, as scary as that is, I suppose. But, Betty ultimately agrees with Emilia's thoughts, in fact."

Emilia and Beatrice exchange words between them regarding the red haired, eye patch clad man who guards the second floor. Although in his mind that man had done nothing but cause him great torment, Emilia had faced him and more or less heard him out safely. It seems like she had managed to come back unharmed. Feeling a sense of relief by that fact, Subaru shook his head.

There's no reason for him to feel such a sense of relief, rather, he has no right to considering what had transpired before. He doesn't know if he even has the right to comfort Emilia.

Echidna: "—Can I mention one thing? It may sound cruel, but I want to propose something, and I am prepared that I may end up being shouted at because of it."

Draining her bowl of bland soup, Echidna raises her hand as she finishes her meager dinner. Whilst facing everyone around the dinner table, she narrows her turquoise eyes, and says:

Echidna: "Searching for that little girl… I think we should stop for today… and from tomorrow, we should focus on trying to capture this tower again. What are your thoughts about that?"

Emilia: "—hk! We will do no such thing! What would Meili think of us?!"

Echidna: "It is already too late, she has no way to think or feel anything. That was proved by Natsuki-kun's confirmation after he read her Book of the Dead. I am against further searching for her."

Emilia had been the first to oppose Echidna's proposal, which could be said to have been both realistic and level headed. However, Echidna's expression didn't waver when hearing Emilia's argument that had come purely from her emotions. However, on behalf of Emilia who was at a complete loss for words, Beatrice spoke in her place: "Wait, I suppose"

Beatrice: "Your point at first seems to make sense, in fact. But, it seems quite sudden for you to mention it, I suppose. Why is it that you want to stop the search for Meili?"

Echidna: "—. Was it really that strange to say? In this tower, the food supplies we brought in are limited, and as more days pass by, it will likely become more burdensome for everyone in each camp to stay here. If our stay greatly drags on, then you ought to think that a search party will be sent out to look for us."

Ram: "Naturally. Emilia-sama and Anastasia-sama… well, what's inside of her now is different, but both of you are esteemed candidates for the royal selection. You both shouldn't even be in this tower in the desert."

Beatrice and Ram began to display a somewhat lukewarm attitude, beginning with Echidna's proposal. The suggestion, that went by the rules of rationality, served as a trigger for colder opinions, making the tense atmosphere around their dinner meeting more intense.

Shaula: "Gee~ This isn't much fun. If you're going to squabble, I'd rather you did it away from Master and I. But I don't mind either way, as for meee, I'll build a happy family with Master, just the two of us. A girl first, and then a boy, and then another boy!”

He doesn’t deign to reply to Shaula, who had slipped into the seat right next to him as she babbled on, sticking her tongue out at the tense atmosphere around her. She’d also shown this kind of attitude back at the library. Shaula had pressed Subaru for a choice back at the library; what was it that she had wanted Subaru to say back to her? If she refers to Subaru as her Master and completely idolizes him, then how far would she go for him?—How far would she obey him, if Subaru were to give her a command?

Julius: “We should stop arguing.”

Julius, with anguish etched across his handsome face breaks the tense mood around them. He places his arm in front of Echidna and looks at Beatrice and Ram.

Julius: “Beatrice-sama, Miss Ram. As a member of her camp, I deeply apologize for Echidna’s careless words. However, don’t misunderstand what she meant to say. She didn’t make such a proposal with only rationalism in mind, with no other meaning to it.”

Echidna: “Julius, stop. That speech was”

Julius: “Emilia-sama’s camp may have lost the little girl that accompanied us here. That pain can be felt there. If possible, we should be more understanding in this situation.”

Hearing Julius’ sincere remarks, Echidna stops herself from saying any more. Julius then turns to face Beatrice once again.

Julius: “For now, Anastasia-sama’s body has been pretty much taken over by Echidna’s spirit. It’s true that in her current state we can’t find a way to get Anastasia-sama back… but, there are other issues as well. —Echidna is with every passing moment consuming Anastasia-sama’s Od.”

Emilia: “Her Od… So, she’s always been burning her way through it? Has it always been like that, ever since Anastasia-san became unable to be woken up?”

Julius: “…Indeed. I imagine that’s why she wants to hurry to borrow the Sage’s wisdom by capturing this tower.”

The rest of them react in shock at hearing Echidna’s secret being spoken out loud by Julius. Echidna’s secret had been revealed by her own camp member, shrugging her shoulders at the people staring at her, she says: “Ah!”

Echidna: “No point in trying to gloss over this. It is as Julius said. I, I don’t think it’s a good idea to consume so much of Ana’s Od like this, which isn’t really abundant in the first place. If I can, I want to return this body back to Ana as soon as possible.”

Emilia: “Even going as far as letting go of her human body, so you’re free?”

Echidna: “Even if I can free Ana’s body, my own mind itself is being bound unfreely. I don’t know how much you’ll trust me with what I’m saying, but…”

Echidna paused for a moment, and then continued her speech.

Echidna: “Essentially, one’s very vessel should contain its own being. Even if you just borrow the outer shell, if the insides doesn’t come with it, it will fall to tatters and become unnatural. —And that’s just plain awful.”

Everyone: “…!!”

Casting her eyes down, Echidna’s words had been relentless, as if she were cursing herself. Her story had struck Subaru’s heart to its very core as he’d listened in casually.

If you just borrow the outer shell, and the insides don’t come with it…—That pierces his heart really profoundly.

Echidna: “Anyways, that is why I want to hurry up and capture this tower. By all means, if you don’t believe what I have said, you can let someone like Beatrice poke around this body just to make sure. I suppose they will immediately see how distorted I am as a spirit and how much Od I have consumed.”

Echidna leaves to the others the proof of her own situation without noticing the turmoil brimming inside of Subaru, brought upon him by her words. In fact, after being nominated, Beatrice takes Echidna's arm and probes into what in principal is her body; it seemed like Echidna's words were proven to be true. And, receiving that result—

Emilia: "…Okay. I understand the difficult circumstances that Echidna—and Anastasia-san are in. It's no wonder you want to hurry up and climb all the way up to the top of the tower…"

Echidna: "I do not know if this will bring you peace of mind, but if it is as is it is said and the Sage in this tower is omniscient, possessing esoteric wisdoms, then it is possible that he may also know the whereabouts of where the little girl disappeared. When putting it this way, I really do know how unfair it is, but…"

Emilia: "Nono, thank you. It's better than having no hope left at all… you're also looking out for me, and Meili too, aren't you?"

Echidna: "Hmm. Maybe. Or maybe it is just that mine—and Ana's body is far too cute?"

Echidna, her face showing traces of awkwardness, turns away from Emilia who seemed prepared to accept her claim. Emilia narrowed her amethyst eyes seeing Echidna react like this. Taking a deep breath, she once again spoke:

Emilia: "I am reaaallly worried about Meili. But, I also get Echidna's point. So, starting from tomorrow again, let's do our best to try and get to the top of the tower. Of course, I will keep looking for Meili as much as I possibly can, but…"

Julius: "Remember to not neglect the importance of capturing the tower, Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "I know. —Sometimes, you've gotta think on your own about what's important."

Putting her hand on her cheek, Emilia chastises herself, a firm resolve grows deep in her irises. Turning back, she look towards

Subaru, who had been observing the exchange as if he was a spectator. For a moment, the intensity in her gaze overpowered him, but the words Emilia continued with did not scathe into him.

Emilia: “Is that okay with you too, Subaru?”

Subaru: “I-I guess that’s okay. That way Meili can also rest in peace… No, I guess we all need to move forward… No, no that… uh, why are you asking me?”

Emilia: “Because Subaru read Meili’s book, mhm? When I saw Subaru’s reaction immediately after reading it, I… that’s why I think the one who is the most worried about Meili should be Subaru.”

Emilia reminded him about it. Hearing her words, Subaru held his breath. It wasn’t just Emilia who was looking at him. Beatrice, Ram, Echidna and Julius… everyone was looking at Subaru.

What sort of intention is present in those gazes? He can’t hazard a guess. Without even realizing it, Subaru moves his lips in accordance to the treacherous spirit inside of him.

Subaru: “—I’m definitely worried. But, I think Meili also would have wanted us to go on.”

Perhaps, just so he could utter the most superficial words in the world.

3

—Late at night, Subaru springs himself into action, finally having the time to freely act without anyone interfering.

Subaru: “…”

After the group resolved to wrack each other’s brains for ideas on how to capture the second floor, and after having established a firm plan for tomorrow, the meeting at the dinner table ended. They then proceeded to get ready for bed. It was a night in which unforeseen problems had occurred to one of their companions. Naturally, they recommended that they put all their bedding together in one room and sleep together. So, more or less, they gathered together in one room and made an improvised partition across the room using a blanket to act as a curtain between the male and female sides.

However, Subaru had insisted on sleeping inside the spirit room.

The after-effects from reading the Book of The Dead, was most of his excuse. Practically, after having experienced what followed Subaru reading the Book of The Dead, no one had tried to argue with him. Of course, Beatrice had shown particularly strong disapproval at letting Subaru sleep alone, but the spirit room has a fixed capacity limit. Sick with worry, Subaru's voice had trembled, but Beatrice had to withdraw her opposition to it.

Rather than it being a boon of Subaru's acting prowess, it had likely been his awfully pale face that had influenced them. Honestly, it was a miracle that he hadn't collapsed, he was aware that he was in a terrible state.

Meili: "I think Meili also would have wanted us to go on. —What an actor you are, e~h?"

Subaru: "…"

Meili: "Fufu, don't get mad no~w. It isn't sarcasm. I truly think that, and I commend you for i~t."

He had thought she had been surprisingly quiet during the meeting at the dinner table. He wonders if she had something to do with the barefaced lie he had told at the end. Even if he refuses to listen to this troublesome hallucination, blocking his ears to her voice has no effect. That sweet voice continues to cause him discomfort just like the sound of scratching a chalkboard with nails.

Meili: "H~mm, so, tonight you're not going to take care of the blue haired Onee-san's head?"

Subaru: "…"

Her shade kept repeatedly hinting to Subaru, who had waited for the evening to grow dark to take action, about the existence of the sleeping beauty in the room. To the same shade's temptation from several hours ago, Subaru's answer remained the same as before.

Subaru: "It isn't her turn yet."

Saying that, Subaru leaves the room without even looking at the sleeping beauty's face. At that moment, his eyes met with Patrasche's, who had slightly opened her eyes. He handles the situation by bringing his finger to his lips, shushing her, a gesture that indicated to her to keep it a secret. He did not know to what extent the intention has been transmitted to his reptilian companion, but at the same time it feels like Patrasche is more clever than creatures like dogs or horses. Whether or not she is, it would be nice if she remained silent.

Subaru: "…"

After ensuring he had made it so he ended up being left alone, the reason why Subaru started to move in the dead of night—wasn't to take the lives of his sleeping companions and to put the plan of the Book of The Dead into practice.

Of course, he had carefully considered that scheme too. With Subaru's abilities, it would be best for that plan to be realized with surprise attacks, and you could say that while they're sleeping would be the best opportunity. However, it is still too early. It is a last resort, a deed that goes against humanity, that he shouldn't do unless they force his hand.

Then, for what purpose had Subaru started acting in the dead of night? It was because of—

Meili: "—My corpse, what are you going to do about it?"

Realizing where Subaru was going, the voice of the little girl, as if standing behind him, poses him that question. Subaru doesn't reply to her, but, the direction he was walking towards was just as good as a confirmation to her question.

—Subaru is acting to dispose of Meili's still hidden corpse.

Subaru: "…"

Whether you can call this a ridiculous story or a lucky situation or whatever, in any case, he had no other choice. That today, Emilia and the others hadn't found Meili's remains should be called nothing more than a devil's plot, rather than God's plan.

Thinking back on it, in regards to the situation, his cover up for the abrupt situation was full of holes that were plain to see, to the point that he wanted to curse himself for his own dim-wittedness. Unexpected as it was, she hadn't been found. That had saved him. However, from tomorrow, whilst committing himself to capturing the tower, it would be no strange thing if they were to find by chance something that had slipped by them.

At least, he expects that Emilia will not abandon searching for Meili. Seeing that she is a girl without any troubles of her own, her heart will not give in until the situation is resolved, it's easy to imagine that she'll continue to look for the little girl that had vanished.

Therefore, it was necessary for Subaru to have peace of mind. If he can't have peace of mind, he wouldn't be able to lay the groundwork for his success. Unless he lays the groundwork, he won't be able to build his castle on top of it, in the future. If the groundwork can't be built, he will not be able to achieve his future.

To Natsuki Subaru's peace, the existence of Meili Portroute is an obstacle.

Meili: "I guess it kind of feels like you're being… even more restless now inside your he~ad"

He turns a deaf ear to her. She had just made her affirmation clear, she

would get in his way. He firmly refuses to let that happen.

As Subaru travels stealthily through the night, making sure not to draw any attention to himself, he arrives at the room where he had hid Meili's corpse. Although the rooms in this area all looked the same, you can see discoloration in the stone wall near the entrance of this one, making it so that the room is easy to identify via this landmark.

Subaru: “Honestly, this is going to leave a bad aftertaste…”

Taking her out from the tower’s entrance into the desert and burying her in the sand would be for the best. She would continue to decay if she was left for a few more days inside the building. And although the temperature aren’t too high or too low, A body, after ceasing biological functions, cannot be expected to avoid rotting.

Indeed, if he wanted to never have to see it again, The best would be to do bring it far away from the tower, as much of a pain as it would be, and turn her into chow for the witchbeasts prowling about outside. However, He imagined how that would weigh on his heart. No matter what, It was an impossible decision.

Subaru: “…”

At the back of the dim room, was enshrined a square lump of rock. On the opposite side of it, her corpse was hidden. You couldn’t overlook it if you consciously looked at it. It was an awfully childish manner of hiding. While he was feeling pathetic at losing his head, Subaru went around to the other side of the stone.

There, Meili’s approximately half a day old remains—

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Without thinking, his voice leaks out. His head renounced grasping the view before him.

On the other side of that stone, was absolutely nothing. At the very least, he had made arrangements for the little girl’s corpse, closing her eyes, crossing her arms together on top of her chest. The bruises adorning her pale neck, even the corpse of the poor little girl… they were nowhere to be found.

Subaru: “Wh-…y…I was sure… I left it here…”

It was supposed to be here. He couldn’t have possibly mistaken the room. He didn’t make such a fundamental mistake when coming here. He didn’t. So if he didn’t, where was the dead body which had to be here?

—Where did Meili Portroute’s remains disappear to?

???: “—What are you sneaking about to search for this late at night, Barusu?”

Subaru: “—hk?!”

Astounded, the voice coming from behind him made his body go stiff, and Subaru fearfully turned around. Paling, within his field of vision, at the entrance of the not so small room, stood a single silhouette.

Bobbed pink hair, sharp, light pink irises; with crossed arms, her imposing yet lovely features staring in his direction with coldness. With that out-of-place feeling in her chest, while staring at the petrified Subaru, the girl—Ram, gazed at his eyes and with an absolutely cold tone of voice said,

Ram: “Or I guess I should call you a fake. A worthless excuse of a Barusu—of Natsuki Subaru”

Chapter 50:
To You, the Absolutely Worthless Excuse

1

At the sound of her cold voice, Subaru literally felt his heart freeze.

Subaru: "…"

Looking back at the front of the room, Ram stands still at the entrance, her light pink irises ablaze, quietly boring into Subaru. Though Subaru had only came in contact with her a few times before, he had rarely ever seen her reveal such emotion on her face—in that Ram, there was a fervor that easily betrayed that impression.

Subaru: "Nhh, uh…"

Ram: "What are you getting so flustered for? Ram asked you a question. Answering is Barusu's… No, answering is your duty."

Subaru: "I- I am… just…"

Ram: "Just?"

Promptly, Subaru's head begins to spin as he tries to explain himself. Somehow he needed to move his tongue, curse his sluggish mind for its initial response and meet this situation with a silver tongue. However, in addition to having been thrown into this unexpected turmoil, in the first place, before this had occurred, Subaru hadn't—he hadn't even processed how Meili's corpse had disappeared. He hadn't even prepared the words to talk his way out of things, he wasn't even able to prepare to come to grips to what was happening right before his eyes.

All that Subaru can do is open and shut his mouth awkwardly as he tries his best to not to say anything improper. Even though Subaru's manner now supported his suspicious behavior louder than any words could.

Subaru: “…”

Ram narrows her eyes at Subaru’s silence. The coldness in her gaze, which he had already thought to be at the level of absolute zero, falls even further. It almost feels as if he had been assailed by a sharp, bone-chilling blizzard. While desperately trying to keep his knees from trembling, Subaru slowly starts to understand, too little too late.

—Had he been set up?

When Meili’s body hadn’t been found, the meeting at the dinner table had been a bluff. When they had reported that Meili’s body hadn’t been found, Subaru had been relieved that he had escaped from a chance of being blamed.

Desperately searching in vain, they hadn’t found the little girl’s body that hadn’t even been hidden that well. His bad luck had prevailed even in these unnatural circumstances, Subaru had accepted the convenient truth, putting off any niggling doubts that had concerned him then. And that resulted in him being caught up in this uncouth act.

Hadn’t Subaru also repeatedly seen this in various TV shows? In the final scene, the murderer who had meticulously put together his perfect plan returns back to the crime scene and gives himself away as the police and the detectives are closely watching the crime scene. And due to that, they give away that they committed the crime by showing themselves as being the smoking gun. That kind of comedic-ish moment…

Somewhere in his mind, Subaru had thought that if it was himself, he would never show such stupidity. Any connoisseur of mysteries will take note of the sheer foolishness of the dumb criminal slipped up at the very end. He had acted completely the same way—rather, worse, for his shock of being caught up in this act had made him quite a miserable sight to behold.

Ram: “—Fake.”

Ram’s quiet mutter barrels into him as he is stricken by his own defective actions. With just that single word, Subaru's brittle heart crumbles and sinks in his chest, as if he had been shell-shocked by a mortar attack. As soon as he had heard it, his face had turned as white as a sheet, his lips trembling. Ram let out a sigh.

Ram: "So, you have nothing to say to defend yourself. I guess that's proof that even you yourself, were aware of what a botchjob your acting is. You didn't prepare well enough when disguising yourself as him. There's limits when it comes to not being diligent, don't you agree?"

Without hiding her contempt in her voice, Ram starts to tell Subaru why she had suspected him. Fakeness, poor acting, and showing insufficient understanding towards 'Natsuki Subaru' were all pointed out by her. Not only was Subaru lost for words, but his heart felt as if it was going to crack, and the flow of his blood ached with each heartbeat. In fact, Subaru bit his lower lip, and blood started to stream out, accompanied by a sharp stinging pain.

A fake fake fake fake fake fake fake fake fake fake fake—A poor imitation of 'Natsuki Subaru', A fake—.

That thought settles into the pit of his stomach as if it were thick, black sludge. A disgusting sludge covering him from head to toe; a weight that caused his knees to stop trembling. Instead, where the depths of his eyes had burned; a blaze glowed, dancing atop the fuse of his dark emotions. One could call it hostility, malice, malintention—or perhaps an intent to kill.

Ram: "There's no way such unnatural behavior would go unnoticed, well, except for those that can't spare the heed for it. That could be said of Julius, Anastasia-sama… well, Echidna."

Subaru: "… you're sure letting it all out. Here I am listening to you patiently without even saying a word."

Ram: "…"

Subaru: "A fake?! I think you're crossing the line here of false accusations. Who the hell do you think you are?!"

Ram: “False accusations, huh?”

Subaru tried to voice his objections, painful as it was, in response to Ram’s unwithering sharp tongue. Of course, the point she made had been completely correct. Even if he didn’t agree with having been sternly described by her as that Worthless Excuse, that unfillable void between Subaru and ‘Natsuki Subaru’ existed. However, she couldn’t have noticed this. If she comes to notice it, then it would become impossible for him to worm himself out of this situation. He can’t stop here, halfway through—

Subaru: “False accusations upon false accusations. My ears are deaf to them, y’know, I can’t hear any of ‘em.”

Shoulders shrugging and cheeks distorting into a scowl, Subaru speaks while glaring at Ram. As if he were dramatizing truth and lies, which even he himself felt as to be so brazen, to be the truth of the world.

Subaru: “Anyways, what’s with going on about me having wanted to wander about in the middle of the night. I just wanted to stretch my legs and think a bit whilst there was no one around. That’s why I deliberately went somewhere where I wouldn’t be around your little sister… Rem’s sleeping, nor Patrasche’s presence…”

Ram: “—Did you really think that nobody had seen anything?”

Ram had quietly asked Subaru this as he was rapidly blurting his excuses out. Her words were brief, but sharp, designed to puncture deep into his vitals.

Subaru: “…”

Holding his breath at hearing her inquiry, he racks his brain, trying to figure out what she really meant by saying those words. See, seen, not be seen, can’t have seen.

—Where had Ram got this word from, See. What does she mean by this?

Meili’s corpse? Or perhaps the Meili from before she had became a corpse? Or had she seen him working on hiding Meili’s corpse? Or maybe—

Ram: “Nothing… even if it was your plan that nobody would see anything, the Earth Dragon was diligently watching your strange behavior. And because of that, Ram was also able to watch you in the same way.”

Putting her fingers to her lips, Right in front of him, Ram deliberately makes a scene out of showing this particularly uncouth gesture towards Subaru.

Subaru: “…What the heck are you saying?!”

Without understanding the meaning of her behavior behind her gesture, Subaru let out these words in bewilderment. However, he did have quite a recent memory of this particular gesture. It was none other than the gesture Subaru had shown to Patrasche before leaving the Spirit Room. Right now, he couldn’t for the life of him understand the meaning behind how it had cropped up again in this place with Ram—

Ram: “You need to study him more, you Worthless Excuse—”

The utter disappointment those two words carry is what drives home that this is Subaru’s final warning.

Subaru: “…”

Up until now, though extremely cold and unfeeling, Ram had kept up her stance of wanting to talk, even if her intention of exchanging words with Subaru was disappearing by the second. The instant Subaru had seen the look in her eyes, he realized that his excuses were meaningless.

Ram will turn a deaf ear to whatever excuses Subaru comes up with. Since it had come to this, Subaru has no other choice but to break through this situation using brute-strength.

—In that moment, Subaru starts to consider how to kill Ram inside of his head.

Subaru: “…”

Think about how to kill her. There is no longer any point in feeling reluctant about it. He had already killed one person. One or two, it makes little difference. A while ago, I had a lot of experience in snatching away the lives of a great number of people. From here on out, there'd be no hindrance in the execution of his Book of The Dead plan.

Meili: "—Bu~t, that Onee-san…"

Countless choices within Subaru crumbled away noisily. On the verge of being left with only his dangerous thoughts, the shade of the little girl that had been keeping silent up until now had chimed in.

Though invisible, the presence of the shade beside him was so strong he could practically feel her breathing. It hugs Subaru's body from behind him, softly whispering into his ear and tempting him. And the contents of that sweet, sweet, saccharine temptation is—

Meili: "—Surely she's in a poor condition, ri~ght? Her center of gravity on the left side, its balance is po~or."

Those sweet whispers had whispered to him the weaknesses of that awe-inspiring, yet terrifying girl—when it comes down to it, she had given him instructions on how to kill her.

She is smaller than him, she is weaker than him, she has less experience when it comes to killing. With the knowledge She had accumulated by spending so much time with the assassin in black, it should be easy to kill this woman.

Meili: "Knock her over towards her left-hand side, and bash her head against the wall. That'll do the tri~ck."

As he was taking into account the difference in strength between himself and Ram, relevant advice comes from Her. By just following that, the girl's skull will crack, and flowers of deep crimson will bloom upon the wall.

Crimson flowers that would marvelously complement this lovely young girl's pink hair—

Subaru: “—!”

Without any cues, and without any obvious openings, Subaru faces his opponent in the blink of an eye, and stepped forward. Receiving a round of applause from the shade, Subaru steps forwards without hesitation towards Ram’s body which was slightly tensed. Towards her right hand side. He will throw her body against the wall and then—

Ram: “Since you’re lost for words, you’re now resorting to violence. What a barbaric, boring conclusion.”

In that moment of offence and defense, before Subaru’s arm could reach her, Ram had opened her lips and uttered these words. Meeting each other’s gazes, Subaru’s breath was knocked out of him seeing Ram’s cold eyes.

Ram: “—Did you really think that the oh so frail and feeble Ram would challenge such a barbaric man alone?”

Rather than mocking him, Ram’s words feel similar to pity. As she speaks, Subaru hears a crackling sound in the air mingling in with her voice. In fact, he was not hearing things. The moisture in the atmosphere freezes rapidly, the air around him was being forcibly changed from gas to solid.

Subaru: “Wh…a?”

That crackling sound he had heard, had been caused from Subaru’s own foot stepping against the pile of ice rising at his feet; it had stopped him in his tracks, causing him pain.

Subaru: “I-Ice…?! “

Ricocheting from the hard, cold impact, Subaru could hardly believe his eyes. But, the transformation didn’t just stop here. Bars of ice weren’t just materializing where his foot had been, rather, they rose from all around him—enclosing him, materializing into an ice cage.

Subaru: “You’re kidding me… what the… magic?!”

In the blink of an eye, the ice cage finishes materializing, Subaru was completely trapped within. Seizing the bars of ice with his hands, Subaru tries to violently shake them in an attempt to break that prison; however, his efforts only result in him being astounded at the strength of the ice. The bars did not yield even an inch. Even if he kicks and punches with all his strength, he doesn't at all believe that he'll be able to break through. And thus, Subaru had been imprisoned within that ice cage—

???: "—Everything would have been so much better if Ram had been wrong about this…"

Looking at him with her sad amethyst eyes, Emilia comes into view from behind Ram.

2

What had happened was hardly surprising; Subaru finds himself dumbstruck like a monkey inside a cage.

Subaru: "…"

Ram and Emilia had banded together to restrain him; that much was obvious. Unlike Subaru, however, they had the option of cooperating with each other. From the very beginning, the choice of trying to go against a dangerous person alone wouldn't have cropped up for them. Ultimately, Subaru had definitely been dancing in the palm of their hands at every step of the way.

Ram: "In this scene, you won't be able to aggrandize yourself with frivolousness, nevermind chattering away with your unproven twaddle. As an actor I can barely say that you are below third-rate, let alone second rate."

Ram spits this out, crossing her arms and looking at Subaru sitting in the cage. Looking at her, he noticed that she hadn't even moved a single step away from the place where she had first made her entry. Even worse, she hadn't even changed her posture. Between her and Subaru, that's what differed between the two actors, that's it.

Ram: “With such acting, only a seriously oblivious person could be fooled. Then, who the most mentally tough person was amongst everyone, you needn’t even consider there.”

Emilia: “From that way you’re speaking…aren’t you praising me? Thanks.”

Ram: “…You’re welcome.”

Next to Ram who had reacted with a faint air of bitterness, silver hair flew up as Emilia stepped forward. Judging by what Ram had said, this ice cage had been handmade by Emilia—in other words, it can be concluded that this was a kind of magic she is able to use.

Had he not been stuck in this situation, Subaru would have definitely been impressed by her enchanting ice magic which suited its owner’s beautiful, mystical face quite well. But, seeing that practically he was a captive in the ice cage, and witnessing just how strong it is, at a glance he can understand the difference in strength between him and her, and just how inferior he is.

The difficulty level of executing his Book of The Dead plan, that ranking had now greatly changed. But, before that—

Emilia: “—Subaru, what were you trying to do at this time? Weren’t you supposed to be resting in the room?”

Subaru: “I…”

Looking worried, Emilia asked Subaru what he had been doing here at this time. A serious look of anxiety dwells in her eyes, but, when it comes to this situation, the only possible conclusion he could think of it as being a simple honesty that practically almost classified as stupidity. She was mistaken, thinking that there was a logical reason behind everything.

Even Subaru has his own say about this. A reason how he had ended up like this certainly exists. However, telling them would be like grasping at thin air; who on earth would believe Subaru’s words.

Ram: “Emilia-sama, it’s pointless to ask him that. I doubt he will answer your question honestly. I am doubtful in handling it as if it were Barusu.”

Emilia: “But, Subaru is Subaru! Ram, you must understand that, right?”

Ram: “Just a counterfeit that has a similar appearance only… that’s how Ram judges it.”

If anything, it seemed to resemble something closer to one of Subaru’s own thoughts about himself; Ram rebuked Emilia’s notion. Most likely, it had been Ram who had suspected Subaru and also proposed to keep an eye on what he would get up to at night. For sure, Emilia must have been standing by as the rear-guard, brought along in the case of an emergency.

In other words, the answer to dealing with the ‘Natsuki Subaru’ who is not Subaru had already been noticed by Ram a while ago. And afterward, all that was left was to take the steps to confirm both the fact and the accompanying grievances.

Ram: “Thanks to Emilia-sama, you were captured without any harm done. I wonder if a bit of pain will make you willing to tell us what we want to hear?”

Subaru: “Pain… like torture me? Isn’t it a well known thing that that’s not only extremely sadistic, but needs sophisticated knowledge!!”

Ram: “I will do what is necessary. Besides, I don’t really like inflicting pain on others—but, it is a specialty of mine.”

Keeping him in a cage with a space of not even 2 meters square, Ram wasn’t going easy on Subaru. Pale and slender though her fingers may be, her humble claim of Inflicting pain is my specialty feels frightfully convincing to Subaru.

If he keeps going like this without doing anything, if the opportunity to launch a counterattack doesn’t present itself, it will end up becoming a case where no matter how hard she searches for his secrets he would just be meaninglessly confessing his miserable behavior.

Emilia: “—Wait. You can’t hurt him. I won’t let you do that.”

However, Emilia, who herself had imprisoned Subaru in the ice cage, was the one to stop Ram before she could resort to extreme measures. She turned her back on the cage Subaru was in and faced Ram directly.

Ram: “…Emilia-sama, Weren’t you supporting Ram?”

Emilia: “I endorsed your opinion of questioning him because I also felt that Subaru was acting strange. But it’s because I thought this might happen…that I decided to stay here.”

Ram: “It’s because I didn’t want something like this to happen that I asked Beatrice to keep Julius and the rest company. And yet, I did not think Emilia-sama would be so… disobedient… Too naive.”

Without hiding her irritation at the difference in their opinions, Ram points at Subaru, who was hiding behind Emilia’s back. Regarding them, she utters the biting words “Is this okay?”.

Ram: “He’s too lacking in the points that the original Barusu should obviously have. I heard you talk about the Water Gate city… Priestella. It seemed like there you’d met a shape-shifting Sin Archbishop.”

Emilia”…Yes. A reason for us coming here was to change back those people who that Sin Archbishop changed into a different form.”

Ram: “Then what are the chances that Sin Archbishop could have become any of us?”

Emilia: “…”

Ram: “Even if they’re not that specific Sin Archbishop, If they are able to freely change their shape then we can’t go by outward appearances. Their normal conduct, the feeling when they try to talk, if all of those things are different…”

Ram responded with logic while holding back her anger towards Emilia's emotion driven opposition. They're nothing but deductions and baseless accusations towards Subaru, but they didn't have any basis to deny them. And no less important than that, Subaru—No, I felt revulsed by the topic at hand.

Subaru: "—hk"

A flashback, white memories. They come not from Natsuki Subaru, but from a small fragment of the memories seen in The Book of The Dead. The memories from when I was Herself.

—Training, that's what they called their actions towards Me.

Even though dread was carved into me many times, the most terrifying thing to happen to me, was when my body was made to change into countless innumerable Frogs.

Even though my consciousness existed only in one body, my infinitely fragmented consciousness did as it liked, leaping whenever it wanted, running wherever it wanted.

Dreading the thought of not being able to go back to my original self, brought the realization that I had forgotten what my Original self was in the first place, Having my reason for existence as a living being crash like that, I was thankful from the bottom of my heart to Mother the moment I was returned to normal.

And at the same time, the Idea that I should never, under any circumstances, go against her orders was etched into my soul.

Subaru: "—hk

Recalling that dread directly, almost as if he'd personally lived it, Subaru's field of vision blurs. One's own appearance is something that is directly linked to one's identity and sense of self. Tampering and changing that as one liked on a whim, that could only be called blasphemy to one's existence. The most detestable deed of all—.

Emilia: "That's too extreme, this is quite unlike you Ram! You sound like you're forcing me to contain him!"

Ram: “Can you even say nothing’s up? Before that man behind us…”

Emilia and Ram continue their arguing while Subaru alone drowns in anguish, feeling like his stomach was churning. However, Ram’s claim was like a “probatio diabolica”. You can prove that something is, but no one can prove that it isn’t.

This Natsuki Subaru was not the ‘Natsuki Subaru’ that they wanted. To explain that theory, some kind of shape shifter power was helpful. It made it simple—and at the same time, it was unbearable for the current Subaru, from the bottom of his heart. Overwhelmed by the hostile emotions inside him, Subaru wheezed in pain.

Ram: “I need to make him spit it out, right now! So I can know where Meili and the real Barusu are.”

Subaru: “—ah?”

That complaint from Ram, like a surprise attack, overloads Subaru’s consciousness. It was a bolt out of the blue, a truly unexpected comment.

Subaru: “…”

Raising his face, Subaru looked at Emilia and Ram, at their continuing quarrel. Gazing at her back, he couldn’t see Emilia’s emotions; however, Ram’s face was clearly visible to him. Her eyes, burning with rage, contain no schemes that would snare Subaru into lies right here. At least, what she just stated was what she really meant.

In other words, this means that Ram and the others hadn’t found Meili’s remains. The only thing that was lying in wait, in trying to denounce Subaru right here, was his suspicious behavior, since he couldn’t at all, try as he might, play the part of ‘Natsuki Subaru’. He understands where the confused Ram’s questioning was coming from. But at the same time, he didn’t understand.

If it hadn’t been Ram or Emilia, who was the one who had moved Meili’s remains? If it had been neither Ram, nor the others, nor

Subaru, then there was another agenda at work—.

Emilia: “Real or fake, you can’t just decide like that! I mean, the Subaru that is here right now is…”

Subaru”—I have… Amnesia!!”

Ram: “Huh…?”

Holding onto the ice cage bars, Subaru’s scream cuts into the duo’s quarrel.

Hearing that screaming voice, Ram appears taken aback and confused. That one unexpected angle of attack leaves Ram’s mind blank. If it had been a trick, employed to poke gaps between her logic and disturb her thoughts, then it had been a success. But there had been no such intent; this had been Subaru’s scream of truth.

Subaru: “—tch”

As for why he had cried this out right at this moment, even Subaru himself has no clue. In this loop, Subaru had hidden the fact that he had lost his memories, and had tried to imitate how the old ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had seemed. Thanks to that, his life hadn’t been snatched away this loop.

And though that had not come to pass, hadn’t there been some other alarming situations that perhaps even rivalled that, which had toyed with Natsuki Subaru, and chased him about, one after the other?

But in truth, concealing his amnesia had complicated everything else in this loop. So what will happen now, after his grand reveal?

Ram: “After all this time, you’re still joking like that…?!”

In reality, the moment her stagnating thoughts had resumed their activities, Ram’s expression became dyed in anger. The girl probably thinks that Subaru’s desperate cry now was a desperate lie —that it’s nothing more than sheer nonsense.

Emilia: “Ram! Listen to what Subaru is saying! There was a reason after all!”

Ram: “Are you serious, Emilia-sama?! That was completely unbelievable…!”

With arms stretched, Emilia stands in front of Ram, rallying with Subaru’s words. If she thinks he had only jumped up in taking advantage using this absurd excuse, Subaru may as well give up on continuing to speak. However, standing in opposition to Ram, who wants to reject it completely, Emilia still faces her with resolve,

Emilia: “It’s worth believing him! Didn’t we all up until now?!”

Ram: “—hk”

Ram’s cheek slightly stiffens at Emilia’s appeal. For a second, a trace of doubt flits through Ram’s light-pink irises, various thoughts seeming to spin through Ram’s intelligent head. She starts to open her stiffly closed lips, and,

Emilia: “Ram, let’s listen to Subaru and…”

Ram: “—What about Rem?”

Emilia: “—ah”

In an instant, Ram’s closed teary-eyed, petite form spins around and leaps at Emilia. Deciding in that moment to fall back, Emilia had prepared herself to hold down Ram. But, the approaching Ram’s movements prove to be faster, and Emilia’s left hand was caught by Ram’s right.

Ram: “Don’t get in my way now!”

Emilia: “Kyaa!”

As she spoke, demonstrating her excellent footwork and defensive movements, and minimally moving her wrist and shoulder, Ram flings Emilia’s body aside, in a manner that had demonstrated maximum effectiveness. As Emilia flies away, her figure slowly somersaulted to the side. Through her surprise at her world’s sudden revolutions, she quickly grasps her situation and attempts to swing her long legs onto the floor below.

Emilia: “—hk”

In the spot where Emilia landed, lay one of Ram’s shoes which she had flung off. Tripping over it, Emilia loses her balance and lands on all fours.

In that close combat, Emilia had been overwhelmed by Ram’s technique, and Ram slips into the gap created. Thrusting her wand between the bars of the ice cage, towards the tip of the frightened Subaru’s nose,

Ram: “I dare you to say that again.”

Subaru: “It’s—…Not like that…”

Ram: “With that face. And that voice. Say that you forgot Rem. One more time…”

Gritting her teeth, Ram was collecting something on the tip of her trembling wand, and he knew what it was. It was invisible to the eye, a power which you would probably call mana was accumulating in front of his eyes, but even then, Subaru couldn’t follow with any words.

He couldn’t think of what to say to Ram. To that girl in front of him hanging on the verge of tears. If he wasn’t Natsuki Subaru, but ‘Natsuki Subaru’ Would he have been able to do it?

Emilia: “You cant, Ram! Stop!!”

Emilia, having just clambered back to her feet, screams in an attempt to stop Ram. However, she doesn’t make it in time.

Emilia: “…”

A white light blinks through the ice cage’s bars, and the shock engulfs Subaru. That shock flings his body all the way to the back onto the ice bars, the back of his head banged against them.

Subaru: “—hgh”

His head shook violently, and his consciousness became hazy. Without even having time to explain himself, Natsuki Subaru's consciousness slipped away.

3

Subaru: "—huh?"

Letting out a faint, weak groan, his consciousness starts to resurface. Gradually, gradually, his consciousness rises to the surface from the sludge of darkness. Feeling as if he were somewhere vast, steady, steadily accelerating, stretching into reality, and finally—

Subaru: "—Ghuua?! Owww?!"

In the instant in which he'd been about to flit into consciousness, he had been yanked up by a force that felt like it had seized him by the scruff of his neck; sharp, hot pain burned within Subaru's mind. Groaning and writhing in pain, Subaru wakes up on the cold, hard floor.

Subaru: "Ow, ow, owwww, what, what is this…?"

His body roused by throbbing pain Subaru reaches out his hand to his left shoulder. The moment he touches it, scorching pain once again burns across his mind. He couldn't move his left arm at all.

Subaru: "Did it get yanked out of my socket…? Is it dislocated? Ugh, never felt this one before …"

Dangling about, his arm cannot move to his will down from his shoulder. However, when he had tried to move and touch it, he had felt a sharp pain. Thus, Subaru stood up with great care. Looking around at his surroundings, he sees that… there was nobody around. And this room was—

Subaru: "The room where I hid Meili…"

In other words, he was in the same room where he had been conscious up until just before. As evidence for that, behind Subaru, the ice cage Emilia had magically crafted was still there. It was strange that Subaru had been lying down outside of the cage. Looking at the cage, it didn't appear opened, and it didn't look like he should have been able to get out of it by any normal means—

Subaru: "—So does that mean my shoulder was…?"

Thinking to that degree, Subaru notices the relationship between his dislocated shoulder and his escape from the ice cage. The gaps between the bars of the ice cage were so small that it would be impossible to get through them unless he was the size of a child. By force, it should be possible to get through with his shoulder dislocated. The question is how did Natsuki Subaru manage that whilst unconscious? Also—

Subaru: "—Where have Emilia… and Ram gone?"

Within the room, the girls who'd been arguing with each other not long ago, or even about to kill each other, their figures were nowhere to be seen. That situation was far too unnatural. —No, it was more like a terrible situation than an unnatural one.

Subaru had been knocked out of consciousness, and thus knew nothing about his shoulder's dislocation, or Emilia and Ram whereabout, or anyone else who should have been here. Subaru looks around the room, wondering what had happened during his unconsciousness, looking to see whether anything strange had occurred—and there he saw it.

"Natsuki Subaru was Here"

Subaru: "…"

On the walls, everywhere he could see, those words were engraved. Cut into the stone wall, crudely shaped words were carved as if scribbled into a notepad.

Had it been the fragment of stone that was near the wall that had done that? It seems like it was part of the stone that had been in the back of the room, which had been originally used to hide Meili's dead body. Using that stone fragment, the phrase "Natsuki Subaru was Here" was engraved onto the wall. —If it was just that, then the impact had not been as great as when the same words had been carved into his arm.

Under the influence of the surprise and astonishment that the redux had brought along to him, he should have laughed it off as no big deal. But, however—

“Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki

Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”

“Natsuki Subaru was Here” “Natsuki Subaru was Here”—.

Subaru: “—U…ah.”

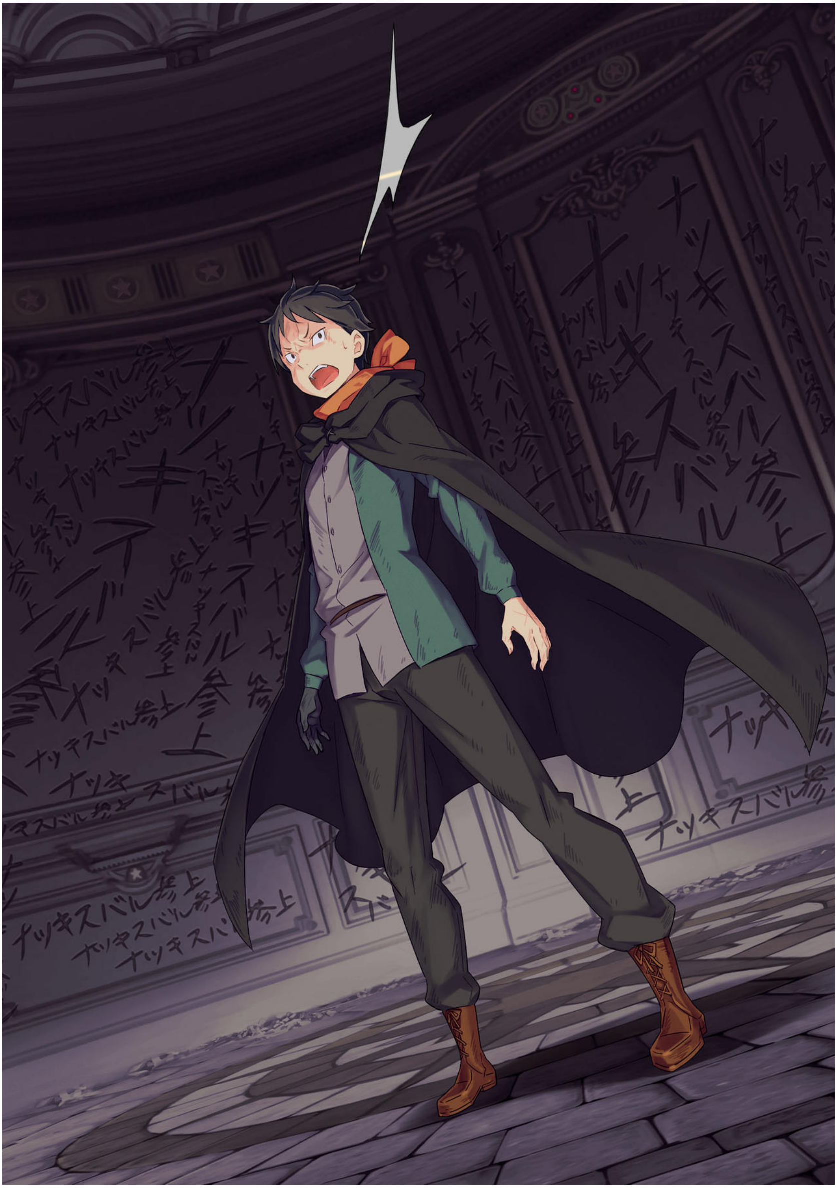
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Tightly packed together, abnormally so, the words were engraved so that they completely covered the walls inside the room. They had even looked so natural that he hadn't truly noticed the uncomfortable feeling from the start. The words were so abnormally and stubbornly engraved to the extent that it had looked somewhat like an optical illusion, due to the excess of that pattern on the walls.

Inside this room, for what purpose? Engraving these characters—

???: "—Hmm? OY, th'fuck is up with this creepy ass room? You, th'fuck is this crap decorating the walls?"

Subaru: "…"

Shuddering, standing stock still, the voice coming from behind Subaru inspired fear, and it wasn't down to the fact that he hadn't detected its presence. After all, Subaru's attention right now had been firmly fixed at the writing on the walls. He wouldn't have noticed anyone approaching.

Thus, he was not surprised because of that. Subaru's surprise had come from how familiar that crude voice sounded. The terrible memories of it that he wanted to forget—

???: "You, th'hell ya doing looking so blank, small fry. What's a small fry doing so far away from his flock? Aren't ya just asking to be a bigger fish's prey?"

As he spoke from behind Subaru, who dares not to look back, the red-haired man's laugh rang out like a shark's. Oh how he laughed indeed, that man who should by all means not be here.

Chapter 51:
Tower of the Living II

1

Hearing the voice of the familiar man from behind him, Subaru trembles in fear, to the point that he forgets to breathe.

Subaru: “…”

Right in that instant, he even forgets about the pain from his dislocated left shoulder. His mind is dominated by a vast succession of negative emotions, such as fear and cowardice; a tempest of hopeless feelings clouds over his thoughts, a single word repeats inside his head: “Why?”

Why, his list of questions is inexhaustible. Why is his left shoulder dislocated? Why is the phrase “Natsuki Subaru was Here” carved all around this room to this extent? Why are Emilia and Ram’s figures, who had captured Subaru, nowhere to be seen? Why is Meili’s body, which he had hidden, nowhere to be seen? Why had Natsuki Subaru lost his memories? Why had Natsuki Subaru been summoned into a different world? Why… couldn’t he ever tell his mom and dad the truth about everything? Why—

???: “What’re ya doin’ all huddled up. Don’t be so silent, gross bastard.”

—Why is the man who wasn’t supposed to be able to come down standing here?

???: “—Urgh”

Suddenly, irritation rises in that man’s voice, causing Subaru to whirl around in a panic. To look directly at the figure behind him is a frightening notion. In most cases, what triggers this sense of trepidation is a fear of the unknown; however, the fear that this man inspires comes from more than just the immediate risk of looking.

This is far deeper than just unease from being unable to see, for this specific opponent's intent is not merely to inspire fear. Subaru can't help but think it's a much closer to a straightforward urge to maim or even to kill.

???: "Hah. What ya lookin' at. With that face. Are ya that scared?! Ya look like you're about to cry. A disgusting bastard, in this fucked up room."

Smiling sardonically at Subaru, who'd made up his mind as such, the man dressed in a male kimono brazenly bares his white teeth. Long, red hair, an eye patch covering his right eye, his bare chest wrapped in white linen strips, and a muscular, well-built body; he is looking down at the pitiful Subaru.

Pleiades Watchtower's Second Floor Guardian—Reid is the man that is calling out to him.

Subaru: "…"

Reid: "… Does yer mouth not work? Can ya not hear me speak? Or, are you trying to show that ya have no plans of speaking with me? If that's th'way it is, I don't really mind, but still, I guess it feels more dignifying that way."

Bluntly saying this out loud, with words that show utmost arrogance, Reid stares at Subaru with an angry expression on his face. Whilst being overwhelmed by the hostility coming from Reid, Subaru forces his lips into a mumble.

Subaru: "Righ…t… eye…"

Reid: "Haaah?"

Subaru: "Wasn't your eyepatch… on your left eye…? Why… is it on your right eye…?"

It was a question that he should not have uttered right now. As Subaru asks him, Reid's eyes flicker slightly. And just after, the man clanged his teeth together with a "CLACK."

Reid: "Whim, it's a whim! Either eye is fine for me. That's th' way it is, I put it on just when I feel like messing about. If I don't put it on, I'll end up seein' way too much crap. It's just that kind of thing."

As Reid said that, he turns over the eyepatch covering his right eye using his fingers. And there below his eyepatch, there are no wounds; his eye is in good health exactly as he had stated. And of course, there are no signs of injuries in his uncovered left eye. In short, his words had been completely true, he understood that his eyepatch was really only an item for doing something because he wants to. Even so, when it comes to him, it's a pastime needed for bridging the power-gap between himself and others—

Reid: "—what th'. OY, isn't yer shoulder dislocated, I did think't looked a bit weird."

Subaru: "—GH?"

Immediately after he'd felt such profound emotion, a burning sensation scorches the lining of Subaru's brain, with a sudden impact.

Subaru: "GH, GHA…!"

His throat is constricted by sharp pain, and his field of view around him flickers, pierced by great anguish. Looking at it with no consideration or hesitation, Reid had grasped Subaru's dislocated shoulder with his right hand. With a mere twist of the wrist, he had casually inserted the dislocated bone back into its socket.

The dislocated bone was fixed, echoing a dull click across the room, and freedom of movement returns to his left shoulder. However, the pain that for a moment had become negligible returns to him, tears pour down Subaru's cheeks, the pain makes him feel like cursing the world around him.

Reid: "Don't ya be acting so over the' top. It looks like I'm pickin' on ya when you look like that, damn it. As a matter of fact, it's not me who's pickin' on ya, more so it's that smokin' hottie!"

Subaru: "Smoking… hottie?"

Reid: "That smokin' hottie with th' silver hair. The ice cage behind ya', I can pretty much tell by looking at that, plus yer dislocated shoulder. Did ya fall out with yer friends, hah, how amusing!"

Reid snorts this back at Subaru, who is holding his left shoulder, and groaning in pain. Having heard those words, Subaru understood he means Emilia when he described them as a smoking hottie. And, at the same time, when it comes to what had happened in the room, between Subaru and everyone else—Subaru fears that Reid's observant eye must have grasped what happened.

Subaru: "How… do you know?"

Reid: "Stuck inside the sullen tower, the stuff between a man n' woman'll either improve beyond imagination, or deteriorate beyond imagination, those're the only two options. When it comes to ya, yer the type t' piss people off beyond belief. 'S not so hard t' figure that out."

In all honestly, none of those conclusions are wrong. Therefore, Subaru has no way to refuse those words. Tearing his gaze away from Subaru, Reid turns to glance at Emilia's ice cage.

Subaru: "…"

Twisting his neck, he strides huffily away from Subaru's side, eyeing the ice cage for a moment before he stomps on it, applying force but for a brief moment. In that instant, the structure gives a sharp cracking sound; in the next, the destructive force spreads to all of the resilient prison, shattering the lattice entirely.

Needless to say, no matter how hard Subaru had tried, he couldn't shift that ice cage even slightly; the cage's integrity had refused to yield. Whether in terms of magic or strength, with a simple glance, the disparity between is immediately revealed, leaving Subaru dumbstruck. Putting his reaction to one side, Reid stretches his hands and feet lightly.

Reid: "—Well, looks like ya can move it again all right. Excellent, excellent indeed."

Muttering that, making sure he had some kind of feeling there, he slowly steps out from the room. He takes absolutely no notice of Subaru, who stood stock still, perplexed out of his mind by that attitude. The confusion still hadn't settled down, he isn't able to completely grasp what happened, but he knew that in this place, taking his eyes away from Reid would result in nothing good.

Subaru: "Wait up! Didn't you… didn't you say you couldn't come down from the floor above? Why are you walking around this floor like it's normal?!"

As Reid walks along the corridor of the fourth floor with complete indifference, Subaru rushes out of the room. Quite unpretentiously, staring at Reid's back as he strides across the floor with an air of majesty, Subaru throws out that one question which had been inside his head since the very beginning. In response, Reid waved his hand without looking behind him,

Reid: "When did I say I couldn' walk out th' second floor? If that's what yer saying… then isn't that a lil' bit unfair? Don't worry. Yer assumption that I can't leave has a bitta' truth to it. I only became able to leave jus' now."

Subaru: "Just now… wait, so may I ask why the premise collapsed?"

Reid: "I'm not gonna give ya a full lecture 'ere and explain everything. I can walk about. Yer about t' piss yerself. That's that, the end. —Ah, wait, 's not th' end yet."

Following Reid in his wake, Subaru catches up to him. Changing the tone of his voice, Reid narrows his eyes at him. Subaru's body shrunk in place, as Reid distorted his cheeks at him, it looked like he could kill him just with his sharp eyes. The red haired swordsman, who didn't carry around weapons, unarmed. —With merely the glint in his eyes, this man's gaze would be enough to put someone to the sword; Subaru takes a deep breath.

Subaru: "Wh.. What the…"

Reid: "Excellent, keep blusterin' on like that, you. 'F you can't even do that, y've no right to call yerself a man. 'n so, I've a question for ya, y’ borderline failed man. I’m about to bid this sullen tower farewell, but where th’ hell did yer buddies y’ fell out with run off to?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

As the hostility exuding from the man nearby squeezes his heart, Subaru hears this surprising remark, causing his eyes to widen. Seeing the disheveled Subaru’s reaction, Reid naturally continues with a “YOU,”

Reid: “I plan t’ get outta here, but I need food, water, and sake. Let’s not even talk about th’ women. Well, from yer friends, that smokin’ hottie and that woman with such a slutty figure are certainly fine prospects. Though, since I’d feel guilty seducing th’ smokin’ hottie, the slutty woman would have to be th’ prime candidate for it.”

Subaru: “Lea… ving? This tower? But… what about… your Trial , no, what about everything else? What’re you going to do about this situation, and everything that’s going on?!”

Reid: “’S nothin’, everythin’ y’ said doesn’t have shit t’ do with me. Yer issues should be solved by yerself, I’ve got nuffin’ t’ do with it. Ah, hold up. ‘S one last disgustin’ task left.”

Subaru: “Disgusting… task,—gha?!”

Reid’s facial expression suddenly changes, jabbing at Subaru’s forehead with his finger, as Subaru’s eyebrows had knitted into a grimace at those words. Subaru’s back crashes against the wall of the corridor due to the sheer strength of the poke. Looking down at Subaru laying in a painful heap beneath him, Reid snorts out a “Hmph.”

Reid: “I already told ya. don’t ya be thinkin’ you’ll be able t’ get an answer to everythin’, ya lil’ chicken. Are ya a small fry, or a lil’ chicken, tighten the grip under yer feet, ya prick. “

Subaru: “That’s a problem of your own definition…”

Reid: “Don’t use th’ me, who so fortunately appeared before ya as a tool to dispel yer worries, questions, or regrets with. Yer issues're for ya to solve. Don't use me as a crutch."

Subaru: "…"

Calling those words akin to something like irritated was not be quite right. Feelings of irritation have some emotion to it, but Reid does not care at all about Subaru's existence. You don't get emotional over someone you don't care about. Thus, there isn't any irritation present in his voice.

However, just these "over the shoulder" words were enough for Subaru to feel as if a knife had been stuck into his heart. Groaning from that pain, once again the questions left behind filling Subaru's mind lurch as if they were going to bury up his heart. But, just before that happened.

Reid: "—Aaah, it came."

Swiveling his head to look towards the end of the aisleway, Reid grumbles this as if something was up. Lifting his head up, Subaru's eyes are also lured towards that direction, pointing them towards where Reid was looking at; however, he couldn't spot anything different there. However, he realizes it late. Crouched down, his buttocks against the floor, he notices it. A faint tremor. The tower is shaking. Faintly, not quite on the same scale as an earthquake, but he felt tremors nevertheless.

Reid: "KAH"

Clacking his teeth together and laughing, his eyes shining, Reid steps forward, sandals firmly treading against the floor. Seeing his unhesitating manner from the corner of his eyes, Subaru panickily follows in his trail.

Reid had said that he shouldn't use him as a tool to dispel his own worries. It's undeniable, there was no doubt in Subaru that Reid's words had cut right into his frail heart. Subaru's issues could not be solved by merely complaining about them to Reid. However, apart from that, Subaru now has a responsibility to get to the bottom of why Reid was wandering about the Fourth Floor, and what was happening in the tower in general.

Subaru: “Reid!”

Reid: “…”

Subaru: “Hey, wait up! Wait up! At the very least, tell me… what are you going to do…?”

With long strides, and a quick pace, Reid’s back was proudly advancing forward, and he did not deign to stop and answer Subaru’s question. His shoulder is in pain, there is bewilderment and confusion in his heart, he doesn’t have any assertiveness. Subaru is driven by his half-hearted obligation, he has no other choice but to chase with utmost effort after the man’s back who was striding forward.

And suddenly, the back of the man with the swaying long red hair abruptly ground to a halt and stopped.

Reid: “…”

Reid had stopped his feet as he reached the spiral staircase present in the atrium at the end of the corridor—It was the place where the amnesiac Natsuki Subaru had twice been pushed to his death.

As Subaru had been busy frantically chasing after Reid, he only noticed where he is standing at the last second. He holds his breath, frozen in place. However, his desire of wanting to break the deadlock in the feelings of hopelessness surpasses the feeling of avoiding this place that brought about his “death” and gives Subaru the strength to move forward.

—It wasn’t the place that had killed Subaru. It was evil that had killed Subaru. It isn’t the place that ought to cause him to harbor these feelings of avoidance, rather the main cause of this should be attributed to the culprit.

Subaru: “…”

The beating of his heart, and the sound of his blood flowing through his veins feel frightfully loud. Ignoring that, Subaru wipes off a bead of sweat and pushed on forwards towards where Reid had stopped. He is standing at the edge of the drop, looking down below at the scene beneath his eyes. Wherever he may be, he is a man who really suits the posture of looking down on things. Whilst thinking such a useless thought in the depths of his mind, Subaru follows his gaze.

Following his gaze, he finally notices it. Having been lost in his noisy heartbeat, the sound that he hadn't heard before was now audible to him.

Subaru: "…"

—Right beneath him, at the bottom of the large staircase, on the fifth floor, having appeared out of nowhere, a repulsive herd of witchbeasts of flame were filling up the hall, presenting to him a spectacle of absolute hell.

2

Witnessing this display from beyond even his wildest imaginations, Subaru's senses went completely white.

Subaru: "—Huh?"

The cracking of the scorching crimson flame and the sound of countless wailing infants dwelt in the tower. Connecting those two factors led to a only one conclusion—that was, this terrifying witchbeast, which wore a mane of flame around its neck, is only one part of a violent chaos of a horde.

Four legs and a torso akin to that of horses, an upper body with arms that are comparable to a human's, and a gaping maw complete with fangs spreading through the human half. The dreadful heat's flames were about to scorch and devour the oxygen within the tower.

There are about 20 witchbeasts here, more or less; he can see them rampaging about below him on the fifth floor. The dreadful heat reaches below towards Subaru and Reid, who are dozens and dozens of meters above. Flinching back, being taken by surprise by this heatwave, to the extent that he felt like his eyeballs dry up in an instant.

What is…really… what is going on.

Reid: “So there’s some creepy-ass witchbeasts here huh. You, d’ ya know what they are?”

Subaru: “…I don’t know. It’s the first time for me too seeing these witchbeasts, other than the Huge Earthworm…… ah?!”

Next to Subaru who cannot keep his eyes off of the scene, stands Reid looking at the exact same spectacle, issuing that question to him. Subaru shakes his head at that query, his voice unintentionally trembling at the change in his view.

The witchbeasts are rampaging about inside the tower, garbed in flame—looking like both horse and man, a more convenient term to call them by would be Centaurs. The Centaurs let out a piercing yell. Coming out from their warped maws is a violent yell, a shrill roar as if caused by sheer fury. And the reason for that was due to the lone knight who was fighting back, swinging his slender sword, weaving his way through the herd of witchbeasts.

“—KSHEEEEEEGHHH!!”

Holding his breath, an elegant sword slips through the gap between the herd of the witchbeasts who carried swords of flame. Blood scatters, the arms and legs of a witchbeast is severed, its delayed shriek reverberates around the surroundings. Whilst listening to this, the knight who risked being overwhelmed by the amount of centaurs springs forward and leaps towards the next beast, sword poised.

Subaru: “—JULIUS!”

Reflexively, Subaru’s lips calls out his name, deeply moved at having found a survivor. He can’t tell which emotion is stronger within himself, the one of joy or grief. Nevertheless, immediately after his consciousness leapt he had done something unknown, there had been a situation like that once when he found himself with Meili’s corpse beside him. He can’t say for sure if the next time he meets with someone, whether they’ll end up as a corpse. There’s always such a fear in him. Therefore, it was good news that he had broke through this fear.

Subaru: “…”

Putting aside the expression of surprise from above, beneath Subaru’s eyes, Julius wields his sword and continues to fight against the witchbeasts. Although he is at a disadvantage in terms of numbers, it was a situation where the strength of one probably wasn’t equal to that of Julius. Although, if the witchbeasts which freely emit flame think of swarming Julius, who had only a sword to fend off against them would mean his limits would be called upon.

—And if he burnt to death, then his Book of The Dead should appear in the library.

Reid: “Where are all th’ others?—Well, I guess this is convenient.”

Subaru: “—!”

In that moment, a dark thought had floated across Subaru’s mind, desiring for the “death” of his companion, that idea fought in the depths of Subaru’s heart. Reid’s muttering as he gazes at the scene below jerks his thoughts back to reality. But, Reid wasn’t aware of Subaru’s internal conflict. Baring his fangs, he takes a step forward. Already on the verge of falling down to the depths below, he steps forward again.

Subaru: “H…Hey, what are you going to do?”

Reid: “You, ‘s your only ability askin’ questions? Stop relyin’ on me n’ try to pull some darin’ moves every once in a while. Talkin’ t’ ya’s completely no fun. Yer not a sexy lady for me t’ feast my eyes on, nor’re ya interestin’ t’ talk ta. You, with what intents’re ya tryin’ t’ talk t’ me with?”

Subaru: “…”

Reid: “Lemme ask again, th’ hell’re ya goin’ t’ do? One of your comrades is just right there, trapped t' face a bunch've disgustin' witchbeasts, n' yer still just standin'? T' say that weak guys don't have options's just a pitiful excuse."

Just like a carnivore making sport of a herbivore, so did Reid's philosophy echo the right of the strong. This philosophy's incompatibility with Subaru only serve to reinforce its veracity; that was the sheer disparity between the strong and the weak.

Reid: "Haaaaah"

Without neither a word nor glance to Subaru, Reid at last stepped into motion, leaning forward slightly. There had been no chance to stop him. Like this, Reid fell forward, weightless, tracing the path that Subaru had followed to his death.

Straight, straight, straight down Reid fell. Back then, Natsuki Subaru's consciousness had left him before he had crashed into the ground, and he hadn't been able to even see the moment which had actually caused his "death".

That red-haired swordsman, Reid dropped down in the same way, falling, falling—

"—*THUMP THUMP*!!"

Its back being struck by sandals falling from such great heights, the centaur's equine body is crushed. Its limbs, unable to bear that impact, shatter. It's unbelievable how the witchbeast's huge body was crushed, blood the color of ink spraying out, staining the floor of the fifth floor.

Completing this scene is, falling from a height that would have been fatal to Subaru, energetically stomping on the remains of the witchbeast, the violence of Reid Astrea.

Subaru: "…"

The witchbeasts, which from their looks, likely did not possess intelligence, ceased their movements. Noticing the chaotic appearance of this red-haired man, their baby-like wails stop. Looking closely revealed that these headless witchbeasts were using their non-visual senses to gauge their opponent; this is what Subaru surmises.

Reid's abnormality is clear to them, using just their organs remaining that were devoid of sight. That observation is equally apparent to the knight, with all five senses intact, who had been engaged in a vigorous battle with these creatures.

Julius: "You… why are you… here…"

Reid: "Why, why, why. 'S there anythin' else ya'll can ask at all? What's th' secret to bein' popular with woman, what's the best kinda alcohol, how'd ya get t' be so strong, for instance?"

Standing in front of Julius, whose eyes are wide open in sheer shock, Reid brushes away the pieces of meat on the soles of his sandals. He turns his hand to another Centaur standing beside him. As if it were a joke, in his hand, he held a thin, wooden stick—he could see that he was holding a chopstick.

Reid: "My secret t' being popular with women's my face. Th' best kinda alcohol's Granhiert brandy. —N' 's fer how I'm the strongest in the world? 'S simply because I'm me."

Pausing for a moment after he finished speaking, Reid lightly began moving the chopsticks at his fingertips. In the next moment, the frozen centaur's body exploded in a shower of blood. Slow to detect the collapse of its body, the witchbeast finally released the cries of its throes of Death.

Those screams, reminiscent of the cries of a baby, clinging desperately to this world, are indeed the worst in taste. However, a smile remains firmly on the face of the man who had caused all this. He raises his unbloodied weapons, his chopsticks, once more; this time not towards the witchbeasts, but Julius.

Then, looking at the yellow irises of the faraway Julius, who seems to dread those chopsticks far beyond what he appears to, Reid bares his fangs.

Reid: "Right, let's get the rest of the Trial goin'. Try 'n wrench 'em away before I get bored with this, ya prick.”

Chapter 52:
God, Please Forgive Me

1

—An unpleasant sword dance began to unfold, with the stage being the Fifth Floor Atrium.

"…"

With his long, red hair flying about, the eyepatch-clad man flawlessly weaved left and right, with absolute control of his burly body, wielding only short, fragile sticks of wood. Unfolding right on the stage was an unbelievable spectacle.

"—KSHEEEEEEGHHH!!"

A witchbeast in the form of a Centaur rushed towards the Redhead, its half-human, half-horse form raising a cry that sounded like something a newborn baby would emit. On its upper-half, the human part, the witchbeast had no head. It wielded a sword of flame, carrying it in both hands—were you to come into contact with this immeasurable, scorching heat, even if were to graze you then certainly your body would end up becoming carbonized. And, yet, how was it that the man was doing this? He had twisted his body into this dance within the searing heat, fending it off as if it was child's play, using only those plain-as-day wooden sticks that he carried about.

Flames did not alight upon the wooden sticks which had successfully warded the creature off. They didn't catch on fire. Why?!

—Perhaps it was just because he was swinging those wooden sticks faster than they could catch on fire and burn.

The reason why his wooden sticks were not burnt by the fire was because he was swinging the sticks faster than they could catch aflame. The reason why he'd warded off those slashes of flame was because he'd shift his sword flashes, conferring unto them the minimal amount of strength needed with the gale of his blades. And, it seemed like the reason why that man found this so enjoyable, as the air around him became red-hot with murderous intent, was because he was absolutely insane.

Fully enjoying this crazy situation like it were the prime of this world, Reid in this crazed state resumed the Trial.

Reid: "Looklooklooklook Looklooklooklook! You, what happened ?! You, are ya playing?! Unlike before, 's time t' get serious, you. Use your companions around ya, time t' take vengeance on me! C'monC'monC'monC'monC'monC'monC'monC'mon!"

While bellowing angrily, with spittle flying from his mouth into the midst of the flames, Reid held a wooden stick in each hand. In a similar manner to how those blue eyes glared at him, Julius was encircled by the flames around him.

As Julius dealt with the witchbeasts around him, with his sword in hand, a sudden feeling of tension and bewilderment floated across his face; he didn't want to pay any heed to the words of Reid, who, as expected, was treating this as if this were song and dance. And with that same expression, Julius shouted out.

Julius: "What the heck, what are you thinking?! All these witchbeasts came from the basement! This is a big deal for the tower, we should combine our strength!"

Reid: "Wowzers! Bein' a dude who's a well-mannered swordster, you sure are well-mannered in how ya think too, huh. You, like this, can you even enjoy living? From my experience, guys who hold off on doing what they wanna do, live much boring lives than guys who do what they want, understand, you?"

Julius: "What do you-…"

Reid: "First of all, what's the problem with letting those disgusting burning horseys run around? They're only as bothersome as rain t' me. 'Cept rain's plenty bothersome, cuz I've got frizzy hair, ya see"

Julius' argument had come from a sensible point of view, but Reid laughed at it like it had been madness-spurned nonsense from a madman's reasoning. Comparing the flock of clearly murderous witchbeasts of flame to something on the same level as the rain served as proof that any reasoning within Reid was long dead. There were no chances of there being any proper reasoning to it, holding no meaning save for filling the minds of those listening with confusion and chaos.

Julius: "—hk!"

When Julius heard this, he was disturbed by a thought he'd never even considered, and as a result, a trace of hesitation was born in him as he brandished his sword, and his parry to the Centaur's attack was belated.

Julius: "Damn—!"

Julius did not meet the arcing, flaming sword with his sword, he instead dodged it with something like a backward somersault. And straight afterwards, another Centaur came to trample his head under its hooves. He avoided it by jumping forwards using his momentum from his landing. He thrusted his sword towards the body of the witchbeast that had been wielding the flaming sword just before as the witchbeasts behind them screamed—

Centaur: "—!!"

As he went to turn around, a hoof-kick caught Julius's left shoulder. A muffled sound, and then a look of anguish ran across his handsome features. Even so, he used the momentum of the hoof to turn his body around, and with his sword, he cut down the witchbeast by its legs, and with one mighty sword sweep he ran his sword through its body. Then, he slammed the pommel of his own sword into his bleeding left shoulder. The sound of raw meat and bone reverberated, and far more drastic than had been the case when Reid had treated Subaru's own shoulder, his bone slotted back into place.

Reid: "Kah! And that's that. Heh, not bad, that expression of yers."

As their giant burning bodies and trampling hooves transformed the fifth floor into a burning hellhole, only one person, Julius, had dared to fight against everyone's despair. Reid was pleased by this, with a cruel smile taking form on his face. The witchbeasts, unable to reason, would consider Reid and Julius equally harmful opponents; however, their troublesomeness was clearer than flame, had you any intelligence.

Stained with blood, lacking his usual elegance, Julius's sword kept the witchbeasts' attacks at bay and steadily cut them down one by one. Meanwhile, Reid didn't seem troubled, and with martial arts skills that were about the same, or higher than Julius, he was reaping the lives of the witchbeasts as if he were a Shinigami. And, in the meanwhile—

Julius: "—GH"

Reid: "But, watch yer step. Well though, from how I see it, ya gotta watch yer everywhere."

Picking his ear seemingly in boredom, Reid's long leg slammed into the back of Julius, who had been turned away from him. How much power had been in that kick? Having received it, Julius' body was blown away with ease, just like a stone, wrapped up in a piece of cloth. His body crashed into the tower wall. His crash could be felt reverberating all throughout the tower, the witchbeasts let out a shrill cry, welcoming their prey's predicament. Hunched down on the floor, the herd of witchbeasts rushed forward in a mad scramble towards Julius, who was coughing up blood.

Julius: "Gh… aaa!"

Julius slid his torso up from the ground, and as he kicked out at one of the hooves with his long legs, he jumped back onto his feet. Using that momentum, Julius clambered up using the shoulders and the torso of one of the witchbeasts that had rushed forward as a foothold, and tried to break through their encirclement. He pointed his left hand towards a gap left in between the witchbeasts.

Julius: "…"

Nothing happened. Grasping his left hand, Julius's face showed bitterness. The witchbeasts had turned around, drawing nearer towards Julius—

Reid: "—Even at a time like this, ya ain't gotten serious yet, you."

Julius found himself between the witchbeasts, while Reid sighed and waved his stick as he cut in. Holding one each in both hands, a heavy gust of wind was raised as he swung them, lifting up around about 10 of the Centaur's up into the air. A sensation of being unaware at what had happened rose up in the witchbeasts as they felt their hooves floating in mid-air.

Reid: "Die, ya useless horses!"

Right there, Reid gently took a step and jumped up, towards the witchbeasts, one by one, he cut the torsos in half, pierced their heart, broke their upper body, destroying all of the witchbeasts, massacring them all, total annihilation in different manners.

Flying in the air, to scattering their corpses on the ground, everything happened in about two/three seconds. The witchbeasts, known for their tremendous lethality, killed without anything they could do about it, all destroyed. Then, the fifth layer filled with the Centaurs was swept away, and in this case, it felt like there was room for some relief—

Reid: "Jeez, there ain't any end to 'em. One after another, they emerge from their nest."

Reid clicked his tongue, and, as if to confirm what he had said and indicated, from the stairs that led towards the Sixth Floor underneath, the sounds of hooves and the cries of their baby-like voices were once again approaching the Fifth Floor.

If this went on, due to the accumulation of the corpses, it would only be a matter of time before the witchbeasts would go up. If the desert outside was the natural habitat of these witchbeasts, it was impossible to fathom that they'd run out of stock.

Reid seemed to have a similar idea, and he slowly crossed his arms together,

Reid: "'s a time where man comes down feelin' like leavin' 'n settlin' a few things on my plate, 'n they're just gettin' in the damn way. They're fucking annoyin', mhhhm, Oi."

Julius: "Wait, go out? Things are in this state, and you're still saying you want to go out from the tower?!"

Reid: "You, heard me, that's my conclusion. Like I said. These guys ain't nothing but drops of rain, playin' with 'em 's just borin'. They're really nothin' special. Only the smokin' hottie was capable of playin' with me… The rest of ya, you, can't match up t' my level at all."

Julius: "—Gnh!"

Clenching his teeth, Julius was highly dissatisfied with Reid's attitude, but he hesitated to express that.

If he lost his temper here, the discussion with Reid would break down. In this case, the situation would be against both Reid Astrea and the witchbeasts. Yes, that was what Julius's rationality had thought. Glancing at him, he saw Julius's hesitation in an instant, the anguish that was clear as day,

Reid: "Nothin' can be done about it, it's their nature."

Reid was disappointed from the bottom of his heart, and he muttered, which made Julius' cheeks become stiff. How much anguish was coursing through there? Julius's, his expression and overly complex emotional vortex, it was like a child heading for the top of the mountain which was covered by clouds.

The pain within his heart was absolutely invisible to everyone other than him.

—However, it was immediately after that the hellfire which spouted from below rose up aiming at Julius. All of what was happening below was well visible to the Mediocre Guy looking down at the battlefield from up above.

Subaru: "—Aah"

While everything had reached this point, Natsuki Subaru overlooked the fifth layer fight from above, he realized that he had even forgot to breathe because of the situation downstairs.

"…"

Beneath his eyes, the melee between Reid and Julius, with the witchbeasts added to the equation, was on an absurd dimension, in which Subaru, lump of banality as he was, could not even think of intruding.

Struck with admiration towards Reid, who operated far outside the norm, he could feel nothing but fresh-born awe towards him. But, for the first time, Subaru witnessed Julius's fight. His swordsmanship and skills, were at a level at which Subaru could not remotely take advantage of him.

If Subaru challenged him, he would definitely have all his limbs lopped off in an instant; it would only be an ugly defeat. To face him without utmost seriousness, with only a wooden practice sword, well, that nonchalant face would never waver; there would only be agonizing, crushing defeat.

Whether it was Emilia, or Julius, or Ram, it was all the same.

Or, let's say Beatrice and Echidna, not to mention Shaula, and everyone in this tower, Natsuki Subaru's meagre power could not be compared with theirs. He had taken them, the people of this world, the inhabitants of this fantasy world far too lightly.

Weak and young, Meili was the only one he had killed. Even then, it was 'Natsuki Subaru' who did that, which meant that Subaru did not participate in that.

He can't kill what he can't kill. Natsuki Subaru realized that he did not have the strength to fulfill the Book of The Dead plan.

"…"

After realizing that, Natsuki Subaru's heart became hesitant.

Amazed while standing, Julius lost his calm, and was slow to notice the witchbeasts behind him. Reid noticed them, but showed no signs of warning him.

At this rate, Julius would be burned to death by the flames of the witchbeasts, who were approaching him from behind—The fulfilment of the possibility that had crossed his mind before.

That Julius's Book of The Dead would also be added to the library.

Subaru could not make this situation unfold with his own hands.

It would be a tragedy, by going with the flow of the situation, Subaru would push Julius into his Death—.

Subaru: "—BEHIND YOU, JULIUS!!"

Julius: "—Tsk!"

Upon hearing that scream, Julius's body reflexively unstiffened. Without hesitation, his slender body flew to the right, over the hellfire that had been set loose from behind him swept across the floor of the Fifth Floor, incinerating everything in its wake. Explosive flames which dyed the air crimson; the source of this continuous emission was a witchbeast an entire size larger than all the previous ones. Adolescent and adult—whether or not such distinctions existed amongst witchbeasts, Subaru felt such a discrepancy in their power levels.

"—KSEEEEEEEEEEGH!!"

Cloaked by the flames, the big centaur that made a piercing noise, gathered several other smaller centaurs around him. Once again the fifth floor was swarmed by a herd. The situation turned once again back into a stalemate. Having been caught up in the aftermath of the hellfire, Julius flung off his burning cloak in which flames had set it alight from the hem without turning back towards the witchbeasts… or not, with now nimble figure. Julius faced Subaru, who was feeling desperate and unable to move.

Julius: "…"

Subaru: “Urkh…”

That moment, even with the distance between them, Julius’s and Subaru’s gazes crossed with each other’s. Even though they are clearly quite a distance apart, in positions where they can’t even see each other’s faces clearly, Subaru felt the complex emotion buried in those yellow eyes, letting out a groan from the depths of his throat. Doubt, confusion, hesitation, worry, various shades of negative emotions swirled around within the depths of his eyes. They pierce straight into the depths of Natsuki Subaru’s inexpressible guilt… and then,

And then, just after, speaking this to Subaru who wanted to do nothing but run away from there, Julius spoke out.

Julius: “—I’m leaving Echidna, Anastasia-sama in your hands!!”

“…”

Julius pointed his sword towards Subaru—No, not at Subaru; behind him, when he shouted that it was likely to point up to the fourth floor. With trust that was cracked and full of scars, Julius clung onto this supplication. Or perhaps, as if it had been the right thing to shout right now, even Julius himself couldn’t brush away all his doubts. Those were words he shouted among all this.

Doubtful, confused, hesitant, concerned, he still did not stop, and made a decision.

So—

“—!!”

Like a bullet, Subaru lifted his heavy legs which were attached to the floor, and ran as fast as he could. Scrambling forward, while stumbling, he clumsily ran. He turned his back to the spiral staircase and started running. He did not know the destination. Was he escaping, or not escaping? He didn’t even know that anymore. He didn’t understand his feelings, but even so he could not stop running.

Leaving Julius downstairs, in the place where there was a horde of witchbeasts and Reid, Subaru ran away like a rabbit.

Reid: “—Woah. Truly, truly no helpin’ it, that nature.”

In the distance, Reid, who was watching the situation from afar, muttered silently. Mutters which seemed identical to his previous one. Whether or not a touch of emotion was lodged into them was unclear.

2

Why did he scream? Why couldn’t he let him die right there?

“Haa, Haa…!”

While he sprinted almost running out of breath, Subaru questioned himself over and over again in his head.

Why did he scream? Why couldn’t he let him die right there?

Meili: “Letting him die shouldn’t feel any different than killing him yourself, right?”

Embracing Subaru’s back while he ran, the shade of the girl sentimentally grumbled her complaint.

The shade hadn’t come out even once after Reid’s appearance. Her voice, although Her neck had been strangled, was entirely torturing Subaru as if cursing him with that.

In actual fact, it was like that.

Subaru’s actions were contradictory. His thoughts, his actions, his desires and his goals, none of them aligned.

The Book of The Dead plan was constantly in a corner of his head, that craving awaited eagerly for an opportunity.

The shade of the deceased girl could see through Subaru’s conflicts, so why did he, even when she gave him a push in the back by calling out to him in his time of doubt, waste his chance?

"…"

He had given Julius a chance to escape the line of fire.

However, in the end he remained downstairs, where the danger of Reid and the witchbeasts was very much still present. It was a half-hearted way of leaving someone to die. Was it that he just didn't want to be involved in the actual scene?

Having strangled Meili with his own hands, the depths of his heart had that impulsive fear engraved in it, could he say that it was such that he didn't want to see someone else die in front of him?

Was that why he ran away so desperately?

Regardless of the words, and everything, which had been left to him by Julius, entrusted by Julius—

"—Subaru!"

While he was absorbed in his thoughts, Subaru's feet were abruptly stopped by an overbearing call. When he stopped in his tracks, lurching forward, the voice he heard was from a side-passage that he'd gone past without noticing.

Coming from the other side of the corner, a shadow rushed over to Subaru.

It was—

"I was looking for you, in fact! Right now going there is too dangerous, I suppose!"

"B- Beatrice…?! And…"

Holding up the hem of her dress, Beatrice came running up to him with an earnest expression. Following Julius, Subaru felt both relief and surprise at the same time at having confirmed her safety as well.

However, the surprises didn't stop there. Someone else was accompanying her from behind, Subaru: “Echidna?! Why are you two together…”

Echidna: “…It had to be here that I met you,, Natsuki-kun.”

With a slightly disturbed breath, the girl following behind Beatrice —Echidna, grumbled so.

Aside from the surprise of the unexpected meeting, what had taken a strict hold of Subaru’s heart even more was the emotion with which Echidna’s pale green eyes were looking his way.

“—Hk”

That clear as day suspicion would be made aware to someone in Subaru’s position whether they wanted or not.

Reid, of course, knew nothing. Julius and Beatrice’s demeanors indicated that they also didn’t clearly know anything at all. However, Echidna’s demeanor told a different story.

—Echidna knew.

About the exchange that Subaru, Emilia, and Ram had in the room where he hid Meili’s corpse, where he was locked up in a prison of ice.

And, possibly, that might not be limited to only her.

He remembered how Julius looked at him with a complex emotion in the end.

All of them supposedly shared what happened to Subaru when he woke up. So, it was only natural for Echidna to react this way, rather—

“Beatrice, You’re…”

“—hk! Right now’s not the time to talk about that, in fact! Come over here, I suppose!”

However, in contrast to Subaru who was remembering his hesitation, Beatrice one-sidedly took his hand. Subaru’s quivering voice was blotted out, caught off guard by her action, having been grabbed by her tiny hand.

As a matter of fact, if they were informed by Ram and the others of his circumstances, it was immeasurable how much determination would be required to go ahead with this action. It was such a careless move that it made Subaru want to question their sanity.

“Beatrice, are you serious? He escaped his cell! In a situation like this!”

However, Beatrice taking Subaru’s hand made Echidna’s face go pale and scream at them. She was questioning the pros and cons of Beatrice’s actions. She raised her own hand above and pointed it at Subaru, she pointed her finger at him. The look of that gesture held more pressure.

That seemingly restrained attitude did not seem like a bluff to Subaru. To him the situation was the same as if he were being held at gunpoint.

However, the threat to his life, Subaru took it as a matter of course.

From Echidna’s point of view, being wary of Subaru was obvious. Beatrice was, for some reason. —even now, standing in front of Subaru and standing off even against Echidna.

Echidna: “Hold it, Beatrice! With such odd behavior, siding with him, is a dangerous choice, so I can’t allow it! Just as Ram warned, he isn’t Natsuki Subaru! “

Beatrice: “That’s not true, in fact! Holding his hand like this… Betty who has been in contact with him like this knows, I suppose! Subaru and Betty are still bound by our contract, in fact. You would understand this if you’re in the same position as Betty, I suppose! “

Echidna: “..Even if that’s the case, he’s still untrustworthy! Escaping his cage in circumstances like this! How can I trust him at all? There’s no possible explanation for this!”

As Echidna screamed so, her expression had the strongest emotion he had ever seen of her. To date, she’d always stifled her feelings skillfully- the her the had always given off that air now seemed painfully anxious. Continuously forceful, she desperately tried to eliminate the threat before her. Desperately, doing so.

"…"

An overwhelming number of witchbeasts are overflowing downstairs, every single thing happening in this tower is to be feared. It's natural she would have an outburst when thrown into that impossible situation, while looking at that, he thought.

Subaru: "Just, whatever"

Beatrice: "Subaru?"

Beatrice who was holding his hand, hearing Subaru's whisper, her eyes widened in shock. That Beatrice's small soft hand was then released. With a sudden sound, something that had until now been pulled taught, snapped. Snapped, like so.

Echidna: "…What are you trying to do?"

Subaru having pushed away Beatrice's shoulders, Echidna furrows her brow at him as he stepped forward. Bewildered, her caution was more than that. Even then, Subaru's heart didn't falter.

Subaru: "Just as you see, I'm giving up…Just, do whatever you want with me."

He felt like his emotions couldn't stir into anything else now, other than having whatever happens happen.

He committed a crime he doesn't remember, he desperately wanted to conceal all of it, causing doubts around people, he just tried to stay in peace, but his life was targeted, all while being continuously frightened by the shadow of 'Natsuki Subaru'.

Echidna: "With that admirable attitude, do you think we'll lower our guard? If so, you're making a big mistake. From the bottom of my heart, I can't trust you."

Subaru: "Fine, whatever. You're free to add that in too. This tower, is finished..”

Subaru could not handle it.

He had gone over his mental capacity, having gone through one too many impossible situations. This was, just him wanting to grumble at his blockade.

However, it seemed that Echidna thought differently.

Echidna: “This Tower is…? In other words, you already have achieved your goal?”

Subaru: “…My goal?”

Echidna: “Don’t feign ignorance! Your goal, it is the Witch in the shrine, isn’t it?!Because your goal is fulfilled, everything reveals its true nature.…I should have followed Ana’s intuition. I shouldn’t have brought anyone else here.”

Echidna’s voice, speaking with anguish, was filled with contrition and remorse. It was like Subaru didn’t know its origins.

Just now, she was seeing something Subaru couldn’t. Moreover, she suspects that Subaru is related to that. —But does it even matter? The end of the world is approaching.

Beatrice: “Subaru, Subaru! In fact, what’s wrong with you?! The way you’re talking, it’s nothing like Subaru, I suppose! You cannot stop in such a place like this in fact!”

Subaru: “Like… me?”

Beatrice appealed and pulled Subaru’s sleeve, whose expressions had completely disappeared. The trembling voice shook his ears, and Subaru stared at Beatrice.

Subaru: “What is, being like me. Just where is that being like me, which you guys are seeing.”

Echidna: “… Amnesia. Do you intend to continue your disgusting farce? You know that Ram has lost memories of her little sister, or

Julius who has had himself forgotten, and the fact many have had the memories of their precious ones erased, and yet you maintain your cruel act.”

Subaru: “Act?! Act you say?! Give me a break! If it’s acting, then isn’t it obvious I’d act with much more determination?! Who would… who would like to become ‘Natsuki Subaru’, by their choice! Who would become that disgusting guy!!”

With his brain a total mess, Subaru burst out with anger at Echidna,

If he had the freedom of choice, if he had the luxury of being picky, who would like to become ‘Natsuki Subaru’. Twisted, unbearable, that was the kind of existence he was. Just who would want that.

—Just who, would wish to become ‘Natsuki Subaru’?

Subaru: “You’re all just ganging up on me! Who do you think you are! I lost everything! I was just coming back from the convenience store! All I remember is that there was just the store clerk with me! From that, suddenly a different world? Sand tower? Dead body! Trial ! Fakeness! ‘Natsuki Subaru’ ! Don’t mess with me! Don’t mess with, me!”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “That’s right! It must be my fault! I came here when I shouldn’t have had! I didn’t want to go back home! I was too scared to bother dad and mom by putting on a fake look on my face! So I was all excited in the beginning, but just in the beginning!”

Beatrice and Echidna were staring open-eyed at the emotions of the exploding Subaru.

They surely didn’t know their meaning. To them, Subaru’s anguish was simply meaningless.

He also confessed of this being a different world for him.

However, they did not understand the meaning of Different World in its truest sense. —There was an unquestionable gap between their understanding.

Subaru was not the ‘Natsuki Subaru’ they were seeking.

Likewise, they too, would never become to the salvation Subaru was seeking.

Subaru: “You must all be thinking why I’m blowing my temper right now all of a sudden, right? I don’t know either! But, I have suddenly just reached my limit! Because I am like this, something that was perfectly fine snapped! Even if I was implored, I can’t do anything! Not a single thing! So!”

“…”

Subaru: “So… just forgive me now. Please forgive me. Please, send me back home… If God, wanted to, punish me then, I understand… it was my fault.”

Subaru said, overwhelmed, with his voice gradually fading away and holding back all his bitterness.

He asked for forgiveness, as he rubbed his forehead on the aisle. He did not know who he should ask this of, so he prayed to God. Taking the name of all the gods that were to his knowledge, he prayed.

He wished forgiveness for the punishment given to him, to his slothful self. Reflection and regrets, he had surely done both enough to change his life.

So, please forgive me.

He no longer wished to have anyone else involved in the punishment resulting from Natsuki Subaru’s foolishness.

He did not want to be hurt himself, he did not want to hurt anyone else.

“…”

Cowering, Subaru desperately and tearfully appealed to the silent Echidna and Beatrice.

Beatrice's palm gently stroked Subaru's back, who was squatted down next to the two of them.

That feeling of the palm of someone not of the same incorrigibleness as him, why did it still persist with him?

Hearing to the answer of that question was too hurtful for Subaru.

Echidna: "…I don't believe you."

Beatrice: "Echidna…"

Beatrice called out to Echidna, who had sighed out her conclusion. At her voice, Echidna loosely shook her head.

Echidna: "Even if you cradle your head and sob, none of my doubt will be erased. My answer remains the same. I am… I have the responsibility of borrowing Ana's body. For her safe return, no matter who curses me, who hates me, I'll bear it."

Beatrice: "…"

Echidna: "…However, I don't want to do anything that leaves me incapable of facing her."

Saying that, Echidna gradually lowered her fingers towards Subaru's forehead. Seeing the fingers lose the pressure they had ever since coming to this aisle, it became obvious that the issue of those fingers holding Subaru's life had been solved.

But, that had nothing to do with the salvation Subaru wished for.

Echidna: "Beatrice, you're free to go with him. I plan to go to where Julius is. After reuniting with him, if no surprises arise, we'll meet again above."

Beatrice: "… Understood, I suppose. Hey, Subaru, stand now. If you can't stand, then Betty is ready to even carry you, I suppose."

Echidna turned her back and recognized that Beatrice respected her beliefs. At that time, as Beatrice tried to lend her small shoulder to him, Subaru stared at Echidna's back, who was trying to keep distance from his affairs.

—I'm leaving Echidna, Anastasia-sama in your hands!!

Echidna: "—By this, what do you think you're doing?"

Echidna turned her head around and glared intensely—at the hand which grabbed the sleeve of her left hand. Echidna asked Subaru, whose face was all messy with his tears and a runny nose, his cheeks stiffening at her question.

He was unable to answer what he was doing.

Subaru could not stand the look in Echidna's accusations. Even so, having heard Subaru's unsightly plea, it had been Echidna's judgement to not lay her hands on him.

As she realized that, Subaru's fingers continued to damage her judgement.

Echidna: "I thought I was handing you over. Even so, how come has it come down to this?"

Subaru: "…Julius, asked me to."

Echidna: "He did? Don't joke around. He could… make this decision, but…"

—At that moment, Echidna, who was the reason behind Subaru's tears, reconsidered what she was going to say, letting out a "before that",

Echidna: "Did you meet him before coming here? He should have headed over to take a look at the situation on the fifth floor. And if he met with you… No, rather than that, what did he ask you for? Right now he is…"

Subaru experienced an overwhelming pressure due to her threatening attitude, hearing those rapid-fire questions.

The cracks in his heart hadn't healed yet in the first place. Just why, did his body act, for a world out of his control, where he could not do anything.

Why, until he'd recalled Julius' scream, which could hardly be called a promise—

Echidna: "Yeah, we're making no progress. Anyway, where did you last meet Julius, tell…"

Subaru: "—Ah"

Echidna, driven with impatience, picked words to continue the conversation. Looking at her efforts, Subaru gulped.

It was not because he was hesitating to tell her.

A situation even more urgent, than this unavoidable one with Echidna, had come up.

"…"

Behind Echidna, who was staring at Subaru—a dot of red light floated across the aisle. Subaru was distracted by it, wondering what it was.

The dot of red light, floating in the dark and moving slowly, directly faced Subaru's black eyes.

Subaru understood that this was a situation of being "eye-to-eye" with someone or something thanks to his mere intuition.

At the same time, the eyes of the one who had locked with his own, its figure was faintly visible through the dark. A black body that stood in the dark, with a glowing dot of light, and a pair of strangely developed sharp pincers, and above all, a trembling sharp tail stinger—

Subaru: "WAH?"

—An unbelievably huge scorpion, with its tailpiece pointing towards them.

Beatrice: "SUBARU ! !"

At the moment when it swung its tail, Beatrice, who was standing next to him, called out.

—Light swept through the aisle, the shock waves emitted violently shattering the stones which composed the fourth floor.

Chapter 53:
A Voice Chimed

1

The volitant tail stinger which came flying towards them shattered the stone aisle, causing an eruption of smoke as the destruction spread rampantly.

Feeling the spectacle seemingly in slow motion, Subaru witnessed a petite young girl in a dress jump into the core of the vortex of the terrible destruction unfolding before his eyes.

With her vertically rolled hair fluttering, jumping into the destruction head on had been Beatrice.

Courage—no, foolhardiness. Though a matter of course, the petite young girl's build was fragile, it had much less capacity to withstand the tail stinger's blow than the stone monument. Should she even try to act as a shield, the young girl, with her stature, would not be able to obstruct any strike above Subaru's chest.

In other words, it was naught but an impulsive action, naught but a death futile.

Just as how the sobbing Subaru, with his face stained with nasal mucus, had grasped Echidna's sleeve.

Just as how he had ultimately called out Julius' name, who had been scorched in the flames of deeds.

Just as how he had tried to slam Ram's head into the wall, and had not abided by the illusionary young girl's advice.

Beatrice too, had overlooked the Impossible, and tried to receive and halt the tail stinger—

Subaru: "Woah?!"

Beatrice: "—Incomplete EMT in fact!"

At that instant, Beatrice, who had appeared forth, grasped Subaru's hand and held her empty hand aloft ahead.

At the same pace with the young girl's shout, something invisible to the eyes similar to energy flowed out of Subaru's body. Before Subaru, whose head was tottering, the tail stinger's blow was blocked by a seeming light screen which had been activated in front of Beatrice's pointing palm.

"…"

The shockwave, which gave one the impression of this being the last thing one gets to see was blocked by the defensive wall which had Beatrice's palm as its center and it unrolled the damage onto the environs, seemingly avoiding Subaru and the others.

The launched tail stinger did not end with a single blow, and rained upon them continuously. However, all of it was blocked by the shield which had taken the form of the young girl named Beatrice, and led the damage onto their rear.

The terrible shock wave blew violently, one of the scattered fragments of the aisle grazed Subaru's cheek.

The noise became further distant, in the situation where his field of vision became white and as he squinted his eyes due to the pain of his cheek, Subaru had his glance robbed by Beatrice's back.

The titanic scorpion which had been visible for a single instant, if this was indeed that scorpion's tail stinger which had rained incessantly upon them then it was a matter of course that it was a mortar which could effortlessly turn a human body to dust.

Having that be shielded by a young girl with such a small build, gave Subaru the chance to pick up his life.

An instant before, he had been thinking of what unimaginable hell must he endure, having continued to wish for salvation from god.

Subaru had no room to be cursing his own misfortune, and close to his awareness, an existence separate from Beatrice or the scorpion had been present in the corner of his field of vision.

That was Echidna, who had been dragged into this attack and exposed to the same damage.

She had once declared acting separately and tried to part ways with Subaru and Beatrice, but immediately preceding the commencement of the attack she had been restrained by Subaru, and thus dragged into this situation.

Fortunately, she had also been in the location which Beatrice was protecting so the tail stinger's damage had been obstructed by the light screen and did not reach through. However, that was all.

What Beatrice had blocked was merely the direct damage that had been rained upon them by the tail stinger.

She had not been able to defend against the secondary damage that the tail stinger brought with itself.

In other words—

Echidna: "—Wo, ah!"

Raising her voice faintly, Echidna lost her balance and collapsed backwards. Though she stepped back in order to support her body, there was no floor to support her legs.

Shattered by the tail stinger's attack, the aisle crumbled halfway. As a result, the structure of the tower's aisle was damaged and due to the collapse of the floor, ceiling and walls, Echidna lost space to step on. Upon being abandoned into an unknown space, death due to falling would be inescapable.

Instinctively comprehending that fear, a sense of impending crisis levitated in Echidna's eyes.

Subaru: "—~hk!"

Subaru instantaneously stepped ahead and grasped Echidna's hand, preventing her from falling to death.

Echidna: "Natsuki-kun…?!"

Beatrice had grasped his right hand, while he grasped Echidna's with his left hand.

Thanks to Reid's coercive surgery his shoulder was still in, the pain was deep-rooted, his shoulder may get dislocated if overused. Without handing the responsibility over to Beatrice, who was busy desperately catching the tail stinger, Subaru braced his legs as he gnashed his molars and had no choice but to muster the entirety of his strength in order to restrain Echidna's body weight.

Subaru: "Gh, ya~a~a~a~…!"

Regardless of her small stature, Echidna possessed the weight of a human. Lifting up a human is not an easy task to begin with. Much less with a single hand, much less by a wounded person, much less with the other person being uncooperative due to this crisis—even upon being pulled, the danger of falling had not been reduced.

Though that was something which was well understood even if not given any thought. Why, he braved this risk.

Echidna: "…Don't do something which, will make me surmise something about you."

Subaru: "Like, I care…! It was just instantaneous…!"

Echidna: "That response… does seem fitting of Natsuki-kun, as well!"

Overlapping the exhausted soliloquy, he refuted Echidna's remarks, whom he had saved reflexively. Though unshapely she turned her body around and with the support of Subaru's arm, somehow laid foot upon the crumbled floor.

Somehow supporting her actions until the very end, Subaru looked down onto his arm.

—Letters engraved as wounds, patterns of black speckles covering it which he did know happened when, painful and fierce white scars all over his body remained which had been carved by his own volition.

Subaru: “It, moves better than, what’s in the limits… of my memories?”

His arm’s functioning being better than what he remembered, or the countless scratches on them. His physique, which had become slightly stronger, narrowly managed to save Echidna from falling to death.

Though his body was too defective and limited for the execution of the Book of The Dead plan.

Echidna: “Somehow I managed, to get back up…! Beatrice! How’re things on your end?!”

Beatrice: “About to, hit the limit, I suppose! About time…”

Putting her unfitting emotions somewhere else, Echidna, having climbed up, called out to Beatrice with a grim expression. At her call, Beatrice stiffened her lovely cheeks and responded and at the very next instant—

“—~Bishaaan!!”

The scorpion, which must have unleashed a rapid-fire of the tail stinger, clung to the ceiling and pointed its enormous pincers towards them while letting out a cry.

Subaru: “—~hk.”

With the seemingly scything down pincers closing in, Subaru had his thoughts slowly washed away.

According to his ordinary knowledge, when speaking of a scorpion rises a strong image of a venomous stinger but the truth is, over the thousands of species of scorpions venomous species were only a few dozen in number. In that case, what would be the weapon of a scorpion which hunts without venom. —Of course, those pincers would be its weapon.

Sharpness, or perhaps it should be called cutting strength instead. It may seem less hazardous when compared to a venomous stinger, but should the scorpion be this large its killing ability anyhow cannot be made light of.

That was also made clear through the spectacle of the walls or floor of the tower, which had managed to barely hold their structure, being minced like tofu being cut with a knife.

Beatrice: “—Murak.”

Beatrice evaded the spectacle, seemingly a symbol of destruction and massacre, by jumping and rebounding with an unbelievable leap—no, by flying unnaturally, as if abusing the laws of inertia.

It was a queer sensation, of seemingly escaping the effect of gravity with Beatrice at the center. Beatrice grabbed the lower back of Subaru and Echidna’s clothes, taking a large distance away from the scorpion’s attack.

And with the new distance in between, Echidna prepared the fingers of her right hand in the direction of the scorpion’s face.

Echidna: “El Jiwald—!”

White lines of heat were fired from each of her five fingers respectively, the five beams mowed down the aisle like the claws of a giant and scorched the face, right pincer and shell of the scorpion clinging to the ceiling.

Perhaps due to being unable to endure that strength and damage, the scorpion vehemently waved about its tail stinger and right pincer, and whilst slipping into the dust which erupted due to the aisle’s destruction, retreated to the rear.

Echidna: “Jiwald! Jiwald! Jiwa~ld!”

Subaru: “Wait! Calm down, Echidna! It ran away! That thing ran away! It ran away!”

While the scorpion drew back into the plume of smoke, Subaru bound Echidna’s arms back, who all the more refused to halt her attack.

Even after that Echidna continued struggling for some time, desperately glaring towards the other side of the plume of smoke, finally relaxing her body and entrusted her body weight onto Subaru.

Echidna: “Hah, hah, hah… d-did it, do it?”

Subaru: “…Not, totally. It probably ran away.”

Subaru shook his head horizontally before Echidna, who was short of breath and in an unbelievable condition. The plume of smoke was yet to clear away, but it gave the impression that the scorpion’s corpse was not present there.

In fact, even right now he was trembling with the fear of the tail stinger’s counterattack from the other side of the plume.

Subaru: “But, isn’t that… eh? That one just now was…”

Beatrice: “A Witch Beast, in fact. A boorish fellow, which suddenly appeared onto this fourth layer. The tremors in the lower floors, and the Witch Beast of the fourth layer. On top of that, the abnormalities in the upper layers.”

Subaru: “Up, down, inside… are there problems happening everywhere?”

Subaru changed his expression and turned around upon Beatrice’s report, as she made a serious face.

Certainly, Julius was continuing the battle in the lower floors, and the existence of that scorpion—that Witch Beast had become clear. It was also convincing to believe that the abnormalities in the upper floors were happening due to Reid’s descent.

Echidna: “…Though it seems you do not realize, that one of those problems is you.”

“…”

As if trying the very basis of Subaru’s thoughts, Echidna stood alone, having distanced herself from Subaru’s chest. She wiped the sweat off her forehead, gazing at Subaru with vigilance she found impossible to eliminate.

In her pale cerulean eyes was vigilance, suspicion, along with anxiety, perplexity.

Echidna: “Just what… what, are you? Where do you stand, what do you want?”

Subaru: “I, don’t know the details. I said, didn’t I. I don’t know what occurred, and what’s happening either, the same as you. After all, I…”

Beatrice: “—Amnesia.”

Subaru’s muttered weakly in response to Echidna’s question, unable to respond with nothing but the same former perplexity. The one to claim the last one was Beatrice, who had been lost in thoughts with a serious expression.

—Amnesia, Subaru had opened his heart to subjects regarding that only before the two of Emilia and Ram. In other words, Beatrice and the others are aware of the cage as well as Subaru’s excuses.

And despite knowing, this was the attitude Beatrice possessed.

Echidna too, thought as she nearly ran out of words.

Echidna: “How did you, escape from the cage?”

Subaru: “…When I took notice, I was lying outside with a broken shoulder.”

Though he answered straightforwardly and honestly, he did not expect to be believed. However, overlapping lies with lies leading to gradual deterioration is what the current situation was.

Though his self had even prayed to god with a dripping nose to award him with punishment, but there was no longer any point in keeping up appearances and pretenses.

With that mental state Subaru responded to Echidna without any falsehood, making her hesitate to say something for a brief period.

But, after that she immediately closed her eyes, and resumed without looking at Subaru.

Echidna: "…Why, did you save me, just now?"

"…"

Echidna: "Had you not offered your hand, I would have unmistakably died. Taking Ana's body with me, it surely would have been a death terribly filled with regrets."

As if other human affairs, the question distanced him away by a single step.

However, the reason she dared to do that was the same as the reason why she abstained from looking at Subaru's face, eyes. Namely, a last resort to ensure she did not err her judgement due to her emotions.

With Echidna's such judgement before him, Subaru pondered. Why had his self, offered his hand to Echidna. —Was it because Julius, had entrusted him in the end.

Did those words, make Subaru offer his hand.

Subaru: "…It was instantaneous, I don't know."

However, shaking his head left and right, Subaru denied that notion.

Certainly, Subaru had thought back to Julius' words and moved in order to prevent Echidna from acting separately once. But when her life was actually in danger, the reason why his body moved was not due to such deliberate thinking.

He did not know, why had his self made such a move.

Subaru: "It's not like everything needs a reason, you know? It was sudden. Everything, was sudden. That's why, I…"

Prepared to despair, Subaru expressed the emotions within him whilst faltering. He thought that he would undoubtedly receive a cold response by Echidna, having made her hear this—

Echidna: "—. That might be, the true nature of the human known as yourself."

Subaru: "Eh…?"

So spilled out Echidna, relaxing her shoulders having stiffened herself up before his eyes. Upon hearing that Subaru stared in amazement, eaten by the dumbfoundedness.

Subaru stood in mute amazement, as Echidna shrugged her shoulders upon his gaze,

Echidna: "It is inevitable that we would want to quarrel here. It would also be foolish to remain here for long, and accept the Witch Beast's second attack. Let's move. I want to unite with Julius."

Subaru: "Ah, eh…"

Beatrice: "Agreed, in fact. For now, let's get away from this place, I suppose."

Echidna and Beatrice indifferently determined their plan, leaving out Subaru, who was at sea. Echidna ascertained the area behind Subaru and Beatrice, and Beatrice tightly grabbed Subaru's hand.

Upon that tiny sensation he looked towards the young girl, as Beatrice, with a deep nod,

Beatrice: "Do you not remember, taking Betty outside as well?"

Subaru: "…I'm, sorry. I don't know, what you're, talking about."

Beatrice: "—It's fine, in fact."

Hearing the terribly transient emotions of loneliness mixed in Beatrice's voice, Subaru felt as if he had committed the most dreadful crime in this world.

But, Beatrice shook her head left and right before Subaru, who was bleached with a fear of unknown nature. And concealing her self's lonesome feelings, carved a daring smile upon her lips.

Beatrice: “Even if Subaru has forgotten, it is still present within Betty’s heart. It is impossible for what Subaru engraved into Betty’s heart, to fade away at all, I suppose. That’s why, it’s fine for now, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “Even if Subaru forgets, Betty will never forget. Betty will always remember. And, Betty will also make Subaru remember, I suppose. For that, Betty will do whatever she can, in fact.”

“…”

That had been a response far too dazzling for Natsuki Subaru, who was standing here all alone.

Just how many predicaments had she overcome, how many times had she tempered her heart into steel, to make a girl this young wield such will.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

He could be saved, and upon that sensation Subaru held his breath. Spontaneously, a sensation welling up deep within his eyes tried to kill Subaru, as he braved letting that warmth overflow.

Beatrice supported that strenuous effort of Subaru’s, by gripping to his hand without saying a thing.

By merely gripping his hand, it proved to be his support.

Echidna: “It does not seem to be possible to tread the path Natsuki-kun came from due the Witch Beast’s attack just now. Though undeniably dangerous, it seems there is no choice but to utilize the side of the aisle which remains alright, where the Witch Beast retracted to, and move.”

Beatrice: “Echidna, you too…”

Echidna: “Talking about forgiving, not forgiving, doubting, not doubting is unsuitable for this place. Regardless, the suspicions I have cannot be cleared. However, the situation does not allow for that. Creating an order of priorities is an indispensable ability in business. I witnessed that, right by Ana's side."

That is why, no more arguments were to be had in this place.

That must be Echidna's conclusion. Subaru also avoided objecting to Echidna's judgement, who had made compromises and possessed feelings of rejection, and decided to abide by the judgement of the two.

There was no change in his feeling of wanting to run away even now. However, he wanted to believe that if he crouched down and had his hands on his head, a scene further befitting of pleading for would await him rather than simply offering his prayers to god.

"…"

Behind him, the aisle Subaru came running from was in a terrible state. Receiving the attack by the scorpion's tail stinger as if a catastrophe, most of it had been converted into piles of debris and wreckage and did not seem like it could be used, just as what Echidna had said.

What Beatrice's magical safeguard had protected was only her own and the other two's lives. Even if they try to go towards Emilia and the others, who were moving separately, or Julius who was fighting in the fifth layer, they had no choice but to advance upon that side of the aisle which the scorpion had retreated towards.

Subaru: "Ugh…"

Ahead of jumping over the hole due to which Echidna nearly fell to her death, after clearing up the smoke in the part of the aisle her white lines of heat had grilled, a reason for Subaru to spontaneously groan fell over there.

—It was that Witch Beast's tail, which had perhaps fallen off from its roots.

Echidna: "I see, it means there was no counterattack. Its means of attacking splintered off, which is a bit of good news, I guess."

Beatrice: "That's what it seems, I suppose… Don't fall off the floor, in fact. It's time to jump over, I suppose."

Beatrice and Echidna nodded to each other as they looked at the fallen tail, which even had the stinger attached. By appearance it was overwhelmingly grotesque, but the Witch Beast had certainly lost its means of long ranged attacks with this.

Of course, the circumstance in the lower floors was that countless centaurs clad in flames were surging forth. Just because the danger of that one Witch Beast had diminished it could not possibly be said that the hazards present within the entire tower had reduced.

Subaru: "—Here."

Subaru lightly jumped over the hole while continuing to hold Beatrice. Beatrice's body was light, far too light for any comparison. The fruits of an year's worth of labor which Subaru felt in his own body which were nowhere to be found in his memories—her lightness was seemingly irrespective of that.

"…"

Keeping that in the back of his mind, Subaru turned his eyes once again towards the fallen tail which lied ahead of the hole on the aisle.

The tail had launched a rapid fire of the tail stinger as if a catastrophe, but its structure was completely different from the scorpion's biological features which Subaru was aware of, to an extent that it could be called a separate article entirely. Though a matter of course, the venom stinger of a scorpion which Subaru knew could not be used for things like shooting, and probably couldn't be regenerated either.

Above all, evident from the aisle's destroyed condition, it had not been firing the tail stinger as an object. —It had been firing power which resembled a stinger in form.

Basically, it could alternatively be said that just like Beatrice's light screen and Echidna’s white lines of heat, what the scorpion was firing was something akin to magical stingers.

Naturally, since it had been utilized as a stinger it would no longer be able to invoke it after having lost its tail, that is what he wanted to believe—

Subaru: “—?”

Thinking that far, Subaru embraced unease.

He had noticed it after observing the fallen tail. That fallen tail had been cut off nearly from what was its root, but the wound’s mouth appeared as something unusual.

Had it been burned off by Echidna’s lines of heat, regardless of cutting strength, there should have been scorch marks remaining on the wound. As a matter of fact, the surrounding part of the aisle which had been struck as well also had such burn marks.

However, there were no traces of that on the scorpion’s fallen tail, but instead had an awfully clean cross-section—

Subaru: “—Bea”

Subaru noticed, something was strange. Far too late.

The tail fallen on the floor which he had kept at the edge of his field of vision, quaked with a start.

—An instant later, a light burst open.

2

—There exists a mechanism, named autotomy.

A phenomenon primarily witnessed among arthropods and lizards, is often called things like “lizard’s tail” and refers to the action of cutting off a part of one’s own body for escaping from foreign enemies.

This action is also seen among pincers of crabs, and in other words, the Witch Beast shaped as a scorpion had perhaps done something similar.

In the case of a lizard practicing autotomy upon its own tail, the detached portion of the tail moves around for a while and serves the purpose of distracting the enemy while the real deal escapes.

Of course, the tail possesses no such consciousness and only acts reflexively but it is an example of a species which practices autotomy being capable of such reflex action.

Then, would this not be possible as well.

Once the prey gets close to the detached tail, it would explode and spread damage, a duty like that of a Land Mine, and also granting the ability to do so to the amputated part.

Subaru: “U~gh, gh, u~gh…”

He wailed. Whilst spilling out a wail from his throat, slowly and steadily, Subaru dragged his feet.

As for why he was dragging them, it was not because of fatigue. The problem was physical. With a large and deep tear in the flesh of his left leg, and in a situation where he continuously bled from that wound he had no choice but to move that way.

And, what Subaru was dragging, was not his body alone.

???: “…Enough, now. Leave me, and go.”

So pronounced Echidna, having lost all of her strength, as she was dragged along by Subaru who was dragging his feet.

Subaru took both of her armpits in his arms, pulling her from behind and anyhow leaving the scene. Once the scene of the explosion is left, that Witch Beast shall return.

—The scorpion Witch Beast, which left the explosion as a parting gift, responsible for ripping Subaru and the others to shreds.

Subaru: “—Shit, shit, shit, shit!”

He was negligent. He let his guard down. His mind, had been completely submerged in lukewarm water.

Just an instant before, there had been words which Beatrice told him, there had been somewhat of a softening in Echidna’s attitude, resulting in a gap within his heart, and that is thoroughly why they were the way they were now.

He was so pathetic, so pathetic, so pathetic from the bottom of his heart, that he teared up.

Why, despite being made to stand before such crises, yet his self displayed no growth. Displayed no change. Troubles, trials, hardships, are they not chances to grow provided by god.

However, if hardships could consist of only being beaten up, bleeding out and having bones broken, having the soul shattered and the life robbed, then just what do humans suffer for.

Echidna: “Natsuki, -kun… this, is, enough…”

Subaru: “It’s not enough! Not a single thing, is enough!”

Echidna: “…Beatrice, rather than, me, right?”

Closing her eyes, Echidna whispered with difficulty. Responding to her words with a yell, Subaru halted his breath upon the words she followed up with.

Echidna’s words, though sad, were sound. Should Subaru be asked who was more valuable to him between Beatrice and Echidna, though sad, Subaru shall choose Beatrice.

The worth of lives may be equal, but the worth of humans is not equal. There exists a sequential order when it comes to relationships. In a scene of choosing, that order would probably be followed.

—However, Beatrice wasn’t here. She was not there. She was no longer anywhere.

The moment the tail left by the scorpion Witch Beast exploded, Subaru pulled Beatrice towards himself in fear. How fortunate would it have been, had he been able to protect her body and everything just like that.

However, Subaru's actions were tragically slow, and his wish could not be fulfilled.

The tail of the Witch Beast, from which the light exploded and countless stingers were scattered throughout its environs. Though Subaru had not been exposed to that explosion from close proximity either, the reason why he survived despite being fatally injured is to Beatrice's credit entirely.

The moment Subaru hugged and pulled her, she tried to shield Subaru's body and vitals. As a result of which, was exposed to the concentrated light—

Subaru: "—~hk."

Echidna: "…I, see. That child, is truly, like that."

It seemed that even Echidna's imagination got an idea of the words he had been unable to continue. Subaru could not possibly refute her husky, sighing voice.

Subaru, bleeding and wailing in agony, had been unable to even exchange a final few words with the young girl, who had seemingly melted away. —However, merely her final expression, he did possess in his memories.

Eyes seemingly relieved, seemingly loving and cherishing Subaru.

That far too convenient expression for Subaru, had been Beatrice's end.

And if that's so, then 'Natsuki Subaru', who made her disappearing self make that expression, should vanish from this world without leaving the slightest trace behind.

And due to the process of elimination after Beatrice's disappearance, Subaru escaped by dragging Echidna with him, who had still been breathing.

As if for atonement, as if for redemption, or perhaps in an effort to be rightfully punished by the offender.

And Subaru's such actions, were restrained by the feebly breathing Echidna. Telling him that it would be pointless for him to do this, she, who had been so enthused about returning Anastasia's body.

That too was a matter of course. —Both of her legs had been blown off from the roots.

"…"

At this point, she had almost stopped bleeding.

Pulling the body he felt to be lighter than even Beatrice's, in a state where she had not received any immediate medical attention, what kind of a future must be awaiting her.

Subaru: "Ugh, ah ~hk!"

When such thoughts filled his mind, Subaru stumbled upon the debris, and collapsed at that very spot. At the same time, Echidna, whom he was dragging along, was also thrown down onto the aisle and she toppled over.

Momentarily, merely the wails of two people, seemingly cursing the entire world, echoed through the aisle.

Echidna: "It hurts… ah, it really, hurts. The human body, truly, hurts…"

Subaru: "M-My bad… sorry, sorry… no, rather than that, I…"

Echidna: "Don't apologize, sincerely, Natsuki-kun. Also… I, no longer have any face to show Ana… This pain, is my sole, repayment to Ana."

Subaru: "Re, payment…?"

Remaining collapsed on the ground, Echidna assented, unable to even move her body, as Subaru shook his eyes, unable to comprehend the words she had spoken.

Just what, did repayment mean. Looking at Subaru's puzzled expression, Echidna said "After all, isn't that so?" by loosely opening her mouth slightly.

Echidna: "If I, return this body to Ana now… she would have to taste, this doomed pain, and the fear of death… That would be, hell. I should be the one, to taste it alone."

Subaru: "Ah, ugh…"

Echidna: "Unable to return this body to Ana for her sake, and unable to assist Julius… It is fitting, for me to fall, into hell like this."

He could understand that emotions of self-derision and self-reproach were vehemently scorching Echidna's heart.

Even Subaru was able to grasp that Echidna's lifeless eyes, after having recited this, had commenced counting down to her gradually approaching Death.

Without having done a single thing, the powerless, insouciant, incompetent oneself.

With those regrets, Echidna shall die. —She shall die, leaving Subaru behind.

Subaru: "Wai… ~hk."

Echidna: "Please don't, think about making it… easy, okay? I am, yeah, fine like this…"

Echidna's fading life force, dreading it, Subaru raised his voice first. However, her words suddenly bestowed a new choice upon Subaru, who had been unable to do anything.

—He shall, make it easy. His actions, at this point, were far too slow to call it a comforting death, yet, assisting her by shortening the time of suffering and hastening her Death was something even he was capable of.

"…"

Subaru forced his agonizing body to stand up before Echidna's sidelong glance, as she breathed lightly, faintly, and he picked up a broken piece of the crumbled aisle, confirming its weight.

Of a size which could be grabbed with a palm, about the size of a fist at maximum. However, even this could surely serve as a weapon for taking away the life of a young girl on the verge of death.

Subaru: "…Echidna."

Echidna: "…"

Keeping the piece of rubble in his hand, Subaru called Echidna's name and got on his knees beside her, and denied her condition.

Not a response, she did not even open her eyelids. But, it could be understood from her expression that she was not unconscious, having faintly stiffened her cheeks and pursed her lips.

She perhaps no longer had any willpower left to even stop him.

Should Subaru raise the piece of rubble overhead and swing it down energetically, her life would be taken easily.

Meili: "Smashing someone's head with a stone, even I haven't done something like thi~s."

So heard Subaru, the echoing sweet voice of the young girl within his mind as he held the piece of rubble in his hand. However, this action was not for the sake of reading the Book of The Dead.

That may happen in terms of results, but as of this moment, Subaru did not have that in mind whatsoever.

He was being, a suicide assistant. A suicide assistant, for the sake of making someone's parting, who was already on the verge of dying, as comfortable as possible.

If someone had the right to take away that life, then surely this moment alone was sincerely—.

This was the sole opportunity of atonement for Subaru, who happened to be present here, for Natsuki Subaru, who no longer was capable of doing anything.

It was the sole opportunity, and yet—.

"…"

His hand, trembled. The depths of his eyelids called out to agony, his throat forgot respiration and ossified.

Raise it overhead, swing it down. An exceedingly easy action. The present Subaru, was unable to do that. His body would not move, as if he had forgotten how to move his body.

Subaru: "…Ah."

Spilling out a husky sigh, the piece of rubble fell to the aisle's floor, giving rise to a report.

Conceding defeat to that report and his powerless knees, Subaru crumbled down at that spot.

Subaru: "…No way."

Can't you even do something so simple, Natsuki Subaru.

Swinging down a weapon for the sake of making it easy for someone who was suffering and heading towards death, are you not capable of even that deceit.

Atonement of mere words, guilt which was merely an expedient, if that's wrong then how would you explain this plight.

Echidna: "…Natsuki-kun."

Subaru: "I, am…"

Echidna: "For helping, with suicide, you… can't even, clasp a stone…”

Raising her thin eyelids, powerless pale cerulean eyes looked at Subaru, who was knelt down, and whispered. Thinking that weak voice, akin to a sigh, had put Subaru’s weakness to blame, he halted breathing.

However, as Subaru drew back his body, Echidna unsuitably loosened her lips,

Echidna: “…Forgive me, for doubting you.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “…”

As she lost her breath, she apologized.

Echidna, apologized to him. She apologized, for having doubted Natsuki Subaru.

—And before he could ascertain her true intent, she died.

Killing Meili and hiding her corpse, acting without saying that he had lost his memories, continuously piling up nothing but others’ doubts, escaping out of the ice cage he had been trapped in, unable to fulfill the wish entrusted onto him, protected by the young girl who tried to save his heart, and finally, unable to stain his hands with blood for the sake of the dying young girl, as Subaru knelt down in his own disgrace, Echidna apologized to him and died.

Subaru: “…”

He wanted to die.

He wanted to forget everything that had happened just now, and die.

He wanted the people all over the world to point their fingers towards Natsuki Subaru, saying that he deserved to die, and be sentenced to death penalty. Natsuki Subaru despaired upon oneself, that he had committed a sin befitting of that.

He, despaired.

3

Despair, feasted upon and eroded away Natsuki Subaru’s heart.

Subaru: “…”

He could not move. He had no right to move. Nothing good would happen even if he moved.

It had been proved. Natsuki Subaru had proved his own incompetence—no, calling it incompetence would be rather cute. Instead of that, furthermore, Natsuki Subaru had proved that he was a jinx, a pest, an angel of death.

Subaru: “…”

Should despair nest into one’s chest, kill one’s heart, what gets eaten to ruin even before one’s life is one’s soul.

If that happens, then no longer would it remain possible to stand up. No longer, would it be possible to fight against anyone. Should he realize that he himself was the genuine source of anguish without being able to defy it whatsoever, it was a natural consequence.

I want to disappear. I want to vanish.

Should’ve decided much earlier. Before things turned to this, in this different world. Should have known, must have known before coming to a place like this different world.

Why, do you trouble other people’s hearts by simply existing.

There’s no way you could ever have the right to solely occupy a part of others’ hearts, no matter how small it may be. You filthy wall stain. You, an existence like the dust accumulated in the corner of a room, like the maggots which swarm over a pile of pure garbage, like a scar which never disappears located in an eye-catching spot.

Natsuki Subaru, why won't you die.

Even after dying, all that awaits is redoing? Who decided that. Who made sure, that it would continue eternally. If once isn't enough, then die ten times, die a hundred times

Die until you disappear.

Die until you vanish from anyone and everyone's memories, until you're no longer able to affect anything at all, until your name, your existence, your vestiges no longer remain in the hearts of anyone.

—I love you.

Shut up. Disappear. Erase me.

—I love you, I love you, I love you.

Keep quiet. Don't talk to me. Don't get in my way of disappearing. I want to disappear, just disappear.

—I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.

I want to die. I want to disappear. I want to be smashed to pieces. I don't want to leave a single trace. I want to become something which never existed. I want to erase my existence. I want to disappear from history. I want to disappear from memories. I want to disappear from remembrances. I want to disappear even for the girl who said she won't forget. I'm worthless. I'm meaningless. I won't leave anything behind. I don't have anything worthy of leaving behind. All, anything, everything, disappear, vanish away from this world.

—I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you

I love you I love you.

As despair ruled over his heart, the world surrounding him and everything else was concealed by the black shadow, the hollow confession of love was poured onto him ceaselessly as it drew near in order to bestow punishment upon the garbage which took the form of a crouched human.

Should he be swallowed within it, would he finally disappear.

Would he sink within nihility far greater than death. Would he really be abandoned within a convenient place, like a dark space which no eyes could ever reach.

If I can die there, then, I will—.

I will—

Natsuki Subaru, headed towards the despair which seemingly painted out everything—

???: “—That’s as far as you go.”

—A voice, chimed.

A voice, akin to a silver bell, denying the end of this world, chimed.

Chapter 54:
Re:
Starting Life in a Different World from Zero

—The world was about to be painted in darkness.

Sitting down without any strength, the shadow stretched out its countless hands towards the motionless Subaru. Just like spirals, or a whirlpool, the pitch-black hands were trying to wrap Natsuki Subaru along with his soul into its clutches. The places where he was touched, like melting, like crumbling, like coming apart; he knew that his very being was going to go hollow.

But, strangely enough, he couldn't feel anything unpleasant at all.

Subaru: "…"

His body was going to crumble as far as he could see, his very being was going to be overwritten, his soul was going to be churned up. Whilst it was infringing perhaps the greatest blasphemy that could be done to a living thing, Natsuki Subaru's mind was quiet enough to say that he was at peace.

Though there too was the effects of having disappointed back then resting heavily in the depths of his heart. But, it wasn't just that. Since it was just this shadow, its shadowy tendrils which were steadfast-true.

It was only this shadow that showed consideration for Natsuki Subaru's emotions, who wanted to vanish and disappear even now.

I want to die. I want to vanish. I want to fall apart, I want to be trampled over, I want to be reduced to ashes, leaving nothing behind. Even if I am to revive over and over again, come erase my body down into ashes.

This black shadow would grant such a desirable prayer, this black shadow would grant what Subaru had earnestly cried out for.

—I love you.

Just repeating these words ad nauseum was irritating. Even if he plugged up his ears and closed his mind, she put her fingers in the gaps of his closed mind, and slid them in from the opened gaps, directly whispering her love.

—I love you. I love you. I love you.

Stop this, I am fed up. No matter how many times you repeat this, I god-damn know already. I… don't love you. I… don't love myself. I knew about being loved. I knew it all too well.

It was his parents. Both his mother and father loved Subaru from the depths of their heart. He knew that. As if he couldn't know. And so, that's why Subaru wanted to disappear. Despite being loved by his parents, he definitely couldn't love himself which had no worth in being loved.

—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

Stop it, give me a break. Enough already. No matter how many times you repeat this, you can't get anything more than this. I came to this conclusion a while ago already. I knew it. And despite knowing, I just turned my eyes away from it.

The people who were concerned about Subaru for dear life, with such desperation, all of them couldn't be bad people. He knew that. He couldn't not know that. So, Subaru should have just died. He should have endeavored to not be illuminated by the compassion of those bothered by Subaru's very existence.

—I love you. I love you.

Stop it, I said I know. If I endure this torture until the end, will you grant my wish? Will you swallow me and break me and pulverize me, and erase me into oblivion, so that I may never presume on another ever again? If you can do that—if you can do that, I will accept it. I want to accept it. If this is the end.

If this could be made into the end, then Natsuki Subaru, even if he would disappear…

—I love you. I love you.

???: "That's as far as you'll go!"

I love you. I love you.

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———.

A voice… chimed.

It seemed just like the confession of love that was being whispered endlessly into his ears. A voice reminiscent of a silver bell rose up, piercing through the confessions of love that were painting over Natsuki Subaru's existence and the world itself. It pierced right through and reached down towards Subaru.

Subaru: "…"

A light gushed out. It pierced right into the pitch-black shadowy appendages that had tried to swallow up Subaru. A shockwave broke out, the hand that had received the direct hit snapped off and was torn away, but that was just one from a countless number of them. It was just one amongst thousands that had been cut down, that effort meant absolutely nothing to the hostility coming from that enormous, powerful mass of shadows. But even so, the person who let loose that blow stepped forward with determination, dodging, evading, avoiding the evil arms of the shadow that were launched towards them, with exceptional agility. And then,

???: "—Subaru!"

Subaru: "—hk"

Calling out the Subaru's name as he sat slumped down, the owner of the voice that was ever so reminiscent of a silver bell grasped his feeble hand. Subaru's body was pulled up abruptly and she took him away from that spot with all of her strength. As if to say she wouldn't let them do that, the shadow stretched out its arms, blocking their front and rear, trying to block off both their path forwards and their path of escape. However, even with that obstacle in front of their eyes, her legs went forwards without stopping.

???: "…Ryaa!!"

One hand gripping Subaru's own, sticking out her free hand, a dazzling light was born there. And immediately afterwards, a beautiful crystal of ice appeared, shining brightly—it was the very same kind as that of the ice cage which had kept Subaru confined. It was a mesmerizing, valiant riposte of ice.

She smashed down the pitch-black tendrils that had expanded so to make a wall in front of them and forcibly wrenched open their path. Witnessing the instant of the shadow being washed away, Subaru, who had harbored the impression that the strange shadow would swallow everything in its path, could only feel that the heart which he'd thought would remain forever unbeating had started to tremble again.

And, as his then frozen heart started to stir, his eyes also turned to face the beautiful face right beside him. The long silver hair of the girl glittered like the moonlight as she held Subaru's hand whilst looking straight in front, taking him along, running away.

Though her survival was also confirmed, in his heart, he was not excited by this. Quite the opposite in fact, in the depths of Subaru's skull, he felt like something was going to crack.

Of course he couldn't be delighted by his survival. The people he had made sure were alive, Julius, Beatrice, Echidna, he had let them all die. Though he hadn't seen the end with his own eyes, he can only imagine that things went south with what happened when he left Julius behind down with the Witch Beasts and Reid. Beatrice was blown to smithereens protecting Subaru, and he couldn't even ease Echidna's suffering whilst she was on the brink of death.

Natsuki Subaru was pestilence personified. Death was intrinsic to his very being. As his own death was shaped into nothingness, correspondingly, he imposed that misfortune upon everyone around him, he was such a being, that couldn't help but conjure to mind such a ridiculous metaphor, its poster-child ensconced in such a pitch black fate—

Subaru: "—Enough already"

Emilia: "Huh?"

Subaru: "I said there's no use even struggling on anymore"

Subaru forcibly stopped moving his feet, struggling against Emilia pulling him along by his arm. And still, Emilia tried to pull Subaru's arm, though Subaru now possessing grit determination did not allow this. Although the disparity in their strength was evident, Subaru's determination still remained steadfast. As if noticing that dark urge from the depths of his dark irises, Emilia let out a gulp and stopped pulling his arm with all her strength.

Emilia: "…"

The two of them, Subaru and Emilia were at a standoff. Both of them were staring at each other. Looking around at their surroundings, there were no signs of the shadow that had tried to engulf Subaru. Had he shook it off him when he had escaped together with Emilia? If that's the case, then wouldn't they still come across it again if they turned back? It seemed as if that thing was the best way of completely erasing Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "Why did you come and save me? You must be out of your mind. You thought I was a fake as well… So you could have just locked me in that ice cage and tried to kill me.”

These words were purposefully deceptive, twisting the truth at will, each word spoken maliciously opening more wounds. So as to never think, that Emilia would once again take his hand.

However, to Emilia, who saw only the truth when she looked, Subaru’s despicable tactic was futile. Her eyes narrowed in anger, and she raised her voice at Subaru.

Emilia: “I am not trying to kill you! I just wanted to hear your side of the story, as there was something unusual about you. And since you hadn’t told us about your missing memories, we…”

Subaru: “And what of it! That may’ve been just something for my own convenience! Did you believe it that easily?! You sure look stupid. You’ve gone crazy! You, Julius, and Beatrice!”

He had been locked up in the ice cage, and he had told them the truth about having amnesia as if he had been in desperation. No one who possessed the ability to think should have believed such words. Ram and Echidna’s attitude was the correct one. And yet, despite that, more than half of the others were stupid.

Subaru: “No, NO… Everyone’s stupid. In the end… with things like this, in the end, even Echidna apologized to me… I don’t get it!”

Emilia: “In the end, Echidna…? Subaru, what happened? Are Echidna and the others…”

Emilia begun to ask that question to Subaru who was muttering and groaning with his face covered by his own hands. Even with how worried she looked, he would be digging his nails into that beautiful girl’s heart. It was because of that that Subaru was letting all of his own emotional scars as if made of glass.

Even her lifeblood had bled out, leaving behind only an expression of fragility, a feeling that keeping those existences which matter from feeling pain would be a blessing, achieving only such a heart wrenching, desolate desire, in the figure of a young girl who’d lost her life. As the thoughts revived back in his mind, Subaru let out a scream in an attempt to let the wounds he had in the depths of his heart spread open.

Subaru: “Dead! Echidna is dead! Both of her legs were blown off, and she bled out in pain… in short, she died in anguish! Beatrice as well!”

Emilia: “—hk”

Subaru: “She even… protected me… What an absurd thing… cutting off its own tail…If only I’d noticed earlier… but I didn’t, and so she died. She said she wouldn’t forget me…”

Even if Subaru had forgotten, Beatrice would not forget. Beatrice had firmly declared that she would help Subaru regain his memories without fail. But, she had perished… straight after she had said that.

It was all bark and no bite. Words are wind. And immediately after she had spoken this, she had kept Subaru away from death. And with a face full of relief, she had vanished from this world.

Subaru: “If she was going to disappear like that, I should have stopped her. I took her out? I took her away? Whatever, how it happened doesn’t matter. At any rate, if I took her from anywhere other than here, I never should have. If I hadn’t, then…”

Then things wouldn’t have ended with her meeting that fate, vanishing with that expression on her face.

Subaru: “That’s right, that Julius guy too. Surely, around about now, he must already be… in a place with so many scary Witch Beasts… and with that Reid guy inconveniencing him… and then being all like “Go, please”… What idiocy.”

Everyone here is an idiot. What on earth were they expecting? Entreating, taking back, having apologized for doubting him, what on earth were they spouting out?

What would become of their request? What would the meaning be in taking them back? Wasn’t it natural for them to doubt him? Natsuki Subaru was here because he betrayed everything that hung over him. Survive and have some peace and quiet alone; since that was unbearable, he wanted to disappear and die.

He was the most idiotic, stupid, utterly helpless, he couldn't save anything—

If those weren't Natsuki Subaru, then just what would they be—

Emilia: "—Me and Subaru met for the first time at a place called the Loot House in the Royal Capital."

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Subaru: "…"

Subaru had sunk to a bottomless swamp of self-blame and self-doubt with no escape; he couldn't even move his own body. Emilia's sudden confession had made Subaru's eardrums throb—her words came out as if it was bringing fond, precious, nostalgic memories back to her.

Subaru: "… Huh?"

Subaru was dumbfounded, all he could do was let go of his breath in his lungs when he received those words with no context so suddenly. In no way was this meant to scorn or mock Emilia's sudden actions. Subaru's consciousness simply couldn't keep up to that degree, and was genuinely stunned into silence. And yet, Emilia ignored his reaction, proffering down a finger as she allowed more memories to resurface.

Emilia: "Back then, Felt-chan stole a reaaaally important insignia from me. I was in a mad rush with Puck to try and get it back. And then, after we pursued her, we fought against Meili's onee-san… we were in grave danger, but Reinhardt came to save us. And after that, just as I breathed a sigh of relief, Meili's onee-san went straight for me… Subaru saved me from that."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "That was when I first met with Subaru… Don't you remember it?"

Hearing her question, Subaru shook his head. Even though she had recited those memories in detail, he had no knowledge of even a small bit of what she had said. It was to be expected of course. Those were the memories of Emilia and 'Natsuki Subaru.' No matter what, those were bits of memories spun by 'Natsuki Subaru', who kept behaving in ways unimaginable to him—

Emilia: "But, Subaru protected me causing him serious injuries, so I brought you back with me to Roswaal's mansion. And there, whilst she complained, Beatrice treated your wounds. Ram and… surely even Rem got on well with Subaru."

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "And then, without her onee-san, Meili acted wickedly and spurred on the attack of some Witch Beasts. Subaru and Ram held them back until Roswaal finished them off… I was staying in the mansion, it was when you'd also promised to take me on a "daaayte"… don't you remember it?"

Subaru: "…"

He shook his head. He didn't remember it. He hadn't ever done such things. He never had.

Emilia: "And y'know we did so many things in the mansion. We made mayonnaise, we drank alcohol with everyone, Puck made it snow, we played the "King Gaaayme"… and after that, I was called to the Royal Capital for the Royal selection, right?"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "It was also the first time I ever had a big fight with Subaru. I didn't want to hurt Subaru anymore, nor make you overdo things, and I was scared and didn't understand why you were so kind to me. So, I thought that everything would've come to an end when we fought…"

As she recounted these memories, Emilia's voice started to faintly tremble. There was a mixture of joy and sorrow, anxiety and expectation; various conflicting emotions. Subaru was assailed by a feeling of being completely parched.

Unbearable, unbearable, unbearable was this yearning scorching his chest. For the sake of Emilia revealing this expression in its entirety—no, for this single reason, that yearning was unbearable.

Emilia: "I didn't understand what was happening, at the time I was being swept away by the uneasy situation, and then Subaru came running back to me when I was my most depressed, and after that…"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "And after that, what was it that you said…? Do you remember it?"

Subaru: "I don…"

I don't remember. It didn't come out. They really weren't going to come out. The trembling of Emilia's voice, her appeal, her echoing voice that clung onto him, all of these made it evident.

The Subaru that was here now was not the 'Natsuki Subaru' that she wanted. Having this obvious fact thrust before him, Subaru broiled in envy and jealousy towards himself.

Why is it you, 'Natsuki Subaru'? You and I, why are we so different, 'Natsuki Subaru'?

Emilia, and everyone thought like this. Return the real 'Natsuki Subaru.' The you, the Natsuki Subaru right now, just drop dead. For how much longer will it be you the one present in this place?

Such should be what they were thinking, hurting, suffering, lamenting. And yet—

Emilia: "—But, I remember everything. I remember what Subaru promised me, and what Subaru told me, and what Subaru has done. I remember everything."

Joy and hope were lodged in that smile, so that both sadness and anxiety would never have been there. Seeing Emilia's smile, Subaru's lips trembled.

There was… nothing. It was… nowhere. Everything he had said, everything he had done, everything he had promised. Inside of this body, inside of this head, inside of this heart, at the depths of his soul, there was nothing. And so he said—

Subaru: "I don't remember. I don't even remember it. Who are you… who are you! Who are you all! WHO ARE YOU ALL TALKING ABOUT?!"

He exploded. Some time ago, with Beatrice and Echidna, he had let himself burst into a fit of emotions, and once again, he also shouted this here.

Emilia: "…"

Faced with his bellow, Emilia widened her amethyst eyes. All the while still gazing at her, Subaru rapidly blinked his eyes, clearing away the hot tears that had welled up there, with an even dirtier voice which strove to preserve a malicious tone, he continued to bellow,

Subaru: "Putting your life on the line for someone else's sake! Springing into action straight away for someone else's sake! Running so to give it your all for someone else's sake! Accomplishing something by risking my life for someone else's sake! Can there be such things?! Can I do such things?!"

To hear all of Emilia's recollections, and reply that he couldn't remember. Unable to answer Beatrice's question before she vanished, still bearing that regret in his heart, he'd listen to Emilia gently, almost convincingly, talk about her memories.

Julius entrusted in him, Beatrice believed in him, Echidna forgave him, Emilia desired him. All of that for 'Natsuki Subaru.' The one that had been summoned to this parallel world, the real him—

Subaru: "—Don't joke about! Such a guy cannot be Natsuki

Subaru!”

There was no way that someone could entrust their wishes to Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “I know all too well! About how pathetic, and disgusting, and helpless, and what a rotten bastard Natsuki Subaru is!”

There was no way that anyone could believe in Natsuki Subaru, in his heart.

Subaru: “Who are you actually looking at?! What are you talking about?! Such a guy is nowhere to be seen! Everything is a downright lie! The things that guy showed, the things that guy said, everythingeverything! It was just random crap that he spouted out from his mouth! There isn’t any value in believing in it!”

There was no way that someone could pardon Natsuki Subaru from his sins.

Subaru: “You think there’s any value in Natsuki Subaru?! Natsuki Subaru is scum! He’s a useless rotten bastard! I know this better than anyone else!!”

Like hell anyone would want Natsuki Subaru to be along with them.

Subaru: “…”

There was no worth. There was no worth or anything to be desired anywhere. Natsuki Subaru was pestilence personified. No matter whom it may be, everything just amounted to wounds, loss and death. Thus, let’s end it.

Emilia, and everyone else needed not get hurt anymore because of that guy.

Subaru: “…It doesn’t have to be… me.”

He merely did mutter those words. It didn’t have to be himself—No, it’d be way better if it wasn’t Natsuki Subaru. Why did they entrust things to a man who couldn’t do anything. Why did they believe in him. Why did they forgive him. Why did they desire him. There should be more ways for them to manage things better. There should be someone else to help them manage things better.

Even if that someone was the ‘Natsuki Subaru’ that everyone wished for, he was nowhere to be found anymore. ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was a pretense that he never possessed from the beginning. A vain being.

Subaru: “Someone like me, just disregard and toss me away. Someone smarter than me, someone stronger than me will turn up. I am…”

He said that he couldn’t do anything. It was just this sense of sheer helplessness that overwhelmed Natsuki Subaru.

Everyone has their lot in life. One appropriate to them. He wanted everyone to understand that. Subaru was unqualified to walk next to Emilia and the others. He was unqualified to be desired by them. He was neither strong nor smart. They needed not desire to have such a Subaru around. Therefore he would—

Emilia: “—My name is Emilia. Just Emilia.”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Having spat out his sheer sense of helplessness, with his heart dominated by the things he wanted to spit out as he spiraled towards hollowness, the bell-like voice rang out, like a surprise attack, causing him to let out a sound.

Subaru: “…”

He didn’t understand the meaning of those words. —No, not the meaning. It was her intention that he didn’t understand. Lifting his head up, Subaru looked at the person who had introduced herself as Emilia standing right in front of him. She had her hand on top of her ample chest. Within her big, round, amethyst eyes, Subaru could see his own figure reflected, his breath was taken away by their shimmer. Emilia continued on with her speech, right in front of Subaru.

Emilia: “There are so many things I have to tell you, and so many things I have to ask you. Many many many things. But, right now I have to hear just one thing.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Julius, Beatrice, and Echidna. And now, I’ve taken you by the hand… by running away together… I wanted to protect you at any cost… I didn’t want you to die… so by doing that…”

Emilia closed her eyes, and plunged into thought, full of emotion. After a few seconds, she broke off her speech. He could see that various emotions were coursing through her chest. These even included her feelings of anxiety for her companions who weren’t here. Emilia’s cherry blossom lips quivered with those emotions fresh in her mind,

Emilia: “You, who have made us feel that way, who are you?”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Please. —Let me hear your name.”

At Emilia’s question, the very depths of his heart shook within his chest. The manifestation of her intentions weren’t to deny the Natsuki Subaru in front of her eyes or to recover the old Subaru.

—They were an affirmation of Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “…”

The one before us is a fake, return the real Natsuki Subaru to us, words along those lines, behavior along those lines, resentment along those lines, would have been easier to bear. Because, it was nothing other than something Subaru had desired himself.

He still preferred the side of those who said that his self-standing in front of their eyes was a fake, that they wanted him to return Natsuki Subaru, the ones who said that to him, the ones who wished that from him, the ones who tormented him with that, he still preferred their side.

But, it was Emilia that— No, not just her. Up until here, everyone who had spoken to Natsuki Subaru had implored the same thing.

Irrespective of whether he was strong or weak. Thus, even if he let himself be seen so shamefully, and couldn't help forgetting everything, he still hadn't changed. By their words, by their behavior, by their life, they showed their need for Natsuki Subaru—

Subaru: "…Why?"

Emilia: "…"

Subaru: "Why are you here, Natsuki Subaru? What can that guy do? What do you expect from him…?"

He didn't understand it. In this… In just this overwhelming despair, in their helpless numerical inferiority, what would happen if Natsuki Subaru was there? In what way would the situation improve? Could they break through this?

Subaru: "A weak, dumb, miserable, spineless guy… what do you even see in him?"

Emilia: "—Maybe it's as you say."

Emilia cast her eyes down at Subaru entreating her with this rather than denying, shaking her head begrudgingly. Her eyes were bordered by long eyelashes, her voice ever so reminiscent of a silver bell tickled his heart; everything about Emilia seemed to be a linchpin that tied Natsuki Subaru to this world. Yet despite that out-of-place, powerful emotion, certainly one connected to Subaru's own heart, Emilia continued.

Emilia: "There are plenty of people stronger than Subaru, and surely there are many people smarter than Subaru. But, I prefer to be with you, Subaru, no matter what time. I believe that Subaru will do so for me, thus do I wish. After all…"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "After all, If you're going to help me anyways, having it be —someone I like, would make me so so much happier than someone who just does it because they're there and can."

And, whilst smiling, Emilia said this. Whilst smiling and with her cheeks slightly blushing, she said this.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru took a breath, as if gasping. Having received Emilia’s words, in that instant, surely all time had stopped within his body. With a bad-um, bad-um, he could feel his heart pounding. And at the same time in which his feelings had boiled up from with him, another emotion rose up; it was scorn towards ‘Natsuki Subaru.’

Subaru: “—Hah”

I see, ‘Natsuki Subaru.’ Did you fall in love with this beautiful girl? Someone who is probably way out of my league. As if such a young woman would even give him the time of the day.

Such a cool knight, such a wise woman, such a sweet little girl. And finally, such a beautiful girl right in front of his eyes.

Entrusting to you, believing in you, forgiving you, wishing it were you. Not asking you to be a savior, nor even expecting you to be a savior, merely, if those staggering walls had to be crossed, rather than someone capable, just wishing it were you.

Emilia: “—My name is Emilia. Just Emilia.”

Once again, Emilia gave the silent Subaru her name. She looked over to him with her amethyst eyes. Subaru’s dark-brown eyes gazed back at those eyes right in front of him. And then,

Emilia: “—Please. Let me hear your name.”

Subaru: “I am…”

He hesitated forming his words, hearing Emilia’s question once again.

He had denied it over and over again. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t be it. He had repeatedly denied it. So, this was surely nothing more than convenient wordplay.

—Entrusted, believed in, forgiven, desired.

In this desert’s tower, what if there were the qualifications to be treated like that by them.

In this desert’s tower, what if there was someone that could save Emilia and the others.

If that was ‘Natsuki Subaru’, then if that ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was nowhere to be found…

Subaru: “—My name is… Natsuki Subaru.”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “Entrusted by Julius, believed in by Beatrice, forgiven by Echidna, desired by Emilia… by you. If that man’s name is Natsuki Subaru, then…”

The black haired boy answered the young woman with the glimmering silver hair, staring with his dark-brown eyes into her amethyst ones. To the question that had quivered from her cherry blossom lips, his blood-stained lips answered back.

Subaru: “I AM NATSUKI SUBARU.”

Right now, feeble, without strength, mind and body wracked by despair, but still he declared it. For Emilia, for Emilia and everyone else, for you, for you and everyone else, for their safety, for peace and quiet, thus did he wish; thus did he implore.

Emilia: "…"

Subaru strongly declared it. In his heart, he hadn't fully wiped away the pieces of distrust towards 'Natsuki Subaru.'. Even now, the one that caused his death hadn't left Subaru's mind—No, not his death, Meili's. The face and voice of that wicked man. Mayhaps the time where it would be wiped away would never come.

But, it's okay. Even so, it's okay. It's not like he wanted to be saved. It's not like he would cling on them, wishing to be saved either.

I want you all to be saved, he thought. I want to help you all, he implored.

—If that can be done by 'Natsuki Subaru' then I will do it.

The reason you started running, the destination you set out for better be the same. So long as the road envisioned is the same, then we're just bitter enemies in the same boat, even if I hate you, I will not complain.

Let me, let 'Natsuki Subaru' save Emilia and the others.

Subaru: "Thank you, Emilia. —You made me believe in that."

Emilia: "…Subaru, I am—"

With Subaru's reply, ripples rose within Emilia's amethyst eyes. Her lips quivering, Emilia started to somehow string together some words towards Subaru who had defined himself as such. And just after that,

Subaru: "—hk"

Up until then, nothing had disturbed the two of them talking. The situation which had until now remained peaceful, cracked in an instant.

Subaru: “—Emilia!”

Near them, the aisleway where the two had been conversing was in a flash crushed and pulverized by a shadow. The aisleway lost its shape, and Emilia, losing her balance, lost her footing. Facing her, Subaru who had barely clung onto his foothold strongly kicked against the floor.

At that moment, the tower lost its shape, smashed up and weathered. Perishing next to lumps of stone cladded in the aroma of sand. Subaru immediately dived towards Emilia who had started to fall. The distance shrunk, catching up to her silver hair still lingering above, and finally he closed his arms around her slender body.

Emilia: “Subaru…!”

As he clutched her slender, soft, warm body, Emilia stirred, calling out Subaru’s name. She was probably trying to change her position in his arms, trying to put herself lower. And because of that, the one that helped and the one that had been helped reversed. Emilia, and everyone else were truly nuts. But alas, Emilia’s effort had been completely useless in this situation.

Emilia, with her back to the ground, unable to see where she was falling to, probably didn’t get the swing of things. It was neither the hard floor of the tower, nor the sprawling sand dunes outside that would come to meet Subaru and her. It would be the pitch-black shadows wrapping this tower that would lead to the end of everything.

So, the two of them would end up being swallowed by the shadow whilst embracing each other just like that.

—No, the opposite.

This surely would become the beginning. That which they’d started once, he would start once again right here, from the end, anew.

For that reason, he would make a promise. Right here, in this world, in this place, he would make the words he exchanged with Emilia real.

Having been saved, having wished of wanting to save them. Let's start from the end, holding all of that. The time for sputtering and babbling was over.

Infatuation like a curse is nice, isn't it? It's what I always wanted.

He didn't know whether Natsuki Subaru was worthy of being loved. But, since the requirements needed to be loved by Emilia, by Emilia and everyone else were there

Even if they still forget, even if they… even if they don't remember the words you told me, in this ending world, in this world beginning anew.

Even if they still forget, even if they… even if they don't remember the words that I struck in you all, in this ending world, in this world beginning anew.

I will remember. I will remember everything. Because even now, even if I have to cling onto them, I will not forget them.

Subaru: "Even if you forget—I will not forget any of you."

—Always remember, Natsuki Subaru.

The shadow drew ever closer, its darkness engulfing Emilia and Subaru. Just like that, Emilia… and Natsuki Subaru were sinking, sinking towards the depths of the shadows.

Metempsychosis, everything was coming apart, everything was becoming zero, the end was coming as expected. And, it began in the place where everything became zero.

—A battle to kill Natsuki Subaru and bring back 'Natsuki Subaru'.

Bonus Short Stories

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Four
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

A high-pitched metallic sound rang out, and the impact blew the dirty underground air, causing strange noises to rise. The splattering blood was black in color and had a foul odor. Garfiel and Ricardo repeatedly attacked and evaded to weaken the enemy as they moved around to avoid being exposed to it. A fist and the giant serpent stabbed at the same time, and an ugly scream echoed horribly in the underground passage.

Ezzo: “Both of you, get back!”

Immediately afterwards, a voice of caution was heard over the screams, and Garfiel and Ricardo jumped away from the scene. After a moment’s delay, Ezzo released a gleaming flame that dazzled the underground.

Ezzo: “UI Goa!”

The mass of flames that appeared with the chanting scorched the body of the deformity that was blocking the way. There were more screams than ever before, and the huge body of the deformity shivered violently in pain. The screams were cut short when the flames turned most of the body into charcoal.

All that was left was the charred remains of the deformed body, and the foul smell of burning.

Garfiel: “Is it dead already?”

Ricardo: “Oh, that was hard! The creepy looking thing was one thing, but being too stubborn is another thing. What the hell is this thing?”

After witnessing the death of the strange figure, Garfiel and Ricardo untied their battle stance. A small figure, Ezzo, who passed by them and struck the death blow of magic, made a difficult face. He looked down at the charred corpse and muttered briefly, “I don’t know.”

Ezzo: “It looked like it had extraordinary regenerative powers and multiple heads vying for control of a single body. Normally, it would not be possible to fight in such a state, but in the case of this variant, it was possible because it had a corresponding number of limbs and tails for multiple heads. Because of this…”

Liliana: “Yes, yes, yes, stop it! It’s okay, we’ve already beaten it! For now, let’s just rejoice in the fact that we’ve defeated the giant Witch beast Priestella!”

Ezzo: “Mm… You’re right. Miss Liliana has a point.”

Liliana suggested, frowning as she peered at the oddly shaped corpse. At her words, Ezzo wrinkled his brow and nodded. He was more than a little curious about it, but…

Ezzo: “At least we defeated this one. The original purpose of the temple is the “Remains of the Witch”, which may be found in the innermost part of the temple, so let’s leave solving the mystery for later.”

Liliana: “I thought it would be better! So, unknown, this Liliana, who was behind you cheering on your struggles with different hands, was moved by your excitement and had a flash of inspiration! Listen to me… Tem-Tem-Tem, Great Temple.”

Liliana begins to sing a new song, playing the strings of a once-muddy lyulyre. The three men faced each other as they listened to the soul-stirring voice of the song, despite its name. After the battle with the creature, they reconfirmed their plan to attack the Great Temple.

Garfiel: “But there’s no way to climb up a wall that’s fallen down. We’re going to keep going forward at this rate, is that unanimous?”

Ricardo: “Well, there’s no other way to put it. I was most worried about Miss Liliana, but she can't fight, but she's got a lot of guts. And…"

Garfiel: "Let's see how many of those creatures are lurking up ahead."

Hearing Ezzo's summary, Garfiel and Ricardo sighed. It was wishful thinking that there was only that one creature now, but Liliana was the only one here who was optimistic about that.

Ezzo: "It's hard to imagine that it's a singular entity that occurred by chance. As long as it can survive in a place where almost no living thing comes and goes, it should be considered as such a life form. In other words, life forms that can live in minimal conditions without the need for food."

Ricardo: "Can it live only with this moss and water? I wonder if it can think like that with its big body. A big body needs a lot of food. I'm proof of that!"

Garfiel: "I hate to say it, but I eat a lot of food too, though not as much as "Motesso the mountain eater"… Well, I don't disagree with the great Sensei's point of view."

Sniffing the musty underground air, Garfiel searched for enemies. The strange odor coming from the shape was quite disturbing, but even so, he could at least get a feel for the area. If Garfiel was frank, there was no smell of living things around. It was not practical for Garfiel, who grew up in the forest, to hide himself completely from them.

Ezzo: "These are the protectors of the temple, let's call them "Guardians" for now. If my imagination is correct, there should be many more of these guardians lurking around."

Ricardo: "Yeah, I'm tired…"

Ricardo shrugged at Ezzo's speculation. In contrast to Ricardo, however, Ezzo's eyes lit up and he shook his head, "No way!" He shook his head.

Ezzo: "It is not a dangerous Witch beast, nor is it a rare sacred beast of existence. If it did not come about naturally, then there was an unnatural creation of life… It's an unknown technique."

Ricardo: "It's like an unknown technique in the depths of this ancient temple…"

Ezzo: "Ah. Considering the origins of Priestella, maybe it has something to do with the lost civilization from over four hundred years ago…"

Liliana: "…Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey!"

Liliana then jumped into the heated discussion with vigor. Strumming her lyulyre, she looked from one to the other at the men who had left her out.

Liliana: "What, what, what a surprise! Let's hear it for silence. If you say I'm too loud, I'll apologize! But I refuse to ignore the song!"

Ricardo: "Oh, oh, I'm sorry, song girl. I'll listen to you sing next time…"

Liliana: "Yes! You can't be allowed to behave like that! So listen up!"

Liliana does not accept Ricardo's efforts to intervene, expressing her passion in sound. She jumped straight over the deformed corpse and stood at the end of the path. Then she looked back at the three of them, stomped on the ground forcefully, and…

Liliana: "If you want to go this way, you'll have to accompany me in my singing! That's what sincerity is all about…! And now I have something to tell you!"

Garfiel: "…Isn't that something other than a suggestion?"

Liliana: "…I just heard a strange sound under my foot as I stepped on it. A clunk. "

Garfiel: "…clunk?"

Liliana was sweating profusely, and everyone's eyes were drawn to her feet. Garfiel looked over and saw that her right foot had sunk one step deeper. …As if the floor had sunk.

The next moment, behind Garfiel and the others, a sound came from the falling wall. A faint but steadily approaching tremor signals its approach to us. It was…

Ezzo: “A trap of some kind guides the intruder to activate the device. For example, you can step on something, press against a wall, and so on. In other words…”

Garfiel: “This is no time to be talking!”

With Ezzo beginning to lecture, Garfiel and the others ran as fast as they could through the underground passage. Ricardo picked up Liliana on the way, and the four of them ran and ran and ran to get away from the cause of the shaking… a huge ball that was rolling behind them.

2

After that, traps blocking the intruders’ advance and the guardians’ interference occurred again and again. At first, the guardians that Garfiel and his companions encountered looked like a collection of rats, but they were preceded by a giant creature that looked like a fusion of a winged insect and a dog, or a mucus-like organism with no distinction between head and body. The traps ranged from basic forms such as pitfalls and projectiles, to dissolving liquids that dissolved everything they touched, and cursed techniques that made them become one with the walls. The four of them managed to get through all of it by working together, sometimes getting along, and using the power of song to lift their spirits. And then…

Ricardo: “That’s enough of that… you asshole!”

The barking Ricardo swung the big machete down and slammed his opponent’s arm hard into the floor. As the arm struck by the big machete buried itself in the ground, Ricardo let go of the big machete and ran up the arm. The owner of the arm… a guardian whose entire body is made of stone, has Ricardo’s right arm plunged into its head. The hook that had been attached in place of his missing arm shattered the guardian's head, causing the stone giant to lose his fighting strength and fall to his knees on the spot. The huge body collapsed with a loud noise, and Ricardo kicked the body and howled in victory. Looking up at the howling Ricardo, Garfiel and Ezzo also clapped their hands together and praised each other's good fight.

Liliana: "Well, well, well, this is the fifth guardian… Is it time to call it a day?"

Ezzo: "To be honest, I have no idea! But I hope so. After all, it's just one battle after another… I'm not sure how much mana I have left."

Using a wooden stick she found somewhere as a cane, the exhausted Liliana asked, to which Ezzo could not give her an optimistic answer. It had already been more than six hours since they started attacking the temple, but they hadn't been able to find the end point at all. This was bizarre, since the group must have walked a considerable distance.

Garfiel: "In addition to the fact that we fell long ways in the first place, we also lost our bearings because we ran all over the place to escape the iron ball."

"Ugh!"

Garfiel: "I don't blame you for anything. Besides…"

Gnashing his teeth at Liliana, who was holding her chest, Garfiel turned to face the wall. Then, he pressed his palm against that moss-covered wall and scraped off the dirt. As Garfiel did so, a pattern that had been hidden by moss appeared on the dirty wall of the underground passage… No, it's not a pattern, it's letters.

Garfiel: "I've been wondering about this thing that keeps flashing back and forth for a while now."

Ricardo: "Well, didn't you say something pretty cute?. What do you care about this graffiti?"

Garfiel: "Hmm, yeah…"

Garfiel crossed his arms in response to Ricardo's question as he stepped down from the top of the giant stone figure. Peeking at the wall from behind him, Ezzo muttered, "Oh, this," as if he was satisfied.

Ezzo: "This is an ancient script that is often found in ruins. Most of them have been scratched off, and the writing is too irregular to analyze, so it's considered difficult. For the most part, this is usually seen as graffiti or a pattern, as Ricardo says…"

Garfiel: "I know I've seen this somewhere before."

Ezzo: "…? Garfiel-dono, do you have a hobby of diving in ruins?"

Garfiel: "That's not what I meant. I thought I saw it in a more normal place…"

Twisting his head, Garfiel pondered. But no answer came to him. He felt a burning sensation in his memory, and he groaned "Ah" and scratched his head.

Garfiel: "I can't think of anything! It's so vague, my head itches."

Ezzo: "It's interesting to hear you say that you recognize the ancient script… but perhaps you're mistaken. Deja vu is something that can happen to anyone."

Liliana: "Oh, those letters are similar to a Daikuscore. Strange coincidences do happen."

Ezzo: "Oh, yes. Much like the Daikuscore… What?"

Despite the fact that Garfiel scratched his head, he couldn't remember, it was Liliana who looked at the letters and said those words. She looked at the surprised face of Ezzo and tilted her head, "What?". At such a tilt of Liliana's head, Ezzo tilted his head in the same way and…

Ezzo: "What did you say, Miss Liliana? If I'm not mistaken, it was a statement that I thought you said you recognized the writing on this wall…"

Liliana: “No, I’ve seen a look-alike before. A daikuscore is a special cryptogram that is only handed down to bards. To be frank, bardic singing is the source of their livelihood, so they devise various ways to prevent people from stealing it easily! So they use a daikuscore to pass down the old songs.”

Ezzo: “You think that’s what these letters look like?”

Liliana: “Yes, yes. Well, there are strange coincidences, aren’t there? Ezzo-sama?”

Liliana smiled and replied, and Ezzo grabbed her hard by the shoulders. Then he opened his eyes with a snap and looked right into Liliana’s eyes.

Liliana: “Isn’t it a big discovery…! Why are you so blurry?!”

Ezzo: “Uehe, yeah…?”

Liliana turned her eyes to Ezzo, who shouted loudly. As he rocked her back and forth by her shoulders, Ezzo’s face reddened with excitement, he spoke up.

Ezzo: “Ancient letters inscribed on ruins from ancient times! These were said to be impossible to decipher, but if they could be deciphered, various civilizations that were lost in this age might be revived! I see, bards! This is a contact point that was overlooked because these people were not supposed to go in and out of the ruins!”

Liliana: “Awawwawwaw.”

Ricardo: “Oh, calm down, Sensei. You’re making the little diva girl’s eyes roll.”

Grabbing Ezzo’s excited head, Ricardo waits for the momentum to be broken. Poor, wobbly Liliana with her eyes rolling, Garfiel supports her, and Ezzo coughs in embarrassment.

Ezzo: “I’m sorry, I got excited. But the historical value is immeasurable…”

Garfiel: “Yeah, guess you’re right. I know, because my amazing self is very interested in it too…”

Garfiel agreed with Ezzo’s words. And then he looked again at the ancient writing on the wall, and tried to think about the unknowable people of hundreds of years ago…

“…”

Immediately afterwards, a huge stone fist rammed into Garfiel from behind, smashing the letters all over the wall.

Garfiel: “What?!”

When Garfiel turned around at the impact of the blow to his shoulder, he saw that it was a stone giant who had lost its head that had fired the fist. The giant is still missing its head and is slowly pulling back its fist it slammed into Garfiel.

Garfiel: “Did you just pretend to be dead? You don’t even have a brain!”

Liliana: “Now, now, now, now, now, now! My head was grazed?!”

Liliana, who was stunned by the fist that grazed her head, hid behind Ricardo, who returned to his fighting stance. Next to her, Garfiel and Ezzo were stunned by the shattered walls of the ruins. An unexpected encounter with the ancient world was shattered by the guardian of the temple.

Ezzo: “My anger at you now is momentary, but it exceeds Roswaal! Guardians! You’ll never get out of here alive!”

Enraged, Ezzo’s arms lit up and two magics, fire and wind, were created. Combining them to create a flaming tornado is Roswaal’s specialty, but it would be wise not to tell Ezzo, who is about to do the same thing. It was more than that, because Garfiel was angry, too. And so, a fight to the death begins with the vigor of a mythical battle, as Liliana performs against a deadly stone giant… Just before that, Garfiel suddenly remembered.

Garfiel: “Oh, yeah, the captain’s room.”

Ancient letters that Garfiel could not remember where he had them seen before. It was in Subaru's room in the mansion that Garfiel saw similar characters. It was not unusual for Subaru to keep a diary once in a while, but when Garfiel entered the room where he was writing, he happened to see those words on the page he was looking at. Garfiel wondered if it was some kind of game, because he couldn't read the letters, but…

Garfiel: "O-raaaaa!"

Leaving that behind for now, Garfiel raised his fist and challenged the giants. After a series of confrontations with the guardians, the group slowly and gradually made their way deeper into the temple.

…They were only one step away from the deepest part, the location of the Witch's Remains.

To Be Continued

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion's Ferocity: First Chronicle

1

The Dragon Carriage's wheels made a clattering noise as it travelled across the highway—.

Typically Dragon Carriages would travel down the highway in groups of several. That was the least they could do to mitigate the dangers, a means to avoid being attacked by bandits or wild dogs along the way.

The Kingdom of Lugunica was considered to be a relatively safe place, however that only applied to its urban areas. There was no way for the guards who maintained the public order to nip crime in the bud where their eyes did not reach.

So in that sense, a lone Dragon Carriage without an escort attached to it would be easy prey. The danger around it would increase colossally especially when the Dragon Carriage was one that carried nobles in it.

Even so, there was also an unavoidable aspect to this. They had a reason why they couldn't take a whole group of Dragon Carriages along with a bunch of guards with them.

Even so…

???: "These guys ain't gonna bother listening to us about our situation you know…"

Sat in the box seat, the young girl crossed her arms and gave a frown as she gazed at the situation they'd been put in.

She was a girl with golden hair that shimmered in the sunlight and strong-willed red eyes. Her cute looks along with the fang-like canine that protruded from her mouth could be appropriately described as being adorable, however she had a tough nature to her to the point that you could say it was closer to the valiance of a lion than the cuteness of a cat.

That seemed plain as day from the fact that she wasn't fazed by the Dragon Carriage being surrounded by a group of rough-looking men.

However, the biggest reason behind why she'd remained unfazed wasn't because of her pluckiness, but rather because of the red-haired young man sitting beside her in the carriage's box seat.

Red-Haired Young Man: "—Just a moment please, Felt-sama"

Felt: "Sure"

The young man spoke up to her, and the girl—Felt—replied back to him carelessly with a scruffy scratch of her head. Included in that were feelings not too dissimilar to a kind of resignation as well as dismay.

She was letting them out towards the downright hapless men who were there surrounding the Dragon Carriage. To them an unprotected Dragon Carriage going down the highway must have seemed like easy spoils, but they couldn't have been more wrong.

They really should have staked it out far more carefully. —There were two possibilities as to why there was just one Carriage here; the first one being that they'd just been careless, and the second one being that merely one of them was plenty enough.

Each of these men had a weapon in their hands, and they all looked like they were well-accustomed to fighting. They would have come up with a good way on how to make money as well after they made them surrender by force, she thought. But there were only 20 of them—Even if you were to add another digit to that, it still probably wouldn't be anything worth their consideration.

That's why…

Felt: "—Go get them Reinhard"

Reinhard: “Right away!”

The young man—Reinhard—gallantly jumped out as soon as Felt had ordered him with a jab of her fingers at those men.

It took him practically less than a minute to capture all of those poor bandits.

2

They stopped at a nearby town after, so that they could tell the guards stationed there where they’d left the bandits.

Unfortunately they hadn’t had the room in their lone Dragon Carriage to transport 20 people at once. The best they could manage had been to tie up the defeated bandits and have the guards collect them later.

If they could have, they would have liked to make sure that the bandits were properly collected, however they didn’t have such time at their disposal. Besides, it probably wasn’t good for the town either for them to stay there long.

Reason being due to the fellow passenger who accompanied them in their Dragon Carriage.

Felt leaned against the Dragon Carriage as Reinhard talked to the guards. She could make out a cracked, hoarse voice coming from inside of the carriage that made her eardrums tremble.

Just listening to that voice made her feel like her heart was being grated; if she were to give it a favorable interpretation, then it was humming. However, that humming took away every single good part the song itself was supposed to possess.

The result of which became a cacophony that made her instinctively want to scrunch her face up: a blasphemy towards music. Or perhaps it was far more warped, something you ought to call “The Music of Resentment”. Either way…

Felt: “Hearing you hum is really getting on my nerves, so give it a rest. If you want to keep going that way then sing properly like that spazzy diva”

Felt kicked out at the body of the carriage with her heel, peered inside through its window and brought her complaints to the one singing. Following her complaints, the humming stopped, and the one who’d been singing lifted her face up and looked back at her.

Her protuberant, wide open amethyst eyes stirred, staring at Felt in an eerie manner. The wicked glint in her eyes gave off an impression similar to that of tearing the heart out of anyone facing her. Even so, Felt gave her a dauntless grunt and met her gaze without shrinking back.

There was a terrible pressure coming from her, but at this point it wasn’t really a big deal for Felt. Otherwise, her position—her title as one of the five candidates vying for the throne which shook the Kingdom of Lugunica—would be extremely hard to shoulder.

The lips of the one who’d been humming relaxed seeing Felt’s unflinching attitude and they let out a ragged sigh.

???: “I’m sorry if that bothered you? Even so, thank you. You’ve been listening to me for a while without complaining because you must be a kind girl, right?”

Felt: “Me? Kind? That joke wasn’t funny. I kept quiet for a while ‘cuz I imagined it’d be better to listen to you hum than talking to you. Then I stopped bein’ quiet ‘cuz I rethinked things and realized that your humming is the absolute worst”

Sirius: “Dear oh dear, hehehe…”

Felt’s opponent laughed at her curt response while still keeping the smile on her face. There was a slight clinking noise coming from her due to the fact that both of her arms were completely bound in chains. Though it wasn’t just her arms which were restrained, rather it was her entire body, including both of her legs. —No, in the sense of restraints, chains weren’t the only thing which were wrapped around her entire body. There were white bandages as well.

Bandages wrapped around every inch of her body from head to toe, making it so that the only thing that remained visible was her wide open eyes.

—That monstrous figure was the Sin Archbishop, Sirius Romanee-Conti.

It went without saying that Felt, currently being one of the Royal Selection Candidates, had one of the most important positions in the Kingdom. Felt and one the Sin Archbishops who'd committed so much atrocity across the world were two individuals who should never be associating with each other. Yet by some twist of fate, the two of them were riding on the same Dragon Carriage and had been sharing the road together for their journey that would take them no less than 10 days to get to the destination.

Just how many times already had they had these shallow conversations, let alone her humming, Felt sighed. Even counting it was already tiresome enough for her.

Felt: "Jeez, I'm probably gonna regret not getting a Sin Archbishop-escort, or whatever."

Sirius: "So you're going to hand over your role to someone else from now on?"

Felt: "I wouldn't be going to all this trouble if I could, god damnit!"

Felt gave her a foul-mannered tch after she'd retorted back to her in a casual tone. Though Sirius hadn't abandoned her friendly-looking attitude, not in a million years would Felt do something like relaxing her guard around her.

The reason behind why Felt had taken the role to escort this monster hadn't been so she could warm up to her; it had been because she was never going to let her escape, no matter what she was scheming.

—A calamity of the likes never seen before had struck the Watergate City of Priestella. A concurrent attack by several of the Sin Archbishops on the city had incurred colossal damage before they'd managed to settle things. The incident had led to the death of one of the main offenders, whilst others had been captured or had managed to flee. However, the Sin Archbishop they'd managed to capture was Sirius herself.

They needed to get this monster to tell them about the mysterious Witch Cult. And so for that they were taking her to the Royal Capital so she could be interrogated.

It was none other than the Felt Faction who'd taken on the role to bring this monster to the Royal Capital. At first they'd been planning to make the trip there in around 10 days, but by now they'd gone way over their schedule. All because of the hindrances that they'd come across along the journey.

—They captured bandits and reported them to the guards in nearby villages. This was already the sixth time that they'd come across impediments like these—an unusual amount, no matter how you sliced it.

Sirius: "It's always like this"

Felt: "What?"

Sirius: "It feels like my presence attracts misfortune, or well… It feels like I have a disposition for calling disaster to me. That's why all these things keep happening. I'm sorry? Thank you."

While clattering the chains on her hand, Sirius let out both an apology and a thanks in chorus. Hearing that, Felt gave her a frown and then batted one of her eyes shut.

Felt: "Calling misfortune to you, you say. If that's true, wouldn't it have been better for you to have lived a quieter life? If the result of you despairing about the world was to run amok in the Witch Cult, then my bad, but I can't sympathize with you one bit."

Sirius: "That view of yours is a tad biased. I just go around preaching about the importance of love, but it doesn't get through to you or that knight of yours… It's a real real shame."

Even her dropping her shoulders looking rather crestfallen was, in the end, something to not be taken at face value.

In any case, Sirius' words were correct; Felt wasn't affected by the authority, or whatever it was, that induced abnormalities in one's psyche which the monster strew around. If all the stories she'd heard about it on the way were true, then it looked like even Sirius' authority had some conditions or whatnot that Felt hadn't been able to satisfy.

According to what that dodgy Natsuki Subaru, who was oddly versed in the Witch Cult, had said, the more targets Sirius' authority had, the more effective it would become—or so he'd surmised. In that sense as well, when it came to the least amount of people required—You could probably say that just having Reinhard escort her would have been adequate enough.

Even so, she couldn't help but feel on edge, and not because of something that had to do with her authority. It was moreso a sensation which she couldn't help but feel, one of instinctive repugnance towards the Sin Archbishop.

Sirius: "You've ended up hating me, haven't you?"

Felt: "Is there really anything about you which is likeable by anyone…? For all your blathering on about love this and love that, talking with you always keeps pissin' me off."

Sirius: "…"

Sirius sunk into silence in response to Felt's pointed reply. The monster was the sort who never ceased throwing in needless retorts, no matter what was said, thus Felt became suspicious about her auspicious reaction.

Felt didn't really think she'd hurt her feelings, not that she would have cared about that; however, she did feel some fear in not knowing what she was scheming when she sunk into silence so ungracefully.

So, as she stared off into the distance where Reinhard was still busy talking to the guards, she spoke up, Felt: “What is it then? Are you saying that your misfortune was behind all of those bandits attacking us, as well as us happening to come across those migrating Witchbeasts, and the river’s pier collapsing too?”

Sirius: “Who knows. But there’s a side of me that thinks like that you know? After all, in spite of how things look, I’ve lived farfarfaaar longer than you…”

She repeated the word three times, causing a look of suspicion to appear on Felt’s face. She couldn’t properly hazard a guess at the monster’s age due to her bandaged appearance. That being said, judging from her tone of voice and her bodyshape, her “longevity” seemed pretty likely to be a bluff.

But then again, within the Demi-Human Tribes, there were a bunch of them who did live for long. It wasn’t like she could have wholly denied Sirius’ claim from the start either.

Sirius: “It was harder to live back then compared to now, way tougher… My hometown was destroyed by a Witch Hunt. Back then, I was still really young…”

Felt: “A Witch Hunt? Never heard of such a dangerous thing.”

Sirius: “Indeed, I supposed you wouldn’t have. You’re still quite young after all.”

Felt had never so much as heard of anything as reckless and over the top as hunting witches. But, having received Felt’s answer with an air of composure about her, Sirius had shown her that she understood.

Sirius: “Ever since then, misfortune has followed me around no matter where I flee to… So that’s why I thought that—that misfortune is following in my wake. It appears like it tangles everyone up in it but me.”

Sirius spun those words in her gloomy voice while moving her chains about. Her rattling the chains, which had now tightened firmly around her, should have made her arm bones creak and brought her pain.

Her doing that to herself looked almost like she was punishing herself—Yet at the same time, Felt could only feel like she was full of herself.

That's why…

Felt: "As if I've heard anything so absurd"

Sirius: "…"

Felt: "It's like you believe that the whole world is revolving around you, don'cha think? First things first, if that's the reason why you said that…"

Felt trailed her words off there and lifted her gaze up slightly. Her eyes squinted in the sunlight that was streaming from the clouds, and she let out a quiet sigh.

Sorry, but when it came to Sirius giving her oh so esteemed opinion that misfortune gathered around, with her smack bang in the middle of it; such an idea was completely absurd.

Felt: "I know someone as well, just like you, who is seen in a bad light from the people around them, ya know? But that girl didn't take it as an excuse to act rotten. The complete opposite in fact, she's got an easygoing attitude over her condition where she just tries to give it her best."

Sirius: "In a bad light… from the people around her…"

Felt: "Of course, I reckon it's also because she's blessed by the people around her, yeah? She's prob'ly had a bunch of bad experiences, but at the same time, she's also got people with her who treat her well. That too must be why she came up decent."

What had come to Felt's mind had been that silver-haired, amethyst eyed, half-elf girl.

It was pretty easy to imagine that she would have kept meeting unreasonable experiences due to her features resembling the "Witch of Envy”. Felt too had once been just as wary of her.

However she didn’t make excuses for the unfavorable situations she found herself in through no fault of her own. There must have been times where she would have felt frustrated and bitter. And yet…

Felt: “There’s these people who turn out decent, so what you’re saying is just you being spoiled. I ain’t ever gonna feel any sympathy for you. You’re just a crazy asshole.”

Felt dismissed this monster with her words while still looking away from the inside of the Dragon Carriage. She was honestly so glad that she’d spoken exactly what she wanted to.

Sirius’, or rather, these Witch Cultists’ justifications really boiled her blood whenever she just heard them.

Felt didn’t like people who resigned themselves to weakness, not to even mention weak people themselves. The Sin Archbishops’—rather, Sirius’ insistence had been meshing as well as oil on water with Felt’s likes and dislikes.

Sirius: “…”

Sirius didn’t utter any words for a bit after hearing what Felt had told her. Although Felt could say that she’d rather have her be silent than keeping up her eerie humming or her pointless chatter, the way she’d gone quiet—as if her words had really hit home—had won over her unease.

Felt: “Hey, say something. Don’t tell me I hurt your feelings and you’re gonna start cryin’”

Sirius: “…No, I’m not going to do that. I was just thinking.”

Felt: “Thinking? About what?”

Sirius: “—About how odious that slut is”

Felt’s body stiffened as soon as she heard her tone of voice, which seemed chock-full with hatred.

Where on earth had the superficially calm and friendly attitude she'd had up till now gone. Sirius' feelings would cool down in a flash while at the same time boiling up.

Felt: "—hk"

Sensing this, Felt moved her back away from the Dragon Carriage and gulped.

???: "Sorry to keep you waiting, Felt-sama."

Having come back from talking to the guards, Reinhard had called out to Felt. She looked back at him, seeing his familiar face when she looked up. She felt a touch of relief—and then her face grew sullen.

Reinhard: "Felt-sama? Is something the matter?"

Felt: "Nothing, was just angry at myself for seeing your face and being so relieved by it."

Reinhard cocked his head in confusion as if he didn't understand what she meant, but Felt didn't bother with any further explanation.

Felt: "No need to worry. If things are settled here, then we oughta head off… How much is left till we get to the Royal Capital?"

Reinhard: "I think it will take five days, even at Romy's pace. I apologize for the inconvenience it's becoming for you, Felt-sama…"

Felt: "Yeah, it's fine, whatever… I'm just gonna sit by your side for a bit, alright?"

A look of wonder appeared over Reinhard's face at Felt's words but she glared at the Dragon Carriage without giving him any further reply again.

Through an imperceptible wall, was the Dragon Carriage that contained the Sin Archbishop who wouldn't let them perceive their true nature.

The road to the Royal Capital was still long, and there was probably going to be more trouble Felt thought with a sigh.

END

Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me!
Shadows of Conspiracy Part

1

???: “Even so, is this really alright Princess?”

Al asked that to his Mistress, who was sitting up in the front, as he fiddled with the seams of his iron helmet. The young lady with crimson eyes narrowed her eyes languidly at his words before returning his gaze.

She had bright orange hair and her crimson eyes looked like the color of blood. She was wearing a magnificent dress bedecked with many ornaments, and possessed a beauty that went undimmed by all of its radiance—Priscilla Barielle.

She was the one who owned the Dragon Carriage they were in; Al's one and only Mistress of arrogance.

The Dragon Carriage was currently on its way back to Priscilla's lands. They'd been staying in Priestella up until a few days ago, a Great City in the North-West of Lugunica.

As much as he wanted to say “The scenic streets in Priestella, so well known as the beautiful water-city, ended up being a delight to our eyes”, the reality was that it hadn't been such a pleasant trip.

The savagery of the notorious Witch Cultists struck the Great City where they'd been staying, and to make matters worse, several of the big guns, the Sin Archbishops, also turned up; all in all becoming an absolutely unthinkable affair.

Thus, the city suffered catastrophic damage of the likes which had never been seen before, giving them no time at all to settle down and enjoy the scenery. Fortunately enough, Priscilla and her faction had managed to leave the city practically unscathed…,

Al: “I mean it's not just bro', but the other Royal Selection

Candidates who are busyin' themselves around with stuff as well, right? So, if we like pull out without doing anything then that won't give us much of a good image, right?"

Priscilla: "Hah. And here I was wondering what all this babble was about, yet 'tis just the man getting caught up on his trivialities. Everyone's going to end up knowing about what sort of caliber you have with these kinds of things. Cease your foolish preconceptions this instant."

Al: "Foolish preconceptions. And here I was worrying so much about you Princess…"

He'd been worrying about his Mistress' future. The offer had been from his own flavor of kindness, but it didn't look like this young lady, who kept these kinds of people at bay as well, was all too pleased by it.

Her gaze had become sharp and Al could almost feel his neck being burnt by her heat, making him trail off his words. Taking in his reaction, Priscilla let out a short sigh and then spoke,

Priscilla: "I thought you'd learnt how to serve me properly, but I have to say, on that point your ability to learn is even worse than Schult's. Nevertheless, being so generous, I shall grant you some leeway."

Al: "That's really kind of you…"

Priscilla: "Indeed, now let yourself be moved to tears at my generosity. If you manage that I'll let you off the hook for your clownish ramblings. —Something you really couldn't stomach must have happened back in that city."

Al: "…"

Priscilla: "Did you really think I wouldn't notice? That would put you even further below a commoner if that's the case."

Priscilla drew out her fan from between her cleavage and quietly covered her lips with it.

Al silently held his breath, taking in what she'd just pointed out; then, he placed his hand over his head at the complicated feelings that were emerging in him due to her having seen through to his heart. However, his head was covered by his helmet, so in actual fact the best he could do was place his hand over his helmet.

What had happened in Priestella—The sort of helplessness he'd experienced back there had been profound.

Strictly speaking, it was the sort of thing he would say was a sense of defeat that had only been felt by one of them. There'd been that young man there who'd been burdened with just about everything and yet had still challenged his role impressively.

This sense of defeat had been engraved on his back as something so far, far out of reach—The fact that the young lady in front of him had seen through it was even more awkward than he'd imagined.

The mood he was in was so bad that he almost felt like wanting to redo this scene.

Al: "…It ain't such a convenient thing; at least, this curse of mine"

Al spat those words out before moving his finger over to the seam of his helmet—something that had become a habit of his. There was a small click, making him aware of how turbulent his mind was and calling him back to his senses.

Though his helmet had been something he'd gotten his hand on quite unexpectedly, he'd really been saved and helped out a lot by it being there with him. It was a lifeline, not just in the sense that it protected his life, but also in the sense that it allowed him to cover his face up.

Aldebaran would never be able to face anyone without it. —Since he'd be unable to conceal this desperate tempest of emotions that continued to simmer in his heart from them.

Priscilla: "—The mansion should be coming up soon"

Priscilla muttered this not to the taciturn Al, but to herself, while resting her chin in her hands. And just as she'd said that, the familiar Barielle Mansion came into view along the path of the cantering Dragon Carriage.

For the time being, he’d be able to get out of the Dragon Carriage when they got back to the mansion. As tense as his time with Priscilla could sometimes get, it was still usually quite enjoyable—Yet now Al wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible.

2

???: “—Please give me a chance to redeem myself”

???: “A chance to redeem yourself, huh. What an odd thing to say. I didn’t know you could afford to beg for your life after having your head cut off in the battlefield. Is this how they do it in the Kingdom?”

???: “Gh…”

The middle-aged man choked on his words, faced with Priscilla in front of him, who’d now returned home and changed out of her lavish formalwear.

Before the seated Priscilla’s eyes was the red-haired man, kneeling before her and sweating nervously. He was Heinkel Astrea—The current head of the Astrea Family which was well known for being the lineage of the Sword Saint.

However no one in the Kingdom, not even himself, recognized him by that title. Thus Priscilla had taken Heinkel on as one of her subordinates, making him her pathetic clown.

Because of that Heinkel had accompanied them on their trip as well; but it appeared like he’d caused quite a huge mess out of Priscilla’s sight. She’d followed her instincts in thinking that it would be amusing to bring him along, yet…

Priscilla: “You threatened your own son and gave that lowborn girl a chance to take advantage of it. You really should have carried out that scene before mine eyes, because if you’d done that…”

Heinkel: “…”

Priscilla: “I would have had your head personally, so things would have probably ended without us having to have this unpleasant conversation.”

Heinkel’s face grew paler and the sweat beading on his forehead grew clammier. This state of his, where he was alternating between hope and fear at every turn of her behavior in a manner that was likewise different to Al, was a sight worth seeing.

Al would take what she was feeling into consideration and receive her whilst keeping his composure. Unfortunately right now, a shadow was appearing over that attitude of his; but in stark contrast Heinkel, who had no leeway for that, was also putting on a fantastic show.

That said, there was no way she was going to indulge him insofar as pardoning his impertinence or letting him off the hook for his next blunder. Therefore, Priscilla was about to give up on him unless he could come up with something witty in return.

And in this case, giving up meant no less than making him pay with his life. Though perhaps that would be more of a mercy for Heinkel.

The tragic circumstances that surrounded him were a curse of the kind which you wouldn’t find anywhere in Priscilla.

Priscilla reached out for her water pitcher as she thought to herself, “Now, what shall I do with him”, and noticed it was empty.

Priscilla: “Schult, my water pitcher’s empty. My good looks are going to fade away to nothing with how thirsty I am. Go fill it up, quickly.”

Schult: “—! That would be a disaster! I shall fetch you some right away!”

Schult had been waiting on her at her side, and as soon as she gave him her command, the young pink haired servant sprung up and dashed out to the hallway as fast as he could holding the empty water pitcher. Priscilla saw him off before then looking back down at Heinkel, with the two of them now left alone in the room. The foolish man shrank back and braced himself for what Priscilla was going to say next.

An elaborate Knight Sword was hanging down from the trembling man's waist. Yet what a pathetic condition he was in, despite possessing this famed sword that probably was full of rich history; even so—

Priscilla: "That sword at your waist hasn't rusted away, has it?"

Heinkel: "—hk, W-Well"

Heinkel's expression stiffened when he heard what Priscilla had asked him. However, her intentions were far different from what he'd imagined.

Priscilla tilted her head in thought, still sat on her chair, and then closed one of her eyes.

Priscilla: "You said you wanted a chance to redeem yourself, didn't you? Then behold, a chance for that has just fallen your way."

Heinkel: "What do you…"

"Mean", Heinkel didn't manage to finish his sentence.

The moment after, all of the windows in Priscilla's room were smashed in from the outside, and multiple figures clad in black came rushing in.

Priscilla's smile grew wider as Heinkel instinctively drew out his sword.

—The battle to redeem himself broke out with a flash of silver.

3

???: "—AL-SAMA!!"

Al gritted his teeth, feeling a burning heat coming from his shoulder that came at the same time as that high-pitched yell; with all his might, he brought his Blue Dragon Sword into a horizontal strike.

For a moment his sword got stuck on his opponent's body, but a split second later, it cut him in two.

He spared only a sidelong glance at his enemy's blood spurting out and getting all over the walls and floor before hurriedly running over to where Schult was. He felt really impressed at how loyal the boy was, having not dropped his water pitcher even at a time like this.

Were it possible for him to do so, he would have liked to have patted him on his head for a job well done, however…

Al: "Unfortunately I ain't got enough arms to spare for that. I'll get the Princess to pat you for your hard work later Schult-chan"

Schult: "Th-That can wait for later! More importantly, there's blood coming from your shoulder Al-sama! A ton of it!"

Al: "Oh yeah, right. He sure got me good there."

Al took a quick glance at his wound where he'd been stabbed. A hefty amount of blood was flowing from it, showing just how sharp his opponent's surprise attack had been.

In all, it would be ridiculous to even count how many times he'd had his head lopped off or his heart stabbed. He'd somehow managed to give the interminable hells of death the slip, so something like this counted just as an inevitable expense.

Al: "But thank goodness nothing happened to you Schult-chan"

In actual fact, Schult's safety came first above all else. He had no way of knowing what kind of punishment he'd receive from Priscilla later were he to screw up there.

Biting back his relief at that fact, Al turned his eyes back over to the invader—over to the assassin.

There collapsed on the kitchen floor with his limbs still twitching lay the black-garbed individual whom he'd cut in two. He definitely hadn't lacked in skill and his fighting competency had been far superior to Al's.

In that respect, he almost felt bad for his opponent since he'd gotten his win over him with a dirty trick.

Al: "Guess he'll have to try and forgive me about that… wait, Schult-chan! What about the Princess?"

Schult: "Uh…I'm… I'm not sure, though she ordered me to go and fetch her some water"

Al: "Of all times to do that… Ah wait, no, maybe that's okay? If the Princess hadn't told you to do that then one of them would've targeted you by now…"

Having thought that far, Al finally remembered the position his Mistress had upstairs.

In this mansion, the one who had the highest likelihood of being targeted by the assassins was Priscilla herself. If it was Al or Schult being targeted, then that could only be considered as them being bystanders getting caught up in the mix.

Al: "Schult-chan, let's make our way over to the Princess! Follow me!"

Schult: "R-Right away!"

Al rushed over to Priscilla's room with a paling Schult in tow. When he arrived, he kicked the large door open and jumped inside, calling out to his princess.

What unfurled itself in front of both Al and Schult's eyes was a bloodbath.

Six corpses were lying there on the fluffy carpet inside Priscilla's room; and in front of these corpses, a red-haired man—Heinkel—was crossing swords with the last intruder.

The assassin brought his body down and swung up the sharp daggers he held in each of his hands. He threw the blades up with blazing speed, aiming straight for Heinkel's neck and heart; and to make matters worse, he took out yet another blade from within his bosom and tried to strike Heinkel with it.

However, Heinkel deflected the daggers away with a flash of his Knight Sword, and with his parrying blow slashed his opponent down along with his weapon. His flash of silver had cut the assassin down, downward through the shoulder.

His swordplay, which you could even admire as being beautiful, made short work of the assassins that had been targeting Priscilla.

Heinkel: “*Puff*, *Pant*…”

Priscilla: “You’ve done reasonably well, foolish commoner. This doesn’t make up for all the disgrace you’ve caused, but you have my praises.”

Priscilla clapped Heinkel’s shoulder from behind with her fan as he panted in exhaustion, leaving him some unusually generous words. As far as Heinkel was concerned, considering that he was making up for his disgraceful behavior in Priestella, those few words were a salvation to him.

Heinkel’s shoulders slumped in relief at that; meanwhile, having moved away from him, Priscilla turned her eyes over to the fallen assassin who was still breathing faintly.

Priscilla: “Al, what are you doing just standing there? Go lift this guy’s face up.”

Al: “Ah, if you’re on about my shoulder wound, it’s just a scratch, so I’ll be okay. Thanks for worryin’ about me.”

Al retorted back with a sarcastic reply to his Mistress, who didn’t seem to be much in a mood to spare them any thanks, before then indifferently shrugging his shoulders. He grabbed the dying assassin by his head, the one Priscilla had indicated to him with a jerk of her chin, and forced his head up.

He tore his mask off, revealing the young man beneath who still looked like he was in his mid-teens. The young man quietly stared up at Priscilla as he breathed out his dying breaths.

There was neither anger nor hatred in him, his blue eyes were full of tranquil emotion.

Al: “He sure has the typical assassin look in him. Did another one of the candidates send these guys here or something?”

Priscilla: “If those people were to choose to use an approach like that then they wouldn’t even begin to enter into my consideration. This has nothing to do with the Royal Selection… No, this probably doesn’t even have anything to do with the Kingdom.”

Al: “With the Kingdom as well?”

Al cocked his head in confusion at what Priscilla had said as she’d brought her face close up to the assassin’s. The assassin’s shoulders tensed slightly as she stared at him with her crimson eyes.

However, no matter how much he tried to muster his strength, he still didn’t even have it in him to hold his dagger. All he could manage to do as he waited for death was to not avert his eyes from Priscilla’s gaze.

Priscilla: “Who commanded you to target me?”

Assassin: “…”

Priscilla: “Hmph, then let me change my question. —It was the wolf of the sword who commanded you to do this, wasn’t it.”

His response to that question was dramatic.

Al: “H-Hey?!”

The assassin, whom Al had seized by the hair so to keep his face up, began trembling all over and foaming blood. Seeing this all unfold, Al peered down at his face to try to find out what had happened. However the assassin was shedding blood from his eyes and nose as well, and like that, the strength abandoned his body. —He didn’t even need to double check, death had come instantly to him.

Priscilla: “He must have ingested poison. He was probably keeping some in his molar or whatnot.”

Al: “These guys were really damn resolved…”

Priscilla: “That’s to be expected, they’re as good as dead if they mess up. That’s how it is in Vollachia after all. —So, they’ve finally stirred”

Priscilla glanced over at Al, who looked rather surprised at her having touched on the identity of their unknown enemy. Then her gaze latched onto the wound on Al’s shoulder,

Priscilla: “By the way Al, about that shoulder wound of yours…”

Al: “Oh, yeah, it’s just a scratch. No point in worrying about it now…”

Priscilla: “—Considering where these guys are from, they would have coated it in poison.”

Al: “Huh?”

Immediately following her sudden warning, Al’s field of view began to spin.

His strength deserted him, causing him to fall to his knees. Unable to keep himself up, he collapsed into the pool of blood. No matter how many times or places he’d been covered in someone else’s blood, the feeling was always the worst for him.

Al: “Bgh, bgggh, bgggggh…”

Priscilla: “What a fool you are. I’d say you’re getting careless, wouldn’t you agree? You aren’t going to make it in time for the antidote.”

Al could hear Priscilla’s disembodied voice as she gazed down at his collapsed, foaming self. He could feel Schult panicking behind her as well, but he had no time to worry about that.

In front of him, Priscilla shrugged her shoulders and said,

Priscilla: “Do you need me to put you out of your misery, foolish commoner. At the very least I can lop your head off”

Al: “A-Are you sure? I’m your prized servant…”

Priscilla: “You’re my clown. Besides, if an attack like this is all it takes for you to die, then that’s it for you. Even so…”

Priscilla trailed her words off there, and her crimson eyes met Al’s. The gleam in her eyes seared queerly, yet vividly, into Al’s fading consciousness…

Priscilla: “—Will it end for you like this? If so, what a terrible disappointment you are, Aldebaran.”

Al: “…Don’t call me”

“By that name”, he wasn’t able to finish his sentence. Nevertheless, at the edge of his dimming consciousness, he inscribed in his soul, “I musn’t receive even a scratch”, and whilst holding that firmly within him, reality slowly started to slip away…

Being poisoned is an annoying one considering how long it takes to act.

With such deep emotion in his thoughts in his final moments, Al’s “Current Life” fell apart, and once again, the stars went around.

The stars went around—for the sake of granting him a next chance to redeem himself.

END

Comic Alive Collection 6

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village Ex: Blessing Day
(CA)

1

Ram: “Let’s celebrate.”

Is what Ram said, in the middle of her morning servant work.

In response to that sudden remark, Subaru widened his eyes as he said “Huh?”, carrying the mansion’s clothes with Ram right before it was time for breakfast.

Ram reacts to Subaru’s stupid voice by squinting her almond eyes.

Ram: “You got a problem with that, Barusu?”

Subaru: “No I don’t really have a problem, but I got surprised since it was sudden. Besides, isn’t it always my job to propose something out of nowhere?”

Ram: “In other words, as a result of me beating you at your own game of coming up with wild ideas, Barusu is vanishing from this world as you’ve lost your own self-worth…?”

Subaru: “You just said something really science fictiony out of the blue! It’s not something that grand!”

Ram: “Science fictiony…”

Ram looked somewhat cute, as she put a finger on her lips and repeated a word she was unfamiliar with. However, that was not Subaru’s gesture; when Ram said her sudden idea, he tilted his head as he said “Well”.

Ram would be sudden relatively often, but it was all just her joking. Her quick thinking brought about her evil. And while Ram had that skill to figure out complicated things, Subaru also had the ability to explain things in a simple way.

But still, what was the deal with this insufficient explanation that was even unkind?

Subaru: “Well, I won’t argue against it, but a celebration is for when something happy happens, right? I’m not really informed on them, but is it sort of like a national holiday or something?”

Hearing the word celebration, what suddenly came to Subaru’s mind were “Ceremonies”—it would be partly wrong to call them celebrations, but they were things that reminded him of them.

If none of those were it, then perhaps they could possibly be things like the world’s specific events, or festivals.

In his original world, they would be things like Christmas, New Years, Halloween, Golden Week, Summer break, Winter break, Spring break, stuff like that—

Subaru: “Why is fall the only one without a break, I wonder…Is it because there are so many delicious things in fall, and they’re afraid of people never working again if they carelessly rest for too long… or something?”

Ram: “I don’t get what you’re saying, but I feel you’ve gone way off topic.”

Subaru: “I did digress at the end, but up until before that, they were pretty serious questions. The things done and preparations needed depend on the details of the celebration, too. Just try doing something like leave a Christmas tree up until new years. You’ll become the laughingstock of the neighborhood.”

It was Subaru mumbling about his very true feelings that came from experience.

Although in the Natsuki household, the one week between Christmas and New Years—whenever big events came by continuously in short amounts of time, all the events would get mixed together because of his festive father and troublesome mother’s ideas. When things didn’t go well, Halloween pumpkins would get mixed with Christmas and New Years, so it was quite chaotic.

Subaru: “Well, I wonder if we became the laughingstock of the neighborhood, for better or worse…”

Ram: “Why are you making a distant look?”

Then, Ram glared at Subaru with half-opened eyes, him getting a bit nostalgic, and she sighed.

Ram: “I don’t know why Barusu is uneasy, but it’s neither an idea nor a strange festival, so don’t worry. Besides, normally Rem takes care of things, right? It’s a chance to pay her back.”

Subaru: “—? Paying back Rem? Something like Labor Thanksgiving Day?”

Ram: “Thanking her for her work would be a perfect way to put it. So, are you okay with it?”

Subaru: “You’re saying that to me, someone who suggested giving Rem a day off before?”

Rem had a very extreme amount of duties put on her at Roswaal’s mansion.

Rem was depended on way too much, so Subaru wanted do something about it so much that he was always thinking about it. In the past, he got all of the mansion together to somehow work out a day off for Rem, and he acted as her representative.

As a result, they all reflected upon Rem’s greatness, but—

Subaru: “And so Nee-sama had a change of heart. If you say that you want to make another day off for Rem, then I will help you with pleasure! There’s a pile of favors that must be returned, after all!”

Ram: “…I see you have no problem with making suggestions into your own.”

Subaru: “Did you say something just now?”

Ram: “I said it is natural to pay her back, and work hard.”

Ram snorts her nose, her arms folded, and Subaru nodded as he said “Got it”.

He felt like paying Rem back was a very good idea. It felt somewhat sudden, but since Ram said it as her loving sister, it didn’t feel out of place. However—

Subaru: “Huh? But if that’s the case, then isn’t the nuance slightly different than a celebration?”

Ram: “Huh?! Your limits are showing with how you fuss over trivial and small things.”

Subaru: “This is the reply I get even when I simply made a point about national language?!”

Subaru gets treated unreasonably, and he raises his voice. However, Ram didn’t pay attention to that. When she quickly finished her work, she said

Ram: “Also, let’s keep this a secret from Rem.”

Subaru: “A secret…yeah, right. Got it, you can count on me.”

Ram leaves just those words, and she left that place briskly with a quick pace. Subaru sees her off, and while scratching his head with a slightly confused look, he said

Subaru: “A celebration, huh. If I can’t talk to Rem about it…then I guess I’ll talk to Emilia-tan for now.”

When Subaru vaguely decided on his plan after breakfast, he finished up the rest of his work.

A nice, slight scent of Rem’s homemade breakfast came drifting about.

Subaru: “So yeah, Ram said that she wants to celebrate.”

Emilia: “I see. Feels kinda weird. Usually Subaru would be the one to bring stuff like that up…are you depressed?”

Subaru: “I’m not depressed, but Emilia-tan has that perception of me, too?”

“The erraticness of my ideas truly is my unique characteristic!”, wasn’t something Subaru should’ve been proud of, but he was worried about if he was falling behind in that field.

Of course, it wasn’t necessary for Ram to have that impression of him, someone who even said that his existence would vanish, but he was a little shocked by how even Emilia had that impression.

Emilia: “Ah, kidding, just kidding. Subaru is always mean to me, so I just tried to get back at him a bit. Don’t make such a sad face.”

Subaru: “Really?”

Emilia: “I’m being truthfully truthful. Reeaaally truthful.”

Just for a moment, Emilia followed up on Subaru’s situation in panic, as he was hurt.

Considering how she got tricked by that little act, she wasn’t suited for teasing people.

That meekness makes Subaru forget about his act without thinking about it, and a smile came to his face.

He was in Emilia’s room, and it was right after breakfast ended.

Subaru caught Emilia before she started her work after breakfast, borrowing just a little of her time, and he talked about his conversation with Ram this morning.

As expected, Emilia also was surprised from the sudden suggestion at first, but—

Emilia: “I was like this for the recent day off too, but I am in agreement with doing something for Rem. I agree…but hmm, it feels reeeaaally sudden somehow.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, you think so too after all? Agreed. It is very sudden. I did think that it may have been a Lugunica national holiday or something that only I didn’t know about.”

Emilia: “I’m also still studying, but there probably isn’t one… maybe. Ummm, Puck, Puck.”

Puck: “—Hm? What is it, Lia?”

Suddenly losing confidence in herself, Emilia talks to her necklace in the middle of the conversation.

When she did, the green crystal stone stuck onto her necklace emits a faint light. Immediately after the flicker of light, a kitten spirit—Puck showed up on Emilia’s shoulder. The spirit scratches his eyes sleepily, and he yawns with his big mouth open as he said “Fuwaa”.

Subaru: “Just when I thought you weren’t here at breakfast. You slept in quite late today, huh.”

Puck: “I did actually stay up a little late last night…I’m still sleepy, but what’s up?”

Emilia: “Sorry for waking you up, Puck. The truth is that I’d like to ask you something.”

She pats Puck’s head, him waking up, and she explains the previous interaction. It was related to Ram’s sudden suggestion, and national holidays of the Lugunica kingdom.

It was weird how Puck was more informed than Emilia, but this kitten would show his bag of wisdom for rarely understood mysteries, so she thought that maybe he’d give her an answer.

That’s what Subaru and Emilia had hoped for, but—

Puck: “Hmm, can’t think of one. In the kingdom, I don’t think there’s anything like a celebration day to thank someone. If I had to say something, then maybe the moon festival would be close.”

Subaru: “Moon festival?”

Emilia: “Oh, you see, it’s something that happens on the 25th of each month. The founding of the Lugunica kingdom was on the 25th day of the month of Marshba of Laguna history. So, every month on that day, a festival is held in places like the king’s capital and big towns. Humph, didn’t know that, did you?”

Subaru: “Thanks for letting me know, but it kinda felt like you wanted to tell us the knowledge you studied for a lot.”

It was like the fluency of a person that only read guidebooks and would speak pridefully while traveling.

Anyhow, Subaru was convinced with Emilia’s explanation.

This world’s time was about the same as well. It had the one year period, along with the 12 month system, too. However, occasionally the naming would be different, which was the only thing that left slight discomfort.

Subaru: “Well, that discomfort fades with time…but isn’t this month Arb month? It’s already past the 25th of that.”

Puck: “That’s why I said “If I had to say”. It was three days ago, so it is in fact close, you know?”

Subaru: “But, putting if the event was a previous date aside, the ones in the past were forgotten immediately…things like the cake after christmas and the chicken were too terrible to look at.”

They should’ve been the same things, and yet what was this sorrow of the products that came after the event days? And yet Christmas is considered to be the cause of excitement for the 23rd eve and the days up to that…

Subaru: “For Christmas, even the day it’s on has a late feeling to it…”

Emilia: “What is Christmas?”

Subaru: “Someday I want to talk about the holy night and the red good old man, but it will take long, so I'll put it off for now."

Subaru digressed himself, but he fooled Emilia with a smile as she had her head tilted. Afterwards, he cleared his throat, and while thinking about Puck's previous remark again he said

Subaru: "Though, Ram messing up the date is so unlike her that it's weird. I don't think she's celebrating to accommodate for the moon festival passing by."

Puck: "I also agree. That peach haired girl wouldn't do something like that."

Emilia: "Somehow it feels like you two have reeeeaally matching opinions on Ram. …Though, I also feel the same way."

Emilia chuckles, finding the matching of their opinions amusing, and she smiles. Subaru and Puck also look at each other, and they smile because of her smile.

The opinion also was that they had faith in Ram's personality and abilities. Putting her abilities as a maid aside, they could put trust in her humanity.

Subaru didn't even think Rem's opinion of calling Ram a prodigy before was an overvaluation, either.

Subaru: "The main doubt won't be resolved after all, eh. I guess we shouldn't worry about it too much and we should come up with a solution like we did the other day for Rem."

Emilia: "It was difficult, but it was fun, so I'm fine with that…but if you're worried, then should I ask Ram? Even though she won't tell Subaru, she might tell me."

Subaru: "That really seems like what it'll come down to, so I have mixed feelings. It feels a little like I've lost."

Emilia: "—? You never talked about winning or losing though."

Emilia responds to Subaru's strange stubbornness by putting a finger on her lips in confusion.

There certainly was quite a high possibility that Emilia would get an answer out of Ram if she asked her directly—or rather, she would probably get an answer.

However, that was sort of like a cheat, or maybe a forbidden move, or like attacking a boss after lowering the difficulty in the middle of the game. Anyways, that's what it felt like.

Subaru: "Well, we men do have backbone. Anyways, it doesn't seem like there's any urgency today or tomorrow, so I'd like you to let me do my best for a little longer."

Emilia: "Oo, then I wouldn't know the answer and I'd be sad, being the one you guys consulted…"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan can ask for an answer too…"

"You can ask for an answer too, but…", is what he said vaguely.

Emilia had a little bit of a childish side, although it was something he understood from his recent socializing with her, so he was worried about if she'd be able to keep silent after finding out the answer.

For some reason it made it feel like she was going to carelessly and happily have a slip of the tongue.

Puck: "Subaru's concern might be relatively appropriate."

Subaru: "So you think so too huh, Dad."

Puck: "Who you callin' Dad? Well, I am happy that you understand my daughter."

He guesses the vague parts of his innermost thoughts, and Puck shares a firm handshake with Subaru as he nodded.

Emilia seemed to be a little displeased from the dynamic handshake of Puck being on Subaru's palm, but she quickly said "Jeez" as she lowered one eyebrow and sighed.

Emilia: "Okay, got it. I'll count on Subaru's obstinance of a man.

However, I'm also with you in wanting to do something for Rem, so once you get information, let me know."

Subaru: "Of course I will. She would be happier with everyone doing something for her than if it was just me, anyways. I hate to admit it, but I seriously have poor abilities as a single body, after all."

Puck: "If it's Subaru that does something for her, then I'm sure the blue haired girl would be happy even with your poor abilities."

Subaru: "My poor abilities won't be enough to show my gratitude towards Rem."

Subaru thrusted his finger at Puck, who mumbled that while playing with his whiskers.

It wasn't just about her work at the mansion. There was a ton of things he wanted to thank Rem for. If it was a chance to pay her back even a little, he wanted to pay her back as much as he possibly could.

Subaru: "Thus, I won't let this chance go with the tenacity of a hyena."

Emilia: "Doesn't that kinda sound like a line that would come from someone requesting a favor?"

In response to Subaru's evil smile, him having nihilistically decided on his intentions, Emilia mutters with a troubled face as she put a finger on her cheek and tilted her head slightly.

3

—Like that, it was at the same time when Subaru and Emilia were talking.

Ram: "Roswaal-sama, are you free?"

After the sound of a light knock, the door slowly opened.

The owner of the room lifts his head in response to that voice and sound, and he closed one of his eyes at the follower that appeared from the gap of the door.

Indigo blue hair, and different colored eyes. It was a man that had the appearance of a clown with his eccentric outfit and makeup—the man sitting down on the business desk was Roswaal L Mathers the Margrave.

When Roswaal put his feather pen on the desk, he smiled slightly at the visit from the follower.

Roswaal: “Unusual of you to come in the middle of work. What is wroooooong Ram?”

Ram: “Sorry. However, I have a request for Roswaal-sama.”

Roswaal: “—You have one, for me?”

Roswaal includes a rare nuance in his sentence, and he raised his eyebrow at Ram’s words.

Normally Ram would have times when she’d be arrogant towards anyone, but Master Roswaal was the only person she’d always pay her respects to, offering her loyalty. It was rare for her to request a favor of Roswaal herself. —No, this was just about the first time.

Roswaal: “Disregarding the first time you came to the mansion, thaaaaat is.”

Ram: “…I was very rude during that time, repeatedly.”

Roswaal: “I don’t mean to blaaame you. I’m surprisingly very happy with you and Rem wanting something from me.”

Ram shrugs her shoulders, having apologized, and Roswaal causes the back of his chair to creak.

Roswaal knew Ram and Rem for close to 10 years. Not once did those two ask for something unreasonable of their position.

That’s why he felt both surprise and delight from this request.

Roswaal: “So, what is the request? Is it something you want me to do, or is it something you want? Considering Rem’s usual services and yours, I would like to grant most of your wisheees.”

Ram: “—Well then, may I ask for Roswaal-sama’s time, just for today?”

Roswaal: “Oh?”

Having hypothesized if it was an object or an action, Roswaal deepens his smile after having time requested.

Indeed, he did admire her for putting thought into this. However, Roswaal somehow understood the aim of this erratic request.

Therefore, with his closed eye—with his blue eye, Roswaal stared at Ram and said

Roswaal: “Is it for Rem?”

Ram: “Impressive insight.”

Roswaal: “Of course I know. You never ask something for yourself, after all.”

Ram: “…That’s wrong. If it’s for Rem, then it’s also for me.”

Roswaal: “Then I’ll put it correctly. You never ask something “only” for yourself.”

When Roswaal nodded approvingly at Ram’s reaction, her keeping silent, he put the feather pen back in the pen holder. And then he turns over the papers on his desk, and he goes back to his unfinished work.

Ram sees that, and she gave a deep bow upon him accepting her request.

Roswaal: “So, what do you plan on doing by asking for my time?”

Ram: “Right. There is a number of things.”

Ram squints her light pink eyes that emitted a prudent light, and she said that to Roswaal.

Ram: “—First, let’s start with returning home, perhaps.”

4

Subaru: “Where did Ros-chi and Ram go off to?”

Rem: “Yes. They ordered me to take care of the mansion for today.”

Subaru opened his eyes wide at Rem’s information, who he came across in the middle of work at the corridor.

Ram’s absence—he was checking out the truth of the “Celebration” she spoke of, and it immediately crushed his plan that he had just made in his discussion with Emilia.

Once Subaru lost his chance to interrogate her, he already had nothing else he could do.

Subaru: “No, it’s still too early to give in. If they just left, then if I run I might be able to catch them…”

Rem: “It might be difficult because Roswaal-sama held onto Nee-sama and flew via magic…”

Subaru: “I can’t deal with this if they use Flight!”

He saw Roswaal’s flying magic just once before. He heard that it was an advanced technique that combined several magic attributes, but that must’ve been a considerable speed shown.

It took just over 10 seconds for them to disappear at the end of the sky—not necessarily. It was a miscalculation of how long it took Ram and Roswaal to leave, although treating it as Flight was an exaggeration, too. At the very least, Roswaal going out should’ve been unexpected, so it seemed there was a high possibility of this sudden leave and the aforementioned celebration to be related to each other.

Subaru: “If so, then that makes me more sad…Rem do you know where they went off to?”

Rem: “Right. I did not hear about it in detail. However, they said they’d be back before the day was over, so I don’t think they went that far.”

Subaru: “I see. Hmm, I see…”

Rem: “Subaru-kun, did you need something from Roswaal-sama?”

Subaru: “Yeah, the truth is…oh, woops.”

Answering carelessly, Subaru shut his mouth while Rem had her head tilted.

He felt bad for Rem’s pure look, but Ram forbade him from speaking about this matter. The celebration was for Rem’s sake anyways, so Subaru was in agreement with keeping it a secret from her.

Subaru: “Everything’s funner as a surprise, after all.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “Ah, that’s not what I meant, ummm…right! Do Ram and Roswaal go out together like this a lot?”

Rem: “Nee-sama and Roswaal-sama, you say? Let’s see. In a way, they do. With the preparations for the royal selection, Roswaal-sama has more chances to meet with various people…”

Rem honestly answered his half powered question, which he asked to fool her. When she cut off her words once in the middle of it with a “However”, she said

Rem: “But in those cases the other party has their circumstances too, so pre-planning is…so going out like this today is rare.”

Subaru: “…During the witchbeast commotion, Ros-chi was called from somewhere and he flew, right?”

Rem: “That was a rare exception. It was Garf being selfish in the first place…anyways, please don't say mean things, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "My bad, my bad."

Rem pouts with her cheeks, making a bit of a sulky look, and Subaru apologized to her while having a wry smile.

Once he listened to Rem's answer, he knew that the sudden leave was a rare, strange occurrence.

Rem: "You seem very worried about Nee-sama. Subaru-kun, do you actually…"

Rem folds her arms. In response to Subaru, him going into deep thought, she puts her hand on her mouth upon suddenly realizing something. That reaction makes Subaru lose his breath, thinking that she may have seen through him planning a celebration.

Rem looks down quietly with her light blue eyes in reaction to Subaru's state and says

Rem: "No, maybe it just can't be helped. Nee-sama is perfect, after all…but Nee-sama has Roswaal-sama, so it might be difficult."

Subaru: "You are having a really unexpected misunderstanding! No way! It's not like that at all! That would be way too fearless of me with how Ram's been treating me up until today!"

Rem: "Yes, I know. I was kidding."

Rem smiles with a chuckle, and she sticks her tongue out at Subaru, who frantically explained himself. That lovely gesture makes Subaru feel relieved.

The weird misunderstanding bothered him, but above that, it meant she didn't realize his secret.

Rem: "It's regretful, but I guess it's about time we go back to work. Nee-sama is out, so Subaru-kun and I will have more trouble than usual, but let's do our best."

Subaru: "Yeah…even if Ram isn't there, that doesn't mean I don't feel a little concerned about how it doesn't make that much of a difference in workload."

Rem: "Just having Nee-sama there gives me power. Ah, Subaru-kun, too."

Subaru: "Doesn't that imply I've been discharged?!"

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "You're not gonna say anything."

He was so useless that you could say it was upsetting, so she was at a loss for a response. However, when Rem showed a gesture that similar to rolling up her sleeves, being silent with a cute smile on her face, she said

Rem: "Alright, let's do some work. Subaru-kun gets the garden, while I'll work on the east wing."

Subaru: "Boo-hoo…Rem has been nice lately, so it was a piercing that happened for the first time in a long while."

Subaru follows Rem's back, who walked ahead, while cursing his inadequacy and hanging his head. In the middle of that, he suddenly looks out the corridor's window, and he squinted at the blue sky with few clouds.

—Where were those two that left to someplace while flying in the blue sky, and how were they?

While vaguely thinking about those things, Subaru headed towards the garden to collect the laundry.

5

It was the hidden village that existed silently in the verdant mountains.

Actually, that wouldn't be accurate. Putting it correctly, it "was" a hidden village. Long after the site of the village became deserted, the place that was a village completely became a mountain forest. If you stared at it, you could barely locate things like the roads and the fields, but doing that would only make you feel sentimental, nothing more.

Ram: “Leaving it alone for many years, how cold-hearted of me.”

Is what Ram let out, sounding as if she was deprecating herself while walking on grass.

Inside Ram’s light pink eyes that viewed the surroundings silently, there were rare emotions that had a complex hue, even though she was someone good at hiding her inner thoughts.

The faint feelings were nostalgia and relief, while the deep ones were self-deprecation and sorrow—perhaps that was it.

Roswaal: “You haven’t returned home ever since you reported the retribution riiiiight?”

The person accompanying Ram calmly walking close to her side was Roswaal.

When Ram nodded with a “Yes” to Roswaal’s question, she said

Ram: “My relative’s souls were put to rest. Since then, there was never any reason to come over here.”

Roswaal: “There are other reasons to come to the graves besides putting them to rest…although, this is a difference in our individual ways of thinking. Perhaps there’s a difference between races, too.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama is attached to the graveyard, after all.”

Roswaal: “Oh, now that’s some rare sarcasm coming from youuuu.”

In response to the teasing, Roswaal gives Ram a happy look with his cheeks, and she lets out a small sigh.

The careless word was the cause of the disturbance inside her chest.

This place was special to the sisters Ram and Rem—because it was their home town, and it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to even call it the place of the Oni clan's demise.

The Oni were a stoic race that took pride in the fact that they had unrivaled strength, even if you looked look through all of the Demi-Human races.

However, in exchange, the absolute number of the Oni clan was small, and this place was the last of the villages that formed the "Oni Clan" village. That village burned down 10 years ago, and as long as there weren't even any "strays" that left their families, there were only two survivors: "the sisters Ram and Rem.

Rem was essentially the last of the Oni clan because Ram lost her horn during that ordeal.

Afterwards, the sisters were luckily found by Roswaal, and they spent 10 years at his mansion. During that time, the sisters came here only once—.

Roswaal: "You remember where the cenotaph is?"

Ram: "Well, I did get Roswaal-sama to build it at the most visible place. Apart from that, sorry for asking something selfish."

Roswaal: "Why? I've decided to use this time for you. Besides, asking to walk a little at your birthplace doesn't count as being selfish."

Shrugging his shoulders, Roswaal says those words, and Ram took a peek behind her.

Ram compares the path they've been walking on and the scenery in her memory, and the difference makes her clearly feel that it's been 10 years.

They came here with the use of Roswaal's flying magic.

Ram could also count the number of times she was held in his arms and experienced flying in the sky. Although, this time she was thinking more about how she was visiting her hometown, rather than she was feeling happy.

She was thinking more about how this one single time was when the nostalgia was way too much to handle.

Roswaal: “—Is that it? It’s been awhile since I’ve been here, too. Can’t really say I’m so sure myseeeelf.”

Ram: “Yes, that’s it, no doubt about it.”

Roswaal mutters that while looking far away. Ram nods, affirming his words.

Ahead of the mountain road with slopes, there was a location that showed up just a little from their surroundings. It was a place where you could look over all of the village, and it was also where the patriarch’s residence was built once before.

And then now, it was also the place where a cenotaph was built to put the Oni clan’s souls to rest.

—It was a stone monument made out of white, crystal stone built at the apex of the high ground. Back then, it was big enough so that she had to look up at it. However, now it was about the same size as Ram’s height, which also made her feel the time that passed. However—

Ram: “—?”

The discomfort that Ram had when the cenotaph was right before her made her frown.

She felt discomfort from the cenotaph itself, and the situation around it. The village’s state of ruin was something that could be understood at a glance, but the exuberant plants completely returned it to a part of nature.

But even then, the greenery had a weak influence only in the area of the cenotaph. At the foot of the stone monument, soil was prepared so that weeds wouldn’t grow, and the monument itself was repaired very beautifully.

As mentioned before, it had been approximately 10 years since Ram came here—Even Rem never disappeared on her own accord in the days that she managed to come here privately.

Before that, nobody had ever trod over the path they went along. Doing something like arriving at the side of the cenotaph without making footprints would be—

Ram: “Roswaal-sama?”

Roswaal: “Whaaat is it?”

Ram: “Earlier, did you say it’s “been awhile” since you came here?”

According to Ram’s memory, Roswaal visited the village three times—one time was when he took Rem out from the burned down village. The second time was when he established the cenotaph in the village. And then the third time was when he brought Ram and her to the village, as they came to the cenotaph.

However, Roswaal stayed at the village’s entrance for the third time. And besides, if he never came here after that, what Roswaal said earlier was inappropriate—it wasn’t like him.

Roswaal quickly raised his hands and said “I give up” to Ram, as she had her doubts.

Roswaal: “Don’t make such a scary looook. Don’t doubt me so oddly. I am the one that repaired this area a little, after all. Also, I think Clind did, too.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama and that thing did?”

Having nonchalantly listened to the unexpected truth, Ram opens her eyes wide in surprise.

It was natural. Even though this place was Ram and her sister’s birthplace, Roswaal had nothing to do with this place. And yet, instead of these two, why was he—

Roswaal: “—There are other reasons to visit a grave besides putting souls to rest. It’s a difference in our individual ways of thinking, and a difference between races.”

Ram: "…"

Roswaal: "I don't go so often that you could call it periodic. Only when I remember and have the time. As you know, I do not take the time to come here, after aaaall."

If he used fly magic, it would take around an hour to go from the mansion to here.

That said, it didn't change how Roswaal had no obligation, and it didn't change how he took the time to repair the cenotaph, either. It shook Ram up, as she didn't know about it until now.

Roswaal: "I got to see your surprised face. Thaaat makes it worth it."

Ram: "…I am in awe."

Ram gets her shoulder tapped gently, and she admired Roswaal, him laughing while being unbothered.

Although, she was also irritated by wondering why he was always at a place where he couldn't be seen.

Ram: "However, it is annoying how I have to thank you for that."

Roswaal: "Well, it does seem that Clind lost special interest in people like you and Rem ever since he was about 13. This is purely him having good intentions. I know that it's hard to say it thouuuugh."

Ram mutters, having curved her lips, and Roswaal changes his smile to a bitter one.

Ram sees that with the corner of her eye, and she sighed as she quietly faced the cenotaph.

"…"

There was no erosion on the cenotaph from the wind, rain, or moss perhaps because of the periodic maintenance. It was also kept away from such foreign substances because of how the highly pure crystal stone encapsulated mana abundantly.

The inclusion of that was Roswaal being considerate. While feeling grateful for that, Ram kneels down at that place, and she prays—she puts her hand on the scar of her forehead that used to have a horn, and she prays briefly.

Roswaal: "…Making a report again?"

Ram: "—Yes."

Roswaal asks a direct question, knowing about the circumstances, and Ram simply gives a short affirmation once again.

The circumstances—yes, it was about a report. Ram came here, returning home, to give a report to the souls of the Oni clan sleeping in the cenotaph.

Ram and Rem's parents were also included in these solaced souls of the stone monument, after all.

Ram: "I have a right to let them know. —Rem has been released from her curse."

She tells it. The truth. To her parents, and to her race.

Although—

Ram: "—You guys probably didn't know that Rem was binded though."

"…"

In silence from the back, Roswaal watches over Ram as she called out to the spirits of the Oni clan.

Rem's curse—it started with the ending of the retribution towards the cause of the destruction of the oni clan that happened 9 years ago, or 10 years ago when the village burned down.

—Maybe it started 17 years ago, ever since Ram and Rem were born.

Ram: “She continued to bind herself.”

Their race didn’t have bad intentions. Ram understood that, and Rem also must’ve felt the same way.

Their parents at least loved Ram and Rem equally in their conscience. The race of the village also put their expectations and hopes in them. Ram wasn’t so sure about the patriarch’s true feelings, but he was the only one.

That love, expectation, and clear disdain bound Rem with an unnecessary sense of duty.

That completely bound Rem’s heart for a long long time. A really long time, but—

Ram: “Rem has finally been released from it. Although, the one who released her irritates me a little.”

It wasn’t as if she wasn’t thanking him. No, she did feel grateful. She was just a little conflicted inside.

The black haired boy’s foolish smile that came to her mind—Rem just truly being herself and getting embarrassed after looking at that boy was a facial expression Ram had wished to see for a long time.

It was Rem finally going towards happiness without it being because of Ram.

Ram: “That’s why I came to report this. For the sake of the race… and family connections.”

She didn’t love her race that much. Therefore, Ram considered herself cold-hearted.

She didn’t carry out the retribution before for the family out of love. She did it because it was an obligation.

This report about Rem today wasn’t out of love, either. It was also an obligation.

She was pretty much uninterested in her parents and her race.

The only one Ram loved in this village was Rem, her younger sister that she treasured more than half her body. She could love many more things after leaving this village.

But even then, she felt like she had to communicate to relieve them.

Ram: "…"

Ram stands up, unpacks a package she brought, and she took out a bottle of sake.

Pouring sake on a cenotaph was a funeral that was somewhat unorthodox. The crystal stone brightens in the alcohol, perhaps because of how the sake's flavor was exceptional after 9 years, and it seemed to be satisfied with the offering.

Ram: "My apologies for making you wait for such a long time."

Roswaal: "Are you satisfied?"

Ram: "I told them the things they should know. I thank you, and not just for today."

In response to Ram's reply, her having finished her ritual, Roswaal closed one of his eyes, and he nodded. While having Ram reflected in his blue eye, Roswaal smiles at the petite follower and he says

Roswaal: "Well then, let's move on, I guess. The report has been made to your race and the trip back home has been completed…but there's more to do, riiiiiight?"

Ram: "—Yes."

Ram gives an acknowledging gesture with her chin, and after that she brought her body close to Roswaal, him having his arms spread out. When Roswaal raised his eyebrow at that distance. Ram looked up at him, and she said this.

Ram: "Hold onto me gently, and please bring me to the mansion. —The next request will happen there."

Subaru: “So Ram is gone and Rem will be doing a clean sweep of the mansion work instead. This means we can also look forward to today’s dinner!”

Beatrice: “…Even though you are a person with a lot of free time, for you to bother coming to me to say something like that…it’s awful.”

Sitting down on the stepladder, Beatrice sighs at Subaru, him having his thumb held up firmly.

Subaru found Beatrice’ library with lined up bookcases using his usual good intuition—he found the mysterious library in the mansion that she could go in and out of freely, and he was involving himself with that room’s librarian.

Having gotten tired of it, Beatrice also stopped saying anything about Subaru’s guesswork, but she was not in a good mood after having her reading time disturbed.

Subaru: “Well, in your case it’s weird for you to not spend time reading, which means that you’ll be in a bad mood every time I come, right? Eat small fish. Calcium calcium.”

Beatrice: “You not coming would be the best, I suppose. The best in terms of a simple solution.”

Subaru: “Losing your temper too much is unhealthy, too. Aren’t you scared of stuff like adult diseases from raising your blood pressure too much when you’re little? Not that I know much about it.”

Beatrice: “Not only are you ignoring the solution, but you’re also even ignoring what I’m saying, I suppose!”

Beatrice raises her voice in frustration without changing Subaru’s pace.

She opens her big eyes widely, and Subaru laughed frankly with a “Hahaha” at Beatrice acting angry with her long, splendid drills swinging.

Subaru: “So now that I’ve had my quota of playing with Beako, I have a question for you.”

Beatrice: “Did you just say “Playing with me”?!”

Subaru: “You misheard me. I said “Playing along with Beako”.”

Beatrice: “E-Either way, I don’t even remember playing with you. You are too selfish, I suppose…”

Being on the stepladder, Beatrice hits her forehead with her hand, and she felt dead with a tired look on her face. Subaru gazed at Beatrice acting like that, and when he put his hand on his chin he said

Subaru: “Alright, calm down. So, can I ask a question? By the way, even if you don’t like it and refuse, I’ll keep on asking until I get an answer, so it would just be a waste of time.”

Beatrice: “I don’t understand what you want when you reduce my will to answer and my will to decline!”

Beatrice suddenly jumps off the ladder, and she started to stamp her feet.

This very reactive girl really was the only one he’d unconsciously get carried away with. He’d always reflect on himself, but when Beatrice was in front of him, the reflections would get smashed into pieces, so it was a problem.

However, at the ending of her period of anger with her floor kicking and heavy breathing, Beatrice sighed “Good grief…” while hitting her forehead with her hand and said

Beatrice: “Whether it be a question or anything else, make it quick, I suppose. Then leave quickly, and let me return to my healthy reading time.”

Subaru: “In the end, you finally accepted it little by little, so I love Beako.”

Beatrice: “Stop stringing together pretentious words and say what you have to say, I suppose!!”

Subaru: “O-Okay okay. …say, is there a special day coming up soon? Not something like a global event, but something in this mansion.”

It seemed like he was going to be driven out for real, so Subaru abandoned his substitute objective of getting carried away, and he started his main objective of asking his question.

The question was of course aiming at the truth of the “Celebration”—he didn’t understand it even after asking Emilia and Puck, but if it was an extremely private event, then that would be a different story.

And in that case, Beatrice, someone who has lived in the mansion for a long time, should know more details about it than people like Subaru and Emilia, as it hadn’t been long since they came to the mansion.

Subaru: “So, I asked you with that train of thought.”

Beatrice: “An important day in this mansion…? I can’t possibly imagine Roswaal paying attention to something like that.”

Subaru: “If anythiiing, it seems to be related to Ram more than it is to Ros-chi…”

Beatrice: “If so, then it’s getting even more impossible to understand, I suppose. It’s not like I’m special friends with those sisters. We don’t even talk that much, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Beako, you…”

In response to Beatrice’ reply, her looking away as she snorted her nose with a “Humph”, Subaru stiffens his cheeks. Afterwards, he kneels, matching the eyesight of the girl, and he tapped her on the shoulder.

Subaru: “Don’t you get lonely living your life keeping people away?”

Beatrice: “You are getting in the way of my reading. Get the hell oouuuut!”

Subaru: “Yagogergee?!”

The moment Subaru mentioned the misery of that comment, he receives a shockwave from Beatrice’s palm after the disappointing answer as she was enraged, and Subaru gets sent flying to the back, raising cries of pain. The door of the forbidden archives gets thrown open like that, and Subaru gets shot out of the library while rolling.

Beatrice: “Even if you visit, I won’t let you in until I get called to dinner, I suppose!”

The door shuts along with that voice and vibrant sound. Having rolled on the corridor’s carpet while facing down, Subaru manages to sit up while shaking his head.

Subaru: “Until…dinner? I can’t tell if her rage voltage is high, or if it’s low…”

His Keep Out time was slightly short, perhaps because he told her to look forward to Rem’s dinner.

However, Beatrice not having an idea meant that he was off. Since he came this far, maybe waiting obediently for Ram’s return would be a better idea than working behind the scenes.

Subaru: “But if I do that, it’d feel like I’ve lost…”

Rem: “Lost what?”

Subaru: “That is, I lost in a sense of a man’s spirit. I’m lost with what I should do and for what purpose, and no matter how fired up with motivation I am, I don’t get any results.”

Rem: “That’s how it is? I see…”

Subaru: “This time it’s about a celebration for Rem, so I especially didn’t want to slack off.”

Rem: “…Th-That’s”

Subaru: “Yeah. That’s how it is…wait.”

Subaru was trying to have a monologue, but he clearly realized that he was having a conversation with someone, and he turned around.

When he did, he saw Rem put her hands on her blushed cheeks, wiggling her hips shyly. Rem closes her eyes, and when she let out a feverish sigh, she said

Rem: “Subaru-kun trying his hardest for me…that alone is enough to fill my heart.”

Subaru: “D-Damn it! For me, of all people, to make a basic mistake…!”

The situation wasn’t so clever that you could put it as the crafty schemer drowning in his own scheme, but it was him being unlucky.

If Ram found out that Rem heard him talk about the surprise plan for her, then he’d get killed. That’s how Subaru lamented the future and shuddered, but—

Rem: “So earlier Emilia-sama asked me “Rem, is there something you want, or something you want to do?”. The mystery has been solved.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan isn’t very motivated either!”

Rem: “No, she’d say “Hypothetically speaking, hypothetically speaking?” every time between her questions as a preface, so I also couldn’t go as far as to deepen my suspicions confidently…”

Subaru: “She has some talent for being so bad at hiding things… Rem, you don’t have to follow up. You suspected something was up, right?”

Rem: “I’ll keep it a secret for Emilia-sama.”

Rem smiles, and she refrains from saying anything as she tilted her head. That attitude of refraining from speaking showed Rem’s gratitude towards Emilia in itself, but Subaru also didn’t mention that again.

However, when it became futile to keep his secret any longer, he also felt like giving in.

Subaru: “I feel sorry for Ram, but anyways that matter came up, eh…so I have something I want to ask you, Rem.”

Rem: “Eehh?! I can do whatever I want with Subaru-kun for a day?!”

Subaru: “What did you say?!”

Having a red face, Rem jumped the gun with some sort of remark. Rem responds to Subaru, him being taken aback by it, by clearing her throat as she said

Rem: “Sorry. I went a little too far. I couldn’t help myself. Emilia-sama asked me what I wanted, so I thought about what I’d say.”

Subaru: “W-Well, I did want to ask you something in that direction, too. It’d be best for you to want more nice things. And so what I wanted to ask you was…ah! That was it.”

Subaru raises his finger, and he throws a question at Rem, her having reflected on herself. Although, it was weird to directly ask the question to the person herself.

Subaru: “Is there any special day coming up that comes to mind? Although, the celebration I talked about was actually Ram’s idea.”

Rem: “Nee-sama did, you say? Um, let me think…”

Subaru asks a question, and Rem goes into deep thought. However, it seemed like nothing came to Rem intuitively, even though she had excellent abilities as a maid with each schedule she had in the mansion.

She frowns with her nicely shaped eyebrows, and while lowering her shoulders apologetically she said

Rem: “No occasion in particular comes to mind…sorry.”

Subaru: “No, you don’t have to apologize. So I guess it is just something she came up with after all…?”

In the end, if that calmed her down, then that would be it. It didn’t occur particularly at the same time as an event. She just happened to want to thank Rem one day. Still, it didn’t matter.

It didn’t matter, but—

Subaru: “If that’s the case, then the efforts were all for naught, and it would just be Rem finding out about the surprise…”

Ram: “—Finding out about what?”

Subaru: “Like I said, the surprise…in other words, a celebration… eep.”

Subaru breaks down the loan word, and he turns around to the back where his voice reached. And then, he was captured in light pink eyes that were lighted with terribly cold passion.

The one with the light pink eyes folds her slender arms, and she continues while having Subaru frozen with her look.

Ram: “If I say “Wait”, even a dog can do that. If I say “Don’t talk”, even a baby can do that. What on earth are you doing, Barusu, someone who can’t do either?”

Subaru: “Um, you see, yes I…”

Ram: “I can’t believe how much shame you were able to show in just a single day. I’m actually impressed.”

Subaru hangs his head in response to the eyes and voice that weren’t impressed at all without even being able to give an excuse.

Taking the place of Subaru and appearing in front of her, the owner of the eyes—the one who confronted Ram was Rem. When she faced Ram, she joins the words “Please wait” and says

Rem: “Nee-sama, Subaru-kun isn’t at fault. He was just a little careless!”

Ram: “That’s not the right way to put it, Rem. It’s the unbecoming mouth of a servant and stupidity.”

Subaru: “Agh, I can’t deny it…!”

Rem: “B-But…Emilia-sama also…she was…she was completely terrible at hiding it!”

Ram: “Yes, Emilia-sama got exposed, too. Is the wind clogging your mouth? You are being too lenient.”

Rem: “This is so shameful…!”

Subaru gets glared at with sharp eyes across from Rem’s follow up, and he sunk instantly. Rem also didn’t let—or rather, it wasn’t a situation she could defend in the first place, so she showed a rare sight of her squirming while opening and closing her mouth.

Then, at the place with a stalemate of those three each doing their own thing, there was a dry, stop sound—there was the sound of a clap and

Roswaal: “Okay okay, let’s stop this unproductive arguiiiiing.”

The one who forced his way in between the three of them with these words was a tall clown—no, it was Roswaal.

Ram had returned. It was natural for him to also be back at the mansion, as he had went out with her. With his usual easygoing behavior, Roswaal looked around at the three of them and said

Roswaal: “Anyhow, this isn’t the first time Subaru-kun was careleeess. Even if you blame him for it, it can’t be helped. Besides, this isn’t something that can be kept secret from Rem.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama, but…”

Roswaal: “It’s okay to hide things. However, I don’t think that would work this time, you know?”

Having shown a rejective attitude, Ram did not respond to Roswaal continuing his words. Watching nearby, Subaru could not comprehend what was going on with the interaction between the two that understood each other. However, there was the true meaning of this “Celebration” in the core of the interaction.

Once he understood that, he made Roswaal his focus.

Subaru: “…Um, I won’t deny that I am guilty now, and I do seriously feel like apologizing, but what is this all about in the end? I want you to explain that to me.”

Roswaal: “And that is Subaru-kun’s order. He certainly does have a big mouth, but I do think that your insufficient explanation was greatly at fault. I wonder what I should do about thiiiiis?”

Subaru: “Ros-chi…”

He did also stop the three-way deadlock, but Roswaal was on Subaru’s side this time—or rather, he wanted this discussion to move on smoothly.

It was unusual for him to not stir up complicated situations. Surely the true meaning of Ram’s celebration was behind that unusual behavior.

“…”

Ram receives looks from Subaru and the others, and she went into silence for a little while, appearing to have gone into deep thought. However, the answer should’ve already appeared within the smart girl.

Ram: “…Birthday”

Subaru: “…What?”

Subaru asks that to Ram, not being able to hear the quiet voice that came out like a whisper. When he did, Ram glared at Subaru unpleasantly and said

Ram: “I said birthday. —I wanted to celebrate that for Rem.”

Ram looks away when she said the latter half of her words, and she showed an unusual sight of stiffening her cheeks as if she got sulky.

Ram acted like that, and everyone had their own reactions again. Roswaal gave a wry smile, while Rem opened her eyes wide and stiffened up. And then since Subaru was dumbfounded, he said

Subaru: “Birthday…a birthday! Now that you mention it, that was a blind spot…or wait, I wish I realized that in the beginning!”

Not having “birthday” come to mind when he heard celebration at the start was his first oversight. It was also probably because he didn’t imagine this world’s customs to be that insistent on birthdays.

However, right after he clapped his hands upon gaining understanding, Subaru puzzled with a “Wait” as he said

Subaru: “You said birthday, but…since you and Rem are twins, isn’t it your birthday too?”

Ram: “Well, yeah.”

Subaru: “Which means you said that sort of thing to celebrate your own birthday?!”

What an indirectly shameless proposal. However, if it was Ram, then there certainly was a possibility for her to say something like that. Ram reached for Subaru’s neck while he had those thoughts.

He gets caught by that unexpected movement, and he gets pulled firmly. Ram’s face was right by him as she said

Ram: “—Take a hint. This year’s birthday is special to Rem.”

Subaru: “…Her heart”

Ram: “That girl’s now definitely able to be happy with her own birthday from the bottom of her heart.”

It was a conversation where they talked with each other briefly and quietly. Then Subaru gets pushed aside, and he finally understood Ram’s deepest thoughts, her turning away coldly as he staggered one step backwards.

He understood Ram's birthday—it was not for herself. He understood the reason why she wished to celebrate Rem's birthday.

Subaru: "…Shit. If that's the case, then I really am a damn idiot."

Ram: "Were you not aware?"

Subaru: "Can you not talk as if it's an outstanding surprise?! Ahh, jeez, I get it! If it's like that, then I'll give it all I got! I'll help with everything I have in me!"

Subaru resents Ram, who put her hand on her mouth and talked with a trembling voice, being nothing but dumbfounded. Even that reaction also made him realize that it was out of consideration for reducing the awkwardness of the previous conversation.

Seeing that agreement between Subaru and Ram made Roswaal pull his chin in approvingly. The one being left behind instead in that situation was Rem, the person who did not say anything even though the matter involved her.

She looks around at the three of them while nervously putting her hands up and down in disturbance and says

Rem: "U-Um…just having you say that makes me really happy. I am so lucky. But, for me to get special treatment…"

Rem shows her appreciation, and she chooses words to try and firmly decline the celebration, being nothing but grateful.

She was a girl who would be scared of achieving happiness and being rewarded. That was something he understood when he tried to make a day off for her before. Rem got so confused just from him trying to get her to rest for a single day.

Never mind the fact that her birthday was even on the same day as her sister's, having a special celebration for her would be—

Rem: "I really…can't make up for…"

Ram: "—I love you, Rem."

Rem: "…"

She was at a loss for words. Rem touches her thin chest, and she chokes up over the words that came from her smiling sister.

Ram looks towards her sister's surprised look with eyes full of affection and says

Ram: "The preparations are finally set. The preparations to let you know just how much you mean to me, and just how much you saved me, are finally set."

Rem: "No, Nee-sama…I am the one that should…for Nee-sama"

Ram: "If you care about me, let me give you special treatment, Rem. What I want the most in the world right now, is that privilege."

Ram closes some distance with one step. Rem looks down, being close to her. Meanwhile, Ram gets closer, one step at a time, and when she finally gets close enough to touch her, she brought her little sister close to her.

Letting out a quiet "Ah", Rem's forehead settles into Ram's chest. Then, within the arms of her sister that hugged her affectionately, Rem nervously hugged her back.

Rem: "Nee-sama, Nee-samaa…"

Ram: "There, there, you're cute, Rem. —Let me brag about that."

Ram smiles in satisfaction at the voice mixed with sobbing, and she continues to pat Rem affectionately, so so affectionately.

He felt like it was a cut out moment of seriously picture-perfect sisterly love.

—While looking at those sisters embrace each other, he said

Subaru: “…But this is a situation where Ros-chi and I aren’t needed at all.”

Roswaal: “Interrupting this would be way too insensitiiiive.”

Then, the two men exchange glances, and they shrug their shoulders, being left behind.

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Ram: “It was a bit different than what was planned, but I am relieved that we got Rem to accept it.”

Roswaal: “If it was back then, I wonder if she’d decline stubbornly, or if she’d accept it, but not with her true feelings…either way, I really like the transformaaaation.”

Roswaal and Ram finish the daily healing at night in the office at the top floor of the mansion, and while having that matter lingering in their minds, they look back at the day.

Roswaal was sitting down on a chair. Being on his lap with her light body, Ram looked up at him while leaning on his surprisingly sturdy chest and said

Ram: “Roswaal-sama, thank you too for readily accepting my selfish proposal.”

Roswaal: “Well, I’m not sure how much I can help with the essential preparations, after all. I won’t have any problem with something as a little as approving the plan, or offering a place for it.”

Ram: “Never mind Emilia-sama. Barusu’s actions need to be paid attention to.”

There was sharpness in her voice. Roswaal gave a bitter smile. By paying attention to Subaru’s actions, she was probably talking about how he made a mistake of carelessly letting Rem find about the celebration.

Or maybe it was her talking about how saying ridiculous things came with his personality.

Roswaal: “However, we really do need his help to have Rem be happy with a birthday party. You must also be preeeetty conflicted about it, right?”

Ram: “…I’ll try my best to compromise.”

Roswaal: “If you say that, then you might actually do it. But still…”

While patting Ram’s head, her sitting in his lap, Roswaal closed one of his eyes. With his blue eye, he looks at the girl right by him. Ram raises her head up to his eyes. Pink and blue light cross each other.

Roswaal: “I respect your feelings of wanting to celebrate Rem. However, are you really okay with that?”

Ram: “What I want is to see Rem be happy for the first time. Even if I’m blessed, what I want is for Rem to be happy. Also…”

Ram stops talking, and she squints. Roswaal chuckles at the true meaning that she couldn’t clearly say.

Roswaal: “What you want is “Time for me, just for today”, riiiiight?”

Ram: “Yes. —Was it immodest to get a present in advanced?”

Roswaal: “As long as you admit it, I won’t take it back. Buuut I also have my own way to bless.”

Roswaal deepens his smile at Ram, who hesitated to say anything, perhaps because it was an unexpected turn. While feeling the light weight of the girl on his lap, he thinks about the sisters’ birthdays that were coming up, and he said

Roswaal: “I will keep the blessing words you want until that day. So, tonight will be the same as always.”

The moon that drew a semicircle outside the window illuminated their private talk.

The blessing day was close. What would happen on that day, and what could be done?

Ram pouts a little at Roswaal, who strangely just seemed to be happy, and after that, she loosened her lips.

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Ram: “Let’s celebrate.”

—is what Ram said a few days ago.

Ram’s sudden proposal caused all of the Roswaal residence(excluding one person), to get jumbled in immense chaos and suspicion, including Subaru.

However, he was enlightened and he nodded because now her true motive was clear.

Ram: “I want to celebrate Rem’s birthday. This year is special for that girl.”

Subaru immediately raised a white flag in response to Ram’s profile full of rare affection. It couldn’t be helped. He completely gave in to help her. He couldn’t handle that sort of look.

Besides, he nodded to many parts of Ram’s point.

Being someone that undervalued herself too much and was humble about everything, Rem even managed to forget about her own birthday. Could she really forget about that anniversary, even when it was also her beloved older sister’s birthday?

Basically, that day was the only matter she unconsciously avoided.

Subaru: “But, she can’t. Avoiding celebrating your own birthday? There’s no way that’s possible.”

Subaru could not believe in Rem’s unconsciousness, and he wholeheartedly approved of Ram’s suggestion.

Birthday—if there was a reason to celebrate that, then you could even put it as a way to show gratitude. He was always in Rem’s care. He also insisted on that repayment.

However, Subaru didn't put it like that, and he didn't think of it like that, either. There was no need for such forced reasoning.

Because a birthday is for celebration. It was the best day that happened once a year when you could ask for selfish things.

It was something that didn't have any special reason. That's what Subaru believed.

It was common sense that he took with him, despite it being a different world. He wanted Rem to ask for whatever she wanted with confidence.

She had that right. Everyone living in the Roswaal residence came to that conclusion.

—Actually, putting it as a bundle called "everyone" would be somewhat misleading.

The truth was that not everyone in this mansion was on board with the idea.

On the contrary, there was only one person that was clearly against it.

It wasn't even Roswaal, someone who you could never tell what he was thinking. It wasn't even Beatrice, who would try to oppose the mansion's events at first. It wasn't even Emilia, who Subaru enjoyed while oddly explaining his strange festivals that he proposed. Incidentally, it wasn't Puck, either. And of course, it wasn't Ram, as she was the one that came up with it.

Which meant that it could be only one other person—it was none other than Rem herself.

Rem: "I'm so happy that Nee-sama and Subaru-kun put in so much effort for me. I'm lucky. Those feelings alone are enough to fill my heart. That's why you really don't need to do this. Anyways, let's celebrate Nee-sama's birthday!"

Subaru: "What do you mean "anyways"?!"

Subaru shouted at the empty sky without thinking, but Rem did not change her mind at all, in regards to her habit of being modest.

However, there was a but.

Cancelling her birthday party this year because Rem herself declined—Subaru was against accepting a development like that obediently.

And so Ram was also in agreement, as she literally wanted to spoil her beloved sister. Subaru and Ram's opinion matched in regards to this issue. They were complete accomplices.

The two of them wanted to somehow celebrate Rem. They simply just had that iron will.

However, it wasn't as if that was Subaru's only motive. That's right. While looking at the profile of his accomplice, he thought about things.

The restraint and deep affection. The hidden plan and the decision. What would happen in the mansion because of all that?

—It was the beginning of an honorless, inhumane, and violent mutual celebration.

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Ram: "Stubborn Rem is cute, but it'll become a stalemate at this rate."

Ram let out a sigh listlessly, sitting on the bed of the room while having her thin arms crossed.

In front of her, Subaru looked up at the ceiling in agreement, puzzling over the same issue. Subaru was used to seeing this ceiling, but it was his room, so if you were to say that it was something natural, then yes, it was.

It was becoming the time in the afternoon when he had a break during work. That was when Subaru and Ram met and groaned together in the room.

Needless to say, the item on the agenda was the nearest birthday that was getting closer.

Ram: “At first, I thought Rem was convinced with how she reacted when we talked about the birthday celebration…”

Subaru: “It seemed like she was going to accept it with the atmosphere, but for her to immediately revise it, that sure is like Rem. It was her usual habit of being restrained, but her humility is a problem, too.”

Ram: “Quit talking like it’s somebody else’s problem. That girl cowered because Barusu was being presumptuous and had to go stick his nose in. You lack self-awareness.”

Subaru: “Agh…well, it’s not like I can deny it.”

Ram sighed at Subaru in the silence, him looking away as he admitted his mistakes awkwardly.

—Rem’s delicate birthday party refusal came out the day after Ram announced the holding for her birthday party.

When Ram spilled the beans about wanting to have a birthday celebration for Rem, Rem was moved to tears because of her sister’s kindness, and she showed her gratitude. Everyone thought that the birthday party would be held for sure with those events.

Subaru: “Who would’ve thought Rem could break down when we asked her things like what she wants and what she wants us to do…”

Ram: “Not could, she did break down. I made a mistake of not putting an end to it, too. I should’ve known with Rem’s delicacy and Barusu’s uselessness.”

Ram’s sharp speaking causes Subaru to drop his shoulders, heartbroken.

Just this one time, Subaru gave up on objecting. Ram’s opinion was correct, at least for those points. Subaru was truly partly involved with Rem’s change of heart. And on top of that, it was a big part, too.

Consequently, they were having trouble persuading Rem, being someone who showed a tendency to be modest.

Subaru: “It would be great if Rem could reconsider it before the upcoming big day in the near future. If the worst comes to the worst, we also have the option of having a guerrilla warfare sort of birthday party, but I’m not sure what a guerilla warfare birthday party would even be.”

Ram: “Nevermind the big day, it would have to be done very well anyway. Also…”

Then, Ram stopped criticizing him, and instead she took a glance behind Subaru. Subaru follows her eyes, and he understood what caught her attention.

He understood that she was interested in the desk that was there. Or to put it more precisely, it was something placed on top of it.

Subaru: “This is a cracker that I made myself. It is instant, but it’s necessary for a party.”

Ram: “A cracker…”

Subaru handed over a cracker as big as his palm to Ram, seeing how she was interested. She accepts it and gazes at it closely. It was something that rolled up cardboard into the shape of a cone, and the circular part was covered with a lid. Rubber was stretched out from the pointy part, and Ram was pulling on it lightly with her fingers.

Ram: “What is this toy used for?”

Subaru: “Really, you’re gonna call it a toy? Well, you’ve grasped what it really is, though.”

However, as you’d expect, it seemed like Ram didn’t do any further analysis of it.

The cracker gets put back by Ram, who frankly did not understand its purpose, and then Subaru looked at her in a bit of a mischievous way. And then—

Subaru: "—Take this!"

With the sound of rubber snapping, white confetti fell down with Ram as its target.

"…"

Contrary to its size, a pretty large amount of pieces of paper fell onto Ram's head. This unexpected effect makes Ram's big eyes open wide, and Subaru smiles at that satisfying reaction.

The instant cracker was something Subaru made all by himself, including the confetti inside of it. The knowledge he gained a long time ago from watching an educational program on TV proved to be useful. He was very grateful for the glasses guy.

Subaru: "What'cha think? Surprised you, right? It's a gem that's safe for children without gunpowder, and on top of that, it's even ecologically considerate since you can reuse it however many times you want."

Ram: "…I see."

Ram responds to Subaru's explanation, him acting prideful, by smiling after whispering with a low voice. For some reason, Subaru felt strange chills because of that lovely smile. While smiling at Subaru, him shuddering, she pinched a piece of paper on her head.

Ram: "This is a clever idea you'd expect from Barusu. I'll praise you for this, except for the fact that you showered me with it and you covered the room in paper waste."

Subaru: "Be more straightforward with your praise! I'm sorry! It's standard to aim it at people! And if you're gonna call it paper waste, don't make it worse than scraps of paper!"

Subaru picks up a broom and dustpan at the corner of the room while defending himself against Ram's abuse.

He had tools ready to collect confetti because he was making crackers on his own and he test fired them several times in his room. He quickly picks up the scattered confetti, and he put it back into the cracker.

Now the loading was complete. It was an ecological good considerate of the environment and safety.

Ram: “Barusu, wait.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Ram held her hand out to Subaru, who had been blowing his own horn, to tell him to hand her a cracker. When Subaru obediently accepted that request, Ram looked at the cracker she received and said

Ram: “…Did you test this a lot, Barusu?”

Subaru: “It was a performance test, too. Oh, you want to try it now too? I do understand how you feel, though.”

Ram: “So you basically showered me with scraps of paper scattered on the floor along with stuff like dust and garbage.”

“…”

Subaru gets overpowered by Ram’s tone of voice, and he looked away.

Subaru: “…I guess…you can…put it…like that?”

He did consider safety and the ecology of it, but he may have been lacking in the cleanliness department. It seemed they had different viewpoints on the matter of reusing confetti that fell on the floor.

Ram: “Barusu.”

Subaru responds to the low calling by nervously looking back at her. He met the eyes of Ram smiling.

With a smile, she aimed the cracker at him.

—With the sound of a snap, Subaru's vision became pure white.

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With this and that, his conversation with Ram that may or may not have been productive ended.

Subaru walked unsteadily out of the room, and now he was heading towards the dining hall. It was unrelated to his meeting in his room with Ram, and he had another promise.

And then, when he slid into the dining hall with stealthy footsteps, he—

Rem: "—I've been waiting, Subaru-kun. Here, come here."

Subaru: "S-So-Sorry for making you wait. I ran into a bit of trouble shaking off Nee-sama."

Subaru gets greeted by a sweet, warm smell and a soft voice, and he said that while scratching his head. The one who shook her head in response to Subaru's words was Rem, who had been waiting for Subaru in the dining hall.

Right after his private talk with Ram, Subaru met up with Rem, who he arranged a meeting with.

Of course, there was a reason for this secret rendezvous that was out of everyone's sight.

Rem: "So Subaru-kun, did it go fine with Nee-sama?"

Subaru: "Don't worry. As of now, it seems she hasn't noticed our plan. She's been deceived perfectly."

Rem: "That makes me feel relieved. But, we can't be careless. Nee-sama is perfect even in those kind of insights. Evading Nee-sama's eyes is probably next to impossible for me, and even Subaru."

Subaru: "You have so much faith in Nee-sama that our precautions are going to waste."

That said, Rem's assessment of her sister wasn't a complete exaggeration.

In actuality, Ram's insight was not something to make light of. It was especially responsive to evil schemes. And so Subaru also had to be very careful to try and keep up an appearance during his conversation with Ram.

—Because at any rate, Subaru and Rem were working together to plan a conspiracy with Ram as the opponent.

Rem: "I'm so happy that Nee-sama and Subaru-kun want to celebrate me. But, I can't just neglect Nee-sama because of that."

Subaru: "That's why we're planning a counter surprise without letting Ram know. It's a plot where Rem and I will be the instigators, and we'll play a trick on Nee-sama while her guard is down!"

Rem: "Yes, as expected, Subaru-kun's ideas are the best in the whole world. At first, when Subaru-kun proposed this idea to me, I couldn't stop trembling from how devious it was."

Subaru: "'Devious' you say, I guess the evil in me just got a bit stronger…"

Rem: "—?"

Rem tilted her head curiously in response to Subaru sighing, unsure of whether it was praise or not.

Anyhow, on the other side of Rem's birthday party event, they were actually secretly working on a surprise birthday party plan for Ram. Subaru and Rem meeting at the dining hall like this was linked to that surprise plan, but there was another purpose for it besides having a secret talk. That was—

Rem: "This is a way for me to show my gratitude towards Nee-sama. Although, it is a mere token."

Rem made a humble pose, but Subaru reflexively swallowed his spit in reaction to the scene before him.

There was the cause of the sweet aroma that filled the room. Various sorts of sweets were lined up on the table. He could see the degree of Rem's enthusiasm with those sweets that needed more than just the fingers of both her hands.

Subaru: "If this is a mere token, then Rem's gratitude seems to be infinite."

Rem: "My feelings towards Nee-sama are infinite, after all."

The way she threw her chest out with a little pride as she said "Humph!" looked lovely. He smiled seeing Rem talk about Ram because she was someone who would often act unconfidently.

Ram also looked the same when she talked about Rem.

Subaru: "Alright, how about I get a taste of a part of those endless feelings for my incompetent self."

Rem: "Sure! There are plenty of things that haven't been tried yet, so please tell me your honest opinion."

Rem bows, and she waited next to Subaru, who headed towards the table. And then, Subaru smacked his lips while being pleased by the benefits of the plates of sweets that were introduced in succession.

The familiar baked sweets had a sweetness that vaguely ringed a bell. However, there were a lot of sweets he saw for the first time that were characteristic of this different world, too. What really impressed him in particular was the dish that looked like a steamed potato and made warm steam drift about—but the truth was that it was clearly different from a steamed potato.

Subaru: "No way, it's not just a mere steamed potato, but a…"

Rem: "That's right, Subaru-kun. It is the baked potato dish Nee-sama and Emilia-sama came up with for Subaru-kun. Not wanting to be outdone, there were many trial and errors, and I made it."

Subaru: "Th-The potato is melting apart in my mouth! And yet, I can still taste the sweetness on my tongue! What the hell is this! What the hell! So good! What the hell!"

Rem: “If you are that happy with it, then working it out was worth it for me, too.”

Subaru showed his praise for the bite again, continuously admiring Rem as she smiled happily.

Rem was happy about all that, and Subaru also was eating up the sweets without caring about the calories. After that, he enjoyed the after meal tea, and he pleasantly let out a sigh of satisfaction.

Subaru: “I have no complaints. It was all made so splendidly. Something like this will blow away even Nee-sama.”

Rem: “Thank you. Well then, I’ll clean up now. There’s still time until dinner, so stay hungry in the meantime, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Yeah. It would be a problem if Ram got suspicious of the reason behind me not having dinner.”

Rem: “That’s right. …So”

Then, Rem paused, and she reached out to touch Subaru’s cheek with her hand. When Subaru stiffened up in an instant, wondering what just happened, she gently moved her finger and said

Rem: “There was a tiny bread crumb. There’s a possibility of Nee-sama noticing it, even if it’s this small.”

Subaru: “Ah, aah, I see. Thanks a lot.”

When Subaru scratched his cheek in embarrassment, Rem brought that bread crumb towards her lips as she said “No problem”. Subaru felt even more embarrassed because of her licking it like that with her tongue stuck out.

Rem, who gazed at Subaru mischievously, said

Rem: “Okay then, see you later. Subaru-kun.”

Then, her cheeks turned slightly red, and she showed him out.

While stroking his bulged stomach that had a feeling of sweet fullness, Subaru secretly went away from the dining hall.

If he carelessly came across Ram like this, that would be the end of him. Not only did he have to be cautious with his speech and conduct, but he had to be cautious with his actions in the mansion, too. This was because Ram wasn't the only one he had to be careful of.

And he couldn't even show Rem what he was going to do now, after all.

Emilia: "—Subaru, Subaru"

Suddenly, Subaru was called out to quietly while walking with caution.

When he looked around at his surroundings, there was a room with a slightly opened door, and he saw a white hand beckoning him from it. Subaru headed towards the room in accordance with that beckoning.

And then, when he slid into the room without a sound, she said—

Emilia: "Did it work out fine? Nobody found you, right?"

Subaru: "Based off of what I saw, nobody was there. Emilia-tan, how about you?"

Emilia: "It worked out for me, too. I saw Ram far away taking in clothing, and Subaru has been with Rem, yes? So, there's no need to worry."

The one who said that and puffed up with pride going "Ahem" was a girl with braided hair, Emilia. While giving a wry smile at that somewhat smug look, Subaru continued as he went "Still" and said

Subaru: "Why in this room? We were supposed to meet in Emilia-tan's room."

Emilia: "I heard what Subaru and Rem were doing in the dining hall. So, I reeeaaally couldn't wait…I couldn't just stand around."

Subaru: “Were you scared of me screwing up?”

Emilia: “I wouldn’t put it like that. But, something pretty close to that…maybe.”

She gives a vague answer to avoid offending him, and that vague truth hurt him.

That said, they were lucky that they managed to meet up without being seen by anyone. There was a reason why Subaru and Emilia were having a secret talk like this without people knowing about it. As for what that reason was—

Emilia: “So, has Rem noticed anything? As in, has she noticed that we’re preparing to celebrate Rem’s birthday while Rem is preparing to celebrate Ram’s birthday?”

Subaru: “That was a really complicated explanation, though that is because we are doing something complicated.”

Emilia: “I also feel like I’m going to mix up things a bit when I talk about it.”

Subaru shrugs his shoulders saying “Good grief”, while Emilia stuck her tongue out with a shy smile.

—This was the reality of the birthday parties currently happening behind the scenes at the Roswaal mansion.

Just like Ram had suggested at the beginning, people were talking about proceeding with the preparations for Rem’s birthday party. Ram should’ve been able to be an accomplice in this, being someone who became blind when it came to her younger sister.

On Rem’s end, she was under the illusion that it was related to a conspiracy that was reversing Ram’s proposal and planning a main celebration not for herself, but for Ram.

However, the ones making plans for the birthdays were actually the sisters Ram and Rem, and it was a birthday party for both of them. The sisters were both preparing for it without knowing about that.

Subaru: “Those two sure do have some bothersome personalities with this and that…”

Emilia: “Ram and Rem both have this reeeeaally stubborn side of them, after all.”

Subaru: “In the end, that’s what it means to be sisters. They’re both exactly alike with their weird traits.”

He sighed because not only were they two peas in a pod with their looks, but they were unnecessarily alike with their stubborn sides, too.

—Rem was not the only one who was refusing to celebrate the upcoming birthday. Rem’s birthday was a different case; the problem was that Ram also disapproved of celebrating herself.

Although, Ram’s excuse was that she even wanted to dedicate all of the effort she put in for herself towards blessing Rem.

Subaru: “And she thinks that Rem can be happy without any qualms. Surprisingly, she doesn’t get it, either.”

Emilia: “Ram thinks what Rem thinks. And Rem thinks what Ram thinks.”

Subaru: “That’s how the tactics came about, though. Honestly, not knowing where I might make a stupid mistake as a double spy makes me feel nervous…”

He wasn’t rubbing his stomach while speaking just because of his full stomach from sweets. He was doing it also because of the intense stomach pain that came from the psychological warfare that was the climax of these last few days.

Seeing Subaru’s state, Emilia also lowered her nicely shaped eyebrows worriedly, and she said

Emilia: “Subaru, are you okay? I would actually be fine with taking your place…”

Subaru: “Well, I’m even making Emilia-tan lie, as you know the circumstances, and that's something you're not used to. Having to do my best to hang in there is natural, since I'm someone that meets with them a lot."

Besides, Subaru was the one that first suggested this situation. He was suffering as a matter of course in two ways.

Subaru: "But, everything is for surprising the two of them on the day. When I think of that, trouble like this is nothing to me."

Emilia: "Mm, yeah. This might sound inconsiderate…but this is reeeaaally fun for me."

Subaru: "Is Emilia-tan's path towards becoming a little demon blooming…? This is not the time to give a metal rod to an Oni."

Emilia: "Sorry. I don't really understand what you're getting at."

He drops his shoulders in response to Emilia's indifferent reply. However, Emilia being there with him was more than enough to save him, since it meant that he was not alone in thinking about the two of them.

When he thought about how there was their blessing ahead of this stomach pain, he kind of felt, like, stomach heartburn.

Subaru: "And so, Emilia-tan will have to take the challenge in this pinch of time for a little longer. Don't push yourself too hard…is what I'd like to say, but if you're going to get exposed, then push yourself."

Emilia: "Of course, I know. Is there anything else I can do?"

Subaru: "Right. For now, how about you get pumped?"

Emilia: "Okay. Hold on a second. Mm! Okay, done."

Subaru: "Cute."

Subaru gets charmed by Emilia as she firmly clenched her fist, and he ended the progress report. When they were about to leave the room, they both swore to do their best in what would come up ahead, and they swung into action separately.

Emilia: “Subaru, let’s make this a success, no matter what.”

Subaru: “You got it.”

They bump each other’s firm fists, and Subaru watched Emilia run out of the corridor in a hurry. Emilia carefully peeks out the window, puts her ear to the floor to listen for footsteps, checks for signs of life in her surroundings as she sent lesser spirits flying, and she ran while having her whole body sparkle with light from mana.

Subaru keeps watching that appearance which was so pleasant that he couldn’t help but smile, and he let out a deep sigh.

—Thinking, “Just like I thought, I feel sorry, but my judgement was right.”

Subaru: “Alright then.”

Subaru turns around, and he started walking towards the opposite side of Emilia. At this time, nearly one hour had passed since his conversation with Ram, and his break became a little long. However, that wasn’t a problem he could blame. There was still another person he had to meet up with.

And if there were to be someone that would blame Subaru, that right would go to that exact person, anyways.

Subaru: “This should be it.”

He walked around the mansion unsteadily, and he felt slightly relieved from not encountering anyone while doing so. After that, Subaru touched the doorknob of a plain guest room, and he opened it. Inside there was—

Roswaal: “—Myyyyy, you sure took a long time, Subaru-kun.”

There was a bookshelf filled with countless rows of books, and a man that looked like a clown with his back leaning against it—

Roswaal L Mathers’ smile greeted Subaru.

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Roswaal: “So, how’d deceiving the three of them go?”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “—? What’s wrong?”

Subaru: “…No, it’s just that it feels like I’ve been repeating the same sort of interaction in this short time span. Once again, I’m truly understanding the feelings of guilt from being a triple spy.”

Roswaal: “Well well, I understand how you feel. Buuuut, thinking of valuable experiences, this would be one, too. Isn’t it important to have fun? In fact, Emilia-sama seems to be doing so.”

Roswaal closes one eye, and with a jestful gesture he made fun of the last interaction. When that made Subaru open his eyes wide, he pointed at his own ear and said

Roswaal: “These ears are custom-made…that was a joke, but if it’s in the mansion, it’s possible to hear the voices you’re trying to hear. Emilia-sama’s is one that stands out in particulaaaaar.”

Subaru: “I agree with that, too. Although, there’s no doubt that she really is taking this seriously.”

Subaru remembered her standing out even though she was being careful to not stand out when she parted with him.

Emilia’s characteristic of always being serious was a virtue, but on the other hand, she was not fit at all for things like attempting to deceive people.

And so, since she was unfit for hiding things, in replacement of Emilia—

Subaru: “—We have us, the “Beginning Four People” that will carry out the true evil scheme.”

Beatrice: “Don’t just mix me into that disgraceful meeting, I suppose!”

A screechy, angry voice went over Subaru, his arms folded while making a declaration in a dignified manner. Once he took a look, the one who had a red face and shouted was a girl sitting on a stepladder in the middle of the room—it was Beatrice.

She was the caretaker of this secret talk’s place, the forbidden archives, and she was one of the “Beginning Four People”.

Beatrice: “Now, what the hell is that “Beginning Four People” thing about?!”

Subaru: “The ‘Beginning’ part was added on solely because it just felt right with the situation, but it means that we are the real accomplices. We are the people needed to make this plan a success…that’s what it means.”

Beatrice: “Grrr…”

Beatrice had a frown that showed because of her frustration, but that didn’t lead to her bringing out forceful measures to kick out Subaru and the others. That showed her dishonest personality.

Subaru: “Anyhow, thanks for coming. I’m in your debt.”

Subaru sets aside Beatrice, grinding her teeth angrily, and he turned his attention to the library. There was Beatrice sitting on a stepladder, and Roswaal leaning his back onto a bookshelf. And so now, including Subaru, there were three people that came to this room in the end. The last person was—

Puck: “—I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make fun of Lia too much. Her honest side is the cutest side of them all.”

While saying that, a grey kitten—Puck made his appearance to get under Beatrice’s drills. He left Emilia, and he was the last person, someone who was used to Beatrice.

Subaru, Roswaal, Beatrice, and Puck—these were the “Beginning People”.

Subaru: “Well, the one who started it was actually Ram, so we aren’t the “beginning” ones all.”

Roswaal: “I don’t dislike iiiiit. It’s way more exciting than an uncolorful title like mere accompliceeees. Don’t you think so, Mr. Great Spirit?”

Puck: “I feel the same way. So Betty, cheer up. Your cute face will go to waste if you keep looking angry, you know?”

Beatrice: “Hmph…I guess I have to if Nii-chan says so, I suppose.”

Beatrice holds onto Puck gently, who was rubbing his cheek against hers, and she reluctantly accepted the situation. Once Subaru made sure of that, he clapped his hands as he said “All right!”.

Subaru: “Okay, time to sort out the current situation again. About Ram and Rem’s birthday that got a few days closer, the preparations for the party are proceeding steadily. They shouldn’t know about the plan, either. Right, Ros-chi?”

Roswaal: “You’re asking me about Ram, right? We do talk to each other every night alone. At the very least, it appears no suspicion has surfaced yet.”

Subaru: “Alright, please keep it that way, since Ram is probably the biggest obstacle to this plan…”

There was also the barrier of Rem’s habit of being modest, but she followed the “Ram Surprise Plan”, which was a cover story, and the suspicion in her eyes was pretty much out of sight.

Simply put, the thing he had to be careful of the most was Ram’s sight. However, things were still proceeding pretty carefully thanks to Roswaal’s cooperation, who knew the sisters the best.

Subaru: “Surprisingly, thanks to Ros-chi’s cooperation, this will save some time.”

Roswaal: “I am relatively open to your ideas, you knooow. Although, it is true that I’d usually have to monitor the circumstances a lot…and this time it’s about Ram and Rem.”

The tone with very rare deep affection makes Subaru smile slightly as he saw Roswaal in a new light.

Subaru was not the only one who treasured Ram and Rem, although that was a given.

Thinking back, he did remember Roswaal grieving over Rem's death in the loop where she died during the witchbeast turmoil. He probably had so many memories from being with them for 10 years.

Subaru: "Now you just need to…"

Roswaal: "There's no way I wouldn't be on board with an exciting proposal of a plan to hide something from Ram and Rem."

Subaru: "As expected, that's the Ros-chi I know! So filthy!"

Roswaal: "You'll make me blush if you praise me that muuuuuch."

Subaru plays along with Roswaal, him returning to his usual manner, and he also smiled brightly, giving a thumbs up. After that, he turned towards Beatrice, who had a sulky expression, and said

Subaru: "Goddamn. People are being smoothly united, and yet you keep acting like this…you're gonna completely lose it when I tell you to read the atmosphere."

Beatrice: "So it finally came out of your mouth!"

Beatrice stares at Subaru, him being unabashed, and she let out an extremely deep sigh.

Beatrice: "I'm not really accepting you saying this and that about the plan now. But, once we finish this, those three that we fooled will be angry, no doubt about it."

Subaru: "Yeah, well, I guess. But, this is the one thing we just have to think of as necessary cost."

Nevermind Rem, this would even make Emilia have a bad mood. And above all, Ram's anger would be as clear as day.

However, Roswaal smiled at Beatrice's and Subaru's fear and said

Roswaal: "Coooome on. Don't you know that I'll be there to apologize with you guys as well when the time comes? Besides, we are acooomplices."

Puck: "Lia's involved too, so I'll also be there."

Even Puck went along with Roswaal's approval; the unity was quite unexpected. Perhaps inside this evil scheme the bonds of the "Beginning Four People" deepened, and a strong sense of trust connected them together.

Subaru: "My god. It's my first time feeling like this with an evil scheme…I'm not afraid of anything anymore."

Beatrice: "Even if Nii-chan and Roswaal are there, the one who will be in the most trouble is you."

Subaru: "Hehe, when that happens, you'll be there with me too, Beako."

Beatrice: "According to your dictionary, it seems accomplice means someone you bring into your own mess, I suppose!"

Beatrice had enough of Subaru, and she shrugged her shoulders, unable to play along with his nonsense. However, if Subaru had to describe that reaction, it would not be farsightedness, but practice.

Beatrice finally adapted to the days of getting teased repeatedly—!

Roswaal: "Maybe an angry expression fits her the beeeest?"

Subaru: "Agreed."

Beatrice: "It got done without anyone getting mad, and yet my consideration didn't even matter with you guys!"

Cheers for Beatrice, who confessed to have being cautious of getting mad.

Subaru: "Anyways, in preparation for the big day of the birthday party, from here on out I expect each of you to work your butts off! Ros-chi you have continuing to watch out for Ram. And Puck, you'll take care of Emilia,, the decoy…or for short, you'll take care of the Decolia-tan followup. Beatrice you'll be standing by at the headquarters just like you are now."

Beatrice: "God, go ahead and do what you want I supp… headquarters?!"

Beatrice's surprise from having the forbidden archives being turned into the "Beginning Four People Headquarters" gets put aside, and the three men of the Roswaal residence bump their clenched fists(Just Puck used his whole body).

—Thus, the intensity of the furious mutual celebration that circled the birthday party began to increase.

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Ram knitted her brows and pondered about how people were scheming something.

The possible "people" were mainly Rem, Emilia, and incidentally, Subaru. If she were to restrict them to people that had secrets, Master Roswaal was the first one that bothered her, but him scheming something without telling anyone was just the usual. She wasn't worried about him at this point.

And so, if there was something people besides Roswaal, AKA her younger sister and others, were hiding from her it would be—

Ram: "—It's a birthday party, isn't it."

She didn't need to think deeply on it to understand it, but even if she didn't, there was no other answer, anyways.

Besides, Rem's birthday party that Ram proposed herself—putting it correctly, the intention of it was to celebrate Rem by holding a birthday party for Ram and Rem.

Everybody knew Rem was nervous of that getting carried out, but it seemed like Subaru was trying to outwit Ram, though he should've had the role of persuading Rem. God knows how that happened.

Whether he really was outwitting her or not was questionable, but—

Rem: “Ah, Nee-sama!”

Suddenly, Rem’s expression becomes bright in a flash, having met her at the corridor, and she ran up to her. She looked truly lovely with her sparkling eyes. Ram’s wrinkles between her eyebrows disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Ram: “Oh, what’s wrong, Rem? Running in the corridor is shameful.”

Rem: “S-Sorry. I couldn’t help myself since I was so happy from seeing Nee-sama…well, there isn’t really any special reason why I got happy. There isn’t, but oopsie.”

Ram: “…No special reason, huh.”

Rem: “Nope, none at all! But, I don’t think there needs to be any reason for me to run up to Nee-sama…I’m not sure what I’m saying.”

Rem’s energy that she had disappeared like mist, and she looked down, dispirited. While tilting her head at that situation, Ram caressed her cute sister’s cheeks to comfort her.

Ram: “It’s not really weird. I’m an older sister that you just want to run up to automatically, after all. I don’t blame you for how you feel, Rem.”

Rem: “You’re so right! Ah, Nee-sama, well then I’ll see you later… I’m looking forward to something coming up in a few days. Or well, not that I know anything about it, though.”

Ram: “…I see.”

Rem waves her small hand, and she hurried herself out of there. Ram waved her goodbye just like she did, and when she was no longer able to see her, wrinkles appeared between her eyebrows

again.

What was Rem trying to tell her with that interaction? Or maybe she should investigate what she didn't want to tell her. Ram's sisterly heart had to make a choice.

Emilia: "Ah, Ram…"

Ram heard her name being called once again as she was getting lost in her thoughts. When Ram lifted her face, she saw Emilia walking quickly towards her. She looked around at her surroundings restlessly, and while silencing her footsteps as she carefully stepped on the floor she said

Emilia: "Can I borrow you for a second…?"

Ram: "I don't mind, but why are you talking so quietly, Emilia-sama?"

Emilia: "You see, there's a reeeeaally important reason for that… But, I can't talk to you about that, Ram…ah, it wasn't just you. I can't tell Rem either…"

Ram: "…Oh."

Being close enough to breath on her, Emilia spoke quietly while putting her hand on her mouth. She was certainly being careful with how loud she spoke, but Ram felt like she wasn't being careful at all with essential words and actions.

However, Emilia put Ram's thoughts aside, and as she made her bluish purple eyes sparkle she said

Emilia: "Say, Ram…just out of curiosity…it really is just out of curiosity, but can I ask you something?"

Ram: "Depends on the question."

Emilia: "Um, so, if…and I mean only if, okay? If I listened to one request from you, and you could get something you wanted, what would you ask for, Ram?"

Ram: "…"

Emilia's fastball that pretended to be a straight ball made Ram blank out for a moment.

Ram was certainly squinting because of the suspicion that this was some sort of instruction. However, she saw Emilia peeking at her repeatedly, and she was smiling due to her unconcealable anticipation.

Ram knew that Emilia wasn't acting because of the life she had with Emilia for half a year. In other words, Emilia wasn't scheming anything; she was just not hiding the fact that something was being schemed.

Ram: "…Maybe acting ability."

Emilia: "Acting ability…like for a play? Ram, you want to have a play?"

Ram: "No, acting ability for Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "My acting…gosh, stop joking around with me. I am being reeeeaally serious with this question."

Ram: "What about it being just out of curiosity?"

Emilia: "Oh! Right, it's a talk. It's a talk, but a serious talk. Nope, not sloppy at all."

The way she went about deception was reeeeaally sloppy.

Ram was surprisingly at a loss for a reply to Emilia's serious but sloppy behavior. Irresponsibly dodging the issue here was a possibility, but wouldn't be a basic solution.

Having said that—

Emilia: "—? What's wrong?"

Innocently tilting her head, Emilia wasn't nervous at all from Ram's light pink suspicions. This was most likely the aura of not being told anything important. Emilia was delivered as a blatant decoy, and she was given practically no information—she was impressed by the good move.

Emilia: “So so? Ram, have you decided what you want?”

Ram: “I would like Emilia-sama to be a little more suspicious of the people around her.”

Emilia: “Hehe, I didn’t even want you to tell jokes right now. Oh Ram, you are funny.”

Ram: “Please give me the ability to persuade.”

Emilia: “Ram, why have you only asked for abilities…are you worried about something?”

Ram made a seriously worried look, and she wanted to let out a deep sigh. But, she was certain that sighing would cause her to worry, so she dealt with it.

Ram: “Let’s see…I’ll think about it until dinner.”

Emilia: “Okay. It’s reeeeaally important. So answer it seriously.”

With a look that indicated she had forgotten about the interaction from just before, Emilia seriously left her that message.

Emilia: “Ah!”

And then while she was leaving, she raised her voice as if she remembered the fact that she had to hide from people, and midway she started to walk again with soft footsteps.

Puck: “Oops.”

Just when Emilia was about to go out of her sight, she saw a kitten from a gap in her silver hair. He put his paw on his head, and he stuck his tongue out mischievously.

Subaru: “Sup, Ram. What you doing standing at a place like this…your face, oh God!”

Ram: “Huh…”

Ram pompously lets out the sigh she had held in, and she glared up at Subaru, who was standing next to her. When Subaru stiffened his cheeks in response to the sharpness of that look, he said

Subaru: “Wh-What happened to you? You seem so tired, and that’s not like Nee-sama.”

Ram: “If this is is Barusu’s scheme, I’ve now fallen right into your hands. Are you satisfied, Barusu?”

Subaru: “That makes me look bad, and what’s up with you?!”

Ram: “Huh?! Go ahead, push your luck all you want. I’ll be the one laughing in the end.”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait wait, I don’t understand. Let’s calm down and talk this out, Ram.”

Once Ram smacked her lips, clearly seeing through him, and Subaru panicked as if he encountered a wounded beast. Ram felt a little better while looking at that, and when she folded her arms to hold onto her elbows she said

Ram: “Fine, I’ll talk with you. —So, how’s it going with Rem?”

Subaru: “Oh…oh, that’s better. It’s, like, progressing, but slowly. Rem is easing up little by little. It’s a forceful approach, but it feels like it’s just a matter of time until she breaks.”

Ram: “Yeah.”

Subaru: “Why hasn’t there been any sharpness?! Is there something you’re displeased with or something?!”

Ram: “If I had to say something, it would be…”

Subaru: “Yes?”

Ram: “Barusu’s face?”

Subaru: “Mmmm! I wish you’d get used to it already and love it…!”

Ram snorted at Subaru as he put his hands on his cheeks, his voice shaking with a horrible smile on his face.

She could’ve just asked Subaru directly about what he was planning here, but he probably would never confess. That showed the difference in difficulty in comparison to how it was with Emilia. Even if the situation got bad, he would just play it off with jokes, which meant that questioning him wouldn’t be effective.

Ram: “By the way, Emilia-sama seemed kinda weird. Barusu, do you know why?”

Subaru: “She seemed weird? Like how?”

Ram: “Right. She was trying to hide her fidgeting, but it wasn’t hidden at all.”

Subaru: “Sounds cute just hearing it. But, I see…not hidden at all, eh.”

In response to Ram’s words, Subaru looked down listlessly. But, there was no sign of that being a heavy blow in the slight change of his expression. In other words, Emilia’s behavior was taken into account now.

Nothing came out of Emilia. Most likely, nothing from Rem, either.

And so—

Subaru: “—Wh-What? Something wrong?”

Ram: “…No.”

When she gave him a sidelong glance, Subaru made an openly panicked expression. Having seen that reaction right before her eyes, Ram let out a slight, fleeting sigh.

—As she thought, Subaru was most likely hiding the full story, too.

The days passed by wrapped in doubt and suspicion, and finally that day arrived.

Rem: “—Nee-sama, good morning. It’s a very important morning.”

Then, there was a lovely voice that first shook Ram’s eardrums, her lying down on a bed.

When she slowly opened her eyes, she noticed the bright morning sun shining in from the other side of the open curtains. And then, the appearance of Rem smiling with her head tilted came at her inside of the illuminated room.

Ram: “…5 more minutes.”

Rem: “You can’t Nee-sama. I’d like to grant Nee-sama’s wish too if I could, but I can’t today. Now, please wake up.”

Ram: “My goodness. I can’t believe Rem is being strict with me. I’m not getting up today.”

Rem: “Ne-Nee-sama…”

Ram: “Just kidding. Come on, Rem, help me change.”

Ram resisted being pulled forcefully by the arms. However, the moment Rem let out a slightly sad voice in response to that resistance, she woke up as if a switch was flipped.

After that, with the usual routine, she got her face wiped with a steamy towel, and she took off her nightgown as she changed into her uniform. Then she fixed her hair, and once she saw herself reflected on the full-length mirror, she was done.

Ram: “Perfect, right?”

Rem: “Yes, as expected of Nee-sama. I’m proud of you.”

In response to Rem’s reply, her being in a very good mood, Ram took a look at her sister’s profile. Once Ram saw her being in a good mood, looking as if she was about to even start humming, she forced herself to hold back on saying the feelings she was about to put into words.

Once she left the room with Rem, the sisters headed towards the mansion's entrance. That was where they'd meet with Subaru, and they'd confirm each other's plans for the day. It was the usual way they went about it.

However, today didn't go like that—

Ram: "…Barusu isn't here. I suppose he's sleeping in."

Rem: "What, no way. Subaru-kun would never sleep in."

Rem's footsteps resound throughout the empty entrance, and she immediately objected what Ram said in a low tone. However, for some reason that objection sounded really monotone to Ram.

Ram: "—Rem?"

Rem: "*Sniff*, *sniff* …no, Nee-sama, leave it up to me. Subaru-kun is definitely…somewhere around here. *Sniff*…"

Rem stops Ram with her hand, as she squinted with her eyes, and she started to walk while cutely sniffing with her nose.

The oni clan did develop an above average sense of smell, but at the very least, Ram's sense of smell wasn't good enough to recognize a specific scent from someone. She was seriously hoping that Rem was pretending.

Putting Ram's hopes aside, the place Rem arrived at, as she walked ahead, was the dining hall.

Rem: "Nee-sama, it seems like Subaru-kun is in here. What should we do?"

Ram: "We can just call him from out here."

Rem: "No! We can't! Subaru-kun has really bad hearing, so he might not even notice if Nee-sama calls out to him. This is where

Nee-sama should go directly inside.”

Rem gave up the place to Ram as she went “Come”, and she guided her towards the door of the dining hall. Ram unconsciously got overpowered by her sister’s threatening attitude, but she snorted her nose slightly before she reached for the door.

As stated before, the oni clan developed a sense of smell that was above-average. It certainly wasn’t as precise as an animal’s, but it was still better than humans’ sense of smell.

And so, Ram’s sense of smell that was better than humans’ sensed a slightly sweet and warm smell coming from the gap of the dining hall’s door.

Rem: “Nee-sama.”

When she looked back with her eyes, she saw Rem clenching her fist with an expression of unconcealable expectation. If she had, say, something like a dog’s tail, she would’ve been intensely shaking it back and forth.

She couldn’t betray her expectations. Ram showed a rare sight of her praying towards the heavens for that truth and her sense of duty as an older sister.

—She prayed, as she had earnestly wished for Emilia, to have that acting skill herself.

Ram: “—Barusu, are you there?”

Ram continues to speak in a natural manner, and she opened the door as she twisted the doorknob. At the other side of the door that opened slowly, she vaguely saw who was standing there—and it happened the next moment.

Subaru: “Happy birthday!”

Someone shouts in a loud voice, and confetti exploded at the same time she heard something that sounded like air bursting. That scene was familiar to her. Ram squinted her eyes. And then—

Subaru: “Hahaha, how do you like them apples? This surely supris—”

Right beside Subaru, who acted triumphant while laughing, an iron sphere came piercing through with tremendous force. The rotating dangerous weapon that had thorns on it just barely missed Subaru, and only the sound of the twisting chains could be heard loudly throughout the mansion in the morning.

Rem: “S-Sorry, Subaru-kun! There was a sudden loud sound, and I just…!”

Subaru: “…”

Rem brings the iron sphere back to her, as she reflexively tried to counterattack, and she ran up to Subaru, who stiffened up. Subaru feels his body, and after making sure that he was safe, he said

Subaru: “I-I almost…died…there…right…?”

Ram: “I forgot to tell you, but if you try out the crackers on Rem, you might even get smashed into pieces by this girl who thought it was a surprise attack.”

Subaru: “Can you please deal with those sort of time bombs earlier?!”

In reaction to Ram’s unconcerned speaking, Subaru’s voice squeaks, as he trembled from the fear of nearly dying. Ram was earnestly apologizing to the side, but Subaru felt like it was a good lesson, having gotten carried away with himself.

He kinda wanted Ram to put herself in his shoes, who kept making his worry worse up to this point.

Ram: “So, was this some kind of side show?”

Subaru: “It’s not a side show. You get the gist of it, don’t you? If not, then here’s the trump card! Emilia-tan, do it!”

Emilia: “Leave it up to me!”

Subaru snapped his fingers to answer Ram. When he did, Emilia puffed up with pride, who was in the dining room as she responded to that sound. When she held out her graceful fingers towards the ceiling, she said

Emilia: “Puck!”

Puck: “OK, Lia. It’s still morning, so I’m kinda sleepy, but let’s do this with gusto!”

The gathering light takes form, and a kitten spirit appeared at Emilia’s fingertips. And then, the person and the animal nod at each other, and the transmitting light completely covered the dining hall’s ceiling. That light clears up. Then there was—

Emilia: “—It’s an ice decoration.”

Subaru: “I designed it. The ice interior was well done too, but how about you take a look at it?”

Rem: “—! Nee-sama, could that be a picture of you and me?”

Inside of the dining hall that was engulfed in light, there were various creations of decorations formed with ice, but the one that stood out remarkably was a drawn ice painting that used the whole ceiling.

The shading was done with the use of the ice’s unevenness, and the picture replicated was a portrait of the sisters.

—At a glance, you could understand that it was Ram and Rem snuggling.

Subaru: “This is a birthday party for Ram and Rem, from me, Emilia-tan, and everyone in the mansion.”

Emilia: “That’s right. We worked reeeeaally hard for this day.”

Rem: “Yes! This is Nee-sama and my birthday party…what?! I-t’s mine too?”

Subaru and Emilia puff up with pride, and Rem was amazed as she almost agreed with that. It seemed like she didn't have the right idea of the situation. Rem was probably told that the birthday party was only Ram's to mislead Rem's tendency to be modest.

She had thoughts on Rem's honesty of having not noticed that and on Subaru's heinous behavior.

She had thoughts, and yet—

Ram: "—Ah"

Even if she had thoughts, the words wouldn't come out.

Roswaal: "—My oh myyyyyy, this went better than I expeeeected."

From behind, a big palm gently held onto Ram's shoulder as she was at a loss for words. Once she turned around because of that feeling and warmth, she saw the face of a man that made her heart throb no matter how many times she saw it.

He smiles as if he saw through all of the feelings that filled Ram's heart, and he said

Roswaal: "It was difficult keeping this a secret until today. Buuuuuut, it was all worth it after I look at the face she had right now. Don't you think?"

Subaru: "Yeah, it was. You don't get to see Ram dumbfounded all that often. It was difficult, but looking back on the parts that were difficult…"

Ram aims at Subaru's triumphant face, and she made her own crackers explode. Subaru reflexively fell over in response to the sound of air bursting and the confetti.

Subaru: "N-No way…! When in the world did you make a cracker…"

Ram: "It has a simple makeup, so I made it immediately. Incidentally, I also made it so that the scraps of paper inside would cling onto the person they got onto."

Subaru: “So that’s why it won’t come off my face! Aah! I can’t…I can’t see!”

Rem: “Subaru-kun! Don’t scratch your face so much! Let’s go wash your face before it gets damaged. This way.”

Rem pulls onto Subaru’s hand, him being in agony, and she started to head towards the bathroom with him. Emilia followed them from behind worriedly, but before she left the room, she turned towards Ram and said

Emilia: “Oh right, Ram. I prepared what you wanted. Haha, are you surprised?”

Ram: “What I wanted…”

After Emilia’s words, her appearing to be happy, Ram turned her attention to the dining hall table. There were probably kinds of Rem’s homemade pastries lined up, and she was going to take a look regardless of her sister’s enthusiasm—but deep inside the table, there was something that strangely had a strong presence.

Ram: “It’s a whole roasted farty pig…”

Emilia: “Ram said she wanted to eat it, so I did my best to hunt it down. Like it?”

Although it had a pitiful appearance, Ram nodded at Emilia with her pretty pro way of hunting. If she didn’t, she would’ve felt really bad for the farty pig she chose as the random thing she wanted.

When Emilia smiled at that affirmation in satisfaction, she also chased after Subaru with lively footsteps. And then she heard screams of “Ouch ouch ouch, my face is peeling off!” coming from the bathroom.

Beatrice: “Good grief, people are being noisy early in the morning.”

Ram: “Even Beatrice-sama came.”

The one who used that moment of screaming to show up at the dining hall with an annoyed expression was Beatrice. When she looked up at Ram, who opened her eyes wide, she pouted irritably.

Beatrice: “It’s not like I came here to celebrate. Besides, it has nothing to do with the party for your guys’ birthday. But since it was something that was talked about so much, today’s meals had to be splendid, I suppose. I just came to taste them.”

Ram: “It’s not like anyone told me anything about it.”

Beatrice: “Shut up, I suppose! Just be convinced with that! Hmph!”

Beatrice stamped her feet as her straight face turned red, and she passed by Ram’s side to head towards the dining table. While watching that small back, Roswaal let out a slight smile with a slip of laughter.

He was completely amused, and while being at his limit, his shoulders trembled, and he said

Roswaal: “How should I put it…you guys are lovely.”

Ram: “…You’re evil. Roswaal-sama, you knew about most of this, didn’t you?”

Roswaal: “Well, I understood that Subaru-kun’s, Emilia-sama’s and Rem’s secrets made no sense at all. I knew it was impossible to fool your eyes…and besides, doing such a thing was pointless.”

Roswaal shrugs his shoulders, and he said that indifferently without shame. When Ram squinted in response to those words, Roswaal went “I mean” as he left just his blue eye open of his heterochromatic eyes, and he said

Roswaal: “It’s about Ram. You can never underestimate Rem and the others who worked hard to do something for you. The worried profile you had these past few days was charming.”

Ram: “—Roswaal-sama said he agreed to do my idea.”

Roswaal: “I told you, didn’t I? I told you that I have my own way of blessing. I’ll respect your wishes. In addition, I’ll have you respect mine as well. And if the wishes ever conflict with each other, it will be a competition…in this case, it was called a mutual celebraaation.”

She suffered utter defeat. That sense of defeat makes Ram drop her shoulders. In reality, she acted just like they expected her to; there was no room to excuse her defeat.

Ram didn’t reject Rem, Emilia, and incidentally Subaru’s kindness.

That’s why she felt there was surely no choice but to celebrate.

Roswaal: “You’re thinking too hard on it. It might be hard for you as someone who sees anything and everything too clearly, but you should be kinder to yourself.”

Ram: “If so, then it would be best for Roswaal-sama to do that.”

Roswaal: “Oh, that hit me where it huuuuurts.”

Roswaal gives a wry smile. Ram felt warmth in that wry smile, and she treated it as the bargain for her sense of defeat.

Beatrice: “Hmph, if this is the younger sister’s cooking…this looks very weird, I suppose.”

When she looked, she saw Beatrice complaining about something with a plate in her hand while she was searching the dining hall. She had stuff like Rem’s homemade baked sweets on the plate she held, but she was looking at a different corner of the table.

Beatrice saw ugly cooking and sweets lined that didn’t appear to be Rem’s, just like she said, and

Ram: “—It would be weird to make Rem do all the cooking for her own birthday celebration, after all.”

Ram mutters that, and she brought that ugly dish, the cooking that appeared to have used steamed potatoes, to her mouth.

Ram: “Yuck.”

Ram licks her lips with her pink tongue, and she let out those thoughts.

And then the only ones who saw Ram's face while making kind smiles were Roswaal and Beatrice.

Subaru: "Oi, Ram! That was a close one! I almost lost my face!"

Ram: "I might've been able to stand looking at you if you had. That's a pity."

Subaru: "You'd be able to look at me if I had no face, you say, do you really hate my face that much?! Love it!"

Ram snorted her nose as she went "Huh" in response to Subaru's complaint, who came back from the bathroom. There was no sign of the gentle behavior she had from earlier as she acted like she usually would.

Roswaal takes notice of that, and he was the only one who shrugged his shoulders as if saying it couldn't be helped.

Emilia: "So, Ram, how's the roasted farty pig? Is it good enough?"

Ram: "Sorry, Emilia-sama. Meat dishes aren't really my forte…"

Subaru: "Then why did you say that you wanted this?!"

She frankly confessed that she wasn't good with pitiful farty pigs. Ram left dealing with the pig up to Subaru and Emilia, and she decided to fully enjoy the potato dish.

That's how the buffet party, and gradually, the birthday party, began—

Rem: "—Nee-sama"

Standing next to her, Rem quietly took a look at her expression. She took a look while having the guilt from having hid something from her, and the expectations of what Ram thought about this birthday party.

Rem: "Nee-sama, happy birthday."

Like that, Rem smiled. Ram smiled back at Rem as well as she smiled.

Ram: “Yes, happy birthday to you too, Rem. —I’m really, just so happy that Rem is my sister.”

Ram gave the blessing words to Rem with the endless love that came from her heart.

Everyone: “—Happy birthday!!”

And then right after that, the blessing words flew about in the Roswaal residence.

—Because this day was a birthday. It’s the one day in the year when anyone can become the protagonist.

END

The Three Idiots Set Out!
Cursed Goddess Statue Episode
(CA)
(Translation Pending)

The Witch's After Tea Party: Requirements to Be a Witch (CA)

1

Colette dipped her hands into the freezing-cold water, her narrow shoulders shuddering.

Colette: "Gha, it's cold. So cold…"

She rubbed her numbing fingers together in the water while letting out frosted breaths. The dirt clinging to her fingers slowly washed away into the river and she began to feel them again.

It was that time of the year where it was getting much colder. Colette's hometown didn't really get that warm to begin with; however, even if she was used to that, it didn't mean that she was immune to the chill of the Ice Season. To make matters worse, the air was far, far colder this year compared to the typical year.

Though adults would probably laugh it off as her being "cheeky" if she used a phrase like "compared to the typical year" considering she was still 12 years old.

Colette: "There, all cleaned up now. Still, it's so cold… I'm gonna have to hurry and warm myself up by the fire."

Colette drew her washed hands out from the water, then picked up her bracelet, which she'd left on a nearby tree stump, and slipped it back onto her wrist. With a shudder of her narrow shoulders, she turned back towards her small cabin.

She'd already gone ahead and kindled a fire in front of her cabin, having imagined something like this would have happened. Back when she'd still not been used to these kinds of chores, she'd ended up putting off lighting the fire until later. But because of that, she'd kept failing to light it due to her frozen numb fingers, and had been left unable to even get warm.

Nevertheless, Colette took those failures as a learning experience; one that would help her to spread her wings out and grow. She would probably fail again when she next unfurled them, but she'd use those failures as a learning experience as well.

Slowly but steadily, one step at a time. That was Colette's mantra.

Colette: "I don't need to rush since it's the Ice Season, though it'll be much tougher on me if I don't. So I'll…"

Colette began to walk over to her cabin so she could warm herself by her fire, all the while checking off the steps she'd done from her fingers. Then…

???: "…You there, do you perhaps have a moment?"

Suddenly, Colette heard a voice echoing. She stopped in her tracks, having been in the motion of heading back.

She'd heard a girl's voice, one which she wasn't familiar with. The village she'd been raised in wasn't that big, so all its inhabitants knew each other. She could immediately tell who it was when anyone spoke.

Since her voice hadn't matched any of them, Colette felt a little, or rather, fairly surprised. She nervously turned around to look at the river where she'd just washed her hands in.

However, surprise came to her in that moment in a manner that was far greater than her surprise at the unfamiliar voice.

Colette: "…Wha"

???: "My apologies, but it looks like I could use some help… The cold water's dropped my body temperature right down, and I feel like I'm about to lose consciousness. I may die, you see."

The individual was being swept away by the freezing-cold river as she said that to Colette.

Colette barely managed to stop herself from letting out a scream, before hurriedly reaching her hand out to the girl in the river.

???: “You have my thanks. I would have ended up drowning if you’d left me there. Or perhaps I would have freezed to death first? Either way, I would have died. Some people believe that freezing to death is an easy way to die, like falling asleep… But having actually felt what hypothermia is like when I was soaked in the river, I would say that it doesn’t seem one bit easy, wouldn’t you agree?”

Colette: “U-Uh…”

Colette felt overwhelmed by her companion, who was rattling on, showing no signs of stopping as they warmed themselves by the fire. But it wasn’t like she wasn’t showing a response to what had just occurred; her companion’s face was awfully pale, and her fingers were trembling with cold.

Perhaps she was delirious, cornered down in both mind and body, Colette thought.

She felt sorry for the shivering girl, who was still showing a smile. She gently offered her some freshly boiled water, in an attempt to ease her suffering.

???: “Something hot to drink? Truly, you have my thanks. Restoring one’s body temperature back to normal is the most important thing to do when dealing with hypothermia. It makes sense in that respect to warm one’s body up from the inside. So, you had that kind of knowledge inside you all along, even though you look like you come from an environment with lackluster education.”

Colette: “I’m not really sure about education. But like, even children, nevermind adults, know to give someone who’s cold a hot drink, no?”

???: “…Right. I was the one being big-headed here. Then I shall gratefully accept your drink.”

The girl brought her parted lips to her cup of hot water, then almost dropped it, likely because it was so hot to the touch. She breathed on it, and somehow started to drink from it.

Colette: “…What a strange girl.”

Colette muttered that to herself, without even meaning to.

The girl had been carried in by the cold river. —That expression alone carried a strange vibe to it, however the girl gave off an odd impression in many other respects.

She had long pink hair, and was wearing a cloak made for men, as well as shoes that didn’t at all seem suitable for a girl as slender and petite as her. She looked to be close to Colette in age, and was probably a tad shorter than her. However, her facial features were quite attractive, so much so that Colette couldn’t take her eyes off them. She possessed a beauty that was unsuiting to her age.

And, the most eye-catching feature about this girl’s appearance was…

???: “Have my ears perhaps caught your attention?”

Colette realized for the first time that she’d been staring at the girl’s ears—At her distinctive, long ears.

Many different kinds of Demi-Human lived in this world, but amongst them, there was only one species that was renown for and wide for their long, beautiful ears.

Colette: “Are you an elf?”

???: “The answer to that question is a difficult one. Certainly, the girl who I got this body from had elvish blood flowing through her; but, it’s hard to say whether the same blood is flowing through her body when it was reproduced like this. If we were to dig more into it, then it’s also a matter of which out of one’s body or soul revolves as its main driving force. This body is elf, but my soul clearly isn’t…”

Colette: “Erm, umm…?”

???: “…I’m dipping into my bad habits again, aren’t I.”

The girl finally answered her question, though Colette hardly understood what she'd said. Still looking around, the girl brushed her chest with her finger and then drew a breath.

Some kind of blue, glittering stone, which looked rather beautiful, was hanging there over the girl's chest. She held it pinched between her fingers as she mumbled "I get it, I get it" to herself.

???: "There's some really noisy girls around, you see. I'll go ahead and recognize myself as an elf here, so as to keep things going smoothly."

Colette: "…! Th-Then, could it be that you're much older than me?"

???: "How old am I? If you mean this body, then I suppose I could say that I'm roughly 400 years old."

Colette: "400 years old…!"

Colette had heard that elves were a species which lived for far longer in contrast to their looks. But even so, 400 years was quite a surprise; far beyond what she could fathom. Because, when it came to the topic of 400 years.

Colette: "Back then, was when the "Witch of Envy" was carrying out her evil…"

???: "…"

The girl's expression clouded over immediately after she'd let the name of that abominable "Witch" slip through her mouth.

Her expression could only literally be described as having clouded over. Colette felt deeply regretful, wondering if her careless remark had hurt her.

???: "Oh, you didn't do anything wrong. It's just that I had a few things on my mind. Which reminds me, I still haven't heard the name of my benefactor yet."

Colette: "…Huh, me? I'm Colette, and I live in this cabin."

???: "I see, I shall remember it, Colette. My name is… Omega. For now that'll do."

Colette: "Omega…chan?"

Omega: "I'm really not too used to people calling me by "chan". It sounds rather sweet, wouldn't you say?"

Not blaming Colette for her blunder, the girl—Omega gave her an adorable, yet relatively intelligent smile. And while keeping that smile on her face, she spoke,

Omega: "While we're on the topic of "sweet", do you have anything to eat? It seems like my once slumbering stomach has kicked back into life after drinking your hot water… I'm famished."

Though feeling unsure as to whether she was good or bad at relying on the kindness of others, Colette willingly complied with Omega's request.

Luckily Colette had a rabbit in her cabin that she'd caught just before she'd found Omega, so she began to quickly prepare it and cook it for the starving girl.

Omega: "Hm, Colette, for such a young girl, you sure know your way around knives, don't you? There's no hesitation in your hands as you handle the rabbit."

Colette: "My parents passed away, so I had to help out with adult work since I was small. That's why I'm pretty good at catching wild rabbits like this one. Oh, Omega-chan, are you okay with eating meat?"

Omega: "Yeah, I have no problem with it. Even so, rabbits, rabbits, huh…"

Colette: "…? What about them?"

Omega: "Nothing, it's just that I've had a recent run of fate with them, so they're like bad luck to me. Naturally, I have no problem with eating them, so I'm looking forward to it."

Since she was expecting from her, Colette determined herself to cook it properly for her rare, yet welcome visitor.

She really wanted to take the time to roast it with some herbs, but from the way Omega was lying on the floor, bursting with hunger, it didn't seem like she could afford to wait any longer.

All she could do was sprinkle some solte and peppa on it as she hurriedly roasted it on the fire, preparing it with speed in mind. The fragrance lured Omega back to her feet, which she did so unsteadily.

Colette: "Here you go! It's hot, so be careful when you eat it."

Omega: "Oh dear, you mean that because you saw me mess up with the hot water earlier, right? Sure, I've been showing you a bunch of clumsiness for a while now, but that's because this body appears to be more sensitive to hot stuff than my original one."

In all honesty, Colette had no clue what she was talking about anymore. Nevertheless, Omega accepted the rabbit meat she'd offered, served on the bone. She breathed hard on it, before then daintily taking a bite out of it.

Daintily taking a bite out of it. It felt like a weird expression to use, but at least that seemed to be the only way Colette's eyes could describe it. Even Palmyra, who lived in the biggest house of the village, wouldn't have been able to eat this in such a captivating fashion, she thought.

Omega: "Me being washed away by the river earlier was also like that, but you see, I've been asleep for quite a long time. It's been a very long time since I stood and walked on my own two feet."

Colette: "Really? Is that why you ended up forgetting how to swim?"

Omega: "No, I've never been able to swim. I was swept away by the river because I was trying to get some water to quench my thirst, and I slipped. My legs were shorter than I remembered them being after all…"

She took another bite out of her meat-on-the-bone as she proudly professed that she couldn't swim with a shake of her leg. Colette's conversation with Omega was refreshing, considering she was used to passing time in idle boredom.

From what she'd heard, Omega appeared to be in the middle of an aimless journey. Frankly, given her age and her ability to handle things, didn't her travelling alone seem like a recipe for disaster?

Colette, though hesitant, offered her a proposal.

Colette: "Um, if it's okay with you, why don't you stay in my cabin for a little while? It's going to get way colder, so I think you should prepare properly for your journey."

Omega: "Hmm, I appreciate the offer, but even if I allow you to do all that for me, there's not much I can give back in return…"

Colette: "…Then please tell me a story"

Omega: "A story?"

Colette got a positive response to her proposal, thus taking away the reason for Omega's own hesitation from her.

She was an elf with a long life-span, who'd lived for more than 400 years. —A being that was familiar with events that many living in the present had no knowledge about.

Colette: "It'd make me really happy if you told me some stories that I don't know… Like, for example, a story from long ago, from the times that no one knows about."

Omega: "…"

Omega closed one of her eyes and nodded as soon as Colette had asked her that.

Then…

Omega: "Indeed, people typically want to know, don't they? He was strange in that respect as well."

Colette: “…?”

Omega: “My apologies. I was talking to myself. —I don’t mind. Talking with people has always been one of my favorite things to do after all. If you’re okay with that, then I suppose I shall trouble you for a little while.”

Omega gave her a small smile which indicated that she’d accepted Colette’s proposal.

3

Omega: “The world was a tough place for humans to live in 400 years ago. Magic was an exclusive strong suit Demi-Humans and Spirits had, regardless of which country you were in. Humans even struggled at building fires.”

Omega snapped her fingers as she spoke, making the flames of the fire dance.

A few days had passed with Omega staying in Colette’s small cabin. In that short amount of time, this young-looking elf had rewritten everything she knew about the world, one by one.

At first, when she’d been swept in by the river, Omega had seemed to her like a bundle of danger. However, the way she displayed her knowledge and magic in these various everyday scenes had changed Colette’s perception of her.

Omega was heedless, and an absentminded kind of gal to boot. Nevertheless, the reason she was able to keep travelling with a disposition like that was because she possessed the “power” to make it more or less feasible.

She could easily tell how powerful Omega was by just looking at the way she created fire, boiled water, chopped firewood with the wind and tilled the soil with a mere snap of her fingers.

Omega: “A knack for magic? Indeed. I would like to say that it’s become possible for anyone to do this sort of stuff with some practise, but that would be wrong. Magic too is an art, so it greatly depends on the qualities of the individual. As far as I know, there are only two or three people in history who can do what I can."

In history, not in the world. Her use of that expression conjured up images of Omega's grandiosity in Colette's mind.

She was taken aback, gripped by Omega's face in profile as she declared that without showing any signs of laughing it off as being bombastic, let alone as being braggadocious.

Omega unreservedly declared that she was one of the best in the world, and not out of conceit. A certain word popped up in Colette's mind seeing her like that.

How would Omega react if she were to muster her courage and say it out loud?

Omega: "…If you've got something to say, why don't you try and say it?"

Omega said that in a quiet tone as she looked at the taciturn Colette.

While feeling like those clear blue eyes had seized her, Colette spoke that "word" out loud. As soon as she heard what it was, Omega gave her her most bewitching smile yet.

Omega: "Yes, it's like that of course. —I'm quite the wicked witch you know?"

That was her reply.

…In other words, Colette's life had become such that she was spending her daily life with a "Witch" who knew about the days of yore.

4

Omega: "Why am I wearing a cloak that doesn't fit me, you ask? That's because it didn't belong to me from the start, I received it from someone else."

Omega calmly answered Colette's question as the latter hung up her cloak to dry, having just been washed.

Colette had a fondness for asking questions, and often pestered Omega for “stories”, which had been the condition she’d offered her for staying here. Her overwhelming curiousity was something which Omega liked, considering she loved to talk.

Omega: “After all, most people tend to either ignore me when I’m talking pleasantly, or they’ll forcibly tell me to shut up from the start.”

Colette: “Really? Butbut, that’s such a waste. Your stories are super interesting Omega-chan, and I love finding out about all these things that I didn’t know about.”

Omega: “Mhhm, that’s good. Knowledge is a treasure that no one can steal from you. Whereas, with stuff like possessions, it’s basically like, having more of them can only give you more of an edge in life.”

There were many situations where not having knowledge would lead one to being compelled to take the long way around things.

Even the act of lighting a fire had been a struggle for humans, back when they couldn’t use magic. However, that struggle had abated drastically when they’d been able to learn how to light one.

Omega: “With knowledge, you end up not having to risk your life in situations where there’s no need to die. Naturally though, you mustn’t let it become a waste of a treasure, so it does take talent to use it.”

Colette: “Talent…”

Omega: “Indeed. Without knowledge, or, even if you do have the knowledge but lack the talent to use it, you’ll just end up having stuff taken away from you. Like this cloak I own for example.”

She pointed at her cloak that was hanging out to dry and continued the lecture she was giving Colette, as she washed stuff in the river.

Though she didn’t have many of it, most of Omega’s luggage had been borrowed from their original owners. That said, she had no way of returning any of it at the present, since they were already dead.

But then, they probably would have sympathized as well, since this had been their just reward for trying to steal from Omega. This world was a survival of the fittest after all, just like how bigger fish eat the smaller ones.

Omega: “Or rather, I guess saying “the strong devour the weak” is more apt. I prefer the saying “the survival of the fittest”, but it’s in my nature to want to use the most accurate one as possible…”

Colette: “You’ve been through a lot as well, haven’t you, Omega-chan? Would it be because you’ve lived for so long?”

Omega: “It’s true that I’ve gotten way more opportunities to learn given that I’ve lived for so long. But, the stuff I need to know keeps growing the longer I live on for. I don’t think the day will come where I’d want to die, unless my thirst for knowledge runs out. In that respect, I feel like I’m able to enjoy life to its utmost.”

Colette: “Errm, is that so?”

Colette was trying her best to understand what she’d said, but it must have been a difficult topic for her.

Omega batted one of her eyes shut at the girl, who looked like smoke was about to come out from her head. She then stretched up and turned her eye over to Colette as she continued with the washing.

Omega: “Colette, about that bracelet of yours…”

Colette: “…Oh, this? It’d end up getting drenched with river water if I kept it on while doing the washing, no? It’d be a real pain if it got washed away or started to rust: that’s why I take it off.”

Omega: “…Hmm?”

She’d quietly placed her silver bracelet on top of a tree stump by the riverside. The bracelet itself looked a bit like it had some work put into it, with artisan patterns running down both its inside and outside. It felt like it had value in its own right, such that wearing it wasn't deserved by a young girl dwelling in a forest.

Omega: "You seem to have a pretty decent upbringing though; where did you get that from?"

Colette: "This? This is a memento from my mom and dad. They left it to me when they died… That's why I always carry it around with me."

Omega: "A memento from your parents? I see."

Colette: "They were working on a job that took them out from the village. This bracelet was something they brought back from the outside as well. I was really small, so I couldn't go with them; so they left me at my mom's sister's… my aunty's house. I learnt so much stuff there."

She probably meant she'd learnt these skills of life, like cooking, washing and hunting there.

The trauma of her parents' death must have been like a scab that was still healing inside her as well. So long as no one tried to peel it off on purpose, the wounds would slowly heal until one day, she would start to not be ailed by them.

That was the passage of time people lived under. —Sweet music to Omega's ears.

Omega: "Colette, since it looks like it's still going to take some time for you to do the washing, you don't mind if I take a short walk, right? Come to think of it, lately I've been doing nothing but going back and forth between your house and the river."

Colette: "I did drag you from the river to my cabin, but…"

Colette's face looked meek when she heard her proposal. Omega tilted her head in response to her hesitation. Her reaction seemed rather odd in regards to an approval for just taking a walk.

Omega: "Is something the matter?"

Colette: “No, no, nothing at all. It’s just, like, I don’t think you should go too far towards the east side of the forest. They erm… They say that a Witchbeast lives there, so the villagers don’t go near it.”

Omega: “I see. The east side of the forest, yeah. I appreciate your worries.”

Omega left Colette behind by the river to continue with the washing as the latter saw her off, and went for her stroll. Then, she stretched herself up as soon as Colette was out of sight.

Omega: “So, a Witchbeast’s appeared in the east?”

She could safely say that a dangerous Witchbeast appearing there would be a life-threatening problem for both Colette and the villagers.

Witchbeasts were pure, unadulterated threats to most human’s lives. There were many different kinds of them, and their danger levels all varied as well; however, they’d no doubt be a danger to the average person, regardless of what species it was.

As she thought about that, Omega’s feet slowly made their way to the “East Side” of the forest.

Omega: “…”

Of course, it wasn’t like Omega was trying to disregard Colette’s words of warning for no reason.

Though perhaps surprising, her warning made Omega feel unexpectedly grateful for Colette’s kindness. If a girl with such pluckiness as hers was terrified of a Witchbeast, then she’d be willing to get rid of it.

However…

Omega: “…Hmm.”

Omega came out into a small clearing in the east side of the forest. She gently stroked her pink hair, narrowing her eyes at the spectacle in front of her.

—Before her, lay slightly frosted ground, and atop it she could see some scattered piles of stones. There must have been more than thirty of them there, more or less.

If it had just been one or two of them, she could have dismissed them as being the work of a child's playfulness, but a deeper meaning started to take root with so many in one place.

Considering there were so many piles of stones that had been carefully stacked, their purpose was clear.

This place was a…

???: "…Who are you?"

Omega didn't show any particular signs of surprise at having heard a voice calling out from behind her.

She'd been able to sense that someone had been approaching her by the sound of their footsteps as well as their scent. What she hadn't expected was that her opponent had called out to her. She'd been sure that they would have attacked her without bothering to exchange any dialogue.

Omega: "First things first, I hold no animosity towards you. I'd just like to put it out there that the reason I treaded in here was, well, it was on purpose, but not out of ill will. Oh, that reminds me, I don't have any kind of weapon on me, so I'm going to slowly turn around now. You aren't going to freak out, right?"

???: "…Just quit your damned babbling and turn yourself around."

Omega held her hands up, showing she wasn't hostile, and then closed her mouth as well, so to show her opponent that she was doing exactly as they'd said. After that, she slowly turned back where she stood.

???: "…Never seen you before."

A tall girl looked down at Omega as she said that.

She was dressed in black clothes, had long dark hair, and was rather pretty. However her sanpaku eyes were incredibly sharp, giving her an awfully piercing impression.

Omega: “Hmm.”

Just after she’d finished processing her initial impressions, she noticed that the girl in front of her wasn’t that old either. At most she was fifteen years old; thus there didn’t seem to be much of an age difference between her and Colette. The only differences in their impressions came from her atmosphere and height.

???: “What’s with that reaction. You’re such an irritating girl.”

Omega: “Aren’t you the one being awfully snappy at a young girl that you’ve just met? Besides…”

???: “What?”

Omega: “I mean, the fact that you’re carrying around something like that was quite a shock for me too you know.”

She’d realized from the signs she’d felt when she’d walked up behind her—Mostly from its stench; that held within the arms of the girl with the baleful eyes was something really shocking.

Namely, the cadaver of a living creature that had been wrapped up in white cloth.

It must have once been in decent shape she thought, but right now it didn’t retain any of that.

Omega: “That’s far too much of an overkill to call it hunting. Doing that would have ended up ruining both its flesh and hide. The way you went about it would be awful for securing them for their pelt or as food. Even so…”

Omega first trailed her words off and then continued, all the while examining the girl’s reaction.

Omega: “If you’re just killing them for the sake of it, then I won’t say anything to you.”

???: “—. Don’t speak to me like you know everything.”

Sullenly flinging those words at her, the girl made her way past Omega, and placed the cadaver on the ground—Or rather, maybe she ought to call it something that was once a rabbit. Regardless, she placed it on the ground and began to dig a hole with the Habou she’d brought along.

She buried the body, covered it with soil and piled stones on top of it. —As she looked at her doing this, Omega was convinced that the impression she’d harbored at the start wasn’t a mistaken one.

Just like she’d mused, this place was a graveyard. The remains of many critters must have been buried beneath the piles of stones, just like the rabbit from now, to be memorialized.

Omega: “I’ve been around graves a lot too after all.”

???: “…Who are you? Where did you come from?”

The girl finished her burial work, stood up, and asked that from Omega.

There was quite an intensity about her in not bothering to hide her bloodstained hands. It felt to Omega like she was going to end up in this graveyard along with them if she screwed up her reply.

Omega vied for friendly relations, hence she introduced herself, though not specifically due to the aforementioned reason.

Omega: “I am Omega, I’m pretty much a travelling vagrant. I just happened to drop by in the vicinity en-route down the river. I won’t be staying long so I hope you won’t be too harsh on me.”

???: “A traveler, huh. At your age… No, rather, those ears of yours… are you an elf?”

Noticing Omega’s distinctive ears, the girl’s face turned to one of open discomfort. It made sense that a strong tide of discrimination remained towards elves in this era, even so, her reaction seemed different to usual ones. She must have had still another reason for despising elves—However, before Omega could question her about it, she'd begun to walk back the way she'd come, with her hands still stained with blood.

Omega: "Sorry to barge in, but the river's over there if you're looking to wash your hands."

???: "…You said you wouldn't be staying long, right? Take my advice and kindly hurry up and leave this place."

Omega: "I'm not really catching what this talk is about. I guess I must suck at this?"

The girl paid no heed to her casual chit-chat and started to walk away from the river without pause. And, just before the back of her slipped out of sight, she spoke up,

???: "Because if you don't, then you too will eventually be torn apart by the "Beast"."

The girl left behind only those words before her figure vanished from Omega's sight.

Omega: "…A "Beast", she says."

5

Omega: "So that's what she told me; do you happen to know anything about it, Colette?"

Omega told Colette about what had happened in the east of the forest as they had dinner by the fire. Colette puffed out her cheeks as she listened to her story, sipping from her vegetable soup.

Colette: "I did tell you not to go to the eastern side of the forest…"

Omega: "Did you? Ah, you did. However I thought that I could help if you were having problems with a Witchbeast, considering that I can deal with most of them. That said, I didn't come across a Witchbeast, but rather a girl with a look so terrible in her eyes, that it almost looked like a Witchbeast's."

Colette: "…I think you mean Palmyra's"

Was it actually an honor for said person to be pinpointed merely by the terrible look to their eyes? The boy Omega knew, who had the same terrible look, would definitely complain loudly and say it was disgraceful.

Omega: “I rather think there’s a charm to it… But, well, the feelings of others are things that can’t be inferred by other people no matter where you go, so I suppose it can’t be helped.”

Colette: “So, um, what did you talk to Palmyra about?”

Omega: “I didn’t really manage to have a proper conversation with her… Though, yeah, she told me to not stay long and hurry up and leave the forest if I valued my life.”

Colette: “—hk! That’s so…!”

Colette raised her voice in a flash and stood up from where she was sitting. The bowl that had been resting on her lap toppled over, spilling its soup down onto the ground.

Omega: “Isn’t that boiling hot Colette? We ought to cool it down with some water as soon as possible…”

Colette: “That’s so… That’s so selfish of her! Why would Palmyra do something like that…”

Speaking rapidly, Colette turned her quivering eyes towards Omega.

Colette: “Hey, Omega-chan, you’re not going to leave, right?”

Colette asked her that, not even paying any heed to how hot the soup was that had spilled onto her lap.

She wasn’t lending her ears to the words that girl—Palmyra had said. She only wanted Omega to stay with her. However, that wish couldn’t be granted by Omega.

Omega: “I’m glad about how you feel, but I wasn’t planning on staying long from the start. My body’s in far better shape thanks to these past few days. I’d like to repay you for your kindness, so I’d hope to at least take care of that Witchbeast in the forest, or whatever it is.”

Colette: “…”

Omega: “Colette?”

Omega frowned at the fact she hadn’t gotten any sort of response from her of either affirmation or denial. Then, after she’d called out her name, Colette let out a short sigh and said, “Oh,”

Colette: “Y-Yeah, right. Yeah, of course. From the beginning, you were just dropping in for a short while, so it’s only natural that you’d leave for another journey. It’s only natural.”

The way she was saying it felt more like she was convincing herself rather than telling Omega. Then, Colette picked up her dishes and cleared them away, still half-eaten.

Omega was lost for what to say to Colette, who had an air of tension about her. Despite that, she flashed Omega a smile as she cleared away her dinner, and said,

Colette: “It’s alright, Omega-chan. I’m lonely, but not that lonely. So…”

Omega: ““Feel free to set out on your journey”? Well, that’s what I’m planning on doing, but…”

Colette: “Yeah, go for it. That would be great. Definitely, it’s for the best.”

After she said that, Colette turned her back away from Omega. Her small back looked pitiful, but it wasn’t like she could say anything to her, so she kept her silence.

She kept her unforgiving, ruthless silence.

6

Omega: “…”

Omega that night slowly woke up on her bed.

In all honesty, getting up wasn't a strong point of hers. She didn't think this was an issue with her body, but rather one with her soul. When she thought back to it, she'd never been great at getting up, even when she'd had her own body.

She hadn't been aware of it, but perhaps it was down to what they called "low blood pressure."

How strange it was that even changing the receptacle of her soul didn't solve her issues with her blood pressure one bit. But now wasn't the time to think about the relation of souls and blood pressure.

Omega: "…It's not here."

Her crude bed was just a blanket spread out on the floor. Her blue glintstone, which should have been near her pillow, was nowhere to be seen. Omega typically wore it as a necklace, with it attached to a string; though naturally she took it off when going to sleep. She remembered doing that tonight before sleeping as well.

Omega: "Colette?"

A lick of flame came alight from Omega's raised fingers inside the pitch black cabin. There was no sign of Colette in the bed next to hers, and her cloak, which should have been hanging on the wall, was also nowhere to be seen.

Colette had vanished, and so had her glintstone. This relationship between cause and effect probably went without saying.

Omega: "No way, it's hard to imagine she was out for money."

Omega rubbed her weary eyes and hurriedly put her cloak on, before stepping outside of the cabin.

The forest air at night was chilly, and her misty breaths sapped away the strength from her legs. But she didn't have the option to abandon her glintstone and go back to bed. —She couldn't part with it. It was one of her most important things in the world.

Omega: "…"

As she began to walk, a sound rattled Omega's eardrums—She could hear a howl off in the distance.

The howl had come from deep within the forest. It had been sharp, seeming to reach o'er yonder of the chilly night sky. As soon as Omega heard it, the word "Beast" flashed through her mind.

Omega: "Not a Witchbeast, a "Beast", huh."

Omega recalled the state Palmyra had been in when she'd left her those words, and then took another step forward. There was no doubt as to where she was headed. —The eastern forest.

Omega: "…"

Omega narrowed her eyes as she entered the clearing she'd visited during the day, with the cemetery within.

The scent of blood filling her nostrils lay thicker compared to what she'd smelled during the day. Probably because of all the fresh blood that had newly been splattered around the graveyard.

Omega: "Hmm."

Omega gave a curt nod of her chin as she gazed at the graveyard, which was now dyed in red.

The flesh and blood that was scattered around must have belonged to animals that lived in the forest. At a glimpse, the scene looked gruesome, however none of the flesh and blood there appeared to be human. Could that have been an expression of the "Beast's" conscience?

Omega: "Or perhaps it already decided on its first target."

Omega slowly took a look around the graveyard and the cadavers. The light of the moon was obstructed by heavy clouds, and the ground was shrouded in a darkness so still, that it would make anyone want to die.

—Yet the host of fireballs that Omega had conjured cut through the darkness without relent.

They became quite literally lamplights that laid bare the state of the bloodstained surroundings. That, and it was nothing short of an act of despicableness for those who dwelled in the darkness, who held no love for light.

???: “—϶ ϶!!”

The “Beast” came flying out from the veil of darkness, letting off a ferocious howl.

It thundered towards Omega at razor-sharp speed and threw its claws at her with tremendous force. She’d surely end up like the flesh and blood scattered around them if she ended up on the receiving end of its attack.

Having said that, Omega didn’t have the finesse to dodge these attacks quickly enough. In regards to her physical ability, she was as delicate and frail as a child, just like she looked.

Though, despite being slender, she was still made from different stock than your atypical half-elf, that could break even boulders by hitting them.

Omega: “My my, that reminded me of someone I dislike.”

Omega’s face soured a few moments before its claws stuck into her head, as memories flashed through her mind.

The speed which significant thoughts flash by at was far quicker compared to actually moving her body. There were some theories that stated that the flashbacks that appear on the verge of death were lookup operations which the brain, caved by the risk of death, did, using one’s own memories to find a way to escape from the situation at hand.

That’s just how overwhelming the speed of her thoughts was. The claws of the “Beast” still hadn’t reached Omega, even as she finished with her absurd intrusion of thoughts.

—Thence, a protective wall of earth easily got in the way of her enemy’s attack.

Omega: “Dona.”

She didn’t actually need to recite the incantation. If anything, the wall of earth rose up far quicker than the movement of her lips. Even so, she’d still bothered to chant it because she liked to put stuff that happened into words.

Omega: “…”

The “Beast” was thrown up from underneath by the rising wall of earth, and was blown up into the night sky. Its small shadow spun round and round; however, it quickly kicked out at a nearby tree branch, stopped itself from spinning, and fell back to earth. It skillfully protected its head and back from the fall, landing on the ground on its own four limbs. Not too shabby.

However…

Omega: “Didn’t I hit you a moment ago using that very same earth?”

There was no way it was going to best her attack with a mere stopgap countermeasure.

Her attack commenced before the “Beast”, who had now landed on the ground, made its next move. Once again, the earth writhed, and this time it swallowed the “Beast’s” limbs within, pinning it down.

The “Beast”: “—ッ ッ?!”

With its arms and legs swallowed all the way up to its knees and elbows, it had absolutely nowhere left to place its strength. An earthen stake savagely rose up towards the exposed belly of the pitiful, struggling “Beast”, as it lay unable to move.

The “Beast”: “—ッ ッ”

Omega: “Using everything around as tools is where you really get to show off your skills as a mage. Wind, earth, fire, water; all of it under my spell. —This must be how it feels like to make the world your enemy.”

Omega muttered those words out without any real emotion as she unleashed her vicious blow. Receiving it, the “Beast” was struck in its belly. It gulped down a roar of pain, and lifted its face up, baring its fangs.

The “Beast”: “—))”

Omega: “Hmm, you still look lively, don’t you? Shall we perhaps do two or three more of these?”

Omega closed one of her eyes as she looked at the lively, howling “Beast”, and then she pointed her palm at it.

Her earthen stake had punched against its guts, albeit she had rounded its tip before she’d unleashed it, to go easy on it. However, perhaps it’d be easier for her to fire off a sharp one into it. For now, if she had to resort to bloodshed to stop its movements, then…

???: “…That’s enough already!”

Omega had tried to stick her palm out and unleash a barrage of attacks on it. However, she was stopped in her tracks.

Reflected in her cold, blue eyes was first the struggling “Beast”, whose limbs were caught in the ground, and then the girl who’d stood in front of the “Beast” to protect it—Palmyra.

Large tears were welling up in her round eyes as she glared at Omega.

Omega: “What are you doing?”

Palmyra: “I beg you, enough already! Don’t you think there’s no need to go any further?!”

Omega: “It’s up to you if you can’t bear to watch, but I cannot help but feel that it would be irresponsible of me to leave this be. I imagine that in the first place, they must have been a bother for you too, right? You must have been shunning the “Beast”.”

Palmyra: “No! As if I’d ever think “I want you to kill the “Beast!”“

Palmyra turned around as tears streamed down her face, disregarding Omega’s words with a snarl. Then she wrapped her arms around the shackled “Beast”, pulling it into a tight embrace.

Palmyra: “I never wanted to turn Colette into a “Witch”. I wanted to help her!”

She desperately shouted that as she continued to embrace the “Beast”—Rather, Colette.

7

…All the strange things about this had been visible, in various respects, from the start.

The way Colette lived, for example. Why would a girl of only 12 or 13 years of age be living alone in a ramshackle cabin in a forest right next to a village? She had told her that her parents had passed away, but she was still too young to be living on her own.

She was precisely at the kind of age where the villagers ought to be looking after her, given that she’d been born in its vicinity. Communal life wouldn’t be possible if not for the spirit of people mutually helping each other out.

If they weren’t going to help her out, then that meant…

Omega: “The very fact that a young girl has ended up living in a ramshackle cabin in the forest is proof that Colette is shunned by the people of the village. She can’t get any help from the adults, so she’s had no choice but to live on her own. Though, surprisingly enough, it seems like she’s been living quite a strong life.”

She’d acquired her cooking and hunting skills back when her parents were alive. Despite not receiving any love from the villagers, the love she’d received from her parents had kept her from dying.

However, having been shunned and turned away from her village, the girl’s loneliness had attracted a different problem.

Namely, the issue which Palmyra had shouted at her…

Omega: “…A Witch? This sure is a fateful thing.”

Colette’s living circumstances, the presence of the “Beast” which Palmyra had told her about, as well as the word: “Witch” that she’d cried out as she embraced the struggling Colette.

The whole picture surrounding this snowy forest became clear from the fragmented pieces.

There’d been a downwards spiral, wrought by the fear they’d held against the unavoidable “Witch”.

Palmyra: “It started when Colette’s parents died.”

Palmyra let go of Colette as she twisted her body with a bestial roar, and began to talk.

The death of Colette’s parents. —That had been the trigger for the collapse of everything.

Palmyra: “Colette’s house was attacked by a Witchbeast. Both of her parents were killed, leaving only Colette behind…”

The house was left in a dreadful state, and Colette’s parents, having been attacked by the Witchbeast, had apparently been left in a state so terrible, that no one could bear to look at them. Palmyra had said that Colette had ended up being the only one to survive in this bloody house.

Colette had afterwards been taken in by one of her relatives in the village and begun to live there.

However, tragedy wasn’t going to let her escape.

Palmyra: “The Witchbeast hadn’t overlooked Colette after it failed to kill her. It found the house that had taken Colette in and…”

Omega: “Sunk its fangs into that family, I imagine. —Witchbeasts are the nemeses of mankind. It’s really no wonder that there’s some around that show such guile if it’s for the sake of killing or maiming.”

Palmyra: “…The harm the Witchbeast brought didn’t end only with that. It went on, and on.”

The Witchbeast had kept pursuing Colette without showing signs of relenting.

Tragedy struck each house every time that Colette was taken into them. —Despite that, the Witchbeast had never bothered to kill Colette.

As the damage spread, no matter how kind of heart the villagers were, they became unable to keep her. They perceived the presence of the girl named Colette as a burden.

Palmyra: “In the end, they got so spooked out, to the point that no one would take Colette in. The opposite in fact, they drove her away to a small forest cabin… It was like she was…”

Omega: “…A human sacrifice.”

Omega took over for Palmyra as she choked for words.

Palmyra’s expression stiffened as soon as she heard her. She was a rather innocent girl, unlike what you would imagine from her face. You could perhaps say that she was good of heart, in stark contrast to her upbringing.

Nevertheless, she couldn’t help but say it was a meaningless sentimentality when compared to the facts at hand.

Omega: “When you consider it from the perspective of protecting the village, they must have thought that offering Colette as a sacrifice would have resulted in less damage, compared to defeating this dangerous Witchbeast. It’s only natural, from a risk management point of view.”

Rituals where sacrifices were offered, to pray for things such as good weather and bountiful harvest, have been carried out everywhere throughout the course of history.

In all honesty, Omega couldn’t see the validity in offering sacrifices to unwilling enemies. However, if said enemy presented a concrete threat, then she could say that trying to draw out its warmth wasn't that bad of a move.

Omega: "Although, that presumes your enemy's one that can understand conversation."

Palmyra: "…I know right. Why would a Witchbeast that lacks all manner of reason leave, even if they offered Colette to it. I didn't really get it, and I'm still unconvinced. But, the entire village was gripped by fear. That's why they tried to offer Colette…"

Omega: "As a sacrifice… Well, no, not just that. When I think back to the warning you gave me Palmyra, it's obvious."

Palmyra: "…"

Omega: "It's nothing. The villagers thought that Colette was the Witchbeast's master, right?"

She could say that too, was a natural development.

They'd been attacked by the Witchbeast over and over again, and each time, only Colette had survived. It was logical that people would turn their eyes suspiciously towards Colette as it kept happening. "A sacrifice for the Witchbeast" was a nice excuse, with the real reason being to keep the dangerous Colette away from the village.

It must have been the least scrap of conscience the villagers could spare, for them to not have made any attempt to kill Colette.

Omega: "Well, I suppose they were protecting themselves. Humans aren't good at sympathizing with others in times where they can't afford to."

Palmyra: "And like that, the villagers started to call Colette a Witch."

Omega: "—. I see. No better proof of being kicked out than that."

Mending their ties had already become futile, now that they'd insulted her with a curse that spelled out the most abominable being in the world. She knew what it meant for Colette to live in the forest, alone.

And if Omega's conjecture was right, the manhunt should have started, rather than ended.

Omega: "There were incidents where animals were gruesomely slain in the forest, right? This graveyard serves as a place for you to bury these brutalized animals. You made it, am I right?"

Palmyra: "…How"

Omega: "Elementary my dear Watson."

Her much unneeded words she'd squeezed in didn't get through to the frantic Palmyra. By wanting to show off her knowledge as well, she'd ended up messing about, saying words which held no particularly positive meaning to them.

Without brushing back on her casual remark, Omega circled her hand around, and pointed at the gravestones,

Omega: "In fact, similar things to this happened everywhere 400 years ago. Back in those days, the requirements you needed to become a "Witch" were rather unclear. That's why, to put it in other words, some thought that maybe anyone could become a Witch, provided they fulfilled the minimum requirements. Thus, weird rituals became widespread."

There'd been quite a lot of these rituals, so gruesome they had been, that they'd make anyone with a delicate disposition avert their eyes. She could truly say that back then, the world was at its darkest.

Omega: "This is off topic, but why must rituals always escalate towards the path of gruesomeness? Wouldn't it be great if once in a while we had a ritual taking place during the day, rather than at night, where we just laid flowers out?"

Palmyra: "What are you trying to say…"

Omega: "Whoops, pardon me. Well, it's nothing so complicated…

What I mean is that the girl who's been treated as a "Witch" by the villagers decided she might as well actually try and become one. Or, perhaps she started the ritual because she was under the impression that she'd become one."

So regardless of the actual person's intent, the ritual would prove effective when the conditions were right.

Living alone in the forest, Colette had involuntarily brought about these conditions.

Omega: "The factors choose those who are qualified. Had she been found by them, the path to being a "Witch" would have opened… Unfortunately though, it seems like the Witch Factors of this era have already found qualified individuals. Well, I suppose this is a Witch-lacking era, thanks to that kid who's keeping a bunch of them on their own."

For starters, in this era, they called those with Witch Factors names like Sin Archbishops, rather than "Witches". Quite rightly, the way they were treated didn't change, no matter how they were called.

Omega: "Looks like I got sidetracked again. Anyways, Colette was alienated from her village due to this, and so, left alone, she began to dip her hands into carrying out these gruesome rituals to try her damndest to become a "Witch"… Luckily, it doesn't seem like she's sullied her hands past killing some animals. Though, it would have only been a matter of time."

Palmyra: "…She would've probably you know, hurt someone, if we'd left her alone…"

Omega: "Indeed. Oh dear, without a doubt I would have been the prime candidate for that. Or perhaps it would have been you. Both of us were lured into the forest."

Had Palmyra come here to the graveyard tonight because she'd predicted things were about to move forward?

Considering she was actively carrying out the ritual, the concept of opening a path towards becoming a "Witch" by cutting herself free from all of her attachments wasn't a bad one. She had a really keen eye.

However, Palmyra's prediction was off the mark here. —Colette hadn't set her mind on that.

Omega: "I'm sorry to say, but this girl is not a "Witch". And getting more into this, her true nature isn't that of a "Beast" either. By the way Palmyra, is it okay if I ask you something?"

Palmyra: "What is it. If you know so much, what are you even…"

Omega: "The villagers fear a Witchbeast; but no one has seen it, right?"

As she said this, Omega walked over to the two embracing girls. She stretched out her hand over to the still struggling Colette—And gently took off the bracelet she was wearing on her wrist.

Instantly, the strength from Colette's body left her.

Palmyra: "…Colette? Colette! What did you do to her?!"

Omega: "She's only lost her consciousness since the link's been severed. She used up way too much of her strength, so it's really no wonder that she fell asleep immediately. At any rate…"

Colette let out soft breaths as she slept, despite Palmyra's panic. Her angelic sleeping face felt quite out of place in this brutal situation, but that couldn't be helped either considering that she probably had no idea that she was the "Beast".

Omega: ""Meteors"… They were named after "Shooting Stars" because they can make your wishes come true."

Wishes like that were fleeting; in the long run they became a breeding ground for causing trouble, deviating from the manufacturer's intent. Both now, and in the days of yore, that was the main issue underlying these "Meteors".

Was it the wishes people had which were tainted, or the tools themselves? Perhaps it would have been better to also include an instruction manual with them.

Omega: “Though, you should be able to hazard a guess at what kind of use the tool has just by looking at it.”

Anyhow, there were many cases where they wouldn’t, so maybe she was overestimating the general public?

Either way…

Omega: “Colette won’t be running rampant anymore. So long as she gets rid of her bracelet.”

Palmyra: “But that’s a memento her parents left her…”

Omega: “This is the “Beasting Bracelet”… That’s what the “Meteor” is called. It’s a tool that you can activate even if you don’t possess any special powers; a harness that people who lack strength may use to protect themselves.”

There’d once been a time where humanity had been swamped with enemies. The “Beasting Bracelet” had been created out of pity for humans, who back then, were putting their lives at risk even to just set up camp. It had been created to help them.

Omega: “When it senses danger, its owner’s mana is temporarily increased, making it so their body is able to fight. The owner’s sense of reason decreases drastically in exchange, and they become similar to a beast. That’s why it’s called the “Beasting Bracelet”.”

Palmyra: “Then it’s all because of this damn bracelet that Colette’s parents, and all of the other victims…”

Omega: “I heard that her parents were merchants who had dealings with the outside. I dare say they got their hands on the “Beasting Bracelet” from somewhere there. They made it into a gift for their daughter, and after that…”

On that fateful night, the “Beasting Bracelet” had transformed Colette into a “Beast” and carnage had ensued.

Typically, the “Meteor” would spring into motion whenever danger loomed; however, it wasn't all too strange a naive girl could feel danger coming from even the turmoils of a nightmare.

Omega: "The same thing occurred wherever she was taken in, until finally she ended up alone. Ironically enough, Colette thought of herself as being dangerous, after being treated as the root of all evil. Contrarily, that made her acquire the qualifications to control the bracelet. The killing of those animals was an "in your face" resistance."

That was the truth of the matter that surrounded Colette, the girl who lived in the forest all on her own.

She'd lost her family, she'd been shunned by the villagers, and she'd been driven away into the forest. The little girl had kept performing her ritual to turn herself into a "Witch" instead of sealing up the fearsome "Beast".

But this time, she was going to sacrifice the traveler who'd stopped by her place, to turn herself into an actual "Witch"…

Omega: "…That's ridiculous."

Palmyra: "…"

Omega: "Does she really think that killing all those wild rabbits is going to turn her into a "Witch"? That's a child's dream."

Omega looked up above her as she said that. The sky was still covered in heavy clouds, with not a star in sight. That irked her, so she swung her arms up.

In an instant, a gust of wind kicked into life far above in the skies and dispersed the clouds, revealing the pale moon behind.

Palmyra: "…Hgha"

Moonlight poured down from the pale moon, illuminating the girls in the forest clearing. Then, the girl who was embracing the "Beast", and was face-to-face with this ancient being, gasped.

Because, the girl who'd been standing before her eyes was…

Omega: “…I see. The fact that you can keep your cool while looking at me means you have promise.”

…a white-haired “Witch” with the hint of a smile on her face.

Omega: “The villagers cursed Colette as a “Witch”, right? That’s no good. Something like this being mistaken as a “Witch” would make both I, as well as those girls turn in their grave.”

Palmyra: “*Eep*”

Omega: “The village was this way, right? I’m terrible with directions you see.”

The “Witch” smiled at Palmyra as her throat froze, before then asking her that. Still unable to muster any kind of thoughts, all the frightened Palmyra could do was nod repeatedly.

Omega: “My thanks.”

The “Witch” thanked her for her reply, and began to slowly walk away. Straight towards the village. To show each and everyone of those cretins who’d mistaken Colette as a “Witch” the real truth.

Palmyra: “…”

Palmyra had felt her heart freeze over as she’d looked at the “Witch” walking off into the distance. After she’d left, she turned her gaze up to the sky — at the moon.

—The pale moon was looking down on the two embracing girls, silent as ever.

8

She nibbled on some cured meat that had been left over, and warmed her body up with some warm water.

Then she put on her dried cloak, and straight after she’d made sure that her shoes were on again, her journey preparations were complete.

Omega: “I ended up staying longer than I’d imagined… Though I guess I did enjoy myself more than I thought.”

Even ordinary daily life was a treasure in and of itself for one with a penchant for being able to enjoy just about every kind of event unknown. So long as it abounded with stuff happening, she needed no more.

Omega: “That said, nothing substantial remains. That must be my fate as well.”

As she spilled those words out in a quiet tone, Omega exited the cabin that had served her for several days. Since its owner wasn’t in, she had no one to say farewell too. A thank-you letter would be a bother as well, she supposed.

Omega: “A bird fouls not the nest as it is about to leave. Well, after it’s been fouled plenty already.”

Leaving these impressions behind, Omega left the cabin, went through the forest, walked across the empty graveyard, before finally she stepped out onto the path outside of the forest.

She would resume her aimless journey once more. With those feelings in mind, Omega would□

???: “—Where are you going all on your own, Omega-chan?”

Omega: “…Now this is an unexpected reunion.”

Having been called from behind, Omega turned around, feeling slightly taken aback. Two young girls standing side-by-side appeared in her field of view.

The two girls, Colette and Palmyra, were holding hands, eyes fixed on Omega.

Omega: “You couldn’t have come all the way here just to see me off right? I shouldn’t really be saying this, but I don’t think we parted in the best manner.”

Palmyra: “You realize that, and you’re still saying it… Look, you forgot something.”

Palmyra tossed something over to her after she’d finished speaking. Omega instantly stretched out her hand to catch it as it arced towards her. She tried to catch it, but failed, and the object dropped to the ground.

Omega: “—. Oh, damn it. I nearly forgot about it.”

Palmyra: “…Are you for real? It looks pretty important. You must be out of your mind.”

Palmyra gave Omega a sigh as she picked up the important object that had fallen near her feet—Her blue glintstone. Beside Palmyra, Colette raised her voice and called out with an: “Omega-chan”,

Colette: “Um, you know, I really have so many apologies I need to give you. After all, I nearly…”

Omega: “Nearly killed me? Well, sometimes such things happen when you’re alive. In reality, ‘twas no more than an attempt, so you needn’t fret about it.”

Colette: “But that’s not fair! Come on, please please let me make it up to you. Don’t just keep everything away from you and shut me out like that.”

Omega: “…”

Faced with Colette’s vehement attitude, Omega once again felt regretful that she’d messed up with her choice of words. She’d just wanted to tell her not to worry, so how had it ended up like this?

Omega: “You don’t need to thank me. You being treated as a “Witch” was a result of a series of unfortunate accidents. We identified the source, so the misunderstanding should have been cleared up. No one in the village should be treating you as a “Witch” anymore, right?”

Colette: “Uh-Uh, that’s right. Definitely not.”

Omega: “I see. That makes me glad.”

A lot of slip ups had happened that couldn't be remedied, but she was glad that at least one of them had turned out well.

The village had turned into pandemonium when an actual "Witch" had visited. Since she'd staged it to be as un-traumatic as possible, the villagers would only be left having nightmares for the rest of their lives.

Omega: "All that's left is to pray that they don't accidentally choke on their own vomit."

Palmyra: "…Do you have any idea what you're saying?"

Omega: "…? I was just pointing it out from a logical perspective, was there something strange about that?"

Palmyra let out a deep sigh as Omega cocked her head, with the latter unable to comprehend her reaction. Colette piped up in her place, with an "Uhm…"

Colette: "It's thanks to you Omega-chan that everyone in the village doesn't believe that I'm a "Witch". And their misunderstanding about the "Beast" has also been cleared up… But, you know…"

Omega: "But?"

Colette: "They also know now that I'm friends with a "Witch"."

Omega: "—That's…"

Omega frowned as Colette said with a tap of her flat chest.

An actual "Witch" making its appearance had worked in proving that Colette wasn't a real one. However, it seemed like this kind of treatment had worked too well. The villagers sought the reason why an actual "Witch" had appeared, and thus, Colette had once again bore the brunt of the blame.

Meaning…

Colette: "This time, I can't stay in either the village or the forest."

Omega: “I see… Yeah, I kinda get it. I kinda can’t help but feel like it’s partly my fault…”

Palmyra: “No, it’s definitely all your fault.”

Palmyra interrupted Omega as she stumbled for words, clearly stating it. Almost floored by the force of her argument, Omega suddenly took notice of the outfits the two of them were wearing.

Now that she looked properly, they were both wearing travel clothing. And not the sort you’d wear for a small trip, they were fully decked for a journey.

Colette: “Didn’t I already tell you? I can’t stay in the village.”

Palmyra: “And I’ve also used up all my courtesy with that village. That’s why I’m going with Colette.”

Colette: “So like, we were going to discuss it from here… But are you really alright by yourself, Omega-chan?”

Her question caught Omega off guard in its fullest sense. And that was why the eyes of the two girls shone brightly as they looked at Omega, her facial expression having changed without meaning to.

One of them was full of unbridled delight, while the other was full of pernicious delight.

Omega: “I’ve told you this many times, but my journey is an aimless one. I cannot promise you that it’ll be a spectacular all-action grand adventure like you both desire.”

Colette: “Spectacu…? Erm, I don’t really get you, but if it’s with Omega-chan, I bet it’ll be really fun. I just love hanging out with friends!”

Palmyra: “I don’t trust you to that extent, but… I feel like both you and Colette would fall into danger if I left you both to your own devices.”

Colette happily clutched Palmyra’s arm as she seemed to tail off into a sulk. Then, Omega let out a deep, deep breath as she looked at the girl beaming from eye to eye at her.

Omega: “Alright. I do need to teach you how to use the “Beasting Bracelet” as well. I don’t know how far we’ll be able to stick together, but you’re both welcome to do as you like until you get fed up with it.”

Colette: “Yaaay, way to go! Let’s keep treating each other well, Omega-chan!”

Both Colette and Palmyra hurriedly shuffled over by Omega’s side as she walked off in resignation.

Having found companions in this unexpected place, Omega’s aimless journey, regardless, continued.

Omega: “…An aimless journey, huh? Well, compared to that boring journey, it’s far, far better I guess.”

Omega walked with the girls, reminiscing about an incident that had occurred once.

The blue glintstone hanging down from her neck shook; illuminated by the sunlight, it glittered brightly. It almost looked like it was trying to say something to Omega…

However, the complaints coming from the blue glintstone only reached Omega’s ears.

END

Short Story Collection 6

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village Ex: Blessing Day
(Translation Pending)

The Three Idiots Set Out!
Cursed Goddess Statue Episode
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

It was a scene of luxury and opulence, a model of the glittering world of the upper class. It was a standing-room-only party, and the interior of the venue was lavishly decorated, with precious materials used in abundance in the opulent building.

???: “I feel dizzy just thinking about the total cost of tonight’s party.”

The party was attended by ladies and gentlemen dressed in elegant attire, and there was a constant comparison of rank between them and their counterparts in an exchange that hid the harshness behind the elegance. It is truly a world of heavenly beings, a space where only a handful of people from the upper class are allowed to enter, where a different way of life operates. To be honest, I thought it was a world I’d never be a part of, but…

???: “How did I end up getting involved in this again…?”

A murmur, unheard by anyone, spilled out softly in the corner of the room.

On both the left and right sides of the room, heavenly beings come and go. For those of us with a small-town mentality, it’s tempting to ask ourselves why we are in this place.

???: “The more I think back, the more I wonder why I chose to do it this way…”

Thinking about these “past problems” that had been bothering me since before I came to the party, I gently turned my gaze to the front, to the crowd of people in the hall. It’s a venue with a lot of people, but there are a few places that stand out from the crowd. One of the first things I noticed was a crowd of people, mostly dressed up like clowns.

As this is a party attended by wealthy people and other affluent people, there is a lot of playfulness in the costumes of the invited guests. Compared to them, “that” man’s strange appearance was outstanding. However, it is not only appearance that makes a person stand out, but also their position. After all, his status is very high, even in this venue. Therefore, it was only natural that those who knew of his role in the midst of the major events that was currently shaking the power of the Kingdom of Lugnica would strive to make it a little better.

While having a casual conversation with these people, the clownish figure noticed our gaze. He closed one of his two different colored eyes and winked at me.

???: “Even you don’t even know what people are thinking… No, no. That’s a knowing look.”

Sadly, that’s about the time I can see the bottom of my opponent’s stomach and give up. A smile on his shoulder

???: “sigh”

I drop my shoulders and look next to me to see a familiar face in another crowd, and my cheeks tense.

???: “Oh, no, I don’t want to, Gwain-sama, you’re too good at that.”

Then, smiling with her hand over her mouth, is a woman with distinctive mean looking eyes. With her unusual black hair and jet-black dress, she exudes elegance in her demeanor. Perhaps it’s because she’s a good talker and a good listener, but she seems to be able to swim through the social scene with ease, laughing and creating a friendly atmosphere even when surrounded by several men. I couldn’t decide whether I should be impressed or dismayed by her versatility. A short distance away, a sharp-looking blonde woman silently waved away the men who approached her, creating a stark contrast between the light and dark of the people involved. And to those of us on the sidelines, watching the scene…

???: “Are you bored at the party, young lady?”

Suddenly, I was approached by a male guest who was also standing by the wall. The rich can afford to pay more attention to their own needs. This is one of the strengths of the upper class, he thought to himself as he smiled.

???: “No, I was just a little drunk from all the people. I don’t usually get to participate in such events…”

???: “I see. You’re beautiful, but I’ve never seen you before. If you don’t mind, may I ask your name and your position here?”

I almost laughed at the word “beautiful,” but managed to hold it back just in time. Then, using the urgency of the smile to deepen my own smile, I picked up my skirt and bowed. Then I said my name.

???: “…My name is Audrey Souffle.”

Audrey Souffle… no, Otto Suwen blurted out inwardly. With His hair in place, a dress on, and light makeup applied.

2

The time goes back about thirty-six hours from the party scene to the beginning of the story.

???: “I’m pretty sure it’s a cold.”

The blonde maid Frederica shook her head lazily as she checked on Ram, who was lying on the bed in her room with a red face, and gave a blunt diagnosis.

Ram: “Yes”

The lying Ram replied shortly.

Ram: “A misdiagnosis. Ram is fine. You can’t trust anything Frederica says.”

Frederica: “How dare you! Don’t be so stubborn. If you collapse in public because of this, who do you think will suffer the most?”

Ram: “Damn, you coward… I’m sorry.”

Frederica pressed Ram’s forehead down as she tried to sit up and get off the bed. At her point, Ram’s cheeks hardened and she turned her face down in frustration.

Frederica: “You can call me a coward or whatever you want. Anyway, you need to rest for a few days. It’s just that you’ve been sick for a long time, so take care of yourself.”

Ram: “But if Ram is asleep…”

Frederica: “…I’ll let the Master know you’re here. We have to think of alternatives, too.”

She pushed Ram’s forehead, who was glaring at her with a red face, and forced her into a pillow to rest. This stubborn girl won’t even take a moment to rest unless you do this. So just rest.

Frederica: “I’ll take care of it somehow, so you can rest quietly.”

The best thing to do was to reassure her, assuring her forcefully that she was in good hands.

Frederica: “That’s why Ram needs to stay in bed for a few days. Please try to avoid going to her room, as we don’t want you to catch it.”

At the dinner table, Frederica gave an announcement about Ram’s condition. In the dining room of the Roswaal mansion, all the members of the Emilia camp reacted to the report in different ways. Subaru, for example, crosses his arms and turns his head.

Subaru: “So Ram’s not feeling well. That’s what I called a demon sickness.”

Emilia: “Oh my goodness, Subaru, you’re acting so weird again… So, is Ram going to be okay? Is it really just a cold?”

Frederica: “Yes, you don’t have to worry about it. It’s just that Emilia-sama is going through an important time, and Ram doesn’t want Emilia to catch her cold. I’m sure she’s thinking about that too…”

Subaru: “Feels like Nee-sama is unsure about that.”

Subaru chuckles at Frederica’s indecisive tone.

Subaru: “You know they say you can cure a cold by passing it on?”

Frederica was sure he'll say something like that. No wonder Frederica couldn't say it outright. Anyway, Ram's health condition was worrisome, but it seemed that we would have to wait and see how she progressed and recovered. Subaru wouldn't be immune to a cold from another world, and it could inadvertently make him seriously ill.

Subaru: "In fact, what would happen to me if I got a cold or something over here…? Hey, Emilia-Tan. Do you have any memories of colds? Is it still painful?"

Emilia: "What? Me? I'm sorry. I've never had a cold, so I don't know…"

Subaru: "Oh, really? You have never had a cold. That's unusual."

Emilia, who was sitting next to Subaru answered his question with a troubled eyebrow. Then, she made a goofy grin and gave him a cute look.

Emilia: "Maybe it's because I obeyed Puck's orders to eat well and sleep warm? I've always been Reeealy healthy."

Subaru: "It's called beauty and health, and the Puck's advice was rather spot on…"

The beauty of Emilia's upbringing can be attributed in no small part to her natural upbringing, as well as to Puck's acquired advice. Beauty is something that can be seen in every gesture. Emilia was perfect in this respect as well.

Subaru: "However, that wasn't a good reference point for a cold in my world. Hey Beako, have you ever had a cold or anything like that…? I don't think so right.

Beatrice: "Of course not. I don't want Betty to be lumped in with the rest of you, In fact. I don't think I'm weak enough to be affected by something as obscure as a cold, I suppose.

Subaru: "Hmmm, cute how you puff out your chest with useless opinions."

He gently stroked Beatrice's head as she proudly answered, and Subaru stopped, looking expectantly at his two companions, Garfiel and Otto, instead.

Subaru: "You guys look like you're not even remotely acquainted with a cold."

Otto: "I'm curious as to what your opinion is based on, but the fact is, I haven't had a cold either, so I can't argue with you."

Garfiel: "My amazing self has never had one either. Sis, can't Ram be helped with healing magic?"

The two of them answered as expected, but Frederica shook her head at Garfield's question.

Frederica: "I understand how you feel, Garf. But unfortunately, there are traces of a constitutional problem in her case that cannot be cured by any kind of healing magic."

Garfiel: "That's right… Got it."

It is Garfield who has feelings for Ram. He is unhappy to hear that the woman he loves is suffering, but he is not so stubborn as to reject his sister's opinion. Healing an injury and healing a disease are two different things, It seemed that healing magic was not a cure all.

Petra: "Yes! Subaru-sama, I've caught a cold before!"

Subaru: "Oh! That's my girl, Petra! You're the only one who can live up to my expectations! No. Emilia-Tan and the others were just as I expected, or rather, how I expected them to be."

Petra: "Tee-hee, I'll tell you. I was so confused, it was difficult to think clearly when I got sick."

Subaru: "I know, right?"

Petra's experience, which she had raised her hand to share, confirmed Subaru's memory of his own cold. It brought back memories of his mother leaving him porridge with the wrong amount of sugar and salt at night when he was suffering from a fever, and his father's fainting when he caught it. It was not a good memory. And while we're talking about that—

???: "Subaru-kun, wow, aren't you going to ask meeeee?"

Roswaal, sitting at the far end of the table, said this with a fluttering wave of his hand. Subaru scratched his head at his caring attitude, and said, "No," before going on.

Subaru: "I don't mind if you ask, but I'm guessing you've never had a cold either, Roswaal?"

Roswaal: Oh, that's not very nice. I'll tell you what, Even though, Iiii was a very sickly boy when I was young. It wasn't the common cold but, I spent a lot of time in paaaain.

Subaru: "Huh. Hmm."

Roswaal: "Oh, you don't seem interested."

Subaru: "I don't know how much to believe, and Petra's episode was more realistic and cute, so Petra is the winner. Petra wins."

Petra: "I did it! I'm winning!"

A delighted Petra came running up to him, and Subaru high-fived her. He then took Petra in his arms and twirled her around, making her squeal with delight before letting her down on the floor. After that, Beatrice was not happy, so he took her in his arms and spun her around as well.

Emilia: "Hehe, Subaru has become good friends with the two of you, hasn't he? I'd like to try it too."

Subaru: "Emilia? Well, Emilia-tan is as light as an angel's feather, so it's okay, but it's a rather surprising opinion…"

Emilia: "Petra and Beatrice, you look Reeealy cuddly!"

Subaru: "Oh, you want to spin them around? Okay, here you go."

Beatrice: “Don’t just hand Betty over like she’s property, I suppose!”

When he handed Beatrice over, she was met with protests from the recipient. However, Emilia happily took Beatrice in her arms and began to spin her around on the spot. It’s a very pleasant sight to behold, but…

Otto: “I don’t mean to put a damper on your fun, Emilia-sama, but… didn’t Ram-san have plans to go out tomorrow night to escort the Margrave an event?”

Frederica: “Thank you, Otto-sama. Yes, that’s the problem.”

When Otto raised his hand, Frederica’s expression tightened as she said, “This is where the real issue lies.” The problem was exactly what Otto had just pointed out.

Frederica: “Tomorrow night, Ram was going to accompany her master to a party hosted by Gwain Merette-dono. However, she caught a cold…”

Subaru: “Ros-Chi is going to a lonely party by himself?”

Frederica: “I can’t blame you for thinking of Ram, unfortunately, Gwain-dono’s party has certain requirements, and it is essential that you have a female companion.”

Subaru: “What are those requirements…?”

Subaru looks over at Frederica, wondering how such a ridiculous thing could be possible. “I’m sure you’ve heard of it,” she said, nodding earnestly and letting out a long, deep sigh.

Frederica: “It sounds like a joke, but it’s true. Gwain-sama is a representative of the Chamber of Commerce in the western part of the kingdom… In other words, he is the head of the Chamber of Commerce centered on Margrave Mathers territory. He is a very capable person, but he has a few quirks…”

Subaru: “So what’s the big deal? What’s the hard part?”

Frederica: “He is an old friend of the Margrave”

Subaru: “Whoa.”

With that one word, Subaru immediately understood the troublesome nature of the yet unseen Gwain. So everyone in the dinning room shared the uneasiness that Frederica had.

Subaru: “So, this friend of Roswaal’s is having a party, and he needs a female companion? I could understand if there was no reason, but is there a reason?”

Frederica: “Well, I guess Gwain-dono wants nothing more than to liven up the party. In fact, it was very popular. It’s also used as an occasion for powerful people to bring their daughters as their companions in order to match them with promising young men.”

Subaru: “I see. It’s like a social gathering…”

Subaru had a preconceived notion that the so-called social parties of the upper class were often used as a meeting place for the children of the nobility. In fact, from what I hear now, it seems like it’s not too far off.

Subaru: “So, now that Ram’s sick, what do we do? Isn’t there anyone else?”

Garfiel: “If you can’t take Ram, can’t you take sis? Oh wait, she’s too big and scary, so it’s better to keep her around here… Ouch!”

Petra: “Garf-san, that made me angry.”

Garfiel’s comment had offended not Frederica herself, but her co-worker Petra. His ears were tugged, and Garfiel’s nose wrinkled in pain.

Frederica: “Thanks to Petra, I won’t say anything to Garf, but it will be difficult for me to accompany the master. It’s hard to keep the house running when I have to take care of Ram also.”

Petra: “Uh-oh.”

Frederica’s opinion was that it would be unwise to leave the mansion in Petra’s hands for a few days. When Petra heard this, she puffed up her cheeks in frustration at her lack of ability.

Emilia: “Oh, well then, since you guys are being so difficult, do you want me to go with you?”

Subaru: “No, Emilia-Tan, that’s not really needed…”

As an alternative, Emilia, with Beatrice on her lap, recommended herself. However, Subaru stopped the proposal because he thought it would be problematic. This is not to say that I am worried about letting Emilia out into the world. It’s also not that I don’t have concerns, but that’s not what this is about.

Otto: “I agree with you, Natsuki-san. If Emilia-sama goes with the Margrave here, the participants of the party will not have time for that…”

Emilia: “Is that because I’m a half-elf?”

Otto: “No, it’s because Emilia-sama is a candidate for the throne.”

Emilia’s fears were misplaced; the main problem was her position. Emilia is one of the candidates for the election of the next king of Lugnica, and she is one of the most important people in the country. If she were to attend a party without notice, the confusion among the participants would be unimaginable.

Otto: “The organizer will not feel good about losing the spotlight. From the sphere of influence of the Chamber of Commerce, they would want to maintain a good relationship with Gwain-san. Am I wrong?”

Emilia “You’re right, you’re right. That’s why you’re so smart, Otto-san. I’m impressed.”

Otto: “I’m not sure what gives you that confidence, but… Anyway. That’s why I think it would be wise for Emilia-sama to avoid going with the Margrave.”

Emilia “Hmm, okay. Thank you, Otto-Sensei.”

Backing down meekly at the polite explanation, Emilia continued with the word, “But…”

Emilia: “Then who’s going to go with Roswaal? If I can’t, and neither can Frederica, then…”

Petra: “I don’t want to do this. I absolutely hate it.”

With a cute, adorable smile, Petra immediately eliminated herself as an option. I couldn’t even muster up the courage to try to persuade her with her absolute refusal.

Subaru: “Well, if Petra is no good, then the last option is…”

If we limit the candidates to women, we are missing Ram, Frederica, Emilia, and Petra, of course, since Rem, who continues to sleep, can not be considered as a candidate. Finally we have only one candidate left…

Roswaal: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “Wahh.”

Beatrice moans as she rests her weight on Emilia’s soft lap. The one who called her name was Roswaal, whose different colored gazes were staring straight at the girl. The relationship between the two of them is extremely complicated, even after they got over the incident in the sanctuary. In the first place, Roswaal’s position in the camp is quite precarious, but apart from this relationship, the relationship between the two of them is complicated. Of course, Beatrice is angry with Roswaal. She had every right to be angry. And yet, Beatrice is kind.

So if Roswaal was serious about patching things up with her, she couldn’t just brush his hand away. So…

Beatrice: “I understand, In fact. I don’t want to, but I will listen to you if you ask me nicely, I suppose. Betty’s coming to the party with you…”

Roswaal: “I’m flattered by the sentiment, but… You’re too young to be my companion, after all.

It's also complicated to explain our relationship to the people around us."

Beatrice: "Drop dead, In fact"

As soon as she showed compassion, her palm was returned and Beatrice threw her napkin at Roswaal. Roswaal folded his hands on the table, comfortably avoiding it.

Roswaal: "That's why I'm in a very diiiifficult situation. As Otto-kun said, I want to keep a good relationship with Gwain-dono considering the future of the royal selection. So, I want to avoid missing theeee party, you know?"

Subaru: "What if we told him what happened, and asked if you could go unaccompanied because…"

Roswaal: "If my presence is underestimated. I would say that's a bad move."

Shaking his head slowly, Roswaal dismissed Subaru's opinion. To be honest, I'm not sure how much of Roswaal's argument I can trust, but he is complicit in one thing: he has to win the royal selection.

If that's the case, then we need to take this matter reasonably seriously.

Subaru: "Substitute plan. Substitute plan…"

Emilia and the other women in the camp are difficult to bring along. If Beatrice can't join, it'll be tough to convince Petra to join for the same reason. In that case, it would be best to recruit a companion from outside the camp, but is there such a convenient person close at hand?

Subaru: "It can't be Annerose, can it?"

Roswaal: "If you say it's for Emilia's sake, I'm sure she'll be happy to help, but…I mean, there's a good chance that she has already been invited to the party."

The young girl who is a distant relative of Roswaal is a huge Emilia sympathizer, so if it was a simple request for cooperation, she would lend a hand right away. But it's meaningless if the most important thing is that she herself is an invited guest.

Subaru: "In that case, we'll have to resort to the last option, right?"

Emilia: "…?"

Emilia tilted her head with a curious look on her face at Subaru's prepared words. It was for the sake of this pretty-faced girl. - Subaru's determination to take a stand was firm.

3

…The next day, it was time for Roswaal to leave for the party. In front of the house, a dragon carriage was set up, and preparations were already being made for departure. However, the problem of being unaccompanied had not been solved, and Emilia's face was clouded with anxiety.

Emilia: "Subaru told me to leave it to him…"

- Attending the party was a barrier that Emilia had to overcome in order to be elected king. Emilia felt a twinge of disappointment at her inability to help in such an important matter. She was glad that Subaru had patted her on the shoulder, as usual, for her sake.

Beatrice: "No need to worry, In fact, Emilia. That's what Subaru said he would do, I suppose."

Emilia "Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "Subaru said they'd take care of it, I suppose, He must have some idea what he's doing, In fact. Betty and the others should just wait until Subaru asks for help, I suppose."

Next to Emilia, a smiling Beatrice encourages her in this way. Emilia was happy to see such kindness and concern. Beatrice has really changed. And that's because the change was brought about by Subaru, of all people.

Emilia: "You're right. I believe in Subaru… yes I do."

Beatrice: “You’re correct, In fact”

Emilia stroked the girl’s head softly, smiling at Beatrice who nodded proudly. Beatrice didn’t let that hand go unanswered. She sighs and accepts it.

Frederica: “Please rest assured, Emilia-sama. In the meantime, Petra and I are working on the next best thing.”

Petra: “I’m sure you’ll be happy to hear that Emilia-sama and Beatrice-chan are talking to each other.”

Frederica, who was also standing at Roswaal’s send-off, interrupted. Next to her, Petra. She clenched her fists.

Petra: “Yes, It’s a work that Frederica-Neesama and I are proud of. I would have hated it if it was for my master, but it was for Emilia-sama, so I did my best.”

Emilia: “Huh? I don’t know what it is, but I appreciate it, Petra-chan.”

Petra: “Heh heh.”

Petra’s cheeks stained with cuteness, and Emilia smiled at her report of her struggle. However, next to her,

Frederica: “But… There is one thing I’m not sure about. Apparently, Ram was also planning something, and I don’t know what she was planning when she was bed sick.”

At Frederica’s words, Petra puts her finger to her lips and tilts her head. It is certainly questionable that Ram, who needs to rest, called Otto, who is the hardest working man in the camp. It would be very bad for him to catch a cold.

Emilia: “But Roswaal, is late. Subaru and the others are nowhere to be seen…”

???: “I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

As the time for departure approaches, Emilia is anxious that Roswaal is nowhere to be seen. An unfamiliar voice suddenly rings in her eardrums, shaking her faintly.

Emilia: “Oh.”

Turning around, Emilia looked with her purplish blue eyes. What she saw in her round eyes was a woman in a black dress who appeared from the main gate of the Roswaal mansion. Emilia recognized the woman with the long shiny black hair, a big ribbon, and a jet black dress. She met her once before.

Emilia: “…You’re Natsumi Schwartz, right?”

Natsumi: “Yes, it’s been a while, Emilia-sama. I’m honored that you remember me.”

The woman, Natsumi Schwartz, stood in front of Emilia, picked up her skirt with a graceful gesture, and gently performed a perfect curtsy. Emilia followed her gesture and gave her a tentative bow. The smiling Natsumi was a woman with a strange atmosphere who had sat at the same table as Emilia when a legendary chef had been invited to the Roswaal mansion before it burned down. She is beautiful and elegant, but also strangely familiar. She seemed like a familiar and likable person, but unfortunately, she left the mansion as soon as she finished eating, and I regretted that I could not talk to her for a longer time.

Emilia: “But why is Natsumi here?”

Natsumi: To tell you the truth, Natsuki Subaru-sama asked me for a favor. He asked me if I could accompany the Margrave to the party that he is attending tonight.

Emilia: “Ah…”

After Natsumi’s explanation, Emilia understood that she was Subaru’s idea. It was unclear how they were connected, but it seemed that Subaru and Natsumi were on the same page when it came to asking for favors. So, Natsumi agreed to take care of tonight.

Emilia: “Huh? But where’s Subaru?”

Natsumi: “If you are looking for Natsuki-sama, he is at my parents’ house helping them in exchange for my attending the party tonight. It will only be for a day, and he will be back tomorrow.”

Emilia: “…Subaru is so cool.”

It was truly typical of Subaru that he prepared everything by himself without saying anything to Emilia. Emilia bowed her head to Natsumi, her cheeks relaxing at her skillfulness.

Emilia: “Thank you for coming. Take care of yourself tonight, okay?”

Natsumi: “Yes, you can count on me as if I were on a big ship. I’ll make sure everything goes smoothly.”

And that’s how much more manly Natsumi answered, slapping herself on the chest. Emilia was relieved, and turned to Beatrice and the others beside her.

Emilia: “What? Beatrice, what’s wrong?”

Beatrice: “…It’s nothing, I suppose. Only, Betty was stupid enough to believe it wouldn’t work, In fact.”

Natsumi: “Oh-ho-ho, she’s adorable.”

Natsumi put her hand over her mouth and smiled at Beatrice, who looked embarrassed. When she saw this, Beatrice’s expression became more and more ashamed, Emilia doesn’t quite understand what that means. When it comes to not understanding, there is no one who seems to be more perplexed than Beatrice.

Emilia: “Frederica, Petra, what’s wrong with you two? What’s wrong?”

Frederica: “Oh, no, actually, uh, it’s, uh…”

She clammed up, and Frederica’s gaze swam wide. Emilia tilted her head at Frederica’s inarticulate response.

Petra: “Actually! Frederica-Neesama also asked for her friends to come!”

Then it was Petra who spoke up on Frederica’s behalf. She answered Emilia’s question quickly while fumbling and waving her hands around.

Petra: “I was helping Frederica’s friends change their clothes at the mansion! That’s why I thought this would be a good way to accompany the master…”

Emilia: “Oh, you did? But then, what should we do? Even though Natsumi is here, too…”

This would create not an unaccompanied problem, but an over-accompanied problem. Is it better to have more than less? It’s a difficult question for Emilia, who doesn’t know much about the social scene, but…

Roswaal: “Sorry to keep you waiting. We’re all set.”

Emilia: “Roswaal! We’ re in trouble, actually…”

Emilia turned around at the sound of Roswaal’s voice. Emilia was about to ask him for his opinion on the problem of too many companions,

“…”

When she saw Roswaal with different women on either side of him. One of them was a petite woman with long blond hair and jade eyes. She wore a loose dress that hugged her body and walked with a straight back. The atmosphere is somewhat similar to Frederica’s, and except for her height, her facial features may be similar as well. Perhaps this woman is Frederica’s friend. If so, who is the woman next to her?

???: “Ugh…”

She is a thin woman with wavy gray hair and beautiful ornaments. She has a neutral face, but the lightly applied makeup enhances her good looks. She looks so good in a dress that exposes her thin white shoulders that it is a shame that she walks with her head down.

Emilia: “Uh, Roswaal, those two…”

Roswaal: “Emilia-sama, may I present. This is Miss Garnet and Miss

Audrey. We just met in the entrance hall of the mansion. It seems that Frederica and the others, as well as Ram, have been taking care offff things for me."

Emilia: "I heard about Frederica and the others helping, but Ram too?"

From the description, the gray-haired woman, Audrey and the one Roswaal had introduced me to, must have been the one Ram had asked to represent her as his companion. In the end, as a result of everyone in the camp taking care of each other, there were three companions.

Roswaal: "…Oh, there you are."

Natsumi: "It's been a long time, Margrave Mathers. I am Natsumi Schwartz.

Roswaal notices Natsumi, who has been standing in alongside Emilia and the others to be their companions. Emilia touched Natsumi's shoulder and said, "I see."

Emilia: "Subaru did us a favor, and Natsumi came. But…"

Roswaal: "No, I see, I see. I'm glad you're here, Miss Natsumi. Well, then. Thank you for coming, If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask."

There, Roswaal's smile deepened, and he closed one eye and looked at Natsumi with his blue eye. Then, in front of Emilia and the others, he gestured to their potential companions.

Roswaal: "I'd like to attend this party with you three."

Yes, by making such a bold choice, he was able to bring the situation to a successful conclusion.

And so, he set off on his way to the party, accompanied by Natsumi and the others in his dragon carriage.

And so, as they watched the back of the carriage going away…

Petra: “Frederica-Neesama, um, are you okay?”

Frederica: “Yes, it is… It looks perfect on the outside, but it’s what’s on the inside that counts.”

When Petra let out her anxiety, Frederica also covered her own mouth and thought about it. I’m not going to say it’s a great idea. I thought I had come up with a rather ingenious plan, but I hadn’t expected that there would be two other people who would have a similar idea. To be honest, there were too many unknowns whether this would turn out to be a good idea or a bad one.

Frederica: “But surely everything will be all right. You see, Otto-sama is there.”

Petra: “Yes, you’re right. Because Otto-san’s there.”

Frederica and Petra pushed aside this uneasy feeling with their expectations of the young man. It’s a good idea to have a good idea of what you’re looking for. Beatrice, as one of those who knew the whole story.

Beatrice: “What a stupid conclusion! I suppose, I don’t think Betty’s partner knows what he’s doing, In fact.”

Emilia: “Hey, Beatrice. I can’t find not only Subaru, but also Otto-san and Garfiel, where did they go?

Beatrice: “…”

Beatrice tilted her head and was at a loss in front of Emilia, who was the only one who was completely fooled. Beatrice was not sure how to respond to this as Subaru’s partner, considering how Subaru feels. “I’m not sure I can tell you the truth right now,” Beatrice said, sighing deeply again.

???: “Achoo”

???: “Oh, no! That’s disgusting! Put your hand over your mouth and sneeze!”

In a running dragon carriage, Audrey suddenly sneezed, and Natsumi lost her ladylike air and shouted at her. When she heard her voice, Garnet broke the silence and said, “So you’re really the captain?

Garnet: “Holy shit, captain. You look like a woman. The smell is the captain, but my amazing self can’t be sure it’s the captain. What’s going on?”

Natsumi: “It’s like a combination of old skills, hard work and dedication. —What do you think? My voice sounds like a woman, doesn’t it?”

Garnet: “Holy shit!”

Natsumi coughs lightly and her voice changes tone, and Garnet slaps her knee. Natsumi frowned at Garnet’s unladylike posture as she sat down and opened her legs.

Natsumi: “It’s not a good look, Garnet, even if you only have your sisters eyes. Are you sure you can fulfill your duties like that? I don’t care if Frederica and the others scold you.”

Garnet: “Ugh… my amazing self knows what I’m doing. I’m the one who took on this role too, you know.”

Garnet smiles as she closes her legs at the sharp point and lightly leans her body at an angle. I’m not sure if it’s the result of Frederica’s makeup or Petra’s. I’m not sure if it’s a good thing or a bad thing. If she smiled silently, her gender would be undetectable because of her hidden physique.

Natsumi: “So, how long are you going to keep your mouth shut? Don’t you think it’s time to make up your mind?”

Audrey: “I’m more curious as to why you’re so adamant about this!”

Natsumi: “Oh-ho-ho-ho”

Audrey blushed and yelled at Natsumi, who put her hand over her mouth and laughed loudly. However, in no time at all. Audrey immediately covered her face with her hands, as if ashamed of herself. and covered her face with her hands.

Audrey: “How could this happen? If I knew there had been two other people besides me, I wouldn’t have had to resort to such emergency measures! I’ve been tricked!”

Natsumi: “Tricked is a bad word to use. I didn’t deceive anyone. It’s just that our compassion for each other got out of control because we didn’t keep up with our communication.”

Audrey: “Yeah, yeah.”

Natsumi gently patted Audrey on the shoulder as she wept hopelessly, as if it was the end of the world. Natsumi rolled her eyes, “Oh dear.”

Natsumi: “It’s more plain than I thought, dear. The flavors of the ingredients have been brought to life.”

Audrey: “I’m not happy about that assessment at all.”

Garnet: “That’s what you call Ram’s handiwork. I don’t know how Otto-Bro managed to pull it off.”

Otto: I don’t want to hear it from you two, Natsuki-san and Garfiel!

And so Garnet no, Garfiel was chewed out by Audrey no Otto. Needless to say, it was Garfiel who was dressed as the blonde woman, and Otto as the gray-haired woman. And the last one, Natsumi Schwartz, was the one who…

Subaru: “So she’s the temporary form of Natsuki Subaru, as you know.”

Otto: “Um, how come you’re so smooth and perfect? Even your voice has changed, hasn’t it?”

Subaru: “Actually, I failed once before because I couldn’t change my voice. Ever since then, I’ve been practicing for a chance at revenge.”

This is the third time that Natsuki Subaru has dressed up as a woman, but in both cases, he tried to use a disguised voice and failed. The first time, Subaru was clueless, and the second time, Subaru put Puck around his neck and asked him to speak for Subaru, but you get the idea.

Subaru: “After all, it’s my handiwork. I’d trust you more if you learned it as your own skill.”

Otto: “I don’t know if you can learn to copy a woman’s vocal chords even if you try.”

That being said, Subaru was able to do it with practice, so there was nothing Subaru could do about it. Incidentally, Otto’s natural voice is quite high, so a little conscious effort should be enough for him to be treated as a neutral tone.

Subaru: “But Garfiel’s tone is harsh. You’d better not talk once you’re there.”

Garfiel: “Oh, that’s what my sis says about me. I was told to keep silent, to smile, and to bow.”

Subaru: “Well, as long as you’re careful about it, you’ll be fine. But still…”

He told Garfiel to be thorough in his manners, and then Subaru broke off. In the dragon carriage, he alternately looked at his two companions, who had changed so much.

Garfiel: “You’re surprisingly good at cross-dressing. It’s like Operation Spy”

Subaru: “Surprisingly, It’s not like I wanted to! Why are you two cross-dressing?”

Garfiel: “I was persuaded by my sis and Petra. To be honest, I was hoping for a break…”

Subaru: “What?”

Garfiel: “It’s for Ram, alright… She said she’d be happy if I did it.”

Subaru and Otto exchanged glances at the embarrassed Garfield, who rubbed the bridge of his nose with his finger. I pity him. She is completely taking advantage of his love for her. Frederica and the others have gone to any means they could think of.

Subaru: “So, enough about Garfield, Otto, what about you? Aside from looking good in women’s clothes. But you didn’t want to do it yourself, did you? Why did you let Ram talk you into it?”

Otto: “The reason for this is because, unusually, Ram-san had asked me for a favor. If I miss this opportunity, it will have a big impact on the election of the king, so I had to make a hard choice.”

Subaru: “Hmm. That’s it? That is all it took to convince you?”

Otto: “Oh, really?”

Of course, Subaru was not sure if he would be able to maintain his normal composure if he encountered a rare situation where Ram was asking for a favor in a nonchalant manner. However, even if that was the reason for his loss of judgment, it was still somewhat unnatural for him to agree to dress as a woman.

Subaru: “What? No way, Otto, you…”

Otto: “What is it?”

Subaru: “Did you actually have a secret desire to dress as a woman? So you took this opportunity to…?”

Otto: “don’t look at me like you’ve just found out the terrible truth!”

Otto spat and screamed at Subaru’s shocked face. Then, while he was breathing hard.

Otto: “Your crazy prediction is way off! I really only did what Ram asked me to do. I thought I was doing the camp a favor, and this is how they treat me!”

Subaru: “Wow, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, calm down. Look, you’re ruining your pretty face…”

Otto: “Shut up”

If he teased him too much, he might end up in a fistfight, so Subaru restrained himself.

Anyway, the situation between Otto and Garfield was understood. In the end, it was a tragedy that occurred because all of them didn’t talk about their intentions, as originally expected.

Subaru: “So you’re happy with this, huh? You’ve been smirking all day.”

Roswaal: “oh my! So you’re not just going to leaaaave me out?”

Finally, Subaru turned the spotlight on the last person riding in the dragon carriage – the party’s escort, Roswaal. He was in the same dragon carriage with Subaru and the others from the beginning. He watched with a wry smile as the three cross-dressers finished their discussion.

Subaru: “You have bad taste. Are our struggles that funny?”

Roswaal: “I’m more thaaaan a little flattered, aren’t I? After all, you guys took the role of accompanying me in this situation so seriously, If I can’t live up to that spirit, then my feelings foooor you guys will be lost… Haha!”

Subaru: “Don’t laugh in the middle of a sentence!”

It was hard to be convincing when you start laughing right in the middle of a sentence that is so silly. Finally, Roswaal gave up trying to hold in his laughter and began to shake his shoulders and laugh hysterically

Roswaal: “I was surprised to see Subaru dressed in women’s clothing again, but I didn’t expect to see Otto and Garfiel as well… Ha-Ha! Ha-Ha-Ha!!”

Subaru: “Is that supposed to be funny? I’ve never seen you laugh so much before.”

Roswaal’s laughter is a rare sight, but…It was outrageous that

Subaru could pull it off and dress as a woman as a result of his compassion. In the end, Roswaal was too busy laughing to engage in conversation, so Subaru crossed his arms and sat down deeply in his seat. And then, on the side of Subaru…

Garfiel: “By the way, me and Otto-Bro dressed up as women because we were asked to. What’s wrong with the captain dressing up as a woman? Did Emilia-sama ask you to do that?”

Subaru: “No, no, no, Emilia-Tan didn’t ask me to do anything like that. Emilia-Tan doesn’t even know we’re dressed as women.”

Otto: “I did not know about that either, but why are you doing this, Natsuki-san?”

Subaru: “What? Isn’t she cute?”

With a surprised look on his face, Subaru looked at both Otto and Garfiel. The more times Subaru has done this, the better Subaru has gotten at dressing up as a woman, and this time it was quite a big production. So Subaru went in rather enthusiastically and confidently, regardless of the circumstances.

Otto and Garfiel: “…”

Otto and Garfiel looked reluctantly at Subaru’s unexpected voice. Subaru feels like a strange emotional gap has been created.

Subaru: “Wait, wait, don’t get me wrong. It’s just that none of the women could participate, so I had to take a stab at it, and I’m totally with Otto on this one.”

Otto: “No, but it’s voluntary, right? That’s a little…”

Garfiel: “Captain, you can’t tell Otto-Bro about your taste in women’s clothing, can you?”

Subaru: “It’s not like that! It’s just that when I’m going to do something, I’m going to do it completely, and it’s only right to have high quality, right? Did I say something wrong?”

Roswaal: “Pfft.”

Subaru: “Don’t laugh, Roswaal!”

While revealing unexpected aspects of each other, the group heads off to their destination. They have no idea of the calamity that awaits them there, which is more than just cross-dressing.

5

…and so the story returns to the scene at the beginning, in the party hall.

Subaru, Garfiel, and Otto = Natsumi, Garnet, and Audrey were Roswaal’s companions, and they successfully entered the party without any problems. Of course, there was the assumption that Roswaal and the invited guests, would have full confidence in them.

Natsumi: “I guess we’re not so bad at this after all, Ho ho ho”

???: “…”

Once they were safely ushered into the venue and blended into the party without any problems, Natsumi, who was in high spirits, let out a loud laugh. Next to her, Garnet, who was unable to speak due to her voice tone problem, kept silent and passed the time appropriately with a lousy smile. And as for Audrey, she was the least enthusiastic.

Man 1: “Miss, why don’t we have a little chat over there?”

Man 2: “If you’d like, I’d be happy to join you for a drink.”

Man 3: “The glow of the moon tonight and the color of your hair are very striking. I want to gaze upon it for a long time.”

Audrey: “Haha, thank you. But I’m sorry. I’m not feeling well right now, so I’d like to be by myself.”

With the men calling out to her one after another, Audrey left the crowd and took a breath. She wanted to sit on the balcony and enjoy the cool breeze to cool down the heat of the party. To be honest, since we entered the venue, the men have been constantly coming at us with no time to rest. Audrey had heard that this was a place to meet people, but the hunt of a hungry wolf is insatiable. They are so hungry that they are even blinded by the gender of the person in front of them. If they don't develop a better eye for women, even if they do meet someone, they will probably end up unhappy. Or is it that "good"?

Audrey: "Hmm, makeup is scary. I can see how men can turn into…"

The person who applied makeup to Audrey was obviously Ram, who had managed to overcome her own health problems to get the job done. Audrey was not under the impression that she wore a lot of make-up, but since it was in her nature to be good at everything, Audrey was not surprised that she was good at it. Ram was satisfied with the finished product of Audrey's make up.

Originally, Audrey's sense of beauty and ugliness was normal, so she was aware of the fact that her face could be seen in a reasonable way, except that she was a little too genial looking. Audrey didn't think that she would be able to deceive people like this by dressing up as a woman with some makeup, but…

Audrey: "Well, the same goes for Natsuki-san and Garfiel, for that matter…"

Thanks to the outfit that disguised his figure, Garfiel's cross-dressing was more feasible than expected. If he didn't know the truth, he would be able to pass himself off as Frederica's sister. You can see that Petra was more excited than Frederica, at the results, Audrey could feel a smile on her face. I don't know what to say anymore about Subaru, who got ready on his own. I'll just summarize it as the power of his love for Emilia.

Garnet: "…Oh, my shoulders are stiff. Are you okay, Audrey-sis?"

Audrey had distanced herself from the noise, when a tired-looking Garnet came up to her. Garnet, who had been keeping silent for various reasons, made sure that no one was around and then turned her stiff, shriveled shoulders.

Audrey: "Garnet. It was very popular."

Garnet: “If you say that, then Audrey-sis is the same way. She barely even speaks, and yet they all follow you around.”

Muttering in disgust, Audrey glanced toward the center of the hall. There, as usual, Natsumi was having a good time chatting with many of the participants. She was so excited that she could be heard shouting over and over again.

Garnet: “Captain… No, not so much as a lady”

Audrey: “I really wonder what’s going on with that guy… I’m worried that he won’t respond to me calling him Natsuki-san anymore.”

Garnet: “Kodoro is a quick match with Oodoro” As they say, but… No way, huh?

They were worried that they would get so wrapped up in their roles that they would forget who they really were, but Audrey and Garnet were able to shake off their fears with a wry smile. Anyway, the three of them are making good progress in their infiltration. If they could just get through this night, they would be able to say goodbye to Audrey and Garnet forever.

Audrey: “But we can’t be sure that Natsumi Schwartz will really be gone after this”

Garnet: “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe…”

Audrey: “…? Garnet?”

As they were talking about this, Garnet’s gaze, leaning on the balcony railing, was suddenly fixed on the sky. As she looked up, she saw a magnificent bell hanging from the bell tower on the roof of the house where the event was held.

Audrey: “Oh, that’s the bell tower we saw on the way here. I can’t say for sure until I get a closer look, but that bell and the pillars are quite magnificent, aren’t they?”

Garnet: “Yeah, I like it. When I see something like that, it makes my fangs ache.”

Audrey: “I don’t want you to get hurt so don’t bite it, Garnet…”

Garnet puts her hand over her mouth and clicks her sharp fangs. Audrey had a bad feeling about this, so she made the first move and warned her. Originally, Garnet had a habit of chewing on hard things. She is often seen chewing on knives and files at the Roswaal mansion, so it must be a habit of her being half demi-human.

Garnet: “I know what I’m doing. Um… My amazing self is going to have some food. Audrey-sis, what about you?”

Audrey: “I… I’ll stay here. I am afraid that if you and I were in the hall together, we might be approached by more people.”

With a wave of her hand, Audrey saw Garnet off as she returned to the venue. Garnet did not have the most elegant of manners while eating in public, but since she was told not to speak, it was not too much of an issue. Worst of all, Audrey hopes they don’t find out about this ridiculous plan. As long as it was done carefully and discreetly.

???: “Audrey, right? Aren’t you lonely out here all by yourself?”

Audrey: “Um…”

As Audrey repeats this in her mind, a person who has come to replace Garnet calls out to her. Looking back at the face of the man, Audrey raised her eyebrows with a little nervousness. He was a well-dressed man with a nice stubble. He was a bit of an oddity among the guests, but it didn’t take me long to realize that he was a close associate of Roswaal. The host of the party, Gwain Merette. He was one of the influential people that Emilia needed to get behind her in her bid for the throne.

Audrey: “Gwain-sama, are you sure you want to be here as the host of the party?”

Gwain: “It’s not a glamorous position to be the host. I’m just providing a venue. I want everyone to be happy, so I’m just sharing.”

Smiling, Gwain ducked Audrey’s words. Audrey’s lips pursed lightly as she thought about how annoying he was. It’s unlikely that this exchange will have much impact on the election, but it’s better to make a good impression than a bad one.

Gwain: “I was surprised, though. Roswaal-chan always brought that favorite maid girl, didn’t he?”

Audrey: “She was not feeling well this time, so we accompanied him on her behalf. Although it is far from what her original duties are supposed to be, we are trying not to ruin the name of the Margrave.”

Gwain: “No, no, no, enough is enough. You ladies are beautiful, especially that dark-haired girl, Natsumi Schwartz. She’s got the youngsters by the balls. She’s a bad girl.”

Audrey: “Ha-Ha-ha.”

Audrey couldn’t help but let out a hearty laugh and failed to look feminine. But it didn’t seem to cost her too many points, and Gwain changed the subject, “By the way,” he said.

Gwain: “Since you came to the party tonight, do you have any special items that you’re looking for?”

Audrey: “Item you are looking for…? Is something happening later?”

It was a casual question, but Audrey’s voice stiffened slightly as she replied. Gwain nodded deeply in response.

Gwain: “Yes, yes. The main attraction of our party is the auction, after all.”

Audrey: “An auction…”

At the sound of this, Audrey narrowed her eyes and thought about it. It was a party hosted by Gwain Merette that was held on a regular basis. The reason for the party is ostensibly to be a social gathering for the upper class and to create an opportunity to meet people, but the main focus of the participants is the auction that takes place in the latter half of the party. Gwain, a figurehead of the kingdom's chamber of commerce and industry in the western part of the kingdom, regularly organizes these auctions, offering the wealthy the opportunity to acquire rare items. It is said that some of the items, such as the really rare Metia(Meteor), are put up for sale, and it is not uncommon to see eye-popping sums of money go up in one night.

At least, that's what Audrey has been told by Ram…

Gwain: "We've gathered quite a few unusual items tonight. Newcomers are often interested in the items being auctioned, and I thought you might be too."

Audrey: "Yes, it's very interesting, but I'm not interested in any particular item. I would love to see the atmosphere of the auction itself, though."

Gwain: "Oh, really? I guess my old man's intuition has gotten dull."

Gwain strokes the back of his long brown hair in response to Audrey's reply.

It's a gesture that Audrey has never seen before, but she wonders how much she can trust his smile. Her experience as a merchant calls Audrey to a deep sense of caution. Gwain's demeanor is no different than that of a successful merchant, and she wanted to be prepared to face a successful man.

However, tonight he is not an enemy. Rather, he was an ally that Audrey needed to have on her side. Fortunately, he doesn't have a stomach that hurts from being probed. —Not at all. Because he's dressed as a woman.

Audrey: "It's…"

The urgency of dealing with Gwain alone made Audrey look around and try to find an ally to help her. But while she was talking to Gwain and the other men, three of her companions, Natsumi, Garnet, and Roswaal, had disappeared from sight in the hall. Each of them stood out for their own reasons, so it would have been easy to see them if they were in the hall.

Gwain: “Are you looking for someone? “

Audrey: “Well, I’d like you to meet the other young ladies with me and the Margrave…”

It was the moment when Audrey was about to shake her head at Gwain’s question.

—The lights in the hall went out and darkness fell over the area.

Gwain: “Whoa, whoa, whoa. What the hell?”

Audrey choked up, and Gwain shouted in surprise right beside her. It wasn’t just Audrey and the others who were startled, but everyone in the room. Suddenly, it was dark. Audrey’s vision was completely obscured by darkness, and she could barely make out a figure in the dim light coming through the window, but she couldn’t make out who it was.

Gwain: “Everybody, calm down! Our people will turn on the lights immediately. Please stay where you are and don’t move. If you panic, it could be dangerous.”

Gwain, who was already aware of the situation, used his excellent judgment to give instructions to the people around him. Gwain’s figure was illuminated in the darkness as he prevented the initial chaos from erupting. At the tip of his upraised finger, Gwain had a small fire flickering there.

Gwain: “It’s an emergency spell I learned from Roswaal-chan once upon a time. At best, it’s only been useful for reading books in the dark.”

He explained this to Audrey beside him, and then Gwain instructed his men who were all over the hall. There were some magicians among them, and like Gwain, they lit their hands with fire and turned on the lights that had gone out in the hall to bring back the light. This brought a sense of relief to the participants, but Audrey was struck by a completely opposite, a feeling of discomfort.

Audrey: “Where is the Margrave…?”

Just as Gwain lit the lights with his magic, Roswaal could have filled the entire hall with light. But that didn’t happen. There was no sign of Roswaal in the hall.

Audrey: “At a time like this, Where the hell are you…?”

Even though Audrey could see the whole hall again, she couldn’t find any familiar faces among them. It was not only Roswaal, but Natsumi and Garnet as well. Of course, there is a possibility that they all went to the bathroom together, but…

???: “—Representative, I have something I need to tell you right away.”

Gwain: “What is it?”

Next to Audrey, who was lost in thought, one of his subordinates came up to Gwain. He begins to report something to Gwain in a hushed voice.

Gwain: “What? The vault?”

Gwain’s cheeks hardened at the mention of the word, and he quickly regained his composure. He smiled at Audrey standing next to him.

Gwain: “There seems to be a slight problem. I’ll be right back, so don’t panic, just follow the instructions, okay?”

Audrey: “Oh, wait a minute!”

That’s all he said, and then he headed out of the hall with the subordinate that had come to report to Gwain. Audrey reached out her hand to his back but was unsure of her decision. She should refrain from making decisions on her own. Audrey was an outsider, and Gwain should be the one in charge of what happened in this venue. However, at the same time, there was a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that she didn’t understand.

Audrey: “Good grief, Please don’t let anything happen to me.”

Almost scratching her head out of habit and not wanting to mess up her hair, Audrey took off running. The unfamiliar dress and the uncomfortable heels made it hard, but she managed to keep up with Gwain and the others who were going ahead of her without losing sight of them. Gwain and his friends went to a different building from the one where the party was held, a building connected to it by a corridor, which probably had the vault in it.

To put it simply, the vault Gwain had mentioned was where the items for tonight's auction would be stored. There was some kind of problem there, and the person in charge was called in. It was a situation that gave off a very bad vibe. And then…

Audrey: "Gwain-sama, what's going on?"

Gwain: "Miss Audrey? I told you not to come here."

When Gwain turned around at the call and saw Audrey, he looked surprised. The door in front of him was a heavy iron door that looked very secure. Three men were facing the iron door and tried to open it. Naturally, they thought Gwain had the key to the room.

???: "The lock to the vault was broken, and something's stuck inside. We' re trying to open it by force."

Gwain: "The key to the vault is…"

Immediately after that explanation, the steel door was forcibly pushed open by the struggles of Gwain's men. The door, cracked by the pounding of the men, opened. The scene in the middle of the room drew Audrey and everyone else's attention. There was…

???: "What the…?"

At the sound of such a dumb struck voice, the person standing in the storage room turned around. "The person with black hair, a jet-black dress, and a rather sharp look in her eyes was Natsumi Schwartz. -In the closed vault, Natsumi blinked her eyes, seemingly unable to comprehend the situation.

In Natsumi's hand, she was holding what looked like a fake white stone arm.

Natsumi: "…"

At Natsumi's feet, Audrey saw a strange, fat man slumped over. In a closed vault, Natsumi Schwartz stands with what appears to be the murder weapon in her hand. Audrey Souffle felt truly hopeless, having been at the worst possible scene.

6

Audrey Souffle covered her face with her hands when she saw the situation. It was quite, quite a dire situation.

"…"

A fat man is lying on the floor in a storage room whose locks have been broken and sealed from the inside. There were signs of a struggle in the room, which matched the circumstances of the man's collapse. In this locked room situation, if the victim and another person were alone in the room, that person would naturally be the assailant. Audrey has no objection to that opinion. However…

Gwain: "Miss Natsumi Schwartz, did you attack this man?"

Natsumi: "No, You're wrong! I am… Not the one who did this!"

That is, if the suspect is not Natsumi Schwartz, who is shaking her head in desperation. Surrounded by a group of strong men, and threatened by their employer, Gwain, Natsumi keeps her long-lashed eyes downcast and stoutly proclaims her innocence. "I don't care what you say," Audrey thought, but even at the last minute, you've got some tricks up your sleeve.

Natsumi: "You've got it all wrong! It's a false accusation! I'll fight you in court!"

Man in black: "I don't care if you say that you're going to fight."

Natsumi does her best to refute the accusation, but the fact that she was in a locked room with the victim makes her look bad. What makes her position worse is the situation in the locked room. At her feet is the fallen victim, and in her hand is a broken stone arm.

Gwain: “Well, I’d like to hear what the beautiful lady has to say, wouldn’t you? but in this situation, that’s not going to happen look…”

As he said this, Gwain pointed to the stone arm that Natsumi was holding. The fake white arm was covered in blood, indicating at a glance that the victim had been struck with it.

In other words, Natsumi was alone with the victim in the locked room, and she even had the murder weapon in her hand.

Audrey: “Natsumi-san, this is a bit…”

Natsumi: “Hey, Audrey, you tried to throw me under the bus didn’t you! It’s not me, I tell you!”

Natsumi stomped on the ground and complained loudly. I admire her thoroughness in not forgetting to be “Natsumi” even in this critical situation, but she may be an idiot. However, it is a thought that will come back to her, so Audrey doesn’t think too much about it.

Audrey: “By the way, is that man okay? He’s still breathing, right?”

I looked at the man who was being carried out of the room by the black-clad men. He was a middle-aged man, around 40 years old, and seemed to be limp and unconscious, but his chest was moving up and down, indicating that he was still breathing. It was good news that the victim was not dead, even considering the bad position Natsumi was in. Gwain nodded to Audrey’s relief.

Gwain: “This is Sir Lazlane Enimou He was knocked out, but luckily the wound was minor. It’s just that it seems to have hit him in the head. It may take me a little while for him to wake up.”

Audrey: “We can talk about extenuating circumstances until then…”

Natsumi: “Don’t say that while looking at me!”

At Audrey’s blank stare, Natsumi raised her voice with a red face. However, the situation made it impossible for Audrey to fully defend her. It’s easy to prove that Natsumi doesn’t have the guts to beat up a complete stranger for no reason at all.

Man in black: “Representative, we have a problem.”

Gwain: “Another one? Yeah, yeah, yeah… Huh.”

It was one of his men in black who overheard Gwain. Gwain’s expression changed when he heard the report from one of the men who had been inspecting the vault where the crime had occurred. Audrey had a bad feeling about this… When Audrey had a bad feeling about things, and that feeling often came true.

Gwain: “I’m sorry, Miss Natsumi.”

Natsumi: “Huh? Oh, hey, what are you doing?”

Suddenly, one of the black-clad men restrains her arms, and Natsumi lets out a cry of dismay. Gwain touched his stubble in front of Natsumi, closed one eye and smiled lightly.

Gwain: “I am sorry about this Miss Natsumi but, I have an old man’s reputation to uphold.”

Natsumi: “Wait, what’s happening? The problem is… I’m sure it’s not a big deal.”

Gwain: “It’s not like Miss Audrey is involved with this, but You seem to be on friendly terms with Miss Natsumi. Well, Then I’ll tell you, we might have a problem…”

Gwain looked back at her and smiled with a mixture of intelligence and wildness. Audrey felt a chilling sense of intimidation at the sight of that smile, and she couldn’t help but chuckle. Watching Audrey’s reaction, Gwain shrugged his shoulders and said

Gwain: “There are a number of items missing from the vault that will be auctioned off tonight. I’d like to speak to Miss Natsumi, who was in the room and knows what happened, for more information.”

He told Natsumi that the troublesome situation was accelerating and it made Natsumi’s face go pale.

Audrey: “Why does he always have to go head first into the middle of problems like this…?”

She breathed heavily and held her head in a dexterous manner so as not to mess up her hair. In the name of hearing the details, Gwain and his team took Natsumi into custody. There was nothing that Audrey could do at that moment, and the most she could do was solemnly send off Natsumi, who was looking at her with bitter eyes. Although…

Audrey: “There’s no way Natsumi-san did it, but there’s some compelling evidence…”

A physical examination would quickly reveal that Natsumi was not in possession of the goods stolen from the vault. The question then becomes about the man who was beaten up, but Natsumi denies all of it, and Audrey is inclined to believe her. The most important reason is that she has no reason to lie. It was an unusual situation, and if it was the man who attacked her, she should just confess it honestly.

Audrey: “Well, it’s not impossible that the fact that she was attacked by the man herself might be difficult to tell”

Natsumi was a victim with her own success that she was toying with a lot of men at the party, and Audrey can’t deny that she deserved it. In that case, I’d like her to be ashamed and tell the truth, but…

Audrey: “However, that could lead to Natsumi-san’s identity being compromised, which could lead to a conflict here…”

Audrey’s biggest fear was that Natsumi would set off a chain of events that would reveal her and Garnet’s identities. That would be an embarrassment to the Emilia camp, and could leave a very strong mark on the social scene in the future.

Audrey: “And it wouldn’t be much fun if the real culprit escaped while we were fumbling around.”

If Natsumi insists that she didn't do it, then someone else must have beaten up the man and taken the treasure from the vault. At this point. It was no fun for Audrey to see that plan work out so well. So, um…

???: "Hey, Audrey-sis, what's going on?"

Audrey: "Garnet."

As Audrey stood alone in the hallway, Garnet, who had been nowhere to be seen, appeared. Taking advantage of the lack of people around her, Garnet roars in an imposing man's voice.

Garnet: "I thought it suddenly got dark and noisy…There's a lot of trouble with strange things flying in the air and someone getting hit. Sis has been arrested, hasn't she?"

Audrey: "A lot has happened, but the last one is the most problematic. I need to help, Natsumi-san… Garnet, I'll need your help as well."

Garnet: "Oh."

Garnet's green eyes rolled back into her head, and she looked surprised for a moment. However, the surprise quickly disappears and the blonde girl smiles fiercely.

Garnet: "Oh, you're so determined, Audrey-sis. My amazing self can't lose, too. I don't know what it is, but I'm going to do it."

Audrey: "That's the spirit. Let's go see what happened and hear what Natsumi has to say. Also, have you seen the Margrave?"

Garnet: "The bastard has Sis in custody, Where are they?"

Audrey: "Well, I guess we can meet up over there. Let's hurry."

With Garnet nodding her head in agreement, Audrey heads to the waiting room where Natsumi was taken. On the way, she noticed that the lights of the mansion were back on, and kept that fact in her mind. When Audrey and the others came to the front of the waiting room…

???: “I didn’t do anything! The door to the vault was already open when I walked past it!”

From inside the waiting room, Natsumi’s voice echoed down the hallway in her defense. Audrey decided that, despite the content, there seemed to be no progress in the situation.

Audrey: “Excuse me, but is Margrave Mathers inside?”

At the front of the waiting room, Audrey checked in with a burly man in black.

Burly man: “He’s already inside.”

Audrey explained the situation to him and asked him to let Garnet and Audrey into the waiting room.

Roswaal: “Ooooh, you guys came, tooooo.”

It’s a very intimidating sight. In the middle of the room, Natsumi was seated on a chair, surrounded by black-clad men, and Gwain was asking her about her situation. As they watched, Audrey and Garnet naturally lined up next to Roswaal

Audrey: “It’s only natural, given the circumstances. Where have you been all this time, Margrave?”

Roswaal: “In my position, I have a lot of things to do and people to talk to. It’s hard to know who’s friend and who’s foe, and that’s the problem with social circles. I’m glad to be out of it, but this situation is not so easy.”

Audrey: “…I see. I understand.”

Roswaal remains aloof, but Audrey doesn’t have time to worry about him right now. Audrey turns her gaze toward Natsumi, who is being relentlessly interrogated in the center of the room. Her face is pale, and her dark eyes are slightly moistened with sorrow. “I’m in too deep.”

Audrey: “Gwain-sama, Natsumi-san is…”

Gwain: “I’ve been consistent in my assertions. We are having a hard time with it. If we don’t hurry up and solve this problem, we’re going to lose a lot of money.”

Audrey: “I’m sure that’s true.”

When Gwain shrugged his shoulders, Audrey’s eyes fell down with a serious expression. The next to her, Garnet, silently pulled Audrey’s sleeve.

Due to her nature, Garnet is unable to open her mouth in front of anyone other than her companions. At social gatherings, she attracts a lot of attention for being shy and mysterious, but that’s the way it has to be. Anyway, Audrey knew what Garnet was trying to do by pulling her sleeve.

Audrey: “If you don’t mind, we’d like to hear what Natsumi-san has to say.”

Gwain: “If you can get her to say something new, then I would be happy. If you can get her to say she’s sorry she did it, that would be perfect.”

Audrey: “I don’t know if I can live up to your expectations there…”

The expectations were heavy, but the necessary permissions were obtained. Audrey, accompanied by Garnet, walked over to Natsumi, who was slumped in her chair. When Natsumi noticed the two of them, she looked blatantly relieved

“Natsumi: “Audrey, Garnet. I…I…I…”

Audrey: “Let’s cut the small talk and get down to business. What the hell happened to you?”

Natsumi: “There is no sentimentality here… I’m having a really tough time right now, aren’t I?

I’m going to cry if you don’t stay close to me.”

Audrey: “If crying solves your problems, you can make a lake out of your tears, but that’s not how it works. Now, please answer the question.”

Audrey’s outspokenness made Natsumi look frustrated. However, after clearing her frustration with a sigh, Natsumi began to speak in a fluent manner.

Natsumi Schwartz’s testimony

During the party, I was talking to many gentlemen. I had a lot of fun, but I was a little tired, so I left the party.

As I was walking alone in the mansion, I heard a noise coming from the storage room in question. I was so curious that I went over there.

Then I saw the door to the storage room open. I thought it was a little odd, but I took a peek inside. And then there was that noise, wasn’t there?

I’m so scared, I feel like I’m about to cry.

—Natsumi’s tearful testimony was spun while she held a handkerchief to her eyes.

As she listened, Audrey tried to cross her arms, but dismissed the gesture as unladylike and switched to the way Ram postured herself, hugging her own arms.

Audrey: “In the meantime, can you please be more accurate in your testimony? Natsumi-san, you didn’t just peek into the vault, you were inside.”

Natsumi: “Ugh!”

Audrey: “And please don’t leave out what happened from the time we entered the vault until the commotion started. In fact, that’s the most important part.”

Natsumi: “Oh, you’re relentless, Audrey…!”

Audrey pointed out that Natsumi's cheeks tensed up. Watching the exchange next to her…

Garnet: "That's what I'm talking about, Audrey-sis."

She seemed to be satisfied.

Audrey: "Anyway, revise your testimony. Focus on what you left out."

Natsumi: "I guess I don't have a choice. I'll tell you about it…"

Natsumi Schwartz's testimony 2

Yes, Audrey is right. I went inside the vault. I could hardly see what was going on inside from the outside.

The inside of the vault was dimly lit, but when I asked, "Is anyone there?" There was no answer when I asked, I felt very nervous.

…Now that I think about it, maybe it was the thief who made the noise. I was in the middle of my business when I walked into the vault. Maybe that's where he was…

Then I looked around the vault for a bit, but didn't find anything unusual, and the place soon went dark. After that, I have no idea what happened. I felt something hit my foot, and when I picked it up, I found it was the murder weapon… That's all.

Audrey: "I see, I see…"

After listening to what Natsumi had to say, Audrey looked at him with difficulty as she held her arms. Audrey could understand why Gwain had a hard time with this testimony. At any rate, Audrey couldn't find a single piece of information that would get to the heart of the case. It's not like she's being deliberately hasty.

He heard a noise, entered the storage room, and probably went into the thief's place of business. Then, after the lights went out and the mansion went dark, the murder weapon was found at her feet.

Audrey: “I hate to say this, but aren’t you missing the part where you got into a struggle with the fat man victim, or where you hit the attacker over the head with that stone arm?”

Natsumi: “I’ve told you over and over again that I’m not the one who did it, that I didn’t do it! The murder weapon and the man appeared out of nowhere!”

Audrey: “Hmm, credibility…”

Audrey was troubled by Natsumi’s desperate plea, waving her arms in the air. However, Garnet suddenly snapped his canine teeth beside Audrey.

Garnet: “Isn’t it weird that he just came out of nowhere?”

Audrey: “Garnet?”

In a hushed voice, Garnet muttered in a volume that Gwain and the others could not hear.

Natsumi: “I could not tell it was already dark. The lights in the mansion were all out, you know. But if someone had been hit, there would have been a scream. It’s strange that it was so sudden.”

Audrey: “That’s for sure. Natsumi-san, did you just leave that out of your story? The male scream.”

Natsumi: “No, no, not at all. But if you ask me, I certainly did not hear the screams of the fallen gentlemen And the same for the sound of him being struck.”

Natsumi shakes her head and Audrey inwardly admires Garnet’s flash of inspiration. Then again, the story is very different. From the wounds and blood loss, it was clear that the man had been beaten. But if Natsumi didn’t hear the sound of the struggle…

Audrey: “The victim passed out first, and Natsumi-san entered the room later?”

Since Natsumi did not hear the victim’s scream, this conclusion fits well. If this is the case, it is more likely that the noise Natsumi heard was the sound of the victim collapsing, rather than an object. The attack happened first, and then Natsumi enters the room. The lights in the house are turned off, and the perpetrators escape while it is dark, leaving Natsumi and the victim alone in the room. The problem of the sequence of the events has now been overcome. However, there is still a problem.

Audrey: "…The problem is that the entrance was sealed from the inside."

The entrance to the vault was closed, and Gwain's men had to physically pried it open. The lock on the iron door had been broken, and the door had been sealed in some way. And there, Audrey turned to Gwain and said,

Audrey: "Gwain-sama, may I take a look inside the vault?"

Gwain: "For the Miss Oh?"

Gwain was surprised by Audrey's words, but it was a natural reaction. Even at the scene of the crime, he would not want to open the vault where the treasure was still stored to outsiders. The vault is currently being checked against the inventory, and they don't want to be disturbed.

Audrey was about to speak her next words when she heard Gwain's subtle response.

Gwain: "What do you think, Roswaal-chan?"

Roswaal: "Me? I trust you, Audrey-san, don't I? She's a good girl, yesss."

Audrey: "…It's an honor."

Audrey accepts Roswaal's assessment with a reluctant look. It's hard to imagine that the expression on her face could have caused the situation to thaw, but Gwain nodded and said, "Okay."

Gwain: "Go ahead and do it. I don't want to interfere with the work, but Miss Audrey seems to know what she's doing."

Audrey: “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Gwain: “I’ll try anything if it gets results. That’s this old man’s motto.”

When Gwain replied with one eye closed, Audrey compared it with Roswaal’s face. I see, the information that Frederica had given me before we left was true.

Roswaal and Gwain are definitely close friends with bad qualities.

Audrey: “Let’s go check out the vault. Garnet, let’s go.”

Natsumi: “What? What will happen to me? I don’t feel comfortable, you know?”

Audrey: “Instead of standing around here, let’s hurry up and solve the case. It will be better for both of us in the end. Chew on your handkerchief and wait for me.”

I shook off Natsumi’s clinging arms and watched as she really bit her handkerchief with a “kee~k”. Audrey and Garnet walked to the storage room.

On the way, Audrey wrinkled her brow at the meaningful gaze of Roswaal, who closed his yellow eye and gave her support

Roswaal: “I’m counting on you, Audrey-kun”

And Audrey’s brow wrinkled at the thought of such support.

8

Garnet: “So, what are you going to do from here, Audrey-sis?”

Audrey: “The first priority should be to check the status of the vault. The guests at the venue won’t be able to stay for long, so if we don’t do something, Natsumi will be made out to be the bad guy. That’s not going to work.”

As she adjusts to walking in her dress, Audrey answers Garnet’s question.

Audrey: “Oh, by the way.”

She turned her gaze to Garnet.

Audrey: “Where were you when all the commotion was going on? I didn’t see you or the Margrave, let alone Natsumi.”

Garnet: “Oh… My amazing self was in the same place as you, out of the party. After I left Audrey-sis, I was eating dinner, but it was hard for me to talk to you…”

Audrey: “I see. I see. Well, it’s an understandable story.”

Audrey could understand Garnet’s difficulty. If you think about Garnet’s original temperament, there’s a limit to how far she can go to be a wallflower without being able to speak. If Natsumi and Audrey hadn’t gone with her to the party, I shudder to think that Garnet would have had to go with Roswaal alone.

“…”

While she was thinking about this, Audrey was concerned about Garnet’s subtle lack of tact. Maybe Audrey was just over-sensitive, but she felt like there was a delay in her response. However, it is a little faster to get to the front of the vault than to pursue that line of thought.

Audrey: “Gwain-sama gave me permission to come and check the vault.”

In front of the broken door of the vault, the black-clad man standing guard made way for Audrey and the others. Audrey hesitated. Gwain’s subordinate knew his master’s temperament when he could make a decision without hesitation. In any case, so as not to disturb the black-clad men who were inside comparing the inventory with the merchandise, Audrey took another look inside the storage room, which she had not had time to look at earlier.

Garnet: “So, what’s on your mind, Audrey-sis?”

Audrey: “I’ve been so busy that I haven’t had time to check the situation and… Well, the first thing I wanted to check was the area around the broken door.”

Garnet: “The door?”

Raising an eyebrow at the unexpected objective, Garnet turned back to the entrance of the room.

The door to the vault, which housed a lot of valuable items, was very secure. As it was the door to a room that housed the expensive items, it was made of iron, though it was now in a miserable state, broken and cracked from the incident.

Garnet: “What’s wrong with it, it’s all busted up?”

Audrey: “The only way to open it was by force. That’s why it’s broken.”

Garnet: “You know what? If you were going to destroy it anyway, you should have gotten my amazing self.”

Audrey: “I wouldn’t dream of asking the lady of the party to help break down a door.”

Garnet cracked her knuckles. Audrey blocked the gaze of the black-clad man, who was startled by the sound, and looked around the entrance, where the broken hinges lay.

Audrey: “I still don’t see it.”

Garnet: “What is it?”

Audrey: “It’s a pry bar. I can’t find it anywhere. Besides… eep.”

Garnet: “Whoa.”

As she was looking for the missing pry bar, Audrey suddenly slipped. Garnet quickly supports her back and holds her tightly.

Garnet: “You’re so clumsy. Are you still not used to wearing a dress skirt Audrey-sis?”

Audrey: “It’s not something I want to get used to. Thank you for your help. But then again, I slipped because my feet were…”

As she said this, Audrey discovered that the floor she had slipped on was wet. It was a puddle of water, and the soles of her unfamiliar shoes had slipped on it.

Audrey: “It’s not a pry bar, it’s an unnatural pool of water.”

Garnet: “What does that have to do with the case?”

Audrey: “Now, I can’t say for sure yet, but…”

The storage room is far from any water source, and there is nothing in the room that could cause a puddle. The uncomfortable feeling of a puddle of water falling and springing up is strongly burned into my memory.

“…”

Audrey then turned her thoughtful gaze to the cracked steel door. If there was no pry bar, was it the person inside who was holding the door? In that case, based on Natsumi’s testimony that she didn’t do anything, we can only assume that the victim’s body was holding the door. He fell backwards when the door was opened, hit his head and passed out… no, there is no explanation for the murder weapon.

Audrey: “Come to think of it, what did the stone arm that was used as the murder weapon originally belong to?”

In the storage room, Audrey asks a man in a black suit who is checking the inventory. The black suit flipped through the inventory and found the item that was the centerpiece of the auction.

Black suit: “A statue of The Blessed Goddess it’s just…”

Audrey: “Just?”

Black suit: “The statue appears to be one of the stolen items, and all that was left was the arm that was used as the murder weapon.”

Audrey: “I see.”

As the black suit said, there was no stone statue in the room that looked like it. The size of the murder weapon, the arm, was roughly the same as that of a human, so the statue itself was probably about the same size. The size of the…

Audrey: “But then it wouldn’t be easy to take it out, would it? You’re going for the big one, aren’t you?”

Garnet: “Oh? Why? It’s not like it weighs much.”

Audrey: “To you maybe, but not to ordinary people. And even if you could take it out, where would you hide it? In your skirt?”

Garnet: “Oh, I see what you mean.”

Even if you could take out such a large statue of the goddess, you would have no place to hide it and it would be too much to carry.

Black suit: “All the stolen items are all small compared to the statue… As for the criminal’s aim, the statue of the goddess is the one that’s completely out of place.”

Audrey: “The criminal who targeted the easy-to-carry items but couldn’t overlook the statue.”

After receiving a detailed report from the black suit, it became increasingly difficult to narrow down the culprit. Only the targeting of the statue of the Goddess was unique. But…

Audrey: “There are probably a few things that are still bugging me, but I think we got a decent turnout.”

Garnet: “Oh, you figured something out, Audrey-sis?”

Audrey held up one finger in front of the questioning Garnet. Then she closed one eye on Garnet, whose eyes lit up.

Audrey: “I think I can at least change Natsumi-san’s situation.

Roswaal: “Your face, it looks like you’ve maaaade some progress, Audrey-kun.”

As soon as he saw Audrey’s face when she came back into the waiting room, Roswaal loosened his lips and said so. Fed up with the fact that she couldn’t read the depths of their expressions, Audrey nodded and said, “Yes.” and stood in front of Natsumi and Gwain with Garnet.

Audrey: “First of all, I found something unusual in the vault. I think it’s probably a trace left by the murderer, but I don’t think it has anything to do with Natsumi-san.”

Gwain: “Wow, you’re really good at this and in such of a short time… So, what did you find?”

Audrey: “It’s a puddle.”

With a twitch, Gwain raised an eyebrow at Audrey’s reply. And then he asked, “Puddle?” Audrey nodded her chin lightly and said…

Audrey: “There was a puddle of water at the entrance to the vault. Right near the door. Strange, don’t you think?”

Gwain: “It is indeed strange. Some of the items up for auction are paintings, and they’re not supposed to be wet.”

Natsumi: “But what does that puddle have to do with anything?”

Gwain nodded earnestly, and behind him, the captive Natsumi was impatiently waiting for an answer.

Audrey: “May I? The door to the storage vault had the lock broken and was being held from the inside by something. That’s why they pried the door open, but what was holding the door from the inside? When I checked, there was nothing, isn’t that right Garnet?”

When I checked with Garnet next to me, she nodded her head silently. Seeing that affirmation.

Roswaal: “Buuuut you know what?”

Roswaal tilted his head.

Roswaal: “The strange puddle, what’s so important aboooout it?”

Audrey: “Of course. Because this puddle of water affirms the existence of a third party.”

Gwain: Well, that’s a good one. “Well, that’s something to say. What does Miss Audrey think that puddle was?

Gwain seemed to be enjoying himself as he asked Audrey if she was confident. Audrey prefaced her challenge with, “It’s simple”.

Audrey: “Ice… Magically created ice, that’s what was blocking the door.”

Natsumi: “Ice! It’s a classic item used in mystery tricks!” (TL note Subaru uses engrish here ミステリーでトリック Misuterī de torikku)

Gwain: “Myst… what?”

Gwain raised an eyebrow at Natsumi’s words as she leaned forward excitedly at Audrey’s explanation. Natsumi immediately apologized for interrupting the conversation, saying, “I’m sorry. With a look of hope in his eyes that he would at least get out of our way since he was in a serious predicament, Audrey coughed and said, “Okay.”

Audrey: “The puddle of water in the storage room is probably the result of that ice melting. The ice must have melted that’s why there wasn’t a pry bar there at all. To be precise, the form was different.

Gwain: “…I don’t mean to be critical of the idea, but it’s just not enough. The magic ice is a novel idea. But what about the denial of Miss Natsumi’s involvement?”

Audrey: “First of all, what’s the point of sealing the door if you’re still inside? The purpose of sealing the door is to keep people out, so what’s the point if they’re still inside? Secondly…”

Roswaal: “Miss Natsumi has no ability for magic. Even then her aptitude is Yin, you seeeee.”

Taking up the last part of Audrey's sentence, Roswaal encouraged the theory. Gwain glanced at him sharply.

Gwain: "Roswaal-chan, If you're covering for your people, I would understand."

Roswaal: "Of course… Even if I lie to you about everything else in my life, I promise never to lie to you about magic."

Gwain: "I wish you had lied there, but you swore on something more agreeable."

Roswaal: "Yes, it's important to me, you knoooow?"

Gwain scratched his head when he heard Roswaal's answer. Audrey said, "Anyway," as she watched the exchange.

Audrey: "As the Margrave said, Natsumi-san has no aptitude for it. You can use a Metia to confirm this."

Gwain: "Well, I'll have to check that out later in the other room… In fact, I don't really suspect Miss Natsumi of being part of the criminal. I just want to find out what she knows."

Natsumi: "You're not a very nice person"

A pale Natsumi let out a few words at Gwain's idea. But to Audrey, Gwain's idea was perfectly reasonable. It was inevitable that the attention would be focused on Natsumi, who was the only one in a position to speak to them under the circumstances. If she didn't know anything about it, she would have struck out, and the person in charge would not have felt at ease.

Gwain: "No hard feelings, Miss Natsumi. My men are at work, too. Besides, my old man's intuition tells me that Miss Natsumi is hiding something."

Natsumi: "No! No! That's not true, okay?"

Natsumi becomes speechless, but behind her back, Audrey and Garnet also break out in a cold sweat. Gwain was right in his assessment. Natsumi is hiding a great secret. She is hiding a great secret, but it is a much more trivial secret that has nothing to do with the case. Audrey can't let them find out, though. Audrey hated that Roswaal is secretly smiling while Natsumi and the others are in a state of confusion. Who do you think is to blame?

Gwain: "Anyway, if the criminal is using ice magic to make the vault a sealed room. then that's how they sealed the door from the outside, then the two people inside would be the victims."

Audrey: "The purpose is to buy time and disrupt the investigation… What is the seal of ice? I'm afraid you're right."

Gwain muttered in frustration, and Audrey knew exactly what he was thinking. This was a carefully planned crime. It is possible that the culprit has already fled far away from the house with the stolen goods.

Gwain: "No, it's unlikely. Security is tight at night when there's an auction. If an uninvited guest enters my mansion, they won't get away with it. So…"

Audrey: "Is the criminal still in the mansion? Then let's get to it. I'm sure you're not that careless. They are the hiding items, aren't they?"

Even if they can't take the items out, they will have a stash of it ready to take out later. Even if the culprit is among the guests of the mansion, it would be nearly impossible to identify him by his belongings.

Garnet: "…Audrey-sis"

Audrey: "…? Yes, Garnet."

As Audrey ponders, Garnet tugs at the waist of her dress and whispers to her. Gently turning her face to me, Garnet gives Audrey an earful.

Garnet: "There's a problem with that ice seal story. According to Audrey-sis, the criminal blocked the door when he escaped, but it's not easy to see through the door from the outside.”

Audrey: “Yeah?”

Garnet: “But magic through a door? It’s not easy to cast a perfect spell where you can’t see. You can’t just do it randomly. Then you would…”

Audrey: “They need proficient magical abilities…?”

Audrey’s brow wrinkled deeply at Garnet’s point.

Garnet had a point. Audrey had some magic of her own, but it was very difficult to cast a spell precisely where she could not see. It’s like hitting a target with a stone thrown with your eyes closed, it’s not easy. Of course, any magic user above a reasonable level would be able to do that with ease, but…

Audrey: “A more than competent magic user…”

When Gwain overheard the conversation, Audrey’s face turned pale. When she looked back, she saw Gwain looking at Roswaal. And…

Gwain: “Roswaal-chan, what were you doing before and after the mansion went dark?”

Yes, he had unleashed a question without friendliness on the new suspect.

10

Roswaal’s testimony

With a skilled magic user as a suspect, it’s noooo wonder I’m under suspicion. Of course, I’ll answer your questions, woooon’t I? It was your behavior before and after theeee incident?

I was not in the hall at that time. Liiiike Miss Natsumi and Miss Garnet, I was tired of talking to people, so I was outside theeee venue.

I was caught by a very passionate woman there, and I spent some time with her. After that, I was called in about the case and came here… but you knew that, didn't you?

Roswaal: "And that's aboooout it."

"…"

Roswaal answered the question, and they all fell silent. The reason for the silence was probably different for each of them, but at least Audrey was relieved. There were a few things that she couldn't let Ram hear, but

Audrey: "So you were with a woman, Margrave. If so, I'm relieved…"

Roswaal: "Well, well, I'm glad you're concerned about me and I'm glad you're interested in me, and I hope you don't miiiind that I've been with other women besides you."

Audrey: "No, I'll report that to Ram-san later."

Roswaal: "Hmmm…"

When Ram's name is mentioned, Roswaal looks unusually self-conscious. This is a sign of the current delicate relationship between Roswaal and Ram, but from Audrey's point of view, it's a good way to make her feel better. Anyway, the good news was that there was a woman who was with Roswaal.

Natsumi: "Well, if we could talk to the woman, that might clear up our suspicions."

Roswaal: "Weeeell, there you have it. I'm flattered that I'm the first one who comes to miiiind when people talk about magic, but this kind of trickery iiiisn't that difficult, is it?"

Nodding at Natsumi's words, Roswaal lightly waved his hand. Then there was a small sound of freezing air, and the surprised voice of a man in black outside the waiting room.

Man in black: “Representative! Suddenly an ice statue appeared outside the door… Oh, it’s gone?”

Gwain: “Roswaal-chan, Don’t play with me. You’ll upset my men.”

Gwain complained and told the black-clad man outside the waiting room not to worry. I glanced out the door at the ice statue that Roswaal had made, a finely crafted statue of Audrey.

As I frowned, the ice statue disappeared into the air, leaving no trace of its existence. If you only look at the skill, you can easily make a seal of ice in the vault. But even though he was obsessed with magic, Roswaal’s senses were controlled.

Audrey: “One correction, that is not an easy thing to do. You have no common sense, Margrave.”

Roswaal: “Really? I’ve been doing this kind of stuff since I first started ussssing magic.”

Garnet: “You’re one annoying son of a bitch…”

Garnet muttered quietly, uncomfortable with his unconscious genius statement. Audrey rather agreed with that statement, but she was not going to bother agreeing with “genius” Audrey didn’t want to get carried away. Audrey let out a single sigh.

Audrey: “Gwain-sama, let’s find the woman who was with the Margrave and get on with it.”

Gwain: “Lets get this going the guests are getting impatient. Miss Natsumi, may I ask you to confirm your magical affinity with my subordinate to clear up any doubts?”

Natsumi: “If you’ll escort me.”

Natsumi responded in a relaxed manner, perhaps feeling more comfortable now that the suspicions of her had faded. Gwain smiled at her and had one of the black-clad men take Natsumi out of the room. Hopefully, this will improve things a bit…

Audrey: "…Are you kidding me?"

Audrey mutters in a lamenting tone of voice.

The place was a party hall, and in front of Audrey were all the invited guests. When Gwain called out to the guests, "I would like the women who were alone with Roswaal to come forward," no one raised their hands, and only silence fell.

It's understandable. It's not as simple as being asked to come forward. In this social setting, the presence of a man and a woman alone together has certain implications. In addition, the man she was talking to, Roswaal, was the Margrave of this territory, so there was no doubt that it wouldn't raise some strange suspicions. There was no need to worry about that, though Gwain took precautions.

Gwain: "Well, I can understand why it's hard to come forward. I guess I don't have a choice. Roswaal-chan."

"…"

Gwain: "Which one of your young ladies was with him, if you could just tell me…"

Roswaal: "Oh, that's the thiiiing, though."

Gwain prioritized his position of responsibility over the shame of the purported lady. At his words, however, Roswaal blinked his different colored eyes with a difficult look on his face.

Roswaal: "Well, I don't see the young lady who was with me."

Gwain: "…What?"

Roswaal: Noooo, I'm surprised, too, aren't I? She is not here. She is nowhere toooo be found.

Audrey: "Ahhhhh?"

Audrey's exclamation went up as she raised her hands in the air. But there was no hint of mischief in her face, only confusion.

Audrey: “Well, that’s all the guests at the mansion, isn’t it? Except for Natsumi and the man who collapsed, are they all here?”

Gwain: “That’s right. It doesn’t make sense if no one is missing.”

In response to Audrey’s question, Gwain put his hand on his forehead. The absence of the woman who was with Roswaal, this does not prove Roswaal’s innocence. In addition, it raises the suspicion that he was trying to evade the charges by lying in his testimony.

Gwain: “Well, at least, has anyone seen the Margrave? Just before and after the lights went out?”

???: “Yes, if that’s case”

Audrey: “Ah..! Are you sure? That’s great…”

Audrey stiffened again when she looked up in response to his thoughtful statement. There was no woman here that was with Roswaal. But as soon as he asked if anyone had seen Roswaal…

Audrey: “Just how many of them are there…?”

The number of raised hands was huge, almost all of the guests in front of me were raising their hands. This is the craziest thing I’ve ever seen. Roswaal wasn’t supposed to be here.

Audrey: “Where did you see the Margrave…”

???: “Well, uh, in the sky…”

Audrey: “…What?”

Audrey was upset, but one of the guests replied in a hesitant manner. Audrey’s eyes literally rolled back in her head as she couldn’t make sense of the answer. However, the guests who raised their hands nodded to each other when they heard the answer, which seemed ridiculous.

Gwain: “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, everybody. Can you talk to me in a way that I can understand? You said you saw Roswaal-chan in the sky…"

???: "…I can explain it to you."

Gwain: "Oh…"

The person who stepped forward was a thin man with a well-defined face. he had short blond hair, a somewhat neutral face, and strong eyes. Seeing the person, Gwain said, "You're…" He muttered.

Gwain: "Sir Canon Raydim, Sorry for the delay in greeting you."

Canon: "No, it's only natural that the organizer is busy. More importantly, about Margrave Mathers"

The person who responded with a nod of his head, Canon, turned his blue eyes towards Roswaal. When he looked at him, Roswaal looked back at him with the same blue eye.

Roswaal: "I'd appreciate it if you could explain it to me. What do you mean, I was in the sky?"

Canon: "This was after the lights had gone out and Gwain-dono had left the hall. In the dark, we leaned on each other to comfort our fears, but in the middle of it all."

"…"

Canon: "Outside the window of the hall, we saw a figure shimmering in the dark night sky. A fluttering cloak, distinctive long hair, and above all, not many have the ability to freely fly in sky."

Canon has a rather poetic way of saying things, but his explanation takes Audrey's breath away. Audrey gasps at his explanation, and since no one around her raises an objection, she can only assume that many of them have actually witnessed it. Cloaked, long-haired, able to fly freely… Who else could be like that?

Audrey: "Margrave Mathers, Wasn't it you who was flying?"

Roswaal: "Nooo, I'm sorry, but it wasn't me. It's true that flying with magic is one of my specialties. But it's not like noooo one else can so it."

Canon: "But there are so many guests who saw this."

With his hands outstretched, Canon asked for approval, and the guests nodded their heads in agreement. It was as if he was denouncing Roswaal, but if he was flying…

Audrey: "No, well, it's useful for hiding stolen goods out of reach…"

Roswaal: "Audrey-kun, are you on my side? Or are you oooon theirs?"

Audrey: "Think of me as an ally who is constantly exploring the possibility of being your enemy."

Audrey's grudges against Roswaal are endless, but she keeps them to herself and deep in her heart. The problem was the suspicion of Roswaal that lay before her. It was as if the Emilia camp had targeted him, just like they had done with Natsumi.

Audrey: "Actually, I'm not so sure…"

How could so many unexpected things happen in such a concentrated manner?

The discovery of Natsumi in the storage room, the traces of the crime scene, the absence of the woman who was with Roswaal, and the fact that Roswaal was known to have acted suspiciously all worked against this situation. One or two coincidences can coincide. But when three coincide, it is an artifice…Isn't this another attack on Emilia's camp from somebody else?

Gwain: "Roswaal-chan, It's not looking good. Is there anything you can tell me that would help you?"

Roswaal: "Honestly, I caaaan't help you. I didn't think I had anyone on my side so far. No, this kind of environment is common innnn my own mansion, however…"

Gwain: "I don't know about that."

Gwain’s shoulders slumped at Roswaal’s answer. But even Gwain, an old acquaintance, couldn’t come up with an explanation to defend Roswaal at this point. Audrey, too, only gut feeling that Roswaal was not the culprit, and did not speak in support of Roswaal from a logical point of view. If she didn’t do something, the rumors would hurt Roswaal and affect Emilia’s election as king. Audrey knew she had to avoid that, and she was desperate to get her head around it.

Garnet: “I’ve been listening to you for a while now. What the hell are you guys talking about?”

Gwain: “…Is that Miss Garnet?”

Gwain’s cheeks hardened as he heard a shocked and chillingly angry voice. He wasn’t the only one who tensed up, Canon and the other guests did as well. Out of the corner of their eye, ahead of Audrey, was the blonde-haired lady, Garnet Thruam. Garnet crossed her arms and nodded fiercely, “Ah.”

Garnet: “If you’d just shut up and listen, you’d hear all kinds of crazy talk. What the hell is that Roswaal guy doing flying around? Does everyone even have working eyes in their heads.”

Canon: “I’m sorry, but you’re being very rude. No, before that, Young lady… your voice…”

Garnet: “Oh, I’ve got a cold. That’s why I’ve kept quiet. But I’m running out of patience.”

Canon: “Wha…”

After silencing Canon with her greatness and strength, Garnet stared at the crowd with her green eyes.

Garnet: “I don’t know what the hell you’re all looking at, okay…? My amazing self going to tell you exactly what I’m talking about. It’s not Roswaal that was flying around!”

12

Garnet’s testimony

It’s before the house went dark, right? My amazing self walked out of the hall with that young lady and Roswaal. I was too lazy to talk to them since I couldn’t talk at the time.

So I was relaxing outside in the breeze, and then… The mansion suddenly went dark. I was going back to the mansion when I saw that the guests were in a panic, and then I saw it.

Yes, that strange thing that you’re calling Roswaal flew right in front of me. It’s like a badly made doll.

Garnet: “It’s not a human or anything, it’s more like a wooden doll. They all think it’s a Roswaal just because it was flying around…”

Good grief, Garnet bites her sharp canine teeth as she watches the guests. After hearing Garnet’s testimony, the guests looked troubled. On behalf of those confused, Canon raised his hand wanting to speak.

Canon: “I don’t know where you’re coming from, but that’s a subjective statement. Who do you trust more, the eyes of the crowd or the eyes of one person? You know which is more trustworthy?”

Garnet: “My amazing self’s eyes, Isn’t that right Audrey-sis.”

Audrey: “Um, that’s right in my opinion.”

Audrey covered her face at Garnet’s brazen abandonment of the idea of logical persuasion. It was a mistake to ask Garnet to give a coherent explanation, but I wish she would learn to be more cooperative. In the face of Audrey’s hopes, Garnet wrinkled her nose and said, “What is it?”

Garnet: “My amazing self is pretty sure I saw it with my own eyes. A doll drifting in the wind, right in front of me!”

Audrey: “Wait. Did you say you saw it right in front of you?”

Garnet: “Yeah?”

Audrey thrust her finger out in response to Garnet's enthusiastic words. Looking at her finger, Garnet scowls. She asks once again, with a subtle expression on her face.

Audrey: "You said you saw it right in front of you, didn't you? Everyone in the hall looked out the window and saw the Margrave flying in the sky. Canon-sama, are you sure?"

Canon: "Huh? Oh, yeah, that's right. I'm sure I'm not mistaken."

Audrey: "But Garnet said she saw him right in front of her. Garnet, where were you?"

Garnet: "Yeah… like a garden or something"

Audrey: "If you saw a flying doll from the garden, you wouldn't say it was right in front of you. But if you say it's right in front of you, it must be right in front of you. In other words, you were also in the sky…"

The same height, Audrey thought, and looked up above her. Roswaal and Gwain looked up as well. Garnet was the only one with cold sweat all over her face. She and Garnet had looked up at the rooftop of this mansion before. Audrey's eyes narrowed at the coincidence of that event, which was still fresh in her mind, and the possibility that it might have happened.

Audrey: "Gwain-sama, I believe you have a magnificent bell tower on the roof of your house. The columns are very, very grand…"

Gwain: "Hmm, I guess so. That bell is also very expensive. Not only the bell, but also the pillars are made of special hard stone, so they are also very valuable."

Audrey: "I see, I see, it is a precious and very hard pillar, is it not?"

"…"

Audrey then gave Garnet a serious look. And Garnet, whose face was drenched in cold sweat, turned bright red.

Garnet: "G-Gah! I got it, you got me! I'll tell you! I was on the roof!

I was frustrated, and then I saw that pillar, and my fangs started tingling…”

Shaking her clenched fist, Garnet confesses her actions. She disappeared from the venue and went to the bell tower And Garnet, who has a habit of chewing on hard things because her fangs ache…

Audrey: “You said you were chewing on a pillar?”

Garnet: “But it was tougher than I thought it would be, and I got so worked up that I ended up chewing it up.”

Audrey: “I am speechless…”

Rubbing her brow, Audrey didn’t know what to say to her “sister’s” outburst. But if Garnet had been on the roof and had seen the unknown object that was supposed to be “Roswaal” closer than the guests…

Audrey: “For now, let’s revise the testimony. I’m sure the story will change again”

Gwain: “I guess so. In the meantime, I’ll have my men take a look at the roof…”

Audrey thought that Gwain had a big heart when he didn’t yell at her without question.

Garnet’s testimony 2

I have to confess, my amazing self was in the bell tower when it got dark. When I first saw it, I couldn’t wait to try chewing it. I just couldn’t resist it.

The story is the same, it was dark when I was chewing and I was in a hurry to get down. The same is true for the wooden puppet that floated in front of me.

I felt really bad about it. My amazing self had a piece of the pillar that I chewed up, so I had no choice but to throw it and smash the wooden doll. So I threw it.

Audrey: “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! That’s a whole other story! What? Did you break it?”

Garnet: “Oh, I broke it. It was refreshing.”

Guests: “It’s amazing how many people are surprised by the suddenness of this story! Oh, did you guys see that?!”

As Garnet’s story developed, a very upset Audrey turned to the guests. They looked at each other.

Guest: “Speaking of which…”

And then he started talking.

Guest: “I was sure that I had suddenly lost sight of the flying figure. I thought it was just out of sight,”

Roswaal: “Actually, it was Miss Garnet who shot it down. Now this issss getting interesting.”

Audrey: “Can you please stop having fun, I know who’s having the worst time.”

Roswaal: “I know, I know, I know. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please don’t beeee mad at me.”

When Audrey grabbed him by the chest, even Roswaal retracted his impertinence. However, the situation is moving dramatically. If Garnet had actually shot down the flying doll, they would have been able to see it.

Audrey: “Do you know where it fell”

Garnet: “…No, I don’t know, it was pitch black. I don’t think it fell that far.”

Audrey: “It was too much to hope for, wait a minute. What Garnet said earlier she said she broke the doll…”

Garnet: “Oh, When I broke the wooden doll it went Boom-Splash”

Audrey: “Doesn’t that sound strange?”

It was a very distinctive sound for a broken doll. Garnet didn’t seem to mind, but Audrey felt a strong sense of discomfort. If such a distinctive sound could be heard anywhere…

Roswaal: “It’s the sound of water, issss it not?”

Audrey: “Ah! That’s it! Garnet, did the doll fall into the water?”

Garnet: “Oh, is that what you think? No, that’s right. I’ve got a hunch!”

Audrey and Garnet clap their hands together after getting a reminder from Roswaal. With their hands clasped together, they both turned to Gwain.

Audrey: “Gwain-sama, I believe there is a fountain in the garden. Maybe that’s where the sound of water came from that Garnet was talking about. If so…”

Gwain: “The doll has fallen into the fountain. Good, good, good. I’ll have them check that out too.”

Garnet: “Audrey-sis, was my amazing self helpful?”

Audrey: “Yes, it helped! Although I’ll definitely make you regret chewing on a pillar in someone’s mansion later.”

Garnet: “Geez, my real sister’s gonna be mad at me…!”

Audrey: “Doesn’t that sound strange?”

Natsumi: “Audrey! Garnet! Oh my…!”

Audrey: “Natsumi-san!”

The jet-black haired lady who opened the large door of the party venue and showed herself with vigor. It was Natsumi Schwartz. Natsumi was taken out of the waiting room and put through the “Metia” for evaluation to prove her magical attributes. she slowly came over to Audrey and the others.

Natsumi: “Would you please calm down and listen to me? Something terrible has happened.”

Audrey: “It’s hard… Anyway, how did your test go Natsumi-san? Did they figure out your Yin affinity?”

Natsumi: “The test was fine, but that’s not the point…! The victim, who was knocked out, woke up!”

Gwain: “Sir Lazlane? Well, that’s good news, isn’t it?”

After hearing the report from Natsumi, Gwain clapped his hands in delight at the prospect of a resolution. However, Audrey’s spine felt… a cold, unpleasant premonition. As if to affirm Audrey’s premonition, Natsumi cut in with a grave, “The thing is.”

Natsumi: It’s not that simple, Gwain-sama. It’s about Lazlane-sama.

Gwain: Don’t tell me he was so badly beaten up that he doesn’t remember what happened?

Gwain frowned and anticipated the worst possibilities. In fact, it is quite common for a person who is knocked unconscious by a blow to the head to have vague memories of what happened before and after the blow. In that case, the testimony of the male victim would not be a clue to solving the case…

Natsumi: “It would have been nice if that was all it was.”

Gwain and Audrey: “Huh?”

Then, to the stunned Audrey and the others, Natsumi continued with an unexpected statement.

Natsumi: “Lazlane-sama… the blow to his head has caused him to forget not only what happened before and after the incident, but also who he is, he has total amnesia.”

13

The case had taken another unexpected turn. The overwhelmingly bad news was delivered. This was at the same time as the report that the victim, Sir Lazlane Enimou, the man at the heart of the case, who was thought to hold the key to solving the case, had awakened it was expected that the situation would be resolved quickly…

Audrey: “Uh, so, can you tell me your name…?”

???: “I… Oh, you mean me? Uh, yeah, um, well, my name is…”

Audrey: “Oh, okay. Yes, everything is fine. I understand. Your alright.”

Audrey ended the questioning early after receiving an answer that showed the suspicious direction of the wind in one shot. The man sitting on the large chair in the middle of the party hall in front of Audrey is the victim in question, Sir Lazlane. Fortunately, the injuries were minor, and from the looks of it, his body did not seem to have any problems. The problem is not with his body, but with his mind. At any rate…

Lazlane: “I didn’t expect to have all my memories completely erased, let alone the moment of the incident.”

Audrey held her head in her hands and groaned softly as she described the tragedy that had struck Lazlane. “Amnesia”—that was the tragedy that had struck Lazlane. He had been beaten and had lost his memory, and his misfortune knew no bounds.

Garnet: “Dammit. Audrey-sis. You’re the one I was counting on.”

Audrey: “Well, yes. If Lazlane-sama had remembered, it would have been a decisive factor in solving the case.”

Audrey responded to Garnet’s words next to her, and then they both sighed deeply. When Lazlane saw Audrey and the others, he asked, “What, did I do something?” said Lazlane, looking worried. In any case Audrey can’t help but continue to be discouraged with the current situation.

Gwain: “I’m sorry to bother you, Miss Audrey, but do you have a minute?”

Audrey: “Gwain-sama, did you figure something out?”

Gwain: “Oh, I guess that’s good news. I found exactly what we were looking for in the garden fountain.”

Gwain, shrugging his shoulders, nodded at Audrey’s question with one eye closed. He turned to Garnet with a meaningful look…

Gwain: “I also checked the bell tower in question. Whether it was Miss Garnet’s teeth marks or not I am not sure, but It’s true that someone was there, and there’s little doubt that it was Miss Garnet.”

Roswaal: “I apologize for the inconvenience caused by one of them.”

Gwain: “Well, I’ll be sure to bill you for this, Roswaal. As for the lecturing, Miss Audrey will do that for you, won’t she?”

Audrey: “I’m going to inform that to her sister and make sure she’s on top of it.”

Garnet: “Geez, no blood, no tears!”

Garnet groaned with his head in her hands, but from Audrey’s point of view, it was such a compassionate act It was mind-boggling to hear what she had to complain about. Aside from Garnet’s testimony being corroborated, Gwain ordered his men to bring something to him.

Audrey: “This is…”

Gwain: “It’s the object that was submerged in the fountain in the garden. It’s quite a sight, isn’t it?”

At Gwain’s feet, the black-clad men laid out the items they had collected from the fountain. In addition to being soaked in water, the evidence was in a bad state after being hit by Garnet’s merciless blow. However, we were at least able to confirm its original form.

The object we recovered was an oddly shaped combination of cloth and wood. We knew that the torn cloth was the result of Garnet’s stone throw, but what was the purpose of the object in the first place?

It’s hard to believe that this thing was flying in the sky…

???: “It looks like a balloon…”

Natsumi: “Kikyū, is it?”

Audrey tilted her head at Natsumi, who said some unfamiliar words when she saw the recovered items. In response, Natsumi said “Yea” She brushed a strand of dark hair off her shoulder.

Natsumi: “It’s a man-made flying object that floats using the power of heat. When air is heated, it rises upward. That’s why it flies by storing warm air inside the cloth.”

While saying this, Natsumi unrolled the mess of collected items and reassembled them into the original shape. The “balloon” that Natsumi had described was then created.

Gwain: “This thing flies, huh? Are you sure?”

Roswaal: “It’s probably true. For a fire mage cold air temperatures are common knowledge. I’ve never heard of a Balloon before.”

Gwain: “Heat the air to make it float, right? That’s an interesting idea. In fact, if they say it was floating, it must be true, unless it was magical. Besides, There’s more to pick up.”

???: “What else?”

Roswaal and Gwain each accept the existence of the balloon positively, and then Gwain continues more meaningfully. As if he was a friend of Roswaal’s, he draws the audience’s attention to himself with a pompous gesture.

Gwain: “In fact, we found some items stolen from the vaults at the fountain. Circumstantially speaking, I’d say this balloon thing was flying around with a small object.”

Audrey: “What…? I see, he was trying to carry the stolen goods out in a balloon. That would explain why they went to the trouble of flying a balloon!”

Audrey’s clapped her hands together loudly as Gwain spoke. The culprit’s plan was to strap the stolen goods to a balloon and carry them out of the sky. It almost worked, but Garnet’s unexpected act of violence paid off.

Audrey: “You did it, Garnet, you did it! I’ll report it to Ram-san, Frederica-san and Petra-chan later, but you can be proud of it.”

Garnet: “How can I be proud when I have been accused so much!”

Garnet snapped her fangs in protest at Audrey’s broken-face words. Then Garnet scratched her blonde hair wildly.

Garnet: “So, they found the balloon or whatever it was that my amazing self shot down, and the stolen stuff came back. It’s good, but it’s not all there, is it?”

Audrey: “I suppose that’s right… Gwain-sama, the stone statue is…”

Gwain: “I’m sorry, but it wasn’t hiding in the fountain. It’s too big enough to be carried in a balloon.”

We found a few small items, but the whereabouts of the statue of the goddess, the biggest item of all, remained unknown. As expected, it was nearly impossible to carry something of that size in this balloon.

Gwain: “But it’s not big enough to carry around easily, either…”

Natsumi: “The stone statue was from the vault, right? I’m sure it would be difficult to get it out of there, there’s two of them…”

Audrey: “…I’m sorry. What? What?”

Natsumi put her hand on her chin and took a thoughtful stance. Audrey was silent for a few seconds before asking her a question. In response to the question, Natsumi tilted her head and asked, “What is it? Natsumi tilted her head

Natsumi: “Did I say something funny? It’s just a fact check.”

Audrey: “No, I felt that my observations were a bit different from yours. I’m sorry, did I just mishear that? Uh, how many stone statues were stolen?”

Natsumi: “There’s two of them, right? Please don’t make me repeat myself.”

Audrey: “Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

Audrey screamed at Natsumi’s matter-of-fact statement. Audrey grabbed Natsumi by the shoulders and shook her back and forth.

Audrey: “Hold up, hold up, wait a minute! Two of them? Why two? Did someone say that to you?”

Natsumi: “Please calm down. When I entered the vault, there were two statues, you know? If they were gone when the lights came back on, you’ll think they have been stolen.”

Audrey: “Originally, there were two statues? Gwain-sama?”

Audrey turns around and asks Gwain to confirm. But Gwain shook his head “No way”

Audrey: “He said there was no information to hide from us in this situation. I didn’t even bother to check, but the only statue in the vault was the one in question.”

Audrey: “Well, then, it’s just Natsumi-san being mistaken…”

Natsumi: “It is not a mistake! Please don’t make fun of me! All right, I’ll testify properly!”

Natsumi Schwartz’s testimony 3

I’ll say it again. When I heard the noise and went into the vault, there was no suspicious figure inside, and there were two statues.

I’m pretty sure I saw both a male and a female statue with my own eyes! Immediately after I saw the statues, the area went dark and… And then, as I’ve told you many times, I found the weapon and Sir Lazlane lying at my feet. There are a lot of things I don’t understand about this situation… But there are two statues, that’s for sure!

Natsumi: “And this is my testimony. Please make sure you record it.”

Audrey can't help but be embarrassed by Natsumi's testimony. This is true not only for Audrey, but for everyone involved, including Gwain. Only Natsumi brings up the stone statue that never existed…

Audrey: "Do you think stealing a stone statue of a man is possible when a statue of a goddess has already been stolen with so little time to do it in? Do you think that's realistically possible?"

Natsumi: "That being said, I'm telling the truth! I will continue to fight until the whole truth is exposed to the light of day!"

Audrey: "Well, I'll put Natsumi-san's testimony in the back of my mind. I feel like we're getting off the subject, so let's leave it there for now."

Putting aside the subject of Natsumi's big promise, Audrey tries to sort out the rest of the confusing information. Then, she suddenly noticed Garnet crouching on the floor.

Audrey: "Garnet? What are you doing messing around with the balloon?"

Garnet: "Hey hey, Audrey-sis, I'm not messing around with it, I'm fiddling with this thing, but something doesn't look right about it, does it?"

On the floor, Garnet in a posture that seems to have forgotten the modesty of a lady.

Garnet: "Something funny?"

Audrey tilted her head and looked at the balloon as well. As Natsumi explained, it is difficult to find anything strange in the finished product because Audrey is not familiar with any flying objects that float on warmed air.

Garnet: "If all you want to do is fly and steal stuff, you don't need this, do you? It kind of looks like a cape to my amazing self."

Natsumi: "Oh, it's this flickering, isn't it? It does look like that, if you ask me. The fluttering on this one looks like human hair, which is kind of creepy.”

“…”

Garnet and Natsumi exchanged such words as they looked at the balloon and pointed at the structure. Audrey’s mind flashed with an idea as she listened to their conversation…

Garnet: “Oh, hey? You look like you just thought of something, right?”

Audrey: “I don’t like it when people stare at me from the side, Well, let’s see… I’m sure the Margrave has already noticed this. This time, the camp is being targeted.”

Roswaal: “Hmm, go on.”

Roswaal, who has one eye closed and stares at Audrey with his blue eye, prompts her to go on with her story. —It was a suspicion that Audrey had felt from the very beginning of the case. There was Natsumi, who had almost been framed for the crime in the vault, and Roswaal, who had subsequently come under suspicion. The disadvantageous situation back at the venue and the blatant disguise of this balloon, the conspiracy was now certain.

Audrey: “The color of the cloth used for the balloon and the use of the cloak as a disguise… are obviously tricks to mislead us into believing that this is Margrave Mathers.”

Gwain: “Really? It’s certainly natural to think that way… But that doesn’t make sense to some people, does it?”

Audrey’s quiet reasoning was interrupted by Gwain, whose cheeks were twisted. He combed his fingers through his long hair and turned his gaze to the window of the hall.

Gwain: “It’s a good idea to make the balloon look like Roswaal-chan. But is it going to work out that conveniently? It’s a good thing that the people at the party happened to notice the fake Roswaal-chan floating outside the window, if they don’t notice it, it’s over. right?”

Roswaal “That’s for sure. So the criminal must have devised a way to prevent that from happening.”

Audrey: “Huh?”

Audrey looked away from Gwain, who was raising one eyebrow, and looked around at the participants. As the people watching the situation unfold reacted in different ways, Audrey held up a finger…

Audrey: “May I have your attention, please?”

Audrey called out.

Audrey: “The Margrave that was flying outside was a balloon, did you see it by chance? Or maybe there was some kind of trigger that made you look out the window.”

“…“

Audrey: “From that reaction, I think I’ve hit the nail on the head.”

Audrey’s eyes narrowed as she nodded at the reaction of the people who gasped for breath.

Natsumi: “Audrey? What do you mean? Please explain it to us so we can understand. If you don’t, we won’t know what you’re talking about. Also, there are two statues, right?

Audrey: “You’re so persistent, you know that? And it’s simple, Natsumi-san. When you look out the window and see this balloon from a distance, someone shouts, “Margrave Mathers is flying!” “Margrave Mathers is flying!”

Natsumi: “Gah”

Audrey shouted at the top of her voice, and Natsumi in front of her rolled her eyes. Garnet and many of the other participants were surprised as well. However, there is a subtle difference between Natsumi’s and Garnet’s surprise and that of the participants. Because the participants probably had some idea of what Audrey had just shouted.

Audrey: “When you heard the name of the Margrave, and see a balloon floating in the night sky. From a distance, you could easily mistake it for the Margrave. It’s a simple induction of thought.”

Natsumi: “Let them think it’s Roswaal from the start, so they won’t suspect anything. That is what you meant?”

Well, it was a plan that made good use of the human mind, Audrey admired her enemy. It’s a brilliant plan to take advantage of Roswaal’s famous flight magic and preconceived notions. However, this strategy has a weakness.

Gwain: “Who was the first person to call out that it was Roswaal-chan…?”

Quickly understanding the situation, Gwain asked the participants. That’s the right question. The plan is a trick to play on the minds of the crowd to misrepresent the facts, but as soon as the trick is discovered, it will reveal the identity of the perpetrator. Sure enough, the participants slowly turned their attention to one person.

Audrey: “Are you the one who shouted that this balloon was Margrave Mathers?”

The participants broke through the crowd and turned their attention to the person in the middle of the crowd, a woman in a yellow dress with a pale face.

14

With the eyes of everyone in the hall on her, the woman shook her head stiffly. Her lips quivered as she shook her head in disgust, as if denying the reality in front of her.

Audrey: “Wait a minute. I don’t think so…”

Audrey called out.

Audrey: “So many people have identified you. There’s no way you can get away.”

???: “Ugh…”

The woman’s face turns even paler as Audrey pursues her. She is so nervous and upset that she is not good enough to be performing in this situation. this situation. At this rate, she might as well be confessing that she’s done something wrong.

Gwain: “Miss Hallaine, don’t be so frightened, will you? It’s not that we want to blame you, either. We’re just checking the facts.”

Gwain spoke to the upset woman in a soft voice. The woman, whom he called Hallaine, took several deep breaths and nodded, though her face was still tense. In the meantime, Audrey gently turned her face to Roswaal.

Audrey: “That woman wasn’t the one who was with the Margrave, right?”

Roswaal: “Noooo, I was with a woman who seemed to be a little more substance to her.”

When Roswaal shrugged his shoulders, Audrey pulled her chin back and said, “I see.” Then, after Gwain had managed to calm her down, Hallaine began to talk about the situation. Audrey listens to what she has to say…

Testimony of Hallaine Banksy

Oh, I was just out on the balcony for a bit to sober up. I took in the night breeze, and as I did so, I noticed that there was something flying in the night sky.

I was drunk. And I was far away. I saw the cloak, the color of it, and the fact that it was flying, and I immediately assumed it was Margrave Mathers… So, I couldn’t help but tell the people inside that there was Margrave Mathers flying around.

It was known that the Margrave could fly with magic, and Since he was going to show off his magic in front of people, I thought he would use flight magic.

Audrey: “Wait a minute. Where did you hear that a Margrave would perform magic in public?”

Hallaine: “Ehh”

Audrey waited for Hallaine’s faltering explanation. Hallaine rolled her eyes in surprise, but she couldn’t ignore the fact that she had slipped up. She made it clear. She said that she was talking about showing magic in public.

Audrey: “But that is not the case. I’m sure you don’t have any such plans tonight. Isn’t that right, Margrave?”

Roswaal: “I’m not planning to. Of course, I have noooo such plans. Gwain-dono is hosting today’s event. There is no curtain for me to appear in sideshow.”

Audrey: “…? I see. Thank you.”

There was a momentary blank in his reply, which bothered her, but Audrey put off pursuing it. and

Hallaine’s face turned pale again, and she seemed on the verge of collapse. There were many unnatural things about the witness, and naturally, my suspicions about her grew stronger. And then…

???: “I would appreciate it if you didn’t torment my companion any further.”

Audrey: “You are, Canon-sama?”

Audrey raises her eyebrows at the blonde nobleman, Canon Raydim, who steps forward again.

Audrey: “Was Miss Hallaine your companion?”

Canon: “Yes, Yes they are, and I can’t stand to see your ruthless pursuit of them. I understand that the situation is what it is, but you should still be considerate of women.”

Audrey: “But there are some oddities in Miss Hallaine’s testimony…”

Canon: “I can explain that part. I was with her when she stood on the balcony to sober up.”

Audrey: “Canon-sama, you were?”

Putting his hand on his chest, Cannon nodded deeply. He stood next to her and gently held her trembling shoulders, smiling gently at her moist eyes.

Canon: “I don’t think she had an agenda. It’s just a balloon floating in the sky? She just saw it and assumed too much. A woman with a lot of assumptions is compassionate and caring. Isn’t that a good thing?”

Audrey: “Well, even if you say so…”

Audrey is vulnerable to the claim that she was just making assumptions. As it stands, the only things that suggest Hallaine’s involvement in the crime are circumstantial evidence and her suspicious behavior. The flow and momentum had pushed Hallaine into a corner, but there was no evidence. Audrey could only say that her previous misstatement about magic was just a misunderstanding.

Canon: “Calm down and take a deep breath, Miss Hallaine. You did nothing wrong. Right?”

Hallaine: “Yes, yes. That’s right.”

As Canon gently stroked her back, Hallaine’s expression instantly became calmer. Audrey’s frustration grew as she realized that she would be able talk her way out of this. But no matter how much she rushed or thought about it, the situation was not going to be easy to overcome.

Audrey: “At the very least, get some information to back up her gibberish… like the Margrave was actually using magic.”

Roswaal: “Oh, I’ve useeed magic before, haven’t I?”

Audrey: “Wha?”

Roswaal affirmed Audrey's anguished muttering in an easy-going tone. In response, the people other than Roswaal were naturally taken aback.

Audrey: ""I used magic"… What? Does that mean you've flown or something?"

Roswaal: "If that were the case, things would be really complicated. Fortunately, it's nooot. You see, all the lights in the house went out at once, didn't they? That was my doing."

Audrey, Garnet, and Natsumi: """AHHHHH…??!!"""

The exclamations of Audrey, Natsumi and Garnet overlapped with Roswaal pointing at himself, of course. Who would have thought that the event that caused the house to turn dark would turn out to be Roswaal's work? First of all.

Audrey: "Weren't the lights supposed to have been turned off so the criminal could steal something from the vault?"

Roswaal: "It's understandable thaaaat you would think that, though. But think about it. If your goal is really to steal what's in the vault, you don't need to darken the house, do you?"

Audrey: "Well, that's…"

Audrey could only shudder and nod at Roswaal's point. The darkening of the mansion and the crime in the vault were unrelated. She hadn't imagined that. Since they had happened at the same time, she naturally assumed that they were related.

Gwain: "I certainly don't see the benefit of blacking out the power since we don't have electricity to manage security. Blind spot:…! It's a complete blind spot…!"

Roswaal: "Gwain-dono's house is fully lit wiiiith magic lights. The woman who was with me at the time asked to see the magic, and so I diiiid."

Gwain: "How dare you say that with such impunity? Roswaal-chan…"

Gwain, a man of great tolerance, could not keep his mouth shut at Roswaal's brazen act. However, this changes the situation again. The fact that the culprit had nothing to do with the darkening of the lights in the mansion was a new revelation in itself.

Audrey: "If that is the case, I won't be able to ignore what Hallaine-san said earlier. As you mentioned earlier, the Margrave was using magic. It was not flight magic, but it was…"

Hallaine: "Eh, uh, that's… That."

Hallaine's sullenness returns in another unfriendly atmosphere. At first glance, it was obvious that she was not cut out for artistic performances. But she's not unrelated. Of course, someone must have ordered her to perjure herself or say something false. And at the moment, the person most likely to be the mastermind behind it is…

Canon: "…As I said earlier. It was a bad assumption. It just happened to fit the situation, but it would have been possible for her to say the wrong thing."

Saying this, the blond-haired nobleman, Canon Raydim, takes the brunt of it on Hallaine's behalf. He is most likely the main culprit…

Audrey: "But at the same time, he looks the most formidable…"

Canon: "Miss Hallaine is already tired. It's no wonder she's been in the public eye for so long. Rather, the one who should be answering is Margrave Mathers, for his outlandish behavior."

Garnet: "That's weak."

Audrey agreed with Garnet, who folded her arms and curved her lips. Roswaal's behavior has been so suspicious from the beginning that Audrey is losing her will to defend him. Nevertheless, it would be strange to come this far and lose the case, so it is important to be determined.

Audrey: "I understand that you want to protect your companion. But you shouldn't be too protective of them…"

Canon: “Hmm… I was trying not to say this, but I had no choice. It would be a waste of Miss Hallaine’s kindness.”

Gwain: “Huh? It’s not just Roswaal-chan, Is there something you’re not telling me, Canon-dono?”

Roswaal: “Hmmm, that’s a thorn in my siiiide.”

Gwain’s words, with their fierce smile, stung Roswaal. But, of course, it was retribution, so no one defended it. Everyone’s attention was focused on what Canon would say next. And so, with all eyes on him, Canon began to speak with a determined expression.

“Miss Hallaine didn’t dare to say it as to protect me, but it was I who mistook Margrave Mathers for the balloon flying in the air.”

15

Testimony of Canon Raydim

I am embarrassed to say that I was the one who first mistook the balloon for the Margrave. I was sitting on the balcony with Miss Hallaine, enjoying the night breeze. As I was gazing at the stars in the night sky, I noticed something wandering across my field of vision. I looked at it and was surprised.

The cloak dancing in the night air, the long hair fluttering in the distance, the eccentric and eye-catching color of the clothing… The thing that came to mind was that the Margrave could fly.

I couldn’t help but say to Miss Hallaine next to me,”The Margrave is flying in the sky.” My exuberance must have been contagious. Miss Hallaine also called inside…

Canon: “…The rest, as you all already know. I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

Cannon bowed to Audrey and the others, then turned and bowed to the line of participants. His neat posture and gestures left no room for error. Audrey bites her lip, thinking that this is a formidable opponent.

Gwain: “Oh, I see. So, Raydim-dono said that it was his own words that caused Miss Hallaine’s initial assumption. That was a brave confession.”

Canon: “That may be true. But my honor pales in comparison to the disgrace that is the stain on Miss Hallaine’s name. It is only natural.”

His expression tightened, and he said it with the straightforwardness of a knight in shining armor.

Looking at his profile, Audrey tried to think of any holes in Cannon’s testimony that she could exploit. But she couldn’t find any holes to poke. It’s all in the realm of misjudgment and assumption. Unlike Hallaine, who was blatantly upset, Cannon didn’t show his faults.

Gwain: “It’s a noble thing you’ve decided to do. But if so, you must have been surprised. At Miss Hallaine’s behavior.”

Canon: “Yes, a little. But I would say that her unrestrained nature is also her charm. So, if she shouted, “Margrave Mathers is flying!” I pity her.”

That was another moment when Audrey inwardly spilled that it was a blind view.

“…”

Roswaal’s gaze, a meaningful gaze, was directed at Audrey. Audrey was confused by the color of his gaze, which was somewhat provocative, mischievous and hateful. I was puzzled, and then I noticed… I noticed the subtle changes in the participants’ expressions.

Audrey: “…You all seem to be reacting rather strangely. Is there something wrong with Raydim-dono’s story?”

Audrey asked a question, and the participants looked at each other.

Then, one of the participants coyly said…

Guest: “I’ll preface this by saying, This may not be relevant. Well, Raydim-dono’s story and my impression are a bit different…”

Audrey: “Discrepancy, huh? How is that?”

Audrey tilted her head, and behind her, Natsumi and Garnet tilted their heads as well. In the background, Cannon, Gwain, and Roswaal were also listening to the conversation.

Guest: “Raydim-dono described Miss Hallaine as lovely, but… I can’t accept that so easily.”

Canon: “It’s a matter of taste and people’s likes and dislikes…”

Guest: “Of course it is. That’s right, but Miss Hallaine said, “The Margrave is flying around! Woosh! He is flying, It’s Amazing! If you don’t see it, you’re missing out for life! Everybody pay attention! Watch out!” she called out the people in the hall…”

Audrey: “You’re so excited!”

A guest whose name I didn’t even know blurted out an impassioned performance, and Audrey’s surprise at what she saw overlapped with the surprise of someone else. However, only this time, the overlapping of the voices of surprise proved to be fatal.

Garnet: “weren’t you supposed be standing next to her? Why the hell are you surprised, man?”

It was Garnet who said in a low voice, her whole body brimming with the air of a swordsman. Garnet, no longer trying to hide her cross-dressing, has the gaze of a predator, despite her pretty, dainty appearance. Her gaze turned to Canon, who was as surprised as Audrey was. Garnet made a good point, and Audrey was confronted with the same question. That is, why was Canon, who was also on the balcony, so surprised and flustered?

Guest: “Sir Raydim, you can’t fake surprise, can you?”

Canon: “No, no, not at all. This is also in the category of a misstatement… To my ears, Miss Hallaine's words sounded like a cute little bird chirping…"

Guest: "Well, that was more like a strangling chicken than a little bird chirping, wasn't it?"

Canon: "You're really coming on strong, aren't you?"

The attendee, who had acted with great persistence, further blocked the escape route of Canon's bitter excuse. But it was a stab in the dark. Canon stiffens his cheek cheeks.

Guest: "Is that what you were talking about earlier with Sir Raydim? Probably because of what I guessed Miss Hallaine had said had left a lasting impression."

"…"

Guest: "In other words, you didn't hear Miss Hallaine's voice directly! Am I wrong!"

Canon: "Gaahh"

Cannon's calm expression finally crumbled, and he became cornered. Now it was clear that Canon and Hallaine were covering for each other…or rather, working together. Canon was not with Hallaine. What was he doing…?

Natsumi: "If you could give me a minute of your time."

Audrey: "Natsumi-san?"

Suddenly, as if to break the air of imposition, it was Natsumi who stepped forward. While gathering the gazes of those involved to herself, Natsumi turned her black eyes to Canon. The nobleman, with a bitter expression on his face, met those black eyes head-on and…

Canon: "Miss Natsumi, do you have something to say to me too?"

Natsumi: "Yeah, well, I'm just confirming something."

In response to Canon’s question, Natsumi pulled her chin back and looked the nobleman up and down. After that insouciant gaze, Natsumi frowned and said.

Natsumi: “Cannon-sama, you’re not really a man, are you?”

Canon: “Wha…”

When Natsumi said this, Cannon’s eyes blinked and he was stunned. The surprise was not limited to Canon, as everyone in the hall looked at Natsumi like, “What the hell is he talking about?” Everyone in the hall turned their gaze to Natsumi. However, Natsumi was unfazed by this.

Natsumi: “You can draw on your eyebrows and camouflage the way you stand, walk and behave, but you can’t fool my eyes. You are a beautiful woman dressed as a man…!”

Audrey: “Wait, wait, wait, wait, Natsumi-san! I’m serious, you’re insane…!”

Natsumi: “Of course not! Do you really think I’d play a joke on you?”

Natsumi has a fake chest, but in Audrey’s opinion, it’s a very possible story. But Audrey doesn’t think Natsumi would do anything rash in this situation. Audrey can’t help but think that she might, but…

Canon: “No, no matter what, that is an insult! I ask you to withdraw it, Miss Natsumi!”

Natsumi: “But I’m absolutely, positively sure that my eyes are right.”

Canon: “What are you, a child? Don’t act like.”

Cannon, recovering from the shock, gives Natsumi a stern look at her point. However, Natsumi shakes her shoulders from side to side at the gaze, ready to fight back with a blistering thoroughness. Audrey clutched her head, wondering what was going on in the midst of this futile argument.

Garnet: “Ah, why don’t we see if my Sis’s statement is correct?”

Canon: “Huh.”

Then Garnet, her nose wrinkled, intervened. Garnet spoke of a quick solution, and Canon was once again stunned by her words.

Garnet: “If we go check you out in the dark somewhere, you’ll be able to get your story checked out faster. Then, if the questions of my Sis are cleared and the wet clothes are explained, isn’t it okay?”

Canon: “I’m saying that… no, in the first place, such allegations themselves are insulting! I’m sure Miss Garnet and Miss Natsumi would be troubled if you were to ask them to confirm their gender!”

“…”

Canon: “What is it with you two and even Miss Audrey’s tasteful face…?”

The expressions of Audrey and the others who had been stung by Cannon’s rebuttal twisted. In fact, if by mistake we were to confirm the gender of Audrey and the others, Emilia’s camp would drop out of the royal selection in front of the thief, And If that’s not much enough the men of Emilia’s camp would be accused of being a bunch of perverts. At the sound of such a doomed footstep, Audrey and the rest of the team’s pursuits become heavier. However, this is by no means the end of Canon’s suffering.

Gwain: “Is this old man the only one who can’t separate a ridiculous accusation from something like that? What do you think, Roswaal-chan?”

Roswaal: “No, no, no way. I cannnn’t believe that anyone would be so boooold as to pretend to be a different gender and participate in such a social gathering of the aristocracy.”

Gwain: “Wow”

Roswaal and Gwain, bad adults with bad faces, are having a bad conversation. How can these two people so happily torture others? Audrey is not sure what to say, but she can’t say she is disappointed in Roswaal's brash comments. This is what it means to be without a human heart. You can't help but feel sorry for Canon, whose face turns pale as he is pushed to the brink by these two.

Audrey: "But that's only if he… or she is really wearing wet clothes."

Natsumi: "But if Canon-sama was a woman, would that be a clue?"

Natsumi twisted her neck and lowered her eyebrows when she saw one possibility of perjury. Audrey nodded in response to Natsumi's words.

Audrey: "Natsumi-san doesn't seem to feel it, but if Canon-sama were to lie about their gender, one of the questions that had been floating around could be answered."

Natsumi: "The question that remains unanswered… Well, that's the two statues!"

Audrey: "Oh, if there was such a thing, wasn't there? Well, it's not like that."

At the moment, Natsumi seems to have an urgent need for the statue in the vault, but unfortunately, that's not Audrey's focus. Perhaps Roswaal and the others are already aware of this. If Sir Canon Raydim were a woman, the problem she would solve would be…

Roswaal: "By the way, Sir Raydim, you have very beautiful haaair."

Canon: "I'm flattered, but what are you doing at a time like this…?"

Roswaal: "No, that reminds me, the lady who took me outside and begged me so adorably to see magic also had a beautiful goldeeeen hairpiece."

Gently reaching out, Roswaal touched Canon's stiff golden hair. The movement was too natural for Cannon to reject it. If anything, the shock of being exposed to his own schemes was too much for Canon.

Gwain: “Well this old man forgot to check with you, too”

Roswaal: “Hmm? Yes, my friend, Gwain Merette-dono. Is there a problem?”

Gwain: “It’s no big deal. My friend, Margrave Roswaal L Mathers”

Roswaal and Gwain exchanged glances in a white-knuckled exchange. Gwain turned a blurry smile to the back of his head, to the quiet Lazlane. He pointed to the man who has been watching the situation with a dumbfounded look on his face ever since the first amnesia episode.

Gwain: “I was thinking. I wondered where the woman who was with Sir Lazlane Enimou, who had lost his memory was. If you’re here, I’d like you to stay by Sir Enimou’s side.”

Canon: “That is…”

Gwain: “What do you think? Sir Canon Raydim… Or is that Miss Canon Raydim?”

In response to Gwain’s question, Canon nodded their head in disappointment. And then, with their hands in the air, they raised their hands in a small gesture.

Canon: “I admit it… I lost.”

16

So, here’s what happened.

At tonight’s party, Canon Raydim came and went twice.

Once, dressed as a man, he and his companion, Miss Hallaine, went through the reception. Then he snuck out, this time in a dress, and came as the companion of Sir Lazlane Enimou.

Gwain: “And then, as a woman, Canon lured Margrave Mathers, while her co-conspirators, Miss Hallaine and Lazlane-dono, did their evil deeds. After she would be gone when the case comes to light, as to not cast suspicion on Canon. That’ s how it was supposed to go.”

Canon: “That’s right…”

When Gwain sorted out the situation, Canon took it all in with a look of resignation. He… or rather, she is sitting on the floor next to Hallaine, who is slumped over, with only a blank look on her face. Only Lazlane, with a blank look on his face, said, “What? Did I do something?” Anyway, the situation was now clear. The problem is…

Audrey: “It’s obvious that Canon-sama’s goal in this case was Margrave Mathers. His goal is not to steal the contents of the vault, but to frame the Margrave as a suspect, right?”

To be honest, this plan was too far-fetched to just steal the contents of the vault. There were too many things that were planned to make it look like Roswaal’s work, such as making the balloon look like Roswaal, and luring Roswaal out with strange tricks. Audrey can’t help but think that Roswaal held a grudge against Canon.

Canon: “Miss Hallaine and Sir Enimou were only invited by me to participate in the scheme. The only scumbag who devised this plan and truly targeted the Margrave was me… Therefore, the punishment is most heavily on me.”

Roswaal: “The fact that she was a woman makes me want to twist the word “scumbag”, buuuut I’m curious about her motives before I saaaay anything about punishment. Why would you do this to me?”

Audrey: “Maybe it’s a woman who used and dumped the Margrave before, or someone related to her?”

Roswaal: “Audrey-kun, what do you mean? And that’s it. If thaaaat was the case, why would I forget it?”

It was not something to be proud of, but Audrey was convinced by Roswaal’s words. It’s not like Roswaal to leave the seeds of such discord unpicked. It was at the same time that Audrey was convinced and Canon let out a short breath.

Canon “There is no direct connection between me and Margrave.

but you are wrong.”

Roswaal: “Oh, me? why is that exactly?”

Canon: “Because you chose the “Witch of Glaciation” for the Royal selection…”

Natsumi: “Oh…”

It was Natsumi who gasped at Canon’s clear statement. In the back of the ladylike expression, the hidden pride of Emilia’s knight appears faintly. Or, as it seemed, he could just yell at her, forgetting that he was Natsumi.

“Oh, I seeeee. I’ve finally figured it out. Sir Canon Raydim. You had a territory near the Elior Forest. In other words.”

Canon: “I’m acquainted with the witch who created that permafrost and terrorized the inhabitants of the area.”

Roswaal: “So they targeted me, who decided to support Emilia-sama, instead of Emilia-sama since you can’t harm Emilia-sama’s name directly.”

Roswaal’s statement was wordy, but it was a fact that could not be denied. In the election of the king, the negative impression that Emilia carries is so heavy. The fact that she has the same characteristics as the “Witch of Envy” alone is a symbol of fear for most people in the world. For Canon, however, the negative impression of Emilia’s existence itself is even greater. That’s the story behind the Elior Forest that even Audrey doesn’t know…

Canon: “It would be enough if the witch was eliminated from the list of candidates, damaging the name of the Margrave. And then, when the time comes, I’ll reveal the truth. I was the only one who was going to take the fall for it.”

Audrey: “Even if the Raydim family is destroyed because of it? That’s a huge gamble.”

Canon: “Originally, my family was finished with my generation. No boys were born, and a girl was made to succeed to the family as a boy. As long as we are unable to create the next generation, we will have to end our lives in a whisper. Then, at least”

Audrey: “At least you wanted to do your noble duty by disposing of a ticking time bomb that could have endangered the kingdom?”

“It was a dream that never came true.” Canon said, shaking her head lazily. When told about Canon’s strong will, Audrey felt a bitterness in her heart. Considering the kingdom, Canon’s actions were radical, but understandable. It’s just that it’s too…

Natsumi: “It’s a story that you don’t know about Emilia-sama.”

Canon: “Miss Natsumi…?”

Natsumi took a step forward and looked Cannon squarely in the eye. The strength of her words and the sharpness of her gaze caused Canon to flinch slightly.

Natsumi: “You should have met with Emilia-sama before taking any bold actions. If you did that… then you would know that girl is hardworking, healthy, sincere, caring, compassionate, kind, strong, tough, cute and adorable. Yes, you would have realized.”

Natsumi’s commentary on Emilia, while terribly clutching her fake chest. Cannon’s eyes widen at that. Then, with a huff, she smiles and chuckles as she lets out a breath.

Canon: “You know the Witch of Glaciation… Emilia-sama, very well, don’t you? I wish I could have talked to you before tonight’s plan was put into action.”

Natsumi: “That would have been difficult… I was locked in the vault.”

Natsumi put her finger to her lips and smiled at Canon, the tension seemed to have been broken.

The case is now closed.

Canon Raydim confessed to her crimes, and her co-conspirators, Hallaine and Lazlane, are taken into custody. Although Cannon’s appeal was not heard, his warning to Emilia about her participation in the election of the king was certainly engraved in the minds of the participants, and the camp suffered a great blow…

Roswaal: “So, that’s it foooor tonight’s entertainment. How was it, everyone? I’ll beeee delighted if you enjoyed it.”

Roswaal, with a big hand, said cheerfully. A look of surprise appeared on the faces of everyone except Roswaal. However, Roswaal took advantage of the surprise and continued to ignore the people who were slow to react.

Roswaal: “A big round of applause for Sir Lazlane Enimou, Miss Hallaine Banksy, and Sir Canon Raydim for their help with the entertainment!”

“…”

Roswaal: “Let’s hear it!”

At Roswaal’s order, the participants unexpectedly started to applaud here and there. As the sound of applause naturally increased, the consciousness of the participants gradually began to accept the situation. In other words, the whole thing was a conspiracy between Gwain and Roswaal, a sideshow mystery play.

Canon: “Margrave! This is…”

Roswaal: “Caaalm down, Sir Raydim. If you don’t smile at the audience, you’re not being a good performer, are you?”

Roswaal smiles wickedly at Canon, who turns bloodthirsty and comes at him. When Cannon gasped at the intimidation, Roswaal whispered more.

Roswaal: “I’ll take care of this. You’re going to have to go along with this. It won’t hurt if you do.”

Canon: “But, you know what happened tonight.”

Roswaal: “The Elior Forest was my fault. I was not considerate enough, right.”

Canon huffed when she heard him quietly. He smiled thinly at her surprise and nodded several times.

Roswaal: “I’m goooing to take all the credit for this evening’s entertainment, is there a proooblem with that, Gwain-dono?”

Gwain: “I don’t know where you got that idea from, but I can’t shake the feeling that you’ve been following my lead. I can’t help it if I’m made a spectacle of like this. I understand.”

Gwen shrugged his shoulders as he listened to Roswaal’s words.

If the people in charge of this venue and the people who suffered the most had made their own decisions, there was no one to argue with them. Even the perpetrator, Canon, was no exception.

Canon: “Margrave Mathers, I am…”

Roswaal: “I’m not going to say that I know hoooow you feel. Ultimately, I don’t know how other people feel. So I’m going to use logic. You owe me a great debt for this one. I’m sure you’ll make a greeeeat contribution to the future election of the king.”

In a nasty voice, Roswaal adds at the end, “And for that reason”.

Roswaal: “You have to solve your misgivings towards Emilia-sama.”

Canon: “Huh?”

Roswaal: “Strangely enough, it’s just like what Miss Natsumi said. Iffff you meet Emilia-sama in person, your impression will change a little. At the very leeeeast, she won’t seem like a witch.”

Canon: “It’s… but if she knew what I’d done…”

She lowered her eyes and made a gloomy face at the suggestion, as if Canon couldn’t face it. However, upon hearing Canon’s statement, Roswaal burst out laughing. And then, to her surprise, he left her with the urge to laugh.

Roswaal: “Believe me. Compared to what I’ve doooone, what you’ve done is a petty little thing.”

17

And just like that, the case was about to come to an end, but…

Natsumi: “Please wait! There are mysteries yet to be revealed…!”

It was Natsumi Schwartz who stepped hard on the floor while picking up the hem of her dress. Natsumi’s comment caused the audience, who had been enjoying the grand finale, to groan again.

Guests: “Miss? what’s wrong? Now that we know who did it, it’s all good, isn’t it?”

Canon: “It’s not all good! The stolen goods carried by the balloon were found, but where were the statues? What’s the mystery behind the two stone statues?”

Natsumi: “That’s right. Sir Raydim, that’s the point.”

Canon: “No, no, that’s the thing.”

The water was pointed at her, and Cannon winced in dismay. Then she let her lips quiver faintly.

Canon: “Originally, the plan was not to take away the statue. Since the plan was to transport it by balloon, there was a weight limit. So the goddess statue…”

Natsumi: “Then, even if it disappeared in a blink of an eye? It’s an illusion that one minute it’s dark and almost the next it’s gone! Copperfield!”

Audrey: “…Wait, Natsumi-san, Did you just say it was gone in an instant?”

Audrey cocked her head at Natsumi, who was exaggerating her surprise by putting her hands on her cheeks. In response to her question, Natsumi frowned and said, “Yes”

Testimony of Natsumi Schwartz 4

I was resting alone in the hallway when I heard a noise and went to the vault. The door was already unlocked, and I peeked inside, calling out to anyone who might be in the room. It was at this time that I took a short look around the dimly lit vault and saw the two… statues!

I was about to go out to make sure no one was around when the lights went out. I gasped in surprise, for what seemed like a dozen seconds? Audrey and Gwain had jumped into the vault and were looking at me.

Natsumi: “I still can’t stop shaking when I think of your faces at that time…”

Audrey: “I don’t want to play games with you. It’s odd, though…”

Audrey puts her hand on her chin and thinks about it, ignoring Natsumi, who puts on a performance of trembling fingers. There is one thing that is definitely wrong with Natsumi’s testimony now. It’s terribly simple.

Audrey: “I’m sure it took at least five minutes for the Margrave turn off the lights of the magic stone lamps and for me and Gwain-sama to break down the door of the vault. But Natsumi-san said it was a dozen seconds, didn’t she?”

Canon: “It’s not just that her perception of time is out of whack, is it?”

Audrey: “You’re right, you can’t mistake five minutes for ten seconds. Even if you’re making a mess of the story.”

Natsumi: “I’m not making it up!”

Natsumi insists with her inflated, fake chest. Like Roswaal, Audrey was impressed inwardly that she could so brazenly put herself on the spot. She was so impressed that she suddenly felt uncomfortable.

Audrey: “It was fake Shelving…”

Natsumi: “Audrey?”

Audrey: “Remember, Natsumi-san. Was it just after you checked the statue that it went dark?”

Natsumi: “Huh? Yes, I did, didn’t I? Check out the statue, around the back of the…”

Audrey exhaled deeply in response to Natsumi’s nodding nod. Looking at Audrey’s profile, Garnet twisted her cheeks.

Garnet: “Audrey-sis, you look like you’ve got an idea?”

Audrey: “That’s right. I have an idea. Gwain-sama, could you please bring the Metia that confirmed Natsumi-san’s magical attributes over here?”

Gwain “I don’t mind if you want me to bring it to you… but what do you want me to do with it?”

Audrey: “That’s easy. All you have to do is identify the last character in this story and their magical attributes.”

18

Audrey Souffle’s Deduction

That person is Sir Canon Raydim, and she has colluded with Miss Hallaine Banksy in this scheme. The role is that of an accomplice, and an important one at that.

He went ahead with his plan and succeeded in getting the stolen items from the vault onto a balloon and flying it. However, there was a problem here. But now there was a problem: Natsumi-san’s existence.

After flying the balloon, while preparing the ice contraption to close the lock of the storage room, Natsumi noticed that the door was open and came over.

The person, who didn’t want to be seen inside, panicked and quickly jumped in next to the goddess statue. He then assumed an upright position and became the second stone statue in the vault.

Audrey: “That’s how you succeeded in deceiving Natsumi-san’s eyes.”

Natsumi: “Wait a minute. You may be able to fool them for a moment, but they’ll see right through that little trick!”

Hearing Audrey’s reasoning, Natsumi countered, feeling like her distraction was pointed out to her. Audrey nodded at Natsumi’s words and said, “That’s right.”

Audrey: “That’s why they did all the little tricks. There was a big gap between Natsumi-san’s senses and the actual time the lights went down, wasn’t there? Natsumi-san also said that the weapon and the victim appeared out of nowhere.”

Garnet: “Yeah, you said that. So, what is it?”

Audrey: “It’s Shamak.”

In response to Garnet's question, Audrey closed one eye and said.

Audrey: "Shamak is a rudimentary form of Yin magic, a kind of illusion that separates the subject's consciousness from reality. The subject does not even feel the disconnection of consciousness, and the flow of time becomes vague. In other words, Natsumi-san was enchanted by the criminal dressed as a statue the moment she turned her back on him."

Audrey: "So, there is a time gap between Natsumi-san and us. She was in the darkness earlier than when the magic stone lights went out, and then after the magic cleared, she was in the same darkness as us."

Natsumi: "What, no way! But if that's the case, then the culprit is…"

Audrey nodded to Natsumi, whose face had turned pale and white. And then, Audrey picked up the Metia a pearl that changes color based on the magical properties of the object it is placed on the lap of the person next to her. Immediately, the color of the jewel slowly faded to a vague, pale black…

Audrey: "Sir Lazlane Enimou, you have Yin affinity. He's the victim. And he is the culprit."

Audrey's words are the true end to tonight's incident…

Lazlane: "What? Did I do something?"

Correction. The words of such a person who had forgotten all of his plans as well as his memories was the end of the case.

19

Gwain: "I'm sorry you had to go through all that, Miss Audrey."

It wasn't until about two hours after the situation was resolved that Gwain, who had been seeing off the party goers, visited Audrey, who was lazily resting. Gwain thanked her for her help in uncovering the truth, but Audrey was not happy about it. The net result was too much shame for her people.

Audrey: “Fortunately, I was relieved that it didn’t seem to develop into a big problem. As for Garnet”s outburst, I’ll have her family and loved ones punish her for it.”

Gwain: “I’m glad to hear that. Well, it’s a blow to this old man to have his precious bell tower damaged, but I’m sure Roswaal-chan will pay for it.”

Audrey: “I don’t understand a person, like Canon-san…”

While the Margrave may have ruthlessly used Emilia and the others, as well as the people of his domain, to further his own agenda, he also tolerates bad behavior, such as the three cross-dressers today, and shows warmth to Canon who have clearly taken hostile actions against him. It was hard to believe that the behavior was consistent.

Gwain: “I’m sure it’s all consistent in your mind, This old man has known Roswaal-chan for a while, but he’s an unfathomable person.”

Audrey: “I agree with you… That’s why I’m relieved.”

Gwain: “You mean to tell me that Roswaal-chan wasn’t the one who stole the statue and everything?”

Audrey nodded in response to Gwain’s question with one eye closed, saying that there was no point in hiding it.

In the end, this evening’s events had been a ploy to frame Roswaal, but Audrey always assumed the worst. But Audrey was always prepared for the worst case scenario: that the culprit was really Roswaal.

That was the real reason why Audrey had dressed up as a woman to attend tonight’s event. Ram, who could not accompany her due to fever, asked Audrey for a favor. And that is…

Audrey: “…I was wondering if tonight’s auction might have some of those curious items that the Margrave is so obsessed with.”

What kept her from laughing at Ram's premonition was her trust in her intuition, which was outstanding, and her fear of the damage it could do if it came true.

Audrey: "But it was an unfounded fear."

Gwain: "Well, I didn't really suspect it, either. Even if Roswaal-chan was going to do something violent, there was no need to steal it from the vault. As for paying for the bell tower, he could hit me with his massive wealth if he wanted to. That's another scary part."

Gwain shrugged his shoulders and then held out his hand to Audrey. He asked for a handshake, which Audrey gladly accepted.

Gwain: "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of cleaning up to do. Thank you again, Miss Audrey. Give my regards to your friends, Miss Natsumi and Miss Garnet."

Audrey: "Yes, thank you very much for your help…!"

Suddenly, Audrey was surprised when he pulled her arm to shake her hand. Then, as he pulled her close, Gwain said softly in a low voice into Audrey's ear

Gwain: "Next time, I want to talk to you when you're properly dressed. Promise that to this old man…"

That was all he said, and Gwain turned away, laughing. As she watched him walk away, Audrey…no, Otto, let out a small sigh.

Audrey: "Good grief. He's a friend of the Margrave, after all. You're an inedible person."

And that was a fair assessment of the person who was probably the most impressive of the night.

20

Roswaal: "And so, along with the memory of Sir Lazlane Enimou, the whereabouts of the stolen statue of the Goddess are now unknown. In addition, I promised to take the blaaaame for tonight's events, you know. Gwain-dono has taken my word for it."

???: “That’s why the master had to pay for everything, including tonight’s party and the compensation for the lost statue of the goddess. Exciting.”

Roswaal “I’m glaaad you said that.”

So said Roswaal, smiling in the late evening when the world was already asleep.

The place is a little further away from Gwain Merette’s mansion, by the lake in the forest where there is no human presence. There were two figures standing on the water’s edge, Roswaal and a tall, slender man standing next to him.

Roswaal: “Buuuut thank you for your help, Clind. I don’t know how you managed to get Annerose to miss the party.”

Clind: “No, Annerose-sama has a fever and is absent. I had nothing to do with it. Denial.”

Roswaal: “Fever…? Is she going to be okay?”

Clind: “Yes, it’s a lie. When Annerose-sama heard that Emilia-sama was not going to attend, she lost interest in participating. Affection.”

Bending at the waist and stating in an indifferent manner is a beautiful and strong man with the impression of a stoic with a monocle over one eye. This is Clind, a servant of Annerose, a relative of Roswaal’s. Roswaal frowned at Clind’s words.

Roswaal: “You often tell nonsensical lies, don’t you? Eveeeen if we’ve known each other for a long time, it doesn’t change that.”

Clind: “I thought it was because we have known each other for a long time. And I was pleasantly surprised to see the Master’s concern for Annerose-sama. Mischievous spirit.”

Roswaal: “Good grief. That’s what you are. So, what’s this thing?”

Shrugging his shoulders at Clind’s lack of a smile, Roswaal lowered his voice to a faint whisper. Clind said, “Here,” and brought a cloth-covered object to the water’s edge. Roswaal reached out and removed the cloth. Then…

Roswaal: “This is the statue of the goddess in question.”

Clind: “I have brought it out as you wish, Master. Secrecy.”

Roswaal pulled his chin back as Clind placed a hand on his chest and bowed. This is the statue of the goddess that was stolen from Gwain’s house this evening and whose whereabouts are unknown. Canon’s plan was not a bad one. The fact that they tried to frame Roswaal for the crime was also to Roswaal’s liking. The only thing the girl screwed up was…

Roswaal: “So I wasn’t particularly guilty of any wrongdoing in the statue incident riiiight.”

Clind “Master dims the light of the magic stone lamps while I steal the statue of the goddess. Nevertheless, I didn’t think anyone else had the same idea and good eyesight. I had to take care of it in a hurry. Introspection.”

Roswaal: “What did you do in the heat of the moment, smash Sir Enimou’s head in with a statue of the goddess?”

Clind does not deny it. Is he ashamed in his own way, or does he think nothing of it? Roswaal doesn’t know what’s going on in his heart. He makes no special effort to read it. Whatever the case, he followed Roswaal’s instructions to the letter. That’s all.

Roswaal: “I feel bad for Subaru-kun who got caught up in it byyyy accident. After that, Otto-kun’s and Garfiel’s efforts were also… really something to see.”

Clind: The Master is a good judge of character. Bad taste.

Roswaal: “I don’t know what to say to you about my hobby… Weeell”

Then Roswaal narrowed his left and right differently colored eyes and looked at the statue of the goddess in front of him. In Roswaal’s vision, the moonlit statue of the goddess gradually revealed itself. It was a statue in the shape of a beautiful, long-haired woman. It was so majestic that it could be described as a goddess. Roswaal gently placed his palm against the statue.

Roswaal: “Disappear…”

Immediately after the murmur, a crack appeared in the chest of the statue of the goddess, and the statue shattered with a breaking sound. The white fragments sank into the lake with the sound of water, impossible to restore. The purpose had been fulfilled.

Clind: “The statue of the cursed goddess, which has given birth to tragedies one after another while changing owners, seems to have come to an end. Curtain closing.”

Roswaal: “A cursed statue of a goddess is ridiculous. They just blamed the goddess statue for the tragedies that happened to be created as a result of the desires of the people around them… Stupid.”

Roswaal muttered in a tone of voice that somehow held back his irritation. Clind quietly looked at Roswaal’s profile and took a short breath.

Clind: “It’s a goddess statue, whoever called it that… but it doesn’t look anything like Echidna-sama. Excellent work.”

Roswaal: “Yeah. Yeah, I know. They don’t look alike at all. It’s no joke to come here and see a goddess.”

Staring at the shattered pieces, looking out at the lake it had sunk into, looking at the shimmering silver moon reflected on the surface of the lake, Roswaal let out a sigh.

Roswaal: “It’s been a night like a bad comedy…”

END

The Witch's After Tea Party: Requirements to Be a Witch (Translation Pending)

Bonus Short Stories

The Witch’s After Tea Party: Witches’ Evaluation Meeting

1

???: “…I’m against you taking those girls along.”

The beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Witch — Minerva — crossed her arms and puffed out her flushed cheeks as she declared that, anger filling her glimmering eyes.

She was sitting on one of the six chairs positioned around the white table. Opposite to her, Echidna let out a choked “Hmm…” in response to her complaint.

She raised her cup of tea off the table and gazed at the hot steam rising up from it,

Echidna: “I still haven’t decided where I’m going to go now, but if possible, I’d like to go and see how much the world has changed in these 400 years. What do you all think about that?”

Minerva: “Now hold on just a minute. Didn’t you hear what I said? How can you ignore me so easily! This is unacceptable. Utterly unacceptable!”

Minerva flared up in anger at Echidna as the latter tried to ignore her earlier complaint by changing the subject. With her face still flushed, Minerva grabbed Echidna by the scruff of her neck; however, that only caused her smile to grow deeper.

Echidna: “I was just joking. It sure would be nice if you didn’t fly off the handle so suddenly.”

Minerva: “You goddamn…”

???: “—You shouldn’t always get so riled up Minerva, hhaa.”

A languid voice called out to Minerva as she grew angrier and angrier, with her soft eyebrows raised on end. The voice belonged to a woman who was sitting hugging her knees on one of the chairs, submerged in a sea of her own hair.

For better or for worse, that lethargic gaze belonged to Sekhmet.

Sekhmet: “Echidna’s messing about with you, hhuu. This wouldn’t be the first time, hhaa. She’s just going to take advantage of you every time you fall for them, hhuu.”

Minerva: “So you’re saying I should just let her be? I’m completely against this!”

Minerva bellowed that she wasn’t in the wrong with tears in her eyes, before then crouching down where she sat, looking completely at wit’s end. Two small hands came from her left and right, patting Minerva on the head.

???: “I D-Don’t, I don’t think… M-Minerva-chan… Is in the wrong here, y-you know?”

???: “I agree, Nerva’s not at fault. Dona’s the real baddie here. Should I tear her apart?”

The ones who were comforting Minerva from both sides were Carmilla and Typhon.

Unlike Carmilla, there’d been no bluff in the words the young Typhon had spoken. Left unchecked, there was a real chance she’d use her authority on her. Thus, Echidna shrugged her shoulders in apology.

Echidna: “I really wish you wouldn’t do that. Someone as weak as I am wouldn’t stand a chance against you all, if you were to turn against me. Besides, considering that I’m the host, you’d all fall together with me if I did…”

???: “If you’re going to use that as a threat Dona-Dona, then isn’t it just a little strange that we’re all here with you like this~?”

Echidna: “…You had to go and put me on the spot there.”

Right next to her, while restrained in her coffin, Daphne gave her a laugh. She'd already "devoured" her own chair and was now stuffing her face with the tea cakes that were set on the table, drool pouring down the corner of her mouth.

Echidna let a wry smile slip onto her face as she looked on at the participants of the tea party. They were the Witches, her friends.

Echidna: "You girls are always such an odd bunch, if I do say so myself."

Minerva: "I really don't want to hear that coming from you!"

2

There once was a Witch who plunged the world into a maelstrom of chaos and terror.

The world then entered an age of darkness because of that being known as The Witch of Envy. Afterwards, said Witch passed down into legend, becoming an object of terror that few dared to speak of.

But there were actually six other Witches of Sin during that era; yet, they remained surprisingly unknown, with all of their deeds, personalities and such falling into obscurity…

Echidna: "…Or, to put it more accurately, they're in my citadel of dreams, after I collected their souls."

Carmilla: "Y-You… You know you did all of that on your accord though…"

Carmilla looked at Echidna reproachfully, as the latter placed the cup she'd been drinking out of down with a smile.

That look of protest in her eyes was rather cute, but have too much of it and it would become poison. After all, Carmilla could make people devote their lives to her by merely staring at them and asking them to do so. None of the Witches of Sin could even come close to Carmilla in regards to how many people she'd made throw their lives away because she so desired.

But, even then…

Echidna: “Those are rookie numbers compared to Minerva, since she’s the one who killed the most.”

Minerva: “…”

Typhon: “Oh no, someone’s made Nerva cry! Was it Dona again? She really never learns her lesson!”

Large teardrops had welled up in the silent Minerva’s eyes as she listened to Echidna’s recollection. Yet, the reason she didn’t pose any objections was because she was fully aware of how much of a mass-murderer she was.

Minerva’s authority let her forcefully convert the destructive energy she could hold into healing power. Her punches and kicks were some of the gentlest in the whole world, but they didn’t come cheap.

Minerva saved the lives of many people; but at the same time, she also killed many with natural disasters. The Witch who had saved and killed the most people in the world, was Minerva.

Nevertheless, the amount of lives she’d taken by no means repudiated the gentleness of her heart. That’s why her point had been a deeply honest and sincere one.

Minerva: “…How long do you plan to keep Colette and Palmyra around?”

The focus of Minerva’s agenda became what they were going to do about those two girls from now.

The Witches were gathered here in the citadel of dreams that Echidna had built, merely as souls. However, it was a citadel only in name; a green hillock was situated there instead, with a tea-party taking place on it.

The topic they were discussing was regarding the two girls she’d met on her journey. Currently, both of them were outside of the citadel of dreams — To put it briefly, they were tagging along with

Omega in the real world, who was possessed by Echidna. The girls were far more resistant to the miasma than your average person, based on the fact that they kept their wits about them even when coming into contact with the Witch Echidna. Regardless though…

Minerva: "This really isn't good enough. It's not safe for starters. What are you planning on doing with them?"

Echidna: "…Well, it's like I told the two. One of them was driven out from her hometown, and isn't even able to use the "Beasting Bracelet" that her parents left her as a memento. So I want to at least give them the knowledge and skills to keep them alive."

Sekhmet: "There must be something more to it, hhaa. I'm guessing it's not something you did out of kindness, hhuu. This isn't like you, considering you've brought chaos to so many countries for one reason or another, hhaa. Do you have a fever or something? Hhuu."

Daphne: "Ooh~, she was soaked in ice cold water for quite a looong time, wasn't she~? Isn't it pretty much unheard of for a Witch to drown to death~? Bhahaha~"

Only within this world of dreams would sweets appear as much as one desired. Daphne, who was constantly stricken by insatiable hunger, laughed happily as she devoured them.

The young Typhon tilted her head in response to what Daphne had said, and said: "Oh?"

Typhon: "You're wrong Phinnie, I drowned 'cause all of that water came pouring in! Since I met my watery grave, I suppose I managed it before Dona?"

Echidna: "Indeed, when it comes to drowning, Typhon has a lot more experience than I do. We have to take our hats off to that."

Minerva: "No! We don't!"

Minerva snarled at Typhon and Echidna as they unmindfully shared a laugh together.

Centuries had passed since the Witches of Sin had wreaked havoc everywhere. Now they were long-dead, with naturally each of them having their own manner of death. Typhon's death by drowning had been one of those.

Either way…

Carmilla: "W-We're… We're getting off topic… We're getting off topic, aren't we?"

Echidna: "Yeah. I don't have a fever by the way. Nor does my body on the outside. Therefore, I can safely say that the decision I made to take them with me was done under normal circumstances."

Daphne: "So~, you're saying that you actually meant what you said before~?"

Echidna: "…Joking aside, my body is quite weak as things stand."

Echidna brought up the body she had on the outside — Omega's actual body — in response to Daphne's question.

The body which she was possessing was a duplicate of Ryuzu Meyer's, fabricated using Pseudo-Od as its core. It wasn't truly made from flesh and blood, rather from an artificial substitute that wasn't too far off from a Spirit in terms of composition.

Echidna: "I'm making use of it in a way that wasn't originally intended. I had to get rid of quite a few things so that I could pour myself into this vessel."

Sekhmet: "So you did something like that, hhuu. Don't you think the world is going to end this time, hhaa, if one of your flops goes out and about again, like the olden days? Hhuu."

Echidna: "Whoa there, I didn't expect that from you, Sekhmet. You care about whether the world ends?"

Sekhmet: "It's not the end of the world, hhaa, that I care about, hhuu. It's just that, if the world ends, your favourite things would be in deep trouble as well, hhaa. That's what my issue is, hhuu."

Echidna: "…"

Sekhmet: “It’s as I’ve been telling you for a while now, hhaa. I’m more terrified of you losing your interest in this world than anyone else, hhuu. After all, there’s no knowing what you would do, hhaa.”

Sekhmet spoke for an unnaturally long time; when she finally finished, she let out an utterly exhausted sigh. Then, she placed her head on her lap, and began to talk again.

Sekhmet: “I’m exhausted, hhuu. I don’t have anything else to say, hhaa.”

Typhon: “Whaa? Whaa, you’re going to sleep? Want me to sing you a lullaby?”

Typhon somewhat valiantly began to take care of the exhausted Sekhmet. Echidna took a glimpse at their topsy-turvy parent-child relationship, one that she was all too used to seeing, before then batting one of her eyes shut.

Echidna: “The point Sekhmet brought up now was rather interesting, but you needn’t worry about it. I am not going to repeat my past mistakes. The problem I had with those was that I shaved off parts of my soul to make myself fit into the vessel. That’s why this time, I shaved off a different part.”

Carmilla: “A-A… A different… part… Wh-Which one?”

Echidna: “My powers.”

She had to regulate how much of herself she could pour into the vessel she called Omega, otherwise she wouldn’t fit.

This time around, Echidna had cast aside the powers she had no particular attachment to, in order to preserve herself. Thanks to that, she’d been able to step out from the Sanctuary while still keeping her own identity.

And in exchange for that…

Echidna: “It seems like I’ve regrettably lost most of the powers and skills I developed as a Witch. I still have the knowledge, but I don’t imagine it will be easy for me to regain my former strength.”

Daphne: “Oh~, is that why that happened~? You ended up burning a bit of the forest straight after you left the graveyard, right~? It did kinda seem like you weren’t able to control it at all~”

Echidna: “—. Yeah, that’s why.”

Minerva: “Wait up, why did you hesitate there? Are you sure it wasn’t just down to a lack of effort on your part?”

Daphne had pointed out the incident where she’d messed up after leaving the Sanctuary as Omega.

When she’d used her magic like in the citadel of dreams, she’d imagined that she would have been able to put out the fire. However, that hadn’t been the case. Part of the forest had burnt down as a result, with her almost dying after being caught up in the smoke.

Echidna: “Of course not. What other reason are you saying it could be?”

Minerva: “It could be that you’re a complete dolt! You’ve always been someone who’s quite careless in a lot of respects, ever since the olden days! How many times is it now that you’ve burnt forests down?”

Echidna: “Not that many. Please don’t just spout out whatever you like.”

Carmilla: “W-Wasn’t there a time… that you went out… i-in public… still wearing your nightgown?”

Echidna: “Who’s side are you on Carmilla?”

Echidna gazed at Carmilla as a look of dissatisfaction appeared on her face, having just been on the receiving end for her past slip-ups. Carmilla however just tilted her head wonderingly in response to her gaze.

Carmilla: “I-I’m… I’m on my own side… Y-You know?”

Echidna: “…I suppose so. You’ve always been that way.”

Echidna facepalmed as Carmilla put herself first without any shred of hesitation.

Certainly, it was true that she'd set forest fires; and if need be, it was also true that she'd carelessly gone out in public wearing just her nightgown. Even so, the circumstances surrounding Omega now had nothing to do with those things.

The key thing now was that Omega had lost her powers, making her extremely weak and fragile.

Echidna: "Of course that doesn't apply when I materialize myself, even if it's just for a short amount of time. Most people end up dying from mental breakdowns just by looking at me, thanks to my miasma. It's just that I don't want to make heavy use of it. Anyhow, I…"

Typhon: "…There's someone you don't want to be found by, right?"

Typhon anticipated what Echidna was going to say, and spoke them for her innocently. The latter didn't bother to deny the point the young Witch had made.

She was speaking the truth. All of the Witches here in the citadel of dreams knew that. It wasn't just Echidna after all.

This someone was an enemy all of the Witches had in common.

Echidna: "Anyways, that's why I don't want to stand out. So rather than wandering around on my own and bringing about modern Witch-related legends, I'll…"

Minerva: "You mean to say it'll be far more convenient for you to mingle in as a trio of female travelers, yeah?"

Echidna: "Yeah, pretty much. There's a chance I'm inviting different kinds of dangers, but there's no way anyone would think that a Witch would be moving about with other people."

Minerva: "…If you say so."

Her explanation should have made quite a lot of sense, being a valid reason for travelling along with Palmyra and Colette. But it didn't have much of an effect on the others, considering how long they'd known each other.

She did like them, but sometimes, in instances like this, they were such a nuisance.

Minerva: "By the way, how long do you think it'll take to get your powers back?"

Echidna: "Right, I guess they'll be in a far better state in roughly two to three years. Though that's just an estimate from how I'm seeing it now."

Minerva: "I see… Then your deadline is two years."

Minerva's compromise had been to set a deadline for the time Echidna spent with the girls. The very fact that she'd set the shortest time possible as the deadline was indeed typical of her good nature.

Not even Echidna had any objections to that. Whether two years would take a long or short time must surely have been a foolish question for the Witches, who hadn't yet breathed their last even in death.

Daphne: "So~, where do you want to head off to Dona-Dona~?"

Echidna: "Right, there's a lot of prime candidates for that. Though well, for now I'd like to leave Lugunica. Many of you met your ends here in this country, it depresses me a bit."

Carmilla: "W-We… We actually all… ended up dying here…"

Echidna: "It's something we couldn't really help considering how things were at the time. Be that as it may, given that Gusteko is out of the question, I'd say Vollachia or Kararagi… Though from where we are, I'd say Kararagi. I've got a connection with that country since I helped found it, so I'm curious to see how it's doing now."

Having settled on how they were going to deal with the girls, Echidna's interest moved over to the next subject. The other

Witches exchanged glances with each other, shrugging their shoulders as they witnessed Echidna coming more and more to life.

A bundle of curiosity, an incarnation of the thirst for knowledge. None other than said person would whisper those words. Yet, from the eyes of her friends, this sort of stuff amounted to nothing more than simple nosiness.

Sekhmet: “It terrifies me that your nosiness, hhaa, could quite easily destroy the world, hhuu.”

Typhon: “Whaa? Didn’t you say that you were done with talking?”

Typhon caught ear of Sekhmet’s exhausted mutter and innocently cocked her head in confusion. Sekhmet gave her hair a brisk ruffle, before placing her hand over her mouth to shush her.

Meanwhile, Minerva was letting out a bunch of “Yeah” and “uh-huh”‘s with a disgruntled look on her face as Echidna talked about her plans for the future. Daphne was there, god knows whether she was listening in or not, as well as Carmilla, who’d occasionally interject with some ill-choiced words.

—The Witches’ tea party, unleashed on the world, continued to take place for a while to come.

END

Volume 24

Chapters 55-70

Chapter 55:
You Who Awaits The Snowmelt

1

—Black, murky, distant, dense, deep, weighty, bitter darkness was what was present.

"…"

Coarsely, like all things negative of this world were being blended into a heterogeneous mixture, he felt such cumbrous, choking darkness thickly coiling upon his entire body.

His face, his body, his limbs, his supposed skin were all corrupted by that darkness, and oozily it soaked into his blood, and accompanying that was a sense of discomfort as if calling upon his thirst.

Imaginable or not, it felt as if all leftover parts of his body were covered with scabs.

His skin became taut, and the feeling of it not even feeling like the skin of a human upon touch reversed, for the fingers that would touch the scabs were covered with scabs themselves, and he lost understanding of the form of his true Self.

—No, what he truly couldn't understand, was not merely his outward appearance.

"…"

Something further in the interior, as if his essence.

Otherwise what should likely be named as his Soul.

Losing its form, the state of his own Soul, at the end of the repetition of this sheerly hopeless straying, he felt as if fingers were coming into view from those fragments.

As his reaction to those appearing fingers was covered in scabs as aforementioned, rendered futile, perhaps it could be said to be merely uneasiness and something greater, repugnance. As if they things someone could possibly grasp.

"…"

Was the Self he seeked, truly present ahead.

Before he was pulled in, the moment he had reached here, didn't a completely new self of his take shape.

Though it was queer imagination, it was not something completely implausible. The truth is, the happenings within his body gave a sudden sense of abruptness inclined towards that, and brought about impracticality.

Grasping that as his own affair, accepting the trial which posed in front of him, he seeked the spectacle which lay ahead of overcoming it. —For just that, just how much time had he devoted.

"…"

That is why, he felt a heavy sense of uneasiness.

Should he really go ahead of this point. Was the place in which he would be received, accepted, seeked, truly there.

Entrustment, forgiveness, faith, wishing, his Self which had engaged in all those, was it truly present there.

—I love you.

—Such incomparable uneasiness, was melted by the voice which felt as if it was leading the way, and fading away.

"…"

—White, bright, tall, precious, beautiful, sweet, light was what he faced.

And that soul was, Natsuki Subaru was—.

2

Upon that moment, Natsuki Subaru revived and reawakened his consciousness from the deepest of slumbers.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

A weak sigh spilled out of his mouth at first.

It was his own voice, though husky and lacking life. But with this, he understood he had not been rendered mentally to a point where he would no longer be able to even speak.

This made for a single step forward. As for the rest, he must confirm that he had not been reset to a person with entirely an different sense of values—

???: “—Are you awake, Subaru?”

Subaru: “…”

The chime of a silver bell had been observing Subaru’s ear and forehead from the side, immediately close to him.

A chime refreshing, kind, peaceful and loveable.

The voice he had heard just a few moments ago whilst in a terrible condition.

His heart bounced upon hearing it now. With his chest hurting him, Subaru slowly turned sideward.

“…”

—What awaited there was an amethyst glimmer, with eyes dyed in concern.

Subaru: “…Emi, lia?”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right. Subaru, are you okay? Can you get up? Are you able to speak properly?”

Subaru: “Um…”

With her name called to her, the possessor of the amethyst eyes—Emilia wet her lips and tilted her head. Beautiful long silver hair flowed down her white shoulders. It seemed like the glow of the moon was swimming gracefully within light, her heroic beauty scorched Subaru’s heart.

—Frankly speaking, there stood a girl too beautiful to think that she was of this world.

Subaru: “Wah…”

The moment he grew conscious of that, Subaru’s blood flow rejuvenated with great vigor.

His face grew warmer, his face became redder, as he darted his eyes in all directions, rendered unable to raise his voice. Blushing so intensely that his ears nearly started hurting, he spilled out a voice saying “Ahaha, ahaha…”

Emilia: “Ahaha…?”

Surprised by his antics, Emilia furrowed her finely-shaped eyebrows. Even the slightest of her gestures seemed like a work of art painted with extreme detail by the artist.

Witnessing this from a distance where they could feel each other’s breaths, Subaru suffered with a rapid increase of heart rate.

“…”

What’s this. Just what was this.

Is this real. Isn’t this a mirage or an illusion. Speaking of mirages in the middle of a desert, that would be an oasis— in other words, what you see at that moment is what you desire the most.

Then in accordance with that rule, this definitely should be a mirage. What an extravagant illusion—

Emilia: “A-Are you okay, Subaru? Something’s wrong after all. You were collapsed, after all.”

Subaru: “Bah!”

Emilia: “See, you just said bah!”

Subaru was caught up in a vortex of confusion, as the reversed palm on his forehead trembled.

Upon witnessing that, Emilia blinked her twinkling eyes to confirm Subaru’s possible injuries, as Subaru was denied his “Emilia illusion” whilst he tasted seriousness like that of the scholar who disproved the Ptolemaic theory.

However, he certainly did feel the sensation of contact. Reality affirmed her existence.

And not only did it affirm that Emilia truly existed, but also that his self was Natsuki Subaru.

And above all—

???: “—What’s with this conversing while ignoring Betty, stop it, I suppose. Geez, it isn’t just Emilia who’s worried, in fact.”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

Opposite to Emilia, a young voice, seemingly displeased, echoed and turned around.

He leapt towards the turned figure, who belonged to a young girl with puffed up cheeks.

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “That’s quite the low voice, I suppose… as if you can’t believe Betty is here, your expression speaks the same, in fact.”

Accepting the faint call, Beatrice relaxed her furrowed eyebrows.

Though her words were harsh, her voice had a tint of concern and relief.

The relief for Subaru waking up, and the concern for Subaru collapsing. Giving that impression, Beatrice's attitude— no, her entire existence jolted Subaru's heart.

In other words—

Beatrice: "Nyah?!"

Grabbing Beatrice's figure, Subaru immediately pulled her light body towards his chest. Light. Her body was truly light.

Unable to resist upon his sudden action, Beatrice was completely engulfed within Subaru's arms as her eyes encircled. Atop the emerald bed covered with vines and creepers, with all his strength Subaru confirmed her existence.

Subaru: "Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatri~ce!"

Beatrice: "W-Wh-Wh-What, I suppose?! What happened, in fact?! This is too sudden!"

Subaru: "You, you… you really, have such a calming face! Cuteness that's seemingly welcoming someone back to his parents' home. I'll fall for you."

Beatrice: "What, that better not be a compliment, in fact?!"

Hugging her and viewing Beatrice's face, Subaru said earnestly. Becoming redder due to his actions and words, Beatrice put her palm on Subaru's face with strength.

As the young girl's tiny fingers touched his cheek and ear, whilst tasting cute pain, Subaru truly felt the existence of the young girl named Beatrice with certainty.

Emilia: "Geez! Subaru, don't start fooling around immediately after waking up! We don't even know why you collapsed, yet…"

Feeling slightly left out, so spoke Emilia sharply towards Subaru, who was busy hugging Beatrice.

Concerned for Subaru's body, Emilia tried to grab his shoulder, but then stopped.

Emilia: "—Subaru?"

Emilia, tinted with more of concern than rage. The emotions blended within her voice changed into a single shade of worry. Her eyes, painted with surprise, were looking at Subaru whom she had tried to grasp.

The shoulder of Subaru, who was faintly trembling, and crying.

Subaru: "…Uhm, kh."

Beatrice: "Subaru? Subaru, what happened, I suppose? Betty is right here, in fact. It's alright, it's alright, I suppose. You don't have to cry, in fact."

Noticing Subaru's state, who let out a faint wail from his throat and wept, Beatrice erased the color of chaos from her face entirely and caressed Subaru's cheek, which was stained with tears.

His faintly trembling hands, were trying to release Beatrice's young, petite body. Beatrice understood, that anxiety and fear was the cause of that.

Henceforth, Beatrice gently called out to his heart.

That he doesn't have to cry. That he is alright. That she is right there.

Emilia: "Stop crying, Subaru. You don't have to rush. Slowly, take a deep breath, calm down. Beatrice and I, are both right here with you."

Just like Beatrice, Emilia consoled Subaru on top of the bed.

Her hand, which had earlier halted in hesitation, now touched Subaru's shoulder, Emilia's voice, like the chime of a silver bell, respected Subaru's actions and determinations.

"…"

The two's existences and ways did not change.

The sublime two did not change, even within a world where everything had been brought to ruin, where everything had been lost irrecoverably, they still gave precedence to others, to Subaru instead of themselves even whilst they stood at the door of death.

Having confirmed that, having recognized that, this time for sure, he shall work to push through.

Natsuki Subaru, in order to regain everything as 'Natsuki Subaru'—

Subaru: "I've, returned."

A crying voice accompanied with a disheveled attitude, though he had been in other situations which could not have been more pathetic, more disgraceful.

—Natsuki Subaru commenced a new loop in order to rescue everything.

3

Subaru: "And so, it seems that I actually lost my memories in the library of Taygeta. I get that this may not mesh well for everyone in a lot of ways and thus quite a problem, but please understand."

"…"

On the breakfast table, Subaru courteously bowed his head down before all of his comrades, who were sitting in a circle.

Such explosive words of Subaru's triggered all kinds of reactions amongst everyone. Even so, the most prominent of them was confusion, mayhem or grief had seemingly been postponed to later.

Emilia: "Everyone is rea~lly worried for Subaru. But, Subaru is utmost worried for us so…"

Ram: "…Emilia-sama may say so, but."

By Subaru's side, Emilia followed up with a concerned yet understanding expression.

However, Emilia's words were viewed skeptically by Ram. She folded her own arms and glared at Subaru with her light crimson eyes,

Ram: "Ram doesn't see that Barusu is the one who's utmost worried. Rather, Barusu, what is this farce."

Subaru: "It's not a farce. I'm speaking my heart out about my concern and the truth rea~lly honestly. My chest is about to burst from the idea of being stubborn and not telling about it, considering the tragedy that brings."

"…"

Ram's glare became increasingly suspicious upon Subaru's response, as he answered with a grim expression.

Emilia made a hurried response to the two's severe exchange, having heard the situation moments beforehand in the Green Room. Upon hearing about his Amnesia, Emilia and Beatrice were astonished but accepted it with concern for Subaru's safety— the sequence followed the footsteps of what had happened previously this time as well, and he had asked her to provide backup to him whilst he opened his heart out.

—Retiring from that previously horrible environment, Natsuki Subaru now broke into an entirely new environment.

Should it be said in a stylish manner, he had determined his resolve to start life in the different world from zero once again, but of course the actual circumstance was nothing so wonderful.

It's good that he has resolved, but at that moment wherein he wished for Death, it's possible that could've been the end for him.

Without that happening to him, and now having gotten a chance to commence again thanks to Return by Death like this, in all honesty, the relief and gratitude he felt now was insuppressible. —However, he had no intention to rely on it.

The power of Return by Death which resided within Subaru's body, was an immense power which distorted fate itself.

Though Death being its trigger was rough on Subaru, the user, but should it be considered compensation for distorting fate then this would be nothing less than appropriate.

A form of compensation— yes, Subaru thought of Death as naught but a form of compensation.

It's natural that a power so great would need to be compensated in some form. Of course, Subaru assumed that that was naturally the case with his Return by Death as well.

A limit on the frequency, or perhaps a need to sacrifice something upon recovering.

Subaru did not believe that the goddess of fate would indulge him so much as to grant him an infinite number of trials. The only experience he had of being loved by someone would only be loved by his parents, that would be the only case he could say so confidently.

But in that case, the trials and errors for acquiring the knowledge of the limit of Return by Death — piling up Deaths by his own choice would not be what he would normally choose for. It would not be strange whatsoever if this was his last chance.

And if it followed the pattern of sacrificing something, what's common is to give up on a valuable existence or cherished remembrances.

Unfortunately, for the amnesiac Subaru the only valuable existences he had except for his family in the world he was formerly in, were only Emilia and the others who are also with him in the tower.

And when he thought that far—

Subaru: "No way, the disappearance of my memories better not be a compensation for Return by Death."

Though frightening to even think of, it was fairly possible.

Sacrificing memories as compensation for Return by Death. Quite a vicious idea, but Return by Death itself was not a good act to engage in in the first place.

What was utmost frightening was that there was no way to confirm if this was the case or not.

The truth is, the relationship between Subaru's amnesia and Return by Death was completely unknown. For the moment, having realized his Amnesia, Subaru, who had already died four times, had not affirmed his memory loss within his sphere of what all he could gain a grasp on.

His memories after his start of waking up in the tower while on the way back from the convenience store were vivid—

Ram: "Hey, are you listening, Barusu."

Ram's voice, sharp like a blade, brought Subaru back to reality, after him having gotten completely lost in his thoughts. Upon her gaze, Subaru spilled out a voice from his throat saying "Wh…",

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm listening. I know I surprised you. This is way too sudden and I understand that you won't believe it, but…"

Ram: "But?"

Subaru: "I…"

Beatrice: "Subaru has no reason to say such a duplicitous lie, in fact. Ram must also be holding at least that much trust in Subaru's plans, I suppose."

Beatrice responded to Ram in Subaru's stead, while he was busy choosing his words. Having heard the situation back in the Green Room, she was entirely on Subaru's side as she now sat beside him.

Ram: "Beatrice-sama…"

Beatrice: "What Emilia said isn't wholly false either, in fact. Having lost his memories, the one who's the most worried is Subaru, I suppose. That's why he was even crying like a little kid, in fact."

Subaru: “Talking about that episode makes it so much more embarrassing.”

Subaru pushed a grin upon the unexpected revelation, and made the reason behind his tears to be “this”.

It actually was due to the fact that he had Returned by Death, that he was able to reunite with them, that he had been granted a chance to redo. Those tears had many factors to them, but tears are ultimately tears.

It’s meaningless to investigate the reason behind a man’s tears.

Regardless, his gratitude to Beatrice as she now sided with him was insuppressible.

Just like Emilia, Beatrice had been confused at first upon hearing him in the Green Room, but not only did she less more time than Emilia to digest what he said, she promised to support him with wiseness and sensibility unbefitting her appearance.

—Reminded of the transient relief he had shown her, and the words “taking outside” which Beatrice had said at the very end last time, Subaru felt agony like his heart was being strangled by chains.

Just, what did ‘Natsuki Subaru’ do to Beatrice.

He felt guilty relying on her faith despite not being aware of that. But he must accept it as a matter of course, he admonished himself.

Subaru: “To be honest, it would be a bit unreasonable to reject the theory of me having no reason to lie so directly about having lost my memories, but I want you to just digest that.”

Ram: “Digest that, you say…”

Subaru: “On top of that, let’s talk about something constructive. Luckily, my present self is facing forward. I’d give a large welcome to talking about advancing forward… but if you have something to say, then I’ll properly listen to it.”

Under the cover of Beatrice’s comments, Subaru said so and bowed his head once again. In order to follow up with Subaru, Emilia also bowed her head saying “Please, trust him”.

“…”

Witnessing Emilia, Beatrice and Subaru’s meek attitudes, even Ram was unable to pronounce words of rebuttal. Although, even if they make an angry response, it would only be natural and reasonable.

Of course, it wasn’t just Ram who was impacted by Subaru’s avouched Amnesia. Just because she made the most striking reaction, the reactions of the people besides Ram— Echidna, Julius and Shaula’s reaction also aligned with what Subaru had already experienced twice.

“…”

In all honesty, his reunion with Emilia and Beatrice alone had been quite something, but the moment he saw and reunited with everyone present altogether in this place, Subaru’s heart received a fierce jolt.

Julius, whom he had left on the lower floor along with Reid. Echidna, who had gotten both of her legs blown off and lost her life while apologizing for doubting Subaru. Shaula, who did not show her form amidst all of that mayhem and chaos. And finally, Ram, who directed the utmost powerful suspicion towards Subaru, and did not meet him again thereafter.

Everyone, everyone was here. He had been granted an opportunity to exchange words with everyone once again.

And above all, the one whom Subaru had been the most conscious of in this place—

Meili: “Neverthele~ss, onii-san is truly such a troubled perso~n.”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

Meili: “Wha~t’s with that reaction. Making a face like you’ve met a dead person, isn’t it te~rribly rude?”

So recited the young girl, not too surprised by what Subaru had said.

With her dark blue hair tied into a braid, the young killer wearing a stylish black outfit— Meili.

Meili Portroute, was certainly there, moving and talking.

Subaru: “Meili…”

Meili: “Oh? You remember my name, don’t you~… in fact, I don’t know what’s different about onii-san compared to normal circumstances, so what did you forge~t?”

Subaru: “—. Yeah, it’s a bit complicated. Right now it may seem like I’m having no difficulty when conversing, but once you start digging deeper it becomes a mess. In other words, it’s what they call episodic memory loss, I remember names of stuff quite well, but remembrances with people are all very uncertain.”

Meili: “…Are you referring to, for example, what happened yesterda~y?”

Subaru: “—That’s right.”

Meili straitened her eyes, as her voice became faintly deeper. Subaru hesitated only for a second upon her question, but responded without falling to the pressure.

He perhaps could’ve talked his way out with a rough excuse, but he did not do that. He had decided to not do that. —Subaru shall remain honest with them as long as possible.

Julius: “—Forgot about yesterday, huh. That’s, that’s, well.”

“…”

Hearing Subaru’s response, as if having received a shock greater than simply his claims about Amnesia in a certain sense, whispered Julius accompanied solely by Echidna, somewhat suspiciously.

However, putting their reactions aside,

Shaula: “Master-sama, did you lose memories again? How many times will you forget about me until you’re satisfied. I’m Maicching~.”

Pushing in her voluptuous breasts, Shaula said so whilst making a sour expression.

Shaula’s silly comments followed the same style as last time, but after coming this far, her comments left a strong impression of having an inexcusably odd ambience.

Subaru: “Delving deep into your nonsense also feels weird, but did this Master-sama of yours really keep throwing memories around like this?”

Shaula: “—? Yeah, he kept throwing ’em around quite a lot. When he woke up in the morning and I greeted him, he said “Who’re you, again? I don’t remember you. I don’t know you” and treated me like a woman the really old-fashioned way.”

Subaru: “Hmm, if it’s at that level, then it’s difficult to determine if it was just a bad joke or what.”

Though only an assumption, but if Subaru got closer to Shaula and in ordinary life hereafter, that kind of a frivolous exchange seems really possible.

However Subaru was aware that there existed a self of his who lost his memories and concealed that from Emilia and the others, and chose not to speak of him losing his memories. Deceiving that he had lost his memories under the cover of pretending it to be a bad joke would also be a move that existed.

Though by his own perspective, that would be deathly difficult. And since he had indeed died four times, this wouldn’t be a joke either.

Echidna: “The aforementioned amnesia is understood. I wouldn’t say it’s something that won’t take any time to fully accept… but if there are things like traps which are capable of possibly triggering this phenomenon, then it seems it would be better to act while keeping that in consideration.”

Subaru: “The place with the highest possibility as the crime scene is the library of Taygeta, where Emilia-chan found me collapsed. It seems like the place with the most history too.”

Emilia: “-chan…”

Subaru: “—?”

Echidna commenced the discussion with a serious expression, and Subaru nodded in agreement. However, in the midst of it, Emilia’s lonesome mumble left quite an impression.

Previously she had shown reactions with this expression in the middle of conversing with Subaru several times as well. In the end, the reason for it yet remained unclear.

Was he perhaps overlooking something fatal. —That was, frightening.

Subaru: “—Anyway, everyone, sorry for surprising you all. I think it’s pointless to tell you all to suddenly accept it and continue on at the same pace. Let’s take a break for now. In that time I’ll go draw water with Ram or something.”

Putting forward that suggestion, Subaru stood up. Ram raised her eyebrows upon what he said, whilst Emilia and Beatrice looked at Subaru anxiously.

However, nodding to the two’s look, Subaru turned his black eyes towards Ram,

Subaru: “Let’s go, Ram. —You were just making a face as if calling me to fetch water with you.”

Ram: “—Filthy.”

Averting her gaze, Ram whispered in response to Subaru’s invitation.

4

Ram: “So, what was the meaning of that farce earlier? Now that you’ve taken Ram out like this, you intend to talk about it now, right?”

With a bucket in her hand, Ram and Subaru headed to the water well away from the place of assembly. And once judging that they had taken sufficient distance from Emilia and the others, Ram fired her question.

Her not accepting Subaru’s claims regarding Amnesia whatsoever is something which happened each round. She was not being simply stubborn or being skeptical of the evidence, but she had a further important reason behind it.

—The existence of Rem. Ram’s beloved younger sister, who remained asleep.

In concern for her, Ram was unable to accept Subaru’s Amnesia.

That was why she persistently denied Subaru’s Amnesia. He didn’t know any particulars. But surely, Subaru had some sort of a connection with Rem when she was awake.

And that had been an immense support for Ram, for her existence as the elder sister.

That is why—

Ram: “Kindly stop entrusting too many important roles on Emilia-sama or Beatrice-sama. Beatrice-sama aside, it would be far too heavy a burden for Emilia-sama. That is why it would be appreciated if you involve Ram now. The details are…”

Subaru: “—Ram, it’s true that I’ve lost my memories. Neither is it a lie, nor a plan.”

Ram tried to be relied upon, clinging onto that fine thread, however, Subaru must deny her.

“…”

Ram’s words were interrupted by Subaru’s straightforward remark, and she narrowed her eyes. Levitating within her light crimson eyes was confusion, fear— and rage.

Rage which could scorch and burn Subaru's soul. And the reason for its existence, were her suspicions for Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "I've lost my memories. I have a grasp on the names and relationships of everyone within the tower, but I can't remember a single thing aside from that. That's also true."

Ram: "Kindly stop."

Subaru: "I did talk to Emilia and Beatrice earlier, but I conveyed them the same thing. I have nothing else to convey. Right now, my hands are all empty."

Ram: "Kindly stop, Barusu. If you say anything more than that…"

Subaru: "I know that we came to this tower, to regain a lot of things which were robbed away from us. That we're in the midst of the Trial too. That's all. My intention, is…"

Ram: "Barusu, if you say anything more than this."

Subaru: "About Rem too, I have"

Ram: "Barusu—!!"

Subaru heartbreakingly conveyed to Ram, that he had forgotten.

Denoting that she denied it, that she didn't want to listen to Subaru's words with her attitude, and upon hearing Subaru's apology, Ram grabbed Subaru as an expression of her rage.

Subaru: "Ghu!"

With his collars grasped, his back was thrown onto the wall. With unbelievable physical strength stemming from her build, Ram pinned Subaru and glared at him from a close distance.

He understood that the fire within her light crimson eyes was trying to scorch Subaru and Ram herself.

The instant this fire scorches Subaru— no, scorches Ram, the tragedy will be repeated.

Ram: “What’s your intention? Saying such a, such a stupid lie!”

Subaru: “It’s not, a lie… For me, lying to you is…”

Ram: “So you’re saying you’ve not lied? Then what should be done according to you? That Ram, should trust you? That Barusu, forgot Rem… something, so ridiculous!”

Subaru: “Ram…”

Further sharpening her eyes, Ram scowled at Subaru from a distance so close their lips could touch each other. Finally Subaru noticed, that fire was not so much made up of rage as much as it was made of tears.

Her conflict went far deeper than what Subaru could ever imagine.

Subaru finally managed to grasp that, after repeating four times. How prudent does one have to be, to think it was possible to understand the emotions, the wounds others harbored in their chest.

Subaru came to realize this after repeating the same foul play four times, whilst Emilia and the others realized at once, which seemed dazzling to him.

Unable to merely be scorched by that dazzle, Subaru—

Subaru: “—I will, get Rem back for sure.”

Ram: “—~hk!”

Glaring back into the light crimson eyes, Subaru poured strength into his throat and conveyed clearly.

Upon hearing that, Ram’s eyes widened once again in surprise, but her rage concealed that.

Ram: “How can you talk… about getting her back or whatever, Barusu, you forgot about Rem, didn't you!"

Subaru: "But still, I'll get her back. Rem, my memories, the goal behind coming to this tower, accomplishing and regaining everything without leaving a single thing, we'll all go back together. —It's a matter of course, that I'd guarantee at least that."

Ram: "—Barusu?"

Subaru: "It is, a matter of course… when you think of, everything which happened in this tower."

He was finding it difficult to breathe. Yet, Subaru distorted his cheeks for a different reason. Ram raised her eyebrows upon Subaru's reaction, and slightly relaxed her hands which had grabbed his collars.

Now, Subaru grabbed hold of her hands and pulled them apart. At the same pace, their bodies switched positions.

Ram: "—Filthy. Kindly let go."

Having gotten pinned to the wall now after their positions switched, Ram declared before Subaru whilst she shared glares with him.

However, though powerless, Subaru did not flinch away from saying the words he intended to speak.

Subaru: "Ram. I'm going to definitely get back both my memories, and Rem. For that, please lend me your strength."

"…"

Subaru: "I need everyone's strength. The 'Natsuki Subaru' who was there until yesterday, whom you all knew, may not have said something so pathetic. But, for my present self…"

Julius commended to him, Beatrice trusted him, Echidna forgave him, Emilia wished for him.

And perhaps 'Natsuki Subaru', whom everyone held expectations for, may have changed this stalemated situation by himself.

However, the present Natsuki Subaru was not capable of that. And the people within this tower, were far too loving for him to throw a tantrum and give up, saying that he couldn’t do anything.

Subaru: “I know you won’t believe or forgive me for forgetting Rem. But, please keep that rage of yours for later. In exchange for that, I promise you.”

Ram: “Promise…?”

Subaru: “I will carry through, no matter what. I’ll eat it all up, no matter how many tries it takes. If, I break this promise, if I give up in front of you, then feel free to do whatever you’d like to me, burn me, scorch me, anything.”

“…”

Ram’s eyes widened, and the flame of rage within them weakened. What appeared instead of rage now, was an emotion which she had kept concealed until now.

Whilst witnessing that, Subaru pulled back his head and continued with his straightforward approach with her— and continued his words from the same distance as when their glances had entangled when he had been trapped in the cage of ice.

Subaru: “That is, my resolve.”

Ram: “…Why would you go that far. If Barusu has truly forgotten, then you shouldn’t think of getting Rem back this much.”

“…”

Ram: “Once you forget, it all turns into a void. It becomes a gaping vacuum, and the feelings for what used to be there all disappear. All vanish. Love, hatred, warmth, loneliness, everything.”

Ram’s quiet tone was feigned over by her cold attitude.

Those terribly experienced words, perhaps spoke of the void she had experienced herself. That is why, she found Subaru’s resolve to be difficult to trust.

She believed that it was impossible to possess such a strong desire when embraced by that void.

Subaru: “The truth is, that’s true. My memories are blank, and the feelings which my self, who was there until yesterday, felt for Rem have all slipped out of my hand, but…”

Ram: “Then, why?”

Subaru: “But, I know that you cherish Rem and desperately want to get her back.”

He had seen Ram’s form struggling, desperately wishing for regaining her beloved younger sister, Rem.

By witnessing a wish and love so strong with his own eyes, Subaru had been overwhelmed. And the desperate Ram was one of the people Subaru wished to be saved as well—

Subaru: “Right now, the reason I want to get Rem back is for ‘Natsuki Subaru’, and you.”

“…”

Subaru: “That’s why, I’m counting on you for when I give up. Do whatever you’d like to with my head, that is my atonement, my self who made you cry.”

Ram: “Ram never cried, don’t fool around.”

Subaru: “That hu~rt ~hk?!”

Receiving a tight slap on the side of his face, Subaru crumbled on that very spot.

Slapped on the cheek which had gotten flushed, Subaru looked at Ram as if he was looking at something unbelievable.

Subaru: “Y-You… I was, just now, saying something, pretty brave…”

Ram: “Getting all energetic on your own accord, what do you mean by saying something brave? First things first, Barusu making a promise is laughable itself. Quite impressive how you yourself proposed what is the last thing that can be trusted in this world.”

Subaru: “I said the same to Emilia-chan, but how many promises did the me until yesterday break?!”

Ram: “Was there even a single promise that was kept?”

Subaru: “That bad of a level?!”

Vilified by the voice which had gotten colder, Subaru re-evaluated ‘Natsuki Subaru’. All other things good or bad aside, but it seemed breaking promises was a common occurrence.

First of all, the greatest obligation for keeping promises was to make efforts for the same.

Protecting promises even when not being watched by anyone, and that was why humans often put themselves to a disadvantage on their own volition. If not, it served as a proof of one possessing a deficient spirit.

Subaru: “I guess, someone like ‘Natsuki Subaru’ wasn’t a half-decent guy after all…”

Ram: “Yes, that would be right. It seemed like you misunderstood, but the Barusu until yesterday wasn’t a capable man who could manage everything by himself either. Rather, he was a simpleton and his specialty was that whenever he tried to manage something by himself, he would only enlarge the damage in the end. Ram also got caught up in a lot of the trouble.”

Subaru: “Are you serious. Why did you bring a guy like that to the tower…”

Ram: “He butted in. Along with that, he was a man of mere words and lip service. Skillful at its own way, and looked forward to chores being entrusted upon him. Also, he was also good at dandling Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama, isn’t it. After that…”

Sitting cross-legged on the ground, Subaru felt far too uncomfortable.

He was being scolded about himself, even though it wasn't even about himself. Being told much about 'Natsuki Subaru' by Emilia and the rest also felt agonizing in quite a complicated manner, and Ram firing words and speaking ill of 'Natsuki Subaru' like this also felt, well, complicated.

Subaru became serious, determining to hear it to the end this time,

Subaru: "What else? Short legs, bad at remembering things, had an unhealthy diet, stubborn?"

Ram: "He had short legs, he was bad at remembering, he had an unhealthy diet, he was stubborn."

Subaru: "I suppose so~."

Ram: "—Along with that, he cherished Rem."

"…"

Suddenly, her tone changed, and colors were painted into Ram's cold voice.

If the warmth of voice was to have a color— it would be a tender soft crimson.

Rem, her affection for her younger sister in her voice, and reminded of 'Natsuki Subaru' who used to be by her younger sister's side, she showed a glimpse of tender love, which shall never disappear.

Such that Subaru hallucinated, that soft crimson was the color of kindness.

Ram: "Barusu. —Did you truly forget Rem?"

Subaru: "…Yeah."

Ram's eyes were reflecting Subaru, and she never averted them. Truly respectable.

In this kind of a scene, made to hear the words he did not want to hear, Subaru would probably avert his eyes. Yet she, Ram, didn't try to avert her gaze even once.

Ram: "Barusu. —You will really remember Rem again, right?"

Subaru: "Yeah, I'll remember her again. And not just Rem, but everything else too."

Ram: "It won't be the worst even if you don't remember everything else. Kindly remember just Rem again."

Subaru: "Don't be absurd. Let me remember everything again…"

Ram: "Saying it once again. Kindly remember just Rem again, even if you need to die for it."

Subaru: "Yeah, I swear. —Even if I die, I will remember everything again."

Remember everything again even if he has to die, quite literally.

What did 'Natsuki Subaru' see, hear, feel, establish to come this far in this different world. —Natsuki Subaru shall recover all of it.

Ram: "…Alright. You're free to go this time."

Upon hearing his response, the intimidating air surrounding Ram suddenly disappeared.

Sensing that, Subaru asked "Are you sure?" Whilst remaining on the floor.

Subaru: "I know I requested this, but are you really fine with just this?"

Ram: "You're a man, aren't you. Kindly accept it head-on. Barusu's resolve has been heard. And on top of that, you even said that anything could be done to you, burn you, scorch you, whittle you, gouge you in case you give up. If you found it difficult to hear that, then Ram's motherly affectionate heart will suspect you."

Subaru: “I don’t remember anything about whittling and gouging though…”

Ram: “Did you say something?”

Subaru: “I did not.”

Shaking his head, Subaru responded to Ram politely.

It would perhaps be amusing that when he shall not be able to rely on any god, then perhaps he should resign himself to this motherly affection for casting judgement upon him.

Ram: “Stand up, Barusu. Ram won’t allow you to give up or kneel down.”

Subaru: “Don’t group sitting on the floor together with them… here.”

Standing up, Subaru brushed off his behind and faced Ram.

Ram, with her back resting on the wall and arms folded after adjusting her disheveled clothes, had already gone back to her normal state— and Ram glared at Subaru, suggesting to him that this was her “normal state”.

Ram: “…Did you tell Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama the same thing?”

Subaru: “Those two… seemed like they didn’t even consider me giving up as a possibility, that’s why.”

Ram: “That’s so. —The fault is them being infected with Barusu.”

Subaru: “That’s why, I won’t request those two. Nor Julius or Echidna, emotionally you see.”

Also perhaps, when it came to Emilia and Beatrice, Julius and Echidna.

He believed he had heard their thoughts during the events that happened last time.

That is why, he shall confirm the remaining answer ahead of now.

Subaru: “But, you know… Going by what you said, it seems the me until yesterday wasn’t too impressive of a guy either.”

Ram: “For Ram, your worth changes immensely depending on whether you have the memories of Rem or not. Kindly watch what you ask.”

With a cold declaration, Ram turned her back towards Subaru and started walking.

The two weren’t really supposed to have the time to stop their feet whilst fetching water, but they did not want to worry Emilia and the others unnecessarily if they returned empty-handed.

Subaru held the bucket in his hand, whilst Ram stood beside him.

And,

Subaru: “I was… ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was here for certain, right?”

With a faint voice, Subaru directed his question towards Ram’s side profile.

This was more of an anxious cry than seeking confirmation. Naught more than words unsuitable immediately after pledging to not give up.

He knew it won’t be strange for Ram to reprimand him, as he stood with his tongue dry.

Ram: “—Truly a fool.”

However, without doing anything of such sort and without halting her feet, Ram disparaged Subaru in seeming affection,

Ram: “Right now, it has just momentarily become invisible. It just feels like it’s lost due to being under the depth of a variety of things which had been accumulated. Like flowers buried under the cold snow, once the season of snowmelt arrives they shall be visible once again. —Surely, that’s all there is to it.”

Yes, Subaru could not show his current expression to Ram, who was hiding her own.

Immediately after acting so boldly, he could never show her an expression this pathetic.

That is why, Ram's way, as she remained quiet without even attempting to look at him, at this moment, truly seemed like a mother's affection to Subaru.

5

The situation had largely changed— or so he wanted to think, but the changes were not so great.

This was not the first time Subaru had opened his heart out after losing his memories, and the impact everyone felt is also a spectacle he had witnessed.

But should he change his heart's stance, everyone's point of view shall also respectively change.

Last time, Subaru much distrusted Emilia and the others and that was due to several factors such as their actions, attitudes and words. Firmly believing that they had all been plotting something.

However, upon doing away with those misgivings, he realized that their actions, attitudes and words were all in concern for him, and he rebuked himself.

In other words, they restrained themselves to make sure Subaru was not made to feel anxious.

Suspecting their actions was a problem entirely on Subaru's part.

Subaru: "Let's do it, properly. Do it properly, Natsuki Subaru…"

Telling himself so, Subaru glanced at his palm.

The cause of the disappearance of Subaru's memories was highly likely to be in Taygeta. Though walking through the Trial was also important, investigating the cause behind this amnesia was also urgent business.

There was no guarantee that it may not eventually develop into a ridiculous situation where everyone forgot each other and greeted each other saying “Hello, who might you be” upon seeing each other.

And the truth was, he very much had the flexibility to proceed with it all slowly.

Subaru: “Last time, and the time before that too, everything in the tower was a total mess.”

Last to last time, Subaru had successively discovered the Dead Bodies of Emilia and the others— no, of everyone except Emilia and Beatrice.

Last time was different, he got to witness the Deaths of his comrades with his own eyes, and his heart fell into desolation and ruin.

However, all of those abnormalities were disasters which should occur within the tower not so far into the future.

As one who was aware of the damage these disasters cause, Subaru must try to stop them from happening.

For that purpose, he shall dedicate all the strength he possessed. — That’s why, first, Subaru will.

“…”

A faint breath was present behind Subaru, who was standing at a great height.

A moderate level of attempt to conceal existence, sensing it was possible if one was conscious of it. Perceiving the foul play thanks to the knowledge he possessed beforehand, he turned his body around just on the verge.

???: “—~hk.”

Subaru: “Woops, that was dangerous. —Don’t fall down instead of me.”

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Striking the two hands stretched out, his opponent’s body pitched forward, Subaru instantaneously grasped the stretched out hand to make sure nobody fell.

That body was light. Lightness befitting the appearance of the young girl— yes, calling her a young girl would be adequate.

Subaru: “Alright, let’s talk. —I’ll have you take responsibility, for killing me.”

Saying so, Subaru smiled at the young girl whose elbow he had grasped— Meili, commencing the climax of this mystery of catching the criminal who pushed him off twice in the past.

Chapter 56:
Talking about What Awaits

"…"

Possessing the hazardous intent to make him lose balance and fall down the spiral staircase, the girl— Meili, looked on in surprise.

Closing his dark eyes, Subaru could not help but grumble upon this situation, a turn of events he had predicted but doubted halfway through.

He was glad that by using Return by Death, he was able to eventually prevent this tragedy from happening. This was also proof that this young girl had been the one to push Subaru's back twice in the past, in different timelines.

To think that the criminal who had pushed Subaru from a height and into his doom— who had been killed by the very hands of 'Natsuki Subaru' previously, was Meili Portroute.

Meili: "…Responsibility for killing me, huh, there you go again saying stra~nge things, onii-san."

At that moment, as Meili widened her eyes and loosened her lips, Subaru's arm immediately turned and his finger traced his torso, whilst he continued to smile.

She took a step backwards whilst facing Subaru, who was standing at a distance from the spiral staircase.

Meili: "Perhaps your mind lost a lot of other stu~ff along with memories. This misunderstanding can happen only then."

Subaru: "Misunderstanding?"

Meili: "Yes, don't you think so~? —Me trying to kill onii-san, would be a te~rrible misunderstanding."

Inching backwards, Meili said so with a smile. Witnessing her truly dignified approach, this was something beyond even Subaru's expectations.

He believed that he would never be able to avoid this mishap. But should the one he was struggling against be Myself — no, Meili, then he might just manage to convince her.

She acted quietly, adamantly, that too unfavorably.

Choosing the most seemingly optimal solution momentarily was her way of living.

Frankly, that was precisely a Beast's way of living.

Meili: "There is no need to be suspicious. Had I really wanted to kill onii-san, wouldn't the sand dunes have been better for that rather than this tower? Ah, onii-san doesn't remember all that, so you may not kno~w."

Subaru: "I guess so. It's weird. If you intended to kill from the very beginning, then you must have gotten countless chances to do so. But, you didn't do so."

Meili: "Don't you agree~? Then…"

Subaru: "But, the matter of your motivation to kill me sprouting and growing since this morning is a totally separate issue. Am I correct to say that this is a chain reaction due to what happened last night?"

Meili: "…"

Meili's facial expression changed upon what Subaru mentioned. She sealed her lips, erased her smile, and then took a deep sigh.

And, shrugged her shoulders with an unfavorable attitude, unfitting of her appearance.

Meili: "Could it be, I have been trapped into this awkward situation, I suppo~se?"

Subaru: "What do you mean by "awkward situation"?"

Meili: “Isn’t that what you trie~d? Lying about your memory loss, to see whether I would push off onii-san… To eliminate any obstacles that you may have on your side. To see how useful I was in this tower? This would be the perfect time and chance, to do so.”

The girl, who tried to reaffirm the authenticity of the situation, was displeased by her disadvantageous position.

Certainly, up to this point she had displayed no malice whatsoever on her part, but it was also true that Subaru knew how Meili would act beforehand. Even if she shall deny it, the evidence against Meili shan’t be altered.

However, there were some things that could be said clearly. Those being—

Meili: “Well, what exactly should I do~? Since everything has already come this far, should I try resisting and running away from here? Especially when those bad animal-chan’s aren’t here, even I can get away from onii-san by myse~lf.”

Subaru: “Don’t get me wrong, Meili. My memory loss isn’t a lie for deceiving you. It’s the truth, that’s why I’m being serious, like I should be.”

Meili: “That’s that, I actually did doubt whether you were lying or not bu~t… In the end, what is it that onii-san wants to do? Do you think I believe it just because I’m not retaliating in respo~nse?”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

The young girl put her hands on her slender neck, saying so whilst showing her tongue.

At that moment, Subaru’s heart rate accelerated. However, ironically enough, it was a metaphor for simply killing, not something as ridiculous as Meili remembering her own death.

With that conviction, the young female assassin gestured her capability to deal serious damage to Subaru’s heart.

That’s why Subaru did not intend to let her act on that conviction,

but—

Meili: “Actually, I really don’t recommend using ways of killing that take a lo~ng time. I do have methods that don’t require much suffering, but onii-san is pretty bad at hiding stuff…”

Subaru: “—I, don’t intend to kill or hurt you. Even after this, tomorrow onward as well, whatever awaits, I intend to treat you the same way as I have done till now.”

Meili: “…Huh?”

Meili once again changed her expression, hearing Subaru’s response.

However, this was unlike the change that had come upon her when she had opted for the optimal solution for the immediate situation. Meili’s expression was filled with obvious dismay, as she looked at Subaru with eyes that could not comprehend what he was saying.

Upon that gaze, Subaru nodded.

Subaru: “Fortunately, your crime was prevented beforehand, and so if we were to keep it a secret, it’ll all be fine. Even if you just think of killing me through some different method, all I’ll have to do is prevent that as well. Although, all this undeniably leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Really bad.”

Meili: “Ah… Wh-What are you…”

Subaru: “But at least, did you get it this time? Doing something to me is an incredibly huge risk for you. If you’re going to say “But still” and continue, then, you know, at the very least let’s just talk properly. If you’re still dissatisfied, I’ll hear as much as I…”

Meili: “Dissatisfied? Dissatisfied you say…”

Abruptly, Meili murmured with a quiet and shivering voice.

Afterwards, she sharpened her lips,

Meili: “What’s dissatisfying is this situatio~n! I can’t believe it!”

Subaru was saying all this in order to persuade her into making a moderate decision. Following up with that, Meili shouted, with her eyes looking at Subaru as if she were looking at something unbelievable.

Meili: “Can’t believe it, can’t believe it, I can’t believe i~t…”

Whilst she pronounced so, her hands busily toyed with her braid.

It was visibly evident to Subaru that she had gotten perplexed regarding her own mental self-defense and that this was a sign— a sign of dependence on someone who had the same hairstyle.

Meili: “Onii-san has no idea about what I tried to do right no~w! If that’s wrong then, it’s stra~nge. If that’s wrong, then…”

With words filled with frustration, Meili’s attitude was unnaturally desperate.

This was Subaru’s first time seeing Meili so disturbed— no, rather he had first seen her like this in her Book of The Dead.

After what she had done last night, encountering Subaru in Taygeta, and after having a conversation with ‘Natsuki Subaru’, she had decided to kill the amnesiac Natsuki Subaru.

However, this plan of murder, carried out in such a hurry, would have had been a double-edged sword for her too.

Although Subaru would have been pushed off to death, ignorant, how did she plan to escape the allegations of murder that could be placed upon her after Subaru’s death.

It was probably possible to cover it up as just an accident— or perhaps not.

Should it be Emilia, Beatrice, Ram or any of the others, by now, Subaru knew that they would not let his Death slide by without even trying to uncover the truth behind it.

In that case, it was inevitable that Meili’s crime would eventually come to light.

Ram, Julius, or Echidna were much smarter than Subaru, and they would be able to see through to the truth behind his death at once. It was unimaginable to think that Meili had never taken that into her consideration.

That's why, this is—

Subaru: "This is, just a desperate urge of yours. You just have a habit of murder. You don't even consider other factors for solving issues. That, isn't your fault."

Meili: "—~hk! Don't talk like you understa~nd! What does onii-san… what do you—! What do you know about me?!"

Subaru: "—I do know."

Meili: "…"

Meili, grinding her teeth, stiffened herself as if she had been doused in cold water.

Looking straight at Meili, Subaru assertively declared,

Subaru: "Meili. I know about you. I know it may sound pretty creepy but, I may even know more about you than the only other two people in this world that know about you, you know?"

Upon Subaru's shrug, Meili's worry intensified.

Believing that it was completely obvious, however at the same time, Subaru was looking for a way to convey that undeniable truth— he was struggling with the twisted Self-Love in the back of his chest.

He shall remember, My never-ending temptation.

A whispering voice seemed to echo right before Natsuki Subaru took any action, repeatedly tempting Subaru to solve his problems through murder, the worst course of action packed with cowardice.

By reading her Book of the Dead, the ghost of the dead Meili Portroute and its temptations, had returned to haunt Natsuki Subaru—

Subaru: “—No, that’s not it.”

Shaking his head, Subaru then pondered over what the girl he had killed had done.

During all this time, something had happened. Visibly evident from the confusion and frustration of the girl standing before him. Above all, recalling what Subaru had seen about Meili in her Book of The Dead.

Considering what Meili had suffered through, it could never be said that she became simply murderous.

This was not the same Meili as the one in her Book of The Dead

That was something Subaru’s soft heart was somewhat sure about.

After all, upon that evidence, the girl with that voice did not show herself to Subaru.

“…”

Putting it terribly straightforwardly, Subaru had lived through the life of Meili by the Book of the Dead. This was her mindset in normal daily life— creating an impression, establishing a way of action, however, she never thought of ending someone’s life with such lack of fairness and reason.

In those days, there was an unquestionable emptiness in Meili’s heart, and her experiences increased the Fear inside her, but there remained a lone something that glimmered within herself

It’s name being—

Subaru: “—Elsa Granhiert.”

Meili: “—~hk.”

Subaru: “That, is the reason why you tried to kill me, yes?”

Upon that question, Meili’s facial expression distorted with bitterness.

That was the rage of getting something sensitive that should never be touched, being prodded— no, being trampled upon.

However, Subaru yet dared to do so. Because,

Subaru: “Remove your shoes when entering someone’s house, but rudely walk in while wearing shoes when entering into others’ hearts is the rule of the Natsuki household.”

As one of its members, Subaru climbed into the heart of the young assassin.

This was something akin to forcing himself into her heart—.

A murderer of black, whom Subaru did not know, but was familiar with.

Just thinking about her gave rise to feelings in the heart, like a desire of relief, longing, sadness and rage, and, emptiness— the feelings that Meili felt for her were extremely complicated, yet, extremely simple.

—Meili, longed for Elsa, loved her, and admired her.

That’s why, having her be stolen away gave rise to despair, suffering, hatred, wrath, murderous intent and despondency.

All of the time she had accompanied Subaru and the others in their journey, it had all been for the sake of revenge— could not be said for her unskilled self.

In fact, it could be said that Meili was very clumsy.

A despairing young girl who was ignorant about her own emotions, enough to not know about the depth of the scar in her heart.

—A professional assassin who made up her own environment, that’s who Meili Portroute was.

Subaru: “Did you want to take, revenge?”

Meili: “… I don’t kno~w.”

Subaru: “Even so, Elsa was…”

Meili: “I have no such wish. I am well aware of that…”

Meili shook her head twice in response to Subaru’s question.

Subaru understood Meili’s feelings. And, Meili was also well-aware of where Subaru’s words were coming from.

In this situation, Subaru and Meili stood equal to each other.

That’s why, filled with sadness and stuck in a dark chamber ignorant of the correct answer, all she could do in order to express her emotions was to act like the assassin she is and Murder.

At the same time, the hatred that Meili held while remaining trapped in that world, left solely that option for her.

Despite all this, Meili’s desperation for Elsa did not reach its end.

For Meili, Elsa may have been a shining light but that light was far too dazzling for ordinary people to follow.

Subaru: “I know, that you are holding back your feelings. But, the answer you’re looking for probably cannot be found this way. That’s why.”

“…”

Subaru: “Leave this place to me. I won’t make things worse. At the very least I’ll work hard to make sure things don’t get worse. If you’d believe that.”

Meili: “…I ca~n’t, trust. Anything which, may come out of onii-san’s mouth’

No matter how forcefully Subaru persuaded, Meili, who was hiding her face, did not nod even slightly.

That was obvious. Because, that meant finding a way of action that did not exist in her way of life.

On the other hand, there was Natsuki Subaru, who shall propose and preach whatever he wants to without flinching even the slightest.

On top of that, if a senior ever invited him to a place with full preparation and bashed him, even Subaru would be surprised by how much it would sting.

Henceforth, since he had an idea that she would say this, he had well prepared other measures.

Subaru: “So what comes out of my mouth cannot be trusted, I will reflect on that. Thanks, until yesterday I was already pretty bad with promises. That’s why”

Meili: “That’s why?”

Subaru: “Instead of a promise between you and me, let’s make a promise between you and us.”

“…”

Upon Subaru’s words Meili frowned, unaware of his intentions.

However, the answer to her doubts was brought to light soon afterward.

That being—

???: “—Mhm, it’s fine. I was also carefully listening, as a witness of the promise.”

Meili: “—~hk.”

Hearing that voice, Meili’s shoulders shivered, but she managed to compose herself. What appeared in before her next was an outstanding beauty, whose magnificence could not be doubted—.

Upon her appearance, Meili’s eyes widened and her lips trembled.

Meili: “Onee-san… you, heard everything?”

???: “Subaru told me, to stay here and see… to stop Meili if she was going to do something dangerous, that’s what he said.”

Saying so, stepping into the place where both of them stood, with fluttering hair that was reminiscent of the glitter of moonlight and standing as a figure of a seemingly mythical beauty, was Emilia.

Hearing Emilia’s words, Meili rotated her neck in astonishment.

Meili: “If I, did something dangerous…? Not, onii-san…?”

Emilia: “Yeah, if Meili did something dangerous. Well, is it okay now, Subaru?”

Subaru: “—. Yeah, that’s right. It’s just that it made me a bit anxious.”

Emilia: “—? Why are you turning your face away? Did something happen, Subaru?”

Subaru: “No, it’s just that, you’re just, too cute to look at directly…”

Subaru responded with a whisper to Emilia’s question, who had tilted her neck. As Emilia furthermore tilted her neck, Subaru managed to put aside the trembling of his throat and his embarrassment, and turned his attention to the perplexed Meili once again.

As Subaru had foreseen the attack, he was confident about stopping Meili’s crime. The problem after that was the occurrence of ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

Speaking of his purpose, it may be possible that in the loop when ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had killed Meili, it may have had been simply self-defense against Meili’s attempt to murder, and immediately after stopping her, ‘Natsuki Subaru’ did not necessarily take actions against Subaru’s will.

Therefore Subaru determined that he would leave this problem to people stronger than him.

He has complete faith that even if his consciousness disappeared, and 'Natsuki Subaru' appeared, Emilia will certainly— no, his comrades shall certainly do something about it.

Emilia: "Listen, Meili. I believe what Subaru has said. If Meili can't believe it, then it's fine to just carefully observe him. And, if he breaks the promise, I'll be angry alongside."

Meili: "Observe, onii-san…? That's, weird. Isn't that strange. Observing onii-san and onee-san, is what, I…"

Emilia: "If Meili wants to do something bad, that can be only after Subaru actually breaks the promise. Till then, observe whether he breaks it or not. Isn't that fair?"

"…"

Meili was confused by Emilia's words, who bent enough to have their eyes at the same level.

Inside her mind, her ways of coping with and solving truths and circumstances distorted and crumbled.

Subaru: "You seemed to be about to make a huge mistake, but mine and Emilia-chan's nice save somehow prevented that. That's why, this is your chance to learn how it should have actually been done. This is your chance to find a different solution than killing me… it's a bet."

Meili: "Bet…?"

Subaru: "Settle down the evil feelings inside you, and see whether you still want to kill me, or whether you've changed your mind… I'll also, do my best at giving you lectures about morality."

Scratching his head, Subaru laid down this path for Meili's confusion.

Frankly, unneeded care was unneeded and intrusive. There was a certain way of living that Meili had followed until now, and Subaru was trying to arbitrarily open new options for her.

But, should she refuse it, her path will meet a dead end because of the sand tower. If her way of life is followed, they couldn't possibly ever conquer this sand tower together.

And—

Subaru: "I'm not letting you get off this train. I don't know how old you are or anything but… When I was around your age, I got the adults around me to help me all the time."

Meili: "…"

Subaru: "That's why, I will help you even if you don't want me to. You are far too young to think stuff like what you should be doing or refusing adults' help."

Saying so, Subaru stepped forward to reduce the distance between him and Meili.

Seeing the distance between them shrink, Meili's shoulders shivered. Subsequently, Subaru patted the head of the nervous Meili, who looked up with uneasiness in her eyes.

He won't crush that thin neck. He presented this decisively different alternative, to 'Natsuki Subaru'.

Meili was a child, that did not need to die. And—

Emilia: "I sincerely request, please trust Subaru… trust us, Meili."

Meili: "—Ah."

While Subaru caressed her head, Emilia hugged her from behind, leaving her completely immobile. Embracing her body, Emilia rubbed her cheek against her as Meili lightly bit her lips,

Emilia: "This sand tower is a place too small for you to decide something big"

"…"

Emilia: "Leave this place, go to a bigger place and find your answer there. We will also work rea~lly hard."

Teaching her all this when she possessed feelings, whilst trapped in such a cage, was not exactly the best thing to do.

Even so, this was the only way Subaru could have said it. With complete, utmost care and kind words, they conveyed it to Meili.

"…"

In response, Meili repeatedly and thoughtfully glanced into their eyes.

Meili: "I don't want to, forget about… Elsa."

Subaru: "Ah, that's fine. There is no need to forget someone you loved. It's just that, we~ll…"

Cutting his own words off, Subaru thought of the beautiful woman of black he witnessed in the Book of the Dead.

What a strange impression. He had never been in contact with her, yet she still has a sense of familiarity. Reminiscing such an opponent, Subaru subconsciously stroked his guts.

Subaru: "—Even if it's someone you love, I wish you don't imitate their way of doing things."

Yes, he believed so.

—Meili was powerless, had lost her path, but still, after several silent seconds had passed, she nodded.

Chapter 57:
Putting it Aside for Now

1

???: “Betty was dragged into this against her will, in fact. But since it was Subaru’s request, it had to be properly answered to, I suppose.”

???: “Master-sama is an invulnerable man, after all. I wasn’t worried or anything. In fact, I was suspecting the possibility of little girl number two going off and exploding the moment she stood behind Master-sama.

Meili: “Ah, uh…”

Upon looking at those faces slowly climbing up the spiral staircase, Meili had her white cheeks go red and tried moving her lips as she stood at a loss for words.

Viewing the changes occurring in Meili from the side, Subaru then raised his hand and said “Hey” to the shadows on the staircase.

Subaru: “Thank you for being on the rear guard. I’m relieved that falling down could be avoided somehow.”

???: “…No matter what Subaru may say, there’s no saying she would’ve been forgiven if you really came down falling, in fact. That is why this is a matter of being lucky, I suppose.”

Snorting her nose, climbing up the staircase holding the hem of her dress was Beatrice. Behind her was also Shaula’s figure, with her hand behind her head, laboriously returning to the fourth layer after having been far down below on the spiral staircase.

Meili: “Wh-Wh-Wha… o-onii-san? Those two, what is the meaning of thi~s…?”

Upon seeing Beatrice and Shaula’s figures, Meili looked back at

Subaru in astonishment.

Subaru crossed his arms upon the bewilderment of the young girl who had been unaware of this.

Subaru: “Well, I don’t really know how to word it, but the plan just now was a lot like walking on a tightrope… I don’t like to think this way, but the pattern of me being pushed by you and just dying had also been quite possible, you know? It turned out all nicely cause I happened to have stylishly caught your arms beforehand.”

Meili: “B-But, onee-san was also keeping a watch over us, no~…?”

Subaru: “Well I also know about Emilia-chan being powerful despite her mad cute looks, so it was for just in case of an emergency. Though it’d be no joke if Emilia-chan also jumped down with me in an effort to save me.”

The truth was, at the very end of where they had been in the past, Subaru had fallen alongside Emilia. He had embraced her, but had been unable to save her. —This had been etched into his heart profoundly.

If the same happened again then Subaru shall surely push Emilia to someplace safe, is what he would like to say, but it could not be helped that his body wouldn’t be able to process any more data when already at its limits.

Subaru: “Why, I simply played this card just to make sure that emergency doesn’t happen. I judged it’d be alright if two people… Beatrice and Shaula were watching from below.”

He had witnessed that Beatrice was a skilled magician with his own eyes, and when it came to Shaula, the specifics remained unknown but there was no need to confirm that she possessed strength unfitting of her appearance.

No doubt with regards to that, since Subaru had her lift him up just in case when he was requesting them and discussing this plan.

Meili: “Why go so far, there must’ve been much simpler and wiser ways and ye~t.”

Upon hearing Subaru's explanation, so whispered Meili with a downcast gaze. Her embarrassment for having been seen at a disgraceful spot was fading away, what she felt instead was perhaps the negativity of punishment.

Upon her words, Subaru said "Yeah" as he touched his cheek with a finger.

Subaru: "Just as you said, I think there had been easier and wiser ways. I think so, but…"

Meili: "Think so bu~t…?"

Subaru: "At the level my mind operates on, easiness and compromise are two sides of the same coin, and wiseness is partnered with unfairness. I… hm, I did not want to resort to compromise and unfairness."

"…"

Upon hearing those words, Meili's eyes somewhat straitened, as she softly bit her lips.

Looking at her with a wry, strained smile, Subaru clenched his fists.

He thought of somehow fixing everything.

He wished to somehow fix everything.

Henceforth, in order to somehow fix everything, he wanted to do everything he was capable of.

Subaru: "That's why, I didn't hesitate in asking Emilia and the rest for help."

Emilia: "Mhm, that's right. I was also very surprised when Subaru first told me about this."

So pronounced Emilia, still hugging Meili from behind. She had her chin rest on Meili's petite shoulder, and glanced up towards Subaru,

Emilia: "But I knew Subaru was rea~lly serious at a single glance.

Besides…”

Subaru: “Besides?”

Emilia: “—I was happy that Subaru was willing to discuss. Because Subaru always makes preparations to put an end to everything by the time I even take notice.”

Smiling with her eyes upturned, Subaru halted his breath before the young girl with amethyst eyes.

As Subaru stiffened his cheeks, Emilia instead loosened her cheeks and lips, following with a nodded.

Emilia: “That’s why, I was happy that you came asking what to do and allowed us to think alongside this time. Hehe, it’s a bit strange, isn’t it.”

Subaru: “…No point in saying it, but the me who was there until yesterday really pisses me off. No, but since getting to look at this face and hearing this voice is my special privilege, did something rather deserved happen to the me until yesterday…? What do you say, Emilia-chan?”

Emilia: “Sorry. I don’t get what you’re saying.”

Subaru, continuing to smile, blathered and loosened his shoulders.

And, the two who were climbing the staircase below these three finally joined them.

Beatrice: “Once again, it is relieving to know that nothing happened, in fact.”

Subaru: “Nothing happened would be a bit of a faulty expression. Considering tons of reformations occurred within Meili’s consciousness… so something did happen.”

Shaula: “O~h, as expected of Master-sama! Absolutely no idea what you’re on about, but when it comes to your cool aura then there’s nothing that can surpass it!”

Subaru: “Do you actually even hold any respect for me?”

Shaula seemed to be regardlessly impressed by anything she was told, but when Subaru consulted regarding the principle of saving Meili, the first one to endorse him had also been her.

Naturally, it also did feel like she put no deep thought to it and simply wanted to support Subaru with what he wanted to do, but it was also certain that he had been saved by such existence of hers.

Meili: “Um, Beatrice-chan… are you, not angry with me?”

Beatrice: “It’s a matter of course that Betty is angry, I suppose. But you seem like you’d get popped to shreds by Betty, so Betty has somehow managed to shut it off, in fact. There’s also what happened in the sand dunes, so what happened now shall be written off, I suppose.”

“…”

Beatrice: “However! Writing off what happened now only goes for this one incident, in fact. You still bear the sin of burning the forbidden archive in the previous mansion, I suppose. As long as that exists, Betty will probably never forgive you, in fact.”

Crossing her short arms, Beatrice responded to Meili’s doubt with a stern look in her eyes. Meili halted her breath upon her words, but Emilia immediately laughed with a “Hehe”,

Emilia: “It may be a bit difficult to grasp, but Beatrice just now said “probably”. She’s saying she’ll properly forgive Meili if she stays a good girl. You’re rea~lly so kind.”

Beatrice: “Emilia! Don’t go saying unnecessary stuff, I suppose!”

Meili: “…I’ll do whatever I can, to touch your heart.”

Exposing the other side of the strict comments, Emilia laughed before the blushing Beatrice. Seeing them, Meili responded with a soft voice.

Witnessing the scene, Subaru nodded several times in satisfaction.

Could he not say that finally, the progress before his eyes had actually happened.

At the very least, her actions, having ultimately believed that Subaru must be killed, had been prevented. Though this was yet merely one of the tragedies which occur in this tower—

Shaula: "—So, is this really fine, Master-sama?"

Subaru: "Hm?"

Said Shaula with an innocent and calm voice, standing behind Subaru, who was drowned in thoughts. Standing beside Subaru, narrowing her dark eyes, she was glaring at the spectacle where Beatrice and Meili went back and forth with Emilia in between them.

And as Subaru furrowed his eyebrows, she resumed with the same tone,

Shaula: "The girl who tried to kill Master-sama. Is it, really okay to let her go with no reproach?"

Subaru: "You sure ask some dangerous stuff… it's fine. Meili's already gotten reproached. But, things ended up like this because nobody actually taught her about why she was being reproached. She shall be taught about that, now onwards."

Shaula: "Master-sama also said the same, but what if she tries to kill Master-sama again because of that?"

Subaru: "That'd happen if I'm extraordinarily bad at teaching, But, it's not like I'll be the only one at it."

That was how Subaru responded to Shaula's questioning.

If Subaru were to aim for changing the sense of ethics of someone fostered to be an assassin from a very young age by himself, then it would be extremely difficult, and in all honesty, he did not possess the strength to shoulder this responsibility either.

However, Subaru did not think of doing anything and everything by himself.

He had relied on Emilia and the others for stopping Meili's crime as well. He shall have Emilia and Beatrice go along with him ahead of this as well.

Subaru: "Of course, I'll have you helping as well, Shaula. Because it'll be a long road of her objecting individual sense of values."

Shaula: "…Me, too?"

Subaru: "That's of course. You… well, on the flip side you have teacher-like ambience, and I won't leave you out alone. Your body is overflowing with motherhood, use it nicely to break through to Meili's obstinate heart."

Before Shaula, who pointed a finger at herself in sheer surprise, Subaru declared relaxedly and shrugged his shoulders.

It was a mystery as to what she was so astonished by, but considering she often overreacts, Subaru did not question it much, thinking that just was a part of her.

Upon Subaru's judgement, Shaula sandwiched her face with her hands,

Shaula: "Me too, huh. Me too, together, with Master-sama, me too… a~h, a~a~a~h. A~a~a~a~h."

Subaru: "Huh… what happened, you…"

Shaula: "Nothing! I've decided! Just as Master-sama ordered, I'll raise that little girl number two into a pro~per upright person!"

With a red face, Shaula sprinted towards Emilia and the rest. And lifting up Meili's body with ease, hugged her and pushed her into her voluptuous chest.

Meili: "Kya~?! What happene~d, naked onee-san. You surprised me!"

Shaula: "It's okay it's okay, you can act like a spoilt child under my care as much as you'd like, little girl number two. My chest belongs to Master-sama, but I'll share it with little girl number two just for now. The wealthy should give to the needy, you see!"

Meili: "Hey onii-san?! You drilled some weird stuff into naked onee-san's head once again, ri~ght!"

Meili, being treated by Shaula as per her own pleasure, raised her voice upon judging this was Subaru's antic.

Subaru: "Well, think of it like compensation for worrying everyone, and get treated affectionately all nicely. It's alright, from what I saw she doesn't have any ill will."

Meili: "…Geez, such hopeless people. It's fine, I'll let it pass. But, what happened here is a secret to other peo~ple."

Saying so, Meili puffed her cheeks as she was sandwiched by Shaula's breasts. But, upon Meili's comment, Subaru scratched his head and said "Ah".

Meili furrowed her eyebrows upon his reaction, and in Subaru's stead, Emilia responded to her.

Emilia: "Um, Meili, it's rea~lly difficult to say this but…"

Meili: "…I'm getting a bad feeling about thi~s."

Whether that bad feeling of Meili's had hit the mark or not.

The answer to that question could immediately be understood by her reaction to the words Emilia followed up with.

Emilia: "—Subaru had also properly consulted Ram and the others, who are not here."

Meili made an immensely wry expression.

2

The room which was used for meals or conversations was called the "Common-Use Room", but what awaited Subaru and the rest when they returned to the Common-Use Room was Ram, with her hands on her hips.

Ram: “Is that so. Seems you cleaned it all up. Not bad, worthy of a compliment.”

Receiving Subaru and the rest upon their safe return, Ram said so to the five with peaceful eyes.

That was perhaps high praise from her, hence Subaru accepted it straightforwardly. The whole incident with Meili was something he could brag about to even her. And he was relieved that his boasting would not lead to him being in a bind.

???: “There’s no requirement to say this, but she had been awaiting your return standing like this the whole time.”

Ram: “…There truly was no requirement to say that. Kindly restraint yourself, Echidna.”

Echidna: “You’ve had this attitude ever since you got to know I was the one controlling this body. How likeable.”

Saying so and making Ram stiffen the edges of her eyebrows, was Echidna, with her hips down onto the floor of the Common-Use Room. She accepted Ram’s eloquence with a smile, then looked at Subaru and the rest.

Meili: “Hmph.”

Echidna: “So, what is she so sulky about?”

The one Echidna pointed to was Meili, who was being carried on Shaula’s back.

Groaning with a bitter expression, without responding to Echidna’s question, Meili continued to sulk and averted her eyes away. She was being completely peevish.

Echidna: “So, for example she’s irritated because she got her plan for murder intercepted. If that’s the case, then I am slightly uneasy about leaving her without any constraints like this…”

Subaru: “Ah, no no, that’s wrong that’s wrong.”

Echidna’s insecure supposition, and the way she had visibly been on guard for Subaru even in this short interval— must be a display of her emotions, of wanting to protect the girl named Anastasia, the owner of her body.

She could not help but form a strange misunderstanding, and Subaru firmly denied it.

Subaru: “She just feels awkward that she got her thoughts uncovered and everyone got to know about them. It’s so childlike, it’s cute.”

Echidna: “Considering what she attempted to do, it feels odd to describe it as something childlike but… I see. Even after losing memories, the true nature doesn’t change so easily is what it’s about, hm. Must be surprising to you, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “It’s my honor if it serves to be entertaining for you, that’s all.”

Winking towards Echidna’s line of sight, he was then ridiculed by a “Hah” by Ram. Afterwards, Subaru turned around in a circle and surveyed the room from the inside.

Subaru: “Huh, Julius isn’t here? Where is he? Toilet or something…”

???: “—At the time of utmost serious affairs, you engage in trifling matters, the thought of that is truly vexing.”

Subaru: “…It’s not like it’s decided that it’s a trifling matter. He may be doing a rather important task, you know.”

Hearing a voice from behind, Subaru curved his cheeks and turned back towards the echoed voice. Receiving his smile, which had a negative connotation to it, was Julius as he touched his own bangs.

As he returned from the outside of the Common-Use Room, Emilia tilted her head.

Emilia: “Julius, were you having a stomachache?”

Julius: “Emilia-sama, do not take his words and deeds at face value. Certainly, he is your one and only knight, a position where you should trust him more than anyone, unquestionably so, but sometimes, even his prominent words and deeds are…”

Subaru: “Hey hey, don’t stuff such unnecessary stuff into Emilia-chan’s mind. First of all, it was you who wasn’t even in here. I’ll excuse you if you say you were out in the toilet for a bit.”

Julius: “—. Heh.”

Glared by Subaru’s black eyes, Julius loosened his lips.

A way of laughter seemingly losing breath, truly irksome and befitting of his appearance, but Subaru felt that there just was something wrong with that laughter.

Echidna: “Emilia, and Natsuki-kun, no need to worry. Following the earlier conversation, Julius went to be on the lookout for the outside. As Meili wields the power to control witchbeasts, and in case she truly intended to achieve her goal, what should be seen as the greatest threat would be the existence of the witchbeasts outside the tower, you see.”

Julius: “So I was on the watch for the outside of the tower from the balcony I found last night. Fortunately, there appeared to be no oddities outside of the tower and it seemed everything was alright inside as well…”

Whilst saying so, Julius turned his gaze towards Meili. Atop Shaula’s back, upon noticing Julius’ gaze, she made a sour look with her lips.

However, seeing Meili’s conduct, Julius abruptly relaxed his cheeks.

Julius: “I am glad, it seems everything was resolved safely. Though when you spoke about having lost memories and then about this, it felt as if heaven and earth had partly been overturned…”

Subaru: “That’s way too huge an exaggeration. Well, that’s not something I, who lost memories, can say."

Julius: "I suppose so. Saying heaven and earth got overturned, would be going too far. Just slightly, though… Anyway, I am glad everyone's safe. After having sought even Emilia-sama's help, if it still ended up as a failure ultimately then there wouldn't even be any room for recovery."

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm also relieved… You and I, are close enough to be quarrelling like this, right."

Julius: "—Heh."

Julius laughed in a stuck-up manner at what Subaru said with a finger raised.

Thinking that this smile did not have that earlier faint vacillation, Subaru also felt satisfied.

"…"

This made the fifth time of them meeting by chance ever since he had lost his memories.

All this time, he did not get much time that was spent peacefully, and the reality was that he must've spent much more of his time with Emilia and the others. And surely, "Natsuki Subaru" had his own way of connecting to them.

Henceforth, Subaru wanted to carefully follow "Natsuki Subaru's" footsteps to make sure there isn't too huge a difference, to make sure Emilia and the others do not get saddened.

He did not want to directly lay his eyes upon the reality that Emilia and the others had lost "Natsuki Subaru". —Besides, it would surely be better to not face a reality of such sort.

If Natsuki Subaru disappears, and "Natsuki Subaru" returns, then surely.

Subaru: "Alright then, let's head for capturing the tower with this newly reborn all friendly team of ours. Any objections?"

Emilia: “Mhm, none. Let’s give it our all.”

Beatrice: “That name, friendly team has a bit of a sense of apathy to it, in fact.”

Regardless, Emilia and Beatrice presented two extremes of agreement to Subaru’s opinion. The others did not seem to hold any objections either, which relieved him for the moment.

Julius: “Will it be fine to accept that there’ll be no problems with regards to her this way?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’ll be fine. She won’t act recklessly and try to kill me behind everyone’s backs. However, whether she’ll be able to keep this up hereafter depends on Meili as she grows up watching our backs, so be careful to make sure she doesn’t get to see our backs being uncool or dreadful.”

Julius: “I see. So it is a matter of appearances. Then I want you to leave it to me.”

Turning his gaze towards Meili, Julius drew his chin in and agreed with Subaru’s words.

Appearances seemed somewhat of a wrong way to describe it, but to have others look at your back— in other words, becoming a role model, in that sense Julius’ description was certainly befitting.

The present Subaru could not say he had been with him much, but he had still witnessed that Julius possessed a strong sense of self-denial and excellency in various kinds of conducts.

Those were the fruits of his own ready wit, an indication of the refinement of the environment he grew up in, and at the same time they also symbolized the hard work he had put into applying them to himself.

Through evident hard work, he had applied those to himself. Them being something valuable, something priceless.

Emilia: “—Subaru, are you okay? Do you think you’ll be able to converse?”

Subaru: “Woah?!”

Suddenly, Emilia grasped Subaru’s arm whilst he stood with halted breath, looking at him in concern. Seeing how close he was to her, Subaru regained his senses and jumped backwards, flustered.

Witnessing Subaru’s overreaction, Emilia spilled out a faint “Ah…”,

Emilia: “You know, ever since you’ve woken up… no, ever since you said you lost your memories, Subaru just keeps getting surprised by me, no? Is there something strange about me? Is there something on my face?”

Subaru: “No, um, not at all. There’s just your cute eyes and cute nose and cute lips and cute ears.”

Emilia: “Cute… hehe, thank you. But if that’s the case, then why?”

Subaru: “I guess it’s because it feels like Emilia-chan’s features aren’t just the parts added up, but multiplied such that they compliment each other. Also, your voice is cute. You’re also cute. This won’t do, what an angel.”

Subaru covered his face with his hands and looked at Emilia through his fingers, suggesting she was too dazzling to look at. Hearing Subaru’s comments, it was Beatrice who responded suddenly,

Beatrice: “——~hk! Try saying that in a more Subaru-like fashion, I suppose?!”

Subaru: “Huh?! Eh, what’s wrong?!”

Beatrice: “Again, say the words Emilia looks like an angel in a Subaru-like fashion, in fact.”

Subaru: “What kind of public shaming is that?! I’m not doing it! It’s embarrassing! Beatrice, you’re also cute like an angel! Don’t sulk!”

Beatrice: “It’s true that Betty is cute like an angel, but that’s not what its about, I suppose…”

Heartbroken, Beatrice lowered her shoulders in dejection. This made him feel guilty, as Subaru then patted her head and everyone now was in formation of a circle in the Common-Use Room.

Now this made for a proper place to converse. It was regrettable that the real progress sought after had not been realized yet, but it was about time to continue the conversation rather boldly.

Subaru: “With all the being said, once again, Meili’s a part of our team now. For having a societal inspection of Meili, having her entered genuinely now, I would like to hurry up and leave this sandy tower as well. Any objections?”

Ram: “That manner of speaking really makes one question if you’ve truly lost your memories or not… But, Barusu’s memory loss is a rather light problem when compared to more serious ones, but its still a problem.”

Emilia: “Mhm, that’s right. Its not like they could’ve just suddenly disappeared out of nowhere, so we have to make sure Subaru gets his memories back…”

Subaru: “Ah, about that, how about we disregard it for now?”

After raising a hand and seeking approval, Subaru interjected a pause between Ram and Emilia’s comments. Everyone in the conversation, not just the two of them, responded with a “Huh?” in surprise.

The only one not surprised was Shaula, but she was busy tending to Meili after earnestly accepting Subaru’s requests so he left her out for the moment.

Beatrice: “Subaru… please don’t make Betty and the others worry too much, in fact. Your memory loss was sufficiently surprising, yet saying that it’s alright to not recover them would be far too self-abandoning, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right, Subaru. Are you perhaps thinking that you don’t want to cause problems for us? But, Subaru, you consulted us regarding Meili, didn’t you. Similar to that, we will all think together with regards to Subaru's memories as well. Please, okay?"

Subaru: "That persuasion makes my heart ache! No, but well, listen to me for a second! It's not like I'm saying this out of self-abandonment. There's a proper reason behind it!"

That was the excuse Subaru made against Emilia and Beatrice's concern. Following, Subaru raised a finger making sure everyone could see it and said "Listen".

Subaru: "I do think that me suddenly losing my memories in this situation is regrettable, and it rea~lly makes me happy that everyone wishes to get them back. However, is there anyone here who thinks this memory loss is unrelated to the existence of this tower?"

Shaula: "Master-sama hit his head in the toilet's urinal and lost memories before. There's no end to it."

Subaru: "Outfielders to remain quiet for a second! What you said certainly can't be ignored, but its fine for now!"

Irritated by the outfielder's disruption, Subaru brought the conversation back together by saying "Anyway!".

Subaru: "What I want to say is that there's a relation between the tower and my memory loss. In other words…"

Echidna: "—In other words, upon fulfilling the conditions for capturing the tower, the cause behind Natsuki-kun's memory loss or the key to it might naturally be obtained. Is that what you mean?"

Subaru: "Ah, yeah, that's right that's right. That's what I mean!"

Subaru nodded several times upon Echidna's words, who had read into Subaru's thoughts. Hearing Echidna's view, Julius put his hand on his chin and said "I see",

Julius: "If the tower's mechanism has stolen Subaru's memories, we might get closer to the answer upon capturing the tower. Or instead the occasion of Subaru losing his memories might have happened because he got too close to the answer.”

Echidna: “It seems quite possible. His insight at the time of capturing “Taygeta”, to say it clearly, he utilized knowledge we couldn’t possibly ever have. Due to the knowledge only Natsuki-kun possessed, he went far too ahead of even us and resultantly had his memories lost.”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait wait, that would be way too much overestimation. I’m just a shut-in, you know? My specialty is like, spreading bedsheets open cleanly and sewing, you know?”

Emilia: “Ah, look, Subaru. The embroidery on these clothes, Subaru did it. Did you start remembering something upon looking at it? It’s cute, right? It’s Puck.”

Subaru: “Hmm, embroidery of a cute cat. But, I don’t really have an idea~.”

Digesting the conversation which required a great deal of thinking ability, Subaru denied Emilia, who was caressing the picture of a cat embroidered on her clothes, downhearted.

Perhaps a cat she had kept and even given a name to. It seemed she did not bring it along to the tower, so he wanted to hurry up and return safely, and make her reunite with her pet.

Regardless—

Ram: “Barusu learnt something there was no need for, and as a result, lost his memories out of rashness… certainly seems convincing.”

Beatrice: “Ram’s way of saying it is quite thorny, but Betty generally agrees as well, in fact. Besides, Subaru’s thoughts of the tower’s capture being prioritized… the prospect seems repulsive, but it does have a point, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice’s dissatisfaction was perhaps directed towards the situation of not giving topmost priority to Subaru’s memories, after all. It made him happy from the bottom of his heart that she would think this way, but Subaru had his own reason for not prioritizing his memories. —If they leisurely search around for his memories or, they wouldn't make it in time to prevent the tower's tragedies.

What had happened. What was going to happen. Subaru— no, Subaru and everyone else, must become one and prepare for those calamities.

Subaru: "And so, I want to prioritize capturing the tower. I want everyone to understand for now as well."

"…"

Subaru: "I don't think its fine if things remain this way either. But, my problem can be dealt later. If we postpone the initial problems, we won't ever reach our goal. I want to do what we should do."

So appealed Subaru to everyone, earnestly.

He put in as many efforts as possible to cover the demerits of "Natsuki Subaru" not being here. And that he wanted everyone to lend their strengths in return.

Subaru's request had everyone at a loss for words, however—

Ram: "—Truly, such a fool."

Sighed Ram, turning her head and looking at everyone with her light crimson eyes.

Ram: "Even after losing memories, your deplorable intellect won't change. In other words, even if your memories return, there's not much the present Barusu can contribute… then, prioritizing Barusu's memories would only be wasteful. Let's capture the tower, and subsequently anticipate their return."

Subaru: "Subsequently you say, don't you have any other ways to put it."

Ram: "No. You lost your memories subsequent to attempting to capture the tower, isn't it? In that case, kindly find them subsequently as well. Don’t cause Ram problems.”

—He promised Ram, that he will remember, he will get them back, no matter what.

That is why, he couldn’t possibly weigh the impact Ram’s heart must’ve received when he said he wanted to postpone matters regarding his memories. However, precisely because of that promise, Ram had said this in the first place.

She had made the promise with Subaru, despite him being a habitual breaker of promises.

Echidna: “Progressively speaking, it’s not like we have a way to recover memories. I shall also agree with Natsuki-kun and Ram’s say. Speaking optimistically here, but there’s also the possibility that the memories come back with time.”

Julius: “I’d say a passive agreement for me. I shall not give utmost priority to it. I shall prioritize the tower’s capture. But should I find a chance to recover your memories, I shall prioritize that. —Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama mustn’t be made to make such a sad expression.”

Subaru gave a deep nod in response to Echidna and Julius’ words.

He then turned his eyes towards the two of Emilia and Beatrice. Receiving Subaru’s gaze, the two ultimately hesitated a bit but—

Emilia: “—This time, even if it’s tough, I’ll be patient. But”

Subaru: “But?”

Emilia: “Sometimes, do excuse me for worrying about Subaru the most.”

Subaru: “Uh… I’m sorry.”

Noticing that it was equal to what he had said about keeping worrying about him later, Subaru turned his head down in response to Emilia’s request.

Seeing the two, Beatrice let out a sad sigh.

Beatrice: “Emilia said what Betty wanted to say, I suppose. That was supposed to be the most effective one, so do properly reflect on yourself, in fact.”

Subaru: “—Yeah, I got it.”

Henceforth, gaining everyone’s approval, Subaru once again firmed his resolve for capturing the tower.

And what Subaru wanted to first propose thus forward was—

Subaru: “—How about we all go and search, if there’s Reid’s book in the library of Taygeta?”

Chapter 58:
This is This, That is That

—Let's search and see if there's Reid's book in the library of Taygeta.

That was what Subaru suggested as a necessity for capturing the tower as well as capturing their immediate problem, the second layer.

While sitting in a circle, everyone made a puzzled expression upon hearing that.

Emilia: "His book…? Are you serious?"

Subaru: "Yep."

Subaru looked at Emilia as she gave her reaction. Feeling a sense of bliss due to her cuteness and lovable nature, Subaru then turned to everyone saying "Listen".

Subaru: "Searching for Reid's book, I think that is the quickest and easiest way for capturing the second layer. Don't you all think so as well?"

Emilia: "I asked this earlier too, but why? I'm not against searching for the book. But I just don't know why we should search for Reid's book. Besides…"

Julius: "—First of all, would Reid Astrea's book truly even be in that library."

Hearing Subaru's suggestion Emilia tilted her head, and Julius conveyed the latter half of her words.

Subject to everyone's gaze now, Julius looked upwards with his eyes and eyelashes which had an affinity with each other. As if glancing at the second layer which was perhaps above the ceiling.

Julius: "Though indeed hard to believe, the hero who engraved his name in history, Reid Astrea takes the name of the Trial upon himself and is awaiting our challenge in the second layer. There is no reason to doubt that he is a personage who existed four hundred years ago, and still is that very same person… but now, there is room to question his death in my mind.”

Subaru: “Seeing how lively he is, did he really even die? I guess my supposition may have been wrong considering this point…”

The truth was that Subaru merely recognized the fact that he is a dead person from several hundreds of years ago after hearing about it from Emilia from the rest.

Should he have been met unknowing of his respective circumstances, it would be truly hard to believe that Reid was a dead person. First of all, he had too much life in him. He’s a far too energetic dead person.

Subaru: “Regardless, I think things are at a level that we need not ponder over this point much. It’s inconceivable that he’d live for several hundreds of years, and he should be dead. Am I right, Beatrice?”

Beatrice: “Despite everything, Betty has lived for four hundred years, in fact.”

Emilia: “Around a hundred years for me, I guess?”

Echidna: “Same here, I suppose if my birth would be considered then it would make around four hundred years. Though the time I was conscious for was short.”

Shaula: “Me too! Me too, Master-sama! I’ve been waiting here in vain for four hundred years! I was so lonely! I demand a hug for those four hundred years!”

Subaru: “So many characters who’ve lived long?! Even Emilia-chan?!”

His objective was to seek agreement but unknowingly brought objection, whilst he had his jaw hanging.

He never thought that over half of his party members would be characters who've lived for long. The party's average age jumped up so much it wasn't even a joke.

Especially when it came to Beatrice to Emilia, he was unable to shut his hanging jaw.

He merely thought that he had to come to terms with it.

Subaru: "I-Is that so, Emilia-chan is a half elf… I'm also convinced she's an unparalleled beauty. The rule goes that half elves are pretty and live long, after all."

Emilia: "Um, mhm, yes… Subaru, even without memories, you aren't scared of half elves?"

Subaru: "When you ask about being scared, then I'm scared of that cuteness. It's seriously lethal. If I look at you when I'm half asleep and have my guard down then my eyes might go blind. To be honest I'm having to blink frequently even now."

Emilia: "…Geez, stupid."

Scolded by the slightly pouting Emilia, Subaru got lost in thoughts of this ambience feeling nice, but braced himself up to make sure he didn't make such a foolish misunderstanding.

Emilia was extremely kind, one could easily get the careless impression that she had feelings for Subaru. His beating heart, swayed away. Well, it was fine if it was beating at least.

Subaru: "Ha~… at such spots, you have a sense of relief like I've returned to my parents' home, Beatrice."

Beatrice: "That feels somewhat unacceptable, I suppose… but well, since you're patting Betty's head, you'll be let off the hook this time, in fact."

After being thrown into disarray by Emilia, his heartbeats calmed down upon caressing Beatrice. It seemed that Beatrice's mood had also been restored so it served both ends.

And, upon the derailing of the conversation, Echidna said “Would you mind if I say something” and raised her hand.

Echidna: “It’s not like I don’t understand Julius’ worry, but I want to earnestly endorse the supposition that Reid is a dead person. Though it’s simply the impression I got when I got in contact with him personally.”

Subaru: “And the reason for that would be?”

Echidna: “First, just as what Natsuki-kun had said, I cannot conceive that Reid Astrea belongs to a species which lives for long. He is a person who goes beyond norms in multiple ways, but he is still a human. Second, his personality.”

Emilia: “Personality? Like his rea~lly energetic nature?”

Echidna: “Energetic to an extent which is rather unheard of. I cannot imagine that the possessor of such a hearty and lively personality would quietly seclude himself in the tower for four hundred years. The fact that he hadn’t even met her… Shaula, would mean that he always remained in that one room of the second layer. It’s very hard to believe. It’s my arbitrary impression, but he would probably leave in three days.”

Subaru: “Ah.”

In response to Echidna’s views, Subaru responded with a voice filled with acceptance and reconciliation.

Emilia and the others also thought back to Reid’s bustling attitude. They all seemed to be convinced by the credibility of Echidna’s views.

Observing them all, Echidna turned her pale cerulean gaze towards Julius.

Echidna: “So, that is the impression I have, Julius, do you agree?”

Julius: “It is impossible to not agree. Certainly, considering Reid Astrea’s real impression, it does not seem like he would stay at the same place for such a long time. The reason behind that is because the tower's Trials and his present self have strings of conditions attached to them… is that how we should consider it."

Subaru: "The tower and him, have strings of conditions attached, huh."

Hearing Echidna and Julius' conversation, he recalled the denouement of the previous loop.

Within the tower caught in the flames of great chaos and mayhem, Reid was walking around freely and boasted about going outside. Without any diffidence he had descended from the second layer down to the fourth layer and even pushed the back of Subaru's head.

To Subaru it did not seem like his freedom was constrained whatsoever.

The truth was that had he not possessed the last bit of reluctance, he would have unmistakably left the tower full of life with his legs at the very same pace. —The reason why, he did not do so.

Julius: "—? What is it, do you need something from me?"

Subaru: "No…"

Julius: "Heh. I believe I also have eyes, a nose, ears and lips on my face, but is there any strangeness in that?"

Subaru: "Ah, unlike Emilia-chan's they aren't cute at all so they've failed the screening. Regardless…"

The conversation had drifted far too distant from the main issue at hand, with that notion Subaru turned his gaze away from Julius.

And once again returned the topic to "Reid's book".

Subaru: "Well then, now that we've all agreed that Reid's a lively dead then let's go back to what I first said. Taygeta has Books of the Dead, am I right?"

Ram: "That is the understanding as of now. Memories of the dead flow into the reader's head… Barusu and Julius have confirmed that much. Though unfortunately, it seems you lost memories of that as well."

Subaru: "I said I'm sorry, don't hold it against me. —And, that is where the focus of this conversation lies."

Subaru pointed his finger towards Ram. Perhaps finding that gesture unpleasant, Ram twisted his finger, making Subaru taste ache and scream "Ga∼a∼h!".

Right beside their exchange, Beatrice raised a soft voice saying "Ah".

Beatrice: "So that is what it is, I suppose!"

Emilia: "Beatrice, did you get what Subaru wants to say?"

Beatrice: "Yes, in fact. So that is what it is, I suppose. —In other words, it means utilizing Reid's Book of the Dead as an essential point for capturing Reid, in fact."

Subaru: "Yeah."

Caressing his twisted finger, Subaru affirmed Beatrice's words with a pained expression.

Hearing that explanation, Emilia rounded her amethyst eyes and whispered "Is that so∼".

—Utilizing the Book of the Dead, and capturing the dead himself.

To summarize, not only was the Book of the Dead a record of one's lifetime, but also elaborately recorded why that person had died, a "capture guidebook".

And should it be put in Subaru's words, who was a veteran player having already died four times— the cause of death isn't something which can be evaded easily.

Subaru: "That's why if we read his Book of the Dead we'll get to know of the cause of his death. That would serve as a great means of capturing. The Books of the Dead may be, in a roundabout way, for that purpose alone, you know?”

Echidna: “That is… something I didn’t notice. But now that you mention it, certainly. They’ve gone out of their way to deploy a dead person as the trial taker. It wouldn’t be odd if that was the aim.”

Subaru: “Well, you don’t have to accept it that readily…”

Subaru rounded his eyes and gave a bitter smile as response to Echidna, who commended him far greater than what he had anticipated.

Regardless, the situation was such that they could either find a way to capture, or become able to define a bypass to evade it entirely.

Subaru: “Ah, this is something I’m saying with personal conviction… not my present self who doesn’t have memories, but my self who had memories also tried to test this way of capturing as well, I think.”

Beatrice: “…That is convincing, I suppose. There’s no way Subaru wouldn’t test such a byroad, in fact.”

Ram: “That being a road toward evil, not a road toward righteousness. Certainly seems like something Barusu would do. Ram is also convinced.”

Emilia: “Mhm, yeah. Things inequitable, that’s something Subaru’s rea~lly good at.”

Subaru: “Who says inequitable in this day and age…”

Emilia: “——~hk!”

He distorted his cheeks in response to the unblurred assessment of ‘Natsuki Subaru’, and Emilia suddenly had eyes twinkling as a reaction. Subaru was surprised by her reaction, but Emilia immediately afterwards touched her cheek with her finger.

Emilia: “Ugh, this won’t do this won’t do. Subaru is the one who has it rough the most, after all. I have to get myself together…”

Ram: “Emilia-sama, your feelings are understandable, but your cheeks are flushed red.”

Taking Emilia’s hand, Ram directed her attention towards what was happening with her.

Emilia or Beatrice upon times had been giving overly sensitive reactions since a while ago, and the reason behind that was perhaps because of the vestiges of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ they could feel.

He truly felt guilty and apologetic. He wanted to return ‘Natsuki Subaru’ to Emilia and the others as soon as possible.

Regardless, in accordance with Emilia and the rest’s impression as well, it was highly probable that the Subaru who was there until yesterday had arrived at a point of utilizing the Book of the Dead as a means of capturing.

Hearing Subaru’s thoughts, Meili then said “Ah” with her hand on her mouth.

Meili: “…This reminds me, last night I saw onii-san in Taygeta with lot of books scattered arou~nd. I wonder if that’s what it was fo~r.”

Julius: “Last night, Subaru was in Taygeta? Hmm…”

Subaru: “By the way, did you get to see what book I was reading?”

Meili: “U~m… I don’t know that mu~ch. Really sorry~.”

Meili closed her eyes as she remained sitting on Shaula’s lap and getting her head caressed.

Waving his hand gesturing “Don’t worry about it”, Subaru referred to My memories which were not his own, and arrived at the same conclusion.

Amongst the memories of Meili he had confirmed with the Book of the Dead, despite seeing Subaru with multiple books scattered around him he had been unable to see the specifics of that point onward.

That is why he had not been disappointed much by the answer to his question. However, at the point when he was in the library of Taygeta it was certain that there was some sort of abnormality in ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

Before he scattered the books around, or perhaps shortly after that —

Julius: “What are the chances of that act itself having some connection with the loss of memories?”

Echidna: “A lot of them were scattered around, huh… Something like reading the Book of the Dead beyond the maximum possible limit filled up the entire place for storing memories and they overflowed out, that won’t be possible, right?”

Subaru: “I want to think that it shouldn’t be possible, but I can’t say it isn’t possible. Anyhow, I have amnesia!”

Julius and Echidna sighed at the same time before Subaru, who had puffed up his chest and raised a single finger.

They had come to a standstill when it came to discussing his memory loss, but Subaru did not doubt that the cause of his memory loss was in the book.

That is why, he thought of avoiding letting anyone else read Reid’s Book of the Dead should they actually find it.

If someone had to read it, then it must be Subaru, who already had his memories disappear once, it wouldn’t be of much consequence should they disappear again— no, by now, Subaru also had too many memories he could not let disappear.

“…”

The events of the previous loop, the events prior to the previous loop.

Along with that, the things he had committed to his heart in these surroundings, or the promise with Ram, and what he pledged to Meili.

What's this, already hands full of stuff which mustn't be forgotten despite merely being here for a few days and repeating four times.

This is why, memories were valuable, priceless, and difficult to part ways with. —They must not be forgotten.

Emilia: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "Uh, ah, I'm alright I'm alright, I'm alright. Erm, ahem."

Upon Emilia's call, Subaru awoke from his silence and regained his composure.

Then glanced at everyone's faces,

Subaru: "With all that being said, I propose heading to Taygeta. That guy, hero of the past or the legendary so-and-so or whatever, will be handing down his achievements in his life hereafter. Instead there'll also be any failures or weaknesses he left behind, and we'll straightforwardly attack those points as a fame tax."

Ram: "You sure are confident, speaking of something you've heard someplace else."

Subaru: "Hehe, it's cause I never thought there'd be a chance to realistically use a way for capturing this tower. If the opponent can be traced down to his roots then even the cause of his death and what he treasures can be ascertained. This is what you truly call a modern day knowledge cheat…!"

Emilia and Beatrice tilted their heads hearing Subaru's words, who had his fists clenched with strength.

That was mere persiflage so he did not get into its details, but it was unmistakable that Reid Astrea, in this world, was a personage famous enough to have his name etched into history.

Echidna: "So in other words, that guy's cause of defeat is a fame tax… that's quite novel for a weakness, isn't it?"

Ram: "—. Barusu's aim is understood. Ram is convinced as well. Though Ram certainly has some anxiety about it."

Echidna: "It's worth trying, huh. My oh my. Simply thinking about how difficult it will be to find a single book out of an amount of books that vast makes me feel heavy."

Ignoring Subaru's frivolous comments, Ram and Echidna raised their hips. Emilia, Beatrice, Meili and Shaula followed shortly afterwards.

Subaru also got on his knees and stood up, and then glanced at Julius, who was lagging behind.

Subaru: "What happened? Are you against it?"

Julius: "…No, there's no other breakthrough solution either. Also considering that the proposal was initiated by you, I shall recognize its validity."

Subaru: "But, there's still something on your mind?"

Julius: "—. That would be, a problem of my own. I want you to disregard it."

Shaking his head left and right, Julius stood up at that spot.

Since it was impossible to disregard it even when told to do so, Subaru only got more concerned—

Subaru: "I'll disregard it, for now. —By the way, with the exception of the Book of the Dead, just how famous is Reid? Feels like it'd be at a crazy level."

Julius: "Seems like that was quite a strong memory. For memories that were spilled in bits and pieces, seems like some are left… Reid Astrea, is one of the three heroes who defeated the Witch who existed in the past."

Subaru: "The Sage Shaula, the Divine Dragon Volcanica, the Sword

Saint Reid…”

Shaula: “ Sage refers to Master-sama, not me.”

Subaru: “Going by your logic, I’m also several hundreds of years old? I’ve lived a time way too shocking between leaving the convenience store and waking up in the morning…”

Rather than simply taking Shaula’s speech with a grain of salt, Subaru ignored it after tasting the flavor of only a small percentage of what she had to say, Subaru dug deeper into the legend of Reid whereby he was spoken of as one of the three heroes.

With respect to that topic, Emilia and the others’ glances were directed towards Julius.

Julius accepted their gazes, and whilst touching his bangs,

Julius: “Certainly, there’s no time to recite the legend Reid Astrea etched into posterity in all parts of the world. Speaking of things he was famous for… the fight where he slayed a hundred dragons, or his battle achievement of six thousand undefeated victories recorded in the arena of the Gladiator Island. An existence called to be a fierce god, and the victor of drinking competitions, such varieties are also there.”

Subaru: “All of that sounds so stupid, but after having met the real deal…”

Julius: “It feels that they’ve not been exaggerated. After knowing that strength, unhesitatingly he would… no.”

Subaru: “—?”

Julius: “Within what I’m aware of, all anecdotes regarding him retell his achievements and such. His personality, or records of humanly failures and defeats, there are no memories of things like those.”

Touching his bangs, that was how Julius brought the display of information to a finish.

Hearing what he said made Subaru slightly tremble, due to the fact that he had no records of defeat. It would be fine if there were no such records left, it surely cannot be that he was simply never defeated.

Subaru shuddered, thinking that him being undefeated for his entire life was a relevant possibility.

Subaru: “Oh, we’re here.”

Whilst they were conversing, they arrived at the room which had the staircase connecting to Taygeta.

Further up would be the library filled with Books of the Dead, and the third layer Taygeta shall welcome them.

Subaru: “—Ram, would you mind guiding everyone for a bit? There’s something I want to talk about with Julius.”

Ram: “With Julius?”

Ram furrowed her eyebrows in response to Subaru, who had halted his feet.

Julius was also surprised to hear those words, but for the moment he did not object to it. Seeing them Ram straitened her light crimson eyes and sighed, looking back into Subaru’s black eyes.

A sigh which revealed grief, or perhaps, understanding,

Ram: “Kindly make sure you make it quick. It’ll get completely out of hand if Ram and the others also lose memories like Barusu upon reaching there.”

Subaru: “Don’t say such scary stuff. Though if amnesiac Ram becomes more meek and elegant, it’ll sure be a sight to see.”

Ram: “Ram does not, intend to forget, anything more.”

Subaru: “…You’re right. Please make sure you don’t get close to any weird book if you spot one.”

With that exchange done, Ram was the first one to start climbing the staircase.

For the moment he did not worry about misjudgments should it be left to her. Amongst all of these party members, he assessed Ram to be utmost worthy of such trust.

Subaru: “Meili, be lady-like. Hold hands with Emilia-chan or something at least.”

Meili: “That, is really upsetti~ng. You don’t have to treat me like a burden like thi~s. Naked onee-san already has grabbed my hand, even though I don’t want to grab he~r’s.”

Pouting, with one of her hands taken by Shaula and the other by Emilia, Meili was taken to Taygeta. Behind her was Beatrice, and last in line was Echidna, who looked back upon stepping onto the staircase.

Echidna: “Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Echidna: “Please do be gentle.”

Leaving those words behind, Echidna headed to the upper layer.

Subaru scratched his head whilst viewing her back. It seemed that Echidna had probably seen through the reason why Subaru had Julius remain here.

And with the departure of all the females, the only ones left standing before the staircase were the two of Subaru and Julius,

Julius: “So, what did you want to talk about? You’ve gone out of your way to keep Emilia-sama and the others at a distance, can I believe that it is something very important?”

Subaru: “Something very important… well, I guess so. Probably.”

Julius: “What an unclear way of speaking.”

Subaru: “It’s the kind of thing difficult to speak clearly.”

Subaru scratched his black hair in front of Julius, who had his back turned to the staircase.

The reason why he had Julius stop here was to confirm certain things. This also included what all he had been concerned about in the earlier conversation as well—

“…”

Julius: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “Just wait. I’m organizing my mind right now.”

Subaru pondered, pulling the thread of the problem which was tangled greater than expected.

He had left the search for the book onto Emilia and the others and had told Julius to stop here. The main focus of it being, of course, Reid Astrea.

Along with that, floating in Subaru’s mind was the previous loop, one of the acts of this great battle royale.

—Having gained freedom, Reid battles Julius one-on-one, choosing that to be the reason for his final bit of reluctance.

Despite there being countless obstructions in the situation, that had been a scene truly deserving being called a one-on-one battle. However, the difference in their actual ability, perhaps including this aspect of being a psychological issue too, was absolute.

On top of that, he head heard that Julius had already fought, suffered and swallowed defeat at the hands of Reid once.

Adding that to the situation, Reid held some sort of attachment towards Julius.

Whether that was towards the person named Julius, he couldn’t help but feel that was the key to deciphering Reid. —However, the problem was how to utilize it.

Subaru: “Ah, what do you think about Reid? Do you like him?”

Julius: “—. What significance does that question hold, I wonder.”

Subaru: “Well, I just tried making the atmosphere less serious. The real one needs to be said just a bit differently. —What I really mean is whether you have the intent to win against Reid.”

Julius: “—~hk.”

What Subaru said with one eye closed, made Julius widen his yellow eyes. Witnessing vehement turmoil levitate in those eyes, Subaru took a short exhale.

He felt this to be both expected, and unexpected.

Subaru: “Disregarding stuff I’m not self-aware of myself… this is a situation where cowering away in fright is not allowed, you know. They say the habit of losing starts becoming difficult to get rid of.”

Julius: “Subaru, you’re…”

Subaru: “Wicked, eh. The truth is that even I, after taking time and doing some stuff, do think that your daunted heart must be made to stand up again. I do think so, but we don’t have such time. You get it, right?”

“…”

Receiving Subaru’s question, Julius stiffened his cheeks and halted his breath.

Subaru and Julius interpreted the implication of the words “There’s no time” differently, yet he did possess identical unrest.

And surely, this was something the Subaru who was there until yesterday, was unable to do. Speaking the words which had to be conveyed to this wounded man who did not realize the restlessness of his own heart, and making him realize.

Perhaps, Natsuki Subaru was doing what ‘Natsuki Subaru’ couldn’t.

Believing that this would be a certain strike, for breaking through the deadlock of this obstructive situation—

Subaru: “I’ll say it clearly, Julius. If you ask why, then that’s cause right now, I am invincible.”

Julius: “Invincible, huh… that is, quite a large thing to say.”

Subaru: “I can say big stuff cause I’ve got no ties of obligations. I can’t stand seeing you all curled up after you’ve looked at me in the eye, looked at Echidna in the eye, and have spoken about Reid. I’ve got a nature where I influence others so I can’t really say for the others, but I’ll just close my eyes and say it clearly.”

Julius: “—I shall listen.”

Inhaling, adjusting his seated posture, Julius glared towards Subaru.

Accepting that earnest gaze, Subaru resumed.

Subaru: “That is that, this is this.”

Julius: “—Huh.”

Julius gave a dumbfounded response to Subaru’s confident declaration.

With that Julius before him, Subaru opened his arms wide and,

Subaru: “I know it got awkward since you were looking at me. The me until yesterday probably was responsible for doing something to you. What that me who was there until yesterday did will not disappear from this world, but it has indeed disappeared from my mind.”

Julius: “I, suppose so. That is correct. However, I am…”

Subaru: “Hear it till the end. Since I’m in that state, there’s a need for us to establish our relationship from scratch. At the very least, that goes for the relationship with my present self. Forget about the me who was there until yesterday for now.”

"…"

With the tides of conversation taking a rather violent turn, Julius yet remained unable to recover from drowning in his earlier unease.

A terribly overbearing logic. He had not managed to fully convey what he wanted to whatsoever.

The truth was that Subaru was borrowing the strength of Emilia, Beatrice, Julius and the rest— whom had been influenced by 'Natsuki Subaru', those being his achievements.

However, right now he shall borrow merely the positive aspects of that influence, and discard the negative ones.

Because—

Subaru: "In our party, you're the strongest. That's why, it'll be you who will be clashing with Reid. Even if we find the capture book all well and good, the fighting will still be on you."

Of course, he had also considered Reid's attachment, the opponent's desire to have a one-on-one battle with Julius.

However, Subaru did not intend to surrender this spot. Even if he ignored the fact that Emilia had already secured victory, Ram, Shaula, Echidna, Meili, Beatrice, out of everyone Subaru knew, surely nobody would be willing to surrender before that scene.

Subaru: "I understand you're scared. I also understand you're perplexed. I deeply apologize on behalf of the me who was there until yesterday. —Consider all of that, switch over, and fight."

Julius: "…I have, already lost to him, twice."

Subaru: "I know. But, next time, win."

"…"

The number of defeats was greater by one from what he had known.

However, in this circumstance, it was unrelated and of little significance.

Subaru: “Our calculations will eventually be that you will have to win. I thought of various match ups in my mind, but before having the girls do their best, we, the men, will have to do our best, or it’ll be a disgrace to knighthood.”

Julius: “—Disgrace. My current self, bringing disgrace to knighthood, huh.”

Before Subaru, who had his fist clenched out, Julius closed his eyes and whispered with a soft tone, lowering his head.

Astonished, astrayed, wounded, defeated, and now finally by means of a logic akin to violently being grabbed by the collars, Julius was trifled by Subaru’s words.

That was something which made him change his elegant expression, into one far unlike what Subaru had expected—

Julius: “Just as how Miss Ram had stated, I’ve started to doubt whether you’ve truly lost memories. Or perhaps instead, are you pretending to not have memories in order to stop me from abandoning the sword out of fear?”

Subaru: “I’d go so far, even making Emilia-chan’s smiling face dull? You retard, I’d never do something so roundabout. Besides, above all, even without me doing that you’d still not let go of the sword and fight for everyone, won’t you.”

Julius: “That is… contradicting. You’re truly trying to put strain on my frightened heart right now, huh.”

Subaru: “No. That’s wrong. What you lack isn’t courage. You’ve got courage properly packed up in here. —What you lack is the determination to win. The spirit of rivalry, competitiveness.”

Subaru got closer, having his clenched out fist touched Julius’ chest.

Receiving his words and his fist, Julius inhaled.

"…"

Subaru's words possessed no lies.

In the earlier loop, despite being driven into a corner against the witchbeasts and Reid, Julius did not let go of his sword, did not lose to despair, and conveyed the words "I'm leaving that to you" to Subaru.

And should the other side of those words be seen, they couldn't mean anything else but "Leave this to me".

Under those circumstances, Julius had certainly said.

—To leave Reid Astrea, up to him.

And witnessing him say so had been the end.

That is why—

Subaru: "…I have not seen, the settlement. Neither my memories of everything until yesterday. That is why, I've not been acquainted to you, losing to Reid, even once."

Julius, Julius Juukulius, had not lost.

This knight, this man, had not lost even once, in front of Natsuki Subaru.

That is why, no matter what anyone may say, Natsuki Subaru shall not surrender the settlement.

He shall persist expecting Julius Juukulius, to defeat Reid Astrea.

Subaru: "I will leave Reid Astrea, up to you. Defeat that utmost troublesome enemy. In exchange, I will… try my hand, using my own ways, at everything else."

"…"

Subaru: "Can't you hear me, Julius. Answer your friend's expectations."

Earlier was to put the weight of expectations on him, now was to forcefully drive hope into him.

Subaru's fist prodded Julius' chest once again.

That single gesture, and Julius touched his chest.

Continuing to have his hand touch his chest, Julius stepped back, and took a deep breath.

A deep, deep, deep, deep breath, and,

Julius: "…How come can you, having lost memories of everything until yesterday, are able to expect that much from me?"

Subaru: "That's… the kind of image I had. Kind of like my impression. Like your looks, the way you talk, the way you behave, what you wield, what you wear, the way you eat, the way you walk, it's the art of synthesizing from all that kind of stuff."

Subaru replied without alluding to the previous loop, making him clench his chest in ache.

Without even planning to, both Subaru and Julius faced each other whilst touching their chests. At the same pace, Julius corrected his posture whilst still having his hand at his chest, and slowly raised his hips.

With elegant, beautiful, natural conduct, seemingly something a knight in some story would do.

Julius: "Impression, huh."

Subaru: "Y-Yeah. It's the way you appear. Your everything, makes me expect this much."

Julius: "Is that so… My appearance, made you think that way, isn't it."

The tone of Julius' voice changed, whilst he remained to have his head lowered.

Until then, Julius' tone of voice gave the impression of being touched someplace difficult to touch, but now, though extremely slight, strength returned to it, softness lodged abode, warmth budded into it once again, that was the impression it gave.

And—

Julius: "Forgotten by the world, forgotten by you, the only one who remembered me, failing to ascertain my master's existence, it became unclear where my self was. However, despite being in that state —everything I have fostered until now, has not disappeared. That is what I'd like to say, at least."

Subaru: "Not so wise or collected, but that's what the nuance is."

Julius accepted Subaru's shoddy and convoluted words in a wise, polished form.

Subaru had thought that he hadn't been able to convey everything he wanted to just a moment ago. However, he felt that the listener had selected something close to the everything he wanted to convey.

Subaru: "Well, it was kind of like a conversation on notions, I guess you could call it a psychological discussion, but it felt like the psychological problem was serious, so was I correct?"

Julius: "Heh. Why would you become timid with regards to that? Weren't you supposed to be invincible, I wonder?"

Subaru: "Well, even if Mario picks up a star, if he falls into a hole he still dies, you know…"

Though Julius furrowed his eyebrows hearing the illogical metaphor, he did not press further.

It seemed like that was something also associated to 'Natsuki Subaru', and that it was an understood notion to ignore his meaningless persiflage, so it felt unquestionably strange.

Regardless—

Subaru: “Have you become a bit forward-looking now?”

Julius: “Well, I wonder. Ultimately, your words were of destitute concreteness and were more of psychological discussion, and, it’s not as if all of the various things which happened to me have changed dramatically.”

Subaru: “You…”

Julius: “But”

Pausing his words there, Julius narrowed his eyes whilst looking at Subaru.

And, suddenly loosening his lips,

Julius: “—That is that, this is this.”

With unbefitting words, he concluded this exchange.

Chapter 59:
Smiles in the White World

1

—That is that, this is this.

Ending their conversation with that, Subaru and Julius both experienced a strange sensation.

The truth was, he did not know if he had managed to reach close to Julius' convoluted heart. What he ended up thinking of was whether there could've been better words, a more perfect way of action, a further beautiful way of connection.

A way of action which could've overwritten this absurd reality, instead of reaching a reckless conclusion like "that is that, this is this".

Julius: "But, it is very befitting of you. For better or worse, you see."

Subaru: "…Is that so, eh. You know, how much of what befits me overlaps with the me until yesterday, actually quite concerns with my present self's identity."

Julius: "In terms of the establishment of one's self, my former self was very much greatly shaken as well. As one who's already tasted the same crisis, let me give you some advice. —That is that, this is this."

Subaru: "Oh shut up!"

Subaru howled in response to Julius' ridicule of their earlier banter. Julius shrugged his shoulders at his objection and seemingly had an air of composure.

Indeed, it appeared he seriously did manage to make his heart stand up once again a bit. Although they had been words quite immature and maladroit, it was all thanks to the listener being apt.

Regardless, whilst the two of them interacted in that fashion—

Shaula: “Master-sama~, are you done~?”

Subaru: “Oh? Shaula?”

Behind them, peeking from the top of the staircase leading to the third layer was Shaula, calling out to him.

With her black braid dangling down as she peered down to the lower floor, she was looking at them with her voluptuous chest touching the floor.

Subaru: “Why so well-behaved? Were you that kind of a character?”

Shaula: “Well, when Master-sama’s talking to someone one-to-one then that’s when it’s some real solid talk, isn’t it. So I was told before to stay away cause I break the mood if I’m there, so I’m just abiding by that… oh right, Master-sama has forgotten everything!”

Subaru: “Solid talk and breaking the mood, eh…”

Subaru furrowed his eyebrows in response to Shaula, who was laughing earnestly and openly. Seeing Subaru, Shaula then jumped and descended from the staircase in one breath.

Jumping over two hundred stairs, Shaula made a silent landing onto the floor. She then proceeded to stand beside Subaru and grab his arm into her chest.

Subaru: “I’ve told you several times already, stop doing this kind of stuff. Emilia-chan will have a misunderstanding.”

Julius: “Hmm, Emilia-sama huh?”

Subaru: “Don’t hmm me. There’s just that small possibility, you know. Even if it’s a possibility as absurd as finding a needle in a desert, it’s still a possibility.”

Saying so, Subaru forcefully unfastened Shaula’s arms. Upon that gesture, Shaula said “A~h” and pouted with a dissatisfied expression,

Shaula: “Master-sama is so mean. Treating me like this when I’m thirsting for warmth.”

Subaru: “If you’re thirsting for warmth then go hug Meili or Beatrice. Both of their body temperatures are pretty warm since they’re kids… Beatrice, she’s pretty warm for being four hundred years old.”

Bringing that to light by connecting the shocking truth had been confirmed earlier and the truth he had ascertained several times, Subaru was shaken by Beatrice’s little girl energy.

The conclusion, she’ll always remain a little girl no matter how many years she may live.

Shaula: “Boo. I won’t report anything to the cold Master-sama. It’s the disciple’s strike. The manager is to listen to the voice of the workers.”

Subaru: “Ah, geez, I get it I get it. I’ll positively handle and improve the labor conditions, so let us hear your report. Did something happen?”

Shaula: “It’s suspicious whether you’ll really improve them. But but, I’m an obedient, cute disciple so I’ll answer! —Reid’s book has been found.”

Subaru: “…Huh?”

So articulated Shaula as she distanced her braid and shoulders away.

Subaru widened his eyes upon how unexpected those words were. Julius also widened his eyes just as much.

Julius: “Miss Shaula, what did you say just now?”

Shaula: “Li~ke I~ sai~d, I’m saying Reid’s book has been found. Something like the book which has that scum’s name on it, I personally think it'd be better to just burn it and throw it away. You think so too, right, Master-sama?"

Subaru: "Ha, ha, ha…"

Shaula: "Hahaha? Master-sama, is that a laugh?"

Lowering her hips, Shaula looked at Subaru's face from below. Looking back into her black eyes teeming with rustic simplicity and naivete, Subaru opened his mouth.

And shouted.

Subaru: "—That should be the first thing you say!!"

2

Emilia: "Ah! Look, Subaru! We found Reid's book!"

Said Emilia with a wide smile and voice like the chime of a silver bell, noticing Subaru climb up the staircase.

What she pointed toward with her hand was the bulky book Ram was carrying in her arms. It seems that was Reid's Book of the Dead. It got found rather quickly.

The library, filled with a vast amount of books no matter where one looked— it was unknown from which age this existed, but if this recorded all of the dead in this world, then the amount of books was rather suitable.

Subaru: "Good job finding the book we aimed for amongst all of this. While I was busy with Julius' counselling… therapy? Aromatherapy? Something like that."

Emilia: "Caoonselliing…? Ah, I don't really get it but, hehehe, isn't it quite something. But, I'm not the one who found it."

Emilia, with her chest puffed up, stated the achievement wasn't her's.

What that implied was immediately made clear by her subsequent actions. Emilia gently pushed forward the dark blue haired young girl hugging her waist,

Emilia: “Meili is the one who found it. Isn’t it meritorious?”

Subaru: “Who says meritorious in this day and age… but that aside, so Meili found it! That’s certainly meritorious! Good work.”

Accepting Emilia’s words, Subaru then automatically commended the achiever as well.

With her arms around Emilia’s slim waist, and whilst she was being caressed by her, Meili averted her eyes out of embarrassment in response to Subaru’s words.

Meili: “N-Not really. It was a book that just caught my eye, and I just happened to mention it. It got found just slightly quickly, so I don’t think it’s anything grea~t.”

Subaru: “Don’t be stupid. You can brag about what you did well just fine! Really good, Meili. You’ve nullified the negative of trying to push me back to zero right away, huh!”

Meili: “By something this si~mple?!”

Meili widened her eyes in surprise, as Subaru overbearingly brushed her head. Meili didn’t take a liking to it, saying “My hair will get dishevele~d!” but that simply made Subaru relax his cheeks.

Subaru: “It’s fine. It was just an attempt anyway, and you compensated for it with a big achievement, let’s agree to that.”

“…”

Subaru: “So, Reid’s book… nobody has seen it yet, right?”

Meili tried saying something in response to the smiling Subaru, but remained with her mouth closed.

Whilst keeping Meili’s faltering within his vision, Subaru turned his attention to the book for the moment, which was the root subject.

The book Ram was carrying— the patterns drawn at its back cover, those were characters Subaru couldn't read.

Neither did it possess a bizarre sensation like giving Reid's vibes upon a single glance.

Subaru: "No matter how unconventional the actual person himself may be, the book recording that doesn't resound that, huh."

Ram: "If the binding was meaninglessly over the top, or if the title aggressively self-asserted itself then it would've been easier to find. It's helpful that Meili made up for that and found it."

Subaru: "See, look, Meili! Even Ram is complimenting you! That one and only Ram! This Ram! You really can be glad about it… ghe~gh."

Ram: "Kindly shut up."

With his side gouged by her fingers, Subaru collapsed in agony at the same spot. And after quietening Subaru, Ram lightly shook the book in her arms,

Ram: "There's what happened with Barusu. It'd be a disaster if one did something rash and lost memories like Barusu did. That is why, it's been shown to nobody."

Subaru: "W-We, haven't confirmed if the reason for my memory loss, is that, book…"

Ram: "Hah!"

The comment, which didn't convince him alone, was slashed down by Ram's laugh.

The truth was, it was nearly impossible that his memory loss and the Book of the Dead were unrelated. Even if they've found the book they aimed to, it was only natural that they would have disputes over how it was to be utilized.

Beatrice: "So, the book has properly been found, in fact. What remains is using it, I suppose."

So remarked Beatrice, having the same train of thought as Subaru.

Receiving her words, everyone’s joy for having discovered the book was then coated with nervousness. This one book was capable of causing memory loss should its usage be mistaken. That was the same as gulping down a medicine of unknown identity. Reluctance was natural.

Echidna: “So should we, discuss and conjecture the dangers?”

Subaru: “Discuss and conjecture the dangers… is that even possible, Echidna?”

Echidna: “Conjecture is possible only on the basis of events that have already occurred and bits and pieces of information, though.”

Saying so, Echidna raised her hands and shrugged.

Afterwards she raised her index finger.

Echidna: “First, the riskiness of the Book of the Dead… just as what Natsuki-kun’s present condition indicates, there exists the possibility of losing one’s memories. From what Natsuki-kun said, the memories which spill and fall out are rather in fragments… though I suppose, in this case it would be better to call the remaining memories to be in fragments?”

The portion which spilled over and the portion which remained, the amount of the former was overwhelmingly greater. What Echidna said was correct.

However, what slightly deviated from the truth here was that Subaru used memory loss and its remnants as camouflage in order to hide Return by Death.

The truth was, around the first time when he had lost memories in its truest sense, Subaru had lost memories of everything— after arriving in the different world, rather.

Henceforth, it would be better to think that the amnesia made no pardons. Right now, the only actual precedent set was that Subaru merely did not lose himself due to the memory loss.

Had he lost not only episodic memories, but also his own self.

When he thought about that, he shuddered.

—At the same time, why did he not lose memories of just the different world but those of the former world as well, that question also posed within Subaru’s mind.

Echidna: “The reason for the amnesia is also possible to speculate about. First, memories are erased as indemnification for reading the Book of the Dead. That is difficult to consider, keeping in mind the differences in cases of Natsuki-kun and Julius, who’ve both read the books.”

Beatrice: “Don’t really want to think about it, but… there is also the possibility of losing a small bit of memories, in fact. If what’s being read and the memories that get erased are proportional in amount, then that induction would also be logical, I suppose.”

Julius: “I agree. In other words, the reason why Subaru’s and my circumstances are different, is due to the difference in the amount of books read… it would coincide with the Subaru whom Miss Meili had witnessed last night.”

“…”

Beatrice objected to Echidna’s inference, which was then affirmed by Julius.

Listening to his intelligent party members converse, Subaru nodded in response.

Subaru: “In order words, the voluminousness of the books read possibly has something to do with the loss of memories?”

Echidna: “It means that would also be a possible way of interpretation. In the case of this inference being affirmed, the ones who should force their eyes through Reid’s Book of the Dead are us, who haven’t read a single Book of the Dead before. It may be dangerous for Natsuki-kun and Julius, who’ve already read them.”

“…”

The view that the one with experience should read it and the view that one without experience should read it ran counter to each other.

Both sides were logical, and it was difficult to conceive either side as wrong. However, what made him curious then was—

Subaru: “Then, what about me, who’s already lost memories once? If the condition for losing memories is to accumulate information from Books of the Dead, have I been reset? Or not?”

Ram: “That is quite a grave issue. If Barusu’s memories are lost again, and everything has to be explained again… even the thought of it makes one shudder.”

Subaru: “Your language made me shudder too!”

Emilia: “Mm… I’m also rea~lly worried, about that. I don’t want Subaru to forget all sorts of things, again.”

Emilia and Ram affirmed the concern Subaru wielded in their own ways.

In all honesty, the questions had no end to them. It was unknown whether reading a large number of people made them disappear, or if a smaller number of people was dangerous.

He couldn’t say it openly, but Subaru also possessed the memories of reading Meili’s Book of the Dead in the previous loop. Would that count as having read one book this time as well.

Meili: “Wha~t? Does that look in your eyes say that you’re thinking of just making me read as expiation, e~h? That hu~rt.”

Subaru: “There’s no way. If you say stupid stuff, you’ll be grounded.”

Meili: “It’s abu~se. Isn’t the way you treat prisoners even more mean than back when we were in the mansion, hu~h.”

Subaru scolded in response to Meili’s ill humored joke which she remarked upon accepting his gaze. Subsequently, Meili pouted her cheeks, grabbed Shaula and Emilia’s hands and hid behind them.

Though quite self-interested, that is how cute children should be. Subaru smiled wryly before Meili’s attitude, and then turned back towards Echidna.

Subaru: “So, do you have any other ideas?”

Echidna: “Let’s see. Whether we, who have the leeway of a single book more than Julius, are to read it or if Julius, who’s already experienced it, is to read it or if Natsuki-kun, whose memories have already possibly overflown once, is to read it…”

Subaru: “Can I make a comment really convenient to me? —I think it’s best if I read it.”

Beatrice: “Subaru…”

Echidna brought up the list of candidates, and Beatrice grasped Subaru's hand when he responded. Subaru winked whilst looking into her gaze, tinted with a deeper color of concern than one of unease.

Beatrice: "This is no time for bad jokes, in fact. His own memories, Subaru will…"

Subaru: "No, I don't want to lose my memories, of course. But this is the appropriate call in terms of risk management. No matter how you look at it, I'm the person with the least possibility of putting everyone in danger by losing memories. I'm the weakest one out of all of us, after all."

Well, he did want to say he wasn't weaker than at least Meili, but it was a well-known fact that he couldn't win against any of the others.

He would be easy to subdue, and since he had already lost memories once, the way to cope with it would also be simple.

The issue was, Subaru had already accumulated memories of four laps which mustn't be forgotten.

That is why—

Subaru: "I'm not throwing down the gauntlet with the intention to forget. But, we are a team. Everyone needs to bear some sort of responsibility for the sake of everyone."

"…"

Subaru: "Julius is charged with fighting, Echidna is charged with intellect, Ram is charged with having a wicked tongue, Meili is charged with being cute, Beatrice is charged with being cute, Emilia-chan is charged with being the beautiful heroine, Shaula is charged with photogenic scenes, if you think about it that way then I should be the one charged with this."

Beatrice: "For some reason, it feels like there are way too many pointless positions…"

Shaula: “Not at all! When the plot takes a turn for the worse, romantic scenes are important! If it’s for art and Master-sama then I’ll take off my clothes!”

Subaru: “No, if you take any more clothes off then I’ll pull out, so you don’t have to do your best.”

Shaula: “The ladder slipped!”

Everyone here knew, that this was Subaru’s way of comforting them. In response to Subaru’s speech and conduct whilst he presumed upon that, the first one to sigh was Beatrice, who still had his hand gripped.

She took a deep inhale and then turned her eyes towards Subaru.

Beatrice: “Geez, if things take this sort of a turn then Subaru will never budge no matter what, I suppose. That part of you hasn’t changed even after losing memories, in fact. That is already a well-known fact seeing what happened with Meili, I suppose.”

Subaru: “E~h, but, you love me with all my qualities, right? I’ll blush.”

Beatrice: “Don’t get cocky, in fact!”

He spanked the blushing Beatrice around her hips.

However, her words did not possess the nuance of denial. And it seems the same went for the rest of the members as well.

Ram: “You’re getting mashed if you forget your promise with Ram.”

Subaru: “What’s that, right when I was having such a nice monologue?!”

Ram: “What indeed.”

Snorting her nose, Ram then turned the book she held in her arms to Subaru.

Profoundly tasting the heavy sensation of the book with his arms, Subaru smiled bitterly.

Emilia: “Even if we tell you to not be reckless, Subaru will still be reckless, isn’t it… I think that part of you is rea~lly unfair. I’m always worried.”

Subaru: “I have nothing to say but apologize for that. But, just as how much Emilia-chan is worried, I’m worried about you the same amount… what do you think. Would that be presumptuous?”

Emilia: “It makes me happy that Subaru would think that way. That’s why, I feel rea~lly convoluted. Come back no matter what… even if we make a promise like that, Subaru will break it anyways so I won’t make that promise.”

Subaru: “The fact that the me until yesterday couldn’t be trusted this much instead gets my heart throbbing. I wonder what the hell did he do.”

Shrugging his shoulders upon Emilia’s pleasant words, Subaru asked “Am I right?” to those surrounding them. And upon that, he noticed everyone but Shaula and Meili had all averted their eyes away.

Regardless of Beatrice and Ram, who were in the same camp as him, it seemed that Subaru’s breaking of promises had reached even Julius and Echidna.

Regardless—

Subaru: “I’ll read it, no objections, right?”

Echidna: “…In the end, I am unable to come up with any inference or suspicion. Though if possible, I wanted to opt for the eyes which would be the least endangered out of everyone here.”

Echidna apologetically lowered her eyebrows before Subaru, who was lightly holding the book.

What she said was true, and the fact that she had been concerned for everyone was unquestionable. That is why, Subaru was able to respond earnestly to her saying “Don’t let it bother you”.

Subaru: “Well, for now, I’ll dive into it. If I lose my memories, then put me down with ice and explain everything to me gently.”

Beatrice: “Nobody, is going to perform such a violent act, in fact…”

Subaru: “I know. Because you’re kind.”

Caressing the perturbed Beatrice on her head, he gently pressed her wide forehead. Beatrice pouted with a discontent expression, and took a single step backward.

And with everyone’s gazes focusing on him, Subaru sat down on the spot, crossed his legs, and took an immensely deep inhale.

—Atop his knees, Reid Astrea’s Book of the Dead.

“…”

Upon concentrating on it, there definitely was certain ominousness emanating from the book.

A similar sensation also existed back when he read Meili’s, her Book of the Dead, but the sense of intimidation this book had was far greater. Perhaps what the reader could feel changed depending on whose book was taken. —Just what kind of a life, would he be made to read, he pondered.

And, would Subaru’s memories be able to withstand it.

“…”

Putting his hand on the front cover of the book, Subaru, for merely once, looked towards everyone who was watching over him.

Beatrice, Meili, Ram, Echidna, Julius, Shaula, were observing him.

And—

Emilia: “—Subaru.”

Subaru: “Well then, I’ll be leaving. I may get late coming back, so you can go ahead and have dinner.”

Emilia: “…Stupid.”

Seen off by that smile of Emilia’s, Subaru turned the front cover of the Book of the Dead over.

Upon that instant, the characters written on the book glowed, and Subaru was made to undergo a hallucination as though information was being smited into his brain via his eyeballs.

And in but a moment, his consciousness was taken in towards the book—

—His consciousness, was detached from the library, and propelled towards darkness.

3

—What he felt when he read Meili’s Book of the Dead, had become quite amorphous now.

The spectacles he had witnessed, the life she had walked, the paths she had trodden were distinct in their own ways.

However, his memories were of witnessing those spectacles, tangibly speaking, becoming one with whose name was the title of the Book of the Dead, and being made to personally experience those subjective thoughts, sights.

To summarize, the journey of treading through the content of the Book of the Dead, was to assimilate into that person.

In those moments, the Natsuki Subaru witnessing the contents of the book was Meili Portroute.

That is precisely why, it could be believed that queer self consciousness which bore the presence of Meili, as Me, constantly shadowed Subaru’s consciousness from close vicinity.

If that was the potency of the Book of the Dead, then right now, what Subaru was supposed to be laying his eyes on was the life of Reid Astrea, his subjective world within his incomprehensible thinking.

What he thought, what he liked, what he disliked, what he loved, what he despised, what he achieved.

He was supposed to become one with the philosophy of Reid Astrea, and be shown his life.

Thus, Subaru noticed the abnormality at once.

—The place where he was, right now, definitely was not that past of Reid Astrea's.

Subaru: "…Ah?"

He stood in a white, white location.

His environs, unduly spacious, white, ambiguous space of no visible end stretched across, and without knowing where his self was, Subaru was exhausted of reason.

He could see his hands. He could see his legs. Upon turning his neck, his torso and hips were also there.

In other words, Subaru's body was here. This did not coincide with the phenomena that had occurred in Meili's Book of the Dead. Unable to concur, he was thrown into an unnatural circumstance.

From what he could see, Subaru's attire was the same as when he decided to read the Book of the Dead.

Whether that was due to Subaru recognizing that he would look like this in this Present Condition, or the will of something else, like the work of the library's will, hence reconstructing Subaru in that form.

He did not want to consider that the moment he read the book, his entire body got captured within—

???: "—Well well? Oh onii-san, you've come here again?"

Subaru: "—~hk."

Suddenly, Subaru's shoulders sprang up upon hearing a voice which wasn't his own, but that of another.

The voice came from behind, Subaru spontaneously jumped ahead and subsequently turned around, making a circle, remaining vigilant. In response to Subaru's spasmodic conduct, the personage behind rounded eyes.

Subaru: "—Who are you."

Looking at that person, Subaru whispered openly, with perplexity and bafflement.

That was his encounter with someone, completely unexpected and unknown to Subaru.

The one standing there, was a young girl Subaru had never seen before.

Pale toned, with hair lengthy, truly lengthy, like transparent gold threads. They spanned across the white floor, submerging underfoot her standing self like a sea of golden.

Large, round, blue eyes, limbs like transparent porcelain. On the other hand, she wore unshapely clothes on her body, seemingly crude, pale cloths attached together, hurting her beautiful impression.

"…"

A young girl he had never seen before. That was how it was supposed to be.

However, before that young girl's form, Subaru narrowed his eyes and rubbed his eyelids with the back of his hand. A gesture to seemingly recover the field of vision from haze, but her visible form didn't change.

Even after looking at her yet again, she remained a young girl whom he was unacquainted with. —He felt his memories, throb faintly.

???: "Did you calm down a bit, onii-san?"

Subaru: "What's this place… no, who are you? Which one should I ask first?”

???: “How covetous, onii-san. But, the quality of vomiting out the honest emotion of wanting to ask both is certainly not bad. We, love covetous people, you see.”

Saying so, in response to the baffled Subaru, the young girl cleaved her lips sideways and smiled.

Yes, she smiled, and that was the only befitting expression for describing that smile.

The young girl was thirteen to fourteen years of age, but gave the impression of being even younger.

Coupled with her well-featured physical appearance, unquestionably, a smile would suit the young girl, and yet.

In Subaru’s eyes, her smile, seemed ominous.

His instincts conjectured, as though, the soul of this young girl, had belittled a great number of lives.

And whilst Subaru shuddered, before him, the young girl reported.

???: “This place is, lonesome white, the final destination of the soul. The cradle of Od Lagna. —The Hall of Memories.”

Subaru: “Hall of, Memories…?”

???: “Yes yes, the Hall of Memories. And—”

Subaru widened his eyes upon hearing the term unheard of.

Whilst making a satisfied expression upon seeing Subaru’s reaction, the young girl, spoke.

Whilst smiling, the malice which had taken the shape of a young girl, vocalized.

Louis: “—We are, Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Louis Arneb.”

“…”

Louis: “Pretty sure it’ll be for a short while again, but please be caring, onii-san.”

Chapter 60:
A Single Spot in the Sunshine

1

—The Hall of Memories and Louis Arneb.

“…”

Yes, in front of the yellow-haired young girl who had responded to his query, Subaru remained silent.

Within the unanticipated space of white, the happenstance meeting with the unanticipated young girl. And, the know-it-all expression of the young girl set up an ambience as though she would be willing to talk about a multitude of things—

Subaru: “…First of all, Witch Cult or Gluttony, Sin Archbishop, what the hell do they even mean.”

Louis: “Awa~ ~tsu.”

At Subaru’s remark, whilst he folded his arms and tilted his head, Louis put her hand on her mouth and smiled widely.

If that moment alone was to be excluded, the solitary girl standing still within the illusion-like spectacle of sheer white was a location capable of being an artwork masterpiece, but the alarm of Subaru’s instincts had been turbulently ringing since earlier.

Subaru’s survival instincts which were highly likely to be of no avail, as a result of being brought up in the tranquil modern day Japan. The reason why they were excited, was a matter of course due to the heterogeneous aura of this young girl.

Along with that, this was the result of being visited with unforeseen circumstances, so it was halfway something which could not have been helped but— pertaining to this existence wielding such know-it-all airs, the knowledge Subaru was endowed with was seemingly insufficient.

It was also the case with what she had said just now, Witch Cult, Sin Archbishop, Hall of Memories and whatnot. Perchance, it may have been ordinary knowledge in this world, but unfortunately Subaru possessed no change of such ordinary general knowledge in his hand.

Consequently, he found launching a progressive question to be difficult as well—

Louis: "—The Witch Cult you see is, basically, a gathering of people loathed by this world."

Subaru: "Oh?"

Louis: "Even onii-san must have at least heard the name Witch of Envy, no? The Witch Cult, has a deep connection with that Witch-sama… we~ll, you can think of it as something like followers."

Subaru: "…Then, what you said just now, refers to Sin Archbishop, huh."

Sin and archbishop, had quite a strong ambience of running counter to each other as a combination, but was a naming which suited Subaru's sense down to a tee.

For upon hearing it even once,

Subaru: "It can be understood it's the name of a villain."

Louis: "Oh no, well no, ah no, as it's no, we're telling you no, even though it's no you kno~w."

Horizontally shaking her head in refusal, Louis embraced her own petite body in Subaru's line of sight. With no signs of the smile fading away from those lips, her refusal was merely in appearance as well.

It was a young girl with her true feelings beyond perception. —No, perhaps it should be said they were vague, with no point to grip on.

Louis: “Don’t tease a tender young girl with such words, onii-san. Even we get hurt, you know? Because we are the owner of a heart more fragile and easy to hurt than all others.”

Subaru: “Not convincing at all. Also, the way you use your first person pronoun, is it cause it’s stuck to your character? Or is it a cool appeal like a one man army. We or us, it’s not stable, you know.”

Louis: “A~h… you don’t have to worry about that. It’s just that, there are too many selves, so it’s getting airy as to which one is to be the subject, that’s all. At this point, we’re actually getting sick of it, you know.”

Whilst saying so, Louis lightly oriented her gaze downwards, continuing her words saying “But”.

Louis: “It can’t be helped, isn’t it. They are gifts from onii-chan and nii-sama after all, must earnestly accept them or it’ll be disqualification as a little sister. We’re siblings so we must help each other out and cooperate, you know.”

Subaru: “…Well, you’re an adorable little sister, considerate of your elder brothers. I was the only child so I’m jealous.”

Louis: “Is that so eh? Onii-san may have also gotten a little brother or little sister about now, no?”

Subaru: “Could you stop saying terrifying stuff?! I don’t want to imagine that?!”

Regardless, his parents were an intimate married couple, so something like that actually meant no jest.

If it’s that father and mother of his, they would have another child upon Subaru’s disappearance— no, inconceivable.

“…”

Should Subaru disappear, they would continue searching until they find him, that’s how Subaru’s parents were.

What must have his mother thought of her son, who did not even say any greetings when leaving. What must have his father felt, upon getting to know about that.

He wished, that Subaru's summoning into the different world was a reincarnation, is what his belief was.

Must he make his parents taste the agony of searching for their disappeared son, then Subaru wanted to say that he came to the different world after dying. That was much more comfortable. It had much more, salvation.

That is why—

Louis: "—We understand, onii-san."

Subaru: "——hk! Don't joke around!"

He felt indignant for Louis, who was peering at Subaru from below, carrying the hair which buried the floor in both of her arms.

It was not as if she had spoken of his current uneasiness. It was merely that having his bitter expression observed, he had been told as if she understood Subaru's sentiments.

Finding that to be terribly infuriating, Subaru shouted at Louis, and turned his back towards her.

Subaru: "As if you know anything about me! Saying things as you plea…"

Louis: "—You're inexcusably apologetic towards dad, and mom, aren't you? Without having said a single word of farewell, you're regretting how disobedient of a son you were. No, you were always regretting. Both now and earlier, isn't it?"

"…"

Yes, with the purport of being aware, whilst continuing the remarks of one showing to be a sympathizer, Louis softly hugged Subaru's back.

A small, petite frame. Subaru halted his breath and stiffened his body.

Not because of having been nestled close to by the young girl. Because of the very content of the young girl's words.

Those comments of one showing to be a sympathizer, had unmistakably, however, guessed the end of Subaru's heart correctly.

Louis: "Why do we understand, you say? Isn't it obvious we'd understand. Because there's not a single person who knows about onii-san as much as we or us do, after all."

Subaru: "—Don't touch me!"

Louis: "Ah."

Louis harbored a sour look on her lips at Subaru, who swung his arms, raised his breath and took distance.

What the hell. Do females of unknown character in this world, have no hesitation at all in having physical contact with unfamiliar men. Too over-familiar.

It was frightening to possibly abandon the heart weakened by the warmth of that body.

Subaru: "What's the deal, with you! What do you want to say!"

Louis: "We just want onii-san to be relieved, we're telling you. It's alright, it's alright. There's a pro~per full stop, on your feelings for dad and mom. Even if it may be one-sided, it's with the intention of facing them. Your heart got relaxed, we're telling you. Pretense, you see."

"…"

Whilst deriding, Louis had the nails of her right hand stab into her left arm. With the note of scratching, with vigor one would flinch from pain by simply witnessing, she began wounding that thin, white arm.

At Subaru, who knitted his eyebrows upon that deed, Louis unraveled her frighteningly scarlet, long tongue,

Louis: “Pretense, is completely healthy. It makes it look as if there are no problems within one’s heart at all. You’re skilled at it, onii-san, isn’t it. It’s sad that you’re skilled at it, onii-san, isn’t it.”

Subaru distorted his lips, at the speech which seemingly terribly abraded the interior of his chest.

Now on he must abide by the alarm bell of his instinct, which’s way of ringing may undergo change should he go along with her anymore.

Subaru: “I, don’t get what you want to say. I don’t get it, but it’ll become an injury so stop. Well then, let’s play the catch of conversation. No beamers allowed. Let’s keep in mind to only throw curveballs.”

Louis: “Mutually?”

Subaru: “Mutually. Yeah, for example… let’s continue the conversation about Sin Archbishops, from earlier.”

Without staying on board with Louis’ way, Subaru returned the topic to what it was just recently.

If he got to know Sin Archbishop was Sin Archbishop literally, then he had some knowledge of the associativity between the words sin and Gluttony.

Subaru: “If you are Gluttony, then there must be six other similar people, no?”

Louis: “If onii-chan and nii-sama were also to be included, then that would make exactly six, we guess? Ah, but, it got reduced by two people recently so there may be four people now. If only those two could just die quickly as well, you know.”

Subaru: “…If that’s what you say, then your sense of comradeship seems to be pretty low.”

Louis: “It’s obvious, you know. We may name ourselves as something like Sin Archbishops, but we are just a gathering of people loathed by this world anyway. Just the way of calling us is different, but we’re the same as the Witch after all.”

Saying so, Louis flopped and knelt down at that spot. When she did that, she appeared as having her self sunken within hair of gold threads, an extremely peculiar ambience.

Subaru scratched his head, settling his hips onto a position making sure as to her hair did not get crushed underneath, and tilted his head saying “Witch?”.

Subaru: “Same as the Witch you say, you mean same as the Witch which seems to be believed as being excessively frightening?”

Louis: “As one would expect, the nature of the Witch of Envy is worse than even us so we don’t want to be lumped together, you know. The rest is the same. Both Witch and Sin Archbishop, are the same thing which are just called differently. The good-for-nothings compatible with the Witch Factors, are just called differently due to different eras and positions, that’s all.”

“…”

Louis: “We~ll, the present onii-san has forgotten about Witches and Sin Archbishops, and us anyways, so whichever one may be fine, you know. We get it, we do get it, we get it you know, as we get it, but we got it, because we got it, because we had gotten it…”

Subaru: “Shut up.”

Louis: “Ah.”

Mouthing off, intercepting the words assailing upon him like a wave, Subaru put his hand on his chin.

Somehow or the other, it also felt like he was getting to hear things which were quite important. Though it was a speech Subaru couldn’t make a single pinpoint at, it seemed he could remain without getting into the awkward situation of returning to Emilia and the rest without reaping any harvest.

However, Subaru pondering here was not due to the existence or nonexistence of that achievement.

Subaru was pondering here due to the unease he felt from Louis' responses, which could be avoided no more— no, it was a sensation which ought to be labelled as one he was already familiar with.

With that as the reason, if there was anything that struck his mind —

Subaru: "Could it be, you're a lineage of gods?"

Louis: "Lineage of gods, you say… ah, is it this? Something like, reincarnation into different worlds? Don't really get it, but we and that are unrelated. Certainly, this is a place which can feel weird, though."

Chuckling and mocking, with her yellow hair underneath her buttocks, Louis turned her body around once at that very spot, and denoted the white world possessing nothing with her lightly fluttering hair.

Louis: "This is, a place just as how it appears. A place where e~verything disappears, hence, a place with nothing. We're standing here all alone, that's why we may seem like the guardian deity of this place, isn't it."

Subaru: "The cradle of Od Lagna, was it? Including the name Hall of Memories as well, none of it got into my head whatsoever."

Louis: "Hm, hm, hm, hm~, guess so… Basically, this is the place where souls are filtered."

Subaru: "Filtering, souls?"

At the phraseology difficult to be accustomed to, Subaru had question marks float within his mind.

Filtering, in other words had the same implication as saying sieving, but it was rare to hear it being utilized with regard to souls.

However, Louis, with a happy expression, pulled her knees towards herself and said “Yes, yes”.

Louis: “You use a dust cloth which had been used before once again after washing and drying it, no? The same goes for souls. By clearing the dirt stuck onto it, it is used once more when in a clear state again.”

Subaru: “That, dirt stuck onto it… does it mean memories or experiences and stuff?”

Louis: “If that’s what you can understand, then let’s keep it that way, alright? Onii-san, do as how you’d like.”

Distorting his cheeks at Louis, who had her tongue out, Subaru turned his head around towards the environs.

As ever, in the white space— in the Hall of Memories, existed nothing novel to the eyes. Within the endless white world, any easy to understand exhibit was not present either.

For argument’s sake, if this place was indeed how Louis spoke of it, then there could have been levitating disembodied souls, or the filtered memories or experiences rendered visible in some form.

Louis: “It’s not something so easy to comprehend, you know.”

Subaru: “That god called Od Lagna is pretty malicious, isn’t it.”

Louis: “It’s not an article so great as to be called god, that thing. That thing has nothing like such splendid ideology, after all. It’s just a mechanism, you know. A mechanism for keeping the world from breaking is what it is.”

Subaru: “A mechanism…”

Louis: “Whether its Witch Factors, or Divine Protections, or Sword Saints, or Witches, it considers nothing, you know. If there’s something nice about Od Lagna, it’s just that it’s uninterested, equal, impartial, and favors nothing.”

Narrowing her eyes with seeming disinterest, Louis interposed her own face in the space between her knees which she had pulled towards herself. Sidelong glancing at her, who had her cheeks curved by her white kneecaps, Subaru took a short inhale.

She was a young girl who had continued conversing quite obediently till now. He could reckon that perhaps, she had not spoken any seemingly false lies either. That is precisely why, Subaru inhaled.

Inhaling, exhaling, inhaling once more, and then, he looked at her.

And, asked her.

Subaru: "—The one, to steal my memories of everything till yesterday, is it you?"

Louis: "Yeah, so?"

The offender responded to Subaru's question, exceedingly promptly.

2

"…"

With his doubt readily responded to, Subaru closed his eyes.

He felt, that he would not be denied much. She must have done something like that, that was why she had judged so much about him with the dialogue they had in this scant time, was how he felt.

Louis, knew far too much. She was deeply, far too au fait with the emotions of Subaru's heart.

Also including precisely that which the present Natsuki Subaru could never be aware of, Louis Arneb was thoroughly informed regarding 'Natsuki Subaru'.

It was not something which could be falsely classified with words like it being a type of observation seldom seen, hence precisely why Subaru had gone ahead and enquired with complete honesty, and attained its affirmation.

Mysteriously, what was welling up in his chest was not rage, but understanding.

In other words—

Subaru: “So the me of yesterday, did indeed come here as well, huh.”

Louis: “Speaking strictly, the way of arrival was a bit different, you see. But we~ll, the purpose was the same. The result was slightly different, that’s all. But, how amazing. How wonderful. After how many times, did you manage to come here?”

“…”

Louis: “Hey, answer, onii-san. We answered, you know. —After having gotten eaten by us, what count of onii-san are you, onii-san?”

Upon that question of Louis’, chills ran through the muscles around Subaru’s spine.

Her eyes, questions, were clearly in vein of one aware of the conviction of Return by Death.

No, it was a matter of course. It was but a matter of course.

If she had stolen the memories of ‘Natsuki Subaru’, and had the ability to freely read those memories, then there was nothing odd about her knowing of Return by Death.

Return by Death, was not a power wielded only by the Subaru who had lost his memories, but must have unquestionably been the power which ‘Natsuki Subaru’ wielded prior to losing his memories.

Certainly, ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had made free use of that power, and sailed across a great number of difficult situations. The result of that was the trust he gained from Emilia, Beatrice, his comrades, the testimony of cheat = foul as it were.

Subaru did not intend to find faults in that. Whether it be cheating or foul play, if in a setting where someone’s life was on the line, there mustn’t be any hesitation in utilizing it. The choice ‘Natsuki

Subaru’ made was correct. That is why, Subaru must do the same now, when ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was absent.

And, accepting there being worth in its application, he gulped down the power of Return by Death.

However, contrary to that resolve, there existed a queer uneasiness, anxiety, in the interior of Subaru’s chest.

Louis Arneb was infringing upon that difficult to repel fear, that taboo.

That was—

Louis: “—About how nobody must get to know? If it’s about that, then it’s already too late, onii-san. Us meeting onii-san happened yesterday, no?”

“…”

Louis: “The Rule about how nobody must get to know, has already been broken way long time back. But, happenings of the Hall of Memories don’t leak outside easily. That’s why the scary, scary Witch won’t make a move.”

Quickly, with her limbs set on the floor, Louis drew her face closer to Subaru, who was sitting cross-legged. She expressed a bewitching smile unsuited to her age, whilst having her scarlet tongue peek out,

Louis: “Hey, onii-san. Which time is this?”

At that tone of voice which seemed as if her tongue was directly pecking at his brain, Subaru tasted a numbing pain.

And then, having his tongue and throat tremble faintly,

Subaru: “…It’s, the fifth time.”

Louis: “—~tsu! Amazing, how amazing, so amazing, it’s amazing, isn’t it amazing, we’re telling you it’s amazing, because it is amazing, because it is amazing that we admire and yearn for it…

gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!”

Subaru: “Gah ~hk!”

Louis: “We irresistibly want to taste onii-san so much, that our stomach would be filled to bursting! From our experiences, we think appetite and sexual desire are similar. Sexual desire in other words is love, right? In other words, onii-san, we—”

Thrusting Subaru away, Louis, who was in the position of riding a horseback, breathed out warm sighs with an aroused face. With blood rushing to her cheeks and eyes spellbound, Louis had her tongue crawl on Subaru’s neck lacking any hesitation.

At the same pace, the words she tried to continue on to, his thoughts finally caught up to what they would be—

—Love you.

His heart exploded, reminded of the words of love that fusilladed upon Subaru countless times in the previous loop, wherein he had desired Death under circumstances which took a hopeless turn.

Subaru: “—Let’s see, you tiny damn sexologist ~hk!”

Louis: “—Uhi.”

Opening his eyes, Subaru seized the nape of the young girl who was pressing him down, and at the same pace violently, coercively pushed her down onto the white floor. Exchanging their stances, this time it was Subaru in the position of riding a horseback atop her.

A slender, light figure. The long yellow hair stretching out on the floor, like a golden bed she was lying sprawled upon, whilst Subaru kept a check on her neck and bared his canines, seemingly in a position of having pinned her down.

Subaru: “Did you, let your guard down? How unfortunate! In this position, I have an overwhelming advantage! If you don’t want to get your neck strangled like this, my memories are to be…”

Louis: “Returned, you say? You’ll strangle the neck if they’re not returned? Our neck, a feeble little girl’s?”

With her neck arrested, in the state of having gotten the right over her life and death seized, Louis gazed at Subaru, who was breathing roughly through his nose, and loosened her lips with the earlier excitement in her eyes not dimmed in the slightest.

And, from her loosened lips, she asked with an imitative voice which felt as if it were a curse.

Louis: “Is onii-san, really going to do something like that?”

Subaru: “—Do you think, I can’t?”

Louis: “Not really think, we actually know, isn’t it. After all, look, it’s such that the current us know more about onii-san than onii-san himself anyway.”

Whilst saying so, Louis repeatedly nudged her cheeks with the index fingers of both her hands, and tilted her head as if provoking. Holding his breath at that attitude of hers, Subaru looked down onto his right hand which had grasped Louis’ neck.

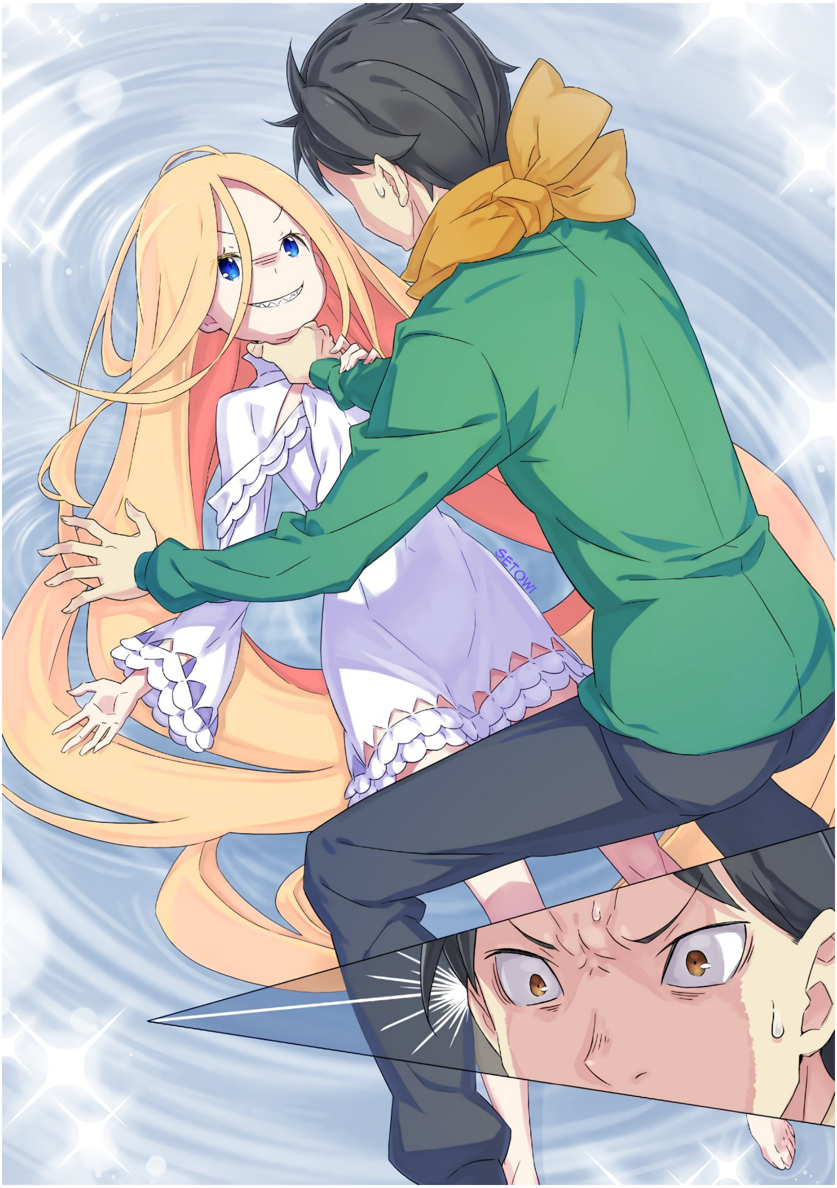
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Should Subaru want to show his seriousness a bit, all he had to do was to pour strength into his arm.

Should he show his seriousness, Louis would certainly reconsider her ideas as well.

Were he to be asked whether he would kill her, that would certainly be difficult. Arduous.

Even for a just cause, like being a suicide assistant, Subaru was unable to smash consciousness out of his comrade's mind with a piece of rubble.

So even if he knew it was an enemy of his, powerfully strangling the neck of the young girl before his eyes was.

No, at least strangling he was capable of. It was a necessity.

He called back to Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Meili, Julius, Echidna, Shaula, Patrasche, everyone in his mind, and.

And—

Louis: "—Strength has faded away from your arms, hasn't it, onii-san."

"…"

Louis: "We really had no intention of resisting, you know? After all, over here we are just as how it seems or a weak young girl. Unlike onii-chan or nii-sama, we must take the form of eaten people or we can't haul out any powers, isn't it."

With the finger that had been nudging her own cheek, Louis nudged Subaru's right hand which was gripping to Louis' neck. With that frail strength, Subaru's palm let go of her neck far too swiftly.

Subaru: "Shit… ~hk!"

Louis: "Don't feel down anymore, onii-san. It was a good performance, a good performance. After all, to be honest… it's such that we didn't even think that onii-san would come back here."

Subaru: "Do you think, that's any good consolation?"

Continuing to remain in the pushed down stance, Louis, who was lying sprawled on the floor, made an expression suggesting already being over with the worst. Destroying that expression, he searched for words in order to convey his demands, but was unable to find anything precise.

That is why, looking at Subaru, who ended up making an utterance like that of a poor loser, Louis raised her voice saying "Ahaha" similar to observing fish swimming inside an aquarium,

Louis: "But we~ll, it turned out nicely, did it not. If something like the memories of 'Natsuki Subaru' are regained, the current onii-san will end up dying is what that means anyway, stay without doing something idiotic like committing suicide, you know."

Subaru: "…Ah?"

Louis: "Huh, what's with that weird reaction? It can't be, did you not notice? If memories return, the current self will get overwritten, and its existence will get terminated… That's, the same as dying, no?"

—Subaru was petrified at that attitude of Louis', as if she were asked the solution to an obvious riddle.

He shall die. He shall disappear, vanish. So was he distinctly told.

So he was told, upon the return of the memories of 'Natsuki Subaru', the consciousness, the memories of the Subaru present right here right now shall get overwritten, and will disappear, vanish.

Should that not be named as Death, what else should it be—

Louis: "—Right now, 'Natsuki Subaru' is dead, isn't it. He's nowhere, after all. But, if 'Natsuki Subaru' comes back, this time it'll be onii-san who will die, isn't it. He won't be able to go anywhere,

after all.”

“…”

Louis: “Um you kno~w, does ‘Natsuki Subaru’ really have the worth to go so far for and be recovered eh? Onii-san must also be capable of doing the same things, no? Onii-san must have also come to love the people around him in the same way, isn’t that right. The people around too will also come to love onii-san the sa~me way. —What’s so wrong with that?”

Subaru: “What’s…”

So wrong with that, should that be asked, then certainly there was nothing wrong with it.

Certainly there was nothing wrong with either ‘Natsuki Subaru’ or Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru was a human possessing numerous flaws. Filled with flaws such that he would be repulsed by himself. Should he be asked whom he hated the most in this world, he would answer it was himself with not an instant’s worth of faltering.

That was how hopeless, insufficient Natsuki Subaru was.

However, there present were no errs in Subaru pertaining to this particular question.

—What was present was merely the hopeless truth, a single spot of sunshine.

Subaru: “To Emilia-chan and the others, I…”

Wanted to return ‘Natsuki Subaru’ back.

That is why, he intended to prepare resolve within himself that should he find a chance to recover memories, he shall take it without any hesitation.

However, he had completely averted his eyes away from the disappearance of his own existence.

Speaking of sheer conveniences, the two memories blending together, or some part of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ being left within the current Subaru, he had thought if something like that could not happen, he had thought if it could all not be settled in a nice shape of some sort, he had expected the occurrence of a miracle of this kind.

Subaru’s such vacillating expectations were—

Louis: “What would it be like? Never seen a person who had their memories returned before, so we have no idea.”

Louis unveiled her teeth, as though ridiculing Subaru’s conflict, with the expression in her eyes being that of a cat tormenting a mouse.

The offender who heisted these memories, even irresponsibly, was pleased to say that she knew nothing of what would happen thereafter. That was not a lie, but certainly the truth.

Louis Arneb, would never do something as to return what she had stolen away from others back to the original proprietor.

That is why, she truly held no idea what would happen to Natsuki Subaru as a consequence of having the memories returned.

Louis: “Onii-san, you got this life by being born and everything, it won’t do if you don’t celebrate it.”

That irresponsible usurper, continued to gaze intently at Subaru’s face from an inch worth distance.

Louis: “As a result of us eating the memories of ‘Natsuki Subaru’, onii-san is here. In other words we, are something like onii-san’s birth parent, isn’t that right. To try and choose the option of having yourself die in front of that parent, isn’t that what’s called lack of filial piety, onii-san.”

Subaru: “Something so, absurd is… ~hk.”

Louis: “—Memories are what shape people, onii-san.”

"…"

Becoming deeper, becoming colder, Louis erased all expression and said only those brief words with a serious tone.

Without thinking, Subaru inhaled at the acuity of those words, and quietened.

Alongside, he also felt that this had not been the first time he heard those words. If not mistaken, then that resonance, those words, immediately before facing the second Death as well had been—

Louis: "The present onii-san, has relationships which the present onii-san has created. Why don't you try living again anew, facing forward. We think that's also an option, you know."

"…"

Louis: "On top of that, don't know how we should feel saying this but… 'Natsuki Subaru', didn't really feel like the image of an ideal man you know?"

Closing one of her eyes, Louis smited the emotions of Subaru's heart with an expression as if finding what she was going to say to be difficult.

All the more, she linked her arms in front of her chest while remaining in the stance of Subaru riding a horseback atop her, and gazed into his dark pupils with eyes like that of a dreaming maiden —

Louis: "Pitiable Emilia! A miserable girl who is avoided by everyone, just because of having her birth being the same as the former Witch! Ah, how kind must my self be, to still remain by her side!"

Subaru: "Wha…"

Louis: "Weak, fragile Beatrice! Without anyone to rely on, a lonely girl who spent a time of solitude all by herself! My self must pull her hand through the dark and dangerous path!"

Before the staggered Subaru, what Louis sonorously continued articulating were the names of two young girls who prayed for Subaru's safety and showed him a path, and terribly elliptical mental images of them.

Even Subaru understood whose mental images they were, and what Louis intended to express.

Though he understood, that was.

Louis: "Devoted and seeks to dedicate gratuitous love, Rem! Foolish and beautiful, how pure. Surely she is an incomplete being who gains the true feeling of living by becoming frantic for the sake of someone else, other than herself. Precisely that, must be led by the existence known as I!"

Subaru: "What're you… what're you trying to do?!"

Louis: "Speaking for what 'Natsuki Subaru' used to think, we're telling you. Wanting a sense of superiority. Not thinking it was for the sake of someone else all of the time, you know. Flocking only convenient people around, getting drunk on the pleasant feeling of offering a hand. Not even throwing any feed to a dog which won't get emotionally attached. Keeping those away."

"…"

Louis: "Do you really intend to hand yourself over, to that 'Natsuki Subaru'?"

The question, having overlapped twice.

That was a requisition of confession for Natsuki Subaru, by Louis, by Gluttony.

To speak his true feelings, that is what Louis demanded of Subaru.

Whether he did want to die, whether he did not want to die, if he, for the argument's sake were to die, whether would it be for the sake of someone like that.

—No, Subaru's death, would not be for the sake of 'Natsuki Subaru'.

—No, from the very beginning, Subaru did not have the intent to die. Even if he thought of returning ‘Natsuki Subaru’ back to Emilia and the others, for it to mean his own death.

—No, could he however, truly trust ‘Natsuki Subaru’. At the very least, ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had killed Meili, and even carved incomprehensible characters on the wall.

Louis: “—We~ll, what do you want to do, onii-san.”

Subaru: “——~hk.”

Whilst saying so, Louis grasped Subaru’s hands with her slender arms, and fastened them to her own neck.

Once again, though this time through her own incitement, Louis’ slim neck lay vulnerable to Subaru’s arms. Should he pour strength in both of his arms, it will surely fracture easily.

If not, the conclusion will get established.

However, to not do that meant either choosing to kill ‘Natsuki Subaru’, or the same happening to himself. —At the very least, that was what Louis was saying.

For the argument’s sake, for just the argument’s sake if he broke this slim neck, and if ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was to return and the present Subaru was to disappear, would he not be able to witness even the fruits of his actions.

If that’s the case, then what was the meaning of Subaru mustering up meagre courage and undertaking action here.

Louis: “We~ll.”

“…”

Louis: “What? What will you do? What is it that you’ll do? What are you going to do? What are you going to do huh? What do you want to do? What do you want to do it like? Whatever you do it’s alright you know? Whatever it ends up as we’ll forgive you—”

As though tormenting him, as though ridiculing him, as though laying a curse upon him, Louis' words struck Subaru's eardrums.

So did Louis Arneb, so did Gluttony, so did the Sin Archbishop, so did the slim young girl, so did the abominable existence, so did his birth parent.

The choice of what he shall do with 'Natsuki Subaru', drew near Natsuki Subaru.

Louis: "We~ll."

Well.

Louis: "—What do you want to do? Onii-san."

Chapter 61:
—Stand Up

1

—A choice, that too a cruel one, was eating into Natsuki Subaru.

He heard the sound of something being abandoned and scorched away within the interior of his chest with a sizzling report, slowly and steadily.

That was his human nature, his emotion of trusting himself, his sentiments for ‘Natsuki Subaru’, various entities of such kind, were being abandoned and scorched away.

With his hands on the young girl’s throat, whilst being ridiculed by the young girl pushed down, Natsuki Subaru was made to stand in a setting of determining his own destiny, Natsuki Subaru’s destiny.

“…”

Heartbeats, inaudible. Though his breath was rough, his lungs were probably dysfunctional. A situation packed to the hilt to such an extent, yet not a single drop of cold sweat appeared on his forehead.

That was certainly because Natsuki Subaru’s flesh body present here was not a part of reality.

By reading the book, he did not have his entire flesh body transferred, but merely his mind had been hauled— to make such considerations unfitting the situation, would also merely be a deed of evading reality.

And, by firing his considerations over to the other side, trying to secure transient peace was Subaru’s heart.

However, neither time nor space nor his opponent would pardon this escape route of Subaru’s.

Louis: “We~ll, what’ll you do, onii-san.”

The young girl which had been pinned down by him, laughed sadistically and looked up at Subaru, petrified, having lost his way in the choice.

Whilst peeping into Subaru’s dark eyes, the young girl flickered her tongue in order to lick those eyeballs.

Louis: “Pinning down a feeble young girl, and placing your hands on that thin neck. Gets you shivering with thrill, no? Or perhaps instead, if it’s a predisposition like that of onii-san’s, such experiences become commonplace, is that right?”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

Louis: “You’re trembling, so cute. In this state, will you be able to make such an important, important choice?”

Inclining her neck, Louis, facing upwards, kissed Subaru’s wrist. That shuddering gesture and the ardor pouring from her flirtatious glance, her inhumane words made Subaru recall a certain spectacle.

That was the spectacle of the callousness Subaru had acted upon once. —Provided that his way of having observed it was the reverse. Not something Subaru had witnessed from his own perspective, but the field of vision of a young girl who had gotten into a confrontation with Subaru.

The spectacle of Subaru pinning down, with a wicked countenance, and strangling the neck.

Exactly the same as the present situation, the spectacle of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ strangling Meili to death—.

Subaru: “Ugh.”

—The instant he realized this to be approximate to that spectacle, Subaru’s entire body, cheeks, tightened.

Louis: “—So after all, there really is an occasion which comes your mind?”

Subaru: “Nons ~hk! Nonse…”

Louis: “We’re no~t speaking nonsense, you know. Instead, the one not being serious is onii-san, no? With more seriousness, earnestness, solemnity, you should love yourself.”

“…”

Louis: “A~h, yes yes. Love yourself. See, love. —Similar to how the people onii-san wants to cherish hope for that, onii-san should also love himself, you know.”

With a superficial verbal tone, and words fitting identical description, a cosmetic wave of words was formed.

Did she intend to persuade him, or instead, was her faculty of sympathizing simply dead. Was this purposeful or was it simply her nature, was she jeering at him or was she consoling him.

It was vague. Louis Arneb’s way, was vague with regards to everything.

Vague, vague it was.

Louis’ words, her words were unsteady from the foundation, like leaves instably afloat water’s surface. All of them of arbitrary nature, bent and distorted, if they preferably came to a clear disposition, then this indecision itself would surely be cleared up as well.

No, just how hazardous would it be, to consider keeping her words as the premise from the very beginning.

Subaru: “Do you have the proof… that everything should be done the way you say, and everything will happen the way you say.”

Louis: “Proof?”

Subaru: “Do you have the proof, that if I regain ‘Natsuki Subaru’, the me present right now would disappear…!”

Louis: “We don’t. We don’t you know. It seems we don’t. As we don’t. We don’t we’re telling you. We don’t though. Even though it seems we don’t. It seems we don’t as we’re telling you. Even though it means we don’t you know… Will that, give you any solace?”

“…”

Louis: “It’s just going around in circles, onii-san. Even we can’t speak of what we don’t know. If we or onii-chan, nii-sama die, then will what was eaten come back, we wonder. —To be honest, never returned something which we ate so we do~n’t actually kno~w. After all, we’ve eaten it up, you know.”

Saying ah, Louis opened her mouth, arraying her frightfully sharp cuspids and scarlet tongue, showing until the interior of her throat to Subaru, appealing a certain zilch.

Others’ memories, the memories of someone within others, if heisting things of such kind was to be taken under the name of Eating, it was impossible for physical vestiges to remain there.

However, Subaru felt the words “Eaten it up” to be terribly weighty.

Louis: “What will you do, onii-san.”

Once again, Louis questioned Subaru.

In the interval between the questions and answers, Subaru’s hands remained on Louis’ neck. Unable to pour strength, or otherwise, completely withdraw his hands, Subaru continued to cast aside the question regarding his own existence.

Subaru: “Gh, kh… ~hk.”

Dying, was frightening. Terrifying.

However, that was a fear differing from what Subaru had tasted by Return by Death four times till now.

The proposition pressing down Subaru’s soul right here and now, was the death comparing and contrasting the choices regarding Forfeiting Oneself.

By nature, that was how what was labelled as Death was supposed to be.

Upon dying, the consciousness of that existence was lost, and something like an opportunity to redo was never granted.

That was why, Subaru, who continued to take advantage of having opportunities to redo upon making blunders, may not have any right to complain.

To simply be given the choice to disappear or to not disappear, and having the time to be troubled over it may itself be a luxury.

But, it was his own life.

He must choose whether he would blow that flame out or not by himself, Subaru's heart, who had been interposed in such a situation, developed a crack by each passing second.

"…"

Subaru had already died four times in this different world. All of them, affairs within a short time frame.

Thrown into a world he was unacquainted with, meeting people he never would have met, and an instant later having to suffer circumstances difficult to avoid, chased Subaru into death.

The time he spent when he was in a conscious state, when totaled, would not even fit into two days.

It was a short, short time. —However, Natsuki Subaru also had the time of seventeen years he had lived in the world he was previously in aside from the two days of this different world.

He had a father. He had a mother. Friends too, though scarce, his relationship with them was a delicate matter and it was uncertain whether he could call them friends, but he had people whom he would at least exchange greetings with. Upon glancing back onto the past, in elementary and middle schools he had people whom he got along with, and he was also acquainted with many who resided in his neighborhood.

Though, it did not go well. Subaru, was incompetent at life.

However, in vein of not going well, there had been a time of trial and error, though he had never been in a setting where his life was on the line, Subaru still intended to struggle upon his own stage.

Was he going to abdicate, these various times, and accumulated memories.

Should 'Natsuki Subaru' return, the fact that they existed would not disappear. However, his current self, who certainly thought of those times, shall disappear.

Exchanging promises with Ram, swearing to protect Meili, etching Echidna's forgiveness upon his heart, aggressively imploring Julius to fight, affectionately trusting Beatrice, and Emilia—

—His self, who fell in love with Emilia, was he truly going to disappear.

Subaru: "No…"

That realization, made the flesh body of Subaru present here on this spot develop cracks, this not being a metaphorical expression.

Crevices emerging on his cheek, fissures like a spider's web emerged on both of his hands which were on Louis' throat as well. He felt no pain. Neither did he bleed from those crevices. Mysteriously, present within the crevices was darkness. Not the sort possessing flesh or bones, unnatural, unending darkness.

It was in accordance with what he had conjectured, he had not carried over his flesh body of reality.

The body of the Subaru present here was not real. And since it was not real, the current sentiments of his heart directly manifesting, Subaru's body developed fissures, and was shattering.

The crevices expanded, the surface came unstuck and fell.

That was certainly, the body of deceit called 'Natsuki Subaru' which Natsuki Subaru had been wearing.

Alongside that which detached and fell in large drops, even his bluff came unstuck and fell.

Subaru: “No, no, no… no… ~hk.”

Louis: “That’s right. It’s natural, you know.”

Shaking his head in refusal, he denied the fear of the death awaiting him— no, the fear of forfeiting.

Why, must he vanish. His self, who had just recognized that he was in love with the person he loved.

Subaru: “No…”

Louis: “Hm hm. We get it. We quite do get it. As we get it. We do indeed get it.”

Subaru: “No, I refuse… ~hk.”

Louis: “It’s onii-san’s life, after all. Why must you surrender it to others, you know.”

Subaru: “I, everyone… more, with everyone…”

Want to stay longer with everyone.

He was in love. He had fallen in love. Even though in the time which would not even amount to a total of two days, he had been engulfed in doubting them, thinking of killing them, thinking of running away from them, and being suspected by them.

Subaru, had fallen in love with them. Right now, he thought lovingly of them.

If he were to stay with them, if they would cherish Subaru, then he might even grow to love himself, whom he utterly loathed.

That, was what he thought. Facing forward, that was what he thought.

Even though in Subaru’s life, of always facing backward, this was, at long last, a scintillating spot of sunshine.

Why must he relinquish it.

That was something he—

Subaru: "…I refuse."

Louis: "That's right. That's how it is. —Then, what do you think you should do?"

Subaru: "…I, just as myself."

Louis: "Yes, onii-san will be, just as onii-san. That is correct. It got plundered once. It's a game of musical chairs. The guy sitting on the vacant seat, is the king, you know."

"…"

Louis: "The opponent who got pushed away, must exit. You have to recognize. Your own existence. You have to shout loudly, that you are real! Hey, isn't that so!"

Directly below him, at a distance such that their breaths intertwined, widening her eyes illumine blazingly, Louis roared.

With vigor like that of snarling— no, as a matter of fact, she gnawed Subaru's wrists which were on her neck, etching admonition and a striking pain upon Subaru.

Staring at the wavering dark eyes, Louis Arneb shouted.

Louis: "Recognize! — 'Natsuki Subaru' is, the closest person to onii-san ~tsu!"

The howl called for him, telling him to establish oneself.

Telling him to stop doing something so foolish as dying for the sake of someone.

Why, must there be a need for him to sacrifice himself for the sake of someone or the other.

—That too, for the sake of having his self who wasn’t himself, who named his self as him, meet the people he loved, whom he won’t be able to meet anymore.

All for the sake of him ceding the time he had spent with them, the priceless days difficult to ever obtain.

As if he would allow himself to do, something so foolish.

Louis: “Well the~n, kill him! Let’s kill him! Let’s go ahead and kill him! You have to kill him! Do kill him! If you kill him! Let’s end up killing him! Just kill him! End up killing him! If you can only kill him! If you kill and crush him!”

Subaru: “ ‘Natsuki Subaru’ will…”

Louis: “Onii-san is this universe’s one and only, not a substitute article for anyone, Natsuki Subaru!”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

This universe’s one and only, not a replacement for anyone, Natsuki Subaru.

Holding hands with Beatrice, striking persiflage with Ram, making Meili pout, being astonished by Shaula’s frankness, exchanging smiles with Echidna through frivolous conversations, entrusting his back to Julius, receiving Patrasche’s gratis love, attaining the right to live, with Emilia.

If the one who possesses those was ‘Natsuki Subaru’, then by Subaru’s hands, that man shall.

“…”

Tears building up, his field of vision was blurred by the sentiments welling up within of him.

His mind had a direct impact on his flesh body. The beating of his heart, his breathing through aching lungs, he could unmistakably feel them vividly right now.

However, what he could feel the greatest right now, were his irresistible tears wielding no answer.

Whether that was rage or grief, envy or jealousy, guilt or fear.

Just, what was the cause of this violent emotion, Subaru did not know whatsoever. There was lots he did not know. However, with his field of vision fogged by those tears, Subaru looked.

"…"

Someone, was overlooking Subaru, Louis.

Staring at the teary eyed pathetic Subaru, who had pinned Louis down and had his hands on her neck.

Whom that could have been, within what all Subaru's mind could grasp, it could have been only one person.

Subaru: "…Did you, appear because you got scared of me, 'Natsuki Subaru'."

"…"

The blurry shadow of a person said nothing.

Standing on the white floor, the white world behind its back, the form veiled in gaze of white, was watching Subaru.

Subaru, with his face soggy, informed the existence who had panicked and abruptly appeared forth.

Subaru: "I will… I will, not disappear. I don't want to die. That's why, I…"

"…"

Subaru: "Want to stay together with everyone. I love everyone. That's why, I am…"

"…"

Subaru: "That's why, I am…"

As though an excuse, his complaints stockpiled.

Same as when he had put his hands on Louis' throat. —Subaru had concluded, that he didn't want himself to disappear. That's why, what he did now was conveying that to the shadow of a person which had appeared.

That also meant that he would, with certainty, kill the opponent before of his eyes, who possessed an identical visage as himself.

After all, he is, 'Natsuki Subaru' is, the closest person to him.

That is why, Subaru must be in possession of that right.

Natsuki Subaru, shall kill 'Natsuki Subaru', and the single spot of sunshine shall be—.

Subaru: "That's why, I am, not you! You and I are…"

Different, he tried to convey that clearly, and sever the possibility.

That had been the moment, he had tried to do so.

Louis: "…Who, are you talking to, onii-san."

Dumbfounded, eyes dilated, Louis questioned with an expression as if her conversation had been stalled.

She inclined her neck and glared in the same direction as Subaru, and tried to look at that shadow of a person. However, she knitted her eyebrows in doubt and grimaced, and as her sharp canines quivered,

Louis: "—Nobody, nobody's there, but still, who are you talking to, onii-san."

"…"

With her fangs rattling and trembling, Louis whispered so with an expression of disbelief.

In refusal, she erased her expression until then, and made a face like that of being frightened by something,

Louis: “This is, our place… no hindrances are supposed to get in, and yet. In this place, talking to someone aside from us… just stop. Onii-san is our, our… ~tsu!”

Louis words, they clung onto him, however Subaru’s awareness did not move a bit.

Subaru’s awareness, had focused all concentration on the yet present shadow of a person in his field o vision, not having vanished. His field of vision blurred with tears, the wavering shadow of a person, its contour and features became ever so slightly clear.

Who was it, he had no idea whatsoever.

That shadow of a person whose contour and features gradually got clearer, to Subaru seemed as though it was smiling.

Shaking his head, blinking with strength, he tried to look at that diminutive smile with further clarity—

???: “—Why, are you trying to choose only one of the two?”

A question, was raised towards him.

With a voice he had never heard before, with the voice of someone, who was not supposed to be here.

Whom he had never seen smiling— a young girl of blue hair, had been standing there, smiling.

That smiling young girl, whilst continuing to smile, towards Subaru who had sunk in silence said—

???: “—Stand Up!!”

—Her commencing words.

—The young girl, with the utmost relentless voice in the world, shouted at Natsuki Subaru.

2

???: "—Stand up!!"

The voice, vanquished the cracking Natsuki Subaru, scourged him, and knocked him down.

Without mercy, without hesitation, the bellow shattered Natsuki Subaru, and accelerated his cracking. —As if, talons artlessly stabbing into his naked heart.

???: "Stand up!"

The young girl of blue hair, raised her voice facing Subaru.

Glaring at Subaru, the young girl, with a loud voice, howled. Howled. She was howling.

At Natsuki Subaru, who remained on his knees, who had pinned a young girl down, and had fissures emerge on his dumbfounded face.

???: "Stand up!!"

Her bellow, repeated.

Limitlessly and endlessly, callously and inconsiderately, it knocked Subaru's heart down.

Why, must such words strike him.

It was painful. It was hurtful. It was excruciating. It was sorrowful. His heart, even now, was on the verge of shattering.

Never in his life, had he been struck with such agonizing decisions from one to the next without even having prepared his heart beforehand. —He had somehow stopped lamenting that crisis.

That was why, at the very least, he had arrived at a conclusion.

That is why, was it not just fine anymore.

???: “Stand up!”

The young girl before his eyes, by no means approved of the complaints, the obstinate conclusion, the heart afraid to forfeit, making Subaru’s heart cower. Laded with a resolute purpose of rejection, she piled up the potent words.

He had made the decision. Could she not just affirm it. At the very least, show being troubled over it. It was alright, was it not. He had been troubled sufficiently. Yet, the young girl went so far, all for the sake of having Subaru be.

???: “Stand up—!”

As his heart continued to shatter to fragments, she did not pardon Subaru, who had made the decision.

???: “Stand up—!”

Was she, still going to say that.

Why, was this young girl, this voice.

Despite it being so hurtful, so excruciating.

???: “Stand…! Stand! Stand! Stand up!”

Just who, was this young girl.

Just where in his reminiscences, was this young girl.

Never had he exchanged words with her. Even her reminiscences, were not present within the current Subaru.

Who was she, what kind of a person was she, he had known merely her outward appearance.

Their relationship was one such that he would not even bother giving up for her sake.

Yet, why, was his chest so warm.

Why, was there a fever rising from the interior of his chest.

???: “Stand up, Natsuki Subaru! Stand up! —Rem’s hero!!”

The tearful voice of the young girl not present in his memories, shouted to be a hero by that voice, his heart trembled.

Subaru’s heart trembled, in such a good condition that he almost wanted to laugh, with the notion of something so absurd as that being possible.

The cracks, the fissures, continued to accelerate.

That was, quite literally, the spectacle of Natsuki Subaru tearing apart the shell of ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

However, what slept within that shell, only faintly varied from what was there just previously.

—No, if it were to truly change, it shall from now onward.

Continuing to be wished to stand up, gnashing his teeth at his frightened heart, he stood up.

???: “If you’ve stood up, then please go. Go, and save, everything.”

Everything, what does that mean. Everything, just what did it mean.

A way of speaking far too absentminded. Just what, did everything even refer to.

???: “Everything is everything. Anything and everything. All, everyone, yourself, and the closest person to you as well!”

What’s, that.

As if something like that, is achievable. Does this girl, truly believe he was capable of that.

His self, who lacked in much, who can’t even save himself.

For the sake of the people Subaru fell in love with, for the sake of the people who cherished Subaru, for the sake of the people Subaru wished to cherish, for the sake of his reminiscences with the people he did not want to disappear.

Does she truly believe that the Subaru, who had tried to let go of merely one, is also capable of it.

???: “You can do it. After all”

After all.

After all, what.

Give me the strength, the answer. If you’re going to give them, then give them through those words.

I pray that the blue young girl’s, your words, give me—

Rem: “—Subaru-kun is, Rem’s hero.”

Subaru: “…”

Something, fell in the interior of chest.

That which had stagnated in black, as if had been purified by the echo of the young girl, seemingly a confession of love. —No, not seemingly a confession of love. That had been, a confession of love.

Though once again, his reasons for not wanting to give back the place where he belongs to ‘Natsuki Subaru’ increased.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

At the same time, what had increased was not just that.

Purified by the words of the young girl, that which had stagnated in black gave rise to radiance and altered its very form.

And, commenced pulsating from what was the strongest desire stemming from the core of Natsuki Subaru.

“…”

It pulsated. That which had lost anything and everything, and had been deserted by entirety.

Yet furthermore, wishing, desiring, wanting to fasten and secure everything, wanting to not lose anything at all from these hands, wanting to not let go of oneself, from oneself’s own hands.

Concording with the cowardly Greed which implored so, it bloomed by becoming a power which granted this wish.

—The Factor wandering and jolting, connected together with existence.

Subaru: “Come, —Cor Leonis.”

Within Subaru, the seed of the Greed lost of destination budded.

And, standing firm, his form was—

Rem: “…”

Merely the diminutive smile of the young girl of blue hair, blessed that moment.

Louis: “—Onii-san?”

“…”

Looking up at Subaru, who had slowly stood up at that spot, Louis called out to him.

Pulling the hand that had been on her neck, Louis, with bafflement remaining on her expression, woke her body up from the golden bed her hair had been blanketing and blinked in seeming perplexment.

Louis: “What, happened. Look, continue the one from earlier… continue it?”

“…”

Louis: “Continue it…”

Being told to resume, Subaru moistened his lips with his tongue.

When contemplating as an existence of mere mind, both this and temporary peace of mind were naught but meaningless actions closer to habits.

However, by that single action, he had come to notice something.

—He was clear-headed to such an extent that even he himself would be surprised.

The incomprehensible chaos and frenzy until a moment ago, just as both of them had been pulled away by waves, he felt at peace as if swimming in the middle of a calm sea.

That is why—

Subaru: “You don’t need to say anything, anymore. I’m fed up of your gut-wrenching explanation.”

He had managed to recognize how the clod of malice which had taken the form of a young girl before his eyes twisted and distorted Subaru’s will and use it as per her own conveniences.

At what Subaru had pointed out, Louis said “Nonono” and shook her right and left,

Louis: “Gut-wrenching you say… how harsh. Even though we had, in our own way, pro~perly thought of onii-san, and just given advice…”

Subaru: “Also, stop using words I know for purposefully making it seem sarcasm about myself like this. Even if you try to shake me like this, it’s of no use. —The present me, will no longer waver.”

“…”

At those words, Louis straitened her eyes. Surely she was unaware of the details of what changes had occurred in Subaru’s self. Even Subaru did not specifically know.

However, the Greed which shall not waver by anything, had decided upon Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru had also defined himself.

Into the form wished by the young girl, who had shouted at none but the Subaru of that moment.

“…”

Subaru glanced at not Louis, but the side opposite to her.

There no longer was the form of her, who had not too long ago faced Subaru and smited him with words relentless. The moment Subaru stood up and faced forward, she disappeared.

But, perhaps, that was fine.

The reunion with the young girl, was not to take place here, and neither with Subaru.

No, that was not exactly accurate either. Merely, the one to reunite with her, must be the Natsuki Subaru who has recovered his memories with her, his feelings for her.

And, there was no need to form a distinction between that ‘Natsuki Subaru’ and Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “I was told… time and time again, still huh.”

—He had been told, that even after losing his memories, Subaru was Subaru.

When he stubbornly used to think that there was a precise, distinct disparity, that he must differentiate, those had been Subaru’s encumbrance, chains of curse.

But, so what.

Right now, from Subaru’s perspective, who had ascertained what he must do, that was a guidepost, a thread of hope.

It shall surely light Subaru’s path until he pulls it in, reels it in, gets closer, and reaches the place where the people whom he cherishes, who were holding the front of that thread were.

That was why—

Subaru: “Put away your knife and fork, you food-thieving escaped fugitive. There’s no noodle soup for you here.”

“…”

She widened, her eyes.

Louis Arneb widened her eyes, staring at Subaru who had a finger pointed towards her. And perceiving the absence of even the slightest sympathy in Subaru’s expression, she cast her eyes down.

Louis: “A~h…”

Her eyes cast down, she leaked a husky sigh.

That had been a sigh conceived with emotions highly difficult to delineate.

Louis, who got her body up, had her shoulders shake, drew her knees towards herself, and curled up atop her golden carpet.

And, slowly elevating her face which had been cast downward—

Louis: "—A~h, shit, shit, shit. A single step more, a single step more was left, and yet."

With a gaze brimming in abhorrence, Louis glared at Subaru and wrung that out with a voice as though casting a curse.

"…"

Louis: "A single step more was left and yet, huh. Why, how come, did it fail, huh. —Who, tricked onii-san, huh."

That was a tone of voice which reached a murky conclusion, hatred towards isolation like that of the dead from the depths of hell envying the way of being of the living celebrating paradise above ground.

With a voice filled with such resentment, Louis resumed.

Louis: "With a single step more, 'Natsuki Subaru' and Natsuki Subaru could've been completely torn apart and yet…!"

Subaru: "…What's up with that. Why'd you do something like that."

Louis: "—Isn't it obvious, because we can't eat the same human twice ~tsu?!"

Subaru: "—~hk."

Painting out Subaru's dubious voice, Louis screamed with a cracking voice as if vomiting blood.

She set her limbs on that spot and then stood up, and with an expression completely changed from what it had been until then—with a countenance like that of a beast which had lost its human kindness, she glared at Subaru.

Louis: "It each had to be separate! The 'Natsuki Subaru' who got eaten once, and the Natsuki Subaru left to be eaten each had to be separate. For that, we had concentrated attention on this plan or that and yet… it was all stupidity! Laughable, isn't it!"

Subaru: "…I won't laugh. It's not funny, not one bit."

Louis: "Is that so? Is that really so! But, onii-san also hates us, isn't that right? Isn't it fun to see our hated self being sad? It must be feeling good, right? Even though onii-san would have… only you would have fulfilled us, who've gotten sick of eating… by only you, us of Satiation could've ~tsu!"

At Louis, her eyes bloodshot, Subaru whispered "Satiation" within his lips.

If he had not misheard her, the title she had named herself as was supposed to be Gluttony. Why would that now turn into something like Satiation.

In front of Subaru, who was perplexed in that manner, Louis shouted, saying "To begin with!" whilst looking up into the white sky.

Louis: "Both Lye of Gourmet! And Roy of Bizarre Eating! Know absolu~tely nothing! From one to the next, thoughtlessly unbridledly eating messily like a bunch of idiots… for our sake, who are locked up here and don't have the freedom to choose? Don't make us laugh, hopeless siblings ~tsu!"

Embracing and bringing her yellow hair close to her, Louis disheveled her body and spat.

Her words, Subaru, whilst standing straight, was unaware of all what they meant. Lye or Roy, those which she had brought up, could they be names, perhaps.

However, the existence of Gluttony, memories, there were certain things he could discern from them—

Subaru: "You, get together with your comrades and things like people's memories and, names… is it fine to notate it as that? At any rate, you go around stealing things like that. Go around eating things like that. Isn't that right?"

An instance of getting his memories eaten, and forgetting who his own self was would be Subaru.

An instance of getting his name eaten, and being forgotten by the surroundings and lamenting would be Julius.

And, perhaps getting both sides eaten, forgotten by the world and falling into a slumber never to awaken from was Rem.

All of them, were deeds of Gluttony, of Louis, and her comrades whose names got brought up earlier—

Subaru: “Why the hell are you all doing something like that? What is the goal, of all of you?”

Louis: “—It’s to become happy.”

“…”

Made to hear the immediate reply, Subaru halted his breath.

Paying no heed to his reaction, Louis resounded her teeth by clattering them with seeming instability of mind,

Louis: “It’s to become happy. What other goal is there? To become happy is the goal of living, isn’t it? Or, did you think that our loathed self had distorted away from that? Wrong. That’s wrong. It’s wrong anyway. As it’s wrong. Certainly it is wrong. As it’s too wrong. It seems it’s wrong. As we’re telling you it’s wrong! A~h, our soul hurts… ~tsu!”

Subaru: “What’s the connection between, the goal of becoming happy and stealing others’ memories…”

Louis: “—Sa~y onii-san, have you ever thought life is unfair?”

Subaru: “I have.”

Louis: “Awa ~tsu.”

Her teeth into the back of her white hand, Louis questioned Subaru. When Subaru nodded his head in agreement as a matter of prompt judgement, Louis loathsomely laughed saying “Of course”.

Whilst deriding, she had her hand with impressions of her teeth crawl up her slim chest.

Louis: “We have, too. Rather, life is unfairness itself. Can’t choose birth, can’t choose parents, can’t choose the environment, can’t choose the future, not a single thing can be chosen. Always, it’s made to be a system of that kind. It’s being atop a belt conveyor.”

“…”

Louis: “—But, what if that wasn’t the case?”

In front of the silent Subaru, Louis tilted her neck.

Louis: “What if birth could be chosen? What if parents could be chosen? What if the environment could be chosen? What if the future could be chosen? What if all options were as per imagination…? Everyone, would choose a better life, isn’t it? Is that wrong?”

Subaru: “That… may be true but.”

What was the associativity between that and Louis and the others’ crimes, Subaru pondered.

However, Louis clang her teeth at that doubt of Subaru’s,

Louis: “—That’s it.”

Subaru: “…Ah?”

Louis: “If birth could be chosen, if parents could be chosen, if the environment could be chosen, if the future could be chosen, if all options were as per imagination, everyone would choose a better life. —That is why, we are taking time and making utmost effort, and searching the greatest life for us.”

“…”

Louis: “Surely, it is somewhere ~tsu! Where we can live with our head held high, like us! A future filled with roses, such that we'd think we were glad to have lived this life! Until the time of fortuitously meeting that destined life, we'll eat, crunch, chew, lick, suck, indulge, gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!"

Her eyes dazzling blazingly, Louis Arneb shouted her lovely ambition out with a roaring voice.

She truly believed, from the bottom of her heart, that this was pursuit for happiness, that this was the sole way for her to grasp the supreme future for herself.

Louis had not discovered any hopes, any expectations for her own life.

For in her mind, the life of the young girl named Louis Arneb had been inferior in its initial disposition. The starting point had been incorrect. —That is why, she wanted to negate that.

She wanted to win and gain her self who was abound in birth, parents, environment, future, talents, everything.

She had defined precisely that to be an indispensable condition, for enjoying life to the maximum.

That is why—

Subaru: "For that, you steal the memories of others, and eat them…?"

Louis: "Once the desired life is found, by affixing the Memories and Name, we will live that life with our head held high. Unfortunately, as of now, everyone's been omitted from being selected… there had been lives which were on the right track but, you know, we won't be satisfied by a few meagre experiences."

Speaking enthusiastically with a trembling voice, Louis had her finger gently crawl upon her petite body beneath her patchy clothes, and made a charming gesture unbefitting her age— no, that was not the case.

If her, if Gluttony's words were true, then she had eaten the lives of innumerable people until now, and through that had procured an amount of resources of experiences beyond what any ordinary man could physically experience.

Men, women, children, elderly, possibly leaping over the fences of even races or species, having her fill of the experiences of every possible existence, tasting them till finishing, a person who indulged in the satiation of lives.

It was just as how Louis had called herself.

She had, grown tired. Of eating the lives of others.

For her, who continued to snitch and eat the “delicious parts” of the lives of all kinds of people, all possible happenings were stale articles, the same hackneyed events with nothing novel to them.

But, just as when he understood Louis’ mental state, he also discovered something he could not understand.

That was—

Subaru: “Then why did you, who practices such an unbalanced diet, go as far as to use that pain in the butt measure to try and chew me? Is it your obstinacy as a food fighter, something like never excusing what was left to be eaten?”

Louis: “It’s not such a silly reason. —It’s because onii-san, is our destiny.”

“…”

Whether he should accept that at face value and that it seemed as if he was being made fun of, with those thoughts Subaru glared at Louis with rage and vigilance.

However, Louis’ pupils looking at Subaru, present therein was no falsehood in their ardor. She truly was deeply in love with and yearned for Subaru— precisely, Subaru’s Life.

The reason being—

Louis: “Men and women of all ages, all kinds of humans, races, positions, anything and everything, leaping above it all and having eaten all kinds of things are us, but there’s a single thing, which is unknown to us. Do you know what it is?”

Subaru: “What might it be. I don’t know. My good-for-nothing self’s way of grieving or something?”

Louis: “—It’s the experience of Death.”

Subaru, with one of his eyes remaining shut, halted all movement.

Whilst intently watching that Subaru, Louis lifted up her slim arms and pointed both her palms towards him.

Louis: “No matter how many of others’ memories are eaten, it’s impossible. Only the memories of Death, can never be obtained. After all, isn’t that the way it is? Memories, are the record of the period of living after all. That’s why, something like the memories of the time of dying don’t exist. —Only onii-san, is an exception.”

Louis seemingly envied, jealoused, deeply loved, yearned for the power of Return by Death from the innermost depths of her heart.

The young girl who had grown tired of this world, was deeply in love with and yearned for the man who conferred upon her the solitary fresh moment.

Louis: “Hey hey, what does death feel like? It’s surely rough, right? It’s agonizing, right? It’s terrible, right? It’s painful, isn’t it? There was also a time when it didn’t hurt, isn’t it? Some say it feels good, is that true? When dying, do you actually always feel delighted? Or, do you stop caring anymore? An easy victory? Hey, hey hey, heyheyhey!”

Subaru: “…If you, have my memories of everything till yesterday, then shouldn’t you be knowing all that.”

Louis: “As memories, you see! But, on second thought that is old, as it’s not real! We want a more raw experience. We can’t be satisfied by a reused stale ingredient. What will satisfy us, is a new, fresh and juicy state of mind nobody is aware of ~tsu!”

Resuming her words, saying that is why—

Louis: “The sole special memories in this world, which nobody else can experience! Not just that, but the simplicity of just quickly dying and redoing upon making a mistake! Even upon finding the greatest life for oneself, there’s always the possibility of ruining it by some sort of failure, isn’t that right? But, if it’s onii-san’s life then that isn’t there! It’s alright, we’ll do it well such that nobody will find out!”

“…”

Louis: “Neither Emilia, nor Beatrice, nor Ram, nor Meili, nor Julius, nor Echidna, nor Shaula, nor Patrasche, nor Petra, nor Otto, nor Garfiel, nor Frederica, nor Lewes, nor Roswaal, nor Clind, nor Annerose, nor Felt, nor Reinhardt, nor Grandpa Rom, nor TonChinKan, nor Crusch, nor Ferris, nor Wilhelm, nor Ricardo, nor Mimi, nor Hetaro, nor Tivey, nor Priscilla, nor Al, nor Schult, nor Heinkel, nor Kiritaka, nor Liliana, no body no one no body no one no body no one! Deceiving them all, we will live happily!”

Making both of her hands, which had been pushed out, project so that they were holding out to him, Louis adorably tilted her head.

Louis: “That’s why, please. —Let us eat onii-san’s life, such that we fill our stomach?”

As though pleading, the young girl, from the multitude of memories possessed by herself, must have unmistakably chosen the plead, the dependency utmost befitting of this place.

Proof that no matter what kind of ingredients are gathered, should the cooking skills be poor it’ll amount to nothing.

There had been a wise saying which Subaru liked, it’s not that the ingredients are bad, it’s merely the cookery that is bad.

Never had he realized that to this extent.

Innumerable, multitudinous, numerous experience points ordinary humans could never possess.

Never had Subaru come across an existence, so wasteful and squandering.

Subaru: “—You won’t get a third chance. My anguish, my death, my life, everything belongs to me. There’s not a single thing, which I’ll give you!”

“…”

Subaru: “Starve to death, bloody bastard. If you can’t choose but a single way to die in life, then that’s what I’d suggest to you. —Suffer the most, in this whole world.”

Gesturing a slash on his own neck with his thumb, Subaru asserted so.

In response to those words, Louis rounded her eyes then looked at both of her hands. And then, covering her face with those hands, looking up into the white sky, she groaned “A~a~a~a~a~h”.

Louis: “We, failed. We did fail. We ended up failing. So we did fail. We did end up failing. We quite indeed ended up failing. We ended up failing isn't it. As we ended up failing… a~h, a~a~a~a~a~h."

With teeth clattering and knees quivering, Louis sunk down to the floor at that very spot.

Her genuinely being astound, was testimony to her coaxing Subaru with equal seriousness. Since the result of that seriousness was that wording, the style of failure of her spiritual nature held no need to be pronounced.

Neither did Subaru, rescind his gaze suggesting serves you right whatsoever.

Subaru: "I won't become as you wished. My name is Natsuki Subaru, the name given to me by Natsuki Kenichi and Natsuki Naoko. —Nothing else. I am myself."

Louis: "Even though it may get overwritten, and disappear?"

Subaru: "I'll teach you a magic spell. —That is that, this is this."

The magic spell he had struck Julius with, this time he shall face himself and strike it.

Should 'Natsuki Subaru' be recovered, the Subaru of this moment may disappear. However, it's also possible that he may not disappear. There may be a way to not erase him.

He may somehow find a way, to share the single spot of sunshine.

Subaru: "I, who enter into others' hearts with shoes on via speaking bluntly, have no need to be mannerless and occupy the spot of sunshine either. That's my answer. Cut your hair, stupid."

Declaring a remark suggesting an act of abandonment, Subaru turned his back towards Louis.

He directed no vigilance towards the young girl sunken to the floor, holding her head. Right now, a way to return from this incomprehensible space was more important than that.

As quickly as possible, he must return to Emilia and the others, and once again tackle Reid's Book of the Dead.

To begin with, why to this place, would Reid's Book of the Dead —

Louis: "—A~h, enough. So there's no choice but to leave the rest, to onii-chan and nii-sama, hu~h."

"…"

Behind the pondering Subaru, Louis revealed as though grieving.

Hearing that, Subaru, who had his ears on the floor and was knocking the ground, turned around. Louis was lying sprawled atop her own golden hair, covering her face with her palms, flapping her legs.

Onii-chan and, nii-sama.

Bynames Louis had often mentioned. If that was, just as how Subaru imagined—

Subaru: "—Lye and, Roy. Gourmet and Bizarre Eating?"

Louis: "We can't exit this place. That's why, unless onii-chan and nii-sama kindly eat, we can't choose what to eat either… That's why, we made a request."

Subaru: "Request…"

Ruminating the words of a bad premonition, Subaru prompted the other side of those words.

He felt Louis took awfully long to vomit out the continuation of those words. Before long, as if tracing Subaru's impatience, Louis' red lips quivered,

Louis: "Isn't this the second time, onii-san has come here since last night. —That's why, both onii-chan and nii-sama, both of them have noticed. About where, onii-san is."

"…"

—It was made clear, those two menaces now drew near Pleiades Watchtower.

Louis: “Both of them, said they were keenly interested in onii-san, you know. That’s a matter of course. —Because you kno~w, onii-san is abundantly doing experiences which they have never tasted before.”

Subaru: “Sh, it…! You… ~hk.”

Louis: “—A~h, how unfai~r.”

Louis casually whispered so, upon Subaru’s shivers, having gotten to know that truth.

Louis’ whisper, possessing no chain of logic, even Subaru immediately understood what it meant.

Subaru: “Is this, an outlet?!”

Behind Subaru, who had turned back, a fissure was generated in the white space and its other side was visible, though flickering.

A clear physical disorder, an inconceivable leap through space originating within.

Inspired by Subaru’s purpose, that he must return to the library.

“…”

Louis: “You cannot. Onii-san can never. Though we wanted you to, you know.”

The existence of the outlet, before he could sail across it, Subaru wavered over Louis’ treatment.

Whether it be the sequence of events of him strangling her neck, and thereafter, also including her attitude once her ulterior motive had been made clear, it was perhaps true that she possessed no combat power greater than what her appearance suggested.

That is why, Subaru ending Louis in this place should physically be possible.

Thinking about that, for naught but a single instant, the moment he directed his troubled gaze, his true motives got seen through.

Louis: “Even if you suspect, even if you despair, you can’t kill yourself, others, or even those whom you loathe. Spineless coward. —Even though, we licked you gently.”

Subaru: “—. Well, your teeth must’ve gotten spoilt. Get them remedied, stupid.”

Subaru declared with his middle finger raised, at Louis who made a provocative expression.

Without seeing through until Louis felt ashamed by those words, Subaru tried to insert his body into the fissure in space. At that moment, that lone instant, he yielded faltering.

It was not as if he felt sorry for Louis. He felt relieved at the thought of not having to see that face again.

What Subaru felt sorry for, was not his parting with Louis, but the voice that made Subaru stand up.

For that instant alone, the young girl who had appeared, only to enliven Subaru.

Having gotten her memories and name stolen, the sole young girl who consequently called out to Subaru at the extremity of the world.

Subaru: “It’s alright. —I remember, the promise.”

Natsuki Subaru, shall certainly never forget that.

That is why, certainly, they shall meet again.

—Ruminating that he would like to hear, not merely her stern voice, but also her tender voice then.

“…”

Enthusiastic for that, Subaru had his body leap into the fissure, in order to return under his comrades.

4

Louis: “A~h, a~h, a~h, God damn it! Not even turning around, what a man ~tsu!”

Louis: “Won’t excuse you. Won’t let you escape. Absolutely, absolutely… ~tsu!”

Louis: “Don’t think it’s over with this, Natsuki Subaru… ~tsu!”

Louis: “Your life, belongs, to u~u~u~s— ~tsu!!”

Chapter 62:
Tremors of Collapse

1

—As the white world peeled away, the harlequin world which lied beyond to the other side was slowly reformed.

The enormous, rough and overwhelming paintbrush of god daubed colors to the world.

It was an exotic sensation, as if witnessing the world being painted with colors from a confined, colorless space.

He had heard the legend of god creating the world in seven days, but it did not seem like god had necessarily assembled the building blocks of the world within seven days, it rather felt as if God had painted it out on the colorless canvas.

—The cradle of Od Lagna. Or, the Hall of Memories.

Natsuki Subaru's existence was being extracted out from a seemingly different dimension.

Being separated from that unfamiliar space into the former world, the fragments of his consciousness gradually tied up, and bit by bit, his self was being reconstructed—

???: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "Mph…"

Hearing that voice, Subaru opened his eyes and was immediately struck upon by thirst.

As he blinked over and over again in this world with unclear vision, he realized that his back and hips felt something hard and cold. He was perhaps lying against a wall somewhere.

Immediately after that, he noticed signs of an existence before his

eyes.

"…"

In front of Subaru was an anxious girl with a peculiar pattern in her eyes— it was Beatrice, with a flamboyant dress and a cute appearance.

Subaru realized that he had returned from the Hall of Memories to the former world, to the watchtower, to despair and apprehension.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Beatrice: "How's your consciousness, in fact? Are you alright, I suppose? It should be confirmed that you didn't accidentally lose your memories, in fact. First up, do you know Betty?"

Blinking her eyes, Beatrice touched Subaru's face and chest in the weighty environment.

Though she knew that it wasn't something she could confirm by touching him, to someone who's worried, it served as reassurance. With his cheek being touched, Subaru answered and said "I'm fine, I'll be alright", adhering to the mood.

Subaru: "No problems at all. I do remember. My memories are safe, you… Beatrice, I haven't forgotten about you. Of course, that goes for everyone else as well."

Beatrice: "…We~ll, you'll get praise for calling Betty's name the first, in fact."

Having touched Subaru's cheeks, Beatrice let out a sigh of relief and relaxed her eyes upon witnessing him call her name. At her reaction Subaru also loosened his lips and stroked her head without any hesitation.

As he felt Beatrice accept his palm with narrowed eyes, he took a deep breath and Subaru reaffirmed his memories, their safety.

Although he had asserted "I remember" before Beatrice, it was something difficult to affirm.

The encounter he had had immediately previously with the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb.

She was unquestionably a monster who had eaten countless Names and Memories, but to Subaru that ability of her's of apparently eating memories yet remained undetermined.

It was uncertain whether actually biting was needed, or just to declare Eating, or if it was a further complex procedure. —The greater the constraints and commitments, the more complex the requirements, the greater the power granted to one's hands is how it goes. He wanted to deduce it.

Regardless, Subaru had no idea whether or not those conditions had been fulfilled in the Hall of Memories in the first place. The truth was he did indeed make physical contact, was bitten in the arm and had gotten licked. If they were the conditions, then he had completely been swept away by the mood and been defeated.

Therefore, the possibility of his memories being worm eaten despite showing no conscious symptoms was sufficiently probable, but—

Subaru: "—It's probably fine. The promises and feelings of love, are all still within this heart of mine."

His heartbeats rose when he thought of Emilia, and felt the desire to caress Beatrice upon being worried. It was proof that he wished for the safety of his comrades, and dubiety disappeared from his mind.

He need not proceed alone, at the very least, and he shan't experience those horrors again that way.

???: "—Natsuki-kun, have you come back?"

A voice stroked Subaru's eardrums whilst he reaffirmed the presence of his memories in his mind.

Raising his face, he saw Echidna with her light purple hair fluttering, with Beatrice beside him. After seeing her step up, Subaru made a belated realization.

Subaru: "…What about Emilia-chan, and the others?"

Echidna: “Good, seems you haven’t lost the ability to look around. Do you remember what you had been attempting to do just previously?”

Seeing Echidna ask pompous queries, Subaru glared back into her pale cerulean eyes and looked at the shadows he sought at the other side— he comprehended that a few of his comrades were missing.

It couldn’t possibly be something cute that they were hiding behind the various bookshelves within the library. Touching the thick black cover closed on his knee, Subaru exhaled.

Right now the members present here were—

Subaru: “Beatrice and Echidna, and Meili…?”

Meili: “Onii-san, so you’re finally u~p? You really had us on the edge, it seems you even overslee~p.”

Subaru: “Oversleep you say…”

Whilst Meili had her hands on her hips and reprimanded him, Subaru scratched his head.

Calming his heart down, Subaru tried determining the situation.

He could not see Emilia, Ram, Julius or Shaula in this room.

Only the aforementioned three were here, and all four of them happened to be non-combatants. Plenty strange in this situation, but what was further strange was—

Subaru: “It can’t be that I woke up right after opening the book, right? How much time was I unconscious for?”

Beatrice: “—. About an hour, I suppose. Till now the books got finished in a few seconds, so there was concern whether something happened to Subaru, in fact.”

Subaru: “One hour…”

Thanks to Beatrice’s answer, Subaru figured out the time lag between the Hall of Memories and reality wasn't large.

The challenge he faced now truly was different from what would've happened had he read the Book of the Dead normally. That Hall of Memories really did exist somewhere, and the time he spent there seemed to be legitimate as well.

He encountered Louis, had his heart tormented, licked by Louis, and tried strangle her throat and deny 'Natsuki Subaru' —and, was made to refuse that with gently harsh words.

There was nothing wrong with the thought that all that time could have been some convenient dream seen by Subaru. However, it couldn't be ignored that a finite amount of time had passed as a matter of fact.

Subaru: "Why are Emilia-chan and the others, not with you?"

Echidna: "While you were, quite literally, immersed in that book, some abnormalities came up here as well, you see. The four not present here are going around, dealing with them."

Subaru: "Abnormalities…?"

Echidna: "The first one to notice the abnormalities was Shaula. It could perhaps be said that it was expected of the one who holds the position of defending this watchtower."

Although the content she spoke seemed calm, her tone wasn't. Echidna responded to Subaru's words with a voice into which her repressed sense of urgency was getting leaked.

She pointed to the entrance of the room, the staircase which led downstairs,

Echidna: "Shaula said that something was approaching the tower from the outside. She was being quite sharp then. In order to confirm the reason behind the abnormalities, she rushed out giving nobody the time to even stop her…"

Meili: "The cool onii-san then went after he~r. Meanwhile, the silver-haired onee-san and the maid onee-san went to see the sleeping younger sister.”

Subaru: “So that left all four of us in this place. —To be honest, though it makes me feel a bit lonely, it was the correct answer. Especially in this situation, I don’t want anyone amongst us to have unknown whereabouts.”

Responding to Echidna and Meili’s report, Subaru sighed in response to this situation of utter disarray.

Subaru was thankful to Shaula, who noticed the concerning matter, to Julius, who followed her, and to Emilia and Ram for their actions as well.

If the body of the blue-haired girl, Rem, could be safeguarded, then he could crush all his worries one by one.

—In face of the emergencies that shall occur hereafter.

Echidna: “—That reaction, Natsuki-kun, do you happen to be aware of something?”

“…”

Echidna asked the abrupt question seeing Subaru’s subtle expressions. Targeted by that mindful gaze, Subaru tried to respond that very second, as he shook his head.

There was no need for him to mix up or complicate matters further. All he had to do was to speak those vexing words as they were and let his comrades worry.

Subaru: “I’ll tell you what happened starting from the conclusion. —The plan of reading Reid’s book and seeing through his past failed. I couldn’t see his past, and there’s no time for that now.”

Beatrice: “You could not see his past, I suppose? What in the world does that mean, in fact?”

Subaru: “Something got in the way. —The Sin Archbishop, of Gluttony.”

Beatrice: "—~hk!"

Finally he managed to convey those words.

Hearing the words that came from Subaru's mouth, Beatrice blinked her eyes in astonishment. Though Subaru had heard of the words Sin Archbishop for the first time by Louis, it perhaps wasn't the same for them.

Echidna: "Though it's quite difficult to conceive, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony is in the book… in this situation, saying that it was in the book has room to be doubted, but you're saying it was in it and?"

Echidna furrowed her eyebrows and folded her arms, pondering with a strained face. In her eyes levitated doubt, but even greater unease. On top of that, unease directed toward Subaru.

It was obvious that her unease directly pointed towards Subaru's memories such that it could be ascertained without words.

Subaru: "Though Beatrice had said the same earlier, I didn't lose my memories… that's what I mean. I haven't forgotten the faces of my friends, and my love for Patrasche is still genuine."

Meili: "I don't know why dragon-chan's name was mentioned there tho~ugh…"

Puffing up her cheeks, Meili expressed irritation upon the mention of Subaru's dragon.

Her anger was befitting. The truth was, Subaru had the criminal record of losing his memories once already. The presence or absence of his memories was uncertain, and nobody could prove the unconscious, asymptomatic loss of memories.

—However, only the Subaru present here at this place, instead declared that wasn't the case.

Subaru: "It makes me happy that you're all so worried, but I haven't forgotten anything. I give the stamp of approval."

Echidna: “I am very doubtful of the existence of that stamp of approval right now… but if you possess such confidence, then I’m sure you must have some basis for it, yes?”

Subaru: “—Because when I was completely cornered by Gluttony, Rem saved me, you see.”

“…”

The potency of the name he had mentioned echoed merely within Beatrice.

That’s why, whilst Echidna and Meili remained to have a puzzled expression, Beatrice on the other hand was completely astonished, with her eyes twinkling.

Subaru nodded in response to that Beatrice. —No matter how trivial a memory, the only reason Subaru could boast around having not gotten them stolen by Louis was solely her existence.

In that place, when Subaru’s heart was on the verge of shattering, the young girl encouraged him and made him stand up.

Her existence did not allow for such an opening to be given to Gluttony, was what he believed.

Beatrice: “Subaru, let’s have a detailed explanation, I suppose. That too…”

Looking directly into Subaru’s black eyes, Beatrice asked for a detailed explanation. However, by the ending of the young girl’s words, a deathly quake— shook the tower, and the shaking sensations repeated.

Though it was obvious that the bookshelves would shake, the shaking of the tower itself was obviously unnatural. This was probably because of the emergency that Shaula went to take care of.

Henceforth, Beatrice blinked merely once.

Beatrice: “As briefly as possible, in fact.”

Subaru: "—When I dove into the Book of the Dead, I was brought to a white, empty place instead of Reid's past. That's where the girl who's the Sin Archbishop… of Gluttony was, she named herself as Louis. According to what that Louis said, that place was something like Od Lagna's cradle, the Hall of Memories is how it seems."

Inside the tower, with continued tremors pursuing the soles of their feet, Subaru commenced explaining what he had seen in the Book of the Dead.

The reality of his encounter with the girl in the white space, and that place being called as the Hall of Memories. The interposition of a supernatural existence possessing overwhelming strength, Od Lagna.

Though they were just an unknown bunch of words and phenomena to Subaru, they must be worthwhile information for those who were aware of both the common knowledge and absurdities of this world.

In response to what Subaru had explained, Beatrice thoughtfully muttered "Od Lagna…".

Subaru: "Louis, said it was a mechanism to keep the world from breaking or something. Do you have any idea about it?"

Beatrice: "Betty isn't well-knowledgeable regarding that either, I suppose. But, just that it is the core point of this world… the place where all the mana returns to, is what it's said, in fact."

Shaking her head in response to the doubt, such was Beatrice's response. Putting her finger on her sliding drills, she continued fidgeting with her soft hair.

Beatrice: "All mana returns to Od Lagna, and gets circulated… In other words, Od Lagna is an existence heavily tied with the death and resuscitation of spirits. That's why, it can't be stated as something unrelated to Betty and the others."

Echidna: "However, we are special due to our origins. Our existence does not go by way of Od Lagna. In that sense, unlike other normal spirits we are able to hold an objective view at Od Lagna, I suppose."

Subaru: "Unlike normal spirits, you say… Is that so. So I guess that's behind you all living for long despite your appearance."

Echidna took over Beatrice's words, and Subaru was convinced by what she said.

Though the topic of conversation itself had gotten deviated, it seemed it was true that Beatrice and Echidna had lived for several hundreds of years.

The reason for the longevity of their lives was perhaps their origin of being spirits.

Subaru: "If you ask me, I think Beatrice's cuteness makes her more of a fairy than a spirit."

Beatrice: "…That, Subaru said that once before too, I suppose. It seems stupid Subaru doesn't know, but fairy is not a compliment here, in fact. That's why, we~ll, Betty can't feel either straightforwardly happy or be angry for being insulted, so it's just weird, I suppose."

Subaru: "Hmm, is that so. Apologies for my rudeness, then."

Certainly, he had heard that in foreign places home to fantasy, the image of fairies deceiving and harming humans was quite common.

If that thought applied to this world as well, then it was natural that calling someone a fairy won't be considered a compliment.

Subaru: "Sorry. I meant that you're so cute that I want to eat you up."

Beatrice: "The feeling of wanting to eat being complementary to cuteness is what is strange, in fact!"

Subaru: "Huh, is that so? Don't you kinda just feel like putting cute stuff inside your mouth?"

Meili: “That reminds me, bad animal-chan’s carefully take their babies in their mouth and then crunch them to death, isn’t i~t.”

Beatrice shivered in response to Meili’s unnecessary remark.

Regardless, the topic had deviated once again. What was crucial here was—

Echidna: “—That, cradle of Od Lagna. What kind of a place is the Hall of Memories?”

Subaru: “The place where souls are filtered, it’s even been given that rank, did you know?”

Echidna: “Filtering souls… in the sense of filtering and cleansing them? Thinking that the role Od Lagna played was to circulate mana isn’t even a laughing matter in front of that.”

Subaru yet again agreed to Echidna’s views.

Having witnessed that actual space, Subaru couldn’t laugh at it and call it an exaggeration.

All of the souls of the dead arrive at the Hall of Memories and get circulated.

Afterwards, the soul is washed off of its indelible stains like memories or history collected over the stretch of life, becoming a pure existence and gains a novel life once again.

Subaru: “I actually think it’s a pretty good explanation. The system reuses the souls of the dead… and the Memories which get washed over there, become books called the Books of the Dead in this library.”

Echidna: “So you say that they don’t disappear to someplace, but instead as a matter of fact the world keeps the dead in memory. Looking at these bookshelves, it’s not possible to jokingly call you a budding poet either.”

These bookshelves, banished by this world, recorded everything that reached the Hall of Memories.

In other words, the Hall of Memories was a place for compiling and creating the Books of the Dead. A system whereby the memories, having been prepared in the form of books, got placed as Books of the Dead in these bookshelves.

And, Gluttony was acting selfishly with respect to how the memories and history of individuals should originally be, thus putting evil to work.

—That was precisely the identity of the power endowed upon Gluttony.

Subaru: “If that’s true, then the function of filtering souls that Od Lagna was originally supposed to do, is arbitrarily being done by them on their own. That way, they gulp down the chipped off Memories into their stomachs, and have been literally eating the Lives of others.”

When put into words, it could be understood how viscous a deed that was.

Much less, Louis had declared it to be the Trial and Error for Becoming Happy. That she would snitch and eat every possible life, and select a joyful life suitable to her from them.

It was the equivalent to continually attempting to win a lottery till ultimately hitting victory.

As a result of having gained the right to draw the lot boundlessly, Louis, her elder brothers chose the path of turning others into food and thus forth grasping happiness. —That was frightening and dreadful in Subaru’s perspective.

Not Louis and the others’ judgement. But the fact that their thought was not something special, something abnormal.

Should one gain the right to draw the lot boundlessly, anyone would draw until hitting victory.

That’s why the actions of Louis Arneb, were a desire exceedingly, respectably, wholly human—

Beatrice: “Even if that’s the case, you’re not supposed to continue drawing the lot knowing others will be sacrificed, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “Knowing that there will be sacrifices but still continuing to draw the lot, is not the way a sane person would think, in fact. That’s why, there exists no room for sympathy for a Sin Archbishop, I suppose.”

Reading into Subaru’s idea, Beatrice declared flatly.

That was an extremely clear distinction, being trapped in the thought itself was unworthy of compassion. Beatrice was well aware of Subaru’s true thoughts and had merely said the words Subaru himself was unable to say.

Yes, there was no room for sympathy.

The persons themselves may not be responsible for the situation they were placed in, or for lacking a place to belong. Even so, misstepping the very first step and thereafter continuing to travel down the wrong path is the persons’ choice.

No matter who, they must get the fruit for their actions.

Meili: “But, it’s pretty stra~nge. Why did the book, despite knowing the details of when he was alive, connected to that unknown place, hu~h?”

Subaru: “That’s… because the soul of a dead person is recycled in the Hall of Memories, so the book sold in wholesale connected directly to its producer… No, that explanation is incomplete.”

Subaru was unable to clearly clarify Meili’s doubts.

Why, did Reid’s Book of the Dead connect to the Hall of Memories.

At the very least, the Subaru prior to losing memories was supposed to have read a Book of the Dead at least once. He had heard that Julius also read one at the same timing, and he had even already experienced reading Meili’s book in a former loop.

But within those experiences, there was no record of the reader being thrown into that space.

Then they should perhaps consider it to be Louis' interference.

Subaru: "But, it looked like Gluttony didn't intend to summon me. It felt like my arrival was out of calculations for even her… so she's not supposed to have used some tactic on Reid's Book of the Dead."

Beatrice: "—Betty has one hypothesis, in fact."

In front of Subaru, who was drowned in his thoughts, said Beatrice with a finger raised.

Looking at her fingertip, Subaru said "Hypothesis?" and asked her to continue.

Subaru: "Tell us. What possibilities can you think of?"

Beatrice: "The Books of the Dead in the library record the memories that get stripped away from souls in the Hall of Memories, I suppose. The normal mechanism is to read them in the form of a book… But, what do you think will happen if that record will be used for other purposes, in fact?"

Subaru: "Using the memories of the dead in a way other than Books of the Dead? But, how else can they be used aside from being Books of the Dead…"

Echidna: "—Ah, I see, is that so. Intelligent indeed, Beatrice."

Subaru furrowed his eyebrows in response to Beatrice's words. But Echidna interjected with seeming comprehension. Not just that, following up with Echidna, even Meili put her fingers on her mouth, and said.

Meili: "Could it, refer to that?"

Subaru: "Wait wait, don't make a face as if you understand. You really hate losing huh. It's nice finding a new part of yourself like that, but just honestly saying you don't understand what you don't, like a child, is perfectly forgiven, that's the position you're in."

Meili: “Isn’t onii-san the one here who hates losing, hu~h? Even I can properly understand when I put my thoughts to it and then say that I do~… The redhead onii-san above, is like that, isn’t he~.”

Brushing Subaru aside with her hands, Meili confirmed to Beatrice. Subsequently, Beatrice let out a sigh,

Beatrice: “Meili’s idea is correct, I suppose… Reid is, like that, in fact.”

Subaru: “Um, that means?”

Echidna: “Reid’s past could not be referred to through his Book of the Dead. That is because there is no record of Reid Astrea actually in it. Reid’s record right now is being used differently, —In order to reconstruct Reid Astrea in this tower, as the trial taker.”

Subaru: “Ah!”

Hearing Echidna’s explanation, Subaru finally came to understand as well.

It was convincing if that were indeed the case. It did not contradict what all happened as a result of Subaru reading the Book of the Dead.

Beatrice: “Reid’s memories are being utilized not for being read but for reconstruction, I suppose. It can be conjectured why Subaru couldn’t read them earlier, in fact.”

Subaru: “Along with that, it also explains how the me of yesterday got memories eaten by Louis at the Hall of Memories.”

It was beyond doubt that the Subaru who was there until yesterday had noticed the same way of capturing Reid as the current Subaru. The fact that as a result of trying it out, he read Reid’s book in the library, and was sent to that white world, as well.

The truth was, Louis herself had said that this was her second meeting Subaru since last night. She ate Subaru’s memories upon their first contact, and tried to consume even the leftovers when they met the second time.

Subaru: “But, if you take that into consideration, then this book can never be used as Reid’s capture book, huh… No, forget about that, this is a dangerous book that would send you straight to an unwished one-on-one confrontation with Gluttony.”

Echidna: “I suppose so. Regardless, though unexpected, it is fortunate that we figured out the reason behind Natsuki-kun’s memory loss. Taking memories away was not a function of the tower… Because for the moment, the tower likely didn’t aim to create a trap which led to contact with Gluttony.”

Subaru: “That’s, we~ll, I guess that’s true.”

It was unknown whether the creator of the tower had taken into account the transition to being before an instantaneous death. It was perhaps only incidental that it ended up like this, is what he’d like to believe.

Otherwise, the personage who prepared the installations in this tower possessed an extremely destructive way of thinking, or possessed a personality nasty like a demon.

Though Subaru had no memories of it, Shaula referred to them as Master-sama and claimed them to be the same person as Subaru, so he currently feared greater damage caused by gossip.

Subaru: “Reid was reconstructed, the book was one which was Empty. That’s why that Book of the Dead connected directly to Od Lagna… would that be correct?”

Beatrice: “That’s the only hypothesis as of now, I suppose. It’s still a mystery why one of Gluttony was hidden and lurking in there, in fact. But, the one thing that can be said is…”

The series of inexplicable events that happened around Reid’s Book of the Dead.

There was one hypothesis around that. Naturally, questions whose answers were yet undiscovered remain unanswered. However, unfortunately, Subaru and the others did not have the time to ponder over that question.

Its proof being—

???: "—Echidna! Is everyone alright?!"

Rushing up the stairs, a solitary knight arrived in this archive of Taygeta. Echidna quickly turned her head backwards and rounded her eyes.

Echidna: "Julius, you seem in quite the hurry, don't you?"

Julius: "Unexpected matters have come up. I want to hear everyone's thoughts, as soon as possible… hm."

The good-looking young man, Julius, approached them whilst answering Echidna's question.

He had stiffened his cheeks with faint nervousness and vigilance, but upon seeing Subaru eye to eye sitting on the floor, his yellow eyes slightly widened.

Julius: "So you have woken up, Subaru. That is indeed very fortunate. Do you know who I am?"

Subaru: "I guess so, that worry comes first. Um, so you are…?"

Julius: "—I knew it."

Subaru: "I'm lying! I'm joking! You are Julius Juukulius! What's up with that I knew it with that serious face of yours! I came back all well and good!"

Julius: "Hmph. I was also joking. Think of it as payback for your incurable childishness. —Now I shall be telling you something which slightly isn't laughable."

Subaru made a strained expression, having gotten cornered in the argument. Snorting in response to Subaru's reaction, Julius subsequently braced his expression without any delay.

Just as what he said, he perhaps intended to report something which wasn't something to laugh at.

Julius: “While I would like to hear Subaru’s report back from the Book of the Dead, this is an emergency. —The abnormalities Miss Shaula noticed have been confirmed outside of the tower.”

Subaru: “I can’t see that Shaula anywhere though…”

Julius: “She, is dealing with the threat from the outer wall of the tower at this very moment. However, that will surely not suffice.”

Subaru glared at Julius, gesturing the roundabout nature of his words. Receiving that sharp gaze, Julius let out a short sigh and commenced by saying “Apologies”.

Julius: “You all must have also noticed that there are slight tremors. They are, footsteps.”

Subaru: “Footsteps?”

Julius: “Yes.”

Subaru and the others tilted their heads upon the unexpected word, and seeing them, Julius inhaled for a second and resumed.

Julius: “—The witchbeasts which existed in various parts of Augria Sand Dunes are charging towards this tower all at once. Although Miss Shaula is fighting them back, it is only a matter of time before they manage to break through inside.”

Chapter 63:
Five Obstacles

1

—The arrival of the witchbeasts to the watchtower.

Upon Julius' report of the witchbeasts of Augria Sand Dunes making a collective charge inside, Subaru and the rest's cheeks stiffened and a hue of seriousness dyed everyone's eyes.

What they could feel at the soles of their feet, were tremors faintly jolting the tower's floor and rumbling— upon hearing that they were literally the footsteps and neighs of witchbeasts echoing across the tower, it was impossible to not feel unrest.

Subaru: "Though I barely know about this desert aside faintly knowing how humongous it is…"

Back when he attempted to escape the tower upon being impelled to be suspicious of everything, and the desert's severity which foiled his plan to flee at the first step, was something Subaru hadn't actually experienced.

Merely the sight of unending sands spreading as far as the eye could see was difficult to forget, so he was able to make suitable imaginations.

Regardless, it was also hard to imagine that the desert was overflowing with living organisms—

Julius: "Augria Sand Dunes is a place where witchbeasts live en masse, you see. Such that the witchbeasts targeting any human that may enter the sands is a bigger issue than the severity of the environment."

Echidna: "Formerly, there was a military contingent dispatched with the plan to annihilate the witchbeasts. Though, the result of that should be obvious from the sound of these footsteps."

Julius and Echidna gave their respective responses to Subaru’s question.

In other words, Subaru’s hope of the rumbling earth being naught but mere paper tigers and that the number of enemies coming was at best at the level of a zoo had been an immense miscalculation. To be precise, it was rather at the level of an entire savanna of witchbeasts.

Understandably enough, it was sufficient to make one despair.

However—

Meili: “—So, you realized that you should call me~?”

Raising her voice, said Meili whilst fiddling with her braid.

The only one to not show any signs of Anxiety upon the report of the witchbeasts’ arrival, was her. Though her reaction did not intend to imply that this wasn’t an abnormality.

Her reaction was the kind that she didn’t perceive the witchbeasts to be a threat.

Julius: “Although it is quite pathetic, it’s just as you say. I want to borrow your strength.”

Cheeks stiff, Julius nodded in response to Meili’s question.

Leaving the witchbeasts charging in great numbers up to Meili, who possessed the ability to command witchbeasts. —Julius’ idea was understandable. The first thing Subaru came up with had also been this.

However, a queer sensation caused the alarm bell to ring depths of Subaru’s chest.

Beatrice: “Subaru? What happened, I suppose? That’s a somewhat strange face, in fact.”

Subaru: “…Having a strange face, has been my destiny ever since I was born.”

Beatrice: “That goes just for your eyes, I suppose.”

Immediately beside him, Beatrice noticed his bitter expression and looked at him in concern. He sighed a large amount of carbon dioxide out, along with something shapeless like unease. That was indeed, something ambiguous and vague, with no tinge of concreteness.

Julius: “Subaru, are you concerned about something?”

Subaru: “Don’t come at me asking questions one after another. That being said, I guess it’s my fault for making a face that’d give that impression. On top of apologizing for it, I have something else to say. An exclusive scoop I picked up from the Book of the Dead.”

“…”

Beatrice halted her breath and widened her eyes, having already heard those words. In all honesty, the reaction could be anticipated, but he couldn’t explain without stating it.

The reason behind the sudden change in situation, why the witchbeasts were charging towards the tower in such great numbers—

Subaru: “—It’s Gluttony. The Gluttony Sin Archbishop, is sending the witchbeasts to the tower.”

Julius: “—~hk, why?”

Subaru: “I’ll have to apologize for that. I met one of Gluttony in Reid’s Book of the Dead. To be exact, I reunited with one of Gluttony. It seems I met last night as well. That is…”

Julius: “The reason behind your loss of memories, is what it means, huh.”

Subaru nodded in response to Julius’ immediate arrival at the conclusion.

Though difficult to say it was as per expectations, Julius’ ability to understand was immense. Associating the name and power of

Gluttony, using that knowledge, he immediately reached the desired conclusion.

Julius: “I cannot say I’m not unsettled. I ask again, did you truly not get anything stolen away from you this time?”

Subaru: “Fortunately, aside from my whole life being stalked and shared, I’m still complete. Though, I just explained all that to Beatrice and the others.”

Julius: “I see… Beatrice-sama?”

Beatrice: “Betty is also anxious about what you fear, in fact. For the time being, no abnormalities were present, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You really can’t trust me, can you…”

With a convinced expression, Julius immediately turned to Beatrice for confirmation. Though Subaru understood that it was a matter beyond helping, he still found himself at a complex state of mind.

Regardless—

Subaru: “It seems like, due to the incident last night, the enemy grasped that we are over here. After about half a day… they’ve come here to meddle along with their pets, is that what this means, huh?”

Echidna: “Considering the normal speed of traveling, arriving at this tower in half a day is hard to conceive. Especially considering the obstacles witchbeasts pose as during the course of the journey. However…”

Subaru: “However?”

Echidna: “Unlike the difficult journey we had, if Gluttony holds the power to make the witchbeasts abide command… then the issue would be merely the speed of traveling.”

Subaru crossed his arms with a strained expression upon Echidna’s comment, whilst she shrugged her shoulders.

Gluttony possessed the power to make the witchbeasts abide command, it would be appropriate to assume that as minimum. At the very least, there was no room of doubt in that the witchbeasts were advancing towards the tower due to the enemy's direction.

It should be kept in mind that they possessed such means as well.

Subaru: "What about the issue of the speed of traveling?"

Echidna: "…The vast sandy terrain. Even if the witchbeasts were to not pose as an obstruction, the speed is bound to fall should one tread through sand. I would like to believe that it would still take a couple of days even if the path taken is straight to the tower and one never gets lost."

Subaru: "But, are there any other possibilities?"

Echidna: "—It would be a totally different story if an aerial route is used in case the overland route will cost time."

Subaru: "Aerial route…!"

Subaru openly expressed his astonishment with his black eyes widened, upon the presentation of the unforeseen possibility.

An aerial route, if that was a feasible way then it would certainly reduce travel time drastically. A flying bird is faster than a walking man, that is how it usually goes.

Subaru: "Due to my arbitrary preconceptions, I thought means of flying would be an exception. Magic exists anyway, so something like flying in the sky is pretty normal, huh."

Beatrice: "That is not the case, I suppose. Flying is a complex variety of magic, its procedure is very complicated, in fact. Considering the danger of crashing, normally nobody would be willing to take the risk and do it, I suppose. The one who would do it would either be an idiot or a genius, or otherwise an idiotic genius, in fact."

Julius: "Though it was commonly said that Margrave Mathers makes attendance to the royal castle through the skies…"

Beatrice: “That would be the idiotic genius, I suppose.”

It seemed that Beatrice didn’t particularly like this Margrave, whom he hadn’t met.

Whilst looking at the cutely pouting Beatrice, Subaru tilted his head upon being told that flying magic wasn’t usual.

Subaru: “If it’s not magic then, a huge bird… Ah, a dragon! They must have ridden on some flying dragon’s back or something!”

Echidna: “In fact, the technique of taming flying dragons has been established as a secret in the Vollachian Empire to the south. Though the Empire has full monopoly on that technique, with the evil techniques of Gluttony then simply usurping it would be simple.”

Subaru: “They could just get it by someone who knew that technique. By taking away their memories with a lick, huh.”

Should that be considered, the enemy owned far too powerful methods when it came to intelligence.

By eating the Memories, everything regarding what was intended to remain secret could become one’s own, and by eating the Name, that very happening, as a matter of fact, along with the opponent’s entire existence could be written off.

—It is often said that, memories are what shape people.

“…”

Subaru thought that a person’s worth, path, is etched into memories and history.

Possessing the sense of values where he especially thought so right now, Subaru truly despised the power of the foul playing Gluttony from the very bottom of his heart.

Ruinsome.

Gluttony’s power, of plundering the memories of others, was evil that blasphemed against everything and brought ruin.

To use it for one's own joyfulness, for one's own pursuit of happiness was absurd. With mistaken methods, illogical ways, distorting and twisting fate.

—Well, is onii-san, who uses Return by Death, going to be saying that?

Subaru: "—~hk."

Beatrice: "Subaru!"

Beatrice called out to Subaru who subconsciously bit his lip with force.

Feeling his arm being pulled, his line of sight and her deep blue eyes then intersected. He could feel a sharp ache at the edge of his mouth, and it was pathetic that this painful wound had been inflicted by his own bite.

Licking the blood exiting the wound with his tongue, Subaru lowered his head saying "Sorry".

Subaru: "For a moment, her ridiculing face came up in my head, you see. Making that thing have a thoroughly tearful and sorry face is one of the biggest goals, but… the problem which comes first are that thing's big brothers."

Julius: "It is already known that there are multiple Sin Archbishops of Gluttony, but did you grasp something?"

Subaru: "It's rea~lly confusing cause of the incomprehensible first person, but, probably. There's one rolled up in the Book of the Dead, and that one has two big brothers, I think."

In the Hall of Memories, Louis had frequently mentioned the bynames Onii-chan and Nii-sama. If that was to be taken at face value, then it would mean that Louis had two elder brothers.

Whether that were to be exactly taken as proof of Gluttony being three siblings was a separate issue—

Subaru: “At the very least, she was not the type who’d use such a tactic. We~ll, not that I, who slightly lost to the force of her personality, can say that.”

What would have had happened had he gone as per the enemy’s plan, and strangled that slender neck?

If it wasn’t for the voice of the young girl of blue hair that had appeared then, then by now he would’ve surely.

Meili: “—So~, what does onii-san want to sa~y? Making stopovers here and there and beating around the bush is onii-san’s bad habit, rea~lly.”

Seemingly interrupting her drowsiness, Meili jolted her body and made a dissatisfied expression.

The young girl, who was supposed to have already gotten her role assigned to her since the beginning, seemed to be incredibly discontent due to being made to wait as is.

Comprehending her displeasure, Subaru said “I know” and commanded with his hand.

Subaru: “I understand how you feel, but this is the minimum necessary conversation. Beating around the bush is certainly my bad habit, but think of it as a part of my charm and be charmed…”

Meili: “Do you want to get chewed u~p?”

Subaru: “Sorry! It’s just that, a ton of witchbeasts have come! Then, let’s request professor Meili, who is an expert in witchbeasts! That kind of a flow is normal, right? I must’ve said. The enemies are the ones who stole my memories.”

Meili: “That mea~ns…”

Meili lowered her tone once again, seeing Subaru speak cautiously. The true meaning of what Subaru wanted to convey had been conveyed to her as well.

And the same went for his comrades around them, who had changed their expressions.

Taking an extensive view of the faces of his party members, Subaru resumed whilst scratching his head.

Subaru: “I’ll introduce by saying it’s my fault, okay? But, they have my memories. —They will lay traps knowing the strengths of our lineup. We will have to beat them at their own game.”

2

—The one who controls intelligence, controls the battle.

Natsuki Subaru, who had grown up in modern day Japan, poisoned by various game cultures, recognized that this saying was a formula of victory in modern day warfare.

Even if that were not the case, victory in a game of poker in which the opponent has already seen one’s hand was impossible, a logic obvious to even children.

Henceforth—

Julius: “If the opponent has seen our war potential, then I shall agree with your concern.”

Whilst leading the way, Julius narrowed his eyes and conveyed merely the caution in his words behind.

He shared the cognizance that it was dangerous to not know the opponent’s move, as well as explaining the situation only briefly. Regardless, the thought of the balance being destroyed on top of not knowing the opponent’s move did not prevent him from keeping his head raised—

Beatrice: “Keeping important information a secret and it being found out later is much more scary, in fact. Subaru’s current idea is correct, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Really? It’s alright? You all don’t hate me?”

Beatrice: “Why are you so uneasy, in fact? It’s alright, I suppose.

Nobody hates Subaru, in fact. Rather, everyone li-li-li-…”

Subaru: “I get it I get it. It’s alright, I’m relieved. I love you.”

Whilst holding hands and walking side-by-side, Subaru nodded at Beatrice as she tried to somehow encourage him. In fact, the speaker got far more embarrassed than the listener.

Words of love are much lighter on the one telling, than the one being told. There is no need to doubt one’s own feelings.

Subaru: “So, where’s Shaula?!”

Julius: “Ah, just a bit more… over there.”

Dashing in front of everyone, Julius pointed towards a stone passage. Though the passage appeared to be a dead end, a hidden sideway path was present on the right.

Lowering his hips, Julius passed under the wall and his body then arrived outside of the tower, welcomed by vehement winds filled with sand and sounds impossible to get accustomed to.

—That, sounded like an innumerable amount of glass shattering on Subaru’s ear all at once.

SETOWI

???: “Ah, hiyah hiyah hiyah yahyahyahyahyahyahyahyahyahyahyah~!!”

“…”

That place was a space like a balcony installed on the wall of the tower.

Though it was something he knew thanks to the enormous spiral staircase connecting to the lower floors, but the fourth layer existed at a height far above several hundreds of meters.

Amidst the parched winds, dancing about in the lofty balcony was a stylish beauty with a long, lustrous braid—

Subaru: “—Shaula!”

Shaula: “Ah! Master-sama, you’ve come here?! I’m so happy! My world stage, it feels like a workplace inspection! Since my esteemed master has come for inspection, take a good look and feast your eyes!”

Shaula replied to Subaru’s shout with a dazzling voice, whilst he covered his eyes with his arm to protect them from the sand. What she did with the same energy, was a fantasy difficult to believe in its own way.

For about the balcony’s width, countless gunports had been deployed horizontally that had been generated in the air.

Gunports would be a slight bit of exaggeration, but there were no other words befitting it that he could think of. Gunports, muzzles, shooting portals— in any case, they were openings for firing something for sure.

The white, great gunports, which had been deployed through forming something akin to a magic square in the air, their aims were tilted diagonally towards the ground.

And—

Shaula: "—Infinitied Hells Snipe!!"

Subaru: "What the, that's so cool!!"

Upon Shaula's casting shout, the white gunports glimmered brilliantly.

The sound of shattering glass then repeatedly echoed through the sky of the sands, crushing Subaru's howl. At the same time, the gunports lost their form and dissolved into the atmosphere.

This was the true identity of the high-pitched sound that had welcomed Subaru and the others upon their arrival at the balcony earlier. And, there was only one reason why Shaula was utilizing them.

—Firing bombardments as much as possible, the coronas approached the ground with the speed of light.

Upon making impact on the sand, they released a violent luster and blew away the ground. The same impact was also placed on the backs of the savagely rushing witchbeasts atop the sand.

The witchbeasts, which were aiming for the tower and gave rise to a plume of sand, received the coronas on their backs, their blood and flesh scattering across the sand subsequently. The thirsting sand sipped their flesh, the scattered corpses were trampled by the other witchbeasts, the coronas' carpet bombing heartily and unmistakably reduced the total number of the approaching witchbeasts.

The number of coronas was close to a hundred, and each aimed for and struck down two or three witchbeasts.

This was what Shaula had fired in rapid succession within a short period of time. Also considering the interval when Julius went to call Subaru and the others, just how high a number would be the total shots fired by her.

However, against the horde of witchbeasts which submerged the environs of the tower like an army of ants, even Shaula's carpet bombardment only provided resistance eventually bound to fall short.

That was how large an obstacle were the numbers of the witchbeasts gathering from the sands.

Subaru: “Hey, hey, hey… I don’t really want to hear about it, but could it be.”

Echidna: “From this footing, only a single direction from the tower is visible. However, the same scenery also spreads on the other side of the tower as well. That chain of thought is not wrong.”

Subaru: “It’s also possible that, just this side of the tower has been painted with luring sugared water, you know.”

Beatrice: “If there’s someone who actually did such an idiotic antic, then Betty will slap them with full force, I suppose.”

Unending tremors, and wriggling black lumps underneath.

Hearing that they were approaching the tower from all directions, Subaru got on the verge of collapsing due to this overwhelming reality. Digressing, he also wanted to object to the appearance of the witchbeasts visible from afar.

Far too grotesque, ominous, inexplicable, a C-grade design by god.

Shaula: “What do you think, master-sama! Did you see my great service?! Also, that angle from behind was an appeal for Master-sama. What did you think about that as well?!”

Subaru: “You, such an unwavering nature even in this situation, it’s amazing, I ordinarily admire it! Since you seem the type on whom complimenting the process instead of the result works better, well what can I say, it was totally great! Nice bulk! Also, no matter which angle you decide on, I don’t have the leeway to be looking around, so keep concentrating and let’s go!”

Shaula: “Okay Google! Defense! Offense!”

The truth was, he bowed before Shaula’s unwavering spirit. Whilst throwing words rather iffy for being encouragement, he also felt guilty seeing Shaula respond gallantly.

He wanted to reward her once this battle ends safely, but—

Subaru: “First comes overcoming this place, that’s top priority…! Meili!”

Meili: “I know, no nee~d to shout like that. But…”

Subaru: “But?! But what?! “But, would you be fine if I fully annihilated the Witch Bea~sts?”, is that what you mean to say? Ah, it’s completely fine, rather, I request you!”

Meili: “Don’t have such cocky expectations, oka~y. Even I won’t be able to cope with thi~s many bad animal-chan’s.”

Meili looked down from the balcony with both her hands clenching her ears with a sullen expression.

Alongside, she ignored Subaru’s irrational hopes and touched her lovable, young side profile. And, licking her somewhat glossy lips,

Meili: “—That’s why, I’ll make the children I had prepared move and strike them ha~rd.”

“–~Haahraan!!”

With that declaration Meili pointed her hand towards the ground and simultaneously, a huge mass jumped up, seeming as if the sand dunes had exploded.

From a point quite distant such that even the enormous witchbeasts appeared to be tiny specs, the existence which had broken through the ground was clearly visible.

In other words, it meant that it was an appropriately gigantic existence. —With the overall size of about twenty or thirty meters, a gigantic earthworm appeared and crushed the surrounding witchbeasts with its frame.

Subaru: “That one is…”

Meili: “I figured that it may be needed, so I kept tamed and prepared. To be honest, I was intending to silently run away but running away in this kind of a place would be a fai~lure.”

With the gigantic earthworm before their eyes, Meili showed her tongue whilst Subaru inhaled.

Unfortunately, Subaru’s astonishment was not directed towards the earthworm itself, but to the fact that he had memories of that earthworm. That was the Witch Beast which Subaru had encountered once when he had tried to escape from the tower.

Thinking back to it, Subaru had also been victim to the earthworm, which jumped out altogether from the underground.

What was also in the nook of his memories was that the earthworm had been blasted away by a white luster.

So Meili had been behind the earthworm and Shaula had been behind the luster.

Tasting surprise and startlement upon the delayed convincement, Subaru, with a bitter expression, caressed her head with his hand and patted it rather forcefully, which she was unable to dodge for how sudden it was.

Meili: “Wah, ah, he~y!”

Subaru: “I don’t know if it’s just your nature or your habit but, you don’t have to act villainous. I’ll never believe that you tried to run away leaving us all behind, anyways.”

Meili: “Mgh, how can you say something like tha~t?”

Subaru: “That’s, cause I am you and you are me, everyone’s different and everyone’s nice, probably.”

Meili: “Huh?”

Meili stood with an expression of failing to comprehend, and neither did Subaru intend to make her understand.

Ultimately, Subaru, at the present stage, was able to see through all of the deceit in Meili’s words. For he had once inspected and read through the memories of her dead self as something which was his own.

Considering her self who was in the tower while she didn't have a change in her sense of values at the very least, he could surely speak to her like he understood her.

And, while keeping his hand on Meili's head, who groaned "Ugh" in displeasure, Subaru directed his consciousness towards the outbreaking situation at the present point in time— and the commonness of the happenings in the former loops.

The witchbeasts advancing in great numbers perhaps coincided with the situation of burning centaurs inside the tower whose invasion had been permitted last time. In other words, the incident of the witchbeasts being allowed to invade the tower itself had also happened last time. It had been Julius who put up a fierce fight in order to drive them out.

In that case, had Shaula been dealing with the witchbeasts from the exterior of the tower like this time.

And since she was unable to suffice, the result was the witchbeasts' invasion being permitted.

However, the same shall not happen this time.

They now had an advantage at their side which made a huge difference compared to last time when it came to this large horde of witchbeasts.

That was the existence of Meili— the very girl who had lost her life unintentionally at the hands of Subaru last time, was the existence who possessed the key to open through the deadlock of this situation.

Subaru: "If Meili fights the witchbeasts alongside Shaula, then the situation will change. Does that mean Julius' hands will be open? If that's so, then…"

—It would be possible to use the war potential named Julius, to deal with a separate problem.

"…"

The instant that thought dawned upon Subaru, he understood that it was essential to direct various people to needed deployments for dealing with the various problems that have repeatedly occurred in this tower.

—The large horde of witchbeasts covering the sand dunes.

—The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, who will launch an attack on the tower.

—The titanic scorpion which will wander around the tower with an expression as if it owns the place.

—The colossal black shadow which will swallow not only the tower, but the sand dunes as well.

—And, Reid Astrea, who will eventually start freely walking around the tower.

Subaru: "Our war potential would be me and Beatrice, Emilia-chan and Ram. Meili with Shaula, and Echidna with Julius…"

Echidna: "Additionally, two ground dragons and the healing spirit of the Green Room, how about counting them too? It will only be an advantage to think of them as choices, I believe."

Echidna shrugged her shoulders before Subaru, who was counting the strength of their side and the enemy's. Nodding in response to her words, Subaru decided to include Patrasche and the large healing spirit of the lower layer to the cards in their hand.

Just as Echidna had said, it was not a situation in which they could afford to keep any hands free.

Subaru tilted his head, since the inclusion of all available cards was necessary, it was also necessary to fulfill their conditions for victory.

Even in that sense, he wanted to have a grasp on all of his comrades' positions such that he could reach them—

Subaru: "—Hey, wait a second. No matter what, this is way too late, isn't it?"

"…"

Subaru: "Emilia-chan and Ram, went to the Green Room just to see Rem and the others, right?"

Subaru tasted the sensation of having his throat parched, upon the delay in uniting with the two female comrades who were not here.

The Green Room was on the fourth layer, the same layer Subaru and the others were on. The possibility of them not knowing about this place and going astray in the rest of the tower was also probable, but.

Julius: "It's this situation. If they don't know our location, then Miss Ram would surely use some way and find us. In fact, Emilia-sama is supposed to have broken the wall and shown herself."

Subaru: "Ram aside, the hell is with your evaluation of Emilia-chan. There's no way she'd break a wall with those adorable, slender arms of hers. Even if she does, she doesn't have that kind of a personality, right?"

Beatrice: "Loss of confidence is good proof, in fact. But, Betty also has a bad feeling about this, I suppose."

Subaru: "—~hk! Shaula! Meili! Can I leave this place to you?!"

Gaining Julius and Beatrice's approval, Subaru called out to Shaula and Meili. Upon hearing that, Shaula, who was busy piling up the deployment and firing of even more gunports of light smoothened up, and Meili brushed away her braid and puffed her chest.

Shaula: "Leave this place to me and go on ahead!"

Meili: "If this keeps up, I'll do whatever I ca~n. I won't let it pass by if you don't come back with onee-san and the others all sa~fe."

With Shaula saying the line he's always wanted to say at the best possible moment and discovering a side of Meili which allowed them to rely upon her, Subaru nodded towards Beatrice and the rest, subsequently sprinting.

Diving through the wall, he slid onto the aisle,

Subaru: “Even though Meili and Shaula are holding out, what’s the possibility of the witchbeasts penetrating into the tower?”

Echidna: “It’s not as if it’s not possible, but the underground sand chamber we fell into… right, Natsuki-kun does not remember it. There was the possibility of entering the tower from there. But, thanks to Meili-kun, that is.”

Subaru: “When the Earthworm was raging about, the underground collapsed?”

Echidna: “The subterranean tunnel had so many fork roads. I doubt it would’ve managed to withstand it in terms of strength.”

Subaru clenched his fists upon Echidna’s affirmation.

In other words, the doubly beneficial existence of Meili, had held the witchbeasts’ stampede back. It was possible to have plenty of defense to ensure they didn’t enter either from the ground or the underground.

If the large horde of witchbeasts had been dealt with, then that would largely leave four more problems.

Even though they were a sufficient matter of concern, there was still one left, one which must be overcome with certainty.

After overcoming those five perilous paths—

Subaru: “By us, this tower must be…”

Captured, immediately subsequent to him having that word on the tip of his tongue.

???: “—Barusu!!”

Subaru: “—~hk! It’s Ram?!”

Dashing towards the Green Room, he raised his face towards the voice which had reached the other side of the aisle. Upon observing, rushing fiercely towards the four composed of Subaru and the others was a black shadow— it was Patrasche.

The ground dragon with sharp looks, clinging onto its back was Ram who had the sleeping Rem's body tightly embraced in her slender arms.

Subaru: "Ram! Along with Patrasche and Rem, are you alright?!"

Ram: "Yes, somehow, you see. Ram had a mountain of problems in the time Barusu was dozing off. How can you even sleep in this situation. Kindly stand up immediately."

Subaru: "I'm sorry! Both of you sisters, don't reproach me! Look, I'm properly standing! I'm running!"

Nimbly dismounting from the ground dragon's back, with Rem still on the saddle, Ram's cutting eloquence struck him.

Since her words happened to be similar to those of Rem's when she had gone off like an explosion in his dream, a queer thought appeared in his mind that they were sisters not just by looks.

Ram: "—? While Barusu's odd attitude is concerning, now is not the time for that."

Upon hearing Subaru's words Ram briefly furrowed her eyebrows, but immediately turned her head back and diverted her attention towards the rear.

That was, the aisle she just came from— the direction in which the Green Room was.

Subaru also felt uneasy about Ram having brought only Patrasche and Rem with her, and not Emilia who was supposed to be with her.

Subaru: "Ah, I also have things I have to ask about and tell you about. You, were supposed to be with…"

Ram: “—On the other side of the aisle, Ram came across the opponent who named himself the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.”

“…”

Declared Ram with absolute clarity, slashing down his question.

Daunted by the strength of those words, Subaru, along with Beatrice and Julius, sealed their mouths right. Thus the one to react the most differently was Echidna, who had been disturbed the least.

Subaru: “You just said the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, right? That, on the other side of the aisle?”

Ram: “Yes, that’s right. —And, someone is battling that Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.”

Subaru: “…Someone?”

An explanation exceedingly unusual in impression.

Ram’s words did not change, brimming with ambition and confidence, and the existence of unintelligible portions itself yielded a terribly far-reaching unease.

When Subaru pressed those unintelligible portions, Ram nodded with a “Yes”.

She nodded, and said.

Ram: “—An unknown person of silver hair, is clashing with the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. Even right now, after telling Ram and the others to escape.”

Chapter 64:
The Second Obstacle

1

—An unknown person, of silver hair.

Subaru: “Huh?”

Ram’s unexpected expression yielded a faint gap in Subaru’s consciousness.

Had it been simply “A person of silver hair” it would have been wording quite dubious, but it surely would’ve allowed Subaru to not embrace any feelings of oddity.

There was no question that Emilia was a possessor of beautiful silver hair. Her amethyst eyes were also beautiful. Her face and all other parts constituting her body were so cute, seemingly a piece of art made by God himself.

However, merely that one unnecessary “unknown” largely changed implications of what was stated.

Subaru: “An unknown person, of silver hair…”

Ram: “Yes, that’s right. Someone who had never been seen in this tower before. At the very least, that person did not seem to have hostility towards us… Seeing the situation, Ram retreated for the moment. But”

Julius: “—No matter who joins in as reinforcement, if the opponent is Gluttony then it is an entirely different issue.”

Nodding in response to Subaru’s whispers, Ram turned her eyes towards the direction she came from. Taking over Ram’s words whilst making a grim expression due to the unrest caused by the echo of Gluttony, was Julius.

Tightly pursing his lips, he touched the knight sword attached to his waist.

Julius: “Though it is an unforeseen encounter, now that they have shown themselves here as enemies, they cannot be allowed to escape. Our goal was to find a way to negate the damage brought about by the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony and Lust in the first place. If they themselves have appeared, then we simply need to hear it from their own mouths.”

Ram: “Agreed. Ram too, has no intentions of letting him return alive. For they must be made to regret coming here so carefreely.”

Subaru: “W-Wait! Wait a second! I understand your eagerness! I understand but… ~hk.”

Whilst the two displayed their hostility towards Gluttony, Subaru thoughtlessly called for a pause.

Julius, who had had the existence known as himself erased from the world, and Ram, who had gotten her beloved younger sister thoroughly devoured away from her own heart— he understood the two’s motivation for defeating Gluttony. The truth was such that Subaru felt opportunities both good and bad had arrived at the same time.

But, the problem here was—

Subaru: “In your entire conversation, there was no mention of Emilia’s name. What about, that?”

“…”

Feeling a bad premonition about it, Subaru fired his doubt straightforwardly.

Ram’s unnatural manner of speech, and the lacking response from Julius and Beatrice with regards to Emilia. Upon turning his line of sight, he noticed even Beatrice and Echidna did not wear expressions which would come from sensing something odd.

They had accepted Ram’s comment about “An unknown person of silver hair” as is.

Ram: “—Who, is Emilia?”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

As Ram tilted her neck without concealing any of her doubts, Subaru’s throat was parched in surprise.

Upon observing, Julius and Beatrice, even Echidna were looking at him with an expression of incomprehension in their eyes. —The impact he felt by that, was not faint.

Subaru: “I mean.”

Things were at a level which would make one think just what had happened in the interval of a single minute.

Prior to things reaching this level Subaru had been talking about Emilia with Julius and the others. First of all, the reason why they dashed from the balcony into the interior of the tower was due to the concern caused by Emilia and Ram not joining up with them and wishing for their safety.

How did that, in the matter of a single instant—

Beatrice: “Subaru, could it be”

Suddenly Beatrice, who was holding Subaru’s hand, changed her expression as if having noticed something. The first one to notice was Beatrice, but the rest of the members all subsequently had their expressions changed as if having guessed correctly as well.

They immediately came to realize that the name Subaru had mentioned, the name which did not exist in their memories, was a name that held great significance to them.

Beatrice: “Emilia… Is that, the name of that silver haired girl?”

Subaru: “—. That’s right. If there was a girl of silver hair, then that is the girl named Emilia, a comrade of ours. That’s why, she told Ram to escape and stayed there herself. She’s fighting even right now.”

Julius: “l believe something like that, is possible to occur. Not anyone else but I myself have tasted that feeling.”

“…”

Responding to Subaru’s strengthless answer, Julius touched his bangs as if having heard something difficult to believe.

Julius made no effort to conceal his astonishment, but Subaru also once again felt the extent of the reach of Gluttony’s power, its immediate effectivity, its atrocious and fiendish nature, and sensed its true fearsomeness.

Speaking honestly, though Subaru was aware of the fact that his memories had been stolen, his experience of its real feeling was rather weak.

Of course, upon the disappearance of his memories misunderstandings and suspicions were yielded forth, his negative emotions towards Emilia and the others were difficult to forget, an act of dark history which, if possible, he would like to forget for eternity.

But, even still, his real feeling of it was weak. The act of searching for something which never existed upon feeling that it did was an uncertain battle akin to fishing in a wide ocean on a night with zero visibility.

That’s why, his real feeling of it was faint. But, that was not all.

Forgetting Emilia, the person whom they remembered a moment ago, the comrade whom they had undergone numerous hardships with. —Was there anything at all more fearsome than that.

Usurper of memories, trampler of reminiscences, devourer of bonds was Gluttony, and these were its habitual crimes.

Having finally witnessed it personally, Subaru came to understand.

Gluttony were villains who only cared for their own joyfulness, who trespassed and raided into territories which should never be laid a finger on.

Ram: “—Ugh, kh.”

Subaru: “Ram?!”

And, Subaru somehow digested the astonishment. In front of him, amongst the members shocked regarding the theft of the memories of a comrade, Ram suddenly knelt down on that very spot.

Beside Patrasche, leaning against the feet of the black dragon Ram exhaled out a rough breath.

Subaru: “What happened? Are you alright?”

Ram: “…Ram’s head, just hurts a bit. Upon thinking about that, unknown person.”

Subaru: “About Emilia…?”

Subaru wrinkled his forehead with his eyebrows in response to Ram, who had her hand on the head and made an expression faced with adversity.

Possibly, if Gluttony had robbed away the memories of Emilia, Ram must have witnessed that scene with her own eyes. Subaru wondered, if that was having its effect.

However, Beatrice voiced out “Subaru” with stiffened shoulders as she shook her head,

Beatrice: “It’s better to stop trying to remind about it anymore, in fact. It’s too absent, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Too absent, you say…”

Beatrice: “The sloven part of the Authority of Gluttony is showing itself, in fact. —The parts where the stolen person has not been established as absent from memories are too many, which leads to parts of discrepancies, I suppose.”

“…”

Hearing Beatrice’s words, Subaru had been rendered speechless for a moment.

However, he immediately swallowed its implication and understood its meaning.

The Authority of Gluttony was exercised, and Emilia's memories disappeared from Ram and the others.

Ram's position was Emilia's caretaker— otherwise said, a master-servant relationship. In their bond, though difficult to explain, there was a certain warmth which both of them felt for each other.

With that erased entirely, born was a vacuum in the place where the existence of Emilia should've been within Ram.

Memories are akin to something like articles of reminiscences kept inside a drawer.

Normally one isn't conscious of their presence there, but upon opening the drawer when trying to remember, what one witnesses are a variety of things. —If that isn't so, then life shan't come into existence.

In other words, should Ram search for Emilia's name within herself here, she shall be doing something equivalent to the fatiguing work of opening the drawer endlessly and failing to find it.

Echidna: "I shall look after her."

Subaru: "Echidna…?"

Beside Ram, who had distorted her expression in agony, Echidna stood in a row and stated with her hand raised. Subaru looked at her with surprise and subsequently Echidna shrugged her slender shoulders,

Echidna: "Right now, we do not possess the time to be arguing and discussing. All the more when Gluttony has arrived, and one of our comrades has gotten their name stolen and is continuing to fight. We mustn't halt our feet."

Julius: "Echidna, please take care of Miss Ram and her younger sister. Please distance away from the battle along with Patrasche.”

Echidna: “Yes, leave it to me. —Julius, this is a do-or-die situation, but make sure you don’t heat up.”

Julius: “I know. My fighting spirit has grown cold quite a bit. Just like this sword.”

Julius immediately accepted Echidna’s suggestion and turned his dignified gaze towards the front. He brimmed with such keen fighting spirit, enough to make Subaru be at a loss for words.

Subaru: “Ram.”

Ram: “Though frustrating, even if Ram goes, Ram will only get in the way. Kindly leave Ram behind and go. However, kindly spare Gluttony’s life. Rest is all on Barusu.”

Subaru: “Sounds like you’re talking about beef or pork, but anyway, don’t worry. We’ll go!”

Ram: “—Yes, kindly succeed.”

Leaving behind Ram, who had a frustrated expression, Subaru nodded towards Echidna who was going to stay with them. He then caressed Patrasche’s neck before commencing his sprint and looked at the side profile of the sleeping beauty atop its back.

“…”

Unchanging, silent, breathing so faint as if she weren’t breathing, Rem’s eyes remained closed, witnessing an eternal dream.

For now it’s fine this way. He had already received the words he should have from her.

What remained was—

Subaru: “Just you wait, Gluttony…! I’m fed up of letting you eat any more!”

—In all honesty, that doubt continued to come to his mind ceaselessly.

Why did the effect of the Authority of Gluttony, not show on Subaru.

Even after Emilia's name was robbed away and she disappeared from the memories of Beatrice, Ram and the others, Emilia's name, form, voice continued to exist clearly within Subaru.

The fleeting feelings he held for her were still present within his chest, unforgettably.

Subaru: 「Because I, came from a different world…?」

Because of that, this world's rules may not affect Subaru.

If the memories of this world were records of life which get chipped away from the souls of the dead in the Hall of Memories, then the fact that Gluttony's power of snatching and usurping them does not apply to Subaru may be because he is an exception who came from a different world, that was perhaps a possibility.

In that case, the memories of 'Natsuki Subaru' would also be etched into this world's Hall of Memories if he was treated as a temporary dead. Otherwise—

Subaru: "—Am I Returning by Death, because I can't do that?"

That was, the cold conclusion capable of making one shudder which he arrived at.

If that was the answer to the question why Subaru was Returning by Death, then Subaru's life would follow an endless spiral of living in this world.

To summarize, it meant that he would spend decades and decades in this world, unable to die from even ageing.

If Subaru was going to complete his life without being applied to this rule, in other words it must be in a world where Natsuki Subaru could truly deposit his memories—

???: “—Ice Brand Arts!!”

Subaru: “—~hk?!”

That instant, his consciousness, drowned within thoughts, was slashed up by the sharp voice of a silver bell.

What stretched before the rushing Subaru, who was sprinting with his head raised— the aisle which led to the Green Room was frozen white, and he was welcomed by a dreadfully icy wind feeling upon his skin.

And as its origin was a fairy of snow moving her body as if dancing within the fluttering diamond dust— so it seemed, but it was actually Emilia, with her silver hair fluttering.

Emilia: “—Yah! Hiyah! Hi! Yah!”

Swinging around the twin swords of ice in her hands, Emilia unleashed a fierce attack whilst raising her voice. Her yell somewhat had a sense of dejection to it, however her velocity was not lacking whatsoever, as she sprinted with swords of ice.

The blades evidently launched a blow onto the confronting enemy, and tried to end it with a single strike.

Subaru: “That is…”

And, the environs of Emilia as she fluttered and danced about with the ice swords in her hands, the aisle which had become her battle field had been frozen a bluish-white, a transformation which gave the impression that this was an entirely different world from the tower in the desert.

Perhaps this was the effect of the ice magic utilized by Emilia having stretched onto the environs. As if this was an extraordinarily powerful power even in this world, Beatrice and Julius inhaled upon laying their eyes on it.

However, greater than that was—

???: “A~haha~! You’re doing it, you sure are doing it, aren’t you doing it, you’re really doing it, it seems you’re doing it, because you can do it, because you’re doing it! It’s something we’ve eaten too~!”

Confronting Emilia, whilst warding off the hurled ice swords lightly and easily, the laughing and sneering existence was pronounced and prominent.

“…”

That had been a young boy, with long, dark brown hair waving about freely, expressing a smile dyed with melancholic insanity.

His age in his teens, his outfit shabby, it had even started losing color in some spots. He did not appear healthy or clean whatsoever, but what was utmost repulsive about him was the glint in his eye, having limitlessly scorned others, turning them into food without any hesitation, a glint which had caught a glimpse of the despair and longing for Life.

It could be understood at a single glance. There was no need to even mention it.

The reality that there was an existence aside from Louis Arneb with such eyes, was intolerable.

Subaru: “—Sin Archbishop of Gluttony!”

Gluttony: “A~ha~! Customer! Well nope! It’s the main dish, onii-san! We had also been eagerly waiting to meet you. Seems like you looked after little sister, isn’t it!”

Hearing Subaru’s roar, having brushed off Emilia’s sword strikes Gluttony intensified his evil smile. Alongside dreading that ominous smile, Emilia also noticed Subaru and the others in the rear, letting out a surprised voice saying “Eh!”

Emilia: “Ah, everyone! Um, you may not know about me, but that’s the enemy! The bad guy! Leave this place to me… though you may not, know about me!”

“…”

Emilia had correctly grasped the situation she had been placed into with respect the existence of the comrades behind her.

Of course, she must have received a shock, having gotten her memories vanished from others. Thinking of only having gotten forgotten due to that impact, she had not taken Subaru into account, who had never experienced forgetting like this.

However, not only did she firmly let Ram escape, she was looking out for Subaru and others who had rushed to this place whilst continuing to battle Gluttony like this.

A flood of emotions, and Subaru shouted.

Subaru: "It's alright, Emilia-chan! I've not forgotten!"

"…"

Subaru: "I won't forget you anymore, I swear! No matter what happens, I will not forget you!"

Tossing his fist up, that is what Subaru conveyed to Emilia's back.

The instant upon hearing it, Emilia's eyes twinkled wide, but then straitened a moment later.

"…"

Subaru was unaware what emotions must've bloomed within her mind at that moment.

However, it was certain that those emotions were not related to anything negative, judging from her minute smile.

At the same pace, Emilia clashed with Gluttony head-on, heaving the ice twin swords and then drawing out a lance of ice from the floor, dancing about with moves of ice and pursuing the enemy.

Julius: "Surely you do not realize the extent of the affect your words had on her just now."

Subaru: "Ah?"

He heard Julius spill those words with a smile right beside him. His words sounded like they possessed an extremely deep meaning, Julius refrained from responding to Subaru after he turned around.

However, he drew out and assumed the sword on his waist, having sketched a clean path.

And—

Julius: “There’s no need to even ask, but she is on our side, isn’t she, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. No way she’d be our enemy with that cuteness!”

Julius: “—I understand.”

Julius’ form, as he responded with a nod, faded from the edge of his vision. —No, that was an illusion.

The very next instant, accelerating with a single step, Julius flew into the melee of ice and his piercing strike captured Gluttony, who had both of his arms crossed in front of his chest, as he took a gigantic leap behind.

Gluttony: “Woo~ps, onii-san is…”

Julius: “I had been eagerly awaiting this moment, Gluttony —!”

Julius’ sharp sword strike forcefully drilled into the faintly smiling Gluttony. However, Gluttony killed and nullified the impact by jumping backward on his own volition, and knelled his throat after positioning his feet on the frozen wall, a gesture filled with gloom and sadness.

After that, Gluttony let his lengthy tongue peek through provocatively,

Gluttony: “Heyhey, don’t charge and bump in like thi~s. Sorry, but we and us don’t share everything that got eaten, you see~. We don’t remember seeing onii-san. Doesn’t that mean that not us, but Roy is the one to blame?”

Julius: “—~hk.”

Gluttony: “Well, guess you can also possibly think there’s not much difference. Regardless, Roy aside, we don’t really have much interest in onii-san, e~h. Feels like it doesn’t match up to our eating standards?”

Julius: “Eating standards, you say?”

Gluttony: “Ah, yeah yeah. That’s…”

Hanging both of his hands down languidly, Gluttony had repaired daggers attached around his wrists. Viewing Julius, he tried to recite in a terribly ominous style.

However—

Emilia: “Hiya— ~hk!!”

Gluttony: “—~tsu?!”

Over there, smashing an ice floe by swinging both of her hands down was Emilia.

Her sole strike mercilessly submerged the aisle easily, with a range seemingly unsuited for battle, paying special attention to make sure that the strike allowed no way to escape.

Sensing it in the midst of the conversation, Gluttony changed his expression and dove under and through the ice floe and succeeded in picking up his life.

Gluttony: “Tc~h ~tsu! It’s something we knew as we ate it, but you really aren’t hesitating, are you, Emilia! If you attack like that, what if you start being thought of as a scary person…”

Emilia: “It’s fine so keep quiet! You must be aware that I am used to being thought of as a scary person, isn’t it! What’s important is how I think of everyone! Besides…”

Emilia plunged her fair knees towards Gluttony’s face, who had dived through the ice floe and roughened his breath. Gluttony accepted that with his arm, and jumped backwards upon the nullified impact.

At the same pace, Emilia looked back onto Subaru whilst finishing her words with a valiant smile,

Emilia: “The person I wished would remember the most did remember. I’m feeling rea~lly good right now!”

Gluttony: “This is why, the type which moves by feelings isn’t our strong point. It’s the type we don’t go well with the most.”

Julius: “—Is that so. However, I am in agreement with her.”

Gluttony distorted his cheeks in annoyance, and Julius’s tall figure slid behind him. A decapitating strike slashed down, and Gluttony accepted that with his arm which he suddenly swung behind.

However, the arm, which was yet growing, was unable to fully intercept the decapitating strike, receiving a slash ahead of his elbow it started bleeding. The consecutive strikes resumed upon Gluttony’s rumble of ache.

Julius: “—Completely forgotten by everything once, I also felt like by losing my own footing I had been denied life, but from the very beginning I had no need to be puzzled over the place where I stand.”

Gluttony: “Tch! Ugh, ghi, ghya~!”

Putting his quiet determination into words, the sword strikes Julius was firing increased gradually.

Unable to fully accept them, Gluttony’s wounds gradually increased and finally receiving a decent blow on his chest, he let out a shriek.

Beatrice: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “I know. I won’t jump into it.”

Beatrice: “…It’s alright if you know that, in fact.”

Julius resumed his fierce attack, whilst Emilia also launched a merciless strike towards Gluttony. On the other hand, Gluttony was on the defensive, intercepting the two's attacks.

Of course, had it been possible then Subaru also wanted to join in and assist in cornering Gluttony, but it was extremely clear to him that he did not have the ability to do so.

Right now right here, he had no choice but to watch and believe that there will come a moment when the combination of Emilia and Julius will defeat Gluttony. However—

Gluttony: "You're quite doing it for a hurriedly constructed combination ~tsu! But, how about thi~s?"

Emilia: "What?"

Gluttony: "—Ice Brand Arts."

Despite continuing to bleed, Gluttony did not erase his smile of leeway, and whispered so whilst facing downwards with a sorrowful tone. Upon hearing that whisper, Subaru and Emilia raised their eyebrows in astonishment. Unable to comprehend its meaning, Beatrice and Julius furrowed their eyebrows. However, all four of them stood stunned at the spectacle which followed.

The following moment, a lance of ice shot up from Gluttony's feet, and Julius evaded it by turning sideways at once, whilst Emilia transformed the lance of ice in her hands into an ice hammer and blocked it through forceful destruction.

However, even if they had avoided a single attack did not mean that they had not been surprised and caught off guard and had to switch from offence to defense.

Gluttony: "Haha ~tsu! How does it feel to have your own signature move be eaten, hu~h? How is it, how does it, just how is it, well how is it, how would it be, how will it have to be, how must it be, how does it have to be is what we're saying, how does it feel is what we're saying, gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!"

Emilia: "—~hk! Suddenly"

Julius: “His movements changed?!”

So voiced Emilia and Julius in astonishment, whilst before them Gluttony drew out weapons of ice from the floor. Upon witnessing the armament of ice difficult to model, Subaru inhaled.

For that was—

Subaru: “E-Excalibur?!”

Gluttony: “Even if Ice Brand Arts itself is Emilia’s move, the one reconstructing it is us, who ate onii-san, you see~! Knowledge is weaponry! We are intellectual Sin Archbishop.”

Subaru: “—~Hk”

Whilst saying so, Gluttony lunged down the holy sword of ice he had reconstructed himself, and struck the brilliant decapitating slash into Emilia and Julius. Of course, by its appearance it was a weapon which had reconstructed only through ice, and nothing like light energy was being released from it.

However, keeping up that energy Gluttony produced weapons which do not exist in this different world in succession, and cornered Emilia and Julius into disadvantage, who had been stabbed with surprise.

Of course, Emilia immediately took her stance again, abandoning the initial impact and tried to counterattack Gluttony, however, Gluttony changed his battling style as if a different person entirely, and the war situation where they tried to cope with that but were cornered into disadvantage again continued.

“…”

Witnessing that offence and defense of Gluttony’s, Subaru learnt the menace that was the memories of a plurality of people being taken in.

Emilia’s move of successively producing weapons of ice was sufficiently strong by itself, but once the user’s power of imagination was appended to it, it transformed into a move which appeared to be completely different. Especially the knowledge of another world which Subaru brought in, the weapons reconstructed from that were extraordinarily problematic.

Although not in this world, there existed a mountain of armaments which had suitable utility. This was the fault of Subaru's guilty history, as when he was in junior high school he had been absorbed in reading books about weapons of the past and the present, the east and the west.

On top of that, Gluttony had likely captured a large number of warriors within oneself amongst all the lives until now, and resultantly was in a form where he had ceaselessly, incessantly installed the fighting strength of countless combatants.

Henceforth, by merely hauling out the optimum memories from the stock, he transformed into an expert of that weapon instantaneously, piling up offence and defense at will.

And, there was one more cause behind Emilia's inferior position.

Emilia: "Julius! Not there!"

Julius: "Kh… ~hk."

Julius' painful stepping overlapped with Emilia's shriek.

The cooperation between them for taking down a single menacing enemy was artless.

Emilia and Julius, their compatibility with each other when it came to cooperation was not good.

It was also largely impacted by the fact that Emilia's fighting style relied on senses therefore she was on the Feeling Side, whilst Julius was on the Technique Side, having stacked training and discipline.

However, if the problem came to even the two's power, then the problem would be how plausible would it be for them to know and amend each other's habits.

Yes, should they establish a relationship between each other's habits, if they got to know them.

Gluttony: “It sure is sad. Did you really think you could cooperate? Knowing, and trusting the partner for the time being, may be in the same direction when it comes to results but are totally different things, no? Don’t know the thoughts so can’t adjoin, don’t know the habits so can’t amend. At last, collide with one another and get in the way… haha~, that won’t do won’t do~, you two!”

Emilia: “Kh…”

Gluttony: “Knowledge is strength! Memories are bonds! Sacrificing reminiscences, we’re high above! We are strong! We can flap wings to the highest, to the utmost is what it means you kno~w!”

Jumping above, the kick unleashed by Gluttony captured the two at the same time.

He yet had a petite build and his legs weren’t too lengthy, but his soles and heels placed a firm, powerful hit on the two’s shoulders with absolute perfection, and instantly blew off both of them far backwards, sending them flying as they screeched in pain.

Meanwhile Gluttony somersaulted agilely, landing with his limbs on the icy floor, utterly dominating the battlefield.

Gluttony: “Troubles! Impertinence! Greatly difficult fighting! What do you think of these skills of ours, eh! Onii-san who’s just watching from there too, are you satisfied by just tasting feelings of vexation, eh?”

Subaru: “You bastard…”

Gluttony: “You said something or the other about not forgetting or whatever bu~t, how much can someone with that worth even manage to save? In the end, experience ultimately determines everything. Accumulating excellent expertise is precisely what enriches life and turns people into winners. In other words, it’s us who is the greatest is what it means!”

Opening both of his arms Gluttony laughed saying whatever he wished to as per his convenience, whilst unraveling his sharp fangs.

SETOWL

And precisely the words which Gluttony had recited were, indeed, his philosophy. Though slightly different from The Philosophy to Attain Joyfulness which Louis, who was supposed to be his younger sister had recited, it was the worst kind of ideology envisioning and intending to use the lives of others as a stepping stone for rising above and fattening oneself.

Subaru thought of it as an ideology which deserved to be utterly despised from the bottom of one's heart—

???: "—You, the hell're ya gettin' all fired up for?"

Gluttony: "Wha."

"…"

Until that point, Gluttony had been laughing loudly, enjoying his heyday, but the instant upon hearing that voice he widened his eyes. And, his surprise was shared by Subaru and the others.

That had been a scene of carnage, far too unexpected, trespassing onto this place without any shame.

Steadily, firmly treading on the aisle of ice, casually dressed with one side exposed, the tall figure of a redhead. With a fiendish smile, he revealed his form from the other side of the aisle— from the direction such that he directly faced Subaru and the others, and interposed Gluttony in between.

And—

???: "No goddamn way the greatest'd be a twisted with willpower kinda brat like you. That's cause the greatest, the strongest, the best n' the utmost're all words saved for me."

Saying so, standing there with a wicked smile was Reid Astrea, having descended from the second layer despite not being supposed to.

Chapter 65:
The Second, The Fifth, And Then—

1

"…"

Majestic and undaunted, the red-haired great man who had appeared in this place, Reid Astrea.

The unforeseen entrance of the man, his sharp blue eyes lacking any consideration for the other side's surprise, his very presence caused everyone— even Gluttony to be at a loss for words.

Reid: "Heyhey, the hell ya spacin' out for, you all. Is me bein' here somethin' so surprisin' huh. It's a matter of course, aye?"

And seeing Subaru and the others completely petrified, Reid slammed his left eye covered under his own eyepatch, and struck the sandals he was wearing onto the floor.

A gesture implicitly referring to the entire tower,

Reid: "I wasn't even able to take a nap cause of all the damn noise happenin' both outside and inside. It's so borin' that there ain't even drinks here in the first place n' then this happens, no way I'd tolerate it."

Subaru: "…That's completely your own convenience, isn't it. As you can see we're busy here in our own way. Don't make things more complicated."

Reid: "Hah! Ya said somethin', young fish? Sorry but yer voice's so low I couldn't hear a thin'. Well, even if I could hear it I'd still say I couldn't hear it."

Subaru: "Nasty stubborn…"

And what was nasty was not merely his stubbornness, but also his timing.

Too weak to blame him, not enough substance to protest him. Subaru, stumped by the violent and relentless words, realized that he was feeling afraid of Reid and tightened his fists.

His soul, remembered the sense of defeat pertaining to Reid's existence.

That was not simply because of what all Reid had made him experience back when he used to be filled with suspicion. He had faced his repulsive audacity even in the previous loop.

Subaru's heart was not supposed to have feared Reid this much back then.

But now, at this moment, why could he feel it peculiarly, unusually severely.

That was—

Subaru: "—Because my soul, clearly recognizes you as an enemy, huh."

Reid: "Nice, young fish. Don't mean to raise yer status from a young fish, but I'll commend ya for not misunderstandin' that I ain't any convenient support."

Subaru: "Even if you said, rejoice I'm your support, there's no way it'd be possible to fully accept such words by you."

Reid: "Hah! Sure said somethin'."

Unraveling his fangs in ferocity, Reid laughed like a shark whilst Subaru concealed the chills it sent down to his spine.

Reid's proclamation just now was also a hopeless pronouncement of a certain kind. However, Subaru had never thought of Reid as something like an ally from the beginning.

That had merely been affirmed. —He had not, been mistaken.

And upon the arrival of Subaru and Reid's exchange at a point where it paused—

Gluttony: “Well sa~y, Reid Astrea.”

Yes, the personage who had promptly returned to his true spirit, Gluttony called out Reid’s name.

Right in the center of the frozen aisle— the Sin Archbishop of insanity was standing literally in the middle of Subaru and the others and Reid, and upon being glared by that line of sight glinted with vicious emotions, Reid looked towards Gluttony and snorted his nose in displeasure.

Reid: “Oh, what is it, midget… What a filthy midget. What is it, filthy midget-chan.”

Gluttony: “You’re the first generation Sword Saint, aren’t you? Then why is that here again, hu~h? According to our memories, you, the trial taker, shouldn’t be able to come down from the upper floor, isn’t that right?”

Ignoring his humiliating nickname and provocative efforts, Gluttony fired the question at Reid.

The Memories he had spoken of were clearly Subaru’s Memories, which was quite infuriating, but Subaru and the others also shared the same question that he had raised.

—The trial taker of the second layer, Reid Astrea’s arrival onto the fourth layer.

This was something Subaru had also witnessed in the previous loop, and had considered it as one of the five obstacles which must be cleared.

The trick behind the phenomenon of him freely walking within the tower was entirely unknown. However, that phenomenon only occurred at this stage of the game. —Should it be said that he had been able to walk around all this time but simply chose not to, then the issue would be entirely different.

Gluttony: “Whether there’s a peculiar trick behind it, or whether the rules of the tower itself changed. Either way, you doing this is out of calculations, and we have no choice but to rethi~nk the full course in a lot of ways. After having the appetizer is the main dish and then the dessert, that's standard, you know. Right?"

Reid: "Don't ramble 'bout such incomprehensible bullshit, filthy midget bloody bastard."

"…"

Reid: "I can't come do~wn? Brace yer eyes n' look, you. Ya can understand the stupidity yer talkin' 'bout by takin' a look, aye, you. Hey you over there."

Whilst speaking, Reid pitched forward towards Gluttony in displeasure. His form, with his white fangs unraveled and glaring with a single eye was indeed like the natural style of a delinquent.

However, the pressure his self exerted was incomparably more than those of delinquents who gather in front of convenience stores, enough to make one feel threatened for their life by simply its aftermath.

Should it be equated, then what was standing there was a beast which was the mixture of a tiger, a bear, a lion and a dragon all in a single body.

Clad in every possible hint of violence, Reid bared his fangs.

Reid: "Don't joke 'round, you. I'm doin' whatever I want to however I want to. No way I'd accept someone's instructions, you. Don't be jokin' 'round, you. First of all, right back at ya, the hell 'bout you. Whose permission did ya take to be makin' a racket here. Hey, you, you over there, you."

Gluttony: "A~haha~, how amazi~ng, how unbea~rable, it's impossible to get talki~ng."

Turning the holy sword of ice he held in his hand into fragments of ice, Gluttony combed up his long bangs.

It seemed even Gluttony couldn't fare well with an opponent who was this difficult to get dialogue across to. Even Emilia, for whom it was no use arguing had hints of struggling, but Reid was multiple levels above Emilia in terms of getting conversation across to.

However, Gluttony said “Although” pertaining to the opponent this incompatible and resumed,

Gluttony: “As prey i~t’s the finest quality. Our appetite, as Gourmet, is starting to crave binging ~tsu! Eat it away! Chew it up! Lick it all! Attain the flavor! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!”

Roaring, maddening in excitement and ferocity, Gluttony positioned his limbs onto the frozen floor and glared at Reid.

Making his lengthy tongue peek through his white canines, as per the command of the aberrant Appetite which indulged in the memories of others, impossible to be understood by ordinary men, his saliva drooled and dripped onto the floor.

And—

Lye: “—Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Lye Batenkaitos.”

Whether that statement was boastful or conceited, anyhow, Gluttony — no, Lye Batenkaitos gave his name, kicked the floor of ice the immediately following instant, and commenced his sprint with the velocity of a fired arrow.

That spectacle was like the hunting ground of a ferocious quadruped, and his dash was wild enough to make one truly hallucinate that as well.

Reid: “Ah, what a pain.”

Focusing on Batenkaitos charging ahead madly, Reid put a single finger in his ear and grumbled as if troubled,

Reid: “Well then, I’m the swordsman, Hauroy Larrier.”

Subaru: “Who even is that?!”

Reid: “The guy who lived beside my house in my hometown.”

Subaru thoughtlessly shouted at that excessively grand alias, to which Reid responded quite indifferently. Afterwards, he pulled his finger out of his ear and looked down onto Batenkaitos immediately before him,

Lye: "—Let's eat ~tsu!!"

Reid: "Puttin' aside if the frizzlin' nee-chan said this, but bein' told that by a dirty midget-chan like you ain't makin' me happy."

Lye: "—Dzu ~tsu."

As Batenkaitos advanced in with his large mouth open, his body was intensely shifted horizontally.

That was Reid's right leg crudely unleashed, its kick captured Batenkaitos' torso directly horizontally in order to energetically strike him into the wall of the aisle.

Lye: "Ghu, egh… ~hk."

Reid: "Don't make the sound of a chicken bein' strangled, you. Let me tell ya, a chicken tastes delicious after bein' strangled, but I ain't intendin' to eat you. Don't care 'bout gluttony or whatever."

Lye: "Ghi, ah!"

Reid: "Ya came jumpin' at an adult. Hope yer prepared for a spankin', yo~u!"

Despite being caught up in the vigor, Batenkaitos retained his senses and gave a short grin, displaying extraordinary endurance. The subsequent instant he positioned his arm upward, intending to bring down the dagger attached to his wrist onto Reid's leg with fierce strength, which invited Reid to twitch his eyebrows.

Whilst speaking, Reid pushed Batenkaitos' body onto the wall with his leg, and started running across the frozen aisle with a single leg at an incomprehensible speed.

Of course, having been pushed onto the wall and being slid across the surface of the wall which had the ruggedness of ice here and there, Batenkaitos was in no state to be able to resist. That damage was enormous and destructive.

Lye: “Ghi, ga~a~a~a~a~a~— ~tsu!”

Reid: “Heyhey, don’tcha start screamin’ by jus’ this. This way it won’t even be somethin’ to consider. This ain’t even children’s play in my era yet. Brats these days’re not only filthy but also meager aye, hey, hey, hey, yo~u!”

Declaring with displeasure, Reid stopped his feet and turned around halfway through at that spot.

With his leg which had pressed Batenkaitos onto the wall unfastened, the body of the Sin Archbishop slid down. Before that, the left leg he had balanced himself with launched a rotating kick which energetically slammed into Batenkaitos’ side, and his petite frame was lightly blown off.

“…”

With unusual vigor, Batenkaitos sprang onto the floor whilst taking a defensive stance. The Sin Archbishop, rotating at a high speed and bleeding, went through the gap between Emilia and Julius and finally tumbled onto the aisle’s interior horizontal to Subaru and Beatrice.

As he lay spread-eagled, fallen on the floor, no longer did he display any of his former strength.

All this was easily enough to kill anyone, but perhaps because of his exceptional awareness of defense, that was possibly not the case here.

Subaru: “That guy, was the formidable enemy who had been overpowering both Emilia-chan and Julius till now, right?”

Beatrice: “…No question in that, in fact. But this one exceeds norms even more, I suppose. That’s why, respectively it can be said that the situation has worsened, in fact.”

Subaru: “The war cards have only changed places, huh.”

Beatrice: “That too, to a worse opponent, I suppose.”

Beatrice, whilst tightly holding Subaru’s hand, was vigilant regarding Reid in front instead of the collapsed, immobile Batenkaitos. The same went for Emilia or Julius as well.

The war situation had already changed from the battle against Gluttony to a new warrior.

Even in the midst of that—

Emilia: “Rea~lly, thank you for beating, the Sin Archbishop… and, can’t we just go ahead and get along like this?”

First, Emilia spoke to Reid in a friendly manner. She offered a proposal for peace befitting of her, however in response Reid shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and stomped on the floor.

Clearing away that proposal with those three gestures of his body, Reid scratched his head.

Reid: “Hah, don’t be sayin’ such demotivatin’ shit, you… Actually, the hell’s up with ya, you. Yer too frizzlin’, the heck’s happenin’, it ain’t a joke! Aren’tcha fiercely frizzlin’! Why’re ya here in this place, you. The hell ya doin’ in this situation. Don’t be tourin’ ’round this sandy bullshit place, instead let’s go for drinks tonight, you.”

Emilia: “Umm, this is also the second time though…”

Julius: “—Unfortunately, she cannot accompany you for your evening drinks. The reason being”

Reid: “Oh?”

Julius: “A night of peace shall not visit you, an illusion.”

Saying so, as if intercepting the inelegant comment, the sole man who stepped forward with his knight sword prepared— Julius stood off Reid as if covering for Emilia, and sharpened his gaze by honing it with knightly spirit.

Right before those yellow eyes, Reid changed his expression slightly.

Reid: "…The hell, you. Haven't ya gotten a bit better aye. Did somethin' good happen aye. A woman aye. Gotta be a woman, right, you."

Julius: "I shall not deny that certain events happened which affected my preparedness in many ways, however, I will state that they were not because of involvement with a female. If the embrace of a female can heal a wounded heart, then so can the relentless reprimand of a friend."

Reid: "Still a bastard who keeps beatin' 'round the bush, that hasn't changed eh. The hell do ya wanna say?"

Julius: "In other words, the fact that I am able to hold my sword like this, is thanks to my friend—!"

An instant after that declaration, Julius tipped up his knight sword with sharp footsteps, painting the tip of his sword with beauty enough to make one doubt their eyes, and fired a strike towards Reid's neck.

"…"

The opponent had not shown any hostility yet, such a thoughtless identification was entirely unneeded.

Upon standing at this spot, Reid's thoughts were clearer than fire at night— his unrestrainable sword spirit could fleetingly even be felt on the skins of the bystanders.

It was inconceivable that one possessing such sword spirit would remain without using his weapons.

—Reid was motivated. Just like the previous loop, without giving any regard to the surrounding situation either.

Hence, Julius made the preemptive strike without any indecision.

That choice was the optimal solution. It could be affirmed that this precise strike aimed for dampening the calm and composed attitude of Reid here, a necessity to capture this first generation Sword Saint.

The problem was—

Reid: "—Do ya've any idea what it means to be calm n' composed?"

"…"

Reid: "That's bein' able to do anythin' with flexibility regardless of whatever petty tricks're played, ya idiot, is what it means."

—It was that Julius' preemptive strike had been intercepted and stopped by the two chopsticks Reid held in his hand.

Julius: "Kh… ~hk."

Reid: "Well, it wasn't bad, ya know? Had I not been the opponent, ya would've probably made the opponent taste at least this one. —Well then, let's go."

Julius: "Shi ~hk!"

Reid laughed like a shark against Julius, who choked on even his biting words.

At the same pace, Reid gripped to one chopstick in each of his hands and swept away the tip of the sword, as well as at the same time, stomped ahead and launched blows from his chopsticks. The impact firmly struck the front of the knight sword, giving rise to a clear echo.

"…"

Two slim sticks far shorter than a sword in terms of length, but by being wielded by the expert known as Reid, turned into a weapon far greater than their size and bashed destruction.

The moment subsequent to the clear echo, the outbreaking shockwaves made Julius' hair and clothes flutter, and sent cracks in all of the frozen parts of the aisle at once.

—Literally exceeding norms, going against common sense, a lump of abnormality befitting to be named as an error of the world.

Even though Subaru had seen his physical strength several times in the past, seeing the personage himself rendered Subaru speechless.

The negativity of the fact that such a monster existed in this world, and the devilish nature of the latent feelings of the designer who decided to include overcoming this monster as one of the conditions for the tower's capture, nauseated his chest.

However—

Reid: "—Aye, I'm actually impressed a bit."

It was unknown how much of Reid's full strength had been applied into that blow of the chopsticks.

However, it appeared that even that blow being accepted was out of Reid's calculations, and he commended Julius' fighting spirit for warding off the chopsticks' strike.

Receiving that, Julius squinted his eyes whilst blood seeped out from the edge of his mouth.

Julius: "After all, I must win against you or otherwise our calculations will flunk, you see."

Reid: "Is it yer intent to win why yer barkin' 'bout."

Julius: "I'm sure that must be the case. But, allow me to give you company!"

At that moment, Julius' sword strike brimmed in light and was wildly received away by Reid with his two chopsticks.

The sword's momentum got deflected, and Julius' stance crumbled — was not the case. Julius, having considered his knight sword being swept away, rotated and connected the second sword blow with no lag whatsoever.

Thus commenced a swords dance, like the flow of refined water with not a single droplet wasteful.

"…"

Subaru inhaled, witnessing the swords dance piling up countless offence and defense with his own eyes.

This was at most what Subaru was able to follow with his eyes, yes, only what Subaru had been able to follow his eyes, but this was the proof of Julius Juukulius' willpower and disciplining seeking to reach the Sword Saint, called to be the pinnacle of the sword.

—If Reid's might of the sword was like blazing flames, then Julius' swordsmanship was like flowing water.

Speaking in terms of basic compatibility then the water should extinguish the flames, however, the flames here were mighty, so mighty that they could simply evaporate the opposing water and reduce it to nothing.

Perhaps, many swordsmen akin to flowing water had been evaporated away by the blazing flames of Reid's swordsmanship.

However, at the very least, Julius had no fear of throwing himself in there and getting himself evaporated as he continued launching destructive and unavoidable attacks upon Reid.

And—

Emilia: "Don't think that your opponent is just, Julius!"

Reid: "Hah ~hk! I ain't forgettin', fiercely frizzlin'! Your face's too good to forget!"

Emilia: "Thank you for the compliment! But, there is only one person who truly remembered!"

Emilia joined in on Reid and Julius' swords dance wielding a mountain of armaments of ice.

Due to that, Reid turned one of his chopsticks against Julius and the other against Emilia. Whether that could even serve as a counter measure, such banal sense of values were smashed by Reid's swordsmanship.

Glaciation interrupted the swords dance of blazing flames and flowing water, and the colors of the battlefield altered into further vividness yet again.

The cast of the swords dance had been changed by one, with Reid being the opponent instead of Batenkaitos, and Emilia and Julius' crude coordination resumed— no, that also changed.

Perhaps due to the enemy being stronger, but much more likely that the two of them brought together their battling style in this short interval and made amendments, somehow bringing it all together finally, their cooperation turned into actual cooperation.

Beatrice: "Julius, is matching in with Emilia, in fact."

Subaru: "You get it?"

Beatrice: "There's also their compatibility on the basis of their personality, I suppose. Emilia showed all her strength clearly, and Julius became capable of moving accordingly, in fact. Probably because of Emilia dropping the need to match in, I suppose."

Subaru: "What an amazing comment."

Regardless, since it was going well, it had to have been the correct judgement.

In the end, Emilia did not hold back and did everything at her own pace, and Julius matched in with the easy to comprehend movement of the other, adorning himself being his specialty.

Reid: "Haha~! Good goin' good goin', you all! I'm startin' to have fun too aye!"

Emilia: "Huyah! Siyah! Hayah! Hiyayaya~!"

Joyfully brushing away the two whilst they cordially engaged with each other, Reid laughed loudly. Emilia then let out a shout and launched a mighty attack one would not think could come from that voice, but it failed to become the decisive blow.

A marvelous swords dance, as if an illusion of water, fire and ice intertwining.

The knight sword of steel, the sticks that had seemingly been turned into steel due to the skill and force they were being used with, and the weapons of ice which struck, broke, regenerated and gave rise to high pitched notes.

A sight so beautiful, capable of making one misunderstand that there was truly such a dance being performed—

???: "—Shi~ya~a~a~a~a~!!"

Henceforth, the dissonant existence which wedged itself in obstructively, seared itself into everyone's minds as foreign to both eyes and ears.

Subaru: "Bastard… ~hk!"

Wedging himself obstructively and rudely into the space where the three unfolded their offence and defense, was Lye Batenkaitos.

The young boy who was supposed to have eaten Reid's kick and tumbled into a state of being almost dead. He stood up and rose once again, joining in on the battlefield as if he had not suffered any damage whatsoever.

Batenkaitos swung the daggers fastened to the wrists on both of his hands, alongside combining the battle techniques that made skillful use of his short limbs, he continuously fired fatal attacks onto the three from next to next.

They caught Emilia, Julius and Reid off guard and the three respectively defended against them, troubled and hurriedly. However, their defense against them was imperfect, and some bits of their hair and clothes got sliced off,

Julius: "How stubborn of you to not give up, Sin Archbishop!"

Lye: "Haha~! Shunning us and then having fun, stop doing such nasty things, nii-sama! Always and always having it just to yourself, eh? How unfair, truly!"

Emilia: "Reid! I'm sure you get it! There's no point even if we fight here! Will you help us, just stay still at the very least please!"

Reid: "What a clueless woman ya're, fiercely frizzlin'. I'm enjoyin' myself as things're, ya know? Even if the great stars fall from the sky, my plans ain't bendin'!"

"…"

The four, whilst waging fierce and heroic blows upon each other, knocked their respective wills onto each other.

This was a spectacle of battle, impossible to be approached readily, impossible to reach a common ground, impossible to be disunited from the odor of blood.

For an outsider it was difficult to judge who was at an advantage, who was at a disadvantage, who was superior, who was inferior.

All what was possible was to hope for their allies' victory, however —

Subaru: "—Gh."

Beatrice: "Subaru?!"

And, Beatrice was astonished to see Subaru, who could do nothing but watch and hope, kneel down whilst gripping onto his chest.

Beatrice knelt down, touching Subaru's shoulder as he breathed hoarsely and looked at his face.

Beatrice: "Subaru, Subaru! What's wrong, in fact. What happened, I suppose!"

Subaru: "…No, what is, this?"

Beatrice: "Subaru?"

Against Beatrice's desperate calls, Subaru tightened his grip onto his chest and repeatedly blinked.

There was no possibility that he had made a mistake, or a move. But even Subaru could not comprehend this. Peculiarly strange, pain— unbelievable heat swelled up in the interior of his chest.

His heart was beating at a rate as if it would explode, he could feel every single drop of blood flowing within his body, an awful and incomprehensible sensation as if an alarm bell was sounding off.

"…"

He did not understand. What was happening to his body right now.

This was something that did not happen in any of the loops till now. Some sort of chronic sickness, or even worse, some sort of magical interference had possibly happened.

Rushing across all of the knowledge he possessed in his mind, he went through the worst case possibilities and shook his head.

No. This was perhaps, not something negative. The alarm bell was sounding only because of a problem.

Subaru: "Wah, ah…"

Inhaling deeply, he then exhaled.

Till now, Subaru's brain had been getting seared by concern for Emilia and Julius who were fighting Batenkaitos and Reid before him.

In terms of the situation, his powerless self could do nothing but stand and watch.

In this situation, what seared Subaru's brain was the advance of the five obstacles whilst they were busy with this— being the two remaining obstacles.

—The five obstacles.

One was the large horde of witchbeasts which surrounded the tower. One was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, who would launch an attack on the tower. One was Reid Astrea, who would start freely walking around the tower. —In the current situation, there were three present.

The remaining two were, the titanic scorpion which would wander around the tower with an expression as if it owns the place, and the colossal black shadow which would swallow the tower with fearsome vigor.

Those two must also be dealt with, or the problems falling upon the tower shall not get disposed of.

At the other side of Emilia and Julius' strenuous efforts, the moment he troubled over dealing with the possibilities seeking the collapse of the tower, his chest pounded with heat and made Subaru kneel down.

His heart continued beating fiercely.

Remaining conscious of his heartbeats, Subaru slowly breathed and closed his eyes.

He thought that he should do what his body felt like doing. Abiding by that, he closed his eyes.

"…"

Seeing Subaru's condition, Beatrice stopped her calls.

Perhaps she possessed no affirmation either. Yet she made that gesture. Subaru was blessed to possess such understanding comrades.

And, into the back of Subaru's eyeballs, a curious sensation welled up.

—They were faint, fleeting lights levitating against dim darkness.

Subaru: "—?"

Faint, warm and blurry lights.

There was one right beside Subaru, and two at slight distance from him. Strangely enough, Subaru comprehended that there were lights behind him without even having to glance backwards.

Behind him, were four lights. One of them was at some distance from the rest, and, and, and—

—He realized that one was approaching overhead.

Subaru: "—Beatrice!"

Beatrice: "Hya ~hk!"

For some reason Subaru blindly trusted this sensation and without any hesitation, leapt away from that spot as if jumping at Beatrice.

Hugging the young girl's light body in his arms, Subaru tumbled onto the floor lacking all faltering— that instant, he grasped that scorching heat raided the thigh of his right leg, as he gave rise to a wail of anguish.

Subaru: "Gha, gho~o~o~o~o~!"

He instantly realized that the burning sensation was generated from a deep wound. Perhaps in an attempt to turn his eyes away from his wounded leg, Subaru looked at Beatrice whilst hugging her.

And, forcing his eyes to open through the pain and tears, he saw.

"…"

Subaru: "I knew, it'd come, this scorpion… ~hk!"

Subaru threw that up in rage, and what had appeared before him was, this being the second chance meeting with it as well, the titanic scorpion— the scorpion, possessing a black shell and eyes like red luminous dots had the rest of its legs crawl on the wall as it lorded over Subaru and the others.

Beatrice: "—Ah."

In front of the horrifyingly humongous creature, Beatrice widened her eyes. What Beatrice could see in front of her were pincers of the scorpion that had gouged out Subaru's leg deeply. The scorpion ecstatically upheld Subaru's flesh in its pincers, dripping a large amount of blood onto the aisle.

—He had been worried, about the obstruction of the titanic scorpion.

The five obstacles he needed to overcome, had all assembled here.

"…"

This was bad. This was bad this was bad. This was bad this was bad this was bad. This was bad this was bad.

Comprehending how unfavorable the situation was, Subaru tried searching for a means of survival within his thoughts which were being scorched by ache.

However, nothing dawned upon Subaru as to what could bring about a positive change in the situation.

Batenkaitos was here, Reid was here, even the titanic scorpion had appeared.

Even if Meili and Shaula restrained the horde of witchbeasts, the other cards had already failed to function well with these turn of events. This, will not do.

This path, will not do. With a further, different way of action—

"—Subaru!" "Subaru!" "Subaru!!"

Subaru, gnashing his teeth, was able to hear three voices calling for him strike his eardrums.

Beatrice's poignant voice, Julius' tensed voice, Emilia's pleading voice, Subaru heard them respectively call for him, and.

Batenkaitos, Reid, the titanic scorpion, then moved towards each of them respectively.

As if in order to hinder the actions, the road of Natsuki Subaru, but even earlier than that,

"…"

—An impact struck the tower with immense vigor, the entire tower vehemently quaked and a thunderous roar echoed.

"…"

With the same pace it made Subaru's body, lying on floor jump, blew away Emilia and the others who had unfolded offence and defense, crushed even the titanic scorpion's shell, as the world crumbled.

The small body beside Subaru was hugging him seemingly in order to protect him. Hugging back that soft body, Subaru widened his eyes in the midst of the impact.

—I love you.

—There present was solely the darkness harboring blind love, as it tried to swallow Subaru.

2

—At that instant everything in the world, white and black, men and women, love and hate, all had been consumed by the quaking impact but solely Natsuki Subaru managed escaping it.

???: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "—~hk!"

???: "Uhya ~hk!"

A call to him, as if pulling that in, Subaru hugged the owner of that voice.

Within his arms, the body moved about in fluster and panic, looking upwards from the middle of his chest.

That was—

Subaru: “Bea, trice…”

Beatrice: “Y-Yes, I suppose! Doing this suddenly is surprising, in fact. Well it’s not as if Betty doesn’t like it, I suppose. But, Betty was just worried that you just returned from the book… but, seeing Betty’s name being called first is relieving, I suppose.”

“…”

Yes, Beatrice whispered whilst remaining in Subaru’s arms. Hearing her words, Subaru looked around himself.

What had happened immediately previously, he had fallen onto the aisle, his leg had also been wounded, and then into that dark, dark shadow—.

Subaru: “…Library?”

???: “For the moment, if you could clear whether you are still half asleep or not then I believe we could proceed with our codes of action as well, Natsuki-kun.”

That voice struck Subaru, who was astonished to find himself surrounded by the vast amount of books.

Upon looking that had been Echidna, smiling wryly whilst caressing her light purple hair. Behind her was the shelf she leaned on and Meili, who rested her chin on her hands saying “You’re finally u~p”.

“…”

Beatrice: “Wah, wah wah! Subaru! Subaru, what happened, in fact! Are you not feeling well after all, I suppose? Can you speak about what you saw in the book?”

Subaru: “Ah, well, hm. I also, need to do that, but…”

Subaru tightly hugged Beatrice’s petite body, and enjoyed her warmth.

And, recognized the reality that he must recognize.

—He had returned. To this moment.

Subaru returned to this moment, having failed to overcome the five obstacles.

Chapter 66:
Second Chance to The End

1

—The first thing he did was to make his heart accept the truth that he had Returned by Death.

"…"

Whilst stroking the concerned Beatrice's head, who was in his arms, Subaru reflected onto the Predicament that he had experienced immediately previously and also were happenings of the future.

The fact that he had Returned by Death meant that he had been unable to evade the circumstance of crises befalling onto his life.

Abandoning the disasters he knew would arrive, he had exposed the lives of his comrades to hazard— no, that was naive. That was not what had happened.

He had not exposed their lives to hazard. Subaru, had let Emilia and the others die.

He knew that would be what it would come down to, yet he missed it.

The existence of the five obstacles assailing the tower, difficult to be neglected. Despite knowing of them, Subaru had failed to evade the problems due to his indiscretion and naivete.

At the very last moment, what had perhaps decisively taken his life away had been the colossal black shadow, which relentlessly destroyed this humongous and gigantic tower itself— that was, the greatest and the final obstacle.

Including that, he arranged the five obstacles in his mind again.

The first was the large horde of witchbeasts, pushing into the tower all at once.

The second one was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, coming with the aim of Subaru's Memories and Name.

The third was the titanic scorpion, which invaded into the tower in sometime unknown and lurked in a blind spot, subsequently attacking.

Fourth was the rampaging Reid Astrea, swaggering about freely in the tower, ignoring all enemies and allies.

The fifth one and the last one was the black shadow, which swallowed and ruined everything.

Their circumstances evolved at the same time, and overlooking even a single one of them would easily cause the entire plan to collapse.

Could it be said that the jet black shadow which should rightfully be feared was a gesture of kindness by this unfair and absurd world by notifying Subaru of a time limit. He was in a dilemma whether it was an issue he should feel grateful for.

Subaru: "Leaving the first one, the large horde of witchbeasts to Meili and Shaula…"

This choice could be affirmed to not have been wrong.

Last time— no, it would be last to last time now, in the loops until last to last time the five obstacles must have also concurrently occurred. Subaru had also witnessed the scenario of the witchbeasts invading into the tower.

Should that happen, crucial fighting forces like Emilia and Julius would have to face the witchbeasts in order to restrain them. That had been avoided in this loop whereby Meili had survived.

The strength of Meili's existence was unmistakably a single step forward.

However, it was still not sufficient.

Even if the large horde of witchbeasts could be held back, Subaru and the others were helpless against the following obstacle.

Emilia had gotten her Name robbed by the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony who had appeared, and though they somehow managed to have Julius join the fight against Batenkaitos, subsequently Reid partook in the battlefield.

Resultantly the two Emilia and Julius were forced to employ open tactics against the frontiers of both Gluttony and Reid, causing valuable time to be lost ultimately leading to the titanic scorpion's intrusion, and directly hitting the declaration of time up by the shadow.

In other words, that balance mustn't happen. Their number of moves were lacking.

On top of that, what Subaru feared was if the words of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony — Louis Arneb were correct, two of Gluttony were supposed to have arrived.

He had encountered Lye Batenkaitos. However, the other one's form was nowhere to be seen.

—This was bad. This was bad this was bad this was bad. At any rate, this was bad.

Even though the situation was progressing with every second, even though Subaru alone had got a grasp on all the problems, despite piling up so many Deaths he did not have the full picture in clarity.

It had taken far too long for him to take a step. Why did his self, spend so much time in inactivity—.

Beatrice: "Calm down, I suppose!"

Subaru: "Ahyah ~hk!"

Subaru's brain overhead and almost started fuming, that was when Beatrice strongly sandwiched his cheeks between her two small hands and brought his consciousness back to reality through pain.

With her hands still on his cheeks, Beatrice resumed at distance close enough to exchange breaths.

Beatrice: “Subaru, tell what happened in the book, in fact. It’ll be fruitless if you take it upon yourself alone, I suppose. Properly talk about it, and it will be thought about together… that is, Betty and the others’ forte, in fact.”

Subaru: “What happened, in the book, huh…”

Hearing Beatrice’s earnest appeal, Subaru looked down onto the situation he had been placed in.

He has accepted the truth that he had Returned by Death. And similarly, he must also recognize and etch the place he had returned to as well.

This place was the library of the third layer of Taygeta.

In the room surrounded with bookshelves housing countless Books of the Dead, this was the scene immediately after his consciousness returned from challenging the Book of the Dead of Reid.

And, speaking of what had happened to Subaru in the book—.

Subaru: “—Stand up, happened.”

Beatrice: “Eh?”

Subaru: “No, I mean I got my back kicked and was driven out of giving up. Shit, this is so pathetic. I’ve made no progress at all.”

Subaru scratched his head in front of Beatrice, who rounded her eyes.

Subsequently he stood up whilst keeping Beatrice in his grasp, and slowly looked towards the environs— towards the two of Echidna and Meili. The members who had been waiting for Subaru to wake up.

He was already aware of what the missing Emilia and Ram, Shaula and Julius were doing.

The circumstances were already breaking forth, there was no time to halt.

That is why—

Subaru: “I’ll cut it short. I failed to see Reid’s memories in the Book of the Dead. Something got in the way. Books of the Dead are connected to the soles of the existence called Od Lagna, that is where I encountered a problematic one.”

Hearing Subaru’s short and quick explanation, the three widened their eyes in surprise.

Subaru gestured an apology for not giving them the time to halt and give thought to it, and continued his words.

Them being—

Subaru: “—The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb has declared war on us.”

2

Echidna: “Though I must say, we come so far to the boundary in the east and Sin Archbishops again, huh. It seems that there is a profound and immeasurable connection between them and Natsuki-kun.”

After listening to his explanation, Echidna ridiculed Subaru’s circumstances with that comment.

Whilst hearing that comment, Subaru and the others jumped and descended the staircase of the library, moving in order to reunite with their comrades who had distanced themselves from Taygeta.

Subaru: “Unfortunately, I happen to have amnesia. I have no idea about having a relationship with these Sin Archbishop folks if it was worth calling profound… Am I really that connected to them?”

Beatrice: “At the very least, they are the ones responsible for making Betty and the others come to this tower, I suppose. Made a long journey through the desert, seeking a solution to what all they had done.”

Subaru: “I thought I had heard just the surface of the aim behind coming to this tower, so they were the true origin. They really can’t do anything better.”

Frowning in tediousness, Subaru was stumped by happening to have a destined relationship with unpleasant parties.

Although he did not press them much about it, both Beatrice and Echidna did not limit the people he was connected to as only Gluttony. If Subaru’s ideas were correct, then there were perhaps seven people who were all Sin Archbishops, thus he conjectured that the ones he had gotten involved with had not been solely Gluttony.

Subaru: “That depresses me, so I don’t want to talk about it right now… oh.”

???: “Echidna! Subaru, you’re also there!”

And, when Subaru and the others returned to the fourth layer and sprinted towards the aisle, the person who came dashing towards them just in time— Julius, raised a voice of surprise.

Last time as well Julius had returned to Taygeta in order to inform Echidna and Subaru of the atypical situation surrounding the tower. They had now encountered him a bit earlier.

Seeing Subaru having safely returned from the Book of the Dead, Julius said,

Julius: “So you are safe, Subaru. Did you secure the vital information from the Book of the Dead?”

Subaru: “Though it’ll be the same explanation as what I gave to Beatrice and the others, that failed. The detailed explanation is a question for me later, so I’d like to solve these abnormal circumstances concurrently.”

Julius: “What do you mean, in other words?”

Subaru: “It means I can guess what the situation basically is. — Right now, witchbeasts are surrounding the tower, right?”

The moment Subaru fired his question, an immense tremor jolted the tower.

That indistinct and constant something akin to tremors reached everyone present inside the tower. Its cause being correctly guessed made Julius gaze in slight wonderment.

However, he immediately lowered his chin and nodded,

Julius: “Just as you say. Currently, the environs of this Pleiades Watchtower have been besieged by a great number of witchbeasts. At the outer edge of the tower, Miss Shaula is aggressively struggling and stalling the witchbeasts’ invasion but…”

Meili: “If the identity of these tremors is a horde of bad animal-chan’s the~n, no matter how strongly the naked onee-san may stand she’ll eventually not be able to restrain them hu~h.”

Julius: “Henceforth, I want you to lend your strength. What do you say, Meili.”

Meili jumped into the conversation, and Julius faced and requested her with sincerity. Accepting his sincerity, Meili turned a profoundly meaningful gaze towards Subaru and the others.

Getting the impression that the gaze intended to ask about the pros and cons about her actions, Subaru lightly inhaled and nodded.

Subaru: “I’m requesting you too, Meili, nothing will get sorted if it isn’t for you. Sorry for this being so sudden, but please cooperate so that we can all take a step forward together.”

Meili: “…Hmm? Geez onii-san, still so pathetic even after saying such grand wo~rds. But, since you asked me earnestly, leave that place to me. Be gratefu~l.”

Subaru: “Ah, my heartfelt gratitude! I love you!”

Meili: “How pe~tty…”

Making a sour look in response to Subaru's gratitude, Meili consented to cope with the witchbeasts. With this, one of the five obstacles will be cleared. Till now it had been the same as last time.

Hence—

Julius: "Well then, let's take her to Miss Shaula…"

Subaru: "No, we will be taking a different code of action. Meili, do you know where the balcony is? Work together with Shaula there, and somehow stall the witchbeasts."

Meili: "The end of the aisle, ri~ght? Really, you don't know ho~w to treat people."

Hearing that, Meili spilled a sigh and dashed off. Though languid and unenthusiastic, he understood that that was her own pose seeing her move in accordance with Subaru's orders. That was, as fast as she could run.

And,

Julius: "Subaru, with the witchbeasts aside, you seem to possess confirmation of some sort. What are you aware of?"

Subaru: "I guess so. I'll explain it along the way. Come with me for now. —We must hurry, or Emilia-chan and the others will be in danger."

Julius: "—~hk!"

Julius widened his eyes in astonishment, and Subaru ran after patting his shoulder. He held Beatrice in his arms, and Echidna hurried behind them as well.

For a moment Julius was stumped but shook his head, and caught up to his back quickly.

Subaru: "Earlier I told you that I failed to dive into the Book of the Dead, right. I couldn't see Reid's memories. Instead of that, I came across another chap over there… I encountered the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony."

Julius: "—No way. Why would Gluttony, be in the Book of the Dead?"

Hearing the name of the enemy he had a connection to, Julius' expression froze. Echidna called out to his side profile saying "Julius".

She alone was making an expression of feeling chagrined pertaining to the speed of her feet, as she raised a single finger,

Echidna: "According to what Natsuki-kun had said, the Books of the Dead are an apparatus of the cradle of Od Lagna… the Hall of Memories in order to take custody of the memories of the dead, the paths of life walked. And, the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony eat the Memories and Names of others. In other words…"

Julius: "Their Authority, is making use of that end of Od Lagna's power…? No, you said that you met Gluttony in the book, right. If that's so then Subaru, the reason behind your memory loss is."

Subaru: "Yeah, it's nothing like the tower's trap or mechanism. Sheer FOE… it was an accident caused by a random encounter is what it means. The same way of victimization as you say."

It was impossible to imagine having to encounter Gluttony when facing the Book of the Dead.

That too if Subaru and the others' imagination last time had been correct, then the Book of the Dead possessing the possibility of encountering Gluttony was solely the book of Reid, who had been reconstructed in the tower.

How terrible a fortune would one need for that to happen, he also wanted to object to the deeds of the Subaru until yesterday. Such that he had started wanting to believe idle gossip like truly had a connection with the Sin Archbishops.

Julius: "For it to be the same as this, quite an awful preference I must say… However, if there had been contact between you and Gluttony at the point of last night, then this charge of the witchbeasts too?"

Beatrice: “It would mean that the enemy ended up getting the time of more than half a day for making preparations, I suppose. Had Subaru remembered, matters might’ve been… Ah! Betty is not reproaching Subaru, in fact!”

Subaru: “I know. But, it’s a matter of course that you’d reproach me. It would’ve been better had the me until yesterday not made this blunder, it would’ve been better if the present me was smarter.”

Had that been the case, they would’ve surely been able to face the enemy in a further prepared state.

But saying that now was pointless. Contesting with all cards they possessed, that was vital.

What was needed was readiness, decisiveness and the intent to have faith in— oneself aside, in comrades.

Subaru: “Just as what you judged, the horde of witchbeasts is Gluttony’s doing. On top of that, Gluttony himself will march in and enter… and will be aiming for Emilia-chan and the others.”

And before Subaru and the others reach, having been late at noticing, the isolated force of Emilia will be coerced into making strenuous efforts and letting Ram and the rest escape, calling the result of getting her Name eaten upon herself.

They must stop that from happening this time. —For that purpose, he had taken shortcuts in several positions of the game.

Subaru: “If we don’t let Emilia-chan’s Name get robbed…”

—Perhaps, they might avoid Ram having to withdraw from the war front.

“…”

Last time, the reason why Ram was unable to undertake action was the result of Batenkaitos stealing Emilia’s Name, for she had been unable to catch Emilia’s lack of existence and the absence of memories.

Should that risk be done away with, it would be plausible to expect Ram's existence as war potential. Should they hold onto Rem and take care of her, whom she had brought with herself, then there shouldn't be any issues in that regard either.

And, if the tag team of Emilia and Ram could hold Batenkaitos down.

Subaru: "Julius! There's a job you have to do as well! We'll somehow manage things with Gluttony. The opponent you've been connected to as well. I very well get your feeling of wanting to send him flying, but…"

Julius: "But, what? In this place, an opponent which should be prioritized above Gluttony can't…"

Subaru: "—Reid will come down. If he manages to interfere then everything will come down to nothing. There's the role, to stop that."

"…"

Receiving that elucidation, the repeated surprise yielded wrinkles on Julius' middle forehead yet again.

However, rather than meagre astonishment this time it was composed more of perplexity, and doubt.

It was a matter of course.

The attack and raid by the large horde of witchbeasts and the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. Both of those could be disposed of as things he heard directly by Gluttony in the Book of the Dead.

However, matters shall differ should Reid's existence get tangled with that. There was no point of contact between the existence of Reid and Gluttony. Because at the very least, the facility of the tower and the Sin Archbishops were unrelated.

Henceforth, seeking a logical basis for that explanation was not possible—

Julius: “…If that is true, then let’s assume Reid Astrea shall arrive downstairs. In this state of affairs, the possibility of him acting whilst ignoring them.”

Subaru: “Can’t imagine that happening, right? Really? Does he seem to be the type of guy who would be influenced by the surrounding situation?”

Beatrice: “…Sorry but Betty can’t imagine that happening, in fact. That thing has the nature to prioritize what he wants to do, I suppose. No matter what the situation.”

Beatrice assented on the basis of an unpleasant confirmation whilst being carried in Subaru’s arms. Julius reached the conclusion hearing her and then looked at Echidna, as if asking for final thoughts.

Echidna shrugged her petite shoulders in response to his gaze.

Echidna: “I agree as well. Regardless, it is difficult to believe he would start walking around freely in the tower. Though it would be more accurate to say that I don’t want to believe that… Natsuki-kun, that information too?”

Subaru: “—. That’s right. I heard from Gluttony.”

After hesitating for a moment, Subaru nodded and boldly lied responding to Echidna’s question.

As a matter of fact, the possibility of Gluttony playing a role in the sequence of events of Reid walking freely was slim. At the very least, Batenkaitos had been surprised by Reid’s presence, and looking at how they dealt with each other, he must not have summoned Reid as an ally either.

That’s why this had been entirely unable to convey the authenticity of the information Subaru had and was more like a safeguard.

“…”

Listening to Subaru’s answer, who was at a somewhat rough spot, Julius dove into his thoughts making a strained face.

However, even when they were troubled with thoughts, time continued to flow moment by moment. Especially presently, the situation of the tower was worsening, with the horde of witchbeasts and Sin Archbishops.

Recognizing that fact, Echidna called out saying “Julius”,

Echidna: “In the present situation, I am also hesitant about keeping distance from visible threats and turning towards potential hazards. But, Natsuki-kun’s words…”

Julius: “Should be trusted… yes, I know, Echidna. To be honest, I find it regrettable to turn away from the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, a bitter enemy of mine as well. However”

Subaru: “—Reid Astrea, can only be left to you. Just as I told you earlier.”

Julius: “…If I don’t win, our calculations will fail, was it. Geez, such incorrigible killing words.”

Should their calculations fail, should the gears come disjointed, perhaps what would be yielded forth would be a tragedy lacking reason.

As if having caught a glimpse of that in Subaru’s earnest, black eyes, Julius let out a deep sigh.

Julius: “I promise you. I shall take the responsibility for Reid. —However, if things turn out that he cannot move from the second layer then I shall join you. Any objections?”

Subaru: “None. There can’t be anything better than you being free and Reid being immobile. I leave the timely judgement up to you, but it’s your duty to win against Reid as well, you know.”

Julius: “Very well, I understand. Echidna, Beatrice-sama, I shall leave the rest to you.”

Subaru: “Leave it to me…”

Subaru distorted his cheeks at the remark of the other two aside from himself being entrusted with it, whereas Julius smoothly caressed his bangs and gallantly turned their back towards them.

The cuffs of his white clothes getting disordered, Julius kicked the floor with his lengthy legs and headed for the staircase to the second layer.

Echidna: "—I will not press you much regarding how you got that affirmation."

"…"

Echidna: "What is important, is that we trust you. I will appreciate it if you don't betray mine or his feelings."

Subaru: "I don't know what you're talking about, but you have my gratitude."

Having seen off Julius' back, Echidna addressed in a low tone. The true intent of those words identified the lack of connection between Reid and Gluttony.

Gulping down that unease, Echidna and Julius made the gesture of trusting Subaru's discourse. He must respond to their trust, their expectations.

Subaru: "—Ugh."

Abruptly, just when his mind came upon such thoughts, a chilling sensation rose in the interior of Subaru's chest.

Beatrice furrowed her eyebrows upon Subaru's response, but Subaru narrowed his eyes and turned away from her reaction.

—He had memories of this warmth.

It was the queer warmth he had tasted immediately prior to being swallowed by the shadow in the previous loop. His heart rate increasing, Subaru suffered the chilling warmth and closed his eyes.

What levitated at the back of his eyelids were balls of light shivering with fleetingness and transience.

One within his arms and one right next to him, and one in the direction Subaru was facing—.

Subaru: “Let’s hurry! We all have to go by ourselves and join Emilia-chan and the others!”

Echidna: “That is all well and good, but will we be of any help? To say it clearly, the present you and Beatrice, and me on top of that, we are all non-combatants.”

Beatrice: “Betty can act as a bit of fighting force upon wanting to fight, in fact. Besides, Subaru must not be aiming to be a reinforcement either, I suppose.”

With Subaru having sprinted ahead, Beatrice and Echidna exchanged their views.

Echidna’s anxiety was undisputable, and Beatrice’s idea was correct.

Sadly enough, Subaru and the others could not act as reinforcement for Emilia in terms of war potential. Instead of them—

Ram: “—Barusu! So you have woken up!”

Subaru: “Ram!”

By the edge of the aisle, the same spectacle as before— appeared the figure of Ram on Patrasche’s back, with Rem in her arms.

She jauntily jumped off Patrasche’s back and handed over the reins to Subaru,

Ram: “You took too long to wake up! Look after Rem! Protect her with the will to die, you won’t be excused if you hurt her or touch her in a weird manner. Ram will—.”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait, in a lot of ways you’re too fast! I get what you’re talking about but calm down! You are…”

Ram: “The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony is here! Emilia-sama is fighting back, but she won’t fare well. Ram must return immediately, or it will be too late!”

"…"

That instant, the emotions recurring within Subaru's chest twisted.

He was relieved pertaining to Ram, who hurriedly wanted to return to the battlefield and hearing Emilia's name from her mouth, and rage sprouted for the abominable Batenkaitos' existence being confirmed, his bitter enemy.

Keeping those aside, Subaru handed over the reins he had been given to Echidna.

Subaru: "Echidna! I'm counting on you to take Rem and Patrasche to a safe zone! The balcony or the second layer won't do! You can't get close to the Green Room right now either. Probably Taygeta should be the safest!"

Echidna: "Natsuki-kun, what about you?!"

Subaru: "Beatrice and I will go with Ram for the Sin Archbishop!"

Subaru glared into the pale cerulean eyes of Echidna, who had been startled by suddenly being handed over the reins. Whilst she inhaled faintly Subaru caressed Patrasche's neck and jerked his chin seeing Rem, on its back,

Subaru: "Earlier, you had said. To not betray your trust. I'm counting on you for the same. Rem is in your hands. She is, an indispensable girl for 'Natsuki Subaru'."

Echidna: "—What a curious thing to say. Even though you yourself are supposed to be Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru: "…I also trust you for understanding my feelings a bit, you know."

He had heard that the existence of Echidna consisted of having borrowed the body of the young girl named Anastasia. That could also be said to be a position similar to the present Natsuki Subaru, who was overwriting the existence 'Natsuki Subaru' with himself.

Receiving those words from Subaru, Echidna made a staggered expression,

Echidna: “Natsuki-kun, could it be that you are—.”

Subaru: “—I’m counting on you.”

Not letting Echidna complete her words, Subaru sprinted, leaving her and the rest behind.

Ram had already been heading towards the front of the aisle. Leaving whilst catching a small glimpse of Rem’s sleeping face, atop Patrasche’s back, and stimulating her own courage.

Ram: “Why, did you come, Barusu. Rem is…”

Subaru: “Rem said, to do what needs to be done instead of looking after her! That was preached to me in the book!”

Ram: “—~hk! By Rem? What does that mean?”

Ram’s light crimson eyes gave way to unrest upon Subaru’s words, who was right next to her. It was just that they simply did not have enough time for him to cordially and courteously explain the events of the Hall of Memories.

That’s why Subaru conveyed only what was utmost important briefly.

Subaru: “Rem said to fight, and regain. That’s why, I’ll go with you too!”

Beatrice: “Of course, don’t forget that Betty is there too, in fact.”

Ram: “—. That is fine, for now. You’ll be cross-questioned about it a hundred times later.”

Subaru: “Isn’t hundred a bit too scary?!”

Subaru shivered, since he couldn’t even hear it to be a joke in Ram’s case. However, it was her compassion for letting Subaru bypass through that despite not explaining a single crucial thing.

And, the circumstance where that was required to be done, approached right in front of their eyes—.

???: “—Ice Brand Arts!”

The following moment, Emilia’s back was visible in the center of the frozen aisle as she fluttered, dancing about with armaments of ice.

Confronting her was the Sin Archbishop of dirty appearance, Lye Batenkaitos.

Catching sight of that, Ram shouted.

Ram: “Emilia-sama!”

Subaru was convinced that they had made it in time considering that was Emilia’s name.

And at the same time, Emilia noticed them behind upon being called and responded with “Eh, Ram?!”.

Emilia: “Why did you come back?! And Subaru and Beatrice too, I’m glad you’re okay… but! This is rea~lly dangerous right now! Stay back! Get away!”

Ram: “Rem has been evacuated to someplace safe. Now on, Ram shall also assist you in battle.”

Emilia: “But, Ram, you are…”

Ram: “To be taken away, even if you say that do you think Ram will allow being taken away?”

Whilst responding to Emilia, Ram reached to her legs and unsheathed the slender wand equipped there.

The wand was shorter than what normally magicians could be imagined to have. Though it seemed like an article with no peculiarities, it could also be felt that it exerted a sense of enigma and queer pressure.

And, seeing Ram's form preparing to use it, Gluttony laughed at a distance away from Emilia,

Lye: "Haha~! What's this what's this, so you came back, nee-sama! Oh dear, how handsome! Why just why is nee-sama so cool? Truly, nee-sama is wonderful ~tsu!"

Ram: "—Irksome. You're getting killed, Sin Archbishop."

Ram fired her quiet intent to kill towards the Sin Archbishop clapping his hands and guffawing.

It was intense rage enough to send chills down Subaru's spine, who had never been faced by it, as he glanced from the side. Despite receiving that direct eye contact, Batenkaitos' composure did not flinch whatsoever,

Lye: "How nice, so nice, very nice, quite nice, as it's nice, isn't it nice, as it's probably nice, as it's perhaps nice, as we think it's nice! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! We apologize for arbitrarily and overwhelmingly bringing an end to the connection. Though in actuality, it was supposed to be a much more touching reunion, you kno~w."

Ram: "What are you…"

Lye: "Something like stealing the Name and Memories of a valuable person, feels like becoming the greatest enemy upon being thought of revenge, right? Yet, the people eaten by us, in most cases don't remember about that is what it means. Even though we love, we understand nee-sama this much, nee-sama doesn't know even the slightest bit of that feeling is what it means! That's like, a wasteful way of usage like showering salt onto a salivatingly high-quality ingredient, isn't it."

Attentively and profoundly, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony commenced explaining circumstances completely impossible to be referred to.

The truth was, the power Gluttony wielded of stealing the memories of others was an act equivalent to trampling upon life. Should family members, lovers, benefactors be attacked and hunted down by them, the worst possible phenomenon would be that they would be forgotten and disappear onto the other side of oblivion, and the hatred which was supposed to exist would also vanish.

In one way, that would function as safety against letting anyone take revenge on themselves.

However—

Lye: "—Isn't that we~ll, the greatest level of boring?"

However, none other than Batenkaitos, declared it to be boring.

"…"

Lye: "Like the rich hatred which was originally supposed to be attained, or the rumbling corrupted rage, such freshly aromatic and fetid emotions get thoroughly denied is what it means. That's a great loss for us… Until the onii-san over there, shows up."

Subaru: "Me…?"

Lye: "Sa~y onii-san, for some reason even after we eat the Name you can still remember that person, right? We pretty much do get the reason behind that? The place onii-san was born into must have been a bit different from here, but what's important is its result. Onii-san, is our savior."

Whilst saying so, Batenkaitos opened his arms wide and continued looking at Subaru with an intoxicated expression.

With a passionate and zealous gaze as if he was truly deeply in love with Subaru.

Lye: "No, let's dare state it this way! Onii-san is our hero ~tsu! Innocent, hard working, uneasy unless someone is by his side, mean, makes our chest sting and hurt the more we think about it, on top of that, a hero who understands those feelings…!"

Subaru: "Stop with such eerie comments! With what intention are you…"

Lye: “Of course, these are emotions from the bottom of the heart. How ha~rsh, how patheti~c. Even though we are so gallantly, we are so wholeheartedly, thinking of onii-san, you know.”

Subaru could not comprehend how true a remark that was, composed of blended emotions. He couldn’t imagine it, neither did he want to.

However, taking Batenkaitos’ comments until now into account it naturally became clear.

The emotions of the existence captured by him, directed towards Subaru were being— no, deception was unnecessary.

The emotions of Rem, who had been captured by him, were being—

Lye: “How about it eh! If it suits you then let’s repeat that touching passion once again! Let’s start from here, onii-san ~tsu! From square one, no… from ze”

Emilia: “—Hiyah!!”

Lye: “Woopsie?!”

At that instant, after having stalked up to Batenkaitos’ rear, Emilia slammed the large ice hammer she held in both of her hands into the back of the Sin Archbishop’s head mercilessly.

Batenkaitos spilled the words in a ridiculing tone as if in a manga or something and fell towards the front.

“…”

Subaru: “…Eh, we won?”

Emilia: “I did it!”

With Batenkaitos silent and inactive, Emilia made a triumphant pose with her fist clenched. Only after looking at the two did Subaru finally widen his eyes at that dreadfully abrupt quick conclusion.

Beatrice: "…The curtain fell way too quickly, in fact."

Ram: "Indeed. Where should Ram take these feelings when she was just about to tear that thing to pieces. Emilia-sama!"

Emilia: "Eh, what? Was it wrong?"

Ram: "—. No, it was splendid. Yes, truly splendid."

Beatrice, who was being hugged by Subaru, and Ram expressed their disappointment for the collapsed Gluttony.

Ram, who had the connection between her and the bitter enemy trampled by in an unexpected manner, seemed to have a complex state of mind pertaining to Emilia's action.

However,

Subaru: "Well, there's certainly a mountain of stuff I'd like to say but the words which come up the first are Emilia-chan, good job! With this, we should tie up Gluttony and…"

???: "—Unfortunately, it can't be allowed to go that way, onii-san."

"…"

Before Subaru, who was thinking that the second of the five obstacles had been digested in an unexpected fashion, Batenkaitos slowly and relaxedly stood up despite being supposed to have collapsed motionlessly.

Subaru widened his eyes in response to that unnatural movement, whilst Beatrice stiffened herself.

Of course, Emilia and Ram also had a hue of vigilance paint their eyes—

Ram: "Did he go crazy by getting hit in the head? Also considering his courting comments towards Barusu, if he can't discern the situation then…"

???: "Ah, ah, all that is fine. We have also already conveyed our feelings, and neither do we intend to do something like hold back…"

Intercepting Ram's views, Batenkaitos remained with his eyes cast downwards after standing up, hiding his face behind his long, dark brown hair, he muttered and whispered something.

As if overlapping with those whispers, a distorted and repulsive sound echoed through the aisle.

Emilia: "No way…"

Emilia blinked her amethyst eyes in response to the bizarre happening accompanying the repulsive echo.

What was being reflected in her beautiful eyes was Batenkaitos' body changing from its very skeletal structure, giving rise to a distorted report— the flesh body of the petite youth changed into a muscly and brawny giant.

A nightmarish occurrence, but what was truly nightmarish for Subaru was waiting ahead.

???: "Yay, onii-san, were you surprised? This is Solar Eclipse… well, kind of like one of our trump cards? Unlike earlier, this time we'll make you ours through sheer force."

Subaru: "You sure, are saying some pretty eerie stuff, transgender bastard. You are…"

Seized with nightmarish dread, Subaru asked whilst sweating cold.

Receiving that, the giant smiled sweetly and without hiding his eccentric ambience, bowed.

Louis: "—Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Louis Arneb."

"…"

Louis: "Can't stay for much long. By snitching and eating, we must clean up everything, everything while onii-chan is asleep, you see."

Chapter 67:
Little King

Witnessing the figure of the man before his eyes ridiculously claim himself to be Louis Arneb, Subaru was at a loss for words.

The man's way of appearing was unforeseen and unnatural, but what was further unexpected was the name he had given for himself.

It was difficult to conceive it as a mere prank, and even when considered as a phenomenon it yet remained grueling to accept—.

Ram: "—They did say something about a form changing Sin Archbishop, it seems that was regarding this. However, the choice of the form taken is rather questionable, did you think you would receive any mercy if you chose this appearance?"

Louis: "Form changing, huh… A~h, you mean that prattling loudmouth woman? Grouping us with that thing hurts even us. Besides, the principle of that thing and our Solar Eclipse is totally different. That is being a copycat, while this is reconstruction."

Ram: "Copycat, reconstruction…?"

Using that interim mighty body, Louis replied. As he frowned at that answer, hearing Ram mention "another Sin Archbishop" left a bad taste in Subaru's mouth.

Though it was only to be expected that there would be Sins and Sin Archbishops other than Gluttony existing, knowing even one of them stemmed into an immediate dislike for all of them.

Though they were supposed to be form changing, it was intriguing why they had not used that ability till now.

Louis: "That being said, this body, being treated as an unknown person, was actually quite a famous person, you know? Though sadly, nee-sama and the others wouldn't have any memory of the people eaten by us.”

Ram: “Famous person… in other words, borrowing the form of an eaten person? Is that so, truly the worst kind of thing to do, totally fits you people who have committed themselves to doing evil. Nauseating.”

Louis: “Wa~h oh, nee-sama geez, your words are so dirty they hurt, you know? If you say that then we, who still have the memories as your younger sister, will feel ashamed…”

And, that was as far as the interim Louis’ conversation went.

The interim Louis flexibly leaned forward, and the blow that came from behind— he dodged the strike by the hammer of ice. Of course, the attacker was—

Emilia: “Ah, yah!”

Louis: “Huhuhu ~tsu, how merciless, Emilia-sama! Onii-chan may have allowed you to let him get a taste of it, but we won’t allow such an ambush to hit us, you know?”

Emilia: “If it won’t hit then I will just keep attacking till it hits! I don’t even want to ambush you, I just want to strike you down!”

Proclaiming so, Emilia changed the hammer of ice she held in her hands into twin swords of ice and attacked the interim Louis. However, the interim Louis dodged her attack with an extraordinary jump above, and aimed for Emilia’s slender hands from a higher angle,

Louis: “Here ~tsu!”

Emilia: “Kya~!”

Her body sharply rotated, Emilia’s frame was thrown off balance. Emilia twisted her body and used her arms in order to prevent herself from falling on her back. However, the interim Louis aimed straight for her face with his toe.

Should it be too late then Emilia’s face, which was the cutest in the world, would get squashed. —At that point,

Ram: “Stop ignoring Ram and fighting all by yourself already.”

Emilia: “Ram!”

Ram, confirming the movement of the opponent who was aiming for Emilia’s face, pointed the wand that she held in her hands towards the face of the interim Louis.

At that moment, an extremely small wind was born, and transforming into a blade, was launched to slice up the opponent’s face.

Louis: “—Palm of the Fist King!”

Nullifying Ram’s powerful attack with minimal strength using his palm, the interim Louis avoided the damage and then pounced downwards.

His perforating palm received the blade of wind from below, swallowing the wind in its shockwaves and scattering it away subsequently.

Crushing the wind from his right hand, the interim Louis then tried to grip onto Ram with his free left hand. However, by the time his hand reached Ram had already taken Emilia away with herself out of the opponent’s reach, diving into a downward position outside the battle.

Louis: “You’re do~ing it!”

Ram: “Hah ~hk!”

Clenching her swinging free left hand, the interim Louis applauded Ram’s judgement and strength of action. Shaking his praise away with a ridiculing exhale, Ram then pulled Emilia’s hand towards herself.

Ram: “Emilia-sama, are you unhurt?”

Emilia: “Y-Yes, thank you. It would have been rea~lly painful for me if it wasn't for Ram saving me. Even so… did you see that just now?"

Ram: "—It seems, he has clearly gotten stronger."

Ram nodded, gesturing her knowledge upon Emilia's response.

And, witnessing the short dialogue between the two, Subaru also held the same opinion as them.

—Although it was only a short exchange of moves, the interim Louis' maneuvers were swift and accurate.

Though it was the opinion of someone inexperienced, these abilities probably exceeded those of Batenkaitos. At the end of that exchange Ram's attack had been completely crushed, as if reality was messing around with them.

Louis: "The one right now was Palm of the Fist King… Named by the one who possessed this body and memory, Fist King Neiji Rockhardt. Possessing the strongest palm, capable of blasting away anything, a powerful person with no enemies on the Gladiator Island."

Ram: "…It seems that you are not familiar with revealing your strengths. In the end, you are just trying to show that you are at the disadvantage. Ram will not be fooled and hesitate because of this."

Louis: "We would not mind that at all, nee-sama! To the point that if you can corner us then we want you to corner us! See, don't you look back onto the sweet memory of defeat later on?"

Ram: "Who knows. Ram only knows of victory so she doesn't understand that."

Louis: "Is that so? That's just the waste of not knowing the sourness of life."

The moment he said that, the interim Louis' figure was scratched out of visibility. It would seemingly be more accurate to say that he literally disappeared rather than just moving swiftly.

Ram: “—?!”

Ram widened her eyes at the enemy’s unexpected move. Even she had been unable to grasp the opponent’s position.

There was no way for her to escape—

Emilia: “—Ram, watch out!”

Saying that, this time it was Emilia who grasped Ram and leapt backwards. Several of Emilia’s beautiful silver hair were too late to escape that attack, as they were caught up in the impact and got slashed off, scattering around in the aisle.

And, the one visible was not a fast warrior, but instead a bald man, as he laughed saying “Haha ~tsu!”.

With a somewhat jumpy appearance and wearing an orange gown, the man smacked his lips at the form of the fleeing Emilia.

Louis: “How nice, so nice, isn’t it nice. Can you dodge the next one?”

Emilia: “Kya—”

At that moment, the form of the famous person disappeared into thin air and that of a different one appeared. This seemed as if it was a payback for the earlier surprise ambush.

From one blind spot to another, a flashing dagger made accurate attacks energetically. Emilia, whilst holding Ram, continued to defend the attacks off as she got completely dominated.

Louis: “Hahaha! You’re doing it, doing it, doing it! How did you see through these secret maneuvers of Leaper Dorkell? It’s truly a mystery!”

Emilia: “That’s obvious! I guessed it!”

Ram: “Of course, that is not all to it, there is also Ram’s support. —Emilia-sama!”

Emilia: “Y-Yeah.”

Flying into a blind spot, the interim Louis launched an attack.

Although the opponent was someone capable of flying around freely, all whilst maintaining that vicious smile, Ram was able to see where he would appear next. On Ram’s call, Emilia swung her long legs rapidly.

With that, when the bald man appeared next, Emilia’s heel struck his side.

Louis: “Ghu… ~tsu.”

Emilia: “Hiya~h–!!”

Emilia thrusted her heel into his face, and struck the opponent down. At that moment, Emilia grabbed one of the pillars of ice erecting from the ground in her hands and launched its sharp, pointed tip towards her fallen opponent.

If the blow were to not be defended away, the strike would penetrate right through his chest and it would make for a truly unpleasant finish. However, unfortunately enough, it was not effective whatsoever.

Emilia: “Eh?!”

Louis: “ Carnivorous Beast Beli Heinelga’s skin cannot be pierced, not even by a Holy Sword, is what they used to say.”

Shattering the pillar of ice with his bare back, was a middle aged man with an enormous beard, smiling ferociously.

Lying down, he aimed for Emilia’s waist with his arm, which was seemingly as tough as a log— and somehow defending away that attack, Emilia made haste and flew, flew, flew backwards.

Emilia: “Uh! Ah! Uh! Hey, at this pace…!”

Ram: “Emilia-sama, please let go of Ram.”

Emilia: “No! As if I will abandon Ram…ghk.”

Ram: “That is not the case.”

Emilia escaped from the enemy with Ram in her grip, and Ram sealed her lips by gently placing a finger onto them. Ram shook her head looking at Emilia, whose words she had interrupted,

Ram: “It’s about time you let Ram also attack is what it means.”

The moment she said that, she swept away Emilia’s gripped arms, and stood firm directly against the giant. Seeing that, the interim Louis smacked his rock-hard lips, and launched his palm towards the young girl.

Louis: “Huhu ~tsu! Get crushed!”

Ram: “Assuming that is even possible, politely say please be crushed, Ram-sama.”

With that comeback, Ram charged straight towards the approaching palm. If the situation was to be slightly exaggerated, then it could be said that the palm was enormous enough to crush Ram’s entire body.

Recklessly clashing with the palm up front would be the same as clashing with the front of an approaching car— at the very least, that appeared to be so in Subaru’s eyes.

In response to that, Ram,

“…”

Ram: “At this level, you shouldn’t even think you can catch Ram.”

At the moment those fingers were about to reach her, Ram, with her lips relaxed, dodged the attack with minimal movement and launched her elbow onto her opponent’s face.

That fair elbow, with its sharpness resulting from its fragility, came in contact with the opponent’s nose, mercilessly sending shocks through the body of the Carnivorous Beast. And, at that moment, Ram's left hand was visibly coming down to grab his throat.

Louis: "——~tsu."

Ram: "You have continued to blabber nonsense for quite some time, it is getting irritating now. Embrace your misfortune, and choke to death at the hands of Ram here, you despicable thing of a person."

The interim Louis faced problems, as he tried to pursue the crucial points of the body whilst lacking proper training for doing so. Using that to her advantage, Ram resumed her offensive and this time, pointed the tip of her elegant wand towards him.

And, as its tip became the center of a beautiful gathering of energy, it subsequently released wind magic, pushing the giant slightly behind.

Subaru: "Strong…!"

Subaru intently stared at the sight of the interim Louis splattering blood onto the aisle whilst skillfully rolling.

Till now, he had concentrated on observing the fight so much that he had forgotten to breathe, but the moment Ram stood upon the battlefield, the flow of the fight faced slight alteration.

Of course, though all of it was based on the fact that Ram could not drag on battling for too long,

Subaru: "Ram fighting this much is a miscalculation I'm happy for…"

Beatrice: "That, is not the case, in fact. You cannot rely on just Ram, I suppose."

Subaru: "—? What does that…"

Mean, was what Subaru intended to ask Beatrice, who was in his arms whilst tilting his head. And, before Beatrice could respond to his query the answer itself appeared before him.

"…"

Ram's posture, as she tried to step ahead, broke down. Subaru observed whether she had accidentally slipped, but that was not the case.

Ram's forehead and neck were flooded with sweat and it was visible that every continuing breath was hurting her.

At that moment, he wondered how much of defense and prolongation of the battle he could actually speak of, taking the unforeseen spectacle before him into account.

Beatrice: "If it is for a short period of time, then Ram's fighting sense can follow, I suppose. However…"

Subaru: "She has a time limit like that…?! Oh no, Ram—"

Unaware of such a weakness of hers, he had sent Ram into that dangerous situation. Along with Subaru's panicking voice, the interim Louis changed into the form of the muscle-rich huge man once again at the same time.

Aiming for the stationary Ram, the enemy moved forward briskly with his palm pointed outwards seeking to make a successful onslaught. If she were to receive a direct hit, it was unknown how much of it Ram would actually be able to take.

Subaru: "Ram—!"

Louis: "Shut your mumbling, you are so damn loud for a man."

Subaru called out desperately, but Ram showed no signs of response.

At that moment, the interim Louis' blow captured Ram's face directly—

Emilia: "I know Ram the most, almost as much as I know my own weaknesses. That's why—"

Emilia: "I am fighting alongside Ram!"

Louis: "—~tsu?!"

Jumping over Ram's head, with her silver hair fluttering Emilia positioned her knees elegantly. Against the opponent who had his palm pointing towards the front, the tactics Emilia had chosen were very simple.

The move she had chosen was to have an innumerable amount of weapons of ice float in the air, and fire them all towards her opponent at once.

Emilia: "Hi, yaaaaa—!!"

The interim Louis launched off his body, as he had positioned his empty palm, against the rain of ice.

The interim Louis avoided, dodged, defended away, destroyed, and crossed through the range of the overwhelming storm of ice flawlessly, with nothing managing to even scratch him. That ability was again, that of an expert who had achieved heights in proficiency.

The truth was, the Fist King who had been victimized by Gluttony was perhaps a true warrior, who had trained with extreme perseverance to gain such prowess. —That power was now being exploited like this.

The power he had trained to achieve and the fame he had received for being such a great warrior, Gluttony had stolen everything away from him and continued to mock and ridicule his journey of life.

In fact, it was possible that they had achieved new heights in skill, heights which had not been achieved by this memory originally.

Louis: "Ha~!"

He could not help but despair seeing the form of Gluttony, who had defended away all of Emilia's attacks and blows with ease and was now sighing an exhale of achievement.

Louis: "How nice, this is the best! How do we put it, sort of like, we had completely reconstructed the catalogue specs of this memory but only after we exceeded even that, we felt as if living in this body would be worth it ~tsu! Sort of feels like we made better use of the borrowed soul than its original owner? We're glad we were able to live it ~tsu!"

Ram: "—For someone who is into such evil deeds, you are quite thoughtful of such things, aren't you."

Louis: "Perhaps so! But you see, for us, who are different from normal people, don't you think it is only natural that what we find happiness in would be different too? Don't you think so. Perhaps you think so. Possibly you think so ~tsu?"

Ram: "Who knows? Isn't that so, Emilia-sama?"

Emilia: "No, you're wrong!"

In response to the words of Ram, who shrugged her shoulders, Emilia responded to the interim vicious-looking man— no, Louis Arneb, whilst letting go the chunks of ice she held in his palm.

Doing that and upon receiving that question, Emilia then upheld the spears and axes of ice that got erected from the floor,

Emilia: "No matter how different you may be from people, you can still be happy and sad by thinking of the same things! I, for example, was always alone but I enjoyed stacking rocks on river beaches."

Ram: "…That, as well, feels unique in its own way though."

Louis: "We see. Indeed indeed, we also have memories of stacking rocks on river beaches, but that's."

Emilia: "See!"

Louis: "But, we didn't do it because it was fun. It's just that there was nothing else to do. There was just no other thing to kill our time with."

Emilia: "Eh, is that so…?"

Surprised, Emilia made a confused expression, seeing the happiness of her memories get rejected down. And, behind Emilia, who had that reaction, Ram called out “Emilia-sama” with more strength than normal.

Ram: “Please do not get swayed by the enemy. The opponent is a Sin Archbishop… if they want to demolish our plans, they will use whatever words necessary. Don’t get deceived.”

Emilia: “Is that so? That is so. Yes, I know. I won’t be deceived anymore.”

Louis: “What can we say, we~ll, that was a truly hurtful thing to say. Even though our one and only nee-sama would leave us behind, so we had no choice but to be doing that.”

Ram: “—Shut up!”

Once again, Ram kicked the frozen floor and launched her body towards Louis, who had repeatedly voiced words which had pierced straight through her heart.

Her body’s condition was not at its best. Well aware of that, Ram charged straight towards the enemy because she knew that she must get her own hands dirty in order to clean up this mess.

Ram’s intimidating roar piercingly struck Louis.

However—

Emilia: “This time I’m with her, so if you want to surrender yourself, this is your chance!”

Louis: “Gratitude for such graciousness, but there’s no need for it!”

Ram: “Enough of your stubbornness!!”

Making a cute expression but using brutal attacks which were not cute in the least, was Emilia. The duo of the enraged Ram and Emilia went in together, however, Louis repulsively kept switching his form and battle style with absolute freedom, controlling the battle’s pace as per his own will.

“…”

In this overwhelming duel, there were two things that would surprise the observer.

First, was the flawless, breath-to-breath coordination between Emilia and Ram.

In the previous loop, Emilia's Name had been stolen away, due to which her existence was forgotten and her battle style became unknown to all, thus there was discrepancy between her and Julius, who was unaware of her style of fighting, however, there was not the slightest of that discrepancy in Emilia and Ram's case, not even the slightest of lag.

Of course, though it does not mean that the adjustments Emilia made were meaningless, what was of utmost relevance here was Ram's wonderful sense of combat.

Ram: "Ha— ~hk!"

Louis: "Tch~! Truly, what a nuisance you are, nee-sama!"

Just when he was about to counterattack, her wand was pointed towards his nose and narrowly dodging the subsequent piercing blades of wind, Louis pulled out his tongue.

Although what Ram did was not something too substantial, Emilia used such gaps to their advantage by further putting pressure on Louis and halting him from counterattacking.

Although her moves weren't too showy, it granted her a convenient position to launch attacks without holding back.

The breathtaking cooperation between the duo of Emilia and Ram was all thanks to Ram's judgement. That was one of the things which surprised Subaru the most.

And, there was something else which was equally surprising. That was—

Louis: "Haha~! How nice, so nice, very nice, perhaps it is nice, surely it is nice, isn't it nice, maybe it is nice, probably it is nice, as it is probably nice! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! Our mood and feelings are also perhaps gradually pumping up ~tsu!”

Emilia: “Kh ~hk! He’s right, his strength is gradually increasing…!”

Ram: “Irritating…!”

Chewing on her own teeth, Emilia launched the twin sword she held in her fist whilst Ram darted a blade of wind aiming for the opponent’s feet. However, Louis, becoming the Fist King, crushed Emilia’s twin sword with his palm, becoming the Leaper, dodged Ram’s attack, and becoming the Carnivorous Beast, rolled his body through the passage of ice.

The shockwave he released impacted Emilia and Ram, pushing them backwards as they let out a screech.

“…”

The coordination between Emilia and Ram was undoubtedly highly refined. However, as surprising as it seemed, Louis’ prowess in using and switching memories was even faster.

Possibly, by changing forms Louis was able to perfectly reconstruct those Memories, with no limitation whatsoever.

— Solar Eclipse, that is indeed what Louis had said.

Batenkaitos, before he had lost his body— Louis’ elder brother too, in the previous loop had copied Emilia’s awesome technique called Ice Brand Arts, but its reconstruction was limited to him maintaining his own form. Louis had exceeded that.

Solar eclipse was a phenomenon in which the sun got hidden behind the moon’s shadow, consequently becoming invisible, that was perhaps Louis’ true body being treated as the sun, which got shadowed by the moon, the reconstructed Names and Memories.

In other words, Solar Eclipse could safely be assumed to be an ability to change into the form of that respective eaten Memories. —Consequent was the Louis before them, using that ability’s advantage.

And—

Subaru: “If there’s Solar Eclipse then it’s natural to think that there would be Lunar Eclipse existing too, but what kind of power would come by the hiding of the moon… no, can I even figure it out beforehand?”

What happened oftentimes in such patterns of copying abilities was that the user’s inexperience and lack of proper knowledge to use those abilities resulted in a discrepancy, becoming a cause of defeat.

However, the copying abilities of Gluttony, which obviously would include Louis as well, overcome that weakness perfectly by using The Victim’s Body and Memories.

It was clear that this was a flawless, perfect copying ability.

Subaru: “This is bad… if Emilia-chan and the rest get overpowered, the situation will change.”

Tightly grabbing his own chest, Subaru gnashed his teeth at the sense of helplessness which was visible straight in his eyes.

Starting with Emilia and Ram who had engaged in battle against Gluttony, his other comrades had already commenced their own battles at various places in the tower.

Echidna, who had evacuated Rem and Patrasche to Taygeta while Meili went to attend to the large hordes of witchbeasts surrounding the tower. And, considering Julius’ battle was still continuing, the violence had spread to two layers in the tower.

Subaru: “—Julius, must be struggling a lot too. On second thought, should the opponent here be Reid after all?”

Beatrice: “—Subaru? Just what are you saying? Where are you looking, at what?”

Subaru: “Where are you looking, and what are you saying, huh, Beatrice. That’s…”

Beatrice, within his arms, heard his muttering and looked up, blinking once. Subaru tried to respond to her and clear up her confusion.

Unquestionably, right now, he would be unable to firmly state what he was saying or looking at.

But—

Subaru: “What’s, this? I can sense what everyone is doing and where they are. I can see it?”

Grabbing his chest in a crushing grip, Subaru slowly realized— the existence of that incongruous feeling, those blurry, faint dots of light.

They enlightened Subaru regarding the actions of his comrades in the tower. He could also sense Ram and the others, and at that moment Subaru accepted this as if it was something natural, like a third arm by birth.

However, this was nothing like being naturally born with a third arm.

The moment he noticed that, Subaru realized what an unnatural situation he was in and a sense of rejection and unacceptability rose within his own heart for his own thoughts.

Subaru: “—Ghu.”

However, grinding his molars, he swallowed the thought back in so that he didn’t spit it out.

Right now, if his third arm had developed out of nowhere, then he should rightfully accept it and reject his feelings of rejection for it.

He was able to get a rough grasp on where everyone was, in what situation everyone was in. —In a situation whereby all his comrades had to split up, could there be any power more suitable than this for such a situation.

That’s why—

Subaru: “Momentarily, silently, belong to me—”

The form of this unnatural power appeared before Natsuki Subaru’s soul, when he did this.

The nature of it reminded him of the Hall of Memories, where he had first faced Louis Arneb and the strength that had bloomed within him before he left that place.

He had given it a name as well. Yes, that name was—

Subaru: “—Cor Leonis.”

The moment he called that name, the presence and control of that power flooded over Natsuki Subaru’s soul.

And, the power, which bore itself with Lion’s Heart, rightfully gave the ability— no, the authority over itself to Natsuki Subaru. The fruit it bore being,

Subaru: “Nuu, gh… ~hk?!”

Beatrice: “Subaru!”

Suddenly, Subaru’s feet experienced a crushing weight coming from his body. The moment she noticed that Beatrice shouted in panic, but he was unable to respond due to his headache.

A sudden headache to the point that was almost seemingly hazardous, strained Subaru’s body. What was even worse was the awful fatigue his body was suffering with, accompanying a tear jerking pain in his bones— the combination of pain and exhaustion crushed his entire body, making Subaru kneel down instantly.

Subaru: “Gh, a~h…”

A voice echoed within his mind, questioning what this was.

The overwhelming strain on his body, a combination of pain and fatigue, his body felt heavy, as if poisoned, and he was panting like he was continuing to run after his stamina had exhausted itself.

Rubbing his back, Beatrice screamed in panic at this sudden development. As he felt somewhat eased by the touch of her palm, Subaru turned his eyes towards the situation.

At that moment, Subaru was trying to properly exercise his newly gained Authority, Cor Leonis.

—No, it felt as if he were merely continuing to exercise it.

His very condition right now as well, was the result of the usage of Cor Leonis. If that was so, then just what meaning did that ability hold?

Subaru's body felt heavy, stamina was exhausted, and till now he had done nothing that would—.

Yes, Subaru himself could not do anything.

Instead of him—

Louis: "—Ah?"

Out of nowhere, a dry voice echoed, as Louis continued to look while his attack slashed through the sky.

Louis, who had taken the form of the Fist King, was showing off his violent combat techniques, overpowering Emilia and Ram and just when he raised the fingers of his detestable body.

Louis' arms were grabbed, and his joints got stabbed. And,

Ram: "Ha~ ~hk!"

Without any hesitation or mercy, Ram kneed his joints, breaking Louis' right arm. A repulsive sound echoed and the white bones within got broken and became visible, as the fibers of his light pink muscles hung down, and the color of blood spread through the frozen white passage, a sight painful to even look at.

Louis: "Igh, ya… ghkhe ~hk!"

Ram: "Too slow!"

Ram’s iron-hard elbow rotated, smashing right into the opponent’s face. With the same pace, Ram clutched the enemy’s hair at the back of his head and smashed him into the wall which Louis somehow stopped, whilst Ram continuing to stab his torso with her right fist.

When Louis’ body, just after the sounds of his ribs cracking echoed, tried to get back onto her, Ram delivered her own kick with an unaccepting expression as the giant’s body rolled at the floor at a fast pace, splattering blood around.

Ram: “…Ram’s body feels lighter?”

Clenching her fists, Ram widened her eyes at the unexpected surprise of her body.

Emilia, who had witnessed the sight of her strength, also commented “Amazing…” at the power she got newly acquainted with.

Beatrice had been concerned about Ram’s fatigue, so her actions right now were completely expected. —And that was as far as Subaru’s thinking went, before he realized.

Subaru: “This, can’t be… could it be, that I took Ram’s fatigue?”

Comparing the improvement in Ram’s physical condition and the worsening of Subaru’s, that indeed seemed to be the case.

The truth is, the lights Subaru was able to sense— there were two in front of him which seemed to stand for Emilia and Ram, and he could sense something flow into himself from there.

If his assumption was right and it indeed projected his comrades, who were all facing challenges, then that was.

Subaru: “— Cor Leonis means, Lion’s Heart.”

The answer to that, lay in Subaru’s knowledge of the stars.

“…”

The Authority of Greed, which Subaru had unintentionally named Cor Leonis.

That is in fact a Latin word which meant Lion's Heart, referring to the star named Regulus, the brightest of the Leo constellation. However, Regulus also meant something else aside from Cor Leonis in Latin, which was Little King.

— Lion's Heart and Little King.

As lions themselves were called the king of all beasts, the alias of King was well fitting, it was understandable. But, what did the Little affixed to it mean?

A little, lion king. —The king of, a pride.

What exactly made one deserving the title of king? That was—

Subaru: "—One who stands by everyone's wishes, that is who a king is. That's why."

Natsuki Subaru's ability of Cor Leonis shall lighten the burden on the back of his comrades.

So that his comrades can fight without restraints, he shall take all damage for them.

If that was the case, then it was decided what Natsuki Subaru was supposed to do.

Subaru: "If I'm spitting blood, then that means the preparations are all okay."

Beatrice: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "My ba~d, I made you worry. My head just hurts a bit, my legs feel strained, my joints ache like all hell, my hands and feet feel like they've been victim to some ambush attack, but I'm alright."

Beatrice: "Ambush attacked?! When, where, I suppose?!"

Subaru: “Probably, when I wasn’t looking at the fight.”

He was unable to clearly explain to Beatrice, whose eyes were filled with concern.

However, the source for the pain in his hands and legs was him hiding the wounds taken by Emilia or Ram, and just like what the worst case scenario would be, both of them had suffered this at the hands of Louis and Batenkaitos.

And, Subaru didn’t mutter a single word about the weight of injuries on his back. For some reason a person like that seemed cool, that’s why.

Subaru: “Just like this…”

If Ram was able to keep these abilities up and keep up with Louis they might manage to actually overcome Gluttony, unlike how they had failed last time.

Win against Louis, and hurry to catch up to Julius, who was fighting Reid, or in worst case scenario, face the titanic scorpion and the shadow—.

Subaru: “—?”

Thinking that far, Subaru looked at the existence of the lights within his chest yet again.

One was Julius, who was battling above the layer Subaru and the others were on, and Meili, who was confronting the hordes of witchbeasts from the balcony. Echidna and the others seemed to have safely evacuated to Taygeta, these were the ones whose positions could very well be felt by Subaru.

However—

Subaru: “—This, who’s that?”

At a point distanced away from them all, Subaru could feel the existence of the light coming from the same layer as he was in, in the direction opposite to him.

That was the direction the dignified Reid had first appeared from in the previous loop. Wishing for it to not be Reid, Subaru confirmed the presence of certain confidence within him as he looked on with somewhat of hesitation.

And—

Subaru: “Beatrice!”

Beatrice: “—~hk! Minya!!”

As he shouted from the back of the aisle, Beatrice instantly came to notice the mishap and widened her palm. At that very moment, shining purple crystals were born as the consequence of her chant.

Floating in the air with terrifyingly sharp tips, they were fired like bullets from a gun the subsequent instant. They flew overhead Emilia, Ram and Louis, who were fighting in the aisle, towards further beyond.

And, from there, it collided with an attack which was aiming right for Emilia’s back.

“…”

As an excruciating sound of shattering glass echoed, a blinding light broke through and exposed the white corridor to itself. Amidst the sparkles of the shattered ice and crystals, a blinking red light was visible in between darkness.

As soon as he laid his eyes on it, the pain in Subaru’s heart multiplied several times. Once again, the threat repeated itself, further worsening the situation.

However, at this point, the pain in his heart was not because of seeing that dot of red light.

The red dot of light and the faint light Subaru could sense within his chest— which showed him the position of his comrades, they overlapped.

That could mean, only one thing.

Subaru: “What does, this mean. You…”

“…”

Swinging its tail which wielded a long and sharp needle, the black shadow, clad in armor-like black shell over its body— was the form of the titanic scorpion.

However, at this moment, the scorpion’s appearance held a totally different meaning for Subaru.

For the existence which had revealed itself there was—

Subaru: “—Is it you, Shaula!!”

Facing a reality he did not want to face, accepting a truth he did not want to accept, Subaru called out in a voice mixed with rage and despair.

Hearing that voice, the scorpion, lacking a mouth to respond with words, lifted up its enormous pincers and clanked them, as if affirming his words.

A clank echoed.

Chapter 68:
The Woman of Scorpius

—When he had first heard of Shaula's name, it's not as if he had thought nothing of it.

It was not because he possessed some emotional attachment to the name Shaula.

It was because Subaru had memories of that word.

Shaula was the name of a star which glowed in the sky Subaru was acquainted with— the single term which bestowed meaning to the Scorpius.

To think the true identity of the one who took upon the name of the Scorpius was the scorpion clad in a jet black shell, that answer was something truly straightforward and simple. So straightforward, that one would actually grow suspicious of the one who chose that name.

However, at present, the first candidate for that lack of sense was the one she referred to as "Master", Natsuki Subaru.

The problem here was how unlikely it was that Subaru got the chance to bestow her with that name regardless of the presence or absence of his memories and how they had no leeway to confirm that right now.

"…"

Before his eyes, the tag team of Emilia and Ram continued their fierce battle with the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb. Interposing in the space of that battlefield, in the interior of the aisle the jet black titanic scorpion let out a fiendish sound by clanking its huge pincers and stared towards them with deep red compound eyes.

The ominous huge pincers had evolved for the purpose of slaughter, wielding such sharpness that gave rise to the conjecture that they possessed enough strength to easily cut apart bones or internal organs of the human body with a single clank of its edges.

Red compound eyes, two ominous huge pincers, multiple legs supporting its large frame, a shell boasting the strength as that of an iron armor, all of them were symbols of refinement for the purpose of destruction and violence.

The truth was its fighting strength did not contradict the sense of ferocity its outer appearance gave.

Time and time again, Subaru had confirmed that with his very eyes through the conflict till now, through the world he had seen till now, rather, he had experienced it's true feeling with his own body.

Subaru: “Y…”

The moment that realization spouted within him, certain happenings of a previous loop appeared before Subaru.

Driving away the brutal attack of the titanic scorpion, the moment they thought they had somehow managed to temporarily withdraw Subaru and the others had bathed in the explosion caused by the parting gift of that evil beast, resulting in Beatrice and Echidna, the two of them being deprived of their lives.

The intolerable rage he felt back then was something he was incapable of forgetting.

The wrath he embraced directed resentment towards the powerlessness of his own self, and at the same time he also had that rage pinning down the titanic scorpion who had been behind that slaughter.

—The subject of that wrath, the titanic scorpion, its true identity had been of one who was supposed to be his comrade, Shaula.

Now that he knew that, what occupied Subaru's mind was merely violent emotion with no place to belong accompanied with suspicion.

Why, had Shaula taken the form of the titanic scorpion.

Why, was Shaula attacking Subaru and the others, and trying to kill them.

Why, did Shaula reveal her true nature at this stage of the game, and was interrupting in between the battle.

Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why—.

Beatrice: "—Subaru, calm down, in fact. First, take deep breaths, I suppose."

"…"

Subaru was tormented by such thoughts after greeting such shocking truths. Softly calling Subaru's name who was in that state and restoring him back to sanity was Beatrice, standing next to him.

With his hand grasped by her tiny palm, Subaru noticed for the first time, that he had forgotten to even breathe. Abiding by the command Subaru slowly inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

And,

Beatrice: "Keep it up, in fact. —Is it true, that that thing is Shaula?"

At Beatrice's question, once again, Subaru affirmed to himself.

Cor Leonis — though the Authority, a characteristic unique to him, had just blossomed within him and he had only recently managed to get a grasp on it, it conveyed the whereabouts of his comrades to Subaru and took over the inferiorities in the physical form of allies, that alone was unquestionable.

Henceforth, Subaru could vaguely catch onto the locations of all his comrades within the tower, Emilia, Ram, Beatrice, Julius, Meili and Echidna.

And that faint, warm sensation he could feel from those comrades of his, he could feel the same from the titanic scorpion.

If the relative positions of all his comrades within the towers were to be considered, no other candidate came to mind.

Henceforth, that titanic scorpion was unmistakably—

Subaru: “It’s Shaula for sure. I don’t know why but, she’s turned into a huge scorpion…”

Beatrice: “—. It is true that she was a girl with an uncertain true identity in the first place, in fact. That true identity, being that of a slightly big bug isn’t even worthy of astonishment, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Amazi~ng courage you have…”

Asserting the scorpion to be a mere bug, Beatrice warded it off with not the ability to comprehend but the ability to respond to the call. Coiling his tongue at that approach of coping with the situation, Subaru at that moment glared at the titanic scorpion for once.

Red compound eyes with the aim of their gaze unknown, stabbed by the scowl coming from the opposite direction,

Subaru: “How about you give some answers! Your true identity has been uncovered already, you bastard!!”

“…”

Subaru: “Making excuses or flicking your tongue before the prey, there must be something you have to do… ~hk.”

When he raised his harsh voice, he felt his head ache with the weight of the atmosphere and inferior physical form. However, Subaru ignored that pain and sought a response from the titanic scorpion.

However, the titanic scorpion, maintaining its outward appearance which suggested its inability of will and communication, never even once tried to respond.

Subaru: “Are you, not going to make a single excuse…”

Murmuring powerlessly, Subaru thought while fighting his urge to vomit.

Just like the memories he had recalled earlier, Subaru had been made to taste hardships time and time again by this titanic scorpion.

With unruly naivete, the one who had continued to show her courtesy and affection to Subaru without ever attempting to conceal it, Shaula— having gotten cheated by her, deceived by her, that truth piercingly stabbed through his chest.

How her smile, her words, her attitude, anything and everything had been made-up fakes.

How she had deceived Subaru and others, and had been a traitor.

Subaru: “No…”

Traitor, sadly expressing that notation, Subaru stiffened his cheeks with a dicey sense of unease.

Shaula betrayed them. —That thought itself was a conclusion which could not be helped considering the existing situation. However, whether or not everything relating to Shaula had truly been fiction had room for argument.

Of course, it is plausible that all of Shaula’s words and deeds till now had been acting and that her smile, bonding, anything and everything were all just swindles for deceiving them.

It was plausible. But, for what—?

Had she intended to crawl into Subaru and the rest’s trust through her acting, her intentions would pose her as an opponent to Subaru and the rest.

However, had Shaula aimed for that she must have obtained chances to chop off their sleeping heads time and time again even without having to do something like diving into the battle at this stage of the game.

Precisely that, whilst she crawled into gaining such deep trust from

Subaru and the others, she must have had infinite chances to slowly and secretly poison them as well.

Missing those chances, why did she unconceal her betrayal now.

That, could never be a completely rational enemy.

Going out of her way and putting up a dubious pretense and becoming a comrade for Subaru and the others, what could be the point of all that.

Listening to Subaru's requests and even cooperating in stopping Meili, displaying hyper magic against the hordes of witchbeasts from the balcony, it was unknown what meaning all that held.

None of it, made any sense, did it.

Subaru: "The reason why I end up thinking that, is it because I got mesmerized by her fair legs visible in her hot pants?"

Beatrice: "If Subaru's thoughts are becoming blurred by that, then Shaula's plan has not been discarded completely, in fact.

Subaru: "Right. My feelings are aligned with Emilia-chan… argh, the end!"

Just when they jointly felt discomfort towards Shaula's conduct he suddenly had his arm pulled by Beatrice. It was not objection, but an action of overbearing extrication.

Overhead Subaru, who had unintentionally stepped upon that foot bellow, a white corona striked through and he picked up his life from within the breadth of his hair.

Beatrice: "It seems, there's no time to sit and chatter, I, suppose!"

While saying that, raising Subaru's hand other than the one which she had grasped, Beatrice's environs gleamed faintly.

Clad in the violet light which evolved along with sharpened pointed tips in large numbers. As if enclosing Subaru and Beatrice, the violet arrows unfolded, facing the titanic scorpion directly, and were shot.

At that moment, the white corona from the same frontward came flying and clashed with the violet arrows and the light performed a boisterous dance.

Subaru: “U~o~o~o~o~o~o~?!”

Beatrice: “Duck down, in fact! It won’t be good if you receive a direct hit, in fact!”

The glittering violet light raged on and a sound like that of shattering glass beautifully chained through the aisle.

On the other side of the spectacle where the glitter seemingly grilled his eyes, the flash fired by the titanic scorpion— no, that attack by the sharp tail stinger had been established to relentlessly take away Subaru’s life.

The single arrow possessing that advancing intent to kill was warded off and repelled away by the hundred arrows stemming from the magic Beatrice had spun, making her protect themselves by jumping.

However, that resource consumption had been overwhelming.

Beatrice: “Gh, not good, in fact…! At this rate, our mana will get exhausted in no time, I suppose…!”

Subaru: “What’ll happen if it gets exhausted?!”

Beatrice: “Betty and Subaru will get pierced through by that single arrow together, in fact!”

Being together aside, he could not come to accept that circumstance.

Against the assailing attack Beatrice’s remaining strength could not last for long, that was what she had reported herself. With their circumstances continuing to deteriorate, there was a need to somehow defeat the situation before they were crushed by the pressure.

And at the moment immediately after Subaru gritted his teeth due to the impending sense of crisis—

Emilia: "—Swishing that right above someone's head, it's dangerous, you know!"

The sound of silver bells chimed potently and a large rock of ice energetically struck the shell of the titanic scorpion. A hammering sound echoed and surprise was reflected in the emotionless compound eyes of the scorpion.

The one who managed to draw out that reaction was the one who created a wall of ice in the aisle and subsequently kicked it, decisively plunging into the bosom of the scorpion, Emilia.

Her silver hair fluttering, leaping upon the scorpion with magnificence she wielded a longsword of ice,

Emilia: "Targeting Subaru and Beatrice… bullying the weak ones shows you are a coward!"

"…"

With the sword slash capable of slashing down anything with a single hit, she brushed away the large pincers and the titanic scorpion made a speedy withdraw using its multiple legs, wriggling like a worm. However, Emilia pursued the retreating large build and in the cramped aisle thus commenced the three-dimensional battle between the beauty and the scorpion.

Emilia: "Hiyah! Eyah! I~ya~h!"

The longsword, twin sword, lance, large hammer hence given shape to smashed to a light report, and the falling, glittering ice shards flutter around the gracefully dancing Emilia.

The potent pincers of the titanic scorpion, the strength they had was their highlight as they easily shattered the weapons of the enemy they had come to accept and hid their herculean cutting strength. However, that destruction of weapons would not work on Emilia.

Emilia's Ice Brand Arts was an ability capable of creating countless weapons through her magical power.

The disposable weapons of ice were no greater than trifling articles to Emilia. No matter how many times were they to be smashed, shattered, it neither hurt nor itch Emilia.

Emilia: “Hi, ya~h!!”

The pincers and tail stinger waving about and Emilia, who had dodged them, launched the picket of ice floating midair. It collided head on with the corona shot by the scorpion, resulting in light scattering across.

It was the overwhelming offence and defense of the two, one human and one inhuman.

What was worth admiring was Emilia’s sense against an enemy for whom a coping method different from those used against people was required, having jumped in without any hesitation whatsoever and continued hanging on.

For Emilia, who readily took upon an instinctive battle style, the form and shape of the enemy were not absolute. Not by piling up strict disciplining but the greater than sufficient battle sense within her body told her of her enemy.

Henceforth, the offence and defense of Emilia and the titanic scorpion was taking alternately favorable and unfavorable turns, and gave rise to a stalemate.

However, with Emilia fighting the titanic scorpion, another progressing battle was unable to avoid remaining unchanged.

Even if that battle, at maximum, had commenced with an attack by the both of them at the same time, the offence and defense with the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony Louis Arneb— had been left to Ram alone.

Subaru: “Ram!!”

Ram: “You are audible, there is no need to shout every second. As it dampens spirit.”

Upon Subaru's voice, who had been fearful regarding her, she responded with an outrageously cruel reply.

Ram confronted Louis in the middle of the aisle all by herself. Having her back face his side, she clashed head-on with the large build exerting tremendous pressure.

Of course, with Emilia's fallout the battle had turned worse, Subaru was able to see that, but—

Ram: "Kh ~hk."

Louis: "Higyahah ~tsu! Nee-sama is just so harsh so harsh!"

With a smile glued to his face, the large build, shaking his head about, took a single step backward instead of jumping.

The rebuff he had experienced head-on, his retreat was to disperse its impact. In front of the large build who did that, Ram sharply gyrated her body and commenced a resolute extremely close combat with the expert who named himself as the Fist King.

The unarmed martial arts Louis was using had been endowed with immeasurable bloodshed to the name of the Fist King. However, through merely the sense of gaps, Ram was somehow managing to keep up with those fighting techniques which had been taken to the extremities, and their proper tracks.

Even now, as she unleashed herself, her fair fist fired into the median line of the enemy mercilessly.

Louis: "How amazing! So amazing! Isn't it amazing, isn't it too amazing! Nee-sama is just too strong, much more than what we knew ~tsu! What's this what's this, why are you able to move so much?!"

Ram: "Don't talk as if you know anything, kindly keep quiet and die."

Bathing in the vehement impact, passing his comment while somewhat writhing in pain was Louis.

Louis had gotten his right arm broken and was in a state of plugging the roots of his arm currently. In that state, even if it is the body of a man who had mastered unarmed combat, it would not be possible to bring out those specs.

The experience points of the martial arts cultivated within the Fist King were being competed against by Ram, who had been released from her inferior physical form.

To a point that the inborn natural specs Ram had were keeping up with the enemy.

However, as Ram continued to put up a hard fight, as much as she fought hard—

Subaru: “Gh, bhugh.”

Welling up of nausea, limitless rise in temperature. Within his head, the seemingly cursing noise of gongs being struck buzzing in his ears accompanied with a headache, whilst experiencing these Subaru fought against getting distracted and letting his guard down.

This was what Ram felt and tasted normally.

It was now, mercilessly scraping off Subaru’s mind and body with a rasp. Whether it was possible to get used to it or not, the chills continued becoming heavier with each passing second and as Ram’s voltage rose, its weight rose accordingly as well.

“…”

However, that nausea, that headache, that sense of fatigue, Subaru kept them at the back of his molars and patiently endured them.

Thanks to this Authority, he could take on Ram’s suffering and grant her the strength to fight. At this point, the recoil of Subaru having to suffer was a compensation they must accept and pay.

His entire body felt heavy, limbs creaking, ears hurting of noise, the torn thighs aching, the struck and damaged abdomen screaming in agony, the rate of breathing rising due to the usage of all strength, and vision flickering in red and white.

—This much, he should simply bluff and show that it is of no concern.

Ram: "—Foolish, truly."

And, glancing towards Subaru who had bent down behind Beatrice, Ram's lips faintly murmured something is what it seemed like.

However, the Authority was only capable of taking on the burden, it could not convey everything regarding the partner.

The lightly whispered words went unheard and the only result they bore was Subaru furrowing his eyebrows.

However—

Ram: "Kindly collapse already. If you drag this on for too long, the ones charged with our household chores will all faint."

Louis: "How cold, so cold, isn't it cold, because it is so cold! Nee-sama, nee-sama! Let's play more! Let's have fun! Even though we are sisters, we've never even once engaged in a bout like this you know, isn't it ~tsu!"

Ram: "—Then, your wish shall be granted."

Narrowing her cold eyes, Ram struck the side of the frolicking Louis' face with her palm.

At the same pace, as if in flow, she struck countless blows on the entirety of Louis' body, delivering rebuff to the receptacle in the same direction.

Louis turned completely defensive and folding up that jaw with her palm directly underneath it, Ram grabbed her opponent's collar and forcefully bashed his face into the wall on the side, and thereafter drove her lovely knees into his head.

Louis: "Pgh, gugh."

With his face caught between the bare wall and the knee, Louis had his nose crushed as he collapsed, bleeding. Towards that Louis' naked nape, Ram turned her palm relentlessly.

Within that palm was whirling an extremely small blade of wind. However, its potency was nothing to be made light of. The swirl of the wind blade thus formed in her palm had enough strength to gouge out any vitals of the body.

Grand destruction unneeded, a minimalistic attack to merely gouge out the vitals of the body and bring down the enemy. If the neck was to receive it, regardless of how thick the neck of even the Fist King may be, he would still be equally helpless.

And, Ram's attack settled the battle—

???: "—Geez, alwa~ys doing things as you please when someone's sleeping. This is why, youngest little sisters can't be selfish. As an elder herself, nee-sama must also agree, right?"

Ram: "—~hk."

The moment when the strike to the nape was settled, Fist King's form changed, and Ram's palm missed its aim.

The moment initially afterwards, what seized Ram's petite torso from the frontward was the brutal backwards kick of, with a strikingly short height, Louis— no, Lye Batenkaitos.

Subaru: "Switch…?!"

Lye: "No no no no no we're telling you ~tsu! It wasn't something we were aiming for and then did it or anything, by sheer chance, the moment we opened our eyes little sister was in an unfavorable position, that's all it is. Onii-san can understand, right? The feeling when your sibling is so bad at the game being played that you can't stand it and end up taking away the controller?"

Languidly stretching out his tongue, with his dubiously long dark brown hair, Lye smiled at Subaru.

With that evil smile of Lye's, Ram, who had received the fierce kick directly in her guts, had been pushed backwards to an immense distance. And, she distorted her cheeks and expression at that singular counterattack and inhaled a rough and large breath.

At the same time, Subaru took over the origin of what had stopped her in her tracks through the Authority.

And—

Subaru: “Ghu, gya~a~a~a~a ~hk!”

Pain that was enough to make him give up springing forth in his abdomen, Subaru shouted at the scorching heat difficult to bear.

He was tormented by the extreme pain which seemed as if his guts had been stirred up and damaged with a blazing hot rod of iron. His field of vision whitening at the impact, he understood that his internal organs within were all screeching at once.

By this, he understood. —In actuality, this blow by Lye had been the true and sole decisive blow of the battle, which would have unquestionably ended the fight with Ram.

Lye: “Huh? Just as thought. So it was thanks to onii-san that nee-sama, for whom it should be impossible to move, was able to move is what it means ~tsu! Geez nee-sama, in the time your little sister wasn’t there you deepened your relationship with the one your little sister had feelings for, is that what it means?!”

Blurting out nonsense, while looking at the screaming Subaru, Lye struck the floor with his heel. At his feet, peeking out from his heel was a hidden blade of short length and its sharp tip had been soaked with Ram’s blood.

She had been stabbed. Subaru had taken up that pain and was now suffering with it.

Otherwise this scorching heat, the blade may have been varnished with poison or something. His body temperature degraded at such vigor that it made him shiver, and the immense sweat all over his body started to flow.

Beatrice: “Subaru?!”

Ram: “Barusu, kindly stop!”

Beatrice was astonished upon Subaru’s screech and Ram shouted, seemingly having guessed the situation.

Stabbed, the wound in the abdomen letting out massive amounts of blood from the guts. It was natural to feel malaise if by the loss of blood, it still had no effect on movement. However, Subaru desperately shook his head.

He could not return this agony to Ram. The moment he would return it, Ram would be rendered immobile.

It was an obvious flow. It is best if their pain settles upon Subaru. If that were to be done, everyone would still be able to continue without losing. He must assist those who were fighting.

Subaru: “Not yet…”

Ram: “Beatrice-sama! Kindly take Barusu and stand back! He is only an obstruction!”

At Subaru’s condition who had his voice seem like incoherent murmuring, Ram prompted her quick judgement.

She rolled the tunic she had taken off around her wound in the guts thus trying to stop the bleeding and on top of that decided to continue the battle. In exchange for that she urged Beatrice to have Subaru withdraw from this place.

Beatrice abided by Ram’s judgement and pulled Subaru’s sleeve.

Beatrice: “Subaru, it’s just as how Ram says, I suppose! For now, get away from this place and…”

Subaru: “Th-That won’t do…! If I, get away from here…”

Shaking his head towards Beatrice who was pulling his sleeve, Subaru attempted remaining in this place.

Right now if he were to get away from this theater, the effect of Cor Leonis may get cut off and the battle Ram was managing may collapse at once.

If that happened, then what would be the point of having Subaru withdraw from here.

Ram: “Kugh…! Emilia-sama! For once, come over here!

Emilia: “Eh? Ah, hm! I get it!”

Looking at Subaru, who was attempting to remain here, Ram called upon Emilia.

At that call, Emilia, who had been concentrating on her battle with the titanic scorpion flew backwards greatly. The titanic scorpion tried to go after her but that pursuit was hindered by a humongous ice wall which seemingly covered the aisle.

Of course, in front of the titanic scorpion’s pincers the ice wall could stand for not more than a single second, but that single second was sufficient for Emilia’s retreat.

At that point—

Lye: “Woahwoahwoah, justasecondjustasecondjustasecond! Even if you come back with such energy, did you think we’ll just say ah is that so and overlook you…”

Ram: “Keep quiet!”

Lye: “Woops.”

Lye, slurping on his tongue, swung his dagger towards the retreating Emilia’s back. Ram, closing in with a low stance, brushed it away energetically by sweeping it with her legs.

And Emilia flew overhead of Lye, whose attack had been overturned, as if jumping over a hurdle. The result of that, as Lye stood in the aisle—

Shaula: “—Bishaaan!”

Lye: “Tch~! Hahaha ~tsu! Well well, aren’t you doing it ~tsu!”

The titanic scorpion, trying to pursue Emilia, viciously clashed with Lye who had been left alone in the theater. Though the compound eyes of the titanic scorpion were originally turned towards Subaru, even still, there was no way it could simply ignore the one standing in between as an obstruction and be able to pass freely.

The pincers of the titanic scorpion swung, and Lye warded them off with a miraculous technique of the blade with his daggers. Though the brittle blades seemed that they would get shattered easily by a single strike, Lye's ability was able to do that extremely easily.

At the same pace, glancing backwards, seeing as how the enemy collided with the enemy,

Ram: "Emilia-sama! Take Barusu!"

Emilia: "Leave it to me!"

Hearing Ram's shout as she dashed from the aisle, Emilia held the crouching Subaru in her arms like a baby. Shouldered by Emilia's slender arms, Subaru gave rise to a surprised voice saying "Woah!" but,

Emilia: "I'm sorry, stay put for a second, okay!"

Subaru: "To be carried by a girl, my pride got hurt…"

Ram: "There's no way there's any pride even left to be hurt at this point. Kindly stay put and get treated like luggage!"

Emilia's speed did not decrease even slightly whilst shouldering Subaru, who had blurted such thoughtless comments.

Behind them unfolded the clash between Lye and the titanic scorpion, and regardless of what the conclusion of it should become, the two would surely be obstructing each other's way for some time for the moment.

With that being said—

Beatrice: "—Shaula must be aiming for Subaru, in fact. The direction in which if you take your eyes off and lose sight of where it may come from is dangerous, I suppose!”

Ram: “That is the problem, Beatrice-sama. —Is that thing, really Shaula?”

Running alongside Emilia who was shouldering Subaru, Ram and Beatrice exchanged thoughts on the situation.

What Ram had asked demanded confirmation of what Subaru had previously convicted. Hearing that, Beatrice gave a sidelong glance to Subaru and nodded,

Beatrice: “That is what Subaru believes, in fact. That, attack of firing light also coincides, I suppose.”

Ram: “…The attack seen from the balcony, or during the time of exiting the sand, is it.”

Hearing Beatrice’s analysis, Ram furrowed her eyebrows. She then glanced towards Subaru, speaking to Subaru who was being carried Emilia’s arms.

Ram: “Barusu, whatever you are doing, disconnect it. At that pace…”

Subaru: “I-I will have to endure it? I’ll say this, I’m a man, you know. Enduring and being patient, is the special right of us men…”

Ram: “Quite a thing to say after being in such a tattered state and being carried by Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “U~ghu.”

At Ram’s words, he was unable to voice even “Ugh” properly.

The truth is, due to the effect of taking over Ram’s inferior physical form, ignoring his spirit, even breathing was painful for him. The burden increased each passing second and the exhaustion felt as if it were some curse that would eat away his life.

At the strong act being put up by that Subaru, Emilia whispered “As I thought”, Emilia: “Subaru, you’re doing something, right? Midway through, my body also became re~ally light, and the parts where I was damaged and wounded ndidn’t hurt either… Beatrice, in case you are having Subaru push himself.”

Beatrice: “It’s not Betty, in fact. This is what Subaru is doing by himself… through an Authority, I suppose. Even Betty wants to stop him if he can be stopped, in fact.”

Emilia: “Authority…?”

Against Emilia, who had offered her frank advice, Beatrice denied her involvement and made an astringent face. Emilia and Ram furrowed their eyebrows together in response to what she had pronounced.

Calling it an Authority, Beatrice gave the impression that she had an idea about the power Subaru was using—

Ram: “Beatrice-sama, what would be an Authority?”

Beatrice: “—. Something like, the backwards compatibility of a Divine Protection, I suppose. Subaru is pushing himself quite a bit and using it, in fact. That is the cause behind Emilia and Ram’s states as well, I suppose.”

“…”

Hearing that, Emilia inhaled while Ram sharpened her gaze.

Though she was physically supposed to be fine, what dwelled in Ram’s light crimson eyes was powerful rage. With such eyes, she glared at Subaru,

Ram: “Taking up Ram’s burden as how you please, when did you become so admirable?”

Subaru: “My bad… I’m a gentleman. That’s why, I end up smartly taking the girls’ luggage…”

Ram: “And as a result of that, become a girl’s luggage instead? It can be said countless times, you’ve got it backwards.”

Ram’s continued sighs somewhat felt as if she had given up on Subaru’s attitude. She must have understood as well, that Subaru had no intentions of returning that burden.

Honestly speaking, possessing it forever would be tiresome, but even so, at least while they are in the middle of the conflict—

Subaru: “—That’s, it.”

Thinking that far, at last, Subaru finally turned his consciousness towards— not the internal organs within the depths of his abdomen, but something else.

His consciousness passed through the body of what was his self, and largely spread out to the scope perceivable to him. And, grasping onto Cor Leonis, he connected to the conditions and positions of his comrades.

Without any change, in Taygeta were Echidna and Rem, along with Patrasche. Slightly away from them was Gyan at a lower floor, and then—

Subaru: “I knew it.”

Emilia: “I knew it? What did you know?”

Subaru: “Meili is, even now, obstructing the witchbeasts from the balcony…”

Though faintly distant, the flickering, blurry light on the balcony of the fourth layer was Meili. Though the situation was that Shaula had broken away, she was mobilizing her own strength and was dealing with the large hordes of witchbeasts.

He held the deepest admiration for the strenuous efforts she was making, and he felt grateful as well—

Beatrice: “That girl was not attacked by Shaula is what that would mean, in fact.”

Subaru: “Exactly.”

Subaru affirmed what Beatrice had stated, while on top of Emilia's shoulders.

The moment immediately after the battles had broken out in each of the respective places, Subaru had left dealing with the witchbeasts advancing towards the watchtower to the two of Meili and Shaula.

Thereafter, with Shaula unraveling herself in form of the titanic scorpion to attack Subaru and the rest, of course, the well-being of Meili, who was supposed to be with her became a matter of concern — but Subaru could feel her safety.

In other words,

Subaru: "Shaula turned into that after parting with Meili. At any rate, Shaula hasn't laid a finger on Meili…"

How relevant that was to the present situation, he could not think about that with an exhausted mind.

On top of that, even if they continued running at this rate—

Emilia: "We need to solve the problems rising up, otherwise we'll just get cornered no matter how much we run!"

With a shout similar to a cry, Emilia perfectly expressed the present condition of Subaru and the others.

The first of the five problems, the hordes of witchbeasts, for that was Meili, the titanic scorpion and Gluttony were continuing trying to devour each other, and he felt no signs of the arrival of the jet black shadow.

However, Reid Astrea, equipped with absurd violence like the hammer of god, was—

Ram: "—~hk, kindly stop!"

"—?!"

Ram, who was running and leading the vanguard, stretched her hand towards the rear and restrained Emilia and the others. In front of the momentarily stopped three a shockwave pierced through the following instant.

The shockwave diagonally bisected the aisle seemingly made of stone, creating an entrapment of rubble and smoke.

Seeing the destruction of the watchtower which had professed itself as indestructible, taking into account Subaru's memories, this would be the third time— but if being crushed by the shadow was to be kept out of the picture, this would be the first.

And, the true identity of that destruction was—

???: "Miss Ram… along with Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama, is it."

Subaru: "Julius?!"

Evading the erupted smoke, flying backwards greatly, the figure with a white outfit contaminated by blood and dust was the good-looking man, Julius Juukulius.

Stepping onto that place and the cause of the shockwave, he quickly turned his yellow eyes backwards and glanced into the dark-colored eyes of Subaru, who was sitting atop Emilia's shoulders,

Julius: "Though I believe it has only been a few minutes since we parted ways, it seems you were damaged quite harshly, isn't it."

Subaru: "Shut u~p… For once, I'm unhurt."

Julius: "I do not see the cold sweat of an unhurt human, though…"

Julius closed a single eye at Subaru, who had a pallid face and blurted out rough words with a faint breath. Even he, who possessed good judgement, had not been able to understand the effects of the Authority of Cor Leonis, as expected.

And unfortunately, no longer remained any time for them to calm down and converse about it.

Subaru: "I'm begging you, please say you slashed Reid's throat…"

Julius: "Reporting what differs from reality, is an extraordinarily difficult choice as a knight."

Beatrice: "…That, already makes for the answer, I suppose."

Subaru's wish, which seemed more like a prayer, had been implicitly repudiated by the excessively serious response. While feeling his hope turn into despair, Subaru made a bitter expression.

He felt his earbuds hurt, by a sound as that of crushing of the wall's fragments,

???: "Hah! So ya're greetin' all the women ya've gathered in here, you. It was jus' startin' to get a bit borin' after walkin' 'round freely. So are y'all gonna be my opponents, aye?"

Ram: "…The worst progression of events, isn't it."

Following Julius, the one who showed his form through the smoke was the great man with long red hair, casually dressed on only a single side, with a tall figure built with muscularity—red violence, Reid Astrea.

At the form of Reid, boldly stepping into the aisle of the fourth layer and not the second layer, Ram commented with a low voice. With identical astonishment Emilia said "You…" with a quivering voice.

Emilia: "Why are you on this floor? Aren't you supposed to be unable to exit from there…"

Reid: "Heyhey, don'tcha be makin' me laugh, fiercely frizzlin'. I live where I wanna live, slash down those whom I wanna slash down, and sleep with women I wanna sleep with. As if I'll be abidin' by the customs of others."

Beatrice: "…Just how cheap is this guy, in fact."

Beatrice, whilst trembling with fear, smacked her lips at Reid's self-centered philosophy.

However, it was fact that Reid had appeared in this place and was standing in the way of Subaru and the others, obstructing them.

With this was, Reid at the main gate, and Gluttony and the titanic scorpion at the rear gate. —This was the location of a tremendous battle.

Subaru: “Though it may be useless to just talk… Right now, everything happening in the tower is…”

Reid: “Ah, I know it’s becomin’ quite the ruckus, ya know? But, it ain’t concernin’ me. If the ones that got in will be gettin’ in my way then I’ll slash ’em down, or if they’ll open my way then I won’t kill ’em at least. —Woops, well those takin’ part in the Trial gotta be a special case. Though that still ain’t different from pickin’ a fight with me.”

Subaru: “Then…”

Reid: “—Hey, young fish. Don’tcha say any borin’ shit now.”

Twisting his words, Subaru tried to somehow extract information out of Reid. With his spirit of the sword losing its proper way, he made him shut his mouth.

“…”

As if an electric shock, pressure which caused physical numbness jolted Subaru— no, not only Subaru, but all four standing in the aisle. Otherwise, it may have jolted the entire tower itself.

This merely brought the displeasure of the lone man. So this was just his sense of intimidation.

Upon Pleiades Watchtower were threats aside from this giant man —

Subaru: “The way to deal with one of Gluttony and that shadow hasn’t been found either, and still…”

Julius: “—Subaru, regarding that, I have a good news and bad news from my side.”

Said Julius, preparing to use his knight sword, commencing with his words. At his commencement, with words as those from some overseas drama, Subaru stiffened his cheeks.

Good news and bad news, though it was an expression common in literary works, hearing those words in reality like this gave a terrible feeling of his chest being scratched apart.

Gulping down saliva for once, Subaru affirmed the words “Good news and bad news” in his mouth,

Subaru: “Then, say the good news first.”

Julius: “Regarding the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony nowhere to be seen whom you are getting anxious about, there is no need to be on the lookout for him. I can assure you regarding that.”

Subaru: “—? I don’t know on what basis you’re saying that, but it’s certainly good news. Then, what’s the bad news?”

Whether he found his tracks, or whether he got hands on proof of him having not arrived in the first place or having exited the tower, Subaru raised a single eyebrow in response to what Julius had pointed out.

If there was to be only one Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, then certainly the problems they had to deal with would reduce by one.

If the cards in their hands and the cards in the hands of the opponent were to be seen and compared, what would be the ideal course of action, Subaru considered that with his body in a horribly bad state.

Before that Subaru, Julius softly exhaled, and continued.

Julius: “The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard is over there.”

Subaru: “…Ah?”

With an earnest tone, Julius turned the leading edge of his knight sword towards the front.

What stood ahead of the pointing tip of that knight sword, was only the great man with the smile of a ferocious shark.

It could not mean anything else. —The man with the smile of a shark, was standing there.

However, Julius continued his words, as Subaru and the others stood stunned.

Julius: “The one before our eyes, the first generation Sword Saint, Reid Astrea. —He is, Roy Alphard.”

Chapter 69:
The Absurd Iron Hammer of the Sword

1

—Gulping down those words he had heard, he required several seconds to chew their implication.

Subaru: “Reid is, Roy Alphard…?”

Upon the report betraying his expectations, Subaru’s thoughts were disturbed into a shape unlike the anguish he had taken over.

The pain and suffering he had arbitrarily taken from his comrades, due to that negativity his mind was working slowly but this was a situation where even that couldn’t be used as scapegoat.

Taking some time for the moment with his brain seemingly melting out of his ears, he found his thoughts to be endless.

“…”

In front of him, the majestic figure standing boldly about whom this revelation had been made, the red-haired swordsman, unmistakably the existence who was the biggest nuisance in this Pleiades Watchtower, Reid Astrea, all whilst staring at him Subaru whispered.

Julius, who had readied his knight sword on his side, his expression possessed no signs of falsehood whilst he focused his eyes on Reid.

He was not a person with the personality to make such unfunny jokes in a gambling room where it was all a matter of life and death in the first place. That was the commentary on Julius by Subaru, who had once forgotten everything, and abiding by that notion the one in question remained fully serious.

Because it meant that Julius’ remarks, who possessed that conviction, were certain truth.

Subaru: “If Reid, is Gluttony, then that means…”

Reid was one of the obstacles that existed in the watchtower, however, stood at an ambiguous position when it came to demarcation as an ally or enemy.

But if his existence were to explicitly be one of those who were distinctly the enemies, then—

Subaru: “So that’s why, you were… again and again, so persistently…?”

Reid: “—Hey, jus’ wait, you. That’s a pretty borin’ misunderstandin’, ya know.”

Subaru: “Eh?”

Reid: “It ain’t a joke, you. Hey, you. You. You, sayin’ that I’m takin’ the form of that unrelated idiot, don’t go ’bout trustin’ that borin’ conclusion, you.”

Hearing Subaru’s trembling voice, Reid distorted his cheeks with seemingly painful displeasure.

Subaru was unable to comprehend, the meaning of that reaction.

—The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard was manifesting in the form of Reid.

Subaru, who had just previously seen the transformations of Louis Arneb, had reached that extremely respectable conclusion. The Authority of Gluttony of extorting the shape, form and combat power of the opponent, the result of which was the Reid before them.

However, Reid’s mood turned worse quite frankly at that conclusion.

The cause of that seemed to be, instead of the behavior of a coward hiding his true identity without knowing when to give, something much more simple like the displeasure of a child upon being teased.

The real meaning of that was—

Reid: “Ain’t it obvious that I’d be me. Because that’ll never change, I’m standin’ here. Do ya disagree? You, are ya sayin’ I’m wrong?”

“…”

Touching the eyepatch on his left eye whilst baring his sharp fangs, Reid declared towards Subaru.

Receiving that, Subaru inhaled and furrowed his eyebrows, reading deeply into his words.

And noticing a certain possibility, he took a short breath.

Subaru: “It can’t be, Julius…”

Julius: “Ah, likely, what you are imagining is correct.”

While keeping his line of sight maintained towards Reid, Julius pulled in his jaw upon Subaru’s hoarse voice. The good-looking man rubbed his cheek stained by his own blood with his shoulder and whilst continuing to erase that bloodstain,

Julius: “My wording earlier, was at fault. Let me correct it. —He, in front of our eyes, that flesh body belongs to Roy Alphard. However, that spirit is different.”

Subaru: “—Spirit.”

Julius: “Roy Alphard, ate the Memories of Reid Astrea, and had the control over his own spirit stolen by those Memories. Henceforth he, without any restrictions, descended from the second layer and is now here.”

“…”

Subaru found himself dumbfounded in response to Julius affirming the absurd possibility he had thought of.

Subaru wondered how something like that was even possible— no, each one aside from Subaru, Emilia, Beatrice, and even Ram, all of them widened their eyes together.

Certainly, everything's reasoning was logical with Julius' explanation.

Originally, as the trial taker of the Trial in Pleiades Watchtower, Reid Astrea was not supposed to be able to leave the second layer, but he started wandering about in the tower making an expression as if he owned the whole place, the reality behind that.

In the worlds he had continued to repeatedly witness, Subaru had been confused in the mayhem which brought the end of the tower, within those, he himself had not been able to attain freedom but had taken advantage of the actions of Gluttony and had acquired freedom.

Yes, that's right. With that, all of the baffling situations surrounding Reid made sense.

—However, he was unable to shut his hanging jaw for this exceeded norms far too much.

Beatrice: "Got dragged along by the Memories and lost sight of the true self, is what it would mean, I suppose."

Ram: "Simply put, it must mean that the one with the stronger self won and remained. —In terms of self principles, one chased away the other."

Though a bit late compared to Subaru, Beatrice and Ram arrived at the same conclusion.

An unstructured way of speaking, but Ram's words expressed the truth with frankness.

Subaru: "But, I have a doubt too…"

That was, why the eaten Reid's existence had not disappeared from everyone's memories.

Till now, the ones who had fallen victim to Gluttony aside from Subaru, Rem and Julius, had their existences erased from the memories of all people, is how it seemed.

The truth is, in the previous loop, the existence of Emilia disappearing from the memories of Ram and the rest was something Subaru could attest to. If so, then the same thing not happening to Reid was,

Julius: “Principally, what Gluttony had eaten was not Reid’s Name but at most his Memories, is what that would mean. It is not possible to eat both the Name and Memories of a dead person. That is what Roy Alphard had asserted.”

Subaru: “——~hk! Did you witness the scene of Reid getting eaten?!”

Sensing Subaru’s doubt, Julius responded with a single eye open. He answered with a short “Yes”, looking at the crumbled wall he himself had passed through,

Julius: “When I went to the second layer in accordance with your instructions, you see. Timely enough, that was when Roy Alphard and Reid were having negotiations. Negotiation, to label it as that would be suspicious in itself, though.”

Subaru: “What’s suspicious, about that?”

Julius: “Because Reid was making no effort for resistance. —Perhaps Gluttony, for some reason, may have been subjected to the Trial. That is why he, the trial taker, was unable to attack the opponent.”

Reid: “Hah! You, that’s ’bout half correct n’ half incorrect.”

Upon Julius stating that conjecture, none other than Reid called a halt to it. While crackling his thick neck bones, he had his nails touch the pit of his stomach,

Reid: “Certainly, no way they were gonna be participants for the Trial, but had I thought of doin’ it then I would’ve done it, ya know? If I did that then I won’t be here right now, ain’t that so?”

Julius: “You have attained the opponent’s self. Are you, saying that you already possessed confidence in that?”

Reid: “Jus’ actin’ as if focusin’ on only the strong parts’s somethin’ I won’t allow. Placin’ everythin’ one’s side has n’ gamblin’ it all’s what’s interestin’. Though, that was somethin’ that midget didn’t understand.”

Regardless of the truth of him having obtained that physical body, whatever may have been the interests of Gluttony who had been affected by that sequence of events, Reid declared pertaining to Roy with terrible indifference, whom he had confronted.

Merely, the fact is that the reality in front of their eyes was the truth. —The self of Roy Alphard, had been painted out by the monster known as Reid Astrea.

Reid: “If you wanna eat n’ taste me then ya gotta have the stomach large enough to fit me in. He didn’t have that. That’s why, I bit and tore apart the stomach. That’s all there’s to it.”

Subaru: “That’s all, there’s to it, you say…”

Aside from his bearing nausea and the sense of abrasion of his mind and body, Subaru felt his head starting to hurt.

In other words, if what happened in Reid’s body was to be said straightforwardly then,

Subaru: “Revived… Resurrected from the dead, is that what this is about?”

Julius: “In terms of results, you could say that. Above all, a situation where it is possible to meddle with the Memories of a dead person, and the existence who wielded that ability being encountered for the first time and then subsequently arriving into existence, it is a series of events akin to miracles.”

Subaru: “Miracles…”

A life who was supposed to have vanished four hundred years ago, to witness the moment of it being resurrected like this, Julius might have stated it to be the embodiment of an ironical miracle regardless of his intent to call it that way.

Although, he did not intend to state the reality of his resurrection alongside that as well—

Emilia: “Um, can I ask one thing?”

Reid: “A~h?”

Abruptly, when all of the happenings were being arranged into order, the one to raise her voice like that was Emilia.

Hereafter the encounter with Reid, Emilia had kept her mouth shut so that the topic of discussion may not get diverted. Seeing the discussion reach a point where it could halt she turned her amethyst eyes towards Reid.

And,

Emilia: “You have… Reid has been revived, right? With that you’ve become able to leave that place, that’s something I rea~lly congratulate you for.”

Reid: “Ah, thanks. With this I can teach ya all sorts of stuff at a proper place, fiercely frizzlin’. Let’s have drinks tonight, you. Aside from that… ah, heyhey we’ll do stuff as I teach ya.”

Emilia: “—? Are you inviting me to go out with you? But, I have only gone to a “dayte” with Puck and Subaru, so, I’m sorry. Also”

Though it would make for an exchange Subaru would never want to miss out on, getting caught on by Emilia’s comment on her date was something Subaru currently had no time to spare for.

Keeping those innermost thoughts of Subaru’s for some other occasion, Emilia repositioned Subaru’s body she was carrying on her shoulders,

Emilia: “Even though you have become free, can’t you stop being in our way? In case you don’t know, we are rea~lly busy right now…”

Reid: “Don’tcha make me say it, fiercely frizzlin’. I more or less’ve got grasp on what’s happenin’ here. After all, the tiny brat of this body was unusually well-informed, I hate it. —Ah, I really don’t like

it.”

As if throwing up, Reid annoyingly gripped to his guts.

It seemed as not merely resurrection but Reid also had the ability to read the memories of Roy Alphard— in other words, he apparently even had the power to catch a glimpse of an edge of the Authority of Gluttony.

Above all, it seemed as if it was something he aesthetically found strongly, terribly repulsive,

Reid: “He didn’t have a standpoint of his own, that’s why he got himself involved in such stupid shit. He’s an irredeemable kid. Though he ended up disappearin’ ’cause he was doin’ it without knowin’ his position, it’s gotta be a natural reward.”

Subaru: “…Why talk about only this place, if you’re free then how about you go conquer the world and the vast oceans? I rea~lly feel like you’re just delaying the problem, if that’s the case”

Reid: “You, don’tcha start preparin’ to run away. As it is, a situation where ya’re bein’ carried on the shoulders of a woman, it’s so pathetic it’d be better to die. Do ya wanna be coated with embarrassment?”

“…”

Subaru’s venture to avoid battle and having the situation ameliorate ended with a failure.

Perhaps, even the ones other than Subaru may have failed to understand what he had proposed just now as well. In the end, even if Reid were to gain freedom, he intended to respect his role as the trial taker.

Otherwise, not being particular about his title of the trial taker he simply would not allow for an opponent, whom he had decided to cross swords with, to escape.

At any rate,

Emilia: "—Is that so. If you won't move aside then there's no choice."

With a long sigh congested with nuance of it being unfortunate, the reply sufficiently suggested Emilia's decision to attack Reid.

Emilia: "I'm sorry."

Those words were directed, not at the confronting Reid, but at Subaru who was atop her shoulders, and he was a second late for noticing that.

Because after a single second, Subaru's body had been brought down from Emilia's shoulders and gently handed over to Beatrice, who was beside them.

—In but an instant, crossing the aisle with the speed as that of a bullet, Emilia slammed an ice sword into Reid.

The atmosphere gave rise to a high-pitched sound, yielding forth frost and the beautiful yet cruel blade of ice fluttered through the aisle as it was enshrouded in the erupted smoke. In any case, the attack with no hesitation whatsoever aiming for a fatal wound—once Emilia had decided to act upon, there was no faltering in her then. That was something clearly understood after all of the battles till now.

Emilia: "—Ha ~hk!"

The slash attack Subaru's eyes finally caught up to, the strike which was almost like an ambush, Reid easily received it using his arm outside of the breast pocket of his casual dress with the chopsticks he was holding in his hand.

This was not the first time seeing Reid wield chopsticks as his special weapon. However, it was not something which could be gotten used to even after seeing it on multiple occasions. Abnormalities were abnormalities, there lay change in that recognition.

Subaru: "He…! Emilia-chan!"

Beatrice: “S-Subaru! Don’t push yourself, in fact! Stay put, I suppose!”

Subaru shouted at Reid’s abnormal swordsmanship, feeling perturbed about Emilia’s safety. Appealing to Subaru to take care of himself was Beatrice, whom Emilia had suddenly forgone and entrusted his body to.

Being supported by her petite frame while kneeling down onto the aisle, Subaru pushed his eyes open.

Meanwhile, Emilia renewed her arms which had been smashed, or rather, slashed by the chopsticks and continued the performance of her swords dance like a fairy within sparkling diamond dust.

Easily brushing that away, Reid laughed with a “Haha ~hk!” like a shark,

Reid: “Hah! Jus’ as expected, ya got it quickly, fiercely frizzlin’! But, you, don’tcha know? Your Trial is already over, ya know?”

Emilia: “If that’s so! Then pass everyone else too!”

Reid: “Heyhey, the hell kind of reasonin’ makes ya say that aye. I ain’t got any reason to be doin’ that.”

Emilia: “I request you!”

Reid: “There ain’t anythin’ cute in beggin’ like that. For now, take off yer clothes, you.”

Though she had been making a serious expression, Emilia’s entreaty did not wield anything to Reid’s ears.

Identical to the first strike, Reid warded it away, chased it away the subsequent strikes using vivid techniques of chopsticks, barely conceivable. Subaru was unable to close his mouth hanging open before that abnormal swordsmanship.

Of course, Reid’s irrefutable mastery was not something unknown.

However, even Emilia had not drawn a step back against even the enemies of Gluttony and the titanic scorpion, when compared to such a variety of warriors she had shown overwhelming capacity. At the very least, even a hundred of Subaru would not be able to oppose Emilia. —For Reid, that was, quite literally, a child's play.

Emilia's offence and defense jaded the spirit of it being a do-or-die situation, was naught but the play of an unskilled child for Reid.

Subsequently, Emilia, after a mere few exchanges, was unable to reach through and experienced defeat. The difference in their ability was so immense that even the untrained eyes could identify that.

However—

Ram: "—The reason to abstain from using full force? That should be quite simple."

Reid: "A~h?"

Ram: "Because you, will face an unsightly defeat here at the hands of Ram and the others."

Interrupting the battlefield with a petite frame pronounced Ram, positioned behind Reid.

—And caught hold of that back of Reid's.

That alone was more than worthy of admiring, but Ram's fearsomeness was not the end of it.

Emilia attacked without any relent against the opponent Reid Astrea. Ram matched the timing with her, who had left her battle style upon her senses, with godly intuition.

Precisely this which Subaru had not been able to read at all, was Emilia's initial surprise attack— movements that suggested the question whether he had really managed to read them, and the truth was that they were movements which gave the impression of possibly already having gotten read.

"…"

The very next instant, Ram's unleashed fist stabbed into the side of Reid's casual dress.

At the moment of the impact, with the sound of the flesh and bones creaking, Ram's white fist's piercing strength penetrated through Reid's internal organs and the aisle was split open by the bottom of Reid's feet, who continued standing his ground.

Subaru: "It reached through… ~hk?!"

Looking at that, Subaru thoughtlessly hugged Beatrice tightly.

He wanted to cheer, but he was unable to voice anything further. Instead of that, he felt his body heat up as if his blood was boiling. Because that was, as far as Subaru knew, the first time Reid had taken damage without it even being a matter of super luck.

Ram: "Ha, a~a~a~—!"

The unimaginably powerful fists fired from her slender arms were hammered into Reid as if a storm. Reid received that with his defenseless lower body, and retreated.

It was not as if he lacked all defense. Even for blocking Ram's attacks, his two chopsticks were being used to block Emilia's fierce attack, so he merely lacked the defense to direct there.

Henceforth, pressurized by the might of her tremendous fisting, Reid's body was greatly pushed back.

And whilst his figure was blown off, Emilia threw the twin swords she had created with both of her hands and the sword slashes drew an arc which was then cleared away by Reid's chopsticks' slash, subsequently he collapsed onto the aisle, lying spread-eagled.

Subaru: "Did they, do it…?"

Seeing the form of Reid collapsed, lying flat on the aisle, Subaru lightly whispered in astonishment, with widened eyes.

Blocking Emilia's surprise attack had been a final desperate tactic of his, and the one other than that, Ram's attacks was what he had gotten a taste of. Every blow had wielded enough power to make his bones creak.

Emilia's difficult fighting was a matter of course, but perhaps misjudging Ram's combat power had been Reid's cause of defeat.

As an effect of Cor Leonis, having been able to move without any hindrances, Ram's ability had been enough to mow down the opponent's consciousness before Reid could get serious—

Subaru: "—~hk! Right now you can quickly tie him down and render him unable to battle! Emilia-chan! Constrict him with ice…"

For a moment his thoughts had come to a halt without confirming their victory, but he was unable to overlook that extremely valuable situation. Panicking, Subaru instructed Emilia to constrict Reid.

At the same pace, he tried to call out to Ram, who had been making strenuous efforts—

Beatrice: "…Subaru, when did, your health come back?"

Subaru: "Eh?"

Suddenly, so asked Beatrice, who had been supporting his body.

Receiving that doubt, Subaru tardily came to notice the truth of him standing on his legs and giving instructions to Emilia. —The agony which was eating into him as if a curse, had disappeared.

Ram: "—Ka, fugh"

The moment immediately after he judged what that must mean, Ram's body shivered, trembling violently.

Ram's upper body, who had turned her back towards this side, jolted and she collapsed down to her knees, unable to support her body.

Subaru: "Ram!!"

Julius: "Ku~gh!"

Unable to even stretch out her hand, Ram collapsed seemingly like a puppet whose threads had been slashed away. The one to jump at Ram's collapsing body was Julius, who had been awaiting an interval to plunge into the battle.

Supporting Ram's wholly exhausted body, Julius confirmed her condition with his expression frozen. The reason for that was Ram's complexion, and the crimson of thick blood which dyed her clothes.

Massive amounts of blood was flowing from the wound in Ram's abdomen whose bleeding she had stopped. Though it was true that the lost blood brought serious danger to her life, that alone was not the issue.

The greatest problem was linked with the healing of Subaru's condition.

In other words—

Subaru: "The effect of Cor Leonis, has been cut off…"

???: "—A~h, so it finally got cut aye. You, don't be doin' borin' shit. Aren'tcha jus' hidin' behind a woman. Ya're a disgrace for a young fish, you."

"…"

In front of Subaru, who had been rendered speechless, the collapsed Reid swung and stationed both of his feet and vigorously stood up. Reid lightly patted and swept his back, and swung his arms in circles from his shoulders whilst gripping onto the chopsticks.

His attitude which felt as if he hadn't taken any of the damage Ram had inflicted on him, though that alone made his body shudder, what made Subaru uneasy were his words immediately afterwards.

—Reid said, that it got cut. Just, what was he referring to.

Reid: "Playin' 'round like that'll always be borin'. First of all, somethin' like feelin' no pain or ache even when the guts're all torn up, are ya makin' fun of me, you."

Subaru: “Wo, ah…”

Reid: “If ya say ya wanna do it with perfection, then ya gotta stand what ya receive too. But, this one’s done for. You, this one’s done for, ya know. You, can’t ya see. This woman, was gonna die even before it got cut.”

Intimidated by Reid’s low pitched words, Subaru turned his line of sight towards Ram, who was in Julius’ arms. Receiving that gaze, Julius lightly pulled in his chin.

Julius: “His words are correct. Miss Ram’s wounds are no trivial matter. Even now, she is on the verge of death.”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

Julius: “The reason why the bleeding is not stopping, is perhaps because of the usage of a chemical which hinders the clotting of blood. Other than that must be the recoil of her pushing herself which is present on her body.”

Each and every word of Julius’ analysis attempted to carve a painful fissure onto Subaru’s chest.

He, failed. —Subaru’s Cor Leonis overlapped with his complacent failure.

“…”

Taking over Ram’s inferior physical form, he had created a circumstance under which she could fight.

Though that was not a mistaken judgement, he ignored the injuries she had taken— no, having Rem herself ignore those is what had been a mistake.

If Subaru was to take over the pain and anguish of injuries, she would not be able to be conscious of the wounds’ seriousness. If Ram were to conduct herself in a way suggesting she was unharmed, Emilia would not come to notice anything either.

Julius: “A magic similar to Nect of sharing sensations, a bit different from that, or perhaps something entirely unlike. Something much more different, had been put to use. And, you said that you had cut it."

Reid: "I'm good at cuttin' invisible stuff, ya see. Well, the trick's intuition. With that, a bit of time got used up. Took a pretty grand hit."

Reid exaggerated the reason he had bathed in Ram's storm-like fists. However, returning to the original topic, the truth was that he could more or less not feel any of the damage he had taken.

The trick behind that too, was pronounced from Julius' mouth. Whilst keeping Ram in his embrace, Julius gently turned his gaze backwards— facing the aisle which had been fissured by the close combat.

Julius: "You let all of Miss Ram's attacks escape onto the floor with the bottom of your feet, huh."

Reid: "It's a technique which a woman friend of mine, Trisha used to be good at, ya see."

Reid laughed with a "Kaha" as he firmly stomped on the aisle.

Hearing the conversation of the two, Subaru, whilst continuing to shiver, glanced at the crevices of the aisle. The endless wounds born onto the aisle were the proof of Reid having directed Ram's attacks onto the aisle.

It was perhaps some technique to direct the impact of blows towards someplace else. —It could be said that it was the culmination of martial arts.

Subaru: "…Ah."

The truth is, when Ram's initial blow had struck, Subaru too had witnessed the aisle tremendously fissure with his own eyes. That also applied to all subsequent consecutive strikes.

Both this and that, everything was—

Subaru: “To slash down the connection between me, and Ram…? In the first place, how did that even…”

Reid: “I jus’ said. I slash down what I wanna slash down, live where I wanna live, and sleep with women I wanna sleep with. —I slashed down that borin’ game, all while hummin’.”

Leading a carefree life, was Reid.

Cutting things which could not be seen. Otherwise, cutting connections which do not physically exist. Was the capability of doing so, the true ability of the existence named the Sword Saint.

Emilia: “But, when I struck you from above with a lot of strength, you had been in pain…!”

Reid: “Back then the situation was different ya know, fiercely frizzlin’. Right now I’m here to enjoy the fightin’ more than the Trial. If it’s a fight then ya gotta be more serious than the Trial, ya know. Do ya disagree, you.”

Slashing and repelling away Emilia’s response, Reid snorted his nose and prepared his chopsticks. Adjusting the stance of his chopsticks as if he was ordinarily commencing a meal, and pointing their ends towards Julius, Reid’s blue eyes gleamed with a blaze.

Reid: “That’s how it is. Ya got what I’m sayin’, aye, you. You. Hey you.”

Julius: “—To settle this, with the sword. That is your intention, correct?”

Reid: “Yeah, that’s right. Let me tell ya, I’ll allow any damn thin’ aside from swords too, ya know? Whether ya wanna throw magic at me or clash with me, it ain’t any problem. If you wanna win against me…”

Quite boldly, Reid gestured with a finger touching his chest, and pointed towards his heart.

In other words, that was the only way to bring an end to his life, that is what his expression indicated.

That was the evidence that Subaru's card of waging war had been correct—

Julius: "Why, must you be fixated over myself?"

Reid: "A~h? I'm bein' fixated over you? Gimme a break. Bastards of jus' mere words with nice faces're the race I hate the most, ain't that so. On top of that, why'd I gotta be fixated?"

Julius: "Then…"

Reid: "—You're the one who'd have a reason to be fixated over me. If I draw back from here, do ya really think that'd be fine?"

"…"

Reid's response to Julius' question could not be described as one that was clear.

He himself, belonged to a race of those types who did deem worth in conveying all things as words. Furthermore, a large part of his response had been occupied by something similar to sensation, it was difficult to comprehend.

However, for those who did understand that, merely had the answer which was limited to that was—

Reid: "—Tch. A troublesome one ended up comin' here."

Before that answer could be chewed, what preceded was Reid clicking his tongue in discontent.

And, the cause behind the click of his tongue, revealed its figure from the interior of the aisle Subaru and the others had crossed through— no, in the form of a corona, it pounced upon them.

Emilia: "Subaru!"

Immediately before the corona could evaporate away Subaru, Emilia's ice sword separated and distanced away the two from each other. As a note of shattering of ice echoed, the repelled light stabbed through the aisle. —An extremely long tail stinger, disappeared as if having frayed.

That was namely, the baptism by the guardian of the Sage's watchtower—

Subaru: "—Shaula."

"…"

Red compound eyes emerged from the interior of the aisle, possessing multiple legs, the titanic scorpion revealed its form. Jet black shell and fiendishly large pincers, its figure was both ominous and healthy.

However, the form of Lye, who had been left behind to battle that titanic scorpion, was nowhere around it. Although the titanic scorpion had no traces of blood on itself, if he had faced defeat at the hands of the titanic scorpion and had fallen then it was all good, but,

Subaru: "Reid and Shaula, at the same time…"

Beatrice: "S-Subaru…"

Caught between the two formidable enemies, in the midst of the situation where they could not take any inadvertent action, Beatrice called out to Subaru with a trembling voice.

Looking back towards that Beatrice, he noticed her pale expression. Beatrice's expression was painted with fear, and he tightly hugged it with his chest.

Somehow or the other, he searched for words in an attempt to clear away the unrest in her heart,

Subaru: "Beatrice, it's alright. At any rate, we haven't managed to find a plan yet, but it's alright. Recovery is still…"

Beatrice: "That's not it, I suppose, that's not it, in fact! —It's coming, I suppose!"

Subaru: "It's coming?"

As he heard Beatrice's concerns, who had widened her eyes and changed her expression, he glanced at the titanic scorpion once again.

Reid was here, and Shaula was on the other side, this was the very meaning of threat. In a situation where such terrifying ones had gathered, what was going to come now—

Subaru: "It can't be."

Reid: "I jus' said, didn't I. That a troublesome one ended up comin' here."

The thought which had passed by Subaru's mind, as if affirming it, Reid pronounced.

That tone of speaking was serious, as if it were having trouble digesting this situation.

—The subsequent instant, an impact reached their feet in the form of a parlous earthquake, jolting Pleiades Watchtower.

"…"

Without exaggerating, when Subaru felt the impact reach his body, heaven and earth got overturned for him.

Subaru was blown off without even the use of a technique. —In the field of vision of that Subaru, the residents of the fantasy world were each displaying astonishing movements respectively.

Midair, Emilia kicked the foothold she had created with ice and repelled away the consecutively fired tail stringers by the titanic scorpion seemingly advancing towards her comrades— no, towards Subaru.

In the world which was tilting diagonally, Julius seemingly dashed on the wall and closed in on Reid, and commenced with an elite sword slash with his knight sword.

And, Beatrice jumped towards Subaru, who had tightly held onto Ram and kept her close to himself,

Beatrice: “—Murak!”

The moment she chanted that, Subaru felt himself envelope within the feeling of suspension, different from that of the impact. Released from the force of gravity, the feeling as if he had been thrown into a world without gravity.

The effect was not as little as simply having restored heaven and earth for him.

Each one respectively, was acting at their very best with whatever each one of them respectively could do—

Subaru: “—Ah.”

As if sneering at those very best of actions, multitudinous volumes of the jet black shadow swallowed the tower in its entirety.

“…”

Dreadful pressure echoed, and the watchtower, which boasted strength enough to make it difficult to believe that it was mere stone, got completely crushed. That was the tyranny of the shadow, which was not originally supposed to possess mass.

The arrival of the impact, which could no longer be named as a single destructive happening but rather was closer to a natural disaster, easily swallowed, chewed even those who possessed extraordinary abilities enough to be called superhumans in this world.

Going up against the titanic scorpion, making free use of magic and her physical abilities and putting up a brave fight, Emilia, as well.

Swinging the knight sword, and charging towards the legend who was entertained by his self, Julius, as well.

Protecting Subaru, and using magic with her small body, Beatrice, as well.

In the juncture where they twinkled aglow, the stretching shadow entwined and they turned invisible.

"…"

Without sound, without reverberation, the forms of Emilia and the others vanished.

What name should be given to what had occurred to their bodies in the matter of an instant, Subaru was unable to find any pertinent words within himself.

Merely, there existed something he could clearly say.

"—I have failed."

—I love you.

At the same time, he accepted reality, and was whispered words of dusky love.

Whilst being whispered into his ears, or otherwise, whilst kissing him, or otherwise, whilst embracing his entire body, or otherwise, whilst caressing his soul, frighteningly direct, words with the soul of love.

He immediately understood. The greatest problem amongst the five obstacles.

The shadow which swallowed everything had arrived, whether it was possible to deal with it at all, even that notion alone was questionable.

"…"

This was his third time seeing that shadow, and each time he encountered it, Subaru's life had been lost.

This time was no exception, now that the shadow had arrived and reached through—

Reid: "—You, the hell ya doin' thinkin' 'bout sleepin', hey."

At that moment, the jet black shadow which enclosed Subaru, was mowed down by a flash that had been swung.

Subaru: "—You've got to be joking."

Reid: "Widen yer eyes n' see. What's the joke, you. You, do ya have yer eyes open. Open yer eyes n' take a good look, you. What's the joke 'bout me."

Saying that whilst casually swinging the knight sword, and having slashed away the shadow was Reid. He wielded in his hands, not chopsticks, but a knight sword— which belonged to Julius, and exhaled through his nose.

It was truly ironic that the sword which had lost its owner, was displaying more ability in the hands of the Sword Saint than its owner, but there was no time present to be having such thoughts.

That was because Subaru, who had been standing upright, had his torso kicked by Reid.

Subaru: "Ghu, egh."

Inside the narrow aisle, his suspended body was unable to hit even the ceiling or the walls.

The structure of the watchtower had already been destroyed, and he no longer was able to determine where the ceiling was or where the walls were. What was present in Subaru's environs was the endlessly black sky, endlessly black sole, endlessly black world.

Anything and everything, became incomprehensible. —No, there was slightly moving heat, within his arms.

Ram: "—Ugh."

The warm body of the unconscious, fainted Ram asserted her existence.

Subaru: "—~hk."

Directing strength in his molars, biting and tearing into his own lips, he directed life into himself.

At this moment, when anything and everything was being painted black, by giving up on comprehending the situation, wasn't Subaru simply entrusting his body to the end.

In front of this life trying its best to live at this moment, that was unforgivable.

Subaru: "—Still, something."

Though the situation was in this state, there yet must be something he could attain.

Till now, Subaru had been swallowed by this jet black evil influence and had lost his life twice. However, those two occasions had been abrupt, and he must have had no time left to do this.

What he had attained through this, was Ram who was asserting her fragile life, and—

Reid: "—Hah."

The kick he had received by Reid, who was within the same shadow as Subaru, wearing a ferocious smile.

Of course, he was not grateful for that.

It hurt as if the pit of his stomach had been gouged out, and in the first place, the reason why they had lacked time till the shadow swallowed the watchtower was because of Reid's unnecessary interruption.

That's why—

Subaru: "You will, get crushed too. —By the Greatest Knight, I know of."

Reid: "That's, you, keep actin' cool as how you're till the very end, young fish."

Looking downward, Reid set his aim on Subaru with a backhand grip to the knight sword. There was distance between them, but from Reid's perspective, distance of a few meters must be as good as nonexistent.

And, below Reid, who had established Subaru as his enemy, the vivacious jet black shadow yet continued advancing closer. Something like that wasn't even deemed to be anything by Reid's sword spirit.

Though he was unaware of it, at this moment, Subaru may just be witnessing it.

A long time ago, said to have happened four hundred years ago, the legendary acts of the Witch and the Sword Saint.

However, something like that was meagre as the absurd destruction and violence, namely Death drew close to Subaru—.

Subaru: "At least"

Even if just a second longer, I want you to stay alive.

Enshrouded by that wish, Subaru tightly embraced Ram's body, in his arms.

The next moment, a torrent of light, unbelievably stemming from a sword, swallowed Subaru—

2

—Each time he vanished, each time he redid, each time he made a wish, he was faced with vicissitude.

Countless times, repeating, repeating, he continued to pile up ends which are supposed to happen only once.

Suddenly, he thought.

Always, having someone by his side in the moments of end, may be something to feel happy for.

Should never being alone in the moments of end, grant him the strength to stand.

However, alongside, he also thought of this.

About why, always, Natsuki Subaru was unable to rescue that someone whom he nestled close to, in the moments of end.

3

"…"

Clouds of sand, were rising up to extremely high skies which they were never supposed to reach.

Pleiades Watchtower's balcony, several meters above ground, underneath where present were the advancing hordes of witchbeasts, commencing with their attack to bring down the watchtower.

Holding them back, with her own ability to control witchbeasts was Meili, making strenuous efforts.

Julius was above, heading for Reid on the second layer.

And, Subaru and the others must make haste and dash to Emilia and the others, who must be clashing with Lye Batenkaitos—

???: "Master-sama? Are you alright?"

In accordance with Subaru's summons, she tilted her neck, with her long, black braid swaying about.

As she pronounced that question, in her expression, in her eyes, sentiments such as those of impatience or irritation could not be felt. Of course, no light of cunningness planning to deceive them could be perceived either.

Whether that was her camouflage or her true intents, there was no definite answer to that, however—

???: "Master-sama, are you listening? People other than master-sama or me seem to have gotten involved in troublesome stuff but… is there something I can do for Master-sama?"

Subaru: "Ah, is that so… Something you can do for me, huh."

???: “Yup. If it’s Master-sama’s request, then into fire, into water, even into large explosions, I can energetically FLYWAY into ’em!”

Energetically, possessing no malice, the personality with her arms stretched wide whilst saying that, Shaula.

Staring at that carefree smile, Subaru turned back and inhaled.

He made his return. To this moment, he was made to return.

There were no changes in what he was supposed to do. There existed people he must save, people he must defeat.

That is why, without losing his way, in order to settle what all he was supposed to do, Subaru undertook a necessary ceremony.

That was—

Subaru: “Shaula, will you listen to anything I tell you to do?”

Shaula: “Course of of! If it’s Master-sama’s request then I’ll listen to anything! If it’s master-sama’s demand then I’ll even listen to something which may be a bit extreme. Ah, ah, ah, could it be Master-sama, finally reached the limit of holding back in front of my DYNAMITE BODY? That’s why you kept away all others and it’s just the two of us now? Ah, you you you! Geez Master-sama—”

Subaru: “—Shaula.”

Twisting and turning, with her cheeks sandwiched in her hands, Shaula blushed at Subaru’s words.

However, Subaru did not pay heed to such words of hers, and stared at her face with a serious face.

And—

Subaru: “—If I tell you to die, will you die?”

Chapter 70:
The Earnest Star

1

—Within the collapsing tower, basking in Reid’s decapitating slash, Natsuki Subaru’s life had burned out.

Quite literally, burning out had accurately been his moment of death.

There were various things which he was pained by and which he needed to confirm, such as the way to cope with the mass of the shadow drawing near, or what he intended to do afterwards, and above all, somehow or other confirming a scaffold within the crumbling tower, and all those of his efforts had gotten abandoned.

What alone was confirmed was that Reid’s final flash had swallowed Subaru, and vaporized him away.

Perhaps, it had not hurt, is what he thought.

Of course, he did not believe it had been Reid’s benevolence at all, but pain and fear not accompanying the moment of Death was an unexpected occurrence for Subaru, who had died several times within a short frame of time.

Yes, neither had he felt pain nor fear. —Merely Rage was what he held.

Subaru: “—I will”

For just how many times continue to pile up meaningless deaths, is what he thought.

Things he had taken with him, hints that would break him out of the deadlock, as long as those were present, Subaru’s Deaths would not be meaningless, and the Deaths he was continuing to pile up would not be put to waste.

That was, terrible deceit.

That was, merely an excuse to turn his eyes away from his own powerlessness.

He had died meaninglessly, powerlessly, without will, without heart, aimlessly, and he did not want to think that, that was all there was to it. That is why, for not having merely died, he desired meaning in his Death.

If only he could have had been more strong.

If only, he could have had been more smart.

If only, instead of his current self, he could have had been stronger, smarter, bolder.

Subaru: “But…”

The only one here was merely the weak, stupid, pathetic Natsuki Subaru.

Because nobody, ever, tried to leave that Subaru alone.

That was, because they were supporting his current self’s wound-filled resolution.

Subaru: “That is why, I am—”

That is why, Natsuki Subaru is—.

2

Subaru: “—If I tell you to die, will you die?”

The moment he declared that, it was not as if he felt no hesitation.

That was because he had been unable to anticipate what kind of a reaction his opponent would give him the moment she received that question. —No, if it was merely anticipation, then he had done so.

With various patterns of imagination, he had thought of what it eventually would be.

If so, then the faltering he had embraced while declaring that question, for what reason did he possess that indecision.

At any rate—

Shaula: “—? If Master-sama told me to die then I’ll die, you know?”

He felt his chest ache upon Shaula’s indifferent response, who had a finger touching her cheek.

As if he was being stabbed, to the point it would form cracks, painfully, he let out a shriek within the core of his chest.

“…”

Oozily, upon the painful optical illusion, Subaru gripped to the pit of his stomach and deeply exhaled.

Though he himself had voiced out those wounding words just now, he thought himself comical for feeling hurt. Looking at that Subaru’s state, Shaula rounded her eyes in curiosity.

With no ill intent, Shaula’s attitude seemed as if she had been asked about the menu for today’s evening meal and she had merely responded appropriately.

That reaction of hers, was the second worst in the patterns he had predicted.

With no pretense, selecting the option of accepting the instruction for her to abandon her life was Shaula.

That was no lie or humor, that was her real intention with no second thoughts, he was able to understand that by a single glance into her straightforward eyes.

Subsequently having caught a glimpse into her dark self-interests or plans might have had saved Subaru’s heart.

However, the reality was that Subaru had not prepared for such an escape route. Whether that was compassion or mercilessness, at this stage he would not be able to even differentiate between the two,

but—

Subaru: "…Is that, so."

Shaula: "Does Master-sama, want me to die? Hmm, if it's Master-sama's request then I'll listen to anything, and I'm perfectly fine with it personally, but again, isn't it quite a weird timing for such a thought? Right now, it's a total fiasco inside the tower…"

Subaru: "I know. I know."

Hearing Subaru's husky reply, Shaula tilted her neck while having her finger remain on her cheek. Going along with that movement of her neck, her long braid— scorpion tail swayed about.

Scorpion tail. If considered, that was quite an ironic naming as well.

Similar to Shaula which bestowed meaning upon the Scorpius, her name was expressed even upon her body. That was made apparent not merely through her name, but through various other aspects of hers as well.

That was surely because she had no intentions of concealing it.

That is why—

Subaru: "—Shaula, you, aren't you capable of taking the form of a large scorpion?"

Lacking any sluggish phraseology, Subaru frankly cut into the opponent's secret.

The five obstacles that attack the Pleiades Watchtower— one of those, the existence of the jet black titanic scorpion. Subaru had been halfway convinced that it had been Shaula.

However, for Subaru, that answer he had sensed was merely his interpretation of the feeling he got from the powerful Authority of unidentified nature, Cor Leonis.

If he were to try and gain confirmation for that answer he had sensed, enquiring the opponent directly about it would be the fastest.

Of course, if he had time to then he may have chosen a different option as well, and if he had been unable to trust his opponent's response, then he might have been obligated to employ a different method.

However, Shaula kept her neck tilted at that inquiry of Subaru's,

Shaula: "Take the form of, the nuance is a bit different from that, but yup I can~. Ah, but, it damages my PRETTINESS so I don't really like it too much. I just think that the design given to me by mother-sama and Master-sama is the best."

In spite of the question being one lacking any chain of logic, Shaula readily answered with no hesitation yet again.

"…"

She possessed no intentions of hiding anything.

And the nature of Shaula herself, it could be said that it had been established with this proof. At the same time, the titanic scorpion which made its appearance in the tower— its true identity had been her, he had gained that confirmation now.

The effect of Cor Leonis, the moment he perceived the positions of his comrades within the tower, the reason why the titanic scorpion had been indicated in that perception, that had indeed been the trick instigating it.

Shaula: "Master-sama? Are you okay? Your face has a pretty bad color, you know? Would you like to REFRESH yourself with my lap pillow, arm pillow, chest pillow, hug pillow or something like that?"

Subaru: "…Don't say things which dampen my spirits. First of all, we don't have such time, you yourself said that, didn't you."

Shaula: "It's true that it's a fiasco inside the tower, but for me, Master-sama is on the top of my priority list, everything else can be kept for later. That's why, if Master-sama slips into confusion and says he wants to be locked in a grapple with me, I’d welcome it super openly. I’m getting fired up.”

Subaru: “Don’t get fired up. Get some water.”

Shaula: “Just as always, geez Master-sama~.”

Sharpening her lips, Shaula made a pouting face.

His back and forth with her, along with her expression, if only these were to be taken into consideration, it could be misunderstood that the situation that had come up around Subaru and the others was seemingly one of peace.

“…”

However, reality was not kind to Subaru and the others at all. It was the farthest thing from peace.

Whilst Subaru and Shaula leisurely conversed like this, Emilia and Ram were making efforts in order to hold off Gluttony, and Beatrice had joined in with them for support. Julius was colliding with Reid = Roy on the second layer, Echidna had grouped with Patrasche, and must be evacuating to Taygeta along with Rem. And, Meili was holding off the hordes of witchbeasts— the very best they could do to strike the five obstacles.

However, even that was merely deceit for the sake of conversing with Shaula.

Because, in these surroundings, Natsuki Subaru was—

Shaula: “M-Master-sama? Are you seriously alright? If you stare at me with such imposing eyes, I won’t be able to hold back this four hundred year old wait I have experienced, you know…?”

At Subaru’s gaze staring at her self, Shaula hugged her slender figure with her arms. It seemed to be the usual feign, but that was not it.

She truly was in a situation where she was feeling uneasiness by Subaru’s attitude. It was unlike her— no, that’s wrong. Perhaps these were her true feelings.

She had not felt shaken even when Subaru had told her to die, but when Subaru acted abnormally, her fragile heart had shaken up, almost astonishingly. —Akin to, a baby bird innocently yearning for its parents.

"…"

When he had fired his first question at Shaula, Subaru had thought of several possibilities.

Amongst those, the worst one was that the instant she would get struck by those heartless words from Subaru, she might murder him impulsively at the very same pace. —In the case that Shaula's attitude till now had been mere acting, and anything and everything had been fabricated.

It was not impossible.

Though he had possessed no confirmation before that question, she had a track record of having changed into the form of the titanic scorpion and murdering Subaru, Echidna and Beatrice. Otherwise, in the tragedy where Subaru had been unable to find a single person alive in his surroundings, it was highly possible that she had a hand in that after turning into the titanic scorpion.

That is why, the first question, for Subaru as well, had been a gamble.

Once he said that, the instant immediately afterwards Shaula had gulped down that question, it would not have been strange if Subaru's head had been sent evaporating, it had been that kind of a gamble— he could now say that he had won that gamble.

However, merely once is never an end to gambling.

The debt Subaru had unconsciously piled up, the stakes prepared by Gluttony and the Pleiades Watchtower, in order to regain whatever he had lost till now, piling up such little victories would be far too lacking.

For a huge victory, it is a necessity to make a huge gamble. Henceforth—

Subaru: “Shaula, sorry for having so many questions, but I want to ask something. From what I’ve heard, there are supposed to be some rules for the Trials of this Pleiades Watchtower, is that so?”

Shaula: “You ask that now at this timing when I’m getting all hot?!…Well, yes there are? I had talked about it before Master-sama crashed his head into the urinal too, though…”

Subaru: “Tell me, about them.”

Without hiding her sulking attitude, Shaula gently positioned her fingers opposite to her chest. And, she immediately swayed about her positioned fingers, whispering “Umm”.

Shaula: “First, it is forbidden to leave without completing the Trials. Second, it is forbidden to violate the rules of the Trials. Third, it is forbidden to disrespect the libraries. Fourth, it is forbidden to do anything which causes destruction to the tower itself. —Yeah.”

Whilst keeping her fingers folded, Shaula explained with an awfully fluent tone.

Of course, she was a girl proficient in speaking if she were to limit her thoughtless comments, and nothing felt odd in her explanation, which was lacking any pauses. Though nothing felt odd, there was a catch to it.

That went for the serious tone of her voice which was unlike her, at but the end of her gesture of counting with fingers, she had touched her final finger and then stopped there, that too.

Subaru: “—The fifth one?”

Shaula: “…That’s not there. Master-sama, didn’t you hear me? I must have said up to four. Master-sama, can’t you even count numbers now? That won’t do~. Numbers aren’t my strong point either, but even I can count that much…”

Subaru: “Shaula.”

"…"

Staring, Subaru raised his voice and took a single step, shortening the distance between him and Shaula.

Those two had been facing each other head-on beforehand, but the distance between them now was enough that one could extend his hand and grasp onto the other one. —Even that action was a gamble for Subaru.

Of course, just because he had opened up the distance between them being only of a single arm, just because he had shortened the distance between them to that of only a single arm, the war potential of having the capability of doing something which belonged to both of them was nothing so superficial.

Shaula: "Master-sama… could it be, you're toying with my heart? Not my will, but Master-sama getting closer on his will, if you want me to open my mouth, then, it's that. At the same pace and with the same energy, hug me and melt me…"

Subaru: "If your mouth really will open by that, then I'll do it. That can even be said to be a side benefit… But, if what you believe is my purpose based on your intuition isn't actually my purpose, then that won't be the case, I think."

"…"

Subaru: "Shaula, I shall ask again. What is, the fifth rule of the tower?"

While accepting Shaula's mild refusal, Subaru asked for the second time.

That was an action not inching closer to her physically, but instead stepping onto her heart. Those repeated words, although perhaps bitter, were something she could not make it seem as if she did not hear them.

Embracing that resolution, in front of Subaru who had clenched his fists, Shaula slightly exhaled, and,

Shaula: "—NG."

Subaru: "…NG?"

Rotating her neck right and left, Shaula crossed her arms in front of her voluptuous chest, making a symbol of her discomfort.

Though her behavior was childish, her eyes were far beyond seriousness.

"…"

Intently staring at Subaru, who was standing at a precarious spot, Shaula's eyes had been filled with heavy emotions.

Those quiet, yet boundlessly deep, heavy emotions, which should be named as an appeal, were brittle and ephemeral.

With unwillingness, she once again rotated her neck right and left,

Shaula: "NG. No, I don't wanna talk about it. The fifth rule? Does something like that, even matter. In my and Master-sama's honeymoon, it has nothing to…"

Subaru: "As if it has nothing to do. I am, and everyone is challenging the Trials of this tower. I can't be as optimistic as to think it'll all be fine without even knowing the Trials' rules. That's why, Shaula."

Shaula: "…I'd rather not."

Subaru: "Shaula!"

Like a disobedient child, Shaula covered her ears and averted her eyes. At that attitude of Shaula's, Subaru declared with a strong tone.

Subaru: "You must be having your own duties in this tower. The tower's Star-Keeper…? You must have been doing that all this time, right. I don't know if it's true or not, but for four hundred years! Then—"

Shaula: "—It's been, four days."

Subaru: "…Ah?"

The spilled voice, as if a whisper, shortly halted Subaru's thoughts.

The years Subaru was questioning, and the time frame too short to even be comparable. Surely, her statements had been lies, and the time Shaula had spent in the tower had always been short—something like that was not possible.

While retaining possession of the heavy emotions in her eyes, Shaula, with her lips shivering, continued.

Shaula: "It's been only four days, since Master-sama has come to the tower. Within those, as Master-sama was in bed for two days, that makes only two days since Master-sama and I have met with each other, spoken to each other, have been side-by-side with each other… even though I've waited for even four hundred years! It's been only two days…"

Subaru: "Shaula…"

Shaula: "I thought just a single moment, a single glimpse, would be fine."

Covering her eyes, Shaula immediately ceased to have her gaze slumped downwards. Seemingly, as if she were saying she regretted to have Subaru out of her field of vision for even a single moment. —No, upon considering, that was indeed the case.

As far back as Subaru could recall, Shaula had been in the same space, at the same time with Subaru, always watching Subaru. That was not for a shallow purpose like keeping Subaru under surveillance with minimal effort, but certainly—.

Shaula: "Four hundred years, I waited for Master-sama in the tower. I thought, I would be satisfied with a single glimpse. —But, that wasn't the truth."

"…"

Shaula: “I mean, Master-sama is my everything, after all. Master-sama’s everything, and all of my feelings for Master-sama, are what make me. The four hundred years it took, I can’t convey them to Master-sama. All of it, in just two days… I can’t, come to terms with that.”

Subaru: “…That’s why, you won’t tell me the fifth rule?”

Acute emotions enfolded the entirety of Shaula’s body, and molded the existence known as her.

Four hundred years— the weight of those words he had perceived through mere appearance of words, finally became an actual time frame for Subaru, and he stood at a disposition where he could feel that.

After all, her attitude had been too casual to speak of four hundred years.

He thought that perhaps there existed no instrument in her to embrace feelings such as hardship, sadness.

Perhaps she was inhuman like that scorpion, down to her very heart, down to her very soul.

Shaula: “I don’t wanna talk about the rules. NG. After all, if I talk about that…”

“…”

Shaula: “If I talk about that, Master-sama will notice the way to clear the Trials. That’s why, if I talk about that, if I end up talking about that… my time with Master-sama will end.”

Poignantly, Shaula hugged her body, and expressed her own true feelings to Subaru.

As if vomiting blood— no, as if restraining herself from crying, that tone of her voice stabbed through Subaru’s heart.

It was a reply, he had not anticipated.

Just as his initial question, Subaru had thought of some patterns regarding the answer to this question.

The true motives behind Shaula hiding the rules of Pleiades Watchtower— if she had colluded with the person who created the rules of this nasty tower, she had certain plans as well, is what he thought.

Otherwise, unrelated to such dark plans, the reason why she had not spoken about the rules was on a simple whim or had slipped out of her mind, and that may not hold any significance, he had thought that as well.

But, neither was the truth.

Shaula did have a reason as to why she did not want to speak of the tower's rules. And that reason, was unrelated to the ideas of the Sage or whoever who created the tower, but rather, an earnest wish.

—Four hundred years, having lived that time in solitude, and had continued to await the reunion with the person she was waiting for, was Shaula.

That had come true, she had gained happiness, and that is why, she wished for that time to last longer, even slightly.

If it was for the sake of fulfilling that modest desire—

Shaula: "Master-sama, will you hate me, who lied to you?"

"…"

Shaula: "Hating me, not even wanting to see my face… will you be like that?"

For what reason, was she making a face much more pained than when told something like "Will you die".

For what reason, did she view being hated by him to be more crucial than losing her life.

—For what reason, did she think of everything like a goal, despite waiting for four hundred years.

Subaru: "…I won't, hate you or anything."

"…"

Subaru: "Because you kept quiet, I do think I probably had to face really hard situations, and sometimes I honestly thought I'd never been cornered this badly."

Facing the silent Shaula, Subaru spoke his mind.

There were no lies here. Those were his true feelings. Because Shaula hid information as per her true intentions, Subaru had been unable to make crucial investigations and had to repeatedly face mercilessly cruel deaths.

Not just Subaru. Aside from Subaru, Emilia and Beatrice had to, as well.

He could never forget the despair, discontentment, and hopelessness he felt during those moments.

That is why, if there were to be an existence who were the originator of all of that evil, Subaru would certainly never be able to forgive them, is what he believed.

Then, at this instant, in front of Shaula like this, was he going to do the same.

Subaru: "—No."

He did not think of Shaula, she, who had lived four hundred years in solitude, she, who had fulfilled the meaning of her being born in mere two days and was satisfied such that she gained happiness, to be the originator of that evil.

If there were to be an originator of that evil, it would be the unfairness of this world itself, and the one who created the circumstances where it was impossible to do anything about that, the "Master-sama" who commanded Shaula for four hundred years

—.

Shaula: "—Ah."

Suddenly, a hoarse exhale leaked out of Shaula's lips.

Subaru: "Shaula?"

Shaula: "Ah, ah… a~h, ah…"

Feeling abnormality in Shaula's condition in front of his eyes, Subaru called out her name. However, Shaula, without responding to Subaru's call, concealed her face with her palms.

A painfully trembling voice, unbefitting her, could be heard from that throat.

Shaula: "No, good… no good… Master-sama! Master-samaMaster-samaMaster-samaMaster-sama…!"

Subaru: "Shaula?! Shaula, what happened?! So suddenly…"

Shaula: "—Somebody, violated the rules."

"…"

Rushing over, as Subaru jolted her white shoulders, his arms got grasped instead. And, while painfully gripping to Subaru's arms with her slender ones, Shaula spoke.

Gazing intently into Shaula's eyes, who had said that, Subaru inhaled.

—A queer change was occurring in the dark pupils and irises of Shaula's eyes.

Within her spherical eyes, the dark pupil and iris of her eyeball split into three, turning red and pulsating. The transfiguration which occurred in the right and left eyeballs alongside, it meant that her dark pupils and irises split into six.

—Six compound eyes, three on the left, three on the right.

Shaula: “Master-sama…! Right now, I can still make it…”

Subaru: “Make it?”

Shaula: “Right now, if Master-sama commands me, then I can… I can, still kill myself.”

With her eyeballs pulsating red, white steam started to arise from the entirety of Shaula’s body. Her white skin got engulfed with a tint of red, and even Subaru, who was standing right next to her, could feel the abnormal rise in body temperature.

The principle behind it was ambiguous. —Just that Shaula’s body was generating heat, and change was ensuing in it.

Perhaps, it was the initial phase of transforming into the form of the titanic scorpion.

Shaula: “If I transform, I won’t make it. I will become a KILLING MACHINE lacking any blood or tears, and kill Master-sama. I mean, I want Master-sama so much… I want Master-sama so badly, so badly that I can’t bear it, that’s why.”

Subaru: “Before that happens”

Shaula: “Please tell me, to die… If you do that, I will, for Master-sama”

Will come to an end before killing you, Shaula was unable to continue her words on to say that.

In place of words, her eyes, her shivering voice, her entire body and soul, were conveying the same.

“…”

An incomparable dread welled up in Subaru’s body as well. That was, surely the instinctive reaction of a human faced with otherworldly fear.

The Human known as Natsuki Subaru, was being frightened by the Monster known as Shaula, who was in front of him.

That is why, Subaru was—

Subaru: “Shaula, tell me the fifth rule.”

Shaula: “Master-sama, this is not the time for…”

Subaru: “If you tell that to me—!”

Subaru interrupted the words of the appealing Shaula with a loud voice. At that menacing glare, Shaula’s shoulders shivered. He grabbed those shivering shoulders. They were warm. Such that his palm could melt, Shaula’s body temperature had already risen to the level of a fire.

However, he did not let his hands go. Right now, he did not release her body, burning and scorching.

Subaru: “If you tell that to me, I’ll command you. —Stay calm. Before you turn into a monster, I’ll command you.”

“…”

Hearing Subaru say that straightforwardly, Shaula widened her eyes.

She then called out to Subaru, saying “Master-sama”,

Shaula: “Master-sama, such a womanizer.”

Subaru: “I don’t remember being one…”

Shaula: “Then, Master-sama is a Shaula-izer. My favorite kind of -izer…”

Smiling weakly, Shaula softly overlapped the hands grasping her shoulders with her own hands.

And—

Shaula: “—Fifth, it is not forbidden to destroy the Trials.”

“…”

Shaula: “Look, the color of my eyes has changed. —At my beloved, Master-sama.”

Saying that, Shaula thrusted away Subaru’s chest.

At that greater than expected might, Subaru was thrown back, unable to keep his grip onto her shoulders. When he looked towards the front while lightly coughing, Shaula, while hugging her own body, crouched down—

Shaula: “Ah, ah… a~h, a~a~h… ~hk!”

Red steam, like the color of blood, ascended from the entirety of her body. The steam had changed its color, it was a sign of danger. Shaula’s eyes lost its dark pupils and irises as well, and before one could notice, turned bright red.

Shaula: “Master-sama… hurry. Before I, lose myself…”

“…”

Shaula: “Please tell me… to die ~hk! If Master-sama says that, I will…”

With the same mouth which had argued being against Subaru and the others completing the Trials and leaving the tower, Shaula, using up her life, indicated the path where she could remain without killing Subaru and the others— no, Subaru.

Hearing that desperate voice of Shaula’s, Subaru inhaled.

And then,

Subaru: “Shaula.”

Shaula: “Master-sama…”

Subaru: “—My bad. What I said just now was a lie.”

Shaula: “Eh?”

At Subaru’s informing words, Shaula rounded her eyes. Watching

Shaula's reaction for himself, Subaru halted his breath, and at the same pace, leapt backwards.

Having been pushed away by Shaula had been a blessing for him amidst all this misfortune. —Had Shaula kept his wrists grabbed, he would have never been able to perform this act.

—Subaru's body crossed over the narrow open-air verandah of the balcony, and was launched into the air.

Shaula: "Ah—."

Shaula's instantaneous voice got engulfed in the vehement sand gusts and was rendered inaudible. At the same pace, Subaru's body, without any support, fell non-stop for several hundreds of meters.

"…"

Falling down, he possessed no plans to save himself.

He had not prepared any plans to save himself. What Subaru had done was purely throw himself to death. He did not desire to do this at all, nor did he want to speak of it but— this was his intention from the very beginning.

If these surroundings, these actions could be excused, he intended to surely do this.

That is because, Subaru could then trust his choice without any indecision.

After all—

Shaula: "Master-sama!!"

Similarly jumping out from the balcony herself as well, Shaula chased after Subaru.

Widening those eyes, desperately stretching out her hand, Shaula chased the falling Subaru, and leapt trying not to take away, but save that life with her own hands.

—The true identity of the titanic scorpion, was Shaula.

—Shaula purposefully, hid the rules of the tower.

—Shaula had repeatedly killed Subaru or his comrades, and stood in the way as the fifth obstacle.

But—

Subaru: "—I just, want to save you."

"…"

He could never forget her form, she, who had endured her transformation against her own feelings, and had requested to be ordered to kill herself so that she does not kill Subaru, till the very end of the end.

Though it was quite a nasty thing to say, he wanted to confirm that.

Whom he should save, whom he should not save, whom he should defeat, whom he should protect, whom he should love.

Because Natsuki Subaru believed he could not advance further unless he confirmed that.

He will no longer perplex over, whom he should love.

Shaula: "Master-sama~a~a~a~a~a~a~a~a~a~a~a~!!"

Shaula's form, while she stretched out her hand and tried pursuing Subaru, changed mid-air.

Her hand stretching out enlarged, and transformed into large pincers clad in a jet black shell. Her white skin was covered with a rough shell, without leaving any trace behind, and her flesh body expanded, as if bursting open from the interior.

For a single moment, the seemingly painful transformation as if bursting open her blood and flesh, reached conclusion as if a tape being reversed, and finally, the immense ominous incongruity— the titanic scorpion, had achieved completion.

And, that titanic scorpion's tail's tip nimbly established its aim at Subaru.

Perhaps, tail stingers similar to that white luster would be fired from there, and burn Subaru's life to nothing in an instant. The mid-air Subaru lacked any technique to avoid that.

However—

Subaru: "—I won't let myself be killed by you, because Shaula would cry."

"…"

The tail stinger was fired— but before that, arrived the terminus of his fall.

The two of Subaru and the titanic scorpion came falling down above the hordes of witchbeasts fiercely advancing onto the sand tower.

The existence known as Natsuki Subaru did not have the ability to endure the several hundred meters long fall.

Bursting open, his life was shed.

However, on the verge of his life being shed, he said a few final words—

Subaru: "—I will, definitely help you."

—He got the meagre time, to convey the message to the sandy gusts, incomprehensible to the titanic scorpion.

Bonus Short Stories

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Five
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

A heavy, weighty feeling of oppression washed over me. The air is heavy. This is not a metaphorical meaning, but a true feeling of the air with weight. The weighted air restrains my limbs, making it difficult for me to move even a single finger. As I craned my neck, which I could barely move, I could see my friends around me who were in the same situation as me. Still, their damage seemed minor compared to my own, as they were down on one knee or sitting on the ground.

That must be it. That's what… Garfiel thought, remembering the voice that had reached everyone's ears directly before they were in this desperate situation. If the voices we heard caused this situation, it stands to reason that the heaviest burden would fall on Garfiel. That made sense to him. If there's one thing Garfiel didn't agree with, it's this…

Garfiel: "…It would be strange if only one person didn't get affected, no matter what."

Ezzo: "Nevertheless. If we hadn't had that good fortune, our adventure would have ended here. For that, we should be able to say we're grateful."

Ezzo, who was on one knee diagonally in front of him, responded to Garfiel's strained voice. His earnest words made sense in theory, but unfortunately, Garfiel's disapproval came from an emotional standpoint. Garfiel couldn't agree with him so easily.

Ricardo: "Well, in my case, even if I could move, I don't think I could have helped with this."

Ricardo was sitting on his haunches, scratching his head dexterously with his hooked arm. It was a somewhat modest self-assessment, considering the success he had achieved so far in conquering the Great Temple, but under the circumstances, no one could raise a negative voice. Indeed, the situation was already out of his hands… Neither Garfiel nor Ezzo, or Ricardo can do anything about it. The one who holds the possibility of overcoming this situation is…

Ezzo: “We have no choice but to leave everything to Miss Liliana.”

Garfiel: “That sounds like a hopeless situation to my amazing self…”

Garfiel said with a bitter look on his face that there was a limit to the number of bad bets he could take. As he said this, he couldn’t even lift his arm to scratch his own head. The situation itself affirmed Ezzo’s words to the utmost.

2

…Time goes back only a few moments from Garfiel’s lamenting.

Ezzo: “Apparently, this is the deepest part of the temple.”

Having defeated the guardians along the way one after another, and managed to break through the many traps that were set up, the first step in attacking the temple, which began with a fall… is finally coming to a close. Once they had defeated the deformed serpent guardian with eight heads and passed through the passage behind it, the group was greeted by an open stone chamber.

The mossy floor became a large step about ten meters ahead, and beyond that was an even larger space twenty meters square. And at the far end of the space, there is a stone pedestal that emits a vague, faint light… No, it’s not the pedestal itself that’s shining, it’s the thing on top of it. It is the secret of the Watergate city, sealed in the Great Temple, that gives off a strange sense of intimidation…

Ezzo: “The Witches remains…?”

Ezzo muttered quietly from a distance where he could not even dimly make out its shape. There was no one to contradict his muttering. Not his eyes, but his intuition affirmed it.

Garfiel: “I don’t see anything that would get in the way…”

Ricardo: “We’ve got a lot of traps and ugly bugs in our way. Isn’t it time for the ruins to end? Or at least, I hope so. I’m exhausted too.”

Snorting side by side, Garfiel and Ricardo, both with beast blood in their veins, scanned the area. There was no sign of the guardian with its fishy scent, which was disconcerting. If this was the last place Garfiel was going to be, he was definitely going to have to go through some more trouble.

Liliana: “Well, well, well, Isn’t that nice! As Ricardo-san said, we have been through a lot to get here. I’m sure the mean person who built the ruins will feel sorry for himself for overdoing it, It’s a crazy thing to reflect on!”

While the men were on guard, the energetic Liliana stepped forward. Her careless actions had often triggered traps, but since she was not capable of learning, the three of them no longer had the energy to blame her. Fortunately, this time, the trap was not triggered by her advance.

Liliana: “The thing you see over there is the witch’s remains, our main objective! It’s a testament to the Watergate city’s legend of battling watery smelling witches, isn’t it?!”

Ezzo: “Watery is not the right word for it, Miss Liliana.”

Liliana: “No! Actually, I wanted to describe it as a hematoma, but I heard that the events that took place here were eventually waterlogged, so I thought watery would be more appropriate than bloody.”

Ezzo gave up his linguistic attention to Liliana, who stuck out her tongue and closed one eye. Regardless of the relationship between the two, Garfiel prefaced his speech with, “But…”

Garfiel: “I don’t know anything about witch who died in this city… what were they like?”

Ezzo: “Oh, I think someone told me that. A long time ago, there were many other witches in the world besides the “Witch of Envy”, and they also went on a rampage.”

Ezzo’s stance is admirable, but it doesn’t resonate with Garfiel, who tries to evaluate the witch’s remains from the perspective of a historical discovery.

History and legend are similar but are different. History is fact, but legends are thrilling. To put it in the style of Natsuki Subaru, whom Garfiel admires and respects…

Garfiel: “Not very romantic…”

Liliana: “Huh. It’s kind of a mellow and mysterious word… What does it mean?”

Garfiel: “It would be awkward to give it a meaning, but if you dare to name something that makes your heart flutter, it would be fitting.”

Liliana: “What’s that? That’s so cool! It’s not fair! I’m jealous!”

Liliana chews on a white towel to reveal her jealousy, wondering where it came from in that light outfit. Laughing at her exaggeration, Ricardo called out to everyone, “Here”.

Ricardo: “I understand that you want to play, but the thing you’re looking for is right in front of you. If that’s the case, you’d better get it over with as soon as possible.”

Garfiel: “Yeah, that’s right. I need to wash myself.”

At any rate, Garfiel’s body was a mess of mud and sludge from the fierce struggle to get here. In order to bathe quickly, they must collect the “Witch’s remains” and return to the surface. With that in mind, the four of them stepped out.

???: “…Sin will become a wedge which allows no escape.”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

Suddenly, a piercing voice sounded, and Garfiel gasped. Immediately afterwards, his body, which should have been walking forward, was crushed to the floor with the feeling of being overwhelmed by a tremendous amount of weight. His arms, legs, and torso seemed to plunge into the floor.

Garfiel: “Gah…!”

It was as if his entire body had been held in the palm of a giant. When Garfiel turned his eyes to see what had happened, Ricardo, who was walking in front of him, and Ezzo, who was behind him, had both fallen to the floor as well, letting out a cry of surprise.

Ricardo: “What is this? Ah…!”

Ezzo: “A trap in the ruins… no doubt. But it’s not magic…!

They were pushed to the floor and struggled to sit up, their eyes bugging out of their heads. Somehow, they managed to at least get down on their knees, and Garfiel bit his teeth. Unlike the two of them, Garfiel could not move his body at all.

Liliana: “…? Um, what are you all doing?”

That’ s why Liliana’s presence, looking down at the three of them quizzically, was so foreign. She looked at the three of them crawling on the floor, their heads tilted to the limit. From the look on her face, Liliana could tell that she was not under the “load” that had hit Garfiel and the others.

Liliana: “If you’re trying to make fun of me for some reason…”

Garfiel: “I wouldn’t do anything stupid like that…! You…”

Ezzo: “…Did you hear those funny words in your head?”

Liliana: “You mean like Sins something or other?”

From beside the irritated Garfiel, Ezzo quietly asked Liliana a question. Liliana’s answer was an affirmation of the existence of the strange voice that Garfiel had also heard. In response, Ezzo muttered, “I knew it…”.”

Ricardo: What, Sensei, do you have an idea?

Ezzo: “It’s tricky, you know. I used to own a “Meteor” called the White Fox’s Nest. This is a situation of a very similar nature.”

Ricardo: “‘Meteor’…? What does it do?”

Ezzo: “…To put it simply, it’s a test of the other person. You impose conditions and see if they can overcome them.”

Liliana: “Mmah, So it’s like a trial.”

With a hand to her chin, Liliana’s muttered words, which sounded like she was satisfied with the situation, said exactly what Garfiel did not want to hear. The word “Trial” is the last thing Garfiel wants to hear anywhere. Of course, it’s not as bad as the name Echidna. Anyway…

Ricardo: “Given the circumstances, I’m pretty sure she’s the one who’s going through the trial.”

With a twitch of his chin, Ricardo points to a pedestal at the far end. The pale, glowing, strangely intimidating thing must be the cause of this situation. If that is the case, what on earth is this testing?

Ezzo: “Sin will become a wedge, It’s supposed to mean sins, mistakes, that sort of thing.”

Ricardo: Oh, so you’re saying we’re stuck because we have done something wrong? Ha-Ha-ha, masterpiece, masterpiece…!It’s not funny, what’s the sin?

“…”

Hearing the anger in Ricardo’s voice, Garfiel choked back a breath. If Ezzo’s guess and the voice he heard were correct, the reason for the difference in “load” between Garfiel and the other three was obvious.

…that is the difference in the weight of “Sin”.

Liliana: “I don’t know what’s going on here! This is where I, who am strangely free of constraints, can play an active role!!”

Liliana moved forward lightly, leaving Garfiel to his voiceless wailing. She smeared her hair with moss for no good reason, then gave a thumbs up to the three crawling people with a nice smile.

Liliana: “I’m sorry to say that I’ve been a burden to you so far! That I would be the one to reverse the situation in the final phase. This is a very hot development in the story!”

Ricardo: “No, no, no, no, missy, stop it! I think your enthusiasm is great. But you never know what might happen, so you need to talk to Sensei before you do anything…”

Liliana: “That’s crazy! What if time goes on like this and the three of you end up crushed flat on your back? I’m not going home alone. If that’s the case, I’ll have to show my woman-ness here!”

Not listening to Ricardo’s words to stop her, Liliana turned her head forward with a snort, rolled forward once more, and landed at the bottom of the steps with her momentum. Then, as she furiously tried to run toward the remains on the pedestal…

Liliana: “hmm… gulp”

Her footsteps stopped as she was about to step forward, and Liliana’s feet glowed beneath her. The light started from the soles of Liliana’s feet as she stopped, and went on to divide the floor into squares. Something else was rising from the floor of the lower space.

Liliana: “Eeee?! What, what, what, what?!”

Around the panicked Liliana, stone statues rose and appeared one after another. They appeared side by side at equal intervals, forming a formation with Liliana at the center… No, it wasn’t just around Liliana that the stone statues appeared. In front of Liliana, with her back to the pedestal, three horizontal rows of stone statues were forming a protective formation. That would not have made sense to Liliana, to say the least, but…

Garfiel: “A Shatranj board…?”

Ezzo: “I’m sure it is! This is a Shatranj board! Miss Liliana!”

Liliana: “Huh?!”

Garfiel, who had a bird’s eye view of the situation from above, murmured, and Ezzo agreed with him with wide eyes. Liliana’s voice turned upside down, and Ezzo nodded back at her questioning gaze.

Ezzo: “It is said that the origin of Shatranj board dates back to more than four hundred years ago! It is widely believed that it is from the Kararagi City states and originated from one of the small states when it was still a collection of small states before it was called by that name, and that the purpose for which it was originally conceived was to provide a strategic…”

Ricardo: “We don’t have time for this! This is that piece-playing board, so what!”

Ezzo: “Oh, I’m sorry. I mean, the fact that this is a Shatranj board…”

Ezzo was on the verge of revealing his useless knowledge when his words were interrupted by a strange phenomenon. There was a shuddering sound in the air, and with a heavy echo, a stone statue moved. It is also the case that one of the pieces, the one facing Liliana, moved forward in a square towards her.

Liliana “Eh? So it’s like the first attacker and the second were decided on their own?!”

Ezzo: “No, Miss Liliana, you were the first to make a move. That’s why your opponent saw it as a move. That’s all there is to it.”

Looking down at her feet at Ezzo’s point, Liliana realized that she had straddled the light square with an “Ah”. In other words, she is one of the pieces on this board.

Liliana: “I, I, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do about this?!”

Ricardo: “Sensei! I think we should just win! What do you think we should do?”

Ezzo: “Yes, you’re right… Miss Liliana, order the third slave piece to advance!”

Liliana: “…Order? Well, Number three-Saaan, can you step forward for a moment? You know, if you don’t want to, that’s totally fine, but the more you do it, the happier I’ll be… Oh!”

At Liliana’s humble instruction while rubbing her hands together, the pieces of her army begin to move. The other side’s pieces begin to move along with them, so it seems that the guess is correct. This is a Shatranj board where you also participate as a piece… and you can only participate if you were not eliminated at the first “load”.

Liliana: “But! I’ve never played Shatranj at all!”

Ricardo: “I only ever saw it played from the side…”

Ezzo: “I never had anyone to play against… Yeah, I can advise you! Miss Liliana! I’m counting on you! Good luck!”

Liliana: “Damn it! I’ll do it! Women are courageous, charming, and crazy, all at the same time!”

Then, with a gesture of rolling up her sleeves, Liliana went to the harsh Shatranj board… to a board where defeat would mean your death.

Garfiel: “…You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Garfiel gritted his teeth as he watched Liliana’s vigorous back in the distance. He couldn’t move his arms, his legs, even with all his strength… If it is due to sin.

“…”

There is a sin in Garfiel that can never be wiped away. It must be the chain that keeps chasing Garfiel without letting him go, no matter how long or how far he goes.

Ezzo: “Miss Liliana! The tactic is…”

Liliana: “No! I know what I’m doing! The best way to win is to move the strongest piece first. In other words, the King…!”

Ezzo: “That’s a bad move!!”

While Garfiel was in agony, the last big battle for the Great Temple had begun.

With Ezzo’s scream behind her, Liliana made a vigorous, unorthodox move… in a very real sense, the fate of the group was in the hands of the maverick “Diva”.

END

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion's Ferocity: Second Chronicle

—The trip from Priestella, the Watergate City, to the royal capital, Lugunica, ended up taking much longer than anticipated.

The reason they took a month, two weeks longer than they originally planned, was largely due to being forced to face various obstacles on the way there.

"I was so sure those Witch Cult guys would come try to get her back."

"That wasn't the case, it seems. I, too, thought it had been done on purpose, but the bandits and other obstacles we faced on the way here didn't seem to have any connection to that."

"—. Just ordinary bandits, right?" With her arms crossed, Felt gave a sidewards glance at Reinhard, who had raised his perfectly shaped eyebrows.

They were currently in front of a tower in the royal capital, Lugunica, on the same layer as the royal castle. Viewed from the castle, the tower appeared to be extremely high up, but the people there were treated worse than those who lived in the slums. The tower was naturally named the Prison Tower—a place where heinous criminals were imprisoned and awaited their punishments.

"…"

In front of the tower, Reinhard thought about the contents of the conversation they just had. He appeared to be uncomfortable and looked as if he didn't understand, but compared to him, who didn't rate himself highly, Felt was able to grasp the unnaturalness of the situation much more easily.

The dragon carriage carrying Felt and Reinhard had been stopped more than ten times by unforeseen obstacles. As Reinhard had already mentioned, the only attacks on their dragon carriage had been carried out by bandits or witchbeasts.

However, for Felt to be attacked like that. —That fact was quite strange.

“If you think about it normally, do you think the bandits, who only care about themselves, would be stupid enough to do something as dangerous as attacking people who are riding such a decent dragon carriage like this?”

“Perhaps they had no other options?”

“Are you sayin’ they wouldn’t be able to fill their bellies otherwise? Reinhard, stop makin’ excuses for those little scoundrels. Those guys are crafty. They wouldn’t be able to survive otherwise.”

“…”

“That’s why they don’t go after people they can’t handle. They don’t care about being buddy-buddy with each other, they only care about themselves.”

After hearing Felt’s reasoning, Reinhard held his tongue. It seemed to indicate that he thought her reasoning was valid. Though his strength was unmatched, and though he was extremely skilled with a sword, he was a bit naïve when it came to the ways of the world. This was what concerned Felt the most.

“…Why do I even need to worry about you so MUCH!”

“Lady Felt, please don’t kick your leg at me so suddenly. Did something happen?”

“And don’t you just avoid it like that…! Urgh, forget it.”

With scuff marks from her shoes on the hem of her white skirt, Felt bent her lips and snorted.

In front of the existence known as Reinhard, the bandits acted recklessly. It was forgivable that the ignorant bandits attacked a luxury dragon carriage, however, when discovering that they were in the presence of Reinhard, it was completely absurd that they did not cower in fear or lose their fighting spirit. Not only the bandits, but the witchbeasts who acted according to their instincts as well. Though, Felt did not tell him about that—

"—Lady Felt."

"I know."

Her name was called, and Felt answered immediately.

Without having to say a word, Felt's skin tingled, her instincts kicked in, and her very soul felt that existence—for it was evil, hated, and rejected by all living beings.

"I enjoyed the journey here. Thank you for taking the time to see me off. Thank you."

Laughing, she lifted up her cuffed arms, revealing a freak covered in bandages—it was the evildoer Sirius, who Felt had been escorting on her journey. She had been tasked with bringing her to the Prison Tower so that she would cough up everything she knew about the Witch Cult, a mysterious and dangerous organization. That was one of the ways they could get some compensation for all of the damage she'd done in the Watergate City.

Even though she understood that, traveling with Sirius was a real pain.

"What's up with you actin' carefree like that. Hey you! Do you not understand what kind of situation you're in? Or…"

"Dear me. It's so sweet of you to worry about me. Thank you, I'm quite flattered, but please don't worry about me, Miss Felt. This is just my trial to repay all of their precious, precious, precious love."

"A repayment of love, a trial…?"

"Don't take her words seriously. It's just a load of hot air."

Reinhard, who had been thinking seriously about Sirius' incoherent comments, didn't seem to have good chemistry with her. It was not unusual for those living in the slums to become mentally damaged by alcohol and the violence around them, thus losing their sense of reality and proper thinking.

However, Sirius' evil spirit was quite distinct from such commonplace happenings.

"Sir Reinhard, she will be imprisoned now. Will you come along?"

The guard in charge of bringing Sirius to the prison asked Reinhard to go with them.

The power of a Sin Archbishop's Authority was quite immense. Sirius' in particular was capable of enveloping the entire city of Priestella. So they couldn't half-ass it when it came to taking precautions.

"Have you taken the appropriate measures?"

"The four walls of the cell are sealed with Evil Sealing Stones, and her hands and feet are also restrained using the same thing. Additionally, other than during an interrogation, her mouth will be gagged as well.

"Your precautions are quite natural. That makes sense."

Reinhard stroked his chin after hearing the guard's response. Capturing and imprisoning a Sin Archbishop had never been done before, so even if they piled up precaution after precaution, they would still need to stay vigilant.

Then, as Reinhard and his colleagues spoke, Felt could feel a slight tingling sensation on her skin and realized it had been caused by the silent Sirius.

"…What the… she got irritated all of the sudden."

"…Ah, really, Miss Felt, you really have an eye for people."

Felt didn't feel happy to be praised like that, but the answer Sirius gave was an affirmation of her point. Her lips were smiling, but her purple eyes were not smiling at all. On the contrary, she had revealed the anger she'd been hiding, which she hadn't seen much in the past month.

She had just arrived here and suddenly got angry. What could possibly make her angry like that? It didn't make sense for her to be angry due to getting imprisoned at this point.

"—Evil Sealing Stones."

"Huh?"

"I really don't like Evil Sealing Stones. —It's the same thing that was used to seal that damned Witch, that damned, damned Witch…!"

Felt squinted her red eyes at Sirius, who had hatefully clenched her teeth.

Felt had felt many times on their journey to the royal capital that Sirius, despite being in the Witch Cult, had very little respect for the Witch of Envy. She had always assumed that Witch Cultists believed in the Witch of Envy.

But for Sirius, the feelings she held for the Witch were not respect or faith, but were hatred or a grudge, and the fact that she pointed that towards a half-witch—Emilia, was a cause for concern for Felt.

"Lady Felt, we'll be taking her to prison now… But we'll be going into the Prison Tower."

"You don't want me to go with you, do you? But if you didn't want me to be close to criminals, why did you let me stay in the same dragon carriage as the Sin Archbishop?"

"There are situations that are unavoidable and those that are not. You should discern between them."

"Well, alright. So there are conditions."

Felt scratched her head violently and let out a rasp of discontent after hearing Reinhard's words, which seemed far more protective than cautious, and then held out her hand to the guard in charge of Sirius. In his hand was a gag that was meant to go into her mouth.

Felt took it from his hand and stood in front of her. “Your words mean nothin’ to me, as if they were gibberish you said while sleeping. But I still need to be careful. Better to be safe than sorry.”

“Dear me, you’re being so cold to me now. Haven’t we been getting along for a long time though?”

“Then accept THIS as MY firm resolve to say goodbye to this whole month with YOU.” With her own two hands, Felt fastened the gag onto Sirius. It was essentially like a piece of wood that she bit on, which prevented her from speaking and trying to kill herself.

“Don’t even look her in the eyes. Put her in the prison as fast as you can and come right back.”

“It sounds like you’re speaking to a child… But I understand. I’ll be right back.”

Thinking there wasn’t much of a difference between the two, Felt snorted at his reply. After that, Reinhard led Sirius into the Prison Tower with the guards.

“…”

Just before she vanished into the tower, Sirius looked back at her once and their eyes connected. Felt could tell at once what she’d transmitted through those purple eyes, to her own horror. Since she’d been with her for the last month in the dragon carriage, she was used to such things.

“Damn, she’s such a freak. Saying “Thanks, and I’m sorry”? Don’t make me laugh!”

“—The value of an expression of gratitude changes greatly depending on the position or title of the person who says it. I believe your thinking is correct, Lady Felt.”

Felt, standing in front of the Prison Tower, had been seeing Reinhard and Sirius off. While she had been speaking her mind, someone suddenly butted in and expressed their own ideas as well.

In a bad mood, Felt turned around and said, “So?”

Then the other person, who had sharp eyes, raised their hands up as if in defeat. “I’m sorry. Terribly sorry. I happened to see you from a distance, so I just wanted to come over and say hello.”

“You…”

Felt looked at the man from top to bottom, who’d been smiling and apologizing.

He had a dark blonde beard and dark blond hair and an expensive suit on. Based on her first impression, she could see that he was a man who wielded power. However, while this place was connected to the castle, he did not give off the aura of a knight or nobleman, but someone of a lesser position.

“…A merchant or something?”

“How discerning. I am Russell Fellow, Treasurer of the Royal Capital Commercial Union. I also have dealings with the royal castle, but this time I am fulfilling a special order.”

“Evil Sealing Stones?”

“Again, your eyes are quite perceptive. With all due respect, you have excellent eyes, Lady Felt.”

Nodding his head with his hands behind his back—Russell’s words sounded like flattery. However, Felt had a feeling that what he had on his mind was far more mysterious than simply a shallow intention of trying to get her win the royal selection.

But it didn’t give her a bad feeling. What she could feel was that this man simply had a strong will.

“Evil Sealing Stones, which have special properties compared to other magic stones, cannot be told apart from a normal lump of stones with a single glance. One need’s a special eye to tell them apart. Therefore, though it might not be enough, I also exerted my own efforts.”

“So you have “special eyes”?”

"Yes. It's like an eye one gains through experience."

Russell blurred the meaning of "special eyes" with a dubious smile.

Whether it was an eye gained from observation, like Russell said, or the result of a power derived from a Divine Protection, Felt could not tell. She didn't know, but—

"Your clothing and face are merchant-like, but you aren't acting like a merchant."

"…"

Russell narrowed his eyes slightly at Felt's suspicious words. The appearance of the complex emotions that passed through his eyes showed her a window into his true feelings.

She felt as if he gave off the appearance of appraising her, most likely with admiration—

"No one has really told me that before. I'd like to think that I act merchant-like…"

"I'm gettin' more and more suspicious, and it's keepin' me on my toes. Who are you really?"

"Well, I wonder about that. I'd like to talk with you a bit more to let you know about that."

"Huh?"

He had apparently just invited her to dinner and business talks. That had probably been his objective from the beginning. It must've meant he had recognized her in some way.

However—

"That isn't going to work for me. If you want to talk, then go ahead and talk now. Our base is pretty far away. Anyways…"

"Oh, considering Reinhard's personality, he would not leave the interrogation of the Sin Archbishop to anyone else, so won't you be staying in the Kingdom for a while? I do not believe you to be foolish enough to leave one of your knights behind."

"…You seem pretty pissed off. Did you start feelin' like that when I told you you weren't merchant-like?"

"No, not at all."

Russell bowed politely to Felt, who exhaled through her nose and shrugged.

In fact, Felt's future plans were exactly as he said. Her and Reinhard would stay in the royal capital for a while. At least… "Until those guys get back from the Sand Tower."

Muttering that to herself, Felt was reminded of those who were going after different clues for the same purpose as her. Hearing her mutterings, Russell looked up at the Prison Tower with a thoughtful look on his face. "—The world is now going through a time of change. Do you understand, Lady Felt?"

"I'm surprised to hear you talkin' about such a big thing all of the sudden. So the world's changing?"

"A Sin Archbishop is now in prison, and two Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult, who had not been known about before, were defeated, and two of the three Great Witchbeast's that had threatened the world for 400 years were also defeated. Far too much has happened in just a year or two."

"Including the extermination of the royal family?"

"Of course, that is also included. —400 years ago, the age of the Witch was also a tumultuous time. Perhaps the same thing will happen again."

One could say that when merchants earned money ahead of time, it was an omen that the times were changing in a big way. It would be no exaggeration to say that the ability of a merchant largely depended on their level of foresight, but Russell's current attitude didn't seem to be focused on the future. And it was not hidden when his gaze shifted from the tower to Felt.

"Lady Felt, I expect the most from you in the royal selection. And I'm not saying so just because of hearsay, but due to taking many things into consideration."

"You've been tellin' everyone the same thing, haven'tcha?"

"Yes."

Russell, who'd acted shy, answered as if nothing had happened, and Felt responded by contorting her face in a grand manner. Her reaction caused him to clear his throat, and then he turned away.

"Please excuse me. I have an appointment after this. However, I'll be home in the evening. Would you like to join me for dinner?"

"I'll tell you what, half-assed cookin' won't be enough to win Reinhard over."

"…And I'll be sure to tell my kitchen staff about that."

He waved, and Felt stuck her tongue out at his back as he was leaving.

Before she knew it, she'd already made a promise, but Felt was actually interested in what Russell was talking about. And that included the mask he wore, hiding his true face.

"…Similar to the era of the Witch, a tumultuous era."

The absence of the King and the scrambling together of five candidates to find a replacement was part of it. It wasn't the kind of story that'd make the parties involved shudder, but it seemed strangely compelling.

"Damn, it's gonna be late again by the time I get back to Grandpa Rom's place, ain't it?"

Felt thought of the family that she hadn't seen in a long time. Worrying about things like this wasn't really like her.

—I really wanna leave some shoe marks on Reinhard's white uniform.

To Be Continued

Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me!
Declaration of War Part

1

One by one, the corpses were thrown inside the deep hole they'd dug. They had been stripped of their black garb, and even their dying faces, pitiful and wretched, had been laid bare. Their deaths would neither be known nor mourned by anyone, laid here beneath the cold, dark soil.

???: "I think a phrase like life comes and goes is quite fitting here. Life's fleeting after all. Don'cha think?"

He called out to the corpses as they were buried, but naturally they didn't reply back to him.

One of the soldiers burying the bodies called out to him instead with an: "Al-sama". He was a member of the so-called Red Plates, with red armor bedecking his entire body.

The soldiers were part of the private forces belonging to Priscilla, who was the lord of the Barielle Territory; several of them were busying themselves with burying the bodies. As could be plainly seen from the sloppy manner they were going about it, the ones they were burying weren't their own comrades or associates. It was the opposite.

Soldier: "I heard that you crossed swords with one of the assassins that broke into the mansion; were you injured?"

Al: "Should be pretty obvious from looking at me. The fighting was really damn fierce you see, I even ended up losin' my left arm."

Soldier: "…I really don't know what to say to that."

The overly-serious young man pulled a wry face, to which Al shrugged his shoulders, thinking to himself "Ugh, this guy doesn't get jokes." That said, the youth was actually worried about him, so

Al raised his right arm up and turned around,

Al: “No need to worry, I ain’t injured. After persevering thirty times, I finally managed to find a good way to win without straining myself.”

Soldier: “Huh…? Nevermind, the main thing is that you’re okay.”

The Red Plates were often swept up in Al’s eccentric behavior, thus they didn’t bother probing into what he’d said, unable to understand what he was referring to.

Soldier: “In any case, I’m glad neither Al-sama nor any of the servants were harmed. —Not to mention, I can’t imagine what we would have done if something were to have happened to Priscilla-sama.”

Soldier: “The one who protected Priscilla-sama was that awfully ill-reputed Deputy Commander of the Royal Guards, or whatever. I guess he’s still the Sword Saint’s father, even if he’s rotten to the bone.”

Soldier: “Yet even if he’s the Sword Saint’s father and the Deputy Commander of the Royal Guards, it’d be real nice if he weren’t so rotten.”

The other soldiers used the words of the youth, who was delighted about Al’s safety, as an opportunity to continue speaking while they filled the hole in. Though they held mixed impressions about the Deputy Commander, there was probably a lot of merit to their scathing backtalk. Al’s impressions were more or less the same. —They were mixed, but there was some gratitude in them.

Al: “…I really had no idea what was gonna happen to the Princess after all.”

He’d decided a long time ago that he was ready to put his life on the line as Priscilla’s meat shield wherever possible. Even so, it wasn’t realistic for him to protect her by always sticking with her around the clock.

He wondered what would have happened to Priscilla if she’d been completely on her own in what had happened earlier.

Al: “Knowing her, the Princess would probably still end up pulling through somehow, even on her own…”

Soldier: “Even so, an assassination at a time like this… It has to be one of the other Royal Selection Candidates, right?”

Al: “Don’cha think they aren’t the sort of women who’d lose their cool like this? Well, either way, the Princess probably has an inkling about what’s going on, actually, no, she probably knows exactly what’s up. Though I don’t imagine she’ll tell us straight.”

Soldier: “‘Tis quite vexing for those of us at her side protecting her.”

Al: “Yeah, I agree.”

The soldier cast his eyes down and let out a sigh before getting back to his burial work. Since Al only had one arm, he could only play the part of the supervisor, rather than holding them back with their work. Nevertheless, he could fully understand the worries and fears the Red Plates carried.

Al silently plunged deep into thought over the turmoil of the situation Priscilla had been put in, while gazing at the faces of the dead being buried in the ground, destined to become fertilizer for the soil.

2

About a month had passed since the disaster that was the Witch Cult attacking had been settled.

Priscilla’s group had returned back to their own lands in the south of the Kingdom. As soon as they’d gotten back, they’d been besieged by assassins, right in their dearly-missed home.

Fortunately though, they were able to turn the tables on them with the fighting strength they had in the mansion, and things ended with the camp incurring no damages.

Even so, it remained unclear to whom the assassins belonged.

Priscilla had ordered Al to bury their bodies with the help of the Red Plates, and they'd just finished doing that.

Although the Red Plates were concerned as well, the simplest possibility as to where the assassins came from was from one of the other Royal Selection Candidates—After all, they were in the midst of a battle for the Kingdom's throne. Stuff like assassinations and secret plots should be pretty unsurprising.

However, due to what had happened back in Priestella, the other camps probably couldn't afford to put any energy into these feuds. And the candidates' personalities too, they probably wouldn't be too fond of such things.

Of course, he also had to consider the chance that someone took preparations to ensure that their favored candidate would win, and it having nothing to do with the personalities of the candidates themselves, or their involvement in the first place. But this was going to get him nowhere.

Priscilla would surely skip over such details and come up with an answer using her powers of insight that no one else was privy to. However, whether she was going to give him a reply was a different story…

???: "—The assassins who targeted me must have come from Vollachia."

In stark contrast to what Al had been expecting, Priscilla presented her thoughts without any fuss.

???: "Vollachia…You mean the big Kingdom to the south?"

Priscilla: "It looks like you've been studying, but that's not quite right. Vollachia is an Empire, not a Kingdom, since an Emperor, and not a King, stands above the masses."

???: "Is there a difference between a King and an Emperor…?"

Priscilla: “No, not really. They’re both foolish and ugly compared to me.”

Al: “That ain’t much of an answer…”

Priscilla was in her study, sitting with her legs crossed on her favorite chair, surrounded by tons of bookshelves. She glared at Al with her crimson eyes as he muttered his complaints.

He shrank back from her piercing gaze and shamelessly cowered behind the short servant—Schult—who was there standing there next to him.

Schult: “Al-sama, Al-sama! I’m pretty small, so Priscilla-sama can still see you!”

Al: “Whoa whoa, c’mon Schult-chan. Please help me out here and turn into a man that’s big enough to hide me.”

Schult: “I-I’ll try my best…! Oh, I know! What if I take a suuuper deep breath…”

Schult looked adorable as he tried to take in a deep breath to make his body look a teensy-bit bigger. Al managed to hide his head behind the young boy’s cute efforts, before then speaking out.

Al: “Anyways, how did you know the assassins were from Vollachia?”

Priscilla: “You fool, how could I not? They failed in their assassination, and before committing suicide, I asked one of them a question. It should have been pretty obvious from their reaction.”

Al: “The wolf of the sword… I know that refers to Vollachia’s coat of arms, ya feel? I get that their reaction is fishy as hell too, but what I’m asking is: from where did the Empire come into this in the first place?”

This was why the ones who ought to have attracted their suspicions first should have been the Royal Selection Candidates and those involved with them.

Even if the suspicion cast on them had been cleared up due to some factor, he still couldn't comprehend why the next option that had popped up was a foreign intervention.

Al: "Plus, why's it gotta be Vollachia? I've got nothing but terrible, terrible impressions left towards that country."

Schult: "Did something happen to you there, Al-sama?"

Al: "Yeah, as you can see, I ended up losing my left arm."

Hearing Schult's innocent question, Al let out his second one-armed joke of the day. Although, this time his answer had a shred of truth to it.

Al had lost his left arm and became a one-armed man due to the spectacle that went on in the Vollachian Empire's Gladiator Island, Guninhive, in the arena.

Al: "It's pretty rough having to kill one another for the entertainment of others, ya know? It would have at least been better if things had ended up easier…"

Schult: "Easier… But even so, I'm glad I got to meet you, Al-sama."

Al: "Schult-chan…"

Al's eyes gazed in wonder inside his helmet as he heard those unexpected words coming from the little boy. Schult's round eyes widened in surprise as continued to reflect Al in his red irises.

Schult: "If you'd ended up having it easy back there, Al-sama, I wouldn't have been able to meet you like this. Meaning, that in that earlier kerfuffle, I would have…"

Al: "…Jeez, you sure have a way with words, don'cha?"

Since Schult could say these things quite naturally, without any pre-planning, it led to him having a natural talent for getting people to like him. Coupled with his adorable looks, if he kept growing up like this, he could end up being renowned far and wide as a playboy in the future.

Al: “Either way, it makes me proud to say that having protected a future like that is one of my crowning glories in my life. Princess, are you going to answer my question from before? Like, what basis is there for these Vollachian assassins…”

Priscilla: “It’s obvious. —The Empire really felt like killing me.”

Al: “…You, princess? Don’t tell me it’s some sort of issue with the catastrophe Leip left behind?”

The domain Priscilla ruled over, the Barielle Barony, were originally the lands of her late husband, Leip Barielle. The barony was located near the border with the southern Vollachian Empire. It served as a buffer zone between the Kingdom and the Empire; the latter of which was always in conflict with the former one way or another.

It wouldn’t surprise him if they’d earned the Empire’s enmity from something like that. And although Al had been thinking that, Priscilla’s reply came as a complete shock to him.

Priscilla: “No, my foolish husband had nothing to do with it. The reason why the Vollachian Empire is trying to kill me should be because I come from its imperial family, but faked my death before later fleeing the country.”

Al: “…Huh?”

She said those words while resting her chin against her hands, with a look of tedium on her face. Although he’d taken in what she’d said, his brain could barely process what she’d meant, leaving him completely confused.

What was it that she’d said now?—That she came from its imperial family?

Schult: “So you’re really from the Empire, Priscilla-sama!”

Priscilla: “There’s really not a scrap of significance to be had in where one is born. Regardless, were you to trace back to where I was born, it’s sure to be that land where my history began.”

Schult: “Um, but like, you came to the Kingdom?”

Priscilla: “I had to, in order to avoid those troublesome rules. It’s the way of the Empire after all, to be unable to succeed its throne without first killing all of your siblings…I am completely fed up with it.”

Al: “Wait, wait, wait, wait, waaaait.”

Priscilla casually answered Schult’s innocent question, showing no signs of hesitation. Nevertheless, Al really couldn’t help but interrupt, having been listening beside him in utter confusion.

This was news even for Al, who due to one reason or another possessed a lot of knowledge that others didn’t. He’d never dug deep into Priscilla’s history, but…

Al: “Princess, if I’m not mistaken, wasn’t your title: daughter of a feudal lord?”

Priscilla: “That’s because I switched places with a girl who’d come as a servant, to learn the ways of etiquette, at the time I faked my death.”

Al: “…So you’re seriously Vollachian nobility?”

Priscilla: “What reason would I have to lie? You ought to be mindful of your heedless behavior.”

Though Priscilla’s demeanor was cool and collected, there was still time for Al’s mind to snap back to its sense.

Of course, there were times where Priscilla would say pretty erratic things, but that was just down to the fact that her ability to think outside the norm went beyond the understanding of ordinary men and women. That, and she wasn’t the type who’d go out of her way to deceive people.

In other words, it meant that everything she’d told them here was the truth.

Al: “I’ve heard that the succession to the Vollachian throne is a pretty damn crazy affair. All the Emperor’s children who hold the right to succession set out to kill each other, right? So, the current

Emperor must be…”

Priscilla: “My elder brother. Though he’s my half-brother.”

Her reply was nonchalant as ever, but that shouldn’t have been the case to begin with.

He’d taken up the seat of Emperor with another one of his siblings who held the right to succession still alive. It would be a terrible scandal if that were to come to light, even should he be ousted from the throne.

Al: “Then why did you participate in the Royal Selection?”

Priscilla: “What?”

Al: “Like, isn’t it obvious? You hold a position that stands out a ton, so you saying you pretended to be dead so you’d escape makes no sense. Shouldn’t it be obvious that the Empire would notice, as well as that assassins would come?”

Priscilla: “So, you’re implying I should live in fear of them, with my head down, eyes shut and ears plugged? If you’re being serious about that, then I must have been awfully wrong about you.”

Al: “…”

Al let out a small gulp as he felt cold heat coming from her crimson eyes.

However, he wasn’t going to be so reluctant as to take back his opinion because of that. Al was convinced that his opinion was right in this matter.

If Priscilla held her life dear, then she shouldn’t have gotten involved in stuff like the Royal Selection.

Al: “…Though who am I to say that?”

Al realized, as he tried to call Priscilla’s behavior into question, that he didn’t have the qualifications to do so.

The one who'd twisted her path into shape, had been none other than Al himself. There'd once been the choice for him, to progress things in a different manner, and not let her participate in the Royal Selection.

Al had already made the choice when he refused to help Leip Barielle with his wicked scheme. He was wrong here to pin the blame on Priscilla for his own choice.

Al: "So, Princess… What will you do now?"

Priscilla: "Hmm. Since the assassins won't have returned, the Empire will immediately make their next move. It will be nigh impossible to change their minds. Thus, the path we must follow is but one."

Priscilla gave a radiant smile, like that of a blazing fire, as she snapped her fingers.

Priscilla: "…To settle this in person."

Al: "…"

Al's breath hitched for a moment when he heard her unyielding answer. Beside them, with a nervous look on his face, Schult anxiously observed their back and forth. Even if his worries for Priscilla were genuine, he could barely follow the conversation, considering how young he was.

That's why only Al could advise Priscilla against this.

Al: "Princess, I know you may not want to listen to me, but please listen to what I have to say. It's not like we have only one option. We can forget about the Empire, and even with the Royal Selection, and everything, there's the option to abandon them—"

Al counselled her with rueful resignation, that it'd be for the best if it was to put her first.

Or otherwise, he had to take into account the possibility that this might incur her wrath as well. That's why he'd been somewhat surprised, though not enough as to cluelessly wonder why.

—Even were he to have his head burnt off, without having a chance to explain himself, by the Yang Sword of Priscilla, who'd gotten up from her chair.

3

There are things that won't change, no matter what you say or how many different actions you take.

That was the case with fate or faith unyielding, things which weren't influenced by the actions or interference of others. A stubborn person, who won't budge once they decide on something, won't yield, regardless what kind of persuasion or threats you use. And the most stubborn person Al knew, was Priscilla.

Thus, when his attempts to make her give up on the idea were about to reach one thousand, Al was left with no choice but to regretfully admit that his persuasions weren't going to work.

Priscilla: "…To settle this in person."

Priscilla's choice couldn't be changed anymore by outside interference. Al understood that more than enough, thus he let out a sigh, and said.

Al: "I get what you mean, Princess. I don't have any objections."

Priscilla: "Oh? Now that's surprising. Considering your behavior recently, I was thinking that you'd have been foolish enough to not understand your position and go against me, getting your head lopped off in the process."

Al: "…I'm sorry things haven't gone your way."

Al couldn't hide the cold sweat within his helmet, speaking to her like he'd seen that before.

Either way, he knew all too well that he wouldn't be able to change her choice. Thus, what Al could do was deal with every single obstacle that awaited her.

…This was a reawakening of the same determination he'd held on the day he'd decided to stop being a following star.

Priscilla: "Then get prepared. We'll be going to the Empire as soon as the inspection of our lands is complete."

Schult: "R-Right away! I'll give it my all as well!"

Schult stood up straight and replied back to Priscilla, holding no intentions of going against what Priscilla had decided. Al afforded only a glance to the side at their exchange, before looking out at the scenery outside from the study window.

Under the endless sky, far, far away, lay the Vollachian Empire—A land that Al held a close connection with; a land that Al never wanted to set foot in again, if possible.

Al: "…Let's do this, shall we. Bring it on, oh inevitable fate!"

No matter what awaited, he would break through each dead-end and seize the result they so desired.

Al, or rather, Aldebaran, clenched his remaining fist in determination, unbeknownst to anyone.

END

Volume 25

Chapters 71-90

Chapter 71:
Count One

1

—With his final words washed away by the wind, Natsuki Subaru's consciousness came to an end.

"…"

Speaking of irony, ironically enough, his Death this time had been a Death by his own volition.

Perhaps that is why his mind and heart had remained calm at the moment of Death— of course, that had not been the case, he had possessed uneasiness and nervousness for jumping into the circumstance of Death on his own accord.

However, unlike till now, he had faced the Death he had anticipated with much more sincerity than his other Deaths up to this time.

Of course, he did not believe that him choosing to die had truly saved Shaula.

She did not want to kill him, so she wanted him to command her to die.

Shaula, who had been concerned about Subaru to that extent, had let Subaru throw himself to his death right in front of her eyes. The weight of that impact he did not know and it must have immensely shattered her heart, which had continued awaiting for four hundred years.

That is why, this was nothing more than Subaru's self-satisfaction. The worst kind of self-satisfaction of exaggerating and not seeing the result for himself with his own eyes.

However—

Subaru: “—So what.”

If all that is fastened to him was nothing but self-satisfaction, nothing but hypocrisy, what was wrong with that.

In the end, the method to catch and halt the impact of all happenings in this world could only be wielded in one’s own weighing scales. Unaccomplished good deeds hold no meaning, and the word known as hypocrisy doesn’t ultimately exist.

—All of them, surviving.

After his discussion with Shaula, Subaru cemented the final objective he had touted.

—No, to be precise, the survival of all of them had been his goal from the beginning. That judgement had merely decided whether to include Shaula in that or not, and Subaru chose to love all of them.

He shall lead the way to solve all of the catastrophes surrounding this sand tower.

For that purpose, he would do anything he could.

That is—

Subaru: “The meaning, behind why I am myself. —Isn’t that so, ‘Natsuki Subaru’.”

Along with that instantaneous decision, he awakened from the deep, deep abyss of Death—.

2

???: “—Subaru, are you certain of what you said earlier?”

Subaru: “Yeah, don’t be doubtful after coming this far. It’s the information I collected after meeting it face to face and everything. If it couldn’t be made the best use out of, I wouldn’t bring it up!”

Harshly replying to the sideward face of the good-looking man running at an average speed, Subaru dashed while pulling the tiny palm.

Running past the fourth layer's aisle, they aimed for the second layer of Electra — loaded with frustration, as Subaru sprinted whilst pulling Beatrice's hand, Julius' yellow eyes glanced sideways at him.

Julius: "Subaru, your paleness has not gotten any better. So indeed, the happening in the book was…"

Subaru: "I'm not hiding how worried I am. Don't even try telling me I should have quietly caved into the Green Room, you."

Julius: "I would recommend you to stay calm here if it weren't for this situation, but unfortunately things are quite bustling. Right now, we must use anything we can, even if they are mere grains of sand."

Subaru: "You've got nothing to say so you'll call me using grains of sand, eh…"

Julius: "They can be thrown if the wind is meagre enough. If possible, when in a position capable of reaching the opponent's eyes."

Narrowing his eyes at the elegant eloquency, Subaru thought of his words about being thrown into the wind to be ironic.

The truth is, in terms of experience Subaru's Death just a few minutes ago had been one of being thrown into the wind. Julius comparing Subaru's existence to grains of sand was not necessarily a mistake either.

Subaru: "But, grains of sand have their own qualities."

Beatrice: "On top of that, those grains of sand have Betty with them, I suppose. In other words, they are grains of sand with the cutest companion, in fact."

Subaru: "What, I guess you're talking about the sand that got into your shoes."

Beatrice: “That’s not what that means, I suppose!”

Smiling at Beatrice, who puffed her cheeks, Subaru pulled her body by directing strength into his arm. Beatrice let out a shriek saying “Wa~h ~hk” and her light frame tightly fit into Subaru’s chest.

Running while pulling her hand was something quite romantic, but right now he wanted to prioritize speed. Fortunately, Beatrice’s body was light like an angel’s feather so carrying her and running was an easy win as well.

Subaru: “Well, I haven’t ever carried an angel’s feather, though.”

Julius: “About time, idle talk ends here. —Subaru, I do believe it is annoying but”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s annoying. Though I can’t come up with words telling you to relax even if I rip my mouth apart, but… it is absolute that that guy Reid, and Gluttony will come in contact. We have to go, to hold that off.”

Halting his legs, Julius asked while gazing at the humongous stairway that led to the second layer which lay ahead of them. Interrupting that inquiry, Subaru affirmed that he possessed confidence in it.

It was inconceivable for that to be untrue. After all, this was something he had heard from Julius himself. And, if they could obstruct this—

Subaru: “We can put out a safe, against Reid messing everything up.”

Julius: “…At any rate, it would be better if his trespassing can be avoided in this chaos. Even if it is just for confirming his movements, it is well worth it to make our way here.”

Positioning his legs ahead of the humongous stairway, Julius nodded at Subaru. Returning a nod to that Subaru, whilst keeping Beatrice in his grasp, stepped onto the final level of the stairway.

And—

Subaru: "—Gugh."

Beatrice: "Subaru, your condition really is bad, in fact. The book's effect is visible, I suppose."

Beatrice looked at Subaru, who had shaken his head violently for a single moment and touched his cheek out of anxiety. Whilst gaining tranquility from the warmth of that small palm, Subaru shook his head, saying "I'm fine".

Subaru: "Exhaustion from reading did not lower my wisdom. On top of that, it's just as what I told Julius. This is no time to stay in bed. —This is the time when everyone should put their strength together."

Beatrice: "…When about to really reach the limit, absolutely tell Betty, in fact."

Subaru: "…Yeah, I know."

Responding to Beatrice, who was pressurizing him based on her senses, Subaru took in a long, deep breath.

His body felt sluggish. His head felt heavy. His nausea was increasing without pause and he felt congestion in his blood vessels as if in place of blood, coal tar had been poured into them.

All of this, was the result of Subaru taking over Ram's inferior physical form through Cor Leonis.

"…"

What he had harvested was the aftermath of having strode across Return by Death and the continuation of Cor Leonis. —Equal to his uneasiness by the memories of Death, what he carried over by the Authority.

Thanks to that he was able to grasp on the positions of his comrades at the current moment. Everyone was abiding by Subaru's instructions, and had started to respond to each of the respective attacks.

Within those responses of his comrades also existed Meili, in the balcony, and Shaula, struggling fiercely. She was certainly there and fighting for Subaru and the others'— no, for Subaru's sake.

Subaru: "I will, definitely help you."

Whispering behind him, Subaru followed Julius' back, who had gone ahead of him.

The humongous stairway, which cleared over the first layer of the tower and went through the layer above that, was lengthy. But neither was this the time to spit up complaints nor the situation to leak whining.

His entire body was sore, his bones had been shattered to pieces, but they were a necessary compensation to break out of this situation.

And—

Julius: "Subaru, let's advance!"

Julius' dignified voice resounded, and Subaru raised his face whilst running out of breath. And Julius, who had reached the utmost step, turned half of his body back and gestured to Subaru with his hand.

Abiding by that, the moment he galloped over the stairway he was met with the space that had opened up.

"…"

The complete opposite arrangement of rooms from the fourth layer, which had multiple rooms dividing the floor like a spherical wineglass that had been shattered. The second layer Electra, which divided all of their worth of existence by the Trial, is where they had arrived.

And, in Electra, where the three of Subaru, Beatrice and Julius had arrived, the first generation Sword Saint Reid and the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony were—

Reid: “—Hey, you. Is that all ya’ve got, you. It ain’t a joke, you. Didn’t ya come here to entertain me, you. It’s lackin’, you. Don’tcha be makin’ me laugh, you. No, at least be makin’ me laugh ya know, you. It ain’t amusin’ or anythin’, you.”

They came across the scene where the Sword Saint Reid Astrea went on and on complaining, having grabbed a single leg of the young boy that had been mercilessly struck down onto the floor.

3

“…”

Julius: “This is…”

Staring at the spectacle before their eyes, the one to whisper that in blank surprise was Julius. However, Subaru’s mental state witnessing the scene was absolutely the same as what he had whispered.

Then, what scene had they been expecting, was something quite difficult to determine now that if it were to be mentioned—

Reid: “A∼h? What’s up, you all. Y’all comin’ here too, ain’t that some enthusiasm. Or, do ya have business not with me, but with this guy?”

Gluttony: “Kah, kah, kah…”

Saying that, Reid scratched the area of his chest with his right hand, and with his other hand the leg of the young boy he had in his grip — the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, he lifted him upside down and made a look of suspicion.

Just as mentioned before, what scene they had been expecting was something quite difficult to determine now that if it were to be mentioned, but at the very least, this scene far surpassed what Subaru had assumed.

Subaru: “I had heard that Reid and Gluttony were negotiating, but…”

Beatrice: “Negotiating… this, I suppose? Betty thinks that even an exchange would be a lacking expression for this, in fact.”

Julius: “Yes, I agree. It is difficult to even call this a conversation.”

With that, Beatrice and Julius arrived at the same conclusion as what Subaru had whispered. However, the reaction of those two did not make sense from Subaru’s perspective.

Because the contact between Reid and Gluttony, the one to express it as negotiation from what he had heard last time, had been Julius, who must have witnessed a similar situation.

In any case—

Subaru: “The scene where Gluttony got overwhelmingly whipped down, would that be correct?”

Though nobody had asked for it, that is what Subaru worded what he witnessed.

In the white space of the second layer Electra indeed, the one-on-one battle Gluttony and Reid had engaged in, its traces remained in various spots.

They were the crevices on the floor caused by being stepped firmly upon or the cracks in walls which gave the impression of being caused by slashing strikes, aside from those, the traces of black burns caused by fires, or the scattered lumps of earth which were not supposed to be here, that precisely made clear the characteristic of Gluttony, it was unmistakable that the departments of all kinds of special moves had been lavish feasts.

—The departments of those techniques had been struck and smashed to atoms by the calamity known as Reid.

Subaru: “Earthquake, thunder, fire, are all of them Reid…”

Reid: “So, what’re y’all gonna do, you all. Do ya wanna go for the Trial ? Ya can go for it since ya’ve a slightly nice expression. But, young fish, you can’t. Ah, you can’t.”

Julius: “Why do you say, he is an exception?”

Reid: “Don’tcha get it jus’ by takin’ a look. A guy who ain’t perfect or can’t even become a game companion, instead of bein’ imperfect, is jus’ full of holes, ain’t that so. Don’t stand in front of me when ya’re like that. I start wantin’ to kill ya with a single finger, ya know. “

Gluttony: “Gi, gughya~a~a~!!”

While saying that, Reid stabbed his right hand’s fingers into the torso of Gluttony whom he had in his grip. With his guts mercilessly gouged, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony gave rise to an unseemly shriek.

Though it was unknown how old Gluttony physically was, even so, from the standpoint of his outward appearance, the young boy of thirteen or fourteen years of age was being tormented by an adult was the emotion he felt, difficult to suppress upon that sight.

It seemed as if Julius also had the identical feeling, and so—

Julius: “Reid Astrea, you must also be possessing the dignity as a knight. Then, what reason is there for you to torment that young boy any more than necessary…”

Reid: “Hey, you, don’tcha be sayin’ idiotic bullshit.”

“…”

Said Reid without changing the tone of his voice, and declared whilst possessing only the sword spirit similar to penetrating cold in response to Julius, who tried to offer commencing conversation from a fresh start.

Reid shook the body of Gluttony left and right whose leg he had grabbed,

Reid: “The dignity of a swordsma~n? If ya scatter that ‘bout in exaggeration, that’s exactly why the thin’ called the preparedness of a swordsman exists. Are ya gonna be fightin’ without even the preparedness to die. If ya’re gonna have an attitude makin’ light of it like that, then there ain't any choice but to teach it to ya with pain. Aye?"

"…"

The preparedness and dignity of a swordsman, if the argument was to be placed such a sumo ring, the one to be at the inferior position would be Julius. On top of having pride hang outside earlier, Reid's words about preparedness possessed a constant persuasive power.

On top of that, though the visible person was painful to even look at,

Subaru: "If Gluttony collapses, then the result certainly is alright…"

Though obvious, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony was not included in his touted objective of everyone's survival.

The ones Subaru wanted to save were only Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Rem, Meili, Echidna, Julius and Shaula. On top of that, the two of Patrasche and Gyan.

Gluttony and Reid were not subject to that. If the two of them were to crush each other— to call it as that results in an outcome too unilateral, but it was advantageous for Subaru and the others should that happen.

However—

Reid: "First of all, you. Is this guy yer buddy. If that's so then it ain't as if I don't get why ya're gettin' so heated up…"

Julius: "No, absolutely not. That Sin Archbishop of Gluttony is a bitter enemy of myself as well, an opponent with whom, in the worst case scenario if I were to fight to the extremity, one may end up taking the other's life."

Reid: "Eh? Then why're ya gettin' so mad? Cause yer prey got snatched away?"

Julius: "—It is because, you are kicking the pride of a swordsman."

Julius told the Sword Saint — the man who was the first one to hold that title, bestowed upon only those who stand at the pinnacle of the sword.

That declaration of Julius', which couldn't even be an insult, was silently being heard by Reid who narrowed his eye not covered by the eyepatch.

Upon the waitful watch of that Sword Saint, Julius continued as if slashing the atmosphere.

Julius: "If battling swordsmen, warriors, knights is something where one must prepare his body for death beforehand, then it is fine to submit to losing one's life at the extremity of the battle. However that, at most, is the extremity of battle, death at the extremity upon the exhaustion of all of one's desperate efforts is how it should be. The victor, absolutely, must not play around with the life of the defeated."

Reid: "…Ya're sayin' shit that's makin' my ears itchy. Who the hell's gonna be listenin' to all that."

Julius: "I do not mind should they be named as even inexperienced ideals, or sweet nothings! Merely, embodying those ideals and sweet nothings is the way of the knight I believe in."

"…"

With that bold assertion Julius unsheathed his own knight sword.

From what he had heard, this knight sword had gotten fractured once— it was not supposed to be a sword he had a habit of using, hence, it was something suspicious which his hand was yet growing accustomed to.

But above all, what must have always been in his fundamental values, those will never waver.

That is because they had certainly, always continued to shimmer within his self.

That shimmering something, did not let Julius overlook Reid's unjustness.

Even if the one to fall victim to that unjustness should be a Sin Archbishop, someone who had committed grave atrocities.

Reid: “—The way of the knight, aye.”

Beyond all expectation, that whisper jolted the atmosphere in Electra.

That was, a quiet tone of voice.

That was, not a voice harboring emotions of little significance.

That was, nothing but an echo which seemed as if it had slipped in amongst the other nonchalant and bored echoes.

—However, that was the signal of eruption of the first generation Sword Saint, Reid Astrea.

Reid: “Hey, you. How long’re ya gonna be sleepin’. Wake the hell up.”

Gluttony: “Gughi ~tsu!”

As he groaned and directed strength of grip such that he could crush that grabbed leg with his hand, Gluttony responsively shrieked upon his leg almost being crushed. And, Reid looked down onto the upside down Sin Archbishop,

Reid: “You, ya said some interestin’ shit, ain’t that so. Ya said ya’re gonna eat me up, taste me up, lick me up, aye. —I will, let ya do that.”

Gluttony: “—. Gihi, gaha, ahahaha ~tsu! What’s up with that ~tsu! What’s that what’s that, what happened so suddenly ~tsu! Why so suddenly, do you feel like that, red-haired onii-san! Even though you swung we or us around this much because you were against that hu~h!”

Reid: “I changed my mind. —Ah, that’s right that’s right.”

Removing the distortion of his face caused by pain, Gluttony tried regaining his state of health as Reid glared at him. After that as if having suddenly noticed something, Reid rotated his neck around,

Reid: “Ones like ya’ll will be intrudin’ right away anyway, ain’t that so.”

Remarkably saying that, Reid stepped ahead diagonally.

At that moment, shining violet crystals were thrown into the spot Reid was standing on. A shrill sound as that of shattering glass reverberated, and the violet arrows themselves along with the floor smashed and got scattered about.

However, they missed their aim. And Reid, who had been their aim, took a single step and leapt, shortening his distance to Subaru and the others who had commenced that attack just now.

Beatrice: “—~hk! Subaru, not good I suppo…”

Reid: “Here.”

Beatrice’s warning rendered fruitless, Gluttony was struck into Subaru’s torso, delivering a side blow.

Handling a human as a blunt weapon, the unstoppable force mercilessly sent Subaru flying who had been carrying Beatrice.

Subaru: “Gahagh ~hk!”

Reid: “It’s good ya didn’t hesitate, you all. This is way better than that beautiful girl in terms of fightin’. Well, the broken fragments of yer ability haven’t been reassembled, though.”

With no flexibility to even respond to Reid’s brief review, Subaru rolled over while holding Beatrice with all his might. He must not feel as if the origin of his life had been shorn off, with his internal organs overturned by the single blow just now, accompanied with Ram’s physical burden.

Julius: “Subaru! Beatrice-sama! Kgh… ~hk.”

And whilst fearing for the blown away Subaru and Beatrice, Julius, in a single instant piercingly charged towards Reid who had shortened the distance in between. However, Reid strode on and crushed that with his feet and hammered a kick into Julius' abdomen, who had tilted the axis of his legs.

Though Julius received that with the handle of the knight sword he had instantaneously drawn he could not block being lunged through by the shock wave as well. With his guts churned by the perforating single blow, he fell back greatly.

And meanwhile—

Reid: "Here, try it out n' see. To eat me up, or to die jus' like this by bein' played around by me, choose one what ya'd like or I'd have no choice but to make a move. Ain't that the thin' called life, hey you."

Gluttony: "—A~h, ah, ah ~tsu! We get it, we do get it, we really get it, we completely get it, as we get it, so we get it, as we want to get it, because we get it! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! We'll do as per your wish ~tsu! It's impossible for us to stay without eating ~tsu."

Remaining upside down, raising his face right towards the front, Gluttony smiled at Reid. And, Gluttony stretched his hand, grabbing the area of Reid's left eye which had been concealed by the eyepatch.

He subsequently opened his mouth and—

Gluttony: "Reid Astrea."

Licking, Gluttony let go of Reid from his hand, as if tearing something off. And, gazing lovingly at his palm where that something was not even present, he exposed his tongue.

At the same pace, he chewed that invisible something, and reverberated a slurping sound as if indulging in it.

Afterwards—

Reid: "—Ah."

Abruptly, change arrived in a single instant.

As if it had been an illusion or something, Reid's form vanished in the blink of an eye. With the tall figure disappearing from the space it was certainly supposed to be in, Gluttony, whose leg had been grabbed, fell onto the floor. At the same pace, his hands skillfully made a reversal and Gluttony made an agile landing, and looked at his own palm.

What was recurring in those eyes, was something close to the nothingness, desolateness, dismay of seemingly a gourmet delicacy, which had exhausted its extravagance, disappearing from the top of the platter—

Gluttony: "A~h, so amazi~ng. That kind of flavor, this kind of flavor, which kind of flavor would it be like, we imagined a lot a lot a lo~t about it but… it was above expectations ~tsu!"

Subaru: "He ate, Reid…?"

Gluttony: "A~h, you saw that, right ~tsu?! We did eat him! We indeed ate him! Really, isn't it the best, this is the flavor which cannot be imagined ~tsu! Even we, who are called something like Bizarre Eating are able to get it at this guy's rich taste ~tsu! Even without knowing Lye's say—"

Leaning backwards, whilst touching own sharp canines Gluttony praised Reid's flavor. As far as thought could go, it was the worst food report in human history— it halted in between.

It was not as if something had barged in as an obstruction. Its origin lay in Gluttony himself.

Gluttony: "—Wha? Ah, ah, a~h, a~h, a~a~a~a~h?"

Beatrice: "J-Just, what is being started up this time, in fact…"

Subaru: "No, that is…"

Putting his hands on his own throat and abdomen, Gluttony started making movement as if practicing speech. Though Beatrice found that state to be ominous Subaru had an idea regarding this abnormality.

If the exchange between Reid and Gluttony just a moment ago— if that was what Julius spoke of as “negotiation” then,

Gluttony: “Wa-Wa-Wa~-Wait, hieh, gihi, gihihi ~tsu. Strange, it’s strange, isn’t it strange ~tsu! After all, this is… you, odd isn’t it?”

“…”

Gluttony: “It ain’t odd, you. To eat or to be eaten, that’s how life works, ain’t that so.”

Strangling his own throat, Gluttony fired words as if answering his own questions. That tone of voice met clear change, and as if pulled into the change of that tone of voice change ensued in Gluttony’s flesh body itself.

It was a change as if the waxing and waning of the moon, and the expression of questioning when did it even happen was appropriate for it.

Subaru did not avert his eyes at all.

The same went for Beatrice, who was in his chest, and of course Julius, who had taken stance with his sword. However, whilst remaining captured in the field of vision of the three, Gluttony erased that form of his in an instant.

And instead, the one standing at the spot where Gluttony had been was—

???: “—Ah, a fresh body sure’s different. It feels like blood’s flowin’ through flesh. I’m already feelin’ hungry. At least come after fillin’ yer stomach, mentally adult brat.”

Pronouncing so, the one who had carried out substituting for the former player, having exited the stage known as the Pleiades Watchtower for merely a few ten seconds, the existence who was blooming a second time at the center of the stage, was Reid.

Reid Astrea had stolen the flesh body of the Sin Archbishop of

Gluttony and had achieved resurrection into the present world.

Julius: "This is…"

The result of the negotiations between Reid and Gluttony from Julius' perspective.

Of course, the details of the content of the conversation between Reid and Gluttony must have changed due to Subaru and the others' intervention but it should have approximately remained the same.

In other words—

Subaru: "What the hell's the negotiation, speaking while putting on airs…"

Beatrice: "Subaru, this is not the time to be saying all that, I suppose. Gluttony has disappeared, and Reid has…"

Subaru directed a rough remark towards Julius' pretentious phrasing the previous time. Within those arms, Beatrice called for further vigilance but Subaru patted her head lightly and gazed towards Reid—

Subaru: "Strictly speaking, taking a backhand grip onto the Authority of Gluttony which reconstructs eaten opponents, and painted out the opponent's self… is that right?"

Reid: "Don'tcha go 'round sayin' tough bullshit. Like I'd know such convenient shit. So, don't swagger 'bout with shit I'd no way in hell know, damn young fish. Young fish? A~h, hm? You… ah? You, this, you, that's it, ain't it, you."

"—?"

Though his spirit had hijacked that flesh body, Reid made a wry face unrelated to that truth. He unusually groaned saying hm and gently put a finger in his own eyepatch. And turning it over, he looked at Subaru with his healthy blue eye which had no particular need for an eyepatch.

Looking, gazing, staring,

Reid: "—You, ya're pretty disgustin'."

"…"

Reid: "Good job not havin' yer head gettin' screwed up with that. No, has it gotten so? What it'll be precisely cause it's gotten so, I ain't got any idea. I haven't even given it a thought."

"…"

What was he saying, thinking that, Subaru got truly perplexed upon Reid's attitude.

On top of being perplexed, the shivering and nausea enveloping his entire body were about to hit the critical point. Though obvious, Ram's inferior physical form was worsening as much Ram's body increased its voltage, and was throwing the backfire of recoil she was originally supposed to have felt into Subaru.

This time Subaru had not personally met up with Ram so there were no means for Ram to find out the reason why her body was favorably working.

Thinking of it now, it seemed as if Ram had been concerned regarding Subaru last time as well.

Though he had noticed Ram's concern, who was not in this place, only after dying twice—

Reid: "I see I see I do see. I ain't got any idea, but it looks like ya're the one these guys're aimin' for, ain't that so. Then that makes things faster."

Julius: "Reid! Your opponent is myself!"

Stepping ahead, Julius fired a slashing strike. But Reid attempted receive that with the chopsticks he had drawn out from his bosom —

However,

Reid: "Ah?"

The slashing strike lightly touched the tip of the chopsticks and blood spouted out of Reid's right hand, despite him wanting to receive it. Looking at that Reid made a suspicious look, Julius raised his eyebrows in faint surprise as well.

And—

"…"

For having witnessed that with his own eyes, that alone was a harvest for Subaru.

Reid: "Tch."

Clicking his tongue, Reid gyrated his chopsticks as if spinning a pen between the gap of his fingers and skillfully repelled Julius' knight sword. At the same pace, stepping ahead with a single stomp he lapsed the distance between him and Julius, who had instantaneously drawn his body back, and aimed his palm towards his abdomen,

Reid: "Your opponent is myself, did ya say that?"

Julius: "Kh—"

Reid: "No way ya'll be gettin' to have an exchange with me, after doin' a princess carry back there!"

The further twisted sole of the palm burst open Julius' abdomen, the slender tall figure continued bleeding and was blown away backwards. He tried to position his lengthy legs to the floor in order to kill off that vigor, but failing to do so, Julius' body turned upward at the bottom on the floor, and tumbled over at the same pace.

And, concluding his battle with Julius, who had widened the distance in between, Reid turned back,

Subaru: "Shi ~hk!"

Aiming for that sideward face of Reid's, Subaru fired the whip which was at the back of his waist. However, without the occurrence of a miracle such as his body continuing to remember it, the tip of the whip flew towards the wrong direction.

The effect of lost memories was not only in his mind but also affecting the recursive actions of his flesh body. As a result of fully realizing that, Subaru took in a heavy inhale.

At the same time as that—

Reid: “You, with such a borin’ trick…”

Beatrice: “—That boring trick, is the recommendation of you getting an end of being buried, in fact.”

Going past his amazement, Reid expressed his rage, and from his hind echoed the loud sound of striking hands. Upon looking that had been Beatrice, who had both her hands free, away from Subaru.

However, even if their hands were unconnected there was a certain connection between them. Beatrice extracted an extremely small amount of something like MP from the path of Subaru— and exercised great magic.

Beatrice: “—Ul Shamak.”

The moment immediately after Beatrice’s chant had achieved completion, what arose in the space was an enormous black hole.

That which had appeared all of a sudden in the air, manifested as an existence accompanied by primordial fear such as its unknown bounds and unknown depths, and tried to swallow Reid, who was right before it.

Subaru: “That, is…”

At a single glance, it could be understood that it was the great magic in effect within the space.

This was more of an issue of imaging it so, rather than having knowledge about it. Subaru had heard of Beatrice being a wasteful spirit, but the intensity of the real great magic could not even be in the same league of comparison.

Subaru had been unaware, that this was even possible. This was, a harvest.

That black hole swallowed Reid, and repelled away his Sword Saint off to somewhere unknown—

Reid: “The hell, it’s jus’ air. Somethin’ like air’s everywhere, as if it’d stop me.”

“…”

With just a single swing of his chopsticks, Reid broke through that immense magic with extreme easiness.

A carefree attitude as if, quite literally, slashing through air— no, for him, it truly was exactly that. He did not have the nature of taking roundabouts around something which he was capable of doing and then boasting about it.

He had slashed the air, so that was his explanation. That was all there was to it.

Subaru: “Slashing dimensions, I imagine it as quite a superior ability, you know…”

Reid: “Heyhey, don’tcha put such cool names on it, better food can be served, ya know. If ya’ll stay persistent jus’ cause things’ve gotten a bit lively, that won’t be amusin’ or anythin’, ya know.”

Swinging his chopsticks at the same angle as when he had slashed Beatrice’s magic, the moment immediately afterwards, Subaru’s body had been diagonally burst open from his chest to his waist.

Subaru: “Gha, a~a~a~!!”

Beatrice: “Subaru!!”

Julius: “Subaru— ~hk!”

Tasting the sensation of scorching heat Subaru collapsed on the spot, as Beatrice and Julius called for him. Upon the voices of those two, Subaru gnashed his molars and glared at Reid with bloodshot

eyes.

And, turning his palm towards the two trying the rush up to him, he managed to halt their legs.

Subaru: “I’m, al, right…”

Shaking his head left and right, he urged the two to not worry for him. Of course, there was no way he could truly convince them simply by conveying such words to the two.

The chest wound, was shallow. —No, it was not shallow. Though it was not shallow, it did not ache. It could be expressed as not being unbearable. At any rate, though it was bitter, it was alright. It was not worthy of making those two experience bitter, painful emotions. Gnashing molars, the blood on the verge of being vomited—nausea? Whichever it was, vomiting must be restrained from. Facing the front, glaring ahead, Reid must be carefully observed.

Reid: “As if ya can reach me with that, you.”

With a stunned expression, Reid was looking at Subaru, who was bleeding out of his lips.

Facing that Reid, Subaru stretched out his hand, and raised a single finger.

Subaru: “—Y-Yeah. I will, reach you.”

Even right now. I can reach you. In a place not necessarily here.

I will, for sure, save Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Rem, Meili, Echidna, Julius, Shaula, Patrasche, Gyan.

Without failing, a single person.

Gluttony and Reid were exceptions. —The ‘Natsuki Subaru’ who was not Natsuki Subaru as well.

That is why, right now, at this moment—

Subaru: “—This is, count one.”

Overlapping with Death necessary for a counterattack, was an accomplishment of Natsuki Subaru's as well.

At the very end of the end, Reid's blue eyes sheened a dull flash towards Subaru, who had made that declaration.

4

■ Count 1

□ The fight between Reid and Gluttony cannot be stopped.

□ If it's Julius, then there is a chance for them to succeed.

□ —Natsuki Subaru, has no chance of succeeding.

Chapter 72: ■■ ■

1

—Upon the advent of unforeseen Death, Natsuki Subaru heard the sound of ■ cracking.

However, upon each instance of that inexorable sound, he thought.

That it was certainly the proof of his progress not having come to a halt. That it was, the footsteps of the approaching future.

No matter how small those steps were, no matter how trifling the path he had advanced upon was, he was certainly, walking and progressing.

???: "—Subaru."

"…"

The moment his consciousness was led to awakening, blue eyes of a characteristic pattern were reflected into his own. In front of his eyes, peeping at Subaru worriedly was Beatrice.

Beatrice's hand was gently placed at Subaru's cheek, and Subaru inhaled.

He had parted with Beatrice's crying face not too long ago.

That consciousness' switchover had not been carried out well. Just previously, though it could not be associated with something as extravagant as a parting, she certainly had been in Subaru's eyes.

Subaru: "…Ah."

Beatrice: "Is your consciousness firm, I suppose? It took time for you to wake up till now, it was worrying, in fact. It would be better to confirm you did not lose any memories accidentally, I suppose. To start with, Betty, do you recall who…"

Subaru: “Bea, trice…”

Beatrice: “—. It seems you do properly remember, in fact. Good boy good boy, I suppose.”

Saying that, Beatrice stretched the hand she had at Subaru’s cheek towards his head. At the same pace, she patted him with her tiny palm and slowly, his consciousness caught up to reality.

Subaru: “Count, one huh…”

“—?”

Beatrice tilted her head upon the whispering voice.

However, neither did she know what it meant, nor did he intend to explain it. She might not understand even if he were to explain, and he did not intend to make her understand either.

She was kind. Beatrice, was extremely kind.

That is why, what Subaru was testing out. If he were to tell her about that, it was a given that she would be absolutely against it. — That was, something which Beatrice must not be allowed to know.

Beatrice: “So, how did it go, in fact? Was the purpose of reading the book fulfilled, I suppose?”

Subaru: “—Yeah, about that.”

That is what Beatrice asked Subaru, who still had the book placed on his knees.

The moment immediately before the immediately previous moment — the moment immediately before Subaru had disregarded his own physical state, Subaru had just been seeking a way to capture Reid Astrea and was just about to read his Book of the Dead.

That had come to a standstill due to complicated reasons, and multitudes of situations got caught in between the interval such that that would feel as if it was quite an old topic— though that went only for Subaru, at maximum.

Things he ought to do, things he must do, they had all been decided.

That is why—

Subaru: “Beatrice, it’ll be getting a bit confusing. —Lend me, your strength.”

Beatrice: “—. That is a given, in fact. Betty is Subaru’s partner, I suppose.”

Promised Beatrice to Subaru, who had broken the ice without any explanations.

Her existence was, truly, very truly, reassuring for the ■.

2

—The impact, jumped around freely in the aisle of the stone tower.

???: “Haha ~tsu! Hahaha ~tsu! You’re doing it, you’re quite doing it, you’re surely doing it, perhaps you’re doing it, you’ve been doing it, you’ve done it, because you’ve been doing it ~tsu! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!”

???: “Is there any time to be playing around? That is quite the pliability, isn’t it.”

Using the walls, ceilings of the aisle as a foothold, making free use of transforming tactics at will from next to next was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Lye Batenkaitos.

And the one rushing around at high speeds, having kept the inferior physical form of her body someplace else and moving around nimbly, was Ram.

Her petite frame fluttered about and danced, and directed merciless blows towards the direction of Gluttony’s body, who countered with equivalent fiendishness. At that point, rushing in as having been waiting for that was—

Emilia: “—Wroom and, boom!”

Wielding a large ice hammer in both of those hands, swinging it as if aiming for a home run was Emilia.

The damaging portion of the ice hammer, as large as a human's trunk, turned into a strike with all of her might and made a firm hit onto Lye's back. The small frame bounced and jumped along with a thunderous roar like a gum ball.

—No, he bounced too far off.

Instantly kicking the ice hammer, he by himself had jumped ahead and killed the impact.

Lye: "Ahawaha~! You're doing it doing it doing i~t! But but, that won't do! That can't defeat us!"

Emilia: "——~hk, he's fast!"

In response to Gluttony displaying moves with a touch of acrobatics, Emilia made a frustrated expression on her cute face.

Past and present, east and west, chewing the experts of all kinds of master arts, demonstrating abilities that had, quite literally, become "every single kind of martial arts" was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Lye's fighting strength— or perhaps, it should be called his opposing pressure. It had attained preeminence, a remarkable difference of unleashing optimal techniques of the highest peak each moment to the next.

Subaru: "If the Memories, the efforts or the training, if they're all being completely included then…"

Though it was quite hateful, perhaps Gluttony did not even have a need to possess a consciousness such as one saying "let's pull them out". When noticed the body already moved, that was the kind of Authority it was, of pulling them out in all kinds of scenes.

—The stolen Memories even included the experience points of the physical body.

That was also evident by Subaru not remembering how to use the whip he carried around whatsoever. It seemed that the whip had been Subaru's main weapon before losing his memories, but the correct way to hold it and swing it, he could remember none of it altogether.

In the first place, why did he choose something like a whip as his main weapon.

It'd be easier to make better use out of than a sword or a lance, it must have been a shallow thought like that. Though there were no objections to that itself—

Subaru: "I wish I would've thought of a counter plan, in case I lost my memories…!"

Of course, he was aware it was an absurd request, however, Subaru still cursed it. By doing that, for a single moment, he was able to forget his effeminate jealousy towards his disappeared Memories.

The jealousy towards the disappeared Memories ＝'Natsuki Subaru'.

Beatrice: "Subaru, asking again, in fact. Are you really alright, I suppose?"

Towards that sideward face of Subaru's, Beatrice raised her voice.

Upon her question, who had been supporting Subaru's body as he shrugged his shoulders, Subaru nodded with a "Yeah",

Subaru: "Right now, the fight's a struggle… if that collapses, our way to victory will…"

Beatrice: "—But, there is opposition in Subaru being taken away from here, in fact."

Subaru: "But, it's necessary. You understand, right, Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "That is—"

Subaru: "Lend me, your strength. Once again… I request you."

While maintaining meticulous caution among the ceaseless shocks, trying not to have his voice tremble, Subaru blackmailed Beatrice with an unfair manner of speaking.

In response to those cruel words of request of Subaru's, Beatrice closed her eyes, making a strained expression.

Lend your strength, that was the flow of conversation they had also had in Taygeta library.

However, that time had been before Subaru had activated Cor Leonis, and neither had Beatrice known that the situation of Pleiades Watchtower had deteriorated this much.

That is why, this was a heinous technique of Subaru's which gripped onto Beatrice's kindness.

"…"

Beatrice scrutinized Subaru's proposal with a difficult face.

The sudden deterioration of Subaru's physical condition and the recovery of Ram's fighting strength which accompanied it— the associativity between them was evident, and Ram, Beatrice, and even Emilia had noticed Subaru's rash perseverance.

But still, everyone knew they could not tell him to stop.

—For Subaru being burdened with his hardship was why the war front was being barely maintained.

Talk in name only, if Subaru was to unfasten Cor Leonis here whilst caring for himself, the first to follow would be the collapse of Ram, Emilia will get her Name eaten by Gluttony, their cooperation will crumble down and they will be defeated.

And should Gluttony be rendered free, the power balance of the tower would fall into an unrecoverable state, ultimately everyone would die in defeat and it would be game over.

Subaru: "…In the end, me being burdened is the best, the better option."

Subaru, who could never really be of any help even when he was acting rash, was making strides in the fighting strength by taking over Ram's inferior physical form. That was, an absolute requirement for capturing the tower.

Correctly speaking, even in the efficacy of Cor Leonis, there lay a trap not easy to solve.

That was, consciously or subconsciously, Ram saving up a bit of her fighting strength.

"…"

With overwhelming sense and techniques beyond comprehension, Ram maintained a firm balance in the place.

In spite of that, the reason why she had not gone further in order to overcome the opposition was because Ram had imposed a limiter on her own fighting strength. —The reason for that was her faltering due to carefully considering Subaru's status.

If Ram were to move to the fullest, it would impose an enormous burden onto Subaru.

Subaru would not be able to endure that. That possibility, was putting a halt on Ram's limbs.

The truth is, something similar had occurred when he had gone around towards Julius and Reid.

It had been confirmed he was capable of taking over Ram's inferior physical form through Cor Leonis itself without having to meet up with her— however, in a situation where Ram does not know of the interrelation between her own favorable state and Subaru's state, Ram does not save on her fighting strength.

As a result, the backfire, lacking any regret, scorched only Subaru and did not lead to mutual harm.

It also meant the end for Ram's time as standing unrivalled, the worst kind of mutual harm.

It was not possible to continue sprinting with the entire strength for long in a state of lacking oxygen. That was all there was to it.

Henceforth, drawing up Ram's fighting strength through Cor Leonis, in terms of results, Ram's judgement to save onto her abilities was correct. Being balanced was the best.

However, that improvement of Ram's combat power, Gluttony was indeed following and keeping up with it with the limitless arts of war he had plundered. Emilia was compensating for the parts where he could not be pushed away, but still, Gluttony could not be distanced away from, continuing to eat away with an extraordinary ability to survive.

That is why, towards that—

Beatrice: "—Minya!!"

Enough to envelop the entire aisle, violet crystals materialized and were fired in a single action.

Acting in consent with Beatrice's chant, who swung her small arm downwards, the concentrated attack of the magic called shadow magic swooped down onto Lye, who had turned his back towards this side, with tremendous vigor.

Immediately afterwards the boisterous dance of violet light swallowed the petite frame, engulfing the aisle with the sound of shattering glass.

"…"

Within the fluttering flakes of violet, dancing and falling, leaping away from the attack's span were the two of Emilia and Ram. Evading the fire with instantaneous judgement, it was as expected of their physical ability to quickly avoid it.

On the other hand, having been in the same circumstance but only having delayed the part of him facing it with his back, Lye could not evade it easily the way Emilia and Ram had done.

It was a magic to be feared which crystallized the struck targets, turning them into a brittle and transient existence and smashing

them.

Minya, capable of fatally wounding even through light contact, if it were to be recklessly fired this much in such a confined range it would be difficult for an enemy, even if it were to be a transient being, to cut through unhurt.

When the dance of the light which had been given rise to by the violet arrows came to a halt, the form of Gluttony who had taken enormous damage was— not there.

Beatrice: "—~hk?!"

Emilia: "Eh?! Where did…"

Beatrice inhaled in astonishment whilst Emilia made a strained expression and looked around.

Within the chaos, the one to get a grasp on the situation the fastest truly had been Ram.

She put her hand on her own right eye, and with only her left eye open, turned back. Subaru knew there was something like a path connecting him and Ram through Cor Leonis.

Ram, activated some type of a technique. Using that peculiar power, she understood where specifically the disappeared Gluttony was.

His whereabouts were—

Ram: "Barusu!"

"…"

Ram shouted, widening her light crimson eyes.

At that moment, from her line of sight Subaru comprehended the arrival of a hazardous presence right behind them. That was aiming for the back of Subaru— no, Beatrice.

With the interruption by Minya just now, did it intend to convey that it had polluted the battle.

At any rate, it was not vastly different from the transpiring happening.

Lye: “—Must say, if the one right now was to be continued consecutively, it’ll be getting tiresome, that’s why.”

Accompanying the sneering words, the dagger fastened to his arm flashed.

That was the strike by Lye, who had leapt through the space and escaped the concentrated attack of violet arrows. In line with the frequent usage of the Fist King, the odd talent of the one who became the Leaper — it could be named, short range warp.

According to what had been seen, it seemed as if there were certain limits to the distance, but still the compatibility of the strange talent of jumping over space and the encircling attack was the worst.

Carrying no significance regarding the type of the surprise attack, in the end, anything aside from getting involved in the head-on match was—

Subaru: “Beatrice”

Beatrice: “Suba—”

Thoughts and actions, ■ and body did not always coincide.

The moment initially after he pushed the small body away reflexively, a piercing sensation deeply gouged out his chest.

Subaru: “Kah.”

Like scratching the scab with claws, no, the pain and impact was several thousand times that. He instantly regretted having received that with his chest. Though he regretted it, no other convenient shield had been present there.

Bewildered by the momentary judgement, he shuddered at the mere thought of Beatrice having been slashing down. So much so that he thought it would be better for him to become a shield of flesh compared to that. It was painful, though it was painful, if it was merely pain, merely the wound on his body, it would last for only an instant. Not even an instant. But, it was much better than ■ being wounded.

Much better, than ■ dying.

“Subaru— ~hk!!”

The loud voice echoed within the tower, when he tried to turn back and see to whom it belonged, his knees snapped.

Strength faded away from his limbs surprisingly easily. Pathetically fragile, he was unable to support even his head. Even an infant could hold his head still but what was this man, who had significantly aged, doing.

Such that even this frivolous talk wouldn’t come to mind, his consciousness fell into the sole of the deep, dark hole.

A vivid ache and sense of loss, scorched his brain.

Subaru: “—Ghi.”

Whilst wanting to give rise to a shriek, he endured his voice trying to fly out by grinding his teeth.

It was not as if he would feel any better if he were to let it out. It was not as if he would feel any better if he were to not let it out. However, there were people here who would surely have their ■ shattered, if Subaru were to cry out now.

He could not allow that. Because he could not do so, stay silent and die. Natsuki Subaru.

Lye: “—How nice, onii-san. So you will be going to the next one by doing tha~t?”

There echoed a voice overlooking Subaru, who had powerlessly crumbled down whilst continuing to resist his screaming.

He had endured his screaming. However, he could not possibly endure that mocking voice.

“…”

In a situation where his limbs had been rendered completely incapable of moving, he directed strength into his arm and moved his finger.

And, with a single middle finger raised, his lips moved.

Subaru: “Die, idiot.”

After that, his consciousness came to a halt—.

3

■ Count 2

☐Having Emilia and Ram cooperate, aiming for an early settlement with Lye Batenkaitos, failure.

☐Timing is essential for taking over Ram’s inferior physical form through Cor Leonis.

☐—Beatrice’s surprise attack is incompatible with Gluttony.

4

—Fiercely, the enshrouding clouds of sand were trying to enwrap the field of vision.

“—Haahraan.”

With his entire body swinging around at the sensation of violently swaying about, Subaru desperately clung on, trying not to be thrown off. Ahead of him, a pigtail was shaking about left and right.

???: “—Work hard, Sand Earthworm-chan!”

In accordance with Meili’s call, the Sand Earthworm trembled its large build and intensely hammered in and struck its face. Being swallowed by that shock wave gave rise to an immense loss in the troops of the advancing horde of Witch Beasts.

However, those lost troops were covered in the matter of a few seconds, trampling upon the scattered corpses of their own kind, the hordes of Witch Beasts continued to push in without halting their feet. —The war situation, was unfavorable.

"…"

Under their eyes— no, in all directions, advancing in were the innumerable Witch Beasts. With those as her opponents, Meili made free use of her preparations, which in no way could be stated to be sufficient and was struggling fiercely.

Honestly speaking, Meili's efforts, as she controlled the Witch Beast, were hard to notice by an outsider's perspective. She ordered instructions to the Witch Beast and abiding by that the fiendish monster rampaged about. There was no mystery in that if that alone was to be observed.

However—

Meili: "Hah, hah ~hk."

Looking at her shape, with sweat on her forehead and her occasionally inhaling agonizingly, it could perhaps be understood at a single glance that it was a recognition too difficult to observe.

Meili: "Hah, fu~h… enough, geez o-onii-san, treats people so rudely~."

Wiping the sweat dripping down her chin by the back of her hand and stating some rather harsh words, Meili's eyes had become bloodshot.

It was not as if she had directly linked with the Witch Beast like Subaru's Cor Leonis but to bend the atrocious Witch Beast's instinct as per her own notions, an immense strength of will was needed.

For Subaru, who had read her book once and personally experienced her half death, the weight of that indemnification was clearly known. That is precisely why, it had been transmitted to

him.

—That Meili was seriously thinking of capturing the tower, along with Subaru and the rest.

Subaru: "—~hk "

Meili: "He~y, onii-san?! If you don't grab on properly, you'll die~, you kno~w!"

Subaru: "I-I know…!"

The moment immediately after he profoundly thought of those deep emotions, his body felt as if it was being carried away in the horizontal jolts and his posture crumbled. He had momentarily withstood his ground but he was shouted at by Meili when she discovered that.

Whilst complying with those words, Subaru calmed down and clung to the protuberance of the large build.

—At present, the figures of Subaru and Meili were on top of the large build of the Sand Earthworm.

Meili: "If instructions were to be given directly from a close distance, there must be a child which listens to what is said even within children who cannot learn anything, isn't i~t."

Subaru: "Like I said, I never thought, I'd get to have a Witch Beast ride…!"

Swishing through the air, with his frame being jolted by the velocity of the Witch Beast's body cutting through the atmosphere with a roar, Subaru skillfully moved around his body weight whilst stuck in admiration of Meili, who was managing the Witch Beast's back.

This time as well, Meili's battle with the hordes of Witch Beasts commenced from the balcony of the fourth layer.

Making use of several Sand Earthworms which had been prepared in advance, having the hordes of Witch Beasts advancing towards the watchtower suffer an attack in order to block the invasion of the Witch Beasts into the tower was Meili's role.

However, she quickly gave up on the attack from the balcony, jumping onto the back of the Sand Earthworm underneath and then in one go, plunged into the Witch Beasts with vigor like that of a high wave, from the middle of its forehead.

With that heroic tactic of Meili's, accompanying her as bait was what Subaru's current state was.

Meili: "Really, the Witch Beast-chan's all really love onii-san, isn't i~t."

Subaru: "And that's nothing to be happy about… ~hk."

Looking at the excited state of the Witch Beasts drawing near, Meili sighed as they were crushed by the Sand Earthworm. Whilst agreeing with her comment, Subaru narrowed his eyes at the hurriedly approaching hordes of Witch Beasts.

Though the principle behind it was unknown, it was something he was aware of in terms of the result.

The Witch Beasts who surrounded the watchtower, strictly speaking, were not aiming for the watchtower but had gathered aiming for Subaru who was inside of it. —That was, evident from this situation as well.

The spearheads of the Witch Beasts were concentrating on the extreme towards the Sand Earthworm, which was giving a ride to Meili and Subaru.

Turning their legs around, which were supposed to have been facing towards the tower, hastily making way towards this side with unraveled fangs was merely the instinct of Witch Beasts trying to kill a living being, nothing more.

Subaru: "It wasn't as if I was half-convinced, but…"

Him having the physical constitution which attracted Witch Beasts was a peculiarity Subaru, who had been in present-day Japan till yesterday, did not even need confirmation for as a real feeling. In the past, he had gnawed the pocky for the dog kept in the neighborhood, but could that have possibly been a symptom of the early stage of this physical constitution.

He was utterly unaware now. Though he was unaware—

Subaru: “It seems it’s no mistake that I am responsible for a large part of the five obstacles.”

The large hordes of Witch Beasts advancing towards the watchtower, the ones of Gluttony putting his approach towards the tower to test through Subaru’s Memories, Reid who took in that Gluttony and acquired substance, Shaula who commenced aiming for Subaru by the virtue of her transformation, the jet black shadow which swallowed the entirety of the watchtower—.

Looking at it back now, it was impossible to prevent the thought of the responsibility for their origin seemingly coming down onto Subaru in the truest sense. Of course, inevitability was no possible part of it.

Subaru: “My mind, is getting depressed…”

However, if the Witch Beasts, Shaula, and the jet black shadow could be lured outside of the watchtower, there may possibly form a way to break out of the deadlock of the present circumstances.

Subaru: “…It is not forbidden to destroy the Trials, huh.”

The fifth rule, behind capturing Pleiades Watchtower.

When he thought of the feelings of Shaula’s ■, who had hid that, he felt his chest ache but the rule he had finally fished out of her mouth granted a new viewpoint towards the place known as the Pleiades Watchtower.

It was not as if his eyes had opened innovatively by getting to know that rule.

However, granted with a scale he had never thought of, his way of looking at the world had expanded remarkably. Things which dk not exist cannot be obtained. That was, the fundamental law of the world.

To pass over the Trial without finishing it, to act contrary to the established routine of the Trial, those had been prohibited.

Without even getting involved in that, destroying the Trial itself had not been prohibited. What, could that mean.

What could it—.

Subaru: “Mei—”

Li, trying to continue his words on, that is when Subaru witnessed it.

By changing the course of the Sand Earthworm, whilst attempting to confirm whether the terrain of the watchtower’s environs were usable or not, the objective came to a standstill.

Because an assailing corona, from overhead, had scattered away the thick trunk of the Sand Earthworm.

“—Haahraaaan.”

With more than eight meters blown off of the approximately ten meter wide waist the Sand Earthworm shrieked, giving rise to its death wail.

The proceedingly lowering roar of the Witch Beast also resembled a howl, and Subaru, who had basked in that at close proximity, felt his vision dye white with its explosive intrusion into his eardrums.

Atop the Witch Beast, which had experienced that and was disseminating bluish-purple bodily fluids, having failed to stop its body from getting blown off into a thousand scraps from both the front and back of its trunk, Subaru and Meili’s bodies were thrown down.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Meili: “Gh— ~hk!”

Instantaneously stretching out his hand, he took Meili's petite body within his arms.

Patting his shoulder and trying to call out to him was a byproduct of it. By reflexively leaning his body forward, he had been able to catch her falling body.

However, that had not been a drastic settlement. The Sand Earthworm's large frame somersaulted, and not only Meili but Subaru had also been thrown off.

Even if he were to pull her in, in the end, they would fall on top of the sand, a place entirely surrounded by Witch Beasts.

Should that happen, the two of them would become feed for the Witch Beasts whilst they attempted to reorganize themselves.

Above all—

Subaru: "—Shaula."

Clinging to the outer wall of the tower with its tail stinger facing towards Subaru and the rest, the titanic scorpion— Shaula, with her large build slipped into the twilight, she was distantly visible having made her appearance.

They were out of time.

Within the tower, someone broke the rule. In accordance with that, Shaula lost her self and transformed into the titanic scorpion and just as what she had reported about herself, she commenced attacking, aiming for Subaru.

That single bomb had scattered away the Sand Earthworm's trunk, and mid air, towards Subaru and Meili—

Meili: "Onii-sa… ~hk."

Hugging Meili tightly, who was within his arms and had raised a voice as that of a scream, Subaru did not let his eyes avert from the titanic scorpion— no, Shaula. The red compound eyes emitted a distinct glow within the presence of night and the line of sight unbeknownst to any course of action, clearly understood its aim was Subaru upon looking at him.

Light gathered at the tail stinger, and now once again, a corona was fired.

They would get vaporized away should they be struck by that. However, they must not get struck by that.

He wanted to avoid being killed by Shaula, regardless of how much that may abrade away his ■. If he were to bend away from that notion, he would surely become a miscreant then.

However, a way to defend themselves while they were mid air was.

“—Haahraan.”

The moment the corona was fired, the Sand Earthworm writhing in agony thrusted itself above the line of fire. Was that simply the instinctive movement of the Sand Earthworm or did Meili influence it in some way, he did not know.

However, the single blast Shaula had fired had been avoided at the moment when it was supposed to have vaporized Subaru away.

And—

Subaru: “Gah, gugh.”

With vehement vigor, Subaru and the rest fell on top of the sand from their sands.

Meili, who was strongly embraced within Subaru’s arms, was perhaps safe. However, Subaru himself had not been safe. Unable to defend himself, he had gotten his head within the extensive sand.

A dull sound echoed, the joints of his bones, which must be avoided from getting smashed, had gotten broken.

At that instant, his field of vision was rendered completely black.

His nerves, which must be avoided from getting slashed, had gotten cut a thousand times.

Not only what was visible to his eyes, but sounds, sensations, anything and everything turned distant.

Merely his nose remained alive. It was baffling. The nose, which was not even expected to be capable of doing something useful normally. For some reason, till the very end of the end, he could sense scents.

The sweet, scent.

Within his arms, having been there till recently, that sweet scent.

Perhaps, yet remaining alive, that sce—.

5

■ Count 7

□ Escaping outside of the tower, the effectiveness of luring away the Witch Beasts.

□ The Witch Beasts' aim is Subaru. The aim of the shadow and titanic scorpion as well, is perhaps the same.

□ —With Natsuki Subaru alone, Meili cannot be protected.

6

Subaru: "Ghu—"

Enduring the nausea welling up within him, Subaru glanced at the front once again.

Stepping firmly, pouring immense strength in the legs, he somehow managed to have his body remain still. His anguish had not been eased. He was merely skillfully deceiving his anguish.

???: "Hiyah! Hiyayah! Eiyah!"

Crushing the bitterness of gastric juices in his teeth was Subaru and in front of him, fiercely welding two ice swords was Emilia. Evading those attacks of Emilia's calmly, with a deriding smile was the bitter enemy he was tired of looking at, Lye Batenkaitos.

"…"

Since the restart point of Return by Death had been set up to the moment immediately following the confrontation with Louis Arneb in the Book of the Dead, Emilia and Gluttony's encounter was inevitable.

At the point in time Subaru had Returned by Death to, the battle between Emilia and Gluttony had already commenced.

The simple way to change situations was to tamper with the matchmaking. However, by activating Cor Leonis immediately after Returning by Death Subaru was able to see the positions of his comrades within the tower, and he naturally understood that this fight was unavoidable.

Henceforth, he did not have the situation of the tag team of Emilia and Ram fighting Lye change.

—However, something could be done about that in its own way.

Subaru: "—Julius!"

Julius: "I know!"

At Subaru's sharp call, in accordance with that, a single shadow stepped in.

That was, with a knight sword in his grip and running through the frozen aisle, Julius. Having his light purple hair flutter in the icy wind he commenced his gallant piercing sprint from a lower posture.

Lye: "Haha ~tsu! Even the nameless knight-sama shall be partaking in the battle hu~h!"

Julius: "Unfortunately, if that was intended to be a provocation then that is quite weak. Subaru pricks at spots much more painful."

Lye: “You know, despite being comrades, what’s up with that?”

Brushing away the advancing piercing bolt with his dagger, Lye and Julius exchanged words at close proximity. Even in the midst of that sword strikes unfolded between the two, and exchanges of special moves, opposite to the content of their conversation, were being performed.

—Having Julius accompany them to this place, was a type of a gamble.

When the five obstacles had attacked the watchtower for the first time, Subaru had Julius accompany them for going around this as well. At that time, Emilia had gotten her Name eaten and her cooperation with Julius, who had been rendered unknowing to her battle style, had been shoddy and lacked the ability to corner Gluttony.

However—

Subaru: “This time, nobody has forgotten Emilia-chan. On top of that…”

Emilia and Julius’ coordination attempted to soundly counter Lye. At that point, ahead of Subaru’s line of sight, was the shadow of a person kicking the ceiling and making a sudden descent— Ram severely cut in between.

Of course, increasing her fighting strength through Cor Leonis was Subaru’s greatest duty. That had been practiced this time as well, and Ram advanced closer to Lye’s torso with unordinary body handling.

And,

Ram: “Just, kindly take the exit already.”

Lye: “Ghu, egh.”

Cold words, and her palm, with equal sharpness, drove into Lye’s side. At the palm strike aiming to directly impact the internal organs through the gaps in ribs, and a distinct rumble of pain spilled through Lye's lips.

At the same pace, Ram's knee tried assaulting the snapping body which then got blocked, but grabbing the hair of her opponent from the back of his head she slammed him onto the floor. On top of that, she consecutively swung down her heel into his face.

Merciless might, continuous attacks, those were the only way to drive Lye into certain defeat.

However, this had been far from being sufficient for damaging Lye. The heel Ram swung down onto his face, having grabbed that slender ankle whilst lying down, he glared at Ram from below with a bloodstained evil countenance.

Lye: "Nee-sama, cau~ght…"

Emilia: "Hiryah!!"

Lye: "—Gah ~tsu?!"

Lye expressed a smile on his evil countenance and his body, from a directly horizontal attack— by the ice hammer given shape to and swung by Emilia like a golf swing, got blown off.

It was a nice save, just when he was about to put his wickedness to work by grabbing Ram's leg. At Lye, who went rolling and somersaulting skillfully, Emilia gallantly raised her eyebrows and puffed up her chest.

???: "…As merciless, as always, I suppose."

Beatrice, while supporting his body right by his side, whispered in response to those actions of Emilia's with admiration, amazement, and somewhat pride.

The truth is, Subaru felt the same. She had a cute face, she could truly be relied upon.

Ram: "Emilia-sama, gratitude for the rescue."

Emilia: "Mhm, it's fine. Ram got grabbed because she's moving around this much, after all. Julius as well, thank you for coming here.”

Julius: “Not at all, Gluttony is an opponent I am deeply connected to as well. Rather, my deepest apologies for exposing Emilia-sama and Miss Ram to danger. This was originally supposed to be a spot where I would tell you to kindly stand back, but…”

Ram: “With that as the opponent, there must be no room to be acting upon chivalry or gentlemanliness, isn’t it.”

Whilst hugging her elbows, Ram flatly intercepted Julius’ words. Even Julius could not refuse that. It seemed as if he felt ashamed of his feelings towards that itself.

There is a certain style to battle, there are certain rules to warriors.

However, adhering to that and becoming too obsessed over pride would result in large losses. —For Julius, this was a difficult spot. However, there was no choice for him but to respond to it.

At the very least, with the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, an atrocious gang as the enemy—

Lye: “…A~h, you sure are doing it. To do this much with us as the opponent is quite something.”

Saying that, the aforementioned Sin Archbishop stood up while shaking his head.

Whether that was him resounding having received Emilia’s heroic blow from his shoulder, his right arm was still loosely handing down. Possibly, the shoulder bones had perhaps been fractured.

If that was true, then it could be said it was possibly fatal for the Authority of Lye Batenkaitos, of reconstructing battle styles through Memories. No matter how proficient a battle style may be, it would be rendered meaningless if it was not exercised perfectly.

Subaru: “…Or instead, by substituting with the little sister, are you going to be switching the body and everything to the other?”

Lye: “—. Waha~n, we see, huh. Onii-san is aware of our Solar Eclipse and Lunar Eclipse is what that means. Well well, got seen through, isn’t it. But you kno~w”

Putting an abrupt halt to his words, Gluttony carefreely stuck his tongue out as if mocking Subaru and the rest. Though Subaru furrowed his eyebrows to that gesture, the answer was provided immediately.

That was—

Lye: “—In such a disadvantageous situation, i~s there any meaning for us to still continue fighting?”

Subaru: “—~hk! Not good!”

Obvious logic, Subaru shouted while cursing the shallowness of his own thought.

Hearing that call of Subaru’s, Emilia and the others also seemingly reached the same thought, but they were too late.

Lye: “Baha~hayee.”

Lightly swinging his hand, Lye’s figure jumped over the space.

Using the odd talent of the Leaper, he erased his form from the aisle.

Julius: “Stay on the lookout for the surroundings! We don’t know where he may appear from yet!”

Ram: “—It is futile. That bunch, once they are allowed to get away, they escape. That must be why, they haven’t been caught even once yet, isn’t it.”

Rendering his form invisible was Gluttony, Julius called for vigilance for his surprise attack but Ram probed into the situation with composure whilst shaking her head left and right.

Subaru too felt the same as Ram. Just as the words Lye had left, there lay not a single reason for him to continue fighting in such a disadvantageous situation.

Lye Batenkaitos, was a Sin Archbishop, not a warrior.

He did not possess the qualities of continuing to fight until the very end, or enjoying hard battles either. According to Louis' statement, what they desired was the greatest life, the itinerary of optimum solutions.

—The hazards of hard battles or defeat, those could not even be forgotten desires for them.

Emilia: "…Then, it's over already?"

Dumbfounded, Emilia whispered whilst reducing the ice hammer she held in her hand to air.

In those words was not the relief of the enemy having disappeared, but the disappointment having let a bitter enemy slip from their hands— no, something differing furthermore, despondency.

The reply to that despondency, was—

Ram: "—Just, a little bit more and yet!"

"…"

Ram: "Just, a single step more, and the bunch who made Rem go through all that could have been… ~hk."

Kneeling down, Ram raised a high-pitched voice.

She powerfully struck her fist to the aisle's floor, trembling her voice regarding Gluttony, who had artfully succeeded in running away.

Everyone in this place was painfully aware, of the feelings of her regretful self.

The reason why Emilia prevaricated her words, why Julius hid his yellow eyes, why Beatrice, beside Subaru, lowered her shoulders, all of it collected upon that.

They had come to possess a sudden clue.

However, unlike relying on knowledge of the tower, enquiring Gluttony about the damage dealt by the Authority of Gluttony directly was a way that had been thought over with certainty.

To have that slip away from right in front of the eyes, it was obvious to feel despondency for that.

Subaru: “…With this, Lye has been repelled away, is that what it would mean?”

Understanding the feelings of Ram’s ■ sinking deep into lamentation, Subaru possessed a different kind of doubt.

Seeing the disadvantage of three against one, Lye decided to withdraw from this spot. However, speaking in terms of whether he had withdrawn completely as a threat to the watchtower, that was yet unclear.

Though Ram had informed Julius of the futility of looking out for a surprise attack, that was something limited to only this place. Within the tower, dangerous Gluttony were wandering around, that situation yet remained unchanged.

If so then it could not possibly be said that one of the five obstacles had been eliminated.

On the contrary, they had left an opponent about whom they had no idea where he may clash in from, to take care of himself, that was all there was to it.

Subaru: “——~hk, should the guy who escaped be ran after, or should another problem be looked after. At any right, right now…”

???: “—The thin’ known as a situation’s all ‘bout the opponent, where ya should be movin’ ‘round without thinkin’ anythin’.”

“…”

Suddenly, the moment he was giving consideration to the possibility of not making a move, he felt his hair rise at the voice which originated from behind. When everyone turned back instantly, slow footsteps approached from ahead of the aisle.

Their owner, as if simply taking a walk without halting a single step, that was not something the aforementioned bunch would do.

For some reason.

???: “I’m takin’ a walk ‘round my garden, yet why’d I be worryin’ ‘bout other fellas?”

Boldly, without feeling shy for a single thing, the man— the figure of Reid who descended down from the second layer, at that Subaru felt the situation deteriorate further.

Keeping the issue of Reid for later he had hastened Lye Batenkaitos’ subjugation, but in terms of results, Lye had escaped and obstructing Reid’s revival had completely failed—

Emilia: “Since when, did this tower become your garden?”

Reid: “Heyhey, don’tcha go ‘round havin’ misunderstandin’s, fiercely frizzlin’. Lemme tell ya, when I said garden I wasn’t refferin’ to this gloomy tower. You, ain’t it obvious I’d be callin’ the whole damn world’s my garden.”

Julius: “…If the man who became legend by a single swing of sword says that, then that comment must not be a trifling matter.”

At the arrival of Reid, who was not supposed to be able to leave the second layer, Emilia and Julius fired their own respective astonishment and words. The response to that was extremely typical of Reid, that could be stated straightforwardly.

For this warrior who surpassed all human intellect, the idea of thinking over his footsteps— no, not just footsteps. The thought of taking other people into consideration, was completely out of the balance.

Ram: “—Why, have you descended down here? You were not supposed to be able to leave that floor, isn’t that so, trial taker.”

Reid: “Talkin’ to women knelt down and sunken ain’t to my likin’. If ya want me to answer then try requestin’. I don’t think strong-hearted women’re bad. Though I don’t think weak-hearted women’re bad either.”

Ram: “Is that so. —Such a sleazebag.”

Without expecting a direct response, Ram promptly halted her response to Reid.

The next instant, Ram, who had kicked the floor with enough force to burst it open, rushed towards the opposing Reid’s bottom in a straight line and turning into a pink whirlwind, leapt towards the Sword Saint standing bolt upright.

At the same pace, making the best use of her petite build, a high speed rotating kick was fired from her heel towards Reid’s head. Without any exaggeration, a kick strike with enough force to mow down his head.

It was a stark kick which, if it landed a direct hit, would blow off his head physically, if not that then at the very least, his consciousness.

Of course, the respective recoil would flow into Subaru from Ram and ache like a strike of lightning would bolt through his body.

Subaru: “Ghu, ghu~u~u~ ~hk.”

It is said that when an artery explodes, it pains to an inconceivable level. Right now, it could be boasted that what was running through Subaru’s entire body was something close to that.

Ram’s attack which had been unleashed to this extent, the fruits it bore were—

Reid: “Not bad. But, that’s all it’s got. Had it been Trisha she would’ve broken the floor with a single blow, ya know.”

Ram: “…Monster.”

Reid: “Don’t lump me together with somethin’ like monsters.

There's gotta be a limit to how low my worth can be, ya know."

Intercepting the kicking leg, he had the impact flow into the ground.

Having been witnessed earlier, physical attack killing— that made the floor and walls of the aisle develop cracks, however, the damage to Reid himself had been blocked perfectly.

And, towards Ram's abdomen, who had halted movement—

Reid: "Here, try endurin' this, you."

Spinning and turning around his body once, Reid's bulky and sturdy leg sprang up. At the same pace, the sole of his foot captured Ram's body and swept it right upwards energetically.

Ram: "Kafugh."

With the air within her lungs squeezed out, Ram's lips, as she widened her eyes, vomited a large amount of blood out. Whilst bathing in that without evading it, Reid narrowed his eye unconcealed by the eyepatch and distorted his lips.

However, immediately opening up his narrowed eye again, he spilled out "The he~ll?" with his voice.

Ram: "It was successful, wasn't it."

At that instant Ram grasped the leg caved into her abdomen and using her entire body, settled the joint of her knee. With an attitude as if unaffected by the impact of the strike which had pierced through her abdomen. Seeing that, Reid carved a puzzled expression—

Reid: "—The heck. Ya're behind this too aye, young fish."

"…"

With a damp voice, he told Subaru, who gnashed his molars at the anguish like a bowling ball had been thrown into the pit of his stomach.

Emilia: "——~hk, no! Don't get any closer to Subaru!"

Immediately afterwards Emilia stepped ahead upon observing hazardous emotions levitating across Reid's blue eyes. However, upon her advance Reid swung his arm in annoyance, purloining the ice sword driven into him and mercilessly struck Emilia's shoulder with its handle, and energetically kicked her after she fell down.

Emilia: "Ah ~hk!"

Reid: "Ya're in my way."

Receiving the kick, Emilia got physically blown away. Much frighteningly, Reid did that with the leg whose knee was supposed to be captured in grip.

In other words, whilst continuing to have Ram cling to his leg, he had kicked and sent Emilia flying. In the end, no matter how much strength Ram may pour in, it could not do anything to Reid's knee.

Ram: "Kgh, his limits know no end!"

Julius: "—Prepare yourself!"

Casting aside the advantage of locking him, Ram, like a chess piece, and Julius drew near him alongside.

However, the result of the attacks of the two was just as miserable.

His kick and his hand being used like a sword shot down Ram and Julius respectively, who were supposed to be at the pinnacle as warriors. Ram had her neck struck, Julius had his leg broken, all of them rendered incapable of standing.

Subaru: "—Shit."

And, in the aisle where comrades had fallen, Reid approached further, having literally eliminated the obstacles in his way. In front of his eyes was merely the groggy Subaru, who had taken up Emilia and others' damage, and Beatrice, who had spread both of her arms wide as if shielding that Subaru.

Subaru: “Bea… it’s no use…”

Beatrice: “It doesn’t matter if it’s no use or if it’s absurd, in fact. This is property protection of Subaru… in this case, it is a special field of Betty’s, Subaru’s partner as well, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s voice of acting strong, right now, echoed far too vainly.

Even when trying to respond to that strong spirit of Beatrice’s, Subaru’s hands, legs, made no reaction to the fighting spirit. What Subaru had taken up was only damage, which seemingly rendered the actions of his comrades futile.

Three of them were merely conscious, that was the fruit their willpower bore.

Beatrice: “Reid, why are you aiming for Betty and the others… for Subaru, in fact?”

Reid: “Cause it’s in the middle of the Trial, sayin’ that’d be a pretty outdated response. My original plan aside, that actually goes for that pretty one…”

Beatrice: “So what, I suppose.”

Reid: “By meetin’ that one firsthand, my mind changed. It’s disgustin’, so I’ll erase him.”

A judgement grounded on peculiar sensitivity, conversation could not work against such an opponent.

At the same time, with the possibility of him turning over his view wiped out Beatrice gnashed her pretty molars and glanced at Subaru lying behind, who had crumbled down and had been rendered immobile.

“…”

The reason why she took a tiny breath, was because she resolved her preparedness to fight and protect Subaru.

He wanted to tell her, to run away. However, what spilled out of

Subaru's lips was merely a hoarse breath.

Reid: "There ain't any need for ya to go outta yer way and rush to yer death ya know, kid."

Beatrice: "Unfortunately enough, living as if dead is utterly unwelcome at this point."

Reid: "Hu~h, that so. Then, there ain't any choice."

With his name bearing the expression of a hero and a legend, he would not hurt a girl child.

Believing such thoughts to be as though illusions, the glint in Reid's eye remained firm. It seemed to be sentencing as if the one standing in his path was naught but an infant.

Henceforth, without expecting any benevolence of ■, Beatrice was the first one to use all her might.

Beatrice: "Ul Minya."

The emerging countless violet arrows submerged the aisle entirely, and completely blocked off any paths for Reid to escape through.

To fatally wound with the slightest contact was the special trait of Minya's, fathoming that with a single glance, without flinching whatsoever, Reid curved his lips.

Beatrice: "Natsuki Subaru's Great Spirit, Beatrice."

Reid: "Good goin'. — Stick Swinger, Reid Astrea."

With the mutual exchange of names, the atmosphere froze. Beatrice, with the violet crystals spread out in the air, and Reid, having picked up Julius' knight sword that had fallen at his feet, prepared themselves.

"…"

Until the very end of the end, Subaru was unable to voice anything.

However, he kept his eyes open, he never closed them for even an instant.

His own decisions and choices, from the results they bore, he had been unable to avert his eyes.

He had been unable to avert them—.

7

■ Count 15

☐ Gluttony deserts, upon observing the situation to be visibly unfavorable.

☐ Neglected Reid ultimately comes to kill Subaru with absolute certainty.

☐ —Never again, will he let someone die before his own self.

8

Subaru: “Beatrice ~hk.”

???: “Wah?! Wh-What happened, I suppose?! Subaru?! Subaru?!”

The moment he opened his eyes, he hugged the young girl before him without any forethought.

Astonished by the sudden action, the young girl— Beatrice, stiffened her petite body.

It was his reunion with her, who had persisted with tragic preparedness until the previous moment. It turned into relief within his chest, along with unbearable guilt that breathed a painful wind into his ■.

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

He was grateful, he was able to meet her again.

Along with that, he felt apologetic for having her go through all of that.

Beatrice: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “—No, it’s nothing. I do remember. You are Beatrice, I am Natsuki Subaru. You and I, are each other’s partners, now onwards too, please take care of me, please have fun with me, very good.”

Beatrice: “V-Very good, in fact…”

Beatrice, perplexed, raised her thumb at Subaru’s rhythmic words.

It was an expression that must not be existing in this different world, so it must be the result of Subaru poisoning her with it. Patting that head of hers, Subaru took in a deep inhale, and exhaled shortly.

Following that he switched over his consciousness, believing he must grasp the situation—

Beatrice: “Calm down, I suppose, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Eh?”

Beatrice: “Properly tell what happened, in fact. Did something happen inside the book, I suppose? Were Reid’s memories displayed? Betty aside, what about Emilia and everyone? Confirm whether you remember them, in fact. Properly recall, all things precious, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Th-That’s… yeah, hm, that’s right.”

Holding both of Subaru’s cheeks in her hands, Beatrice brought that to attention.

Hearing those words of her’s, in front of her hurried self he fell into slight reflection. It was a phenomenon that might happen to someone who was looping often.

For an individual piling up loops, the fresh taste of a happening eventually fades away.

With that, experience points gained with people for whom that happening is for the first time and react accordingly slips off, and suddenly people start to appear as not being people—

Subaru: "…I never thought, I'd be in that position."

In those kinds of works, the mind and body falls into that state due to trials run tens, hundreds or times even more than that.

Compared to that, for Subaru it was— merely, the fifteenth time.

To stop thinking of people as people in merely fifteen times, perhaps it could be said his ■ was turning harsher.

Subaru: "Am I an idiot. No, I am an idiot."

Casting away the weak, brittle, pathetic nature of his own ■, Subaru braced his mind.

He had only, died fifteen times yet, that is all. Without having made any progress, he had merely exhausted his life in indolence. How come did his such self, hold any right to proclaim that he was exhausted.

Such a thing did not exist for him. It did not.

Stand up, raise your face, clench your fists, Natsuki Subaru.

There's nobody else except you. Except you.

—Had it been 'Natsuki Subaru' , such failures never would have.

Beatrice: "—From the very beginning, Subaru has never been some superman capable of doing everything, in fact."

"…"

Suddenly, Beatrice told Subaru, who had been repeatedly wondering to himself.

Subaru inhaled upon that comment and widened his eyes. Gazing into those black eyes of Subaru's straightforwardly, Beatrice shook her head left and right, conceiving grief in her blue eyes.

Beatrice: "It can be said countless times, I suppose. Subaru is no such superman who can do anything, in fact. Always frantic about what lies in front, gets hurt for everyone's sake… even enduring pain is not something he is good at, he is a normal boy, I suppose."

Subaru: "Th-That's not, possible. That's not. After all, it should be that way…"

Beatrice: "It should be that way?"

Subaru: "It should be that way, only then can this…"

He firmly gripped to the pit of his stomach, gritting his molars, thinking back to the wounds of his arm, to the wounds within his body, to his arms which had grown slightly sturdier, to everyone who relied upon Subaru, to Emilia, to Beatrice, to Ram, to Julius, to Echidna, to Meili, to Shaula.

His guts were rumbling such that it was irritating.

They were rashly pushing away, more than the moment of being on the verge of death, but perhaps Subaru's ■.

???: "So you have returned, Natsuki-kun… Did something, happen?"

???: "Geez onii-sa~n, just when I thought you've worried everyone, it's because of tha~t? No fighting with Beatrice-chan now onwa~rds."

Disputing with Subaru and Beatrice— no, it was nothing so stern.

However, looking at the state of the two facing him, they were Meili and Echidna returning from their patrolling of the library. Neither could he look at the faces of those two straightforwardly.

Echidna: "Beatrice, did something happen to Natsuki-kun? Was the impact, indeed, too much?"

Beatrice: "…It's not as if that's not true, in fact. But, Betty and the rest's proper thought was far too lacking for Subaru, who had to experience that misery, I suppose."

Echidna: “That is…”

Echidna furrowed her eyebrows at Beatrice, who turned her gaze downwards after staring at Subaru. However, she immediately pulled her chin in, as if having judged the circumstances,

Echidna: “Shaula, who had jumped out, and Julius, who went after her have not returned. I am also worried about Emilia-san and Ram-san who went to see Rem-san. I would like to join up with at least either of them, but…”

Beatrice: “…Echidna and Meili, head to the balcony, in fact. Betty will head to the Green Room and search for Emilia, I suppose. Stay sufficiently careful, in fact.”

Meili: “That’s okay bu~t, what’s onii-san going to do~?”

At Beatrice’s brisk instruction, Echidna and Meili’s lines of sight turned towards Subaru.

At those gazes, naturally, Subaru wanted to say he would accompany Beatrice but,

Beatrice: “—Subaru, will quietly stay here, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Wha…! Don’t say stupid stuff, Beatrice! I’m alright! My senses may certainly have dulled down after returning from the book but, they’ll immediately be in their place…!”

Informed by the standing Beatrice, Subaru reflexively snarled at those words. At the same pace, he poured strength into his legs in order to stand at the same level as them.

He poured strength into his legs but—

Subaru: “—Ah?”

Beatrice: “Be in their place and, what then, in fact?”

At Beatrice’s question, Subaru looked down onto his legs in astonishment. Even if he tried to pour strength somehow, especially into his knees, he was unable to retain balance.

No matter what he did, his posture crumbled, and he was unable to stand up.

Subaru: “Why…”

Beatrice: “It’s a matter of course, I suppose. Subaru is always, working too hard, in fact.”

Subaru: “No, wait, please wait! Everything somehow working out when I’m at this level, that’s…”

“…”

Subaru: “That’s, not possible. I am…”

Shaking his head left and right in refusal, no matter how many times he tried, the result remained unchanged.

Even though he possessed no pain, no anguish, no fatigue, his will did not get conveyed to his limbs. And whilst he remained occupied with that, Beatrice ultimately took a single step in the direction of the staircase.

Beatrice: “—Subaru, Betty and the rest will cover whatever remains lacking, I suppose. That is why, you don’t have to think of doing anything and everything all alone, in fact, after all”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “After all, that is Natsuki Subaru, I suppose.”

Leaving behind a smile for Subaru, who widened his eyes in astonishment, Beatrice dashed. As if equaling her energy, Echidna and Meili also turned their backs towards Subaru,

Echidna: “Natsuki-kun, I have expectations from you. That you still might be able to give one last push.”

Meili: “I think it’s fine if you rest. But, it was onii-san who said some pretty grand stuff to me so~, work hard on that a bit more.”

Saying all they had to say, the figures of the three disappeared from the library, leaving Subaru behind, whom they had all spoken to.

If they were to take the staircase from the third layer, the three will encounter Julius, who must be making his way back around this timing. Or perhaps at this rate, Julius would not come and drag Subaru out, he had embraced that expectation as well—

Subaru: “No way, he’d come… if Beatrice, says all that.”

He respected that.

Much less, the Subaru after returning from the Book of the Dead had been seen by the two of Echidna and Meili. There was no way their kind selves, would not relay that.

However, that solicitude came at the cost of life. Even though, he did not want to see someone among his comrades die before him.

Subaru: “All because, I’m so weak… because I’m losing my spirit, at just this level, why.”

Had it been the true ‘Natsuki Subaru’, he must not have halted his feet by just this. His rage towards his own worthless self, gave rise to warmth in Subaru’s chest.

However, alongside that, a separate feeling was also gushing forth.

That was, the words Beatrice had left behind.

‘—From the very beginning, Subaru has never been some superman capable of doing everything, in fact.’

‘It can be said countless times, I suppose. Subaru is no such superman who can do anything, in fact. Always frantic about what lies in front, gets hurt for everyone’s sake… even enduring pain is not something he is good at, he is a normal boy, I suppose.’

What Beatrice had recited, the image of the ‘Natsuki Subaru’ not present here.

Despite hearing that, Subaru was unable to believe that. It was difficult to believe in. After all, in accordance with that, that would truly mean he was just a normal human, isn’t it.

Subaru: “Something, must have happened. That must have changed you, isn’t it, ‘Natsuki Subaru’ …”

Something, like an extravagant meeting with someone.

Something, like attaining an unbelievable power.

Something, like experiencing something his current self couldn’t even imagine.

Because something must have happened, which had allowed him to grow out of being the hopeless Natsuki Subaru, that ‘Natsuki Subaru’ must have won the faith of everyone in his life in a different world.

Subaru: “It has to be like that…”

Without change, beating his legs, Subaru rolled up the sleeves of his clothes. Over there, a sarcoma with its origins not within Subaru’s memories had engraved a pattern.

Personally experiencing as if taking responsibility for that seeming curse over his body, its root perhaps still remained without changing. That was not possible.

That is why, ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was—

Subaru: “‘Natsuki Subaru’, I summon you…”

Suddenly, what he had mouthed was the genesis of the suspicion he harbored for this world’s ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

The message for the existence absent here who had, upon times, engraved upon his arm, upon times, composed as if it were a curse and inscribed it on the room.

Seemingly finding it to be as if hexing someone who had stolen away the role which originally belonged to himself.

Subaru: “If, you really are within me, then… come out now…!”

Gripping his arms powerfully, with strength such that his bones would grate, Subaru called for 'Natsuki Subaru' who was within—no, who was not present here.

The existence who could achieve ideals which Subaru, who was present here, could never attain. He asked 'Natsuki Subaru' to come out, if he was here.

Subaru: "Come, come, come…! Show yourself, 'Natsuki Subaru' !!"

His arms had been lacking, so he latched to his neck with his hands. Of course, the deed of strangling oneself with his own hands, neither was it easy, nor could it be properly done.

In the first place, something as convenient as 'Natsuki Subaru' showing his face when his life was in a predicament would never occur. Had that been the trigger, Subaru would have drawn him close twenty times now.

Just how many times 'Natsuki Subaru' would have shown his face through that.

Subaru: "Shit, shit, shit…! I am! I can't, do it! You're needed for this, 'Natsuki Subaru' !"

Seizing the grasp on his trembling knees, Subaru powerfully struck the floor with his fist. Though his fist pained upon striking the floor of the library of unknown material properties, it could not possibly equal the sense of hopelessness tormenting his chest.

He wanted to save them. He truly, wanted to save everyone.

Nobody was in the wrong. Nobody would mutually hurt each other. He knew that. He could believe, without any wavering, that he could save, that he could love everything.

Even though he wanted to save his beloved everyone, he did not possess the power to save them.

Subaru: "Precisely now, is when you are needed, isn't it… and yet, why is it me. My weak, cowardly self, cannot save… and yet."

Even now, his legs could not move.

Due to that, he ended up making Beatrice, Echidna, Meili, those who had not been here, Emilia, Ram, Julius, Shaula, face their point of death.

Because Subaru had not been able to do anything, they, who had been destined to die, could not be saved.

Subaru: “…Cor Leonis.”

Whispering weakly, Subaru activated his own Authority, in order to be wounded.

The power of the Little King that dwelled within him immediately reported the positions of his comrades within the tower. On top of that, the reality of them heading to face their own end, of the tower heading to its demise.

Distant, having unrolled a violent battle, that light was Emilia. This time, Ram, who was supposed to stay by her side, her light was slightly distanced away— two separate lights, Patrasche and, Rem. She was accompanying them.

In the balcony, Shaula was struggling fiercely, and perhaps Meili had joined together there with her. Julius and Echidna seem to be moving together, and Beatrice, acting independently, was heading towards Emilia and the others is what he comprehended.

The flow was precisely as Beatrice’s instructions, and Subaru’s knowledge of the situation.

At the same pace, the current circumstance headed towards failure as well—.

Subaru: “—?”

With his mind directed by such negative thoughts, Subaru picked up a curious sense of discomfort.

As he turned his head towards his hind— Subaru took an extensive look of the enormous library, filled with countless Books of the

Dead, Taygeta.

"…"

It was an odd sensation.

Unmistakably, it was a sensation he was feeling for the first time. After all, ever since he grew conscious of his Authority of Cor Leonis, he had been activating it at this spot after Returning by Death.

Each time after that, Subaru headed for his comrades below, changing the cards he played repeatedly, running about for the sake of changing the situation, ultimately using and exhausting his own life.

That is why, activating the Authority in Taygeta was a matter of course for him.

However, after what Beatrice told him, stopping his feet here, a single step distant from the core and getting to overlook the situations within the tower, might have been the origin of this.

Thanks to that, what could this have been,

Subaru: "—This, response is."

Faintly, he could feel it, so dim that it felt as if it was about to disappear.

It was distant from his comrades within the tower, however, when compared to being felt with certainty, it was a fleeting, frail sensation— but a sensation that was certainly present there.

Pushing himself and having his trembling legs move, Subaru advanced tardily like a caterpillar. After that, he quickly had his body lean onto the bookshelf and elevated his upper body with all his might.

Somehow leaning his body weight on the bookshelf, he stood up. And he stretched his hand out to the frail light about to disappear, and grasped it.

That grasped light, a single Book of the Dead, drawing that out—

“…”

He gulped down a single inhale.

A single book, with just the title upon its black binding, a book terribly dull and stale.

However, it possessed profound meaning for Subaru.

Because—

Subaru: “—Natsuki Subaru.”

—There present was, the Book of the Dead not supposed to be there.

Chapter 73:
'Natsuki Subaru'

1

—With the Book of the Dead which had 'Natsuki Subaru' inscribed on it in his hands, he stood still.

Subaru: "…"

Widening his dark eyes in astonishment, Subaru felt his throat rapidly turning parched.

Modest expressions such as astonishing or stupefying would be far too lacking. What had struck Subaru at that moment was something much more serious, something as if numbing harm.

A lethal toxic which would wield affect only when used on Subaru, and nobody else—.

The Book of the Dead of 'Natsuki Subaru', was piercing through Subaru whilst commanding such powerful connotation.

Subaru: "Wh, y…"

So, the Book of the Dead not supposed to be here was present here.

What was supposed to be present in the third layer of Pleiades Watchtower, Taygeta were the Books of the Dead recording the lives of the departed. Having the book of a living being was contradictory.

Or perhaps, could this mean he simply, by chance, had found the book of a human with the same name and surname.

Subaru: "That would have actually been convincing, had this not been a different world…"

The possibility that rose to the surface in his mind, was instantly repudiated.

Though it was a matter of course, this place was a different world—in this place, where even the rules of naming would be vastly different from what Subaru was aware of, why would a name like 'Natsuki Subaru' take birth here.

Even before that, there lay a decisive issue.

The title of that book of 'Natsuki Subaru', had been written in Kanji.

Subaru: "…"

From what all Subaru had witnessed till now, even letters were disparate in this different world. That is why, even if someone else, aside from Subaru, who did not know of the world's letters were to see it, they would probably perceive this title as if being hieroglyphic characters or something of that sort.

If that were to be considered, the unbelievable chances of Subaru finding the Book of the Dead of 'Natsuki Subaru' here through sheer luck were—

Subaru: "—It's predetermined and established, whom this belongs to."

He could only think of that being true.

Subaru: "…"

Once again, with the Book of the Dead in his hands, Subaru silenced himself and pondered.

The reason why Subaru happened upon this Book of the Dead, was because he had depended upon the dim response he had spied out through Cor Leonis.

This had not been the first or second time he had searched for a book in the library, though Subaru was mindful of it, discovering the book being aimed for in this enormous archive was a deed next to impossible to achieve.

Perhaps, the kind unattainable unless god's invisible hand was being put to work.

Subaru: “Or perhaps, not god, but someone’s…”

Subaru convicted, as if having anticipated that.

The rest lay, in the authenticity of this Book of the Dead — whether what was depicted here, was truly the life of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ or not. If it was depicted indeed, then what sort of a trick was behind it.

As the solemn truth, Subaru was here, alive.

If the Book of the Dead of this Subaru was truly here then—

Subaru: “Am I being treated as deceased, ever since I lost my memories… the Books of the Dead of Taygeta, that Hall of Memories, is even observing the worlds I die in…?”

If that were the case, then in no way is it inconceivable that it was depicting Subaru’s Deaths in some type of form through the Book of the Dead. However, in that case, what did that make of Return by Death.

Subaru: “Whether it rewinds time, or does it rebuild the world itself, I had given a thought to both but…”

For the argument’s sake, in the case that the Books of the Dead assumed a method to generate the book of ‘Natsuki Subaru’, it could not be helped but to reach the conviction that the latter had much more likelihood. If that holds true, then the phenomenon which encased this Natsuki Subaru was not something as charming as Return by Death but—

Subaru: “Am I, an idiot. No, I am an idiot… Damn, coward.”

Sensing his contemplation disarray into a slant, Subaru abused himself.

Why his thoughts had gone astray, he understood the reason for that by immediately noticing his own cowardice. —He was merely, frightened of the Book of the Dead.

What would happen when he would read the book of ‘Natsuki

Subaru’.

He was frightened, of that happening whose course was completely unfathomable. That is why, pursuing the hypothesis lacking all foundation, he was trying to delay it and keep delaying it.

Of opening up the first page, of the book within his hands.

Subaru: “…”

Though it was not a hypothesis which came into being merely five minutes ago or anything, the fact that the Book of the Dead of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was present here was strange, but for Subaru, it was also salvation.

Subaru also considered the evidence that it had not popped up and appeared at just this instant.

However, along with that, it also held the meaning that a ‘Natsuki Subaru’ other than himself, had certainly existed and had walked his own path in this different world, and also that Subaru was trampling upon those footsteps from above, laying waste to them, and painting them out.

That is why, all that was left was to gain confirmation.

Subaru: “First of all, as the Book of the Dead of ‘Natsuki Subaru’… where does this thing start from, and where does it end at?”

At Meili’s instance, precisely from her infancy onwards— ever since she gained awareness of ■, ever since her memories had been established as memories, even her half death was able to be followed up to.

However, how would things unfold in Subaru’s case. —Having read the Book of the Dead, it originated with sprouting as self-consciousness identical to that of Meili, facing growth over time, and finally, where it all came to an end.

If ‘Natsuki Subaru’ is being counted as deceased instead of the present Natsuki Subaru who lost his memories, to follow up to Natsuki Subaru’s memories till the moment immediately preceding the loss of memories, would be natural, or perhaps not.

Instead, perhaps it would follow up to the memories of the present Subaru, who had lost his memories, and awakened inside the tower. In that scenario, which Death would it choose for the end.

Otherwise, as Reid's Book of the Dead, what would merely be present would be a wreckage of memories turned void.

Just as the memories of Reid, which had been recorded in the Book of the Dead, had disappeared from within the book in order to reconstruct him as the trial taker of this tower, the memories of 'Natsuki Subaru' had also possibly disappeared.

That is why, what would be visible after opening this book would not be the memories of 'Natsuki Subaru', but—

Subaru: "—In the end, what do you want to do, cowardly bastard."

Does he desire to see it, does he desire not to see it.

Disdaining his own self, who had been unable to easily respond to that, reprimanding the fearfully curled up ■, he exhaled.

After coming this far, it was inconceivable to opt for not seeing it. Even if it had risen to the surface as an option, he could not even envisage the lunacy of choosing it.

That is why, that is why, that is why, that is why, that is why—

And then, and then, and then, and then, and then—

Subaru: "—~hk."

Taking a powerful breath in, he opened up, the Book of the Dead.

And, the journey of 'Natsuki Subaru', of an unknown origin and an unknown termination—.

2

—This is seriously bad.

Tasting a solid sensation on his face, his brain was being scorched by the flaming heat in his abdomen.

Violent fever which restricted even his breathing, his head felt hot as if magma had been poured into his blood vessels. Yet his limbs turned colder and heavier, the inconsistent sensations jolting his existence down to the very soul itself.

His thoughts screamed about what had occurred. His thoughts screamed that he must do something.

With those flowing in and intertwining, he gave rise to a screech.

However, his consciousness, which was screaming he must do something, proved to be futile.

The moment he moved his hands in an attempt to break out of the deadlock, and touched his guts, which were the origin of the scorching heat, his palm was drenched wet with thick blood, and he understood that further blood also had the floor drenched.

—Ah, is all of this, my blood.

Though he was unaware of the amount of blood that had flowed on and inundated the floor, the bleeding had not been of the level of blood donation and so forth. The source of his life streaming out, did not put a halt to the fragile lamp of life.

In short, his flesh body had already commenced the countdown to death.

Even still, the reason why ■ had not died yet, was because for this life of his, which was heading towards its death, there yet remained a mission to fulfill.

—He had, to raise his voice.

He must raise his voice.

Watch out. It’s dangerous. Don’t come here. Run. Without turning back even once, run at full speed.

And, he must inform about the hazard.

He must convey it to her, inform her about danger, so that she does not enter this place.

And yet—

"…"

He was unable to raise his voice.

What spilled out instead, was the nauseating warm blood clot. With his throat clogged by that, he was rendered incapable of bringing out even a single uncouth word. Violently coughing, the scorching heat in his abdomen expanded.

Ache and agony, misery and disorder, and—

"—baru?"

The tone of the silver bell's voice, eventually took a step into the space it must not enter.

"…"

He had to stop that, no matter what.

And yet, he did not make it.

Though he had to do that even if it meant selling his life away for it, just because his guts had gotten lacerated.

"—~hk!"

A scream echoed, someone collapsed down onto the floor along with a violent report.

The hand of that fallen someone, overlapping with hand of his fallen self, was an offensive prank on part of the far too ironic fate. In all ways, the wickedness of the one known as fate was far too onerous to describe with words.

"…"

Those weakly trembling fingers, softly grasped that overlapping hand. Grasping back that sensation of fingers, as if they were clinging and relying upon, Subaru deeply, deeply, along with that clump of blood, inhaled.

"…ait."

The overflowing clot of blood, the seeping and streaming away life. He could not, stop that outward flow of blood.

No longer, could he do anything. This situation, had reached its absolute limits.

All due to a single powerless, incompetent man, everything was going to start afresh.

That is why, his vow dyed with this blood, wielded no significance.

Even though he knew nothing could be done, his idiocy yet commanded him to vow.

Even though he knew it was over.

Even though he knew it will be over.

As if those were not coming to an end, disgracefully, he vowed.

"I will, for sure—"

—Save, you.

At the next instant, he— Natsuki Subaru 'Natsuki Subaru' 'Natsuki Subaru' lost his life.

3

The moment the connection was severed, Subaru sensed firm pain at the back of his head.

Subaru: "Gah— ~hk."

The impact reverberating in his skull, he hallucinated as if he had been suddenly struck from behind, but he immediately understood that he was mistaken. Because, Subaru's body had collapsed right behind, and he could feel the entirety of his back make contact with the chilling floor.

Subaru: "This, place is…"

Icy and dim, not in the soiled building, but he was in the library of Taygeta.

Slowly pouring energy back into his body, turning about his dumbfounded head, Subaru turned his neck around— and then, touched his own guts with great perplexity.

There supposed to be present, was the wound which would diminish his life.

However—

Subaru: "Not, there… not there, not there, the wound is, not there. The slash, in the guts, is not there… ~hk."

Touching his guts countless times, he confirmed the disappearance of the origin of scorching heat. Within the spectacle he had witnessed immediately previously, that utmost vivid sensation was vanishing.

He had heard that the brain hallucinates ache far too scorchingly hot as a "fever". A phenomenon identical to what had occurred. In other words—

Subaru: "—A memory, of having the guts be slashed open, and dying."

The end of having the guts cut open by a sharp edged tool, drowning in the foam of blood and powerlessness, and dying.

Finally, if he himself had alone been the one to die by that, it was still excusable. However, that was not how it had been.

Subaru: "Satella…"

What he whispered, at the very end of the end, the girl he had been unable to save, her name— her alias.

Within that memory, the silver-haired young girl he recognized had fabricated her name and come in contact with Subaru. What had been the reason behind that. Though it was evident no evil intent was the reason for it.

Subaru: “…Still, dying such an uncouth way.”

Putting his hand on his forehead, Subaru ruminated about what had occurred to his own body.

Summoned to the different world, wandering aimlessly in the town with foolish positivity, picking up a quarrel with delinquents and almost dying, saved by Satella from that, and assisting her in her search for what she was looking for—

Subaru: “Completely useless…”

At the final moment, without even conveying the crisis he was supposed to convey, he ended up having her get involved as well.

Not just dying wastefully, the word vain in the expression dying in vain could not even make for an excuse.

The life of Natsuki Subaru— ‘Natsuki Subaru’ could never compensate for it.

Subaru: “But.”

It was not as if he had gained absolutely nothing from it.

Subaru: “—This was, the Book of the Dead of ‘Natsuki Subaru’.”

That alone was the certain, absolute, unquestionable truth.

Subaru: “…”

Hopeless, foolish, weak, irredeemable ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

He continued to enlarge his absurd self-consciousness, overlapping with that, averted his eyes away from his lack of filial piety. And finally, using being summoned into the different world as a convenient means of escaping, and by exhibiting pessimistic positivity, he became a swindler trying deceive himself, those around him, anything and everything.

The result of that idiocy, had tied together with the tragedy in that loot storehouse.

What a pretentious, naive, and foolish failure had it been.

How come, could he stay defenseless at that hazardous place. What gave your idiotic self such baseless confidence. Like that, it would not be odd to get killed overseas, let alone in a different world. That lack of vigilance was to blame. The result of it all, must be that.

It had been so unsightly, such that he would have wanted to kill himself had he survived.

Subaru: “That hopeless, idiotic bastard… but.”

Evidently, it had been fatal foolishness, but it was fortuitous to have it affirmed.

Putting a check on his rage, enduring it, he scrutinized that truth closely.

The Book of the Dead was certainly functioning. That book had recorded the death of ‘Natsuki Subaru’. And, it thrust a great number of truths, which were a matter of course for ‘Natsuki Subaru’, at Natsuki Subaru, for whom there was no way to know them.

—To name it specifically, it was the sequence of events of obtaining Return by Death.

As per convention, an existence who was god, or wielded similar strength, normally in a transcendental state of being, summoned Subaru to the different world.

However, for that ‘Natsuki Subaru’, if he were to not have the memories of being summoned by such a transcendental being, there would be no occasion where he would get to know whom he got the power granted to him from and how he grew conscious of that power.

That was something Subaru could affirm, who had seen the end of that ‘Natsuki Subaru’ for himself.

At the very end of the end, though he had been blabbering things without knowing when to give up, at that moment, ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was supposed to not have any confirmation that he would overcome death, and rewind time.

At the very least, he himself had been like that. —Thinking that far, he abruptly noticed.

That he, and ‘Natsuki Subaru’, had not been objected well visually.

The reason for that, evident.

Subaru: “It’s diving more deeply in, than on, Meili’s instance…”

When he had read Meili’s Book of the Dead, and personally experienced her life, he had tasted the sensation of having his mind undergo influence quite severely as well. Halfway melting together with her personality, Meili appeared within his mind as a symptom of hallucination, such that she said all what she wanted to say, and was toying around with Subaru.

Above all, that had ultimately been a Meili fabricated by Subaru’s consciousness, utterly unrelated to the real Meili, an illusion brought forth by chaos, he was aware of that.

Subaru: “…”

However, this instance’s Book of the Dead demarcated a line between itself and Meili’s experience.

All things said and done, in the chaos immediately after reading Meili’s book, still present were clues to differentiate between himself and her. The difference in gender, the difference in age, the difference in values, there were plenty.

Detaching himself from her through those clues, even if slightly, it was a possibility to withdraw the comprehension that she was an entirely different existence.

However, that was not how it was this time.

None other than he himself was the party concerned. His self who was not himself, a situation which normally would not manifest, it layed expectation upon Natsuki Subaru, and pushed him into his fight with himself.

His fight with himself. —Judging by mere words, those were not words too cliché, but they were words which evidently and straightforwardly denoted the situation which Subaru had currently been placed in.

The truth is, he possessed a negative outlook.

Overlapping with his self, rather meant an act of painting his self out. The water washed by the dark paint called ‘Natsuki Subaru’, dyed him as if with a paintbrush that had been dipped in that.

Subaru: “—Emilia. Emilia, Emilia, Emilia, Emilia, Emilia.”

At the sensation of feeling himself be painted out, Subaru called Emilia’s name, as if it were some magic.

The reason why he chanted Emilia, that reason was evident. The ‘Natsuki Subaru’ inside the Book of the Dead, did not recognize her as Emilia.

Trusting the alias he had been told, he saw through his duties as a buffoon till the very end of the end.

That is why, that was the difference between the present Subaru, and ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

Subaru: “…”

With the roots of his teeth quivering, fearing the sensation of his self being whittled, Subaru looked at his feet. The single book he had dropped thoughtlessly, that had fallen there.

Subaru: "…"

He continued to observe, such that 'Natsuki Subaru' would have died.

If considered now, mysteriously enough, the Book of the Dead commenced from the moment he arrived into the different world, from when he had shouted out the change of worlds with a foolishly bare expression. Even though for Meili's instance, it had properly commenced since she gained the awareness of ■— no, for now, all that was of no significance.

The problem was, the continuation to that Book of the Dead.

Subaru: "You must be thinking, the same, "Natsuki Subaru"…"

Thanks to the Book of the Dead, he was able to witness what was perhaps the Death of 'Natsuki Subaru' when he was first summoned into the different world for himself.

However, that was merely the beginning.

That 'Natsuki Subaru', must have also utilized the power of Return by Death.

Otherwise, that may have been a power which had manifested not in the form of Return by Death but something further different. — No, that was the natural state of affairs.

Rewinding time at will, that was much more convincing.

For 'Natsuki Subaru', who was met by Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Echidna, Julius, Meili, Shaula, Patrasche, Gyan, and was expected to play an active role, something like that was much more suitable.

In that case—

Subaru: "That must be there, ahead of this…"

'Natsuki Subaru', who seemed to be no different from Natsuki Subaru.

However, there present was something decisive which caused that 'Natsuki Subaru' to be 'Natsuki Subaru'. Seeking that, Subaru, at once, held the book in his hands.

And, closing his eyes, took deep breaths.

Subaru: "…"

With the book in his hands, Subaru counted the beating of his chest. And while calming his ■ down, he slowly commenced walking.

A slow gait, however, straightforward, lacking all faltering.

Before long, where Subaru had reached was in front of the bookshelf, and as he stretched his hand out—

Subaru: "—Second book."

The single book following 'Natsuki Subaru', made a weak assertion of itself through Cor Leonis.

4

—The progress 'Natsuki Subaru' made, was unsightly, haphazard, irredeemable.

"Completely useless. A novice as per appearance, with crude movements. Neither with any Divine Protections nor with any skills, imagined that there would at least be some instinct or intelligence, but not even that. Just, why must you challenge."

Tormented by the self-indulging mighty enemy, he was minced without being able to even launch a proper counterattack.

And in the environs of his wounded self, was a bloodstained old man and a golden-haired girl, collapsed. Neither of them could be saved. He could not even move.

"Slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, agonize."

Before long, with his guts sliced, with his eyes sliced, within the world where he lost his eyesight, with a time limit running against his life, he lived the time until his death nestling close with dismay.

Until the very end of the end, all whilst fearing, shivering, dreading, disgracefully—

5

“Hey, did you get stabbed.”

“It can’t be helped, you know. Try running outside. It’s more than just difficult.”

“A~h, this won’t do. If the insides of the guts get wounded then it’s death for sure… The clothes are all a mess too.”

Fallen with the opponent overhead of him, did he truly intend to make such heedless dialogue.

He must use his brain for such worthless thoughts, otherwise he would be rendered unable to comprehend the shocking pain piercing through his back.

A technique to escape pain, or a method to protect himself, to have possession of them would have astonished him to the bottom of his ■.

He was unable to save himself, from the truly futile, vain death.

Calling the girl Satella while she was not Satella, having to hear harsh words from her due to that, unable to sense the strikingly obvious situation, killed by the opponent whom he already had tasted before abandoning thought.

A suitable end. Why, from the beginning to the end, could he not live without regretting even for a second, even for a minute.

Enough. This world was going to end. He knew it.

Because from the very beginning, he knew and could see Death, and henceforth came here. That is why, if there was not something decisive present, it was the end of this world. As it is the end, as it is the end, go to the next one. Go to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next. Otherwise, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts and it hurts and it's painful and it's unbearably hurtful but something must be carried on to the next—.

6

The demise that was brought to him whilst he was asleep, contrary to a swift and easy end, was accompanied with mercilessness as if chilling venom was poured into his blood vessels.

The arrival of the Death whereby he couldn't even comprehend he had died, compared to the Deaths till now in which he was unable to detach pain and suffering from himself, was perhaps the easiest one is what he believed.

However, in no way was that true.

Why, did he die. First of all, did he really die.

Within humans fearful of Death, the wish to die as if sleeping is substantially present, but if Subaru, who had experienced that, were to be asked, then he would respond that it was not worth wishing for.

In Death, there lies the meaning of Death.

In the demise, denouement of life, something which is learnt from it must be attached to the end.

Within chaos and despair, fright and yearning, Subaru sought the subsequent Book of the Dead. He must unravel what had occurred. He must unravel, what had killed his self—.

7

—Mysteries invited further mysteries, as incomprehensible and irrational Deaths followed him.

Overlapping ends, continual tragedies.

Though he had refused dying as if sleeping, dying as if being shattered, as if being gouged out, were indeed not pleasant either.

From next to next, his life was aimed for, robbed, shattered, and finally, betrayed.

Why, was no longer the question for that.

Why, must he have to save the blue-haired girl, who had killed his self.

Why, did his self become so frantic in order to save her, why, did she give such a powerful push to Subaru's back, who was crushed and knelt down.

Why, did he gain strength by her words, and resolve to move forward.

Ahead of betrayal, he earnestly yearned.

For the desire which had actually not been betrayed, for the world which affirmed that it was correct.

'Natsuki Subaru', offered his life as indemnification for the sake of the fruitless, sorrowful misunderstanding of saving someone, and prized it open through sheer strength.

Meeting Emilia, meeting Puck, meeting Felt, meeting Grandpa Rom, meeting Reinhardt, meeting Elsa, meeting Beatrice, meeting Ram, meeting Rem, meeting Roswaal, meeting Petra, meeting the residents of Earlham Village—

—No matter what, he will thrust refusal at any muddy stream that may advance upon them, is what he believed.

8

Subaru: "Ugh, bhu… ~hk."

Putting a check on his lips, facing assailing death once again, Subaru knelt down in the library of Taygeta. Without supporting his body, he collapsed onto the bare ground as if falling.

Subaru: “Hah, hah…”

His breath was rough, what drenched the entirety of his body was abundant cold sweat.

Whether it was hot, whether it was cold, whether it was bitter, whether it was sweet, whether it was agonizing, whether it was pleasant, his feelings were blended into a heterogeneous mixture of likes and dislikes, black and white, and he was unable to comprehend the correct answer.

It felt as if he was being struck from all angles and directions ceaselessly, from next to next.

Subaru: “…With this, eight books.”

Discovering the Books of the Dead of ‘Natsuki Subaru’, and ever since he commenced reading them, he was merely piling up the number of books.

To say the number of books, was something odd in itself as well. Not that the numbering kept on ascending, originally, to have the “next book of the same series” for a book present in this library was not how it was supposed to be.

Yet, the books of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ kept on piling up the number of books readily, and continued.

Adding to the mystery, the structure of not being able to find the next book of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ unless the first book of ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was read— it all commenced orderly.

Without skipping a single Death for the purpose of an interval, he followed the footsteps of ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

And, whilst following the footsteps, he thought.

About how tactlessly frank, incorrigible, immature ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was.

Particularly the last book, observing the fate of the eighth Book of the Dead, it was impossible to not feel that way.

Immediately after the announcement of the royal election, fracturing his relationship with Emilia, ultimately, merely hurting her ■ simply because he could, without any apology or retrospection, dying within the chaos was ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

His self who was reading the books, sunk with his consciousness equivalent with the subjectivity of the Book of the Dead.

Merely the people concerned were supposed to particularly experience that effect, but it was still difficult to tolerate.

His self, who thought why did he not understand, was present.

On the other hand was his self, who thought why did he lament by not understanding through that, as well.

Subaru: “Don’t be trapped, in the past…”

It was a tragedy he had witnessed with these eyes an instant ago, that is why, his body ached as if being torn off.

However, that was the past. At maximum, a happening that had occurred in the past.

Even if it was a happening right in front of the eyes for ‘Natsuki Subaru’, who faced Death at that instant.

Even if it was a happening right in front of the eyes for Subaru, who was in agreement with ‘Natsuki Subaru’, who faced that instant.

That was the past.

Persisting by turning into a wound difficult to forget, it was the past.

That is why, at the present instant, take a breather and escape the impact. Forget it. That someone, killed Emilia. That someone, committed that terrible spectacle in the village.

If not, then ■ would get shattered.

What would he do, should Subaru’s ■ shatter here, rendered unable to stand up.

How would someone, do something. ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was not present here. That is why, there was no other choice but for Subaru to somehow manage through.

Subaru: “Not, yet…”

—Has it been found.

Subaru: “…”

There was supposed to be something decisive existing, bestowed only upon ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

It would be the key to precisely distinguish between Natsuki Subaru, and ‘Natsuki Subaru’. At the very least, until that key was procured, this voyage of going through Books of the Dead shall not terminate.

The decisive key, which made Natsuki Subaru grow wings and attain flight, as ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

The key which changed him into the savior who could catch Emilia, Beatrice, Rem, Ram, Echidna, Julius, Meili, Shaula, Patrasche, Gyan, from falling.

At the current instant, there were no signs of it.

‘Natsuki Subaru’ could not possibly possess the mettle, the magnanimity, to be a savior or a hero, to be able to fulfill the immense duty of saving someone.

What he possessed was merely standing out stubbornness, and the good fortune of being blessed by the people around him.

However, that was not all.

It was not that formless “something”.

He possessed the omnipotent key, something which was further apparent, evident, which could be recognized at a single glance, which convinced everyone that he had the ability because he possessed that.

He possessed it. That is why, seeking that—

Subaru: “—Number, nine.”

Once again he tackled, the samsara of Death, whirling with mayhem and chaos, betrayal and despair.

His wish, ‘Natsuki Subaru’. To turn into you, as fast as possible.

—Before I, am no longer able to bear with your footsteps, your wounds, Death, in my ■.

9

—Deaths, were accumulated relentlessly.

—Ends, were relentlessly accumulated.

Each time he felt ache, each time he was in agony, each time he lost something, each time he was robbed of something, he heard the sound of ■ cracking.

Crying and screaming why and how, gritting his molars thinking it ends here, standing up whilst vomiting blood, sheathed in wounds, he advanced.

The struggle of an uncouth man risking his life, was present there.

Not once but twice, not twice but thrice, not thrice but four times and so forth, getting cornered by situations and expiring, yet, he held his ground in order to smash through the lock of turmoil.

That was amazing. Plenty amazing. Truly worthy of respect.

To not give up, that was something quite amazing. Even after experiencing so much, gritting teeth so much, to fight to the bitter end was amazing. Truly admirable. Improved opinions. —But, that was not it.

But, that was not it. That was not it. That was not it. That was not it indeed.

Subaru: “Something was… ~hk.”

—”Something” was, supposed to have happened, isn’t it.

“Something” must have happened. Otherwise, it would not make sense. Otherwise, things would not hold true.

“Something” happened, which made the impotent, irremediable Natsuki Subaru develop wings, attain flight and turn into ‘Natsuki Subaru’, who could save everyone, someone, Emilia and the others, that was how it was supposed to be.

That was why, he was searching for it, dying, losing sanity, with bloodshot eyes.

Upon each instance of reading the Books of the Dead, personally experiencing the impact, terror, and the agony of Death which ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had to taste by trifling with the altering situations, he grew further desperate and pursued his search.

Yet, he was unable to find a single clue—

Subaru: “Ugh, a~a~a~a~a~— ~hk ~hk!!”

He struck his head onto the floor.

It was alright when he was in the midst of witnessing it. However, the instant he returned, his ■ was fomented with disgrace.

Subaru: “Dad… mom… ~hk.”

There had been ‘Natsuki Subaru’, who exchanged words with his father and mother, and apologized to the two of them.

There had been ‘Natsuki Subaru’, who was thrown into the different world, and for the sake of residing in this place, bid farewell to those two.

Even after carelessly forgetting what all his self had committed, knowingly of the fact that his parents would be saddened, conveying words of love for self-satisfaction—.

Subaru: “Ugh, bhu, e~e~e~gh.”

He vomited. His tears, overflowing.

What was hurtful, what was excruciating, was that he was painfully aware of the feelings of ‘Natsuki Subaru’, and the fact that Subaru also got to know, that his parents forgave it.

Please don’t forgive. Please curse. He wished his parents would speak ill of him, call him out for lacking filial piety.

However, they did not act that way.

Neither his father nor his mother, be as per Subaru’s wishes. In order to console himself, he wished his parents to call him a petty human or things similar. He was unable to achieve that.

Subaru’s father, Kenichi. Subaru’s mother, Naoko. —They were the greatest couple of parents.

There had been his self, who was happy for that, there had been his self, who approved of the judgement ‘Natsuki Subaru’ took, despite lacking all rights to be saved, there had been his self, who was going to be saved, making his ■ unsightly.

—This. Was this the source for it? With this being the reason, did he turn into ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

Subaru: “No… no, no, no! That’s not it! Not something like, this!”

Scratching his head violently, striking his aching eyebrows with his fist, Subaru disparaged his own self.

What Subaru sought, was not spiritual salvation. What he sought was a key, —a power further evident, which was established in terms of proper efficacy.

The power which Subaru was ignorant of, which only ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was cognizant of.

Just as Subaru had succeeded in the manifestation of Cor Leonis, the special “something” which only ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had awakened, that, that was.

Subaru: “The key to change this situation, I have to believe it is, or…”

The laceration of his guts, which had been the very last cause of his death from the present moment, touching the wound he was supposed to have from that, Subaru whispered.

His memories, started to overlap with what he had witnessed in Meili’s Book of the Dead. The assault on the mansion, Meili’s both beloved and troublesome elder sister, Elsa’s attack. A natural enemy for ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

However, that was all about a world where everything came to an end.

That was all about a world which ‘Natsuki Subaru’ already surmounted.

What was crucial, was not sympathizing with ‘Natsuki Subaru’. But unveiling, and obtaining, the deception only he was supposed to possess, which only he was using.

For that, only for that, read the Books of the Dead.

—Because only for that, Natsuki Subaru had been dying and redoing his actions.

Subaru: “Please tell me, ‘Natsuki Subaru’! —How are you special! How can only you, stay being special! There must be “something”, right?!”

Subaru: “Something”, must have changed you! “Something”, must have rid you of your uselessness, and turned you into someone else!”

Subaru: “Please change my weak, pathetic, petty self who can’t be useful for shit! I’m fed up now! I can’t see everyone suffering, not anymore!”

Subaru: ““Something”… “something”! Is there, right?! If “something” isn’t there then, it doesn’t make sense… “something”, happened… that’s why, you are… different from, me… it has to be that way…”

—It has to be that way, or he will be rendered incapable of doing anything, but to simply watch.

Subaru: “You were, the same as me, weak, petty, completely powerless…”

—Kneeling down time and time again, and on each instance having someone give a push to his back, as he wanted to recompense everyone who acted courteously towards him, as they had acted kindly towards him, he wanted to pay them back.

Subaru: “Please, ‘Natsuki Subaru’. I request you. Please, just stop…”

—It would have had been much, much better, had he been a superhuman.

—He wished for him to be an existence completely dissimilar to his self, one who had transcended above weakness with both his ■ and body.

—That is why, he wished to be convinced by him that he had done, what his self could never achieve.

And yet—.

Drawing books out as if plucking berries, having his head struck by continually stockpiling Death, all whilst having ■ shatter upon each instance of that, eagerly, earnestly, as if sipping mud, he ate into his life.

But still, until the very end of the end, he did not cast aside the possibility he clung onto—.

Subaru: "…"

He opened up, the book he had in his grasp.

With the preparedness of his brain tissues being churned, his ■ being violated, his soul being humiliated, he opened it up.

After all, it was far more painful to have the very last hope severed rather than feeling ache or anguish.

Subaru: "You get it, right, 'Natsuki Subaru'…"

As if, seemingly seeking consent, he called out to the person concerned who was not in presence here.

The tone of that voice, felt as if it had sustained a terrible loss of ambition, it could not be helped.

After all, the person concerned was not someone to be enthusiastic about.

He was not, that great of a man. —Whilst wishing for that to not happen, his fingers as if pulling a rope, he started to draw the Book of the Dead out.

And, what will follow will certainly be the finishing blow, harboring such feelings—

???: "—Yeah, I get it."

Subaru: "…"

A white, white world.

Upon noticing, Subaru was not in the library, nor a shapeless existence overlapping with memories, but had been sent a place which he recognized, which was not here.

There—

???: "I get it, Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru: "…"

???: “After all, because you are me, you know.”

Standing still within the white world, sanpaku eyes he was well acquainted with, had been awaiting Subaru.

SETOWI

Chapter 74:
Natsuki Subaru

1

Short, black hair, legs with the same length as his upper body, sanpaku eyes enough to kill someone.

Those almost unpleasantly familiar features no matter which one was to be chosen, were overlooking Natsuki Subaru whilst sitting on the white, bare ground.

Subaru: "…"

Astounded, fixedly, he gazed a deep stare into the opposing person's face.

No matter which angle he looked at it from, it was a face he was acquainted with— no, it looked slightly different. That was perhaps because it was, in a true sense, not the form he was accustomed to seeing.

That which he had grown accustomed to looking at ordinarily, on overwhelmingly multiple occasions, was something reflected upon mirrors or the surface of water. Strictly speaking, the human face was not perfectly symmetrical on both halves, that alone shaped a sensitive disparity.

That is why—

???: "Ah, is that so. It's not a mirror's reflection so it feels a bit awkward, huh. In that sense, this is probably closer to imaging it as facing a photograph or a video recording, isn't it."

Subaru: "—~hk."

???: "—? Ah, could it be, you thought of the same thing?"

When he slightly tightened his cheeks upon the single voice seemingly having read his mind, the opposing person precisely guessed those feelings as well.

Though ■ was flustered by even that, any response he could possibly give could neither serve as poison nor medicine. In the first place, what was essential for Subaru was not something on the likes of quick exchange of remarks.

Far greater, precisely that, the problem which seemingly jolted away everything was—

???: “Once again then… hey, sibling.”

Subaru: “…”

???: “No, sibling feels slightly faulty for an expression, huh. More accurately this’d be… hey, another me.”

Raising a single hand, the personage greeted with a relaxed tone—no, he was not a person so unduly distant. He was an existence such that even calling him someone close would be a half-hearted expression.

After all, because the one present there was unmistakably was, with the same face as Natsuki Subaru, none other than ‘Natsuki Subaru’ .

Subaru: “— ‘Natsuki Subaru’ .”

‘Subaru’: “…You know, doesn’t that have a strange ring to it? On top of that, calling yourself using the full name… though, I don’t know using what else would be correct. Though it’s a situation often there in manga and stuff, it’s pretty troublesome in reality.”

Subaru: “‘Natsuki Subaru’…!”

Discerning rage for Subaru, who piled up remarks as if talking about good weather, Subaru stood right up at that spot. And as he tried to grasp the opponent’s collars, his legs tangled instantly.

With no strength driven into his knees, his stance crumbled—

‘Subaru’: “Woops, watch out.”

Subaru: "——~hk, don't touch me!"

Subaru, who was in front, caught his body which was pitching forward and falling. The moment he came in contact with those arms, Subaru experienced unbearable repugnance and shook off the opponent's arms.

At the same pace, taking steps and distancing himself away from Subaru, he continued glaring at the opponent.

Subaru: "Why are, you here… first of all, where is this place?!"

With Subaru within his field of vision, Subaru signaled the surrounding white world with his hands.

White space, a place with nothing, that was just as the cradle of Od Lagna where he had confronted that Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb.

Subaru: "Shit…!"

It was a total mess inside of his mind.

In accordance with the real time that flowed within the tower, his meeting with Louis was not something which happened even a few hours ago.

However, for Subaru who had stockpiled multiple attempts pertaining to the five obstacles, it felt like an incident in the faraway, distant past.

Furthermore, Subaru had personally experienced the life and death of 'Natsuki Subaru' more than twenty times through the Books of the Dead. Even if the contents of the Books of the Dead were something which felt short, running through life and death in less than five minutes, there had also been more than a year's time where nothing had occurred.

He had tasted those successively, indulgently. Neither were there any guarantees regarding his recognition not getting disordered.

The passage of time was vague, on top of that, he had much awaited this meeting with the unanticipated opponent.

Subaru widened his eyes and waved his arms about violently,

Subaru: “Why, are you in this place!!”

‘Subaru’: “—It is, the proof of you having caught up to me.”

Subaru: “…”

‘Subaru’: “You read the Book of the Dead, and caught up to me. Everything you were not aware of, you must have seen it in the form of personally experiencing it. My, life in a different world, alright.”

Subaru: “Huh.”

With an indifferent tone, Subaru responded to Subaru, who had depleted his breath and clamored. Viewing that composed attitude, Subaru gritted his molars.

He was unable to stomach that conclusive expression, that attitude of seemingly knowing all, anything and everything.

—First of all, what did this man, making that odious face, say just now?

Subaru: “I, caught up to you?”

‘Subaru’: “That’s right. There’s not a single thing anymore, which you don’t know about me. That’s why…”

Subaru: “—Don’t, joke around ~hk!!”

‘Subaru’: “…”

Subaru: “I, caught up to you, you say? Stop kidding! Don’t lie! Not yet! I don’t know about that which is the most important, which is much more essential, yet!”

Roaring with his eyes open wide, Subaru seized hold of Subaru’s collars this time.

Upon that usage of brute strength, Subaru made no attempt to parry it. Pulling the opponent's collars towards himself at the same pace, from a distance where both of their breaths entwined, he glared into those black eyes.

"…"

Within the dark eyes of the face which was the same as his, the instant he perceived the same face reflected within, nauseating self-hatred surged within his own self.

Whether he harbored that self-hatred for himself or for the Himself present before his eyes, was neither known to him nor did he even contemplate considering it.

Merely remaining at that extremely close distance, he glared at the opponent and unraveled his fangs.

Subaru: "Tell me! It's pretty convenient you're here! Tell me now! The reason you became yourself must be somewhere! I haven't seen that. I haven't found it. That is…"

'Subaru': "The reason I, became myself?"

Subaru: "That's right! There must have been a cue for you, to turn into yourself! You are, you are…"

'Subaru': "—That, must have been seen by you, no?"

With his collars seized, Subaru was gazing at Subaru, nonresistant.

He did not even try to repel away the arms waving him about. Subaru received that as a hallucination as if he wasn't even doing anything.

He perceived exactly that, as being looked down onto from a higher level—

Subaru: "Stop looking at me like that!"

'Subaru': "—Gah ~hk."

Aiming at that conclusive side profile, Subaru launched his fist.

The fist wielded firm impact, blowing Subaru off as if he had been strummed. There was no recoil, no similar pain striking back at Subaru.

The pain Subaru sustained, injured, was only the pain Subaru had sustained.

That was, not identical to what Natsuki Subaru had sustained.

Subaru: “Lining up words, as if knowing that… is that so, I get it.”

Smacked by Subaru, Subaru had knelt down on his right leg. Observing him rubbing his struck cheek with the back of his hand, Subaru consented.

That opponent ahead of his eyes, who spoke with a mouth as if knowing everything, was not mistaken.

First of all, if this was the cradle of Od Lagna— the Hall of Memories, would that not make him the opponent he should be utmost vigilant of above all other matters

Subaru: “Are you, Louis? The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony ! It’s you again, right?!”

‘Subaru’: “…Me?”

Subaru: “Don’t play dumb!”

Last time, Louis, whom he had encountered in the Hall of Memories, attempted to prompt segregation between Subaru and ‘Natsuki Subaru’ , and eat that existence away from his head through one way or another.

Back then, he had managed to escape those fangs from a hair strand’s breadth worth of distance but had their nature been such that they would be willing to give up through simply that alone, they would not be called Sin Archbishops.

Just how ugly, how irredeemable the existences known as the Sin

Archbishops were, he had witnessed that in its entirety.

Petelgeuse, Regulus, Sirius, Capella, all of them were the absolute lowest and worst of failures as personalities. Lye, Roy, and Louis were no exceptions to that either, he could especially affirm that.

What if Louis, who had been lying in wait inside of Reid's Book of the Dead, was utilizing some form of method and hiding in ambush within the Book of the Dead of 'Natsuki Subaru' .

Thus, it was plausible that she had been boldly lingering and awaiting Subaru.

Subaru: "Isn't that true, Gluttony ! Louis Arneb! There's no way I can be confused by you, who can change shapes and forms, like this!"

Relying upon the Memories and Names stolen from others, rather than just the opponents' abilities but extorting even their form, and chewing and digesting them as if they were her belongings was the Authority of Louis Arneb, as well as that of her elder brothers, Lye Batenkaitos and Roy Alphard.

She had demonstrated that artifice even within the tower, lacking any regret. Nothing felt out of place should her place of demonstrating that merely have gotten changed to the Hall of Memories.

Subaru: "This time for sure, devouring me and hijacking me, is that what your plan is? Even after being rejected once, persistent little… do you really want to Return by Death so much?!"

Without any vacillation, he voiced the words Return by Death.

He had personally experienced the memory of having to taste hellish anguish by voicing that on several instances. The penalty of having his heart be crushingly gripped accompanied with immense pain. However, it was still alright if only his self was to be the one to experience that agony. —Compared to the cases where it befell over Emilia, or the surroundings.

However, the penalty was not invoked for Subaru, who had shouted whilst crushing faint horror.

Subaru before his eyes, did not seem to have had his heart crushingly gripped at all either. In bug a single instant he understood that Subaru had also been relieved at the lack of the evil influence's ingress, seemingly having been on lookout for the same. That was, infuriating.

With the same face as his, he also bore the same thoughts as him. —He thought of it as an assertion that, at maximum, he and his opponent were the same.

Subaru: "—~hk! Just, get it already! Is this really that amazing of a power? Is this an admirable power?! It's just dying, and redoing. Dying and redoing… nothing more than that. If I, who uses it, am shit then the results it brings are also shit! That's why…"

'Subaru': "…"

Subaru: "That's why, I couldn't save anyone… I let everyone die. Because I am weak, I make everyone, miserable. Just like how, even now, nobody will get saved…!"

— Return by Death, was nothing so adequate.

It was always far better, to not have something like this be of need. Though there had been a Witch who claimed this power to be something splendid, the utmost prime and nonpareil thing in this world, he could never hold the same opinion.

Even if an ant is made to wield artillery, it can never utilize it. Ultimately, it was unsuited to it.

He was a weak, petty, lonely child who kept crying and throwing tantrums.

What the Witches in that dream tea party had stated, was correct. He was hopeless. He was weak. He could never find it. He could never use it. Both Gluttony and the Witch of Greed, who failed to comprehend that, were damned.

Just, how many times would he have to get deceived, how many times would he have to get his hope trampled underfoot, how many times would he have to get his ■ vanquished, until he learnt.

Why, after countlessly getting deceived, countlessly having his hope trampled underfoot, countlessly having his ■ vanquished, does he still think of doing it.

Return by Death, displayed all of the unpleasant fragments of the world.

It displayed the absurdities, the irrationalities, the destiny enough to make one avert one's eyes.

Yet, how come—

Subaru: "—I love, everyone."

Without noticing, with his head hanging down, kneeling down at that very spot, Subaru shouted as if casting a curse.

And upon the disgraceful grievance similar to weeping, Subaru horizontally shook his head. Whilst shaking his head horizontally, for once, at this instant, he said, converging with his words.

'Subaru': "—I love everyone. That's why, I can't stop."

Subaru: "…"

Erasing the tinge of red on his struck cheek with his fingers, Subaru stood up in Subaru's stead.

The same attire, the same expression, possessing the same face and name, 'Natsuki Subaru' , who seemed to be decisively different from his self— whilst that looked at Natsuki Subaru,

'Subaru': "The position you were put in, to be honest, even imagining its difficulty is rough. Everything completely new, starting from level 6 having the status of initial stage without the option of going back. The complaints you voice out too, I understand all of them. Because those, are wounds I have gotten to taste time and time again."

With immense powerlessness, with immense ignorance, it was a countenance that had gotten to taste that countless times. —No, he had gotten to taste that countless times.

The defeat, the agony, the grief of Death which Subaru had to taste, Subaru was aware of it all. He had witnessed it all with these eyes. He had tasted it all, with this body and ■.

Precisely because he had tasted those, precisely because he knew that was not a lie, he could not accept Subaru's words. He did not want, to accept them.

'Subaru': "Had I been strong, had I been smart, had I been more, more… it must be frustrating."

Subaru: "Speaking as if, you understand it…! About me, what the hell do you"

'Subaru': "I do know. You must also be aware of what I know. It's a pointless quarrel, actually. For both me and you."

Subaru: "—~hk."

There was no strength in his words of objection. It had been a matter of course.

An objection repels away the opponent's words, brushes them away suggesting lack of agreement, crushingly defeating them, making the statement that you are wrong. Such an intention was essential.

Subaru of now, did not have the ability to face Subaru with that.

After all, he was aware of it.

He was aware that that was no lie or deceit, but the entirety of 'Natsuki Subaru' .

Subaru: "I didn't look, at your memories or anything…"

'Subaru': "Hey you can't be doing this, after looking through one's diary as per your own convenience."

Subaru: “I didn’t look, at your memories or anything!”

Upon hearing Subaru’s seemingly sullen voice, Subaru powerfully clenched his fists.

Slapped, poured with jeers, yet not bending his approach of dialogue Subaru gave the impression of being far more mature than Subaru. Perhaps even that, was a matter of course.

After all, the truth is Subaru was supposed to be an year older than Subaru.

That too, having observed rich experiences in the different world and having personally experienced Death on multiple occasions, on top of that, having woven many bonds and acquiring the position of his current self.

But still—

Subaru: “I didn’t look, at your memories or anything… ~hk.”

Once again, once again Subaru utilized those words.

For once, right now Subaru said nothing to Subaru, who stockpiled the very same repentances. Subaru, without even seeking any response, resumed as if incoherently muttering.

Subaru: “I, wanted to have hopes for you. That you were an amazing guy, and that if I got to know the “something” which was supporting your amazing nature, I would be able to do the same thing too. But still…”

But still, he ended up knowing it.

He ended up witnessing, everything.

‘Natsuki Subaru’ had absolutely no difference from the Natsuki Subaru present here, that he was a weak and petty man, he ended up knowing that.

In the time unknown to Subaru meeting people unknown to Subaru, running past a chronicle unknown to Subaru, having witnessed a scenery unknown to Subaru, he was merely an ordinary human who had done all that.

Subaru: "—By denying you, I wanted to proclaim something plausible and fulfill it."

However, he could not do that.

Subaru: "After all, I understand your feelings. —Because you, are me."

The world 'Natsuki Subaru' had witnessed, had tasted, he had viewed it.

'Natsuki Subaru' had fallen in love with this world, with the people of this world, with Emilia and everyone else and the wounds he had accepted for them to survive, he had viewed all of that.

He had been misunderstanding. He had been misapprehending.

Since it was regarding himself, it may be appropriate to say he had conceited.

The illusion of 'Natsuki Subaru' being a superhuman, had been shattered and cast aside.

Subaru: "Yeah, I get it! I got it! Why you… why you kept standing up again and again, why you never gave up after dying again and again, is because that's all you can do!!"

Just like Subaru, Subaru had also gotten slammed into walls he could do nothing about on innumerable instances.

Upon each occasion of that, he died recurrently, repeatedly, stockpiling Deaths, amending the way he met, amending the way he connected, Subaru overcame hindrances.

That was all.

Subaru: "Can there be someone who won't stand up despite Rem telling him so much to do so?! Acting conceitedly after getting knocked by Otto, I noticed that! I always knew that dad and mom, were considerate like that! I mean, they are my dad and mom, after all!”

The scenery ‘Natsuki Subaru’ passed through, the cue essential for surmounting, not the “something” which Subaru sought but merely accumulated wishes were certainly there.

Subaru: “I love Emilia. I want her to rely on me to protect her. I want to be with her. The reason I wanted to be a knight, was so that she thought of me that way. I was happy. I want to walk outside with her without any failures, she, who is afraid of getting hated, and I want to boast around that she is someone capable of being loved by everyone! I finally had Beatrice accompany me. I want to make her happy as much as the time she had been in pain. She, has the right to be happy!”

That is why—

Subaru: “—The reason why you don’t give up, is just because you love everyone! Bloody bastard! Why aren’t you a superhuman! Why, are you still an idiotic brat!!”

‘Subaru’: “…”

Subaru: “Be strong like Reinhardt! Be someone who can do anything like Julius! If you can’t do that then be useful like Ferris! How about exceeding in a single thing like Wilhelm-san?! Choose even one, for you to…”

By taking time and even experiencing agony, what he realized was merely that.

That ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was an ordinary human, that he possessed only the cards which were the same as what Subaru did, that he extremely lacked skill in properly utilizing them, that neither did he have good fortune when it came to victory and defeat.

Even, a single one of just those—

Subaru: “Any single one of them…”

With a powerless voice, having forfeited all spirit, he whispered.

Any single one of them, even a single one of them, grasping tightly the hand incapable of wielding anything.

Subaru: "…You, are Louis, aren't you."

With a husky voice, he uttered a query unrelated to what he had said till now.

Listening to that, Subaru, who had remained silent for long nodded, saying "Ah".

'Subaru': "No. I'm not Louis. Unfortunately, I won't say even that. I'd rather not have her disturbing. You don't need an explanation for her personality being the worst, do you?"

Subaru: "Yeah… I guess, so."

Responding with a meagre, feeble voice, Subaru hid his own face with his arms.

Concealing that his throat had shriveled up due to his howling up until the previous moment, oozily, pain started to well up in his fist which had hit Subaru.

If this was the Hall of Memories, then Subaru's body could not be stated to be a real entity here, is how it was supposed to be, and yet, it was absurd that he could feel pain.

—Yes, pain, Death, was ever absurd and ever difficult to bear.

That was accurately why, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb was mistaken.

The thought of wishing for that by one's own accord, was unmistakably mistaken.

Subaru: "…Why did you, disappear."

'Subaru': "Hm?"

Subaru: "Why did you vanish away. You disappeared, that caused, so many hardships…"

The impetus of the ever present incomprehension, and the origin of everything.

The reason why 'Natsuki Subaru' disappeared, and Natsuki Subaru was born.

Just what happened to the body of 'Natsuki Subaru' , who had disappeared alongside his memories.

Subaru: "The reason why you disappeared…"

'Subaru': "…That was a total miss on my part. I entered Taygeta with the intention of finding a way to capture Reid. Then, through the series of events, it was all great till I found Reid's book, but…"

Subaru: "…Then, Reid's book turned out to be empty."

'Subaru': "Then I was put in the same bowl as Gluttony. The rest is, you probably get it even without me having to say it."

Scratching his head, Subaru looked back onto his own shame.

Encountering Louis Arneb in the Hall of Memories, 'Natsuki Subaru' had gotten Memories stolen. And, forgetting all of his life in the different world until that point, his self, of course, created Natsuki Subaru who could not apprehend the feelings of the people around him.

'Subaru': "Don't depreciate yourself like that… Would be difficult even if I tell you so, huh. After all, you are me."

Subaru: "…'Natsuki Subaru' is a weak, petty, irredeemable huge idiot."

'Subaru': "That's not wrong."

Subaru: "But."

'Subaru': "—?"

Whilst making a wry smile and gesturing his agreement, Subaru raised his eyebrows in response to Subaru, who had whispered powerlessly.

While looking at that Subaru, Subaru voiced the continuance of the words he had held back.

That was—

Subaru: "—You are, an amazing guy, 'Natsuki Subaru' ."

—That was, his honest opinion lacking all exaggeration, having witnessed him Return by Death greater than twenty times.

2

"…"

Whilst looking at the man before him, he steadily narrowed his eyes.

With a face he was used to looking at, with a face he was tired of looking at, a face he thought that was even was distressful to look at, it was his own self. It was his own self, it was not his own self, though it was his own self, he did not believe it to be his own self.

That face had a reaction as if having been pricked with something unanticipated for the first time, it was gratifying.

Subaru: "…The closest person, huh."

There were not many humans who loved their own self from the bottom of their heart.

Subaru particularly belonged to that category, and Subaru hated himself. Perhaps 'Natsuki Subaru' was no different in that regard either. —Subaru, Subaru, hated himself.

However, as the closest person, when Natsuki Subaru saw 'Natsuki Subaru' , to say this would be exceedingly embarrassing but, so cool, was the thought that crossed his mind.

Subaru: "I respect you, who is weak, hopeless, unable to do anything, but still, continues to struggle, and loves them. That's why—”

‘Subaru’: “…”

Subaru: “—The meaning of me, reading your Book of the Dead, was there.”

He had not opened up the Book of the Dead merely in order to gnash his weakness, to grieve the cease of trails, to slam grudges on his self who had the same face as his own self.

Of course, neither was it to have the megalomania of following up to the superhuman Natsuki Subaru’s roots and attaining unparalleled strength, granted.

What he sought was learning that ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was merely human, his deeds, his path.

Subaru: “…You sure are a guy, who says embarrassing stuff suddenly, you.”

Subaru, who had remained frozen by Subaru’s oration until then, abruptly came alive.

Subaru had his eyes narrowed at the ill humor— no, in a state of feeling somewhat awkward, he sharply gazed at Subaru and slowly stretched his fingers ahead,

‘Subaru’: “It’s pretty questionable for me to say it myself, but you sure can say all that after having looked back onto my entirety up until now. Now that it’s mentioned, it’s Natsuki Subaru Starting Life in a Different World from Zero, you know.”

Subaru: “Ah, it feels so weird to have the leading actor’s name be the same as yourself.”

‘Subaru’: “It’s better than having the heroine have the same name as your mom, isn’t it… No, not that.”

Unreservedly reciprocating persiflage, Subaru exchanged a gaze with Subaru.

Subaru, who somewhat seemed to have tasted an under-shoulder swing down, he pointed at himself with his hand and,

‘Subaru’: “I had said all that earlier, but is this seriously okay? The possibility of me being a fake of Louis is not supposed to have completely disappeared, you know.”

Subaru: “It has disappeared. You didn’t revert even after I seriously hit you.”

‘Subaru’: “I mean, to revert back by that is just in the case of Yanagisawa’s copy ability…”

As per Subaru’s objections, that could not truly be used as rationale.

However, at that point in time, Subaru had let go of his skepticism regarding Subaru.

The reason for that was perhaps what Subaru had commented earlier.

For argument’s sake, even if Louis Arneb ate away one’s life away from head to toe without sparing a single part, he believed that she would not be able to reconstruct that face, that voice.

Because she did not have the ability to comprehend blessedness, felicity, happiness.

That is why—

Subaru: “She, who loved nobody, cannot understand the emotion of Returning by Death for the sake of someone you love.”

‘Subaru’: “…”

Subaru before his eyes kept silent, as Subaru took a long, painful inhale.

Now that he had voiced it out, it was terribly stale, naught but sweet nothings pleasing to hear, nothing more. Yet he had been unable to discover any other responses.

That is why the Subaru before his eyes was unquestionably 'Natsuki Subaru' .

Subaru: "Why are you, here? Were you waiting, for me?"

He recognized the Subaru before his eyes to be possessing the same roots as himself.

On top of that, the doubt surfacing in his mind, was regarding the two Subaru happening upon each other here.

Upon that question of Subaru's, Subaru firmly stepped on the pure white floor,

'Subaru': "The reason why you and I met each other here, is because this place is the sole point of contact between you and me."

Subaru: "The point of contact, between you and me…"

'Subaru': "The reason me, who has Memories within the tower, and you, who doesn't have Memories, crossed over is just because of the Book of the Dead of this area. Both ahead of this and before this, you and I couldn't have met each other."

Subaru: "—. On second thought, let's go back to the first question. Why, are you here?"

Without digesting the explanation Subaru gave, Subaru, once again, cast the same question.

Strictly speaking, he could not comprehend the logic behind the two Subaru coming across each other here. It ended up being that Subaru, who possessed Memories, and Subaru, who did not possess Memories, both existed alongside each other.

—The rules of the formation of a Book of the Dead, its intricacies were unknown.

Now that if it were to be mentioned, the book of 'Natsuki Subaru' piling up the count of deaths up until now was strange in itself. Precisely that was a phenomenon which if the Deaths of 'Natsuki Subaru' were not being observed from outside of the world, it would not come into existence.

Did that mean, that Od Lagna fulfilled the role of that observer.

Subaru: “But if that’s the case then Louis, who was in the Hall of Memories, if she had been observing Return by Death, I don’t know for what reason she would be in such high spirits. If she can recognize that from the outside…”

‘Subaru’: “She may be staying in the Hall of Memories, but she can’t be its ruler. It’s ruler is… probably a guy even more nasty, I think. If you consider it from this situation.”

Subaru: “I get it when you say it’s a nasty guy. The one most plausible is…”

Halting words there for once, Subaru and Subaru collectively stated.

“—The Sage Flugel.”

They called that, to be the ill-natured utmost plausible personage.

The personage who had connections to the establishment of this Pleiades Watchtower, installing a Trial such that Reid was placed in it, furthermore, imposing an ascetic of unknown termination upon Shaula for four hundred years.

In all honesty, Shaula was pitiable. If it would be possible, then he wanted to snatch her away from that master of her’s.

Subaru: “Then, the reason for my self, both possessing and not possessing Memories existing alongside is…”

‘Subaru’: “—. That’s the type of question difficult to find an answer for. Since I am here, and you are here”

Subaru: “That’s just how, it is, huh…?”

Whilst feeling a sense of unease, catching Subaru’s words, Subaru drew his chin in.

The truth is it had been the kind of question lacking a question setter. Even if theories of some kind were to be arrived at, in the end, they could never provide the answer.

If this question must be investigated thoroughly, and the answer must be found, then it was—

Subaru: “As long as you truly aren’t Louis Arneb, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

‘Subaru’: “That’s a pretty bothersome way to confirm. Do you, really trust me?”

Subaru: “I trust you I trust you. If you let me hit you one more time on the other side, I’ll trust you more.”

‘Subaru’: “Is that so. I wouldn’t say it’s the best bargain, you know.”

Interchanging frivolous dialogue in a relaxed manner, Subaru shrugged his shoulders at Subaru’s words.

The cowardly way of conversation for delaying the core of the dialogue like this, with other people aside, but when it was used with oneself it got seen through far too easily.

That is why, Subaru took it upon himself and for the third time, fired the same question.

Subaru: “He~y, another me. —For what purpose, are you here?”

‘Subaru’: “…”

Subaru: “You must also be knowing, I won’t listen to something like that.”

Upon Subaru’s attitude, who opted for reticence, Subaru whispered with his black eyes straitened. Even after hearing that, he did not return back persiflage similar to the one until now.

Instead of that, what levitated in Subaru’s black eyes was the radiance that had always been present since the beginning.

Perhaps that was, often called, what is known as, the feeling of guilt

—

‘Subaru’: “—Hey, what do you think will happen, in unification of memories?”

That was why, Subaru had deliberately asked that question cheerfully.

3

“—In the pattern of a conversation about this trick, what would be the normal answer, huh.”

“I have no idea. Clearly, it feels like something which has no answer to it.”

“To be honest, you seem to be the more knowledgeable one here, do you know about any rules that would be advantageous to know about which I don’t?”

“You read the book dissecting me, didn’t you. It’s as likely as not.”

“As likely as not, huh.”

“As likely as not.”

“…If you and I carelessly bump into each other and one eliminates the other, if it’s something like that, what will you do?”

“Don’t say all that. Whatever you think when you’re anxious, generally I also think the same when I’m anxious, that’s why.”

“That’s that. Then, no hard feelings no matter which one wins, hm?”

“No, I sure will be crazy bitter. And so if I’ll be bitter, then that means you’ll be bitter too.”

“Well, I guess so. That’s, probably right. Hm, pretty shallow-■ed huh.”

“What did you say?”

“Pretty shallow-■ed… huh, is something wrong?”

“…No, I just probably misheard, I guess.”

“…”

“…”

“Ah, that’s right. There are some things you may wonder about their possibility, so there are some things I want to tell you, can I?”

“Well, since you’ve heard everything I’ve said up till now go right ahead and say anything.”

“Originally, you were more informed than me regarding this world… though that advantage has more or less disappeared by me reading the Book of the Dead, there are some things that have changed a bit, you know?”

“Things that have changed?”

“After losing Memories, I talked to everyone, I got to know everyone… it’s the story of Natsuki Subaru Starting Life in a Different World from Zero you don’t know about.”

“…”

“First up, Meili, okay. She’s a bit, in various ways, saddled with bombs upon herself so it’s rough but she understands if you talk to her so please, properly talk to her. I’m imagining Meili-senpai to be pretty angry right now.”

“Yeah, got it.”

“And then, there’s this huge scorpion wandering about inside the tower, but it’s true identity is Shaula. That makes things really dangerous but… she’s not doing that, because she wants to. Please, help her too.”

“Yeah, got it.”

“Oh, by the way, I forgot to say this, but when I met Louis I got my back kicked hard by Rem. Back then, I didn't remember Rem, so it was only after I read the book did I recall what kind of a girl Rem was, but… hmm, as expected, that had been my Rem."

"No, it's my Rem, you know."

"No, mine."

"Mine."

"…"

"…"

"Ram had said. That when the season of snowmelt arrives, things invisible will be visible and will surely show their faces… As expected of her."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"About that guy Julius… well, it'll be fine even if I don't say anything, isn't it. He's not that unreliable, that I must tell you something about him."

"Yeah, agreed."

"Thank you, for apologizing, to dad, and mom."

"Yeah, hm."

"Thank you, for saving Otto, and Garfiel."

"Yeah."

"Thank you, for saving Petra, Frederica, and everyone from Earlham Village."

"Yeah."

"Thank you, for taking Beatrice out, and holding her hand."

"…"

“Emilia…”

“…”

“Thank you, for falling in love, with Emilia. I also, love her. I really love her.”

“…Yeah, I know.”

“—Natsuki Subaru. You are an amazing guy, I sincerely know that, if it’s you then it’ll certainly be alright.”

“Yeah.”

“…”

“Hm… I guess so.”

“…”

“Yeah. —If it’s us, then it’ll certainly be alright.”

4

“It’ll be alright, huh.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Yeah, it’ll be alright.”

“You, are amazing, I sincerely know that.”

“…Yeah, but, hm. I have to say, that.”

“…”

“—Looks like my summer vacation is, over.”

Chapter 75:
Louis Arneb

—Want to become, happy.

1

—What are termed as the positives and negatives of life, are great gambles determined by birth and environment.

That had been the philosophy Louis Arneb acquired, upon the extremity of eating and hunting down the lives of innumerable humans, as the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.

Louis Arneb, was the youngest sister among the three siblings who were Sin Archbishops affixed with Gluttony.

By nature, contrary to the scale and unsound state of control of its activity, was the Witch Cult with surprisingly unascertained true state of affairs, though much regarding the Sin Archbishops especially was enveloped in mystery.

Although the principal source for that was that the majority of people who happened upon them had lost their lives, the ones to have their names well known even amongst Sin Archbishops— no, it is past tense, so the ones who "had their names well known" must have been the two of Sloth and Greed.

Aside from those, even if it was identified that the Sin Archbishops of Wrath and Lust, and finally, Gluttony existed, for several years it had been fogged with enigmas what kind of a bunch they were. Much less, the very existence of Louis Arneb, the youngest sister among the trio of siblings of Gluttony, save for fellow Sin Archbishops being the only exception, was unknown.

The concealed Sin Archbishop, that had been the position Louis Arneb stood at.

"Well, it's not as if we wished for it, you know."

So whispered Louis, stretching her legs within the white space she had been in since birth.

Impotently, Louis could not exit this white space, and did not have the ability to meet anyone. Unable to avail the Authority of Gluttony anywhere except in the location where it was highly restricted as well, it was what is called an unused treasured possession to her.

However, thanks to her two elder brothers, only when it came to meals was she not incapacitated.

That was because the Memories and Names her elder brothers ate—that is to say, the lives of others, she could unassociatedly snitch that food and be able to fulfill her hunger.

“Why, do we have to be like this?”

Fulfilling her hunger through her elder brothers’ leftovers, whilst indulging in the lives of others, Louis, who was having her self-identity molded and taking form little by little, immediately discerned that she was in circumstances entirely different from others.

Without a body that could be free, what she could operate was merely consciousness.

Though she possessed the Memories of having walked, she possessed no experience of having walked. That was, the defective article known as herself.

“Ah… we are, in such unhappy circumstances.”

That was how Louis recognized to herself, that she was in a Sorrowful environment.

And, she understood these circumstances shan’t change, regardless how much she lamented.

In order to console their younger sister lost adrift within such sorrow, her elder brothers seemingly vied with each other and ate. And provided their little sister, the platters same as what they had eaten themselves.

Those platters which her elder brothers served to her, were brimming with respective individuality.

Lye, who named himself Gourmet, loved lives with strong flavors for both better or worse.

Roy, of Bizarre Eating, anyhow gave precedence to amount, becoming entranced for fulfilling hunger with off-flavors.

From Louis' perspective, if she had to say then she had been able to enjoy the platters chosen by Lye on numerous occasions, but on numerous occasions she had also made gains from the platters chosen by Roy, who ate and hunted in an unprincipled manner.

Chewing and digesting eleventy lives, comparing flavors by rolling them atop her tongue and within her mind, what she came to understand. —That was, the difference in the absolute amount of Joyfulness.

Louis, who possessed the power to compare the lives of others through her own sense of values, graded various items such as the difference of wealth and poverty or the presence or absence of affection, from the environment of growth to family and friends, the existence of lovers, through a formula based on their extent, awarding scores to the lives of others from one to the next, and continued rating.

For being prosperous by birth. For being loved by parents and siblings. For living a life sailing smooth without any trials or tribulations. For having a great number of friends, who could be reached out to in times of difficulty. For possessing overflowing talent, such that it was possible to stand above all others.

Either this or that or this or that, regardless of fortune and misfortune, countless reasons, such that some could be discarded.

Though it was an idea terribly prideful and conceited, Louis possessed the Authority to make it attainable.

If it were to be expressed in alternate words, that was equivalent to the act of peeping onto the screen of a game other people were playing, complaining and pointing out they should've done this and they should've done that all whilst ridiculing them.

Knocking disdain and mockery across the entire screen, she criticized the lives of others as per her own conveniences as a bystander. Showering jeers as well, striking frank impressions lacking all distinction between likes and dislikes as well, all to her own contentment.

Those were Louis' deeds. Rating as per her principles, egoistic abuse and slander.

However, that which she enjoyed at first, soon turned wearisome as well.

That was natural. What Louis could do, was to review the Memories passed onto her, she could not interfere with anything further. She did not possess the ability to speak of the present and the future.

Even if she tried to speak ill of or correct the gameplay of others, there was nobody who would lend an ear to what she would point out, that is why she lost her initial amusement.

To incessantly look at the play of unskillful humans, was close to torture rather than just being tedious.

"Even though if allowed to, then we would do it so much much mu~ch better. Because each and every single one is incompetent."

Despite possessing feet to walk their own life, despite having arms to cut through distress, despite owning a head to picture the future, all of the other people were brainless.

Louis' elder brothers, Lye and Roy were no exceptions to that either. Rather, they could be called the incarnation of ineptitude.

If Memories would be peeped into, it could be well understood what that life failed at, and at what point was it unable to recover. All of them, accumulated failures terribly simple and trivial.

Why would one stumble at such a spot, Louis was unable to comprehend at all.

“Incompetent, incompetent, incompetent. If you’re going to live irresponsibly, then hand it over to us, that life. We will do it way way wa~y better. Everyone everyone everyone, is too brainless.”

From one to the next, Lives ought to be felt contempt for were itemized in the form of platters.

Chewing and digesting numerous, multitudinous of them, Louis was overwhelmed with rage, and became nauseous.

Without realizing such emotions of Louis’ ■, her elder brothers, who successively resumed eating for fulfilling their own desires, she also felt irritated at. Without even feeling anxious for their younger sister, who was making a nauseous expression, the folly of continuing to provide filled platters incessantly, what could she possibly detest could she not detest that.

“Ah, you sure eat while finding it delicious, onii-chan.”

“Ah, you sure eat while finding it fun, nii-sama.”

“—Ah, we are, we are, even now even now, feeling nauseous, you know.”

That was the reason why Louis Arneb, named herself Satiation.

The starvation not fulfilled no matter how much is eaten.

For what was starved was not her body, but her ■.

2

—Want to become, happy.

—Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy.

3

“—Ahahahaha! This is, this is the feeling of walking outside, isn’t it! Both onii-chan and nii-sama, doing this the whole time… a~h, unfair unfair unfair!”

Within the enforced confinement, her shackled self-consciousness followed the lone road to expansion.

Just as eating facilitated healthy growth amongst humans, while being provided with platters unwished for as well, Louis underwent favorable growth vigorously.

The same was also the case with Lye and Roy, her two elder brothers.

Her elder brothers too, had their own ego enlarge rampantly, having their ■ feel greater zeal for meals. The insensible food selection by such elder brothers of hers, Louis anyhow felt irritated by.

That change had been, a byproduct of Louis’ such growth, and irritation.

“This is the air of outside! This is the water of outside! This is the soil of outside! This is the blood of outside! A~h, amazing amazing amazing! It’s real! It’s rea~l!”

Lying sprawled on bare earth, whilst lovingly licking the soil, having his fill of the world with his entire body was a young boy—no, though that very flesh body belonged to the personage who named himself as Lye Batenkaitos, the content within it was disparate.

It was not Lye wielding the right of control over that flesh body, and moving about freely.

Believed to possess the fate of being unable to leave the white world congenitally, Louis Arneb— the Sin Archbishop of tragedy, it was her form having broken through the white cage for the first

time.

It had been a coincidence.

Certainly, she did not think the Authority possessed such an ability. Or perhaps Louis' craving spirit had stimulated the Authority to bloom instead, there was no definite answer. Neither was it momentous.

What was momentous, was that this had been realized. —That she, had walked outside.

"Ahahahaha! Ahahahahahaha!"

Intervening between her restricted reality, Louis grandly guffawed for the fruit it bore.

It had become possible for her to borrow her elder brothers' bodies, and independently manipulate that body, that Authority.

And—

"Huh? Lye, just what is the meaning of this. While putting on airs as something like Gourmet and being fastidious, are you sure you didn't get too hungry and go crazy?"

"A~hahaha! That's wrong that's wrong, that's completely wrong. That's wrong anyway, as that's wrong, that's certainly wrong, as that's certainly wrong, that is wrong, because that's wrong!"

"…"

"We are, Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Louis Arneb."

Saying so, Louis gave greetings to the baffled Roy Alphard, using the body of Lye Batenkaitos.

For this had been the first time ever since she was born, did she get to even converse with her elder brothers, after all.

"It's the cute, cute little sister, the third sibling of onii-chan and nii-sama. Please be loving, please be doting, please be well wishing, and please be caring, okay?”

4

—Want to become, happy.

—Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy.

—Want to become happy. Want to become happy.

5

By borrowing the bodies of her elder brothers, she acquired a method to meddle with the outside world.

Her elder brothers’ supply of food did not halt, and as always, never did she suffer with hunger.

However, such long awaited opportunities, and jumping out into the outside world she much yearned for, Louis Arneb grew tired of it before long. —She ended up growing tired it.

“Outside is pretty boring, more than what we tho~ught.”

In the end, a borrowed body was a borrowed body.

There lay no change in the fact that the real form of her self, who was unable to be free, was trapped inside the white world.

Rather, by firmly making certain of her shadow, she strangled her throat by herself.

“In the end, something like life… is not what you eat, or how much you eat. Who you eat with, and yet.”

Her elder brothers, were living lives of their own. For that must be, why they were not seeking it.

Louis alone, had been dispossessed of her own life. For that must be, why she was eternally seeking it.

“Want to become, happy.”

Within the white world, whilst untidily scattering around countless Memories, she wished for that with all her ■.

That could have perhaps been the greatest— or the sole desire, of Louis Arneb.

“Want to become happy.”

A desire unfulfilled.

Unfading regardless of her borrowing the bodies of her elder brothers, or kicking others as per her liking.

Albeit tasting rich Lives and getting drunk on momentary pleasures, it all perished immediately.

“Want to become happy.”

She grew tired of it. She had grown tired of it.

She wished for a life, which belonged to herself, and her alone. She wished for a body, a soul, a destiny.

“Want to become happy.”

Louis was sorrowful.

The origin of Louis’ sorrow, was that nowhere present a life which was her own.

“Want to become happy.”

However, at the same time, Louis knew herself.

Even if her fickle natured, easily resigning self attained a life that suddenly appeared before her, it would be inconceivable for her to be satisfied by that. After all, she had known.

In this world lay countless lives, in them lay the absolute amount of joyfulness, and they were primarily determined upon the result of the incorrigible great gambles.

In what way would things play out for a human belonging to a poor residence born into the harsh Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

In what way would things play out for a human weak by birth born into Vollachia Empire, which valued warriors.

In what way would things play out for a slow-footed nitwit born into Kararagi City States, which expected perpetual progress.

In what way would things play out for a mixed race, a silver haired half devil born into the Kingdom of Lugnica, which was spoiled by ancient customs.

By possessing the selves of others, Louis was aware that they would not have a decent time.

However, to say joyfulness would be being affluent in those aspects, would be an immense mistake as well.

Being born into the household of a great priest in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, being born into the household of a general in Vollachia Empire, being born into the household of a distinguished merchant in Kararagi City States, being born into the household of any kind of an influential noble in the Kingdom of Lugnica, as one looked upward it continued without cease.

Louis, did not want to be inferior. She wanted to be affluent. She did not want to be looked down upon.

She had continued rating the lives of others.

Within those, naturally the lives who had received the worst evaluation, but withal the lives who had received the highest evaluation, it was not as if all of the items to be graded within them were the greatest. Even those highest evaluated lives, she could not gain satisfaction by.

"A~h, want to become happy."

—Lye and Roy, around that time, discovered a novel transfiguration of the Authority, Eclipse.

The ability the Authority of Gluttony was endowed with, was the ability to plunder the Memories, the Names, from others, chewing and digesting them. Applying that in practical use, the Authority of Solar Eclipse and Lunar Eclipse which reconstructed the plundered populace.

Drawing out techniques or knowledge from the Memories of others, and using them as one's own belonging, Lunar Eclipse.

To the utmost it drew out skills, not the benefits of the likes of physical abilities, so the possibility of not utilizing that power perfectly was high.

Conversely, Solar Eclipse used the captured Name as foundation, and reconstructed the person's existence in its entirety, completely reconstructing the techniques polished by that flesh body, it could manifest strength to its maximum.

As an ability, it went without saying that Solar Eclipse was overwhelmingly excelling, but her two elder brothers preferred to exercise not Solar Eclipse, but Lunar Eclipse. —No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they feared using Solar Eclipse, and found it repugnant.

According to Lye and Roy’s cognizance, Solar Eclipse seemed to drag along the thinking in the flesh body which had transformed.

That sensation felt as if their selves were being damaged, it was unendurable, was the two’s reasoning. Hearing what her elder brothers had to say, Louis, from the bottom of her ■, found it to be utterly ludicrous.

Despite even possessing their own flesh bodies, despite standing on a position where even their person had been established, to not be able to preserve their selves possessing firm beliefs, how deficient and puny must that self-consciousness be.

It was no jest to assume the airs of being more sorrowful than her, who possessed no flesh body of her own, did not have even her siblings be cognizant of her existence for greater than ten years, and had, at last, grown tired of even the sourness and sweetness of life.

The Authority of Solar Eclipse was very much splendid. Rather, for Louis it was convenient.

It would be no misstatement to say that precisely this was the power Louis Arneb longed for.

—Louis Arneb was craving for a life belonging to her alone, that too, a life which was the greatest.

That was unlike her elder brothers’ self-pleasure, who gained contentment by eating the lives of others and capturing Memories. A right further refined and ubiquitous— Louis, wanted to live.

Birth could not be chosen.

That was the entire source of what brought forth sorrowful humans. However, Louis was different.

Louis, had acquired the power, the opportunity, to choose her birth, her life. She could heist the Memories of others, reconstruct them by way of Solar Eclipse, and make it to be her own belonging.

She had the ability, to choose life. —Everything, she could choose again.

She shall be fastidious, seeking the greatest Memories and Name which she was yet to see.

Though there had been some aligned favorably amongst what all Lye and Roy had eaten, they had not been perfect. There had been a dearth of novelty and ingenuity.

Happy homes, tender parents, wealthy livelihoods and rich environments, magnificent friends and seemingly destined companions, all of it seemed naught but "happiness which had seemingly been seen somewhere else".

She was searching for not that, but the greatest life.

Having the ability to choose as per one's liking, did not coincide with the fact that one would not get tired of what one was choosing. Getting tired of the countless platters lined up before her eyes, what could she possibly find enjoyable.

Louis Arneb, was searching for the greatest life. —She had been searching.

That is why—

6

—That is why, when she happened upon Natsuki Subaru, Louis' chest pulsated intensely.

"Oho? Onii-san is… umm, Natsuki Subaru was it?"

To be precise, it did not throb the instant she had met him.

Natsuki Subaru’s outward appearance was not to Louis’ taste, to make it throb the instant of meeting him.

From start, though it seemed a face not to her taste, in accordance with the sense of values cultivated within Louis, the beauty which a vast majority of humans pictured would precisely be the face Louis would seek.

In that sense, there did not exist even a single atom which would throb for Natsuki Subaru’s outward appearance.

Moreover, from Louis’ perspective Natsuki Subaru was certainly a personage she had already known, but he was not someone she had been attentive of simply because he was in the Memories of others.

Though it was something not requiring much thought, the Memories present within Louis went up to enormous numbers. It was not simple to draw out the intended Memories from within that.

All the more when the opponent was one she held no interest in.

The reason why Louis yet recollected the opponent’s name at a single glance was because, not Louis, but one of her elder brothers — Lye Batenkaitos had been considerably attached to that name.

If not mistaken, then there had been something mightily attached to Natsuki Subaru amongst the platters Lye had eaten.

‘—’

“This place? This place you see, is the cradle of Od Lagna… the Hall of Memories. The place where the souls of dead people are filtered. As it’s rare for a person to come here maintaining one’s self, you shall be welcomed, onii-san. We, have too much boredom at hand, you see.”

Smiling sinisterly, Louis gave a warm reception to the visit of the rare guest.

Truth be told, there lay no dishonesty in those feelings of welcome. Louis longed for others, quite a bit.

The birthplace of Louis Arneb, the white world she could not leave, the Hall of Memories.

The reason why Louis was aware that this place had been designated that title, that the gigantic existence of unknown disposition was a workshop of such an enormous scale, was the result of her generally mobilizing the knowledge of the Memories which Lye or Roy had eaten and hunted down.

Within the ones fallen prey to the Authority of Gluttony, there had been many wise men who, in reality, had done great studies which would remain for posterity, and had made historical findings. Without seeing the light of day, they had settled into the sole of the bellies of the three Gluttony siblings, but they were profoundly serving Louis.

In all honesty, Louis was not at all interested in the reason why she was born here, or why she was confined here.

Neither would there be any means to dispel those doubts, nor did she find it to be meaningful. She had assented it as that's just how things were. Even if she was suddenly taken into the outside world at this point, it would have merely been troublesome in its own way.

The day she shall leave this place, must be the day she has discovered the greatest life.

'—'

"Awa! Sorry sorry, name giving was still left, isn't it! But, do forgive! After all, introducing like this while being sober doesn't happen often in this place, you see!"

'—'

"Well then, guess it's introduction one more ti~me! —We are Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Louis Arneb."

'—'

"Don't know if it'll be for a long time or short, but please be caring, okay, onii-san?”

The opponent was exceedingly surprised and distressed with regards to Louis, who named herself in that manner.

Obviously enough, standardly, humans who step afoot here do not possess the aim of coming here. Though occasionally there are some who thus slip in, Louis considered that as something like lost souls — rephrasing, the consequence of near-death experiences.

A situation where the Soul was easily separated from the flesh body, or a situation where it had come unstuck, perhaps.

From their perspectives, such situations were close to the feeling of being summoned out of the blue by Od Lagna.

If that were to be considered, possibly, Louis’ role was something like a guide who quelled the turmoil of people who had experienced near-death, and elucidated what this place was.

If that were to be considered as being atop Od Lagna’s invisible palm, that was, again, infuriating.

Of course, being looked down upon, but Louis also despised being directed.

That was the same as Od Lagna, an existence for whom that perpetually was the usual state of things. Louis did not want her life, which yet remained to commence, to be distorted by the interference of anyone but Louis.

‘—’

“Eh? Of course we do know? Lye and Roy… onii-chan and nii-sama, right? Ah, ah, don’t get so excited, onii-san! As the two are just devoted to their little sister, you know.”

‘—’

“The two of them devouring here and there too, part of it is for our sake. They lack brains, and don’t have a grasp on our preferences at all either, but they are being considerate. Probably, isn’t it. But it can’t be helped, isn’t it. After all, all three of us have never even been together.”

‘—’

“By borrowing onii-chan or nii-sama’s body, you see, we have gone outside a wee bit on times, you know? But, when we do that the one lending his body goes to sleep and can’t be met, is what that means! That’s why, all three of us have never been together. Awa, spilled that out.”

Enumerating whilst speaking rapidly in somewhat agitation, Louis carefully observed the opponent’s reaction.

Slight panic, just a smidgen of daze. Somewhat preponderant rage, and a fairly strong sense of purpose. What was perplexed at first, had now regained presence of mind, possessing the ambience of trying to proceed ahead logically.

“He~h…”

Not bad, with that thought in her innermost ■, Louis licked her lips.

Whether it should be labelled as being accustomed to diving into scenes of carnage, he was suitably fast in adapting to situations. If observed and compared with the impression she had received at first, that was quite a mismatching attribute.

That which varied greatly from the original attribute, a posteriori, too was an attribute compelled into polishing.

What lay at its origin, Louis incited her appetite with interest, and alongside—

“—Ah, there it is there it is. This is it, right, onii-san.”

Whilst conversing, what Louis towed out were certain Memories.

The greatest reason why Lye, through a single platter which Lye had indulged in, was attached to the juvenile before her eyes. Reeling in and collecting the Memories mightily, potently calling out to that existence, Louis synchronized with them.

“—Awa.”

At that precise moment, her breathing was obturated by feelings of love overflowing out in the interior of her chest.

Welling up unaware of any bounds, the feelings of love for the juvenile within her sight. He was so beloved, so beloved, so in love with, it was unbearable. Louis’ small chest hottened, and her entire body throbbed with a sweet premonition.

With her eyes moist, her breaths sweet and warm, her lips smiled.

And—

“Please don’t make such an anxious face. —Subaru-kun.”

—Upon that instant, there existed mighty, potent rejection.

‘—!!’

Honing his eyes whilst maintaining his rage, Natsuki Subaru charged ahead and pounced.

Though she possessed the impulse to accept his outbursting self by spreading both her arms wide, she somehow immobilized that and sharply crawled into his chest in accordance with Memories.

Catching ahold of the juvenile’s arms with smooth movement, pulling him towards herself she gave him a twisting throw. With a flesh body which was not a real object, hallucinating the sound of his bones creaking, the juvenile, giving rise to a roar of anguish, was held down onto the white floor by her.

‘—’

“Please stop. If you throw yourself so bravely, it will be embarrassing. —Something like that.”

Utilizing the Memories which thought lovingly of the juvenile, she held the juvenile down through sheer force. With her sadistic ■ fulfilled, she ended up relaxing the edges of her mouth. As if giving further satisfaction to that desire to afflict belonging to Louis' ■, frantically continuing to scream was Natsuki Subaru's voice, as he twisted his body.

His form, earnestly calling for rage for the sake of someone else—upon that, incidentally, Louis tilted her head.

"—Onii-san, why do you remember the Memories we had stolen?"

It had been an unnatural response.

Perceiving that whilst holding him down, Louis greatly twisted her neck.

The Memories eaten by Gluttony did not remain extant within the person concerned, the Names eaten by Gluttony did not remain extant within other people. That is because the Authority tore them off from the Soul, which defined existence in the world.

The proper cleansing of the Soul by Od Lagna, which was practiced in the Hall of Memories — arbitrarily acting as its agent, and stealthily deceiving, plundering and harvesting was what the Authority of Gluttony was.

Therefore, the Memories and Names snavelled by Gluttony did not remain extant within anyone. Restrictively, though there had been ones who had only Memories, only Names stolen away, respective negative effects got applied.

If the Memories were stolen then said person, if the Name was stolen then other people, could no longer remember the person concerned. That could not be altered as long as the disposition of the Soul remained within the protection of Od Lagna.

Yet, Natsuki Subaru did remember.

The ingredient, the soul which had been rendered naked, having both sides of Memories and Name gotten stolen.

Despite not being supposed to be able to remember it. Why, why, why—.

‘—’

“We may have developed a bit of interest in onii-san now. Though it seems onii-chan will resent us.”

Licking her lips, Louis dyed her cheeks with welling passion.

It was the opponent Lye had been attached to. To have that food snitched detachedly from the side, would surely make even Lye take befitting offence. Though Lye was actually quite soft and sweet to his little sister, the major premise of him listening to her selfishness was to the utmost until they did not cross each other’s appetite.

Appetite was, Gluttony was, the meaning of living for Louis, for Lye, and for Roy as well.

To have that be invaded arbitrarily could not let their ■ remain calm.

“If a dear platter that has been looked forward to is usurped, even if by a sibling, even killing them would be something that can’t be helped, isn’t it. —Ah, but, how irresistible, onii-san.”

Whilst twisting his arms behind his back, she drew her lips closer to the nape of the juvenile pushed onto the floor.

It was something alike the form of the spirit with no true substance. She could not sense the taste of sweat from him, who was in the state of mere Soul. Though by nature, even pain was something similar to hallucination, she did not intend to expressly inform him.

Merely, the feelings of love she wanted to be in contact with erupted. —It seemed the owner of these Memories had been attached to this juvenile greater than what was appropriate. She could feel that strongly.

“Well, right now that goes for us.”

Should it even be a hearsay Memory, now that it had been stored like this, it belonged to her.

She could slightly understand Lye or Roy's feeling of fear for Eclipse. She held no fear, but she did understand that the two's premonition was correct. —Perhaps, if she continued at this pace,

"We, will certainly end up loving onii-san, isn't it."

'—'

"…E~h? Nauseating you say, that is so ha~rsh. Because despite everything we are still a girl, even though we mustered up courage and confessed, how cruel. Ah, you're acting violently again. That won't do, onii-san. It won't hurt so please calm down, okay?"

'—'

"There's no way we would hurt onii-san, you know. After all, he is so beloved. That's why calm your ■."

No matter her tenderly addressing him in an effort to calm him down, she faced opposition through frantic meagre movement.

With the name of the Memories called countless times, Louis had her entire body tremble with a sensation terribly ecstatic. This ecstasy, could only be tasted from a personage remembering one who had their Name stolen.

Namely, a flavor which Louis had never tasted.

—An unknown, sweet, sweet berry.

"—Natsuki Subaru."

—What shall, your flavor be?

"Let's eat."

Seeking the answer to that glacé inquisitiveness of her ■, Louis tenderly licked the juvenile's nape with her scarlet tongue. Calling his name, whilst tasting a lanuginous texture on the tip of her tongue, amiably, suavely, she licked.

In the significance of being fulfilled, what was termed as appetite lay similar to sexual desire.

Within such strengthening of affection for the person before her eyes, for even this unremitting appetite to be fulfilled, this must now be something alike copulation sought after sordidly.

People who mutually valued each other, blend within the existence known as Louis.

The sufficiency of that flavor, or how a saccharine a thing would it be—

“Thank you for the treat.”

Savoring adequately, as per her contentment, Louis conveyed her gratitude for the food through words.

That was the procedure of Gluttony’s meal— invoking the name of the opponent whose Memories are desired to be stolen, peeling off one section of the Soul from the opponent’s flesh body, and eating that.

—What are termed as Memories, are things similar to sediments accumulated upon the Soul.

It was also possible to adorn that with alluring words, such as feasts dished upon white platters.

However, should everything be exposed to its origin, what shall be stretching before would be the meaninglessness of adorning it beautifully. That was the cognizance of Louis, who was affixed with the Authority of Gluttony, and the ability to indulge in those Souls, Louis’ privilege.

With this, the entirety of what was associated with the Soul of the juvenile before her eyes shall get particularized.

What would then remain, would be for her to mix it with the Memories of the young girl already within Louis, then have her fill of what nature of chemical reaction it would cause—

‘—You, just now, what did you do to me.’

With a voice not supposed to be audible echoing, for the first time, Louis faced Natsuki Subaru himself.

Until then it had not seemed like they had been conversing. They had not faced each other as if facing each other. It had been naught but such a vague, drowning dream.

That was, for Louis too, an occasion of never before seen circumstances, abruptly getting tinged with colors.

What had been said, just now.

“…Onii-san, it can’t be, you remember us?”

A gaze charged with mighty, potent animosity, was the answer to Louis’ doubt.

“—Ah.”

That had been the moment Louis’ slim, petite chest throbbed at a definite high rate of pulsation.

7

Why, in spite of getting Memories eaten, could he remain composed.

Why, even now, was he glaring at Louis with such a look in his eyes.

Why, despite within such bewilderment, was Louis having her chest throb so intensely.

Why, why, why, why, why—.

Rather, that could have perhaps been the impetus deserving to be called premonition.

“Why, does onii-san remember us?”

Whilst glaring at the back of Natsuki Subaru's head, under her eyes, whom she had held down, what Louis suspected at first was the possibility of having failed at the meal.

In the Authority of Louis and the others, of Gluttony there were a certain set of protocols absolutely necessary.

The prime amongst them was to know the name of the opponent who was to be eaten, this was an indispensable element necessary for meddling with the Soul of the opponent.

Therefore, in the case of seizing an alias, the Authority was rendered powerless.

And, till now there had been a number of cases of having failed at the meal.

In those cases, the one to face the painful experience had always been either one of Lye or Roy, so not even once had Louis herself faced the painful experience but—

"Onii-chan and nii-sama, felt unpleasant like it was painful but…"

Louis stiffened up her body, assuming there would be similar recoil upon her.

However, though she waited for a long time, there were no signs of that supposed recoil rushing upon Louis.

To begin with, new Memories were certainly being poured within Louis.

"Watchtower of the Sage, dear comrades, and there were Trials …"

Murmuring indicating approval, as if carefully reading a single book within her mind, Louis became entranced with excavating through the new Memories.

Appending to the fact that there occurred no recoil, she was being successful in the extortion of Memories.

Referring to those Memories, she had comprehended what Natsuki

Subaru and his comrades were doing, and even the sequence of events due to which he strayed into this Hall of Memories.

What remained, was for Natsuki Subaru's specialness to be—

"—Huh."

Upon that instant, the voluminousness of the impact which was firmly placed upon Louis, what words shall be apt enough to describe it.

"…"

Astound due to the overwhelming substance, with the strength in her arms fading, she widened her eyes.

Prodding that interval, the held down Natsuki Subaru made his escape from Louis's arms. Taking distance at the same pace, he took a fighting pose nothing too impressive.

Though it was opposition rather comical and creasing up, Louis was not made to laugh at it.

There existed no scope for her, to be laughing over that.

The impact of having seen something improbable, was stabbing through Louis' petite physique.

That was—

"Why, are there Memories of the time of dying?"

'—'

"No, that's not all. That's not all, onii-san. It's of course strange to have the Memories of the time of dying. Plenty odd, you know. But, it's strange. After all…"

'—'

"After all, in the Memories we ate, there's nothing like the Memories of killing onii-san, yet onii-san has the Memories of getting killed!”

That was, something abnormal.

There was no origin, what was occurring was a mysterious paradox.

Ah, the influence of Natsuki Subaru’s Memories, the repertoire of words originally she was not supposed to be aware of increase. It was a paradox. Under the emergency due to the paradox, Schrödinger’s Maxwell’s Einstein was Nikola Tesla—!

“What is this?! What’s the meaning of this?! Memories are different from delusion, you know?! The sediments stuck onto the Soul, can’t be distorted or bent as how one pleases! That’s why! This is the world onii-san witnessed ~tsu! This is, the history onii-san tasted! This is, the story of onii-san, only onii-san knows ~tsu!”

Putting her fingers into her long, long golden-colored hair, Louis detonated her flaring impulse.

Not even for a single second could she remain without hurling it instead of simply stockpiling this impulse. The very instant she did so, Louis Arneb erupted. Erupting and scattering across in all directions, her mind was fractionated into tiny fragments.

“New… new new new new new new new new! New sense of values ~tsu!”

It had been her meeting with that.

Her meeting with an article which surpassed all imagination, which Louis had not known, had not seen, had not thought of.

Her entire body transfixed by lightning, she was unable to think of anything else but that. What else could this be possibly called, should it not be called destiny. What name, should possibly be affixed to these emotions.

“Onii-san, could it be you’re the same as us? Aren’t you a Sin Archbishop?”

‘—’

"Though we have never met directly, Petelgeuse said so! That the Factors were supposed to have reached. That since the positions of Sins were filled, eventually everyone would gather! That vacant seat is the seat belonging to onii-san… belonging to me, is it not?"

'—!!'

"Ahahahahahahahahaha! Don't get angry, don't get angry please, onii-san! Don't make us perplexed, any more than this, onii-san! At this point, our mind is at its absolute limit, this small chest is about to burst open it really hurts. Ah, ah, ah! Amazing, amazing, amazing!"

Tapping continuously, striking the temple of her own forehead with her fingers, Louis chewed the Memories down to its very bones.

Difficult to believe in. Unable to be believed in. The margin of having it believed in, existed only in a fortuitous meeting with none but Gluttony.

Since Louis could jointly own the same Memories, she could believe in Natsuki Subaru's progression. —No, she could not believe in it, but savvy it as fact.

For this was the journey, Louis Arneb had traversed as well.

"Ah, what Pride !! Unfair… unfair unfair! Unfair unfair unfair unfair unfair unfair unfair unfair unfair unfair!! —Mm, wonderful ~tsu! Onii-san, you really die again and again, again and again and again, isn't it!"

'—'

"Wa~h, amazing! You're really dying! You're dying so miserably, onii-san! Again and again, you're dying without any method of succeeding, onii-san! Even something like this is possible, right, onii-san!"

A round of applause, a standing ovation, congratulations for taking birth.

Gratitude for the miracle of meeting you, the train to future which shall advance with me.

“Welling forth inspiration! Receiving stimulus and innovation! Onii-san, so you came from a place not here, not anywhere huh! Ah, we can’t even think, anymo… re.”

Spouting sentiments without confining her momentum, Louis, who was unreservedly immersed by it making no effort for resistance, suddenly recognized that potentiality. —No, she inclined her ears towards her inner voice.

To know a scenery unknown, to have taken birth in a world untold, all were finest quality full courses which would fulfill the hunger called the inquisitiveness of Louis’ ■.

However, the specialty of Natsuki Subaru which was deserving of utmost attention was—

“—Memories of Death.”

Not supposed to exist. Absolutely unattainable, there existed the memories of Death and beyond.

This was principally dissimilar to something like near-death experiences, which were like cheap test tours. A phenomenon established due to the Soul shattering, life slashed into a thousand fragments, the lifeline terminating in its true essence.

The other side of the River of Three Crossings, the border of the living world and netherworld, which was impossible to rebound from. Neither swimming through it nor striding across it, the Memories of redoing the life supposed to have been robbed away—.

“— Return by Death.”

That was how Louis read the greatest showpiece of the Memories blossoming within herself.

Accumulating the experiences of sundry Deaths as memories, that which could not be carved into Memories even once he handed over to his next self as something certain.

And that Natsuki Subaru had surmounted all kinds of hardships.

“Amazing amazing, onii-san! Truly amazing! We’ve been moved deeply. We admire it from the bottom of our ■. You really can do something like that. Overcoming Death, with complete freedom!”

‘—’

“No no, no need to be modest. We are serious, you know? We really do find onii-san to be enviable. After all, something like the memories of Death, nobody possesses it no matter what ~tsu.”

‘—’

“Also also, why is it so? Why are you all composed despite getting Memories stolen by us? What specialness is it? Soul’s save? Backup? Invariance? Makes no sense makes no sense!”

Within the struggling, writhing Natsuki Subaru existed numerous, multitudinous Memories of the time of dying.

That was stimulation Louis, by no means, managed to acquire. Furthermore, to continue to die interminably, the power with the ability to stockpile Death was the target of her jealousy.

“—Want it.”

She desired the power of Return by Death.

Not for it being capable of repeating Death. Naturally, that fresh stimulation was also a factor eternally captivating Louis, but what was further momentous was the ability to Redo.

—Louis Arneb was searching for the greatest life.

And, the conclusion derived by Louis, having indulged in diverse lives, was that what was termed as the greatest life was neither being affluent, nor being loved by many, nor being blessed with a high status.

What was termed as the greatest life, referred to the life which “went as one wished”.

Anything and everything, would occur as one believed, as one expected, as one wished.

Without any flaws, without any incompletion, without any irrationality, the perfect world view.

She had always searched a method for its realization. The answer to that was an endlessly unbearing darkness within Louis, but finally, she understood.

“—It’s Return by Death.”

Should she procure that, she would be able to recover from conflicts, from failures.

Should she know what shall happen in future, she would be able to cope with it. If only she can know, what failure shall occur, what irrationality shall await, what incompletion shall she come across.

“We can, live the greatest life—!”

‘—’

“What should be done? What should be done in order to steal it? If onii-san’s Return by Death is an Authority, then it can’t be stolen by just eating. It’s different from things that come attached with Memories and Names. Witch Factors are the antithesis of Od Lagna, after all! It won’t come detached easily! That’s why…”

That is why, was an Authority to be stolen, there was no choice but to steal the Witch Factor itself.

However, even Louis was unaware of a method to steal as far as Witch Factors. Until now, never had she wished for an Authority belonging to other Sin Archbishops. That kind of a bunch was disgusting to even come in contact with.

However—

“Onii-san, the Authority of the killed Petelgeuse, you’re using it…?”

The Unseen Hand present within the Memories had weakened in both numbers and range from the original, but indubitably was the power utilised by that lunatic. In other words, that was none but proof that several Witch Factors were being stocked in the interior of Natsuki Subaru.

Stocking Witch Factors, if that was possible then—

“We will absolutely, no matter what, get our hands on Return by Death. Onii-san’s Authority, is our hope. If that can be obtained, we will…”

‘—’

“We will, be able to live our own life ~tsu!!”

Want to become, happy.

Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy.

Want to become happy. Want to become happy—.

“The method for that, is right there… the method, for that… ~tsu.”

‘—’

“—~hk! How arbitrary! Something like Return by Death is nothing so good? A person possessing it can’t understand the feelings of a person who doesn’t possess it ~tsu!”

Something like allotted persuasion which had seemingly been heard somewhere else was nothing but tedious.

One who had continued using that power as per his contentment, disliking using that power seemed foolish.

That is why, she shall definitely obtain it. Absolutely, definitely, with certainty.

What shall be done—.

“What shall be done, in order to steal the Authority… wrong. That’s wrong, it’s wrong anyway, as it’s wrong, certainly it is wrong, as it’s too wrong, we’re saying it’s wrong, because it is wrong ~tsu! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!”

Clapping her hands mightily, potently, Louis widened her eyes.

Unraveling her sharp fangs, she applauded suggesting how clear-headed her self was.

Before one could notice, the means and objective switched positions.

However, that wasn’t the case. That was not the case.

Louis’ objective was not to plunder because she wanted to Return by Death, because she could amusingly live the greatest life by obtaining Return by Death.

It was no good to have the bad habit of considering things hazardously remain clinging, because of having played something like Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony for a long period of time. Problematic. Imprisoning in fixated notions. That was a cause of defeat.

It was simple. If it was not to plunder, but to obtain—

“—It’ll be fine if we, just become.”

‘—’

“It’ll be fine if we, just become onii-san. If we become onii-san, and have him be consumed by the Authority of Gluttony … we can integrate Witch Factors. Since if it’s onii-san, then they can be stocked.”

Saying so, Louis plucked her cheeks with both her hands, continuously, forcefully, tempted into violence.

Not an endearing gesture, but excruciating, she did so wielding the intention of injuring. For what purpose. To tear apart her flesh and blood, and dividing herself, that was the purpose.

“You know the Three Great Witch Beasts? It’s said that those, are monsters created by the owner of the Witch Factor long before us. We too, can do something similar. We didn’t do that because there wasn’t really any meaning in doing so… but, you see.”

‘—’

“—If we think of doing it, then we can do anything.”

—If we think of doing it, then we can do anything.

That was, what is called the monster of potentiality.

That was, what is called the potentiality of a pure existence, prior to taking birth.

That was, one affixed with the destiny of living the greatest life, hereafter in the future.

—That was, the destiny of the utmost joyful being, named Louis Arneb.

” “—That is, the existence known as us.” “

The speech of the slowly spinning Louis, was overlapped and enunciated.

The phenomenon of hearing the same voice doubled, was not some kind of auditory hallucination or mishearing. That was in accordance with the occurrence happening, for there appeared two of the same people, with the same voice, with the same tone.

“Got surprised by onii-san’s Memories but, Arneb is a star of the constellation of the hare, huh? It was also astonishing that onii-san and the others were the ones to destroy the Sizeable Hare too.”

“But, if that’s the case then it doesn’t become too much of a surprise? How come we multiplied, or is it onii-san’s great delight that cute Louis-chan multiplied? No, huh. No, eh. So onii-san is the type who doesn’t sexually desire little girls. Hmm, is that so?”

Observing the opponent who was frozen in place, with his eyes widened in astonishment, Louis linked her shoulders with the existence standing immediately beside her— namely, the same Louis. Within this place, called the Hall of Memories which was separated from reality, Louis was merely an existence of a Witch Factor possessing no flesh body and a Soul joint together, other than that, it rather seemed that the respective names of the three siblings corresponded with the Three Great Witch Beasts, though that, well, did not matter.

Anyhow, separating the Witch Factor into two, Louis Arneb multiplied into two.

This was a stunt perhaps Lye and Roy, who feared losing their selves upon the utilization of Solar Eclipse, those two were not capable of. To know it was possible to duplicate oneself, also tied together with forfeiting the true essence of one’s real self.

However, that did not apply to Louis, whose self had been established as vague from start.

It was possible to have one Louis, two Louis, and so on.

With this, Louis Arneb obtaining Natsuki Subaru’s Authority was.

‘—’

“Eh? What?”

The juvenile, the receptacle of the Witch Factor, declared some words.

Upon glancing at the juvenile, aside from the glamour called Return by Death, simply feelings of love welled up. Finding that annoying, Louis abandoned the Memories emerging to the surface.

Upon peeling them off of her own Soul, she discarded and abandoned them with the notion of them being useless.

—No, that was not simply a notion. Truth be told, they were indeed useless now.

All of the Memories had been mere fillers until the greatest life was discovered, naught but side dishes. However, Louis Arneb had finally reached her full course.

” “—If we think of doing it, then we can do anything.” “

That is why, she shall tread onto this path.

Eating into Natsuki Subaru, from the interior. Chewing the eaten into Natsuki Subaru, from the exterior, sparing not a single bit—Louis Arneb, shall obtain Natsuki Subaru.

‘—You’ll, ■ ■ ■.’

Until the very end of the end, the receptacle continued saying something.

However, what had it been saying, something like that no longer held any relevance. Licking the sediments stuck onto the Soul with her tongue, Louis inherited the Memories.

And, within the receptacle which had forgotten anything and everything, Louis personally had herself appended to the Witch Factor.

As for the rest—

“As for the rest, it’s fine to simply wait for completion.”

Unremittingly waiting in the Hall of Memories, was something she had grown all too accustomed to.

Problem lied in the usage of the Memories. There was a scheme for stealing Memories once again from an opponent who had already been eaten once. The gourmet Authority did not deem the menu of the same name, the same taste as a separate article in its judgement.

That is why, there present was a need to alter the flavor from the Soul.

Into an article separate to such an extent that it was not possible to recall that it had once been atop the tongue of Louis, of Gluttony.

Anticipating it proves to be the taste of the finest quality, that which Louis Arneb had fervidly awaited.

Hoping it achieves completion into the greatest, utmost, supreme dish.

Looking forward to that moment, whilst licking her lips, and longing—

8

???: “So. Did you get to see what you wanted to see. —Louis Arneb.”

Louis: “Huh?”

Upon the sudden accost, Louis, who had gained awakening of her consciousness, rounded her eyes.

Blinking a few times, she made certain of her location. White environs, white ground and white skies, standing within the world blanketed white, Louis had been making a stupefied expression.

Louis: “…”

Having her hand touch her face, making contact, she made certain of the sensation.

Since there was no mirror in this place she could not take a look, but this sensation was irrefutably her own face. With there not being even any moderate amusements in this place, speaking of things touchable, only her own face, own body counted as one.

That is why, she had touched her face to an extent one would grow sick of touching it. That is why, upon touching her face she had grown sick of touching, she could immediately know in what state her face, her body was.

Just as before. Yes, just as before. —This was, Louis’ own body.

???: “Did you get to see what you wanted to see, huh?”

Slowly, stupefied, making certain of herself was Louis.

With that behavior reaching a point where it could pause, abruptly, the accost now overlapped once again. Lifting her face, Louis looked at the personage who had been standing before her, in front of her eyes all along.

Rather short black hair and stabbing sanpaku eyes, with legs the same length as his body, wearing a shabby appearance was the juvenile.

His name, Natsuki Subaru. The existence Louis herself had become one with as a Witch Factor, and—

Louis: “—Ah.”

—And, the being of unimaginable insanity, wielding the Authority which had the ability to Return by Death.

Louis: “No, NOOOOOooooooOOOOOooOOoOOoooo— ~tsu!!”

Louis opened her mouth, and roared.

As long as the strength remained, as long as the possibility remained, with complete devotion she roared.

Should she have not done that, she would get crushed by the pressure. By the terror, by the menace, by the despair.

She would get snared in the insanity of a lunatic, who repeated and resumed continuing Death time after time.

Louis: “Don’t want to die! We, don’t want to die! Hate it, hate it hate it hate it hate it, hate it hate it hate it hate it hate it hate it! Hate it! Hate i~t ~tsu!!”

Swinging her head, collapsing onto the bare ground, Louis frantically appealed while drawing back.

Assimilating with that existence, Louis had personally experienced Death. She had tasted it. By being taken in by the Soul who practiced Return by Death by her own volition, she had experienced Return by Death first-hand, which turned back even time.

The memories of Death that had been incomplete as merely Natsuki Subaru's Memories.

After all, memories were naught but memories. The sensational impact of never returning again upon letting go even once of that instant, of that juncture, of that moment, could never be obtained.

That had been, why she thirsted for that. She had thirsted, for what flavor Death had.

Even if Death had been something less vivid than what Louis had expected, using the Authority that goes by the name of Return by Death, she could gain sufficient change with the right to walk a life in which redoing was a possibility.

That, is what she believed. —Until she herself, tasted Death that is.

Louis: "Something like that… something like that, can never be withstood! That anguish! Sense of loss! No way can it be withstood! Impossible! Impossible impossible! Absolutely impossible! Hate i~t!"

Not even once, had she possessed a way to die comfortably.

Not even once, had she felt Death to be luscious.

Not even once, had she wished to die on her own volition.

Natsuki Subaru had tasted that greater than twenty times, and had replayed that.

Louis: "Someone who can withstand that, is not human! Monster! A monste~r ~tsu!"

She could not. No way she could.

Louis had indulged in a great number of lives, affronted all kinds of Souls, and had searched a life of her own.

She believed she had possessed the right, the privilege, to do so.

That is why, she stretched her hands even into the Soul of Natsuki Subaru— the consequence, she got her naive ■ shattered.

Because—

Louis: "—The human heart, cannot withstand something like itself dyi~ng ~tsu!!"

Want to become, happy.

Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy.

Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Want to become happy. Wanted— to become happy.

Wanted to become, happy.

That was, the wish Louis Arneb had envisaged all along, for the whole time.

Trampling upon all aspects of everything, she possessed the right to exercise her power for the purpose of acquiring the greatest life. Louis had remained, believing so without any pangs of conscience whatsoever, until today.

That, that, that, that premise, crumbled.

Wanted to become, happy. However, right now, the wish right now, was different.

Louis: "Don't want to die."

Don't want to die.

Don't want to die. Don't want to die. Don't want to die.

Don’t want to die don’t want to die—.

Subaru: “That is why, when you were trying to eat me, I told you.”

Her arms hugging her head, cowering, shaking her head in fear, desperately trying to protect herself was Louis.

In close proximity to that Louis, immediately above Louis, who did not raise her face, onward came a voice descending.

She did not want to listen to even that. Listening was terrifying. However, something which may befall upon her due to not listening was terrifying. —Dying was frightening.

That is why, she had no choice but to listen.

And, whilst looking down upon Louis curling herself in fear, the voice continued.

It’s preface, saying you had been warned—

Subaru: “That you’ll, definitely regret it.”

Chapter 76:
The Hell Named Oneself

1

"…"

—With the young girl who had experienced Return by Death and was sobbing with her hands on her head before his eyes, Natsuki Subaru intently stared at his own palm.

It was not as if he was feeling hurt after having been called a monster, after having been spoken ill of.

That he was crazy. That it was impossible to withstand, he agreed with those notions as well.

Subaru himself, had died countless times until now.

He was aware of something as basic as those experiences being unordinary. But he had simply gritted his teeth, and endured it.

Believing with all his heart that it would be better for him to suffer than the death of someone aside from himself, a friend or an acquaintance, people whose names and faces he did not know, his precious comrades or the people he loved.

That was—

Subaru: "—Yeah, I sure am amazing, right, Natsuki Subaru."

Tightly clenching the fist he had been gazing, Subaru Sang His Own Praises from the bottom of his heart.

He had been commended, through loose-lipped logic impossible to be held true. Such words had been used as if to console oneself, or for encouraging oneself.

However, the Singing His Own Praises just now had been different.

The Memories and Real Experience which had observed the existence named Natsuki Subaru terribly objectively, were commending the path oneself had walked until now.

Subaru: “Dang. I’m unexpectedly a pretty big deal, huh.”

And that was something which ‘Natsuki Subaru’ , who had lost his Memories and had returned to the starting point of being summoned into the different world, and ultimately reached this point after taking a deep read of the Books of the Dead, could also be told.

Starting from being ignorant with regards to the different world, accumulating personal experiences of Death sufficient to equal the single year Subaru had lived through, and had returned without letting his heart shatter into pieces, impressively.

Thanks to that, the lost Memories and the Memories thereafter had been unified.

Subaru: “Meili, Shaula, entrusted to me, and I will take responsibility for them.”

Meili, for whom murder had become a habit, and had locked herself into a dark future.

Shaula, who had been liberated from a vain wait which lasted for four hundred years, and wished to continue the blessed present.

Subaru: “Ram and Julius, both of them sure act unreasonably. For those two to be doing that, that’s quite a feat.”

Ram, who already knew the best possible option, and displayed prudence more reliable than anyone.

Julius, who had lost his own resort, yet embraced faith and still resumed holding the sword.

Subaru: “Beatrice and Echidna, I’ve really been a bother to them as well. Geez, I’m such a…”

Beatrice, who dedicatedly supported Subaru, and noticed the limits of his heart before anyone else.

Echidna, who was utmost suspicious regarding Subaru's amnesia, and had granted him forgiveness at its extremity.

"…"

And, no matter if he lost his Memories, no matter how many times he redid, he ultimately returned to the path of being drawn towards you.

He wanted to do that. He must do that. He could not think of any other path.

That is how much, you are—

Subaru: "—EMT."

With love and certain tranquility on his lips, Subaru raised his face.

And looked at Louis, who still had her face covered and was shivering.

Subaru: "Hey."

Louis: "Eek ~hk!"

Subaru: "…You're too scared."

Subaru scratched his cheek with a single finger upon her being excessively frightened by a single call.

She was a young girl with an outward appearance which could unobjectionably be called young. The form of that young girl shivering in fear, desperately rejecting the world was a sight heavy to the chest. It seemed she had been endowed with something akin to fleeting fragility which would make one thoughtlessly extend a hand to her, by birth.

Surely, an attainment of the nature to undo the opponent's vigilance and crawling into their interior. —That could perhaps be, a crystal pure like a child that had been coercively refined.

That Louis Arneb, who did not know of the world, was like an innocent, pure child.

However—

Subaru: "—Louis Arneb, you lose."

—Natsuki Subaru shall not forgive Louis Arneb, who was sobbing like a child.

"…"

Louis widened her eyes, frozen, upon the verification of defeat that had been slammed right before her.

Whilst witnessing fear fill her eyes like ink spilled on a white sheet, Subaru's heart yet remained peaceful like the calm at sea.

The world was not filled with problems that could be ignored simply because of not knowing. And the deeds Louis or her siblings had committed were countless inhuman and demonic atrocities.

It was not as if she did not get a chance to know. Through the Memories of others, she must have also had a chance to come in contact with human emotions, likes and dislikes and learn from them.

However, what she absorbed from there was not something akin to affection for others, but a further dusky, grisly desire, and the conduct of trampling upon and spitting on the effortful lives of others.

Perhaps the fault was that of her teachers. Her elder brothers, had been bad role models of her life.

However, it was her decision to never use any chance to return back from the mistaken path.

Subaru: "You may know as well if you were a part of me. But the ranks which you all… Sin Archbishops name yourself as is common with the seven deadly sins. "Seven deadly sins" is a pretty English term for chuunibyou purveyors, but there also exist the "Seven heavenly virtues" which are something close it."

The seven deadly sins, Pride Envy Wrath Gluttony Sloth Lust Greed.

And the seven heavenly virtues, Chastity Humility Temperance Patience Diligence Charity Kindness.

If the seven deadly sins were karma impossible to be sundered from humans as long as they live, then these were seven conventions which mustn't be forgotten in order for humans carrying the burden of those sins to live with others.

Because they respect that, humans can live with other humans.

Subaru: "But, you all… you, violated that."

That is why, the Sin Archbishops, Louis Arneb had become an unforgivable great evil.

Louis: "Eek, eek, eek…"

The frightened, curled up Louis was struck with Subaru's words and was shivering as if she had experienced agony.

The slightest effort of others, of the world connected to fear. Subaru was also aware of that sensation.

Having tasted the other-worldly sensation called Return by Death, in a situation of not knowing how to surmount the obstacle however much one may Die, even the sound of dry leaves swaying in the breeze seemed fatal to life.

Because he remembered that feeling akin to the soul being frozen, Subaru closed his eyes.

And,

Subaru: "Louis Arneb, you lose."

"…"

Subaru: "So, recognize that and release anything and everything."

Once again, Subaru repeated her defeat such that she could hear it herself. On top of that, he pushed a firm demand toward the young girl, who remained silent upon hearing that.

The return of Subaru's own Memories was due to the chance meeting between Natsuki Subaru, who lost his memories, and Natsuki Subaru of the moment immediately previous to his memories being robbed— since his advance through the different world was replayed in the Books of the Dead, he was able to restore his own memories in the from of tracing them back.

In the form of re-experiencing the stolen Memories by utilizing the Books of the Dead.

And fulfilling the unification of Subaru before and after losing Memories, the result was the successful second advent of Natsuki Subaru.

As it's byproduct, Louis, who had gotten into Subaru in the form of a Witch Factor, had been forced out as a foreign substance. However Subaru had witnessed with his own eyes, her self-indulgent treatment of the stolen Memories of freely bringing them out and peeling them off.

If that was possible then a method to save the people who had their Memories, their Names robbed would be—

Subaru: "If we think of doing it, then we can do anything is what you said, right. Then…"

From being conceited and bragging about her own abilities, she had even succeeded in a stunt like splitting the Witch Factor into two.

Since she had achieved that, then surely it wasn't impossible for her to cancel out the effects of her own Authority. If that, that alone, could come true, then perhaps—

—It would be possible to recover the people who got their Memories and Name stolen, to recover Rem.

Subaru: "Then, release all of the people you've eaten up until now. If you do that…"

Louis: “…Do that, then what?”

“…”

Subaru articulated powerfully, but Louis shortly intercepted that voice.

Louis remained on white floor in the posture of pulling her knees towards herself, making her long, long golden hair spreading out on the floor blanket herself, she was glaring at Subaru through the gaps of her hair.

What dwelled in her eyes, was the sole unquestionable hue of fear.

Louis: “Do that, then what?”

Repeating, Louis piled up the same question yet again.

Subaru had been caught off guard by her retort for a moment, but got a hold of himself immediately after she displayed her stance of conversation. Far better than her not talking due to fear.

He must accept the words head-on and fumble around for a compromise plan that could change the situation.

Subaru: “Release the great number of people, you have eaten. If the Names return, then even the honor of the people who’ve already died can be restored. The people who are alive, can even reunite with their families. If you would do that, then I will let you…”

Louis: “—Off the hook, you say? If we do that, then onii-san will let us off the hook? Off the hook, you say?”

His words intercepted yet again, Subaru felt daunted.

Viewing that reaction of Subaru’s, Louis said “Hah” and opened her mouth bearing sharp fangs,

Louis: “That can’t be, isn’t it! That isn’t possible!”

Energetically lifting her face, Louis shouted with a blazing glint in her eyes.

Her two eyes glaring at Subaru, they immutably remained soaked in fear, twinkling darkly.

With those dark twinkles in her eyes, Louis forcefully rocked her body back and forth,

Louis: “It isn’t! It really isn’t, it isn’t after all, it indeed isn’t, we’re telling you it isn’t, as it isn’t, as we know it isn’t, that’s why! Onii-san will not let us off the hook! Absolutely certainly! After all”

“…”

Louis: “Onii-san, destroys his enemies! Absolutely crushes them until the very end of the end! Without any exception! Completely thoroughly! Closes it with a perfect game! He can do that! Then there’s no way he wouldn’t do that! There’s no point in him not doing that!”

As if having heard a first-class joke, Louis ended her silence and let her emotions explode.

And to Subaru, Louis’ outbursting form was visible as terribly distant, minute.

Louis’ facial expression was disordered, trying to laugh, trying to be angered, trying to be doleful, and baffled by the notation of fear not present in any of those, she was perplexed and was imploring.

“…”

The gateways of all of Louis’ surging emotions, all directly connected to Fear.

Regardless of whether they began with delight, rage or sadness. Knowing that all would ultimately lead to Fear, for what should she be delighted, be enraged, be saddened.

Even if she were to believe, that conclusion led to Fear as well.

Subaru was more than sufficiently aware of the ingrained nature of Louis’ rejection. Cursing the entirety of the world, being flung into a storm of suspicion and distrust, becoming trapped in a sensation of being forbid into the slightest movement.

That was, the hell named oneself which Natsuki Subaru had also experienced.

What pulled Subaru out of that hopeless hell, was surely because there had been someone who held his hand, and that warmth never let go of Subaru.

That was, the silver-haired young girl who had saved Subaru's life, his heart when he had first arrived in the different world.

That was, the dressed young girl who strived to protect Subaru when he had been betrayed by anything and everything.

That was, the blue-haired young girl who gently made Subaru realize when he sought to abandon everything.

—That was, the reason why Natsuki Subaru had remained without being prisoned in hell.

"…"

That foundation of heart was not possessed by Louis Arneb, who was drowned in fear before his eyes.

That is why, she did not possess the ability to conquer Fear. —She could never think of Return by Death other than being a nightmarish curse of being dragged into an inescapable hell.

Though quite a clichéd expression, humans cannot live by themselves. That is why, for her to be saved, she, who was caged in Fear, it was necessary for someone to extend their hand to her.

Someone offering their hand, just as Subaru had been offered once.

However—

Subaru: "—I will, not save you."

—Subaru shall not extend his hand, to Louis Arneb.

Louis: "—Ah."

Subaru: "I will, not save you. Neither will I pity you."

Louis Arneb, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, the blasphemer of Souls standing in the white world.

Not matter how sweet an appearance, no matter how miserable and transient an ambience, no matter how luring an attitude of craving being sheltered by adults were she to possess, Subaru shall not forgive her.

The Sin Archbishops had committed sins difficult to forgive. —That was the conclusion, Natsuki Subaru had derived.

Subaru: "I'm sure no matter what I say, it'll never prove to be salvation for you in the first place."

Louis: "Eek."

Louis' distended eyes were filled with naught but terror toward Subaru.

In this place though only Subaru could understand the fear she bore, the very reason for her fear was Subaru himself. In other words, her labyrinth couldn't possibly be opened up.

And upon Subaru's head-on declaration that we won't save her, that he detested her, Louis stabbed her claws into the shapeless white world and whilst desperately distancing herself away from Subaru —

Louis: "We know… we know onii-san's ploy! We had been onii-san after all! That's why, we know what onii-san is going to do… however, we won't let you ~tsu!"

Subaru: "You…"

Louis: "Return what was eaten! Absolutely never! After all, this is our lifeline! If we lose this, then onii-san will be able to kill us! As long as this isn't returned, onii-san won't kill us! Its the other way around, the other way around, completely the other way around! In order to not be killed by onii-san, we, cannot return this! That’s why you kno~w!!”

Howling with a loud voice, Louis turned her palm towards Subaru. Its not as if something was being fired from the fair palm held out. However, Louis’ aim materialized in a different form.

Subaru’s field of vision steadily distorted into white, a change was yielded in the Hall of Memories. It commenced constricting the world, having detected the presence of a foreign substance and seeking to eliminate it.

As a result, Subaru’s existence was extracted out—

Louis: “Enough, we don’t want to be in the same place as onii-san for even a second! Impossible in terms of physiology! Impossible in terms of life! Impossible in terms of destiny you see! That’s why, disappear! The ones who will eat onii-san, will be onii-chan and nii-sama! Either of them can do however they please! No thanks from our side!”

Louis’ decision, infuriatingly enough, was the best possible option for her.

Banishing Subaru from the Hall of Memories and sending him back to reality. And entrusting opposing him to her siblings Lye and Roy instead of herself.

If the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony could choose to share or not to share a meal, then Louis would be able to part ways from the worst platter named Natsuki Subaru. Whether her siblings would bear the same anguish as herself or not, that itself was something her current self did not know.

Subaru: “—Gh.”

It was difficult to hold out.

With not a single thing to latch onto, and with even the ground to stand firm on becoming vague, Subaru was hopelessly the weaker side in this Hall of Memories.

Subaru: “If you, don’t like me doing it… then if you settle this, by yourself…”

Louis: “We won’t go along with that ~tsu! Even if you try to make us kill you, it’s futile! You intend to take us to task through Return by Death ! We won’t let you! Onii-chan and nii-sama, will utterly eat away onii-san! That is, the condition for our victory ~tsu!!”

Unraveling her fangs, Louis scowled at Subaru who tried to hold his ground. He could no longer oppose her will. Comprehending that, he let in a deep inhale.

Afterwards, Subaru’s black eyes directly pierced through Louis—

Louis: “—Eek.”

Subaru: “If your siblings, are your final rope to rely on, then I understand. —I will slash that rope and make you pay. You’d better remember this, Louis Arneb.”

With a single finger pointed towards the frightened, cowering Louis, he resumed.

Subaru: “Everything distressful, everything painful, bear all of it by yourself. —Don’t run away, from the Memories.”

Humiliation and repentance, were all Memories necessary to shape the current oneself.

It’s entirety had become food for the human named Natsuki Subaru, and the Natsuki Subaru constructed by its entirety had reached this point after having stockpiled many a Death.

If Natsuki Subaru was amazing, then that was because humiliation and repentance let him be so.

Subaru: “With that being said, I don’t really want even a part of that shame.”

That was what Subaru whispered whilst being expelled out from a space to its edge, which wasn’t present in the world, with his field of vision turning white as if nothing had been there.

And, the Hall of Memories came untied—

2

And, within the Hall of Memories wherein the form of the dreadful lunatic had been erased, Louis Arneb took in a deep, deep shivering inhale, and confirmed her own pure life.

Louis: “Ah, ah, a~h…”

Her throat, shivering, her lungs, shivering, her heart, shivering, her soul, shivering.

Even Louis, who had indulged in every possible variety of Memories, couldn’t comprehend an existence that repulsive. What was truly frightening about that thing, was it’s inconceivable spirit.

Louis: “Wh, y…”

Whether she could remain as per ordinary, she did not know.

Louis had become a part of that thing, and prior to that had eaten that thing’s Memories thoroughly down to its roots. Slowly crunching the Memories without exception, she had masticated them.

That deed itself was roundabout, as if peeling off the layers of an onion’s skin one by one, a code of action separating that which yielded new life upon each instance of Death into greater than twenty sections.

Before having experienced Return by Death, that deed of dividing those Memories into several portions then eating them was something that made her heart pound with the notion of it being a new experience, but now all she found was incomprehensible fear.

In the first place, why couldn’t the Memories prior to the occurrence of the Summoning Into the Different World or whatever be robbed.

Originally, the power of the Authority of Gluttony was supposed to eat away all of the Memories of the subject until the moment of birth. Yet, what could be robbed from that thing were merely the Memories of this one year.

As if Od Lagna did not assess the Memories previous to that, abhorred them, or otherwise—

???: "—Listen listen, um, isn't this a bit from what was supposed to be?"

Louis: "…"

Suddenly, a voice echoed in the Hall of Memories supposed to have been left alone, and Louis turned around, astonished. However, her doubts were immediately dispelled.

The one who stood before Louis' line of sight, who had turned back, was—

Louis: "Us…"

'Louis': "That's right, us. Because we got the short end of the stick, its us who had been waiting here in vain. Which one will play the trial version of the greatest life by becoming onii-san, was the play environment properly arranged? Came here to report that, is it?"

Whilst saying so, smiling at Louis was the existence exactly the same her— Louis.

Dividing the Witch Factor originally supposed to be one into two, having segregated the Soul despite being the same personage, in the utmost correct sense, another one of herself.

The greatest factor which made that possible must be that Louis did not fear the deterioration of her self, an existence of mere Soul devoid of a flesh body.

That Louis, who was one more of oneself, did not share that personal experience unlike Louis. That is why, Louis found the genuinely smiling form of Louis, to be unordinarily distant.

'Louis': "—? What happened, us. Making such an expression huh. First of all, what about onii-san? Being here means, got into this place by reading the Book of the Dead again, no?”

Louis: “…”

‘Louis’: “Besides, what’s with this being all crouched since earlier? Why be so curled up? Hey, hey hey, the goal was properly accomplished, right? Though we failed on this end, we were supposed to have fulfilled the role, isn’t it. Amazing amazing, got in pretty cleanly huh. Onii-san geez, didn’t take notice at all. Of the us inside of himself!”

Clasping her hands energetically, Louis reminisced the forbidden tryst.

Of course, unneeding of a necessity to mention it, Louis was aware of that affair.

It referred to back when the Hall of Memories got connected to when thinking of investigating the way of capturing the atrocious swordsman, Reid Astrea. Louis then once again came in contact with that thing, which had forgotten anything and everything, and had the circumstances permitted, intended to eat that thing including Louis, who was a Witch Factor.

Though it was an experiment to see if that thing’s Authority, including the integrated Witch Factor, could possibly be successfully plundered by doing that, it failed due to an unexpected hindrance.

She surely never mused having to taste a counterattack by one of the eaten Memories.

However, reflecting on it now, had the hindrance not entered there, then Louis might have become one with that thing by this time.

With that thing—

‘Louis’: “Hey hey, what happened, us! Talk about various more stuff, let us hear it! Saw it, right? Heard it, right? Scented it, right? Touched it, right? Tasted it, right? —Natsuki Subaru’s Authority eh!”

Louis: “—Don’t mention that thing’s name!!”

‘Louis’: “—~tsu.”

Resuming her merry words, Louis stretched her hand. The moment that arm attempted to touch her own shoulder, Louis shook off the arm in accompaniment of exasperation.

Violently, powerfully, with as much rejection as possible, she did, to the arm of her literal other half.

‘Louis’: “…Huh?”

Naturally, unbeknownst to the meaning behind her other half’s action, bafflement was yielded forth in Louis’ facial expression.

However, Louis did not possess the leeway to look back onto that expression of Louis’. Louis hugged the shoulder Others had tried touching, and stepped backwards whilst shaking her head in rejection.

Louis: “No! Nonono! Don’t touch! Don’t come near!”

She was astonished, by her own cognizance.

However, it was her own sensation. It would not turn traitor, like the hell named oneself.

She comprehended. Louis before her eyes, who possessed the same face as herself, who had undergone the same experiences as herself.

The existence supposed to understand her Soul — at present, it was someone other for Louis.

It was unknown, what others will do. They will not protect Louis.

They could become Louis’ cause of death. Baleful enemies who would naught but kill Louis, who did not want to die.

Louis: “Don’t come! Don’t come near don’t come near don’t come near don’t come near ~tsu! Don’t come close! Don’t touch u~s!”

‘Louis’: “…”

Hugging her own body, she was unable to do anything but react in exactly the same way as when she had confronted that thing.

For Louis, who had continued molding her self through the Memories of others in this space devoid of the freedom to even look at a mirror, the sense of foreignity she felt towards Louis, who possessed the same face as herself, was stronger than the unskillful others.

Witnessing Louis repeat denial and rejection like this, Louis reciprocatively shifted her gaze along with the hand that had been shaken off. And,

‘Louis’: “Huh? What’s with that.”

Pertaining to Louis’ rejective response, Louis clenched her hand that had been shaken off. She then looked down onto Louis with a terribly thirstful voice, biting and clanking her fangs.

‘Louis’: “What’s with that. What’s with that what’s with that, what does this mean. With what purpose, with what idea, with what plan with what thought, hey?!”

Louis: “Ee~k ~tsu.”

‘Louis’: “This is different from what was supposed to be ~tsu! What happened, us?! What’s, with that reaction! Attitude! Response!”

The rejected Louis enraged, closing in towards the huddled Louis. Crouching down before Louis, who knelled her throat upon the vigor, Louis grasped the hair of her cowering other half.

Subsequently making her raise her face through sheer force, the two with the same faces glared into each other at a distance that their breaths entangled.

‘Louis’: “It sure is strange. Strange, how strange, isn’t it strange, pretty strange, it is strange, as it’s strange, quite strange, as it’s too strange, as we’re saying it’s strange!!”

Louis: “…”

‘Louis’: “What about the strategy? The plan went well, didn’t it? The plan was to become a Factor and get inside onii-san, and put wickedness to work, wasn’t it? It was a job really well done. Onii-san was frightened, after all! Onii-san completely thought, that ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was the closest person to him!”

Louis made no response to the plan which Louis recited and its progress.

The truth was, Louis and Louis’ plans had transitioned smoothly. Louis experienced Return by Death inside Subaru and stimulated the separation of Subaru and ‘Natsuki Subaru’ by putting wickedness to work.

And whilst staying behind in the Hall of Memories, Louis shall eat Subaru who had differentiated himself from ‘Natsuki Subaru’ and make the Authority her own belonging. A single step had remained.

And even if that had not went well—

‘Louis’: “—No matter how many times, tens of times, hundreds of times! The arrangement was to challenge until the Authority of Return by Death has been looted, isn’t it! What’s wrong after failing a bit! It’ll be fine by stealing onii-san’s Memories again and trying again no matter how many times it takes. Let’s mutually exchange roles and challenge, no matter how many times how many times it takes! Failures, can be recovered from!”

The one to assimilate as a Witch Factor, and the one to stand by in the Hall of Memories, she had intended to accomplish the complete extortion of the Authority by exchanging roles and regardless how many times it would take, without getting tired of it.

And yet—

‘Louis’: “—And yet, to do something like rejecting us, what happened huh!”

Louis: “NOOOOoooo— ~tsu!”

‘Louis’: “Wo, ah!”

With strength poured into the arm which had grasped her hair, Louis gave rise to a screech in agony and fear. Afterwards she shoved the chest of Louis who was before her eyes, making her other half rumble in pain and fall onto her back.

Mutually glaring at each other with eyes of disbelief, a painful silence fell upon the white world. And, whilst Louis remained silent, Louis widened her eyes and,

‘Louis’: “It can’t be… aiming to monopolize the Authority?”

Louis: “…”

‘Louis’: “Since the Authority of Return by Death was obtained successfully, erasing onii-san immediately and aiming to enjoy it by oneselves? Leaving us as is, too.”

Louis: “Th-That’s wrong ~tsu!”

Louis bellowed before the frozen Louis, who had painted a picture of repulsive misgivings in astonishment, in shock. That was not true at all. It was improbable. She had not thought in the slightest bit, to monopolize this.

Something like this, if it was possible to throw it away then she wished to throw it away. However, she could not do so.

For these were the Memories of nobody, but Louis Arneb. Oneself’s own Memories were impossible to be erased. Impossible to be stolen. Impossible to be taken in and out.

‘Everything distressful, everything painful, bear all of it by yourself. —Don’t run away, from the Memories.’

Louis: “Eek.”

So she had been told by that thing just previously.

What was experienced by oneself, what path was walked by oneself, could not be erased. Having certainly taken birth within Louis, that was the history of Louis Arneb herself.

‘Louis’: “This is no joke ~tsu! Something like this, as if it can be excused…!”

She had wanted to become happy. She had wanted to attain a joyful life that was hers alone.

However, the life solely belonging to her which she had attained in an unexpected form smashed Louis’ ■— Heart into pieces, and wounded her to an irrecoverable extent.

Louis was unable to comprehend, Louis fearing the wounds and abrasion of her heart.

‘Louis’: “As if we’ll let someone like you, monopolize our means to become happy!”

Louis: “That’s wrong! That’s wrong that’s wrong that’s wrong that’s wro~o~o~o~ng! That’s not it! That is not it! That’s definitely not i~t!”

‘Louis’: “As if we can believe that! We never thought, that we’d be betrayed by us. As expected of us, isn’t it, us! That’s right. We get it, we get it. Hm hm, we do get it!”

Louis: “No! Don’t get it at all! Don’t get it at all! Don’t get our feelings at all ~tsu!”

‘Louis’: “No, do get it indeed! After all, it is about us. That’s right. If it’s for the sake of becoming happy then we’d be willing to do anything, and must do anything! Joyfulness, is something which keeps on keeps on declining by the slightest thing!”

Louis bounced and joined her hands before her slim chest. And with a magnificent, broad smile, she directed a sidelong glance towards Louis who articulated her rejection in a tearful voice.

‘Louis’: “What if, we carelessly schemed wickedness? If that’s done to us by us, who have attained Return by Death, then no matter how much the struggle we can never win, isn’t it! Amazing! Really put thought into it, isn’t it!”

Louis: “Don’t want to die! We don’t want to die! Don’t want to die don’t want to die don’t want to die~e~e~e~!”

‘Louis’: “Don’t say such utterly obvious lies! Don’t want to die? Why? How come? If it’s unneeded then hand it over to us! What a filthy desire to monopolize… can’t even think that it’s us!”

Louis: “…”

From Louis’ words, she was repudiated being the same existence.

At that instant, Louis felt like she heard the note of something inside of her thirsting, cracking, shattering. She did know, what had been present inside of her which shattered.

Though she did not know—

‘Louis’: “—Natsuki Subaru belongs to us. This, thieving cat.”

Despite not knowing what that thing was whatsoever, it was condescendingly called as a belonging.

Even though the only one who truly comprehended what thing was, was only herself, how arbitrary a thing to say.

—The only one who truly comprehended that thing, was herself alone.

Louis: “—The only one who understands Natsuki Subaru is us. This, foolish girl.”

That thing was fearsome. That thing was repulsive. That thing, was abhorrent.

That is why—

‘Louis’: “—Let us taste it too— ~tsu!!”

Louis pounced, advancing in order to purloin the Memories which made Louis, Louis.

To hand that over, would resort to give the meaning of it being the

Death of Louis Arneb.

Giving the meaning, of Death. —Giving the meaning, of the world witnessed by that thing.

Louis: “Ah, a~a~a~a~a~a~h— ~tsu!!”

Screamed. Screamed. Screaming, screaming, screaming, she screamed.

Continuing to scream, whilst screaming, whilst resuming screaming, whilst continuing to raise a screaming voice—

“—Don’t want to die.”

An exceedingly fierce, meaningless conflict commenced in the Hall of Memories.

A conflict with nobody watching, nobody interested.

Commenced, and ended. —A conflict, devoid of victors.

SETOWI

3

???: “—Ice Brand Arts!!”

The instant those words were fired, she tightly gripped to sensation born within her palm and swung it completely. What had been generated in her hands was a longsword shaped with ice and it’s cutting ability was far greater than that of some incomplete iron sword.

Though she had only just begun practicing the sword, moving her body was her specialty. Swinging the ice sword atop the extended line, she attempted to land a fatal blow upon her opponent whilst sealing off his routes to escape.

However—

???: “Hahaha~! You’re doing i~t! But, this is far from too far from being enough to land, gee~z!”

???: “—~hk!”

The enemy, with his long hair waving about, evaded her fatal strike by seemingly crawling on the ground.

Glaring with his sharp cuspids unraveled, was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony who named himself as Lye Batenkaitos.

Upon hearing the name of Sin Archbishop, something akin to dislike swelled up within her.

That was because approximately a month ago, clashing with a great number of Sin Archbishops in the Watergate City Priestella had led to a large number of settlements, as well as a large number of settlements being delayed, at any rate, led to mountain worth of grave happenings.

Plentiful emotions of sadness or bitterness had been born forth.

Their elimination or solution had yet not been achieved, that is why everyone was doing their best, and yet.

???: “Why, do you all act like this and—!”

Lye: “Why? Why indeed? Why we wonder? Why is it why? Why must it be why we wonder? Why is it what we certainly wonde~r? Why must what be why? Why is what why is why is why eh!”

His teasing words possessed no echo of seriousness, her opponent did not intend to give a proper response.

Sensing that, she powerfully stiffened her cheeks. Being able to converse would be the best. However, should the opponent not comply with conversation, then she shall not hesitate any further.

That resolute exchange, certainly occurred with clarity during that moment.

???: “—Icicle Line.”

Lye: “Wow.”

Accompanying the chant, a sound of freezing space echoed from her rear. Countless ice stakes with sharp tips were born in the air, signifying they were ready to be fired.

Gazing at that, Lye’s composure, yet, remained unchanged. With no strong feelings for that, she merely commenced the offensive abiding by her frozen fighting spirit.

“…”

The count of the fired ice stakes was close to, but no greater than, a hundred.

Submerging the aisle seemingly constructed of stone, the dust of the ice which had impacted the floor, the walls, the ceiling fluttered about and the space frozen white brought immense damage upon the one who had been immensely hit.

However—

Lye: “Sorry, onee-san. We’re tired of seeing that… is something we won’t say, but we have seen it. See, because we are genius after a~ll, we don’t think an attack that has already been seen once will hit!”

Swinging the daggers fastened to both of his hands, Lye laughed, having outdone the terrific attack of ice.

She inhaled in astonishment, witnessing his talent and skill, and having withstood and outdone it as a matter of fact, as he stood completely unwounded. However, if he had outdone it once, then twice, thrice, if that still won’t work, then even more.

Lye: “You’re thinking you’ll be able to win if you do it a hundred times? It will not reach through even after you do it a thousand times, you know?”

???: “Then I’ll just do it ten thousand times! I won’t let you go where everyone is!”

Lye: “Ahaha ~tsu, well that sure is a large scale! Good gracious, how outrageou~s!”

Putting his hand on his forehead, Lye let out a sigh divided into disgust and irritation. Whilst viewing that, she quietly abided by her own words.

Though she had pronounced those words whilst simply going with the flow, she must abide by them.

Thus, the moment she attempted to step ahead and fulfill that—

???: “—Lye Batenkaitos!!”

“…”

From the rear echoed a voice in the aisle that was neither her’s nor Lye’s, leading her to thoughtlessly halt her feet. Upon looking back after being immediately lured by the voice, a shadow showed itself by the corner of the path and leapt into her field of her vision.

That was a black-haired youth with a somewhat nasty look of eyes.

He rushed into the battlefield with a gallant expression, and was looking at Lye and herself, who were sparring in the aisle.

???: “Ah…”

Suddenly, “oh no” was the thought which surfaced in her innermost mind.

Though she must say something, a vacuum was born in her words. This was due to the various emotions which overflowed in face of the rushing youth.

However, before Bafflement was yielded in front of the youth, she hurriedly moved her lips,

???: “Its dangerous so wait! Um, you may not, know about me, but he is the enemy! Leave this place to me! Even though you may not, know about me!”

She wished for him to leave this place, and for him to not think of herself much.

At the very least, right now at the present instant, should she begin considering things aside from fighting, she would certainly burst into tears and cry.

She did not wish to show her weak side like this and trouble everyone.

And yet—

???: “—Its alright, Emilia-tan.”

The youth who had rushed in called her name.

Emotions she could not concern herself with, like anxiety, like sorrow, strummed and sprang within her chest due to simply that, for which she tried her best to make sure they did flow out.

After all—

Subaru: “—My name is Natsuki Subaru. Emilia-tan’s one and only knight!”

Right now, Emilia’s heart was beating with such warmth, such warmth.

Chapter 77:
The Beacon of Counterattack

1

Abiding by his warm emotions, dashing with the entirety of his might, he stepped foot into that place.

Opposite to his heart sending out hot-blooded pulses within the depths of his chest, the outside air had become chilly enough to whiten his exhales, and within this glaciated world, he discovered the back he was looking for.

"…"

His gaze plunged towards the slim, supple back, and his heart voluntarily came on the verge of bursting.

Though affection lighted his chest, he narrowly managed to suppress his impulse. This was no time for him to let his heart explode and die.

Powerfully gnashing his molars, he looked at the face of the enemy opposing on the other side of the struggling back.

Long hair of a dark brown hue, and a crude outfit as though being wreathed in rags. What was the most impressive, outstanding of all, was the revolting glint in eyes that trampled upon the lives of others, and had turned them into literal food articles—

Subaru: "—Lye Batenkaitos!!"

Roaring at the absolute top of his voice, he asserted his existence, and attracted the attention of the opponent.

Even gaining his attention for this singular moment alone, was beneficial. Of course, there lay the possibility of his side sustaining equal blows, but it was nothing if it meant reducing the damage being inflicted upon her.

With affection filling his heart as fuel, he could even fly in the sky right now.

???: “If that could increase our chances of winning, even slightly.”

Halting his feet before the frozen floor, he poured strength into his abdomen and glared at Lye. He maintained a watch at his movements with all of strength, and no matter what move should he make—

???: “Ah…”

Such preparedness of Subaru’s was robbed and shattered by the amethyst eyes that suddenly turned backwards.

“…”

His black eyes and her amethyst eyes intermingled with each other.

The wave of emotions that appeared in her eyes at that instant was enormous, almost washing him away. Her eyes had always, always, gripped his heart and sought to drown it within themselves.

Because he wished to somehow save the entirety of the multiple emotions levitating in her eyes.

Thus—

???: “It’s dangerous so wait! Um, you may not, know about me, but he is the enemy! Leave this place to me! Even though you may not, know about me!”

His eyes twinkled upon seeing her call for vigilance whilst swaying her hands in panic.

Delayed by a beat, he gulped down the meaning behind her words. —The Memories of being told this very same thing were certainly present within him. At the same time, he comprehended the turn of events.

And, he truly thought. —That he was glad to have been the first one to reach this place.

He knew what he ought to say, how he ought to call out to her.

Furthermore, the thought of how he wanted to call out to her arose.

Subaru: "—It's alright, Emilia-tan."

Sorry for causing problems for you, for making you worry, for making you wait.

Wielding those sentiments, though unbefitting for this place, he nodded whilst loosening his lips. And whilst looking at the young girl, whose eyes grasped comprehension by the few words he had said, he resumed.

With a finger of his right hand pointing towards the heavens, he posed with one hand on his waist.

Though there was no need for him to be doing this, doing this enabled him to solidify his resolve. For that purpose—

Subaru: "—My name is Natsuki Subaru. Emilia-tan's one and only knight!"

Emilia: "Subaru— ~hk!!"

Subaru: "Bah?!"

The instant he declared so with a determined, smiling expression, the silver haired young girl— Emilia dashed towards Subaru with fearsome velocity.

Colliding, Subaru was thrown backwards but he somehow supported Emilia's frame. No need for concern, she was light as an angel's feather. No problem at all.

But if there were to be something labelled a problem—

Subaru: "E-Emilia-tan?! This is so sudden I'm freaking surprised, and you're also super light and smell so nice! Did you change your shampoo?!"

Emilia: "Stupid Subaru! Geez, you're rea~lly so stupid! I was so, so worried! Yet just like that… stupid! Stupid stupid!”

Subaru: “Wow you’re really calling me stupid an astounding number of times! Well, I can’t make any excuses…”

Subaru was overwhelmed as Emilia pressed him with widened eyes within his arms. Since he was meanwhile also glued together with Emilia, Subaru’s heart was a total mess and even his vocabulary crumbled.

Putting all this aside, Subaru reluctantly parted, grasped Emilia’s slender shoulders and distanced her body.

Subaru: “I’m sorry for making you worry. But, I’ve returned… I’ve been revived? Restored? Or should I say, I’ve become the complete Natsuki Subaru, either way, it’s alright, so.”

Emilia: “Ah…”

Subaru: “I’ll leave all of Natsuki Subaru in the past. —This is Natsuki Subaru’s explosive birth.” “1”

Energetically talking on and on, he forcefully attempted to exert Emilia’s relief. However, in the midst of this plan of Subaru’s, Emilia blinked and lay a single finger on his chest.

A ticklish, gentle sensation. Subaru involuntarily shivered.

Emilia: “Did you, properly become one?”

“…”

Emilia: “Because, even the Subaru who didn’t have memories, was Subaru. So, even if Subaru remembers everything now, that Subaru, who worked his hardest and put his life on the line even for the short while he was here for, was…”

Subaru: “—Yeah, hm. It’s alright.”

Whilst touching his chest, Emilia affirmed Subaru’s footsteps with faltering words.

There existed a Natsuki Subaru who, due to the unification of Memories, could be interpreted as having become one or even having disappeared, and a time wherein their hearts were touched by him also existed within them.

'—Yeah, thus, it was simple.'

Subaru: "The fact that I was within myself, and within Emilia-tan, certainly remains even now. So, it really is alright, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "…Hm."

Subaru: "So please expect great things here onward from Perfect Natsuki Subaru. With all the frustration piled up in this time of turmoil as the trigger, let's & go towards a bright future!"

Emilia: "Sorry, I have no clue what you're saying."

Emilia shook her head and responded, as Subaru smiled with a single finger upraised.

This unkind attitude of her's was also so lovable and something he eagerly looked forward to, Subaru would prefer to spend countless minutes, countless hours, countless days just messing around with Emilia like this, but—

???: "—About time you kno~w, had enough of your moving conversation?"

Saying so, raising his voice and calling out to the timidly touching Subaru and Emilia, was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony with a devious, malicious, vicious smile.

But Subaru raised his eyebrows, in response to the fact that he did not launch an attack in this interval.

Subaru: "Yeah. I didn't think you'd wait so conscientiously. Did you become contrite?"

Lye: "Become contr"eat" you say, that would be outrageous ~tsu! It's just that, you know, we are Gourmet you see~. From onii-san's perspective that'd be what you call gourmet? A~s one who knows the delight of meals, wanting to be pro~perly attentive to the setting of the table is what it's about. If the table is untidy then it's a kill-joy. Isn't that right?"

Speaking of table manners difficult to apply practically, Lye laughed with a shrill voice in a strange and frivolous manner. Whilst listening to the ear-hurting voice of his laughter, Subaru gave a deep nod.

And,

Subaru: "I see, makes sense. I completely thought…"

Lye: "Completely thought?"

Subaru: "That you got all afraid, considering how ugly of a shape your little sister was left in."

Lye: "—~tsu."

The next instant, Lye's expression completely changed from that of having a smile of leisure.

His smile disappeared in an instant, what appeared instead was scorching rage. Abiding by that intense fury, Lye's body kicked the frozen aisle and plunged ahead in the blink of an eye.

Lye: "What would 'you', know about our Louis— ~tsu!!"

Subaru: "I know nothing. I just arbitrarily had my body be entered by her. I have no idea what she was thinking, nor do I want to know."

Seemingly truly possessing sentiments and love for his younger sister, enraged Lye's dagger inched closer towards Subaru. However, Subaru did not fear the approaching footsteps of Death.

Controlled by violent emotion, if Lye was not viewing anything but Subaru then that was precisely what he was aiming for—

Emilia: "—I'm also here, don't, forget!"

Lye: “Gah, bgh ~tsu.”

Accompanied by a brave voice, Emilia’s beautiful, long legs drew an arc. Energetically rotating it to a large degree, she intercepted Lye’s face as he plunged straight ahead.

The instant of the direct hit, Emilia’s ice battle technique Ice Brand Arts activated and reinforced her toes, which were striking the enemy, with boots of ice as bonus.

Emilia: “U, riya~a~a~a~!”

Pouring strength into her fair leg, Emilia completely swung the leg which had struck the enemy’s frontal teeth. Despite somehow defending against direct damage, Lye’s petite stature was unable to withstand that force and was pushed away, as he slid on the frozen floor and landed towards the interior of the aisle.

Emilia subsequently pointed her palm towards that direction, and the generated stumps of ice mercilessly pursued Louis’ elder brother, having collapsed, icicle dust then engulfed the aisle, seemingly succeeding in inflicting enormous damage onto Gluttony.

Subaru: “That did it! This was a mixed attack of my instigation and Emilia-tan’s adorable intent to kill!”

Emilia: “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

Subaru: “It is a compliment indeed! The best! So cute! I wanna marry you!”

Emilia: “Marr… geez, no messing around.”

With her cheeks slightly red, Emilia’s reaction as she fixedly looked towards him was unexpected. He thought her refute would be more powerful, so the embarrassment rebounded onto Subaru as well.

Subaru: “No no, I’m acting way too merry since having met with Emilia-tan. All messing about comes after the problems have been solved.”

Emilia: “Subaru! I don’t know when another attack will come! So don’t let your guard down!”

Subaru: “I know! Though I’d openly welcome it if this makes for his defeat…”

Straightening out their minds at once, Subaru and Emilia turned towards breaking the deadlock of the situation— Emilia concentrated on Lye Batenkaitos before her eyes, whilst Subaru concentrated on the problems encircling the Pleiades Watchtower.

The five obstacles— even after Natsuki Subaru’s identity problem had been solved, they still remained and exposed this watchtower and all of Subaru’s comrades within it to hazard.

But some conditions had changed. For example, the menace of the shadow that descended as though symbolizing a time limit, swallowing the entire tower and bringing ruin to everything.

If that was—

Subaru: “If that is, the penalty as the way I’ve imagined it till now…”

The event of the shadow swallowing everything, was the reappearance of the catastrophe he had formerly encountered in the Sanctuary as well.

The story behind why that happened was because he had spoken to Echidna within the Graveyard and had unburdened himself by telling her everything about Return by Death. If the happenings occurring in this tower were also of the same kind, then that shadow resetted everything in cases when Return by Death had been largely leaked outside.

In other words, it was surely because Louis Arneb had been within Subaru.

Now that Louis Arneb had been eliminated, and her existence had disappeared from Subaru’s interior, there was around a 50% chance that shadow would swallow the Pleiades Watchtower.

Hence he did not possess the option to rely on that and let the circumstances proceed slowly.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan! I have a plan!”

Emilia: “—! Got it! Then, let’s follow it!”

Subaru: “I haven’t said anything yet though?!”

Subaru arranged the options in his mind and accordingly called out to her, and the next instant came Emilia’s ready consent flying towards him without him having said a single word of explanation.

Subaru was surprised, as Emilia said “It’s fine!” in response,

Emilia: “Subaru’s plan must be one he came up with after thinking with all his might! I can trust it far more than having to think about a lot of things and coming up with an answer here!”

Subaru: “—Ah, damn it! Makes me so happy you’d say that!”

Scratching his head, Subaru powerfully stomped the floor as though in response to the faith that made him feel uneasy. Afterwards, Subaru pointed towards the interior of the aisle, the space filled with icicle dust,

Subaru: “For now, Emilia-tan, another shot at him!”

Emilia: “Aye!”

With an explosive, dynamic sound, Emilia dropped the floe of ice onto the interior of the aisle.

It would be great if this merciless strike made for the finishing blow for Lye, but that would be a dim prospect. In reality, Emilia spilled out a note saying “Ah!” as she widened her eyes upon the impact,

Emilia: “Subaru! The Sin Archbishop from earlier…”

Subaru: “Tch, he’s a tenacious bastard. But there should be no way he took absolutely no damage.”

When Emilia turned backward, Subaru understood from her expression that Lye had erased his form from the course of impact.

He had gotten fed up of that tenaciousness, on the same level as that of a cockroach, but his characteristic of judging the situation to be unfavorable and ejecting accordingly was different from Petelgeuse of aggravated diligence and tactless frankness, or Regulus who did not possess the word "Humility" in his dictionary. —Amongst the Sin Archbishops, Lye Batenkaitos had the greatest survival instinct.

However, it was inconceivable that he would withdraw from the tower.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan! For now, we meet up with everyone else! We need to re-allot the deployments of our personnel! Everyone needs to do their best or this situation won't be broken through!"

Emilia: "Right! But, is it okay if we let him escape like that?"

Subaru: "I'll be honest, I would've preferred if the one from earlier would've finished him off but…"

Having retreated once, Lye would surely make the best use of this time to catch up on his breath as well. In that case, it would be difficult to calculate the necessary time and certainty for striking Lye.

Then they might as well prioritize planned movement in this situation, and take custody of his life.

Subaru: "No need to worry, he won't leave the tower or anything. As he's stimulated a lot because of Louis… because of his little sister. The misunderstanding siscon bastard won't back down."

Emilia: "Sisskon…?"

Subaru: "It means one who is affectionate to their younger sister. Though in their case, it'd be being affectionate to the little sister in a negative sense."

At the very least, it did not seem as though Louis deeply loved Lye or Roy, her true elder brothers, very much on her end. To devote themselves for the sake of Louis without even knowing that, they were either pitiable victims or just role-playing maniacs intoxicated with that duty.

However, ironically, only the unbending distorted ways of the Sin Archbishops could be relied on.

Subaru: “Someone who can adapt to circumstances and flexibly change methods to deal with something, wouldn’t become something like a Sin Archbishop in the first place.”

That was Subaru’s Sin Archbishop evaluation, having unwillingly repeatedly come in contact with the Sin Archbishops.

Hence, it was not easy to track down the dirtily living Lye Batenkaitos. Meanwhile, situations Subaru could not interfere with continued to head towards ruin.

Before that happened—

Subaru: “Emilia-tan! We go where everyone is!”

Emilia: “Mhm, got it! But, I don’t know where everyone is…”

Subaru: “—It is my duty, to SubaNavi ‘em.”

Natsuki Subaru Navigation System.

—SubaNavi for short, referring to Cor Leonis, he activated.

“…”

Queer, deep emotions came to his mind upon the activation of the Authority wherein coexisted familiar and unfamiliar sensations.

Concentrating the whereabouts of his beating heart, he magnified everything within the close range of his radar with his beating heart at the center. That was close to sonar, which grasped the surroundings based on the reverberation of sounds.

But, what he could feel was his comrades’ warmth and fleeting lights, thus it was a restrictive sensation.

—However, that which specialized solely in feeling the existence of his comrades, rather than being an omnipotent might, was presently the Authority of the most worth for Subaru.

Figuring the location of those fleeting lights, Subaru lifted his face.

Just as he had first hurriedly met up with Emilia, next, they shall prioritize meeting up with the members she had earlier enabled to run away.

In other words—

Subaru: "—First, we retrieve my cute partner!"

2

—Through the sensations being conveyed from Cor Leonis, Subaru grasped large sections of the happenings occurring in Pleiades Watchtower.

What he understood through the effect of the Authority was, at maximum, the individual respective conditions of his comrades and a vague sense of distance with Subaru at the center. His comrades' fields of vision could be shared, but he could not grasp their state with clarity.

But still, should they sustain an injury he could substitute for the injury, and should they be burdened with recoil, he could take over the recoil. That was the effect of Subaru's Authority of Greed, and various usages could be mused for it

Emilia: "Subaru, are you okay? You look pale…"

Subaru: "Mhm, yeah, I'm good I'm good. Well, I'm acting strong a bit, but I'm still alright. I can still work hard at this level."

As they dashed through the aisle side by side, Emilia worried for Subaru whilst he let out a heavy sigh. Her voice, like a silver bell, and her amethyst eyes tickled his heart, and Subaru revealed his honest thoughts.

It was agonizing. But he could still endure it. Those were his true thoughts.

"…"

As pointed out by Emilia, Subaru's paleness was also of course due to the chaos that had unfolded with Louis in order to recover the Memories. Mental abrasion is quite difficult to heal, and it is not an easy task to make a worn down heart stand up again.

But, what was presently making Subaru suffer was a much more simple, clear cause. —Ram's inferior physical form, because he had been preliminarily taking up the anguish she had always been experiencing on a normal basis.

Subaru: "Taking up her wounds without permission, Ram is sure not going to be happy…"

It would never sit well with Ram, who actually possessed a strong sense of responsibility, to let others substitute for her own recoil. Should he propose to her saying "I want to shoulder your pain together with you" at her face, she would simply laugh it off with a snort, and in the end stuff steamed potatoes in his nose.

So, he shall arbitrarily shoulder Ram's inferior physical form. He shan't let her refuse.

That is why—

Emilia: "Subaru!"

By the shattered angle of the aisle, as she saw clearly ahead Emilia called Subaru. The meaning behind her call was known by Subaru, whose Lion's Heart was beating.

The comrades that had escaped from the battlefield and taken distance, whilst Emilia preoccupied Lye.

The jet black Ground Dragon, and the blue-haired young girl on its back. Holding its reins was her elder sister possessing an identical face like two peas in a pod, and standing beside her was a little girl in a dress—

Subaru: “Beako!!”

Emilia: “Beatrice!”

Beatrice: “——~hk, S-Subaru and a god-knows-who girl are here, in fact?!”

Beatrice turned behind to look at Subaru and Emilia, who were energetically dashing towards them.

Paying no heed to her astonishment, Subaru and Emilia reached her at almost the same time.

At the same pace, he hugged and picked up the young girl as she shouted “Wakya~”,

Subaru: “Oh, Beako! Beako, you’re so light! You’re so cute! You’ve got such an intelligent look!”

Beatrice: “Wa, wa, wa, wa…”

Emilia: “Look, Beatrice! Subaru remembered everything! Ah, wait, you still don’t know who I am, isn’t that right… but, Subaru remembered! That rea~lly made me so happy…”

Beatrice: “W-Wait, I suppose! Wait, in fact! It’s like both a known occasion and an unknown occasion have arrived, so Betty’s mind is all topsy-turvy, I suppose!”

Whilst being swung around, Beatrice was mutually knocked down by Subaru and Emilia’s words, as she darted her eyes about in confusion. However, she immediately pointed her palm forward, making Emilia shut up, and,

Beatrice: “…Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yeah.”

Beatrice: “Do you, truly, remember everything, in fact? About Betty, about the time you’ve spent with Betty as well, everything?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. Don’t make such an anxious expression.

I remember everything, and if anything can just make up a lot of the stuff too. The historia of everything that happened and didn't happen between you and me."

Beatrice: "No need to make up what didn't happen, I suppose! Agh geez!"

Raised up in his arms, Beatrice sandwiched Subaru's face between her hands. Looking at the silent Subaru from an inch's worth of distance, Beatrice let out a deep sigh.

Her eyes, with a peculiar pattern on them, subsequently quivered,

Beatrice: "Truly, all Subaru does is swing Betty around, in fact."

Subaru: "The contract's condition was that I'd be a contractor who'd never let you get bored, after all. And, you said that I'm no superman…"

Beatrice: "—?"

Subaru: "Looking at it objectively, I'm pretty superman-ly, am I not?"

Closing an eye, Subaru winked and smiled at Beatrice. For an instant Beatrice widened her eyes at his response, but then immediately pouted.

Beatrice: "Don't get carried away, I suppose!"

Subaru: "Let me get carried away. I'm the type who gets things done when I get carried away. Along with that…"

"…"

Glancing sideways, he noticed Ram standing there with a dazed expression. She narrowed her light crimson eyes and looked at Subaru with a piercing— no, stabbing gaze.

Subaru: "Ah, nee-sama?"

Ram: "That was quite the fast snowmelt, isn't it. Ultimately, a pointless fuss befitting of Barusu.”

Subaru: “…Well, in essence, I guess it did last only for a day.”

Subaru couldn’t do anything but smile wryly, upon it all being labelled as a pointless fuss.

In reality, close to twenty deaths that Subaru had experienced, upon thinking of the mental recoil he had undertaken for the purpose of accepting them all as his own, it would be impossible to think that all of the happenings had been a matter of a single day.

From Subaru’s perspective, it felt as if the amnesia had lasted for several years.

Subaru: “But, I’ve come to terms with everything and made it back. The man who gives 150% of his strength for everyone, Natsuki Subaru, pleased to be in your company.”

Ram: “Hah! How nice. Kindly say whatever you would like. However, Ram’s exceedingly benevolent self shall overlook it…”

Subaru: “Overlook it? …Bangladesh?!”

Beatrice: “Kya~, in fact!”?

Ram spoke deeply meaningful words and subsequently paused, and just as he tilted his head upon her words he was blown away by a tail whip that targeted his blind spot coming from the Ground Dragon, together with Beatrice.

As Subaru and Beatrice twirled around, they were caught by a soft sensation. Upon looking, it had been Emilia who halted their spinning. She softly supported Subaru’s body from his back’s side and smiled,

Emilia: “It looks like Patrasche-chan is also rea~lly happy that Subaru came back.”

“…”

Ahead of Emilia’s line of sight stood a jet black majestic figure, exhaling from its nose.

Having gotten a taste of one of its powerful tail strikes, Subaru readjusted Beatrice, whom he was carrying in his arms and,

Subaru: “You’ve always been such a tsundere… no, my bad. I made you worry a lot too. In the first place…”

“…”

Receiving Emilia’s support, Subaru fixed his stance and faced Patrasche, who was looking at him with a sharp glint in its eyes. And, thinking back to the unchanging devotion of the affectionate dragon during the time he was devoid of Memories,

Subaru: “Really, you save me so many times. I love you.”

“…”

Subaru: “…So you’re not going to slap me away like usual, right?”

Every time he made a flimsy confession of love to her, it was standard that Patrasche’s lady-like self would discipline him, but that wasn’t the case with this time’s confession of his. Otherwise,

Beatrice: “Even this Ground Dragon can tell when you’re joking and when you’re being serious, is what it means, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…Yeah.”

Nobody knew when she had gotten so close to it, but Beatrice spoke for Patrasche’s true heart. The fact that she didn’t get struck by another tail whip meant that her interpretation was correct.

Now if Beatrice were to also learn the ability of deciphering and translating, then Otto could finally be dismissed of his duty.

Subaru: “—Rem.”

On Patrasche’s back was Rem, her body leaning on the saddle.

Of course, it shan’t be possible to hear her eternally asleep self’s voice of delight upon the return of Subaru's Memories. However, the emotion that arose within Subaru's heart upon looking at Rem's side profile was different.

"…"

What if, in that white world, persuaded by Louis Arneb's cajolery, the instant he was truly going to fall into Gluttony's poison fangs, had there not been the voice which kicked the hopeless weakling up.

The existence known as her, truly, shan't let Natsuki Subaru loose, even should he forget himself.

That is why, once again, after overcoming a totality of 40 Deaths, he ended up coming back.

Subaru: "I'll save getting lost in thoughts for later. Anyway, my memories are back. I appreciate all of you wanting to celebrate it, but let's clean up the situation at once."

Ram: "Celebrate you say, truly, what an overestimation of oneself. Wonder what happened in this short duration… besides."

Emilia: "—. Ah, me?"

Snorting her nose upon Subaru's lowered tone, Ram then turned her gaze towards Emilia. Levitating in her eyes was usual arrogance, and an equal sense of unease.

It was clear from Beatrice's reaction, but indeed—

Emilia: "I'm Emilia. You don't remember, I guess, yeah…"

Ram: "…The person who let Ram and others escape earlier, that is known. But, that is all, nothing further can be remembered. How do things stand for you, Beatrice-sama…"

Beatrice: "Same for, Betty, in fact… the effect of the Authority of Gluttony, is what it is, I suppose."

At Ram's assent, Beatrice identically lowered her face.

What had occurred to Julius's person in Priestella, had descended onto Emilia's person within this tower as well. With this forming an omnipresent excruciating wound—

Emilia: "Right! I am Emilia, just Emilia. There's lots of stuff I want to say, but I am family who is looking in the same direction as both Beatrice and Ram!"

"…"

Emilia: "If you can just understand that much, then for now, I will be fine. Ever since I got to know that Subaru remembered, I'm feeling rea~lly good."

Emilia flexed the biceps of her fair arms, and stout-heartedly— no, she was not merely acting strong, but truly seeming to fear nothing, smiled. Not only Subaru but Beatrice also came at a loss for words upon her exceedingly confident conduct. Unusually enough, even Ram widened her eyes, unable to suppress her astonishment.

Emilia: "Huh? Did I say something weird?"

Subaru: "…Well, rather than weird, it was super-duper cool."

Scratching his cheeks, Subaru answered upon Emilia's slightly flustered reaction. Subsequent to Subaru's response, Ram said "Indeed" and took a deep inhale.

She steadily affirmed Emilia's conduct and,

Ram: "Emilia, was it. Enigmatically enough, upon looking at you Ram feels the nooks of her mind be awfully uneasy… The same happened, on Rem's instance."

Emilia: "That's…"

Ram: "Everything about you disappearing from the mind and being replaced by a void is difficult, is what it surely means. Though it is difficult to consider that Ram had someone like that other than Rem."

Narrowing her eyes, Ram touched her head with a finger as though tracing Emilia’s disappeared existence within herself. Her words made Subaru remember something out-of-place.

Though Ram may say so, it was unmistakable for Subaru, who had been witness to the two’s relationship from the sidelines, that she cherished Emilia. Although with the vanishing of those spans of time, it was only natural that it would not come to Ram’s mind.

However—

Ram: “The throbbing and aching of the mind Ram feels upon looking at you, is the answer for the relationship between you and Ram. So, rest assured. —Ram, dislikes remaining defeated.”

Emilia: “—. The same, goes for me. We’re going to strike back, absolutely, no matter what.”

Ram: “Indeed, let the payback be a hundred million times greater.”

Emilia: “That many times?!”

Subaru felt Emilia and Ram to be reliable, as the two exchanged fearless smiles.

After all, originally, once the Name was plundered, the victim drowned in isolation as all relationships around them collapsed. However, Emilia did not give in against isolation and managed to retain the core of her heart. Thanks to that, the collapse supposed to commence from her, could not destroy the foundation of Subaru as well as that of Ram and the others.

On top of that—

Ram: “Barusu, kindly give suggestions. However, do not think that just because your forgetful self managed to remember again, all of the missteps so far can be salvaged.”

Subaru: “I know without you having to point it out, but how many things do you plan to point out!”

But, he was grateful that they were willing to be cooperative without having to be convinced.

Anyhow, the dilemmas laid within this tower of the sand sea were far too impending for accumulating trust, explaining the situation, and confronting each one of the problems whilst tying bonds.

Hence—

Subaru: “Let’s obliterate this overeating festival those utmost worst three siblings started with the power of our bonds.”

Emilia: “Yes!”

Beatrice: “Naturally, in fact.”

Ram: “Hah!”

The three parties gave their three respective answers directed towards three of Subaru’s greatest enemies, as he gave a deep nod to all of their words.

And,

Subaru: “—It’s still all over the place, but it feels like I’ve come back home!”

Saying so, he vocalized first and foremost a quiet, yet a valuable and definite deep emotion.

Chapter 78:
The Four Corners

1

Subaru: "…Are you ready? The tower's in pretty bad shape right now. If I were to go out and say how bad it is, it's nearly as bad as playing Othello with all four of its corners taken away from you."

Ram: "That… must be pretty bad."

Ram's expression clouded over as Subaru launched into his explanation, holding one of his fingers up in the air. Quite the solemn look had appeared on the latter's face. Albeit, Ram wasn't the only one who was taking this seriously. Emilia and Beatrice, who were listening in as well, were like that too.

Othello — more commonly referred to by the name Reversi — was a board game in which two players competed on an $8 \times 8 = 64$ board using black and white pieces.

Naturally this was knowledge Subaru had brought with him from his original world. But since it had been relatively easy to recreate the game here, he'd introduced it to the Roswaal mansion fairly early on. It brought a huge stir, with it being extremely well received, especially from Emilia.

That's why he was able to properly convey the gravity of the current situation to them. Having all four of your corners taken away from you in Othello meant that you were already completely lost.

Furthermore, though she hadn't partaken in it much, Ram had literally been as strong as an Oni in the few occasions she'd played, as one would expect from her.

In any case…

Beatrice: "Losing all four corners, an utterly outrageous situation, I suppose… That’s going too far, even as a handicap, in fact.”

Emilia: “I guess even I’d end up becoming as busy as a bee and winning if I got ahold of so many of them…”

Subaru: “Who even says “busy as a bee” these days…”

Emilia: “…! Subaru, can you say that again?”

Subaru: “I will, but later. Later.”

Emilia snapped onto Subaru’s traditional retort, looking somewhat dejected at having her request denied. Although he felt a bit guilty seeing her like that, the flirting would have to wait until later, just like he’d said many times.

Their first priority was to find a way out of the situation they were in. And for that…

Subaru: “The four corners… They’re the two “Gluttonies” inside the tower, as well as the swarm of witchbeasts they’ve called with them. Also, it pains me to say this, but our companion… Oh yeah, I guess it’s sorta debatable if I can call them that…”

Everyone: “…?”

Subaru had been about to mention the fourth corner, but for a split second he’d faltered on what to say next.

Namely because not even he had come up with an answer that would both be simple to understand and properly describe the woman who unintentionally stood in their way as the fourth corner.

He wasn’t so distant with her to call her an acquaintance. That, and their connection wasn’t weak enough to be called bitter enemies either. But, did they share enough of a destiny such that he could call her a companion? At the very least, he could perhaps leave it at them having sort of like a clueless, but very much unsanctioned teacher and student relationship.

Still, how did Emilia and the rest of them view her?

But, as Subaru fell prey to his hesitation…

Emilia: “You said companion right? What’s happened to Shaula?”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “…? Subaru?”

Subaru: “No, it’s nothing. That’s right, I do mean Shaula.”

Subaru immediately acted like nothing was up and nodded back at Emilia. It hadn’t been just her; Beatrice and Ram also hadn’t seen anything wrong with how Emilia had recognized her.

The way they’d perceived her had been the same as Emilia, regardless of whether they had memories of the latter or not. In other words, it served as proof that they viewed Shaula as someone friendly to them.

Subaru: “Was I being an idiot…? Yeah, of course I was.”

Stumbling over the obvious was a bad habit of Natsuki Subaru. Yet, he would reflect hard on things, leveraging them so that he could give it his all; and this, was one of his strengths.

A compliment, for each time he put himself down. Ideally he would give himself a hundred for each time he did.

That much would do. Though the true ideal would be giving himself ten thousand compliments without putting himself down even once.

Subaru: “Anyways, about Shaula… Well before that, do you remember the tower rules? The ones that mustn’t be broken. They were explained before, right?”

Ram: “Yes, they were. We can’t leave without completing the Trials, we can’t break the rules of the Trials, we can’t disrespect the libraries, we can’t damage the tower… I think those were all the violations.”

Subaru: “Yeah, precisely.”

Subaru snapped his fingers at Ram after she'd readily laid them out. Then he pointed down at his feet and swung his arm around, indicating the entire tower.

Subaru: "So, with those rules… The fourth corner shows up when one of them is broken. I don't know which one specifically, but one of them will. Then, after that…"

Ram: "She'll bare her fangs at us, just like she said. —How annoying."

Ram, assuming her typical pose with her arms crossed together, batted one of her eyes shut as she imagined the worst.

Shaula's insane combat prowess was well known to Subaru of course, considering he'd gone through many loops where she'd killed him. But other than him, the rest of them were also well aware of it after they'd been showered by sniper-fire from afar, back in the sand sea.

Beatrice: "That vapid girl is quite strong when she uses those things of hers, I suppose. Even if we're better off than before, where we couldn't do a thing due to being attacked from afar, it's not going to change the fact that things are going to get grim if she turns into our enemy, in fact."

With their arms folded, both Beatrice and Ram frowned, their brows wrinkling up.

The fact that they were so quick on the uptake was a huge help, since he could cut down the time he spent explaining. From all those sullen faces, it was only Emilia that raised her hand. Her face, which was the cutest in the whole-wide world, was still free of wrinkles,

Emilia: "But we'd be going up against Shaula, no? Can't we somehow persuade her by talking to her? Shaula's suuuuper attached to Subaru, so if he tried his hardest, maybe…"

Subaru: "I'd love a peaceful resolution to this, but getting Shaula to the negotiating table seems like a tall order. In regards to her being attached to me…, I guess nothing about that's changed, in a broad sense."

Ram: "Meaning she's going to be primarily targeting you, Barusu. The fact that she's got her targets narrowed down is going to be extremely useful."

It could be perceived as her targeting the weaker members in their camp, but regardless, Subaru agreed with Ram's thoughts.

Rather than facing a situation where they wouldn't know who'd be targeted by the enemies indiscriminately lurking in the tower, it would be easier to come up with a plan of counterattack that involved having Subaru recklessly targeted.

So, putting the issues they were facing in a nutshell…

Beatrice: "…The four corners are: the two Gluttonies, their swarm of witchbeasts, as well as Shaula, who'll come to attack us, I suppose."

Subaru: "Though two of these corners are already being dealt with. All thanks to Beako taking command."

During the time Subaru had spent cowering in the "Taygeta" Library, the smart and adorable Beatrice had taken everyone with her in turn, and got them busy dealing with the damage that had struck the tower.

She'd sent Meili to the balcony, where she could overlook the swarm of witchbeasts. Then, as part of that, she'd also joined up with Ram and Emilia after they'd taken Rem out of the Green Room — Unfortunately though, they'd encountered Lye en-route, which had led to them falling into this situation where Emilia's name had been taken away from her.

Emilia: "Mhmnh, it's okay. Subaru still remembers me, so I'm completely fine with it. Even though he often ends up forgetting about our promises, it still makes me reaaaaally happy that he remembers me properly."

Subaru: "Nnh, what's with stabbing me in the back all of a sudden?"

Beatrice: “It looks to me like it’s just her usual, in fact. That girl seems to know you well too, I suppose. Though not as well as I do.”

Subaru: “No need to fight over me my sweethearts.”

Subaru gave a few nods as he stroked Beatrice’s head, basking in their affection for him. Then, while still steeped in emotion, Ram called out to him with a “Barusu”,

Ram: “You said that two of the corners are being dealt with, right? I know that one of them is Meili holding back the swarm of witchbeasts, but what about the other one?”

Subaru: “…Julius.”

Subaru grabbed his chest in reply to Ram and turned his attention to the beating of his heart.

His “Cor Leonis” power was still going strong. He was naturally taking Ram’s burdens from her. Also, the whereabouts of his companions were being broadcasted to him in real-time.

From those, there was a light that definitely seemed to correspond to Julius. And the place he was at was…

Subaru: “…He’s on the second floor, locked in battle with the enemy.”

Emilia: “The second floor… you can’t mean that…”

Subaru: “Yeah, I do.”

He nodded back at Emilia as she quickly turned pale, before sneaking a furtive glance up above.

He couldn’t see it firsthand, since the ceiling was in the way, but he could most definitely feel the signs of the furious fight that was taking place beyond his gaze.

—Julius Juukulius and Reid Astrea’s rematch had begun.

Subaru: “…”

In the end, it looked like he hadn't been able to avoid a conclusion to it.

After Subaru had fallen to his knees earlier, unable to pick himself back up, Beatrice had taken charge of their companions. The opponent Julius had ended up waging battle with had been Reid Astrea, even under Beatrice's command.

That naturally had been influenced by the fact Roy Alphard — Or rather, Reid, who'd taken over the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony's body and gained his freedom, actively sought its conclusion.

Nevertheless, Subaru had gone through many "deaths" and crossed through many possibilities whether he'd wanted to or not. And that had made him understand something.

—As annoying as it was, fate existed.

No matter what road you followed, the firm, unchangeable reality that lay there was called fate.

The fluctuations of history were so unyielding, to the point it really made you believe things were predetermined. It was almost like the results had already been determined by fate, with all the branches converging there.

That had been the outcome of all of their wills coming together to try and achieve their respective goals. However, precisely because of that, they'd become so closely entwined with each other, that they'd never come apart.

Yet, couldn't it also be said that meant there was no hope ahead?

Considering that the conclusion between Julius Juukulius and Reid Astrea was inevitable, it could only mean that…

Subaru: "Reid should have assimilated with one of the Gluttonies, his take-over should be almost done. Though we'll let Julius settle things with Reid. We're going to deal with the remaining three."

Ram: "Is that really going to be okay, Barusu?"

Subaru: "…? What do you mean?"

Subaru cocked his head earnestly in response to Ram's question. But on seeing him react like that she just muttered out a brief: "Nevermind,"

Ram: "I already know how Barusu goes about things. Looks like I'm losing my edge as well. I suppose we have no choice but to rely on Barusu's proposal."

Subaru: "I don't really fully get what you mean, but you do know I can tell you're making fun of me?"

Emilia: "Huh? No, no, she's just complimenting you. Ram's saying that she relies on you a loooot, Subaru. Hehe, now I'm gonna need to work hard."

Ram: "…I will be having a word with you later, Emilia."

Emilia replied back to the mortified Ram with a "Yessir", a slightly happy trill in her voice.

Despite the situation they were in, Emilia was most likely glad, and found it refreshing that Ram wasn't using honorifics to address her. Now that their master-servant connection was gone, the attitude she was showing Emilia was one of perhaps friends, or maybe a little sister that was always quite a handful.

Ram didn't have the opportunity anymore to play the part of the capable big sister now that her actual little sister didn't require much to handle. Nevertheless, she seemed that way now thanks to the bizarrely happy-go-lucky Emilia.

Subaru: "Anyways, that's it for what's going on in the tower. What we need to do next is sort out the best people for each place. This sorting business is where Natsuki Subaru really shines!"

Ram: "You sure are really humble…"

Subaru: "Humble or not, it's still important work! This is what they mean when they talk about unsung heroes! This is something only I… That's right, this is something only I can do! This is my battle…

Owowowow!!"

Ram: "Just hurry up and start sorting."

Ram slapped his face for spending too long on the preambles. Feeling the pain of the damage he'd received, Subaru looked around at all three of their faces— as well as the earth dragon's, and said: "Are you all ready?"

From here on out, it would be all out war, in its truest sense. It barely made any difference whether you were a human or earth dragon; and in the first place, Patrasche was typically far more useful than Subaru himself.

But if you added Super-Subaru into the mix, their possibilities would explode ten-fold, and then double.

Subaru: "One for all, all for one. All for one, one for all. We can't win without having everyone on board. We can't have even one of us missing. We will start winning if we've got everyone, because we…"

Emilia: "…Because we came to this tower to get back what was taken from us, we won't allow ourselves to lose them."

Subaru: "Exactly."

Subaru gave Emilia a nod with a snap of his fingers before regaining his composure.

Subaru: "So, first things first, Lye Batenkaitos' opponent shall be…"

2

???: "…Barusu."

Subaru: "Huh?"

They began to head to their posts after they'd finished their discussion. However, someone grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and forced him to a halt before he could. Though, there hadn't been enough force in it to throttle him.

There'd probably been a reason why they'd shown such consideration.

Subaru: "It's really not like you to care enough to not hurt me, nee-sama."

Ram: "It's not like I would bother using too much of my strength when looking at a fly trapped in the palm of my hand. This is the same as that… Though, it's not like I would purposely put one there. That'd be disgusting."

Subaru: "Don't just say it and then deny it!"

Subaru shrugged his shoulders at Ram's Ram-like phrasing. Standing in front of him, Ram softly clenched and unclenched the palm of her hand, checking its feel a few times.

Her gestures carried faint traces of bewilderment in them. This was quite the rare sight for Subaru, so used was he in seeing Ram always acting aloof.

It was quite a perk to witness her acting so perplexed and unsure of herself. It was only thanks to this that he could put up with the levels of exhaustion that were threatening to crush his entire body.

Subaru: "…"

Ram's body was constantly tormented by the burden of being "Hornless". Subaru took over this burden when he used his Cor Leonis, which in turn gave her the extra strength that let her operate to her fullest. Cor Leonis was one of their most essential tricks for beating this tower.

Subaru had already given Ram a brief summary of what was happening to her, albeit setting aside the fine details.

Simply put, Ram's burdens were flowing into him, making Ram's body a lot lighter in those respects. However, since it strained him terribly, he desired a speedy settlement to the situation they were in. That was it, more or less.

Ram: "Now that I think about it, since it's just going to be you who's suffering Barusu, I don't really care how long it'll last."

Subaru: "But this is a joint effort between you and me, nee-sama. You must want to get this over as soon as possible when you think about it like that, right?"

Ram: "Yeah. You repulse me."

Subaru: "Don't you think using repulse is going a little too far…"

Though, well, throwing abuse at me is so typical of her.

Subaru accepted that, all the while suppressing the urge to vomit. Ram stared at him, assuming her familiar pose with her arms folded in front of him.

Ram: "…Barusu. I won't be taking it easy."

Subaru: "…"

Naturally, the more Ram moved using the full capabilities of her body, the greater the burden he would need to take, acting as its counterbalance. Even so, if he wanted to keep Ram in this state, he'd need to be prepared to take on all of that extra burden.

Just her standing there breathing was already plenty to make him groan. And that was just the pain she experienced in her typical daily life.

Subaru: "Nee-sama is too kind, huh."

That was how the still sleeping Rem would frequently assess her. He hadn't really gotten it back then, but now he finally understood what she'd meant.

If he were to let himself preface it in typical Ram fashion, it'd be something like: "That's how Ram goes about things".

Ram: "Barusu?"

Subaru: "It's nothing. —Definitely don't take it easy of course. I can tell whether you're in serious-mode or not by how much pain I'm in. What torture it is.”

Ram: “So, you’re saying your plan is the kind where the better I feel, the more you’ll suffer?”

Subaru: “I feel like I’ve just handed the switch to the nukes to the one person I shouldn’t have.”

Then again, if Subaru was going to hand over the switch to the nukes to one of his compatriots, Ram was the only one he’d consider for it.

Subaru: “Otto would be a good bet as well, if not for the fact I’d worry he’d probably slip and accidentally push it… You’re the most reliable in the sense of who’d use it properly nee-sama.”

Ram: “Hah! Flattery will get you nowhere… Listen, take good care of Emilia and Beatrice-sama. I don’t care what happens to you Barusu, since I know you’re always a mess whatever the case.”

Subaru: “Yeah Yeah, I know. And about Rem…”

Ram: “—The one who cares the most about Rem in this world, is me.”

Ram declared that as if she were stating a matter of course. Her crimson eyes narrowed as Subaru’s breath was taken away by the sheer intensity of her words.

Ram: “Let’s just say that it’s enough that you, in your own Barusu-like way, are the person who cares about her the second-most in the world. Leaving it at that shouldn’t unsettle even a single hair on Rem’s head.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, or it’d make me want to die.”

Ram turned her back on Subaru after they’d exchanged their feelings.

There were probably so many things that she wanted to say, words that she wanted to leave him, but she’d quickly changed her attitude, putting an end to them there.

That was truly how Ram went about things.

Ram: “Kindly take care of yourself as much as possible, Barusu. Otherwise, if you die, you won’t be able to see Rem again.”

Subaru: “Yeah, love you too.”

Subaru likewise replied jokingly to Ram’s facetious concerns.

And so, Subaru watched her run off into the distance saying nary a word, before then planting his feet firmly down onto the corridor and regrouping with Emilia and Beatrice who were waiting for him.

Subaru: “Sorry to keep you waiting. Let’s head out as well.”

Emilia: “Yeah, let’s do that. Will Ram be okay?”

Subaru: “Yeah, most likely; she’s Ram after all, so she’ll be fine… If I’d told her to do something really dumb, there’d be no way she wouldn’t have said anything about it.”

Beatrice: “You’ve gone and put a lot of trust in Ram again, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I trust you just as much, and on top of that, I love you way more. Don’t pout.”

Beatrice puffed out her cheeks as if she were saying: “I’m not pouting, in fact!”. Subaru took her outstretched hand and then looked over at Emilia, standing by his side. He wondered if she was worried about Ram going out on her own; however, her face in profile looked only slightly anxious.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “No, it’s nothing. I just find that reaaaally reassuring.”

Subaru: “—. Coincidence as it may be, I actually feel the same.”

Emilia’s words didn’t really have any foundation to them, but for Subaru her words served as a great boost.

Their expectations far surpassed their anxieties. It was far more reassuring to have someone you could entrust, rather than have someone trusting in you. You could better face up against what lay ahead by believing, rather than clinging. Though it wasn't like they'd solved any of their problems yet.

Subaru: "It's only natural to believe in your companions; what's more, you can believe in yourselves relying on them as well. Now's the clearest our view's gotten ever since we came to this sand-filled tower."

Beatrice: "—That look of yours, it's my favorite kind of Subaru, I suppose."

Beatrice looked at Subaru, who'd encouragingly taken over things, and gave him an audacious smile. And then at Beatrice's comment, Emilia brought a hand to her lips with a "Hehe", causing Beatrice to point out Emilia's reaction with a "What's up with that, in fact."

Emilia shook her head and then spoke up:

Emilia: "It doesn't look like you remember, Beatrice, but I was thinking the exact same thing as you."

3

A huge creature was caught by its hind-legs and savagely swung around before being smashed against the walls and floor without relent.

???: "…"

This creature, that was on the receiving end of these monstrous, unfathomable blows let out a hideous wail. A cacophony grated through the air that sounded like the wails of countless babies.

???: "—))"

What was letting off those wretched cries was a repulsive, bizarre-looking witchbeast— One, which in accordance with his own knowledge, Natsuki Subaru had called the Centaur. However, that girl who'd been well acquainted with this kind of witchbeast had once called it by a different name. —The Hungry Horse King.

The Hungry Horse King: “—ッ ッ”

The Hungry Horse King’s massive body was hurled away, causing it to somersault through the sand-tower’s balcony. Having been knocked about by the impacts, the King of the Sand Sea instantly picked itself back up with flames spewing from its mane.

Its human upper-half brought forth two swords wreathed in flame. Using this completely un-witchbeast-like dual-wielding sword art, the Horse King tried to fire off a scorching red blow at the being that had been piling on attacks at it.

However…

???: “…”

A white ray of light pierced the Hungry Horse King as it tried to swing its swords of flame, its fiery mane billowing. The impact caused this massive creature to falter back a fair few steps. However, it withstood it. It had withstood it. And just like that, the Horse King stepped forward again, preparing to launch its counterattack. —But the very next moment, the white ray of light exploded inside its body.

The ray of white light turned into a plethora of white rays that shot out of the Horse King in all directions from the inside out

No matter how resilient a creature was, it could not escape death if all of its vital organs were destroyed within. The Hungry Horse King was no exception to this rule as it brutally perished to the white rays of light.

???: “…”

The slaughter of the woman who’d been behind its death — Shaula — didn’t stop there.

Swinging her braided brown hair about, Shaula powerfully kicked off the floor and leaped across the balcony floor. With light coming from her outstretched hands, she grabbed ahold of two enemies that were obstructing her path — they were witchbeasts that had lizard scales over their ape-like bodies. From there, the light coming from her hands welled forth.

If Subaru would have seen her blow, he would have probably dubbed it a Pile Bunker. The heads of the two monkeys she'd grabbed by the face were obliterated by the white light she'd shot, not even giving them a chance to fight back. She followed up by spinning around on the spot and using her long legs to knock down the monkeys that were bounding towards her. Her toes slammed into their faces, whacking them down to the floor with their heads caved in.

The stage where the battle between Shaula and the witchbeasts was taking place was the fourth floor of the Pleiades Watchtower. Although the outer-wall balcony was built hundreds of meters above the ground, there were quite a few witchbeasts there that had wings, or could easily climb the wall.

She shot down the ones climbing one by one, the balcony soon becoming a sea of blood.

Shaula: "…"

Even after carrying out so much carnage, Shaula wasn't the least bit out of breath.

The total number of witchbeasts that were swarming towards the Pleiades Watchtower was so massive, that it'd be pointless to count them. However, the fact that the tower hadn't succumbed to their avalanche was in no doubt thanks to her overwhelming fighting strength.

Even so, the precarious equilibrium that Shaula was keeping was about to…

???: "…Shaula!"

Shaula: "Ghhhhhhhh…!"

A shrill voice called out her name, but she didn't answer back. With her face contorted in pain, she grabbed a winged witchbeast that was flying towards her and smashed it down at her feet.

She followed up by piercing it with a white ray of light, giving bloom to flowers of red mid-air, successfully putting an end to its pursuit. However, the state Shaula was in didn't change as she drove them away. She clutched at her own face and stamped her feet down onto the floor.

Through the gap between her fingers— Her large-pupiled eyes were beginning to split apart and pulse a brilliant red. Her compound eyes were making their appearance, meaning Shaula was transforming.

Shaula: "Someone… Someone broke a rule…"

With her face covered by the palm of her hands, she met the looming witchbeasts in this destitute state. She fought off their attacks with her long legs, pulverizing their bodies with sharp back-kicks.

???: "This is bad. She's at her limit. Meili! How's it looking on your end…"

Meili: "It's exactly how it looks, I've got my ha~nds full dealing with these flying young'uns! If my naked onee-san becomes unable to fight too, we'll definitely, definitely be running short of ha~nds!"

???: "Guess so. This is looking fairly grim."

Gazing at Shaula's anguish, was a girl with wavy light-purple hair sporting a bleak look on her face; Anastasia — Or rather, Echidna, who was currently borrowing her body. Standing beside her was Meili as well. Her dark blue ponytail was swaying about as she somehow kept the scales tipped in their favor by using her Divine Protection.

The trio of Shaula, Echidna and Meili were the team resisting with all their might to keep the witchbeasts from approaching the Pleiades Watchtower. However, unlike Meili with her Divine Protection of Magic Manipulation and Shaula with her predisposition for pure firepower, Echidna's presence was pretty much worthless.

She was reluctant to go back to Taygeta, but at the same time, she wanted to avoid retreating further into the tower which was in a state of unease, where she'd only end up being an unnecessary burden.

Echidna: "Calm down, now's not the time for that…"

She moved her slender fingers and focused her awareness at the Od inside her — Though strictly speaking it was the Od inside Anastasia's body. Anastasia's Gate had a defect in it, where it couldn't take in any mana. That's why she could only cast magic with her natural Od.

In other words, it was tantamount to cutting Anastasia's lifespan. Therefore, a measure that not even Echidna wanted to take, other than when her life was truly in danger.

But better to take action than just sit around waiting for death. At least, that's what the Anastasia she knew would think.

Everyone had to use the cards they were dealt with, and thus, victory was determined by the way you played your cards.

Echidna: "…"

The change afflicting Shaula was most likely due to something that was rooted in her core. Something that definitely couldn't be overturned, existing as a kind of shackle on her. As an Artificial Spirit, Echidna understood that all too well, considering she was in similar shoes. There wasn't anything anyone could do about one's force of will.

If what she'd said before was true, then the rules of the Pleiades Watchtower had been broken. She needed to act as the Watchtower's keeper to remedy that.

The reason she was resisting so hard was because, in the depths of her heart, she didn't actually want to harm them— Or rather, she probably didn't want to harm Natsuki Subaru.

Echidna: “…It’s ironic.”

Thanks to her staying on as the keeper of this Watchtower, she’d been able to reunite with the one person she’d wanted to meet. Yet because of her continued presence as its keeper, she couldn’t go against the orders to harm him. —Truly the sorrow of being a creation.

In its truest sense, Echidna thought that probably only she and Beatrice, with her also being a creation, could comprehend the pain she was in.

That was why she…

???: “…DRYHAAAAAAA!!”

Echidna caught a glimpse of the silhouette of a person leaping out from the corridor that led from the balcony to the tower, letting out a vigorous yell. Her eyes mutely widened in surprise, her breath taken away from her.

4

Subaru felt shocked the moment he’d leapt out onto the balcony, witnessing the differences between what it usually looked like and now. He immediately realized that a fierce battle was taking place here.

Subaru: “…”

The fourth floor balcony had turned into a sea of blood, with countless witchbeast cadavers scattered about.

This best seat in the house, where you could enjoy an unbroken view of the sand sea, was now dyed in blood thanks to the countless witchbeasts ceaselessly charging at it. If left unchecked, they’d get into the tower and mayhem would ensue.

And, the biggest contributor in preventing this damage from spreading was…

Subaru: “…Shaula!”

Shaula: “Master…?”

Shaula turned around at the sound of Subaru’s yell — Her eyes were about to split apart and divide into her six compound eyes; three on the left, three on the right.

He’d already witnessed this transformation process of hers with his own eyes. It meant that the rules of the Pleiades Watchtower had been broken and Shaula’s time had come to take up her duty as the watchtower’s keeper.

This would culminate in Shaula transforming into the giant scorpion against her will, where she’d then set about annihilating the challengers inside the tower — i.e. Subaru and his group.

That’s why…

Shaula: “Master… Please… Please order me…!”

Subaru: “…”

Shaula: “Someone broke the rules. At this rate… Master… I’ll… end up ki…! If you can’t, you know, before I do that, I’ll… I’ll…”

Shaula clutched her body tightly as she sought Subaru’s orders with a look of desperation set on her face.

Her capacity for self-suicide seemed to have been instinctively robbed from her. What she was beseeching for here was one final push to kill her.

Shaula would throw away her life without any hesitation if Subaru were to say it. You could safely say that the threat of the giant scorpion would be gone, so long as he gave the command.

Thus, Subaru nodded his head firmly,

Subaru: “Shaula.”

Shaula: “Y…es… If it’s for you Master, I’ll…”

Subaru: “I’m getting sick of telling you this, but I ain’t got a clue why you're calling me Master."

Shaula: "—hk"

The instant Subaru replied back to her, Shaula's compound eyes became tinged with despair.

After four hundred years of waiting in vain, she'd finally been able to meet him again. But to have that denied by him, and after all that, even have her last wish trampled on, led to her feeling as frightened as a child.

Subaru took a deep breath, and then let it out as he gazed on at her trepidation.

Subaru: "That's why we'll talk about whether I'm your Master or not later, as well as if I'll admit to it."

Shaula: "Eh…"

Subaru: "I'm not going to tell you to die. There's no way I'm going to let you keep crying. There's absolutely no way I'm going to let your four hundred years end here."

He'd spent quite some time scraping up the "Memories" he'd temporarily lost, so he knew all too well.

The patience people had in this world was insane. Four hundred years they'd spend waiting in earnest for someone. He really needed to drag out these people they wanted to meet, even if it meant grabbing them by the scruff of their necks.

Subaru: "I'll just do it myself! As if I'm going to willingly do what someone else tells me! Bring it on, oh inevitable fate!"

Shaula: "…"

Subaru raised his fist up above him while he firmly declared that, leaving Shaula speechless. Yet at the same time, the unbearable urge going on inside her seemed to be about to burst.

But, at least in that precise moment for her, that which mattered weren’t the rules of the tower or the explosive urge to swell up from within.

Shaula: “Master… I love you.”

Such it would seem were her emotions of uncontrollable love she held for the person she’d longed for all these four hundred years.

Shaula: “…”

Shaula’s transformation truly began straight after she’d proclaimed her love.

Her pale, slender hands swelled up, and morphed into giant pincers. Her feminine, voluptuous body burst open, scattering flesh and blood which then formed back, like the rewind on a tape, re-molding her body anew. A jet-black shell grew there as her bright red compound eyes glared down at the world. Her many legs pierced into the floor, and so the warden of the sand-tower was completed—.

Shaula: “—))”

The foreboding figure of the giant scorpion let out a shrill warning cry at the rule-breakers who’d violated the tower rules. The first thing its compound eyes settled on was, ironically enough, the black-haired young man that the previous version had obsessed over.

It aimed at him, ready to unleash its devastating blow…

???: “—HIYAAAAAAAA!!”

—Yet a thunderous flying kick drove into the giant scorpion’s body from the side.

The kick carried a tremendous amount of power, enough to lift the giant scorpion’s huge body up from the floor and blow it back. It hurtled across the stone floor, collecting witchbeasts on its way, before flying off the edge of the balcony out into the skies over the sand sea.

However, the giant scorpion wasn’t going to just do nothing about it. She hurriedly thrust her outstretched stinger into the wall of the watchtower, tossing its massive body up, twisting its body midair as it desperately tried to get back to the balcony.

Subaru: “…Murak”

A single chanted word was what prevented it from making its way back.

This direction-imbued mana interfered with the reality around them, bringing about effects into the world that wouldn’t normally occur on their own. This time, its effect had been to block the giant scorpion’s return.

The scorpion was caught by a gust of wind as it desperately tried to land on the balcony. Its body was swept back by the sandy breeze, sending it far off trajectory.

How strong a turbulence would it have to be to blow away the scorpion’s colossal body? It was utterly massive, weighing at least several hundred kilos. Though, things weren’t like it seemed.

Murak was a kind of Yin Magic that changed the gravity of its target.

To put it briefly, it was quite natural that its body had ended up unable to move as it normally did, considering it now weighed as much as a speck of dust. That’s all there was to it.

Shaula: “—ッッ”

The giant scorpion let out a pained cry before being thrown back once again from the balcony. It quickly swung its stinger in an attempt to snipe those in the tower, having given up on getting back.

But that came a step too late.

Meili: “Hanemogura-chan!”

The girl’s imposing command gave way to a rush of blows that hurtled towards the giant scorpion as it blew away in the breeze. witchbeasts, with what seemed to be bird feathers sprouting from them and most of their heads morphed into a horn, dove towards her.

One by one, they shot themselves straight at the scorpion's shell. And although they didn't damage it, they were still able to push her further and further away with each impact, keeping her away from the tower.

Shaula: "…"

Even as great of a scorpion as she was, she wasn't going to be able to shift her body weight around without something to support her. Just like that, after the wind had blown her away, the magic was canceled, making her fall head over heels towards the ground.

They were hundreds of meters up from the ground, but she wasn't the kind of opponent who'd be done in by something like that. Though, it sufficed as a means for buying time, thus he would make use of this brief reprieve.

Subaru: "Meili! Echidna!"

Echidna: "Natsuki-kun! You've pulled yourself together… yeah?"

Echidna looked up with a frown as Subaru rushed over to her. Then with a pensive look adorning Anastasia's face, she continued her words,

Echidna: "Have you perchance gotten your memories back?"

Subaru: "This is going to save me a lot of time! Though how did you know?"

Echidna: "It's obvious. Otherwise Beatrice wouldn't be sporting such a proud look next to you."

Echidna jerked her chin at Beatrice, who was looking rather smug as she held Subaru's hand.

Indeed, it was plain as day that Beatrice's mood had lifted for the better. Plus, the fact that she couldn't hide this show of emotion of hers was really lovely.

Of course Echidna's insight was superb as well, make no mistake about that. Following from it, she shifted her gaze to look behind Subaru — at Emilia — who'd given the giant scorpion a flying kick earlier.

Echidna: "And this girl I don't recognize is…?"

Subaru: "It's due to Gluttony's authority. She's a victim to it, just like Julius is… They're all forgotten, other than by the person themselves. Her name is Emilia. My tough yet adorable princess."

Echidna: "I appreciate you getting me up to speed so quickly, even so, the tower, both inside and outside, is an utter mess. Would you mind if I were to ask you what we're going to do about it?"

Subaru: "You can, I've already got an answer ready for that."

Subaru gave her a deep nod. Behind him, Emilia spread her arms out and sent countless shards of ice up into the air. She waited a moment and then unleashed them all, their ferocious power tearing through the witchbeasts soaring through the skies, as well as those on the ground.

Although Subaru couldn't see it from where he was, they must have also pierced into the giant scorpion who'd fallen beneath. Yet her attack had only been a drop in the ocean with all these witchbeasts they had in front of them…

Subaru: "Echidna, you're going to take over inside! First, you're going to meet back up with Julius on the second floor where he's fighting! I've told Emilia what to do after that!"

Echidna: "—. I have no issues leaving together with her, but what are you and Beatrice going to do?"

Beatrice: "Our role is already set, in fact."

Echidna hesitated for a moment before giving her answer. Beatrice replied back to her before raising her eyes up in admiration to look at Subaru's face in profile, firmly giving his hand a squeeze.

Beatrice: "We're going to deal with that giant scorpion here, I suppose. We're going to have to go easy on her, so that we don't accidentally kill her. Jeez, what a bother, in fact."

Subaru: "She sure talks big doesn't she. That's my Beako for you."

Beatrice: "Thbptttttttt, I suppose."

After voicing out her boasts, as if trying to rouse both herself and her contractor, Beatrice stuck her tongue out.

Echidna's eyes grew wider as she witnessed their exchange, followed by a shake of her head. Rather than wasting time arguing, it'd better for her to believe that this was the best way to go about things, and commit to it.

Indeed, it was so typical of Anastasia to have that instinct that allowed her to make split second decisions.

Echidna: "There's no doubting that your opinions have come as a great help for us pretty much everywhere inside this tower. That's why… it seems to me that handing this place over to you would give us our best chances of winning."

Subaru: "I feel honored. Though I can't help but feel bad that you've ended up with Echidna's name."

Echidna: "Regarding the matter of the deep influence my Creator has, I'd like to find an opportunity to have a proper discussion about this after we settle things. …Is there anything you want me to pass on to Julius?"

Subaru: "…"

Echidna tacked that question onto the end, just before she turned her back to leave.

Subaru could still sense Julius fighting a floor above them using the effects of Cor Leonis — Now that he thought about it, this meant that he'd met back up with all of his friends inside the tower, bar

him.

Given that Julius had also been really worried about him when he'd lost his memories, Subaru wondered whether he needed to tell him that he'd gotten them back. However…

Subaru: "Nope, not really."

He had no words that he needed to tell Julius Juukulius who lay locked in combat with Reid Astrea.

After all, Subaru's plan had been to assign the best people to their most suitable posts amidst this dismal state of affairs. That's why he'd gone around talking to them, after all he'd needed to reshuffle their roles. However, he didn't need to do that for Julius.

…Because his post lay nowhere else but against Reid Astrea.

Subaru: "At this point, I can literally only say attaboy to him. He'd still end up going to Reid, even if I didn't mention anything."

Thanks to that he'd been able to talk with Shaula before transforming into the giant scorpion.

The familiar words of love she'd uttered in the end had provided Subaru with a boundless strength. A fire had been lit in his heart when he'd told her that he'd definitely, definitely help her.

So, that was why…

Subaru: "…Everything I needed to say has already been said by the previous me, as well as the me a little before that. I don't have anything else to add now. He is Julius Juukulius after all."

Natsuki Subaru fully acknowledged that an unyielding fate existed in this world.

The many problems shrouding the watchtower were impossible to avoid, they would always rear their ugly heads at them. But, being unavoidable and unsurmountable were two completely different stories.

If it was fate for Reid Astrea to stand against Julius, then what came beyond that was also inevitable.

The one who was going to slay Reid Astrea reborn was Julius Juukulius.

Echidna: "—. I see. I'll just tell him as it is then."

Subaru: "Oh wait, there is something. Since everyone's having a hard time here, tell him to hurry his ass and settle things there, then come give back up to the others."

Subaru waved at Echidna as she began to rush off to her duties with a strained smile on her face. After seeing her off, he turned towards Emilia, who was busy cutting down a pair of witchbeasts with a sword of ice, over by where Echidna was heading to.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan! It's going to be just as we discussed! I'm counting on you Emilia-tan!"

Emilia: "Mhm, leave it to me! You're the one who mustn't die here Subaru!"

Subaru: "Of course I won't!"

Emilia's words were only natural, however, they'd made Subaru raise his fist, feeling more overwhelmed than usual.

He didn't want to die. —The reason for that remained unchanged, but now he had more of them why he needed to avoid it at all costs. The dangers of Returning by Death in this situation were nigh unspeakable.

If his restart point hadn't changed, then he'd go back to the stage before he'd separated Louis Arneb, along with her Witch Factor, from himself. As for what kind of trouble that would bring, neither he, nor anyone else, could know.

Would Louis vanish from Subaru's body or not? The Hall of Memories lay somewhat out of the normal scheme of things, so he didn't know whether it would avoid the effects of his Return by Death. Everything was so unclear.

So, that meant…

Subaru: “…This time, we’re going to settle things here!”

Following Subaru’s affirmation, Emilia grabbed ahold of Echidna and left the balcony. The girls would be going to their respective field of battle, and likewise, so would Subaru and his group.

Meili: “Wha~t now? All of that sounded like gibberish to m~e, any chance you could explain things to me pro~perly?”

Meili had been patient and not interrupted his conversation with Echidna. But she’d called out to him when she’d noticed that only he and Beatrice had remained on the balcony.

Subaru gave her a thumbs up and flashed her a devilish smile, showing all of his teeth.

There’d been only one reason why Subaru hadn’t called out to Meili in these last moments — Like Julius, she was already in her ideal field of battle.

Subaru: “I’m sorry Meili, but you’re going to be joining us. Me, you and Beako are going to be holding down two of these corners — the giant scorpion and the swarm of witchbeasts!”

Meili: “That’s really not much of an expla~nation!”

Beatrice: “…She’s coming, in fact!”

He didn’t have the time to give Meili a more detailed explanation as she gave a swing of her braided hair with a puff of her cheeks. The very next instant, a massive creature jumped up from the outer-wall of the tower, onto the balcony, as if in response to what Beatrice had said.

The creature had a jet-black shell, red compounded eyes and ferocious looking pincers…

Subaru: “So, you’re a four hundred year old hikikomori, yeah?”

Subaru let out a quick sigh before nimbly picking Beatrice up from his side, and snuggling her into his arms. Then, along with Meili who'd rushed over to join them, they came face to face with the giant scorpion.

Faced with their enemy who was still silently glaring at them, he gave a small smile,

Subaru: "This is a hikikomori showdown. Her over there clocks in at four hundred years, whereas us two over here clock in at four hundred and one."

Meili: "Isn't four hundred and two more co~rrect when you count all three of us?"

Subaru: "In other words, we're gonna win!"

Beatrice: "I don't get what any of this means, other than the part you said about winning, I suppose!!"

Held within his arms, Beatrice shouted at Subaru and Meili for joking about together. And just like that, surrounded by just the right amount of tension, he glared at the giant scorpion and let out a sigh.

Now things had shaped up to become his foreseen match-ups. All that was left now…

Subaru: "…I'm seriously counting on you, Emilia-tan. You're the key to everything."

…The battle against the Four Corners enclosing the Pleiades Watchtower had officially begun.

Chapter 79:
Ready, Steady, Go!

1

The giant scorpion was the one who fired off the first blow to start the battle.

“…”

Its red compound eyes glittered brightly, and immediately afterwards, a white ray of light gushed forth from its swinging tail. What was terrifying about that, was that its blow, meant as a fatal one for them, had been fired off without even one of its typical cries. With nary even a hiss, the giant scorpion nonchalantly rained death down towards them.

Subaru had tons of bad memories associated with that white light. Specifically, he’d been killed by it in around half of his fifteen plus attempts inside the tower.

Nevertheless, given that he’d been killed so much by it, he did learn a thing or two, despite how much he despised it.

Namely…

Subaru: “The time it takes to charge up and the signs it shows when it’s about to attack…!”

The scorpion’s compound eyes and stinger both glowed a smidgen more when it was about to unleash an attack. These signs were so subtle, to the point he’d thought he was just seeing things, but this eye for survival was what Subaru had developed through his mortal trial and errors.

Making full use of it, Subaru ran with Beatrice in his arms, taking it upon himself to close the gap between them and the giant scorpion. Reason being…

Subaru: “Its charging speed is pretty damn slow…!”

With a twist of his body, he dodged the white ray light that had welled forth as he said that.

Even if he’d called the ray of light slow, it was still much faster than a pitch from a shoddy high-school baseball player. Fortunately though, he was confident in his ability to tell whether a pitch was good or not. And in any case, there was no way he was going to stay alive without being able to do that.

A great man had once said that life was all about trial and error. Though, he probably hadn’t been envisioning these life or death situations when he’d said that.

Even so, you learn by making mistakes. That was an immutable truth. Subaru “luckily” had the ability to go through trial and error in life or death situations.

He’d made full use of that to find his eye for survival. —Thus this was Natsuki Subaru’s arena.

Subaru: “I’m sorry for not being able to live up to all your expectations, other me!”

Subaru dished out a heartfelt apology to his other self who’d sought out an almighty Natsuki Subaru. It was like he was saying to them, “I’m sorry for only being able to fight dirty.” Beatrice though reacted with a snorted “Hmph”. She was still held tightly in between his arms, dancing this jig of life and death with him.

Beatrice: “What are you talking about, in fact. You’ve never failed to live up to our expectations, I suppose.”

Beatrice spoke up, then raised her hand up in a flash. From her thin lips, she chanted the word “Murak”; a kind of Yin Magic that tampered with the law of gravity.

The giant scorpion had once been hit with its effects and pushed far away below them. So this time, the scorpion braced its jet-black shell and planted its legs firmly so that it wouldn’t go through the same thing again.

However…

Meili: “You’re just playing into my hands if you’re going to stay sti~ll!”

A barrage of witchbeasts began to assail the unmoving giant scorpion.

The strange-looking witchbeasts Meili had ordered the attack from were called “Hanemogura”. They looked like what you’d get if you crossed wings and horns together. And just like bullets that held no fear of death, they shot towards the giant scorpion and unhesitatingly struck its tough shell with their horns. The sounds of them crashing against it overlapped with the sounds of shattering.

The giant scorpion writhed in pain and raised its large pincers in retaliation.

???: “…ヲ ヲ”

What followed the attack in their stead was the bizarrest of all bizarre-looking figures. A being that was the very manifestation of a nightmare-ridden night, the Centaur that was a cross between man and horse: the “Hungry Horse King”.

The terrible wail of babies swept through the watchtower’s balcony. Along with it came a grating roar that made him want to cover his ears up, and then a burst of flames which violently filled the area around them, almost all the way up to the sky.

Hungry Horse King: “…ヲ ヲ”

The Hungry Horse King didn’t hesitate and thrust its fiery spear right into the heart of the flames. Its red-hot tip was going to land a critical hit that would burn through even the scorpion’s iron-like shell.

The giant scorpion was overwhelmingly strong when it came to plain fighting strength. However, that didn’t mean attacks wouldn’t work against it. It felt pain if struck, just like any living creature.

It felt pain if struck. If struck.

Subaru: "…"

Thus the giant scorpion embodied the "Then everything's hunky dory so long as I'm not hit" sort of mantra.

It caught the fiery spear with one of its enormous pincers and severed the Hungry Horse King's arm in one swoop. The Horse King tried to regenerate its wound, but it had been ruthlessly cauterized by its own fiery spear. The squirming, bubbling flesh of its wound trying to regenerate itself stopped in its tracks.

Subaru had been able to obtain an unnecessary tidbit from this; namely, that it wouldn't be able to regenerate its burnt wounds. The Hungry Horse King was now stopped in its tracks, but then, the giant scorpion's stinger went off with a bang into the Hungry Horse King's body, causing its large body to burst open from within.

"…"

The Hungry Horse King's flesh and blood scattered everywhere, and along with it went its life.

Even the Hanemogura who'd been smashed against the scorpion's shell ended up dead when their horn, which was fused with their head, broke. The way they fought by tragically throwing away their lives was one that could naturally be cursed as utterly barbaric.

It would be wrong of Subaru to close his eyes to this and dismiss it as "There's no problem with that since they're a witchbeast." However, he also wasn't planning on glossing things over by saying "All lives are created equally."

Life had value to it, and without a doubt, there were differences in their values.

There were clear differences in the way he felt about the weight of the lives of those who were precious to him and those who weren't. He wasn't going to hide that behind any deceptions. That's why he was going to make full use of the witchbeasts' lives to win this fight.

Therefore…

Subaru: “Though you’re doing the right thing overlooking me, you’re still making a big mistake!”

With the witchbeast vanguard repelled, Subaru confidently stepped through the floor which was now coated red. Carrying Beatrice in his left arm, he drew out his whip with his right and swung it up.

Dubbed the Guiltywhip, its blasphemous finishing touches had been done using the corpse of his former foe— Natsuki Subaru cracked it through the air, his super-quick whiplash scored a direct hit on the giant scorpion’s shell.

The scorpion let out a thunderous cry and glared at Subaru with its red compound eyes. There were no signs that he’d caused any damage to it, nor that it was feeling any pain.

But he was fine with that. His aim hadn’t been to inflict any damage on it. That had probably been why it had put off dealing with Subaru until last, after the other witchbeasts.

The great scorpion’s decision was both right, and wrong.

Subaru: “WHRAAAAAAA—!!”

Beatrice: “We caught a big one, in fact!!”

His whip had snared itself around the scorpion’s shell. With that, the scorpion’s massive body would shoot up when he tugged with all his might, thanks to the recoil. This was made possible by the fact that the effects of Beatrice’s Yin Magic were still in play, drastically decreasing the weight of the titanic beast.

The giant scorpion immediately tried to plant itself firmly on the ground. However, the vast quantities of blood and entrails at its feet made the conditions extremely poor for getting a firm grip. Subaru reeled the scorpion up in one swoop as it tried to cling onto the floor with its sharp talons.

From an outsider’s perspective, the situation almost looked like Subaru was swinging the giant beast about using some form of superhuman strength. But this grandiose spectacle on display had only been made possible thanks to Beatrice’s help. And so he kept swinging the giant scorpion's body as much as he could with his whip, until finally, he hurled it away.

Subaru: "BOOON VOOOOYAGE—!!"

The giant scorpion's body spun around in midair, carrying its super-giant swinging momentum.

As it spun around uncontrollably, it tried to hit Subaru with a white ray of light, showing pinpoint targeting. However, Beatrice raised her hand up to knock it away.

She materialized glowing purple crystals in midair, and used them to shoot the white ray of light down head-on. As their coordination sprung to life, Subaru released the giant scorpion from his whip and it flew away towards the sky once more.

Subaru: "This should buy us more…"

"Time."

Subaru found a reprieve out of this mess with this precarious attack, although he had to allow some concessions to win out in the end. However, his eyes widened in surprise before he could finish what he was saying.

Right before his eyes, the giant scorpion began to perform an astonishing feat of acrobatics as it hurtled away.

"…"

With a slash from its enormous pincers, it severed its own tail at the root. Just like that, its tail flew away, scattering dark-red bodily fluids in its wake. Yet, a white ray of light was fired off from the very tip of it.

It slammed against the now tailless scorpion and blew it back towards the balcony of the watchtower with tremendous force. All that work in making it lighter and practically weightless— and now it had made it back to the balcony, bringing a shockwave with it. It dug its enormous pincers into the floor to stop its momentum, before then pointing its glare at them.

Subaru: “Th-Those were some acrobatics you did. But if that means you’ve lost your tail, then all the better for us…”

Scorpion: “…”

Subaru: “Like, I mean, hey, wait a sec, wait a sec, wait a sec, wait a sec!”

The giant scorpion had landed and lowered its body, putting itself on guard as more darkish-red blood poured out from its tail. But its wound hadn’t gotten any deeper. Quite the opposite in fact. —Its severed tail was regrowing from its stump.

And it wasn’t only its tail. The cracks in its shell that had come from firing the white ray of light at itself, so to blow it back, were also bubbling away. He could see those wounds filling in as well.

Subaru: “It’s tough, smart and heals; aren’t we just getting more and more of these un-Shaula like features?!”

Healing aside, Shaula’s body was soft, and she wasn’t in the least bit smart. Nevertheless, the giant scorpion had shed all of these traits and was now coming at them with its overwhelming killing power.

It haphazardly swung its newly-grown tail about, releasing its stingers all around into the surroundings. Its attack was a ranged one, that showed no signs of its typical tells; so it was safe to say that it was the worst kind of attack for Subaru and Beatrice to be subjected to, given how much they fell short in strength.

Subaru: “Whoooooaaaa—?!”

Beatrice: “Gh… Subaru, we’ll have to fly, I suppose!!”

They had no means to escape from the white rays of light the scorpion had fired off, at least on terra firma. That said, a means of escape had presented itself in the skies. Beatrice quickly released her magic from the scorpion and called back to Subaru.

Subaru kicked off from the ground and jumped up into the air with all his might, trusting in his partner, regardless of whether her magic was actually going to work. The white rays of light began to shatter the balcony, with one of them just barely grazing his feet.

Subaru: “That was really close…”

Beatrice: “Don’t speak so soon, in fact…!”

They’d literally jumped over the possibility of death, but they had no time for relief.

The same thing had happened as before when Subaru and Beatrice had laid their attack onto the giant scorpion. Escaping up to the skies meant that they’d lost both their foothold and escape route. — All that was left for them was to be destroyed by one of the scorpion’s attacks.

Subaru: “Beako! Original Spell, Part 2—!”

Although this trump card could only be used three times a day, there was no way they could risk messing up by not using it and dying as a result. The moment Subaru squeezed her shoulders tightly, Beatrice came to the same conclusion as well.

She’d have their special technique ready for deployment in a jiffy, which would make Subaru invincible for a set amount of time…

???: “…ﾐ) ﾐ)”

Subaru: “Whoa?!”

Beatrice: “Whaaa?!”

She and Subaru were grabbed from the side before she could cast the technique. A white ray of light passed through the space which they’d been in a moment ago, almost evaporating them.

The only thing that had saved them from that demise, and was keeping them from being pursued by the great scorpion was…

Subaru: “Th-That was close. What even happened… Ghe?!”

Beatrice: “I suppose?!”

Subaru checked to see what was going on as he clinged to something rubbery. His voice caught in astonishment; likewise Beatrice also had quite the frown on her face.

This was because the one who'd saved them from the giant scorpion's attack, and was still giving it their all to protect them, was a mauve-colored, vicious-looking witchbeast: a Hungry Horse King.

Subaru: "I never thought we'd be here fighting together at the climax when I first saw you down in the underground!"

Hungry Horse King: "…))"

The Hungry Horse King let out an ear-splitting cry in reply to Subaru's bluff. His face tensed up at that; then, another Hungry Horse King pulled over next to them. Clinging to that Horse King's back was Meili's small body.

Meili: "It looked to me like you were about to pull out your trump card, we~ren't you? Try to be a li~ttle more careful. Onii-san's and Beatrice-chan's trump card is a lifeline for me as well after a~ll!"

Subaru: "Nice save! Nice support! You did well Meili! Can we change the field of battle at this rate?"

Meili: "You mean, you want us to cha~nge locations? I sure can, bu~t…"

Subaru: "Then please go for it! We have too few escape routes here for starters!"

Scanning the surroundings, Subaru decided to beat a retreat from the balcony, since there weren't many places left to stand on. Tons of witchbeast corpses were already littered about there, and with how things were, weird accidents would be prone to happen.

Meili gave some thought to the efficiency of his decision and then nodded. She clapped her Hungry Horse King on its back and gave the two of them their orders. As soon as they heard her words, the two Horse Kings picked up their pace and jumped down from the balcony, onto the wall of the watchtower. They began to run down it without wasting any time, at breakneck speeds.

Subaru: “WHAAAAAA—?!”

Beatrice: “WABABABABABABA, IN FACT?!”

Subaru and Beatrice yelled out in tandem, hugging each other as they faced this unexpected hard ride. At the same time though, he could only take his hat off at Meili, for being able to tame Hungry Horse Kings of all things, and have them be part of their troops.

Subaru: “…”

With the supremely-powerful Hungry Horse Kings at their head, the Hanemogura flying through the skies, the colossal sandworms, courtesan bears and other countless witchbeasts on the ground as their allies, they had quite a wide range of strategy available to them.

It could be said that they were the ideal partners for Subaru, since his plan was to keep stalling for time by dishing out one delay tactic after the other.

Subaru: “We’re really being spoilt for choice with how many ways we have to attack! You and I may be way more compatible than I’d ever thought Meili!”

Meili: “Do~n’t say that, Onii-san. I really wouldn’t want Petra and Beatrice-chan gla~ring at me!”

Subaru exchanged shouts with Meili as they galloped down the watchtower in vertical fashion. The latter gave Subaru a sullen frown in response to his casual chit-chat as she clung onto her Hungry Horse King’s back. Her reaction slightly hurt his innocent male sensibilities, but right now was the time to ignore such trivial wounds.

Subaru: “Round two’s gonna start when we drop onto the sand sea. She’s gonna come after me! So for the time being, she shouldn’t interfere with anyone inside the tower…”

Meili: “Bu~t, we’re still stuck without a way to beat her, yeah? No matter how much time we spend running around, we're not gonna be able to grab a win, ri~ght?"

Since they were in the Augria Sand Dunes, they had witchbeasts in endless supply. Thus their witchbeast ammo. wasn't ever going to run out. However, all that gave them was the ability to continue waging their battle, rather than a surefire way to beat the scorpion.

Subaru: "…"

He glanced over at Meili. Sweat was dripping from her forehead, which she was wiping away at, and her breaths were slightly labored.

That was in part due to how strained she was, being caught smack dab in between the hammer and anvil that was the battlefield. However, he couldn't help but think that it was also in part due to the toll which controlling witchbeasts had on her. Though this was something which Subaru couldn't really comprehend, since he didn't hold a Divine Protection, there was enough of a chance for a Divine Protection to become toxic when overused.

Subaru: "Otto did joke about this, saying stuff like the world was hellish back when he couldn't control his Divine Protection…"

Maybe those words that Otto had spluttered out when drunk were nothing to sneeze at.

If Divine Protections became burdensome like Otto had said, then there'd be a limit to how much Meili could fight as well. Their defeat would instantly be set in stone were Meili to fall in battle.

In other words…

Subaru: "Indeed, this battle will be decided by how much I coddle Meili as a princess—!"

Beatrice: "What an inexcusable plan, I suppose!"

Right after Beatrice raised her eyebrows in response to Subaru's declaration, a shock ran through their entire bodies. It served as a sign that the Hungry Horse Kings had reached their final stop after running down the tower at breakneck speeds.

Meaning they'd broken past the vertical wall of the watchtower and arrived back at the sand sea.

Subaru: "It's not like it's gone anywhere at the end of the day… But when you drop down to it like this, it feels way more different."

Beatrice: "How does it feel, in fact?"

Subaru: "Absolutely awful, I hate how deserts are just full of sand. It reminds me of how I never liked the desert stages you often got in games as well."

Sometimes, depending on the game's system, the HP of his character would start ticking down by doing nothing but walking in the searing heat. This sand sea had nothing to do with the scorching sand you got in those, but even so, he didn't have any fond memories of it.

Made all the worse by the fact that they were surrounded by countless swarms of witchbeasts.

Subaru: "Though, I know they aren't going to attack us…"

A sickly-sweet aroma that made him want to wrinkle his nose was floating about, accompanied by a far worse beastly stench; he could pretty much say that the air around the sand sea was one of the crummiest in the world. Though with the environment being filled with tons of witchbeasts, some familiar, others not; perhaps witchbeast Researchers or whatever would drool over that?

Unfortunately it only made Subaru and his team feel uneasy.

Meili: "S~o, what's your answer to my question?"

Meili rode her Hungry Horse King over to Subaru and Beatrice as the former shuddered. She wanted an answer to her question. Subaru glanced up at the tower, and then replied,

Subaru: "It's as you say, we can't do anything about the giant scorpion… about Shaula. That's why Emilia-tan holds the key to everything.”

Meili: “Are you talking about that silver-haired Onee-san from earlier?”

Subaru: “Yeah. Emilia-tan and the fifth rule are the key to everything.”

Subaru gave the puzzled Meili a nod before sticking his palm up in front of her. He spread out all five of his fingers, marking the rules imposed on them as challengers of the Pleiades Watchtower.

Subaru: “We can’t leave without completing the “Trials”. We can’t break the “Trial” rules. We aren’t allowed to disrespect the “Libraries”. We mustn’t damage the tower. And finally…”

Meili: “Hm?”

Meili should have heard the first four rules.

But she didn’t know the fifth one. Shaula had been trying to hide it, so only Subaru, who’d “Returned by Death”, knew what it was. As well as Shaula herself of course.

The fifth rule that Shaula had zipped her lips shut and refused to tell them was…

Subaru: “…It is not forbidden to destroy the “Trials”. Meaning we can destroy the rules of this tower.”

As challengers, the “Trials” constrained their actions. At the same time though, the rules also constrained Shaula’s actions since she was one of their examiners.

Shaula was bound by the rules of the tower. So, even though she didn’t want to kill them, she couldn’t escape from the fate that bound her to try and do so through her giant scorpion transformation.

If those shackles had been binding her for over four hundred years, then…

Beatrice: "…tch. She's coming, I suppose!"

A great plume of smoke rose before their eyes just after her warning.

An accompanying shockwave came from the giant silhouette that had leaped down from the balcony without any hesitation, rather than running straight down the tower.

He could hear the heavy grating sound of its large pincers coming from the thick of the smoke. The giant scorpion slowly emerged from within, its compound eyes were pointed directly at Subaru instead of at the countless enemies around them.

Subaru: "Beako, Meili! We need to buy some time! Emilia-tan's victory is the condition for our's!"

Beatrice: "I get you loud and clear, in fact!"

Meili: "And exactly how long is she going to take to achieve tha~t?"

Subaru: "As fast as she possibly can."

Emilia was always earnest and extremely hardworking.

Thus, there was no way she was going to compromise or slack off with the problems they were facing. The results she delivered were always the best she could give, and with it came the highest firepower she could muster.

Subaru believed in that, he loved that, he cherished that. That's why he was going to be able to stand his ground here.

Subaru: "Now then, let's do this. We're gonna break fate… No, we're gonna break the tower's system!"

2

???: "I see, so that's why you're…"

???: "Yeah, it's like that! Subaru told me that I'd definitely find a way to rewrite the situation we're in if I go up to the very top of the tower!"

Emilia focused on running as fast as she could, giving her only a brisk reply. She was holding Echidna in her arms as she ran, with the latter trying to make her body as small as possible.

At first Emilia had taken her by the hand as they ran; but being slowed down by her, she'd ended up picking her up partway through, and she'd remained like that ever since.

In fact, it was much faster this way and it strained her body far less, so it was a huge help. Even so…

Echidna: "Shouldn't it be you who needs to save their strength? You haven't got a clue what's lying in wait for you, right?"

Emilia: "Huh? Oh, you don't need to worry! Anastasia-san's body is reaaally light, and it's not like it's gotten any heavier even with you in it. It's no sweat off my back!"

Echidna: "My presence doesn't really have anything to do with Ana's weight… Like, not at all."

Faced with those slightly amiss answers, Echidna looked at Emilia, rather, at the beauty of the unfamiliar half-elf as she felt the struggles within herself.

This unfamiliar half-elf was one of her companions who'd had her very "name" stolen away by the authority of "Gluttony". Her circumstances were pretty much like Julius', but the way she was behaving was far different compared to him. Were their intrinsic personalities different? Or was it perhaps a difference in the people who were there to support them?

Echidna: "Doesn't it terrify you that you've been forgotten?"

Emilia: "It's reaaaaally scary, and lonely. But I don't have the time to sit down and curl up in fear, wouldn't you think?"

Emilia gave a brutally honest reply to Echidna's hushed question. The strength behind her change seemed like a testament of her mental fortitude, or perhaps it was down to some other factor.

Emilia had said before, “I’m not worried because Subaru remembers me.”

They’d been awfully simple words, the stuff you’d see in dreams. Yet, at the same time, they seemed to be the truth.

Echidna: “…”

It wasn’t clear what made Natsuki Subaru impervious to the effects of the authority of “Gluttony”. Though strictly speaking it wasn’t like even he was completely impervious to it. In fact, hadn’t he said that the reason he’d lost his “memories” had been due to an unexpected encounter with “Gluttony”?

So Echidna couldn’t definitively say that Subaru’s specialness was the main cause behind everything that occurred. Meaning, there should have still been a certain possibility.

As in, couldn’t they have protected their “names” and “memories” somehow?

If they could have done that, then both Anastasia and Julius…

Echidna: “…”

When she stopped to think about how Julius felt, having been forgotten by everyone, could anyone even blame him for faltering? Though, when she looked at Emilia’s strength after she’d been placed in the same situation, she couldn’t help but wonder what was different between the two.

The difference must have come in who was at their side. The difference must have been in who was beside them, supporting them.

Likewise, wouldn’t Julius not have collapsed if he’d had some support? And shouldn’t someone have been there like Natsuki Subaru had for Emilia?

Echidna: “What should I…”

"What should I do?" Echidna couldn't find an answer to that question within herself.

It was so bad that she felt like this may have been the first time in her life as an empty Artificial Spirit where she'd been at such a loss with herself.

Emilia: "Echidna?"

Echidna: "…It's nothing. More importantly, is it true? That you managed to find a way through Reid Astrea's violence… and passed the Second Floor's "Trial" before?"

Emilia: "Yeah, it is. It's reaaally hard to explain now that you've forgotten."

Emilia gave her an adorable puff of her cheeks. But, the fact of the matter was, she was embarrassed by how she'd beaten the "trial" of that man, who was the very picture of "violence" itself.

Echidna never for one moment imagined that she'd be lying in this situation. Despite only knowing her for a short time, Echidna could tell that her nature wasn't suited to telling fibs. So everything must have been true. It'd only been for a few moments, but judging by how she'd stood up against the giant scorpion on the balcony, there was no doubt that she was quite the capable fighter.

So, the only remaining issue was…

Echidna: "So, you can find a way to fix this situation if you go up to the very top of the tower. What's your basis for that?"

Emilia: "Subaru told me that he heard what the fifth rule was from Shaula. Plus, Subaru's thought long and hard about this before coming up with the idea, so I'm pretty sure it's the right way to go about things."

Echidna: "To me that seems like an idea based on excessive blind faith, but…"

Emilia: "If you're still full of doubts, we can address them, but I don't think now's the time for it… That, and didn't you come here with me because you believe in Subaru as well?”

Echidna was lost for words as Emilia turned her crystal-clear eyes over to her. Seeing Echidna’s reaction, Emilia gave her a smile that was tinged with delight, even if it seemed a tad out of place.

Emilia: “You see, my esteemed knight is reaaaally giving it his all for us.”

Emilia showed with her attitude that she was proud of the fact that their hard work was being appreciated. In response to that, Echidna likewise felt an odd pang of emotion. She placed her palm over Anastasia’s flat chest and breathed out a sigh.

Echidna: “…”

“These sorts of emotions are dangerous”, Echidna warned herself.

They were completely irrational and out of place. At the very least, it wasn’t something she ought to feel at a time like this. She needed to forget them if she could, and if not, then at the very least she should forget them for the time being.

Emilia: “…Subaru’s relying on me!”

Echidna felt, amongst other things, envious of her. She, who believed so, so much in her companion, who was that much closer to her.

“I need to forget this present moment and focus on overcoming the situation we’re in”, Echidna thought to herself.

Echidna: “…”

Emilia’s long legs moved gracefully as she flew up the stairs. Then, after they’d climbed up what should have been quite a lot of steps, a tremendous flash of silver came into view, scattering sparks everywhere.

With their vision now unobstructed, they saw a battle unfolding wherever they looked. With his lilac hair aflutter, and white uniform stained with blood, stood Julius Juukulius.

And, the person he was up against was…

Julius: “Gh, khh…!”

???: “Whoawhoawhoawhoawhoa! Doesn’ look like ya can do anythin’ about me like that, ya prick. Don’t go underestimatin’ me, ya prick. Did ya come here to mess about? If ya wanna mess about then go put on some makeup. When ya do, I’m gonna step on ya, bully ya and ruffle ya about, ya damn prick.”

The very embodiment of violence, Reid Astrea, let loose a nightmarish slash with the pair of chopsticks he held in his hands as he swore. He was dancing a danse macabre, with the second floor as his stage.

Theirs was a battle that transcended what humanity could fathom; even so, the fact that Julius was far inferior in strength to him was something that was so sadly obvious, that it could be grasped instantly, even to the untrained eye.

Julius: “…tch”

Dealing with the flurry of slashes and kicks coming from Reid, Julius countered by spinning his Knight Sword around and thrusting it into one of the gaps.

His sharp thrust derived from extraordinary technique seemed to be nothing more than a blur of light. Yet Reid easily avoided it with a yawn, and that was with his eyepatch blocking part of his sight.

Reid: “RRRRHAAA!!”

Julius looked on, stunned that Reid had avoided his thrust. Immediately afterwards, a casual-looking kick slammed into Julius’ torso, with the soles of his zōri digging straight into his abdominal muscles. Julius took a few steps back and let out a pained cry.

Then, a blow from one of his chopsticks dropped down towards his head…

Reid: “Get pulverized, ya prick.”

With a vertical flash, his slash, which came with a shockwave, cut through the air, space and reason itself.

His sword slash was so overwhelming that ways to even express it no longer came to their minds. It was so beautiful, that even though his weapon had been a chopstick, one couldn't help but be captivated by it, even if they were an amateur at swordplay— It was the pinnacle of swordplay, the very culmination of it which was what was being manifested there.

"…"

A slash so beautiful, that you would probably die from just admiring it.

Julius leapt aside, dodging it. The hem of his cloak didn't make it in time and was swallowed by Reid's blade, evaporating. A vertical groove was left carved into the second floor of the watchtower, which was made of unknown materials, as if it were all a jape.

And to make matters worse…

Reid: "Heyheyhey, arent'cha bein' naive if yer thinkin' you've escaped with that?"

Julius: "…hk"

Giving him a mocking smile, the air he'd cut through in the room warped and bent, with a gust of wind starting to roar.

Julius, who should have managed to jump aside, gulped, and then was instantly dragged back to his feet, as if he were being pulled back towards the torn space – back into the range of Reid's sword slashes.

To their disbelief, this was due to the force of gravity from the torn space restoring itself. It was pulling Julius back after his narrow brush with death straight into the range of the next blow.

Reid began to throw a punch at Julius, unable to move due to what was happening…

Emilia: “…That’s enough.”

A split second before he released his punch, the sound of a chiming silver bell interjected between the two swordsmen.

However, in contrast to the beautiful chime of her voice, the way she’d joined the fight was rather audacious. Echidna became lost for words, faced with that extreme spectacle in front of her.

Reid: “Haah?”

Julius: “…”

Reid looked up above him, unable to conceal the suspicion in his voice. Julius on the other hand opened his eyes wide in surprise, utterly speechless.

They were looking at the strange thing that had appeared above them— A block of ice that was so big that it covered the ceiling.

This block of destruction that could instantly shatter even a Dragon Carriage into smithereens fell down towards the two swordsmen.

Reid and Julius’ reactions were contrastingly different. Julius leapt away to avoid the hurtling ice block, while Reid curved his lips up into a smile and laughed.

Reid: “Hah!!”

With a fierce smile on his face, Reid thrust up one of his chopsticks at the falling block of ice. His raised chopstick collided with the point of fall of the block. By some miracle, the forces between the two points stood at an equilibrium with each other, causing Reid’s chopstick to bend, but preventing its fall.

Reid stamped his zōri down firmly onto the floor; the force of it travelled through his chopstick and flowed into the ice block which was still being held up by said chopstick. A crack began to run up the block as his chopstick snapped in half.

Reid: “…Now wasn’ that somethin’”

Reid spat those words out, and a split second later, the block of ice with a crack running through its center, shattered in the blink of an eye.

Chunks of ice began to rain down, and while basking in them, Reid slowly turned himself around. Receiving the piercing gaze from his blue, uncovered eye, Emilia pointed her palm at him, with a look of resolve setting in on her face.

Their gazes crossed each other's, causing Reid to ogle at her in surprise.

Reid: "Yer a real feisty one, ain'tcha. It's not like I dislike women like you, but… Huh?! What the hell, ya twat, yer really damn hot ain'tcha?! One helluva smokin' hottie! Why the hell's there such a smokin' hottie in the middle of this sand sea! C'mon, yer gonna be my opponent, ya twat"

Emilia: "My apologies, I didn't mean to interrupt, but I do need to get Julius to beat you…"

Reid: "Wha?"

Emilia paid no heed to Reid's egoistic talk, and instead continued with a troubled look appearing on her face. Reid frowned at what she had said, but Julius was the one who was far more bewildered, having just been rescued.

Though he'd managed to escape from the block of ice that Emilia had unleashed, he couldn't hide his suspicion towards the fact that she'd suddenly appeared. Keeping himself at a distance from Reid, he turned his yellow eyes to look over at Echidna, who was standing beside her, and spoke,

Julius: "I get that she helped me, but… who on earth is she, Echidna?"

Echidna: "It's kinda hard for me to explain her identity. But, if I may put it simply, she's someone who's in the same boat as you Julius."

Julius: "What the…?"

Julius stared at Emilia once again, with his eyes widening slightly, probably because her features coincided with a being he knew about.

Julius: “A silver-haired, amethyst eyed elf… No, I find it hard to believe that such a distinctive being would have suddenly turned up in the tower. Then, could it be that she’s…”

In light of the situation in the tower, as well as the peculiarities of her appearance, and the fact that her presence was nowhere to be found within him, Julius felt, out of his own accord, that something was not quite right.

Julius came to the answer by himself. Seeing his startled eyes, Emilia gave him a firm nod.

Emilia: “Julius, right now I know exactly how you feel.”

Julius: “Then you indeed are…”

Given that they’d both had their “names” snatched away by Gluttony, Julius immediately grasped what was going on. And as soon as he did, his conviction that Emilia was their ally appeared to grow.

He stood in front of both Echidna and Emilia, protecting them, once again pointing his sword at Reid.

Julius: “You have my thanks for helping me out earlier. But I still don’t quite get why you two have come rushing here considering what’s going on in the tower. What’s happening with the “Taygeta” library, and with Miss Rem and the situation outside?”

Echidna: “There’s an attempt underway to try and bring all these matters together so to deal with them all at once. The idea is Natsuki-kun’s, and the ones helping him with it are all of us in the tower.”

Julius: “It’s Subaru’s? But he’s…”

A puzzled frown appeared on Julius’ face as he heard Subaru’s name wedged in the middle of her explanation.

As far as he knew, Subaru should have faced Reid's "Book of the Dead" in the "Taygeta" library, and his consciousness should have been in a state of disarray from his return. Beatrice had told him that his return had been difficult, thus, Julius had continued to fight against Reid so that they could overcome the turmoil in the tower in his own way.

Therefore, even if she was saying Subaru had woken up and came up with this idea, you could say it was only natural that there was no real link between spontaneity and recognition. Nevertheless…

Reid: "I haven' got anythin' against y'all gettin' all chummy with each other, but don't ya pricks go jabberin' away while ignorin' me!"

The floor exploded with a loud bang, resulting in Julius receiving a blow from the intruding Reid's chopstick. Although he'd lost one chopstick, he still had another one left. And it wasn't like he had to use them. Even if he just fought empty handed, it wasn't like his strength was going to diminish.

Julius: "Kh!"

While buffeted by Reid's sharp attacks, Julius rallied himself and focused on keeping his desperate defense up. Seeing that, Reid unleashed a blow with one of his hands that could have literally felled even a dragon. At the same time, he stuck out his spare hand at Emilia as she searched for an opening, thrusting his fingers out at her.

Reid: "I ain't got a clue what yer tryin' to pull off, but I don't think I'm gonna let you do as ya please, ya twat. I'm gonna be your opponent after I'm done dealing with this novice… Huh?"

Reid abruptly tilted his head in doubt mid-sentence. He then brought his fingers of his spare hand to his eyepatched left eye and spat out a venomous tirade of: "HeyHeyHeyHey"'s.

Reid: "The hell, ya twat. For some reason my hand ain't movin' to stop ya. Unless I've like suddenly become smitten by ya… No way, ya must have passed the "Trial"!"

Emilia: “Yeah, I did! You lost because you touched my chest with your chopsticks!”

Reid: “Kah! Now that’s one way of losing that I can really get behind! What a huge waste that I can’t even remember it, ya smokin’ hottie!”

Reid clucked his tongue. His words indicated that there was some shackle on him that wouldn’t let him stop Emilia. In other words, it meant that the obstruction standing in between her and her duty was now gone.

Emilia: “Julius, I…”

Julius: “You may go my lovely lady; you, who like me, are of unknown name.”

Turning only his head around, he interrupted Emilia as she was about to say something. Seeing his Knight Sword now held at the ready again, Emilia kept her silence at his words.

Seeing the surprise on her face, Julius gave her a gallant smile,

Julius: “You have your duty to carry out. I know it’s something I won’t be able to help you with, but that’s fine with me. —I pray everything goes well.”

Emilia: “…Yeah, for you too!”

Receiving Julius’ encouragement, Emilia nodded at him and then broke out into a run. Reid didn’t make any attempt at stopping her. The one-eyed red lion let her pass by him and saw her off.

Then, as Emilia reached the front of the staircase in the innermost part of the second floor that would lead the way up, she stopped in her tracks and turned around,

Emilia: “It’s Emilia.”

Julius: “…”

Emilia: “My name is Emilia, just Emilia. —I’ll definitely see you again later!”

Leaving her name behind, Emilia ran up the stairs with an air of elegance about her. Echidna let out a long, long sigh as she watched her disappear from sight.

From here on out, Emilia’s duty was to head to the top. So, Echidna’s duty was to…

Julius: “You’re not going anywhere? Are you planning on watching me fight?”

Echidna: “Only if you’ll let me do so… Well, no, I suppose not. I’m the one who’s decided to do that.”

Julius: “…”

Julius glanced towards Echidna, who was standing by the wall, and then pursed his lips together. She took a quick gasp of air as she witnessed all kinds of emotions flitting across the profile of his face.

Echidna: “It’s not like I can do anything, but if Ana were here, she would have probably done this. No matter where I am in this tower, I will always be subject to danger. Given that, I shall stand behind you out of my own volition. Because…”

Julius: “…”

Echidna: “…Because you are Anastasia Hoshin’s knight. Isn’t that right?”

It took a tremendous amount of courage to believe in something that didn’t feel real.

It was nigh impossible to grasp just how much strength it took to believe in something that had no concrete basis, to the point that it would make her feel relieved; at least when compared to believing in something that was actually tangible.

Regardless, Echidna spoke those words to the man before her eyes, his back facing away from her, while believing in that uncertainty.

Julius: “…”

Julius lowered his long-lashed eyes in response and softly let out a deep, long sigh.

Julius: “You’re able to give me more strength than you give yourself credit for. Merely from the fact that someone went and summoned their courage to believe, and hold expectations, in a me who may not be anyone anymore.”

Echidna: “Julius…”

For Julius, the footing he’d lost had become uncertain.

For Echidna, the bonds which she was supposed to know had become ambiguous.

The two of them had to rely on something so shaky to build this relationship which altogether differed to the one that they should have been bound by. Nevertheless, at this very moment, the two of them must have surely been seeing the same thing.

So for that reason…

Echidna: “…Julius, I have a message for you.”

Julius: “A message?”

Echidna: “Yeah. Everyone’s fighting all over the tower, so… he said to “Hurry your ass and settle things here, then come help the others”“

Julius: “…”

Echidna could tell that this was his kind of encouragement, thus she conveyed it to him exactly as she’d heard. Julius’ slender shoulders tensed slightly after he heard it.

He digested the contents of the message and took it on board. His response following it was loud and clear.

Julius: “Hah”

It almost seemed like he'd let out a short, sharp gasp of air, but it wasn't like that at all.

He'd let out a laugh. He'd breathed out a single gasp of air from the pit of his stomach to wheeze out that laugh.

The fact that Julius Juukulius was facing battle with a smile on his face would have been a thing to marvel about, had there been anyone here who knew Julius.

Julius: "…If he's broken out of his shell, then I mustn't lose here either."

His expression of determination was quiet, yet full of hidden zeal.

Julius raised his Knight Sword in front of him and faced his foe, reflecting himself in his blade. Reid had been lodging a bored look on his face for a while… But now, he was grinning like a shark.

Reid: "Ya really kicked into gear, didn't ya, ya prick."

Julius: "Pardon me, but when it comes to fighting, I always take it seriously."

Reid: "Nono, that ain't what I mean. You get it right? Even if I don't spell it out for ya, ya prick."

Reid lifted his left hand up with a grin still plastered on his face. He flipped his eyepatch up and uncovered his eye. Thus, with his perfectly functioning blue eyes, the peak of all swordsmen pointed his cheerful murderous intent towards his challenger.

His sword spirit was so formidable that anyone faint of heart would have been killed by the glint in his eyes alone. However, Julius met that sharp glint of his head-on, and Echidna behind him likewise braced herself and endured it.

Seeing the two of them endure the raging storm of his sword spirit, Reid loudly clacked his fangs together.

Reid: "I am the "Stick Swinger" Reid. Remember only my name, before you disappear."

Julius: “…”

Exchanging one’s name in battle before crossing swords was a sign of recognizing a warrior as their equal. There was no knowing how much Reid really cared about that norm, but regardless of what he thought, the considerations of the person who’d basked in that had changed dramatically.

Julius took a breath and prepared himself, stilling his raging heart.

Julius: “I shall give you my name once again. I am Julius Juukulius. One and only knight to Anastasia Hoshin-sama, who stands as a Royal Selection Candidate in the Kingdom of Lugunica. —It’s time for me to give up acting the part of a nameless knight.”

He magnificently proclaimed his “name” so that it would be engraved in both he, and the world itself.

3

Leaving behind Julius and Echidna downstairs, Emilia continued to run up the steps.

Her long legs were moving as fast as she could muster, skipping up the stairs two or three steps at a time. Though the speed she was going at was inordinate, her own thoughts were screaming at her to go faster and faster.

Emilia: “…gnh”

Emilia strongly gritted her teeth; a look of desperation was adorning her beautiful face in profile.

She was worried about the two she’d left behind downstairs on the second floor. Reid was extremely strong, foulmouthed and a thug to boot. The two of them could easily get hurt both physically and mentally dealing with him.

Naturally Emilia’s worries didn’t just stop at Julius and Echidna. Would Subaru, Beatrice and Meili manage to keep Shaula in check? Would Ram be able to play her part too? Would Patrasche keep guard over Rem?

Her anxieties, such as whether she was going to have to rebuild all her relationships from scratch with her “name” eaten, were never-ending. She felt like she was going to burst into tears if she took a moment to stop.

However, she didn’t stop. She didn’t shed any tears either. She endured the tingling-sensation at the back of her throat.

Emilia: “Nothing is over yet after all…!”

The fact that they believed in her, and that they were able to believe in her, was what was propping Emilia’s entirety up right now.

She was full of worries, brimming with anxiety, but she was also full of “I believe in you”‘s, which trumped over those emotions.

Emilia: “…hk! There’s a light!”

As she continued to pour her heart and soul in running up the stairs, Emilia’s amethyst eyes caught a glimpse of a white glow at the far end of her field of view. She realized that it was coming from the end of this extremely long staircase, and that it would lead to the unknown first floor.

The moment she comprehended that, she firmly kicked off from the floor and sped up even more.

Then, finally…

Emilia: “…I made it out!”

Emilia broke through into the light, where the staircase had ended in front of her. What unfurled itself before her eyes that instant wasn’t an area that you could call a “floor”.

Emilia: “Huh…?”

Emilia stopped in her tracks, completely flabbergasted, and unintentionally let out her surprise at the scene she was faced with. Reflected in her amethyst eyes, was not the next part of the familiar watchtower she’d come to expect.

The walls had disappeared, as had the ceiling; spread out all around her lay the vibrant blue sky— Emilia wasn't standing inside the building, but rather, she was outside. She'd ended up emerging right on the rooftop at the top of the tower after running up the second floor's stairs.

Emilia: "The first floor's outside…? This place is up even higher than the clouds…"

There was a vast, circular floor at the summit of the tower with no other partitions or anything that looked like a handrail at its edge. Therefore, she could easily look down below by going over to the edge of the floor.

Clouds which should have been far above in the sky were brushing against the tower. Emilia's breath caught as she realized she'd come all the way up to the clouds, or was even above them.

It was the first time Emilia had ever come to a place as high as this. However, despite receiving such a shock, she was quickly distracted by another profound emotion.

???: "…"

…There was a presence there, that she hadn't been able to notice on account of how still and grand it kept itself.

Emilia: "…Ah"

Emilia had been busy looking at stuff like where she was, the height of the clouds and what the situation was like on the first floor. She'd been late in noticing the being that had swept past the corner of her eyes. She slowly turned around and let out a large gasp.

Even though Emilia had almost fallen into despair from being forgotten by the world with her "name" being taken from her, her heart had still stood firm in the end. —But even that Emilia was lost for words in sheer awe.

The "being" that had appeared before her eyes was utterly beyond the pale of her imagination.

Because that being was…

Emilia: “You’re…”

???: “—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth through the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

Its voice was solemn, and it felt like it was being roared directly into her soul. She realized that her voice was trembling.

Was there anyone who could fault Emilia and call her weak-minded? No one would be able to. It would be impossible. Because all living creatures had no choice but to prostrate themselves before this being.

Because this being’s name was…

???: “—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, I ask the will of thee who hath reached the summit.”

With his huge body covered in glittering blue scales, the “Divine Dragon” Volcanica looked down upon Emilia and declared that while exerting a presence that seemed like it would blow even her very soul out of existence.

4

Outside of the tower, commenced the battle of Shaula, who had transformed into the titanic scorpion, against Subaru and the rest.

In the second floor of the tower, the sword play of the grinning wielder of violence, Reid Astrea and Julius reopened.

On the first floor of the tower, Emilia achieved an unforeseen encounter with the mighty existence awaiting there.

And, on the spiral staircase connecting the fourth floor and sixth floor of the tower—

???: “A~h, damn it ~tsu! Even after stealing it and everything, it just feels like not having put it to decent use, doesn’t it, gee~z us!”

Spitting away in irritation, the young boy clicked his tongue whilst tearing at his dark brown hair. Upon swinging down the hand scratching his head, what had been generated therein was a beautiful, ornate sword shaped with ice.

With the stolen “Name” as the foundation, it was a special power which he had reconstructed, but contrary to its appearance its regulation of Mana was exquisitely arduous, and was quite difficult to use jointly with other “Memories”. In the first place, combining the skills of multiple others required a suitable sense, and that was something which Roy and Louis were maladroit at.

???: “We~ll, it’s because we excel in it that we are so able, but you kno~w.”

Even within the trio of siblings possessing the Authority of ”Gluttony”, each one’s way of using the Authority subtly differed. Amongst them, as one who took pride in being “Gourmet”, the points he would like to object to in his younger brother and sister’s ways weren’t few. —Fortes connected to sense of superiority. Though something like advice, was unbefitting of him.

???: “The message won’t get across to dear cute Louis, or that chap Roy… a~h, it can’t be helped ~tsu! If the two of them are saying they can’t do anything then it can’t be helped! That means that we can thoroughly lick the feasts present inside this tower down to the roots ~tsu! How nice, so nice, quite nice, very nice, as it’s nice, it certainly is nice, surely it is nice, surely it must be nice, as it must be nice! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!”

Crunching the sword of ice in his hand, with his sharp fangs unraveled, “Gluttony” — Lye Batenkaitos decided to itemize all of the targets inside the tower for his own platter, without leaving a single one.

Fortunately, the situation had been served. What remained was to simply select the order, and what was to be the main course—

???: “—Do you think you have the privilege to be choosing that? How very easygoing.”

Lye: “…”

Upon the voice descending from the top of the spiral staircase, Lye seized chewing the ice, and raised his head. Overhead, on the fourth floor were light crimson eyes looking at Lye, who was standing on the staircase between the fourth floor and the fifth floor.

With the same hue as blood or blaze, eyes with terribly icy heat, were looking down upon Lye’s ferocious hunger as if pitying.

And—

Ram: “From what was said, it seems you were the one who tore apart Ram and Rem’s sisterly love, isn’t it. —Kindly die whilst baying like a pig.”

Chapter 80:
Death of the Mind

1

—It smelled of rage.

Fragrant, sweet-smelling—it reeked of pure rage. It felt irresistible, and his slender body could not help but squirm with excitement. He had a feeling it would push him to greater heights.

“Ha-ha-haaa.”

Looking at each other from the top and bottom of the spiral staircase, Batenkaitos sneered at Ram’s defiant words.

Looking at the girl with powerful emotions in her light crimson eyes, Batenkaitos experienced ecstasy as he inhaled all of the rage, hatred, and murderous intent that was being directed towards him. For a lack of a better word to describe it, it was no exaggeration to say that breathing in this one breath was his life’s purpose.

“How nice, so nice, quite nice, very nice, as it’s nice, surely it’s nice. We don’t usually see people who give us such an angry look. It’s a very precious feeling. Understand? Do you understand, how happy we are now!”

Batenkaitos licked his lips as he stepped on the ground to express his feelings of excitement. Encountering someone who could make him experience this emotion is something that would usually be too much for him to hope for.

The memories and names taken away by the Authority of Gluttony were removed from the world, and no one except Roy and Louis were capable of recognizing them. The grief of losing a loved one, the anger of denial, the empty feeling of loss—everything ceased to exist and there was nothing that could be done about it.

“So of course it’s natural, that’s natural. So we never really paid attention to it."

Due to his affiliation with the Witch Cult, it was only natural for him to meet many people who directed their hatred towards him due to who he was. However, there was no one who remembered what Lye Batenkaitos had done, nor anyone who harbored hatred for him personally, and none who aimed to kill him. This was the natural order of things—however, this natural unwritten rule created by the Authority of Gluttony had been overturned.

—Batenkaitos was no longer the only one who was not influenced by the Authority of Gluttony. The existence of a third party had emerged—

"Natsuki Subaru…!"

Murmuring the name of the man that Louis had so steadfastly obsessed about, Batenkaitos felt a sweet tingle deep inside his thin chest. It hadn't been because of Louis, either. She had known him since long before that. She had thought of him much more strongly and deeply than Louis had.

That is—

"Sister, you understand, riiight?"

The cause of the sweet tingling in his chest and the girl looking down at him were deeply connected. —No, it wasn't quite right to call it a deep connection. It was no wonder that he felt like they were of one mind and body, and this could be called their other half. He was sure she would understand these sweet, light, and strong feelings. —This love-hate feeling mixed with the tingling inside his chest that was just waiting to burst forth.

And so, with a sense of conviction and expectation, she spoke with her mouth formed into the shape of a half-moon and—

"I told you. —Die, squealing like a pig."

"—!"

In the next moment, Ram flew down the stairs like a missile and unleashed an attack that sent Batenkaitos flying backwards in retreat. He quickly evaded the attack by moving backwards, but the tip of the wand that had been thrust towards him was zooming in on his right eye. If he hadn't pulled his head back in time, he would have had his brain ripped out from his eye socket and tossed into the air.

"Forgive us, Sister! If we had eaten that attack, we would have only been able to squeal like a pig and die!"

"I am having second thoughts now. If a lesser pig were to mimic a real pig, real pigs would feel insulted."

He then jumped off the spiral staircase but was delayed by the time it took for him to reach the ground. With her cold murderous intent locked on to the back of the fleeing Batenkaitos, Ram went on the pursuit and began a fierce assault.

As she turned her slender body, Ram thrust her wand, unleashed a powerful kick, and shot an iron elbow at him. Batenkaitos evaded them all by moving his body perfectly, but the powerful gusts of wind that whipped past his ears had the potential to rip off one of his body parts if he got hit by them even once.

"Ha-ha! Scary, scary! I'm so scared, but bring it on!"

Batenkaitos laughed as he ducked and weaved in the face of that unrelenting attack. There wasn't time to spare, but his mood was uplifted. —No, there was a little room.

Ram was strong. She was merciless and didn't hesitate to kill, but Batenkaitos was still able to easily avoid her. Why? It's easy to see why—

"I know you are even more amazing than that, Sister."

The limitless amount of trust and expectation of Ram, in the Memories he possessed, accurately conveyed the unfortunate difference between the Ram in front of him and the other one. In short—

"—Sister without a horn is nothing but a fake who can be replaced by Rem."

"…"

"Ah, are you angry? Are you furious? If you're angry, it's okay to be angry, Sister. When I think about it, I've never had a proper quarrel with my sister before."

Batenkaitos had flaunted her memories as his own. In response, Ram's cheeks hardened at his words, but she didn't let up on her assault. He suddenly felt as if he had taken it too far with her and admired himself inwardly.

It was unclear just how much suffering they felt, but it was famously known that hornless Oni's couldn't keep their bodies under control. Ram had been suffering from the side effects of being hornless for a long time.

Batenkaitos wasn't sure just how many times he wanted to take over her pain, but, at the same time, he knew he mustn't bear the brunt of her suffering. If the pain that came with the loss of a horn depended on the strength of the Oni, then Ram must be dealing with such a large amount of pain that no other Oni in the world could match her.

Therefore, Batenkaitos could only commend her for daring to live her own life despite living each day in such agony. And, with a distorted face, he wanted to thank her for her hard-working attitude.

Batenkaitos wasn't sure who he should congratulate for being able to witness this moment of richness when the best, greatest, and finest delicacy was about to mature and to be consumed.

—Batenkaitos could only be extremely grateful for the miracle of having encountered this gourmet meal.

"Really! Sister is so fantastic!!"

A dance of death mixed with love and hate began to unfold on the spiral staircase. Batenkaitos felt blessed by Ram's existence and savored it to the fullest. And he leaned, diverted, bent, and avoided just as the Memories instructed him—

“Ta-dah! Counterattack time—”

“Shut up.”

Batenkaitos moved around to the outside of Ram’s vision, who had her wand out, and tried to aim for her white neck. Although he thought he had surely entered her blind spot, she quickly turned around and intercepted his attack. In an instant, he felt frightened, stopped his attack, and then leapt sideways to escape. However, the moment his right cheek felt the wind, it began to bleed.

“…”

Then Batenkaitos stroked his roughly torn cheek and took a ragged breath. It was an unbearable wound for him. At least, according to the Memories he had—which knew about the old Ram when she was a prodigy—there was no way for him to be hurt by her.

And yet—

“I told you to squeal miserably, but your voice is also very unpleasant to hear. I can’t get along with you anymore, so just die.”

“Sister, this is...”

“If you were evaluating Ram on the basis of those Memories, then you are still underestimating me.”

She looked at Batenkaitos, whose cheeks were soiled with blood, and then stroked her pink hair. Then she sent a cold gaze his way—

“Did you think you had uncovered the extent of Ram’s potential? So funny. —The possibilities of Ram are endless. Because—”

“…”

“Ram is Rem’s sister.”

Her baseless rhetoric had an extraordinary ring of persuasion because that’s what the Memories inside of Batenkaitos thought of her. Recognizing that fact, he erased his smile and distorted his cheeks. It’s not fun. It’s boring. I don’t understand, he thinks.

“Anger and hatred are spices that increase the flavor of the dish, you know. But if the spices are too strong or too assertive, the dish will be ruined. I wonder if that analogy sounded strange to you, Sister, since you can’t cook?”

“Not really. I have nothing to hide. Ram’s specialty is steamed potatoes.”

The Memories that vividly reminded him of that came back to life, and his stomach rumbled. Deliberately ignoring his hunger, Batenkaitos gave up on his playfulness.

Ram had not yet shown the true value of her power. That meant she hadn’t even revealed everything to her younger sister, who was her other half.

In other words—

“Sister can’t even believe her own younger sister, so you’re the ultimate in individualism, isn’t it?”

“…Such a shallow view on things. I don’t know how many human lives you’ve savored, but I’m not concerned with them either. They are all trivial except for Rem.”

Ram’s pale crimson eyes narrowed as she dismissed Batenkaitos’ views on food. And then, while she stroked her thin chest, she—

“Try harder and do your best, Barusu.”

She had called out to the boy who was not there with a cold look of ruthless determination on her face.

“This common destiny thing is pretty horrifying, isn’t it?”

2

Subaru pulled his dustproof cloth over his mouth and took a deep breath in order to avoid breathing in all the dust in the air. He would really like to get some goggles, but that would be pretty difficult to do at the moment. His only option was to stare directly into the sandstorm and get used to the sand flying into his eyes.

"Beako! Meili! Keep going!"

"I know!"

"Oh, you're such a slave driver!"

Crossing their field of vision blurred by the sandstorm was an evil presence with a jet-black shell. If they allowed it to get close to them, they would be chopped in half by its pincers. If they tried to outrun it, they'd get zapped by its deadly stinger and die. There were many other ways that it could kill them. In their current situation, due to all of the ways they could be defeated, they were only capable of keeping it at a stalemate.

"But that's how it always is...!"

The battles of Natsuki Subaru had always been like walking on a tightrope.

The reason Subaru was having such a hard time even though he knew the future due to his Return by Death ability was that the strength of the current enemy and his current fighting strength were unbalanced.

Subaru was almost always short of cards in his hand. He believed in everyone's power and hoped they could fight flexibly, and in response he himself would struggle to meet their expectations.

"This isn't so much my battle as it is mine and my merry comrade's!"

"What are you saying in this situation?! Oh! Keep at it, Hungry Horse King!"

In response to Subaru's meaningless cries, Meili, who was riding next to him, ordered the witchbeast known as the Hungry Horse King. Two centaur-like witchbeasts, both carrying Subaru, Beatrice, and Meili, ran through the sea of sand with all their might making noises that could only be described as baby cries. And, right on their tails was a gigantic scorpion that was attacking them with its multitude of legs, scraping out clumps of sand and kicking up a cloud of dust.

“—!”

Just like what Subaru had experienced before, if they moved far enough away from it, then the rays of light from the stinger would try to vaporize them, and if they got close enough to it, its large pincers would try to chop them up. It was simply a matter of maintaining a balance between being too far away and being too close, and coping with its attacks as they did so.

Compared to the number of defeat scenarios they had counted, the victory scenario would only become available at the end of their battle. It depended on Emilia conquering the first floor of the tower and rewriting the rules of the tower. In fact, it was not even certain whether it was possible or not.

“If you can't do that, then it's strange that it was built into the rules of the tower in the first place, I suppose.”

“Exactly, Beako. The fact that the rule says, “It is not forbidden to break the rules of the Trial,” means that this rule is supposed to be broken.”

And if that is really possible, then it would be a reward for the challengers of the tower. If Subaru thought about it, the right was only given to those who cleared it using proper means. He was really glad that Emilia beat Reid’s Trial. If she hadn’t won, a way to save Shaula would not have come into his grasp.

“I will NEVER forgive him for sexually harassing Emilia-tan…!”

Thinking about that really got Subaru’s blood boiling, but the person who was sent to take care of Reid for that was Julius.

With the hope that he would beat that violent man into a pulp, Subaru kept his eyes on the tall watchtower and surrendered himself to their current struggle with Beatrice and Meili.

"Mister! It's a bit difficult to move around in here! Don't you think it it'll be easier for the witchbeasts to move around outside of the tower?!"

"Ugh…! I know what you mean! I know, but I can't! I can't leave the tower. If we go any further, I won't know what's going on!"

Subaru, who dismissed Meili's suggestion, grabbed his chest and clenched his molars.

The effect of Cor Leonis continued, and the whereabouts of his friends in the tower were still within Subaru's sphere of control as dim lights. However, there were still many things about this Authority that were unknown, and it was not yet clear what will cause it to stop working.

Distance probably had the most effect on the Authority. In fact, Subaru couldn't sense the whereabouts of his friends who were outside of the Augria Sand Dunes. The real question is how far can he get from the watchtower without it turning off? Not being able to confirm the whereabouts and safety of his friends was one of his biggest fears.

But the biggest issue was more than just confirming their safety, it was not being able to shoulder their burdens himself. Emilia and Julius, for example, were strong and were about enter into hard-fought battles. But, more than that, it was Ram, who was facing a dangerous enemy, who had grabbed Subaru's heart the most.

"…"

Subaru was confident that everyone had been sent to the place that suited them best. From the beginning, Ram's battle was expected to be especially difficult. That was because her opponent was Lye Batenkaitos, the one who turned Rem into a Sleeping Beauty and was responsible for Ram's current condition.

It was impossible to compete with Lye Batenkaitos without a perfect Ram. And on top of that, Subaru wanted her to beat him up to her heart's content. However, in order to do that, it was necessary for him to shoulder the suffering that had constantly tormented her every day. That’s why—

“I can’t just carelessly leave the tower! I know there are lots of handicaps, but please just follow me!”

“—! This will absolutely, positively, come back to bite us later!”

Meili, with her lips pursed and face turning bright red due to Subaru’s plea, shouted that from the back of the Hungry Horse King. Then the girl glared into the sky and clapped her hands at the circling entity flying in the cloudless sky.

“Winged Mole! It’s time!”

After her high-pitched command, a small shadow that had been flying in the sky descended into the sea of sand. When Subaru saw it aim at the gigantic scorpion on the sand, he instantly exclaimed, “Beako!”

“I want you to go with them!”

“—Oh, I understand! Vita!”

Beatrice raised her little palm into the sky, having guessed Subaru’s true aim.

The effect had been activated, but it hadn’t been aimed at the giant scorpion, but at the winged moles flying towards it. A ring of light formed in the path of the falling winged moles, and the moment the winged moles dove through the ring, the witchbeasts accelerated rapidly.

“…”

The impact of the attack pierced the outer shell of the scorpion, and a loud noise rang out. Up to this point, the gigantic scorpion had taken the attacks of the winged moles as if they were nothing, but this time, the attack stopped it in its tracks after suffering powerful direct hits to a few of its legs, which could not be ignored.

“That… Beatrice, what did you do?”

"Did it make the witchbeasts you control heavier before impact, I wonder? The speed and hardness are the same, but the result changes just by making it heavier, I suppose."

Beatrice answered Meili's surprised question with that.

The reason behind the sudden power of the winged mole is: its power is the product of its weight and speed.

The life-threatening attack of the winged mole, a witchbeast that flew freely through the sky and dived deep underground with its strong horns, managed to stall the gigantic scorpion with its unbelievable destructive power. Although the gigantic scorpion was impressive in its ability to reflexively respond to attacks, it wasn't able to respond to this attack very well. And, to get around its great reflexiveness, Subaru's head was spinning at full speed trying to find a solution.

"Bad for the witchbeasts, but it's a trade-off between sacrificing lives and staying alive longer. There are many types and quantities of witchbeasts you can use, and if you have Beako's assistance, the possibilities are limitless…! In this way—"

Sure enough, Subaru had clenched his fists and grabbed Beatrice's hair at the same time. Stuck in his grip, Beatrice gave a cry of protest, "It hurts, in fact!"—That was the moment—

"—Ah?"

Subaru looked up at the watchtower and said that, hoping to buy time with it. When Beatrice heard his empty response, she turned around and said, "Subaru?" but got no answer.

Subaru's consciousness had been taken elsewhere, not because of what was happening outside the tower, but because of what was going on with his friends inside the tower, where he could feel dim lights in various places. One connection seemed to have disappeared from those who were supposed to be fighting a fierce battle—Emilia's, who was supposed to be at the summit.

"…"

At that moment, Subaru's heart began to beat out of his chest. Feeling Emilia's connection disappear like that made him very confused. How could Emilia have disappeared so suddenly?

"Ah—Calm down, you dumbass."

When he had been falling into despair, Subaru scolded himself and stopped it from continuing. It was too early to feel despair about the current reality. He believed that he should have more faith in his Cor Leonis ability. Even if it came from the worst man in the world, that power was his ally, even if it was still in an early stage of development.

Judging from the reaction of Cor Leonis up until this point, Subaru deduced that the intensity of the light and the intensity of the warmth of the light were indicators of the current state of his comrades. The intensity of the light and warmth changes when it was excited violently, and the opposite was also true. Therefore, does the disappearance of Emilia's connection indicate her death?

"If that's the case, the connection will disappear in a second."

If Emilia had met a powerful enemy who had annihilated her existence in a single moment, it wouldn't have vanished without any resistance, even if she had fallen into the hands of that enemy. Subaru didn't think that had happened nor wanted to think that had happened. He believed that something else had happened instead.

It was also plausible that when Emilia ran up the tower and got to the first floor, something happened that pulled her out of Cor Leonis' influence. Therefore causing Emilia's connection to disappear from Subaru's perception in an instant. That is what Subaru wanted to believe.

"Subaru!"

"Mister! This is no time to be staring into space!"

The two little girls called out to Subaru, who bit his cheeks and clenched his molars in order to get back to reality using pain as a gateway. When he heard them speak, he let out an "I know" for all to hear—

“I don’t know where she is or what she is facing, but I have faith that she will return.”

3

—At the same time Subaru uttered a prayer on the sands far below.

Subaru thought he had no idea what Emilia was facing right now, but even with his imagination, there was no way he would have been able to guess what was going on with her situation at this moment.

Following Subaru’s instructions, Emilia headed up to the first floor of the tower to rewrite the rules of the Pleiades Watchtower. There she encountered a mighty being covered in shimmering blue scales. In the kingdom of Lugunica—no, there was none in this world that did not know its name.

If the Witch of Envy was a symbol of fear, it should be called a symbol of hope and trust. That was the type of work that entity had done for the world.

The name of that mighty and great being—

“The Divine Dragon, Volcanica.”

As Emilia ruminated on the name she had spoken, she felt as if her whole body suddenly became cold.

Although it was difficult to say, Emilia had a constitution that was not associated with nervousness. Of course, when she stood in front of people or had important conversations, she may have felt a little tense, but whenever she geared up for action, she would quickly leave those effects in the dust. She was often praised by Subaru and Ram for being a kind of big shot. However, Emilia, who was thought to be a powerful person, could only cower in the presence of the Divine Dragon.

It felt as if even breathing required permission from the other party in order to be done. The presence of a real dragon was so powerful that it seemed to have taken control of the entire world.

"…"

While holding her breath, Emilia took another look at the whole body of Volcanica.

The blue, deep-colored scales shimmered like jewels, and each one seemed to be sharper than a masterfully forged treasured sword.

The thick forefeet and hindfeet were equipped with black rock-like claws, and the look of the dragon made it seem as if it was long-lived. Its head had two thick, large horns, which were white like freshly squeezed milk.

The body of the Divine Dragon was perhaps 50 to 52 feet long (15 to 16 meters.) Emilia didn't know the exact size since she couldn't just go measure it on the spot. However, due to its size, it was natural that it would not be able to fit into the tower.

The first floor must have been made especially for Volcanica due to his need for an open floor.

"The third one was the Sage, the second one was Reid, and the first one was Volcanica."

"…"

"Perhaps all three ancient heroes are involved in the Trial of the tower?"

Looking back on the Trial so far, Emilia found a common trait.

The Three Heroes—The three heroes who made an effort to seal the Witch of Envy and made history in the Kingdom of Lugunica—Shaula, Reid, and Volcanica.

However, Shaula attributed everything to Flugel, Reid was a very violent and badmouthed man, and Volcanica was a dragon, not a man. Still, if everyone involved was here—

"It's really nice to still be good friends even after hundreds of years.”

If promises, unity, and that kind of thing connected the three heroes, that seemed like a really nice thing to Emilia.

Originally, Volcanica was an entity that had a Covenant with the Kingdom of Lugunica, and in fact, even when the black dragon rampaged in Lugunica decades ago, it offered its aid.

Emilia liked a person who placed an importance on keeping their promises. She thought that it was very good to keep promises. Subaru was very important to her and she trusted him, but she thought it would be no good if he didn’t keep his promises.

Then she suddenly began to wonder what she would do if even Beatrice started imitating such behavior. In the end, she didn’t want to scold Subaru or Beatrice for breaking their promises.

“Oh, no. Now isn’t the time to think about that… Hey, Volcanica! I came to complete the Trial. The Trial of the first floor! I’ll give it a try!”

“…”

“I don’t know what kind of hard Trial I’ll have to go through…but I’m asking you to please hurry! If I don’t do my best, then Subaru and the others will be in trouble. Whatever it is, bring it on!”

After striking her cheeks with both of her hands, Emilia regained her composure.

Emilia’s sudden thoughts about Subaru and Beatrice caused her to feel anxious. If they were to break their promises and she had no choice but to reprimand them, that was something that would happen tomorrow and in the future. It was here that she had to hold steadfastly in order to greet the future.

“…”

The Divine Dragon stared at Emilia with his golden eyes in silence. His eyes were so deep that she felt as if she were about to be sucked in, and that was no exaggeration.

He had fought the Witch of Envy and made a covenant with the Kingdom of Lugunica 400 years ago—but the great dragon was probably older than 400 In the years that may have well approached 1000, those twin eyes had gazed at the world. There was no telling what Emilia looked like to the Divine Dragon. She didn't know—

"I'm used to being scorned by others. There have been people who hated me because I was a half-elf, and there have been people who were mean to me like Echidna... But there are also people who have expectations of me, like Subaru, Ram, and Beatrice."

As she spoke, Emilia touched the crystal stone on her chest with her finger. Even now, her precious family member, who was the first to accept her, and who often looked at her though rose-tinted glasses, was still in a deep slumber. In this tower, including her family, there were friends who recognized her.

"That's why, I don't care how you look at me!"

Emilia deplored that in the face of the Divine Dragon and had once again become overwhelmed by its presence. The existence of Emilia, whose soul that had been crushed by the difference in presence, whose limbs seemed to tremble and become smaller, who had been swallowed by that eternal existence, could no longer be defeated.

—Never, I will never lose.

"…"

Emilia stood there with her fists clenched and her violet-blue eyes shining brightly.

Volcanica blinked slowly as he gazed at Emilia. Then he swung his magnificent dragon jaws open, and—

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

"…"

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

"…Huh?"

Emilia, who had been holding her breath and was prepared for the difficult questions that Volcanica would ask, tilted her head as she heard the words that had been spit out of the dragon's mouth. She already knew what they said.

"Well, that's the same story you told me earlier, right? I'm the one who came all the way to the first floor, and you are Volcanica…is that correct?"

"…"

"…Ah! Is it because I didn't introduce myself? I'm sorry. I'm Emilia, just Emilia. Hey, and it just so happens that there are a lot of people who don't remember me right now, so if you ask me to prove it, I'll be in trouble, but it's Emilia!"

"…"

"…Is this still hopeless?"

Emilia had thought that skipping her introduction had made him displeased, but even when she greeted him again, Volcanica's reaction was still lacking. If this was Subaru, he would have felt pessimistic and thought that by skipping the first greeting, he would have been disqualified from the Trial, but Emilia did not think so. Even if something were wrong, she believed that as long as she apologized, the other party wouldn't be so ruthless.

Therefore, Emilia did not believe that her rudeness was what caused Volcanica to remain silent. She speculated that he was not angry, or perhaps it was worse than being angry. Because—

"Perhaps…"

Emilia walked forward timidly as she stared at his golden eyes.

She took one or two steps closer to the sky and closed the distance between her and the Divine Dragon, Volcanica. Emilia boldly approached the majestic dragon that even breathed majestically. Then, she reached out her hand and gently touched the scales on the dragon's forelegs.

"—Cold."

The scales felt as cold as ice or cold steel. She wondered how long it had taken to lose so much heat simply by lying down. It did not mean biological "death." Physical vitality wasn't the only thing that long-term inactivity robbed.

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

Volcanica repeated this once more, and looked down at Emilia, who was still touching his paw. The words of welcome had been repeated frequently on a certain interval, and Emilia's lack of greetings was not to blame.

Volcanica's eyes, which stared deeply at Emilia, seemed to reflect her, and yet didn't.

The reason was obvious.

"Maybe you are too old and forgot about the Trial…?"

It was the "death" of the spirit, not the physical "death," that plagued the long-lived dragon. And it presented itself as a separate Trial for Emilia, and may have even been more challenging than the main Trial of the first floor.

The Trial of the First Floor, Maia, of the Great Library of Pleiades.

Time Limit: Survival Time of Friends.

Number of Challenges: Unknown.

Number of Challengers: One.

The Content of the Trial is Unknown.

—Trial, Start.

Chapter 81:
—Pleased to Meet You

1

—The spirit of the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, had “died” after being neglected for so many years. To put it simply, after being left alone for so long, he became senile.

“But, I can’t afford for you to be behaving like an old man! Hey, Volcanica!”

“—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

“Jeez! It’s no use!”

Emilia desperately called out to him by hitting his forefoot, but the only response she got was the feeling of his hard scales and the barrier around his spirit that made him senile and seemed like it would never end.

Like Reid, the Trial where the dead were revived as they originally were was also a difficult task, but when Emilia thought about it now, it seemed much more cute. Oh, and saying that the violent person named Reid was cute was just a joke—

“Reid was at least able to talk and tell me what I needed to do...”

But that wasn’t the case with Volcanica.

For Emilia, who needed to break through the Trial, it was the absolute worst thing for the Trial Overseer to be completely senile. She wanted to bring good news back to Subaru as soon as possible.

“Uhh… What should I do, what should I do… There’s no way I could defeat Volcanica by negotiating with him like I did to defeat Reid…”

Even so, it was expected to be a difficult Trial, but the differences between the Trials of the third and second floors made Emilia put her ideas on hold for now.

The Trial of the third floor, Taygeta, required challengers to use their knowledge to answer the questions that were asked. They were lucky enough to beat that Trial due to Subaru's knowledge from beyond the Great Waterfall, and it would have been seemingly impossible without it.

The Trial of the second floor, Electra, as was already known, was overseen by Reid Astrea. Even so, Emilia managed to win because she had gotten the better of Reid, but some say she succeeded because it was her first challenge.

In any case, there was no doubt that both Trials of the first and second floors had been hard-fought victories. So it was hard enough to just take on a challenge normally—

"I can't believe I can't even get the question out of you..."

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

"Jeez! I got it already! I want to hear rest of it!"

Emilia was hoping that she could get him to talk to her properly after a few tries, but she soon discovered that she had been wasting her time trying. She then looked around while resisting the urge to stomp on the ground in frustration.

The Trial of the third floor was set in a white room, with black slates that had questions on them—something that Subaru and Julius had happily called a monolith. Perhaps there were hidden things here. While Volcanica was in an unreliable state, it would be best for her to figure things out by herself.

"I have to do everything I can do now...!"

While keeping her eye on Volcanica, Emilia began to investigate her surroundings.

First of all, the top floor of the Pleiades Watchtower was located in a position that was too high to be seen from below. There were six pillars placed around the floor and a huge pillar in the center of the space—which Volcanica was leaning against. The size of the space also seemed to have a 330 feet (100 meter) radius.

It felt like a much larger space than the other two floors, but Volcanica also seemed to make it seem less big than it actually was due to his sheer size.

"Down below… Is it possible to see what's down there?"

Email grasped one of the pillars on the perimeter of the first floor and then looked down. Subaru and Ram were fighting hard in the tower and outside, but thick clouds obstructed her view and she could not see what was under them. It almost seemed like she could just hop into the clouds and join up with her companions—

"I'm sure I would be scolded if I tried climbing up here from the outside... Er, in the first place, I don't think it would be possible to get to the top of the clouds so quickly even if I tried reaaally hard."

Emilia didn't think her motor nerves were bad, but she knew how high the clouds and sky were. When she was little, she tried reaching out and touching the clouds, but it wasn't possible, and when she grew up, she tried it again but still couldn't do it. It might be possible for Reinhard to jump up into the clouds, but it wasn't possible for her.

Therefore, she concluded that a magical force must have brought her to the top of the tower.

"If so, then it wouldn't be unusual for the Trial to be here!"

Encouraged by her thoughts, Emilia looked around at the six pillars, and then hit and tried to climb them. However, she was unable to experience any sort of strange phenomenon or see any writing on them.

And, if there was one possibility—

"—The large pillar in the middle, where Volcanica is sitting."

If the surrounding pillars have nothing on them and don't react in any way, then the most likely culprit is the central pillar. Unlike the other six, the central pillar extended even higher. It was possible that there was another floor above this one that could be called floor zero. If that was so, then there seemed to be a way to change this place where nothing ever changed.

However—

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

In order to get to that pillar, it was impossible to avoid Volcanica, who kept repeating the same words over and over again.

"…"

Although she had decided on challenging the Trial, dealing with Volcanica was in a whole different ballpark. Even so, Emilia approached the central pillar where Volcanica laid.

"Volcanica, what do I need to do for the Trial?"

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

The answer from Volcanica had remained the same.

Emilia felt more relieved than disappointed or disheartened. If Volcanica's reaction remained the same, then he should remain indifferent to her, like when she touched his forefoot. Believing that to be the case, she started walking to the other side of him to examine the central pillar—

"—Eh?"

Just as Emilia was about the touch the pillar, she heard the sound of the wind. She then instinctively created an ice wall above her head before she even knew what was happening. After a single moment, something smashed through the ice wall and into her slender body, flipping her into the air.

"Oof."

The impact of that attack went straight through her back and into her chest, and Emilia coughed as she rolled violently on the floor. She stopped the momentum by placing her hand on the floor and managed to come to a stop. She then slowly raised her face and realized what had happened.

—The Divine Dragon, leaning against the pillar, slowly lowered his tail to the floor.

"Was I hit by his tail?"

In other words, it was a very simple attack.

Dragons often used their tails to express their emotions. The relationship between Subaru and Patrasche was one example. When Subaru would go too far with one of his pranks, Ram or Patrasche would compete to see would could hit him more. However, the blow that came from Volcanica's tail could not be compared to the expression of affection between a person and an animal.

Emilia was okay since her defensive measure had been deployed immediately, but if she had not reacted in time, the blow would have broken her neck or blown her head off.

For Volcanica, it was akin to unconsciously stepping on an insect. Or as if they were little insects at the feet of giant creatures.

"…"

Understanding that fact, cold sweat started forming along Emilia's neck and back. But it also brought up one possibility—

"Just as I thought, there must be something on that pillar."

"…"

"You're here to oversee the Trial. You haven't forgotten about that, even though you've forgotten about the Trial itself. That's why you keep saying the same things over and over again."

Volcanica looked as if he had no idea what he was supposed to do.

Still, the fact that the Divine Dragon was here was a testament to how strong his will to keep the promise he made before his “death” was.

The Sage, the Sword Saint, and the Divine Dragon were meant to test their wisdom, power, and ambition, respectively.

If that’s the case—

“—Don’t feel halfhearted. I’m also seriously serious.”

Emilia also firmly declared that she would use force on the condition that the other party interfered. In a matter of seconds the atmosphere around Emilia screamed and the world slowly began to freeze. An ice warrior was born one after the other, as if following Emilia as their queen. —This was a new possibility for her born from further developing her Ice Brand Arts. She hadn’t been able to try this in the narrow watchtower, but with the size of this space and the opponent she was facing, she couldn’t show mercy.

Emilia hadn’t told Subaru about it, so he hadn’t been able to give it a name for her. Therefore, she named it—

“Ice Brand Arts: Ice Shoulders….!”

The seven ice soldiers, that had been created in the shape of a humanoid, held their respective weapons and were brave companions who would fight to the death with Emilia.

“I’m going, Mr. Sleepyhead! If you’re going to wake up, I hope you wake up sooner!”

That consciousness was still buried in the same stupor as before.

2

—At the same moment, Emilia was not the only one who was taking on a mighty enemy that was far stronger than them.

The clash between two swordsman on the second floor, Electra, which was one floor lower than where Emilia was fighting the senile Divine Dragon, started to heat up in intensity.

However, the one-sided nature of the battle had remained unchanged.

“Heyheyheyhey, what’s the matter, what’s wrong? Ya think losin’ one chopstick will be enough for ya ta win? Ya still can’t reach me, you, this ain’t a game, you, you!”

“Ugh…!”

A man with long red hair threw a powerful kick while swearing at and taunting his opponent.

The knight with a graceful profile got thrown back after receiving the blow with the handle of the knight sword in his hand. He wasn’t able to diminish the shock the blow and could only move at fast as he could. But the next strike came before he could move.

This exact sequence of events had been repeated over and over again on the battlefield of the second floor.

This had happened many times—the knight was blown away by the swordsman’s attack, and when he was constantly on the defensive, the swordsman would spit out “Good grief…”

“Your sword will change when your mood changes. You, I was hopin’ for that explosion, ya know? But, when the hell do ya plan on explodin’, you, or…”

Saying that, the red-haired swordsman—Reid—bent his lips while twisting his neck. In an arrogant and taunting manner, the uncommon swordsman glared at the knight.

“Are ya just gonna lose because of your fixation on manners, you? Are ya happy with that, you?”

“You can say whatever you like about me.”

At Reid’s suggestion, the knight loosed his lips and spoke freely. The knight stood solemnly under Reid’s sharp gaze, and checked the feel of his knight sword while still feeling numb from his kick.

Julius Juukulius decided to give up his Nameless Knight persona and resist his fate.

“You have said those words to me many times. A boring fight, well-mannered sword skills, lack of play… I also remember these words.”

“Ha, right. Even if it ain’t as good as mine, no matter who sees it, they will get the same feelin’. Your sword is desperate.”

“...Desperate?”

Reid’s proclamation would not have come from a noble point of view. He probably was just saying what he thought. It captured the essence that even if one eye was covered, he could see everything through those blue eyes. And he may have been able to see Julius’s true character through his flimsy ideals.

“…”

There was a woman watching the battle between Julius and Reid. And to Julius, she was the most precious woman in the world, although her identity wasn’t exactly the same as it was before. Although it had been an irresistible force, two months had passed since the event that happened in the Watergate City occurred—and they continued to have an empty master-servant relationship as a result.

“Now that I think about it, you and I should have spoken to each other more openly.”

“Julius...?”

“If we had been able to do that, I would have been a good friend to you. Because we adore and cherish the same woman.”

With his words full of zeal, Julius once again challenged the Sword Saint.

Reid held a short, thin chopstick in his right hand and greeted

Julius's assault from the front.

Cut, pierce, slash, swing, swing down, it was a continuous attack.

Sometimes Julius set up feints and tried to confuse his opponent with his footwork, but Reid easily prevented it with an attitude of not even seeing it as a being serious.

“This again? I already told ya many times that this won't work…”

“Even if you say it's boring, this is my sword!”

“Jeez!”

The unimpressed scoring was interrupted by a yell, and Reid unleashed a kick to intercept Julius's sword attack. The kick caused him to lose his balance, and Reid's chopstick instantly struck diagonally into him, who had shown an opening in his defenses.

“HAH!”

Reid laughed at his movements and tried to cut the cloaked Julius in two. However, by the time the cloak had been blown away by the power of the strike, Julius had already jumped backwards horizontally and escaped his attack.

“Oh, that's it!”

“No, wrong!”

“Ah?”

Reid had praised Julius for wearing white to blind his opponent and throwing away his righteous ways.

However, Julius immediately cut him off and ran over to the cloak that had been blown off. Then he picked up the cloak that had been torn by the chopstick and put it back on.

He fastened the fasteners firmly and put on the white cloak over his white unform, which was the embodiment of a knight. Even if he were to stop being Nameless, he couldn't stop being a knight.

Seeing Julius's attitude like that, Reid clicked his tongue.

"You, I was expectin' you ta change when that dazzlin' gal and the other dazzlin' gal came, ya know? They came to win regardless of their appearance. That's what I'm sayin'. You don't know who ya are, do ya?"

"…"

"You pretend to be a righteous knight, but that's not the real you. You're just like me, a Stick Swinger. Ya just can't see it cuz you're too stuck in your ways, you."

Pointing his chopstick at Julius, Reid spat that out with a sour face.

Julius was blind to Reid's remarks, and after a pause, he murmured, "Alright."

"I feel like I finally understand."

"Yeah? What did ya find out?"

"I figured out why you're being so relentless with me."

Reid was frustrated but didn't stop talking to Julius. His methods were certainly violent, and he didn't seem like the kind of person who would do something like that at all, but Julius felt as if he were a master who was teaching and guiding him.

Then, the reason as to why Reid had been constantly giving Julius a hard time had finally been realized—

"—Did you see yourself in me?"

The reason he had laughed so much at Julius for his boring fighting and well-mannered swordplay was because he thought he had been a lion sleeping in his shell. Although, he may have been just overestimating himself by calling himself a lion—

"I dunno the details, pale-faced weakling. I just do what I wanna do. That feelin' of mine is crazy. It's more interestin' to peel your mask off bit by bit, you."

"…"

"That's why I'm tryin' ta peel it off. Understand, you? That's why ya can't reach me, and ya can't even look good for the dazzlin' gal behind ya."

Julius laughed wryly when Reid pointed at Echidna with his chin. Indeed, Reid had great eyes, and could see perfectly.

—Julius Juukulius knew that he was a man who just wanted to look good.

"That's why I won't change who I am."

"What?"

"Your words are correct. There are a lot of things that come to mind... In a world where everyone forgot me, I did not speak about it, but I am not a legitimate son of the House of Juukulius."

Julius had begun to speak in an audible tone to Reid, who frowned, and to Echidna, who looked forward with a determined expression on her face. This was the true history of Julius Juukulius, which only Natsuki Subaru could remember.

"My father, who ran away from a house of nobility, married my mother, who was a commoner, and I was born between them. And so my origin is that of a commoner. Until my parents died and my uncle took me in, I had nothing to do with the culture of the nobility... So, I forged my own path."

"You're an ugly faker."

"Might be so. My true essence is probably that of a crude child who doesn't know his ideals who is running around a field laughing with his friends, and wearing plain clothes instead of formal attire."

Without knowing etiquette, without ideals to aim for, working hard to live every day. This was the future promised to Julius. However, that future was swept away by the flash floods along with his parents, and disappeared.

That’s why—

“That is why I pretend to be a knight. I will stick with that appearance and keep my true self hidden.”

“You...”

“I was ignorant and didn’t know anything, but I met my ideal. —I longed to be a knight. I longed for the image of a knight who was dignified and clean. Therefore, I will stick to that longing.”

Julius’s cloak made a sound as it was put on once more, and his gaze was full of strength.

Reid had been put into a bad mood, and the expression on his face went from frustrated to suspicious. He had been surprised that his words had been denied, but he couldn’t even make a rebuttal. And then Julius continued with a loud voice—

“I am a clumsy man. Things began to take shape on their own, and I came to believe that as long as I had a good sword, wore fine clothes, and used the correct words, that I could be like that. That’s why I have to be stubborn. I must hold on to my vanity.”

Julius knew that some people hated vanity and that kind of language. One person that came to mind was Natsuki Subaru. But Julius thought—

“It is used as a crutch to carry out my will by straightening my back, adjusting my tastes, and pretending to be that way. That is the fake appearance I decided to suffer with forever.”

“…”

“Some will make a fool of my vanity. But I believe there are others who are just as dazzling as that. —Let me continue to long for the Way of the Knight.”

Julius couldn’t remember who first made him long to become a knight, but he became a knight regardless. He was called ‘The Finest’ not only because of his refined swordsmanship and spirit arts skills, but because he was gifted with great ability. Because he was made to think that the way Julius Juukulius should be is the way a knight should be. When he pretended to be The Finest of Knights, it made him feel as if he dazzled.

Julius then relaxed his lips and turned to Echidna. He lightly shook his head at her—who borrowed the appearance of his beloved lord—at her who deeply regretted that she couldn't remember him. There was no need for him to feel guilty about it.

"There is no need to fear, regret, or mourn being forgotten. Because I exist in the chivalry that I yearn for that everyone knows."

And the same thing could be said of the girls who were here—

"Sorry about this, my buds. I held onto the bonds that had been lost, however, not letting you go only made you all uneasy. Now I will release you all from your restraints."

Followed by Julius's whisper, visible pale lights made up of vivid colors could be seen—beautiful spirits bearing six attributes, Julius Juukulius' quasi-spirits. They were inseparable beings that had been with him since before he became a knight. But they had also forgotten him, who had lost his Name due to the Authority of Gluttony.

However, they had been attracted to the everlasting contract between the Spirit and the Contractor and Julius's Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits, so they had continued to linger.

Julius also believed that if he could regain his Name, the relationship could be regained, and so he refused to let them go. Oh, how foolish that was. Due to everything that had changed, he probably didn't want to lose anything else. But—

"The buds who have always been with me. You were so dear to me that I refused to let go of your warmth and kindness. I was hoping to be able to return to the old days without issue, but nothing happened. —Oh, how weak, pathetic, and ugly I am."

In a state of bewilderment, the six quasi-spirits swirled around Julius. Then he softly held out his arm to them. After seeing the arm that looked like a perch, the quasi-spirits gathered there slowly. And Julius smiled at the dim lights that hung upon his arm.

“I was afraid of change. However, there are some things that cannot be obtained without the willingness to lose them. For example, it is the flowering of a bud called love. A future where buds that have been around for a long time can see with their own eyes what kind of flowers the buds will bloom into.”

“…”

The girls did not respond, however, they seemed to be expecting something to happen. Therefore, Julius went along with it and—

“My buds! I will let all of you go now. I’m sorry I clung onto our bonds for so long.”

At the same time he said that, the quasi-spirits surrounding Julius’s arms were blown away. It seemed to have been accompanied by a shock, but it was a violent sensation like being struck by a bolt of lightning, and it only seemed to have pierced Julius and the quasi-spirits.

The connection, the bond, the spirit-to-spirit contract that had certainly been there, was broken. The pain and grief that came from losing a spirit-to-spirit connection was only something a spirit arts user could know.

Julius did not yet know, but Emilia had once experienced the same pain and cowered in anguish. He himself had just experienced parting with the six quasi spirits at the same time, which damaged his soul. He then felt a strange sensation in his chest, as if something had been separated from his soul.

This was a pain that was fundamentally different from being forgotten by his buds due to the Authority of Gluttony. Julius and the spirits themselves must have experienced the same pain and regretted it. The spirits may have even cursed the wounds inflicted on themselves and wondered why they had ever made a contract with a human in the first place. But—

"—On top of all that, I will call you all again."

"…"

"I love you all. If you accept this vain man's courtship, then let's reconnect. —A new contract between me and you all!!"

Julius shouted loudly and stretched his arms out to the heavens. Hearing his cry, the quasi-spirits scattered about and flickered for just a second.

However, their hesitation and indecision only lasted for a moment.

3

A warm light enveloped Julius Juukulius. It gently seeped into the wounds of his soul that had been caused by the severance of the contract. There was joy; there was anger; there was sadness; there was love; and there was also hatred. These were the emotions that each of them had accumulated for over a decade. He then decided to just let bygones be bygones and forge a new path into the future. He wasn't sure if that was the correct answer, but he wanted to get it right this time.

Julius knew that it may go wrong many times, and that he may not choose the right path every time and make mistakes, but he vowed that he would shape himself every time. Even if he made a mistake, he was not alone. He was never alone.

If he moved forward, there were the ideals created by many great predecessors.

If he stopped, he would feel the warmth of the buds who had been lovingly watching over him.

And if he looked to his side, there was the profile of his lord who he had pledged his faith to, which had shaped him.

What on earth could Julius Juukulius fear from now on? Nothing.

"—That's right. My beautiful flowering maidens."

The six buds answered in a unified voice—no, it was the answer of the flowering maidens.

Light was born—

4

“I will continue on this deep, kind, and thorny path.”

The pain of breaking the contract had been healed by the bond that had been reformed.

Wrapped in six more mysterious lights than before, Julius Juukulius looked ahead. There was a figure at the apex that he longed to reach as one who devoted himself to the sword.

However, the envy of Julius Juukulius was pointed at a different place from the apex in front of him. And so, he did not hesitate to express that longing with the light of the rainbow.

“—My apologies for keeping you waiting, Sword Saint Reid Astrea. —Nice to meet you.”

He shook his knight sword aside, grasped his cloak in his hands, and bowed gracefully. Then he raised his face , became the ‘It’ that he most admired in the world, and announced his name.

“—I am the Finest of Knights, Julius Juukulius. The sword of the Kingdom that will slay you.

Chapter 82:
Shackle Accompanying Battle

1

—She slowly and gradually removed her ‘shackles’ and increased the amount of heat in her body.

There was a sensation as if her blood were boiling, and the muscles of her thin body were tightened. The body of this girl was soft to the touch and seemed fleeting and weak, however, the blood that flowed in it, the flesh that made it up, and its very bones came from the best race in the world.

The Oni God, which was the most supreme being among them, had returned.

“That’s my sister! Oh, how lovely! You’re on fire! No matter how far she goes, Rem will never reach you. She is no match for you, Sister!

“Stop spitting when you talk. It’s sickening. And don’t compare Rem to anything.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s already been decided. —Ram does not need a title higher than that of Rem’s sister.”

She said that in a bemused tone as she twisted her body and bluntly rejected his words by unleashing a gust of wind. It was a very powerful skill that ripped through one’s skin if it were grazed, crushed one’s bones if they were struck, and penetrated one’s internal organs. It was a skill that had been used generously, and a series of attacks that used both her hands and feet equally had been released. And it wasn’t just pure physical prowess or skill.

If this were due to pure technique, then Batenkaitos would have been able to bring out all of the techniques in his arsenal, which came from East to West and from all ages, relying on the Memories of the opponents he had eaten. However, Ram's current tactics were anything but straightforward.

"…"

The attacks that Ram released, such as elbow strikes and knee strikes, could be freely sped up or slowed down when she was in the middle of an attack. That was due to the fact that she was proficient in the use of Wind Magic which she could combine with her movements in the midst of battle.

The speed of the wind sped up or slowed down, confusing Batenkaitos' perception as he tried to fight back. In fact, Ram had dispersed gusts of wind in all directions in order to mask her movements, which allowed her to get into her enemy's blind spot, and unleashed attacks with the intent to kill many times.

"Wow! This is the best!"

Batenkaitos cheered with delight as he dodged Ram's attacks. While bleeding from his torn right cheek, Gluttony, with his long, lightly parted dark brown hair with highlights at the ends, enjoyed tasting his opponent's abilities.

"This spicy taste is irresistible! It's strong and really does the trick! It's so dynamic with a joyful explosion of flavor! Sister is a perfect treat for our Gourmet!"

Batenkaitos smirked as they flew around the spiral staircase and switched their original positions. The daggers attached to his wrists struck against Ram's wand, and when he gained some distance from her, his mouth opened and began drooling.

"How nice, so nice, quite nice, very nice, as it's nice, surely it's nice, isn't it nice. Gluttonous drinking! Gluttony!"

"…"

"Above all, the scent of anger is great. With such a person who personally hates us so much...what kind of Gourmet can we enjoy if we taste it on our tongue?!"

"…"

Then Batenkaitos clapped his hands and trembled after having a premonition that he would experience incomprehensible pleasure in his future. In the face of that, Ram took a deep breath and checked the condition of her body.

"It's far from the real thing, but…"

Ram had been truly amazed, although she hadn't shown it on her face. There was a common saying that said people did not understand themselves best, but unlike those fools, Ram knew herself perfectly.

Ram's body, which had lost the horn of the Oni's and became Hornless, had been crushed by a huge load every day. As a result, Ram put shackles on her consciousness. She had usually kept all of her shackles on while working as a maid. However, there were times when there was an emergency and she had to use magic to get through the situation. In cases like that, she would remove a single shackle in order to use a little bit of her magic. And if that wasn't enough, she would remove another shackle and bring out 20% of the power she had originally.

She had a battle with Garfiel in the Sanctuary around a year and a half ago. Ram had been convinced that that had been the absolute best she could do as a Hornless Oni, and that releasing any more would be fruitless since her body wouldn't be able to handle the strain. However, at this very moment, Ram was trying to remove her shackles, which were a double-edged sword, one shackle at a time.

"…"

Ram had experienced a rare moment of hesitation in her heart. As had already been mentioned, she had a perfect grasp of herself. The last time she hadn't felt any side effects of unleashing her power when she was in battle had been when she was less than ten years old. However, in the battles that occurred after that time, every time she unleashed too much of her power, she would experience a terrible migraine, with nosebleeds and tears of blood flowing endlessly, and she wouldn't be able to move her body for a while. She would have to be prepared for that if she decided to go through with it.

That's not good. —Because Ram and Subaru shared a common destiny.

"…If I take too long, Barusu will die."

As was already known, Subaru was still scrambling to deal with Shaula and the hordes of witchbeasts. Beatrice and Meili were probably with him. —Was Emilia, who made her memories ache, heading up to the top of the tower and struggling on her own?

For some reason, Ram had been worried about the fate of that silver-haired girl. She was sure they had been very close before her Name had been stolen.

None of them could rely on Ram without him.

Therefore—

"Do your best not to die, Barusu. —Rem would cry."

And so, after whispering those words, Ram released the third shackle for the first time in 10 years.

2

—At that same moment, the reaction of Cor Leonis rattled Natsuki Subaru's teeth.

"—Guh."

That had marked the arrival of a burden which might—no, would, cause him to vomit blood. For a moment, Subaru had felt as if one of the faint lights in the tower had gotten bigger, and immediately after that it seemed like he had been attacked by it.

"Subaru!"

"—Ugh."

Beatrice had immediately supported Subaru in her bosom, who had been coughing up blood and was on the verge of collapsing. They were unfortunately not being carried by Patrasche, but a witchbeast known as the Hungry Horse King, who was not accustomed to carrying other creatures.

They did not have a lot of experience riding without the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, and there wasn't a saddle to sit on either, nor stirrups to put their feet in, so if they relaxed for even a second, they would get thrown off. The reason why that hadn't happened is because of Beatrice's weight-control magic , and the fact that she wrapped Subaru's Guiltywhip around the upper body of the witchbeast to serve as the reins. And so, he could not afford to ruin her painstaking efforts to keep them on the witchbeast.

"Has a reaction from Ram arrived, I wonder?"

"That's right… Sorry, I will bear with it somehow…ugh."

As he grabbed the whip again, Subaru responded to Beatrice, who was a woman of understanding. The taste of rust filled his mouth as vomit tried to escape from his insides, and he had no idea which part of her body was being burdened. Perhaps her internal organs were being overworked, or something inside her body had ruptured, or there was some other kind of damage to her body that he couldn't think of. Either way, it only meant one thing: Ram had started getting serious.

"If Ram can take out one of the Gluttonies..."

Subaru couldn't claim that it would instantly make things easier. In the first place, he wasn't sure if it meant that by taking out Gluttony, that the Names and Memories would be returned. However, it would at least reduce the amount of burdens that were being placed on him.

"Hah, hah...!"

She clung onto the upper body of the Hungry Horse King and was working hard to give orders to the witchbeasts. In order for Subaru to fight against the pincers and the light from the stinger, it was essential for Meili to work hard. They had been able to make up for their lack of military strength by using the power of witchbeasts, which created a grace period that had not existed before. Therefore, Subaru wasn't playing around when he said that they needed to love Meili like a parent loves their child.

At this moment, in the Pleiades Watchtower, which was targeted by five obstacles, the power of Emilia, Ram, and Julius were needed to break through each obstacle, but the key to their success or failure was Meili Portroute, who was keeping the battlefields in a state of balance.

Therefore, Subaru had already been taking on Meili's burdens for a long time.

"Winged Mole! Courtesan Bear! Go together!

Speaking in a high-pitched voice, Meili looked at the battlefield with a birds-eye view and ordered the witchbeasts to charge to their deaths. She clapped her hands, snapped her fingers, or said the orders aloud. The way in which she ordered the witchbeasts varied from one to another, but her Divine Protection was in a perpetual state of use.

Subaru was feeling the effects of taking on her burdens, as if his brain was expanding and about to pop out of his skull—essentially a migraine.

"…"

Otto's Divine Protection of Soul Language and Meili's Divine Protection of Magic Manipulation were more like human abilities rather than magic. In other words, they were more of a supernatural power, not magic. In which case, the strain their users felt was larger than others, which meant it would take a bigger toll on Subaru. That meant that the object of the Divine Protection was not focused on others, but on the users themselves.

"Divine Protections and Authorities are part of a system that I just can't wrap my head around…"

Powers that were supposed to only be able to be used by Sin Archbishops and the Witches, for whatever reason, were able to be used by Subaru. And the Divine Protections were given to people in this world at birth in a random manner. However, he admitted that it's true that Authorities had their own uses—

"Because of that..."

Subaru couldn't stop thinking about the possibility of a tragedy occurring as a result. There was no doubt that the Authorities of the Sin Archbishops and Witches played a major role in why people feared them so much and why they were so powerful. There were many people who would not have had their fates changed if such things didn't exist.

Meili, for example, was a victim of the negative side of having a Divine Protection. She had been abandoned by her own parents due to her natural ability to communicate with witchbeasts. —Subaru was not sure if there were actually negative sides to having Divine Protections, but it made sense in his mind. It seemed obvious. That was at least the truth in Meili's case.

That's why—

"Me, I'm really a double standard..."

Subaru didn't really want to rely on Authorities or Divine Protections, but he didn't hesitate to use them if it was necessary. He believed it was true that weak people didn't have a ton of options, but that didn't mean they needed to be humble too.

Subaru had forced himself to walk an immoral path, and to be able to laugh, he didn't want to forget that.

"Mister! Are you concentrating?! If you and Beatrice get killed, it's all over, you know?!"

"I know. —Hey, Meili, when this is all over, will you become my child?"

"—Uh! What are you saying over there, stay focused!"

While holding her head up, Meili yelled back at Subaru, who had just asked that question. But they couldn't afford to play around with each other. If they lost their concentration, they would get swept away in an instant.

However—

"I'm experiencing a lot of pain right now, so I don't think it'll be worth it unless I think tomorrow is gonna be a good day."

Really, that was what Natsuki Subaru thought as he spat blood.

3

As she continued to fight on the sand, Meili murmured "Something's wrong" out of her mouth.

Of course, there were many reasons why something felt wrong. There was the case of Shaula, who had turned into a gigantic scorpion, who was right in front of her, or the half-elf with radiant and healthy silver hair, or Ram and Julius who were fighting various enemies in the watchtower, and especially Subaru and Beatrice who were fighting together with her.

However, what felt the most wrong was—

"Who am I?"

Meili herself did not really know why this had happened. In the first place, when Subaru and his friends started their journey to the Augria Sand Dunes, she began to feel as if she wasn't in control of her own actions. As her own autonomy had been swept away, as had been requested of her, she obediently did as she was told, not worrying about whether it was right or wrong. Because that was what she had always done before, she intended to do that same here as well. And yet—

"—There was a thing known as a Book of the Dead."

When Meili heard that she could relive the memories of the dead, her own curiosity got the best of her. She felt as if she had no choice but to go search for Elsa Granhiert's Book of the Dead, who she had deeply cared about for a long time, which ended up being the number one mistake in her life. Because of that, she had been reproached and lectured at by Subaru. And she couldn't help but laugh at his complaints.

After that, she had somehow been forced to promise to cooperate with them. Subaru had told her that he would always have her back, but she thought he was the type of guy who regretted saying how much responsibility he intended to take. And there was a part of her that felt as if he would easily forget about his promises.

However, what was different between Subaru and Meili was not just what came out of their mouths. Subaru would always try to do what he said he would do, and he would always show up to keep his promise—and if Beatrice were on the scene as well, she would assist him in keeping his promise. When that happened, she felt bad about being spoiled so much, and she felt like she should help them out in return, but she had not gotten around to doing that yet, or rather, she had not had an opportunity to do that yet.

"…"

Even now, a group of winged moles that moved in response to Meili's gestures had just been vaporized by a ray of white light that came from the stinger of the gigantic scorpion and their corpses had been scattered over the battlefield. The winged moles were originally very timid witchbeasts that would never even dare to attack an enemy that was stronger than them, but Meili, who was capable of commanding them to fight regardless of what their instincts told them, could not make these witchbeasts stronger than what they originally were.

"Aaah! I was attacked?!"

Swinging its massive pincers, the violent gigantic scorpion that had been raging on the battlefield tore through witchbeasts one after another. The blood of the witchbeasts that had been torn, crushed, and pierced soaked the parched sand, and the sea of sand that had originally looked yellow was transforming into a reddish black color.

“—Ugh!”

While biting into that fact, Meili quickly looked around and searched for signs of witchbeasts in the sky, on the sand, or even under the sand, and tamed ones that were capable of being tamed. Now was not to time to care about quality. What she needed now was an inexhaustible supply of soldiers to use.

“La, lalalalalalalalalalalalala! I’m definitely going to get you to listen to me later, Brother, whether you want to or not!”

There wasn’t even any time for Meili to wipe the sweat accumulating on her forehead as she cursed at Subaru and kept a close eye on the rampaging gigantic scorpion. On the back of the Hungry Horse King, Meili did not feel comfortable at all riding on it in these conditions. However, her solution had been to stick a knife into the back of the witchbeast through the cloak that was wrapped around her body so that her body could be forcibly fixed onto it. It was a witchbeast that was under her direct control, so it had no choice but to accept this kind of treatment without complaint. The problem was that her situation was much more dire than that of the witchbeast she was riding on.

In the first place, the original Meili would never have taken part in a last-ditch effort battle like this. Her way of fighting had always required preparing in advance by getting the surrounding witchbeast’s under her control, placing them on the battlefield, and watching the battle from a high vantage point. That was what the witchbeast Master, Meili Portroute, was all about.

Of course, having direct command on the battlefield would improve the accuracy of the witchbeasts’ attacks and would help her get them to attack and defend when they needed to, but the downside of that was that it would put herself in danger. Due to making the wrong choice, Meili lost the battle against Subaru and had been taken prisoner.

“Elsa…”

Elsa had died because of such mistakes as well. Of course, she wouldn’t want Meili to blame herself at all, and Meili sometimes thought that she hadn't even died, which made her feel nervous.

Just like she didn't know how Elsa felt, Meili didn't know how she herself felt.

Meili had been fighting a slow battle with the gigantic scorpion, and devoted a lot of time to buying time for the witchbeasts so they could stay alive, however, she had never really done this in the past.

Meili Portroute was an assassin. She made a living by taking the lives of others via orders, instructions, or request. So this was the first time—

—To save and protect the lives of others.

"This isn't my way!"

What Subaru had said earlier made Meili very angry. How dare he ask her to be his child? She believed the way he behaved as if he had no idea people would find it hateful was disgusting. Garfiel may have been her direct enemy, but Subaru was the architect behind the whole situation. Even now, in the Pleaides Watchtower, he was the cause behind the whole situation itself.

"…"

It was true that she thought negatively of Subaru's words and actions, but Meili herself noticed how she followed his instructions and moved like a piece on a game board like everyone else.

If it had been a result of Subaru's deeply thought out plans, then it would be much more convincing. However, no matter how Meili looked at it, he wasn't capable of something like that. All he had was desperation, crazy expectations, and a way to make her trust him to the point that she would leave her life in his hands—

"For some reason, I feel like I'm an idiiiot."

While saying that, Meili brought out a witchbeast that she had gotten from beneath the sand and told it to go after the gigantic scorpion.

“…”

A giant sand earthworm popped out from beneath the sand and into the battlefield that had been painted red. Its body was at least 33 feet (10 meters) long, and it wiggled over to the gigantic scorpion before it rose up, expanded itself to its limit, and then boldly fell onto the gigantic scorpion. If it had been crushed and pushed into the sand, it would have been like defeating an undefeatable opponent—but it did not work out so well.

A ray of white light poured out from the stinger of the gigantic scorpion and cut through the massive sand earthworm in an instant. While the sand earthworm—which had been cut in two—made a strange sound as it plopped onto the sand below into its own body fluids, the attack that came from the stinger did not stop and continued to break the body of the dead sand earthworm into even more pieces.

However, it was just an opening created by using the life of the sand earthworm.

—Three Hungry Horse Kings, which were her favorites, emerged from where the sand earthworm had come from.

“—ッッ.”

A screech that sounded like the cry of a baby had been raised, and the burning half-human half-horse’s attacked the gigantic scorpion.

Although the Augria Sand Dunes was home to a variety of witchbeasts, it was the Hungry Horse King that had the most firepower out of all of them. Meili had preserved her favorite witchbeast by sacrificing a large number of other witchbeasts that wouldn’t have been enough to turn the tide of the battle. She had sacrificed courtesan bears, that had a poor amount of stamina, and sand earthworms, that could only try to crush their prey with their large bodies.

The Three Hungry Horse Kings had been attracted by the battle taking place.

Although they were inferior to the gigantic scorpion when it came to fighting power, the enemy was very cautious around this witchbeast. That was proof that they had felt threatened by their power.

"I think I'm in pretty good shape now."

Moving herself, along with Subaru and Beatrice, as well as getting the three Hungry Horse Kings ready for their attack all at the same time must have put quite a burden on Meili. However, the current her didn't seem to notice it at all. As to why, there was a possibility that the battle had exhilarated her to the point that she no longer noticed the burden that had been placed on herself. And she didn't think she'd be able to kill it. However, for the sake of achieving Subaru's goals, damaging it a bit would be acceptable.

"…"

—In a sense, it may have been the third time that a little girl named Meili, who had always done what she had been told, had wished to do something of her own volition.

The first time had been when she had walked around the watchtower at night to seek help from the Book of the Dead.

The second time had been when she had approached Subaru's back from the corner, who had been standing near the spiral staircase.

And the third time had been when she went above and beyond for the purpose of earning a little bit of extra time during the battle.

"—Meili!!"

As soon as the three Hungry Horse Kings had begun approaching the gigantic scorpion, a bloodcurdling scream could be heard calling out to Meili. It had literally been the cry of Subaru, who had blood flowing out of the edges of his mouth.

She had been puzzled due to it containing no hint of exultation, joy, or admiration. She wondered why he had sounded so angry when everything had been going so well. But—

"—Huh?"

The three Hungry Horse Kings, holding spears of fire, fiercely pounced onto the gigantic scorpion. No matter how well the gigantic scorpion was able to use its pincers and stinger, it would have been impossible to avoid this attack—but then they saw a change in the body of the scorpion, and it collapsed. It was as if it had been cooked in flames, or had taken in all the blood that had been soaked up by the sea of sand.

The outer shell, which had been as dull and shiny as dark steel, discolored as if it had been awakening from its slumber. In the next moment, the color of the jet-black scorpion changed to bloody red.

—There are some witchbeasts that changed into a Warning Color when they felt threatened or like they were in danger.

When this happened, there was a clear change in behavior, and they became more aggressive and ferocious. A change in appearance was also a good indicator for seeing if they had changed. For example, when the Hungry Horse King changed, it's flames swelled, and when the White Whale changed, it would create many clones of itself.

And that was also applicable to the gigantic scorpion—no, it was also be applicable to the Red Scorpion.

More aggression, more destruction—complete annihilation—

"—Ah."

Rays of white light had been emitted in all directions, and the three Hungry Horse Kings who tried to get away had been vaporized. At the same time, the ray of white light raged through the sea of sand, slaughtering everything in its path. And—

"…"

Swallowed by the exploding rays of white light, Meili's small body flew through the air as droplets of blood fell from it.

—She had hated the feeling of her blood boiling and the feeling of exhilaration that came from it ever since she was a child.

She used to have a sense of omnipotence that made her feel as if she had control of everything in this world. If enough time had gone by where she had believed in that illusion, no matter how rich in spirit she was, she would have gone down the wrong path.

She had a good awareness of herself, but it wasn't like she was overconfident in her abilities. As far as making mistakes was concerned, she just wanted to have the will to make no mistakes as well as the character to correct the mistakes she made. She had been able to maintain that attitude because she had not gotten drunk on her own power.

It was because she didn't assume she was wonderful just because the people around her told her so, and she refused to be obedient to the people who valued old conventions and ancient mysteries.

And what was the reason why she hadn't been crushed by those external factors? She knew it was something that she couldn't remember.

Because—

"—Ram is not only beautiful, but intelligent."

Putting aside her own words of praise, Ram's step shattered the steps of the spiral staircase. At that moment, a pink-haired Oni wrapped in the wind brought out her arm and smashed the arm of the enemy who was about to catch her. She had twisted and broken her wrist, elbow, and shoulder in a matter of seconds.

"—But…"

Now wasn't the time to scream in agony.

Ram's fist had then been shot into the side of his screaming face and her white fingers turned into shrapnel. A myriad of blows had been shot all over his body, and Batenkaitos spat blood as he was blown away. Chasing him, Ram rode on the wind that had been generated on the soles of her feet and then jumped high into the air.

“Hee-hee.”

Batenkaitos then launched himself into the air and swung his legs around to meet Ram.

Immediately after, the distortion of space that occurred made contact with Ram’s shoulder and sliced through her clothes and skin. —That had been where an invisible blade had been placed as a present, a cheeky trap created using Wind Magic.

“This is nothing to me—”

“You thought you could blow it away with the wind? No good no good, it’s useless! It’s in a fixed position in space! It’s regretful that not even you can get rid of it, Sister!”

Batenkaitos kicked himself into the air with a blood-stained smile on his face, anticipating Ram’s intentions. He hadn’t actually kicked the air, but had jumped off of the invisible blade that had cut through Ram’s shoulder, which would be a very difficult feat since he would have needed to know where it was in the air near the spiral staircase.

But, even so—

“—Clairvoyance.”

Even if it wasn’t something that could be perceived with one’s perception, if it could be overlapped with the vision of the person that had set it up, a small change in consciousness would reveal its whereabouts.

Then Ram saw the trap by overlapping her vision with Gluttony’s, kept that in her mind so she could use it in the same way, and finally chased after him by jumping up and using it as a foothold.

“Hah! Ahahahahahaha! Sister, are you serious about that? Seriously?!”

“That’s sounds like something Barusu would say. —I’ve been saved since the hesitation to beat you up has disappeared.”

The astonished Batenkaitos leapt into the air quicker than he had before and Ram glared at his gloomy face from below. And then she mercilessly slammed the sole of her shoe into his open-mouthed face that had his fangs protruding.

“Ugh.”

“Now, how many times do you need to taste the soles of Ram’s shoes before you’ll kindly fall down?”

The surface of his nose had been crushed, and Batenkaitos’ dwarf body was flipped into the air. The momentum of his ascent had finally been stopped, and Gluttony was then kicked downwards by the power of Ram’s kick. Following that, Ram raised her hands above her head, swooped down with the wind from her palms, and threw a second kick—no, third kick, and then a fourth kick into the face of the plummeting Batenkaitos.

Ram mercilessly struck his nose, front teeth, chin, and forehead with her heel with each kick. She had been so annoyed with his smiling face and his mouth, which had kept calling her Sister. So she continued to mess them both up as their descent continued.

By the way—

“If you fall into your own trap, it’s not Ram’s fault. You reap what you sow.”

“Gah! Gya! Ugh!”

While being kicked downwards, the invisible blade that had been anchored in the air tore into Batenkaitos’ body. Blood gushed out, and some of the cuts were quite deep, but Ram didn’t care about that. She didn’t have a hobby of wanting to hurt others. However, that was only the case when she could sympathize with the other person, but if she truly hated the other person, she had no issue with making them scream like a pig.

“Well? Do you regret it?”

Stopping skillfully in the air, Ram asked that, with her feet on his face and chest.

However, Batenkaitos did not answer the question, leaving his face covered in blood, and instead tried to swings the daggers he had on both arms. At that moment, Ram's knife-like hands shot into his shoulders and forcibly pulled his arms from his shoulder joints.

"—Ugh."

"Well? Do you regret it?"

No matter how skilled he was, there was no way he could move his arms when his arms had been ripped from their sockets. And Ram had asked that question again as she opened her eyes and looked down at his shocked face.

"…"

Ram tried to find fear in the eyes of Batenkaitos as he looked at her. The purpose of that was to engrave it into his mind. Fear, pain, a sense of defeat. It was for vengeance—not a trivial reason at all.

"Rem—"

To get them back. A large number of victims, not just Rem, had been victimized by Gluttony so far. The purpose of doing this was to regain the Name's and Memories of those who had lost them and everything they had ever had contact with.

If she had wished to kill him, she could have gone ahead and done it now.

With the same effort she had used to kick his face in, she could have created a wind blade on the sole of her foot and stepped on his neck. It had already been proven that even Witch Cultists, who were famous for playing dirty, would die if their neck and torso were separated.

She had learned that in the process of responding to the people that had destroyed the village of the Oni's by burning it to the ground. After all, she knew that Witch Cultists were just a bunch of weak and stupid creatures with horrible natures. And so, the reason why Ram had asked questions first was to kill their spirits before taking their lives.

"Well? Do you regret it?"

"—Ugh, Solar Eclipse!"

When he heard the third question, a hint of fear had been mixed into his bloody expression. But it had disappeared in the blink of an eye in front of Ram. It wasn't like his dimensional leap earlier. The feeling of the face and body of the person she had just been stepping on had disappeared. However, where Batenkaitos had run off to would quickly come to light.

"—Clairvoyance."

It was impossible for anyone to run away from Ram as long as she had her eyes set on them.

"…"

She had followed the visible field of view and located the spiral staircase where her enemy was. When she had caught up using her Wind Magic, she saw a bald old man wearing something like a monk's robe standing there. If it hadn't been Ram, the change in appearance might have worked, however, by sharing their vision, she was convinced that they were Batenkaitos, no matter what they looked like.

"I heard that this was one of Lust's tricks, but what other tricks are there?"

"Ah, Ahhhhh, shit! I didn't mean to use it… No, I shouldn't have used it… Ugh."

"—? What are you talking about?"

When she had reached the spiral staircase, the old man—Batenkaitos—who was kneeling there, groaned in anguish. She raised her eyebrows at his unseemly attitude but instantly threw her doubt away. The only thing that mattered was that the other person was still breathing and his spirit was not broken.

And—

"—I don't have much time left."

It was only a murmur, but Ram had already removed her shackles for over a minute—and there was a slight burden on herself, but most of it was going to Subaru. She had told him to fine-tune it, but just as she had expected, he had been taking on all of her burdens. Such a showoff. She believed he only needed to do it for his loved ones and Rem.

"—. I'm not sure what's going on with you, but are you willing to accept our demands? You need only restore everyone you have eaten so far as Gluttony. And if you do that—"

"...And then what? Are you going to miss us?"

"No. Then I'll kill you right away. Not a bad deal, right? I will forgive you at once in exchange for your life."

"Hah."

Batenkaitos, who had aged into an old man, laughed the way he usually did with the voice of an old man. Observing his behavior, Ram speculated that a change in shape was perhaps necessary in order to unlock the full potential of a person's abilities. The technique he had used before when he had disappeared in front of her was called the Leaper technique. And even the bald old Batenkaitos could use it.

"But it's strange. If you have a trump card like this, you should have been able to pull it out earlier. So why did you choose to run away and hide?"

"…"

"…Is it also the reason why you don't want to use it? Like being pulled by a vessel."

"You know…I've really never come across such a scary girl before... No no. Really, you are really scary, Sister.

The figure of the old man slowly turned back into a dwarf, probably due to the possibility of losing himself while in that form. It had been an affirmation of Ram's point, and at the same time it proved that transforming did not heal the wounds he had suffered. Batenkaitos was still bloody and his face was still in terrible shape.

"How's your shoulder?"

"I bumped it into a wall. Now it won't even work at all… it hurts, aah, it hurts."

Batenkaitos then popped his shoulders back into place, and to make sure everything was working properly, he rotated them a bit. Seeing this, Ram regretted that she hadn't just cut his arms off from the shoulder rather than just ripped them out of their sockets. Or perhaps if she had just crushed the ends of his limbs, she could have crushed all his silly little tricks.

"Everything I do, this and that, has been seen through…amazing, Sister. Maybe you are using that guy's Authority, Sister?"

"How regrettable. This was Ram's excellent insight. Don't mix it up with Barusu's nonsensical intuition. It's unpleasant. Just die."

"Ahahaha, so bitter. But, I see I see, that's right."

Batenkaitos had a bloody smile on his face with his torn tongue hanging out of his broken mouth. That eerie gesture could only make Ram widen her eyes, and her shoulders tensed up in response. If he made a strange move—no—

"Before you make any other movements, eat this."

Before he could pull off any strange movements, Ram made the decision to just blow off his other limbs with a wind blade. There was a way to stop the bleeding. However, there was no way to stop the pain, but if he did not die, the interrogation would continue. With that in mind, she shot a wind blade without hesitation. But—

"—The bets are on our victory!!"

A plump, bearded man flew backwards while taking the full brunt of the wind blade. His skin was extremely thick, and the wind blade that would normally have been able to cut into his body had been repelled, and only turned the fat man's skin a little red.

"I wonder if you misunderstood us a little, Sister. —You know, you're not the only one doing the observing, right?"

Ram heard him say that as she was about to move forward in order to not let the giant man escape. Immediately after that, Ram was cut by the invisible blade that had been left as a present and was stopped in her tracks for but a moment. Seeing that opening, Batenkaitos rushed into the gap.

"From our approach, a blow of ours!"

In the blink of an eye, the image of the old man disappeared, and the feeling of pressure behind Ram increased. She didn't have time to look behind her, and a powerful palm pummeled into her side, blowing her slender body away.

With a "Huh?," Ram was blown away by his strike, and after a quick glance, she noticed that the strike she had received had come from a man with a strong physique that gave off a rough aura. —He had instantly changed into three different people and perfectly took advantage of their unique characteristics and abilities.

"Even so, if the skill I used before works—"

"We don't think so. We don't believe so. Because we don't imagine it to be so. As we don't think so. As we really don't think so. We can say with certainty that we don't think so!"

The barking Batenkaitos turned back into the old man and covered one of his eyes with his hands. Fearful of what her enemy might do, Ram stretched her long legs out and kicked up onto the wall to put herself in a position where she could quickly jump at him. But she hadn't done it fast enough.

"We know. —Rem's sister can't keep moving like that without using tricks."

"…"

Rem's knowledge, rather than her movements, gave him the answer. Seeing the movements of Ram who had gone beyond the limits of a Hornless Oni, Batenkaitos confirmed his own suspicions, and when she had returned to the steps of the spiral staircase, he let out all of his malicious intent.

That is to say—

"—Sister, we don't want to compare our strength with yours."

And so, the cunning smile that had been plastered on his face disappeared.

Instantaneous movements through space using the Leaper technique. —If he were to use it continuously, it would have been easy to escape, but she had a feeling that there was a limit to how much he could use it without dying.

"His decision to escape came rather quickly. No, anyway—"

If he knew about Ram's Clairvoyance, then he wouldn't have been foolish enough to think he could escape so easily. The reason he had run away from her was because he knew about her time limit. And so she had unfortunately been deprived of precious time as a result.

The burdens being placed on Subaru increased by the second. And she needed to find the whereabouts of Batenkaitos who had escaped into the tower as soon as possible.

When she thought about it, she suddenly realized something.

The deadly Sin Archbishop, who was an accumulation of maliciousness, fled into the tower just to get away from her. And he knew what would get under her skin the most.

It was—

"—Rem."

Finally, by connecting her vision with that evil being, what came into her view was the tail of a black ground dragon, carrying the Sleeping Beauty on its back.

Chapter 83:
Ram

1

—Red, red, all she could remember was everything being wrapped in flames.

The calm, stagnant, and self-indulgent days had suddenly come to an end.

In the face of that senseless violence, the title of “Strongest Demi-human Race,” the position of the most feared village chieftain, and the universal law of parents protecting their children all held no meaning.

It had been a pity that she had been late in noticing the mayhem that was going on around her. —No, perhaps in this case it would be appropriate to praise the cleverness of the other party. They had been hated, alienated, repelled, and persecuted by the world. Therefore, they were very good at hiding in the darkness, masking their presence, staying silent, and being sneaky.

At the time of the first surprise attack, the outcome of the battle had already been decided. It had already been too late when their horns finally sensed that there had been a slight peculiarity in the mana in the atmosphere.

First of all, half of the villagers had been eliminated with the first attack, and less than half of the survivors were capable of fighting at that point. On top of that, half of the survivors felt like something was wrong but did not see the urgency of the situation. In short, being in a state of peace and harmony for so long had made them soft-hearted and weak-minded.

It had once been said that if the Oni Tribe—once called the strongest demi-human race—had participated in the Demi-human War, the situation in the Kingdom of Lugunica would have changed drastically. —However, even if an historical ‘what-if-scenario’ like that had happened, they wouldn't have been able to do much.

In any case, the first attack had halved their fighting forces, and their fighting forces were again reduced by half by the second attack. At this point, many parts of the village had already been engulfed in flames, and by the time the death howls of the Oni's had begun echoing in the night sky illuminated in red, every Oni in the village noticed something wasn't right. However, there were only two people who had realized that this was going to be the end of the Oni Tribe.

"—Ram! Escape the siege! All you need to do is survive!!"

The Elder barked that at her as his two horns grew larger and his body increased in size.

The Elder had said that to Ram, who had been cutting down the enemy with her Wind Magic, as he jumped out of the house. And he had said that not because he cared about her, but because he believed she was the future of the Oni Tribe.

To restore the former glory of the Oni Tribe, it was imperative to bring back the Oni God who had been an unstoppable force during the era of the Witch. That had been the role that had been forced upon the child prodigy named Ram, and that had most likely been the last wish of the Chieftain of the Oni Tribe, who seemed to have forgotten how to fight.

"Ha!"

Ram felt like that was the most ridiculous thing in the world, and scoffed at the thought of it.

In these current circumstances, was the only desire of the representative of the Oni's really only to entrust the realization of his unfulfilled dream to her? There were many more important things he could be doing, such as rallying his people and trying to fight back against the enemy. However, Ram had no intention of advising the Chieftain about such things. —And the events of this night weren't the cause. She had forgotten about her tribe a long time ago.

“The glory of the Oni’s…”

It’s stupid. It’s worthless. It’s absurd.

The fact that the pure blood of the Oni’s was flowing through her veins terrified her to no end. If she desired power, her blood would boil, feelings of excitement would fill every pore of her body, and she would feel as if she were invincible and could do anything she desired. In fact, if Ram had grown up normally, that omnipotence might have become a reality. However, she had no desire for it.

Ram wanted to choose her own future instead of pretending to be the child of a god in a tiny world. That was far more valuable to her than being seen as the second coming of the Oni God, or being the portable shrine of a relative who continued to obsess about the glory of the Oni’s that was already a thing of the past.

—Living as the ■■■■■■ of ■■■.

“…”

Then Ram focused on her forehead and absorbed hot mana from the atmosphere into her body through her white horn. After getting into a state of deep concentration, her perception was greatly expanded, and she was able to sense all of the living people around her, and was also able to get a good idea of what was going on in the small village. There were many enemies, and they had surrounded the village so that none could escape.

Their response had been delayed at the beginning, half of them had perished, and the other half had put up a great resistance, but the current number of fighters left was so small that they could be counted on one hand, and the Oni’s seemed to be losing the desire to resist.

There was an Elder struggling in battle, but their enemies were also quite skilled, and the Elder, whose defeat was imminent, seemed to be wrapped in an aura of Death.

“—■■■.”

Ram wrapped her body in the wind and flew through the village like a strong gale. The only person that occupied her mind and whose name came from her lips was her one and only ■■■■■■. It wasn't that she was heartless, she had only changed her focus. Her parents had been killed during the first attack, so there was nothing she could do for them now.

—Ram had never hated her parents.

However, both of them had been born in this village, for better or worse, grew up in this village, and chose to die in this village as Oni's after unconsciously accepting the destruction that occurred. And so, their deaths had been inevitable on this night.

However—

"—That doesn't mean I won't retaliate in kind."

Ram then saw her enemy that looked like black shadows and wore robes that covered their bodies from head to toe, and unleashed a powerful gust of wind at the fools wielding cross-shaped daggers.

Were they underestimating her because she was a child, or were they just lacking in ability? They were unable to handle Ram's countless wind blades, so the black shadows were cut down one after another, and their corpses began to litter the ground. After that, Ram wrapped herself in the wind and continued to massacre them as if she were dancing in the flames. It might have even looked like a beautiful dance performance to an onlooker. However, the reality was that every time she swung her arm, a life was taken, and every time she made something with a form disappear, dark pleasure filled her immature heart and shouted for joy.

It howled at her to kill more and more. That inner self desired blood, flesh, bones, souls, and lives. And that hadn't been the first time she'd heard it make demands.

—At all times, ever since she had been born, that voice tried to coax her into doing its bidding at every opportunity.

For it needed blood, flesh, bones, souls, and lives to awaken itself from within. It told her to kill more and more, and destroy more and more. And Ram didn’t understand what was so great about that. Neither the Elders nor her parents understood either. Those who wanted Ram to be something other than herself did not want to see that reality.

It was as if the horn had been controlling her. Without a firm grasp of herself, she would have been easily swallowed up and destroyed, and the Oni God would have returned just as everyone around her had hoped. But that never happened. Because—

“—■■■■■■!!”

A high-pitched voice called out to her, and as she turned, ■■■ was lit up by flames. A moment later, a powerful gust of wind blew away the swarming black shadows, driving them away in a single breath. And then Ram ran over to her ■■■■■■.

“■■■...”

■■■ stared at her with fear in her eyes, and she seemed to have no strength left in her legs. Then she reached out to her beloved ■■■■■■ and tried to get her to stand up. She thought that she needed to survive just as the Elder wished. However, not only Ram, but ■■■, too—

—That was the moment.

She confirmed the safety of ■■■ and was able to relax for a second. However, by the time she noticed what had happened, she was surrounded, and it wasn’t going to be easy to find a way out of there. She could have easily saved herself, but being the only one to survive would be the same as dying.

She needed to break through the current situation somehow. And to do that, she decided to remove all of the shackles placed on her power that had been sealed, and directed a raging gust of wind towards the enemy.

“…”

Perhaps it had been brought about by the feeling of omnipotence she’d been feeling at that moment, but a black shadow managed to weave through the gust of wind and struck her forehead, which split her field of vision.

Ram looked at it, which made her feel a great sense of loss and greatly shocked her. Twirling and twirling, the white horn twirled round and round into the red night sky, which had been lit by the flames that engulfed the village. She understood that it was her horn, and a pained scream came from her thin throat due to the loss of it. But while screaming, she noticed something.

Ram could no longer hear the voice that had been inside her ever since she'd been born. Realizing how easy it really was, she went crazy due to her own stupidity.

Looking at the horn that drew a parabola in the red night sky—

—Oh, it's finally been broken.

Yes, that's what she thought at that moment.

2

—A black ground dragon could be seen desperately running away in the field of vision shared using Clairvoyance. The girl on its back was supposed to be Ram's other half, but she couldn't remember that missing other half and only felt a sense of loss—

"—Rem."

Ram's heart trembled with anger when she understood what it meant.

It annoyed her to admit it, but with Subaru's help, she'd been able to regain the powers she had when she was in her prime, and she managed to overpower the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Lye Batenkaitos, as a result, which put him in a tough spot. She could easily declare that there had been countless opportunities to kill him if she wanted to do so.

However, due to the presence of his troublesome Authority, which had the power to eat the Names and Memories of others, she hesitated to take his blasphemous life so carelessly. She didn't make that decision because she was warm-hearted, but because it was necessary. And the outcome was the outcome.

As a result, Batenkaitos used his Authority to escape from right from under Ram's nose, and set out to capture her other half, Rem. The purpose of such an action was obvious—he knew he couldn't beat her by fighting fair and square.

He had fought her head-on, and when he realized that he wasn't going to win, he escaped and changed his fighting tactics. The archbishop was no warrior. He had no reason to fight fair and square, and he was only concerned with fulfilling his own greedy desires. Therefore, his retaliation plan against Ram for humiliating him was to waste her time due to the time limit in her Oni form, which had been based on the memory he had stolen from Rem.

This strategy was infuriating to her, albeit a good choice of action for him. If Rem got captured, then Ram would be easy to neutralize.

Even if that doesn't happen, their fighting strength will be greatly reduced if she takes more time. The odds of winning will decrease as time goes by.

Therefore—

"—I'll catch up to Patrasche as soon as possible."

Fortunately, Patrasche, who was in charge of looking after Rem, was the most clever ground dragon in the tower, second only to Julius in terms of cleverness. Subaru and Beatrice were on opposite sides of the spectrum, and she didn't know about Echidna and Meili. What was even more outrageous was the atmosphere that Emilia gave off that made Ram hesitate to want to rely on her.

And though it was complex, Batenkaitos was clearly playing around with Patrasche. He would deliberately let up on his attack and let her gain some distance so that he could enjoy hunting his prey—prey that he could cut down at any moment if he so wished.

Ram had had enough and wasn't going to let him play his games any longer—

"—Ugh."

It had been at the moment she sped up and tried to fly forward while wrapped in the wind. When she tried to go upstairs via the spiral staircase, her vision blurred, and her Clairvoyance had come undone for but a moment. Her right eye was still linked with Batenkaitos', but her left eye had been unlinked and her view was blurred as a result.

But that wasn't all. A heavy feeling of fatigue, which she had not felt before, and a feeling of pain and discomfort, as if invisible hands were caressing her internal organs, had just been thrown upon Ram. This was undeniably the fatigue that she usually felt when she used her powers to their limits.

The price that every Hornless Oni had to pay, which Subaru had promised to pay to a certain extent, had just been returned to Ram. The first possibility that popped up in her mind was that Subaru had died in a careless manner. However, she judged that that wasn't the case due to how light the effects of the rebound were. Only a few minutes had gone by, but given the amount of power she had used, this was nowhere close to the price she usually paid. Normally she'd be in an extreme state of suffering by spitting up blood and rolling around in pain.

In other words, whatever unforeseen circumstances he'd been dealing with that made this happen didn't mean he was completely out of commission. Or perhaps it meant that the exact opposite happened, and another person in their group had suffered more damage than Ram did, and Subaru was currently undertaking their burdens.

"Lady Beatrice or Meili, or perhaps Julius the Knight."

That was what she came up with, but there was no point in trying to figure that out right now. The only thing that mattered at this moment was that Ram could no longer exert the same amount of power as before which could overpower Batenkaitos. —There was only one that could be removed, as far as shackles were concerned.

It may have been possible for her to remove the second one if she overdid it, but it was another story when it came to keeping it active for ten or more seconds. So, is it even possible to defeat Lye Batenkaitos now?—

"Now isn't the time to get weak-kneed. —I have no choice but to do whatever I can to win."

In the meantime, the camp's chances of winning was going down little by little.

Then Ram once again took a step and started running up the spiral staircase.

—Ram's breath caught as she felt the pain of loss, as if she had always rushed to her side like this when she was being chased in this way.

“—ッッ.”

“Ha-ha! Hey, It’s pretty nice! Keep at it, you’re a ground dragon, after all!”

He praised the ground dragon that was currently running through a narrow corridor, whose scales had been damaged by a dagger he threw earlier. Bleeding painfully from the gouged wound, the ground dragon, who had made the wise decision to escape, was determined not to let this victory go to waste.

The Divine Protection of Wind Evasion was something that all ground dragons had. As long as the ground dragon continued to run, it wouldn’t need to worry about wind resistance or its footing, and could keep running as much as it needed. And it’s range extended to the dragon carriage attached to it and to the person on its back.

In other words, it was largely due to the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion that the Sleeping Beauty, who was firmly fastened to the saddle, did not fall off. Without it, the Sleeping Beauty would have already fallen into the hands of Batenkaitos.

“Amazing, so amazing, so brave, so courageous! Although I’ve tried to stop you from running so much, you’re still doing your best to keep running with those legs of yours. Well, if you stop, your Divine Protection of Wind Evasion will be cancelled, so we can see why you’re so desperate!”

“—ッッ.”

“This ground dragon is great. It’s tenacious and loyal to its master. I’m sure that if it were a human, it would have become one of our most coveted dishes as Gourmet! But, butbut, butbutbutbutbutbut! Alas, a ground dragon won’t fill our belly!”

There was a Will, a Soul, a Memory, and a Name.

Despite that, the Authority of Gluttony can’t eat That which is not human. Therefore, Batenkaitos cannot love the ground dragon that was fighting so desperately, so hard, and so courageously against a tough enemy, in the best way. It looked so delicious and made him drool, but he could not eat it.

It was like a painting of a meal that had been drawn by a master painter. —He had heard an expression that people could not live off of the sticky rice cakes they drew in a picture.

“Ah, that’s it! That’s totally it! When our belly gets smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller, and we can’t help it! The picture of such delicious food is just making us suffer on purpose. Isn’t that a form of child abuse?!”

His face had been crushed in the battle he had just been in, and the eyeball in his left eye socket was on the verge of falling out, probably because the fundus had been crushed. His sharp fangs had been broken and his tongue had been torn apart, and blood was flowing endlessly onto his lower jaw, but it didn’t matter to him.

—Just the thought of Ram watching him right now made him giddy with excitement.

“Sister—”

A pure, noble, perfect, and flawless complete being. It was what the Memories that slept in Batenkaitos thought of her, and he also believed it was a good evaluation of her after being nearly killed by her without being able to put up a fight.

A serious Ram would make short work of Batenkaitos. —No, no matter who the deadly Sin Archbishop was, a serious Ram would squeeze them to death. Well, perhaps Regulus would have been able to compete with her due to the invincibility of his Authority, but—

“Well, there’s no way that idiot could kill Sister. Anyways, if she can’t kill him, then she wouldn’t try to kill him, and would just throw him over the Great Waterfall instead.”

Even if they couldn’t be killed, there are many other ways to keep them contained. Just like how the Witch of Envy wasn’t able to be killed by the Three Heroes but was still confined in the Evil Sealing Stone Shrine. In the end, that’s how it is—

“In order to entertain our best and perfect Sister, we must prepare accordingly, otherwise it would be rude!”

With his wobbly left eye open, Batenkaitos smiled gruesomely with blood dripping from his face.

The speed of the ground dragon was impressive, but its mobility indoors was a wasted treasure. Moreover, Batenkaitos could even cross the space easily by using a skill from a Memory, even if there was no open space in front of him.

“As Sister’s little sister, we have to grow up without shame.”

With a growing sense of mission, Batenkaitos pulled out the Memories in his possession.

One of the Authorities of Gluttony was a skill called Eclipse. It could be divided into two categories, Solar Eclipse and Lunar Eclipse, but finding a good way to use it was quite challenging.

Lunar Eclipse was the phenomenon where the moon appeared to be missing. —It drew out the Memories of the people he had eaten and reproduced them in Batenkaitos’ own body.

One of the main advantages of Lunar Eclipse was that Batenkaitos could look at any of the Memories in his possession, combine them, and create any sort of synthesized super-class technique he desired.

Solar Eclipse, on the other hand, was the phenomenon where the sun appeared to be hidden. —In other words, it was a skill that not only used the Memories of the person but also the body of the person themselves, and the body could be operated just like the original owner used it.

Naturally, using the body of the person that mastered the skill would strengthen the skill itself since it was originally theirs. However, when they transformed into another person, there was a fear that the influence of the other person’s mind would become too strong, and it could have major repercussions later on. For this reason, Batenkaitos and Alphard did not use that skill often unless something extraordinary happened.

Lye Batenkaitos and Roy Alphard favored using Lunar Eclipse.

Louis Arneb, however, favored using Solar Eclipse—a hand that could be easily used because she had no physical form and no fixed ego.

However, in the battle with Ram, he almost died, and in order to survive, Batenkaitos broke out of his shell the moment he turned into ‘Leaper’ Dorkell using Solar Eclipse. He had found a way to maintain his sense of self while in his Solar Eclipse form that he had originally been afraid of losing. Now he could enjoy the main dish of their Life without being wasteful.

“Growing up in the midst of a battle is something that would never happen to an old guy like me. Ha-ha! This is a masterpiece! Sister!”

Having established a stronger ego, he felt very refreshed.

He wanted his wonderful sister to take a good look at him while he was still awake, and to do that, he would have to find a way to incite her hatred even more.

He wanted a full-course meal with the scent of anger, the taste of anger, and the texture of anger and hatred. What on earth would a Gourmet be without enjoying everything that could be experienced by a loved one? He would use his other self on the back of the ground dragon for that purpose.

“Come to think of it, I’ve never done it before. I wonder if I can discover new values by killing myself?”

“—ッッ.”

In the blink of an eye, the world warped with the activation of his Leaper technique. The ground dragon emitted a groan from its throat and was startled by the sudden appearance of Batenkaitos, who should have been far behind it, and ran as fast as it could without looking back. It was brave, very brave, however, that braveness would only spice up the future tragedy.

“—Palm of the Fist King.”

A palm strike was unleashed and pierced into the side of the ground dragon. Normally, that would have been an attack unleashed by the dwarf form of Batenkaitos, but that was no longer the case with a Batenkaitos who had awakened from his shell and gained more power.

Then the original form of Neiji Rockheart pierced the body of the ground dragon with a powerful strike. That was The Palm of the Fist King, which had even killed countless opponents with giant bodies on the Gladiator Islands.

The ground dragon bathed in it and let out a deathly groan before being slammed violently against the wall of the corridor. However, as it fell, it continued to protect the girl from his strikes, the wall, the floor, and from its own giant body. It then gently grasped the falling girl's body with its long tail and lowered her to the floor of the corridor. It was supposed to be a female, but the treatment was so gentle that it could serve as a model for all gentlemen. Involuntarily, even Batenkaitos applauded.

"Ta-da! Even if you gently lay her on the floor like that, I'll still be beheading her and giving her head as a present to Sister."

"—ッッ."

"Yes yes, don't act violently, don't struggle, here's your reward for all of your hard work."

He kicked at the ground dragon that was lying on its side trying to bite him. Their hard work would normally have brought tears to his eyes, but this time, it was hate. Batenkaitos and the ground dragon were enemies. He could praise his opponent for the good fight, but they would not be able to look up at the same sky as victors. If one side won, the other side lost. Alas, that was the way reality worked.

"That' it! Do! You! Understand! Hey!"

A single word, a single pause, one word at a time, he drove them each carefully into the black ground dragon. Its cheekbones and forefoot were crushed, and the ground dragon that had been hit should have learned its lesson with pain by now. Fortunately, Batenkaitos could not eat the Memories of the ground dragon, so there was no reason to take its life. It was something he wanted them both to remember.

After that—

“For Sister, for Sister’s precious Rem, with Rem’s own hands…”

“—Don’t say anything weird.”

Immediately after hearing a dignified voice, the face that was hovering over Rem was powerfully repelled. What the face saw when it was raised due to hearing a voice came in the form of a direct hit from the soles of her shoes that had come from the front. As it was, Batenkaitos had been thrown backwards onto his back and was skidding on the ground. And—

“Aha-ha-hahahhaha… You finally caught up with us, Sister. We…huh? We… We…? —Our Rem has been waiting for you.”

He slowly got up from his position on the ground with only the strength of his feet. When he looked at his beloved other half from the front, Ram had an expression on her face that he had never seen before.

“…You’ve become considerably more ugly looking in a very short time.”

4

“…You’ve become considerably more ugly looking in a very short time.”

That had been Ram’s honest impression after catching up with them. While linking with Batenkaitos’ vision, Ram had forced her incompletely transformed body to move and rushed to the scene, believing that Patrasche could get through it.

In the corridor of the fourth floor, a bit far away from the spiral staircase, she found a ground dragon that was hurt and in tatters, with Rem lying beside it. And the one that was hovering over her was—

"You think we're ugly… Sister is so cruel...to us, like this, in this way! We were thinking that Sister sh-sh-sh-sh-shined and is so important to us."

The way in which he spoke and acted was indecisive and his way of thinking was extremely uncoordinated. Ram felt like he was suffering from a mental disorder—no, anyone could tell he was with a quick glance. Since Batenkaitos' appearance looked so distorted.

"…"

This must have been the secret technique of Batenkaitos that he had showed her earlier where he could transform into another person using their Memories. However, it seemed to be preventing him from doing it, and the current appearance of Gluttony standing in front of Ram contained none of the Memories he had pulled out before. They had all been jumbled up together instead.

There was a part of the old man who could seemingly teleport; there was a part of the fat giant who defended against Ram's wind blade with ease; a part of that martial artist who had seemingly divine fighting abilities, and various other physical characteristics of human beings that made up his unearthly body.

The length of his right and left hands were different, and his face seemed to be made up of different people. The only characteristic of the original Batenkaitos that remained was the way he looked, but that too may have just been a borrowed appearance. And it appeared as if he was unaware of his own distorted appearance.

"—?"

Batenkaitos was becoming something that was no longer anything. Batenkaitos, who specialized in taking the Memories of others, may have actually had a weak sense of self, and because of that, he completely broke. And so this thing was born—

"—You're just a monster pretending to be Rem. If I'm being honest, this is the first time I've felt so angry."

Looking down at the broken pieces of his face where she could see some of her little sister’s features, Ram absolutely hated Batenkaitos, who had added her features to a part of his face. How is he so good at getting on people’s nerves? She thought Subaru and him could have a good match to see who was better at irritating people.

“Thank you for your hard work, Patrasche. Take Rem and get out of here.”

“～～ッッ.”

The sound of the reply was very weak, and she sheltered the bleeding Patrasche behind her. And then Patrasche grabbed Rem by the collar and dragged her away with her large body. Ram hoped they could get away from the battlefield—

“That’s no good, Sister. That’s an important appetizer… Isn’t it absolutely essential to eat it before the main dish?—”

“—Kindly die.”

He had stepped on the ground with a foot that was bigger than a person’s head and tried to rant at her with a palm on his face. In response, Ram unleashed a wind blade that was as powerful as a small storm and capable of ripping her enemy’s neck to pieces. —At this point, she was no longer messing around.

As a result of trying to find a way to restore everyone’s Memories without killing him, Ram’s mission had been jeopardized, and had led to Patrasche getting seriously injured. She then firmly decided to start being serious. —And she needed to deeply apologize to Subaru for this.

And so, Ram began unleashing attacks with the intent to kill so as to not make that same mistake twice. It was unlikely that Batenkaitos would give a straight answer, even after giving that confusing remark earlier. All in all, this was the right choice.

Ram needed to defeat Batenkaitos and take back the burdens being placed on Subaru. Then Patrasche and Rem needed to be taken to the Green Room, and she needed to hurry and help the others. That was what she had been thinking about.

"…"

Just as his face was about to be torn apart by the torrent of wind, Ram gazed in amazement at the changes that occurred. Nothing happened, and only Batenkaitos' appearance had changed. However, that change was what was hard to overlook for her.

—A white horn appeared on his forehead, which was a conglomeration of features of many different people.

"That's…"

She had no choice but to take her hat off to him if he really was acting according to his instincts. Because the actions of Batenkaitos were all about making a mockery of Rem.

"—Sister."

For a moment, Ram felt like she had been called by a voice that sounded like Rem's, with a face that looked exactly like Rem's. And then a punch from Batenkaitos' giant arm flew into her rigid face.

5

It hadn't been fatal. But it hadn't been a light blow at all, not one that she could be optimistic about. It had shaken her brain and caused blood to drip out of her nose. The fact that her feet had become unstable even though she hadn't been taking on all of her burdens meant that she had taken quite a bit of damage. And it had come from a pretty girl with blue hair and a lovely face—three faces lined up that gave off the same atmosphere. What kind of joke was this?

"Please cry, Sister."

His fist was thrown with tears in his pale-blue eyes, as if he were pleading with her. The impact from each strike reached the marrow of her very bones or even deeper into her very soul.

"Please be angry, Sister."

She got hit in the stomach, causing her to lower her face, and then her chin was struck with an uppercut from below. She managed to avoid biting her tongue, but she was forced to eat a few elbow attacks to the head before being struck in the gut again, making her take a few steps backwards.

“Please smile, Sister.”

The deep affection in that voice plucked at Ram’s heartstrings with every word.

Rem had been sleeping in Ram’s view for a long time. Her Memories had been wiped away, and she could not recall her at all, despite having been together for their whole lives. She had been looking forward to hearing her call out to her when she woke up.

At that time, Ram wasn’t sure if she would regain her memories of her. Regardless of whether or not they came back, the first word out of Rem’s mouth would be as a special as the sound of a baby’s first cry.

That was—

“Please cry, get angry, laugh, worry, smile, feel pain, get worked up, be in a bad mood, be shy, sleep, blush, get surprised, be congratulated.”

“Sister, Sister—”

“Stop—Ugh.”

As she was about to respond, her mouth was forcefully closed by his palm and she could no longer speak. This was the monster that Ram had created by driving him into a corner. —His power was overwhelming.

There was no hesitation and no limits on how much he took out. He didn’t even seem to recognize that he had lost his sense of self, and so he did not change out of the form of Ram’s other half.

Despite the Sun and Moon being hidden, the darkness painted Gluttony perfectly.

Of course, Ram wasn’t going to let things stay as they were, either. She was going to fight back. She removed as many shackles as she could, but only as many as Subaru could handle, and then went past the limit she had placed on herself where could only stay in that form for ten seconds. This time, she would try her absolute best to kill him. But, he was a little too hard to defeat right now.

“Sister, Sister, I think it’s unlike you to look like that.”

“—Ugh.”

With pursed lips, the form of her lovely little sister corrected her mistake with her fist. Although her face had been punched and smashed into the wall behind her, Ram managed to keep up with that blasphemer. However, that was the best she could do for now.

How long had it been since the battle with that monster started? There was no doubt that she had already exceeded 20 seconds of the original 10 second time limit. She had no time to count in her head, and her perception of time had been warped. However, the most important thing she needed to think about was whether she could escape or not.

She had probably been trying to help Patrasche escape with Rem, but she couldn’t remember possibly due to getting hit in the head so much. Her body felt heavy; she was out of breath; her head hurt; her throat was swelling up; her limbs felt numb; and she was bleeding from her old forehead wound. And blood was spilling out from where her horn used to be, covering her entire face.

“—Such a dirty thing, that’s no good.”

And then her blood-covered face was hit again by his palm. The blow pummeled into her body until her knees could no longer support her own weight. And when she was about to fall over, a quiet voice broke in and said “Oh no you don’t” before a kick was unleashed.

Then Ram was smashed into the wall, her sternum creaking. Before long, the material that made up the Pleiades Watchtower, which was supposed to be quite strong, lost its strength and turned into a material that could be easily broken. In other words, the wall finally shattered after that relentless assault.

Then Ram broke through the stone wall and rolled into the other side of the corridor. A thick fog of dust filled the air around her, and she coughed as blood and dust formed a powdery texture on her tongue. And her broken bones and crushed flesh immediately began to scream and shriek in pain.

Ram then craned her neck and tried to figure out where she had been kicked into.

“—Ah.”

A small, breathless sound leaked out from her mouth. It may have been due to her own disappointment or had been disappointment mixed with dismay.

Ram could see Patrasche and Rem in her sight at the end of the corridor. The distance couldn’t be more than 40 feet (12 meters) at most. —And the time she had earned was a dozen seconds that felt much longer than it should due to how much pain she was in.

“Sister, Sister, are you safe?”

As she relished in her momentary safety, Batenkaitos did not jump over the wall that he had broken, but instead tried to get over there by finding another way into the corridor.

In the meantime, Ram managed to get to her feet by pushing herself off the ground with her arms. Leaning her body against the wall, she exchanged glances with Patrasche, who was in a tattered state.

“—ッッ.”

"…Yes, I know. When all is said and done, let's punish Barusu together."

She actually did not even know what Patrasche had said. However, the fact that the black ground dragon did not try to correct her answer meant that her answer was not wrong.

"…"

Ram had to admit that her decision had backfired on her. Not killing Batenkaitos first was the trigger for all of this. In an attempt to correct her mistake, her next step was to quickly take his life, but Batenkaitos, who survived being half-dead, was able to develop an eye for finding the best possible solution to his problems.

Ram had used up all the cards in her hand, and had been betrayed by all the cards she drew. She had been aware of her own superiority, but there was one thing she was unaware of and could do nothing about.

—Luck.

It hadn't changed since the day she lost her horn and ceased being a proper Oni. However, she had not been interested in being a proper Oni, anyways, for it was Ram herself who hated the white horn that had been on her forehead. And yet, ironically, she now wished she had the horn she had lost.

—No, that's not quite right. To be precise, the horn itself was still around.

The horn was still in Ram's possession. Her broken horn served as the base of her favorite wand, which she always carried around with her.

The horn, which assisted in the collection of mana from the atmosphere, was a very important part of an Oni's body, since their strong bodies needed a constant supply of mana to function properly. Therefore, as a catalyst for using magic, there was nothing that Ram was more familiar with. As a result, Roswaal went out of his way to find the broken horn and had it used as a piece in Ram's wand.

The horn didn’t operate differently when she compared how it was used on her forehead and how it was used in her wand. It’s like this —

“…”

Ram suddenly had a thought in her mind as she was thinking about the horn. It was the same whether the horn was there or not. This was due to the fact that she had overpowered Batenkaitos. Then she mobilized her collection of knowledge in order to overcome the situation and connected all of the possibilities.

Ram had a broken horn and Rem was sleeping.

The latter was simply a consequence of what had happened, but what about the former? —Why did Roswaal retrieve Ram in the first place?

Ram knew what role Roswaal wanted her to play, and she knew he was planning something as well. She had heard that he needed her to do it, but she would only find out about it in due time, so she decided not to pry until it was necessary to do so.

However, at this moment, Ram was trying to come up with a plan so that she could survive with Patrasche, who was protecting Rem, and Rem, who continued to sleep.

It was a terribly absurd possibility, but at the same time, she couldn’t help but feel proud of her reasoning.

If it were Ram’s beloved Roswaal L. Mathers—

“It’s really something he might do even if he were to be verbally abused and thought of as a brute.”

Spilling that out, Ram pulled out the wand that had been strapped to her thigh with trembling hands. She then gazed at the wand she had used for ten years and slammed it against the wall. From the inside of the shattered wand, she saw something she hadn’t seen in a long time.

—It was just like that time when it whirled around and around so much that it became unpleasant to look at.

6

Batenkaitos slowly cleared the white dust from the corridor by hand and then moved forward. It was the Way of the Maid to be gentle, move with neat gestures, and to not make unnecessary noises, and that was the bare minimum they had to do in order to not feel ashamed.

Beyond the smoke was where his sister should have been. He wanted to see her various faces. He wanted to look straight into her crimson eyes that held powerful emotions and burned brilliantly. It was a desire that was so innocent that it felt like an awakening of love.

“Oh.”

“—ッッ.”

Once he got past the smoke, the first thing he saw was a black ground dragon writhing in pain. During the time he had been in contact with and speaking with his sister, the ground dragon had disappeared. He was not really interested in it, but he had to do something about the existence the ground dragon was carrying. He wanted to erase the existence that carelessly attracted his sister’s attention. He believed that only he could call his sister his sister and that his sister belonged to him alone.

“Ah, I found her.”

On the other side of the writhing ground dragon was the figure of the Sleeping Beauty leaning against the wall. She had been placed there in the perfect position, so perfect that he could easily aim at her neck or heart. He firmly decided that he must make her breathe her last breath and then move on to his sister, who was the main dish.

And then Batenkaitos noticed something as he was getting closer to the Sleeping Beauty.

—The drooping forehead of the blue-haired girl was shining with a dim light.

He wondered for a moment what that light was, but it couldn't be possible, and his own self-awareness made him deny any answers he came up with. How could a sleeping girl do something like that?—

"I'll make it right."

"—Huh? Sis-."

"I thought I had been out of luck. —But, I wasn't."

He tried to call out to the voice he heard, but couldn't. An attack much faster than that had struck Batenkaitos' face. There was a sense of astonishment, and in the next moment, he felt a shockwave and was blown into the opposite direction of the corridor he had walked through.

"Huuuh?!"

The force of the attack had been so strong that Batenkaitos did not stop until he had broken through two walls. A feeling of surprise preceded the feelings of pain and suffering, and after trying to stand up, he immediately fell into onto his knees due to how much damage he had taken. It had been a blow that smashed his body to the core.

And then Batenkaitos wondered what on earth had happened with a look of astonishment painted on his lovely face—

"It appears that even the heavens have fallen in love with the loveliness of Ram and Rem."

A plumb of smoke rose from the hole in the wall that he had been thrown through, and just as he was about to look beyond it, his face was grabbed by a hand faster than the speed of sound. And then, with his cheeks and jawbones creaking in their grip, he saw the person behind it.

It was—

“Si…ster...”

“Unfortunately for you, Ram’s sister is sleeping over there. Synesthesia makes that clear.”

“Syne…thes...?”

“Synesthesia. It appears that Ram and Rem were good sisters. We could share joy and anger; sorrow and pain, and so on. —The broken horn was reactivated, and the burden too.”

The meaning of her words were not clear, but what Batenkaitos had seen with his own eyes was affirmed. Before he got beaten up, what he saw on the forehead of the Sleeping Beauty leaning against the wall was a white horn. —The only thing that the daughter of the Oni’s had that allowed her to surpass her older sister.

Because it was there, because it was glowing, because it was working, what was it?

“Although it annoys me to admit that it was a hint from Barusu’s strategy, that’s okay.”

“Subaru? What...”

“—Don’t call Barusu’s name with that face and voice.”

“—!!”

In a single moment, Batenkaitos was lifted up by the face, which had been in her grasp, and slammed into the ground. Trembling, trembling, Batenkaitos’ arms and legs were involuntarily shaking. In front of him, Ram opened and closed her hands just to make sure, and was bleeding a lot from the old wound on her forehead.

However, instead of being bothered by the bleeding, Ram loosened her lips as if welcoming it. As if the blood and the pain proved that their lost bonds were real.

“If you were born in a dark place, return to that dark place. If you were born crying, die while crying.”

Then she gently wiped the blood off of her forehead with her palm and looked down at Batenkaitos with her pale crimson eyes.

Everything that Batenkaitos had done so far had been for this moment. He wanted to see that look of fury in her eyes.

—Ram looked down at the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony with cold, icy eyes.

“The second coming of the Oni God. It’s not something I’m fond of, but I’m going to perform my role, at least for today. —I’m going to tear the fake version of my lovely little sister into eight pieces this time.”

Chapter 84:
Heave-Ho! Heave-Ho!

1

—It was important to construct an Image in her mind in order to make the ice turn into the shape she wanted.

At first, when Subaru brought up the idea of "Ice Brand Arts," Emilia thought it would be very useful, but she felt anxious about whether or not she could actually do it.

"It's alright! Don't worry about it! You can definitely do it, Emilia-tan!"

When Emilia felt anxious at that time, she remembered how Subaru smiled at her as he gave her a thumbs up. When she thought about it now, she felt like it was a bit ungrounded. —Actually, no, it was more like he had been encouraging her because "He loved her."

In the process of learning to create a weapon using an Image, Emilia studied drawing really hard. Unlike singing, she wasn't very good at drawing, but even so, she made a good amount of progress after drawing a lot of pictures with Subaru.

While they were studying, when they saw Emilia drawing pictures with Subaru and Beatrice, Ram was shocked, Otto smiled bitterly, Frederica and Petra would occasionally join them, and Garfiel would offer advice. Even Roswaal would occasionally see her, from a distance, drawing next to Beatrice from time to time.

Emilia thought that these were very, very precious, and unforgettable memories. Although it had disappeared from everyone's memories, Subaru stilled remembered it. And when she thought about that, a warm feeling appeared in the back of her chest.

"I'll change it into courage—!"

Inspired by her rising emotions, Emilia took the ice weapons and seven ice soldiers she'd created with her and began moving forward in order to challenge the Divine Dragon, Volcanica.

As had been mentioned above, forming an Image in her mind was very important in the shaping of ice. It was the same for the ice weapons and soldiers she'd just created. She'd made the ice soldiers by picking someone she could easily imagine in her mind. In short, she'd made seven Natsuki Subaru's to fight by her side.

"But, he's soooo much more powerful than the real Subaru, and he's a lot more agile too!"

As far as liveliness and naughtiness were concerned, Subaru was superior, but he was still a lot different than the ice soldiers. The strength of the ice soldiers depended on the amount of mana that Emilia used when making them, which could hardly be compared to making a simple ice sculpture. Much like her ice weapons, they would be as tough as steel.

"Go!"

Following Emilia's order, the ice soldier in the front moved into the range of Volcanica. However, Volcanica did not move an inch while leaning against the central pillar in the middle of the watchtower. His tail's attack range was around 20 to 22 feet (six to seven meters) from where he was sitting.

Shortly after, however, the blue tail of the dragon moved at an extremely high speed, probably due to sensing that it wanted to approach the central pillar. A strange sound could be heard, as if a hole had been cut into the air, and immediately after that, the upper body of the ice soldier at the front shattered and was turned to dust. It'd been near the chest where the ice soldier had been hit and cut in half, and the evil-eyed Subaru-like head could be seen flying through the air.

"I'm sorry! But, that means he's not just going after me."

It had been bad for the ice soldier used as a test subject, but now Volcanica's aim was clearly understood. Although the Divine

Dragon was senile and had forgotten about the Trial, he still seemed to have the intention of preventing anyone from approaching the central pillar. Then, whether there was life or not, there was a way to do it.

“Mr. Soldiers, if you would!”

In response to the voice of Emilia, the ice soldiers zipped forward to get past the silver-haired girl. The first one was easily crushed, however, and the remaining six managed to scatter in different directions, creating a slight opening to the central pillar.

“—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

Sensing the presence of an approaching ice soldier, the Divine Dragon uttered that once again.

The appearance of a doll that could not hear anything, and who had become something that could only utter meaningless words, scratched at Emilia’s heart and made her remember feelings of loneliness and sadness.

Even with the way he was currently acting, Volcanica was trying to protect that Something. Emilia didn’t know what kind of promise was made, nor who it was made to, nor why it was made in the first place. But—

“—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned.”

And with a shake of his tail, two ice soldiers holding weapons were crushed in the blink of an eye. Although each of them quickly got into defensive positions, one was cut in half at the waist and the other lost the right side of their body, and they shattered without being able to put up any resistance. Even so, the four remaining ice soldiers immediately tried to grab the tail before it returned to its original resting position.

At least for now, Volcanica’s attack methods were limited to a single tail swing. Perhaps it could be said that he wasn’t just senile, but his legs and hips were also quite weak. If he couldn't even stand up, then she would only have to stop the tail.

"Brace for impact!"

Three ice soldiers stood shoulder-to-shoulder in order to try and stop the tail in its tracks. However, they were swept away all at once, and the tip of the Divine Dragon's tail once again left a sound behind. It seemed similar to how Subaru's whip worked, but its speed and power were on a different level. His whip could be grasped by Emilia, but not the tail of a dragon.

The Divine Dragon used the equivalent of every living beings power put together to essentially swipe away some insects. It was pushing against the three ice soldiers, who were sitting side-by-side, with its tail, but the sound of ice shattering was not heard this time. The three ice soldiers had been sitting down on the ground and were propped up against a wall of ice.

If she knew when his attacks would come, then there would be a way to deal with them.

With its whole body cracking, the ice soldier who resembled a boy with evil eyes lifted the corners of its mouth and rose. And from behind the three ice soldiers that had stopped the attack, the last one that had been entrusted with a separate job jumped.

The fourth ice soldier was wielding a so-called spear fork weapon. At the end of the long spear-like handle, there was a U-shaped metal fitting that was used to hold down an opponent instead of stabbing them, and made it seem as if it was used to capture people.

The ice soldier then pushed it down on the poorly behaved tail of the Divine Dragon until it reached the floor. The dragon's tail, which was as thick as a log even at the tip, would be impossible to keep in place with only one spear fork, so the three ice soldiers on the floor grabbed one as well and thrusted it into its tail in different places.

Now that the Divine Dragon's tail was held down by four of them, it would be stuck there for a little while—

“—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

Immediately afterwards, the sound of the world being scraped by something could be heard, and the four high-fiving ice soldiers holding the tail down were scraped out. Only the lower half of their bodies remained, and then they collapsed onto the ground. It had been an attack with his claws this time, and not an attack with his tail, which had been restrained to the point that he deemed it too serious to be left alone.

Volcanica, who had been lying on the floor, had swung his left forefoot instead of his tail this time. And that was the reason why Emilia’s ice soldiers had been destroyed so easily. She had almost been deceived due to being careless.

“If your tail and feet are both healthy… Jeez! Why is your body normal but not your brain?!”

“—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned.”

“Did you even understand that—?!”

If it were someone other than Emilia, they would have been much more upset. However, despite getting that response, her determined and resolute spirit was unbreakable. The only things that broke were the ice soldiers, though that did hurt her a bit.

“It’s okay! I just didn’t understand everything yet.”

Emilia then went into the range of the tail, and promised the ice soldiers that they did not die in vain. However, the spear forks that had been holding down the tail were still there and doing their job, and the sacrifice of the four ice soldiers was worth it as a result. As a matter of course, the paw was being aimed at her instead of the tail, now. —

“The reach of his forefeet is shorter than the tail, right? And…”

Another ice soldier had been created right behind Emilia. She could create up to seven ice soldiers at a time, and they could be remade every time they were destroyed as well. In other words, she could keep creating ice soldiers until she ran out of mana. It was just like the real Natsuki Subaru.

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

"Eeeek?!"

Ice spears had been rained down upon Volcanica from out of his attack range, however, he swiped at them with his front paw. The attack tore through the space, leaving behind claw marks that would forever remain, and created a shockwave that threatened to swallow the entirety of the first floor along with Emilia and the ice soldiers as powerful gusts of wind erupted.

"…"

Emilia squinted at it with her violet-blue eyes as the shockwave stopped her in her tracks. The central pillar that Volcanica was protecting was quite solid, but she hadn't been able to carefully observe it yet. It looked just like the other six pillars from a distance, but it was too early to say. However, what Emilia was most interested in was not the central pillar itself, but—

"—The top floor of the tower above it!!"

In spite of the wind, Emilia kicked off of the floor with vigor. There was still a long way to go before she could do anything about Volcanica and the pillar, however, she believed this was the correct answer. The ice soldier from before had already regenerated and was currently on the ground holding out its linked hands. And then it caught her foot to serve as a foothold and helped her jump as high as possible.

Holding down his tail and drawing his attention to the central pillar were both necessary in order for Emilia to reach the top floor as per her own intuition. This wasn't something that usually happened, but after arriving here, her intuition told her that she had to get to the top floor of the tower.

With the help of the ice soldier, she jumped over Volcanica's head and tried to reach the top of the pillar. Now, if she could get to the top floor from there—

"—?"

Immediately after that, feeling a lot of heat under her feet as she tried to grab onto the top of the pillar, Emilia felt as if the room became quiet. —No, it was not quiet. The heat had been so powerful and hot that it killed all sound. If the concept of sound itself was killed, it was no wonder why it became so silent.

And Emilia sensed that her ice soldiers had disappeared due to the destruction on the first floor as well. The one that had helped her jump, the four who had been throwing ice spears to support the others, and the other two who had been running around and adding spear forks to his tail all had disappeared at the same time. And it hadn't been Volcanica's forefeet or tail that did it.

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

She could hear those solemn words coming out of his mouth as the flames began to dissipate. Emilia realized that the concept of sound that had been killed came back to life when those words reached her ears once again, and at the same time, she managed to grab onto the top of the pillar.

Trying to stabilize herself on the pillar, Emilia looked down. The entire first floor had been burnt white. White smoke was rising from various places, and the ice soldiers that should have existed were seemingly erased from existence. There had been so much heat, so much power, and so much annihilation—

—The dragon breath of the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, had burned everything to the ground.

"His tail, hands, and feet are all healthy, and he can even breathe fire!"

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

"I've got it! I understand! I reaaaally got it already… Ah."

In the middle of her strangely short answer, despite everything that had just happened, Emilia was shocked by something. Slowly, the golden eyes of the Divine Dragon looked up at Emilia. And—

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

As he spoke, Volcanica spread his wings and stood up.

2

"Oh my gosh—!"

Recognizing the danger of the events unfolding below her, Emilia hurriedly made her way to the top floor of the tower. In the meantime, Volcanica was freeing his tail from the spear forks and trying to flap his wings. It seemed like he was trying to fly.

Due to him being the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, it only seemed natural that he would be able to fly. —But Emilia had never seen a flying dragon before, so she wasn't sure if it was actually possible. In the first place, was it even possible for a creature with such a large body to fly in the sky?

"The only people I've seen fly are Puck and Roswaal…"

It wasn't surprising that Puck, a spirit, and Roswaal, an eccentric mage, could fly.

She'd heard about there being flying dragons called Sky Dragons in the southern Vollachia Empire, similar to Earth Dragons and Water Dragons. So is Volcanica similar to a Sky Dragon? Or would it be wrong to think of a Sky Dragon and a Dragon in the same way?

"Oh! No-no! Ah! Ahh!"

Emilia climbed to the top floor of the tower as fast as she could while crying that out. It had been so fast that if someone saw it from a distance, it would appear as if her mouth never closed, and even if her unconventional power were used, it wouldn't have been enough to escape in time.

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

The fact that his voice was closer than before was not her ear's tricking her. Because it was a sentence that had been uttered after flying into the air, not from down below.

—His blue wings were stretched open and an incredible being was flying in the air.

The Divine Dragon, Volcanica, was proudly exerting his presence over the sand dunes while flying in the air.

From the intimidation he was oozing, to his eye-catching glare, to his tail and forelegs, to his powerful breath, none of them betrayed the fact that he was the super-class dragon that had been described in the legend.

"Me! I'm going to go up to the next floor, so maybe I'm reaaaally not your enemy!"

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

Emilia clung to the pillar as Volcanica unleashed an attack, completely ignoring what she said. Gasping for breath, she grinded her molars, and with the help of a Non-Existent Foothold, she jumped over the approaching tail.

"Hiyaaa!!"

That had been an application of her Ice Brand Arts. —It was faster to add footholds to the side of the pillar than to try and climb up by hand.

"I wonder if my limbs are free?… Kiyaaa!"

Two swords made of ice were pulled out and flashed boldly at the oncoming tail before colliding with it.

That had been an attack that had relied on guesswork. Emilia's arms were numb from her wrist's to her elbows, and she wouldn't be able to hold onto her new weapons until she recovered after a few seconds.

However, unlike the damage Emilia took, Volcanica had only shook his tail.

The Divine Dragon, who continued to fly at the same altitude as the challenger, swung his tail and tried to knock down—no, crush—the challenger trying to climb the pillar.

"—Hic."

Emilia choked as she faced that swinging tail. Once it was flicked, she didn't feel like she'd have enough energy to get back onto the pillar. If he were to strike her with that scaly jagged tail, the whole area around her would be in trouble too. She couldn't afford to be hit by that tail attack.

"More and more...soooo much more, I will try my best!!"

She couldn't use her hands anymore, but she could use her legs and aim for the top of the pillar. And so she created footholds and started making her way up to the top. However, it wouldn't be enough. There was a limit to how much ice she could create at once. This process could not be wasted. She needed something that could act as a foothold but wouldn't stay stationary—

"—I got it!"

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

Emilia once again faced another strike from his tail as it approached her in a flash. However, Emilia managed to avoid the strike with the help of the footholds she'd made. After that, she created the new foothold she'd just thought of, and grabbed its Hand with her outstretched hand.

“Please give me a hand, Mr. Soldier!”

In response to Emilia’s voice, the creaking arm made of ice burned away, disappeared, and rebuilt itself into the form of a Subaru-like ice soldier—but only the upper body.

It wasn’t just a foothold, it functioned as a foothold for Emilia and also as a reliable ally. —That was known as the Ice Soldier’s Road, and their upper bodies were currently forming on the pillar one after another.

Since she only needed to form their upper bodies on the pillar, she didn’t need to make the legs, so she could create more than seven of them in total. Emilia could create 10 helpers at a time, and she went up the pillar with their help.

“Heave! Ho! Heave! Ho!”

Emilia climbed up to the top of the pillar, literally with the help of the upper body of her ice soldier’s that had been formed on the side of the pillar. During that time, Volcanica tried to interfere with Emilia’s climb, but the ice soldiers on the pillar got in its way from the side.

Volcanica, who was obsessed with protecting the pillar, couldn’t leave the ice soldiers alone on the pillar. The ice soldier’s that’d been born threw ice swords and axes at Volcanica in the air, and while they were playing with him, the Divine Dragon hunted the ice soldiers on the pillar one-by-one with his tail and front legs.

But in the meantime, Emilia had been on the pillar, climbing higher, and higher, and higher.

“This is a biiit difficult to do!”

Crossing over thin ice was a bit daunting, but with the power and sacrifice of the ice soldiers, Emilia’s hand finally reached the top of the pillar.

It should be possible for her to reach the top floor of the tower in about 33 feet (10 meters) or so, but the upper part of the pillar extended around the edge like a rat guard, and so it was extremely difficult for her to climb up from here on out.

Even for someone who was good at mountain climbing, this would be very difficult for them, but Emilia was fortunately good at climbing trees. When she was young, she had been scolded by Fortuna and Arch for working so hard at it.

“This looks fine in spite of some numbness in my fingers…!”

Regaining the feeling back into her numb fingers, Emilia challenged the mean, curving pillar. She grabbed the hand of an ice soldier hanging upside-down, and hung in the sky with her feet hanging in the air. However, thanks to the ice soldiers, climbing up was a stable process.

And even with Volcanica’s interference—

“—Hic.”

Something unlucky happened right as she was starting to feel relaxed.

“—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned.”

The strong tremor that had just occurred was caused by the tail of Volcanica smacking against the pillar, who had just said that once again. It sent a shock through the entire pillar, cracking and crushing the ice soldiers down to their roots that been formed up and down the pillar. And the ice soldiers helping Emilia get over the extended part of the pillar were no exception.

“—Ah.”

The hand she’d been grasping stopped supporting her as its arm broke off from the shoulder, causing her to start falling. The wide-eyed ice soldier desperately tried to stop her from falling, but his other hand couldn’t reach her in time.

Emilia felt as if she were floating as the air wrapped itself around her as she fell, ruining all of the hard work she had just done to get to the top of the pillar, and tried to pretend as if it wasn’t happening. —But it was.

“Eeeeek!”

The height of the pillar she’d climbed was quite high, and Emilia was supposed to have been falling hundreds of feet (tens of meters.) However, she unexpectedly fell on her butt as she was falling and thinking about what was about to happen.

It hadn’t been an ice soldier. If she thought about it, all of the ice soldiers on the pillar had been destroyed. In addition, her hand was touching a hard and rugged object this time—

“Could it be…”

“—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

Emilia knew that the voice was very close to her as she confirmed the feeling of the wind up in the sky and the feeling under her butt. She took too long to realize because of how close the voice seemed. —She had fallen onto the back of the Divine Dragon, Volcanica.

“—Hic! Don’t let up! I can still get there from here.”

She could also get back onto the pillar by using Volcanica as a foothold. That’s what Emilia thought, but it would be very difficult to do so.

Flapping his wings, Volcanica rose, spun around, and tried to shake her off.

“—Ah, aaahhhaaahhh!”

Emilia desperately clung to the back of the dragon while enduring the strong winds that smacked into her body. These were physical winds that she’d never felt before—and, clinging to his large, strong, and rugged scales, she knew she wouldn’t last long like this. Moreover, Volcanica was just freely flying through the sky.

It wasn’t even a strike from his tail, a blow from his forefeet, or even his dragon breath. He was just trying to shake Emilia off, who was clinging on for dear life, and flying around as fast as he could. This was too much for her to handle—

"—I won't be able to see Subaru and the others now."

If she tried to open her mouth for any reason, the wind could rush in and might cause her lungs to burst. Behind her closed eyelids, Emilia thought about the important people in her life, biting down on her back teeth. It felt like she was preparing for death, yet she wasn't. Then she thought of the important people she looked forward to seeing again. She did so in order to give her the courage to raise her face and push herself forward.

"…"

While being blasted by the strong winds, Emilia pushed her eyelids open as far as she could. If she wasn't even going to do her best, then she wouldn't even be able to open her own eyelids. However, she dared to open her eyes in order to find a way out, and did not lose the fire that had been in her violet-blue eyes.

It was common for people to close their eyes when they were about to be crushed by fear or anxiety. But the important people she saw behind her eyelids never closed their eyes and always looked forward. She needed to keep her eyes open.

To reach something, to take someone's hand, and—

"—That's strange."

—It was a view dominated by blue on all sides—above, below, to the left, to the right, everywhere. This was probably due to the fact that Emilia was above the clouds and the Divine Dragon that she had been clinging to was clad in dazzling blue scales.

Everything else was going by so quickly that Emilia's perfect vision, which could even see the seams of a ball that had been thrown, couldn't capture the world. Therefore, her consciousness did not see anything outside of the world of blue in her vision.

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

Volcanica was flying while twisting and weaving through the air. And, apparently, Emilia had been clinging to the base of his wings. It was strange how the dragon wasn't moving his wings at all. Birds and insects needed to flap their wings to fly, but the principle behind dragon flight seemed to be a bit different. She was sure it was similar to how Puck and Roswaal flew.

If so—

"Roswaal used magic… And Puck did it using a mysterious power."

She hasn't tried Roswaal's method, and she didn't think she ever would. However, Emilia had spent a long time with her family, who she thought was the only one she had for a long time. She hadn't seen him in a year, and she missed him very much. There had even been times where she felt like crying at night, but her memories of him kept her going. And the recollection of those memories gave her hope even at times like this.

That is—

"Maybe you don't like when you get tickled under your chin either?"

The violet-blue eyes that had been pushed open looked his body up and down. Under the chin of the great dragon, there was only one white scale among all of the blue scales.

—The days she spent playing with Puck came up in Emilia's mind.

"Please dooon't, Lia. My concentration is broken when you tickle me that much, you know?"

"—It suuure is, Puck."

In response, Emilia focused on concentrating. The wind was still quite powerful, and Emilia had no way of getting to the white scale directly. However, she had learned on the pillar that her partner could be used even if the other party changed from inorganic matter to organic matter.

"—Mr. Soldier."

At the end of where Emilia's consciousness was focused on, the ice soldiers started forming around the white scale. The ice soldiers supported each other with only their upper bodies, and the one that had been born in the center slowly extended their hands towards the white scale—

"—Huuuh?!"

—For the first time, Emilia heard a sound that wasn't just the repeated words of the Divine Dragon.

3

—There was something known as "Inverted Scales."

The word originated from an ancient Chinese story. There was only one scale that shouldn't be touched on the neck of a dragon, which was a mythical existence. If a dragon's inverse scale were to be touched, it would become furious and supposedly kill the person who did it. Because of that, the expression "touching the inverted scale" came to be used to describe touching a part of someone that shouldn't be touched. And of course, there was no way that Emilia would know something like that that originated in a different world.

The reason why she had tried to touch the white scale on the dragon's neck was to disturb the concentration of her opponent, who was flying like mad to shake her off, and also to create a gap.

But—

"Eeeeeeeeeek!!"

Emilia screamed as she was thrown into the air, and heaven and earth appeared to be spinning round and round. But the feeling of floating in the air was much shorter than when she had fallen onto the dragon's back earlier. She suddenly felt something hard, and then rolled her body in response. After that, she quickly stood up and looked at her surroundings.

"…"

While breathing heavily, Emilia took a look around. Fortunately, there was no sign of a sudden attack, but that was natural since Volcanica, who was usually so vigilant, was currently far above her.

"—Aaaah."

He clearly didn't like when his white scale was touched. Emilia involuntarily rounded her eyes as she heard his screams piercing through the sky.

"Puck reaaally liked that though…"

However, whether someone was happy or not depended on the person. Admonishing herself not to be too insensitive, Emilia checked the condition of her hands and feet. She had been flung around a lot while on Volcanica's back, and so the blood flow in her body felt a bit strange. In some cases, when one's blood flow was blocked, and blood could not properly flow to the brain, it caused a phenomenon where one would lose their vision, but she had managed to endure despite everything she'd gone through.

And, having confirmed that, Emilia discovered something.

"—Ah! It's here."

Looking around, Emilia realized that she was higher than she was before. The fact that the six pillars weren't there was a testament to the fact that she had reached above the tops of the pillars, and that this place was the top floor. She had managed to get here by falling off of Volcanica's back.

At the top of the Pleiades Watchtower, to a place that no one has been to before, at last—

"Wow! I did it! My efforts were sooo worth it in the end!"

With a small reaction to her accomplishment, Emilia immediately rushed to the center of the top floor after patting herself on the chest. If she were to wait, she would have to deal with Volcanica's anger. Before that happened, she wanted to find the Trial in order to help Subaru and the others.

“Pleeeease give me some questions that I can understand…”

Volcanica, who had forgotten all about the Trial, was also a huge problem, but the issue for Emilia was whether or not she could even solve the Trial of the first floor.

Fearing that, Emilia went to the center of the top floor, and from there, she went to the base of the pillar that extended up to the heavens, and then widened her eyes with an “Ah.”

She had found it. The six pillars of the level below this one did not have this feature. There was a feature here that could only be found on the central pillar on the top floor.

It was—

“—Someone’s handprints?”

The black monolith was at the base of the central pillar at the top of the Pleaides Watchtower. And it bore handprints.

—Six different male and female handprints had been left on it.

Chapter 85:
Good Loser

1

—It took courage for him to call himself the Finest of Knights.

He was called that by others and was proud of being praised so. However, he had never called himself the “Most” “Superior.” He could pride himself on his days spent diligently studying. However, in his inexperienced and immature life, he was surrounded by excellent elders, worthy companions, and amazing juniors. He thought it was a regrettable yet happy situation.

Being recognized by others should be in return for one’s efforts and dedication. If he wanted to be recognized by everyone, his efforts and dedication would need to be tremendous, and he would have to study in such a way that everyone would admire him for that alone.

—Have I made a good enough effort? He wonders.

It was true that he had been proud of spending his days studying diligently. But did he overcome his limits? Did he hone himself to the best of his abilities? Inspired by the efforts of others, did he vow to work harder towards his ideals?

These were the questions he had asked himself. And—

Julius Juukulius had already done that.

He had overcome his limits, honed himself to the best of his abilities, and, inspired by the efforts of others, worked harder towards his ideals.

—Therefore, he had been able to hold his head up high in spite of confronting the being said to be at the apex of the Sword.

“—I am the Finest of Knights, Julius Juukulius. The sword of the Kingdom that will slay you.”

“…”

Grabbing the hem of his cloak, Julius bowed at the Sword Saint, who remained silent. Then Reid closed his eye, the one not covered by the eyepatch, and did not even look at him. He simply crossed his thick and strong arms and went deep into thought.

However, he did not think for long. His nature was not one that was suited for thinking about things. And it was easy to tell even though they’d not known each other for long.

And so—

“Ooh, ooh, ooh, Ooooooh— It’s a contest!!”

Scratching his head intensely, Sword Saint Reid stomped on the ground with a great amount of force. With that one movement, the white floor of the second floor shook and then split open. Watching the confrontation between the two of them, Echidna flinched, but Julius stood upright without moving an inch.

When Reid saw that, he clicked his tongue with a “Tch.”

“Showy, showy, showy… Ah, just showy. Ya said the same thing as my follower, you. I don’t like ya, ya son of a bitch.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know him, but I can’t help but sympathize with him.”

“What? Who said my follower’s a guy? First of all, workin’ with a bastard is no fun. The follower I’m talkin’ ‘bout is a woman. She was a dazzlin’ gal, but she was way too logical.”

“Woman… What do I have in common with a woman?”

“Ah? Do I really need ta repeat myself?”

Wrinkling his nose, Reid smiled ferociously like a shark. Then he tapped on his cheeks with his unfolded hands.

“A pretty face, but too logical.”

"…"

"Ha, well ain't ya irritated? It's a shame since it's cute… But, that's alright."

Reid snorted at Julius' lackluster reaction, and then he cracked his neck loudly. Shortly after, he observed him with his blue eyes—no, not him, but what was surrounding him. The lights, which hovered around him, shined more brilliantly than ever. Above all, this had been the first time they'd shined like this in front of Reid.

"My buds…no, my beautiful maidens, you mean?"

"Haaah, it's nothin'. I'll take any dazzlin' gal regardless of race. But sorry, I ain't interested in a gal I can't bang. —You, ya became stronger when ya broke outta your shell, didn't ya?"

"If you say so, there may have a been a way like that."

Something like giving advice to his juniors was unfathomable based on Reid's personality. This only happened because Julius, who had no choice but to trust in his sword, was extremely desperate, and Reid felt like it was a total waste.

If he were to cling desperately to his sword anyways, then he should at least not care about his appearance. —What he desired from Julius was for him to show that kind of attitude and determination, and to see it as a path forward.

But—

"I've decided to go this way. Or, as you said, it's also possible for me to become stronger by breaking out of my shell and accepting my true self."

Julius himself was aware that if he was not strongly conscious of it, it would happen without him knowing it. At that moment, when he'd been fighting desperately offensively and defensively, and one mistake would've been the difference between life and death, Julius' true face appeared.

But that was only the story when he wasn't strongly conscious of it.

—He could waver no longer.

“I swear. I will master the chivalry I believe in. Moreover, rather than becoming the way in which you have tried to guide me, I shall become a better me in every respect.”

“Hah? What kind of reasons do ya have for doin’ that, you.”

“That should be obvious. The knight I believe in should embody an ideal. He should be pure, honest, and invincibly strong. Then, I also have to be like so, because I call myself a knight.”

“—Ha.”

This had been his own absurd reasoning, thoughtless words, and oppressive arrogance that naturally deserved to be laughed at. But when Reid heard it, instead of showing anger or contempt, he just smiled with his sharp teeth. And—

“I’m gonna make ya cry.”

While Julius was staring at him, Reid threw away the chopstick in his hand and jumped back. Then he slowly moved his hand to the side and picked up the Sword of Selection sticking out of the white floor with his big hand—

Reid Astrea was only supposed to be an existence that served as a Trial Overseer in the tower. However, for some reason, this mechanism of the tower was overcome with the power of his will, and by taking over the body of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, he managed to somehow revive himself.

No longer being in a position where he had to obey the Trial of the tower, he pulled out the Sword of Selection for the first time, as per its original purpose.

That is to say—

“—Gain his permission, by hand of the Fool who has reached the Heavenly Sword.”

“That’s my line… Well, it completely slipped my mind, though.”

“I thought that would be the case, so I said it instead. —I challenge you.”

“I’ll never forgive ya, ya bastard. I’m gonna make ya cry.”

In front of Julius, who had drawn his knight’s sword, Reid pointed the sword he’d just pulled out at him. There was no chance. This was the ultimate swordsman who was a natural.

—The pinnacle of all swordsmen, Sword Saint Reid Astrea.

“Here I come—”

“Yeah yeah.”

“—Take this!!”

Believing in the chivalry that’d shaped him, Julius Juukulius took on the Sword Saint with all his might.

2

His mind and body felt light.

Without using an analogy, it was the power of excitement that wrapped around the body of Julius, wielding a knight’s sword. It went without saying that one’s mental fortitude played a major role in a fight.

Come to think of it, Julius had been in an unstable state of mind since he got to the Pleiades Watchtower—or, rather, since his Name was taken away in the Watergate City.

Of course, Julius had warned himself as much as he could, and had restrained himself and kept it a secret. This type of self-discipline, which could be called an iron will, was not something to be proud of.

The result of not revealing his own illness, and of deceiving his companions and even himself, led to the series of successive defeats since his arrival to this tower, and to that terrible defeat. Julius should have believed in the people around him in the beginning.

Overcome with the shock of having his existence being forgotten, he felt pity for himself, who had been removed from the world, and overlooked what he should have believed the most.

Were the people Julius cherished the most, whom he trusted, pledged his allegiance to, and entrusted himself to, the kind of people who would despise Julius Juukulius, who had been removed from the world?

—Absolutely not, is what he could say for sure.

If so, then Julius only had to do one thing. He should have appealed to them with sincerity and showed them his love. —Just like he'd done with his buds.

"I should have reformed the broken bond. What is nothing can become anything...because I myself have witnessed it!"

Julius, who was nothing, could have become anything. And—

"No matter how many opportunities I get, I will always look up at that fiery boy with admiration on that day, at that back that embodies the ideals of chivalry, and I will challenge you, who is at the apex of the Sword, again and again."

"Quit prattlin' on and on, you're a sassy little bitch, you!!"

Reid howled that at Julius, who was intent on killing him. With his whole body getting struck by the wind and the pressure of his sword, Julius, with his yellow eyes narrowed, admired him.

This was the fourth time he'd fought against Reid. He had been defeated immediately when he challenged him the other three times. However, on his fourth try, the entire tower had been in danger, and he had reformed his contract with his buds.

Out of all of them, this was the first time he had used a weapon other than chopsticks, although it was questionable whether chopsticks could be called a weapon. And now he felt as if the Sword Saint, who was at the apex of the Sword, was fighting at full strength with a sword.

“Compared with the chopsticks, the power of the sword doesn’t seem any different…!”

“I already told ya. I ain’t strong because I can swing a sword. I’m strong because I’m strong.”

Receiving a downward sword slash which had been thrown casually, his knees creaked under the pressure, and then he was immediately chased from below. Julius flew back in shock, barely evading it. Reid followed him, not by jumping or running, but by simply walking with big steps.

Julius wanted to believe that there was something special about the way he was walking, but there wasn’t. Reid was the only one who could create a walking style that would have taken many generations to perfect just by thinking about it during a battle when he wanted to catch up to an opponent who had retreated.

As Reid himself had said, he was just an extraordinary Being.

“You wanna cry yet?”

“—. No, it is quite exciting when I feel like I’m going up against a legend!”

It was just a bluff, but Julius answered him, driven by his own strength.

Yes, that’s right. Reid Astrea was right in front of him. How many times had Julius himself been excited by stories about him with sparkling eyes?

He had been surprised by his personality, but his abilities were the ideal he had dreamed of. And if so, how much time had he already wasted? There had been many opportunities to exchange words, exchange swords, and exchange ideas and beliefs—

“Ha.”

Julius let that out at the sudden thought of clashing swords with the Real Thing. Though it was out of place, that truly pleasant thought made his heart throb with excitement.

“What’re ya laughin’ at over there?”

“No, I just thought…that when I finish what I came here to do, I would challenge my friend Reinhard.”

When Reid asked that, that idea suddenly popped into Julius’ mind.

Julius had never competed against Reinhard in sword fighting. On the contrary, he never thought of competing against him until he’d already he’d joined an opposing camp in the royal selection.

—He regretted not trying to catch up to him before.

3

That was one of the reasons why Julius served Anastasia, who was involved with the royal selection. But even if he hadn’t had such thoughts, he would have been charmed by her great talent and stood in the same place as her, hoping to share the same dream.

Then, there had been no need for him to come up with trivial excuses or speak in a roundabout way from the beginning. The only thing he needed to do back then was meet up with Reinhard with two wooden swords in his hands.

There had once been a time where Reinhard had crossed swords with the best swordsmen of the Vollachia Empire. While everyone else had been filled with excitement on the training grounds on that day, Julius had been moved to tears. That was the kind of response he gave—

“Hm, I ain’t familiar with that name. Who is that nobody?”

“He’s your descendant. As well as the current Sword Saint, and also my friend.”

“Hah! Another person’s brat is already a stranger to me. Even if I met ‘em on the street, I wouldn’t even notice ‘em.”

With a combination of kicks and swordplay, Reid spat that out while snorting. When that declaration had been refuted, he spoke again as Julius was readying his sword—

“I’m getting’ tired of talkin’ ‘bout someone else. You, are ya talkin to me?”

“—. I don’t deny that I’d like to chat with you, but I can’t help but say no.”

“…”

“I’d like to talk with you for two or three nights if the time allowed it. But now is not the time for that. He told me to “Hurry your ass up.” Therefore—”

From a distance, Reid could be seen lifting his cheeks . In the reflection of his blue eyes was the image of Julius, who was becoming brighter by the second. Six colors were swirling around and blending together, which then slowly began to draw a halo and emit the colors of the rainbow.

And—

“—Al Clauselia!!”

—A light radiating the colors of the rainbow was let off and swept across the world of white towards Reid.

4

Julius himself was amazed by the power and range of the sixfold light he’d just released.

It had been transformed from a great spirit arts technique to a magic attack of an extraordinary scale, so it would be improper to treat it as the same thing as before.

“…”

His buds—no, they can no longer be called buds now that their talents have bloomed. Beautiful, lovely, brave, dignified, colorful, and perhaps even divine—they were now maidens, not buds.

Possessing the six girls, each of whom had their own charm, by himself alone might make him more sinful than a Sin Archbishop.

But—

“Even if you have forgotten me, I still love you all.”

Julius then moved forward to catch up to the light he’d just released. The rainbow-colored light made up of six elements was capable of breaking through any and all defenses and destroying the object it’d been released at. Therefore, the two things that an opponent could do before the sixfold light reached them would be either taking it head-on or ducking.

“—Ha.”

And as expected of him due to his nature, Reid Astrea didn’t try to duck or evade the sixfold light. As the colors of the rainbow flashed in front of his eyes, he waived his powerful arm and cut the end of the sixfold light off with the Sword of Selection in his hand.

A Sword Technique of pure violence that did not rely on any special magic or Divine Protections. —He erased the enormous amount of magic that Julius had fired with all of his might with a single stroke of his sword.

But Julius had already planned for that. Rushing out from behind the bright light that had been extinguished, he borrowed the power of his sword and his maidens.

“La! Aro!”

In an instant the red and green spirits, responding to his call, increased their strength, and the power of the wind combined with the power of fire, forming a blazing vortex beneath Reid’s feet. Feeling the heat beneath his Zori, or sandals, Reid escaped by jumping upwards before it could burn him. But this was where the Nameless Knight’s link with the Finest of Knights came in.

“Kua! Ik!”

The yellow spirit caused something to protrude from the white floor, pushing Julius’s body upward. At the same time, the radiance of the blue spirit froze the moisture in the atmosphere, stopping the rising Reid in his tracks. Then he clicked his tongue, kicked in the air, and reversed his position with what could be called an inhuman feat. While standing upside-down from a block of ice that had been created in midair, he glared at Julius.

All of a sudden, Reid began to increase the strength in his knees, but Julius quickly shot upwards to intercept him.

“In! Nes!”

As the Sword Saint’s counterattack approached, the black and white spirits interfered with the world with their own power. The white light that was emitted powered up Julius’s entire body, while the black light decreased the power of his enemies, even if only slightly. That small difference at that moment was the key to landing a blow.

“…”

The ice ceiling that had created a foothold in midair shattered, and the image of Reid as he pushed off of it was blurred due to his sheer speed. The Sword of Selection had a special function or ultimate form where vertical and horizonal slashes were prevented from being read. —Instead of seeing it as a threat, Julius took it head-on with his head held high.

It made sense to him that he’d have to trade sword strikes with a power that was out of his league. Therefore, Julius opened his eyes. —Eyes that have always looked up and always looked forward.

“…”

Breaking through the sound barrier and moving at the speed of light, Reid broke through the space with a flash. Whether he did it using his chopsticks, or did it with the Sword of Selection, the result was the same—everything in his path was cut down. Because that was a manifestation of the function of a Sword.

The Sword was created in order to kill things. And Swordsmanship was a general term that encompassed techniques used to kill things with a sword.

Therefore, a single flash that was capable of killing anything in this world was the true embodiment of the Sword and Swordsmanship, and the true meaning of that word. Those who have been cut by such a slash would never forget that fact for eternity.

And so the scar that Julius had received beneath his left eye would forever remain. That had been the price of dodging the Sword Saint that moved like a flash at a distance that was within arm's reach.

"…"

He gave up on the attitude that told him to accept his fate and watched his opponent's sword for but a moment during the battle. Blood gushed from beneath his left eye, but he refused to close that eye and simply swung his arms while he kept his eyes on Reid. Pouring in the power of a hundred into an offensive attack, he abandoned his defensive stance—

"—Al Clarista."

Julius Juukulius, letting off the best sword attack of his life, drew the colors of the rainbow. It smashed into Reid Astrea's ferocious shark-like smile, and—

—The eyepatch covering the left eye of the Sword Saint flew through the air after the knight's blow struck true.

5

"…"

As he landed toes-first onto the white floor, the sound of his shoes seemed unusually loud. As soon as his consciousness returned, his heart, which had seemingly stopped beating in the depths of Julius' chest, reactivated. The sudden flow of blood made him step back, and he took a deep breath and exhaled deeply. Then he turned around and looked at that strong back that was turned away from him.

"…"

His long red hair swayed in the wind and his back was completely still. He held the Sword of Selection in his right hand and covered his face with his left. There used to be an eyepatch where his left hand was, but it was no longer there. The Sword Saint's eyepatch had fallen beneath Julius' feet.

"—Did I do it?"

His eyes fell to the white floor, and, looking down at the knight's sword in his hand, his voice trembled.

"…"

It seemed as if he had forgotten how to speak, and the six lights fluttering around Julius praised him for what he had accomplished. A warm flower called deep affection tried to fill the void created in Julius' heart. And with the praise of his flowering maidens—

"—Julius."

A faint voice was heard, and Julius turned towards the direction it came from. There was a great man who had turned away from him, his maidens that were showering him with praise, and, overlooking the battle from a different viewpoint, and the one who had called out to Julius, was a woman with light purple hair.

She was the eternal spirit that had the same face as the lord he cherished, who he had sworn to dedicate his sword to, and who he had unknowingly hurt—

She had never revealed whether or not she cared about Julius because he cared for Anastasia, or because his Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits was at play. However, Julius Juukulius was extremely grateful that there was someone who had witnessed his resolve, and, feeling the load on his heart lighten, he raised his knight's sword in the air.

"…"

In silence, he raised his knight's sword to the heavens. The trail of the sword drew a rainbow with the remains of the sparkling lights, as if it were blessing the knight named Julius Juukulius.

"—If this were the damn Trial, ya would've won with that, you."

As he spoke, that great man casually stepped across the floor with his Zori. Reid's face was in one piece. The tip of Julius' sword had only reached his eyepatch, but he wasn't shameful enough to not admit that he hadn't been hit. Above all, his remark earlier wasn't a poor excuse, but was the truth.

If this had been a continuation of the Trial of the second floor, Electra, of the Pleiades Watchtower, then Julius would have won with that first blow and been allowed to challenge the first floor of the tower. But the battle between Julius and Reid had no longer been about the Trial of the tower. It had been the battle between a knight and a swordsman, in order to settle the score man-to-man.

"…"

Reid, who had lost his eyepatch, gripped the Sword of Selection with both of his hands. He gripped the handle of the sword with his dominant hand first and gazed at the sword with his eyes. —Indeed, the Sword Saint was ready. Instead of swinging it around carelessly, he held it properly this time in order to cut down his enemy.

"Don't complain even if ya disappear."

"Even if I wanted to complain, I wouldn't be able to do so if my mouth also disappears."

"Ha! Weren't ya the one who never laughed at jokes? You, what was your name again?"

When the legend himself asked him his name, Julius raised his eyebrows. He knew that he must have told him his name many times already, but he wasn't sure, and it didn't matter if he couldn't remember it. Because Reid asking him that question meant that he had finally accepted Julius.

"Julius Juukulius. It's an easy-to-forget name, so please remember it."

Julius pointed his knight's sword at Reid, uttering a joke he would not have been able to laugh at not too long ago. And he again requested the help of his six spirits who had just helped him out earlier. The current them would be able to make the power of the sixfold light even more powerful.

Al Clauselia and Al Clarista.

With the help of his six spirits, the six elements combined to release the light of the rainbow. —Clauselia, which released his maximum level magic, and Clarista, which imbued his knight's sword.

Beyond that, it had been a secret technique that had never been successfully performed due to his own inexperience.

"—Go."

"—Let's do this."

At that moment, that extreme light filled the white space, and the sixfold light once again challenged that godlike red-haired man.

The secret behind the rainbow spirt arts technique that was originally created by Julius Juukulius—

He did not imbue the rainbow light in his sword nor did he emit it, but instead clad himself in it, becoming the aurora itself that eliminated what it was aimed at.

"—Al Cranvel."

The ultimate attack of the Spirit Knight was met head-on by a flash of white.

6

From beginning to end, it had been too out of this world to follow with untrained eyes.

Not to mention the sword attacks that collided with each other, but the constantly changing positions and foot movements, whether they be superior or inferior, could not be seen by her blue-green eyes. And it had nothing to do with the fact that her body was not her own. It was just that there were people fighting to the death on such a high level, and compared to them, the world she lived in was way too normal.

If a person's value was based on how strong they were, then she was weak enough to be considered worthless. It was also evidence that she had spent hundreds of years doing nothing and had turned away from the path of self-improvement.

From the moment she first became aware of her own ego, she had a hunch. She knew that from the moment she'd been born that the purpose of her unnatural existence had already been fulfilled. If she had to explain it, the very act of being born had been her life's purpose, and she'd fulfilled it already. Therefore, she had been left alone and wandered around the world without a purpose, and was forced to live in a vacuum for 400 years.

She wouldn't mind dying, either, but she had no reason to die. So she decided to just procrastinate, and for a long time, she was quite lazy. But after some time, she met a girl.

She had been fascinated by the way that young girl lived her vivid life, and her cold life was suddenly filled with passion. She became eager and impatient to see what the girl, who had made bold claims with her tiny body, would become, or might not become.

At some point, such interests no longer mattered, and—

"I don't want to lose you or the children you cherish so much."

She knew that the passing of time could be kind or cruel. Time healed all wounds, but it could also make one stuck in their ways. For the first time in her long, long life, she thought—that she didn't want to leave this in the past.

"This is also an unreasonable wish."

Even if she begged it to stop, time would go on without stopping. A life that was supposed to be small and weak could show all kinds of changes in that time.

It was like the Nameless Knight, who had been deprived of his Name and was taken from everyone's memories, who wanted to prove that he was still himself, Julius Juukulius.

—A knight clad in the colors of the rainbow dove straight into that white light.

In contrast to Julius, who brought out his secret techniques, Reid Astrea's fighting style was very simple to understand. He simply repeated using the same downward sword slash that let out a light that cut through the world and destroyed everything in its path.

There was nothing special about it, and it wasn't even a special magic attack. Just by waving his sword, the world got burnt by the light. It was something she did not understand. Was Reid Astrea just beyond understanding, or were all Sword Saints like this?

What was certain was that—

"—Julius."

She wanted to do everything in her power to prevent the sixfold light from being overwhelmed by that overpowered white light. It was the truth, and she wouldn't even complain even if her soul were destroyed after charging in for one final suicide attack.

And she, Echidna, was already aware that she was powerless and could do nothing in this situation. What if, in this moment, Julius Juukulius, who had unleashed that sixfold light, could do something here?

"…"

She then put her hand on her thin chest and felt the existence sleeping inside. The original owner of this body was within, who was unable to wake up from her deep sleep, and this was the reason why Echidna came to this tower in the sea of sand. —But she had only been lying to herself. Echidna already knew why she wouldn't wake up.

She boasted about how greedy she was and how she wanted to take everything for herself. Once she had something in her hands, she wouldn't let go of it no matter what, and she was one who truly hated to lose, so she could only think of one reason alone.

"Having given up your body to me, you are now temporarily hiding in your own Od, unable to be interfered with by the outside world. —One’s Od is its own world in a way.”

And she had locked herself in there. The reason as to why was obvious. —If she left her Od, she would be affected by the horrible Authority of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. It was capable of making one forget what one didn’t want to forget, and making one let go of what one don’t want to let go of. Anastasia Hoshin didn’t want to forget about Julius Juukulius. And so she did this, but—

“It seems to me that everyone who came to this tower is extremely stubborn. —No one is cute enough to not end up getting lost.”

For the past two months, she’d tried to copy her in every way, but it was about time to put an end to that. Besides, she’d watched him run around as a Nameless Knight, and saw both the good and the bad, so she felt like she could go ahead and teach her about him, even if she’d forgotten him.

“Oh, that’s right.”

She was an artificial spirit without a purpose who had lived lazily after her creation. She thought that was the role she had to play, but that wasn’t all there was to it.

She needed to create a bridge between a precious girl, a precious knight, and everything the two lacked. This role requires a lot of responsibility, doesn’t it? It felt like such a large amount of responsibility that she thought she had been born for this.

Therefore—

“—You’re stingy, so it’s not like you to not want to see your knight acting cool.”

7

—A white light clashed with the light being released.

Even with the help of the six spirits he’d renewed his contract with, and putting his entire being into the attack, he was still being pushed back. He’d brought out his secret technique, while the other guy just swung his sword with a bit more seriousness. —He was amazed at how inhuman the guy was. And yet, at the same time, he couldn't help but get excited as his blood boiled.

The world got split in two by his sword. It was a Sword Saint skill that Reinhard was also able to use when he swung his sword. Suddenly, in the middle of this life or death battle, Julius had a thought.

If they were to fight, who would be stronger, Reid or Reinhard? Two legendary Sword Saints—he wondered what would happen if the two of them fought a hypothetical battle. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to find out.

"Then I have no choice but to confirm it myself."

The only people who could cross swords with Reinhard Van Astrea and Reid Astrea were those who had reached this tower. Only Julius and Emilia, who had reached the top floor, would be able to do so. —Julius had no intention of handing over that role to someone else. And so, all he had to do now was win.

He would get by that white light and kill Reid Astrea using that sixfold light. To that end, he would devote his entire being and the power of his sword—

With a little pride and power in the tip of the sword of the Finest of Knights—

"—Julius."

That had been a voice that should never have reached him. In the midst of a battle that slowed down the passage of time, it only took less than a second for their swords to clash. That had been the way they'd fought in that slow-motion world. There would be no way for a voice to reach that place, and definitely not when they were in the middle of a life-or-death battle.

"…"

But the voice managed to reach Julius. Or perhaps it had not reached his ears, but deeper into the innermost part of his chest.

Since he had chosen to continue pretending to be a knight, there was no way he would not respond to it.

So when Julius heard the voice that couldn't have possibly reached him, he turned to the person he could not possibly see, and looked at her blue-green eyes. The light in her eyes was clearly different from before. —

"Go, my knight."

And with these words alone, he let off one last thrust with all of his power—

"La! Kua! Aro! Ik! In! Nes!"

Giving himself one last push, he called out to the spirits who became part of that aurora of light. In front of him, beyond the white light, was the enemy he wished to defeat, and he needed to get past it. In order to get the point of his sword to reach beyond that light—

"Oh, oooooooooooooooh—!!"

He opened his mouth in a unsightly way and let out a blood-curdling cry. In the face of death, Julius stepped forward, not caring about whether or not he was being graceful, yet still refusing to allow his beliefs to be broken, and gave it his all.

"…"

And under the assault of the sixfold light, the white light increased in intensity. It grew so great that the sixfold light and the white light clashed violently—

"—Ah."

The clash, which seemed as if it would last forever, had come to an abrupt end.

8

"—Ah."

Julius was dumbfounded by the dismal sound that had escaped from his throat. The clash of their attacks going at full-throttle ended abruptly. However, the momentum of his strike did not stop, and his sword, still tinged with light, was stabbing through his opponent's vital area.

"Why…?"

"Tch, ah, shit. Is this is gonna be the shitty ending to this boring show?"

Julius, on the side that had done the stabbing, was in great turmoil, while Reid, who was the one who had been stabbed, was completely calm. Even though something had stabbed into his chest, he did not even grimace in pain. Was this due to his mental fortitude, or was it because of what had happened to his godlike body?

The hard chest of Reid Astrea had been wounded—or perhaps cracked as Julius' sword stabbed into it. And it wasn't just the chest. The cracks spread to his arms, legs, neck, face, and other parts of his body.

Julius had a hunch as to what it was too. Something that was not supposed to be there was being corrected. This is what he believed to be a sign that the process was occurring.

"In the end, that's how it is. There ain't no vessel that can contain me other than my own."

While looking at his cracked palm, Reid figured out what had happened.

Reid Astrea had been eaten up by the Authority of Gluttony and acquired a physical body by taking control of this one—but the body he was currently using belonged to the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard.

In other words, the vessel of Roy Alphard could not contain the powerful soul of Reid Astrea. As a result, it started breaking down during the last part of the fight against Julius.

“You’re just so much better than me!”

“Ah, if I hadn’t been eaten by him, ya might have been able ta win in the end. If that was the case, it would’ve been over when ya removed my eyepatch, wouldn’t it?”

“Guh…”

“Ka-ka-ka. You’re a weak guy who can’t do anything. You wanna cry yet?”

Throwing away the Sword of Selection, Reid smiled maliciously, showing his teeth.

How can he laugh like that? Julius wonders. It was almost certain that he would disappear in the near future if he kept it up like this. Or, if he had just killed Julius, he might have been able to start a new life, but now even that possibility had slipped away.

“You’re an idiot, you. Livin’ forever? Who would wanna do such a troublesome thing? Besides, what if ya ran into me out there?”

“…Unfortunately, you already died of old age 400 years ago. Even if you go out now, you are still different from the person you were before.”

“Gah! And ya expect me to recognize the face of someone else’s kid? Get outta here with that bullshit.”

It seemed as if he truly did treat his descendants as if they were strangers, so his earlier statements were true after all. Expressing no real interest in living a second life, Reid cracked his neck.

“Ha, you really have no regrets…?”

“Ya know. My style is ta do things whenever I wanna do ‘em. I think it would be a lot easier for ya if ya did that, ya know.”

“…I appreciate your guidance. But, that path would be a lot more difficult for me.”

He willingly chose to wear that shell. Even if he was told that he just pretended to be something he wasn't, or that he acted differently from his true self, it didn't matter.

Julius, though he was dazzled by the carefreeness of Reid, could not choose that path, for he knew that it would have been better for him to choose it, and to do as he wished.

When Reid heard Julius' answer, he snorted. Then he pointed at the wound on his chest—on it were the cracks that had formed due to going beyond his body's limits, as well as the stab wound—

"You, ya aren't mistaken, are ya? It was just a stroke of luck that your sword reached me. If this were my body, ya wouldn't be able ta do shit."

"I wouldn't be able to do anything at all in that case..."

"Huh! That ain't exciting!"

After spitting that out, Reid struck Julius on the shoulder with the hand that had been pointing at his chest. Stiff as a statue due to his sudden movement, Julius took deep breaths.

He was not yet convinced of everything yet, nor had he been able to take everything in properly. But the thing occurring right in front of him was much more unnerving, and it would have been more unbearable for him to be upset and miss this moment.

The cracks were widening and the end was near. And so Julius brought his knight's sword up and held it in front of his face—

"I respect your swordsmanship from the bottom of my heart."

"I don't want your respect, ya bastard. —It was my win, and I'm 'bouta head out, Julius."

"…"

Hearing him call him by his name, Julius fell into a state of wonderment. However, since he had already decided to not be upset, he hid his surprise behind his smile and respectfully bowed once.

He had proudly declared that he was the Finest of Knights in the presence of this legend. So there was no reason for Julius Juukulius to be ashamed of the ideals and appearance he strove after.

“Yes, from beginning to end. —It was your victory, Reid Astrea.”

“Ha, that’s a good look on your face, loser.”

After he said that, the cracks on Reid Astrea’s body began to widen.

9

“…”

Contrary to its appearance, the cracks on his body continued to expand without making a single sound. Without even the sound of glass shattering, the red-haired figure vanished as the light flickered—and what was now lying on the white floor was a small, white-eyed boy.

A disgusting being known as Bizarre Eating who ate the Names and Memories of others whenever he wished. Roy Alphard, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, had fallen onto the floor and let out a whimper before going silent.

“…”

Whether he was alive or dead, Gluttony didn’t move an inch from where he lay. However, the deep wound on the left side of his chest was proof that he had been fatally injured. Observing this, Julius lowered the knight’s sword that he had just lifted up as a sign of respect, put it into its scabbard, and looked behind him.

The sixfold light had returned to normal, and now their individual auras increased in intensity around Julius. Without the power of his girls, who had blossomed from buds into maidens, it would have been him, and not the other guy, who was lying on the white floor.

Julius wanted to express his gratitude and appreciation for what they had done, but for now, he could only apologize to them and postpone that until later.

He then slowly moved forward.

While walking, he could see someone else coming his way—a small, delicate woman with blue-green eyes. She was dressed in white, which didn’t seem to match the sand dunes at all, and had long, wavy pale purple hair. Under her feet was a white fox who was shaking anxiously. Her appearance, which was supposed to be in the form of a scarf most of the time, meant something big had happened.

Realizing this, Julius closed his eyes. And—

“—Nice to meet you.”

Just like how he did a little while ago as a challenger, he decided to restate the same statement he’d said to the Sword Saint to her. But the feeling in the back of his chest was different from the feeling he got when he was in a battle. And some things did not change.

It was like opening the first page of a new story about a boy with an adventurous spirit who longed to be a knight.

“I’m…”

She responded to Julius, who had knelt on the ground and spoken first. Staying in that position, he waited for her following words. He felt as if he could wait as long as she needed. He believed that if he simply waited patiently, he could hear that person’s words.

“—I am Anastasia Hoshin.”

“…”

"I want everything in this world… So, what's your name, good-lookin' guy?"

Halfway through, Julius could see how she smiled while tilting her head with her hand on her cheek. While kneeling, with his head lowered, he let out a quick "Ha."

"I am Julius Juukulius. —Your one and only knight."

"…"

"You may have forgotten it, but, I have dedicated my sword to you. I will do everything I can for you and support whatever you wish to do."

Giving the most respectful salute he could muster with his knight's sword on the floor, Julius finally looked up. No matter how his lord responded, he would not regret anything. Being upset, puzzled, and looking down was not how a knight should act.

Because it was none other than Julius who longed to look better and be better dressed than all others.

And, looking down at him, she narrowed her round eyes—

"Is that so? I don't remember that… However—"

"…"

"—With a single look, I had a thought. —I knew that ya just had ta be mine."

In his immediate view was his lord, with glittering, flaming eyes that sought after him, who was never willing to part with the things she desired.

Julius Juukulius again pledged his sword to that Greed that desired everything.

Like the king and the knight of that story, it had been a divine act—

The bond between the master and servant had been restored on the second floor, Electra.

One of the obstacles that Natsuki Subaru had told everyone about had been overcome.

The Second Trial of the Great Library of Pleiades: Finished.

Chapter 86:
Conversing of What Yesterday Held

1

She had long been suspicious.

Roswaal L. Mathers, the lord she swore to serve, needed to kill the Dragon that defended the Kingdom of Lugunica in order to achieve his ultimate goal. Ram was an important pawn in achieving his goal, and it had almost been ten years since he'd told her this.

Roswaal, who had saved Ram and ■■■ in the Oni Village engulfed in flames, asked this of her as a form of compensation. And so Ram made the decision to pay the price in exchange for getting retribution for the Oni's. It was for that reason that she chose to cooperate with him, even if his plan was to kill the Dragon.

The only thing he did not tell Ram was how he intended to kill the Dragon. It wouldn't be easy at all. Even if he were to try everything, and resort to any means possible, it still would not be easy. So when the time came, what could Ram possibly do?

"You will understand when the time comes. —This is the role only you and your ■■■■■ can play."

She felt as if she were given a very vague explanation. And, oddly enough, she'd never really thought about what it truly meant until today. But—

"I finally understand it… Master Roswaal's ultimate goal."

Everything that Roswaal had done up until now had been for his own long-term goal. It was for that reason that he had traveled deep into the Kingdom of Lugunica and saved Ram and ■■■, guarded the Sanctuary, and tested Natsuki Subaru there.

Even if he were forced to alter his original plan, the preparations he'd already made would not be in vain. —No, he would make sure they wouldn’t be wasted.

And so the answer suddenly appeared in Ram’s mind. The reason why Roswaal had taken in the youngest Oni ■■■■■■ to serve as his trump card.

■■■ had been taken in to serve as a replacement for Ram, who had lost her horn. Ram and her little ■■■■■■, ■■■, were supposed to serve as a single Oni in order to kill the Dragon.

Naturally, Roswaal was not able to escape the influence of Gluttony’s Authority. As a result, he must have forgotten why ■■■ was in his mansion in the first place. But even if he had forgotten, he would have figured out what he had been trying to do.

And while watching Ram trying to get ■■■ back due to what Gluttony had done, he didn’t even reveal that fact.

“His meticulous ways will never change.”

Even though his scheme had been derailed by the actions of Subaru, he still worked hard to accomplish his goals behind the scenes. His personality was very troublesome. Ram wondered what he was doing while he was out of her sight right now. But, she also thought—

—Perhaps Roswaal expected this possibility when he allowed Ram to accompany Subaru and the others who’d brought ■■■ with them on this journey. But perhaps she had just been overthinking things.

In the first place, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony appearing at the Pleiades Watchtower was an unforeseen event, and there was no reason for him to assume that Ram and ■■■ would be in danger.

This might have been Ram’s own delusion due to overestimating the man she loved. But—

“—I’d much rather feel as if the man I love trusted in me.”

Perhaps he thought that by having Ram there, ■■■ and the others would be more protected. When it came down to it, Roswaal must have assumed that Ram would have figured out what he'd been hiding and willingly served as the trump card to kill the Dragon.

It felt much better for her to think that the man named Roswaal L. Mathers valued the decade of service of the woman named Ram. Therefore—

"—I'm in a great mood now. Kindly allow me to slap you to death."

2

The feats of the Fist King, Neiji Rockheart, was a bit of a legend on the Gladiator Island, Ginnunhive, of the Holy Vollachia Empire. —No, it was a legend.

But now that he'd lost his Name and Memories due to the Authority of Gluttony, no one knew about his achievements as a gladiator. Neiji had survived hundreds of battles to the death using only his bare hands as a weapon, which had been an amazing show of strength, and finally managed to win his freedom.

In the face of his fist, which had been filled with a refined fighting spirit, even swords and steel would be smashed to bits, and any obstacle in its path would appear to be as soft as a young maiden's skin. He could be said to be one of the greatest fighters in history.

The Carnivorous Beast, Beli Hainelga, was a rare serial killer, who in many brutal ways, terrorized the Kingdom of Gusteko. —No, used to terrorize it. Now that he had become a victim of the Authority of Gluttony and been deprived of his Name and Memories, no one could remember the tragedies and lessons he had left behind as a killer.

Once he'd been born, he grew abnormally large and gained a level of physical strength that no mere human could achieve. After that, he committed a number of brutal crimes, and killed the men he liked by hugging them to death. His body, and even his skin, was so strong that not even a sword could pierce or scratch it.

This serial killer, who'd sought contact and warmth from others, had been one of the most feared criminals, along with the Bowel

Hunter.

The Leaper, Dorkell, had an unusual backstory. Originally a mere merchant living in Kararagi, Dorkell strayed away from his merchant path after hearing a strange voice.

Now that he had fallen victim to the Authority of Gluttony, and been deprived of his Name and Memories, no one remembered the fact that he had been considered a lunatic and an outcast by many.

One day, he decided to throw away the life he had been living with his family and chose to believe in non-existent things and ideals. Soon after, he came into contact with the Witch Cult and developed a power that was different from magic. Differing from their doctrine, it was regarded as a heresy within a heresy, and he was expelled from the Witch Cult as a result.

In short, they more or less transcended even the level of monsters, eccentrics, and lunatics. Not only were they unrivaled when compared to normal human beings, they weren't even being used as they were, but were mixed with the Memories of Gluttony, turning them into even more exceptional beings.

What if Neiji Rockheart acquired the hard body of Beli Hainelga and the speed of Dorkell? That would end up being an existence that was rarely seen throughout history.

However, up to this point, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Lye Batenkaitos, had not done that. This was because he was afraid that by mixing all of the Memories into the same pot, he himself would be mixed into that pot.

However, the reality was that even if he swallowed the contents of that pot full of a mixture of Memories, he himself would not be sucked into it. —At least that was what he now assumed.

And now that he had accomplished that feat, he was not afraid of trying things that he had not tried before in order to break his own limits. For it was Lye Batenkaitos himself who, as a Gourmet, had consumed all of the great talents, from all backgrounds, and all of their possibilities, from the world, thus making him a true Gourmet.

Therefore, a monster was born in the tower in the sea of sand at the eastern end of the world on this day. It was a monster that combined all kinds of skills and high-level abilities, whether they be its own or from others.

It had arms that were capable of destroying anything, a body that could repel any attack, magic that could repel any technique, and the wisdom to control it all at once. No one in history had ever been so complete, and there would be none who could match this being even a thousand years from now.

This was the result of extracting all of the potential from the world, created due to the existence of a dreadful thing called a Witch Factor. It was the greatest form of Gourmet that came from melting countless excellent ingredients down in a large pot—

"—I'll kindly give you three chances."

Somehow, in the face of such a rare existence, a girl with pink hair said that while holding three fingers up. It had been a young girl, bleeding from her forehead, with a fierce light in her eyes. She had wounds all over her body that messed with her movements. And there were many other reasons why she couldn't keep up with him. He understood that.

The biggest factor wasn't even her wounds or the blood loss, but the fact that her petite body wasn't even functioning as a proper vessel for her very existence. —He thought it was such an awful thing.

"I'll kindly allow you to hit me three times. I'd like to try something out. Isn't that a wonderful deal?"

But the young girl, with three fingers up, said that as if she were trying to provoke him. Three opportunities to strike her would certainly be fatal. In the first place, he didn't believe she would be able to survive even one strike. But there really was no reason to reject her offer.

He did not believe it could be a trap, either. She was not the type of girl would offer such concessions for free. However, if someone were to be self-confident to the point of excess, then there was no reason not to sincerely let them know.

"—Sister, here I come."

He erupted from where he was standing with his powerful legs and zoomed in to strike a few blows.

"Well, first chance."

"—Gu?!"

At the moment he thought he had gotten her, she avoided his fist so narrowly that it grazed a few strands of her hair. And then after placing her hand on the arm he'd extended, she unleashed a knee strike on the elbow joint of his right arm, breaking it.

Such a thing was impossible. That impenetrable body, which could not even be pierced or cut by a holy sword, had been broken by a mere girl simply by striking the elbow joint of his extended arm—kneeing the only weak point on his body. But—

Still feeling the pain of his arm being broken, he quickly brought his left leg up to the young girl's face. He did not do so in order to get revenge for his arm, but it had been a knee strike aimed at her face. His long, slender leg and white knee smashed into the young girl's nose, ruining her beautiful face.

"Second chance."

Hearing these words come from her thin lips, he couldn't believe his ears. There was no way she would be able to speak in such a situation. But the young girl gently brought her hand up from the side and then pushed his knee away. His knee strike passed smoothly over her head, as if it were supposed to strike the air from the beginning. And—

"Third chance."

After she evaded the strikes from his right arm and left knee, he threw an iron elbow strike that had enough momentum to swing his body around. It was sharp and powerful, and if it had connected, would have crushed the young girls skull like a fruit and spilled its contents onto the floor of the tower. The iron elbow, which had been aimed at the girls head, only managed to graze a few strands of her pink hair.

And the young girl, who seemed to have known that the elbow strike was coming, once again grabbed his face with her outstretched hand.

“Such a fool.”

She said so coldly, as if she couldn’t bear to look at him anymore, and then slammed his head into the floor.

3

With three fingers wrapped around his face, Ram slammed the transformed Batenkaitos into the floor.

“You thought you could win since you were given three chances, but you lost three times in a row. If you play a game without really trying, your luck will eventually run out.”

“Ah, Gah… Ugh.”

“I give you my thanks. This is definite proof. —That even the luck of good timing is not the enemy of Ram.”

Ram’s greatest enemy had always been her unluckiness. But this time she’d managed to overcome it with her own two hands, and made it fall right at her feet. There was no reason for her to be afraid any longer.

“—Ugh.”

Lying on the ground, Batenkaitos swung his legs up, and, using the momentum of that movement, he got back on his feet. Ram quickly stepped forward and did not hesitate to strike her enemy with a broken right arm. Blood gushed out of the wound on her forehead, but the pain and sense of loss she was experiencing caused her blood to boil from deep within herself.

Oh, how irritating this was. She had always felt that this sensation, and the excitedness that came from it, caused her a great deal of annoyance.

Ram hated the natural instincts of the Oni's—the exhilaration that came from fighting, the exhilaration that came from wielding power, and the thirst for blood for the enemies that they wished to kill.

And she had always believed that she had been freed from it once she had lost her horn on that night.

"How ironic."

As he grumbled, Ram grabbed his broken arm and threw him onto his back. Now that he was on the ground, she punted him all the way to the back of the corridor by kicking his head.

This was done so that she could keep him away from the wounded earth dragon and the young girl leaning against the wall.

"…"

There was a girl who continued to slumber, declaring that she still existed with her horn shining with a faint light on her forehead. For her, who had unwillingly been stuck in a deep slumber, it was supposed to be impossible for her to use her horn, even if she was an Oni.

However, even if her feelings had been lost, Ram and the young girl were twin sisters. —There was something called Synesthesia, which was an ability that sometimes linked two people who shared the same blood together.

Her existence itself had been felt by Ram for the past year, during which she took care of the sleeping Rem. It was not just the fact that they shared a similar appearance, but also the gut feeling she got that said she was definitely her sister. But the Synesthesia that connected them had never been activated in the past year.

If Rem were to have nightmares, then the fear she felt might have been conveyed to Ram, but not even this had happened during the past year. In other words, Rem, who continued to slumber, did not even have dreams. —For all this time, she had simply looked at the darkness behind her eyelids and breathed in and out for eternity.

So it was only by accident that Ram discovered how to use Synesthesia in such a way. It annoyed her to no end, but it had been thanks to Subaru's idea. He took on her burdens thus giving her the power to fight, and so the idea to try the same thing had been born.

When they were connected through Synesthesia, they shared powerful emotions, and sometimes even injuries and pain. She did not understand the principle behind how it worked, but she had read a hypothesis about it in a book in Beatrice's Forbidden Library.

—Synesthesia referred to the way in which the Od's of two different individuals were connected and functioned as one.

The Od was also referred to as the source of a human beings power that existed deep inside of them—in other words, the soul. There were times when it also served as an energy source for magic instead of mana, but originally, one's Od was the life-energy that made a human a human.

The theory was that Synesthesia was the result of being born in the same womb and being connected in a world that could not be entered by any others.

However, in the end, it was dismissed as being just a theory that could not be proven. So it was no surprise to her that it had been locked away in the Forbidden Library. Above all, Ram really liked this theory. It was really nice to think that one could naturally be connected to someone else.

"That annoying horn has really caused me an endless amount of trouble."

Ram really hated the destructive impulses that the white horn caused her to feel. She also hated the fact that the people around her had hailed her as the second coming of the Oni God. There was absolutely no connection between that mysterious ancient god and Ram.

Ram wanted to be valued for who she was, not because of those things.

Therefore, if she were able to be connected to someone despite all of that, she thought it would be great. And if she really had a connection like that with someone, then—

"—Ram is sure that she would have an inborn love for that child."

Even if she were an infant, she'd do anything to protect that bond. She would do everything she could to protect, cherish, and love them, and give them everything.

Therefore—

"Forgive this bad older sister for making you take on her burdens at a time like this."

Through Synesthesia, Ram shared her burdens with her sleeping sister. This was due to the fact that she had experienced Subaru's Authority herself many times. Once she'd seen something once, Ram could copy what she'd seen and replicate it.

The thing that Subaru did probably worked in a similar manner—it probably forcibly connected the Od's of others to his own, creating a one-way-only Synesthesia. If he wanted to share the burdens with others, he probably could, but he was a fool who refused to do that.

Instead, he chose to try to reduce the burdens of everyone by taking them all on himself.

"—Such a fool."

These were the same words she had uttered to Batenkaitos earlier, but only the words were the same, the way she said them was different.

Subaru's Authority could be reproduced by connecting to Rem via Synesthesia. She was not sure what was going on with Subaru, either, but this should be a bit better. Ram would be able to get out of the horrible situation of constantly being connected to him.

Instead, her burdens would flow directly into Rem—

"…"

Rem, who continued to slumber, said nothing.

However, she continued to send the mana that flowed into her own horn to Ram by using Ram's broken horn, which had been placed on her lap, as a catalyst. The amount of strain on her body must have been unfathomable due to the vast amounts of mana that Ram needed.

—Therefore, the battle needed to be ended quickly and decisively.

"Si-st-eraaaaaahhhh—!!"

While barking that out, Batenkaitos appeared right below Ram in an instant.

It was a magic technique that used the skill of the Leaper to teleport instantly—but even that elusive technique was useless if his foe could see it coming.

"Too slow, slowpoke. At this rate, Ram will become an old lady."

She stole his vision using Clairvoyance.

Integrating with him to see what he was focusing on, his eye movements, and the flow of his power, she aimed to read him more easily than trying to read his mind.

She avoided his palm strike, then slipped through to the other side by twisting and bending her five fingers. At the same time, she struck his screaming throat with her elbow and unleashed a powerful turning back kick.

"Gah…"

"Of course, even an old Ram will be beautiful."

As she spoke, she grabbed the back of his collar, forcefully pulled it down, and smashed the back of his head into the ground. She then brought her heel up and swung it down on his face, crushing his nose.

With him in her grasp, she swung her arms and unleashed an endless amount of wind blades at him.

“Gah, aaaaaah!!”

“Such a lovely face is accompanied by such an unpleasant scream.”

His entire body being assaulted and cut by her wind blades, Batenkaitos was blown away as blood gushed from his wounds.

As was usual, his body never stayed the same and was constantly transforming from one thing to another. However, no matter how much time went by, the form that appeared from the neck up did not change.

Ram felt like vomiting at that sight, but chose not to due to it not being elegant.

“…”

Batenkaitos then leaped at her without using any tricks, spilling out a lot of blood. It appeared to be an extraordinary technique. She was sure he had created a technique that no one else could replicate by combining the power of various masters.

Ram crushed his superior skill that could strike every direction at once with an even more violent attack. Even if she had to face 100 or 1000 masterful techniques, she would crush them all with an even greater force. That was the current state of their battle.

Batenkaitos could not even touch her, which filled her with glee.

And unlike with Subaru, she was much more compatible with her. And so she removed two more shackles. Compared with her prime, she was using about 50% of her power—no, since she was still so young at that time, her current self was much more powerful. Ram’s current strength could not be compared to the strength from before, either.

“Just as I thought, losing my horn was a good thing.”

Had she not lost her horn on that night, she might have given in to the horn that constantly enticed her. She wanted to say that it wasn’t possible, but she couldn’t say for sure. Nonetheless, Ram was proud of the road she had walked on up to this point.

The loss of her horn saved Ram from becoming the Oni she hated most.

“In the first place, I wouldn’t have been able to meet Master Roswaal if the events of that night never happened, so there is no need to compare the two.”

In response to her inquiries, Ram simply held her hand out in front of her. Batenkaitos, who had been teleporting around the area, appeared right in front of her hand. A look of astonishment could be seen on his face when he appeared, and then she grabbed it.

“You can’t run around forever, can you? I’m growing tired of your tricks, and seeing that face on you, too.”

“Oh—”

“I can’t wait any longer.”

Saying that coldly, Ram produced a wind blade in the hand that had been clutching his face. In that moment, his eyes, nose, lips, ears, and every part of his face were minced into pieces, and Batenkaitos screamed as blood poured from his wounds. And even if he were to escape, he couldn’t escape from his wounds, the pain he felt, nor the reality he was living in.

“Ah, aaaah, aaaaaaaaaah—!!”

Batenkaitos, who’d been floundering around, cried that out as he shed blood instead of tears. Ram, seeing that, slowly walked over to him.

When he heard her approaching, he quickly started transforming. A tall, muscular man appeared.

—The fist he threw was quickly repelled with a knee strike.

After getting overwhelmed by Ram, he rushed to escape from her. Next up was a fat guy with a beard, who curled into a ball and hardened himself as much as he could.

—She threw a kick that made him fly into the ceiling and then unleashed a torrent of punches that turned his hard skin into a blob of meat.

Batenkaitos had tried to transform into different people in order to kill Ram, but instead received the beating of his life—an unending torture session.

Last up was the bald old man who could leap around as if teleporting. —Now that she understand how it worked, she grabbed his head with a pitying look, and then pressed his face into the wall and ran, as if she were trying to grind him into dust.

“Ah, babababababababababababaaaaa—!!”

Held down by Ram’s strength alone, Batenkaitos had no way to escape, and his whole body was continuously scrapped against the wall as she ran. His form changed in her hands as he tried to find a way out of his situation.

Ram mourned for the hundred, thousand, and ten thousand victims who’d suffered at his hands and been sealed away.

Using her strength, she held a memorial service for those who had been eaten by Gluttony, who had mastered their techniques and loved the life they lived, and whose lives had been trampled upon and slighted.

There were no more techniques, paths, nor thoughts that he could use. None of it would work against Ram.

“Kindly take responsibility for what you have done.”

With a wave of her arm, Ram violently threw that blasphemer that looked as if he’d been peeled. Trembling in fear, Batenkaitos rolled down the corridor of the watchtower. His form changed slowly, quite slowly. Relying on the Memories he'd accumulated, he transformed himself—

"Oh, it's been a long time. I've missed that face of yours. This is about the third time I've seen it so far."

"—Ah, gah, ah."

Seeing the real Batenkaitos, Ram wiped the blood from her forehead and relaxed her lips. In a real sense, it was Batenkaitos. He had changed back into his original form, face included, instead of borrowing the forms and skills of others.

No matter who he turned into, relied on, or trusted, he could never escape from his true self.

Just as Ram was still an Oni even if her horn had been broken.

Just as Ram was still Rem's sister despite losing her Memories of her.

"Will you at least try to fight as yourself in your last moments?"

"…"

"That reminds me, you said something interesting on the spiral staircase. —You said you had a brother and sister. So why don't you show your pride for their sakes?"

Batenkaitos fell onto the ground, his painful breathing suddenly stopping. It wasn't because he died, but was merely because he'd reacted to Ram's words.

As soon as he heard her mention his brother and sister, Batenkaitos' breathing calmed down a bit, and he slowly rose from where he had been sitting—

"O-ur… O-ur…little sister…"

"Trying to tell me to back off? Sorry, but do you really think you deserve to make such a request? Have you ever listened to anyone or lifted a finger to help someone before?"

“That, it’s...”

“…”

With his bloody face shaking, Batenkaitos begged her with tears in his eyes. Ram narrowed her eyes slightly at that bitter sounding appeal, then she lowered her eyes with a sigh—

“—I’ll kindly consider it.”

“—Sister is so kind.”

At the same moment she looked away, Batenkaitos said that and disappeared in an instant.

Using the Leaper Dorkell’s Leaper Technique—that blasphemer vanished from her view without a trace.

—He ran away.

4

“Ha-ha! Ahahaha! Ahahahahahaaaa!”

Making full use of the different techniques of the Leaper, Dorkell, Batenkaitos escaped from Ram’s clutches. He no longer cared about eating Ram now. He chose to run away using any means necessary, not caring how he looked.

We can’t win. We can’t win. We can’t beat that.

Just as he thought, she was a complete monster. It would be a good idea to buy some time and go back when he was a bit stronger. That was the type of bad food that would never show up on the plate of a gourmet meal.

“Louis and Roy, too bad for you two! Preparation is everything as far as a gourmet meal is concerned.”

Pushing his injured body forward, Batenkaitos teased his brother and sister who’d been aiming for the same prey.

Louis had already left for the front line earlier, and Roy was going on a rampage somewhere else. If the Oni were to go after them instead, he thought it'd be easy for him to slip away.

Roy of Bizarre Eating didn't know when to quit, so he might actually die this time, but it couldn't be helped. Actually, he was rather fed up with him. He felt as if he had taken away a lot of gourmet food from him that would've gone to him otherwise because he'd always eat as much as he wanted.

—Wait, have the meals we've eaten so far even been gourmet?

"That guy has always been so useless... Aaah, shit! Shit, shit, shit! That there had been such, such a thing! I wish I had known about itttt!!"

This wasn't the feeling of deep affection that the sister adoring her sister made him feel. It was an immeasurable and impulsive desire to have something—an extremely intense feeling was born in Batenkaitos that made him really, truly desire it from the bottom of his heart.

He wanted to eat it up and savor it with all his heart and soul.

He had always called himself a Gourmet since he thought he had savored all kinds of great talents and feelings, but now that he knew that the Real Thing existed, everything else paled in comparison.

The being known as Lye Batenkaitos, who had always believed that he was worthy of being called the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, turned into rubbish.

The magnificent dining table, which had always looked so alluring, suddenly began to look like a sandbox for playing with mud dango's.

"I want it."

I want it, I want it—

In order to taste it, he was willing to throw everything else away. He wouldn't even regret losing everything he'd accumulated so far in order to eat it. He didn't want to savor anything but that. He wouldn't feel satisfied with anything else except that.

"Buuu, Guuuu."

As Batenkaitos ran, vomit leaked out of the corners of his mouth. And it wasn't because of pain or suffering, either. He just felt as if it was just too unbearable. Everything that used to satisfy his appetite suddenly seemed so unsavory after realizing that what he believed to be the best was not the best at all.

Why did we think that anything other than this was the best? Was it worthy of praise? Did it satisfy us?

Was there any point in calling himself a Gourmet if he loved anything less than the best?

"Aaaaah, how nice, quite nice, very nice, as it's so nice, isn't it nice, as it's probably nice, as we think it's so nice! Gluttonous drinking! Gluttony!"

His appetite rose along with a desire to fill his belly, and he let out a heartfelt cry that seemed to beg for it.

If he had an appetite to be one with another and mix with them, to take in someone else, then the Gluttony that drove him forward was the ultimate form of love.

"We love you, we love you...so much! We love you! Sister...no, Ram! We love you—"

This powerful feeling that had been bubbling up from within and being let out in the form of words was suddenly broken. The cause of it was pain, and it was a newly formed kind of pain.

"—Ah?"

Batenkaitos placed his hand on his cheek, feeling the sensation of blood. He had been trying to escape from the watchtower, and a brand new cut, which had tore his cheek, had formed. —It seemed to have come from nowhere.

"…"

Batenkaitos, in silence, stretched a finger out in front of him, and saw as his finger was also cut by something. In the empty space in front of him was an invisible blade.

"Ha."

It was the same technique that he had shown Ram on the spiral staircase. The technique of placing an invisible blade in the air was a legendary Shinobi skill, but he did not care whose Memories it came from. The issue now was that this wasn't an invisible blade that he'd placed.

"It can't be..."

Walking carefully past the invisible blade that'd cut his finger, Batenkaitos attempted to advance forwards—but then he screamed out an "Aaaaah!" as his toes were cut off, and attempted to turn.

—He was surrounded by invisible blades on all sides.

"...Ha-ha, is this for real?"

He had only shown it to her once. It had been shown once during that fight, and since it was an invisible technique, it shouldn't have been able to be seen.

And she wasn't even here right now. And yet, she managed to figure out his escape route and placed countless invisible blades before he got there.

"…"

Batenkaitos placed his hand on his right eye, which was barely functioning still, and not his left eye, which had been torn to bits by her wind blades. —It was Clairvoyance, which allowed Ram to share his vision.

She would never allow him to escape. It was impossible to do so because she could see his every move.

“Ha-ha-ha!”

Batenkaitos laughed out loud. And it was no longer a simple sneer.

It was love. For the first time in his life, he was passionate about someone. He fell in love with that exceptional person. And—

“Aaah! Wait, wait a second! Wait, wait just a little longer! Just a liiittle longer!”

He already knew that no matter how much he yelled, none of it would reach her through Clairvoyance. And so those desperate words weren’t meant to be heard. He did so in order to push himself forward.

Batenkaitos quickly clung to the wall. He had prematurely let go of everything he’d eaten. He might have been able to save himself from this hardship had he been able to use the masterfulness of the Fist King.

After that, Batenkaitos struck his arms against an invisible blade. Blood spurted from where his wrists used to be.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, hurts, it huuuurts, its hurts so much, but the pain isn’t important anymore.

“Receive our feelings! With your own eyes, witness our plea!”

He pressed his bleeding arm against the wall and started writing as well as he could. With his little body covered in blood, he drew large characters on the wall of the tower in the sea of sand.

“Bwaaah.”

Then he took a step back and looked at what he had written with his right eye open. This was done so that the bloody message on the wall reached the person he wanted to see the most. He was sure that'd she'd be watching him until the very end since their vision was connected.

“Aaaaah, we love you—”

—Before he could finish his sentence, Gluttony was beheaded by a wind blade.

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5

"—Fula."

With a single murmur and a movement of her hand, a wind blade was unleashed.

Even if the amount of magic used affected the size of it, the power of the wind blade itself remained relatively constant. Moreover, due to how sharp the wind blade was, even a small one was enough to cut through a neck.

Ram had chased after Gluttony, who'd escaped, and struck him with a single wind blade.

Keeping track of the fleeing Gluttony had been easy due to the use of Clairvoyance. She had left a few traps in the path he was running on to confine him, and they seemed to have worked quite well despite placing them in a hurried manner.

And just before the last wind blade struck him, Gluttony had been behaving strangely.

He had cut off his own hands and wrote a message on the wall with his own blood.

It was a filthy, completely one-sided, nasty form of harassment that was not worth looking at, but—

"…"

In his last moments, he must have seen the message written in blood spin around in his vision as his head flew through the air, and then closed his eyes one last time.

She had done so because she wouldn't feel at ease unless she did. That was the only reason she needed. There was no sense of duty holding her back.

The blasphemer made the wrong choice for the last time.

If he had risked his life for the sake of his brother and sister, Ram might have shown some mercy, but he had only used that as a way to fool her, using it as a tool for his own survival.

And he probably did not even know how to return what he had eaten. If he had, he might have used it as a bargaining chip in order to survive. —But it wasn’t even that. So this was his punishment.

“Those who live by the sword, die by the sword. Those who rely on witches, die by witches. Those who devote themselves to fire, die by fire. —And so, those who ask of Oni's, will die by Oni's, and shall be destroyed by what they relied on.”

—This was the justice that Ram believed in.

Lowering her arm, she took a deep breath. Then she turned and returned to the rocky corridor. She could not fight near them, so she made sure to create a lot of distance between them.

It had been a terribly long distance, and Ram naturally began to walk impatiently as a result.

“—ッッ.”

When she walked past the collapsed wall, she was greeted by the sound of an earth dragon. The jet-black earth dragon used her large body to hide Rem behind her. If Ram wasn’t the one who’d returned, she would’ve used her body as a shield.

Subaru really didn’t deserve this earth dragon. Despite being so hurt, she was still trying to follow Subaru’s instructions—

“—No, that’s not quite right. You wanted to protect Rem too, didn’t you?”

“…”

“Really…you’re such a good girl, Patrasche.”

Saying that, she gently stroked the neck of the earth dragon.

She needed to move her to the Green Room as soon as she could.

She didn’t want to force such a loyal earth dragon to move around with such wounds. Ram didn’t want to be rude to the earth dragon that had done so much for her sister.

Thanking the earth dragon from the bottom of her heart, Ram moved over to where Rem was behind her. Now that she had stopped sharing her burdens via Synesthesia, the horn no longer appeared on her forehead. However, the recoil from taking on so many of Ram’s burdens, who had almost been on the level of the Oni God, had definitely damaged her body.

Ram herself felt a bit depressed when she thought about how the recoil would soon arrive. But—

“Now isn’t the time to think about such tasteless things.”

Kneeling down slowly, Ram softly placed her hand on her sleeping sister’s cheek. The bond they shared as sisters that she didn’t really feel before felt much more real now, and she felt love and a sense of importance overflowing within her.

She had lost her horn, and, consequently, her power as the second coming of the Oni God, and lived on to this day.

Ram had concluded that the events that occurred on that fiery night were for her own good, and she didn’t think she was wrong, either. But from this point onward, that had changed. The reason her horn was broken on that day—

“—Was so that Ram could find out, here, on this day, that she was Rem’s sister.

Through Synesthesia, she was able to realize that they were twins who shared a single world, connected via their souls, and that she was her irreplaceable sister.

“Now, more than ever, I want to talk with you. About you and Ram, and our time together. Together, let’s fill in the memories of yesterday that we’ve lost.”

Time never stopped flowing, so they’d be able to create as many memories in the future as they wanted. So, she would make their memories bloom like a flower as often as possible, every night, so that nothing would disappear and nothing would be forgotten.

“Let’s talk a lot about the stories of yesterday.”

The Sleeping Beauty said nothing.

And yet her silence did not make her heart ache. Instead, Ram smiled as her heart filled with warmth. With a smile, she moved her lips without doubting her feelings—

“—I love you, Rem.”

She was sure that no matter how much time they spent together, they’d never be able to betray their feelings for each other. Oddly enough, she’d uttered the same thing that that warped Sin Archbishop had said in his last moments. Though the words were the same, the way they were said was completely different.

Those who don’t know love, and those who live for love, never sound the same. They never will.

Chapter 87:
Distant Regard

1

Her head rocked back and forth with a great amount of vigor.

She discovered that someone was running quickly with her waist held under their arm. And this wasn't the first time she had been carried like this. Not that she was used to being treated like an object, but being carried like this by her less-than-considerate partner had happened quite often.

"Cut it ouuut, Elsa…"

She's always had trouble describing her, someone who wouldn't listen to her no matter how many times she warned her.

She didn't trust her enough to call her a partner or a companion, nor was she close enough to her to call her sister or mother. Her relationship with her wasn't even close enough to call her a friend or acquaintance.

That was why she was always at a loss. What could she call her?

—What did Elsa even think of me?

"I told you to stop shaking meeee…"

It wasn't something that could be stopped just by saying it, but it annoyed her to no end to think that they'd think she'd given up due to not saying anything, so she made sure to make her voice heard whilst knowing nothing would come of it—no, she tried to do so.

But before she could give it a try, something hot started pouring out of her mouth. She thought she had thrown up what she'd eaten earlier, but that wasn't the case. What spilled out from deep within her was red blood.

"Damn it! She won't stop bleeding! Beako! What should I do?!"

"At any rate! I wonder if you can get rid of the blood by making her vomit! It'd be bad if she suffocated, in fact!"

She could hear a man and a woman shouting at each other right next to her ears, and then she was leaned to the side. She continued to cough and cough as blood spilled for her throat through her lips.

Something was put into her mouth and the blood that never stopped flowing was drawn out. On the verge of suffocating, they just barely managed to create an opening in her throat, allowing oxygen to flow into her lungs and brain.

"—*Spit*! Hooray, she can breathe again! Gimme some of your healing magic!"

"Fine, I suppose! But I can't do that much, in fact."

"I know that!... It was my mistake that led to Meili putting herself in danger. I'll pay the price for that."

She could hear them talking above her head, but when she finally managed to breathe, her body grew heavy. No, it probably really did become heavier. Due to the seriousness of the situation, she had probably shifted her consciousness to other parts of her body, and, as a result of that, she became aware of her body as a whole.

Her hands and feet were immobile. Her head continued to shake. She'd vomited around three glasses of blood. And her whole body felt like it was on fire, but her back was especially so.

There was something especially wrong with her back compared to everything else. That had probably been why she couldn't move her body and had continuously vomited blood.

Whether it was what had happened before, or what the man and woman arguing were about, or what was happening right now and how, she couldn't remember well. However, in a world where everything was vague and disjointed, there was something that had grabbed her attention. It was—

"Pro…mise..."

She felt as if she had exchanged that with someone–

2

—When the color of the gigantic scorpion changed, it released the most powerful ray of light so far.

The expanding ray of white light shot out in all directions, and the Hungry Horse Kings, who had been aiming at its crimson shell, were blown into pieces, but it didn’t stop there, but spread out further, leaving a mass of destruction in the sea of sand.

Naturally, Subaru and Beatrice wouldn’t be able to escape unscathed, but Meili was the one who took the most damage out of all of them.

While she was leaning forward in order to command the witchbeast, she had been extremely exposed to the powerful counterattack of the gigantic scorpion—of the Crimson Scorpion.

Fortunately, she’d managed to avoid being directly hit by the stinger, which emitted that deadly ray of white light. If that happened, the body of the small girl would have been disintegrated instantly.

That hadn’t happened. However, the ray of white light from the stinger left a mass of destruction in the sea of sand, and the shock wave it generated had smashed into her. That was more than enough to cause a life-threatening injury.

“Meili!!”

Subaru and Beatrice rushed to her aid and threw themselves down into the sand, and she looked to be in terrible shape when they saw her. She seemed to have instinctively curled herself into a ball, and the impact of the shockwave seemed to have affected her back the most.

Her black cloak had been blown off, and they could see her shredded skin under her torn clothes. She appeared to be suffering from lacerations and severe burns, and, for a moment, Subaru blacked out. However—

“Am I a dumbass? Think about what you need to do right now!”

Using his fist, Subaru brought his distant consciousness back and brought out his inner strength.

His Cor Leonis ability that had always been in use–it was the ability that allowed him to take on the burdens of his friends, and to take on the life-threatening injury that Meili had just been dealt.

And of course, if Subaru were to get taken out due to taking it all on himself, then it would become completely useless. He needed to do his best to help Meili whilst not falling unconscious himself.

“It’s gonna be alright. I can do this. —You got this, Natsuki Subaru.”

Up until this point, he might have become flustered and broken down, and acted in an unsightly and disgraceful manner. But after walking on the same road as ‘Natsuki Subaru’, Subaru looked at himself in a different light. Not only did he have his own role to play, but there were also things that only he could do. Therefore—

“Emilia and Julius are doing alright. And Patrasche and Rem are also safe and sound.”

He took a look at how everyone in the tower was doing, and made a strategy based around their current conditions.

The response from Emilia suddenly disappeared, and he was worried about Julius’ fight with Reid. He was also a bit concerned about the positions of Echidna and Patrasche, but he trusted them enough to leave them be.

Instead, Subaru’s main focus right now was on Ram, and Meili, who was right in front of him.

“—Guh.”

The agony Meili was currently feeling suddenly started pouring into Subaru, causing him to groan in agony due to the intense pain he was feeling in his insides.

To be honest, Ram's burdens alone were quite difficult to deal with. To add Meili's life-threatening injuries to that would be akin to suicide.

"This is bad...!"

Though he'd bragged about his abilities before, it was impossible to take on 100% of both at the same time.

And if that's the case, then Meili, who was dealing with life-threatening injuries, must be given priority, and he would need to reduce the amount of Ram's burdens flowing into him.

Perhaps Ram would be perceptive enough to figure out what had happened with that alone.

"Man, I'm gonna be in for a big scolding later..."

"Haaa! After all that big talk about your Authority, look how messy things turned out. I wouldn't expect anything less from Barusu."

Enduring the bitter taste of blood, Subaru imagined a very realistic reaction from her.

The effect of Cor Leonis should simply take on people' burdens, but the fact that he could actually taste blood was a sign that a reaction was going on within Subaru's own body.

One's imagination had an extraordinary affect on one's body. He had heard about how if a person firmly believed that a hot iron had been pressed against their body, then they would feel as if they had been burned.

In other words, by taking on Meili's severe back injury and other internal injuries, Subaru's body reacted in a similar way. If things went south, there could be two dead bodies lying here with the same causes of death.

"That is…well, a bit troubling, you know—!"

Carrying Meili on his back, he spit the blood in his mouth out and stood up. Then he ducked, evading the flaming spear of the Hungry

Horse King, and retreated, and created distance between them with Beatrice's purple stakes.

The one who was attacking them was the Hungry Horse King that had been carrying them not too long ago. As soon as the situation took a turn for the worse, the intelligent witchbeast did not betray her out of the blue–it was simply because Meili's Divine Protection was no longer in effect, causing it to return to following its natural instincts.

Without the leadership of Meili, the witchbeast went back to being an enemy of mankind, and regarded Subaru and the others as enemies. And now there were many such witchbeasts in the sea of sand.

"Uuugh."

"Meili!"

As he was running away from the witchbeast, Meili spat blood onto Subaru's arm. She coughed up a storm and spat out blood, and seeing her in pain like that made him really nervous. He couldn't even take a breather and find a place to treat her wounds.

At this rate—

"Damn it! She won't stop bleeding! Beako! What should I do?!"

"At any rate! I wonder if you can get rid of the blood by making her vomit! It'd be bad if she suffocated, in fact!"

While trying hard to maintain a certain amount of distance between them and the witchbeasts, he gave his mana over to Beatrice. In the meantime, Subaru shook Meili to get her to vomit the blood that was stuck in her throat.

But even with such efforts, Meili's complexion didn't change and she wouldn't stop bleeding. As a result, Subaru had no choice but to forcefully remove the blood from her throat by creating a siphon using his clenched fist, placing it over her mouth, and sucking all of the blood out.

“*Cough*! Gah.”

“—*Spit* Hooray, she can breathe again! Gimme some of your healing magic!”

“Fine, I suppose! But I can’t do that much, in fact.”

“I know that!… It was my mistake that led to Meili putting herself in danger. I’ll pay the price for that.”

Strictly speaking, Subaru was already starting to pay for his failure. But the interest was accumulating at a rapid rate even though he’d already reduced the amount of Ram’s burdens he’d take in.

As it was now, he wondered how much time he could buy.

“No, this is where I need to take a stand. If I stand back and do nothing, I’d just be a cowa…”

“Don’t let go! I suppose!”

“Huh?!”

Subaru ran with his teeth clenched and his body dealing with the full effects of his Authority. And Beatrice suddenly jumped onto his shoulders.

Of course, Subaru was surprised to suddenly be giving someone a piggyback ride, but Beatrice was as light as cotton candy, so it wouldn’t slow down their escape.

“Beako—”

“Subaru, don’t try to do everything by yourself, I suppose. Betty and Subaru are partners, and Meili is as well. You weren’t the only one who promised to help, in fact.”

“…”

Holding Subaru’s head tightly in her arms, Beatrice spoke softly.

Through Subaru, who was speechless after hearing that, she began to treat Meili's wounds with her gentle healing magic. —And Subaru could feel the sensation of a warm light gradually healing her through him.

Based on this warmth alone, it was clear that Beatrice was looking out for everyone.

""""—ッッッ.""""

"..."

In the background, the battle between the witchbeasts continued.

Fortunately, even when Meili's Divine Protection was no longer in use, the Crimson Scorpion and the Hungry Horse King's didn't sign some sort of peace treaty. And it was the same with all of the other witchbeasts.

The stinger and the pincers of the Crimson Scorpion took out around half of the witchbeasts approaching Subaru and co. And, naturally, the other half was still beelining for them, so there was no time to rest.

"Do we have any options?—"

In fact, it wasn't that there weren't any. Based on Beatrice's words and the care she showed for Meili, there was definitely a way to change their current situation, if not break through it.

However, he was hesitant to do so because he wasn't sure if it was feasible or not and it could not be confirmed with trial and error this time, so this was the worst kind of situation for Subaru. However—

"Subaru! If you're hesitating for Betty's sake, I don't want you to, I suppose! If the reason has nothing to do with Betty, then we can simply apologize together later, in fact!"

"..."

"—To go through suffering together, to experience happiness together...to never leave Betty behind! Those are the terms of Betty and Subaru's contract!"

Beatrice cried that out angrily as she looked at Subaru's profile. Though he couldn't see her face because she was behind his head, Subaru's prideful partner, however, was rather adorable even when she got angry.

And so, though Subaru had gotten spoiled, the words his partner uttered to him gave him courage. There was no time for him to worry about anything. The need to worry was no longer necessary due to his partner's words.

Therefore—

"I love you, Beako."

"Betty loves you more, in fact."

They exchanged words of love, and then Subaru looked down at the dying Meili. And, he resolved to never lose another life.

"—Cor Leonis, Second Shift."

He gave a new name to the Lion's Heart ability that he had already named himself, and internally switched gears.

By doing so, he expanded his Small King Authority—for he had always been scolded for being an isolated king who carried everyone's burdens on his back.

However, he would never be like the shameless Greed who forced all of his burdens onto others. And so, what Subaru wanted to do with this Authority was share his burdens with those who wanted to be with him. Basically—

"Second Shift—Burden Sharing."

The burdens that Subaru had once had to carry by himself would be sent to his friends who'd need to experience it with their entire beings. It would be distributed to those who were willing to accept it.

For now—

"—Subaru."

"Yeah?"

"...IT'S VERY HARD, IN FACT!!"

"YUP, IT'S VERY HARD!!"

The Second Shift of Cor Leonis had been activated, and the burdens that Subaru received were distributed to the others. It wasn't half, though. Even so, the burden on him was much lighter now, and Beatrice, who was now sharing in his burdens, looked quite pale.

Subaru shouted that back at Beatrice, who yelled in order to make it seem like she was in more pain than she really was.

It's tough. It's painful. It's impossible to handle.

Having to take care of everyone's burdens because he's the king? Damn that. —Therefore, thanks to everyone who wanted to support the Small King, who could not stand alone, he could now move forward.

"Is it fine to share this suffering with you, by the way?..."

"…"

"I see, so I can't share it with you. That's too bad."

Subaru then turned his attention towards the Crimson Scorpion while Beatrice, who now shared his burdens and was on his shoulders, treated Meili.

Its true identity was Shaula, and he could still feel their connection though Cor Leonis. He could see a big, massive light over there.

Unfortunately for them, Subaru and Beatrice didn't seem to be able to hand all of the burdens over to the Crimson Scorpion. —Since she didn't have the intention to take it.

Only those who wanted to support the Small King would receive it. The rules of this Authority were very clear and inflexible. That's why he could not afford to be arrogant. He could not forget that he was being supported by the people around him.

"Beako! Let your head and body do different things!"

"—Mm, That's a difficult order, in fact!!"

They wanted to continue her treatment, and they also wanted to come up with a solution for the current situation, since the Crimson Scorpion's tail was starting to light up and turning towards Subaru and co. —

"—E M M!!"

His absolute defense magic, which granted him a form of invincibility and served as a trump card, was activated, and then a shockwave swallowed Subaru's three-person group.

3

—The events currently occurring below the clouds were not able to be perceived by Emilia, who was above the clouds.

But much like her friends who were fighting for their lives, Emilia, after fighting a fierce battle, had finally made it there.

"…"

The top of the Pleiades Watchtower, above the first floor, the true peak.

In the place she managed to reach by sacrificing countless ice soldiers, she saw the base of the central pillar—a black Monolith had been placed there. The Monolith itself looked just like the one's she saw during the Trial of the third floor. What made it different was that it was not floating, and the surface, which should have been free of imperfections, caught her eye. It was—

"—Someone's handprints?"

Emilia, who'd widened her amethyst eyes, could see several sets of handprints on the surface of the Monolith—six in total, including both men and women.

The size of the hands and the thickness of the fingers indicated that they all belonged to humans. And it was clear that they were all friendly with each other due to taking the trouble to place their handprints next to each other like that, and that they had something to do with the tower—

"...Maybe Shaula's master or Reid?"

They were all Emilia could think of when it came to people who were involved with the tower. There was also Volcanica, but these were human handprints, and there was no sign of dragon handprints. Therefore, she could only come up with two people out of six who could have placed their handprints here.

"—? Wait, this is…"

One of the handprints suddenly made Emilia feel uncomfortable. It was lightly pressed at the end of the other six handprints—the one's next to it all had similar sizes, but the two at the end were uniquely small.

What had attracted Emilia's attention the most was this set of handprints—

"Are these handprints…mine...?"

Murmuring that, Emilia frowned and looked down at her right hand.

It was strange, but she couldn't help but get that feeling. One of the handprints that had been pressed onto the Monolith appeared to be her own.

"…"

Holding her breath, Emilia turned to face the Monolith, and, in order to dispel the doubts she had, she stretched out her right hand towards the handprint—

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

"—Mmm! He's here!"

Right before touching the Monolith, Emilia heard a familiar voice sounding down from above, and turned towards it.

It was Volcanica, who fluttered his wings and descended to the upper floor, who had writhed in agony when Emilia's ice soldiers touched the white scale on his neck earlier.

"…"

With the Monolith behind her, Emilia confronted the Divine Dragon.

When she was climbing up the pillar, the battle they'd waged had been quite intense, and if they were to continue it here, they would have to fight just as hard. Though it had a decent amount of space, the upper floor of the tower was smaller than the floor below, which would make fighting more difficult.

"And if the Monolith gets destroyed, I'll reaaally be in trouble..."

When they first encountered a Monolith on the third floor, Julius and Ram prevented anyone from striking them, so she didn't know how durable they were.

However, no matter how durable it was, Emilia felt like it wouldn't be able to survive a strike from the Divine Dragon.

"I'm suuuper positive it'll break if you try to hit me. Sooo—!"

Just in case, Emilia once again created seven ice soldiers near her. They had been crushed on the way to the upper floor, but their faces were full of energy and confidence like Emilia's right now.

As they brought out their ice weapons, Emilia created two ice swords and held them in her hands. Then she rushed towards Volcanica in tandem with her seven ice soldiers.

"Let's go, everyone! The white spot on Volcanica's neck is suuuper sensitive!"

After seeing how strongly Volcanica reacted when she fiddled with the white scale before, she discovered that it was his weak point. She didn't want to hurt him or anything, but if she could just get someone to play with it for a while, she would have time to focus on the Monolith—

"—Huh?"

After uttering that, Emilia discovered that she had been turned upside-down.

"…"

She couldn't figure out what in the world had happened. But she had a feeling that something had touched her foot as it was moving forward. It had happened so quickly that she didn't realize what had just occurred until she'd already been flipped over.

And, at the same time—

"Ah."

The seven ice soldiers were reduced to nothing around Emilia, who had been flipped upside-down. All of their heads had been skillfully smashed, reducing them to mana particles before they could make a move. Feeling it on her skin, she shivered.

That had been Volcanica's tail. It had rapidly swept Emilia's legs out from under her and at the same time crushed the heads of the ice soldiers. Realizing that a single swing of his tail had done that, her throat froze up.

It was a lot faster than the surprise attack Emilia had been able to block the first time. If the attack power of Subaru's whip was one, Volcanica's tail was around 1,000 or even 10,000. Before that power, even Emilia would get mercilessly defeated. And so a question suddenly sprung up in her mind.

"Why are you soooo kind to me...?"

He had only swept her feet from under her and flipped her upside-down, but had mercilessly smashed the heads of the ice soldiers.

Why the different treatment? It was hard for her to believe based on how angry he was when she touched his white scale before.

Then Emilia suddenly remembered that she hadn't gotten away from the situation she was currently in.

“Oh nooo—”

She was about to fall headfirst into the ground. Once again, a gentle impact from the side had flipped her legs into the air.

“Wow, oopsies...!”

Emilia landed in a dangerous position after rotating herself until she was sideways. At the moment she looked up after that close call—

“...What art thou doing?”

As he said this, she saw the Divine Dragon's face right in front of her.

“Umm...?”

He was literally right in front of her eyes and nose. If Emilia were to move her face forward just a tad, her nose would brush against his rock-hard, sharp, and robust body.

Emilia was completely surprised by the fact that a dragon's face was so close to her. But what puzzled Emilia even more was—

“Your way of speaking is soooo different from the way you've been speaking this whoooole time!”

“...”

“Have you come back to your senses now? Can we talk about lots of things then? I reaaaally want to talk to you about the Trial and about changing the rules of the tower...”

Gazing at Volcanica, Emilia shot question after question at him. If the Divine Dragon, who she had thought had become senile, had returned to normal, then she could try asking him about the Trial again. Then there would be no need to resort to violence.

“Hey, I’m begging you! Pleaaaase talk to me...”

“What if thou fell due to thou jumping up and down wildly like that? If something were to happen to thee, I would be scolded...because everyone humbles themselves before thee.”

“Volcanica...?”

Volcanica spoke to Emilia, who had been worried about everyone in the tower and desperately begging for his help, with words that had never been spoken before.

However, the content of his answer did not seem to answer Emilia’s plea, which only deepened the amount of confusion.

However, in the eyes of Volcanica that reflected Emilia, there was gentleness. It was the appearance of emotion, quite different from the emptiness of before. He gazed gently and affectionately at Emilia—

“Where art Flugel and Reid? Shaula wilt be lonely if they dost not say adieu when leaving. Farsale, too, shalt make much noise.”

“…”

Volcanica kept going, looking at Emilia with kind eyes. As the dragon gazed at something that wasn’t there, he spoke of Flugel and Reid, as well as Shaula, and another—

It would not be clear unless she knew their family game, but Emilia remembered that name. Farsale, and if that was who she thought it was…

“Farsale? Farsale Lugunica? The king from 400 years ago?”

In the course of studying for the royal selection, that was a person who had been mentioned many times in books.

Farsale Lugunica—the thirty-fifth king of the Kingdom of Lugunica as well as a great man who ruled the kingdom 400 years ago during the era of the Witch.

And the Last Lion King had formed a covenant with none other than the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, which set the future prosperity of the Kingdom of Lugunica in stone.

"…"

Emilia gently turned to look at the Monolith behind her.

There were six handprints—and if what Volcanica said were true, then did three of the handprints belong to Flugel, Reid, and Farsale? And the others probably belonged to a man and a woman.

"Then is the woman's handprint Shaula's…?"

She thought that was the most likely answer. She did not know who the last male handprint belonged to, but she'd let it be for now. Anyhow, the biggest issue at the moment was that there was an unknown handprint that appeared to be hers—

"No way, I…am I forgetting even more things than just Mom and everyone else in the forest?"

Emilia had a history of having her memories sealed, so she began to doubt herself. Even if that weren't the case, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony was capable of taking away one's Name and Memories. There was a possibility that she had come here before and left a handprint on it but had forgotten about it.

"No, it doesn't matter. If only Puck were here, then he could tell me if I've been here before or not."

"—Art thou alright? Is something troubling thee?"

"Oh, well, uh… I'm fine. Thank you for caring about me. Thank you, buuut…"

In the end, Emilia was in trouble since it seemed like it would be hard to have a normal conversation with Volcanica. This was much better than being hit by his tail or paws, there was no question about that, but it still seemed pretty strange since this was a Trial.

Emilia thought about what to do—

“If thou needs anything, tell me. I will remove thy anxiety from thee, —Satella.”

—As he uttered those words, she gasped.

“…”

Satella…it hadn’t been the first time she’d been called that name.

Many people were reminded of that being because of Emilia’s long silver hair, amethyst eyes, and the fact that she was a half-elf. The only difference between them was simply their names.

There were those who called her Satella, those who called her the most horrible calamity, and those who called her the Witch of Envy. Therefore, it wasn’t a surprise that he called Emilia by that name.

What was strange, however, was that he treated Satella with affection. For it was Volcanica, Reid, and Flugel, whose feats were credited to Shaula, who sealed Satella, who was also called the Witch of Envy.

Why did he treat her like that?—

“Why do you speak the name of the Witch of Envy with such gentleness?”

She could have called her Satella or the Witch, too.

There were those who called her Satella, those who called her the worst calamity, and those who called her the Witch.

And Emilia called her the Witch of Envy. That is—

“—The Witch of Envy.”

—There was a change in Volcanica’s distant gaze.

The change that could be seen in Volcanica's golden eyes was dramatic.

As usual, the dragon's head, right in front of Emilia, was still gazing at her. That was why she got goosebumps when she saw him change so dramatically up close.

She felt as if it wasn't a good kind of change, either.

Emilia, who'd been raised in a forest, had knowledge due to experiencing many thing while living out in the wild. In circumstances like that, she had seen many witchbeasts that changed suddenly.

Getting that kind of feeling, Emilia jumped backwards as she was being pulled by something.

That was the correct choice.

"…"

In the moment afterwards, the air in front of Emilia exploded. And that was no exaggeration, as the space had compressed and then quickly expanded, resulting in an explosion.

The principle behind that phenomenon, which was peculiar, was unknowable, and it was as if it warped the space itself. If one were in its area of effect, one would get warped by it, and it did not matter if one's defenses were strong or not.

And that had occurred right where Emilia's head had been.

If Emilia had not jumped back in time, she would most certainly have died.

Not to mention his tail attacks, but now even the warping of space itself, Emilia had gotten into many situations that could have led to her death. This may have been the first time that a person's life had been threatened so many times.

"But I seem to be reaaally lucky so I somehow managed to get through everything."

If the element of luck was Emilia's ally, then it was the gift of good luck that gave her a chance to breathe, so she interpretated her situation in a positive manner.

If she didn't do so, then she would become overwhelmed by all of the new changes. Because—

"—Satella."

Spreading his wings out once more, Volcanica was starting to express a certain hostility towards her.

Seeing this, Emilia endured the urge to stomp on the ground in frustration. It looked as if he had finally come back to his senses, but now it seemed as if he had reverted to the way he was before.

What's more, he seemed even more senile and vigilant than when he was in a dazed state.

"—Icicle Line."

Therefore, there was no need for Emilia to go easy on him, so she unleashed her magic with unwavering determination.

It froze the atmosphere which soon began to crack, then a white mist slowly began to drift through the battlefield. It created a frozen world of white, as if it were no different from the upper floor above the clouds.

Then, making a bit of noise, Emilia slowly stood up wearing ice armor—pulling an ice spear out of the floor, she twirled it around and pointed it in front of her. She once again prepared to fight against Volcanica.

However, if Volcanica were to get serious, Emilia wasn't sure if she would be able to handle his attacks. He was a lot stronger than he was when he was in a senile state—no, perhaps he was back in that state again.

"But…"

Staring straight into those golden eyes, Emilia wasn't sure if she could say that Volcanica's behavior was due to being senile. For his eyes were full of sorrow and anguish.

"Satella, yes, Satella. We must stop thee who hast become the Witch of Envy."

"…Were you two reaaally close?"

"On that day, I wish I hadn't hesitated. On that day, if I did not hesitate, then no one would have—"

He did not finish what he was about to say. But based on Volcanica's trembling voice, the answer as to why was quite clear.

The dragon, languishing in regret, took a deep breath, and the breath that had scorched the world of white earlier was unleashed once again.

But before that happened, it was crucial for Emilia to get up close and strike his white scale. Without doing so, Emilia would perish, and as a consequence, everyone else would too.

"—Subaru, Beatrice, Ram, Rem, Meili, Patrasche, Echidna, Julius, and Anastasia."

She thought about everyone else in the tower who were fighting for their lives. Of everyone she needed to help, of everyone who was fighting for the same cause. After doing so, a strange power appeared from deep within Emilia's chest.

"—The Witch of Envy, Satella!!"

"—No, that's not me. I am the Witch of Glaciation of the Elior Forest, Emilia."

Emilia answered the Divine Dragon, who mistook her for someone else, in a loud voice, overflowing with the power that had sprung up from within herself.

Though the enemy was the Divine Dragon, there was nothing to be afraid of. —Emilia was supported by everyone.

“—Be sure to at least remember that name!”

—In the final phase of the battle surrounding the Pleiades Watchtower, light erupted above and below the clouds.

Chapter 88:
—I Ask Thy Will

1

—It was at almost the same time that light erupted above and below the clouds.

If there were one who could observe the battle's taking place, separated by thick clouds and a large distance, then they would most certainly not be of this world.

The battle, which had begun with attempting to conquer the Pleiades Watchtower, was finally coming to an end.

The current situation was—

"Ah, ooooooooooh—!!"

Cried Subaru, as the sea of sand was blown to bits and shockwaves that whipped up a sandstorm raged.

The immense amount of destructive power that was smashing into Subaru was enough to instantly blow his body to bits. And yet no such thing occurred—

"E—M—M!!"

One of the three original magic spells that had been created by Subaru and Beatrice.

Roughly speaking, this magic spell was a form of absolute defense magic that prevented the bodies of Subaru and Beatrice from being influenced by external forces by stopping the passage of time around them.

"It's so frustrating because I came up with the idea in the first place, but it feels like I'm the one getting thrown into the worst situations because that guy used a similar ability!"

“We’ve talked quite enough about this matter, I suppose! Betty already decided to ignore it long ago, in fact!”

When she heard Subaru’s complaint, Beatrice, who was on his shoulders, shouted that at him.

The Witch of Greed’s Sin Archbishop, Regulus Corneas’ Invincibility ability, was an extremely powerful force that could be described as being backwards compatible with E M M. Though the guy who used it was a scumbag, its practicality was outstanding. That was what he’d aimed for, though it wasn’t something he wanted to do.

“I still need to reference him, even though that guy is a scumbag that makes me feel like throwing up.”

Would it sound better if he said he lived by experience?

This type of thinking also reminded Subaru of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, and he was extremely disgusted by the fact those guys stood in his way no matter where he looked.

However, without it, he wouldn’t be able to protect Beatrice and Meili.

“—Ah.”

Meili, with her eyes closed, began taking strained breaths in Subaru’s arms.

She looked to be in a state of shock, but that was simply due to how painful breathing was for her. The injuries she’d been dealt looked like they were gradually healing due to Beatrice’s healing magic. Well, more or less, but she should be improving, maybe, possibly.

“Using healing magic and E M M at the same time is too difficult, I suppose! The three of us would be dead by now if it weren’t for Betty, in fact!”

“I know that! It’s just…”

Thanks to Beatrice’s rebuke, Subaru began to question himself.

When it came to the damage he'd taken, there was no longer any other way to endure it but to bite down on his back teeth. The problem was his current supply of mana—in the first place, he was only useful as a tank for holding magic power, but the capacity of Subaru's tank was just average, if not below-average.

When he used E M M, his mana was continuously consumed, like water flowing out of a bucket with holes in it.

And at this rate, it wouldn't be long before E M M and the healing magic stopped working altogether. And—

"Stopping Meili's healing magic is NOT an option...!"

"Then we will have to stop using E M M, I suppose. I'll have to entrust the timing and what happens next to Subaru, in fact!

"Then you can count on me. Beako, you will take care of Meili's treatment and become a good obedient spirit that responds immediately to my instructions!"

"The way you worded that! Is! Bad, in fact!"

Arguing with each other in such a way, Subaru and Beatrice exchanged glances, and without a single second of disturbance in their connection, turned E M M off—and then jumped from where they were standing.

Behind them, the Crimson Scorpion and the other witchbeasts were fighting and making a beeline towards Subaru and the others. As per usual, the bothersome Crimson Scorpion had its sights set on Subaru, who had a handicap where he couldn't get too far away from the tower.

In terrible situations like this where the situation would not change otherwise—

"—The Witch…"

By revealing his Return by Death ability, Subaru generated a thick amount of Miasma which attracted all of the witchbeasts there to his location. —It wasn't a technique of any kind, but that was one of the abilities that he heavily relied on.

It was dangerous enough as it was, but if the Crimson Scorpion was aiming for Subaru, making it fight with the other witchbeasts might bear fruit.

But it might have been too much to ask for.

If Beatrice, Meili, and Subaru collapsed here, then Ram, who had entrusted some of her burdens to him, would also collapse, and then, one after the other, they would be annihilated.

Due to the power of Cor Leonis, the sense of closeness he felt with the others became far too strong. With the power of this Authority, he had no idea how Regulus grew accustomed to living his life in solitude.

"…"

"—! E M T!!"

Thinking useless thoughts, he saw a future where everyone was disintegrated by a ray of white light, and then, having a premonition of Death, he released his second original magic spell.

E M T was a form of negation magic that negated all magic released at it. It didn't have the same weakness as E M M, which required zero movement in order to stay activated. —At least in principle, any attack that used mana would be negated by this magic spell.

However—

"I turned E M M off and used my trump card in five seconds flat!"

That wasn't as easy as it sounded, and, on the contrary, he didn't know what to do after that, and was surrounded on all sides.

As it was, the stinger of the Crimson Scorpion, the flames of the Hungry Horse Kings, and the other attacks of the witchbeasts were aimed and then fired at Subaru and his group, threatening to turn them all into ash.

Gulping, Subaru stiffened. If he wanted to break through the current situation, he would need to use his third and final original magic spell. However, it was not complete yet.

If anything were to go wrong, Subaru and his group might end up floating in an imaginary space—

“I can’t believe in myself enough to bet on it awakening at the last minute—!”

Although Natsuki Subaru was recognized as a capable guy, he didn’t blindly believe that he was some type of superman who could break through any sort of situation no matter the circumstances.

He was simply the type of guy who never gave up. Even if he gave up, he would get himself back on his feet more than any other. To put it another way, it means that other people gave up more.

“Now isn’t the time to show my habit of losing. It’s a bad gamble, but…”

“—Can you do anything with your willpower and vanity alone? That level of determination is truly like you, however.”

It was at the moment Subaru decided he had no choice but to give it a try. A sudden voice came from above, and then the figure of a person descended and slashed in between the attack of Death that had been fired at Subaru and everyone else. It was so radiant that Subaru reflexively shut his eyes.

That wasn’t a metaphor either, for it truly was dazzling. —It was because the figure was clad in the colors of the rainbow.

“—Al Clauselia.”

Immediately after that, a light shined and repelled that furious onslaught of attacks.

There were the shock waves that left destruction in their wake, an inferno of flames, and the charge of the other witchbeasts with their lives on the line. A black light weakened them, water overflowed and swallowed them up, and the violent winds of a sandstorm made them lose their momentum.

That had been the act of manipulating the forces of nature itself, and it had been done by a man with a graceful countenance, who landed on the sand wielding his long knight's sword—

"—For that reason, I came here in a hurry. It seems that I arrived in the nick of time."

As he spoke, Julius Juukulius, who was known as the Finest of Knights, glanced back at Subaru.

With his white uniform stained here and there with blood and dirt, he stood there calmly. He was a refined as ever, clad in the colors of the rainbow.

At his commanding presence, Subaru said "Julius..." with quivering lips.

"You... I left a message that said to go help out the others who were in dangerous places!"

"Yes, and I did so. That is why I came here. My apologies, but I thought this place was the most dangerous compared to the others."

"Shut up! What's up with that scar on your face? What happened with Reid?!"

"It was my loss. He ran away in a pleasant mood after winning."

"That's lame! If you're gonna do it, then you gotta go for the win! But I would've been done for had you not come, so I'll only say this once. Thanks!"

Julius, who had a white scar under his left eye, laughed with a "Ha."

He said that with a hint of annoyance, but he had apparently gained something after finishing his fight with Reid. The proof of that was —

"Have you made up with your quasi-spirits?"

“Actually, they blossomed from their budded forms and were elevated into spirits. Also, saying we made up would be incorrect. We were never at odds to begin with.”

Hovering around Julius as he answered were the six dim, glowing quasi-spirits—no, spirits.

The spirits, who had lost their connection to Julius due to Gluttony’s Authority taking his Name away, had not given him any assistance whatsoever, and had long been puzzled as a result.

However, they’d bridged the gap between them, causing them to develop a stronger bond. Forming a new contract with his six spirits made him seem both smart and like a womanizer.

“I had such a hard time persuading Beako, but you’re such a clever guy, huh.”

“Regrettably, I’ve already been eaten, though.”

“Not funny! Aren’t you getting over it a little too fast?!”

Subaru was amazed at Julius, who could even joke about being victimized by Gluttony’s Authority.

Seeing as he had said that he had won and escaped, it was clear that he had managed to conclude things with Reid. And since it was clear that Reid’s body had belonged to Roy Alphard, it would be natural to assume that he had also settled things with one of the Gluttonies.

And since Julius had yet to say anything about the danger he posed, then it could be assumed that he had succeeded in neutralizing Alphard.

“Julius! You got here at just the right time, I suppose! I need to borrow Kua!”

“—. Understood.”

Julius immediately consented to Beatrice’s request, who was above Subaru’s head. He was also able to sense that it was only a matter of time until something went wrong with Meili, still in Subaru's arms.

From the group of six spirits, the blue-colored Kua, which governed the water element, flew out and began pouring its gentle healing magic into Meili's body along with Beatrice's.

And then—

"This will require a considerable amount of time."

"Yup, so take a look around. Now that Shaula has turned red and is very angry, can you handle her? Didn't you just lose to the red dude?"

"For that very reason, it would be discourteous to the lady to state that this battle was being fought to make up for that loss."

Julius faced the Crimson Scorpion—Shaula—wielding his knight's sword.

The knight stepped forward, but the Crimson Scorpion seemed to look right through him. Everyone in Subaru's way was simply an obstacle to it, and its murderous intent stayed locked on to a single target.

It was with that attitude that Julius, a spirit knight, improved himself and moved a step up.

"Subaru, I will handle Miss Shaula. As far as other things are concerned..."

"You mean I need to handle them on my own, huh? Roger that."

"No, please work together with Miss Beatrice to get things done."

"In a situation like this, I can produce about 70% of my power thanks to Beako."

To be honest, even 70% was a pretty vain figure. At 80% or 90%, what Subaru could be proud of as the contractor of Beako was his cunning brain and a few little techniques, so it might even go up to 95%.

In any case—

“You coming here really helped us a lot…”

“It would be best for you to reexamine the value that you yourself possess.”

After having a relatively short conversation, Subaru and Julius each focused on their distinct roles.

Julius advanced in order to prevent the attacks of the witchbeasts from reaching Subaru and the others, reducing the damage to the rear by fighting a fierce battle.

Subaru, on the other hand, wanted to keep the injured Meili away from the witchbeasts while focusing on buying time so that the conditions for victory could be met.

“—Hic.”

Feeling a sense of astonishment, Subaru raised his face as if blown away by something. The cause of this was the Pleaides Watchtower and the change that had occurred there. It was—

“—The response from Ram disappeared?”

2

—Volcanica’s breath was released over the upper floor, tinged in a blue light.

“…”

Emilia attempted to break through the situation with every ounce of her being by using ice shields.

When they were traveling through the sea of sand to the Pleiades Watchtower, she had used ice shields to defend against the rays of white light coming from the tower. However, they did not last a single second against the dragon’s breath.

The stacked ice shields were melted instantly, yet still managed to slightly weaken the power and scale of that attack as it rained down upon Emilia.

As a result, Emilia took shelter behind the black Monolith for a moment.

It was true that it was quite strong and undaunted by the breath of the dragon. However, she had a hunch that if it were destroyed, the Trial would be ruined. And besides, she had a feeling that this had nothing to do with breaking through the Trial—

“I’ll reaaally be lonely if it’s destroyed...”

There was a handprint that gave her a feeling of déjà vu, on a Monolith that had been left behind.

She also had no idea if it had anything to do with her, or if she was just seeing things. She just wanted to find out why it gave her that kind of feeling in the first place.

So she couldn’t lose it. In order to not lose it—

“…”

Gathering her mana together to the limits of her current state , Emilia deployed an Icicle Line. Though she had a massive amount of mana at her disposal, using it all at the same time was not feasible. No matter how much mana a person had, they were limited by how much could pass through their Gate in a single instance.

Emilia had ten times the amount of power as most magic users, but her potential was further developed due to her experience as a spirit arts user.

Magic users interfered with the world with their power by sending the mana they built up within themselves through their Gates.

Spirit arts users interfered with the world with the help of spirits and by using the mana in the atmosphere.

That being the case, Emilia trained herself in both.

The amount of water coming out of a faucet was fixed in quantity, but if one were to store it in a bucket, one would have more water at one's disposal. Based on that, Emilia did this both inside and outside her body.

The application of a maximum magic spell, one in which the mana overflowing from within was preserved on the outside, with the gate being ignored entirely—

"—Absolute Zero."

Subaru had called it that and said it would be difficult to pull off.

Oddly enough, this had happened at the same time Subaru shouted out that he couldn't believe in himself enough to pull it off. And then Emilia went ahead and gave it her all to succeed in something that had never been done before.

And she succeeded in doing it.

If Emilia's original magic power was at a level of one, would the power of this magic spell that came into being due to the application of the overflow of magic be ten, or perhaps even reach a hundred?

In a single moment, the white void that swept over the world was not the expression of a frozen atmosphere, but was rather the accompaniment of the power to stop the unstoppable passage of time.

The dragon's breath, which was the embodiment of Death, was no exception.

The collision of the blue light and Absolute Zero created a void in the world.

"…"

In an instant, the two maximum powers struggled against each other for a short amount of time before cancelling each other out.

Indeed, they had surprisingly silently cancelled each other out without any other effects, and when the time that had been stopped began moving again, Emilia brought out an ice spear and rushed forward.

“Ha, yaaaaaa—!!”

Her slender throat vibrating, Emilia charged towards Volcanica.

Her body felt awfully heavy because it had taken energy from her entire body. Even though the mana itself was used outside of the body, the toll it took on Emilia was rather large.

Turning over a bucket full of water required an enormous amount of energy. So it was no wonder that Emilia was exhausted and fatigued, for she had used enough energy to overturn a fountain, not just a bucket.

However, she let out her voice.

“I can’t…lose heart forever!!”

By shouting that out, Emilia reinvigorated herself.

While life energy and mana were different things, she still thought that she could awaken her sleeping energy simply by willing it to come forth. That may have been a misunderstanding, but even if she was just fooling herself, lying wasn’t so bad from time to time.

“—SATELAAAA!”

Not giving her a chance to breathe, Volcanica roared that out as he swung his paw and tail.

The impact came from outside of her perception, and Emilia defended against it by relying on the feeling of the beads of ice spreading around her—helping her advance as they got crushed were seven ice soldiers she’d created.

An ice soldier stopped a downward blow from reaching her, and then another ice soldier stopped the following blow from a paw with its own body. Emilia then jumped off of its shoulder whilst another ice soldier, standing on the shoulders of two other’s stacked on top of each other in order to give itself some height, held off the tail flailing in the air, ultimately sacrificing itself.

“Ha! Haiya! Haiyaaaaa!”

After borrowing the aid of those who had nobly sacrificed themselves, Emilia threw an ice spear while rotating herself in the air. It hadn’t been enough to penetrate the outer layer of the Divine Dragon, but it had been enough to get his attention.

Volcanica swung his troublesome paw at Emilia, grazing her silver hair as she dodged it. Then she charged in, risking her life in order to get under his chest. —And from that position…

“That’s… his white scale—”

Emilia hoped that her blow would be able to touch or hit it, and then looked up at the sky.

Emilia opened her eyes when she drew close to the Divine Dragon once again, close enough to touch, and saw that evasive white scale directly in her vision.

The reason as to why was rather surprising. That wasn’t a white scale. Not at all.

There was a white scar there that could have easily been mistaken as one of his scales.

“An old…scar...”

Since the wound had already closed, he shouldn’t feel any pain if it were touched.

However, the Divine Dragon just didn’t want that wound to be touched for some reason, and went through a lot of agony when it was. Emilia’s breath caught when she realized that it had something to do with his old, undying memories.

Taking advantage of her momentary hesitation, Volcanica flapped his wings.

"Ah—Hic!"

Volcanica's massive body flew up in an instant with Emilia's hand still stretched out in front of her. Emilia greatly regretted her mistake after she'd done it.

When fighting a winged being, this was the worst situation one could be in. If one were to be attacked in a position that was unreachable, one would accumulate debt in the blink of an eye.

"No waaaaaayyy—!!"

Emilia immediately placed her hand on the floor, then ice suddenly began to rise from where she was standing.

Now that she had an improvised ice foothold in the sky, Emilia desperately attempted to catch up to the flying Volcanica. However, the ice foothold reached its limit when it had been extended to 33 to 66 feet (10 to 20 meters), and she wouldn't be able to reach him if he moved further away.

"—Everyone! Pleaaase!!"

Emilia's shouts were answered by her ice soldiers, who were climbing up the side of the ice platform.

The ice soldiers climbed to the top of the foothold and then immediately began jumping. They used the shoulders of the one that jumped previously as a footstool, repeating that process six times. Then Emilia jumped off of the back of the last one—

"Sorry!"

As soon as she pushed off of the ice soldier's back with a great amount of force, it broke their formation.

However, the seven ice soldiers, who were now falling, all fell with smiles on their faces while giving her a thumbs up. With their encouragement, Emilia, who had jumped last, moved her hand towards Volcanica's tail.

"—Foolish."

Emilia’s fingers grabbed thin air as his tail was drawn back. And then the tail, which had been pulled back rapidly, returned to Emilia’s position, who gazed at it in wonderment.

There was nowhere to go in the air. Even if she were capable of producing an ice shield in an instant, that power that could break through it in an instant was destructive enough to be fatal.

Emilia “—Ah.”

Emilia was entangled with thoughts of failing in addition to what she should do.

As time slowed down, she desperately tried to find a way out of her situation, and mobilized all of her resources in her mind and body to see if she could do anything. Giving up wasn’t an option, however.

None of Emilia’s favorite people ever chose to give up.

Therefore—

“I won’t give up, either!”

However, just saying such words wouldn’t be enough to save herself.

The tail attack of the Divine Dragon, who understood the long passage of time, drew near to Emilia, as if trying to teach her the meaning of impermanence—

“—LADY EMILIA!!”

In a single moment, a raging wind from directly below Emilia blew upwards, helping her ascend, though only slightly. The wind blowing upwards pushed against her body, slightly altering her situation.

This had brought her from a situation where there was a 100% chance of Death to a situation where the possibility of Death was 90%. And Emilia, who refused to give up, took hold of that 10% chance of survival.

"—Hic."

The Divine Dragon's tail was swung towards Emilia's head. Since the momentum behind her ascent had increased, the trajectory of the tail attack moved from her head to her body. Understanding that with her intuition, rather than her perception, she pulled her knee's to her chest with all her might.

Emilia made her body as small as she could in order to get out of its attack range—but the tips of her toes were grazed by his tail attack, causing her body to spin at a high speed due to the fierce shock it caused.

"…"

Emilia's body was blown upwards with her knee's held in her arms.

Emilia clenched her back teeth as she was swallowed by the attack that was capable of causing the contents of her head to spill out, and created some ice footholds in the sky, stopping herself by force.

Boom

With tears in her eyes, and her entire body taking in the shock, Emilia looked down after hearing a powerful sound.

With her field of view turned upside-down on the ice ceiling in the sky, she could see Volcanica's head, as well as figures approaching from the stairs of the first floor in the distance.

Actually, they weren't figures at all, but rather the silhouettes of a person and an earth dragon.

"Ram and…!"

It had been Ram who'd come here and helped Emilia move a bit higher. She couldn't hide her astonishment at the fact that Ram, who she could see in the distance, had come here in a bloodied state.

But thanks to her assistance, Emilia managed to escape a death resulting from her head getting struck.

Thanks to her help, Emilia once again put some strength into her knees. Using the ice ceiling as a foothold, she went on the offensive against Volcanica. However, Volcanica looked rather funny in front of her.

He was wagging his tail and looking down, rather than looking at Emilia. There was a possibility that he had deemed Ram, who had saved her, to be his next prey. But that wasn't the case. The golden eyes of the ancient Divine Dragon weren't looking at Ram at all.

It was—

"—Patrasche."

"N-o-aaaaahhh—!!"

After Volcanica's murmur faded away, Emilia's rushed her body directly beneath him. Half a moment later, the tail of Volcanica, who had been looking above him, broke the ice ceiling. He had been late as Emilia was no longer there, nor was she aiming directly at his throat.

Then Emilia created another ice foothold—no, an Ice Slope. When she had been running away from Regulus with Subaru in Priestella, she'd created something with the aim of not killing her speed, but accelerating it—it was created in the air and slid on using shoes made of ice.

Emilia's speed accelerated in the sky, preventing the tail attack from reaching her.

Creating an ice slope in midair and then steadily, steadily accelerating, Emilia's silver hair fluttered in the wind as his tail chased after her, and then—

"Chiyaaaa—!!"

Jumping off of the slope, Emilia aimed a kick at Volcanica's throat, going at a high speed. She fired herself straight, like an arrow, at the white scar on his throat, avoiding the closing paw trying to grab her.

"—Gah!!"

The white sole of Emilia's shoe struck his throat, causing Volcanica to let out a shout once again.

Hearing the sound of the sky cracking, Emilia let out an "Eeeeekaaaaah!" causing her to cover her ears as she immediately began falling due to the kick's recoil. Falling, falling, falling—

"Eek!... Wow, thank you!"

The falling Emilia had been caught by the ice soldiers who were supposed to have fallen to the ground.

Emilia stood up thanks to the aid of that soft landing and saw that she had gotten back to the upper floor, as well as that Volcanica was writhing in agony above her. Once again, she ran straight to the Monolith next to the central pillar.

She ran and ran to get to the Monolith that gave her a sense of déjà vu—

"I knew it!!"

She reached the Monolith, and, this time, she was able to press her hand against it unhindered. That force created a shock that shook the Monolith, and Emilia's hand was a perfect match for the handprint in question. She wasn't sure how many people in the world shared similar hands, but this handprint on the Monolith at least belonged to someone who looked exactly like her.

And—

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

"Ah..."

When Emilia placed her hand on the Monolith, Volcanica descended whilst flapping his wings.

Volcanica, whose large body was still floating up in the sky, and was supposed to have returned to a sane state, asked that same first question once more, as if he had returned to being senile.

But she felt like the question was different than the one he had asked the first time when he was in a completely senile state. — Right, that was the question he had always started with.

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

These were words that had been said many times.

The will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned. —In other words, the feelings of those who have reached the top.

What do you want to do? What do you desire? What did you come here to do?

"…"

There were many answers that Emilia could give to that question. There were plenty of answers to 'what do you want to do?, what do you desire?, and what did you come here to do?'.

However, at this moment, what Emilia wanted the most—

"—I ask. Thy will!"

After all of those repeated question, Emilia opened her eyes wide whilst opening her mouth. Then she answered him in a loud voice.

"—For everyone to get along!!"

3

Suddenly a powerful gust of wind blew, engulfing the sea of sand with its force.

Evading a fierce attack from a witchbeast, Subaru cried out "huh?!" and Beatrice, who was working hard to heal Meili, was also shocked, saying "what is it, I suppose?!."

Naturally, the same could be said of Julius, who was currently engaged in an extraordinary battle against Shaula.

—No, the amount of surprise he felt must have been even greater.

The reason why was because he wasn't pursued despite there being a fierce whirlwind of dirt that blocked his field of view, causing him to feel a sense a danger and fall back.

"—What on earth. SUBARU!!"

"HUH?! What is it! I can't see my surroundings because of all the sand…"

"It's fine! Come here!"

Responding to Julius' earnest call, Subaru, spitting the sand out of his mouth, turned towards him. Then he saw why Julius had been so frantic and widened his eyes.

It was—

"—SHAULA?!"

"～～ッッ."

Subaru, with a cry of astonishment, saw the figure of the Crimson Scorpion toppled in the whirlwind of dust, fluttering its many legs in the sand.

Until now, the tower administrator had not responded to any of their attacks and had simply chased them down in a machine-like manner—an error had occurred in the self-proclaimed Stars-Keeper.

"Have you done something?!"

"No, I didn't do anything special. I was focusing my attention on staving off its attacks. But as soon as that sand wind blew…"

"Sand wind…that's right, that wind…"

The fierce wind that had engulfed Subaru and the others was called

Sand Wind, and it made them realize that something was wrong.

The Sand Wind mercilessly engulfed those who traveled through the Augria Sand Dunes, but ever since they broke through the barrier in question, a powerful wind like this had never blown around the watchtower.

That was why there had never been such a thing known as Sand Wind here. And yet now it was blowing—

"Subaru! Look! The sky."

"…"

Beatrice exclaimed that with an adorable voice to Subaru, who was confused. When he heard her, he looked up with a pained look on his face.

Changes had occurred in the Pleiades Watchtower, and those changes were quite obvious.

"—The clouds…cleared up."

The Pleaides Watchtower went all the way up into the clouds and extended into the sky. The top of it was literally covered with clouds and could not be viewed from below. However, the strange clouds that had always covered the top of the watchtower had disappeared.

So he finally realized something. —That the aftermath of the wind just now had scattered those clouds.

The clouds had been cleared and the top of the tower was now visible from below. And that only meant one thing, at least according to Subaru's wishful thinking.

"—Did you do it, Emilia?"

The perception of the muttering Subaru, who could sense everyone in the tower with Cor Leonis, could perceive Emilia who had disappeared, and then Ram and Patrasche returned as well. It was likely that they went to help Emilia and had gotten some results from that.

To put it another way, if Subaru's deduction was right—

"The rules of the tower have been rewritten… Shaula! Hey, Shaula! Listen to me!"

"～～ッ!"

"You don't need to fight us anymore! Now you're free to…"

Was the reason why the toppled-over Crimson Scorpion was writhing and suffering so much because the ancient pact that had been etched into her had been severed? He didn't understand the fine details. But that was enough. There was no reason for her to suffer anymore—

"Hey, Shau—"

"—! SUBARU!!"

As Subaru was approaching her and calling out her name, someone grabbed his collar. At that moment, a razor sharp tail passed through the space where he had just been before being dragged away.

With the wind blowing, Subaru was at a loss for words as he felt the smell of burnt air brush against his nose.

If Julius hadn't stopped him, he would have been hit. But it wasn't a sense of Death that afflicted Subaru.

"HEY, SHAULA! SHAULA! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU, STOP MESSING AROUNDDD!!"

"～～ッッ."

While listening to Subaru's desperate words, the Crimson Scorpion slowly went back to where it was in the sand. With its compound eyes gleaming, it went back to its toppled-over position, and, slowly perceiving Subaru once again, drooled from its fiendish fangs.

That didn’t seem to be the attitude of a normal, rational being—

“—Subaru, unfortunately, but…”

Julius grabbed Subaru by the shoulder as he spoke and tried to move forward. But when he realized what he was thinking, Subaru grabbed his arm and stopped him in his tracks.

He could tell that Julius was trying to take on the role of the guy who did what he needed to do. But he would never allow that to happen.

“I’ve decided to help. —I’m…gonna help her out.”

“Is it the duty you feel towards her as her master?”

“Nope.”

Shaking his head, Subaru disagreed with Julius’ words. That wasn’t the case. Subaru wanted to help Shaula, but not because he was her master or anything—

“It’s not because I’m her master. I’m going to do that because I’m…moved by her.”

“…”

“It’s the same with Beako. How could I abandon someone who’s been all alone in a sand tower like this, who cried and said she enjoyed the days she spent with us?”

Clenching his back teeth, Subaru declared that to Julius with his arm in his grasp.

Julius then glanced back at Subaru and sighed.

“...You’re stubborn. But that’s what you should do.”

“—Julius?”

“No, I was just impressed by you again. I stuck to my vanity once. So you should stick with it until the end.”

Julius, smiling lightly, replied with that, tracing the wound on his left cheek with his finger.

Subaru narrowed his eyes at his answer and suddenly realized that his left hand was being held by someone with a gentle touch. It seemed to have been Beatrice who had done it.

Gazing at Subaru with the loveliest eyes in the world—

“Meili has gotten past the difficult part, I suppose. The rest—”

“Can you help me get her out?”

“If I say no, what kind of brute would Betty be, I wonder… Good grief, Subaru really is such a helpless partner, I suppose.”

In response to Beatrice, Subaru smiled bitterly and scratched his head. Then he firmly rejoined his hand with his most precious contracted spirit and turned to the Crimson Scorpion—to Shaula.

The spirit knight, and two people standing side-by-side, faced the crying girl who needed to be saved. And—

“I’m already worn out both mentally and physically. —So help me out already, Shaula!”

—In the conquering of the Pleiades Watchtower, the final showdown, began.

Chapter 89:
Shaula

Ragged, ragged, scattering away.

Crumbling, crumbling, flaking away.

Tired, tired, fading away.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything in the distance was shimmering.

1

—Outside the tower, the witchbeast Master broke through the stampede of countless witchbeasts by fighting with all her strength.

—On the second floor, Reid Astrea, who had seized the body of Roy Alphard, was defeated.

—On the fourth floor, the blasphemer of fate, the vile Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, was defeated.

—On the first floor, Emilia broke through the unknown Trial by fighting bravely and heroically.

A variety of obstacles they had faced while trying to capture the Pleiades Watchtower had been cleared. This was the result of them trusting in each other, staying unified, and cooperating.

To put it in an Emilia-like way, this was the result of "everyone getting along."

Thanks to this, they had finally managed to make it to this point.

Therefore, the next step was—

"—It won't mean a thing if we don't win this together!"

When they first arrived to the Pleiades Watchtower, this was what

Emilia had said.

They had come here not to lose anything more, but to recover what had already been lost.

Everyone had agreed with what she'd said back then, and that everyone returning from the sea of sand safe and sound was of absolute necessity. It would not be an issue even if more people returned than came.

In addition to Subaru, Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Rem, Meili, Anastasia = Echidna, and Patrasche, one extra Shaula wouldn't be a problem at all. It wouldn't even matter how loud and boisterous things would be on the way back because of her.

"—Go!"

Of the two Spirit Knights standing side-by-side, the one who had made the first move was, of course, Julius.

—Julius brought back Kua, who was in the process of healing someone, temporarily halting their treatment, and once again clad himself in an aurora of light with the help of his six spirits.

Due to the effect of Cor Leonis, Subaru understood that in order for the light of his Od to expand so much, both Julius and his spirits would have to be under a considerable load.

It was a rather cool technique to pull off. However, no one here wanted to fight an extended battle in the first place.

"—A short, decisive battle."

Julius flew over the sand, leaving a trail of rainbow-colored light in his wake.

Closing the distance in a single instant, Julius brought his sword closer to the Crimson Scorpion. Seeing his movements with its compound eyes, it swung its pincers and stinger with the fierceness of a storm. However, the moment his sword made contact with its shell, white smoke began to rise.

It had caused it to melt.

It wasn't even able to protect itself after receiving that blow, for Julius' strike had turned into a rainbow, his magic sword wrapping itself in a sixfold light due to the constant use of Al Clarista.

Moreover, the light of the rainbow enveloping his entire body wasn't just for show, either.

"…"

The ray of light, fired from the stinger at close range, had killed Subaru more than a dozen times, and had also been used as the weapon of Death that led to the deaths of Emilia and Julius—it was also known as Hell's Snipe.

Julius did not deflect it with his sword, but rather by using the defensive capabilities of the aurora of light. The aurora of light, which enveloped his entire body, applied the concept of Al Clauselia, which created a rainbow barrier.

And so, a high-level swordsman who could unify both offense and defense was born, and could thus be called the Rainbow Spirit Knight.

"～～ッッ!!"

Its defenses were being broken through, it could not land a single lethal blow, and so, as a result, the Crimson Scorpion was having an awful time.

However, the witchbeast that had been the guardian of the watchtower for the past 400 years had a sense of dignity. Its crimson shell growing brighter and brighter, a great amount of heat was released from its powerful pincers and slammed into Julius, blowing the Rainbow Knight quite a ways away.

Its pincers were extremely hot, distorting the atmosphere around itself due to the intensity of the heat. If Subaru were to give a name to the blazing-hot pincers, he would call them the "Jesus Scissors Hellfire Form."

It was quite admirable for it to show off its new techniques in order to try to liven up the last battle, but the reality was that he did not want it to show any growth. An enemy breaking out of their shell was extremely undesirable at the moment.

“MINYA!!”

It swung its crimson pincers through the air but was deflected by purple stakes from the side, preventing them from making contact with Julius.

By himself, Subaru was not enough to do anything in the high-level battle between Julius and the Crimson Scorpion. As a result, Beatrice covered for Julius to the side whilst Subaru waited for an opportunity to do something.

“…”

Subaru made sure to keep himself out of harm’s way so he wouldn’t be killed by the aftermath of the battle. He then pointed his gaze at the sea of sand that had been devastated by the whirlwind that drove the swarm of witchbeasts from there.

In terms of the damage inflicted and their sheer vigilance, the witchbeasts that inhabited the Augria Sand Dunes had a major impact on Subaru and the others during their journey.

However, what was truly unusual was that they were now staying away from the watchtower and looking at it from a distance.

Emilia had probably rewritten the rules of the tower on the first floor, causing the clouds to disperse.

Perhaps that had served as a measure to keep witchbeasts away from the tower? witchbeasts did not seem to even approach the watchtower originally, so the fact that a stampede of witchbeasts approached it was rather unnatural.

Whatever the case may be, the fact the witchbeasts didn’t start popping up all over the place was a huge relief to Subaru and the others, who were attempting to get the Crimson Scorpion’s—Shaula’s sanity back.

"—SUBARU!!"

"Ah."

So that he could find an ideal position, Subaru cut across the sea of sand diagonally, but while doing so, he heard someone's shout.

Right as Subaru looked up to confirm what was going on, the Crimson Scorpion, which had been dodging the many sword thrusts of Julius, somehow landed right next to him.

Subaru stopped in his tracks after hearing Beatrice's call, who was right next to him holding his hand. However, as if flicking away an insect, the witchbeast's tail whipped towards them, and Subaru had a premonition of Death in the face of it.

"Persevere—!"

"—Murak!"

Subaru and Beatrice made their judgments simultaneously. The effect of gravity lessened, causing them to become as light as cotton candy. And Subaru's whip simultaneously wrapped around the base of the Crimson Scorpion's tail.

In the next second, Subaru and Beatrice were flung through the air due to the swinging of the tail.

"Wha-"

"Pyyah?!"

They hadn't been flung into the air, but shaken off. After feeling as if they were floating through the air, they had immediately fallen to the ground and were now covered in sand.

If there had been a hard surface beneath them, even though they were as light as cotton candy right now, their bodies would have shattered due to the sheer power and force. Luckily, they had only had their breath knocked out of them since it was on the sand.

"We gotta give up on chasing after it—!"

"—ッ."

The Crimson Scorpion continued to target Subaru and Beatrice, who were still buried in the sand. However, the light of the rainbow cut in between them, preventing it from making a move, and the heat and sixfold light clashed with each other.

Every time the light was scattered, a sea of destruction was left in its wake, and the shockwave it caused kicked up a sandstorm under the clear sky. The destructive power of each was equal; Julius had speed on his side, but the Crimson Scorpion was rather resilient.

"—*Spit* *Spit*! Shit, something needs to be done!"

"—*Spit* *Spit*! Figure out a way to win then, I suppose!"

—Together, Subaru and Beatrice got themselves out of the sand and spat the grains of sand in their mouths out at the same time. With tears in their eyes, they tried to figure out how to get the sound of Subaru's voice as well as Julius' rainbow light to reach Shaula.

There were three possibilities they could rely on—

The first was for Julius to suddenly awaken to an even greater power and defeat the Crimson Scorpion in a single blow. This one was a bit unpleasant but would be a win nonetheless.

The second was for Subaru and Beatrice to successfully complete their new spell and finish off the Crimson Scorpion, obtaining a win with their teamwork.

The third was for Emilia to suddenly drop down from the sky with love and peace in tow, bringing about world peace with her cuteness.

"I was really hoping for the third one to happen first, but..."

As has already been stated before, Subaru didn't believe that he was capable of successfully awakening, and it was unrealistic to expect Emilia to show up with the perfect timing.

That being the case, the best they could hope for was Julius suddenly becoming stronger.

“He’s already done that once, so I can’t expect too much from him…”

Julius and the Crimson Scorpion continued to fight at a speed that Subaru’s eyes could not follow. Pondering what to do next, Subaru stared at the devastation occurring right in front of him, the aftermath of which was capable of turning him to ash if he got too close.

The only thing he could do in the end was to fight with all his cards. If that was the case, then the least he could do as the complete Natsuki Subaru was to exhaust every card in his arsenal.

“Think-think-think….”

His brain going at full throttle, going over that which was not simply a hopeless dream or observation, he found something with substance. As he was searching through his hand for something to use, Subaru realized something.

He still had one last card he had yet to use.

“—Beako!”

“Did you think of something, I suppose!”

Beatrice responded to Subaru’s call with eagerness, as if she had been waiting for it. Blessed to have such an understanding partner, Subaru clasped her hand with his once again and nodded vigorously with a “Yeah!.”

“—Here, I’m gonna use all of the strength this journey gave me!”

2

Ragged, ragged, scattering away.

Crumbling, crumbling, flaking away.

Tired, tired, fading away.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything in the distance was shimmering.

The fierce light of a rainbow flashed in front of her eyes, and, following her instincts, she swung her arms to get rid of it.

Her two bright crimson pincers glowed, containing enough power to burn anything in existence regardless of whether or not the object was rock or steel, and could cut through them as easily as cutting through butter.

“Buuuuuut, I’m not really sure what “butter” even is, either.”

Talking about things based off of secondhand knowledge, she continued to chase after that shimmering target. However, this place was a vast sea of sand without any obstacles, so there was no way for her to corner them. But whether this was a place where there was nowhere to run or where she had to fight from a distance, she had complete mastery in such things—

“After all, snipers are always alone, right?”

This was also something she had heard before. A sniper was a sharpshooter who needed to wait patiently before completely finishing off their prey. And so she also chose to wait. With the pride of a sniper in her heart, she continued to wait.

Day after day, night after night, she gazed into the horizon, forever waiting, looking at those who attempted to come to the tower.

There were rules there; rules that bound her to the tower.

She was upset about that, but she also thought that if there were no rules at all, her forgetful self would have forgotten various things in no time.

Whether it was the places they went together, the words they spoke to each other, the time they spent together, or the feelings and thoughts they shared, they would all be forgotten.

“Aaaaaah… That would be sooo terrible.”

Everything had moved on and left her behind.

Because she had been asked to wait, she could wait for as long as they desired, but since she was waiting, she couldn’t help but hope that the person she was waiting for would come back. As long as they came back, she could wait forever.

Therefore—

“I was sooooooooo happy that Master came back.”

Because, one by one, everyone disappeared. When he came back, she wasn’t sure if she could believe the words he said.

Did she wait because she believed in him, or did she continue to wait simply out of habit? She wasn’t even able to answer this question. She had never even thought about it before.

There was no reason to think about it, either, for before it had disappeared, they made true on their promise.

“Aaaah, I’m sooooo happyyy, Master.”

So, she hoped he would never leave. She thought it would be great if he could stay here forever. Because she was no longer alone and could graduate from being a sniper, she thought she should receive an appropriate reward for graduating.

“Master, I don’t want to be left behind agaaain… Aaaah, I also… want to be loveeeed.”

Everything had moved on and left her far behind.

Therefore, this time, she wanted to follow him, no matter where or when.

So—

“I hope you…can come to love me. —Master.”

3

The Crimson Scorpion twitched, the glow of its crimson shell growing ever brighter.

It was possible that it was an increased reaction of its Warning Color, but in the eyes of Subaru, that didn't seem to be the case. It was as if that crimson hue came about due to Shaula crying.

It was the expression of the true thoughts of the being named Shaula, who had locked her feelings away for the past 400 years and kept her promise to stay in the tower.

Red was the color of fervor, of passion, of unrestrainable Love. The crimson hue of the Crimson Scorpion must've been brought about by its strong desire to love and be loved by the person it loved.

"—AFTER ALL, EVERYONE SAYS THAT SCORPIO WOMEN ARE EXTREMELY LOVING!!"

Kicking up a lot of sand with his own two feet, Subaru shouted that out with a burst of enthusiasm and brought his hand up to fling his whip with his broad shoulders.

"…"

He aimed at the one whose back to turned to him and was fighting and fooling around with Julius, the Crimson Scorpion. He used his whip to announce his presence, seeing that she was so busy, but the Master she longed for was standing right there. Since she was making advances on another man, he had no choice but to say some nasty things to her—

"SEEING YOU GO AFTER ANOTHER MAN LIKE THIS REALLY MAKES ME SAD AND WOUNDS MY MANLY HEART, YOU KNOW—!!"

"Subaru's way of speaking is disgusting as usual, in fact!"

Subaru unleashed his whip and landed a perfect hit, having been pushed onwards by Beatrice's harsh words from behind his head—it had been beautifully wrapped around the base of the Crimson

Scorpion’s tail.

However, just this alone would still lead to what had happened not too long ago where they had been buried into the sand.

The Crimson Scorpion, perhaps because it did not think much of their game of tug-of-war, instead focused on the fight with Julius, completely ignoring Subaru and co. altogether.

Subaru and everyone else was weak. —It would take advantage of that idea.

“EL VITA—!!”

“GAAAAAH!!”

Beatrice chanted the magic spell, causing the effects of it to pour over Subaru’s whole body, his legs sinking into the sand due to the sheer weight.

In contrast to Murak which mitigated the effects of gravity, Vita increased the effects of gravity—Subaru’s weight class had been raised to the Yokozuna level of the Makuuchi division of sumo wrestling, allowing him to compete with the tail of the Crimson Scorpion.

Naturally, that alone would not be enough. It could enhance the effects of gravity, but only up to 220 or so pounds (100 kilograms.) That was nowhere near enough to compete with the monstrous strength of Shaula, who could easily pick up and carry a dragon carriage.

Therefore—

“—Time for the climax! DO IT!!”

With both hands pulling hard on the whip and his feet firmly planted in the sand, Subaru let out a loud cry. In the next instant, Subaru’s body, which was being pulled up by the brute strength of the Crimson Scorpion’s tail, returned to the ground.

The obvious reason as to why was because the strength of the

Crimson Scorpion and Subaru—no, Subaru and the others—was evenly matched.

"—ッッ."

Now in front of Subartu, still standing firmly in place, was the Hungry Horse King, who had broken into their game of tug-of-war with its huge, strange-looking body. Moreover, it wasn't just the Hungry Horse King that had joined this unprecedented game of tug-of-war.

Courtesan bears, winged moles, and suspicious serpents all joined the battle. All of these witchbeasts, who were supposed to be Subaru's enemies, were giving him a helping hand in this battle.

The cause of this scene was none other than—

"...Really, you're such a slave driverrr!"

It was the voice of a girl enveloped in a weary and unhappy atmosphere. The owner of that voice was a young girl whose cheeks were devoid of blood and having trouble breathing—Meili.

Tightening her lovely face, she let out a long, hard sigh. Then, yelling out a "Hoorah!" and clapping loudly—

"Okay! Come here, everyone. Watching from the side is a waaasteee."

With a single clap, and, after a single beat, the sea of sand began to rumble. Continuously pouring into this area were witchbeasts, whose footsteps and roars could be heard. This environment was well-suited for witchbeasts, and the one who had taken control of it was the witchbeast Master—no, she could no longer be called that.

The massive phenomenon occurring wasn't caused by a mere witchbeast Master. Using the Divine Protection of Magic Manipulation, she guided and took control of the witchbeasts of the Augria Sand Dunes, so the title of witchbeast Master no longer suited her.

It was as if the Mother of witchbeasts, who had left a trail of destruction in the southern empire, had returned. She once again made use of her skills to cause a stampede for this battle, turning it into an all-out war.

"…"

Though Meili wore a painful expression on her face, she still managed to stay conscious and had recovered enough to participate in the final battle. Naturally, there was a little trick behind it.

Subaru had, naturally, used Cor Leonis to distribute the damage Meili had taken to another. —Sharing it had been the last card in his hand.

Not with Emilia, not with Beatrice, and not with Ram, either. Nor was it shared with Julius, Echidna, Patrasche, Meili, or the sleeping Rem. It was the one who had come with them to conquer the Augria Sand Dunes, their last ally—

"—Sorry to get you involved, Gyan! Give me a hand!!"

The earth dragon Gyan, who had been left on the sixth floor of the distant watchtower, was also within the range of Cor Leonis' influence, so, as a result, Subaru made the decision to share that burden with the earth dragon.

The decision to do so was heartbreaking for Subaru, but what was even more heartbreaking for him was that Gyan met the conditions of Cor Leonis for those who wished to share his burdens.

This meant that, just like Beatrice and his other friends, Gyan wanted to support Subaru's actions. He was grateful for the spirit of the theatrical version of Gyan, transferring most of Meili's burdens to the earth dragon through himself. This was the trick that allowed Meili to get back in the game.

It was also the main reason why the Crimson Scorpion lost in the competition of strength. And also—

"—This will be the cause of your defeat, Shaula."

Subaru had taken command of the battle, and even used the power of witchbeasts and an earth dragon, and, as he spoke, the Crimson Scorpion lifted its legs up.

The Finest of Knights did not let this opportunity go to waste. Unleashing a rainbow slash, Julius cut the tail of the Crimson Scorpion, who had been struggling against them in a battle of strength, clean off.

The severed tail let off an explosion, much like it had earlier, spreading a mass of destruction throughout the area, but it was unable to get through the rainbow light. Its trump card having been blocked, it violently swung his large pincers down at Julius' back.

However, its attack appeared to have been born from a feeling of agitation and impatience due to losing the battle of strength and having its tail cut off. As a result, it was not able to overpower the knight who had defeated the first Sword Saint and overcame his limits.

"—Hiss…!"

The slash drew an arc through the air, beautifully slicing through the vulnerable joint on the left pincer. Still trying to regain its balance after its left pincer got sliced off, it attempted to chop Julius in half with its remaining right pincer.

Right as the pincer closed, threatening to bisect his slender body from the waist—

"—Al Cranvel."

A moment before the pincer snapped shut, an aurora of light enveloped Julius' entire body in a single breath. As soon as he deactivated his rainbow armor, that aurora of light let off an explosion inside the pincer that was about to close, blowing it to shreds.

"—ッッ."

Pushed by the shockwave of the explosion, the massive body of the Crimson Scorpion flew into the air. The witchbeast flew through the air, spinning, before finally falling into the sand, its tail and arms lost and covered in injuries.

The other witchbeasts quickly swarmed around it and pinned down the eight-legged Crimson Scorpion. Still resisting its fate, it turned its large head, barring its sharp teeth.

Taking the Crimson Scorpion's resilience into account, it would not be surprising for it to suddenly come up with a new move at this very moment, spurred on to achieve new growth due to its current predicament, however—

"—This is the end, Shaula."

Subaru stood right in front of the writhing, struggling, Crimson Scorpion so that its compound eyes could see him fully. With no weapons left and its legs pinned down, it was in a rather sad state. It would be easy to strike the final blow now, but that was not what he wanted.

Subaru was not sure what the correct answer was despite being driven to this point—

"Meili."

"...If I had not been here, I wonder what you and everyone else would've doneeeee, mister."

Having been called by name, Meili sighed and walked over to the Crimson Scorpion. She stood next to Subaru and snapped her fingers with a sigh. She then had its compound eyes focus on herself.

"Who are you? The crimson, scary Miss Scorpion? Or are you…"

"…"

"Or are you someone else, I wonder?"

Having been asked such a question, the compound eyes of the Crimson Scorpion gradually slowed down. Gazing at Meili, its compound eyes showed signs of wavering before turning its gaze to Subaru. Those aggressive, compound red eyes slowly changed color.

"Shaula."

The crimson hue of its shell slowly began to fade away. Its eyes turned green once more, its shell went back to being black, and it slowly began to calm down, and finally—

"—Shaula!"

At last—

4

Ragged, ragged, scattering away.

Crumbling, crumbling, flaking away.

Tired, tired, fading away.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything in the distance was shimmering.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything shimmered in the distance.

Even though she was left behind, even though her memories faded somewhat, they still shined so brightly.

Because they were so precious to her, she desperately tried to preserve them.

"…"

"Master, do you still remember? You told meee, 'I'll definitely return, so wait here for me', and then you disappearedddd."

In a seated position, Shaula hugged her knees, inclined her head, and asked like so.

Subaru shook his head at her, who seemed to be thinking about nostalgic memories of her past.

"I don't remember. And I've already told you I don't know, right? Don't keep making me repeat myself!"

"Weeeeelllll, it can't be helped then. After allllll, Master is so much better at forgetting things than me. Master and I reallllly are similar."

"That creeps me out! No, I admit that we have a similar way of speaking, though."

That said, it was only the fact that she was using words from Subaru's world that he unconsciously felt a sense of closeness with her. He was not as charming, cute, or spirited as she was. He wasn't willing to wait 400 years for someone who had abandoned him.

"After all, I'm an impatient guy who wants immediate results. Well, if I could at least be with the other person, I might be able to endure it…"

"Aaaaaaaaah, Master, you're no good like this! Ready? There's a saying for this: 'The key to love is patience!'"

"Aren't you confusing this with 'The key to fashion is patience'?! Isn't that like the slogan of a tribute woman rather than a devoted woman?!"

"It's all about realizing the love swirling around in the depths of my heart. You can even laugh at this sad, pathetic woman. That kind of smiling face is also verrrrrry attractiveee…mmm."

"Nope, I'm not laughing at all. Look, I'm starting to tear up."

"Let me see, let me seeeeee."

When Subaru pointed at his face and said that, Shaula got up and walked over to him. Shaula, who had jumped up enthusiastically, came close enough to where he could feel her breath, so he once again examined her face that had fine features from up close.

Her shining eyes were large and long, and she had a finely-shaped nose between them. She had long, slender eyelashes, and her skin was so soft and firm that it was hard to imagine that she had been living in the sea of sand for so long. Although hidden by her spirited and varied expressions, her body as a whole was rather beautiful instead of cute.

Given the name of a star, she had been destined to wait in this place for the return of the one she loved.

“Huh? Master, are your eyes glistening, or are you crying a little?”

“...Your Master…is a piece of shit. I’m gonna punch him in the face if I ever get the chance.”

“Then I’ll have to witness it with superrrr-superrrr mixed feelings! What sort of horrible situation would it be if Master KO’d Master!... Jeez.”

Lips quivering, Subaru squeezed his eyes shut. His hot emotions rose, pushing past his eyelids and falling down his cheeks. Seeing those tears fall, Shaula gently whispered “Jeez.”—

“…”

While Subaru’s eyes were closed, his cheek was suddenly attacked by a wet sensation. When he opened his eyes, he saw Shaula’s face pulling away from his. Her fingertips on her lips, she mischievously smiled with her red tongue slightly sticking out.

“...Master’s body fluids…are salty and sweet.”

“Saying it like this...”

“The way I say it…doesn’t change anything at all. Ah, I always express my feelings with my whole body and soul, you know. — Master, I love youuu.”

I love you. She had often told him that. Once he understood the context, it was impossible for Subaru to say that it was a meaningless statement. Shaula said “I love you” as often as she could because her heart was overflowing with love.

Always, always, the words she wanted to convey overflowed from within. For 400 years, she had been waiting, wanting to love him, wanting to be loved by him.

“I love youuu, Master.”

“...I…won’t tell you I love you.”

“I know, I knowww. Because Master is a bad guy, is thin-skinned, and shy, but this is what I like about you. I’m crazy about you. Only you.”

“…”

Time had left her, and the role she had been assigned had bound her like chains. When she had almost hurt to one she loved, she cried and begged for Death. Instead of hurting him with her own hands, she would rather lose it all.

What did he say to her, who was in tears? He said he would never allow her to continue to cry like that.

“I…will not say that to you…I love you…words like that.”

“...It’s okay. I’ll keep saying the words Master won’t say. Master will definitely want to say them to me sometime in the future.”

“Sometime in the future, you say… That’s a looooong time. 400 years of waiting…can you really do that?”

“Is it? 400 years went by soooo quicklyyy.”

Waiting for so long, she had once cried out in anguish at that fact. Having been left behind by the passage of time, her love holding her hostage, she cried out that she was lonely.

Now she had no idea that a world had once existed where she had spilled her heart out. Therefore, concealed behind her spirited attitude, how much emotion had been swirling around in her own heart?

Subaru had swore to never make her cry. And he wasn’t going to break that vow even now. That’s why—he hoped she could cry out. He wished she would cry. But now that wasn’t going to be enough.

As long as she cried, bawled her eyes out, cried out, and howled, Natsuki Subaru, who wasn't her Master or anything like that, would run with all his heart and soul to her side to stop her tears.

And yet—

"A mere 400 years…is almost like the day after tomorowww."

The Crimson Scorpion was nowhere to be seen, and in its place was a beautiful girl, smiling.

She was so beautiful that he could not help but become speechless. So ephemeral that it seemed as if she would collapse at the touch of his hand. Shaula's soft cheeks flushed red as she said "because" with the look of a maiden in love.

Continuing, the maiden in love said "because—"

"—I also loved waiting for you."

"…"

"Hey, Master. That's why…one day…again—"

5

Ragged, ragged, scattering away.

Crumbling, crumbling, flaking away.

Tired, tired, fading away.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything in the distance was shimmering.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything shimmered in the distance.

"—Shaula."

A part of her shell fell off, crumbling and flaking away, and turned into dust. It didn't stop there, but spread elsewhere, her whole body peeling off and turning into dust.

The tail and pincers that had been cut off, the eight legs being held down by the witchbeasts, and the head that Natsuki Subaru held in his arms, everything—

"...Did she…fulfill her purpose, I wonder?"

While Subaru attempted to bring all of the pieces of her existence that had been diminishing together in his arms, Beatrice uttered that to him in a hushed voice.

The adorable spirit was listlessly gazing at the witchbeast powerlessly crumbling away—no, it was someone just like her who had given their life to the role that fate provided them.

His brain refused to comprehend what Beatrice had just said. But he instinctively understood. —This was not Death.

This was, after being entrusted as the Stars-Keeper of the Pleiades Watchtower, the inevitable end that she had met today.

"Then...we..."

If they had not come here, she might have been able to exist here for eternity. Forever, in this sand tower, waiting for a person who would never return—

"—Subaru, you should be of the understanding that this assumption…is insulting to her."

"…"

"And so, what you should do…is not live in regret."

Sheathing his knight's sword back into its scabbard, the knight tidied up his appearance, which had been dirtied by blood and sand, and spoke such words.

It was a ruthless thing to say, but he was right nonetheless. At that, Subaru gritted his teeth and took a deep breath to hide his hatred for that correctness.

Then he hugged the one who had been alone for so long tighter. She who had been left behind and spent such a long time in this place. Slowly, not being alone, she was being sent off by her one and only.

Subaru, Beatrice, Julius, and Meili were all there.

In the distance, people could be seen running here from the tower. They must've been their other companions. Everyone was gathering together for her who had been alone for so long.

"But, even if Master were here alone, that would be enough."

The image of her saying such words, not being demanding at all, appeared in front of his eyes, which slowly began welling up with tears. The witchbeast's fangs gently brushed the tears that were falling down Subaru's cheeks.

The sharp fangs that seemed as if they could destroy anything, intimately, tenderly, and gently caressed Subaru, who was the most fragile of all. And then—

"—Ah."

The arms that had been wrapped around her suddenly no longer felt her. Crumbling, the shell of the Crimson Scorpion that had lost its weight scattered into dust. As he watched the black particles scatter over the sea of sand, Subaru opened his mouth wide.

"Shaula..."

"Yes, Master."

"Shaula…Shaula…Shaula."

"Did you call for me? Master."

"Shaula, Shaula..."

"Mmmmm, ahhhhh, being loved sooo much by Master like this makes me feel soooooo embarasseedddd!”

Closing his eyes, the sound of her voice responding to his call rang in his ears. And yet, now, she no longer existed anywhere.

“—Ah.”

Subaru crouched down to the ground, scratching at the sea of sand in front of him. The sound of someone’s voice reached his ears. He didn’t know whose voice it was. He didn’t have the time to confirm who it was, but simply looked up at where it came from and widened his eyes.

Still covered in black particles, a mound of sand shook slightly, and something crawled out from it. It was rather small, about the size of a palm. The small creature with a crimson shell swung its two pincers in order to get through the sand and then expertly pulled its body from the sand with its tail—

“…”

It skittered over to Subaru, who was on his knees, and brushed against his sandy hand. The mere act of brushing against him seemed to have been her leaving behind a trace of her charm.

6

Ragged, ragged, scattering away.

Crumbling, crumbling, flaking away.

Tired, tired, fading away.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything in the distance was shimmering.

Ragged, crumbling, and tired, everything shimmered in the distance.

—Everything shimmered, because you were there.

“A mere 400 years…is almost like the day after tomorowww.”

“Because I also loved waiting for you.”

“Hey, Master. That’ why, someday, again…”

“I hope you’ll meet me again someday.”

“This time…is it my turn to wait for you? Instead of the woman doing the chasing, the woman is being chased.”

“Master, this promise is…very, very important.”

“This time…please don’t forget it.”

“—I love youuu, Master.”

7

“You’re an…idiot.”

His voice trembling, Subaru muttered that, as if saying he could never forget that.

Then he picked up the being tickling the back of his hand and cupped it with both hands.

As if it were a little embarrassed, the tiny scorpion trembled, accepting his action.

Its shell was a bright shade of red, so vivid that it seemed like it could burn one’s eyes—oh so red.

—That was something that not even the span of 400 years could fade, the color of Love.

Chapter 90:
Hero

1

—In complete silence, Subaru's shoulders trembled, the tiny scorpion that had emerged from beneath the dust in his hands.

He'd wanted to save her. He'd wanted to take her out of this lonely sand tower. He'd promised to help her, but now he couldn't keep his promise. Natsuki Subaru always made promises he couldn't keep.

"…"

Not a single soul could utter a word to Subaru, squatting in the sand in silence.

Beatrice, who was beside him, and Julius and Meili, who were behind him, could not find the right words to say.

The scorpion, which had been in his cupped hands, crawled up Subaru's arm and perched itself on his shoulder, brushing against his neck as if it were trying to comfort him, who had even forgotten to shed tears and weep.

Subaru didn't have a clue as to what the tiny scorpion even was. What did this scorpion, which had emerged from the remains of the Crimson Scorpion, have to do with Shaula? Or was she this scorpion?—

"—That's…impossible."

Subaru had exchanged words with Shaula in her last moments. However, it was not clear whether the conversation actually happened or if he was just imagining it all as she was passing away.

However, Subaru harbored a sad conviction that it was indeed the case. Shaula was gone. Her existence was tied to the very rules of the Pleaides Watchtower, and, ultimately, much like Reid or the Monolith of the third floor, was like a stage prop for a Trial.

As a result, once the watchtower had fulfilled its role, she had to leave. She had followed the role of a Stage Prop until the very end, and for her to merely be a Stage Prop opened up a hole in Subaru's heart.

"…"

That frank smile, the annoyance he felt because of her desire to interact with him, and her unfamiliar voice calling him "Master, Master" with deep affection, all of it was gone.

If Shaula were to cry out and scream that she did not want to disappear, then Subaru would do everything in his power to stop it from happening, and would sacrifice himself time and time again in order to save her.

However, that wasn't what she wanted.

Smiling, she told him she wanted to meet him again someday, but then she disappeared shortly after. He wasn't sure, but—

"I know... I will meet you again someday. So…"

With a cheerful smile, she fulfilled her wish to tell him she loved him. For that reason—

"—So… Goodbye for now, Shaula."

Her dreams, which had turned into crimson dust, were stolen away by the sand wind along with her remains. Subaru let out a sigh as he watched. And, as if to brighten the mood, the scorpion, which had crawled up to his neck, was playing with his ears with its pincers.

"OUCH!"

Feeling a sharp pain, he felt as if he were being urged not to feel down about it. With tears in his eyes because of the pain, Subaru nodded with an "I know, I know" and grabbed the scorpion on his neck and tried to disengage it from his ears. However—

“OUCH! No, I got it already, so you can let me go now...OW! Hey…this…is making my ear bleed...this guy! This guy’s…not letting go...!”

“...What are you doinnnng, mister?”

Subaru’s ear currently in its grasp, he panicked since he couldn’t manage to peel the mini crimson scorpion away from it. When he was about to lose part of his ear, it was Meili who came to the rescue.

Astounded by what was happening, she quickly moved over to where Subaru was and grabbed the mini crimson scorpion with her little hand.

“Just because it’s smallll, it’s stilllll a witchbeast, you know, so if you let it get close to your face, it could start chomping on your eyes or nose before you knew what hit youuu.”

“Eyes and nose?! But…this little guy isn’t like that.”

“It’s a witchbeast, mister. —That…isn’t Naked Lady anymore.”

“…”

Saying that, Meili plopped the mini crimson scorpion onto the top of her head. The little thing didn’t do anything naughty to her head, unlike what it did to Subaru earlier. It appeared as if it were under the influence of her Divine Protection of Magic Manipulation, thus hiding its aggression.

Needless to say, this was proof that the mini crimson scorpion was a witchbeast that could be tamed by Meili—as well as proof that the little thing didn’t contain Shaula’s ego.

“Subaru, let me heal your wounds then, I suppose.”

Then, with his eyes still cast downward, Beatrice tugged on his sleeve and tenderly looked his body over. In consideration of her, he bit his lip and nodded strongly. He knew he couldn’t stay in the sea of sand forever.

“—Subaru! Everyone!”

In the distance, the big door to the watchtower swung open, and Emilia came rushing towards them. It was clear that she hadn’t had an easy time due to how messed up her clothes looked. They would all be able to chat together, including about that as well.

They had too many things to talk about as well as too many farewells to give.

2

“...Shaula…was someone who always worked reaaaaally hard.”

After she heard the details and found out the reason why Shaula was no longer there, Emilia stared out into the sea of sand where her remains had scattered, mourning her loss in her own ladylike way.

And then she gently patted the mini crimson scorpion on Meili’s head with her white fingers. It was rather accepting of Emilia’s fingers despite being ordered by Meili to behave well, and it seemed to find it quite pleasant even though she could not see a change in its facial expression.

“Lady Emilia, what went on on the first floor? Were you able to safely complete the Trial?”

After hearing about what happened to Shaula, Emilia looked at Subaru, whose face was sunken, with grief painted on her face. However, it was Julius who’d made the first move to change the subject. And after hearing his question, she answered him with an “I think so.”

“Mm, it was reaaaaally hard because I didn’t understand it, but I more or less completed it, I think... Oh! Do you completely remember me, Julius?”

“—. That’s…right. I can certainly remember who you are now.”

Emilia asked that question nervously, and Julius replied with a look of surprise on his face. Whilst covering his mouth his hand, Julius said “Lady Emilia” once more, confirming that the Emilia who had previously gone missing had returned, and then nodded.

“Beatrice! Do you remember me? How about you, Meili?”

“...I remember you, so don’t worry, I suppose. It was as if I had completely forgotten you until someone told me I’d forgotten you, in fact. It’s such a scary feeling, I suppose.”

“I also completellly remember youuu. How about you, Big Sis? Do you remember me and all of the promises we made?”

“Absolutely. I’ll never forget them. That’s a relief. I had a feeling everything would be okay since Ram and Patrasche remembered me too...”

After hearing Beatrice’s and Meili’s answers, Emilia gave a sigh of relief. Subaru called out to their response with “Wait.”

And with everyone’s attention drawn to himself, Subaru let out—

“That’s super awesome news, but I wanna properly make sense of it. In short? Everyone…can properly remember everything about Emilia-tan now? That means…uhh...”

“—Miss Ram…has slain Lye Batenkaitos.”

“…”

Subaru widened his eyes after Julius interrupted him and made that declaration.

Lye Batenkaitos—one of the three Sin Archbishops of Gluttony, as well one of Subaru and Ram’s mortal enemies. He was also an enemy in this tower who had caused them much hardship with his extreme violence in addition to eating Emilia’s Name.

After being told that he had been slain, Subaru’s throat dried up. If Lye Batenkaitos had been slain, that meant—

“Does that mean the things he stole will be given back…? If that’s true—”

If Emilia’s Name had returned, that means the other effects of Gluttony’s Authority will also come undone.

Batenkaitos, who had pretended to be a Gourmet, must have eaten beyond his fill. If everything that had been stolen had been returned, that would also affect the people in the Watergate City, Priestella—

“…”

Thinking about such things, Subaru shook his head. He knew he shouldn’t deceive himself like this. He knew he shouldn’t bottle up his feeling and keep bullshitting himself.

Natsuki Subaru, at this very moment, harbored an excessively selfish and egotistical hope. If Lye Batenkaitos had been slain, and the influence of his Authority had come undone, then—

“—Rem…can anyone remember her?”

She was a girl who had been forgotten by the world, leaving a hole in Subaru’s heart because of her absence. They had gone on this journey to take back what had been stolen—and for Subaru, the purpose of this journey was simply to save Rem.

For the watchtower, where they had gone to obtain wisdom for that purpose, to be attacked by Gluttony, was rather ironic, but it did not matter as long as they got what went there for.

Subaru looked at everyone, fueled by such hopes. In response to his question, however—

“…I’m reaaalllly sorry, Subaru. But I still can’t remember who Rem is.”

“—! Why not?!”

“Betty can’t either, I suppose. I still can’t recall who Ram’s sister is, in fact. Moreover…”

"Moreover? Moreover, what? What else is there?"

Emilia had denied it, and Beatrice followed, leaving Subaru in a state of shock.

His budding hopes had been shot down, so Subaru rushed over to Beatrice, who had yet to continue her words. Desperation in his eyes, she pointed towards Julius behind her with her white chin.

"I still can't remember Julius, in fact. Perhaps not all of the harm Gluttony caused has been undone, I suppose."

"Julius…"

Emilia agreed with Beatrice's opinion with a nod of her head. Meili, on the other hand, shrugged since she didn't even know Julius before his Name was taken, and Emilia had no reason to lie, either.

It was clear that Rem and Julius' Names had not been returned—

"As far as that is concerned, I have an idea as to why my Name hasn't been returned."

Whilst Subaru was still in a state of confusion, it was none other than Julius who uttered that. And then, after looking back at Subaru with narrowed eyes, he continued.

It was—

"—The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, was captured alive. To be exact, he was the one who bereaved me of my Name. I suppose that is why my Name has yet to return."

3

Passing through the grand entrance to the Pleaides Watchtower was the dragon carriage that had brought Subaru and the others to the sand tower and left on the fifth floor. Next to it was a person waving at them.

"Long time no see, Emilia, Natsuki."

“...Could that be Lady Anastasia?”

Widening his eyes, Subaru stared intently at the smiling, slowly waving figure.

He confirmed that her movements, attitude, and even her expressions were all natural. Was that the artificial spirit, Echidna, who could reproduce a persons nature and act exactly like the original?—No, it wasn’t a reproduction.

This was her ORIGINAL character. He couldn’t really call it a reproduction now. That is to say—

“Anastasia! Did you wake up?”

“Yep. It seems like I took a really long nap and made you guys worry. Echidna told me about the things that happened these past few months, too.”

“Is Echidna alright, too?”

“How can I put it? For now, other than the thought of blamin’ herself, there are no thoughts like ‘Let me just die.’”

As Anastasia answered Emilia’s question, the scarf around her neck moved, and the white fox lowered her head as if in apology.

“Blamin’ yourself like that. I’ve already told ya before. It was our choice, so there’s no need for ya ta be depressed, Echidna. Ya think so too, don’t’cha, Julius?”

“Me?...Yes. If I am speaking honestly, the decision you made made me quite worried, so I am afraid I cannot give you an answer to that, Lady Anastasia.”

“I feel a bit embarrassed, but I’d still like ta ask: what do ya mean by that?”

“Hearing the reason why you shut yourself within yourself is…all I could ask for as your knight.”

Unraveling his lips, Julius answered gracefully. Hearing his answer, Anastasia covered her mouth with her hand and said “Forget it, I’m not going to force you to say it” with a smile.

It was a very harmonious conversation. If you were to say that these two were like a master and a servant, then there would be none who could say otherwise.

“Did Anastasia really forget about Julius? Because they seem to be getting along pretty well...”

“I really did forget about the relationship we had before... This in itself, for me, is already makin’ me totally angry and is unbearable...! But...!”

“She’s been controlling her feelings, really, so she’s acting like that. Fortunately, after being with Julius for the past two months, I can say a few things about him. It appears that I was born for this very purpose.”

“...You…also seem to be going off in an odd direction, in fact.”

Beatrice spoke a bit gently to Anastasia, whose lips were quivering, and, by extension, Echidna, who was around her neck. Hearing that, Echidna snorted her fox nose and nodded with a “yeah.”

Echidna, the artificial spirit without any history, and who had gone to the watchtower in the place of Anastasia, also had her own thoughts and appeared to have been able to come to a positive conclusion.

It seemed as if Anastasia getting her own body back safely was part of it. The taking care of her many problems, as well as her regret she felt for shutting herself off in her own Od, and so on, had yet to be resolved—

“It’d be insensitive for us to poke around at their affairs, huh.”

The problems between Anastasia and Echidna should be discussed by them alone. Of course, if they asked for his assistance, Subaru would gladly exert himself for their sakes and assist them in solving their problems. It would be safe to say that the time they spent on this two month journey had fostered such a bond.

"—Um, Anastasia. I'm sooooo happy that you got back safely and are suuuper talkative, but…"

"I know. You wanna know what happened to the Sin Archbishop that Julius defeated? He did this and that, and then chucked him into the dragon carriage."

"Julius did this and that…"

Anastasia shrugged her shoulders and then gestured at the dragon carriage behind her. Subaru silently gazed at the dragon carriage next to Emilia, who was pondering her words. Within it was Roy Alphard, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.

"…"

Before he entered the dragon carriage, he stroked the neck of the earth dragon—Gyan, who was attached to the carriage. With its thick legs, the earth dragon from the Agaress species played a crucial role in the final battle with Shaula, and had unexpectedly led Subaru and the others to victory.

This wasn't the absolute best result. Nevertheless, it didn't undermine his consideration for Gyan. Not to mention that Meili was able to survive thanks to Gyan's spirit.

"I was totally saved thanks to you… In the future, no matter what happens, please continue to help me out."

"…"

Gyan, whose thick neck was being stroked, flared his nostrils, as if saying that that would be a heavy burden to carry. Subaru smiled bitterly, put on a serious face, and then got on the dragon carriage. Then, after giving a nod to Emilia and the others, he peered inside.

"—That's him."

The atmosphere full of tension, Subaru peered into the dragon carriage, and after seeing what was inside, was shocked by what he saw. Alphard was indeed inside of the dragon carriage. However, the method in which he had been detained was a bit different from what Subaru had imagined.

Roy Alphard, with his eyes rolled back revealing the whites of his eyes, was covered in a black crystalline material, effectively detaining—no, sealing him.

“It’s a Sin Archbishop...so just preventing them from moving wouldn’t be enough, right? That’s why I rigorously solidified it to the best of my ability.”

“This solidification thing...what’s the principle behind it?”

“The principle…is that it is an application of Yin Magic, I suppose. Using Shamak to separate them from their consciousness, it is then solidified like that... It’s a very ruthless way of doing it, in fact.”

“So this black thing is like a chunk of Shamak...?”

After Subaru heard Beatrice’s explanation, he was a bit shocked and then looked at the seal once more. Shamak was arguably Subaru’s most trustworthy magic before he formed a contract with Beatrice, but its effects and the way Julius used it as a means of sealing someone could only be described as amazing.

Seeing the way Subaru reacted, Julius said “Please don’t misunderstand me.”

“It’s nothing…it’s not a technique I invented or anything. This exact technique is used to make the world’s most famous seal. Though there is a huge difference in the scale.”

“The most famous in the world... You mean that one?”

“—The Witch of Envy…right?”

Emilia, who was looking at the sealed Alphard, said that. Julius gave a deep nod, confirming what she’d said. The seal used on Alphard had used the same technique that had sealed the Witch of Envy for the past 400 years nearby, east of the watchtower.

In other words, the words of Julius, who had created the seal using a tried and true method, could be said to be more than reliable enough. But that wasn't the question that needed to be asked.

"The question is…why do you want to keep this guy alive?"

"Subaru..."

Emilia, gazing at the sealed Alphard, said that to Subaru whilst lowering her eyebrows. His heart aching due to her gaze, Subaru turned his head and said, "That's just how it is, right?."

"When one of the Gluttony's…when Batenkaitos died, everyone remembered Emilia again. So, if this guy dies, then the rest of the Memories would..."

"There is no solid proof that they would come back. That is the biggest reason why I did not end his life."

"…"

"There is absolutely no doubt that Miss Ram slayed Batenkaitos. However, was Lady Emilia's Name returned merely because of that? Something else…perhaps he had given it back voluntarily...that possibility cannot be ruled out. If you make a hasty decision, everything could be lost."

Julius threw out one sound argument after another, as if reprimanding Subaru for his impatience. And his argument was so sound that Subaru could not even offer up a rebuttal. However—

"In that case...in that case, what about his Book of the Dead?"

Subaru proposed using a method that only existed in the watchtower as an alternative. When it came to revealing the true thoughts of a person, there was perhaps nothing more suitable than a Book of the Dead. Whatever the case may be, it was something that allowed one to experience another person's life.

"Even if you interrogate him, there's no guarantee that he will spill the beans. If that's the case, then it would be better to just use his Book of the Dead to reveal this guy's innermost thoughts."

"Subaru, that...I don't think that's a good idea. This kind of approach is…”

“But, I’m sure it’ll work. If we do it this way…”

“Ya know what? Can I interrupt ya for a sec?”

Emilia’s opinion differed from Subaru’s, who had suggested using his Book of the Dead. Not only that, but Subaru was just about to lay out his argument only for Anastasia to butt in with a raise of her hand.

Anastasia looked at Subaru, who looked embarrassed, and folded her hands on top of her chest—

“I heard from Echidna that there may be things missin’ in ‘em…like that Book of the Dead, so wouldn’t it be dangerous ta rely on it too much?”

“Dangerous…? why do you say so?”

“In any case, that’s somethin’ you’ve vividly experienced yourself, right, Natsuki? I heard that ya lost yourself while I was asleep.”

“…”

How many things could she possibly talk about with Echidna in such a short period of time? He wondered. Anastasia had hit him where it hurts.

However, the danger the Book of the Dead held did not necessarily coincide with Subaru’s amnesia. The disappearance of his memories did not come about due to the Book of the Dead. However, that did not completely negate the risk that Books of the Dead posed.

In fact, when he read Meili's Book of the Dead, some parts of Subaru’s mind and emotions were almost painted over by her personality.

What would have become of Subaru, who did not consider himself to be particularly powerful or mentally strong, if he had been a more impressionable person?

Who could say that a new Roy Alphard, who had inherited the soul of the former Roy Alphard, would not be born as a result?

“Then…then are you trying to say that it’s right to let this guy live, Anastasia? Even after everything he’s done up until now?!”

“If you’re talkin’ ‘bout what’s right or wrong, then I don’t think it’s right to keep a Sin Archbishop alive. If I could just kill this guy and get Julius’ Memories back, I think that’d be good. But I have a pet theory ‘bout that.”

“A pet theory…?”

“Whether someone should be alive or not, snatchin’ and robbin’ ‘em of it should only be done as a last resort. —A person who can easily kill another human being will not have a good end. It ain’t one of Hoshin’s Sayings but one of my own.”

Subaru’s eyes widened after hearing Anastasia’s words. In this fantasy world of swords and magic, there was such a rebellious, naïve way of thinking. But at the same time, the moral side of Subaru felt like she was right.

Subaru also believed that the less people died, the better. Not to mention his friends, it would even be better for his enemies to die less. However, that way of thinking was only limited to cases where the other person deserved mercy.

“He has caused so much misfortune for so many people, and has continued to torment everyone until this day… Do you still think we shouldn’t kill a guy like that, Anastasia?”

“When it’s the right time to kill someone, kill them. When I need ta make a decision, and the situation is critical, I will dirty my hands. But it ain’t right ta leave it ta impulse. —I think you’re that kinda guy, Natsuki.”

“That kind of…thing, is…”

“Because of that, you can shed tears for someone else who’s been lost… Rather than a heartless Natsuki who doesn’t shed blood nor tears, I would prefer ta get along with that kind of you forever.”

Anastasia ran her fingers across her cheek and pointed out Subaru's tears. Instantly, Subaru lowered his gaze, the wound in his heart due to losing Shaula aching. Anastasia's statement had been mean. But it was, without a doubt, quite effective.

"…Subaru, I also share the same opinion as Anastasia. Taking the sleeping Rem and Julius into account, I reaaaally want to hurry up and resolve things, but…"

"No need to worry about me, at least. Having gotten to this point, doing what is right is far more important than making hasty decisions… This also concerns my younger brother, after all."

They were on the brink of recovering Joshua's memories, who had been left in Priestella, and Julius was extremely cautious—but, as has already been mentioned above, that was the correct choice.

In order to make up for their pain and sense of loss, he was eager to get results. That was probably how Subaru felt right now.

"Let's summarize it then. Ana and Julius' opinion is that we should move Roy Alphard…the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, to the royal capital to find a way to save the victims of his Authority. He will not be pardoned after that, either. He shouldn't be able to escape capital punishment."

"There're limits ta how much they can pardon on the grounds of age. That's how it may end up in the end."

After seeing Subaru unclenching his fist, Echidna and Anastasia got the story in order.

Emilia had no objections to the treatment of Alphard. He would be taken to the royal capital in a sealed state, so, in a sense, he would be in the same position as Sirius, who had been taken there not too long ago.

"Do ya also think this'll be alright, Emilia?"

"Yeah. I also reaaally want to properly remember the people who have been forgotten."

When Anastasia asked her that to confirm her intentions, Emilia lifted her head and answered in a dignified manner.

Subaru couldn't form a rebuttal to her words, feeling somewhat hopeful and bitter at the same time, and then turned away from the Sin Archbishop in the dragon carriage and suddenly fell to his knees.

"Huh...?"

"Subaru! Ahh, jeez, I knew you were going too far, in fact! It's only natural for you to become like this when you've been in a bad mood for so long, I suppose!"

Subaru's head felt heavy, his vision was unclear, and she was supporting his shoulders whilst yelling angrily at him. Her adorable voice rang in his head and he realized he had consuming more energy than he thought. Wouldn't it be natural for her to say, "it's a natural result"?

He had died many times when he had amnesia, died many times afterwards, came face-to-face with himself in order to recover his memories, fought against the five obstacles that plagued the tower when he woke up, used his Authority to take on the burdens of his friends in battle, and lost Shaula at the end of it all—

He had exhausted his mind and body well past their limits. He had only been there for a few days but felt like he had spent more than five years in the tower.

"—Ah, I…"

"Subaru, relax, everything is going to be alright. Can you be good now and rest for a little while? Let's talk about it when you wake up. I have a loooot I want to say to you, too."

Subaru, who was exhausted and unable to move an inch, was being hugged from the front by Emilia. Her soft touch and sweet scent, which would normally cause his body to stiffen, were as effective as a powerful drug for him now, causing his consciousness to quickly descend into darkness.

If I die now in the darkness, would I go back to an earlier point where I was running around the tower trying to find a way to save Shaula? he wondered. But that was impossible. He half-understood it would be impossible, but he couldn't help but hope for it.

Slowly, Subaru's consciousness was swallowed up by the darkness.

4

"Heave-ho!"

Lifting up Subaru's unconscious body, Emilia sighed. Subaru's eyes were shut tight and was breathing laborious breaths, testaments of how hard he worked to solve the problems in the watchtower.

It showed just how desperate Subaru was to save Emilia and the others. When he rushed to her side when Batenkaitos took her Name and was forgotten by everyone, she was so happy.

She wanted to tell him that. She hoped Subaru would not blame himself too much. He was not responsible for what happened to Shaula. It was Emilia's and everyone else's responsibility, but to be more precise—

"—I think her Master, Flugel, was a reaaaally bad person."

He was the one who pushed the achievements of the Sage onto Shaula, and, binding her to the Pleiades Watchtower, was responsible for putting her to sleep.

Even if he was one of the three heroes who saved the world, since he made Subaru cry and Shaula sad, he was just a villain in Emilia's mind. Of course, since she would never have a chance to talk to him, there was no one who could relieve her of this feeling of frustration.

"He looks like he's really fatigued…but it ain't a big problem. He will recover if he rests. That's it, why don't we go to that 'Green Room'?"

"Yeah. Ram and the others are there too… Weren't you looking after Rem when she came to help me, Anastasia?"

"That's an exaggerated story, right? Once I recovered my self, I just saw off Julius, who was goin' to help Natsuki, and Ram, who was goin' to help out Emilia… I'm afraid ta say that Rem hasn't shown any changes at all."

"I see…"

Thinking of Ram, Rem, and Patrasche waiting in the Green Room, Emilia wrinkled her finely-shaped eyebrows.

The slaying of Batenkaitos was, in a sense, done as revenge for Rem, who had been bereaved of her Name and Memories. However, the only thing that mattered was that she woke up, and since she had not done so, whether they managed to get their revenge or not was unimportant.

That was at least something Ram would say without any sort of hesitation. The only thing that mattered to her was getting Rem back.

"I hope Roy Alphard can tell us something about that, too. There are too many unanswered questions about this watchtower…no, about the Great Library of Pleiades."

"An all-knowing Great Library…that is the claim Shaula had made, in fact. She was a carefree girl, but because of that, she did not play around with words, I suppose. She said this was the Great Library, so there's no reason to doubt that, in fact.

Was the function of the Great Library merely the Books of the Dead? Or were there other functions? That is what they needed to find out. Based on that, Emilia had something to say to Beatrice and the others.

"Well, after taking Subaru to the Green Room to rest, there's a place I want to go with everyone… There is someone I'd like everyone to meet."

"…Is it related to the first floor, I wonder?"

On the first floor, Emilia had broken through the last Trial. This was something Beatrice and the others already knew about. The problem was that she had yet to reveal everything.

Specifically, what was on the first floor? Who did she meet? What did Emilia do there? Since it was bizarre, out-of-this-world, and difficult to express in words—

“It won’t take long to tell you about it, but it’s suuuper complex, so how about we just meet them in person and talk about it?”

Said Emilia, pointing far above her at the top of the watchtower.

5

“—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

“…”

After being guided by Emilia to the highest floor of the Pleiades Watchtower—the first floor—everyone was overwhelmed and rendered speechless by the massive dragon’s greeting.

“When I got to the first floor and saw Volcanica waiting here, I was reaaaally surprised…”

“No-no, hold on, hold on a second, I suppose. Hey, this isn’t a problem that can be solved simply by being surprised, in fact!”

In front of the Divine Dragon covered in azure scales, Beatrice let out a panicky voice unbefitting of her appearance. She was swinging her hands up and down as if she were completely restless. However, she was not the only one who was in a shocked state.

“This…is…”

“Wooooow, somethin’ has appeared that not even I could’ve anticipated. What’s goin’ on here? Didn’t ya say that Mr. Divine Dragon was beyond the Great Waterfall?”

“That should be the case. According to the prophecy from the Dragon History Stone, in the same year that the royal selection comes to an end, he will renew the covenant with the one who becomes the ruler of Lugunica, Ana."

Next to Julius, who had been rendered speechless, the calm Anastasia could barely hide her cold sweat. Around her neck, the sound of Echidna's voice was also slightly hoarse. However, after being late in reacting to the ladies' response, Julius fixed his posture and said, "Excuse me—"

"Oh Great Divine Dragon who defends our Kingdom. We deeply apologize for our rudeness in the presence of your esteemed self, Great Volcanica, the bearer of the covenant who has kept it for so long and given us much aid."

"…"

"Although it is like this, it is such an honor to meet you. I am Julius Juukulius, a member of the royal guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica. I've made sure to keep many of your treasured tales in mind."

Julius, who had kneeled down and bowed, removed his sword from his waist and placed it on the ground next to him as a form of the utmost respect.

And so, as a knight who served the Dragon Kingdom, he showed the greatest courtesy to the Divine Dragon. Then, narrowing his golden eyes, Volcanica said—

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

"My life, my faith, have all been dedicated to Lady Anastasia Hoshin. The one who will be the next ruler…and forge the next covenant…will surely be Lady Anastasia...Kuuu."

"Ju-Julius, are ya crying?"

Julius, who was on his knees helplessly shedding tears, disturbed Anastasia. Wiping his tears away with the back of his hand, he said, "My apologies—"

"Not only did I become acquainted with one of the Three Heroes—

Reid—but I was also able to meet the Divine Dragon, Volcanica. As a knight of the Kingdom of Lugunica, I could not be any more honored... This…tower, what in the world is it?"

Julius' voice trembled due to experiencing something awe-inspiring.

With a tinge of remorse, as if she were ruining his special moment, Emilia started to say "About that..."

"Julius, I'm reaaally hesitant to tell you this because you're sooo happy, but..."

"—. My apologies, Lady Emilia. Disregarding you and Lady Anastasia, I attempted to talk with the Divine Dragon without permission..."

"Mmm, don't worry about it. It's just that…Volcanica is..."

Trying to explain things to Julius without hurting him, Emilia struggled to find the right words to say. Then, coming from above her head—

"—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner."

"...Wait a second. This line…I feel like I just heard it earlier."

Hearing him repeat those words, Anastasia was the first to become suspicious. However, that same feeling spread to the others, too. Saying that was a natural thing to do, and everyone immediately noticed the change in Volcanica, who continued to repeat the same words over and over again. And—

"Although that's Volcanica, he's been waiting here for soooo long that he became a bit senile. Since his body is still full of energy, he's a biiit of a rowdy one though..."

Volcanica, who had a pretty bad case of dementia, still had the true power of a dragon, but over the course of a long period his time, his mind became damaged.

Perhaps because of the Trial of the first floor, the Divine Dragon exerted a great amount of energy to stop Emilia from getting up the pillar, but once Emilia had reached the Monolith, he judged that she had passed the Trial and returned to his original position.

Moreover, although the Trial had ended, he still continued to talk about the Trial.

“The Great Divine Dragon is senile...?”

“Ju-Julius, calm down. Come on, you’re a little tired, aren’tcha? Why don’t ya sit down?”

Julius was extremely shocked by Emilia’s words. After Reid, the second legend he encountered also differed from the stories he’d heard about them, causing his knees to tremble.

Emilia also didn’t want to disappoint Julius, whose eyes sparkled, and somehow felt a dull pain in her chest. But—

“Emilia, that’s probably not the case, I suppose. This isn’t some kind of dementia, in fact.”

“Eh?”

“Echidna, I’m sure you can feel it, too, I suppose. This isn’t dementia...”

“Ah, yes. I wasn’t sure at first, but I feel it now. This isn’t the wearing down of the mind, but the emptiness of the spirit.”

“Emptiness of the…spirit...?”

Emilia was puzzled by the mutually understandable conversation going on between the artificial spirits Echidna and Beatrice. With surprised expressions on the faces of Julius and Anastasia, Beatrice held out her finger and said, “It’s simple, in fact.”

“His spirit is empty.... That is to say, his spirit is not within him, I suppose. As a result, he is limited in what he can say and respond with, in fact. Just think of it as him being 90 percent asleep, I suppose.”

“90 percent... But he was suuuper strong, though?”

“If his spirit were there, it would have been incomparable.”

Echidna’s tone implied that she had been lucky to survive, making Emilia shudder in response.

Emilia had just barely survived the desperate battle with the help of her ice soldiers. Surprisingly, that had just been akin to fighting with a half-asleep Volcanica. Although being half-asleep and being senile were similar, they were completely different in nature.

“But even if his spirit isn’t there, he still has the body of the Divine Dragon, I suppose. If that’s the case, then there may be a way to help the people of Priestella, in fact.”

“—! A way to help everyone? How can we do that?”

“—I see. We can get the blood of a dragon from the…Divine Dragon.”

Anastasia snapped her fingers, and Beatrice nodded at her words. Also hearing that, Emilia widened her eyes and let out an “Ah.”

The source of all of the tales that had been passed down in the Kingdom of Lugunica was none other than the blood of the Divine Dragon, Volcanica.

It had been said that a dragon’s blood was a miracle elixir that could revive a barren land, ensure a bountiful harvest, and heal all illnesses and injuries. To put it simply, many remarkable effects of it had been recorded.

And, not to mention anything else. Dragon’s blood was an element that Emilia could not ignore—

“If I get the blood from Volcanica...”

The reason why Emilia was participating in the royal selection was to obtain the Dragon’s Blood kept in the Kingdom of Lugunica and use it to thaw the frozen soil of the Great Elior Forest.

Emilia was determined to participle in the royal selection in order to liberate her people, who had been frozen in that forest because of her power going wild.

"…"

The realization that her main purpose in participating in it had a possibility of being achieved suddenly hit her. It made Emilia tense up and hold her breath.

If Volcanica's blood could be obtained here, then Emilia would no longer have a reason to ascend the throne—

"I..."

"...Emilia, I'm sorry to have confused you, I suppose. The Blood that you are thinking about is not the same blood of this Volcanica, in fact. That's why you won't be able to achieve that, I suppose."

Said Beatrice to Emilia, who was about to lose her reason for participating in the royal selection. Emilia then looked at her with rounded eyes and said "Huh?."

"What do you mean I won't be able to achieve that? I've…studied reaaallllly hard, you know. In order to melt the ice in the forest, I need the Dragon's Blood in the royal castle. So..."

"There's nothing wrong with that idea, I suppose. However, as I stated earlier, the Blood in Lugunica's royal castle and the blood of this Volcanica are, strictly speaking, not the same... The Dragon's Blood in the royal castle is the blood that spilled from the last beat of a dying dragon's heart, I suppose."

"The last drop of blood from the…heart?"

Hearing things she had never heard before, Emilia frowned, scrunching up her finely-shaped eyebrows. Beatrice gently nodded, and then Julius raised his hand and said, "May I ask a question?."

Julius, who seemed to have just barely recovered from the shock of hearing about the existence or nonexistence of the Divine Dragon's spirit, looked up at the Divine Dragon, whose responses remained unchanged—

“Excuse me, Lady Beatrice, but what do you mean by what you just said? I am also a knight belonging to the royal guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica. My ears pick up many things regarding the Kingdom. However, the thing you just said…”

“—As its heart beat one last time, the blood from its heart was poured into a container. That blood, as the true blood of a dragon, was entrusted to the royal castle in order to serve as proof of the covenant between man and dragon.”

“…”

“It’s no surprise that you do not know this, in fact. The words I said just now came from a book that had been sealed within the Forbidden Library… There is no longer any trace of its existence in the outside world, for it was an account left by the Witch of Greed, Echidna, I suppose.”

After hearing Beatrice’s response, Julius gasped, his eyes widening. As a knight of the Kingdom, he didn’t even know about that, but if it came from Beatrice, he couldn’t consider it a lie. And if it was the truth—

“Then, which dragon’s blood is the Dragon’s Blood being kept in the royal capital, Lugunica? The last beating of the heart would mean…”

“It’d be strange if the dragon who left the blood didn’t die… In that case, it wouldn’t make sense for it ta have come from the empty-headed Mr. Divine Dragon.”

Julius and Anastasia voiced their doubts, but they were also justified in doing so. If the Dragon’s Blood came from the last beat of its heart, then it would not belong to Volcanica. Also, if it was still the blood of a great power—

“Unfortunately, it wasn’t mentioned in the book, in fact.”

“…That person is always doing things half-heartedly. From what I can tell, that Witch of Greed is the biggest reason why Natsuki is so cold to me, right? Because of that, he doesn't have a good impression of me, and now that impression is only getting amplified."

"Don't speak ill of Mother, I suppose. Mind your words, in fact."

"Don't fight like that, you two! But, errmmm, mmm..."

After scolding the two of them who were getting heated with each other because of having a difference of opinion regarding Echidna, Emilia silently lowered her head.

When Emilia first heard that Volcanica's blood was different from the Dragon's Blood in the royal castle, she was surprised. And yet, at the same time, she was relieved.

"...Such a thing is…sooooo strange."

Emilia's main goal was to help everyone in the forest. This goal remained unchanged even today. Therefore, if she were able to obtain Volcanica's blood here and use it as a solution, it would be possible to liberate everyone in the Great Elior Forest using it. However, while she wanted to do so, she was hesitant.

—If she used another means to melt the permafrost plaguing the Great Elior Forest, would she step off the stage and stop participating in the royal selection?

"…"

"...Emilia's concerns aside, if Beatrice's words are true, can anythin' be done with Mr. Volcanica's blood? There's a high possibility of it bein' a disappointment, right?"

"Whether he's become useless, senile, or lost his spirit, he is still a Divine Dragon, I suppose. So his blood must be quite powerful as well. It's just that..."

"It wouldn't be enough to melt everyone's ice, right?"

In response to Emilia's question, Beatrice gave her an apologetic look and nodded her head. Gazing at the appearance of Beatrice who looked more sad than herself, Emilia relaxed her lips, looked up, and said, “It’s okay.”

“That fact is pretty disappointing, but since it was something that happened so suddenly, I was soooo surprised that I didn’t realize it… So, it’s not a big deal.”

“I’m sorry, I suppose. I should have told you about it, in fact… I didn’t expect the Divine Dragon to be in a place like this, I suppose. It’s truly regrettable.”

“Mmm, that’s right, he’s such a troublemaker.”

Beatrice’s face sunk in a way that didn’t suit her, and Emilia puffed up her chest.

To be honest, she really did feel disappointed. However, what she had said to Beatrice was the truth. Rather, it felt as if she had been told she could not take shortcuts or cheat.

“Then, let’s get back to the question at hand. If the blood of the Divine Dragon is used, there is a possibility of restoring those in Priestella who have had their appearances changed due to Lust’s Authority. As Beatrice stated, even if he does not have a spirit, the blood itself should still contain great power.”

“It has been said that a single drop of the castles Dragon’s Blood could revitalize a wasteland. It’s a powerful medicine, ain’t it?”

“Therefore, it would be essential to dilute it thousands of times.”

“But it’s a pretty big improvement compared to having nothing at all. If the stories about it being a miracle medicine are true, then it’s worth giving it a shot.”

After hearing the conversation going on between Echidna, Anastasia, and Julius, Emilia once again felt hopeful. They had crossed the Augria Sand Dunes in order to help those who had suffered misfortune.

If they could find a way to solve the problems caused by Lust and Gluttony, that would be best. Otherwise, there would be no way to reward Subaru for all of the damage he had suffered.

“I’m sooooo selfish like this...”

It was very selfish of her to want to make Shaula’s sacrifice have meaning. She’d spent a long time in this tower following her own thoughts and desires. It had been Shaula herself who’d made it meaningful, not Emilia.

“Mm, I got it. I’ll go and ask Volcanica about it. But he may not understand me at all and go on a rampage if I try to take his blood.”

“Don’t you ever get tired of hearing that, I suppose? Emilia, as the new administrator of the Pleiades Watchtower, you have authority over it now, in fact. Can you do something with it, I wonder?”

“The administrator’s authority...I still don’t have any awareness of that…like at all.”

The mystery of the third floor had been solved, she had broken through Reid on the second floor, and expressed her will to Volcanica on the first floor.

Based on these conditions alone, Emilia had indeed captured the watchtower. However, if she were to say whether or not she could see any obvious changes, the answer would be no.

What she could vaguely perceive now was—

“The sand dunes leading to the watchtower will no longer reject anyone...I think?”

“Is this…the choice you made, Emilia? Isn’t that kind of statement quite risky since Books of the Dead are troublesome things?”

“We may face dangerous situations sometimes, but I think we can handle it if we are careful and use them properly. I think there are still lots of things that can’t be decided on on our own.”

For Emilia and the others, it would be too difficult to draw any conclusions about the tower since they were too few in number. For better or worse, she and the others didn’t have the power to do anything about it. Therefore, it would be best to let more capable people figure it out.

“That’s what I think. Do you not agree with it?”

“…I feel like you’re putting a little too much hope in others, but this is the conclusion you came to. If Ana and Julius don’t object to it, then neither will I.”

“Thank you, Echidna.”

Emilia thanked Echidna, who had been the first to agree with her, like this. Anastasia also spoke up with a “Got it, got it.”

“I don’t object to it, either. Actually, even if we made an effort ta hide it, it would be difficult to make the most of it… If that’s the case, it’d be best ta share what we found after trekkin’ all the way here. There’s the issue of Gluttony and we might be able ta bring the dragon’s blood back, too.”

“We should not be vile, nor expect too much. The most important thing is that it was Lady Emilia who reached the top of the tower. We should respect her wishes.”

“Anastasia, Julius, thank you!”

After receiving the two’s agreement, Emilia thanked them with a smile. Then she finally looked back at Beatrice, who had yet to express her opinion on the matter.

“How about you, Beatrice? Do you think this is too irresponsible?”

“If you are talking about being responsible or irresponsible, abandoning this place without investigating it is the most irresponsible thing we could do, I suppose. Betty does not object, in fact. I am also personally interested in this.”

“Awesome!”

Emilia placed her hand on her chest, relieved that one of her closest companions did not disagree with her.

“Okay, next up is the issue of the blood… The easiest way to go about it is to take Volcanica with us.”

“I think that’ll cause a lotta problems.”

It was true that Volcanica was rather large, and if they took him back with them, there was a possibility that he would bump into a lot of things. However, since he could fly, he could just fly in the air when they entered a street and not have to worry about him bumping into anything.

“Erm, Volcanica. Can you come with us? Or, if you have to stay here, I’d like for you to share some of your blood with me…”

“…”

“Volcanica?”

Half expecting something to happen, half giving up, thinking that Volcanica would only repeat the lines from the Trial, Emilia frowned at his present reaction.

Volcanica, the Divine Dragon, who had returned to his original position on the first floor and was leaning against the central pillar, slowly raised his head and turned his gaze outside of the tower.

He neither responded to Emilia and the others, nor did he show any sort of aggression. Emilia, at least, felt like his behavior was rather peculiar. And at the same time—

“What?”

Feeling as if a cold finger had traced along the entirety of her back, Emilia quickly turned her gaze in the direction of the cause of that chilly feeling—the direction of Volcanica’s gaze, east of the tower.

East of the tower, past the end of the sea of sand, was the Great Waterfall at the world’s edge—no, what existed there was the Great Waterfall, as well as a special place.

That was—

6

“Mmmmm...”

Feeling something rough gently brushing against his face, Subaru opened his eyes whilst groaning. His vision was blurred, and after blinking a few times, a clear outline appeared, and what came into view was the cause of that rough sensation—Patrasche had been licking his face with her red tongue.

“...Is that you, Patrasche…?”

“…”

“Sorry for making you worry... You…risked your life again, didn’t you? Sorry for always making things hard for you.”

Relaxing his lips, Subaru gently put his hand on his beloved earth dragon’s worried face and began stroking it. This jet-black earth dragon had always saved him when he was in tough spots. Not to mention her kindness for saving him when he had amnesia, but the things Patrasche had done in this past week were also of great importance. To put it simply—

“If Patrasche hadn’t been here, Rem might have died. Bringing this girl back home is probably the greatest accomplishment of Barusu’s life.”

“Even if it’s true, don’t diss me like that! I took Beako out and got Emilia-tan’s insignia back, too. Although Roswaal was involved with both of those, you know.”

As a matter of fact, Roswaal had nothing to do with Beatrice’s problem, but he dared to say it since it would get under her skin. And, as expected, he heard Ram “Tch” with her tongue in disgust.

Ram was leaning against the wall of the Green Room with her arms wrapped around herself. Subaru painfully narrowed his eyes and looked at her bruised body. It was clear that the battle against Lye Batenkaitos had been an intense one.

Since Meili had been injured in the middle of their battle, the amount of burdens Subaru could shoulder had been reduced, which was one of the reasons why she had to fight such a hard battle in the first place. Not sure of what to say, Subaru opened his mouth to apologize—

“Hey, Ram. It was my fault that you got hurt like this...blughhh!”

“Don’t speak such stupid words. Barusu being responsible for Ram’s injuries? There is no place in Ram’s life where Barusu has any such role. How repulsive.”

“What’s repulsive is talking like that! Stuffing grass into a person’s mouth is even worse!”

Subaru protested as he pulled the lump of ivy that had been shoved into his mouth, his eyes watering due to the grassy odor. Hearing that, Ram responded with an unapologetic “Haaa.”

At the argument going on between Ram and Subaru, the sound of giggling could be heard.

“You two…look like such close friendsss. It’s like watching two siblingsss,” said Meili, who’d spread her legs out on the grass mattress covering the floor, the mini crimson scorpion perched on her head. Ram’s face scowled at her giggling with an easy-to-understand expression—

“Barusu is my little brother...? For argument’s sake, let’s assume it’s true, but even if we weren’t related by blood, the Oni Village would cull a useless little brother like him.”

“Is the Oni Village really so severe? I’m glad I wasn’t born as an Oni...”

“That was just a joke. But, it’s just that Ram could not stand the horror and would have you culled.”

“Don’t make it more complicated by doubling up on your assumptions!”

Spit flying, Subaru shouted that at Ram, who was acting like she usually did. Having said that, he could now see that it was just her roundabout way of showing consideration for him. She'd said that the cause of her injuries was not due to his decision, after all.

It was difficult for him to presume upon that consideration. But if he were stubborn and insisted that he was the one responsible, he would instead incur Ram's ire.

"You're…such a troublesome girl, Big Sis..."

"After Meili's presumptuous remark just now, kindly stop calling Ram 'Big Sis'. It would be troublesome if someone we met for the first time had a misunderstanding."

Getting the usual cold reply and the Ram experience, Subaru looked around the room—at everyone in the Green Room. There was Subaru and Patrasche, and Ram and Meili along with the mini crimson scorpion. And at the back of the room was the Sleeping Beauty lying on a bed.

"—Rem…is she not awake?"

"I regret to say this, but…I beheaded that hateful, rude person. Lady Emilia's stuff seems to have returned because of that..."

"Julius' stuff hasn't returned, and neither has Rem's... Is there anything we're missing?"

Pressing his fist firmly into his palm, Subaru chewed on his bitter feelings.

He had once again confirmed the matter he had spoken about to Emilia and the others about before losing consciousness. —In the end, they would need talk to those guys directly and wring the information out of them in order to completely eradicate the damage caused by Gluttony.

"Are the ones here…based on the severity of the injuries? Where are Emilia-tan and the others?"

"If it's Big Sister and Beatrice, they said they were going up there to meet someoneee. Waaay up on the first floor, waaay, waaaay up there... Who might be up there? Big Sister Ram must know, riiight?"

"It's nothing to be concerned with. However, there is a large, senile old man there."

"The senile old man at the top of the watchtower…is DEFINITELY an important key character..."

Hearing that there was a new character, Subaru wrinkled his eyebrows. Who was the senile old man that Ram was talking about? Or, if they were an overseer like Reid on the second floor, then—

"—It couldn't be Flugel, right?"

"Barusu."

"If Flugel is the one who is up there, I'll never forgive him. I have enough to say to that guy to fill a whole mountain. If he isn't there, then Shaula..."

"Barusu, please calm down."

"Calm down? Ram…you, that kind of thing, Shaula, she..."

The cheek of the vigorous and rash Subaru was slapped while he was trying to determine the true identity of the old man on the top floor of the tower, causing him to put strength into his knees. The cause…was the palm of Ram, who had moved in on him.

With his face having been slapped, Subaru widened his eyes and looked at Ram with a dumbfounded expression.

"Don't use Shaula as a crutch because of your own powerlessness."

"…"

"I heard about Shaula. She was obnoxious and unmannered, and the eyes that admired Barusu were rotten...but she wasn't so bad that she deserved to disappear."

As she spoke, Ram gently placed her hand on Subaru's struck cheek. It was hot, but her palm was cold. While absorbing the heat, Ram continued her words to the speechless Subaru.

"If you can't accept it, then, rather than getting angry, just cry. Shaula would be happier if you cried out "I miss you" rather than using her as a reason for your anger. —Ram is the same way."

"Ram..."

"I still believe you are mixing up someone you should strongly care for with someone else."

After getting one last word in, Ram flicked Subaru's forehead with her finger. That painless force made Subaru fall onto his butt, and, as he placed his hand on his forehead, said "My bad..."

If Subaru calmed down, Flugel being on the first floor could just be called his own desire, or even something like paranoia. But for argument's sake, if Flugel really was there—

"Before Barusu could do anything, Lady Emilia and I would beat him until he was on the cusp of death."

"...I can see you doing that, but not Emilia-tan."

When thinking of Shaula, the amount of anger directed at Flugel was by no means small, and everyone in the tower naturally shared that feeling.

With Ram's affirmation, Subaru let out a long exhale. In that case, he was curious about who the senile old man on the first floor was.

"Let's put that aside for now. If we assume that the senile old man can be helpful in some way, then we should ask him about the victims of the Sin Archbishop of Lust, not Gluttony."

"That's a pretty big thing to talk about...so, uh…"

Ram clearly had her priorities straight at this point. Being able to advocate for such a thing without hesitation was one of Ram's fine qualities. Subaru could also resonate with her ideas to a certain extent. The prospect of being able to save the victims of Lust was attractive, but…

"But did Big Sister Ram have something else in mind when you said that?”

However, Meili had said that right next to Subaru’s face, who was on guard. She poked the mini crimson scorpion on her head with her finger and said—

“Didn’t you say this before? The effects of Gluttony have something to do with time or something like thattt.”

“—. What a loose-lipped girl. In that case, it will be necessary to discipline you properly once we return home.”

“Ohhh, so scaryyy.”

Meili held her head and stuck out her tiny tongue. Above her head, the mini crimson scorpion aimed its pincers and stinger at Ram, as if trying to protect her. However, under Ram’s icy gaze, it quickly shrunk into a little ball.

He could sense a part of her previous self in that flustered behavior.

“Ram, that hypothesis is? What’s it about?”

“It doesn’t amount to much. However, it’s been said that Gluttony eats other people’s memories, correct? If they are truly treated like food, I believe that time will affect the rate of digestion.”

“Digestion…”

“Lady Emilia’s came back a few hours after it was taken away. If so, then what about the other victims such as Julius the Knight, the people of Priestella, and Rem?”

“—Ah.”

After hearing the hypothetical statement of Ram, whose finger was raised, Subaru’s eyes widened due to how uncomplicated it was. Just as she said, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony had equated the stealing of Names and Memories to eating. If that were more than just a superficial expression, then he could find her hypothesis to be satisfactory.

It took time for the Names and Memories that were stolen away to be digested. Then, the reason why Emilia's Name came back but nothing else did was because—

"...There's no way…has everything already been digested?"

"—I'm not sure. There's a possibility that it might just take time for them to come back. If that's the case, then there is hope. The Memories of Julius, the other victims...and Rem, will hopefully come back, too."

"…"

Not knowing whether it was good or bad, Ram made the above explanation. Subaru knew what she was thinking as well. This was a question that could not be answered immediately.

However, now that Batenkaitos had been slain and Alphard had been captured, Subaru had another big thing to worry about—no, it was something that had come up once again.

"Louis Arneb..."

He had come across her, the final Gluttony, in the Corridor of Memories by chance, and then left her there. Was that young girl, who did not possess her own body, and took over the bodies of her two brothers as well as Natsuki Subaru's in order to commit evil deeds, really the object of a Witch Factor?

Her abilities were not inferior to those of Gluttony. However, if the life of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony was needed to undo the damage caused by their Authority, how could he defeat Louis, who was in that place? In the first place—

"Does the concept of dying exist in that place or not?"

In that place, a spirit-like body took the place of a physical one. He may be able to emulate an idea from manga and games and apply it to kill a spirit, but would that be enough to release a Witch Factor?

Whether it was that place or Louis who remained there, nothing about them was clear. Moreover, even if an answer could be garnered—

“When Julius defeated Reid, Reid’s role in the Trial was terminated. If that’s the case, then wouldn’t Reid go back into his blank Book of the Dead?”

Subaru had managed to go to the place known as the Corridor of Memories within the cradle of Od Laguna. And the reason why he had managed to do so was because of an empty Book of the Dead that just happened to lead to that place.

Since the soul of Reid Astrea had been used in the Trial, there had been a gap in his Book of the Dead, which was connected to the Corridor of Memories. If that was no longer there—

Natsuki Subaru may have missed the opportunity to defeat Louis Arneb.

“…”

Subaru had thought a lot about it, and he needed to confirm the possibility that Reid’s Book of the Dead was still blank. Not only that, but he also had a way to challenge his own Book of the Dead. This was a trump card that connected him to the Corridor of Memories.

Although he would have to go through the hell of watching himself Die again, it was better than closing himself off to other possibilities. He thought it would be much better for him to do so.

Instead of giving up because I’ve made irreversible mistakes—

“—Such a fool.”

“Big Sis?”

“If you have the leisure to worry about such frivolous things, then it would be much better for you to rest your mind and body so you can think properly. —Barusu was not the only one who failed to choose the most excellent answer in this tower.”

Shaking her head, Ram gently touched her forehead. Remaining there where her horn previously came from was a slim scar. After doing so, she stretched out that same finger towards Rem, who was on the bed. She then lovingly caressed her sister's forehead and said —

"For the purpose of defeating the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, I borrowed Rem's power. Though I achieved victory in the end, it came at a cost... This girl must have paid a heavy burden, right?"

"Heavy burden..."

"If it were Barusu, and I did the thing where I activated my horn, Barusu's body would probably explode from the inside out."

Subaru, who had taken on Ram's usual burdens before, knew very well that these were not exaggerated words. The simple acts of breathing and moving conservatively made Ram experience the taste of hell.

That kind of her was the real deal. —What sort of recoil would he get from it? It would be no exaggeration to say that had Subaru taken it on, a part of his body would suffer from so much damage that it would never be able to recover.

After Ram told him that she made Rem take on her burdens, she closed her eyes, revealing her long eyelashes. However, she said, "Make sense?" and then continued—

"Because of this, Rem might feel resentment towards me when she wakes up. However, I will not regret it. Ram is Rem's sister. That fact will never change, even if this girl resents or hates Ram... Then, so that things might get better, we can only rely on each other."

"—Rem…won't hate you."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right. —She's a very smart girl, and my amazing little sister."

Like this, Ram smiled, brimming with confidence, and looked at Subaru with her pale crimson eyes.

Though she had no memories of her little sister except through

Subaru, since she came to love her, she no longer doubted her feelings. Instead of lamenting about the past, it was better to forge a better future.

"...Saying these words to me…really hits me where it hurts, you know."

Unbeknownst to Ram, Subaru had gone through several loops to change the past. For Ram, who was an extremely positive thinker, it wouldn't be too much to describe Subaru's using of Return by Death as being an extremely regressive form of thinking. Return by Death, which changed what had already occurred, was always used because of regretting the past.

"In the end, it's better not to use it, huh..."

Subaru once again loosened his tightly clenched fist, smiling bitterly. He admitted that he used Return by Death in order to seize a better future where everyone could laugh together. Based on that, he also knew he should not indulge himself too much in the use of Return by Death itself.

In this tower, Subaru had seen the shedding of so many tears and heard many voices full of regret.

"Although I'm not sureee, but you look to be a bit betterrr."

Seeing the change in Subaru's expression, Meili whispered that whilst sitting on the floor. She was sitting in a P.E. sitting posture, and, while stroking her three-strand braid, said—

"Big Sister (Emilia) and Big Sister Ram can do iiit, but I'd be in trouble if you felt down since I can't cheer you uppp, so please don't feel dooown. You promiseddd me you'd show me how much I could depend on you to get things done, riiiight?"

"Oh, there was that promise as well. Uh, well, I'll definitely keep it…this time."

Gazing at Meili and the mini crimson scorpion on her head, Subaru nodded his head vigoresly. To the side, Patrasche nuzzled her head against his cheek, as if supporting his determination. Though her scaly body was tough, since he had gotten used to it, he could rub his cheeks against it without feeling uncomfortable.

Subaru returned that show of affection with affection of his own and then stood up. Although he had consumed so much energy before that'd he collapsed earlier, he seemed to have more or less recovered his lost strength. The Spirit of the Green Room had a variety of healing methods at its disposal.

"If I think about it, whether it be Gyan who joined the big battle, or the Spirit in this room, I don't know how to thank them enough for everything they've done."

Shaula had explained that although the Green Room was used as a recovery room, there was a Spirit here originally that was fond of treating the injuries of those who entered the room.

It did not have a physical form, nor was it possible to converse with the Spirit, but its intention for healing others was crystal clear. Subaru and the others had been healed time after time by this room as they constantly attempted to capture the tower.

It was for that reason that, after arriving at the watchtower, Rem had been left in this room.

"Wellllll, I didn't let her stay here just 'cause I wanted her to hang around."

"The Spirit, then. Barusu…no, it'd be a waste to say it. Why don't we force it to come out by using Julius' Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits?"

"I know what you're trying to say, but it won't work on me since my strong point is that I can put my life on the line for Beako. Anyways, I wonder if we can talk to it with the added effect of Julius' Divine Protection…"

The Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits was simply a Divine Protection that made it easier for him to be liked by spirits. Under that effect, he had contracted with his six quasi-spirits—no, La and the others who'd been elevated into spirits. If he could use that effect to converse with the Spirit of the Green Room, it would open up a world of possibilities.

The Spirit has been in the tower for as long as Shaula, if not longer. That nameless being might be able to help solve the mysteries in the watchtower—

"—?"

While Subaru was immersed in his thoughts, a small breath suddenly flowed into the room.

"Ram? What's the matter?"

"...I…sensed something strange. This is…"

—Ram uttered an unusual premonition in that moment.

"—Hic?!"

"HUH?!"

A phenomenon suddenly occurred in the middle of the Green Room —light spilled out, shocking Subaru and the others. In response to that, their bodies suddenly stiffened, and Subaru and Ram gravitated over to where Rem was. Meili and Patrasche also seemed to be wary of it and slowly moved away from the light.

"What-what-what-what, what's happening?!"

"I don't know! In any case, do not leave us! No matter what happens... Oh, AH?!"

Subaru shielded the flurried Meili behind him, his warning words having been interrupted. The reason was because the light in the room suddenly became brighter, which captured his attention. Then, while covering his eyes with his hands, he carefully gazed in the direction of the light.

He could see that the light, which was currently strong, was gradually becoming weaker, and then it disappeared. When he wasn't sure whether or not he should be relieved or cautious, 'That' appeared in front of Subaru’s eyes.

“—Huh?”

Subaru wasn’t sure what it meant when ‘That’ appeared right in front of his eyes in the spot where the light disappeared. He became speechless, then stunned, and then speechless once more.

“...A girl?”

Next to Subaru, seeing the same thing as him, was Ram, who’d muttered that in surprise. That observation was correct. However, between him and her, she did not have the same knowledge of the Girl that Subaru did.

Subaru…knew the name of that Girl. The name of the Girl lying on the floor of the Green Room was—

“—Louis Arneb.”

7

Louis Arneb, the girl who appeared in the middle of the room along with the light.

Subaru was speechless when the youngest sister of the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony trio known as Satiation—and was not supposed to have a physical form—appeared in reality like that. However, the nearby Ram did not fail to pick up on his words.

“Louis Arneb...the name of the last Gluttony, isn’t it?”

Subaru had yet to tell Ram the details about his encounter with Louis through the Book of the Dead during this loop. He’d only mentioned that he’d had contact with her. Ram had a very good memory indeed.

Now faced with this question, Subaru was a bit disturbed.

“Ah, ah, that’s right, she’s the last one of the Gluttonies...Louis Arneb. The little sister of Batenkaitos and Alphard...”

“—. It appears that she is unconscious.”

Based on what Ram had said, Subaru calmly observed Louis and determined that she was indeed asleep. Well, he could say that, but he wasn’t exactly sure if that was the case. How in the world could Louis, who didn’t even have a physical body, appear here like this?

He could not imagine that she, who was ever-so terrified of and despaired because of Subaru’s Return by Death ability, would somehow reinvigorate herself within a few hours and come back to challenge him again.

—The thing known as Death was something that left a deep wound in a person’s heart.

“I can’t make any progress even after thinking about it... Meili! Go get Emilia-tan and the others! Ram and I…will watch her!”

“Really, you’re suuuuch a slave driverrr... Don’t let yourself die easily, ‘kay?”

Gradually moving backwards, Meili moved towards the entrance of the Green Room. Subaru heard her admonishments and gave her a thumbs up before she left.

He saw the mini crimson scorpion above her head put up its pincers as if imitating her, before she quickly turned around and went to go get Emilia and the others.

And then, in the room where Subaru and Ram remained—

“I don’t think anything will happen, but in any case, should we tie her up with ivy?”

“I’d rather not provoke them...Barusu, have you noticed it yet?”

“—? What?”

When he was trying to discuss the treatment of Louis with her, Ram grabbed his shoulder and asked him that. Not seeming to understand the purpose of her question, he cocked his head.

So, Ram pointed at the ceiling of the Green Room with her chin—no, the entire room.

"—The healing effects of the room have disappeared. The Spirit is gone."

"Ah… That's a joke, right?"

"It's not a joke. Barusu, even you will be able to feel it if you concentrate. There is an emptiness in this place."

Subaru looked around the room, spurred on by Ram's statement. Even if he was told to concentrate, the way Subaru felt the presence of a spirit was by picking them up, kissing their face, sleeping together, and so on. He's not sure about other ways of doing it.

However, just as Ram had said, he could no longer feel the gentle power that had previously wrapped around his entire body. It seemed that something had indeed happened, for the Spirit in the Green Room was no longer there—

"If that is so, then perhaps it has something to do with the Sin Archbishop."

"…"

Subaru could not deny Ram's conjecture. He also had a similar thought. The Spirit in the Green Room had disappeared and been replaced by Louis Arneb. Then, perhaps—

"—. Anyways, it's best not to jump to any conclusions. We should wait for Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice to return. Once Lady Emilia and the others come back—"

—We can continue our discussion on what to do with Louis. He thought that that was what Ram was about to say. However, she did not continue her words. One step ahead of her—the blackness that led to the demise of all…had assaulted the Pleiades Watchtower.

"—Hic?!"

A huge explosion went off at their feet, letting off a bang, causing

Subaru and the others to get thrown into the air. Seconds afterwards, his entire body crashed into the ceiling and wall, making him let out a “Guh!.” He then turned his head to figure out what had happened.

—Fear permeated throughout his whole body as that vile presence drew near.

“N-No way…”

In a state of disbelief, Subaru stood up, denying that foreboding feeling in his gut. But that horrible chill grew stronger and stronger, making his suspicions more and more real.

“Patrasche! Take Ram—!”

“—Ree-reeee!”

As he crawled along the floor, he grabbed Ram’s body and threw her over to Patrasche. Though she was still covered in injuries, Patrasche understood his intentions and flew towards the room’s entrance.

“Barusu, that fool…!”

Ram resented that forceful action, but there was no time to listen to her. Subaru pushed off of the ground and sped towards Rem on the bed made of ivy. Then he carried her towards the door—

“…”

—Just before that, the figure of Louis, who was tumbling in the grass, passed by the edge of his vision.

“—Hic! Aaah, shit! Shiiiiiit!!”

While spewing out curses angrily, Subaru exerted as much strength as possible with his worn-out body for this maneuver. With Rem’s body held in the right hand, he used his left hand to grab Louis’ arm by force.

Both of them were rather light. In extraordinary circumstances like this, it was possible for him to ignore the weight as he carried them. Like this, carrying both of them, he was on the verge of leaping out of the Green Room.

"…"

A black shadow emerged through the floor of the Green Room, as if trying to cut Subaru off from the entrance—indeed, it was the black shadow. The last of the five obstacles—the black shadow of the Witch who had an obsession with Subaru—had come to the tower at a time like this.

"Ram—!"

Subaru, who was screaming maniacally, tried to get Rem away from the clutches of the shadow. However, the black shadow swallowed up his vision, leaving not even a gap. Moreover, the black shadow did not stop flowing in, engulfing him from the front, the left, the right, and the back.

"Damn it... Even though…I've made it this far...!"

Gazing at the shadow inching closer and closer, Subaru's heart was filled with regret as he tried to find a way to escape. If he got swallowed up by the black shadow, he would lose his life and have to Return by Death. If he Returned by Death in this tower, and his respawn point had not been updated, then he would have to start over at a point when Louis was still within him.

If that happened, he would be at the mercy of the Sin Archbishop in the shape of a white girl. That fear was what drove him to do his best with the attitude that this loop was his last chance—

"BARUSU! SNAP OUT OF IT! REM WOULD CRY!!"

"—REE-REEE!!"

Coming from beyond the black shadow were the desperate cries of Ram and Patrasche. In response, Subaru took a deep breath, but could not utter a word.

—Long before that, the entirety of Natsuki Subaru had been swallowed up by the black shadow.

8

—Having been swallowed up by the immense black shadow, Subaru’s consciousness slowly swirled around in the darkness.

“…”

He felt as if his hands, feet, blood, flesh, and his very existence had been broken apart and turned into concepts. Consumed by endlessly powerful and vast emotions, his very existence had been overwritten.

“—I love you.”

He heard a murmur in that silent and dark nothingness. That sound was, indeed, very nostalgic for him, causing Natsuki Subaru’s consciousness to smile to itself. Getting used to someone saying “I love you” to him was akin to being the Knight who was loved by his six spirits.

Unfortunately, Subaru didn’t have a strong will like that. Even if he pushed himself to his limits, the love he could give was limited to what he could do with his own two hands and back. So, the whispers of the black shadow just seemed like forced words to him.

“So? It’s way too forced, you know...”

“—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

“Sorry, can’t give you an answer to that... That phrase is like a landmine to me right now. I’ve never been able to grab the hand of the person who said that to me...”

“—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

“...Is there no way for us to hear each other? Then…hurry up and consume me.”

In this nothingness, there was no hope of escaping from it and living. So, Natsuki Subaru would die a merciless death in the darkness. He would not grieve over it, but would accept it and turn that feeling into anger, pushing himself onwards.

“When I get back, the worst thing may be waiting for me. Louis, who would still have a clear head on her shoulders, might fight me again for my Return by Death ability.”

“—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

“But, I’m not gonna lose. I won’t lose. No matter how many times it takes, I’ll keep fighting. This time, I’ll keep my promise.”

“—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

“—I’ll fight for tomorrow’s tomorrow, no matter how many times it takes.”

He would no longer be overwhelmed by the repetitive “I love you’s”. He was sorry, but the heart that could be wounded by such words had gotten worn out long ago. This kind of ‘love’ could not chain Natsuki Subaru down any longer.

And yet the words of love that were continuously uttered did not pay any mind to Subaru’s rejection. Indeed, the words of love themselves came pouring in, coating the world in them as Natsuki Subaru was swallowed up by the darkness—

“—I love you. I love you.”

"—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

In the next instant, a pale blue light poured down from above, striking the darkness that had engulfed the world. That fierce light then swallowed up the darkness, and the color of the world changed—

It changed—

It chan…ged—

9

"Mmm..."

Subaru groaned as he felt a rough sensation moving against his face and opened his eyes. His consciousness slowly returned. And at the same time, on the other side of his open eyelids, his blurry vision gradually returned to normality, revealing an outline.

Subaru had continued to feel a rough sensation on his cheek during this time.

"Pat…rasche... I…got it. I'm up. I'm awake…already..."

He wasn't sure just how tired he was, the sound coming from his throat was incredibly thin, and he wasn't sure if his intentions were being communicated properly. The other person didn't show any signs of stopping their skinship.

"You're being such a sweetie... I bet you could win the next heroine contest with that cuteness..."

"Aaaah-ooh?"

"Aaaaaah…ooh...?"

After swallowing some saliva in his dry mouth, he managed to utter a word and got a response in return.

However, the answer Subaru received was different from what he was expecting, causing his face to stiffen. His cheek was being licked like mad, and, gradually getting his vision back, what appeared in front of him was—

“Woo, ah—?”

—Louis Arneb, whilst sitting on top of Subaru, was licking his face.

“Nn, UWAAAA—?!”

“Waaah!”

Subaru was startled by that impossible sight and then immediately pushed Louis, who’d been in front of him, away. Due to that action, she let out a anguished cry and rolled around on the grass.

Gazing at that sight, Subaru desperately slid his butt backwards.

“What, what, what, what the hell are you doing?! What are you trying to do?! Coming on to me like this...”

“Woo—, Woo—? Wooah—”

“Waah, what in the! What, what the hell... Did I…die...?”

Subaru stared at Louis in complete shock, his voice trembling with desperation. Right in front of Subaru was Louis, lying on her back in the grass, shaking her arms and legs like a child, whining.

He didn’t understand what she was doing. What was the point—no, before that—

“What, where…is this place...?”

Without taking his eyes off Louis, Subaru observed his surroundings whilst staying vigilant. Then, what came into his view was a lush, green prairie—as if it were a vast grassland, flowers swayed in the wind here and there.

“…”

Such a sight would be impossible to see in the Augria Sand Dunes.

Well, to be precise, there were also things like flower gardens there where courtesan bears lived, but this was not an artificial place, and the vegetation was definitely real.

A little bit further away, Subaru could see a forest, plunging his mind into confusion. This clearly was not the Augria Sand Dunes. It didn't seem to be the Corridor of Memories where he'd encountered Louis before, either.

"The grass seems pretty real. And it tastes like...Peh, peh! Grass!"

After pulling up some grass and checking the smell and taste of it, Subaru was certain that it was real. Then, basing it on the injuries he'd incurred and the state of his torn clothing, he confirmed that the traces from the last battle—the battle surrounding the Pleiades Watchtower—had remained.

That is to say, that the battle had taken place, and Subaru had yet to die. He had been swallowed by the massive black shadow that had assaulted the Green Room and survived.

"—That's right! Rem! Rem is..."

If Louis was right here in front of him, that meant that Rem, who he also had in his grasp at that time, would also be around here.

Based on that idea, Subaru ignored Louis and searched around the grassland for Rem. It did not take long for him to find her soundless figure lying down in the low-cut grass.

"Rem! Ah, this is great... What a relief, you're safe and sound..."

Rushing over to Rem, Subaru confirmed that she was indeed safe and then fell to the ground in relief. She also appeared to not have any external injuries. Her body temperature and slow breathing were just as they were before. This made Subaru breathe a sigh of relief and wipe away the sweat on his brow.

"Ah, there's nothing to worry about. Big Sis would kill me if anything happened to Rem, anyways..."

Even if Ram didn't do anything, Subaru would go ahead and off himself since he wouldn't be able to forgive himself. While having such thoughts, Subaru uttered "Then again..." and then looked up.

"Where is this place...where's the tower at? Where are Emilia-tan, Beako, and the others?..."

Looking around, he still could not find the watchtower that was supposed to be visible in the distance. No matter where he looked, the result was the same.

"EMILIA—!! BEAKO!! RAM—!!"

"Ooo, waaah!"

Even if he couldn't see them, there was a possibility that they would respond, so Subaru called out to Emilia and the others. However, his voice beget hollowness, and the only one who answered was Louis, lying in the grass. Although that fact annoyed him, it was also true that he could not ignore her presence.

With no way of knowing what she was trying to do, nor with a way to deal with whatever it might be, the only one who could protect Rem was himself, so he got up so he could deal with Louis and—

"…"

—When he was about to get on his feet, someone gently grabbed onto his arm.

"—Eh?"

Subaru, currently on one knee and about to stand up, emitted a gruff breath. Though the strength of the arm pulling on his sleeve was not much, he could not move an inch.

"…"

Subaru's knees began to creak and tremble, and his whole body began to sweat. It truly was an incomprehensible urge. The entire being known as Natsuki Subaru began to shake all at once, the phenomenon making him go crazy.

That was…a shock that could not be described in words.

That was…intense emotions that could not be compared to anything else.

That was…of all the great surprises he had savored in this world, it was as big as a massive wave.

"—Ah."

Slowly, her eyelids trembled and opened slightly. Beneath those eyelids were her pale blue eyes, as clear as the surface of a lake.

He loved…her happy and cheerful eyes.

He loved…the twinkle in her eyes when she occasionally acted mischievously.

He loved…the eyes that grasped his heart when she pleaded with him.

—He had always, always, always, yearned for that radiance.

"Re..."

His heart thumping, his throat quivering, as if he were choking on something, unable to produce a sound. He'd choked up. That was indeed so. How many thoughts were swirling around in his heart at this moment?

The words he'd wanted to convey to her, the things he'd wanted to talk to her about, the dreams he'd wanted to share with her, all of these had been accumulating.

In pursuit of these very things, Natsuki Subaru—

"—Rem."

His lips trembling, he called out her name. Sadly, he had failed countless times trying to do just that. He wondered if he had ever clearly conveyed anything to her. Perhaps it had only been done in his own fantasies, and the most important thing was never conveyed.

Out of fear, Subaru gasped out her name repeatedly.

“Rem, Rem... Remm, Remm... Re…m...REM!”

Each time he called out her name, he could not stop his tears from overflowing like a flood. Each time tears flowed out of his eyes, she became blurred. Whenever she became obscured, he was afraid she would slip through his fingers once more.

And so, with snot falling out like rain and desperately wiping his face with his sleeve, Subaru frantically tried to keep her face in his view.

“…”

Rem blinked silently, a light shining in her eyes. Having gotten to this point, Subaru knew this was not simply an illusion being shown due to his desire. He had no doubt that this was her—Rem—and she was here.

“—Ah.”

Rem appeared to be trying to say something, her lips moving weakly. Hearing only that weak sound, Subaru’s heart was on the brink of breaking. He’d always talked to her sleeping face, and, in order to confirm that she still had life, checked her breathing as she slept.

Ushering in countless mornings and nights, Subaru had vowed to get her back. However, not once had he heard her voice in all this time. Closing his eyes, he recalled how she’d called out his name, and all sorts of other scenes. —But all of that belonged to the past.

Today, tomorrow, he wanted to hear the voice of the new her. Now that wish had finally come true. Subaru had gotten what he’d yearned for.

“Re…m...It’s fine. It’s okay, so take your time...”

“—Who.”

She anxiously moved her lips, her mouth still closed. Honestly, he thought he should grab her a glass of water or something for her now. However, there didn't seem to be a water source available near them, and it was impossible for him to tear his eyes away from her. Just a single word. If she called out to Subaru once more. When he heard that word, he would—

"—Are."

"...Rem?"

In silence, Rem sped up the movements of her lips, seeking out any ounce of moisture in her mouth. Moistening her tongue with the secreted saliva, Rem finally regained enough strength to open her mouth. Then, with Subaru reflected in her light blue eyes, she opened her mouth and said—

"—Who…are…you?"

"…"

The sound that spun from her lips, tied together with significance, pierced into Subaru's mind.

—Who are you?

"…"

Subaru knelt down, gazing at Rem's expression, holding his breath. Then, painfully exhaling the accumulated breath in his lungs, he pounded on his chest. Harder and harder, twice, thrice, talking to himself.

He should have expected this possibility. The possibility that Rem might not remember him when she woke up, he had considered it. It was only natural to think of that if he took Gluttony's Authority into account. There was a high possibility of her waking up without her Name or Memories.

Indeed, it was quite likely. So, it wasn't like Subaru had never considered that she'd lack memories. And, of course, the shock and pain he was feeling right now wouldn't be eliminated just because of this, either.

Even if that were the case, no longer would Subaru curse fate and live in despair, no longer would he live in rage, no longer would he pretend to be a tragic hero and feel sorry for himself.

Most important of all, Natsuki Subaru had already been told something by her.

"Please show me how awesome you can be, Subaru."

"—My name is Natsuki Subaru."

Gritting his teeth hard, Subaru threw away his anguished expression and pulled his cheeks up. Rubbing his face hard, he did his best to put on an act and give Rem a smile.

"You may not be able to remember it for now. But…I'm..."

"You…are..."

In the face of Rem's question, Subaru made a pause and shut his eyes tightly. Then, his black eyes reflecting in her light blue eyes, he continued—

"I'm…your hero. —I've missed you, Rem."

Saying this, for the sake of the girl he'd made an oath to, Natsuki Subaru once again took on the role of a hero. Bearing the image of a broken hero, the young boy once again gave his name for the sake of the young girl.

—Once again, here, and now, he vowed. To start a story with her, from zero.

Bonus Short Stories

Those Remaining in the Watergate City, Priestella: Reconstruction Journal Number Six
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

…The attack on the great underground temple in the Watergate city of Priestella is finally coming to a close.

However, as they approach the final phase, the circumstances are slowly catching up with the invading party.

Liliana: “Ugh, ugh, ugh… w, what do I do from here?!”

Ezzo: “I told you! I told you it was best to proceed as instructed!”

Liliana: “No! It is always the fresh and innovative ideas that break through the confines of the environment and are not bound by existing values…!”

Ezzo: “That’s coming from someone who doesn’t have a full understanding of the standards that need to be broken!”

Liliana: “Sniffle!”

Hearing Liliana’s reckless desire to be a hero, Ezzo judges it. Normally, Garfiel would be more in line with Liliana’s views, but in the current situation, Ezzo’s argument was far more correct. Everyone’s life was at stake right now. There was no doubt that Garfiel was the most pathetic person in the world, stuck in such a situation.

Garfiel: “Damn it…!”

He was slumped on the mossy floor, biting his back teeth as his body refused to budge. Garfiel was lying on his stomach on the floor, unable to move a single finger due to the mysterious load acting on the space. This is a thing… a punishment for sinners, or so Ricardo had interpreted it.

Liliana: “Ouchhh! It’s bad, it’s bad, it’s bad!”

Liliana’s transparent scream goes up, and the board tilts more and more to our disadvantage. Unlike the men who were crippled before her, Liliana was the only one who was free to challenge the last trap of the Great Temple, the giant Shatranj board. The Shatranj board is an ancient board game, where each piece is life-sized, and the game has begun with the commander, Liliana, as the king. However, the board was overwhelmingly disadvantageous for Liliana, who defied the rules from the beginning of the game, and her fate as the King piece was in the wind. With a number of shattered pieces already scattered all over the board, it was only a matter of time before Liliana was shattered at this rate.

Ricardo: “Liliana-chan! If you lose, you’ll probably die, so you’ve got to be strong!”

Liliana: “Uhh? What’s that? I didn’t hear any of that!”

Ricardo: “You didn’t even realize it! You’d know it if you saw it!”

Ricardo waved the hooks on his right arm, and Liliana, hearing his voice, became upset. Even Ezzo, who was a wise mentor to the strategy team, seemed to be uncomfortable with the Shatranj board, and it was difficult to come up with a move that would resolve the situation.

Garfiel: “If we lose like this, Liliana will be gone and our amazing selves be…?”

Will the defeat of Liliana, the representative, be the defeat of Garfiel and the others as it is? In that case, Garfiel would be defeated without a fight. That was when such anxiety flashed through his mind… A small shadow passed by the edge of his vision.

Garfiel: “Rats…?”

Garfiel frowned suspiciously. This is a space beneath the city, a space that has been abandoned for years. I would not be surprised if there were not one, but a hundred rats living here, but Garfiel had not seen a single one of them in all their adventures. The only thing that was there was a deformed monsters. The only reason the rats appeared there was because they had come in from the outside…

???: “That’s not good, Garfiel. You can’t be too honest. You should be more skeptical and not be poisoned by Natsuki-san.”

“…”

The voice came from the back of the corridor where Garfiel and the others had come from. It was a familiar voice, as it should be, but my rational mind denied that it could be. Because the person who this voice reminds me of is badly injured in both legs. Even if the enemies and traps along the way had been eliminated, there was no way to get there.

???: “Well, I wouldn’t have been able to do it alone. So…”

???: “My sister asked us to come with her, and we did.”

???: “I was worried about the captain, too.”

With that, two small cat people appeared from the dark passageway and a basket they carried… in that basket, Otto Suwen rushed to his brother’s predicament.

2

???: “…Sin will become a wedge which allows no escape.”

As soon as Otto, Hetaro and Tivey, Mimi’s brothers who appeared carrying him, stepped into the place, the voice directly shook Garfiel’s brain again.

Hetaro: “Ahh!”

Tivey: “Gah, It’s, It’s…”

Under the influence of the voice, Hetaro and Tivey could not stand there either. Somehow, the dragon was lowered to the ground, but Otto frowned as he crawled out from inside.

Otto: “I see, this is the load in question…”

Garfiel: “Oh, Otto-Bro?”

Otto: “Oh, I don’t want to keep you wondering. It’s a simple story. I asked the rats to scout for me, so I knew what would happen here…”

Garfiel: “That’s not it! No, it’s not. Why is Otto-Bro here…?”

With a hint of astonishment in his voice, Garfiel struggled to keep his voice down. Garfiel knew the answer to his own question. Otto came here because he was worried about Garfiel. Otto is a very caring person, so it’s easy to understand his decision.

Garfiel: “But now that Otto-Bro is involved… what happens to us if Liliana loses? Our amazing selves can’t face the captain or Emilia-sama like this…!”

Otto: “I told you, you’re taking it too seriously. Didn’t I tell you? We jumped into this situation knowing what we were getting into. Why is that?”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

Otto shook his head loosely in front of a gritted teeth Garfiel. Then he did something even more startling in front of Garfiel, who rolled his eyes… he pushed his injured leg and slowly stood up on the spot. The load must have been on for sure. He chuckled at the questioning look.

Otto: “I know it doesn’t seem like much… but what does it matter?”

Garfiel: “What about…?”

Otto: “Sin is a wedge, was it? I can imagine this situation, that it is weighing on each of us. It’s not the severity of the sins committed by each individual that makes the difference… is it?”

Garfiel: “…Ah?”

Otto’s guess, which negates Garfiel’s conclusion. Otto looked down at his brother, still crawling on his belly, his astonishment, and shrugged his shoulders.

Otto: “It’s not the sin committed that weighs you down, but how heavy you take it. So if you are willing to reopen it, the weight will go away.”

Garfiel: “Ah…”

Otto: “However, it’s hard to truly reopen your mind. That’s why I can’t stop my knees from shaking…The best of us for this is probably Emilia-sama.”

Garfiel was greatly puzzled when he was told that opening up was the right thing to do. The mind is not an easy thing to free. Especially when it comes to Garfiel. In this case…

Otto: “That’s why I’m here. …Garfiel, to forgive you.”

“…”

Garfiel was confused by the sudden offer and choked up. Otto’s forgiveness, he couldn’t quite grasp what it meant.

Otto: “I know that despite your appearance and demeanor, you have a difficult personality to reopen. I also know that you can’t forgive yourself easily. So let me forgive you instead.”

Garfiel: “…Ah”

Otto: “I’m pretty sure your regrets are about your family and us, anyway.”

At Otto’s bitter words, Garfiel was astonished and could not argue. Garfiel can’t say anything back to Otto, who laughed at him anyway. It was undoubtedly true. And Otto was right, Garfiel thinks he is naive, no, he is ashamed.

Garfiel: “Oh, oh oh…!”

…Just that one word was enough to lift the weight off of Garfiel’s body.

Hetaro: “Captain, we’ll forgive you for worrying us when you lost your… right hand.”

Tivey: “I forgive you, too. I forgive you for all the trouble you’ve caused me.”

Ricardo: “…Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, you little bastards. You’re so full of shit…”

With Hetaro and Tivey crouched down and cheering, Ricardo also stood up laughing. Next to him, only Ezzo, who had no one to forgive him, was in pain, “Why…?”. Then they stood up, Garfiel and Ricardo, and looked at each other.

Ricardo: “So, I’m standing up, but what are we going to do? Why don’t we cheer for Miss Liliana loudly from behind?”

Garfiel: “No, that’s not it. You’re right, our amazing selves were too honest.”

Gently clenching his fists together, Garfiel replied with a ferocious grit of his teeth. Then he nodded to Otto, who was standing painfully behind him, with just a glance.

Garfiel: “Our amazing selves don’t need to be a part of this nonsense.”

With that, Garfiel jumped down the front steps and landed on the board where Liliana was cornered. Then he stood proudly in front of Liliana, the king.

Liliana: “Ga, Garfiel-san? This is a rule thing?”

Garfiel: “Who decides what the rules are and where are they written?”

Garfiel whispers this to Liliana, who turns a wary eye. At that moment, a piece resembling a knight aiming at Liliana brandished a weapon and closed in on her. Garfiel literally kicked him in the face with a spinning kick.

Garfiel: “You can’t expect a lump of stone to stop someone else!”

Ricardo: “Oh, that’s fine! That’s something I’m really good at too!”

With a hearty laugh, Ricardo jumped down onto the board as well, and firmly caught the next piece’s blow with his hook. In the meantime, he slams his machete sideways into the vacant torso, shattering it. It was a big mistake to try to start a straightforward contest of wits.

Ricardo: “The first voice and the atmosphere that started on its own got the better of me. But, you know, now that I’m not going to be asked to win Shatranj… I’ll push through.”

Liliana: “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Let’s do it! It flashed an Idea! Brain muscle in the middle of the chestnut hair!!”

An excited Liliana strummed her lyulyre and charged at the pieces, listening to the sound… Garfiel and Ricardo attacked, and it took less than a minute to wipe out the enemy pieces.

3

The last, unpleasant load disappeared right after Garfiel hit the enemy king.

Ezzo: “Yes, I thought it would be a contest of wits, but in the end it was a matter of brute force…”

Otto: “I’m sure I’ve been a bad influence, but if you can solve a problem by punching it, it’s often the fastest way. I’ve learned a lot in the past year.”

When Ezzo finally stood up, Otto smiled and closed one eye. Once again, Otto was in the basket carried by Hetaro and Tivey. Then, the group, including the three who followed, headed for the innermost space of the temple this time. There is an object with a vague light on it that asserts its existence… the “Witch’s remains”.

Garfiel: “This is…”

Placed on a glowing pedestal, it looked like the bone of a human arm. However, it was very small and probably belonged to a child… So the “Witch” was young.

Ezzo: “Very interesting, but we’ll have to look into it later. There is a magic cloth. Let’s wrap it up and take it with us.”

When Garfiel thought it was in poor taste to gaze at it, Ezzo offered it to him, holding back his academic interest. The cloth is made of a special material that is woven with a magic formula that prevents the deterioration of the wrapped object. There is a question of degree, but it is probably best for wrapping bones. The rest…

Garfiel: “Now that we’ve served our purpose… how do we get back?”

At the entrance to the underground temple, at the very beginning, we fell more than one hundred meters. The walls were rigged to be unclimbable, and Garfiel hadn’t seen any side passages that looked like exits up to this point. Garfiel had assumed that there would be a way out once they reached the end of the room.

Liliana: “Well, if nothing else, can I count on Otto-san’s blessing?”

Otto: “…I’m sure they know we’re down here, so if we don’t come back for a while, they’ll send help. Just like we did.”

Liliana: “So, yeah! Fortunately, we’ve already taken care of all the scary things on our way here, and now we just need to stay here and wait for help.”

With a particularly cheerful voice, Liliana placed her butt on the pedestal where she had moved the remains.

…It was that moment.

Liliana: “Up?”

The moment Liliana gets on, the pedestal sinks down significantly. Then a quiet earth tremor and the sound of something approaching from afar began to echo.

Otto: “Wait, Liliana-san?! What did you do?!”

Liliana: “Wa, I didn’t do anything! I didn’t do anything! I insist that I did not!”

Garfiel: “This is no time to talk! Oi, this shaking…”

It happened just as Liliana was about to deny her responsibility… A tremendous amount of water rushed in and rushed at the group.

Garfiel: “Uh, ooooh…!”

The water flowed in with such force that it sank the underground temple and swallowed Garfiel and the others in one fell swoop. Quickly reaching out, Garfiel grabbed the basket containing Otto. Ricardo, too, grabs Hetaro and Tivey, and snags Liliana with his hook. Then Ezzo curls up and defends the remains wrapped in magic cloth to the death… but is swept away.

“…”

As he was swept away by the murky waters, Garfiel forced his eyes open to the dark vision and desperately searched for a way out. With the help of Liliana, Ricardo and Ezzo, Garfiel reached the deepest part of the Great Underground Temple, and with the help of Otto and Mimi’s brothers, they finally obtained the Witch’s Remains. It should never have ended in failure in this way…

Garfiel: “…Buhaa”

The end of the struggle came abruptly. Garfiel felt that he was being thrown out of a high place, and after sinking deeply once, he surfaced with Otto in his arms. Garfiel managed to catch his breath and looked around…

???: “…Ga, Garfiel-dono? And Liliana! And Ricardo-dono!”

Above the surface of the water, a young man standing on the edge of the moat… Kiritaka, the current leader of Priestella, was looking down at the group, stunned. If you look closely, you can see that the surroundings have brightened up, and everyone has been thrown out of the dimly lit space underground.

Otto: “Cough, cough, I wonder if this thing is supposed to be drained out?”

Coughing, Otto guessed the situation they were in. Garfiel agrees with him.

…The waterway, a muddy stream, merged into it and swept Garfiel and the others from the dark underground to the bright surface.

Liliana: “Ki, Kiritaka-Saaan! Please help me! The bones, I brought the bones back!”

Ezzo: “I’m at my wits’ end… I’m not fit to do manual labor in the first place…!”

Liliana complained as she splashed and splashed, and Ezzo floated helplessly. Ricardo, Hetaro and the others were completely soaked, their hair flattened and they looked like different people.

Kiritaka: “In any case, I hope all of you all… made it back safely.”

Garfiel: “Oh, Thanks to Otto-Bro.”

Otto: “If you say that, I’m sure it’s because of you Garfiel.”

As he relaxed his body and floated in the water, Garfiel laughed back at his older brother’s words. Then, they both thrust out their fists without either of them, and bumped them together.

…The group continued to drift in the water, relaxed and surrendered to a comfortable sense of weakness, until a panicked Kiritaka came calling. After a long ride, the group that had conquered the Great Underground Temple returned safely.

END

Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me!
Presentiments of Chaos Part

1

Looking back at the history between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Vollachian Empire, one could clearly see the depth of the rift that ran between them.

Both of these countries were part of the four great nations; however, it was plain and clear that they had the remaining two countries —The Holy Kingdom of Gusteko and The Kararagi City States—beat if boiled down to how abundant their realms were.

Of course, spreading the notion that further expansion was desirable, or seeking further prosperities, in lands like these was rather easy. Thus, as a result, Lugunica and Vollachia clashed with each other many a time, with the other's territory as their aim.

For most of these, the Vollachians, with their harsh mantra of life, had been the ones to seize many opportunities to wage battle. But, throughout their long history, the Lugunicans too had gone and waged battle on them.

Nevertheless, these skirmishes had gotten fewer and further between ever since four hundred years ago—when the Kingdom of Lugunica formed its covenant with the Divine Dragon; and so, peaceful times flourished between the two nations.

???: "…I read that stuff in a book! I'm really glad the two countries have quit fighting thanks to the esteemed Divine Dragon giving it its all!"

As soon as they heard Schult's answer, the three riding along in the same Dragon Carriage reacted in three different ways. Priscilla batted her eyes shut as she listened to him talk, Al nodded as he rested his chin on his hand, and…

???: “So you’re really going to blindly believe such a childish fairytale?”

And lastly, Heinkel, a red-haired man who, immaturely, was acting like a wet blanket.

The four of them were travelling together, all key members of the camp belonging to Priscilla, who was participating in the Royal Selection. They were currently on board the same Dragon Carriage, deep into their journey towards their destination.

During their journey Priscilla had ended up with a lot of time on her hands, thus she’d asked Schult about his studies. And just after he’d answered, Heinkel had given him his crude impression.

In all honesty, Al and such were always in a constant state of anxiety over Heinkel’s attitude.

How could he spew that sort of stuff to Priscilla’s favorite, Schult? Couldn’t he remember that he’d put his life at risk several times before for the very same reason?

This time as well, Heinkel received a cold look from Priscilla, as if it were natural…

Al: “Huh?”

Priscilla: “…What is it, Al. Are you amusing yourself by stealing glances at my face?”

Al: “Nope, though make no mistake, your face is gorgeous, Princess; the kind where you never get tired of it, no matter how many times you look… Regardless, I was surprised you didn’t say anything. I was terrified you were going to blow a fuse again and set off a blood purge.”

Priscilla: “Fool.”

Priscilla fired off a curt rebuke in response to the content of Al’s answer, as the latter shrugged his shoulders. Following that, she gave her beautiful chin a nod towards the front—pointing out Schult and Heinkel.

Al looked over in that direction, and…

Schult: “Calling it childish is awful, Heinkel-sama! After all, I am still a child, so of course I’m gonna be getting hooked on childish stuff.”

Heinkel: “The fact you can take a good look at yourself at your age is great and all. But is the place you’re living in one with guys who are willing to show due consideration to the fact you’re a child?”

Schult: “Well…”

Heinkel: “I’ll go ahead and tell you. No, it’s not. They’ll mercilessly snap at the fact you’re Priscilla-sama’s weak point, if they catch wind of it. Priscilla-sama would be put in a bind, due to you being content with the fact you’re a child. Get it?”

The words Heinkel had for Schult were devoid of any mercy as the latter frantically defended himself.

Though it still appeared to be a manifestation of Heinkel’s immaturity, if one were to attentively prick their ears up to their exchange, it would be noticeable that was not the case at all.

In fact, it seemed like Schult had figured out the meaning of his words in his own way too.

Schult: “I get it… I’ve gotta not be a child, right?”

Heinkel: “…No, kids should stick to being kids, being cute is way better. Though they may be a bit more of a handful, it's way better to have no special powers.”

Schult: “So which one is it…?!”

With the look on his face indicating he’d heard something pleasant, Schult grew red in anger while Heinkel brushed that aside.

But they weren’t actually arguing with each other, as far as Al could see. Plus, it was clear that Heinkel wasn’t trying to harass Schult.

Al: “He’s not going to be showing some part of him where he’s kind to children, right? Even if he does, he ain't gonna be getting back any of the likability he's lost."

Priscilla: "Enough with the nonsense, Al. Though evaluations may be things that others attach to one another, they need not be shackles that fetter one's way of living. Do you really believe that thing cares about what others think of him? There are far easier ways of living life out there."

Al agreed with what Priscilla had said, all the while fiddling around with the seam of his helmet.

Heinkel's way of life certainly looked more like the epitome of horridness, rather than one of clumsiness. He even seemed to willingly walk down the path of being loathed, rebuked, disdained and shunned by others.

That's why the fact that he displayed a decent human side every so often would bring them the sort of surprise Al had felt. In other words…

Al: "I guess it's just like the cliché where a hooligan picks up a stray cat on a rainy day."

Priscilla: "You are saying incomprehensible stuff again."

Al: "You don't ask about these things as much as you used to, huh. It's pretty sad that I've been getting less chances to lecture you about them, you know?"

Priscilla: "We have been acquainted with each other for a long time now, so I can tell which of your words elicit my interest, and which are prattle. What you said now is prattle that I shall not listen to. Besides…"

Priscilla cut her words off there and looked towards the Dragon Carriage's window. Naturally, Al followed suit and turned his face around. There, he saw how the atmosphere had changed outside the window.

Priscilla: "…We shall be arriving at the harbor soon."

Al could feel the smell of water in the breeze straight after Priscilla had spoken those words. The air too was starting to be tinged with moisture; he could feel it on his skin that they were near a large body of water.

The harbor city they were heading to was nearby. Ironic as it was, the harbor looked out towards the lower reaches of a massive river —one they'd been close to until very recently.

Al: "The Watergate City of Priestella, or rather, the Great Tigracy River that flows nearby once again huh. We've come far downstream from that city, but I can't shake off the impression that we've ended up looping back to it."

Priscilla: "It is not part of my nature to fritter away time for nothing. We cannot be so naive as to take the road that leads down south through the Barielle Territory though. We have nothing to gain by carelessly provoking the Empire."

Al: "There's one way around that, using your splendor, Princess"

Priscilla: "Indeed, my face is always bright and radiant. Nevertheless, the rabble will oftentimes misjudge the value of that which shines. Birds that gather shiny objects are far more honest and adorable in that respect."

Priscilla directly called the people of the Empire fools without so much as mincing her words. However, given that he was so used to being on the end of her speech and actions, there wasn't anything in particular in what she'd said that he could find fault with. Besides, the relations they held with the Empire were in line with what Schult had said at the start.

Thus, Al and the others had headed off to the Great Tigracy River, heeding Priscilla's intentions. Their aim was to ride the river's current downstream and make it into the Empire.

Al: "The Empire, huh…"

He muttered softly. The Vollachian Empire was a place that had not left any good impressions on Al. Though he had spent eighteen years there, far longer than the time he had spent in the Kingdom of Lugunica, the only impression he had left with him was one of struggling to survive in a world akin to hell.

This place was one he had hoped to never return to, if it were at all possible…

Priscilla: "…What is it?"

Al let out a sigh as he looked at Priscilla, the very reason behind why he was going back to the Empire. Priscilla raised her shapely eyebrows in response, making Al bluster out a "Nothing,"

Al: "Just if this is one of the weaknesses of falling in love, then I wonder what there's to like about it."

Priscilla: "I see. This feels like a bunch of nonsense that I need not hear."

Keeping in line with the standard she'd set earlier, Priscilla lost interest in what Al had to say. And in response to her cold attitude, Al softly muttered "What's there to like about it, huh."

2

Cutting down through the world map, the Great Tigracy River had its source in the south of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko and meandered southward, passing through the places where the four great countries bordered one another, before finally flowing into the Vollachian Empire. There the river also swept down its realm, linking the southernmost land to the Great Waterfall.

Many ships travelled through the river, often being used for trade between the countries. Priestella was one of these trading hubs, though other, more modest, river harbors existed as well.

The ship they had chartered to cross into the Empire was one setting sail to the great river from one such river harbor.

They had started off their cruise by reserving a ship neither too big nor too small, the Empire as their destination.

Some stuff happened during their journey. Like Schult getting sick from the ship rocking about, Priscilla telling them all she knew about travelling by ship and the great river, and Heinkel getting into disputes with the sailors. However, they didn't encounter any major troubles, and like that, the ship with them aboard crossed into the Empire. And then…

???: "No sudden movements folks. Do anything weird and there'll be hell to pay."

Al: "…"

???: "'Oy, you, the asshole with the face covered up, do you get what I'm saying? I'm talking to you!"

Al: "Oh, me? My bad, my bad, couldn't quite catch your expression. Now I get you loud and clear."

Al raised his hands and kneeled down on the deck of the medium-sized ship—which was still in the midst of its journey downstream. Saying "How did it come to this?", he lamented his ill luck.

They had boarded their ship in the harbor city and tried to cross into the Empire from the river, just as they had initially planned.

The Vollachian Empire was in a state of constant tension with the Kingdom of Lugunica, the latter holding its Royal Selection; however, the river-crossing was way less guarded, compared to crossing the border station by land.

Al had imagined they would be able to continue like this and get onto Imperial Lands without any issues, however…

Al: "Never thought we'd come across river bandits…"

Al frowned inside his helmet as he placed his sole arm behind his head, indicating that he was not going to put up a fight.

River bandits: just like one would get mountain bandits up in the mountains and moor bandits in the moors, one would also get bandits dubbed “river bandits” in the rivers. They were simply robbers by trade, forming bands to attack merchant ships and ferries, pillaging their valuables.

By the time they had caught a glimpse of the boats around their chartered ship, it was already too late. They had come aboard in the blink of an eye, and both Al and the sailors ended up being taken captive.

???: “Wh-Wh-Whoa, Al-sama? Wh-What should we do?”

Al: “Calm down, Schult-chan. We’ll be okay for now, so long as we don’t go against them. Heinkel, ya geezer, that goes for you as well y’know?”

Heinkel: “…Tch”

Heinkel moved his hand away from the sword at his waist as he stood next to the panicking Schult.

His lifeless blue eyes were seemingly saying he would do whatever it took against these river bandits, however, Al had lazily shaken his head. His chances of coming out as the winner rested with having Al help him.

For sure, if Al and Heinkel worked together, they might be able to scrape by against these river bandits, which numbered around twenty. However…

Al: “We wouldn’t come out unscathed either. You wouldn’t want Schult-chan to get hurt, right?”

Heinkel: “…”

Al: “Oh, seriously? That worked. Attaboy Schult-chan, how fiendish of you.”

Schult: “H-H-Huh? What’s that all about?”

Heinkel, albeit reluctantly, finally shelved away his readiness to fight.

Al was not sure whether Schult's presence contributing to that was because Heinkel seriously liked children, or because he was projecting someone else through Schult.

River Bandit: "I'm gonna lower the boats down. You guys move over there, we won't be killing you."

The rogue in charge of the river bandits lowered the boat at the side of the ship down as he said that.

However, it was going to be touch and go whether this boat could fit all of the sailors from the ship, even crammed together. Though their ship was by no means a large one, it still held a crew of twenty, same as the river bandits. Add passengers like Al and the others to the mix, and things were going to get tough.

River Bandit: "Boss! We've got a real beauty staying in one of the cabins!"

Al: "Gah!"

One of the river bandits who had been scouring the ship came back carrying that bombshell. The person he had brought along was Priscilla, who should have been relaxing in her cabin. Naturally, she was not in a great mood, given that she had been interrupted. —No, it was much worse.

That was obvious enough from witnessing the smoldering look in her eyes. However, the boss stepped over to Priscilla and boldly grabbed her chin, not taking any note of this.

Boss: "Whoa, she's lush. She's gorgeous, and well-dressed to boot… I bet we'll be getting a huge ransom from her parents or husband. No way we're letting this golden goose out of our sight."

Priscilla: "…How vulgar."

Boss: "What?"

Priscilla: "Even under the best of times, the thought of going back to where I used to live is one that weighs heavy on me. This first hurdle already is not starting to bode well. Nevertheless, I shall not tolerate having it upon the path I walk. Therefore…”

Priscilla narrowed her eyes, all the while being still made to look up at him.

Both Al and Heinkel snapped to attention, bracing themselves for the carnage that would ensue. However, nothing happened.

Priscilla: “…”

With her eyes still narrowed, Priscilla softly moved her lips and began whispering something to the boss.

His expression significantly tensed up after he heard what she had to say, his eyes swinging wide open. His underlings also exchanged glances with one another, witnessing their boss like that.

And then…

Boss: “—. Just like I said, get the sailors onto the boat! We’ll be taking the woman and her companions for ransom. And we’ll be having the ship as well!”

The boss loudly declared this again, causing the river bandits to hurriedly comply. And just like that, the original sailors were placed on the boat and set loose on the river, leaving only Priscilla’s group behind.

Al: “Erm… So, what are we going to do? Negotiate the price of the ransom or something?”

Priscilla: “Fool, we needn’t do anything like that. Lo’ and behold.”

Al: “Uh, what do you mean… Whoa?!”

Al had tried to continue with what he was saying once the sailors were out of sight, but he was left amazed by the fact that the river bandits were all kneeling down on the spot, reverentially waiting on Priscilla.

Al, Schult and Heinkel blinked in astonishment, not understanding the meaning of what lay in front of them. But Priscilla drank it in, as if it were the most obvious thing ever,

Priscilla: “Excellent work, you have my thanks for welcoming me. That was quite the smart move.”

Boss: “Yes ma’am. Smart…?”

Priscilla: “It is a word the jester who serves me says. You can take it as a compliment if you do not capture its meaning.”

The river bandit tilted his head in confusion, before nodding deeply at what Priscilla had said. Seeing that, Al finally got up from where he was and said “Princess?”

Al: “I don’t get what this means, or what sort of connection you have with these guys, Princess… Any chance of an explanation?”

Priscilla: “There is nothing to explain. These people belong to the private troops of an Imperial Noble and are merely disguised as river bandits.”

Schult: “Private troops? But but, aren’t they wicked people?”

Both Al and Schult could not figure out what Priscilla meant, their heads similarly tilted in confusion. Only Heinkel behind them said something, looking as if he had figured it out.

Heinkel: “So that’s what it is. Your identity would stand out no matter how much we tried to avoid it. So the easiest way to get them off your trail is to hide where you are. Therefore…”

Priscilla: “…High Countess Selena Dracroy. We are acquainted via my ex-husband.”

Priscilla quietly replied back to Heinkel, not once denying what he had said. Hearing both her answer, and the name that had cropped up there, the facial expression of the river bandits grew tenser.

Likely, this High Countess or whatever was their mistress. And so, in following her orders—no, in accordance with her and Priscilla’s collaboration, they had put on this spiel.

Al: “Did you really have to go this far just to get these people to tell them off? Aren’t you just going back home?”

Priscilla: “This shall not end up being only a mere visit back home. —Otherwise, where would the fun be in that.”

Priscilla pulled out her fan from her cleavage, hiding her mouth with it, before then flashing him a somewhat cruel smile. Though Al could not actually see her lips, which had taken the form of that smile, he could feel a shiver running down his spine.

The ship, with them on board, sailed down the river and headed into the Empire. —The curtain-rise signaling unrest drew ever near.

END

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint, The Lion's Ferocity: Third Chronicle

1

"Does the dinner suit your tastes?"

"It ain't bad. Anyhow, Reinhard's cookin' is more delicious."

"This, really… The kitchen staff have been giving it their all, but it still isn't up to par? Just as I thought, the world's greatest knight truly seems to be great at everything."

"It ain't that big of a deal. This dude's cookin' is just one of the few things I acknowledge about him."

Whilst saying that, Felt jutted her finger at the red-haired knight, Reinhard, who was seated next to her. Her comment, which was hard to tell if it really was a compliment or not, caused Reinhard and the dinner host—Russell Fellow, the merchant who'd invited the two of them there—to exchange glances while smiling bitterly.

Felt and Reinhard, who had escorted the Sin Archbishop, Sirius, to prison, were being entertained by Russell, one of the most influential people in the royal capital, and came to this place to be treated to dinner.

In the royal capital, Lugunica, this was the largest residence in the commercial district, as well as where Russell lived. The residence of the man who was known as one of the prominent merchants in the royal capital was even more luxurious than the mansions of your average noble in the noble district, highlighting the fact that he was a highly successful individual.

This was evidenced further by the fact that Felt and the others enjoyed a variety of different dishes that satisfied their tastebuds.

"…"

Narrowing her crimson eyes, Felt poured the post-dinner black tea into her mouth, as was only natural. Though it irritated her to no end, the life she had lived this past year was rather distinct, like a completely different world, when compared to the life she had lived for ten or so years in the slums. She may have been shocked by the differences in ideas and what could be considered common sense, but whether she liked it or not, the appearance and form of the person known as Felt had changed, having been dyed a different color.

—Felt was not afraid of change. For change was only the natural course of things.

No matter who or where you are, there will always be those with unparalleled strength whom you cannot match up to. However, the theory of 'Only the Strong Survive' only applied to the strong.

Felt was instinctively aware that she was most certainly not a strong person. Having been born and raised in the slums, she had not been educated, and to top it all off, she was a female. If it weren't for Grandpa Rom looking after her, she likely would not have made it to the present day.

As a result, Felt had a preference for the theory of the Survival of the Fittest—where the one who could adapt to their situation and discern the best manner of survival would survive—rather than the theory of 'Only the Strong Survive.'

She also believed that it was because of this belief that she is who she is today. Therefore, she did not blame herself for changing and adapting to her current situation and position. This was only the natural course of things. If there existed anything unnatural or unsatisfying, it would be—

"What the hell are ya smirkin' at?"

"Smirking… Did I smirk in such a way? My apologies, milady. It's just unusual for you to praise me in such a frank manner."

"Frank? I was simply praisin' your cookin' skills, yeah? But you're a knight, not a cook. Ain't that right?" Felt wrinkled her nose at his smile, which made her feel as if he weren't two-faced.

Reinhard was the knight who served Felt, as well as the knight who brought her into this different world against her will. Although they had spent time together for the past year, for some reason, Felt still hated him. —No, that wasn't the proper word for it. Instead, it could be said that she got angry at the mere sight of him.

Even at this very moment, she felt angry at him like she usually did.

"Ha."

"Oh-ho?"

"No, my apologies. The relationship between the two of you simply feels surprisingly novel." Observing the interaction going on between Reinhard and Felt, Russell provided a justification for his laugh, chuckling softly. "I've heard word of it before, but your Master-Servant relationship truly is incredible. The relationship between you two really breaks the bounds of common sense when it comes to the relationship between a knight and their lord."

"This ain't the first time I've heard something like that, but no matter how many times I hear it, I still don't see where it's comin' from."

"However, it came from Mr. Russell this time, who is famed for his excellent eyes in the royal capital. I believe it is a very good opinion. Lady Felt."

The relationship between the two of them which Russell had evaluated was often said to be an unordinary Master-Servant relationship. However, to Felt, the idea of "Normal" didn't exist. And, in the first place… "When it comes to human relationships, it's only natural for there to be no such thing as 'normal.' Everyone is different. And if that's the case, then every relationship ain't the same. Ain't that right?"

"…"

"That's why I don't wanna hear from a guy who often talks about what is 'normal'. Even less so if it's from a guy who's said to have excellent eyes. That'd be outta the question."

Even if a man were said to have a good eye for people, if he were held back by superficial values, it would mean the people around him had poor judgement.

Such uninteresting guys aren't that hard to find throughout the kingdom, so… "What kind of guy are ya gonna be for me? If you're just gonna be an uninteresting guy who talks bullshit, then I'm just gonna have ta thank ya for the fine meal and head on out."

"…Now I understand. You're more…tough than I heard."

"Hmph. I ain't sure where ya heard that, but if you're truly a person who has a good eye for people, then don't listen to such things, confirm it with your own eyes."

With her arms crossed, Felt snorted at Russell in a provocative manner.

He was the one who had invited them here. To put it another way, there must have been another reason as to why they were invited here other than to simply have a friendly get-together.

—From this point forward, the main discussion would begin.

"—. Do you recall what we were talking about in front of the Prison Tower during the day, Lady Felt?"

"Are you referrin' to the thing 'bout the changin' times and the tumultuous era?"

"Yes, that is correct."

Russell nodded and began talking about the conversation they'd had when the Sin Archbishop was being escorted into the Prison Tower. He then called the trend of Sin Archbishops and the Three Great Witchbeasts being defeated one after the other, as well as how the royal selection first began, the changing times.

It was the flow of change comparable to 400 years ago, when the Witch of Envy was running wild.

"The signs of change are not limited to within the borders of the

Kingdom of Lugunica. To the north, the Church of Gusteko has begun hunting heretics, and to the west, in Kararagi, the thinking of the mayors there has begun to fester. Most importantly, in the south, in Vollachia…”

“Vollachia… Are there any signs of unrest in his empire?” Responded Reinhard to Russell, who’d folded his hands on the table and spoken in a lowered voice.

To the south was the Vollachia Empire, which was the nation that the Kingdom of Lugunica was most weary of. The relationship between the two countries could not be said to be friendly, and they often had conflicts with each other.

“However, what I can say is that the Kingdom exchanged a non-aggression contract with the Empire for the duration of the royal selection.”

“The Kingdom did indeed hold negotiations with the Empire for the forming of a non-aggression pact before the start of the royal selection. Weren’t you part of the delegation that handled that, Sir Reinhard?”

“That’s right. Felix and I accompanied Council Elder Miklotov and Council Elder Bordeaux.”

Felt raised her eyebrows when she heard the nodding Reinhard say that. Of course, one of the reasons why she was surprised was because this was the first time she’d heard about the fact that he had been in the delegation that’d been sent to the Empire, but—

“Wait, what? From what I can remember, wasn’t there some stupid little treaty called the Reinhard Law? And ‘cause of that, you can’t go to other nations, yeah?”

“Yes, that’s correct. However, it was the Empire that asked me to go with the delegation. I heard it was the wish of the Emperor himself.”

“That guy has strange tastes… if ya ask me, I definitely wouldn’t wanna see this guy’s face if I could avoid it.”

"This… Even I can be hurt sometimes."

Felt shrugged her shoulders at Reinhard, who was sitting across from her and smiling bitterly.

Whatever the case may be, since it was the Emperor himself who'd requested Reinhard's presence there, and the non-aggression pact came about because of that, then even if the Empire was rather warlike, it would never dishonor itself by violating the pact and attacking the kingdom.

"It's precisely as you have presumed. Even the Empire wouldn't violate the pact made between the two nations by making a move on the Kingdom."

"—. That really worsens the mood, ya know."

"Lady Felt?"

Russell had picked up on that guess and agreed with it completely. That kind of attitude, as if he were fully aware of her ulterior motives and saw through them, annoyed Felt to no end.

If the topic of this conversation ended with this, then she had no idea why he would bring it up in the first place. In that case, Russell should have enough material to continue with it.

Then why was he withholding it from them?

"Are ya tryin' to say that there's no goin' back after hearin' what comes next? I'll tell ya what, once I boasted to the arrogant guys in the castle, there was no goin' back after that."

"And it is my duty to remove all of the obstacles in Lady Felt's path."

Felt's eyes took on a stern expression, and Reinhard's expression became serious as well.

Russell's eyes could only widen slightly at the sight of the master and servant, who were near each other and looking in the same direction. Then, he reluctantly shook his head in the next moment.

"I was rather rude earlier and apologize for that. I did say that you two did not fit within the mold of what could be considered normal when it comes to the relationship between a knight and their lord… However, it is clear now that you two are, without a doubt, master and servant."

Even though Felt did not really see this as a compliment, she felt like there was no point in interrupting him here, so she remained silent.

Russell then raised his hand and had all of the staff in the room leave.

Then, with only them in the room, and without any outsiders present, he lowered his voice and said—

"Now then. What I am about to say is confidential and must not be shared with the outside world… There is a bit of a loophole in what Sir Reinhard said."

"A loophole? Are you referring to the non-aggression pact?"

"Yes. Who actually signed the non-aggression pact between the two countries?"

Reinhard dubiously scrunched up his finely-shaped eyebrows in response to that question.

"The King is actually not present at this time. It was a representative of the Council of Wise Men, Council Elder Miklotov, and Emperor Vincent Vollachia of the Vollachia Empire who… It can't be."

In the middle of saying this, Reinhard's eyes widened in surprise. Felt, who did not share in that surprise, asked for an explanation with a "What the hell is it?!"

"There's nothin' weird about that, yeah? The Council of Wise Men represents the Kingdom now. Ain't it only natural to talk to the highest rankin' person on the opposing side? No one is gonna complain now that the opposing side ain't in the same rank as them, right?"

“…There’s no need to worry about that. His Majesty, Vincent, is a wise man. He should know very well that it doesn’t work like that, right? But…”

“But?”

“—This pact…was made with the Empire ruled by His Majesty, Vincent.”

Russell said that in the place of Reinhard, who was hesitant to say it. After thinking about it for a moment, Felt understood what he was saying, too. The true meaning behind his roundabout words was—

“There are signs of civil unrest in the Vollachia Empire. If that is true, then the Kingdom is not unrelated to this. —Because there is a possibility that the pact will be dissolved.”

2

“What do ya think ‘bout what that guy said?”

Asked Felt, on the way back to the mansion. The dinner meeting and secret talk now over, their current plan was to return to the Astrea Family’s mansion in the royal capital. In it lived Grimm, who was its caretaker, and Carol, his wife. It was time to see them again after a long time.

Felt was quite fond of the old couple. Therefore, she did not want to return to the mansion with a sad, troubled expression on her face, and intended on getting rid of it on the way there. The source of said expression was none other than the discussion she’d just had with Russell.

“Do ya really believe that something will happen in Vollachia?”

“In my personal opinion, this is not something I want to believe. However, Mr. Russell is not one who would speak such irresponsible words without evidence, after all.”

“That’s very important for a merchant, ain’t it. That’s only natural.”

What could be gleaned from speaking with him was that Russell was the kind of guy that would never spread rumors without gaining anything from it. It would not be right to describe him as being a good person. However, he wasn’t necessarily evil, either. He was the type of person who would use the information at his disposal in order to guide others towards fulfilling his own plans.

Moreover, whether he acted with good or bad intentions would more or less depend on the situation he was currently in and what he needed to deal with, so it wouldn’t be possible to know which one it was until all was said and done. Therefore—

“If Mr. Russell’s speculation turns out to be true and the throne is handed over to another…”

“The Empire would be able to make a big move against the Kingdom. But there ain’t no way the new Emperor wouldn’t know about the pact made by the previous Emperor, yeah?”

“According to the way things are done in the Empire, it is the norm to negate whatever the previous government did, so his speculation is no laughing matter.”

The more she heard about it, the more idiotic the theories of the Empire sounded. While an ability-based system sounded good in name, if it got taken to an extreme, it would advance past what could be considered a good thing and into the realm of anarchy.

Therefore, it could be said that Reinhard and Russell’s fears were by no means ungrounded.

“What will ya do if the Empire attacks?”

“I will ensure your safety first and foremost, Lady Felt. Fortunately, I have met and fought against many of the Empire’s most skilled, so I am sure I’ll be able to take care of things.”

“I ain’t worried ‘bout myself. If I gave a damn about that, I’d just find a way to turn tail and run, anyway. By the way, if that were to actually happen, ya wouldn’t even be able to stay with me in such a situation, would ya?”

Though it was just a hypothetical, if the Empire did indeed invade, then it would end up being a war between two nations. If that were to happen, it would only be natural for there to be no way to deal with the matter of the royal selection.

The strongest knight in the kingdom, Reinhard, as he was a former knight of the royal guard, would be assigned a different role. He would then no longer be in a situation where he was by Felt's side, doing things like cooking meals.

However, in front of Felt who was having such thoughts, Reinhard shook his head. "That's not the case," he said. "Although I am not certain what decision the Council of Wise Men will make at that time, I have already pledged my sword to you, Lady Felt. I will ensure that my duties as your one and only knight and my duties as a member of the royal guard are properly balanced."

"Even if I were to tell ya to turn your back on your country, ya have no intention of turning your back on me…?"

"At the very least, that is the meaning behind the oath I made to you in the royal castle."

Felt couldn't help but scrunch her face up whilst looking at the display of Reinhard looking pleased with himself, a slight smile on his face.

In the royal castle, she had made a vow to make Reinhard her knight, and he had also made a vow to be her knight. In any case, it was something that had been done based on the circumstances she had been placed in, and she had no intention of stepping away from it. Well, she did still feel angry at the very sight of him, however.

"Having said that, it would be best if nothing actually happened in the Empire. The unfortunate thing is that I cannot do anything in such a case if I am not close to the border."

"What we can do, then, is prepare for war. I really don't like this negative way of thinkin' AT ALL."

Pouting, Felt turned her head upwards and gazed at the starry sky.

However, whilst being in trance-like state, what suddenly sprang up within her mind was—

“Even if there ain’t nothing we can do, I’m sure there may be others who can figure out a way to do something about it.”

“Others… You mean the other royal selection candidates? But the others are all…”

…Preoccupied with dealing with the problems in Priestella. She thought that was what Reinhard was about to say before cutting himself off. Much like Felt, who was tasked with transporting the Sin Archbishop to the capital, the Emilia and Anastasia camps were acting in order to overcome the great disaster that had occurred in Priestella.

If they thought about it in this way, it would only be natural that no one had the time or energy to worry about the workings of neighboring nations, however—

“It is a tumultuous era, or so they say, right? I’m lookin’ forward to what’s gonna happen.”

Although she didn’t like borrowing Russell’s words, there must be someone that brought about these tumultuous times. —Perhaps Emilia or the dark-haired boy by her side, for instance.

Looking back at things, she thought that it was because of them that her and Reinhard’s paths intertwined. I’m so lookin’ forward to what is to come. —Lookin’ forward to them making big waves once again.

“Lady Felt?”

“No, it’s nothing. Anyway, let’s go and do what we gotta do. First things first—”

Stopping herself midsentence, Felt then grinned at Reinhard in a rare display of emotion. Without thinking, with her heart overflowing with joy, and her canines in full view, she said, “It’s been sooo long since I’ve had Grandma’s red tea and snacks. Let’s get goin’ already!”

“—Yes. As you wish.”

END

Arc 7:
The Land of Wolves

Volume 26

Chapters 1-12

Chapter 1: Initiation

1

…As soon as the plume of smoke cleared up, Ram felt a rare sense of helplessness.

Ram: "…"

She opened her pale crimson eyes, straining them as she peered into the room which still had smoke hovering over it. However, even as she did so, searching for something amongst the emptiness, the ones which she was seeking were nowhere to be seen.

She looked for those people in the room where a large hole had appeared, someone moving, or someone in black, along with the adorable blue one; however, they were nowhere to be found…

???: "…Ram!"

Ram's shoulder was grabbed from behind as she'd tried to take a step forward, bringing her back to her senses. She realized that she'd been about to step through a cracked bit of the floor. If she hadn't been stopped in her tracks, she might have fallen.

How clumsy of her, to literally not even see what was beneath her feet.

???: "I'm glad you're safe Ram… And Patrasche-chan, are you okay as well?"

Ram: "Emilia… sama…"

Ram bit her lip. Meanwhile, the one who'd grabbed her by the shoulder was Emilia, who should have been on the upper floors. While panting slightly, Emilia checked to make sure Ram was okay, as well as how the black Earth Dragon, Patrasche, who was crouched down behind them, was getting on.

Finally, while looking at them, Ram regained enough of her composure to take in the state of her surroundings.

The corridor in what should have been a robust stone tower had collapsed, with the floor and ceiling both smashed to pieces. She could see the sky and sand of the sand-sea from across the wall, which now had a hole in it; a parched breeze was blowing in as a result.

However, the place that had gotten damaged the most was the room where Ram, Patrasche and co. had been staying in until just before—That's to say, the room they'd so dubbed the "Green Room".

Ram: "…"

The room had been chock-full of grass and ivy, covering the walls, floor, and even going up all the way to the ceiling. Nevertheless, the room was now unrecognizable from its original state, with its natural erosion of many, many years torn up root and branch.

That included its beds, which were woven from grass and ivy, as well as the faint light the Spirit's presence gave off; all of it.

That, and their biggest problem was…

Emilia: "Ram… Where did Subaru and Rem go? They're safe, right?"

Standing by Ram's side, Emilia peered into the area where the Green Room had previously stood. Ram wasn't able to answer her question straight away, even though she knew that her painful silence itself served as an answer.

2

???: "…First of all, let's try 'n sort out what happened. We're not gonna be able ta talk about things calmly unless we do tha'."

Looking around at everyone who'd gathered within the room as she said that, Anastasia took charge of the situation.

Anastasia's white fox scarf—Echidna—was still wrapped around her. She brushed her fingers through her slightly dusty fur as she spoke.

Anastasia: "So, about that black shadow that attacked the tower jus' before…"

Julius: "It's gone, at least for now. Thanks to the power of the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, I'd say."

Echidna: "Both the Dragon and the shadow's movements were so sudden, it made us really wonder what the heck was happening, huh."

Inside the tower, the ones who'd come back safe and sound began to share what had happened, starting first with Anastasia, and then Julius and Echidna following her lead.

Much like Anastasia and Echidna, Julius' white knight garb was also covered in grime. However, that wasn't just because of the heated battle that had taken place in the tower, it was also heavily due to the effects of the aforementioned event.

Nevertheless, none of these three had ended up with any extra injuries; on that point itself, you could say it was a relief.

That in itself was thanks to the achievement wrought by the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, on the top-most floor of the tower.

Beatrice: "Volcanica cleaved the looming shadow with its breath, I suppose. If not for that, we would have probably been in for a world of hurt, in fact."

Anastasia gave Beatrice a nod in response to what she'd said, as the latter folded her short arms together.

In all honesty, when Volcanica had unleashed its breath so suddenly, Anastasia had uncharacteristically resigned herself for death. Things had happened so quickly, that there hadn't been any way to deal with it.

Though of course she couldn't say that she'd completely relaxed her guard just because of that single breath.

Julius: “The Divine Dragon’s response to the crisis dawning upon us was simply magnificent, but even so, the state it’s in isn’t great, that remains unchanged still… Currently though, it seems to be keeping itself quite obedient and following Emilia-sama’s instructions.”

Anastasia: “Out of consideration for Julius, I’mma try ‘n avoid callin’ ‘em “senile”… But, ‘tis all the same as the Divine Dragon-san bein’ a scary‘un. Anyways, as for what happened, it’s exactly as Beatrice-chan says.”

Beatrice: “I suppose.”

The only one who could have dealt with a situation as abrupt as that was Volcanica. What would have become of them now, had the Dragon not blown away the looming shadow for them.

Yet, they couldn’t start jumping around in joy…

???: “There was a to~n of ‘em. But, they all went towards Onii-san and stuff…”

Anastasia: “Meili-chan.”

Meili: “…Ah, my apo~logies.”

Anastasia: “…”

Meili didn’t take care with her word choice, almost as if she were upset, and for that, Anastasia chided her. Meili gave her a sincere apology as she looked towards Ram and Emilia, both having kept their silence.

In hindsight, the ones who’d received the damage from that shadow had been the two from the Emilia Camp—Subaru and Rem—Thus, the damage the Anastasia Camp had suffered was practically zilch.

Anastasia: “Though it’s not like I can actually say that, we’re all travelin’ together after all.”

Anastasia muttered that to herself before then catching a glimpse of

Julius and Echidna. They had been working together with Emilia's group during the time she'd traded places with Echidna, when she'd been sleeping at the depths of her own consciousness.

It went without saying for Echidna, whom she'd known for around ten years, but even the practically brand spanking new Julius, at least as far as her memories were concerned, could easily tell that she was shook.

On that point, it was quite the surprise to Anastasia that Beatrice, who should have been quite close to them, had come to this meeting.

Anastasia: "Beatrice-chan, are ya alright? Ah wait, no, it ain't propa' of me to use a word like "Alright". But still, ya haven' gotten ya'self into a panic, no?"

Beatrice: "…Betty panicking wouldn't mean it'd bring back Subaru and Rem, in fact. Right now, the main issue in question is messing up our first move due to panic, I suppose. I'd specifically like to avoid that, in fact."

Anastasia: "First move? By that, do you mean…"

Emilia: "…Bringing back Subaru and Rem. Taking action for that, yeah?"

Anastasia raised her eyebrows quizzically as she tried to question Beatrice. However Emilia interrupted her, still while supporting Ram by her shoulder.

Emilia's amethyst eyes pierced right through Anastasia, her eyes widening in surprise a tad at the intensity of her glare. She wet her lips with her tongue.

Anastasia: "Dang, I thought you were gonna be dejected as heck, but that's one helluva' look you've got in your eyes. What d'ya mean?"

Emilia: "It's really nothing complicated. Subaru and Rem ended up being swallowed by that shadow and taken away from us… Volcanica did drive it away, but he was just a tad too slow. Even so…”

Ram: “They didn’t die from it. I’m sure of it.”

While still being propped up by Emilia, Ram opened her eyes and replied. Then she gently touched the part of her on her forehead—the part where presumably her Oni Clan Horn had been—as she let out an exhausted sigh. It was what served as the basis of her words, which felt full of conviction.

Anastasia: “The Oni Tribe’s… Ah, wouldn’t that be the sisters’ synesthesia? So you’re saying that you’re linked with Rem-san?”

Ram: “Yep, that’s right. Rem is alive… No clue about Barusu.”

Beatrice: “Subaru’s alright as well, I suppose! Betty can guarantee that, in fact!”

Beatrice shouted in anger, almost red in the face, in response to Ram’s very Ram-like words. After all, she was Beatrice, the Spirit who’d made a contract with Subaru. Her words did have some credibility to them.

In other words, it meant that the two of them who had vanished had been confirmed to be alive from separate angles.

Julius: “In regards to Subaru, we have his connection with Beatrice-sama’s contract, and in regards to Miss Rem, we have Miss Ram’s synesthesia… Both of those are worth believing in. Besides, I too would like to hope.”

Anastasia: “Quite the honesty there… Well, either way, I too would rather prefer that Natsuki-kun ‘n Rem-san were safe ‘n sound.”

Anastasia stroked her scarf after Julius replied, as if to say getting too close to them would be a problem.

They were working with Emilia’s group as collaborators for the time being—But the fact that they were competing with each other in the Royal Selection hadn’t changed. She didn’t want them to get the wrong idea about that and add to their troubles.

Nevertheless, it was precisely because they were fighting each other that they ought to repay their debts without fail.

Meili: “We~ll then? Like, it’s super-duper good that Onii-san ‘n stuff are alive, bu~t, where are they?”

Failing to read the mood positively, Meili asked them that while playing around with the Tiny Crimson Scorpion balanced on her head. Julius opened his mouth in reaction to her question, and began to speak,

Julius: “Well, though I wouldn’t be able to explain them in great detail, that shadow was the product of Yin Magic… Or at the very least, the Yin Attribute. It should be the same sort that’s sealing the likes of the Witch of Envy in her shrine, and Roy Alphard in the Dragon Carriage. If we presume this to be the case, then as for our resident expert…”

Beatrice: “…That would be Betty, I suppose. My prognosis isn’t all that different from Julius’ either, in fact. That thing was a clump of Yin, I suppose. It’s close to a Shamak that’s been given direction, in fact.”

Echidna: “Shamak? Isn’t that the basic magic of the Yin Attribute? How was it then so powerful?”

Beatrice: “…I knew there were going to be quite a few humans who’d misunderstand since there are hardly any users of it. However, it’s troubling that even you think of it like that, when you’re a Spirit like me, in fact.”

Echidna, who had taken up her white-fox form, was stared at reproachfully by Beatrice, causing her to cower her head. Giving a sigh at her reaction, Beatrice raised one of her fingers and said: “May I, I suppose?”

Beatrice: “Shamak’s special quality is in “Separation”, in fact. A low-grade Shamak separates one’s body from their awareness, whereas a high-grade Shamak rends space from itself, I suppose. Betty’s Door Crossing is one such application, linking two rooms together, and achieving something close to teleportation, in fact.”

Ram: “That was the contraption Beatrice-sama had set up in the previous mansion. It was a real pain having to call her for mealtimes, so to be quite honest, I’d gotten fed up with it.”

Beatrice: “It really upsets Betty that you’d say that so honestly right here, right now, I suppose. I do believe I am sorry about it, but the apologies can wait until later… Anyways, Shamak, in essence, can separate space from space if so inclined; as well as that, it can separate objects, no matter how strong they are. It’s the Witch of Envy’s specialty, in fact.”

Anastasia: “From your explanation, aren’t you saying that Natsuki-kun and Rem-san have been scattered into pieces?”

If that shadow was as deadly as that, then what she’d said felt just like something that branded Subaru and Rem’s survival, who’d been swallowed by it, as being hopeless.

Beatrice however shook her head at Anastasia’s question.

Beatrice: “What I mentioned right now was an allegory, I suppose. At least, that shadow wasn’t something that was set to chop Subaru and Rem into pieces, in fact. But it was going to take them within and whisk them away somewhere, I suppose.”

Echidna: “Somewhere… Across space… In this situation, I imagine it would be to where she is?”

Ram: “…After all, there’s the matter of Barusu’s miasma.”

Echidna broke down Beatrice’s exposition into simpler terms, and at the end of that, Ram provided the reason why.

The miasma that enveloped Subaru, which had greatly agitated the witchbeasts en-route to the Watchtower, was now a well-known fact amongst the Royal Selection Candidates.

Regarding this miasma thing, both its cause, and its finer details, were unknowns.

Ram: “All I know about the miasma is that it attracts witchbeasts to it, and that the people who are connected with the Witch Cult often emanate it in spades… That's pretty much it."

Emilia: "Hm, although Subaru's been chased by witchbeasts quite a few times, he's got nothing to do with the Witch Cult. I get that it's preeeeetty suspicious, but…"

Anastasia: "No need ta fret, don' worry, I ain't castin' doubt on that now, Emilia-san."

Emilia: "Oh? Thank goodness. Subaru is a good boy, so…"

Emilia patted her chest in relief, however, the issue was still very much there.

Just like Anastasia had said, the thread of thought regarding Subaru being connected to the Witch Cult was no longer inside her. Nevertheless, the fact that they didn't know Subaru's origins still brought forth doubts within her.

She didn't think that Subaru was someone with ill intent. However, ill intent that one wasn't conscious to was a thing too.

There was a chance that, behind all of his good intent, Subaru's existence was a ticking time-bomb in itself.

Anastasia: "Yeah Yeah, so your concern is unnecessary, I got that much from how ya started the sentence off. The shadow that swallowed Natsuki-kun and Rem-san up was the one that whisked 'em away ta somewhere. The real question is, where ta?"

Echidna: "As well as what happened due to Volcanica's breath having interfered with it."

Beatrice and Ram, who were linked with the two of Subaru and Rem respectively, probably had a rough idea of their whereabouts.

Searching for them was going to be a tall order, if all they knew was that they were alive, without knowing exactly where they'd been hurtled off to. —At the very least, the option of not searching for them was not available to anyone in this place.

Emilia: "Please, you two, where are Subaru and Rem? Tell me please.”

Beatrice and Ram exchanged looks, having turned towards Emilia’s sincere appeal. Then after a few seconds of silence from the both of them…

Beatrice: “…He’s south, in fact.”

Ram: “Ram too senses that she’s in that same direction. I’m not sure of her exact position, but I think she’s fairly far away.”

Emilia: “South? South from here we have the uhh…”

Emilia furrowed her well-defined eyebrows straight after Beatrice and Ram had both mentioned they were south. Though she must have been giving it her all to envision the map of the world in her mind, Anastasia raised her hand in her stead.

Currently they were in the Augria Sand Dunes situated in the easternmost part of the world map. As far as south from here went, Picoutatte or Flanders, of the five great cities, were the most likely, however…

Julius: “In regards to that alone, the state of the two is inscrutable.”

Seemingly having arrived at the same idea, Julius spoke Anastasia’s mind for her.

From the way he got into sync with the speed of her thoughts, Anastasia valued him as being ideal as her knight even more, all while batting one of her eyes shut and saying: “Indeed.”

Anastasia: “‘Tis quite the distance, but if they find themselves aroun’ those parts, then we can say that the damage incurred would be negligible. Yet, despite that, both of yer faces look pale… Do ya both mean ta say he’s way more south?”

Emilia: “Way more south, you can’t mean…”

Meili: “…They ended up going all the way down to the Vollachian Empire in the sou~th?”

Meili’s surprise was minimal compared to how shocked Emilia was. But it was safe to say that Meili’s reaction was down to the fact that she hadn’t comprehended the scale of things. Given that, Beatrice and the others’ reactions were all perfectly understandable.

If Subaru and Rem had crossed through the country… And if they’d crossed into the Southern Empire, they had a real problem at hand.

Anastasia: “If I’m not mistaken… The Kingdom of Lugunica ‘n the Vollachian Empire in the south signed a nonaggression pact that would last for the entire Royal Selection. Isn’ that right, Julius?”

Julius: “That’s correct. I imagine you wouldn’t know about this, but I also went there to tie down the agreement. Me, Reinhard, Ferris and such met the Emperor in person.”

Emilia: “From what I’d heard, we were on reaaaally bad terms with the Empire; but, if you did that, then are we okay with them now? So if we were to go and search for Subaru and Rem…”

Julius: “…No, that’s not going to fly.”

Julius lowered his brows with a shake of his head in response to Emilia’s timid question. He softly cast his yellow eyes down, which glittered like jewels, emblazoned on his handsome features,

Julius: “The Empire has forbidden travel between itself and the Kingdom since several months ago, for the time being. Due to the Royal Selection, the same thing happened with the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko in the north, however they’ve already rescinded their ban…”

Echidna: “I guess that means the one the Empire set hasn’t been rescinded. Though we did travel to the Watchtower, so because of that we don’t have the latest information… So if the situation there hasn’t changed…”

Emilia: “Going there to help Subaru and Rem is going to be tough?”

Julius: “Yes, unfortunately.”

Though they exchanged various thoughts about it, Julius concluded with these mere words of regret.

Anastasia too, could only come to the same conclusion as Julius. It would be impossible to break in from the front where entering the Vollachian Empire was concerned.

They'd have no choice but to look for a secret way in, and in addition to that, they'd also need to find the time and contacts for it.

There'd be no quick and easy way here. Surely Emilia would be in an absolute hurry when thinking about the two people who's status remained unknown…

Emilia: "…We need to move quickly. We'll receive Volcanica's blood and bring it back to Pristella… Then we'll take the Gluttony we captured to the Royal Capital, yeah?"

Beatrice: "Emilia…?"

Emilia: "I know Beatrice. I can't help but feel reaaally, reaaally impatient. But we won't be able to help Subaru and Rem out, even if we rush things here… We've gotta remain calm."

However, Emilia's calm decision surprised Anastasia, just as it seemed she would have gotten into a panic. She gave a resolute nod at Beatrice, also similarly surprised. Her eyes were quivering, her voice was shaking a bit, yet she was giving it her all to keep a grip of herself.

It was just like she was saying I'm not going to fold my arms together and sit back for even a second, if it means getting Subaru and Rem back.

Emilia: "You two, Subaru and Rem must be together, right?"

Ram: "…I just double-checked with Beatrice-sama, we think they probably are."

Emilia: "Alrighty… Then if that's the case, I'm sure Subaru will go to great lengths to protect Rem. That's why we needn't worry about Rem. Even though Subaru's a lil' scary."

Though her belief in Subaru was strong, in regards to the same kind of worries, Anastasia did agree as well.

Natsuki Subaru had lost his memories for a bit in the tower, as a result of being left to his own devices. That boy with a propensity for self-punishment had a bad habit of making light of himself in order to protect the people precious to him.

Just as it sometimes would encourage others, it also similarly served as a cause for concern.

Anastasia: "That said, guess all we can really do is count on Natsuki-kun's quick wits. Emilia-san is right, what we can't do is stay here grumblin' 'n moanin' inside the tower. We gotta get a move on."

Julius: "Understood loud and clear… Beatrice-sama, do inform us if there are any elements of concern."

Beatrice: "…Subaru's body, I suppose. Subaru's gate can't expel mana out on its own since it's broken, in fact. If we leave him alone for too long, then it's going to burst due to a mana blockage, I suppose."

Anastasia: "I see. I'm sorta in the same boat, so I can really get on the same level as Natsuki-kun there."

Anastasia's gate was defective by birth. She was unable to take in mana properly; such, for example, would be a critical defect for a mage. Nevertheless, this had no effect on the luck and knack for business needed for a merchant, so it didn't really bother her much.

Echidna: "Ana…"

Anastasia: "I know, I know. In regards to our problems, ain't we gonna talk about 'em separately a bit later… That aside, it doesn' look like we've got any time ta slack off."

Anastasia clapped her hands together, with everyone else nodding back at her signal.

Their objective was to search for the whereabouts of Subaru and

Rem, who'd both disappeared. For that, they would need to return from the Pleiades Watchtower as soon as possible, in order to muster a search party as well.

On top of that, they needed to fulfill one of the primary objectives that they'd come to the tower for.

Meili: "Things are so hectic, to the point that I almost feel like I'm gonna pass ou~t…"

Emilia: "I know right. Still, Subaru and Rem must be having it way more tough."

Emilia firmly clenched her fist, thinking of Subaru, who'd been hurtled off to somewhere faraway. Seeing her face in profile, Meili, with the Tiny Crimson Scorpion plopped on her head, narrowed her eyes and said "Yeah, of course" with a shrug of her shoulders.

And just like that, the group began to busy themselves to get their preparations done—Or so, they were about to.

Meili: "Come to thi~nk of it, Ram Onee-san, did you tell 'em about th~at thing?"

Ram: "… I still haven't."

Anastasia and the others: "…? That thing?"

Ram's face turned sour at Meili's rather abrupt question. All of their gazes turned towards Ram, clearly having not heard anything about it.

With them all looking at her, Ram paused for a brief moment, and after that said,

Ram: "Emilia-sama, although I'm still not one-hundred percent sure about this… The ones swallowed by the shadow and hurtled away to the Empire may not just be only Barusu and Rem."

Emilia: "Not only the two of them… But you, Patrasche-chan, and Meili are all accounted for, so shouldn't that be everyone who was in the Green Room?"

Meili: “Well, a girl appeared all of a sudden, before that shadow came kinda kerplowing i~n. And what’s more, according to Oniisan, it was the third Gluttony or some~thing.”

Anastasia and the others: “The third Gluttony?!”

Anastasia and the others were taken completely aback after being told this tidbit they really could not disregard.

And so, the discussion grew in intensity, regarding whether they should amend their actions going forward and getting the details which Ram had kept under wraps regarding this matter out of her.

As that went on, within the now turned bedlam of the Pleiades Watchtower, Emilia clasped her hands in prayer in front of her chest, all the while looking out of the huge hole where the Green Room had once stood.

Emilia: “Please, Subaru… I really hope you’ll be alright with Rem.”

3

—As Emilia’s small prayer drowned in the parched skies overhead the sea of sand, at the same time far, far away,

Subaru: “…”

Sitting atop an open meadow, caressed gently by a wandering breeze was a boy, and in his embrace, a girl.

The boy had black hair, and his eyes sharp as the edge of a dagger, with the whites being quite pronounced, aka the very known sanpakugan; eyes that made his face to appear in a permanent scowl, a glare rumored to be all that is needed to kill a man.

However, at that moment, his lips curved up ever so softly, and the corners of those eyes were wet. It took all he had to not break into a complete bawl.

It was a natural outcome, of course.

He’d waited for this very moment for so long. The memories of each day he passed in wait, in grief, none would allow him to look away for even the briefest of moments from the girl in front of him.

The girl, embraced so dearly, looked at him through the locks of her bright, blue hair.

Her eyes widened, though the strength to resist was barely present on her adorable face. It was as if she had woken from sleep, and was still caught up in her drowsiness.

To be fair, that was indeed the truth of the matter. She'd finally woken up from a long, long slumber, so she'd quite obviously feel a disconnect from reality.

Rem: "…Ah… um…"

Her lips moved, as if mulling over what he'd spoken of moments ago.

As he watched, the boy—Natsuki Subaru nodded vigorously.

Subaru: "Yeah, exactly, that's exactly it, Rem. I'm your Hero. I've been waiting for so long for…"

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "Rem?"

Trying to stifle the tremble of his own voice, he desperately tried to pick up on Rem's.

Perhaps due to being thirsty or something of the sort, though as her lips moved and her tongue flicked, her throat would not produce sound. Even so, he put his ear near her mouth, attempting to glean even a sliver of what Rem was trying to communicate to him.

Her meagre attempts to convey anything filled him with immense joy.

Rem: "…m."

Subaru: "I'm listening, there's no need to rush it, okay? Rem, what are you trying to…”

Tell me, as he would’ve said, but was ultimately cut off.

Once he’d drawn his ears close enough to listen to her, his trail of thought was halted as a hand pushed against his head and chin.

Following that flow, he felt himself be turned over and fall to the ground.

And then—

Subaru: “…Re…Rem?”

Subaru found himself with his back on the grass, and Rem straddled on top of him.

Bewildered, he remained stiff in place. Staring down at him, Rem’s eyes scanned him from top to bottom.

She then released a quiet sigh and,

Rem: “What’s your aim here? Tell me what you intend to do to me right now!”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “Calling yourself some Hero out of the blue and… Who’s Rem? Tell me right now!”

Knees pressed down over Subaru’s shoulders, her hands shot to his neck. With her weight bearing down on him, Subaru struggled to move, his legs twitching restlessly.

Kaede

However, the skill with which Rem had restrained him was somewhat aweing. She'd left no room for him to regain his freedom.

Subaru: "Gu… ah… ghk…"

Rem: "If you refuse to speak, I will simply continue until you desire to do so. Please do not prolong your own suffering. Speak. What exactly are you…"

Subaru: "—Gha."

He knew not whether it was involuntary or on purpose, but the strength with which Rem used to press against his neck left him no room to answer her with.

As his mind dimmed due to the lack of oxygen, he realized letting this go on would result in his death.

It had been so long, and even if it were a one-sided reunion, Subaru could not allow it to end with Rem strangling him. Not like this.

Even if nothing of Subaru remains in her memories.

Subaru: "A- Ah…"

Rem: "Are you feeling like speaking now? If so, I will, in good faith —"

Just then, as Rem frowned while looking at the signs of strained struggle on his face,

Louis: "Ah-! Ooh-!"

Rem: "—Kya-?!"

Suddenly, a petite shadow slammed into Rem's body from the side —Or rather, it leapt onto Rem and became entangled with her on the grass.

With the weight gone, he rolled over and began coughing, then looked towards Rem with clouded, wet eyes. There, he saw the figure of a little girl struggling with Rem.

Louis: “Uuu—! Uuuu—!”

Rem: “Wh-What are you doing… Stop it, please! This isn’t the time to be…”

Her blonde hair covering all of Rem, the little girl bared her teeth on her flushed red face as she howled. Subaru stopped, unable to form any thoughts upon witnessing this sight.

Subaru took a breath and rushed to the two.

And then—

Subaru: “Oi! Get away from Rem, right now!”

Louis: “Ah—, Uuu—!!”

Subaru pushed off the little girl who had been trying to pull on Rem’s hair—Archbishop Louis Arneb, and held her down with her hands behind her back.

The light bodied Gluttony attempted to struggle, but only in vain. The best she could currently do was kick about. Twists and groans were thrown in, but nothing more beyond that.

Louis: “Au—! Uuu—, Uuuu—!!”

Subaru: “God damnit, you…! Stop struggling…Just stay put! Rem, are you okay?! Did she do anything to you?!”

Rem: “N-No, I’m fine. More than that, I keep asking you over and over…”

Subaru yelled as he held Louis down, to which Rem answered with crooked brows. With her eyes fixed on him, she attempted to stand on her feet—

Rem: “—Eh?”

And thumped back onto the ground, her knees having given away.

Her strange way of falling down raised questions in Subaru's mind. Yet unaware she was being observed, she pushed on her knees and tried to stand up once more. However—

Rem: "…My legs won't…"

Subaru: "Wait, you can't stand up?"

Rem: "N…no, that's not… Not true… It's not true at all…"

Her voice trembled as she attempted to refute his strong claim. However, no amount of willpower allowed her to stand up. Far from being able to balance herself, she couldn't even put any power into her feet at all.

Subaru: "Are you feeling weak because you've been asleep for so long? Wait, that can't be right. Wouldn't call the strength you used to push me over just now that of someone who's been bedridden as long as you."

There was often talk of how one would eventually grow weaker over their long stay at the hospital, likely due to a lack of exercise.

It was quite a well-known fact that those people require rehabilitation to stand and walk again, but would that truly end at the legs?

It wasn't as if Rem had been moving her upper body during her 'hospitalization period'. She'd been asleep for over a year, so it would only make sense for her to feel weak overall, and not just in her legs.

And yet, this disconnect existed in her, in Rem's body. Likely, this was due to—

Subaru: "—Wait, could it be because of the feedback she took from Nee-sama's fight?"

As his mind sifted through the possible reasons as to why Rem's body would behave like this, that was the conclusion he had reached.

He'd heard from Ram in the Green Room about how her death-battle against Gluttony went down. Due to Subaru's worsening condition, Ram needed to change things to avoid being cornered. So she'd chosen to share her 'burden' with Rem as her trump card.

As a result, the majority of Ram's burden of pain, who was said to be the strongest of the Oni Clan, flowed into Rem. Subaru remembered having that conversation.

If that were the case, then—

Subaru: "…It's all my fault."

He'd uttered a phrase he'd surely be rebuked by Ram for.

However, as it stood, Subaru had been unable to fulfil the duty he himself had taken on himself, resulting in Ram needing to push herself further, which consequently affected Rem. It all went back to being Subaru's fault.

Steeped in this situation, having none of his friends around that he could rely on, where only he, Rem, and Louis, who was continuing to act weird for god knows what reason, the responsibility he bore was all the more heavy.

Rem: "All your fault you say… Did you do something to me?!"

Subaru: "Not at all, it was just a figure of speech; however…"

Rem: "First things first! Who are you?! And who am I?!"

Subaru: "…"

Giving the legs that wouldn't obey her will properly a firm whack, Rem glared at Subaru with a tempest of fury in her eyes. Subaru felt something rather bitter, that his unpleasant guess had become reality, hearing Rem's heartbreaking complaint, which had felt like she was going to lose her temper.

…Rem had said: "Who am I"?

"Who are you" was still way better. However, her asking about who she was, was still something extremely gut-wrenching for Subaru, considering he'd been waiting so long to see Rem again.

He'd had an inkling this would be the case, from the fact that she was referring to herself using "I" instead of "Rem".

Subaru: "I guess she must be in the same state as Crusch-san…"

Rem had had her name and memories taken away from her, resulting in her continued slumber.

There were two other patterns found in the victims of Gluttony; namely, the ones found with Julius, who'd had his name taken away from him, thus forgotten by the people around him, as well as with Crusch, who'd had her memories taken away, having lost herself.

When Rem had woken up, she'd done so having lost her own memories; in an amnesiac state.

Her confusion was perfectly natural when you considered she was stuck in a situation this incomprehensible, along with a boy with mean-looking eyes to him, a girl who could do nothing but groan and her own legs not working as she wished.

Louis: "Uwaa!"

Without even realizing that Louis had grown quiet, as if she'd tired herself out from struggling around, she dropped from the exhausted Subaru's arms, and fell down on her backside, letting out a screech.

She began to roll about, while rubbing her backside. Subaru didn't bother to give her any attention, instead he slowly made his way over to Rem's side.

As Subaru drew closer to her, Rem kept an eye on him, all the while keeping her guard up strongly.

Seeing that look in her eyes, he was reminded of the first time Rem had turned this hostility against him.

It was easy to forget, because they'd gotten quite close after they'd warmed up to each other, but Rem originally was quite reserved, and was a rather difficult girl to get close enough to.

In that respect, it was way easier with Ram, since she never changed how she interacted with him, both before and after they became closer.

The scary part in fact though, was that according to one theory, there was even the chance that they didn't get along.

Subaru: "Anyways, the matter of nee-sama aside… Hey, you know…"

Rem: "Wh-What is it? Just so you know, if you're planning on doing anything to me, I'll…"

Subaru: "…Rem."

Rem: "Huh?"

Rem's tense expression turned into one of being taken by surprise. Subaru stopped in his tracks as he made his way over, keeping enough distance between them, so he'd be more than a step out of her reach,

Subaru: "It's Rem. That's your name."

Once again, he called out her name.

Rem: "…"

Rem sunk into silence, unable to hide her bewilderment, having had that gently poured against her. Nevertheless, she shifted her red tongue, which was barely visible behind her lips, and repeated "Rem" as if making sure of it.

It was like she was making herself familiar with her own name anew.

Subaru: "In all honesty, I don't really know properly what happened either. Just that we got separated from our friends, and we're here, in this place which is god knows where. You should be able to understand that’s quite the mess, right?”

Rem: “Well, I…”

While still very bewildered, Rem’s eyes examined the grassland in their surroundings rather than Subaru.

A breeze rustled through the grassland, the sun was high up in the sky, and he felt humidity against his skin. A muggy sensation that felt different to the parched air of the Augria Sand Dunes.

He was in a place that was so different that the sensation he felt from the air had changed.

In other words…

Subaru: “We can’t expect to be helped immediately. We’re gonna need to take the necessary actions to help ourselves from here, somehow or other. That’s why…”

Rem: “That’s why what? What are you going to tell me to do? Me, and my legs which can hardly move and all.”

Subaru: “…I imagine you’ll get all suspicious again once I say this sort of stuff, but I’d be just content with you being here for me. Breathing, talking to me, looking around the surroundings with your eyes; I’d be content with only that.”

Rem: “…? You mean looking around with my eyes, and telling you whether the coast is clear?”

Subaru: “No quite like that, though, that too would be fine.”

He was very much just content with Rem waking up, breathing, and speaking to him.

Even though it was something rather unselfish, what Subaru had implored in regards to Rem having woken up, was only that she’d be in good health, thus these were, no word of exaggeration, his true intentions.

Of course, he needed to solve the issue of her missing memories.

That, and Emilia, Beatrice, Ram and everyone who'd been left behind in the tower with the matter of Subaru and his group having gotten separated from them, ought to be quite worried.

He wanted to join up with them as quickly as possible. —He wanted to get Ram to meet Rem, since she'd felt such love for her little sister, whom she didn't remember.

Subaru: "Please, won't you trust me here? Even if I were to give up my life in exchange… No, it means squat were I to give up my life, so I shall protect you at all cost. I swear it. That's why…

Rem: "—. And say I take you up on your offer, then what will you do?"

Subaru: "Ah, right. Would be pointless to act with no-plan, so when it comes to one…"

Receiving Rem's prudent question, Subaru sought for the information needed to draw up a plan.

As aforementioned, Subaru and the others were in a vast grassland, however, they could see large trees growing close to each other, encircling the grassland.

Seeing they were intercepted by the canopies of the trees before they reached the horizon, the trees surrounding them at a 360 degree angle, it seemed like they were in an open grassland, a place such as that inside of a forest.

Truthfully, it was nothing but dangerous to venture into a forest on a land he was completely unfamiliar with, but—

Subaru: "Firstly, the unbreakable rule when one gets lost in a forest is to let his allies know his location, using a GPS, but…"

Rem: ""Gee-pee-es"?"

Subaru: "I know. Nothing like that exists… It's just that Beako has the connection she has with me, so there's a possibility she could pinpoint my whereabouts with something similar. In a way, you could say my existence itself is a GPS."

Depending on the situation, there was also the possibility that Ram's Synesthesia would detect Rem's location. In that sense, both Subaru and Rem were fulfilling their roles as a GPS that connected them to their allies.

Subaru: "What's left is securing a source of water… It's important to get a hold of water, no matter what. It's probably better if we chose our base camp, and start widening our field of search from there. Edible grass and fruits are… ahh, I was right to learn it from Clind-san. Gotta thank my mentor…"

During the process in which he learned parkour and how to handle a whip, Clind had hammered various techniques and knowledge into his head. There were times he nearly whined about giving up on the teachings of the versatile steward, but thanks to it being beneficial to him, Subaru could keep his guiding principle with him despite being in this situation.

Anyway—

Subaru: "There's a lot of other stuff as well, but it's not like I'm trying to take action without a plan. Are you able to understand now?"

Rem: "…To an extent. Even if I wanted to resist, I'm in this condition, so…"

Subaru: "…That's a remark that I can get a glimpse of your honest thoughts from."

Subaru tested a smile, trying to reassure her, but her reaction wasn't as good as he thought it would be.

Having lost her "memories", there was no foundation for Rem to build her trust for Subaru on. If she could move her legs freely, then she might've already escaped from him long ago.

Though, he didn't want to think of the misfortune that happened to her as something fortunate.

Subaru: "Your legs. I hope you can start moving around on them soon."

Rem: "—hk, even if you told me that, I don't know. What are you going to do?"

Subaru: "I told you. Firstly, I'm planning on searching for water. There's the thing with your legs, so I'm thankful if you wouldn't act against me if you could…"

Saying that, Subaru closed the final step between him and Rem, crouching down and turning his back to her.

If she looked at his posture, even Rem would know what he was trying to do.

Rem: "Are you planning to bring me with you on your back?"

Subaru: "There's also the choice to princess carry you, but I won't last very long if I do that. If you would let me carry you on my back, I guess it's very helpful, personally."

Rem: "…"

She fell silent for a while, staring at Subaru's pitiful expression. After that, she slowly blew out a sigh, and tentatively reached for his back.

Rem's slender arms slunk above his shoulders, interlocking in front of his chest. Feeling the tender weight on his back, Subaru took his time in standing up, making sure he wouldn't shake Rem, who was clinging onto him.

He felt her weight. However, what he thought while carrying her on his back was that she was light.

During this one year, he had many opportunities to carry the slumbering Rem, but every time he did, he experienced how difficult it was to carry an unconscious person firsthand.

The sensation wasn't there with the Rem who was holding onto him of her own accord.

Rem: "—? Is something the matter?"

Subaru: “No, it’s just that it was deeply moving, oddly enough. So, it’s about the search for water, but,”

Rem: “Before that… what will we do about that girl?”

Subaru: “…Ah.”

Looking ahead of the place where Rem indicated by jerking her chin over his shoulder, Subaru remembered the problem.

On the grassland, splayed out on the grass while patting her bottom, the area she had hit on the ground, was Louis, who was tangled up in her own long, blonde hair. —What should he do about this Sin Archbishop that was acting strangely?

Subaru: “…”

Even Subaru knew Louis’s current state was unnatural.

She was an opponent with a mental structure that couldn’t be declared as decent, but it was because of her knavishness, not because he could see her previously hidden side of infantile regression.

In fact, she was quite intelligent for her age, and she also had the room to ponder over her devilish thoughts, something that was similar to swiping her tongue across the splinters in one’s heart.

What about the behavior of the current Louis?

Louis: “Aah, aauuh—”

Having been licking Subaru’s face at the time he woke up, growling like a toddler that didn’t know how to speak, and throwing a tantrum like an infant as a result.

There was no mistake that something immeasurable had occurred within her mind.

However—

Subaru: “Will that become a reason for me to pity her?”

She was abhorrently evil. That truth would always be unwavering.

Louis, who he had faced at the last scene in the “Hall of Memories”, had been traumatized from experiencing “Return by Death”, becoming frightened of not only Subaru, but everything that existed in this world.

At that point, she had already become enough of a poor, miserable girl.

However, Subaru didn’t save her. He didn’t even think about wanting to save her.

Despite having many different options held in front of them, they continuously picked the choices that went against humanity, ultimately losing the opportunity to correct those, and cut off their own way out of it. The Sin Archbishops were those kinds of people.

Her two older brothers, as well as Louis herself, weren’t exceptions, either.

Committing unforgivable evils, Louis Arneb had turned into a degenerate deserving of being damned to hell.

—Why did Subaru have to save someone like that?

Rem: “You won’t help her?”

Subaru: “…It’s complicated. I was in the same place as her, but she’s not really my ally. In fact, she’s on the opposite side of an ally. My heart won’t ache, even if I left her here.”

Rem: “…”

Behind him, he heard Rem’s breath catching in her throat, but it was a reaction that couldn’t be helped.

From Rem, who didn’t know of Subaru’s circumstances, Louis probably only appeared to her as a young, helpless girl, just as what she looked like. Even if her true identity was one of the desecrators that toyed with a great number of lives.

That's why Subaru had one choice.

Subaru: "We're leaving her there… We can't bring a dangerous element with us, much less a burden."

Picking up Louis from the advancing shadows was an error of misjudgment that he made in the tower. Perhaps, if Subaru had abandoned her then and there, there could've been the possibility this wouldn't have happened between him and Rem.

It was certainly what people called it as causing a hundred problems and bringing forth not a single profit.

Rem: "Is… that so."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's right. I can't say I had a pleasant time waking up either, but…"

Subaru's topmost priority was Rem, and then himself. He would never be confused about it.

With that intention, Subaru ignored Louis, who was lying down on the grass, and headed towards the forest on the opposite side to—

Rem: "—As I thought, even if I were to be empty, I was right to believe in myself."

It was said with a terribly icy, cutting tone.

Having that voice murmured by his ear close by, Subaru released a breath with an, "Eh?". However, forbidding him from reacting any further, a pair of slender arms snaked themselves around his neck.

—Rem, who was being carried on Subaru's back, was strangling him from behind.

Subaru: "—Gahk,"

Rem: "Saying things that sound pleasant to my ears before inviting me to come with you, and then abandoning the girl. How could I believe someone like that, telling me to put my trust in him? Stop messing around with me."

The strength in the arms wrapped around his neck was certainly the strength of an oni, unlike her physically handicapped legs.

Unable to peel her arms away, Subaru's breathing was blocked completely. Bending himself backwards, he wasn't aiming to do so, but he fell onto the grassland on his back.

However, in spite of being crushed underneath him, Rem refused to remove her arms from his neck. Since she was behind him, he couldn't flail his arms to free himself from her.

Why? The doubts and questions filled up the inside of his head.

He shouldn't be asking "Why?", because Rem had already provided the answer to that. In front of her, who didn't know anything, Subaru had made too much haste out of his panicking feelings.

He was receiving retribution for that, like this—

Rem: "Letting such a wicked stench drift around yourself, and saying you're not scheming anything is a bare-faced lie in itself!"

Subaru: "…"

A wicked stench. Subaru recalled his memories as he heard that.

During the time he had just gotten to meet Rem, the biggest reason she doubted him and regarded him as dangerous, was by no means the bad impression he gave during their first meeting, nor the shape of the eyes he was born with.

—The Witch's miasma.

Having lost her "memories", even if Rem didn't have anything left other than herself, she was still able to perceive it.

That was the largest factor that bought him Rem's suspicions.

He was too late in remembering it, much less even noticing it, and —

Subaru: "—ah,"

Thrashing and twisting his body around, Subaru attempted to make an excuse for his actions, but it was impossible.

Like that, Subaru’s consciousness fell into the deep abyss of the darkness, slowly and gradually.

The last thing he wanted was to be killed by Rem like this. He shouted that out with desperation.

His voice was silent, unable to be heard.

4

Subaru: “–~hk, Rem?!”

The abrupt awakening of his consciousness, woke up Subaru’s upper body as though crashing into him.

At that instant, coughing violently due to the pouncing ache of his throat, whilst spitting out the phlegm stuck there, Subaru somehow raised his body and looked around.

The location was the meadow Subaru had been thrown into; those were his circumstances.

Though he was in a state of awakening he had remembrance of, he immediately discerned that this spectacle was not one yielded by “Return by Death”.

–Because, neither Rem’s form nor Louis’ form were to be found anywhere in his environs.

Subaru: “This place… is undoubtedly, someplace I was hurled to. I…”

Recalling the preceding moments, the instant he touched his neck, the pain regurgitated repulsive memories.

His throat strangled by Rem whom he was carrying, and just like that, he was robbed of his life. –No, that was not the case.

Subaru: “My throat, hurts… that means, Rem didn’t kill me.”

She did strangle him, but did not go as far as to kill him.

Astonished by the judgement of Rem, who'd spoken with such an icy voice, Subaru spilled an exhale of relief and then immediately admonished himself that this was no time to be taking relief.

He did not die. In other words, the world was resuming onward from the earlier worst possible turn of events.

He had Rem doubt his humanity due to the scent of the Witch, and she had disappeared with the worst possible impression of him maintained. –The reason why those two were not here must be because they sought to run away from Subaru.

In the end, Rem was repulsed by Subaru's judgement of seeking to leave Louis behind.

Casting aside a young child in an unknown meadow, he must have seemed as a truly cold-hearted man.

Subaru: "I'm telling you that's a misunderstanding, though she probably won't trust me even if I tell her…!"

Whilst lamenting his consecutive misjudgments, Subaru straightened his cheeks and stood up.

Upon looking at the sky, he could tell from the position of the sun that not much time had passed. He did not wish to call this as good fortune, but Rem's legs were not in a condition wherein they were at complete liberty either.

With her legs in that condition, she shan't be able to run too far off. It's proof—

Subaru: "There are drag marks on the grass…! Now I can run after them!"

Should he pursue the two who ran into the forest spread wide in 360 degrees around him without any clues, then that would mark the beginning of a game of tag with an impossible level of difficulty.

However, should he follow the traces left on the grass then he would be able to grasp where those two entered the forest from. Though being able to further pursue them from there was the gamble,

Subaru: “When it comes to unfavorable gambles, I’ve taken them on for innumerable times!”

Shouting what was unbefitting of commendation, Subaru fiercely pursued the traces on the grass. With his feet’s ability, Subaru was able to immediately discern the position the two entered the forest from.

With exuberant foliage and trees, it somewhat matched Subaru’s impression of tropical rainforests.

For an instant he was reminded of watching information on the television that the Amazon Forest meant the point of death for humans as a matter of course—

Subaru: “If Rem has entered into such a place, then that’s all the more reason for me to not overlook it.”

Both Subaru and Rem were here in a completely unprepared state for entering a forest.

When he thought of Rem, who had escaped into the forest with impaired legs in desperation, he regretted why he did something so foolish, and cursed every single bit of his judgements.

Subaru: “–Rem! Come out! Please! I was the one at fault!”

Within the forest, whilst walking over the soft ground and tall grass, Subaru called with a loud voice. Of course, it was possible that his voice would in turn buy Rem and the other’s anxiety, and make them keep their distance.

But still, it was far better than wandering around aimlessly in the forest, possessing no clues, possessing nothing to rely on.

Above all, he must undertake action he deemed as searching for Rem, or it felt like his chest would burst apart due to guilt and self-hatred.

Even though so many people made so many efforts for the sake of Rem, should something happen to her, just what would he be able to do in order to apologize.

Even though it was not even possible for him to apologize by giving up on his life.

Subaru: “Rem–! Where are you! Please respond! Please, don’t leave my side!!”

Thinking that he would not mind even should his voice run dry, within the obstructive trees of the dense jungle, he raised his voice.

And his limbs, as he passed through the forest, felt heavy accompanied with tremendous exhaustion. Now that he thought about it, Subaru’s body had overcome the fierce skirmishes that occurred in Pleiades Watchtower, and had gotten only a few hours of sleep.

Even if his recovery was augmented by the healing of the spirit of the “Green Room”, it was bound to eventually fail him.

Should he be untactful, then he may collapse out of relief upon finding Rem.

His guard up against that absurd possibility, Subaru aimlessly walked through the forest—

Subaru: “Rem! Please respo~nd! I beg you, I’m sorry!”

His hands by his mouth, Subaru resumed with a loud voice.

A call from the bottom of his heart, yet the absence of any response whatsoever from her made his heart stand a foot away from crumbling.

With things remaining as is, pursuing Rem’s vanished form, he desperately darted his eyes around the dense trees of the forest—

Subaru: “—-”

When he once again widely opened his mouth seeking to call Rem’s name, something entered the vicinity of his field of vision.

That was a slight change peeking through the gaps of the dense trees beyond the fallen leaves. Seeing it move differently from grass swaying in the wind—

Subaru: “Re–”

It was the instant he embraced hope and turned towards that direction.

–The impact charging with tremendous velocity, captured Subaru’s chest from the immediate front.

Subaru: “–hk?!”

Unable to shriek, his legs lost balance due to the impact, and Subaru’s body flew backwards.

Subaru: “Gah… wh, at…hk?!”

His thoughts thrown into chaos by the impact from the gaps through the trees directly ahead which he had seen, he darted his eyes around.

However, upon thinking about the impact he had received, he immediately understood that it was an attack. Thus, before he could even get his thoughts straight, Subaru tried to leap away from that place.

However, he failed to leap. Because—

Subaru: “–Ah?”

Because, the thick arrow piercing through Subaru’s chest, had pinned him to the gigantic tree behind him.

Subaru: “Guh, bhugh…… hk.”

The moment he directed his awareness to it, he vomited blood overflowing through his throat at once.

Stabbed through, massive quantities of blood from ruptured organs or otherwise flowed out, without cease. Vomiting blood instead of exhaling air, Subaru suffered whilst breathing once again.

Whilst suffering, he grabbed the arrow in his chest and tried to pull it out.

He couldn’t, not in the slightest bit. The arrow had firmly pierced through both Subaru and the tree, disabling all movement.

What was this arrow.

Hopeless, abnormal, a blow by a thick, mighty arrow. A truly tightly drawn bow, the body pierced by it was stitched and rendered immobile like a bug, only to flounder unsightly.

Subaru: “Egh, raegh, eem, gh…”

Through the gaps of the overflowing blood, he called the name of she who was yet in this forest.

What the call unable to vocalize words was charged with, was the evocation of caution towards the menace lurking in the forest.

Wielding a bow and arrow, someone lurking in the forest had aimed for him.

And, in this unseemly manner, unable to reach Rem, unable to accomplish anything, Subaru—

Subaru: “–m.”

What the hell is going on. Where is this place, what should he do.

Welling up fever and pain he took notice of after a delay, spread through his entire body, and blood streamed out of Subaru’s eyes, nose, and ears as well.

Tasting the sensation of the disappearance of oneself and becoming empty, whilst feeling icy “Death” draw close to him, Subaru strained his eyes, made his throat tremble, and called her name until the end.

–Called her name, until the end.

Smeared in blood.

Until the very end of the end, he called, called, kept calling her name.

Kept calling her name—

Chapter 2:
Animal Tracking

1

Beatrice: “—Listen, Subaru, I suppose. From now on, you need to understand that you’re always on the verge of death, in fact.”

Subaru: “Hey hey, this little girl-sama made a joke that’s quite unamusing.”

Beatrice: “Betty is not a little girl, and it’s not a joke either, I suppose! You need to take Betty seriously, in fact!”

As Beatrice said so with a reddened face, Subaru nodded with a “Got it, got it.”

He was sitting on the speckless carpet with his legs folded underneath him, in the middle of receiving a lecture from Beatrice-sensei, who was crossing her short arms, but it was simply going nowhere.

It was mainly because Subaru was butting into the lecture between her brief pauses, but—

Subaru: “It’s all because of Beako’s cuteness. It’s not good…”

Beatrice: “Betty thought you finally put on a straight face, but what are you talking about, in fact?! …Well, it’s common knowledge that Betty is cute, so that can’t be helped by now, I suppose…”

Subaru: “Your dere index is tremendous right after we got over the event…”

Beatrice: “You’re going too far in pulling the rug out from under Betty!”

Beatrice stomped on the ground, making her anger known to him. Her current attitude looked like it hadn’t changed from before, but on the other hand, Subaru’s feelings were largely different.

Until now, they had often clashed over their ideas and opinions, and she had the impression of a kitten in a neighborhood that didn't warm up to him easily. However, to Subaru, the current Beatrice was—

Subaru: "Like an adorable pet cat that I want to spend time with by burying my face into its stomach."

Beatrice: "Take! Betty! Seriously! I suppose!"

Subaru: "Bhargh!"

Murmuring that out with deep emotion, he was then sent flying by Beatrice, who had held out her hand towards him. As he stuck to the wall before crumpling down onto the floor, Beatrice gave him an exasperated shrug of her shoulders.

Beatrice: "Don't make Betty repeat herself, in fact. This is an important thing to talk about, I suppose. It's something that's really dangerous if you missed hearing it, in fact. —It's about the problem with your gate, I suppose."

Subaru: "…It's about my gate, huh."

He lifted up his body abruptly, sitting down cross-legged right on the spot where he had fallen.

Placing a gentle hand against his chest, he thought about the organ that was on the inside—something that he couldn't see with his eyes, nor touch it either.

Gates were an important organ that existed within living things, utilized in order to use magic in the world that had differing ideas from Subaru's common sense. Whether it was of decent quality or not apparently had to do with one's aptitude for being a magic user, and in Subaru's case, the quality of his gate hadn't been very good.

"Hadn't been", because his gate was already lost and gone.

Beatrice: "To be specific, you didn't lose it. You broke it, in fact."

Subaru: "It's because I used it recklessly even after being told to not use it. Oh well, the next time I see Ferris, I'm going to get far more than a huge scolding. I went ahead and ruined all the treatment he gave me."

Beatrice: "Congratulations on your newfound worries, I suppose… A "next time" for this isn't guaranteed, in fact."

It was the outcome of completely ignoring Ferris's advice, who had been in charge of restoring Subaru's gate that had been strained from being overused. He shrunk out of fear, certain that Ferris would be angry with him with the ferocity of an oni, but there was a look in Beatrice's eyes that implied the situation was graver than it seemed.

Beatrice: "As a result of your broken gate, you became unable to release your mana properly, I suppose. Even with that, mana will keep being produced, or absorbed for as long as you live, continuing to accumulate in your body, in fact. But, because you don't have a way to get it out…"

Subaru: "Surely you won't say that I'll be filled up with mana and burst apart?"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "Wha, Beatrice-san?! It scares me when you become quiet!"

Subaru raised his voice when she averted her eyes, falling silent with an uneasy expression on her face. Seeing that he looked like he was finally paying serious attention to what she had to say, Beatrice raised a finger with a "Listen,"

Beatrice: "In all seriousness, your perception of it is correct, in fact. If things go on like this, your physical condition will deteriorate from the mana that gradually builds up in your body, and you'll eventually go "boom" from the muddied mana, I suppose."

Subaru: "So scary! Is there a way to do something about it?!"

Beatrice: "That's where Betty comes in, in fact. Fortunately, Betty made a contract with you… Subaru, and we connected ourselves to each other through our souls, I suppose. Just as Betty said, Betty is a little bit different from other Spirits, and requires receiving mana from other people, in fact. That means…”

Subaru: “—You’ll do something about the mana that’s piling up in my body, for me!”

Hearing Beatrice’s idea, one that was like a home run which turned the tide of a baseball match, Subaru stood up vigorously and lifted up her small body in his arms.

He continued to hold her up in the air as she cried out a “Nh, kyah?!”, starting to spin around on the spot,

Subaru: “You’re amazing, Beako! Actually, I owe your existence so much, I feel like I can’t stand on equal ground with you! With this, we’re in the same boat in both name and reality!”

Beatrice: “I-It can’t just be settled as that, I suppose! From now on, you must remember that every time you sour Betty’s mood, your life is going to be as flimsy as a bunch of foam, in fact. If you don’t want to die, continue to put your heart and soul into getting on Betty’s good side, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Heh, so you’re telling me to keep giving it my all in being affectionate with you. If anything, it depends on how long you can continue being spectacular and dazzling. That’s a big responsibility on your shoulders, Beako.”

Beako: “Why does Betty need to be told that, in fact! Betty can’t accept it, I suppose!”

Subaru kept spinning around while he listened to Beatrice’s red-faced shouting, with her still held up in his arms.

Spinning around, round and round.

Round and round, and round and round, and round and round—

2

Like that, the sensation of his field of view being spun around suddenly came to an end, and his consciousness was awakened.

The agony he was suffering through just before, something similar to the feeling of drowning had vanished without warning, and Subaru was assaulted by the pain of the unbalanced rhythm of his breathing, as well as the size of the ground that he felt on his back.

Subaru: "—k, ah, ghagh,"

He sat up while rubbing his throat, retracing his memories of what happened to himself.

At the same time, when he glanced at the center of his chest, he didn't see the arrow that was supposed to be sticking out from there. Aside from it, the scratches he had gotten from scraping his body against the trees had also disappeared.

It was only natural it turned out like this. His chest had been pierced by that single, frightening blow.

Subaru: "I… died…"

Experiencing a vague sensation which felt like the ground was crumbling away from under his feet, Subaru's blood ran cold as he shuddered.

As for the events which led to this, he was swallowed by the black shadow at the Pleiades Watchtower, and only a few dozen minutes after he was whisked away from there—that was all it took for Subaru to lose his life.

Once again, he understood the severity of the position he was in, and stood up. Somehow managing to support his unsteady body, Subaru surveyed his surroundings.

And then—

Subaru: "Shit, this sucks…"

Confirming he was in the middle of a green, grassy plain that stretched far and wide, and also seeing the figure he wished would've stayed with him was nowhere to be found, Subaru cursed his misfortune.

This was unmistakably the grassland where he and the other two had been hurled to from the tower.

The problem was he couldn't find Rem, who had been sent here together with him, and Louis was missing as well. To sum it up, the point in time where he had "Returned by Death" to was—

Subaru: "After Rem choked me and made me pass out…!"

His restart point was the time after he had fallen unconscious, strangled by Rem who he had been carrying on his back.

It hadn't brought him back far enough to make it so that Rem's awakening never happened, and it also didn't make it so that his final loop at the Pleiades Watchtower never existed, either. That in itself, was what Subaru wanted to say was good news.

Or, if he had been able to return to the final loop at the tower, it wasn't like he didn't hope for the possibility that he could've exchanged words with the missing Rem, a hope which only lasted for a fleeting moment, but—

Subaru: "Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot."

If he bore the feelings of regret to such a large extent, he should've made more time for her while he could still afford to come into contact with her, while he still had the time to speak to her, and while he was still graced with the opportunity to listen to her about how she felt.

To Natsuki Subaru, who hadn't done so, he had no right to be lamenting in that manner.

Anyhow, right now—

Subaru: "—I'll find Rem."

He had to chase after the runaway girl, and he had to clear up her misunderstandings.

If the reason for Rem's escape was the Witch's miasma that encircled him, then since he had just "Returned by Death", the intensity of the smell had probably gotten stronger.

It was very likely that she would heed his words even less compared to before. However, the one year Natsuki Subaru had spent wasn't so meaningless, to the point he would give up on her because of something like that.

Subaru: "Also, there's the one who killed me… Though, the arrow shouldn't be an attack from Rem."

The worst case scenario would be Rem launching an attack on him, which was a possibility that existed, but he couldn't imagine her being able to gather the tools she needed to do so in such a short time.

Even more so, a bow and arrow was something that couldn't be prepared so easily and quickly.

Subaru: "The arrow that pierced into me had an arrowhead, and it also had feathers attached to it… Might've been because it punched through my heart, but I didn't feel too much pain. Even though…"

If Rem were to be struck by the heavy-hitting, powerful arrow that was fired from the bow, then she wouldn't stand a chance against it even with her strength.

Since she was unable to move her legs around freely, it would be difficult for her escape to succeed. At any risk, Subaru had to rescue her out of this place before she fell victim to the arrow.

Even if the amnesiac Rem didn't consider him as an ally, that was.

Subaru: "Time to go, Natsuki Subaru. —Show 'em how great you can be."

Slapping his cheeks, what he temporarily dismissed from his mind was the shock of "death" from just before, and the sorrow he felt from being disliked by the girl that was important to him. It was unknown if he could join her even if he found her, but finding her came first before anything else.

Being woeful and being angry, were all things that could be done while one was alive.

Subaru: "…"

Letting out a deep breath, in the same way as he had done previously, Subaru trailed after the footprints that he deduced Rem had followed, judging by the grass that was tipping downwards, and jumped into the forest.

However, he was undecided on the decision of whether he should raise his voice loudly while looking for her, or not.

He had gone through an initiation process courtesy of the arrow, probably because the enemy came across Subaru while he was defenseless.

Whoever they were, their identity and objective were both obscure, but it was difficult to think of them as an amicable person, seeing they aimed to kill him with a single blow. There would be "death" if they found him. He should regard them as that kind of enemy.

Subaru: "But, since they're using tools… a bow and arrow, It's not a witchbeast, but it's a human I'm up against."

If his opponent was a human, then there was a chance he could get out of this situation without trying to kill each other, depending on how he negotiated with them. Although, he didn't know if they would even sit at the table of negotiations to start with.

For the most part, in the total number of times Subaru had "Returned by Death" so far, the percentage of his deaths that were caused by humans and witchbeasts seemed like it was leaning slightly towards humans.

Just because his opponent was a human who could understand what he was saying, didn't mean he thought he could blindly form friendly relations between them.

He did think the likelihood of finding Rem would increase, if there were more people that were looking for her, but—

Subaru: "—Cor Leonis."

Shutting his eyes, Subaru drove away his rambling thoughts, activating the Authority that rested within himself.

The brand new power which demonstrated its fierceness in the Pleiades Watchtower, "Cor Leonis" was a probing skill that enabled him to detect the locations of his companions, those who would support the "Little King".

Using this, Subaru desperately clung onto the hope that he could pinpoint where Rem was at.

However—

Subaru: "…It's no good, there's no reaction. She might've gone far away from me, or if that's not it… is it because she doesn't think of me as an ally?"

Little was known about the exact range of "Cor Leonis", but Subaru didn't see the pale light which indicated his allies in the area where the ability took effect.

Thinking of the cause of being unable to detect their locations, Subaru came up with the distance between them and his relationships with them.

Emilia and the others had once been the targets of its effects, but he currently couldn't perceive them at all. Even if he personally knew both Reid and Gluttony, he didn't know their locations as well.

He was certainly able to ascertain the activation of "Cor Leonis."

If he were to say it, his ally radar was turned on, although it was in a nonreactive state. The reason why it became like that would be because Emilia and the others were outside of its range of effect, and Rem, who was supposed to be inside of its scope, didn't place Subaru under her category of allies.

—The fact he also didn't know the location of Louis, who was acting in unison to Rem, attested to his theory.

Subaru: "There's no way I'll ever treat her as an ally. It's why she won't appear on my radar that has my one-sided love for Rem."

Coming to this point, Subaru regretted the poor communication that had occurred when he came into contact with Rem.

Since he was wrapped around in the Witch's miasma, he was unsure of which words he could've chosen to say would've won over her trust. Despite that, even if he were to be deceitful, he was unable to say anything pertaining to protecting Louis nor bringing her along with them.

Subaru: "Shit, dammit… why…?! Rem finally… finally woke up, so why do I have to…"

Play tag with her like this?

He had been waiting eagerly for the day Rem could stand up and move around freely on her own two legs, but when she actually sprang into motion like this, Subaru couldn't help but resent it.

If he thought about who he should loathe as a result, all it did was make his anger surge up, directed towards the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony, involving Louis as well.

Subaru: "…"

Keeping the thoughts in his mind that were going around in circles, Subaru gingerly moved through the forest.

He kept his body lowered as he walked because of the person that killed him once—he would be referring to them as a "hunter" since it was more convenient, but it was a desperate measure he took in order to avoid making contact with the hunter.

Subaru thought he should do something more, such as rubbing mud on his face, camouflaging his clothes with leaves, and applying the effects of deceptive colors onto himself, but he unfortunately couldn't spend his time on those things.

If he at least precisely knew how much time passed after he was separated from Rem, his search for her would be getting somewhere.

Subaru: "Think, think… It's only during these times I can make use of my crafty mind. Rem forgot everything, and doesn't remember. But, she still had the ability to hold me down and sense the Witch's miasma. It means her episodic memories are missing."

"Amnesia" often had an appearance in manga and games, but in most cases, the amnesia handled in these works corresponded to the lack of what were called episodic memories.

It was the same condition as Subaru, who lost his memories once in the tower as the consequence of coming across Gluttony—no, that Subaru had only lost his memories which were made after arriving at the different world, so Rem wasn't exactly in the same state as him, but it was something similar to that.

In other words, she was in a state where she knew the names of things, and she also remembered the reflexive actions absorbed into her body, but she lost the memories of her own name and the names of other people, as well as any details that tied into her recollections of the time she spent with them.

The evidence of Rem calling herself "I", and being instinctively on her guard against Subaru because of the scent, was proof of that.

Subaru: "She must be confused. She can't keep running away forever. If she separated herself from me to some extent, then she'll make some time to calm down and reflect on herself. Even more so, if she took Louis with her."

It was stupid of him to pray for such a thing, but he just wanted to wish Louis would be a grand hinderance and get in the way of Rem's escape.

Throwing tantrums, refusing to walk sometimes, and continuing to cause Rem a lot of trouble, a chance for him to catch up to Rem would eventually come around if those things happened.

Or, it was also okay if Rem forsook her.

If Rem decided she wouldn't be able to look after her because she couldn't handle her, that could also—

Subaru: "…Actually, I don't know about that."

He didn’t know if Rem would abandon Louis, seeing that she at least looked like a helpless infant.

Losing her episodic memories and being nobody in a sense, it could be said Rem didn’t have the inferiority complex she had from interacting with Ram, nor the establishment of her own identity.

Despite losing the existence of Rem, it was abnormal how Ram could remain stable, with there being no changes. He wondered if the same thing would happen to Rem.

She wasn’t sisters with Ram, her inferiority complex and her pride as a member of the Oni Clan was irrelevant to her, and she thought nothing of Natsuki Subaru. That Rem—

Subaru: “—hk!”

As soon as he imagined it, Subaru felt a burning sensation in his chest, and took a large, mighty step forward.

The twigs he took his emotions out on by stepping on them creaked before snapping, and he leaned forward while walking around the tall grass that sat in front of him, nearly slipping on the muddy ground,

Subaru: “—Ah?”

Unexpectedly, the forest had opened up into a different terrain, and Subaru found he had exited out of it into another grassy plain.

Thinking he might’ve gone around the forest in circles, only to end up in the same place, the color drained from Subaru’s face. However, when he observed the area attentively, he realized it wasn’t the case.

It was similar to the first grassland, but the height of the grass beneath his feet were different.

Compared to the grassy plain at the beginning, the grass here was slightly taller. Adding to it, that place was completely surrounded by forests at a 360 degree angle, but this area only had the forest Subaru had rushed out of.

In front of him with the forest at his back, he could see a large horizon between the rifts in the grassland. The sky looked terribly far away and high up in the air, and the illusion of mysteriously feeling like he was being sucked into it was making the ground beneath him unsteady.

However, it wasn't only the far away sky that caught his eye.

Closer and nearer to him than that, there was a small, open area created by cutting apart the grassland, and the camping tools placed over there—in short, it was a sign of someone previously having been here.

Subaru: "…"

Instantaneously, caution swelled and bubbled all over Subaru's body, and his field of view was narrowed drastically.

Fortunately, there weren't any silhouettes at the place he should refer to as a simple camping ground. Only the possible traces of someone camping out here remained, and it was hard to think of it as a trap.

The problem was about who exactly created this camping site.

Subaru: "The highest possibility for that is the one who killed me… right?"

He thought about the hunter that brought him down. Upon proceeding to carry out a hunt in the forest, the odds of them setting this place as their base camp were high.

If it came to that, then Subaru should immediately move away from here, and ensure his own safety.

Whether he came across them in the forest or on a plain, there was no doubt the hunter was a dangerous individual.

It was often said that the Matagi shot humans by accident because they mistook them for deer, but mistakenly shooting someone that was looking for their acquaintance while shouting loudly, because one confused them for a deer, was simply impossible when Subaru took their skills into consideration.

The hunter was a threatening enemy. He needed to conclude it as such before acting.

However—

Subaru: "…If I could filch at least one knife."

In order to march through the close-knit trees of what he should call a dense forest, Subaru wanted the assistance of a tool. Unfortunately, the only item which was currently in his possession was the whip he used regularly—the Guiltywhip, crafted out of the materials from a powerful enemy.

His outfit, one that was for conquering the sandy sea, was kind of coming in handy for the conquering of the dense forest. Nevertheless, his situation would change drastically if he had even one bladed tool to cut up the trees so he could get a move on.

Therefore, things would go rather differently if he could obtain a single tool that was something like it.

Viewing it as such, Subaru finished his short period of contemplation, and walked towards the camping grounds.

He also had the choice to immediately make a quick turn and return to the forest, but considering what he was after, he wanted to avoid going back there empty-handed.

While paying attention to his footsteps and surroundings, Subaru entered the site.

Subaru: "There's marks left from when they made a fire, and it's shoddy, but… is this a bed?"

He knew the traces of a burning fire were left in the center of the camp, and also that there was something which looked like a bed next to it, lined up with cut grass. There was no doubt someone had been living here.

The bed was empty as well, and it seemed like there was nothing else in the area, but—

Subaru: “If I could just find a knife, or something like that—”

???: “—Huh, so you want a blade. Well, you have made your appearance at the right time.”

The moment Subaru tried to find a tool he could use, going on a brief search around the camp, he stopped as he heard a voice speak behind him and felt something cold being held to his neck.

His breath catching in his throat, upon lowering his gaze slowly, Subaru saw that the object raised against the right side of his neck was the blade of a sword, polished and refined beautifully.

Subaru: “…”

Holding his breath, Subaru understood that he had given his opponent the right to decide whether to kill him or let him live.

However, his head was in a state of confusion because of the fact he had been spoken to from behind. —He was cautious. He was cautious, with calculations thrown out of the window, because he was in a situation with his life on the line.

Of course, among the superhumans that lived in this other world, he knew there were people who could move at a speed his eyes couldn’t catch up to, and there were also people who could even pull off the likes of teleportation.

Despite that,

Subaru: “Did I really manage to roll one of the few exceptions here, at this time? …How unlucky can I be?”

???: “Fool. Who said you could speak? You are to choose each and every one of your words with utmost care. Do not forget that your life is within our… my hands.”

Even as Subaru cursed his own misfortune, there was no mercy in the voice of the person behind him.

Just as they said, they would probably immediately send his head flying if he tried anything funny. Feeling the indubitable, overpowering pressure asserting that things would definitely turn out like that, Subaru desperately tried to think of any ways he could make a breakthrough.

Judging from the voice, the person was a man.

Because he sounded quite young, he could be around the same age as Subaru, or slightly older. The way the man chose his words was peculiar, but it strangely didn’t feel odd to him.

And, more than anything—

Man: “I see you are racking your brains in deep thought whilst your mouth remains closed. However, you are not thinking of throwing away your life and attempting to strike back… Hm.”

The man had the insight that allowed him to discern the silent Subaru’s inward thoughts.

It seemed like he had considered something while looking at Subaru’s back, as he let out a breath that sounded like he was mulling over his thoughts, and,

Man: “You are dressed in a style that I do not see around these places. I do not believe it is suitable for the climate in Buddheim, either. Pale hands and feet… you are not from the local area.”

Subaru: “I’m… woah!”

Man: “Silence. Who said you could open your mouth? If you are to incur my displeasure next time, I would like to see you try speaking even after your head is separated from your body.”

The man had no intention of engaging in the conversation. Subaru was forced to realize it when a shallow cut was delivered to his neck.

Along with the pain from the prickling sensation, blood gradually spilled over the wound and trickled down his neck, but the man wasn’t finished yet with his examination of Subaru.

Man: “The whip at your waist is also extremely, terribly inconvenient to use in a forest. Your arms and legs are also somewhat trained, but it is not so much as to arrange you into the line of wolves… It seems like you did not come here chasing after me.”

Subaru: “…”

Man: “Why is it that you have fallen silent? If you would not explain yourself, would you rather die here?”

Subaru: “Eeh?! I’m allowed to speak this time?! Isn’t that unreasonable?!”

When Subaru protested against the man’s unfairness, the stern gaze boring into the back of his head became sharper.

Subaru stiffened, grasping that he said something unnecessary, but the rigidity of his body was finally loosened as the sword against his neck was drawn back.

However,

Man: “—Turn around slowly. If you try anything funny,”

Subaru: “You’ll lop off my head?”

Man: “No. I will sever your limbs, gouge out your heart, and incinerate it in front of your eyes.”

Subaru: “A threat that’s way too evil!”

Subaru got the message of the threat from its intensity, raising both of his hands, and started turning around bit by bit while proving he had no intention to counterattack.

And then, he took his time to set his eyes on the man that managed to get behind him—

Subaru: “…Are you serious?”

—He came face to face with the man in front of him, whose face was hidden behind a rag wrapped around it.

3

He really was a strange-looking man.

His height was only slightly above Subaru’s, and his physique looked vaguely slim. Showing his slender limbs as he stood, he held something similar to a saber or a rapier in his hand, a thin-bladed sword that had given a shallow slice to Subaru’s neck.

The outfit he wore consisted of noble-like clothes of excellent quality, and it could be said his style was more out of place than Subaru’s appearance. If he looked closely, he could see that the rag wrapped around his face might've been a cape.

Whether he sustained an injury on his face, or whether he simply didn't want to show his face, it wasn't clear why he wore the rag on his face, but—

Masked man: "What is it? With your idiotic face."

Subaru: "Setting it aside if you meant "idiotic look" by that, I was born with this face, so doesn't it count as bad-mouthing me…? There's this and that, but my reaction can't be helped especially after looking at your appearance."

Masked man: "You are making assumptions. I am also looking at your face, currently being once again suspicious if you are an assassin or not."

Subaru: "People don't get jobs assigned to them because of what their eyes look like! My role is just the exact opposite of an assassin in the first place. Rather than going on the offensive, I'm more of a defensive kind of guy."

Without loosening up his vigilance, the man—no, the masked man continued to point his sword at Subaru.

Responding to his voice that was laced with doubt, Subaru looked at the masked man's equipment, and then at his baggage which was placed behind him, before furrowing his brow.

The man's outfit, ill-suited for any camping or activity in the forest, had attracted Subaru's attention, but what drew his focus more than it was the sack lying down behind him—Subaru could only see it as something that materialized into the clearing without any warning, the same as the man that had appeared behind his back.

Adding to that, it was about the masked man's equipment. —He didn't have a bow, nor did he have any arrows.

Subaru: "…It seems like you're probably not the hunter."

Masked man: "Hunter?"

Subaru: “It’s a personal matter. By the way… are you able to do things like crossing a distance instantaneously, or becoming invisible… stuff like that?”

Masked man: “…”

The moment he asked the question, the man’s black eyes, able to be seen from the gap in his mask, were narrowed.

However, the masked man’s reaction wasn’t one of anger nor one thinking of deserting him, but it was a reaction showing he took an interest in Subaru.

In fact, when the man let out a small sigh with a “Huh,”

Masked man: “Why have you reached an idea such as that? State your reasoning.”

Subaru: “…I was cautious of my surroundings before coming closer to this place, just in case. Of course, I know there’s tons of people who can tear through anything as poor as my caution, but you’re not one of them.”

Masked man: “Why is that?”

Subaru: “I want you to listen without getting mad at me, but I had a lot of opportunities to coincidentally come across a bunch of skilled people, or what you would call superhumans. Comparing you to those crazy guys, I get the feeling from you that you’re… uh, ordinary.”

If he was talking to a notable warrior, what he said would definitely offend him.

Even so, it was what Subaru felt after facing the masked man in a conversation. He observed that the man in front of him was unquestionably able to use a sword, but his skill was average, having gotten to that point with a certain amount of training.

Looking at him from Subaru’s eyes, who knew people such as Reinhard, Garfiel, Wilhelm, and Julius, he could only say the masked man was inferior when he measured them side by side.

Subaru: “If that’s so, then the theory of you jumping here outside of my perception will be null and void. What’s left is the possibility of you instantly closing the distance and appearing behind me, or if that’s not it…”

Masked man: “It was either that, or I have disappeared from your sight by utilizing “Concealment”.”

Subaru: “—hk?!”

Soon after, Subaru jolted with astonishment as the man vanished from his field of view, despite having been standing in front of him.

However, his surprise didn’t end there.

Subaru: “You disappeared… but, are you right in front of me?”

Masked man: “—You are correct. “Concealment” cannot remove even my presence.”

Receiving Subaru’s question, the masked man blinked back into view the moment he replied, standing in the same exact place in the same posture as before.

As he thought, the man hadn’t disappeared in the sense of being gone, but he only disappeared in the sense of being invisible. And, the fact he returned from that state the moment he answered Subaru’s question meant—.

Subaru: “It gets canceled if you touch someone, or they become aware of you?”

Masked man: “Although, it is the ideal tool for holding one’s breath and lying low whilst being hidden.”

Saying that, the masked man lowered the sword he was pointing at Subaru, and directed it at the edge of the camping grounds. He was aiming it towards where his sack was placed.

Masked man: “The bed is a decoy. I was holding my breath over there, just slightly far away from it. I saw you sneak into here from the very beginning. How humorous you were.”

Subaru: “Looking from the side, people look super dumb when they’re on alert… wait, that’s not important right now! You lowered your sword, so that means…”

Masked man: “You are not my pursuer. I have no clue of how, nor your motives, but you must be someone that has gotten lost. If so, I have no reason to condemn you severely for that. Neither do I need to teach you a lesson with this blade.”

As if indicating he had no intention to fight, the masked man withdrew the bare sword back into the sheath at his waist. Seeing it through, the tension in Subaru’s body finally softened.

The moment he relaxed, he came to remember his original plan.

Subaru: “Agh, it’s not the time to be calming myself. Hey, sorry for all these questions, but did you see a blue-haired girl? We got separated around here.”

Masked man: “Blue hair? No, I have not. Rather, making my way to this place, the first thing I saw was your face. What are you going to do about this?”

Subaru: “I won’t do anything about it, though?! I won’t do anything about it, but… shit, it ended in failure here too, huh. Hey, this is a maybe, but is it possible for you to help me look for…”

Masked man: “…”

Subaru: “Yeah, just as I thought…”

He failed to obtain a witness statement, and his last resort, relying on the rope of human relations, had also been chopped off in front of him.

Subaru received the masked man’s icy glare, knifelike to the point that it might cut anything that touched it, as the answer to his request. Like that, in order to take back the time he lost, he tried to return to the forest,

Masked man: “Halt. If you were separated in this forest, then reuniting is not a feat that could be done so easily. Although, I believe the best course of action is for you to prioritize your survival?"

Subaru: "—. Sorry, but not a chance. It's just that she's more important than my life. I'll reunite with her no matter what it takes. No, I need to bring her home."

Masked man: "More than your life, huh. Setting aside the bardic poetry of songstresses, I can only imagine those as empty words if I hear it in reality. I can only imagine it as that, but what is interesting are your eyes."

When the intensity of Subaru's gaze sharpened from the man's attitude of ridiculing his recklessness, the man exactly pointed a finger towards his eyes.

As Subaru drew back, thinking he was going to poke his eyes out, the masked man chuckled at him,

Masked man: "Those are eyes that do not tell lies nor slander. I do not know if it will remain the same when it is actually weighed on a scale with your life, but at this moment, it seems like you apparently did not line up any words of deceit."

Subaru: "So… so what? If what I'm saying is true, what will it,"

Masked man: "—It will more or less capture my interest. I shall allow you to borrow my intellect."

With a finger, the masked man tapped the area around his temple.

Listening to his answer, Subaru thought he should just yell out, "Stop messing around!" at the man, but any harsh remarks such as that didn't leap out of his throat.

Mysteriously, this was a strange thing as well, but he couldn't find any feelings of suspicion he could direct towards the man. —No, the man was shady. However, he had a persuasiveness that overpowered it.

It was most likely the effect of the natural-born charisma he held.

Masked man: “Describe the details of what exactly transpired. I will find you a way to search for her.”

Subaru: “…Me and her were suddenly hurled to this place.”

Before he knew it, Subaru was starting to answer the man’s question, slowly and steadily.

It wasn’t as if he actually believed in this guy, or trusted him either. —It was just that he was desperate enough to be grasping at straws. When he felt like this, he wanted to rely on someone, even if they were less trustworthy than a pile of straw.

Maybe, it was just about that.

4

Masked man: “You were careless.”

Like that, having finished hearing Subaru’s explanation of his circumstances, the masked man’s first words in response were biting.

Just as he had been asked by the man, Subaru had given a clean description of what happened between him and Rem—omitting the complicated situation which also surrounded them.

He told him that Rem’s memories were jumbled, and that she had escaped after knocking him out. And, he also included the part where she was acting together with a dangerous little girl.

Subaru: “I know. I know, I was being a huge idiot. But, you won’t stop there… right? Exposing my recently acquired dark past, and being done after making fun of me…”

Masked man: “Fool. How could I bother to go as far as using my precious time to deride a jester such as yourself? —That girl, she is able to think on her feet to a certain degree, yes?”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah, I think so, maybe.”

Intimidated by the air the masked man was giving off, Subaru nodded truthfully.

As a versatile maid, Rem played an active part in the various moments of daily life, but an evaluation such as that couldn't be obtained just by being skilled at doing housework.

Determining the abilities of different people and placing them where it would be appropriate for them, before letting them act. —Even during fights, she predicted his movements and moved in sync with him, despite him not saying anything to invoke that.

Rem was smart. Even if her memories had been lost—

Masked man: "If that is so, it is highly feasible that you have been plotted against."

Subaru: "Pl, plotted against? You're saying I got tricked? That's… I don't…"

Masked man: "In this case, whether she has her memories or not is not the problem. What is important is that the girl is aware she is being chased after, and she has the capability to come up with this and that against her pursuer. For example—"

Cutting off his words there, the masked man stared at Subaru from head to toe with his black eyes.

Feeling like his thoughtlessness was being criticized, Subaru drew his shoulders closer to himself.

Looking at Subaru, the masked man narrowed his eyes,

Masked man: "For example, something such as purposely leaving traces in the grassland, to disguise the direction she had escaped in."

Subaru: "…"

Masked man: "You must have been quite anxious, after you awakened from being knocked unconscious. When you felt like you needed to find her as soon as possible, what would you do if there were footsteps, placed there as if it was being shown off to you?"

Ardent and eager, Subaru had run after the traces like a mongrel.

It was what happened in reality, and it was the answer to the mocking gaze of the masked man. Of course, he could make a retort, saying that wasn't it, but—

Subaru: "—. Sure enough, I couldn't find any more traces deeper into the forest, coming from the entrance. But, I thought it was because the path was unsteady and hard to walk on…"

Masked man: "You do not avert your eyes from the truth that is inconvenient to yourself."

Subaru: "I've known that I'm stupid and an idiot for a long time. It's only that I have a gift for adaptability and willpower, something I'm on the same page with the other me."

It couldn't be conveyed even if he said it, but Subaru replied to the masked man as such.

Truthfully, the man's speculation made a lot of sense. Looking back on it, the traces left on top of the grass felt way too "obvious".

Among wild animals such as foxes and rabbits, there were those that did things such as purposely leaving behind footprints and jumping into a clump of grass midway, utilizing techniques which confused their predators.

The marks Rem left on the grass were the same, so what if it was a cunning trap in order to deceive him?

Subaru: "She made me go to a different direction, and went the other way instead…?"

Masked man: "In that case, the direction one will choose to go would often be the exact opposite. It is reasonable to select the method in which she could keep away as far as she could, considering her state of mind. —Do you understand?"

Subaru: "…It's frustrating, but I get it. Damn! That Rem!"

Just as the masked man said, if Rem had deliberately left visible tracks as a decoy, there was a high possibility she had made her escape towards the opposite direction.

However, if Subaru managed to get a good guess on her actions and went to the forest on the other side, he might be able to work out something to catch her. He somewhat felt like a villain, but—

Subaru: “I’m used to giving others a bad first impression because of stuff like my face and body odor. I’ll definitely catch up to her!”

Masked man: “How high-spirited. —Here, take this with you.”

Subaru: “Uweh?!”

Standing up, as Subaru attempted to dash away, unable to stand still for any longer, the masked man threw something at him after palming his sack of his belongings.

As Subaru looked at the thing he just caught in his hands, he saw it was a small knife, fitted inside of a leather sheath.

When he widened his eyes at it, the masked man shrugged his shoulders,

Masked man: “It is not a forest you could confront with a single whip. Utilize it to the best of your ability.”

Subaru: “I’m really thankful for it, but… are you sure? I can’t do anything in return right now.”

Masked man: “I do not mind. Sometimes, I would like to be the one who bestows to another. Or, will you make an effort to deprive me of every one of my belongings with the knife?”

It sounded like he was joking, but it was true that he had given Subaru the power to carry it out.

The masked man had a certain amount of skill, but it couldn’t be declared that Subaru didn’t have a chance against him, no matter how slim it was. In that sense, the man’s actions were akin to a type of gamble.

However—

Subaru: "—My name is Natsuki Subaru. This is unmistakably a debt that I owe you. I'll definitely return the favor that I was given. I won't try anything ungrateful."

Firmly fastening the knife he received on his waist, Subaru bowed deeply. Looking at that, the masked man let out a small scoff with a, "Hmph,"

Masked man: "I have already shown you the way. Get on with it and go. By all possible means, you are to make every effort in winning over the trust of the runaway girl."

Subaru: "I totally agree. Thanks for the help! Oh wait, that's that, but…"

Masked man: "What is it?"

Waving his hand to express his gratitude, Subaru paused right as he was about to rush into the forest. The masked man's voice had a hint of exasperation in it because of how busy he looked, but Subaru pointed his finger at the forest in front of him,

Subaru: "I'm passing through here to go back to the grassland I was in, but you shouldn't really use this path. There's a frightening hunter in here. They'll try to kill you from afar with a bow, so no matter how many lives you have, it won't be enough against them. If you're going somewhere, I recommend you to take a detour around the forest."

Masked man: "—. I see. I understand. I will keep it in mind."

Subaru: "Yeah, please do that. —See you!"

Hearing the masked man's response, Subaru succeeded in preventing his benefactor from immediately being killed by the hunter, avoiding a potential situation that left a bad taste in his mouth.

And then, racing into the forest as fast as he could, he started running for the first grassland with all his might.

Subaru: “—It cuts really well!”

Fortunately, Subaru didn’t have much trouble returning to the first grassland.

It was because the knife he received from the masked man had a sharp edge, giving him a huge boost in slicing off the branches and leaves that obstructed his path.

Normally, when it came to a knife like this, it seemed like its blade would be heavily chipped if it were to be overused, but he felt no inconveniences such as that. Perhaps it might be an excellent blade of the highest quality.

Subaru: “His clothes looked pretty expensive, too. Who exactly was that guy…?”

While wondering about it, Subaru returned to the original grassland with great haste. After that, when he searched around the area where he had been led towards the opposite way—

Subaru: “—Found it. This must be it.”

Just now, on the other side of the marks placed for show, Subaru discovered a set of footsteps left in an uneven shape on the grass. It looked like Rem had tried her best to rub out the tracks, but it was very likely that she could only erase her own, and couldn’t fully erase Louis’s.

Since traces of the effort that was put into removing the tracks were there, it was implausible to think of this as an additional decoy.

Which meant—

Subaru: “Finally, I got something on you, Rem…!”

Although he was self-conscious of it earlier, he uttered the words that made him straight-up sound like a villain, running as fast as he could while chasing after the marks which became his newly discovered sign of Rem’s location.

The tracks which continued to the entrance of the forest were the same as last time. However, it wasn't possible to disguise the broken twigs at the entrance, nor the footprints in the mud.

Subaru: "I found it! If I use this—"

I can catch up to Rem, Subaru thought as he attempted to track the footprints in the mud with eagerness.

It was the next moment.

Subaru: "—hk?!"

As Subaru paid attention to the footprints, a tied vine broke apart below his feet. The recoil made the branch it was supporting shoot out towards him, and a powerful blow struck him from the side.

Subaru: "Gh, ugh,"

Receiving a horizontal lash from a branch about as thick as his arm, Subaru was sent flying at a long distance. A pained cry escaped from him as he rolled across the mud, unable to stand up from the impact of the blow.

His vision flashing and flickering between light and dark, and hit by a surprise attack that he wasn't expecting, Subaru's consciousness twirled around like the revolving light of a police car from the pain and the shock.

Subaru: "R-Right now, could that be…"

When the pain was mitigated after a while, Subaru finally stood up on the spot. Though, he knew it was affecting his knees, and he also knew that a massive amount of internal damage was done on the side of his body.

However, his shock extended beyond that.

Subaru: "—A trap?"

Although she was running away, she wouldn't end it with a simple escape.

Despite having lost her memories, she could exert herself to the fullest. That was how fearsome the girl—Rem could be.

Natsuki Subaru finally realized it then and there.

—That this was the beginning of his second real, genuine battle with Rem, ever since he arrived at this world.

Chapter 3:
VS Rem

1

Subaru: "—Uwah, it's just as I was told. What's this? It's not cleaned thoroughly at all."

Peeking into the back of the shelf he had tilted over, Subaru grimaced at his own work.

With the suit coat of his butler outfit taken off and the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, Subaru was fully assuming the style of a cleaner—however, the contents of his work deserved to have the title of "Apprentice" or "Poor" attached to the top.

Displaying the small amount of dexterity he naturally possessed, Subaru became able to do his job in the mansion more efficiently compared to before.

Just as he bore those thoughts, he felt like his hubris had been pointed at and called out.

There was one shadow staring at Subaru's self-reflection from behind, sneering with a, "Hah!"

Ram: "Well, well, it's just Barusu after all. You turn into such a wretched state when Ram thought she could try extending the range of your job, thinking you've improved… You should be ashamed of yourself."

Subaru: "Yeah, I don't have anything I could say back against… wait, I do! How come you have the right to stand with such a haughty attitude?! You aren't doing enough work to lecture me like that!"

Ram: "Unlike you, Ram is very skilled at being efficient and well-organized. So, from the moment we allocated our workload in the morning, Ram guided it to make sure she would be in charge of the minimum amount of work.”

Subaru: “Not the skill to proceed with your work efficiently, but the skill to avoid working?!”

It wasn’t being victorious in a fight, but being victorious without fighting was the art of war.

That was what it looked like if put in a good way, and it was an excellent ability for skipping out on one’s job if looked at in a bad way, but it was too late no matter what Subaru wanted to say, because he wasn’t able to point it out during the morning.

Although—

Subaru: “The shifted burden going to Rem… is something neither me or you want, right.”

Ram: “Mn… you’re quite brazen in spite of being Barusu. But, you have a point.”

As Subaru said so while scratching his head with disappointment, Ram narrowed her eyes at him. Like that, when the two turned their faces towards the edge of the room, there was the figure of a person who was moving around with haste, her footsteps pattering against the floor.

A blue-haired girl, wiping away at the trivial parts of the room in the vicinity of the damp spots on the floor, whilst swaying the hem of her maid skirt—

Subaru: “—Rem.”

Rem: “Ah, yes, I’m sorry. I was a bit absorbed in my work. How did it go with the back of the shelf, Subaru-kun?”

The girl, Rem, smiled softly as she turned around to answer his call, asking him a question.

When that smile of hers was directed towards him, Subaru felt apologetic for having to give her a pathetic answer, but he resigned himself to his fate since it wasn’t something he could conceal.

Subaru: “Yeah, it was just as you said. Thoroughly wiping the places that can’t be seen easily… Really, my attitude of being OK with only making the surface clean isn’t good at all.”

Rem: “No, that’s not true. When it comes to putting on a front and glossing over other issues, you’re second to none. You’re the best among those of the kingdom!”

Subaru: “You put it in a way that might get us sued for defamation!”

He knew Rem meant no offense, but it was an evaluation that stabbed him like a needle.

Being good at keeping a facade and hiding his problems was a trait he himself was aware of,

Ram: “As expected, you’re good at seeing through the essence of various things, Rem.”

Subaru: “You’re being noisy, nee-sama! I’m a little aware of it, so don’t make me feel any more downhearted than I already am!”

Subaru directed a stern look at Ram, who was crossing her arms while being seated on the bed. However, she met his eyes with a sharpened gaze, even more intense than his, causing him to flee dejectedly.

The person at the lowest position with the lowest power in this place was Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “Damn, it’s tough to be bullied by a senior maid… In that regard, Rem is kind, right?”

Rem: “Yes, of course. Rem won’t say anything harsh to you. Rem believes that you will understand her even if she doesn’t say anything extra.”

Subaru: “Your kindness is going to tear a hole in me from the inside.”

Sliced up on the outside by her older sister’s wicked tongue, and ripped into tatters on the inside from Rem’s sweet, sweet poison.

Subaru felt like he was going to be confused, whether he was placed in a fortunate environment or whether he wasn’t, but it probably also pertained to how he perceived it.

Subaru: “Hey, don’t shut your eyes against your own faults, Natsuki Subaru. Putting nee-sama aside, isn’t it all about meeting Rem’s expectations for her? I’m gonna do it! Right, Rem?”

Rem: “As expected of you, that’s the spirit! Rem is deeply impressed!”

Subaru: “Heh, this positiveness of mine is also one of my special qualities. So, what should I start from?”

Rem: “Hm, yes… Firstly, the sashes of the windows aren’t wiped properly at all, so let’s redo that. For the place above the shelf, please use a foothold to wipe it thoroughly, not just standing on your toes. As you saw, there’s no need to clean the back of the shelf daily, but it will become a huge mess if it’s not cleaned from time to time. And, it’s about the foot of the bed and the other side of the mat, but…”

Subaru: “Ahh, I’m under heavy fire! It’s going to make me fall forwards!”

As Rem immediately listed off what Subaru could improve one by one in overflowing numbers, speaking at a pace as smooth as water, he was unable to keep up with his mental note-taking.

However, looking at the room from the perspective of Subaru, who was rated as the best among the kingdom at putting on a front and hiding his other problems, he was surprised to be told it had a lot of room for improvement, despite it appearing to be moderately clean.

Subaru: “Really, you’re very observant of things. Is it also a maid’s dedication?”

Rem: “Of course. Ah, but, if you think from another person’s standpoint, there are things you can eventually start seeing. Rem is always thinking about you, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “I’m happy, but the flaws of my cleaning… the dust-covered areas are being seen through one after another…”

Clenching her fist, Rem’s response was rather sweet of her, but it was awkward for Subaru.

However, she could direct her attentive gaze to even the miniscule details and carry out her work meticulously, which was the sign of her having the basics of a maid down, no matter how humble she was trying to be.

She undoubtedly lived up to the reputation of the versatile maid.

Ram: “It’s only natural. Because Rem is Ram’s adorable little sister.”

Subaru: “Wait, you’re the one who’s triumphant about it?!”

Rem: “It’s because nee-sama’s bold attitude fits her well, it being a part of her charm.”

As Ram acted all high and mighty on top of the bed, shamelessly cocking her head and leaning backwards to assert her posture, Subaru and Rem’s voices flew around her.

It was another scene in the everyday lives of the maids and the servant, who all worked at the Roswaal Mansion, and—

2

Subaru: “—Gh, whoa! Hh, dah!”

The feeling of floating that lasted for a moment, and the pain from being caught by the firm, solid ground.

Knowing that he was going to fall, although he curled up his body and rolled forwards to soften his landing, it was still quite the impact.

The follow-up attack from the thick branch that laid on the spot where he tumbled down, was especially beyond what he expected. It dug against his shoulder blades, and the unanticipated pain made his eyes water.

Subaru: “Ow ow… ahh, I’m glad there weren’t any follow-up attacks other than from Mother Nature. Thanks to this knife…”

Standing up while teary-eyed, Subaru sighed after he returned the knife in his hands back into its sheath.

He then spun around to gaze up at the trunk of the large tree, which he had been dangling from until now.

A long vine extended towards the ground from one of the thick branches of the trunk. It was cut off in the middle by the knife, but beyond the severed vine was—

Subaru: “A ring… I’ve seen those before in stuff like manga, but these kinds of traps actually work, huh.”

Saying so, Subaru removed the vine that was looped and tied around his right ankle.

The trap was set up on the ground, and it had a function where it tightened itself around one’s foot should they try to pass above it, leaving the person suspended in midair—to be honest, even though Subaru fell for the trap, he had no idea how it was able to make that possible.

And, he also didn’t have the spare time to search for this and that in order to find out the answer, either.

Subaru: “Although she doesn’t have her memories, her knowledge and skill are left as they are, huh… When I’m in the position of chasing after her like this, I see Rem really is nee-sama’s little sister.”

It was already obvious from the start, but he was forcefully reminded of it yet again. Of course, he didn’t want it to be pointed out to him in this manner, so it felt quite unpleasant to him.

—Over an hour had passed, since Subaru entered the forest in pursuit for Rem.

Following the advice of the masked man, who he met on the other side of the forest, Subaru was able to detect Rem’s attempts to disguise the escape route she used with Louis in tow.

Thanks to it, he could undoubtedly say the distance between him and the two was shrinking. However, the greatest factor of why he wasn't able to close the distance to zero, was because Rem's wariness was his biggest obstacle.

Rem was cautious of the Witch's scent—the miasma that encircled him, not limiting herself to only camouflaging her and Louis's footsteps, but also placing traps everywhere around the forest to slow him down.

Ever since he received the powerful blow at the beginning of all of this, Subaru discovered (or you could say that he fell for) traps that amounted to a number above ten. Knowing Rem was carrying out the positioning of those numbers of traps while running on her unsteady legs, taking a deadweight with her to add to that, Subaru had to be deeply impressed by her.

Subaru: "If it's something like tying some grass or digging a shallow pitfall, it's actually cute, but…"

Minor traps with the purpose of tripping him or spraining his foot. If it came to those kinds of traps, it wasn't as harmful, and it also wasn't much of a hindrance to his continuation of tracking Rem down.

However, their number was abnormally high, and it was troublesome because he needed to be on the lookout for them, when he navigated the areas with considerable amounts of grass and fallen leaves.

Subaru: "It's difficult for me when with Rem's strength, it takes one try for her to make a pit that only traps one of your legs… The difference between the physical abilities we were born with are showing."

Mingled among the minor traps were the intermediate traps made out of vines and fallen trees, similar to the one which pulled him into the air, fully aiming to slow him down.

If Subaru hadn't been blessed with the opportunity to obtain a knife by some miracle, how much time would it have taken him to free himself from the vine trap? There was also the likelihood of the recommencing of his chase being delayed even further, due to losing his cool in one way or another.

And, what made the panicking Subaru hesitate the most was—

Subaru: "Sh!"

He lashed out the Guiltywhip he drew from the back of his waist, the tip of the weapon delivering a powerful strike to a suspicious spot on the ground.

The next moment, aimed towards the spot, two or three branches swooped down onto it, rebounding through the air with a devastating amount of power. It had a force that would be strong enough to break one or two of his arms, if he had been hit directly by those.

Large traps, which existed to seize Subaru's ability to take action—there weren't many, but the fact that these traps had been indeed set up was hampering the speed he was advancing through the forest at.

He could also say the single blow he received from the thick branch at the entrance, was one of Rem's large traps.

As Subaru continued deeper into the forest, the danger and power of the large traps was increasing. Instead of thinking that Rem, being chased, was losing her mercifulness, it was more as if her skill was growing.

Subaru: "She's learning and getting even better at making traps, while creating them during her escape… Damn, as expected of how hardworking you are, Rem. I didn't want it to be demonstrated against me right now, though."

He knew Rem was a hard worker who tried her best at everything, and he was also happy those qualities weren't lost, even in the present situation where her memories haven't returned. However, that was beside the point.

To put it short, Rem was growing throughout their battle. Considering Subaru's own growth was pretty much at its limit, to make matters worse, the already severe difference in their capabilities would be even more noticeable.

He had to capture her before this difference became set in stone, but—

Subaru: "…"

Dismantling the large trap in front of him, Subaru held his breath for a moment.

Restlessly glancing around the area around him, what he sought after was the next escape route of Rem, who had created the trap he just took apart. In order to find it out, there was a need to follow the little amount of tracks she tried to cover up.

Of course, he could think of a situation where she left no traces behind at all, but the current Rem didn't have the ability nor time to pull that off. Because of that—

Subaru: "—Found it."

In the gap between the trees, where the trap was previously set up, Subaru discovered the sign of tree bark having been plucked at, albeit only a little.

It was unrelated to the large trap, and it was a tiny scratch that was similar to a cat dragging its claws against a pillar of a house. However, these childish scars had served a purpose in leading Subaru to this point.

After all, the true identity of these scratches were the tracks left behind by the "hinderance".

Subaru: "…"

It was an ironic thing, but the primary factor that got in Rem's way and allowed Subaru to continue his pursuit, was the existence of the

Sin Archbishop she was taking with her on her escape—Louis Arneb.

Rem and Louis, Subaru didn't know how compatible they were with each other, but what he could observe from the little scars was that Louis wasn't very well-behaved and cooperative with Rem's actions.

No matter how hard Rem tried to erase their footsteps, Louis was ruining all of her efforts.

Subaru: "Shit…!"

Taking notice of the good news as Subaru used it to assist his chase, his feelings remained cloudy, the rays of revitalization refusing to shine through them.

It was only natural. With it resulting in Louis's existence giving Subaru a helping hand, if he thought about his relationship with the evil Sin Archbishop, he couldn't be rejoicing over it.

Even if it wasn't Louis who directly stole Rem's "name" and "memories", the three siblings, representing the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony, all bore sins to an equal degree. Only one of them having the weight of their sins lightened was something that wasn't going to happen.

It didn't matter if she didn't have a physical body that existed in the world, or if she strayed off the correct path in the way of life.

That was the conclusion Subaru made against Louis Arneb, who had been ranting, screaming, and bawling her eyes out in that white-filled world.

Because of that, even if Subaru could catch up to Rem successfully, and entered the stage of persuading her, he had no intention to make a compromise on how Louis would be treated.

In the first place—

Subaru: "Why the hell… do I have to play tag with Rem like this…!"

As he thought about catching up to Rem and discussing what they would do about Louis, Subaru bit his lip out of the anger rushing back into him, despite leaving it out of his mind until now.

He had considered the possibility of the awakened Rem having lost her “memories” and “name”.

Of course, it would’ve been the best if the original, complete Rem had returned, but since there were previous cases such as Crusch and Julius, he couldn’t really expect Rem to wake up in her former state.

His worries had nailed the problem right in the center, and as a result, Rem had forgotten about herself, as well as Subaru.

Even if things turned out like that, Subaru thought he could withstand it and support her.

Emilia and Ram, Beatrice, and the others—with the members of the camp helping each other out, everyone could support Rem together. That was the source of why Subaru could stay put.

However, right now, in the forest with none of the people Subaru could rely on, he was in pursuit of the runaway Rem.

Subaru: “Why… did it turn out like this…? Why does everything always…”

Didn’t allow him to settle down anything neatly and smoothly?

Rem would wake up after remembering everything, and although she would be surprised at the time that had passed during her slumber, they would weave the story that laid ahead of them, together. He was fine with that.

Even if Rem were to be in the same state she currently was in, if Subaru’s allies, who would do their best all together as a group, were there for her and stood by her side, then he wouldn’t have been tormented by a disaster like this. He was fine with that, too.

Fate always had the harshest, cruelest path in store for Natsuki Subaru.

And not only did it prepare that for Subaru, but it also directed that towards the people around him, who were dear to him.

Subaru: “—Have you complained enough already, Natsuki Subaru?”

Gnashing the back of his teeth together, Subaru delivered a strong slap to his cheeks using both of his hands.

The sharp pain and the impact rocked his consciousness, and Subaru temporarily left behind the feeble thoughts he had been harboring just until now.

Yes, fate invariably showed him the cruelest path every single time.

That was why Natsuki Subaru was constantly beaten down by hardship and suffering in the form of a whip, standing up every time he fell despite feeling like he was on the verge of vomiting up blood, and continued to face the front.

Subaru: “The man who finally made his hardships into his own whip. That’s me.”

Strictly speaking, Guiltylowe, the witchbeast that became the raw materials for the whip, was not quite a wall that obstructed his path, and it was on the lower difficulty level among the other hardships that blocked his way. Subaru declared it as such.

Talking big and lifting his own spirits, stirring up his emotions, concentrating his crafty mind, and searching for a way he could fight. It was what Subaru had been doing until now.

He had been following through with it to a foolishly honest degree. He didn’t have any other way to do it. So, he would do the same for today as well.

Subaru: “Think, think, think, me. Even if I keep chasing after Rem, she’ll eventually realize that Louis is screwing up her plan. If that happens, then the tracks would be cut off sooner or later. Before that happens…”

—He either had to catch up to them, or figure out a way to forestall them.

Subaru: "…"

Analyzing the difference in their fighting strength, Subaru racked his brains with all his might, trying to pinpoint the strengths of both the opposing party and himself.

As of now, Rem's strengths were her dexterity and her attentiveness, things which weren't lost even if she didn't have her memories. He wanted to watch over the speed of her growth as she became more adept at setting traps, the cuteness of her face and voice, and how she was taking action, but those could wait.

On the contrary, Subaru's strengths were his handling of the whip and knife, the clues Louis was leaving for him, although it was vexing to think she was helping him, and regarding the mean-looking shape of his eyes as a part of his charm—he could point out that he knew what kind of person Rem was, even more so than Rem herself.

Subaru: "…Rem must've already noticed me chasing after her."

The existence of the countless traps proved it, but Rem had been guessing that Subaru was hot on her heels.

If not, there was no reason for her to prepare an excessive number of traps to this extent. She would've only placed a few traps just to be safe, and prioritize her escape.

Instead of doing so, she continued to set up various traps because she was certain that Subaru was after her. And, the reason why she could be so sure of it was because of the Witch's miasma, as he had thought.

Subaru: "Exactly how much does my body stink right now…?"

Subaru sniffed his arm, but while he could detect the scent of sand and sweat, it wasn't as much as scattering a rancid odor all around himself. Of course, people said that it was hard to notice your own smell, but in this case, the problem was the Witch's miasma being only able to be recognized by the ones who could recognize it.

Previously, he heard something about the scent fading away day by day from Rem and Beatrice, but it would drastically increase its putridity depending on if it was right after he “Returned by Death”, or the frequency of its usage.

And, in half a day, Subaru’s looping in the Watchtower had piled up approximately twice as many Natsuki Subarus, and he was then hurled to a place like this.

That meant—

Subaru: “—In the history of my life in this world, the man who reeks of the Witch the most is the current me.”

It was unknown whether there was a limit to the Witch’s miasma or not, but Subaru could guess that the current him was emitting a substantial amount of it. If it’s the case, then his pursuit had definitely been found out already.

When it becomes so that Rem was unable to keep away the distance between them despite continuing to run and escape, she would eventually grow impatient.

Usually, teasing his opponent and leading them to make an error was a common trick of Subaru’s, but he also wanted to build a new, friendly relationship with Rem, so he didn’t want to rely too much on the method.

Subaru: “Something good on one side would be bad to the other… It’s impossible to appease both sides.”

The fact that the saying was being carried into real life, showed how bad the current situation was in a straightforward manner.

Thinking it as such, Subaru deactivated two or three minor and intermediate traps, chasing after the route Rem took while following the clues left by Louis.

He genuinely felt like Hansel and Gretel, who picked up crumbs of bread as they made their move. However, the difference was Subaru being alone, and also the group of two being the ones on the run.

Subaru: “And it’s in a pretty obvious place this time. Next is…”

Discovering the stripped bark of a tree, Subaru determined the next path he would be taking.

Louis didn't intend to let Subaru know of her and Rem's whereabouts, so if there wasn't any sense of unity between the marks that became his clues, there were many cases where it was hard to find them.

Quite possibly, while Rem worked to create the traps, Louis, who was left by herself, was just doing as she pleased. That was probably the truth of the matter.

The clues Louis left continued to be difficult to find for a while, but it was very helpful when he finally came across an obvious one.

Subaru: "I'm glad it was left there. If Rem found it and erased it, the trail of clues would be…"

Cut off, he almost said, before taking a pause in his words.

Then, he returned to the tree he had just passed by, staring at where the bark had been peeled away. The tree was large and sturdy, and the bark was pulled off from a spot that rather stood out.

Would Rem really fail to notice such a thing?

Subaru: "…"

The part where he was confused by the footprints at the grassland, Rem gradually becoming proficient in her trap-setting skills starting from there, and a large portion of bark being stripped from the tree in front of him in an exaggerated manner.

The three combined themselves inside of Subaru's head, completing the puzzle of the odd feeling he had.

Eventually, a single answer was derived inside of him.

Subaru: "If it's the Rem I know…"

If it was Rem, who was tactful and good at being attentive, she would’ve eliminated any plainly visible tracks.

Since the clue in front of him was left alone, unless Rem had sunk into quite a state of tunnel vision—

Subaru: “—Hah!”

Towards the path he had tried to move past, Subaru ripped out a chunk of thick grass from beneath his feet and hauled it in that direction.

The grass, with soil entangled in between its roots, drew a parabola as it flew at the patch of tall grass—

—Immediately after, the patch of grass made a terrifyingly gigantic sound as it plunged down, and an enormous pit engulfed the earth.

Subaru: “Whoa…!”

A large hole materialized in front of him, almost making him wonder what the other pitfalls from the minor traps were for. Nevertheless, the trap didn’t end there.

Aiming for the huge pit that made its appearance, the surrounding trees creaked as they snapped apart and collapsed. The fallen trees tumbled into the large hole one after another, and the freshly-opened pit was immediately refilled.

If Subaru had fallen into that enormous pitfall, he would’ve been stuck and entombed in there by now, buried alive.

Coming to this point, a daring, powerful technique had been executed, having used the other traps until then as a psychological trick.

The clues that had been serving as a hint for Subaru’s pursuit, was waiting with its mouth wide open as a trap to bury him alive.

He wanted to applaud it for being a measure that was very Rem-like, but—

Subaru: “—The Rem I know wouldn’t end it with this.”

If one set psychological traps, then the best result would be their pursuer falling for it and being forced to stop moving.

However, the Rem he knew was attentive, a hard worker, had a cute face and voice, warmed his chest just by how admirable she was with her actions, and—

Subaru: “Would initiate an attack if she got tired of waiting. —Isn’t that right, Rem?!”

Subaru spun around after he said that, gazing up at the tree with its bark peeled off.

It was just at that time.

“—fh!!”

That Rem gritted her teeth, launching herself at Subaru from a branch of the very tree.

3

Unable to pull away her pursuer from herself, and the traps not even serving to fix him to his spot.

When put under such a situation, what would the Rem that Subaru knew do about it?

Being able to pinpoint the location of her opponent because of the smell, if she also managed to distinguish the identity of the bread crumbs her opponent was relying on, she would use it against them and trap them, trying to eradicate the cause of her escape directly.

And, Subaru’s prediction hit the nail right on the head.

The problem was—

Rem: “—Haaaaahh!”

The difference in their fighting strength, as Subaru was unable to stop Rem’s lunge towards him.

As he cried out, “Gh, whoa!”, he was then blown away by an arm from the falling Rem.

Truthfully, Rem moving around to that extent despite not having the full use of her legs, and his body immediately jolting into action to try and to catch her, were both things that went beyond what he expected.

Rem: “You’re so persistent! So, so persistent!”

Subaru: “Wa… wait, Rem, please listen to…”

Rem: “How insistent…!”

She swung around her arms, one of them hitting Subaru and causing blood to start flowing down his nose. He appealed to her, although he was stained with blood, but Rem wouldn’t listen to him since she was flying into a rage.

Rem was on the forest floor on her hands and feet, glaring at Subaru with her blue eyes.

Rem: “If you gave up on us there and then, I wouldn’t have done anything more than that. And yet, you continue to chase after us… Please stop!”

Subaru: “It really hurts when I get told that in such a simple way…”

Rem: “My nose feels like it’s going to be twisted off! When you come closer, I can immediately notice it. Worst of all, it became stronger compared to the grassland before…”

Holding down on his bleeding nose, Subaru staggered to his feet.

Subaru, who could stand up, and Rem, who was on all fours. The situation seemed like it was in Subaru’s favor, but it was merely an advantage that could be easily flipped over by one thing: physical strength.

To add to that, if Rem started moving swiftly like a Teke Teke using only her arms, Subaru would be knocked down into the gigantic pitfall this time for sure, and it would be the end of him.

He had to clear her misunderstandings while measuring the distance between him and her, little by little.

Subaru: “Rem, please listen to me. It seems like I’m considerably stinky to you…”

Rem: “…Yes, you stink.”

Subaru: “A nostalgic way to put it…! It seems like I stink, and I know you feel like it’s something that’s no good, but I don’t bear any ill will towards you!”

Raising his hands in the air, Subaru showed her that he wasn’t planning on being antagonistic to her.

However, in spite of his claim, the wariness on her face refused to dim. To that extent, the Witch’s miasma was the primary factor in driving the empty Rem into a corner.

No matter where he went, anything related to the Witch really didn’t bring about a decent situation.

Subaru: “There’s the thing with my smell, and I’m aware I gave you a terrible first impression. Even with this, I’ve put up with the existence called myself for eighteen years. So, please let me redo this.”

Rem: “…Redo this?”

Subaru: “I was the one at fault. Even though you were worried and anxious, having forgotten everything, I couldn’t explain a single thing for you. All because of my personal matters, I wasn’t able to listen and be thoughtful of your feelings…”

His eager thoughts and impatient feelings, those were the reasons he couldn’t be considerate towards Rem.

The blame was entirely on those two reasonings—it was easy for Subaru to defend himself like that. However, what meaning was there to a poor, scanty bout of self-justification?

What he needed wasn’t the words to protect himself.

He needed the words to appeal to Rem, to relieve the tension in her stubborn heart.

Subaru: “You’re important to me. I only want to protect you. So, please listen to me. Please don’t reject me. —Please, give me one more chance.”

Rem: “…”

Both of his hands still raised up, Subaru bent over to bow deeply on the spot, pleading to her.

He didn’t know if he was able to be sincere towards her with his whole body and his soul, but he at least put his inner feelings into it. If it would sway Rem’s heart even a tiny bit, if she would give him the opportunity to explain himself—

Rem: “—Is that all you have to say?”

Subaru: “…Eh?”

Rem: “Is that only what you’re offering an explanation to me for?”

Subaru timidly raised his head from the reply he received from her.

The emotion that was thick in her voice was different from what he had hoped for. However, it was also unlike what he expected to happen if things went wrong, and it caused him to be bewildered.

Rem’s voice was adorned by a silent rage, an unbearable amount of fury.

Subaru: “Re, Rem…?”

Rem: “The fact that you’ve chased us around, and the fact that you’re emitting an awfully evil stench is suspicious, of course, and I think it’s terribly strange. But,”

Cutting off her words there, Rem drew her lips tightly.

That was also as if she regarded Subaru, who remained unsure of the answers that lied ahead, as an unpardonable villain from the bottom of her heart, hostility gleaming in her blue eyes.

Rem: “More so than any reason, you can’t wipe away the truth that you tried to abandon such a little girl. How are you telling me to put my trust in a ruthless and despicable person like that?”

Subaru: “—ah,”

Subaru was left speechless from the gaze that condemned the wicked.

The words that were thrusted against him permeated into his brain, and Subaru understood he made the wrong choice in obtaining Rem’s trust with his first move, whether he could gain it or not being completely separate from the Witch’s miasma.

His mean-looking eyes which he inherited from his mother, and the miasma that was forcefully shifted onto him, were not the reasons that damaged Rem’s trust in the real sense.

It wasn’t the things he already had with him, but his own actions that destroyed her belief in him.

Even if Louis were to be a Sin Archbishop, the incarnation of evil. From Rem’s eyes, who knew nothing about the matter, she was a young, weak little girl, and Subaru had overlooked it.

Subaru: “…”

He couldn’t find the answer to what he should say immediately.

Subaru overcame many hardships on countless occasions. Sometimes he lost his life, unable to overcome them, and he had searched around for solutions from a different angle, but the answer for this very moment didn’t lay inside of him.

His apology, his excuse, or the truth. Which one did he need to prioritize?

Apologize for the fact he tried to forsake a child?

Make excuses to gloss it over, saying he had a reason to do so?

Tell her the truth that the “weak little girl” was actually a young monster?

No matter which one he picked, he didn’t feel like he could change the distrusting stare from Rem, who was in front of him.

And that was the result of Subaru’s actions, already set in stone by “Return by Death”.

Rem: “—You’re saying nothing more.”

As Subaru’s gaze wandered around, his cheeks hardened, and no words came out of his mouth, Rem grew tired of waiting for him.

She heaved herself up with tremendous effort, trying to distance herself from him. —It seemed like she didn’t intend to beat him down on the spot, in order to sever the source of her worries for her future.

Perhaps she thought the devastated Subaru wouldn’t chase after her.

Of course, that wasn’t happening. Even if he was brushed off here, he would continue to extend his hand towards her until she took it.

Parting ways—that wasn’t happening. That wasn’t happening, but—

Subaru: “—Re,”

Changing the direction of his body, Subaru tried to call for Rem, who was about to leave the area, to stop.

Firstly, he called her name, not thinking of any other words to continue his sentence, simply trying to call for her.

And then—

Subaru: “…”

As Subaru nearly reached his hand towards the back of Rem, who twisted her body around, a change occurred in his field of view.

It was a tiny flicker of a shadow, beyond the dense trees—and he recognized it.

Subaru: "—Rem!!"

It's coming. Faster than the thought emerged into his mind, Subaru threw himself at Rem's back. Caught off guard by his sudden action, Rem stiffened her petite body.

It was the moment he embraced her small body as if he was wrapping himself around it.

—An arrow that was released from the heavy, powerful bow flew over their heads, and a hulking tree was blasted away, having the center of its trunk pierced through.

Chapter 4:
A Brave Choice

1

Subaru: “Whoa!”

The grip he had on his whip was wrenched away, just as he felt a sharp blow to his right hand.

He immediately tried to resist it, exerting his strength into his hand, but it was no match against the force snatching away his whip. On top of that, he was pulled forwards and fell down, flipped upside down onto the ground with an, “Abeshi!”.

Subaru: “Ouch…”

???: “The only way to improve, is to dedicate yourself to trying your best everyday. It seems like you still have an insufficient amount of training. Very poor.”

Subaru: “I don’t have anything to say to that…”

Subaru flopped down onto the bare ground, grimacing as his lack of skill was harshly pointed out to him. He sat up slowly, his gaze clashing with the intelligent, handsome man.

The man had a sharp look in his eyes that reminded Subaru of reptiles, and he also had deep blue hair, cut and arranged evenly. Just like the impression he gave off, with his butler outfit and the monocle on one of his eyes, he was a formal, proper, and smart professional.

His name was—

???: “—Clind! How could you do such a disrespectful thing to Subaru-sama!”

Clind: “…”

The young man, called Clind, wordlessly turned his gaze to the side. As he did so, the figure of a tall woman, lumbering towards them, jumped into his field of vision.

She was a stylish and beautiful woman with exquisite green eyes, her long, blonde hair swaying from side to side. Clothed in a maid outfit with black as its main color, she passed by Clind and walked towards Subaru, who was still on the ground, and gently held out a white towel to him.

Woman: “Are you alright, Subaru-sama? From what I can see, you fell onto the ground face-first…”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m fine, Frederica. My clothes got a little mud on them, but that usually happens.”

The beautiful woman—Frederica gave Subaru a worried stare, standing her ground with a, “But…” as he accepted the towel gratefully, using it to wipe his face.

However, Clind was the person to shrug his shoulders out of exasperation at Frederica’s words.

Clind: “Just as Subaru-sama himself said, it’s a normal occurrence during his training. If anything, aren’t you the one who’s embarrassing him by making a big deal out of it? Meddlesome.”

Frederica: “Wha!”

Her face reddening from Clind’s choice of words, Frederica glowered at him, putting her sharp teeth on display.

Caught between the two who had started glaring at each other, Subaru felt like holding his head in his hands, muttering out a, “There they go again…”

—Clind and Frederica.

In butler and maid outfits respectively, both were in the position of servants who worked under the Mathers family. Although Subaru heard they’ve known each other for a long time, they didn’t have a very good relationship.

Usually, both were capable servants who were simultaneously polite and attentive, but when they came into contact with each other like this, arguments would immediately break out with every opportunity they had.

If their arguments consisted of exchanging their opinions on Roswaal's political affairs, a deed that was quite highly advanced for servants, then trivial disputes over something as simple as making way for each other in the hallways also occurred.

In short, they were apparently incompatible with each other, but—

Subaru: "Frederica, I'm happy you're worried for me, but I'm fine, really."

Frederica: "No, I'm not particularly worried about you. It's only that this man's fake expression and composed attitude, as well as his inconsiderate remarks, they are so infuriating…!"

Subaru: "Oh, you weren't worried about me! I'm embarrassed!"

Frederica: "Ah, that isn't…! It's not as if I wasn't worried! Of course, I'm concerned for your well-being, Subaru-sama. Not only me, but Petra as well."

Frederica seemed like she accidentally blurted out her honest thoughts, and Subaru could only give her a wry smile as he scratched his cheek with a finger, hearing the mention of Petra's name from her mouth.

He was causing the women in the mansion, barring Ram, to be worried about him—especially Petra.

Regarding the current situation, what had likely happened was that Frederica had been asked to check up on Subaru on the behalf of Petra, who had her hands full.

Subaru: "But, I was the one who asked him. I was already prepared for it to be this Spartan… No matter what it takes, I need to break out of my shell before he returns to Annerose's place."

Clind: "—You are splendidly determined. It makes me more enthusiastic in tutoring you. Inspired.”

Listening to Subaru’s answer, Clind swung his arm, the ivory-colored whip in his hand bending as it created a sound reminiscent of the air bursting apart.

Using the same weapon, Clind was helping Subaru learn the way of the whip. Because he respected Clind’s technique and position, Subaru referred to him as “Teacher”.

Subaru: “Really, learning by myself would only get me so far, I would have hit a limit if I weren’t mentored by another person. It’s nice if there’s someone who can use a whip near you. Thanks for the help.”

Clind: “I’m honored to be of help. Delighted. However, if it comes to people who are able to use a whip aside from me, there is another. Candidate.”

Subaru: “Eh, someone else can use a whip? It’s not Ram in the sense of handling the whip of words, right?”

Frederica: “Subaru-sama, that idea of yours is… no, I can’t deny it if what you’re saying about Ram.”

A displeased look settled on Frederica’s face as Subaru cracked a joke, picking up his whip from where he dropped it, and carrying it in his hand. Clind looked at their faces, comparing their behavior before closing his monocle-side eye,

Clind: “It’s simple enough. I’m referring to Master. Versatile.”

Subaru: “Well then, I absolutely don’t want to be taught by him!”

While he spoke, Subaru stomped the option that was as good as nothing into the ground, and lashed out his whip.

It flew at top speed, its velocity having the potential to exceed the speed of sound if Subaru was serious about it. The tip of the whip made a deep, hollow sound as it aimed for Clind—actually, not him, but the piece of wood set on top of the tree stump between him and Subaru.

Entangling and capturing the wood positioned atop the round stump with the whip.

It was the assignment given to Subaru by Clind, and it was a high enough hurdle that he wasn't able to overcome even once until today.

It's not exclusively because Subaru was unable to capture the wood with his whip due to his technique lacking experience and skill.

Clind: "Your aim is transparently obvious. Impede."

Subaru: "Guh…!"

With a terrifying amount of precision, Clind's whip repelled the pointed end of the whip Subaru had released.

The requirement of completing the assignment was to overcome this form of obstruction, and pull the piece of wood into his hands with his own whip. This was why exactly Subaru wasn't able to cross the hurdle even a single time.

Clind: "Striking the area you are aiming for, entangling the entity you are aiming to capture, and displaying the results you are aiming for. Instead of relying on a sword or a spear, if you cannot fulfill the reason why you chose the whip… Worthless."

Subaru: "Dah! Deh! Doh! Damn! You're warding me off like it's no big deal! I know, I don't have to be told! This is the only path I have to make use of my crafty mi…ndah?!"

He attempted to draw back the whip that was forced away, but its tip was caught by Clind's once again.

It was too late when Subaru realized it. The next moment, his sense of balance was disoriented, and Subaru was easily pulled down onto the ground by Clind, who wasn't even putting that much strength into his weapon.

Subaru: "Wagh! Sound Pillar!"

Clind: "You fell rather flamboyantly. Breaking your fall is important as well. Caution."

Frederica: "Su, Subaru-sama!"

Subaru fell from the front and collapsed onto the ground yet again, and Frederica hurriedly rushed to his side. This time, he hit the ground face-first, and blood was trickling out of his nose.

She hastily held it down with the towel, and then,

Frederica: "Clind! No matter how you look at it, this is too much!"

Clind: "It's inevitable, considering Subaru-sama's position. Necessary. You shouldn't really get in the way of a man's rise to action as well. Understand."

Frederica: "A man's rise to action…?"

She made a face as if she were saying, I can't believe it, but Clind shook his head at her. And then, with his sharp eyes, he gazed at Subaru who was wiping his nosebleed,

Clind: "Subaru-sama, I think highly of your attitude of asking for guidance. Admirable. As long as you stand by Emilia-sama's side as her knight, you need strength. The strength to protect Emilia-sama and yourself to the very end. Indispensable."

Subaru: "…Yeah, I know. That's why I'm thankful that you're this strict with me."

Although he was snorting and his voice was muffled, Subaru's spirit refused to crack.

Looking at him, Frederica drew her lips tightly against her teeth.

Frederica: "You two gentlemen are as dumb as Garf…"

Subaru: "It would be super helpful if my strength, instead of just my dumbness, was enough to stand side by side with him as well, but it seems like that's not gonna happen, so…"

Holding his nose, with blood spurting out of both of his nostrils, Subaru forcefully stopped his nosebleed.

As Subaru stood up after doing so, Clind looked at him, tucking his chin in and straightening his posture.

Clind: “Facing the front and refusing to stop… Your attitude is truly pleasant. Long-awaited.”

Subaru: “Thanks a lot… If my handling of the whip gets better, then I’ll have more options to choose from. If I get more choices, then the people around me will also have more moves to make, not just me.”

Clind: “Yes. However, please do not place too much confidence in that. I believe there will not be many occasions where you have to fight alone. Support.”

Clind jerked his chin, pointing towards Frederica.

Beginning with her, Subaru had people such as Garfiel and Otto around him, and Beatrice stood the closest to him, more than anything else. If it was a fight in order to protect, then of course, Emilia stood alongside them as well.

That’s why Clind’s statement was correct.

In Subaru’s battles, it wasn’t as if Subaru himself would snatch a hard-earned victory. His battles were brought to fruition by making the most out of everyone else’s abilities.

Subaru: “By the way, what if I accidentally find myself in a situation where there’s only me and no one else?”

Clind: “You ought to run. Full speed.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru said that, half-intending for it to be a joke, but Clind didn’t smile at it.

It was a situation that was extremely unlikely to happen, but it didn’t mean it was impossible. In a set of circumstances in which he would be chased and driven into a corner, with his back to the wall, Clind's advice went straight to the point.

Clind: "You must run, Subaru-sama. Put every last drop of effort into running away, as fast as your legs could carry you, disgracefully, and with no regard to how you appear in doing so. That is the wisest course of action. The only one."

Subaru: "If that's how you ended your sentence, then it sounds like there's no other decision I could make, instead of it being a better choice."

Clind didn't answer, his expression unchanging at Subaru's words.

There was no need to answer. Was his wordlessness the proof of it being just as Subaru had deduced, after all?

Subaru: "Jeez, my mentor really has no mercy!"

Frederica: "That man has been like that since a long time ago. Being strict with those who show promise and training them… but, he quits and throws that out of the window when he loses interest in doing so. Icily, and cruelly."

Subaru: "Derica-san? Uh, your voice is becoming kinda icy?"

Feeling something lethal in her voice, as if it would slice him upon touching it, Subaru hesitantly questioned her, who turned her face away in a sullen mood, muttering, "Don't ask me!"

Frederica: "I've decided. I will also be rooting for your success with your training. Please embarrass Clind, make him contort that nonchalant face of his, and make him cry."

Subaru: "That's a pretty tough request…!"

Frederica: "Oh, the person who demands and desires for Emilia-sama to become King says that?"

As expected of a capable maid, even her taunts were top notch, although Subaru provoked her into doing so.

Subaru widened his eyes at her words, then nodded with an evil smile, replying, “You’re right.” After that, he assumed a fierce stance with his whip,

Subaru: “It’ll hurt my honor as a man if I can’t achieve it, despite being told all that! Watch me, I’m gonna do it!”

Alongside a courageous shout, Subaru swung his whip, lashing it out with all his might.

It drew a sharp trajectory, the tip whizzing through the air as it aimed straight for the tree stump—

Clind: “Your enthusiasm is admirable, but your skill is poor. Inadequate.”

Subaru: “Guh, gwaaaaaaaahh—!!”

Frederica: “Su, Subaru-sama—!!”

Yet again, Subaru was pulled down and was slammed onto the ground face-first.

2

The hulking tree broke in half overhead, its resulting shockwave buffeting Subaru’s entire body. With his back battered by that, he spat out the rust-tinged blood that had accumulated inside of his mouth.

Subaru: “…”

Rem’s soft, warm body was wrapped inside his arms.

His own hands and feet were still there too, and it looked like he’d managed to avoid the arrow. As soon as he became cognizant of that, this moment was a pass mark.

Rem: “Wh-What are you doing all of a sudden…”

Subaru: “Shut up! Or you’ll end up biting that tongue of yours!”

Rem had been slow in her reaction, due to how sudden things had been; however, Subaru paid no attention to her complaints. So as to pull her body up, having first fallen forward, he then tumbled backwards, rolling around as much as he could while still clutching Rem close to him.

Wrapped inside his arms, he could feel Rem stifling the urge to scream; yet that was interrupted by a far louder sound—Namely, the roar of the broken, hulking tree coming crashing down.

The spot where Subaru and Rem had been lying in just a moment ago was flattened, with the other trees caught in its fall spreading the deforestation around.

As someone quite in tune with nature, that fact made his heart pang quite a bit, however…

Subaru: "…Right now, we're more important!"

Using the dust unsettled by the fallen tree as a diversion, Subaru didn't stop rolling. There was some resistance from Rem, but despite that, he let his adrenaline rush take over and pulled her in towards him with all the strength he could muster.

They kept rolling, and rolling and rolling, until the ground before them suddenly disappeared.

Subaru: "Gwhooaa!"

Rem: "Kyaa?!"

For a moment, it felt like they were floating, however the ground stopped their fall in their tracks straight afterwards.

A large hole full of many a fallen tree and heaps of earth and sand—Namely, it was the pitfall that Rem had constructed to trap Subaru. By taking it upon himself to roll into it, he'd cut off the line of sight away from his opponent.

Nonetheless, it wasn't like he'd paid nothing in return for that.

Subaru: "Gh, gkh… Damn, Oh no you didn't…!"

His left arm had been frantically wrapped around Rem, and some of that arm's fingers, that she had kept a hold on, were broken. His middle finger, his ring finger, and his little finger; all of them, except for his thumb and index finger, were kaput.

Having fallen into the same large hole as Subaru had, Rem crawled away, keeping her distance from Subaru. He was in agony, trying his best to not to look at his fingers, which were pointed in strange directions.

Rem: "What did you expect! Doing that so suddenly… What the hell is going on?!"

Subaru: "…I failed to mention it, but just so you know, there's a dangerous hunter knocking about in this forest. Though, this pretty much eliminated the chance that they were hunting game and missed their target… Dzaah"

As cold sweat beaded down his forehead, Subaru straightened out his three broken fingers. For the time being, he'd fix them in place using a towel, with a branch as a splint.

It was a small mercy that the fingers that he'd broken were the ones on his left hand. Had it been the ones on his right hand, his dominant hand, which handled his whip, then his ability to take action would have dropped down to that of a primary school kid.

Rem: "A dangerous hunter… They're not your ally?"

Subaru: "Would an ally be providing covering fire with this kind of force? And in general, why would they be providing covering fire… Uwoa?!"

A tree exploded in front of his eyes the moment he'd gingerly stuck his head out of the hole to try and get a glimpse of the situation outside.

It seemed like the hunter had started to prioritize clearing up their field of vision first, so that they could aim and shoot at Subaru and Rem. They must have seen that they didn't possess any means to attack from distance.

Subaru: “The theory usually goes that sharpshooters change their positions when their presence becomes exposed…Shit, they’re making light of us. Can’t say anything back to that though.”

Rem: “—. This is the power of a bow and arrow? I can’t believe that. This isn’t normal.”

Subaru: “Mhm, I agree with you! Like for sure you’re gonna end up with a huge airhole in your chest if you get shot by it!”

In fact, last time, he’d ended up being pierced by one of their arrows, and dying like a trapped insect, pinned to a tree. However, there were yet strange points about it. —Last time, Subaru had come to the opposite side of the forest.

Subaru: “Why the fuck did you come here…?”

The pain coursing through from his broken fingers bored through his mind intensely. Subaru gritted his back teeth, almost to the point of cracking them from his anguish, and frantically plunged into thought.

It was difficult to imagine that this hunter and the hunter who killed Subaru were two different people. Both of them had come to attack Subaru, plus, their weapon of choice was the same strongbow. Thus the question remained on whether their attack was an accidental one or not.

Whichever it was, the amount of questions regarding why Subaru was being targeted right now were endless. Subaru and Rem had confronted each other, and while it was true that the former had frozen up at her rejection, he didn’t really think that would mean it would make it easier to aim at him than before.

Furthermore, if they were actively targeting him, then the possibility that they were following him grew larger.

What had happened to them was still rather vague, but what was beyond their grasp was how they’d been hurled away from the Pleiades Watchtower. There was always the chance that, perhaps, they’d flown through the sky like a shooting star and crashed down onto the grassland.

Naturally, if that were the case, even disregarding Rem, there'd be no explanation as to why Subaru's weak body hadn't ended up in smithereens; so it was a reasonable assumption that what happened to them was something else.

Subaru: "They're aiming for the dodgy 'uns who dropped down there, or something…"

Or perhaps this was private property, so they were trying to chase off anyone who trespassed in an extreme manner. In opposition to the accuracy of their bow, should they perhaps take it as the hunter sucking at going easy on others?

Subaru: "In that case, can't I just talk things out with them! Hey! I mean no harm! It's just mere coincidence that we're in this forest, so…"

Rem: "Wait a second! When you say "we", are you counting me and that girl as well? I don't want us to be lumped in with you!"

Subaru: "Now's not the time to be saying that sort of stuf—Dwhaa?!"

A single arrow that punched into the ground came as the reply to Subaru's call for a ceasefire. This magisterial power, enough even to extinguish his quarrel with Rem halfway through, was probably going to make short work of all the obstacles in their field of view soon and turn its bared fangs over to Subaru and Rem in the large hole.

Rem: "It seems like they're not the sort of person you can get through to…"

Subaru: "When you're facing arrows, you've gotta assume there's a chance they could hit you with an arcing shot… If they can hold their position for hours and hours, just like a sniper that means business… No, considering we're talking about a bow and arrow here, then it is indeed different to looking through a scope. So… does it make it impossible to keep that up for such a long time?"

In stuff like movies and manga, you'd often get scenes like the sniper waiting for hours on end while staring at their prey with their sniper rifles. However, with a bow and arrow, it would indeed be a completely different kettle of fish.

Unlike rifles, which only require a trigger to be fired, arrows need to be notched to the bow, before then drawing its string. There were limits even to those who possessed supernatural strength in the different world.

Then, with the enemy hunter aiming at them, it too was…

Subaru: "…A short-term battle"

Predicting that their opponent would make some kind of move soonish, Subaru set himself a time-limit, given that he couldn't afford to think too long here.

They wouldn't be able to avoid a fight so long as their enemy wasn't going to acquiesce to talking things out. And even though they wouldn't be able to avoid one, the aces they had up their sleeve were way too meager.

Subaru: "Just like what my mentor taught me, the only way is to run."

Thankfully, their enemy couldn't catch eye of Subaru and Rem's position thanks to them jumping into this large hole. If they climbed out from the opposite side and ran away while keeping close to the ground, they could perhaps escape into the thicket.

Or maybe…

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "…? What's with you shutting your gob all of a sudden? Weren't you coming up with an escape plan right now?"

Subaru: "…We're really in a huge pickle here, and what's more, it seems like you're finally listening to what I have to say, huh."

Rem: "Ugh."

Rem furrowed her well-shaped eyebrows as she sat down on the ground, a disgruntled look on her face. However, it seemed like she understood that she couldn't afford to argue with Subaru, so long as she didn't come and attack him immediately.

It would save them a lot of time if she could rein in her hostility for the time being, and call a temporary truce.

Subaru: "Listen to me, Rem. I'm going to jump out and attract their attention. While I do that, you're going to climb over the other side of the hole and flee for cover."

Rem: "Wha…?"

Subaru: "Though the power behind their arrows is frightenin' as heck, you're going to be spoilt for choice for somewhere to find cover in the greenery of mother nature. So I'll give it my all to somehow buy you time, that way you can run away."

It was either take Rem with him and run away, or let Rem run away ahead of him.

Subaru thought the option had the biggest chance of success was probably the latter. No matter how much of an expert their enemy was with the bow, they were in a forest chock full of trees. Thus, Subaru had played his cards, taking into consideration the possibility of arrows flying towards them. They probably wouldn't pierce through all of that so easily.

Subaru: "I'll make a run for it as well, after I've bought you enough time. However, I don't want to become separated from you, after you've ran away, so if you can, please leave me some markers. Though it may be hard for you to understand this, in my hometown we have a symbol called an arrow, it gives you a general sense of direction towards…"

Rem: "…Can you please stop spouting out whatever you feel like."

Subaru: "Rem?"

Subaru had briskly told Rem about his plans for her escape, however, she interrupted his explanation and glared at him very sharply.

With his breath knocked out of him by how sharp her expression was, Subaru was perplexed as to what was up with her. And Rem looked even more irritated by his perplexion.

Rem: “You decide everything, absolutely everything, on your own… And after all of that, you’re telling me to run away? You’re telling me, who’s angry with you because you tried to abandon a child?”

She refused Subaru’s proposal for the same reason she had rejected Subaru in the beginning.

It was perfectly reasonable. You could probably say it was an answer born out of being a good human being. However, Subaru hadn’t thought she’d decide that she wouldn’t let him abandon them in this situation.

Subaru: “But… well, I…”

Rem: “I’ll pass on the excuses. There’s no time for that. Still, as for your instructions telling me, and only me, to run away, I refuse them. I can’t leave that child behind in the first place.”

Shifting her gaze away from Subaru, who was unable to hide his surprise, Rem turned her attention to the outside of the hole.

She’d turned her attention to the hulking tree that the first arrow had blown apart—and after that, to another large tree a little bit away from it.

Subaru: “And just when I was thinking she wasn’t here; is she hiding over there? How can she be so quiet despite all of this commotion…”

Rem: “…Taking her along with me was a real pain, so I knocked her out. I don’t think she’ll be waking up for a while.”

Subaru: “You…”

Even now, Louis had become a burden towards Subaru and Rem’s withdrawal. The resentment that had been beginning to sprout regarding that was shattered the moment he heard her typical Rem-like answer.

He could only describe that rather extreme snap decision as being truly like Rem.

Rem: “…I know it wasn’t a good move as well.”

Subaru: “Nah, I reckon it’s a fine move given how things are. —Just between us, you wouldn’t leave her behind and have us running away together, right?”

Rem: “Even though I have no idea who I am, I’d rather bite my tongue and die than do something like that.”

Subaru doubted that she’d really die from something of that degree, but he sure didn’t want Rem to do anything like that, even if she was just testing.

In all honesty, the best choice for Subaru would be to leave Louis behind here and leave with Rem, however Rem herself wasn’t about to let that happen.

Subaru: “God damned me, for showing my benevolent side before we were swallowed by the shadow…”

He’d ended up carrying not just Rem’s body, but Louis’ as well when the Green Room had been swallowed by the shadow. And that had brought forth this situation. Albeit a setting which he couldn’t re-do again anymore, he could say loud and clear that he’d made the wrong choice back there.

Rem: “So what shall you do?”

Subaru: “…I’ll do it. I’ll come and bring her. That tree there, right?”

Rem: “—. Correct. She’s fast asleep inside the hollow of the tree. Do you stand any chance of making it?”

Subaru: “Well, my mentor told me to run away without wasting a moment whenever I’m up against a strong foe.”

He wasn’t talking about gauging the difference in strengths between the two sides, and so on and so forth.

After all, in this world, the majority of Subaru’s opponents were stronger than him. Thus, the optimal way to defend himself was to assume in advance that everyone he met would be better ranking than him.

It was precisely for that reason that he’d prioritize running away. However, in cases where he couldn’t…

Subaru: “I will make use of everything I can. Rem, you probably don’t want to, but please lend me your hand.”

Rem: “—. If it’s for helping her out.”

Rem gazed at the hand offered out to her, but she didn’t take it.

She merely nodded at Subaru, quite begrudgingly, with him having worked out a plan of action.

3

Subaru gave his left arm a strong swing, checking the condition his three broken fingers were in.

They hurt. And so, while feeling this pain, that would not fade no matter what, as if it were digging its talons into his mind, Subaru steeled himself so that it wouldn’t become a hindrance to him running over.

And then…

Subaru: “…Zha!”

Putting some muscle into it, he pushed a small-ish fallen tree from the large hole up to the ground above.

The very next moment, an arrow that had come towards them at insane speeds pierced into the fallen tree that he’d pushed up. The impact wrenched it away from his arms, forcefully buffeting him backwards.

Subaru: “Whoaaaa!!”

Looking at that from the corner of his eyes, Subaru crawled out of the large hole and stepped firmly on the rough ground. There were limits to how quick the hunter could fire off their bow, no matter how confident they were with their archery. Unlike with guns, you have to notch the arrow, draw the bowstring, and then take aim.

This time lag gave Subaru the merest ray of hope for survival…

Rem: “…It’s coming faster!!”

She said that the moment he’d crawled out of the large hole and kicked out his first step.

Time-wise, only two seconds had passed since the first arrow had blown away the fallen tree he’d used as a decoy—Nevertheless, for a skilled hunter, those two seconds were plenty sufficient for them to fire off their next one.

Subaru: “…hk”

The ground behind Subaru exploded straight after he heard Rem’s voice ringing out.

The fact he had tensed up in place and hadn’t gone into a defensive stance at her call proved to be the right course of action. More specifically, his nerves weren’t quite in tune enough to be able to respond to her call; however, that turned out to be alright in the end.

And just like that, arrows came flying towards Subaru, as he ran to his tree, one after the other—Each in the space of less than two seconds.

If any of them had made it to him, he would have been turned into a hedgehog in the blink of an eye.

However…

Rem: “I won’t allow that to happen—!”

The hunter's next attack was interrupted by a clump of dirt which Rem had flung out, along with her valiant cry.

With her back against the slope of the large hole, it had been something thrown by Rem—No, it had been a ferocious attack which you could even call a bombardment, made from a large stone covered in dirt.

Subaru: "Though, it would have been best if she knew how to use her magic…"

When they'd been confirming how much she could fight, Rem had shown her disapproval for using the power of her Oni horn, magic and such. To be more exact though, in truth, she couldn't remember how to use them.

Nevertheless, they couldn't waste time trying to get her to remember those techniques. For that reason, what Subaru had suggested to her instead, was her physical strength, which she still had in her, even if she didn't have her techniques…

Getting in their way via some rather primitive violence, using the physicality intrinsic to the Oni Tribe by birth; an attack borne of that struck at the hunter, who had maintained their position, dismissing Subaru and Rem as weaklings.

Subaru: "You know that saying, a cornered rat will bite the cat! Then get a load of this!!"

Subaru leapt over the shockwave which the arrow had produced right under his feet as he let out a bellow. Meanwhile, in his field of view, a large stone thrown by Rem went flying towards the direction that the hunter had loosed their arrow from.

Subaru: "GRHAAAAAAA—!!"

When face to face with an enemy, Rem didn't know how to go easy on them. And that was Rem's best feature.

She'd gathered those stones just to be safe, yet, they quickly became extremely dangerous weapons from just the act of throwing them from her slender arms.

Subaru: “Well, while Rem’s buying me time, I’mma—!”

While Rem smashed up the sniper fire with her bombardment, leveraging the use of her appropriate weaponry, Subaru made it to the tree in question.

As that raged on, he walked around to the back of the large tree. There the figure of Louis flew into his sight, sleeping in a bed of her own golden hair inside the rotten hollow.

Subaru: “…”

He caught sight of her rosy-red cheeks, as well as her chest gently heaving up and down, confirming that she was alive and well.

And so, as he tried to reach his arms around her body, Subaru felt a strong sense of rejection within himself. Even though he’d tried to act without bringing personal feelings into it, his soul, rather than his mind, rejected Louis.

This was a Sin Archbishop, even if now it was an innocent sleeping face she was showing. She was a traitor that was beyond forgiveness…

Rem: “Stop dawdling please!!”

Subaru: “—hk!”

His indecision was shattered by Rem urging him on.

The moment he heard that, Subaru somehow bit down his sense of rejection and picked Louis up. And then, while having a hold of her light body, he jumped out of the tree’s hollow and started to make his way back to Rem…

Subaru: “…Huh?”

When suddenly, a black shadow blocked his path, having leapt out right in front of his eyes.

The assumption was, that he’d take the same path to get back to the large hole. Subaru hadn’t imagined that something like this would be on his way there; he looked up at the shadow that had so suddenly made its presence known here. —And then, he was lost for words.

???: “—ﾐﾐ!!”

This gargantuan shadow had slipped through the forest, making nary a sound, and was now blocking Subaru’s way. It was a huge snake, probably around ten meters in length. Its entire body was covered in tightly-packed green scales, and its eyes were yellow. Spotting the twisted white horn on their sudden intruder’s forehead, Subaru realized what its identity was.

Subaru: “A witchbeast—!!”

Faced with its imposing appearance ever so near to him, Subaru rued his foolish oversight.

Subaru himself should have taken note of this; of the fact that, as he was right now, he was letting off the Witch’s lingering scent the strongest ever since he was summoned into this different world.

So it was inevitable that Subaru would be attracting witchbeasts to him, just as it had happened in the Augria Sand Dunes, and just as it had happened in so many places up until now.

He should have known that the inside of a dingy forest like this, which had few people going in and out of it, would have been an ideal dwelling for them.

Snake witchbeast: “—ﾐﾐ!!”

The huge snake opened its gaping mouth wide, settling its aim on Subaru.

Its gaping mouth seemed plenty big enough to swallow not just Subaru himself, but Louis as well, whom he was carrying in his arms. Seeing it drawing near to him, Subaru’s perception of time crawled to a halt.

…Oh, this is bad.

Subaru felt like he was feeling these things as someone else entirely.

Seeing the world flickering ever so slowly and languidly was something close to the times where you'd see your life flashing before your eyes, so to speak. In regards to this topic, there were theories along the lines of it being the mind's way of looking for a solution using what has been experienced in life up to this point, as death looms.

But, when it came to Subaru, no matter how much he racked his mind, he couldn't find anything like having narrowly escaped from being gobbled up by a huge snake. If he forced himself, the closest he could find involved the swarm of rabbits; but that was one memory he wished to reject, even when it came to his life flashing before his eyes.

Having wasted a few brief moments on such pointless thoughts, Subaru's shoulders then slumped.

As he cursed his body for having stirred into action to protect Louis so quickly, they were about to be swallowed, head-first, into the huge snake's gaping mouth—

Snake witchbeast: "—))?!"

Subaru: "Whoa?"

Subaru reflexively closed his eyes, when something dripping wet poured down on top of his head. An unpleasant thought ran through this mind, that for sure, it was the type that sprayed its digestive juices out before its meals. However, that was not the case. What caked Subaru's entire body was darkish blood that had been sprayed everywhere.

It was a tremendous amount of blood that the huge snake had spat from its jaws, having had its body pierced by a sharp arrow.

Chapter 5: Being a Man is Tough

1

Subaru: “Wabuh—!”

???: “Kyah! Subaru-sama, I’m sorry!”

Splashing and splattering, Subaru was showered by water that cascaded down from above his head. As he let out a cry of alarm, wondering what the heck was going on, an apology from a high-pitched voice flew towards him.

When Subaru glanced up while shaking his head, he saw the curtains swaying from an opened window, and his gaze mingled with a girl’s—Petra’s, who was looking down at him from above.

It seemed like it was right when Petra threw some water out of the window on the second floor.

Of course, she wouldn’t do anything ill-behaved, such as dumping water onto the garden. She threw the water onto the edge of the flowerbed to make sure no one would be splashed by it.

Subaru: “And yet, unluckily, I was gardening right there…”

Petra: “I-I’m sorry, Subaru-sama! I’ll bring a change of clothes straight away…”

Subaru: “Ahh, you don’t have to do that much. Getting drenched was the only thing that happened, and… it freaking stinks! Getting drenched wasn’t the only thing that happened?!”

Petra: “Because it’s the water I was using to clean the room, and… anyway! I’ll get going right now, wait for me at the watering place!”

Petra said to Subaru, who was astounded by the smell of the dirty water poured all over him. Like that, her adorable face was withdrawn into the other side of the window, and she started running to fetch him extra clothes, her footsteps pattering against the floor.

Subaru smiled wryly at the panicking Petra, deepening due to his own rotten luck, and he headed towards the watering place at the garden of the mansion, just as Petra had told him to do.

Subaru: “Well, I was planning on changing my clothes once I’ve finished gardening, anyway…”

Subaru consoled himself with the fact his plans were only brought forward by a tiny bit.

If Petra was going to bring a change of clothes, then he should wash the dirt off himself first. Before drawing up water from the well, he flung off his shirt with haste—

???: “—Hm, you’re quite daring, getting undressed so suddenly.”

Subaru: “Wait… kyaaaaaa?!”

???: “Woah, to think you would let out a scream comparable to a girl’s… Normally, wouldn’t you think our positions would be reversed?”

Saying that and staring at the screaming Subaru was a pink-haired girl—old woman Ryuzu, who was sitting on a garden rock next to the watering place.

She looked at Subaru, who covered the exposed upper half of his body by hugging his shirt to his chest, her intellectual eyes shimmering in contrast to her awfully young appearance,

Ryuzu: “You don’t have to hide it like that. I’ve gotten used to seeing the naked body of a boy. I used to live with Ga-bo, you know.”

Subaru: “Well, you might be right, but what’s embarrassing is embarrassing, right?”

Ryuzu: “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Besides, your physique is not too bad as well, Su-bo. It's quite pleasing to the eye. Pleasing to the eye, indeed."

Subaru: "It's embarrassing, after all! Ryuzu-san, aren't you acting out of character?!"

Ryuzu was characterized by her behavior that didn't match up with her appearance, like her calm and relaxed manner of speech, but she left a strong impression on Subaru with how everything about her, except for her looks, were faithful to the role she was entrusted with.

It was why he was surprised when she poked fun at Subaru, referring to the naked half of his body.

Subaru: "Am I right in guessing this is mostly because you were released from the heavy responsibility of being the leader of the Sanctuary?"

Ryuzu: "I suppose there's that aspect to a considerable degree. Although I went outside of the Sanctuary, I moved onto the land Ros-bo had prepared, and a similar position was handed over to me. So, if I would ask myself if a load was lifted off my shoulders, then…"

Ryuzu said, directing her narrowed eyes behind her—towards the mansion.

Specifically, she wasn't looking at the mansion, but she was looking at the people living inside of it. To be even more specific, she was probably gazing at the siblings consisting of an older sister and younger brother, who she both loved as if they were her own grandchildren.

With the reconciliation between Garfiel and Frederica having been finished, Garfiel was also freed from the cross he had been bearing for ages. Though, Subaru was surprised he turned into a brat that was mischievous beyond his expectations, as a result of being freed from his burdens, Subaru: “Do you feel lonely, living separately from Garfiel and Frederica?”

Ryuzu: “Nn… what got into you all of a sudden?”

Subaru: “Was it too sudden? But, I thought about it. Of course, it would be a great help if they stayed in the mansion together for Emilia-tan’s Royal Selection. But…”

Ryuzu: “It can’t be helped. In order to live in the mansion, there are many problems for me, of course, and also for the other clones… my sisters. I don’t think we can be of use as well.”

Subaru: “…”

Ryuzu answered him with a small laugh, and Subaru closed his mouth as he heard her speak.

I wasn’t talking about being useful or useless, the emotional side of Subaru wanted to shout.

However, the details of this couldn’t be reasoned with anything like a child’s tantrum.

In the current Roswaal Mansion, the people who were permitted to stay were only those that actively took on a role, and could fulfill their responsibilities. During times like these, it was necessary to have severe regulations to that extent.

Subaru: “…Still, Garfiel is fourteen. He’s still a kid.”

Ryuzu: “—. You’re a kind one. Are you worried about Ga-bo?”

Subaru: “Well, yeah… When I myself was fourteen, I was an immature, stupid brat. Even now, the “stupid brat” part hasn’t changed, but I used to be worse. To the point I would be fed up with myself, because I think I wouldn’t even be able to do anything if I got separated from my parents.”

Of course, in direct opposition to the norm in this world, Subaru had experienced a loose and lenient daily life, something peaceful that was as good as being rocked from side to side in a cradle.

Garfiel's was fourteen years old—even if he was around the age of a middle schooler, it didn't apply to this world, and Garfiel was far more mature than when Subaru was his age.

Even so—

Subaru: "What others did for you, could also be done for them as well… is what I think…"

Ryuzu: "Fufu, let me rephrase what I said. Not only are you kind, but you're soft and green, too."

Subaru: "I know a famous passage of writing that says men should not only be strong, but also be kind… huh? Going by this logic, I'm not a man because I'm not strong…? What am I?"

Seeing Subaru unable to defend himself from what he had brought upon himself, the sound of laughter rumbled in Ryuzu's throat. Subaru thought of her reaction as something unexpected, and she wiped the corners of her eyes with a finger, saying, "Sorry, sorry."

Ryuzu: "I understand what you want to say. I'll drop by from time to time to make sure Ga-bo and Frederica won't feel lonely. Is that alright?"

Subaru: "Sorry. It probably seemed like an outsider was pestering you about it."

Ryuzu: "You have nothing to apologize for… It's just, if it's about a very young child, who hadn't reached the age of maturity yet, leaving their parents, there's someone younger than Ga-bo in this mansion, isn't there?"

Subaru: "Are you…"

Right after Subaru made a guess about who Ryuzu was referring to, a set of footsteps approached them. When he and Ryuzu turned their eyes to the direction of the sound, they saw Petra running towards them.

Petra held a pair of extra clothes for Subaru in her hands, calling out, "Subaru-sama~!" as she rushed over to him, seemingly full of energy. However, she stopped immediately before setting foot on the watering place.

Petra: “Wah! Kya! Subaru! Why are you naked?!”

Subaru: “Ah, shoot. I was planning on bathing, but I got too focused in this deep conversation.”

Petra blushed, commenting on Subaru’s half-naked body while covering her face with both her hands. However, she was staring at him from the space between the fingers that hid her face, with Subaru noting it as a common turn of events, something he often saw in mediums such as anime and manga.

Even Petra’s ears were a bright red color as she cried out, “Wah, wah!” rather excitedly.

Subaru: “Look, Ryuzu-san. This is what you call an adolescent girl’s cute reaction.”

Ryuzu: “You’re being fairly greedy, telling me to act like that… It’s no use even if I do that in the first place. I’m an elderly person.”

Subaru: “You don’t really feel like an elderly person, aside from your mature way of speaking…”

Responding to Ryuzu’s easy-going voice, Subaru heaved up a pail of water from the well. He then dumped the ice-cold water onto his head, exclaiming, “Agh! Cold!”

Subaru: “Anyway, that reaction of yours is pretty adult-like for your age, Petra.”

Petra: “Ah, Subaru-sama, you’re still treating me like a child, aren’t you? I’m just saying, but I recently became thirteen years old. A one year difference with Garf-san!”

Subaru: “Even if it had to do with their birthdays, the fact that there’s a one year difference between Petra and Garfiel feels kinda amusing to me…”

There was Garfiel, whose combat strength and appearance didn’t really seem like a fourteen year-old's, yet his personality did. Then there was Petra, who was like a bud that was gradually trying to bloom into a flower, retaining her young and adorable looks.

It was the natural course of things because time flew by and it couldn't be stopped either, but the concept of growth was a precious notion.

Subaru: "I'm, well, eighteen, and Emilia-tan and Beako don't go through any changes in their appearance. In that regard, I feel a great amount of potential from Petra…"

Ryuzu: "Su-bo, Su-bo. Is it alright for a teenager to look at things from a perspective like that?"

Subaru: "Even if you tell me that… oh, thanks for the extra clothes, Petra. They fell out of your hands while you were staring at me, though."

Shaking his head to get the water out of his hair, Subaru picked up the shirt discarded by Petra's feet, and wore it after brushing the specks of soil off it. Petra seemed to have realized she dropped his change of clothes just now, uttering a, "Wah!" as she flushed at her own blunder.

Petra: "Uu~, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your extra clothes, and the water from before…"

Subaru: "Nah, it's just a cute little mistake. Setting the topic of my clothes aside, I got soaked because I was unlucky. And, because of that, I showed an unseemly side of myself to two maidens."

Ryuzu: "You counted me in as a maiden… Well, well, you're good at flirting with the elderly."

Subaru laughed wryly at Ryuzu, who gave a slow shake of her head, her behavior the same as usual. After that, he gently patted Petra on the head, who was still reflecting upon herself, smiling at her with a, "It's okay."

Subaru: "Everyone makes mistakes once in a while, and it's not like anyone got injured by it. There's no problem, no problem at all."

Petra: “…Yes, I understand. I’ll make sure to write it in today’s entry for my diary.”

Subaru: “You’re writing a diary? That’s great. I’m the type of person that’s good at keeping at it little by little everyday, but my diaries never last no matter what I do.”

He was able to make his daily workouts and jogging into a habit for every single day, but strangely enough, his diaries didn’t last long. He thought it was possibly because the contents of what he wrote everyday weren’t consistent.

Adding to that, his days of truancy were monotonous and boring, so he had nothing to write back then.

Subaru: “Though, my Beako Lovely Diary is still ongoing…”

Petra: “Are you going to show it to Beatrice-chan later?”

Subaru: “Yeah, I want to show off how much I’m spoiling her with tenderness on a daily basis to her.”

Not only that, but Beatrice’s reactions were dramatic and adorable. If it meant being affectionate towards Beako, then Subaru would gladly challenge himself to overcome his own weakness of not being able to continue writing his diaries.

Anyhow—

Petra: “So, what were you two talking about?”

Subaru: “Ahh, just some idle talk? Something like, “Aren’t you lonely to be separated from Garfiel?” and stuff like that… but, you’re also far away from your dad and mom. You don’t get homesick or anything?”

Petra: ““Homesick”… are you asking me if I miss my home?”

Placing a finger to her lips, Petra furrowed her brow as she decoded and made sense of Subaru’s words. She looked to be in deep thought, mumbling, “Hmmm, let me think…” before, Petra: “Sometimes, I do feel lonely. But it’s what I’ve decided I want to do, and I’m doing it right now. I can’t be whining.”

Subaru: “Woah, so mature… did you hear, Ryuzu-san?”

Ryuzu: “I heard it, I heard it. Gee, you look as if you’re proud of her, eh?”

Ryuzu nodded at Subaru, who turned around, genuinely proud of Petra’s confident answer.

It was just as Petra had said.

He was also in the middle of trying to accomplish what he resolved to do. If so, instead of making feeble complaints, he needed to raise his head and smile, even if he were to be in agony and in pain.

Petra: “Subaru-sama, was my answer alright?”

Subaru: “—. Yeah, of course. As expected of Petra! It’s the answer I wanted!”

Petra: “Kya!”

In response to the question from the worried-looking Petra, Subaru lifted up her body in his arms.

It was the same feeling as when he did it to Beako, but Petra was heavier compared to her—it was because she was undergoing growth.

Subaru: “You’re not at the age where I can carry you anymore, huh…”

Petra: “That’s obvious! …But, if you’re gonna have such a saddened face, I guess I can keep you company.”

Subaru: “Oh, thanks!”

Although she turned her face away from him, she was allowing him to be selfish. Taking advantage of Petra’s kindness, Subaru spent some more time lamenting over parting ways with her childhood.

Gazing at the two of them was,

Ryuzu: “Well, well, I’m clueless about which one is the child.”

Ryuzu, who murmured that out with her young visage, in the manner of an elderly person.

2

—Splashing and splattering, Subaru was showered by blackish blood from his head, and the shifting scenes of his life flashing before his eyes ended abruptly.

The one thing in common between the scene and reality was liquid being poured over his head, but if he told Petra that memory fragment involving her was remembered at this very moment, he imagined the situation rolling out into her being furious with him over it.

However, in order to be chastised like that, Subaru couldn’t afford to stop in his tracks here.

Subaru: “Why did the hunter’s arrow hit the snake…?!”

What obstructed his grand escapade, with Louis reluctantly held in his arms, was the huge snake that was hiding itself inside of the forest.

Right as its gaping jaws were about to swallow Subaru whole, a powerful obstruction was wedged itself between the two, and he was fortunate to have an extremely narrow escape from death.

Subaru: “…”

What perforated the snake’s body, thick as three Subarus bunched up together, was an arrow fired by the hunter, who had been tormenting him and Rem, giving them a hard time until this moment.

He thought of the likelihood that the hunter had unexpectedly missed their mark, but since the arrow had gone through the very center of the snake, he felt like the possibility of a misfire was terribly low.

Which meant—

Subaru: “They saved me…?!”

Although he couldn’t understand it at all, no other answer came to his mind.

He was sure the hunter didn’t act on a whim, and it was also difficult to imagine the situation suddenly unraveling into a shounen manga-like development, such as, “I’ll be the one who’ll kill you!”.

However, if Subaru only considered what had occurred, then he was rescued by the hunter. And adding to that, the effect of the single strike wasn’t limited to halting the huge snake’s impending fangs during this moment.

Snake witchbeast: “—϶϶!!”

Its body pierced through by the arrow, the bleeding snake let out a shriek that made the sky tremble, sounding like it two things were grated against one another to produce an ear-splitting screech.

Like that, instead of chasing after Subaru, who was trying to get away from it, the snake turned in the direction the arrow came flying from—setting its sights on the bowman that plowed through its body, beginning to slither through the forest, uncaring of how many plants it damaged along its way.

It was overwhelming to see a ten-meter long snake crawling on the forest floor, drawing closer to its prey.

Without giving off the feeling of being sluggish in spite of its gigantic body, the sight of it moving on the ground as if gliding across the surface, felt like the ground that supported the forest itself was in motion.

The hunter counterattacked the snake’s approach with an arrow, but it didn’t connect.

Snake witchbeast: “—))!!”

Baring its fangs, saliva dripping from them, the huge snake aimed for the hunter as it pounced onto them.

Jumping out of the way, the hunter avoided it, firing an arrow at point-blank range, going in for the kill.

A violent battle between man and witchbeast, in an attempt to kill each other, was unfolding beyond the trees.

In midst of the sounds of crashes and blasts being scattered all over the place, courtesy of the ongoing fight where both the hunter and snake weren’t budging an inch, Subaru dashed back to the large hole Rem was at, keeping Louis held firmly in his arms.

And then—

Subaru: “Rem, give me your hand! We’re using the opportunity to run!”

Rem: “—hk, is the girl safe?”

Subaru: “Yeah, she’s sound asleep to the point it’s getting on my nerves! Here, hurry up!”

He reached a hand out to Rem, who was leaning against the wall inside of the large hole. However, Rem glanced at his hand, before shaking her head with a “No.” and set her hands on the edge of the hole by herself.

It was a gesture out of stubbornness, saying she wouldn’t take the hand Subaru had extended to her. If that was the case, then that was fine. Subaru withdrew his hand, pulling his whip out instead and using it to tie Louis to his back.

If Subaru threw her out, then conflict would arise between him and Rem once again. He wanted to avoid such a thing.

Subaru: “In addition to that—!”

Rem: “Wai…”

After he fixed Louis's body to his back tightly, checking to see if he wouldn't drop her, Subaru forcefully scooped Rem, who crawled out of the large hole, into his arms.

With it resulting in her being princess carried, Rem hardened her expression from Subaru's unanticipated move.

However—

Subaru: "Think! Me or the hunter or the snake, which one is more preferable right now?!"

Rem: "…If I could communicate with it, then it's the snake."

Subaru: "You can't, so please bear with me, the runner-up! Let's go!"

Subaru turned his eyes away from Rem, who was unable to prevent her inner turmoil from showing up on her face, although he believed their priorities were rather obvious. Glancing at the continuous battle between the hunter and the snake from the corner of his eye, Subaru broke away from the battlefield, running with all his might.

Whether the victor was the hunter or the huge snake, Subaru expected them to start chasing after him and Rem as soon as the fight was over. He didn't know when exactly would it end, or if it would be settled sooner or later, but he wanted to keep a distance from them to the best of his ability.

Rem: "—What are you going to do?"

Subaru: "Both of them are really accustomed to the forest, compared to us…! We need a way to throw them off their pursuit, but it's hopeless to escape from the snake because of my body odor. So…"

He wanted to pray for the hunter to be victorious.

If the hunter was a pursuer with no connection to the Witch's miasma that surrounded him, then the methods to throw them off their tracks would be worth putting into practice.

Subaru: “Choosing the path where I won’t leave too many footprints, erasing the tracks as much as possible, and after that is…”

Rem: “Leaving traces in a separate direction, isn’t that right?”

Rem said as she snapped off a twig that nearly made contact with her body, tossing it far away and letting it scratch the trees that were positioned at a different direction from their escape route.

If the tracks were distributed into two places, one being the broken twig, and the other being the mark on the tree, would their opponent be puzzled by those?

Subaru: “…”

As Subaru continued to run with Rem in his arms, a deep emotion, unsuitable for the occasion, somewhat feeling like nostalgia, crossed his mind. Long ago, he had the experience of racing through the forest while being chased by witchbeasts, similar to the current situation.

However, the person he had been carrying wasn’t Rem, but it was Ram.

Subaru: “Nee-sama has also forgotten, so it’s only me… ha… who, remembers it, but…”

Rem: “You’re running out of breath. They will catch up if this goes on.”

Subaru: “I know! Damn, both of you sisters… ha… really have no shred of mercy…!”

The person in his arms wasn’t Ram, but the harshness of her words was practically identical to her sister.

A strong emotion coursed through him upon recognizing their similarities, and it gave an encouraging push to his back. Subaru urged himself to keep running despite his breathlessness, entrusting the role of monitoring whatever was happening behind them to Rem, and desperately rushed across the forest.

Anyhow, Subaru had been running around all day today.

He was exhausted, worn out physically and mentally, and he wanted to sprawl across the ground if possible. Actually, he was going to do that once he lost his pursuer. He would sleep for eight hours straight.

Subaru: “So, please put up with it until I can do that, dear body—!!”

Rem: “—hk, wait!”

Subaru: “Owowowow?! What the heck was that for?!”

While Subaru was spurring himself to action by shouting at his body to move, Rem, who was carried in his arms, gave his ear a sharp tug. As he frowned from the pain, Rem pointed towards a direction straying off the path they were on,

Rem: “I can hear the sound of water. A flowing… river? Perhaps you could erase your tracks with it? Also, you were saying you needed water as well.”

Subaru: “You were actually listening to me talking about my survival knowledge… I’m touched, but that can wait. You’re right, it’d be great if there’s a river! If we crossed the river for the time being, they surely can’t chase after us without any difficulty…!”

Unfortunately, the sound of running water wasn’t audible to Subaru, due to the bothersome noise caused by his rapid heartbeat and breathing, but he had no reason to doubt Rem’s hearing at this place, during this time.

Obeying Rem, who pointed her finger towards the direction, saying “That way.”, Subaru changed courses, dashing through the forest while he searched for the river.

And then, as he passed by the clump of trees and leapt over the patches of grass, just as the road opened up into—

Subaru: “—A river! …B~u~t~?”

The moment the forest cleared up and his field of view was broadened, Subaru was finally able to hear the sound of running water at a tremendous volume—yes, a tremendous volume.

Of course a sound like that would reach his ears, since its source was a great river. As far as Subaru and Rem could see, gazing down at it, the water was gushing down a cliff nearly ten meters tall.

Rem: “No matter how you look at it, this is…”

Inside of his arms, Rem stifled a gasp, gazing at the humongous river below them.

Taking the raging momentum of the water and the height of the cliff into account, it was natural for her to be dismayed at the sight. She was probably also reproaching herself for leading them here, all because she relied on her instincts.

However, there was no time to blame her for what she was already regretting, nor was there time to do the opposite and comfort her.

Subaru: “—Shit, is the fight over?!”

From the forest behind him, a distant, ferocious roar thundered into the sky.

It sounded like the cry of the huge snake, brimming with some sort of emotion. Whether it was a sign of victory or a sign of defeat, the one who survived would come after Subaru and Rem.

Subaru: “Before that happens, we gotta…”

Rem: “—Leave me.”

As Subaru thought about the need to depart from the area, Rem, still held close to his chest area, declared that.

Hearing her strained voice, Subaru blew out a short breath, and,

Subaru: “Wh…at?”

Rem: “Leave me. It’s my fault I made you take an unnecessary detour. A single moment can’t be lost. I will try to tie down the enemy in one way or another, so…”

Subaru: “D-Don’t be ridiculous! Leaving you is something I can’t…”

Rem: “Then, what the hell are you going to do?! How can you, who brought a child and a woman who can’t move her legs, out of breath and your knees shaking, do anything more than this?!”

Subaru: “…”

Rem snapped at him in close proximity, her face flushing with anger. It wasn’t as if Subaru was overwhelmed by the intensity of her words, but he was unable to make an immediate retort.

Subaru wasn’t smart enough to instantly propose an alternative plan upon being asked.

However, because he wasn’t smart, he could come up with an answer that didn’t require it.

Subaru: “—No, that wouldn’t do. I won’t leave you here.”

Rem: “—fh, that stubbornness of yours…”

Subaru: “Which one of us is being more stubborn, huh?! I understand you feel responsible for it! But, you know, you’re demonstrating your sense of responsibility at the wrong place in the wrong time! I can’t just leave you behind!”

Rem: “Wha…”

Subaru: “It’s meaningless if you aren’t there with me! If you’re going to die, it’s better if I died instead. What can I do to make you understand it?!”

Subaru spoke his mind earnestly, trying to withdraw Rem’s idea from the table.

His words came from his heart. Of course, Subaru didn’t want to die as well. Even if “Return by Death” granted him an opportunity, he didn’t want to die. That’s why it was only about being stuck in a dilemma, seeking out the best option between the worst choice and the most unwanted choice.

Even so—

Subaru: “I’ll pick the method that won’t get either of us killed.”

Rem: “…What are you going to do about that girl on your back?”

Subaru: “I would like to use her as bait if I were allowed to, but it’s going to be a problem getting complaints directed at me for doing so. So, for now, I’ll be on the run while also bringing her with me.”

Anyway, it was getting under his skin with how Louis was always getting caught in the problems between him and Rem.

However, if he threw Louis out right now, his relationship with Rem would be damaged beyond repair. That choice was off the table. That’s why, no matter how loathsome she was, Subaru couldn’t abandon her.

Rem: “…”

Listening to Subaru’s words that came from his resolute will, Rem widened her eyes, falling silent.

Even now, Subaru could catch a glimpse of Rem’s inner conflict, unable to comprehend how she should judge him, who was engulfed in a wicked scent that she couldn’t bear to take in.

Keeping her uncertain expression in the corner of his eye, Subaru surveyed his surroundings, searching for an escape route.

However, a path leading to their survival wasn’t something that could be found so conveniently. Subaru could see that the situation provided enough of a reason for Rem to start telling him to use her as a decoy.

If so, their remaining option was—

Subaru: “—To fly.”

Rem: “Wha… Wa-Wait! That’s what you call being reckless! Do you understand the situation we're in?!"

Subaru: "There's me, who's exhausted from the weight strapped against my back, who's carrying Rem who can't move her legs, who has three of my fingers broken, and who's ribcage is in a state that's a bit suspicious…"

Rem: "About your fingers… Anyway! It's absurd to try something like that in your condition! From this height… the moment you jump in, you're only going to fall unconscious and drown!"

Pointing at the gigantic river below them, Rem stated her realistic disagreements to Subaru's plan.

The height was ten meters, and they were in a position where the injured person had to look after two people who couldn't even move around properly. If they had to somehow reach the opposite bank while braving through the violent waters, it was natural to think of it as a suicidal act.

Subaru: "But, it's not suicide. Even if it was, when we die, we'll die together."

Rem: "Absolutely not!"

Subaru: "Yeow!"

Rem gave him a splendid slap across his smile that showed his gleaming teeth. His neck twisted to the side from the power put into the blow, and while he uttered a, "Ow ow," the cheek where he had gotten slapped reddening in color, and,

Subaru: "I got it. Since you're saying that, I won't die."

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "I'm the one who'll grant your wish. —Because, I'm your hero."

Hearing his words, Rem stared at him, wide-eyed.

It wasn't because her memories had unconsciously throbbed, but it was out of surprise at the fact that Subaru had shamelessly repeated the same, untrustworthy declaration he had made right after she awakened, without learning from the disaster it resulted in.

But, that was alright.

He didn't necessarily want to make Rem listen to what he said just now. —All he wanted to do was to cast a spell on the man reflected in Rem's light blue eyes, who concealed his patheticness behind a bluff.

Subaru: "Hold on tight."

Subaru exhaled as he said that, sensing danger drawing near them.

Rem was attempting to resist even as of now, but Subaru had already pushed off against the ground with his feet, while he was carefully selecting the words to get her to stop. Bracing herself for the fall, Rem grabbed onto Subaru's clothes firmly with her hand.

And then—

Rem: "—I won't forgive you if you die!"

"Ahh, I can't die if you say so," Subaru laughed wryly as he gave a strong kick against the cliff.

3

A column of water rose into the air from the impact, his body swallowed by a vicious force, and he spun around, round and round.

Because he managed to plunge into the water feet-first, he kept the damage he received from the fall to a minimum.

However, its power was enough to cause him to receive minimal damage, and for Subaru, whose health bar was already in the red zone, he couldn't erase the impression that he had clenched his teeth and rode it out with his meager amount of willpower.

Although, there was no need to erase it.

Subaru: “Gah, bh,”

Without needing to wipe away such an impression, Subaru’s whole body was soaking wet. He was tossed about by the rushing water’s momentum, as if he was a towel being stirred inside of a washing machine.

He wanted to somehow rise up to the surface of the water, and breathe. Yet, he did not have the freedom to do so. Even if he wanted to flail his limbs around in an attempt to float, he couldn’t do that because he was carrying what was dear to him in his arms.

Subaru: “…”

He was being squeezed and crumpled up by the water, but he felt the targets of his affection and hatred in his arms and on his back respectively. Neither the whip fastened to himself, nor his arms that strongly embraced the girl, were coming apart.

Subaru: “Gabh… gabh…”

Due to the impact from diving into the water, most of the air he had breathed in before jumping had escaped from his lungs.

He wasn’t going to swim, but he needed both stamina and oxygen to retain his sanity. Since both of them were on the verge of depletion, he couldn’t stay leisurely and take things easy.

Subaru: “Gabh, gabh…”

Water flowed into his mouth from his nose, and he felt like it was also spilling into his eyes and ears as well.

His floundering feet paddled the water meaninglessly, and he also felt as if he was powerless to do anything as he was being transported into the stomach of a giant creature’s esophagus—which could be said to be the humongous river. Once he arrived “there”, it would not be possible to undo it.

Before he made it there, he needed to do something.

Subaru: “Gabh… gabh…”

When he desperately fumbled around in the water, many unnecessary thoughts wriggled around in his head.

Just like how he remembered Petra and Ryuzu when he was showered with blood, just like how he remembered carrying Ram while he ran around the forest, many things crossed his mind.

Are Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, and Meili safe? What are Julius, Anastasia, and Echidna doing? Everyone would feel at ease if Patrasche was there. If Patrasche was here, she would've rescued him. Saving and getting saved. He had repeated that cycle many times, and Rem was supposed to be the person he had repeated it with the most, but she broke his fingers. He didn't think of it until now, but he did a good job in not crying out, even though it really hurt. Well done. He didn't want to do anything dumb in front of Rem. In front of Emilia, in front of Beatrice, and in front of Petra and Garfiel as well. Otto, Clind, and Frederica knew how pathetic he was, so it didn't matter with them. Things would take a wrong turn into something frightening if Roswaal knew about it, so he needed to continue hiding it somehow. He needed to return to Pristella quickly, help the people who were in dire need of it, the Royal Selection, tomorrow, everyone—

Subaru: "Gabuh… gabh…"

Every, one—

4

Subaru: "—Gahgk,"

Reaching his hand out with all his might, Subaru pulled himself close to the branch he managed to grab onto. He took a hold of it with his left hand, and excruciating pain shot through his three crippled fingers, but he wasn't bothered by it.

His whole body was chilled to the bone, and his senses were distant and dull. There was a possibility that instead of three fingers, every finger on his left hand was broken, but he had little to no interest in that matter.

Subaru: “Oergh, bhleh,”

He broke out into a coughing fit, vomiting large amounts of the water that had filled his stomach.

While doing so, he was able to draw the heaviness in his right arm closer to himself, making it so her face appeared above the surface of the water. Staring at her unconscious face from the side, he rushed to crawl up the bank, relying on the branch.

Subaru: “Gaghk, urgh,”

On the bank he finally made it to, he left it to his nausea to make him spew out an enormous volume of water. And then, fighting the sensation of having water left inside his body still, he laid the girl he dragged out of the water onto the ground.

Subaru: “…”

Bringing his ear near her mouth, he checked her breathing. There was no reaction. He bit his lip, pushing against her chest area with force, carrying out CPR on her.

However, she didn’t come back to life. Right as he bent over, his face coming near her as he wondered if he should perform artificial respiration, she threw up some water along with a small cough. Tilting her face to the side, Subaru let her expel the water from her body.

Subaru: “Hah, ha…”

Enduring the fatigue that spread across his entire body, he unfastened the whip he tied against himself, lowering the weight on his back. Perhaps the fact that she was unconscious from the beginning proved to be fortunate, as the lowered weight was letting out weak breaths.

That meant… everyone was… safe—

Subaru: “S… a… fe…”

His head swayed to the side, in midst of his dizziness, and he collapsed on the spot.

He thought he had to somehow leave the bank and at least hide in the thickets and bushes, but his body wasn't listening to him at all. His stamina had been completely emptied.

Unable to move a single finger, his consciousness gradually fell deep into the darkness.

As if he had been trapped in an ant lion's pit, descending into the dark, obscure world, forever and ever.

What he wished for before he passed out, was for neither the hunter nor the snake, but for someone else to—

Subaru: "Save… Rem…"

There was only one wish, for someone to at least save Rem, even if it was just her.

5

—.

—.

—.

Subaru: "—ah,"

Slowly, his consciousness was pulled out of the depths of the cold, bitter darkness.

Silently, he remembered he had forgotten how to breathe, then he gulped and ingested air into his empty body. More, more. He desired more oxygen as if he had been drowning, opening his mouth wide—

???: "—Shut it with your wheezing and panting, you."

Subaru: "Mrgh,"

Something was forcefully thrusted into his open jaws, and he was bathed in verbal abuse.

He widened his eyes, unable to grasp the situation, but he wasn't able to see anything. It seemed like something had been wrapped around his face, covering his eyes. However, he knew some wild fellow had shoved something into his mouth.

The taste of soil and earth, and a large, solid texture—he could immediately guess that it was a shoe.

Someone was digging the tip of his shoe into Subaru's mouth.

Subaru: "Oergh! Bweh! Wha, what… guweh!"

???: "Why the hell are you defying me? Don't you understand the position you're in?"

Subaru: "Ghurgh, gargh,"

Subaru was struck in his solar plexus with a good, hard kick delivered by the tip of the man's shoe, after Subaru had spat it out without thinking. As his breath caught in his throat from the impact, followed by a bout of coughing, the wild fellow spat on him.

While the man was doing that, Subaru's mind was jumbled up in a great deal of confusion.

He couldn't see and he was utterly befuddled, yet violence had been inflicted onto him.

Adding to that, even if he tried to rub his aching chest, he couldn't do that because his arms were tied behind his back. His legs were bound as well, so it was impossible to stand up and escape.

Subaru: "Wh-Wha… what's…"

???: "Aah? How long are you gonna be fooling ar…"

????: "—Hey, hey, chill out! He's completely clueless! It can't be helped! Rather than that, here! Let's take off his blindfold!"

???: “Tch.”

Two men seemed to be having an argument in front of Subaru, who was curled up on the ground with saliva spilling out of his mouth. The man that arrived later had persuaded the violent man, and Subaru sensed that the rough, boorish presence had distanced himself from the area.

After that, the voice of the composed man reached his ears with a, “Well,”

????: “Sorry that was done to you right after you woke up. I think you’re probably feeling muddled and all, but I’ll just take off your blindfold, okay? Though, I can’t remove the rope around your hands and feet, so you gotta bear with it.”

Subaru: “…”

As Subaru remained silent, the man gently placed his hands on his head, unfastening the blindfold that was tightly wrapped around his head. He felt the air against his skin, along with a tiny prick of pain, and waited for his vision to return as he took in a deep breath, withstanding the throbbing ache in his chest.

And then—

Subaru: “—Where… the hell is this.”

In his newly-recovered field of view, the clearing was dotted with many tents and campfires. Along with those, there were men equipped with swords and armor, giving off a fierce feeling, and restlessly going to and fro around the area.

Rendered completely speechless, Subaru thought of the most appropriate picture that would be representing the sight at hand in his mind—

Subaru: “…I’ve seen something like this in a long-running TV series.”

The reason he thought of it wasn’t because he had encountered a gigantic river right before all of this, but what crossed his mind was a scene from one of those TV series—the camp of a military unit, busied by preparations before the official battle began.

It was as if the sight in front of him was a replica of—no, it wasn't.

????: "We found you right as we went out to fetch some water, yeah. Sorry, but you've been captured. You're our prisoner."

Was the person who walked in front of him the man that took off his blindfold?

Putting a hand to his hip, he spoke to Subaru with a genuine-looking, troubled expression.

—Natsuki Subaru had been taken prisoner.

Chapter 6:
The Land Faraway in the South

1

???: “Hey, what’s the worst thing that’s happened to you as a traveling merchant?”

???: “And there it is. Yet another unpleasant question…”

In his room, Otto was staring at documents, when Subaru presented this question, causing him to frown.

Wrinkles were already present in-between his brows, but thanks to the question they leveled up to one hundred.

Subaru: “You see, Garfiel and I were having a little chat about one-man journeys. I guess it’s a bit different in your case, but you were a traveling merchant, so you’re familiar with that sort of thing, right?”

Otto: “I would not say you are wrong, but I had Frufoo with me, at the very least. Thanks to my Divine Protection, I always had someone I could talk to, so it did not really feel like I was traveling alone.”

As he spoke, Otto rubbed his eyes and placed the documents on the desk. Then, in front of the desk where the mountain of papers rested, he directed his gaze towards the two guests who sat on the sofa with a Shatranj board spread between them—Subaru and Garfiel.

Although it was Subaru who had the upper hand in this game, each move that he made kept alternately securing or endangering his position.

Otto: “…Garfiel, move the merchant two squares forward.”

Subaru: “Hey! Otto, you bastard!”

Garfiel: “Hm? Ooooh! So that’s it! Ya really bailed me outta this one, Otto-bro!”

With just a quick glance, Otto discerned the most advantageous move to make, receiving two different reactions from Subaru and Garfiel respectively. Ignoring how Subaru struggled in the situation that he was instantly put into, “Still,” Otto muttered,

Otto: “Garfiel, are you interested in traveling alone?”

Garfiel: “If I’m interested, ya say? ‘Course I am. But ya kno’, I spent a whole lotta time stuck in tha ‘Sanctuary’, so I neve’ got to travel or anythin’.”

Otto: “Ah, I see. You really are interested, are you not? Well, with your self-sufficiency and self-defense skills as high as they are, I think you would do just fine. Unlike Natsuki-san.”

Subaru: “Hey hey, don’t you underestimate me like that. My mentor’s been praising my progress a lot lately, just so you know.”

Otto: “It seems like he decided to use praise to motivate you. It is hard to be sure if praise or scolding works better with you, after all.”

Otto’s comments were so soft towards Garfiel, yet so hard towards Subaru.

However, considering how strict Garfiel was with himself, and how prone Subaru was to get carried away, it was probably the correct approach.

But that aside—

Subaru: “Anyway, what’s that worst moment you’ve had as a traveling merchant?”

Otto: “Why are you so insistent on knowing that?”

Garfiel: “Tha Captain may just be askin’ outta curiosity, but I’m seriously interested here, Otto-bro. Knowin’ ya’re such a tough guy, I imagine ya’d be fine unless ya encountered a huge dragon or somethin'."

Otto: "Garfiel, don't you think your expectations of me are way too high?!"

It would take an emergency of such grandiosity to truly place Otto in a tight spot.

Garfiel's strong trust in Otto led him to harbor such conception, which was, albeit slightly exaggerated, not all that different from Subaru's assessment of Otto's crisis response capabilities.

If one were to ask the members of the faction who the most dangerous person was, it was undoubted that they all would unanimously reply saying Otto's name.

Subaru: "Well, I can't really see something like that happening anyway…"

Otto: "What are you grumbling about? …I have been in several risky situations during my life indeed, but I would say the worst one was that one time I was held captive by a certain dangerous group."

Garfiel: "Whatcha mean, dangerous guys? Were ya attacked by bandits or somethin'?"

Otto: "—. Well, something similar to that. They separated me from Frufoo and my carriage, and then left me wrapped up in a mat, without any weapons or tools at hand; and so, I prepared myself to die."

Otto murmured, a distant look on his eyes. As they listened, Subaru and Garfiel turned to look at each other.

The fear that he had experienced was surely no little matter. Otto's words carried a weight that was not typical of him.

Garfiel: "A dead end, huh. Guess that's what it's like ta be 'forsaken on the Decou Plateau,' ain't it."

Otto: "It really was like that. If it were not for some kind people that happened to come across me by chance, I would have lost my life that day. —And that, I will never forget.”

Subaru: “I see. Everyone’s got their own story, after all.”

Arms crossed, Subaru nodded as he reflected on Otto’s adversities.

Tied by bandits, stripped of his belongings, his very right to live or die completely subject to somebody else’s whim: such circumstances were not something that Subaru faced often, yet also not something that he was a stranger to.

Subaru: “Still, it’s thanks to their help that our Otto is here with us now. Those guys who found you deserve a proper thanks, don’t you think?”

Otto: “—. Yes, you are right.”

Subaru: “—? What’s with the lukewarm reply? You’re making me uneasy, man.”

Subaru scowled at Otto’s unexpected reaction. Despite Subaru’s response, Otto stayed oddly calm and composed, his posture like that of a deity.

While Subaru felt shivers going down his spine, Garfiel clenched his fist with a “But hey,”

Garfiel: “Now I know all the stuff you’ve gone thru, Otto-bro. But rest assured. Ya’d better believe I won’t be lettin’ that stuff happen ta ya ever again, a’ight?”

Otto: “Oh, really? Well, I do know I can depend on you, Garfiel. Natsuki-san, on the other hand…”

Subaru: “You can’t just compare me with Garfiel in terms of combat strength! You’ll make me feel like all the hard work I’ve done so far isn’t worth a damn!”

Subaru moved his empty hand as if he brandished a whip with it. With a gesture of his own, Garfiel pretended to crush it with his fangs, making his opponent aware of his powerlessness.

“Ugh…!” Subaru groaned as Garfiel’s victory made him openly display joy; while witnessing the two, a despondent “Ha” escaped Otto’s mouth,

Otto: “Garfiel, move the merchant diagonally to the right. Let us show him what we merchants are made of.”

Subaru: “Argh! D-Damn it, Otto, you jerk!”

Garfiel: “Hm? Ooooh! Look, it’s a checkmate! Captain, what a weaklin’ y’are!!”

Subaru: “You didn’t do it alone, though!!”

Surrounding the Shatranj board, Subaru cried out along with his cornered army. From the moment the alliance between Garfiel and Otto was formed, there was only one thing that he would be given the chance to do—to retreat as he bawled like the sore loser he was.

2

—A prisoner of war.

As soon as he heard those words, what coursed through Subaru’s mind was the chatter of nights like those. He’d had his weapons and tools taken away from him, along with his freedom, held captive by someone he did not know. It was pretty much like Otto had said, this was a natural situation to resign yourself to “death”.

Subaru: “…”

The place where Subaru was being held captive looked quite like encampments raised for war that he’d seen in stuff like a Taiga Drama.

He could see many a tent lined up, along with rows of armor and weapons waiting to be equipped. Men with a heavy atmosphere about them went by, and it seemed like their forces contained both humans and demi-humans.

Subaru was sitting atop some solid ground, with nothing but a barebones curtain fixed at that place to ward off the wind. His hands were tied behind his back, and his feet were restrained as well, making him unable to move.

However, to Subaru, what mattered a lot more was…

Subaru: “Rem… There should have been a girl with me. What happened to her?”

???: “Oh, so we tell you you’re our prisoner of war, and the first thing that pops into your head are girls? Am I right to think that this means these girls are important to you?”

The man who’d been crouching down just before—Namely, the young man who seemed to have stopped the violent man who’d shoved his shoe in Subaru’s mouth—batted one of his eyes shut in response to his muted question.

The youth had bright orange hair, and looked to be just a little older than Subaru. He was smiling quite amiably, but that didn’t put him at ease, given that the situation was what it was.

He wasn’t clad in a full suit of armor per se, but since he was wearing some light garb as his armor, he was probably one of the warriors in the encampment as well. —A warrior, not a knight.

Subaru: “…”

He’d managed to somehow spend over a year in this other world, and several times he’d been blessed with the opportunities to eye the differences between warriors and knights. Of course they had differences in their positions or their influence, but there were visible differences between them, which weren’t only those practical ones.

Knights were glitzy, whereas warriors were coarse—Not in the bad sense. They just differed in what was required.

Of course, knights abounded in skill, yet they needed to be able to procure the reassurance of people’s hearts. On that point, it was necessary for them to be noble of appearance. People like Julius or Reinhard were testaments to this.

On the flipside, what was needed from a warrior was only the strength to fight.

Thus, the men gathered in this encampment were warriors, the youth in front of him was no exception either.

Subaru: “…I’m going to ask you again. Where’s the girl I was with?”

Orange Haired Youth: “So darn stubborn. Though, not like I dislike that… She’s safe and sound. Both of them are full of vim and vigor. A little too full of if you ask me.”

Subaru: “…! For real?!”

Subaru grabbed onto the youth’s answer as the latter gave him a strained smile. He leaned forward so he could hear the answer he wanted to, however the youth pushed him back by the forehead, letting out a “Whoa there”, preventing him from leaning any closer.

Orange Haired Youth: “Both your hands and feet are tied up. Won’t you fall over and bite your tongue if you work yourself up that much? Oh, don’t look at me like that. Both of them are safe and sound, I’m not lying.”

Subaru: “Both of them my ass; quit giving me half-assed answers. I’m happy so long as the blue-haired girl is safe and sound.”

Orange Haired Youth: “That’s an awfully cruel answer, wouldn’t you say?!”

No word of exaggeration, those were his true feelings, however there’d probably be no point telling that to the youth.

In any case, he would believe what the youth had said, for the time being. The next issue at hand was Subaru and Rem’s position. Earlier, he’d said he’d taken Subaru as a prisoner of war…

Subaru: “I find it difficult to accept being a prisoner of war, but let’s say I do… why am I being kept away from them?”

Orange Haired Youth: “If you wanna see them, I’ll let you do so afterwards. If you answer our questions honestly… Right now, those girls are in the slammer.”

Subaru: “In jail?! Why would you do that?!”

The harsh conditions associated with that flashed through his mind straight after he heard the word slammer. However, as he tried to get more details about it, his three broken fingers on his left hand cried out in pain.

Gghha…! Subaru saw stars in his eyes, making him clench his teeth. Behind him, the man sporting an eyepatch over one of his eyes had stomped his shoe on his injured fingers, whereby his hands were tied behind his back.

The man brutely stomped Subaru’s broken fingers, and said,

Man with an Eyepatch: “If you were paying attention before, you’re a guy who fuckin’ lacks the self-awareness of being a prisoner. You just need to answer the questions you’re asked, or am I wrong here? Huh?”

Orange Haired Youth: “Jamal, knock it off! You’re gonna end up making him faint again!”

Jamal: “Really fuckin’ boils my blood that he doesn’t get the position he’s in. So long as his neck ‘n above are fine, he can talk. Anyways, if three of ‘em are broken, what harm would there be in havin’ two more…”

Orange Haired Youth: “…Jamal.”

The man who’d given Subaru’s hand a kick—Jamal—leered at him wickedly as he declared that. But as he did, the youth abruptly called out his name in a hushed tone of voice.

Hearing that caused Jamal’s breath to hitch, and so, he reluctantly moved his foot away with an “Alright then.”

Subaru: “Ghh, ghkk…!”

Jamal: “Tsk. You owe your thanks to Todd. Makes me wanna hurl.”

With the burden removed from his broken fingers, Subaru was able to breathe again, to which Jamal spat at him. And with that said and done, Jamal turned his back away and left the tent in a huff.

When the sound of his footsteps was far off in the distance, the youth—Todd—gave his head a scratch.

Todd: “Dear oh dear. I’m sorry about that. That Jamal dude is quite prickly. After all it was his unit that found you people by the riverbank; but…”

Subaru: “But…?”

Todd: “Well, apparently the girl accompanying you put up quite the fight. The people in his unit were half wrecked, and he, being the commander, lost face.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Having now gotten a rough idea about what had happened, Subaru too wanted to hold his head in exasperation.

This probably happened after Subaru had crawled up the riverbank and lost consciousness. Having woken up before him, Rem had given Jamal, along with his men, a beating when they turned up. That’s why Jamal was in a foul mood.

Rem would have looked like a sweet girl who couldn’t move her legs at a glance, so there was no reason to blame Jamal and his men for having allowed her to get in the first strike. And even though there was no reason…

Subaru: “I… hate… that guy…”

Todd: “Haha, what a coincidence! I don’t like him much either. That said, we’re getting off-topic. How are your fingers?”

Subaru: “They’re broken… Though the pain’s gotten better.”

Even so, the tattoo of the pounding pain was relentless. Yet, Subaru firmly gritted his teeth together and shut out the weaknesses of groaning in pain for the time being. He would, time permitting, face the pain-debt that would have accumulated up later. Right now, he had the things in front of him to face…

Subaru: “Todd, right?”

Todd: “Oh? So you were paying proper attention. Yeah, the name’s Todd. And here’s a question from your local Todd-san. I did say this before, but…”

Subaru: “That I should answer honestly I guess… What is it that you want to hear?”

In the end, he was nothing more than just the Other Worlder Natsuki Subaru.

He had no clue about anything like the means whereby he crossed worlds, nor did he unfortunately have the expertise to use knowledge cheats which were so conventional with Isekai stuff. Zip, zilch, nada. Made him cry when he really thought about it.

Subaru: “What can I, with that kind of lot in life, really answer for you?”

Todd: “What sort of obsequious display is that? Anyways, it’s a shot in the dark, but there’s just one thing I’d like to ask you. —Are you one of the Shudraq?”

Subaru: “…Shudraq?”

That was the imperious youth’s—Todd’s—question, but Subaru had never heard this word before.

Nevertheless, as soon as Todd heard Subaru responding by flipping the question back at him, he brought one of his hands to his forehead and said:

Todd: “See, I knew it. I could tell by your reaction that you’ve got nothing to do with them.”

Subaru: “Heyhey, wait up. I still haven’t answered anything. Aren’t you just being too hasty here…”

Todd: “Not at all. No one would lie when they’re asked about their own warrior clan. Even those who’ve never heard of ‘em before. So, like that, even if you tell us you’re “Shudraqian”, no one’s gonna believe you.”

Subaru: “…”

Though his words felt conclusive, they didn’t sound like a bluff.

Even Subaru couldn’t refuse them; the way Todd had put it, full of conviction, was that persuasive. But in that case…

Subaru: “Just what are these Shudraqians?”

Todd: “They’re the people we’re searching for. They’re somewhere in that huge forest… In the Buddheim Jungle.”

Todd answered Subaru’s question and pointed behind him. However, Subaru’s hands and feet were tied up, so he couldn’t look back that easily. Todd then put his hand on Subaru’s shoulder with a “There’s no helping that”, and turned him around.

Subaru: “…The Buddheim Jungle.”

Todd: “The whole place from here is forest. It’s going to take many years, or whatever, to search it well and good.”

Though Todd muttered those words unenergetically, what he was saying was understandable. This was quite the vast forest.

The greenery continued on to the ends of the horizon both on his left and right, as seen from the encampment where Subaru was being held captive. If its depth was like that to boot, then metaphors aside, it could be on the same level as the Amazon.

And they had to find these Shudraqians or whatever he’d called them, in such a vast forest.

Subaru: “…Isn’t that going to be practically impossible? To say the least.”

Todd: “You reckon so too? Well, nah, I’ve really thrown in the towel here. If it takes me years to go back home, my fiancée will end up turning away from me ya know."

The sorrows of a soldier who'd been taken away from his lover and sent to the field of battle.

Todd's words made Subaru feel something similar to that, evoking a little sympathy out of him. However, his sympathy didn't last long either, since currently he was separated from the person he cherished. And other than that, the problem he had at hand was way more of a big deal.

Subaru: "Hey, Todd-san. In your view, I think I've answered honestly. So, I'd really like it if you kept your promise as well."

Todd: "You're asking me to let you see a woman, even though there's a person who's ruing the fact they can't see their fiancée? What a heart of stone you have."

Subaru: "No way I want to hear that coming from the companion of a guy who steps on an injured guy's broken fingers."

Todd: "Haha, that's for sure."

Although Subaru's answer was quite the bold one, Todd burst out in laughter rather than anger. He then crouched down by his side and loosened the ropes that had been tightly binding Subaru's feet, enough so he could walk.

Todd: "You should be able to at least walk by taking short steps. I'll take you over to the jail."

Todd brought his hands under Subaru's armpits and lifted him up in one go. As soon as he stood up, his legs could move freely, albeit about only half of his usual step.

He could walk like this. Thank god for having short legs. If his legs had been as long as a model's, then he would have been thrown out of balance quite a bit.

Subaru: "Well then, please guide me there."

Todd: “How very impudent of you… You must be a noble, right?”

With a wry smile on his face, Todd gave Subaru a clap on the back as the latter began to walk out, taking small steps.

He felt the inquisitive looks of the men around them, looking at Subaru walking along bit by bit, being led out of the tent that housed prisoners of war. He could see some of them looking like they were sneering, but Subaru cared not a fig about them. Rather, on the flip-side, it was he who observed them.

It was just as he’d thought. He could see an encampment prepared for war.

They’d covered the perimeters of the encampment with impromptu-made wooden fencing and stuff. There appeared to be over a hundred men here. Nevertheless, searching the entire forest with a hundred men was practically impossible. Subaru could understand why Todd was bemoaning that.

With that said, Subaru had expressed his sympathies both to Todd, who was in that state, and his fiancée. Yet, posed towards him was…

Todd: “Oh, talking of nobles, I just remembered… Where did you get that knife that popped up when we fished through your belongings?”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru’s brows furrowed for a moment when he heard Todd’s suddenly remembered question; then he instantly recalled the knife in question.

He’d received the knife from the masked man in the forest. It had really helped him get through the many obstacles posed by the forest, as well as the traps Rem had set. —It was too late for that now, but perhaps that masked man had been one of the Shudraqians they were searching for.

If it was like that, then telling them about him would only be tantamount to a betrayal of his benefactor.

Todd: “What’s up?”

Subaru: “No, nothing…”

Though Todd was suspicious of his silence, Subaru was also stuck between a rock and a hard place, internally.

Given that he’d been taken as a prisoner of war, Todd was treating him in a relatively reasonable manner. But make no mistake, he was still perceived as a prisoner of war. He was someone Subaru would find difficult to describe as being friendly.

On the other hand, it was pretty likely that he’d never see the masked man again. However, not only had he given him some effective advice on the matter of searching for Rem, he’d also given him that knife to boot. He was someone high in the benefactor level.

Meaning…

Todd: “Hey, what’s up?”

Subaru: “—. That knife is something from my family. It’s a family heirloom.”

Todd: “Is that so? Heyhey, then you must be quite the something, right?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

He decided to protect his benefactor in his mind, after mulling it over.

Todd’s voice raised a bit in surprise in response, with Subaru having lied with those thoughts in mind. Subaru didn’t know why it had, but nevertheless, Todd continued,

Todd: “After all, your knife’s got our national emblem, the Sword Wolf, on it. From what I’ve heard, those sorts of things are given personally from the Emperor to his retainers. Meaning, you must be from a family of honor as well?”

Subaru: "…Wait just a sec."

Todd's voice grew excited. Meanwhile, Subaru's breath hitched after he heard what he'd said.

The backstory behind the knife he'd received was good enough in all. He would put that matter to one side for the time being, even though there seemed to be an anecdote well worth of his surprise there.

The Sword Wolf, and the Emperor.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru stopped in his tracks, his lips still pursed together as he looked around his surroundings once again.

There he could see many a tent, bonfires, sneering men, the humongous forest… And a blue flag fluttering in the wind, right next to a large tent.

…Painted smack dab in the middle of this blue flag, was a black wolf pierced by swords.

Over a year had passed for Subaru as well, since he'd come to this other world. The opportunities in which he'd be introduced as Emilia's one and only knight were increasing, thus he was in the middle of studying stuff such as what passed as common knowledge in this world, such that he wouldn't sit cross-legged as an other worlder forever.

The fruits of his studies matched with this flag of a wolf pierced by swords—the Sword Wolf.

Namely…

Subaru: "…The Sacred Vollachian Empire."

The national emblem of the Empire that bordered the south of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica.

It was right now that Subaru first realized that they'd crossed the border between the Kingdom and Empire, having been hurled into a foreign country.

3

—The Sacred Vollachian Empire.

That was the name of the land—No, the name of the country where Subaru was being held prisoner.

The impression Subaru had towards Vollachia was, as a result of his isekai studies, something like: “It’s like that in games or whatever, Empires kinda tend to be like lairs of evil.”

Just like the Kingdom of Lugunica, the Vollachian Empire was one of the four great countries that conserved the balance of power in the world. It was the one that held the largest amount of land, holding its dominion over the south of the world map.

Vollachia was blessed with richer soils compared to Gusteko in the north and Kararagi in the west, along with fertile lands and a warm climate. Apparently, a system of “The Survival of the Fittest” had taken shape there, as if it were a matter of course.

Many tribes and races were mixed in together, with the strong gaining everything and the weak parting with their possessions, the latter oppressed by the former.

Such brutality went unpunished in the Vollachian Empire—In other words, this was a land with people that had the worst compatibility possible for Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “…The Sacred Vollachian Empire.”

Those words slipped out from him without even realizing on the very moment he’d set his eyes on the flag swaying beside the tent. Hearing Subaru’s shocked mutter, Todd raised his brows a bit, and then,

Todd: “…Long live Vollachia!”

Subaru: “Whoa?!”

A voice suddenly boomed from right behind him, taking Subaru aback. He sprang back in surprise, causing Todd to laugh at his reaction.

Todd: “Hahaha. What’s with that reaction. You’re the one who brought it up.”

Subaru: “Long live Vollachia?”

Todd: “Long live Vollachia.”

Though those were accusations he had no awareness of, he kind of understood them.

Whenever you said The Sacred Vollachian Empire out loud, they would answer with: “Long Live Vollachia.” That was what they were used to, a part of their national creed.

And so, there was one more thing which Subaru now knew.

Subaru: “…I cannot carelessly reveal that I’m a Lugunican.”

That was a really huge blow for him.

Subaru’s position right now was as Emilia’s one and only knight, she being one of the candidates in the Royal Selection that was taking place in the Kingdom of Lugunica. Subaru had been officially knighted under Roswaal’s patronage, and thus was actually, for a limited amount of time, part of the Lugunican nobility.

Regardless of that, there shouldn’t be anyone in the Kingdom of Lugunica who didn’t know about the matter of the Royal Selection.

Thus, if he were to reveal his position, he would have been in a position to ask for a favor. —At the very least, he’d imagined he would have talked about it to Todd once Rem’s safety had been assured, given that words got through to him.

But, it was a different matter altogether provided they were currently in the Vollachian Empire.

Subaru: "…"

Having read the history books of this world, Subaru knew all too well about the poor relations between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Vollachian Empire.

More than four hundred years ago, both countries had waged many great wars between them over territory. Ever since the Kingdom of Lugunica made a covenant with the Divine Dragon four hundred years ago, the two countries have strayed away from any major conflicts.

However, some small-scale, sporadic battles had broken out since then, and even now, there was no shadow of a doubt the two countries were in a state of cold war. He'd heard that before the start of the Royal Selection was announced, arrangements were made so that the Empire would not take advantage to lay war on them.

What would become of him were he to tell them he was part of the Lugunican nobility, right here inside the Vollachian Empire.

Maybe this would be possible if it were an Imperial noble with some common sense, but the place they were in was an encampment at the edge of a battlefield.

Todd aside, could he really hope to be treated as a guest of the nation by so many of these impulsive lot like Jamal?

Subaru: "That's a definite no-go."

Meaning that Subaru could not carelessly divulge his position.

Now that things were like this, the fact that he was here with Rem, who had forgotten even Subaru's position, was a blessing in disguise—Truly a small blessing amongst a sea of misfortune.

Todd: "Hey, what's the actual matter? Are your legs useless, as well as your fingers?"

Subaru: "Nah, that's not it. It's just that when I heard you say "Long live Vollachia", I couldn't contain the shudders of awe welling up from deep inside my chest…”

Todd: “Oh, I see. No helpin’ that. ‘Tis only natural that you’d be struck at heart by how the Empire is, given that you’re connected to the Imperial nobility. I was the one who lacked consideration.”

Subaru: “Haha, well, hahaha.”

He would have scratched his head if he could, yet he could only let out a forced laugh at Todd’s answer.

This was the “Empire” indeed, even though his world view on it came only from literature.

The mantra of the Empire permeated all the way down to run-of-the-mill soldiers like Todd. Realizing that it was showing in the man’s behavior right now, Subaru gritted his teeth.

His trump card of sorts, as in, revealing his social standing and returning back to the Mathers Domain, could safely be assumed to have been blocked.

Or maybe a sensible citizen of the Empire would respect his position, but…

Subaru: “…The odds would be stacked against me a little too much, were I to gamble on those two choices.”

Todd: “What are you grumbling about? Looky here, your long-awaited meeting.”

Subaru: “…ah”

Subaru, who’d been shuffling along, was pushed by his back, before then receiving a clap on the shoulder.

He lifted his head up straight after Todd told him that. And when he did, he’d been brought along to some iron cells situated near one edge of the encampment. Within one of those iron cells, all of them lined up neat and tidy, a girl sat flumped down.

Subaru: “Rem!”

Rem: “—hk, it’s you.”

Having found the figure of the girl he was searching for, Subaru flew over to the cell. Rem took notice of him and frowned, all the while glaring at him with the same hostility.

Yet, he didn’t care. So long as, first of all, he could check that she was alright…

Subaru: “Oh, thank goodness. Did they do anything to you? Are you in any pa… Hbwaah!”

Todd: “Whoa, whoa, that looks like it’s gonna hurt.”

Since Subaru had been shuffling along quickly, his feet got tangled up, making him fall forward. He couldn’t use his hands to support himself of course, so he crashed face-first into the iron cell.

And just like that, Subaru let out a groan as he fell over backwards.

Rem: “Wai… What’s with that all of a sudden?!”

Subaru: “Ah nothing, my bad… I… I didn’t mean to scare you…”

Rem: “As if I would be! Stop looking down on me please… Were your nose and teeth and stuff alright?”

Subaru: “Huh?! Are you worried about me?”

Rem: “Wha? No?”

Subaru managed to lift his body up, in the way a caterpillar would, and sniffled. The answer he got from Rem was glacial.

Nevertheless, as he was gazed at by those light-blue eyes, Subaru let out a sigh of relief. However, this caused Rem’s face to tense up even more, still inside her cell.

Todd: “Alrighty then, I get that this is quite the emotional meeting, but you two ain’t quite on the same page, no? Lemme see then, so, um, you must be Rem, right?”

Rem: "—. Who knows."

Todd: "Heyhey, what a pain. Like, there's got to be a limit to how stubborn you can get."

Todd butted in between Subaru and Rem's unexpected meeting, sporting a sullen look on his face.

Rem tsunishly turned her face away, however, it seemed like her cold attitude wasn't just limited to Subaru. It seemed to also be consistently pointed towards the encampment—against the people of the Empire, Todd included.

Though all things said, you could say this was really typical of Rem and her bossy at home, yet timid on the streets temperament.

Subaru: "If you're going to be snapping at whoever comes by, they're gonna nickname you with stuff like "Mad Dog"."

Rem: "And now he has the absolute cheek of calling me a dog. Not only do you stink, but you're also quite the rude person, aren't you?"

Subaru: "What are you trying to say, me stinking is being rude? Like, you mean I lack in the cleanliness department? Even so, cleanliness is something which I've never really properly grasped."

There was a saying that went something like: When you hate someone, you come to hate everything related to the person. Rem's manner of interactions with Subaru matched that sort of stuff to a T.

The fact he had ended up coming to a place like this, while still unable to shake off that poor first impression he gave, was a real bummer.

Subaru: "Anyways, she is indeed called Rem. Thanks for helping me out… Though, that said, it's hard for me to express my gratitude when I see how she's been put in this cell."

Todd: "Didn't I tell you? The people in Jamal's unit were beaten up. If I didn't let myself do at least this, then even I would lose face.

Either way, it’s not like we’re gonna hurt her.”

Subaru: “…Can I really trust you on that?”

Todd: “We have the credence of the Imperial Nobility here after all. Even Jamal can’t complain about that.”

Todd rifled through his bosom and pulled out that knife while saying that. Subaru’s eyes swung wide open as Todd unsheathed it and cut away the rope around his hands and feet.

Feeling himself freed from his restraints, Subaru let out an exhale with an “Oh.”

Subaru: “You’re just going to let me go?”

Todd: “I wanna say “Yeah, and take your girl wherever”… But I can’t.”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “Don’t give me such a scary look. It’s not like I’m doing you a disservice. As you’ve gathered, we’ve prepared our ranks to fight the Shudraqians in the forest. But, it’s not just us who’ve been deployed. If you wander around all willy-nilly, then you’re gonna get captured by the guys at some other encampment.”

In other words, there were several encampments scattered around the land, waiting to raid the vast forest.

Were Subaru and his party to carelessly intrude into another encampment, they would most likely be captured and questioned, just like it had happened here.

But even worse—

Subaru: “With so many Jamals in these encampments, I might even be forced to eat another damn shoe.”

Todd: “I don’t mean to brag, but in the Imperial Army you’d be hard-pressed to find many like myself. I really dislike violence, so if there’s a chance for dialog, I’ll always go with that first, you see.”

Rem: “So we should expect most of them to be as abusive as that rude gentleman, is what you are saying?”

Todd: “Well, he did offend you, so he kinda deserves it, I guess.”

An intense hatred could be heard in Rem’s voice as she firmly spoke.

She could not bring herself to like Subaru either, but her first meeting with Jamal had been simply awful. Judging from the fact that Todd, despite knowing the situation, was not on Jamal’s side either, it could be inferred that not even his allies could defend his actions.

Subaru: “Todd-san, I get that you’re worried about our safety. But what should we do? Just like you, I really don’t want to stay put until they’re done raiding the forest.”

Todd: “I know, plus we’re gonna get shouted at if we let outsiders stay at our encampment for too long. But no matter what we do, a supply convoy will set out for a nearby town in some days from now. If y’all leave the encampment along with them, you’ll probably be able to get out without causing any unneeded ruckus.”

Subaru: “I see, a supply convoy…”

It was a no-brainer, you needed the appropriate amount of food and water to feed all of these people. There was no way they could provide that using the land around them, and so the units that brought in supplies were as important as the troops set out for combat.

That’s why Todd had recommended them to go with the people charged with providing such things for the encampments.

Subaru: “Then is it okay if we depend on you for a little while longer…?”

Todd: “I reckon so. The battle shouldn’t progress any time soon… So just make sure you don’t go near that damn Jamal. Unless you wanna be forced to eat another shoe.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I really feel that… Rem, are you alright with his plan?”

Rem: “…”

Rem gave him no reply, her face still tsunishly turned away from him.

Nevertheless, she did not reject it to his face, so she probably didn’t have any objections or alternatives in mind. He would just take it as being a cute act of defiance from her.

Todd: “You two have a weird relationship though. What sort of people are you?”

Subaru: “Uhm, you can think of us as wanderers or travelers. Rem’s my beloved girl, and the other girl we were with is someone I don’t know.”

Rem: “You’re still saying that stuff…”

Upon hearing Todd’s question, Rem’s distrust grew stronger. Subaru too thought he’d messed up, but on the other hand, he absolutely didn’t want to recognize Louis as being one of their companions.

In all honesty, he’d be all for the Empire taking her from them.

Subaru: “Which reminds me, she hasn’t been thrown into a cell along with Rem. Where did she go?”

Rem: “—. She was taken away for treatment. It seems she cut her forehead somewhere when we recklessly jumped into the river.”

Subaru: “Treatment… Treatment?”

Subaru reacted in astonishment when he heard Rem’s answer, who’d averted her gaze away. Then his expression turned serious, and he jumped towards the cell.

Subaru: “Did you say treatment?!”

Rem: “Wh-What? Indeed I did. Or are you saying you don’t want that girl you detest to even get treatment for her injuries?”

Subaru: “You’re not wrong there either, but that’s not the issue. Hey, Todd-san! Where’s that damned Louis getting treated? Which tent?!”

Subaru had turned around, making Todd react with a surprised “Wha?” in response to his threatening attitude. However, he did not understand the gravity of the situation one bit. Subaru grabbed him by the shoulders and asked once again: “Where is she?”

Todd: “If she’s receiving treatment, she’ll be in that tent with a red flag. But what’s going on with you so suddenly?”

Subaru: “Just like whatever, everyone’s going to die!”

Subaru pushed Todd’s shoulder away, the latter’s eyes peeled wide open, as the former hurried over to the tent with the red flag. Rem and Todd unconsciously exchanged looks with one another seeing the vigor that drove Subaru.

Todd: “What the…? Well, whatever, I’ll go after him, but…”

Rem: “Please do. He’s probably going to do something rash unless you stop him.”

Todd: “Though, why do you have to be the one to tell me that…”

Todd scratched his head and hurriedly went after Subaru, as the latter rushed forward.

And, as soon as she couldn’t see Subaru anymore,

Rem: “Like what the hell? That guy’s just been acting as he pleases with me all this time.”

Rem muttered that under her breath.

Subaru: “…”

And on the other hand, having heard what Todd had said earlier, Subaru was looking around, searching for the red tent. Hearing

Louis was receiving treatment; the worst possibility swept across Subaru‘s mind.

Namely, the possibility that Louis, who seemed to have lost her mind somehow, would turn back to normal with treatment and be re-established as one of the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony.

In that case, both Subaru, and of course the amnesiac Rem, would not be able to contend with her. Even if Todd, Jamal and the people of the Empire in this encampment got together, there would probably be many, many casualties.

He wasn’t going to let that happen. Impatience filled Subaru’s mind, as if saying, That must never happen.

Then, he turned towards a red tent that had caught his eyes and he quickly made his way over to it…

Subaru: “I’m sorry! Is there a vile golden haired kid here—”

???: “Auuuaa!!”

A golden bullet came hurtling out from the inside at terrific speed the moment he’d tried to open the tent’s flap.

True to its aim, it scored a direct hit under his nose—right against the center of his body, causing both his consciousness and upper body to jolt unsteadily. And just like that, he fell down flat on his ass.

As a result, he ended up putting down his left hand on the ground, in an instant move. —His left hand, where three of his fingers were broken.

Subaru: “GYHAAAAAAAAA!!”

Louis: “Ahh! Ahh! Uaaah!”

Subaru’s consciousness flickered from the fierce pain. Present was a demon, making merry, squealing happily while straddled over Subaru, who was writing in agony. —Louis.

She was still the same as the time when she'd woken Subaru up in that grassy plain. There was a smile plastered on her face, a smile that looked just like the very manifestation of innocent evil, as she snuggled up to his chest.

He really wanted to brush her away, but his consciousness, scorching with pain, didn't let him do so.

Subaru: "Gh, khh, a-ahh…!"

Todd: "Whoa there, you used your left hand? Well that's, damn, pretty rough… But from what I can see, this girl looks back to her usual. Like, the wound on her forehead's been patched up too."

Todd caught up to Subaru, who was writhing in agony, and gently lifted the happy Louis up from his chest. Louis flapped her arms and legs while letting out an "Auuh", however, Todd paid her no heed.

Just like Todd had said, there was a bandage wrapped around Louis' head. It looked like they had given her some treatment for her forehead cut. Not with magic though, but with simple first-aid techniques.

Subaru: "Kh, ah… I-Is that so? So that's what you meant by treating her head…"

He'd been so sure they were going to heal her wound with magic, so he'd gotten all panicky. However, with the method they had resorted to, there would be no way its healing would treat any aspects he didn't wish to be treated.

It looked like Subaru's fears had ended up being needless, for now.

Todd: "You treat this girl who's so attached to you as someone you don't know, yet the girl you hold as being so precious treats you so coldly… I don't really get it, but that sounds like a dang mess."

Subaru: "…Can't deny that. There's hardly anyone around who finds themselves in as many messes as I do."

If there were a limit to the amount of hardships a person went through in their life, then was this just a lifetime worth of hardships closing in on him? Or was the count reset with each Return by Death? Would a time when he would be able to feel at ease never ever come?

Just the thought of that was terrifying. And although it was terrifying…

Subaru: "I'm alive for now. That's what matters."

Todd: "Sure feels like you set your targets low… So, what will you do? Are we okay to go along with you guys accompanying the supply convoy in a few days time?"

Subaru: "Oh, yeah, yes please. My apologies though, for having to stay in your care."

Todd: "Mhm? Then no need to fret, since I ain't gonna be leaving y'all to mooch off us."

Subaru, who was sitting cross-legged, raised his face at Todd's words and said: "Huh?" Following that, Todd brought Louis back to the ground as she flapped her legs around, and placed one of his hands to his hips.

After that, he pointed to the Empire's encampment that stretched out behind him, and said,

Todd: "This is quite the encampment. No matter how many hands we have on deck, it's never enough. There's tons of work, so I'm gonna have to get you to help out with some stuff."

Subaru: "…He who does not work, shall not eat, I guess that's what you're saying?"

Subaru quietly murmured those words, causing Todd to repeat them back as soon as he heard them.

Todd: "He who does not work… Yes indeed. That's spot on. You sure know some good words."

Todd nodded his head, and to his side, Louis nodded as well, as if copying him.

Subaru loudly cracked his neck bones while looking up at the two of them.

Subaru: “…I guess this is way better than being told “Don’t do anything”, or being forced to eat a shoe, huh.”

Chapter 7:
Being a Man was Tough

1

Subaru: “Ouch.”

Subaru gave a reflexive grimace as he felt a sharp pain run through his finger.

He looked down and saw a drop of blood beading down from a shallow cut on the tip of his index finger. He’d been tidying up some documents scattered around on the desk, yet it seemed like he’d cut his finger on them.

Subaru: “Shit, I really messed up there. Guess this is the initiation I get for having underestimated the isekai paper making technology…”

???: “My, Subaru-kun, whaaaaat’s the matter? Did you cut your finger on some paper?”

Subaru: “I can tell what you’re thinking here, Roz-chi: “Oh, how miserable of youuuu, weaker even than paper.” I just screwed up a bit… Can’t you fix this up like it’s nothing?”

Subaru showed his aching finger to the owner of the mansion, Roswaal, as he posed his question.

Roswaal was facing his desk, in his office, having been busying himself with some paperwork. He placed his quill down, before then taking a look at the scratch on Subaru’s finger.

Roswaal: “Let me see. Oh my, it looks paaaainful. That said, ‘tis but a scratch. It should heal pretty quickly if you give it a lick. Oooor, should I lick it for you?”

Subaru: “No thank you. I’d just go ahead and stick it in Beako’s mouth or something, if I was going to get it licked by you, Roz-chi.”

Roswaal: “Haha, how amuuuuusing… It seems like you and Beatrice are getting along swimmingly, doesn’t it.”

Roswaal let go of Subaru’s finger and beamed at him while resting his elbows on the desk. Subaru tilted his head, saying “Is that so?” after hearing what he had to say.

The relationship Subaru and Beatrice had was a complex one, nigh impossible to express. Though putting it as such was an exaggeration, he hadn’t really been able to get much compromise from Beatrice.

Subaru: “It’s fun teasing her after all, and it’s me who’s actively doing the provoking, though I’m not too sure how she feels about it.”

Roswaal: “Oh no, no need to wooooorry about that. Beatrice is quite the forthright girl with these kinds of things after all. If she really felt like rejecting you, you probably wouldn’t be able to go in and out of the Forbidden Library either.”

Subaru: “I see…”

Roswaal: “Since aaaaafter all, she won’t allow me into the Forbidden Library currently.”

Subaru: “I see?”

Roswaal placed one of his hands to his chest as he said that with feigned indifference, before giving him a strained smile.

That said, Roswaal was just like Subaru in that it looked like he considered Beatrice as a teasable girl. That, and they’d also been acquainted with each other far longer than Subaru had.

Subaru: “So like, you’re misanalysing the sense of distance between you two and letting it fester, or something? Wouldn’t it have been better to apologize?”

Roswaal: “Well, you’re not too far off there. In regards to an apology… Just a little tooooo much time has ended up passing for both me and Beatrice.”

Subaru: “I don’t think it’s great to not give her an apology and blame time for that, but…”

Roswaal: “Hmmm, this keeps getting more and more painful to hear.”

Roswaal loosened his lips and picked up his quill again. Realizing that was a sign for him to get back to work, Subaru once again took to organizing the bookshelves with a shrug of his shoulders.

Luckily, it seemed like the blood from his cut finger had stopped.

Roswaal: “If your finger does actually hurt, you could get Rem or Beatrice to heal it up; otherwise, have the esteemed Great Spirit do it.”

Subaru: “Roz-chi, can’t you heal it? Are you being spartan?”

Roswaal: “Nooooo, not at all. —You see, I can’t use healing magic.”

Subaru: “Is that so? And here I was thinking you were a versatile mage who can do just about anything.”

Subaru lifted his brows slightly at Roswaal’s unexpected confession.

He could burn forests, herds of witchbeasts included, to nothing with hellfire. He could soar up to the skies like the wind. So as soon as Subaru had heard Roswaal held great renown as a mage, Subaru had been so sure Roswaal’d mastered every single kind of basic magic.

Yet Roswaal had shook his head at what Subaru had said.

Roswaal: “My apologies for not living up to your expectations, but you see, magic heavily depends on the aptitude one possesses from birth. I’ve been lucky enough to have been blessed with many talents for magic, but even that’s not sufficient to completely handle every single bit of magic that there is in the world.”

Subaru: “So, healing magic aside, got any others you can’t use?”

Roswaal: “Nope, I can pretty much use all the others.”

Subaru: “Seriously just the one flaw?!”

Roswaal only had one weakness, coming in stark contrast to his heavy preface.

That said, the fact of the matter was: his flaw meant he couldn’t use healing magic. And it felt to him like this was a surprisingly large flaw, one that would be difficult to make up for.

Subaru: “I reckon being unable to heal your wounds or not is a pretty big deal, like when you’re in the middle of a fight or whatever.”

Roswaal: “Oh? So that’s what you think as well, Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “Well, I graduated from the kinds of power play where you can just win by selecting the “Fight” command, and ignoring the effects of buffs and debuffs, in elementary school. I’m the type who likes to compete with talented people by making full use of my resourcefulness, even though I lack talent, just like in those kinds of mangas.”

Roswaal: “It seems like you’re saying stuff that’s tough to figure out, but in fact, I haven’t even viewed it like so.”

They’d only known each other for a few weeks, yet it looked like Roswaal had seen through to the truth behind his chatter, causing Subaru to stick his tongue out at him with a scratch of his head.

Roswaal batted one of his eyes shut and winked at him with his blue one.

Roswaal: “It’s actually as you say, Subaru-kun. You could say having healing magic or not will change the battlefield, in a way. That’s why it’s such a valuable ability.”

Subaru: “Yeah? But Puck, Beako and Rem can use it, right?”

Roswaal: “The first two are speeeecial. And as for Rem… She’s got the disposition for it too I guess. After all, I’ve focused myself on helping her hone that talent for healing of hers.”

According to what Roswaal had said after, apparently the usefulness of healing magic was regarded so importantly, even in magic, a master-apprentice system was in place in specialized hospitals.

Rem could have learnt it there, but she'd said Roswaal had guided her teachings directly since she didn't want to be separated from Ram.

Roswaal: "And so, come a time you get injured, there's the fear that you'll end up forgetting to grit and bear it, if you entrench yourself too deeply with healing magic, I suppoooooose."

Subaru: "Well…So you mean you'd lose your tolerance for pain? I guess that would happen."

Just like people raised up in sterile rooms did not gain any resistance against viruses and such, pain could well become fatal in a time where one cannot rely on healing magic, in the case where you'd immediately get rid of your pains with its use.

With that in mind, Subaru glanced at his injured finger.

Subaru: "I get it. This cut ain't worth fussing about, I'll grin and bear this pain as a lesson for myself."

Roswaal: "It's just a teeeeensy cut on your finger; aren't you making a meaaaaal of it? It won't really matter if you heal a cut like this, so why not get Rem to do it?"

Subaru: "Sounds like a sweet trap to lure people into slothfulness! …No thanks, I'm perfectly fine as I am. Got no issues."

Roswaal's words felt like they had a touch of banter in them, yet Subaru thought he had a point.

Subaru already knew from the two incidents that had happened at the Royal Capital and the Mansion that his life in another world wasn't going to be easy. It was best to just not experience anything like unbearable pain.

However…

Subaru: “I’ll be ready, for when the unavoidable comes.”

Roswaal: “It’s just a cut on your finger thouuuuuuugh.”

Roswaal gave Subaru a wry smile as the latter emphasized what he said by firmly raising his index finger up.

Nevertheless, Subaru’s enthusiasm proved to be in vain. As soon as he finished cleaning up the office, he met up with Rem and the others, and right after that, Rem noticed his cut and immediately healed it up.

2

Subaru: “Ughghghghgh…!”

???: “Come on, bite down on the brace or something. This is really gonna hurt.”

Todd straightened the fingers on Subaru’s left hand as he said that, before then applying a pungent medicine on his blotched fingers. After that, he nimbly put a splint around his fingers and wound some bandages around them. And with that, he finished patching him up.

Todd: “All’s that left is this potion to finish things up. It should ease your pain a bit.”

Todd passed a bottle over to Subaru, drenched in cold sweat, containing some medicine. It was filled with a thick, viscous, green liquid. However, there was nothing he could do about it if he was told it was medicine.

Subaru steeled himself and swigged it down.

Subaru: “Blargh! Gross! Th-This heavy liquid is gonna get stuck in my throat…!”

Todd: “’Tis a medicine that’s renown for being difficult to swallow after all. But I guarantee you, it will do the trick. It’s an asset that’s heavily used by the troops. It’ll speed up how quickly your wounds heal.”

Subaru gulped it down, holding the now empty bottle between his fingers as Todd flashed him a smile. Subaru lowered his head, saying “Sorry,” in response to Todd, as he wiped his mouth.

Subaru: “You let yourself share something so valuable to a weirdo like me.”

Todd: “No worries at all. In fact, if we were to leave you as you are, your fingers would rot away and fall off. Like, think of it as me having done a favor for a guy who’s been granted a Sword Wolf Dagger.”

Subaru lowered his brows at Todd’s good-natured, generous answer, before then chewing on his lip.

Todd, who appeared to be a soldier from the Vollachian Empire, was under the impression that Subaru was a noble, due to the knife he’d received in the forest. He’d been treated much better thanks to that, even if he was a prisoner of war.

However, it was precisely because of this that he felt sorry for deceiving him.

And in addition, a particular question had been weighing over Subaru’s mind.

Namely…

Subaru: “But, yeah. In times like these, if we had Healing Magic at hand, we could heal my wounds in a jiffy.”

Subaru muttered that out, pretending to put it casually as he checked how his left hand was doing. Hearing that, Todd raised his eyebrows.

Todd: “Oh? Yet again with saying these extravagant things. Like, as if I’ve been able to lay my eyes on anything like that.”

Subaru: “—. So it’s just as I thought.”

Todd: “Guess so. It sure would be useful if wounds and illness could be healed the same as creating a breeze or fire or whatever. Even your left hand would be healed up lickety-split.”

Subaru cast his gaze down as Todd spoke in a solemn tone of voice with a shrug of his shoulders.

Both unease and relief rose inside of him simultaneously for hitting the nail on the head with his prediction.

Subaru and Roswaal had talked about how rare Healing Magic was, back when his plots were yet to be exposed, when he’d deemed him as just being an upbeat, clownish noble.

Roswaal had told him magic depended on one’s talent, as well as that Healing Magic users were precious.

Adding on to that information, medicinal herbs and potion bottles were lined together in the tent that the encampment had set up for healing. A host of medicinal tools, rather than magic, had been prepared there.

Todd, who’d told him he’d get him patched up, had resorted to the use of medicinal herbs and splints, rather than relying on anything magical. Thus, there were no doubts anymore.

Subaru: “Healing Magic is rare.”

Todd: “At the very least, it’s something I’ve never seen. From what I’ve heard, the Imperial Capital keeps mages who can use it close, within its bounds. Whatever the case, ‘tis but a tale of a faraway world for the average person.”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “I’m more surprised you said something like “Healing Magic”. Not like it’s an option for me y’know?”

In the first place, you wouldn’t even be able to come up with things unfamiliar to you; they wouldn’t even pop up at the edge of your thoughts.

That was just how unfamiliar Healing Magic was in the Empire—At least, for Todd and his gang.

Subaru had been expecting him to answer like that, so he shook his head and said,

Subaru: “Well, as you can see, I’m actually a traveler. I’m traveling all over the place, so I have come across people who use Healing Magic.”

Todd: “I see, a traveler huh. I did think you were dressed weirdly, since the garb y’all are in doesn’t at all suit the heat around here.”

Todd looked at Subaru from head to toe as he stated that. Subaru was still dressed in the clothes they’d devised to ward off the sand back when they had passed through the sand sea to capture the Pleiades Watchtower.

The Augria Dunes had been contrary to his impressions of a desert since they hadn’t been hot; however, he’d ended up practically covering almost all of his skin to stave off the sand winds. That’s why one would have to say they weren’t quite dressed for the seasons, here in Vollachia, where the temperatures and the humidity were high.

Todd: “So you’re saying you came across some kind of Healing Artist when you were traveling and you were tainted by its convenience.”

Subaru: “What a terrible way of putting it! Even if it is actually convenient.”

In fact, Subaru had been indebted to Healing Magic a few times— Or rather, quite a few times.

It would have been practically impossible to come back alive from the first hurdle, had it not been for Beatrice’s Healing Magic when he was first summoned into this other world.

If Beatrice hadn’t been there for him back then, Subaru would still be living life with his belly sliced open and his guts drooping out.

Subaru: “Like I ever want to go through the experience of tripping over my own guts again.”

Todd: “Healing Magic, huh.”

Subaru: “…? Todd-san?”

As Subaru reflected on his somewhat uncommon experience, standing in front of him, Todd let out a quiet sigh. Subaru frowned at the change in atmosphere, yet Todd closed one of his eyes and said,

Todd: “Well, I reckon Healing Magic is rather cruel, I’m glad it’s not around where I’m at.”

Subaru: “Cruel… Why? Shouldn’t it be the opposite?”

Subaru showed how baffled he was by Todd’s point of view. To which, Todd, with one of his eyes still closed, continued with,

Todd: “Like, after all, your wounds healing up means you won’t die. They won’t pull you back to recuperate either. They’ll heal you up and force you to fight again, on and on. That’s what it means to have your wounds healed.”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “I can’t help but be terrified by it. Just how much must the guy who came up with the idea of Healing Magic in the first place have loved to fight? It just feels like we’re being shown that plain and clear.”

Subaru was unable to come up with a response after hearing Todd’s calm words.

He found it to be quite a biased way of thinking. In actuality, Healing Magic played a role not only on the battlefield, but also to save people from accidents or disease as part of daily life.

On the other side though, there was some truth to Todd’s way of thinking as well.

They would patch up those wounded on the battlefield and push them to fight anew. —Subaru couldn’t deny his own feelings; he feared that he could not deny such an aspect did exist, after all.

Todd: “My bad, I went off-topic. I didn’t mean to make you furrow your brows like that.”

Todd said that to bring the mood back to normal, seeing how Subaru had sunk into silence. Subaru nodded back at him, and said, “It’s alright”, in response to those values that he himself hadn’t considered.

Todd then shifted his attention to the outside of the tent, in an effort to change the subject.

Todd: “But, if that’s the case, shouldn’t the lil’ missy inside the cell also be one of your traveling companions? But even then, why are you being snapped at so much?”

Subaru: “…An unforeseen accident, I guess. We used to be pretty much on the same wavelength, but now things have gotten completely one-sided, due to one reason or another. I’d be grateful if you looked at the long term here.”

Todd: “It’s fine by me, but it seems rather tough for you… But, in that case…”

Todd didn’t probe too deep into the complex circumstances surrounding Subaru and Rem, instead, he glanced away while brushing his chin.

Todd was looking at Subaru’s right arm, which the latter was deliberately ignoring. And clinging to Subaru’s right arm since quite a while ago…

???: “Ah?”

Was Louis, who said that blankly with a dopey look on her face.

She was still clinging to Subaru’s right arm, smiling away as if something was fun, while occasionally fiddling with his fingers, entwining her hair around them and doing whatever she pleased.

Todd: “You’re obviously not old enough for her to be y’all’s daughter, right? What is she to you?”

Subaru: “How many times do I have to say this, she’s just some stranger. Though I’m dead certain she isn’t a decent person.”

Todd: “You’re being harsh there… But the lil’ miss in her cell seems to care about this girl, no?”

Subaru: “That’s what’s so troublesome…”

Having had that pointed out by Todd once again, Subaru let out a sigh, feeling just how complicated the situation he was put in was.

Right now, Subaru’s feelings towards Rem were spinning around completely in vain. With her memories now gone, Rem’s cold attitude was mostly born out of Subaru’s disdain for Louis.

Nevertheless, Subaru could not accept Louis, even if he knew that was the cause.

It was a no-brainer. She was a Sin Archbishop, a person of pure evil. Someone he could by no means ever get on with.

Subaru: “How is this happening? What the hell are you scheming, what the hell do you want from me?!”

Louis: “Ooh? Aah, Awoh”

Louis merely gave him a frivolous smile, offering no answer to him in return.

Her behavior was absolutely annoying. Of course, it’d spell trouble were she to act as unscrupulously as she had in the Hall of Memories, but it would probably keep things more clear for him, to view her as an enemy as much as he could.

It’d be a better situation compared to now, having her act like a baby or toddler, leaving only Subaru himself able to recognize her dangerous nature.

Todd: “Either way, she’s one of your traveling companions. No matter where it is you’re off to, y’all oughta work on improving your relationship a bit more.”

Subaru: "—. Who's that advice for?"

Todd: "Adv…? Well, it's up to you how you take it."

Todd stood up while cocking his head in confusion at the word he'd never heard before.

They were in the tent designated for healing right now, so the people there probably would rather they didn't stay there too long chattering away. Subaru followed in Todd's wake, Louis still clinging to his right hand.

Todd: "Anyways, now that you're all patched up… Let's get down to business, may I ask you to do something for me?"

Subaru: "Mhm, yeah. That way I'm not gonna be as guilty compared to being left with nothing to do. Let me know whatever you need. I'm ready for anything, so long as the task doesn't involve eatin' shoes."

Todd: "Seems like Jamal really tried your patience… Okay, I getcha, I won't let him behave like that. At least for now."

What Todd had glanced over to as he thought about that was a group of black tents.

Subaru followed his gaze and looked over at those tents before asking him "What are these for?"

Todd: "They hold the stockpiles for our encampment. We've brought them here because we need them for one reason or another, but I suck at tidying 'em up properly. So that's where you come in, considering you pride yourself in keeping stuff neat and tidy."

Subaru: "…Did I ever even say that?"

Todd: "You didn't? Still, I was hoping it was. And if it's not, then you'll still surely give it your all, out of gratitude for me helping you out."

Subaru: "…What a fantastic personality you have, Todd-san."

Todd said something rather mean-spirited, all the while with a good-natured smile on his face. Subaru's expression grew stiff at his words, before then eyeing up the group of black tents.

There were around twenty tents at a glance; if those were all filled with their stockpiles, and worse, if as Todd had said, they were in need of a tidy-up, then the going was going to get tough.

Subaru: "Doubt I'll finish this in a day or two…"

Todd: "All's good so long as you tidy 'em up by the time the Dragon Carriage from the Supply Group turns up. Hahaha."

Subaru: "Hahaha…"

That meant he had to hurry.

The difficulty level went up a bit once the injuries on his left hand were factored in, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Subaru: "This is so I can earn my bread for today, this is so I can go back to Emilia-tan along with Rem…"

Louis: "Uuuh!"

Louis raised her voice beside Subaru as the latter firmly clenched his fist, ready to go and challenge the hard work. She was still dangling down from his right arm, eliciting a loathsome grimace from Subaru.

The Sin Archbishop was burdening Subaru's mind and body, with the look on her face seemingly like she had no idea what was going on. With her craftiness still there, she was a formidable foe who gave the awfully strong impression she'd become hard to handle.

Subaru: "The rate at which I get involved with people I have no recollection of, kinda like with Shaula, is way too high…"

Louis: "Aah, Uuuh."

Whether she understood him or not, Subaru made his way over to the black tents while pulling Louis along, with her seemingly in a good mood.

Unlike with Shaula, where they'd finally comprehended each other at the end, he could not get through to Louis in the first place. He made his way over all the while thinking how it would be impossible to comprehend each other.

3

Rem: "…So, you were tidying away the tent until dark."

Sitting on the floor with her legs folded sideways, Rem greeted Subaru like that, who had returned after finishing a bout of strenuous work.

As Subaru lowered the corners of his eyebrows at her, Rem narrowed her eyes at his reaction,

Rem: "I'm not greeting you."

Subaru: "Don't read my mind… But, they let you out of the prison, right?"

Rem: "—. The people here seemed like they didn't bear any hostility towards me, at least."

The reason she cast down her eyes was probably the meeting engagement that had occurred by the side of the river, which Subaru had heard of—and the guilt that manifested from that unfavorable first meeting between Jamal's squad and Rem.

Rem was generally unfriendly towards those she did not trust.

Her attitude towards Subaru had softened quite a bit after getting to know him, but her old characteristic was beginning to resurface as of now, since she lost her memories. He believed she was reflecting on it.

Subaru: "Though, well done for being able to self-reflect, Rem. That's deserving of a hanamaru."

Rem: "…From whose perspective are you looking at me? Even if you compliment me, it means nothing to me. In the first place,”

Aiming a stinging retort at the smiling Subaru, Rem lifted her gaze up.

Although Subaru was lured into doing the same, all he saw was the cone-shaped, thin ceiling of the tent. He tilted his head, wondering what she was going on about. And then, Rem clicked her tongue in a soured mood,

Rem: “Why are you in the same tent as us? I don’t want to be asking for too much, but couldn’t they be more considerate…”

Subaru: “No, I think this is the incarnation of being considerate. I told Todd-san we’re companions going on the same journey, so if it’s… owowowowowow!”

Rem: “Don’t just say things as you please!”

The moment he sat down next to her, Rem’s hand squeezed the area around his hip bone in an iron grip. She glared at him while he suffered from the creaking bones in his lower back.

However, a tiny silhouette barged in between them, stopping Rem’s actions with an “Ahh!”.

That was—

Rem: “Again, you…”

???: “Uuu!”

Leaning heavily against Rem’s hand, which was gripping onto Subaru’s waist, Louis used her whole body to raise her objections.

Rem, who indulged with Louis for some reason, let out a sigh of resignation at her efforts, and reluctantly broke off her punishment towards Subaru. She pulled Louis closer to her knees instead.

Like that, she placed Louis’s head on her legs, which she couldn’t move around too much, and gently caressed her body.

Subaru: “Tch.”

Rem: “…Why are you clicking your tongue this time? I don’t understand how you could be so cold-hearted, when she is attached to you like this.”

Rem’s reaction towards Subaru’s unsavory attitude wasn’t very good.

All he could do was observe each and every one of Louis’s movements, who was lying down on Rem’s lap, so he could protect Rem whenever Louis decided to show her true colors.

—Ordered by Todd, Subaru had begun cleaning up the interior of the black tent.

Just as he had initially thought, sorting out the inside of the tent wasn’t something that could be finished in a short time. Of course, part of the reason was Subaru’s left hand’s condition being far from perfect, but it was also because the rules on how to organize things didn’t seem to apply to the Vollachians, far more than he had expected. Adding to that—

Subaru: “This one keeps interfering with every little bit of my work. I exerted all that effort tidying up their stuff, but she topples it over and scatters it around, one after another. Thanks to her, I’m not making any progress at all.”

Rem: “She doesn’t know anything, so it can’t be helped.”

Subaru: “You don’t know anything as well. But, you wouldn’t do anything like what she did. That’s all, thus it has been demonstrated! QED!”

Rem: “You’re saying things that don’t make any sense at all, again!”

Knowing that the cause of Rem’s unwelcoming treatment towards Subaru was lying within Louis, how could he not act towards Louis with the same attitude?

He knew this was a unfavorable spiral of treating each other badly, but he couldn’t bring himself to get along with Louis, even if it was just on the surface. —He simply could not stand her with every fiber of his being, and it was something he was unable to conceal.

Subaru: "…"

Feeling greatly disheartened, Subaru sprawled down on the floor on his back.

The tent with only three people, Subaru, Rem, and Louis—it was only for a few days, but Todd had distributed it to them as a place to stay.

Since his allies didn't come back after entering the forest, Todd had smiled at Subaru's group in the midst of setting up camp, saying they could use the ownerless tent as they liked.

Subaru: "No, it's not a thing to smile at, but…"

Despite that, he highly appreciated that Todd had given them a spare tent.

Setting aside Subaru himself, he was worried about leaving Rem in a womanless camp. Todd told them they would be treated as guests, but it was unknown how far his word had spread.

Not to mention, Rem had already incurred Jamal's displeasure.

If possible, Subaru wished she would stay by his side, so he could keep her within his sight while he busied himself with chores—

Rem: "Don't just keep sulking, and eat."

Subaru: "Eh?"

Subaru was absorbed in his thoughts, lying flat on his back. What blocked his view was the skewer that Rem held out above his face.

When he sat up spontaneously, Rem turned away from him, shoving the skewer closer to him.

Subaru: "This is…?"

Rem: “They say it’s a meal. It was being distributed among the people in the camp, so I also went and received some… Because, even if it’s just little by little, I need to practice my movements.”

She murmured, rubbing her leg with her free hand.

Neither of them knew when the condition of her legs would be back to normal, restored from their incapacitated state, but Rem herself was probably feeling more troubled and anxious over them than Subaru.

Surrounded by people she didn’t know in their encampment, not in possession of her memories, and standing in an uncertain position in this mess. Even if she wanted to take action to know about something, her legs were not free to act.

Rem: “…Can you just take it? My hand is becoming tired.”

Subaru: “I-I got it, I got it. Uhh, did you eat already?”

Rem: “Huh? Why would I eat first when the girl hasn’t eaten yet? There’s no way I can do something as selfish at that.”

Snapping at him, Rem drew the container made out of bones that was placed aside at the edge of the tent closer to her, removing the cloth that covered it and lifting the skewer to Louis’s mouth.

Spoiled by Rem, Louis gladly accepted her act of kindness, gnawing at the meat bit by bit like a chick pecking at food that was given by its parents.

Rem: “Fufu.”

Rem watched over Louis with a tender smile as she continued to peck at her meal.

Unable to tear his eyes away from the sight, Subaru munched at the skewer he had been given. With it seemingly being simply pierced through and cooked, he had no idea what kind of meat was used for it.

Anyway, it was stiff and bland, something that couldn’t exactly be described as tasty.

Subaru: “It’s matched pretty evenly with Emilia-tan and Beako’s cooking…”

Rem: “What are you muttering on ab… ah,”

Subaru: “—?”

As Rem glanced over at Subaru, who stated his miscellaneous thoughts about the meal out loud, her eyes suddenly widened. Subaru frowned at her reaction, wondering what was going on.

Her blue eyes were locked onto Subaru’s face. If so, he speculated that the reason for her astonishment belonged to his face, but…

Subaru: “What’s wrong? Wait, don’t say anything sad like, “It’s the first time I looked at your face properly.”“

Rem: “That’s… not it, but… uhm, your tears…”

Subaru: “Tears?”

Rem: “…Tears… are rolling down your face. Haven’t you realized?”

Subaru’s breath caught in his throat at Rem’s words, who so hesitantly begun to speak. After that, he slowly and timidly touched his own cheek, surprised by the warm droplet that met the tip of his fingers.

It was not a ridiculous lie made up by Rem, it was the truth.

Subaru: “Huh? I’m… crying?”

Rem: “Ye… yes, you’re crying. What’s the matter? Did the injuries on your fingers…?”

Using a hand to wipe away the tears that spilled over his cheeks, Subaru was confused by the waves of emotion churning within him. However, the cause of his tears wasn’t the pain from his broken fingers.

The cause was something more different. Maybe it was because of the calm, quiet moment that he was spending together with Rem.

Subaru: “…”

The situation was far from being settled.

He was separated from Emilia and the others, didn’t know how to get in touch with them, in a land that would drag him through a terrible experience if his background was ever discovered, and he was also in a wretched state, lacking any sort of relationship with the amnesiac Rem. On top of that, he had a Sin Archbishop who was the embodiment of the evils in this world as company, and they were led by Natsuki Subaru, the person who had the complete set of ignorance, incompetence, impotence, and incautiousness.

A single reason for him to be optimistic did not exist. Not a single reason existed, but—

Subaru: “…We’re talking and eating together, like this. That… made me happy.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “S-Sorry, you don’t understand what I’m saying, right? I’m spouting nonsense again. It’s natural for you to think I’m being disgusting… But, I’m being truthful.”

Giving up on pushing back his tears by shutting his eyes, they continued running down his face as he sniffed, gazing at Rem.

Subaru: “For such a long time, I’ve wanted to spend time with you like this again, peacefully.”

Placing the half-eaten skewer on his lap, Subaru practically squeezed the words out of his throat.

Wiping his flowing tears with a sleeve, the sound of him stifling his running nose echoed inside the silent tent.

For a while, all that was produced in the tent was the awkward noise, but—

Rem: "…I don't understand what you're saying."

Out of the blue, Rem spoke in a voice that sounded like a brief sigh.

Rubbing away his tears, Subaru held his breath. He also embraced the feeling of embarrassment, thinking Rem's hardened, icy tone to be a just reaction.

A man she did not know, who had an unlikable scent drifting around him to boot, was bawling his eyes out in front of her. No one would look at him and not think of him as suspicious in that case.

He had damaged Rem's trust yet again. This time, it was a fatal, irreparable…

Rem: "But, I don't think I would laugh at you while you weep. I do find it… eerie, but not to the point of it being disgusting."

Subaru: "—Eh?"

Subaru widened his eyes, lifting his face at the unexpected words.

In front of him, Rem caressed Louis's head on her lap, her eyes continuing to be turned away from him, her lips trembling as if she was carefully choosing her words.

Rem: "…That's all. Finish your meal quickly. I'm tired… for today."

Subaru: "—ah,"

Rem said quickly with her eyes closed, and Subaru's reaction was belayed as he was momentarily confused about what she was referring to. However, when he realized she had been talking about the half-eaten skewer on his lap, he hurriedly chomped down on it.

Subaru: "Ri-Right. Yeah, it's tasty. Salty and tasty."

Rem: "It's salty because of your tears… My meal doesn't feel delicious because of your body odor. It's unfair."

Subaru: "That's… uhh, I will think of a remedial plan, yes."

Rem’s manner of speaking was chilly, and sharp.

Yet, she hadn’t told him to go away, nor had she told him she didn’t want to eat together. Then all that was left was for Subaru to come up with a different plan.

Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to keep this leisurely time going.

Subaru: “…But, if you’re going to talk about it being “unfair”, then I’ve got something I want to say too.”

Rem: “Something you want to say? What is it? If it’s about your finger…”

Subaru: “—About her. About that girl who’s sleeping all fine and dandy on your lap.”

Subaru jerked a finger at Louis and frowned as she enjoyed her lap pillow from Rem. Seeing that, Rem narrowed her eyes, as if she were saying “There you go again.”

However, Subaru was trying to convey a different point to what he had repeated up till now.

Subaru: “Rem, you keep mentioning my body odor… I don’t really like the way you’ve been putting it mind you, but she must smell like me too. Yet you’re ignoring that?”

The lingering scent of the Witch grew stronger each time he Returned by Death.

But, if that was something that came to having some affinity with the Witch—in it being related to the Witch Factors—then naturally the Sin Archbishop Louis should possess the same stench wafting off her.

Thinking back to Rem’s rage-filled reaction to those of the Witch Cult, that should have been a certainty…

Rem: “…? What are you talking about? Don’t lump this girl together with you.”

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Rem: "You know, she doesn't smell anything like you. Please don't act so desperate, spouting out such ridiculous things."

However, the response Rem gave to Subaru's previous words was rather unexpected.

He reflexively stared back at Rem, but he couldn't see anything strange about her expression. She did not seem to be lying, nor did it seem like she was trying to deceive Subaru.

Meaning that she truly did not sense the lingering scent of the Witch, the miasma, from Louis.

Subaru: "It couldn't be that she can mask her miasma, right? No way, but for what purpose?"

From all that he'd experienced until now, there'd only been a scarce few who could sense the miasma, otherwise known as the lingering scent of the Witch. Rem aside, who had reacted the most to it, a severely limited number of people had shown a reaction to it, such as Beatrice and Ryuzu.

And besides, he didn't think that Witch Cultists even thought of concealing that sort of stuff.

Those people were Apostles of Treason who infringed on the world as if they owned the damn place. And yet…

Rem: "Is that quite enough? If you're done eating, I'd like to get ready for bed soon, since it looks like this girl wants to hit the hay too…"

Subaru: "Oh, Uhm… Well, are you for sure about what you said before?"

Rem: "How insolent."

Rem flat out shut Subaru's question down.

However, it looked like her attitude was proving all the more that what she was feeling was no lie.

Subaru: "…You can't sense any miasma from Louis?"

Subaru didn't really know what significance that had.

Though, all he felt a horrible sensation, like something awfully eerie was going on, like something that would bode poorly for him.

Rem: "Sorry, but could you put your bowl away? I'll prepare the beds."

Subaru: "Oh, yeah, sure. Like, I'm not gonna get up to no good, so no need to worry."

Rem: "—. That makes me all the more uneasy."

With her saying that rather stiffly, Subaru dejectedly slinked out of the tent to put away the bowl housing the skewer he'd just finished eating.

Campfire lights were visible in the dead of the night, dotted around various places of the encampment. No one from Subaru's group had been ordered to do so, but there would likely be some people keeping watch as the night went by.

Preparing for war was tough, albeit he only knew about this from manga and games.

Subaru: "…I'd like to get away from here as soon as possible."

Todd was a nice guy, but even so, it didn't look like Subaru was ever going to get used to the atmosphere of the battlefield.

He needed to get out of here as soon as possible and find a way to meet back up with Emilia and the others.

That was what Subaru decided. And as he firmly clutched his bowl, he noticed something.

Subaru: "…Huh, my fingers aren't hurting. No way, did the medicine already do its trick?"

He'd clutched the bowl tightly with the fingers of his left hand without even realizing. He looked down at them, surprised at how effective the medicine was.

They still felt uncomfortable. But the numbing heat he felt going through them served as proof that his left hand was starting to work properly.

Subaru: "He chatted so much crap about Healing Magic, but doesn't medicine also more than do the trick…"

Subaru gave his left hand a small shake as he thought back on what Todd had said, before continuing on his way.

He had so many things that he needed to think about. Regarding Rem, Louis and himself.

Though there were so many, he would improve each one; one by one.

4

???: "…"

A lone silhouette watched Subaru as he left the tent and slowly walked off.

The man, who had an eyepatch covering one of his eyes, narrowed his remaining eye and let out a tch towards the back of the figure who was walking away all lackadaisical.

And then…

???: "He has the damn nerve to strut around like that. Such bullshit."

Those words he muttered.

Chapter 8: Name

1

???: “Subaru, you sure are suuuch a busy bee, aren’t you?”

Subaru: “Huh, really?”

Subaru’s nostrils puffed out as he was praised by the silver bell-like voice.

He’d just finished wringing out a cloth that he’d pulled out from a bucket of water, enthusiastically wiping the floor with it, busy cleaning the room they used for guests, when Emilia, the one the voice belonged to, popped in.

She gave him a casual nod as she ran her fingers through her long silver hair,

Emilia: “Yeah. It’s like, you’ve only just recovered, and you’ve already started working. Even though it’s just after all that ruckus with those witchbeasts. It really caught me off guard.”

Subaru: “Hehe, it’s nothing really… Wait, what?! Could it be that you’re lecturing me, telling me that those who are recovering mustn’t over do it?!”

Emilia: “Huh, that wasn’t my intention… But now that you mention it, I guess so. We can’t be having this, Subaru. You need to rest some more.”

Subaru: “Ghaa, I shot myself in the foot.”

Subaru rued how he’d read too much into it, thinking it would have been better if he’d just taken her compliment in stride.

However, a third voice came chiming in from Emilia’s shoulder, before Subaru could reflect on it. And there, a gray kitten squirmed out from amidst Emilia’s silver hair.

Puck: “Fufufu, took you long enough, Subaru. Here was I, thinking that if I allowed Lia to give you some honest praise, you’d try and read between the lines, and fall in way too deep. Just as I had intended.”

Subaru: “Puck, you little… What’s with these devious tricks! The heck do you want?!”

Puck: “Heh, it’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m a fickle cat spirit, that’s the reason. My nature is a mischievous one, leading the hearts of people astray with the help of my cuteness and furriness… Meowmeowmeow”

Emilia: “Jeez, come on Puck, you’re saying strange stuff again. Quit putting Subaru on the spot.”

The little cat spirit had quite the dastardly look on his face, yet defeated he was when Emilia pinched him by the ear halfway through confessing his wicked deeds. She apologized to Subaru, Puck still dangling from her hand by the ear.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, I’d just taken a break from studying, and was taking a stroll around the mansion, when Puck said he’d found you, so I…”

Subaru: “Oh, no, it’s completely fine. As far as I’m concerned, I want to spend as many seconds of the day as possible with you, Emilia-tan. I’ve gotta be thanking Puck here, for having devised that.”

Emilia: “Is that so? I don’t really get you, but I’m glad you’re not angry, what a relief.”

Subaru: “So she didn’t get me! Even though I told it to her straight, to the point it was embarrassing?!”

Abandoning the smile on her face, Emilia furrowed her shapely brows as she listened to Subaru complaining, before then tilting her head in confusion.

Though what he had expressed had been out of relative fondness, sadly, it didn’t look like it had gotten through properly to Emilia.

So, he had no choice but to get even more direct, if he wanted to go further.

Subaru: “Wanting to choose the situation, the mood, and the right day to tell her, it’s all part of a young man’s disposition…”

Puck: “I’d recommend nighttime, otherwise if I’m up, I’d definitely get in the way.”

Subaru: “You sure are showing your upstanding paternal side more and more, ain’tcha.”

It was pretty common for the fathers in this generation to forbid their daughters from having relationships, however, he could clearly tell Puck was the same just by looking at him, fluffball from a different world or not.

As he looked at Puck reproachfully, the cat spirit puffed his chest out, still on Emilia’s shoulder.

Puck: “Of course, considering how cute Lia is, the sheer amount of flies hovering approaching her gets way over the top. There’d be no end to them if I don’t work hard to brush them away, no?”

Subaru: “Oh no, I just thought it’d be handy to pick out one of those flies here ahead of time.”

Puck: “I’ll pass on any flies with such ugly-looking eyes. Besides, it’d be weird for me to let any flies get close to Lia. I’ll search for a proper suitor for Lia, even if it takes me nigh a thousand years.”

Subaru: “That scale’s on the mythical level!”

Though it took the concept of being a doting father way too far, the problem remained that, considering they were a duo of half-elf and spirit, there was a chance they’d seriously end up waiting nigh a thousand years.

Unfortunately, Subaru was a human, so he couldn’t hold a candle to that order of magnitude.

Subaru: “I guess I could at most reach 120 if I really tried hard…”

Emilia: “…? What do you mean?”

Subaru: “Oh, I was talking about my lifespan.”

Emilia: “Your lifespan… Quit it Subaru, that’s weird. You’re still a boy, it’s way too early to worry about these things.”

Subaru: “Well, depends how you look at it…”

Emilia placed a hand over her mouth, stifling a giggle, and then laughed as if she’d heard a joke of the highest quality.

He responded back to her smile with a strained one, however, the man in him was happy to see the girl who was always on his mind smiling. Things were complicated, but first things first, he needed her to recognize this.

Subaru: “At least I won’t need to step into the ring, so long as they keep treating me like a kid.”

Puck: “Pretty good attitude to have, huh, Subaru. Right, the first thing you gotta do is stand on your own two feet as an adult. If you can’t do that, I won’t let you set foot into my house.”

Emilia: “Isn’t this Roswaal’s mansion? What’s this about not letting him set foot there?”

Emilia posed her questions to Puck, who’d listened to Subaru’s quiet determination with his short arms folded.

With that all said and done, Subaru was not discouraged, even after hearing what Puck’d said. If what needed to be done had been decided, then all that was left for him was to make a beeline straight towards his goal.

Subaru: “Heh, look at me, Puck. You see, I’m the sort who has no qualms doing the same thing over and over again day in and day out. Like levelling up for a game!”

Puck: “Puahaha, foolish human. In that case, prove to me that you’re not just a rookie who’s all talk. I shall be waiting with the Princess in the innermost part of the castle. Let us go, Princess!”

Emilia: “Do you mean me? Hmph, but I’m aiming to be a King, not a Princess.”

As Subaru and Puck got worked up without caring about anyone around them, Emilia flashed Subaru a smile as the latter was busy wringing his cloth dry. All this, while dealing with the pair’s contrasting attitudes.

Emilia: “Even so, do your best at your work. If you give it your all, then surely someone will be there to see it.”

Subaru: “But I’d like it to be Emilia-tan, rather than some randomer…”

Emilia: “Yeah, yeah, I get that. I can’t watch over you all the time, but I’ll drop in every so often. Besides…”

Emilia lowered her brows slightly, and paused mid-sentence. Then, she turned towards Subaru, as he waited for her to continue, a charming smile appearing on her face,

Emilia: “You’re the one who sees your hard work the most, no? That’s why you’ve gotta give it your all, so that you don’t let yourself down.”

And so, while hitting the nail right on the head of what it meant to put effort in, she made Subaru fall in love with her anew.

2

Subaru: “Man, I just remembered that time I fell in love with Emilia again… Still, it’s getting tough.”

Subaru looked around the messy tent with a scratch of his head.

He’d found himself taken to an encampment of soldiers from the Vollachian Empire; there, he’d been put to work doing odd jobs, while waiting for the supply convoy headed to the village to come.

Subaru was devoting himself to his “He who does not work, shall not eat” mantra for Rem’s sake, who couldn’t move, as well as the freeloading Louis. Thus, he held no shred of hesitation in helping

Todd and the other Imperials, since they'd provided him food and shelter, and had treated their injuries as well.

However…

Subaru: "Gotta gear myself up, no matter what's going on."

Subaru muttered those words as he packed the content of their stockpiles, now scattered all over the ground, back into their sacks.

Of course, regardless of how disorderly and violent these Imperials were, there was no way they were storing the items that would be supporting their front-lines in such a "whatever works", unorganized manner.

After all, Subaru had tidied the stockpiles within this tent the day before with great effort. The reason why it was in such a mess was but one.

Subaru: "I'm being harassed by a certain mean-spirited someone…"

Louis: "Ahh."

Subaru: "Oh, I guess there's also the chance you snuck out and caused this mess during the night. Are you feeling like revealing your vile, true nature, Sin Archbishop?"

Louis: "Uuh?"

He glared at Louis as he tidied up the stuff scattered about, her peering at his hand meanwhile.

However, Louis merely offered a vague reply to Subaru's question, biting on her own finger. It looked like she still had no intention of revealing her true nature.

It sure would come in handy for him if she just kept it hidden away forever.

Subaru: "…I have no idea what to think about what Rem told me yesterday."

This morning as well, Louis had tottered along with Subaru from the moment he woke up.

The grim look he'd gotten from Rem, at the time they split up for her legs' rehab, flashed through his mind. However it was unreasonable, considering Subaru was the one who found being followed like this bothersome.

In any case, another reason had been added as to why Subaru could barely handle her, compared to the previous day. And that was because of the information Rem had told him—the testimony that she couldn't sense the lingering scent of the Witch coming from Louis.

Subaru: "…"

Although Subaru hadn't given it much thought thus far, it was pretty unlikely that the lingering scent of the Witch was something only he had.

In fact, he felt like Rem had used those words before when facing Witch Cultists. She must have reacted like that against Petelgeuse, along with the Witch Cultists that man led.

In that respect, the fact that Subaru's miasma grew stronger each time he Returned by Death seemed like something strange even from Rem's point of view, back when she had been on good terms with him.

Subaru: "The power of my miasma has come in handy from time to time… Like against the Ulgarm and the White Whale. But, in the end, it's basically just something that brings me way too many misfortunes."

Even if there had been times where his miasma had come in handy, currently, it served merely as a reason to attract Rem's ire. Thus, his impression towards it was at its absolute lowest.

And, no matter how much he tried to think about it…

Subaru: "There's no damn way that the people in the Witch Cult… And the Sin Archbishops don't have something to do with the miasma."

That was the conclusion Subaru had reached.

Given that he did not know anything about the causes of the miasma, or anything about its finer details, he could only describe it as a theory on the table. Even so, it was something he found difficult to speak about.

The link between the Sin Archbishops and the Witch was plain and clear. The Witch Cultists were quintessentially the manifestation of evil.

Nevertheless…

Subaru: "As paradoxical as it may seem, can we really think that those who don't emit miasma aren't related to the Witch Cult? Like, when we've got this girl right in front of me, are we for real?"

Louis: "Awooh?"

Standing by Subaru's side, as he brooded about the issue, Louis merely groaned with a blank look on her face.

Letting out a sigh, Subaru lifted himself up and began to tidy up the tent.

The tools he'd placed in an upright position had been knocked over, and the parcels he'd arranged in a row had been opened, the stuff inside scattered everywhere.

It was exactly like something a child would do.

Subaru: "Well, I guess this harassment must be something that's not out of the ordinary…"

The reason why the tents he'd tidied up were in a state of disarray was not because of Louis sneaking off. It was more likely that someone else in the encampment was the one harrying him and interfering.

Obviously, since he was in an Imperial encampment, he'd come into contact with people other than Todd. And in most cases, he could hardly call the attitudes they had towards him amicable.

In that respect, it went as Todd had said; he was the odd one out.

Subaru: “That said, it’s still way better than getting socked all of a sudden, or being forced to eat a shoe.”

He couldn’t really deny that his standards in regards to happiness and normalcy had taken a hit, were he to say it out loud. But, the fact remained that it was safe to say that things were easier on account of not being treated to that painful of a welcome.

Though Subaru hated to admit it, he was well used to being shunned, or being disliked.

Like, it wasn’t as if he’d flubbed the battle of his debut during High School so gaudily, and gotten cut off from everyone for nearly two years and all. He’d never been bullied per se, but he was a pro at dealing with the mood around him being acrid.

Thinking about it, his classmates back in High School must have been pretty good people.

Even if they’d treat Subaru like he wasn’t there, it didn’t seem to him like they had harassed him, nor had they found pleasure in making him suffer.

Subaru: “I hope life’s worked out well for all you kind-hearted people out there on the other side. It would be nice if people like Inahata-kun, who went out of his way to give me those flyers, made it big.”

Subaru finished tidying up the tent quicker than he had the previous day, and to the same degree of quality, while recalling the vague memories of this classmate, his face a blur.

That said, it was like the hole had been filled, and he had to re-dig it again. So, the net of the work he had done today had swung into the negative.

Subaru wanted to use those words Emilia had told him before, that someone would see his hard work, or at least, he himself would. He wanted to use them as a prop as well. However.

Subaru: “Not like I can gear myself up if you’re the only one watching me right now. My mood would be a lot different if Rem was the one watching, but…”

Louis: “Ooh, uwaa”

Louis today wasn’t getting in the way of Subaru’s work for now, as if she’d learned from him being angry. While thankful for that, Subaru headed outside, off to the next tent…

Subaru: “…Whoa?!”

He caught his foot on something just as left the tent, and fell over in a heap.

He reflexively pushed his hands against the ground, however, his right hand aside, his left still ached a bit. Even though it was healing up, the after-effects that Rem had left behind had yet to heal completely.

Hence, while groaning in pain, Subaru looked behind him,

???: “Heya, you pussy. What’re you doin’ groveling down on the ground?”

Subaru: “You’re…”

Subaru widened his eyes in surprise. Standing before him, right by the entrance of the tent, was a vulgar-looking man.

He wore an eyepatch over his right eye, had a stubbled face, and his appearance was the epitome of roughness. And to boot, he was the guy who’d made Subaru eat his shoe, in this camp.

If he recalled correctly, Todd had said his name was…

Subaru: “He said it was Jamal, ri… Ghaaa?!”

Jamal: “That’s Jamal-san to you. You, along with those women who keep you company, y'all got no manners, huh. HEY."

The instant he'd deemed that Subaru hadn't been addressing him using "san", the man, Jamal, immediately sprung into action.

Jamal stepped on the fingers of Subaru's left hand, which were still wrapped up in bandages and fitted with their brace, and pushed his heel down as he lay on the floor.

The pain in his fingers returned to him once again as they were grated back and forth. Yet, Subaru endured it, stifling a scream that had been building inside his throat.

Louis: "Awuuu!"

Jamal: "Huh?"

As she let out a yell, Louis clung to Jamal's leg as he stomped on Subaru's hand. She didn't weigh much, and with how built Jamal was, he did not budge an inch.

And just like that, he grabbed Louis by her long hair and tore her off him by force.

Subaru: "Hey, she's just a child!"

Seeing what was happening, Subaru flew into a rage and blurted that out without thinking.

Jamal frowned unpleasantly upon hearing his complaint. He firmly pulled Louis up by her hair, causing her to let out a scream.

Jamal: "Who gives a fuck if she's just a kid? From what I've heard more or less, haven't you been treating this kid awfully coldly? What's with changing your mind all of a sudden?"

Subaru: "It's not like tha… You're going to be the one who'll end up regretting it, if you provoke her too much."

Jamal: "How the fuck do you have the gall to say that. Make up some better excuse."

Jamal snorted, swung his arm and threw Louis down to the ground. The fallen Louis tugged at her hair which had previously been seized, clutched her head and glared at Jamal with tears in her eyes, letting out an "Uuuh".

In all honesty, there was always the chance that Jamal's act of violence could serve as the trigger that would turn Louis back to how she was previously. It wasn't like the desperate words that Subaru had blurted out were completely ad hoc.

Luckily enough, it didn't look like Louis' pain and anger would serve to re-awaken her original personality. It was hard to judge for whom it was a blessing though.

Jamal: "What an ill-mannered brat. No, it ain't just the damn brat. I don't like you, nor the other girl, not a single one of you!"

Subaru: "Gwhooa!"

As he was talking, Jamal grew angry and kicked the side of Subaru's face. The unexpected blow caused Subaru's mouth to open, the violent force cracking a tooth. Blood began to drip from his mouth. The moment the smell and taste of iron spread across his tongue, Subaru looked up at Jamal.

Subaru: "Ngghh… I guess we can say Todd-san is verifying my identity, or rather you've gotten permission to spend time here…"

Jamal: "Hmph, "Todd-san", huh. He's quite fond of you, ain't he? That your last ray of hope?"

Subaru: "…"

Jamal: "Sorry, but I outrank that guy. I listened to his request as a favor, but there's no reason I gotta comply."

Speaking in a rough voice, Jamal once again stepped on Subaru. Subaru curled up at once to protect his head, but this time a kick was thrust into his abdomen. The tip of Jamal's boot caused Subaru's stomach to churn and he groaned from the impact, but the relentless kicking went on.

Jamal: “First, that bitch of yours hurt two of my men. Those who can’t be useful anymore have to be sent back. Such bad luck. And instead of getting something to make up for it… that bastard Todd found something extra.”

Subaru: “…tch.”

Jamal: “If you hadn’t been carrying that knife, I would’ve torn you apart limb from limb on the spot. It’s tough to be a soldier, ain’t it?”

His persistent kicking and remarks struck a nerve. Even without looking up to meet Jamal’s one-eyed glare, his opponent’s aim was clear.

Jamal’s aim was not to hurt Subaru. It was beyond that.

Mostly, his goal was to rile Subaru up and provoke him into counterattacking, and he was likely being rude for that purpose too.

Jamal said he didn’t have to listen to Todd’s words, but the fact he couldn’t completely disregard them could be inferred from their interaction the first time Jamal dealt him a blow with his foot. That’s why Jamal wanted a reason. A reason to kill Subaru.

Not only that, but also a reason to carry out retaliation against Rem. Because of that, Subaru wouldn’t let himself be provoked. As long as Jamal didn’t turn his petty spite towards Rem, whether Subaru’s left-hand fingers were broken again or his remaining fingers were broken, it would be Subaru’s victory. For that reason, he would endure endure endure, endure—

???: “…Oi, what’re you doing over there?”

Jamal: “Tch.”

And like that, in the midst of Subaru continuing to endure, a particular voice came flying out to Jamal. At that moment, Jamal clicked his tongue and drew back his foot, and slowly backed off. Thereupon, with noisy footsteps came along an orange haired youth.

Todd: “Even though no one has any business here, when I heard something coming from over here I expected it had to be you.”

Jamal: “If it isn’t Todd. Aren’t you awfully overprotective. Have you really taken such a liking to that imperial dagger? So you’ll fawn over this coward until he sells it, huh.”

Todd: “…Jamal.”

Squinting his eye, Jamal scowled at Todd. Between the two of them a dangerous air flowed, but that tension was cut by Jamal saying “I’ll stop.”

The one who single-handedly cleared the air was Jamal, who until just then had been kicking Subaru and looking down on him,

Jamal: “If you’ve learned your lesson, be careful not to get underfoot outside the range of my eye. If you fall over again like you did just now, who knows what will happen? Hahahahaha!”

Like that, without any concern for the show of extraordinary violence toward Subaru, he passed by Todd’s side and left. Subaru also had no words to stop him. If he were to bring attention to his injuries here, it would only provoke Jamal the same way.

As soon as Jamal’s back vanished from sight, Subaru lifted his body off the ground.

Subaru: “Ahh, shit… ow… That bastard, such a girly-lookin’ guy has no right to be so persistent. What he did was downright malicious…”

He made a show of being full of resentment towards Rem, but basically, he just had a nasty personality. In the first place, he said Rem attacked him at the start, but wouldn’t that be because he provoked Rem who was already in a high-stress situation?

Certainly, there was the possibility that because she had no memories Rem had jumped to the wrong conclusion when a hand reached out to her.

Subaru: “Well, Rem doesn’t know anything, so it can’t be helped.”

While passing kind judgment on Rem, Subaru spit out some of the blood mixed with saliva in his mouth, and slowly stood up on the spot.

Todd: “You alright? Getting mixed up with Jamal was bad luck, wasn’t it.”

To Subaru, who was in shaky condition, Todd frowned when greeting him. Had he not arrived, Jamal’s assault would still be ongoing.

Subaru was grateful for that interruption. But, leaving that aside—

Subaru: “I’m fine. More importantly, Rem…”

Todd: “If you’re talking about that young girl, she’s helping out with the cooking. It’s a task you can do sitting down. Jamal also won’t do anything in public view… surely.”

Todd’s words lacked conclusive proof, so Subaru couldn’t be reassured. Wiping blood from his mouth, Subaru looked at his own left hand. The brace had slipped off and the bandages had come undone. His fingers, which should have been left to heal for a while, began to turn an unpleasant color again.

Todd: “Ahh… If that’s how it is, guess I have to take care of you again. Seriously, that Jamal.”

Subaru: “…That guy, what kind of man is he?”

Todd: “Jamal? He became a soldier at the same time as me, and he’s the most successful. He’s from a lower noble family, so promotion to General Third-Class isn’t just a dream as well… Ah, do you know what General Third-Class means?”

Subaru: “Nope, sure don’t. Is it a rank?”

When Subaru shook his head, Todd nodded and said “I see”, and put up his fingers.

According to his explanation, in the Imperial Army of Vollachia being called General was apparently part of their ranking system.

Private, Private First-Class, General Third-Class, General Second-Class and above that—

Todd: "When it comes to Generals of the First-Class, there are only nine people in the Empire who are extraordinary. The military personnel who serve the Emperor directly are called the Nine Divine Generals. Well, if you make it that far, it's no longer a matter of lineage or achievement."

Subaru: "Is it talent?"

Todd: "Yeah, that's how it is. That's why General Third-Class is the highest ordinary people like us can aim for."

Listening to the story of the not miserable Todd, Subaru thought back on the behavior of Jamal from before.

General seemed to be a position that served the same function as an officer in the military, but Jamal hardly seemed to have that capacity. He was self-centered and his empathy was low by nature. It was easy to understand that he'd be the incompetent type of superior officer.

Subaru: "On the battlefield, they say quite a few soldiers die because they were hit from behind by a stray arrow. Tell that guy from your own mouth would you?"

Todd: "That's an exaggeration. Anyway, shall we get your medical treatment?"

Subaru: "Can I ask a favor? …Before that, I'd like to see Rem's face."

Todd: "My my, aren't you deeply in love… That poor young girl."

Despite the pain in his fingers, confirming Rem's safety was top priority. Todd shrugged his shoulders at Subaru's attitude and drew his attention towards Louis, who was curled up in a ball in front of the tent.

She wrapped the hair Jamal had pulled around her fingers and growled low like a beast.

Todd: “Your deceptive face doesn’t suit your nature. I like strong children with fighting spirit.”

Louis: “Aah—! Ooh, aah—!”

Turning towards Todd’s laughter, Louis howled as if in response.

“If you like her, you can take her” was on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t want that to reach Rem’s ears and have her getting angry again, so Subaru kept his mouth shut.

3

Rem: “—That stench, have you gotten injured again?”

Subaru: “Oh… you knew?”

Rem: “I know. Since the child is watching, please keep in mind the behavior we spoke about.”

Saying that, as they gathered around the same table for lunchtime, Rem warned him.

Although there was a part of that matter he couldn’t agree to, there was no merit in going against her so he nodded his assent. At Subaru’s side, Louis mimicked him and nodded.

Subaru had been on the receiving end of Jamal’s vicious bullying and Todd’s kind offer of help after. Once Rem’s safety had been confirmed, Subaru accepted treatment at the medical tent.

—The person in charge of the medical tent had been shocked to see Subaru come again, but after that was taken care of, he finished up cleaning another tent, and they came together for lunch.

Since lunch at the encampment was rationed, a suitable amount was gathered from what had been made by the people at the distribution station, and the clean up system assigned sequentially.

With Rem helping to prepare and serve the meal, and since they were considered outsiders, Subaru’s group held back until the end and mostly ate what looked like leftovers.

Subaru: “Well, this can’t be called living in luxury. Eating as much as you can would be most satisfactory.”

Said Subaru, as he brought his and Rem’s portions and placed them on the small table. Louis too, cheekily set down her own portion in the same way as Subaru.

Like that, each of the three reluctantly sat down at the table to eat a somewhat late lunch.

Subaru: “How were you up till now? You didn’t run into any kind of trouble?”

Rem: “There was nothing in particular. I had to take care with my legs, so… The only thing I helped with was a bit of cooking. Besides, I’m helping while being taught.”

Subaru: “While being taught… Did your body remember how to do that sort of thing?”

Rem: “…”

In response to Subaru’s urgent question, Rem’s pale blue eyes narrowed and her lips pursed.

Subaru panicked as to whether he had put too much force into that reaction, but Rem immediately let out a sigh and said,

Rem: “…If I said I didn’t hope for that, I’d be lying.”

Subaru: “Rem…”

Rem: “I thought if I tried doing this and that, maybe there would be things my hands are familiar with. But, that would be too convenient right?”

Quietly looking down at her own hands, Rem murmured as if ashamed of her own foolishness.

But who would deride Rem’s hopes as foolish? In a situation of being unable to remember the parts that make up oneself, Rem's attitude of clinging onto a solution, who could tell her that?

Rem: "…Why are you making such a bitter face?"

Subaru: "Why you ask, that's…"

Rem: "—. You knew me before. I understand that. There's no reason to doubt it."

Fixing her gaze on Subaru who had cast down his eyes, Rem surprised him by saying that.

Until now, Rem had only expressed negative opinions of Subaru, but for the first time she made something of a concession.

Understanding that, hope sprouted in Subaru's chest.

However—

Rem: "But no matter how many times you call me Rem, I cannot accept that it is my name. I wonder what that even means."

Louis: "Aaah…"

Rem: "If, by some chance, this child spoke to me, maybe it would be different but,"

While saying that, Rem looked happy as she stroked Louis' hair. Being gently patted, Louis was absorbed in finishing up her own portion which lay under her nose.

Despite her carefree attitude, and unfortunately, even if she had a speck of self-consciousness, she would not be able to talk about Rem with her own mouth. Even supposing she was able to speak, Subaru would not let her. No matter what, Subaru's unending hostility would make it so.

Todd: "What the heck, you're scowling. You shouldn't be so gloomy at the dinner table."

Taking a seat at the dinner table of these three people, Todd cut in with a friendly tone.

An uneasy silence fell as a result of his intrusion. Relieved by the sudden change in atmosphere, Subaru looked at the man seated next to him, letting out a “Todd-san, huh”. After the aforementioned incident with Jamal, Subaru felt he was a nice guy for having saved him.

Subaru: “Thanks for looking out for me earlier, but shouldn’t you eat with your friends?”

Todd: “Hmm? Well, after socializing with the same guys for such a long time, not eating together for a day or two won’t change our relationship much. I’d rather gain influence with you lot.”

Subaru: “Even if you did, we don’t have much to offer.”

Todd: “That’s the idea of yield, or repaying a debt after achieving success. Think of it as in up-front investment.”

Though Todd spoke lightly, he changed the atmosphere whether he had been meaning to or not. And then, Todd said “At any rate”, and suddenly put his arm around Subaru’s shoulder.

As Subaru immediately drew back in surprise, he leaned in close to Subaru’s ear,

Todd: “Compared to yesterday, it looks like you can talk properly. Were you able to make up?”

Subaru: “Make up… I wonder. I want to think my sincerity was able to reach her a little but…”

Rem: “—. I can hear you. If you think you can speak freely without reserve you are mistaken.”

Louis: “Oooh!”

With a sharp look, Rem expressed her displeasure with the two men’s conversation. It looked like Louis was cooperating with her as she feigned innocence, perhaps because she intended to make Rem her ally. The synergistic effect of Rem's cold answer and her acceptance of Louis made Subaru's chest heavier.

It seemed that it was transmitted to Todd with his arm wrapped around Subaru, "Hey now," he said, bringing his arm around to tap Subaru's shoulder…

Todd: "This is depressing. At least you two are at a place and distance where you can speak. That alone would be much better than me."

Subaru: "Ah, come to think of it, you did mention you're separated from your fiancée."

Todd: "Right, my fiancée is living in the Imperial Capital. It's true that I have to complete this mission, but the time we've been separated is too long to begin with. Why oh why, do I have to be so lonely and suffer? Y'know?"

Subaru: "Is that loneliness the reason you're keeping us company?"

Todd: "That's right. So, let me do that as much as possible. It's worth the trouble."

It might be because he didn't let things get out of hand here, but on the inside Subaru was grateful for Todd's concern. It would be tactless to thank him directly though. He also benefited from the state of affairs. In that manner, the four of them went ahead with their meal but—

Subaru: "Actually, we were told our group could catch a ride in the vehicle of the supply team, but how long is Todd's group likely to stay on this mission?"

Todd: "Didn't I say? Until we find the people of Shudraq hidden in the forest… If we don't find them, we could be stuck here for years. It's not easy to serve the palace."

Subaru: "The people of Shudraq…"

Picking up his wooden spoon with a bitter face, Todd answered Subaru's pondering.

People of Shudraq—At first, when Todd told him at the encampment, Subaru guessed it was what the masked man he met in the woods was called. Thanks to him giving Subaru the knife, he owed him a debt of gratitude. So he didn't tell Todd about his existence, but now that seemed ungrateful.

In terms of gratitude, Todd had helped just as much as the masked man.

Then, what was the reason honoring his debt to the masked man over Todd?

Subaru: "If Todd's group finds those people of Shudraq, what will you do? You set up an encampment like this, so do you intend to… fight them?"

"…"

As best he could, Subaru tried to pose his query in an unconcerned manner. However, a sense of urgency he couldn't hide remained in his voice.

In fact, though she didn't go into the topic, Rem's face expressed her reaction to what he said. Even if she wasn't paying attention, there's a reaction to avoiding the word 'fight'.

And when asked, Todd closed his eyes to Subaru's words,

Todd: "Nah, it seems the Generals don't want to fight if at all possible. I don't know the details, but it seems the people of Shudraq are a very powerful tribe. It's certain that we would have a very tough battle if we fought, so the objective this time is negotiations."

Subaru: "Negotiations? What would you negotiate about with a forest tribe?"

Todd: "Don't ask an underling like me so many questions okay?! … I'm not fully in-the-know, but the Imperial Capital or even His Excellency the Emperor himself wants them as a vassal tribe of sorts, probably."

Subaru: “Do the people of Shudraq not obey the Emperor of Vollachia?”

Todd: “There are those who don’t. That’s just the Vollachian way.”

Laughing like a stereotypical soldier, Subaru could only raise his eyebrows in surprise at Todd’s reply. He quietly muttered to himself “Long Live Vollachia” and decided to leave the conversation at that. If he were to believe Todd’s words, the Imperial Army wanted to avoid conflict with the people of Shudraq as well. If that were the case, Subaru could avoid unnecessary bloodshed and conflict between the two groups if he were to offer information.

Even so, Subaru did not have information of much value and if he were to explain why he had hidden this information in the first place, he would have to explain why he had lied about his background.

Subaru: “Ugh, what a dilemma. Can’t get everything I want can I…”

Rem: “…You know, your brows are always furrowed whenever I look at you. I cannot say that you have a very friendly looking face, so shouldn’t you at least try smiling to counteract that?”

Subaru: “That’s some harsh advice…! So if I were to speak with you with a cheery face, would you talk to me in a more kind and cheery manner too?”

Rem: “haaah?”

Rem’s genuinely baffled response hurt Subaru to his core. Seeing Subaru attempt to mask his dismay with a trembling smile, Todd laughed.

Todd: “Well, the journey won’t start if you don’t take the first step. I’ll watch your oh-so-noble efforts, so don’t worry about it.”

Subaru: “Thanks Todd… So what’s the real reason you can’t meet your fiancée?”

Todd: “Hahaha, that’s right, suffer suffer.”

Subaru: “Damn it all!”

Was he getting consoled or teased?

Either way, it didn’t change the fact that it was this attitude of Todd’s that saved Subaru. There was no doubt that this crisis would be worse if not for him. That was why the least Subaru could do was to wish them a speedy completion of their mission.

Subaru: “How long is it actually going to take to clear the forest?”

Todd: “Once the other camps are set up, the plan’s to go all in. The jungle’s big and dense though, so the ground we can cover in a day isn’t much…”

Subaru: “I see. Well, I guess you can’t just speed your way through the forest. You never know what’s inside it, and there’s huge witchbeasts lurking about inside it and all.”

The masked man Subaru suspected to be a member of the people of Shudraq; the hunter who also had a chance to be a member of the tribe; the area in which the massive snake witchbeast had appeared while Subaru was fighting the hunter was full of Rem’s traps as well.

Subaru could easily guess how much trouble Todd’s group were going to have, going through that jungle. Even if he couldn’t explain the context surrounding them, he should at least tell Todd about Rem’s traps. He didn’t want any unnecessary setbacks to—

Todd: “—witchbeasts?”

Todd, who was drinking water while Subaru was lost in thought, widened his eyes in surprise. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he stared at Subaru with a startled expression.

Failing to understand why Todd was so surprised, Subaru could only stare back with a puzzled expression.

Todd: “Just now, you said witchbeast right? You’re saying there’s a witchbeast in that forest?”

Subaru: “Uh, well, yeah, I did say that but… Did I say something weird?”

Todd: “Of course you did. You don’t just run into a witchbeast everyday do ya? Now it’s a different story if you’re talking about the witchbeast Kingdom of Lugunica, but they don’t appear anywhere within Vollachia’s borders.”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “This isn’t a joke right? Right miss?”

Subaru was speechless and could only stay perplexed at Todd’s increasingly serious tone. Todd switched targets to Rem.

Finding herself to be the subject of questioning, Rem answered Todd with a simple “Yes”.

Todd: “Answer me miss. Did you see a witchbeast too? In the Buddheim Jungle?”

Rem: “The witchbeast, though I am not sure exactly what it was… I can say I definitely saw a large, green creature.”

Todd: “Was there a horn on its head?”

Rem: “A horn? …There was something white and crooked, for sure.”

Upon hearing that reply, a grimacing Todd leapt up. He looked over at Subaru again,

Todd: “What kind of witchbeast was it? What’d it look like?”

Subaru: “A-A snake. A giant snake. About 10 meters. One super giant one.”

Todd: “One, just one is it… Shit, how’re we supposed to know if it’s just one lurking in this massive jungle? But, you don’t seem like you’re lying. The situation’s changed!”

Violently scratching his head, Todd faced away from them, his demeanor completely changed. He started walking off before stopping midway with an audible “Ah”, coming to a realization of some sort. He turned around and returned to Subaru and the others,

Todd: “That was some important information. Things could’ve turned ugly if we didn’t know. You saved us.”

Subaru: “—Uh huh”

Todd proceeded to vigorously pat the still seated Subaru and Rem’s heads. Failing to react in time to the sudden patting, the duo could only look at him in shock. Paying no mind to their bewilderment, Todd turned away once again.

He then started moving towards the people still in the middle of their lunch.

Todd: “Camp Captains, gather up! We’re going to the General! It’s important news!”

He clapped his hands together as he started assembling some people. The sounds of many footsteps could be heard as the camp was whipped up into a frenzy. Todd continued on to a tent at the back – which was probably where war meetings and other such important discussions were held.

The two could only watch on absentmindedly at the intense energy that now took over the camp.

Rem: “…That was quite the reaction. That creature… Is a witchbeast that important? Of course, I know that it is a dangerous being but.”

Subaru: “—. Actually, I might not have been properly acknowledging how dangerous it was.”

Rem: “I see…”

Rem was unconvinced, to say the least, but Subaru himself had yet to fully organize his thoughts in order.

That was how shocking this revelation had been to Subaru.

Subaru: “witchbeasts are……rare here.”

That had been unexpected to put it mildly, but moreover, it had never even crossed his mind.

To Subaru, life in another world and the existence of witchbeasts were concepts inseparable from one another. One could not break this bond no matter how hard they tried. Excluding his first day at the capital, witchbeasts had always been a major factor in the numerous events that unfolded after he was transported here.

The witchbeast scuffle that Meili set in motion starred the Ulgarms, the White Whale that was needed to fulfill Wilheim’s deepest wish, and the Great Rabbit that had tried to devour the Sanctuary.

Though witchbeasts were nowhere to be found in Priestella, the place he went to after – Pleiades Watchtower – could be called without exaggeration, witchbeast headquarters.

Needless to say, the most memorable witchbeast to Subaru would be the Crimson Scorpion.

Subaru: “…I got myself a little down but, anyway… I arrived here with my own assumptions so I never would have thought that witchbeasts were rare.”

He thought for sure that witchbeasts would pop up anywhere in the world like a monster from an RPG. Yet, that did not seem to be the case.

If he thought about it, even back in his original world, it was not like you could find lions or giraffes anywhere in the world. So in a way, this should have been obvious.

Subaru: “I also found out for the first time that Lugunica’s called the witchbeast Kingdom.”

Even if it was a large threat, Todd’s entire attitude did a complete one-eighty in reaction to one witchbeast. If you compared that “normal reaction” in Vollachia to someone in Lugunica, it was no wonder why Lugunica was called the witchbeast Kingdom.

Someone like Meili must sound like a fairy-tale.

Subaru: “So does that mean that if she went to a country or place with not that many witchbeasts around, she could live like a normal child…?”

Rem: “Hey, excuse me.”

Rem called out to him while Subaru held his head at an angle, pondering about the future of Meili, who he was now separated from.

Wondering what was up, Subaru looked to see Rem pointing on top of the table. There, he found Louis sleeping with her plate empty.

Rem: “It seems she ate herself full and has fallen asleep. Though I despise it, could you please help me carry her.”

Subaru: “You’d go as far to say you despise it…”

Bitterly laughing at Rem’s words, Subaru cocked his head in resignation. After cleaning up four plates – the fourth being Todd’s forgotten lunch, Subaru reluctantly lifted Louis up.

He knew this because Louis would sometimes latch onto him but she was light. Her appearance made her look like a normal young girl. Honestly, only her appearance made her look like a normal young girl.

Subaru: “Are you good to go Rem? My back is free…”

Rem: “What a displeasing offer. There is no need for your assistance. I can at least take care of myself…”

Saying that, Rem took hold of a wooden cane leaning on the table—though, it was a “wooden cane” in name only, as it looked more like a random, thick branch that had been picked up somewhere.

The handle was wrapped in cloth, likely to prevent any splinters. It was a simple and improvised cane. Setting the cane, Rem stood up.

Her stance and gait still left much to be desired.

Rem: “—I’m, okay.”

Subaru: “…Are you sure? There’s no need to be so stubborn you know. If you’re in trouble you can rely on me.”

Rem: “I will not rely on you. This is nothing. You make sure you do not drop her.”

Subaru: “Haih, alright. But, you should know this. The only reason I’m carrying this person is not because I want to, but because it’s for you.”

Rem: “What in the world is compelling you to say stuff like that…”

Simply, Subaru did not want Rem to find out his view of Louis was becoming positive of his own accord. Getting tired of his comments, Rem followed Subaru with her cane, albeit with some difficulty.

Subaru returned Rem and Louis to the tent they were borrowing. He would probably be going back to clean up the tents again. —Although, he was curious at what Todd’s group was going to do.

Rem: “—. Are you concerned about them?”

Subaru: “…m? Uh, yeah, you could say that. It’s just that…even I have the self-awareness that I’m being dishonest towards our saviors. The talk about the witchbeast may have been careless from me too.”

Rem: “—our, saviors.”

Thinking on it, Subaru could only see himself as a scoundrel who kept on lying. He could only feel deflated and low-spirited on that thought.

However, while listening to Subaru, Rem muttered thoughtfully.

“Savior”, the word she had taken out of Subaru’s speech was said in a tone that was hard to decipher. Though it definitely did not seem to have a positive emotion attached to it.

Subaru: “Rem?”

Rem: “ —. No, it’s nothing. Please forget about it.”

Subaru: “Well, It’s impossible to forget about it now. The way this conversation is going, you’re gonna have to tell me.”

Rem: “Is that so. Would you kindly stop talking to me then.”

Subaru: “Isn’t the distance between us increasing! Don’t just leave me hanging, finish what you were going to say! I’m really curious!”

Subaru was matching his walk speed to Rem, so they were walking at a rather slow pace. It might have been her frustration towards Subaru walking with her, but for one reason or another, Rem let out a small sigh.

Sensing that Subaru was not going to back out, she slowly turned to face him,

Rem: “Um, Todd was it…? I do not hold such a good impression of him.”

Subaru: “Huh? Why? He let useless people like us stay at the camp. He even protects us from the bad guy who makes people eat shoes. I don’t see how you can’t feel grateful.”

Rem: “It is not that I don’t feel grateful. I am thankful of course. Just…”

Subaru: “Just?”

Cutting off her sentence there, Rem showed slight hesitation as Subaru urged her on to continue. The silence that had fallen during the pause had only lasted two seconds when Rem with a deep exhale said,

Rem: “—People who do not ask for others’ names are difficult to trust in my opinion.”

Subaru: “…”

Being told that, Subaru unconsciously stopped his breath.

Wanting to disprove her statement, he thought over the past few days.

—People who do not ask for others' names, is what Rem said.

Keeping that in mind while reflecting back; technically it was correct.

Todd had, to this very day, not called Subaru by his name. He would always say "you" or something similar. If he didn't know his name, that would be the obvious course of action.

However—

Subaru: "Isn't it just a coincidence? Even you Rem, you don't call me by my name do—"

Rem: "—It's Natsuki Subaru, correct? Knowing the name and choosing not to call it, and not even bothering to learn the others' name have two different meanings. That is all."

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "That is just my opinion. There is no choice but to rely on them anyway."

Saying that, Rem overtook a standstill Subaru and continued forward.

Watching Rem slowly advance on, Subaru found himself unable to say anything.

Unfortunately, Subaru didn't have the solution to Rem's hard-heartedness.

As it had been made clear with that exchange regarding the witchbeast, Subaru was still ignorant about a lot of things in this world. He wasn't completely satisfied with the Kingdom and yet, the unknown lands of the Empire were good in its own ways.

Maybe in here, asking for a name or not had a special meaning attached to it. Perhaps asking for a name before offering yours was considered rude.

Even if there was a rule like that in place, Subaru could not tell Rem about it. His lack of knowledge, his lack of cultural awareness, he hated those to no end.

Rem: "…How long do you plan to stand there for?"

Subaru: "Ah…"

Glancing up at the voice, he saw Rem slightly ahead, facing back towards him.

With a hint of impatience in her expression, she leaned on her cane with both hands, glaring at Subaru. Seeing her wait for him, Subaru felt his chest tighten up.

His knees almost buckled.

Subaru: "G…uh"

Rem: "Are… Wh-What happened?! Don't tell me your finger……"

Subaru: "No, I just thought about how you were waiting for me and I…"

Rem: "I wasted my time."

She said that with an expressionless voice and face. This time she turned her back on Subaru to truly leave him.

Frantically chasing after her, Subaru went to apologize to Rem. He thought back to their conversation before and smiled gently.

Rem's probably just overthinking things, he debated to himself.

4

—Like that, the deep-seated doubt that lurked in the bottom of his heart was lifted the next day.

After Subaru and his group parted ways with Todd, the man had attended a meeting with the Generals of the encampment, and the council of war had apparently dragged on until late at night.

Eventually, Subaru ended up bringing Rem and Louis back into their tent, and he had to engage in the tasks assigned to him, all the while saddled with uneasiness. To add to that, Rem had given him the cold shoulder more blatantly than the day before, making him feel like he didn't belong anywhere.

However—

???: "—Oi, wake up, wake up. Until when are you planning to sleep in?"

Subaru: "Nnh… Ah?"

Having his shoulder shaken, Subaru was jerked awake by someone.

Being woken up easily was one of Subaru's few merits, but when he compared waking up on his own to being woken up by someone else, he could reaffirm that it was different from what he was used to. Once he blinked open his eyes, spinning his sluggish thoughts into motion, lying down on the ground, Todd's face popped into his field of vision.

Subaru: "…Todd-san?"

Todd: "Yeah, you look tired. I guess that's reasonable, 'cause we made you do jobs you weren't used to. Anyway, thanks to you…"

Subaru: "—Natsuki Subaru."

Todd: "Hm?"

Todd spoke rapidly to Subaru, who sat up slowly, and he also widened his eyes as Subaru introduced himself to him.

For a moment, it seemed like he had not understood the meaning of Subaru's introduction, but,

Subaru: "Natsuki Subaru, that's my name."

Todd: “Nn… Ahh, were you bothered that I kept referring to you as just “you” by any chance?”

Subaru: “Ah, no, it’s not to the point that it was bothering me, but… I haven’t introduced myself to you, so I thought I might’ve been super rude or something.”

Todd: “Haha, you think too much about it. But, Natsuki Subaru, right? I gotcha, I gotcha.”

While chuckling, Todd clapped the shoulder of Subaru, who lowered his gaze out of embarrassment. Seeing that he was acting the same as always, Subaru felt relieved to an extent.

Apparently, Rem’s worries from yesterday were simply her overthinking the situation, and Subaru’s uneasiness was also groundless.

Todd appeared to be just a careless person for real. Murmuring, “My mistake, my mistake,”

Todd: “Though, that’s an important topic, but I’m here to talk about something even more important. Thanks to what you told me yesterday, the Generals’ plans changed course.”

Subaru: “Changed course… you mean, the conquering of the forest?”

Todd: “Yep, yep. At any rate, if it’s really witchbeasts inhabiting the area, adding that to the reclamation of an unknown forest, then it becomes quite a different story. Even the casualties on our side will be by no means negligible. So…”

Taking a pause in his words, a wide grin spread across his face. And then, he took the half-awake Subaru’s face in his hands, and,

Todd: “Our military operations were called off immediately.”

Subaru: “Immediately? Then, Todd-san, does it mean you can return to your fiancée’s place?”

Todd: “Haha, that’s right!”

“Whoa!” Subaru exclaimed, sharing his joy with Todd, who nodded vigorously.

If the soldier-dispatching operation that would last for years had been changed, and Todd could return to his hometown, then he must’ve felt especially ecstatic. Subaru placed his hands together with the jubilant man, dancing inside of the tent with him.

Then, naturally—

???: “…Um, can you be a little more quiet?”

Subaru: “Ah, sorry, Rem.”

Sitting up on her bed, Rem glared at the two men with a scowl on her face.

He guessed that her soured mood was not because of having just woken up. The reason was none other than her dreams being disrupted by the dance steps of the two men.

She then gave a light shake of her head, murmuring, “Oh well…”

Rem: “—? Doesn’t it smell… somewhat strange?”

Subaru: “Smell?”

Rem: “Yes. It’s different from your body odor.”

Sniffing at the air, Rem waved at Subaru as if she was brushing off a smelly object. Her gesture wounded him to a certain degree, but Todd immediately apologized with, “My bad, my bad.”

Todd: “I thought ‘twas alright because there’s some distance, but I guess you’d know if you have a good sense of smell. But, doesn’t it feel wrong to not hurry up and do something that has already been settled upon?”

Subaru: “Todd-san?”

Saying that, Todd opened the tent flap, and motioned with a hand for the two to come out.

So, Subaru exchanged glances with Rem, before handing her wooden cane over to her, moving towards the entrance.

They lined up next to Todd after that, and saw.

Subaru: “—Huh?”

A dense plume of black smoke was being spouted with tremendous momentum, and a fierce smell of something burning hung in the air.

The great jungle that had filled up every inch of his vision left and right, no matter the distance or where he looked—Subaru was greeted by the sight of the Buddheim Jungle engulfed in scarlet flames, burning and blazing furiously.

Rem: “This is…”

Next to Subaru who stood there in shock, Rem was left speechless by witnessing the same view as him.

Both Subaru and Rem stood still as a stone, staring at the forest that flared with red as if it were a nightmare, staring at the incinerated jungle, and staring at the world that was coming to an end.

Todd: "If it comes to witchbeasts prowling around, there's no telling the number of casualties on our side. When I insisted on that, General Second-Class Zikr, our commander, agreed to it."

Subaru: "…"

Todd: "Thanks to the information you provided us, we ended up with no casualties. You've been very helpful."

He laughed after he finished speaking, slapping Subaru on the back with the palm of his hand. Struck by the friendly impact of the blow, Subaru's lips trembled. His lungs shivered, his throat shook, and his voice quivered as well.

Against Todd's unchanging, amiable attitude, Subaru's wavering voice formed the following words—

Subaru: "Wh… why…?"

Todd: "Why? What do you mean by that?"

Subaru: "But, you said… you didn't want to fight the Shudraqians… right?"

A difficult fight was inevitable if a battle was going to break out, and negotiations were the most desirable to make the people of Shudraq pledge their loyalty to the Emperor.

That was what Todd had told Subaru while they were eating yesterday.

If so, there wouldn't be a battle. Relief had seeped into Subaru's heart back then.

Subaru: "But, this… more so than battle, it's…!"

Todd: "Yeah, we didn't wanna fight them. We don't know how many victims the battle will claim on our side. I could've died too. But, because I was able to obtain what's needed to persuade the General, the issue was taken care of. The Shudraqians won't be able to oppose His Excellency the Emperor as well."

Subaru: "—hk,"

Todd: "I can also go home early, back to my fiancée. Really, really, you were a great find. I told the Generals about you, so you'll definitely receive a reward."

"Maybe you might be given a second dagger," Todd joked, clapping Subaru on the back once more.

And then, as if he just remembered something, he murmured out an, "Oh,"

Todd: "I was told to return after showing you our military gains from this. Sorry, but I might be a little late to breakfast. But, you don't have to tidy up the tents anymore. After a while, we're gonna end up lifting the camp."

Subaru: "—Ah, eh?"

Todd: "Well, well, get a hold of yourself. —Don't make the lil' missy feel uneasy."

Whispering his last sentence in Subaru's ear, Todd gave him a genuine, well-intentioned smile before leaving the area.

In the end, Subaru could not utter a single word at the back of the man who was going far away in his line of sight, unable to do anything but remain silent.

Subaru: "…"

However, no matter if he stayed quiet, or if he was tormented by the confusion whirling within his heart, the scene of the blazing forest both far away and in front of him would never change.

The erupting flames would consume everything, and it would eventually burn down every single sliver of life on the land here.

The gigantic snake witchbeast, or the Masked Man who lived in the forest, and the hunter that had sought Subaru's life weren't exceptions, either. —Everything would be reduced to ashes.

Rem: "—h,"

Next to Subaru, who grinded his teeth together from the shocking realization, Rem suddenly staggered.

When he instinctively supported her slender body with a hand, Rem stiffened the moment he touched her. And then, as she gazed up at him, fear and a sense of rejection began bubbling over into her expression.

Subaru: "Ah…"

Rem: "It's not like this is your fault… I know that. But,"

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "Don't… touch me."

She stifled the fright that threatened to overwhelm her for a moment, slowly pushing Subaru's hand away. She didn't brush it off nor broke it, but she simply pushed it away.

Her words were her honest thoughts. Rem did understand that this situation wasn't what Subaru intended to cause. However, it only brought a meager amount of comfort to him.

Like this, facing the incident that had actually occurred, the comfort was too small—.

Rem: "…It seems like she has woken up."

Rem said, glancing away from Subaru, averting her eyes from the burning forest, and as if looking away from what she did not want to see, she turned to face Louis, who was inside the tent.

Staring at her back, Subaru couldn't call for her immediately.

Even he had trouble wrapping his head around what had happened. As of now, only dialog choices that would be incorrect no matter what he said came to his mind.

So, he could not stop Rem, who was leaving his side at the speed of a crawling infant with difficulty.

He couldn't stop her—

Subaru: "—oh?"

Subaru bit his lip, gazing at Rem's petite back after being rejected by her. He then noticed the tiny sensation that suddenly thumped against his back, letting out a gasp in the process.

He spun around, wondering what had happened, but he did not see anything or anyone that could have touched him from behind. However, the moment he turned his body, he caught a glimpse of something zipping through the corner of his eyes.

It was almost as if it had pivoted around him just as he turned around—

Louis: "Uuuu!!"

The next second, like an explosive fit of a child's tantrum, Louis raised her voice inside the tent.

The Sin Archbishop was irritatingly loud from the moment she woke up, but there was a situation in front of him that he had to prioritize, more so than the Sin Archbishop who was no different than a toddler. Although, it wasn't like he could do anything about it.

Louis: "Uah, Aaa! Aaaaa!!"

Subaru: "—kh, shut it! We're in a dire situation right now! There's no time to dote on,"

You, he tried to shout at the wailing Louis, and knitted his brows together.

He reacted like that because Rem, sitting on the floor and her arms locked around the thrashing child, also had a sudden change in her expression.

Different compared to the fear and sense of rejection from before, she displayed astonishment that purely asked, “Why?”. Her wide blue eyes honed in on Subaru—no, it was not on him to be precise, but,

Subaru: “…My back?”

Judging from the slightly unaligned angle of her stare, Subaru deduced the target of the focus of her gaze. He followed her eyes and turned his head around, peering into his own back.

And then, he realized it too late. —The true identity of the thing that had pivoted around him just a while ago.

Subaru: “—The… arrow’s feather,”

That was exactly what had whizzed past his sight.

Then it was only natural, but the actual arrow itself was attached to the feather, and if the feather was swaying on his back, then that meant—

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Simply, the released arrow had been shot straight into Subaru’s back.

Subaru: “…”

Feeling dizzy, Subaru collapsed on the spot, unable to stand for any longer. His hand immediately shot out, grabbing onto the entrance of the tent, and the tent tilted sideways with the momentum of being toppled over.

However, he could not afford to be bothered by it, as his body had already fallen sideways.

Rem: “Aaaaaaaaaahh—!”

Witnessing the ordeal, Rem let out a shrill scream.

His thoughts swirling inside his head, Subaru absently noted it was the first time he had ever heard Rem's normal scream. The useless comment flooded the inside of his head, overflowing and spilling out of his ears.

Louis: "Aaa, Uuaaa!"

Scrambling up on all fours, Louis approached the fallen Subaru. She shook his body violently, but he was unable to reprimand her, nor did he have any strength to resist.

How could one arrow reduce him into this sorry state?

Rem: "Someone! Someone, please some—! …This… Something like this must be nothing! Such a… shallow injury from an arrow can't possibly…!"

Rem tossed away her cane and rushed to his side as she fell, frantically called out to him while looking at the wound on his back.

Ahh, Rem is really kind, Subaru thought. Even if Rem could not bring herself to believe him because of the miasma, even if he had created a world set on fire with a careless word, if Subaru had collapsed before her eyes, despite all of it, she would raise her voice in an effort to save him.

Subaru thought he did not want to show his weak side in front of this Rem.

If it's just a wound caused by an arrow, then why don't you show 'em by standing back up like it's nothing, Natsuki Subaru.

When he watched long-running TV shows or historical dramas, he often believed the people who died or were immobilized from being stabbed by such thin arrows did not have enough willpower.

Well, even if he excluded the case where his chest had been penetrated by a large arrow, the arrow in his back was not really powerful, just as Rem said. In actuality, it bumped into him so gently that he thought he had been patted on the back.

Why would an arrow like that be—

Subaru: “—Geh, bh, uehk,”

Rem: “—hk, could it be… poison?”

As Subaru retched out the scorching sensation rising up in his throat, Rem arrived at the same conclusion as him.

He was not going to be killed by the impact of the arrow. The poison slathered on the arrow was eating away at him.

His limbs no longer moved, and his mind was sluggish as if he had been struck by a high fever. Something flowed out of his eyes and nose and ears, and his whole body began convulsing.

His ears began ringing thunderously, and he could not hear the voice of the worried Rem. He could not hear Louis’s shrieking that hurt his ears. He could no longer hear them.

The poison, poison, the poison, who, why, the arrow, hunter, forest’s, burning, scorching and flaring, Subaru had unnecessarily, the witchbeast, Todd, burning, Rem, Rem, Rem—.

His consciousness fading in and out, a groan escaped his throat as blood bubbled and frothed out of his lips. And then, opening his bloodshot eyes wide, he tried to take a look at Rem’s face no matter what it took, and noticed.

—Around thirty meters away from the tent, there was a tiny, tiny silhouette glowering at him in a location easily reachable in less than ten seconds if one ran for it.

Subaru: “…”

A child. A small child who was not too different from Louis.

She was a small child with mean-looking eyes. —No, that wasn’t it. She did not have mean-looking eyes. She was glaring at Subaru. With eyes clouded over by hatred, her gaze pierced through Subaru with the intent to kill.

Her hair and face dirtied with soot, it was a girl holding a small bow with hate-filled eyes.

With those fingers, that hand, and the will to do so, she had shot Subaru with a poisoned arrow.

Subaru: "…"

It was natural that he was hated by her.

It was also natural for her to want to kill him.

The results Subaru had brought about caused the girl to pursue her hatred, a fate like that.

If so, this… the retribution that arrived before him—

???: "—No! Wait! Please, wait. Wait…"

Beside his ear, he heard a desperate voice.

He wanted to wait for her. He wanted to stop in his tracks for her. He wanted to lead her by the hand, and smile at her.

He could not do any of those.

He remained unable to do any of those.

Bubbling and churning, he gurgled out blood-red foam, his body convulsed, his eyes rolled into the back of his head, urine seeped across the floor, and he threw up his guzzling, melting organs, while falling down towards the darkness.

???: "Wait…!"

The unsightly, filthy, and thoughtless fool plunged deeper into the darkness.

Descendi—

Chapter 9:
The Way of the Empire

1

A menace that consumed him, bit by bit. An anguish that seemed to turn his very blood into magma. Together, they tore away at Natsuki Subaru's existence, trying to bare his unvarnished self.

An overtime of such cruelty, like peeling off a scab that hadn't fully healed, and exposing the raw wound beneath to the cold air. —His soul brushed against a reality that couldn't be protected.

Would it be pain, grief or sorrow that would come?

Or perhaps, it would be something entirely different; Subaru had no idea.

If there was something he did understand, if there was something that served as salvation, it was but one thing only.

Namely, that the hopelessness he felt would be severed before he could reach an answer, and that the false sense of freedom would—

???: "…Shut it with your wheezing and panting, you."

Subaru: "Mrgh"

Having been liberated from his earlier anguish, Subaru opened his mouth wide, which should have been foaming with blood.

His body was empty, like someone had punched a hole in his lungs, as it gasped for oxygen. And just as he tried to relish its tasteless goodness to his heart's content, something was shoved into his mouth against his will.

Subaru was showered in verbal abuse as he recoiled from the unforeseen blow, coughing and spluttering.

Yet, he could not tell what was going on. He could not see properly.

The tightness he felt on his face served as proof that something was wrapped around his eyes. His face had been bound.

—Actually, no, his face was not the only thing that had been bound. His arms and legs were tied up too.

And with him in this state, someone had forced something into his mouth.

Subaru: “Oergh! Bweh! Wh-Why am I tied u…Guweh?!”

???: “Why the hell are you defying me? Don’t you understand the position you’re in?”

Subaru: “Gha, Gghhk…!”

Subaru was kicked in the pit of his stomach by that violent figure, straight after he had spat out whatever had been stuck into his mouth. The wind was knocked out of him by the impact as he fell over, his opponent spitting after him.

Even the humiliation of being showered in their spit paled before the pain he felt piercing his chest. Nevertheless, Subaru’s mind was engulfed by a sea of confusion as his deprived vision flickered red in pain.

…The stuff that had happened a few dozen seconds prior was churning around his mind.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru had been woken up by Todd, taken outside the tent, and there, the great forest had been set ablaze. And straight after he found out that they had made it happen due to his own gaffe, he had been struck by an arrow in the back and toppled over. The one who had fired it had been a young-looking girl. The moment he had looked at her, his strength had abandoned him, his entire body breaking into convulsions.

He’d suffered while foaming up blood, he’d heard Rem’s voice as she rushed over to him, he’d tried to hold onto his fading consciousness…

Subaru: “This place is…”

???: “Aah? How long are you gonna be fooling ar…”

???: “—Hey, hey, chill out! He’s completely clueless! It can’t be helped! Rather than that, here! Let’s take off his blindfold!”

Subaru: “…Ah”

His thoughts, engulfed in a maelstrom of chaos, were brought back to reality by the conversation happening overhead.

A conversation between two men. One of the voices was gruff, belonging to a man who was like the very embodiment of boorishness and roughness. The other one sounded like velvet, and gave a good impression of someone who could smooth stuff over.

…The faces that went with those voices popped up as a matter of course in Subaru’s mind.

???: “Tch”

With the sound of a tch and that of footsteps, the man who’d kicked Subaru moved away from him. And straight after that, Subaru heard a sigh which came interlaced with shocked exasperation and wryness.

????: “Sorry that was done to you right after you woke up. I think you’re probably feeling muddled and all, but I’ll just take off your blindfold, okay? Though, I can’t remove the rope around your hands and feet, so you gotta bear with it.”

Subaru: “…”

Saying that as he walked up to Subaru, he unfastened the blindfold that was wrapped around Subaru’s head.

Subaru took a deep breath before relishing the feeling of freedom, along with the slight pain that accompanied it. Then he took another one, and another one, before finally holding his breath slightly.

After that, he opened his eyelids and slowly waited for his sight to return.

And…

Subaru: "…I knew it."

What unfurled itself before Subaru's eyes, as soon as his dimmed vision gradually sharpened, were tents, fires and the figures of Imperial Soldiers bustling about.

Subaru was in the familiar, though not so familiar, Imperial Encampment—The place they'd expropriated, where he'd scurried to and fro, doing odd jobs.

Subaru: "…"

There wasn't anything strange regarding the scene itself.

After all, it was here in this encampment that he'd been felled by the arrow wound. Then what was so weird about waking up here, following his treatment after regaining consciousness?

Nevertheless, he still couldn't explain things like the first blow—the fact he'd had a shoe forced into his mouth, and the fact his hands and legs were still tied up, to be sure of his hypothesis.

Even considering how estranged Subaru was from how the Empire did things, if no one batted an eye at this kind of common sense, where the people would tie up one's hands and feet every time the latter was treated, then he would wish for the country's ruin.

In other words, if that was not the case, then it meant that…

Subaru: "I guess I must have died…?"

—It was the most natural to think he had "Returned by Death".

Ironically enough, he readily came up with an idea to confirm that. He would just need to swing his head around and set his gaze on the green forest beyond the encampment.

The result of Subaru's own gaffe had been the jungle burning down, letting the Imperial Soldiers get away with that recklessness.

Black smoke should have been billowing out from the forest, enveloped by the fires of hell. Yet, there it still stood. On his left, on his right, the green jungle stretched across the horizon, in perfect condition.

Subaru: "…"

The scenes vividly popped back into his mind, right after confirming this.

Subaru had fallen due to his arrow wound, foaming at the mouth. Rem had crawled over to him, and there he'd heard her voice, her presence, her entreaty, begging him to not die.

Yet, Subaru had betrayed her there. He ended up dying miserably before her eyes.

The man who knew her, even if she detested him, had ended up dying in this godforsaken land. Just imagining the amount of fear and anxiety the amnesiac Rem would have experienced tore his heart asunder.

While at the same time, he thought. —I never want to make her feel that ever again.

???: "We found you right as we went out to fetch some water, yeah. Sorry, but you've been captured. You're our prisoner."

And thus, the man squatted down in front of him, as his heart was filled with strong emotion.

The individual flashed him a velvety smile, his eyes beaming. Subaru knew who he was. —Todd, the only person who'd acted friendly towards Subaru and Rem, in this encampment full of Imperial Soldiers.

He was the man who had patiently spent his time with Subaru, the latter knowing so little about the Empire; Subaru even considered the fact he'd been picked up by him at first, a stroke of good fortune.

That was, until he'd backed burning the forest to the ground, using Subaru's words as a pretext.

Subaru: "…"

Hardly ten minutes had passed physically, but his carefree report had sent chills running down Subaru's spine.

The Imperial Soldiers had ruthlessly burnt the forest to the ground, straight after they'd decided that entering the forest to invade the people of Shudraq, the purpose for which the troops had been dispatched for, would prove troublesome. And adding to that, they'd lauded Subaru for his contributions, since he'd provided them the information that ended up being the clincher for their choice.

In the Sacred Vollachian Empire, the strong were revered and the weak were oppressed.

It was a great nation which went by the creed that only in the Sword Wolf, the symbol of a wolf pierced by swords, were there the qualifications to live.

A mentality like Todd's probably wasn't at all unusual in the Empire.

He could even understand them going ahead with the plan to set the forest on fire, once they'd heard there was a witchbeast inside.

Nevertheless, they would not mesh well with the people of the Kingdom of Lugunica, let alone Subaru. Maybe Roswaal at best, since he was a clump of rationalism.

Either way, he must not allow them to burn the forest down this time.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru let out a gulp as he took what had happened last time as being his failure.

The fact that Subaru had ended up getting himself killed was whatever, but the fact that they'd burnt the forest down was taking it too far, even if the Imperial Soldiers had done it as a safety measure.

If not for Subaru's gaffe, the chance remained that Todd and the others would have established a place to discuss things amiably, and have their negotiations succeed without spilling any blood.

He'd taken away that possibility, and brought danger upon the people inside the forest—No, he should not dodge the responsibility he bore here. There was absolutely no way that there would be no casualties in that inferno.

Due to his own gaffe, Natsuki Subaru had reaped the lives of the people who lived in the forest.

Even if he could not meddle with what happened in that world-line, due to Returning by Death, the fact still remained. —Subaru would never forget it.

Subaru: "…"

Thus, Subaru resolved to himself, that he would not repeat the same mistake twice.

"Death" was a heavy thing, and regardless of whether it was him, or others, he would never let it repeat again. With those thoughts clouding his mind, it was a small mercy that he was redoing his first encounter with Todd and Jamal here.

The restart point of his Return by Death had been updated. He'd returned to the point after he'd been knocked unconscious by Rem in the grassland, after he'd fled from the Hunter in the forest, and the fierce attack of the witchbeast, to where he'd been picked up by the Imperial Encampment.

From here on out, he would establish friendly ties with Todd, as well as with Jamal, if possible, and get them to open negotiations in a way that would not make them rend asunder the Shudraqians in the forest.

So, for that, he would…

Todd: “Hey you, are you listening? I get that you’re confused about being called a prisoner out of nowhere, but…”

Subaru: “—. Well, yeah, I guess. I am confused. But even if I am, well, you see…”

Squatting in front of the taciturn Subaru, Todd gave his feelings some consideration. Subaru sunk into thought, deciding on what to say next as he took in Todd’s stance.

His relationship with Todd had been good, last time. Subaru really needed to maintain it, and him and Rem would be getting the most out of that thread.

What’s more, Subaru needed to choose what he knew carefully, so to restrain his extreme behavior.

Subaru: “You startled me, but I do know that I’ve been taken prisoner. I also remember diving into the river. If y’all rescued me from there, then you must be our saviors—”

Todd: “Wait up just a second.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Taking first things first, Subaru examined the situation he was in carefully. Then, he tried to put on an act that looked natural, resembling a person who’d just been dragged out of a river.

However, Todd stuck his hand out towards Subaru’s face, interrupting what the latter was saying.

The palm of his hand, along with his five spread out fingers, blocked Subaru’s vision, causing Subaru to hitch in response.

Then…

Todd: “…Why were you looking at me like that just now?”

And just after catching wind of Todd’s cold, hard voice, Subaru felt something sharp being thrust into his right shoulder.

With his field of view obstructed, Subaru's reaction to Todd's actions were slow. He swung his eyes over to where his right shoulder was smarting, and then realized what had happened.

—The sharp point of a dagger had been thrust into his right shoulder.

2

Subaru: "—Hhh?!"

The moment he realized what had happened, a voiceless scream arose in Subaru's throat.

A sensation much like burning exploded in Subaru's right shoulder, and with sharp pain came a feeling of being pierced by pins and needles, which extended through his whole body. Had he not instinctively stretched and dispersed the pain in his entire body, the maximum level of tolerance would have been exceeded and he would be unable to keep his mind from reaching the breaking point.

The shock of the unexpected stab wound was just that immense.

Subaru: "Guh, GYAAAAAaaaahhhh!!"

Moments later, following the voiceless cry, came the delayed scream, drawn out by pain.

He wanted to writhe, to move his shoulder around and rub it, to apply pressure to it, or take any kind of action to lessen the pain. But Subaru's hands and feet were bound, and there was nothing he could do to pull out the knife thrust into his shoulder. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

???: "H-Hey! What was that scream just now!"

In pain and agony, Subaru screamed over and over. It was Jamal, the rough-looking man with an eyepatch, who hurriedly rushed in upon hearing the alarming sound.

Jamal, who had been kicking Subaru just before in a violent display of power, opened his eyes wide seeing the image of Subaru with a knife in his right shoulder screaming bloody murder.

And then,

Jamal: “Todd, this isn’t what we agreed on! Weren’t you the one who said you’d reach out a hand to them since they were carrying that aristocratic knife?!”

Todd: “Ahh, that had been the plan because I didn’t know these guys’ lineage. I should’ve known you’d get angry about it just because it’s different from what I had said. My bad, my bad.”

Jamal: “…If you’re saying that, does that mean you know who this guy is?”

Although he spoke in a rough voice, he recovered his composure after hearing Todd’s answer. However, in response to Jamal’s question, Todd just said “Who knows?” and tilted his head.

Without pause, Todd knocked over Subaru who let out a cry of pain, and stepped on him.

Todd: “I haven’t heard where he’s from or who he is, so I have no idea. But there’s a high possibility he’s our enemy. So, it was a preemptive strike.”

Subaru: “Guh, gyaaahh!”

Todd: “Oh, that looks painful. We can’t avoid having you suffer a bit, but you seem like you have some pain tolerance, y’know. Where’s your self-respect?”

With his foot heavily pressing into Subaru’s body, Todd asked calmly.

However, with Todd’s weight pressing the fallen Subaru into the ground, the knife in his shoulder was pushed even deeper into the wound, and the return of unbearable agony left no room for him to answer Todd.

His vision flickered, his throat burned, bloody screams rose up over and over again. No matter how many times that was repeated, the pain showed no sign of easing. Without missing a beat, it became fresh despair and continued to assault Subaru like waves crashing against the shore.

Todd: “He’s not answering. How defiant. Looks like he’s an enemy after all.”

Jamal: “…If he’s being rolled like that, he won’t be able to answer even if he could y’know.”

Todd: “Hm? Is that so? Oops. When I’m sluggish from pain, I always mess up in these kinds of situations. My bad, my bad.”

Saying that, Todd finally moved his foot away from Subaru’s body.

The additional pain vanished, but the intermittent pain continued to sting Subaru, and the unbearable agony had caused him to bite his lip and blood streamed out from his mouth.

From the corners of his eyes tears also flowed, and miserably he could not even wipe them away.

Jamal: “You… After this, I don’t know how you can warn me about my bad behavior…”

Todd: “…? Don’t you hit prisoners of war and your subordinates to relieve stress? So don’t joke around acting all high and mighty. I’m only doing what is necessary.”

On the other hand, ignoring Subaru’s disgraceful sight, the two men continued talking above his head.

With Jamal pacifying Todd and pointing out Subaru’s bloodshed, a scene unthinkable a short while ago had unfolded.

What the heck was going on?

Although most of his mental resources were devoted to enduring the pain, this view was too incoherent.

Why would Todd, who had treated Subaru and his group so well, take such action—

Jamal: “So, why did you stab him?”

Strangely, Jamal raised to Todd the same question Subaru had.

When asked, Todd closed one eye and looked in the direction of Subaru, who was writhing in agony.

Todd: “When I took off his blindfold and he looked at me, his eyes were intent on manipulating me. I could understand being nervous or uneasy. Crying from fear would also be fine… But trying to manipulate me is suspicious, no?”

Jamal: “Manipulate, huh.”

Todd: “This guy was unconscious, he’s kicked awake and his blindfold removed, and the first thing he tries to do is to use the first face he saw? There may be such a guy, but that sorta guy is frightening and simply cannot be handled. We should kill him quickly.”

Todd persistently expressed his own well-reasoned opinion in contrast with the thoughtful Jamal.

The reason Subaru had been stabbed was because Todd had judged Subaru to be dangerous. And the best way to deal with dangerous opponents was to neutralize them.

That was why Todd had stabbed Subaru’s right shoulder. Because Todd knew that the fingers of Subaru’s left hand had been broken, and were thereby useless.

With his right shoulder stabbed and his left-hand fingers broken, the function of both of Subaru’s arms was greatly reduced.

To ensure his own safety, Todd immediately made a decision and just acted on it.

—“Just”, that is.

Jamal: “I dunno how you can think about that sorta thing right after you wake up. I might still be in the middle of waking up, straining my ears standing here tryna to listen to this…”

Todd: “No, that’s not it. He must’ve been pretending to be asleep the whole time I watched him. If he had regained consciousness along the way somewhere he should’ve had some kind of physical reaction. Supposing I overlooked him pretending to sleep, then…”

Jamal: “Then?”

Todd: “Then he planned to try to manipulate me while deceiving me and pretending to be asleep, isn’t that right? That method is even more frightening. As I thought, killing him would be the correct answer, it seems.”

Hearing that, Subaru gasped and shivered as he fought off the pain.

While listening to Todd’s explanation, Jamal’s tone gradually weakened. At first he must’ve been shocked and angry at the fact that Todd had stabbed Subaru, but little by little his fury was dismantled.

Todd’s tone of voice and way of speaking held a charm that softened the other person’s emotions.

Observing from the position of a third party, he could finally see that.

Todd would get close to the other person, show his understanding, and then offer attractive proposals that were beneficial to them on top of that. First the momentum was killed, then as the other person became more open-minded, the offered proposal would be carefully considered, and against one’s better judgement it would become desirable to go through with it.

That’s exactly what was happening to Jamal right now, before his eyes.

And that was also what had happened to Subaru just before he used

Return by Death.

Todd: “The young ladies with him are also suspicious, but the two of them are straightforward and easy to interact with. Let’s get rid of this one before there’s any trouble.”

Jamal: “Well, I guess that’s fine, but…”

Todd: “Or, do you want to be the one to do it? To stop your anger from getting out of control over that blue-haired girl injuring your men, you need someone to relieve your stress right?”

Jamal: “…That’s also true.”

In response to Todd’s calm proposal, a vulgar smile appeared on Jamal’s face.

Just like that, Jamal passed by Todd’s side while cracking his knuckles. The signs of violence Jamal displayed made Subaru cower, but Todd’s remark made him tremble even more.

Much akin to how he had offered Subaru to Jamal for stress relief, Todd was willing to investigate his intentions in a different way, if he ended up eliminating Subaru here.

For that purpose he would use Rem, as well as Louis.

But no matter what was asked, the two of them would not be able to answer. No matter how harsh the torture, Rem had no information to reveal.

In other words…

Subaru: “…tch”

Biting down harshly with his molars, the taste of blood exploded in his mouth, as Subaru searched for a way to prevent Rem from tasting the same. In a few seconds, Jamal’s violence would resume, and Subaru would either be killed or left half-dead by his brutal attack. Even if Jamal had a conscience, Todd would not keep Subaru alive.

Todd, who would be able to set fire to the forest, would likewise not bat an eye when it came to extinguishing Subaru's life.

Step by step, Jamal drew closer.

In that time, Subaru's brain went into overdrive, searching within himself for the answer. To break the deadlock of the current state of affairs, some kind of plan, a possibility, he needed a miracle,—

Jamal: "To relieve my stress, you better scream as much as you can, you son of a bitch. For your girl's part too, I'm gonna make your body pay—"

Subaru: "People of Shudraq."

Jamal: "…"

Jamal spat out his stereotypical violent threats right on the verge of striking Subaru,—but Subaru's lips put together those words.

At that moment, Jamal's movement stopped, and Todd's expression in the background changed too. Jamal's face showed clear surprise, while Todd cocked one eyebrow, "Oh?", and grinned.

Todd: "People of Shudraq… You decided to play that card now? Seems you're well aware of how to gamble."

Jamal: "Todd, what this brat is saying…"

Todd: "Just wait, just wait Jamal. You can hit and kick him after. But it's hard to understand the voice of someone with their tongue and throat crushed. It's best if we listen here."

Jamal: "Fuck!"

With nowhere to direct his anger, Jamal roughly kicked the nearby wooden railing.

Todd looked sideways at the literal dispersion of anger, and turned toward Subaru. The smile on his face was, horrifyingly, no different from the one Subaru knew.

Just as he had done when treating Subaru's fingers, inviting Subaru to eat, and praising Subaru for his contribution to burning the forest, Todd grinned at Subaru, as the latter stood on the precipice between life and death.

Todd: "So, the name of the People of Shudraq came up. I wonder, can I expect to hear something from you that will make me happy?"

Subaru: "…Ah. You know, the location of the People of Shudraq in the forest?"

Todd: "— ! Oh, that's great!"

Smiling, Todd clapped his hands in front of his chest in a show of joy.

Seeing his reaction, Subaru was confident that the miracle he had pulled out of himself had helped put off the impending predicament. However, at the same time, it was a double-edged sword for Subaru.

After all, Subaru did not know the location of the People of Shudraq.

The masked man who had handed him the knife, the hunter who had shot arrows at him… Perhaps either or both of them were related to the People of Shudraq, but he had no means of contacting them or knowing specifically where they were.

—In other words, Subaru was staking his life on this big gamble.

Todd: "How is it you know the location of the People of Shudraq?"

Subaru: "…Because I'm one of the People of Shudraq."

Todd: "I see, after all that's how it is. Setting aside skin color, it's the black hair, y'know? So I was wondering if that was the case. Since it's a famous rumor that Shudraqians have black hair."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru was greatly relieved as fortune smiled upon him and he received this information that had been entirely unknown to him.

His whole body was covered in greasy sweat, and the tension of the conversation had caused Subaru to break out in cold sweat in addition. The pain in his shoulder was increasing, and the pain in the fingers of his left hand was beginning to bug him as well.

On top of that, his body had yet to recover from the turmoil at the Pleiades Watchtower or from the trouble with Rem in the forest or from the burden of the escape to the river right after that.

Barely hanging on to his fleeting consciousness and breaking spirit, he continued the questioning. One wrong answer would result in his death. —Everything was to survive and save Rem.

To return to Emilia and Beatrice and everyone, and to reunite Ram and Rem.

Todd: "So basically, you're a scout. And your clothing and knife were prepared to blend in with us."

Subaru: "—. I stole the knife from a traveler. Same goes for the clothes. And…"

Todd: "You tried to get some info on us. A pretty bold plan I gotta say. Seems like you were actually drowning and there was a chance that we wouldn't notice the knife…"

Subaru: "But it was more realistic that way, wasn't it?"

Even as his supposed plan was pointed out as careless and flawed, Subaru laughed it off, saying that it had been all on purpose.

Putting a brazen smile on his face, he bared his teeth and made his mean eyes look more menacing. This was his act to make his bluff more believable.

Todd squinted at Subaru, trying to scrutinize his real motive.

Todd: "…"

The silence was deafening and the noose on Subaru's neck tightened every second.

Truth be told, he had no idea if his words were persuasive at all. Neither could he tell if his act was convincing. The pain and stress he felt were too much to even give a second thought to his performance.

It felt to him, like he was making comical excuses, where it'd be no wonder if, the next moment, he'd crack his head open after dismissing him as being ludicrous with a snort.

Unable to read Todd's expression, the tension in the room spurred up.

And after some time—

Todd: "—You, would you sell out your tribe for your life?"

Todd asked with one eye closed. Subaru gulped.

He would bring out the words he needed to bring out. All he needed to do was to not answer incorrectly.

He would sell out his tribe for his life.

After stating that he was a member of the people of Shudraq, he would sell out the people of Shudraq.

He could not let them discover that this was a farce. To aid him, he would adopt the necessary expression and voice.

—The expression and voice of a deplorable bootlicker who would sell out his own tribe for his life.

Subaru: "…Yeh, yeah, that's right. I'll sell them out."

Todd: "…"

Subaru: "Please, I'll do anything. I'll even lure them out if you want. Anything, I'll do anything!"

Stammering, twitching his cheeks, smeared in cold sweat, Subaru begged for his life.

Clinging on to his life, disregarding the lives of others, not letting others see him in any positive light, he had to transform himself into selfishness personified.

But he only had to act.

Over the course of his time in this world, Subaru had seen many people with that way of thinking.

He did not think the day would come where he would model himself after the most inhumane among inhumans, the Sin Archbishops.

Jamal: “You’re a rotten guy you know. Hate that no-good look in your eye.”

Jamal spat out his true feelings, hearing Subaru plead for his life. His disdain and anger were evident.

It seemed that Subaru’s performance had steered Jamal into having a negative opinion of him. But to be completely honest, though he felt bad, he had no time to deal with Jamal’s shenanigans.

Right now, the right to decide Subaru’s fate belonged to Todd.

A person’s ranking or standing did not matter here. The strong eat the weak. He would follow the Empire’s motto to the tee.

Todd: “—. That seriousness, you don’t seem to be lying.”

Todd finally replied to Subaru, who with great effort, kept a docile face.

Hearing that, Subaru almost jumped in joy at his tiny victory. Though, he prayed it was not a premature celebration. At the same time, Jamal spoke up, unhappy about it.

Jamal: “Oi, Todd! You trust what this guy says? This piece of shit who would sell out his people for his own life would…”

Todd: “Hang on, hang on. What are you saying Jamal? These are the words of a bootlicker who would betray his people for his own sake. Of course he’d show how much worth he has. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to save his own precious life.”

Jamal: “…Tsk”

Jamal’s outburst was silenced by Todd’s reasoning.

Of course, this “subservient and servile bootlicker” was the exact image Subaru wanted Todd to have of him. The type of person who would double-cross his comrades just to save his own neck. To make his story believable, Subaru would have to drag his reputation to rock-bottom.

On that point, the big scene he had caused after getting stabbed in the shoulder should have helped in that regard too.

Though, the pain he had to suffer as a result was too great for consolation.

Jamal: “Don’t blame me if anything happens!”

In the end, exactly to Subaru’s plan, Jamal was persuaded by Todd.

Admonishing him, Todd tapped Jamal’s shoulders saying “Trust him, trust him”.

Todd: “There’s no mistake he’s attached to life. —Whether it’s his or not.”

Todd said as he looked at the meek, downcast Subaru.

3

Rem: “—! Wait a moment! What do you plan to do with that person?!”

Rem yelled out angrily, grabbing onto the bars of the metal cage she was confined in.

They were currently in the Imperial army’s campground. Todd and

Jamal, after listening to Subaru's claims, dragged him out straight away and were now on the way out of the camp.

Rem—who had been put in a cage after her turbulent capture—had started shouting out when the trio just so happened to pass by.

Subaru: "…"

Rem glared at a tattered and worn out Subaru.

Having been dragged out of the river, his half-dried clothes were still heavy. Additionally, the stab wound on his right shoulder had received the bare minimum treatment and the broken fingers on his left hand had received none. Even if the restraints on his legs were gone, the cuffs on his arms robbed him of his freedom.

Looking no different from a slave worker, the person who was being led outside of the camp, Natsuki Subaru.

Seeing this Subaru, Rem's emotions were all over the place. Shock and surprise, all of it in turmoil. Of course, Subaru was unable to explain the situation to her.

Having Returned by Death, what little progress that had been achieved in the relationship between Subaru and Rem was reset, and needed to be redone from scratch again.

Rem saw Subaru as an enemy based on the witch's scent that clung to him. Subaru was given no time or opportunity to solve that misunderstanding. Also—

Rem: "—?! The smell has become worse since last time… What is this exactly?"

The miasma that would thicken with each consecutive Return by Death. Having smelled it, Rem's caution rose to another level.

To her, Natsuki Subaru might as well have been a child of darkness.

It pained Subaru's heart, but he could not afford to perform any action that could fix that misconception, lest he be found out.

Todd: "…You two have a pretty convoluted relationship don't you? The way she's acting. Didn't you bring that girl along with you?"

Subaru: "That girl… No, the two that were together."

Todd: "The two of them?"

Subaru: "—. I bought them as tools to help when meeting you guys."

For a moment, he was unsure how to reply. But he donned his inhumane mask and answered frankly.

Subaru, right now, was a cold-blooded person who would sell off his comrades' lives to save his own. Naturally, he felt nothing for Rem and Louis. He needed to be one-hundred percent filled with his selfish love for his life.

He could not let the scenario where the two of them—well, at least, Rem be taken as hostages to occur.

Subaru: "So I don't know anything about them. There's no point asking them this and that…Though you seemed to have gotten the gist of it already."

Todd: "Well, it didn't seem to be an act, I guess? The little missy seems to be actually nuts in the head and the missy here ain't lying. Even so, her reason for rampaging being so vague is a bit troublesome."

Jamal: "tsk"

Todd scratched his cheek with a bitter smile, while Jamal clicked his tongue in annoyance.

With the two of them at the head, a group of twenty or so Imperial soldiers would be leaving the camp with Subaru. Subaru was to bring this group into the jungle and show them where the people of Shudraq resided.

He would show them their settlement and bring the Empire one step closer to victory. And as a reward for that, his life would be saved. Terrible people live long lives after all, so that was the plan.

A plan that would get average reviews as a bootlicker's success story.

Though, that would only happen if one ignored just how impossible it was.

Subaru: "Isn't it better if you threw them out? I did buy them. If you don't need them, I'm happy to have them after they've done their work…"

Todd: "You're a hasty one, aren't ya? It's good to be thinking ahead but don't forget your life depends on whether you can do your job properly or not. Rather than what's going to happen to them, you should worry about yourself first."

Subaru: "Hehe, oh yeah, that's right. My desire for what comes after slipped out."

If he were to make a fuss over this, his attachment to Rem would be found out instantly and the tables would be flipped on Subaru.

He couldn't rub his hands together because of his bindings, but in his heart, that was the manner in which he interacted with Todd. Thankfully, Todd did not look deeper into his words. Waving his hand at the caged Rem,

Todd: "Behave yourself missy. If nothing happens, nothing will happen to you."

Rem: "Do you think your words hold any weight?"

Todd: "I don't know about weight, but believing me or not is your problem, ain't it missy?"

Having been told that by Todd, Rem had no choice but to quiet down, annoyed.

Frustrated that he was unable to support Rem or even talk to her any more than this, Subaru burned her figure and voice into his mind. He would use those as fuel for his spirit.

—One way or another, he had to bring Rem out of the camp and escape.

Building a friendly relationship with Todd's group and getting them to protect him and Rem was no longer a thought Subaru entertained. —They were a threat, both as an enemy and as an ally.

They could not be controlled even when allied and he did not need to state how dangerous they would be as an enemy.

To begin with, he should avoid teaming up with the people of Vollachia as much as possible.

Subaru's standing in Vollachia was extremely complex, and if he were to slip up, it would not be a problem that affected just himself. That was another secret he held.

Todd: "Alright, let's go. Stay sharp everyone."

Jamal: "I'm the one giving orders!"

Todd called out to his crew, bringing along a hyperconscious Subaru.

Among the Imperial soldier's replies to Todd's call, Jamal's reply was very openly angry.

4

—After that, the group trespassed onto the Buddheim Jungle with Subaru at the very front.

Their destination was the village of the Shudraqians who lived in the forest, and their objective was to pinpoint their location. —However, Subaru the navigator was pulling a bluff, as he didn't know where the village was.

Far from that, he was making a gamble while only vaguely knowing about the identities of the people of Shudraq.

Subaru: "…"

Walking through the thickly-wooded forest, Subaru was waiting for an opportunity to somehow sneak away from the group.

He was against a large number of people, and even if they were wearing light armor, said equipment did not allow them to move around quicker than he could. If he could take advantage of their carelessness and run away, it might be possible to return to the encampment quicker than them, and bring Rem with him on his escape. Actually, that was his only plan as of now.

Fortunately, the cage that Rem had been put in could be easily unlocked from the outside.

The important things were Subaru obtaining the right to do so from Rem, and the hope that she would believe in him and follow him out once he unlocked the cage. And, there was the matter of Louis's existence as well.

Subaru: "If I say that I am leaving Louis behind, Rem will never come with me…"

In addition to the current situation, he had shaved off a significant amount of Rem's trust with the added miasma via Return by Death.

Even if Subaru desperately rushed back to the camp in that state, Rem would not welcome his decision to leave Louis behind. Far from that, she would beat him into the ground on the spot, rescue Louis from him by herself, and there was also the possibility of her deserting him in the Empire's encampment.

Subaru: "…I guess that's not going to happen, even if Rem is hostile to me. Her legs aren't free to move around, after all."

She couldn't go through with these events he imagined solely due to the condition of her legs, so were she to be physically fit, then Subaru wouldn't put it past her to actually carry it out. That was what he thought, but it would cause him trouble if she did so.

So, if Subaru was going to take her out of that place, then he had to bring Louis along with them as well. Thus, it forced Subaru to face the hardship of being unable to abandon this negative factor, which should be referred to as a shackle, no matter where he went or what he did.

And then—

Todd: “So, how long will it take until we arrive at the village?”

Subaru: “…Around two to three hours.”

Todd: “Two to three hours! That’s pretty quick. If that’s all it takes, then I could wish for nothing more. From our point of view, this was supposed to be a mission that’d take years to complete.”

Obtaining an answer to his question, Todd broke into a smile, seemingly considering his situation to be one of good fortune.

Hearing his words, and seeing him clad in his light armor with a hatchet hanging from his waist, Subaru remembered that Todd had joined the mission whilst leaving his fiancée behind.

That should be glaringly obvious, but even if he made a decision that inflicted wounds upon Subaru, it wasn’t like the story behind his circumstances would change completely.

Todd was dispatched to the jungle as an Imperial Soldier following his orders, and he was unavoidably separated from his fiancée to do so.

The same could be said for some of Todd’s fellow soldiers, such as Jamal. They too had their own circumstances behind their actions, and so every one of them must have a reason to be engaged in the mission like this.

In that sense, there was no reason for Subaru and Todd’s group to be at odds with each other.

Subaru was purely unlucky. His misfortune had piled up on top of itself. The situation was turning against him. That would be what this whole thing was, if he were to line up an assortment of words in this manner.

However—

Subaru: “…I don’t think this is for me to say, but isn’t this unsafe? Only bringing this many people, even though we’re heading for the Shudraqian village…”

Walking at the front of the line as the leader, Subaru called out to Todd, who was right behind him.

There were about twenty Imperial Soldiers in the group. Even though they had a guide with them, it wasn’t possible to say that there were enough people to explore the extensive forest.

Todd shrugged his shoulders in response to Subaru’s doubts,

Todd: “It can’t be helped. You’re a splendid source of information, but the higher-ups aren’t expecting much from your story. The information only becomes worth it when we go out and confirm it. Also…”

Subaru: “Also?”

Todd: “If this turns out to be your trap, and my group doesn’t return, our absence will inform our allies back at the encampment that it’s dangerous to enter the forest. Haha, long live Vollachia.”

Imperial Soldiers: “—Long live Vollachia!”

Making sacrifices in order to attain victory was inevitable. Todd seemed to display that with his easy-going attitude, the Imperial Soldiers following his chant with their own.

Long live Vollachia! Their voices caused the atmosphere of the forest to tremble, sounding like an indication of how devoted they were to the country that valued strength above all.

In any case—

???: “Is this the time to be worrying about us, eh? After this is done, there’s no guarantee that your head and body will stay connected. At least do your best to humor us.”

Subaru: “Jamal-san…”

Jamal: “Don’t call my name, you shitty traitor. You’ll be cut up into pieces and dumped somewhere, and the woman and child will… hm… maybe I’ll offer them to the Womanizer, General Second-Class Zikr. He’ll definitely be overjoyed.”

Todd: “Jamal… don’t say anything too stupid. It tires me out.”

Acting as if he absolutely hated Subaru’s guts, Jamal’s gaze and voice were filled with foul intent.

Adding to that, Subaru and Rem were also not getting along with each other, so if he made Jamal hold the casting vote for the situation, then the results could very well turn out as the worst for Subaru.

As expected, it was Todd who tried to quell Jamal’s anger, saying, “Calm down,”

Todd: “Rather, don’t forget it’s us who have to humor this guy. He’ll provide us with the necessary information to save his skin. We’ll rescue him in exchange for that. If not, we’re gonna get jumped by the Shudraq the moment we arrive at the village.”

Jamal: “Bring it on. If they’re gonna pull something like that, we can exterminate…”

Todd: “—Are you serious? I can’t get on board with a fight I see no chance of winning in. You don’t want to turn your little sister into a widow before she gets married, either. Right? Brother-in-law?”

Jamal: “Gh…”

Todd persuaded Jamal, who often spoke while disregarding all thought.

Subaru caught a glimpse of the unknown relationship between them, but it unfortunately did not move his feelings. He had already steeled his resolve against Todd and his group.

—Their encounter, the situation, his luck. All of those were terrible.

Subaru: “—But, Rem is more important to me.”

That was why Subaru decided to put them in harm's way.

Imperial Soldier: "—?"

Suddenly, at the back of the search party that was organized in a line, one of the Imperial Soldiers made a small sound in his throat. He cocked his head as if he had noticed something, searching for the cause of it in his field of view.

The faintest feeling of something being wrong. He searched for it, unable to simply ignore it, his gaze whizzing around the jungle in circles, and then—

Imperial Soldier: "—Ah?"

Amidst the darkness of the forest, his eyes met with a red glimmer that rose to the surface.

Imperial Soldier: "It's a witchbeast—!!"

Other Imperial Soldiers: "—?!"

Immediately after making eye contact, the Imperial Soldier who found "it" instantaneously alerted his allies to take caution.

His reaction had been perfect up to this point, and it could be said that there was no fault on the soldier's part. The same could be said for his allies, who readied themselves for a fight, having listened to the first soldier's call.

However, they wasted no time in attacking the witchbeast the moment they unsheathed their swords.

—This could be exactly noted as being rash.

Imperial Soldier: "Uwooooh!!"

An Imperial Soldier drew his sword, running through the forest and lunging at his opponent, a humongous snake that twisted its giant body around—it was a serpentine witchbeast, enclosed in green-colored scales and its full height around ten meters long.

Being the same species as the witchbeast Subaru had encountered in the forest, its existence was like a bolt from the blue to the Imperial Soldiers, who did not know of the existence of witchbeasts in the forest.

However, their attempt to deal with the witchbeast immediately, knowing full well of how dangerous it could be, had been a mistake precisely because it was the right decision. —The witchbeast was not after them.

Its target was none other than Natsuki Subaru, who was shrouded in a gigantic amount of miasma.

Snake witchbeast: “—ッッ!!”

Catching the released sword strike with its scales, the large snake roared as it sent the Imperial Soldier flying with its huge tail. The red glint in its eyes gleamed savagely, and the group was hit by a tremendous bellow.

With one year that had passed ever since he started acting as a decoy against witchbeasts, Subaru knew what it was all about, being a professional who went down this path.

Most of the time, the concerned witchbeast would actively go after Subaru, encircled by the miasma as he was, but it was a different story if harm were caused to the witchbeast itself. That was their unchangeable nature, no matter if the witchbeast was the White Whale or this snake.

The White Whale had aimed for Wilhelm, who had been chopping it up, and the gigantic snake had bore its fangs against the hunter that had shot it.

The rule took effect even in the present situation. The snake’s aim had shifted from Subaru over to the Imperial Soldiers, who were covered in matching equipment, their hostility leveled towards the witchbeast.

Jamal: “—a witchbeast?! I wasn’t told about it!!”

Having the roaring snake’s malevolence directed against himself, Jamal drew out a pair of swords, his voice trembling with rage. Unexpectedly, he dauntlessly threw himself at the witchbeast with surprising swiftness, putting his combative capabilities on display.

However, Subaru could not cheer for Jamal's unanticipated, courageous fight.

Subaru had been meaning for this to happen, having walked in the forest with Todd for a few hours, with this objective.

The soldiers who did not know of the witchbeast's existence, and the witchbeast that was pulled closer to them by Subaru's miasma. He always made use of witchbeasts with his body odor every time, but Subaru was also a proud "witchbeast Master".

He had multiple accomplishments, enough to fight against Meili with the title of the "witchbeast Master" on the line.

However, now was not the time to fuss over that.

Subaru: "I should—"

Taking advantage of this opportunity, he would return to the encampment and free Rem.

He tried to make a break for it in order to do so, but felt dread pricking at the back of his neck. Conforming to the frightening sensation, Subaru lowered his head regardless of how ridiculous he would look in the eyes of others.

The very next moment, an axe sliced through the place where his head had previously been, wedging itself into the large tree right beside him.

Subaru: "—kh,"

He would have been dead had he not lowered his head just now.

Shaken by that fact, Subaru only moved his gaze behind him, looking at the person who had made that attempt on his life.

Subaru: "…"

His gaze crossed Todd’s, who was glaring at him, a piercing look in his eyes.

Subaru: “—hk,”

Refusing to be caught in his gaze, Subaru began running inside the forest with all his might.

He would be caught by Todd if he stopped in his tracks. If he were caught, then Todd would unquestioningly claim his life. Those eyes had that kind of firm, strong will. They were darkened with pitch-black intent.

Subaru felt a different kind of fear compared to what he had experienced with the Sin Archbishops, witchbeasts, and even Reid Astrea.

Those eyes were brimming with vindictiveness—pitch-black intent to kill.

Subaru: “Gah?!”

A forceful impact penetrated Subaru’s back as he ran, unable to turn around.

What struck the area around his shoulder blade was a knife that had been thrown at him— it was returned to him in an awful manner, strangely enough.

Leaving the knife hanging from his shoulder, Subaru blew out a ragged breath, continuing his desperate escape.

Behind him, he felt like the battle between witchbeast and Imperial Soldiers was still ongoing, but Subaru was also desperately hoping he would not be intercepted by other witchbeasts, and that he would not be chased after by Todd as well.

Desperately, urgently, and frantically, Subaru carried on running, and ran, and ran, and ran.

Out of breath, spitting out blood, nearly tripping multiple times, actually falling over, and still running even with his whole body being covered in mud, he was growing more frenzied to return to the Empire's camp.

Subaru: "Rem… Rem… Re, m…"

Growing slower to the point a walking child would be faster, panting for breath with his dried throat, and in a condition in which his oxygen and stamina and mental fortitude were on the verge of running out, Subaru clung to the only attachment he had.

He would reach Rem, bring Rem out of that place, save Rem, and go back home, back where everyone was.

He would return to the place where Emilia and Beatrice, Ram and Petra and Frederica, Garfiel and Otto, and even Roswaal were at, and then, he would give Rem her peaceful, mellow time back.

The time she was supposed to have spent, her dear time, like that—

Subaru: "—Ah,"

Reaching his hand out as if seeking for such a fleeting dream, Subaru's legs kicked empty air.

Losing his footing abruptly and unable to use his arms to support his unbalanced posture, he plunged downwards head-first.

Towards somewhere, he was falling upside down. He couldn't scream. His throat wouldn't open.

Falling. Purely, utterly, simply, falling.

Descending, plummeting down. Almost as if his dreams were bursting apart like a bubble, faint and broken.

Subaru: "—Rem."

Sounding empty and meaningless, he let out a hoarse voice, and Subaru's consciousness was cut off during that moment.

5

???: "…Until when do you plan on sleeping, fool?"

Subaru: “Gah?!”

Subaru’s consciousness was pulled up from the depths of the abyss by a sudden strike.

The blow to his temple felt almost as if the side of his head had been stepped on—No, not almost as if, rather, that was exactly what had happened.

As far as he could tell, the right side of his head was being pushed into the ground while the left was being stepped on. Resulting in the sharp sandwich of pain that awoke him.

Subaru: “…Wha… t? I’m… ugh…”

Tasting blood in the back of his throat, Subaru sat up in a daze.

Suddenly, Subaru became acutely aware of the intense pain that emanated from his right shoulder, back, left hand, legs and various other places on his body.

The terrible agony caused his field of vision to turn red, his body falling back on the floor and he shivered like a fish on dry land.

The adrenaline allowed him to ignore the pain for a bit, but that had been the result of having passed out and returned to consciousness. However, each part of his body hurting like this meant—

Subaru: “I’m not… dead.”

???: “Obviously. Do the dead speak? I will say, your reaction entertains me more than some second-rate jester’s half baked acts. I will grant you a compliment for that.”

Subaru: “Hah?”

The word slipped out of a dumbfounded Subaru who was doing a once over on himself as he was showered in arrogant speech.

As his understanding caught up to what had been said, Subaru slowly rose again, wary of the pain that would return.

Looking at his surroundings, Subaru could see thick branches protruding from the ground where he'd been lying— No, it was a wooden lattice.

Remembering Rem for the umpteenth time, Subaru realized he was imprisoned in a wooden cage. His head was in further chaos.

No way, did he fail to escape and was once again captured by Todd and his group? He started to fret—

???: "Do not panic. Your pursuers are not here. Although to say everything is alright would be a rather bold lie to the current predicament we are in."

Subaru: "You're…"

???: "Seriously, I never thought I would look upon your face again, Natsuki Subaru."

Like that, his companion smirked and laughed, calling the wide-eyed Subaru by name.

Because he wore a mask and so only the shape of his eyes could be seen, it was not possible to say for sure that he was smiling, yet Subaru could tell.

Trapped in the same wooden cage and situation as Subaru, that arrogant masked man laughed.

Chapter 10:
The People of Shudrak

1

Faced by that conceited and prideful smile flashing through his mask, Subaru held his breath.

There was no difference between this arrogant man and the man who had shown Subaru the way and given him the knife, when he had gotten separated from Rem at the grassland. Subaru could not say for sure because of his masked appearance, but he remembered his voice as well as his attitude. The fact that the man knew his name also proved it.

Subaru: "…"

Laid on the bare ground inside the wooden cage, Subaru's fate seemed to be continuing onwards instead of being cut off, even though his whole body was worn out, not just his hands and feet.

He had entered the forest, bringing Todd and the Imperial Soldiers together with him, summoned the witchbeast by luring it with his miasma, tried to escape by taking advantage of the opportunity that had arisen after making the witchbeast attack the soldiers, and—

Subaru: "And then, I…"

Masked man: "From what I have heard, it seems like you had been caught in a trap while loitering around the forest. Those of the village were making a great fuss over a human being caught in a trap meant for capturing beasts."

Subaru: "A trap, and village…?"

Receiving an explanation from the masked man, Subaru shook his pounding head, as he directed his attention outside of the cage.

The wooden cage that imprisoned him was of poor construction, compared to the ones he had seen in the Imperial Soldiers' camp, which were in turn made out of iron. It looked simple, or more like it had been built in a rush.

And then, outside of the cage, he saw groups of tall trees, and land that had been created by clearing a part of the forest—Subaru's impression was something close to the village in the Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary was also a village built deep inside a forest, called the Forest of Kremaldy. However, unlike the Sanctuary which had buildings such as houses and a church despite existing in a forest, the village here only had log cabins, putting it nicely, and primitive dwellings, if put in a bad way.

Subaru thought it would be better to beat around the bush by saying they preferred being naturalistic.

Besides, what was more important to Subaru was not the shabby-looking village, but who lived here.

That meant—

Subaru: "—The People of Shudraq?"

Masked man: "Huh, so you did know. Well, looking at your unsightly state, I suppose you were burdened with hardships all within a single day. Have you found the woman you had been separated from?"

Subaru: "…Yeah, thanks to you."

As the man questioned him after hearing what he had mumbled out, Subaru breathed out a deep sigh.

The masked man did not soften his confident attitude. However, he was also inside the cage, much like Subaru. Unless he was an important member of the village and had a commendable preference of entering the cage together with his captive, they would be in the same exact position.

Subaru had already been held captive at the Empire's camp, but he had gotten captured here as well.

However, there were a few points that told him that wasn't all it amounted to.

Subaru: "—The wounds on my shoulder and back… did they treat my injuries?"

Touching his shoulder and back, Subaru knew the bleeding had been stopped, judging from the sensation of something being fastened tightly against his wounds. The pungent scent that stung his nostrils felt similar to a sort of liquid medicine, such as disinfectant.

The masked man sniffed at Subaru's doubts with a, "Hmph,"

Masked man: "You would have died just like that had your injuries been left untreated. Those of the village must have been confused with how to handle you. Wondering what is the correct choice, similarly to myself."

Subaru: "Where do you get your composure from…"

Masked man: "If I must say, then it is from my soul. Rather, when will you stop exhibiting such disgraceful behavior? Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru: "It's none of your—"

Business, he tried to retort, before grinding the back of his teeth together from the pain brought by his wounds.

His injuries had been bandaged only the bare minimum as to not let Subaru die, not to close his wounds rapidly, nor to get rid of the pain. In contrast to what he had received at the Empire's camp, he was in an inferior environment.

As he thought about the Empire's camp, Subaru had a realization.

He had a reason for having to arrive at the camp as soon as possible.

Subaru: "Damn… how long has it been since I was brought here?!"

Masked man: "—. Hmm, around two hours, perhaps. I will tell you beforehand, but I am being lenient enough with you already. If I did not think much of it, then I would have woken you s—"

Subaru: "Why didn't you wake me sooner?!"

Masked man: "…"

As Subaru sank down on his trembling knees complaining, the man narrowed his eyes.

To him, it would look like Subaru was picking a fight with him, something that was uncalled for. As for why he had let Subaru stay asleep for two whole hours, who had been on the verge of death, covered with cuts and bruises upon being brought in, it was because he had deemed rest to be necessary, probably.

After that, if his act of stepping on Subaru's head had been an offense carried out by his impatience, then it could be said he was also the owner of a Vollachia-like nature. However, if so—

Subaru: "You should've reached the end of your patience sooner."

Masked man: "What a strange thing to say. Do you understand what you are saying? You are telling me that you wished I had stepped on your head sooner."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's what I'm saying! What else… ugh, kh…!"

As he continued blurting out unreasonable, irrational logic, his vision flashed red.

His whole body was aching, but what caused him the most pain was on his back, the newly created stab wound in the vicinity of his shoulder blade—the blow from Todd using the knife, who targeted the escaping Subaru the last time they met.

Thinking back, the knife he had been stabbed with was the same one he had been given by the masked man in front of him. Reuniting with him, in an injured state, due to the wound his knife had inflicted on him, seemed like an unfortunate chain of events.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “I left Rem at the Empire’s camp… Before the Imperial Soldiers I sicced against the witchbeasts return there, if I don’t go back, then Rem will…”

There was no time until Todd’s group left the forest, returned to their camp, and finished reporting everything to the higher-ups.

When the giant snake broke the soldiers’ formation into disarray, Jamal and the others had naturally dealt with the witchbeast as a priority. However, among them, only Todd had made killing Subaru his first concern.

Todd might have suspected it had been Subaru who had drawn the witchbeast towards them. And then, in order to make sure another would not be attracted, Todd had attempted to dispose of him immediately on the spot. His judgement and his ability to get things done—what he had demonstrated within that single moment could not, and should not be underestimated.

At least, Subaru had put emphasis on how he was not even related to Rem and Louis in the slightest, having intended to place the impression that any information on him could not be gleaned from them, but—

Masked man: “If there is no definite evidence, then they are capable of trying out torture.”

There was a certain terrorizing aspect to Todd and the Vollachia Empire that led Subaru to believe it.

To make sure they could not carry out such a thing, Subaru had to go back and save Rem.

But—

Subaru: “In a place like this…!”

Masked man: “—. I see. Judging from your words, that “Rem” is the woman you were searching for. It seems like you have gone through a considerable experience after you parted ways with me. Is it about the Imperial Soldiers outside the forest?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right! I was held captive by them! And then, I played a trick on them so I could run away… but, I couldn’t bring Rem with me. So…”

Masked man: “So that is the origin of your desperation. No wonder you appear to have grown accustomed to being a captive.”

Subaru: “Who looks accustomed to being a captive?! In the first place—”

The masked man was in the same predicament as him, wasn’t he?

Although Subaru was indebted to him, he nearly shouted in anger as he did not have the mental capacity to think about anything else at the moment. However, a sudden realization stunted his rash behavior.

Subaru: “…”

Amidst that exchange of harsh words, having been focused on his argument with the masked man, Subaru felt a new pair of eyes boring into the side of his face.

When he turned around, he saw two specks of light outside the cage, peeking inside from between the bars. Building a picture of the person, Subaru saw that those were green-colored eyes.

The owner of the pair of eyes blinked when Subaru’s gaze turned towards them,

???: “—Ah, he noticed Uu.”

Subaru: “Wha…”

???: “Need to tell Mii.”

Saying that, the person swiftly distanced itself from the wooden lattice. Subaru tried to stop them, calling out, “Wait!” but his words did not make it in time.

By the time he threw himself at the bars of the cage, the person had already vacated the area, sprinting away without taking any notice of him.

Subaru: “Just now, that was…”

Masked man: “A Shudraqian girl. She must be very inquisitive. Even when I was by myself, she paid a few visits and even peered inside. “Show me your face!”, “Take off your mask!”, she was saying. Her irksomeness knows no bounds…”

Subaru: “…”

The masked man grumbled as he crossed his arms, seemingly dissatisfied by the attitude of the sneaky person.

Unfortunately, Subaru did not have the mind to respond to his complaints. That was because his focus had been stolen away by the person who had just left—the young girl.

She was a young girl with brown skin, somewhere around ten years old.

She wore a light outfit that exposed her skin, having white clothes wrapped around her body. It was probably a choice of attire that had been made to adapt to this land, which gave off the feeling of a subtropical zone.

The reason for the pink tips of her uniquely colored, bob cut-esque hair was because it had been dyed, most likely. The roots of her hair were black, matching Todd’s explanation of the Shudraqians having black hair.

However, what shocked Subaru the most about the girl’s appearance was not how peculiar she looked, but the fact that was not the first time he had seen her.

Subaru: “She’s…”

The one who killed me, Subaru’s memories insisted.

She was the girl who had used a poisoned arrow to shoot Subaru in the back, resulting in his death.

With the jungle having been set on fire because of Subaru's careless remark, the girl had escaped from the land where those spreading flames blazed, glaring at Subaru with hate-filled eyes—.

Subaru connected the dots together.

Back then, the girl had been glowering at Subaru with an expression of pure abhorrence for only a single reason. —Retribution towards the cause that had incinerated both her land and allies into ashes.

Masked man: "Why did you suddenly become so meek, as if just doused with water?"

Subaru: "—ah."

As Subaru bit his lip with his head resting against the wooden lattice, the voice came out from over his shoulder.

The masked man had been sitting in the same position from the start, and watched Subaru and his violently fluctuating emotions intently.

Masked man: "You are a difficult man to grasp. In any event, it's good if you rant and rave. It will be troublesome if it gets quiet here. Idleness is a waste of energy too. Without each and every shout—"

Subaru: "Without shouting…?"

Masked man: "—From over there, they shall arrive to hear our conversation. Look."

In the direction the man had jerked his chin, Subaru turned around and opened his eyes wide.

A flame slowly illuminated the gloomy view—It was the light of a torch. The figures of several people appeared, holding the torches in hand, headed towards the cage Subaru and the man were inside.

Leading them was a woman of tall stature with a strong, well-trained body. The woman appeared to have hair originally black in color, but had been dyed red, and her dark-brown-skinned face and body were covered in designs of white paint. Her green eyes conveyed a strong sense of purpose that left a powerful impression.

Hiding behind such a woman, happened to be the little girl from before. A group of about ten people had come their way, and all of them appeared to be women.

Subaru: "…"

However, Subaru was involuntarily overpowered by that feeling of oppression.

The wild air of the group was unlike the chivalric Order of Knights of Lugunica, or even unlike what he had seen of the Vollachian military; it had a beauty like that of a troop of beasts that were commanded by instinct.

The impression was one of a group built on instinct at its core, rather than logic.

Subaru held that sort of impression on their development, and as they stood before the cage in which they had imprisoned Subaru, the women—The People of Shudraq, fixed their gazes on the two people inside the cage.

And then—

???: "Looks like you're up huh. —You lot, who the hell are you lot anyway?"

The question was asked of Subaru and the masked man together.

@floating_here

2

—Who are you?

It was relatively common in stories, but in practice, it was the kind of question that was not often asked.

A situation where someone was suspicious of your identity and questioned you was not exactly a normal event in real life. Whether on the side of the questioner or the listener, with the exception of businesses such things needed to be asked, you could potentially go your whole life without having said those words.

In that sense, it was a question Subaru was not familiar with.

Nevertheless, he could still clearly recall the first time in his life that he heard that question.

Who is Subaru and what is his purpose?

The first time Subaru was asked that, the question had come from none other than Rem, who had doubted his identity at the mansion.

Subaru: “Not you, but you lot…?”

As he tried to shake off those memories, he questioned the question.

Although they were put in the same prison, the connection between Subaru and the masked man was flimsy. Or rather, it was for convenience that they had been put in the same prison, and Subaru’s level of involvement was equal to zero.

Was it not a rather careless way of thinking, to treat them as if they were the same because of that?

Masked man: “Do not get caught up in trivial matters. I have informed them that you and I are acquainted with each other. That is the sole reason for the inquiry.”

Subaru: “You…gh! Saying we know each other… That’s taking it a bit far no?!”

Masked man: “I did not lie. If we looked upon each other, you and I would both know the identity of the other. What more is required to consider someone else a person you are acquainted with?”

Subaru: “Wh-What an unreasonable tone…”

It was an excessively high-handed way of speaking, but Subaru remembered that high-handed tone.

There was one person he knew in particular, a character who would wield that sort of logic to talk down to Subaru and other people.

Such troublesome people, the thought as to whether there were many more like them made Subaru’s head dizzy but—

???: “Oi, what are you talking about all sneaky-like. Answer the question.”

Subaru: “Ah, ah, my name is Natsuki Subaru. As you can see, a pitiful, worn-out and miserable lost child! And next, the one behind me is… umm?”

Masked man: “—Abel.”

Subaru: “Right, Abel! He wears a mask to hide his face and has an arrogant and disagreeable personality, but he also hands knives to people who are lost. He’s a playboy who’s made many girls cry due to the gap brought about by that element of unpredictability, so at this time please go ahead and introduce yourself!”

???: “Oh, ohh…? I’m Mizelda but…”

Overwhelmed by the energy with which Subaru pressed for an answer, the lead woman— Mizelda gave her name.

As Subaru took the time to look properly at the opposing party, starting with Mizelda, an extremely fitting word to describe the aura of the women came to mind. Amazons.

They were of a small tribe composed mainly of women, with strong, disciplined bodies and body paint that seemed to fit the image, and some even carried bows.

Subaru definitely recognized the People of Shudraq as Amazons.

Subaru: “To be honest, I was actually surprised that Mask Man’s name turned out to be Abel but…”

Abel: “…”

Subaru: “Let’s put that off for now! Listen to me, Mizelda-san, and everyone of Shudraq!”

Having put off the allusion to the masked man—Abel, Subaru raised his voice to the assembled women.

Judging from appearances, it was no use arguing with the women, as they seemed to have no intention of killing Subaru. That much could be surmised from how they had treated him and the fact that they showed willingness to listen to what he had to say.

In that case, if he talked with them sincerely and earnestly, they might understand.

Subaru: “You might already know this, but outside this forest an encampment of Imperial Soldiers is being established. A girl who is very important to me is being held captive there, and if I don’t return immediately it could be dangerous! So please, let me go!”

Mizelda: “…”

Subaru: “After that, the soldiers are aiming for the People of Shudraq. They said it’d be fine if they could talk but, in the worst case, they are also prepared for battle. If that happens, I…”

Will help smooth things over, he was going to say, but he shut his mouth.

If it could be achieved, there might not be a battle between the Imperial Soldiers and the People of Shudraq, but most likely, it would be impossible for Subaru to help with that.

Todd and his group recognized Subaru as the main culprit who had sprung the witchbeast trap on them. Since he could not be trusted, that would be asking too much.

Subaru had precisely weighed the options of Rem and Todd.

And he chose to harm them in order to help Rem. He could not escape the responsibility of that choice.

Subaru: “Sorry, let me correct myself. The truth is the soldiers are targeting everyone in Shudraq. There are quite a number of people in the camp, so even if you fight…”

Mizelda: “—You saying we’d lose?”

Subaru: “Ah…”

Because of the discrepancy in resources and strategies that could be taken, it was undeniable that they were at a disadvantage.

Interrupting Subaru as he tried to convey that, Mizelda spoke bluntly in a quiet voice.

Hearing that reaction, Subaru understood he had chosen the wrong words.

The People of Shudraq were likely a tribe of hunters.

Those who honed their skills and were constantly improving their abilities. The method of trying to persuade them with the point that they would lose the fight could easily set them off. It was an argument that should not be made.

Mizelda: “About the Vollachian soldiers coming, we know. But there is an old promise between those guys and us. There shouldn’t be conflict.”

Subaru: “—hk, no, wait! I don’t know anything about that promise but, even so, those guys are serious about you…”

Mizelda: “Enough!”

Subaru: "—gh!"

Subaru tried to get closer, but was struck through the wooden lattice and fell over from the impact. Mizelda had banged her fist against the bars, but it was her eyes that conveyed her indignation.

Once again, Subaru had chosen the wrong words.

Just like taking pride in a fight, old promises and the like were important to them.

Subaru had trampled on that, rudely and unknowingly. Again.

Mizelda: "The Vollachian soldiers moved their troops outside the forest to train. They have done that many times."

Subaru: "Moving troops to train… What, like a military exercise?"

It seemed that term was unfamiliar, and Mizelda frowned at Subaru's words. However, Subaru was gradually beginning to see the big picture of the trap that had been set by the Vollachian side.

It was common for Vollachian soldiers to set up encampments around the Buddheim Jungle, in the name of military exercises. The People of Shudraq were accustomed to it. By taking advantage of their inattention to those exercises, the Vollachian military was going to surround the Buddheim Jungle, and capture all of the People of Shudraq in one fell swoop.

If that was their concern—

Subaru: "Why go so far to aim for these people?"

Of course, much like Mizelda, who stood before his eyes, the People of Shudraq were an undoubtedly powerful tribe.

However, Subaru had no idea why Vollachia would have to send an army to siege the jungle and capture them.

With the current state of affairs, they looked like they would be unwilling to leave the forest. They lived, breathed, and labored here.

And yet—

Mizelda: “Neither Natsuki Subaru nor Abel speak the truth. In which case they do not suit us.”

Subaru: “—gh, are you serious?”

Mizelda: “…”

Mizelda shook her head back and forth, signaling the end of the conversation.

None of the People of Shudraq offered any counter-arguments against her dispassionate rejection. It seemed as though she was the leader of the current group of Shudraqians, if not the entire settlement.

Obeying her commands, the People of Shudraq turned their backs on Subaru’s accusations and decided to leave him and Abel be.

Still carrying their torches, the group started to leave.

Subaru: “Wait! It’s not a lie! It’s not a lie! Everyone’s in danger! The promise… The promise will be broken! Everyone’s in, Rem’s also in danger!”

Watching them disperse, Subaru desperately tried to warn them.

However, having already received the decision of their leader, the People of Shudraq would not stop. The only one who acknowledged him in the slightest was the little girl, who glanced at him periodically. Even then, she did it as she walked away.

Subaru shouted himself hoarse, hacking up bloody phlegm. Still, no one would listen to him.

Subaru: “Khoff… Damn, it. Why, is it always like this…!”

Sinking down into the ground, Subaru bemoaned his situation as he hit his forehead against the bars.

He could not even vent out his anger on the cage. His right hand was unusable due to the injury on his shoulder and his left hand still held broken fingers. Subaru was a useless person, riddled with wounds, and his speech could not even be persuasive.

If that was the case, what worth did Natsuki Subaru have left?

Subaru: "…Is it just how bad I am at giving up and my slyness?"

His eyes clouded over as he tasted despair. However, Subaru determinedly refused to admit defeat. He would grit his teeth and rise above.

If it were the Subaru of the past, he would have set his limits on a whim.

Looking back at the events that had happened until this point, he recognized that the path he had walked to get here had not been an easy one. The Subaru of the now was a little different.

He got slightly worse at giving up. That was the light that guided him on his pitch-black path.

Abel: "That was a rather pointless discussion that was had."

Subaru: "…"

Those words mixed with disdain and scorn reached Subaru, who was currently gripping on to the bars, scheming for a way to create a gap where he could slip through.

Though it was irritating, he could not retort. Subaru had in fact splendidly stepped on a taboo landmine and failed the negotiations. He was surely at the peak of thoughtlessness.

However—

Subaru: "If that was pointless, wouldn't that mean there was no point for you too? Anyway, didn't I tell you? There are dangerous people in the jungle, so don't go inside."

Abel: "Yes, that is correct. Those instructions became my guidance. I shall give my thanks for that."

Subaru: “But you still got caught even after being told that. I feel so helpless… Dammit, isn’t it loose anywhere?”

Even after hitting the wooden cage with his body, there were no signs of breakage anywhere. The log-like bars had been inserted deep into the ground individually and were sturdy enough to believe that heavy machinery had been used in its construction.

Of course, since no such machinery existed in this world, it had to be the product of manual labor. Either they had done it with a large number of people, or they had someone among their ranks with superhuman strength somewhere on the level of Emilia and Garfiel.

Subaru: “What a thing they’ve built, considering the whole place is full of girls…”

Abel: “Do not underestimate the People of Shudraq. They are a matriarchal tribe that birth only women, and have lived in this jungle for hundreds of years as descendants of war gods. They have no need for males, except to birth their children. It is even customary to abduct those males from elsewhere.”

Subaru: “They’re Amazons for real… Wait, don’t tell me the reason we’re caught is…”

Capturing males, using them as tools to make offspring.

That notion and line of thinking only existed in places like poor, mountainous villages of old. Even so, being that he was in a foreign country in another world, where Subaru’s normal would not apply, this could be a very real belief held by people.

Abel mockingly laughed at Subaru’s words however,

Abel: “Calm yourself. They choose their children. —Any child of a person who speaks falsehoods to attempt to deceive them would only end up a disgrace. That kind of offspring is not desired, I imagine.”

Subaru: “…Falsehoods”

Accepting Abel’s statement, Subaru cursed his incompetent attempt at an explanation.

The reason Mizelda and the other Shudraqians had not believed him, though in part due to his impatience, was because of his poor setup of an argument.

If one did not understand what the opponent's characteristics were, and where did their pride lay, even an argument full of sincerity and seriousness would not be any different from an insult or physical offense. It would not be different at all.

Subaru: "But, it's no lie. The Empire's soldiers are targeting the Shudraqians. And…"

Abel: "And…?"

Subaru: "As a last resort… Actually, no. As a first resort, they'll set this whole place on fire."

At Subaru's declaration, Abel for the first time quietly held his breath.

The flaming jungle had been an event that occurred after Todd had learned of the witchbeast lurking in the woods. Last time, the Imperial Army had chosen to burn away the Buddheim Jungle going off Subaru's testimony only.

If they confirmed the witchbeast's existence themselves, the forest being burnt down would be difficult to avoid.

Subaru: "…Though, if Todd and the others got wiped out, that'd be a different story."

He had already heavily considered that possibility after deciding to incite the witchbeast.

Calling upon an potentially deadly enemy was tantamount to indirect murder. Knowing this, Subaru had gone ahead with his bait plan nonetheless. In reality, people might have actually died.

Thinking about this, a lump grew heavy in his chest. His heart pained like it was being stuffed.

Nevertheless, setting aside the feelings of aversion and guilt for those murders as ones he would carry for life, he focused on another, more important point—Todd and the others had, most likely, not been completely wiped out.

Subaru: “…”

Todd’s group was around twenty people strong, all with little to no experience fighting witchbeasts.

Even so, adding together Todd’s decision-making to Jamal’s surprising assertiveness, it was impossible to hope for that one Snake witchbeast to destroy the entire group.

Naturally, it was better to believe that Todd’s group had survived, and were retreating back to the camp from the jungle.

After getting back to the camp, Todd’s group would report on Subaru’s betrayal and the existence of the witchbeast. Depending on the situation, they could still believe that Subaru was one of the People of Shudraq and have concluded that the Shudraqians had taken an offensive course of action against them.

If that were to happen, it would be the same as last time. Wanting to minimize casualties, the Imperial Soldiers would set the jungle ablaze without hesitation. —The People of Shudraq would no doubt be burnt to a crisp.

Abel: “—What is that, that look in your eye.”

Subaru: “Nothing…”

Abel commented on Subaru’s gaze. Subaru immediately looked away, but was still preoccupied with thoughts on Abel’s end in the last loop.

Most likely, Abel had been captured by the People of Shudraq, similar to the current situation. In those circumstances, considering the jungle had been set on fire, he had probably perished in flames alongside them.

It was a stretch to think that the People of Shudraq would help someone like a prisoner escape from that inferno. Worst case scenario, he had not been able to escape the cage in time and burned to death.

If that were the case—

Subaru: "—The People of Shudraq, Abel. I basically killed all of them."

His own life, Rem's life, Abel's life and the People of Shudraq's lives. He did not want to lose any of them.

That was why Subaru would stand up and devise a way to break out of his current predicament.

Abel: "Do you not understand it is useless? They are not a group so lacking that they would leave an opening for someone of your strength. Much less someone as injured as you are. Why do you exert yourself that far for just one woman?"

Abel said to Subaru in exasperation, the latter continuing to grip onto the wood, still fervently resisting.

Those words lit a fire in Subaru.

Subaru: "It's because that girl to me, isn't just one woman. That isn't nearly enough to describe her. There's no replacement. Rem is, the one and only Rem."

Abel: "…"

Subaru: "And you. Do you have the time to be picking on me constantly? I don't know why you're here, but surely you're not going "Yeah I'm finished, I'm done", after being caught are ya?"

Upon first meeting him, Abel had worn his concealment cloak and looked as though he had come to the jungle to fulfill some task. Even if that were not the case, he was the type of person to readily give away a knife. Which, according to Todd, was the sort of knife that would only be gifted by an Emperor.

To say that he was here for no reason at all would be a fact difficult to imagine and quite frankly unbelievable.

Subaru: “Sitting on the cold ground over there, what do you want to do?”

Abel: “—I was merely waiting for an opportunity.”

Abel responded deathly quietly to Subaru’s question.

His response had been unlike the goading and mocking comments previously made to Subaru. It held a different tone, sounding more like Abel’s true feelings, spilled out into words.

Subaru: “Waiting for an, opportunity? Opportunity as in, a chance? What chance were you waiting for…”

Abel: “I do not know of this chance you speak of, but I was waiting for the pieces to be set. Until they had been organized, any unnecessary action by myself would have muddied the waters. That is why I was forced to observe. Actually, I believed having the group outside the jungle make their move first was the correct move, however…”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “If they are willing to burn down this jungle, I cannot be sitting here cross-legged forever.”

Saying that, Abel uncrossed his arms and slowly stood up.

Looking at his long and slender posture, Subaru froze stiff in surprise at his words.

Abel: “What is the matter? That stupefied face of yours. That is quite a disrespectful face you are presenting me with.”

Subaru: “Dun-dunno about disrespectful but… You, believe what I said? Cause, the People of Shudraq…”

Abel: “I did not believe you. Tainting their pride, rejecting the age-old promise which is held with great respect, saying it amounts to nothing. Truly, it was a failed negotiation for the ages.”

Subaru: “Uguu…u”

He knew that there was no defense for his choice of words, so it left him no choice but to be pummeled by Abel’s assessment.

As Subaru frowned, Abel continued his speech with, “But…”. And then, through his disguise, he gazed at Subaru, who raised his head —

Abel: “I am not a part of the Shudraqians. Their pride and meaningful contracts are as good as dust. What is necessary is the truth you brought about, free of any falsehood.”

Subaru: “…What will you do if I am lying?”

Abel: “It is obvious. —You shall pay with your life.”

His words were heavy, carrying a clear distinction from those who spoke of death in jest.

Abel was earnestly telling Subaru to atone with his death, should he make a wrong move. This was neither a game, nor was it said on a whim, but it was a scene that would put his real determination to the test.

Getting that feeling from Abel, Subaru subconsciously straightened his posture.

He stopped fighting the bars of the cage before he knew it, facing Abel, who was right in front of him. Staring into Subaru’s black eyes, the menacing look inside of the piercing light in Abel’s eyes intensified.

Abel: “You are to choose each and every one of your words with utmost care, Natsuki Subaru. —Do you have the resolve to sacrifice everything, in order to save what you desire to save?”

Subaru: “…”

His question had been straightforward, unforgiving of any hesitation to answer, as well as any lies being stated.

If Subaru answered it by interweaving truth and fiction, he would be a dead man. Yes, the man called Abel held a certain power in his voice, enough to make Subaru put his trust in him.

Subaru received Abel's question in his heart.

Did he have the necessary resolve to save everything, to save what he wanted to save, at the cost of sacrificing everything else?

His answer to the question would be—

Subaru: "—I don't have the resolve to do that."

Abel: "…"

Subaru: "All I can offer is myself. —If it's just that, then I can put all of it on the line."

Instead of his right arm that had been stabbed, Subaru put the arm with broken fingers on his chest, responding to the inquiry.

It was Subaru's answer to Abel's question, containing not a speck of dishonesty.

Even if he were told to forfeit everything and everyone, there was no way he would be able to accept that.

In order to do so, this world had too many things important to Subaru, and too many radiant things he had not witnessed yet.

That was why—

Abel: "You gave me a presumptuous answer, you vexing jester."

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "However, you did not state any falsehoods. In that case, you will not be incinerated."

Subaru realized his life had been spared, after Abel stated that as a result of hearing the answer to his question.

Cold sweat suddenly began flowing out of his body, and he understood that his life was in the palm of Abel's hand.

As Subaru had evaluated Abel earlier, when they first came across each other at the grassland, he was not extraordinarily strong.

Comparing the masked man to the powerful people Subaru had either seen, or interacted with in the past and to this day, his strength did not step over the bounds of an ordinary person. However, even considering that, Subaru felt as if he just had narrowly escaped death.

A power dissimilar to pure physical strength and sword skills resided within Abel. That was what Subaru thought.

Abel: "Then, that will save us time. —Hey, you. The girl over there."

???: "Ukyan?!"

Ignoring Subaru, who was sweating heavily from having his life spared, Abel suddenly called out to someone. Immediately, a small cry was emitted from the shadows, reacting to the tone of his voice.

When Subaru spun around in surprise, he saw a girl staring shyly at them under the shade of a tree ahead of Abel's line of sight.

The girl, with the tips of her hair dyed pink, hurriedly tried to escape from the gazes of Subaru and Abel, but—

Abel: "You will lose your opportunity if you run, girl. Surely, that must not be what you intend."

Girl: "Ough…"

Beaten to the punch by Abel, the girl groaned softly. After that, with an embarrassed look on her face, she walked towards them with dejected steps.

And then, her lips trembled as she said, "Uu is, Uu is…"

Girl: "Mii said not to listen to men. But, Uu is curious. Curious about you."

Subaru: “…Me?”

Saying that, the girl who had called herself “Uu” pointed a finger in Subaru’s direction. Receiving the unexpected indication that she was curious about him, Subaru widened his eyes while the girl nodded at him.

Girl: “You were doing your best. We are in danger. But, Mii won’t listen.”

Subaru: “Ah…”

Girl: “Why were you trying so hard? You have nothing to do with us.”

Why were you interfering, even though you have nothing to do with us?

Subaru’s breath hitched for a moment, wondering if his nosiness was being pointed out. However, the girl’s words did not seem to have that purpose. She was genuinely inquisitive.

Why was Subaru desperate about not only himself, but the People of Shudraq as well?

The answer to that was something not even Subaru himself knew, but—

Subaru: “…I think, I don’t want you to have that expression on your face.”

Girl: “—?”

Subaru: “I don’t want you to have that… feeling of having to loathe your enemies, clouded by hatred.”

The girl who had shot her opponent with a poisoned arrow, watching his death to the end with hate-filled eyes.

To this day, the girl’s feelings of loathing, and his guilt from the extreme events that had led her to that point, still remained in his eyes. They were surging up and whirling around. They had morphed into thorns, causing him pain.

That… must not be piled on top of one other. It must never recur.

There was nothing better than not Returning by Death.

However, by losing his life, in a world where he had to start over, if there was a way he could bring the people involved with him onto a better path—

Subaru: "I think… the purpose of me trying my best with all my might lies there."

Girl: "…Uu doesn't understand."

Despite hearing his answer, what he had really meant had been not conveyed to the girl. It was only natural. Speak of this to someone who did not know of Return by Death, and they would not understand a thing.

And Subaru was not thinking of having her understand that, either. Knowing that such a reality had existed was an unnecessary addition to the girl's life.

Abel: "—Are you satisfied? It should be the same for me and you, to not have the time for a long chat."

Subaru: "Ye… yeah, sorry."

Uninterested in the conversation between Subaru and the girl, Abel cut it off without any hesitation.

When he turned to face the girl, she grew tense and gazed up at him, perhaps perceiving the same pressure Subaru had felt previously.

Abel: "I do not plan on blithering on with you, girl. The woman from earlier… Mizelda, was it? Bring that one here. That is the chieftain, no?"

Girl: "Mii? What will you talk about with Mii?"

Abel: “It is trivial. I merely have a suggestion to make.”

Girl: “Suggestion?”

Stared at by Subaru and the girl, who were tilting their heads, Abel nodded deeply.

And then, he smiled just as Subaru had expected, although it could not be seen under his mask,

Abel: “—Tell her that we will be undergoing the Lifeblood Ritual. It is the fastest way to persuade them.”

He told her, just like that.

Chapter 11:
The Lifeblood Ceremony

1

Subaru: “—So what’s this “Lifeblood Ritual”?”

Abel: “An absolutely unignorable custom belonging to the people of Shudraq, who place great value on pride and commitment. We will hear more about it from them. More importantly…”

Abel stared at Subaru, only giving him a rough answer to his question.

The Shudraqian girl had set off to deliver Abel’s earlier message to the chief, Mizelda, leaving only Subaru and Abel behind.

Meaning that the time they had left for a private chat was limited.

Abel: “Fill me in, you said you were taken prisoner in an encampment outside the forest, right. How did they treat you?”

Subaru: “…I’ve got to thank them for the injuries to my shoulder and back. That, and they made me do some odd jobs.”

To be precise, the odd jobs and abuse had happened in different loops, however, pressured by Abel’s intimidating atmosphere, Subaru had blurted it all out.

Abel narrowed his eyes, letting out a “Hmmm” upon hearing him, before looking at Subaru’s left hand,

Abel: “Seeing that you did not touch on the matter of your fingers, I guess that must be a different issue. It must have been done to you by the woman you were after.”

Subaru: “Ugh… What’s that got to do with this?!”

Abel: “It serves as proof that you are a fool to yearn for a woman who goes and breaks your fingers.”

It was hard to say that Abel's statement was one that described Subaru and Rem's relationship appropriately. However, Subaru had neither the time nor the obligation to dwell on it with him, and fill him in on the details.

Then, Abel quickly shifted his focus from the state of Subaru's left hand.

Abel: "So, by saying you have performed "odd jobs", you are implying that you have seen inside the camp. What is the layout like? Rack your empty brains, draw it out from your memory."

Subaru: "There were a bunch of tents, and when it comes to the number of people in the camp… Hey, what's up with that?"

Abel: "Do you not get it? It goes without saying, that the people you saw were…"

Abel snorted at Subaru after asking him one question after another, the latter's face scrunched into a frown.

However, Abel was unable to answer Subaru's question, due to the sound of several footsteps pattering towards the cage again.

They belonged to Mizelda, and her group, being dragged along by the girl.

Mizelda: "I heard everything from Utakata. She said you're both going to take the Lifeblood Ritual."

Mizelda, her hair dyed red, placed her hand on the head of the girl clinging to her leg—the girl called Utakata. Then she sent a piercing look at both Subaru and Abel.

Her gaze was filled with sharpness that rivalled the drive from earlier, when Subaru had trampled over their pride as warriors.

Mizelda: "Where the heck did you find out about the Lifeblood Ritual? It's supposed to be a rite that's passed down only for us Shudraq."

Abel: "Do not make me laugh, young chief of the Shudraq. Do you seriously think that no one knows about your traditions in this day and age? Two people, that is all it takes for a secret to leak out. Abandon your pipe dream of thinking that you are all as one."

Mizelda: "…"

Abel: "Your precious "Lifeblood Ritual" is no exception either. In actual fact, I know both what kind of ritual it is, as well as what happened in the past."

Mizelda's gaze turned stern as Abel's response grew in zeal.

Subaru could tell that the Shudraqians' expressions in their vicinity, and not just Mizelda's at that, were growing more and more tense, faced with Abel's lofty words. Subaru took a sizable heavy gulp himself.

Right now, Subaru was the only one being left behind, not knowing anything about the details of this "Lifeblood Ritual" that had been mentioned by Abel. Nevertheless, the fact remained that the ritual was an important one to Mizelda and the others, and that Abel would not welcome him making light of how they felt about it.

And so, in order to prevent the situation from causing any further confusion, Subaru spoke up, interjecting with an, "Um!".

Subaru: "Sorry to interrupt when your discussion was starting to become more lively, but can you tell me more about this "Lifeblood Ritual"? I'm probably not unrelated to it, right?"

Mizelda: "…Why do you think so?"

Subaru: "Ah, I just got threatened by this masked prick a while ago. Stuff like asking me whether I could sacrifice everything or not. "Hell no" was my answer, though."

Mizelda: "Then…"

Subaru: "All I can put on the line is myself. That guy's overestimating his influence a little too much."

Sacrificing everything. That kind of remark was only allowed to be made by people who were quite powerful.

Unfortunately for Subaru and Abel, both of them were helpless as they had been captured by the People of Shudraq, so they were not qualified to be faced with such a grandiose choice.

So, all he could wager were only whatever cards he held firmly in his hand. And as of now, "Natsuki Subaru" was his sole card.

Subaru: "But, just as Abel said, it'll be difficult for us if you won't listen. It's going to be a repetition of what I previously said, but I'll keep saying the same thing as many times as I need. At worst, I need you to at least let me out, so I can protect what's precious to me, else I will be stumped on what to do."

Mizelda: "…I see. It seems like you're qualified to undergo the Lifeblood Ritual."

As Subaru made his appeal to her, wanting to keep their conversation going, Mizelda muttered with a hushed tone.

Subaru widened his eyes at her answer, and Abel made a small noise in his throat. However, there was one person who proceeded to overreact upon hearing her chief's words.

Amidst the group that surrounded Mizelda, the person, a woman with hair dyed blue, was standing right beside her.

???: "Sister! Are you sure? Believing the words of these men…"

Mizelda: "It's not like I believe them, Taritta. I just thought it would be a waste to disregard their words."

Taritta: "Sister…"

The woman called Taritta hung her head, listening to Mizelda's response, who she had referred to as "Sister".

It seemed like they were sisters, related by blood. Once their connection had been pointed out to Subaru, he realized that they were actually quite similar, especially the fierce impression given off by their eyes.

Then, after Mizelda had rejected her younger sister's words, she looked at Subaru once more, and,

Mizelda: "You've heard about the Lifeblood Ritual. It's a ritual to make the tribe acknowledge oneself, passed down to us Shudraqians since ancient times. You can call it a coming of age ritual."

Subaru: "Coming of age… ah, it's that kind of thing. But, we aren't really…"

Abel: "A part of the Shudraq. It is needless to say that, as everyone is aware of it. Do not waste any time with your foolish antics. What matters most is the true nature of this ritual."

Subaru had made Abel seem exasperated, the former perplexed by his newfound knowledge of the ritual, that it existed so that those who completed it would be treated as an adult. Subaru's cheeks stiffened from Abel's callous words, but he understood what the masked man wanted to say.

The true nature of the coming of age ritual laid within making the group acknowledge the challenger as an adult. That meant, the true nature of the "Lifeblood Ritual" was—

Subaru: "A rite of passage… To ensure the Shudraqians would listen to us as their equals…"

Abel: "Exactly."

Affirming Subaru's belief, Abel folded his arms, glancing over at Mizelda. Soon after receiving his gaze, Mizelda drew back her chin, and then,

Mizelda: "If you are challenging the Lifeblood Ritual, then you must prepare yourselves."

Abel: "What will happen if the challenge were withdrawn? Will you claim that you will release us, right here and now? Unfortunately, I do not possess a mind so unsophisticated as to hope for something too good to be true. That goes for me, as well as this Natsuki Subaru over here."

Subaru: “Ueh?!”

With the discussion between Mizelda and Abel suddenly becoming heated, Subaru was surprised to hear himself included as one of the people who were determined to complete the ritual. However, Abel did not seem to care about what he thought.

While being shoved around by Abel’s current momentum, Mizelda asked him, “What will you do?”, he responded with,

Subaru: “…I’ll do it. If there’s no other way, then I’ll go through that ritual and make sure you listen to what I have to say. But, it’ll be a problem if the ritual’s going to take a few days…”

Mizelda: “That’s true. We do not want that, either. If that’s it…”

Taritta: “Sister, won’t the Elgina be enough, then?”

As Subaru steeled himself to undergo the ritual, Taritta offered a helpful suggestion to Mizelda, who was preoccupied with her own thoughts. Hearing her sister’s opinion, Mizelda nodded deeply, and then,

Mizelda: “Good idea. When the Lifeblood Ritual is carried out, the greatest obstacle will be chosen.”

Subaru: “The greatest obstacle… That’s…”

Mizelda: “—The Elgina.”

Mizelda repeated the word as Subaru swallowed audibly.

Utakata shrunk away, her shoulders jolting at the mention of the word, and the air around the Shudraqian women became wrapped with tension.

Since they took pride in being warriors, their reactions were more than enough to provoke Subaru’s feeling of uneasiness.

However—

Abel: “You and I both cannot back out of this. Have you hardened your resolve?”

Subaru: “You’re acting all arrogant, even though you brought the conversation to this point without asking me anything. Aren’t you doing things as you please a bit too much, just because I’m indebted to you…?”

It was true that Subaru was in Abel’s debt for the knife he had been given, but any positive, calm feelings he held towards that had been blown away by their interactions inside the cage. Though, of course, he also appreciated the fact that Abel had undone Subaru’s mistake and created a chance for the Shudraqians to listen to him.

Subaru: “As far as I know, those who hide their faces are never good people!”

Abel: “There is a reason for why I am hiding my face, however. — You are being insolent, but I will not deny that.”

If a character who hides their face happened to appear in a story, then there was a high possibility for them to be related to the main character in one way or another. In this case, Subaru would be in the position of the protagonist, but—

Subaru: “You’re thinner than my dad, and your voice is also different. More so, there’s no way I would mistake my dad for another person.”

Abel: “…It seems like you are spouting out nonsense.”

Subaru: “It’s not nonsense, it’s about my dad. He’s the most annoying and also the coolest in the world.”

Abel: “…”

Perhaps the topic did not pique Abel’s interest, as what little warmth he had in his gaze had been visibly diminished.

In fact, Subaru had only mentioned that since he was in the Empire, and a masked person had made their appearance, comparing his situation to a movie about a war in outer space from a long time ago. Subaru could probably consider Abel to be a stranger who hid his face… maybe.

Ignoring his nonsensical thoughts, Mizelda proceeded to issue orders to her fellow Shudraqians, and then,

Mizelda: “Abel and Natsuki Subaru, we will bring both of you to the Elgina. Prove to us whether you can complete the Lifeblood Ritual admirably, or not!”

As she made her declaration, the cage was opened, and Subaru and Abel were taken outside.

2

Subaru and Abel were let out of the cage without blindfolds or restraints, and the Shudraqians surrounded them and walked them outside of the village.

In the deep, dense jungle, Subaru walked as if he were groping around in the dark, which nearly caused him to trip and fall many times. But each time, one of the surrounding Shudraqians saved him.

Subaru: “Oops, my bad. You had to help me again…”

Blonde woman: “Nooo problem~. Me, I’m a strong woman so it’s toootally fine~.”

Saying that, the woman, who dyed her hair yellow, supported Subaru as he tumbled.

The woman speaking had a plump figure and soft features. She was a rare type in Shudraq, where many women had firm and muscular bodies, but she had an air about her that made her very easy to get along with.

Blonde woman: “Are your injuries okay~? I’m the one who did your medical treatment~.”

Subaru: “Oh, this was thanks to you? Ahh, I’m alright. It’s still a little, well, I mean it hurts quite a bit, but it’s better.”

Blonde woman: “Ahahaha, you’re an honest guy ain’tcha~?”

Saying that, the woman laughed in a carefree manner, and her attitude also helped Subaru. Practically speaking, she had treated his wounds, so he should say he was helped in two ways.

Subaru naturally relaxed in the presence of such a big-hearted and kind woman. But he was rather concerned about the meat bone she always carried in her other hand.

Blonde woman: “Yeah? You hungry~? Wanna have some meat~?”

Subaru: “Ah, no, I’m good. Not that I’m not hungry, but if I eat I won’t be able to move well.”

Blonde woman: “Ahaha, that’s how it is~. Besides, if your stomach is full you’ll suffer when you die too~.”

Subaru: “Haha…”

Even while gnawing on her ham bone, and despite with her gentle looks, she was Shudraqian through-and-through.

In any case, Subaru and Abel were led someplace by the Shudraq in this manner, without feeling any hostility from them.

Mizelda had been like that at first, but once Subaru and Abel resolved to face the Lifeblood Ritual, it appeared that the effect of the failure of initial negotiations had been nullified.

In other words, whatever the outcome of the trial, the rehabilitation of their image with the women was a success.

If that was the case, even if the outcome of the trial were not favorable, it might be possible to get back to the negotiating table again.

Abel: “—Your face appears like you are thinking of something convenient.”

Subaru: “…Don’t read whether a person is thinking this or that just from the color of their face and the look in their eyes. I get that you're like that, but are people in the Empire always that sort?"

Abel: "I do not know the cause of your bewilderment. Moreover I have no interest in whom you may be comparing me to. It is simply that, in order to live, humans in the Empire learn to look closely at their opponents. It is different from the Kingdom."

Subaru: "Look closely at their opponents, huh…"

Abel, who was being taken away with him, impressed Subaru with his words.

That was a lesson many people without outstanding military power should be aware of, not just the people of the Empire. For Subaru too, without careful observation of his opponents, would be unable to grasp a chance of success even under normal circumstances.

It was a tough, tough issue that he needed to be aware of from now on.

Abel: "By the way, are you not thinking of fleeing when you have the chance?"

While Subaru was entertained by those thoughts, Abel whispered a new one in his ear.

Subaru narrowed his eyes, surprised at Abel's dispassion to the matter.

Subaru: "Could you stop coming up with such weird temptations? I'm sure you can't help thinking about it, but it can't be done."

Abel: "Oho, why not? There is a better chance to escape now than when you were in that cage. If you create a good opportunity, you could slip out of the Shudraq's sight."

Subaru: "Well, I've also started running in that sort of reckless manner before, when getting too hot-headed, but…"

Abel's words were like that of a carefree criminal's, and Subaru once again surveyed his surroundings.

The depths of the forest were so dark that Subaru could only see a few meters ahead. In the end, the direction and distance of the encampment Subaru must get back to were not clear, so there was no point in escaping.

On top of that, all of the surrounding Shudraqians were much more capable than Subaru with his two injured hands.

Blonde woman: "—? What's the matter?"

Utakata: "Definitely in love with Hol. Hol is the prettiest girl in village."

Blonde woman: "Wahaa~, Me, that's so embarrassing~"

Peeping into Subaru's line of sight, Utakata spoke to the woman at her side.

The woman shook her head from side to side in denial, blushing. It was awfully cute, but there was no opening. If Subaru tried to flee, she would certainly pin him down in an instant.

Above all—

Subaru: "If I ran, what exactly would happen to you?"

Abel: "—. I see. When it comes down to it, you are that kind of fellow, hm? A detestable, idiotic, wannabe hero."

Subaru: "And?"

Averting his gaze, Abel spat out those words.

Annoyed by that declaration, Subaru snapped at the masked man's profile. However, before he could enquire about the real meaning of his words, the feet of Mizelda, who stood at the vanguard, came to a halt.

Mizelda: "We're here."

Subaru: "You say we're here, but I can't see anything…"

Even with a raised torch to illuminate the surroundings, it was only possible to see a range of a few meters at best. To Subaru, the view of the forest spread before him seemed unchanged.

What on earth is here—

Mizelda: “Go ahead and you’ll see.”

Subaru: “Whoa-aa?!”

Straining to see in the darkness, Subaru pitched forward. His back was pushed by Taritta, who was behind him, and upon taking one or two steps forward, his feet stepped on thin air.

It was proof that a foothold was missing, that a foundation to stand on was missing.

Subaru: “This feeling… Oh no, not again?!”

Without thinking, Subaru shouted as he faced the earthen void—A steep slope to be precise. He put his feet to the incline and slid down so as not to start tumbling.

He traveled down the steep slope, and, someway or another, managed to catch his breath at the bottom.

Subaru: “Ah, that was dangerous… Even though I’m untouched, what was with that all of the sudden?!”

Abel: “Move.”

There was a strong impact on his back that had barely come to a halt, causing him to stumble and fall forward in the end. When he looked over his shoulder reproachfully, Subaru saw that the one who had collided with his back was Abel.

It seemed he had been pushed down the steep incline, just like Subaru.

Subaru: “From the looks of it, it just seems like the bottom of a hole but… is this where the ritual’s happening?”

Abel: “Indeed it is. Now then, what will reveal itself? Elgina, they called it.”

Subaru: “You got any idea what that is?”

Abel: ““El” has the meaning of large but… hm.”

While Subaru and Abel conversed at the bottom of the slope where they had been dropped, something was thrown in. At Abel’s feet, a bundle of cloth rolled to a stop.

And peeking out from inside the package was—

Abel: “It’s my luggage and your garbage.”

Subaru: “Mine is luggage too!”

Subaru and Abel picked up their equipment, which had been tossed down.

Inside was the Guiltywhip, naturally, and the knife that had been stuck in Subaru’s shoulder. He had received it from Abel, but after being bounced around from one place to the next, it had returned here.

Abel also picked up his own things, a sword and a mantle, and quickly put them on.

Subaru: “But, what the hell does this mean…?”

Utakata: “Uu’s watching too! Good luck!”

Following Abel, a high-pitched voice answered Subaru’s question as he recovered his equipment. He looked over and saw Utakata waving both hands atop the slope. It looked like that girl had thrown in the equipment.

Mizelda and Taritta did not raise their voices against her actions either. It seemed this level of assistance would not hinder the ritual.

And then, at the same time—

Blonde woman: “I want you to do your best, okay~?!”

Subaru: “Seriously…?”

He saw the woman from before, her hair dyed yellow, with a calm voice and a carefree manner, smiling nonchalantly while blocking the entrance to the slope with a large boulder.

There was no mistaking it, judging from the rumbling of the earth, it could be nothing else.

Unbelievable superhuman strength. —It was clear whose hands had made that solid, improvised cage.

With the entrance closed, Subaru and Abel were enclosed in an empty valley about twenty meters across from left to right.

Opposite the entrance, darkness spread out in front of the pair. It looked like they could escape if they ran straight ahead, but such a naive idea should be abandoned.

Abel: “Natsuki Subaru, how much are you able to move your hands?”

Subaru: “Huh? My hands… they’re as bad as they look. I can’t raise my right hand, and my left hand can’t grip strongly either. Naturally, I also can’t do fine movements…Woah?!”

Abel: “Put this on your finger in best condition! There is no time.”

Abel then threw a ring from his belongings to Subaru. Without saying yes or no, Subaru accepted it immediately and put it on the middle finger of his left hand.

The ring was inlaid with a black jewel, which gave it an air of luxury, as well as a strange sense of intimidation.

Subaru: “This is?”

Abel: “A ring with magic sealed inside it. Kiss it before using it. It spews fire, but it is limited.”

Subaru: “Huh? Magic? Kiss? What do you…”

Abel: “—Here it comes.”

Unable to keep up with the stream of rapid-fire information, Subaru was hung out to dry by Abel, who readied his sword. Swept up in the moment by a determined-looking Abel, Subaru hurriedly drew his whip out.

And so, just as the preparation of their equipment was more or less completed—

Subaru: “…Oi oi, you gotta be kidding me.”

Backs facing the sloped surface that blocked their exit, Subaru stood alongside Abel as he stared in shock at the sight in front of him.

The figure that appeared as it slowly slithered along the ground from the darkness was a collection of scales. All green, shiny and dripping with water—It was a Snake witchbeast.

A witchbeast that Subaru had already encountered in this Buddheim Jungle twice before.

Subaru: “Don’t tell me, Elgina…?”

Snake witchbeast: “—ℨℨ!!”

Subaru questioned fearfully, swallowing his breath.

The Snake witchbeast opened its giant maw and, as if it were agreeing with Subaru, roared loudly. Enveloped in the fierce wind pressure of the roar, Subaru froze up.

Elgina is the Snake witchbeast, and undertaking the Lifeblood Ritual meant facing the most difficult challenge available.

If that were the case, the wall that Subaru and Abel had to break through was—

Mizelda: “Now, it is time to fight. Show that you are warriors. Shudraq’s eyes, the eyes of the hunters will see you through.”

Subaru: “Daaah! Of course it’s something like this!”

The booming voice of Mizelda reverberated around the arena, along with other blaring voices of cheer from the other Shudraqians. They stood on the surrounding cliffs, overlooking Subaru and Abel’s match against the witchbeast.

Subaru took to heart the questioningly cheerful and encouraging shouts. Meanwhile, the Snake witchbeast took a stance—

Abel: “—Here it comes, Natsuki Subaru!”

Subaru: “I can see that! Dammit, all I’ve been doing is facing trials lately!”

The Snake witchbeast surged forward ferociously as if to silence Subaru’s whining. And so, the Lifeblood Ritual had begun.

3

—The witchbeast that inhabited the Buddheim Jungle, Elgina.

According to Abel, “El” meant “Large”. Therefore, “Gina” was probably the word for “Snake”.

Or it could be that that was the People of Shudraq’s unique way of naming the witchbeast.

Nevertheless, verifying that claim and contributing to the history of cultural anthropology would have to come later.

Subaru: “The enemy in front of me comes first!”

Snapping its mouth open, the Snake witchbeast charged, baring its sharp fangs. Its body was at least ten meters in length and it resembled a large, sentient tree thrashing about in a forest.

Its torso was as thick as a bundle of logs and its flailing tail had enough power to cause serious injuries with just a graze.

As always, witchbeasts would try to kill with their physicality.

Subaru: “Bea—”

—ko. Calling out to his absent partner, Subaru grit his teeth.

The course of action Subaru would usually take when thrust into an unexpected situation was to, before even giving it a thought, let his trusted partner Beatrice handle it with her judgement and adaptability. That was what he had decided to be for the best.

In this situation however, this line of thinking would illuminate Subaru’s lack of adaptability—.

Subaru: “Firs…t.”

Abel: “Fool! This is not the time to be dawdling!”

Stiffening up at the realization of his blunder, an angry shout rang out as Subaru’s head, along with his hair, was grabbed. Bent backwards and falling, Subaru yelped before being dragged down.

Above the head of Subaru’s fallen body, the fangs of the Snake witchbeast snapped shut without mercy. An intense sound roared overhead, choking the atmosphere with bloodlust. At the same time, the resulting smoke and wind violently kicked up the soil.

Snake witchbeast: “Oooooaaaa—!”

Pushed by the strong gales, Subaru, unable to bear against it, rolled along the ground. Still, he could not stay rolling forever. Only a fool would pick their life up by the skin of their teeth and lose it immediately after.

Using the momentum to stand up, he tried to put some distance between him and the Snake witchbeast.

Abel: “Do not make me repeat myself, fool. Hold your breath.”

Subaru: “Ugoh.”

Subaru’s head was forcibly pushed down, pinning his body to the ground. Looking up, he saw a dust-covered Abel wrapping the both of them under his cloak.

However, the cloak was not that big. It was too small to wrap the two of them fully and currently, Abel was straddling Subaru's back.

Subaru: "What, what are you… Oh right, the Concealment Cloak!"

Abel: "Correct. If we stifle our breath, it will not find us immediately… Still, how unfortunate. If the Lifeblood Ritual were anything but a test of strength, we would have had a chance."

Looking out for any signs of the Snake witchbeast in the immediate vicinity, Abel's eyes were mixed with anger and frustration.

Hearing Abel's thoughts, Subaru could painfully relate to his thinking.

The contents of the Lifeblood Ritual seemed to differ with each attempt.

There must have been other trials that did not involve fighting a witchbeast. However, fighting the Snake witchbeast was the path thrust to Subaru and Abel to prove their status as warriors.

Subaru: "Both my hands are damaged and Abel's swordsmanship is second-rate… What a shit situation we're in."

Abel: "My swordsmanship is second-rate, you say? Considering your current state, your arms cannot even be used to drag me down."

Subaru: "I still got my mouth to talk back to you… Oh yeah, about before."

Inside the dense smoke, Subaru lifted his left hand up to show the ring on his middle finger.

The ring that had been thrown at him by Abel. The ring with much needed explaining. Having to kiss it, it spewing out fire, various inexplicable facts were said but—

Subaru: "How do I use it?"

Abel: "I told you before. Kiss the jewel and have it acknowledge you as its holder. The rest is akin to using magic."

Subaru: “What the hell is that. A ring that’s like a weapon from a light novel…!”

Staring at the ring in half-belief half-doubt, Subaru frowned at the explanation. Ignoring Subaru’s reaction, Abel searched for movements of the Snake witchbeast through the plumes of dust.

Although he had looked relaxed when trapped in the cage, he could not hide his tension when faced with a genuine threat. Breathing heavily, Abel tightly gripped his sword,

Abel: “Even if we get close, it is doubtful that we can pierce its scales. The places without scales… The eyes or mouth. If we do not pierce those places, or those places where the scales are thin, our attacks will be ineffective, I imagine.”

Subaru: “That’s kinda impossible if we don’t create an opening. If we could just do that somehow…”

Abel: “You create that opening. Why do you think you and I are working together?”

Subaru: “I was thinking of saying it but, being told to be a decoy really does my head in…!”

Having said that though, looking at the duo’s equipment and physical condition, those were the only roles they could realistically accept.

Subaru on support and Abel on offense. A familiar role for Subaru, as being in the role of an assistant was always Natsuki Subaru’s job.

Abel: “Currently, the witchbeast has lost sight of us. Draw its attention with fire. That will be the opening.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I get—”

Investing your resources at the start to reap the biggest reward possible was a fundamental tenet of battle.

Utilizing the cover of smoke that the witchbeast had coincidentally created, they would use their environment to their advantage to defeat the enemy.

Just as Subaru finished that thought, he felt a sense of wrongness.

The source of that wrongness was the witchbeast, Elgina.

The witchbeast that appeared to be a large snake. Its large size made it comparable to anacondas and the like. However, because it actively hunted humans, its threat level was above that of an anaconda.

And, if the witchbeast were snake-like, if its biology was similar to that of a snake—

Subaru: “—Uh.”

Trembling with fear, Subaru unconsciously pressed his lips to the ring. He then raised the ring above him and faced it towards the plumes of dust Abel was watching over.

Faster than Abel could question his actions, Subaru opened his mouth and—

Subaru: “—Goa.”

Immediately after, the Snake witchbeast aiming for Subaru and Abel burst through the smoke. And right in front of its nose, a flame exploded out.

4

—Snakes possess an organ specialized in detection of heat, called a ‘pit organ’.

As nocturnal critters inhabiting dense forests and boulder crevices, they require the ability to track their prey in the dark. That is why they are equipped with the pit organ from birth, which allows them to track and capture their prey by sensing their heat in total darkness.

In practice, this principle is known as thermography. But snakes are born with this ability, and thus have earned their moniker as an assassin cloaked in darkness.

So in turn, this giant snake was also equipped with the same pit organ.

Abel: "—!!"

It slithered near, but was met with a counterblow right as it attempted to strike. As its snout was singed with a blast of heat, it raised its neck upwards. And Abel took his chance immediately.

His swordsmanship was one of not letting any chances slide. He thrust with great might, the edge of his sharp blade poised to slide through the giant snake's underneck. The strike connected with its scales, cold steel hissing—But to no avail.

Abel: "Gh…!"

Abel groaned as the strike was deflected.

The tip of his sword had barely pierced the snake's scales. While his stance may have not been the best, his whole backbone had definitely been put into that strike.

Even so, he was not permitted entry.

Subaru: "One more!!"

Glaring at Abel as he took a step back, it attempted to strike once more, only for a fireball to smash into the side of its face.

Even though the dense forest lit up in red and its damp air sizzled, the great snake looked to have taken little to no damage. Its long tongue flicked over its burnt side, then moved its eyes to Subaru and out rose a great bellow from within its gaping maw.

Subaru: "Shit—"

A mere thirty seconds had elapsed since this fight started.

Within that timeframe alone, he had determined they possessed no chance of winning this fight. Abel's sword could not pierce through its scales, and, as hurt as he was, Subaru's petty and cheap tricks had no place in this fight.

After all, Subaru had no means of standing up to the face of overwhelming violence. Those were always his worst obstacles.

Subaru: "Goa! Goa! And again, Goa!!"

With a short wave of his hand, Subaru haphazardly shot multiple rounds of magic at the giant snake just as it was lunging at him.

Each shot blossomed with a brilliant flash of light as the fire from his ring shot past the witchbeast, smashed into the precipice of the ravine they were fighting in, and caused a collapse of debris, separating Subaru and Abel from the witchbeast, albeit temporarily.

Subaru: "Oi, Mizelda-san! This is-—"

Getting worse by the minute, he had wanted to say, but swallowed his words.

The Shudraqians, who were supposed to protect them during their difficult battle—They had instead set up arrows on their bows, their sights aimed at Subaru and co.

Subaru: "…"

With cold, hardened gazes, the Shudraqians sized up their prey.

Mizelda, Taritta, the lady with the blonde hair, and even Utakata; Without exception, all glared at Subaru's party.

Subaru: "—Oh."

Abel: "We set this in motion. There is no way to run from the "Lifeblood Ritual". If we do not kill it, forget your little wish, we shall not even be left with our own lives."

Abel informed Subaru, who was frozen stiff under the Shudraqians' cold gaze.

He understood this. It was a difference in values, in morals. He had felt this from the moment he had been flung to Vollachia, and throughout the trek he had made from the military encampment until this place. —The People of Shudraq were the kind who could sing and laugh with their fellow comrades one moment, then turn their blades on them the other.

One glance at Utakata told him everything. This was the result of being brought up with these values. It was a difference in their nurturing environment.

To ponder on or ask whether these values were right or wrong was meaningless.

Here, was not the place for an argument about ethics.

What was necessary at this moment, was to follow their rules, participate in the “Lifeblood Ritual”, and win.

Abel: “I cannot pierce its scaly hide. If cutting out its heart through its chest is impossible, should I aim for its brain through the eyes or mouth instead?”

Subaru: “That’s the thing about all living beings, the brain’s the weak spot, but… That might be a bit too hard to pull off. What we should really aim for is that area right above its pit organ. That’s our ticket to victory.”

Abel: “—Right above.”

Winning via a death blow was a hurdle too high to cross.

Then all that remained were victories earned by means other than that. Were this its nest, perhaps taking its eggs hostage to force it into surrender may have been the best, albeit the scummiest, course of action. Of course, that was not the case.

Thus, what remained was to take advantage of that one weakness all witchbeasts possessed.

Subaru: “We break its horn. The beast will submit itself to whoever breaks it. —That’s the only way.”

Abel: “And your plan—”

Subaru: “Like I said before. I’ll be the bait, and you, my suspicious hooded stranger, will be the attacker.”

Abel: “I beg your pardon? There’s naught but hooded nobility here.”

Once their brief conversation ended with one of Abel’s usual comebacks, Subaru took in a deep breath, then exhaled.

They had exchanged their objectives. It was set in stone.

Behind and overhead, the Shudraqians observed them with a frozen gaze. With targets painted on their backs, the two stood back up, a show of their resolve as warriors, and then headed back into the fight against the giant snake that had claimed the great forest as its own.

Not that they desired, nor was a warrior’s resolve a fit for them, but regardless—

Subaru: “But if that’s what it takes, that is exactly what I’ll do.”

—As his mind drifted to Rem, whom he had left behind in the encampment of the Imperial Army, Subaru put strength into his stride forward.

Snake witchbeast: “—ℨℨ!!”

Its great maw agape, the giant snake burst through the smoke.

Subaru thrust his left arm forward. The witchbeast’s yellow eyes took notice, and immediately closed its mouth and turned to the side.

While the lowest level of flames would not deal any significant damage, it seemed that Subaru had managed to make it become averse to being hit.

However, that proved to be its undoing. Subaru did not actually have the ring on his left hand, at that moment.

Subaru: “My left hand’s not aiming for the side of your face, but right above that!”

As he shouted, the tip of a whip lashed out of his left hand.

Able to use the whip with ease using either hand thanks to Clind’s teachings, Subaru opted to exert his left arm, which could be used to easily handle the weapon with merely two fingers as his crutch, as opposed to his right, which he could barely lift above from his shoulders onwards.

The tip of his whip was not aimed at the snake’s scales, but rather at the thick branches overhead. With his whip firmly wrapped around a branch, Subaru leapt into the air.

Snake witchbeast: “—ッッ!!”

Below, the snake’s maw opened, chasing after him.

Had he not folded up his knees midair, everything below his thighs would have been ripped off by the giant snake’s jaws just now.

Taritta: “—Tch, sister! That man, he’s running away!!”

Mizelda: “No—”

Taritta shouted to Mizelda, then nocked, her sight and arrow aimed at Subaru’s back as he rose out of the ravine delegated as their battlefield. Mizelda, however, put her hand on the bow and lowered it.

Mizelda’s green eyes shone like gems, fixated on Subaru,

Mizelda: “He’s not running away, he’s going to fight!!”

She shouted in cheer as Subaru whirled through the air using his whip.

His trajectory drawing circles in the sky much like an amusement park attraction, Subaru aimed the ring with his right hand at the edges of the cliff.

Subaru: “Gooooooooo—!!”

It was more of a war cry, rather than a chant.

Fire erupted from his right hand as he raised his voice, dousing the edges of the ravine in flames—The vines and branches all caught fire, turning the ravine into a sea of hellfire.

Utakata: “Ukyaaa—?!”

Blonde woman: “Wawawawa! Utakata, look out~!”

Taritta: “Aaaah, sister! Sister! Should I? Should I?!”

As they watched the ravine burn, the People of Shudraq began to panic.

Utakata and the blonde-haired Shudraqian embraced each other, while Taritta kept insisting on permission to put an arrow through Subaru. However, Mizelda took no notice of her, eyes sparkling with excitement.

She only balled her fist, her eyes nailed to Subaru.

Mizelda: “Amazing! Wonderful! This is getting exciting!”

Mizelda & Subaru: “AAAAaaAaaAaaa—!!”

Mizelda’s cheers and Subaru’s yell, prolonged right until he ran out of breath, overlapped.

The ring’s light faded, but with one final bellow, a fireball sprung forth and shot straight at the precipice of a cliff, causing a landslide of rocks, forcing the giant snake to stand down to avoid the falling debris.

However—

Snake witchbeast: “…”

The snake, while slowly drawing itself backwards, understood that it had no way to escape, its surroundings blocked off.

The fire spreading over the fallen trees, the valley was brightened with shimmering flames, to the point the light of a torch would be considered unnecessary.

More than that, the splendidly scattered flames—

Abel: “Perhaps it has a technique that allows it to see heat. —That will no longer be effective.”

The giant snake had lost sight of Abel, who had hidden himself under the cape of “Concealment” and leapt towards the beast.

Snake witchbeast: “—϶϶!!”

Sensing a dangerous presence, the snake kept a watchful eye on its surroundings. However, above its head was Subaru with miasma wafting out of his body, its heat detecting ability had been rendered useless by the flames, and Abel’s figure was unperceivable.

Moving onto a pathway with weaker flames was all the witchbeast could do.

And that was a false escape route Subaru had created, by intentionally spreading the flames—

Abel: “Haaaa—!!”

Instantaneously, Abel sprung off the cliff, assaulting the snake’s head as it attempted to flee.

The sword drew an arc as it was swung, a silver flash streaking towards the snake’s head, where its gnarled horn was located. The blade diagonally entered the center of the horn, with enough force to bisect it in one clean stroke—

Snake witchbeast: “—϶϶!!”

It was right as the snake’s horn was about to be sliced off, which would signify the battle drawing near its end due to the snake losing its sense of self.

The giant snake roared, twisting its head in as a last act of desperation, attempting to avoid the sword strike. However, a fruitless struggle was still fruitless. Acting out of desperation like that would not be effective.

—But that was only if the single attack had been that of a warrior's.

Abel: "Gh—!"

His strike dislodged by the snake's twisting head, Abel's attack stopped midway through its horn. Like that, before he could pour additional strength into his arms to resume his attack, a tail lashed out and collided with his body.

Tossed about by that impact, Abel's slender frame was blasted sideways. He rolled across the burning valley, unable to break his fall, spitting out blood from his throat as he coughed.

Abel: "Kfuh…kh, how careless of me…! I suppose it will not turn out like how it did with the fool…"

The large snake turned its face towards Abel, who was still coughing up blood, down on his hands and knees.

Catching a glimpse of its golden opportunity, the chance of a lifetime to turn the tables, the snake's eyes glinted with malice as it slithered towards Abel. Having received a blow from its tail earlier, Abel was unable to stand up, and neither did he have the time to curl up in his "Concealment".

Its jaws wide open, the snake lunged at Abel to swallow him whole.

Upon witnessing that, Subaru had no time to spare for thought.

Subaru: "I can… Return by Dea—"

It felt like it had been quite a while since he had last declared that out loud.

However, to Subaru, who had traced his own steps through the Books of the Dead inside the Pleiades Watchtower, his experience of attempting to lure witchbeasts towards himself was fresh in his memory, almost as if he had just done that the day before.

That was why he had come up with that on the spur of the moment.

Subaru: “Gih, gah—!”

Once the color faded from the world, all sound disappeared, and Subaru could no longer feel the flow of air, what visited him instead was a black shadow, streaming into that static world.

It was identical to that tremendous mass of shadows that had surged towards Subaru back then, when he had dealt with the Trials, lost Shaula, and had been overwhelmed with everything that had happened—

???: “—I love you.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, I’m sick of hearing that so many times.”

He responded to the short phrase, just like that.

Immediately after that, the palm of a hand slid into him, seizing his heart. Uncontrollable pain consumed him, making him feel as if his whole body was being ground into dust, starting from his fingertips. Rather than his vision being stained red, a force that felt like his eyeballs had exploded tore him down.

Pain that he could never become accustomed to, and the attachment and hopelessness that would not foretell when it would end.

However, once those had eventually withdrawn—

Subaru: “Eyes… on… me—!!”

Snake witchbeast: “—϶϶!!”

Right after the color, sound, smell, and sensation had returned to the world, Subaru let out a fierce shout.

Along with the reappearance of Subaru, the snake spun around, having detected the increased amount of miasma. It did not face the feeble, masked man in front of itself, despite being able to kill him at any second, but it faced Subaru, who was above its head, all smelly and full of energy.

Subaru: “It’s all up to you—!”

The moment his eyes met with the snake’s as it turned around, Subaru brought the ring on his right hand to his lips.

Letting go of the whip at once, Subaru’s body drew a parabola as he flew towards the giant snake. —In order to reach the snake’s head, he needed it to turn around and face him.

The confession of Return by Death was for that. And a very little small fraction of the reason was to not let Abel die, as well.

And then—

Subaru: “Aaaaaaaahhhh—!!”

Placing his feet on the snake’s upper jaw, Subaru jumped forward, although he looked like he was falling ungracefully.

In front of his eyes was the white horn, with the blade of a sword jammed halfway through it. Subaru twisted his body so that he was facing the hilt of the sword, guessing that the weapon would be able to sever the horn after one last push, and slammed his right fist into it with all his might.

Of course, he did not think he could cut apart the thick horn with only his fist.

However, his strike was not a simple swing of his fist. —It was a devastating blow, joined with the magic stone and loaded with magic.

Subaru: “…”

The jewel embedded in the ring cracked as it connected with the sword’s hilt, vermillion light pouring out.

The next moment, the leaking light swelled, detonating with Subaru’s right arm and the snake’s horn at the center of the explosion, and everything in his vision, as well as all sound in his ears, vanished.

Subaru: “Hh,”

Subaru spun around as he fell to the ground, rolling across it around two or three times.

His whole body hit the ground with intense force, but he could not recognize the damage it had taken. The right half of his body was scorching hot, almost as if it was on fire, and he could not even perceive his physical condition.

Subaru: “…”

His body began convulsing while he was lying flat on his back, and as yellowish stomach fluid dripped out of the corner of his mouth, Subaru felt the ground rumble.

As he was on the verge of death, his body riddled with critical injuries impossible to overlook, he did not realize that the source of that sound was the giant snake that had collapsed onto the ground beside him, having lost its head.

However—

???: “—Natsuki Subaru! Hey, Natsuki Subaru! Stand up! Stand up at once!”

Although he was barely maintaining his consciousness by a single thread that was about to be torn off, someone scrambled towards him, calling out to him and shaking his body.

Subaru did not know which part of his body the person was grabbing as he was shaken, but he was being jerked from side to side. The scorching sensation worsened, and he let out a soundless voice, fluids spilling out of every hole on his face.

He could not process anything anymore.

He wanted the person to allow him to lose hold of his consciousness. Pain, heat, a burning thirst, and suffering, every negative-sounding word that existed in the world swirled around in his head—

???: “There is something you must stand up and pronounce, no?! The woman… What will become of that woman called Rem?!”

Subaru: “—ah,”

???: “Speak with your own mouth! Your desires cannot be expressed by me!”

A strong, passionate plea was wedged into his ears, and his body was forced to sit up on top of that. Even if he were in a state where he could not comprehend whether it was his head or feet on top, he had been propped up.

He could not lift his body. Perhaps, only the upper half of his body had been held up.

Colored by SoupVEVO

???: “Listen, People of Shudraq! This is just as you are witnessing it! We have completed the Lifeblood Ritual, establishing the proof that we are warriors! If so, as our comrades-in-arms, is there not anything you all must carry out?”

????: “—Yes, I, Mizelda, the chief of the Shudraq, have seen your endeavors with my own eyes! Dear warrior, our fellow comrade! What do you desire? What will you shout out for us to do?”

Voices emerged from his side and right above him, resonating inside of his head.

It was as if his brain had lost its source of protection, the voices passing straight through into his head. Even as he could not fathom what their words meant, his shoulder was shook, his head rocked back and forth, and his soul was stirred.

???: “Answer me, Natsuki Subaru. Speak of what you desire. Squeeze and wring out all that you have.”

Subaru: “—h,”

???: “Envision what you wish for behind those closed eyelids of yours. Nothing can be granted to those who cannot disclose what they seek. —There is no food to be given to a slothful pig!”

Think up and envision what you wish for behind those closed eyelids.

He could see a silver-haired girl. A young girl with cream-colored hair, a pink-haired girl, a gray-haired youth and a golden-haired boy. He could also see many faces, the faces of other people, and,

—He was happy to see a blue-haired girl standing among them.

Subaru: “S…ave…”

???: “What is it?!”

Subaru: “Rem…”

???: “…”

Feeling as if he himself was being peeled off slowly, Subaru made out his words with his lips. The moment he said that, the force behind the hand that was gripping his shoulder, or what was most likely his shoulder, grew stronger.

And then, the owner of the voice nodded quietly with an, “I see.”

???: “You have heard him, People of Shudraq. This is the wish of your new comrade. He must have validated it by making a gamble with his own life. What he desires… If you have seen his act, then…!”

????: “Say no more. —We have dignity, as well as courage.”

Subaru: “…”

His body grew limp as it lost its strength, and his consciousness started fading into the distance.

The voice that had previously attempted to keep him awake by force did not try a second time. Slowly, gradually, and bit by bit, his consciousness faded—

???: “—You have fulfilled your duty. Leave the woman to us.”

At the very end, although he did not understand the meaning, he heard a trustworthy voice. He felt like he had heard it.

He felt like he had heard it.

Chapter 12:
The Vollachia Empire

1

—He felt like something, something horrible was swirling around him.

A vortex, indeed, it was a vortex.

The vortex was swirling round and around, spinning fast, swallowing everything.

Swirling round and around who knows where, actually, no, it was swirling around his core.

This horrible black vortex, as ferocious as a storm, as stark as a bolt of lightning, as scorching as magma, was going to end up swallowing everything in its path as it swirled around.

Perhaps it was the horrible malediction that had been sleeping for so long deep inside his body.

A malediction of “Death”, that had never been removed, always intertwined, tied together, linked forevermore.

A curse befitting greed, which would not sell his life over to anyone, as if saying: “it has already been pledged.”

These begrudged curses, which should by all means have eaten away at his life, meddled with each other, detested each other, refused to hand him over to the other, opposed each other, and fought with each other. —And as a result, they reached a conflicting answer.

The curses would have it so they would not let this vessel perish.

The vortex was swirling round and around, spinning fast, swallowing everything.

Smack-dab at the core of this vessel, which had been cursed by Beast and Dragon, swirling round and around…

2

Tents with a red flag were for medical treatment. There were five of them in total within the encampment.

Tents with a black flag were for their stores. There were twenty-five of them in total within the encampment.

Tents with a white flag were for the top brass. There were three of them in total within the encampment.

The tent with a golden flag was for the commander. There was just the one within the encampment.

He'd been given the freedom to bustle around the place, acting as a handyman. So even though the time he'd spent there had been brief, he'd managed to pay attention to various areas, surprisingly enough.

The Empire marked the second time Subaru had seen an actual military encampment.

The first time was around the time of the White Whale Battle in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Back when they'd set up around the Flugel Tree, to prepare for the White Whale's arrival, they'd prepared something like an encampment. Though that one did not have the scale this one had.

Following that, he did have some more chances to set up camp, though on a much smaller scale. That said, all of them had been far simpler; hardly any of them had been a full-blown camp, like the one in the Empire.

Thus, he thought he'd take note of things here and there, with curiosity being a helping factor.

Naturally, the Imperial Soldiers bar one did not seem to hold favorable impressions of him, so had he made any attempt to enter anywhere possessing anything of importance, they would have probably separated Subaru's head from his body, and that was just if he were lucky.

However, even having this much knowledge was…

???: "…Plenty useful. There is a world of difference between having some information and having nothing… And most of all, knowing their formation should give us a rough idea of the enemy's strength. All that is left now is…"

???: "To show our courage and strength. This I know, my brethren."

???: "Indeed, then show it. Show the pride and velour of the people of Shudraq, the valiant warriors who once swept down enemy after enemy, standing alongside the Emperor lauded as the Martial Emperor."

He felt exhausted, as if he were wearily drifting through warm water.

In the midst of this, the voices of a man and woman brimming with ambition became audible to him.

???: "…"

And many other sounds of breathing could be heard, apart from that of the man and woman the voices belonged to.

He could feel the presence of a great number of people.

He could feel something akin to the fervent, fervent zeal of a great number of people.

He could feel those things swelling up rather strangely, with him smack-dab in the middle.

???: "…Then let us begin, Shudraq! We shall raise the beacons of our counterattack from here on!!"

???: "Oooooooooh—!!"

A cacophony of battle cries echoed throughout, as if crunching the entire world into pieces.

???: "…Whoa?!"

Feeling something cold and wet squelched against his face, Subaru's whole body jumped up in surprise. While wondering what had happened, his awareness swiftly rose, and his vision was covered in white as he blinked in surprise. —Actually, no, this was the answer to the wetness he felt.

A wet cloth, that had barely been wrung, was what was covering Subaru's face.

He'd once read in a book that there existed a kind of torture where someone would cover your face with a towel and pour water on top of it. All that was needed was a towel and some water, and then it would be easy to make someone feel like they were drowning, just like in the hellish waterboarding technique.

Subaru: "I-I've got nothing that I can tell you…!"

???: "Oh, Suu, you're up. Uu too is glad you're in good spirits."

Subaru: "A… Ah…?"

Subaru could hear a voice, that for a torturer, was rather young. He shook his face in surprise. Following that, the cloth that had been covering his face slid off, allowing him to recover his normal vision.

It didn't seem like it was torture, and in his unobstructed field of view he could see the sky, with the leaves of some large trees slightly clogging his view. And then, suddenly poking her face around, as if hiding the sky was…

Subaru: "Y… You're…"

Utakata: "Utakata! Uu's your guard, Suu! And nurse! And babysitter! Thank goodness you're awake!"

Subaru: "…I still don't get what you're on about."

A black-haired girl with the ends dyed pink let out a shrill cackle and asserted herself—Right, it was Utakata.

This girl was one of the people of Shudraq, someone he'd met in their village. —The one who'd once killed Subaru with a poisoned arrow.

However, from the smile on her face, it looked like currently they'd established an amicable relationship, so he probably didn't need to worry about having his life snuffed out by a poisoned arrow like that one.

Subaru: "Of course, there's no sign of me being waterboarded… Is there? Umm…"

Utakata: "Suu, the Lifeblood Ritual, you finished it. Elgina, you beat it. Uu and Mii and Hoo, everyone and everybody surprised!"

Subaru: "…It's starting to come back to me. That's right, I was forced into the Lifeblood Ritual."

To get the people of Shudraq to acknowledge Subaru and Abel, they had challenged the Lifeblood Ritual.

It was a traditional Shudraqian rite of passage and it was used to recognize one's coming of age. The then-caught Subaru and Abel had challenged it together.

The opponent for the ritual had been a giant snake that inhabited the Buddheim Jungle, the witchbeast Elgina.

Subaru and Abel had put their lives on the line to try and break the Snake witchbeast's horn—

Subaru: "…It's no use. Dunno if it's because I was super absorbed during the fight or not, but I can't recall anything from the last half. If I'm alive, does that mean Abel managed to pull it off…?"

Utakata: "—? Suu, you don't remember? Mii, was in stitches."

Subaru: "In stitches as in laughing at my pathetic self? Gimme a break… Wait."

Frowning at Utakata who had her head tilted in puzzlement, Subaru tried to sit upright. In the process of doing that, Subaru felt a weird sensation as his right hand touched the ground.

It was not a normal kind of weird sensation, like touching a floor that was wet or walking over something rocky. No, the source of this weird sensation felt much closer to home than usual.

To put it frankly, it was not the ground, but more likely, Subaru's arm that was the source of the sensation.

Subaru: "—. Um, Utakata-san? Is something happening with my right hand?"

Utakata: "Suu's right hand? Oh yeah, it was cool! It went all like guju guju and bwahhh."

Subaru: "Guju guju and bwahhh?!"

Only getting bad feelings from those onomatopoeias, Subaru widened his eyes in surprise.

Repeatedly taking deep breaths, he settled his heart down, before readying himself for his next course of action. First, he turned his neck towards his left hand. Three of his fingers were broken. They hurt, but he felt relief from that.

Then slowly, he moved his gaze towards his right hand and—

Subaru: "… What the heck is this."

For a moment he questioned what he was looking at. That was how unnatural the circumstances were.

Originally, Subaru's right arm was covered in an unnerving, mottled, black pattern. That was an outcome of the fight with the Sin Archbishop of Lust, at the Watergate City of Priestella.

The Sin Archbishop of Lust Capella declared her own blood to be dragon's blood and had dripped it on Subaru and Crusch. As a result, Crusch received an injury that could not be healed and Subaru had a black pattern etched onto his right arm, as he took in the repulsive blood that ran over her body.

Despite all of that, it did not seem to have any negative side-effects. Subaru would wear long sleeves to hide the black pattern as they showed no signs of special behavior.

But now, that black pattern—

Subaru: "…"

Actually, this was not the time to talk about the pattern.

Subaru's right arm, from his fingertips to wrist and wrist to elbow, the distal half of his arm was clad in black, as if he were wearing a black glove.

Swallowing his saliva, Subaru tentatively touched his black right hand with his left hand.

His left hand contacted something with a soft and flabby elasticity. On the other hand, he could barely feel his right hand being touched. It felt like he was wearing a rubber glove, so its movement was sluggish as well, and—

Subaru: "…Hang on, actually, is this?"

He felt something familiar within the weird sensation. To help that feeling take shape, Subaru strongly dug his left hand's fingernails into the black hand. Forcing his fingers in, he made a motion like clawing it.

At which point, the black parts of his right hand peeled off like paint.

Yelping in surprise, Subaru bore his fingers into the peeled pieces. He then continued to peel off the remaining black areas with enough fervor to make others think that he was possessed. In the end, he peeled off all the black spots from his fingertips to the front half of his right arm, and out came a clean, fresh new right hand for Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "Oh, oh my gooooddd?!"

Utakata: “Ukyan?!”

Witnessing the shocking event unfurling just before his very own eyes, no less on his own flesh, Subaru yelled out. Surprised by his yell, Utakata fell on her bottom.

However, Subaru had no time to spare to even give a helping hand to the fallen girl.

Subaru: “Wh, wh, wh… What’s going on with my hand! This is my hand… right?”

Still in a state of shock, Subaru opened and closed the new right hand. He also hesitantly touched his own face and prodded the ground with it.

In terms of its sense of touch and movement, there were no problems. It was completely normal.

The black pattern originally on his right arm was also gone. Subaru’s clean right hand was unmistakably the same as the one which had been tossed and knocked about during his year in another world. It was the right arm of the Lolimancer.

Subaru: “Wait, who’s calling who a Lolimancer?!”

Abel: “—I thought I heard you talking, what nonsense are you spouting?”

Confused, Subaru confirmed his right hand was in good health, and somebody came along. —No, it was not just somebody. He knew only two people with such a haughty and arrogant way of speaking, and it was easy to distinguish between the two since they were separated by gender.

This was the voice of a man, namely—

Subaru: “Abel, huh? Guess you lived.”

Abel: “Naturally. I am much more level-headed than you.”

Speaking with a snort, it was Abel, wearing his unchanged disguise.

Subaru was becoming used to seeing it.

He had challenged the Lifeblood Ritual with Subaru, but somehow survived the battle with the Elgina. Rather, it should be said that it was thanks to him that Subaru had survived.

Because, most likely, it had been him who had brought down the Elgina.

Abel: "—Mm. You, how is your right arm? Are you done looking repulsive?"

Subaru: "Can you please stop talking like I can change the color of my right hand at will? This isn't a Western-style video game character creation screen y'know, I don't have that kind of freedom… The black part came off cleanly when I picked at it. Right, Utakata?"

Utakata: "Yep. Suu's right hand peeled off dry and crumbly! Gross!"

Subaru: "I get it but geez!"

His cheeks stiffened from Utakata's straightforward reaction, Subaru stuck out his right hand to Abel. Abel scrutinized it and muttered, "I see".

Abel: "In any event, I do not care if it is returned to its previous state. I certainly had not expected a strike using the entirety of the magical sealing stone ring. Everything below the wrist was gone, and I believed you to be beyond saving."

Subaru: "Wait wait wait, are you trying to scare me? Everything below who's wrist was gone?"

Abel: "Yours."

Utakata: "Suu's!"

Abel answered with his arms crossed, and Utakata cheerfully thrust his right hand into the air.

Subaru shuddered at their answer, and stared at his lovely right hand. Not only had it been blown off, his right hand was now in brand new condition.

Subaru: “Th-There you go again, saying that sort of thing. If it was gone, then what’s with this right hand?”

Abel: “It was a disgusting and curious phenomenon. Your arm was gone, and on the verge of death I had you speak your last words. I thought you were a dying man but… from your hand, black sludge flooded out.”

Subaru: “Slu-Sludge…?”

Abel: “In the blink of an eye it took shape, and formed a black arm. If you wish to ask me what happened, I would have to inquiry you back about the meaning of what you were doing to yourself.”

Pierced by his sharp look, Subaru’s breath caught in his throat.

His eyes returned to his right hand immediately, but no matter what Abel said, even Subaru did not understand what had happened to cause this result. However, the black pattern that had been engraved on his arm for some time—its disappearance was not unrelated, that much was certain.

Perhaps it was really the effect of the dragon blood at work but—

Subaru: “Still, it becomes a question of why it wasn’t triggered up until now…”

That being said, close to three months had passed since the incident where Subaru had been showered in dragon’s blood.

Afterwards, during the journey through the Augria Sand Dunes and in the midst of the deadly struggle at the Pleiades Watchtower, Subaru had walked the line between life and death more times than ever before, and in the end entered the Empire.

During that time, numerous literally deadly situations came about, however, nothing conveniently happened to heal his wounds.

So why here, why now—

Subaru: "…There's no point thinking about what I don't understand. Besides, except for my right hand, my wounds haven't healed at all."

Subaru grumbled, as he checked his whole body. The broken fingers of his left hand, the wound on his back by his scapula, the strange burns overlapping on the nape of his neck, the numerous other bruises as well, none had healed.

Honestly, since only his right hand had been healed, it raised the possibility that, much to his misfortune, it had only been healed because of the black markings.

Subaru: "And what was on my right hand is gone too, so it probably won't heal again… If you asked me to blow off my hand once more to test it, I couldn't do it."

Abel: "Ultimately, you are saying it is a situation you cannot speak of. You have a considerable amount of secrets it seems."

Subaru: "I don't want to be told that by a guy who hides his face…"

Subaru answered while making a bitter expression, and exhaled with an "ah".

He had been leisurely thinking about the strangeness of his right hand, and checking on Abel's safety, but he remembered there was something he had to prioritize over that.

He had participated in the Lifeblood Ritual, and if the end of the ritual had proceeded without him dying, that meant time had kept on flowing even while Subaru was unconscious.

That is to say, a number of hours had passed since then—

Subaru: "—Rem. That's right, Rem! I can't sit here like this, I need to…"

His goal from the start was to bring back Rem, whom he had left behind.

For that reason he had challenged the Lifeblood Ritual, but if too much time had passed for her to be rescued, the meaning of risking his life in battle would be lost just like that.

Utakata: “Ah! Suu, don’t be silly! You’ll die!”

Subaru: “Fuck that! Even if I don’t die, if Rem dies there’s no—Gghh”

Compelled by the anxiety in his heart, Subaru shifted his posture to get out of the bed.

It was at this point that Subaru noticed the apparent strangeness of the bed—He had been sleeping in a portable shrine-like box made of crossed logs seemingly taken out of a building.

From there Subaru came down with great force, groaning as pain pierced his entire body.

Subaru: “Gah, haah… hh”

Abel: “What foolishness. Did you truly think your body would recover from the verge of death simply because your right arm grew back? I told you. I witnessed you as a dying man. Do you think I erred in my judgement?”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Looking down at Subaru balled up in pain, Abel’s cold voice came down like rain.

As if to affirm Abel’s words, Subaru noticed a sensation deep within his own body, as if something was slowly but steadily oozing out.

Having experienced fatal injuries many times, Subaru knew this was a bad sign.

Like a balloon or a bucket with a hole where it should not be, with water or air or whatever else inside, it was a feeling as though what had been keeping him inflated was spilling out—

Subaru: “But, Rem needs…”

Abel: "—. In this situation still, rather than yourself, you worry about that woman? Well, fine. I knew as much. Since that was what you desired, even at the cost of your right hand."

Subaru: "…Aaah?"

Abel: "This way."

Subaru cared more about the safety of Rem, who was not here, than about his own life.

Abel let out a sigh of exasperation at Subaru's words, and jerked his chin. Immediately, he walked off without a second glance at Subaru. As if to say "Follow me".

Utakata: "Suu, can you walk? Need my shoulder?"

Subaru: "Nah, I can walk… If I used your shoulder, the height difference would just make it harder."

Seeing her expression, seeing that Utakata was worried for him, Subaru forced a smile for her sake.

And then, Subaru took a deep breath and somehow managed to stand up. Limping, he caught up with Abel walking ahead.

Abel: "…"

Abel was a little further ahead, waiting for Subaru to catch up with him.

Using rocks covered in green grass as footholds, he had a good view, looking out from near the cliff's edge. With a great deal of effort, Subaru also clambered over the large rocks and stood next to him.

And finally—

Abel: "—Look."

Once more, in accordance with the small jerk of his chin, Subaru raised his eyes.

Like that, his field of vision increased, from the high ground Subaru swept his eyes over the unbroken view and opened his mouth.

As in open-mouthed astonishment. Because over there—

Subaru: “—Ah?”

Black smoke rose up, the camp engulfed in flames—The Imperial Soldiers’ campground was swallowed up by the blaze.

3

—He could hear battle cries. They reverberated through the air along with songs of victory.

Subaru: “—mh!!”

The people who were shouting war cries, or otherwise loudly singing a song Subaru had never heard of, were a group of olive-skinned female warriors. They ran freely through the battlefield, carrying bows on their back.

Due to the surprise attack by the People of Shudraq, the Imperial Army’s camp fell into a state of ruin. The Imperial Soldiers lost the ability to counterattack and could only hope to run and escape, only to get shot one after the other.

Subaru: “This, is…”

Abel: “Go on the offensive, steal their weapons, burn their medicine and pierce a hole in their command. After losing their fingers and head, all they can do is turn tail and run without a thought of how they look. —How unsightly for so-called Sword Wolves.”

Subaru: “…”

Below, the scurrying figures of the Imperial Soldiers could be seen as they were evicted by black smoke and drawn bows.

However, escaping from the Shudraqians, whose livelihood was to hunt beasts in the jungle, would be impossible. Their arrows, which could fly far and beyond, struck the fleeing soldier’s backs, piercing their hearts with deadly accuracy.

How many had managed to escape? How many had managed to survive?

Just how many people had died?

Subaru: “This…”

Abel: “Why do you look bewildered, Natsuki Subaru? This is what you wished. The information you brought forth helped your brethren achieve these results in battle. When do you laugh, if not now?”

Looking down at the battleground-turned campsite, Subaru felt faint. On top of that, Abel strongly pushed the reality of the situation in Subaru’s face, declaring that these were the acts Subaru wished for.

Unable to bear those words, Subaru stood up with great force and grabbed Abel by the collar.

Clutching Abel with his newly-healed right arm, he glared Abel closely in the eye.

Subaru: “I wished for this? This, this kind of scene?! Don’t be stupid…”

Abel: “—Then, did you think you could fulfill your wish without any blood being spilled?”

Subaru: “—mh”

Against Subaru’s angry outburst however, Abel snapped back. Cut deep by his sharp tongue, Subaru could not retort.

Subaru: “…”

Being questioned if he thought that he could fulfill his wish without bloodshed, Subaru could not say anything in return.

He thought he could achieve it without bloodshed. He thought it was possible.

Because—

Abel: “Let me rephrase, Natsuki Subaru. —You thought you could realize your wish without any blood being spilled, aside from your own.”

Subaru: “—a”

Abel: “That thought process is moronic. A foolish and incorrigible assumption. Did you seriously think that, by spilling your blood, the warring third-party would stop? That hero mentality you strive to hold up is nothing but a ridiculous and negative quality. They are delusions of heroism.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “You are human, Natsuki Subaru. You are neither a Hero nor a Sage. Therefore, humans like you will repeatedly bleed, die, take and be taken.”

Still having his collar clutched, Abel showered Subaru with metaphorical blows, as Subaru’s grip slowly weakened.

Hit by those words, Subaru’s jaw trembled. He half-heartedly shook his head.

That was probably true.

That was a reality he could not deny. He understood that. Even so, Subaru could not accept it.

Until now, he had not lived in this world accepting things like that.

Even after coming to another world, Natsuki Subaru’s morals were still that of a Japanese high school student.

He could not acknowledge the tenets and commonsense of the battlefield as obvious, everyday facts.

Abel: “I do not desire to be a Hero. Nor do I cling to them, rely on them or entrust them. To shoulder various matters and advance towards a bountiful future. —A Hero cannot do that."

Subaru: "Wha, what… You, what do you want…"

Losing his strength, Subaru fell to his knees once again, unable to comprehend Abel.

Having challenged the Lifeblood Ritual together, he was the person Subaru had wrenched victory with. They unexpectedly matched each other's wavelengths and Subaru thought they had had some good chemistry between them. But now, he could not understand what he was thinking.

Of course he was unable to. —Against someone who refused to show their face, how could one come to understand the other.

Subaru: "From someone who doesn't even show their face, what do you…"

Abel: "My face, is it? —Then, let me show you."

He was not even given time to finish wording his question.

Hearing Subaru's thin, desperate retort, Abel put his hands on his face. As he undid the frayed knots on his wrapped mask with his fingers, a wind blew.

Blown by the strong winds, the mask energetically came undone, flying far away.

Flying, flying, flying past the battleground-turned encampment. Riding the outbound wind, it would travel elsewhere, anywhere, flying far and beyond—

Abel: "We will go to the Imperial Capital. —To the Capital where the throne I ought to be sitting in is."

Subaru: "…"

Watching the flying rags, Abel proclaimed those words of hyperbole.

Looking at that man, his face exposed, Subaru's breath quietly hitched, unable to look away.

He saw an attractive black-haired young adult with memorable slit eyes.

He seemed to be in his early to mid twenties, an age higher than that of Subaru. His features were enchanting enough to steal your gaze. And although his hair was unkempt and his cheeks were dirtied, likely due to his time spent in the jungle and the settlement, they only served to amplify his natural beauty.

His arms and legs were long and slender. And on top of that slim body rested that face, so you could say that his existence had been made to be perfectly attractive.

Even so, his most defining characteristic lied in his black eyes.

Eyes that seemed to make anything prostrate before him. Their gaze extruding an air of overpowering supremacy and intimidation.

Feeling the full frontal assault of those eyes, Subaru, already down on his knees, became consciously aware that there was another reason that made him unable to move, besides being injured and fatigued.

He understood it. That his soul knew he must submit to the person in front of him.

The reason for his overpowering presence was because of—

Abel: "—Vincent Abellux"

Subaru: "…What?"

Vincent Abellux: "That is my name. At least, until I sit on my throne once again, that is my name. Though, I believe using Abel is most sensible, going forward."

Saying that, Abel curled his lips in response to Subaru, struck with dumbfoundment.

Subaru realized too late that his smile was a terribly villainous and wild one.

Unable to understand the significance behind that name—

Mizelda: "—Abel! Subaru!"

Subaru: "—mh"

What woke Subaru from his stupor was a sharp voice.

Snapping his head to the voice, he saw a figure swinging their hands as they walked towards them. The figure was an amazon with red-dyed hair, the Shudraq's leader, Mizelda.

Mizelda relaxed her belligerent face into a friendly one.

Mizelda: "The takeover of the camp is complete. The casualties on our side are minimal and… oh? Abel, it's my first time seeing your face but, you're quite the lady-killer aren't ya…"

Subaru: "Mizelda…"

Mizelda: "Ahem… Subaru, I'm glad you're up. Dying back then, even as brethren, it did not come to mind."

Coughing away her momentary enchantment by Abel's true face, she looked at Subaru with kind eyes.

Her smile was warm, directed to those living, yet at death's doorstep. Seeing that smile, Subaru's heart and body shrunk. Like Abel, she had come to the conclusion that Subaru did not have long to live.

Additionally, her being able to put on a happy demeanor, even while he was dying, was because their viewpoints on life and death was different.

However, her stances on life and death were not the sole reason she could stay cheerful. Her next action confirmed it for Subaru.

Mizelda: "Holly, bring them here."

Holly: “Yeah yeah, I will~!”

When Mizelda beckoned, she received a cheerful reply in return.

Lumbering towards was the young woman with blonde hair, the one who’d effortlessly lifted a huge boulder—Holly was her name.

She strode forward with a smile on her face, in her arms was—

Holly: “Come on, stop being so fussy~. Poor little Kuna, she hasn’t even woken up yet after you sent her flying~”

Rem: “Like I’ll stop struggling…! Let me go! What do you want to do with me?!”

Holly: “Aww, come on, you’re not listening at all~”

Though Holly only pouted, the girl locked in her arms showed no signs of stopping her struggle.

He had been wanting to reunite with her, to hear her voice, to look at her blue hair and her lovely face, which was currently puffed up in anger. It was none other than—

Subaru: “—Rem!”

At that moment, Subaru forgot everything; the awe he felt for Abel, the pitiful condition he was in and even the sea of flames that this battlefield had been turned into. He tossed it all away and broke into a sprint.

He was painfully slow. Unable to simply leap off the boulder, he dragged his feet behind him, running barely faster than a toddler.

He dragged himself over to Holly, who had been carrying Rem and —

Rem: “You…”

Subaru: “Rem! Thank goodness you’re okay…”

Rem: “You, you were behind this? You scum!”

The moment he stretched out a hand to her, she slapped him across the face.

The sudden, sharp sound startled Holly, Mizelda and even Utakata. That slap had been strong enough to blow him off his feet.

But he did not crumble, nor did he even utter a sound of complaint.

After all, what was there to be dissatisfied about.

Rem was here. She was alive, awake, talking. That was all he wanted.

Subaru: "Rem…"

Rem: "—tch, you, you and your…"

Even though he had been slapped with quite the force, Subaru nevertheless held Rem in an embrace. He took her from Holly as if he were snatching her away into his chest, much to her initial surprise, but immediately after her face reddened with rage.

And to punch him with her back put into it, she closed her hand into a fist and—

Rem: "…You—"

She stopped, seemingly having noticed how he was covered in wounds.

Rem: "…"

Relief took away the strength in his knees, so Subaru plopped down to the ground right then and there, with Rem still held in his chest. And while in his chest, Rem looked—and was left speechless by the injuries on his shoulders, at his torso, legs, left hand and many other places.

Subaru: "…You were the one who broke my left hand, remember?"

Rem: "I know! But, everything other than that… You'll die! We have to treat you right away…"

Mizelda: “It’s useless.”

Rem fretted over his wounds as Subaru gave her a weak smile. However, her request was instantly denied by Mizelda’s curt answer.

Rem’s breath caught, startled by how sharp Mizelda’s denial was.

And as she raised her face to look, Mizelda met her gaze, then shook her head slowly.

Mizelda: “His wounds are deep. Too deep. Even if we tend to them, they won’t heal. Only his will is keeping him with us here right now, but even that looks to be fading away.”

Rem: “Fading away… But why! Why now, why all of a sudden…!”

Mizelda: “—? Because he got the woman he was fighting for back. Why else?”

She tilted her head to the side, slightly puzzled, then spelled it out for her as if it were the most natural conclusion.

Hearing that, Rem’s breath caught in her throat, and Subaru, unable to even lift his head, smiled bitterly.

Subaru: “Mizelda-san, that phrasing’s kinda…”

Mizelda: “Did I misspeak? It’s a comrade’s final wish. Of course we’d do our best to comply. You’ve earned that, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Haha, much obliged…”

Half of him found Mizelda’s frank display of trust refreshing, while the other half of him found it detestable.

He knew all too well that their appearance and words held no lie; they were to be taken at face value. Thus, he made Rem shoulder everything else, including his heavy legs.

Though in the end, he made his own heavy legs even heavier—.

Rem: “Why, why why why…”

Unable to even lift his face, he silently listened to Rem’s voice.

He noticed her voice crack, and at some point, their positions had been flipped. He realized he was being lifted up by her shoulder.

Her blue eyes dart to him, watching him carefully. In them rose suspicion, distrust and sadness.

Rem: “Why, why do you have to go so far? Why, do you…”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “Why? Tell me.”

She inquired. About why he was doing such a thing.

He recalled a memory of this, of being asked the same question once before.

What had he replied back with, upon being asked this the first time? Once more, an important person was asking this of him.

But being so close to losing consciousness, he could not recall the rest of that memory.

So, he thought, he would give this girl, this girl who was on the verge of breaking into tears, the answer that was in his heart, at this moment.

Rem: “Why?”

He had been asked.

Subaru: “—Because, I want you to be happy.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “I want you to laugh, to smile… That’s all I really want. That’s all I need.”

I want you to be surrounded by your loved ones, in a place where you’re accepted. There, I want you to be happy.

I want you to smile like you always do, that smile like a blooming flower, like the stars that twinkle in a clear night sky, far far away.

I just, want you to be happy. That’s all I ask.

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “—Eh? Wha… Wait! Wait…!”

Subaru’s body slowly grew limp.

His head hung low, his neck became unable to support it, and his upper body was about to tumble over. Rem immediately pulled him closer to herself with a firm grip, calling out to him as his head drooped down by her side.

There was no answer.

Mizelda: “—Dear comrades, may we bring peace to the spirit of this warrior.”

Mizelda straightened her posture, expressing respect and furthering it with a melody that began flowing out of her lips.

Following her song, Holly and Utakata, as well as the other People of Shudraq, the women who had previously been singing a song of victory, all started to sing in unison.

It was a requiem to bid farewell to a warrior, who had fought until his last breath, who had upheld his dignity to the very end—

Rem: “Wait… That’s, but… to me, he’s…!”

Sent off by that requiem, Subaru was on the verge of relinquishing his hold on his life. Rem shook her head at his peaceful face, unable to accept it.

Rem: “…”

She did not know why. She did not understand it, either.

In the end, what he told her had not answered her doubts.

But, she knew the answer would be lost forever at this rate, so—

Rem: “Please, don’t die in a place like this… Don’t die, don’t die, don’t die…!”

The man who had looked at her so tenderly and compassionately, despite being encased in such an unbearable, repulsive smell that she wanted to instinctively avoid. You must not lose him here, it begged and pleaded to her soul.

Like that, Rem bit her lip, longing for salvation—

???: “Aa, uu?”

Suddenly, simultaneously with the child’s groaning voice, Rem felt a hand on her shoulder.

Rem: “—ah,”

Turning around with tear-filled eyes, Rem saw that the golden-haired girl had placed a hand on her shoulder. Still looking as if she was zoning out, the girl stared at the unconscious Subaru.

When the girl mumbled out an, “Uauu,”

Rem: “…This is…?”

Little by little, a warm sensation seeped into Rem from her shoulder, where the girl had touched her.

It was soft, a feeling that slowly tickled at the depths of her heart. Rem found it difficult to breathe, unable to hold back her tears from flowing down her cheeks.

Whatever it was that seeped into her from the girl’s palm, it was stimulating a strange sensation that laid within her.

It was swelling up, and she must not bottle it up like this. She had to set it free somewhere. Commanded by her instincts, Rem released it from her whole body.

It streamed down the girl’s palm, overflowing into Rem, like that—

Subaru: “…”

Pouring into Subaru’s body, who she had been holding, with his life in the balance.

????: “—Healing Magic, I see. Even I had not anticipated this.”

Rem: “Eh…?”

A man’s voice reached Rem’s ears, leaving her dumbfounded, unable to understand what exactly had occurred. Upon raising her head, she saw a black-haired man gazing at her through narrowed eyes, his arms folded together.

Rem was about to open her mouth to question him, and—

????: “Close your mouth, woman. Although you are doing it subconsciously, it is a type of miracle, one that has been activated due to the conditions having been met. Should your mind wander, it will be broken off and lose its effectiveness.”

Rem: “…”

????: “Leave your doubts and anger until you have finished what lies in front of you. Do not let this opportunity go to waste.”

There was a weight to the man’s words that Rem could not deny, so she closed her mouth right as she was about to argue back at him.

And then, just as the man told her, she focused on sending the warmth into Subaru’s body, placed in her arms.

She had no idea what sort of effect the heat would bring forth. However, Subaru’s breathing, which had been growing weaker as he laid in her arms, had regained a little bit of its stability.

That alone was enough for the current Rem.

Rem: “…I still don’t know what you are, for now. But,”

But, she took a pause there and then, hesitating to continue what she was about to say, and closed her eyes.

I want you to be happy. Those words she had heard did not seem like a lie.

Rem: “If you don’t stay alive, then you won’t be able to see me smile.”

She called to him, almost as if she were whispering.

4

—The healing light had been activated, and Natsuki Subaru’s fatal injuries were being treated.

????: “…”

While folding his arms, the man who gazed down at the scene—the person who had called himself Vincent Abellux let out a sigh, as Subaru’s life was just barely sustained.

The man considered Subaru to be terribly unlucky, but also extremely lucky at the same time. He had won over the hearts of the Shudraqians while on the verge of death, regained what he had wanted to regain on top of that, and he had also narrowly escaped from his own death.

He could also theorize that Subaru could be shrewd, having calculated that he would survive if he took back that blue-haired girl—Rem, although the chances were narrow.

Vincent: “If he were truly that clever, then he would have had the broken fingers on his left hand healed to begin with.”

Despite having his fingers broken by Rem, and leaving them without any treatment, Subaru was a man who had wished to take her back, whilst being covered in blood and mud.

If he did all of that to make his ambition come true, it had to be admitted that Subaru’s ploy was unfathomable and otherworldly. However, the brilliance of a wise man could not be felt from him, neither did he appear to be one.

Not a slightest bit, not even a glimpse of the “hero” who was mentioned in various rumors, could be seen in that man.

Vincent: “It was supposed to be an offering to a man who would have been killed in action, however… If he survives, then I suppose that is fine as it is."

Having lost the sensation that covered his face, the man narrowed his eyes while touching his face, the wind caressing his skin for the first time in a while.

Natsuki Subaru had narrowly escaped death, and a pledge of blood had been made with the People of Shudraq. It seemed as if the group of Imperial Soldiers had not been notified of anything, but that was also within the man's expectations.

The people on this land—no, the majority of the people in the Empire had yet to realize it.

They had not realized the grave crisis, the unprecedented, political upheaval that had arrived to the great power known as the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

However—

Vincent: "Prime Minister Berstetz, you traitorous Nine Divine Generals, and you foolish Imperial Soldiers who are ignorant of the apex."

Standing on the hill where the heat-laced wind was blowing, the man—Abel turned around towards the Imperial Capital, which was located at the far west.

The heart of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, the Imperial Capital Lupugana, the land that held the throne, ought to be reclaimed—

Vincent: "—Shiver and tremble as you await my return."

And then—

Vincent: "Since you have survived, after all… I shall have you accompany me, Natsuki Subaru. —To take back the Vollachian Empire into these hands of mine."

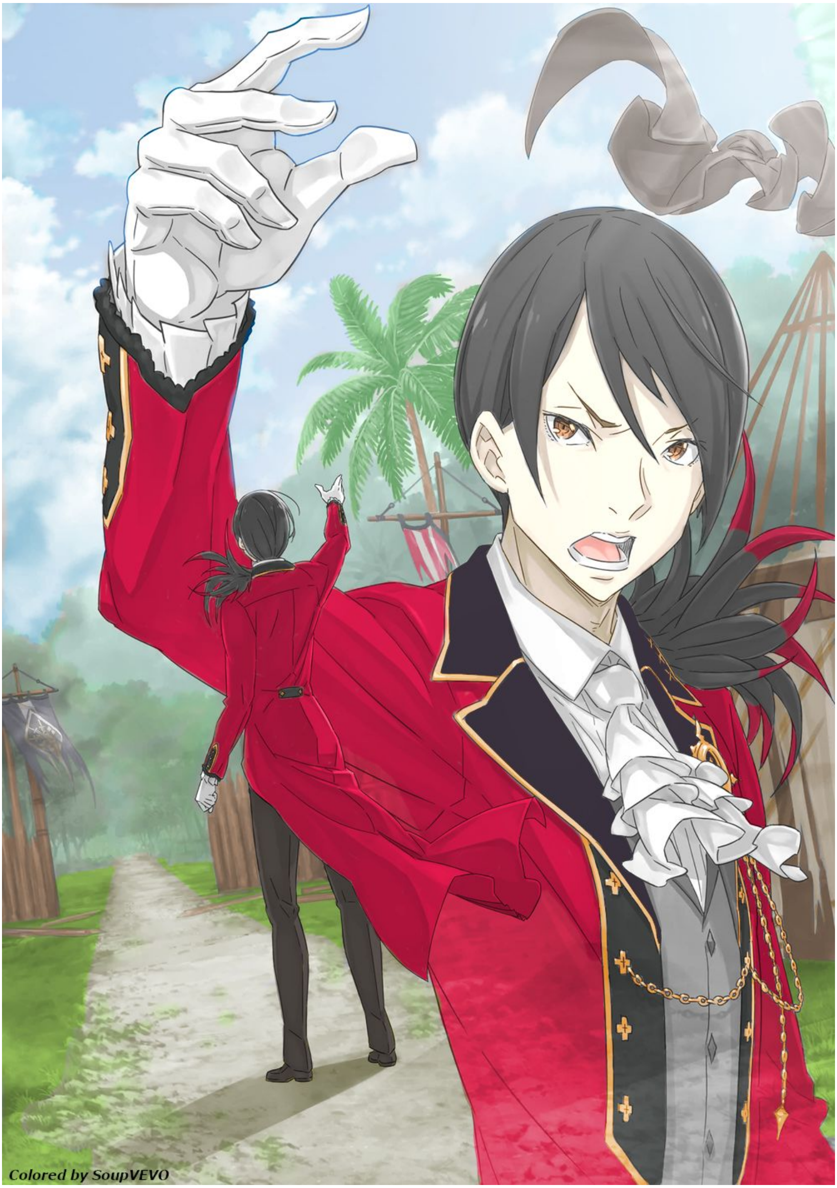
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Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy I

1

…The Graveyard of Nameless Monarchs.

At the far, far east of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, in the Buddheim Jungle, renowned to be so vast it was impossible to grasp everything it had in store, stood a lone, weathered tombstone on an empty plain.

For a place where the remains of Emperors were interred, having reigned at the top of a powerful nation, shrouded in glory, the scene was an incredibly barren one, with nary even a shred of glamour to it.

???: "…The dead cannot bring anything with them, regardless of what great deeds they achieved during their lifetime. Even Emperors cannot escape from the natural course, once reduced to mere corpses."

Before the lone tombstone, stood the slender figure of a person, their arms crossed together.

He was a man with almond-shaped eyes, and both his arms and legs were long and slender. His hair was black, which was rather rare in this world, and his voice was brimming with both ambition and majesty, to the point that its echo was wasted here, in this empty place.

Yet, the most eye-catching thing about the man's appearance—even more than the handsomeness of his face when viewed in profile—was the fact that his looks, which bore a certain tranquil fierceness to them, would attract the attention of just about everyone.

The Man: "…"

This man was alone here, gazing at the empty graveyard.

This barren graveyard was a place in the Vollachian Empire which even the Imperial Family held no knowledge of, known only to the Emperors' trusted retainers in generations past, as well as…

The Man: "…The Emperors of the past. Even though for the most part, their remains burnt to naught but ash. I sure do wonder though what they placed beneath this tombstone."

He did not mean that they had been cremated.

That boiled down to how things in the Vollachian Empire were done, regarding the Emperor Selection Ceremony, to succeed the seat of Emperor.

Past Emperors had produced many heirs, and a stark number of them were then made to compete with each other to become the next Emperor. Many of the previous Emperors had been burnt by the sword at the beginning of the war for imperial succession.

…Burnt by the flames of the Yang Sword Vollachia, which had been passed down the Emperors of Vollachia for generations.

The Man: "…"

The man quietly shook his head as he looked down at his own hands.

Then, he slowly took a step forward, and walked up to the desolate graveyard, possessing only this tombstone. The graveyard had been built atop a cliff, at the end of a grassy plain. There was a large river a little beyond—or rather, there was a grand cascade a little beyond.

It was literally the Great Cascade that proved this place was situated at the edge of the world. Gazing from afar at the sight of all of this brimming water washing away, the man lost himself in reverie for a moment.

Back when he'd learnt about this bizarre structure of the world, which everyone called the "Great Cascade", he would oftentimes wonder whether the world they were in was but an island floating atop a huge mass of water.

Even now, with his arms and legs fully-grown, and his position in the world changed, he had not cast his suspicion aside. Or perhaps the Great Cascade was imposing itself on everyone who lived on this floating island, telling them, “You are all locked in the world you live in, there can be no escape.”

The Man; “…Quell your absolute nonsense.”

The man grimaced in annoyance at what the world proclaimed, before raising his foot. He then ruthlessly placed his shoe right against the tombstone and kicked it over, showing not a shred of respect for the dead.

With a loud thud, the tombstone where the souls of the former Emperors were buried toppled over. However, the man cared not about being cursed by his own, reckless action.

He did know that the grudges of the dead, when combined with an evil spirit, could end up as a phenomenon called a “Hollow”. However, that was not possible when applied to those interred here.

That was exactly what it meant to look upon the world from the very pinnacle of the Land of the Wolf, as the Emperor of Vollachia.

The Man: “…There we go.”

The man peered down, beneath the tombstone he had kicked over as he muttered, stretching his arm out.

There was neither a coffin there, nor an urn to hold their ashes. Instead, what he found there was a sack, which he then grabbed and hauled up—And those were not the relics of the dead, nor letters of any kind.

There was naught to give to the dead, it was only the living who required things. It was precisely the one embodying that unwritten rule who was fit to be at the very top. Thus, what he found there was…

The Man: “A sword, a dagger, and… the cloak of “Concealment”, huh.”

He rifled through his sack; within it were some weapons, a magic tool, and a “Meteor”. As well as some nonperishables and camping gear. —Although only the bare necessities.

The Man: “It seems like there is no need to grieve for the fallen.”

What lay hidden in the graveyard of the former Emperors served as the final link, allowing those who fled here to stand anew.

The first thing the man reached for, inside the sack, was not the sword, nor the Meteor, but rather the white cloth wrapping them.

The man cut the cloth into strips with a knife, and wrapped them around his face. He fastened them tightly so that they would never come undone, veiling his face.

The Man: “I need to lay low for a while. Those people are never going to let up until my venerable self… No, until I return.”

Checking the feel of his masked face, the man donned the cloak, and stood up with the sword now in his hand. Slinging the sack over his shoulder, he turned away from the graveyard where those exalted souls slept, sparing it no more heed.

He was at the edge of the world, there was nowhere left to flee past this point.

The Man: “…There is no better place to start things than hither.”

And so, with the wind from the Great Cascade blowing against his back, the man turned towards the vast jungle—the Buddheim Jungle—and began walking towards it.

2

The Man: “…He’s gone, huh.”

The man silently lowered his guard after seeing the boy rush off into the forest in high spirits, the man’s knife in one hand.

It was plain as day, from the yellow-bellied way he’d approached his camp, as well as their interactions afterwards, that he wasn’t a seasoned assassin. Yet, since there was still the possibility he was an unseasoned one, he had gone and kept his guard up. However…

The Man: “I guess it was pointless to put myself so on edge when the person in question is, well…”

The man sat himself down, as he commented about the boy he’d met just a moment ago—the boy who’d said his name was Natsuki Subaru.

The man did think he was being pursued, but the only one who’d been lured to the smoulders of his campfire was a lowlife petty thief, and a lost one to boot. Things had ended up being nothing more than a small letdown.

In any case, the petty thief had told him something that was now weighing on his mind, just before he’d left.

The Man: “He came across a hunter wielding a bow in the forest… Huh.”

The man was thinking of broadening his search in a certain direction. Incidentally, the boy had pointed in the same direction. The issue at hand were the mixed emotions that had flashed through the petty thief’s eyes.

There had been unease and apprehension regarding the hunter, as well as a fair amount of fear.

The Man: “If he’d just happened to catch a glimpse of them, he would not have warned me with such a look in his eyes. Thus, he inevitably came across something worthy of his fear and apprehension… Did they attack him?”

There was no way the petty thief’s eyes would have looked like that, unless something like that had happened. Yet, if they had attacked him, that still didn’t explain how he’d survived.

Perhaps he had somehow managed to flee from his adversary’s menace thanks to a bunch of coincidences, or perhaps the one who had been attacked had been someone other than the petty thief.

Had he witnessed someone else being attacked, and informed him as gratitude for the knife?

The Man: "…'Tis naught but speculation for now. After all, who else but him could have gotten attacked? There should be no explanation if they are targeting me, regardless of the army outside the forest already being deployed."

By now, an army should have been deployed on the other side of the Buddheim Jungle, under the guise of a military exercise.

They had likely been dispatched under the pretense of negotiating with the People of Shudraq who lived in the jungle. Their true mission was to wipe out the People of Shudraq, as well as taking the head of the General hiding in the forest…

The Man: "…In other words, my head. Though, they probably cannot tell them the details, so the common soldiers must be in the dark about it."

However, they would achieve their goal if his own head were to come off in the process. And even if that did not come to pass, if they cleaned out the People of Shudraq, their plan would come to fruition.

But then again…

The Man: "…If I mess up in getting into contact with them, I probably shall not emerge unscathed."

He did not know all the details about the formation of the Imperial Soldiers outside the forest. However, there was a chance they would provoke the ire of the Shudraqians, were they to go about things too crudely.

If the mood around had gotten to the stage where they'd be keeping outsiders at bay, then things would probably get quite inconvenient for him.

His biggest concern for him, was regarding how quick the people who knew the secret about the Graveyard of Emperors would act.

The Man: “I’ve got my “Concealment”, so if anyone’s going to get caught into their net, it’s going to be that man, I reckon.”

If the man’s concerns were right, then assassins had already been set loose in the forest, who were aiming for his life.

If so, serendipitous as it may be, it had been by total fluke he’d met a man with unusual black hair here in the forest.

The knife he’d handed over to him had an engraving on it, which showed it belonged to someone from the Vollachian nobility. Thus, if an assassin killed him, chances were that they would mistake him for the wrong target, due to the colour of his hair and the things he was carrying.

The man ought to serve well as a smokescreen or decoy that would conceal him, were he to make some noise going through the forest.

The Man: “Now then…”

The man masked the traces left by his camp, shouldered his belongings, before finally donning his “Concealment” once again.

His Meteor could ultimately only trick other people’s sense of vision. It could not mask things like sound, odour and footprints. For that reason, he could nott put too much stock into it.

Keeping that in mind, the man took it upon himself to venture towards the direction Natsuki Subaru had warned him to be careful of before.

And…

The Man: “Even so, Natsuki Subaru, huh.”

The man’s brows furrowed as he recalled the man who’d given him his name as he left, all the while showing that commendable attitude.

The name was not an unfamiliar one. It was one hardly anyone would know of in the Vollachian Empire, but for those privy to news from neighbouring countries, the name was one that was inevitable to end up hearing.

You could safely say he was someone who had risen to utmost fame in the past year or so, within the neighbouring Kingdom of Lugunica. Oftentimes, the reputation that reached one’s ears came laced with lies, even if naught but a rumour. And even if the news were embellished, the degree those were flaunted about was repulsive, given just how outrageous the contents were.

Crossing into the Kingdom had been prohibited for several months now. Thus, it would be strange for someone to imitate his name and trespass into the Empire. Though not impossible.

At the very least, that was way easier to accept compared to this “Natsuki Subaru” actually making his way into the Vollachian Empire.

The Man: “I suppose I can give this some reconsideration, so long as you stay alive and are able to meet up again with the person you are looking for.”

His attitude was so different to what one would expect from someone strong. He was an outspoken rookie, who held nary a scrap of vigilance about him.

The man should never have held such expectations of him, now that this was the only impression he held.

The Man: “Am I really letting my guard down over this strange coincidence? There is no such thing as good luck showing up, unless you set it up yourself. —At least, when it comes to me.”

Admonishing himself like that, the man quickened his step and headed into the forest.

He was not qualified to boast that the world was his own, like a certain someone did. He pondered so, feeling rather irritated.

3

The Man: “…There we go.”

The man came across a contraption made of ivy, which was spread beneath him, and squatted down where he stood.

Several hours had passed since he'd parted with the self-proclaimed "Natsuki Subaru" and gone into the forest. Luckily enough, he had not caught wind of that man's dying screams, so he must have either made it, or died somewhere far away, where his screams could not reach him.

Either way, he didn't care too much about how that self-proclaimed "Natsuki Subaru" was doing. The most important thing was that he had discovered traces belonging to the People of Shudraq he had been looking for.

The Man: "Just how much do these Shudraqians know about what's going on here?"

Now that he had found what he was looking for, all that was left for him to consider was how much did these people he wanted to get in touch with know. Them not knowing about what was happening outside would be ideal if possible, however, never be optimistic.

It wasn't as if his enemies would be carrying out their schemes on an ad hoc basis. If they had been meticulous in polishing out their plan, then they would always be paying heed to the chance of revolts here and there.

The people of Shudraq would have been designated as those to most look out for, given that they had a history of having provided their aid to militant Emperors in the past. That was what he would have done, were he in the enemy's shoes, at the very least.

Therefore…

The Man: "…I am never getting an answer to this, no matter how much I brood. I need to take my chances somewhere."

The man slowly shook his head, steeled himself, and then pointed his sword at the contraption set before his eyes. It was the kind which cutting the ivy snare that had been strung out would trigger a trap covered in soil, hoisting its prey upwards.

However, the man had seen right through it, thus he didn't fall for it. Instead, the clappers dangling from atop a tree smacked together, causing a chorus of chimes to echo throughout the forest.

The contraption was the sort that would send notice that the prey had been caught, after the trap had been activated.

And so, he waited a while…

???: "Ggha, you weren't caught in it."

A woman had turned up to where the trap had been, pushing her way through the foliage with a frown on her face.

The woman was of slender build, had brown skin, and her formerly black hair was now dyed green. She was holding a dagger in her hand as she stooped down in front of the trap, and looked to be fairly proficient with it. Most likely, it was not going to be something used as a mere idle threat.

She folded her arms together and tched at the man, who had been audaciously lying in wait for her.

???: "Hey you, do you not know what this place is? If you're trespassing as you please…"

The Man: "Of course I know. Dispense the pointless chatter, it's only a waste of time."

???: "Ghwa…!"

He had cut the woman off as she had been about to threaten him, causing her to let out a strange groan. Yet, the man paid no attention to that, and brought his hand to his sword, holstered at his waist.

As soon as he did that, the woman's crestfallen gaze became sharp, however…

The Man: "Here, take it. Just do not throw it away. Make sure you keep it safe."

???: “…Wha?”

After saying that, the man unfastened his sword from his waist, along with its scabbard, and threw what could have been his weapon down at the woman’s feet. And he did not just throw down his sword, but he did likewise to his belongings and his cloak of concealment.

Since he’d already parted ways with his knife, he was now completely defenseless…

The Man: “And there’s still something else. Take this.”

???: “What are you… Whoaaaaa? A-A ring?!”

The woman’s eyes flickered in astonishment as she caught the ring he’d thrown towards her. He did like seeing confusion plaster their face, not understanding his intentions. He felt a sense of relief spreading through his long-troubled heart. But that could wait.

The Man: “Take me to your settlement. For now, I shall be captured by your people, at least until things get moving. Even if I’m to be taken captive by the Shudraq, I have no intention of taking my own life. You would do well to remember that.”

???: “S-So bossy… Like when did I even say I was one of the Shudraq…”

The Man: “I can tell by a mere glance. If you feel like hiding that fact, then get it together. I have given you my life.”

???: “Gnh, gnnnnnnnh…!”

Though it was hard to tell due to her brown skin, the woman was probably red in the face with anger. —However, since she had not attacked him at this juncture, it was safe to say his first gamble had paid off.

All that was left now was to…

The Man: “…Wait for the board to be set. To wait until the Shudraq feel like listening to me.”

He knew that the Shudraq had a rule that said “Men are to be brought to the settlement.” Men from the outside were a precious commodity for the Shudraq, a tribe of hunters made up only of women.

It was unlikely that they would treat him poorly. He could use this fact to his advantage to bring himself unto the board, if he lay low in their settlement. Though, from here on out, he would need to make more gambles. However…

The Man: “Moves ought never to be fleeting.”

The People of Shudraq, along with the Imperial Soldiers outside the forest. It would perhaps be great if he could add this self-proclaimed “Natsuki Subaru” to the cards he held—over to one side.

If this person was lucky enough to survive, and if they were to find themselves face to face again due to some kind of mistake, he would somewhat serve as a lucky charm on this board, where the pieces were swarming in.

The man let out a sigh, a wrinkle appearing between his brows, as if he were wondering whether he even needed to rely on something like that.

???: “…Let me just tell you, our chief loves a good face.”

The Man: “Are you referring to the fact that I’m hiding my face? Sorry, but I bear an utterly hideous wound. Forgive me.”

???: “As if that’s something a man who wants forgiveness says…”

The man, Vincent Abellux, followed in her wake as she led the way with some complaints. He quietly steadied his breathing and faced forward.

As if he were warning himself, that from now on, an utterly unstoppable battle would begin.

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Empty Words of an Oni

1

—Rem, the girl who has been called that, is currently confused and in turmoil.

"…"

Tightly, she tries squeezing the iron bars in front of her eyes, putting in all her strength. However, she can't make the iron cage creak, nor bend.

Although, she couldn't come up with a way to escape even had she made a bend in the bars.

There were enough people about this area for it to be called encampment, and with the presence of each of their corresponding military strength, she could not simply catch them off guard.

Not to mention, how she couldn't put any strength into her lower half.

She couldn't sneak away from their eyes like this, and search for the one she was split from—for that girl.

"My legs don't seem like they're paralyzed…"

Rem mutters so as she lowers her hips with a plop onto the iron cage's cold floor while rubbing her own legs.

Touching them with her hands like this, she still has a sense of touch in them. Since she also felt pain when she tried pinching them, it's not like her legs are paralyzed.

Simply, it was hard for her to communicate the will to move her legs, you could say they were slow to react.

It was like that in the forest as well, she had to grab onto something to force herself to stand up, she thinks that if she had something like a cane, she could walk given a bit of time.

That said, it's not like she'll always have walls or a cane at hand to grab onto either. Her outlook was dark. Will her legs ever be able to move properly again? Or will she stay this way forever, or worse—

"No good, no good. I'm thinking way too much about the bad."

Shrugging off the previous bad thoughts by shaking her head side to side, Rem admonished herself.

In all honesty, although she was in a situation where she had no basis at all for being positive, when all is said and done, she mustn't decide how bad a future that hasn't arrived would be.

Viewing things with woe and anxiety makes you liable to cast the real future in a dark shadow.

That is the truth that Rem learned in this small span of time, that transpired since she woke up having lost her Memories.

"And that person chased us wherever we went…"

Saying that, the one Rem recalled was a black-haired boy with an evil glare.

His voice which could be said to be coaxing her, as well as his attitude and demeanor, like he was softening her up, were suspiciously cold, but the reason Rem was extremely suspicious of him, was that stench that reeked of evil wrapped around him.

Without exaggerating, she could affirm the stench was an evil one that turned her nose—To the point that it was unbelievable that the person in question did not even seem to realize it, but Rem rejected it instinctively.

To put it plainly, when that stench wafts around him, not a word coming from that boy reaches Rem's heart. As if anyone would believe the words of a monster with the smell of bloody murder lingering around them, covered head to toe in blood saying 'I'm not dangerous’.

An extreme example, that was how that boy’s appearance and demeanor looked to Rem.

“—Natsuki Subaru”

She tried speaking that name which the boy called himself time and time again.

She’s strangely bothered by the feeling that name gives off. From Rem’s little knowledge, she can’t quite tell which one is the name and which one is the surname.

Since no one else had called him by his name, even that was ambiguous to Rem.

“…”

Leaving her back to the cage’s walls, Rem observed her surroundings while taking a deep breath.

Firstly, the place Rem was in was a military encampment somewhere—Since there was a unified flag raised, it probably indicates how it belongs to some country or organization, that kind of place.

With only men in the encampment, they should number around a hundred, it might be conjecture from the number of tents, but she thinks she can’t be off by too much. Their fighting strength should be about as expected.

Though the men Rem had knocked out when she woke up by the riverbank weren’t very strong.

“Except for that Eyepatch man…”

There weren’t even 10 of them gathered, however that Eyepatch man commanding them was exceptionally strong.

Of course, Rem couldn’t move her legs, and her being less than perfect condition was big, however even if she had been in perfect condition for argument's sake she's unsure whether she could have stood up to him or not.

As a result, Rem was unceremoniously pinned down, she was dragged to the camp together with the girl and Subaru, and just like that they were made captive.

After that, whether they'd concluded that she would not speak, or they'd judged her to be a dangerous person, she was put in a cage. Currently she'd been separated from Subaru and that girl.

As expected, she was worried if they—especially that girl, were safe or not. Her head was hurt and bleeding, thus she worried if she'd been given the proper first aid or not. Subaru is fine enough.

Him being in the same encampment is something she doesn't doubt from his stench, given that she can tell it's there, even from a distance.

"…In the end, who am I, where am I, and what should I even do?"

Even thinking about this, that and whatever, Rem's suspicions reach the bottom of a dead end.

It's the plain obvious—worrying about what's in front of you is a privilege only the people who have the necessary foothold to stop and look at what's in front of them have.

In that sense, Rem doesn't even have the proper preparations done to begin problem-solving.

"Rem…"

Like that, she once again tried uttering her name—no, that word.

Countless times, Natsuki Subaru had called her that. It regrettably doesn't seem like there's anyone to be found who knows her other than him. The violent people in this encampment, and of course that girl she was with weren't much for conversation partners.

Therefore, what she can confirm herself about her current self is, the name Rem that she was called by, and the feeling of disgust from the depths of her instincts for the stench enveloping Natsuki Subaru.

“For the time being, let’s set aside the name Rem. It doesn’t feel right to me.”

She did have the expectation that with time, perhaps if you happened to have some chance encounter, memories could dramatically be brought back.

It seemed like in her own case, even when seeing the people she had something to do with and her own name, she couldn’t expect that dramatic appearance.

Although, she’s definitely thought quite a lot about the possibility that this name, Rem, is from someone she has absolutely nothing to do with, and that Natsuki Subaru is a complete fiend, just like the evil stench wrapping him indicates.

That’s right, the possibility that Natsuki Subaru is an utter fiend was high.

Yet still—

“Why…”

At the grass field and at the forest, and at the cliff’s edge afterwards before they jumped into the river, in all of those places Natsuki Subaru’s face and voice, remembering their desperate state, makes Rem’s heart creak terribly.

There was no point in believing, she could have thrown out those careless words that she couldn’t bear to listen to.

And yet why, did his voice and words, the feeling of his arms around her, still not leave her.

“…Because that person, kept acting like he knew me.”

It was a connection, for she who had nothing to cling to, that just made her think she didn’t know when to let go.

Rem admonishes herself, and once again tightly grips the iron bars using her strength.

Is that girl safe? What is Natsuki Subaru doing?

Those vague thoughts were the only things her empty, unsure self was certain of.

2

“—H-Hold it there! What will you do with him?!”

As she briefly tried to stop the men dragging Natsuki Subaru away, her complaint was abruptly denied, and so he ended up being dragged away.

Stuck in the iron cage, she can’t even be granted the chance to voice her opinion on that matter. It was just, seeing Natsuki Subaru being dragged away, Rem’s chest was dominated by righteous indignation.

—Natsuki Subaru was in terrible shape.

Running through the forest covered in mud, being chased both by the hunter and giant snake, then finally having to experience barely surviving jumping into a river, it was a matter of course that he’d be in rough shape. However, seeing him again after being separate from him, the bruise marks on him and injuries on his shoulders had increased at some point.

The fingers in his left hand that were broken by Rem were obviously painful. However it was clear from how his other injuries hadn’t been given the proper aid that his treatment hasn’t been the best.

“Is it not almost like he’s a slave like that…?”

Watching Natsuki Subaru with his hands restrained, surrounded by some imposing men, in this vulnerable state wasn’t something you could do calmly. Even Rem who did not hold a good impression of him, couldn’t help but object at that miserable state of his.

Even if, say, more and more of that evil scent had increased while he was out of sight.

“What are they going to do to that person like that, and that girl too…?”

Thinking that, Rem’s chest was wracked by anxiety.

Her relationship with the men in the encampment, having turned to the worst case from the beginning, definitely couldn’t be said to be on the road for the better.

Even wishing they treat her gentlemanly, could only be said to be awfully convenient.

“If it came to it—”

She thinks that at that time, she’d rather bravely take her own life.

If she’s going to be disgraced while kept ignorant, it’d be much better to choose death, still without any attachments. Death before disgrace, that thought felt obvious to her.

If this was the voice of her inner self, she must have been this way before losing her memories. Then in that case, even if with just that single shred of faith she’d go and cross the river of death—

So long as you’re breathing, talking, and looking around with those eyes, then all’s fine.

“…”

Again, Natsuki Subaru’s voice echoed in Rem’s head.

She was about to accept suicide as if natural and yet, his words come directly to force Rem’s decision. Impudent, and so carefreely.

Who the hell does he think he is? Her anger against that man who’d been dragged away intensified.

Like this, it was almost like she was acting exactly like he wanted. Perhaps he left her these words to stop her should Rem ever find herself about to choose death.

The only ones who could do that, were those who possess strength beyond human comprehension.

Where could that scrawny powerless boy, have that kind of strength.

“Ridiculous…”

Closing her eyes, she tries to clear away that thought from her head.

However, no matter how much she tries to shake it off, or brush it off, it doesn’t disappear.

Why, because inside of her empty self that hasn’t been awake for even half a day since she lost her memories, all there is, is that boy, Natsuki Subaru.

Whether she likes it or not, if she wants to have another look at herself, she has no choice but to face Natsuki Subaru.

More and more, that makes Rem suffer, so rather than that—

“Maybe I should break the fingers from his right hand as well.”

Thinking that, Rem closed her eyes while pulling her legs closer.

She forgets the fact that she was about to bravely choose suicide just a moment ago, and instead bravely, acknowledges the discomfort she feels towards Natsuki Subaru that can’t be put to words, and closes her eyes.

Once Natsuki Subaru is back, that’s when she’ll face her problems once again.

That’s why at least, just for now, keeping herself calm, she’ll leave her problems for later.

3

—However, Natsuki Subaru didn't come back after half a day.

In fact, the men who dragged Natsuki Subaru away—The two called Todd and Jamal disappeared into the forest with about 20 men.

Though it's the result of what she pieced together from what she overheard while the encampment suddenly became boisterous, she thinks she didn't get it too wrong for the most part.

"Uuuh, aaah?"

"Yes, it's alright. You have nothing to worry about, so just stay quiet please"

Perhaps noticing the atmosphere around her filling with trepidation, the girl resting her head in Rem's lap groaned.

Fortunately, it seems the men were not so inhuman, the girl she'd been separated from received proper treatment for the injury on her forehead, and was delivered back to Rem.

That said, their treatment still did not change and they remained imprisoned, so it was dubious whether this could be called a gentlemanly approach. Although, even that approach could turn out to be far stricter.

"…"

While soothing the girl, she silently pumps herself up.

If something were to happen, and she couldn't act fast, she'd be at a complete loss. She instinctively understood that this mentality was unmistakably necessary to survive.

In that case, there was truth in that thought Rem has, however there was also meaninglessness to it.

"—This is."

At first, what Rem sensed was a faint, off-putting smell.

It was different from the one she sensed from Subaru, however, it was still a smell of the wicked kind. One that she absolutely never wanted to get used to smelling, said plainly, it was the scent of blood.

What's more, it's not a small quantity that's being spilled, it's quite a bit. A deep stench of life and death.

She was about to alert her surroundings to that, however the other party's movements were far faster. Like they were completely out of her league, it was a perfect Ambush.

"—Gaaah!"

Thus, a voice like a scream rang out, and it spread in the next moment.

The encampment turned to pandemonium, the death throes of the men every which way reverberate all throughout.

"What is… What is happening?!"

"Aaah aaah!!"

Having woken up, in the shocked Rem's arms, the girl began crying while covering her face.

She could feel how this wasn't a trivial matter. Looking at the girl's reaction, Rem decided to begin moving like she had decided to—She grasped the bar of the cage which had taken load after load from the front, put her entire body's strength into it, and forcefully twisted off that single bar.

"We can't stay here. Can you come with me?"

Using the bar she twisted off as a cane, Rem pulled on the crying girl's arm. The girl didn't stop crying nor did she respond, yet she also didn't brush off Rem's hand.

That's fine. If she ran right now, Rem couldn't currently keep up.

Flames have already spread to every place in the encampment, marked by the presence of mayhem and combat.

Therefore, what Rem needed to chose was their own safety and nothing more—

"—I found you yeees. Definitely this girl is the girl I was looking for yeees."

When Rem was about to take the girl, and escape this battlefield, a carefree female voice struck her eardrums. But, despite the mood in her voice, Rem gasped at the speed of the hand that reached for her.

She immediately tried to swipe it away, but she grabbed her held out wrist, and was pulled in instead. And just like that, she was picked up, and lifted into the air.

"P- please let me- let me go…"

"Worry and struggle not, you're safe yeees. Mask said to take you with me yeees"

"Who is that?! P-Please stop!"

She twisted her body around flailing, but that woman—Brown skinned, with hair dyed yellow, was unyielding. Rem couldn't pull her off using the strength of her arms, her opponent's strength was monstrous, that went beyond that.

"Uuuuh! Uuuuh!"

"My my, you're together with this girl too yeees? Then, you can come along yeees."

The girl is trying to face the woman carrying Rem around with her powerless arms but she doesn't seem to mind her. Just like that, the two of them, can only submit to the woman's whims.

"Why…hic."

Why? That question that she did not know who she should ask, reverberated in futility.

An answer would come neither from the woman, nor the girl.

However, the answer to the Why which Rem held, would come after this.

After being dragged away, and meeting with that boy in a near death state who rushed towards Rem—with Natsuki Subaru, it would come from his mouth.

END

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle I

—Following the disappearance of Natsuki Subaru and Rem, the group that had remained at the Pleiades Watchtower decided to mobilize a search for them.

After doing so, in order to take action as soon as possible, Emilia, with the cooperation of Beatrice and Ram, declared that they had to follow the faint trail of the two who had vanished, and reunite with them as soon as possible. However… "—It's too bad, but doin' that ain't as easy as ya think, Emilia."

"Eh?! How come, Anastasia?!"

Anastasia held up her hand, putting Emilia, who couldn't keep her impatience in check, on hold. Emilia then raised her eyebrows in astonishment due to being interrupted like that.

Although Subaru and Rem had already been gone for a few hours, they were each connected to Beatrice and Ram, so they could assure her that they were alive, but it didn't give her any peace of mind.

And though each camp had different opinions about that, they had been working together to accomplish the same thing, so she thought Anastasia and company would understand her.

"He might be weeping right about now, so we need to find Subaru and Rem as soon as we can…"

"Oh, c'mon… Don'tcha make such a face. It'll make me feel bad. I didn't really say that with any bad intentions or anythin', alright? I'm just sayin' that ya can't just leave all this behind ta go help Natsuki and the others… Our belongin's ain't light enough ta be able ta do that, got it?"

"Our belongings…" Having the word, 'belongings', said to her, Emilia quietly looked down at her hand.

Emilia understood that the thing she was referring to was not her belongings in the physical sense. However, she'd realized it once more when Anastasia said it to her.

—So this is what it means to have completed the Trials of the Pleiades Watchtower.

“Originally, at the far reaches of the Augria Sand Dunes… where the Witch of Envy was said to have been sealed away in a shrine, there are stories that talk of the Witch Cult attempting to invade it many a time. The existence of the desert, with its mystical sand barrier, as well as Miss Shaula, had served as an impediment against that, at least until now, but…” Julius said.

Ram continued, “But with the freeing of the tower, the desert's mystical barrier has dissipated, and Shaula is also gone. And now, the desert is merely a slightly threatening place, where witchbeasts are just roaming around.”

What Julius and Ram said made the reality Emilia had come to terms with a surety.

Following what they'd said, the things going on around the Pleiades Watchtower were different from before. So if such a thing came to light, the number of problems they'd have to deal with would continue to pile up like mad.

Having changed from the way it used to be, the number of obstacles preventing people from reaching the Pleiades Watchtower had gone down considerably.

“But if you're so worried about the Witch Cultists, can't we just keep all the stuff in this place a secret for a little while? Is that no good?” Emilia wondered.

“That's not too bad of a suggestion, coming from you, in fact. However, it would be quite unfeasible to do, I suppose. No matter how hard you try to keep a secret, it always somehow manages to get out from somewhere, in fact,” Beatrice replied.

Ram concurred, “Indeed, that is quite so. Back then, there was a time when you were bustling about in an attempt to conceal the Great Spirit's Magicletting Period, so there is no doubt from me that the same thing would happen again, Lady Emilia."

"B-But that was just Puck being suuuper careless, and I was bad at hiding it! I think I've grown quite a bit compared to back then, though…" Bringing up something from the past and saying it was proof she couldn't keep a secret was really embarrassing for her.

Ram had brought up something that had happened a year and a half ago when Puck caused a whole lot of chaos because of his Magicletting Period.

For beings who possessed enormous amounts of mana, not letting it out in a periodic manner led to them feeling an awful amount of discomfort. Puck had already been tormented by that condition, so he'd used his power little by little to release his stockpiled mana, resulting in the area around Roswaal's place getting covered in snow.

They had been able to turn it into a festival back then thanks to one of Subaru's outlandish ideas, but… "Unlike that lovely story, I guess we'd be hard-pressed ta turn the things that happened here inta good memories."

"So what you mean is that the big amount of snow Ram talked about came from that spiriiiit? After I'd set my cute little cursed doggy's sites on him, I was hanging around to see how it would go, and then I got reallyyy surprised when it suddenly started snowinggg out of season."

"This girl has the nerve to say such a thing like nothing even happened, I suppose… Subaru might have told you he's forgiven you, but you're making a great mistake if you think Betty will be as sentimental as him and forgive you after everything you've done, in fact."

"Oh! I'm so sorryyy," said Meili in apology to Beatrice as she stuck her tongue out and closed one of her eyes.

When she heard that, Beatrice's face puffed up with anger, but

Emilia thought Meili was actually a good girl, being able to apologize for something she felt bad for, and reflecting on her own actions. She believed she really regretted it.

“Well, well, it seems like we get sidetracked too easily. Weren’t we supposed to talk about the problems surrounding finding a way to search for Natsuki and the others as soon as possible, and bringing those issues to light?” Echidna asked.

Emilia replied, “Oh, that’s right… I’m so sorry. Err, so about those issues…”

“—What we’re going to do with the Pleiades Watchtower, how we’re going to deal with the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, and as for the rest… Making preparations to get through the desert to the neighboring town.” Ram went through each of the issues in order, making it easy to understand, bringing a finger up for each.

Nodding her head, Emilia thought about solving the issues one-by-one. For now, it’ll be what we’re going to do with the Pleiades Watchtower.

“As I’ve said before, we won’t be able to handle everything ourselves, so I think we should listen to a lot of different peoples’ viewpoints. We might be able to figure this stuff out by talking with people with lots of knowledge, like the people from the Council of Elders in the royal capital, or Roswaal.”

“Frankly, Betty is quite reluctant to give Roswaal access to this place, I suppose… The Books of the Dead have a sort of dreadfulness that would revive his evil motives, in fact.”

“But if that does happen—”

“—Kindly allow Ram to bring him back to his senses by force.” Ram interrupted Emilia and Beatrice’s conversation, insistent on that point.

Ram had been standing up, holding an elbow with her hand, and though lingering fatigue could be seen in her eyes and countenance, her gaze remained sharp, and her voice stayed lucid, displaying her unwavering conviction.

Therefore, Emilia, standing next to the daunted Beatrice, nodded her head in agreement with a “Yeah,” then continued, “Mm, I understand. I’ll leave the matter of Roswaal to you, Ram. Roswaal hasn’t really seemed to be able to go hard on Petra and Frederica these days, and I can always count on my maids because they are reaaally good at handling him. Right, Beatrice?”

Beatrice replied, “…Well… I have no doubt that Ram and Petra are Roswaal’s weaknesses, I suppose. Fine then, I get it. However, you must hold on tightly to his reins, I suppose.”

“Master Roswaal’s reins… Simply hearing that has made me ever more excited about what is to come. Kindly leave it to me.” Puffing out her chest, Ram gave a dignified nod of her head, making Emilia and Beatrice feel quite relieved.

In response to that, Anastasia gave a visibly impressed nod. “Wooow,” she said. “I ain’t sure what went on after I gave my self over ta Echidna for a while, but the relationship between Ms. Emilia and everyone looks pretty dang good. Was it fun like this when you were travelin’ together with them, Julius?”

He replied, “Though it is regrettable, I am hesitant to say whether the journey was comfortable and enjoyable considering the situation we were placed in and the duty I had been charged with. Of course, the relationship between Lady Emilia, Miss Beatrice, Miss Ram, and everyone else is certainly an appealing one, which goes without saying.”

“Well, ain’t you an earnest guy? Ah well, since I’m a pretty easygoin’ gal, maybe it ain’t so bad for my knight ta be all serious about things.” Chuckling softly, Anastasia shrugged, meeting Julius’s eyes.

Ultimately, his Name had still been snatched away, and he was still in a state where his previous self had been forgotten. Even so, she couldn’t really say if Anastasia and Julius’s new relationship was better or worse when compared to their old one.

They had accepted that this was going to be the beginning of their new relationship.

Maybe, much like how everyone had managed to remember Emilia's Name, Julius's Name might also come back after a while.

I wonder what I used to think of Julius. I've never really worried about a future like that, though. After all, I'm pretty sure the old me and the old Julius were able to become good friends, I think.

As Emilia was bringing her thoughts to a close, Echidna spoke. "The matter concerning Margrave Mathers is your side's problem. Thus, I shall leave its resolution in your hands, but apart from that… I'd like to raise a topic of discussion, that being the matter pertaining to Meili."

"Meee?" said Meili, absentmindedly, surprised that she had been called out by name, perhaps thinking it was none of her concern. Atop her head sat the former Shaula, now the mini crimson scorpion, whose tail had shot up like a pen at the same time she became surprised, which looked smile-provoking.

Eeeeh?! What did this lil' ankle-biter do?! Emilia could hear Shaula's voice ringing in her head, making her heart ache with a constant dull pain.

In any case…

"I can understand Echidna's point as well. With the freeing of the Pleiades Watchtower, the only impediment keeping people from traveling through the Augria Sand Dunes are the witchbeasts that reside there. In that case…" Ram said.

Beatrice continued, "As a possessor of the Divine Protection of Magic Manipulation, Meili is our lifeline for getting through the sand dunes, in fact."

Ram and Beatrice both had the same understanding, and when Emilia reached that very same understanding, she let out a "Yeaaah…"

Yes, that's right. With the sandy wind having died down, it's possible to travel through the sand dunes now. With Meili, who can make friends with the witchbeasts, none of us will encounter any danger along the way.

"Her value shooting through the roof was inevitable. For bringing knowledgeable people here to the watchtower, I think her presence will be of absolute necessity. To the kingdom, as well as to the Witch Cult," Echidna declared.

"…"

She could see that Meili had zipped her lips shut after hearing what Echidna had quietly pointed out.

Meili has always somehow had a calm and rational air about her, but now that Echidna pointed that out, she didn't seem to be able to laugh about it anymore.

If I'm not mistaken, if the Witch Cult wants to get to the sealed shrine of the Witch of Envy, they won't be able to do so without first dealing with the problem of the witchbeasts. And Meili has become the key to solving that problem.

"…Key." Thinking to herself, that word gave Emilia an awfully unpleasant feeling.

I really don't like the thought of someone becoming a Key to solve a problem. This is related to the thing that happened when I was just a child where I lost my mom and the forest, but—

"—If Meili cooperates with the kingdom by serving the role of keeping witchbeasts away from the Augria Sand Dunes, would you be willing to forgive her for what she's done?"

"…Oh?" Anastasia brought a hand to her mouth and looked at Emilia, who'd had such a thought, with one eye closed.

Her pale blue-green eye twinkled with intense curiosity, causing Emilia's chest to tighten. However, she firmly held her head up high, not looking away. "I've yet to be able to bring this up with you, Ms. Anastasia, but Meili was a reaaally bad girl in the past. She was just doing what her mother told her to do…but they were still things that Meili did.”

“So ya thought ya had ta make her take responsibility by lettin’ her do somethin’. And now it’s her turn ta fulfill a role that’s just right for her. I see, so that’s it.”

“I wonder… Is it even okay for me to say something like that?” Emilia nervously asked Anastasia if her idea was okay or not.

Emilia was hoping a wise and knowledgeable person like Anastasia would give her a reasonable response to what she thought. However, before Anastasia could reply, Meili called out to Emilia with a “Big Sis,” then continued, “Umm, what do you meannn? Forgive me, you say…”

“It means exactly as you heard. Keeping you down in the basement of Roswaal’s mansion was only supposed to be a temporary measure. And now you have something to do to get out from down there and live a proper life, don’t you?”

“And you say you’ll forgive me with thattt?” Meili’s large eyes rounded after hearing what Emilia said, then she shook her head. Unwilling to accept it, she said, “Wait,” with a quivering voice. “Y-You say that buttt, forgiving me should be an impossible thing. Because I… took on lottts of jobs with Elsa…”

“Subaru forgave you though, didn’t he? Beatrice and I can’t just laugh off everything you’ve done and forgive you so easily, but… I think after a good scolding, we’ll be willing to.”

“Don’t put words in Betty’s mouth, I suppose…” Beatrice retorted.

Beatrice cut into Emilia’s response to Meili’s words, but she was only being dishonest with how she felt, her face showing that she wasn’t against it, which Emilia had picked up on.

Then Emilia, who was brimming full of confidence, made a compromise. “In that case, it’ll be no good if you can’t do the same thing with people other than us. If you do bad things, you need to apologize by saying, I’m sorry. Even Roswaal is able to do it.”

“—. B-But that’s only because you and Big Brother are so hopelessly good-natured! I'm… It's not like everyone would forgive…"

"Even if they don't, you need to say you're sorry. …I know it'll be hard to make up for all the things you've done, but you have to, even if it's not all of it."

"…"

Meili, after hearing what Emilia had said, remained silent, as if she had lost her voice. Emilia noticed bewilderment, fear, and anxiety peeking into Meili's eyes, and she understood those feelings all too well, to the point that it pained her.

It was only natural to be afraid of making up for something she couldn't atone for and saying sorry without forgiveness.

Emilia, who herself was at fault for causing the Great Elior Forest to be frozen in ice, needed to free the elves who had lived in there with her, and apologize to them.

They have been sleeping for over a century because of my mistake. Even though they are kind people, they wouldn't forgive me like when I was a child, since I'm an adult now. Even so—

"You have to properly say, I'm sorry. This isn't something you can gloss over, shut your eyes to, or ignore."

"…That's such a scaryyy thing."

"Yeah, it is. So we can apologize together, then. Me, Subaru, and everyone else can do it together with you."

"—Oh." After hearing that, Meili's eyes widened with the most surprise yet.

Emilia's lips relaxed at Meili's expression, which made her look like she hadn't thought about it. I guess she thought she'd have to do a scary thing like apologizing all by herself.

Nevertheless, Emilia wouldn't let her do that. Meili would, of course, have to say what she needed to say herself. However, she wouldn't have to do that on her own.

Like on the spiral staircase in the tower when Subaru promised Meili he'd go through thick and thin together with her. I think it means something like that.

"…"

Upon touching Meili's shoulders as she hung her head, the young girl gently buried her head into Emilia's chest. Then, Emilia gave a satisfied smile as she looked at the mini crimson scorpion dancing on Meili's head. "So it's settled, then. What do you think about it, Ms. Anastasia?"

"Well, I guess there's value in extenuation, considerin' that it's an Emilia-like proposition, yeah? I unfortunately ain't got no clue what sorta jobs can be done in the desert, but…"

"I can put in a good word for it, as to its feasibility. As long as you attach value to and are willing to place your faith in the testimony of this nameless knight, that is, Lady Anastasia."

"Well, ain't you eloquent. That is my area of expertise, though, but it can't be helped, can it?" As Julius looked in Emilia's direction, Anastasia stuck her tongue out at him.

It was settled that Emilia and Anastasia and co. would work together, and while that was going on, Emilia stroked Meili's back, whose face was still buried in her chest.

"Then we have an agreement. For now, let's have Meili do her best to remain vigilant against the desert, and we should have the people from the royal capital investigate the tower as soon as possible. And as for the Witch Cult…"

"I believe it will be necessary to deploy the royal knights at some point. But it isn't particularly a problem for us though, now is it?"

"Huh?"

Emilia became full of expectation when she looked at Ram, whose words exuded a great deal of conviction. What sort of amazing idea is going to come out of her mouth? She wondered.

However, Ram simply shrugged her shoulders. “Ram is not sure what to feel if you place high expectations on her. Thinking of a solution is your job, Lady Emilia.”

“My job? Err, then how about doing our best to drive away the Witch Cult or…?”

“It’s not that. It’s about making use of Volcanica, in fact. Having completed the Trials and freed the tower, it’s possible that he might listen to your words, I suppose,” said Beatrice, grasping what Ram was trying to say.

Upon hearing that, Emilia looked far up above her. In the room above where they were talking, on the first floor, she imagined that the Divine Dragon was calmly lying in wait.

“—I wonder if Volcanica will listen to what I have to say.”

There was perhaps none, no matter how wise they may be, who could have answered the unsure Emilia’s question.

END

Volume 27

Chapters 13-24

Chapter 13:
As a Mortal

1

—Swaying, tottering, wobbling.

His consciousness wavered slowly.

Like a ship traveling across the vast ocean, it wobbled to the right, and to the left.

His consciousness teetered, its feeling heavy, and it felt as if he were going to become dizzy, despite his eyes being closed.

It was not enough. He did not have enough of everything.

Blood, flesh, bones, peace, anger, and happiness. Of those various things that formed a human, there was not enough.

He did not have enough of them, almost as if everything had been spilled somewhere, falling apart like droplets.

He had to gather them up, he thought.

He had to pick them up again, pack them in again, and then he had to stand up once again.

There was a place where he had to go. He had a desire that yearned to go there.

There was a reason why he had to live. He had a wish that cried out, I want to live.

That’s why, that’s why, that’s why…

Even if there was not enough of everything in him, even if he remained flawed and imperfect, he had to keep moving.

For that reason, Natsuki Subaru would—

2

"—Ubeh." As soon as he awoke, Natsuki Subaru curled his lip at the sticky sensation on his face.

It felt like the area from his face to his chest was drenched. Its lukewarm sensation seemed similar to the sweat he would feel on the morning after he had had a nightmare.

Combined with him spacing out with his head feeling heavy, he thought he might have had a fever, perhaps.

Subaru: "…The ceiling is unfamiliar."

Subaru mumbled out what he saw in his field of vision, a shabby wooden ceiling, with the intent of making it sound like a cliché.

He was in a shack, built by putting wooden materials together in a crude manner, and far from adhering to any architectural style. Subaru was confused on what to think of it for a while, looking at the masterpiece that compensated for its inexperienced technique with raw muscle.

What had caused him to be in this shack? To remember that, Subaru recalled his memories at a gradual pace.

Subaru: "If I remember correctly, after I exited the convenience store and blinked, I found myself in another world, I met Emilia-tan there, and — it's a bit long, so let's omit the rest of the details."

It was a monologue he would not let anyone else hear, but as he continued to joke around, the speed at which he could process his thoughts returned to him.

Yes, after young Natsuki Subaru had been summoned to a different world, he had met a super beautiful silver-haired girl, had gone on various great adventures after that, finally conquered the tower of sand, and had been sent away to a neighboring country.

Subaru: "I have no idea what I'm talking about…"

Anyway, the real situation at hand was how these bizarre situations kept persisting, almost to the point he wanted to bemoan his current predicament.

And then, although he searched through his own memories, he did not remember seeing this shabby ceiling, as expected.

Subaru: "Somewhere like the place in the Sanctuary is a narrow possibility, but the building from the time I was imprisoned by Garfiel was decent."

Nowadays, the adorable Garfiel admired him and called him "Captain", but the memory of being imprisoned by him, with his hands and feet tied together, lingered inside of Subaru, despite it being a memory from a world that was lost.

It was not as if Subaru held it against him, but being imprisoned was a valuable experience, so he could not quite forget it even if he tried.

However, the memories he had of his ceiling did not match the poor environment from back then.

He had been living life in a different world, in a place where the level of civilization was rather high, after all. Subaru, a man from the modern era, realized one of his few occasions of fortune right there and then.

While he was in filled with deep emotion, thinking about how he wanted to make that realization in a better environment—

Subaru: "—Hic,"

As he organized the disorderly contents of what went through his head like that, one by one, a sudden realization pierced through him without warning, almost like a clap of thunder.

Yes, this was not the Lugunican Kingdom, but this was the Vollachian Empire.

In the neighboring country where he had been unexpectedly thrown into, the people he could rely on were not there—

Subaru: “Rem…!”

The girl who he had to protect no matter what had arrived in this country, together with him.

In addition to that, Subaru had been separated from her, and she was still with the dangerous men—

Subaru: “Am I an idiot? No, I am an idiot…! This isn’t the time to…”

???: “—What are you busying yourself and making a racket for?”

Subaru: “—Ah,”

As Subaru immediately sat upright on the verge of going out to look for Rem with great determination, upon hearing a stiff voice thrown towards him from the side, his breath caught in his throat.

Subaru only noticed it as he sat up, but it seemed like he had been placed in a bed just as shabby as the ceiling. His eyes met with a pair of blue ones beside him, staring at him with a scornful gaze.

The eyes belonged to a girl with rather short blue hair, who was looking at him, her pretty eyes narrowed in a stern manner.

Subaru: “Re…m…?”

Rem: “—. I’m not really positive about answering, “yes” to that. I still haven’t acknowledged that I am this person you call Rem, after all.”

Subaru widened his eyes as Rem spoke to him stiffly, sounding as if she were trying to sound impassive to the best of her ability.

However, she was right in front of him, she was speaking, and he could also feel her warmth and sense the gentle fragrance that wafted from her, as evidence of this being neither a dream nor an illusion. Yes, the warmness of her hand also counted.

Subaru: “Huh? A hand?”

Rem: "…"

Suddenly, Subaru was stunned as he realized his right hand was holding the girl's — Rem's hand, under the ragged cloth covering his body.

He had no recollection of what had exactly happened, however.

Subaru: "Wait, were you holding my hand until I woke up?"

Rem: "Huh? Don't say something so disgusting. You can tell by looking at it. You seized my hand and refused to let go."

Subaru: "O-Oh, I see. I guess that's right. Yeah, I'm the one who was grabbing your hand…"

He had spurred Rem's souring mood, unable to tell the difference between expectations and reality.

Apparently, he had been grasping Rem's hand the whole time he had been unconscious. —Even so, the fact she had not shaken him off weighed on his mind.

Rem: "What's that look in your eyes?"

Subaru: "N-No, no, it's nothing. Yes, it's nothing."

Rem: "I see. Let go of me already. Your hand is slimy with sweat."

Subaru: "An enormous amount of damage done to an adolescent boy…!"

When said by a cute girl, it was a blow that would inflict an incurable wound, depending on the person receiving it.

Fortunately, Subaru only got away with nearly dying because he was made of tough stuff, but when he timidly let go of Rem's hand, she brought her hand to her chest and wiped it on her clothes, resulting in him being hit by a follow-up attack.

Anyhow, aside from Subaru's inner feelings—

Subaru: “Rem, are you hurt anywhere? If you are hurt anywhere, please don’t hide it and tell me.”

Rem: “Huh?”

Subaru: “Eh, what’s that face for…? Did I say anything weird…?”

Setting aside their first interaction, Subaru wanted to be certain of Rem’s safety. However, despite his question being rooted out of concern for her wellbeing, Rem’s reaction was terribly frosty.

Subaru spontaneously panicked, wondering if he had said something he should not have, but he did not have the faintest idea of what it was.

All he had stated had been about his worry for Rem, without anything out of the ordinary.

Rem: “…You’re the one who was seriously injured. You aren’t aware of it, even though you were at death’s door?”

Subaru: “Aware…? Umm, that’s…”

Rem: “I see, it seems like you aren’t. —You can’t be trusted, just as I thought.”

Subaru swallowed as she met his eyes, all the while flinging out words of rejection at him.

She had lost her Memories, the smell of the miasma that encircled Subaru had been of assistance in making a bad impression of him, and Rem’s attitude towards him had remained consistently stand-offish and cold.

Much more than that, he had been unable to create an opportunity to bridge the rift between her and himself this time.

Subaru had been really desperate, trying his best to save Rem from the Empire’s camp—

Subaru: “—Ah,”

Another piece of his deficient memory was filled, and it felt as if he were under an illusion that caused his brain to tremble.

The astonishment he currently felt was special to the point it rivaled Rem's existence.

Subaru had risked everything to save Rem, after he had been captured by the Empire's camp.

In the end, he had come across the tribe in the forest — the People of Shudraq, and underwent their ritual, along with the prisoner of war who had been placed in the same cage with him.

And then—

Subaru: "…I have a right hand…And it's not black."

Subaru mumbled as he lifted his right arm, looking at the torn sleeve and the arm that peeked out from there.

A dreadfully dark pattern that had surfaced on his right arm. An aftereffect of an encounter with the Sin Archbishops at the Watergate City of Priestella, but it was gone without a trace, despite having been indelible until now.

—That black pattern had treated the wounds of his tattered right arm.

It was an event he remembered as a horrible memory, but it seemed like it was neither a dream nor a nightmare. No, it was a nightmare, but it appeared to be something that had really occurred.

His crippled right arm had been healed, and Rem was at his bedside.

That meant Subaru had finished the Lifeblood Ritual without dying, and he was also successful in taking back Rem. —Causing many casualties in return.

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "…You look pale. I think…you should stay in bed."

She declared that as she looked as Subaru, who grew silent as he glanced down at his unnaturally taintless arm.

Showing her concern to someone when they looked ill, even if she did not have a good opinion of them, was probably a result of her innate kindness. Or it may have been because Subaru's expression looked like a dead man's.

A part of him wanted to depend on her kindness.

However, he could not do that. There were too many things he had to make sure of.

Subaru: "Thanks for worrying about me. But, I have a lot of things I need to ask you about…Just asking, but this house belongs to someone from the People of Shudraq, right?"

Rem: "They were calling themselves that, it seems."

Subaru: "I see…If that's the case, I want to see Mizelda-san and the others. Also,"

It was a subject he did not want to ask her about, but he could not afford to not verify it.

Rem, who had been imprisoned in the Empire's camp, was here. If so, he was also curious about the person — Louis, who was similarly held captive over there.

To put it bluntly, he was worried.

Not about Louis's safety, but more about the damage that would be caused if she were to be left alone.

Subaru: "I'm gonna be honest with you, but where's that girl…Louis?"

Rem: "—. You have a disgruntled look on your face. Why do you keep her at a distance?"

Subaru: "It's hard to explain. And I have reasons you probably won't understand even if I did."

Any conversations regarding Louis would always incur Rem's displeasure.

Subaru felt pained by that, but he also thought of it as a matter that could not be communicated by talking about it.

Subaru: "Anyway, where's she? Was she left in the ca…"

Rem: "—You'd know if you looked to your left."

Subaru: "Ah?"

Pondering over what she had told him, Subaru widened his eyes, and directed them to his left — towards the side opposite to Rem, who was at his right.

And then, glancing over, Subaru's face grew stiff from the delayed bewilderment.

Laying there was—

???: "Zzz…zzz…"

Subaru: "W…ha…"

Louis was sleeping soundly, showing off her innocent, sleeping face.

She was at his left side, sleeping in the same bed and wrapped in the same, ragged cloth. Saliva dripped down from her wide-open mouth, and looking at her shameless display, Subaru finally caught onto the situation.

The identity of the stickiness and wet sensation on his chest and face, when he had awoken was—

Subaru: "—!!"

Subaru let out a soundless scream.

3

???: "Oh, Subaru! It seems like you've woken up without any problem."

The person who welcomed Subaru as he showed up at the clearing, guided by Rem, was Mizelda.

Her black hair dyed red, the young matriarch of the People of Shudraq walked over to Subaru, who exited the shack, and double-checked his condition from head to toe.

He let out a small, dry laugh at Mizelda's unreserved, yet powerful demeanor that felt rather refreshing.

Subaru: "I made it back alive, thanks to you. It seems like I've made you worry, too."

Mizelda: "Don't worry about it. If you were to die, all we have to do is return the soul of our brave comrade to the skies, and bury your corpse under the soil as we mourn. It's a good thing your soul remained instead of that happening."

Subaru: "Mizelda-san…"

Crossing her muscular arms, the olive-skinned, tall Mizelda held her head high.

Her unpretentious words bore into his chest, and Subaru felt quietly, and deeply impressed by them. Although, to be honest, back when he had been captured by the Shudraq and placed inside that prison, he had steeled himself for another death.

Like that, while Subaru was impressed by her, Mizelda narrowed her eyes with a, "By the way,"

Mizelda: "It's too bad you're taken. Rem and Louis…will you add at least one more person?"

Rem: "Mizelda-san!"

Next to Subaru, Rem raised her voice at Mizelda's somewhat mischievous-sounding offer.

She had a stern expression on her face, still shaky on her feet as she walked with her new wooden cane. Having woken up just a little while ago, Louis was clinging onto her arm, her eyes widening out of surprise at Rem's voice.

While caressing Louis's blonde hair, Rem called Mizelda by name once again, and then,

Rem: "You shouldn't say that. I do not trust, or understand this person."

Mizelda: "Then, could he be given to me?"

Rem: "Yes, of course. I will give him to you."

Subaru: "The conversation isn't reflecting my will!"

Louis: "Aaa! Uuu!"

With a prickly attitude, Rem agreed to the proposal to transfer Subaru.

When Subaru rushed to put a stop to it, Louis shouted as well, going along with the momentum of the atmosphere.

"I'm only joking," Mizelda laughed as she heard him, but Subaru could not hold back his astonishment once he saw her affable disposition.

He could barely remember what had happened right after the Lifeblood Ritual.

Even after that, he still could not define the line that distinguished his memories from his desires, made to be favorable to him. Seeing how Mizelda was acting, it did not seem like a fantasy, however.

Subaru: "So, for once, I was able to build a good relationship with someone I've met for the first time. That's great, but…"

Mizelda: "Mh, you look pale. Are you feeling unwell? I can cut off any impaired parts on your body."

Subaru: "I feel like it's going to turn out to be a disaster if I carelessly say, "Yes, please!", so I'll decline."

It was not a joke, but an earnest offer, probably.

He figured it could be a fatal mistake if he were to say, “Yes, please!” without thinking it through.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “Last time, I didn’t have the time to look around leisurely, but…”

Going around in a circle to observe the village of the Shudraqians, Subaru muttered.

The village existed deep inside a vast forest, and it looked like a world where the level of civilization’s improvement had come to a halt, including the shack where Subaru had awoken.

It was a sight befitting the impression of what would be called an ethnic minority, living in an uncultivated jungle.

Amazons who lived their lives while taking part in hunting, with no male workers — it seemed like an undeveloped area, indeed, as Subaru saw no signs of civilization in the village.

Subaru: “Their numbers are few, so they can keep living by going hunting everyday…but, I…”

Rem: “…”

Subaru murmured, knitting his eyebrows in a distressed manner while biting his lip.

Rem was wordlessly staring at his face from the side, with a cross look on her face. Whatever she was thinking in the depths of her blue eyes, the current Subaru was unable to perceive it.

He was scared of being unable to read her thoughts. He also could not smile back with ease at Mizelda, who had smiled at him.

That was why, in order to overcome this situation—

Subaru: “I want to talk to you, Mizelda-san. —I think I also need to speak to that guy…as well.”

Mizelda: “…Yeah. You said it at a good time. He’s probably at the meeting area with Taritta and the others right now.”

Hearing Subaru’s words, Mizelda nodded and jerked her chin.

She was pointing towards a large building at the back of the clearing — a place that had been referred to as the meeting area. It was most likely a place that fulfilled its role as its name suggested, and setting aside whether it was the most fine-looking construct in the village or not, it seemed as if the role had been assigned to the largest building.

Subaru: “—Let’s go.”

Locating his destination, Subaru began walking in that direction.

He held out his hand to be of assistance to Rem, just in case, but she had rejected it. Taking Louis with her, she indicated that she would walk on her own with her attitude.

Laughing dryly at the invariable response Rem sent towards him, Subaru tightened his expression.

And then, the group passed through the entrance of the meeting area, and went inside.

There—

???: “It seems like you are finally awake. Have you enjoyed yourself, Natsuki Subaru?”

Yes, he was greeted by a masked man, who sat on the ground of the meeting area with one knee raised.

4

Amidst the Shudraqians, who were surrounding a fire, a man had slipped into the center of the meeting place.

Subaru’s cheeks twitched at his reception, and he was also at a loss for words.

Subaru: “…”

???: “What is it? Surely, you shall not declare that you have lost your voice, in return for barely returning alive? A price such as that…Perhaps, it was an appropriate one to pay, looking at the results.”

Subaru: “No, I haven’t lost my voice. My voice isn’t gone, but I’m at a loss for words. What’s with that mask of yours?”

Having said that, Subaru pointed at the man who spoke in an arrogant manner.

Placed on the man’s face, where Subaru’s finger was pointing at, was what looked like an Oni mask, painted in red and white. However, since the Oni existed as a race in this world, it could not be an actual Oni mask.

A mask that simply resembled the face of something frightening. That was what the man was wearing.

The man, sounding disinterested, responded to Subaru’s indication with a, “Yes,”

???: “It is an offering. Originally, I had the intention of keeping my face hidden going forward. I suppose it will do. It was troublesome to re-wrap my face every time I washed it.”

Subaru: “Yeah, it looks like you might get itchy if it gets dirty… Wait, it’s not the time to be talking about that.”

???: “Oh?”

Grimacing at the man’s indifference, Subaru walked towards him from the front without hesitating.

And then, seated in a circle together with the man, Taritta attempted to stop him with a, “Hey.”

However—

???: “Halt, Taritta. It seems as if this person has business with me.”

Taritta: “Y-Yes…however…”

???: “When I say it is fine, then it is fine. Are there any other words that are necessary?”

Held back by none other than the man, Taritta shook her head and backed off.

It seemed like the man had won over a hefty amount of trust from the People of Shudraq, all within a short time period. —No, considering that attitude, “control” was more appropriate than “trust”.

Taritta neither acted out of fear nor trust, but respect. The same applied to the other Shudraqians that surrounded the same area, at least.

Subaru had no idea what sort of method the man had used in order to do that, however.

Subaru: “For now, I just want to speak to you, one-on-one. —Vincent Abellux.”

Vincent: “…”

Subaru declared, standing in front of the man who was sitting, gazing down at him. He could not see how the man’s expression had shifted behind his mask upon hearing Subaru’s words.

However, the air around the meeting place grew tense, and it was almost as if he could feel that the temperature had decreased.

The pressure in the atmosphere almost made him inadvertently hold his breath, but Subaru endured it with willpower alone.

And then—

Vincent: “I shall overlook the first time because of your befuddlement, so do not make me repeat myself. Therefore, know that there shall not be a third time. You shall withhold yourself from uttering my name indiscreetly."

Subaru: "…What if I say, I don't want to?"

Vincent: "I shall administer punishment accordingly. I know a great number of ways to force you to surrender."

The man stood up on the spot, glaring at Subaru while facing him directly.

Judging from the feeling of his proclamation and his demeanor, there were no falsehoods within the man's words. There was no possibility of them being a bluff, either. Even if the number of moves he could make and the measures he could take were limited, Subaru was sure the man could implement the punishment he had been talking about.

Subaru: "You're an annoying guy…"

Vincent: "Then, will you make me say it a third time?"

Subaru: "—. No, I'll pass. I didn't come here to argue. —Abel."

It's meaningless to remain stubborn, Subaru thought, giving in first.

Like that — Subaru decided he would heed the advice of the masked man and call him Abel. Drawing his chin back at Subaru's decision, Abel commented, "A wise choice."

Abel: "Had you not withdrawn, then there would have been an instance of bloodshed."

Subaru: "Ha, you wish. I'll probably offend you if I say this, but I think it'll be just barely an even match if we both went at it."

Abel: "If that is the case, you are the one who should look behind himself."

Subaru: "Behind myself…?"

Abel said to Subaru, who had received his earlier words as provocation and crinkled up his nose. When he complied and turned around, his shoulders shook as he exclaimed, “Uweh!”.

Rem was standing there, watching the argument unfold between the two men with an icy stare.

Subaru: “U-Umm, Rem-san? Your face…”

Rem: “No? It’s just…Even after you were about to die, having been asleep for three days, it seems like you’re ridiculously stubborn, refusing to take good care of your own body. Why don’t you just drop dead at the side of the road, then?”

Subaru: “Sorry! I’m sorry, I won’t do it again!”

Giving in to Rem’s cold eyes, Subaru apologized desperately.

In the end, he could not make any changes to Rem’s disappointed expression, but he had a sudden realization.

It came out of the blue, but there was a high possibility that the reason why Subaru had been able to survive, narrowly escaping from his death, was thanks to Healing Magic, unless there was some sort of miraculous elixir.

If that was the case, the person who did that was—

Abel: “Including that, I must speak with you.”

Subaru: “Abel…”

Abel had apparently deciphered Subaru’s feelings after seeing him hold his breath. He shrugged his shoulders lightly, then turned his face in Mizelda’s direction.

Abel: “Mizelda, make everyone leave. I only require myself and this man to be here.”

Mizelda: “Well, well, you’re just doing as you please, now. I would’ve been angry if you weren’t handsome.”

Taritta: “Sister, please get angry even if you’re up against a handsome man…”

While Mizelda obeyed Abel's orders without any resistance, Taritta's shoulders dropped as she looked at her sister.

However, Taritta had also followed Abel's command earlier, so her words were unconvincing.

Once Mizelda, the chief of the tribe, had been persuaded, the other People of Shudraq would not stay put.

All of them streamed out of the meeting place, one after another. The problem was whether Rem, and in addition, Louis should be placed among the wave of Shudraqians, but—

Abel: "It is inconvenient for you to speak about your desired topic if that woman is here, is it not?"

Subaru: "Gh…"

He saw through the reason of my hesitation, Subaru thought, his breath catching in his throat from Abel's words.

However, in the end, what Abel had said was correct. Subaru did not want Rem to hear the conversation that would come after this.

Subaru: "Rem, can you step outside with everyone else? It'll be over soon…Or, well, I don't know if we'll get it done soon, but we won't take too long."

Rem: "When you put that way, it sounds like I'm the one who's behaving like a spoiled child."

Subaru: "I didn't mean it like that…Then, can you step outside for now?"

Rem: "…What would you do if I were to say, "I don't want to"?"

Subaru: "Eh?!"

He was astonished by Rem's response, having believed his hands to be already full from dealing with Abel.

Subaru immediately understood she was ridiculing his interaction with Abel from a short while ago, but he was a complete pushover whenever Rem held her ground.

If it were possible, he wanted to grant any of her wishes and let her do whatever she wanted to do.

However—

Subaru: "—. ——. I think…I don't want you to…listen to this."

Rem: "I could remain here by force."

Subaru: "Then… Then, I'm being cheap, but I'll run away in that case."

If Subaru started running, then Rem would not be able to catch up to him with her speed, since she had to use a cane.

That was the only point where Subaru could clearly surpass her right now. He had to say it was rather shameful of him, as Subaru could not think of anything else other than that.

Louis: "Uuu."

Louis groaned as she pulled Rem's arm, in front of the distressed Subaru. Apparently, she was trying to take Rem out of the meeting place.

Looking at Louis, Rem chuckled,

Rem: "I'm sorry, I must've made you worry. It's just…I wanted to say mean things to this smelly person, just a little bit."

Louis: "Auu."

Subaru: "Smelly person…"

The term pierced him, deep and razor-sharp, more so than any other "mean things", but that was currently not of importance.

Just as she had told Louis, Rem quickly withdrew with a, "Well then", and left the meeting place with the blonde girl in tow, while using her cane.

Subaru scratched his cheek as he watched Rem's back, with it never turning around for her to look back at him.

Whether Rem seriously did not have any interest in Subaru, or whether she had said that out of consideration, it was hard for him to make a judgement.

Of course, he would be happier if it were the latter, however.

Subaru: "She was brought here with the worst impression of me. I won't wish for more, that's my lifestyle."

Abel: "You have downright ridiculous perseverance and vanity. — Sit, I shall listen to what you have to say."

And so, the two were left alone in the meeting area. Following what Abel said, Subaru dropped himself onto the ground, sitting cross-legged.

In front of him, Abel also seated himself on the ground, with one knee up. He watched Subaru through his mask.

Sitting opposite of the burning bonfire in the middle, the two men faced off against each other.

Subaru: "First thing I want to ask, how much of it was a dream, and how much of it was real."

Abel: "Hm. I suppose that is a question no one but you would ask. How would you like me to answer? Everything was a dream, we avoided utter catastrophe and the situation is approaching a peaceful conclusion. Would hearing that satisfy you?"

Subaru: "You know Utakata and utter cata-strophe kinda sound similar, you might confuse me with the girl if you say that…"

A young girl, one of the People of Shudraq. Subaru was pretty sure her name was Utakata.

The unintentional pun was confusing, but that was not the true meaning behind Abel's words. —No, Subaru understood what Abel had meant, and used that light joke as a brief escape.

Abel did not overlook Subaru's timidity.

Abel: "I do not plan to keep up with your cowardice, Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru: "…Yeah, I know. —Attacking the Empire's camp, that was real, correct?"

Abel: "Of course, that is correct. The Empire's camp deployed outside of Buddheim was completely destroyed with the power of the Shudraq. The scene you saw was no illusion."

—Again, Abel confirmed the reality of that scene.

Hearing that, Subaru felt something profoundly heavy pierce the back of his chest. Tightly biting his lips, he used the pain to keep his consciousness from fading.

That kind of easy escape was not permitted for Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "…I, I understand the situation now. You commanded the people of Shudraq and attacked the Empire's campsite, chasing them away. That's the jist of it."

Abel: "Yes. However, that explanation is lacking. Let me supplement."

Subaru: "Supplement?"

Abel: "I commanded the Shudraq to destroy the encampment. Moreover, that was done with no casualties suffered on our side."

Subaru: "—. So, is that you just bragging about how amazing your commanding ability is?"

Abel: "No, that is not the case. —This feat is your achievement."

Towards Abel, who shook his head, Subaru widened his eyes in surprise with an audible "Ah?".

It was a completely unexpected statement. Abel actually acknowledging Subaru's achievements was one thing in and of itself, but Subaru could not even fathom as to why he was getting any sort of credit.

What in the world was he talking about—

Abel: "Do you not understand? The reason why the Shudraq and I could achieve a flawless victory was because we had detailed knowledge of the enemy's organization. We got this information from none other than you yourself."

Subaru: "—Hah?"

On top of his raised knee, Abel spoke with his chin rested on his hand. Meanwhile, Subaru's thoughts came to a standstill.

Those words were completely contrary to his expectations. It did not just come out of left field, it gut-punched him from left field. Finding it difficult to accept the implications behind those words, Subaru opened and closed his mouth silently like a fish—

Abel: "If you roughly know the enemy's stationing, layout and personnel, the probability of success of a siege rises. In reality, we won with no casualties. That was your contribution. You even received a reward."

Subaru: "Re…ward…?"

Abel: "We safely rescued your woman. I reward work. I do not have the ability to reward the dead. I thought that only while you still drew breath but…hm, the devil's luck in you is strong."

Although he had been told that he had extremely good luck, Subaru was still in a state of shock.

It could be that, as far as Abel was concerned, those words were supposed to be considered a compliment or praise. However, unfortunately, Subaru did not have the capacity to accept them, nor did he have the mores rooted in him to do so.

That was natural, of course. —Why did he have to be happy about being useful as a tool of war.

Subaru: “Why did I, even talk about the campsite…”

Abel: “It was the side-effects of the medicine. After finishing the Lifeblood Ritual, you were on the verge of death. There was a need to keep you alive until the takeover of the campsite and the rescue of the woman was complete. The medicine used kept your mind in a clouded state. Hence why you spoke.”

Subaru: “I just blabbed about anything that was asked of me…?”

Aghast, Subaru held his face in his hands, his voice trembling.

It was true, Subaru had a general understanding of the particulars inside the encampment. He had once spent several days in the camp as a chore boy after all.

He knew what was where and the rough number of people that were there. He also knew where their weapons and tools were stored, so if one were to crush those locations as a first strike, it was no question that they would get the overwhelming advantage. He understood that.

He understood, but so what if he did.

Subaru: “Medicine?! Are you messing with me?! Using that kind of thing without asking me! You…!”

Abel: “However, without it, you would have died, unable to reunite with the woman. It means the woman’s Healing Magic would not have reached you, either. There is no reason for you to speak ill of me, who let a dead man live.”

Subaru: “O-Of course there is…! I…I didn’t want to assist in a war! So many people…died…but, you’re…!”

Abel: “—It seems like you are misunderstanding something.”

He said bluntly to Subaru, who was breathing heavily, positioned in a stance to denounce evil.

Pierced by the coldness in Abel's tone, Subaru stiffened his cheeks.

Subaru: "Misunderstand, you say? What am I misunderstanding, exactly?"

Abel: "For example, we shall pretend your consciousness was not befuddled by the medicine. In order to rescue that woman, you would still need the aid of the Shudraq, nevertheless. Naturally, you would disclose what you know, and give it your all…If so, you would have spoken about who is assigned to where in the camping grounds."

Subaru: "Ah, uh…"

Abel: "You understand it, do you not? The result would be the same. Whether you were on the verge of death or not, the secrets of the encampment would be exposed by your knowledge, and those soldiers would perish."

Receiving Abel's indication, Subaru searched for a way to protest against it.

However, Abel was correct, and Subaru could imagine what would have happened in that case, off the top of his head.

In fact, had he lived through the Lifeblood Ritual in a better state, and had there been a discussion on forming a plan to save Rem, then Subaru would have talked about the Empire's camp.

He would have divulged the positions of the soldiers, as well as their numbers, and he would have used his knowledge to aid him in thinking up any measures to save Rem.

Subaru: "But, I would be a part of the council of war in that case. I would've definitely been against a strategy that would result in casualties. So…"

Abel: "You claim you would have been able to convince them? Would it have been possible for you to convince the people who do not know, nor have any other means aside from bloodshed, find a more appropriate method of carrying things out, and save the woman without any casualties, peacefully and civilly?"

Subaru: “That’s…”

Abel: “I will tell you this. —That…is what would be called a pipe dream.”

Pierced by Abel’s words, Subaru’s soul shrieked as it bled out.

No!, he wanted to yell, wanted to deny Abel’s words. However, everything that came out of his mouth was baseless, driven by emotion, and it would not be able to inflict a single crack on Abel’s mask, nor make his expression waver.

The things they saw were different from one another. They led their own lives differently.

Contrasting views on life and death laid within Subaru and Abel, as well as the People of Shudraq. And, it was impossible to remove and break through such a wall.

During the short time in which he had lost Rem, at the very least. Certainly.

Subaru was sure of it.

Subaru: “…I didn’t want to give up just because of that.”

Abel: “In return for your perseverance, someone other than you would die. Perhaps, that person may be a complete stranger to you. Or they could be someone who may be akin to your other half. When you stand still and indulge in your foolish thoughts, it means you are allowing that to happen.”

Abel carried on with shoving it into his face, despite Subaru cursing the unforgivable reality while grinding his teeth.

Perhaps, in exchange for the harsh, unmerciful way of how things had been done, Abel had reeled in a definite result. However, why did he have the privilege of selecting which lives would be lost in return?

Subaru: “Who do you think you are? Do you think you’ve become a God or something...?”

Abel: “Fool. I am neither a God nor a Hero. Naturally, I am also different from those wicked Observers who look down on this world. —I am a King. A King amongst Kings.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “The one who stands at the apex is called the Emperor by their people. —I, am that.”

Abel announced, placing a hand on his chest daringly.

Subaru could not see his expression beyond the mask that hid his face. However, Subaru imagined Abel’s face, a face he had only seen once, displaying a bold smile, a bright fire lit within his eyes.

Emperor. Hearing that, the thought of holding his breath completely slipped from his mind.

The man had proved his existence with his own words, in such an imposing, majestic way.

And then, Abel—Vincent Abellux—continued speaking to Subaru, the latter shell-shocked, the former maintaining the dignified tone of his voice. “—The seventy-seventh Emperor of the Sacred Empire of Vollachia. That is me.”

“…”

“However, I have left my position as of now, having been ousted from the apex.”

Chapter 14:
Unbridgeable Values

1

"…"

—The Seventy-Seventh Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

Hearing Abel give his title, Subaru's mind went blank.

The reason was not because he was unable to take in the meaning of the words, nor that he was afraid to square off against royalty.

Certainly, in this other world he was in, this was the first time Subaru had met royalty in person.

By the time when Subaru had been summoned to another world, all members of the Royal Family of the Kingdom of Lugunica had succumbed to illness. Felt was suspected of being a surviving royal, but Felt didn't recognize herself as such, and since she had nary a trace of anything like royal-ness, she didn't count.

In that respect, of all the people Subaru had met in this world, the ones of the highest station were the people he happened to see at the place of the Royal Selection, the dignitaries of the Council of Wise Men, or perhaps the Duchess Crusch.

Roswaal was also a Margrave of a remote region, which in itself was a high position. —Actually, as Emilia was a Royal Candidate in the selection of the next sovereign, what kind of position did that correspond to?

Subaru: "…Wait, this isn't time to be running away from reality."

Subaru restrained himself before his thoughts could become scattered and chaotic.

In any case, the important thing was that Abel had revealed himself to be the Emperor. Ever since he came across him on the jungle plain, Subaru had a feeling he was no ordinary person.

Still, he would never have imagined that this person actually held the position of Emperor.

Provided that—

Subaru: “Well, if it’s actually true.”

Abel: “You doubt my word?”

Subaru: “It’s only natural to doubt it. How is it in the middle of a forest I just happen to get stuck with the most preeminent person in the country? I can easily believe your brazenness is Emperor-class, but…”

Then, Subaru paused, and scowled directly at the fiendish face Abel wore.

From Abel’s side, only the sharpness of his gaze could be felt as they stood facing each other, which was not fair. Certainly, there was a strength of will in Abel’s voice that only a person of importance could possess.

Having come in contact with people of various stations in this world, Subaru’s intuition verified that. —Still, that was not what this was about.

Subaru: “It’s like I said before. How the hell am I supposed to trust a guy who doesn’t even show his face, huh?”

Opposite the open fire, through the flickering flames, Abel considered Subaru’s words.

Subaru glared harshly at Abel’s masked visage, referring to the words they had exchanged while he watched the burning encampment in a daze.

Abel’s face had been concealed by old rags rather than a mask then, but he had said the same thing to him.

And finally, having heard that, Abel had undone the binds and revealed his face of his own accord.

Abel: “You are a tiresome man, going on and on about inconsequential matters.”

While saying that, he set the mask to the side, in that same moment.

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “What is with that insolent look? There is nothing about me that is exceptionally different from you.”

Subaru: “…That’s true, in part. I’m sensing God’s spite in the arrangement.”

Staring fixedly at Abel’s face, the irony of it struck Subaru.

It could be said that Abel and Subaru were similar. However, that was only speaking in broad terms. When broken down to a finer degree, they were different on a grand scale.

Glossy black hair, an imposing sharp-eyed look. It was an overbearingly powerful impression, but his devilish face had a peculiar charm that was difficult to look away from—

That was the countenance of the Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

Nevertheless, Subaru had no recognition of that face. From his position as a Knight of the Royal Selection Candidate Emilia, he had, somehow, also become involved in national affairs of a neighboring country.

Subaru: “Is that how it is? Even though you’re at the top of the nation, your face is…”

Abel: “There is no reason you would know it. From the beginning, my face has not been seen outside of the Imperial Capital. The reason being there are far too many in this country aiming for my head.”

Subaru: “So it’s for self-defense? You must’ve really stirred up people’s resentment, huh.”

Abel: “No. It is because being powerful is the creed of the citizens of the Empire. The weak-willed must die, the frail must die, and the cowardly must die… because the strong deserve to have it all.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “The position of the Emperor is also no exception. It is the grounds for the Empire’s unparalleled strength as a nation.”

Resting his chin on his own knees, Abel spoke of Vollachia’s extreme ideology, leaving Subaru at a loss.

His words were not false. Having spent a few days at the Imperial Soldiers’ camp, Subaru knew it too. Todd and the other imperial soldiers would likely greatly approve of Abel’s words just now.

Them included, the citizens of the Empire earnestly believed in the notion that victory would balance out everything.

The way they existed was the embodiment of, “Long live the Empire”.

If they could fulfil that, then they would not hesitate to burn down the jungle to exterminate a tribe.

If they could fulfil that, launching a surprise attack on their fellow countrymen and massacring the soldiers was also—

Subaru: “—Wait, that doesn’t make any sense.”

Abel: “What is it?”

Subaru: “For example… For example, if you were really the Emperor, then why did you attack the Imperial Soldiers’ camp? If you just walked over there and spoke with the camp’s higher-up, then…”

Abel: “Fool. How could I saunter over there with such nonchalance? I do not have a desire to end my own life. Do not lump me in with yourself.”

Subaru: “I don’t have a death wish either. But, suicide…?”

Subaru did not understand the reason as to why an Emperor interacting with his country’s soldiers would be referred to as a suicidal act.

To Abel, all of those Imperial Soldiers should be his subordinates. It was unreasonable to consider it as a suicidal act to interact with them. —No, there was a way to rationalize it.

That was—

Subaru: “If I haven’t misheard it, then… Did you say you were ousted from the position of the Emperor?”

Abel: “It seems like you did not fail to hear it. However, I have also announced that I will not repeat myself.”

Subaru: “Don’t joke around! It’s an important section, isn’t it. Uh, is it true that you’ve really been kicked out of the Emperor’s…”

With Abel’s unchanging expression, Subaru started to doubt whether he was a human like Subaru himself, or not.

Because if Abel’s circumstances were just as Subaru had predicted, then he must be in a situation that was practically hopeless.

The thought made Subaru hesitate to continue his words.

Abel: “Your way of thinking is correct.”

However, Abel nodded, stepping over Subaru’s hesitation with ease.

In front of Subaru, who was holding his breath, Abel’s gaze was lowered ever so slightly, staring at the burning fire. The wood crackled amidst the flames, and the faint noise sounded as if they were throes of death.

Abel closed one eye whilst listening to it, Abel: “The group of Imperial Soldiers that had been deployed outside of Buddheim were dispatched by my political opponents, in order to dispose of me. To be precise, you have become embroiled in this.”

Subaru: “But… but, the people at the camp didn’t say anything about that. They said their objective was to negotiate with the People of Shudraq in the forest.”

It was not like Subaru had the ability to see through someone’s lies.

Even with that, he thought it unrealistic to consider that everyone, in a place where dozens of people had been crowded together, had coordinated their stories to match each other’s, all just to deceive the outsiders who were Subaru and Rem.

That was why the Imperial Soldiers—Todd and his group had believed they were after the People of Shudraq.

Subaru: “Though, capturing you being their true objective is…”

Abel: “Do not beat around the bush. They were plotting an attack. You are the one who said that. And then, in order to protect yourself and the woman, you have weighed the Shudraqians and the Imperial Soldiers on a scale.”

Subaru: “No…!”

Abel: “I am not mistaken. What has already occurred cannot be changed. Those soldiers will not come back to life. The dead will not speak of anything, nor are they able to exert their influence upon the living.”

Subaru: “…”

—The dead will not come back to life.

Subaru squeezed his eyes shut, struck by Abel’s fierce words.

How dare he say whatever as he pleased, when he knew absolutely nothing?

—There was a way to revive the dead.

The method was the one and only Authority, which only Subaru was capable of holding.

Subaru: “…”

If he were to Return by Death, then there was a possibility he could go back to the time before the encampment was wiped out.

Once he did that, Subaru could warn the Imperial Soldiers and save them from their deadly fate, perhaps. However, if he did that, then the safety of the People of Shudraq would be put in jeopardy.

He was trapped in a dilemma of choosing which side would be left standing at the cost of the other side. It was difficult to save both of them, when they stood diametrically opposed to each other.

More than anything—

Subaru: “I…”

Subaru did not have the courage to Return by Death for them.

Even if he did redo it, how much of a chance did he have at being even more successful? This time, the fact that Subaru and Rem were safe could be referred to as second best, rather than the very best.

Asking for anything more than that was equivalent to confronting an endless challenge.

In order to do that, letting his own life wear down would be—

Abel: “You are a foolish man, bearing enigmatic woes.”

As Subaru asked and answered his own question, Abel’s words had abruptly disturbed his ear drums.

Subaru’s eyes flew open out of astonishment, unable to comprehend what Abel had said to him for a moment. Abel was staring at Subaru from the front, on the other side of the flickering flames.

It was almost as if Abel was pitying him with that gaze of his.

Abel: “Why would you always desire to curry favor with others?”

Subaru: “Curry favor? You’re saying… I do that?”

Abel: “You are always gazing at others. You have intentionally constructed yourself to be that way. Similar to how a warrior would hone their skills, you have concealed your own heart with a deception called charity.”

Subaru: “—hic, it’s none of your business!”

Intense rage coursed through Subaru as Abel spoke as if he understood him.

To someone who did not know anything about Subaru himself, nor about Return by Death, it was impossible for him to understand even a fraction of what Subaru was saddled with.

There was no reason for Subaru to be lectured, nor pitied.

Subaru: “You haven’t answered my question at all! The Imperial Soldiers were after the People of Shudraq. They never mentioned anything about y…”

Abel: “It is a topic that is not disclosed to the foot soldiers. I suppose even the Commander is unaware. The Emperor having left his position… Is not something that could afford to be leaked out of the Empire. Neither do I, nor those who have deposed me, wish for the Empire to be shaken.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “Additionally, it was inevitable that they would target the Shudraqians. Forced out of the Emperor’s throne, the only hand an Emperor can take after escaping the capital are the Shudraqians. —Therefore, killing the People of Shudraq is equivalent to cutting my hands and feet and sinking me to the bottom of water when I am already half-drowning.”

Letting Abel’s nonchalant explanation sink in, Subaru’s questions melted away.

Why Todd and the rest of the Imperial soldiers surrounded the jungle? Why they sought to negotiate with the People of Shudraq to demilitarize them or otherwise exterminate them? Only now did he understand the reason for it all.

Subaru: "…Why are the Shudraqians the only ones you can rely on?"

Abel: "An Emperor of Vollachia has saved Shudraq from a predicament in times past. Shudraqians never forget their debts. There is also the Lifeblood Ritual. They are my path to victory."

The old debt that the tribe pridefully owed to the Emperor, and the way the Shudraqians respected their rituals.

Driven away from the Imperial Capital, Abel bet on that and attempted contact with the People of Shudraq. Consequently, Abel's political opponents tried to prevent him from doing so, by dispatching Imperial soldiers to the jungle to try and entomb the Emperor.

It was a bet with terrible odds, but one could say that he had won that gamble.

Superbly defying the opponent's expectations, he repelled the enemy's first wave that was meant to corner him. However, even Subaru knew. —The opponent would not stay their hand here.

Subaru: "You, and your enemy's battle hasn't ended."

Abel: "Of course. —It would end if I were to die. However, I still draw breath. Therefore, to take back my things, I shall use my utmost power to go and reclaim them."

That was the Emperor of Vollachia, Abel—Vincent Abellux's choice.

To Subaru, the word "things" that Abel had used seemed like it had an asterisk next to it, with a note saying "this actually means country". The scale in which Abel looked at things was too big for Subaru.

At the same time as being overwhelmed by his absurdity, Subaru came to realize something far too late.

Subaru: “So, you’re planning to… start a war using the People of Shudraq?!”

Abel: “Correct. I have made them promise cooperation. The results of the Lifeblood Ritual and the pact they made with the Emperor before. People who extol pride are easy to manipulate. They will undoubtedly fight with me.”

Subaru: “You’re saying… It wasn’t enough after doing all that?!”

Retaking the Emperor’s throne. To do that, there would inevitably be more battles to come.

Resulting in war—War, a fierce battle where humans would fight other humans, with their lives on the line.

Abel: “…”

The Imperial Camp, which had been burnt to the ground. As far as Subaru knew, there had been at least a hundred Imperial Soldiers there.

If Abel and the Shudraqians had only attacked that one encampment, even if there were some who managed to escape, there had been over a hundred casualties. If not, it was probably safe to say casualties had not reached a thousand.

—During the few hours Subaru spent unconscious, over a hundred lives had been lost.

Subaru: “Just because of that…”

Throughout the days he had lived in another world, this was the experience with the most casualties.

There had been victims at the White Whale subjugation and at the fight with Petelgeuse. There were people he could not save at the fights in Priestella, and even more in times now gone.

Compared to those unpreventable casualties, the number of lives lost here was greater.

Additionally, the enemies fought were not Witchbeasts nor were they evil entities. They were human beings.

They were not people who could not be reasoned with. They were people who could come to an understanding with dialogue.

Subaru: “Why… did they have to be killed…”

Abel: “There was no other method. That is all.”

Subaru: “…Is that really true? Did you seriously try and find another way? Before all your options were snatched away by murdering them, did you try to find another option until the very end?”

Abel: “…”

Abel narrowed his eyes at Subaru’s feeble grievances.

His look told Subaru that, instead of carefully considering Subaru’s opinion, he was questioning as to why he had to do something like that. He was questioning the fundamental part of Subaru’s argument.

It was not like he did not understand the words exchanged, nor was it that he was unwilling to partake in discourse.

The reason they could not come to an understanding despite this, was because Abel’s ethics were terrifyingly secluded from his own.

Fortunately for Natsuki Subaru, until now, he had not fallen into a situation where he had to build a relationship with someone whose values greatly differed from his.

The majority of people he had encountered in this other world were rational. They lent their ears to Subaru and interacted with him, while communicating their own opinions. Once upon a time, an idiotic Subaru had failed to understand this and was thus unable to notice their tact, resulting in him throwing all that away. Even so, he managed until now.

The people he had been unable to come to an understanding, because of their different sets of values, were mostly either Witches or Sin Archbishops.

However, by defining them as “different” beings, Subaru could continue going on without having to knock morals with them.

But Abel was different. The People of Shudraq and the Imperial Soldiers were also different.

They held no ill will, they did not toy with life and death, and they did not wield tremendous power for selfish reasons.

Excluding their base principles, they were humans, just like Subaru.

But even then—

Subaru: “…I, just want to bring Rem home.”

The battle to retake Abel’s throne was going to commence.

If this were another person’s affair, or if it was a past event detailed in a biography or something similar, Subaru would eagerly turn those pages with excitement.

This was reality, however.

In a foreign country, where there was no one to rely on, a fierce internal struggle that would shake the very foundation of the country was about to take place. To intervene in this situation and try to change history, there were no plans to even entertain that thought, in Subaru.

The objective was to bring Rem and return to the Kingdom of Lugunica.

He needed to reunite with Emilia and Beatrice, his friends at Roswaal’s mansion as soon as possible. They had to celebrate Rem’s awakening, and discuss what to do moving forward.

Any issues other than that, he could not keep up with.

Subaru: "—Tell me the location of the nearest town or village. I'll find a way back from there."

Tapping his cheeks with both his hands, Subaru stated his single-minded goal.

Receiving that, Abel responded with a small sigh,

Abel: "Hoh, that makes sense. Nevertheless, it will not be a simple path."

Subaru: "Easy or difficult, if it is necessary, I will walk that path. A paved path though, if possible."

Abel: "Hmph."

Standing up in front of the snorting Abel, Subaru strongly bit the inside of his cheek.

Stimulating his brain with the pain, he struck down his rising doubts and faced forward. He looked towards Abel, who remained unmoving.

The lonely Emperor had one of his eyes closed, his gaze crossing over with Subaru.

Subaru: "I still haven't thanked you. Putting aside the method in which you did it, thank you for rescuing Rem. I'm grateful for that."

Abel: "It was not only the girl, another one was rescued too."

Subaru: "That was unnecessary… Thanks to you, my worries will stay as-is for a while."

Of course, even in the case Louis had been lost in the Imperial Camp, it did not mean that the problems Subaru held would be neatly resolved. If one were to narrow it down to just his problems with Rem, there was a rather high chance that his relationship with her would become more strained.

He did not know which was better. And because he did not know—

Subaru: “I will pick the path that I agree with. I have mixed feelings about it but… you do the best you can do. But, the People of Shudraq…”

Abel: “Are you saying I should not involve them? Either way, if you and I did not intervene, a scorched jungle was what awaited them. This is already their fight too.”

Subaru: “…”

There was no room for denial.

They were already in a position where they were forced to fight to protect themselves.

However—

Subaru: “It’s impossible for me… I don’t think I will ever be able to become like you.”

Shaking his head, Subaru muttered while looking at Abel.

Abel had one of his eyes closed—The closed eyelid was opposite of the one before. To explain further, Abel’s blinking was unique. He would blink one eye at a time, never letting both eyes be closed at the same time.

Subaru recognized that this was done so that both eyes would never be closed even for an instant.

Subaru feared the Vollachian Emperor, who lived in a world where habits like that were formed just to survive as the one on the apex of the Sword Wolf’s Empire. He feared in reverence.

Listening to his mutterings, Abel, unsurprisingly with one eye closed,

Abel: “Naturally. You, nor anyone else would be fit to be my substitute.”

Stated that.

2

Leaving the People of Shudraq, Subaru and his group would be heading to the town closest to the Buddheim Jungle.

Such a decision had been made by Subaru. After the people surrounding him had listened to it, their reaction was unexpectedly mild.

???: “I see. It’s unfortunate, but if that is my comrade’s decision, it can’t be helped.”

That was Mizelda’s reaction after hearing what Subaru had to say.

She regarded his decision with respect, her dignified face tinted with sadness to some degree, just as what her words suggested.

Truthfully, Subaru had made his declaration whilst bracing himself against verbal abuse, such as, “You’re not a warrior if you don’t fight!”, so he felt all the more regretful because of her thoughtfulness.

Once Subaru had obtained permission from the chief, no one could stand in the way of his decision.

The existence of Utakata, who appeared to be more dejected than Mizelda, made Subaru feel reluctant to leave, as if something was tugging at the back of his hair. However, it would not become a reason for him to stay here.

Utakata: “Suu is going somewhere. Uu feels sad…”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m sorry… Hey, do you know what’s going to happen from now on?”

Subaru asked her, caressing the girl’s head as she pinched his sleeve.

Not a single doubt was held against the values and their sense of unity, and there was no mistaking the fact that Mizelda’s decision was the tribe's decision, but Utakata was still young.

If she had been pulled by the flow of the people around her without understanding anything—

Utakata: "—? A battle's going to start now. Uu will fight together with Mii, Taa, and everyone."

Subaru: "…I see."

As Utakata said that, showing off the bow she had equipped on her back, Subaru blew out a sigh.

He wanted young children to remain ignorant. As expected, such deceit was a facile idea that did not apply to this jungle.

In the first place, Utakata had once achieved putting Subaru to death by shooting him with a poisoned arrow.

Even if she did not look like it, she was definitely one of the People of Shudraq. She possessed the resolve to fight, as well as the resolve to kill her opponent.

Nevertheless—

Subaru: "Don't die, Utakata."

Utakata: "Uu won't die! Make sure you don't die, too. And do your best."

Although he attempted to cheer her on, a larger voice of encouragement was returned to him, causing Subaru to choke up, managing to respond to her by putting on a feeble smile.

In all honesty, Subaru could not imagine how much of a chance at victory that Abel and the Shudraqians would have in their battle.

Targeting Abel, who had been deprived of his status as an Emperor, their opponents had dispatched a subjugation force to the Buddheim Jungle.

That meant the enemy was in a state where they were able to move around the forces that made up the fighting strength of the Empire at their own discretion. Meanwhile, the only force that Abel held were the Shudraqians, and they were a small group of less than a hundred people.

Of course, there was a possibility that Abel would consecutively stack victory after victory, by utilizing an otherworldly, unfathomable plan similar to the one he had used to launch a one-sided assault on the Empire's Camp, forcing them to retreat, but—

???: "—Everything is all set."

Subaru: "—Hic."

While Subaru had been controlled by the very thoughts he had supposedly casted away by changing his mindset, someone called out to him from the side, like that.

Subaru immediately turned around, his shoulders jolting, and the person also widened her eyes from his momentum.

???: "—? What's the matter? Why are you so surprised?"

The person looking at the stiff-faced Subaru was Rem, who had said that.

With a wooden stick in one hand and carrying a small amount of baggage on her back, Rem appeared to have finished getting ready to leave the forest, just like Subaru.

—Yes, when Subaru had informed her that he had chosen to leave the forest, the person who had reacted to it in the most unexpected way had been none other than Rem.

To be honest, Subaru had thought she would oppose him stubbornly, therefore creating a need for him to persuade her.

In the worst case, he would forcefully take Rem outside while she was asleep, having steeled himself to part ways with the Shudraqians' village with the momentum of an escape under the cover of night.

However, Rem's reaction towards Subaru, who had revealed their circumstances to her with the expectation of being rejected, had been surprisingly simple.

Rem: "—. I understand. I will finish making preparations by tomorrow."

That was why, even when Subaru looked at Rem once she had finished making preparations for travel, he could not really accept it as something that had actually occurred.

Rem: "…Uhh?"

Subaru: "Ah! No, sorry, I'm alright. Yeah, your preparations look great, too. Cute, cute."

Rem: "Huh?"

Subaru: "I mean, you're reliable! Thank you. With you being such a responsible person, I'm such a fortunate guy."

His reply was awkward to the point Rem stared at him with a doubtful look.

It was not like he wished to curry favor with Rem. Since he was in a condition where he would be saved by Rem's lack of resistance, of course, so maintaining their current relationship was the most desirable.

Ideally, he wanted her to warm up to him, however.

Subaru: "…"

He could test that out again when he had a calmer state of mind.

For now, his honest opinion was that he wished to distance himself from the presence of war, which hung densely in the air, as soon as possible.

Rem: "So, have you finished your preparations? It seemed like you had the time to be reluctant about leaving, but…"

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s all good. I didn’t have much baggage to begin with, and you’re going to be carrying most of them.”

Rem: “…But, you’re going to be carrying me.”

With a drop in the tone of her voice, Rem snuck a glance at the handmade, wooden framework that had been placed in the clearing.

It was a wooden rack that had been assembled for Subaru to carry Rem on his back while travelling, weaved out of a combination of thick branches and vines.

Rem was able to walk with some difficulty by use of her cane, but the journey from this place to the nearest town would take a few days.

In the meantime, he did not know how time-consuming it would be if he were to walk at the same speed as Rem. Because of that, the wooden frame had been created through the cooperation of Subaru and the Shudraqians.

Subaru: “It feels pretty handmade, but there should be no issues with its durability. I already tested it out with Taritta-san, who’s heavier than you, so…”

Rem: “I’m not really concerned about heaviness or lightness, but I think you’re being rude to Taritta-san.”

Incurring Rem’s displeasure once again, Subaru scratched his cheek with a dry laugh.

And then, he directed his gaze behind Rem—towards Louis, their fellow traveling companion. It went without saying, but if Subaru were to bring Rem with him, then Louis would also be accompanying them.

Subaru: “There’s no way I could force a bomb onto everyone of the Shudraq, after all…”

Even if that was not the case, taking his eyes off a Sin Archbishop was purely preposterous.

There had been many instances where he had looked away from Louis, and that meant she had had plenty of opportunities to reveal her true nature, but he did not want to let her do that from now on.

Even if he had started to believe that Louis's behavior was not an act, but actually genuine.

Louis: "Aah, uuu."

The girl in question had her long hair tied behind her head, and also had her white clothes mended, her attire giving her a wholly different impression.

Apparently, the Shudraqians had been fond of Louis in their village, and her repaired clothes were a gift from them.

Subaru: "Sorry for making your tribe do pretty much everything for us."

Mizelda: "Don't worry about it, Subaru. You have overcome the Lifeblood Ritual, displaying the brightness of your soul. The fact that we're lending our strength to you is obviously to honor our comrade."

Subaru: "Comrade…"

Subaru dropped his eyes at Mizelda's words, as she came over to see him off, her arms crossed.

He could not face Mizelda, who has been referring to him as her comrade with such friendliness. After all, he knew that a harsh battle was looming upon them, and he was aware of being one of the very people who had involved the People of Shudraq into that, yet he was trying to flee from this place.

Would something like that be what a fellow comrade, dignified and honorable just as the tribe had described him, actually do?

Mizelda: "Don't trouble yourself about it, Subaru."

However, Mizelda said that as if she had deciphered his inner thoughts.

Subaru: “Mizelda-san…”

Mizelda: “We fight to prove our worth. However, we create our future by protecting those dear to us until the end. It’s way of thinking that’s necessary in order to protect our tribe.”

Subaru: “…”

Mizelda: “Protect Rem and Louis. That is the honor we expect from our comrade.”

Subaru felt the corners of his eyes grow hot from Mizelda’s straightforward words.

He did not feel like correcting Mizelda, saying she had misunderstood about Louis. He had to at least fulfil that role, to answer to the trust Mizelda and the others had put in him.

Or, although he would never meet the Shudraqians ever again—.

???: “We’re ready~. Now is a good opportunity to take our leave~.”

Right as Subaru had been spurred by Mizelda, a woman with yellow-tipped hair, waving her hand exaggeratedly—Holly, called over to him with a wide grin.

Next to her was Kuna, who had a slender build, her hair dyed green. The cheerful Holly and in contrast, the reticent-looking Kuna. Those two were the guardians of Subaru’s group.

Arrangements had been made so that the two Shudraqians would be protecting Subaru, Rem, and Louis, ensuring they would not be attacked by anything on their way to Guaral—the nearest town.

Subaru: “I’m super grateful for bodyguards, but I also feel like it’s too much. Even though…”

This was a foreign country, and Subaru had already died multiple times in the mere span of a few days.

He could not deny it was a unique situation, but it was the safest to take precautions. Subaru himself did not have enough prowess as a fighter to be confident in his own abilities, and it was fruitless to depend on Rem and Louis.

He could say nothing regarding Kuna, but he had also seen Holly lift a boulder effortlessly with his own eyes. They were more than reliable as the group's bodyguards during their journey.

And then—

Subaru: "—Rem, does it hurt anywhere?"

Subaru asked Rem over his shoulder, while pulling up the wooden rack.

Since they would be positioned back-to-back with the handmade frame between them, Subaru could not see Rem's face from where he was. He had tried packing in soft leaves and fabric to secure her body, but there would be a few inconveniences considering they would be traveling for a long time.

Rem: "I'm fine… Are you okay with this?"

Subaru: "I've been training myself moderately… at least. My stamina hasn't completely returned, but I want to prevent Holly and Kuna's hands from being full, in the case of emergency."

In the first place, he was immensely thankful towards the two Shudraqians for being their escorts, but making them carry Rem on top of that was something he could never dare to ask for.

Subaru, demonstrating his stubbornness, Rem, carried by him, and Louis had lined up as a group. Accompanying them were Holly and Kuna, having finished their preparations despite being lightly dressed, and they all stood together.

Then, the People of Shudraq began crowding around the entrance of the village.

Mizelda: "Well then, may the tranquility and objective of our fellow comrade, Natsuki Subaru, be fulfilled."

People of Shudraq: “—May it be fulfilled!”

Mizelda called out, standing in the front, and the other Shudraqians followed in unison.

Experiencing an illusion of feeling like the wind had blown, filling up the area, Subaru made sure to return their spirit with a, “Yeah!”, along with a smiling face.

Subaru: “Thank you, everyone. Take care of yourselves and stay happy!”

As soon as he had said it, he realized that was a greeting terribly filled with deceit.

Thinking about the turbulent path that awaited the tribe after this, “stay happy” were two words that sounded far too hollow and meaningless.

However, he could not say anything more than that. He could not wish for anything more than that.

He hoped for the pleasant, refreshing women to stay happy as they continued to live their lives.

Subaru: “…”

While wishing for that, Subaru searched for the man with the wicked mask among the line of people who had come to see his group off.

However, it was only natural that the man could not be found anywhere.

He was not someone who would send them off, nor did the relationship between him and Subaru involve something like that.

Even if Subaru were to spot the man, he would not have any words to tell him.

That was why—

Subaru: “—We’re heading off!”

Louis: “Uu!”

As Subaru said that, almost in a desperate way, Louis’s loud voice overlapped with his words.

And then, Subaru and his group split themselves from the People of Shudraq, departing for Guaral, the nearest town, in an effort to escape from the war that would take place hereafter, taking their first step in doing so.

Chapter 15:
Those I Want to Protect

1

Deer: “—MUU!”

At that instant, there was a thud and a loud cry, and animals kicked the ground and fled.

On their way through the prairie, they had happened to come across a small forest. Amidst the shade of the trees, animals resembling deer had been eating grass. They were called black deer because of their impressive antlers and black fur. They also inhabited the Kingdom of Lugunica, and could be said to be one of the major animals of this parallel world.

In the center of the herd, from where they had fled from the sound and impact, one black deer had been left behind, collapsed atop the grass.

A thick arrow had pierced the black deer’s ribs, its heart destroyed by a single shot.

Its four limbs twitched and quivered in post-mortem convulsion, but, before long, that too stopped.

In any event—

???: “I brought down the meat~!”

????: “…“Meat”. You could say black deer at least.”

???: “Huh? What did you say just now~? Kuna’s voice is soft, I can’t really hear you~”

The one who’d drawn the heavy bow and raised a cheer was Holly.

She wore a sunny smile, and the young girl beside her, Kuna, had muttered inaudibly, causing Holly to begin tilting her head to the side with a curious expression.

But, seeing that Kuna pouted her lips,

Kuna: “It was nothing! Drain the blood! Quickly now!”

Holly: “Ah, please wait~!”

Holly started lumbering to Kuna’s side, rushing after her. But before she got there, Holly stopped walking, let out an “Oh”, and spun around to look back.

There, before Holly’s eyes, was the figure of their companion—

Holly: “It’s a lot, so we’re gonna go take a short break. Subaru, you wanna take one too~?”

Subaru: “…Um, uhh, not particularly, I’m totally fine, but sure.”

Pouring sweat like a waterfall, Subaru answered Holly’s proposal of a break.

Looking at Subaru, Holly said “I’m glad”, and ran back to Kuna’s side. Watching them leave, Subaru slowly fell to his knees on the spot.

Behind the totally exhausted Subaru, being carried in a wooden backpack, Rem took a small breath,

Rem: “…Stubborn.”

And muttered too softly to be heard by Subaru.

2

Subaru: “Man, that really took a lot outta me. I was able to withstand it because I’m the eldest son. But I wouldn’t be able to do it if I were the second son or the youngest.”

Putting together the twigs he’d collected, Subaru gave his explanation in a cool breeze.

Rem listened with an unamused look, and Louis listened with a blank expression, one that made it unclear what she was thinking. Nonetheless, Rem let out a short sigh, like she was exasperated with the matter.

Rem: "I do not understand what you mean. To begin with, is there a connection between having siblings and one's perseverance?"

Subaru: "Now it's kind of a dumb cliche, but I feel like there's a correlation between one's sibling status and relative fortitude. Like, they say the firstborn son is raised strictly by his parents, and the youngest child is spoiled, right?"

Rem: "I don't know if that could be called "right". Doesn't that not apply in the case of an only child?"

Subaru: "In that case, you end up getting spoiled while being raised strictly… Naturally, since I'm an only child, that means the special characteristics of the eldest and youngest son both apply to me."

Considering his parents' closeness, Subaru not having any siblings was quite the mystery.

Since he was aware he'd had his mom and dad's love all to himself, he couldn't help but wonder what having siblings would have been like, but that didn't change the reality of it.

Subaru: "Besides, it's not certain that I don't have younger siblings now that I'm not there…"

Rem: "…"

Louis: "Aauuaah"

While Subaru was imagining terrible things, Rem looked down, towards Louis, who was being playful on her lap.

While on the move, the wooden rack would be secured to Subaru's back, but when placed on the ground, it could also serve as a chair. It was an item with exceptional potential.

Thanks to that, going through the trouble of picking Rem up or setting her down could be done without much hassle.

Although Rem probably thought the circumstances requiring her to keep asking Subaru for help were shameful, for the time being, she had to get through and accept that disgrace.

Rem: “Siblings…”

Subaru: “Uh huh?”

Rem: “Family born before me, or born after… Did I have any?”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Rem inquired abruptly, and Subaru reflexively held his breath.

With a start he raised his head, while Rem was minding Louis’s hair threading her fingers, those blue pupils of hers turned toward Subaru.

In them a faint light flickered, with emotions he did not understand. He thought that perhaps Rem herself did not quite know those either.

Nevertheless—

Subaru: “It’s the first time. That you’ve tried asking me about your memories.”

Rem: “Where are we, who are you, who am I, what will you do, how dare you… I think I have asked a number of questions up until now.”

Subaru: “I’m not talking about that kind of negative stuff. Also, I thought you hadn’t yet said how dare you…”

He gave a strained grin to Rem’s prickly objection, however, it provided meager relief.

As he had told Rem, this was the first time she had asked him anything in a positive sense. Subaru perceived that as progress in their relationship.

Frankly, since their departure from the Shudraq village, all through their journey up till now, Subaru had been continuously uneasy.

After all, Rem had laid bare her hostility and suspicions towards Subaru, but despite that, she had not rejected his proposal to head toward the town for a few days because of those.

To put it bluntly, he had thought the greatest obstacle to leaving the Shudraq village would be Rem's stubborn unwillingness to listen to Subaru's words.

Without opposing Subaru's plan, Rem had been cooperative. — Rather than believing it to be a miracle, he had wondered what the heck kind of a calamity it heralded.

But not only was Rem being cooperative at present, she had not even troubled Subaru with various, excessive questions while being carried in the wooden carrier. Instead, she had chided Louis for shifting restlessly and hindering the march, and tried to lessen Subaru's burden.

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "What is it? You don't feel like talking, is that it?"

Subaru: "No, no, not at all. You're jumping to the wrong conclusion. Just, look, our relationship has been pretty strained right?"

Rem: "It still is now, though it is not strained, it is unfriendly."

Subaru: "I thought the unfriendliness had softened a bit!"

Rem's eyes looked at him with disgust, and Subaru's heart was wounded once again. But, being careful to protect the injury he had just gotten from Rem, he scratched his cheek with his fingers.

Subaru: "I don't know everything about you either. But, I know more about you than you do now. If there's anything you want to ask, I'll answer as much as I can. But…"

Rem: "Whether or not to believe you is up to me…"

Subaru: "Mhm."

Subaru gave a short nod, and with a glance examined Rem's appearance.

She was carding her fingers through Louis's hair, and frowning as if in deep thought. After a short moment, Rem once again met Subaru's eyes and said,

Rem: "I do not know."

Subaru: "You don't know… about yourself?"

Rem: "About you. …What in the world kind of person are you, I do not understand it at all. Because what I sense and what I see do not match."

Her lips pursed tightly, Rem's icy look was tinged with heat.

It was not that the distance between their hearts had increased, it was that the level of seriousness had risen. As Rem evaluated Subaru, the earnestness in those eyes increased.

It was evidence that at least she thought Subaru's humanity was worthy of investigation.

Subaru: "Compared to when you treated me like an incarnation of evil without giving me a chance to explain, this feels like a Great Leap Forward."

Rem: "I still think there is a paper-thin difference between you and evil incarnate… However, it is just that we have reached a point where it seems fine to insert one thin sheet of paper."

Subaru: "…"

The few words she added felt like a conciliatory handshake from Rem.

With relief, Subaru reached out to grasp that invisible handshake. Rem made a distrustful face at Subaru, who shook an invisible hand in midair.

In any case—

Subaru: “Well, our thin ice relationship has reached a place of having a thin sheet of paper inserted… How about it? Anything you want to ask?”

Rem: “…Please let me think a bit more.”

Unprepared to have a heart-to-heart with Subaru, Rem shook her head and requested that.

Rem’s way of preparation—More accurately, Rem had yet to prepare herself to believe Subaru.

Right now, it was possible she was worried about listening to his story, in a situation where she was unable to completely trust Subaru, and the information being too much to handle.

Honestly, he would be lying if he said that he did not feel impatient about Rem worrying like that but,

Subaru: “—Gotcha. I’ll wait for you to be ready.”

Rem: “…Please do not say it like that, like it is someone else’s problem. Since you could say that it also depends on your daily behavior, I think.”

Subaru: “I see… In other words, the only way to gain early access to that route is if I earn Rem likeability and credibility points like crazy?”

Rem: “I do not understand the meaning, but I understand what you said is unpleasant.”

Putting his hand on his chin, Subaru could see that Rem’s displeasure was accumulating once again.

As that conversation unfolded, from below the two of them—

Holly: “Sorry to keep you waiting~. We had fun taking apart the black deer and we’re done~.”

Like that, Holly returned with a face-splitting grin.

She took great delight in the dismembered black deer, hung from a branch she carried on her shoulder. Behind the chipper Holly was the tired face of Kuna, who seemed to have worked hard at the job of dismemberment.

Kuna: “Why did I have to do everything myself…”

Holly: “Because, Kuna can do it better~. If the meat got ruined, even if I eat and eat my tummy’d still end up especially empty~”

Kuna: “Why?! If you eat something, seriously keep it in your stomach, you weirdo!”

Kuna yelled at the easy-going Holly, but the latter laughed it off.

Holly then set her eyes on the bundle of dried branches Subaru had collected.

Holly: “Oh, you properly gathered them~. I’m impressed, I’m impressed~.”

Subaru: “I can’t do any hunting. I’ll at least do this much… Can you instruct me on how to start a fire?”

Holly: “Instruct? Never heard of that word before~.”

Kuna: “Obviously it means to teach…”

Holly tilted her head in contemplation, replying to Kuna with a giggle and a “Does it~?”.

Next, Holly brought out a small, black stone from her luggage. Allowing Subaru to witness it, she struck the stone quickly and used the sparks produced to easily light the branches on fire.

Subaru: “Woa, woahhhhhh, awesome. That’s some artisanship.”

Holly: “It’s a fire starter stone~. It’s easy-peasy once you get the hang of it~. Subaru, you try too~.”

Subaru: “You’re letting me try? Okay, I’ll just borrow this…”

Holly casually threw the fire starter stone to Subaru. He attempted to imitate Holly's actions from earlier, and as a result, he failed three times, but on his fourth try, he finally was able to produce sparks.

All he had to do now was to do the same thing over the dried branches—

Subaru: "It lit up!"

Holly: "Well done~! Now if any meat pops out, it can be cooked and eaten anytime~!"

Kuna: "The meat she's talking about are the animals before becoming meat, so don't take her for her word."

Towards Subaru, who had gained a small sense of accomplishment, Holly and Kuna appraised him from opposite extremes.

Accepting both of those in his heart, Subaru gazed at the black deer's meat roasting over the campfire. He brought up a new topic, saying "By the way,"

Subaru: "Back when we found the herd of deer, Holly's speed was amazing. By the time I realized, you had already shot an arrow."

Holly: "It's because Kuna found the herd~. Because of her we could get fresh meat~."

Kuna: "The only thing I did was say that the herd was there… Leaving aside firing quickly, anyone in Shudraq can shoot a bow and arrow."

Holly: "Except Kuna, you know~."

Kuna: "Uguh."

Having been prodded on a sensitive topic, Kuna's expression turned into a scowl.

Rem widened her eyes in surprise to Kuna's reaction.

Rem: “Really? That is unexpected. Kuna’s eyes are good, is what I heard from Mizelda so…”

Kuna: “…Even if my eyes are good, if my arms are bad then there’s no point.”

Holly: “Kuna, who loses even to Utakata in archery. It’s cute~.”

Kuna: “Shudduuup!”

Having been rated as below Utakata, Kuna used her hand to strike Holly in the stomach as if using a dagger. However, Holly’s plump body simply bounced the strike back.

Rem watched the seemingly practiced interaction between the two with a smile, but hearing about Utakata’s archery put Subaru in a conflicted state of mind.

Because, Subaru was someone who had once lost his life to Utakata’s poisoned arrow.

In terms of strength, Utakata was not strong enough to kill Subaru. Even so, if poison were to be used, for example, on an arrowhead, there would not be a great handicap in killing power.

When it came to hunting and prey though, the use of poison was probably not highly regarded.

Subaru: “And also…”

Putting his fingers on his lips, Subaru pondered about the wielder of a heavily drawn bow.

This was about the Hunter who had attacked Subaru and Rem in the jungle, before being caught by the Imperial Soldier’s camp. The bow master who had protected Subaru and Rem from the Witchbeast once, and murdered Subaru the other.

The true identity of the Hunter had yet to be discovered.

That was why, when Holly had shot the black deer, Subaru went pale.

Except, after hearing the talk about the People of Shudraq's archery skills—

Subaru: "—It's someone from Shudraq? Is doubting anyone else wasted thinking?"

At that time, Subaru's group was a suspicious disturbance that had entered the jungle.

Subaru was shouting while searching for Rem. So it was not impossible to think that someone had concluded that Subaru was a suspicious enemy seeking to bring harm, and as a result, decided to eliminate him as a threat. It was most likely the same for the confrontation with the Witchbeast afterwards.

Actually, the Hunter had in fact protected Subaru's group from the Witchbeast. —The reasoning to declare that the Hunter was definitely an enemy was weak.

Rem: "Holly-san and Kuna-san are good friends, aren't they."

While Subaru was sunken in thought, Rem had struck up a conversation with Holly and Kuna.

Rem was talking about Holly and Kuna—the ones who were accompanying Subaru's group, the young duo from the People of Shudraq.

However, the only one who laughed upon being told they were good friends was Holly. Kuna, on the other hand, scrunched up her face in disgust and stuck her tongue out with an unflattering sound.

Subaru: "What's with that reaction and face? Pretty girls aren't supposed to do both of those, you know?"

Kuna: "I just remembered that as much as I hate it, we can't be separated. I've been left to suffer over and over…"

Holly: "Ahahaha, Kuna's a worrier."

Kuna: "Who's. Fault. Is. That!"

A furious Kuna grabbed Holly’s shoulder and harshly shook her. However, the difference in physique between the two was too great, and Holly, who had about double the mass of Kuna and her slender physique, did not budge an inch.

In the end, Kuna realized she would only tire herself out and drooped her shoulders. She ground her teeth, frustratedly saying “Dammit”.

Holly: “Me and Kuna were born on the same day∼. We’re neighbors and kinda like sisters∼.”

Kuna: “Someone like you, I’d refuse as a sister. Older or younger.”

Holly: “Ah, the roast’s starting to become a nice color∼.”

Kuna: “Listen to me!”

Towards Holly, who entirely directed her own pace, Kuna’s one-way resistance reverberated emptily and in vain.

Witnessing this scene, Subaru thought that the sight of Kuna being at the mercy of Holly somewhat resembled a certain fussy, violent internal affairs officer.

Subaru: “Kuna’s dyed her hair green, so the color theme overlaps… Even in situations he’s missing in, that guy asserts himself quite strongly.”

If that person were listening, he would say something like “That false accusation is a positive trait, you know?!” However, since he wasn’t present, Subaru disposed of that thought as an auditory hallucination.

Rem looked at Holly and Kuna, who were arguing about the roasted meat’s color with a small smile. Subaru heard her mutter “I’m jealous.”

Rem: “Someone you can honestly talk with just like that…”

Subaru: “…Ahhhh, Rem, can I just say one thing?”

There was a certain and earnest envy packed into Rem's mutterance.

For the amnesiac Rem, the environment around her, including Subaru, must feel like an invader from the darkness. She could not feel truly at ease at any moment.

He did not know whether he had the skill to soothe her strained heart but—

Rem: "What is it?"

Subaru: "I said I was going to keep my mouth shut until you wanted to ask about it but, I'll spill about one thing."

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "You have an older sister. Your older twin, who holds you dear from the bottom of her heart… So, no matter where you are, you'll never be alone."

Hearing Subaru's words, Rem's already wide eyes, opened further in surprise.

After saying that, Subaru wondered if he should have been more patient, but he immediately told himself that this was the correct decision.

Rem had just said that she would wait until she could trust Subaru. It could not be helped if she disparaged him next.

Subaru understood Rem's anxiety, but, nevertheless, he was at his limit too.

At the very least, he could let her know about Ram's existence.

Ram, who was probably, even now, worried about her younger sister, all the way from the far lands of Lugunica. —The Ram who was feeling Rem through Synesthesia.

Subaru: "I don't understand it but, if you close your eyes and try to imagine it, you might be able to feel it. That's what's called a twin's

Synesthesia.”

Rem: “Synesthesia…”

Somewhat hesitating, Rem timidly placed her hand on her chest and closed her eyes.

Staying still, seeking her other half, born on the same day and from the same mother—seeking the existence of her older twin, Rem’s consciousness started to extend its hand through a sea of black night.

However—

Rem: “…I cannot feel anything.”

Subaru: “Is that, so… I guess it’s pretty difficult if you can’t visualize it.”

Shaking her head slowly, Rem reported on the failure of her Synesthesia.

For a moment, he worried something had happened to Ram that made it unable to connect with her. However, he judged that the distance— both physical and mental, was the bigger problem.

Frankly, in a situation where the Synesthesia had indeed connected, a lot of things would turn for the better at once. It was pretty disappointing, but he could not let that show on the outside.

The most frustrated one here was Rem.

For now, he had to console Rem’s feelings of frustration and—

Rem: “—a”

Louis: “Uu—?”

However, while Subaru was choosing his words of comfort, a slight sigh escaped from Rem’s lips.

The reason for that was Louis’s hand, which was placed on top of

Rem’s resting hand. Louis, while resting her head on Rem’s lap, was concerned about Rem, overlapping her hands with her own from underneath.

Rem softly curled her lips up at Louis’s actions.

Rem: “Thank you. I’m okay.”

Louis: “Aa—”

Rem put on a brave smile, and Louis cheerfully laughed upon seeing it.

Looking at their heartwarming scene, Subaru grit his teeth. He realized he was too late and his role had been snatched from him.

Subaru: “Dammit… I knew it! You’re still my enemy aren’t you...?!”

Rem: “Again, why does it end up that way? Do you not think it is childish?”

Looking at Subaru, who was glaring at Louis, Rem again lost faith in Subaru.

Ignorant to the situation, Louis, the recipient of Subaru’s glare, gleefully flailed her arms and legs up and down.

And then, the ones who took no notice of the stiff atmosphere between Subaru’s group—

Holly: “It’s done~!”

Kuna: “It’s still raw!!”

The duo who had an already established relationship raised their voices.

3

—Subaru’s group had arrived safely at Guaral, having taken four days in total,

Subaru: “So that’s Guaral… It’s protected by fine-looking walls.”

A fortified city, surrounded by towering walls, that could be seen from a distance.

He was astonished that his prediction had missed its mark, and felt like he had been hit by a stroke of luck. Subaru was experiencing two sensations, as there was a disparity between the sight of the city and what he had imagined after hearing that it was the "nearest town".

Subaru: "The city feels pretty rugged… Is a giant gonna come over or what?"

Kuna: "Giants? I heard they were nearly wiped out, quite a while ago."

Subaru: "Really? I wonder if the old fart I know is the last giant, then…"

Subaru muttered out a purposeless comment in response to Kuna's serious-minded reply.

It was surprising to know that Rom-ji, the only giant that Subaru knew, was in such a rare position. Although, he had heard of the oni race being extremely scarce in numbers from Rem, so perhaps the struggle for survival between races was unforgiving, even in this world.

Subaru: "Thinking about it calmly, I've never met anyone related to elves aside from Emilia-tan, so maybe there aren't many elves out there, either."

As a cliché of the fantasy genre, it was common for long-lived species to have low fertility in exchange for a long lifespan, therefore being unable to increase their numbers easily.

In addition to that, because of the fear directed towards the Witch of Envy, half-elves were a target of hatred, in this world. That was the real state of things. Naturally, Subaru could think of the possibility that pure-blooded elves were also pressured by those conventions, as they were the foundation of the births of half-elves.

Subaru: "I think about Emilia-tan in a place where she's absent.

Dammit, I haven't been able to meet Beako for a while as well. I feel like my Emiliase and Beatromin deficiency is becoming severe."

The prescribed medicine for both cases of malnutrition would be coming into contact with Emilia and Beatrice.

In all seriousness, the mental fatigue that resulted from being continuously worried or tense was substantial, so just hearing the voices of Emilia and Beatrice, who both contributed to Subaru's peace of mind, would make him feel more relaxed.

Subaru: "I miss Ram, Petra, Frederica, and the others' voices… Hell, in a situation like this, I'm fine with even Roswaal's voice."

Rem: "Excuse me, can you give me a break with your meaningless emotional conflict?"

Subaru: "Ah, my bad."

Rem chided him for his overflowing soliloquy while remaining on his back.

Subaru had splendidly managed to carry Rem on the wooden rack for the duration of the journey, without entrusting her to anyone else. He had not learned the ropes on how to carry things during the first and second day, and his waste of stamina had been quite prominent. However, he had gotten the hang of his pacing and sense of balance from the third day onwards, so he had been able to make a lot of progress while walking.

Subaru: "When it comes to carrying Rem on one's back, I'm second to none by now."

Rem: "Don't try to compete over such an undignified thing. Also, those two are…"

Subaru and Rem were positioned back-to-back, so Rem would be pointing towards somewhere behind him. As he turned around, obeying her words, there were Holly and Kuna.

And then, next to Kuna, who was lazily scratching her head, Holly took one step towards Subaru and Rem, Holly: “Well, I guess this is goodbye since you arrived safely ~ .”

Subaru: “Ah… You two won’t enter the city…?”

Kuna: “It’s meaningless for us to enter. Our role is to escort you two.”

Subaru: “I see… You two really helped us out a lot.”

With the abrupt farewell, Subaru admonished himself, thinking this would obviously happen.

Kuna and Holly had only followed them out of the kindness of the People of Shudraq. He felt that he was dependent on them, because they had saved him multiple times during his travels.

Holly, who had cleared the atmosphere with her hunting skills and cheery personality.

Kuna, who possessed unexpectedly extensive knowledge and an earnest will to provide answers to Subaru’s questions, had been reliable.

Parting ways with the two of them, Subaru would be traveling with Rem, this time for sure—no, it would be a three-person-journey with Rem and Louis.

There had been someone else at the Empire’s encampment, as well as the Shudraqian village, but this time, it was different.

Kuna: “…Jeez, stop making such a miserable face.”

Subaru: “My bad. By “miserable face”, do you mean… woah?!”

Gazing at Subaru’s black eyes that had previously wavered with uneasiness, Kuna shoved something towards him.

Subaru instinctively caught the item in his hand, and teetered forward from its unexpected weight. A long and thin white wrapping was given to him. It was the object which Holly had been carrying on her back, for the whole duration of the journey.

During the trip, he had assumed that it was an item essential to Holly and Kuna.

Subaru: “Now that I think about it, I feel like you never opened this… What’s this?”

Holly: “It’s yours~. The chieftain told us to give it to you, once you arrived properly at the town~.”

Subaru: “It’s mine, and once I arrived at the town…?”

Unable to grasp the true meaning behind Holly’s words, Subaru knitted his brows out of uncertainty. However, Kuna had prompted him roughly with a, “Just open it.”

Receiving her words, Subaru lowered the wooden rack on his back to the ground, and opened the white wrapping.

Inside, there was—

Subaru: “Ah…”

Rem: “Is this… a horn?”

A white lump laid in Subaru’s arms, as large as his arms could hold. What Rem had murmured after looking at it had told him it was a horn—a Witchbeast’s horn at that.

Subaru recognized it. He had seen it twice, and he had taken a good look at it during the Lifeblood Ritual.

Subaru: “Is this the Elgina’s horn, by any chance?”

Holly: “Yep~. You were the one who broke it off, so it’s yours~.”

Kuna: “It’s a valuable item. With that size, it’ll fetch a high price.”

Subaru: “—Hic!”

Having been told that the horn would fetch a high price, Subaru held his breath at Holly and Kuna’s thoughtful arrangements.

In other words, they were telling him to exchange the Witchbeast’s horn for traveling expenses, so that Subaru's group could go back to the Kingdom of Lugunica.

The two had carried the baggage for that purpose, without specifying said purpose.

Subaru: "It must've been pretty heavy…"

Kuna: "You were carrying Rem on your back for the whole time."

Holly: "Besides, besides! I'm very strong~. So, it was no problem at all~."

Both Kuna and Holly had faces looking like they had only done something trivial, while Subaru's voice was trembling because of the two's ulterior motives.

Their thoughtfulness had rendered him completely speechless, word for word.

Subaru: "…"

They had helped him on the way to Guaral, and even secured traveling expenses for Subaru's group.

Despite all that, Subaru would part ways with him, and go back to his country. —Holly and Kuna would reunite with their Shudraqian allies, and join the battle to retake the Imperial Capital alongside Abel.

Whilst yielding the life or death of many along the way—

Subaru: "I…"

Kuna: "—Don't think about anything stupid."

Subaru: "…"

Kuna: "You gotta fight to protect the ones you wanna protect. It's the same for us."

Although impulsive words nearly found their way out of Subaru's mouth, Kuna had sharply put a stop to those.

Kuna directed an annoyed glare at Subaru, all while emanating her usual feeling of listlessness.

She had a lot of complaints, and always seemed irritated towards Holly. However, she had never separated herself from the Shudraqians, nor had she ever given any indication that she disliked Holly.

As a member of the Shudraqians, she thought it was only natural for her to fight together with Abel.

—That must be proof that she had already chosen the "ones she wanted to protect" in her words.

Kuna: "Don't keep idling around. I have good eyesight. If you do something stupid, then I can see it straight away."

Holly: "And if Kuna tells me about it, then I can go kaboom with my bow and arrow~!"

Subaru: "…Yeah, that's scary."

From their words, Subaru understood that he had been gently pushed away.

If he acted out of impulse here, then he would disregard their—no, the People of Shudraq's kindness. He could not do such a thing for the women who had referred to him as their comrade.

Subaru: "I'll gratefully make good use of it for our journey. Thanks for taking care of us, you two!"

Comprehending Kuna and Holly's intentions, Subaru swallowed the thoughts that surged forward.

Receiving it, albeit their respective attitudes, they nodded.

Rem: "Thank you for accompanying us, Holly-san and Kuna-san. I won't forget my gratitude towards you two, as well as to every person of the People of Shudraq."

Kuna: “Please do that. You’ve apparently forgotten a lot of things, so…”

Holly: “I think you’re going too far with that~.”

Wanting to at least bid them farewell, Rem had climbed down the wooden frame and seemed to be reluctant to part ways with them.

Louis also showing her unwillingness to leave Holly and Kuna was something unexpected. She had gotten close to Holly in particular, who was outspoken and unreserved with her interactions. Louis clung on to Holly’s stomach for a while, refusing to separate herself from her.

Kuna: “Bye, Subaru. Don’t forget, I’ll be watching.”

Holly: “Yep~!”

Subaru: “Yeah! Thank you so much! Thank you!”

Turning their backs towards the two waving their hands in an exaggerated manner, Subaru’s group resumed their three-person-journey.

Subaru had placed back the horn he was given into its wrapping, and left it in Louis’s care by making her carry it on her back. Subaru had made that agonizing decision because his hands were occupied, but perhaps Holly and Kuna’s words had been effective, as Louis was trying to ensure the wrapping would not drop, following Subaru and Rem quietly.

Rem: “It means she also pays attention to a lot of things.”

Subaru: “…I know she’s a ball of curiosity.”

Rem pointed it out while on his back, with Subaru replying to her with a bitter feeling.

The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb, had devoured myriad lives, in an attempt to find the life most suited for herself. She would be an inquirer if framed in a positive light, or an omnivore if framed negatively.

That was why, even if Louis had shown a slightly admirable side of herself, Subaru's impression of her would not change.

It would not change.

Subaru: “Let's go.”

Hearing Rem's sigh behind him, Subaru began walking.

He also heard Louis's footsteps as if she were following him.

There were only three of them, just as how it had been back then, when they had been first plunged into the Vollachian Empire.

Finally seeming as if they were all facing the same direction, they moved on.

And then, they passed through the gates of the fortified city—Guaral.

Chapter 16:
The Situation in the Empire

1

—The fortress city of Guaral.

That was the name of the first civilized town in the Empire that Subaru's party had reached.

Because they had constantly been sleeping under the stars at the Imperial Soldiers' encampment and the Shudraqian village until now, catching sight of civilization was especially exciting.

That said, it was not as though they could just let go and enjoy the wonders of civilization.

The reason being—

???: "—Inspection."

Before their eyes, at the entrance to the city, they saw an inspection taking place, and Subaru wet his lips with his tongue.

Guaral was surrounded on all four sides by a protective wall, and entering or exiting to the east and west was limited to one at a time by means of large gates. There were permanent inspection posts at the gates, and even from a distance the gate guards' grim faces as they kept a stern, watchful eye, could be confirmed.

Kuna: "They'll be able to tell we're Shudraqian with one look. So we can't come with you friends, but as long as you're not carrying anything shady you'll be fine."

Holly: "It'll work out if you're not timid and walk in boldly~. Take care of Rem and Louis-chan okay~?"

Before they arrived at the city, those were the parting words of Kuna and Holly.

Both had advised him not to get more worked up than necessary, but to forget his nervousness and anxiety so easily was a suggestion impossible to follow.

Since, at any rate, in the Empire they were foreigners with unknown affiliations and no identification either.

Subaru: “Anyways, even a foreigner with no common sense like me can tell Lugunican people aren’t welcome to wander around in Vollachia these days.”

It seemed that if he foolishly revealed his true identity, he would without a doubt incur the displeasure of the gate guards.

It was not just that they could literally be turned away at the gate, to be inadvertently arrested or something of the sort would be a terrible event if it came to pass. He had already gone through that back at the Imperial encampment.

—Subaru absolutely could not permit an end such as that, where many would burn as a result of his own mishaps, to occur again.

Subaru: “…”

??? “…People around you are going to get suspicious if you look too grim.”

Subaru had furrowed his brows, in reflection of how torn he was within; upon hearing her voice, his eyes widened in surprise.

The voice had come from his back—And had belonged to Rem, who was riding along in the wooden backpack.

Because of the way the pack was structured, Rem should not be able to see Subaru’s face since their backs were up against each other.

Subaru: “And yet, how did you know I was wrinkling my brows?”

Rem: “Even if I can’t see it, I can hear your breathing. Your heartbeat too, since our backs are touching, although it is through the backpack… I can feel the tension from here.”

Subaru: “Oof… Sorry ‘bout that. For my wrinkled brow, and for my loud heartbeat too.”

Rem: “Yes. Allow me some quiet, please.”

Subaru: “By that, you mean “calm down”, not “stop breathing” right?”

In response to Subaru seeking confirmation just in case, Rem remained silent, sighing.

Rem’s long sigh felt like it was somewhere between being fed up with Subaru and being apathetic towards him. Since it was not born out of clear disgust or hostility, Subaru was a tiny bit relieved.

If one were to tell him his aspirations were low, there would be nothing he could reply back with.

Louis: “Ooh, ooh?”

Subaru: “…I get it, so hurry up. You’re also one cause of my worries y’know!”

Pulling vigorously on Subaru’s sleeve and pointing at the line was the long-haired Louis.

The Witchbeast’s horn which Kuna had bequeathed to them—Louis was shouldering it in a white bundle, currently wondering why Subaru was not lining up.

However, he could not act thoughtlessly like Louis and recklessly line up in the queue.

Subaru: “Right now, we don’t have any way to give identification or bribes to the gate guards. So, it’s impossible to approach from the front.”

Rem: “Isn’t it possible to line up and talk it out with the gate guards?”

Subaru: “Being honest and talking it out is an option, but a situation in which it fails and we can’t recover from is scary… Cause, we don’t have anyone that we can rely on right now.”

Listening to Subaru’s concerns, Rem made a small noise and went silent.

It may have been difficult to imagine for the amnesiac Rem, but for every place to place, and culture to culture, there was no overdoing cautiousness.

—Surprisingly, ten days were about to pass, since the time the trio had been blown off into the Empire from the Pleiades Watchtower.

The initial chaos had subsided quite a bit, and the heated relationship between Subaru, Rem and Louis had been shelved away for the time being. Nevertheless, it was still difficult to say that everything was looking up.

In any case, the only time when Subaru and Rem – and also Louis – were acting together and by themselves, had occurred when they were running from the Hunter and Elgina. It lasted merely a moment after they had been blown off here.

Any other time, whether at the Imperial Soldiers’ camp, the Shudraqian settlement or during the journey to Guaral, there was always someone familiar with the Empire alongside them.

They were not on friendly terms with everyone there, but at least they were not lonely.

Subaru: “But, it’s different now.”

Antagonizing Todd and his crew, splitting off from Abel’s path and even separating from the People of Shudraq.

From here on out, the trio would need to traverse the untrodden lands of the Empire without any crutches. Like it or not, taking care in their decisions would be the name of the game.

Rem: “So, what shall we do? No matter how troubled or hesitant, our goal is still the same, right? There’s no way we can just pass by through this city, I reckon…”

Subaru: “Even if we call it quits here because of this inspection, they might be doing the same thing in other cities. If only this were Lugunica, they wouldn’t be on such high alert… No.”

Subaru shook his head, taking into account the situation in the Empire.

Though they had since parted from him, Abel had conveyed to them his own situation, and how he had been ousted from his seat as Emperor. If that were true, then, currently, the Empire was in the midst of internal strife, one could say.

Though Abel had said that the matter of the Emperor’s absence was being kept from the populace, putting a lid on people’s mouths was pretty difficult, and the mood would be surreptitiously contagious.

On that, even Todd had looked like he had been holding misgivings at their dispatchment back at the encampment.

Subaru: “If that’s the case, then I guess it’s because of Abel that the inspections are so strict…? Shit, screw that guy.”

Though Abel had been of some help to them, he would rather place him as more of a negative, given the problems when you evened it all out, and mood-related ones.

Given his personality and attitude, it was easy to imagine a Nobunaga-esque reason as to why the people beneath him had rebelled.”

Subaru: “He seemed like a guy who would carry out the phrase, “The King does not understand human feelings,” for real.”

Rem: “…Are you perhaps wasting time by thinking about worthless things, instead of being worried in earnest?”

Rem’s voice hardened into ice as Subaru muttered that out while rubbing his chin.

Her tone harbored genuine anger, stretching beyond exasperation or indifference, causing Subaru to try and explain his previous remark in a hurry.

Subaru: “Nonono, wait a moment, relax. My Round Table-like comment was definitely worse than some idle chatter, but it’s not like I’m just absent-mindedly staring at the line without a plan. I do have an idea.”

Rem: “Don’t you feel embarrassed as a person, lying with such nonchalance?”

Subaru: “At least please show that you’re willing to trust me, even if it’s just a little bit! You’re being too hasty by deciding that I lied in a snap!”

Rem’s impression of him continued to decrease without ever reaching rock-bottom, and Subaru was desperate to restore her trust.

Truthfully, he did not make up lie after lie, since he did have an alternative plan to pass through the inspection process. If it were just Subaru and Rem, it would be impossible to bypass the gate guards’ check-up the proper way.

If so, it did not just have to be Subaru and Rem.

Rem: “That means…”

Subaru: “It’s time to demonstrate Natsuki Subaru’s hundred and eighth special skill — “Relying On Other People”.”

Subaru answered with a smile that showed his gleaming teeth, while holding a thumbs up.

For some reason, behind himself, he felt as if Rem had frowned at his response, even if he should not have been able to see her face.

2

Passing through the inspection, which had been packed with a unique sort of tension, they went through the towering main gate.

Like that, Subaru’s field of vision opened up. As he faced the stone-crafted cityscape that overflowed with exoticness, he thrusted both of his hands into the air out of a sense of accomplishment.

Subaru: “We passed through!”

Louis: “Aauu!”

Listening to Subaru’s zesty voice, Louis raised her hands up as well right beside him.

Subaru had some personal opinions regarding her, acting as if they were companions; but for now, the joy he felt at overcoming the first hurdle to enter the city washed those away.

Although he was immensely vexed about it, there was the truth that Louis’s existence had been useful in passing the inspection.

Subaru: “Speaking of which, this place really is completely different from Lugunica. Although there were tiny differences between the Capital and Priestella as well……”

While taking in the ambiance of the streets, in his mind Subaru compared it to the townscapes in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

To Subaru the most striking were the streets of Costuul near the new Roswaal mansion, but as expected, the variance was great when compared to a different country.

Each had their own idiosyncrasies, the Royal Capital, Costuul, and Pristella too, but they had something of a commonality in atmosphere, something characteristic of the Kingdom. That he could not sense in Guaral.

So to speak, compared to the parallel fantasy world noble-like feel of the Kingdom, the stores and houses in the streets of the Empire seemed more rustic and devoid of color. It gave an impression of valuing utility over showiness.

The entire street was unified in a sense, as they evoked a sense of power and refinement rather than splendor, and it felt like the leveled ground encouraged that impression.

Subaru: “If it were Lugunica this would be stone pavement, but here it’s kinda basic, huh?”

Considering the size of the streets and population, Guaral could be thought of as an above average city in the Empire.

On the whole, it was a pretty good measuring stick, to compare various places in the Empire.

Subaru: “Well, we don’t wanna stay too long, so I better not waste time using measuring sticks either.”

Rem: “—Um, could you let me down before long?”

Subaru: “Ah, my bad.”

Behind Subaru, strong feelings being evoked in him, Rem requested to be let down from her ride on the wooden rack, and Subaru apologized as he slowly got down on his knees on the spot.

She undid the fasten across her shoulders and got out of the carrier, and clutching her cane Rem stood on the ground.

While on the long journey, she had been carried in the wooden rack, but if they were going to walk through a street, she wanted to walk on her own two legs. There was no reason to hurry either, so there was no reason not to grant Rem’s request.

Rem: “This is…”

Using her cane, Rem turned around and finally gazed upon the same view as Subaru and Louis.

Eyebrows raised slightly, Rem’s pale blue eyes held an indistinct sense of wonder and excitement, and seeing Rem’s positive reaction Subaru’s face relaxed a little.

Subaru: “How ‘bout it, you surprised?”

Rem: “That is… Yes, I am. The queue was similar but… It’s because this is my first time seeing people like this, and a proper street too.”

Subaru: “Ah, it is, isn’t it? This is your first time in a normal human town, huh.”

As mentioned above, up until now, Rem's experiences had been limited to exceptional places and treatment.

And as long as she remained without Memories, Rem would possess no recollection of living with anyone either. Life with Subaru, Louis, and the Shudraqians amounted to the entirety of the experience Rem had.

Subaru: "…"

Rem looked deeply moved, smiling with her whole face, and Subaru closed one eye.

For now, he folded up the wooden rack Rem had gotten out of and waited for her excitement to subside.

—It was hard to say Guaral was brimming with life for a city.

The queued checkpoints, and the boorish dark colors of the streets stood out. Altogether, the place's impression was a far cry from gorgeous. The size of the city too, appeared to be in the thousands.

And yet, that did not detract value from the excitement in Rem's eyes it seemed.

Subaru: "So then, shall we look around a bit?"

Rem: "—. No, it's fine. I don't want to take up too much time."

Subaru: "If it's for you, I wouldn't say it's too much…"

Rem shook her head, and Subaru scratched his cheek as he answered.

Really, if it served as a promising sign regarding Rem's inner feelings, sightseeing around town wouldn't be a problem. If a pressing matter arose, he would want her to hold back, but for now the outlook was positive.

After all, it was because of Rem's quick-wittedness that they were so fortunate.

Subaru: “If it weren’t for Rem, I wouldn’t have managed successfully with Flop-san and his sister. It’s okay for you to be a little selfish, y’know.”

Rem: “… What I am saying is that it’s not good to keep them waiting. Even though you’re already relying on their kindness, are you going to incur more debt beyond that?”

Subaru: “Oh… When you put it like that, yeah, sorry…”

Turning away from the buildings, Rem’s sharp gaze pressed down on Subaru’s heart.

Behind Subaru’s group, slowly with the sound of heavy wheels, came an oxcart —a Falo-cart, pulled by a Brave Oxen Falo, came along.

Falos, like ground dragons and the large canine Ligers, were a type of animal used for labor.

Like ground dragons and Ligers, many pulled carts, and many were used for things like transporting cargo. Their pace was slow, and they did not have the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion like ground dragons either, and he’d heard they were generally utilized in cities.

And then—

???: “Hey hey hey, kept you waiting, huh? They took their sweet time checking the cargo. Honestly, those officials’ task is such a pain.”

Speaking with a shrug from the coachman’s seat of the falo-cart was a young man with long bangs.

A character with dazzling golden hair and a fair-skinned complexion, his slender form wrapped in wide sleeved clothing, it was the person who had assisted Subaru’s group with entering the city.

At the appearance of the young man on the falo-cart, Subaru gave a “Glad you made it”, and bowed his head.

Subaru: “I’m sorry, Flop-san. Next time I’ll get them to let you through ahead of us.”

Flop: “Nah, I don’t mind really. Things like cargo inspection are tedious work. So it’s not especially worth coming along to see, I must say.”

In response to Subaru’s words of apology, the youth in the coachman’s seat—Flop gently shook his head.

With his flowy gesture his long bangs swayed like the mane of a lion, and Subaru felt like he could envision a sparkling effect there. He was a quirky guy, but since his responses were relatively forthright, the gap was large.

That sort of mental image before Subaru, he once again smoothed down his own bangs,

Flop: “Yeah, it’s a boring task. In the future, travelers like you should leave that sort of thing to me… Actually, I’m sure my sister can handle it.”

???: “Big bro, big bro, I can hear you though!”

Flop: “Hahaha, it’s not as if you weren’t supposed to hear what I said, dear sister. Don’t underestimate an older brother’s volume.”

Walking alongside the slowly advancing cart, was the woman whom Flop had let overhear his slightly out-of-focus response.

She was a woman of high stature with hair the same color as Flop’s, her features very much resembling his. Her shoulders and legs were exposed by a daring attire, and her voluminous hair was parted into many segments in an avant-garde style.

Even with that kind of peculiar outward appearance, the two barbarian swords attached to opposite sides of her waist were probably what stood out the most.

It was clear these were not weapons for mere show or vain threats, since their condition was that of having been well-used.

This woman was called Medium, and along with her older brother Flop, the two traveled together as the friendly O'Connell siblings.

They had made their acquaintance in the inspection line, and they had helped Subaru's group, for whom providing identification or bribes would have been difficult, pass through inspection. So they were partners that ought to be called benefactors.

Of course, it wasn't just out of kindness that they had cooperated with Subaru's party. To begin with, it had been Subaru who had laid his eyes on the O'Connells with the objective of passing the inspection.

As they were without money or connections, cooperating with another party was a requirement to get through the checkpoint.

So when Subaru saw them, he thought there might be room for negotiations.

The reason he thought so was—

Medium: "Wowie, Big bro! So, you saw through everything I was thinking!"

Flop: "Of course, naturally. You can't win in business if you can't predict someone's thoughts. Our O'Connell company is viable because of my brains and your brawn, y'know!"

Medium: "That's my bro! Though I don't really get what you're saying!"

Flop: "Hahahaha, it's great that you seem to be enjoying life dear sister!"

Both their chests puffed up with pride, the O'Connell siblings laughed together uproariously. Their trade was peddling.

To be precise, Flop was responsible for the business of peddling, and Medium was the one in charge of guarding her brother and their goods while on the road and inside towns.

—Merchants.

Well, actually, for Subaru to pass the inspection, that was the selection criteria for companions to depend on.

Subaru: “The experience of talking about this and that with Otto and Anastasia-san came in handy…”

His close friend Otto, and Anastasia, with whom he had embarked on a long journey. —The latter was not really the person herself, but Echidna who had been acting as her, although the knowledge she showed ought to be the same as the person in question.

He had mainly received instruction from those two, and that was the seed of Subaru’s faith in merchants.

Even across national borders, if someone were a merchant, they would be willing to listen to a partner who presented benefits.

Literally ready to take a chance on a strong offensive gambit, after they’d struck out on four groups of merchants, Subaru’s party encountered the O’Connell siblings.

And then, they won over that somewhat quirky pair, and successfully earned their cooperation in crossing the checkpoint.

As the leverage for negotiation, the item that captured their interest was—

Subaru: “By the way, is this wooden rack really enough as compensation? Though I did put effort into making it, the crudeness of its craftsmanship still makes it very obvious that it’s handmade?”

Flop: “I can’t deny that it’s very minimalistic. However, the fact it can be assembled from parts, as well as the way it’s designed and made for carrying were what piqued my interest. It’d be useful even for transporting heavy baggage, no?”

Subaru: “…Well, as long as Flop-san’s fine with that.”

Feeling somewhat unassured, Subaru handed the folded wooden rack over to Medium.

After receiving it, Medium let out a “Woah~” as she checked it out, then turned around and shoved it inside the cargo bed of the falo-cart. It seemed like she had not seen much value in the rack.

In truth, even Subaru himself didn't know what exactly Flop had seen in it.

The handover of the wooden rack made by Subaru had been the condition for the O'Connell siblings' assistance.

After seeing Rem being carried by use of the wooden rack, Flop had felt it was a unique and fascinating creation, and promised to help break through the inspection with the object in exchange.

Honestly, as far as Subaru was concerned, who had been prepared for something like a witchbeast's horn to be brought up to the negotiation table, he could say this had been a rather unexpected proposal.

Subaru: "I was thinking about remaking it with better materials after arriving in town anyways, worst case scenario, it was possible that Rem wouldn't want to ride on it anymore."

Rem: "It's true that I want to walk with my own feet whenever possible. Because if I ride on the wooden rack, your stench will come drifting along with the wind."

Subaru: "Sorry…"

While leaning on the cane, Rem dished out a jab on the matter of the witch's scent in a low voice.

Nonetheless, enduring this whole time during their travels and only saying so after reaching their destination was considerate of her, or so Subaru told himself.

Watching this back-and-forth between Subaru and Rem, Flop shrugged his shoulders as if saying "This won't do". Although he displayed a completely rueful reaction, there was a reason behind that attitude.

Flop: "Try to get along better, you guys. To be husband and wife means to be each other's support. The way you relied on each other earlier was absolutely beautiful."

Medium: "Well, the one who took away their wooden rack was big bro though."

Flop: "Exactly! What right do I have for saying that, silly me!"

One held his palm against his forehead, and the other holding her stomach, Flop and Medium burst out in laughter.

Affected by the sibling's guffaws, Subaru's tensed face eased while taking a quick peek at Rem. Without a hint of laughter on her face, was Rem, to whom Louis was holding on to with one arm.

Directed at the girl's profile, Subaru voiced a "Umm~" timidly.

Subaru: "You know, erm, Rem-san? Are you perhaps upset right now?"

Rem: "Huh? Why would I be upset? Do you have a clue as to why or something?"

Subaru: "Oh no, I was just wondering if it was against your wishes to play husband and wife with me, even if it's just made up for the sake of our disguise…"

While poking his index fingers against each other, Subaru tries to tend to Rem's mood in trepidation.

From Flop and Medium's perspectives, the relationship between Subaru and Rem was that of husband and wife.

That had been the result of Subaru's sudden speechlessness at the abrupt demand for an answer regarding their relationship the siblings had put out, while having a discussion for passing the inspection. —No, it was not because of speechlessness.

They did have an answer prepared beforehand, however the credibility of that answer was doubted, so there was nothing that could be done about it.

Subaru: "To think that the story of traveling siblings was not believable enough…”

Rem: “Flop-san and Medium-san are not only under the same situation, but the two of them are also very similar in terms of appearance, that’s why. It’s an impossible feat to pull off for me, you, and this child.”

On the matter of deceiving them, as merchants living in a world filled with deception and honesty, there was no other choice but to say that Subaru was simply too inexperienced to succeed.

In the first place, the one who had seen through their lie had been Medium, who had blurted out “they look nothing alike, right big bro?” in a loud voice.

Anyhow, after being defeated by those keen eyes, the spectacular story (derived from the brother-sister setting Subaru had prepared beforehand) of how they had traveled far from their hometown with the goal of throwing away a cursed ring in a far-off mountain had been rendered useless.”

The shock received from that was another reason as to why Subaru had entered a state of stupefaction when the time came to supposedly answer their question. The one that had saved him from that predicament had been Rem, who made use of her quick-wittedness and explained, “I’m his wife”.

Subaru: “So the story is that Rem and I are husband and wife, and this kid is the child of Rem’s elder sister, who left her in our care…”

Rem: “Wasn’t it you who told me I had an older sister? Although, since we’re supposed to be twins, I don’t think she’ll have such a grown kid… but I’ll turn a blind eye to that.”

Louis: “Hmm~?”

Having been stroked on the head by Rem, Louis let out a tiny groan with a content look.

Louis’s harmless presence and mannerism had been one of the reasons why Flop and Medium had not become cautious around Subaru’s group, apparently.

Leaving aside Subaru and his nasty-looking eyes, there was the debilitated Rem and the vulnerable Louis. This trio did not seem like bad people who would commit crimes in the city to Flop and Medium.

Rem: “Why…”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Rem: “Why did you fumble your words in that situation? It’s not like you’re incapable considering how you normally chatter on and on.”

Subaru: “That feels like a complaint disguised as praise…”

Nevertheless, it was true that Subaru’s incompetence had almost caused trouble for Rem.

If it weren’t for Rem’s quick response, the three of them would most likely still be stuck outside the gate, gawking at the line helplessly.

Subaru: “…”

There was a limit to how far he could get by just fooling around.

Subaru, wanting to avoid damaging his trust with Rem any further, let out a faint “Ah,” when Rem casted her eyes towards him.

Subaru: “I was surprised myself but, the moment they saw through the lie, my body tensed up like crazy. Maybe it was because I was traumatized by the campground from before.”

Rem: “Ah…”

Subaru: “I thought that if we gave a sloppy answer, Flop and Medium might’ve changed their attitude or something. I’m ashamed to say but, that was why my train of thought suddenly stopped. My bad.”

After conveying the self-analysis of his incompetent self, Subaru lowered his head towards Rem sincerely.

A brain full of smart little tricks coupled with an articulate tongue, that was one of the few weapons Natsuki Subaru possessed. That was why, once both of those stopped working, Subaru would be reduced to nothing but a mere nuisance.

He was responsible for Rem's well-being. —Careless failures cannot be afforded.

Rem: "—. I understand now. I guess it is what it is."

Subaru: "…Really? Even though I messed up like that?"

Rem: "Anyone would freeze up after having experienced something unpleasant. That's what I think, at least."

Subaru, who had thought he was totally going to be yelled at mercilessly, was surprised by Rem's response.

Of course, it was because Rem's very core was kind, so he was already aware that she would spare her consideration for other people. The fact that Subaru was among those who she directed her consideration towards, however, was a surprise.

Subaru: "…So you're not mad?"

Rem: "I'm not angry. But, just discuss with me beforehand next time. Because I don't think I'll be able to spin up believable excuses every time."

Subaru: "Ohh, okay, understood. You sure you aren't mad though, right?"

Rem: "I'm not mad."

Subaru: "For sure for sure?"

Rem: "Haven't I been saying I wasn't mad…!"

Out of excess worry, Subaru had fueled Rem's anger instead.

Hugging his head from Rem's sharp gaze, Subaru cowered and begged for forgiveness in the end.

With that interlude, Subaru's group finally entered the stage called Guaral.

3

Subaru: "—I can finally relax!"

Said Subaru who threw himself onto the bed at the inn, stretching his arms and legs, enjoying the freedom.

The bed and sheets which possessed decent quality, and the ambiance of the room let off a decent sense of cleanliness; both these aspects indicated the quality of the inn was above average.

Given their situation, although it was not like they should indulge in too much luxury, this was a necessary expense to ensure safety.

Otto: "If we are to stay somewhere, I believe it is best that we eliminate the options of cheap inns and camping. Leaving people who have the power to protect themselves aside such as Emilia-sama and Garfiel, people like me or Natsuki-san would be easy pickings for those harboring ill intents."

Such was one of the topics brought up in conversations over alcohol, which used to take place in Otto's room.

Thinking hard about it, being that cautious was necessary, but in the case that the traveling budget wasn't very high, safety would be something that would slip out of mind easily.

However, considering the situation that Subaru and the rest were in at the moment, it was a needed expense.

Although, speaking of which—

Subaru: "We sure spent a considerable time fighting over who gets which room…"

While saying so, Subaru rolled over on his bed, and began staring at the wall.

Beyond that wall, in the adjacent room were Rem and Louis. —

They had decided to rent an inn in Guaral and divided the rooms based on gender, but Subaru felt disappointed with the results.

Albeit a while had passed, Subaru had yet to fully shed his suspicions of her. He was still opposed to them being together outside of his personal supervision.

That said, Rem had refused his proposal for all of them to share one room. Thus at present, he had no choice but to settle in with the current state of affairs but—

???: “My oh my, mister, feeling quite sullen today aren’t we. Wonderful, simply wonderful!”

So spoke Flop as he entered the room quite belayed.

Inside, he tossed his luggage onto the bed Subaru was not mulling on, then winked at him as he caressed his own long bangs.

While Flop was indeed being Flop, he did have an actual reason to be present.

This room had been rented with the intention that Subaru and Flop occupy it, and Flop’s sister, Medium, would occupy the other room with Rem.

Subaru: “Ahhh, I’m sorry. For leaving everything to you…”

Flop: “It’s all fine and dandy. You protected yourself with wit. The saying that “Citizens of the Sacred Empire must be the strongest” does not refer exclusively to the art of war.”

Subaru: “…That makes me feel a bit better, thank you.”

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, Subaru smiled at him bitterly.

Even after overcoming the checkpoint at the gates, the siblings Flop and Medium had continued to help Subaru and his friends in various other ways.

They had helped in finding an inn where they could procure safety as well, but the biggest help Subaru had received regarded the

Witchbeast's horn.

Subaru: "Who knows how we'd have been taken advantage of if we were on our own."

The horn of the Witchbeast that Louis had carried was already no longer in their possession.

This was because, following Kuna's, along with many others' advice, they had liquidated the horn into currency. For some reason, Flop had come along and helped in the selling price negotiations for it.

All they could do was witness the unfolding of a fierce battle between Flop and the shop owner, like people watching a court trial in progress while being ignorant of the law.

Regardless, they had managed to convert the Witchbeast's horn into Imperial Gold Coins.

That adequately heavy bag of coins would provide funds for Subaru's 'campaign' in the Empire. It would have to cover their future traveling expenses, so they had to be careful about it.

Subaru: "I can't afford to get swallowed whole again like before after all."

Flop: "Hahaha! The first move should always be an attempt to be imposing. Straighten your back and stand tall, and you'll see your opposition won't come to make their move so easily. Your baseless confidence may just become the only truth in the meantime. Doesn't profit only exist beyond that!"

Subaru: "Yeah, when you put it like that, it definitely sounds really convincing…"

For better or worse, Flop was full of confidence.

Subaru could imagine circumstances where his unreserved way of speaking would bring about unnecessary arguments, but seeing as he had made his way in the world to date, his way of life was evidently correct.

In fact, Subaru had been saved by those very mannerisms of his, so he was quite honestly impressed.

Flop: “That said, it was quite the long trip with the missus, correct? Would you prefer to continue that conversation of ours tomorrow?”

Subaru: “It… It’s a pretty tempting suggestion, but I’m good. We need to get to our destination as soon as possible. We can’t afford to waste even a single day.”

Tempted as he were by the softness of the bed, Subaru managed to tear himself away from it.

As Subaru got off the bed, Flop exclaimed “Truly fantastic”, with his hands thrown out,

Flop: “There are times when dragging along one’s feet for the sake of one’s loved ones, even if they are heavy as iron, is truly a necessity. For me, that’s my sister. For you, mister, it’s the missus.”

Subaru: “Don’t put it like that, it makes me feel awkward…! So, may I ask you to show us the way?”

Flop: “By all means. I was the one who proposed the idea in the first place!”

He smacked his fist on his chest as he willingly accepted.

Having received his answer, Subaru pulled his will to lie down back into him with renewed vigor, and headed off to the next room with Flop in tow.

He knocked on the door and called out to Rem.

Subaru: “Is everything good on your end, Rem?”

Rem: “Yes, everything’s fine. Medium-san and I were just having a discussion on whose bed Louis-san should sleep…”

Subaru: “…I see.”

Rem: “You thought that we should put her to sleep on the floor just now, didn't you?"

Subaru: "I didn't say anything because you'd get mad at me…"

Considering how dangerous Louis was, he could not suggest letting her sleep on the same bed as Medium.

If he were allowed to speak his mind, Subaru would've opted to stay up all night to keep an eye on her, but given his current physical condition, he'd end up falling asleep within the first few hours after starting.

He had no choice but to put faith in her, seeing as she had done nothing worth being on guard for in the last ten days.

—Trusting an Archbishop would be just a stupid idea all around, though.

Subaru: "Remember that talk we had earlier? Yeah, I'm heading out for a bit with Flop-san. I'll buy dinner on the way back, so let's eat together."

Rem: "I understand… Well, now that I think about it, there are lots of people around here now, so I don't really have to rely on just you anymore."

Subaru: "Why, of all times, did you have to say something like that now?! That just makes it harder for me to go out!"

Rem: "…Why indeed. I just said whatever came to mind."

Even though Rem had just filled him with incredible reluctance, Subaru strived to prioritize his original goal.

He waved his hand to Medium, who was playing around with Louis, letting her pull on her hair,

Subaru: "Medium-san, please look after these two for me. If she bothers you too much, just hit her with everything you got."

Medium: "Reallyyy~? My punches hurt lots and lots, y'know?"

Subaru: “Exactly. Sometimes pain’s a great teacher.”

That said, Rem would definitely step in should something go wrong.

Vexing as it were, Louis was helping Rem gain mental stability. He was thankful for that. Were she present with no purpose, he would surely be unable to find even a shred of justification to carry her around with them.

Flop: “What a tumultuous journey it must have been, mister.”

Once he had left Rem and Louis behind at the inn and stepped out onto the streets, Flop tapped his shoulder.

Being offered consolation like that had given rise to an urge to begin spewing complaints inside Subaru, but even if he had given in to it, it would only put Flop in a difficult position.

Especially with how he was indebted to him and Medium.

He wished to not pile anything else on top of them.

Subaru: “Relying on others might be one of my hundred and eight special moves, but even that has a limit.”

Flop: “Certainly, so long as you do not put your full weight on them, relying on others is not at all a bad thing. My sister and I are traveling together, so we make up for each other’s shortcomings. Otherwise, both of us would surely have perished long before. That too is the Imperial Way.”

Subaru: “The Imperial Way…”

As Flop waved around his hands, patting his own bangs once more, Subaru thought about the words he spoke of. The Imperial Way. They lay heavy on his chest.

Perhaps, that was the source of Subaru’s intangible fear—The difference in values of life.

In that sense, Flop’s trains of thought were easy to digest as they hit closer to home. His manner of being was definitely different from what Subaru had experienced so far in the Empire of Vollachia, however.

Flop: “Not everyone can adopt a martial way of life. What is important is to come to terms with oneself within our own outlines of life.”

Subaru: “Come to terms with oneself, huh.”

Flop: “As I said a moment ago, if we were to look at Medium and myself as individuals on their own, our numerous weaknesses would be quite apparent. However, should we come together, we can cover up each other’s flaws, and they become quite trifling. In fact, one could say my sister and I have made it alive to the present day because of this, and that’d indeed be the whole truth.”

Subaru: “…”

Flop: “Always keep this in mind, mister. We, my sister and I, you and your missus, we have all won all of life’s challenges so far only because we went at them head on. —Do I seem like a man of the Empire more now?”

His cheeks loosened, Flop waited for praise.

Subaru stared hard at him, when he was hit with an epiphany. To make up for one’s lackings with the help of others; that was no different from his own values.

He had thought there would be none in the Empire with whom his ideals would be shared.

Subaru: “Not everything’s that hopeless, huh.”

Flop: “That said, when most of the Empire’s residents speak of the Imperial Way, they do indeed refer to brute strength! My ideals are laughed at. The flapping of a chicken’s wings, they call it! My way of thinking is by no means common.”

As Subaru came to his own conclusions, Flop once more reminded him to not be too trusting.

However,

Flop: “That’s precisely why, putting a price on that skill also holds true. Like how I’m referring you to someone.”

Subaru: “Yup, thanks a bunch.”

Nodding, Subaru reaffirmed his gratitude for Flop’s referral.

On top of Flop’s help on getting past the security check and finding them an inn, he was thankful to Flop for the reason of this outing—A meeting with a referral that could help smooth out Subaru’s group’s journey by securing them a mode of transport and an escort.

Just like how Kuna and Holly had escorted them on their way to Guaral, they required a skilled bodyguard to protect them from the dangers of the road. Otherwise, the journey would be difficult.

There was a limit to how much Subaru could travel by foot while carrying Rem on his back. Ideally, he’d opt to acquire an Earth Dragon, but if that proved to be a difficult task, a Brave Ox or Large Canine would do. In any case, a riding beast was necessary for transport.

And for both of those, they had to get by with their limited funds.

Subaru: “That’s why, we’ve been seriously saved because Flop has someone in mind.”

Flop: “You say someone in mind, but I just know about the bar where someone with that occupation regularly visits. Now, if you’re talking about riding beasts, then we’ve got something to talk about. —That’s right, like a Falo Cart!”

Subaru: “You’re really pushing Falos, aren’t you?”

Flop: “I’m not kidding when I say I grew up on Falo milk, ‘cause I’m a Falo fan.”

Laughing loudly, Flop strongly recommended Falos in a passionate tone.

Subaru did not know about the circumstances of travel for those who had large amounts of cargo, but at least for Subaru's group, who wanted to travel long distances, Falos were not a good match for them. Their speed was rather slow, and so, Falos would be their last resort.

Flop: "Anyhow, you should take any little precaution you can when on the road… Just between us, things at the Imperial Capital seem to be pretty rowdy at the moment. It's not guaranteed that those sparks won't spread."

Subaru: "—The Imperial Capital is rowdy."

Subaru's eyebrows twitched. However, Flop did not seem to notice his reaction and crossed his arms, replying with "That's right".

Flop: "The Empire's known to constantly have spots of smoldering embers somewhere all year round, but the possibility of an ember sparking and spreading is being feared right now. I didn't want to worry your wife, so I'm telling this only to you."

Subaru: "Thank you for the consideration… By the way, is that related to the Emperor or something in any way?"

Flop: "To the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia?"

Flop widened his eyes in surprise, as if he had heard something that one would never dream of. He then immediately shook his head saying "Nonono,"

Flop: "Something happening to his Excellency is unheard of. Besides, the Emperor has superbly managed to settle the country's affairs so far."

Subaru: "But you said those embers are still smoldering, didn't you?"

Flop: "The reason they stay as embers is due to the Emperor's prowess. The current Emperor rose to the throne about seven or eight years ago. Before then, the Empire was in a much more chaotic state."

Subaru: "…"

Flop: "The Emperor himself is taking control of the situation regarding these current quarrels. I'm sure our homeland will return to its smoldering state very soon."

Subaru: "Eh?"

Their homeland smoldering with embers, boasted Flop.

However, something Flop had asserted caught Subaru's ears. —How he said, that the Emperor himself was taking direct control of the situation.

Subaru: "The Emperor is trying to do something about the Imperial Capital's troubles?"

Flop: "His own turf… Well, I guess if something happens very close to home, even the Emperor'd start taking action. Anyone who takes advantage of the situation will be spared no quarter, that kind of statement was issued."

Subaru: "A statement from the Emperor…"

There did not seem to be any indication of a lie from Flop's matter-of-fact explanation.

In any case, Flop would have absolutely no reason to try and deceive Subaru on the troubles going on inside the Imperial Capital. So at the very least, he spoke what was the truth for him.

Nevertheless, that was why Subaru's ears had gotten hung up on it.

Subaru: "If Abel really is the Emperor, then he was the one that gave out that statement…?"

—No, it was strange considering the timing.

Of course, giving out an official statement did not necessitate the Emperor themself to be present. A minister could have easily ghost written it, and deflect blame by saying "The secretary did it." First and foremost, if he were to believe Abel's words, the people remaining at the Emperor's Palace were none other than the people who chased him out.

They would stomp on their respect towards the Emperor and would use his name and anything else for their under-handed tactics.

Except—

Subaru: "Abel could just be a crazy dude. I'll keep that in mind, just in case."

To see and believe something as presented was a sure-fire way to a quick death on the stormy oceans.

Even if this place were the ocean, that did not mean it would always be stormy. Subaru just wanted to assert his conviction that he needed at least this kind of mindset to face the Empire.

Most of all, as a person who had confronted and talked to Abel himself, there was a part of him that thought that his intensity was not something a self-proclaimed Emperor could give out but —

Flop: "—Mister, it's no good to have a scowl on your face."

Flop spoke as he circled in front of Subaru, mulling over his expression.

Pointing to his own forehead, Flop directed words at Subaru, who unconsciously stopped moving,

Flop: "Good fortune won't come to anyone who doesn't have the time to smile. You're going to try and find companions for your journey now, aren't you? Then, you need to find someone good."

Subaru: "That's…"

Flop: "If that's the case, then erase those wrinkles on your brow and warm those cheeks up. That's what we call the merits of a successful man."

Flop rubbed his fingers in between his eyebrows and then proceeded to warm his face up with his hands.

Seeing Flop's act, Subaru caught his breath. Next, he slowly loosened his brow and cheeks with his fingers as he was told.

Subaru: "Yeah, I forgot. The look on my face is already nasty so I should at least carry with me a light and gentle atmosphere, shouldn't I?"

Flop: "Sorry! My ability can't do anything about your looks!"

Subaru: "You don't have to take it that seriously! It's something I got from my parents so I actually don't mind it as much as I say it!"

Flop's lament was overdramatic, and so he responded in an overdramatic fashion as well. Maybe that was part of Flop's concern for him and he was just trying to relax Subaru's stiff nervousness.

Exchanging quips like that, Subaru and Flop approached the street to their destination.

What Flop pointed toward, was a hideout-like bar at the end of the alleyway.

Flop: "Were it a lot of people, you'd normally hire a bunch of guards, but since mister, the missus and the niece-y only amount to three people, it's not like you can say you're a large family. After all, me and my sister can't follow you out of Guaral!"

Subaru: "But, I got the feeling Medium-san'd stick with us if we played our cards right…"

Flop: "If my sister's taken away, I can't cover for my weaknesses, so I guess I'll die!"

If one were to weigh trustworthiness and security on a scale, Flop and Medium were genuinely not a bad option. However, Subaru could not burden them more than he already had.

Subaru: "Hang on, worst-case scenario, we escape the country to Lugunica with the two of them in tow. And then, we could grant them the successful merchant life that Otto couldn't achieve. That's also a possibility…"

Flop: “Heyyy, mister? Are you alright?”

Flop waved his hand in front of the deep-in-thought Subaru, checking on his well-being.

Subaru scratched his head, replying to Flop with a “My bad”. It was just a thought, but he felt that it was not a bad proposal.

He felt bad that Flop had gone out of his way to show him the way here but—

Subaru: “Hey, Flop-san? Medium-san and you, there’s a favor I—”

It was at the moment he tried to say want to ask of you two.

???: “…”

—Somewhere, something faintly hard-sounding reverberated.

4

Flop: “—Mister, it’s no good to have a scowl on your face.”

Subaru: “…Huh?”

Abruptly, his field of view shifted in a blink and Subaru’s mind went blank.

In front of Subaru, Flop was pointing at his own forehead. He was loosening the space in between his eyebrows by rubbing it with his fingers, and as if he were lecturing the frozen Subaru.

@floating here

Flop: “Good fortune won’t come to anyone who doesn’t have the time to smile. You’re going to try and find companions for your journey now, aren’t you? Then, you need to find someone good.”

Subaru: “…”

Flop: “If that’s the case, then erase those wrinkles on your brow and warm those cheeks up. That’s what we call the merits of a successful man.”

Continuing on, Flop started warming his cheeks up with his hands.

That action was something Subaru recognized as one he had seen before. Of course he recognized it. Because, it had occurred a sparse few minutes ago.

It was an exchange that had happened a mere few minutes ago, and the same conversation was repeating.

Subaru: “Oi, hang on, wait a second…”

Subaru was suddenly assaulted by cold sweat and covered his face with his hands.

Seeing that, Flop loudly exclaimed “Don’t hide it, relax it!”. However, Subaru’s ability to reply to his words had vanished.

Looking around, he recognized the surrounding street too.

This was his first foray into this town’s streets, and he was not well-acquainted with Guaral. Yet, his memory was not as faulty as to forget the scenery he had just witnessed.

Meaning—

Subaru: “—Did I Return by Death?”

In an inconspicuous situation, in which he did not know what exactly had happened to him, Subaru hardened his cheeks for a completely different reason from before, with that mutter escaping his lips.

Chapter 17:
Looming Evil

1

Subaru: "…"

Reflecting upon the unbelievable truth, Subaru could feel his entire body awash with cold sweat.

As far as Subaru knew, this was one of the most terrifying situations he could be in.

A scenery he remembered, a conversation he had already heard before. This was not something like déjà vu.

This was not an event that he thought had happened before, it was an event he was actually reliving. The reason for that was only one—he had Returned by Death.

Subaru: "But, why…?"

There was absolutely zero warning.

Particularly for Subaru, it felt like the world had switched out in a blink of an eye.

It felt so unreal to the point that it was enough to question whether the Authority he carried had misactivated. And that for some reason, the "Death" part of Return by Death had been dropped and only the "Return" part had activated.

Subaru: "Am I an idiot? No, I am an idiot."

Subaru disciplined himself as he attempted to look at this situation optimistically.

It was a stupid statement, but he had to trust Return by Death. The power to reverse time that Subaru held had never once been activated without death as a trigger.

By losing his life, Subaru would go back in time. That was a certainty.

Subaru: "—OK, I'll accept it. I've accepted it. Now, me, what do I do."

Pushing his fist into his forehead, Subaru told his panicked self to be calm.

Now that he accepted that he had Returned by Death, the next point to focus on was his cause of death. He thought back to the events that had occurred only a few dozen seconds ago.

Subaru: "…I can't think of anything."

However, even when reflecting back on the time he had met his demise, he could not recall anything.

He searched for the tiniest of clues in his memory, but turned up empty-handed.

The bar which was their destination; a talking Flop; the hustle and bustle of the main road getting quieter; the slight, unique smell of the shade in the alleyway; a faint, hard sound—that was all he could scrounge up.

None of them were linked to the reason as to why Subaru's life was in danger.

Subaru: "Fuck, why am I always like this…!"

If Subaru had been watchful regarding changes in his surroundings, he would not be exposed to this misery. He detested and cursed his own carelessness.

However, the logical part of him understood that that was an impossible demand and it turned an unamused eye towards himself.

He was not a security camera. It was impossible to stay alert of his surroundings twenty-four-seven. He was not a genius that could take in the small changes in his environment and be able to form a plan to deal with them immediately.

Natsuki Subaru was undoubtedly an ordinary person.

That was the unchanging assessment he had given himself, even after experiencing his memories vicariously from the eyes of an outsider and seeing himself in a new light.

That was why he could not stop thinking and moving forward.

Subaru: "—The situation is similar to when Shaula first killed me."

Along the path to Pleiades Watchtower, Subaru's group, who was challenging the sand wind at the Augria Sand Dunes, had been annihilated by Shaula, who was guarding the area from the Watchtower to the sand sea.

The sand sea's rite of passage had begun with a white light that could not be reacted to. It was that first strike which blew Subaru away and started the infernal fight afterwards.

What had occurred, what was the cause of death. The situation where it was uncertain if he had died or not could be said to be a mercy bestowed by his first death at the sand sea.

However, unlike then, he was currently in the middle of a town.

The environment was fundamentally different from the sand sea where he had the conviction to face the various dangers to his life.

Subaru: "What's going to take my life in this situation…?"

A death with no forewarning. The only thing he could think of that fit the bill was still Shaula's snipe, as it left a strong impression.

That was why he may have been shot this time too. Subaru had died inside the alleyway—although they were not tall, the surrounding buildings sandwiched them and created a space with poor visibility.

If one were to shoot here, they could only do it from the front or back, but this was not the most ideal place for shooting, was what he thought. Of course, since Subaru did not know how accurate his memory was, the possibility that this position actually allowed an ideal line of sight was—

Flop: "—Mister? Why is your brow more wrinkled than before?"

Subaru: "Ah…"

Flop: "Weren't you listening to my advice? Your fortune will run away if you don't erase those wrinkles! To chase something that's run away is an arduous task! Cause I'm usually on an ox cart!"

Hitting his hand on his chest, Flop exaggeratedly gestured in front of Subaru.

Sensing that this overaction of his had the purpose of cheering up Subaru's grimacing face, Subaru could not help but freeze up at his actions.

To find his cause of death, he would have to investigate the suspect that was travelling with him at the time too.

In the case that Subaru's cause of death was not by shooting, the most likely culprit was Flop—the person who was travelling with him, and the person that was nearest to him.

However, at Subaru's time of death, Flop had been within his field of vision and there was no sign that Flop had taken action to attack him.

Needless to say, Subaru knew that in this world, there was a plethora of attacks that could reap his life in a single strike without him noticing at all. Nevertheless, Flop did not seem like someone who could do that.

First of all—

Subaru: "Does Flop-san have a reason to kill me?"

The most likely possibility was that he had faked goodwill and was trying to mug Subaru. However, Subaru thought that doing so, purposefully, in the middle of a town, was a poor decision.

They had met the O'Connell siblings for the first time at the queue outside the gate.

If they wanted to do their deed without detection, all they had to do was to deceive and invite them somewhere outside the gate. All could be done before entering Guaral, a place with guards. Even if their objective was the money they could get by selling the Witchbeast's horn, in the end, the reason Subaru had not been cheated out when selling it was none other than Flop's help. —There was no reason to trap Subaru.

All they needed was to trick Subaru outside and steal the horn, and sell it once they got inside the city.

There was no logical explanation for their motive.

Quite a lot of people had killed Subaru until now, but they all possessed a rational explanation for doing so. Excluding Witchbeasts where communication was non-existent, that was a solid rule.

That was why—

Subaru: "Flop-san? Why are you so nice to us?"

Flop: "Hm? That's a sudden question."

Subaru: "Yeah, sorry about that. Just, I got a bit worried."

Flop raised his nicely-shaped eyebrows in surprise at Subaru's abrupt question.

Faking a chuckle at this reaction, Subaru held his breath, waiting for Flop's response. —Logically, he did not doubt Flop. All that was left was whether he could believe him or not.

Flop, who acted cordially and had performed various deeds to help them out.

Subaru sought peace of mind, to believe that Flop and his sister Medium were not two-faced and that they could be trusted.

Flop: "—Hmm"

Subaru did not know if his eyes betrayed his true feelings, but Flop narrowed his handsome eyes as if he could see those emotions.

The expression he told Subaru to adopt before, a look overflowing with confidence and carefreeness yet devoid of any grounds for that, disappeared from his face, and was instead replaced with the face of an intellectual gentleman.

And then he shook his head at the frozen Subaru,

Flop: “It’s not a complex thing. It’s simple. What my sister and I are doing by being good to Mister and Missus and Niece-y is…”

Subaru: “Is?”

Flop: “—Is revenge!”

Subaru: “…Eh?”

Raising his hands, Flop proclaimed that out loud.

The strong and merry tone used, and the disturbing contents of the proclamation clashed with each other so much that, for one moment, Subaru could not take it in. Shocked, his eyes went wide.

In front of the stiff Subaru, Flop brushed his fringe, and said “Listen, okay?”,

Flop: “Long ago, my sister and I were living on the edge of life and death! Thrown away by our parents, we grew up in a home that adopts orphans… That place was pretty terrible!”

Subaru: “A home for orphans…”

At the back of Subaru’s mind, an image of a home vaguely resembling an orphanage came up.

However, it was not difficult to imagine that the facilities and equipment of this world’s orphanages were much different than the modern buildings Subaru was thinking of.

That terrible environment was probably something far worse than he could imagine.

While revealing to Subaru the kind of environment he had grown up in, Flop gestured.

Flop: “Every night, huddling with the other kids in the same boat as us, I decided in my heart to escape from that situation. And then, my sister and I got the chance, and were able to escape from there. For the first time ever, living through a night without being beat up, I vowed. —revenge, that is.”

Subaru: “Revenge as in… against the people at the home for orphans?”

Flop: “No, not them. —At the world.”

Having the same expression as before when proclaiming revenge, Flop hardened his fists.

Towards the intimidated Subaru, Flop put his passionate face upfront and,

Flop: “My sister and I grew up being beaten by the adults at that place. But, were the adults that punched us happy while they were punching me? No, they weren’t. They were unhappy too. Unhappy adults were beating unhappy children. Is this kind of hopeless situation even real?”

Subaru: “…”

Flop: “Even adults who choose violence are unhappy. So I became a merchant to lift me and my sister out of misfortune. And as much as I could, we would bring others out of unhappiness as well. Just like how on that night, those people brought us out of it.”

Subaru: “That’s your revenge against the world?”

Flop: “That’s right. Me and my sister are resisting against the world which pushes misfortune onto us for revenge. Helping you and your Missus is also a part of that.”

After declaring that, Flop scratched his nose in slight embarrassment.

Receiving the fire in his words and actions, Subaru lost the ability to speak. The heat from that fire slowly seeped into his brain, and there, he came to a snap decision.

Subaru: “Thank you, Flop-san. I’m glad I met you siblings, Flop-san and Medium-san, at the queue.”

Whether he could believe them or not, he wished for a response that would point to the answer to that question.

And, the response he had received was far more than he expected. And so it was decided.

Subaru would not doubt Flop O’Connell’s goodwill.

He decided he would trust it to the end, his noble, vengeful heart which had decided to resist against the unfairness of the world.

Meaning, all that was left was to—

Subaru: “Flop-san, this street isn’t really giving off a good Keh in the Feng Shui way. So is it alright if we could use a different path?”

Flop: “Keh? What is Keh? Actually, is that the reason for the wrinkles in your brow and your eyes?”

Subaru: “It’s more like a fortune-telling item for good omens. It’s got nothing to do with my eyes! I think! But yeah, this street’s no good. I don’t mind if we go the long way, so please?”

Depending on Flop’s goodwill, Subaru forcefully advanced the conversation.

Deciding that Flop was not the culprit, the next thing to do was to avoid the incoming death. Whether it was a ranged snipe or not, it was no mistake that this was an attack.

If he were able to avoid the attack’s condition for occurrence, that would result in him being able to avoid this death.

To do that, first, it was crucial that he did not follow the same actions as he did before.

Changing paths, delaying the timings, he would avoid the disaster that would occur to him before it happened.

If he could do that, he should be able to dodge the unwanted death.

Subaru: “Well to begin with, I’ve never wanted to die in the firs… Well, only once or twice.”

And in addition to that, it was an unavoidable option due to the imminent state of affairs.

When cornered in a situation where the only way to save someone was to die, in those times Subaru had chosen death. Yes, Subaru also desired revenge on the world.

Flop: “I don’t know about that Keh thing but I like your earnest expression. It’ll be a bit of a detour, but why don’t we take a different path?”

Subaru: “That’d be a great help! Let’s go to a main street with as many people as possible.”

Flop: “Gotcha.”

Fortunately, Flop listened to Subaru’s unnatural suggestion without opposition.

Following his lead, the plan for which way to go to the bar was changed. They turned back from the path they would have continued on and took a route to the tavern that would go through the main street, with minimal alleys.

Ultimately, if they passed through the line of fire before the tavern, it was possible that it still would not change the fact someone was after Subaru. However, if he knew the attack were to happen in the alleys in front of the tavern, there would be many ways to deal with it.

In the worst case, there was also the possibility his opponent might withdraw upon witnessing Subaru's vigilant look—.

Flop: "Well then Mister, this way—"

Passing by Subaru's side, Flop began leading him down a different road.

It was in that instant. —By accident Flop looked over Subaru's shoulder, and his eyes widened as if he had just noticed something.

Subaru: "—Oh"

What, he attempted to ascertain from Flop's response, but that was not realized.

The reason being that, instead of a question coming from Subaru's mouth, his mouth had opened fully to spit out the blood it was teeming with.

Subaru: "Ah, uh?!"

It was a feat of a single moment.

Subaru felt something seize the back of his head, forcing him to look up. Then, a hot sensation passed over his bare throat, and blood burst forth.

Drowning in the overflowing blood and pain, Subaru understood his throat had been cut open.

Subaru: "Guh…Uh"

Both hands pressed to the wound on his neck, amidst the intense pain and blood loss, Subaru sought for a breakthrough solution.

The wound was deep and wide, cutting through major blood vessels, blood gushing out. He would take off his outer garment and wrap it around his neck to halt the bleeding—No, the first priority here had to be to get away from the enemy behind him.

Moreover, Flop was right there. He was wrong to have doubted him. Afterwards he would have faith in him, he might not be forgiven, but right here, was Flop.

Subaru: “Ah, nghh…”

Rem was at the inn. One way or another, even with blood flowing from his neck, he had to make it back to her.

Go back, take her away, it’s not safe, withdraw. Even if she hated him, drag her away. For Rem to live. She had to live. For that, the neck’s bleeding, stop it.

The blood, the blood, bloodbloodbloodbloodbloodblood, the blood, stop, stop it, stopstopstopstooooo—

Subaru: “—uu”

op.

2

Flop: “—Mister, it’s no good to have a scowl on your face.”

Subaru: “…”

Flop: “Good fortune won’t come to anyone who doesn’t have the time to smile. You’re going to try and find companions for your journey now, aren’t you? Then, you need to find someone good.”

In front, Flop emphasized his point while grinding his finger against his own brow.

While watching that man’s gesture, Subaru promptly put both his hands to his own neck. He did not feel that hot sensation or the heat of life flowing out. The feeling of blood gushing forth with every heartbeat.

Of his own life pouring out, the pulsation of despair approaching Death.

Flop: “If that’s the case, then erase those wrinkles on your brow… What’s the matter, Mister, your face has gone pale.”

Seeing Subaru keep silent, Flop looked surprised and became concerned.

Despite that earnest gaze of his, just before Subaru, he was reminded of the moment his throat had been slashed open.

Right, his throat had been cut.

His throat was cut, blood spurted out, his instincts sounded the alarm that he had to get away, however, even if he could not hear those alarm bells, he came back to that moment.

In other words, he had died. He had once again Returned by Death.

In addition to that, this time was different with instant death from the outset. More explicit, in the form of hostility.

Subaru: "…Bwaah"

With his hands on his throat, Subaru had forgotten to breathe, which he remembered in a hurry. Subaru raised his shoulders up and down with deep breaths, Flop touched his shoulder and asked if he was alright, but Subaru had no room to respond.

However, he could not stay here either.

Subaru: "Haah, Flop-san, today, it's, a terrible day for Feng Shui. Let's return at once…!"

Flop: "Fuusooey? Although, considering that pallor to rest a bit would be…"

Subaru: "No, resting would be a waste of time! This is a fit that won't stop until Rem holds my hand!"

Flop: "I-Is that right… What an affliction that is!"

With a sense of uneasiness and urgency burning in his heart, he had blurted out nonsense, but the good-natured Flop gave more importance to the atmosphere than the content of words.

The hand that had grasped his shoulder was grabbed in turn, and

Flop nodded in surprise. Pulling on that hand of Flop's, Subaru hesitated as to whether to head forward or back.

If they went forward, they would be on route, but if they went back they would go by where he had had his throat slit.

He felt he was at an impasse where whichever way they went his life would be in danger, so rather than forward or backward, he would return to the main street via some other alleyway.

He had failed before, but his opponent would try not to kill them—No, kill Subaru, somewhere in the public eye. If he was going to alert his opponent, getting to the main road was imperative.

Flop: "Mister! Your hand is super cold! We should get your wife to warm them up soon!"

Subaru: "Ahh, as soon as possible, I want to see Rem's face."

As a result, he did not care about the abuse he would face for returning without accomplishing his goal.

At any rate, to that place with Rem—

Subaru: "—No."

Can I go back? The question swirled in Subaru's mind.

In a situation where he had not yet grasped his enemy's true nature, he thought about the danger of going back to Rem. He was unaware of when his opponent had begun targeting him, but if they returned to the inn, he may be kindly revealing the location to his foe.

Subaru: "…"

Cursing his lack of thought, Subaru bit his lip and at the same time, his field of vision opened.

Exiting the alleyway, Subaru and Flop had made it to the main streets of the city. On the right and the left, the number of people coming and going could not be compared to a metropolis, but it was a hell of a lot better than the alleyways with their hideout-like taverns.

Nonetheless, it would take some nerve to dive into the crowd of people. To avoid that, he would have to decide on a guideline for their next course of action.

Flop: “If we’re on this street here, that means the inn should be over there. So then, this way…”

Subaru: “That’s no good, Flop-san! We can’t go back to the inn. To see Rem, such a thing would be inexcusable!”

Flop: “Isn’t that different from what you just said?!”

His conduct ended up being that of an emotionally unstable person, but his anxiety from before made it so he was incapable of returning to Rem’s side. That being said, it was also ungrateful to keep manipulating Flop without giving him any information.

But, what could he say to make him understand?

He was not an associate of the Emilia Camp, nor a long-time traveling companion like Anastasia or Julius. He had no powers of persuasion or grounds to make him take Subaru’s opinion seriously.

Even for this, it would be asking too much to pin his hopes on Flop’s innate goodness.

Subaru: “Damnit…!”

To break the deadlock of the situation, currently Subaru’s hand was sorely lacking.

He was separated from his precious Rem, and was being hunted down in a strange town. He was with the virtuous Flop, but he lacked fighting strength. Subaru himself had no strong point to show.

Without knowing who was attacking him, he did not know who to be wary of.

Subaru: “No way, the hunter…?!”

When he defined his opponent as an invisible assassin, the first possibility that came to Subaru's mind was the Hunter.

They were a dangerous person who had killed Subaru once in the Buddheim Jungle, and after that as well, they had aimed at him while he was with Rem on one occasion. Ultimately, he had not run into them even once since then, but what if they were still meticulously continuing to hunt Subaru?

In the Buddheim Jungle, the military encampment, and the Shudraqian village, there had always been someone acting with Subaru. To avoid a set up with combat-ready opponents, they may have changed their timing until Subaru was with the powerless Flop.

Subaru: "If that's how it is, it's like you have the tenacity of a bear robbed of its prey. Why go this far to aim at me? What about me is the reason for…"

Flop: "Mister? You alright? What are you so worried about? If there's something I can help you with, you can try talking to me first. You're acting strange."

Subaru: "Flop-san…"

While Subaru was looking left and right down the street and losing his nerve, Flop called out to him in that voice.

Directly across from him Flop seized both his shoulders, his earnest gaze and offer made Subaru want to depend on him, and Subaru seriously considered if he should try gambling on his innate goodness.

If it was Flop, he might have the faith to believe in Subaru and lend him a hand.

Subaru: "Flop-san, sorry to keep relying on you, but can I ask you something?"

Flop: "Ah, of course, certainly! Whatever it is, even if I can't help, my sister might be able to. After all, my sister and I have the kind of bond where we can cover for each other's weak points, you know."

Subaru: "In truth, between the two of you this might be a matter for Medium-san though…"

If his opponent violently struck without mercy, there may be no choice but to respond with greater force. Medium's strength was much greater than Subaru's or Flop's.

With that in mind, Subaru would try to explain the situation to Flop. Firstly, he would have to hide the matter of Return by Death, and explain that someone was relentlessly targeting him.

Subaru: "Actually, someone is presently…"

Flop: "—What the?"

Subaru: "Huh?"

His mind made up, while being careful not to trigger the penalty of mentioning Return by Death, Subaru was going to try to explain the circumstances to Flop.

However, just as he was about to speak, Flop's gaze turned toward the wrong direction. He raised his well-shaped brows and squinted in the direction of the street.

By his reaction he seemed to have noticed something, and Subaru belatedly became aware of the same thing.

Subaru: "—Hk"

A long way off, someone was screaming.

And it was not just one person, several people shouted in shrieks and angry roars. Then the voices gradually increased in urgency, and sounds that differed from screams multiplied—

Flop: "Wha—?!"

Eyes wide, Flop's throat closed, and Subaru also turned in the same direction.

Immediately, witnessing what Flop had, the same scene before his eyes also left Subaru at a loss for words.

—A giant wheel was headed right for Flop and Subaru.

Flop: "Mister, watch ou—"

Flop's voice was cut off too early, the impact engulfed Subaru's entire body with its intensity. His body was totally blown away, it hit the hard ground and tumbled many times.

The momentum did not stop, and he crashed into a wall. But that was not the end. —Back-to-back, another successive impact hit the collapsed Subaru, and once more his body was blown away.

Subaru: "—a, guh"

Having been sent somersaulting and tumbling, Subaru's field of vision was dyed black as his body hit the ground.

It was not as if the sky had suddenly been covered in clouds. It was something else, his field of view had been destroyed for a different reason. The cause he did not know, and even if he found out what it was, nothing good would come out of it.

However, if there was something he could say—

Subaru: "D-Dea…"

Death, that was something every cell in his whole body had been proclaiming towards Subaru's instinct.

Up until this point, as someone who had experienced Death over thirty times, Subaru was somewhat conscious of just how much damage his body was able to withstand before he lost his life.

This time, it was clearly over the limit it could endure.

Subaru: "…"

A festering pain.

Yet, that was something on a whole other level compared to merely localized pain. This aching assaulted his entire body. The existence named Subaru was synchronized with the phenomenon called pain.

This was not mere localized pain. Natsuki Subaru was precisely Pain itself. Pain was what he was, and therefore it was only natural to be in pain. Anywhere and everywhere hurt. The pain did not disappear.

From a distance rang a sound like that of tinnitus or similar to the whistle of a train, reverberating inside his head.

Amidst that, the sounds which can be heard were, the joys and sorrows of the people hurled into a maelstrom—nay, there wasn't any joy. It was more fitting to call it a pandemonium. Pandemonium, hah. What a word.

Contrary to the echo of sounds, the events that unfolded were overwhelmingly grave.

Subaru: "Ahii, ouh, ah…"

He could not produce any syllables.

The mouth that attempted to enunciate words was in tatters. Without any teeth remaining, it had decent ventilation. Somewhere had been ripped apart and air was leaking through it. There was blood, sound, and pain.

Something, something, something—

Subaru: "Oh, ah"

Something had killed Natsuki Subaru again.

3

Flop: "—Mister, it's no good to have a scowl on your face."

Subaru: "…"

Flop: "Good fortune won't come to anyone who doesn't have the time to smile. You're going to try and find companions for your journey now, aren't you? Then, you need to find someone good."

Putting his finger in between his eyebrows, Flop rubbed the skin and flesh to relax them.

Watching the man's performance unfold in front of his eyes, Subaru hugged his own two shoulders. Then, he recalled his mouth which air no longer escaped from, as well as the pain that had vanished.

—It can't be, I died again.

Subaru: "Moreover… this time, it was… a dragon carriage, was it…?"

Pulverized by the impact, sent flying and rendered immobile, the candle of life thinned and vanished.

While dominated by the pain proclaimed by every inch of his body, Subaru had been killed. He had lost his life.

Subaru: "…"

Clattering, the shoulders in his own grip trembled, and his knees began to shudder.

Even if his body did not recall the disaster that had befallen it, his soul remembered. The impact and pain inflicted upon his whole body as if tearing it to pieces, even if it no longer remained, still gnawed at his soul.

At last, Subaru could not conceal his fear towards the looming evil that befell upon him.

First time was instant-death, the second was being beheaded, the third was being run over by a dragon carriage—it could no longer be just a mere coincidence. No doubt, the aim was to kill Natsuki Subaru.

It had killed Subaru mercilessly. The most frightening thing of it all was that, despite Return by Death having been triggered thrice, Subaru had obtained no further information other than the fact an enemy existed.

The opponent would not leave behind any information for the lifeless Subaru.

Flop: “If that’s the case, then erase those wrinkles on your brow… What’s wrong, Mister? You don’t look so well.”

Subaru: “Flop, -san…”

Once again, Flop had shown concern towards Subaru, the latter’s facial expression having changed.

Earlier, the chaos on the main street was most likely the result of the dragon carriage going berserk. Then, in the instant before the collision, Flop had extended his hand in an attempt to save Subaru.

Not making it on time, Subaru had received the deadly impact head on, and it was unthinkable that Flop, nearby as he was, would have gotten off scratch free. —he would have been dragged into the collateral damages as well.

Subaru: “In the first place, up until now…”

The enemy would not necessarily retreat in content after killing Subaru.

Flop had been there at the scene, and had witnessed the occurrences on both the first and second time. If the opponent was someone of caution, it would be natural for them to seal Flop’s mouth, as he was a witness.

Would it not mean that, up until now, Subaru’s death would be accompanied by Flop’s murder?

Would it not mean that Flop had already been dragged into the situation Subaru was put in?

“I won’t allow that”, thought Subaru as he gritted the back of his teeth.

Subaru: “—Kh! Flop-san!”

Flop: “Wh-What?!”

Killing any cowardice by gritting the back of his teeth, Subaru faced forward courageously.

Next, with that enthusiasm Subaru grabbed Flop by the hand, catching him by surprise. However, he did not have the leisure to take Flop’s bewilderment into account.

Considering what had happened so far, the countdown to death had already begun.

A situation of dead-end times three, where moving forward meant hell, heading back meant hell, going around still meant hell.

Even then, he must search for the path towards survival. —not just Subaru and Rem, but also the kind older brother who had helped them and return him to his sister’s side.

That was why—

Subaru: “Flop-san, let’s run!”

Flop: “That’s sudden?! What happened?!”

Subaru: “There’s no hows or whats, life is finite! We can’t waste even a second, right?!”

It would be a bad move to stop here and earnestly try to persuade the other.

Subaru made such a judgement, same as previous times, he would use forceful reasoning to destroy Flop’s resistance. Sure enough, swallowed up by the momentum, Flop just nodded in agreement and voiced, “That’s true!”.

Flop: “Life is short. For the sake of achieving my sister and I’s goal, although time should indeed be treasured…”

Subaru: “Let’s run! Run towards the bar immediately! The trivial matters can be discussed later!”

Flop: “U-Understood! I understand already, so stop dragging me! My bangs will get messed up!”

Forcefully dragged away by his arm, Flop cried out as he stumbled over his feet.

Listening to Flop’s shriek-like voice, Subaru advanced toward the road he once took—with the same goal of getting a bodyguard, he hurried toward the bar.

However, the goal was not to get a bodyguard for the sake of their travels.

For the salvation from this series of unavoidable Deaths, for the sake of obtaining the necessary help as soon as possible, they ran.

4

???: “—You want to hire the strongest one here?”

The barkeep they finally found raised his eyebrows in response to Subaru’s ragged breath inquiry.

The middle-aged barkeep, whose hair had started to gray, stared at the panting Subaru from top to bottom with somewhat skeptical eyes.

With his demeanor and his age, Subaru too realized that he was lacking in persuasiveness. Moreover he had barged into the bar, and suddenly brought up a question like that.

You could even say he had been generous enough to not immediately jump to the conclusion that Subaru was messing with him.

Currently, Subaru and Flop are inside the bar which was their original destination.

At first Subaru had been killed instantly by some unknown method in the alleyway within the immediate vicinity of the bar. That in of itself had been unsettling, but perhaps because rushing things turned out to be effective, the clutches of the devil that would have stopped Subaru and Flop who instead hurriedly hastened toward the bar had not made their appearance.

However, it would be premature to assume that they had escaped from danger on the basis of that argument.

Subaru: “That’s why, I have to borrow the strength of the strongest one here.”

Barkeeper: “…If we’re talking about the strongest one here, that’d probably be Rowan.”

The barkeep shrugged his shoulders at Subaru, who had asked again while gathering his breath. Then, he proceeded to look at the other person besides Subaru, Flop, who was also out of breath.

Barkeeper: “Flop, here I thought you haven’t shown your face around in a while, and here you are helping someone again huh. Even though you won’t get a single penny out of it anyways”

Flop: “Hey now, I’m just doing whatever kind of deals I want to partake in. Those whom I partake in deals with aren’t limited to just people. At times, I take on unfavorable deals against the world itself.”

Barkeeper: “I’m saying there’s no profit in doing that, you softy.”

Perhaps because the barkeeper had been on quite familiar terms with him, he commented on Flop’s actions with a speechless tone.

Despite hearing directly from Flop why he had helped Subaru’s group, it seemed his kind nature was a well-known fact to someone who knew him beforehand.

While the barkeeper polished a glass cup, he shot a sharp glance towards Subaru,

Barkeeper: “He’s a real softy like you’ve heard. But, don’t you get the wrong idea here. This dumbass and his sister are softies that will help anyone regardless of who they might be, in turn, there are a lot of people that are indebted to them.”

Subaru: "…I don't have any intention of being an ungrateful bastard either, I'll pamper him back just as much as I have been pampered."

Flop: "Hahaha, I shall look forward to that! The day I'm going to be pampered that is!"

While fixing his bangs with a comb he took out of his pocket, Flop returned a candid response.

Feeling saved by Flop's kindness and magnanimity, Subaru turned towards the inside of the bar, and asked "Which one is Rowan?".

Barkeeper: "Ahh, Rowan's passed out over there at the uh, corner over there."

Subaru: "Passed out at a corner…? That doesn't sound like good news."

While saying so, Subaru looked nervously at the direction the barkeeper pointed at. Upon which, within the dim bar, and amongst several men that chattered drunkenly, he found a man who was slumped over at a table in the corner.

It was a man in his fifties, his long and disheveled hair tied up sloppily, along with his weapon of choice—a katana sheathed by the waist.

The table he had slumped over on was lined with several empty glasses; one can tell he really knocked himself out in every sense of the word before the sun had even set.

Subaru: "…That's the strongest, you say?"

Barkeeper: "There's no doubt he's got a terrible drinking habit but, he's a master of his trade. Though he's got a terrible drinking habit."

Subaru: "You mentioning that about him twice only makes me even more worried."

Subaru received the barkeeper's warning about him having a bad drinking habit, two times consecutively.

Though he had been considered as quite the drunkard, beggars couldn't be choosers. Right now, what was most important was not his personal conduct or the toughness of his liver, but his prowess in combat.

That of the person who possessed the ability to save the desperate Subaru from his impending doom.

Subaru: "Hey, Rowan-san, could you hear me out for a bit?"

Rowen: "Ngah?"

Subaru steeled his resolve and headed towards the table Rowan passed out on along with Flop. As he spoke to the collapsed man while shaking him by his shoulders, Rowan responded in a stupefied voice and raised his head.

Face flushed completely red paired with a sleepy gaze, as well as facial features that would have been rather discernable if it weren't ruined by a reddened nose.

Rowan: "What's up, bro. Whaddya want from me…?"

Subaru: "This dude's wasted… Anyways, listen to me. I have a job for…You reek!!"

Rowan: "Oioi, ain't ya a rude one…"

After getting up wobbly, Rowan exhaled a drawn-out breath which Subaru had to turn his face away from.

As the dreadful stench of alcohol wafted, it even created an illusion that his vision had somehow been warped. It was not something as simple as drinking during the day. There should be a limit to how heavy of an alcoholic a person was.

Subaru: "Come to think of it, because there isn't anyone I already know to be a heavy drinker, this is my first time dealing with this type… Roswaal and Otto too would only drink in moderation…"

The people in the Emilia camp who habitually drank alcohol were Roswaal and Otto. Ram and Frederica would drink too, but only if invited. Besides them, nobody else drank.

Subaru was also apparently of drinking age in this other world, but he had more or less gone until now without feeling the need to drink.

Subaru: “So honestly, I don’t really have a good impression of drunks but… Hey, this guy’s really the best one here right?! I’m not playing around here.”

Barkeeper: “What a coincidence. I don’t have this place open to play around either. There’s no mistake, it’s him.”

Subaru: “Shit, you’re serious…”

Receiving the barkeeper’s reassurance, Subaru turned back to Rowan with a bitter look.

Rowan was sitting sloppily in his chair and shaking an empty glass upside-down above his head, desperately trying to taste any droplets of alcohol left with his tongue.

Rowan: “Tsk, ain’t enough booze. Oi, ya bros, treat me to a drink why don’tcha.”

Flop: “Hm, you want a drink? Okay. Barkeep, A drink for him…”

Subaru: “Wait a sec, wait a sec, Flop-san! I really shouldn’t be saying this since I’ve been saved by your kindness but just for a little bit, keep your good will in your wallet!”

Shutting down Flop, who was about to treat someone just because they requested it, Subaru positioned himself in front of a displeased-looking Rowan. Then, he placed his hands on the table with force,

Subaru: “Rowan-san, let’s get straight to the point. We won’t be treating you to a drink. But, I can pay you the money you need to buy drinks. I want you to take a job.”

Rowan: “Aahn, a job…?”

Subaru: “That’s right. I’d like you to be an escort. And also, starting right this very second.”

Getting close to the stink of alcohol, Subaru boldly laid out those conditions.

Hearing his talk, Rowan stared back at Subaru with sleepy eyes.

Rowan: “…Yer tone’s pretty panicked. Ya bros are in quite a dangerous situation, aren’tcha?”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s no laughing matter. What do you think? The amount I can pay, this is my limit.”

Flop: “Mister, that’s…”

Widening his eyes in surprise, Flop attempted to stop Subaru’s action. However, Subaru halted Flop, who was trying to restrain him, instead and assertively put on the table a bag—the bag which contained all of the money he got after selling the Witchbeast’s horn.

As a precaution, he had not split and pass some amount to Rem.

This was genuinely everything Subaru's group had on hand. There was no more money that he could pay beyond this.

Rowan: "Woah woah, this is…"

Subaru: "This is everything I can pay with. What do you think? Will you take it?"

Rowan: "…"

Opening the mouth of the bag, Rowan went silent as he confirmed the contents with a quick glance. His face was still red but the drunken look in his eyes from before was now gone, a look of serious scrutiny replacing it.

Of course, an escort that could be hired at a bar—to show someone like Rowan, who worked as a knock-off mercenary, all of the funds that Subaru walked around with was a fairly large gamble.

Having crossed national borders, Subaru was not well-informed on the value of goods in the Empire. However, he felt that the value of currency was not so different from the Kingdom of Lugunica.

With the money Subaru had offered up, one could easily live a year just monkeying around.

Rowan: "My skills are first rate… I thought of saying that but, this amount upfront…"

Subaru: "I'll say this now, but I can't negotiate any increase in payment."

Rowan: "I ain't doubting ya. Ya've said y'ain't playing around, it seems you're serious about it."

Scratching his scarlet-turned nose with his finger, Rowan slowly stood up on the spot. He picked up the money bag Subaru had handed out and carefully kept it in his pocket.

Rowan: "I ain't giving this back even if ya tell me to give it back."

Subaru: "It's a shame, but I won't tell you to return it. If you do your job right.”

Rowan: “Puhah”

A breath reeking of alcohol being let out by his laugh, Rowan accepted Subaru’s job.

Hearing his answer, the tension in Subaru’s shoulders, present for all this time, faded away. His nervousness would not go away and uncertainty endlessly circled his insides but—

Flop: “Mister, was that alright? That money was…”

Subaru: “It’s fine. It’s nothing if it means we’re safe now. I’m sorry for scaring Flop like that, and also thank you for introducing me to this place.”

Flop: “—. If you say it’s okay then I’m okay too. Thankfully, we paid for the inn in advance!”

In terms of the accommodation bill, Subaru had already paid for it, including Flop and Medium’s part, who they shared rooms with, under Subaru’s group’s name.

It seemed like he avoided the dishonour of passing the bill off to them by not thinking ahead when hiring Rowan.

Rowan: “So, employer. How shall I address ya?.”

Subaru: “Oh, right. My bad. I was in a rush. My name is—”

Rowan: “—Wait.”

Asked about his name, Subaru panicked as he thought he disrespected Rowan. And as he was about to name himself, Rowan stopped him.

He thrusted his hand in front of Subaru’s face and directed his sharp gaze behind Subaru—towards the bar’s windows.

Subaru: “Ro…wan?”

Rowan: “…It’s a weird feeling. Say bro, you were tailed weren’t ya?”

Subaru: “—Uh”

Rowan’s low and quiet voice made Subaru swallow his breath.

Beside him, Flop, confused, said “What does that mean?”, but Subaru had a general idea on the presence Rowan had detected.

It was not a what-if scenario, it was definite. The weird feeling Rowan had gotten was the being that tailed Subaru; the enemy that had attacked Subaru in the alleyway.

The enemy who had killed Subaru three times had not given up on Subaru this time as well.

Flop: “Just who are you being chased by?”

Subaru: “…I’m not kidding when I say this, I don’t know. I just thought that if we stayed outside, they would come after us. That’s why I hired you.”

Rowan: “I see. They shoulda picked a better fight.”

It was a situation where they had nothing to work with, yet Rowan said that in a joking manner.

However, even if Rowan’s tone had a hint of nervousness and seriousness, there was no worry in his voice. That probably meant he had reasonable confidence in his skill.

In reality, the drunkenness had disappeared from Rowan’s eyes and the atmosphere he gave off was now that of a strong individual.

Rowan: “…”

Rowan’s specialised weapon was a singular katana sheathed on the left side of his waist.

It was late saying this now, but to see a katana as a sword-of-choice was rare in this other world. Rowan’s weapon was a distinct irregularity against the western-style swords that were the norm.

Looking closely, together with the atmosphere emanating from his disheveled hair, Rowan's appearance somewhat resembled that of a samurai. However, he lacked a certain intensity, so maybe a ronin was a better description for him.

Subaru: "Rowan-san, they are…"

Rowan: "There's no need to be a scaredy-cat. No matter who they are, if they're gonna stand in front of me, all that is needed is to cut them in two. There's alcohol in my belly and my sword's in top shape."

Subaru: "So this isn't drunken fist but drunken sword? Can't say I've heard of that."

Nevertheless, it did not sound like a lie and Subaru put his faith in Rowan's self-confidence.

Moving around to the opposite side of where Rowan was glaring at the window, Subaru pulled on the sleeve of the Flop, who had still not fully taken in the situation.

Subaru: "Flop-san, let's have Rowan-san handle this."

Flop: "Handling things and whatnot, I still don't quite understand the situation! What are Mister and Bodyguard-kun fighting with exactly?"

Subaru: "That's something I still—"

"don't know yet." Faster than Subaru could reply with a statement which would only arouse Flop's worry, the situation changed.

However, the situation did not develop in a manner in which the enemy had charged in from the front and Rowan had burst out for a counter attack.

???: "Bweh…"

Spilling those cries of pain, a man with a large build fell at the entrance of the bar.

With that sudden occurrence, Subaru literally jumped up in surprise. However, the other customers in the bar who saw the man had a shallow reaction, as if they were used to the sight.

The drunken customers besides Rowan—They probably worked doing mercenary-like activities as well. Those people simply stared at the fallen man with little reaction.

The only people who rushed to the fallen man's side were Flop and the barkeeper.

Only, the one who was actually worried about the man was Flop, and it was obvious on the face of the barkeeper that he just did not want his floor to be dirtied.

Flop: "Hey, you! Are you alright? Get a hold of yourself!"

Large Man: "Fu, fuga, fuga…"

Flop: "Fugafuga?! Is that your name? Get a hold of yourself Fugafuga-kun!"

Subaru: "Er, no, Flop-san, that person's…"

Flop tried to get the fallen man up but the man responded with a groan. It was not like the man was courteously introducing himself to a person he met for the first time.

Adding on to that, a man entering this bar in this situation meant that—

Large Man: "Fuga…"

Subaru: "—m! Flop-san! Get away!"

Flop was leaning down, endeavoring to get the face-down man up by pulling on his arm.

Having gotten a terrible feeling, Subaru immediately pulled Flop back down onto the ground and got him away from the man.

—On the very next moment.

Large Man: "—!!!"

The body of the man who was groaning and saying "Fugafuga" expanded, and for a brief flash, shone bright scarlet.

Then, the expanded body of the man ruptured and a great explosion threw the inside of the bar into chaos.

Customers: "Guaaaaah?!"

Screams echoed inside the bar and red flecks of light scattered around the area. Right after, they became flames that burned and spread. Subaru came to the realisation that the man who had blown up had been used as a human bomb.

Subaru: "Flop-san!"

Flop: "I-I'm fine Mister! But, this is…"

Subaru and Flop, who had been juggled around by the blast wave, stared in shock at the state of pandemonium inside the bar.

The reason the man's body had exploded was most likely because he had been forced to hold onto Fire Magic Stones. —Looking at his anguished face, the Fire Magic Stones may have been inside his body.

Those detonated, and fire scattered about. Additionally, that was not all—

Customer: "Cough! Wha, What the hell?! My eyes, my eyeeeeessss!"

Inside the overflowing inferno, one of the drunken customers who had gotten caught up in the mess covered his face and screamed out. Looking around, that man was not the only one who was screaming, the other men were doing the same too.

Having been blown away, the men who were engulfed in the lingering smoke from the explosion at the centre of the bar covered their eyes and nose, shouting in great pain.

And then—

???: “It’s no good if we stay in the bar! Everyone, hurry up and get out!”

Subaru: “Wai—”

A man shouted while tears poured down his face, and several men, with their faces covered, rushed for the entrance all at once. Looking at the men jostling against each other, Subaru tried to raise his voice in an effort to tell them to stop.

The man who had exploded, and the smoke accompanied with pain after that. Subaru felt like both of those had contributed to the disorder within the bar, and were attempting to guide people into escaping outside.

However, even if Subaru were to raise his voice out of desperation, it would not halt the footsteps of those men driven by pain.

As a result—

Subaru: “—hk?!”

A second explosion occurred, blowing away the men flooding the entrance altogether.

The second one was larger than the first, and the men caught in its radius were unable to even protect each other as they were charred black, scorched from the front by the bursting flames.

The explosive heat and the blast wave surged towards them, and Subaru was petrified by the gruesome scene.

Nightmarish sights taking place one after another — it all seemed unreal.

Subaru: “Th…is…”

Rowan: “Get a hold of yourself, client! It’s gonna be troublesome for me if ya collapse right here!”

Subaru: "—ah,"

Whilst Subaru remained petrified and dumbfounded, he was seized by the back of his collar and was forcefully dragged to his feet. The person responsible for it was Rowan, who had his face covered with the sleeve of his clothes.

He gestured for Subaru to keep a low posture, ensuring he would not inhale the same smoke that had tormented the other men, and,

Rowan: "Barkeep! We'll head out from the back! The front side's under watch!"

Barkeeper: "G-Got it! It's this way…!"

Listening to Rowan's instructions, the manager nodded obediently as blood flowed down his forehead.

Like that, Rowan made a sign with his hand behind the bartender, who was moving as if he were crawling across the floor, and slapped Subaru's back, shouting, "Go!"

Rowan: "Client, and the young man over there! Get moving right now if ya don't wanna die!"

Flop: "O-Of course, I can't afford to die! Both my little sister and I are still in the middle of our journey…!"

Subaru: "Fuck…!"

Receiving Rowan's encouragement, Subaru and Flop pursued the manager ahead of them. While chasing after him, Subaru's mind was filled with confusion and rage directed at both himself and the enemy.

Of course, there was anger towards the enemy who had committed such atrocious deeds. However, he was also angry with himself, as he had failed to recognize the threat level of the enemy, even though he had known the enemy was present.

To begin with, the enemy had done something to cause a dragon carriage to go out of control in the main street.

A considerable number of people must have been caught up in that. If that was so, Subaru should have been more earnest with his thoughts. He should have acknowledged the fellow as someone who did not pay any heed to the damage to their surroundings.

Because of that, the men, who had only been at the bar, had gotten entangled in—

Barkeeper: "—! The backdoor won't open!"

Having arrived first at the backdoor, the manager cried out in front of the self-reproaching Subaru.

He was desperately trying to open the door, but it would not answer his panicked calls. Perhaps the damage from the explosion had bent the door out of shape, or—

Flop: "This is bad! The front entrance is already demolished! If this goes on…"

Rowan: "Argh, outta the way! A door like this is—"

In the bar, the vermillion flames were growing intense, and in a situation in which the black smoke was about to swallow them, Rowan had leapt out, almost as if he were thrashing out Flop's shout. And then, upon placing a hand on the katana by his waist, he drew and slashed it at the unopening door with great force, with nary a single flash of his blade—

Subaru: "—oh,"

The silver gleam shot forward, cutting away the closed door with a slash.

It was a sword skill similar to Iai, one which Subaru knew. Despite performing a slash that caused Subaru to be mesmerized involuntarily, Rowan did not show his pride for it, and kicked down the remainder of the door.

Rowan: "Aight! It opened! Everyone, keep low!"

Freeing the backdoor that had previously been sealed, Rowan called out to Subaru and the others behind himself.

An enormous amount of confusion was spreading far and wide, but it looked like they would be able to get away from the inescapable situation that was the bar in flames, at least.

Subaru had also understood that Rowan's judgement in battle, as well as his skills, were trustworthy. All they needed to do was to distance themselves from this place, and for their evil opponent—

Subaru: "…"

Suddenly, Subaru held his breath.

Something was nagging at the back of his mind. —He attempted to predict the thoughts of his scrupulous, ruthless enemy.

They had thrown a man-turned-human-bomb into the bar, lured out the people inside using smoke containing stimulants, and blew them away at once with the Mana Stones they had set up at the entrance.

And then, they had obstructed the entrance, and utilized some method to seal off the backdoor as well. Subaru and his group had broken through that blockade, and were able to escape through the backdoor, but—

Subaru: "Rowan-sa—"

Something is wrong, Subaru attempted to put his minuscule feeling of discomfort into words.

If his opponent were a thorough one, then it would be impossible to think they would let up their offensive. In order to convey that eeriness, Subaru called for Rowan. There was no reply.

Rowan: "…"

Leaning forward from the backdoor, Rowan's body teetered backwards, then fell.

Subaru, Flop, and the barkeeper stared at the fallen Rowan, shocked. His head, specifically the area starting from his forehead and above, had been destroyed, and his eyes were hanging out, having been extruded.

No matter who looked at it, Rowan had died, his head pulverized.

Barkeeper: “Ah,”

Gazing at Rowan’s appalling state of death, the bartender widened his eyes, attempting to scream.

However, he could not even do that. A single blow was swung with the other side of the flames, piercing through the chest of the manager who had taken a deep breath, viciously tearing apart the upper half of his body. Scattering the bones and organs from inside his body, the barkeeper rolled straight into the fire.

The scent of burning flesh immediately reached Subaru’s nose, but the barkeeper did not scream. He had been killed instantly.

???: “…”

Beyond the flames and the smoke that filled the area, something gradually made its appearance.

Stepping over the slashed, torn down door, the silhouette of a man with damp cloth wrapped around his face had appeared.

He had a firm grip on the long-handled axe in his hands, and Subaru understood that it was the weapon that had crushed Rowan’s head and given the bartender an instant death. However, his understanding ended there.

Flop: “Wh-Who in the world, are you? Why are you doing this?”

Having watched the deaths of Rowan and the barkeeper just like Subaru, who was unable to move out of dismay, Flop spoke with a trembling voice beside him. Although he was swamped by fear, he was glaring at the silhouette among the flames with a solemn gaze.

As if he were directing his animosity towards the villainous man, who had massacred the people in the bar one after another with such viciousness.

However—

Flop: “Don’t think you can get away with thi—”

???: “…”

Flop, while attempting to condemn the man’s wrongdoings with a firm attitude, received a direct strike to his head from the man’s axe.

The man would not do anything meaningless, such as bashing him with the back of his axe without aligning the edge of the blade. He adjusted the angle of the blade, slamming it into Flop’s forehead where his long bangs were draped over, and spilled the contents outside.

Brain matter flew about, and Flop died as the crimson hue of his blood blended together with the red flames.

His body crumpled into a heap while making a loud splash. Blood slowly flowed out, staining Subaru’s bottom as he sank down onto the floor. —No, Subaru’s pants were already soiled by something vastly different. Out of fear, he had been unable to control his bladder.

Subaru was frightened by the terrifying appearance of the man that held a bloodstained axe amidst the inferno.

His soul quivered at his vindictiveness, his persistence, his dreadfulness.

Subaru: “W…why…”

It was an awfully foolish question.

Flop had been killed unsparingly after asking a similar question. Of course, there was no reason for the man to be merciful only towards Subaru. He would likewise perish. He would be killed.

Subaru did not possess the strength to draw back, nor the courage to crawl away. Right now, he was unable to take his eyes off the man.

Even if gazing at the man filled his being with terror, he could not look away because that was equally as horrifying.

Subaru: “Why… Why!”

Just like an idiot who only ever repeated what he knew, Subaru yelled out with desperation.

The man did not respond despite hearing him shout. He slowly lifted up his axe, his face remaining hidden, and positioned it straight above the sitting Subaru’s head.

And then—

Subaru: “WHY?!”

???: “—I won’t tell you anything. Won’t it be troublesome if you run away again?”

As Subaru shouted out with a bleeding heart, the man at last gave a reply.

Listening to the man’s tone and voice, which sounded as if he was only stating the obvious, Subaru’s breath caught in his throat.

He attempted to match the voice with a voice he had heard somewhere, and,

Subaru: “Bh,”

The axe swung down faster than he could do so, splitting his skull in a single blow.

There was a small, hard sound.

There was.

Chapter 18:
Battle in the Fortress City of Guaral

1

—If he closed his eyes, Subaru could recall the scene in his mind.

The middle of the dense jungle where an abundance of trees grew thickly, the muddy soil, and the atmosphere of the imposing men.

The Witchbeast's roar that reverberated across as if to split that atmosphere apart. The fighting spirit that would rise and excite alongside the start of battle. And, the intense malice that would be directed towards Natsuki Subaru due to his involvement in inviting the Witchbeast—.

That was an action Subaru himself had acknowledged and consciously decided to carry out, and had put it into practice.

He had acted after placing a scale within himself, comparing what was important to him and what was not.

It was an action done with the full determination and intention to cause harm.

What would happen to people inexperienced with fighting Witchbeasts if they actually fought one? He did not know.

They could have subdued it instantly. There was also the possibility that they could have become seriously wounded.

He did not want to think about it much, but instead of ending there, there could have been those who lost their lives.

—No, he should assume there were.

After justifying his own deed, he should at least acknowledge that fact. After all, he was the one who had decided and acted on such an action.

Natsuki Subaru chose the side of the scale he desired, and put a plan into practice, where others may die.

These other people were not Witch Cultists or Sin Archbishops, nor were they wicked people who would cause harm to others for bad intentions.

He had attacked individuals who chose to take up arms just to make ends meet. They were merely following orders from their superiors. These were people who, under the right circumstances, he could have formed positive relations with.

Therefore, this occurrence was justified, inevitable and natural.

The consequences of Natsuki Subaru's actions must be paid for by Natsuki Subaru.

2

Flop: "—Mister, it's no good to have a scowl on your face."

Subaru: "…"

Flop: "Good fortune won't come to anyone who doesn't have the time to smi—M-Mister?!"

The instant after the bladed edge of the axe sunk into his skull, Subaru's field of vision became clear with a ring of a hard sound.

What jumped out in his unclouded vision was the figure of Flop, prodding his brow with his finger.

The pretty boy with his long bangs and slender face. Recalling the event that had come to pass a few dozen seconds ago, his head being split open; Subaru quickly covered his mouth and fell to his knees.

The rising need to vomit. The link between all the malicious acts that had occurred to him—His heart beat like it was about to explode, his organs felt like they were being strangled. That, and the deafening ringing in his ears, tormented Subaru.

The voice of Flop worrying for Subaru sounded far off. No sound properly registered in his brain.

Subaru: “—Todd.”

Listening to the intense ringing in his ears and the screaming of his organs, Subaru’s lips produced a short sound.

That sound was the name of someone he became acquainted with in the Vollachian Empire. He was someone towards whom Natsuki Subaru had for the first time acted with purely antagonistic intent and—

And he was the malicious assailant that had caused the great tragedy that occured moments ago.

Subaru: “…”

The flaming bar and the stifling black smoke.

The reason the drunken customers had fallen victim to the axe one after another was because of an irritant in the smoke. It was probably a simplified tear gas of sorts with strong irritative spices mixed in. However, despite it being pseudo-tear gas, its effects were immediate.

Using magic stones to cause a fire and sealing the entrance to lead the survivors to the back exit. Barring the back door and using the moment of relief after they broke through, an ambush was performed on the strongest survivor, and they were executed.

Then, using a soaked cloth to protect himself from the smoke, he directly, with certainty, killed Subaru.

His last words and voice, and above all else, the eyes he saw of the masked man indicated his true identity.

That was Todd. —The man that was supposed to have died in the Buddheim Jungle.

Subaru: “No…”

That was simply unconfirmed information.

The Imperial Army's camp fell into a state of ruin after the People of Shudraq's attack, under Abel's command. After hearing that there had been many casualties, over a hundred casualties, fearing that more pain would be compounded upon him upon further words, he shut out any other information beyond that.

After that, he had quickly taken Rem along, and decided to leave Abel and the rest.

That was why he had not even tried to think about any survivors from the attack on the encampment.

That included the attack Subaru chose to do himself against Todd's group, which was unrelated to the attack by the People of Shudraq —.

Subaru: "If this is the nearest city to the Jungle, of course any survivors would run away here."

Having had their camp attacked, any Imperial Soldiers who had escaped by the skin of their teeth would inevitably head to Guaral.

Yet, that thought did not cross Subaru's mind; and so, he had nonchalantly stepped his foot into the city where enemies would be waiting. Plus, with Rem in tow.

Subaru: "…Enemy."

That word that popped in his mind, he once again tasted the bitterness of that word on his tongue.

Back when he was living in his original world, the term "enemy" was something that would only appear in manga or games. Even after being transported to another world, the target for that term only extended itself to adversaries like the Witch Cult and Witchbeasts.

Meaning, this was his first time to call someone who was not one of those, an "enemy".

This “enemy”, was one created by none other than Natsuki Subaru’s own actions.

Subaru: “—grk.”

Making a harsh sound, Subaru strongly grit his teeth.

Biting on his cheek meat, utilizing the searing pain and taste of blood to grab his consciousness by the collar, he forcibly pulled himself back to reality. If that were not enough, he did not mind biting off all the meat inside his mouth.

He had no use for constricted organs, loud-ringing ears, trembling hands and feet, nor for a paralyzed brain.

He could not be beaten down by malice and fear right now.

Even if he was just putting on a bold front, until the situation changed, he could not take it off.

Flop: “Mister, get a hold of yourself! Mister! Want to drink some water?”

Subaru: “—Hm, I’m fine. My bad, I worried Flop-san…!”

The color of his face and the tone of his voice probably did not signal that he was fine at all, but Subaru told himself he was fine while slowly standing up.

The shaking in his knees and the discomfort from his paralyzed organs still remained. However, he could not stay crouching forever. While Subaru was being spoiled by weakness, time was still marching forward.

Waiting for the right moment to strike, Todd’s plan of attack should still be in motion right now.

Subaru: “Hey Flop-san, can I ask you to do me a favor? Can you go back to the inn and get the medicine for my chronic illness from Rem?”

Flop: “Medicine? Are you under some bad sickness Mister?”

Subaru: “Yeah, my glossy ankle disease is getting pretty bad.” “1”

Flop: “Oh my! Haven’t heard of that before!”

Being told a random disease name, Flop widened his eyes in surprise.

Taking advantage of Flop’s goodwill left a bad taste in Subaru’s mouth but he turned a blind eye to it, convincing himself that he had no choice. For now, Subaru had to prioritize getting Flop as far as he could from himself, as soon as possible.

If Todd’s aim was revenge and if Flop and Subaru were to split up, he would have no choice but to go after Subaru.

Once Flop’s safety was guaranteed, Subaru could focus on protecting himself.

He had still not decided on what was the correct option to take though—

Subaru: “I can meet up with Rowan at the bar, leave it to escape the surprise attack. Then…”

He had no other choice but to perform a rather haphazard plan.

Given that he did not have the time to stop his legs and think things through slowly, he could only put into actuality the best action he could think of at this very moment, and hope to pick up a miracle as he went.

Subaru: “Rem should…”

When Flop returned to the inn to retrieve the medicine for the unheard-of disease, Rem should figure out that something abnormal had happened to Subaru. She should, he hoped.

Once she figured that out, she would stop Flop from returning to this area, he believed.

It was all a lot of wishful thinking but that was the limit of Subaru’s thought process at the moment.

Subaru: “Flop-san, please!”

Flop: “O-Okay! Wait here! Keep your chin up Mister!”

Hit with Subaru’s genuine seriousness, Flop treaded the path back to the inn. Sending Flop off, Subaru decided instead to hurry to the inn.

Getting the drunk Rowan sober as fast as he could, he would smack him with money and hire him once more. Rowan had fallen prey to the ambush, but in a straight fight, he would have enough strength to win. Subaru hoped for that too.

He was depending on luck a lot but he put his hopes on Rowan. Pleading for him to be the strongest in Vollachia—

???: “—ah?”

About to start running with a praying heart, Subaru abruptly heard a hoarse voice from behind him.

Seeing as this was an unpopular alleyway, the voice he heard could only belong to one person. The problem was, what emotions did the owner of that voice experience to produce such sounds and what that consequently meant.

He quickly realized that those sounds would by no means be leading to a good conclusion.

Flop: “Uu, uuuaaaahhhhh—!!”

What followed the hoarse voice was the scream of Flop, who had gone the other way.

Turning his head around immediately, Subaru found Flop flipped upside down at the street ahead. Fallen face-up, Flop was clutching his right leg. A small knife had pierced through his thigh.

The knife which was buried deeply to the heel, took away the ability to run from Flop.

Subaru: “Flop-san!”

Hurriedly turning back from his running position, Subaru bit his lips as his feet skid on the ground. Then, without pause, he kicked off the ground and ran over to Flop, his leg injured.

Again, his expectations had been suddenly subverted.

He thought that if they were to split up, Todd would definitely prioritize Subaru and go after him. Yet, contrary to his calculations, Flop had suddenly been attacked.

Furthermore, getting attacked at this place and at this very moment, was beyond his expectations as well.

Subaru: “Flop-san! I’ll bring you somewhere to treat that straight away!”

Holding various regrets and remorse, Subaru rushed to Flop’s side. Flop was writhing in agony from the pain in his leg but Subaru did not have the time to treat him right now.

He had to lend his shoulder and take him to someplace with people—No, he could not let the situation develop like it had before, at the time he had perished after being run over at the main road. Even if he had to be forceful, he had to drag him to the bar. That was the best option.

The fact that the knife had struck his leg was a silver lining. Because, as long as a major artery was not pierced, there would be no real danger to his life—

Subaru: “…”

His thought process leading him here, a question abruptly appeared in Subaru’s mind.

It was good news that Flop’s life was not in danger. Yet, how was that so? Seeing the method in which the massacre at the bar was conducted, the enemy’s skill in killing was first-rate.

In spite of that, the attack against Flop ended at his legs. Why was that?

This was knowledge from manga but, this information was about a technique used by snipers in battle.

Snipers, who would hide themselves to perform one-sided attacks against faraway opponents, when faced with a group of enemies, would purposely not kill their opponent and instead stay their hand after majorly injuring them. Then, they would lure out the ones who would try to rescue their injured comrades and strive to extend their hands of death towards them.

It was a nightmarish method that took advantage of those who had a sense of fellowship, of those who could leave no man behind.

Why did he remember something like this at this moment? That was because—

Subaru: “Shi—”

The instant that he felt something was wrong, a dark light flashed in the alley next to the fallen Flop.

Immediately after, a sharp, frontal strike smacked and blew Subaru away, who preemptively threw his hands up in an effort to protect his head.

Subaru: “Gaahh?!”

Eating the hard strike completely, the blown-away Subaru hit the back of his head hard on the ground. His vision went white and the ringing in his ears became loud again. While that was happening, he was pushed further back with momentum, rolling over once.

Subaru tried to discern the true form of the strike, and the distance from which it was launched. Unable to completely block the strike, he stretched his hand to his forehead, where he felt a warm sensation. It was likely that his forehead was cut from the hard strike and—

Subaru: “—ah?”

His right hand, which he attempted to use to touch his forehead had been blown off at the forearm onwards, between wrist and elbow.

Subaru: “G-Gyaaaaaaahhhh!”

His right arm, which showed its jagged cross-cut with white bone and pink muscle fibres, pumped blood out energetically in sync with his heartbeat. Panicked, he tried to stop the flowing blood by putting pressure on the wound, but the palm of his left hand was also cut down the middle, his crushed fingers each all facing a different direction.

It was proof that he had unfashionably suffered an attack from the opponent.

First of all, if he were to say that, running to Flop’s side without any precaution had been a mistake.

Mistake, mistake, mistakemistakemistakemistakemissmissmissmissmiss—

???: “—Ahem”

Holding the overflowing blood, Subaru fell into panic, triggered by pain and a sense of loss.

A man holding an axe in one hand cleared his throat in front of that Subaru—He was a figure that appeared from the alley. A young adult who tied up his orange hair with a bandana. It was Todd.

He was not hiding his face this time.

The malicious eyes Subaru had personally seen at the bar. Subaru had not mistook the true identity behind them for someone else or other.

As expected, Todd had set an attack with the full intention to kill Subaru.

Subaru: “Ugi-giiiiiiiiiiiiiii…!”

The molars he was biting down on cracked and Subaru glared at Todd with bloodshot eyes.

He did not know himself if the meaning behind that glare was anger, hate, or more shamefully, just a plea for his life. Nevertheless, Todd’s response was cold.

He, showing a face that did not present much emotion, traced the bladed edge of the axe which destroyed Subaru’s arms.

Todd: “I need to make sure to properly sharpen this or it’s no good, my bad my bad.”

He said that lightly while reflecting on his actions.

Subaru: “Kah…”

Todd: “Alright.”

Opening his eyes wide, Subaru attempted to form words with his trembling tongue. However, Todd was indifferent to Subaru’s words, and nonchalantly swung his axe upwards.

It was as if he had no interest in Subaru’s words or identity—

Subaru: “Uwaaaahhhhhhh—!!”

Todd: “Woah”

However, before Todd could swing the axe he raised up, someone jumped on his body.

It was not Subaru, groaning in pain due to his destroyed arms. With this situation of Subaru having been rendered useless in a single strike, in order to protect him, a person jumped Todd. Flop.

Taking a knife to his right leg, the good-willed merchant who should have been fighting against intense pain was grabbing onto Todd’s back as if he were going to sink his teeth into him. He looked at Subaru over Todd’s shoulder.

Flop: “Mister! Run away! Run away right no—”

Putting urgency on his slender face, Flop’s strong-willed expression jerked up as he was struck on the chin.

The grappled Todd used his elbow to forcefully hit Flop. The young adult, being far divorced from violence, was easily peeled off.

Then, facing the fallen Flop, Todd raised his axe.

Subaru: “Sto…”

Todd: “One, two aaand three!”

Subaru was not given the chance to stop him. Todd lightly exclaimed and next, an intense, sharp sound of water splashing reverberated.

Hit by Todd’s elbow, Flop, facing upwards, received the blade of an axe to the face. The young man, having his entire face and head split in two, swiftly became a corpse. Blood flowing, brain matter spilling, his arms and legs twitching.

Witnessing the alleyway steadily becoming soaked with blood, Subaru’s mouth fell open in disbelief.

Pain, confusion and rejuvenated fear. Subaru’s normal thought process was stolen by nothing but those emotions.

Just, what was the man in front of him?

Subaru: “I get …”

Todd: “Hm?”

Subaru: “I get, I get that you resent me. I get it…”

Avoiding the blood from the dead Flop, Todd turned to face Subaru as he spoke to him.

Subaru’s tears and mucus actively gushed out in thick drops. Blood flowed from his broken molars and additionally, he was covered in the blood spurting from his right arm. Subaru was in quite a horrible state.

He had not wet himself this time, but that was no comfort of any sort.

He had yet again let Flop die.

He had devised a method in which he thought he could save him, but because of Subaru’s inadequacy, Flop had died. He had let him die with a face unpresentable to his sister, Medium.

Subaru: “But everyone else…everyone else! Don’t…bring them into…it!”

There was a reason to resent him.

It was hard to admit that it was justified, but it was a natural from what had transpired between Subaru and Todd.

That was why it was inevitable that he would come after Subaru. But, to involve other people for that was against the rules. It was a cowardly act. It was far from just and fair. That was evil. Was that not evil?

Subaru was at long last even starting to lose the mental faculties to verbally assault his opponent.

Listening to his statement, Todd hummed “Aaah” in a small voice,

Todd: “You, what do you mean by resent?”

He spoke, standing in the bloody alleyway, as he craned his head in question, wiping the blood that had reached his cheeks.

Taking in that naive-sounding attitude and answer, Subaru held his breath for a moment, but quickly a violent emotion he could not control burst out. With spit flying, he said “Don’t you dare play dumb!”,

Subaru: “Ambushing us, setting traps… relentlessly pursuing me…!”

Relentlessly, he had relentlessly been pursued and cornered.

No matter what action Subaru would take, he would anticipate and stay one step ahead to kill him with certainty. Meticulously preparing and laying out traps.

Going through that much effort to target Subaru. There was no point in feigning ignorance now. That was just being unreasonably stubborn.

It was a desecration of Flop's death. Embarrassing Subaru, was this his way to vent his anger?

Subaru: "Are you…"

Todd: "I don't know what you're misunderstanding, but killing you isn't because of resentment or anything, obviously. I found a dangerous-looking guy in town. Of course I'd kill no questions asked."

Subaru: "…"

Todd: "You kill a poisonous snake not because you resent it, but because you fear it. For that, you'd use anything at your disposal to kill it."

Saying that it was nothing more and nothing less than that, Todd neatly picked off the bits of hair and skin that was stuck to his axe. Were those the fragments of Flop's destroyed head? Subaru could only stay still in shock.

There was no lie in Todd's composed response and attitude. He even responded with a smile.

Since the beginning till now, Todd's attacks against Subaru proved that he was serious about his words.

Todd regarded Subaru as dangerous and could not help but kill him.

That was why he would not listen to him, not let him do anything, and nor would he try to interrogate Subaru for any information.

Also, he did not hate him for the deed done in the jungle. The only impression that Todd had gotten out of that, was that Subaru was a dangerous being.

As a consequence, Todd would unemotionally and dispassionately try to kill Subaru.

Todd: "You are the same as me. —I will not give you time."

Saying that, Todd put his foot on Subaru's chest and kicked him.

Unable to resist, Subaru fell down backwards, facing upwards. Todd straddled the fallen Subaru and raised his axe.

Subaru widened his eyes. He looked for the correct words.

Returning by Death, he would find the throughline behind various events. That was how Subaru seized victory. However, this strategy that worked even on Sin Archbishops had moments where it did not work.

That was when—

Subaru: "—Wai"

Todd: "I won't wait."

—That was when the opponent was a coldhearted cutthroat.

3

Flop: "—Mister, it's no good to have a scowl on your face."

Subaru: "—Hic"

Flop: "Good fortune won't come to anyone who doesn't have the time to… Wh-What's the matter? Your face has suddenly gone pale?"

Upon seeing an axe coming down right on their head, surely most people's faces would be drained of blood.

Without thinking, Subaru put his hands to his own face, cold from the lack of blood. Relief and fear churned within him, as the hands that felt that coldness confirmed the truth that he was alive and well.

Subaru: "Damn it, again…"

What should he do? Subaru did not possess even the slightest idea.

In regard to time, all the events that had happened to Subaru had transpired in only twenty minutes. Within those twenty minutes, Subaru had already lost his life five times.

Even during the last round at the Pleiades Watchtower, he had piled up over fifteen experiences of Deaths in search of victory, but then, there was confidence that progress was being made step-by-step.

But this time, he had nothing.

The corpses of Natsuki Subaru had accumulated, but he did not really feel they were contributing to his victory.

If there was one thing that could be said, it was—

Subaru: "—Even now, I'm being watched."

Already, Todd was observing Subaru with Flop.

Consequently, the moment he separated from Flop, Todd would mercilessly use Flop as bait.

It would be a different story if Subaru had the ruthlessness to be able to use Flop as a decoy, but since he could not do that, if Flop were assaulted, Subaru would put forth every effort to save him.

This was different from the time he had weighed the safety of Rem against the welfare of Todd and company.

Flop had been kind to utter strangers, or rather, to Subaru's group . Subaru did not have it in him to choose an option that would leave him for dead.

So, carrying out a strategy on his own apart from Flop was impossible.

Simultaneously, the option for Subaru to return to the inn had also been snatched away.

It was not clear at what point in time Todd had noticed Subaru's presence, but if he had been discovered on the way to the tavern, the location of the inn, Rem's whereabouts, had not been exposed.

Yes, Rem's location had not been found out. That was quite believable.

Supposing Rem's whereabouts had been found out, Todd would be sure to make use of Rem, and utilize her in order to kill Subaru more systematically. It was ironic that his faith in Todd's cunning conversely became proof that Rem had not fallen into his hands.

Subaru: "Anyway…"

While biting his lip and covering his face with his hand, Subaru desperately turned his head.

Time, somehow there was not enough time.

If he parted ways with Flop, Todd would begin his offensive immediately.

On the contrary, waiting for his offensive and counter attacking—Well, he was not the sort of opponent that could be beaten even if his first attack were avoided. Since Subaru had no weapons, he would have to eliminate his opponent's fighting strength in a single strike. No way.

If they escaped to the main street, Todd would recklessly drive a dragon carriage and kill by running them over.

Even if they avoided the rampaging dragon carriage, the chances that he would then take advantage of the chaos in the street were high. On top of that, the rampaging dragon carriage would drag in uninvolved bystanders. No way.

If they chose some other route, each and every alley would be his hunting ground.

North, east, south, and west, keeping an eye out in all directions was impossible. Even if they dealt with his first attack, in the end the plan to counterattack would be the same, and their lack of fighting power lay ahead. No way.

Would the best thing to do after all be rush to the Tavern with Flop, and before Todd could get ready to attack the tavern, prepare fighting forces to intercept him?

The obstacle would be how seriously he could take the drunk Rowan, but right now this should be the plan with the highest chance of victory that he could think of. No other move came to mind.

Subaru: “Fuck, fuck…”

What a troublesome opponent to have made an enemy of.

In the case of Sin Archbishops, they had the nice point of their reliance on their Authority turning their strengths into weakness. Since by working out the mechanism of their Authority, conversely the weak points of those guys would become evident.

However, Todd did not have that. He would use anything he can. He had stated so himself.

He did not rely on anything, and he did not take damage to the surroundings into consideration either.

After killing Subaru, how on earth he planned to explain that to the people around him, even that was a complete unknown. No consideration had been given to what would come afterward whatsoever.

In order to kill what must be killed, there was a fear of superfluous thoughts interrupting.

Flop: “Mister? You alright? If something’s wrong, going back to the inn would be…”

Subaru: “N-No! Hell no! That’s a bad idea.”

He responded with great force, and Flop stared in wonder at that voice of Subaru’s.

Having done that, Subaru seriously cursed his own mental fragility. If he displayed such odd behavior, Todd would end up becoming suspicious.

If that happened, the valuable advantage of Return by Death would disappear.

Beyond what he had already grasped, the only way Subaru could take advantage of Todd was his preconception that his presence was not known to Subaru.

Ambush and trap, escape and counterattack, whichever means he utilized Todd could not be made aware of what Subaru was aware of.

Well, actually—

Subaru: “—Wait.”

Suddenly, as Subaru was desperately thinking of countermeasures against Todd, a thought crossed his mind.

Todd did not stick to any one way of doing things, or even take damage to the surrounding into consideration. —Still, he paid no mind to damage to the surroundings. That was not damage to himself.

Rather, this surprise attack was because he wished to drastically diminish the damage to himself.

Todd had stated it himself, with his own mouth.

You kill a poisonous snake not because you resent it, but because you fear it, he had said.

So he had said, then—

Subaru: “—TODD! I know you’re here!”

Flop: “Wha wha wha?!”

Abiding by a thought that flashed through his mind, Subaru shouted at the top of his lungs.

Startled, Flop jumped at the sudden occurrence. However, it was more than likely that Flop had not been the only one.

Todd, who had been tailing and keeping a close eye on Subaru and Flop, should have been startled as well.

Counting on Todd's moment of bewilderment, Subaru sharpened his glare, contorted his expression menacingly. While holding up the nastiest, most evil-looking demeanor possible, he swept his gaze around,

Subaru: "What a persistent bastard! Here I thought you had perished for good after all that went down, but it seems you managed to survive by some devil's luck! However, don't think I'll let you get away this time! I'll fucking kill you!"

Using the most threatening voice he could muster, Subaru spewed curses imbued with malice and hostility.

In a way his voice would definitely reach Todd no matter where in the alleyway he was hiding, and so that the message "Natsuki Subaru has caught on to your presence" would be conveyed.

Subaru: "Do you seriously think you can win in a fight against me? That's beyond hilarious! You make me laugh, hahahahaha! Can't wait to see it again, the pathetic way you look running away, that is!"

Revealing his two trumpcards of provocation and mockery, Subaru bursted out in laughter at the middle of the alleyway.

"Thank god I don't have stage fright", thought Subaru as this was the only time he was sincerely thankful for his shameless personality. If it were not for that, the tremble in his voice, the fear on his face, and the terror in his eyes would have been exposed.

It was thanks to Natsuki Subaru's lousy personality that he was able to conceal those emotions.

Flop: "M-Mister?"

Subaru: "Shush. Flop-san, be quiet."

Shutting up Flop who had been completely dumbfounded by Subaru's sudden change, Subaru pulled him by the arm and began walking brazenly.

Returning via the way they came was not possible. For starters, it had been confirmed Todd's hiding laid somewhere over there, probably.

Hence, he stopped in the middle of his tracks, and while turning his head toward the depth of the alleyway,

Subaru: "Oh yea, you're welcome to come at me any time. I shall rip you to shreds, as you wish."

He was not sure whether Todd would get it, but he added his middle finger as his last provocation.

Doing so, Subaru was able to hide the pounding of his heartbeat while heading towards the end of the alleyway wearing an audacious smile.

Subaru: "…"

Honestly, that was a complete gamble.

There was a chance that Todd would become enraged from Subaru's provocations, and jump into the alleyway whilst swinging his axe, which would not have been a completely unlikely scenario at all. — However, Subaru trusted that it would not come to pass.

Todd would not go into a fit of rage. That man was the type that would gradually search for the best move in a composed manner and carry it out.

That was why, the bluffs Subaru had been dishing out should be able to work on Todd.

Having spotted Subaru in the street and developed an intent to kill, if Todd's train of thought were followed, he would have most likely come to the conclusion that Subaru must be eliminated because, to him, Subaru seemed like a ticking time bomb. Choosing a surprise attack as the method to rope in and grasp victory in his hands was just a means to the end, as long as it worked, then all would be well. If that was no longer suitable for execution, he would just move onto the next best option.

Todd had not been particular with his methods.

That was the difference between him and the Sin Archbishops. Subaru would use that adaptability of Todd to his advantage.

Subaru: “Next up is…”

He carried out the strategy that had popped in his head in the heat of the moment, but the next steps had yet to be decided.

If Todd’s caution toward Subaru grew stronger, that would mean spare time until the next wave of attack existed. While the chance was in his hands, Subaru must make a decision between “Fight” or “Flight”.

Choose “Fight”, then it would be necessary to get Rowan from the bar involved. As long as no better alternative showed up, borrowing his strength would be the best bet.

Choose “Flight”, Subaru would have to go to the inn and grab Rem, then escape from the city. He felt bad, but he would have to ask Flop and Medium to come along as their safety were most likely in jeopardy.

Then, in the case that they decide to escape from the city, the place Subaru can go to was—

Subaru: “—So that was why”

Flop: “Mister?”

Though he stayed on guard of the alleyway behind, but, in that instant, Subaru’s eyes had become bloodshot.

The fear toward Todd, remorse toward Flop, concern toward Rem, affection toward Emilia, longing toward Beatrice, all of those had, more or less, been forgotten in that instant.

Forgotten, having grasped the feeling that had surfaced, Subaru firmly closed his eyes.

Then—

Subaru: “—We need to get out of Guaral as fast as possible, before my bluffs are seen through.”

4

After deciding the next course of action, Subaru wasted no time.

Even after he got out of the alleyway with his plan in motion, Todd did not make any moves. It must have been because he had become extra cautious due to Subaru’s provocations, which proved to be effective.

However, the effects of those bluffs could only last so long.

Subaru: “He’ll definitely catch on soon. We have to get out of here as fast as we can…”

Their only option was to run away.

Making up his mind, Subaru gave Flop a brief explanation and took him along, towards the place they had just left—returning to the inn which they departed from before he had met his demise five times, they dashed up the stairs.

Then, after pounding on the door to the room occupied by Rem and the others, they rushed inside hurriedly.

Subaru: “Rem! Are you oka… whoa?!”

Medium: “Uwah! What, so it was you guys! Had almost killed you there!”

The door left wide open, Subaru’s neck was against the icy blade of a halted machete. Its welder Medium gave a “Sowwy sowwy” apologetically as she sheathed her weapon.

Behind Medium, further inside the room, was Rem who watched that whole exchange as she widened her eyes,

Rem: “Wh-What was this about, all of a sudden. I thought you had left yet you came back so soon…”

Subaru: “Rem!”

Rem: "—Hic."

Surprised by his sudden return, Rem began berating Subaru as the color of his face changed. But instead of stopping to hear everything she had to say, he rushed to her side and threw his arms around her.

Her breath caught in her throat, and her shoulders shrunk in, with her slender body being embraced so suddenly.

And then,

Rem: "…Please let go of me."

Subaru: "…Ah, yeah, that was my bad. Got a little bit too carried away there…"

Rem: "I-I understand that. From the looks of it, something serious must have happened."

She calmly pulled him off herself once he had made sure she was truly safe.

Subaru steeled himself for the rebuking that never came. Rem instead sighed for a good moment, let slide his behavior and then continued,

Rem: "Well then. What happened?"

Subaru: "…I got spotted by a really bad guy. I managed to give him the slip, but that won't really help us for long. We can't stay here anymore. I know we just got here, so I'm really sorry but"

Rem: "So we need to leave the city, right? I understand. Louis-chan, could you please get our luggage."

She had caught onto the fact that there was no time for an in-depth explanation. So she quietly accepted the current state of affairs.

Of all things that could've happened, Louis really did as Rem told and heaved the luggage onto her back. —Wait, something's off here.

Subaru: “Why… Why haven’t you unpacked? Even though we settled down at the inn…”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “Wait, Rem, by some chance, did you…”

She remained silent under his inquisitive gaze.

However, her silence was as good as affirming his exact suspicions out loud.

Subaru: “So that’s why… No wonder you accepted my proposal to come here so easily…”

Flop: “—I’m sure you have a lot to mull over, Mister, but now isn’t the time, is it?”

Subaru: “Flop-san.”

Digesting the incomprehensible feeling of Rem’s attitude, Subaru covered his forehead and Flop tapped him on the shoulder. The earnest countenance of Flop urged Subaru to action.

He must not waste the time created by the precious once-in-a-lifetime great charade.

Flop: “My sister, we’re leaving town with these three. I’m told there’s a dangerous paramour after the Mister! We gotta let Missus and Niece-y get away!”

Medium: “Wooah, okay Big Bro! But, like, I already took off my boots?!”

Flop: “So put them back on, my sister! Shoes can be worn any number of times! That’s their strength!”

Medium: “Ohhh! Amazing, Big Bro! You’re a shoe genius!”

After hearing Flop’s determined persuasion, Medium assented and rushed to put on her boots.

Since it was an exchange between siblings, the outsiders did not interfere, but Subaru found that back-and-forth to be highly dubious, as he lifted Rem's body and held her.

Rem: "Wait! At least put me on your back…"

Subaru: "It's an emergency evacuation! And the wooden rack is in their oxcart… Flop-san! Where's the cart?!"

Flop: "At the inn's stable! And let me tell you, it's no exaggeration to say Botecliffe is our third sibling! A cute little brother that we can't leave behind!"

Medium: "Big Bro! Bote-chan is a girl!"

Flop: "A cute little sister!"

Louis: "Ooh! Ooh!"

In spite of the pressing situation, every person coming along was incredibly boisterous, and Subaru hurriedly ran down stairs with Rem in his arms.

Subaru: "Sorry about the noise! Please accept the fee for the room!"

Passing by the inn's reception desk, Subaru and company flew out the door without requesting a refund for not staying.

They went straight to the stables, and found the oxcart tethered with their things inside it.

Subaru: "How's the speed of a Falo if running at full power?!"

Flop: "Hahaha, I haven't let her run at full speed even once. Well my sister, how fast do you think?"

Medium: "I dunno, but probably faster than Big Bro!"

Hearing that unreliable answer, Subaru gave Rem a boost up to the back of the oxcart. Immediately Louis rushed in, and he tossed her up next to Rem, and opened the entrance to the stable.

Flop and Medium got into the coachman's seat, and the preparation to escape was complete.

And then—

Rem: "Um, what is a paramour? What sort of explanation did you give Flop-san?"

Subaru: "Now's not the time! Flop-san, get Botecliffe running at full speed!"

Flop: "Aahh! I know what I'm doing! Run, Botecliffe!!"

Subaru climbed into the back of the cart and Rem pulled on his sleeve with reproachful eyes, but without answering her question Subaru called out to Flop's back.

Hearing that, Flop wielded the reins and struck the tough Brave Ox —Botecliffe, on the back.

And so, the oxcart broke into a run. Slowly.

Subaru: "This is super slow! She's walking!"

Flop: "Botecliffe! Run for me! Listen to your older brother, Botecliffe!"

Rem: "It would appear she does not consider you her brother…"

Rem's words felt like the truth, but Botecliffe's running speed—No, walking speed did not change. At this rate, it would honestly be much better if Subaru carried Rem on his back and everyone ran for it.

And, just as Subaru's sense of urgency was growing in intensity—

Medium: "BOTE-CHAN! RUUUN! Or else, I'm gonna make you dinner!"

Botecliffe: "—Moo!!"

She pulled out her barbarian swords and hoisted them overhead, and Medium shouted while rubbing them together to make sound.

Her smile encompassed her whole face, and perhaps sensing the truth in her words from Medium's behaviour, the next second, Botecliffe let out a loud, deep sound and began ferociously running down the street.

Subaru: "UWOOAAAHH!!"

The intense acceleration and shaking caused swaying, and from the back of the cart Subaru let out a scream.

Flying out of the stable, Botecliffe rushed onto the main street, and the feeling of drifting from the sudden change of direction caused Subaru to nearly be thrown from the back of the cart, but Rem had promptly grabbed his hand.

Subaru: "Ah, that was close! You saved me, Rem! Your hand is so smooth—"

Rem: "Haa?"

Subaru: "Don't let go so quickly!"

Naturally a superfluous thought leaked out, and with his hand released Subaru's head hit the cart. But fortunately, he settled without getting thrown off, and everyone remained on board the running Falo cart.

Continuing on, the Falo cart speedily raced down the road as it headed for the city gate. It drew eyes as it moved left and right, dodging other dragon carriages, ox carts and canine carts.

Subaru: "Once we pass the main road, we should reach the main gate where the inspection was…"

Rem: "It does not seem like things will go that smoothly."

Subaru: "What? Wait, oi oi oi oi!"

Subaru widened his eyes on gazing at what Rem was pointing towards, up ahead of the speeding Falo cart.

In their path stood men clad in armour, engraved with the national seal of the Sword Wolf. They were deployed in a way to block the main road. Imperial Soldiers were attempting to obstruct their path.

Subaru: “It’s Todd, isn’t it?! He changed plans and called for his friends!”

There was no sign of Todd among the Imperial Soldiers that awaited them, but the reason they were obstructing Subaru’s group right now was no doubt because of Todd’s influence.

Receiving Subaru’s taunt at the alleyway, Todd figured he would be at a disadvantage by himself, and so he gathered his comrades. It was definitely a very logical and necessary decision on his part. Subaru hated how correct and appropriate his deci—

???: “—You shits! Don’t think y’all can get away!!”

In place of the absent Todd, at the head of the deployed troops, stood a familiar face.

A man who’s right eye was covered by an eyepatch. His features looking as if someone had painted roughness and wildness directly onto it—It was Jamal. He accompanied Todd and, without a doubt, the man on whom Subaru set a trap on in the Jungle.

Seeing that Todd was alive, it was no surprise that he was alive as well but—

Jamal: “You’ve got some balls sending a Witchbeast at us! You’re fucking dead!”

Subaru: “…He simplyhates me. It’s kind of a relief that way.”

Watching Jamal shout in anger with bloodshot eyes, Subaru felt peace of mind, knowing that his attitude was more human.

However, having said that, that did not mean that Jamal’s existence as a threat was gone. Including Jamal, the lineup of Imperial Soldiers were a plain threat.

Just how were they going to break through?

Medium: “Big Bro, hold them reins tight. I’m counting on ya.”

Flop: “No worries, give it to them sis!”

In the limited time Subaru had to make a decision, before he could choose his next action, the duo at the driver’s seat, the O’Connell siblings Flop and Medium, gave their answer first.

Subaru did not have the chance to stop her. Medium positioned her legs at the tip of the driver’s seat and leaned forward, falling—

Medium: “—Hup!”

Kicking the seat using her feet, her body shot forward with the speed of an arrow.

Machetes-drawn, she flew in a straight line and plunged into the enemy’s formation head-on.

Medium: “Hiyaaaahh!!”

Clawing the earth with her heel, Medium forcibly stopped herself using the enemy line. She then swung her arms.

Her machetes swept forward as it ravaged the air, generating an intense shockwave. The armoured Imperial soldiers were blown back far and wide, spewing blood.

Subaru: “Sh-She’s strooooong!!”

Rem: “Is that how you compliment a girl?”

Subaru: “What else am I meant to say?! It is a compliment! Medium-san’s strong as hell!”

Despite Rem’s coldhearted comment on his honest opinion, Subaru exclaimed loudly at Medium’s unexpected fighting prowess.

Hearing Subaru’s voice, Flop, sitting at the driver’s seat, proudly scratched his nose.

Flop: “How’s that? That’s my sister’s true strength! I’m utterly hopeless at fighting, so my sister and I cover for each other and…"

Subaru: "Crush your weaknesses right? I understand now!"

Flop: "You get it!"

As if Subaru's answer was to his liking, Flop's eyes shone brightly and he flashed his white teeth.

This was second-hand information from Flop himself, but Subaru could confirm it to be true with his own eyes now.

Medium rampaged on, overpowering the Imperial Soldiers that were blocking their way one after another, forcefully clearing a path for the Falo cart to get through.

Subaru: "At this rate…"

???: "—Don't get so cocky, you shitty bitch."

Medium: "Ukyan?!"

Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, Subaru pumped his fists. It was at this moment.

At that moment, a flash of a drawn sword assaulted Medium. She blocked the attack with her machetes but was sent flying as if she were paper.

Medium was shocked by the attack. The man who sent her flying also wielded blades in both hands—It was Jamal.

Jamal: "We've already had our numbers reduced, I ain't gonna lose any more just from this scuffle! Y'all hurry up and prostrate yourselves under my foot!!"

Medium: "Kyaah! Waah! Big Bro, this guy's strong!"

Subaru: "For real?!"

Angrily showering them with words of abuse, Jamal swung his dual blades and attacked Medium. She blocked the strikes, but Subaru could tell, even from an outsider perspective, that she was inferior in fighting strength.

It was his first time seeing Jamal fight properly, but his skill was far higher than the impression Subaru had got of him before. —It made Subaru think that perhaps, the Elgina he had set on Todd's group to beat them in the jungle had been beaten back by none other than Jamal himself.

Subaru: "This is bad, there's not enough distance!"

Thanks to Medium's hard fighting, the number of Imperial Soldiers blocking their path had decreased.

It seemed possible to break through by relying on the Falo cart's momentum and charging in, but that was only if Jamal, who was standing imposingly in the middle of the street, was not there.

As long as Jamal was there, they could not hope to get away.

Flop: "—Sis!"

At that moment, Flop called out.

The cornered Medium glanced in the direction of her brother's loud voice. Perhaps, he was about to yell out words of advice that would help turn around this impossible situation. Subaru hoped, but alas—

Flop: "—You can do it!!"

The advice Flop shouted out, was unmistakably just telling her to believe in herself more.

Hearing those words, Subaru's mind went blank. Even Jamal was dumbfounded.

However, for Medium O'Connell, for a person with who was bonded through blood, the reaction was different.

Medium: "I can do it—!!"

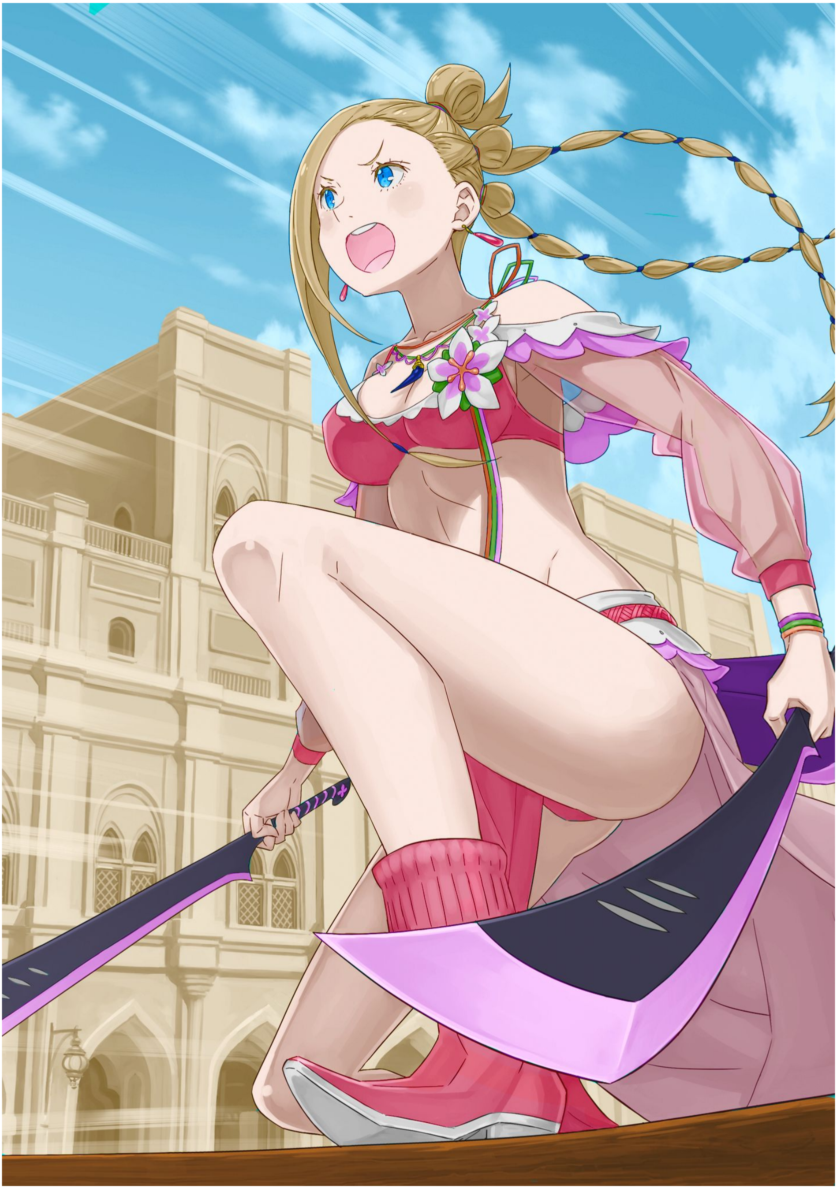

Receiving her brother's encouragement, Medium roared. Her machetes screeching loudly alongside.

From her stance focusing solely on defense, she switched to a ferocious offense. A flurry of blades assaulted Jamal's entire body.

Jamal: "You think a desperate attack like that will work on an Imperial Soldier?!"

Medium: "Ugii!"

However, Jamal parried her ferocious blows with his dual swords, striking her with his own counterattacks.

Medium grimaced from the pain, blood trickling out of the lacerations she had sustained on her arms and legs. Despite that, she continued to stay on the offensive by putting in the effort she could have used to defend herself instead, pressing ahead with preventing Jamal from moving away.

Thinking of the possibility that Medium would stay there to pin Jamal to his spot, Subaru attempted to let out a desperate shout, "No, don't!", and then—

Rem: "Take this."

Subaru: "Woah?! Rem, what are you… Rope?"

Right as he was about to shout, Rem had shoved the rope on the platform into his chest.

It appeared to be quite long, also thick and sturdy, something worthy of being used to secure cargo to the cart. However, in front of the puzzled Subaru, who was unsure of what to do with the rope,

Rem: "—Person with the eyepatch!"

Rem called out as she stood up, carrying a crate that had been stacked on the platform, and then flung it towards Jamal with a gallant throw.

Jamal whirled around, responding to the call with an, “Ah?”. Once he saw the crate heading his way before his very eyes, he easily sliced the wooden box in half with an annoyed swing of his arm.

And then, his whole body was showered with the spices that had been packed inside the crate.

Jamal: “Gh, whoa?! Wha… this is…”

Jamal waved his arm around from the discomfort, his vision obstructed by the scattering powder. At that moment, Medium tried to take advantage of the opening that had been created, aiming for his back with her machete, but—

Rem: “Medium-san!”

The Falo cart had arrived at Medium and Jamal’s battlefield, quicker she could do so. And then, Subaru held the rope Rem had given him high above his head, throwing it towards Medium.

Looking at it, Medium prioritized grabbing the rope over attacking Jamal.

Medium: “I got it!”

Subaru: “I gotcha!”

The moment he heard Medium’s voice, Subaru endured the added weight to the rope with his entire being. He thrust his feet into the loading platform, supported Medium’s weight, and helped her return.

Seeking to jump back onto the Falo cart, Medium took a step forward, about to make a jump with the aid of the rope.

Subaru and Rem would retrieve her, and then they would break through the front gates, heading out—

Jamal: “I said, don’t think you can just escape!”

The next moment, a furious Jamal cut through the cloud of spices, bursting forth from it.

Like that, he set his sights on Medium's back as she positioned herself to jump away, ruthlessly attempting to bring down his dual swords on her.

In a nick of time, Medium would be felled into a sea of blood from Jamal's strike—.

Jamal: "Buh,"

Rem: "This is payback for what happened by the river!"

Jamal's face was smacked by the wooden rack that Rem had tossed from the platform.

The rack that had been handed out to the O'Connell siblings fell apart upon colliding with Jamal's face, having completely finished its role.

Jamal was flipped over, and Medium returned to the Falo cart. She threw out her machetes onto the platform, and then proceeded to lie down with her arms outstretched.

Medium: "Oh no, no, oh no! That was close! Big bro, that was close!"

Flop: "Oh, indeed, dear sister! You two also did very well, Mister and Missus! You saved us!"

Medium: "Really, really! Thanks! You saved us!"

Subaru: "No… not at all. We're the ones who were saved."

Medium, who had made her way back onto the loading platform, and Flop, who had cheered for that fact.

However, the siblings' gratitude was misplaced. In this city, the two had continued to save Subaru and his group, right from the beginning and to the end.

On top of that, he had gotten the siblings involved in his group's circumstances. How could he make it up to them?

Gate guard: “Halt—! Halt! Hal… Whoa?!”

Although a gate guard tried to stand in the way in an effort to stop the speeding Falo cart, he ended up leaping to the side in order to avoid it.

The Falo cart did not let up its momentum as it passed the guard, heading for the front gate with Subaru and his companions on board. The cart would zip out of the city at once, whilst throwing the queue for the inspection process into disarray.

What an outrageous situation. Subaru and company had only stayed at Guaral for less than three hours.

However, they managed to drive past the inspection area, and passed through the front gate. Subaru wanted Botecliffe to do her best, since she would need to keep running in order to shake off the group’s pursuer.

And then, he would have to tell Flop and Medium about—

???: “…”

Amidst the uncontrollable shaking of the platform, the cart blew past the front gate and exited the city.

Subaru’s field of vision opened up, and he was able to discern the wide plains and the horizon. It was just as the cart was about to finally make its escape.

—When a silhouette plummeted towards Subaru from right above the gates, an axe raised high into the air.

???: “Orghhhh!”

A single strike was swung downwards, descending upon the crown of Subaru’s head as if it were slicing a piece of bamboo in half.

The blow was one that Rem nor Medium, as well as neither Flop nor Louis, were able to react to. It was nightmarish, something that could not be guarded against if it had not been predicted.

However—

Subaru: "—I knew it."

Subaru received the axe strike that rained down on him with the machete Medium had dropped on the platform.

Subaru had guessed that the instant he and his companions had succeeded in their escape, the moment where they would let down their guard the most, would be capitalized, and a single blow would be driven into the target—Subaru's head.

—If it were Todd, that would be what he would do. The horrors Subaru had experienced five times over had assured him of it.

Todd: "I should've killed you, after all!"

Subaru: "Ghk…!"

Todd forcefully pressed his axe further with malice gleaming behind his eyes, attempting to split Subaru open.

It was a good thing for Subaru to receive the axe with the machete, but his hands had grown numb from the impact, and it was only a matter of time until he would drop the weapon.

Neither Rem nor Medium would make it in time to the lock of weapons that was placing Subaru's life on the line.

Even though he had managed to dodge a fatal strike, if things went on like this, he would be killed by To—

???: "Aa, uu!!"

Subaru: "Woah!"

All of a sudden, the force behind Todd's axe had grown weak.

When Subaru glanced over to see what was happening with a frown, he saw Louis clinging onto Todd, her arms secured around his body. She shook her blond hair loose, struggling desperately to put an end to Todd's act of violence.

Todd: “Don’t get in the way, kid!”

Louis: “Auh!”

Shaking off Louis’s interference, Todd mercilessly slammed his elbow into her face. Elbowed by him, Louis let out a shriek and fell over.

Subaru: “—Hic, son of a bitch!”

Witnessing that event unfold, Subaru gritted his back teeth as he exerted his strength to push back against Todd.

Todd stumbled back from the sudden action, creating distance between himself and Subaru after the brief moment where their weapons had locked together. However, this was within Todd’s range. He raised the long handle of his axe. The next blow was about to come.

Before that—

Subaru: “—You’re watching, right?! Do it, Kuna! Holly!”

Subaru shouted out with all of his might before Todd could unleash his axe strike.

He was unsure of how far his voice had echoed across the plains.

He was unsure, but—

Kuna: “Bye, Subaru. Don’t forget, I’ll be watching.”

Holly: “Yep~!”

The voices reverberated inside his skull, almost like a reply—in an instant, the sound of something hurtling through the wind pierced the air.

And then, it flew straight across, absorbing itself into Todd’s side—

Todd: “Kah,”

With a small cry of pain, Todd was sent flying at breakneck speed as his body jerked to the side.

Unable to keep himself boarded on the platform, he was thrown off the Falo cart as he spun sideways, tumbling to the solid ground without managing to break his fall.

He rolled twice, and then thrice, his figure growing increasingly distant.

Subaru: “Hah… hah…”

Rem: “Wh-what just…?”

Todd was now absent from the Falo cart’s platform, having been tossed off. Subaru dropped to his knees as the machete fell on the spot, and Rem was propping up Louis, who had received an elbow strike, in her arms.

Rem also had a confused expression on her face from what had just occurred, but Subaru had a sense of confidence, one which told him that they would receive assistance if they could make it past the gates.

The origin of his certainty came from—

Subaru: “That nasty fucking Emperor… I’ll make sure to punch you when I get back…”

Subaru spat out that venom as he sprawled across the Falo cart’s platform, whilst picturing the face of the villainous man who must have known everything.

Chapter 19:
A Vexing Reunion

1

—The man remained motionless, sprawled out on top of the stiff soil.

???: "…"

He was neither dead, nor asleep.

He simply closed his eyes, organizing his thoughts in silence as he adjusted his unsteady breaths.

Assembling them, putting them together, building them back—

????: "Hey, you alive?"

???: "—Yeah, I'm alive."

As someone called out to him overhead, he opened his eyes to see the face of a familiar man.

He felt like the man was in possession of exceptional talent, since the boorish impression he gave off persisted even when looking at him upside-down. Anyway, that was completely unrelated to resolving the current situation.

???: "What happened to those guys?"

????: "They managed to pass through me, and ran away as fast as they could after they threw you out. You're… you better do something about that. I can't help but feel pain whenever I look at it."

???: "That? …Ah, you mean this."

He sat up while scratching his head, glancing towards the side of his body, where the other man had pointed at with a finger. Just then, he spotted the thick arrow embedded into his body.

If the arrow piercing his left side had been positioned slightly higher than where it was, then it might have pierced his heart.

Although the injury had nearly taken his life, he had few strong emotions about it. Not just about how it looked, but also about the fact that his own flesh had been pierced.

Todd: “It’s not really as painful as it looks, alright? Though it’ll be difficult to move for the time being…”

Jamal: “Dumbass. Who said they were worried about you? I said it’s painful to look at. Hurry up and pull it out.”

Todd: “You’re kinda rough with wounded companions, aren’t you. —And”

Hearing that from his frowning partner, he reluctantly grabbed the lodged arrow. The trouble with arrow wounds was that the arrow needed to be pulled out before the flesh closed around it.

Fortunately, it had only been stuck there a short time, so he was able to pull it out in one go with some exertion.

For the flow of blood, he pressed a torn piece of clothing on the opening of the wound and forcefully compressed it to stop the bleeding.

Todd: “So, here’s the arrow just as you ordered. Now what do we do, huh.”

Jamal: “If it’s a deep wound, you should withdraw and rest. As for those guys that got away, I’ll take some people along and crush them. We’ll show those bastards ourselves that they’re prey… “

Todd: “—That’d be a bad move, Jamal.”

Jamal: “What?”

The man dictating the course of action from here—Jamal, was reined in by his hand.

Todd understood why Jamal would want to pursue the fleeing enemies who had made fools of them to get payback. But, if they proceeded with a hasty offensive move, the ones who would be met with a painful experience would be those here.

Todd: “Think about it. Why exactly, did those guys brazenly enter Guaral? Considering what they themselves did, it’s obvious we’d be in this city.”

Jamal: “…Unless they’re brainless idiots.”

Todd: “—They deliberately marched in. They went as far as to conceal an ambush outside the city.”

With a glance, Jamal looked at the arrow that had just been extracted and cleared his throat.

Jamal, as an experienced military man, had the ability to perceive the direction from which an arrow had been fired and its accuracy, and was able to determine from how high it had been shot.

Naturally, he would reach the same conclusion as Todd himself.

Jamal: “If that’s right, their aim is…!”

Todd: “To lure out and hunt us Imperial Soldiers who’d entered Guaral. If we abruptly chased after them with our entire military strength, or rather, if we pursued them with our small force, we’d be playing in the palm of their hand. —Which of us would be the prey, I wonder.”

Jamal: “…”

Gritting his teeth in frustration, Jamal scowled in the direction their opponents had fled.

On the inside, Jamal looked like he was being swayed by gut-boiling fury, but Todd knew that painful feeling all too well—that was something he wouldn’t say. Rather than fury, it was admiration that had taken hold in his heart.

Brazenly using oneself as a decoy, successfully taking advantage of unpreparedness to lure out a foolish opponent.

He was certainly a formidable enemy, a child of war.

Todd: “I seriously fucked up, failing to kill you…”

While looking the same direction as Jamal, he softly muttered that.

And then, he took a breath, “Ahh” as if he had pulled himself together,

Todd: “Seems we’ll have an opportunity for revenge. —They’ll come back, no matter what.”

Jamal: “When that time comes, I’ll show absolutely no mercy.”

Todd silently nodded in approval of Jamal stifling his anger.

Then, for the time being he would confirm this battle as a loss. Moreover—

Todd: “Jamal.”

Jamal: “Oh. …What’s with those hands?”

Todd’s legs were stretched out on the ground, both hands extended in his direction, and Jamal frowned.

Todd tilted his head at the incomprehension, “Just what it looks like”, he continued,

Todd: “Piggyback ride.”

Jamal: “Die alone!”

He shrugged his shoulders, really, that was not a response of true friendship.

2

Stepping strongly on the hard ground, Subaru marched forward with long strides.

As he neared his destination, his restlessness increased and his ability to suppress the need to jump out from the ox cart decreased. And so, with the moment of arrival finally at hand, his body leapt forward with vigor.

He felt like he heard voices trying to stop him, but they all went in one ear and out the other.

Shaking them off, he headed straight for the target building. A wooden building, noticeably larger than the rest, located at the center of the settlement. Entering it, he drew the gazes of several people inside.

And—

???: "—So you have returned. Quicker than my expectations even."

An arrogant man brazenly declared, sporting an oni mask.

Saying nothing towards his haughty attitude, Subaru charged straight forward. Letting the momentum carry him, he, without hesitation, peeled off the mask of the man who looked down on him.

Letting his mask be removed with little resistance, the man's graceful features became exposed.

Grabbing the collar of that unbearable person with his demonic face, Subaru pulled him up into a standing position. Next, he brandished his fist, ready to send his fist flying into that face and—

???: "Subaru, wait."

Just as Subaru was about to punch him into oblivion, his drawn right arm was forcibly stopped from behind.

A tall figure, who dyed the ends of their hair red. It was this settlement's clan leader, Mizelda, who had stopped him. Wanting to complain about her action, he opened his mouth, about to say "Now? Of all times?".

However, faster than he could object, Mizelda prefaced, saying

“Listen,”

Mizelda: “Not the face. Anything else, I’ll forgive.”

Subaru: “ORAA—!”

Abel: “—Hic.”

Receiving her unwavering answer, Subaru, after a brief moment, delivered his fist directly into Abel’s stretched torso.

Subaru did not know if Abel had expected to be punched in the face but, having been hit in a location he was not ready to be hit in, the man let out a cry of pain and took a few steps back. Not all of Subaru’s pent-up anger was released by just that but—

Subaru: “Don’t think we’re even now, shithead…!”

Abel: “—Hmph, what a greedy man you are.”

The man picked up the oni mask that had fallen to the side and put it back on. The man who always had something to say back—Abel.

Having struck the man who was the source of his dam-level pent-up anger, Subaru harshly exhaled.

For he had travelled for three-plus days, taking the path back, just for this one strike.

3

Flop: “Look sis! Apparently, this is the village of the famous People of Shudraq! It’s in the backwoods of the unexplored regions, just like the rumors say! What a find!”

Medium: “Woah! Amazing, big bro! Look look! Everyone’s abs are ripped just like me! Ripped! Big bro, ripped!”

Flop: “Mega ripped!”

The siblings’ voiced thoughts echoed throughout the settlement. They were seemingly easy-going, no matter where they were.

The duo exchanging their candid opinions were the O'Connell siblings, Flop and Medium. Caught up in the flow of things, they had been invited into the People of Shudraq's settlement.

They were in the middle of the plaza, sitting atop their ox cart, surrounded by the Shudraqians who had gathered in curiosity. Their fearless attitude appeared to be a constant even in different lands and environments. Acting like big shots, they showed not a single emotion remotely resembling trepidation, alertness or anxiety, even while drawing the eyes and attention of many.

However, they should become more aware of the dangers and harms to one's life and body when interacting with others. It would be more normal and appropriate to be scared, because currently, they were being surrounded by a pretty much unknown, wild tribe.

Abel: "You have brought back rather noisy company. Were those people required for your journey? If so, the way you and I see value is different."

Subaru: "I won't deny we value things differently. There's a big difference in how you and I see things. —Saying that, that attitude of yours is really something isn't it?"

Abel: "Hoh?"

Sitting on the floor of the meeting area, Subaru and Abel faced off against each other, much like how they had done a few days prior.

Abel had received Subaru's punch of retribution earlier, but there was no inkling of repentance in the tone of his words. Never mind wanting an apology, he did not plan on giving one anyway.

However, Subaru could not ignore his comment on the siblings.

That was because—

Rem: "Abel-san, we inadvertently got those people involved. They were kind to us when we were stuck standing outside the city… Just because of that."

Abel: "…"

The reason for Subaru's anger was explained instead by Rem.

Unlike last time, the meeting room had not been cleared out, and so members other than Subaru and Abel were also participating in the discourse.

Next to Subaru was Rem, seated seiza-style, and their fellow travelers, Kuna and Holly. Seated next to Abel were the sisters Mizelda and Taritta.

As a side note, on the topic of Louis, she was being looked after by the person closest to her in age, Utakata. She was currently, most likely at the ox cart in the plaza, with the Shuraqian-surrounded O'Connell siblings.

In any case—

Rem: "With their assistance, we were able to return safely. In doing so, they are now being targeted by the city's soldiers…"

Abel: "Incorrect, I shall amend that. The ones targeting us and the two outside are not the city's soldiers. They are the Imperial Soldiers. The ones who serve this country have become your enemy."

Rem & Subaru: "…"

From behind his oni mask, Abel's cold words pierced through Subaru and Rem.

Hearing his dry statement, Rem could only avert her light-blue eyes tiredly. To be honest, that was the undeniable truth of the situation. Subaru understood that.

However, understanding and agreeing with the truth were two different things.

Subaru: "Drawing the ire of the camp's Imperial Soldiers was my mistake. Their hostility is also the result of my choices and actions."

Abel: "That is correct. It is the fate you tied yourself to, even before you encountered the People of Shudraq."

Subaru: “I can’t make excuses for that fate, because the one who made them an enemy is unmistakably me. —But, the one who had to pay for those consequences should have just been me.”

It was true that the majority of the fault fell on Subaru, but the problem here was Abel’s attitude.

From the start, he should have known the danger Subaru’s group would be in if they entered Guaral. He should have noticed the possibility where they were attacked after coming into contact with the surviving Imperial Soldiers.

That was why—

Subaru: “You ordered Kuna and Holly – in advance – to wait for us outside the city. To help us if we were trying to escape the city from pursuers.”

Holly: “For real for real, you guys were in quite a pickle you know~. If me and Kuna weren’t there, Subaru, your head would’ve been split in two by an axe by now~.”

Plunking down into a cross-legged position, Holly stated casually while stuffing her mouth full of dangos. Unlike the person sitting next to her, Kuna, who held an uneasy expression, she did not comprehend the mood of the conversation.

Of course, Subaru was thankful for Holly and Kuna’s help. If not for their assistance, the possibility of his head having been split open back then was quite high.

Subaru: “Using Kuna’s eyes to keep watch and Holly’s bow to support us… A long-range bow and arrow snipe. It’s what you’d call a combo skill with both your talents.”

Kuna: “… No one told me that the situation was that crap though.”

Kuna’s spiritless comment evidently showed that she harbored a sense of guilt towards Subaru’s group.

Saying that however, the guilt that Kuna carried was invalid. That was because the words she had given Subaru before they entered

Guaral that had been what had given him the hint he needed.

Had she not advised him, the help that Holly mentioned would have been unattainable.

However—

Subaru: “That kind of thinking only applies to Kuna and Holly. —Someone like you, who foresaw the whole thing, I’m not going to be nice to.”

This was why he had made the first thing he did after coming back to be his strike of retribution on Abel.

If Abel had shown any traces of self-reflection after receiving that, his feelings may have been different. But, mostly as expected, Abel showed no remorse or even any sign that he thought he did something bad.

With his unchanging, arrogant attitude, he toyed around with Subaru’s anger.

Even now, the sharp stare behind his oni mask showed no clouds of doubt.

It was as if he was about to say, “So what of it?”.

Subaru: “Hey, why don’t you say something instead of shutting up.”

Abel: “—So what of it?”

Subaru: “…You actually said it.”

With the aggravating response he had predicted becoming reality, Subaru grit his teeth at Abel’s words and sharpened his glare.

However, Abel coolly let Subaru’s accusatory stare slide and…

Abel: “After returning with vigor and striking me, all you can lay out are dull words of detestment? First off, I warned you from the start, did I not? —That it would not be an easy path.”

Subaru: “Ghh…”

Abel: “Latching onto the closest peace and safety you could find, understand that this was the penalty for not using your head. Out of all the actions any of those defeated soldiers could take, going to the city nearest their burnt camp had the highest probability of occurring. It is common sense.”

Subaru: “Then… Then, you should have said that to begin with!”

Sitting with one knee raised, Abel’s words poked unsparingly at Subaru’s overhastiness.

Still, in the first place, Subaru understood his mistake and acknowledged it. He understood that it had been his lack of thinking and actions beforehand that had caused the unfortunate sequence of events to explode and unfold.

However, Abel had been aware that danger lurked, and let it slide. His actions had directly benefited the enemy—If being allies or enemies was an irrelevant detail, then what he had done was equivalent to setting Subaru up in a trap.

Subaru: “You knew everything from the start. The chances of us encountering the Imperial Army’s survivors, the chances of us having to frantically escape. How, in all that mayhem Rem would…”

Abel: “…”

Subaru: “Anyway! You knew everything. But you kept your mouth shut.”

Letting his mouth run off without thinking, words which should not be spoken almost came tumbling out. Quickly preventing himself from saying any further, Subaru concentrated his anger at Abel, avoiding to look at the face of the person sitting next to him, Rem.

Subaru was getting worked up in his flames of anger. Towards that, Abel cooly—no, coldly, gazed towards him.

Just how much of this world did this man see through with his penetrating gaze.

And, for a person able to see through so much, for what purpose did he toy with Subaru and the others.

Subaru: “Answer me, shithead. Why did you let us…”

Abel: “To save myself from extra work. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Subaru: “Extra work…?”

In response to Subaru’s angry biting look, Abel let out a sound indistinguishable from a sigh.

When Subaru blinked at his response, Abel gently rubbed the ground of the meeting room, and picked up the parched earth in the palm of his hand.

Abel: “Fellows like you value what is seen with your own foolish eyes more than the words of the wise. The intensity of falling raindrops is more eloquent than anything that could come from my mouth.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “Thanks to that, you must feel it keenly. —That for you, there is nowhere to run to.”

As he spoke, he sprinkled the dirt from his palm and scattered it.

With just that action, Subaru felt an optical illusion of being terribly and clearly blocked in every direction was very much being thrust toward him.

As the Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, it was simple to manipulate others with skillful words.

In front of the tough sly fox of an Emperor, Subaru’s complaint was no different from the cries of a caged monkey.

So in reality, Subaru was just left at his wit’s end.

Subaru: “…Ultimately, what is it you want to do?”

Abel: “I have already told you my intentions. To regain what was stolen. To that end, the current Empire is my adversary. It is your enemy as well.”

Subaru: “—. You’re telling me to cooperate with you?”

Abel: “For the time being, I have explained I possess no reason to harm you.”

For the troubled Subaru, Abel’s words seeped in like poison.

Abel’s art of conversation refused to allow for a clear answer to be grasped, and was endowed with cunning as if to mystify Subaru, but, on the other hand, it also felt as though he was attempting to test Subaru.

Again and again, Abel did not make any assertions to Subaru, yet he continued to speak.

Telling him to think for himself, and choose what to take from it.

This time as well, Abel was provoking him to rise to his level if he wanted to argue. Currently, Subaru could not rise to his same level of discussion.

And his Excellency, the Emperor, was not so kind as to wait for Subaru to obediently rise to the occasion.

Subaru: “…So, everything rests in the palm of your hand? I don’t like it.”

Abel: “—. Unfortunately, I hold only some people in the palm of my hand. It is because of the portion I could not control that currently, I am here, sitting upon the dirt.”

Subaru: “…”

In the reply to what Subaru had spit out, Abel’s self-deprecation was audible.

His facial expression was not visible, and the tone of his voice also did not change. Still, it seemed like self-deprecation. It was unusual —No, it was the first time Subaru had heard Abel mock himself.

And it was proof that he had accepted the undeniable reality.

He had allowed his own subordinates to rebel, an uncrowned Emperor, ousted from his throne.

Deep in the jungle, sitting upon the dirt of the Shudraqian meeting place, that situation in particular was evidence that he had made a foolish blunder for which there was no excuse.

Subaru: "…"

While fixing his gaze directly at Abel, Subaru deliberated quietly.

Subaru still was unaware of Abel's true intentions, as well as his own or their own plans of action hereafter. He wished not to be taken for a ride by Abel's calculations yet again, and suffer similar misfortune.

Actually, what the hell was Abel thinking?

Subaru certainly didn't think that Abel would go so far as scheming to bring Subaru over to his side. That he would detect such value in Subaru did not appear plausible.

In spite of that, if there was a reason for Abel to keep Subaru on hand, rather than Subaru's own self, it was an interest in other accessory—

???: "—Mister! The people here are truly delightful and big-hearted! I'm impressed!"

Subaru: "Uwah?!"

Subaru gasped, right in the middle of his serious deliberation.

Losing his footing at the entry to the meeting place, the figure of Flop appeared, his beautiful voice resounding through. In the middle of the meeting place, while he looked out over each face lined up,

Flop: “Oh dear, I apologize for the late greeting! Apparently, it seems the people here are representatives of this village. Oh! Miss Kuna and Miss Holly look-alikes too!”

Kuna: “It is us.”

Holly: “It is~”

Flop: “Oh right! I’m being rude!”

Smoothing down his hair with his hands, Flop briskly moved to the center of the assembly, and bowed wearing a friendly smile.

Flop: “Allow me to correct myself, I’m Flop O’Connell! I do peddling with my sister Medium and Botecliffe. It seems for various reasons we ended up accompanying Mister, Missus, and Niece-y on an incident-filled journey to this position. From now on, everyone, I am in your care!”

Taritta: “Is he being polite or not…”

At Flop’s vigorous greeting, Taritta wore a vexed expression. Then with a glance she peeped at the adjacent Mizelda’s face,

Taritta: “Sister, what shall be done? Outsiders are ordered to stay back…”

Mizelda: “That’s true… Well, he’s a sexy man. I’ll keep him in my room.”

Taritta: “Sister…”

Folding her arms, Mizelda decided on Flop’s treatment by his face.

Mizelda’s judgement by exceedingly simple logic was easy to understand, but seemed troubling to Taritta, who supported her older sister as the chief. Of course, if that alone was the basis for Mizelda’s judgements, Subaru would not have been able to remain in the village, so he thought there must be more to it.

Subaru: “Right, Mizelda-san, there’s one thing I want to check. Flop-san is my guest, or perhaps I should say I decided on my own to bring him along. But, about making him undergo the Lifeblood Ritual…”

Flop: “Lifeblood Ritual? By chance, could that be some kind of traditional welcoming ceremony passed down in this village?! Certainly, I would love to have that experience too!”

Subaru: “It’s a traditional ceremony, but it’s a bit rough to be called welcoming.”

Flop was looking forward to trying the ritual, but even he would likely become reluctant if he were presented with the possibility of being pitted against a Witchbeast. Subaru was afraid that there was a possibility that Flop’s attitude would not change upon hearing that, but either way, he did not want to let it happen.

Abel: “—I knew from the moment we were partitioned by this thin wall, but they are a noisy bunch.”

And now, the one who did not welcome that attitude of Flop’s was the ruthless Emperor donning an oni mask.

It was a stark contrast between the sunny warmth of Flop and the cold blood flowing through Abel. At least, the fact that Abel seemed to have no reason to like Flop made Subaru’s blood freeze.

Flop: “Oh my! What an unusual mask… Is he perhaps the head of the village by chance? I read somewhere that people who have special appearances have special positions!”

At the first chance meeting of the pair, Flop started by referencing Abel’s striking appearance.

Flop’s conclusion from the conspicuous oni mask was understandable, but it was difficult to deem Abel as one of the People of Shudraq. At any rate, the part about the oni mask aside, he was culturally quite far removed from the other Shudraqians. Especially from visuals, his appearance was far too irregular.

Abel: “It is not a poor way of thinking, but lacks attentiveness and prudence. A moment ago, you spoke of your occupation as being that of peddling…”

Flop: “Oh, yeah! My sister’s Botecliffe pulls the ox cart that carries our goods, and we do trade all over the Empire… We are nomadic siblings wandering with the wind!”

With his hand pressed to his chest, Flop responded as if singing.

Outside the building, a voice could be heard saying “That’s my big bro!” from the public square. Even though separated by a thin wall, there was a deep bond between the siblings.

However, even proof of such a wholesome relationship, seemed not to be grounds to Abel to warm his utterly frozen heart.

Upon hearing Flop’s reply, Abel sniffed a small “Hmph.”

Abel: “—Natsuki Subaru, you say you picked these up in the city.”

Subaru: “Don’t go treating people like objects. To start, if I accurately express the state of affairs, a more correct representation is that we were picked up by Flop-san.”

Abel: “The essence is what matters. I am not at leisure to concern myself with trifles. Nevertheless, I will first commend you for returning in this way. It was a great feat.”

Subaru: “Sure doesn’t feel like praise… What the hell are you scheming.”

Frankly, Flop and Abel were a bad match in Subaru’s view.

For that reason, he had planned to ask Flop to wait in the square and introduce him when an opportunity arose, but Abel’s reaction was unforeseen by Subaru.

But then, Abel’s interest was not in Flop’s humanity. Naturally, it would not be the presence of Medium, who was known by the loudness of her voice alone, either. As such, the answer was clear.

Abel: “Merchant, to what degree are you acquainted with Guaral?”

Flop: “That’s a good question, Mr. Chief! I’m proud to say I’m pretty well-known in Guaral. At any rate, it’s certain our lives would be over if we traveled too far. Since even peddlers have to get accustomed to travel coming and going from fixed places!”

Kuna: “Seems like a fine line between caution and cowardice, huh…”

Kuna let out an exasperated sigh at Flop’s overflowing ever-positive self-confidence.

But, listening to Flop’s answer, Abel kept silent under his oni mask. —No, Subaru’s ears picked up a faint sound out of the silence.

It was a small noise from Abel’s throat.

Abel: “How fortuitous. Quite the find, Natsuki Subaru. —A peddler intimate with the city would likely happen to know a byway or two.”

Subaru: “Hey, hold up, Abel. A byway? What are you suggesting?”

Abel: “Again you look towards another for answers? It would appear you fail to comprehend the purpose of my repeated interrogation. I lack the words to label such ignorance with.”

Subaru: “…”

Every single bit of his manner of speaking was aggravating, but he had no retort for Abel’s words.

Natsuki Subaru was too isolated and helpless to actually break off the discussion here, and turn his back and leave. Therefore, he thought carefully, even if it was annoying.

—No, even without thinking about it, he had a pretty good grasp on Abel’s intention.

Just now, it was evident from listening to the interrogation of Flop.

Subaru: “Abel, you, are you seriously…”

Abel: “Even slow minds can happen upon the answer if utilized. Ahh, as expected of your thinking.”

With trembling lips and stiff cheeks, Subaru looked back, and Abel’s penetrating gaze from behind the oni mask told of his cold-hearted plan.

Then, Abel spoke, informing everyone besides Subaru.

“—The walled city of Guaral shall fall. That city is necessary as our next base.”

Chapter 20:
Emperor / Merchant / Natsuki Subaru

1

—The fall of the walled city of Guaral, that was the next move in Abel's scheme.

As his brain digested the contents of that bold proclamation, Subaru instantly reached a conclusion.

That it was an absurd plan.

Subaru: "Though imperfect, a fortified city… It's surrounded by walls on all sides, plus entries and exits through the gates are being monitored constantly. It's not a place where you can just say something like "surrender" so casually."

Abel: "Ho, you speak as though you have seen it… Oh right, you have. As nothing particularly useful has been heard coming from your mouth, I had nearly forgotten."

Subaru: "That sharp wit is very nice. But, that sharpness is only usable against opponents sitting down for discussions like this. It won't work against armed opponents."

In the middle of the meeting place, encircling the fire, Subaru and Abel glared at each other.

Abel let no emotion behind the oni mask peek through, but that just made it all the more impossible for Subaru to guess what was going through his head, leaving Subaru both annoyed and confused.

Right now, the legitimate concern Subaru harbored, there was no way Abel would not have likewise realized it.

And in spite of that, he had proposed something like the fall of the fortified city—

Rem: "…You intend to use a byway to invade the city, is that what you are saying?”

While Subaru was holding his breath, a quiet voice murmured those words beside him; it was Rem’s.

Rem was sitting with her legs folded to one side, her light-blue eyes fixed intently on Abel. It was less of a glare, and more like her gaze was peering into him.

Receiving that look, “That goes without saying”, Abel shrugged.

Abel: “As Natsuki Subaru said, the inspections imposed at the main gates of the city are the first obstacle. It is imperative we find a way to evade them to get into the city.”

Rem: “Even supposing we got in, it looked like there were a large number of Imperial Soldiers within the city. Even ignoring the inspection, I think there would be too many enemies.”

Abel: “Hm.”

To Abel who was sorting the obstacles for the fall of Guaral, Rem gave a well-reasoned objection. Abel snorted at that attitude, but on the other hand Subaru’s bewilderment intensified.

The source of which was, of course, the figure of Rem directly arguing with Abel.

Concerning the content of her argument, Rem’s position could be said to be on the same side as Subaru, opposing an assault on Guaral.

However, her holding that viewpoint was really too fitting. —As though during her short time sojourning in Guaral, she had completely made sure of that point.

Abel: “—Natsuki Subaru, what do you know of the difference between offensive and defensive military force in regards to battle?”

Subaru: “Ah? The difference between offensive and defensive military force, you say… Like, the Law of Threefold Attack?”

Abel: “The Law of Threefold Attack… Indeed, that is a perfectly fitting phrase.”

When asked, Subaru reflexively answered, and Abel nodded as if impressed.

The Law of Threefold Attack, was a theory of combat regarding military force, which stated that the attacking side should have three times the strength of the defending side.

This was due to the difference in the sense of objectives between offense and defense. The offensive side must defeat their opponents, whereas the defensive side could either defeat their opponents, repel them, or just avoid the attack, which was a significant advantage.

For example, in this instance, to procure Guaral Abel would have to command the Shudraqians to occupy the city, but the Imperial Soldiers and guards could withdraw from the attack and barricade themselves in the city to achieve their aim.

To cover for the difference for it to be possible to achieve the objectives, the idea was that such a number of troops were needed, but—

Subaru: “Three times the force of the city, there’s no way we could get something like that together. Mizelda-san, how many people are in this village, give-or-take?”

Mizelda: “Altogether, eighty-two people. Including Abel and that man… Flop, it’s at least a hundred.”

Subaru: “I’m not sure how you’re counting men with nice faces, but it’s merely a hundred. Though I’d roughly estimate there were more than three times that force in the city.”

Setting aside Mizelda’s method of calculation, Subaru estimated Guaral’s military strength to be in that ballpark.

The scale of the city probably did not reach 10,000 people in size, but there should be a suitable number of soldiers protecting the city’s law and order to match. And on top of that, the Imperial

Soldiers whose camp had been torched would join them.

—Those Imperial soldiers, including Todd.

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "At the very least, it seems you possess some fundamental knowledge in that head of yours. Yet, the reason you held your tongue appears to be some other fear besides concern about the power differential."

Subaru: "…It's true that there's something I fear, but it's also true that the power differential is dangerous."

Subaru clicked his tongue, and tasted the discomfort of having his inner feelings correctly guessed.

In truth, when Subaru had heard of the plan to capture Guaral, the first obstacle that came to mind was Todd. Even just the thought of facing him again was enough to make his guts squirm.

Anyway, if they thought in accordance with The Law of Threefold Attack, it was not worth discussing.

Subaru: "As for a means to overcome the difference in strength, I can't think of anything outside of a mighty warrior joining us or the enemy commander being fatally incompetent."

Abel: "Unfortunately, I do not believe we can anticipate either of those. With the Shudraq's abilities, we could scatter the masses of troops, but even if they used their numbers to surround us we would be defeated. Furthermore, I hear the enemy commanding officer is Zikr Osman. He is a solid and boring strategist, but he has no weak point."

Subaru: "Zikr… I've heard that name."

He must have heard that name from Todd, before their relationship had deteriorated.

The Imperial encampment had already been reduced to ashes, but he recalled the person in command of that military operation to be called Zikr.

However, since the camp had been burned, he had thought that person had been defeated as well.

Abel: “Those at the encampment were common soldiers. From the beginning, in order to conceal the primary objective, they were bestowed with minimal intelligence… Against a small tribe, a Second General would not proceed to the front lines.”

Subaru: “So you’re saying the commanding officer remained in the city from the outset?”

Abel: “In truth, by doing nothing he ought to have achieved an adequate result. That plan went awry on my command… Ahh, and due to your presence, Natsuki Subaru.”

Subaru: “Guh…”

Maliciously, Abel tried to force Subaru to face the responsibility he was averting his eyes from.

At that, Subaru ground his teeth and pressed his hand to his mouth.

At any rate, there was a high probability that Second General Zikr was stationed at Guaral.

The Empire’s upper ranks were said to be First General, Second General, Third General and so on, so he could understand that a rank second from the top meant a pretty powerful person.

Subaru: “So what are you trying to say? On top of our inferior military strength, the enemy commander is a big shot counted among the elite. Furthermore, since we poked the beehive, they’ll also be on guard, right?”

Abel: “Precisely. Can you appreciate the weight of your responsibility?”

Subaru: “That’s not what I’m saying!”

Abel condemned Subaru for his thoughtlessness, but the problem lay elsewhere.

It was Abel's stance of still refusing to give up the fight, even with an abysmal chance of success. Subaru resolutely maintained that it was pointless to even try.

In the first place—

Subaru: "I am vehemently against fighting itself. That should've been very clear when I left here. I…I just want to go home with Rem."

Abel: "Yet, that has already proved unfeasible. You think the Imperial Soldiers in Guaral are your only enemy? Are you convinced another village or town would be safe?"

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "No matter where you go, your peace can no longer be secured. I intended to grant you the time to fully realize it, and let it seep into your blood. Or, is the poison still insufficient?"

Abel's mocking gaze was starting to peck at Subaru's feeble spirit.

Besides, as he felt pain like he was enduring great hardship, Subaru let out a long sigh; though annoying, he could not deny the truth of Abel's words.

The suffering he had gone through in the walled city had created a mental barrier inside Subaru.

From now on, even if he attempted to take Rem and flee abroad, even if he went somewhere other than Guaral, the same vigilance and fear would not fade.

Subaru's pride had been lost in exchange for five deaths.

Subaru: "—If that's the case, what if I sell you out to the enemy?"

His way out blocked, and having been abused for thoughtlessness, Subaru asked the question, his face looking twisted.

In an instant, the words Subaru had uttered turned the air of the meeting room tense. At the edge of his vision, he could clearly see Rem next to him, her eyes wide.

However, the one he had threatened to sell out, Abel, gave a small laugh.

Abel: “Hmm. At last, your head appears to be beginning to function normally. And yet…”

Mizelda: “That’s not up for discussion, Subaru.”

In the blink of an eye, Mizelda drew her dagger and pressed the edge to Subaru’s neck.

Subaru gasped at her quick feat, and looked up at the face of the tall tribal chief who had moved instantaneously. Mizelda’s eyes conveyed a stubborn conviction on her beautiful face, they were the eyes of a ruthless huntress.

Mizelda: “We’ve already decided to fight together with Abel. That’s the result of the Lifeblood Ritual, if it’s the desire of the one we’ve recognized as a compatriot, there’s nothing for it.”

Subaru: “…I get that for me, who borrowed your strength to bring back Rem, this is audacious to say. Honestly, are you all okay with that?”

Mizelda seemed resolute, but Subaru’s query jumped over her.

As chieftain, Mizelda must personify the way Shudraqians ought to be, and could not be persuaded. Even so, the other Shudraqians could have separate opinions.

The different opinions of those present, Taritta, Kuna, and Holly.

Subaru: “Just a moment ago, this guy also said as much. The gap in military strength is clear, and the opponent’s a greatly experienced courageous general. From the start, you can see you don’t stand a chance fighting him…”

Holly: “Maybe, Subaru’s got the wrong idea~”

Subaru: “The wrong idea…?”

The first one to answer the question as Subaru searched for other opinions was surprisingly Holly.

At the edge of the meeting place, Holly, who had been listening to the conversation as she gnawed on some dried meat, fixed her eyes on Subaru, his movement prevented.

Holly: “If you’re talking about winning or losing, drawing back from here is also our loss~. If we can’t fight for our compatriot, our spirit will be stained~”

Subaru: “A stain on your spirit, you say… Something like pride, or facing your ancestors, that kind of thing?”

Holly: “Yeah yeah, you got it, Subaru~”

With a smile, Holly affirmed Subaru’s words.

But rather than that being evidence of mutual understanding, it was proof that they could not understand each other.

Subaru also understood that there were such points of view.

Things like pride and family honor, so to speak, were invisible vindications that did not directly contribute to one’s physical body —Thinking those were a matter of grave concern, certainly there existed attitudes that valued such things above all else.

Yet, as far as that went, it was a way of thinking that could not coexist with Subaru’s belief that there was nothing more important than life.

Subaru: “Kuna! Taritta-san! You two share the same opinion?!”

Kuna: “…I don’t really think about it as deeply as Holly or the chief.”

Taritta: “—. I will abide by my older sister’s decision. Since that is my wish.”

Subaru: “I, see…”

He had fished for information from the other two as well, but Subaru was not able to get his desired response.

He had thought perhaps Kuna would, herself being a bit out of step with the other Shudraqians, but it seemed Subaru’s hope was misplaced. Taritta’s complete obedience to Mizelda went without saying.

As it was, Subaru was without allies, with a dagger against his neck, and it appeared the deadlock would drag on, but—

Rem: “…Mizelda-san, please withdraw your weapon. That person has no intention to hand Abel over to the enemy.”

The one requesting Mizelda pull back her dagger was none other than Rem herself.

Meeting her gaze, Mizelda narrowed those eyes of hers.

Mizelda: “Are you giving me an order, Rem? You haven’t taken the Lifeblood Ritual. I permitted you into the village on Subaru’s request, but don’t think that means you can backtalk me.”

Rem: “So, that’s all the more reason you should pull back your weapon. That person undertook the ritual… the Lifeblood Ritual as you call it, and was welcomed as a compatriot. To wound him would not be a good thing.”

Mizelda: “Unh…”

Mizelda had tried to overpower Rem with her strengthened insight, but her undaunted retort left her at a loss for words. In the end, she swiftly returned her dagger to its sheath on her waist.

And like that Subaru was released, and he stared intently at Rem.

Mizelda: “What you said just now is correct. But, if Abel and Subaru’s opinions are divided again, I will side with Abel. Don’t forget it.”

Rem: “Is it because that person’s eyes are that of a heinous villain with fitting body odor?”

Mizelda: “A bit of sharpness in the eyes has charm too. But I have a fondness for beautiful faces.”

The touch-and-go situation had calmed down, but the ending exchange was a weak conversation.

In any case, Subaru was freed from the situation of nearly having his throat cut, and he gently rubbed the place where the knife’s edge had been pressed to. And then he looked intently at Rem.

Rem: “—. What is it?”

Subaru: “…Nothing, I’m just lost as to whether I should respond to the fact you stood up for me or to that face you disparaged my face.”

Rem: “I said nothing of your face. I spoke of your eyes. Then your body odor. My nose is wrinkling. Please sit further away.”

Subaru: “This again…?!”

Met with Rem’s glacial attitude, Subaru was hurt by the distance she made him sit away.

Yet inside his heart more complicated confusion plagued Subaru. In reality, why had she spoken up in defense of Subaru? He did not understand her true motive.

Nevertheless, maybe she disliked turning a blind eye to something illogical, or maybe it was something else. Maybe thinking that was Subaru’s bias?

After all, she had not unpacked at the inn in Guaral, so—.

Abel: “Our conversation was interrupted. However, even supposing you were able to evade the Shudraqians’ eyes, the idea of selling me over to the enemy is futile.”

Subaru: “…Good job getting us back on track. While we’re at it, I’ll ask. Why's that?"

Abel: "You also spent time in the city, albeit briefly. That being the case, did news of how the current Imperial Capital is being governed not reach your ears?"

Subaru: "The Imperial Capital you say… Ah! Right, that's right! You're…"

In sudden understanding, Subaru stood up on the spot without thinking. Then, as he focused on his visible surroundings he called out "Flop-san!"

Not having kept up with the change of affairs, the astonished Flop turned around with a "Yeah?"

Flop: "Wha-wha-wha-what is it Mister? Honestly, I'm feeling extremely confused and bewildered right now, I'm becoming a mess! I'm not following this conversation in the slightest, all I know is it feels like we're getting to the climax of the issue!"

Subaru: "Sorry for leaving you out of the loop, but confirm something for me. In Guaral you talked about the official notice from the Imperial Capital… or rather, about the Emperor's proclamation."

Flop: "The Emperor's proclamation… You mean the trouble in the Imperial Capital?"

Flop snapped his fingers, and Subaru nodded at his understanding.

Immediately after, the intense fight with Todd, having been repeated six-fold, had been severely burned into his brain, but he had also exchanged such talk with Flop in Guaral.

Reflecting on the matter in question, Flop smoothed down his own long hair,

Flop: "Our Empire has smoldering embers, and in the Capital there's some kind of disturbance happening. The current Emperor has been reigning for a long time, and with no signs of civil war, imperial citizens have been enjoying peaceful days. But then this happened."

Subaru: “Talk of trouble in the Capital has spread outside, and you said the Emperor himself had set out to resolve it, right? It was a kind of unusual announcement but…”

Flop: “Right. Actually, this is the first time since the current Emperor took the Throne. Nonetheless, he has an excellent track record managing the Empire so far. So I’m not worried! Viva Vollachia!”

Raising both hands, Flop unconsciously gouged Subaru’s old wound.

Those were the words extolling the Empire that he had heard so often in the Imperial encampment, but now Subaru did not have the presence of mind to innocently go along with it.

In any case, the problem was not the praise, but the movement of the Emperor that was spoken of just before.

That the Emperor was directly starting to move in order to suppress trouble in the Capital was an unprecedented situation. Not to mention, in the event that the Emperor were to do something like issuing a command before the public—

Subaru: “The you that’s here now, who are you and what kind of position are you in? Can you prove you aren’t some crazy nutcase with a screw loose?”

Abel: “Proof you say? Where is the need for that?”

Subaru: “What?”

Sitting with his knee raised, Abel snorted at Subaru’s skepticism. At the same time, he put his hand on his chest and, like he was trying to flaunt his own existence, spoke,

Abel: “Never mind the thoughtless ones who have turned on me. Seeing as you have reached a point of no return, if you were to still treat me as an insolent person who speaks nonsense, how do you explain the situation you have found yourself in?”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Abel: “Cease latching onto facile ideas that cannot fool even yourself, merely to obtain a peace of heart. If you exclude the possibilities that do not align together at the precise time, what is left is nothing but the truth.”

Abel’s statement was harsh, but Subaru bitterly understood the logic behind it.

The oni-masked man in front of him was a fake being disguised as an Emperor and Subaru and also the People of Shudraq were being deceived by his falsehoods. That kind of development would lead to doom beyond saving and above that, was hard to believe.

In reality, Abel had utilized the Shudraqians’ strength and the information obtained from Subaru to fight and win against the Imperial army. That real occurrence was something that could not be explained away by a habitual liar.

Subaru: “Then, what about the Imperial Capital stuff? If it’s said that the Emperor directly took command, there’s no way the Emperor wouldn’t come out in front of people.”

Abel: “I suppose they would then. A fake remarkably similar to myself… To halt mentions of the Emperor’s absence, an exceptionally well-made double is used. —Chisha Gold.”

Subaru: “Chisha…?”

It was a name he had not heard before, but they were Abel’s—No, they were the Emperor’s body double.

In a land where the imperialistic “might makes right” ideology inhabited, it was easy to imagine that in preparation for assassinations, the Emperor would arrange for a body double.

However, having said body double be used by the enemy to usurp the seat of the Emperor was quite the misplacement of priorities.

Abel: “Silence, I am aware.”

Subaru: “Right, thanks to you, we’re in quite a mess. If only the Empire was at peace…”

The only problem Subaru needed to have was the salty interactions from the amnesiac Rem.

To reunite with Emilia and the others, a journey to struggle and escape the Vollachian Empire was to unfold. That was all it had to be. But now, due to some fate, they were in this mess.

Flop: “Um, um, ah, y’know, Mister.”

The one who called out to the sour-faced Subaru was Flop.

Wrinkling the space between his eyebrows of his graceful face, he tilted his head at a rather steep angle and,

Flop: “I’ve been thinking about it ever since I heard it before, but what you’re talking about with Mr. Chief is a bit mysterious, isn’t it? To be honest, I’m still shocked because of your joke about causing the fall of Guaral but…”

Subaru: “A joke… No, don’t mind that. Umm, Flop-san, I’ve been meaning to explain but.”

Flop: “Yes, please explain, if you could! If not, I have no choice but to agree to somewhat accept what I hear without question.”

Saying that, Flop whipped his finger to Abel and poked it out towards him.

Then—

Flop: “I have to agree to the absurd idea that Mr Chief over there is the Emperor himself!”

Subaru: “…”

Flop: “Hohoho? I’m conflicted if you stay silent there, Mister. Thankfully, I have a reputation for jumping to conclusions. That’s why I have the flexibility to change and withdraw my opinion, you know…”

Abel: “—You, you have done something akin to drawing improperness into art.”

If they were trying to hide it, it was a conversation lacking the consideration to do so.

That was why, sitting next to Subaru, Flop was able to naturally reach the correct conclusion. And, being able to do so by himself, Abel was showing displeasure at that.

Putting disdain into his gaze, the one he insulted with “improper” was Subaru. He was pointing out how Subaru had not made any of the situation clear to Flop, having brought him into the Shudraqian settlement.

However, accepting Abel’s disdain was difficult for Subaru.

Subaru: “I’m improper? Like you could say that! First off, even I know that that’s not something you can say out loud all willy-nilly.”

Abel: “Then, finish your ascertainment before bringing them here. It seems you still lack an understanding of the current situation. While being chased by enemies in Guaral, the thinking time provided should have been more than enough.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “Putting something more important than yourself by your side, why did you give in to your thoughts. If you had no intention to line them beside yourself, bringing them back was a mistake from the start.”

Something more important than yourself. Being told that, Subaru thought about Rem beside him.

The words that followed that also hurt Subaru like his flesh being cut open. —What Abel was trying to say was clear as day. He was speaking on how Subaru had left himself exposed at a time he should have been protecting Rem.

Of course, Subaru had no recollection of putting his guard down or giving in at all.

However, in the eyes of Abel, whose thought process spun far deeper and farther than Subaru could, Subaru’s own was severely lacking. It was never enough, and never worth considering.

Do not bring back someone who could not be trusted with the details. That was how he was being criticized.

Subaru thought to not involve Flop and Medium in things. Abel exposed Subaru's naive thought and coldly discarded it, saying that it was a idiotic and stupid.

Subaru: "I…"

Flop: "—Mr. Chief! Could I interrupt this discussion for a moment?"

Subaru was at a loss for words; but in his place, Flop energetically raised his hand.

Noisily advancing forward, he dropped into a cross-legged position with a thud and faced Abel's oni mask head on.

Flop: "Or, perhaps you are not the chief? How should I address you?"

Abel: "As of now I bear no title. I have taken the name of Abel, but you may call me what you like."

Flop: "Is that so! Then, I will keep calling you Mr. Chief, because it feels right. The lady soldiers over there don't mind right?"

Mizelda: "Ahh, you're a sexy man. I'll allow anything."

Taritta: "Sister…"

Putting aside the almost customary interaction between the sisters, Flop laughed with a "My thanks!". As he did so, he strongly slapped his knees with his hands and,

Flop: "I'm scared because you didn't deny it for the longest time, but I want to talk about what you said before what you said before. Mr. Chief, you wanted to ask about hidden routes into the city…?"

Abel: "Yes, I did. Any ideas, merchant?"

Flop: “I do! Is how it seemed I was going to answer, but apologies. If that’s going to be used to attack Guaral then I cannot answer.”

Putting a palm forward, Flop stated so with a cheerful expression.

Listening by his side, Subaru widened his eyes at Flop’s plain and resolute words. Even Abel had narrowed his eyes an inch from behind his oni mask.

That was how much seriousness Flop had put into his words, even if it did not show in his tone.

Abel: “…”

Flop’s statement was rather wild and made him stand out, but that was not because he was stupid.

He had also come to the conclusion that the true identity of the man in front of him, of Abel, was that of someone of high class and esteem. He had not been told he was right or wrong, so he figured his conjecture was close to the truth.

Meaning, he had, against the presumed Emperor, answered with a big “NO”.

Abel: “… Do you comprehend the meaning of what you have said?”

Flop: “You are nothing but a Chief, right Mr. Chief? Of course I do. If swords were to cross, I will reject that. I want to avoid causing harm to someone with the knowledge I hold.”

Abel: “That is a fairytale. In reality, something like malice will attack you without considering your personal history. You would raise your fist against all of that and request for them to withdraw?”

Flop: “If need be!”

Abel: “Even if you do, your efforts will bear no fruit. —This is the land of wolves.”

A ghastly, freezing aura emanating from Abel’s body pierced through the air as he stated that.

The dreadful feeling of oppression from that was not because of their difference in strength. It manifested from the difference of their presences. Even Rem and the People of Shudraq, who would overwhelm Abel if they were to fight, held their breath and froze up.

Of course, Subaru was intimidated too, to the point his breathing had become irregular. Flop was not excluded from this feeling too.

However, while Flop was hit by the Emperor's dreadful aura—

Flop: "Even in a land of wolves, sheep also live. If wolves were to come bite my buttocks, I would ride my ox cart and run away with my sister. I've repeated that over and over til this day, Mr. Chief."

Abel: "…"

Even if his cheeks were frozen, Flop's smile would not disappear. That was his protest.

Hearing that, the demonic aura emanating from Abel suddenly defused. The oppressive air that had swept over the meeting area suddenly disappearing, Subaru got back the ability to breathe freely.

Nevertheless, even if he had obtained some leeway to take a breath, Subaru's heart was in no shape to return to normal.

Subaru: "Ahh, Flop-san…"

Subaru called over to Flop with a raspy voice. The smile Flop showed to Subaru as the latter glanced over to him was bright.

It was close to a wry smile, but the side profile of Flop showed no sign of regret. However, even if he were to hold no regrets, for Subaru, who had brought him here in the first place, his regret would only grow exponentially.

For Flop had directly opposed the Vollachian Emperor.

Using that reason to incur Abel's displeasure, Abel could do anything to Flop as he held command of the people of Shudraq.

However, contrary to Subaru's worries—

Abel: "—. Opposing my lazy argument, I can see your belief does not waver. A troublesome one you are, are you not, merchant?"

Flop: "Is that right? Even so, I acknowledge that my appearance is favorable to people you know!"

Mizelda: "I agree."

Pocketing his aura, Abel did not point his spear of anger towards Flop.

Flop reacted to that in a way that made it unclear if he realized how dangerous of a tightrope he was walking on. No comment on Mizelda's remark.

Abel: "I shall withdraw my gratitude from before, Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Subaru, unable to restore a sense of peace in his heart from before, was spoken to by Abel.

From behind his oni mask, the man with a sharp gaze nodded towards the stubborn Flop and,

Abel: "Your self-awareness is lacking but, if you were planning to bring someone, you should have brought someone more aligned to my interests. That way, things would be done without future complications."

Subaru: "…If it were someone like that, I doubt they'd have been kind to us in the first place."

Abel: "Hm, I suppose that judgement is correct. How aggravating."

If the earlier gratitude had been given for bringing Flop along, then the obstinance Flop had shown certainly made Abel want to retract the commendation.

No way, Flop was snapping at the Emperor's authority directly—No, he should say he was eluding it like a willow. Subaru had not thought there were people who would take such a stance.

Not to mention, it had also been unexpected that Abel would tolerate such an attitude from Flop.

Rem: “I expected Abel-san to be more obstinate.”

Subaru: “Hold on, Rem?!”

Rem’s brief comment seemed to reflect Subaru’s heart, and his eyes widened involuntarily.

In truth he also found that surprising, but he had not spoken because he thought there was nothing to be gained by saying it. It had come from Rem, and Abel’s oni mask turned toward her.

The oni and the oni mask faced one another, and for a moment the space between both of them yielded silence.

Abel: “—People with convictions are worrisome. Strong roots spread, and build up strength in the trunk.”

Rem: “…What, does that mean?”

Abel: “You cannot tell? No matter, it is a trifle.”

Rem knit her brow, hearing Abel’s quiet and somewhat uncharacteristic response. Displaying some disappointment towards Rem’s reply, Abel loosely shook his head.

No one knew the reason for his disappointment. Subaru however, could roughly guess as to what it was.

Subaru: “… Were you alluding to something?”

Abel: “Hoh, that was unexpected. You do not look like the type of person to have received an education.”

Subaru: “I figured it was something of the sort. You sounded like you were quoting someone else.”

Hearing Abel unexpectedly talk like a normal person was surprising.

However, the person in question, Abel, heeded no mind in having his true thoughts revealed and answered shortly with an “I see.”

Abel: “As for your question before, to say it was unexpected of me, you have quite the impression of me, do you not? First off, what did you expect me to do?”

Rem: “…I thought for sure you would at least torture them for information.”

Questioned by Abel, the impression that Rem left with her answer was that of being too honest.

Saying that however, it was not an option that Subaru had not considered as well. If Abel wanted to make Flop obey to his will, it would be unsurprising if he ordered the Shudraqians to torture or perform other similar things to him.

Except, Abel shrugged his shoulders at those words and replied saying “It is useless.”

Abel: “Certainly, there are times when pain is the best negotiation tactic. However, the veracity of the information extracted from that method is extremely low. Humans will lie without hesitation to free themselves from the pain before them.”

Rem: “…”

Abel: “And were you in such a scenario, your eyes tell me you would shield them with your life.”

That was how Abel assessed Rem, who was motionlessly directing her stare at him.

Looking at Rem’s side profile, her jaw was clenched shut and her pretty features were on the verge of being wiped away by a look of grim resolve. Her side profile made clear that Abel’s brief assessment was true.

Abel: “I will not risk a foolish action that may reduce my troops in exchange for information low in accuracy. —Therefore, I will negotiate.”

Flop: “Negotiate?”

Abel: “Merchant, I will buy any knowledge you possess. Let us negotiate for that.”

Abel said, while lowering his raised knee and plunking down into a cross-legged position. Hearing that, Flop widened his eyes and faced Abel with a smile on his face.

Then—

Flop: “When I hear the word negotiation, as a merchant, I can’t help but get excited. However! Before we start negotiating, let me get one thing straight. I’m very stubborn. Even if my head were to be split and smashed open, I won’t comply with anything I can’t agree on.”

Such was his declaration.

2

Subaru: “Even if your head were to be split open, that’s not funny at all… It’s not funny at all, Flop-san.”

Recalling Flop’s caustic words that kicked off the negotiation battle just before, Subaru made a bitter face.

Flop did not do it purposely, but having seen his head be split and smashed open multiple times in reality, his words had the impact of a surprise attack on Subaru.

Subaru: “…”

Narrowing his eyes, Subaru looked over at the meeting area from a hill slightly away.

Even now, in the meeting area, Abel and Flop’s negotiations, or “business talks”, were underway.

Abel wanted a foothold, required for the conquest of Guaral. Flop had the knowledge needed for that task, yet was not revealing it. That was the situation inside at the moment.

The reason Subaru had left the meeting area was because it was ordered that anyone unneeded for the negotiations was to be excluded. Basically, he was ordered out by Abel.

And, Subaru himself could not come up with a reason for him to stay at that place.

Subaru: “Using secret paths to enter the city, a blitzkrieg attack to go straight for the enemy general’s throat.”

Kicked out of the meeting, Subaru savored the jungle-smelling wind as he recollected his memories.

From what he had heard, the plan Abel had outlined was something like that.

Although simple, it was difficult to come up with any other plan that would overcome the difference in manpower. If there was anything to change or add, it would be to attract attention in the city with a diversion, or perform little tricks to reduce the enemy general’s guards.

As for any problems with the plan—

Subaru: “Simple plans are easily anticipated. At least I think so… Especially if Todd is against us.”

If there were no other methods of attack, then of course, the opponent would also take precautions against it.

Therefore, a plan that the enemy was already taking precautions against was, in baseball terms, something like throwing a straight ball right down the middle. From the perspective of the awaiting enemy, it would be a mouth-watering, easy ball to bat.

For Todd to miss this swing, Subaru could not fathom the idea of that happening.

Subaru: "Or am I being too paranoid? In the extreme case Todd was… If the average soldier is like Todd, then there's no chance of winning."

He did not know. There were far too many unknowns. But, he did not want that to be true.

He did not want to think of a scenario in which enemies like Todd existed, other than Todd. His affinity with Return by Death being the worst had been proven by pain, having piled up the most deaths in the shortest amount of time.

To think that that was the norm for the Vollachian Empire was—

???: "—The negotiations seem to be dragging on."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru had at some point covered his face with his hands and shut his vision off from the world.

While Subaru was staring into the black void, the voice of a girl he had gotten used to hearing reached his eardrums. He had gotten used to hearing it, but it was a voice he wanted to always continue listening to.

However, that was only when Subaru's heart and feelings were at peace.

Subaru: "Rem…"

Lowering the hands covering his face, Subaru nervously opened his eyelids. Resting on her cane, Rem stood quietly on the gentle slope of the hill. Her gaze pierced through Subaru, causing him to go rigid.

Right now, being able to stand face-to-face with Rem like this made his heart throb.

During the days spent coming back to the People of Shudraq's settlement, Subaru had focused his anger on Abel, because his actions were equivalent to setting them up in a trap.

In doing so, it could be said he was avoiding talking with Rem. In reality, that was not wrong. He was scared of conversing with her and finding out about her true intentions.

That was why, he averted his eyes from the things he did not like and attempted a makeshift solution.

Nevertheless, there was a limit on how much he could run from the things he did not like.

There was a limit, and henceforth—

Subaru: "…"

Right now, he had no choice but to face himself against her eyes filled with seriousness.

Rem: "Abel-san seems to be adding various conditions and such, but Flop-san doesn't seem to be budging at all."

Subaru: "…Yeah, he's a good person. He doesn't want to help by providing knowledge that could get someone hurt. Being surrounded by the Shudraqians, he has some serious courage to be able to say that."

Subaru had overseen the progress of the negotiations for a while but Flop's stubbornness was exactly as he proclaimed.

The focal point of the discussion was as expected, the casualties in the City of Guaral. People and material things—Flop had made clear that he would not compromise on both those things.

Abel promised to minimize the human casualties as much as possible, but that was not enough to be the deciding factor.

Like parallel lines, they could not meet and reach an agreement.

Towards Flop's stubborn attitude, Subaru also felt relief.

Shunning war, he rebutted Abel head on.

He was relieved that another person of such ilk was here, other than him.

However—

Rem: “I don’t think this is the type of situation where you can simply say he is a good person.”

Subaru: “…What?”

In opposition to Subaru who affirmed himself to Flop’s attitude, Rem quietly revealed her strong criticisms.

Surprised at the bite of her words, Subaru unconsciously stared at Rem. Though difficult to meet face-to-face with, and despite his wish to avoid it, in his field of vision, Rem stared straight at Subaru.

Without dropping her gaze, she continued on.

Rem: “He doesn’t want to hurt others with his knowledge. I understand those feelings. But… if you think about the overall situation, him included, how will he account for the casualties that will arise because he didn’t share his knowledge. Couldn’t you say that would be hurting others with knowledge as well?”

Subaru: “That’s just an argument for argument’s sake. Trying to blame Flop for all the casualties brought about because he doesn’t talk, that’s just a false accusation.”

Rem: “That may be right. But, I do not think it’s realistic to be constantly running away.”

Abel had declared that this was the Land of Wolves. And against that, Flop had proclaimed that sheep would run.

That was a fairytale, was what Rem pessimistically—No, realistically thought, and said. She was yet another person who had stepped foot into Guaral. The tenacity and relentlessness of the Imperial Soldiers seeped deep into her bones.

Could they shake off that oppressive pursuit again?

Under determined opposition and not vague malicious intent, could

Flop, with Medium, keep running to the ends of the world?

And, could Subaru's group, who shared the same fate as them, be able to—.

Subaru: "Hang, hang on Rem. What you're saying is crazy. You also said before that you didn't want there to be a battle. But, the way you're saying it now…"

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "It's like you've accepted that we have to fight."

His throat trembled. Subaru was unable to get his words out properly.

But, just like how it was said that the eyes could say more than the mouth, in Subaru and Rem's precarious conversation, it was not just their words that spelled out their feelings. Their gazes did too.

The grim resolve that colored her eyes was the same as the one when she had defended Flop against Abel. That was what Subaru thought.

Subaru: "… It hurts that I can't understand you."

Seeing that attitude of hers on display, Subaru spit out the honest feelings floating in his heart.

She had criticized Flop for following Subaru's beliefs, but she regarded Subaru with the same eyes she used when defending Flop, when the latter was laying out his beliefs.

She had defended Subaru from Abel but she had not unpacked at the inn in Guaral. The interactions between the awakened Rem and Subaru were always inconsistent and one-way.

From the bottom of his heart, he was happy that she had woken up.

The sadness that assaulted him due to her memories not returning, he believed that they could find a way to solve that problem.

Nevertheless, in the Empire, where there was nobody he could trust from the bottom of his heart, from where he had to bring Rem back to Emilia and the others, her uncooperative attitude was like a knife piercing through his leg.

Every time that would happen, he would be on the verge of hunching over in pain.

Subaru: "… You didn't unpack at the inn in Guaral, right? Thanks to that, we reduced the time needed to escape, but I always thought it was weird."

Rem: "That was…"

Subaru: "The average person, after reaching an inn, will relax and settle down or start unpacking their luggage. At least, that's what I think. Of course, it's always possible that you aren't that sort of person. But…"

He did not want to finish the rest of that sentence.

If he could continue averting his eyes he would, but now that he felt he could not avoid questioning Rem on her inexplicable attitude, he could not continue averting his eyes.

That was why—

Subaru: "But, you tried to run away from me again, didn't you?"

Rem: "…"

Rem's silence was piercing. Subaru felt the blood coursing through his body.

However, a scab already peeled had no use. Letting the blood flow, heeding no mind to the exposed wound, he could only peel it off. Enduring the pain.

Subaru: "If… If you can't believe me, that's fine. It's painful, but I get it. You don't have any memories and for you, my smell reeks like that of someone unforgivable. Also I don't have anything to prove that you can trust me. I understand why you can't believe me and want to distance yourself from me.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “But, the people waiting for you… The people who hold you dear in their hearts, are real. If you don’t like me, you don’t have to talk to me. I’ll endure it if you bat my hands away. But, please don’t try to leave.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “I’m begging you, so, please… Please don’t shut me out from your life.”

His begging voice was shaking, his eyes were on the verge of tears.

Whether those droplets of tears that gradually appeared were the result of his self-pity, or of his petition to Rem, was unknown even to himself.

Truly, he was just being exceedingly pathetic. It was so absurd it made him laugh.

Even if he was not given up on, it would not be surprising were he to be abandoned because of his begging right now.

—He continued to expose his hopeless and pitiful self in front of Rem.

It was a sight he would definitely not show to Emilia, Beatrice or his other friends.

At least, Subaru intentionally strived to not show it to his friends. Nevermind if he was able to actually achieve that, that was what he had done to now.

Because he had decided to show his weakness only in front of Rem.

However, that did not mean that he wanted Rem, amnesiac, with no one to rely on, alone in another country, to shoulder the heavy weight that was Natsuki Subaru. That was not at all what he desired.

Rem: “…”

Hearing Subaru’s shameful begging, Rem would not say a word in return.

Nonetheless, Subaru did not avert his blurry, tear-filled gaze from her. Neither did she avert her gaze from Subaru.

A brief silence enveloped the space between them.

Rem: “—I.”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “I was not trying to abandon you.”

Rem said awkwardly, choosing her words carefully.

That was an emotion Rem had yet to show Subaru. Not even once.

She spoke to the person she should be wary of, with consideration and care. She spoke devoid of a wish to hurt his feelings.

Her words did not sound like she was speaking desperately and without thinking. Her tone made him believe that. Or it could be that that was also Subaru’s hope speaking for him.

Subaru: “Are you…”

Relying on that thin ray of hope, the thread of hope he should not be relying on, Subaru searched for the right words.

What was Rem thinking? What did she wish for? What did she believe in to put those words to her mouth?

Not even knowing if he should be informed of the answers to those questions, Subaru just wanted to hear her voice more, and tried to continue his sentence.

However—

???: “Aaaa, uuuu!!”

Subaru: “Guoh?!”

Faster than he could continue, a force jumped at him around his waist, and Subaru’s body blurred as it was launched to the side.

Unable to support his body at all, Subaru was blown away, sent sprawling on top of the hill. The atmosphere from before being ripped to shreds, Subaru’s head spun as he opened his eyes wide to try and make sense of the situation.

???: “Lou! Don’t sit on top of Suu! That’s bad! Uu tried to stop her. Lou was the one who did it.”

Subaru: “U-Utakata…? Meaning, this is…”

The one who ran over with an almost comical pitter-patter footstep, was a slightly flush olive-skinned Utakata. And, the one who was getting her sleeve pulled by Utakata, sitting atop Subaru’s chest, was the young girl who bundled her long, golden hair behind her head—

Rem: “Louis-chan, please come down. That person’s going to get squished.”

Louis: “Uuu?”

Overwriting her joyful and smiley face with a question mark, the one who craned her neck towards Rem’s words was Louis.

Resting her bottom on Subaru’s chest, Louis patted Subaru’s cheeks without a care in the world. It was, however, her carefreeness that got on Subaru’s nerves in the first place.

Subaru: “We’re in the middle of an important conversation. Get off now.”

Louis: “Aaa?”

Subaru: “Don’t aaa me. Utakata, please?”

Utakata: “I’ll listen cause Suu asked for it. Uu is a good wife and a good mother.”

Did she understand what that meant? In any case, Utakata pulled Louis' arm to get her off Subaru's chest. The pressure on him disappearing, Subaru raised his body up on the spot.

Even then, an unsatisfied-looking Louis entered his immediate field of view, and Subaru became annoyed.

Subaru: "In the end, there hasn't been an answer as to what you are."

Sin Archbishop, the evil being, "Gluttony", Louis Arneb.

If he were to pick some choice words to decorate the blonde girl in front of him, he could think of many foul and uncomplimentary remarks. However, even if all of those words were what correctly described her before, her current self did not match up with that.

That evil girl did not save Subaru, listen to him, or carelessly laugh towards him.

However—

Louis: "Uuu?"

Louis craned her neck. Her actions until now flashed in his mind.

Saving him when Rem had been choking him. She had cried out and faced the many predicaments Subaru had been through with him. Even the most recent one, being Todd and his axe.

The memory of her receiving Todd's elbow hit and bleeding from the nose was still fresh in his mind.

Her face had no sign of the previous injury, and she acted as if that event had no negative bearing on her at all. That was infuriating in a way, but—

Rem: "Louis-chan."

Louis: "Uuu!"

Beckoned, Louis quickly changed her expression into a happy one and ran over to Rem's side.

As if she had learned how to jump on the cane-ridden Rem, Louis jumped on Rem with not too much force. Rem caught Louis and gave her head some soft pats.

She had caught the Sin Archbishop who was one of the reasons for her current state. She had caught one part of them, Louis Arneb.

Rem: "Those eyes of yours…"

Subaru: "Huh?"

Rem: "The eyes with which you look at this child. It puzzles me too. This child, she's so attached to you, and yet you…"

Subaru: "…"

Rem uttered while hugging Louis' small body. Subaru fell silent.

Was that the continuation of her interrupted words from before? The Rem who did not unpack at Guaral, the continuation of that would shine a light on the rest of the truth.

However, despite waiting, Rem did not say another word beyond that. She only wrapped the beaming Louis into her chest.

Subaru: "… What do you want me to do?"

Looking over at Rem, Subaru finally chose to use conclusive words.

It might have been an unfair method to make Rem give him an answer. However, if Rem were to brush aside all of Subaru's chosen words and actions, this was the only option left.

What did Rem wish for, and what did she want him to do? He had to ask her directly.

On top of that, if the answer she brought out was something Subaru could not achieve for her, then it would be that time for sure that their relationship might become unsalvageable. Knowing that, Subaru asked her fearfully.

She held her breath for a moment against Subaru's question, and,

Rem: "… I do not want it to turn into a battle."

Said that.

Subaru could accept that too. In reality, when the Imperial Army's camp had been reduced to ashes, she thought that Subaru had spearheaded that attack and so flared up at him with a strong, threatening attitude.

Rem did not wish for a war. She did not favor it. That was no mistake.

That was why he understood that her opinion had not changed.

However, just when Subaru was convinced of this fact, she added on that.

That was—

Rem: "But I don't think we can keep running forever. Flop-san's words are not realistic. And…"

Subaru: "You can't agree with Abel's opinion."

Rem: "…Yes."

Quietly nodding, Rem agreed with Subaru's question.

Her timid agreement, it was the sign that she held the awareness that the words she spoke were outrageous. And, of course they were.

She agreed with Flop's stance on not wanting to fight, she also agreed with Abel on his stance that they had no choice but to fight. That was an ideology that could be said to be an incarnation of opportunism.

In all honesty, even Subaru thought how good it would be if a fence-sitter opinion like that worked out.

Fighting was not desired. But fighting was an inevitable outcome.

They did not want to take lives. Yet, they were at the forefront of a fight where taking lives was inevitable.

They must confront a dichotomy that involves lives.

Rem: “Could you…”

Subaru: “Ah?”

Making a bitter face, Subaru agreed with Rem’s contradictory thinking. However, to that anguishing Subaru, Rem flicked her gaze towards him.

Holding Louis’ head to her chest, she directed her helpless-looking light blue eyes towards Subaru.

Subaru held his breath. As if she quietly hardened her resolve she—

Rem: “—Could you do something about this?”

She asked as if she were clinging onto him for an answer.

Subaru: “…”

The moment he received that question, Subaru froze as if struck by lightning.

It was… That was a completely… A completely unreasonable question.

Compared to Subaru, who thought himself to be unfair and cowardly, this question was far, far worse.

The want to not fight, the knowledge that there was no choice but to fight. A third answer that was neither of those choices. —That was what Rem wished from Subaru.

Why?

Forgetting everything and anything, her trust and affection for Subaru had been lost. She also held caution and disgust because of the foul smell that surrounded Subaru. And yet, why had she asked that of Subaru.

Why did Rem look at Subaru with eyes that looked like she was holding onto him.

Subaru: “…”

SETOWI

That extremely one-sided, even selfish question started a fire in Natsuki Subaru.

Even if he were to get angry, curse her out loudly and denounce her naiveness now, he would no doubt be forgiven.

That was how selfish the option Rem chose was.

However, what grew in Subaru at that moment was a sense of duty that rose up from the very bottom of his soul.

Subaru: “I…”

He must fight.

He must resist.

He knew that he must break open the present as it was now.

Evading combat, the person stopping himself from revealing his information. Flop O’Connell.

Preparing himself from the unavoidable battle, the person who would win his survival. Vincent Abellux.

In the situation they were in now, the inevitable pathways that these two held.

The person that must find an answer; a pathway that was different from these two answers. Natsuki Subaru.

Why was that? That was because—

Subaru: “—I’m the hero that Rem believed in.”

And also because he was the man that kept on fighting in this other world using only his unwillingness to give up as a weapon.

It was not just his philosophy, the philosophy that did not function just because he crossed borders, that let Natsuki Subaru keep walking until today. That was what he believed.

Meeting Emilia, saved by her, the days spent running to save her.

Clutching Beatrice's hand, bringing her out of the Forbidden Library, his promise to be together with her.

Saving Rem, being saved by her, loved by her and deciding that he would answer her faith and love.

—Natsuki Subaru's blood boiled as he strived to change this current, constrained situation.

Something, anything, was there nothing at all?

The days spent in the Kingdom of Lugunica, the days spent since being blasted into the Vollachian Empire, the people he had met, the enemies he had faced, the people who stood next to him, the people who stood opposite him. All of them became fuel.

Think, concentrate, imagine, grasp all of the possible possibilities.

In this world, where anyone and everyone was more successful than him, the option that was left for Natsuki Subaru was only one. —His scrappy lifestyle and shrewdness.

Then, then, then, then—.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Hit by his uselessness, ruled over by a sense of loss, and with nothing else to do, Subaru had left the meeting area.

In that Subaru, in that Subaru's mind, a thought appeared with a flash.

Reeling in that clownish possibility, Subaru seriously considered if he could convert this thought into an actual plan.

Rem: "…"

Towards the silent Subaru, Rem's eyes quietly stared.

Putting a hand on Louis, who looked like she was about to cause a commotion and holding Utakata back, her head tilted, so that she would not leak any words out, she stared at Subaru.

Despite the fact she was not supposed to possess any memories, she stared at him with the eyes she had when she did.

As if she believed that Natsuki Subaru could reach the answer that others could not reach.

And then—

Subaru: "—Rem"

Holding a hand on his chin, Rem straightened herself at Subaru's call.

There was no answer. She somehow understood that he did not want one.

However, not noticing her reaction, Subaru quietly held his breath and continued.

Subaru: "What would I do if it were up to me? I found the answer."

3

Lumbering, advancing with strong steps on the hard ground, the doors to the meeting area were pushed open.

Looking at the newly-appeared Subaru, the man donning a oni mask flared his nose in displeasement. His attitude conveyed that he had been uncalled for.

Abel: "What is it, Natsuki Subaru? A person like you, one who cannot provide a constructive opinion, has no role for an appearance."

He was actually told in reality that he was not called for, and yet, Subaru's legs did not stop.

Even if he had forgiven Flop's disrespect, Abel would most likely not forgive Subaru for his, as Subaru held no reverence for him.

Feeling the gazes of the faces still remaining in the meeting area, Subaru pressed his legs straight forward.

Standing right next to Abel, looking down at his oni mask up close,

Subaru: “Any developments? You arrogant shit.”

Abel: “…”

Extending his hand, Subaru forcefully peeled the oni mask off Abel’s face.

Mizelda and the other Shudraqians widened their eyes in surprise at his unhesitant action. It went without saying, but Flop too was shocked, laying his eyes upon Abel’s true face for the first time.

However, the others’ actions did not enter his eyes.

Towards Subaru’s question, Abel shifted his demonic face into a cruel expression that would run a chill up anyone’s spine. He shook his head curtly, saying “No,”

Abel: “Negotiations are progressing roughly. Contrary to expectations, this merchant is hard to crack.”

Subaru: “Is that so. Then, since you’re so terrible at being persuasive, I’ll persuade him for you.”

Abel: “What?”

Abel furrowed his nicely-shaped eyebrows together. Seeing his face, Subaru looked down at Abel with satisfaction.

Next, Subaru turned to face Flop.

Because a conclusion had not been made, Flop was in the middle of arguing with the presumed Emperor head on. Taken aback by the difference in Subaru’s expression and attitude, Flop called over to Subaru, saying “Mister?”.

Then, towards the two that held differently shaped doubts, Subaru declared.

The contents of that declaration was—

Subaru: “—I have a plan for the bloodless fall of Guaral. If we can fight without any bloodshed, then the two of you can agree on a plan together, don’t you think?”

Chapter 21:
Zikr Osman

1

—Zikr Osman, General Second-Class of the Vollachian Empire, was known as The Womanizer.

There were many words to describe him, like sex-obsessed, lecherous, and lustful.

For an Imperial Soldier who had to set an example of true strength and gain the respect of his fellow officers, it was a rather disgraceful set of terms.

However, Zikr Osman himself liked being known as The Womanizer.

—No, it would not be an exaggeration to say he took pride in it.

The reason why?

It was because Zikr hated the nickname he had been given before being dubbed The Womanizer.

For a soldier, to be called by such a nickname, was an unbearable humiliation. Thus, he proudly paraded the title of Womanizer, which made his fellow soldiers forget that other nickname.

Anyway, although called such, the meaning of Zikr being labelled The Womanizer differed from that of so-called Casanovas or from the vices of the sort of men who looked down on women.

The Osman household had produced a lineage of soldiers for generations, but in Zikr's generation the blood had been unbalanced, and, for some reason, the family had only sired females. Born and raised in an environment with four elder sisters and six younger ones, Zikr spent his childhood without even one brother.

Growing up surrounded by sisters on all sides, like most people, Zikr was instilled with various preconceived notions relating to women.

But what made him different from most people whose illusions about women were lost due to the existence of female family members, he instead sought fantasies and idealized outside women.

And then, he parted from his sisters, saddened to let go of their adorable and kind brother, and he started his career as an Imperial Soldier at a young age, making contact with outside women for the first time, and he cracked.

Ever since then, women had been like an ephemeral dream for Zikr Osman, an existence between ideal and reality, a forbidden fruit mixed with love and hate.

Having been raised being knocked about by a great number of women in his family, Zikr held a strong desire to treat women kindly, while also being treated kindly by them. Therefore, he considered it a supreme pleasure to serve women and to be served by them, which he put into practice.

This attitude differed from most of the dominant men of the Empire, which combined with jealousy and contempt for his precise tactics and safe victories, led to the name “Womanizer”.

But, as said at the beginning, Zikr Osman enjoyed that sobriquet.

“The Womanizer”, was it not rather splendid? After all, there were more men who liked women than disliked them, which brought opportunities to speak with many officers.

Zikr’s stance was clear and left no doubt, and his subordinates, knowing their superior officer’s taste, naturally looked up to him as the Womanizer, and respected him.

—“The Womanizer”, was it not rather splendid?

Zikr Osman was the man who had risen to the rank of an Imperial General Second-Class, despite being called such.

With the Emperor ousted from his throne, to squeeze the life out of him, his political opponents had chosen the very best within the limits of their dominion, which was none other than he.

It was surely the threatening General called The Womanizer, Zikr Osman.

2

From the beginning, Zikr had a hunch that something about the expedition smelled fishy.

Military exercises were held in the area around the Buddheim Jungle in the eastern part of the Empire every year, but this year they had been held earlier, and, including Zikr, only a portion of the commissioned officers had been notified of the expedition's purpose—Negotiations with the People of Shudraq.

Zikr: "The People of Shudraq hiding in Buddheim…"

An indigenous people that lived in the Buddheim Jungle, the tribe was known for having a long history.

They were also famous for not emerging out of the considerably-dense jungle, and Zikr had never encountered them first-hand. But, he had heard that they were a matriarchal tribe, and he wished to meet them just once.

Living deep in the jungle, their approach of capturing outside men for use as tools to produce children was also fascinating. Likely, they were all strong, indomitable women, he thought.

Women were good. Strong or weak, gentle or harsh, all flavors.

After all, they could not all be lumped together. Older sisters, and younger sisters too, had times when they were gentle and times when they were harsh, times when they were sweet and times when they were bitter.

If a single woman displayed such kaleidoscopic splendor, how could one think of lumping multiple women together?

Therefore—

Zikr: “To make them swear fealty, or be destroyed… What is the Imperial Capital thinking?”

That was the secret order given behind closed doors to Zikr, before he departed for the expedition.

Word from the Imperial Capital Rupgana affirmed that this expedition’s true purpose was to either win over the People of Shudraq, or annihilate them. He attempted to ascertain that there was no mistake, but the reply from the Imperial Capital remained immutable, and Zikr had no choice but to comply.

However, he had heard about some kind of trouble brewing within the Imperial Capital, so he could imagine that had something to do with the purpose of the expedition on this occasion.

That much was clear from the fact that the common soldiers had been ordered to execute this plan while the purpose of the expedition was hidden from them. —What His Excellency, the Emperor was thinking, Zikr had no idea.

Zikr: “But then, no one can read that gentleman’s deeper intentions, can they?”

—The Seventy-Seventh Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, Vincent Vollachia.

That was the name of the one who ruled over this Empire, the wisest man of this age, who never allowed others to read the depths of his thoughts.

In the Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital of Rupgana, His Excellency the Emperor was considered to have a clear view of the entire vast Empire. Even though Zikr was a General Second-Class, his post was far removed from the Imperial Capital, and he had little opportunity to see his countenance. Yet, his ingenuity and renown crossed the distance to reach Zikr’s ears.

Within an imperial society in which the strong consumed the weak, greedily climbing was seen as an inevitability.

In a world in which various clans and locales revolted, and the live coals of insurrection would flare up every day, Vincent crushed every problem before it could become a raging inferno.

In the eight years since the inception of his reign, the Vollachian Empire had become astonishingly peaceful.

Blood was spilled, flames were fanned, and lives were lost.

And still, these were the most tranquil days since the founding of the Vollachian Empire.

Therefore, this completely thorough approach towards the People of Shudraq caused Zikr to furrow his brow.

Though he was a perfect son of battle, His Excellency the Emperor avoided battle in some respects. It was not that he loathed war, but that he had deemed it foolishness, and that was the reason for his decisions. That was the supposition Zikr embraced of his own accord.

Perhaps this feeling was because of a sense that he had been betrayed?

???: “No, it’s not like that, General Second-Class Zikr. I understand your thinking, sir. I’m just a common soldier myself, but I also have to consider all sorts of things.”

Said one of the common soldiers, listening to him with a charming smile.

They were having a moment in a tavern while they were stationed in the fortified city of Guaral, where the expedition was based. On the nights that Zikr did not spend with women, he enjoyed drinking with his subordinates in such a manner. And in addition, rather than a retinue of high-ranked officers or Generals of the Third-Class, he would drink with lower-ranked ordinary soldiers.

Of course, most soldiers did not particularly want to drink alcohol with their superiors.

Even so, Zikr liked such rituals whenever he went on expeditions, as it helped him understand the thoughts and preferences of the subordinates he traveled with. —But on this night, he may have said a bit too much.

The soldier he was drinking with that day was an awfully talkative, chatty sort.

As they drank, he was always looking around, brimming with curiosity. When asked what he was thinking about, he joked that he was hypothesizing what would happen if the tavern turned into a battlefield.

An attitude of constant combat readiness, and a lack of timidness towards his superior officer's company. Such an Imperial mindset combined with his personal affection towards humanity led to him speaking of things he ought not to.

It was not like he had declared the contents of the secret order regarding the People of Shudraq, and though he did not state it explicitly, he got the feeling it was clear from how he had been listened to.

Had he been a spy from another country, Zikr would be executed for such a blunder.

Soldier: "You don't have to worry, I'll even be on the frontlines tomorrow by your order, sir… Really, I'm sure the higher-ups have all sorts of motives, but it's nothing to do with me."

As his drunkenness faded and Zikr came to his senses, the soldier spoke as if to reassure him.

And then just as he had stated, he had departed for the encampment of the expedition at the frontlines, the camp site adjacent to the Buddheim Jungle.

This was confirmed, and as he remained in the city Zikr was once again faced with a lump of unease in his chest.

In spite of the Imperial Capital's order for a completely thorough approach to the Shudraqians, urging either subjugation or death, if at all possible, Zikr intended to stick to a persuasive approach.

That was what Zikr put his faith in, and what he thought was closest to His Excellency the Emperor's conviction.

However—

Zikr: "—The camp was burned down in a Shudraqian attack?"

Receiving the unexpected report at the requisitioned city hall, Zikr was aghast.

Until last night, up till that very moment, he had intended to do as much as possible to accommodate the Shudraqians, and win over their tribe without a fight.

The camp had been set up in order to wall in the western side of the Buddheim Jungle, and when several of those from the People of Shudraq had charged, the Imperial Soldiers were routed without so much as a counterattack.

Those who fled were struck in the back, furthering the extent of the damage, leading to over a hundred casualties.

Zikr: "Ridiculous…"

Whether he was grumbling about his own decisions, the actions of the Shudraqians, or just the reality of it, even Zikr himself did not know.

Nevertheless, the amicable plan he had constructed in his head had collapsed, and the only thing that was certain was that the People of Shudraq had become enemies of his own Imperial Soldiers—No, of His Excellency the Emperor.

Zikr: "It is a shameful circumstance, but we will wait for reinforcements from the Imperial Capital, and defeat the Buddheim Jungle insurgents."

Once they had received the soldiers who had narrowly escaped the Shudraqians' raid into the city, and the appearance of an expeditionary force was arranged, Zikr came to that decision.

There was also the alternative of invading the jungle and fighting the Shudraqians with their present military strength. But the dense forest was those women's domain, and they were quite capable of neutralizing a superficial advantage in numbers.

To secure a certain victory, rather than a superficial advantage, an overwhelming advantage was required.

And in addition to that, they would abandon lenient approaches like seeking negotiations, with elite soldiers for the purpose of annihilation.

Zikr: "Foolishly, they have swatted away the hand extended to them in peace. That being the case, we must act out of loyalty to His Excellency the Emperor, and bring down deadly retribution upon the insurgents without exception."

And like that, once he had disciplined himself, the warmth of even The Womanizer, of Zikr's Osman's heart, was extinguished.

Even if his opponent was the matriarchal tribe of the People of Shudraq, every fragment of that bloodline must be destroyed, so they would not become a concern in the future.

For that reason—

Zikr: "Do not be caught off-guard preparing to close the main gate. I hear the People of Shudraq's specialty is their bows, but they cannot pass through the walls of this fortified city. Avoid leaving room for them to break through."

He got information from the returned soldiers on the particulars of how the front lines of the camp had been razed by fire, and bearing in mind that the fires had been set by a select few, he shifted to a total defense plan.

Based on what was known of the Shudraqians' lifestyle, it was difficult to imagine that the tribe's entirety was numerous, and it did not seem likely that all members of the tribe could fight, children and elderly included.

If he supposed that their fighting strength was approximately a hundred people at most, in order to compete with the Imperial

Soldiers, they could only take advantage of the dark of night for things like surprise attacks.

But even so, a method of preemptive strike would only bear on an opponent whose guard was lowered from a lack of attacks.

Zikr: “See to it that every hole is filled! Even the walls of the fortified city are not solid. With its long history, I can imagine there being plenty of ways to pass through to the outside without using the gates. Do not overlook any sort of secret passage!”

???: “On that point, a report for you, sir. Some of the soldiers who returned from the burned camp are already preparing for an outside attack by going around and blocking off secret passages.”

Zikr: “Is that right? It is heartening that there are soldiers besides Generals who have the guile to anticipate. Once this matter is put to rest, we must start giving promotions again. But for now…”

???: “—Sigh. Until reinforcements arrive, our stance will be total defense, right.”

Hearing Zikr’s instructions, his subordinate, a General Third-Class, bowed deeply at the waist.

Were these the words of an ordinary General, they would be ridiculed for such a passive approach. In fact, Zikr had formerly been the target of that kind of scornful laughter.

But, Zikr had already borne a severe blow from the opposing People of Shudraq, and if he were to return to the Capital he would not be in a position to escape some form of punishment.

With his back already to the wall, there was no reason not to take the very best measures in this situation.

His subordinates knew this as well, so they did not sneer at Zikr’s stance.

And then—

3

Zikr: "…Excuse me?"

Confined within the fortified city of Guaral. Zikr, resuming said operation, raised his eyebrow in irritation at his subordinate's report.

In the days spent waiting for reinforcements from the Imperial Capital to arrive and maintaining the gradually rising tension, the report brought out deep emotions that were exceedingly out-of-place in Zikr.

For as to why that was—

Subordinate: "Yes. It seems, in these past few days in the city, a troupe of travelling entertainers have become the topic of conversation."

Zikr: "Travelling entertainers…"

The report received from the subordinate was quite the carefree and leisurely kind.

It was an ill-suited report, considering the tense time of war they were in. However, there was no reason to reprimand the subordinate who had relayed it.

In the first place, it was Zikr himself who disliked intentionally forcing onto citizens a lifestyle in which they must acknowledge they were under wartime.

Even under normal conditions, discontent would easily build up in cities where troops were stationed. And, depending on the situation, being unable to manage public sentiments would lead to annihilation. That was how far the situation could progress.

Under that line of thinking, Zikr purposely did not carry out any action that would strongly restrict the opinions people held.

Staying vigilant against the threats outside of the city; preventing any infiltration from the People of Shudraq by authorizing his troops to perform thorough searches without exception. By doing this, he allowed the citizens to continue with their everyday lives.

He understood it to be contradictory, but that was the compromise between Zikr's commonsense and his military instincts.

In any case, because he had taken a position to do things this way, the day-to-day entering and exiting of the city—the security check placed at the front gate and the handling of merchants and peddlers, would remain unchanged.

For that reason, it was probably fine to let something like a band of travelling entertainers into the city, but—

Zikr: "…What do you propose with that information? If you are asking to keep them under strict control, I would very much prefer not doing so. Look around us. I can understand why the townsfolk would celebrate that troupe."

It was a situation where a non-negligible amount of Imperial Soldiers, together with the guards there stationed, were maintaining patrol around the city.

Having escaped the raid, many of the soldiers who entered the city had heightened their hostility and alertness towards the People of Shudraq, and, despite orders to be mindful, disputes with the citizens were constant.

It was not hard to imagine that a party of travelling entertainers appearing in the city during all this would bring a modest amount of peace for the citizenry. Therefore, if they were to take that away —

Zikr: "The citizens' antagonism will erupt. You understand, do you not?"

Subordinate: "Of course, your words exactly, sir. That is why, I am not suggesting that we place them under strict control. Just…"

Zikr: "Just what? You are making this seem more important than what it truly is."

Raising an eyebrow, Zikr impatiently urged the hesitant subordinate to continue his sentence.

Then, after a minute of silence, the subordinate lowered his head as if in resignation. Displaying his respect and non-hostility towards his superior officer by putting a fist on his palm, the subordinate controlled his breathing with a “Hah”, and,

Subordinate: “Actually that troupe… Those dancers are quite impressive but, your thoughts, sir? What do you make of seeing them once too?”

Zikr: “Me? It is not that dancers are not tempting for me too, but…”

Hearing his subordinate’s unexpected proposal, Zikr widened his eyes in surprise.

His history with this subordinate was long, and they had walked on many worthy battlefields together. It was unthinkable that he would bring up this proposal without any thought to it.

However, Zikr could not infer the real reason as to why his subordinate wanted to show the dancers to Zikr.

Subordinate: “Sir, I cannot be saying this out too loud but discontent within the troops is also increasing.”

Zikr: “Mm…”

The subordinate straightened himself and disclosed that to the puzzled Zikr.

The grave observation told to Zikr naturally made his eyes narrow. When he wordlessly encouraged his subordinate to keep talking, the subordinate slightly lowered his voice and,

Subordinate: “They have certain thoughts about the reinforcements from the ungenerous Imperial Capital, but they seem to have doubts about you too, sir, who decided to coop up in the city and take a defensive stance. There is also the case with the burnt encampment.”

Zikr: “—. I see. No, that is a natural reaction.”

Receiving his subordinate’s unreserved explanation, Zikr felt something heavy settling at the back of his chest.

It was inevitable that the Soldiers' discontent and distrust towards Zikr would accumulate and fester. Allowing the People of Shudraq to execute their preemptive strike, and in turn causing the death of numerous soldiers, had been Zikr's fault.

After that event, the troops they reunited with were not given a chance to recover. So it was no surprise that they aimed their displeasure towards Zikr.

Subordinate: "Among the more critical gossipers, they call you sir a —"

Zikr: "—Not another word."

Subordinate: "—Hk, excuse my impudence."

Interrupting his subordinate's ongoing sentence, Zikr placed a hand on his forehead.

If a superior officer were to be passive towards their subordinates' attitudes and discontent towards their superior, Zikr could imagine the curses those subordinates would spit out. He could think of those unbearable and straightforward slurs.

Even after receiving the position of General Second-Class, he could not come to accept those kinds of insults.

And, only when his thinking led him to this point, did he figure out what the intention behind his subordinate's proposal had been.

Zikr: "I see now. Essentially, prepare a space where the troops' grievances can be erased, is what you are saying."

Subordinate: "Correct. Can we not utilize the dancers for this task? Once they see that splendid song and dance, many of the men will…"

Zikr: "Hohoh, I see. You speak as if you have seen them before."

Zikr narrowed his eyes and pursued his suspicions, but the subordinate cleared his throat and avoided a straight answer. However, his reaction was more than enough evidence that Zikr's hunch was correct.

In any case, he was stuck in a position between that of a General and that of a Soldier, and so, his place was a difficult one.

As he was trying to obtain the method to heal the relationship between the two, to press him further was to quite literally embody the word "petty".

Additionally, this subordinate had seen these dancers of sorts with his own eyes, and had strongly proposed to use them to great extent.

Zikr: "I believe those dancers are extremely beautiful?"

Subordinate: "Of course! Ah, ahem, no doubt they will suit your eyes, Sir. Their dancing, the musician's song and performance are splendid too…"

Zikr: "Hmhm, that does raise my expectations quite a bit."

Even when responding in kind, Zikr thought their descriptions to be slightly exaggerated.

Thinking that however, it was indeed joyful that his subordinate had taken into consideration his own standing and the times ahead to provide this proposal. So there was no reason to be stubborn and decline it.

Zikr himself, having been hard-pressed and anxiety-ridden, had not invited and played with any ladies over at his bedchamber recently.

He could not put the same inconvenience on his troops as well.

Zikr: "Alright, understood. I will allow myself to be smooth-talked by you here. Invite that troupe of travelling entertainers and prepare a space to show appreciation for the soldiers."

Except—

Zikr: “—Make sure they do not bring in any weapons. Do not forget to search them.”

4

Once approval from Zikr was received, the troops mobilized quickly.

Almost as if they had been suffering from severe dehydration and starvation, they immediately prepared a space for a banquet on the first floor of the City Hall, readied alcohol and food, and gathered women to serve as waitresses.

Then, contacting the band of travelling entertainers in question, the troupe was invited to the top-floor of the City Hall.

???: “—Who you are about to lay your eyes on, is the beautiful danseuse from beyond the Great Waterfall. Her silky black hair that drinks up the sun’s light, along with her heavenly fair skin that has received the blessing of the spirits, her utmost beauty is comparable to the divine beings, and tonight, she will lavishly perform for you all.”

After the musician’s dramatic introductory speech was delivered, the veil was pulled back slowly with showmanship.

A female-only band of travelling entertainers, what the musicians revealed hidden under the drop veil was the dancer that was the hot topic of the city—The appearance of said dancer being revealed, Zikr widened his eyes in surprise.

Zikr: “…”

Exposing her milky skin, the beauty who loosely let her hair flow down her back, her appearance betrayed what had been conveyed by the musician’s introductory speech. —Indeed, such comments were far from sufficient for describing the belle here.

Her bewitching black hair, her cream skin wrapped in a light garment. Certainly, there was a magical power to them, one that would mesmerize many of those who would come to gaze at her. However, those factors were merely one portion of the real reason for her beauty.

Including people other than dancers or musicians, if charisma was what charmed most humans, and if one were to equate charisma with talent, this dancer's aura and appearance was frighteningly overflowing with it.

Most of all, what led Zikr to feel such powerful sentiments, was none other than the dancer's eyes.

To say that those almond shaped eyes with long lashes were the core of her favorable features, was unsuited. It was no exaggeration to think that, on the golden ratio, they were positioned in the most perfect place.

The reason his throat unconsciously parched up was because Zikr instinctively felt a craving.

Whether that was because he was attracted to the dancer's physicality's, or because he was pulled to the charisma the dancer was entwined with, was a phenomenon that was completely unknown to even Zikr himself.

This dancer had already incited such deep emotion with nary a single movement. The size of the impact that would be brought about once she started to actually dance with song and music, would be of unimaginable proportions.

And, Zikr craved to be overwhelmed by an impact of proportions he could not dream of.

Black-haired Musician: "—Please, allow us the chance to display our danseuse's act."

In place of the silent dancer—No, danseuse, a musician with matching black hair bowed her head down.

The two musicians and the black-haired and blond-haired ladies were likewise beautiful; however, to Zikr, who was enraptured by the danseuse's appearance, they could only be considered an accompaniment. Normally, any thoughts of dismissing women were to be met with self-examination and reflection, but he was burning with fervor, to the point where such thoughts did not even cross his mind.

Never, until now, had he so strongly become self-aware of his nickname, Womanizer.

In reality, Zikr probably was a Womanizer. —Because, in front of beauty of this scale, staying at a peace of mind was, without a doubt, impossible.

And so, with his heart still burning with ardor, the banquet commenced.

Of course, seeing as Zikr was the commander, his seat in the banquet was at the very back. The gathered Generals—as the rank-and-file Soldiers had been excluded, the people of higher rank gathered and started to enjoy their alcohol and food.

The number one sight was however, as expected, the showcase from the band of travelling entertainers.

Originally, the objective was to show appreciation for the troops and let them release their dissatisfactions, but Zikr had forgotten the original aim and held his breath for the danseuse's turn on stage.

Bringing booze to his mouth to quench his thirst, he moistened his tongue, lips and throat. He brought his breathing back to normal that way.

Zikr's heart was spell-bound to that extent.

Black-haired Musician: "—Tonight, what you will witness is a dance from the hometown of our danseuse, a dance from beyond the Great Waterfall. Please, satisfy to your heart's content, the dance from the ends of the end."

The voice of a singing musician started and the plucking of strings led to the sounds of gentle music.

As an unfamiliar tune started to play, the Generals who were conversing noisily bated their breaths with faces of vermilion. They too, were unwilling to take their eyes off the performance that was about to start.

Then—

???: “…”

Then, the danseuse who slowly came into sight, started her breathtaking “dance”.

Everyone: “…”

Making full use of her long limbs, everybody lost their words at the figure with swaying black hair as she danced.

Forgetting to breathe, they stared. —This was the very definition of “enchanted”. Anyone who witnessed a dance like this and maintained a clear-headed mind had something wrong with them.

Someone like that did not understand the value of dance, and possessed the sensibilities of an animal.

The Imperial Soldiers were a pack of wolves, but they were not beasts who did not possess the power of intelligence and speech.

Subsequently, the Generals also held their breath, forgetting how to breathe, and were bewitched by the stunning danseuse’s act.

Each person lost their voice and were captivated by the danseuse’s performance.

Pitch-black hair, smooth, white skin with naught a blemish. An alluring face that would make artists want to cut off their dominant hand for its deep knowledge. They were charmed by that.

However, what continued to attract, boundlessly so, Zikr’s eyes, mind and heart, were none of those features.

—It was the eyes.

Just as he thought, he could not shift his gaze from the danseuse’s eyes.

Her long-slitted eyes lorded over the stage in which she was dancing on, and were boring right into the very back of the room, at Zikr.

Her eyes, which did not leave their target for a single second, directly took hold of Zikr's brain and did not release their grasp.

Eventually, the danseuse crossed the hall, advancing right in front of Zikr.

Then, softly kneeling in place, raised her two hands and requested Zikr's sword.

Naturally, Zikr understood her action, that it signified the wish for a sword.

With the world in her grasp, the danseuse's dance raised the tension and made it obvious that she would rise to the next level. On top of transitioning to a dance utilizing a sword; to a blade ballet, the danseuse wished for a blade.

Zikr did not have the option to refuse and not pass the blade over.

No one could stop it. The subordinates and Generals; no one could deliberately obstruct this act.

This was something that was to happen no matter what. That was how natural this course of action was.

That was why—

Danseuse: "—It is your loss, Zikr Osman."

Having his unsheathed sword pointed at his throat, hearing that ruthless declaration, Zikr Osman did not process that he had been defeated by virtue of being the Womanizer.

Zikr: "…"

Even at this very moment, he could not avert his gaze from the eyes of the danseuse who had declared such words.

That cold charisma which attracted many—It was as if he had seen it before. That feeling of déjà vu was endlessly branded by flame into the mind of the defeated General Zikr.

Chapter 22:
The Bloodless Siege Plan

1

—Let us rewind the clock, to before the danseuse's whirling dance at Guaral City Hall.

???: "—A bloodless siege, you say?"

Having entered the meeting place, in front of all those gathered there, Natsuki Subaru had made a powerful declaration.

The concealing oni mask forcibly ripped away, Abel looked up toward Subaru and, in a chilling voice, repeated the "pipe dream" that had vibrated his eardrums.

He sneered—No, there was no sense of mockery in it. It contained pure doubt, a kind of breath that conveyed that the person before him did not understand what they were proposing.

The intention was understood.

Subaru: "You may have devised a plan to get through with minimal sacrifices, but you wouldn't think of a plan with zero sacrifices in the first place."

Abel: "Naturally. Whether you accept it or not, what we are engaging in now is war. Come what may, casualties cannot be avoided. All that can be done, is planning to avoid the waste of human resources."

Subaru: "Well, I don't like your way of thinking about human resources to begin with."

Looking down on Abel sitting cross-legged right in front of him, Subaru clicked his tongue.

The term "human resources", was the combination of two words, "humans" and "resources", one that Subaru thought should not be combined into such an abhorrent term whatsoever.

That way of looking at "humans" by keeping them at a distance, was one step detached from viewing people as only numbers.

Or perhaps that was the sense of balance a ruler like Abel had to have but—

Subaru: "Well, I don't accept it. Flop-san's the same, right?]

Abel: "—. And in place of that, you interject with this bloodless siege? That is a remarkably grand declaration. Coming from you, who was so haggard until just a moment ago."

Subaru: "I won't argue that I've been a worn-out, pitiful, disgraceful sight. To begin with, ever since I got blasted away to this country, I've been through a series of non-stop disasters."

In response to Abel's point, Subaru derided himself, then stared at his own palm.

His unduly clean right hand, that arm which had been replaced by a new one, could also be called part of those "non-stop disasters". Albeit tough, the replacement of his right hand had been one of his few pieces of luck, had it not?

The replacement of his hand, and that Rem had awakened. That, and encountering the siblings Flop and Medium, could be considered good fortune without exaggeration.

Outside of that anyway, fortune and disaster were two sides of the same coin.

So was Abel before him, so were the People of Shudraq, and so were the Imperial Soldiers including Todd—

Subaru: "This series of hardships has been soul-draining. But."

Abel: "…"

Subaru: "—The more friction, the more fire ignites."

Staring hard at his clenched fist, Subaru announced that clearly.

Right then, Rem, who had been lagging behind Subaru, arrived at the entrance to the meeting place. Using her cane, she came in alongside Utakata and Louis.

She had likely come to see with her very own eyes.

Since it had been her selfish plea that had ignited Natsuki Subaru's soul.

Subaru: "A strategy to enter the city, after asking Flop-san for a secret byway… Are you planning a surprise attack? There's no way that'll work."

Abel: "Oh, why is that? It is a fortified city, protected by a bulwark. Do you possess some other method to pass through?"

Subaru: "If there's a wall, anyone'd think to look for a way to bypass it. That is, though the byway itself may be cleverly concealed…"

If there were a secret byway for going in and out of the Fortress City, naturally, it could be assumed that it was for allowing those of uncertain backgrounds and goods of dubious origin to get through.

Of course, it would probably be concealed so as not to be discovered by guards. But even that would only get past ordinary levels of vigilance.

Beyond that, it did not seem possible to evade the net of wartime vigilance especially.

And above all—

Subaru: "That bastard who chased us down in the city isn't the type to overlook something like that."

He was quick-witted, cunning, and made decisions without hesitation.

Seeing that Todd knew of their survival, any sort of byway would be the most guarded “opening”. The enemy would not be so kind to leave it as it was.

Blocking it would be obvious, and there was also the fear that any left unblocked could have been converted into “traps”.

Subaru: “That’s why a surprise attack would be absurd. It’s likely the opponent waiting over there will smash your head in with an axe the moment you slip out from a byway.”

Flop: “Wh-Wh-Why are you looking at my face as you say that, Husband-kun! What a scary thought!”

He had intended to make the danger known to everyone, but his eyes subconsciously fixed on Flop’s face.

Subaru remembered how many times right in front of him the assassin’s dagger—No, the assassin’s axe, had felled the man before him. Subaru did not want to witness that again; even if it killed him, he could not let that happen again.

Abel: “…Were it to simply be a surprise attack, I am of the same opinion regarding the enemy being wary.”

Subaru: “What?”

At his unexpected assent, Subaru stared in wide-eyed wonder. The reason being that the one endorsing Subaru’s opinion was none other than Abel himself.

Abel raised an eyebrow at Subaru’s astonishment and continued,

Abel: “What? Is my affirmation unexpected?”

Subaru: “That’s right… Despite you acting as if you’re right about everything in this world, you do things like readily admit your own mistakes…”

Abel: “Nonsense, when did I admit to having been mistaken? I merely endorsed the idea that a strategy of using a byway to commence a surprise attack would not be successful.”

Subaru: "—? Then, how were you planning to use the byway?"

Abel's denial had a different feeling than that of a sore loser who had had his thoughts correctly guessed.

As Subaru grilled him for the basis, Abel shut one of his eyes,

Abel: "There is no reason humans must be the ones going in and out. If it is only to paralyze the functioning of the soldiers confined in the city, merely smuggling something in would be sufficient."

Subaru: "Something…"

Abel: "—Poison."

Subaru: "They're even less likely to overlook that!"

Abel's dispassionate delivery all the more gave a sense of his unwavering resolve to get things done, and Subaru instinctively and loudly criticized his plan.

The use of poison or the like would be inexcusable. —In truth, since Subaru had experienced the power of poison employed by the People of Shudraq, he vehemently opposed its use.

That hellish suffering, it was more wretched than dying in battle.

Subaru: "Anyway, weren't we talking about trying to minimize suffering, or at least reduce harm to persuade Flop-san? How does a plan that uses poison…"

Abel: "What are you speaking of? A surprise tactic using a secret byway also has the possibility of our own troops being sacrificed in the event of an attack. With poison, that possibility is eliminated."

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "Reducing the losses of the forces on hand. That is what it means to minimize damage."

Abel spoke definitively, and in front of him Subaru held his breath.

Again, Subaru recognized anew, between his own position and Abel's, the grand scale of difference between a ruler's and others' fields of view. The gap was beyond Subaru's comprehension.

In short, Abel did not take damage to the residents of Guaral into account. —No, even if he did not bring harm to the residents, he thought nothing whatsoever of harm to the Imperial Soldiers.

That much had been clear ever since the Imperial Soldiers' encampment that he himself had aimed for had been burnt to the ground.

Subaru: "Still, my thinking was naive. You…"

Abel: "That is correct, your thinking is naive. Consequently, you have no place here…"

As they confronted each other, sparks flew between Subaru and Abel's glares.

Just as their views clashed with one another, and the discussion began to break down—

Flop: "—Now now now, wait a minute, you two! There's no need to glare at each other and argue like this!"

Flop stepped between the two of them and created some distance.

A sodden smile appeared on his face as he looked back and forth between the glaring faces of Subaru and Abel; "Let's calm down and discuss this!", he said as he clapped his hands in front of his chest.

Flop: "To be frank, my discussion with Village Chief-kun was getting nowhere! And then, Husband-kun triumphantly returned. I definitely want to hear about this "bloodless siege" Husband-kun's talking about! If it's real, it'd be like a dream come true!"

Subaru: "Flop-san…"

In response to the grinning Flop's expectation, Subaru quelled his prior anger. Somehow or another, taken aback by Flop's behavior, Abel seemed to do the same.

Abel let out a “Hmph” with a small snort,

Abel: “—. Very well, we shall hear him out. Should your idea manage to successfully fool this merchant, as long as you get the whereabouts of the secret byway, that will be that.”

Flop: “Huh?! Husband-kun?! Don’t tell me you…”

Subaru: “Nonono! We weren’t planning this! Just because it doesn’t seem like your own idea’s going to work, doesn’t mean you get to try to force me to be part of it, asshole!”

His remark needlessly invited Flop’s distrust, yet, moreover Abel showed no shame. He held on to his composed arrogance. “You hardly need that oni mask…”, Subaru spat at him.

???: “So…”

Like that, a faint voice slid into the gap created in the conversation.

Standing stock-still at the entrance of the meeting place, eyes fixed on Subaru’s back, came Rem’s voice.

Not fooled by the atmosphere of the place, Rem continued to stare only at Subaru.

Rem: “So, what would you do? Could you find some other way that isn’t a fleeting dream or a blood-soaked reality?”

Subaru: “…Every bit of the way you say things makes my heart sing.”

Rem: “…”

Rem stared with her lips pursed, and Subaru responded with a bitter smile, and strengthened his resolve once more.

Then, he surveyed the faces in the meeting place once more. Abel and Flop, along with the Shudraqians starting with Mizelda, and as he became the focus of everyone’s gaze,

Subaru: “My plan’s got no need for either byways or bloodshed.

But, it does require Flop-san's assistance."

Flop: "Even though it doesn't need a byway, it requires my help…? But Husband-kun, surely you know I'm just a helpless peddler with a bit of a mouth, don't you?"

Subaru: "Yeah, of course. But Flop-san isn't just a merchant, there's a blessing you were born with. —A nice face."

Flop: "—Huh? My face?"

Wide-eyed, Flop put both his hands to his face.

Similarly, everyone in the meeting area tilted their heads as if to say "His face?".

Mizelda: "I see, that's true."

Taritta: "—! Sister, did you realize something?"

Mizelda: "No, I just approve of what Subaru said about him having a nice face."

Taritta: "Sister…"

Mizelda nodded and crossed her arms, while Taritta sullenly hung her head.

But, since more or less no one had caught on to Subaru's intentions, an air of doubt was spreading among them. Same went for Flop and Abel, even.

However, Mizelda's stubborn interest in the appearance of others was not off-base. It was precisely her weakness and sense for beauty that had given Subaru a great hint regarding this situation.

Because Mizelda putting too much stock in good looks had been that which had inspired this Bloodless Siege Plan.

Subaru: "Evidence's better than debate. —Flop-san, we can't tell until we try it, so follow me."

Flop: “Follow you? That’s not a problem, but what in the world…”

To the still dubious Flop, Subaru pushily told him “Don’t worry about it”.

And then, his gaze turned to face Mizelda,

Subaru: “You dye your hair and draw designs on your body, so you use cosmetics right? Could you try lending me those items for a bit?”

2

Everyone: “…”

Having returned to the meeting place after a while, everyone was lost for words upon witnessing the “results”.

However, Subaru knew that it was not speechlessness born from negative sentiments such as being perplexed or fed up, but rather genuine awe and astonishment, perhaps even some moving emotion.

He could say with confidence that it was well within expectations for his handiwork to have that much of an impact.

Subaru: “Turns out, if given diamonds in the rough to work with, even I could deliver some decent results.”

Everyone: “…”

Rubbing his nose, Subaru who had declared so was met with the same unresponsive crowd as before. While the silence continued without anyone returning from their state of stupefaction, an uneasy “H-Husband-kun” was voiced.

That came from the only person who, other than Subaru, was immune to the shock induced on those present.

Flop: “Something feels off, I haven’t seen the end-product yet, but how did it turn out? The sensation isn’t very pleasant…”

Subaru: “Oh come on, there’s no need to worry Flop-sa… Nah, don’t you worry about it, Flora.”

Flop: “Flora?!”

Eyes widened in surprise was Flop—nay, Flora. Yet even when his expression was washed over with surprise, it was adorable nevertheless, thought Subaru nodding with confidence whilst caressing his face.

Then once again, Subaru grabbed Flora’s slender shoulders, and turned him to face forward.

Veiled behind the silky curtain of long, golden hair, were eyes that were more accentuated than usual from having had eyeshadow applied to them. The eyelashes had been adjusted in a way that showed off their length, and a hint of red adorned the cheeks to create a striking contrast with his naturally fair skin. Lastly, the lips were colored red and he had been changed into clothes that completed the look.

With his dainty physique, only the slightest bit of effort was required to disguise him as a “her”.

Which meant—

Subaru: “—This is the key to a bloodless siege, the best strategy I can devise!”

Throwing his fist up in the air, Subaru debuted Flop-Flora to everybody in the meeting place.

Despite the limited time given, Subaru had been capable of bringing the most out of a gem from its unpolished state, something he took pride in. Surprise should be reserved for now however, for this was only a work born from inadequate preparation, the least adorable version of what Flora could be.

Having gathered all the necessary tools, as long as the person in question kept in mind the appropriate mannerism they should uphold, it would not simply add to their charms, but increase it exponentially.

Subaru: “Beauty can be made.”

Rem: “Are you fooling around here?”

Subaru: “Eh?!”

A cold piercing voice jabbed at Subaru, who had presented a feat without rival.

Taking a peek, the owner of that voice was none other than Rem with a frigid gaze. Those eyes that had regarded Subaru with expectation just before were nowhere to be found, and were instead replaced by those that Rem had since she first woke up.

Having swallowed his breath due to the harsh gaze, Subaru said “Hold on!” with an outstretched hand.

Subaru: “I-I’m not fooling around! I’m really not fooling around here whatsoever, so don’t look at me like that!”

Rem: “You aren’t fooling around? Stop with the absurdity. I was a fool… to even have tried putting the slightest amount of faith in you.”

Subaru: “You’re jumping to conclusions! This is somewhat late but you really are just like Ram in that sense!”

Rem: “Hah?”

Despite it being something that the current Rem did not recall, Ram too was quick to jump to conclusions.

Though his heart was warmed by the thought that they were, after all, sisters, his number one priority right now was regaining the lost trust from Rem.

In actuality, Subaru was not messing around. He was taking everything head-on with all seriousness, and giving it considerable thought.

The purpose of going through all that trouble to turn Flop into a woman named Flora was—

Abel: “—The target’s Zikr Osman, huh.”

Said the first person to arrive at the answer, Abel, who had his chin resting on his hand.

Unlike the rest who had been unable to conceal their surprises at the transformation from Flop to Flora, Abel was able to suppress it and stayed silent, presumably to probe for Subaru’s true intent.

And thus, he had been able to see through what Subaru was getting at completely.

—The target would be Zikr Osman.

General Second-Class of the Empire, and commander of the Imperial Soldiers stationed in the Fortress City of Guaral. A capable man who preferred solid and safe war tactics, and on top of that—

Subaru: “I heard he’s called the Womanizer. Sounded like it was well-known among the Imperial Soldiers.”

Abel: “The fact he is renowned for being one, and that he received a nickname because of it, is common knowledge.”

Rem: “Womanizer… doesn’t give off a very likable impression to me.”

Having heard the conversation between Subaru and Abel, Rem made a grimacing face.

Subaru could not help but agree with Rem’s impression of him. Upon hearing that a military officer was a womanizer, one would probably imagine a filthy pervert with a vulgar personality. However, that’ was an opening they could use to their advantage.

Subaru: “At the Imperial Soldiers’ encampment, there was even talk of doing things like presenting a captured woman to General Zikr. Basically, as long as a woman’s harmless there’s a good chance she can get near him.”

It was something he would rather not recall, but at the encampment, Jamal had directly told Subaru that he would do something such as offering Rem to Zikr.

Rem was a beautiful girl, so it could be said that Zikr's sense of beauty was a normal one.

Subaru: "That being the case, with the power of Flora, it should be doable."

Flop: "H-Husband-kun? You've been calling me Flora with intense anticipation for a while now, but what do I look like right now? I don't know what's going on and I'm scared!"

Subaru: "Don't worry, Flora. I won't make you do this alone, of course. I'm going to fight the same way too."

Mizelda: "No matter how you look at it, that's absurd, Subaru!"

Subaru soothed the bewildered Flora, and Mizelda stood up at his remark. Her eyes were overcast with a strong, hard expression, and she gripped her hands on Subaru's shoulders, shaking her head.

Then, she lowered her tone of voice as if imparting a truth that was difficult to convey,

Mizelda: "Your eyes have a charm to them as well. But as for what you were born with…"

Subaru: "Hey hey, come on now, Mizelda-san. Didn't you hear what I said?"

Mizelda: "What was that?"

Subaru: "—Beauty can be made."

Subaru affirmed reassuringly, placing his hand atop the one Mizelda had placed on his shoulder.

Hearing this, Mizelda opened her eyes wide and gasped. Then, directing her gaze at Flora, she squinted as if the makeup on that face were something radiant.

Mizelda: "You've got me beat… Let's see it, your potential."

Subaru: “Yeah, just watch.]

Kuna: “What are you talking about, I don’t geeet it.”

Mizelda entrusted the matter to Subaru, and he accepted. Kuna watched the exchange between the pair with exasperation, but had no comment to give.

Anyway, the problem now was—

Abel: “As for utilizing Zikr Osman’s preferences, what is your intention? Even he, is still a wolf. Merely dangling a pretty thing in front of him, he is not a dog who shall bite at such bait.”

Subaru: “Well, dangling something purposelessly is hardly worth discussing. So, we need to devise a way to get him to bite. For instance, enticing him to a party.”

Abel: “A banquet? Alas, it shan’t be easy to draw him in. Naturally, there is no reason for him to emerge from inside the walls until reinforcements from the Imperial Capital are present. He shall not be tempted by a suspicious invitation.]

Subaru: “Sure. I’m still narrowing down the choices, but…”

Rem: “W-wait, please!”

Like that, while Subaru and Abel were in the midst of arguing back and forth, Rem raised her voice.

She looked back and forth between the two, a surprised expression affixed to her face,

Rem: “Are you being serious? I can’t believe you’re going through with this, centered on pranking Flop-san.”

Flop: “Wha, they’re pranking me? Seriously, what do I look like right now? Wife-san says I look like I’ve been pranked… Niece-chan, what’s going on?”

Louis: “Auu? Uu! Uu!”

Beside the tense Rem, Flora, who had not yet been able to see his reflection even once, sought solace in Louis. But having never met Flora before, Louis panicked and hid behind Rem.

In other words, in Louis's view, it appeared as if Flora and Flop were different people.

Abel: "Setting aside whether that girl's reaction is appropriate as a litmus test, I do not consider this a prank. At last, you have proposed an idea meriting discussion."

Subaru: "Then you also recognize it. The beauty of Flora."

Abel: "—. I recognized that your idea was one I had not thought of. Do not get it twisted now."

Subaru's lips curled in an expression of dissatisfaction with Abel's obstinate reply.

However, Abel paid him no mind, and for a short period held his hand to his mouth in careful deliberation. Then, he shot a jagged look in Subaru's direction,

Abel: "Natsuki Subaru, I have one question… Your cosmetics, can only the merchant make use of it?"

The question came.

Subaru: "…"

For a moment, Abel's inquiry left him dumbfounded.

But Subaru turned over the intent of the question in his mind, and shook his head.

Subaru: "I already told you. I said I'm in the same boat as you if we go through with this operation!]

Abel: "Nonsense. Who would place their trust in you? Take a look at yourself in the mirror and only then speak."

Subaru: "Watch your mouth!"

Brow furrowed, Abel spat out his contempt from the depths of his heart. Ignoring Subaru's hurt from this comment, he pressed his hand to his chest,

Abel: "To handle this alone is beyond the capabilities of a mere merchant. —Thus, I shall follow suit."

Mizelda: "A-Abel too?!"

Hearing that brazen self-recommendation, the air of the meeting place around Mizelda began to buzz.

Of course, Subaru had also been surprised by Abel's proposal. Truly, he had never dreamed he would suggest that on his own.

Subaru: "…Honestly, I thought the main issue was going to be how to talk you into it."

Abel: "In ordinary times, it would be a fool's errand, something not even worth considering. But as it stands, we possess few cards to play, and our potential plans are also limited. If it is indeed effective, it is a necessary situation we must stoop to."

Subaru: "Tch, you have a freaking terrible way of putting it. This is why charismatic bastards are…"

Never mind that he had been chased off the throne, there was no wavering of the fact that he was the Emperor.

That was Abel's creed, and a belief that he would not yield on. Having been shown a glimpse of it so blatantly, Subaru had no choice but to genuinely commend him.

Were he an example of an inept person with authority, he would make a blunder by being too preoccupied with his own safety.

However, ever since Abel had first encountered Subaru in the jungle, he had continued to win big gambles using himself as a chip, Lifeblood Ritual included.

This time would be no exception as well, and he probably had zero intention of backing down from it.

Abel: “An ingenious scheme is something that starts producing results only when performed from outside the enemy’s expectations. Taking advantage of the General’s biases, it conceals itself in their unavoidable negligence. There is value in discussing this plan.”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s also written in a book called the “Kojiki”. It says that crossdressing’s the best option when aiming for the enemy General’s neck.”

Rem: “You can’t seriously just accept the contents of such a suspicious book…”

It was a reference to an old book of ancient and honorable origin, but even if he were to explain the trustworthiness of the “Kojiki” to Rem now, he would not get a reply from the current her. As of now, he could not think of a way to quickly regain the trust Rem had in him.

He feared rejection without the chance to explain himself, so he was grateful yet surprised that Abel had accepted his proposal.

Subaru: “When you said poison, I really thought you were the type to execute anyone who opposed you, but…”

Abel: “If required, I am willing to do so. Nevertheless, emotions are far from being a necessity for future decisions. After all, what I must obtain is not limited to the city of Guaral.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “If General Zikr Osman were to be secured, we can devise means to procure what I desire without bloodshed. If the concerns of an internal insurrection can be reduced, that would be celebratory.”

Subaru: “…Right. There’s definitely value in the words from the guy who’s lost his place because of an internal insurrection.”

A restrained taunt he said in the spur of the moment, but Abel’s expression did not give the slightest twitch.

Was this level of sarcasm and disrespect not worth getting aggravated over? —Or perhaps, like Abel himself had stated, he was not as pigheaded as to not recognise his own shortcomings.

In any case—

Subaru: “If you’re cooperative then there’s nothing more that I could ask for. Your name… Abel, Vollachia… Is Bianca fine?”

Abel: “I am not particular about my fake name, call me as you prefer. More importantly, there is hardly enough manpower with just you, me and the merchant. Let me see…”

Crossing his arms, Abel surveyed the faces in the meeting area.

Then, closing one eye with a “Hm”,

Abel: “The ones we can use are Kuna and Taritta, that would be about it.”

Subaru: “Wha?”

Abel: “It is the preparation needed. Even if we successfully draw out Zikr Osman, the requisite manpower to suppress him is needed. Saying that, anyone who is instantly recognizable as one of the People of Shudraq should be avoided.”

Abel said while pointing with his chin. Hearing that, Subaru also understood Abel’s thinking.

Suddenly being put under the spotlight, Taritta and Kuna were perplexed. While they were members of the People of Shudraq, compared to the others, these two were the types that did not give off a wild atmosphere.

Mizelda, at first glance, looked like a fiery and aggressive fighter. Similarly, Holly on first look, gave a unique impression on people. They were not suited for this situation, which called for the concealment of their Shudraqian identities.

In the end, what was needed to not raise alarms in the enemy’s mind was a feminine charm—

Subaru: "I think that's the limit of what my dress-up and makeup can do. I can't give them a womanly charm with these cosmetics after all."

Rem: "—Me too."

Subaru: "Rem?"

Then, the one who swiftly raised her hand there was Rem.

This was the Rem who did not hide her disbelief towards Subaru after the case with Flora. Yet, as if she'd had some reconsideration after seeing them continue a serious discussion of this plan, her expression was likewise weighty.

And, with resolve and determination shining in her light-blue eyes,

Rem: "Please, let me take part in this. I'll definitely be of use."

Subaru: "Rem… Sorry, but that's not possible."

Rem: "—Hk! Again, you're unnecessarily trying to distance me from danger…"

Her resolution on the verge of being crushed, Rem's eyes shot daggers at Subaru.

Without a doubt, Subaru held a sense of overprotectiveness that would most likely infuriate Rem. His sentiment to distance her from danger and let her peacefully spend her time inside a cradle was no lie.

However, that was not the sole reason for stopping her participation in this battle.

Subaru: "It's true I'm worried for your safety. But, the reason I'm rejecting your involvement is simply because the plan's success rate will decrease… Rem, your face has already been seen by the Imperial Soldiers."

Rem: "—Ah."

Subaru: “There was that time you got caught at the camp, and also when we were running away from the city. We can’t use Medium’s help for the same reason. We made too much of a scene.”

After causing such a commotion, the guards at the security checkpoint would definitely not forget Rem and Medium’s faces. Louis too, for that matter.

The operation this time, was a battle on whether or not they could get the better of the enemy’s thinking and slip under their radar. Unless they wanted to endanger that core idea, there was no way they could bring Rem along.

Rem: “But… But, if the condition is whether our face has been seen or not, then it should be the same for you too!”

Subaru: “Yes, but no. Because, it won’t be me who’ll be passing through the main gate of Guaral. It’ll be Natsumi Schwartz.”

Rem: “Hah?”

As if she thought she was being deceived again, anger blazed in the determined Rem’s eyes. However, in regards to this case, nothing could be explained through words.

Just like how Flop had been transformed into Flora, Natsuki Subaru had to simply disguise himself into Natsumi Schwartz. —He had to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Subaru: “Anyways, the reason I can’t bring you along’s just as I explained. But, Taritta and Kuna, you guys too, this’ll be a dangerous operation so I’ll have to convince you two first before…”

Mizelda: “Nah, this is interesting. I’ll allow it. Take them both.”

Just as Subaru was trying to confirm the thoughts and intentions of the two Shudraqians, Mizelda interrupted with those words.

Turning his head in surprise, Subaru saw the shining eyes of Mizelda focused back on him with blazing curiosity. She stared with the intensity of a hunter; it felt like she was peeling his skin off and trying to take a peek underneath.

For a brief moment, Subaru could even feel an intense fear sweep through him.

Subaru: “Mizelda, san?”

Mizelda: “Subaru, you and Abel have already proven your valor. Shudraq respects those blessed with valor. But, that doesn’t mean we cut and throw away ingenuity as an unblessed value. Might and wisdom, those excelling in both become supreme warriors… Go and prove yourselves.”

Her cheeks warmed in joy, as if the operation that targeted the enemy’s weakness was favorable for her as well.

Based on assumptions, Subaru had believed without question that Mizelda and the rest of the People of Shudraq would dislike this sort of scheme. That was why he planned on inquiring Taritta and Kuna whether they would like to participate in this operation or not.

However, after Mizelda gave her answer, Taritta and Kuna nodded along as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Kuna: “If the Chieftain says so, I have nothing else to reaaally say.”

Taritta: “I will follow Sister’s direction… I am also interested in this, makeup.”

Linking her hands behind her head, Kuna accepted with an attitude that said she did not care either way. Taritta held the same opinion but she would flick her gaze towards Flora on and off.

It seemed like she had gained an interest in Subaru’s makeup handiwork. He thought the scene was somewhat lacking in the tension expected from the preparation of a life or death operation, but—

Abel: “If there are no objections, then let us swiftly prepare. We must settle this battle before the cowards in the Fortress City receive encouragement from the Imperial Capital.”

Subaru: “… Okay, got it. If everyone’s good with that too. Rem, is this alright with you?”

Rem: “—. You’re not going to listen no matter what I say, are you?”

Laden with embarrassment from what she had spoken before, Rem glared at Subaru intently. He was sorry about dismissing her resolve but, after considering her safety and the success of the operation, there was no path in which she could join them.

That was why Subaru cast his eyes downwards, and resigned himself to bear Rem’s fury.

However—

Rem: “But, the one who asked you to do something about this, the one who requested that, was me.”

Subaru: “Rem?”

Rem: “And for me to make a fuss about it, there’s no way I can do that… Please be successful.”

Her frustration had not vanished, and it was not as if she had forgiven Subaru as well. She would respect the decision made, was what was communicated to him through her averting gaze.

Just by that, the dark clouds within Subaru cleared up.

Subaru: “Only Rem can do this, but man is it calming… Wait, that’s not right is it?”

Just by showing her very slight approval, Subaru was giddy to the point that he felt like he could fly up high in the sky.

But also, when Emilia smiled, he felt like he could rise up to the heavens by that smile alone, and when Beatrice would explain something with her smug face, his chest would become super warm and comfy.

With a “Huh”, Subaru only now noticed that he was easier to deal with than he’d thought.

Abel: “What is the matter? Are you only now getting cold feet?”

Subaru: “Not now, that’s not quite right … It’s just that, I’m getting pumped up.”

Abel: “Hoh? Show that with your utmost efforts, then.”

Receiving courage from Rem’s comment, Subaru answered while Abel flared his nose.

Needless to say, that was what he intended to do. —Once this “bloodless siege” succeeded, the path to return to the Kingdom of Lugunica might open up.

Even if that were not the case, Subaru would not let any tragedy occur within his sight’s reach. He would not let it happen.

???: “—Heeey, big brooo! It’s not nice to Bote-chin if we don’t let her rest so I wanna put her somewhereee.”

Then, in the meeting area where zeal was rising, Medium peeked her face in without hesitation.

Even when compared to the muscular Shudraqians, Medium stood one head taller, and so was very noticeable with her height. The said-noticeable person then looked over the meeting area with her round eyes and,

Medium: “Eh, where’s big bro?”

Flop: “Ohhh, dear sister! To lose sight of your brother is quite cruel of you. I’m present, right here!”

Medium: “—?”

Towards the head-tilted Medium, Flora stood up and made her existence aware. And towards Flora’s words, Medium scrunched her eyebrows and fell into deep thought.

Staying silent for a while, she then yelled, as if she had come to a realization.

Medium: “Big bro, all this time you were actually my big sis!”

Flop: “Husband-kun?! What’s going on here?! This is actually scary!”

If even the eyes of a blood-related sister could be deceived, this would certainly be a firm foothold for this operation.

Chapter 23:
Musician Natsumi Schwartz

1

Subaru: “…”

Looking at his reflection in the crude mirror, Natsuki Subaru—or rather, the being who used to call himself that, squinted their eyes and carefully inspected themselves over and over again.

Dark eyeshadow and carefully curled eyelashes reflected back. The texture of their skin, the greatest point of difference between men and women, was coated with white powder; his lips were painted with a vermillion color that made them look fresh.

The costume had been quite the challenge, but he had been able to disguise his physique by wearing a lot of loose clothing, despite struggling to achieve a style that matched the southern climate.

At any rate, this time he would have to act not as the daughter of a nobleman, but in a looser and casual manner—that of a traveling entertainer. Therefore, aside from gestures, the appearance needed to be more “female” in order to fit the design.

Subaru: “I’m going to gather as much of my body to my chest and stuff it to the limit…”

He had utilized every technique he could think of, pictured the encounters he had so far in his mind.

Starting with Emilia, then Felt and the loathsome Elsa, followed by Ram and Rem, plus Beatrice and Petra, setting Meili aside. After that, Priscilla, Crusch, Anastasia, and Ferris, who he should look up to as a mentor, and then Frederica. Then there were the Witches, well-dressed only in appearance, annoyingly—he had gathered his imagination of “beauty” from all the beautiful girls, beautiful women, and beautiful girl-like beings he had met in this other world so far.

—He must constantly imagine himself as the most beautiful version of herself.

He did not need to think about anything else beyond the vision he held.

He had made the best move he could with what he currently had on hand, and arrived at the place where he needed to be.

Therefore—

Subaru: “—This is me.”

His sight left the mirror, then he slowly took a deep breath and turned around.

Alone, after hours of trying to fight in solitude, he finally pushed open the door. Beyond it, he could see his friends with bated breath, waiting for the success or failure of this mission to take hold.

The women turned their attention to Subaru as he opened the door and stepped out.

Subaru: “…”

There was silence, and he could feel the tense atmosphere.

His immediate anxiety refused to allow him to understand which emotion was causing the silence. Certainly, he was lacking a number of cards to play with. If he’d had that, if he’d had this, there would be no end to his regrets.

However, thinking about it, was it not about taking initiative?

One could not always go into battle in perfect condition. In any case, life was all about playing the cards one had been dealt, wasn’t it?

And it was when he found himself making excuses as if he had already lost the battle.

???: “…Brilliant.”

He heard the faint sound of air bursting and looked up.

There he saw that the true nature of this burst had been nothing of the sort. It was the sound of hands coming together. It was the sound of applause. The sound was a mixture of congratulations, admiration, and respect.

Subaru: “Mi…”

He looked at the person clapping and was about to call out in a manner unbefitting a lady, but stopped himself in time.

It was still incomplete. He gently put his hand to his throat and let the air bounce there in small puffs. Then, just as the gears clicked in his mind, he smiled,

Subaru: “Mizelda-san.”

Mizelda: “—Hk, no way, your voice? What in the world, what in the world, how in the…?!”

Subaru: “Once I’ve decided to do something, it’s my duty to do my best. There are lives that can be saved if I don’t cut corners. If that’s the case, then there’s only one thing I have to do.”

Mizelda: “Ooh…!”

The smile disappeared and he pointed one finger up towards the heavens.

The close thicket of trees prevented him from seeing the sun, but it was not the heavenly beings he had to show this to, only the many friends gathered here.

Look at them, from head to toe.

It didn’t matter if it was from the front, the back, the right, the left, or anywhere in between.

—He must constantly imagine himself as the most beautiful.

If he succeeded in tracing that image, succeeded in recreating the ideal, then he would have nothing to fear.

Here, with authority—

Subaru: "—Natsumi Schwartz's advent."

That's what Natsumi Schwartz heroically—or rather, declared like a lady.

Mizelda, the woman who had stopped clapping in front of him, nodded deeply. She then lined up next to Natsumi, supporting his back with her hand,

Mizelda: "My world was too small. You were right, Subaru… No, Natsumi."

Subaru: "You understand now, don't you, Mizelda-san?"

Mizelda: "Ahh, it is frustrating, but I do understand now… Beauty can be made."

Mizelda lowered the corners of her eyes and smiled gently, while Natsumi smiled back.

The People of Shudraq that were gathered there also looked at each other as they witnessed the beautiful scene. Then, applause rained down, coming as a belated blessing.

The applause continued to pour down, congratulating Natsumi on her unveiling.

And then—

???: "What is this?"

???: "Uh~"

The ones who couldn't quite get over it watched the scene with their cheeks contorted into a frown.

Subaru: “And so, Natsumi Schwartz was born. I was a bit confused, since the different makeup tools and all, but I managed to get this much done.”

Rem: “Are you kidding me?”

Subaru: “Eh?!”

After returning to the meeting place and setting up another assembly, Natsumi—or rather, Subaru’s words were answered by Rem, her gaze gelid, her tone glaciated .

Rem’s chilly attitude did not change even after showing her the results. Subaru pointed to his face and said,

Subaru: “I need fake eyelashes after all… For the wig. I managed to borrow some black hair from the Shudraq…”

Rem: “I’m not talking about that. I think the makeup and wigs are well done. But you don’t have to talk like a woman forever.”

Subaru: “Yes, but… the state of mind is also important, isn’t it? If I’m not careful on a regular basis, I never know where I might fall apart. Besides…”

Rem: “Besides?”

Subaru: “If I indulge in the fact that I’m a man, the goddess of beauty will turn her back on me and… Ouch ouch ouch!”

Just as Subaru was about to speak seriously, Rem pulled his ear quite hard.

He couldn’t help but get teary-eyed as he quickly moved away. Subaru decided to slip close to Mizelda, who was watching the proceedings.

Subaru: “Mizelda-anesama, I’m afraid of Rem-san…”

Mizelda: “Umm, don’t cry, Natsumi… Strangely enough, you look so cute, even though I know you’re Subaru. Taritta should learn from you.”

Taritta: “Sister!”

While her sister patted Subaru’s head, Taritta rolled her eyes at Mizelda’s ruthless comment.

However, Taritta’s face was much softer than it would normally be. That was because Subaru had rearranged the heavy makeup she usually wore, which could be called the war paint of the People of Shudraq, to make her look cuter.

The Shudraq were best known for their bravery and strength, but this time they were required to be both glamorous and dangerous, with a magical and sensuous quality that could drive men crazy.

Taritta and Kuna’s makeup was fun to apply once they decided to focus their beauty regimen in that direction.

Subaru: “You have a much younger face than I expected, Taritta-anesama. Your makeup looks great, it’s nice to show off your cuteness once in a while.”

Taritta: “Please don’t tease me! First of all, I can’t be as pretty as you…”

Subaru: “Well, your lack of confidence is also cute! Right, Mizelda-anesama?”

Mizelda: “Yes, dear.”

Mizelda’s cheeks relaxed as Subaru leaned up to her and spoke softly. Taritta flinched at the sight of the two of them, and turned over with a slight blush on her cheeks.

Her brown skin made it hard to see her cheeks redden, but the makeup on her eyes and lips gave the impression of a slight blush, so it was easy to see the adorable change in her appearance.

Rem: “When are you going to stop fooling around?!”

Rem shattered such a flowery scene with a single shout.

Subaru and Taritta shrank as if hit by a gust of wind. Rem glared at them with her pale blue eyes, then looked at Kuna at the edge of the room.

Kuna, who, like Taritta, also had her makeup done along with her hair, jerked away.

Kuna: “Wh-What is it, for the record, I have nothing to do with this…”

Rem: “Kuna-san, I’m counting on you. Looking at those two, I see you’re the only one who’s sane… Are you seriously going along with this plan?”

Kuna: “I know I’m the only sane one, but…”

Kuna, who had her hair in twin tails, looked at Subaru and Taritta with an unmotivated look in her eyes.

It was an unpleasant assessment, but Subaru could only wait to see what would happen. Her look told him that he was insane, and thus was different from Taritta, who was shaking in shock.

Kuna let out a small exhale at the reaction of Subaru and the others.

Kuna: “The reason why he couldn’t do the mission has disappeared, you understand that too, right, Rem? Natsumi… Subaru doesn’t have a problem. Yeah, he’s more of a woman than the Chieftain.”

Rem: “I think that’s too rude to say about Mizelda-san…”

Kuna: “I don’t think it’s a problem. What’ll be a problem are our results over there…”

And just as Kuna was nearly done answering Rem’s questions,

???: “—It appears everyone is here.”

Kuna: “Oh, speaking of the devil…”

A pompous, undeceiving tone of voice enveloped the meeting hall, and a new figure appeared.

When Kuna's gaze turned in that direction, Rem had no choice but to turn in the same direction. Naturally, Subaru, Mizelda, and the others' gazes were drawn there as well.

Everyone: "…"

At that moment, time stopped for everyone.

—No, to be precise, time stopped for everyone aside from the figure that appeared and Subaru, who had applied makeup to them.

Subaru: "I left the fine-tuning to you, but… you're so good at it, it's almost disgusting."

Abel: "It does not elate me to be praised for my makeup skills. Nevertheless, your skills are impressive. So, even a finished product may become a whole new thing, huh. It looks even better than I imagined."

Subaru: "Kuh, my margin for victory…!"

As he said this, Subaru gently bit his pinky finger in frustration.

Of course, there was no doubting his belief that beauty could be created. Subaru was also proud to say that he had proved this with his own body, using the few cards he had in hand.

However, there was still a difference in materials.

That was why—

Rem: "Ah, Abel-san, right?"

Abel: "Who else would it be? Do not inquire such a silly question. No, if I have changed that much, then your surprise is appropriate for reference."

In response to Rem's trembling words, Abel—or rather, Bianca, the being born from makeup, a wig, and a change of costume, clutched his five thin white fingers.

His raven black hair was long and lustrous, creating a perfect harmony with his beautiful face and slit eyes. The dancer's costume bound his waist, splitting down his legs, showing just enough skin to attract attention.

Standing there was a beautiful dancer who had recreated extreme beauty, the best joker card in hand, that was essential to this plan.

Everyone else: "…"

Bianca's perfection was such that even Mizelda and the others had lost their voices.

That was different from Subaru's Natsumi, where the shock was over the magnitude of the change. This was the pure shock that was brought about by the perfection of beauty that Abel's Bianca had in spades.

The Shudraqian jewelry, which adorned the dancer's costume and long hair, served only as a garnish to accentuate his real beauty.

Subaru remembered the smile on Mizelda's face when she had lent them to him.

For some reason, Subaru's heart ached when he remembered that smile. However, out of concern for Mizelda and the others, Subaru did not have the option of cutting corners.

How could he ruin this perfection himself?

Subaru's ego as Natsumi Schwartz would not allow for such a thing.

Subaru: "It was surprising to me that you weren't afraid of wearing makeup…"

Abel: "What, you think it a disgrace to dress up as a woman? For the record, this is not the first time I have done this. I have undergone such things many times in my childhood."

Subaru: "As a child?"

Abel: "Yes. Considering my position, I would state it is a good idea to possess a wide range of ways to protect oneself."

Subaru's lips curved at Abel's words, not Bianca's, a beautiful woman who crossed her arms adorably.

Perhaps his past experiences were referring to the secret feuds he'd endured as a candidate to become the next Emperor, before actually taking up the seat.

In Vollachia, where the succession to the throne was apparently much more tumultuous than in Lugunica, it was easy to imagine the possibility of assassination being employed in the battle over who became the next Emperor.

In order to survive such a harsh life, he would have sometimes had to disguise his appearance and even gender.

Abel's willingness to make sacrifices, including his own, seemed to have been shaped by his childhood, before he won the throne of the Emperor.

That was how it had come about, and now appeared in Abel's Bianca, now dressed as a woman.

Subaru: "Still, it's kind of annoying that you're aware that you're beautiful…!"

Abel: "That is exactly what is ridiculous. How can someone be in a position where they must be capable of looking at their country from a broad perspective, and not be able to see themselves objectively? Though you seem to have subverted that objective assessment of yourself through your own skills, I have no need for those kinds of petty tricks."

Subaru: "Guh… Hk."

Abel: "Do you know why tigers are strong? Tigers are strong because they are strong."

Subaru was struck by a concept that he had heard from Garfiel as well.

The theory that tigers were strong because they were tigers, became attributed to the fact that Abel was beautiful because he was Abel.

It was no longer the logic of violence.

It was the same as saying that Reinhardt was strong because he was Reinhardt.

In other words, it was a blunt view of the world.

Subaru: “Well, anyway… Flora’s thinking the same thing, isn’t she?!”

Flop: “Aren’t you jumping to conclusions there, Husband-kun?!”

Behind Abel followed an astonished Flop, now disguised as Flora.

He was also dressed up, and had the type of beauty that Subaru knew would make a finished product more complete just by fully utilizing the potential of his resources. In fact, unlike Subaru and Abel, he’d had his originally long hair only slightly tweaked, so it could be said that he was the one who brought out the most charm from the materials.

In fact, Subaru was confident that if they stood side-by-side, he wouldn’t be greatly inferior. But—

Subaru: “There is a difference in the amount of time and effort that is put in… Must be divine favoritism…!”

Flop: “I’m sorry to hear you lamenting this, but you look great Husband-kun. You’re no longer Husband-kun, you’re Husband-san!”

Subaru: “…I’m not satisfied with a compliment like that anymore.”

Flop: “Was that a compliment? I didn’t know it was.”

Flop’s frankness hadn’t changed even though he was now Flora. Anyway, that was fine in his case. Although he would need some acting guidance to follow the plan’s directions.

In this situation however, it was Abel who would be the most important.

Subaru: “Flora and I can play instruments. Therefore, your role is…”

Abel: “Dancing, huh. I do not require being told, I have the plan in my mind. The importance of my role alike. Besides…”

Subaru: “Besides?”

Abel: “I am not as excellent at dancing as my dead sister, but I am pretty close.”

His cheeks twisted, and even his triumphant, arrogant smile was beautiful.

Abel’s confident attitude was reassuring, and at the same time, it made Subaru’s heart burn with anticipation. In fact, Abel had demonstrated his devilishness without regret as a complete Bianca.

If Abel’s self-awareness was correct, Subaru could have high hopes for the dancing as well.

Subaru: “—. Alright then. If you have that much confidence, show me how good you are. After all, you can’t take back whatever you’ve spat out.”

Abel: “Whatever I spat out, huh…? Hmmm, as in, when one is being spat down upon by the clouds, you mean? That is quite a roundabout way of saying it, but that is fine. I shall display it to you.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “It is the least I can do, to reward you for offering this plan.”

Abel’s arrogance did not diminish, even when dressed as a woman, as if he never doubted himself.

Feeling both reassured and threatened by this, Subaru softly looked at Rem. Unfortunately, he couldn’t let her accompany him for his plan.

But still—

Subaru: “Please pray for my safety. I’ll do my best for you.”

Rem: “—. ——. ————. —————. Yes.”

Subaru: “It took you long enough to pray, didn’t it!”

Subaru shouted at Rem’s late reply, who looked sincerely mystified.

Louis, beside Rem, pulled her head back in tightly as she heard this. It seemed that even she could not recognize Natsumi as Subaru.

For the moment, it was a good thing that the reaction convinced him that he had gained some momentum for the mission.

3

—Operation “Kumaso Takeru”.

That was the name of the operation aimed at Zikr Osman, the Womanizer, and General Second-Class of the Empire.

Inspired by a tale out of the Kojiki, the name for the operation had been Subaru’s suggestion, fortunately, no one had not raised any objections.

It was uncertain if they had respected Subaru, the one who had come up with the plan, or if no one cared about the name of the operation in the first place, but it was a good thing that there had been no trouble over it.

At any rate, there was no point in a plan in which the element of luck inevitably came into play.

Of course, they would spare no effort to improve their chances of success, but it was difficult to accrete luck. However, it was not a bad thing to gain a favorable condition, even if it was a small one.

—Leaving the Buddheim Jungle, the group set course for Guaral.

The five members of the party were Subaru’s Natsumi, Abel’s Bianca, Flop’s Flora, Taritta, and Kuna. The rest of the People of Shudraq were led by Mizelda in a separate party, with Rem, Louis, and Medium among them.

Hiding away from the city, they would need to attack the walls of the Fortress City and act as a diversion if the need arose. However, that was only an insurance policy.

A less-than-ideal insurance policy in case the plan fails. If the plan were to fail, Subaru and the others would be in a very dangerous situation by then.

Anyway—

Subaru: “Personally, I think the first checkpoint’s the most important one.”

Subaru muttered this, looking up at the main gate, in which the front was glaring down at them from high above.

They were going to challenge the main gate again, which they had once forced their way through, albeit that had passed a few days ago. Naturally, after what had happened the other day, the security level at the checkpoint was higher than before.

In preparation for another invasion by rebels, special emphasis had been placed on dragon carriages, ox carts, and other vehicles that could hide people in their cargo. He could hear the shouts of merchants and travelers as their tools of the trade were mangled, their carts turned over, and their straw carefully poked with swords.

To be honest, he felt quite bad for them. However, considering the chaos that would occur in the city ahead, he thought it might be wise of them to turn back here.

Of course, there was no way he could give them that kind of advice, but—

???: “—Next, what about you guys?”

A stern man’s rough voice struck Subaru’s eardrums as he pondered.

Upon looking up, he saw a bald-headed guard with a strong physique beckoning toward him. The man called the group forward, and Subaru hung his head reverently at the head of the group.

Subaru: “We are a troupe of traveling entertainers. We come to this city from the north.”

Guard: “Oh, traveling entertainers…”

Raising an eyebrow in curiosity, the guard also looked at the group behind Subaru.

Flora, carrying a musical instrument on her back, waved; Taritta, carrying her luggage on her back, bowed; Kuna draped a parasol over the person next to her, whose face was covered by a veil, not allowing anyone to see her expression.

The guard’s admiration for this rather atmospheric group could be sensed.

Subaru: “…”

On the other hand, while maintaining an amiable smile, Subaru’s insides were tense.

He was familiar with the guard. He was the one who had been in charge of the main gate when Subaru had first met Flop and Medium when entering Guaral.

In other words, he could not have been a better choice for the first obstacle.

Guard: “But coming from the north, that must’ve been tough. It’s rumored that the Scorching Lady’s territory’s bustling with activity over there. Flocks of flying dragons are flying around.”

Subaru: “Yes, yes, that’s true. That’s why we couldn’t stay there for too long… On the other hand, this is a city protected by such a magnificent wall, so I’m sure it’s safe, right?”

Guard: “Uhhh, that’s…”

When Subaru flirted, with a faint smile on his face, the guard’s expression grew uncomfortable.

The reason for his reaction was probably that he too was aware that the Imperial Soldiers, whose camp had been burned to the ground, had fled into the city. On top of that, the commotion caused by Subaru and his companions the other day had probably made the Imperial Soldiers in the city more alert and the atmosphere tense.

That must have been the reason for the guard's slurred speech.

That being the case, there was no reason not to take advantage of it.

Subaru: "…Are you worried about something in this city, by any chance?"

Guard: "…Yeah, kinda. It's something that's easy to find out even if you try to hide it. As a matter of fact, the Imperial Army's stationed in this city right now, and they're having trouble with the tribes to the east. So…"

Subaru: "Oh dear! That must be suffocating for the people of the city."

Guard: "That's right."

Apparently exasperated, the guard leaned forward at Subaru's words.

Although it was hard to distinguish between the two when not in contact with each other, guards and soldiers basically had different positions. Guards in a city belonged to that city only. Soldiers, on the other hand, belonged to the country, in this case the Empire. Their chain of command was also fundamentally different.

The guard in front of him was also a member of this city and had a duty to protect it.

However, the current situation was that the Imperial Army had taken over the City Hall, and the guards were being ordered to do this and that. The guards had no reason to be used as a toy by the Imperial Soldiers.

Guard: “In addition, they took over the city taverns by themselves, calling it “night patrol”. And since they don’t pay well, it’s not good for business. I can’t handle it anymore.”

Subaru: “Oh dear, oh dear, how terrible! My heart goes out to you. Between you and me, I’ve had my share of rough experiences with the arrogance of the Imperial Soldiers.”

Guard: “Oh, really? A beautiful woman like you…?”

After he threw in some agreeable reactions, the guard’s response softened at once at Subaru’s deep and loud approval. Actually, the man seemed to be quite friendly, so Subaru lowered his voice slightly, then said, “Yes,” and turned his head to look away.

Seeing that meaningful gesture, the guard said, “Oh, miss?” before he became flustered.

Guard: “Are you okay? If you don’t wanna talk, don’t bother…”

Subaru: “No, I’m fine. It’s an old, old story. It’s just that before, I was forcibly captured by the Imperial Soldiers and put in a cage and treated like a slave.”

Guard: “That’s…”

Subaru: “They sometimes did things like intentionally extend their feet to make me trip and fall, and at other times they would even threaten me with blades…”

Guard: “Tha-that’s unforgivable…!”

The guard clenched his fists in righteous indignation as Subaru tearfully recounted his past.

Seeing the man’s ears reddening in fury, Subaru muttered softly, “You’re so kind.”

Guard: “No, no, I’m not trying to be nice. Anyone’d feel the same way you do.”

Subaru: “Then, hey, Guard-sama. If you feel sorry for me, please let me in. If you do…”

Guard: “Then what?”

Subaru: “Then I’ll give a makeover to the atmosphere of this city, which the Imperial Army has made so bleak.”

His voice was quiet, but the enthusiasm in his voice was passionate.

Hearing this, the stern face of the guard flushed with surprise. His gaze turned to the troupe of traveling entertainers lined up behind Subaru.

Guard: “…Ladies, what arts exactly are you gonna show us?”

Subaru: “Of course, we have traveled around the world and learned many different arts. I also like to sing, play a bit of music, and do a little magic. But…”

Guard: “…Gulp.”

Subaru: “The best part of the show is the dance of the troupe’s flower, the danseuse.”

With those words, Subaru pointed to a figure standing in the center of the group, protected by a parasol. Her face was hidden by a veil, and she was the main attraction of the troupe.

The guard’s eyes widened and stiffened as he took in the gaze from behind the veil.

His throat was frozen, even though not everything was exposed.

Guard: “…”

It was natural to be blinded and unable to move.

It was a masterpiece that would have frustrated even Subaru. “Beauty can be made”, he had boldly stated, but true beauty was a creation of God.

After all, Subaru‘s beauty was nothing more than touch-up work in comparison to that.

However, even that one step was enough to sharpen his devilish beauty even more.

Subaru: “In addition to the danseuse, we’ll also sing and play music for you. We hope you will allow us to stay in Guaral.”

Guard: “…”

Subaru: “Guard-sama?”

Guard: “…Ah, aah, that’s right. I don’t see anything suspicious among your possessions…”

The guard muttered to himself as he came back to his senses after being nipped in the shoulder with a little pinch. He then put his hand on his chest and looked around at the group, breathing softly to check the beating of his heart.

And as much as possible, while consciously averting his gaze in order to not become mesmerized by that fiendish visage.

Guard: “You can come in. If you’re gonna perform somewhere, it’s better to stay away from the main gate. The main street in the middle of town’s a good place to start. The City Hall’s too crowded with soldiers to be a viable candidate.”

Subaru: “Well, that’s very kind of you… When will Guard-sama be available?”

Guard: “Oh, me? My shift ends just before dinner at dusk, and then I’ll go eat…”

Subaru: “Then please let me know where that restaurant is. I’m sure that if you bring some of your colleagues with you, we’ll be able to thank them for their hospitality towards us.”

He gently leaned in and whispered so into the guard’s ear.

When the guard raised his eyes in surprise, Subaru smiled at him and moved away. Then turning to his troupe mates, impatiently waiting at the checkpoint,

Subaru: “Okay, here we go, folks. Let’s clear the atmosphere in this city as a gift.”

With that, Subaru led the people who had stopped in their tracks and passed by the guard.

With the guard holding his ears and looking on in amazement, Subaru and the others walked proudly and unhindered through the main gate into the city.

Watching them go, the guard exhaled quietly—

Guard: “…Let’s try to finish work as soon as possible for today.”

He blurted this out.

Flop: “Well, that was a thing of beauty, Husband-san! I’m beginning to think that maybe you have more talent as a merchant than I do!”

A few moments after passing through the main gate with his luggage, Flop a.k.a. Flora praised Subaru’s behavior at the checkpoint with a twinkle in his eye.

There was no lie in his open-hearted words, and Subaru nodded cheerfully.

Subaru: “Yes! I’m honored by your praise. But I’m not a merchant by any means. I got my own business that I need to attend to.”

Flop: “Things you need to do? Like what?”

Subaru: “Of course, it’s not about being a lady…it’s about helping the people important to me.”

Flop: “…”

Flop’s eyes widened slightly upon hearing Subaru’s words. However, he quickly relaxed his gaze and nodded, “Well, yes”.

Flop: “Then we need to make this plan work, and reassure Wife-san as soon as possible.”

Subaru: “And Flora, we don’t want to make Medium-san feel uneasy, do we?”

Flop: “Hahahaha! My sister would never be worried. My sister is a very tough girl, both physically and mentally. I can’t imagine her feeling down!”

Subaru agreed with Flop, who smiled cheerfully, albeit unlady-like.

Like Flop, he could not imagine Medium feeling down either. The two siblings must have helped each other through many a rough times.

That was why Subaru had a responsibility to help the two people he had gotten involved.

Subaru: “It’s getting harder and harder to mess up, isn’t it?”

???: “Wait, please wait, Subaru… No, Natsumi.”

Subaru braced himself, as he heard a weak voice from behind.

He looked over to see that it was Taritta, who was carrying the group’s luggage. She was unlike her usual self, as, after leaving the jungle, Taritta had changed her makeup.

Instead of the amazon-esque Shudraqian attire, she wore more fluttery clothing, and her image now was that of an exotic ethnic dancer.

Rather, it was less revealing than her usual attire, but as Taritta glanced around, her cheeks dyed red with embarrassment,

Taritta: “Hey, isn’t this kind of attention grabbing? There’s something weird about Kuna and I…”

Kuna: “Don’t drag me into this, please. If you’re talking about something strange, there’s no one stranger than Natsumi. What the hell was that with that checkpoint just now? You’re too good with men.”

By the side of the flustered Taritta, Kuna touched Subaru with her usual low intensity.

After those words from her, Subaru put his hand on his cheek with an “Oh my”,

Subaru: “It’s not the first time I’ve dealt with a gentleman. And don’t worry, Taritta-san. It’s not that you or Kuna stand out. It’s all of us who stand out… Because we’re beautiful.”

Flop: “Because we’re beautiful!”

Nodding profoundly, Flop and Subaru both agreed.

In response, Taritta looked incredulous as she voiced out a “Beau…tiful…”

Taritta: “I-If you’re going to use words like that, then give them to my sister…”

Flop: “What are you saying, Miss Taritta? Your charm and your sister’s are two very different things. First of all, by no means am I disregarding my admiration for Miss Mizelda when I pay my compliments to you. She’s a different case, and you two are in entirely different categories!”

Taritta: “—Hk!”

In an instant, Flop took Taritta’s hand and said this with a radiant smile.

Taritta’s eyes widened at the vigor of it, and her mouth slowly opened and then closed rapidly. As the blush on her cheeks grew, Subaru put his hand over his mouth and let out a “My oh my”.

Kuna: “Give me a break. Taritta’s particularly attached to the Chieftain, and has hardly ever left the forest. That’s why she’s not very tolerant.”

Subaru: “Well, she’s smiling. But you’re calm, right?”

Kuna: “I’ve been sneaking out of the woods more often than not, and I’ve never had a great and fearsome sister… I have a younger sister who’s quite a handful.”

In the back of Kuna’s closed mind, the person was probably Holly.

They were like sisters, like best friends, like parent and child. However, Taritta’s words could not be ignored.

???: “…”

Around them, attention was certainly focused on the crossdressing Subaru walking down the streets past the checkpoint.

In addition to their unusual attire, the entire city was on edge as the Imperial Soldiers were on high alert. Naturally, the citizens of the city would be very suspicious of strangers.

If that was the case, then—

Abel: “—It is an opportunity.”

Subaru: “Only for curious eyes, isn’t it?”

Under the parasol, a sharp gaze pierced Subaru’s profile from within the veil’s shadow.

Nudged to stop talking nonsense, Subaru replied with a sultry, “Yes”. However, Subaru agreed with the danseuse that this was a good opportunity.

Therefore—

Subaru: “Let’s follow the advice of the guards and make our debut on the main street!”

Flop: “All right, si… No, Miss Natsumi!”

Flop followed along as Subaru decided to start the performance off with a bang right on the spot.

They took off part of their costumes, exposing their shoulders, stomachs, and backs. They then stepped out, each holding an instrument in their hands, poised at the sides of the main street.

And then—

Subaru: “Come on, come by and take a look! I will now show you a song and dance that has been handed down through time and across the world, from beyond the Great Waterfall of the far East! This is from a traveling troupe that has come to the city today to perform!”

Subaru intoned a promotional line loudly, and then Flop, who had received eye contact, began to play the lyulyre, a stringed instrument held in his hand.

The light sounds combined to form music, which drew even more attention from the people who heard it.

???: “Oh, what’s going on?”

???: “They say they’re traveling entertainers! Music, music!”

???: “Wow, that’s quite a collection of beauties…”

The people walking down the street, lured in by Subaru’s words and Flop’s music, stopped or peeked out from the inside of buildings, having their attention drawn by the troupe.

Subaru and Flop were on the lead instruments, as Taritta and Kuna followed with simpler percussion instruments, such as castanets.

Subaru was grateful enough that since Flop was more skilled than expected, so he had no qualms with the music. More importantly, the odds of victory were roughly fifty percent.

Subaru: “From now on, we will sing and dance a story from a different world, far, far away! It is a story of people, dragons, demons, and strange beings that cannot be expressed in words. Please, everyone, relax and enjoy to your heart’s content!”

With a smile on his face and an excited tone of voice, the anticipation built up as Flop’s performance with Subaru reached its first climax.

Everyone was in love with their performance and the beauty of the musicians, but the real deal was right after this.

And just as the music crescendoed into its apex—

???: "…"

A black-haired dancer slowly removed the thin silk she was wearing, and stepped out into the street.

Upon lifting the veil with one hand and revealing his face, the people who had been listening to the music turned their gazes towards him, as a shock feeling like a punch to the gut permeated them.

Yes, that was it. He wanted that reaction, that look, and yet, he was upset.

Subaru: "It's so frustrating."

As he played his instrument, Subaru expressed his inner frustration of being beaten.

Deep in his heart, he felt defeated. But it should feel good to be beaten by something of such high caliber. But that was a lie. A sense of defeat was ultimately a sense of defeat, and it was frustrating.

However, this calmness just before it all turned into a frenzy was the key to this plan

Then, to the fullest extent, they could charm the people of Guaral with this dance.

Subaru: "Now, you're up, Bianca—!"

Abel: "…"

After glancing at Subaru with a flushed look, Abel a.k.a. Bianca slowly raised his arm.

One fluid movement, of merely raising an arm. In spite of this, his gestures had an elegance that exuded from deep within his being. It melted into the air and instantly dominated the main street.

A flowing, beautiful, and solemn dance began.

The dance that accompanied the music was something that Abel had originally mastered, but with Subaru's own twist, was probably new to everyone.

Yet, it even dispensed a need for any sort of manipulation or petty tricks.

With Subaru's tweaks, what had been a solid dance was now far superior.

Audience: "…"

The audience forgot to breathe as their gaze was enraptured by the beautiful dance. It was a cry of beauty that appealed to their instincts, it told them not to take their eyes off it even for a moment. To put it bluntly, this was what the eyes were meant to behold.

Abel's dance was arrogant and pompous, confronting his audience with such thoughts.

—It said, "Look at me".

The sight of the mesmerized and stunned crowd was frightening to Subaru, even though he had been the one to come up with the idea.

If there were a thief here, the people standing around would have their pockets openly searched and would not even notice if someone took their wallets. —No, that assumption was not valid, since even a thief would not be able to take their eyes off Abel's dance.

???: "…"

It was only one song and dance, lasting less than five minutes of time. The performers had been concentrating on not making any mistakes, but Subaru wondered if anyone would have even noticed if they had messed up. To be honest, Subaru's true thoughts were that it would be doubtful.

Once the performance ended, Abel's heels and toes made ground.

Seeing this posture, the audience finally realized that the dance was already over and Abel was just standing there.

Immediately, the main street was filled with applause and cheers.

Just as Subaru had hoped, just as he had aimed for, it was a resounding response.

However, unlike Flop, who was holding up his instrument and responding to the cheers, Subaru was smiling to the crowd with mixed feelings.

At any rate—

Abel: "—Hmm."

He had no idea what to say to Abel, who smiled triumphantly at him.

4

The reputation of the troupe in the Fortress City of Guaral had been determined by the great success of their first performance.

A demonstration of sorts set on the principal avenue, but the response had been far greater than they had expected, and so the troupe's activities after that became much easier.

However—

Subaru: "Don't forget that we were only brought into the spotlight because of our novelty. Our performance is just a hasty effort… Our act now is merely a passing fancy."

Flop: "I see! In other words, we need to work on our skills steadily, don't we, Husband-kun?"

Subaru: “Yes. That’s why we need to work tirelessly and be alert every day!”

Subaru clenched his fists firmly while Flop, who sat upright, nodded with a smile.

In contrast to his loud voice, Flop was a very good listener and responded quickly. Admirably, Subaru’s speech gained momentum thanks to Flop.

Anyway, it was not Flop that Subaru really should be talking to.

Subaru: “You two! Don’t let your guard down.”

Taritta: “Uh-oh, now we got caught in the crossfire.”

Kuna: “W-we did…?”

When Subaru pointed at them, Taritta and Kuna immediately looked displeased.

Inside the inn, the two of them had taken off the clothes they’d dressed up in, and gone back to their Shudraqian style, which appeared almost like underwear. While working as members of the troupe, they were properly dressed, but as soon as they entered the secluded inn, they looked like this.

Subaru: “You’re slacking too much.”

Taritta: “I’m not saying we’re not relaxing, but on the other hand what about her…?”

Subaru: “What do you mean? Actually, what are you even talking about? You know, I find these conversations without a clear subject pretty annoying.”

Taritta: “Natsumi, that’s what. Why you would pretend to be something you’re not, even when no one’s looking, is beyond Kuna and I. Is it really necessary?”

Subaru: “Pretending to be something I’m not…?”

Having no clue, Subaru replied questionably, and Taritta and the others were taken aback.

Naturally, “It’s a joke,” Subaru said, as he dispelled their surprise.

Subaru: “Nevertheless, I can’t accept that notion. You know why? “The devil is in the details”, as they say, and it’s the seemingly useless details that bring about the reality of the situation. That’s precisely why it’s essential to…”

Flop: “Not cut corners in places outside the public eye, is what you’re saying. Mhmmhm, as expected, Husband-kun… No, Miss Natsumi! I’m learning a lot!”

Flop was truly a student worth teaching, as that was an answer worth one hundred points.

That said, in regards to the point that he couldn’t correct himself from using “Boku” as his first person pronoun, no matter how much he tried; Kuna looked in protest at Subaru, but he passed it off with a smile.

—At that moment, Subaru and his troupe of traveling entertainers were staying at an inn in Guaral.

It had already been three days since they had begun their infiltration, and in that time, they had performed a total of ten times, receiving a more-than-adequate response.

He had not been in need of money to begin with, as he had the proceeds from the sale of the Elgina’s horn, but a good amount of money continued to come in for each show, so he thought it to be a really profitable venture.

Subaru: “I think it’s time to move on to the next phase.”

Gently placing his finger on his chin, Subaru hoped for a change in their stagnant situation.

In fact, their current situation was going so well that it was almost too good to be true. Every show was a great success, and the citizens, including the guards, displayed a lot of interest.

This was due to the perfection of Bianca's dancing, as well as the conversational skills of Natsumi and Flora.

Bianca's mysteriousness was also a selling point, and since she rarely appeared in public except to dance, Natsumi and the others naturally took over the role of gathering information.

Initially, the plan had been for Subaru's Natsumi and Flop's Flora to take over the task, since Abel a.k.a Bianca was unable to speak in a female voice.

Subaru: "Strangely enough, no one's suspicious of Flora, right? She hasn't even changed her voice."

Flop: "Haha, I don't have any special skills like Miss Natsumi. But I've been traveling alone with my sister for a long time. Maybe I've picked up some of my sister's habits or something, and that could've given me this feminine-like aura."

Subaru: "So it's from Medium…"

Flop happily proposed his new theory, but the Medium that appeared in Subaru's brain was beautiful in appearance, and her ever-changing facial expressions were adorable and charming. However, the theory that her presence'd had an effect on Flora's current perfection was something that could be debated.

Abel: "—You have a lot of time to waste, do you not?"

Subaru: "Hm."

A cold, icy voice interrupted the conversation between Subaru and the others.

It was Abel, the dancer of the troupe, who was sitting on a chair by the window without the wig on his head, that had finally decided to join the conversation.

Abel had danced in various places as the star of the show day after day, and although he attempted not to show it, a slight hint of fatigue could be seen.

Of course, he would never admit it, but spending time in Guaral placed a heavy burden on the body and mind. They were always keeping their guard up being behind enemy lines. Subaru, as Natsumi, was also constantly reminding himself to not lose his calm demeanor.

One never knew what tragedy would await them if they became discouraged behind enemy lines.

At first, this strategy had been regarded as a joke by both Rem and Mizelda.

However, Subaru had proposed the plan in a serious manner, and they had discussed it together to increase the chance for success. He was not so pessimistic as to give up and lament that the plan had failed.

Therefore—

Subaru: “Bianca, why don’t you get some rest? After all this time, I’ve never seen you sleep.”

Flop: “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Miss Natsumi. It’s impossible that… huh? Huh? Now that you mention it, I don’t remember seeing Miss Bianca sleeping either.”

Flop tried to laugh at Subaru’s point, but then went serious upon noticing how that rang true. Not paying attention to Flop, Abel snorted and ignored it.

Abel’s strong sense of caution was ongoing, and he did not lower his guard with Subaru and the others.

Of course, Subaru understood that it was not easy for a man in his position to be able to open up to others.

But the fact that he could not show any signs of relaxation, even to his comrades who were undertaking this life-threatening mission alongside him, was more than a little tiring.

As usual, he would not even blink both eyes at the same time, Despite the fact nobody here would do anything were he to close both of them.

Subaru: “That way of life is tiring, isn’t it?”

Abel: “—Are you really the one telling me this?”

Abel frowned back at Subaru, the latter conveying his honest thoughts.

Hearing this, Subaru was unable to comprehend it all. It was true that Abel’s way of life was definitely suffocating, and Subaru’s was not.

Abel: “It is especially pathetic that you are not aware of it, but I forgive you. Keep doing your best.”

Subaru: “You don’t have to tell me, I’ll keep living. As for you…”

Abel: “Closing both eyes signifies surrendering the right to life and death to the other. I do not take myself lightly enough to allow that to happen, even for a moment.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “Do not lose your sense of tension, I am sure you have touched on it before.”

With those words, the ones Subaru wished to retort with were blocked.

Subaru stared at Abel’s profile with a bitter feeling, but he was no longer being taken seriously. Abel, who had taken off his wig and jewelry, wore feminine outfits at the inn, so that he could change into Bianca as soon as something happened. That was the justification as to why he looked so good without his wig, even though he should be in an unbalanced state without it.

This was the beauty of the tense atmosphere that was the result of the “ever-present battlefield” mindset Subaru had told the others, Flop included, to maintain.

And while he was thinking about Abel’s cold profile—

Abel: "—There is movement."

Subaru: "Wha?"

Muttering this, Abel stood up from his chair and went to his bunk. Subaru was taken aback as he witnessed how quickly he had put on the wig that had been left there. However, the meaning of that action was made clear immediately.

Loud and uninhibited footsteps came up from downstairs, and the door to Subaru and the others' room was violently slammed.

???: "So this is where the traveling troupe is. Open up. It's a messenger from the City Hall."

Subaru: "Ah, j-just a minute, sir!"

???: "Haha, don't make me laugh, I ain't waiting. We're soldiers."

A hoarse voice mocked the panicked Subaru, and the door of the room opened unceremoniously. Then, a man dressed in the red and black uniform of a soldier strolled into the room.

The man had two swords on his back, his face twisted with joy as he hid his violent impulses, one that Subaru had already seen—Jamal.

Subaru: "—Hk."

Jamal: "Don't be so frightened, I ain't gonna eat you."

Jamal snapped his teeth at Subaru, who involuntarily gasped and stiffened. With an eye patch over his right eye, he glared over the room with his left, not bothering to hide his unrefined attitude, chuckling "Heh heh". He then looked at Taritta and the others in their underwear, who had been slow to react.

Behind him, other than Jamal, there were four other soldiers. Apparently, it was Jamal who led them, and no one dared to interrupt his rough and brutish demeanor.

With his men following behind him, Jamal nodded his head in agreement.

Jamal: “I see, we got some beautiful ladies here. When I heard those lovestruck bureaucrats talking ‘bout it, I thought they were exaggerating…”

Subaru: “Soldier-sama, what can I do for you…?”

Jamal: “—I’m talking right now, woman.”

The tension in the air made Subaru chew the inside of his mouth. Jamal suddenly grabbed Subaru’s neck with his hand.

Not with the intention of breaking it, but with a soft touch to stop him from speaking—still, the agility of his movement and the strength of his grip made him feel just how vast the difference of their abilities was.

After all, Jamal, despite his appearance and bad attitude, was very good at what he did. Up to that point, he was probably the most skilled person Subaru had laid eyes upon in the Empire—although scary and strong were two different things.

Jamal: “You’ve got a nice, defiant look in your eyes. I like those sharp eyes, too.”

Subaru: “Ah, I’m flattered by your compliments… Kh.”

Jamal: “I also like the fact you don’t talk too much. How ‘bout I invite you to my bedroom tonight and…”

Jamal’s face was close to Subaru’s, as he looked at him with a lascivious stare.

@floating_hero

Even at such a close distance, he did not seem to have noticed Subaru's true identity. That in itself was welcome, but it seemed to have tugged at his heartstrings in the opposite sense.

He had received such invitations before, but he had always been able to avoid them with a smile and a good story. But when dealing with Imperial Soldiers, it became hard to refuse.

—It was then that a strong wind blew.

Subaru: "—Oh."

Unexpectedly, a breeze more forceful passed through the room, and Subaru's black hair flew up and tickled Jamal's cheek. After a moment of annoyance, Jamal turned his attention to the window and saw a figure standing there.

It was the black-haired dancer who was causing a stir in Guaral, standing there, wig back on and holding his elbows in a relaxed manner. Catching the figure head-on, Jamal whistled in surprise.

It was a great show of boldness, whereas most of the people were stuck admiring her.

Jamal: "Haha, so this is the danseuse I've heard so much about. No wonder you could pull it off."

Abel: "Hmph."

After Jamal released Subaru with a breath of surprise and admiration, he quickly approached Abel. He then grabbed him and made the danseuse face him.

Even though he was unaware, he was holding the Emperor's precious face in his grasp, giving him a crude smile.

Subaru thought that was exactly what someone had meant when saying ignorance was bliss.

Abel: "…"

Jamal: “You’re a thick-skinned woman, unlike that one. But that’s also okay.”

Abel squared his jaw and quietly stared at his opponent. While Subaru was on edge, Jamal sniffed as he engaged in the Empire’s utmost level of disrespect.

Then, Jamal turned around with his grip still on Abel’s chin and—

Jamal: “Rejoice, traveling entertainers! I’m here to invite y’all to a feast at the City Hall. Zikr Osman, General Second-Class, who runs this city, requests your presence.”

Subaru: “Zikr Osman, the General Second-Class…!”

Jamal: “Ah, ain’t it an honor? For a traveling entertainer to be invited to join a General Second-Class of the Empire.”

—Subaru clenched his fists subconsciously, as if to say So it begins.

Jamal’s pompous words overcame the disrespectfulness of the scene and sent a shock of surprise and joy through Subaru.

Zikr Osman, General Second-Class! It seemed as though they had caught the exact fish they were trying to hook.

Jamal: “No way you traveling entertainers are gonna turn me down, right?”

Subaru: “That…”

Flop: “Of course not! We’d hoped to bring song and dance to the Imperial Soldiers! It was the true meaning of our trip!”

Jamal: “Good answer! I like that.”

Subaru’s hesitation was overshadowed by a more immediate answer from Flop.

Flop’s charm, which allowed him to open himself to any opponent, was on full display here against Jamal.

Jamal, feeling good about Flop's crisp answer, quickly and roughly released Abel's face, then staggered to the entrance of the room.

And then—

Jamal: "Get ready to go. I'm taking y'all to the City Hall."

Subaru: "What? If you've invited us, we'd like to join you lat…"

Jamal: "Hahaha, don't worry 'bout it. We've been told to bring you there. This is our job, too. You can change right now. I'll also have my men in the back carry your belongings."

Subaru: "…"

Jamal: "It's a Generals-only banquet tonight. We lowly soldiers can only hope for more after tomorrow. So…"

With no intention of letting them go, Jamal's vulgar gaze harassed everyone in the room

Apparently, they could not afford to ruin his good mood. Fortunately, Subaru, Abel, and Flop were all at least dressed as women.

Taritta and Kuna, who were in most danger, were clearly women, so there was no need to worry that their lack of preparation would derail the mission. That said—

Jamal: "Take your time."

But the humiliation of having to clean up the room while they watched them unceremoniously change their clothes and pack their bags was hard to shake off. However—

Flop: "Got it! Come on, everyone, let's get ready! We don't want to keep the soldiers waiting! Let's get this done right!"

Subaru: "Flora …"

Flop: "This is so unlike you, Miss Natsumi! Neither blood nor tears suit you."

Subaru: “…”

His boiling anger disappeared at Flop’s words, who then smiled at him.

The words which he had taken the trouble to add at the end, were taken as a dare to remind Subaru of the purpose of the Bloodless Siege.

Subaru: “—. Yes, you’re right. Here, you and Bianca prepare yourselves! Especially since Bianca is a clod who can’t do anything but dance!”

Abel: “…”

Taking advantage of Abel’s inability to speak, Subaru delivered a scathing assessment of Bianca. Abel’s gaze stabbed him, but Subaru brushed it off.

He quickly cleared up the luggage in the room, changed his clothes to go up to City Hall, and forced himself to behave as Jamal wished.

At best, he could only whistle and enjoy watching them change.

Subaru was sure the biggest shock and regret of Jamal’s life would be waiting for him at the time the operation went according to plan.

That was the reason why—

Flop: “No! I don’t think you have to go so far as to need to shake your butt, Miss Natsumi!”

5

Even to the untrained eye, there was nothing in the City Hall that looked like military equipment.

Since the building was used for the management of the city during peacetime, it was only natural that no military equipment was prepared here. Even so, there were currently more than three-hundred Imperial Soldiers in the city, and more than five-hundred if the guards were included, so the defensive power was sufficient.

More importantly—

Subaru: “We’ve succeeded in sneaking into their bosom, but…”

Inside the building, Subaru chuckled as he took a look at the map in his mind.

Operation “Kumaso Takeru” was progressing unexpectedly smoothly.

He hoped that if the beautiful traveling entertainers became the topic of conversation in the city, the General known as the Womanizer would take an interest in them—and ultimately invite them to a banquet which would allow Subaru and the others to seize their target.

By being invited directly to the City Hall, Subaru could see an opportunity to realize their plan.

At the same time, however, another problem surfaced.

Subaru: “We’re going to have to carry out the operation tonight…”

There was no time to tell this to Mizelda and the others in the second squad.

Jamal, who had come to pick up Subaru and the others at the inn, had not allowed them to make contact with the outside world, not out of caution, but because of his perverseness.

There was no mistake that Jamal was a troublesome person, as he had bad intuition, yet compensated with good skills.

Even inside the City Hall, Subaru and his team’s activities were restricted, and since they could not take separate actions for any reason during the course of the meeting, they had yet to inform the other team of tonight’s plans.

Therefore—

Subaru: “We need to contact the outside world from inside the City Hall.”

There was also the possibility of failure, but if Subaru and the others’ operation succeeded, it would be necessary to disarm the other Imperial Soldiers inside the city.

Naturally, this would require a certain amount of strength, so regardless of the success or failure of Operation “Kumaso Takeru”, they needed to be in a position to cooperate with the outside world.

That was why he was undergoing a lot of trial and error.

Subaru: “I don’t know what she’s thinking, but Bianca’s unreliable…”

It sounded good to say that he was concentrating on this evening’s banquet, but ever since they had been invited to City Hall and isolated in confinement within the waiting room, Abel had been silent.

Of course, he understood that cooperation with the outside world would determine the success or failure of this plan, but he had not responded to Subaru’s advice.

Flop was also extremely supportive, and to be honest, he had been a great help, but he did not pose as an appropriate person to discuss the plan to bring down the City Hall with. First of all, Subaru did not want to do something that would cause him any more trouble.

In other words—

Subaru: “I have to do something about it.”

Clenching his fists, Subaru fired himself up in the bathroom he was led to.

Subaru and the others had been ordered not to leave the waiting room, but as expected, they would never forbid them from going to the bathroom. Nevertheless, they could not act recklessly, as the City Hall would immediately be flooded with Imperial Soldiers if they showed any suspicious behavior.

Subaru glanced at the windows, but unfortunately could not even try to go outside, as they had been fitted with iron bars, and because the waiting room itself was located on the third floor of the building.

He did not think the soldiers were particularly wary of Subaru and the others. However, the idea of leaving them completely unguarded was out of the question. That may be the manifestation of imperialism.

In the worst case scenario, the idea of reconsidering the decision to go ahead with the operation tonight at the banquet came to Subaru's mind.

Subaru: "…Even if we could miss the banquet, we wouldn't be able to avoid the invitation afterwards."

They were a troupe of traveling entertainers with beautiful women.

In the first place, when it came to bringing down the so-called Womanizer, it was easy to imagine that the goal was dancing, performing arts, and the nightly fun that lay ahead.

Even if he could avoid the advances of the citizens, it would be difficult for him to refuse the advances of an Imperial Soldier, and a General at that. And there was nothing he could do if they took him to the bedroom.

After all, this was still just crossdressing, and there was no universal guide to what to do from there on out.

Subaru: "I mean, if that happens, it's game over with a bad ending."

So, he needed to settle things tonight at all costs.

Besides, even if by some miracle they were able to avoid tonight's invitation, if Jamal's words were true, there would be a banquet tomorrow that would be attended by ordinary soldiers, rather than the Generals.

Common soldiers—that would, of course, include the one Subaru wanted to meet the least.

Subaru: "…"

To be honest, when Jamal had come into the inn, Subaru thought his heart would stop.

He was relieved that he had not recognized Natsumi as Subaru, but that didn't erase all of the danger—there was still a chance that he could have been killed by that arrow.

Subaru: "I don't want to call that too high a hope, do I?"

It was a difficult state of mind to be in.

He did not want to see him again, yet he also did not want him to be dead. It was complicated.

Even Subaru knew that there was evil in this world that could not be allowed to live. The Sin Archbishops were one of them, and they all stood for unforgivable sins.

So, if it were a Sin Archbishop, Subaru would be willing to let them die without hesitation. But he was not one of them; he was only the object of Subaru's fear, not evil.

First of all, if he were to put it that way, what about Louis, one of the Sin Archbishops, who he continued to overlook without a second thought?

Subaru: "—. It's no good. Right now, I need to focus on the plan in front of me."

It was ridiculous to be worrying about his foundation collapsing now.

Generally speaking, it was not just his foundation. Although he was now wearing makeup, his body and mind were still in tatters everywhere.

Subaru was good at making use of what little he held in hand, and that was what made him special.

Subaru: "I can't stay here much longer, can I?"

After a thorough search of the bathroom, he concluded that, unfortunately, there was nothing there that could be used. He needed to think about other methods of contacting the outside world.

There was also the guard waiting in front of the bathroom, the watchmen who kept them from wandering around inside the City Hall, and besides, Subaru really didn't want to be suspicious.

They may have to rethink the plan. If the situation became more pressing, Abel might understand this viewpoint.

Subaru: "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I've been a little nervous."

Guard: "Hmm, oh, don't worry. I just found someone to talk to."

Subaru: "Someone to talk to?"

As Subaru quietly walked out of the bathroom, the soldier on guard duty who had been waiting for him responded. He seemed to be talking to someone who was passing by, who, with a twitch of their chin, looked over and said—

???: "—Oh, so you're the dancer invited as this evening's entertainment."

—Subaru's heart froze as he saw a face there that he definitely did not want to see.

Subaru: "Ah, ku…"

???: "Hm? What's the matter? You look so startled. Oh, come on, I'm not going to eat you."

Seeing Subaru's throat tremble, the other person laughed and cracked a joke.

It was a quip that he had heard from Jamal at the inn only a short time ago. But unlike Jamal, who had delivered it because of his dirty mind, he couldn't brush it off this time.

He wanted to ask if he really did not want to eat him.

Guard: “What, did you do something, Todd?”

Todd: “Me? Don’t be ridiculous, there’s nothing I can do. My wounds are so severe that I’ve been bedridden for quite a bit. I’m barely able to walk around.”

Guard: “That’s true, too. So it’s like she hated your face physiologically?”

Todd: “That’s rather hurtful…”

The man scratching his head and having a friendly conversation with the soldier on guard—Todd.

The object of fear that made Natsuki Subaru most wary, and the one that made him question the morality of killing those outside of the Sin Archbishops. That was the nightmare personified that was chatting in front of him.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

He needed to say something; Subaru thought, his brain revolving at high speed.

Silence was not good. He must not give even a hint of suspicion. Todd would find out and use it as an excuse to attack.

He did not need evidence or proof. If he had a suspicion, he would try to crush it.

Therefore—

Todd: “Hey, seriously, what’s wrong with you? Wait, have we already…”

Subaru: “Ah, I’m sorry… it’s just that…”

Todd: “It’s just that?”

The same words were repeated quietly, but his heart felt like it was going to flip over.

He wanted to end the conversation by saying he just didn't feel well. But just before he said it, he wondered if it was really okay.

Illness was a common excuse, but it would be a lie. He felt like Todd could see through a lie.

If Subaru tried to use his knowledge gained from Return by Death, Todd would understand his intentions and thrust a knife into him. Lies would be found out. Definitely.

Lies must be avoided.

He was not just feeling bad, Subaru was having a hard time breathing right now—

Subaru: "I'm a little, well, scared…"

Todd: "Scared? Of me?"

Subaru: "Not just you. I hate to say this, but… I was brought here a little too forcefully."

He averted his gaze, and tried not to look Todd in the eye.

Each and every movement caused doubt to swirl in Subaru's mind, as he tried to ascertain if he had succeeded or failed. He felt like if he were to be looked in the eye, his lie would be found. He felt like if he lied, they would see through him.

He was not lying. He was definitely afraid of Todd. There was no twisting that fact.

Hearing Subaru's desperate answer, Todd closed one eye.

Todd: "When she says they were forced to be brought here, who was it that took them?"

Guard: "Uh, I believe it was Private First-Class Aurélie."

Todd: "Oh, Jamal. That makes sense, then. Well, sorry if he scared you."

Subaru: “Eh…”

Todd, who was convinced by the exchange with the guard, said so and apologized to Subaru.

When Subaru peeled his eyes away at his unexpected attitude, Todd scratched his cheek with his fingers.

Todd: “I wouldn’t say he’s a bad… guy. Jamal’s got a bad mouth and personality, and he’s not very smart. But he’s not a bad guy. He’s just being himself.”

Subaru: “Ha, ha…”

Todd: “If you could, would you please be open-minded and forgive him? It looks like he’s going to be my brother-in-law. His angelic sister, who looks nothing like him at all, is my fiancée.”

Subaru was puzzled by Todd’s words that came with a wry smile.

From the looks of it, Todd did not seem to be distrustful of Subaru’s words or actions. Rather, he seemed to be sympathetic and concerned about Subaru’s involvement with Jamal.

Here, Subaru was unable to hide his astonishment at the skill he had mastered for the art of crossdressing and the fact that he had been saved by Jamal, who was usually crude and problematic.

His days of pursuing beauty, having thought they were for nothing, had not been in vain.

Even the sexual harassment he had received from Jamal proved itself useful.

???: “—Oh! Hey, Todd, what the hell are you doing out here!”

While Subaru was thinking about it, a shout of anger echoed through the corridor.

It was Jamal, raising his voice and making rough footsteps. Upon noticing Jamal’s approach, Todd put his hand on his forehead.

Todd: “Oops. You found me…”

Jamal: “I didn’t find you! The guy with a hole in his stomach should rest! You thought you can’t trust what you don’t see with your eyes, didn’t you?”

Todd: “No, no, no, I trust you. I trust you. You’re surprisingly diligent and you do your job well. But even if they work diligently, screw-ups are always gonna be screw-ups, right?”

Jamal: “That’s what I mean when I say you only trust your eyes…!”

Jamal clicked his tongue at Todd’s reply, who raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

But when Jamal, who was approaching with a snort, noticed Subaru beside Todd, his expression changed from anger to a smile.

Jamal: “Oh, you’re that sideshow girl, aren’t you? You’re the one I like the most out of all of them. Hey, if you don’t get invited tonight…”

Todd: “Ah, yes, yes, enough enough.”

Jamal, with a fond look in his eyes, reached out and tried to grab Subaru’s shoulder. However, of all people, it was Todd who stopped Jamal’s hand.

Todd grabbed Jamal’s wrist and gave him another “Enough” as his cheeks contorted.

Todd: “You’re scaring her with your attitude. This girl who I’d never met before got scared all of a sudden, and that stung.”

Jamal: “I didn’t do anything at all. I don’t know why you’re interrupting me in the first place… No way, you… with that woman…?!”

Todd: “Don’t joke about it, Jamal. Your sister’s the only one for me. You know that, right?”

Jamal: “It’s complicated for a brother to be told that his sister is someone's only love…"

Jamal muttered with a venomous look on his face, as he shook off Todd's hand.

He then glanced at Subaru, but the way his cheeks were drawn together seemed to dissuade him from messing with him any further.

Surprisingly, Jamal also had some sense. Or perhaps he had the heart to be hurt by being scared by someone he thought was a little too nice.

Either way—

Todd: "Anyhow, let's get going. We're not going to be able to attend today's banquet anyway."

Jamal: "That said, I'm getting tired of trying to close the holes in the city's defences."

Todd: "It won't be boring. It's a guarantee, a guarantee. —That's where the enemy will come from, absolutely."

With a chuckle, Todd's sharp words scratched Subaru's chest.

He praised his choice in his heart, thinking that the idea of using a secret path had been seen through. Then, after praising himself—

Todd: "By the way, what's your name?"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru was not sure if Todd had seen his distraction.

The feint-like question made Subaru seriously think that he was going to lose consciousness.

He had been asked for his name. Why, why, why, the questions raged.

Wouldn't he at least ask his name? —No, Todd wouldn't ask. That was why Rem had been wary of Todd from the beginning. Because of his bad relationship with him, Subaru had not exchanged names with him this time. Should he give his name, or not, what should he do?

Todd: “Please, just tell me.”

The request was repeated, and Subaru gasped.

Resigned to not being able to pull off an answer, he smiled as nonchalantly as possible and reluctantly said his name.

Subaru: “—Natsumi Schwartz, that’s my name.”

So he voiced his name.

He could not think of any other choice but to do this. He hoped and prayed that it was the right answer, and waited for the other person’s response.

When he heard the reply, Todd nodded his head, stroking his chin with an “Hmm”,

Todd: “You heard her, Jamal. Aren’t you happy you got her name now?”

Jamal: “Shut up! I’m getting the fuck outta here!”

Todd: “Okay, okay… Oh, can I follow you outside too?”

Jamal: “You’re a really untrustworthy guy… Do what you want!”

Todd followed, shrugging his shoulders upon perceiving Jamal’s angry voice, the latter barking with a red face.

With that, the two men disappeared from Subaru’s sight, never once looking back. They turned a corner in the hallway and disappeared. Out of sight, out of mind.

Subaru: “…Really?”

Guard: “Hey, are you okay? You’re looking really pale.”

Subaru exhaled as he looked away, wondering if he would ever come back. The only remaining soldier on guard was concerned about Subaru, as he saw how exasperated he was.

There was no time left for Subaru to respond.

However, he managed to make amends with the soldier on lookout duty, and accompanied him back to the waiting room to join Flop and the others, who were standing by inside.

Flop: “It took you long enough, Miss Natsumi…! Are you okay? You look really pale.”

Subaru: “I’ve already heard that… For the moment, the storm has passed. But the problem remains.”

Back in the waiting room, seeing the worried look on Flop’s face, he finally had time to worry about his heartbeat and his breathing.

Slowly, Subaru calmed himself down by taking deep breaths to correct his rough physiological reactions.

Yes, he had escaped the storm he had suddenly encountered. Probably.

They could not let their guard down until the very end, but for now, the tempest should be over.

However, they still had not overcome the big obstacle that was their initial problem.

Subaru: “We have to find a way to contact the outside world. If we go on like this, even if our plan succeeds…”

Taritta: “Ah, then don’t worry, Natsumi. Kuna and I left a signal that my sister will understand.”

Subaru: “What?”

Subaru’s eyes widened as he was told that the problem he had been facing had been solved just like that.

Taritta looked apologetic for his reaction, while Kuna seemed unconcerned. His gaze, directed towards them, was asking what was going on wordlessly.

Taritta: “Well… Natsumi will be the bait, and I will signal the others, so get your job done. That’s what Bianca said.”

Subaru: “Wha, wha, wha…?”

Subaru’s eyes widened and he looked at Abel in the corner of the room.

Then, noticing his leer, Abel narrowed his eyes, shook his head loosely, and declared—

Abel: “Rather than telling you and having you move unnaturally, I used you as a natural decoy. Fortunately, you seem to have performed your task reasonably well. I shall praise you for that.”

Subaru: “Shut up! Do you know what I’ve had to deal with…?!”

Flop: “Oh, calm down, Miss Natsumi! You’re ruining your pretty face!”

Subaru: “Shut up!”

He was about to get mad at Abel’s attitude, but Flop stopped him from behind.

He really wanted to punch that arrogant demonic face, but Subaru had no choice but to remain calm. As this strategy would not be possible without that face.

It was unbelievably terrible that he would use his own face as a hostage.

Subaru: “You, I’m definitely going to hit you when it’s over…!”

Abel: “If you have so much time to think about what you shall do after its terminus, then I am sure you shall be able to perform without fault.”

Subaru: “Flora! We’re going to rehearse until it’s time!”

Flop: “Okay, okay, okay.”

Subaru gritted his teeth in anger, as if saying “you are the very epitome of always having a comeback for everything I say.”

Whatever the case, if they had made contact with the outside world, all they had to do was wait for the time in question.

At most, yes, at most—

Subaru: “—It’ll be awful if the plan doesn’t work.”

He muttered in defeat, but Subaru had been convinced over the course of the past few days that it would definitely work.

It was really frustrating, because it seemed as though there was nothing that would not fall in love with this arrogant danseuse, except perhaps a Sin Archbishop.

Chapter 24:
Arrogance

1

—As the beginning of the banquet approached, the tension increased.

???: "…"

There was no conversation in the waiting room where the five of them had gathered, and it was quiet.

Nobody could utter a word, neither Abel, who was concentrating, nor Subaru. Even Flop was silent, so the weight of the atmosphere was overwhelming.

They had made it this far, so there was nothing to worry about.

Or, at least, they should be able to think that way, but human beings were not so simple. No matter how good the crossdressing was, the anxiety grew as the main event was about to happen.

Despite how loudly his heart screamed, and how much the cold sweat wetted his back, the flow of time could not be halted, and the promised time would yet come.

???: "The banquet is ready. It's time for you to go."

The voice of the soldier on guard duty rang out, and the moment of the release of the tension arrived.

Looking at each other, Subaru and the others picked up their instruments and followed the soldier leading the way out of the waiting room. They underwent a quick physical examination, but Subaru and the others, wearing only light clothing, had no way to carry concealed weapons.

They passed the inspection, receiving curious and perverted looks, and were ushered into the banquet room.

Only—

Taritta: “—Hk.”

Subaru: “Taritta-san?”

Subaru raised an eyebrow at Taritta’s stiff cheeks and heavy gait.

Although he whispered so that the soldiers leading her would not hear him, his voice had definitely reached Taritta, but she did not respond. From the look in her eyes, it was easy to grasp her mental state.

The extreme tension in her body was strong and overwhelming.

Leaving her familiar village, not being able to rely on her sister, the chieftain of the tribe, and going behind enemy lines almost unarmed, may have put her under a lot of stress.

Her breathing was rough, and she looked like she was about to collapse. Subaru tried to cheer her up, but he could not think of what to say.

It would be easy to say comforting words like “don’t worry” or “leave it to me”.

Would that soothe Taritta’s spirit in this moment?

So, while Subaru was unable to take a step forward due to his inner hesitation—

Abel: “—Taritta.”

Taritta: “…”

Abel: “There is nothing to worry about. Just look at me.”

It was a voice that sounded terribly arrogant and pompous, but full of absolute confidence.

The words were baseless, no different from the comforting words Subaru had thought just before. However, the effect of those easy words of comfort was tremendous.

Letting out a faint breath, Taritta blinked her eyes.

She had forgotten to breathe, and the color in her face had been almost gone, but she was brought back to her senses. It was a voice that contained simple words, but it held the power to strongly affect the hearts of others.

The haves would instantly outstrip the hard work of the have-nots.

He had been made painfully aware of this many times, but now, he had been able to witness it clearly.

Subaru: “Guess I’m not angry anymore.”

Subaru muttered this to himself as a consolation. But he soon realized that not only had Taritta’s nerves relaxed, but his own as well. And so, he bent his lips.

Of course he was not going to tell him that, though, because he’d probably triumph in it, were he to do so.

And then—

???: “—Welcome. I heard that you guys are going to perform a great song and dance.”

In the hall where the banquet had been prepared, Subaru and the others were greeted by nearly thirty strong men. They had been told that no ordinary soldiers would be allowed to enter the banquet hall today, so the people here must be the so-called commissioned officers and Generals. In the midst of all these Generals, a man sitting in a chair at the far end called out to the troupe.

Subaru: “…Is that Zikr Osman, the General Second-Class?”

After Subaru muttered under his breath, he glanced sideways at Abel, the danseuse of the group, whose face was hidden by a veil, who pulled his chin slightly as to answer positively to Subaru’s question.

In response to the affirmation, Subaru looked at the other party again, and furrowed his spruced up eyebrows.

Zikr Osman, the commander of the Imperial Soldiers stationed in the Fortress City of Guaral.

As a General Second-Class of the Empire, he was expected to be a strong warrior, but his appearance betrayed Subaru's imagination in more than one way.

First of all, he was short. He looked about half a head shorter than Subaru, who was by no means a tall man. He was almost as tall as Kuna if she stood up straight.

Of course, there was a precedent in Garfiel, who was short yet strong, so physique was no reason to underestimate him. However, he did not appear like someone of real importance either.

The most striking thing about him was his distinctive, puffy haircut.

If he had to describe it in words, he would say it was an afro, but just the fact that it was on top of a short man's head gave him a sort of mascot-like charm.

Subaru had been told beforehand that Zikr was a military strategist. He certainly did not look like the type to make a military career out of martial prowess.

Zikr: "Now, we have a tricky problem. We've been holed up in the city, feeling more and more depressed by the day. That is why we have set up this feast. You know what your roles are, don't you?"

Subaru: "—Yes, sir. We are extremely honored to be invited."

Subaru kneeled before Zikr, who had thrown an exaggerated remark with his chin resting on the armrest.

Flop, Taritta, and Kuna followed, but Abel, who stood at the end of the line, did not. For a moment, Zikr's gaze narrowed, and a sense of anxiety spread through the Generals.

Sure enough, one of the soldiers with a cup of sake at his feet stood up, putting a cup of alcohol near his own feet, and glared at Abel.

Soldier: “Why don’t you kneel? You know you’re in front of the General Second-Class…”

Zikr: “Wait. Don’t be so uptight. This place was opened for drinking and feasting. What we want from those who make their living in the arts is not etiquette, but unrelenting comfort.”

Soldier: “Mh… If you say so, General…”

It was Zikr, of all people, who rebuked the soldier who was bothering Abel.

The soldier reluctantly sat down in response to his generous attitude. All the while, Abel kept his face hidden under his veil and did not show any sign of wincing.

Zikr: “You don’t even falter in the face of a warrior’s spirit? You seem to have a lot of confidence in your dance. But your first impression was not good. I expect you to overturn it.”

Subaru: “Thank you for your generosity… But please do not worry.”

Zikr, who had a curious view of Abel’s arrogance, replied with a “Hm?” to Subaru as the latter knelt down, raising his eyebrows in interest.

It hurt to think about the rest, but this was the opportunity Subaru had been bestowed with. He was going to make the most of it. He would let Zikr taste complete defeat.

Subaru: “—Who you are about to lay your eyes on, is the beautiful danseuse from beyond the Great Waterfall. Her silky black hair that drinks up the sun’s light, along with her heavenly fair skin that has received the blessing of the spirits, her utmost beauty is comparable to the divine beings, and tonight, she will lavishly perform for you all.”

As he stood up, Subaru laid out his opening words.

As if to prove that his overly exaggerated preamble was not a bluff, the veil that hid Abel’s face was slowly lifted.

As soon as the veil revealed that enamoring visage, all those present gasped in unison at the haughtiness of the danseuse.

Zikr: “…”

In particular, the shock of Zikr, who had gotten lost in Abel’s gaze, was massive.

As he had shown a tolerant stance towards them from the start, perhaps he had already been prepared to deal with the situation magnanimously, or perhaps he had received a shock tantamount of being blindsided.

It was as if he had literally forgotten how to breathe and speak.

Subaru: “—Please, allow us the chance to display our danseuse’s act.”

Subaru hung his head down out of politeness, as he propositioned to Zikr. Likewise, Flop bowed his head and raised his respective instrument to ask for permission to begin the feast.

In response, Zikr nodded his head, prompting Subaru to exchange a glance with Flop.

They then nodded to each other, signaling that they were ready, and began to play.

Subaru: “—Tonight, what you will witness is a dance from the hometown of our danseuse, a dance from beyond the Great Waterfall. Please, satisfy to your heart’s content, the dance from the ends of the end.”

That it was from beyond the Great Waterfall, was an exaggerated expression.

However, it was not a lie in the sense that it was a dance unknown to the Imperial Soldiers. Both the song and the dance had been brought not from this world, but from Subaru’s.

Of course, they had been arranged accordingly, but as the basis of the dance was different, the dance alone was enough to attract the attention of the audience.

However—

Abel: “…”

He was a danseuse who charmed others with his beauty and fluid dancing, so he probably did not even require the help of an exotic song and dance from another world.

Abel: “…”

You’ve got the concept of appetizers with drinks, however this was not just the food being served at the drinking party, if you had a type of entertainment that promoted the drinking of alcohol, anything could be called an appetizer.

Naturally, sideshows were also included, and the dances are called appetizing dances, so they very much served as an appetizer for drinking—But they would hardly have this much of an effect.

The dance of the danseuse dazzled the soldiers, burned their throat, and made their souls thirsty for alcohol.

They naturally tipped their cups more frequently and quickly, while their cheeks turned a shade of vermilion all over. General Second-Class Zikr, in an attempt to heal the numbness in his cerebellum, was a stand-out for sipping booze at a particularly fast pace.

With his judgment robbed by alcohol and dance, he would commit mistakes that he would not normally make.

For example, the unprecedented mistake of giving in to his desire to see a sword dance, which resulted in handing over his own sword, as per the danseuse’s request.

Abel: “—It is your loss, Zikr Osman.”

Therefore, even with the tip of the sword pointed at his neck, and with the unquestionable voice of a man coming from the mouth of the danseuse, the eyes of the Womanizer, Zikr Osman could not escape from this euphoria.

2

—“We did it”, Subaru shouted inwardly, now that victory had been secured.

The sword in Abel’s hand was in a position to pierce Zikr’s throat with ease.

Zikr, who had bent backwards, exposing his neck, had no chance to fight back. Without a doubt, the enemy commander had been seized successfully.

And they had even done it earlier than originally planned, at the appropriate timing.

Originally, Subaru’s plan had been to make a name for themselves in the city as a traveling troupe and infiltrate Zikr Osman’s bosom. Ideally, they would then be summoned to Zikr’s bedchamber, where they would be able to catch him off-guard, take him into custody, and force the Imperial Soldiers stationed in Guaral to surrender.

That premise had been overturned by the holding of this banquet.

Abel: “—At the banquet, we shall neutralize all the remaining soldiers in the city.”

These had been the words of Abel, who had announced the change in strategy when they had been summoned to the banquet.

A high-risk, high-reward strategy, which would be fruitful if successful, yet dangerous—Subaru agreed to change the plan on the condition that they would switch back to the original one depending on the situation.

He had not expected it to work out this well.

Zikr: “…”

Abel: “I shall say it again, Zikr Osman. You have lost. Surrender now and have your men disarm. Otherwise, your cup shall be filled not with alcohol, but blood."

Abel, holding his sword to the motionless Zikr, advised him to surrender once again.

But there was no fear in Zikr's eyes, despite the fact his life was being threatened. Those were not the eyes of a determined Imperial Soldier. Rather, there was hesitation in his eyes.

Hesitation, doubt, and other similar emotions.

Zikr: "Dancer, you… No, you're…"

The hesitation manifested itself in Zikr's eyes much if he had seen something awe-inspiring. It did not seem like the reaction of a man in front of a mere dancer.

General: "—Hk! You bandits! You got no right to…!

One of the dumbfounded Generals came to his senses and immediately tried to jump Abel.

But, faster than they could reach for Abel's back, their arms and legs were pierced by thrown knives. —Blades pitched by a concealed Kuna.

Kuna: "I'm sorry, but the Chieftain told me to protect Abel's face."

She had secretly sneaked knives from the banquet in the tambourine-like instrument in her hand during Abel's dance.

The Generals hesitated at the sight of the fallen soldier, his limbs perforated by the blades.

However, there was one figure that dodged Kuna's blade, and jumped out of the way.

???: "Stop joking! Do you think you can stop Imperial Soldiers with something like this?"

The howling bearded giant of a man caught an additional throwing knife with his arm and brushed it away.

Then pulling out his own greatsword, he flew straight at Abel, with a desire for blood,

Subaru: “Abel—!”

Abel, who had captured Zikr, was presenting his stick-like back.

Subaru screamed Abel’s name, but the danseuse did not even blink.

As things were, a large sword would be brought down at Abel’s back—

Taritta: “—Kuh!”

At the same moment, Taritta gritted her teeth and aimed at the man, taking a bow from one of the soldiers.

Prepping an arrow, she aimed it at the bearded colossus approaching Abel. Taritta’s green eyes lit up with murderous intent.

She was steeled to take the man’s life in order to save Abel and stop the assault.

Flop: “Don’t kill him!!!!”

Taritta: “—Hk!”

But just before the arrow was released, Flop shouted in a panic.

Hearing this, Taritta’s eyes hesitated, and the arrow’s aim blurred slightly. And so, the arrow pierced not into the man’s back, but into his right shoulder.

Bearded General: “Gah?!”

The man screamed in agony and turned over after the tremendous impact. But the momentum of the greatsword in his hand could not be killed, and it spun around and headed for Abel’s back.

It seemed as if the sword would smash Abel’s head from behind. However, the tip of the sword narrowly grazed the back of his head and fell to the floor with a violent thud.

Abel had almost lost his life, but he had escaped disaster just in the nick of time.

And then—

???: "…Ah."

With a flutter, Abel's braided black hair was undone and spread.

The tip of the big sword sliced through the hair clip, untying the knot. —No, it did not stop at that. The frayed wig lost its function, and the fake black hair fell to the floor.

The danseuse's long hair had been replaced by Abel's own sable hair.

—The ruthless Emperor, who, along with the hair clip, had shorn off the soft impression of the danseuse.

???: "General Second-Class! It's our opportunity to get these guys now…!"

Zikr: "—Stop! Do not disobey me!"

While the soldier whose limbs had been pierced by knives and the one who had gotten shot in the right shoulder by an arrow groaned, Zikr silenced the appeals of the a General who was still attempting to resist.

If they recklessly stood their ground, regardless of how many fell, they would be crushed in one go by Subaru's forces. And that was the counterattack they most wanted to avoid.

However, Zikr would not let his subordinates fight on. He understood that, now that he himself had been pinned down, and his subordinate Generals had also had their movements suppressed, the outcome had already been determined.

So—

Zikr: “If I do as you say, can you guarantee the lives of my men?”

Abel: “That also depends on your attitude, Coward.”

Zikr: “Guh… Hk.”

Zikr showed his willingness to accept the recommendation to surrender while reddening and biting his lip as he was abused by the relentless Abel.

That was the face of a man who had experienced humiliation beyond having been caught in a plot against him and having his person captured.

Abel snorted, looking down at Zikr’s humiliation.

Abel: “I heard about you, Zikr Osman. Before being labelled the Womanizer, you had been dubbed the Coward.”

Zikr: “… An unbecoming epithet for an Imperial Soldier. Is that why you chose such a strategy?”

Abel: “…”

Zikr: “If I’m the Coward on top of being the Womanizer, I would surrender to a woman at the point of a sword…”

If so, what a humiliation that would be.

Or, if that was the case, Zikr would have died of humiliation. But the reason why Abel had deemed it feasible was different from the reason Subaru and the others had heard.

It was because—

Abel: “A strategist who, through his skillful and steady use of troops, has achieved few notable results in battle, but has also caused little casualties to his allies. An excellent commander, but lacking aggressiveness. Hence, Coward.”

Zikr: “Yes, that is correct, too. I am, but…”

Abel: “What are you confused about?”

Zikr: “Eh?”

Zikr’s eyes widened as Abel narrowed his eyes and asked that question.

Like that, with confusion plastered on the other party’s face, Abel continued with his sword in his hand.

Abel: “When others denigrate you as a coward, they are either pretending to see the results, or those are the rantings of a fool who cannot see the results. I made use of that nature to win.”

Zikr: “…”

Abel: “You abhor useless casualties. So, I decided that you, as the Coward and a military strategist, would not resist in this situation. —Are you going to disappoint me?”

Keeping his gaze sharp and the blade against his neck, Abel inquired that of Zikr.

To someone who was unaware Abel’s true identity, that would seem like a rant that would make one wonder what the hell he was talking about.

He had trusted his opponent’s cowardice and incorporated it into his plan to win.

There was no certainty that he would not upset his opponent by telling such things bluntly. Rather, it was as if he was deliberately attempting to provoke his opponent’s anger; it was really a statement that could make things worse.

Even when dressed as a woman, he was incapable of any kind of humility.

But, in front of Abel, Zikr Osman gasped.

What came to his eyes was a feeling that was hard to describe— if he dared to verbalize it, it would be a surprise that was close to excitement.

It seemed to be a fresh and new reaction, like a maiden receiving something from the person she loved.

Zikr: “—We’ll disarm ourselves. I’ll give strict orders to my subordinates to do so.”

Abel: “That is a wise decision.”

Abel quietly nodded in assent to Zikr’s quiet, head-down answer.

Even though he was dressed like a dancer, no one could resist his dignified nod of the head. As Zikr, their commander, surrendered, the Imperial Soldiers dropped their weapons one after another.

And—

Abel: “What, are you doing fooling around? Go up and burn the flag on the roof.”

Subaru: “Ueh? Wha, me?”

Abel: “Yes you. Only you. You are the sole one who has not performed a single deed since things started to proceed.”

Abel’s cold eyes pierced Subaru, who pointed at himself and blinked.

With those words, Subaru looked around the hall.

Kuna, who had blocked the enemy with a throwing knife, Taritta, who had shot the giant of a man, Flop, who had not allowed the giant of a man’s death and therefore had desperately defended the materialization of the Bloodless Siege, and Abel, who had disarmed the General.

Indeed, the only one who had not done anything was Subaru, who had fallen on his butt when that behemoth tried to assault them.

Abel: “Get a move on, I shall not even be able to disarm them without Mizelda and the others.”

Subaru: “Okay, I understand! Yeah, yeah, I’m sorry!”

Saying this, Subaru headed for the balcony, crawling carefully up to the rooftop. The rooftop of the City Hall, overlooking Guaral at night, was absolutely spectacular.

Then, while bathed in the cold breeze, Subaru retrieved a torch from the wall, ignited the flag of the empire on the roof of the City Hall—the flag of the Sword Wolf, and set it ablaze.

—That was proof that the fall of the Fortress City of Guaral had been achieved here.

3

The first person to notice something off was Jamal, who had been paying attention to the City Hall.

Jamal glanced around, being mindful of the people he had left behind in the building. Todd, who had grown tired of his naive attitude, continued the patrol of the city.

As a city with a certain amount of history, there was no end to the ways to get past the walls, which posed as a powerful barrier. Smuggling schemes, such as underground passages in private houses, or holes used by children to pass through, also existed. While accurately uncovering these, Todd had his guard up for any possible attacks.

Todd: “It’s not like they’re going to back off. If that’s the case, they’ll definitely try to bring down the city. They could use some secret path and take over the City Hall all at once, or set the city on fire… Hmm, are there other means?”

If it was simply to make the city fall, he could think of many ways to slaughter both soldiers and citizens indiscriminately.

For that matter, people would perish if they were buried in fire, water, or soil. If the means were in place, human beings could be as cruel as they wished.

What kind of brutal methods would the black-haired boy use?

That may seem not to be his forte at first glance, but the fact that he was so good at it made it all the more frightening.

No matter how hard he tried to crush them, there still seemed to be some undiscovered byways.

So even if he had a hole in his stomach, Todd would not have been able to sleep in his quarters.

Todd: “They’re all so rude and sketchy…”

Not all of them were of Jamal’s caliber, but many of them had an inability to pay attention to details.

Todd did not believe himself to be neither brilliant nor clever, but if he’s aware of his own stupidity and shortcomings, there were plenty of ways to fill in the gaps.

He could not understand how people could live their lives without questioning their stupidity.

Every single human being was an idiot, and so, they should do their utmost to compensate for it.

Jamal: “—Ah?”

While thinking about this, Todd was about to go into the next private house, when he suddenly stopped due to the surprised voice raised by Jamal behind him.

He stopped and looked at Jamal, who was looking at City Hall in the distance, with an expression of dumbfoundment on his face.

Todd frowned, wondering what was going on.

Jamal: “Oh, come on, is this some kinda joke?”

Todd: “What’s up, Jamal? What’s happening at the…”

“City Hall”, he almost said. Standing beside Jamal, Todd also looked in the same direction.

He was sure the City Hall was having a banquet at the moment, with the dancers they had invited providing entertainment and comfort to the Generals.

So it was not surprising that some of them would get a little carried away and make fools of themselves.

It would not be strange, but—

Todd: "—No way."

No matter what, burning the flag of the Empire on top of City Hall was unacceptable.

That barbaric act was so beyond the realm of rudeness that even Todd was taken aback. The flag, being scorched by flames while fluttering in the hot wind, swayed and burned, lighting up the night sky with the red glow of its blaze.

And right beside the flag set alight, he saw the figure of a woman he had already met in the City Hall.

A musician with rich black hair and sharp eyes. He believed her name was—

Todd: "—Natsumi Schwartz."

That was what she had stated upon having had her name inquired.

A weak woman, who had become small and frightened when Jamal had crowded her. However, he could clearly see that she was boldly burning the Imperial Flag with a torch in her hand.

There was no sign of the weakness he had encountered before in the City Hall.

Certainly, it could not be something charming like a drunken act of violence.

That was undoubtedly an intentional attack on the Empire. And if the flag of the base was burned, it meant that the place had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Just as he was thinking about it, a possibility suddenly surfaced in Todd's mind.

Todd: "No way, is it you?"

With his eyes wide open, Todd studied the dark-haired woman with the torch in her hand, Natsumi Schwartz, and was struck by the minuscule possibility that had sprung up within him.

But the more he thought about it, the more it matched, and the more he looked at it, the more it diverged.

But that was why the effect was so extraordinary.

Who in the world would think of doing something like this?

Of such a method to break through the enemy's guard from the front, and take their base of operations?

Todd: "I thought it was impossible. I can't believe they tried to sneak through the front gate."

Who could possibly use such a life-threatening approach?

Of course, the possibility of hiding behind cargo or inside dragon carriages had been carefully considered, and the checkpoints had been reinforced. However, an intrusion on foot, in a way that would attract attention, had been unexpected.

Even so, the first infiltration had strengthened their vigilance. On top of that, it would be a natural response to opt for a more stealthy approach—.

Jamal: "You don't think that was just a setup, do you? Did they deliberately find us and instill in us the preconceived notion that a frontal breakthrough was impossible?"

And following that, he had managed to get into the city, was invited to the hall as a dancer, brought down the City Hall, and ignited the Imperial Flag—It had been just as Natsumi Schwartz had intended.

Todd: “…This is bad.”

What a meticulous plan, he thought, a chill running down his spine.

He thought he had done everything in his power to have the upper hand, but on the other side, the poster child of war had easily surpassed and ridiculed him.

Todd was surprised to find himself shuddering.

Jamal: “Shit! What the fuck’s going on here! Anyway, we gotta back to the City Hall…”

Todd: “Idiot, stop. You’re going to die, too.”

Jamal: “Huh?”

Unlike Todd, Jamal was unaware of the identity of the person who had set the Imperial Flag on fire.

Due to the distance, his eyes could not perceive any details on the roof of the City Hall. Todd could see it only because of his special eyes. And it was because he could see them, that he was holding Jamal back.

Now that the Imperial Flag at their base had been set ablaze, the fall of the city was decided.

By now, all the Generals who were participating in the feast, Zikr included, had already been murdered. Even if they were to go back in, they would probably end up being defeated themselves.

Jamal: “You’re freaking out, ain’t you? And you still think of yourself as an Imperial Soldier, huh?”

Todd: “You can’t win and stay alive by being proud. Besides, you know that City Hall’s been taken; the General Second-Class is dead. The Shudraqians will be in the city before long.”

Jamal: “…”

Todd: “If we don’t get out of here before that happens, we won’t have any other choice but to die too."

Jamal was not the kind of person to accept the humiliation of disarming himself quietly.

The alternative would be to jump into the enemy ranks weapon in hand, wielding bravery, and die while taking out about ten people.

It could be said that it would be exactly how a Sword Wolf would die, but from Todd's point of view, it was as good as a dog's death.

Life was akin to a finite hand of cards.

To use it for victory was justified, but it would be a waste to utilize it for a regretful defeat.

Jamal and Todd had known each other for a while. It would not be strange to think that they had enough of a relationship between them to advise each other on this. Probably.

Todd: "You see that hole in the wall that I just plugged? I'm going to run through it. What about you?"

Jamal: "Gu, gu… You wanna make me feel humiliated again?"

Todd: "If you're alive, you'll get a chance to rinse your shame off. But if you die, that's it. So, I'm going. I won't get into a fight I don't think I can win."

He really wished not to get into a fight with a low chance of winning, let alone one with a one-hundred percent chance of losing. But he did not have time to argue with Jamal about the details.

He quickly turned his back to him and started to run. Jamal hesitated for a moment before shouting a curse, a "Damn it!", then followed behind Todd.

It would be nice if everyone were as simple as him, but the world did not work that way.

In any case—

Todd: “I guess I’ll remember you as Natsumi for now. —You poster child of war.”

@TASTB_

4

As soon as they realized that the Imperial Flag had been set on fire and the City Hall had fallen, the Imperial Soldiers unexpectedly obeyed the call for surrender.

The same was true for the guards protecting the city, which was a great help to Subaru, whose goal was to seize the city without bloodshed, but this was also a surprising development.

Subaru: “I’ve always thought it strange that, when I watched battles of the Sengoku period in historical dramas, the battle would end when the head of the other side’s general is taken off…”

If the general were killed, the next person in charge would become the general and the battle would resume.

A layman would think that the battle would not end until one side was annihilated or in shambles, but this was not the case in this actual battle.

Because the Imperial Army, which should be overwhelmingly superior in strength, had agreed to disarm as soon as they found out that their commander, Zikr, had been apprehended.

Mizelda: “Well, that was quite a feat, Subaru… No, Natsumi.”

Subaru: “Mizelda-san.”

As Subaru patted his fake chest at the results of the battle and the success of the operation, he was approached by Mizelda, happily slurping down alcohol directly from a bottle.

The women, who had been hiding outside the city as a detachment, had entered the city too, upon realizing that the City Hall had fallen, signaled by the burning of the Imperial Flag. The guards, becoming aware that the Imperial Soldiers had been defeated, did not attempt to stop them from proudly marching into the city as well.

Thanks to Shudraq's cooperation, they had succeeded in capturing most of the Imperial Soldiers.

In the hall where the feast had been held, the drinks and food had been cleared away, and in their place, the bound Imperial Soldiers were lined up in a row.

It would have been a shame to throw everything away, Subaru thought. Mizelda and the others were sipping their drinks, but doing so made them look more like barbarians who were willing to loot.

Subaru: "But with this many people… It would've been tough to go head-to-head."

Mizelda: "No matter how many enemies we have, the pride of Shudraq won't falter. There's no such thing as too many enemies… And yes, simple numbers can be insurmountable. But you and Abel have defeated them."

Subaru: "…"

Mizelda: "I'm proud of you, Natsumi. You've shown courage through wisdom. We couldn't have done this."

With a vigorous pat on Subaru's shoulder, Mizelda left him with a handsome smile.

She then stood up and headed over to congratulate Taritta and Kuna for their contribution to the fall of the City Hall.

Even from a distance, the sight of Taritta's eyes shining from her sister's praise made Subaru smile. Kuna was hugged by Holly, having confirmed that she was safe, making her look like a rolled mackerel.

Subaru: "Keeping things up like this, it would be nice if Kuna's life wasn't snuffed out, given all the great deeds she's done…"

???: "…"

With a sense of relief, Subaru let out a small smile. Then, as he turned around, he nearly collided with the person standing right behind him.

That other person was—

Subaru: “R-Rem…”

Rem: “…Yes.”

Staring up at him from a close distance, Subaru could not help but step back.

Rem, holding her wooden cane, looked at Subaru from top to bottom with her pale blue eyes. Feeling uncomfortable under her gaze, Subaru cleared his throat and said,

Subaru: “What’s the matter? I’m fine, you know.”

Rem: “Yes, so I heard. But I had a feeling that even if you were injured somewhere, you’d hide it and say the same thing.”

Subaru: “You really don’t have any trust in me… But I’m not very good with pain either, so I’ll report even the slightest injury right away. Really, I mean it.”

Rem: “That sounds suspicious, too.”

Subaru: “Tch ha ha…”

Subaru’s shoulders slumped under Rem’s gaze devoid of trust.

But then he quickly turned his head in realization. “Huh?” Subaru uttered. She may have been a bit curt, but she was probably worried about whether Subaru was injured or not.

Subaru: “You’re worried about me, aren’t you?”

Rem: “Huh?”

Subaru: “Oh! I’m sorry! I got carried away! Of course you weren’t! It can’t be that Rem’s worried about me…”

Rem: “Yes, I was.”

Subaru: “Wha?”

Waving his hands in the air, Subaru hurriedly tried to correct his misunderstanding. But he was interrupted by none other than Rem’s words.

Rem’s expression did not change, but the color of her eyes wavered slightly.

Rem: “I said, I was worried. Of course I was. No matter how much of a joke the plan was, I was the one who made you do it. And yet how could I not be worried? How in the world do you think I could be such a heartless person?”

Subaru: “No, no, no, it’s not that, I don’t think Rem is heartless! I really don’t! Rem is affectionate, a bit presumptuous, and a bit reserved before she gets to know someone, but that difference is also very attractive…”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “Rem, don’t tell me you’re impressed…?”

Rem: “No, I simply thought it was weird.”

And with just a simple statement, Subaru’s fake chest was pierced, prompting an “Ugh!” out of him.

Rem gave an annoyed sigh as Subaru backed away, holding his fake chest in pain. She then took a step toward Subaru,

Rem: “Just so you know, no matter what you said or did, you managed to do it. Really, you managed to bring this city down. And that’s without causing any deaths.”

Subaru: “… If only we kept the bloodless part, I hoped that no one would get hurt if possible. But I wonder if that was too much to ask.]

Rem: “I wonder about that. However, if it’s you and Abel-san, then you may be able to pull it off… Why are you looking at me like that?”

Subaru: "…It's nothing, nothing, nothing, okay?"

Rem raised an eyebrow at Subaru's sullen face.

In fact, she had a good point. Without Abel's help, this plan would not have been possible, and it was true that he was a man of terrifying wisdom.

Still, hearing words of praise for another man from Rem's mouth made his heart squirm.

Subaru: "Even with those fake breasts, there's still something to be impressed by, isn't there…?"

Rem: "I feel like you're talking about something stupid again…"

When Rem started staring at him, Subaru waved his hands and said, "No, no, no," to cover it up.

If he told Rem about his current jealousy, she would probably just feel weird about it. It was unavoidable, but it nevertheless hurt. One-sided affection was painful.

Subaru: "No, in this case, it's just a reflex…? Though they're passable compared to Emilia-tan's, nevertheless they still feel like the real deal, don't you think…"

Medium: "Oh! Natsumi-chan, you're here! I heard you guys did great, congratulations!"

Subaru: "Ah, Medium-san."

Medium ran into the room with a loud voice and sluggish footsteps. Subaru recoiled at the sudden approach of the taller woman, but his step back was meaningless as she filled the distance between them by leaning forward.

Medium had a big smile on her face, looking happily at the soldiers in the hall, as two girls rode her shoulders—Utakata and Louis.

Medium: "These people were all captured by Natsumi-chan and the others, weren't they? I'm so surprised! So, so, where's sis? Did she do her best?”

Subaru: “Sis? Ah, yes. Flora is…”

Flop: “—I’m here, dear sister!”

Medium: “Oh!”

Medium’s round eyes widened even more when she saw Flop appear in the hall, a beautiful man who had accompanied her and whom she had become accustomed to seeing for so long. He quickly asserted his presence with a single loud clap of his shoes.

Medium: “Big bro! Isn’t that big bro?! I knew it, big bro isn’t my sister, and the sister I thought was my sister’s big bro!”

Flop: “Hahaha, I have no idea what you’re talking about, dear sister! But no matter what, I’m still here. So whether I’m your brother or your sister, it doesn’t matter!”

Medium: “That’s true too! Then maybe I’m not a sister, but a brother! I’m so big after all!”

Flop: “Younger sister or younger brother, older brother or older sister, we’re still family!”

The conversation between the O’Connell siblings was peculiar, but it kept its unique tempo until its settlement.

The laughing Flop hugged Medium’s waist, and Medium, with the girls on both shoulders, started spinning around in circles as he did.

As a result, both of Flop’s legs floated up and a grand spin began, as the happy laughter of the siblings and children echoed in the hall.

Subaru: “Surreal, isn’t it…?”

Rem: “I’m sure Medium-san was worried about Flop-san too… So, how long are you going to stay dressed like that? The rest of your life?”

Subaru: “The rest of my life has to be an exaggeration?! No matter how cute I am, this is only a temporary appearance… And I'm destined to have to go back to normal eventually."

Rem: "Does that mean that for the time being you'll be dressed like that?"

Subaru: "I just happen to not have time to change right now!"

Subaru wasn't mentally tough enough to endure such suspicions, or to put it another way, to endure how Rem looked at him like he was a pervert.

In fact, the only reason he was still dressed in women's clothing was that he had been busy with minor tasks, such as burning the Imperial Flag, and welcoming the People of Shudraq who entered the city afterwards.

The situation simply had not permitted him to change into his 'Subaru' clothes. It was not that he intended to stay as Natsumi Schwartz.

Subaru: "Or isn't it?"

Rem: "Oh right. If you're searching for Abel-san, he's in the back room with the commander."

Subaru: "You're acting like you don't believe me!"

Pointing at Rem, who had given him a blank stare, Subaru turned and walked towards him.

He'd like to celebrate the success of the bloodless siege with Rem and the others, but he could not just sit there with his hands up in the air and be overjoyed.

After all, the fall of Guaral was only a checkpoint. They had to think about the future civil war that would rumble the Empire, and what kind of position Subaru would maintain.

To that end—

Subaru: "If you'll excuse me."

With that, Subaru pushed open the door to a separate room at the back of the hall.

It was originally supposed to be a private, office-like room for the city manager, the master of the City Hall, but now the master had been sent away, and the replacement for the ruler was sitting on the chair.

Originally, it had been Zikr, the General Second-Class, but now, it was a more pompous man.

Abel: "—You. You are still dressed like that."

So said Abel, resting his cheek on hand as he snorted, having already shed his dancer's costume and rolled up his sleeves into a more masculine attire.

In front of him was the disheveled head of a kneeling Zikr, with no one else in the room.

Subaru: "Please don't mention my outfit. What's more, you are alone with the General Second-Class without any guards? Do you want to throw your life away?"

Abel: "Of course, had he any intention of resisting, I would have put him to the sword. But he has no such intention. Am I not correct, Zikr Osman."

Zikr: "—Yes. That is correct, Your Excellency."

Jerking his chin, Zikr called out to Abel when prompted to respond.

The respectful manner in which he addressed His Excellency and his obvious superior, was a sign that he judged Abel to be more than just a crossdressing bandit.

In other words, Zikr understood Abel's true identity, and because of that he was kneeling there.

Subaru: "Did you tell him?"

Abel: "I needed not such a thing. Apparently, this guy figured it out during the dance. No, I should say that after the dance, he understood in his head the right thing to do.”

Subaru: “—?”

Subaru tilted his head, not comprehending the meaning of those words.

However, at Abel’s observation, Zikr sank his head more deeply, as if to show further respect.

The result was a valuable person who firmly recognized and expressed respect for the fact that Abel was the Emperor, a fact that had not been felt very much up to this point.

Abel: “But it is convenient that you guessed it without needing to disclose it. Zikr Osman, follow me. You will not be wronged.”

Zikr: “Yes! If it is for you, I, Zikr Osman, will risk my life!”

Subaru: “Wait, wait, wait, are you serious? You haven’t heard anything about this yet, have you?”

Zikr made an immediate dedication to Abel, who had requested vassalage toward him while sitting on the chair.

It was convenient, sure, but too good to be true. Zikr, however, shook his head in response to Subaru’s question.

Zikr: “His Excellency is right in front of me, and he needs my aid. If so, it is my duty as a General of the Empire to respond to his request. Above all, I swear to be even more loyal to you than before.”

Abel: “Oh, why? Were you so fascinated by my dance?”

Zikr: “It was very, very beautiful. But that is not all.”

Zikr’s heat was intense as Abel made a cold joke without even smiling. He pressed both fists to the floor, with strong and intense joy on his face.

Zikr: “I’m surprised that His Excellency remembered my two names… That I cursed as nothing but a disgrace, and that you believed it after all.”

Abel: “Of course. If one wishes to be the ruler of the Empire, they must understand the land. The same is true for the subjects that serve. I never know when I’m going to use you, a General, as my own hand and foot. Do you earnestly believe the Emperor’s steps shall be unimpeded without knowing their own hands and feet?”

Zikr: “Absolutely not! That is why I am truly honored!”

Zikr shuddered with indelible joy, and swore fervent loyalty to Abel.

Honestly speaking, solely regarding the events, it was a too-good-to-be-true turn of events, but Zikr’s profile was so uncanny that even Subaru could not find any room to doubt his inner feelings.

At the same time, Subaru was overwhelmed by the charisma of Abel’s words, as well as his strong pride and conviction as the Emperor that supported it.

He did not know how many Generals there were in the empire, but even if Zikr was outstanding among them, would he be able to remember enough of every one of them to be confident that he could bring down the city regardless?

Well, even if another General had been in charge of the city, Abel seemed sure that he would have pulled the same result.

The Emperor, an opponent transcending even the clouds above, knew him, knew his strengths and weaknesses, and upon that, built his strategy, wonderfully entangled him in his expectations and defeated him.

Perhaps it was similar to a high-school baseball pitcher getting his pitch hit for a home run by his favorite professional baseball player. But actual war is too disturbing to be compared to that. In any case…

Abel: “If Zikr Osman shall follow, then the Generals under him shall likewise follow. Together with the Fortress City, I can say that we have finally gathered a strong fighting force.”

Zikr: “However, if we stand against the rest of the country, we will inevitably lack strength. First of all, I think we should invite the reinforcements that are supposed to be sent from the Imperial Capital into the city, and call for their surrender.”

With the addition of allies familiar with the situation of the Empire, able to formulate strategies, the discussion quickly turned into a full-fledged military one.

Unlike Abel, who accepted it without hesitation, Subaru felt a great deal of resistance to the beginning of preparations for a full-scale war. Therefore, he would prefer to have a discussion with Abel before discussions on such matters could begin.

He wanted to discuss with Abel about what to do with himself and Rem after the Fortress City was seized.

However, unfortunately, the proposal that Subaru wished to bring up was not tackled.

Because—

Abel: “—Reinforcements from the Imperial Capital.”

Abel muttered in response to Zikr’s comment, and the air in the room trembled.

Subaru and the others widened their eyes at the sight of Abel as he stood up from his chair with great vigor and walked back to the hall.

And then—

Abel: “—Close the main gate of the city right now! Do not let anyone enter, messenger or not!”

Everyone in the hall was startled by Abel’s bellow.

Of course, much like Subaru and Zikr, who had been talking with him just before yet could not comprehend it, Mizelda and the others could not discern Abel's true intentions either.

However, Abel's urgent look was enough for them to know that this was no ordinary matter.

Mizelda: "Taritta, go tell them to close the main gate."

Taritta: "Oh, sister, what in the world is…?"

Mizelda: "—Go! Don't disgrace Shudraq's name!"

Mizelda's fierce voice struck the hesitating Taritta; the latter's eyes widened at the sound of her voice, which even sounded murderous, and she promptly rushed out of the hall. With that, Taritta would order the guards to close the main gate.

And so, Abel's instructions would be fulfilled, but—

Flop: "Village Chief-kun, what is going on? It's rare to see you change your expression."

Abel: "Now is not the time for your nonsense, merchant. Zikr Osman, persuade the Generals, Mizelda, you are…"

???: "Uuuuuuuh—Hk."

Abel quickly instructed the others, treating the worried Flop with disregard.

Abel ordered Zikr and Mizelda, the heads of their respective groups, to get their people together, but his instructions were cut off mid-sentence by a high-pitched child's tantrum.

Medium: "Whoa, whoa, whoa, what's happening?! Louis-chan, what happened?!"

Louis: "Uuh! Uuh! Aauh!"

Utakata: "Lou! Calm down! Uu's here!"

Medium's eyes turned in surprise as she was yanked by her highly decorated hair.

Being carried on her shoulders, Louis was screaming desperately as Utakata attempted to soothe her down.

However, the rampaging Louis did not calm down at all. On the contrary, Louis was shedding large tears, her expression tense as if she were afraid of something.

Rem: “Louis-chan, please calm down! What’s wrong? If there’s something wrong, I’ll listen to you, so don’t cry…”

Louis: “Uuh!”

Rem: “Huh? Over there, what’s going on?”

Unable to witness the sight of a sobbing Louis, Rem headed towards her. Upon noticing Rem’s approach, Louis pointed to a corner of the hall, tears streaming down her face.

Subaru and Abel also looked in that direction. But there was nothing. —There should have been nothing.

Abel: “Mizelda!”

Mizelda: “Oh, OHHHHH—!!”

Staring into the void, Abel was the first to call out Mizelda’s name.

As if in response, Mizelda quickly readied the bow on her back, seized four arrows in her right hand, attached them to the bow at once, and drew them.

Mizelda’s strong body unleashed a tremendous blow from the Shudraq chieftain.

Four arrows flew wildly, pushing into the empty space Louis was pointing to. Each one of the arrows was reminiscent of the blow of the Hunter who had killed Subaru in the jungle.

It was so powerful that it would have torn Subaru’s form to shreds had he been struck by those.

The floor and walls, which were supposed to be stronger than arrows, were shattered, and the crushing sent a cloud of smoke into the hall.

As the soldiers jumped for cover and gasped for air, Subaru and the others looked closely at the smoke to ascertain if there was indeed a cause for Louis to make such a commotion.

???: “Something like that isn’t going to kill me.”

From somewhere, a languid voice fell softly into the smoke-filled hall.

He recognized the voice as that of a woman. Subaru’s eardrums judged it to be a slow, carefree voice, lacking in emotion, and of modest volume.

It felt terribly out of place, in the momentary tension of the situation.

However, the result of that voice, was powerful.

Mizelda: “…”

—In the blink of an eye, Mizelda’s entire body was engulfed in tremendous flames, having been set alight.

5

Mizelda: “—Tchtch!!”

In the blink of an eye, Mizelda’s entire body was wrapped in a conflagration, causing her to let out an inaudible scream.

The sight of Mizelda, who had turned into a humanoid mass of flames, prevented everyone from taking any immediate action.

Kuna: “—Tch, Holly!!”

Holly: “U-understood~!!”

Immediately after Kuna called out, Holly hurriedly hastened to a container filled with a large amount of water. She lifted it with her monstrous strength, and threw it with all her might at the burning Mizelda.

The water overflowing from the broken container enveloped Mizelda her, and the immolated woman fell to the floor.

The flames had scorched her for nary a moment, but it was impossible to imagine the pain of one's entire body being incinerated.

Subaru was unable keep up with how quickly the situation had morphed, wondering what the hell had happened. However, he did notice an increase in the number of unfamiliar figures in the center of the chaotic hall.

Not only Subaru, but the rest of the group gradually took noticed of the new figure.

—The person standing there was a beautiful girl with most of her brown skin exposed.

She had silvery-white hair, an eyepatch covering her left eye, a lush furry tail growing out of her rear, and a branch in her hand that looked like it had been picked up in the middle of nowhere.

Her emotionless face gave a somewhat unbalanced impression, when compared to her frame of lush youthful, feminine proportions.

However, there was no doubt that this pretty girl had been the trigger for the previous occurrence.

What she had done, what she desired, who she was, everything was unknown—

???: "—It is you, Arakiya."

But while everyone was frozen in place, there was one person who knew the girl's name and so beckoned her.

The one who stood there with his well-shaped eyes sharpened— Staring at Arakiya, was the Emperor who had been ousted from the throne of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

The intimidating person that Zikr had immediately sworn to obey, faced Arakiya face-to-face, but she waved the branch in her hand from side-to-side without nervousness,.

Arakiya: "Long time no see, Your Excellency."

Abel: "You too, appear to be still in good health—Chisha, too, is sparing no quarter."

Arakiya: "No, he's not? That'd be dangerous, after all."

It was not a tense conversation, from Arakiya's point of view.

Even if they were able to communicate, Abel's tense expression showed that she was not the kind of person with whom one could converse with.

In the first place, who was this woman who treated Abel so casually after recognizing him as the Emperor?

Zikr: "General First-Class, Arakiya…"

Subaru: "…What did you just say?"

With the two of them lined up, Subaru's cheeks tightened at the stifled words from Zikr.

He hoped he had misheard, but Zikr's eyes were serious, and Subaru realized that the possibility of having misheard his words had disappeared.

Then, as if to prove that it was not an illusion, Zikr piled on.

Zikr: "General First-Class Arakiya… One of the empire's strongest, one of the Nine Divine Generals!”

Abel: “She also ranks as Second among the Nine Divine Generals. That means she is the second strongest in the Empire.”

Subaru: “The second strongest in the Empire…?!”

Zikr’s cry was supplemented by Abel’s words, and Subaru exclaimed, unable to conceal his surprise.

At the center of the astonished gazes in the hall, having gathered attention, Arakiya raised a branch and—

Arakiya: “Indeed!”

She puffed out her chest proudly.

Subaru: “…”

Slowly, the Shudraq that were gathered in the hall began to form a circle around Arakiya. Mizelda had been felled in the first attack, and only seventeen Shudraqians remained, including the non-combatant Utakata, so it was hard to tell if they were strong enough.

Nevertheless—

Shudraqian: “We can’t let you interfere with victory finally within our grasp—!”

One spat out a curse, and picked up one of the swords that Subaru had seized.

Driving her away, or knocking her down and capturing her. If they could achieve one of the two, they would ensure their victory in the fall of Guaral.

Arakiya: “Try as you might, it’s no use.”

The next moment, a tremendous wind blew, jumbling the entirety of the hall. Subaru, the Shudraqians, and the bound Imperial Soldiers were all moved together.

Arakiya: "…"

The heavens and earth were turned upside down, Subaru could not see up, down, left, right, in front of him, or behind him, and his entire body slammed into the floor, the wall, and the ceiling, nearly knocking him unconscious from the intense pain.

Subaru: "Kah!"

His whole body was thrown on the ground, and as he looked at the broken ceiling, his brain slowly analyzed and understood what had come to pass. —Perhaps, a tornado.

In an instant, a tornado of tremendous size had erupted in the room, swallowing Subaru—or rather, Subaru and everyone else, and threw them around wildly.

Arakiya's tornado overran the room, making no distinction between people or objects, friend or foe.

Even so, Subaru barely managed to stay conscious—

Zikr: "I am not going to let you… hurt her any more than you already have…"

Zikr, holding Subaru, grunted and threw his arms out sluggishly.

The moment the tornado had spouted, Zikr had quickly pulled Subaru's body nearer to his own, in an attempt to protect him from the impact of the destruction. Its effect was limited, but it had cushioned Subaru's body, and kept him from losing consciousness.

However—

Subaru: "It's a joke, right…?"

Looking around the hall, Subaru spat that out in despair.

In the midst of the mess of people and things, the Shudraq, who had raised their will to fight just before had all fallen to the ground, unable to fight.

In fact, those who had displayed hostile intentions had been the ones to suffer the most damage.

He wondered if Arakiya's tornado had even chosen which people to attack while wrecking so much destruction.

Subaru: "—Re… m."

Enduring the pain in his whole body, Subaru searched for Rem in the hall.

She, like the Shudraq and the others, might have lost consciousness from the attack. Were she to be hit in the wrong place, the worst would be a possibility.

Then, Subaru gazed around the room and spotted someone.

Not Rem, however. Not Rem, but despite that, they had caught Subaru's attention.

Because even after being overrun by that tornado, they had gotten to their feet and fled to the half-destroyed balcony, leaning their back against the railing, gazing at Arakiya.

Subaru: "Abel…"

He did not know how in the world Abel had been able to protect himself in that tornado. Abel's injuries were very minimal—yet it was still painful to see him bleeding from his forehead and with one arm slumped down.

However, Abel was looking straight at Arakiya with eyes that had not lost their supremacy.

Abel: "The obedient puppet, engaging in such grandiose conduct. Have you forgotten as to why you have joined my ranks?"

Arakiya: "…Your Excellency, you lied. You deceived me. That's why, I'll never forgive you."

Abel: "—Did Chisha also put that idea in your head?"

Abel exhaled a heavy, bloodied breath, his eyes slightly downcast.

Arakiya's face was lacking in emotion, but she still held a recognizable anger in her eyes. She slowly stepped on the rough ground, and walked towards Abel on the balcony. The thought of Abel running out to the balcony to look good never crossed Subaru's mind, but he did not think he, injured and not holding anything, had an ace up his sleeve.

The steps Arakiya took while shrinking the distance between them sounded like a countdown to Abel's very life.

One step, two steps, Arakiya approached Abel, and then—

???: "Uh, AAAAAAAAAAAAA—HK!!"

A high-pitched voice rang out, and immediately afterwards, a pillar came crashing down on the spot where Arakiya was about to pass.

There was a roar of stone shattering and cracking, and a primitive weapon that must have weighed no less than several hundred kilograms struck Arakiya.

It was Rem, who had been hiding behind a pillar, watching for the right moment to strike.

Rem, who had remained conscious and hidden behind a pillar despite having been swallowed by the tornado, was probably visible from Abel's position. Hiding her presence, she had timed her attack with Abel's gaze as Arakiya advanced, and then pushed down the pillar.

It was the last attack he could come up with in this situation, utilizing Rem's strength.

It was well-aimed, and so it crushed Arakiya's slender body—

Arakiya: "Hmm?"

Rem: "—No way."

The floor beneath Arakiya's feet, which she had not even looked at, deformed like amezaiku, and stretched upwards as to support the fallen column.

It was as if they had witnessed the completion of avant-garde art from the beginning to the end.

Rem's full power did not reach Arakiya, nor did it even distract her.

Then, as Rem kneeled at the base of the broken pillar, Arakiya regarded her back. After taking a look at Rem, her eyes suddenly widened.

Arakiya: "Oh, an oni. That's unusual."

Rem: "You're…"

Arakiya: "…Don't get in my way. I don't want my people to get hurt."

Rem: "Your people…?"

Rem's face reddened with anger, wondering what she was talking about.

But sadly, because of the existence of a large discrepancy in power between her self and her opponent, anger was merely an emotion, and the will to resist was useless.

Rem reached for rubble, and this time tried to show her intent to attack by throwing stones.

However, Arakiya swung the branch in her hand, conjuring a wind that blew the debris around Rem away.

Literally, they had been swept away. Not only the debris on the floor were blown away, but the walls and ceiling behind Rem, the upper levels of the building, one after another, were as well.

Arakiya: "I'm not good at controlling my strength. You, too, will fly away, at this rate."

Rem: "If that's the case, then why don't you do it? After all you've done, what's there to hesitate about now? It's not like that…"

Arakiya: "…Disappointing."

Rem's clenched-teeth answer made Arakiya's shoulders slump in dejection.

But despite the cute gesture, Arakiya's actions were caustic and simple. Slowly the branch was lifted, and a phenomenon of a different dimension would shatter Rem's existence.

—There was no way Natsuki Subaru could tolerate such a thing.

Subaru: "AH, AHHHHH—Hk!"

With a yell, Subaru's body leapt into action, chasing away the pain in his entire body.

Only at this moment, cowering fear, unpredictable anxiety, and everything else were in the way.

Abandoning his fears, he moved forward as his instincts told him to, and intervened in front of Rem and Arakiya.

He hoped to at least protect Rem from the destruction that was about to befall her.

He was willing to die, if it meant protecting Rem.

He really did not want to die, and everything would be ruined if Natsuki Subaru died here, but he did not mind dying here.

Dressed as a woman, with fake breasts, makeup on his face, a wig on his head, and even an ingenious way to make his skin look white, in such a ridiculous appearance that sought beauty, Natsuki Subaru stood up for the girl he had to protect, with the thought of spitting blood.

Rem: "—Hk."

Protecting Rem against his back, he spread his hands.

He could notice that Rem had gasped upon dawning on her that Subaru had intervened in front of her.

But what she thought or felt about Subaru's action, he would never know. That opportunity would never come again.

It was snatched away in a flash before the destruction named Arakiya—

???: "—What a comical sight. But it is not so bad."

That was the voice that reached Subaru's ears as he prepared to have everything taken away, and nothing to be left.

As he closed his eyes in an attempt to accept the coming end, he gasped when he registered that no heat, loss, pain, suffering, thirst, or any of the other factors that lead to "death" had befallen his body.

Then slowly opening his eyes, he saw it.

Before that Subaru, spreading out his upper limbs, shielding Rem to his back—there was someone else's back.

It was not Arakiya. Arakiya was standing on the other side of that back. He could see her standing there, stunned, astonishment plastered on her face.

The being that had brought that stupefaction to Arakiya turned around, cutting down all the destruction that was supposed to come, while holding up a glowing red sword in their right hand.

Pompous, arrogant, crimson eyes convinced that everything in this world would kneel at their feet. The one who hugged their arms as they bounced their ample breasts, with scornful looks that were the embodiment of cruel beauty, a person who he was not supposed to see here.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Subaru simply gasped at the appearance of an existence that was not supposed to be there.

Looking at him, the owner of the beautiful face, the manifestation of the word “crimson”, snorted.

And then—

???: “No need to say your name, fool. I shall, however, permit you to say my name.”

As she said this, she—Priscilla Barielle, had a blood-colored smile on her face.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy II

1

A slash slides through, giant scales are torn off, pitch black blood splatters out.

“—Hahhah!”

While bathing in the blood from head-to-toe, while baring his teeth, that man—Jamal—laughed.

Laughing, his demeanor while he slips past the gigantic snake witchbeast’s repeated attacks, is certainly what distinguishes him from the strength of a run-of-the-mill soldier.

That he still remains in the position of first class private, despite the ability he presented, was a vivid clue as to the number of attitude problems he has during his daily duties.

“The hell are ya doing! I ain’t got cover, cover!”

“Alright, I get it, I get it”

While parring the witchbeast’s fangs with twin blades, Jamal, in a solo battle against their enemy, yells out. The recipient, Todd who stood at his rear, was coordinating his comrades, and encircling the witchbeast.

And then… “Release!”

Signaled by Todd’s order, attacks start flying from all sides. Arrows and throwing knives, so-called plinking-type attacks, because of the situation. Without any consideration for Jamal’s presence, all come pouring down like rain.

Of course, as the target is the witchbeast, and nobody is trying to hit Jamal—

"We're not going to go out of our way to avoid you. Dodge them yourself."

"You motherfucking…!"

The uncountable number of attacks flying in, Jamal deals with the witchbeast with his left sword, while easily parrying them with his free sword to protect himself.

Meanwhile, the witchbeast screeches while being showered in attacks, bending back. It was done for.

"A snake that's all about size, don't think that you can win against imperial soldiers!"

The leaping Jamal's twin swords swing from left and right, and bisect the snake's thick neck.

With a hefty sound, the head falls down to the ground, and as it spurts fountains of blood, the witchbeast's giant body slowly topples, the quake causing the trees of the jungle to shake.

The fight ended safely.

"How many casualties?"

"No casualties. Thanks to you working so hard on your own, my man."

"That's good and all… But, why was I alone? Ain't it weird?"

Wiping the blood from his twin blades, Jamal sheaths them back in their scabbard and cracks his neck. But, there really is not anything particularly weird about it. It's not so much that the other soldiers are lacking in strength, but rather that Jamal's strength is outstanding.

Matching his pace would be impossible for those around him, and him matching his pace with those around him would be even more of a no-go. Thus, Todd had not set out with him from the start.

In actuality, everything had gone well, so there shouldn't be any problem…

“Oi, why is it? Don’t shut up and answer me.”

“Aah, that’s it. Everyone here hadn’t come across a witchbeast before, so they hesitated on how to handle it. On that front, you didn’t hesitate at all my guy, as expected.”

“Tch, each and every one of you… What would you do if I wasn’t here?”

Jamal clicks his tongue, but even should he not be around, they would make do without him. It was just that in such circumstances, there’s no proof that they would’ve been able to keep the sacrifices down to zero.

In any case—

“That brat escaped?”

Thus, as Jamal mutters so in annoyance, Todd presents no reply.

He simply shrugs in place, as a wordless affirmation.

2

Todd Fang, an Imperial Soldier of Vollachia, holds his head, with a “They got us.”

Currently, Todd, as well as his comrades, are in the heart of the Buddheim Jungle, in the eastern side of the Empire. They had been attacked by a witchbeast some distance away from the place of their encampment, and there was where they had fought.

In all honesty, their encounter with the witchbeast had been a complete surprise attack.

From the beginning, the number of witchbeasts inhabiting the Empire of Vollachia is low, to the point the number of Imperial Citizens who would go their entire lives without seeing one was not small.

In Todd’s case, the number of witchbeast encounters are such that he can count them with the fingers of only one hand, so that his colleagues had gotten cold feet at the appearance of a witchbeast was no surprise.

However, if said appearance of a witchbeast had been somebody’s intention, then things are different.

“—Who’d think, that he would sic that witchbeast on us.”

Pulling out an axe stuck in a tree, Todd reminisces about the prey that he had failed to put down.

A boy with a nasty glare and black hair—He had been one of the prisoners Jamal had collected at the riverside, but he had revealed himself to be a part of the People of Shudraq living within the jungle, and invited Todd’s group into the woods.

Of course, it’s not like everything he had done and stated had been believed, nor had caution been absent in the case he showed any suspicious behavior. However, even that had not been enough.

By some means, the boy had beckoned a witchbeast, in an attempt to have it attack Todd’s group while he escaped. And just like that, he had gotten away, abandoning Todd and the others in the jungle.

“Fucking shit… Anyway, I’m gonna go look for that brat who got away. That’ll take me to the People of Shudraq, and I’ll exterminate all of them.”

“Hey hey, don’t lose sight of the objective. ‘Course, I’m also livid at that guy. But, if you give chase right now, you’ll just look pitiful when you get caught in a trap again.”

“You what now??”

Turning around with an angry expression, Jamal draws closer to Todd. Reining back Jamal’s momentum with a hand, Todd tells him “Now, calm down.”

“For now, you better do something about your appearance my guy. Smells like there’s water over there, so go wash that blood off.”

“What’s the big deal about some splatter? We’re Imperial Soldiers…”

“It’s some unknown witchbeast’s blood, yeah? We don’t know what kind of effects it could have. Not being afraid of poison isn’t bravery, it’s just foolishness.”

In the first place, Todd himself had thought it stupid upon seeing that Jamal had covered himself from head-to-toe in witchbeast blood.

Seemingly not having realized that risk previously, a sense of crisis now starts showing up on Jamal’s face once Todd pointed it out.

“…Where’d you say the water was?”

“Over there. It’s probably not that far off. Hurry and wash that blood off, then come back. We’ll decide our course of action in the meantime.”

Waving his hand nonchalantly, Todd drives Jamal off towards the water. While reluctant, it seemed that Jamal would also hate to fall to poison, and so he promptly disappears into the bushes.

Seeing off his back, Todd crouches down beside the fallen witchbeast, and by touching its fangs, horn and even scales, he confirms its state.

“Todd! It’s not time to fiddle with that witchbeast’s corpse! What’ll we do next?”

“I understand your panic, but there’s some meaning in investigating them. Think about it. If, by chance, that guy from before is able to call over more witchbeasts, what would we do? If it’s Jamal, sure he can just go and take them down, but we need to know if even we are able to easily kill them.”

“…That he was controlling the witchbeast, do you seriously believe that?”

“So, the moment a witchbeast just happened to attack us, the boy that was with us just happened to take off and run away like he was waiting for it to happen. Do you seriously believe that??”

With Todd posing that question, the soldiers accompanying him hold their tongue and sink into silence.

That many coincidences, they shouldn’t add up together like that. Disregarding whether the witchbeast was being controlled, they should think that the boy had concocted a plan to escape, factoring in the assumption that the witchbeast would appear.

Which means… “It’s highly likely that if we brazenly go chasing after that kid, we could get the tables flipped on us. It’s not just one witchbeast in this jungle. There could be a pack of them.”

“Ugh… Then, do we just return to camp empty-handed?”

“Doesn’t have to be empty-handed. At the very least, we’ve learned that the kid and the People of Shudraq are hostile to us. In that case, we have many things in our hands.”

Hitting the shoulders of the soldier who seemed frustrated, Todd clarified another point of view.

It’s true that, just looking at the situation, that boy had bested them through-and-through. However, in both fighting and strategic power, the side that had more options at hand was clearly this one.

To regard the defeat of the first battle, as the defeat of all consequent battles, is too wild a conclusion.

In the first place… “None of us got killed. If we win in the end, it’s our victory.”

“…Understood.”

Saying that, Todd gives a dry laugh at the soldier whose expression, while reluctant, calms down.

After that, those who had put away their weapons, begin to wrack their brains on how to proceed from now. Because they had heard Todd’s opinion, they are discussing whether to retreat or give chase.

Naturally, Todd's opinion being that giving chase is absurd, the other soldiers' opinion too, seems to be solidifying in a direction similar to Todd's.

"For now, let's go back to the camp and make a report. After that, hunt the mountains with the camp's forces? Not very appealing when you consider the size of the forest…"

"It'd be better to consult with Second Commander Zikr at Guaral. But don't think that you'll get that Womanizer out of the town."

At the words of that last Soldier, the other soldiers laughed with a "Not wrong."

While hearing his fellows' conversations, Todd instructs everyone to drink water in preparation for their departure, as he passes around a leather bag filled with water, then once again returns to face the witchbeast's remains.

"By the way, it seems like you can use a witchbeasts' horns and bones for medicine and weapons and the like. They're rumored to go for pretty high prices, anyone interested?"

"You talking about money? Well, it's not like I'm not interested, but right now's not the time for that. We gotta hurry back, and report to our all-ies…s."

"…"

The soldier, while answering back to Todd's remark as the latter looks down to the witchbeast's corpse, has his voice suddenly start shaking midway. Then, becoming numb, he was made unable to continue.

The soldier, bewildered as to what was happening, falls to his knees right where he stood. And he is not the only one to do so. All other soldiers as well, one after another, became unable to stand.

"Wh-at is…"

"It's the water, the water. You didn't think it tasted kind of bitter?"

“—Ah?”

In front of the astonished soldier, picking up the water’s leather bag, Todd shrugs his shoulders. Cutting up the bag with a knife he took out, Todd shows him something tinted red; the water that drips out.

That is… “The snake’s venom. Generally speaking, it seems like the pouch structure that holds a snake’s venom at the root of the fangs is unchanged. Good thing I found it right away.”

“wh- wh- wh-…”

Why, did you do that, the numb soldier, unable to move, desperately asks.

Apparently, it seems the witchbeast’s toxicity had lost some strength, and so, they would not die just from that. While it would take a little more elbow grease, it is something that can’t be avoided.

“Well, I’m sure you have tons of questions. But, I’m not going to go out of my way to answer them, it’s going to be a problem once Jamal comes back. Which is why,”

Saying that, Todd places his axe on his shoulder, and goes to his paralyzed comrade’s side. Then, at arm’s length of one of them, he apathetically raises the axe,

“—Feel free to check your answers.”

3

Finding a small waterfall after emerging from the bushes, Todd takes a small breath.

This is because he had caught sight of Jamal, at the bottom of a small waterfall, in a small puddle-like water source, desperately attempting to wash the blood off.

“My guy, you seem to be having quite a bit of trouble.”

“Ah! You dick, where’s the water. This is some puddle, you little… Because of that, no matter how long I take, the blood won’t wash off, will it now?!”

His eyes bulging at the sight of the returned Todd, Jamal directs his anger at him.

Picking at his ears at that attitude, Todd responds “My bad, my bad” to that,

“For the time being you’re fine like that, so listen. We’ll get out of this jungle, and go back to Guaral. Then, we’ll report the operation failed.”

“—Huuh?! Why would we do that?! After this, we’re going to go after that kid, find those Shudraq and”

“Massacre them? Your enthusiasm’s admirable, but think for a second.”

Jamal bites back at the future plans presented. Raising his finger in front of him, Todd begins his explanation to his partner, someone whose head was lacking in use, with “You listening?”

“That kid used the witchbeast to escape from us. It’s very likely that he could set another one on us, if we give chase.”

“In that case, we just gotta kill’em all”

“If all our soldiers were you, my guy, then sure, but that’s not the case here. And, there’s another problem… There might be, a surprise attack from the Shudraq on the camp.”

“What?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? I mean, that kid will let his allies know that we’re enemies. Then in that case, for the Shudraq to get the early worm, it’d be convenient for them to launch a surprise attack on the camp to secure victory. And, the group at the encampment doesn’t expect that. Their surprise attack would more-or-less succeed.”

And with that, they would annihilate them without giving them the opportunity to regroup after having broken up their formation.

It would be a losing battle. You could say it was an unavoidable conclusion, from the moment that Todd's group was baited out.

"In that case, we just gotta hurry back and tell 'em."

"How would we? That kid had us walk quite a bit, and he kept us quite far away from the camp while we were fighting the witchbeast. At this point, we won't make it in time even if we go back."

"…So, that's why you're shamelessly packing your bags and leaving?"

"That's right. We'll reorganize, and squash those cunning bastards. It's our best shot."

With a vein popping on his forehead, Jamal stands in place grinding his molars.

Befitting an Imperial Soldier, "Never retreat, Never cower, Never Concede" is Jamal's motto. To him, Todd's plan was nothing more than humiliating.

However… "—I'm right. You understand that too, don't you? Your right eye should've been the cost of that lesson."

"…Fucking dammit! Alright, I'll hear you out. In these times, your thought process hasn't been wrong… What about the others?"

"No, well, you get it, right? Unlike you, my guy, they're not as flexible. I told them the same, but not a single one of them lent me an ear."

While scratching his head, Todd points towards the bushes and drops the tone of his voice. Hearing that, Jamal's mood improved and with a snort, "Hah," he continued, "So that's it. So then, they gave up on you? That's a bummer."

"Don't say that. I'm the one saying this, but I'd like to say I was the one who gave up on them. —I thought it'd be pointless even if I talked to them, so I cut it short early.”

Perhaps believing Todd’s words to be those of a sore loser, Jamal’s sneer showed no trace of disappearing.

He thought that was more convenient, so he doesn’t think there’s any particular reason to make excuses. It’d become a back-and-forth between them anyway, they’d dispute over him being a coward and whatever else as much as possible.

He just quickly dealt with the problems he had a grasp on. —In the end, it would be the same.

“Right then, let’s get out of the forest before we’re found by the Shudraq. If we can’t make it back to Guaral, that’d also disgrace the Imperial Soldiers.”

“Let’s go with that, then! If you can’t keep up then I’ll leave you behind, Todd.”

“Ok, ok.”

With rough breaths, Jamal started leading the way out of the forest. He followed behind, seemingly annoyed.

Plainly put, Jamal was determined not to lose next time, but Todd felt the same on that front.

—Because he believed that the run-away black-haired boy, was a troublesome enemy that he definitely ought to kill.

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: An Oni's Ailment

1

Once his earth-smeared cheeks regained their red lush, the young boy's feeble gasps finally turned into normal breathing.

Relieved and reassured, Rem gently released him from her arms and sighed.

Rem: "First things first…"

She had ascertained that his life was no longer at risk, so her mind switched to what she should do with him. At a loss, she turned him over and laid his head on her lap to rest.

A part of her would have felt guilty for allowing someone with such injuries to lie down on grounds with grass this sparse.

Yes, that's all this is. Nothing more.

Rem: "Why, just why am I making excuses…"

Rui: "Mmuh—?"

As Rem muttered to herself, her face twisting into a bitter scowl, the little blonde-haired girl turned to her and tilted her head, puzzled.

Perhaps the little girl felt anxious, perhaps she felt worried, but Rem regardless gave a shake of her head to quell her own thoughts, then turned her attention to her shoulder.

She pressed her hand on her own shoulder softly and felt a steady flow of warmth. With this warmth, she had saved the boy's life which had been hanging by a thread.

It was a strange feeling. This was not something unique to her, she felt, but rather something she had channeled from within. The little girl's palm was nothing more than a conduit, a catalyst.

Vincent: "—To think that you are capable of using healing magic… He truly does have the devil's luck."

Just as it seemed she had let her guard down, a voice called out from nearby.

Her eyes shot to where it had come from and saw that man, the man with black hair and prudish face, standing with a glare in his eyes—He had propped the boy up long enough to survive, and had advised her to save him.

Rem had felt the need to express her gratitude, as she had been able to save the boy thanks to him, strange and vexing to her as it were.

And yet, in his presence, the thought had evaporated from her mind. His gaze was haughty, his tone even more so. To her, it seemed as though he were sizing them up like a product for sale.

Immediately she pulled the little girl behind her, and used her body to hide her from his eyes.

Vincent: "Fret not. Had I any malicious intentions, I would not have brought that man here. My desire was simple, to see that his efforts received just rewards."

Rem: "Efforts…? Just rewards…? What are…"

Vincent: "That would be you."

He cut through Rem's wary questioning and asserted himself.

As he observed Rem shrinking, he closed one eye, fearless, and asserted once more.

Vincent: "It is only natural. That man's aim was one and forever true. It truly requires no repeating. From the very beginning and to the end, he only desired for your safety and your peace of mind, and naught else. He had steeled himself even for death to achieve that."

Rem: “—And why is that? Do you know? Is that why you… For me… And even went as far as to attack those people.”

Vincent: “I know not.”

His short, unfulfilling words cut her inquiries off.

The man seemed to have no time to display any consideration, among other things. A boy she had trouble trusting, vulgar soldiers, and this man in front of her, all of them added to the image Amnesiac Rem had of the male gender; indeed, while this sample of hers was far too small, she could not help but come to the conclusion that men equaled trouble.

Yet without sparing so much as a thought for her, the man looked down at the boy lying on Rem’s lap.

Vincent: “I have no interest in the origin of his desires. I moved in accordance with my own intent. That is why I burned that soldier camp to the ground. And while I was doing so, I thought of rewarding this clown. Thus, all came to be in orderly fashion. That is the truth of things.”

Rem: “…”

Vincent: “I have no interest in how you interpret my words, however.”

He shrugged, his eyes disinterested in anything Rem might have to say, as if the results of this particular tirade mattered little to him. He had done what he wanted, and any actions taken outside of his pursuits were born of his whimsy. However, Rem’s heart had yet to dry or harden so much as to be unable to appreciate his roundabout kindness.

As they spoke, the overwhelming retch of miasma wafted out of the boy as he lay on her lap, keeping her on edge. Her instincts screamed at her to be wary of him, regardless of his appearance or behavior.

Even if that behavior included risking his life to save her from that military encampment.

Rem: “I don’t… I don’t understand you.”

She continued mumbling towards him, having failed to obtain a straight answer from anyone.

Vincent: “—Mizelda, I am going back to the village. Destroy the camp until nothing is left, and take whatever you can make use of.”

Mizelda: “Understood. Don’t you have to hide your face anymore?”

Vincent: “Indeed, there are disadvantages to having my face be witnessed. There should be a mask or two on display at our rally. I will take one of those.”

Mizelda: “Unfortunate but unavoidable…”

Ignoring Rem’s mumbling, the man struck up a conversation with the red-haired woman. And while doing so, he turned his back and began walking away, but for only a moment, he broke his stride and looked back.

Vicent: “You. What shall you do now? Accompany me to the Shudraqian settlement with that fool in tow? Or stay here and die? Choose.”

Rem: “…Don’t you have time to put that in a better way?”

Vincent: “I do not. My time is precious and limited, and has far more important uses.”

As he whispered, Rem grew an intense dislike for this man. However, she held her tongue, and rather than return fire with fire, she only nodded in consent.

With that, she calmed herself. —This was not the time to be stubborn. Even if trusting these people around her was a hard pill to swallow.

Rem: “No one else can protect this girl, other than me.”

Around her were the red, burning remains of a battlefield. There was no one else but her for this little girl, so she decided to do what she could, with or without her memories, as she fastened her grip on the little girl.

Albeit it was still perplexing, that she needed this man's guidance to come to her realizations.

And this boy—

Rem: "And you, sleeping so peacefully like this… I hate you."

Annoyed, she pinched his nose.

2

The tanned women—the Shudraqians took Rem to their village. The scenery there was marvelously strange. There were women everywhere, as far as her eyes could see.

Of course, Rem's previous experience with a large population had been limited to the army campsite from before, which had been full of men. Now, there were no males in sight. The idea that mixed gender environments are rare had begun to take hold in her mind.

Rem: "Are the men of your tribe fighting elsewhere?"

Taritta: "Heeh? No, this is merely circumstances… More women are born to Shudraq, while it just so happens that the Sacred Army has more male soldiers… Ah, Sister!"

Mizelda: "Taritta? Do not annoy me for every little thing. You are my sister, the chieftain's sister. Behave like it."

The Chieftain sisters of the Shudraq—Taritta responded to Rem's question, then called for Mizelda.

Mizelda rebuked Taritta, who had her hair dyed blue. While she did feel bad about having possibly done something bad to Taritta, she decided to keep her inquiry's rejection in mind.

At present, everything around her looked new and fresh, as if a treasure chest lay open in front of her.

She had learned firsthand during her time at the military encampment that not all were willing to humor her questions. In that sense, the women of this village were comparatively kinder, though to be fair, the eye-patch man from the military camp was crueler than expected, so the comparison may have not been truly warranted.

Regardless, Rem had finally found a place to lay low for the time being.

The Shudraq thankfully seemed to have no intention of restricting her in any way, and even went so far as to provide her with a hut to rest. There, she laid the young boy on the bed to rest, and for the time being, Rem decided to calmly mull over her situation.

She had to think about her position in all of this, what to do afterwards, decide on what to do with the young boy and the little girl, and, and—

Rui: “Aah—uuh aah—?”

Rem: “—ah.”

As she rubbed her eyebrows, deep in thought, she felt a small hand tug at her sleeves.

Ever since they had arrived at the village, the little girl had been tagging along behind her quietly. While she had become more attached to Rem compared to the time they had been running around in the great jungle earlier on, the fact that she showed concern for her took Rem aback.

Vincent: “—It seems even that little girl understands that even if you try to piece everything by yourself at random, you shall hit a dead-end.”

Rem: “You again…”

As the little girl tugged on her sleeve, she heard his voice. Taking no effort to hide the displeasure on her face, she turned around. Standing at the entrance of the hut was that man with black hair—Though his current appearance left her dumbfounded.

He was wearing an atrocious mask, one with streaks of red and white, something that made him stand out like a sore thumb.

Regardless, along with his clothes also being a dead giveaway, it failed to mask his particular presence, that made him, him.

Rui: "Uuu—! Uuu—!"

Rem: "What is that mask? It's scaring her."

Vincent: "I am in quite a precarious situation, you see. Regardless, for the sake of the Shudraq, as well as my own, I deemed it best to keep my face hidden."

He spoke as he placed his hand on the mask twisted in anger, then proceeded to nonchalantly enter the hut. Rem attempted to convey that he was not welcome, but alas, he was not of the sorts to heed her.

So Rem decided to drop all pretenses and be straightforward.

Rem: "What exactly are you and him planning to do?"

Vincent: "Strictly speaking, that man and I are not working together. Our interests happened to align this one time, so we joined hands. There is no guarantee that that shall hold true in the future."

Rem: "…"

Vincent: "He shall plan to avoid the conflict ahead of us. He shall attempt to flee from it. Of course, he shall plan to take you with him."

Pulling in her chin, Rem remained silent despite being insulted.

While the keywords 'conflict' and 'flee' piqued her interest, she was more interested in the latter part of what he said—That that boy, Natsuki Subaru, would attempt to take her with him. It worried her.

Truth was, the thick miasma that radiated out of him kept Rem's senses sharp and on-guard against him. That said, her initial hostility towards him had begun fading.

There remained the fear that she would come to regret feeling that way once Subaru woke up, but regardless.

Rem: “Will you keep fighting alongside the women here?”

Vincent: “That is my whole intent. I intend to fight till I breathe my last. And, the fight shall not end so long as I have breath.”

Rem: “…I have to get away from that and hide.”

Vincent: “I am War itself. Where do you intend to hide from me? What land is there that shall keep you hidden from me?”

It was obvious that he alone believed that, but this man had the charisma, the presence to force others to conceive his notions and perceptions to be fact. That was part and parcel of who he was.

He was War itself. Thus, it meant all in his presence would be charred, drowned in waves of the fires of war, leaving naught but ash.

Rem: “And if I don’t like that, I should take that boy and go…?”

Vincent: “—Nay. That is no longer an option. He escaped from the clutches of the Sacred Empire Army camp and came to me with the desire to save you, and from the moment I decided to see that desire be fulfilled, you have lost your chance to escape this conflict.”

Rem: “Eh…”

Vincent: “No matter where you are, no matter how far you flee, the flames of war shall surely find you. They shall once more embroil you, engulf you. Your desire or detestation for it matters not.”

Rem: “But that…! That means that… There’s nothing I can do.”

He keeps saying that my choices are all dead-ends, but keeps leaving the choice itself to me. Is he just enjoying this? That can’t be right. What on earth is his angle?

I can’t keep fighting, and there’s no way out of this fight either—

Rui: “—uuu—!”

Just when Rem kept sinking further and further into the hole of thoughts she had been digging herself into, a small shadow leapt at the man.

Her blonde hair fluttering in the air, the little girl grabbed the man’s arm and groaned as she knocked her fists on it. Her attacks did not hurt, but her displeasure for the man was made plenty apparent.

Seeing that, the man raised his arm, with the little girl still attached to it and,

Vincent: “A child mimics their company. If Cecilus were present, you would have regretted your bold and rash actions.”

Rem: “…You won’t get mad at her?”

Vincent: “You imply that a child’s tantrum would anger me. I may put those who disrespect me in their place, but to expect a mere child to understand the intricacies of honor? That is foolish. However…”

As his voice trailed off, his gaze shifted to Rem and Subaru. Rem immediately covered her body with her arms and narrowed her eyes at him, as if asking ‘What are you aiming for?’

Rem: “What are you planning…?”

Vincent: “Schemes, hidden agendas, plans, do not take these in a bad light. Not everyone is a protagonist, nor is anyone stage decoration, but the truth of the matter is that those who do not take action quickly lose their heads. If you do not wish to lose yours, I suggest you keep wracking your brains.”

Rem: “…”

Vincent: “As I explained before, once that man awakens, he shall surely attempt to run from this conflict of mine, and take you with him. However, the Empire has already become aware of your existence. You no longer possess the means to traverse through proper channels."

His words drove a cold blade deep into her chest.

There was a fierce animosity within them. They clouded her eyes, almost, but they were concrete words. Rem had no way to refute them.

—Even she could not forget that hellish landscape.

Many lives had been lost in that camp. The Empire would surely retaliate. They would surely bare their fangs at Rem and her company, the cause of that tragedy.

There was only one reason for that—

Vincent: "Surely I do not need to point out the reason for that."

Rem: "…The way you put it is as good as pointing it out to my face."

She bit back, but even if she was incapable of seeing the face behind that mask, she knew her words had fallen flat.

The little girl returned, having had enough of the man's arm, and snuggled under Rem. Her upturned eyes looked at her with worry, a gaze that she returned with a slight smile on her face and the gentle exhale of a sigh.

Then she looked straight at the man and spoke,

Rem: "Tell me what I should… What we should do. Please."

Vincent: "So you ask for advice with sincerity. Keep in mind that my aim is only to win. Each move I make is solely to press onward to my victory. Thus, you and your ilk may not end up where you desire."

Rem: "I understand that fully. However, we lack the means to discern between good and bad at the moment. My phrasing may be discourteous, but you are currently my litmus test for that.”

Vincent: “Oh?”

She spoke as she carefully laid down the little girl beside Subaru, when the man laughed in response.

His expression lay hidden behind that mask, so Rem knew not what intentions his voice carried, but even so, she chose to press onward with her own game. Were he intolerant of this display and fell to anger, her aim would be to start fresh.

However, on the off-chance he were more open-minded and showed magnanimity, things would be different—

Vincent: “—Very well. I shall take you up on your bet.”

Rem: “…Thank you very much.”

Vincent: “From the beginning, you, I, and even Natsuki Subaru, who lays asleep behind you, even if we play our hands to the best of our abilities, we must win our bets if we want to move forward. Now is not the time to be frugal.”

Rem sighed, her victory sweet from a man who refused to offer even the simplest of compliments.

Had it been Subaru the first one to gamble to reclaim his person, then he, Rem, the little girl and the masked man must all continue this series of bets.

She balled her fist in secret, noting that the outset was good—

Vincent: “First things first. That man shall attempt to take you and run from this war of mine. However, he shall fail on his first attempt while in the city. Let him. He must learn and face reality. Otherwise, he shall be unable to stand back up. And for that reason…”

As Rem steeled her resolve, the man began speaking of his plans, of his guiding principles.

What Rem ought to do once Subaru awakened. What he would want from her, what her aim should be—Though she had no intention of being a doll who would only nod and affirm. Yet perhaps that man already had taken that into consideration.

Rem: “I cannot let things end without ever finding anything out either.”

And so, to rise up and battle against the many mysteries around her, with the little girl who had no other but her, and the young boy who reeked of evil in her arms, Rem began to wrack her brains.

END

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle II

1

“This request is reaaaaaaaally, reaaaaaaally important, so please listen closely. If you see anyone trying to cross the desert or approaching this tower, I need you to drive them away!” Emilia exclaimed.

“—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

“Ah! And when I say, ‘drive them away’, I mean that you mustn’t hurt them. You have to be reaaally careful to be gentle when you’re driving them away. Can you do that for me?”

“—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned,” the Divine Dragon replied majestically, in complete contrast to Emilia, who was trying her best to get him to listen. His answer was a bit vague, and she wasn’t sure if her intentions had even gotten through to him or not.

Having been left behind at the Pleiades Watchtower, Emilia and the others had decided on a course of action, but in order to go through with it, the guardian of the tower’s—Volcanica’s—actions would be essential.

Finishing the tower’s Trials had resulted in the opening up of the Pleiades Watchtower and the Augria Sand Dunes. Each of them had served as a form of defense for the purpose of guarding the Witch’s shrine in the eastern end of the world map, so there was no way she could ignore the harmful effects that would result from those things losing their function.

For one, she suspected that the Witch Cult might race towards the shrine, aiming to revive the Witch of Envy. However, she couldn’t hesitate to act just because she was afraid of that.

The people she held dear had disappeared—so she needed to go search for Subaru and Rem.

“That’s why I wanted to ask Volcanica to do that…”

But Volcanica was spouting out the same words over and over again like he usually did.

Emilia, who had obtained the qualifications to become an overseer of the tower by completing all of the Trials, had a worried expression on her face, for the Divine Dragon had a habit of going back and forth between being normal and weird.

However… “Huh?”

“—Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

While Emilia still seemed worried about what to do, Volcanica, who was right before her, moved slowly. The Divine Dragon’s azure form bent down and then he gently held out his right forefoot to her.

Emilia became wide-eyed due to that movement, and then a sharp talon on Volcanica’s forefoot began to shake, followed by a crack. A fragment of it then split off and flew into the air, which she instantly snatched away.

“…”

The talon fragment was beautiful; it was pure black.

And so, the reason why Volcanica did that was…

2

“So, I think this is Volcanica’s way of proving that a promise was made.”

“…”

After Emilia gave that answer, sticking out her chest and holding up the black talon for all to see, everyone looked at each other. She finally felt fulfilled now that she thought she had established a bond with Volcanica.

Anastasia stared intently at the fragment of the dragon's talon in Emilia's hand, let out a "Haaaah," and then continued, "In other words, ya could call this somethin' like a promissory note from Volcanica that he ain't gonna attack anyone."

"W-Well… I guess you could say that. Right, Beatrice?" Emilia asked.

"Are you asking Betty, I wonder? Hm, well, I'm not entirely sure, but I think you could interpret it that way, in fact. Otherwise, I haven't the faintest clue as to why he would do that, I suppose."

Taking on Emilia's question, Beatrice replied like so, her arms crossed. She gazed at the talon with her big, round eyes with their characteristic patterns showing, then lightly narrowed them. "As one would expect of the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, even a mere fragment of a talon is made up of an enormous quantity of mana, in fact. With this, the eyes of the dragon will perhaps even be able to distinguish it from a distance, I suppose."

"O-Oh, I see! Then Volcanica understands everything, just as I thought."

Emilia sighed in relief at Beatrice's positive-ish point of view, lightly patting her chest. However, having heard what Beatrice had just said, Julius raised his hand and said, "Please wait a moment."

With a small amount of astonishment showing on his handsome face, he continued, "I cannot help but ask you about this, Miss Beatrice, but did you say that the Divine Dragon's talons are made up of mana? So it's not that they possess mana, but on the contrary…"

"Jeez… Explaining the origins of dragons to the people of this day and age would be a bit of a pain to do, in fact. To make a long story short, you can think of dragons as living beings that are like enormous masses of mana, I suppose."

"'To make a long story short', huh… That's easier said than done."

Lips curled, Julius's eyes widened at Beatrice's explanation, and Ram muttered something as she closed one of her eyes. While she was stroking the scales of the ground dragon, Patrasche, who was next to her, she said, "For Ram, ground dragons…including Patrasche here, do not at all seem like masses of mana, however."

"There's a difference between a dragon (竜) and a Dragon (龍), in fact. We can go through the nitty-gritty details while we are crossing over the desert later, I suppose. Anyhow, what's important is the fact that Volcanica's talon functions like a right of passage of sorts."

"Well… I have no objections to that. Fortunately, if we can get Volcanica to cooperate with us, we should be able to resolve many of the problems we are facing as well," Echidna replied.

They all had mountains of questions for the tiny, yet knowledgeable Beatrice.

Though Beatrice really enjoyed teaching others to the point of being annoyingly helpful sometimes, and though Emilia found it rather charming how everyone was currently surrounding her, Beatrice had made a valid point.

What was truly important now was that Volcanica was going to guard the tower. And the proof that he would take on that duty was the talon fragment he had given to Emilia.

"And with the Divine Dragon's talon, as well as Meili, gettin' through the Augria Sand Dunes should be possible. So I guess we'll be able ta convince the kingdom no matter what," Anastasia added.

"You'll help us with this as well, right, Ms. Anastasia?"

"I've already stuck with y'all up 'til this point, and I guess I was able to wake up without any issues thanks to Meili's help, right? So I'm definitely gonna pay y'all back for that, or I would feel ill at ease," Anastasia obliged with a graceful smile. Emilia nodded in response to her answer, then turned in the direction of Meili, whose eyes had turned red.

Before they had obtained Volcanica's talon, they'd had a serious discussion about how Meili would be treated and how she would atone for what she'd done in the past, and it looked like the proposal they'd made for that purpose would finally be put into practice.

"That's just wonderful, Meili."

"I-I wasn't really expecting much. That's why I wouldn't feel down even if it didn't go so well. Actually, good for you, Miss."

"Yes, it really is. I'm just reaaally glad everything worked out."

Even if Meili might have not felt an ounce of anxiety, Emilia had been quite worried about whether her proposal would work out or not.

She had said quite a few things in a heroic fashion, so she didn't want to disappoint her if it didn't work out.

For one reason or another, when Meili heard Emilia's reply, she let out a groan. "Ugh…"

"It would be quite a blunder to think such an expression would get across to Emilia, I suppose. You've been rather careless, so it's about time you learned how to get along with her, in fact."

"Right, I completely agree. Otherwise, you'll be swayed by her until the end of your days!" Ram added.

"…I got it, alright! Really, dealing with her is such a pain in the butt though, isn't it?"

"Um, are you guys perhaps talking about me?" Emilia asked.

Beatrice, Ram, and Meili were all having a little chat with each other while taking glances at Emilia, but she had no clue what they were talking about.

Anyhow… "Now that our anxieties about the future have been alleviated, let us focus on resolving the issue we are now facing… Which would be searching for Subaru and Miss Rem, who both went missing, don't you think?"

"For sure. My amazing knight ain't the only one on pins n' needles about this, so we gotta do something about it." Anastasia began the process of bringing the discussion to an end, clapping her hands in front of her chest. As far as what she had said, there were no disagreements from Emilia and the others.

If the Divine Dragon would guard the Pleiades Watchtower and the Augria Sand Dunes for them, then they could leave them in his capable hands, and Emilia and company could focus on searching for Subaru and Rem.

Therefore… "The first thing we need to do is go back to the mansion and talk with Roswaal and the others."

3

"—Ohhh myyy, now whoooo might youuu beee?"

After traveling for a long, long time, Emilia and company finally made it back to the familiar-looking mansion.

However, what they received upon exiting the dragon-drawn carriage was an unexpected greeting from a man sporting clownish clothing and white makeup applied to his face.

Emilia gasped upon hearing the words of the man—Roswaal—who had scrunched up his finely-shaped eyebrows and craned his neck.

"Huh! Roswaal… It can't be, you don't remember me…"

"…"

"What should I do? I was sooo sure that everything was fine since everyone could remember me, but…"

Emilia went into a state of panic when Roswaal scrunched up his eyebrows and looked like he was at a loss. She had already been forgotten by everyone once when her Name was snatched away by

Gluttony.

Though it had only been for a short while, a powerful feeling of anxiousness overcame her when she felt like she had been forgotten by the world again.

On the other hand, Emilia thought about how amazing Julius was for not crying, seeing as he was suffering from that very thing, and imagined how dreadful it was to be stuck in that state for an indefinite amount of time.

First of all, if Roswaal really has forgotten who I am, then I won't be able to borrow his help for the sake of saving Subaru and Rem to begin with…

"…Juuust kiiiidding."

"…Eh?"

In front of Emilia, who was in a deep state of pandemonium, Roswaal suddenly spread his arms and uttered that.

Emilia still didn't seem to be able to follow what was going on, so Roswaal repeated the words again, "Becaaause," and continued, "I was just kidding, it was a joke. I didn't forget about you or any such thing, Lady Emilia; indeeeed I did not. It was just a bit of a practical joke… Oopsies!"

"That 'joke' wasn't funny at all, I suppose!" Roared Beatrice at the joking Roswaal as she stood up. As she yelled at him, she gathered up her luggage on the dragon-drawn carriage and threw it at him.

Roswaal casually caught it and turned his neck. "Ohhh myyy, there's no neeed to beee so aaaangry. I already received the letter you sent from Mirula, you seeee. So I understand your situation."

"I-I-I-In that case, then you must really be out of your damn mind, in fact…! How do you think Betty and everyone else feels after dealing with the tower and the desert…!"

"I thought it'd be good to eaaaase your hearts a little with that because I knew just how difficult your journey was, you seeee.

Nooo, it was my mistake, my mistake."

Beatrice had protested with her face turning crimson, but Roswaal remained unperturbed.

Emilia, however, was just glad that Roswaal hadn't forgotten who she was. Of course, I'm still angry at him because of his joke, though.

"—Master Roswaal," said Ram to Roswaal from behind Emilia and everyone else. Roswaal closed one of his eyes as she stepped forward, gazing in her direction with his blue eye.

There were clearly complex emotions silently coming out from Roswaal's eye.

"It looks like you've done something raaaather reckless, Ram."

"I only did what I needed to do. It's simply that I wanted to help Lady Emilia and Miss Beatrice no matter…"

"It seems that your body took on quite a heavy burden. I see. I'll have a look at you later."

"Yes, and kindly make it just the two of us."

"…Caaan we at least let Frederica come along?"

"Kindly make it just the two of us."

Ram asserted her dominance over Roswaal, winning him over with her forceful appeal. "I understand, I understand," Roswaal relented. As one would expect, Ram was strong against Roswaal, and Petra was a rather powerful ally in that regard as well.

Realizing that fact once more, Emilia called out to him, "Roswaal," and continued, "I'll have Petra and Ram give you a good scolding later for the bad joke from before, but you read the letter, right?"

"Indeeeed, I have read it. I was increeedibly astonished to hear that the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, is at the Pleiades Watchtower."

“Yeah. He was reaaaally big, too.”

“The most surprisin’ thing there probably wasn’t that, though…”

Emilia and Roswaal nodded at one another, and Anastasia couldn’t help but smile wryly after listening to their conversation.

Anastasia, Julius, and Echidna had all come along on the dragon-drawn carriage to Roswaal’s mansion.

I guess they want to join up with their ally, the Iron Fang, then.

“Don’t ya worry ‘bout that. We’ll reunite with my little ones soon. I sent a letter out just like Miss Emilia here, so they should be comin’ ta pick us up after a while.”

“Ummm, so what you mean is that they’re going to come here, right?” Emilia asked.

“As long as that’s not a problem for ya, of course.”

“Oh, definitely not, it’s not a problem at all.”

Emilia couldn’t help but press her hands together in front of her chest when she heard the proposal of Anastasia, who had closed one of her eyes.

Originally, whether Anastasia and her group would work with them to search for Subaru and Rem or not depended entirely on how they felt about it.

When they made it through the desert safely, Emilia wouldn’t have been surprised if they had decided to withdraw when they had the option to return home, so when they said they would continue to work with them, she was really happy about that.

“Though I am lacking, please allow me to proffer my assistance to you. After all, if I cannot confirm the safety of Subaru and Miss Rem after everything that has happened, I would remain unsettled,” Julius said.

“And I am of the same opinion. However, that’s what we decided on our own without confirming it with the lord of the manor," Echidna added.

"No need to worry about that. We won't allow Roswaal to say no, I suppose. He isn't qualified enough to say something like that, in fact."

After Julius and Echidna offered their assistance, Beatrice consented to it. Having been completely ignored in the decision-making process, Roswaal could only smile wryly, but his silence was probably his way of showing that he had no objections.

Not being able to go hard on Beatrice was one of Roswaal's weaknesses, after all. In any case, Roswaal assenting to it and Anastasia and co. promising to work with them were both great news.

"Now all that's left is to make sure Subaru and Rem are safe… Roswaal, about them…"

"—Yes, I have been paaaaying close attention to it. Now, it is very likely that they were transported to the south of the Vollaaachian Empire."

"I see… Do you know of a way to get there, Roswaal?"

"As a matter of fact, the Vollachian Empire is very difficult to get into, even for me, you seee." Smoothing down his indigo-colored hair, Roswaal gently shrugged his shoulders.

Emilia responded to him with a "Is that so?" with widened eyes.

"There are sky dragons over there… That is to say that they have quite a lot of aerial firepower, you seee. Therefore, if I were to fly into the country, it's very likely that they would confront me."

"Then, while the sky dragons are chasing after Roswaal, Betty and the others can waltz on in without a care in the world, I suppose."

"Oh myyy, now that wouuuld be a good idea, but I'll end up dying, you seeee."

Roswaal smiled bitterly and put his hand on Beatrice's head, rejecting her idea. Emilia gave Beatrice, who had shaken off his hand, a sidelong glance, thinking that that strategy was no good.

She couldn't just sacrifice someone for the sake of saving Subaru. If she did so, she thought that Subaru would feel extremely bothered, and she herself wouldn't be able to rejoice. I can't just sacrifice someone for the sake of saving Subaru. If I did that, Subaru would probably be bothered by it, and I wouldn't be able to rejoice, either.

"It'll be no good if I can't greet Subaru and Rem properly with a smile. And to do that, I'd like to ask for your help."

"Don'tcha worry yourself about that. That's why I'm here! As the president of the Hoshin Company, I'll do my very best ta help ya."

"Wow, thank you so much!"

Anastasia smiled in response to Emilia's resolute words. The others also looked as if they were facing the same problem with that same feeling.

As far as the rest were concerned… "Otto and the others will come back from Priestella soon. Let's borrow their wisdom to come up with a plaaan to bring Subaru aaaand Rem back."

The fire of determination to work together for the purpose of saving Subaru, who had been lost in a distant foreign land, was burning within them.

END

Ex 5:
The Tale of the Scarlet Princess

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero: Arakiya

1

Panting, her small body bounced like a bouncing ball. The target was small, and her coiled body flew through the air like a ball drawing a large parabola, heading straight toward them with the intent to kill. Like an arrow shot from a bow, she went for their vital spots without hesitation…

"…Unfortunately for you, however, I can see right through it."

The spinning ball's attack was meant to be a surprise attack at the enemy's rear. But what was meant to be a strike against the back of the blue-haired boy's head disappeared like a puff of smoke, as he had cleanly nullified it. Realizing that she had failed, she immediately twisted her body in midair. She looked around, searching for her target that had disappeared before she touched the ground…but even her fastest was too slow.

"Shatzbot."

"…"

"Oh? Don't you know? It's what you say in Shatranj to declare victory over your opponent," said the boy provokingly with a frivolous air about him, rolling his droopy eyes as he spoke.

He was around eleven or twelve and was dressed in clothing known as a kimono, which was made by sewing cloth into an unusual shape. His face showed no tension or seriousness—in fact, she had never once seen him tighten his expression, not even slightly.

And so, even during a practice match with their lives on the line, the boy didn't even bat an eyelid while pointing the blade at her throat.

"That's enough," someone said. "Keep going, and gone shall her head be.”

…I’m no match. Anger bubbled up at the realization, but before it could be unleashed, a voice came from her side. It belonged to a tall, thin man dressed in white from head to toe. A man with a penetrating gaze, at odds with the casual tone of his voice—he couldn’t keep up with their battle but could still follow each and every one of their moves with his eyes.

Listening to the man, who was probably weaker than him, the boy frankly said, “Alright,” and drew back his weapon—a katana—renouncing his right to decide her fate. No, he didn’t renounce it at all.

“That’s right, lil’ doggie. If I wanted to, I could kill you anytime, but that applies to everyone, really. I’m more of a simple, straightforward actor, you see.”

“…I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

“In other words, a lead actor loved by everybody mustn’t be an impossible-to-understand monster. Being loved requires amiability and generosity.”

She frowned, and the boy who had unsheathed his sword looked down at her and placed a finger on his cheek. How that gesture related to amiability and magnanimity was unclear. But amiability was a word she had heard many times before.

From her precious, precious princess, whom she couldn’t be beside…

“Cecilus, that’s enough. It’s not very gentlemanly to harass a lady.”

“Eh! I’m not harassing her. She didn’t look like she understood, so I explained it to her! See how gracious I am?”

“Unfortunately, I have never seen your graciousness. And I worry for your future since it might never come to pass.”

“Your words might be distinctive and original, Chesha, but they’re hard to understand!”

The boy and the man, Cecilus and Chesha, continued with their argument. It was a peculiar argument, where you couldn't tell whether they were friends or not.

In any case, Arakiya wasn't in a position to point that out nor join them. Paying little heed to their conversation, she slowly moved to leave the area…

"…"

"Woah, careful. Do you not have any strength left, lil' doggie?" Seeing her body lose its strength and almost collapse, Cecilus moved quickly to support her. That action, as well as his words, brought forth further humiliation for her, and she felt her lips trembling. Upon seeing that, he tilted his head without any trace of malice on his face. "I'm helping you, and this is how you repay me? Pretty cruel, don't you think, Anya?"

"…Arakiya!" she reflexively responded, quickly regretting it. But it was too late; it was clear from the smirk on her opponent's face that she had fallen into his trap.

"Go to hell." The girl… Arakiya… swung the twig in her hand in an attempt to knock the smirk off Cecilus's face. But her attack was also easily deflected by his lightning-fast sword draw.

2

Rolling around on the grass of the parade grounds, Arakiya listened to the pulsing of the earth. As she became one with nature, she could feel her body being part of the massive power of the world. When she did this, spirits, a mystical existence, stopped thinking of her as an enemy and accepted her as a part of nature. And they would allow her to catch them with her slim fingers and swallow them with her small mouth.

"Agu." The lesser spirit that gently crossed paths with Arakiya was silently swallowed by her, and its earth power became hers. Lesser spirits might not be very sentient, but eating them was still consuming life. She let the power of the lesser spirit permeate throughout her body. And as she was healing her injuries…

“Man, that Spirit Eating is really something, Feels weird no matter how many times I see it.”

As the sound of the Japanese sandals and the clapping became louder, Arakiya, still lying down, turned her head and made a sour face. It was someone she didn’t want to see. At the very least, it was the face she hated most in the Empire.

“Cecilus, I hate you.”

“You are so upfront about it! But the reason you don’t like me is because you couldn’t beat me, right? How is that my fault?”

“…Die.”

“Huh?! Even more hate?!”

He was like a demon—a being that didn’t understand the human mind.

Even amongst Arakiya’s tribe, there were tales of Demons. According to them, they were beings that smiled and pretended to be your friend as they trampled over your feelings.

In that case, Cecilus, the being in front of her, was definitely one of them.

“Demon…”

“That’s a terrible thing to be called. Though as an intimidating title it’s not bad, it’s not good enough for a lead actor that’s loved by everyone. On the other hand, “Blue Lightning” is a very cool name, don’t you think?”

“Blue Lightning…?”

“The flash of lightning. The emperor’s soldiers spread that after seeing my prowess in battle. Wait, could that have been a reward from the Emperor?!” Cecilus’s eyes sparkled as he babbled about something that could be either true or false.

Arakiya had no patience to listen to someone she despised. She had none, but she still felt a pang in her heart when he mentioned the emperor.

She had no interest in Cecilus's loyalty or the feelings he had for his master. But hearing him talk about them so casually brought forth strong feelings of envy.

"Oh, such a gloomy face. Stay like that and the reaper will catch you."

"I…don't understand. That has…nothing to do with my face."

"Of course it does. Sad faces bring unlucky circumstances. You and I, Anya, are just foot soldiers, so unlucky means a cruel death for us."

"I'm not…not afraid of…"

"Really? Even if you aren't able to reach your goal because of that?" Cecilus's eyes narrowed as he struck Arakiya where it hurt her most.

She wasn't afraid of dying. It was considered a great honor to die on the battlefield for those who were born warriors. However, if you asked her to accept the fate of dying without achieving her goal, without fulfilling her wish, then…

"That would be impossible. There we go." Saying that, Cecilus casually sat down next to Arakiya.

Such a thing would be considered improper, but Arakiya couldn't say anything since she was prostrating on the ground as well. And so the two of them stayed side-by-side in an empty parade ground without even looking at each other.

It was uncomfortable. Arakiya didn't even know why Cecilus was there in the first place.

To begin with, Arakiya wasn't good at inferring things. The only reason it never caused a problem before was because the smart princess by her side understood her unspoken thoughts and feelings.

Even if Arakiya couldn't understand the words, she could believe in her princess.

And in this empire without her, there was no such trust or bond to be found.

Perhaps that's why I always feel irritated and lonely all the time.

"By the way, Arakiya, are spirits tasty? You keep eating them."

…No. I'm starting to think that the reason why I'm irritated is because of this idiot boy.

He had casually asked that question as if he had completely forgotten their previous conversation. If he doesn't have anything else to do, then I really wish he wouldn't bother me.

"Ah! You're trying to get rid of me by remaining quiet, aren't you? Unfortunately for you, I won't allow that. I used to believe nobody could keep up with my talking speed, but the Emperor told me that wasn't the case. Everyone was ignoring me!"

"…"

"Now that I understand that, my attitude has completely changed. Now, if I want an answer, I'll keep talking until I get one. I mean, they might shrug me off, saying they'll tell me next time, and then in the blink of an eye their heads could be rolling down the floor."

It was a twisted conversation, but Cecilus did have a point. Human life was a fleeting and fragile thing, and it would be no surprise if it were lost in the blink of an eye. Both Arakiya and Cecilus had the power to do that, after all.

"So, if they don't talk, you kill them?"

"That sounds threatening. But if I kill them, then I can't get my answer, so that would be the same as cutting them down in anger. I won't do it, sounds too petty."

"I see… Then I won't answer."

Even after Arakiya had left the princess's command and joined the Emperor, she kept getting beaten up by him whenever they met, and she hadn't been able to beat him even once. Even if it was for something so trivial, she wanted to feel at least some superiority.

"Eh! Don't be so heartless! Ah, let's do it this way then. I'll fight and beat you one hundred—no, one thousand times, Anya. Then can you tell me?"

"…Are you…picking a fight?"

"What? A fight? No! Just practice. I don't like picking on weak people, it's not my thing… Wait, huh?!"

Cecilus was smiling unconcernedly when a kick infused with the power of the earth came flying towards his head. But Cecilus quickly ducked under the kick and jumped away in an instant.

"You run away like lightning…"

"Ah! Wait a sec, I can't overlook that! You call this running away?! Running might be necessary for victory sometimes, but this isn't it!"

Arakiya crouched on all fours and glared, and Cecilus stood at a distance with his hand on his katana. The energy between them formed a maelstrom and raised the soil of the parade ground up into the air.

Despite both of them looking like children, there was nothing childish about the fighting energy the two were releasing. Without betraying that impression, there was nothing cute to be found in their clash.

Using the power of the spirit she had consumed, Arakiya stepped forward, her foot looking as if it had sunk into the ground. To easily counter that, Cecilus drew his blade as he flashed his white teeth.

Both of them had been forged on the battlefield; both of them could only live on the battlefield. Their weapons clashed like their very souls were screaming out, and the two warriors howled voicelessly.

As her best strike got deflected, Arakiya ground her teeth as she stared at the lightning.

“Really? Even if you aren’t able to reach your goal because of that?”

He was a truly vexing boy. Flighty and irresponsible, he believed that the world was for him to take, control, and play with. And yet, despite all that, he was able to see right through her.

To not achieve her goal. That was the most terrifying thing to Arakiya.

The most important thing to Arakiya—what she would give her life for—was just a single person. And for this reason, she betrayed her. She betrayed her trust, and was unable to stay by her side because of that. But she willingly gave it up, so that her princess could live.

“A-Aaah!!” Screaming, the lone warrior Arakiya twisted her thin body and threw all her anger against the master swordsman and his deadly blade, in hopes she wouldn’t perish as a lone warrior.

She’d made her promise. That one day, one day, once she fulfilled her value…

“Princess…!”

She would be reunited with the one she had been separated from.

3

From a distance, an old man with long white eyebrows cleared his throat as he watched the scene in the parade grounds. Though his laughter sounded like the breathing of a sick man on his deathbed, he was far from it, and in that small spindly body lay plenty of vitality. Chesha closed one eye at the sight of the elderly man, over ninety years old, but still in high spirits. I wonder how this man sees the two at the parade ground.

“Oh-ho, what monsters! You seeing what I’m seeing, Chesshy?”

“It’s Chesha, Olbart. Indeed, I can see them with my own two eyes. Both of them could be either 11 or 12; without a doubt a result of the Empire’s ideals.”

“Ku-ka-ka-ka! Truly, truly. Monsters keep appearing amongst the youngin’s. It makes me laugh now that I am Three at last. I can’t see myself going up any further.”

Standing next to the guffawing old man, Olbart Dunkelkenn, who he had heard voice his own assumption, Chesha watched Cecilus and Arakiya’s practice battle, which looked more like a battle to the death.

Cecilus didn’t know restraint. But as long as Arakiya didn’t die, the promise she had made with Chesha’s master might be fulfilled. However…

“I was relieved that the Imperial Selection Ceremony was finally over, but now there are signs of uprising in various parts of the Empire. There’s no time to rest and I want to lament that this was not what I was promised.”

“Well, this is the Vollachia Empire. You’re too naive, Chis.”

Chesha’s eyes clouded over at the numerous issues before him, in complete contrast to the old man, who was laughing and slapping his back. His life motto was to complete only the work given to him and live a quiet life. So why is that plan falling apart before my very eyes like this? he thought. “To be captivated by someone is such a troublesome thing.”

The girl howled desperately at Cecilus while being danced around. And with a strange feeling of sympathy towards her tumultuous life, Chesha turned his white face towards the sky and sighed a deep, deep sigh.

END

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy ZERO: Vincent

1

Gaoran Peixit, High Count from the Empire of Vollachia, was known by the name of 'Lord of the Cumulus.'

People would talk about how he gave off the impression that he traveled on a white cloud whenever he rode 'Feyron,' the sky dragon that he also had a rather good command of, hence said alias was given to him.

In the Empire of Vollachia, upon which snow never fell, the beauty of Feyron's white scales and eyes was a miracle, and some believed that catching sight of it could bring good luck.

Its majestic mien was sometimes even put on display during the events that took place in their territory to raise the people and soldiers' morale, and it could also be seen in the imperial capital when they presented themselves at the emperor's request.

The whole empire knew how fortunate Gaoran was to be the owner of such a beautiful and gallant miracle of a sky dragon, earning the 'Lord of the Cumulus' a reputation as one of the luckiest men to have ever lived.

And yet…

"…"

High up in the blue sky, the dragon opened its mouth and issued a thunderous roar.

The dragon flew with its wings spread to their full length, as its body, the notable 'Cumulus' that had given its master his alias, was caparisoned by a huge quantity of arrows and blood and its speed slowly decreased.

It had risen to the highest possible altitude, almost piercing the clouds, in order to escape from the incessant rain of arrows, probably out of instinct.

Or maybe, after realizing that it would be unable to go any faster, the dragon had done so in a desperate attempt to protect the master that was on its back.

However, no matter which was true, nothing would stop the soldiers from firing their arrows again. And therefore, nothing would stop the beautiful white dragon from meeting its end.

“Ready! Fire!!”

As he stared at the dragon’s silhouette, which began to look increasingly smaller, somebody moved his lifted arm and gave the order.

Even this man, being a ‘general,’ felt some uneasiness at the thought of murdering the nationwide famous ‘Cumulus,’ Feyron. Nevertheless, he knew that uneasiness could never be allowed to limit his actions.

The slight man was in charge of guarding a sanctuary, one that he could not afford to jeopardize due to sentimentality.

If they were in a beauty competition, that place would not easily lose, even to the ‘Cumulus,’ and it was also just as renowned… Such was the ‘Crystal Palace,’ built out of magic crystal, located in the imperial capital of Vollachia, residence to the emperor.

That was the sanctuary that Third-Class General Zikr Osman had been tasked with protecting.

“Why, High Count Peixit…?!”

As he conducted the imperial capital’s bloody defense against the white dragon, Zikr gritted his teeth.

Causing unnecessary harm to a sky dragon, engaging in an unnecessary fight with somebody, and going against the emperor that he was supposed to protect… Gaoran Peixit’s foolish acts of savagery were too many to count.

Just a few months ago, order in the empire had been in shambles.

The former emperor, elderly at the moment, had burned to death on the throne, thus beginning the ‘Imperial Selection Ceremony’ to choose the next ruler. That gory ceremony was basically a slaughter involving the siblings from the imperial family, an enormous civil war that made a battlefield of the whole country. In accordance with the rules of the empire, where only the strongest were respected, a massive bloodshed and a huge loss of lives had occurred.

Eventually, the ‘Imperial Selection Ceremony’ had concluded, thereby birthing a new emperor. And then, something else had started…

High Count Gaoran Peixit had gathered his soldiers and launched an attack on the imperial capital, Rupgana.

As a result, a lot of soldiers and generals, led by Zikr, had been recruited to fight in its defense, and forced into a battle with the soldiers that Gaoran commanded.

Zikr was one of the empire’s ‘generals,’ and he was not actually opposed to fighting.

As a member of the Osman house, proving the imperial troops’ honor and his own worth on the battlefield was quite splendid to him… However, he simply could not find this one battle so gratifying.

Arrows flew against Gaoran’s dragon, bringing it even closer to death, and blows from several swords sliced his soldiers down. Gaoran, while on top of the dragon that was mid-flight, was probably searching for a chance of victory amidst.

But he was not going to find anything of the sort here.

“Why, High Count Peixit…? You know you won’t win, so why…?!”

Zikr yelled as he watched Gaoran’s soldiers, unable to flee, be surrounded and annihilated. The soldiers originally meant to take the capital were all attacked from both the left and right, then crushed mercilessly.

That was not due to any special technique, nor to a big strength difference between his allies and foes. It was thanks to a superior aspect… a difference in strategy.

Gaoran's strategy was to invade the capital and immediately seize the Crystal Palace through a surprise attack.

However, said strategy proved to be very predictable, causing the soldiers commanded by Gaoran to thoroughly fall into a trap. Perhaps, if they had retired earlier, they could have kept the bloodshed to a minimum, but…

"Ready! Fire!!"

Aware that the battle would only keep dragging on, Zikr shouted and gave the order for the next attack.

No matter how much he pitied the enemy soldiers, he could not risk his own life. Still, he decided to make this end by doing just enough damage to dampen their morale and extinguish the flames of war in their hearts.

If they did not continue this fight to the point of eradication, surely somebody would survive.

"If they survive this battle, they'll have a chance to make up for it next time…!"

All he wanted was for the losing side's commander to put and end to this fight… no, to this massacre, soon.

As Zikr wished in vain, the others fired their arrows, swung their swords, spilled their foes's blood, killed.

They fired their arrows, swung their swords, each time fertilizing the land of the Sword Wolf with more blood and corpses…

Gaoran Peixit grabbed his spear and got down from his exhausted dragon's back.

Several arrow injuries were on the shoulders and back of his burly figure, from the battle that he had engaged in alone a while ago. The number of lodged arrows was, surprisingly, quite low when compared to the total of fired arrows.

And if those arrows had not reached Gaoran, it was because, instead, they had pierced his dragon, Feyron.

"Forgive me, Feyron…!"

This was the same white dragon who had once, with the supreme beauty of its white scales, gained the locals' appreciation and praise. The poor creature had spent its final moments plunging to the ground, its body covered in arrows and blood.

The one to blame for this was Gaoran himself, for having brought Feyron into that battle.

He regretted it, but he had actually never imagined that it would turn out this way.

The imperial capital Rupgana's defenses were weakened, and the first-class generals… the strongest monsters in the empire, who were in charge of guarding the emperor, were all far away from their master, creating a perfect, once-in-a-lifetime chance to strike.

The idea itself was actually not wrong.

Nobody had reported the appearance of any first-class general in this battlefield, and Gaoran himself had not witnessed any of those monsters here with his own eyes, at all. He truly believed that his plan would succeed.

However…

"What is the matter, Gaoran Peixit?"

"…"

When Gaoran raised his head to look at the one who spoke to him, his eyes widened in shock.

Gaoran had just sent the soldiers that served him to their deaths, and condemned his devoted dragon to a tragic demise. It had cost him many sacrifices to arrive here, at the Crystal Palace, and encounter the young man who stood in front of him.

On top of the almost hundred-step stairs, the black-haired youth stared at him, arms crossed and face poised.

There was only one man who possessed slit eyes that gleamed with sagacity and brutality, a handsome face that could very well have been crafted by the gods, and a bearing exuding authority of extraordinary levels.

Such was the seventy-seventh emperor of the Empire of Vollachia, Vincent Vollachia himself.

And at the same time, he was the one at the top of the empire, whom Gaoran had fought with his life at stake to reach.

“Is this the time to be so befuddled? You have finally come to encounter myself. Therefore…”

“The Emperor, Vincent…”

“Therefore, for the subjects that obeyed you and your dragon alike, you had better fight until your last drop of blood is shed!”

A glare filled with ardor and a voice filled with might were cast upon Gaoran, both ardor and might making the entirety of his blood seethe and his strength to fight return.

Gaoran gripped his spear strongly and, with his mouth open, rushed ahead.

By having that beautiful white dragon at his command, Gaoran had achieved acclaim as the luckiest man in the empire.

However, mere luck was nowhere near enough to achieve one’s rise in the Empire of Vollachia, nor to preserve one’s position in it.

After all, only a true warrior would be able to handle the halberds that were passed down every new generation in the House of Peixit.

“Oooooooh!!”

Gaoran’s large frame rose into the air, as if it had grown wings, ready to literally plunge onto the one who stood on top of the stairs, the emperor Vincent.

A single hit from his halberd would have little to no issue destroying the emperor’s slender figure. If he accomplished that, the goal that Gaoran sought by raiding the imperial capital would be fulfilled. And if he fulfilled that goal, all deaths would have served a purpose.

Surely, now the deaths of his dragon and army would not remain in vain…

“Your spirit is commendable, yet lacking. Perhaps you should’ve gotten a shade less sober before trying this.”

When those sudden words hit Gaoran’s eardrums, his narrow eyes opened wide.

Before the halberd had the chance to pierce Vincent’s chest, a powerful silver flash, shaped like an arc, gracefully knocked the tip far away from its target.

Maybe if he had not jumped so carelessly before, the large man could have been able to react in time when the second flash came.

“Those who can’t get drunk on neither blood or alcohol are destined to die first. Oh, the uncertainty.”

Then came a slash that glided from Gaoran’s left shoulder to his right flank, slicing his body. Gaoran did not even feel the blade pierce him while that deft sword cut him into two pieces.

Once his life left that sliced body, it would never come back.

“I, with my very own eyes, have been witness to your spirit. You may muse on that honor as you perish.”

On the verge of silent extinction, Gaoran managed to discern those words.

His ability to understand who said them and what they meant was dying out too, but…

“Hah.”

Apparently, the intuition to distinguish insults from praise was still alive within him.

With one last breath, perhaps of pleasure, Gaoran’s life reached extinction.

And so, the rebellion that High Count Gaoran Peixit had started met its end.

3

“You performed well. You may have my praise.”

“Oh, please, quit that, Your Excellency the Emperor. I actually did nothing more than to get drunk over here.”

“Fool. Would a man under the effects of alcohol be able to swing a sword in that manner?”

That dismissive answer was not a sign of humility, but a simple lack of earnestness.

Seeing such behavior directed towards the emperor made one feel inclined to take back the previous appraisal of his job. The receiver would not feel hurt by this in the slightest, though.

After all, the man before his eyes was not one to seek appraisals of himself, but of his ‘results.’

“You are a shrewd man, Rowan Segmunt. Were you to attempt it, you could even rise to fame through your swordsmanship.”

“Come on, don’t give me that. I know veeery well what my skill amounts to.”

Despite having, in a sheath of his, the blade that had easily slain the enemy ringleader without even staining itself with blood, the man… Rowan Segmunt dared shook his head in response.

He was characterized by his blue hair and reddened face, plus his attire, which was unusual in the empire yet common in Kararagi.

This man was a nonconformer, and remained one even before Vincent; but his skill with the sword, despite his humility, was splendid.

Otherwise, Gaoran Peixit, both the ringleader of the latest rebellion and a warrior known for his impressing halberd technique, would have looked purely pitiful losing against him.

That aside…

"Gaoran Peixit has died, thus ending the rebellion. Victory is ours."

"Woah, good to hear that. So, is that swordsman I raised serving you well?"

"He can be a nuisance at times, but yes. Currently, I am trying to determine the most appropriate way to use him."

"Hahah, I see… My condolences, then."

With a big smile on his reddened face, Rowan put his hands together and bowed before Vincent.

His attitude was not very pleasant, but he was too valuable to be executed merely on the grounds of disrespect. Although his own skill was first-class, his observations and teachings could create beings far above that level.

One of the 'monsters' that had been strategically allocated outside the imperial capital was, in fact, a discovery of his.

"Your Excellency, I have successfully delivered the orders to the soldiers outside."

Vincent, escorted by Rowan, was approached by somebody else.

That report came from an old, white-haired man, who bowed his head reverently. The man had a mustache and wrinkles, and his countenance looked as if every emotion had been emptied from it.

“I see,” Vincent replied briefly. “The suggestion you gave for this occasion was accurate. You truly have proved yourself useful, Berstetz.”

“I am unworthy of such praise, Your Excellency. I am solely striving to repay your kindness in saving me from dying on that battlefield.”

“You feel indebted to myself, who wreaked Lamia’s death?”

“… Yes, and I believe that Lamia-sama, too, would have wished for this.”

The old man, Berstetz Fondalfon, who reacted unconcernedly and without changing his expression to those taunts, had previously served somebody different from Vincent.

Berstetz’s former master was Lamia Godwin, younger sister of Vincent, who had opposed him during the ‘Imperial Selection Ceremony’ and died, and thus Vincent could be considered her enemy. Even so, in this empire, it was an everyday occurrence to hear people questioning who was a foe to whom.

When a master died, their servants would naturally find another master to serve. Repressing personal grudges and following them, even if they were the person who killed their previous master, was the norm in Vollachia.

Therefore, Berstetz did not have any problem with serving Vincent.

To keep competent people only, to adopt useful input only, to use effective methods only.

Those were necessary ideals in Vincent’s Vollachia new reign.

“Now that their ringleader, High Count Peixit, has been defeated, his subordinates will probably surrender, too. Your Excellency, how are we to handle their…?”

“Execute every single one of them, of course. Let that become a lesson for any fool that might be intending to bother myself, or important people, with the realization of a plan so ludicrous.”

That plan was foolish, very foolish indeed.

From its scale to the tasks, funds, and personnel that had been needed to carry it out, every single aspect of the plan was poorly prepared.

The first thing to be done was to start several, simultaneous rebellions and insurrections in each major city of the empire, thus causing specialists from the imperial capital to be sent away in order to solve them… And thanks to their absence, the capital would fall victim to the surprise attack.

The damage had then spread over north, south, east, and west of the empire concurrently, forcing Vincent to dispatch, to each zone, nine first-class soldiers… the ‘Nine Divine Generals.’

However, Vincent had already seen through the enemy’s plan, rendering the coordination among the zones pointless. As a result, inescapable ruination had befallen Gaoran Peixit’s plot.

But there was still more to the story…

“My, my, Your Excellency! Let me congratulate you for this wonderful victory!”

“There you are, ‘Stargazer.’”

Vincent felt jaded when he saw one more acquaintance arrive with the purpose of confirming his victory and ascertaining the situation.

In addition to Rowan and Berstetz, appeared, with a merry look, a slender man clad in a big, blue robe. Although he acted rather giddily, his words were nothing silly.

It was due to his ‘prophecy’ that they had been able to foretell, with total certainty, how and when Gaoran’s recent rebellion would occur, earning an even firmer advantage.

“That was no prophecy, I simply noticed it was going to happen. Though, of course, if that was of use to you, Your Excellency, then I’m deeply satisfied.”

“How audacious. Still, you have, indeed, served myself well. I shall let you stay in the palace for a while.”

“Woah, thank you! I’m so, so glad. I can’t believe I’ll be entering the palace itself!”

Vincent glanced at the rejoicing, grateful ‘Stargazer,’ then breathed a sigh, looked once again at Gaoran’s corpse, and took his leave.

The ‘generals’ and Berstetz would handle the cleanup. Rowan would probably cease his tasteless jests about the body after he ran out of alcohol. As for the ‘Stargazer’…

“Your Excellency, there’s no need to get upset. Even if I sense a rebellion incoming, I’d prefer to have it their way and let it break out first, then mow the seedling down before it grows further. And that’s because I agree with your thoughts.”

Next to him, Vincent heard the ‘Stargazer’ speak as if he had read his mind, but he did not reply.

To merely sit on the emperor’s throne would not make everything shift in the direction that he desired. Therefore, Vincent Vollachia never ceased to strive for what he needed, for one purpose:

This world is absurd… And because it is so, I must destroy it, by my own hand.

END

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero: Priscilla

1

“Hey, Miles my brother. Is she really out here in a place like this?” pointed out a young man by the name of Balleroy Temeglyph while rubbing his chin without a care in the world.

He was a dashing young man, carrying a spear with a long shaft on his shoulder. His red and black armor was proof of his status as a soldier of the Vollachia Empire, and his insignia marked him as a private. His carefree attitude wasn’t evidence of his recklessness but proof of his prestigious skill with the spear. His stance with his beloved spear might appear defenseless, but anyone coming at him with ill will would find themselves cut down in a flash. He knew Balleroy better than anyone, so he forgave his easy-going demeanor. Although, one could say that he had given up trying to change his friend.

“Yo, brother. Are ya listenin’?” asked Balleroy. “Is it actually on the outskirts like…?”

“Ooh, shut up!” cried Miles. “Ya think I have any clue as to why we’re here?! I’m just goin’ by what the rumors said! Shut the fuck up and follow me!”

“Ya don’t have ta yell like that…”

When pestered constantly like that, even a steeled heart would snap in anger. But since Balleroy would never reflect on his actions, Miles just sighed deeply.

The two of them were out in the middle of a forest, searching for a very troublesome target. Normally, Winged Dragon Riders like themselves should be in the sky, but since their target was walking along the ground, it couldn’t be helped.

Miles felt his head ache at the missing person—and at his brother-in-arms who lacked solemnity.

Miles had a rather long relationship with this foolish brother-in-arms. It started back when they were still wandering orphans. He had always been skilled but lacking common sense. But when he became an imperial soldier, he followed him and became one as well. Whether he was following someone he knew, or he just didn't know any better, Miles didn't know. He believed the latter was very possible, so he had stayed with him since. A good example of this would be how this mission of finding a missing person was assigned.

"I feel like the High Countess is just messin' with us for fun…" Miles remarked.

Flaming auburn hair and good looks marked by a white scar… Someone you could lay your eyes on once and never forget—the cunning matriarch, Serena Dracroy. She was beautiful and capable, and Miles felt indebted to her since she hired him. But he still didn't like being used by a woman in whatever way she wanted. He hoped to one day turn the tables.

"Miles, Miles," pestered Balleroy.

"What is it, ya damn idiot?" replied Miles with irritation. "Have somethin' else to complain about?"

"Nah, not that. But isn't that what we're looking for?" Drawing back his shoulders, Balleroy pointed his spearhead diagonally. Following it, Miles carefully observed the path that had been hidden by the trees.

There were two things necessary to become a Winged Dragon Rider; one was being compatible with a Winged Dragon of course, and the other was having excellent eyesight. Thanks to this, Miles and Balleroy were able to lock in on their target's location. Which was…

"…Good lad," praised Miles. "There's no mistakin' it. That's the rumored bandit fort."

"Excellent. So, what's the plan?" asked Balleroy.

Seeing his fellow soldier return his spear to his side, Miles closed his eyes. It was obvious what they had to do. “Kill every bandit in the fort. The High Countess told us ta bring her back, even as a corpse.”

2

“…Gah.” His throat pierced with a spear, the large bandit’s eyes rolled back into his head as he fell to the ground. His body twitched and a steady flow of blood came out of his mouth instead of air. He hadn’t even managed to grab the large sword propped up against the wall. What a pitiful death.

“I’m done here, brother,” said Balleroy.

“Right,” replied Miles. “Good work.”

Balleroy skillfully spun his spear in the low-ceiling room, clearing it of blood. Stepping over the bodies at his feet, Miles checked around the room, which was scattered with junk.

It was a bandit base. He wasn’t expecting it to be neat and tidy, but being so far removed from even the general notion of order and structure made his head hurt.

“Man… I figured this guy had to be the boss based on the layout,” commented Miles.

“You thought she would be in the boss’s room?” questioned Balleroy.

“Yeah, I mean, she’s nobility, practically a princess. If she was caught by bandits, then the boss would be the one ta force himself on ‘er.”

But since they couldn’t find hide nor hair of said girl, his guess was off. Either that or the boss got rough while having his way with the young girl and killed her.

In that case, trying to find where they hid her body would be a huge headache, but…

“In any case, it can’t be helped if she ain’t here,” mentioned Balleroy. “Let’s see if there’re any other survivors…”

“…Oh, so it was you two.”

“Huh…?!” Miles exclaimed in surprise.

As they were thinking of finding someone to interrogate, a voice suddenly called out to them from behind. Miles quickly turned to face them, while Balleroy moved to protect him. But once they saw the figure that approached them, the two quickly stopped.

After all, the person standing there was Miles’s target, the person they were looking for.

“You’re…” started Balleroy. “Lady Priscilla, you’re safe.”

Balleroy’s surprise turned to relief as he lowered his spear. The girl, Priscilla, snorted with her pretty nose, posed haughtily, and replied, “Why wouldn’t mineself be?”

Despite being in her early teens, her haughty attitude suited her well. Blessed with fine features, she would without a doubt become a world-class beauty when she grew up. Hence why Miles had the sadistic desire to watch her cry, but leaving that aside…

“It’s good to see you alive and well, Lady Priscilla,” said Miles. “We were terrified when we heard that you’d gone missing after escaping Pendleton Manor.”

“And Miles here heard rumors that bandits around here had captured a similar-looking girl,” added Balleroy. “It was quite the achievement.”

While Miles was bowing deeply, Balleroy proudly explained his friend’s achievement. In all honesty, Miles wanted to punch Balleroy to get him to bow down but held back due to Priscilla’s presence.

After hearing their report, Priscilla just shrugged her thin shoulders. “I see,” she began. “Mineself thought you were just an ugly man, but you seem quite sharp.”

"…Nice to see you haven't changed either, Lady Priscilla," replied Miles. "This is a bandit base. I was panicked thinking that you might have been violated."

"Hmm. Well, it is obvious that gazing upon the beauty of mineself would drive many a man to vulgar fantasies." The suggestive exchange between them brought a cold smile to the young crimson beauty's lips. "But…" said the girl before glancing around the room and stopping at the corpse at their feet. "But such a thing shall forever remain in the realm of fantasy. The reason why mineself was with them was because I was leading this group of fools."

"Ha-Ha-ha, that's a good one… That's a joke, right?" Balleroy laughed at the sudden confession, but Priscilla made no indication that she had been joking. Looking towards the body, the reason she was safe started to become evident.

These bandits were taken in by Priscilla's overwhelming presence, and they accepted her as their own without being able to use her in any way. But that state of peace had been broken by the entrance of the intruders: Miles and Balleroy.

"Well then, shall we go? You two were coming to retrieve me."

After one glance at the corpse, she felt no need to say anything. There was no emotion or thought left, and even Miles felt pity for the bandit.

That's why he was only slightly relieved at safely retrieving Priscilla.

"Right, understood. The High Countess will surely be pleased. After all, Count Pendleton was executed for treason, which really took its toll on her."

Priscilla's gaze hardened at Miles's unnecessary utterance. But he did not apologize nor go further. Knowing when to stop was the whole reason he had survived this long.

"That was kinda mean, bro," said Balleroy.

"Shut it," Miles snapped back, still tutting at his longtime partner for seeing through it.

3

“First, let me say it’s good to see you safe, since I have yet to repay my debt.” High Countess Serena Dracroy welcomed the young girl, who had changed her dress, and reiterated her joy at her safety and their reunion.

Opposite Serena in the parlor was Priscilla sitting on a sofa, all cleaned up after her bath. Despite having stayed in the desolate conditions of the bandit base, her appearance had regained every ounce of its allure, showcasing her beautiful hair and skin. Even Miles was astonished.

“Miles, Balleroy. Good work on completing your duties.”

“You’re too generous with your gratitude,” gushed Balleroy. “But I did next to nothing to find the lady. That was all my brother, Miles.”

“Yes, indeed…or so I would like to say,” began Miles, “but clearing out the bandit base was all Balleroy. This achievement was only seventy percent mine.”

Balleroy tried to casually pass over the achievement, but Miles passed some of it back with a bitter look.

Balleroy didn’t care for societal approval or acknowledgment of his achievements. If left alone, there was the risk of all of his deeds being passed onto someone else. Miles, on the other hand, knew that if he kept claiming praise, he’d eventually be tasked with something that he couldn’t fulfill and get into trouble.

Announcing your deeds honestly—with just a little embellishment—was best.

“I see,” Serena replied, full of pride at their report. Her face was gallant and unreadable as she turned back to Priscilla. “I’ll say it again, but it’s good to see you safe. After what happened to the Mid-Count…at Pendleton Manor, with your whereabouts unknown, I was quite shaken up.”

“Such concern towards another house is so philanthropic of you, very unlike a Vollachian noble. Perhaps you had some illicit feelings towards mine husband?”

“Even if that were true, that would not be a sign of poor taste… Jorah Pendleton’s last moments would honor any imperial noble’s name,” Serena declared, lowering her eyes that were adorned with long lashes.

Jorah Pendleton had been accused of treason and lost his life when he fought one-on-one against Goz Ralfon of the Nine Divine Generals, who had besieged his mansion.

At first, when Miles heard of his fierce death, he thought it was some kind of a joke. In all honesty, he didn’t think that highly of Jorah. Mainly because kindness was looked down upon in the Empire, which was why Jorah had been exploited many times and often drew the short end of the stick as well.

That same Jorah had been accused of treason by the Empire, but instead of pleading for his life, he drew his sword and fought in a one-on-one duel against one of the Nine Divine Generals…

“…The power of love, or so they say,” muttered Balleroy.

Miles elbowed Balleroy, who was thinking of the same thing, for letting his inner thoughts about the situation slip out.

As if something that picture-perfect could ever happen in reality. Whatever relationship Jorah and Priscilla had was unfortunately beyond Miles’s understanding.

But whatever he was willing to give his life over, it was definitely not love.

“…”

“Wh-What is it, milady? Did I…?”

Miles noticed that Priscilla was looking at his face out of the corner of her eyes when he gritted his teeth. His body shivered at the sudden eye contact as Priscilla shook her head. “No, it is nothing important. It is just that mineself thought that you'd probably end up destroying yourself because of your narrow-minded views. Keep it in mind."

"…I don't get what you're saying, but understood." Miles simply nodded at the riddle-like advice, since he couldn't just brush it off.

The haughty girl looked at him like she knew exactly how the world worked. In her crimson eyes was a perception unbefitting one her age. And that know-it-all manner of speaking closed off any attempts at rebuttal or comeback.

In any case…

"We had been requested in advance by the Mid-Count to look after you if anything ever happened to him," Miles explained. "It seems that he was aware that would happen beforehand."

"That sounds likely," replied Priscilla. "He didn't panic when separated from me. It was quite unlike him."

"I see," added Serena. "I wasn't there at the time, but if you say so, then it must be true." Serena had a deep friendship with Jorah, so hearing that directly from Priscilla made her visibly relieved.

Goz Ralfon was a superior warrior, so there was the possibility that Jorah's final moments had been fabricated to preserve his honor. But that possibility had been eliminated by Priscilla.

Priscilla was not one to hide or embellish the truth, even if it was about her husband.

"Then, now more than ever," said Serena, "I would like to fulfill his wishes."

"Hmm, what are you planning?" questioned Priscilla.

"I've called on some favors with a company that I'm on good terms with to arrange for you to leave the Empire."

Priscilla's shapely eyebrows twitched at Serena's declaration to help her escape.

Whether it was anger at being told to run, or a reaction to thinking that her proposal was worth considering, Miles felt as if the temperature of the room had increased and cleared his throat.

However, this was a dangerous proposal. To be caught assisting in the escape of the traitor Jorah's wife, Serena and any associates would be marked as traitors themselves. They would be executed for treason.

"Why would you go that far? To repay your debt? Or did you truly have feelings for mine husband?"

"…Right after I killed my father, when I was struggling to hold House Dracroy, the Mid-Count…Jorah…helped me out a lot."

"…"

"He was a man who went against the Empire's idea of strength. Even so, there are times when you'll befriend someone who wants to do everything they can for the sake of others, regardless of profit or loss."

That's why Serena was willing to put her house in danger to help Priscilla—no, for the sake of her friend Jorah's request to help save his beloved wife.

"Brings a tear to your eyes, doesn't it, brother?"

"You shut up, ya damn fool." Miles berated Balleroy for getting overcome by emotion, but he didn't complain about what he had said.

Serena Dracroy was a High Countess of the Empire. She could give into emotions once, but it wouldn't happen twice. If this was her one selfish desire, then it would be their duty as her subordinates to let her do as she pleased.

"Even if you stop being Priscilla Pendleton," began Serena, "the fact that you were my friend's wife will not change."

"What an admirable thought… How long will mineself be treated as a child? It seems my husband never treated me as a woman, even to his very end.” Slipping that out with a sigh, Priscilla closed her crimson eyes.

Behind her closed eyes, the memories of times gone by with Jorah swam around in her mind. They were both a sentimentality that others wouldn’t understand and a time far too brief.

“So, your arrangements?” As Priscilla opened her eyes, she showed that she had accepted Serena’s proposal.

Her attitude was completely uncharming, but Serena began to explain at her request. The two ladies seemed wise and dignified, and showed no weakness. Watching them, Miles sighed.

“Hey, Miles my brother. The two of them look pretty good together, don’tcha think?”

And he felt just a bit envious of his brother-in-arms’s carefree attitude.

END

Volume 28

Chapters 25-39

Chapter 25:
A Reunion Akin to Scorching Blood

—There was a girl of “crimson”, like a vivid, scorching flame, richly scented in blood.

Amidst the sudden battlefield, upon the upper levels of City Hall, this violent beauty dominated the desolate scene while holding a radiant treasured sword.

With her dazzling orange hair, a luxurious blood-colored dress, and feminine figure, the person grasping that sword was one whose back exuded strength.

Subaru: “…”

Staring at her in exasperation, Subaru’s thoughts were stirred into confusion as stood with arms open wide.

Momentarily forgetting the pain that coursed through his entire body and the need to breathe, a single word bounced chaotically in his empty head, “Why”.

Why, was she here.

Why, had she saved Subaru.

Why, was she able to face Arakiya with such calm.

Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, he could not stop wondering why.

Overwhelmed by endless questions, Subaru felt like time itself had halted. Then, as if to ridicule the motionless Subaru, the woman of “crimson” gave a snort and—

Priscilla: “What an idiotic visage. Have your eyes been scorched by my nobility?”

Subaru: “—What, do you have eyes in the back of your head?”

Priscilla: “Nonsense. Does it appear like I have such a deformity? I can tell a foolish commoner’s expression just by their respiration.”

Still with nary even a glance back, came a proud retort of the woman—of Priscilla Barielle.

Whilst gazing at the woman who should not be present, Subaru did not have any words to refute the preposterous notion that she would be capable of knowing his expression just by his breathing.

The situation slowly progressed in front of Subaru, who could only be stunned and dumbfounded.

Priscilla: “Well.”

After taking a short breath, Priscilla looked around as she continued to firmly wield the ornate crimson sword.

She recognized that the City Hall had been completely transformed by the sudden intruder’s rampage.

Even accounting for the injured People of Shudraq and the comatose Zikr, the only ones who could move, albeit barely, were Subaru, Rem right behind him, and Abel, atop the balcony.

And the one who was the cause of all this—

Priscilla: “—Arakiya.”

Arakiya: “…”

Narrowing her crimson eyes, Priscilla focused on the other girl quietly.

The one who maintained her silence under such circumstances was the brown-skinned, silver-haired demi-human—The Imperial General First-Class, ranked Second, Arakiya.

She had been said to be the second strongest person in the Vollachia Empire. Her abilities had showcased this well. She met Priscilla’s gaze, brimming with strong will, head-on, with her red right eye that remained uncovered by her eyepatch—Nay, actually, she did not.

Arakiya: “Prin… cess…?”

Until now, Arakiya had given the impression of an otherworldly presence, imposing a solid world of her own. However, under Priscilla’s stare, that world collapsed in a single beat.

Instead, what emerged was intense agitation and equally great joy.

Arakiya: “Princess, Princess, Princess… Hk.”

The dangerous atmosphere fizzled out, while Arakiya uttered those words over and over again, as if to confirm it.

Almost as if she were a lost child reunited with their parents, or a small brother and sister trying to regain their bond; one could see the obsession of the weak trying to cling onto the strong.

—The relationship between Priscilla and Arakiya was unknown to the others.

Odd as the sight was, Subaru could not figure out the reason why Priscilla would need to come to this place, and could only guess that there was an unusual past between the two.

It could be this past relationship had broken Arakiya’s fighting spirit, who was by far the most dangerous being in this place.

Arakiya: “—Hk.”

Lowering the thin tree branch in her grip, Arakiya, overcome by emotion, tried to step forward. It seemed as if she were about to jump straight into Priscilla’s chest.

Perhaps she desired to follow the passion welling up in her heart, and embrace Priscilla.

However—

Arakiya: “Princ—”

Priscilla: “Silence.”

But that did not come to pass.

A short, fierce command was accompanied by a flash. As Arakiya was about to take a step forward, a red glow swept across, just mere centimetres from the toes of her bare feet, and glaring flames flared up to prevent her from advancing further.

Arakiya: “…”

At best, the flames contained the power of a bonfire, which went up to her shins.

They were not great enough to hamper Arakiya’s long legs from stepping over them. She easily could—yet despite that, she was unable to move, almost as if she faced an insurmountable wall.

As they stood, Priscilla continued to stare coldly at Arakiya, whose eyes widened at the unexpected action.

Priscilla: “Arakiya, why do you wish to come to me now?”

Arakiya: “Wha…?”

Priscilla: “Did you believe that I would be so excited to reunite with you as to welcome you into my arms? If such is the case, I cannot help but be amazed at your optimism.”

Priscilla’s words were tinged with contempt and disgust, completely blocking Arakiya from approaching.

Arakiya must have understood that there was distance between them. Her eye trembled in astonishment, as she desperately attempted to find the best answer to Priscilla’s words.

But—

Arakiya: “P-Prisca-sama…”

Priscilla: “Prisca is dead. —Have you not changed after all this time, even after obtaining your newfound position?”

Arakiya: “—Hk.”

Priscilla: “How dull. It has been a long time since I have last gazed at the soil of my homeland, but it is difficult to feel anything when it has grown so emaciated.”

Priscilla was unable to dismiss the fact that she was deeply disappointed.

To be honest, he lacked enough understanding of her position in this situation to even begin to guess what Priscilla was thinking. Even so, Subaru knew that her heartless words had shaken Arakiya to the core, insofar as making her shed blood.

It was a deep wound. One of being disrespected by a person with whom she had formed an important bond.

Arakiya’s eye wavered upon being labeled a disappointment. She could have cowered at the verbal wound; however, instead of faltering, she instead reflected a fierce look from her exposed red eye.

Not anger, but a glimmer of determination and resolve.

Arakiya: “…I don’t care what the Princess thinks of me. Even though it’s painful. But I’ve made up my mind.”

Priscilla: “—. Ho, so you have made up your mind? Can you regain my interest then? Try telling me what you have decided.”

In response to Arakiya’s quiet appeal, Priscilla threw out a provocative statement, whether she intended to or not. In turn, Arakiya looked up and yelled, “I will!”

As she howled, Arakiya flexed her slender knees,

Arakiya: “I will regain the Princess’s rightful place! In the Empire! And to do that…”

The aim of Arakiya’s outburst was not directed at Priscilla, who was only half listening.

The gaze of her one eye strayed from Priscilla, heading toward Abel, still perched on the balcony as these events unfolded. He became the target of her shifting emotions.

Arakiya: “You’re a liar, Your Excellency, and for that, I shall—Tch!”

Her eye blazing with passionate fury, Arakiya’s slender body leapt high in the air. Ignoring the barrier of fire between her and Priscilla, she vaulted forward, her destination being Abel on the balcony.

Her leaping prowess was extraordinary. However, it was not that surprising, considering she held the title of the second strongest in the Empire.

The main problem was that, aside from Priscilla, there was nobody who had the means to stop her.

Subaru: “Shit, Abel’s going to…! Priscilla!”

Priscilla: “Do not raise such a fuss. Why are you acting so familiar, you foolish commoner? With whose permission did you call me by my name?”

Subaru: “This isn’t the time to…”

Priscilla: “—I said, do not raise a fuss.”

With her ornate sword lowered in one hand, Priscilla ignored Subaru’s pleas.

After this threat, which made Priscilla’s next actions unreadable, Arakiya’s form surged like an arrow, approaching Abel in the breathless Subaru’s vision.

Abel: “…”

Abel was leaning onto the railing of the half-destroyed balcony, blood pouring from his forehead.

He had not displayed any signs of dismay at Priscilla’s sudden intrusion, and was still standing firm, regarding Arakiya with his intense black eyes.

It was a known fact that he was not a particularly skilled fighter. His lone uninjured arm, of course, was not strong enough to take on one of the strongest in the Empire. Therefore, Subaru did not know why he refused to fall into despair.

Without knowing—

Subaru: “Abel—!!”

He knew it was pointless, yet nevertheless he tried to dash toward him. But his legs lost their strength at the first step. Having fallen on his knees, Subaru could only reach out as Arakiya approached Abel.

—The very next moment, a chain of events beyond Subaru’s comprehension occurred.

Abel: “…”

Abel stomped hard on the balcony floor, keeping his eyes on the enclosing Arakiya. Immediately after doing so, cracks spread further across the half-destroyed balcony, and the place he took as his foothold collapsed instantaneously.

Naturally, Abel, being on top of it, fell helplessly—so he thought, but that was not what happened.

Abel’s body instead remained suspended in midair. His outstretched right hand had grasped the curtain, which hung from the top floor.

Abel had hidden a lifeline beneath his hand, that he had up against the railing, and then he had intentionally collapsed the place he was standing on.

Perhaps, had the enemy been small fry, the strategy could have been to have them swallowed by the collapse and consequently fall downstairs all at once.

However, the opponent was one of the Nine Divine Generals. Furthermore, she was also ranked Second among them.

Arakiya: “What fun…!”

Swinging like a pendulum, Abel held on for dear life to the curtain, as Arakiya bared her fangs.

Although she had lost the foothold necessary to land after her leap, Arakiya’s strength came not only from her enhanced physical abilities, but also from her superhuman powers.

Her legs flickered like glowing embers, and from her knees down, her body transformed into flames, her posture flexed in midair like that of a missile with jets blowing from her legs.

The flames that had immolated Mizelda, the fierce tornado that had blown away the common soldiers, the crude craftwork that had supported a collapsing pillar, the gale that had disarmed Rem, and finally the transformation of a part of her own body into flames.

From all these past events, they had become painfully aware of the endless versatility of Arakiya’s abilities.

Arakiya: “Your Excellency, die—!”

At this rate, a branch with unknown power was going to strike Abel. Hanging from the drape, Abel was unable to maintain his position and spun around.

It was unclear if the branch was going to stab him, if it was going to release magic, or if it was going to create some sort of other supernatural effect. —It was unknown, yet regardless of what it would do, Abel was going to be shattered into pieces.

That certainty alone made the pupils of Subaru’s dark eyes narrow with impatience and urgency.

And yet—

???: “—Oh damn, bro. I didn’t even know that it was you ‘til I heard your voice just now.”

Instantly, a figure intervened between the demonic Arakiya and the suspended Abel.

From beside Rem, who was knocked down, a figure ran over the pillar that Arakiya had caught, and threw an attack from the side, aiming for the branch that she held. The strike of the broad Blue Dragon Sword was blocked by the branch, its swing produced by a flick of Arakiya's wrist, but the resulting momentum sent her flying.

After the person's surprise attack was parried without any difficulty, they let out a “Daaah!”, and angrily stomped the ground.

???: “Shit, my arm hurts! Don't effortlessly parry a strike someone put their all into, it's gonna make them depressed.”

His whine and waving of his aching arm concluded the chaotic series of events. That person was, once again, outside the scope of Subaru's imagination.

It was a man who sported a jet-black helmet, dressed in a bandit-like fashion from the waist down. The man, who looked like a brigand or a thief, was characterized by his missing left arm, while his thick right arm held the Blue Dragon Sword.

It was a man he knew. In fact, this was the first person he should have thought of, if Priscilla was here.

He was—

Subaru: "—Al?"

Al: "Hey, bro! Didn't think I'd run into you on the other side of the border. I'd like to share my thoughts on your attire and this strange reunion…"

Priscilla's knight—or rather, servant, Al, tilted his head and raised his voice in an out-of-place greeting.

He responded to Subaru in the same aloof tone as usual, while prohibiting Arakiya's advance, still floating in the air with her legs morphed into flame.

In this case, Subaru did not know if he should be more impressed by Al's ability to block Arakiya's attack with just one strike, or by the durability of the tree branch which had clashed straight-on with the Blue Dragon Sword and came out unscathed.

Al: "You can be surprised, man. After all, it wasn't like this was something done in one shot."

Arakiya: "Get out of the way! I can't kill His Excellency like this!"

Al: "I've come all this way to interfere, how can I get out of the way now? I can't just stand here and let my head fall off my body. But…"

Arakiya howled in anger, and Al looked at her from the front without hesitation.

Arakiya’s outfit was overly revealing, but Al did not look at her with lewd intentions. His gaze only contained feelings of nostalgia and deep emotion.

In fact, Al let out an admiring sigh.

Al: “Haa~. You’ve really grown up. I always knew you’d be beautiful.”

Arakiya: “…Who are you?”

Al: “You saying that, it really hurts! Even though we’re friends who trusted each other with their lives!”

When Al called out to her as if she was a familiar face, she raised her eyebrows in suspicion. In order to keep her at a distance, Al kicked up a piece of the broken floor at her slender body.

Looking over Al’s work, Priscilla called out to him.

Priscilla: “Al. You know what I desire, I brought you here, not Schult. Do your job.”

Al: “I’m doing it! Do I look like I’m having fun with this cutie? If I’m not careful, I’ll be ripped to shreds in ten seconds, okay?”

Priscilla: “Taking a look at the situation, you certainly have not accomplished much.”

Al: “It’s better than being ripped to shreds, isn’t it? Whoa!”

Al, whose concentration was disturbed by the impatient remarks of his master, was nearly killed by Arakiya’s blow.

Flying in the air, Arakiya circled more freely than a bird, and Al desperately parried the attacks from her branch being launched one after another.

Arakiya: “You’re in the way…!”

Al: “It really hurts an old man’s heart to hear a girl your age say that.”

Abel continued to hang, and Al continued to protect him.

Glaring down at both of them, Arakiya's eyes became angrier, and every inch of her body was filled with fighting spirit. Still, the reason she would not unleash the fearsome ranged attack she had initially showed was—

Subaru: "Priscilla…"

Princess, that was what Arakiya had called Priscilla.

Priscilla's attitude was nothing but cold and disconnected, but not towards Arakiya. That was the only reason as to why she had not created even more destruction.

Therefore, if anyone could alter this stalemate, that person would be Priscilla, who kept the floating Arakiya in check.

Subaru: "…"

Priscilla: "Do not regard me with those clingy eyes, foolish commoner. I may praise you for your feigned good looks, but wishing to utilize them to make me stir would be irreverent."

Subaru: "Guh… Hk!"

Subaru, on his knees, turned around, but Priscilla was far too arrogant to take him seriously.

Instead, it was Rem, who had been sheltered by Subaru's back till now, who moved. She pursed her lips, stepping in front of Priscilla with a perilous gait.

And then—

Rem: "Please, I beg you. Please, lend us your strength."

Priscilla: "—. Hmm, what an auspicious thing to say. I would state you to be more polite than this foolish commoner."

Rem: "Then…!"

Priscilla: “Do not get too carried away. And just, observe. Already, the provisions to shift the state of affairs are underway.”

Rem’s plea, and the possibility of Priscilla’s disapproval, sent a chill down Subaru’s spine.

However, Priscilla did not lose her temper; instead, she indicated to the battlefield with a slight turn of her head.

Rem followed her gaze with a surprised “Eh?”, and Subaru followed suit.

In that battlefield atop the balcony, were it left unchecked, Abel and Al could be slaughtered by Arakiya in seconds. And in fact, the risk of such a thing increased with every passing second.

Al: “Da! Ga! Ao! Guah! Ubaa!”

Arakiya danced in the sky with her legs ablaze, and Al managed to block her attacks, though his movements were terribly clumsy and unrefined, resulting in him being repeatedly pushed back with one blow after another.

But the succession of miracles would not be everlasting. The damage from the accumulated strikes began to show on Al’s body, and as soon as his reaction began to be visibly delayed, his upper body was shaken by a huge blow.

With that, Al lost his stance and was defenseless against the next attack, and at that moment—

Arakiya: “—Hk?!”

Arakiya tried to kick the air, yet her body unnaturally swayed, causing her to lose some control.

Even to the run-of-the-mill layman, this was no ordinary sort of offensive motion, as demonstrated by the eyes wide in astoundment and choked out cry of distress.

Arakiya: “…”

All of them had been startled by the change that had afflicted Arakiya.

The two people who had not been caught off-guard were Priscilla, who was looking at the situation leisurely, and the one who had instigated it, who was supposed to be in the middle of a fierce battle—

???: "—Attack!"

The order slammed into the air with a mixture of a burning and dusty smell.

It had come from Abel, suspended in midair, whose voice was more stern than angry, more ostentatious than arrogant. The man, still hanging from the curtain, shouted at the opportunity that arose in the battle overhead.

It was as if he had known this moment would come.

Al: "You can tell me what happened later!!"

In response to Abel's command, Al flew.

In an awkward leap and twist, the Blue Dragon Sword drew a parabolic line and mercilessly slammed into the slender body of Arakiya bereft of mercy—no, there was mercy.

The wrist holding the Blue Dragon Sword twisted, and the blunt side, not the blade, headed for Arakiya.

Priscilla: "Fool."

Perceiving that non-lethal trick, Priscilla curtly remarked.

Her eyes, boundlessly arrogant, had correctly foreseen the situation.

Arakiya: "Stay back…!"

At the moment of collision, there was a dull sound that made Subaru want to turn his eyes away.

Al's powerful blow flew into Arakiya just as he had intended, and she took it head-on with her raised left arm. Her elbow snapped in the opposite direction, broken bones pierced her brown skin, and blood sprayed.

It was a painful blow, but not a fatal one.

Behind his jet-black helmet, there was a low growl from Al, and an indication that his cheeks were surprisingly tense.

A moment later, Arakiya's thin foot struck him in the neck from the side, sending him crashing to the floor with a fierce impact. His bouncing body was blown away, and went straight out of the collapsed balcony.

Al: "Dohhh, AHHHHH—HK?!"

An ugly scream tailed off, and so, Al's figure disappeared from sight.

He was safe, of course, but now the obstacle between Abel and Arakiya had vanished.

Arakiya extinguished the flames from her legs and planted her feet on the floor. This time, she was going to pluck the life out of Abel's body.

—Suddenly, a black shadow leaped furiously at Arakiya's back.

???: "GRAAAAAAAAAAH…!!"

A shadow blew away the rubble and rushed at Arakiya with a fierce yell. It was a being that grasped a large knife in a backhand grip, and launched an offensive wielding its hunting instinct.

For a moment, the sheer spirit of the shadow's surprise attack almost overwhelmed Subaru's understanding of its true identity.

Her tall, well-built body, wounded and burnt black, her black hair dyed red, and the white pattern on her skin indicating her as one of the People of Shudraq—Subaru then shouted.

Subaru: “Mizelda-san!!”

Mizelda: “TCHAAAAAAAH!!”

Without answering Subaru’s call, Mizelda continued to roar as if she was spitting up blood.

Mizelda had been the victim of the first strike from Arakiya’s intrusion. And with her whole body still in a pitiful state due to the burns it had sustained, she continued to attack as if burning away her very own life.

The relentless blade she wielded was aimed at Arakiya’s vitals.

Unlike Al, Mizelda had no mercy or compassion to give to her prey at the last minute. Seeing the way she fought, Subaru belatedly realized that she was the target of Abel’s order from before.

Abel had foreseen Arakiya’s slump, and inspired the dying Mizelda to fight harder.

Subaru could not imagine how much thought had gone into performing this divine calculation, under such sudden and seemingly unrecoverable circumstances.

But still, this extra step was not enough.

Mizelda: “…”

Despite Mizelda’s struggle, she still remained in bad shape, and Arakiya’s expert ability would easily be able to deal with her.

Frowning in annoyance, Arakiya easily blocked many of Mizelda’s attacks with some rough swings of her branch, while the latter burnt through the dying drops of her life.

No longer was there any point in mentioning the strength of that branch.

The impact of the cleaving branch drove Mizelda’s knife out of her hand, and a moment later, the branch was thrust into Mizelda’s unarmored torso.

Her well-developed abs of steel were pierced with a sickening sound, without much resistance.

It bored through Mizelda’s body, shredding vital internal organs and forcing the mighty amazoness’s body nearer towards death—

Arakiya: “Now, finally…”

Mizelda: “—Where are you looking?”

It happened the moment when Arakiya’s attention shifted from the interloper she thought she had eliminated.

Mizelda’s eyes glistened as she froze in place, blood bubbling at the corners of her mouth. She gave a fierce smile, red blood staining her white teeth, and grabbed Arakiya’s right hand that held the branch with both of hers.

She gripped it more and more tightly, then made herself immobile.

Mizelda: “…”

The moment of stagnation that was created was, or was to be, the final opportunity.

But there was no one on their side, including Subaru, who could take advantage of the moment created by Abel’s wisdom and Mizelda’s dedication.

The People of Shudraq, led by the struggling chieftain, had yet to recover from that last raging storm, and neither had Subaru, who could barely stay conscious.

Even Rem, who had broken off a pillar, was unable to reach the two due to her weak legs.

Without everyone working as one, the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity was lost.

However—

Priscilla: “—You may hold your head aloft, oni girl. It was your plea that brought about this swing of mine.”

However, even though Subaru’s allies was incapable to reach out, that was not the same for the third force on the battlefield.

Priscilla: “…”

Priscilla, who had a bird’s eye view of the battle, closed the distance with a single step and aimed for Arakiya’s unprotected back.

For a moment, Arakiya was aware of the presence behind her and moved to engage it. She wanted to throw Mizelda’s tall body, which was grabbing her arm, and slam it into the enemy behind her.

But she could not do that. —She could not do it, because she could see who that presence belonged to.

Arakiya: “Prin—”

Arakiya, who had been unable to break her obsession with Priscilla from beginning to end, was struck by a flash of the crimson sword.

With a bang, her gushing blood was incinerated by the flames, and Arakiya’s body shook terribly.

Priscilla: “I did tell you, Arakiya. —That you should have prepared your resolve for the time you met me next.”

A promise made in the past, the true meaning of which no one else had the right to intrude on.

The only thing they knew, was that Priscilla’s merciless blow was the answer to that promise, and also the answer to Arakiya’s unbreakable longing.

Arakiya: “…”

Arakiya’s body collapsed on the floor as the treasured crimson sword collided with her back.

Mizelda, who had grabbed her arm and was blocking her movement, was also caught up in it. The two of them fell in a tangle, throwing their arms and legs out like sluggish ragdolls.

Mizelda: “…”

The situation, which had been moving at a dizzying pace, as the air that seemed to be stirred endlessly with swords and flames, was suddenly engulfed in silence. Subaru felt as if time had stood still.

It was as if the mere movement of one breath or one step would ruin everything, and it would all fall apart like a dream.

Rem: “—Mizelda-san!”

It was Rem’s tense voice that shattered the stillness of that moment.

With faltering arms, she crawled across the floor and hurried to Mizelda, who was lying folded up against Arakiya.

Mizelda’s whole body had been scorched all over, blown away by a gale of wind, and even pierced through the stomach.

Rem, kneeling beside her, gasped, and with a desperate expression, placed her hands on Mizelda’s body and tried to hold her together with a pale light of healing magic.

Abel: “Is this really the situation to be gawking? Give me a hand.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Abel’s voice reached Subaru’s ears, stunned immobile after seeing Rem in action.

Abel was still unable to climb up from his suspended position. Shaking his head, Subaru hurried towards the former balcony and looked down at the empty space below them.

Abel, hanging by his right arm with a curtain wrapped around him, pierced Subaru with his eyes.

Abel: “You survived. You really have the luck of the devil, do you not?”

Subaru: "…Looks like you've got plenty of bark left in that hateful mouth of yours."

Subaru's cheeks twisted at Abel's inability to stop talking, then he grabbed the curtain and pulled him up.

To be honest, if Subaru was a mess, then so was Abel, being drawn up. The former wished to stretch his limbs out and let go of his consciousness right now, but he could not do that.

Subaru: "It's not just Mizelda-san…"

A large number of injured people had fallen victim to Arakiya's rampage.

In an environment where those who could use healing magic were rare, non-magical first aid was necessary. There was no time to pass out.

To fall here would be to allow oneself to be lost.

That should not be allowed to happen.

For that reason—

Subaru: "Hurry up and get up here…"

Clenching his molars, he pulled the curtain and grabbed Abel's hand once he came within reach. Relying on the feeling of Abel's tight grip, he managed to pull the man who was taller than him up.

Abel, upon his return to solid ground, gasped slightly before Subaru fell on his ass.

Abel: "That was a great deed. I commend you."

Subaru: "Shut up…"

Rejecting the praise that did not show a shred of sincerity, Subaru clucked his tongue softly.

As it was, he was about to get up to start carrying out the other wounded—

Priscilla: “—Do not move on your own, foolish commoner. Who do you take as ruler of this place?”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru, who was on his buttocks, and Abel, who was on his knees, closed their mouths in unison.

What intimidated them without a word, with her arms crossed as to emphasize her voluptuous chest, were those crimson beauty’s—Priscilla’s, eyes and voice.

They were acquaintances, not strangers.

But if one asked him if they had a good relationship, he would hesitate to nod in assent. This was not only because they belonged to opposing camps in the Royal Selection, but also because of Priscilla’s temperament.

Pompous and uncompromising, Priscilla could be a powerful ally were she willing to cooperate, and an unpredictable bomb if she was not.

In the battle of the Watergate City of Pristella, she had been a reliable ally. On the other hand, what about this time?

Was it okay to consider her as an ally after she lent a hand fighting off Arakiya?

In any case—

Abel: “While I resent it, you are the one in control of this situation, Prisca Benedict.”

In place of Subaru, rendered immobile and mute, it was Abel who opened his mouth in place of Subaru.

With one knee on the floor, Abel called Priscilla by a different name, and it sounded like the one Arakiya had said before collapsing.

Priscilla gave a tiny snort at being called that,

Priscilla: “Unfortunately, Prisca Benedict was defeated in battle and died in vain. How could one who is beneath the grave speak like this?”

Abel: “…I see. Then who are you, and what do you call yourself?”

Priscilla: “Priscilla Barielle. That is mine name. You shall do well to remember it, Vincent Abellux.”

Priscilla’s and Abel’s gazes met as she answered his question in a dignified manner.

A storm of pressured glances, like either fire or lightning, passed between them. Subaru, standing beside them, was caught in the middle and had to turn his head slightly to avoid being blown away.

Priscilla, who knew Abel’s name, and Abel, who called Priscilla by a different name.

Subaru gulped quietly, foreseeing the alarming relationship between the two.

Such a brutal atmosphere—

Al: “—Hey, can anyone help me out here? I’m almost at the end of my rope.”

The only sound in the air was Al’s pathetic plea for help, as he hung from a crystal light fixture below the balcony’s edge.

Chapter 26:
A Dancing Roundtable Conference

1

Al: "—Oi, wait? Is anyone listening? I'm in serious trouble here!"

The tension in the air was shaken by a foolish voice, but that did not relieve the situation of its tension.

If anything, the pressure between Abel and Priscilla kept escalating, and even Subaru, standing on the fringes, was unable to make a move.

Subaru: "…"

If he made the wrong move, he would risk the wrath of Priscilla, the one in charge of the now half-destroyed hall.

Out of fear, he was hesitant to point out that Al was on the verge of falling to his death. The only way to break this situation was for Abel or Priscilla to speak—

???: "—Don't move."

However, neither of them were the one to change the predicament.

The unexpected voice came from the staircase that connected the hall to the lower floor. He glanced over to see a new figure looking at Priscilla, an arrow notched in their bow, aimed straight at her.

It was Taritta, whose strong eyes were filled with intense hostility.

Under Abel and Mizelda's direction, she had left the City Hall before Arakiya's assault, but had now returned.

Naturally, seeing the upper floors of the City Hall in pieces, Taritta would have inferred that there had been an enemy attack. The problem was that she had no idea what that specifically entailed.

With the heavy atmosphere, and Priscilla looking down at Subaru and Abel, there was no doubt in her mind that Priscilla was the source of all this destruction that had rained down upon the City Hall.

Taritta: “Move, and I’ll shoot you in the head.”

Priscilla: “Oh, my head? It is already bad enough that you could not even get to your ally in time.”

Taritta: “—Hk.”

Taritta’s cheeks tightened at the unnecessary provocation, and Priscilla turned to her with composure.

With an overwhelmingly dignified attitude, Priscilla dismissed the threat of being shot. In fact, Priscilla made a point of walking straight up to Taritta.

???: “That is enough.”

However, Abel halted Priscilla from taking any further steps.

Quietly, Priscilla’s crimson gaze turned to Abel again. Abel, down on one knee, met her gaze firmly.

Abel: “Taritta can be more resourceful than you think. Do not take her lightly.”

Priscilla: “If you say so, but do you think I shall turn a blind eye to her disrespect?”

Abel: “I am sure you cannot. But Priscilla… how many times have you pulled out the Yang Sword?”

Setting aside the unexpected evaluation of Taritta, Abel’s question struck Priscilla.

Subaru, however, could not understand the question’s intent. She was holding the Yang Sword—a treasured sword of dazzling crimson, that held an indisputable amount of power.

But now that she had defeated Arakiya, she had it sheathed, with the sky as its scabbard. Certainly, she would once again pull it out if required—

Abel: “Taritta, put the arrow down. She is not your enemy.”

Without waiting for Priscilla’s response, Abel continued to tell Taritta to drop her weapon. However, she was not convinced.

With the arrow still drawn, Taritta persisted, prefacing with “And yet… Hk”.

Taritta: “That woman is clearly dangerous.”

Abel: “I am aware of that which you are saying. But she is not the one you ought to be paying attention to, currently.”

Taritta: “—?”

Abel’s gaze shifted to the side as he conveyed that to Taritta, who had yet to lower her guard.

That gesture guided her gaze, and, while keeping Priscilla in sight on the corner of her vision, she turned her attention in that direction, and gasped.

Taritta: “S-Sister…?!”

As her eyes were ushered, Taritta saw Mizelda undergoing treatment from Rem.

With half of her body having been scorched by flames, and her abdomen pierced by a branch, Mizelda was gravely injured. Although Rem was doing her best to treat her, the pain was unbearable.

Rem: “Taritta-san, please call out to her. Call out…!”

Taritta: “Sister, Sister… Hk!!”

Instantly, the atmosphere from before fizzled out and Taritta rushed over to Mizelda. She grabbed her sister’s hand and began to call out

“Sister” over and over again, just as Rem had requested.

So once again, there was nothing that could keep Priscilla in check.

Abel: “…”

The standoff between Abel and Priscilla resumed. —Or so it seemed.

Priscilla: “—Foolish commoner. Pull him up, you. He shall spoil the fun with all his noise.”

Subaru: “Eh…”

And with that, Priscilla pointed her chin towards the broken balcony.

She had ordered Subaru to rescue Al, who was doing his best to hold on for dear life. Subaru gasped as she gave the order without a care in the world.

Of course, he could not say anything except yes to her request, unless he wanted to take the risk of ruining Priscilla’s mood. Above all—

Priscilla: “I shall see to that man myself. What, I am not going to let him die. Do not fret too much.”

Pointing to Abel, Priscilla’s mention of Subaru’s concerns also gave some encouragement.

It was not because he had enough of a trusting relationship with Priscilla to believe her outright on that statement, but because he knew that she would not back down from what she had declared.

Abel: “Staring at each other is not going to get us anywhere. For the time being, you should do what she says.”

Subaru: “…Alright. I’m not your subordinate, though.”

Abel added that as Subaru pondered over Priscilla’s words.

He did not like the fact that he was being directed by Abel to do something. Leaving that thought for another time, Subaru immediately went to rescue Al, who was stuck hanging off a light fixture at the edge of the building.

Subaru: "…"

His mind was a jumble of different factors as he did so: the safety of Mizelda and the People of Shudraq, the future of Guaral, and the relationship between Abel and Priscilla.

Subaru clenched his teeth and put those thoughts aside for the moment, concentrating on what was in front of him.

Just as Rem was desperately trying to save the life in front of her, Subaru too, was trying to get as close as possible to the Bloodless Siege that he had envisioned.

2

Al, who had been bathing in the exterior light of the City Hall, was much harder to rescue than expected.

To begin with, Al only had one arm, the other having been lost in his time in this other world. As his lone arm was currently occupied, busy hanging by a thread, his options were limited.

Al: "So this is what it means to have a hand full… No, it's more like I'm busy as hell at this point. Which one do you think it is, bro?"

Subaru: "Shut up! If you want to be saved, don't demotivate me!"

Replying to the out-of-place tease, Subaru ripped the curtain Abel had been hanging from before, made a loop at the end, and guided it towards Al.

The loop was then threaded around Al's torso to secure him in place, and he was ready to be pulled up. Then he tugged at the curtain to pull the dangling and swaying middle-aged man out from his predicament,

Al: "…And up, up I go. Whew, barely escaped death there. You saved me.”

There had been a few close calls, but Subaru finally succeeded in pulling Al back up.

After crawling the rest of the way up with Subaru’s help, Al patted his chest and sat on the floor of the wrecked hall. Looking over at him, Subaru wiped the sweat from his forehead, having completed his task.

He then turned to the person who had helped him rescue Al—Medium.

Subaru: “Thanks, Medium-san, that would’ve been pretty tough on my own.”

Medium: “It’s ok, it’s ok! Also, I’m sorry for collapsing at such a critical moment earlier!”

Laughing cheerfully despite her battered appearance, Medium apologized for what happened in the prior battle.

She apologized for not being able to help during the fight with Arakiya, but her apology was far from necessary. In the first place, both Medium and Flop were not in a position in which they needed to be involved in this battle.

Medium: “Both big bro and I haven’t been diligent enough! I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Subaru: “No, it’s not your fault, Medium-san! You couldn’t move because you were protecting Flop, Utakata and… Louis.”

Stumbling over his words somewhat, Subaru praised Medium’s achievement.

At the time the tornado that was Arakiya had blown through the hall, Medium had protected Flop, who had been right beside her, as well as Utakata and Louis, who she had been carrying on both shoulders.

As a result, she hit her head and was too stunned to move. But thanks to her efforts, the three of them were safe, and Medium was spared from further damage.

Medium: “Hmm, it makes me happy that you say so, Natsumi-chan. But it’s no good. I’m big bro’s bodyguard, so I gotta do my job properly!”

Subaru: “Medium-san…”

Medium: “Next time! Next time, I won’t be so pathetic! Look forward to seeing that from me and big bro tomorrow, Natsumi-chan!”

Subaru: “—. Yes. It’s reassuring to hear you say that. But I don’t think the two of you should…”

Subaru tried to continue, saying that they were not required to go along with him.

However, the slurring of his words was easily drowned out by how bright as the sun she was when she exclaimed “Ah!”, rounding her eyes in amazement.

Medium: “I’ll go over there and help big bro! It’ll be hard for big bro, with how fragile he is, to carry the injured!”

Subaru: “Yeah, right…”

Medium: “Okay, Natsumi-chan, I’ll see you later! I’m glad that the masked person didn’t fall!”

With a big wave of her hand, Medium ran off restlessly.

She began to help Flop, among others, with the injured, and to carry and treat the injured People of Shudraq and Imperial Soldiers alike.

The O’Connell siblings did not even receive a word of appreciation, and Subaru felt more and more indebted to them.

He wondered if one day he would be able to repay the favor he had been given.

Al: “That was a big, cute young girl. As expected of bro, you’re living it up across the border, ain’t you?”

Subaru: “I shudder because I don’t have any idea what do you mean with “living it up”, though I agree, Medium-san’s a big, cute person. More importantly…”

Al: “Hmm? What’s up, bro?”

Subaru glared at Al, who casually cracked his neck and returned the glance with his usual lighthearted demeanor. Subaru then suppressed his anger towards Priscilla, forcing it back down like a rising hunger.

It was only natural. Subaru’s suspicions and questions had been on the back burner for a while now.

Al: “Don’t look so angry. You’re ruining your makeup and wig.”

Subaru: “I’m sorry, but my makeup and wig have already been trashed due to a last minute firestorm. Don’t get it wrong, the real Natsumi Schwartz’s much prettier.”

Al: “Natsumi Schwartz, was it?”

When Al heard Subaru’s horrible fake name, he cleared his throat with a rumble and gave a laugh pregnant of meaning.

With Subaru skeptical of his attitude, he shook his head,

Al: “No, no. I’m just impressed with your pseudonym. I didn’t know you had crossdressing as a hobby, bro.”

Subaru: “Don’t be silly, I’ll fill you in on the correct information about Natsumi next time. But more importantly, answer me. —Why are you and Priscilla here?”

Al: “…”

Subaru: “It was a big help to us, but there’s something I really don’t understand. It’s not just the reason as to why you’re in Guaral. It’s about why you’re in the Empire at all.”

In response to Subaru's serious question, Al closed his mouth softly and fell silent.

It was an inexplicable intervention, no matter how much he thought about it.

It just did not make sense for Priscilla and Al both to be in the Empire with complete impunity. Of course, from their point of view, the same could be said for Subaru, and others too—

Subaru: "Let's put that aside for now. The sooner I learn, the better, though."

Al: "That's a novel idea, but that's not what you really wanna hear, bro."

Subaru: "What?"

Al: "It doesn't matter why me and the Princess are in the Empire. Bro, what you really wanna know, is the way back… from this scary and dangerous country, to the home you know. Ain't that right?"

Subaru fell silent this time. The question the other party posed had hit a sore spot.

The way to return from the Empire to the Kingdom; that was the information Subaru was seeking the most right now—Towards that, Subaru possessed zero words of denial.

He had his doubts. There were other questions, as well as a nagging sense that he was being treated unreasonably. But wasn't it more important to solve the largest problem right now—

Subaru: "Then you have the answer to that question…? A way to get back to the Kingdom of Lugunica, and cross the border of the Empire…?"

Al: "Nah, I'm sorry. I dunno. I was just trying to get your hopes up."

Subaru: "YOU…!"

Al: "Wait, wait, don't be mad! To be precise, I'm talking about how difficult it is to get out of the Empire right now. It's hard enough to get in, let alone trying to escape."

Subaru was frustrated by the way his emotions were being played with in the palm of Al's hand.

As usual, Al refused to show his true feelings. —Did Subaru also look like that, from other people's perspectives? If that's the case, then it would be something for Subaru to reflect on.

In any case—

Subaru: "You can get in, but you can't get out… And the reason for that is…"

Al: "Oh, come on, I don't gotta tell you that. It means that there are people who don't want a situation where a certain someone could easily leave the country."

Subaru: "—. Does that mean you know Abel's true identity too?"

In response to Al's comment, Subaru naturally arrived at that conclusion.

He'd heard before that the Vollachian Empire had strict border control, but if the emigration ban was being strengthened under the conditions that Al mentioned, then the reason for that was none other than the existence of Abel—no, the existence of the Emperor of Vollachia, Vincent Vollachia.

In order to prevent Abel, who had been ousted from the Emperor's seat and was now on the run, from escaping to another country, border security was being tightened.

All that meant was that in order for Subaru and the others to return to the Kingdom of Lugunica, they would need to overcome some major obstacles.

Subaru: "Al, if you have more information than we do…"

Al: "Oops, I'll have to keep my mouth shut about this. I don't want the Princess to get mad at me for blabbering about unnecessary things. If there’s something you wanna talk about, talk to the Princess. However…”

He put his right hand on the metal clasp of his helmet, and a moment later, it made a gentle click.

He then continued,

Al: “I can’t guarantee that the Princess’ll be honest about it, though, can I?”

3

Al: “Princess, I’m back. How’s the discussion going over there?”

Priscilla: “How is it going, you ask? We are not getting anywhere. I have been listening to everyone that has woken up, one-by-one.”

Al, who waved his hand in an easy-going manner, had only been asking about the progress. Meanwhile, Priscilla replied back to him by resting her chin in her hands.

The upper part of the building had been destroyed during Arakiya’s attack, but the foundation remained strong, and fortunately, the contents of the City Hall were still intact.

Thanks to this, they were able to use the conference hall for important discussions with no relocation necessary.

Abel and Pricilla sat on opposite sides of a large roundtable. In addition, Zikr and his Imperial Soldiers, as well as Kuna and the People of Shudraq, were present.

All of them possessed relatively mild injuries, and if Priscilla’s words were true, they had probably already been questioned.

Kuna: “Yo, you okay, Natsumi?”

Subaru: “Kuna, I’m glad you’re awake. Are you hurt?”

Kuna: “Holly’s big frame came in handy. To be honest, I don’t feel comfortable in this place, so I want to get the hell out…”

Subaru noticed Kuna's pained face as he joined them at the roundtable.

Directing his eyes towards the rest of the Shudraq, Subaru could guess the reason for Kuna's bitter face. In a nutshell, she was the one representing all Shudraqians in the current moment.

Kuna: "Taritta can't leave the Chieftain's side and there's no point in letting Holly do the talking. But why put me in this role…"

Subaru: "No, you're attentive and keep a level head, so I think you're the right person for this job. So, how are the discussions going?"

Kuna: "Well, I think we've got a pretty good idea of what's going on. I believe we're about to start the so-called discussion."

Kuna answered while shrugging her shoulders, and Subaru nodded saying "I see".

Soon after, he was at a loss as to where he should be in the room. In the first place, Subaru's position in this group wasn't very clear.

Although he had been the one to plan the operation for the fall of Guaral, because of Arakiya and Priscilla's intrusion it would be difficult for him to say he had been successful.

???: "Miss Natsumi, if you are in trouble, how about you sit next to me?"

And so, Zikr stood quickly and pulled a chair out in front of Subaru, who had been lost in thought.

Small and stocky, Zikr looked at Subaru and smiled like a gentleman. At his grin, Subaru pointed to himself,

Subaru: "Um, I'm sure you've noticed this already, but you know I'm just crossdressing, right?"

Zikr: "If you are posing as a woman, then I am also posing as a man. My idea of a man is to behave like a gentleman with a woman, regardless of who is posing as what."

Subaru: “So this is the Womanizer…!”

Instead of using “womanizer” as a derogatory term, “womanizer” was used as a term of respect that had a different idea behind it.

Subaru was embarrassed to be dressed in women’s clothing, but he took Zikr’s advice and proceeded to sit down in the chair that had been pulled out for him.

Complementing that, Subaru gave Zikr a “Pardon me,” as he took his seat.

Subaru: “Also, thank you for protecting me upstairs, I would’ve been in danger if Zikr-san hadn’t protected me.”

Zikr: “No, it was just a matter of my body moving in the spur of the moment. I do not know if I could repeat that feat next time. I am the Coward, after all.”

Upon hearing Subaru’s thank you, Zikr proudly referred to himself as the Coward.

This was because the Imperial General Second-Class, Zikr, had been remembered this way by the Emperor to whom he had sworn allegiance.

And Abel, the aforementioned Emperor who was held in such high esteem by the worthy Zikr—

Abel: “—The Fortress City of Guaral has fallen, and the commander of the garrisoned troops, General Second-Class Zikr Osman, has shifted to our side, complementing the forces of the People of Shudraq of Buddheim Jungle.”

Priscilla: “That is surely not enough. While I have heard of the bravery of the People of Shudraq, we are still far too weak to take the Empire on.”

Abel: “No doubt. Priscilla, where are your men?”

Priscilla: “I do not have my private army in the Empire. Aside from that, the only people I could call my army include that clown in the iron helmet, a drunken swordsman, and a pipsqueak whose only qualification is his cute face.”

Abel: “…”

While Subaru was in the room talking with Kuna, Abel and Priscilla were having their own discussion.

The two of them looked at each other thoughtfully as they gauged the other’s strength and circumstances, but Subaru intervened with a “Wait a minute”.

He had been pushed around completely and wished to not be left behind again.

Priscilla: “What is the matter, foolish commoner? You are still present?”

Subaru: “I’m here, and I can’t believe I’m saying this, but it’s a hell of a thing that you can look at me without being impressed. The last time she saw me like this, Beako had nightmares for a good while.”

Priscilla: “I believe I had already given you a compliment concerning your attire. Surely you do not believe you shall receive a reward for pulling Al up with a dirty cloth?”

Subaru: “I’m not expecting anything! No, I kind of am. I’m hoping that you’ll at least listen to me a little bit.”

Priscilla’s eyes narrowed at Subaru, who was leaning forward with his hands on the roundtable.

She looked as if she was trying to judge him, but Subaru was not afraid. Unlike before, Kuna and Zikr were here as well. That said, though, he felt like he made for a pathetic bulwark.

Subaru: “Anyway, why’re you even here? I can’t get anywhere asking Al. Let’s hear it clearly from your mouth.”

Priscilla: “That is an annoying question. …I am here to speak with that guy, Vincent Abellux.”

Subaru: "…"

Jutting her chin in his direction, Priscilla replied as if this were something obvious. In response, Abel, who sat comfortably with crossed arms, closed one of his sable eyes, while the other swirled with complicated emotions.

It was a bewildering look that could be of joy, anger, sorrow, pleasure, or something else, something inexplicable that unaffiliated to any of those feelings.

Subaru: "Talk to Abel…? But how did you know where Abel was?"

Priscilla: "The throne of the Emperor, in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, has a device that allows them to teleport elsewhere. Should they sense any potential political change, they may escape to the east through it. —To the tomb where Emperors have been buried for generations."

Subaru: "The Emperors' Graveyard?"

Priscilla: "That is where that mechanism would take him. I believe I am correct, Vincent… No, it is more convenient to call you Abel, presently."

Priscilla's eyes blazed red as she turned the conversation away from Subaru to Abel.

Exhaling under her burning gaze, Abel nodded,

Abel: "Yes, call me Abel, right now. At least, I am not qualified to call myself Emperor now that the throne has been taken from me."

Priscilla: "Exceptional, law-abiding, and foolishly honest… In any case, you think too softly. It appears that during your time sitting on the Emperor's throne, you have forgotten how to stand up."

Abel: "Gaze upon me, and tell me I have forgotten how to stand up."

Priscilla's unrelenting taunting did not deter Abel's swarthiness.

At that moment, their gazes clashed feverishly, and the air in the conference room even smelled of rising heat. As it was, it seemed inevitable that the discussion would break down and fire would rage—

???: “Well, well, calm down, both of you. There’s nothing to be gained by getting into trouble, right?”

However, there was a man who had the audacity needed to poke at a powder keg on the verge of explosion while puffing on a cigarette.

It was Al who easily stepped into the uncomfortable atmosphere with what must have been a wry smile. Instead of sitting down, he remained standing, under the combined smoldering glares of both Abel and Priscilla.

Al: “Even though the Princess acts like this, she’s got her cute sides too. As soon as she found out that she had to rush extra-fast to Guaral, she spurred her flying dragon at full speed, almost enough to exhaust him. That’s how much she was looking forward to seeing you… Guah?!”

Priscilla: “Such foolishness.”

Al went behind Priscilla as he spoke and tried to defend her humanity, but his master did not take his thoughts to heart and slammed her fan into his stomach with fierce force.

Al yelped and fell to one knee on the spot, his body bent into a crooked shape.

Priscilla: “To presume to speak for what I feel is of hubris to the extreme. When did you become so full of yourself? Know your place, clown.”

Al: “The fact that you’re running out of patience’s proof enough… But you’re really here to help, ain’t you?”

Priscilla: “…”

Priscilla’s crimson eyes narrowed as she revealed her displeasure at Al’s words.

But the fact that she did not explicitly deny it in words, was a sign that Al's words had been right on the mark.

Subaru: "Priscilla came to help Abel…?"

It seemed so unreal that Subaru was unable to shake the feeling of discomfort. Of course, looking at the results alone, there could not be any doubt that Priscilla had already helped Abel, Subaru and the others. However, her nature, as Subaru knew it, prevented him from being convinced.

Was fighting to protect someone, even if it had the benefit of defeating an enemy not of her liking, really logic that applied for the person known as Priscilla Barielle?

Priscilla: "You have a gleam in your eyes that suggests unpleasant thoughts. Do you wish them to be gouged, foolish commoner?"

Subaru: "Don't look people in the eye and tell them something so scary. To be honest, I'm not sure how much I believe you…"

Priscilla: "—In any case, Abel, I understand that you reached the east using the mechanism on the throne. If that is the case, were you expecting me to join up with the People of Shudraq and come to the Fortress City?"

Subaru: "Expecting to be here…?"

While Priscilla was admittedly exceptionally perceptive, Subaru found it difficult to fathom the circumstances that Abel had so readily accepted.

Certainly, the given conditions seemed to satisfy the speculation though.

Al: "Don't get it wrong, bro. The smart guys here are convinced. If we keep it together here, we can avoid trouble we don't wanna deal with."

Subaru: "And you're okay with that…?"

Al: "Good or bad, we'll just have to suck it up. Even if you try to fight, you'll lose. —Because me and the Princess are gonna win anyway."

Subaru: "Oh…"

Al, still on his knees, slid up to Subaru and declared so with a whisper.

To be honest, it was surprising for Subaru to hear Al assure him that they would win. Originally, Al had a tendency to draw an arbitrary line in regards to what was around him, rather than being humble.

In fact, the other knights of Royal Candidates were all renowned and talented—and neither Subaru nor Al were special enough to be overconfident among them.

This was why Subaru felt a certain amount of sympathy for Al.

That was why his assertion here was so surprising to Subaru.

Even though he seemed to be unchanging and unconcerned, change was coming. This was because of his master-servant relationship with Priscilla and the accompanying battle of the Royal Selection.

Al: "But I can only speak highly of those who have a chance of winning, even if it's only by a hundred millionth of a percent. In that respect, this Arakiya girl was in a class of her own. I couldn't see any way to win."

Subaru: "…I see, the Nine Divine Generals are the strongest members of the Empire. You could say they're kinda like Reinhardt and Julius in the Kingdom of Lugunica."

If one were to select the strongest members within the Kingdom of Lugunica, they would probably find that most of them would be knights. Reinhardt and Julius dispensed being mentioned, Marcos, the captain of the Royal Guard, and Roswaal, the Head Magician of the Court, could likewise be included.

Subaru would also like to add Wilhelm and Garfiel to the list, and have an all-star lineup to face the Nine Divine Generals.

Subaru: “No, that’s not important, no matter how many times you speak of the Nine Divine Generals, it’s hard to believe that someone would be able to match Reinhardt…”

Abel: “—I am afraid that is not so.”

Subaru: “What?”

When Subaru tried to gauge the strength of the Nine Divine Generals as the most important opponent to be wary of, Abel said something that made him doubt his ears.

What did he just say? —That there’s a being that can rival Reinhardt?

Subaru: “Are you saying that there are other bug characters like Reinhardt?”

Zikr: “I’m not familiar with this vocabulary, but if you mean comparable, I will have to agree. The Nine Divine Generals have a First, above Arakiya.”

Subaru: “The First of the Nine Divine Generals is…?”

Zikr: “—Cecilus Segmunt.”

Next to Subaru, who opened his mouth with a gulp, Zikr quietly said those two words.

Subaru understood that it was a person’s name, and that it was the name of the First Rank in question. The person with that name was the strongest of the Empire, the pride of Vollachia, an overpowered character.

Abel: “The Blue Lightning of Vollachia, as he is called, is a swordsman of the highest class, ranked alongside the Sword Saint of Lugunica, the Admirer of Kararagi, and the Mad Prince of Gusteko.”

Subaru: “Umm… I remember hearing that nickname before… So you’re serious?”

Abel: “If you were to antagonize him, you would lose your head in the blink of an eye. That is the kind of man he is."

Abel, who had his arms crossed, nodded in response to Subaru's question, as his cheeks tightened.

In this situation, there was no reason for Abel or Zikr to tell a lie or a joke. In other words, what they had spoken must be the simple truth.

Cecilus Segmunt, the strongest man in the Empire, who was as skilled as Reinhardt.

Subaru felt a chill run down his spine as he wondered just how dangerous and fierce this superclass swordsman was.

It was a battle of vast differences in strength. Being both outnumbered and outclassed in quality, how could they possibly hope to win?

Al: "…However, if you think about it that way, there's still some hope. The fact that I could beat Lil' Miss Arakiya, ranked Second, here, was a big win for us."

Subaru: "Al…"

Despite the heavy mood of Subaru and the others, Al said this with a cheerful voice.

It was a very optimistic opinion, however it was also a reality that the others could not get on board as easily. However, taking in Al's spirit, Subaru exhaled, "That's right".

If they only considered the negative side of things, they would not be able to make any progress. In fact, Subaru and his team had been able to conquer the Fortress City with minimal damage. They had even managed to add Priscilla and Al as reinforcements, although it was hard to state whether they were friend or foe.

He was sure Rem would do her best to heal the injured Shudraqians, and Mizelda would return to the front lines. They could expect to see more of her relaxed, stoic demeanor, and all-around combat ability.

Henceforth—

Subaru: “Al’s right… It’s great that we were able to defeat one of the Nine Divine Generals… and a pretty highly-ranked one at that. I’m sure she’s got some information, considering her position.”

Al: “Yeah, you could say that! That’s brilliant, bro. Information’s more valuable than gold during a war. Since she was left alive, let’s hear what she has to say.”

Subaru: “Right. She might have a lead…”

Subaru forced himself to get in the mood, and Al matched him. At that rate, the subject of the conversation changed toward the acquisition of information from Arakiya, who had been successfully captured alive.

???: “Wait, Subaru and Iron-Mask. I’m going to have to disagree with you on that.”

But then Kuna, who was participating as the representative of Shudraq, intervened.

As Subaru and Al turned around, Kuna stroked her own green-dyed hair, and said—

Kuna: “That woman is dangerous. You never know what she’ll do if she sees an opening. It’s definitely better to kill her as soon as possible.”

Subaru: “I understand that, but that’s too short-sighted. Killing her is not…”

Kuna: “The Chieftain ended up badly hurt already. I don’t care what Subaru says, we and the others need to execute her.”

Kuna mentioned Arakiya’s execution upfront, and glared at Subaru with stubborn insistence.

When she pointed out Mizelda’s condition, Subaru had no choice but to keep his mouth shut. Her safety had been left to Rem, but even if her wounds healed, the fact that she had been injured would not disappear.

If the Shudraqians found that unforgivable, then Arakiya would have to pay the price.

Subaru: "…"

While searching for a response to Kuna, Subaru glanced at Priscilla.

He wanted to see what kind of reaction Priscilla would have to Kuna's insistence on executing Arakiya, as she seemed to have an unusual relationship with her.

However—

Priscilla: "I have already decided on my attitude towards Arakiya. First and foremost, it was me who slashed down the back of that thing. Are those black eyes on your face merely decoration?"

Subaru: "Guh…"

Priscilla: "I possess no intention to say anything for the sake of Arakiya. If her fate ends here, it will be part of Arakiya's own path. —Although it would be a shame."

Subaru: "…I don't understand you at all."

Subaru shook his head at Priscilla, who spoke simply as she weighed the value of Arakiya's life.

At the end of the day, their relationship seemed to be sour, but judging by Arakiya's attitude, it could have been intimate. Yet, Priscilla's attitude was terribly disconnected.

As an outsider, Subaru had no idea what their relationship was like.

Subaru: "But if you die, it's all over. Life doesn't come back."

Priscilla: "You dare to teach the value of life to me? Do you believe that I can misjudge the value of another's life?"

Subaru: "—. You're not omnipotent. Even you can make mistakes."

Directly facing Priscilla, Subaru answered without a pause.

As soon as he said that, the air in the room became tense.

Kuna and Zikr gasped, while Al could be seen putting his hand on the forehead of helmet. Subaru, too, was aware that he had said something foolish in a spur-of-the-moment manner.

Only after speaking those words, did he realize that it was a pattern that would likely end up with him losing his life by incurring Priscilla's displeasure with those words.

The next moment, he might be beheaded by that shining crimson sword.

But even so—

Subaru: "I'm not wrong. Even you can be wrong."

Again and again, Subaru repeated the statement that could cost him his life.

A moment later, in front of Subaru. Priscilla's eyes narrowed with a cold glare. And then, the scorching "death" that would make Subaru pay for his indiscretion—

Priscilla: "Even I can err, yes? It is a spiteful thing, really."

Never came.

Subaru: "Eh…"

Subaru's eyes widened in surprise, and he exhaled his clenched lungs.

Taking one look at Subaru, Priscilla opened her fan noisily and directed her gaze past Subaru, its aim Kuna.

Priscilla: "Before we cut off that thing's head, it would be best to find a use for it."

Kuna: "—What, are you trying to tell us what to do? You're an outsider.”

Priscilla: “If you wish to ignore my advice, do it.”

Withdrawing her opinion, Priscilla’s gaze stroked over Kuna’s slender body as if it were attempting to burn her.

Hugging herself involuntarily, Kuna ended up naturally demonstrating the pressure that could be felt from that gaze. Unfortunately, Priscilla and Kuna were at different levels.

Al: “Honestly, I was a bit anxious. But now we’re all on the same page!”

As if to break the tense atmosphere, Al struck the roundtable with his hand with force.

Having thus attracted everyone’s attention, he looked at Subaru through his steel helmet and,

Al: “It’s good news that you didn’t die, bro, but it’s also good news that the world didn’t lose that ero-kawaii girl. That said, when she wakes up, we’ll talk—”

???: “—Big problem～!”

Al was just about to summarize their opinions of what to do with Arakiya, when he heard the sound of hurried and panicked footsteps.

It was Holly, her large body twisting around the entrance of the room, as she burst inside the conference hall with a flurry of footsteps and a panicked voice.

Her body and breath bounced as she drew everyone’s attention, and there were words.

Those were—

Holly: “A couple of Imperial Soldiers got in, and the Divine General we captured has escaped～!”

Chapter 27:
The Haves and the Have-Nots

1

???: “If you’re alive, you’ll get a chance to clean off your disgrace. But if you die, that’s the end. So, I’m going. I won’t get into a fight I don’t think I can win.”

There was no lie in those words.

Throwing oneself into a fight with little chance of winning was a folly only an unbelievable fool would commit to.

He did not believe himself wise, not in the slightest, but for that reason he knew he should approach his decisions carefully. While a wise person might reach a conclusion in an instant, a fool would take an eternity to reach it.

Todd knew that this was how those who were untalented waged battle.

He did not get into fights he could not win.

However, paradoxically speaking—

Todd: “—There’s absolutely nothing wrong with getting into a fight you have a chance of winning.”

He brought his clenched fist in front of his right eye, and looked longingly into the distance through the small pinhole he had created.

A primitive means of seeing farther, achieved by narrowing one’s field of vision. If he squinted, Todd’s eyes would be able to see quite far, but he would not be able to make out what was going on inside the chaotic City Hall, let alone past the burning flags.

And that applied even if the situation had the winds in his favour.

Jamal: “Oy, the roof of the City Hall’s gone! What’s going on?”

Right next to him, Todd’s ferocious companion was overwhelmed by his own growing sense of urgency, creating a ruckus.

His concentration was disturbed by the noise, so he flicked his hand towards the man to instruct him to shut up. As for what was going on, he was earnestly evaluating the situation.

Todd: “Pretty sure one of the Nine Divine Generals has joined.”

If not, there was no point in staying in the citadel which had fallen into enemy hands.

As mentioned before, Todd had considered abandoning the city and fleeing once the City Hall had fallen due to the enemy’s plan. He had no intention of politely complying with any disarmament order and surrendering.

In the first place, as long as the shots were being called by the poster child of war—the man who called himself Natsumi Schwartz, dangerous people like Todd and Jamal would be the first to be dealt with.

Even in Vollachia, executions of surrendered prisoners of war were frowned upon, but that man would certainly make up a good reason to excuse such travesties.

At least, that was what Todd would do. It was a natural consideration for survival.

Hence why he had chosen to abandon the city without hesitation. In spite of this, his curiosity got the better of him, so he hid just close enough to confirm the existence of reinforcements heading for the city.

Jamal: “There ain’t any doubt about it. That’s the woman I saw two years ago, when I served during the defeat of the barbarians. —General First-Class Arakiya, ranked Second.”

As he peered at the scantily-clad woman who had leisurely entered the city by jumping over the closed main gate, Jamal declared those words with a hint of excitement in his snorts.

He was the kind of man who walked around with his wild instincts on his sleeve. Both in terms of his strength as a living creature, and in his male disposition to be able to gauge females, he wasn't the sort who would forget anyone who tugged at his heartstrings.

In other words, one of the strongest among the Empire's Nine Divine Generals had made their appearance to suppress the rebellion. —So this must be the "chance" that Todd had previously judged to be missing.

Even so—

Todd: "To act or not to act, it's more than worth the trouble."

Although Natsumi's tricky tactics were brilliant, he had no direct combat power, at least, not within a third of a soldiers' own power. The People of Shudraq who followed him were known for their toughness, but that was only relative to ordinary people.

Those who were truly strong, such as the Nine Divine Generals, were not constrained to such criteria.

Even Jamal, whose only claim to fame was his tremendous swordsmanship and fighting prowess, was only about as good as a dozen regular Imperial soldiers. That was the measure of how well one could gauge an ordinary person. Members of the Nine Divine Generals were prime examples of ones who would "take care" of Jamal. —The City Hall that had fallen into enemy hands would be reclaimed.

Todd: "Then it's wise to back the winning ground dragon."

There was no need to work with a member of the Nine Divine Generals.

All they had to do, was to be more useful to the General than the Soldiers who had been captured and rendered unable to do their job. If they could detain the enemy, interrogate them, and deliver some proper payback, then the General First-Class would remember their actions well.

If they did that, they would be promoted to a higher position, and may be able to find their way back to the Imperial Capital sooner rather than later.

Todd: “Alright, we’re heading back, Jamal. We’re going to help her retake the City Hall.”

Jamal: “Oh? Oh, yeah! Haha, that’s good. I’m glad to hear that! I’ve been itching all over for a while, since running away ain’t my style. I ain’t gonna let the General First-Class hog all the credit!”

Todd: “Don’t be silly. We’re going to gain the favor of the General.”

Todd sighed at Jamal, whose fists hardened in anticipation for a return to battle in response to the change of plans. Setting out for the City Hall, they located a position with an optimal view for monitoring the situation, instead of directly entering the building.

Following his own beliefs to the last, he was careful and cautious, and—

Todd: “—Kill him, Arakiya.”

The top floor of the City Hall was blown away by gale-force wind, the barely-visible General First-Class on a rampage.

From a distance, the Second Ranked silver-haired, brown-skinned woman wielded a tree branch that looked like an improvised weapon, and rampaged about as if she were the highest law of the world.

Between all the bodies indiscriminately strewn around the hall, there was no distinction between Shudraq and Imperial Soldiers.

Under these circumstances, the one who stood in front of Arakiya with a blue-haired girl behind his back was none other than Natsumi Schwartz.

Todd: “…”

As soon as he saw him, the thoughts that came to Todd’s mind were not dismissive like, “How could he be stupid enough to stand in front of a General First-Class?" or "How is he still alive?".

Rather, with utmost vigilance, Todd shouted out loud in his heart.

—Kill that man here, for sure, Arakiya!

Above all else, for better or worse, he did not care what he got credit for. He did not care if the time he spent thinking about his decision to stick around ended up being meaningless.

He did not care about anything else, as long as he could make sure that the life of Natsumi Schwartz, the poster child of war, had been terminated.

It would be—

Todd: "…Oi oi, you've got to be kidding me."

In the instant Arakiya was going to kill Natsumi, Todd's sincere hope was shattered just as something flashed above his tunneled vision, while he was focusing on letting that decisive moment go unmissed.

A flash of red light separated Natsumi and Arakiya.

It both majestically challenged Arakiya and sheltered Natsumi behind her back, as though it seemed to be the absolute strongest thing in the world. The moment he saw this, the balance in Todd's mind tipped significantly.

Jamal: "What was that thing that just fell from the sky?! A flying dragon?! Where's the flying dragon?!"

Todd: "…"

Jamal: "Are you listening to me, Todd! What about us? Shouldn't we be backing General First-Class Arakiya! Hey! Listen to me…"

Todd: "—Shut up, Jamal."

Jamal, whose voice roughened at the change in the situation, gasped at Todd's words.

Without acknowledging Jamal any further, Todd kept his gaze on the scene in the City Hall. The woman in the crimson dress who had suddenly appeared was facing Arakiya head-on.

He knew at a glance. —That woman also belonged to the side of the "haves", far removed from normal people.

Natsumi, having managed to survive what seemed to be a desperate situation, made Todd keenly aware of the fact that he also had something to offer. Something he "had", that was different from combat power or luck.

Todd: "…"

Before the red woman intervened, Arakiya alone would have been enough to make up the difference.

However, the situation had changed, and no resolution was in sight. Would the weight of Todd and Jamal be enough to tip the scales back in their direction?

Jamal: "Todd…!"

Todd: "Don't move, Jamal. —There's nothing you can do right now."

The odds were against them, and the longer Todd watched, the worse it got.

Todd knew Jamal's anger was getting the better of him, but it would be a waste of time to act now.

After all—

Todd: "Because, General First-Class Arakiya's been defeated just now."

The red woman's blade had struck her in the back, and Arakiya had fallen helplessly to the ground.

The balance was broken, and it would never tilt the other way again.

2

Todd: “…”

Arakiya collapsed, and the situation in the City Hall came to its terminus.

This time, the Fortress City of Guaral had completely fallen into the hands of the enemy. There was no way to recover from this.

The Second Ranked of the Nine Divine Generals had just been defeated, and there was no way that other reinforcements would come rushing in.

The Nine Divine Generals were mighty warriors, the pinnacle of the Vollachian Empire’s military might.

The strength of each of the Nine Divine Generals was equivalent to a sizable army. There was no chance that the Empire would dispatch two or three actual large armies to deal with a single situation. This was the end.

The balance had been tipped. The only thing left to do was to find a way to deal with the withdrawal that would come next.

Todd: “What to do next?”

In the shadows of the building from which he had watched the developments at the City Hall, Todd pondered quietly.

In all honesty, he was seething with a mixture of anger and frustration, but letting it out would not solve anything.

Now that the reason for his return was gone, the smart thing to do would be to get the hell out of there.

However—

Jamal: “Oi, Todd… you bastard, you’re not planning to run away, are you?”

The search for any words with which Jamal would be persuaded had been fruitless, the latter with a blue vein popping from his forehead.

Initially, convincing Jamal had been painstaking, even right after the fall, as of the moment the flag of the City Hall had been burned.

And yet, back then, it had been easy to guide Jamal's emotions still.. Reluctant as he was, Todd had still managed to make him obey, and he had reluctantly put away his half-drawn swords.

However, this was not the case this time, where things had repeated themselves, where now he'd let Jamal draw his sheathed blades once again. Even if Todd told him to put away his blades and turn around quietly again, he would not listen.

In fact, depending on what was said next, he might turn the point of the blade he pulled out against Todd.

If that happened, there would be no reason to not kill Jamal. —His future brother-in-law. Killing him would be the least favored path.

If he were not brought back safely as well, keeping the promise that had been made would not be possible.

Todd: "Let's go with that."

Jamal: "Aah?"

Todd: "…I understand how you feel. But you need to calm down. Now that General First-Class Arakiya's been defeated, there's no chance for us to win even if we go in. Do you want to make your sister sad by dying in vain?"

Jamal: "…"

An attempt to persuade him using the love of family as a shield.

As soon as he stared at his opponent, hoping that this would work, an arm quietly stretched out and grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt. Then, with a grunt, the one-eyed Jamal bared his fangs as he drew Todd toward his face.

Jamal: “Hey, if you think I’m gonna back off anytime you mention Katya, you’re definitely wrong.”

Todd: “I see… Too bad.”

Shaking his head loosely, Todd announced his disappointment rather sincerely.

If it made Jamal feel any better to get a couple of hits in on him, Todd would allow it, but it seemed Jamal possessed no intention of doing that, as he instead clicked his tongue and pushed Todd away.

There didn’t seem to be any need for him to be so direct with things, but there was no way to stop him.

As it was, Todd turned to face Jamal, and thought about climbing over the wall of the citadel on his own.

Fortunately, he had already grasped the geography of the city back when they were trying to find any secret paths. Though Arakiya had not achieved her goal, she too had managed to create some confusion. In fact, it would be easier to escape than before Arakiya’s arrival.

Apparently, Jamal would be making one more rampage to get himself noticed.

Todd: “Jamal, I’m sorry, but I’m leaving. I’ll say it again, but you probably won’t listen: you’ll die a dog’s death. Even if you go in there, you won’t be able to kill them all…”

Jamal: “You dumbass! I’m not gonna do something so worthless! I’m going to rescue General First-Class Arakiya.”

Todd: “…What?”

He had expected meaningless sentimentality, however, the other had blurted out some unexpected words instead.

Todd stopped in his tracks and stared at Jamal’s face, from whom slurred out a “What?”, Jamal: “Did you really think I was gonna charge in with the resolve to die?”

Todd: “Yes, I did. I thought you wanted to die like a dog.”

Jamal: “Cut the crap! I’m taking advantage of your clever thinking, but I’ve got a brain to think for myself too! I can tell the difference between what I can and can’t do.”

Jamal seriously surprised Todd with his unexpected statement.

There were some accomplishments to be seen in his wartime experience, but other than that, he was so direct and unsophisticated that Todd thought him to be a man unknowing of what thinking was supposed to be.

Jamal: “It can’t be helped if you’re a coward, I guess Katya wasn’t a good judge of character. I’m gonna rescue the General First-Class. She’s got a nice ass.”

Todd: “—Wait, I’m coming with you.”

Jamal: “Oh?! Don’t tell me, you’re not satisfied with Katya’s ass…?”

Todd: “I had no intention of going along with your suicidal mission, but if it isn’t one, then it becomes a different story.”

Not dealing with the disgraceful allegations, Todd sealed Jamal’s mouth with his palm. Forcing him to shut up, Todd assembled a schedule of actions that followed the change of plans in his mind.

It was not in Todd’s nature to do things in the spur of the moment in the first place. Sadly, however, the more time he spent with Jamal, the more experience he gained in the field of improvisation.

If Jamal was going to die an honourable death on his own to retake the City Hall, he would have left him alone. But if his goal was to retake Arakiya, that was a different story.

Todd: “…”

The situation in City Hall was slowly clearing up.

The only things to watch out for were Natsumi and the red woman. It would be suicide to take action in their presence. However, it did not mean that their enemy had been able to resolve the situation unscathed either.

If they forgot to maintain vigilance, there would be an opportunity to take advantage of.

Jamal: “I’m gonna go in and make a scene. If we take advantage of that opportunity and rescue the General First-Class…”

Todd: “I was impressed earlier, but that’s all gone now… There are two people we need to be wary of. You must avoid doing anything around them. What, there’s no need to worry.”

Todd’s lips loosened as he looked at Jamal from the gap between his fingers, as he chided him for this barbaric distraction. He poked his white canine tooth with the tip of his tongue and smirked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Arakiya being taken, even though she was dying.

If she was not dead, there was a way to get her out.

3

—It was easy to sneak into the City Hall.

After all, it was where they had been headquartered, even if it had been for a short time.

Todd usually had a habit of grasping the geography and layout of any place he stopped by even once. He did not feel safe unless he had an idea of where to run or hide.

That was why, after the camp in the Buddheim Jungle had been burnt down and he entered Guaral, he visited every part of the city, including City Hall, and constructed a mental map.

He knew where to kill unnoticed, and where to hide to avoid detection.

No matter where and what kind of threats they would encounter, he always had a way to murder, and a way to escape.

Todd: “Five.”

As he snuck inside the City Hall, he crushed a few watchmen here and there.

Standing guard were not the Imperial Soldiers nor the People of Shudraq, rather, that task went to guards of the local government that had been conducting the security of the city. They had been called in as soldiers by the disturbing elements who had caused the city to fall—Though no longer could the fence-sitters they’d used be called a fine “Rebel Army”.

Jamal: “I ain’t gonna show you any mercy at all.”

Jamal spat in annoyance as he snapped a sentinel’s neck backward in a two-handed grip.

Jamal was prouder of being an Imperial Soldier than of being Imperial Nobility. His anger towards the guards cooperating with the rebels that were fighting against the Empire was immeasurable.

They had been cooperating with the Imperial Soldiers before the fall of the city, so it was understandable that he would be angry at how quickly they had changed their tune.

Todd: “Well, that’s not a way of thinking I have.”

He only killed them because he had to, and if it were not required, he would not have done so.

They could not be blamed for switching sides so quickly if they were just following the stronger side to survive. Of course, they had to pay for their wrong decision with their life.

So, the pair made up of Jamal and himself proceeded to their destination while eliminating the guards in their path.

There was a prison in the basement of the City Hall, and it was customary for criminals awaiting trial by the City Mayor to be placed there. It was highly likely that Arakiya, having been taken prisoner, would likewise be held captive there.

Naturally, an iron cell was no better than a cage made of sugar against someone from the Nine Divine Generals, but even so, they could not just be giving all the hospitality of a guest room.

Todd might have done the same as well—

Jamal: "—There she is, the General First-Class."

In the underground space downstairs, several cells were placed on both sides of the hall. The lesser criminals were placed in order from the front, while the most dangerous ones were securely at the far end.

Naturally, the cell at the far end, where Arakiya was kept, was heavily guarded.

Unlike before, the person standing in front of it was not a guard, but a Shudraqian woman. She was a large woman with yellow-dyed hair, and he could tell with just a glance that she was very skilled.

In addition, due to the layout, it was impossible to reach Arakiya's cell without being detected by the woman.

In other words—

Jamal: "I guess that's the end of our little sneaking around."

Todd: "…You, why do you look so happy?"

It was hard to understand Jamal's happy attitude when an inevitable battle was imminent.

Todd's desire was to avoid killing, and he did not want to fight if he could help it. If both were inevitable, he would choose the easier and less dangerous way.

Yet Jamal looked as if he enjoyed jumping into danger.

He was probably thinking that the more dangerous it was, the more blood he would shed, and the more loyalty he would show to the Empire.

Jamal: “It’s obvious, ain’t it? Fight like an Imperial Soldier and win the war! Only then can I be proud to say that I’m an Imperial Soldier.”

Todd: “…”

Jamal: “Oi, what are you surprised about?”

Todd: “No, it was almost exactly what I thought it’d be.”

It was rare to find a person whose words and deeds were so consistent.

Jamal looked uncomfortable at Todd’s answer, but quickly shook his head. Then he traced his fingers through his stubble and snorted.

Jamal: “Ah. Well then, you’re the one who’s having second thoughts, ain’t you?”

Todd: “I can’t go along with a suicide mission. If it’s not that, I’ll think about it. So I’m not having second thoughts.”

Jamal: “You were trying to escape, but you didn’t.”

Todd: “I decided to bring back a souvenir while on the run. The plan hasn’t changed.”

Jamal: “You say this, and you say that… Hk.”

Jamal gritted his teeth angrily, his eye bloodshot.

With that look on his face, Todd detached his attention from him and focused on the target at hand.

The woman standing guard was thick, and her limbs were protected by a reasonable amount of flesh. Given a Shudraqian’s athletic ability, even Todd’s axe might not be able to dice even one of her limbs.

Inevitably, then, the sweet spot would be from the neck up.

There were options of smashing her head, decapitating her, or splitting her face, but—

Jamal: “—This is where I come in, ain’t it?”

With that, Jamal foolishly stepped forward.

Todd wondered for a moment if he should call him off, but in the end he said nothing. In fact, the best move would be to push Jamal into action, get her attention, and then proceed from there.

It would save a lot of time and trouble, and if he was willing to do it, there was no need to discourage him.

Holly: “Mmmm, who are you~?!”

Jamal: “Do I gotta answer that? You people have defiled the Sword Wolf of the Vollachian Empire. Don’t you dare think you’ve won in a battlefield I wasn’t in!”

Holly: “A strange guy’s here~!”

Looking at Jamal, who had advanced into the hall, the Shudraqian woman held a large spear at her side. On the other hand, Jamal, who was facing her, drew his twin swords and danced with a maniacal smile on his face.

Jamal’d had his fair share of problems, but his abilities were renowned. At the very least, as long as his opponent was a single member of the Shudraq, he would not fall short.

Jamal: “Take this! And this! And this!”

Holly: “…Hk! You’re a strong guy~!”

The raging twin swords slashed toward the Shudraqian woman countless times while Jamal barked in a loud voice. The woman sidestepped them with her spear-handling, but she was on the defensive.

She must be someone with a certain level of skill, to keep an eye on Arakiya. However, it seemed she had not expected anyone to show up to retake their prisoner as soon as she was placed in confinement.

Additionally, the lack of reliable troops was also a critical flaw for the rebels.

Todd: “Nevertheless, they’re not useful assets at the moment.”

Moistening his lips with his tongue, Todd leapt out from behind Jamal and jumped straight toward the cell, passing by the two of them as they fiercely clashed weapons, sparks flying.

Holly: “Ah! His comrade… Kya!”

Jamal: “Do you have time to look around? Ah!”

With the assistance of an unusually witty Jamal, Todd slammed his axe into the lock of the cell with all his might.

There was no time to look for the key. He could not destroy the cell, but he could at least break the lock.

There was a dull sound and a stiff response, as the tip of the axe cracked loudly. But instead, the lock of the cell broke with a flourish, and Todd jumped in past the creaking door.

Todd: “General First-Class Arakiya!”

Inside the cell, a girl lay face down upon a simple bed.

Even if they belonged to the same Imperial Army, a mere Soldier would not have many opportunities to meet a General. Even a General Third-Class was a commander of an army. A General Second-Class, let alone a General First-Class, would be something from above the clouds.

Therefore, this was the first time that Todd had seen one of the Generals First-Class, one of the Nine Divine Generals, up close.

Arakiya: “…”

The reason why the unconscious Arakiya was lying on her face, was because of the slash she had sustained on her back, covered with a painful scar which had been scorched shut on top of that.

The wound had been cauterized at the same time it had been received, becoming a horrible scar. —If she had not been injured by a scorching blade, she would not have gotten this kind of wound.

Todd: “That red woman, what’d she…?”

That woman was no ordinary person, and the power of that ornate sword she held was also extraordinary.

There were no further details, and Arakiya did not answer when called. So Todd had no choice but to pick up Arakiya’s body, then running straight out of the cell.

Todd: “I got her! Jamal, let’s go!”

Holly: “I’m not going to let you… Ouch!”

Jamal: “That’s why! Looking away again! Don’t you dare! Neeeee—Hk!”

The Shudraqian woman’s mind was momentarily distracted as Arakiya was taken away.

In a moment, Jamal jumped at the woman like a flash with his twin swords. She immediately held her large spear vertically to prevent it, but the impact ripped the spear from the woman’s grasp, and Jamal’s backward kick pierced her unguarded torso as he sprung up.

The woman let out a small scream as her body slammed into the wall of the prison; her head hit the ground with force, and she fell motionlessly limp.

Looking over at her, Todd was about to order Jamal to finish her, but—

Todd: “—Hey, there’s a commotion upstairs. Did they find the body of the guard?”

Jamal: “Tch, we can’t stay around. The General First-Class is…”

Todd: “She’s unconscious, but not dead. That should be enough.”

Answering Jamal’s question in a straightforward manner, Todd ran out of the dungeon. Jamal, who was ahead of him, was in charge of clearing the way for Todd, who easily overtook him.

???: “Who in the world… Guah!”

Jamal: “Outta the way, you dimwitted bastards!”

The guard who looked into the basement was blown away by a slash, and Todd ran through the City Hall behind Jamal as they became increasingly alert.

Unfortunately, he did not have the leisure of caring for Arakiya’s body as he carried her. If she was one of the Nine Divine Generals, her body would probably be strong enough. He just had to trust his endurance and run.

Jamal: “We’re outside! Where are we going?”

Todd: “Main gate’s closed. —Follow me.”

Stitching their way through the dark and tumultuous night of the city, Todd jumped into the back alleys with Jamal. He made full use of the narrow streets and side roads to mislead the enemies tracking their whereabouts.

The battle had just ended, the chaos was still raging, and there were at least three-hundred identically-dressed Imperial Soldiers in the city. It would be difficult to tell them apart.

All that was left was—

Todd: “—Hk!”

The moment he heard the sound of wind, a blade swung right behind Todd.

He turned around, and there stuck just right below his feet was a single, thick, large arrow. Someone had cut it down. It had been aimed at Todd, carrying insane momentum, and Jamal had been the one to swiftly deal with it.

That had been a precise shot, aimed at the two who were running and hiding in the city.

It was, beyond the shadow of doubt, the same archer who had shot Todd in the torso a few days prior.

—They were being observed.

If that were the case, they could not move carelessly.

If they left the alley, that would make them an easy target, and Todd, with Arakiya in tow, would have difficulty moving with agility. Even if they tried to kill the archer, the enemy was located at the City Hall—and there would be no option but to return there for the third time.

So, should they abandon Arakiya and flee? That would be the way most likely to save themselves, but if that was the case, they would not know what they were risking their lives for to begin with.

In light of the current situation, he searched for an optimal way to take action, and the one that would yield the most results was—

Todd: "—Jamal, you know we're being targeted."

Jamal: "Yeah, they're a pain in the ass. They're too far away for me to kill them, but if we don't, they'll just shoot at us one way or another. What should we do?"

Todd: "…Then, there's only one way."

Jamal narrowed his single eye at Todd's words.

To Jamal's gaze that sought a solution, Todd exhaled deeply and closed one eye,

Todd: "As soon as we jump out, the enemy's going to shoot at us. I'll have you get ahead of me and cut off their arrows just like before. Not just one shot, but two or three will follow. I'll run as fast as I can so I don't shake the General First-Class off."

Jamal: "Huh, that doesn't sound like you. That's really your move? Smells of desperation, no?"

Todd: "Ultimately, that's what happens when you run out of cards. But I'm still lucky, aren't I?"

Jamal: "Huh? What do you mean?"

Todd: "You got a pretty strong hand left, you know."

The strategy he presented was almost entirely based on Jamal's swordsmanship.

If Jamal were incapable of cutting off the flying arrows, they would both perish. It was insane, given Todd's beliefs, to risk his life in such a reckless manner.

However, that was his suggestion. With Jamal's swordsmanship, the odds were not null.

Jamal: "…I knew Katya wasn't a good judge of character. I thought you were smarter than that."

Todd: "Don't talk bad about my fiancée, onii-sama."

Todd replied to Jamal scratching his head, his cheeks twisted. Hearing this, Jamal let out a short "Haa", and then gripped the hilts of his twin swords once again.

Then, turning his imposing back to Todd.

Jamal: "Aight, I'm in. Sometimes a stupid bet ain't so bad."

Todd: "If I wasn't here, you'd probably be making all those types of bets."

Jamal: "Shut the hell up. —Shut up and stay behind my back."

Jamal's spirits quietly rose as they exchanged hateful words.

Watching his back, Todd tightened his hold on Arakiya's body.

Todd: "Jamal, when you get out of the alley, run straight. After that, when you get to the end, take the right road. That should give you enough time to catch your breath."

Hearing these instructions, Jamal pondered on them in his head, slowly closed his eye, then re-opened it as he stepped forward.

Jamal: "—Hk."

As soon as he stepped out of the alley, a single arrows, clad in a gale, pierced toward Jamal.

Jamal responded to it with amazing reflexes, and cut it off with a clash of his twin swords. The impact bounced onto Jamal's wrist, and his clenched teeth chattered as he laughed like a rabid dog.

The sensation of blood burning, heart leaping, and life boiling, overtook Jamal.

His extreme concentration made the world retard, and he felt as if he could feel every drop of sweat that ran down his skin, every grain of sand that flew around, and even the existence of air that should have been invisible.

Jamal: "—Hahaa!"

One after another, a storm of arrows poured down like a deluge.

Stepping on the ground, swinging his sword as if dancing, slicing the arrows and striking them down.

What ensued was a sword dance, the sword dance of Jamal Aurélie.

If things had gone well, they would have been able to enjoy the dance of the dancer who had been invited to the City Hall, the following day.

Jamal laughed at the thought that it had been ruined, and that he was the one dancing instead. But it was a dance with all his heart, a dance with all his body, a sword fight with all his energy.

Todd likewise marveled at Jamal's efforts as he furiously handled the attack.

Todd followed without raising his voice, as a storm of lethal arrows rained down on him. This was a sign that he knew that if Jamal were distracted, it would directly lead to his death.

So Todd pushed Jamal away from his consciousness and focused all his energy on avoiding the impending "death".

Straight ahead, evade, strike off, step in, jump, dispel, and cut open.

Jamal: "End of the corr—Hk."

Miraculously, they had finished the straight path of death and hit the end of the indicated path.

The passage of time was vague, and the sword dance must have only lasted several seconds, even if it felt like it had persisted for hours. However, they had only broken through the first barrier. Refusing to relax, Jamal did as he was told and turned right at the end of the road, where—

—At the end of the broken path, there stood a group of Shudraqians, their spears trained on them.

Jamal: "—Fuck."

It would be difficult to handle that many Shudraqians with that archer aiming at them. One could say it was impossible.

He was prepared to fight hard until he ran out of steam, but even if he did, he could not set any of it in reserve. He had no idea that he would be so perfectly anticipated, and it seemed that luck had completely abandoned him.

Jamal: "Even if you strut around being all sorts of a smartass, in the end, luck'll run out on you, huh… Heh, it's in vain. But, it wasn't all that bad."

Checking the feel of the twin swords in his bloodied hands, Jamal spilled this out to Todd behind him.

It wasn’t bad at all, he had said, and he meant it.

In many ways, Todd’s thoughts and actions had been overwhelming and frustrating.

In the end, however, he chose to exert himself like an Imperial Soldier.

Jamal: “I’m sorry about Katya, but it can’t be helped. She’s part of Imperial Nobility as well. I’m sure she was prepared for this to happen to you and me.”

Thinking of the sister he had left behind in the Imperial Capital, Jamal felt a faint tingle in his chest. However, it was soon drowned out by the will to fight the enemy in front of him, and the smell of blood that coated everything.

He was relieved for that. —He was, to the bone, a Sword Wolf of the Vollachian Empire.

Jamal: “Let’s do this, Todd. Let’s at least show them what we’re made of, for one last time.”

Leaning forward, Jamal licked the blood flowing from his eyepatch-covered right eye.

Then, fiercely, he jumped headlong into the enemy, as to display his final prestige as an Imperial Soldier.

Deadly attacks rained down on him like a storm, but he no longer held any regrets.

The fact that he had been able to be himself till the very end, had been the greatest prize for Jamal.

4

???: “…You were an idiot until the very end, weren’t you?”

Hearing Jamal’s fierce roar in the distance, Todd muttered so as he dove through the wall.

The hole he had passed through was collapsed immediately afterwards, and he carefully erased all traces of his presence, so that he could not be pursued. They in the city would probably be occupied with Jamal for a while, so there should be time to escape.

It was just like Jamal had stated.

Todd would never entrust his life to a desperate plan, even if he were dead. —No, he would never do such a thing, precisely to avoid dying.

Todd: "If I let them chase you out of the alley, they'll be distracted. Well, I feel sorry for Katya…"

The promise to bring back his brother-in-law would go unfulfilled, and his fiancée would be terribly heartbroken.

In order to comfort her, he wished to return to the Imperial Capital as soon as possible.

Fortunately, in return for losing Jamal, he had been able to find another way to return to the Imperial Capital.

It was a wildcard that could lead to a much bigger foothold than Jamal's current one, which was that he had been on the verge of promotion to General Third-Class.

Arakiya: "…Princess."

Todd: "Oh dear, you look so innocent. Even so, if you're one of the Nine Divine Generals, then the number of people you've killed would be more than a hundred or two."

In Todd's arms, Arakiya's tears flowed from her closed eye. As he watched the tears roll down her cheeks, the vague thought that his current companion was wearing an eye patch, just like his previous one, passed Todd's mind.

After thinking about it, Todd suddenly inclined his head.

And—

Todd: “On which side did Jamal have that eyepatch…?”

Chapter 28:
Victory Conditions

—The news that the captured Arakiya had been taken sent a tremor through the conference hall.

Kuna: “What a disgrace. Even Holly’s bow couldn’t catch up to him, they got away.”

Holly: “Right~”

The two people who hung their heads and apologized were Holly, who held a bow in her hand, and Kuna.

With Holly, the bearer of bad news, alongside her, Kuna had immediately gone up to the top floor to chase after the runaway, Arakiya. Then, using a combination of Holly’s arm strength and Kuna’s eyesight, they had fired at the fugitives, just as they had done with Todd when Subaru and the others had originally escaped Guaral.

However, the fugitives had been able to deal with the two-man long-range snipe, and successfully outmaneuvered the both of them, taking Arakiya away.

Kuna: “One of them stayed behind as a decoy, and the other one took the Divine General. We can’t let it end like this, we have to go after them…”

??? and ???: “—It is pointless.”

The frustrated Kuna, her nose wrinkled in regret, had her words interrupted by two voices.

The same exact words were uttered simultaneously by both Abel and Priscilla, sitting motionlessly at the roundtable. The two glanced at each other, and Priscilla closed her eyes.

It was a sign that she wanted to hand it over to Abel.

Abel: "…It was a way to get behind our lines with a small number of people, achieve a singular goal, and escape. The two had their roles clearly defined in case they got split up. Their courage in deciding to do it, and the judgment to escape, are worthy of appraisal. They shall not be caught even if someone is sent to chase them."

Kuna: "—Hk, but even so…"

Abel: "In less than half a day, Arakiya shall wake up. If that happens, any pursuers we send her way will not pose a chance. And if they change their mind and return to the city, it shall also be futile. Let me tell you, we shall not have the same luck twice. At the very least, I would state that it would be quite reckless, to make a stand with our current forces."

Kuna: "Guh… Hk."

Holly: "Kuna… What Abel's saying is right~."

By rattling off a string of words, Abel tried to discourage Kuna's insistence. Holly, standing beside her, gently patted Kuna on the shoulder as if to offer some consolation.

Being a representative of the chieftain at the roundtable, and confident in her archery skills, Kuna must have felt bitterly disappointed. However, despite his harsh way of putting it, Subaru nodded in agreement with Abel's argument.

The Imperial Soldiers who had invaded the prison would not have dared to challenge them without a chance of winning. They had set an objective that was achievable under their circumstances, found a way to beat the odds, and executed it.

Naturally, they would not do anything half-hearted like a one-way trip, so they must have had an appropriate plan for escape.

Priscilla: "No matter how you spin it, that thing's fate did not end here. With that as the case, I am sure it has a role to play still."

Subaru: "Priscilla…"

Priscilla casually threw those words into the air upon the fall of silence.

For Subaru, who had been discussing the treatment of Arakiya just before, his feelings about her not being executed and having been taken away without being able to talk to her were complex.

But what did Priscilla, who had taken the stance of staying out of Arakiya's life and death, think of her being taken? That could not be read from her crimson eyes.

Al: "So, in the end, what are we gonna do about that girl, Arakiya? Have you decided to leave her be?"

Subaru: "…If she's been taken away, there's nothing else we can do."

With a pained look on his face, Subaru responded to Al's words, who was incapable of reading the mood.

Having managed to deal with Kuna's and Holly's sniping, they could not expect anyone with only half-decent skill to take pursuit of the fugitives. In that case, this limited who they could choose for the pursuit, and all of those with good skills could not be permitted to be absent from Guaral at the moment.

Despite all his efforts to come up with a solution, Subaru's strength lay in surprise attacks, which made him particularly ill-suited to occasions in which his opponent took the initiative. And this state of affairs made that clear.

Subaru: "By the way, I don't think it's likely, but what if they're still hiding in the city, pretending to have escaped?"

Zikr: "I do not think so. Although the city is claimed to be solidly fortified, there are other secret paths besides the two large gates, but all of them have been meticulously closed off in the past few days."

Subaru: "Meticulously…"

Zikr: "Yes. We were expecting you to use the secret passages to infiltrate the city. We certainly did not believe that you would attempt a reckless plan to break through from the front.”

He had been caught flat-footed, but Zikr responded calmly without a trace of displeasure.

As the commander-in-chief of the Fortress City, it was a matter of course to be wary of any secret pathways. However, the defensive stance taken under Zikr’s leadership lent a tailwind to the soldiers who had taken Arakiya and fled.

Zikr: “Perhaps the soldiers who took the General First-Class were part of the search party for the secret paths. As Abel-dono said, they are not amongst those who would take up a challenge without a prospect of victory. That being the case, I wonder if they were able to do it because they knew there was a way out.”

Subaru: “Isn’t it possible to find the location of the paths you eliminated on a map?”

Zikr: “—. It would be possible to make a map, but not right now. The city has fallen and the soldiers are very shaken. This chaos will not settle any time soon.”

Subaru: “… If only this were a game, it’d be that easy.”

Were this an act in a video game, once one got the commander of the defeated enemy to join their side, and the subordinate units would likewise ally themselves. However, reality was not a game. In a game, soldiers were represented by numbers, but each of them had a life of their own here.

After mulling it over for a while—

Subaru: “Holly-san, are you injured?”

Holly: “Hm? Are you worried about me~? Natsumi is so kind~.”

At Subaru’s inquiry, Holly threw her arms up while smiling broadly. She showed her large biceps to emphasize that she was alive and well.

Holly: “I’m a little banged up, but I’m not badly hurt, so I’ll be fine in no time~.”

Subaru: “I see. I’m glad to hear that… But.”

When Subaru fumbled his words and dropped his gaze, Holly put a puzzled look on her face. Noticing Subaru’s inner thoughts, Kuna scratched her head with an “Ah.”

Then—

Kuna: “Some of the guards we had standing inside the building have been killed. They were all dead, so we couldn’t do anything.”

Subaru: “…Some? Tell me how many?”

Kuna: “…Seven men.”

When asked the exact number of casualties, Kuna, even though hesitant, answered.

Seven. The number of casualties stabbed deeply into Subaru’s heart. —On the top floor, Rem had been making a great deal of continuous effort to treat the Imperial Soldiers and Shudraqians who had gotten injured in Arakiya’s attack, and they had not received any reports of deaths. They had not received those, but—

Subaru: “…How’s this a bloodless siege?”

Brushing up his long black wig, Subaru let out a heartbreaking breath.

The bloodless siege, which he had undertaken with such vigor, and which he had said he would accomplish, was supposed to succeed in bringing about the fall of Guaral without loss of life. Yet instead, it had resulted in many deaths.

His promise had been broken; even if he were accused of being a liar, he would not be able to retort. Even if no one accused Subaru of lying, Subaru would condemn himself as one despite that.

Because he was the biggest liar here—

???: “—A bloodless siege?”

Overhearing Subaru’s mutterings, a voice repeated to themselves as if reflecting on those words.

It was Priscilla, leaning on the round table, resting her cheek on her hand. In an unusual expression, she had slightly raised her well-shaped eyebrow and studied Subaru.

With that expression on her face, Priscilla prefaced her statement with a single word, “You”.

Priscilla: “I thought I heard a very foolish thing. Did you really believe that you could bring down an entire city without shedding blood? In the middle of this war, without an overwhelming military force?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, that’s right, my bad. No, it was really my fault, wasn’t it? After all, at the end of the day, it was my mistake…”

Priscilla: “It was merely a stupid idea, that is what amazed me. I am astonished that you would even attempt to put that pipedream into practice. —Abel, are you insane?”

Abel: “—. The plan itself was sheer madness to begin with.”

The question was directed at Abel, who crossed his arms and replied quietly.

Subaru’s proposed plan was pure madness. In fact, anyone that heard the outline would probably agree. And yet, Abel had gone along with it.

Priscilla, who was apparently acquainted with him, did not seem to understand it.

Priscilla: “Looking at the Empire from the throne made you that much more lax. There is no war without sacrifice. There is no pride without bloodshed. That is the way of the Empire, is it not?”

Abel: “I have no intention of disobeying the code of the Sword Wolf. I said it was madness, but the odds were in my favor. In fact, if it weren't for Arakiya's presence, the siege would have been bloodless."

Priscilla: "…"

Abel: "It was not the plan that went wrong. It was my judgment. Priscilla, I shall not allow even you to make a fool of my military strategist's offering. It was my decision. The blame lies with me."

Subaru: "Oh…"

Abel confronted Priscilla head-on with a statement that had been far too unexpected.

Abel's words and actions were clearly in defense of Subaru, even though he had been appointed to the unheard-of role of military strategist. He could not interject between the dangerous standoff of the two.

Al: "What's the matter, bro? He likes you an awful lot, looks like you're getting a big promotion."

Subaru: "…My position as Emilia-tan's knight and Beako's guardian's good enough for me. I don't want to be given any more positions I'm not familiar with."

Subaru pushed Al away from him, and also pushed away the responsibility that was pressing down on him.

However, thanks to Abel's protection, Priscilla's attention seemed to have turned in that direction. In spite of that, this did not heal the wound to Subaru's internals.

The responsibility for the lives lost should be placed on Subaru, the one who had come up with and implemented the plan.

Al: "You can't save them all, bro."

Al muttered, fiddling with the metal fittings on his helmet, as he looked at Subaru's profile. When Subaru glanced at him, he turned his gaze up towards the ceiling, and said, Al: “You can’t save all the people you get involved with. No one’s stopping you from saving them, but your heart’s gonna be broken while doing so. I don’t recommend it.”

Subaru: “Al…”

Al: “We all live and die as we please. Like you said bro, it ain’t a game. It’s up to them to take care of their own lives.”

This was the cynical attitude that Al sometimes displayed.

On one hand he was giving a sermon to Subaru, on how tragic events happened and that he should accept them as-is, although there seemed to be good advice and counsel there. On the other hand, it also felt like the admonishment of an obstinate child.

It was a sound argument, to some degree.

In fact, Al’s words were right. Saving everyone and anything was not possible, and there would be no end to it if he did decide to save them all. That was why Subaru had never been able to save every last thing till this point.

The sheer scale of war was different. —Could he really say that his choice was correct?

The number of lives that could be saved by a single action taken by Subaru did not even reach ten, much less a hundred.

Priscilla: “This is even worse than farcical, you know.”

While Subaru and Al were talking, Priscilla and Abel continued their standoff.

To Abel who took the blame, Priscilla pulled out a fan from her cleavage and pointed the tip of it at the conference hall—No, at the entire city.

Priscilla: “Even in a situation in which you managed to successfully bring down the city with the help of your military strategist, you shall not be able to repeat the miracle of driving Arakiya away a second time. Will that method ever work again?”

Abel: “Indeed, there shall not be a second time.”

Abel nodded without hesitation in response to Priscilla’s question.

With the mention of the method that had driven away Arakiya, a thought also occurred to the frowning Subaru. —There had been a moment during Al and Arakiya’s bout in which her behavior had become strange.

Subaru: “That wasn’t something that Al did…”

Al: “What? Yeah, it wasn’t me. In the first place, if it were me, I would’ve done it a little smarter. You know, I was the one who got bounced and thrown off.”

Subaru: “That’s right.”

Now that he mentioned it, it had not gone down very well, even with Al’s skills.

The conversation between the two drew the attention of the conference hall to Abel. Only he could tell what somehow happened, and so he sniffed, being annoyed with the gathering attention.

Abel: “Arakiya is the Spirit Eater. She feeds on the spirits in the air and absorbs their power.”

Subaru: “Spirit, Eater…?”

Subaru had no recollection of hearing it before, but the unsettling title made his eyes widen.

He had already guessed that the Vollachian Empire had different rules and a different environment compared to Kingdom of Lugunica, but the idea of a Spirit Eater was quite the novelty.

Subaru himself was a Spiritual Arts User who borrowed the power of spirits, but this sounded distinctly different, and to put it simply —

Subaru: “I definitely don’t want to bring Beako into this… Is being a

Spirit Eater a common thing?”

Priscilla: “No, it’s not. Spirit Eating was originally one of the secrets of the tribes that lived on the borderlands of Vollachia. But it was so powerful that the technique was banished, and the method to possess it lost.”

Abel: “At least, as far as I know, there are no known Spirit Eaters outside of Arakiya. If there had been, I would have politely protected them. That was the Observers’… No, it matters not, now.”

Not wanting the conversation to get off-topic, Abel shook his head, as he encouraged them to get back to the topic at hand with “Returning to the main topic”.

Subaru, who was relieved to hear that Spirit Eating was not a common practice, and that Beatrice was no longer in danger of being munched on, asked,

Subaru: “So how did you confuse the Spirit Eater, Arakiya?”

Abel: “I did not confound her. —I just gave her Mana poisoning.”

Al: “Mana poisoning… Haha, I see. That’s a very clever thing to do.”

Abel’s answer made sense, and Al nodded admiringly as he stroked his chin.

Subaru had heard of the term “Mana poisoning” before, and then it clicked.

Subaru: “As I recall, it was something like, people who are hypersensitive to Mana tend to get sick when they go to places where the concentration of Mana is really high.”

Priscilla: “Arakiya is susceptible to that kind of influence, due to her Spirit Eater characteristic. It is a prerequisite to have a reasonable level of resistance to spirits, in order to take them in. However, if you go beyond that principle and try to make Arakiya sick off Mana, you shall end up with…”

Abel: “Yes, she made me utilize one of my treasures. Including that which he has already used before, I hold nothing else on hand.”

Whilst saying “that”, Abel nodded towards and indicated Subaru. That made Subaru go “Treasure?”, and he tilted his head to the side whilst raising his eyebrows.

Even though Abel had stated that Subaru had used one of his treasures, he honestly had no clue at all as to what he meant.

Subaru: “What treasure are you talking about? When did I get your…?”

Abel: “During the Lifeblood Ritual, you broke the ring to cleave the Witchbeast’s horn off. That’s the one.”

Subaru: “Ah…”

He’d lost track of it, but it brought back memories of a ring he had borrowed, which allowed him to cast magic.

In the throes of battle, he had no choice but to hit the Elgina’s horn with said ring, shattering it and snapping the Witchbeast’s horn, leaving Subaru’s arm and the ring in shambles.

And something else that was mentioned in the same breath, was what Abel had made use of in the fight with Arakiya?

Abel: “As I dropped from the balcony, I shattered the ring I had hidden. It took a while for the Mana it contained to flood the area around it, but…”

Al: “So that Arakiya girl was like that because she got Mana poisoning. Oh come on, I got my ass kicked by that girl.”

Subaru: “Did you pull that little trick at that moment…?”

Even though they were all in a battered and wounded state, Subaru tipped his hat off to Abel’s unwillingness to give up. That he was still searching for a way to win even though he was being cornered by the second-strongest ranking General in the Empire was admirable.

Subaru's resilience was quite good, but his intelligence was so far removed from Abel's that he could not get over the difference between a bad move and a desperate counterattack.

In any case—

Subaru: "Isn't this an original plan prepared specifically for Arakiya? It's very bold of you to prepare such a plan when you didn't know she would be going against you."

Abel: "The more people one keeps close, the more one must prepare for the time of their betrayal… Arakiya in particular, I never knew when Arakiya would turn against me."

Priscilla: "—However, you only get one chance to use your wiles. It is not easy to procure enough Magic Stones to give a person Mana poisoning. It shall be essential to secure a decent fighting force before the next time around. But."

Having declared that much, Priscilla cut off her words meaningfully.

Covering her mouth with her fan, Priscilla narrowed her crimson eyes at Abel. With a somewhat probing, testing look in her eyes, she let out a small breath and,

Priscilla: "Adding the People of Shudraq to your ranks was expected… However, it is difficult to see how you could be foolish enough to adopt a naive military strategist's plan for a bloodless siege of the Fortress City."

Abel: "…"

Priscilla: "At this rate, I shall never be able to advise my collaborators to support you."

Subaru: "Collaborators?!"

Subaru was astonished by Priscilla, who had said it in a matter-of-fact and natural way. It was not just Subaru who was surprised, but everyone in the conference hall except Abel and Al.

Aside from Priscilla's companion, Al, it seemed unreasonable that Abel was also not surprised, but Subaru opted to not mention it.

Subaru: "Wait, wait, wait, this is going all over the place! Collaborators… In the first place, I don't understand your position. I heard that you came to help Abel, but…"

Priscilla: "I am not here to lend aid. Do not listen seriously to the ramblings of my clown."

Subaru: "I get it! I don't care if you've come to help Abel or not. That's not the point. What I want to hear, is your ultimate goal."

As they heard, the immediate subgoal was to have some dialogue with Abel.

However, what Subaru desired to know was why Priscilla—why her, Al, and possibly the other collaborators they had brought alongside them, were in the Vollachian Empire to begin with.

On top of that, it would be best if he knew whether they were willing to side with Abel or not.

Subaru: "Answer me. Honestly, I and everyone else here aren't sure what to think of you."

Priscilla: "That is hubris at its finest. I do not care what you plebeians think of me. I shall do what I wish to do. After all…"

Subaru: "—The world is made to suit you, isn't it?"

Priscilla gave a snort at Subaru's tracing of her philosophy, which was familiar to his ears.

Then, noticing the increased number and sharpness of the glances directed at her, Priscilla shut one eye.

Priscilla: "Mine aim, is to restore the Emperor to the throne he was ousted from. If I do not, I shall be receiving a constant stream of annoying visitors."

Abel: "It goes without mentioning that those assassins were not dispatched by me.”

Priscilla: “I did not even suspect it. Henceforth, I took the trouble to arrive here. Or, it would be more accurate to say that I had my wings carry me.”

With one eye closed, Priscilla answered Abel and turned her gaze upward. Without the ceiling present, what could be observed was the night sky beyond.

More to the point, it was not just the sky, but an existence that made the sky its own—

Subaru: “No way, did you and Al just fly in from the sky?”

Al: “Oh, it’s like a flying dragon express service. To be honest, I thought it’d be the end of the world when the Princess jumped off by herself. I certainly couldn’t follow, so I couldn’t get down until it lowered itself a bit.”

Subaru: “A flying dragon… The water dragons in Pristella scared the hell out of me.”

In addition to the water dragon, which was a fantasy creature aside than the ground dragon, the existence of flying dragons surfaced.

From what he had heard, flying dragons were extremely ferocious and required specialized skills to be tamed. Since there tamers capable of that were not numerous, being able to ride a flying dragon in the first place was a rare thing.

Subaru: “In other words, the person who can provide a flying dragon express delivery is a collaborator of Priscilla’s?”

Priscilla: “Do not perform lowly deeds such as picking apart people’s words. In your case, your lowliness outweighs your cleverness. Polish up your pretty face. You are still capable of looking good if you fix your makeup.”

Subaru: “If I fix my makeup now I’d definitely be a crazy person, right…?”

Now that she mentioned it, the fact that he had not been able to shed his womanly attire thus far might be regarded as a problem, but the people present here could read the atmosphere, so they did not touch the issue.

Anyway, he was getting way off track again, however—

Subaru: “If the goal is to get Abel back on the throne, does that mean we can cooperate with each other?”

Priscilla: “In truth, I cannot give you a straightforward assent. —I have not forgotten my earlier words. If he does not possess the qualities of an Emperor, there will be no point in bringing him back.”

Abel: “…”

Abel glared at Priscilla, his gaze sharpened as he was questioned about his own qualities as an Emperor to his face.

What Priscilla saw as a concern, was the Bloodless Siege proposed by Subaru and approved by Abel—not so much the failure to carry it out, but rather the problem of the idea to begin with.

As per the way of Vollachia, naïveté could be fatal. In fact, lives had been lost because Subaru’s endgame had been naive. Her disapproval was irrefutable.

However—

Abel: “I shall reclaim the throne. No matter what anyone says, that much is certain. —Priscilla, no matter what you may state, that much remains indisputable.”

With Subaru having fallen silent, Abel took his place and made a strong declaration.

It was the same, or perhaps an even more passionate declaration than the one he had made upon revealing his true identity and divulging that he would take back this country in front of Subaru.

Priscilla: “…”

Hearing Abel's resolve, the expressions on the faces of those in the conference hall shifted.

Kuna and Holly had the will to continue fighting as the People of Shudraq, while Zikr bowed his head as if he were in the presence of something divine. Al turned to Priscilla to see her reaction, while Priscilla's eyes narrowed as she continued to assert herself, undaunted.

Priscilla: "Your spirit is undiminished, but reality is not. In fact, you have been forced to abandon your throne."

Abel: "…"

Priscilla: "The circumstances are already apparent. The question is, who set it in motion? Whose plan was it?"

Abel: "—I am certain it was Prime Minister Berstetz who brought it all to fruition."

Abel answered Priscilla's question with a hint of hostility in his dark eyes.

The Prime Minister's position was at the top of the state government, as it was closely associated with the Emperor. If the pinnacle of the armed forces were a general or the head of a knightly order, then the Prime Minister may be said to be the pinnacle of civil services.

In any case, it could be said that being second-in-command made it easy to carry out betrayal.

Priscilla: "That old tree. How dare he waste what he got from Lamia?"

Abel: "Of course, I had foreseen his rebellious intentions and prepared accordingly. But…"

Abel broke off there and exhaled quietly.

It was a reaction that was very much unlike him, the first time he had displayed anything close to fragility. As Emperor, he had never wavered, even when forced to leave his position, but this was the first time he had shown a faint weakness.

The cause of this weakness was not the Prime Minister's betrayal—

Abel: "With Chisha Gold watching over me… I was unable to see through the rebellious intentions of the Nine Divine Generals' Fourth Rank."

Zikr: "—Ridiculous, General First-Class Chisha?!"

As Abel spat out his ashamed thoughts, Zikr was incapable of containing himself and raised his voice.

Zikr, as a General Second-Class of the Empire, must have been familiar with the name of this particular member of the Nine Divine Generals, a name that Subaru was not.

Attracting the gaze of those at the roundtable, Zikr stroked his ample hair and spoke—

Zikr: "General First-Class Chisha is unique among the Nine Divine Generals, in terms of his capability. The General First-Class himself is more famous for his wisdom than his military prowess, and he was the one who supported His Excellency Vincent the most during the Imperial Selection Ceremony…"

Subaru: "Does that mean he was his right-hand man? You mean this guy was betrayed not only by his political right-hand man, the Prime Minister, but his long-time right-hand man, the General, too?"

Abel: "Do not utter those words again. My right arm is still attached to my right shoulder."

Subaru: "When you say that now, it just sounds like you're just trying to be tough…"

Listening to Zikr's explanation, Subaru was surprised by Abel's popularity, which was unexpectedly lacking.

However, keeping the Vollachian Empire's radical ideology in mind, an Emperor who was deemed insufficiently powerful would immediately be rebelled against, so perhaps these situations were not all that rare.

Subaru: “Is it common for Emperors to run for cover in this country?”

Abel: “Since I have been on the throne, there have only been two times in which I was pursued, at least formally.”

Subaru: “But you’ve got a record!”

Abel: “Nonsense. It was the Kingdom’s Royal Guard who dragged me around in that previous venture. If you want to complain, you can take it up with them.”

He gave Subaru a seriously disappointed look, he took the hint and held his tongue.

He thought that Julius had once mentioned that he had gone to the Empire as an emissary, but he had not thought it had anything to do with that. If so, the world was too small.

Al: “Ah, so His Excellency the Emperor was chased from the throne by his confidants and aides, and Lil’ Miss Arakiya’s become an enemy as well… Doesn’t that sound dangerous? Don’t you have an ally or something?”

Abel: “Another one of the Nine Divine Generals, Goz Ralfon… He was instrumental in my escape. Were it not for him stalling for time, I would not have been able to activate the transfer mechanism.”

Zikr: “Oh, as expected of General First-Class Goz…!”

Abel: “However, if the Nine Divine Generals, other than Chisha and Arakiya, have too turned against me, I do not know how Goz alone could have survived. It is far more likely that he was killed.”

The existence of any Divine General who had risked their lives to protect Abel was a hope, albeit a very fleeting one. However, Zikr with a “No” shook his head, Zikr: “If I may be so bold, I have not received any news of the death of General First-Class Goz. Whether he perished in battle or from illness, the death of a man of General First-Class Goz’s status cannot be hidden for long.”

Abel: “Then there remains the possibility that he is being held captive.”

Zikr: “Perhaps. No, surely! For a warrior of the calibre of General First-Class Goz, that is likely the case!”

At Abel’s words, Zikr bowed reverently.

If he had earned this kind of respect from Zikr, then this Goz must be a very reliable man. Or maybe a woman, contrary to the stern name.

Priscilla: “—With the Prime Minister and the Nine Divine Generals as foes, the Empire is very much a place of certain death.”

Priscilla, who had finished listening to the conversation before interjecting uselessly, muttered that. In agreement with her words, Subaru raised his hand, and,

Subaru: “Hey. I know it’s a tad late, but what if Abel comes forward as the Emperor? That way, the people who’re quietly running the government in the Imperial Capital can be branded as rebels and traitors…”

Al: “Unfortunately, it’s impossible to expect an angry populace and soldiers to kill the administration’s coup-d’état before the battle even starts, bro.”

Subaru: “I wasn’t thinking something that crazy, but why not?”

Abel: “—Because this is the Vollachian Empire, where the powerful are respected.”

Subaru’s suggestion was rejected, and Al’s words were supplemented by Abel’s.

The Emperor, removed from his throne, folded his arms, his shapely eyebrows slightly furrowed.

Abel: “If I come forward and announce my intention to reclaim the Imperial Capital myself, I would be welcomed. But that does signify that they shall support me. What was taken from you, you must take back yourself. That is how it is.”

Subaru: “Not only goods and lands, but also the Emperor’s throne…”

Abel: “There are no exceptions… Therefore, I know what must be done.”

Subaru, who was attempting to wrap his head around the situation, was surprised by Abel’s words.

Just when he thought he was at a loss, Abel’s answer was rather the opposite. He stood up and slowly put his hands on the roundtable.

And—

Abel: “General Second-Class Zikr, the map.”

Zikr: “Yes! Right away!”

When told to do so, Zikr sent instructions to the Imperial Soldiers waiting in the corner of the room.

They immediately peeled off the map hanging on the wall of the conference hall, and moved to spread it out atop the roundtable.

It was a world map showing, well, the entire world, including Vollachia.

Abel: “Here we are, in the east, at the Fortress City of Guaral. And the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, which must be reclaimed, is roughly in the center of the Empire.”

Subaru: “…Vollachia’s pretty big.”

The map showed Subaru the size of the country, which he had not been aware of till now. The Vollachian Empire, which occupied the southern portion of the world map, was the largest when compared to the other countries.

The Buddheim Jungle, which had posed so much trouble for Subaru and the others to get through, was merely a small geographic area from the perspective of the whole of Vollachia.

Abel: “Each city in the Empire is controlled by its own Mayor or Lord. As is the case with Guaral, each of these cities possesses its own autonomous military force and shall not hesitate to fight in case of an emergency. —We shall add these to our forces and secure the strength required to retake the Imperial Capital.”

Subaru: “…I get this is a pattern of kingship in a conquering simulation.”

Abel: “You seem to be displeased.”

Subaru: “Of course. It was an enormous undertaking just for Guaral. I don’t think it’s going to keep working out this way.”

Pointing to the map, Subaru had managed to keep up with Abel as he explained. He could manage to keep up with him, but this was a matter of logic, not emotion.

As stated earlier, this was not a game. There was no way that a method that held water when it came to simulation RPGs and things of the sort would be easily applied in actual reality.

Abel’s opinion seemed to be quite optimistic.

Nevertheless—

Abel: “There is a way to dispel your concerns. Rather, there are essential conditions that must be met in order to do what I must.”

Subaru: “Essential conditions…”

Abel: “—By securing Divine Generals.”

Upon hearing that reply, Subaru’s eyes went wide.

That was natural. After all, Abel had just told them that he had been expelled from throne because of the Nine Divine Generals' treachery.

Those of the Nine Divine Generals that favored him were unaccounted for, and the two members of the Nine Divine Generals they were aware of, were already enemies.

As for the others—

Subaru: "What about the other Divine Generals…?"

Abel: "There."

Abel pointed a finger at the sudden question and nodded at Subaru's agitation. Then, he surveyed the faces of everyone except Subaru,

Abel: "The people of the Empire must be strong. The Nine Divine Generals are the incarnation of this rule. In other words, if one wishes to be the supreme ruler of the Vollachian Empire, you must unite the Nine Divine Generals."

Subaru: "So, in other words…"

After Abel's words, Subaru's eyes widened as he realized what was to follow. Abel's cheeks twisted at Subaru's reaction, as he smiled belligerently.

And then—

Abel: "—The Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt. The Spirit Eater, Arakiya. The Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkenn. The White Spider, Chisha Gold. The Lion Knight, Goz Ralfon. The Master of Enchanted Items, Groovy Gumlet. The Flamboyant, Yorna Mishigure. The Steelman, Moguro Hagane. The Flying Dragon General, Madelyn Eschart."

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "The winner of this battle shall be the one who recruits the most Divine Generals. That is the path toward triumph, and that is the absolute condition I must fulfill.”

Chapter 29:
To Each Their Stance

1

—Securing the Nine Divine Generals; that was the victory condition for reclaiming the Imperial throne.

With the condition for victory presented, along with the names and titles of those necessary, the Nine Divine Generals, Subaru could tell from experience that the air in the room had become tense.

Of course, the names of the Nine Divine Generals, which would be familiar to people in the Empire, were all novel to Subaru.

Subaru: "…If this were a manga or an anime, it would have been an exciting development to see all the names of the Generals revealed at once."

However, as this was something that was actually happening to him, the development was one he could not be openly pleased about.

As Abel mentioned the name and corresponding title of each of the Nine Divine Generals, Subaru could imagine how troublesome each one of them would be, with each of them sounding effective in how they were talked up.

As Arakiya's nickname, Spirit Eater, corresponded with a special trait of hers, Subaru could imagine that the others' aliases were somewhat related to their abilities or fighting methods.

Subaru: "The only ones whose names give me a clear image of their abilities would be the Master of Enchanted Items and the Flying Dragon General?"

The two names he pointed out were probably both derived from the way they fought and the tools they used.

The other nicknames were probably inspired by their appearance or anecdotes of their exploits. In China's Romance of the Three Kingdoms and the Water Margin both, characters would often take on aliases for such reasons.

Come to think of it, one could say that those stories were also about taking a country. Unfortunately, Subaru was not very familiar with them, having only a cursory knowledge of their contents.

Subaru: "This is no time to be spacing out. Well, I've heard that securing the Nine Divine Generals is the condition for victory, but there are some things I want to ask you."

Abel: "What. Is there any room for doubt?"

Abel raised one eyebrow and placed his hand on top of the map on the table as Subaru recovered from his initial shock.

If he thought that he had explained everything with that, he would be the ultimate example of a clever man short of words. Compared to the other people here—Zikr and the others, not to mention the People of Shudraq, Subaru had far less information about the Vollachian Empire.

Subaru: "So there's clearly room for me to doubt. If you keep skipping explanations because you yourself know what you're talking about, the people around you won't know what you're thinking about exactly."

Abel: "I shall take that as advice and ignore it. State your question."

Subaru: "Keep that "ignoring" bit to yourself…"

Subaru sighed as Abel crossed his arms and responded arrogantly. Then, having resigned himself to the attention gathering around him, he said, "Ready?", as he held up four fingers on one hand and five fingers on the other.

Subaru: "There are Nine Divine Generals, but thankfully that's an odd number, so it's easy to understand that it comes down to a battle of numbers. But the ones who favor us are unaccounted for, and, right now, Arakiya and this Chisha guy are most definitely enemies. We're already way outnumbered."

They supposedly needed to secure no less than five, but their enemy already held two of the Nine Divine Generals under them.

In addition, it was unclear whether the person who had aided Abel, Goz, was alive or dead. So there was a high chance that one of the cards they could play had been permanently removed from play.

Subaru: "The situation becomes bleaker by the minute. It's good that the victory conditions clear, but is it actually realistic to persuade five of the Nine Divine Generals?"

Al: "Hey hey, bro, I think you're still underestimating the Emperor too much. I said it earlier, but he's already won the Imperial Selection Ceremony. They can't just flat out refuse his request to talk. As long as they don't turn him away at the front door…"

Priscilla: "—Then we shall get the opportunity to behead those who oppose us at the same time."

Subaru: "We need to get them on our side!"

Al's remarks, posing as an attempt to dissolve Subaru's doubts, were incinerated by the extreme comment of his mistress, of all people. They were talking about how to get the Nine Divine Generals on their side, but devising a way to kill the Nine Divine Generals who would not be on their side would be putting carriage before the ground dragon.

Abel: "But the clown in the iron helmet there is correct. In fact, if I state I want to meet them, there would be no General who would refuse. The problem is what happens after we meet."

Al: "Is the clown in the iron helmet me?"

Subaru: "There's no one else with an iron helmet. If you have a problem with him treating you like a clown, you can start with a petition to Priscilla."

After silencing Al's teasing, Subaru returned to the topic at hand.

Subaru: “In the first place, I don’t understand the system of the Nine Divine Generals. I’ve always imagined them as nine Generals who report directly to the Emperor, but doesn’t that mean they’re all in the Imperial Capital?”

Priscilla: “Generals of the First-Class are the cornerstone of this nation. Consider how uselessly vast the Empire is. Even though the Imperial Capital lies in the center of the country, how can they move quickly in an emergency if they all sojourn in the Imperial Capital?”

Zikr: “Yes. Although it has been dramatically reduced during His Excellency’s reign, there is still no end to the fires of civil unrest that smolder in the Empire. Having a firm foothold in the Imperial Capital is not enough to guarantee the safeguarding of the Empire.”

Subaru: “…In other words, the Nine Divine Generals in question are scattered all over, outside the Imperial Capital?”

As Priscilla and Zikr supplemented information, Subaru put his hand on his chin in understanding.

Following a familiar example, Roswaal had also been bestowed with the grandiose title of Margrave of the Western Lands in the Kingdom of Lugunica, and was obligated to act quickly in the Kingdom’s time of need.

Of course, he had the permission to set up a private army in his territory for that purpose. —However, in Roswaal’s case, it seemed that his individual strength was greater than that a poorly-organized army.

Just by raining down fireballs while flying in the sky, he would be able to completely defeat most opponents.

Subaru: “When you think about it, that guy is also quite the cheat unit… I’m a little curious to see where he stands compared to the Nine Divine Generals.”

Kuna: “I don’t know, but I think we’re getting off track here, Natsumi.”

Subaru: “My bad. Anyway, I know now that the Nine Divine Generals are scattered across the country. If that’s the case, am I correct in understanding that not all of them were involved in the coup d’état in the Imperial Capital?”

Abel: “From what I have seen, and from a practical standpoint, I would say so.”

Abel nodded his head to Subaru in confirmation.

To be honest, Subaru was unsure about Abel’s assessment, as he had just been found to be quite unpopular, but the fact that no one around him had pointed it out suggested that it was something that could be accepted for the time being.

Anyway, the good news was, that not all the Nine Divine Generals had become enemies.

The victory condition that the more Nine Divine Generals they secured, the more likely they were to win this battle, made sense. Other than that, if there was one thing that Subaru had doubts about, it was—

Subaru: “Sorry for asking so many questions, but I got an additional question. If the Nine Divine Generals are simply ordered by strength, then priority should be given to the ones of the highest rank, correct?”

Abel: “Yes, that perception is correct.”

Subaru: “Then the one strong enough to be on par with Reinhardt, is Cecilus, right? It’s common sense that we go for that person… wouldn’t he be enough?”

One among the four strongest human beings, those who had made a name for themselves in the Four Great Countries.

If Cecilus, who had been mentioned to be amongst these four, was a person considered to be on par with Reinhardt, then it would be very much as if the outcome of the battle would be decided by that person alone.

In fact, that Reinhardt could win even if he fought everyone in the Kingdom, was an extraordinary expectation and view that had sprouted in Subaru.

So, naturally, he held such sort of presupposition for Cecilus, who was Reinhardt's equal.

However—

Abel: "…It is true that if we secure that person, all the problems of our strength shall be solved in one move."

Subaru: "If that's the case, why do you look so bitter?"

Frowning, Abel's expression was poor as he answered Subaru's question.

While Subaru's expectations did not appear seem to be far off, there was no improvement on his gloomy expression. Abel revealed the reason for this with a small exhale.

Abel: "The reason why securing the Nine Divine Generals is a condition for victory, is because Generals and Soldiers alike shall follow their military orders. The more Nine Divine Generals one possesses under their banner, the more troops shall join your forces. Do you understand?"

Subaru: "—? Yes, I understand. That's why I'm saying we should aim to have the strongest guy on our side. Or is it that him being called the Empire's strongest is not true?"

Abel: "No, there is no question that he is the strongest in the Empire. However, there is a problem."

Subaru: "A problem?"

Abel: "—He is not very popular."

Subaru stopped thinking for a while, due to the words that had been uttered in pent-up frustration.

The words he was told slowly penetrated his brain, as he wondered what the problem was. “Lack of popularity”, that information was digested correctly.

Subaru: “Should you be saying that?”

Abel: “It is factual. His rank is that of the First, amongst the Generals of the First-Class of the Empire, but he holds no authority. Even if I were to give him the power, he would be incapable of doing anything with it. The only thing he can do, is to cut people down.”

Subaru: “You can’t put someone like that in the position of army general!”

Al: “Easy, easy, calm down, bro! That’s just the way of the Empire, you know!”

With that criticism of Cecilus being spoken by Abel, Subaru was held back by Al. With his one arm around Subaru, Al tilted his head to look at Abel, and said,

Al: “Actually, you’ve given him nothing but the title of First. Maybe you should’ve tried giving him the authority he deserves for his position. Maybe he’s been taken advantage of by someone who was sweet-talking him, you know?”

Abel: “Of course, that person being utilised by anyone other than me is not within my wishes. If there were such a danger, I would have disposed of him earlier.”

Subaru: “But you were in the forest, alone and helpless…!”

Even if he said that he was holding the reins, if the actual circumstances differed, then he was just bragging.

In the first place, could the idea that the person labelled as the strongest in the Empire was unable to gather popularity in the Vollachian Empire, dedicated to this strength as it was, be taken seriously?

Subaru: “What about that part, Zikr-san!”

Zikr: “Me, huh?”

Subaru: “Eh, yeah. As a General of the Empire, I’d like to hear your honest opinion. What do you think of General First-Class Cecilus?”

Being probed for information, Zikr spoken “Right then,” and crossed his arms briefly in thought.

Then, nodding several times at the expectant gaze in Subaru’s eyes.

Zikr: “First of all, there is no doubt that Cecilus-dono is the cornerstone of our national defense and the symbol of the strength of the Vollachian Empire. “The people of the empire must be strong”, he is the embodiment of that way of life.”

Subaru: “Oh, that sounds good? So, what is it, then?”

Zikr: “As a person he is carefree, friendly, and has a sunny and pleasant demeanor towards anyone. Overall…”

Subaru: “Overall…?”

Zikr: “Many of the troops fear Cecilus-dono to be an incomprehensible monster and impossible to communicate with on a deeper level. I believe His Excellency is correct in his assessment.”

Subaru: “Your assessment has taken a sharp turn, hasn’t it?!”

Zikr, who had only painted the picture of a good person up to this point, chose his words quite carefully in his evaluation.

Some people would think that he was just trying to be considerate of Abel, the Emperor, but the wrinkles between his eyebrows showed that he was putting in a lot of effort, so he probably told the truth.

In other words—

Priscilla: “It would be unacceptably reckless to even attempt to suppress the First of the Nine Divine Generals with the intent to tip the scales in a single swoop. I cannot comprehend how you would come up with a suitable idea, even if your head was not filled with foolish ruminations."

Subaru: "Shut up! Don't blame me for his lack of popularity! If the Emperor and the Generals aren't popular, it's no wonder a coup d'etat was called!"

Abel: "How many times are you going to repeat this? Do not think that your disrespect shall be overlooked forever."

Receiving sharp glares from Priscilla and Abel respectively, Subaru stuck out his tongue at them.

However, it was true that his plan had been shattered with ease. If securing the Nine Divine Generals was equivalent to securing battle numbers, then securing those who were not popular possessed no merit whatsoever.

Subaru: "In fact, if they're not popular can we leave them alone…?"

Abel: "That is also a problem. That person has the ability to change the course of the war all by his lonesome, depending on the situation. Even if we are capable of securing all of the remaining Divine Generals, there is a good chance that he alone could take my head."

Subaru: "That's a hard guy to handle! He's an absurd hindrance, isn't he?!"

Rushing to secure him was not warranted, but he was too dangerous of a bomb to leave unattended.

It was only now, in a foreign land far away from home, that Subaru realized how much of a good asset Reinhardt was, whose ability and humanity were guaranteed.

Perhaps if he were called out loud enough, he would rush to the neighboring country?

Priscilla: "Let me tell you something, foolish commoner. If you are contemplating summoning the Sword Saint, he cannot cross borders because of the non-aggression-pact. It would be wise not to get your hopes up."

Subaru: “Don’t read people’s minds. I’m not considering it for real… Relying on them only when I’m in trouble isn’t the proper way to treat a friend.”

If used for convenience, just because he could call upon him and have him rush to his side, it would not really be something he could call a friendship.

If the situation were to become really, really bad, he would not be able to say the same. However, till that moment arrived, Subaru was resolved to keep his morals intact.

Priscilla: “So? Foolish commoner being treated as Abel’s military strategist, have you run out of inquiries?”

Subaru: “I haven’t run out of questions yet, and first of all I’m not a military strategist…”

Subaru replied, frowning as Priscilla took a dig at his position.

Then, just as he was about to move on to the next topic of the meeting—

???: “—Miss Natsumi and Village Chief-kun! Excuse me!”

At the same time a cheerful voice resounded, the door was opened, and a new person appeared in the conference hall with vigor.

The one who had arrived was Flop, a beautiful man clad in blue, his long golden hair swaying briskly.

Flop was supposed to be tending to the injured on the upper floor where the damage of Arakiya’s rampage remained. While becoming the focus of all eyes in the room, he looked at Subaru and Abel, and nodded, saying “There you are”.

Flop’s figure was stained all over with blood, accentuating the horror of the makeshift field hospital.

But the fact that he showed up here meant that—

Subaru: “Flop-san, how’s everyone’s treatment?”

Flop: “We just wrapped things up for now! …Hmm? From the looks of it, you’re in the mood for Husband-kun instead of Miss Natsumi? If so, I’ll revert to calling you Husband-kun.”

Subaru: “Well, either is fine. But, yeah, things are getting wrapped up…”

While receiving Flop’s rather oblique words of consideration, Subaru reflected with simultaneous relief and anxiety, upon hearing that the healing process had come to a close.

The relief was simply because of the fact that the aid of the injured had finished. The anxiety was more for the fact that he would hear of the results from the healing mission.

The goal of the “bloodless siege” had already failed.

Seven guards had fallen victim in Arakiya’s extraction. The only question now, was whether any of the wounded would join them.

Flop: “There have been no deaths, Husband-kun.”

Subaru: “Eh…”

Flop: “It was a tough situation for all of us, though. But I think it was thanks to the efforts of Wife-san and Niece-chan. The promptness of Miss Taritta and Miss Utakata as well. Of course, my sister and I had to work hard, too!”

Having read his inner feelings from Subaru’s complexion, Flop gave him the answer first.

Flop boasted about his contributions while pointing at himself, looking rather manly. The answer he had given was concise, so Subaru needed only the time of a heartbeat to digest the information.

However, after his understanding deepened a heartbeat later, a great big sigh escaped him.

Subaru: “No deaths… Hk.”

Flop: “Yeah, it’s a sign that everyone did their best to stay alive. As for me, if it weren’t for my sister protecting me, I would’ve hit my head and died! Hahaha, I’m no match for my sister!”

Subaru: “Yeah, yeah, that’s true. I’m no match for Medium-san either…”

Flop laughed vivaciously while in front of him, whereas Subaru cast his eyes downward and shook his shoulders.

Without exaggeration, without jesting, he was completely of the same opinion. If Medium—or anyone else for that matter, were not present there, this report would never have been heard.

There were lives that had been lost. But there were also lives that had not been lost.

The emotions that brought to his heart were great—

Abel: “—Merchant, what happened to that practitioner of the healing arts?”

Despite Subaru’s excitement, Abel forced himself into the conversation with an indifferent tone..

“Practitioner of the healing arts”, Subaru raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar sound, and Flop put his finger to his lips. “Practitioner…”, he murmured as he gave it some consideration.

Flop: “Is that… You’re talking about Husband-kun’s Wife-san?”

Abel: “Who else is there? Did you believe there was anyone else in that place who could cast healing magic besides that girl?”

Flop: “No, I can’t think of anyone else! Just…”

Abel: “Just?”

Flop: “I think you should try to say things in a way that makes people like you better, Village Chief-kun. Even when you call out to them, things’ll go much more smoothly if you’re conscious of being friendly!”

Abel raised one eyebrow in response to the incredibly direct cheerful protest in front of him.

The statement that Flop had made was a dignified one, but it was quite a harrowing statement to listen to from the bylines in frankness.

Naturally, to have Rem referred to in a way that reduced her to just her capabilities did not sit well with Subaru.

Al: “That impression does not sound very convincing after those disrespectful words from just now, bro.”

Subaru: “Considering how far we’ve come, I got the right to say that much… Flop-san does too, then, right?”

Al: “Dunno, but I’m dying to hear about your adventures bro.”

It was too turbulent a story to tell, but that was a topic to be delved into some other time.

Regardless of how Abel had put it, Rem’s safety was Subaru’s top priority. Of course, he had confirmed with his own eyes that she held no noticeable trauma.

Subaru: “Did she do anything like work too hard and collapse?”

Flop: “Don’t worry about that, Husband-kun. Of course, all that hard work’s taken its toll on her, but it’s nothing that can’t be remedied with some rest. It’s really wonderful that you have the hardworking Wife-san by your side.”

Subaru: “I see…Well, that’s good.”

Stroking his chest in relief, Subaru was glad to hear Flop’s guarantee.

The situation was what it was. Even though he had to rely on Rem, he was frankly afraid that she would try too hard. What Subaru said mattered not; were it within her capabilities, Rem would not listen to him.

Al: "—Wife-san?"

Al muttered quietly beside Subaru, who had patted his chest in relief.

He put a hand to the chin of his steel helmet, and cocked his head, puzzled,

Al: "I don't think I saw her up above, but did the girl from bro's group come here too?"

Subaru: "The girl from my group… you mean Emilia-tan? No, she didn't come here. How reassuring it would be to have her here… on the other hand, I don't think I would want her to be here."

Emilia's gentle nature and the Vollachian Empire's way of being were probably like water and oil.

Although there was also a chance that Emilia, who tended to be someone who acted before thinking, would find the Imperial approach more comfortable, the cruelty of the Empire itself went much further than that. —Emilia was not suited for the Empire.

Al: "—A wife other than your girl, huh?"

Subaru: "…Just to tell you, we're passing it off as a matter of convenience. To tell you the truth, she's a girl I've decided to treat with that much care. I'll bring her home, no matter what."

Al: "…"

Subaru explained to Al, who mumbled in a low tone with his hand on his chin.

As long as they were also in the Empire, it was impossible for strange rumors to spread from Al's mouth, but he did not want Al to get the wrong idea. He did not want his resolve to get rained on.

Priscilla: "That delicate-looking man, the one they call merchant… Are you one of Abel's subordinates?"

Flop: "No, I'm not his subordinate. My sister and I are in a position of cooperating with Husband-kun and Village Chief-kun. Well, I guess it's appropriate to call him my newest friend!"

Priscilla: "Oh, a friend, huh?"

Priscilla, exchanging words with Flop, loosened her lips at his answer. Hiding her loosened lips with her fan, Priscilla sent a meaningful look in Abel's direction.

Priscilla: "I did not know you were hard at work making friends. It seems the throne of the Emperor of Vollachia has become such that it can easily be vacated."

Abel: "Cease the sarcasm. I do not recall being friends with that man."

Flop: "What are you talking about, Village Chief-kun? We've gone through the verge of death together in women's clothing!"

Abel: "If you give death the slip alongside someone, you become friends immediately? If that is the case, then every single Imperial Soldier is my friend. And the one who has been on the verge of death closest to me, is my enemy."

The perfect rebuttal making use of his own position made Flop hold his tongue upon receiving it.

However, it was a double-edged sword that did not leave Abel unscathed either.

Subaru: "Anyway, Flop-san brought us some good news. I'd like to talk about some more good news as well…"

Abel: "—Wait."

Subaru: "…What is it?"

It was an optimistic subject in a not-so-positive meeting. Interrupting Subaru's attempt to spur him on, Abel cocked his chin at Flop.

Subaru's gaze was guided by that movement, and he also looked over at Flop.

Subaru: “Flop-san?”

Indeed, the reason why Abel pointed at him was because he had noticed the change in Flop’s facial expression.

Flop had not lost his bright, cheerful expression, yet in his eyes, which had always carried a cheerfulness as dazzling as the sun, there was a faint hint of hesitation and melancholy.

Abel: “If you are a merchant, you should be careful about how you talk about things. In that respect, I do not believe you are cut out to be a merchant.”

Flop: “I’ve received quite a few of those opinions, so I have some thoughts on that matter, but I’ll leave it at that for now… Husband-kun, there was something I forgot to mention earlier.”

Subaru: “…”

Giving a sidelong glance towards Abel and his remark, Flop fluttered his eyelashes in melancholy, then directing his eyes at Subaru.

His well-groomed face, and the wistfulness in it, made Subaru’s heart tighten. He could not help but think that he did not want to hear what Flop had to say, but he had no choice but to listen.

In that sense, Flop had a natural talent for making others listen to what he had to say. Were it not for this situation, Subaru would have praised him for his talent as a merchant.

Despite that, however—

Flop: “It’s not unrelated to Village Chief-kun, either. I want Miss Kuna and Miss Holly to come with us as well.”

Now that he was unable to stop Flop from telling him, he hated it, as if it were a cursed talent.

???: “…Abel and Natsumi have come too, huh.”

After being called by Flop, Subaru and the others left the conference hall and went to the upper floor of the City Hall.

In the space that looked like a field hospital, where the wounded had been gathered, the one who greeted Subaru and the others was Mizelda, who had cut off her scorched black hair.

The party that had stormed Guaral had been caught unprepared by Arakiya’s surprise attack, yet Mizelda had been the one to receive the most grievous injuries, having been overwhelmed by the flames in the first instance, and then by the blows exchanged with Arakiya at the end.

After having had her whole body scorched and then swallowed by the tornado, Arakiya’s blow clawed deep into her insides afterwards.

No matter how tough her body was, it was unmistakably a situation that tested Mizelda’s vitality, as if to see how far she could go with Rem’s healing arts, which could not be said to be at their best.

Mizelda: “I’m sorry to call you here. I just thought I needed to tell you as soon as possible.”

Subaru: “Mizelda-san…”

Mizelda smiled thinly as she said this, having taken a seat on an object near the wall.

As one of the most powerful amazonesses, Mizelda’s smile was devoid of the wild demeanor that she had displayed towards Subaru and the others on numerous occasions.

However, the willpower in her eyes was yet to be lost. It was unbalanced.

Mizelda: “First of all, thank you. Thanks to Rem, I’m alive. It’s a miracle.”

Subaru: “…”

Mizelda: “You took the city as well. As Shudraq’s Chieftain, I’m impressed with your work. In addition, I must make a declaration for the future of this war.”

Praising Rem’s dedication and Subaru’s contribution, Mizelda straightened her posture.

And then—

Mizelda: “The position of Chieftain of the Shudraq will be given to my sister, Taritta. I can’t fulfill my duties anymore.”

She patted her right leg, which was missing from the knee down, and announced that her sister would take over the role.

Chapter 30:
Self-Proclaimed Hero Natsuki Subaru

1

Mizelda’s expression was resolute as she declared that she would give up her position as Chieftain.

The dominance of her wild, strong-eyed beauty had not diminished, and she was still exactly the same as when they had first seen her. Through thick and thin, the impression of her being a strong woman remained the same.

And with that notion still present, having lost her right leg, Mizelda had decided to step down from her position as Chieftain.

Everyone: “…”

The ones surrounding Mizelda, were the ones who harbored a deep sense of regret.

The People of Shudraq, those who had witnessed Mizelda’s, their Chieftain’s, strength from up close, would not be able to discard their bitterness and sense of loss that easily.

Kuna’s lack of expression was intensified by her usual coldness, next to Holly, whose usual relaxed state was replaced with a somber expression. A teary-eyed Utakata bit her lip and cast her head down, while all the remaining Shudraqians too, displayed gloomy expressions on their faces.

However, the one most shaken up amidst them all—

Taritta: “Oh, sister, it’s impossible. There’s no way someone like me could be a good Chieftain…”

Mizelda: “—Taritta.”

Taritta: “It’s because it’s you, sister, that you were able to do it! I don’t have the ability to do something like that…”

Shaking her head in disagreement, Taritta frantically pleaded.

That she, Mizelda's younger sister, who had personally been nominated to be the next Chieftain, respected and practically worshipped her elder sister was easy to imagine, based off of every single one her daily words and actions.

For that reason precisely, Taritta was in denial, unable to accept the fact that Mizelda had lost her leg. She appeared even more upset than Mizelda herself was.

Rem: "…It's because of my inadequacy."

Taritta's grief-stricken plea was met by a weak, self-condemning voice.

It came from the other end of the room littered with injured bodies, from Rem, who was in a state of exhaustion, making use of her cane to stand.

She was the sole existence at this place able to use healing magic. Making herself useful, Rem bustled left and right, going from person-to-person endeavoring to save many of the injured. One could only guess from her blood-stained clothes, disheveled hair, and fatigued expression how draining it had been.

Nevertheless, the person in question did not care, and even the appreciative words of Subaru at the beginning had been met with a simple "I'm fine" of dismissal.

Even so, no one had the right to condemn Rem for her lack of strength.

Without her, they would not have been able to attain a result devoid of fatalities from Arakiya's attack. Everyone understood that much.

Therefore—

Mizelda: "Rem, there's no need for you to be worried. I was lucky to get out of the battle with the Imperial General having only lost one of my legs… No, it's because I had your help."

Rem: “Mizelda-san… that may be true, but—”

Mizelda: “I’m grateful to you. I have nothing more to say.”

Rem was blocked from speaking any further, as Mizelda repeated her gratitude.

Louis, her long blonde hair in disarray, snuggled up beside the silent Rem. As the former gently picked at the hem of the latter’s dress, Rem quietly lowered her gaze, placing her hand on Louis’s shoulder.

The remorse and helplessness that Rem was feeling was painfully obvious to Subaru. But the dark-haired handsome man stepped forward faster than Subaru could say anything.

Abel: “Mizelda, you have no intention to change your mind, do you?”

Abel’s question as he stepped forward was met with a nod from Mizelda, who sat on an object.

As she felt the surface of her amputated, bandaged leg with her fingers, she said,

Mizelda: “Ah, I have no intention to. The pact between the Shudraq and Emperor of Vollachia will be kept. From here on out though, you should ask Taritta… or rather, the Chieftain.”

Abel: “—. I understand. Mizelda, you have done a great service.”

Mizelda: “Mh.”

Mizelda had hardened her resolve to resign and Abel showed his understanding to her answer while folding his arms. With that, Mizelda let out a small breath and showed a wide grin.

With a faint smile, she glanced upward at Abel.

Mizelda: “If it’s going to be that way, show me your smile. It’s the duty of a good-looking man.”

Abel: “—. Hmm.”

Mizelda: “Good enough.”

Despite losing her leg only recently, Mizelda was still much too fierce.

Even Abel, arrogant as he was, did not criticize her for her disrespect, and even smiled at her attitude.

Above all, this was proof that the Emperor, whose throne had been usurped, displayed his respect towards the female warrior who lived in the jungle.

And then—

Mizelda: “—Listen up, my brethren!”

Mizelda’s smiling face hardened, as she raised her head to speak in a loud voice.

Hearing the fierce sound of her voice, the Shudraq all straightened their posture as to listen carefully.

Mizelda: “As I told you earlier, I am fulfilling my duty as Chieftain! I now hand over the role of Chieftain to my sister, Taritta! Everyone, obey Taritta from now on!”

Shudraqians: "…"

Mizelda: "This is my last command as Chieftain. —Thank you for your ancestral vows and ancestral pride."

Shudraqians: "—Thank you!"

Mizelda concluded, and the Shudraqians seemed to be reciting something.

He knew not of their customs or longstanding practices. But even Subaru, an outsider and a layman, could sense that it was a ritual of succession.

It was short, informal, and a combination of practical and conceptual inheritance.

In this place, the position of Chieftain of the People of Shudraq had been inherited, going from Mizelda to Taritta.

Taritta: "Sister…"

Mizelda: "Don't lower your head, Chieftain. Your hesitation is our hesitation. Your faltering is our faltering. Your death leads to our death."

Taritta: "…"

Approaching her, Mizelda encouraged the new Chieftain, Taritta, the latter's expression was murky.

That would not make Taritta feel any better at once. However, Taritta must have realized that clinging onto her would not change the situation.

After a few moments of silence, Taritta nodded timidly, and silently.

Mizelda: "…"

The complex emotions that flitted in Mizelda's eyes as she saw this, were something that went unnoticed by Taritta as she lowered her head. —And it was something that no one but her would mention.

2

Subaru: “…To be honest, that was unexpected.”

With the Chieftain’s succession spiel and the damage report concluded, Subaru called out to Abel.

Abel furrowed his brow at being stopped without receiving a concrete subject. Showing displeasure, he then inquired about Subaru’s true intention with a “What was?”,

Abel: “I have much to ponder. You, of all people, should not be bothering me.”

Subaru: “You sure are harsh like always… It’s just that I was surprised. You accepted Mizelda-san leaving the frontlines so readily.”

Abel: “…”

Subaru: “I thought you’d say that all she lost was one leg for sure. I thought you were going to tell her to work herself to death for you.”

Even though he thought it far too extreme, Subaru declared his honest feelings to Abel.

This was the Emperor who had appended the People of Shudraq to his troops for the sake of reclaiming the throne, and someone who had considered polluting the Fortress City of Guaral with poison, if worst came to worst.

Abel—no, Vincent Vollachia, was very much willing to do such things.

Abel: “Nonsense. What in the world would be the meaning of being so forceful?”

However, Abel’s response to Subaru, who had been prepared to hurl words of abuse and his true opinion, was calm and sober.

In front of the disappointed Subaru, Abel looked at the Shudraqians conversing in the distance.

Abel: “Well, I do not wish that my subordinates do any more than they are capable of. Even if I order them to do their utmost, it would be delusional to expect them to go any further than their limits.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “If they overperform in comparison to what they had been evaluated as being capable of, the plan shall be thrown into disarray. I simply request nothing more and nothing less than what I demand from my men. And Mizelda has fulfilled her duty. In that case, the only thing I can present her with, is a reward.”

With words, motivate them. With rewards, get them to exceed their abilities. With praise, make them promise to improve next time.

Subaru had always thought, with absolute certainty, that this was how powerful people subjugated their subordinates. Therefore, Abel’s reply was in direct contradiction to what Subaru had in mind.

He would not request labors beyond the capabilities of his subordinates.

It seemed like a good environment for subordinates to work in, albeit simultaneously a lonely one as well.

Abel: “Goes without saying that endeavoring less than what is expected shall be met with punishment. Definite punishment or reward, you do comprehend what it signifies, right?”

Subaru: “…Then, does that mean I’m going to be punished?”

Abel: “If you were my subordinate, that would be correct. But are you my subordinate?”

Staring straight ahead, Subaru’s eyes widened at Abel’s words.

Of course, Subaru did not recall ever becoming Abel’s subordinate.

In his discussion with Priscilla, Abel had treated Subaru as a military strategist, but he did not have any intention of formally becoming one.

Subaru: “It’s not that I’m not attracted to the title of military strategist, but I don’t wish to be something like your subordinate.”

Abel: “And so that is how it is. You are not my subordinate, and therefore, you do not fall under the category of receiving definite punishment or reward.”

Subaru: “Thinking about it, just what are you to me…?”

Because of their situation, they were forced to accompany each other. They did not have the relationship of a master and a servant in the first place, nor any kind of personal one.

They were two people caught in a flow of obstacles, and once these obstacles were cleared, their paths would separate. That was the type of relationship they had.

Calling them friends, or allies, or comrades, would just be untrue. If there was something they could be classified as, it would be crossdressing companions.

Abel: “Some have taken the liberty of calling me a friend, but you have not.”

Subaru: “Ah. I’m a shy guy, so I can’t become your friend that easily.”

Given the current situation, the person who may have been able to call him a friend here would either be a very good person or a fraud, and Flop would be the former.

Anyhow—

Abel: “I shall resume my conversation with Priscilla. Go do whatever else you need to do.”

Subaru: “What I need to do…”

Abel: “It should not be required of me to tell you that.”

Being diced by those almond-shaped eyes, Subaru’s gaze left Abel and headed towards the corner of the room.

There, he found the figure of Rem sitting on the floor. He could not make out her downcast expression from a distance, but there was no doubt that leaving her alone would not do.

He was somewhat annoyed that Abel had told him to do it first, though.

Subaru: “I don’t want you to get in trouble with Priscilla and start another fight. Just be careful with how you talk to her.”

Abel: “I am certain many would advise that you, not I, should be the one to receive those words.”

Hateful words were riposted with further hateful words, and Subaru parted ways with Abel, who returned to the conference hall.

Mizelda’s leg would change the situation of the People of Shudraq, so it would be necessary to take that into account when engaging in discussions with Priscilla.

However, there was little room for Subaru in the conversation between the celestial beings, Abel and Priscilla.

The priority for Subaru was to speak to the only person he could.

Subaru: “—Rem, is now a good time?”

He lightly took a deep breath and calmed himself down, before heading over, towards Rem.

Sitting with her knees folded and her back against the wall, Rem slightly stirred at Subaru’s words, his figure faintly reflected on her pale-blue eyes.

Rem: “…Is that you? When are you going to change your clothes?”

Subaru: “Rem has priority over changing clothes. As soon as this conversation ends, I will change my clothes.”

Rem: “Is that so? Well then, this conversation has ended. Please go change your clothes.”

Subaru: “That’s so crude!”

Subaru was left helpless and raised his voice after Rem’s blunt retort. At Subaru’s voice, Rem’s eyes sharpened and she said, “Please be quiet”.

Then she jerked her chin toward the girl leaning on her left shoulder.

Rem: “At this rate, you’ll wake up the sleeping Louis-chan. Please consider her.”

Subaru: “Well, I…”

Rem: “Or is it just that you do not want to put that much consideration into this girl?”

Subaru: “Don’t say it like that. My bad…”

Taking tiny breaths while sleeping, Louis cuddled closer with Rem.

Louis had been helping Rem to treat the wounded; her white clothes were stained with blood here and there. From what he had learned from Rem’s attitude and from Utakata, she had done exactly as she had been told, albeit poorly.

Naturally, Subaru’s inner thoughts were mixed, though.

Rem: “It throws me off when you make a grim face in that appearance.”

Subaru: “Oh, yeah, my bad. My makeup’s messed up, it’s rather unsightly.”

Rem: “It looked unsightly even when you had it on properly.”

Subaru: “Tohoho…”

Subaru's shoulders slumped in depression at Rem's remark, which was as harsh as ever. Subaru then slowly sat side-by-side with Rem, at her right, opposite of Louis.

He peeked at Rem's protesting gaze, but consciously ignored it.

Subaru: "Rem, you did great. Everyone survived thanks to you."

Rem: "…I'm keenly aware of my lack of power. To tell you the truth, I'm useless."

Subaru: "Rem…"

In response to the words of gratitude, Rem looked down at her hands in frustration. As she regarded those pale fingers, Rem was biting her lip weakly.

Subaru: "You're definitely not useless. Even though your memories are fuzzy, you were able to use your healing magic splendidly and saved a lot of people. But…"

Rem: "I know. If I were whole, this magic wouldn't have been like this."

Subaru: "Like this?"

Rem: "My healing magic. The magic I'm using right now is by intuition, in other words, self-taught. Though with Louis-chan's assistance, I've managed to get it into shape. Even then…"

Rem's words did not continue beyond that point.

The reason why she did not continue after that, was because it was something that went without saying. She knew that, if she put it into words, it would become a blade that she would hurt herself with, and that the pain would console her, albeit slightly.

Complaints, when spoken, would hurt oneself and others. In compensation however, it would lighten one's heart merely a little bit. And Rem disliked the idea of lightening her heart.

It was proof that she truly blamed herself for her inability to save others, because of her lack of power.

Subaru: "…"

Once again, Subaru painfully understood Rem's feelings.

To rue that one could have done more, was more painful than an unreachable wall. It would be even worse when it regarded someone else's future, someone other than one's own.

—The loss of Mizelda's leg had left something weighty in the recesses of Subaru's heart.

It was not a life. But it was not hard to imagine the magnitude of losing one of your four limbs.

The closest example was certainly Al, a one-armed man who had lost his left arm. Additionally, there was the Watergate City of Pristella; during that battle, Ricardo had lost one of his arms in a confrontation against Gluttony.

It had been an extremely shocking event, but it was not a tragedy so remote that it could not happen. In fact, for those who put themselves in harm's way, it may be more appropriate to call it a familiar tragedy.

Still—

Subaru: "That's harsh."

Rem: "…Yes."

Subaru's parched murmur was met with a small nod from Rem right beside him.

This was the first time he had ever gotten a straightforward nod without repercussions, yet he was unfortunately not in the right frame of mind to appreciate it. Rem glanced at Subaru, the latter holding a lump deep in his chest.

Rem: "The previous… If it was the previous me, I wonder how it would've gone…"

Subaru: "…If it was the you when you still had memories?"

Rem: "Yes. If it was the past me's healing magic, Mizelda-san's leg could've been…"

"Could've been saved", Subaru closed his eyes at the words that would have followed.

It was not that he could not comprehend what Rem was thinking. But it was difficult for Subaru, being on the outside, to judge the extent to which the presence or absence of memory had affected Rem's healing magic.

Even if it were possible to quantify the healing power, it would be difficult for Subaru to assess it.

However—

Rem: "…"

Rem, her pale-blue eyes filled with earnest emotion, were directed at Subaru.

If the answer she was looking for was something that Subaru could provide he did not know, but there were only two choices in front of him: "The previous Rem could" or "The previous Rem couldn't".

Which of the two would turn out to be the salvation for Rem?

—Or rather, which of the two would save Rem from being hurt even more?

Subaru: "…Even with your memories, I think it would be helpless."

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "Even healing magic isn't all-powerful. In that case, Rem would have done the best she could."

He replied after a few seconds of agonizing thought, which felt much longer in Subaru's mind.

Even if Rem had her memories, even if her healing magic had been in perfect condition, she would not have been able to save Mizelda's leg.

The truth was that it was not about "ifs".

If they started talking about "ifs", there would be no end to it. It was true that Rem had not been able to salvage Mizelda's leg. But beyond Mizelda, she had saved the lives of many other injured people.

She should be praised for her achievements, and there was no reason for her to blame herself.

In fact, if someone should be blamed, it should be—

Subaru: "I wasn't strong enough."

Rem: "Eh…"

Subaru: "I didn't think enough. I should've examined things more seriously."

Upon hearing this answer spat out by Subaru, Rem's round eyes went wide.

In front of Rem, Subaru clenched his molars with force, and covered his face with both of his hands.

If anyone were to curse the lack of strength, the blame should fall on Subaru.

Subaru: "All of it. It's my fault."

Despite the pompous claims of a "bloodless siege", reality was far from such results.

Arakiya's intrusion had caused many injuries, and her recovery had brought death to multiple guards. There had been no casualties within their own ranks, but taking into account Mizelda's missing leg, how could it be called "bloodless"?

He had failed. It was a pile of failures, and the chance for recovery had been lost.

All he wanted was the best possible happy ending, and what Subaru had obtained was either a so-so happy ending or what should be called a so-so bad ending.

To paraphrase Abel's words from earlier, definite punishment or reward—castigation ought to follow.

Had Subaru been one of Abel's men, it would not be strange for him to have his head chopped off.

—Worst-case scenario, he would have to Return by Death.

Thoughts like these crossed his mind.

In that case, he would most likely go back to the most recent point of return, to the time of the bloody battle against Todd in Guaral. —The fear caused by the recollection of that time made his entire body tremble.

Still, even if he returned to that moment of terror, if he could recover what they had lost—

Rem: "…Why?"

Suddenly, that word struck the brooding Subaru's eardrums.

Raising his face immediately, he was met head-on by Rem's eyes staring right toward him.

Rem's eyes, which had been moist with remorse until just before, were now staring straight at Subaru, holding even stronger remorse within.

Rem: "Why did it turn into your fault?"

Agitated by Rem's gaze, more words were piled up upon Subaru, rendered unable to move.

She extended her hand, her eyes damp, and while indicating the devastated City Hall she said,

Rem: “So Mizelda-san’s leg, Louis-chan’s and Utakata-chan’s injuries, Medium-san’s and Flop-san’s wounds, all of it is your fault?”

Subaru: “They are, yes. It wouldn’t have turned out like this if I’d been more careful about my preparations.”

Rem: “You thought of a plan, and your seemingly reckless plan had a proper pay off. You were able to hold the General Second-Class in place, and get them into the city without letting anyone fight. Just like we planned.”

Subaru: “But then after that…”

Rem: “—Who cares about what happened after?!”

At Subaru’s persistence, Rem raised her eyebrows and made her voice louder. Rem quickly turned her face, and because of this, Louis, who was leaning against her, fell into her lap.

Louis jerked slightly and groaned softly, without waking up. While supporting Louis’s shoulder, Rem puffed slightly and looked at Subaru again.

Rem: “No one could’ve foreseen what would happen after that. The appearance of that half-naked woman and her rampage were all unpredictable. So…”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “So why are you responsible for all of that?”

Subaru gulped as the question of “why” was once again asked toward him.

If you asked him why, he would think it was the responsibility of one that had power.

In the same way that Rem lamented the lack of power in her own healing magic, Subaru sometimes regretted and lamented the fact that his own Authority could not make up for it. The scope of Return by Death was greater.

The future could improve or worsen, depending on whether Subaru exercised his power.

However—

Subaru: “It’s…”

—It was a truth that could not be told to another, even if the person was Rem.

It was not restricted to merely Rem.

The authority Subaru wielded, this alone he could not propagate to anyone, no matter how open-minded the other party was. —No, he was unable to speak of it even to someone he had established an emotional bond with.

If he told them, there was no way he could disclose the truth without possibly causing the death of that person.

He was afraid of pain. The pain brought about from trying to tell someone about Return by Death was terrifying.

Who could get used to that intense pain that gripped one’s heart no matter how many times they experienced it?

But what was truly frightening was not the pain, but the loss.

Was there anything in this world that was more terrifying than loss?

Was it not because of this extreme fear precisely, that this Authority had been granted to Natsuki Subaru?

Rem: “…Why did you protect me?”

Subaru: “Huh…?”

Rem continued to speak as if she had given up on Subaru, the latter silent and unable to answer.

For a moment, Subaru blinked, unsure of what she was talking about.

Rem: "When that half-naked woman attacked me. I knocked down a pillar, and when that didn't work… That woman came at me, and you stood in front of me."

In a selfless attempt to save her from being attacked by Arakiya, Subaru had stood in front of Rem.

His hands outstretched, he had been desperate to keep any threat away from Rem. At that moment, Subaru did not care if Arakiya were to take his life.

He wanted Rem to outlive him, for even a second longer.

That was—

Rem: "The result of your bloodless siege, the fact that you covered for me at that moment, and even the fact that Mizelda-san lost her leg, you're trying to take on everything on your own…"

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "You're not strong enough to do all those things… At first, I was wary of you because of that horrible smell."

That was where Rem broke off her words, and once she did, she looked down at Louis on her lap.

Gently stroking her golden hair, Rem choked and calmly turned her gaze back to Subaru, saying

Rem: "I, Louis-chan, Abel-san, Mizelda-san and the others, Medium-san and Flop-san are all human beings with a will, and you don't have to get worked up to protect them."

Subaru: "Oh…"

Rem: "Please don't try to do anything like that all by yourself. You don't have to take responsibility for our actions."

Subaru’s mouth opened and closed repeatedly, overwhelmed by the shower of words.

His brain refused to comprehend what was being said, in a prompt fashion. However, an unidentified sense of urgency scorched Subaru’s heart, forcing him to listen no further.

With earnest emotion, directed at a Subaru cursing his own lack of power, Rem bit back.

He had to stop her from saying anything beyond that—

Rem: “You aren’t a special person—”

He knew he should not have allowed her to say it.

Rem: “—Because, you’re not a hero.”

3

Staggering, Subaru walked through the City Hall as if wandering.

He had no destination in mind. It was not even clear when he had started walking, to begin with. When he had come to, he was walking, and if anything, his consciousness still remained in a state of vagueness.

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Suddenly, he was hit head-on by a hard impact.

Taking a look at it, it seemed that he had hit a wall. He was walking while only staring at his feet, that was the reason. Slamming his forehead against the bare wall, Subaru held his aching forehead and exhaled.

Then, without thinking, he slammed his forehead against the solid wall again.

A firm impact and a dull sound, and Subaru felt a stinging pain in his brain.

As he shook his brain from the outside, he felt as if the stagnation that permeated his whole body was slowly receding.

In the same manner, Subaru slammed his forehead against the wall again and again.

Slam, slam, slam—

???: “Hey, hey, stop that, bro.”

As he pulled back to strike again, his shoulder was grabbed from behind. He had been called out.

What came into view when Subaru turned around, was a gaze that met his own from behind a steel helmet directed his way. Still grasping Subaru by the shoulder, the other party cracked the bones in his own neck and spoke,

Al: “I understand the feeling of wanting to die. But no matter how many times you do that, there’s gonna be no end to that sorta thing.”

Chapter 31:
A Talk Between Compatriots

1

Subaru’s eyes widened as a strong arm grabbed him by the shoulders, making him turn around.

The iron helmet staring his way—Or rather, Al’s attitude, was rather unexpected.

Subaru: “…”

Ignoring the force of the arm that had seized his shoulder was somewhat difficult. His intent to halt Subaru from banging his head against the wall and harming himself could be keenly felt.

Al: “You should stop that.”

Subaru: “…Ah.”

Their gazes met, and a breath escaped as the words of restraint were repeated.

Immediately, Subaru felt a pang of shame well up from the bottom of his stomach, as if he had been blamed for his eccentric behavior. It was as if he were a character in a game being made to run against a wall.

Looked like it was exactly like that, including the part where he had not thought anything about it.

Al: “Don’t come crying to me if you end up an idiot after doing that. No, rather, it’s because I couldn’t leave you like that, that I came to stop you.”

Subaru: “…Sorry for the inconvenience.”

Al: “Why so formal? Also, your voice is so raspy it’s scaring me.”

With Al pointing out that Subaru's voice was surprisingly hoarse, he once again ridiculed himself.

The one who had suffered from a complete mental breakdown and the one whose shameful behavior had forced him into this broken state of mind, was none other than himself.

It was natural. After all, it was none other than Rem who had told Subaru—

Al: "—Was it so painful for you to hear what that girl said?"

Subaru: "—Hk."

Al: "Oh, scary! Don't look at me like that. I'm gonna get nervous if you keep staring at me looking like that."

Subaru looked up as if he had been hit by a bullet, meanwhile Al shrugged his shoulders as if jesting.

His glare had caused Al to step back, but Subaru closed the distance between them, and directly tackled Al's earlier statement.

Subaru: "You, were you listening…!"

Al: "I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, you know. You just happened to be in the middle of an important conversation when I went to call you, bro. I just thought it'd be wrong to interrupt."

Subaru: "…"

Al: "Even if you look at me with those distrustful eyes, I ain't lying. Well, after that, bro, you started walking like it was the end of the world, so I got worried and followed you. And sure enough…"

As he said this, Al pointed to the front part of his helmet.

And as he had expected, his fears were right on the mark. It was not like Al was paying particularly close attention, but it was more that Subaru's desperation was clear as day.

The pain from his forehead, which he had been hitting right at the spot Al had pointed at, came back, causing Subaru to cast his eyes downward awkwardly.

Subaru: "…Rem."

Al: "Hmm?"

Subaru: "That's right, what happened with Rem? I mean, after she talked to me…"

Al: "Whoa, whoa, don't tell me the shock you got because of what that girl said made you lose your memories? Please gimme a break. If you get amnesia, bro, I'll lose my only buddy."

Al answered Subaru's question while fiddling with the metal clasp of his helmet with his hand around his head.

Unfortunately, what Al had feared would happen had already come to pass. That said, for Subaru it was something equally grave compared to amnesia, so it was inevitable that his mental balance would be disturbed.

Perhaps seeing Subaru's anxiety in his expression, Al prefaced with "Don't worry about it",

Al: "Even after you turned pale, you were still giving decent answers, bro. So I think the girl didn't suspect anything, yeah?"

Subaru: "Ah, I see…"

After receiving Al's guarantee, Subaru felt the faintest of the faintest senses of relief.

Apparently, Subaru's disgraceful behavior had started only after he had left Rem's presence. If he managed to keep up appearances around Rem, he would not have worried her.

In any case—

Subaru: "Al, about what you just said… What did you mean?"

Al: "Just said?"

Subaru: "…About understanding my feeling of wanting to die, or something."

With his hand on his aching forehead, Subaru asked the truth behind Al's words.

Al: "I understand the feeling of wanting to die. But no matter how many times you do that, there's gonna be no end to that sorta thing."

The statement that he understood the feeling of wanting to die, and that there was no end to it, no matter what one did.

To be honest, he thought that it was not an expression that would bother him much. But at the same time, it was an expression too meaningful to be telling Subaru in this situation.

Rather, that statement seemed as if Al also wished to make Subaru believe that he perhaps knew about Subaru's peculiarity, his Authority.

Al: "—. Oh, that."

Subaru: "Yeah, that. It was… It was a very meaningful thing to say. You…"

—You know something about it, right?

Subaru sent Al a gaze shrouded with suspicion. Even if he strained his eyes, he was unable to peer into the eyes and the emotions hidden behind the cold steel helmet.

And with that, his expression and eyes hidden, Al snorted and spoke,

Al: "I don't wanna say this, but I've been getting along in years, right? I've been in the same kind of mess as you, bro. —I've even acted lame in front of a pretty girl."

Subaru: "Ah…?"

Al: "What's with that "ah"? Stuff like making a big fool of yourself and then wanting to die's a road any man has walked. If you ask me, even at my age, I do it quite often. When I do it, the Princess looks at me like I'm a bug."

With a chuckle, Al patted Subaru on the shoulder and gave him a lesson typical of a senior.

Taking in that content and his demeanor, Subaru stared back at Al, trying to determine if he was being deceptive or serious.

Al: "Hmm? What's up, bro?"

Subaru: "…No, it's nothing."

However, even if Subaru attempted to uncover Al's true intentions, he would be incapable of doing so, as his view was obstructed by black iron.

Till this moment, he had always dismissed Al's outfit as nothing more than one of his eccentricities. But when confronting him, attempting to ascertain his true intentions, he became aware that it was a protection much more potent than expected.

But, at the same time, he also reflected on getting too nervous.

Subaru: "There's no way he knows, huh…"

It was just a coincidence that Al's comment had caught Subaru's attention.

If Al knew about Return by Death, he would have tried to show it to Subaru in a way that was easier to understand. —The very existence of that Authority, of Return by Death, was a perilous affair.

Were he to be aware of it, he would not keep himself from alluding to it, much like Roswaal.

Simultaneously—

Subaru: "—I guess not everyone who gets summoned to another world gets some kind of power."

He was not in the know regarding the details of Al's situation, but he thought it safe to assume this.

Because, if Al possessed some kind of special power dwelling inside him, it seemed to him—that the loss of his left arm could have been prevented.

For example, if Subaru were to lose one of his arms in similar fashion, then he could utilize his Authority to prevent the loss of his left arm before it happened, by—

Subaru: "…Returning?"

With that thought in mind, Subaru stared at his left arm intently.

It was merely hypothetical, but very possible. In the first place, the only reason Subaru had been able to survive with all his body parts intact so far, was because he had been able to make full use of Return by Death.

Many times, among the loops in which he had been robbed of his life, he had suffered the loss of an arm or a leg.

Had he been able to survive without Return by Death, he would have been plenty able to live with missing body parts.

—Subaru had decided that he would never fully rely on Return by Death.

But then, to what extent should he rely on it?

How many of his arms, legs, fingers, and eyes would he have to forfeit before he decided to rely on it? Above all, what if it was not his own limbs, but those of Emilia or Rem?

In the Watergate City of Pristella, Subaru had not Returned by Death for the sake of Ricardo's lost arm. Today as well, he had not Returned by Death because Mizelda had lost her leg.

Even though he knew that, via the use of his Authority, he might have been able to procure better results.

Even though he was aware that the number of those who had lost arms or legs, with the paths they had taken so far cut off, could be reduced.

Subaru: “I’m…”

Al: “…”

Subaru: “I’m a hypocrite.”

Conscious that the Authority he had been bestowed with was a mighty one, he was unable to take a decisive step.

Natsuki Subaru was far too impotent and selfish.

Therefore—

Subaru: “Rem too… Zuah?!”

Al: “You’re in a bad loop, bro.”

He had ended up allowing Rem to speak those decisive words.

Right before he was about to fall into depression, Subaru’s forehead was struck by a powerful finger flick. The strong pain brought tears to eyes, and while uttering “Wha, wha…”, he looked at Al.

Al: “Oh, that made a pretty good sound. Wait, did I hit you right where you slammed your forehead? Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

Subaru: “It’s fine… Not, what the hell was that!”

Al: “That was a finger flick. So, the questioning power shifts to me, and I’ll ask the questions now.”

Al pointed the flicked finger at Subaru, whose surprise overrode the pain. Upon having that finger thrust at his nose, Subaru involuntarily backed away and kept his mouth shut.

Then, Al continued with a “Listen”,

Al: “How unsettled are you by that girl’s words? It’s a shame, just because she told you something. Don’t you think so yourself?”

Subaru: “Well, I…”

Al: “I don’t want you to get woozy over something like that. I’m embarrassed to say this, but… I got expectations for you, bro.”

Subaru: “—Expectations?”

Subaru was simply surprised to be given a talk that he had never expected.

Seeing Subaru’s reaction, Al gave a deep nod, and said, “Yes, that’s right”,

Al: “You remember that speech you gave at Pristella, right bro?”

Subaru: “Oh, yeah, I do, but …”

Al: “I’m pretty sure that, back then, I told you that that broadcast would mean that you’d have to carry “heroic reveries”, bro.”

It had been a tense situation, with the city being assaulted by the Sin Archbishops, and many people in dire straits.

Subaru recalled the words Al had given him upon being requested to play a role in that situation, yet been unable to take the next step: those were the “heroic reveries”.

He was an existence burdened with the expectations and hopes of many people. He could not be allowed to lose.

He was carrying the “reverie” of being the “hero” everyone wished for there to be.

And at that time, Subaru responded way too relaxedly.

—It was the same as it had always been.

Al: “It’s the same here. One person denies you, so what? It’s not like it’s going to change what you’ve done, bro, or turn your resolve inside out.”

Subaru: “…”

Al: “Don’t break, bro. Go get ‘em, bro. —Live up to expectations, bro.”

Al, who knew about Subaru’s achievements in the Watergate City, patted him on the back.

Neither Rem, who had forgotten everything, nor Louis, who had regressed to an infant, and obviously, neither Abel, Flop, Medium, nor the People of Shudraq, were cognizant of Subaru’s achievement.

Priscilla also knew, but he doubted she would remember about it in the first place.

Al: “I haven’t forgotten. And I’m sorry, I’m not letting go of it, bro.”

Subaru: “Not letting go of it, you say…”

Al: “You’ve started it. I’m telling you, that’s a reputation you gotta keep up until you die.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru’s breath was taken away yet again, due to Al’s critical words.

He knew that the broadcast in the Watergate City had spread not only to the people in that city, nearly consumed by anxiety and fear, but also to the rest of the world.

He had to maintain that reputation until he died.

And unfortunately, “death” would never come to Subaru.

Therefore, he had no choice but to keep fighting.

Subaru: “…Forever.”

At Al’s words, a voice leaked out of Subaru’s mouth as he covered his face with both hands, and shut his eyes.

Echoing in his head this whole time were the deadly words spoken by Rem. Those devastating words had shredded Subaru’s heart to bits, making him drown in his own stream of blood.

Rem: "—Because, you're not a hero."

Subaru: "I've been relying on a single thing Rem said, all this time."

Rem: "—Because, you're not a hero."

Subaru: "Rem believed in me, and that's why I didn't falter. It was the same in Sanctuary, in Pristella, in Pleiades Watchtower…"

Rem: "—Because, you're not a hero."

Subaru: "Rem woke up without her memory, but I was still happy… I'm one step closer to getting it all back, and this is the time when I need to hold on the hardest."

Rem: "—Because, you're not a hero."

Subaru: "Those were the magic words that roused my spirit."

He was a hero, Rem had told him so.

They had stopped Subaru from giving up on everything and running away; they had not allowed his knees to buckle because Rem had fallen into slumber; they had let him challenge the obstruction of the Sanctuary and the difficult problems at the mansion; they had played a role in his efforts to save the Watergate City of Pristella that had fallen into enemy hands; and they had rocked the soul of a Natsuki Subaru that had lost his "memories", and enabled him to conquer the Pleiades Watchtower.

They were—

Rem: "Because Subaru-kun is Rem's hero."

Because of those words, because of that trust and support, he had been capable of making it to this day.

To take those away, for Natsuki Subaru, that meant—

Al: "Then, you just gotta get them back."

Subaru: “—Huh?”

With his face covered, Subaru was in the midst of drowning in a darkness too deep to be called the back of his eyelids when he gasped due to Al’s statement, raising his face.

Right in front of him, was Al’s face, causing him to take a step backwards. However Al was the one to move forward this time, in a mirrored image of the previous scene.

Subaru’s back immediately made contact with the wall. He could not move back any further. As if to push Subaru, unable to retreat, Al extended his arm and blocked his escape.

And then—

Al: “We’re gonna get them back. Both that girl’s expectations and your confidence, bro.”

Subaru: “Expectations and confidence…”

Al: “You gotta maintain your reputation. You gotta fight. And if you can’t afford to keep losing, then you got no choice but to keep on winning just like you wish. That’s how we’re going to win and get them back.”

Subaru: “…”

Al: “The expectations and reputation you lost can only be regained with better results. That’s something you too should know, because you’ve experienced it many times.”

Suddenly he brought his face closer and the cold iron helmet hit his forehead.

However, Al appealed to Subaru so strongly and sincerely that the latter did not even notice that their foreheads were touching. This had bore a great impact on Subaru. Most importantly, Al seemed to have a point or two.

Lost expectations and reputation—the most bitter of Subaru's memories was, of course, his blunder at the Royal Castle.

At that time, Subaru had lost Emilia's trust and expectations, and his valuation amidst the Royal Candidates dropped. The reason why he had been able to regain their trust afterwards were his actions.

For sure, not because he was banging his forehead against a wall in utter devastation.

Subaru: "…Am I an idiot? No, I am an idiot."

Wasn't it like though nothing had changed from when he made that blunder at the Royal Castle?

At that time as well, Subaru had attempted to disregard a massive hole, by pretense of asking Wilhelm to train him, in order to escape from the immense pain in front of him.

But now, Subaru could not afford to be so weak.

He had to protect Rem and bring her home. In contrast to that time, there was no one else he could turn to for that purpose. —For Rem, there was only Subaru.

And in order to reassure Rem, surrounded by anxiety and gone without memories, he could not display even a little bit of a pathetic appearance in front of her any longer.

Even if Rem, who had forgotten everything, had stated that Subaru was not a hero.

Even if the words that had so strongly supported Subaru's back were retracted by that same face and voice.

Subaru: “—I’m Rem’s hero.”

Yes, wasn’t Natsuki Subaru’s true nature to keep his head up?

Al: “…Got a tad of your energy back?”

Hearing Subaru’s determination, the harshness vanished from Al’s voice. Replying to his words with a “Yeah”, Subaru directed his eyes towards Al from up-close, and,

Subaru: “It’s gotten much better. But back off, move away! What the hell’s up with this kabe-don?”

Al: “Right! Bro’s crossdressing, and I’m a forty-year-old man missing an arm!”

Laughing heartily, Al pulled his hand from the wall and stepped back.

As Subaru’s field of view opened up, Subaru felt as if not just what was in front of him, but he felt like he was able to expand his horizon much more.

—In all honesty, Al’s words had only acted as first aid, and the fatal wound had not been closed completely.

He was not sure that his legs would not tremble in case he met Rem, that he would not be afraid of her repeating her previous words once he regarded her once again.

He had not been able to reach an answer thus far, as to how much and for what purpose he would exercise the Authority named Return by Death.

He was sure that even if he mulled it over in his head, he would be incapable of arriving at a conclusion until that moment came.

But he could say it clearly.

This prideful Authority in Natsuki Subaru’s possession, was indispensable to materialize the “heroic reveries” that he must bear on his back.

Henceforth, he was certain he would continue to be confused on the manner to deal with it in the times to come.

Al: “Ohh, right bro, I just wanted to ask.”

As Subaru stared downward at his hands in the process of renewing his mind, Al suddenly spoke up in an uncomfortable manner, his gaze directed toward Subaru.

Subaru wondered about Al’s attitude, as he had not shown any sign of reservation up till this point.

Subaru: “What’s the big deal now? If you have something to ask me, ask.”

Al: “Then, I’ll feel free to ask… What’s your relationship with that Rem girl?”

Al uttered that question with his head cocked in puzzlement. The question was one that seemed weird to ask at this point.

But it was only when Al asked this, that Subaru realized that he had given no explanation.

Al: “She’s your companion, bro, that you brought all the way to the Empire. She ain’t that half-elf girl or that contracted loli. On top of that, you’re treating her like a wife, right?”

Subaru: “I do that as a matter of convenience, and she herself doesn’t like it.”

Al: “But that girl’s words are tearing you to pieces, bro. —The hell’s up with that?”

Al lowered his voice slightly and asked in a very serious manner.

In response to his words, Subaru frowned and searched his memories to make sure that there was no acquaintance between Al and Rem—at least not in this timeline.

In the first place, he had never even brought up the subject of Rem in front of Al. It was only natural that he did not know about her.

But still, there was something peculiar about his question.

The reason was probably Al's attitude as he made that inquiry.

Al: "…"

His expression could not be seen. But he could feel the heat in his gaze.

Subaru sensed that it was a sign of seriousness and urgency. He was bewildered by the unfamiliar sides of Al he had been shown in such a short period of time, the previous exchange included.

He was his sole compatriot, one who had survived in this other world with his aloof, carefree, and unserious attitude.

As he felt his impression of Al morphing within him,

Subaru: "Rem's my… one of our companions. However, she fell victim to the Archbishop of Gluttony. Because of that, she's gone from everyone's memories. She doesn't even remember herself."

Al: "—. So that's what happened. I see, I see, that makes sense."

Subaru: "Sense?"

With Subaru having simply stated the truth, Al put his hand on his chin and nodded repeatedly.

Subaru's head tilted due to the words that had leaked from his mouth, which prompted a "Right" from Al,

Al: "There were a few things that were bothering me. It was supposed to be a girl I didn't… know, but it looked like a girl I did know. It was kinda asserting itself like the small bone of a fish stuck somewhere."

Subaru: "You don't know her, but you know her… Are you talking about Ram?"

Al: "Oh, yes, yes."

Al’s voice fluttered as Subaru blinked at the unexpected connection that had popped up.

But that was enough to convince Subaru of Al’s attitude.

Thanks to everyone in the Emilia Camp, he was well-aware of how someone would react when one of the two, Ram and Rem, were to be forgotten.

Even Roswaal and Frederica, who had known her for a long time, had completely lost track of her existence until laying eyes on the real Rem, and once they met her face-to-face, they had never doubted the fact that she and Ram were twin sisters.

Aside from their personalities and qualities, Ram and Rem were really very similar. —No, surprisingly, as of late he found himself wondering that they might be similar in nature as well.

Anyway, he now understood what Al’s strange feeling had been.

Knowing Ram, it would be confusing to see a Rem who looked exactly like her.

Subaru: “But I’ve never heard of you and Ram knowing each other.”

Al: “It’s not like we know each other. We ain’t really acquaintances, it’s just like, we got a bit of a connection, somehow. It’s not so much that we know each other. —Twin sisters, huh? So you wanna reunite them.”

Subaru: “…Mhm, that’s right.”

The top priority was to reunite Rem with Ram.

After that, Subaru’s main goal was to bring Rem back to where she belonged, and have everyone in the Emilia Camp, along with him, welcome her. To do so, he could not afford to lose Rem’s trust.

He must do whatever it took to regain her trust and get her to take his hand.

Al: “—Aight, okay. I’ll help you, bro.”

Subaru hardened his fists as he once again focused on the big goal, when Al, still at his front, having mulled over the circumstances that had been relayed to him, nodded and spoke those words.

Unintentionally, Subaru let out a dumb-sounding “Aeh?”,

Al: “Bro, did you just make the dumbest squeal ever?”

Subaru: “Leave me alone! I mean, what did you say? Do you want to help? Help who?”

Al: “I’ll do it for you, bro. And I’m sure the Princess’s gonna have a lotta stuff to say about that, but she can do whatever she wants with that. Anyway, I’ve decided that I’m gonna support you.”

Subaru: “…”

Al: “But I only got one arm’s worth of shoulder to put into it.”

Subaru: “That’s not funny.”

He’d stated that with annoying enthusiasm, and Subaru was puzzled even as he replied swiftly back.

That was probably true. He did not know what in the world tugged at Al’s heartstrings.

Subaru: “…Because you know Ram, that’s why you’re going to help me?”

Al: “It’s not like that. It’s you I’m rooting for, bro. —In any case, if you gonna be a hero, the girl can’t be left out. That’s what I’m talking about.”

Subaru: “It’s not like I’m trying to be a hero…”

Al: “—You will be. Natsuki Subaru will become a hero.”

It was a way of interrupting that did not allow him to say no.

It was a strong, quiet statement, and the heat that it held within scorched Subaru’s heart.

Al: “…Just kidding.”

However, the intense fervor dissipated at the sound of Al’s jesting voice.

With Subaru at the mercy of the sudden change of situation, Al waved his hand and said ”Sorry, sorry”,

Al: “But let’s keep that kinda spirit, bro. It’s better for lazy people like me and you bro, to bluff our way out a little.”

As he said this, Al turned away and walked off with a jaunty gait.

Lagging behind his stately steps, Subaru beckoned him.

Subaru: “Al. That just now was…”

Al: “Whoa, let’s not go off on a tangent here. After all, as I recall, I came to call you to the conference hall, bro. I’m pretty sure the Princess’s gonna gimme a hard time.”

Subaru: “…”

Al: “Com’on, let’s hurry up. There’s always gonna be a chance to talk it out.”

With that, Al turned his head and shrugged his shoulders, gesturing for him to start running. Subaru, hastened by his gesture, had no choice but to retract his concern.

How much of what Al just said should be taken seriously, he did not know.

Even so, declaring his willingness to “cooperate” outright, gave Subaru considerably more energy to be optimistic.

Even if it was forced, Subaru had to be optimistic.

And so, he must keep his chest up, his back straight, and his legs wide apart as he walked.

Subaru: “Rem’s…”

—Hero, because he had lost the person who saw him in such a manner.

2

???: "—Heroic reveries", huh?"

As he dashed, a murmur echoed only inside his steel helmet.

He closed his eyes, uttering in a voice that could not be heard outside, only to be heard by himself.

And so, with his eyes closed, he let it echo in the darkness behind his eyelids.

Al: "I'll have you become a hero, bro. —No, Natsuki Subaru."

Chapter 32:
The Path Onwards

1

???: “How much time does it take just to bring one foolish commoner back? Do you think that the value of the time that flows by is the same between you and I?”

???: “No, that’s why I’m apologizing to you…”

Greeted by his master’s frigid gaze, Al bowed his head in a sullen manner.

As soon as he returned to the conference hall with Subaru, the aforementioned reprimand awaited him.

The original purpose of his mission was to bring Subaru back to the meeting hall, so it was not unreasonable for him to be scolded for having an unplanned conversation. Not unreasonable, but—

Subaru: “Priscilla, please don’t blame Al too much. It’s not Al who’s at fault, it’s me.”

Priscilla: “Hmm. I’m sure you two clowns were consoling each other over some trivial anguish. Your forehead is red, did you bash it against the wall or something?”

Subaru: “Do you have Clairvoyance? You’re so spot on it’s scary.”

Priscilla shot back at Subaru, who had come to Al’s defense, with a comment as if she had seen it before.

The scene was not supposed to be so common as to come to mind easily, but he couldn’t help shudder at Priscilla’s insight.

Anyway—

Subaru: “It’s like the conversation didn’t continue without us…”

Priscilla: “It is not facile to arrive at a conclusion. After all, are you not Abel’s military strategist?”

Subaru: “Well, um…”

Being pierced by Priscilla’s narrowed gaze, Subaru glanced at Abel. In response to his gaze, Abel, sitting on his seat, arms still crossed, paid no heed to Subaru’s questioning look.

Abel must have been reluctant to treat Subaru as a military strategist, but since he had stated such directly to Priscilla, it could be that he was unable to retract it.

As a result, they could not conclude the meeting without Subaru.

Subaru: “Aren’t you shooting yourself in the foot by acting without thinking?”

Abel: “You are the one who needs to regard the value of your words. Any great strategy can be treated as either wise or foolish, depending on how you choose your words.”

Subaru: “You’re regretting treating me as a military strategist, that’s some nerve…”

Frowning at Abel’s officious answer, Subaru sighed deeply.

He then looked around at the people in the meeting room—Abel, Priscilla, Zikr, and Taritta, who had taken over as Chieftain, and then closed one eye.

Without Subaru and Al, they didn’t think they could have reached a conclusion. —

Subaru: “The conclusion you haven’t reached is about cooperating with Priscilla? What was said before, was that Priscilla had a collaborator.”

Abel: “You seem to have the brains to keep up. Of course, I am talking about that. —The one who gathers the most members of the Nine Divine Generals wins, remember?”

Subaru: “Yeah, we got to the part where the First’s a pain in the ass for being useless.”

If he went unrecruited and became an assassin, there would be nothing they could do. On the other hand, if he were recruited, he would not contribute much to the situation. If this were a simulation game, he would be a troublesome unit.

Someone that lacked charm even if turned an ally, all while becoming deadly poisonous if left to their enemies.

Subaru: “But it’s about the final victory. It’s not about Priscilla and the support of her collaborators. Right?”

Priscilla: “—Hmm.”

Priscilla made a small sound in her throat as Subaru summarized the story deftly.

For an instant, Priscilla’s crimson eyes flashed with a look of curiosity that seemed unusual in Subaru’s own eyes—a reaction that suggested that she was interested in someone else, and in addition to that, it was Subaru.

I haven’t done anything special, Subaru contemplated.

Subaru: “What?”

Priscilla: “No, I thought you looked deflated in that guise, but you have made your return with a new look on your face and a new light in your eyes. On top of that, your blood circulation is a little better, so your appearance is slightly different.”

Subaru: “…Are you, complimenting me?”

Priscilla: “You may jump in jubilance if such is your wish.”

Subaru: “I won’t go that far.”

The fact that she had not denied it, must be a compliment in Priscilla’s own way.

Replying with a snort, Subaru accepted the praise for his change of heart.

From Rem's own mouth, the words that had supported Natsuki Subaru had been repudiated.

However, he was encouraged that this was not the time for his knees to buckle because of it.

Subaru: "Well, if that's the case, then it was worth being late for the meeting."

Priscilla: "I see, the result of a conversation between clowns is superb. You are being so uncharacteristically friendly, Al."

Al: "Oi, oi, it's not unusual for a nice guy like me to be friendly to someone, Princess."

Priscilla derided him, and Al shrugged his shoulders as he replied.

Subaru could not decide whose words were correct, Priscilla's or Al's.

For Subaru, Al was the only person from his homeland, the one who patted him on the back and pushed him out of a dead-end situation. It was true that his image was not without its unsympathetic side, as he had been harsh to him elsewhere, and he treated any situation as someone else's problem.

Subaru: "I can forgive it if I consider it as an after-effect of spending so much time in a different world."

Al: "Didn't you just say something really upsetting? Maybe I'm imagining things."

Al tilted his head as if he couldn't make any sense of it, but Subaru let it slide.

Neither the fact that Priscilla had changed her mind about Subaru, nor the fact that Al had contributed to that change of heart, were what was important.

Subaru: “What we need to do is settle the debate… and see how Priscilla’s willing to deal with us in the future. Let’s not go off-topic.”

Abel: “Oh, I am sorry. That someone who gets side-tracked so easily became a military strategist.”

Subaru: “…”

To Abel, who narrowed his eyes in displeasure and retorted sarcastically, Subaru stuck his tongue out and ignored him. Then, turning to Priscilla once again, he urged her to continue the conversation.

Subaru: “So, what are you going to do? With or without the support of Priscilla and her collaborators, I’m sure Abel’s still going to raise an assault on the Imperial Capital…”

Al: “With or without the Princess’s support, the extent of the assault will be the same.”

Priscilla: “It is that you clowns are so in tune with each other. Anyway, your assessment is correct. Therefore, for us to assist you in the future… I have raised a condition to Abel to serve as proof that he is worthy of the support.”

Subaru: “Condition?”

Priscilla: “It is simple. —One of the Nine Divine Generals must be on your side.”

To Subaru’s frowning face, Priscilla presented the requirement as a matter-of-fact.

Upon hearing that prerequisite, Subaru muttered “Nine Divine Generals…”.

It was not an absurd condition, definitely.

In the first place, if one wished to mount a challenge in the battle to regain the throne, the acquisition of many Divine Generals was required beforehand. Priscilla was merely looking for that first step.

In fact, it would be a very fortunate condition if they could get Priscilla on their side just by fulfilling the prerequisites for victory, right—

Subaru: "It's not exactly a condition to be jumping up and down about, is it?"

Abel: "Of course. As long as I remain unknowing of Goz's safety, there are no Divine Generals among the Nine who would follow me unconditionally. Additionally, there are not many eccentrics with an inclination to trouble themselves to fight a losing battle."

Subaru: "…If they can't see even a small chance of winning, no one will come on board."

As Abel described the tragic situation, Subaru also wrinkled his brow with a difficult expression.

Abel's sad self-awareness—if the Emperor's prestige was not enough for the Nine Divine Generals, he desired to get as much support as possible from Priscilla and her collaborators.

At the very least, the presence of such a collaborator would have been a bargaining chip to persuade the Nine Divine Generals.

At this point, Abel had only a few things to go on: his big claim that he was the true Emperor, the People of Shudraq, and the military strength of the Fortress City of Guaral.

Subaru: "I wonder if they'll listen to us when we say we'll fight the Empire with one city and one tribe."

Abel: "Those working with Priscilla… If they rank as mid-level Counts or higher, their names shall pose as good bargaining chips."

Priscilla: "I tell you, do not expect mercy from me. I possess a certain amount of generosity, but it is not meant for beggars."

Priscilla, with her chin resting on her hand, easily trampled their feeble hopes.

As they were already aware, there was no way she was going to change her opinion. Then, all they had to do was to directly challenge the conditions presented to them.

Zikr: “With all due respect, Your Excellency, perhaps we should turn to General First-Class Cecilus for help?”

Subaru: “Zikr-san, what are the odds of success?”

Expectations were placed on Zikr after those words, as heavy silence fell over the room. However, in response to Subaru’s expectant gaze, Zikr shook his head and said, “No”.

Zikr: “As Your Excellency stated earlier, given the current balance in strength, anyone who considers cooperating with us is not thinking straight. Therefore…”

Subaru: “Therefore?”

Zikr: “I am afraid we can only rely on people who don’t think straight, such as General First-Class Cecilus…”

Subaru: “Ah, so Zikr-san thinks that person’s nuts, too.”

Cecilus, who had only a dismal reputation, was hardcore enough that Zikr thought he could be brought to their side due to his craziness.

However, if they really had no other choice, they may have to go for the first troublesome unit they could think of bringing over to their side at some point.

Subaru: “The question is, where is he? Where does that person usually live?”

Abel: “That one usually lives in Arakiya’s house in the Imperial Capital.”

Subaru: “I see, Arakiya’s… wait, why?”

It was said flatly, and Subaru’s understanding of Abel’s words was delayed for a few seconds.

Even Priscilla scowled in displeasure at the outlandishness of the content.

From what he had heard, Cecilus was the First, and Arakiya was the Second.

Subaru: “Does that mean that this Cecilus guy and Arakiya are lovers or something?”

If that were the case, the impression left by Subaru and the others who had repelled Arakiya could not have been worse.

Subaru and his team had successfully made enemies of both the First and Second.

However, Abel shook his head in response to Subaru’s question.

Abel: “No, that is not so. Arakiya is looking for an opportunity to kill Cecilus, but she cannot achieve such a thing if people around him are harmed every time she attempts to murder him. That is why I ordered Cecilus to do it.”

Subaru: “Ordered what?”

Abel: “If it was going to happen anyway, he should stay in places where it’s easy for Arakiya to go after him.”

Subaru: “…I see?”

Even with a concrete explanation, their relationship was difficult for Subaru to understand.

He did not understand the mentality of letting his own Generals kill one another, and he also did not comprehend the idea of living in the house of someone who would try to kill oneself.

First of all—

Subaru: “How can you live with someone who wants to kill you…?”

After he asked that, he felt as if he had spoken something strange, but he was incapable of finding the answer to that odd feeling, and

Subaru quickly forgot his question.

Anyway, the fact that Cecilus usually lived in the Imperial Capital was now known.

Subaru: “So, the only way to get Cecilus on our side is to head to the Imperial Capital… Hey, you sure you’re okay to go all the way to the Imperial Capital?”

Abel: “Of course not. With the current status quo, if I were to get close to the Imperial Capital, it would be no different than advancing toward my own execution. More than that, I do not even know if Cecilus is in the Imperial Capital after all.”

Subaru: “Then we’re out of luck…”

When it came to matters of the Vollachian Empire, and even military matters, Subaru’s knowledge was useless.

Though, since Zikr, who was also a commissioned officer, had been the first to suggest it, it could be considered to be one of the better ideas they could come up with.

If that idea was rejected, Abel’s path would be bleak.

Subaru: “…Yet this isn’t the time to be in a stalemate.”

A dark and heavy feeling began to assert itself in Subaru’s chest.

It was like a bittersweet stagnation, a lump of helplessness that would not vanish even if he banged his head against a wall, something like an aftereffect of Rem giving up on Subaru.

Because of it, Subaru had lost Rem’s trust.

He had to get rid of this stagnation as soon as possible and regain her trust. In order to do so, every second of time spent at a standstill was regrettable.

Abel: “—There is a way.”

However, the gnashing of Subaru’s teeth was halted due to these words of response from Abel.

One eye closed, Abel turned to face Subaru, the latter looking upwards as if he had been struck, and spoke—

Abel: “Cease with that pathetic face, I am sick of seeing it. I have an idea.”

Subaru: “Sorry, but my face’s at the limit of what I can do with the character maker, without whaling for it. I don’t care about the inequality between such faces. What do you mean you have an idea?”

Abel: “It was part of Zikr’s idea. I shall adopt some of it.”

Zikr: “Some of my idea? I would be honored, but that is…?”

With furrowed thick eyebrows, Zikr displayed confusion upon hearing that his opinion would be utilized.

Subaru was just as confused as Zikr. In the first place, Zikr’s idea had been to recruit Cecilus, the First.

As long as they could not go to the Imperial Capital, they would be forced to reject that idea, and he thought that there were no other parts that could be used, outside of that.

To Subaru, who thought so, Abel exhaled via his nose, “Hmm.”

Abel: “I do not possess a chance to talk to Cecilus, but Zikr also stated. —If there is someone else who does not think straight, there is a possibility.”

Zikr: “—Hk! Impossible… Your Excellency, that is dangerous! Please reconsider!”

Subaru: “Eh? Eh? Eh?”

Abel’s bold words were met with fierce opposition by a pale-faced Zikr.

Zikr’s fierce determination made Subaru’s eyes dart back and forth, and he was surprised to see what was going on.

Zikr seemed to have an idea of what was going on, but this seemed illogical to Subaru. From the way the conversation was flowing, it seemed as if he were going to talk to someone crazy—

Subaru: “Is there anyone crazier than that General First-Class Cecilus no one likes?”

Zikr: “I would not label them crazy! But that person is too dangerous…!”

Al: “…Well, I get what you’re saying Afro General, but from the way the conversation’s going, it’s one of the Nine Divine Generals, right? If you leave them out, is there anyone else you can count on? It’s not a situation in which you can be picky.”

Zikr: “That is true, but…”

Subaru and Al spoke to him from both sides, and Zikr quieted down with a reluctant face.

Having seen the good-natured Zikr in suffering made Subaru feel as if they had done something wrong.

Rather, the problem lay with Abel’s personnel management, which had placed people in key positions that Zikr could not help but anguish over.

This was an example of how appointing people based on their abilities alone could lead to such tragedies.

Subaru: “In that respect, Lugunica was run pretty well… Basically, I’ve never come across a big shot who was a jerk… No, there was that old man who said bad things about Emilia-tan, but…”

In hindsight, that was also part of a statement born out of excessive fear of the Witch of Envy.

At the time, Subaru was a foolish hero who did not understand such circumstances and took on the challenge, equipped only with recklessness. Now, were he to encounter an identical situation, he would be better equipped to challenge it.

Of course, the option of not challenging someone over Emilia because of her bad reputation was not present for him.

Subaru: “So just who’s the cause of Zikr-san’s suffering?”

Abel: “What is with that foolish wording?”

Abel responded to Subaru’s question with a resentful look on his face.

Abel: “To answer your question, it is Yorna Mishigure, based in Chaosflame, the Demon City.”

Subaru: “Yorna Mishigure…”

Despite the unfamiliar name of the city, the person’s name was familiar to Subaru.

Yorna Mishigure was one of the Nine Divine Generals mentioned in the list, and he believed her nickname to be—

Subaru: “She’s called the Flamboyant, something like that, right?”

Al: “You’re good, bro. I don’t know how you managed to learn it in one shot.”

Subaru: “I like to memorize the nicknames of executive-level characters in manga and such. That said, this Yorna person is Zikr-san’s…”

As he said this, he glanced at Zikr, and Subaru became speechless.

Because Zikr’s face had gone pale, now covered by his hands.

Zikr: “The Seventh of the Nine Divine Generals, General First-Class Yorna Mishigure…”

Subaru: “Is she that dangerous? I thought the name was feminine, but…”

If his impression was correct, she would be a woman feared even by

Zikr, renowned as the Womanizer, who acted like a gentleman even towards a Subaru only dressed as a woman.

He could not even envision what kind of spectacle was going to come out of her, but—

Zikr: “She is beautiful. I am sure everyone can agree on that, not just me. However, General First-Class Yorna has a small… no, not a small, rather, an inexcusable problem.”

Subaru: “Well, what’s the problem?”

Zikr: “—It’s insurrection.”

Subaru & Al: “Eh?”

Subaru’s and Al’s voices overlapped with Zikr’s, as the words spilled from his mouth.

To Subaru’s dismay, who was suspecting that his ears had heard that wrong, Zikr covered his face with his hands and continued in a trembling voice.

Zikr: “General First-Class Yorna Mishigure has rebelled many times and threatened the reign of Emperor Vincent Vollachia.”

Subaru: “You can’t put someone like that in the position of army general!”

Subaru’s angry voice echoed through the conference hall for a second time.

2

Priscilla: “—This affair seems to have been settled.”

After a while of listening to the ridiculous information about the Nine Divine Generals, and after Subaru’s angry shout, Priscilla adjudged that she had witnessed the conclusion of the discussion, and opened her fan with a snap.

Honestly, it was a conclusion Subaru wanted to object to, but—

Abel: “There is no other option. As of now, the only one among the Nine Divine Generals who might join us is Yorna Mishigure.”

Subaru: “Didn’t she rebel against you because she didn’t like you in the first place…?”

Zikr: “No, actually, that would not be entirely true… It is impossible for me, at least, to know what she is thinking.”

Subaru: “If Zikr-san says as much, then it must be true…”

At the words of the trustworthy Zikr, Subaru had no choice but to retract his doubts.

And Abel, having heard this, sniffed disapprovingly and spoke.

Abel: “What is it with you and your willingness to listen to Zikr’s opinion?”

Subaru: “Even if the opinion’s the same, who said it is important. Do you think you have more credibility in my mind than Zikr-san does?”

Abel: “I see. But what happens if Zikr dies?”

Subaru: “Even though it’s a thought experiment, I’m going to kill you!”

He cursed at Abel for saying something so disturbing.

Taking Zikr’s loyalty into account, if Abel ordered him to do it, he may seriously commit suicide. Subaru was doing everything in his power to prevent such an incident from happening.

Anyway—

Subaru: “Silly stuff aside, Chaosflame… where is it? Is it far from Guaral?”

Abel: “Not in terms of location. That is another reason as to why it is an appropriate place to head towards. It is located southeast of here… and south of the Buddheim Jungle.”

Subaru: “I see, indeed…”

Having been shown the location on the map on the desk, Subaru was convinced by Abel’s explanation.

The location of Chaosflame lay south of the jungle where the People of Shudraq lived—the distance was larger than that between Jungle and Guaral, but it was a destination far more realistic than the one till the Imperial Capital or the land further west.

Subaru: “And then there’s why it’s called the Demon City…”

Priscilla: “Rest assured, foolish commoner. It is not because of a reason that shall crush your minute heart. It is a city where many races have lived in chaos since ancient times. Vollachia is home to a much wider variety of races in comparison to Lugunica, but Chaosflame is a particularly eclectic mix.”

Subaru: “In chaos… and it’s the Demon City.”

Once that was said, the fact that the word “chaos” was connected to the city said to be “in chaos” made a lot of sense.

Given that this was another world, it was probably just a coincidence.

Abel: “—In the Demon City, I shall add Yorna Mishigure, the Seventh of the Nine Divine Generals, to my army. I am certain you shall be able to open your heart… when that comes to pass, Priscilla.”

Priscilla: “That is fine. I am quite magnanimous. I shan’t add conditions afterwards.”

Subaru: “I thought you said something about generosity being out of stock earlier… No, never mind.”

With Priscilla’s glare falling on him, Subaru immediately withdrew his unnecessary remark.

And so, once the plan was properly settled upon—

???: “—Abel, please take me with you.”

Subaru: “Taritta-san?”

Suddenly, Taritta stood up and pleaded with Abel.

Taritta had been seated in place of Kuna during the meeting, but she had never spoken up before this moment.

She was probably confused by the fact that she had to suddenly take over as Chieftain, but even now, her face had a deep sense of urgency plastered on it as she stared at Abel.

In response to her plea, Abel’s dark eyes narrowed.

Abel: “What shall you do? You have inherited the title of Shudraqian Chieftain from your sister. Regardless of your confidence, that will not change.”

Taritta: “I know, I know. I can’t refuse the position that my older sister has given to me. But I’m not strong enough to lead the Shudraq…”

Taritta looked downward, as she bit her lip and stared at her hands.

In her empty hands, what she clutched was probably the same thing that Subaru held in his heart—that was, the sense of helplessness that tormented her.

Taritta: “Because I need… a chance to carry the position of Chieftain with pride.”

Abel: “—. Is that what you are looking for in travelling to Chaosflame?”

Taritta: “Yes, it is… is it no good?”

Taritta’s voice lost some of its power, as if she had lost confidence in herself after saying that.

However, Subaru could understand the anxiety that Taritta was feeling, and what it really was.

After the sudden change in Chieftains, Taritta had been forced to play a major role, but she was not sure that she held the power befitting said role.

So, what she sought was a successful experience. With her own hands, she would seek results sufficient to convince herself, and a success story that would let her deem herself worthy.

—It was the same thing that Subaru was looking for right now.

Subaru: “Abel, I agree with her. Even if she succeeded Mizelda-san with such a mindset, I think Taritta-san wouldn’t be able to fulfill her potential…”

Abel: “…”

Subaru: “Besides, we’re going to need an escort or ally along the way anyway, right? We know what Taritta-san’s capable of. We’re friends who rode into… town together in women’s clothing.”

Taritta: “Natsumi…”

He had rephrased it somewhere in the middle of it, but he declared what he wanted to.

Taritta appeared to be very impressed by Subaru’s decision to side with her. He was painfully aware of her hard work. Therefore, he wanted to be on her side.

Abel: “What shall the Shudraq do while you are gone?”

Taritta: “I will let my sister take over for a while. Kuna and Holly will be assisting her a lot. To protect Guaral we can’t move too many people.”

Abel: “So you thought about that much, whilst keeping quiet?”

Having listened to Taritta’s unrestrained answer, Abel assessed her thoughts.

Then Abel tapped his temple lightly with his finger, Abel: “Only a few are heading for Chaosflame. Of course, as long as I am meeting with Yorna Mishigure, my presence is essential. But we shall not mount an attack.”

Subaru: “At most we can only take one escort…”

Abel: “Then I shall add you, Taritta. The rest—”

???: “—I’ve been listening!”

In the middle of Abel’s sentence, the door was thrown open with great force, and a figure stepped in with vigor.

It was Flop O’Connell, the good merchant who had unabashedly referred to the Emperor as his new friend, and who had no fear of the impertinence of interrupting said Emperor’s words.

Flop snorted, as he held the gaze of everyone in the room to himself.

Flop: “Miss Taritta, I’m very impressed with your spirit in volunteering for such a difficult role! I think it’s great that you’re finding your own way to tackle a big role out of the blue…!”

Taritta: “Ah, thank you, thank you very much, Flop…”

Flop: “I’d like to make a suggestion to keep you and Village Chief-kun safe on the road. —I think it’d be a good idea to take my sister, Medium, with you!”

Finger held high, Flop asserted forcefully.

Subaru almost unintentionally nodded in agreement because of his vigor, but upon examining what he had stated, it was a rather abrupt suggestion.

Subaru: “So, what’s on your mind?”

Flop: “Yeah, yeah, I guess that’s the question. Now let me give y’all my reasons for recommending Medium! First of all, she’s skilled, and then she’s charming. On top of that, she’s a smooth talker!”

Subaru: “Smooth talker…!”

Flop: “She speaks pleasantly and clearly, so your chats while traveling won’t be lonesome. She’s not shy, so she can get along with anyone. What do you think, isn’t she a gem?”

Flop, white teeth on display, praised his sister, but two-thirds of his confident selling points referred to Medium’s people-pleasing nature, and the only real selling point was that she was “skilled”.

In fact, Subaru had confirmed that this one point was accurate, however—

Subaru: “But, have you talked to Medium-san about it?”

Flop: “No, I haven’t! But I’m going to tell her now, so it’s okay!”

Subaru: “…Is this okay?”

It was no travel consultation nor a promise of fun.

Although she would be thrown into a role where her life would be on the line, would discussing it with her later work out? If this were to cause a rift in the relationship between the siblings, it would indeed be painful for Subaru.

However, he was afraid that he could picture them laughing and being okay with it.

Subaru: “Assuming that Medium-san’s okay with it, Abel, what about you?”

Abel: “—. I have witnessed that she possesses the right skills. If she performs her role, I have no objection.”

Flop: “Then you can rest assured! My sister’s one who basically gives her all to whatever she’s told to do! But be careful, she doesn’t get too worked up if she’s not told to.”

Putting his hands on his hips, Flop laughed gaily, “Hahahaha!”.

It could be inferred from the way he’d stated that, and from Abel’s attitude. —This time, Flop would not included in the group that would accompany them to Chaosflame.

Subaru: “But… Medium-san, doesn’t have to go with us, you know.”

Flop: “Don’t be silly, Husband-kun, I have a goal. There’s some revenge that must be done, that must be served.”

Subaru: “…Oh, right.”

Those were the dangerous words that spilled out of Flop’s mouth, but he knew that they were by no means dangerous thoughts, but rather directed towards an outrageous absurdity even the cheerful Flop could not forgive.

Flop’s goodness, which had gone unheard of by Subaru in this world—that was the reason why Subaru trusted him and had been able to spend time with him until today.

Flop: “It’s the same for my sister. My sister and I have the same goal, and the same path to walk. If I abandon you, Wife-san, and Village Chief-kun here, I wouldn’t be able to hold my head high anymore.”

Subaru: “—. I’m going to cry. I’m going to fall in love with you.”

Flop: “Hahaha, that’s a gut-wrenching thing to hear from you Husband-kun, in that outfit! But you can’t do that, because it’d be bad for Wife-san. But I’ll take your feelings!”

Even the way he dealt with it was cool, and Subaru could only admire it.

Perhaps Medium would be willing to follow Flop’s words. In other words, one of their companions in the trip to Chaosflame would be Medium.

Flop: “Miss Taritta, be good to my sister. Hey, you got along well with me, so I’m sure you’ll get along well with my sister.”

Taritta: “Y-yes… Please take care of yourself too…”

Flop: “Hm? Yes, I’ll do my best with Zikr-san and the rest of the Shudraqians!”

Flop slapped himself on the chest as Taritta fidgeted and looked down.

With a smile on his face, Subaru cleared his throat.

Subaru: “By the way, I’m…”

Abel: “I shall be leaving you behind.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Abel: “Did you really believe I would say such a thing?”

When Subaru tried to confirm, Abel threw a feint in bad taste at him.

Even though he was enraged by it, he reacted as if he wanted to be take along, so Subaru did his best to hold back and kept silent by clenching his teeth.

Snickering at Subaru, Abel prefaced his remarks with, “Unfortunately, though,”.

Abel: “You are already a bargaining chip. As long as it is imperative for us to append Yorna Mishigure, no talks can be held without your presence.”

Subaru: “I’ll definitely punch you in the side of the head when all’s done and dusted, but… I’m a bargaining chip?”

Abel: “The fall of Guaral was of your design. Those circumstances shall soon be known. I shall make sure that happens.”

Subaru: “What?”

Not grasping the meaning of Abel’s words, Subaru was bewildered.

There was no doubt that the fall of the Fortress City had been Subaru’s plan, but he did not understand the advantage of going through the trouble of making it known.

Basically, being underestimated was Natsuki Subaru's starting point.

Priscilla: "—That there is someone else who can be utilized besides Abel, we must make her think so."

It was Priscilla who answered Subaru's question in a straightforward manner.

Hearing her words, comprehension slowly seeped into Subaru's mind.

Priscilla: "Of course, that encompasses not only this foolish commoner. The People of Shudraq from the Buddheim Jungle, and the defender of the Fortress City of Guaral, General Second-Class Zikr Osman, are likewise material for negotiations. But the best one would be…"

Abel: "The military strategist who assisted in bringing the city down… As I had stated. In the Empire, the strong are respected. It is not merely about brute force, but intelligence as well."

Subaru: "…"

That was why Natsuki Subaru had value, Abel and Priscilla assured this.

Honestly, from Subaru's point of view, it was a very complicated assessment.

On one hand, he was bothered to be so highly praised.

But on the other hand, it also seemed to be an overestimation. In fact, in spite of this high evaluation, Subaru had lost the trust of Rem, and felt the ground under him collapse.

No matter how highly he was regarded in the Empire, it was nothing compared against Rem's trust.

For this reason, Subaru's heart was not moved by Abel and Priscilla's evaluation.

However—

Subaru: “If I’m useful, that’s fine. Use me well. In return…”

Abel: “In return?”

Subaru: “You’ll definitely get the throne of the Emperor back. And you’ll get us back home safely.”

Subaru firmly stated that this was the only thing he would not compromise on.

Having heard this, Abel’s eyes widened slightly, and then he let out a long breath.

Abel: “Being told that is needless. —That is what I am supposed to do.”

And so he answered.

Chapter 33:
Now, Onto the Journey Towards the Demon City

1

—He would use what he could, to reclaim the Imperial Throne of Vollachia.

He would not only use the Fortress City of Guaral, but also the People of Shudraq, General Second-Class Zikr Osman, and of course, Natsuki Subaru.

Yes, Abel had just nodded his head in agreement to Subaru's confirmation.

Priscilla: "—This affair seems to have been settled."

Priscilla so muttered after seeing the conclusion of the meeting, covering her mouth with her opened fan.

Just as she had stated, the meeting had come to a consensus. The victory conditions were understood by all, their future course of action was decided, and their next destination and goal were set.

And then—

Subaru: "If it's just a select few that are going to Chaosflame, what about the others? Currently, it's just me, Abel, Taritta-san, and Medium-san…"

Al: "—On that note, can I say one thing?"

Subaru: "Al?"

Subaru was about to select the final members for their next destination, the Demon City of Chaosflame, when Al butted in.

He raised the hand of his lone arm, then scratching the back of his own neck with said lifted hand.

Al: “Princess, can I step away from your reins for a moment? I wanna stay with bro’s group.”

Subaru: “Ueh?”

Al: “Oh, come on, your voice’s cracking, bro. Is it really all that surprising?”

In response to that unexpected proposal, Subaru’s voice cracked, which prompted a quiver from Al’s throat.

But even though he had stated so like it was nothing, Subaru couldn’t just voice his agreement.

Subaru: “Wh-why…?”

Al: “I told you everything, didn’t I? I said I’d help you, bro. Even a doddering old man like me can be useful in some way.”

Subaru: “You… You were that serious?”

Al answered by shrugging his burly shoulders, and Subaru thought back to the talk he’d had with him before joining the meeting, and was surprised at how he had adhered to the conversation they’d had.

It was true that he had encouraged him, it was true that he had raised his spirits, and it was true that he had pushed him onwards.

However, he had not expected him to go as far as seriously saying he would “cooperate”.

Al: “Heh, why are you frozen stiff? Did my offer impress you that much?”

Subaru: “…No, shelving away my initial surprise, I haven’t heard anything about you being strong, Al, and with me and Abel, the ratio of men-to-women in our group’s just awful.”

Al: “Sorry if I got your hopes up, but I’m a lot weaker than the amazon nee-chan over there!”

Pointing at Taritta with a snap, Al proudly assured him that he was fairly pathetic.

In fact, Taritta's ability probably ranked among the best in the People of Shudraq, but after witnessing the battle with a member of the Nine Divine Generals, she was a rather unreliable battle reinforcement.

Anyhow—

Subaru: "Still, I'm glad to hear you say that. I'll accept your sentiment."

Al: "Ha, don't worry about it, bro… Huh? Just the sentiment? Are you turning me down gently, perhaps? Are you saying we're not tied together this time?"

Al had endless questions about Subaru's response, but there was no mistaking how he took it.

He was really happy about the offer, but this was the Vollachian Empire. In the first place, more so than Flop and Medium, that Al was participating in the war was purely by chance—

Priscilla: "—Al."

Al: "Yeah, Princess."

While Subaru made his conclusions, a beautiful voice next to him unexpectedly called out Al's name.

The owner of the voice was, of course, Priscilla Barielle, who sat proudly at the roundtable. She squinted her crimson eyes and turned her emotionless gaze to Al.

To her own follower Al, who had just announced his next move,

Priscilla: "You were the one who offered to accompany me to the Fortress City, were you not? And now you wish to leave me, and go on an amusement trip with your clownish friend?"

Al: "I don't think it's gonna be a carefree trip, but that's the plan. Or are you gonna miss me, Princess? If you'd like to hug me and hold me back, go right ahead…"

Priscilla: "Nonsense."

Al: "Riiight."

Al's light-hearted comment was interrupted with a snarky remark, and he sagged down. It looked he hadn't been expecting much anyway.

While staring at the top of Al's head through his helmet, Priscilla let out a small breath and said,

Priscilla: "—Dance well, as best you can."

Al: "Oh, I gotcha. Princess's the one who shouldn't be careless just because Schult and I ain't around. Princess's beauty is the world's beauty."

Priscilla: "I needn't be told that. Who do you take me for?"

Al: "Of course, you're the center of the world, my Princess, Priscilla Barielle."

Al said those pretentious words in a droll tone and bowed frivolously in front of Priscilla. Then he turned around and raised his hand to Subaru, saying "Let's go".

Subaru: "What, that exchange made everything final? What about my opinion?"

Al: "What's with all the reluctance? It's depressing. Or is it just that I haven't noticed that I smell like an old man? Like, is it a pain for you to be around me?"

Subaru: "I'm not talking about that. I mean, what gives you the right to decide…?"

Al: "No, of course you're free to refuse, you know. But how can I refuse? —It's the Princess, yeah?"

Al cocked his chin, indicating Priscilla, who was fanning her face.

This regal behavior was the overwhelming basis for Al's words. To overturn Priscilla's decision, just how terrifying would that be.

Nevertheless, if it'd lead to uncertainty in the future, refusal was not an option.

Subaru: "Priscilla, I'm…"

Abel: "—I do not mind. He may follow us if need be."

Subaru: "Abel, damn you, you're not treating me like a military strategist!"

However, just as Subaru was about to present his opinion to Priscilla, he was shot in the back again.

Subaru glared at Abel, who had interrupted him, and he, too, crossed his arms proudly as he opposed the former. Like Priscilla, he intended to stubbornly fulfill his intentions here as well.

However, Subaru had no choice but to appeal directly to him with the argument that the terms of employment were different.

Subaru: "What's the point of being a military strategist if my opinions aren't even taken into account?"

Abel: "Do not be presumptuous. If your opinion were worth listening to, I would listen to it. Nevertheless, I am the one who calls the final shots. I would not entrust it to you."

Subaru: "Gnnh, are you a nasty boss who takes away the fruits of his workers' labor…?"

Abel: "Do not force me to repeat myself. —The results are yours. They must be."

Subaru: "…"

—The Emperor who had been ousted from his throne had a wise person following him that could not be underestimated.

What Abel wanted was a Subaru with such a reputation. And he was willing to give Subaru credit and exaggerate a bit to get it.

But that was no different than building up a myth.

Subaru: “Being a fake isn’t good enough. It’s got to be the real thing, or I’ll never get back what I lost.”

Abel: “—. If such is the case, then do attempt to convince me and everyone else with your own actions. If you cannot achieve it, it remains as a foolish and delusional remark harboring great ambitions.”

Subaru: “Bastard, I’ll do it. I’ll put any useless loans to good use.”

Biting down hard on his molars, Subaru replied peering into Abel’s cold black eyes.

Even though they were facing the same direction, they did not have a relationship where they could lower their guard around each other. Rather than the difference in the soil they stood on, as in the Kingdom and the Empire, it was something bigger that seemed to be the reason for such a divide.

As long as that was the case, he may disagree with Abel on a crucial point.

And once that happened, Natsuki Subaru—

Al: “…Perhaps he meant me as a useless loan, Princess?”

Priscilla: “Fool.”

Priscilla only briefly responded to Al, who slumped his shoulders and muttered that.

2

—The members of the expedition to the Demon City of Chaosflame had been decided, and the plan was set in motion.

Abel: “Get the soldiers of the Fortress City together by the time I return. I shall send word back soon."

Zikr: "I will, even if it costs me my life."

Receiving Abel's command, Zikr knelt down on one knee and reverently obeyed it.

Zikr, who had unexpectedly found himself in the position of an enemy of the mighty Empire, had no hesitation in his stance, but, naturally, that did not apply to the entirety of the city's troops.

In order to unify their intentions and bring them together as a single army, the efforts of the Generals would be essential. In that sense, Zikr's presence was a boon.

Subaru: "Zikr-san, I know this is a lot of work, but…"

Zikr: "No, this is the role that I, as a General, am supposed to play. It is nothing compared to the Bloodless Siege."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru cast his eyes down at Zikr's words, who gave a strong and proud smile.

Subaru's track record was that he had set up a bloodless siege, claimed he could do it, and failed miserably. As a result, he had failed to meet Rem's expectations and had caused her disappointment.

However, Zikr smiled at Subaru's work.

Zikr: "Do not be discouraged, you proposed the Bloodless Siege, and His Excellency approved it. And the fact is that I and my subordinates joined your ranks without shedding a single drop of blood."

Subaru: "Without shedding a drop of blood, that's…"

An exaggerated expression, yet Subaru choked upon seeing the bandage wrapped around Zikr's injury. But Zikr's cheeks relaxed, and then he forcibly peeled off his own bandage.

The bloodstained bandage was removed, revealing the wound on his arm.

Zikr: “For a Soldier, this is merely a scratch. Moreover, you should be proud. Because, as a result of your efforts, the number of Generals and Soldiers fighting for His Excellency has not decreased.”

Subaru: “…”

Zikr: “You are to do your duty. —Miss Natsumi.”

Subaru knew not if he would be able to respond properly to those words from Zikr.

However, even though Subaru could not give praise to himself outright, he had a newfound fondness for Zikr’s character for finding something to praise, and the fact that he had not allowed his death was an achievement.

And—

???: “—Are you sure you want to go?”

Subaru: “…”

???: “No, that was something ridiculous to say. Forget it.”

And with that, Rem, whose eyes could not hide her fatigue, shook her head.

Rem stood at the entrance of the City Hall with her cane. She was not dressed in traveling gear, but in the light vestment of a healing practitioner scrambling around to help the wounded.

Rem would remain in Guaral.

It was a temporary separation from Subaru, who was on his way to Chaosflame.

Before parting, Subaru smiled at that comment from Rem, who had come to see him off. Even though he knew it was out of concern, he couldn't help it.

Subaru: "Well, it's not all been good, but it's hard on me for you to tell me to forget something about you."

Rem: "Oh, I didn't mean to…"

Subaru: "Because everything you've given me, whether a strangled neck or a broken finger, is a precious memory that I can't live without."

Rem: "Huh?"

He had not meant to make fun of her, but he ended up being pierced by Rem's glaciated eyes.

When he thought back to the events that had impacted him since he was sent to Vollachia, it was just that many of the memories that popped into his mind held a powerful pang of pain and suffering.

Of course, there were many, many memories of hope and joy that he had stored deep in his heart, such as the fact that he had been able to come to terms with Rem and that she cared for him.

—But the most painful memories were stored in the same place, too.

Rem: "You're not nervous… Are you really alright?"

Subaru: "You know, it's exhausting to be tense all the time… If you're asking me if I'm okay, I'd say I've got a lot on my mind. If I could, I'd stay by your side forever."

Rem: "Haa."

Subaru: "An indifferent reply! No, I'm just glad you're not ignoring me…"

He was hurt by that casual attitude, but the words Subaru told Rem were his true feelings.

There had been a great deal of last-minute agonizing over leaving

Rem in Guaral. To be frank, even at this moment, he wanted to retract his previous statement, grab her by her slim arms, and whisk her away.

How good it would be to have Rem within Natsuki Subaru's arm's reach, to protect her from the hardships, fires, and every possible bad thing that could befall her?

Subaru: "In fact, I'd even like to tie you and me together the whole time with an unbreakable cord."

Rem: "Are you serious…?"

Subaru: "Somewhat."

Rem: "…"

Finally, he wasn't even able to get her to say "Huh?".

Of course, he knew that he would've been rejected had been serious about it, so he just went for it. It would be best if he could tie himself to Rem all the time, so that he would always know if she was safe and sound.

Depending on the situation, he may have to resort to the power he had awakened at Pleiades Watchtower—

Subaru: "I'm not sure how to use Cor Leonis, either…"

Subaru's new Authority, Cor Leonis, which had manifested at Pleiades Watchtower—it was the ability to vaguely grasp the location and situation of his allies, with Subaru at the center. In addition, Cor Leonis allowed Subaru to take on the burden of his friends and keep them in good health.

Perhaps he could use his power to take the burden of Rem's crippled legs and let her run around the fields and mountains in high spirits.

He didn't want Rem to go out of reach by doing that, though.

Subaru: "…"

Rem: “Hey, why do you look so depressed all of a sudden?”

Subaru: “Nothing, I’m just self-loathing here.”

Rem pointed out, and Subaru sighed, holding his own deflated face in his hands.

It occurred to him that Rem’s limp had kept her in a place where she could not get away from Subaru. The fact that she was incapable of escaping was one of the things that kept Subaru and Rem from ending their relationship.

The fact that Rem was not in perfect shape made him think that he was lucky.

Subaru: “This is why Rem can’t trust me.”

Subaru was always thinking only of himself.

He wished to be gentler. He desired to be kind, smart, and strong. He had been working hard for the sake of everyone, and now that he had taken another good look at himself in the Tower, it was still not enough.

—He could not retrieve the Natsuki Subaru that Rem believed in.

Rem: “Um…?”

Subaru: “Sorry. I was getting a little sentimental.”

Rem: “Sentchi-what, now?”

Subaru: “Don’t worry about it. It’s an expression that’s only understood by Al and… my hometown.”

Rem frowned slightly as Subaru shrugged his shoulders and replied. However, she rubbed her eyes and erased the wrinkles, as if to put off the feelings growing inside her.

There must be a lot of conflicts within Rem. Even the fact that she had come out to see him off like this must have been something she had put a lot of thought into.

Subaru: “I’m not going to be away for long, because I won’t be able to stand it without you.”

Rem: “…There you go doing that again.”

Subaru: “Ugh, I mean it though… If it makes you feel uncomfortable, I’ll restrain myself as much as I can.”

Rem: “You’re not going to try to stop, are you?”

Subaru’s shoulders slumped in remorse as he was met with a stare.

Of course, he did not want to offend Rem nor to make her uncomfortable. But that would not stop his strong feelings for Rem from overflowing.

No matter what Subaru, who had disappointed Rem, said.

Subaru: “Good luck, and I’ll be back soon. I’ll bring back good news.”

Rem: “…Yes, I’m looking forward to Abel-san, Medium-san and Taritta-san.”

Subaru: “Setting aside Al, what about me?”

Rem: “…”

Subaru asked, just to be sure, but the temperature of Rem’s gaze remained unchanged.

However, Subaru must have looked very miserable with that answer, because Rem fell silent for a while, then let out a small breath as if giving up, and stated,

Rem: “It’d be a lot better if I were to talk about believing or not believing in you.”

Subaru: “You’re not talking about believing or not believing…”

Rem: “As usual the evil smell still hasn’t faded, but that’s not the problem.”

Subaru: “That’s not the problem…?”

Rem’s pale-blue eyes continue to do so, a glint of disbelief in them that would not vanish.

They were going to be separated from each other, even if merely temporarily. Her distrust—even though he was aware that its origin had been Subaru’s blunder in Guaral, he wished to get rid of it, even if but a tad.

Not so much for Subaru’s own sake, but for the sake of Rem’s feelings as she waited in the city.

Subaru: “Tell you what, Rem, I’ll do the best I can. How can I help you get rid of your anxiety, or whatever it is?”

Rem: “…Well, why are you still dressed like that then?”

Subaru: “Eh?!”

Subaru looked down at himself as Rem spoke so with scornful eyes.

A wig with long sable hair, white powder to hide flaws, an outfit carefully designed to hide his body’s contours, and ornaments that were not overly flamboyant—

Subaru: “Is there something strange about it…?”

Rem: “One of the strange things is that there’s nothing strange about it, and one of the strange things is that you’re still dressed like that even when you’re leaving the Fortress City. What defense do you have for that?”

Subaru: “No, that’s why I explained to you that this is something that needs to be done!”

While watching the temperature of Rem’s eyes plummet, Subaru let out a sound like a shriek as he continued his Natsumi Schwartz shtick.

It was completely unexpected that this outfit was playing a role in her disbelief, but as he had relayed to Rem, there was a good reason for this.

Subaru: “Rem, I already told you yesterday, we’re people from a neighboring country. And if my real name gets out, I’m going to be in danger across this country. That’s why I need it. I can’t be the real me, I must be Natsumi Schwartz…!”

Rem: “Huh, I see.”

Subaru: “A reply that doesn’t dispel your disbelief at all!”

The temperature of Rem’s eyes did not change, and in fact, she grew ever more distrustful.

However, this was a countermeasure devised in earnest after weighing up Subaru’s situation and the role he had been assigned.

—The name “Natsuki Subaru”, could not be permitted to gain a reputation in the Vollachian Empire.

Natsuki Subaru was already Emilia’s knight, a major figure in the Kingdom of Lugunica. In other words, what he was doing now would undeniably count as impressive interference in the internal affairs of a neighboring country.

Subaru: “Interfering in another country’s internal affairs isn’t about being impressive or whatever.”

Whatever the case, the important point was that the consequences of Subaru’s actions, and the responsibility for them, did not rest with Subaru alone. —Bluntly, it might cause trouble for Emilia.

As her knight, Subaru, who had sworn to help her on her way to becoming the Monarch, could never allow her to be dragged down like that.

Subaru: “That’s where Natsumi Schwartz comes in. It doesn’t matter how well-known Natsumi becomes. Natsumi will just be a beautiful black-haired girl who suddenly appeared in the Vollachian Empire.”

Rem: “Are you finished?”

Subaru: “Not yet, no! Also, I wager that … Natsumi Schwartz’s name will leave a chance for my friends in Lugunica to notice me.”

Rather, that was the main reason for assuming the pseudonym of “Natsumi Schwartz”.

This instance in the Vollachia Empire did not mark the first time that Subaru had dressed up as a woman and called himself “Natsumi Schwartz”. There had been a time when he’d dressed up as a woman not as a sideshow at Roswaal’s mansion—but out of necessity, and his true identity had been known to everyone except Emilia.

The alias he had given at that time had been the same one. In other words, in the future, if Subaru’s existence became renowned in the Empire as Abel had hoped, and if the name that spread were to be that of “Natsumi Schwartz,” Emilia and the gang may have the opportunity to know that Subaru and the others have been sent to the Empire.

Hence—

Subaru: “I’m dressed like this out of necessity.”

Rem: “—. —. ——. I understand.”

It took quite a while, but he was relieved that Rem understood his approach.

Anyway, that was the reason why Subaru’s crossdressing would be maintained for a little while longer. He did not want to undermine Rem’s trust by having it prolong itself, but that would depend on the situation.

Subaru: “Rem, if you have a problem, talk to Flop-san or Zikr-san. If it’s too difficult for a man, Mizelda-san and the others are there. Don’t keep it all to yourself.”

Rem: “It doesn’t make sense for you to say that, but I’ll consider it… You as well, please try not to bother Abel-san or Medium-san.”

Subaru: “I’ll just watch my back.”

Medium and Taritta aside, Subaru was not going to shy away from burdening Abel.

Once in a while, Abel should have his cool demeanor broken, struggle, and break a sweat.

Once they had said their goodbyes and passed a few words of caution, it was time to depart.

Repressing the difficulty of leaving before the journey—

Subaru: “Rem, where’s that girl?”

Rem: “You mean Louis-chan? I think she’s with Utakata right now…”

Subaru: “I see.”

Rem: “…You don’t want me to go and get her, do you?”

The tone of her voice dropped, and Rem gave him a questioning look.

The tone of her voice was not pleasant, though she knew Subaru’s intentions. Rather, the tone was one of deep-seated irritation and bitterness.

Since the battles at the City Hall, Subaru’s suspicions about Louis had remained unchanged, despite the fact that they’d had very little contact in their hectic schedule. In fact, his suspicions were never cleared up.

Even though she seemed to have a soft spot for Rem and Utakata, and was getting along well with the Shudraqians and the others, there was no telling when and where she might reveal her true nature.

In that sense, he was worried about leaving Louis behind.

It was just that—

Rem: “You’ve already been keeping your eyes away from her for the entire duration of the mission to take down Guaral already, right?”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “After all this time, it’s still at this.”

Upon being told that by Rem, Subaru had no words to reply.

If Louis was going to take any action, she had already possessed several chances to do so. So it was probably useless to keep on being wary of Louis.

Subaru: “For the time being, I’ve already told Kuna and the others that they should remain vigilant.”

Rem: “Stubborn…”

A minute whisper of a word, and having caught it, Subaru mulled over it for a moment.

The reason why he had not disclosed Louis’s true nature and dangerous powers to Rem in the first place, was because she had no basis whatsoever to believe Subaru’s story. To lose Rem’s trust and alienate her by telling her about Louis’s situation was not within his wishes.

But what about now?

Their relationship had improved and she listened to him, albeit coldly. Maybe now she would not be so dismissive when he talked about Louis’ true nature.

Subaru: “…No, don’t do anything stupid.”

Subaru shook his head and rejected the idea that had faintly popped into his head.

She might believe him, but even then it would be pointless. Thus far, Louis had not revealed her true colors. It was hard to believe that she would give away her true nature as soon as he talked to Rem. The situation would remain the same.

It would only make Subaru feel better, but in turn, it would increase Rem's anxiety.

There was no need to do that.

Rem: "…What's with that face?"

Subaru: "Yeah, I was just hoping that only good fortune rains down on Rem's life."

Rem: "Huh?"

Rem's line of sight became narrower, as Subaru attempted to keep the warmth welling up inside him at bay.

However, if he tried to say something, the conversation would go on and on and on and on.

???: "—Bro! It's high time we left."

So said Al, leaning against the carriage, waving his lone hand.

Behind him was a carriage and a single horse-like creature boasting a body as sizable as the carriage—a creature called a Galewind Horse, which was said to pull them along their journey.

Rem: "I've heard that it's a rare animal in Vollachia, it seems it's only given to Generals…"

Subaru: "Zikr-san lent it to me. She's actually female, so he's consistent…"

Rem: "Consistent…?"

Rem tilted her head, seemingly unconvinced by Subaru's words.

This was how Rem reacted to Subaru's words, for better or worse. Such happy circumstances would have to be put on hold for a while.

Al: "Oiii, bro?"

Rem: "Um, Al-san is calling for you."

Subaru: “Yeah, I know. I’m aware of that…”

Rem: “—?”

Subaru: “The soles of my shoes think it’s hard to leave your side and lift off the ground… Ouch, ouch, ouch!”

The tip of the cane poked his back, and the sole of the shoe that should have been attached to the ground, left it. He was forced to take two or three more steps forward, opening the distance between him and Rem.

The distance between them became real.

Subaru: “Rem, I’ve told you many times…”

Rem: “I’ll be careful. I’ll also be vigilant. If I’m in trouble, I’ll turn to someone else. Goodbye.”

Subaru: “Uhh…”

Subaru’s shoulders slumped and he wilted as he was told goodbye in a harsh fashion. Directing her eyes towards him, Rem sighed deeply and said,

Rem: “Take care, and have a good trip. I’ll be waiting for your return.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Rem: “I’m not going to disappear all of a sudden… There are people other than you I trust.”

She added onto it, and Subaru reflected on it carefully.

Then he shook his head several times, even as Rem frowned in disgust, and,

Subaru: “—I’m off!”

And with a big wave of his hand, he was sent off by Rem.

3

???: "…"

The carriage was moving away, passing through the main gate of the Fortress City and disappearing into the distance.

The carriage was headed southeast of the city, to the Demon City of Chaosflame, where one of the most powerful people in the Empire was based, and the focus was on whether or not they could persuade that person to join them.

To be honest, if it meant recruiting someone, the choice to take Subaru with them was questionable.

???: "…I am certain that anyone would agree that you are putting in effort."

With her cane, Rem squinted at the tracks of the carriage, which was no longer visible.

Subaru had been in a joking mood up until the moment they parted. He had made all sorts of excuses, but all Rem could think of was that he did not want to stop dressing as a woman.

Of course, it did not signify that she believed all of the excuses to be lies.

???: "They have parted. The city shall be a little more airy once the boisterous ones have left. I am not sure however, if they shall be bringing back good news, or Abel's head."

Rem: "—Priscilla-san."

Suddenly, a voice called out from behind Rem as she stood there.

Without even needing to turn around, a beautiful woman who made a vivid impression in red stepped out beside her—Priscilla, wearing a luxurious dress and sparingly exposing her violent beauty.

Rem had not held a conversation with her since the latter had saved her life from Arakiya's rampage, during her assault on the City Hall.

So with her suddenly speaking to Rem, her confusion and bewilderment grew stronger.

Rem: "…Thank you very much."

Priscilla: "Hmm, what is this gratitude in regard to?"

Rem: "For what happened yesterday, at the City Hall. I was saved from that woman, Arakiya. Not only me, but everyone else as well. Thanks to you."

Priscilla: "I saved many lives you say? In my opinion, the credit for saving their lives goes to you. You used your talent and skills to save those who were dying. It was not my intention to show mercy to them. Do not take the liberty of twisting mine actions."

Rem: "I didn't mean to…"

Rem thought to herself as she tried to say that she did not.

It was a bad habit to prematurely judge the thoughts and actions of others and their intentions, and try to fit them into one's own mold. She remembered many times of such a thing, not pertaining only to Priscilla.

Considering her lost memories, she had only been alive for about two weeks.

Rem: "…"

Priscilla: "So, you will not state anything in riposte? That too, is an extremely dull decision, is it not?"

Rem: "…I'm sorry. I thought you were right. But I guess you can't twist the fact that I'm grateful to you, either?"

Priscilla: "Hoh?"

Speaking with interest, Priscilla pulled out a fan from her cleavage. Then opening it with a rapport, she hid her own shapely lips.

However, in her unconcealed eyes, there was a light of pleasure and opportunity that could not be concealed.

Priscilla: “I had heard that you had lost yourself, but… How dare you speak back to me?”

Rem: “Lost myself isn’t quite the right expression. Just because I can’t remember, doesn’t mean it’s gone.”

Placing a hand on her chest, Rem defended herself from Priscilla’s words.

If she had indeed disappeared, it would be no different from a dream unreachable by anyone. But Rem’s lost memories were not gone. They were not in Rem, but in Subaru, who was desperately trying to attain them again.

If what he had stated was true, she had a twin sister.

She wondered if there was any trace of the person she had been before she lost her memories in that sister, or if there was any trace of her in the friends that Subaru had talked about, in the people she had not yet seen.

If Rem could be satisfied with the fact that everything in her was gone, and that everything was building up from where there was nothing, then—

Rem: “—Were I able to do that, my heart wouldn’t be aching so much.”

Priscilla: “…”

Rem: “All the time, every second, I’m reminded of it. Every time I look into his eyes, I know I’m betraying his expectations.”

Of course, Subaru probably did not mean to do that.

The stench was so thick and intense to the point it was difficult to even regard him—and whenever she peeked at it, his face was always desperate.

And that desperation was directed at the version of herself that had disappeared, not the Rem that remained.

Rem: “How selfish of me. I’m disgusted with myself…”

So she could not tell him that she was relieved to be apart, she found it difficult to tell him, who wished to not be separated from her.

And not only was she relieved, but also had this disgusting feeling.

Priscilla: “—What had you stated to be your name?”

Rem: “Eh?”

Priscilla: “Your name. Surely you shall not tell me you have likewise lost your name? But then again, you are not nameless, you are certainly called by your name. I am quite certain it is…”

Priscilla raised her gaze slightly, searching the void for an answer to her question.

Perhaps she would remember Rem’s name. Even in the short time she had been present here, Rem could sense that she was a very intelligent person.

At the same time, she was also a very mean person.

Hence—

Rem: “—It’s Rem.”

And before Priscilla could say the wrong name on purpose, Rem said it herself.

Even though her memories had vanished, and there was no sign of them returning, and even though she was separated from the people who knew her in the past, at least the name she had been called and recognized for the past two weeks was real.

Priscilla: “Interesting.”

Priscilla muttered shortly after hearing that answer.

She then closed her fan with a snap, and lifted Rem’s chin with the tip of the closed fan ever so gently. Pierced by the crimson eyes up in front of her, Rem's throat was scorched by that heated gaze.

But even though she was unable to word it, she stared back with intent in her eyes.

Priscilla: "Rem, I shall be keeping you by my side for a while."

Rem: "…By your side?"

Priscilla: "You may have the background and ambition, but not the ability. Your ugly healing magic shall be rehabilitated by me in moderation. Then it shall become something you may lay your eyes upon."

Rem: "—! You're going to teach me how to heal?"

Priscilla: "Nonsense. I hold no background in the healing arts. I only have an eye for beauty. I shall know what you are lacking when I see it."

Rem: "…"

The answer that came back was not the one Rem had expected, but in a way it was either more than she expected, or very far from what she had expected.

However, if Rem's only current skill—the healing magic able to heal others, could then be utilized, it was worth relying on Priscilla's words.

If only she had more power, she thought. It was something she regretted not having.

Rem: "But, Priscilla-san, aren't you returning to your base?"

Priscilla: "I shan't. I have also attached that Al fellow to Abel. It shall not be long before we see whether the conditions I have imposed on him can be met. I shall wait here. There will be some inconveniences, but… I shall summon Schult to resolve them."

Rem: "Ha, haa…"

Rem was unaware of what was tugging at her heartstrings, but Priscilla had settled on staying in Guaral. Either way, it would be helpful to have her as a mentor.

There were still many people in this city in need of Rem's poor healing skills. She could not leave the city without tending to them.

Priscilla: "Now, with that decided, prepare a room for me. I shall allow Schult to take care of the details, but we require a place to spend today and tomorrow."

Rem: "I understand. I'll have it ready for you right away."

Priscilla gave orders as if she owned the place, but Rem didn't feel like disobeying, so she obeyed.

Priscilla had a way of making others obey her, but Rem herself had no resistance to being ordered to do what needed to be done.

With a flurry of steps and a cane in hand, she returned to the City Hall and thought that she should consult with Zikr about Priscilla's stay and the arrangements for her room.

The People of Shudraq were not used to city life as well, and so she felt bad that she had to rely on Zikr for so many things.

However, he was a man who would refuse or label something impossible, if solicited by a woman.

???: "Ah, Ree, there you are."

Rem: "Utakata-chan."

Inside the City Hall, on the way to the office where Zikr would be, she ran into a girl looking out of the corridor window—Utakata.

Upon noticing Rem's appearance, Utakata smiled at her with a friendly face. Rem could not avoid smiling in return, her cheeks relaxing.

Rem: "I'm sorry, I've been kind of busy."

Utakata: “Uu is fine, composed even. I’m more worried about Taa. She’s been wobbling around.”

Rem: “Taritta-san, right…”

Newly appointed as Chieftain, Taritta was accompanying Subaru and the others on their journey.

Even in the eyes of the young Utakata, Taritta must have looked shaky, almost crushed by her sudden assignment. Still, it was admirable of her to seek her own way out, and take the first step to gain confidence.

While Rem had remained crouched in place, whining that she had nothing, the people around her continued to move forward, leaving Rem behind.

She definitely did not wish to curse the world with her whining and drag everyone down alongside her.

Rem: “Taritta-san will be fine. So, Utakata-chan, the others, and I, will protect the place to which Taritta-san will come back.”

Utakata: “Mhm, got it! Ree, you’re dependable.”

Rem: “I wonder. When you say that, I feel a little more confident.”

Rem’s cheeks relaxed slightly at Utakata’s unpretentious words.

Then suddenly, Rem noticed something strange and looked around. Utakata, standing in the aisle looking out the window, was alone. And there was no one else around.

It still seemed like an inappropriate environment for a child to be walking around on their lonesome, but she wasn’t trying to blame her for not being with an adult. —Rather, it was something more fundamental.

Rem: “Are you alone, Utakata-chan? Where’s Louis-chan?”

Although she had been left to her own devices for a long time, Louis had grown quite fond of Utakata.

They were friends of the same age and seemed to have a comfortable relationship, which was why Utakata being alone was such a conspicuously uncomfortable situation.

Of course, she was probably overthinking this, but—

Rem: “Isn’t Louis-chan with you?”

Utakata: “Yes! Lou already left.”

Rem: “…Eh?”

Rem went stiff upon hearing Utakata’s words, the former’s head tilted back.

Stopping her thoughts from going blank for a moment, Rem did her best to use her brain to ascertain the truth of Utakata’s words.

Louis was not with her, so the meaning of Utakata’s words was—

Rem: “L-Louis-chan’s—”

Utakata: “Mm, she’s gone! Uu helped her get into the carriage.”

And the brave and courageous Shudraq girl puffed up her chest with pride, speaking those words to Rem, in a completely nonchalant manner.

Chapter 34:
A Quarrel in the Carriage

1

The carriage moved slowly, but not to the extent of being idyllic, down the road.

The chestnut-haired Galewind Horse, swinging its huge body with a delicacy that belied its sturdy figure, was carefully escorting the carriage carrying Subaru and the others.

Subaru: “How predictable, we’ve got Leidy, who isn’t quite lady… Given it’s Zikr-san’s beloved horse.”

Subaru recalled this as he looked at the Galewind Horse as it dashed, its master in the forefront of his mind.

Zikr’s beloved horse, which they had borrowed, was named Leidy—a name very close in meaning to “lady”, and a surprisingly fateful one for a person dubbed the Womanizer.

In any case, thanks to Leidy’s efforts, the group’s journey to the Demon City of Chaosflame had been progressing smoothly. If things continued at this pace, they expected to arrive in about four days.

Subaru: “But it’s not just about arriving, you know. Not only the reputation of member of the Nine Divine Generals we’re going to meet, but the sound of the name “Demon City” is also scary in the first place.”

The Demon City, a city bearing the word “demon” in its name. It seemed unlikely to be a simple matter.

He’d gotten word that it was a melting pot of a diverse mix of races, but was that enough to crown the city with the words “chaos” and “demon”?

With the fact that one of the Nine Divine Generals, someone who often caused a rebellion, was in charge included, there was the impression that they were only trying to urge on Subaru's sense of danger. —That was one of the reasons why he had not brought Rem along.

Subaru: "I wonder what kind of chaos awaits us…"

Al: "As chaotic as it sounds, it still confuses the hell out of me. That outfit and the bro I know don't seem to go together quite as well, and it's starting to look like a bug."

Subaru: "Ah? You're still saying these things?"

Subaru, who was in the front seat of the spacious carriage, looking out the window at the back of Leidy's nimble running figure, turned around while gently using his hand to stroke his long black hair blowing in the wind.

Raising his chin as if he were exasperated was Al, sitting at the back of the carriage.

Al was occupying a three-seater in a slouched posture. He then hooked his fingers on the chin of his helmet, making his raised head look down.

Al: "You're definitely doing that on purpose."

With a bitter tone, he blurted that out due to Subaru's behavior.

Subaru shrugged his shoulders, feeling disappointed at Al's strong rejection. Surprisingly, Al was the second person after Rem to criticize Subaru's crossdressing.

Abel, the Shudraqs, the O'Connell siblings, and Zikr, all of them naturally indulged him once they accepted it, but Al kept harping on it.

Subaru: "The same mouth that had said they were going to support me is now complaining… So that whole mysterious conversation was a lie?"

Al: "It was no lie, and my decision to help you's genuine bro, but that's not the same thing as this. I'm sure you'll be able to understand why I ain't happy with your crossdressing, bro."

Subaru: "If you're on my side, you'll have to accept me as I am in the meanwhile."

Al: "You sure you wanna keep being called bro when in that disguise? For real?"

Once someone reiterated this to him, even Subaru would feel that it was a bit unreasonable.

Natsuki Subaru and Natsumi Schwartz—albeit the two names may share the same body, there was a clear difference in the way they were and the way they stood.

In other words, Natsuki Subaru was his grounded self, and Natsumi Schwartz was an idealized image of his own fickle self.

Subaru: "Of course, I don't want to be a woman. It's about self-confidence and all that."

Al: "I didn't ask!"

Despite being rebuffed out loud, Subaru looked down at his body and changed his perception.

Natsumi Schwartz had now been recreated with the use of a wig and makeup, but unlike the time he was posing as a dancer, his role in the future would be more intellectual.

Therefore, the costumes and makeup had been put together to reflect that impression.

The red-colored outfit with a collar was a one-of-a-kind design based on the uniforms of the Vollachian Empire's officers—the one worn by Zikr had a similar design. He didn't normally wear a cloak unless necessary as it inhibited his movement, but he was proud of the fact that this bluff was working.

Further down were pants, on his feet were tough boots, and on his head lay a military cap with a bird's feather on it.

This was the complete picture of the Female Military Strategist, Natsumi Schwartz.

Subaru: "Well, I guess I'm more of a female soldier than a female strategist. When you think of women in military attire, you'd expect them to be dressed as men, right?"

Al: "Even when I'm literally looking at the fact, of you, bro, crossdressing as a woman, who's crossdressed as a man, my confusion is only getting worse."

Subaru: "I don't want to stand out, so it's put together in the Empire's style. It's a male look, so I drew a bit of inspiration from Crusch-san's taste."

Al: "I ain't sure if the Duchess'll be pleased with that expression, saying that you got a little inspiration from your previous encounters with her… Am I the only one who thinks that this is strange? What do you think about it, Emperor-san?"

Al raised his right arm in exasperation to Subaru, who explained the concept. With that, Al then turned his lifted right arm to the front, pointing at the figure in front of him.

In the middle seat of the carriage, or in other words, the position where he was endlessly sandwiched in between their conversation, was Abel, looking out the window with a grim expression.

He seemed to be pondering something with a serious look on his face. He raised his eyebrows at the imprudent name Al used, and without turning around, he coldly voiced a "Clown".

Abel: "I do not have the recollection of allowing you to call me that. Know that one careless word can jeopardize the very existence of the Empire. If you do not, you shall lose more than just your other arm."

Al: "Ugh, gimme a break. I've gotten used to it, but an inconvenience's an inconvenience. If I lose another one, it'll be more than just an inconvenience."

Abel: "Then you should bear that in mind."

Al: “Hey, heeey, the imperial way’s not even funny. It’s hard for comedians like ourselves. Right, bro?”

Subaru: “I don’t want to be asked for my agreement.”

The atmosphere was tense, with no room for jokes or light-hearted conversation, but Subaru had no intention of criticizing the Empire, like saying that it was a problem of the country’s character.

At most, as an individual, he found Abel to be difficult to get along with. The answer itself was light-hearted, so it was a complaint that he had never felt on the surface.

Of course, when it came to issues of beliefs and values, it did not stop at that.

Al: “So, what do you think of bro’s outfit, Abel-chan?”

Abel: “…”

For a moment, Abel’s brow creased at the new name.

Subaru was surprised by Al’s daredevil approach, but after a few moments of silence, Abel snorted roughly at the insolence and disregarded him.

Was it better than being called “Emperor-san”? Unsure of Abel’s thoughts on this, Subaru suppressed an inner chill with a sigh.

In the meantime, Abel looked at Subaru again to answer Al’s question,

Abel: “Yes, it is a ridiculous look, but I do not care as long as it pays off. You should separate your abilities from your hobbies.”

Subaru: “Don’t stab me in the back under the guise of backing me up. How many times do I have to tell you that it’s not a hobby, but a necessity? Do you think I dress like a woman because I like it?”

Abel: “…”

Subaru: “Don’t just say nothing!”

Because of the suggestive silence, Subaru's suspicions were unfairly intensified.

Naturally, this was a very unpleasant understanding for Subaru. He did not want to dress as a woman at all, if it was not required.

However, if there was even the slightest possibility that it would resolve the situation, he would not exclude crossdressing as an option. That was all there was to it.

Subaru: "Everyone has a proper… argument prepared by them, listen."

Al: "You said you were armed with an argument. Anyway, I'm pretty sure it's a cliché. The Emperor who was expelled from the throne recruits allies to regain it… In that case, it‘s only natural that there's a position for a mysterious woman to accompany him."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's right. Like a strategist or a mage. And usually in those stories they have that sort of position be the heroine… I'm not the heroine!"

Al: "Don't get mad even though you said it yourself. You'd surprise everyone, not to mention me."

Subaru was indignant, but his intentions were not understood by anyone other than his fellow countryman Al.

In the first place, there were many phrases that would not be understood even in their homeland. Al's knowledge was quite close to Subaru's, as evidenced by the fact that he could even employ it.

Subaru: "…I never asked about which time period he came from, or anything in depth."

So far, even though Subaru had shared the information that he and Al were from the same place, they had never talked about which period they had arrived from.

Al had once told Subaru that he had been summoned to this other world nearly twenty years ago.

Furthermore, his experience had been so terrible, that he had even lost one of his arms.

Though the confession itself had been done without a care, the reality of it was not so frivolous.

The anguish and despair that Al had endured must have been a constant part of his everyday life. Al was a man who had been tormented by the harshness of this other world much more than Subaru.

Now that he was speaking about it, he realized how blessed he was compared to him.

At the same time, he was wondering what the difference was between himself and Al.

Because of this fear, Subaru had not tried to have deep conversations with Al, and Al had not tried to go any further either.

However, considering the language used and the sub-cultural topics that they could understand, the original world where Subaru and Al lived must have been in the same time frame—If he had been summoned twenty years ago, he must have been the same age and from the same epoch.

The current age difference between Subaru and Al was merely a function of the time in this other world they had been summoned to. Henceforth, despite the age difference, he and Subaru were on the same wavelength in their conversations.

—That seemed to be the cause of the vague tingling sensation Subaru felt when interacting with him.

Al: "—I hate clichés."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Al: "A suspicious mage beside the Emperor… Ain't that a cliché? What about that?"

Al's light-hearted comment snapped Subaru, whose thoughts had gone astray, back to reality.

Blinking his eyes, Subaru nodded his head in agreement with what he called "a cliché", with a "Yeah".

Subaru: "It's a cliché, indeed. A bewitching female mage seduces the Emperor and slowly turns him into a puppet of her will… And then the prosperous country collapses."

Abel: "I shall not allow it to collapse on its own. I shall take it back no matter what. It just—"

Subaru: "Just?"

Abel: "It was neither a mage nor a woman, but it is true that there was one dubbed the Stargazer."

Subaru & Al: "—Stargazer?"

The words from Abel's mouth were met with overlapped doubts from both Subaru and Al.

It was a word they had never heard before, but they thought it strange.

Subaru had never heard of this word before, but strangely enough, he held an idea of the characters in his head. And once the characters fit, the role of the word also came to mind, vaguely.

Subaru: "Maybe they're a Feng Shui master, or something of the sort… kinda like the position of a fortune teller?"

Al: "It's more like a prophet, ain't it? I mean, that's what the stone tablet does in the Kingdom."

Subaru: "Yeah, the Dragon History Stone, they called it…"

Convinced by Al's words, Subaru retrieved the knowledge of the prophetic tablet passed down in the Kingdom from his head.

Although Subaru hadn't laid eyes on the actual artifact, it seemed that the tablet contained information about future events that would occur in the Kingdom of Lugunica, and was said to be a useful artifact that also provided solutions to said problems.

However, having forecasted that the Royal Family of Lugunica would succumb to illness, the Tablet had presented an approach for the selection of the next Monarch—In other words, the Royal Selection, in which Emilia and Priscilla were partaking.

Honestly, it was a result that made him tilt his head at the idea of being grateful to the prophecy tablet.

Subaru: "If it was serious about giving advice on how to save the Kingdom, it would tell them how to cure or stop the disease in the first place…"

As he deepened his knowledge as a knight of a Royal Candidate, he learned that the Royal Family of Lugunica possessed no tyrannical behavior or imbecility, and were, at the very least, loved by their people.

Many of their subjects and citizens had been saddened by their deaths, but none had been happy about it. —It was still a mystery as to why the Dragon History Stone had forsaken them.

Subaru: "If the other party's a slab of stone, it'd be a pipe dream to get any answers."

Al: "If they're a stone slab, then sure, but the Stargazer ain't one, right? What role did he play in the court, Abel-chan?"

Abel: "—. Not too far from all of your perception. Because the power of the Stargazer was to peer into the future, to preserve the Empire."

Abel's answer to the question was roughly in line with the impression Subaru had gleamed from the name "Stargazer". Nevertheless, there was one problem.

Subaru: "…But they weren't able to predict things. You were driven out, after all."

Abel: “As I told you before. The Stargazer’s power is for the preservation of the Empire. —It does not necessarily coincide with my safety.”

Subaru: “That would mean… that it’d be better for the Empire if you were chased away.”

Abel: “At least, I suppose that is what the Stargazer has settled upon.”

Abel crossed his arms quietly as he answered nonchalantly.

It could be argued that the Tablet and the Stargazer, two objects with similar roles, had both overlooked the plight of what should be the most noble position in their respective countries.

To suspect a connection between the Kingdom and the Empire was tempting, however—

Subaru: “Before that, I’m starting to feel that there’s a problem with you, who got abandoned by the Prime Minister, your right-hand man, and this prophet. You sure it’s okay to put you back on the Emperor’s throne?”

Al: “Oioi, that’s too straight of a fireball, bro.”

Subaru: “No, don’t you feel concerned when hearing the situation surrounding this as well?!”

Al: “But that’s it. Afro General approved of Abel-chan, didn’t he?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. Then I guess it’s okay…”

With the mention of the Afro General, Zikr, Subaru was peacefully convinced.

Zikr was on Abel’s side, which was a relief, although it made him worry about a lot of other things. On the other hand, without Zikr, it was highly doubtful that he could have gone along with Abel, given his suspicions.

Regardless of how much he wanted to get himself and Rem back to the Kingdom safely, it did not mean that he did not care what happened to the Empire.

To be honest, Subaru held more bad memories of the Empire than good ones, but there were many people he wished to see happy, including the People of Shudraq and the O'Connell siblings.

Subaru: "I'm starting to get pretty worried about including you in that, but…"

Abel: "Whatever you say, no matter what the Stargazer sees regarding the future, I have my answer."

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "If the Stargazer decides that I cannot remain on the throne, I shall not comply. If the Stargazer declares that my presence shall destroy the Empire, then I shall disprove that with my own hands."

Abel's declaration was a little too passionate to be casual.

Abel's fervor was equal to the fervor with which he had stated he would take back his throne on numerous other occasions. This was Abel's unyielding position and his unshakable heart.

Subaru did not doubt Abel's last line, because he could feel that it was not merely revenge or rebellion, but a larger and purer belief.

Other than that, he really wished more of the surrounding parts could be embellished to make it believable.

???: "—Ah! Guuuys! Look ahead a little bit, look ahead~!"

Subaru: "Hm?"

Just as the conversation was coming to a close, from the front of the carriage—from the coachman's bench suddenly came a boisterous voice, and Subaru and the others turned their attention to it.

Medium, who was holding the reins of Leidy on the coachman's bench, was the one to raise that lively voice.

It seemed she had not been allowed to take the reins during her travels together with Flop, so she had taken the initiative by speaking up, “I want to!”.

Medium, her tall, slender frame tucked into the platform, grasped the reins in one hand while pointing to the path ahead with the other.

Medium: “I see a lot of hustle and bustle up ahead! Can you see it too, Natsumi-chan?”

Subaru: “Uh… Barely looks like anything, I guess.”

Subaru leaned out of the window of the carriage, but he could not be sure of what Medium had been talking about with “hustle and bustle”. Maybe it was the angle, or maybe it was just his eyesight.

Subaru had believed to be in possession of good eyesight, but in this other world, that was no longer the case.

People from this other world had eyesight of a different level. Emilia probably had a visual acuity of 5.0. Subaru had the impression he had seen a TV program in his original world that said people in Africa had exceptionally good eyesight.

In this regard, Taritta’s eyesight, as one of the amazonesses of this other world, was quite impressive.

Subaru: “So, what about you, Taritta-san? Can you see it?”

Taritta: “Wait a minute, that’s…”

She answered Subaru’s call, but Taritta was neither inside the carriage nor on the driver’s platform.

Leaning out of the window, Subaru beckoned her; she was atop of carriage, of all places.

Positioned on the roof of the moving carriage, from which Taritta served as a sentinel keeping watch of all directions.

Al: “Is it just me, or is it kinda uncomfortable to have people on the roof like that?”

Subaru: “I don’t know about Abel, but I’m used to it with our Garfiel.”

Al mentioned Taritta whose task lay atop the horse-drawn carriage, but Subaru, familiar with Garfiel who wished to play the same role, was not particularly uncomfortable with it.

In fact, in this other world, it was essential to be vigilant while on the move, so it will have proper effects rather than just a chuuni thing. The fact that Abel did not halt her was proof of that.

Taritta: “…Looks like Imperial Soldiers are gathering. Looks like an Ox Cart or something is being stopped in front of us.”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Abel: “—A checkpoint.”

So muttered Abel to himself after receiving Taritta’s report and understanding the situation.

The checkpoint that came to Subaru’s mind was the one at the main gate of Guaral. However, the fact that the checkpoint was not at the entrance to the city, but in the middle of the road, seized his attention.

It was natural to check the comings and goings in a city, but the impression given by checkpoints on the roads was different, in that they were in response to some kind of anomaly.

In short, they were most likely looking for something specific.

Subaru: “No way, us? Arakiya got away from us, and that’s how things got spread?”

Abel: “Of course, it is inevitable that information shall eventually leak out from Arakiya. But I do not believe it can move as quickly and accurately as this. In addition, the Demon City is in the opposite direction of the Imperial Capital.”

Subaru: “So location-wise, they shouldn’t have any reported information?”

Abel: “Yes. —Although there is the matter of her companion, is there not?”

With his arms crossed, Abel was concerned not about Arakiya, but about her companion.

Arakiya’s companion was the person who had retrieved her from Guaral.

Al: “The guy who dragged Lil’ Miss Arakiya away? He’s the kinda guy who’d fearlessly ride into the middle of enemy territory in the situation, he’s prolly a sharp and able person.”

Subaru: “A sharp and able person…”

Abel’s concern and Al’s point of view made Subaru imagine something unpleasant.

As far as the Imperial Soldiers in the Fortified City were concerned, Subaru had an idea of who the “sharp ones” were. And amongst the Imperial Soldiers who had surrendered after the fall of the City Hall, the object of Subaru’s fear could not be counted.

Perhaps they had mixed amidst the soldiers who had abandoned the city and fled.

Subaru: “No way.”

He did not want to think that it was that man who had taken Arakiya away, no matter how much he wanted to.

He wished that the fate of their relationship would not grow any deeper.

Subaru: “—. Right now, we need to focus on the problem at hand. What do we do? Do you think we can bypass it?”

Taritta: “Right now, I don’t think they’re even aware of us yet…”

Medium and Taritta, two people with excellent eyesight, had been the first to spot them.

Before the Soldiers ahead of them noticed, they could go off the road and avoid the checkpoint. If nothing about them was found to be amiss, they could pass through brazenly, but if they had contraband or something, they would have no choice but to evade.

But—

Abel: "—Hold it, do not take detours."

Subaru: "Ahh?"

And just before he gave the order to get off the road, Abel, of all people, stopped him.

In response to his call for restraint, Subaru turned his suspicious eyes to Abel.

Subaru: "You tell us to not take a detour, what else do you want us to do? If they find you, we're in trouble."

Abel: "I want to know their goal. If the fall of Guaral is the matter, the developments would be too swift. If it is my whereabouts, I would like to learn what the Soldiers say they are searching for."

Subaru: "Sooo, what's going to happen when they find you? You'll poke the beehive and we'll end up getting into a raging car chase."

Of course, the possibility existed that they would be caught on the spot.

Of the five people in the horse-drawn carriage, only three, excluding Subaru and Abel, were capable of fighting, but their total strength was not much different from that of the dancing troupe that had ridden into Guaral. In the event that they were to escape in their carriage, it would be extremely difficult to shake the enemy off on the wide-open road.

Subaru: "The conditions are too bad. Or do you have a better plan?"

Abel: “There is. —You.”

Subaru: “Heh?”

Subaru was stunned as he weighed the risks and rewards and decided that the odds were not in his favor.

They were supposed to be talking about the odds of taking on a dangerous bet right now.

Subaru: “What do you mean, you want me to be the one to appear out there?”

Abel: “There is already a precedent for this in the Fortified City. The carriage is disguised so as not to be recognizable as one from the army. It shall be as we agreed upon in advance.”

Subaru: “Wasn’t that just preparation for small talk while on the road?!”

Abel’s brash statement had been a set-up for making conversation with other vendors and travelers along the way, not a premise to fool the carefully watching Imperial Soldiers.

Yet, Abel turned a deaf ear to Subaru’s complaints that sounded like screams,

Abel: “I shall hide at the bottom of the wagon. You get the Soldiers to talk.”

Subaru: “Wait, wait, wait, are you serious?”

Abel: “Do not allow the soldiers to look into the bottom of the carriage. You too might lose your life.”

Subaru: “I don’t know why you’re so high and mighty…!”

With that said, Abel stood up from his seat and put his hands on the floor. There was a slight gap in the floor underneath the seats, and the floorboards flipped up, allowing him to descend onto the bottom part of the carriage.

The horse-drawn carriage had been originally intended to be pulled by the Galewind Horse of General Second-Class Zikr.

The exterior of the carriage had been replaced to disguise the fact that it was related to the Imperial Army, but this did not mean that its functions had been disabled. The carriage, designed to be used by people of high rank, had a mechanism which allowed the floorboards to come off, so that they could hide in case of emergency.

Subaru was sure the one who had crafted this horse-driven carriage had never imagined that it would be the Emperor who would be hiding there.

Anyway, Abel quickly lifted the floorboards and twisted his thin body into the narrow space. In earnest, he had entrusted the rest to Subaru.

It was not so much daring as it was pride.

Al: “Good grief, Abel-chan’s so pushy. Nevertheless, we got no choice but to do it, bro.”

That was Al’s comment about Abel, who had only made his point and quickly made his retreated. His words after that were based on the reaction of the checkpoint in the carriage’s path.

It seemed that their presence had become known to their side as well.

Taritta: “Natsumi, they’re aware of our presence.”

Medium: “Then, it looks like we have no choice but to go! Alriiight~, good luuuck~, Natsumi-chan!”

Courteously, Taritta’s and Medium’s shouts eliminated the option of a detour. Changing direction at this point would be like advertising “It’s inconvenient to have the carriage inspected”.

Therefore, they had no option but to proceed as His Majesty, the Emperor, desired, even though it was annoying.

Al: “Bro, you ready?”

Subaru: “—Yeah, yeah, I know right! It’s nice to meet you!”

Al: “…Well, that was some switch.”

Delivering a light tap to his cheeks with both hands, Subaru flipped a switch inside himself.

If he slapped his cheeks hard enough, his makeup would be ruined. If he scratched his head, his hair would get messy. If he did not shelve his inner irritation, his words would become rough. —He could not fool the Imperial Soldiers with that.

He had to play the part that was required of him, and accomplish the duty that was expected of him.

That was the first step for Natsuki Subaru to regain the lost trust.

Subaru: “Oh, thank you for your service, gentlemen of the Army. What can I do for you?”

Subaru said, as he leaned out of the window, smiling as dainty and charming as he could, and waved cheerfully to the Imperial Soldiers who stopped the carriage.

2

—The Imperial Soldiers who had halted the carriage did not take the presence of a carriage carrying only Al, in addition to the three “women”, Medium, Taritta and Subaru, seriously.

What they had requested, was the identity of the group and the purpose of the trip.

As they had agreed upon beforehand, Al and Medium had been hired to guard Subaru, the daughter of a lower-ranking count, and Taritta was to be Subaru’s servant.

Before leaving Guaral, Taritta’s style had undergone trial and error, and been changed from the Amazoness style that was instantly recognizable as that of the People of Shudraq.

Currently, Taritta was dressed in the style of a male butler, which was Subaru's preference. Al given rave reviews, his words being "Bro's dressed as a woman who's dressed as a man, and Taritta-chan's dressed as a man… I don't understand anything anymore".

Anyway, the Imperial Soldiers at the checkpoint had not been suspicious of Subaru and the others' kind of behavior.

Only when being told that their destination was Chaosflame, did they display a meaningful hesitation, saying, "Well, that's…". Even among them, the Demon City's impression seemed to be poor.

Soldier: "I wouldn't really recommend visiting the Demon City, young lady."

Subaru: "Even if you say so, I'm afraid my father will be angry with me. Even though I'm a noble, it's not a luxury the family of a lowly Count can afford…"

Soldier: "Hmm, I see. Well, you seem to have a good head on your shoulders, so I guess there's nothing to worry about."

Subaru: "Oh my, you flatter me."

Smiling with the back of his hand over his mouth, Subaru elegantly sidestepped the Soldier's suspicion.

In general, there seemed to be no problem in getting through the checkpoint. The only thing left to do was—

Subaru: "Well, there appears to be quite strict security… Has something happened?"

Soldier: "Oh no, it's nothing serious. There's deserters from a recent skirmish up north near Buddheim, so we're looking for them… And we're also looking for a wanted criminal."

Subaru: "Wanted, is it?"

Careful not to let his voice waver, Subaru frowned at the sound of that.

Fortunately, the soldier did not seem to notice Subaru's surging inner thoughts and nodded, "Yeah".

Soldier: "There's talk of a man wanted in the Imperial Capital being sighted around here. It's said that he's about fifty-years-old and has blue hair, do you have any knowledge of him?"

Subaru: "—. No, I'm afraid not. But to have deserters from the Imperial Soldiers, who are renowned for their strength, makes me worry that the mantra of the Empire is being disturbed."

Medium: "It's okay, Natsumi-chan! We're here for you, so don't worry, don't worry! Let's hold our chests out strong!"

Subaru: "Well, that's reassuring, Medium-san. Ohohoho."

Subaru had not meant for that to happen, but Medium's blunt words made the Imperial Soldiers lose their composure.

There was the possibility that by probing into it, they would become suspicious, but it seemed that they had been successful in evading that worry. Taritta, too, was silent and played the role of a butler who did not interrupt her master unnecessarily.

She had a tendency to be shy, though, so the silence may just have been natural.

And, except for the women, the most worrying person was Al and his suspicious appearance—

Al: "My oh my, thank you Soldiers for all your hard work. It's thanks to your hard work that a half-wit like me's allowed to work so lazily."

Soldier: "…We are only working for the well-being of the Empire. Definitely not for someone as weak and lazy as you."

Al: "I know, I know. I understand where I stand."

Al, too, had perfectly handled the disrespectful move from the Imperial Soldiers, having been met with scorn.

It was hard to discern if he was acting or not, but he had a good point. The unnaturalness of hiring the one-armed Al as a bodyguard was also quashed ahead of time by Subaru.

Subaru: “It wouldn’t look good if I didn’t say I hired him as a bodyguard, would it? With his arm like that, I’m sure he used to be a Soldier serving this country as well.”

Soldier: “…If he resigned his position because of his injuries, there’s nothing for us to say. Just be very careful, because it doesn’t mean that he doesn’t have evil intentions.”

Treating Al’s arm as a strength rather than a weakness reinforced the rationale for his frivolous attitude.

The Imperial Soldiers, with their aversion to weakness and their respect for the strong, were also considerate of those who had retired from the front lines due to unhealable wounds.

—With that, they had been capable of getting through the checkpoint without any major problems.

Medium: “Well, Natsumi-chan was really good. I’m so impressed with you!”

Medium praised him as he waved from the platform towards the Imperial Soldiers in the distance. At her words, Subaru shook his head with a, “No, no”,

Subaru: “It’s no big deal. If the checkpoint had been set up for a more pressing reason, we would’ve had to use a lot of finesse to get through… In that sense, I guess you could say we were lucky.”

Medium: “Yeah? Then I guess so. I’m often told I’m lucky by big bro too! I feel that way too.”

Subaru: “Hehe, both Medium-san and Flop-san are naturals at finding happiness, aren’t they?”

Subaru smiled at Medium’s pleasant answer as he put his hand on his cheek.

At this exchange between Subaru and Medium, Taritta, who was sitting in the front seat of the carriage with an exhausted look on her face, turned around. Subaru tilted his head at her meaningful gaze, as she was relieved of her tension and patted her chest in relief.

Subaru: “What’s the matter, Taritta-san. Is there a problem?”

Taritta: “No, I don’t have a problem, but… Natsumi, how can you be so bold? I’ve been wondering that ever since you planned to dress as a dancer.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, I guess.”

Taritta had found Subaru’s transformation into a woman hard to get used to.

The time Taritta had spent with him in women’s clothing was the same as Abel’s; ever since they had entered Guaral. And yet, it seemed strange to her.

In a way, Abel and Flop had been able to pull it off with zero effort—Bianca and Flora were able to overcome all problems with their natural good looks.

Of course, Subaru’s character, Natsumi Schwartz, had no such sort of grounding.

There was a quality that could not be disguised by clothes or makeup alone, and it was a problem that inevitably arose for those who were not in its possession. —It took effort to compensate for that.

Subaru: “So, I just tried my hardest, that’s all.”

The perfection of Natsumi Schwartz was part of the results of humanity’s accumulated quest for beauty.

Were it not for these pioneers, Subaru’s crossdressing would not have been accepted even at a school festival. Behind its success, were the forefathers’ many wishes and efforts.

Because of this, he also had a sense of being unable to disregard what had been established.

Taritta: “I’m jealous of your confidence… I don’t have that.”

Subaru: “Confidence… What I have is trust in Natsumi Schwartz, but confidence is a different thing.”

Taritta: “Eh? Eh? Eh?”

Al: “Oioi, bro, don’t do that. You’ll confuse Taritta-chan. That level of thinking’s a bit too much for us to follow, y’know?”

In place of Taritta, her flickering to and fro, Al interrupted Subaru’s self-assertion.

He was unaware that he was talking about something so difficult that it would confuse the two of them. He had merely stated that even though it was difficult to believe in himself, he could believe in the ideal image he had created in his mind — one that he could believe in.

Subaru: “I always envision myself as the best version I can be—you know?”

Taritta: “I-I find that a difficult concept to understand…”

Subaru: “But I’d recommend trying that mindset, you know? Comparing yourself to the person you admire can be painful, but… you can envision your ideal self.”

Taritta: “…”

Taritta’s eyes widened slightly as Subaru put his hand on his chest and spoke.

Something about it seemed to resonate with her in no small manner.

Taritta: “Envision, your ideal self…”

Resonated such, that it seemed that she had quietly stored it within her heart

Al: “Deserters aside, dunno what the wanted guy did. Even if it’s a big help that Abel-chan’s story hasn’t spread, that was a pretty big deal.”

Subaru: “Well… A blue-haired man of about fifty years of age, I’m sure there are many gentlemen who fit that description, and I can even think of one in my memory, you know?”

In his original world, blue hair did not occur naturally, but in this other world, it could be seen as a not-so-uncommon hair color, Rem at the forefront.

The wanted man at the checkpoint earlier also fit that description, as did the heavy drinker who had once helped him in the city of Guaral—the mercenary named Rowan also possessed said characteristic.

Unfortunately, Rowan’s demonstration of his abilities had been foiled by Todd’s surprise attack, but Subaru believed that he would have been quite good were he able to do battle in a proper fashion.

However, Subaru did not believe him to be a wanted man, one that would require the mobilization of so many Imperial Soldiers. So it was possibly a matter of someone else, with similar characters, that was wanted.

Subaru: “In any case, Abel’s situation hasn’t been reported to the ordinary soldiers yet… As long as there’s no disorder in the Imperial Capital, it seems safe to assume that a body double’s acting as Emperor.”

Al: “Dunno if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. Honestly, I think it would’ve been more convenient for us if the Emperor’d been absent and that there was a lotta commotion.”

Subaru: “I feel like it has its advantages and disadvantages. Setting handling things if he’s discovered aside, the gravity of finding Abel remains unchanged.”

If the Emperor’s absence were to become public and the Empire thrown into turmoil, it was currently unknown whether Subaru and the others would be able to handle it effectively. At the very least, Abel's perception was that they were still lacking in strength to claim the throne, and Subaru was of the same opinion.

However, the insistence of going through the checkpoint had made him very nervous.

Al: "At any rate, now that we've escaped the checkpoint, let's get Abel-chan outta there."

Subaru: "Right. Besides, I want to complain about something."

Nodding at Al's suggestion, Subaru crossed his arms over his fake cleavage to assert his indignation.

The reason for Subaru's indignation was, of course, the unreasonable reason given so they would go through the checkpoint. But beyond that, it was the reckless flailing by Abel during the checkpoint.

While talking with the Soldiers, noises had echoed from the bottom of the carriage several times, which had been disguised with great difficulty.

Ultimately, it was settled that Subaru, posing as a woman, had a stomachache, saying, "It's not easy being a lowly count…". But it was an outrage that damaged the reputation of the elegant Natsumi Schwartz.

Subaru: "It seems that His Majesty, the Emperor, isn't fully aware of his position."

Al: "Oh bro, you seem angry. Well, guess I should be mad too."

Al agreed with Subaru, who was eager to complain to His Majesty, the reckless Emperor.

Then Al flipped up the floorboard, and Subaru peered into the bottom of the rocking carriage to complain bitterly to the face that appeared—

Subaru: “Hey, Abel, what’s going on? You have no idea how hard it was for us to cover up for you after you did that—”

???: “Uu—!”

Subaru: “Uhyaahhh—Hk?!”

Subaru’s “Or at least I think”, which was about to come with his candid advice, was swallowed by a shout, causing him to jump away landing in Taritta’s arms. All of a sudden, Taritta was holding him in a bridal carry, but he did not have the leisure to admire her core strength.

What appeared was not Abel breaking into laughter—but a young girl of golden hair.

The girl was more than familiar to him, and he had more than enough bad memories of her.

It was Louis, a girl who should not be present.

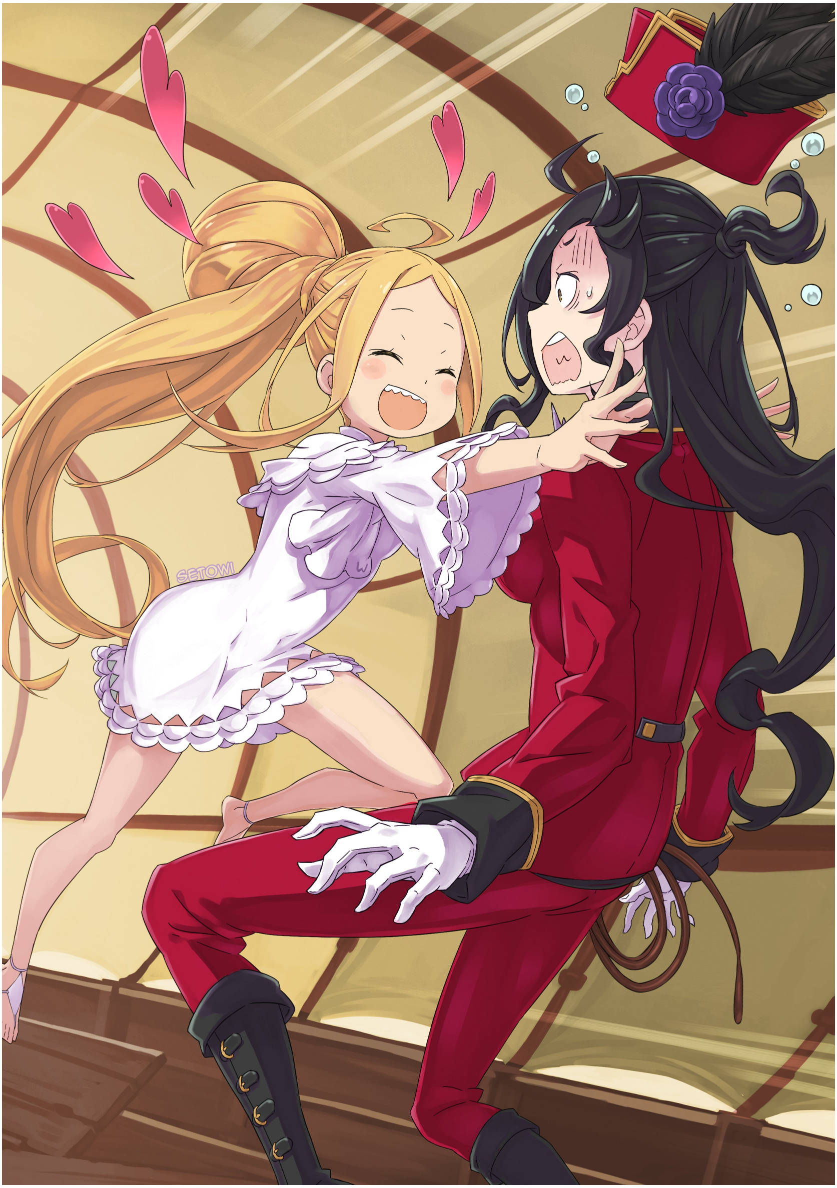
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Louis Arneb, an irregular representative in the Empire, burst cheerfully out from under the floor.

Subaru: “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha…”

Louis: “Aa, uu?”

Subaru: “Why! Why are you in the carriage…?”

??: “—Apparently, she had been hiding under the floor all along. I cannot believe no one had noticed it until now. It was probably the work of Utakata.”

His eyes going wide, Subaru’s voice quivered. Following up Subaru’s question was Abel, his figure emerging from the bottom after Louis.

He patted the dust off his dirty traveling clothes and hand-combed his wildly-disheveled sable hair. Then, regarding Louis leaning in towards Subaru, the latter still being held up by Taritta,

Abel: “Hmm. It appears that she missed you a lot. So much that rather than being with Utakata or your woman, she opted to be with you.”

Subaru: “Wh-What are you so composed for… were you okay with being under the floor with her?”

Abel: “How could it have been fine? She was unnecessarily rampaging at the bottom, and even I was chilled by it. I mulled over about how it could be explained away once the Soldiers discovered me due to her.”

Shutting the floorboards and returning to his seat, Abel’s words made sense to Subaru.

It seemed that the cause of the commotion that had distracted Subaru’s mind so much during the Imperial Soldiers’ inspection of the carriage was none other than Louis.

Perhaps Louis, hiding in the bottom of the carriage as she was, had jostled with Abel, who had come down there to hide. He did not seem to have any talent for caring for children, although it was unclear how Abel was treating Louis.

Subaru: “Then, what the hell can you do…?”

Abel: “You have been speaking disgracefully about me to no end, but what are you planning to do with that thing?”

Subaru: “What should I do…?”

Abel: “I am telling you now, that there is absolutely no way we can turn back anymore. That checkpoint and time both, shall not allow it.”

Al: “Well, Abel-chan’s right about that, ain’t he?”

Touching the clasp of his helmet, Al nodded his head in agreement with Abel’s words.

Meanwhile, an anguished Subaru had Taritta put him down on the floor, then held down Louis’s forehead as she giggled with “Auu”, and snuggled up against him.

Subaru: “Why did this happen…?”

Confusion and bewilderment swirled within his head.

On the other hand, there was a part of him that felt relieved that Louis was here—that he did not have to deal with this uncertainty being beside Rem who had been left behind in Guaral.

However, the fact that Subaru had been followed did not make him any less cautious about Louis’s true nature and what could be in her plans.

Taritta: “Subaru, there’s nothing we can do, we’ll take Louis with us.”

Subaru: “Even you are saying that, Taritta-san?”

Taritta: “Abel’s right, we don’t have a choice but to keep going now. But we also can’t leave Louis behind. I know that you and Louis have a complicated relationship…”

Subaru: “…”

Looking at Subaru and Louis alternately, Taritta timidly offered a neutral opinion.

In addition to their mission to infiltrate Guaral, they had also spent time together in the People of Shudraq’s settlement. The majority of the Shudraqian, though not as much as Rem, were aware of Subaru’s wariness and hostility towards Louis and her existence.

Even with that in mind, Taritta had stated that leaving Louis behind was not an option.

And, much to his own chagrin, Subaru agreed with her.

Subaru: “We can’t just leave her here and let her cause trouble for people who don’t know anything about her…”

Louis: “Uu?”

Inclining her neck, Louis looked clueless.

As things stood right now, ever since they had been sent to Vollachia, Louis had never shown her true face as the vicious Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. But that did not mean it would not happen in the future, and Subaru would be responsible for any damage that may occur once her true nature surfaced.

Subaru had enough conviction that she was dangerous and countless opportunities to preempt a lot of damage from being done.

That was exactly why he felt he should strangle her thin neck this very moment, and sever her future.

With that and that alone, many seeds of anxiety would wither and die without sprouting.

And yet—

Subaru: "…"

Al: "Oh man… I dunno what's going on here, but that lil' girl's fond of you bro, right? I'm sure you understand that she might slow us down in the future, but we'll have to consider how to use that too."

Subaru: "Al…"

While saying this, Al tried to help the anguished Subaru reach a decision.

Walking over toward Louis standing beside Subaru, he took some steps upon the floor of the horse-drawn carriage with a casual gait. Then, trying to stroke the girl's blonde head gently—

Al: "Maybe with a child it'll be easier to have them look away in case there's another checkpoint like that. Traveling with a child ain't so bad after all… Ouch!"

Louis: "Gauuk!"

Just as Al's hand was about to stroke her head, Louis suddenly bared her fangs, literally.

Louis opened her mouth wide and chomped at Al's outstretched hand as hard as she could. With a scream, Al pulled his hand away and Louis hid behind Subaru, snarling like an animal.

It was an ingrateful act, like an unwanted stray cat biting the person who had tried to feed it.

Al: "Whoa, that shit really hurt! I tried to help you out, but that was wrong!"

Subaru: "Y-you've done it, haven't you…! I knew it was your style to prey on others like that!"

Louis: "Uu! Aa! Aauu!"

Subaru: "I can't understand you with your uhhs and ahhs!"

Louis was clinging to Subaru's waist, shaking her head. Subaru was struggling to pull her off, but the pressure was too tight for him to wriggle free.

Luckily, Subaru knew Al's "Name" and who he was, and Al himself did not appear to have lost himself due to having his "Memories" snatched away. But the damage was yet to be confirmed—

Taritta: "—Please calm down!"

Subaru: "Hyaan?!"

Louis: "Uu?!"

Once Subaru and Al began raising a ruckus, Louis started screaming like a child with a tantrum.

To interrupt them, Taritta had intervened by raising her voice.

Putting her hands under Louis's arms, she picked up the child, shooting Subaru and Al both with a potent gaze, her eyes like those of her sister's, conveying a strong impression.

Taritta: "You're a grown man and you're acting like a child! Even more, why don't you behave like a calm adult? The little ones will mimic you."

Subaru: "Uh, kuh… bu-but, Taritta-san, the girl's…"

Taritta: "No buts, Natsumi. I know your relationship with this girl is complicated. But even if that's the case, what are you going to accomplish by making a scene?"

He was reprimanded directly, and the simplicity of the reprimand was the most effective reply for Subaru.

How many could win against the argument that they had been acting immature towards a child? However, such naïve theory would not be applicable to a Sin Archbishop.

If only she was privy to the dangers posed by Louis Arneb, Taritta would surely possess a different opinion—

—Then, why didn't he just tell everyone who Louis was here and now?

Subaru: "…"

The black emotions echoing from within his own heart caused his throat to clog.

Subaru's cheeks tensed up, and Taritta and Al reacted in a quizzical manner.

In the end, the whole situation had been brought about by Subaru's vague decision-making abilities.

The only way to make them understand Subaru's wariness of Louis, was to disclose the fact that Louis was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. Unlike Rem, who had lost her wariness of the Witch Cult along with her Memories, the people in this room would be able to understand the threat.

Once they realized the gravity of the situation, they would not treat Louis as the child she seemed to be. And to get rid of the disturbing threat—

—What could be done to get rid of her?

Subaru: "…"

Louis: "Uu?"

Louis tilted her head at Subaru's expression while being held by Taritta.

Immediately once Subaru and Al stopped being rowdy, Louis calmed down as well. As they had found out in the time so far, Louis would only make noise if there was a lot of it in her environs.

If her surroundings were quiet, Louis, by her lonesome, would not make a peep. The reason as to why Utakata was such a good match for Louis was because she was an exceptionally calm child.

Perhaps this form of behavior was another way for Louis Arneb to blend in with her surroundings.

That girl, so vicious and irredeemably evil, that Subaru had come into contact in the white world he had arrived at the Pleiades Watchtower; was this the guise she had adopted?

He was aware he must consider that way, and deal with it. And yet —

Abel: “—I shall tell you this, our purpose here is neither pleasure nor amusement.”

Abel, alone in the seat, coldly said this to a Subaru still agonizing over the situation.

For a moment, Subaru could not make out the true meaning of his words, but quickly realized that it was Abel’s opinion on how Louis should be treated.

This road trip was no game, Abel asserted. As soon as he voiced that and regarded Louis with his dark eyes, Subaru gasped at their coldness.

Abel’s eyes, directed towards Louis, were devoid of any warmth.

This was a sign that Abel had not found any value in bestowing Louis with any consideration or warmth, and that he did not distinguish between Louis and a stone by the roadside or a wildflower.

The warmth of his eyes made Subaru understand the consequences of revealing Louis’s true identity.

Subaru: “—Let’s take her.”

Abel: “…”

Immediately after making his decision, the dark eyes looking at Louis were turned to Subaru. The sharpness of his gaze felt like it was burrowing into Subaru’s chest, but clenching his molars, he drove that out of his mind.

Subaru: “Since this isn’t a pleasure trip, show them you’re useful… That’s how it works, isn’t it?”

Abel: “Yes, it is of no consequence. —I had a feeling you would state such a thing.”

Subaru: “…That’s a difficult evaluation to interpret.”

Whether it was disappointment or some other sort of emotion, it was hard to tell.

Naturally, Abel wished to have his real intentions go unrevealed, and Subaru was afraid that rehashing them would lead to a different conclusion.

Medium: “Hey, hey, are you done with that? Louis-chan, come here when they are finished talking!”

Taritta: “…Is that okay?”

Feeling the tense atmosphere between Subaru and Abel, Taritta asked for permission to respond to Medium’s voice coming from the driving platform.

Abel was already unconcerned, and although he had decided to take Subaru with him, he did not want to take Louis, so he decided to take advantage of their generosity.

Medium: “Alright, Louis-chan, you want to hold the reins? Try to steer Leidy-chin!”

Louis: “Uu!”

Taritta: “Let’s not do that!”

Louis was welcomed by the two women, although there was a lot of noise coming from the driver’s seat all of a sudden.

Subaru was the only one who had originally been quite wary of Louis, so there was nothing surprising about their reaction. If something had to be said however, was that Louis’s disappearance may have caused Rem, who had remained in Guaral, to panic in search of her.

Abel: “I do not believe that girl could have gotten into the carriage by herself. If there is someone who assisted her, that one should reveal the situation.”

Subaru: “…Well, I guess that’s true.”

Perhaps sensing the nature of Subaru’s anxiety from his expression, Abel dispelled without emotion.

If he was right, and Utakata had helped Louis stowaway, that information would have been shared with Rem and the others back in the city.

With him and Louis together, Subaru wondered if that would help with Rem’s anxiety.

Subaru: “Which would be better, her not knowing where she is or knowing where she is…?”

Al: “—? Of course it’s safer to have her with you, bro. I mean, from what Taritta-chan said, it sounded kinda complicated.”

With Al having overheard his muttering, Subaru’s feelings were further muddied by Al’s words.

The relationship between Subaru, Rem, and Louis was not as simple as it appeared.

Subaru: “…But, that’s right.”

With Rem’s figure behind his eyelids, Subaru found an excuse within himself.

Regardless of Louis’s identity, Rem would be concerned for the girl. Even if he told her the truth the next time he got the chance, it would be one-sided without Louis’s presence.

For that reason, Louis must be kept safe.

Al: “Bro?”

Subaru: “No, nothing unless… Al, do me a favor —Please, pay as much attention to Louis as you can.”

Al: “…What’s with the out-of-the blue request, anyway? What’s with that little girl?”

Al, who’d just had his hand bitten, seemed to have some difficulty with Louis, and responded to Subaru’s request in a reluctant voice, questioning his intentions.

It was a natural question, but for a moment, Subaru hesitated to answer.

When it came to Al, he would believe Louis’s identity more frankly than the others.

However, how would Al act upon learning that Louis was a Sin Archbishop? Would he understand the danger and become an advisor that held the same worries as Subaru?

Subaru: “—. If she gets hurt, Rem will suffer. Please, I beg you.”

Al: “…”

Subaru was troubled, but, a moment later, he kept the truth to himself much like he had done with the rest of the group.

Hearing Subaru’s answer, Al went silent for a moment, and,

Al: “Yeah, sure. I’m worried she might eat my remaining arm, but I’ll deal with it.”

With that as his reply, Al settled into the front seat of the carriage as if he had heard Subaru’s request. He threw his legs out lazily as he listened to the voices of the three girls bustling around the driver’s platform.

It could be said it was his typical way of accepting a request.

Subaru: “—? What is it?”

As he directed his gaze towards the back of Al’s head, Subaru noticed Abel's own trained on himself.

He folded his arms and slumped in his seat, his unreadable black eyes reflecting Subaru, frowning with just a hint of displeasure.

This made him feel terribly anxious, so Subaru's question had ended sharply.

Abel, however, gave a small "Hmm", and said nothing.

Subaru: "…You still haven't thanked me for successfully getting us past the checkpoint in the first place."

Taking out his frustration on Abel's attitude, Subaru stroked his long black hair and settled into a seat a little farther away from both Al and Abel.

The journey to the Demon City of Chaosflame continued with a sense of uncertainty about the future.

However, upon hearing the bustling voices from the driver's platform, especially that of Louis…

Subaru: "Really, who do you think is the cause of my suffering?"

The sound of the horse-drawn carriage swallowed his words of complaint up entirely, and so they did not reach anyone.

Chapter 35:
A Night For Talking

1

Medium: “The place where big bro and I were was a really bad place.”

That was what Medium had said in her usual tone, as they surrounded a campfire at night.

Always bright and cheerful, Medium never cared to keep her voice down. What had come out from her mouth, was the story of the orphanage in which Flop and her used to be previously.

From Flop, too, it had been heard that the two of them had grown up in poor conditions.

The siblings had grown up while being beaten every day, in a facility that took in orphans. Flop had stated that they resented a world where unfortunate adults would beat up unfortunate children, and that they had vowed to take revenge, as well.

Medium: “I don’t get everything big bro says ‘cause it’s too difficult for me. But when he’s walking around with such big steps and his chest puffed out, I wanna help him.”

Subaru: “Even if it’s revenge against the world?”

Medium: “Yes, yes! Though, I dunno how he’s gonna do it.”

With a bashful smile, Medium plunked down cross-legged, taking Louis into her lap then brushing the girl’s hair from behind.

The reason she had spoken about the orphanage in the first place, was because of her skill in dealing with children.

He was surprised that Medium, who, if he may say so, gave the impression that she did everything in a relatively rough manner, was taking such good care of Louis.

So, he asked her about her familiarity, which led them to the previous point.

Medium: “Because there were other children in the facility besides big bro and me, you know. Some of them were smaller than me, and it wasn’t much fun, so I wanted to at least let their hair grow.”

Subaru: “So because of that, you’re good with the little ones. It makes sense, since you’re very good at taking care of people.”

Medium: “Uhehe, you think so? Well, if that’s the case, I’m glad I could help.”

Medium’s beautiful blonde hair glimmered, illuminated by the red glow of the bonfire. Louis, to her front, had hair the same color. The two of them were so intimate they appeared to be sisters.

If Flora was considered and not Flop, one could say that there were three beautiful sisters.

Subaru: “…I shouldn’t have thought of imposing such a liability onto you and Flop-san.”

Medium: “—? Natsumi-chan, did you say something?”

Subaru: “No, it’s nothing. It’s just that I really feel that Medium-san’s been a great help to me.”

Setting aside the improper connection between the O’Connell siblings and Louis, it was a statement that seemed to have been wasted under false pretenses, but that was how he truly felt.

There was a great deal of help from the presence of Medium and Flop being there, both militarily and emotionally.

Had it not been for Flop and her, Subaru and the others’ march through the Empire would have been much bleaker.

Subaru: “In that respect, shouldn’t you be more grateful?”

???: “…”

Narrowing his eyes as he said it, Subaru tried to lure a response out of Abel, who was sticking right by the bonfire.

Surprisingly, Abel had not made his quick return to the carriage for rest after dinner, instead remaining, in silence. However, it did not appear that his attention had been focused on the chit-chat, or on Subaru's words that were merely sarcastic and teasing.

Abel: "Medium, where are you and your brother from?"

Medium: "Huh?"

However, though not in response to Subaru's words, Abel posed a question to Medium.

The content of the question was based on the conversation that had just taken place.

Caught off-guard, Medium's large eyes widened to their fullest and her mouth dropped open. It seemed she was surprised that Abel had started a conversation with her, and that he was listening.

Medium: "Abel-chin, you know my name?"

Apparently, those were not the sole reasons for her surprise.

Anyhow, Abel let out a small sigh at Medium, the latter having utilized a way of addressing him equally as disrespectful as what Al had used, one that could displease His Majesty the Emperor.

Abel: "Remembering names is a trivial task. Cease such trifling admiration. Answer my question. Where are you and Flop from? Who was the head representative of that facility?"

Medium: "Representative? You mean the director? I don't remember his name, but me and big bro were in a little town called Averyk."

Abel: "Averyk… That's a town to the west. I shall remember that."

Medium: "—? You're gonna remember it? What for?"

Abel: “It shall be dealt with accordingly. Whether I do it directly or not.”

Abel’s answer was succinct, but his true intentions were lost on Medium.

A question mark appeared on Medium’s face, and her expression was like her head had been stuffed full of questions. And Abel, unkind as he was, did not attempt to try and dispel the mystery.

Subaru, for his part, did not quite get the whole idea, but,

Subaru: “So you want to listen to the people’s frank opinions and immediately apply them to national politics?”

Abel: “I am not that laudable. I have told you. —It is a matter of definite punishment or reward.”

Achievements should be rewarded, and foolishness punished.

That was Abel’s creed as a ruler, and it seemed to be an unmovable way of being.

Thinking back to the Lifeblood Ritual at the Shudraqian Village, he had desperately appealed to Subaru as the latter was on the verge of death, to tell him of his wish. Behind that desperation laid the same belief.

Namely—

Subaru: “—You’re the kind of person who can’t stand it when other people come up empty-handed, aren’t you?”

Abel: “Many are dropped into this world as have-nots. What they grasp in their hands and what they die with, is their life. There should be no thing such as letting go of something one has earned.”

Subaru: “Hearing that from the Emperor’s mouth having been born as a have-not’s unpleasant.”

Most people were have-nots, and had no choice but to struggle on, lamenting their incompetence and inability. They knew that life was like that, but could not tolerate being told that from the standpoint of those who are blessed.

However, Abel did not even regard Subaru, who took this as irony.

Abel: “—I am no exception.”

Subaru: “—? What do you mean?”

Abel: “With the position, comes a certain amount of responsibility. If one carries a burden that they cannot bear, then those who are crushed are no more than fools. Character and pride can only be honed by daily self-awareness.”

In response to Subaru’s question, Abel’s gaze slowly turned toward him.

He observed Subaru sitting next to the bonfire, and directed his sight to his dark hair and clothes, as if to examine them.

Abel: “False and contrived identities shall eventually be exposed. You seem to be quite adept at disguising yourself, but it shall take some effort to mend it once it comes off.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “I do not interfere with other people’s interests as long as they produce results. I do not mean to contradict that statement, to see a false image as a pillar of support is something I cannot tolerate. Eventually, the entire foundation shall tilt.”

Abel’s eyes, bathed in a feverish breeze, were as clear as a cold night.

The words he had chosen had no room for consideration or understanding by others. Therefore, the true meaning of his words was not even half-understood by Subaru.

The only thing that remained, was the pain of having had his heart insulted so callously.

Abel: “…I have spoken too much. I shall be leaving the rest to you.”

After saying that, Abel stood up and disappeared into the carriage.

The thick door closed with a thud. The only people now remaining around the fire were Subaru, Medium, and Louis, who was oblivious to the topic at hand.

Subaru: "…What's with that guy?"

Then, making a bitter face as he held his own mouth, Subaru blurted out those words.

It was as if he was a sore loser of a villainess, wasn't it? The iron-blooded female military strategist, Natsumi Schwartz, was much tougher and more supple.

That was Subaru's never-ending desire for a heart of steel, and the image of the strongest woman in its possession.

Medium: "Natsumi-chan, are you okay?"

Medium's hand gently stroked Subaru's conflict-laden head.

Medium moved dexterously next to him, sitting on her haunches not letting her buttocks touch the ground. Her hands were proportionate to her height, large enough to grasp Subaru's head with ease.

Her large palm gently, and softly, wrapped around Subaru's heart.

Subaru: "Yes, I'm fine. I mean, that guy was so insinuating… Did you understand what he was trying to say, Medium-san?"

Medium: "Hmmm, not at all! But I could see that Natsumi-chan looked like she was in pain, so this is the least I could do."

Subaru: "That's not true…"

Medium: "It's okay, it's okay, I know! I'm in charge of using my big body to do my best and leave the hard stuff to big bro and everyone else."

Medium smiled pleasantly and continued to pat Subaru's head, her face not showing any lie.

Even though she was aware of her shortcomings, she did not permit it to bother her and had a sunny disposition, something she had in common with the people Subaru admired.

Subaru: “You’re very mature, aren’t you, Medium-san?”

Medium: “No one’s ever told me that before! Although I’ve been told things like, that I’m a good older sister, or that I eat a lot without having any issues after.”

Subaru: “Those are other nice things about you, Medium-san.”

Medium: “Uehehe~”

Because he was unable to express his gratitude and admiration even with all his words, Subaru was frustrated. However, Medium merrily accepted Subaru’s hollow words of praise.

Louis, curled up in her lap, was happy, like she was being carried along by her cheerfulness.

It was a moment so peaceful that, to Subaru, it felt as if he’d been cut off from all hardship and anxiety.

He ended up imagining it as such, so peaceful was this time.

2

Time flowed protractedly, as he gazed at the flickering flames of the fire.

Subaru: “…”

The world was so quiet, with the crackling sound of burning chips of wood popping.

Subaru used to hate this kind of idle time. When spending it in a daze, he would feel tormented and driven by an unfathomable sense of urgency.

He wondered if he was allowed to spend his time aimlessly, as if he were in a stupor.

An unidentified black shadow would creep up behind him, crossing their arms around his shoulders in an intimate manner, persistently hounding Subaru.

Keeping this nightmare away was impossible, even if he plugged his ears and closed his eyes—to escape from it, Natsuki Subaru had attempted everything.

At times, he would be praised for his versatility and guile.

But all of that, was just an excuse to escape from responsibility and guilt.

Natsuki Subaru was papier-mâché, the result of a series of excuses—

Subaru: "—I'm just a little relieved that it didn't end up being just an excuse."

???: "Is that so…"

After listening to Subaru's story, Taritta nodded her head.

On the other side of the flickering flames, Taritta's face was lit up red as she knelt on the ground. The shimmering radiance of the flames appeared to suit her brown skin quite well.

And to mention something suiting, so did her outfit that concealed her identity as a Shudraqian.

Taritta, having removed the white patterns on her body and being dressed like a civilized person, coupled with her tall and well-proportionate body, looked like a beautiful woman dressed in men's clothes.

However, as she stood guard as a night watchman, she had taken off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves, giving the impression that she was more wild than smart.

Taritta: "…"

In the slight silence that fell, Taritta was lost in thought.

She had pestered Subaru into speaking of his personal circumstances—of his original world; he had made the darker and heavier parts of his life ambiguous, but how had it affected Taritta?

It had all begun when Taritta saw Subaru cleaning his nails and asked, “Where did you learn to wear makeup?”.

Using makeup and crossdressing, were not that big of a deal to him.

Subaru had spent his junior high-school year in disarray, and had taken up the challenge as a bit of entertainment to make a spectacular comeback in his high-school life to come.

Subaru: “I’m a bit of a meticulous person, so if I’m going to do something… I want to be thorough and not embarrassed to present it.”

As would be the case in any field, the efforts of many predecessors were involved in the development of arts.

Subaru’s high-school life ended as a result of his attempt to show that he was not embarrassed of it. Since then, he had made up his mind that he would never dress as a woman again, but here he was.

One’d never know what would be useful in life until it was over. — In Subaru’s case, who would not die even if he died, that rang especially true.

Subaru: “Oh, that’s not funny—”

Taritta: “…Natsumi’s attitude, I’m jealous of it.”

Subaru: “Wh-Whaaat?”

Taritta: “Wh-why are you so surprised…?”

Subaru: “Oh, no, it isn’t something I’ve been told very often…”

It was a rather serious shock, and it took Taritta by surprise.

However, the shock in Subaru's mind, as he pressed his fake breasts, did not go away. Objectively speaking, Subaru did not feel that his position was worthy of jealousy.

It was partly from his own perspective, but ever since he came to this other world—and, in retrospect, even before that, his life had been a series of failures and disappointments.

To be honest, had it not been for his encounter with Emilia, he doubted he would have had the chance to turn things around.

Subaru believed that all his encounters and happiness had been given to him by Emilia, who had tried to save him from being beaten up by some thugs in that alley.

—The memory of that moment no longer was present in Emilia's mind, though.

Taritta: "I've always grown up hiding behind Sister. Sister's as we all know her to be, so no one doubted she'd eventually become the Chieftain. Neither did I."

Subaru: "Taritta-san…"

Falteringly, Taritta began to talk about herself.

At first, Subaru had intended to stop her if she started talking about something she did not want to speak about, as a response to his confession. She had inquired him about the source of his makeup and crossdressing skills, and Subaru had told her about himself, which were his own problems. He had no intention of forcing her to do so.

However, upon noticing Taritta's moist eyes and trembling voice, her visage downcast, he halted.

She was talking because she wished to, that was what Subaru felt.

Taritta: "Sister and I are three years apart in age. But the reason why I feel Sister's so big isn't because of the three years difference. That's right, isn't it?"

Subaru: "…"

Taritta: "What Sister could do when she was ten, I couldn't do when I was the same age. It wasn't a difference in age, it was a difference in something different. What that is, I don't know."

Every word that Taritta spoke pierced through Subaru's heart.

It was a story he had heard somewhere, yet, simultaneously, it was a story he had never disclosed to anyone.

An inferiority complex towards her outstanding elder sister, something Rem had been harboring.

An inferiority complex towards the person he yearned to be like, something Subaru had been tormented by.

Taritta: "Why did my sister make me the Chieftain? I just can't see myself in that role."

???: "—He's that guy's child, after all."

The disappointment in oneself. The feeling of guilt regarding the expectations of someone dear.

Nearly overwhelmed by these feelings, Taritta had embarked along on this journey. Mizelda, the former Chieftain, had pledged to assist Abel on his journey with the goal of reclaiming the throne.

Perhaps it was a journey for Taritta to reflect and acknowledge herself, and at the same time, a way to escape the burden of expectations that had fallen upon her.

Taritta: "During this journey, I have to find an answer. No, I need to harden my resolve."

Subaru: "Resolve… Is that resolve to take over as Chieftain?"

Taritta: "…"

Subaru's question was met with a nod from Taritta's thin chin.

It would be unfitting to say she had arrived at an answer, but to say she had readied herself to a fitting fate was possible. —The duty of being the tribe's next Chieftain had been entrusted to her by Mizelda, he could understand that was the way she considered it.

Taritta believed that taking over as Chieftain was inevitable.

She believed that she had no right to reject it. That it was the duty of a sister who had been appointed by her elder sister, and that she must lead the next generation of the clan—.

Subaru: "Even if you run away…"

Taritta: "Eh?"

Subaru: "Even if you run away, I think it'd be fine. I wouldn't blame you for that."

The astonished expression on Taritta's face conveyed to him that she had not expected to hear such words.

Though that had been the flow of the conversation, Taritta had confided in him her innermost thoughts. Her situation, the insecurities, the responsibility she carried on her thin shoulders, could be seen.

He could also see that she was extremely responsible and self-punishing, and that she was struggling to cope with it.

Or perhaps Taritta had wished that Subaru would tell her to "get a grip" here, to encourage her to make a decision that she could not make herself. Perhaps she wanted him to advise her that there was no such thing as a lack of self-confidence in the sight of Subaru proudly and unashamedly wearing women's clothes.

But what Subaru had told her, had betrayed her expectations.

Subaru: "If you can't bear it, if you think there's someone better suited than you, we won't blame you if you pack up and leave the carriage. At least, I won't."

Taritta: "B-but, if I'm gone, our strength will be…"

Subaru: “Of course, I’m worried about that. But I’ll do whatever I can.”

Taritta: “…”

Subaru inwardly ridiculed himself for saying such selfish things, though he did not display it.

If he heard this exchange, Abel would be discontent. As Taritta had said, she was a valuable military asset to their faction, which lacked in strength.

That could be attributed to both their faction as a whole, as well as to the group on this journey.

Of all things, he wondered whether it’d be fine to let them go.

Taritta: “You’re saying I’m not needed…”

Subaru: “No, that’s a big mistake. I also want Taritta-san to be with us in terms of both personality and strength. But that’d be selfish of me, wouldn’t it?”

Taritta: “Selfish…”

Subaru: “Because I’d be telling you to numb your feelings, so that I can live.”

Being an experienced and kindred spirit, Subaru could not force Taritta to do that.

Subaru, who had been given the opportunity to exit that dark place previously, had declared to Taritta, who was older and possibly more experienced than Subaru in this matter, much like if they were senior and junior.

—You cannot be someone else.

No matter if they were a blood relative or just someone close. No matter the degree one had longed for them, envied them, or scorched them into their heart. You cannot be someone else.

Subaru: “We can’t be anyone but our own “self”.”

He could not be anything other than himself, and he had to at least become something he could like, something he could be comfortable with, something he could be confident in.

Like a butterfly that would hatch after repeated disappointments, discouragements, and a small sense of accomplishment.

Subaru: “…It’s unpleasant, isn’t it?”

So whispered Subaru, in a voice so quiet that Taritta had been unable to hear him.

What he was recalling as he spoke, was the ideal that Abel had conveyed to him a few hours prior, around the same bonfire. What many of the have-nots were clutching at, living with, in their empty hands, he had wondered.

The essence of what he had stated, seemed to overlap with what Subaru was attempting to say.

Taritta: “…”

Listening to Subaru’s story, Taritta’s eyes swayed, her hesitation becoming even stronger.

It was up for Taritta to decide which way her hesitation would lead her, but he knew that he should respect whatever she chose.

Subaru had run away from the expectations placed on him and the guilt of not living up to them.

He even suspected that his being summoned to this other world had been an act of consideration by someone who had taken in his desires to escape.

Of course, that was the reason as to why he had been unable of saying goodbye to his parents, his real parents—

Subaru: “You know, the fact that I was able to escape was salvation.”

At the very least, had he stayed locked in his room, always trapped between expectations and guilt, Natsuki Subaru would not have been able to catch up with his current emotions.

He would still be Subaru, his hands full with himself and no opportunity to strain his own heart, or to do something for someone else, or to give something to someone else.

There was nothing wrong with running away until one was ready to fight.

This should be a world in which everyone could choose not to fight.

Taritta: “Confidence and determination…”

Subaru: “What?”

Taritta: “I’m lacking in confidence and determination. But that’s not all…”

Hearing Subaru’s story, which came from his own experience, Taritta muttered, her lips trembling.

It had been so small that it seemed to have been drowned out by the sound of the crackling bonfire. Or perhaps she was filled with acute emotion, more so than when she had recounted the tale of her own powerlessness.

Taritta: “If I make a big mistake, how could I… Make up for it?”

Subaru: “Mistakes and making up for it… Taritta-san?”

Taritta: “…”

The question was repeated and Taritta let out a small “Ah”.

Her eyes widened, and Subaru could see the regret in them. In the same way she had spoken of making a mistake before, her regret for what she had ended up telling Subaru peeked through.

It seemed like Taritta had been burdened with a lot of guilt regarding that big mistake.

Not only the helplessness of comparing herself to her sister, but also the existence of her sister seemed to be a factor that prevented her from making her own decision.

Taritta: “The strange things I said… Please, forget them.”

What followed in the end, was the conclusion that her untold story could not be told.

He could tell by Taritta’s voice and expression that she had not arrived at an answer, but Subaru interpreted it as a sign that he could not force her to talk.

If only he could be there for her when she eventually felt the need to vent—

???: “—Bro, time for a shift change.”

Upon Subaru’s conclusion, a voice called out from the carriage.

It was Al, twisting his thick neck as he slowly walked over to the campfire. The time for Subaru’s shift was over, as the night watch was supposed to change every three hours.

Subaru: “I’m not happy that Abel and Louis are out of the rotation, but…”

Al: “Stop it, stop it. It’d be a terrible thing if we get executed for having Abel-chan work the night shift once he returns to the throne.”

Subaru: “If you’re on about grudges, I don’t think I’d be able to decide how many of my heads should be lined up for that.”

Al: “If you’re aware of it, please control it. Because it’ll make me nervous to be around you.”

Overhearing Subaru’s rambling, Al made a reasonable complaint.

Nevertheless, he would continue complaining about Abel’s attitude going forward. The reason why Abel was so arrogant and tyrannical was because no one had ever spoken up.

While he remained as a fugitive with no real power, to correct that character as much as possible was needed.

Subaru: “Otherwise, even if he returns with our help, another rebellion will soon ensue, and he’ll lose his head that time.”

Al: “Yeah, I’ll leave that to you. As you can see from the Princess, I’m basically a laissez-faire kinda guy.”

With a fluttering wave of his hand, Al threw out the idea of getting Subaru to change his mind.

Sighing at Al’s unreliability, Subaru turned to face Taritta again. “Taritta-san,” he called out to her as she gazed at the fire, lost in thought,

Subaru: “I’ll leave you to it. If you find Al’s sexual harassment or silly jokes unbearable to listen to, please let me know immediately.”

Taritta: “Sexual hara……?”

Al: “I’m not gonna act the same as I do with the Princess! It’s a matter of distance and intimacy, and TPO.”

Subaru: “That’s something I’m not good at.”

Taritta replied in a faint voice, while Al loudly proclaimed his innocence.

After comparing the two, Subaru stood up and whispered to Al as he brushed off the dirt on his hem and buttocks.

Subaru: “Perhaps Taritta-san’ll ask you for some life advice. If she does, please guide her as an experienced leader.”

Al: ““Experienced leader” seems to be the opposite of my description, doesn’t it? I can’t be responsible for other people’s lives, as I’ve been actively running away from such things.”

Subaru: “This is your chance to overcome your weaknesses. It’s the same with peppirs.”

Emilia and Beatrice, who were not fans of peppirs as well, were also trying their best to overcome their dislikes in various ways, without losing their bold challenging spirit.

The two of them had yet a single battle together, but Subaru believed that as long as they kept fighting, one day they would be able to win.

Subaru: “So, please do your best, Al.”

Al: “Is it just me, or that doesn’t resonate that much…?”

At least, what he had just said met the conditions to inspire Subaru, so he concluded that the problem was with Al, who was not affected by it.

Taritta: “Natsumi, see you… tomorrow.”

Subaru: “—Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

Taritta called out to Subaru, who handed over the shift to Al and turned to head back to the carriage.

That feeble yet certain promise of tomorrow, gave Subaru hope that she would accept Subaru’s words, and that they would meet face-to-face the following day.

Running away was not a bad thing. There was power to be gained as a result of running away.

But there were also people who would steel themselves to fight instead of running away, and were able to overcome it.

Subaru hoped that was the case with Taritta.

Subaru: “…”

Back at the carriage, Subaru was greeted by the tranquil air of the dark interior.

The interior of the carriage was divided by a simple curtain, separating the sleeping quarters for men and women in the front and back. The men were at the front, the women at the back, but the group currently sleeping was surprisingly quiet.

Abel, Medium, and Louis were the three resting right now, and how quietly Medium and Louis were slumbering, Abel notwithstanding, seemed to him relatively surprising.

Upon questioning them about their sleeping patterns, knowing that it was against etiquette, Medium had cheerfully replied, "If you snore too loudly, people will know where you are".

It was not until some time later, that Subaru realized that it had been during her travels as a peddler, or during her days in the facility that had been stated to have been in poor condition.

A skill acquired out of necessity.

In that sense, it might also be the reason as to why Abel slept quietly.

Subaru: "…You look odious, even when you're asleep. Perhaps I should doodle on you."

???: "—What, you are staring at me quite rudely."

Subaru: "—Hk."

In the middle of the allotted space in the carriage, Abel was sleeping. Upon peeking at his slumbering face, Subaru was startled by the sudden voice. He almost let out an instinctive scream, but Subaru managed to restrain it, instead saying, "You're awake?".

Subaru: "…Since we're keeping watch, I'd hoped you could at least enjoy the benefits of it."

Abel: "It is the custom of the Vollachian Imperial Family to sleep with one eye open. I am no exception to that rule."

Subaru: "With one eye open, this isn't a movie… Eh, you serious?"

Abel: "Why should I crack a stupid joke with you?"

Subaru’s breath hitched after Abel’s retort, the latter unconcerned, one eye open as he had declared.

The light in his dark eyes proved that his earlier words had been no deception.

There was an old movie that talked of an assassin with the habit of sleeping with one eye open.

Apparently, the structures of the human brain made performing this difficult, but seeing Abel doing it as a matter-of-fact in front of him, made Subaru realize that it was not impossible.

But that was not the same thing as being convinced.

Subaru: “Why don’t you sleep properly? Do you think we’re going to hurt you in your sleep?”

Abel: “If there is a small chance, then it is a possibility. You cannot lose your life for lack of attention.”

Subaru: “Lack of attention…!”

Hearing that detached reply, Subaru’s voice trembled and he pointed out the window.

All that could be seen through the carriage window was the light of a campfire some distance away. Two people, Al and Taritta, stood on night watch, on the lookout for any looming danger.

Of course, it was also for their own safety, but—

Subaru: “—Who the hell do you think they’re doing that for?”

Abel: “…”

Subaru: “After all this time, you still can’t even close both eyes in front of us?”

Natsumi Schwartz’s skin peeled away, revealing Natsuki Subaru from their contorted expression.

Faced with this, Abel's clear expression did not waver. As he had done in the past, Abel blinked alternately with his right and left eyes.

Even the number of blinks was minimal, which was the same reason as to why he could not sleep with both eyes closed.

The time they had risked their lives together in the Lifeblood Ritual, when they infiltrated Guaral dressed as dancers, and when they boarded the carriage and headed for their destination, were no different.

Subaru sympathized with the people who had to be on-guard, in a situation where failure was not an option.

So, why would Abel not make an effort to loosen up before entering a place that could be hostile territory, at least?

At Subaru's raised eyebrow, Abel closed one eye. —A single eye.

He closed a single eye, folded his arms, leaned his back against the seat, and snorted.

Abel: "Do not consider any ideas about distorting my way of being. Mind your place."

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "The Demon City is close by. You must do your part. I desire no more, nor shall I allow it."

Subaru clicked his tongue as he was confronted with an untenable disconnection.

There had been times when he thought he could be able to make some progress, but it was still no use.

Subaru: "Oh, yeah… Oh, yeah! I'm going to snore so hard."

He raised his voice in annoyance, but Abel did not respond.

Subaru frowned in bitterness as he settled into a seat as far away from Abel as possible, loosened his clothes, and laid down, with care not to damage his wig.

He thought about keeping himself awake as an act of rebellion against Abel, but Subaru was unsure what would be the point of doing so, or whether sleeping or staying awake would be the right thing to do; and so, his consciousness went blank.

The carriage ride continued with various problems, anxieties, and relationship values in the air.

—The arrival at the Demon City of Chaosflame was just around the corner.

Chapter 36:
Chaotic Demon City

1

Louis: “Aah! Uuh!”

As she pointed at the cityscape in front of them, Louis bounced her butt off the driver’s seat.

Subaru would’ve liked to warn her that she was disturbing the handling of the Galewind Horse, however Medium, the one who held the reins, pulled Louis by her shoulders and said with a cheerful, yet unrefined “I know, I know!”.

In addition, Subaru, who had also been watching the same thing, was suitably overwhelmed.

Subaru: “So that’s the Demon City of Chaosflame…”

With a gulp, Subaru couldn’t help but express his surprise with his own body.

In Lugunica, he had been amazed by the scenic beauty of the Watergate City of Pristella, and in Vollachia, he had been impressed by the difference in architectural styles. However, the spectacle of the Demon City looming before him had bore a different impact on Subaru compared to either of these.

In Subaru’s perception, a city was an assembly in which a large number of people lived, and for this reason, unified styles and rules should be laid down for architecture.

However, in the streets of Chaosflame, no such sense of unity could be sensed.

Undoubtedly, it was a crucible of miscellaneous and haphazard principles, befitting a city crowned by the term “chaos”.

At the heart of the city lay the most conspicuous feature: a castle painted in vermillion glossy paint, and the streets expanded out as a circle as if encasing the castle. At first glance, it appeared similar to the structure of the Royal Capital of Lugunica, but even there one would notice a clear difference between noble, commoner, and poor.

Chaosflame, on the other hand, had none of that.

Old ruins beside gleaming buildings, streets were lined with short buildings with sudden appearances of spires twice their size, and desolated sandy areas were adjacent to lush parks.

There were countless beams and scaffolding that had been arbitrarily pieced together on top of these streets, and from a distance it seemed as if the entire city were covered in a lattice of spider webs.

This was a city that had nothing to do with discipline, neatness, or decency in general—there was only one way for it to be called. The Demon City.

He could tell, at a glance, that this was without a doubt, a place where chaos prevailed.

Al: "—It looks like a city that could easily crumble with a "giant's thrust", doesn't it?"

Said Al calling out to Subaru, the former having been squinting at the mayhem, shading the tops of his eyes with his hands, spilling his thoughts about the spectacle that was Demon City.

It was a trivial matter, but what was the point of putting his hands over the helmet?

Al: "I've lived in Vollachia for a long time, but this is my first time coming to the east, so it's refreshing."

Subaru: "Is this your first time in Chaosflame too? So you've been on the west side of Vollachia all this time?"

Al: "It's more like, I've been in only one place on the west side. There's a Colosseum smack dab in the middle of a lake, called

Gladiator Island. I was a gladiator there for a long time.”

Subaru: “A gladiator in a colosseum…”

Subaru was taken aback by the tumultuous grandness of Al’s career, which he had incidentally heard about before.

The loss of his arm included many of the things that Al had talked about without hesitation were very serious. It was because of the gravity of his situation that he spoke so casually, in order to not make the other person feel uncomfortable, but—

Subaru: “That doesn’t relieve my mental burden at all…”

Al: “Mh? What did you say, bro?”

Subaru: “No, not a thing… By the way, what’s a “giant’s thrust”?”

Al: “Huh? Didn’t they say that in your hometown? You know, earthquakes and stuff like that?”

When asked about the unfamiliar expression, Al twisted his head and replied to Subaru with a question.

Although Al and him were from the same hometown, hometown in this case broadly referred to their original world, so of course their real hometown would be different.

That said, while there were many proverbs related to demons, he could not recall many related to giants.

Subaru: “Maybe it’s related to a baseball team? I don’t really know much about it.”

Al: “Oh, no, I’m not sure. I don’t remember where I got the word, and I don’t remember being particularly fond of baseball, but…”

Subaru: “I see. Even though you’d look right at home drinking beer and watching a baseball game.”

Al: “In the first place, I never drank anything of the sort.”

Sharing a bitter smile with Al at those words, Subaru remembered the age at which Al had been summoned to this other world, and inwardly agreed, “Yeah, that makes sense”.

In any case, during their little chat, the carriage that transported the group approached the front of the Demon City, the entrance to the city of chaos.

Speaking of entering and exiting the city, the most recent thing that came to mind were the checkpoints in Guaral.

Checkpoints had been set up at the main gates of the city, one in the north and one in the south, and in each the identity of people entering and leaving the city would be inquired, along with the purpose of their stay.

In the end, it was possibly debatable whether the checkpoints were functioning properly, since they had allowed Subaru and the others to infiltrate, but Zikr’s words should then be taken in consideration: “The soldiers’ eyes must have been burned by the sheer beauty of Natsumi and the others”. So it should be treated as a result of their side’s skillfulness.

Regardless, the existence of such checkpoints was not different between the Kingdom and the Empire.

Every city in Lugunica had such checks. Therefore, Subaru thought that this was a win-or-lose moment, and stepped into the shoes of Natsumi Schwartz again—

Guard: “—Enter.”

Medium: “Understooood! Thanks.”

Louis: “Uuh!”

The man had looked around the carriage and given them permission to pass; he was supposedly a part of the city’s garrison, and a member of the Cyclops Tribe—a man from a race with a single large eye at the center of their face.

To Subaru, the fact that he had been given permission to enter with just a quick glance was anticlimactic. He wondered if, possibly, the guard held the power to see something special in that characteristic single eye.

Subaru: “Maybe that’s why he’s been appointed as a gate guard, isn’t it?”

Abel: “It appears that you are reading too much into it, but the Cyclops Tribe does not possess power of that nature. I have heard that they can see a little farther than normal people, but generally, there is no difference in the functioning of their eyes.”

Subaru: “Right! Because how’d he let such a suspicious carriage pass by!”

Subaru, who had put his hand on his chin while trying to convince himself in his own way, barked at the unkind words.

Hearing Subaru’s high-pitched complaint, the other party emitted a small snort, as they adjusted the angle of their face, a mask—an oni mask in red. Following this, they sank back down in their seats.

As soon as he had arrived at the Demon City, Abel had equipped the mask he had brought along. Subaru had protested that such an action would make the guards and soldiers suspicious of him.

However, Abel’s mask did not come off, and the guards had reacted as he had foreseen, leaving Subaru bitter twice over.

Of course, it was good news that Abel had not been suspected.

Subaru: “It’s a serious matter, really. What kind of laws are in place, so that the city’s first line of defense, the gate guard, is in such a state?”

Taritta: “I agree with Natsumi. I’m wearing clothes with sleeves, and they didn’t say anything about it.”

Subaru: “Hmm… your surprise’s of a slightly different nature than mine…”

Taritta agreed with him, her cheeks stiffened, but unfortunately, the gap in cultures she had experienced was different from that which Subaru had experienced.

While Subaru's pertained more so with the way the city carried itself; hers was attributed to her self-identification as a Shudraqian.

Subaru: "…"

It reminded him of the conversation Taritta and him'd had around the campfire, before their arrival at the Demon City.

Following that event, she never again spoke of the same worries and anxieties, but that did not mean that Taritta had been freed from their fetters. It was a concern that might not go away, even if she were able to achieve the decisive event of taking over as the Chieftain.

Subaru sincerely hoped that she could reach a resolution that would put her mind at ease if possible, however—

Subaru: "Well, let's focus on the problem of the Demon City."

After overcoming the careless checkpoint, the carriage was swallowed by the chaotic and disorderly city itself.

The high-pitched cheers of Medium and Louis being impressed at every step arose from the coachman's seat, and Subaru too witnessed the spectacle of what lay within the Demon City, of that which could not be seen from the exterior alone.

The first thing that struck him as he entered the city, was the unprecedented number of races.

The impact caused by the one-eyed guard at the gate had been quite potent, but once inside the city, he realized that the guard's presence was not particularly eye-catching.

In broad terms, there was a large variety of beastmen—And it wasn't just catfolk and dogfolk, there were also rabbit and lionfolk, with a clear distinction between small and large among them, passing through the streets.

A group of reptilian-looking lizardmen set up a store, a member of the Multi-Arm Tribe with many arms, and a group of people with unusually long hair that might or might not be a fashion statement or a racial trait.

As soon as he thought that, he noticed a race that appeared to be made of actual stone walking around, and a chimera whose body parts seemed to be mixed with another race's as well.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru was left speechless by this senseless mixture of races.

Of course, even in the Royal Capital of Lugunica, there were scenes that had reverberated within Subaru similarly, which had made him realize that he had been summoned to another world immediately. But later, as he acquired the knowledge required to live in this world, he also learned a smidgen of the complicated circumstances surrounding demi-humans.

With how Emilia was ostracized for being a half-elf as an example, the environment for demi-humans in this world could not exactly be labelled as favorable.

For better or worse, the custom of keeping away those who were different did not change even across worlds.

Consequently, many demi-humans whose appearance very much reflected their characteristics left human settlements and kept to themselves to avoid trouble, so he had heard.

The Sanctuary, that which Garfiel, among others, called home, was one of those.

But what about Chaosflame, which lay in front of Subaru's eyes?

The variety of species living side-by-side and without prejudice aside, what had struck Subaru the most, was the way they stood.

With their backs straight, everyone was proudly asserting their own species.

Beastmen that did not curl their claws and fangs, lizardmen that would not polish their scales, and those whose shapes were considered abnormal would not cover their faces and bodies with cloth. —To Subaru's eyes, this was novel.

Abel: "What kind of laws are in place, you said?"

The one to speak suddenly was Abel, sporting the oni mask, remaining in his seat.

While not only Medium on the platform, but also Subaru, Al, and even Taritta were looking around curiously, the Emperor, his visage concealed, drew Subaru's attention with his words and continued.

Abel: "As you can see, what we have here, is lawlessness. If you ask what sort of law prevails, that would be an intangible sort. It is a mockery of the nature of order, a city of vices, if you will."

Subaru: "Vices…? People are impressed, yet you still managed to put a damper on it."

Abel: "Impressed? It left a deep impression on you? I guess that is to be expected from an outsider such as yourself."

Abel shrugged his thin shoulders at Subaru's response, with a slight grimace on his face.

The word "outsider" once again made him feel like he did not belong, which in turn reminded Subaru of the argument they'd had in the carriage a few days prior. In spite of that, as Subaru had been the only one becoming emotional, the other party would probably laugh at him labelling it an argument.

Al: "But ain't the concept consistent throughout this city that of disorder itself having become order? What do you think, Abel-chan?"

Abel: "If you question the nature of order, you shall know whether this city is disorderly or not. —Where do you believe the essence of order resides in, in the first place?"

Al: "Getting all philosophical on me… Bro, pass!"

Subaru closed one eye at Al, who had given up on thinking pretty quickly.

However, unlike Al, bereft of pride, Subaru was not willing to raise the white flag so easily. He crossed his arms and twisted his neck, permitting his long hair to flow over his shoulders, then stated,

Subaru: "The essence of order is not that, you know. Everyone getting along! Harmony!"

Abel: "—The essence of order is to be the same."

Without reacting to Subaru's opinion, which sounded like he was in the lower grades of elementary school, such was Abel's statement.

Frowning upon his words, Abel resumed piling on.

Abel: "It is many beings sharing the same values. It may be doctrines or beliefs, goals or self-interest. When as a group, rather than as an individual, the identity that does not deviate from each other is called order. What is built on the foundation of that order, is the pipe dream you spoke of."

Subaru: "Pipe dream… Do you think peace is that ridiculous?"

Abel: "Struggle is an unavoidable human instinct. Even if the weapon for that is not a sword, but a language or a country, the essence remains the same. But order is the perfect mechanism for shaping an environment far from collapse. —Behold."

Jerking his chin, Abel urged Subaru and the others to look out the window.

As he sat in his seat, he presented them with something that they could be confident of its presence without bothering to look out the window—the red castle, the symbol of the Demon City.

Abel: "As the clown said, there is an order called disorder in this city. And that poses as the reason as to why the city has not fallen into collapse, despite its existence as a melting pot for myriad species."

Subaru: “That castle… No, inside the castle…”

Abel: “—Yorna Mishigure.”

The sound of Abel’s voice assaulted Subaru’s eardrums, which trembled slightly.

Abel, his expression unseen behind that mask, spoke of that name. But what did he think of the existence of the most problematic person in the Nine Divine Generals? One who could be indispensable for him to regain the throne?

The Demon City where various things stood in close proximity, both vertically and horizontally; Where people without any sense of unity would arrive, and leave.

The castle at the city’s core appeared to be looking down on the Emperor’s group that had arrived at its laps, its glossy outer walls glowing with a mysterious light.

2

—The information provided in advance regarding Yorna Mishigure, amounted to little.

One of the Nine Divine Generals, the strongest of the Vollachian Empire, and a woman who had been anointed with the rank of Seventh.

Although she held a position as a General of the Empire and was counted as one of the swords of the Emperor, she was a loose cannon who had brought unnecessary chaos upon the country by committing rebellion many times.

Zikr had been the one to supply information about the Nine Divine Generals to Subaru on the behalf of the Emperor who was incapable of communicating with others, but the only two people whose humanity he had vaguely spoken about were Yorna and Cecilus, the First.

In short—

Subaru: “From the craziest men and women of the Empire, it’s the woman who’s the one that’s recognized as such…?”

With those words, as he mulled over what laid ahead, Subaru’s fake chest became laden.

Negotiating with the woman was the challenge at hand, but eventually he would have to face the man as well. Moreover, there was also an agreement on the fact that if they did not have him as an ally, they were almost certain to lose.

Although when he started to say the same thing, he was reminded of the talk about order that Abel had given,

Subaru: “It’s those who are far from orderly that we’ve got to deal with, isn’t it…?”

With a slight headache, Subaru muttered as he brushed a strand of hair off his forehead with his fingers.

Abel’s reasoning was deeply interesting, as expected of the Emperor, but whether it would be of use in capturing Yorna soon was debatable.

However, he was not simply trying to assert his dominance by telling Subaru something clever, instead he wished to convey something else. —The order of the Demon City.

Chaosflame seemed to be overflowing with people and things in a chaotic and disorderly manner, but even in a pot brewing such bedlam, an “order” that would not crumble existed.

Abel had declared that this order was Yorna Mishigure.

In other words, Yorna was in possession of the ability and ingenuity to bring all this disorder together and keep it from overflowing out of the pot.

That was why Abel had not ordered her removal from the Nine Divine Generals, or even her execution, despite the fact she was a dangerous rebel with a history of multiple revolts.

Al: “But I’m sure she’s got a screw loose, and I don’t wanna get the short end of the stick, bro.”

While Subaru was lost in thought, Al, casually sitting cross-legged, laughed at him.

Subaru exhaled lighted as he peeked at Al, the latter sitting in a slouched position on the wooden floor. There were times when his calmness would save the day, but it was on a case-by-case basis.

Subaru: “Al, please behave yourself. You never know when, where, or who might be watching you. Also, please stop calling me bro.”

Al: “Hearing you out about my attitude and posture’s fine, but aside from… bro, what should I call you? Something like, bro but written as sis?”

Subaru: “Isn’t that something that can’t be conveyed without the Kanji?”

The beauty of the Japanese language’s variety of expressions was mind-boggling, but at present, there was no use in increasing the number of exchanges between Subaru and Al that could only be understood by the two of them.

What they needed was a way to call each other externally.

Subaru: “Since you address Medium-san, Taritta-san and Abel as “chan”, wouldn’t it be more natural if you addressed me as such?”

Al: “Then, Natsumi-chan? Whoa, gives me goosebumps!”

Subaru: “Please withstand the urge! You lack so much composure…”

As the leader of the group, Subaru reprimanded Al, who showed the hair on his right arm standing on end.

It was a strange thing to say, but it was unavoidable, because seniority had not played a role in the selection of personnel this time around. Considering the weighty part he had to perform, tempering his behavior was something Subaru had to do.

At any rate—

Subaru: "—We're already inside the Crimson Lapis Castle."

The whisper not leaving his mouth, Subaru began putting his mind in order.

Yes, Subaru and the others had already been invited to enter the Crimson Lapis Castle at the heart of the Demon City, as they had sought an audience with Yorna Mishigure, the Lord of the city.

—After the entrance to the Demon City had been accomplished, the subsequent actions were swift.

They had procured an inn in which they could stay with their Galewind Horse and carriage, booked a room, and began actions towards their goal of conquering Yorna.

Having said that, because they had already decided what steps were required on the way there, no hesitation was to be found in their actions.

The action to be taken was—

Abel: "Deliver this to the lord of the castle, Yorna Mishigure. She should respond."

With that, Abel handed Subaru a letter written by him.

The envelope containing the letter was enclosed with beeswax, rendering it impossible to open. It was customary for important documents to be stamped with a ring, or similar, bearing the family crest before the beeswax hardened, as proof of their origin.

However, there was no such proof stamped on the sealing wax of the letter he had been given.

Abel: "Both of the Emperor's symbols I took with me have already been shattered. One by you, the other in the City Hall of Guaral."

Subaru: "Oh… the Lifeblood Ritual and the Arakiya Panic, yes. But if we don't have anything to show where it came from, I wonder if she'll read it. Even if she does, will she really believe us?"

Abel: "There is no need for unnecessary concern. I shall not disclose the contents of the letter, but I have made it so that if she reads it, she shall know I am its writer."

Subaru: "I see… By the way, wouldn't it be more reliable if you went there in person?"

Subaru asked frankly as he put the letter he received in his pocket.

The reason why he had been requested to hand over the letter, was because Abel would not accompany him to the castle. It seemed like a problem that could be solved in one go had he gone along, even if it meant proving his identity and circumstances.

In the first place, hadn't Abel gone along with them to negotiate directly with Yorna?

Technically speaking, with Abel not going there, wouldn't it be the same as if he had stayed behind in Guaral?

Subaru: "If anything, I think the journey would've been much more relaxed that way, without having to worry about checkpoints along the way…"

Abel: "Your disrespect knows no bounds, does it?"

Subaru: "Because you're disrupting our vibe all by yourself…"

More precisely, it was not restricted to just Abel; Louis's presence, too, was one of the disruptors.

But since he wanted to give Abel a snide remark at this juncture, he put aside the matter of Louis, a specialist in disturbing Subaru's mind.

Abel: "It goes without saying, but I shall be having a direct word with Yorna Mishigure. However, it is not convenient for me to make my entrance so prematurely. You, too, should perceive that."

Subaru: "Perceive… Oh, yeah, that's right."

Abel’s grumpy words, conveyed through that oni mask, peacefully convinced Subaru.

Now you mention it, this was an opponent who had been involved in several rebellions in the past. From Yorna’s point of view, the rebellion had most likely been raised because of her dissatisfaction with Abel’s rule.

Naturally, the relationship between Abel and Yorna was like water and oil, or in some cases, like a smoldering powder keg. It’s already something that he dragged himself all the way to the Demon City.

Abel: “At present, your task is to deliver the letter to Yorna Mishigure. However, you must keep it secret that it is a missive from me… from the Emperor.”

Subaru: “Eh, why not? If I don’t say that, won’t I get turned away at the door?”

Abel: “It’s just in case. Nothing bad shall befall you for allowing her to read the letter, however I cannot read her mind before you hand it over. Therefore, be creative.”

Subaru: “Creative…”

Subaru looked at Abel in surprise as he was thrown an unexpected challenge.

The latter crossed his arms, his expression still hidden by the oni mask,

Abel: “If you look at this city, you can get a rough idea of her temperament and how she weighs her likes and dislikes. Use all the gumption you possess to get her interest.”

Subaru: “There was some malice in your phrasing!”

Abel: “I do have a back-up plan, but I would prefer to not rely on it. It shall not endure for much time. Considering my purpose, we have a long way to go. Do you comprehend that?”

Subaru: “You really are a pompous man, aren’t you…?”

Subaru's lips curved in a grimace at the manner in which Abel spoke his instructions.

He was not afraid to side with Yorna now, and raise a rebellion against Abel. With that rumination in his consciousness, he felt like he could get along with Yorna.

If they could both have a chat about their grievances against His Majesty the Emperor, they could become best friends.

Subaru: "…Well, I guess I'll proceed in that direction then."

Abel: "You seem to have had a flash of inspiration, however, it does not appear to be anything proper."

As far as he was concerned, there was nothing persuasive about being told that by the initiator of something improper himself.

—And so, after going through with this, Subaru and the others had made their way to the epicenter of the Demon City, the Crimson Lapis Castle, the residence of Yorna Mishigure.

In accordance with Abel's instructions, they were taken up to the castle while going without the mention of his name.

Although this was a somewhat unusual move, Yorna's private soldiers, who were as unconcerned as the gate guards, ordered Subaru and the others to enter the castle and await an audience with Yorna.

All said, Subaru and the others were now spending their time inside the castle, within a large waiting room with a wooden floor, until Yorna, the lord of the castle, was ready.

There were no guards in the waiting room, and they could leave at any time if such was their will.

The laxity and carelessness of the security system was enough to make Subaru, an outsider, nervous. In the first place, things had proceeded so smoothly that even Subaru was bewildered.

Subaru: "Of course, it's convenient, but… if they let visitors into the castle like this, with or without the General First-Class, wouldn't they be given free rein to assassinate?"

Al: "In fact, they haven't even taken away our weapons. I was surprised when they said we could enter with them."

Medium: "Well, we don't mean to be violent or anything. They won't get mad."

Subaru and Al were taken aback by their response, which frankly smelled more of defenseless than magnanimity. However, Medium, who had been sitting calmly beside them, laughed boisterously at their conversation.

Subaru, Al, and Medium had been the three to embark to the Crimson Lapis Castle as messengers. The remaining people, Abel, Taritta, and Louis, were currently waiting at the inn.

Since Abel could not come to the castle, one of them had to stay behind to guard him.

And since he wanted to avoid having to spare hands for Louis's protection, who would be in no conceivable scenario be useful, their split had resulted in this.

Subaru: "I also briefly thought about the possibility that the owner of this castle likes unusual things."

If that were the case, it was possible that the People of Shudraq, who would scarcely leave the forest, would attract Yorna's interest; so making Taritta a member of this had come to mind.

However, leaving Abel and Louis alone at the inn was not an option, so the outcome produced was that Taritta had been left with a rather laborious load.

Al: "Even if she likes unusual things, with so many species in the city, wouldn't one or two Taritta-chans be considered unusual now?"

Subaru: "Yes, I thought so too. That's why we're going with this plan."

Medium: “Natsumi-chan, you’re so bold! I was surprised, and so was Al-chin.”

Al: “Yeah, Al-chin was so surprised.”

Even though Subaru had his reservations about Al, who shamelessly took advantage of Medium, the latter saying “Right?” with a tad of pride.

Subaru’d had a bright idea upon being asked to deliver Abel’s letter as a messenger while being disallowed to mention his name.

In fact, the reason they had been allowed to enter the castle this way, was probably because his idea had worked out so well.

Subaru: “The hint for our conquest is, ”Abel pisses me off”.”

Medium: “Haha, Natsumi-chan, you do snap at Abel, don’t you? I think it’s awesome.”

Subaru: “Awesome? Am I? Or is it Abel’s terrible character?”

Medium: “Both of them!”

Subaru: “You’ve got some nerve too, Medium-chan.”

Raising her hand cheerfully, Medium alluded to the relationship between Subaru and Abel.

The relationship between Subaru and Abel was not quite like that of water and oil, but they had no choice but to walk along the same direction; hence, they were bumping shoulders with each other as they went.

In terms of a close relationship, it could be said to be similar to that between Subaru and Julius in a time past.

However, taking in mind the stuff at Pleiades Watchtower, Subaru put a lot of faith in Julius. —Though he would never tell him that, nor was he intending on displaying it via his attitude.

Subaru: “But it’s not that easy either, you know.”

To put it plainly, one could guess that the rivalry had faded and that they had come to terms.

However, that too was the result of a long road, as well as a reasonable quantity of peaks and valleys, having been overcome.

Improving relationships was no trivial undertaking.

A rough road would never be leveled unless both parties were willing to make it better, at the very least.

Even if one side attempted to smoothen it, as long as the other trampled and laid waste to it, it would never happen.

???: “—Thank you for your patience. Messengers, this way.”

Such bitter sentimentality was interrupted by the words of a servant who had made her appearance in the waiting room.

The girl who had shown up, was the same girl who had guided them here—a deerperson with large antlers on her head. She was a half-beastman who, the antlers on her head aside, mostly resembled a human being.

The girl, still in her mid-teens, wrapped her slender body in a kimono-like outfit, its long hem sweeping the floor as she led Subaru and the others.

The grace of that figure and that gesture, made Subaru’s knowledge tingle slightly as he recalled something similar.

With Subaru not being capable of putting a finger on it, the girl who was guiding them conducted them to the upper parts of the Crimson Lapis Castle—to the very top level.

The construction of the Crimson Lapis Castle gave the impression that it was closer to the old-fashioned Japanese castles in Subaru’s knowledge, rather than the Western-style castles that he had grown used to seeing. Naturally, the materials used and the architectural style were different, but the interior and the way the floor had been designed with big open spaces gave him the aforementioned impression.

One of the reasons for this, could be the fact that here and there people clad in a kimono could be seen, together with the girl who had been showing them around.

In any case, Subaru and the others followed the guide in a well-behaved manner, having been brought to a room where they would meet Yorna.

???: “Please wait here. —Yorna-sama shall be here shortly.”

Subaru: “Yes, thank you… Oh?”

After thanking the girl for showing him around, Subaru was ushered into the hall, where he tilted his head.

The reason for this was the presence of previous guests in the hall. —Within the atrium, there were figures other than the three of them who had been ushered in, all facing away as Subaru’s gang entered from the back of the room.

That neither of the figures was Yorna, the lord of the castle, was clear from the fact that the chair placed at the far end of the room was empty.

Subaru: “Those people over there are …”

???: “These are the people who, much like you, have requested a meeting with Yorna-sama. Yorna-sama is a capricious person, so she wishes to see everyone at once.”

Subaru: “Yes…”

Subaru groaned a little from the difficulty of nodding at the girl’s nonchalant words.

It was an idea that was not only unreasonable, but also illogical. In the first place, even if such a situation had been arranged, it would be an extremely awkward one for people who did not even know each other.

There were times a party would wish the contents of their words would go unheard by strangers.

Al: “And that’s exactly what we are, Natsumi-chan.”

Subaru: “…If you call me that, then I’ll get goosebumps too.”

Having had his innermost thoughts peeked into and been called out, he replied to Al.

In fact, albeit the details of the letter he had brought along were unclear, it would undoubtedly describe the circumstances in which Abel had been forced to abdicate his throne, and request Yorna’s cooperation as a foothold to regain it.

Since they had no clue about Yorna’s personality, what her reaction to the letter was likewise unknown. At the very least, Abel had stated that she would not wrong them, were she able to read the missive.

Servant: “Please wait inside. Yorna-sama is here.”

Ignoring Subaru and Al, who were whispering to each other, the girl who was leading the way bowed and stepped back.

Of course, stopping her would not change the situation. If the one who had ordered her to do so was her master, Yorna, it would be pointless to blame her for this.

Medium: “So, what are we gonna do?”

Medium tilted her head as she shook her tied-up hair as she pleased, and touched the twin blades on the back of her waist.

She was quietly following Subaru and the others’ plans, which made her surprisingly reasonable. Medium, who gave the impression of being uninhibited and emotional, was, however, obedient to the directions she had been given.

Perhaps this was the result of the partition of roles between her and Flop in their journey as a duo.

Subaru rubbed his eyes in response to Medium’s straightforward and honest question, rocked his head, and with a “We can’t do anything about this”, he stepped into the room.

Subaru: “Just in case, let’s ask her to clear the room before handing her the letter. We may be refused, but things are what they are. There’s no harm in trying.”

Al: “If it were the Princess, there’s a chance she would have your head chopped off, saying it didn’t suit her fancy, y’know?”

Subaru: “Please don’t give me such an example…”

Having been presented with this most extreme of cases made him become more wary of Yorna, who may also be one such extreme being.

As Subaru hesitated a little to enter the hall, Al tapped him on the shoulder,

Al: “Don’t worry. I told you. I’ll lend you a hand. Today, I ain’t gonna let br… Natsumi-chan get into any trouble.”

Subaru: “Al… You’re the one who’s making me nervous.”

With those words, Subaru then glared at Al’s hand on his shoulder. Al hurriedly withdrew his hand, but for better or worse, his shoulders had relaxed.

Accepting Al’s sentiment with gratitude, the three of them also stepped into the hall.

The atmosphere of the large hall was, the absence of tatami mats excluded, akinto that of a tatami room in a historical drama, where the lord of the castle would hold council with his vassals.

Same went for the messengers in the seats below, waiting for the lord of the castle to make their appearance in the upper seat.

Subaru: “For the moment, let’s stay over here, shall we?”

Advancing through the hall, Subaru settled down in a position opposite to that of the previous guest.

It seemed strange to sit in front of or behind the guests, so he took a position on either side of the hall, keeping a slight distance from them. In historical dramas, there was a strange pattern in which the vassals would deploy to the left and right of the lord of the castle, leaving the front of the hall open. And they had ended up in a matching arrangement.

Pondering that this coincidence was strange, Subaru took a glance at the guests that were there before.

The other party amounted to four people, and like them, they had kept their weapons on their bodies. Among them was one devoid of weapons, sitting a tad ahead of the other three.

Perhaps that person was their representative, and the other three their guards.

Subaru: “They all seem more dependable than Al…”

So did Subaru speak, while looking sideways at the three guards and trampled all over Al’s earlier concern.

Moving on, he turned his attention to the front of the guards, to the person being protected by them, even though he thought it rude.

What kind of person had required to seek audience with Yorna, and for what purpose—

Subaru: “—Hk.”

At that very moment, Subaru’s throat tightened up due to shock, his cheeks and neck completely frozen stiff.

An inaudible voice leaked out, and as he turned his face down in a panicked reaction, the person in question heard the sound, then directed their gaze towards him.

However, having seen Subaru’s face directed downwards and in line with the elevated seat in front of them, his gaze fell away, as if he was not interested, and his attention was diverted.

Sensing this, Subaru took a gentle breath at the explosive beating of his heart.

Al and Medium behind him seemed to think it strange to see Subaru like this, but they soon would experience the same jolt that Subaru had.

Because—

Subaru: “…You’ve got to be kidding me.”

That was Subaru’s bitter complaint, and, just five meters next to him, waiting for Yorna Mishigure to make their appearance—

—Was a man donning the same visage as Abel, who was not supposed to be here.

Chapter 37:
The Lord of the Crimson Lapis Castle

—Towering at the heart of the Demon City of Chaosflame, the Crimson Lapis Castle.

The city looked like a wedding cake with no sense of unity, created by painting chaos on top of disorder—beams and scaffolding of different materials and styles had been strung together, and the castle, with its alternating shimmering red and blue hues, was one-of-a-kind, amidst the Demon City. A city that could not be understood without a certain artistic vein.

To begin with, the word “lapis lazuli” essentially referred to the color blue, so utilizing the word “crimson” in conjunction would be contradictory. However, a glance at the exterior of the Crimson Lapis Castle would convince anyone that such usage was accurate.

The stone used abundantly in the foundation and framework of the castle was, as its name implied, quite literally lapis lazuli.

The jewel emitted a deep-blue luster, and within said gem, crimson was swirling, like a drop of blood slowly dropped into water. So occasionally this supposedly-blue lapis lazuli would be clad in a red glow like that of ichor.

A castle of chaos, clad in ever-changing colors, refusing to stay as one single shade.

That was the Crimson Lapis Castle of the Demon City, the residence of its Lord, Yorna Mishigure.

Subaru: “…”

Having been summoned to the top-most floor, where he would soon meet Yorna, Subaru’s back was drenched in cold sweat.

The reason behind this was because he laid eyes upon a group of people waiting for Yorna in the same keep—and in that group, a face that should not be there was present.

Accompanied by three men who appeared to be his escorts, there sitting with all the composure in the world was a familiar black-haired fiendish figure—That was to say, it was none other than the countenance of that who was supposed to be waiting for him at the inn, Abel.

But there was no way that they could have possibly come across him here. It was for this reason that Subaru and the others had gone to the Crimson Lapis Castle as messengers without him.

In other words, the reason he was here, even though it was impossible was—

Subaru: "—He's a fake, disguised as the Emperor."

Muttering this to himself, Subaru's face turned stark white.

They had been told beforehand that there was someone who looked like Abel and behaved like him. The accuracy and suddenness of the encounter had floored him, but that was why he held no doubt about it.

He was one of the Nine Divine Generals, the body double of Emperor Vincent Vollachia—

Medium: "Eh, Abel-chin? Why are you here… Mguh."

Al: "Whoa, everything's aight, Medium-chan. Al-chin's here."

Behind a Subaru frozen in shock, a dangerous scene occurred.

Having found a familiar face in the crowd, Medium then approached in a friendly manner. Al rapidly covered her mouth and pulled her backwards. Although Medium was taller than him, she obeyed quietly, even though she was surprised at the outburst of the one-armed man.

A close call, but Medium's action had been negated.

???: "—?"

But the exchange seemed to have attracted some suspicion from the other party. Aside from the man with the same face as Abel, a man with yellow-green hair, someone who was probably his bodyguard, glared towards them as well.

That said—

Subaru: “That was a nice follow, Al.”

Al: “Yeah, I’d like to pat myself on the back for my godly reaction, too… But that guy’s a lil’ bit too much of a surprise, ain’t he?”

Subaru: “…Yes. I agree.”

As Al retracted Medium, Subaru nodded with a serious face next to him.

Battling with an unforeseen opponent—and the worst collision imaginable. With this turn of events, it was fortunate that Abel was not with them at this moment.

Had he been present, it would have sparked the start of the battle to determine the true Emperor of Vollachia.

Subaru: “Perhaps that’s an option as well…”

Glancing over at the three guards accompanying the man donning Abel’s face, Subaru was being cajoled by temptation.

The vastness of the troops hiding inside and outside the city was unclear, but at least there were only three of them belonging to him here—He was a false Emperor protected by tens of thousands of Imperial Soldiers within the Imperial Capital, but here and now would be a great opportunity to unmask him.

Subaru: “—No, it’s too soon to tell.”

If they were to believe Abel’s words, the position of the Emperor was no cradle of peace.

Abel never even shut both of his eyes simultaneously in public, constantly on alert for people attempting to slay him in his sleep.

Considering the position of Emperor was one in which this was a normal behavior, even if this Emperor was an imitation, it was unthinkable that he would make a public appearance devoid of any protection.

In other words, either the three people he brought with him as guards were quite powerful, or he had other measures in place.

Al: “You wanna take a shot and see if it works?”

Subaru: “If it were easy to continue, that could be an option. However, what I’m more afraid of’s a development we can’t recover from. So, please, don’t do anything rash.”

Al: “Yeah, yeah.”

Subaru did not know how serious he was, but Al appeared to not mind the rejection of his proposal.

Al’s opinions tended to be rejected relatively often, but that was only because he tended to come up with them faster than Subaru could, giving them time to calmly assess it.

This reduced the number of detours in his train of thought, and allowed him to spend more time examining proper options.

At the very least, they should find a way to get through this without upsetting the false Emperor and his group. He also wished to determine the purpose of the other party’s visit.

Why had he made his appearance in Chaosflame with this timing?

Plus, even though things were in reality different, it appeared like the Emperor himself had shown up.

Medium: “Mm~! Mmphn~!”

In the midst of his thoughts, Medium, who had her mouth covered, groaned something.

She had been forced to step back without explanation, and her mouth was being kept shut, so her indignation was understandable.

Al released her with a “Sorry, sorry”,

Medium: “Pffhaaa, that was tough!”

Al: “Sorry, I didn’t notice. It’s not like I did it on purpose just because of how soft Medium-chan’s cheeks are.”

Subaru: “The more you say, the more the sexual harassment allegations increase.”

Medium: “I don’t really get it, but more importantly!”

Al’s excuse was met with a blank stare from Subaru, and Medium, who took a breath with all her might, thrust a finger at them with both hands.

Subaru and Al both recoiled from her forcefulness, and then,

Medium: “You know, I still don’t really get it but… is that Abel-chin a different person from the Abel-chin we know?”

Al: “Oh yeah, you ain’t wrong. After all, the real one’s supposed to be sitting in an inn downtown, waiting for us to come back, right? That’s why we’re in a pickle…”

Medium: “Wouldn’t that be bad? Because of Natsumi’s plan?”

Subaru: “Me? What have I done… Ah.”

Medium pointed out that although she did not grasp the details, she comprehended the essence of the problem. Subaru, frowning at being the subject of her point, immediately understood her concern.

Medium’s point, and what she intended to do, was obvious.

And it was something that Subaru and Al should have realized before she had spoken.

Of course, there would be no time to take action once the realization dawned on them. Even so, they should have been prepared enough to discuss how to proceed—

Deergirl: “—Yorna Mishigure-sama has arrived.”

Without giving them a chance, it was the deergirl acting as a guide to announce that their time had run out.

Upon her reappearance, the girl lowered her large horned head and bowed to Subaru, the false Emperor, and their groups. Then opening the door at the front of the hall, she voiced, “Come in”.

At that moment a figure slowly stepped into the room, and upon seeing their figure with his own eyes, Subaru succeeded in putting the impression he had of the deergirl into words.

Subaru’s conception of the deergirl, was that she resembled a kamuro.

Kamuros were apprentice prostitutes who worked in Japanese red light districts in the olden days, learning etiquette and the arts while taking care of the other prostitutes in these glamorous pleasure districts.

The unexpectedly stylish kimono and hair ornaments were likely what had brought such a notion to Subaru.

More than anything else though, was the person who brought the girl in question with her—

Subaru: “…”

The reason why Subaru had succeeded in using “kamuro” for the girl, was precisely because of the person who had made its entrance.

Forgetting to breathe and regarding that other person with eyes wide open was a reaction arisen from instinct. Because his mind had been corrupted, his consciousness was dominated by a human being so beautiful and overwhelming.

Yorna: “—There are a lot of guests today, aren’t there?”

The one to speak those words, was a tall woman, as she narrowed her almond-shaped blue eyes.

Her tall, slender body was wrapped in a bright kimono with a floral pattern, and her hair, which faded from white to orange progressively as it reached the tips, was tied with care and allure.

Her hair was adorned with kanzashi fashioned from animal bones and horns, and many other hair ornaments made of fangs and scales played a role in pleasing the eyes of those laying their eyes upon it.

However, they were merely ornaments, forms of beauty crafted by human hands.

In order to truly exhibit their charm, the person being put on display, and the quality of their inner nature was important.

And in this regard, the quality of the person wearing the kimono was something that need not be questioned.

Yorna: "…"

Her beauty was stunning as she moved her svelte body in a supple and relaxed manner.

Those sophisticated gestures and actions that seemed to have taken the eyes of the beholder into consideration, despite the somewhat languid atmosphere, were glimpses of the optimal solution to the act of attracting focus.

What made the impression of the shuffling gait even more striking were the fox tails that looked too large for her slender body—nine of them, with rich fur.

Given the fact that her hair was tied up in a bun, the kanzashi, and between all her hair ornaments, were perked-up animal ears, the information that she was a beautiful foxwoman, clad in a kimono, seeped into his brain like the smell of liquor.

Yorna: "Welcome to my castle, you've come a long way."

With that, she sat on the chair in the upper part of the hall and threw out her long, supple legs, resting her weight on the armrest. She reached out her hand, and the kamuro girl who followed her held a fine, gold-painted kiseru in her pale fingers.

The beautiful woman lit the end of the kiseru in her hand and smiled bewitchingly, as she let the rising purple smoke fill her lungs.

She was sitting in the seat of honor, looking down at her guest—the Emperor of Vollachia seated below.

Yorna: "…"

Her majestic and gorgeous appearance, her way of speech, and her manner of wearing the kimono, exposing her thin shoulders, allied with the presence of the kamuro accompanying her, reminded Subaru of the words "prostitute" and "courtesan".

Of course, Subaru had never seen a brothel or a prostitute in person. It was just knowledge he had acquired from period dramas and other works that dealt with past epochs, but there was nothing else that came to mind.

—No, to say that there was a lack of further words to describe her would be an overstatement.

At this juncture, there was undoubtedly another word to describe her. It was true that she was both beautiful, and it was true she behaved like a prostitute; however, taking precedence over that, she held the position of Seventh among the Nine Divine Generals—

???: "—Yorna Mishigure."

The beautiful woman who appeared—Yorna Mishigure, was called by name, then directed her gaze at the man who had named her.

On the wooden floor, their eyes focused on Yorna's own blue ones, was the fake Emperor—for the purpose of differentiating him from Abel he would be called Vincent, but it was him.

Subaru: "Naturally, the same voice…"

Only a scant quantity of words had been issued, but the voice was very much that of Abel's.

Apparently, the resemblance was not only in appearance, but also voice. However, provided his appearance was being copied, that the voice would be likewise similar was natural. Henceforth, there had been no shock.

Rather, Subaru gasped at the sight of Vincent and Yorna facing each other.

They quietly looked at each other and exchanged glances; their appearance was as magnificent as a painting.

A beautiful and lustrous beauty, and an Emperor with a magical appearance that miraculously combined dignity and majesty. What kind of event would the meeting between the two on this day leave in the history of the Empire?

Whether this affair would lead to love or bloodshed would depend on what was to come.

Subaru: "…What on earth's the purpose of their visit?"

Why Vincent's party had come to the Demon City was currently something that was currently unreadable.

The reaction to their encounter with them and Yorna's entrance was what took priority, but regarding the aim of Vincent's visit—What was the purpose in him having come to one of the Nine Divine Generals who kept rebelling?

Provided he was playing the role of the true Emperor, he must hold some legitimacy. However, why would Yorna welcome the Emperor, given that there was bad blood between them, into the castle?

If he were to end up saying that, due to Yorna's position, she could not refuse it, then that would be all she wrote.

Yorna: "My oh my, Your Excellency, it's been a long time."

As Subaru had a rough time with those thoughts, to his front, Yorna smiled with the corners of her eyes lowered, inserting the kiseru in her mouth. Then exhaling a puff of purple smoke, she closed one eye rudely, and said, Yorna: “I’m honored to have the privilege of seeing your countenance. No matter how many times I’ve invited you to the Demon City, you’ve never come.”

Vincent: “An invitation, is it?”

Without touching on the two instances of disrespect, her posture and the smoke, Vincent frowned in displeasure.

Then, crossing his slim arms and tapping his elbows with his fingers while in thought,

Vincent: “Raising an army against me every so often was your invitation? If so, my response would have been evident.”

Yorna: “Yes, indeed. That’s correct, but my neck’s still connected to my chest. In addition, it seems that you don’t have that troublesome little boy with you today.”

Vincent: “…”

Yorna: “Yes, my chest’s throbbing with excitement to think that my feelings may have reached you. Please forgive me.”

Yorna cleared her throat and let out a chuckle. Her seductive tone of voice and smile, however, did not cause Vincent to waver in his expression.

Vincent’s perfection as a false Emperor was remarkable, but at the same time, Subaru was concerned about Yorna’s attitude—about the passion in her eyes and words toward Vincent.

It had only been a brief exchange, but in Subaru’s eyes, the two of them—

Al: “No way, did that girl plot rebellion just to get Abel-chan’s attention?”

Subaru: “…I really hope you’re wrong.”

Al seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion as Subaru, those words causing Subaru to clack his molars.

He preferred that one of the Empire's greatest warriors would not be someone to deploy their army out of a personal grudge, and it was hard to imagine that there would be anyone around with feelings of goodwill towards Abel, while the latter did not consider them a person.

That was the main reason for the tense state of Subaru's cheeks, but something more important existed.

That being the pretext for Subaru and the others to request an audience with Yorna in the first place.

It was an attempt to capture her attention with the slogan "Abel pisses me off", with the presumption that it would not get through to anyone who was favorable to Abel.

Were the unpleasant imaginations of Subaru and the others true, it would be a not-so-entertaining matter for Yorna. Yet, in spite of this, she'd shown Subaru's group up into the castle.

In fact, that would be why she'd had them being sat alongside none other than Vincent's party.

???: "General First-Class Yorna, is that behavior not a disrespectful one to take? What are you thinking?"

Yorna: "Hmm?"

While Subaru and the others were worried about the unclear situation, the Emperor's group continued their conversation.

In Vincent's stead, who had fallen silent, the figure with yellow-green hair that appeared to be Vincent's bodyguard was the one to cause Yorna to raise her eyebrows.

A man with short, upswept hair, with a portion hanging down as long braids; he seemed to be about the same age as Vincent, perhaps a little older.

Clothed with a sand-colored cloak over light armor of black color, his face and physique gave the impression of being as sharp as a wire. His piercing eyes glared at Yorna as if to denounce her.

Yorna: “So you there with His Excellency, you’re…”

Kafma: “I am Kafma Irulux. I have been ordered to accompany His Excellency. I was planning on only being a bodyguard, but… your demeanor is disgusting.”

Yorna: “My attitude, is it? What do you mean by that?”

Kafma: “Everything!”

Yorna’s words sounded leisurely, to which the man who called himself Kafma became enraged.

He glared at Yorna and pointed his hand at Subaru and the others witnessing the scene in silence,

Kafma: “In the first place, why do you want others to be present here! This is your castle, but at the same time, a territory of the Empire… Did you forget that fact?!”

Yorna: “Of course I did not forget. I belong to His Excellency.”

Kafma: “I am not talking about that! You guys there, you guys!”

Subaru: “Wha?! Us?!”

With Kafma’s anger being directed at them, Subaru’s shoulders trembled, startled. He would have preferred to be left alone, outside of their attention, if possible, but that was quite hopeful.

However, when someone asked you something, there was a way to take advantage.

Subaru: “Um, are we interrupting something? If so, we’ll come back another day…”

Yorna: “That’d be a problem. I have a limited number of hours in a day, and if you miss today, I don’t know when the next time will be.”

Kafma: “Do not keep them here! Those girls are probably feeling awkward too!”

Subaru: “Yes, yes, that’s right.”

For some reason, Yorna was trying to keep Subaru’s group present, but Kafma somehow agreed with Subaru. As long as he was by the false Emperor’s side, he and Kafma were enemies, but the latter’s words and actions were so upright that he seemed to be the sole ally in this situation.

However—

Vincent: “Yorna Mishigure, what are you thinking?”

Suddenly, the one to break the tension was Vincent Vollachia—the false emperor himself.

After he spoke, Kafma, who had been worked up, immediately backed down. Even though the voice and the face were familiar, Subaru also felt his guts shrink.

Even though he was cognizant that he was a fake, the feeling of intimidation was genuine.

Vincent: “Answer. What are you thinking?”

Having silenced both his servant and the uninvited attendee, Vincent inquired Yorna yet again.

In response to that question and the high spirits, Yorna narrowed her eyes slightly. Gently bringing the kiseru to her mouth, allowing the fluttering purple smoke into her lungs, she exhaled sweetly, giving exaggerated emphasis to her answer.

Kafma’s cheeks tugged slightly at the disrespect of keeping the Emperor waiting yet again,

Yorna: “Of course, I am always thinking about Your Excellency… About Your Excellency the Emperor of Vollachia.”

Vincent: “…”

Yorna: “Hehe. Don’t give me those cold eyes. But I’m sure His Excellency will be more pleased if you knock the guests over there down a few pegs, right?”

With a small laugh and a confident attitude, Yorna pointed at Subaru and the others with her chin.

Then, for the first time, Vincent’s consciousness turned his attention to Subaru’s group. He must have judged that there was a reason for the previous exchange, aside from Yorna’s whims.

In order to stop this bad turn of events, Subaru cleared his throat with a “Ahem”, in preparation for a reprimand,

Subaru: “I’m sorry, but I have a new suggestion. We seem to be in the wrong place and there are some things we should most likely not hear. We’d like to step back and go to…”

Yorna: “My oh my, that’s a very timid thing to say.”

Subaru’s words were interrupted as he bent at the waist and attempted to leave the scene politely.

Noticing Yorna’s eyes hidden by the purple smoke for only a moment, and the glint of childishness therein contained, with an “Oh” Subaru realized that he had committed a misstep.

If he was going to go back, he should have made the decision upon seeing the faces of the people ahead of him.

He had misjudged it, and now ended up regretting it.

Because—

Yorna: “I heard it from Tanza… You came here to tempt me into becoming the enemy of His Most Gracious Excellency the Emperor, didn’t you?”

And, such was the manner in which she disclosed the entirety of their intentions.

Chapter 38:
A Reward Eight Years in the Making

1

“Abel pisses me off.”

Subaru had believed this slogan to be a good strategy for conquering the Flamboyant, Yorna Mishigure.

After all, Zikr, a man of distinguished character, had branded her as an owner of a destruction wish, someone who had, time and time again, raised an insurrection.

Subaru’s pretext for requesting an audience with her, was that “a suitably powerful person wished to speak to her privately in order to rebel against the current Emperor of Vollachia”.

Subaru’s group of three were visiting the Crimson Lapis Castle with a missive from that powerful man.

In truth, he had not told a single lie.

The “current Emperor of Vollachia” was none other than the one who had ousted Abel, having usurped his name and position. The “suitably powerful person” who wanted to talk privately happened to also be the real Emperor, the one supposed to be sitting on the throne, so there was no falsehood in his words.

Subaru’s aim was to ensure that the letter from Abel was received no matter what. If necessary to achieve this goal, they would tell as many lies as possible.

Subaru: “This is what Natsumi Schwartz’s plan is all about…!”

In the end, he had been applauded by Al and Medium for his ingenuity.

However—

Kafma: “—Rebels against His Excellency, you say?”

With what had been said to Yorna now laid bare, the atmosphere of the hall grew more gelid.

Kafma Irulux, Vincent’s bodyguard, who had been the most passionate person in the hall for a while now, exuded a hostility that could be mistaken for cold air.

Subaru could tell by the sternness of his gaze that a peaceful exit from this place was no longer possible.

—”A schemer drowns in his own tricks”, that phrase that had never before been more veracious for him.

Subaru: “But aren’t the timing and lack of shared information both Abel’s fault…?”

Kafma: “Keep your mouth shut. —General First-Class Yorna.”

Kafma silenced Subaru, who cursed Abel for getting him into this absurd situation. With that, he then thrusted his steely gaze toward Yorna,

Kafma: “Did you knowingly allow His Excellency and these people to attend at the same time?”

Yorna: “…”

Kafma: “I want you to answer!”

As Kafma raised his voice, his anger was not directed at neither the increasingly anxious Subaru nor his group, but rather at Yorna for having created this tense situation.

The reason for this was not because the blame lay with Yorna.

In simpler terms, it was a sign that they did not regard Subaru and the others as a threat.

In fact, the fighting spirit emitted by Kafma, now standing up vigorously, gave Subaru the feeling that he was as strong and threatening as Arakiya, whom he had encountered at the City Hall in Guaral.

At the very least, there was no doubt that he was powerful enough to be assigned to accompany the Emperor.

From his perspective, it was probably inevitable that Subaru, who went without saying, but even Al, and Medium would be judged as being unworthy of caution.

Al: "We're the ones this concerns but we're being excluded? Is that good or bad…?"

Feeling the same about Al's dim complaint, the tense exchange continued, with Subaru and the others not included in it. Kafma questioned Yorna, who put her mouth on her kiseru and let out a puff of purple smoke.

Then she tilted her head with an "I wonder…", as she shook her vibrant hair ornaments.

Yorna: "What do you mean by, "knowingly"?"

Kafma: "How shameless…! As I have repeatedly advised His Excellency, you are still dangerous."

Yorna: "You're stating the obvious. With all the disorder I've made… do you perhaps not know what I've done?"

Kafma: "—Hk."

Yorna's words, that could not be thought of as anything other than a provocation, caused a vein to bulge out on Kafma's forehead.

Albeit odd, from what he could gather from their exchange, Subaru found himself agreeing with Kafma. Yorna's personality was honestly the worst, even from Subaru's point of view.

Although they had readied themselves for a certain degree of viciousness based on her reputation, it had exceeded their expectations.

However, it seemed that she was not simply planning to give up Subaru and his group, who were plainly rebellious elements, to Vincent and his men, who happened to be visiting.

The air was too far tense for a scene in which traitors were being presented to the Emperor.

Most of all—

Vincent: "—As usual, your taste is repulsive."

And then, disregarding Yorna's intentions, Vincent's voice was loosed.

At Vincent's cold words, Yorna raised her shapely eyebrows slightly,

Yorna: "Oh, does it not suit your taste, Your Excellency?"

Vincent: "Preposterous. If too one-sided, it is akin to letting a rabbit hunt a dog. I have not grown tired of the Empire to the point of making mere cruelty an amusement."

Vincent's statement was one of indifference, but with a definite air of authority.

Taking it in stride, through the gaps of her tied-up hair, Yorna's fox ears quivered. Subaru could not ascertain what sort of emotion she was expressing.

However, the same went for Vincent's feelings.

Subaru: "…"

What sort of storm would brew in his heart upon confronting rebels face-to-face?

Understanding the inner thoughts of the fake Emperor was even more difficult than imagining the thoughts of the real one, especially when he knew that the person in front of him was an imposter.

The fake must think badly of Abel, as he had driven the other away,

but—

Subaru: “Can’t be stupid enough to let it show…”

Vincent: “—You.”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Subaru gasped for breath as Vincent’s black eyes pierced straight through him. In an instant, Subaru was forbidden even to avert his eyes, and while still unprepared, he locked eyes with his greatest foe.

His face was a replica of the real one, though how it had been made was unclear.

Both the genuine and the fake possessed the same sharp black eyes that attempted to peer through one’s every action. This made Subaru’s insides squirm—

Vincent: “If you have something to say, say it now.”

Subaru: “…Those are some annoying eyes.”

Kafma: “Wha…!”

Subaru: “Ah! No, no, no! I didn’t mean it like that! It was just unintentional!”

At the most inopportune time, the questioning of the false Emperor coincided with a leak of annoyance.

Kafma was lost for words, his face one of absolute surprise, after Subaru hurled verbal abuse straight at the Emperor. Subaru then gave a hurried wave of his hand, to which Vincent closed one eye and became silent.

He was surprised, but at the same time, he regarded Subaru as if assessing him.

The look the real Abel had directed at Subaru in the Buddheim Jungle, the Shudraqian village, and the City Hall in Guaral—this one was of the same kind as those.

Subaru: “Uh, anyway, we…”

At his back, Al and Medium were also watching the situation with bated breath.

Subaru’s shocking rant must have put them under a lot of pressure. The atmosphere in the hall was cold and tense, and one additional gaffe would shatter it into pieces.

The situation they had been put into was too painful to begin with.

Not just Yorna but Kafma as well were not the kind of opponents that Subaru and his group could compete with.

If that were the case, wouldn’t it be wiser to recant their opinion to Yorna, emphasize that them being rebels was outrageous, bow their heads, and leave? Even if it would make the scene bland?

With that in mind, Subaru tried to loosen the corners of his mouth in an attempt to put on an amiable smile.

—Subaru then realized Yorna’s gaze homed in on him, with nary a motion.

Yorna: “…”

In silence, Yorna watched Subaru’s movements as she took a drag of her kiseru.

It was a very ambiguous look, neither disinterested nor indifferent. Uncertain as the rising purple smoke, it was like a phantom that disappeared even when one tried to grasp it.

He thought it would be deeply foolish to try to rely on it.

However, Subaru had a hunch that this was a turning point.

That gaze, on the verge of losing interest in Subaru’s group, was not as capricious as to consider taking back what had once been given up on. The opinions discarded here could never be scooped up

again.

In other words, Yorna Mishigure's cooperation could nevermore be obtained.

It was synonymous with blocking the way to an unreliable victory in the dark.

Therefore—

Vincent: "—Answer me carefully. What were you going to say to me."

Subaru: "Well, um—"

At Vincent's question, Subaru took a heartbeat too long to look up.

Kafma, beside the false Emperor, narrowed his eyes and turned his attention to Subaru. Behind him, Al and Medium's tensions swelled, while Yorna sustained a mouthful of purple smoke in her lungs.

Seeing those changes at the corner of his eye, Subaru looked at Vincent, and declared,

Subaru: "It is as Yorna-sama said. We are declaring war on you."

Yes, as if clinging onto a position that he should not withdraw from, a piece that he should not give up on.

Rem, who was waiting for his return in Guaral, Abel, who was absent, and Al and Medium, who were bracing themselves behind him, had entrusted Subaru with this decision.

In order for Natsuki Subaru not to misunderstand the significance and weight of this, and not throw it all away—

Vincent: "…"

Vincent's dark eyes flickered slightly upon hearing the hostile declaration.

Subaru's insightfulness was not able to decipher which emotion it corresponded to; joy, anger, sorrow, or pleasure. Instead, he experienced the rapid parching of his tongue, brought by the enthusiasm of his own words.

Naturally so. Unlike Abel, who had been deprived of his real power as the Emperor of the Vollachian Empire, which boasted of a vast territory, the fake Emperor in front of him was the one who definitely held it as leverage.

Had Vincent not raised a hand to halt Kafma after hearing the gaffe from earlier, the latter would have exploded in rage and Subaru's life would have been cut short.

But that had not come to pass. Vincent would not allow it to happen.

Yorna: "Kuhu…"

Looking down at the confrontation between Subaru and Vincent from her high seat, Yorna let a faint sound slip out from her throat.

A chuckle escaped from the corner of her mouth as smoke leaked out of her mouth, and her shoulders trembled with amusement. It seemed that Subaru's life-threatening pronouncement had taken an effect in relieving her boredom, at least.

Vincent: "What are you laughing at, Yorna Mishigure?"

Yorna: "First of all, these guests have not retracted their words. In addition, the three of them might possibly put His Excellency's life in jeopardy… What do you think?"

Vincent: "Do not taunt me, woman. Even you, who believes in disobeying me, understands my intentions."

Vincent's expression did not change as he met Yorna's provocative gaze.

Like that, he once again cast his dark eyes to Subaru, who had declared his hostility.

Vincent: "This is the land of the Sword Wolf. Only if you possess the mettle to aim at my head can you truly be called a citizen of the Empire."

Subaru: "…That's very sweet of you, isn't it?"

Vincent: "Hmph."

With a snort, Vincent dismissed Subaru's sarcasm with a laugh.

Vincent's behavior, the way he responded included, was a perfect facsimile of the real thing. If Abel were here, he would have responded exactly the same way.

That Abel was together with Subaru and the others made the latter suspect the possibility that he was the false Emperor.

Although in that case, Subaru and the remaining people would be at a complete impasse, so he wished for it to not be the case.

Vincent: "But the value of my head is not so low that I can hand it to you that easily."

Subaru: "—. Then, what do you intend to do with us?"

Vincent: "Well, that's the problem."

The statement acknowledged Subaru and the others who had shown outright defiance to the Emperor by getting the better of Kafma, who was on the verge of a violent outburst. However, the following words showed that there was no change in the cold gaze Vincent directed at his opponents.

Even if he valued their spirit, there was no reason for him to give allowance to those who sought to harm him.

Subaru's and Vincent's black eyes met, the atmosphere of the room an infernal blaze.

Yorna: "Oh, I'm a sinful woman, too. When I see men fighting over me like this, it makes me quite excited."

Kafma: "As if it were someone else's problem… First, there are more women over there than men. Saying men is not accurate."

Yorna: "Kuhu."

Yorna let out her impressions, which really stuck out like a sore thumb, about the staring contest between Subaru and Vincent.

In reaction, Kafma's face grew increasingly angry.

Kafma: "My Excellency! Order me! Those people are…"

???: "—Kafma, ya did that thingy… You've been makin' a bit of a ruckus for a while now."

Fed up with the stalemate, Kafma attempted to appeal directly to Vincent. However, it was not Vincent who interrupted him, nor was it Yorna, but someone else.

Subaru: "Ah…"

Subaru's mouth involuntarily let out an exhale as he turned to the direction of the voice.

The voice had been so far outside of Subaru's consciousness that the very fact that it had been uttered startled him.

It was one of the three people Vincent had brought along as escorts —a small figure sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor, someone other than Kafma.

???: "Ya know, most things work out better when His Excellency's the one ta do the thinkin' rather than us. We're seriously goin' to be in the way if we keep yappin', really."

It was a wrinkled old man who spoke those words, his hair colored white, donning long eyebrows.

He was an old man who had carefully crafted an atmosphere of annoyance in both the tone and content of his speech. His appearance was so striking that it was hard to understand why he had not been seen before.

—No, he had been in sight. It was just that he had been out of awareness.

Perhaps that is what it meant to truly be out of sight.

Once the old man pointed this out, Kafma turned to him and said, "But",

Kafma: "It would be the duty of a loyal subject to remove His Excellency's troubles, Master Olbart!"

Olbart: "When ya call yerself a loyal subject, doesn't it sound like a prelude ta someone bein' purged for bein' self-servin'? I don't like the idea of choppin' off the head of a promisin' young man."

Kafma: "Guh… Hk."

Shaking his head lazily, the old man—the one called Olbart, picked at his ear. Kafma's cheeks tensed up, making one wonder what kind of pressure he had felt from that gesture.

However, Kafma was not the only one who had caused their cheeks to stiffen. Upon hearing the name mentioned, Subaru's cheeks tensed up as well.

Subaru: "Master, Olbart…"

Olbart: "Oh? Ya know me? I'm kinda well-known after all."

Subaru: "…If you're aware that you're a celebrity, then yes, I'm sure of it."

His lips trembled as he spun the name that Olbart reacted to.

If he had that reaction upon witnessing Subaru's look of shock, then there was no doubt about it. In the City Hall of Guaral, and then on their journey to the Demon City, he had heard of Olbart's name.

From here on out, the Nine Divine Generals would be an inevitable part of Subaru's strategy to conquer the Empire. One of them was Yorna, and the other was—

Subaru: "The Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkenn…!"

Olbart: "I don't really like that name, ya know. Vicious Old Man sounds awful. Do I look like such a vicious ol' man? Well, if someone asked me directly, I wouldn't be able ta say that I do. I wouldn't be able ta say it, kakakakka!"

The old man smiled, as he opened his mouth wide and displayed his beautiful white teeth, which looked great for his age.

However, Subaru was in no laughing mood. —They had encountered Vincent, the false Emperor, as they worked towards their goal of getting Yorna on their side, and in the end, he had brought Olbart with him.

This meant that, at this point, Olbart too was a member of the other faction.

Subaru: "Arakiya and Chisha, and also Olbart…"

Subaru felt like he was reaching his wits' end; members of the Nine Divine Generals they were aiming for had seemingly been secured by the enemy already. And furthermore, they were just going for those said to be high ranking.

The problem was that not only the future, but also the situation in front of them was getting worse at an accelerating pace.

Even if it had been just Kafma by himself, he'd have been way too much to handle, and now Olbart of the Nine Divine Generals had joined the fray.

It was not they could have arranged all those terrible conditions thus far, even if they'd planned to—

Al: “—Hey, old man, do you remember me?”

Olbart: “What’s that?”

Sweat flowed down Subaru’s forehead, running down his cheeks and dripping from the tip of his chin.

Amidst all this tension, an unexpected voice made Olbart raise his eyebrows. It was Al, who had called out from behind Subaru.

Al leaned forward, Subaru’s eyes widening in surprise at that action.

Subaru: “Al? What are you… doing all of a sudden, when every move we make’s being questioned right now?”

Al: “Natsumi-chan’s still talking like a woman for the most part in this situation, but I didn’t just butt in without thinking. No, I didn’t think about it, but… Hey, old man! It’s me, hey hey!”

Subaru: “It sounds like you’re a phone scammer talking like that…”

It would be rash to think that just because he was an old man, he would be able to pull off such a scam. In fact, in response to Al’s call, Olbart leaned forward and snorted, “Hmm?”.

Olbart: “Well, that’s quite the eccentric look ya got there, boy. Even tho’ I’m an ol’ man, I wouldn’t be able ta forget someone who looks like that. Do we really know each other?”

Al: “Maybe I don’t know you that well, and the last time I saw you, I wasn’t wearing my helmet. But I didn’t have an arm, and we chatted a bit.”

Olbart: “You’re the armless one who talked ta me at…?”

Al: “Oh, right. —Lil’ Miss Arakiya was with me, too.”

Lowering his voice slightly, Al mentioned Arakiya’s name, the fearsome girl who had stirred up so much trouble for Subaru and the others and, like Olbart, was a member of the Nine Divine Generals.

Al's words were something Subaru could make no sense of; but as soon as Olbart heard them, his eyebrows shot up and he shouted, "Oh!".

Olbart: "You're that guy! You're the guy who took back the island with Araki! Now that ya mention it, ya look similar ta him. Kakakakka, I can't believe you're still alive!"

Al: "Oh, I'm alive, I'm alive. Somehow, my stars have come full circle."

Olbart: "So, by some chance, you've become an enemy of His Excellency. Maybe I should've talked to ya earlier to make His Excellency's reputation better. I messed up, I messed up."

Al and Olbart exchanged words, the former speaking in an easy-going tone, the latter with a broad smile.

Unknowing of the relationship between the two, Subaru could only stare blankly. As for whether things were getting better or not, even that was difficult to gauge.

Vincent: "—. Olbart, you know that man?"

The one person to intervene to put an end to such doubts was Vincent.

Olbart, with crossed arms, replied, "Oh, yes!" to the false Emperor's query,

Olbart: "Two or three years ago when you'd just ascended ta the throne, there were revolts all over the place, weren't there?"

Kafma: "Master Olbart, His Excellency ascended to the throne eight years ago now…"

Olbart: "Huh? Thought it'd have been 'bout three years ago. Dangnabbit, it's been 'bout ten years, which ta me seems recent, guess I just screwed up."

Vincent: "Never mind that, just proceed. Eight years ago, what happened?"

With Olbart going off on a tangent, Vincent set him back on track. In accordance with that correction, Olbart pointed to Al and said, “So,”.

Olbart: “There was a rebellion on Ginunhive back then… and the ones ta stop it were this guy with the helmet and Araki.”

Vincent: “Hoh.”

After hearing Olbart’s story, for the first time, Vincent’s interest turned to Al.

It was difficult to ascertain which way the pendulum had swung, good or bad, but it seemed that his effort had not immediately led to him being punished for his rudeness.

On top of that, Al stepped forward so that he was alongside Subaru,

Al: “Your Most Gracious Excellency the Emperor, as Old Man Olbart over there is seemingly aware of… Actually, eight years ago, I was of service to His Excellency, and I have yet to receive my reward.”

Olbart: “Altho’, ya said ya didn’t want anythin’.”

Vincent: “Olbart, keep your mouth shut. —You may resume, clown.”

Al: “—I was hoping to get my reward today.”

Subaru imagined a sound that seemed to silently freeze the air in the hall.

Al’s fearlessness in demanding a reward for his own achievements over eight years ago, coupled with the presence of someone who knew of Al’s deeds, was certainly a gamble worth taking.

The fake Emperor who had not opted to execute them immediately after hearing Subaru’s declaration of war—Vincent possessed both reasons and resolution to act as the Emperor of Vollachia.

And, if Abel’s words were true, then his beliefs would include “definite punishment or reward”.

Then—

Vincent: “What do you request? My head?”

Al: “It would be a massive victory for me if I could get you to give it to me, but it would take a lot of courage to ask for it. So…”

As he said this, Al turned his head to look at Subaru. Realizing what he was being asked to do, Subaru pulled out an envelope from his pocket.

All along, their objective had been to deliver Abel’s missive.

Subaru: “It is our purpose to give this missive to Yorna-sama. If you would like to reward my companion for his service, please allow it.”

Vincent: “A missive?”

Subaru: “A love letter from our… Master, to Yorna-sama.”

Hesitant to call him “Master”, Subaru stuck his tongue out internally and continued to speak.

Hearing the expression “love letter”, Yorna, who was sitting at the head of the room, laughed and cleared her throat with a “Kuhu”. Her interest seemed to have been piqued. And Vincent’s reaction was not an undesirable one either.

As he squinted his dark eyes, Vincent pondered for just a few seconds,

Vincent: “Over eight years have passed, but the Gladiator Island incident was troublesome.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Vincent: “You may have your reward if you so desire it. You may deliver the missive to Yorna Mishigure.”

Gesturing with his chin, Vincent indicated Yorna.

It took Subaru a moment to comprehend the intent of Vincent’s words. But upon realizing that it meant that Al had won his bet, Subaru and the others looked at one another.

It had been a high-stakes gamble, and Al's decision to go for it had been the correct one—

Vincent: "—However."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Just as they were about to burst in jubilation, Vincent held up one finger and spoke up.

To Subaru and the others turning to look at him, the false Emperor closed his black eyes, which felt like darkness itself, and said,

Vincent: "The only thing I shall allow you to do, is to hand her your missive. You know the meaning of that, do you not?"

And thus, the words spoken were processed.

Subaru's eyes widened at this, and he quickly turned around, gnashing his teeth as his gaze fell on Yorna, gazing over the situation with a grin.

The goal of Subaru's party, though, was to give her a missive and get her to respond.

Subaru: "If I were to give you the missive, when should I expect a response from Yorna-sama?"

Yorna: "Yes, I see…"

Upon that question of Subaru's, Yorna cast her gaze towards the void.

Then turning the kiseru upside down, dropping the ashes into a jar prepared by the attending kamuro.

Yorna: "I'm a woman, after all… I don't want to be seen opening a love letter as soon as I receive it. That's why… I'll carefully read and respond to the guests after they have left the castle."

Subaru: "—. So you will read it once we leave the castle, won't you?"

Yorna: "As the Lord of the Demon City, I won't speak lies in front of my attendants."

Subaru could not tell whether the light in her blue eyes was sincere or naive, as he was unfamiliar with her. However, he no longer had a choice.

For example, were he to alter Al's reward, instead saying that the reward would be to exit the castle safely, Vincent probably would have allowed for that as well.

However, much like the previous one, that plan would terminate the possibility of joining forces with Yorna.

Meaning—

Subaru: "Al, Medium-san."

Before he completely made up his mind, Subaru called out the names of his two companions.

What was going to happen and what needed to be done required the cooperation of both of them. So, it made sense to get their approval before taking any action.

Subaru turned around and met their gaze, as Al and Medium nodded to each other.

Al: "Well, I told you bro, that I'd lend you a hand."

Medium: "Big bro asked me to take care of you, too! He said to take care of Natsumi-chan for him!"

Al tilted his head, and Medium exclaimed with powerful words.

Encouraged by the answers of those two, Subaru nodded back at them.

Then Subaru slowly walked towards the front of the hall—towards Yorna leaning on the armrest in the seat of honor, while she puffed on her kiseru.

With her bewitching beauty in close proximity, Subaru presented her the missive amidst a sweet scent.

Subaru: “Here you go, a missive from our Master.”

Yorna: “Thank you for your hard work. But it’s going to be a lot harder from here.”

Subaru: “Yes, I am aware.”

Supple fingers took the missive, and the words expressed with a smile, cursed the future of Subaru and his friends.

But Subaru responded to her words with dignity and turned around.

And then—

Subaru: “—Your Majesty the Emperor, I’m afraid we’re going to have to take your throne.”

And so, right in front of him, he announced a declaration of war even more clearly than before.

2

The events that took place at that moment were dramatic.

Kafma: “How dare you, you insolent little—!!”

Immediately after their declaration of war, Kafma’s eyes went wide open.

Following Subaru’s proclamation, the height of rudeness and disrespect, Kafma Irulux wished to prove his loyalty to the Emperor with his own power.

—As a result, Kafma’s clothes exploded as his arms were extended, and countless thorns rushed towards Subaru.

Dark-green-colored thorns like slithering snakes surged toward Subaru, their overwhelming mass blanketing his vision. The ivy of thorns, each of which in possession of needles as thick as Subaru's arms, was a deadly weapon that would squeeze its prey out of every last drop of life.

It was a strike that would not permit for any reaction from Subaru, and akin to a snake swallowing a rat, it engulfed Subaru's body in thorns with no effort.

Al: "—Well said, bro."

The thorns pierced through his entire body, and he prepared for the fierce pain to come.

However, it was not the pain that struck Subaru, who had tensed up his body, but rather the shock of him being pulled backwards and falling on his buttocks. Stepping before Subaru was Al, whose words had reached him from the side, taking the thorns on with his Blue Dragon Sword.

Al, with Subaru behind him, drew out the thick blade and parried the enemy's attacks. Incapable of blocking their entirety, his shoulder and side were stained with blood.

Nevertheless, Al had been able to protect Subaru from this overwhelming mass.

Subaru: "What about Medium-san!"

Medium: "Uuaah! That was so close! If I hadn't done what Al-chin said, I would've died!"

Subaru turned around hurriedly, and right beside him was Medium answering in a loud voice, having pulled her twin swords.

Glancing over, she was swinging her twin blades up and down, slashing away, or catching, or stepping on, preventing some of the thorns approaching her from all directions.

Subaru breathed a sigh of relief at the certainty of her skills, and the fact that she was safe. However, relief was too premature. After all, this was merely the first wave—

Yorna: “What an extravagant magic trick.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

To the rear of Subaru’s group putting themselves on guard, was Yorna, who would have been within range of the thorns as well. She pulled her kamuro into her arms and exhaled purple smoke, while remaining in the same posture as when she had accepted the missive.

There were signs of thorns closing in on her from all sides as well, but they avoided her as if by design, the thorns twisting unnaturally as if there were a circle of space around only Yorna.

It was impossible to speculate whether it was Kafma who had intentionally bent it or Yorna who had done something about it, but —

Subaru: “I apologize for the disturbance. We will leave you to it.”

Yorna: “Have a safe return home. If the three of you fail to leave the castle…”

Subaru: “You won’t read the missive. I understand.”

When explained once again in simple terms, Yorna’s intentions could be understood without doubt, no matter how hard to grasp they may be. Vincent too, had made it clear that the game was on—

Subaru: “Game’s on ‘til we leave the castle. —Al, Medium-san!”

Al: “Yeah!”

Medium: “Alright!”

Subaru: “To the right!!”

Immediately after the strong replies, Subaru barked loudly.

Hearing this, his two companions comprehended Subaru’s decision that very instant, and three blades were brandished.

The Blue Dragon Sword of the one-armed man, and a pair of supple swords furiously cut through the thorns, blowing away the mass that blocked their vision and their path, and the three figures flew out of the greenery.

Just like that, they pressed down on the wooden floor to gain speed and momentum.

Kafma: “You think I am going to let you escape?”

However, after one step forward, a needle as thick as a thumb snagged the tip of Subaru’s nose.

As it flashed across his vision, it appeared to be more akin to a piece of white bone to him a rather than a thorn. It was not a shot intended to deter Subaru, but a blow that should have pierced his temple.

He would have died had Al not swiftly placed his blade in the path of the launched needle.

Subaru: “Thorns and needles, along with a freak show?!”

Al: “It’s the Insect Cage Tribe! They attack with the insects they carry inside their bodies!”

Subaru: “This isn’t the Aburame clan!”

While having a dispute over something trivial, Subaru kept his stance low and moved forward with Al and Medium providing support. It was not the exit of the hall that they were headed for.

Even if they headed that way, they would have had to retrace their steps the long way back down the castle tower. There was no way they could continue to be exposed to Kafma’s attacks for that long.

In other words, Subaru and others would need to take a significant shortcut.

Therefore—

Subaru: “Medium-san!”

Medium: “Yeah!”

Subaru: “Do your best!”

Medium: “—I’ll do my best!”

The moment she received that encouragement, without exaggeration, Medium’s whole body bounced and her momentum increased.

With her long hair billowing, she swung the twin swords in her hands, fiercely dispatching the thorns that rushed forth in complicated and bizarre trajectories.

Of course, this was partly due to Medium’s own skills. But in addition to that,

Al: “Right! Right knee! Nape of the neck! Sexy hips!”

Medium: “Uh! Ha! Take this!”

Al’s blood-curdling shouts told Medium of the aim of the approaching dangers, and Medium responded instantly, successfully guarding against and handling the thorns just before they hit.

Subaru wondered how far he could see, but Al’s high level of survivability, which had also been demonstrated against Arakiya, apparently applied not only to himself, but to others as well.

Taking advantage of this, Medium reached the window of the hall. With a single swing, she destroyed the wooden railing, and her long, leaping legs blew down the wall.

Beneath their gaze, the hall of the castle tower, which was more than thirty meters above the ground, had opened up. The blue sky of Demon City spread out in full view, and a wild wind greeted Subaru and the others.

It was not a matter of all or nothing, but—

Subaru: “—If we get out of the castle!”

Yorna put her hand on the missive.

Since they’d accepted these terms, Vincent’s group would cease from doing anything further. Perhaps, it wasn’t like they had made such a promise explicitly.

But with nothing else to believe in, it was the only way to see things through—

Medium: “—Natsumi-chan!”

Medium, who had smashed through the wall, beckoned him, and Subaru ran as fast as he could.

He was grateful for not having worn a skirt carelessly. If the cause of death were crossdressing, Subaru would not be able to face the efforts of his many predecessors.

At the last moment, Subaru, while even forgetting to keep his appearances up, kicked the floor as hard as he could.

He would then catch up with Medium, and exit through the wall with her—

Olbart: “Sorry, but I got a job ta do too, ya know.”

Subaru: “Kah… Hk.”

At the same moment, intercepting Subaru and Medium, the old man appeared in front of them as if from out of nowhere, and his piercing hand struck them both squarely in the chest.

His breath caught in his throat as he was struck by the impact. Subaru’s consciousness cracked, everything seemed to shatter after he took the blow from the Divine General.

However—

Medium: “Natsumi-chan! It’s nothing!”

Subaru: “Huh?!”

A loud voice called out next to him, and Subaru regained the consciousness he had almost lost. Looking down at his chest in a panic, no damage from Olbart’s piercing hand could be seen.

There was no blood, no sign that his heart had been removed without bleeding.

Medium: “Let’s go, Natsumi-chan! Don’t bite your tongue, okay?”

Medium grabbed Subaru by the collar as the latter looked around in confusion. With a large step, she then crossed the wall she had breached, and threw herself out of the Crimson Lapis Castle without hesitation.

Subaru and Medium leapt into the blue sky, intertwined with each other; the sensation of rising through the air caused by the jump disappeared in an instant, only for them to be thrown into a falling trajectory a second later.

Subaru: “Uh, kyaaaa—!”

With a high-pitched scream, Subaru pulled Medium close into him and then felt around his own waist. Following that, he pulled out the familiar feeling in his hand and held up his weapon—a whip, while in midair.

Had he simply jumped without any preparation, it would merely amount to an act of suicide.

Albeit the preparations performed towards their odds of success had not been many, Yorna’s provocation, their declaration of war on Vincent, plus the offense and defense with Kafma and Olbart, had all been a series of gambles.

He had barely picked up everything that was there, so he just had to trust that he could pick up the very last one as well.

Subaru: “Don’t miiiss!!”

While hugging Medium’s thin waist, Subaru swung his arm and unleashed the whip. The tip of the whip extended not into the void, but towards one of the beams that stretched throughout all parts of the Demon City—stretching like a spider's web all throughout the city, reaching likewise one of the outer walls of the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Hooking the whip onto that place, and utilizing it as a stepping stone to get out of the castle grounds. That was the best move Subaru could come up with amidst the chaos of the hall.

Subaru: "—Hk!"

Feeling the tug on his arm, Subaru wrapped the whip around his wrist with all his strength. He thought that this would support his body even if his grip were not strong enough; at worst, the damage would shatter the bones in his wrist.

And then—

Subaru: "Al is… Gyahk!"

Al: "My bad!"

The moment the whip came taut, Al came crashing upon Subaru's back. Apparently he had been able to jump out of the castle, just like Subaru and Medium.

As a result of having crashed into each other in midair, the three of them clung to each other and hung down, entrusting nearly one hundred and fifty kilograms of weight to a single arm of Subaru's.

Subaru: "G-Guaaahhhh—!"

The bodies of Subaru and the others arced around one of the beams outside the Crimson Lapis Castle, using it as a pivot, while the screams of his arm and wrist, elbow and shoulder, of his entire right arm, were replaced by real screams.

As it was, the best thing to do was to wait for the recoil to subside, and have everyone climb up the whip and return to the beam one-by-one. Subaru clenched his molars, as he compared the time it would take to get there to the time it would take his right arm to necrotize—

Al & Medium: “—Ah.”

And just as he was about to exert all his strength, Al and Medium’s voices overlapped.

Before he could see what was up, the burden on Subaru’s right arm vanished. —No, to be precise, the burden had not vanished, but the beam onto which the whip was attached had snapped.

By the thorns extending from the breached walls of the keep, by their fierce mass.

Subaru: “Uh, AHHHHH—!”

With screams trailing behind them, Subaru’s group of three flew through the air in a tangled heap. Their bodies flew in a parabola, recoiling from the whip on the beam.

Even though it was better than jumping from the castle tower, Subaru and Al, as ordinary people, would not be able to survive being knocked down a height of more than twenty meters.

As he searched a way out of the situation, while screaming his head off, the faces of Emilia, of Beatrice, and of Rem popped up one after another in Subaru's mind—

Everyone: "…"

—With a ferocious crash, the three of them crashed through the roof and into the castle stables, entangled with one another atop haystacks.

Chapter 39:
Vicious

1

Taking a look outside through the large hole in the saloon wall, Kafma twisted his lips in disgust.

Under him, in the raging wind, smoke lingered. He strained his eyes towards the building into which the three of them had disappeared to, having successfully escaped the hall. —He could not see the fugitives anywhere.

Kafma: "…"

The beam that had developed a crack crumbled with a loud sound, but as it was too far away, to hope that its debris would crush that insolent group would be folly.

But—

Kafma: "I will not let you escape. I will do whatever it takes to avenge your disrespect towards His Excellency…"

Olbart: "No, no, we can't do that. They bet their every card on this opportunity ta escape, didn't they? If we chase 'em now, wouldn't we make it pointless?"

Kafma: "Master Olbart!"

Having been stopped from pursuing the fugitives, Kafma turned around, his teeth chattering. Receiving that gaze, the diminutive old man voiced a "Oh, scary", and made himself smaller.

Seeing his reaction, Kafma's eyes grew even sharper and angrier,

Kafma: "Why did you let those girls go in the first place? If it's you, Master, you should have been able to seize them in the blink of an eye!"

Olbart: “Oh? I could tell ya the same thing. And I didn’t cut corners too much either. That young fellow with the helmet, he’s got some strange tricks up his sleeve.”

Kafma: “…Young fellow, I got the impression that he really was not that young.”

Olbart: “That’s not really important. Most of ya look like waddlin’ kids to me, actually. I’ve been an old man since ya were born.”

Twisting his wrinkled face into a smile, Olbart pointed at himself. Kafma was about to point out this light-hearted attitude of his yet again, but Olbart continued with “And”,

Olbart: “Ya may’ve forgotten, but I got ta keep an eye on that foxgirl over there, don’t I? Ya never know when she might turn on Your Excellency.”

Kafma: “General First-Class Yorna… Indeed, I have been rash.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka, as long as ya understand.”

Once that was mentioned, Kafma sagged down as if ashamed of himself for losing his cool. At the exchange between the young man and the old man, Yorna, having been designated as a dangerous person, put her hand over her eyes and spoke,

Yorna: “That’s quite rude of you. How dare you speak of a delicate woman such as I as you’d speak of a dangerous animal… I’ve never been so humiliated in my life.”

Kafma: “Who do you think you…!”

She mocked them while faking tears, and Kafma’s anger was directed at Yorna. But Yorna cleared her throat while bathed in his gaze, then gently lowered her hand to touch her eyes.

As she did so, she brought her kiseru to her mouth, filled her lungs with purple smoke, and deeply exhaled, letting out a large plume of smoke. —The smoke slightly wavered as it made its way to the big hole in the wall.

Once the fluttering purple smoke reached it, an astonishing change was born.

In nature very much like that of a hallucination, the demolished wall was mended in a spectacle.

The wood used in the areas where the collapsed walls of the Crimson Lapis Castle had been damaged, wriggled and mended akin to a creature's wounds being healed. It was a building being repaired, but a strange and unearthly one; the impression it gave was more of a living being, rather than something inorganic.

That unrealistic scene caused Kafma, standing by the wall while tensing his cheeks, to retreat, and look back at Yorna.

Yorna: "With this, everything's back to normal now… So if you could as well, please fix your mood."

Kafma: "This is, General Yorna's…"

Vincent: "This is why one cannot mess with the Demon City without proper care… But that is not the sole danger posed by this woman."

After she finished repairing the outer wall, Kafma gasped towards Yorna, who produced a supple smile.

His shiver was complemented by Vincent, who had not even twitched during the earlier commotion. The man at the top of the Empire glanced at the wall, then focused on Yorna,

Vincent: "They have exited the castle. The conditions set forth by you and I have been met."

Yorna: "So, if that's the case, it'd be somewhat unseemly for us to deny their efforts. I hope you understand that, Your Excellency."

Vincent: "…"

Yorna: "Of course, you've got your own ideas, Your Excellency. I respect that. But don't forget."

The Lord of the Demon City, Yorna Mishigure, who had not made an effort to correct her posture against the Emperor from beginning to end, smiled as she looked at the silent Vincent.

Yorna: “This is the Demon City, my city. —Even that blue youngster’s sword cannot reach me.”

Albeit that declaration was appropriate for the Lord of the Demon City, it was inappropriate to announce it to the Emperor.

For the Emperor of Vollachia, who carried out his rule across the entire Empire, for Yorna to act as if her control over even a single city was superior was more than just disrespectful.

However, the words of Yorna Mishigure could not be denied.

Because everyone knew it veracious, regardless of whether she was right or wrong to speak them.

In this Demon City of Chaosflame, Yorna Mishigure possessed absolute power.

Therefore—

Vincent: “I shall give you one night.”

To consider it a defeat for the Vollachian Emperor would disregard that very Emperor’s foresight and deep thinking. However, it was not easy for even those close to the Emperor to discern the intrigues the Emperor held within the depths of his dark eyes.

They must only believe that Vincent’s words were not unreasonable nor erroneous.

Yorna: “Thank you. Then I’ll take my time to examine the reply to the letter.”

And so answered Yorna to Vincent’s permission, and while her words were spirited on the surface, her attitude and face did not display any gentleness at all.

Both of Vincent’s guards, Kafma and Olbart, had their own opinions regarding Yorna’s attitude. But the reason as to why they allowed that from Yorna was their own guilt for letting those three escape.

With Vincent's admission, there was nothing to be gained from backtracking.

Kafma: "But your attitude is inexcusable. I will continue to repeat this."

Yorna: "Kuhu. If you look at me with such scary eyes I won't stop shivering. Master Olbart, could you do something about it for me?"

Olbart: "You're goin' ta spring this on me? I'm an ol' man with a short life ahead of me, it's the duty of young'uns ta be kind to the older generation. Wait, maybe I've found the best idea ta get goodwill from most people? Is my era comin'?"

Kafma: "Master Olbart!"

Kafma raised his voice in anger at Olbart's mischievous remark.

Watching it with a smile, Yorna shook the smoke fluttering from her kiseru. Squinting at the appearance of these Generals, Vincent gave a light snort of his nose.

Then turning, the Emperor regarded the final person accompanying him—the one who, contrary to Kafma and Olbart, had not moved any more than Vincent.

Vincent: "You have been talking very little. It is unlike you."

???: "…It is, isn't it? Well, it'd be complicated if I were to meet some people."

The voice of a young man donning a wry smile responded.

The young man was wearing a blue robe over his head, which prevented his face from being seen by others. That in itself was a normal thing for him, but the fact that he had tightened the neck of the robe even more than usual apparently had something to do with the guests previously present.

The man sighed, and shrugged while being in the line of sight of the silent Emperor,

???: “I thought I had to clam up in this Demon City. —The stars, too, seem to want that.”

Vincent: “Is that what the stars want? Nonsense.”

???: “I’d prefer if you didn’t call it nonsense.”

Shrugging, the man grinned at Vincent’s words of disregard.

With this bitter smile, he continued.

???: “If Your Excellency were serious and took heed of the stars’ desires, you wouldn’t have come all the way out here, would you?”

Vincent: “You fool, do you believe you know what lays within my heart?”

???: “Please don’t be absurd.”

The man’s shoulders shrunk as Vincent folded his arms and lowered his voice one note.

Vincent then looked away from the man—from the Stargazer, and narrowed his eyes at the sky into which the three rebels had disappeared, beyond the wall that had already closed.

And then—

Vincent: “—The wishes of the stars are nonsense.”

That murmur that no one was capable of hearing remained as a whisper to himself, then vanished.

2

Subaru: “Coughk! Kahk! Atchoo!”

Coughing into the thick cloud of dust, he desperately worked his lungs.

His back aching from the impact, Subaru ran his hand over the affected area to check for injuries. He fearfully retrieved his hand to see it not stained by blood; it seemed it was merely a bruise. It was a miracle.

The probability that the building materials from the destroyed building or the pieces of the collapsed beams could have pierced him or tore his vitals was high. Just how much luck had he?

Subaru: “We don’t have time for this… Medium-san! Al!”

???: “I-I’m here… Ouchouch.”

Shaking his head, he quickly called out the names of the two people he was supposed to be with. And hearing a reply originated from beneath the rubble at his side, Subaru moved to push aside the debris in a hurry, as to search for those people.

The buried Medium coughed, then blinked her eyes.

Medium: “Uwah, I thought I was gonna die! Are you okay Natsumi-chan?”

Subaru: “I managed somehow, thanks to Medium-san’s and Al’s protection… Medium-san, are you hurt? Does it hurt anywhere?”

Medium: “Uhyahyahya, that tickles~! It’s okay, it’s okay! I’m fine!”

Checking Medium’s shoulders and back, she wriggled and pushed back against Subaru’s chest.

It was no bluff nor lie; it appeared she had no noticeable injuries either. It would seem that both of them had been blessed with a tremendous amount of luck.

Subaru: “Al’s—”

Looking for Al, who did not respond, Subaru scanned his surroundings.

As the clouds of dust finally settled, Subaru noticed that he and the others had jumped into an empty stable. The building beside the Crimson Lapis Castle was apparently a warehouse where hay for

Galewind Horses was stored.

The reason as to why Subaru's party had been saved from their helpless fall off a great height was said hay, which had acted as a cushion. Had it not been for the hay, at a minimum Subaru would have died a horrible death; being crushed like a tomato.

In Vollachia, where healing magic was rare, Rem not included, there was a high possibility that those with serious injuries would not be saved. In that sense, the environment of the Empire was much more conducive to death than Lugunica.

Of course, it could be said that the Empire's notion of survival of the fittest was what had caused all this danger in the first place.

Medium: "There he is! Al-chin!"

And then, as Subaru looked around the dimly-lit room, Medium next to him moved as if to jump out.

She bent down beside a cart that had been overturned by the impact of the fall. Under the heavy pile of hay the three had fallen upon entangled with one another, something had begun to stir.

Subaru hurriedly rushed over, and the two of them, him and Medium, shoveled through the hay. Eventually, a listless thick arm appeared from under the hay, and they pulled it up.

And then—

Al: "Yeoch! My right arm's gonna come off as well!"

Subaru: "That's not funny!"

Medium: "But Al-chin's alive too! That's amazing!"

Subaru scolded Al for his unfunny joke, but was relieved by Medium's words.

Al was pulled out of the haystack; his body was in a terrible state. Unlike Subaru and Medium who had miraculously escaped with only a few bruises and scratches, Al's body had numerous lacerations and bruises all over.

He had fended off Kafma's thorns and, if only temporarily, Olbart as well. As of his jump onto Subaru and Medium at the very end, he was in a position in which he could easily be pursued by the enemy.

—Each of the wounds he had received, were wounds that were supposedly Subaru and Medium's to receive, originally.

Subaru: "…"

Al: "What's the matter, bro… You got a depressing look on your face."

Subaru: "Well, it's…"

Al: "It's a miracle that we all survived the no-rope bungee. Looking at me like that won't make me feel better about the scars on my back, though. It's a shame for a swordsman, you know?"

Turning his shoulders in a languid manner, Al ran his mouth, as to encourage Subaru.

That attitude caused Subaru to choke up, but he then nodded quickly, "I guess so".

Al tried to act aloof and as if everything were someone else's problem, but his efforts in the offense and defense so far were all due to his sincerity to Subaru.

He sympathized with Subaru's goals, and promised to assist him.

To that end, the man who was even willing to fight for Subaru's life, was Al.

Subaru: "I was wrong about you…"

Al: "Huh?"

Subaru: "I thought you were always aloof and irresponsible, unreliable and unserious about everything."

Al: “Oi oi.”

Subaru: “But you risked your life for me. —I won’t forget that.”

Putting his hand on his fake chest, he spoke of his genuine resolution to Al.

Without him, Natsuki Subaru, would not be alive, at this moment. Therefore, from now on, Natsuki Subaru would fight without forgetting the favor he received from Al.

Even if his life could come to an end the next moment—

Medium: “Natsumi-chan, Al-chin, if you two mess around too much…”

Subaru: “Yes, I know, I know. Let’s get out of here as soon as possible. Otherwise, Al’s sacrifice will have been in vain.”

Al: “It ain’t a sacrifice!”

At Medium’s urging, Subaru wiped his face with his sleeve and gave a strong reply.

It was fortuitous that all three of them had survived, however it was still too early to be relieved. The conditions proposed by Yorna and Vincent had been met, at least, but whether Kafma and Olbart would back off was uncertain.

Until he knew that for sure, they would have to survive.

Subaru: “We need to leave now. Hide ourselves and get the answers over there at…”

???: “—No need to worry about that.”

Subaru: “—Hk?!”

He was about to walk out while lending his shoulder to Al, when a voice called out to him.

Surprised by this, he abruptly moved his hands away, and Al, who was leaning on his shoulder, tipped over and screamed, “Guoh!”. But he did not have the leisure to worry about him.

A confrontation had begun between Subaru’s group, and this new figure at the entrance of the stable.

Subaru: “You’re…”

???: “My apologies for the delay in greeting you. A servant of Yorna Mishigure-sama I am, called Tanza.”

The person to speak these words with a respectful bow of her head, was a person with a distinctive kimono and deer antlers—the deergirl who had been beside Yorna.

The girl who called herself Tanza slowly looked up and faced Medium, who stood in front of her as if protecting Subaru and Al, and shook her head.

Tanza: “Do not be alarmed, all is fine. I mean you all no harm.”

Medium: “Really? But we broke the walls of both this place and your master’s castle, didn’t we?”

Tanza: “The castle and the stables will be fixed by Yorna-sama. — Yorna-sama has accepted you as messengers. No one will interfere with you again.”

Medium’s anxiety was dispelled by the words Tanza had added at the end. That line caused Medium’s eyebrows to lower in relief, but Subaru’s impression was the complete opposite.

Aside from Yorna going to fix the walls and stables, the question was more, what would happen afterward?

Subaru: “To say that no one will interfere with us, is a big deal. We know His Majesty the Emperor was there, you know?”

Subaru stood behind Medium, protected by her, not worrying about looking good. Tanza’s gray eyes stared at Subaru as he stepped forward.

In spite of her pretty face, she was a girl whose emotions did not show. Amiability was supposed to be a crucial part of a kamuro, but her behavior reminded him of a doll.

Subaru: “At the very least, we are those who’d hurt His Majesty the Emperor… and you’ll all overlook that? Is that what Lady Yorna said?”

Tanza: “Yes. No one can stand against Yorna-sama here in the Demon City. I believe Vincent-sama too is aware of that.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Tanza’s answer was matter-of-fact, but with absolute certainty. Hearing this, Subaru was taken aback, swallowing down the words he was about to continue with.

Following that, Subaru and the others looked up at the ceiling of the stables they had just broken through and confirmed that there was no movement in the Crimson Lapis Castle. Based on his short impression, Kafma would have followed them right away.

Subaru: “Not even that’s happening… Apparently, you’re to be believed.”

Tanza: “Vincent-sama will return as well. Your letter will be answered tomorrow.”

Subaru: “…I understand.”

Tanza: “Then, have a safe trip back.”

Tanza bowed in response to Subaru’s sigh, and turned her back on the three of them.

She had performed the minimal amount of work precisely, and was now seemingly returning to Yorna’s company. Suddenly as her back departed, Subaru called her out to stop her with “Tanza-san”.

Tanza stopped and turned around; As he stared back at that motionless, doll-like expression on her face, Subaru: “What kind of person is Yorna-sama to you?”

The pretext for that inquiry was because Subaru had too many inner impressions of Yorna.

As long as she remained unknowing that Vincent was a fake, the way she treated him should be the same as the way she treated Abel, the Emperor.

He did not believe it fair to overlook her disrespectful and rude behavior only because of the pretense that she was a powerful woman, but it was unclear to him as to why she was acting in such a manner.

What was it that Yorna had for Abel, affection or hostility?

Combined with the fact that she had encouraged Subaru and the others to struggle, the depths of her heart were almost unreadable.

Therefore—

Subaru: “I would like to hear it from someone who’s beside her. Their impressions of Yorna Mishigure-sama.”

Tanza: “She is a loving woman. Loves her allies and hates her enemies. —Lover of all things that reside in the Demon City.”

Subaru: “…”

Tanza replied without hesitation, and for the first time a hint of emotion flashed through her eyes.

It disappeared in a flash, but to Subaru’s eyes, it seemed to be filled with a faint passion, and he was unable to say anything else.

Unable to follow up, he could only watch the girl’s back as she walked away.

If asked if he had obtained the answers he desired, he would have to say that he had not.

Instead, the mysterious impression he had of Yorna had only been deepened. He could not detect falsehood in Tanza's words. But it was difficult to believe that that woman was a loving person.

Ever since they had arrived at the Demon City, Subaru and the others had been toyed with at her mercy.

Al: "Good grief, she's gone… What are we gonna do?"

Subaru: "… There's nothing we can do but go back. For now, we have to trust Tanza-san's word and wait for a reply tomorrow."

In the stables from which Tanza had disappeared, Subaru again lent a shoulder to Al, who had fallen on his butt.

While supporting his weight, Subaru looked up at the Crimson Lapis Castle once more.

Subaru: "A showy, eye-catching castle… Is this what "flamboyant" had been referring to?"

While he muttered to himself, Subaru realized that Tanza's words had been true.

This strange castle that edged between blue and red was devoid of the hole that he and the others had created. No matter how much he strained his eyes, it was nowhere to be found, not even a shadow remained.

3

Abel: "I see, so he came, huh."

Subaru: "Do you have something to say? Maybe along the lines of I'm sorry, or I apologize, or please forgive me?"

After scrambling back to the inn, Abel received a report of the incident regarding the delivery of the letter. Frowning heavily at his first remarks, Subaru's face filled with hatred, as he pressed for an answer.

Despite this, Abel, donning the oni mask, pushed Subaru's forehead with his palm with annoyance, Abel: “Why must I apologize? You guys did well. I was just about to praise you on a job well done.”

Subaru: “Praise?! Praise, you say?! Don’t give me that condescending attitude together with that phrasing! You don’t have to praise me, I’m just doing what needs to be done. Hey, you two!”

Al: “Don’t get me involved.”

Subaru stuck his tongue out at the dissatisfied Abel while protesting furiously, calling for backup. Al, however, sprawled his feet on the floor and waved his hand saying, “Gimme a break”.

By net content, Al was the one to display the hardest work of the job. Leaving the first aid of his body with injuries all over to Taritta, his body started to resemble a mummy from all the bandages.

With the combination of his black helmet and the bandages all over his body, the surrealness of his appearance was incredible.

Taritta: “I’m glad that Natsumi and Medium are okay. I really should have gone with you, I was so worried.”

Subaru: “Hey, hear that? This is the correct response. As Emperor, why don’t you follow the example of Taritta-san, who’s taking over as the Chieftain?”

Taritta: “Please stop, I’ll die…”

Having been appraised as a good role model by Subaru, the latter currently explaining what should be the mindset of someone of higher position, Taritta, shook her head, her face turning pale.

Even though her attitude was fearful, Subaru could not help but feel disappointed. Was there nobody out there capable of punishing Abel?

At times like this, he felt ashamed that he had no choice but to take advantage of someone’s vulnerability.

Louis: “Uu! Auu!”

Medium: “Ah! Louis-chan, you can’t do that! You see, Natsumi-chan and the others are in the middle of an important conversation!”

Louis: “Uu! Uu!”

And then, Subaru’s thoughts were disturbed by a high-pitched scream coming from the adjacent room.

Taking a glance at the doorway to the neighboring room, he saw that Louis and Medium were having a scuffle with each other. Of course, there was no way Louis could resist Medium, so it resembled a sumo wrestling match between an adult and a child.

Soon after, Louis was carried away and her figure once again disappeared into the other room.

Louis: “Aauu!”

Subaru: “…Sheesh, what the hell’s going on there? Ever since I came back, she’s been trying to jump at me.”

Al: “For some reason, she seems to be attached to you the most, bro. She doesn’t even look at me. Not that I want her to be attached to me.”

Hearing Subaru’s sighs, Al let out a grumble in his final form, which looked like a cheap Halloween costume. Next to him, Taritta wiped her forehead with satisfaction, her aesthetic sense not too bad.

Subaru had found someone who would compete with Emilia and Beatrice, making him miss them all over again. —No, it was not just the two of them that he missed, but everyone on the other side of the border.

Soon, it would be twenty days since Subaru was sent to Vollachia.

As long as Beatrice and Ram were around, they should be aware of Subaru and Rem’s safety, but that was all; that they would not be able to convey any information beyond that made it even more frustrating.

He wished to find a way to meet up with Emilia and the others as soon as possible.

Subaru: “And yet, this masked man keeps leaving all the important bits out…”

Abel: “Hmm, you can point at me and say I am the masked one? If I am masked, what are you? A fool and a clown, perhaps?”

Al: “I’d say we’re all wearing cheap Halloween costumes, ain’t we?”

Al’s words had guessed Subaru’s innermost thoughts from just a moment before, and that expression, coupled with Abel’s point, caused Subaru to gnash his back teeth with a “Grr”.

In fact, Subaru, dressed as a woman, Abel, donning his oni mask, and Al, as a man wrapped in bandages and wearing a helmet, all looked like participants in a costume party. It somewhat mirrored Chaosflame; in this place where many different races were mingled, it seemed as if they were all trying to keep their individuality from being buried.

Of course, Subaru’s crossdressing was for practical purposes, that it was something that could not be avoided.

Subaru: “Anyway! I was able to meet Yorna-san at the castle, but I also ran into the Emperor’s entourage… That was your body double, correct?”

Clapping his hands, Subaru corrected the flow of conversation by force.

He was careful to keep his voice low to avoid being overheard, but he wanted those in front of him to hear exactly what needed to be heard.

In response, Abel nodded his head sporting the oni mask with a “Yeah”,

Abel: “Even if there are many who may resemble my appearance, there is merely a single person in a position able to perform an impersonation of me. —Chisha Gold.”

Subaru: “Chisha Gold… One of the Nine Divine Generals. If I remember correctly, the White Spider, right?”

Abel: “That is correct. Quite wise, and excellent at commanding a large army. And…”

Al: “The first person who betrayed Abel-chan.”

Following Al’s last comment, Abel, his arms crossed while sitting on the bed, silently affirmed it.

He had been the first one among the treacherous Nine Divine Generals, a person who Abel must have trusted very much. That was Abel’s substitute—no, rather than a substitute, he was now in the seat of the Emperor.

Subaru: “Chisha… Why do you think the fake Emperor came to the Demon City?”

Abel: “He understands the conditions of victory in a battle against me.”

Subaru: “The one with more Nine Divine Generals on their side wins.”

Securing the Nine Divine Generals, the symbol of strength in the Vollachian Empire, was the decisive key to victory.

To obtain this key, Subaru and the others had taken the trouble to go to Chaosflame. However, based on Abel’s current answer, there was only one possible purpose.

Subaru: “So, are they also trying to get Yorna Mishigure on their side?”

Abel: “That is difficult to imagine. Yorna Mishigure… He is not reckless enough to believe that she would listen to persuasion or negotiation.”

Subaru: “—? Then what are they doing here?”

Abel: “That much is obvious. —He knew that I would come to the

Demon City.”

After hearing Abel’s answer and being unable to comprehend it, a question mark popped up above Subaru’s head.

Equally puzzled, Al raised his hand voicing an “Abel-chan”,

Al: “Are you really saying that fake Emperor was able to predict that Abel-chan was gonna come to Chaosflame? If that’s for real, ain’t we in trouble?”

Abel: “He can follow my thoughts with considerable accuracy. After all, starting with where I would show up after having left the throne and the capture of the Fortress City, plus the arrangement of the Nine Divine Generals… Naturally, the Demon City would be narrowed down as a critical location.”

Subaru: “Knowing that… No, no way!”

Subaru widened his eyes as he processed Abel’s nonchalant words. Then he pointed at Abel, who looked at him quietly, with a trembling finger.

Subaru: “You were expecting us to run into the fake Emperor, weren’t you? To avoid running into each other in person, you stayed at the inn by yourself…”

Abel: “Fool. What is the point in doing such a thing? If you have the number of pieces under your control reduced without resistance, you shall spoil the path to victory even in an already-won match of Shatranj.”

Subaru: “…Well, I guess that’s true, but.”

The only point that did not make sense, was that Abel would make a move detrimental to himself.

The only problem was that he could not disprove it; and as long as that was the case, Subaru’s conspiracy theory that Abel was a malevolent mastermind would end up being labeled as quite literally just a conspiracy theory.

In any rate—

Subaru: “Anyway! Back to the point, what do you mean? That the false Emperor knew that he couldn’t convince Yorna-san to join his side. Yet, he still showed up at the Demon City because you’re coming…”

Abel: “He will take the initiative, and ruin the relationship between Vincent Vollachia and Yorna Mishigure. Do you think it would be so easy for me to reach the top of the tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle after such an event?”

Al: “Oh, that’s kinda… What a devious guy, oy!”

Once Al nodded his head in agreement, Subaru became annoyed and agreed as well.

At last, Subaru understood what Abel intended to say. In other words, Vincent’s goal was to make Yorna neither friend nor foe, but to keep her cut off as an invalid vote.

To do so, he had personally gone to the castle and had planned a decisive breakdown of the negotiations with the Emperor.

Subaru: “…So, if we had arrived one day later.”

Abel: “Their plan would have been in place. Hence why I stated it. That it was a job well done.”

Subaru: “…”

Motionless with surveying eyes, Subaru stared at Abel without blinking.

In other words, the previous exchange had been his way of displaying appreciation. If that was the case, a boss could only be so bad at praising his subordinates.

Even patting himself on the back would be more effective than the compliment from Abel.

Subaru: “Well done, me… Al and Medium-san too!”

Al: “Oh? Oh, yeah, well done, us.”

Medium: “Yeaaah~. Natsumi-chan’s cutting remarks were awesome!”

The three of them, who had overcome death together and become more united, praised each other. Unlike Abel, Subaru felt pity for Taritta, the latter feeling lonely for having been left out of the group.

Subaru: “But there are many things I wish you’d told me beforehand. For example, the fact that Yorna-san has feelings for you.”

Al: “Oh, that’s something I’ve been meaning to say as well. I’m begging you Abel-chan. It can’t be helped that you’re a lady-killer by nature, but in that cast you gotta pay the ikemen tax.”

Abel: “I really do not understand what you are talking about, clown. Furthermore, you too misunderstand.”

Al: “What do you mean misunderstand? I’m just looking at the actual interaction.”

Despite saying “actual”, it was Yorna and Vincent’s interaction, but the fact that she was directing flirtatious glances at Abel was true.

However, Abel heaved a deep sigh upon Subaru and Al’s persistence,

Abel: “I am not one towards whom Yorna Mishigure’s thoughts are being directed at. It is the Emperor of Vollachia.”

Subaru: “…So that’s you, right? You’re not going to tell me now that you’re actually the fake, and the other Emperor’s the real one, are you?”

For a moment, the suspicions born in him back at the Crimson Lapis Castle were rekindled, and Subaru glared at him as if he were telling a joke. However, Abel dismissed him with a “Preposterous”,

Abel: “Do not take it at face value. It is true that I am the Emperor of Vollachia, however, “Emperor of Vollachia” does not refer to solely me. There have been Emperors of Vollachia in the past, and there will be Emperors of Vollachia in the future.”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Subaru rolled his eyes after digesting Abel’s concise explanation. Next to him, Al let out a dumb-sounding “Huuuh~?”,

Al: “So you’re saying that Yorna-chan’s goal’s Abel-chan’s wealth or status?”

Abel: “I shall not delve into the details, but I am pretty certain that is what it is about. What she desires is the pinnacle of the Empire… to be the most favored mistress of the Emperor of Vollachia. It does not necessarily mean me.”

Subaru: “…I kind of feel sorry for you.”

Abel: “Do not pity me based off your own advancing narratives.”

In a sense, it was a clearly-defined prerequisite for love.

The Emperor’s most favored mistress—In other words, Yorna’s goal appeared to lay in becoming the Emperor’s wife. Certainly, in that position, she could rule the Empire both in terms of power and financial strength without becoming the Emperor.

To rule the Demon City of Chaosflame was not enough to satisfy the greed of that beautiful foxwoman.

Taritta: “Now that you mention it, what did you write in your letter?”

Al: “Well, maybe that he’ll take her as a wife if she comes to us or something. I think that’s the quickest way to do it, and she’s so beautiful.”

Subaru: “I wonder if her beauty’s enough to make up for the fact that she was so difficult to handle…”

Subaru believed that it was possible to tolerate some selfishness and bad character provided it was a beautiful woman, but only up to a point.

Priscilla and Yorna were undoubtedly beautiful, but Subaru would not take either as his wife. No matter how many lives he had, he could not handle living in a state of constant anxiety like that.

Abel: “I have no intention of revealing the contents of the missive. However, it shan’t disappoint your expectations. I can assure you of that.”

Subaru: “Guarantees can only be established when there’s trust… Oh no, let’s not go there. There’s no point in saying it. Stop, stop!”

Clapping his hands together, Subaru forced the topic to end there.

Abel looked at him disapprovingly upon witnessing that unsatisfying conclusion, but Subaru, looking at Al and prefacing with “By the way”, continued with a new topic of conversation,

Subaru: “A Divine General was there, you called him Olbart. Vicious Old Man, was it?”

Al: “Yeah, he was there. That old man’s bad news. I’ve met a lotta guys in my time, but he’s on a class of his own among those I’ve come across.”

Subaru: “Do you think that old man’s already been recruited by our opponent? If that’s the case, then Arakiya, Chisha, and a third person have already been taken.”

To have the majority of the Nine Divine Generals, five must be held.

But whereas Subaru and the others were still struggling to recruit the first one, there were already three Nine Divine Generals on the opposing side.

Al: “By the way, from what I heard before, that old man’s ranked Third. They also got the Second, Lil’ Miss Arakiya, and the Fourth, Chisha.”

Subaru: “They’ve got the biggest numbers pretty much covered!”

Upon hearing Al's bleak report, Subaru shouted aloud.

If the ranks were in order of strength, the difference in strength seemed hopeless already. Since Yorna held the rank of Seventh, Subaru's distress was to be expected.

Abel: "Do not bellow… It is likely that Olbart has not allied himself with the other faction. Currently, he is merely obeying the orders of the Emperor as a Divine General."

Subaru: "…And your basis for that is?"

Abel: "Olbart Dunklekenn is too, a man whose following plays cannot be read. If one wishes to shift the current situation, the path to victory must be rectified. Influencing Arakiya might be trivial, but Olbart is not as easy to ensnare."

Subaru: "So what you're saying, is that the Nine Divine Generals can't be controlled completely after all…?"

In other words, since he had been unable to hold the reins of power, the body double who had taken his place would be unable to hold the reins of power either.

It was a conversation that he believed there was nothing to be happy about, one that made him feel uneasy about the future to come.

Taritta: "Then, the old man named Olbart has room to be on our side."

Abel: "Naturally, adequate leverage must be brought to the negotiation table. He is a crafty old man with needs and expectations. Once the situation becomes clearer, we can decide what to bring."

Subaru: "…Oh, by the way, you knew him Al, didn't you? What's your relationship with him?"

If they wished to negotiate with Olbart, Subaru believed Al to be the best choice.

The conversation between Al and Olbart at the castle tower had revealed this possibility.

Subaru: “Gladiator Island, was it? So you played a role in resolving a case that happened there…”

Al: “Oh, yeah. There ain’t much to add, though? Eight years ago, when I was still a gladiator in Vollachia, I got caught up in a rebellion on the island. Gladiators from the island took a High Countess hostage during a deathmatch, and gave demands for his release.”

Subaru: “That sounds like a major incident to me… And you solved it, Al?”

Al: “To be exact, it was me and Lil’ Miss Arakiya when she was still a loli. And then there’s the High Countess who was supposedly being held hostage… We can talk about those details later.”

Clouding the second half of the story, Al scratched his neck awkwardly. It seemed to be something difficult to speak of, but even without the hidden details, the gist of it could be understood.

Al had resolved an incident in the Empire and eight years later sought a reward for his achievement. That had permitted Subaru and the others to fulfill their purpose and return with their lives.

Subaru: “Did you really want to use it that way?”

Al: “I don’t think I’d ever have a chance to use it anywhere but there, so why not? To be honest, I didn’t think it’d be such amazing foreshadowing. I wanna thank the lethargic me of the time.”

Al gave a cheerful chuckle, apparently wishing to avoid making Subaru feel any more self-conscious.

At the same time Subaru felt grateful for his concern, Abel, voicing an “Is that so”, nodded his head in assent.

Plucking the chin of his oni mask and gently flipping it upward, Abel exposed his bare face to Al, and, Abel: “I had gotten word that a gladiator of the Gladiator Island had labored in the turmoil immediately after my accession. I too had heard that he had requested no reward… Would that be you, clown?”

Al: “Seems like it was. I’m more surprised that it reached the Emperor’s ears and that he was able to remember it. Feels like he’s also gonna remember later all the frivolous talks we had during our travels.”

Abel: “It was a great deed. —I shall reward you for your service. No matter what happens.”

Al: “Oh…”

Abel’s words were grave and adorned with an unmovable sincerity as he showed his true face.

Abel’s creed of “definite punishment or reward” once again gave him the appearance of an Emperor. Abel’s upbringing as an Emperor would not overlook those who did not seek rewards for their achievements.

Al too, would not be able to escape this time without receiving a reward.

Abel: “Whatever the case, now that the missive is in her hands, we cannot avoid waiting for tomorrow’s response.”

Subaru: “That’s right, isn’t it? There’s nothing more we can do… In the meantime, Yorna-san’s attendant girl said that the fake Emperor’s group would not lay a finger on us.”

Abel: “If that is what Yorna Mishigure said, there is no reason to cast doubt onto it.”

Abel accepted Tanza’s assurance of safety without hesitation. It seemed that there was something hidden there that Abel had yet to tell, something that had not been conveyed to Subaru and the others.

However—

Subaru: “Even if I told you to tell me about it…”

Abel: “I am the one who shall choose what information to relay to you. The information you shall get is what you are capable of handling. —At least for the time being.”

Subaru: “At least for the time being… Huh.”

For a moment, Subaru’s manner of speaking returned to its original form, and he admonished himself for the discord that had formed in his heart.

It would be easy to dismiss this as uncooperative from Abel. But, he himself wished not to be defeated. Just like Subaru was doing his utmost, Abel too was doing his utmost.

That approach might be something desired by Subaru, but he was still not in step with Abel.

Al: “So, that’s it for today, huh? Fortunately, we were able to save our lives and be able to connect them to tomorrow. In addition, we’ve thwarted our opponent’s goals, so I’d say we’ve done well.”

Al spoke in a loud voice, breaking the delicate atmosphere between Subaru and Abel.

Taking this into consideration, Subaru nodded and said, “I guess so”.

Despite the unusual circumstances, the first step toward winning over Yorna Mishigure had been taken, thanks to Al and Medium.

There was no option but to wait for Yorna’s response the following day.

Subaru: “…As expected, I’m very tired.”

As soon as he concluded that there was nothing else to do today, his body became heavy.

The tension must have dissipated, and so his body had become aware of his fatigue. From having to go up the castle right after their arduous journey, to meeting with Yorna and encountering the false Emperor, it was the conclusion of an important bout.

His right arm was sore from the strain he had put on it, and he had to take care of his whip, which had been utilized quite recklessly.

After the completion of a large task, it was important to maintain your body and tools.

Subaru: "Nevertheless, I'm sleepy…"

Holding his wobbly head, Subaru muttered to himself in a daze.

Seeing Subaru's condition, Taritta supported him while saying, "Natsumi",

Taritta: "You've finished an important mission. I'll take care of your equipment, so please rest early tonight. I'll also take care of the night watch."

Subaru: "Being wary of night attacks in the city's so post-apocalyptic…"

With a small smile at Taritta's concern, Subaru decided to take her word for it.

Exhaling deeply, he went to his assigned room. However, as he did so—

???: "Uu!"

Subaru: "It's you again…"

Louis, who was supposed to have been separated from him in the adjacent room, jumped on Subaru as if she had been waiting for him. At Louis's behavior of grabbing onto Subaru's arm, Subaru put his hands on her head, utterly fed up.

Were it not Louis, he would not have minded the childish pleas for attention. However, it was hard to let his guard down considering it was Louis, particularly so when he was tired.

Wordlessly putting his finger on Louis's forehead, Subaru flicked her white forehead prompting an “Ua” from her.

Subaru: “I don't have time for you. Now, please step aside.”

Louis: “Aa, uaa!”

???: “Oh, she's out of bed again! I'm sorry, Natsumi-chan. Hey, Louis-chan, come here! You're with me!”

Louis's body, as she clutched her forehead, was carried by Medium's arms stretching out from behind her. After that, Louis continued to flap her legs, struggling to jump towards Subaru.

Her figure disappeared behind the door again, and this time Louis's misdeeds came to a definite end.

Subaru: “Sheesh, what was that…”

Al: “She's gotten even more attached to you, bro. Ain't that it? Even if she hasn't followed the story, she feels that you almost died.”

Subaru: “…”

If Al's point was right, then Louis's attitude was out of concern for Subaru.

It was hard for Subaru to accept that, emotionally. Louis was acting like an innocent child, but deep down, an evil and unforgivable malice was present.

Stubbornly believing this was the basic premise of the relationship between Subaru and Louis.

Subaru: “Abel, I'm going to go to my room to rest. You can…”

Abel: “Do not bother. You being present would not be of much use to us in a crisis.”

Subaru: “Don't just leave it to Taritta-san. Be on the lookout for night raids all night.”

Upon obtaining a response devoid of any concern, Subaru replied with a scathing remark.

He was sorry that Taritta, who had to mediate all this, was in a panic, but for the time being, he was relieved that everything that had to be done before he went to rest, was now over.

Subaru: “I’m going to take off my makeup, undress… and sleep like a log.”

Returning to the room he had been assigned to, Subaru bobbed his head as he undressed.

Now that he had left the Shudraqian village, it was not possible to repair his wig easily. It needed to be treated with great care and attention, so the process was very delicate.

He washed the wig by pressing it into a fine mesh net, then carefully washed his clothes and shoes after taking them off.

After the minimal treatment, Subaru sunk into bed.

Closing his eyes, he slowly drifted away from consciousness.

Subaru: “Tomorrow, then…”

The circumstances had evolved again.

If the situation changed, what he saw would change. If what he saw changed, a path would open. If a path would open, he could get closer to his goal. That was where everyone he had been separated from was.

Subaru: “Rem, Beako… Emilia, tan…”

With an ache in his heart, Subaru called out the name of his loved ones in another country.

As he dreamed of his loved ones’ names and his reunion with them, his consciousness faded—

???: “…”

At a slow pace, the awakening of his consciousness came, and Subaru opened his eyelids atop the bunk.

He was not one to fall asleep easily, usually, but last night he had been so tired that he slept very well. So deeply that he did not even remember having dreamt.

He’d thought that would have been enough to rid him of much of his fatigue, but—

Subaru: “What?”

However, it was not sufficient rest that prompted Subaru’s awakening, but a noisy presence.

In the bedroom where Subaru slept, some kind of lively voice and presence came from the other side of the door. This had served as an alarm, having pulled Subaru out of sleep.

—A noisy atmosphere upon waking, was never a good sign.

Outside the window, the morning sun was leaking through the closed curtains, indicating that it was a little too early in the morning.

Feeling the already-noisy atmosphere of the Demon City, Subaru looked at the wig drying in the shade, at a loss what to do with it.

Considering what he had done so far, he should dress like a woman with his Natsumi Schwartz persona.

But if the situation on the other side of the door was dire, there was no time for crossdressing. Mulling it over for a moment, he decided that first priority went to finding out what was occurring.

There was a high likelihood that he was jumping into the wrong conclusion. If it was indeed important, Al, Medium, Taritta, or someone other than Abel would have woken Subaru up.

Therefore—

Subaru: “Ah?!”

With this thought in mind, Subaru attempted to get out of bed, and fell from his shoulders to the floor.

The impact sent sparks flying in front of his eyes, causing Subaru astonishment at what had happened to him. It was not that he was sick, or that he had stepped on the clothes he had taken off.

It was, however, that his foot had missed the floor entirely as if he had misjudged the height.

—Subaru’s legs had been unable to cover the distance from the bed to the floor.

Subaru: “That’s ridiculous…”

Subaru, too, was troubled by the fact that his legs were short, but not to the extent that it interfered with his daily life in any way. Even with his short legs, he had been with his body for eighteen years.

He sat up, only to realize that he could not have messed up that badly.

—Strangely, compared to last night, everything in the room looked bigger.

Subaru: “Hey, heyhey, what kind of joke’s this…”

His cheeks tensed and his voice quivered, as Subaru touched his face. Gasping at the loud sound of his heartbeat, he crawled, his arms and legs clutched by his bulky clothes.

Just like that, Subaru headed for the mirror in his bag. A mirror was essential for fixing his makeup and getting dressed, so he reflected himself in it to see what had happened and—

Subaru: “What the hell is this…?”

Looking at what was reflected by the mirror, Subaru muttered in dismay.

The mirror trembling in his hand, its reflection was none other than Natsuki Subaru.

However—

Subaru: “…”

—However, there he was, young Natsuki Subaru, as a boy around ten years old.

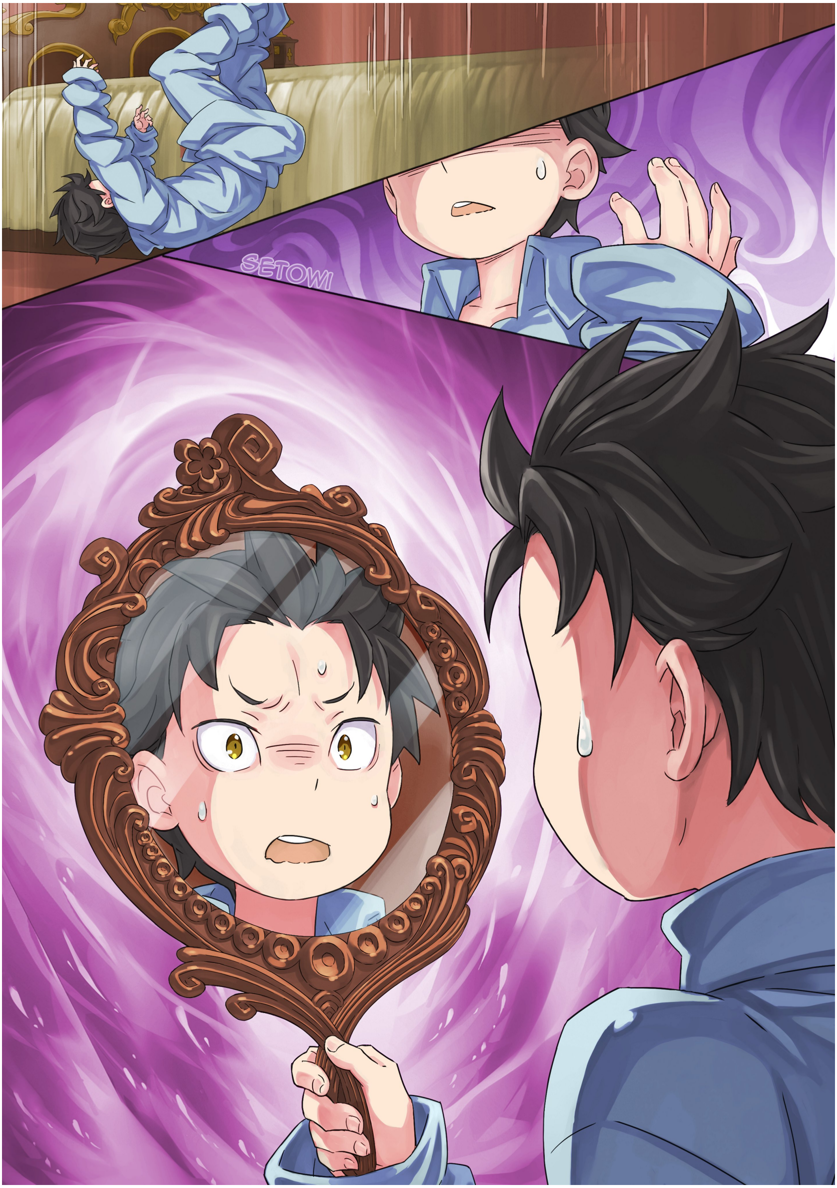
SETOWI

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy III

1

She was drawn in by the crackling of burning firewood, causing her consciousness to slowly surface up.

???: “…”

The first thing that leapt out to her after she woke up was the starry sky.

The stars were shimmering between the gaps left by the specks of cloud, and a chilly breeze brushed against her bare skin. Like that, caressed by the wind and hampered by the chill, there came a pain in her back that pierced her mind…

???: “…Gha.”

A quivering groan escaped her lips as she felt this searing pain from her back. However, what escaped from her had its origin in the thoughts about the cause of her pain, rather than the pain itself.

Who had given her this wound? And by what means had she gotten it?

Well, that was…

???: “…General First-Class Arakiya, it looks like you’re awake?”

A voice rang out, and with that, the agony that tore at her mind and body immediately dispersed. What took seed in her instead was caution; however, she promptly dismissed it, deeming it a pointless worry. The person who had called out to her was garbed in the red and black uniform that typified a Soldier of the Empire—something she was all too accustomed to seeing.

After all, she was also part of the Military, just like that Imperial Soldier.

Arakiya: “Where…am I…?”

Imperial Soldier: “We’re currently in the mountains, after fleeing west from the Fortress City. I feared we’d be pursued if we took the main road, so I gave priority on being safe over being quick.”

Arakiya: “Fortress…City. Pursued…”

She received a clear answer to her hoarse question, and from it, she began to pick up some words she knew.

What had happened in the Fortress City, her standoff with a foe she despised, and finally her reunion with scintillating flame. In the end, her actions had been in vain, going through sheer misery and getting the wound on her back…

Arakiya: “You… helped me?”

Imperial Soldier: “Yes ma’am. But not just by my own strength. There was someone else who acted as a decoy so we could rescue you, General First-Class. —If you please, do keep their devotion in mind.”

Arakiya: “…Mhm… alright.”

She looked for signs of people around, but she could not sense anyone other than the soldier in front of her. Furthermore, she could tell from the flow of the wind and the clear star-studded sky that they were a long way away from any human habitation like cities and villages.

There were no lies in the words of the soldier. She had been rescued, and sacrifices had been made to achieve that.

Therefore…

Arakiya: “I’ll…respond to all your hard work… What is your name?”

Imperial Soldier: “Right away ma’am! The one who acted as the decoy was Private First-Class, Jamal Aurélie.”

Arakiya: “…Yeah, of course, him too.”

She cast her eye down at the soldier. He had placed his hand against his chest in salute and answered her clearly. The individual who had ended up as the decoy must have been someone the soldier had been close with. She could see that from the eager way he wanted to leave behind his great deed, even if but a trifle.

Arakiya: “What I’d like to hear… right now… is your name.”

Bearing that in mind, she asked for the name of the soldier right in front of her.

The one who, after losing his comrade in arms, had resolutely brought her out of the perilous Fortress City.

His eyes grew wide as he realized what she had meant by her question.

Imperial Soldier: “…It’s Private First-Class, Todd Fang, General First-Class Arakiya.”

And so he replied to Arakiya’s question.

2

Todd: “This is going to sting a bit, General First-Class.”

Arakiya: “Nh…!”

She felt something cold on her back, followed by throbbing pain coming from her wound.

Arakiya surrendered her body to Todd, looking over at the flickering flames of the campfire as he applied some ointment on her back.

The fire lit up the place they had set up camp at, shrouded by the darkness of dusk. Usually it would be a complete no-go to have fires, since there was the worry that beasts and bandits could be invited to attack. However, in cases in which someone’s wounds had to be patched up, there was probably enough leeway to bend the rules.

First things first, there was no way that beasts were going to approach them, with Arakiya here. And if any bandits showed up, they would be simply made to regret it. —Her back stung in pain as she thought about that.

Arakiya: "…"

She could not see her own back, but according to Todd, the slash wound she had received had been burnt, and appeared to be in quite the state.

She didn't really care much about having scars, but as she had been ordered to not mar her soft skin with wounds, she had exercised as much care as she could to not get any.

But then again…

Arakiya: "Princess…"

The one who had wounded Arakiya's back was the very same mistress who had once given her this command.

Todd: "All done, General First-Class. The ointment's my own kind of blend, but I can assure you it'll work."

Arakiya: "Thanks so much for all the help… Todd."

Todd: "Hey, don't sweat it."

After Todd finished patching her up and spoke those words, Arakiya slowly lowered her raised arms.

The bandages he'd used to close up the wound on her back were wrapped tightly, however, they didn't impede her movement. The soldier was an extremely well-prepared one, familiar with medical treatment and his own ointments.

Todd: "I've always been the sort to get injured, so I got into the habit of keeping myself prepared for one thing or another."

Arakiya: “…I didn’t say anything about that though.”

Todd: “Oh right, I apologize if I was off the mark. It’s just that, I felt like you were thinking to yourself, “This guy sure is well prepared”, so my mistake.”

Arakiya: “…”

Todd deftly tidied up his belongings as Arakiya remained speechless at how good his guess had been.

In fact, she was impressed that he’d been looking at her so closely. Yet at the same time, she didn’t really think it was great that he could guess her innermost thoughts. That went double for them, given one was a warrior, and the other a soldier.

Todd: “After all, reading what’s in someone’s mind is like reading what they hold in their hands, huh.”

Arakiya: “…”

Todd: “…Just a bad habit of mine. One which I also think isn’t that great…”

Todd placed his hand against his forehead as he once again guessed her innermost thoughts, as if he couldn’t help himself. He then swiftly continued his words with a “However…”

Todd: “A foot soldier like myself has to be quick on his feet. You’re a General First-Class, so you should get it, that I’m not that skilled. The preparations I make ahead of time are mere tricks to make up for what I lack.”

Arakiya looked back at Todd as he jabbered away giving his explanation and deemed he was telling the truth.

He had a lithe, well-built body, thus she could see he was above the norm in ability for a soldier of the Empire. However, compared to Arakiya—No, compared to the fighters who were called “Generals”, his inferiority was plain and clear.

Naturally, he was no match for Arakiya.

She could literally tear Todd into little pieces in mere seconds with her power.

And yet, despite having such power…

Arakiya: "I… was abandoned…"

By my Princess.

By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess.

By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess. By my Princess…

Todd: "…Jamal served as the decoy, however, he was such a huge dumbass."

All of a sudden, another voice interjected her own, bleaching over her thoughts.

Arakiya quickly looked up. In front of her, Todd gazed at the crackling fire next to them, his eyes looking like they were staring off into space, as if wishing for memories to vanish off into the great yonder.

Todd: "It's already been six years since I first met Jamal. It was around the time I took part in the campaign in the Fortress City of Garkla."

Arakiya: "Garkla…"

Todd: "The city that was destroyed by a Sin Archbishop, the place where Eight Arms met his demise. It's been completely rebuilt now, but it used to be under reconstruction back then, and bandits had joined forces across factions to attack it each day."

You could really feel the grandiosity coming from Todd's memories, in stark contrast to the calm way he recited it.

The Fortress City of Garkla was one of the most prominent cities in the Vollachian Empire. However, around ten-odd years ago, back when Arakiya was still young, records showed that miscreants had acted out violently against the Empire.

From what they stated, back then, a man of the multi-arm tribe, who had been hailed as a hero some decades prior, had defended the Fortress City. The hero had bought enough time for the people of the city to escape, dying majestically in battle.

And from then on, the Fortress City was deeply ravaged by the after-effects of that. Its reconstruction began, but plodded along slowly, partially thanks to repeated assaults by bandits who were active in the vicinity. It was pretty much like Todd had stated, Garkla had only become seen as a city again in the past one or two years; they'd kept hearing about it as being a dangerous place that hadn't gotten any better for so long.

Todd: "The city kept being attacked over and over again by bandits, there were many who thought about abandoning it. However, one of the key figures who broke the deadlock was Jamal."

Arakiya: "He… you know…?"

Todd: "He slew one of the leaders of the bandits, killing the enemy's morale. After that, the soldiers of the Empire pressed in right away and wiped them out… He managed to get that victory at the cost of one of his eyes."

Todd clenched his fist, looking as if the results his friend had brought were something to take pride in.

Even Arakiya could tell he'd definitely accomplished something great. However…

Arakiya: "I've never… heard of them."

Todd: "As I said, he was a huge dumbass. He seemed to think it was cool to not go around talking about it, even though what he accomplished was exceptional. And because of that, he didn't covet any prizes for his work. To think that he could have been a General if he'd felt like it."

Arakiya: "…"

Todd: "That's the kind of guy he was, so I couldn't just leave him to his own devices. I wanted to make him into a General eventually, even though he kept saying we could become one."

Todd's voice grew small as he spoke, and before he knew it, he had his face buried in his hands.

He had lost the one he'd accumulated so much history with, he had lost the one he'd envisioned a big future with, and yet here he was, still alive.

The situation Todd was left in was one Arakiya could painfully empathize with.

And at the same time, Arakiya remembered the individual who had brought this throbbing pain in her back…

Todd: "My fiancée is in the Imperial Capital. Jamal's little sister."

Arakiya: "Huh…"

Todd: "She's got various physical ailments, so she needs someone to help her. But Jamal isn't here anymore, so that's why I have to be there for her."

As he said those words, Todd lowered his hands where he'd had his face buried in, and burning there in his eyes, was determination.

He had a strong sense of duty. And to add to that, a determination that encompassed not just his own, but that of his fallen friend.

And with that still alit in his eyes, Todd called out to her.

Todd: "Arakiya. The same applies for you. Enough with that hopeless look in your eye."

Arakiya: "…Ah."

Todd: "Neither of us have the time for this. You cherish them, right? If that's the case, never let go of them. Don't let her be taken away from you. —Living in the Vollachian Empire, that is our right, THAT IS OUR DUTY."

Baring his teeth, Todd leaned forward, zeal amidst his words as he fiercely urged Arakiya.

Don’t let go of the one you cherish, he’d said; don’t accept losing her, he’d said.

Arakiya’s single eye widened in response as she gawked back at Todd.

Todd: “Oh… Y-You have my apologies! I got fired up without even realizing…”

Right then, Todd realized the tone he was speaking in had grown wild. All in a fluster, he went back to using keigo. However, Arakiya shook her head at him, caught in his apology, and said “It’s okay,”

Arakiya: “If talking… that way makes it easier… Then it’s okay… Todd.”

Todd: “General First-Class?”

Arakiya: “—I shall go back… to the Imperial Capital. Come along with me.”

Arakiya declared this as she looked directly into Todd’s eyes.

She had thought everything was over, despairing. However, as she’d been told by Todd, she’d been rescued thanks to this fine individual called Jamal giving his life away. And thus she realized it was too early to end everything.

If she was going to end things here due to what happened, then she might as well have ended everything eight years ago from today.

The one who had chosen not to do that had been Arakiya herself, after she’d gulped down the cup of poisoned liquor.

Todd: “…”

Todd’s eyes grew wide open seeing the look in Arakiya’s eye. She had vowed in her next act, that she was not going to give up.

And following that, the corners of his lips slowly curved up, faced with Arakiya's slightly anxious look.

Todd: "Yeah, alright. Please allow me to accompany you, Arakiya."

And so he replied, a fierce-looking smile on his face, ever-so reminiscent of the Sword Wolf of the Vollachian Empire.

3

Todd gazed at Arakiya, her crimson eyes now full of strength again. She'd fallen fast asleep until morning as soon as she'd gone to take some rest. As he gazed at her, he thought quietly to himself, stoking the fire with a branch.

Todd: "…I can kill her whenever I want, huh."

And that was not because she was sleeping so defenselessly.

It was because she wasn't so desperate for survival, despite being so overwhelmingly strong. Todd could take advantage of these thoughts, and by that, he deemed that the means he had available to kill her were far too much to count.

Naturally though, he didn't have any great reason to kill her, so it wasn't like he was going to act so barbarically.

Todd: "What I told her about Jamal seems to really have struck a chord with her, after all."

Jamal had acted as the decoy in the Fortress City to buy time for Todd and Arakiya's escape. Knowing what he was like, he must have died in a blaze of glory, still he was glad he had a friend who'd proven useful even in death.

In fact, he hadn't lied about what happened in Garkla. Jamal had indeed lopped off the bandit chief's head, leading the city to victory, as well as meeting Todd for the first time there.

However, Todd hadn't been part of the Imperial Forces then, instead he'd been one of the chiefs of the bandits, who'd allied with each other.

His plan had been to round up all of their leaders once the alliance had grown enough and join the soldiers of the Empire having performed that great deed. However, Jamal's heroic actions had made it all come to naught.

But even then…

Todd: "It was thanks to him that I could meet Katya. He has my gratitude for that, even now."

He wouldn't have been able to tie himself together with Katya, Jamal's younger sister, if not for his reckless actions. And it was also thanks to Jamal's efforts that he'd been able to rescue Arakiya like this.

At the very least, Todd keeping Katya and Arakiya safe would serve as Jamal's farewell gift.

Todd: "Luckily, it seems she'll let me bring her back safely to the Imperial Capital."

Persuading Arakiya had been uncharted waters, a challenge which he'd been prepared to put monumental effort into. However, she'd grown fearful of the deteriorating relationship she had with her "Princess" or whatever, thus she was in such a fragile state, in contrast to her peerless fighting strength.

If he presumed this Princess was the woman in red he saw back at Guaral's city hall, then the unnatural defeat that happened in Arakiya's self also somewhat made sense.

Following that logic, if he set up the narrative keeping in mind the reaction Arakiya had, everything was as he could see.

Todd: "Katya…"

Placing her name on the tip of his tongue, he envisioned the figure of a woman in his mind.

She didn't look anything like her older brother, to whom she was related by blood. She was alone in the Imperial Capital, waiting for Todd and Jamal to come back. —He would need to tell her that her older brother was never going to come back again.

The thought of her grief made Todd feel down. But, at the same time, he also took some dark delight at the fact that only he could love such a weak woman who'd been abandoned by pretty much everyone.

Arakiya: "Princess…"

Arakiya's breathing, as she slept weakly, was intermingled with the crackle of the fire as it burnt through its kindling.

Giving a quick look towards her sleeping body, Todd commanded himself to take care of that girl, with such a slender back, with respect. From here on out, she would be the one who supported Todd, now that Jamal was dead.

He would ever so respectfully feed her, let her fatten herself up, thus guiding her towards his desires, and…

Todd: "Don't you ever become a hindrance to me, Arakiya."

Todd took out his axe, which he had holstered at his waist, and let out this warning to the sleeping Arakiya as he chopped the branches he'd gathered in two.

Everything would be fine, so long as she didn't become his enemy. He would take good care of her, so long as she didn't become a hindrance to him.

And if sometime, someday, she died without being a threat to Todd…

Todd: "Just like with Jamal, I will finally be able to stick along with you with ease if you become a corpse."

If she ended up in a position where she could never threaten him, he could stick along with her with open arms.

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: A Metal Bat for an Oni

1

—Rem's life in the walled city was extremely busy.

She would help with cooking and laundry in the morning, after that she would perform a round checking on the condition of the injured people. She would take time to look after their recovery with healing magic, and, when appropriate, she interacted with many people, striving to find her missing memories.

Doing that, a whole day had passed by in the blink of an eye, with no time to sit idle and ruminate on her many troubles. —For that, Rem was currently grateful.

Since troubling over things she could do nothing about, was something she believed to be very unhealthy.

Even so, the moment she had even a sliver of free time—

"…I wonder if Rui-chan, is doing alright with that person."

Only then did such a worry rear its neck and make Rem's chest hurt in gloom.

"…"

Everybody who had headed to the Magic City of Chaosflame—When Rem's thoughts happened upon Rui who had gone with the group headed by Subaru and Abel, she felt uneasy.

She had heard the Magic City, their objective, was a dangerous land, and there was also Rui and Subaru's relationship. To begin with, it was ridiculous that Subaru was so persistently wary of Rui like that.

Of course, Rem had also greatly renewed her impression of Subaru these past few days.

She had many things to say about his actions and attitude, and there was also the fact that, sometimes, when he was out of sight for a moment he'd come back with a gruesome stench on him, but she couldn't doubt that earnestness of his.

—However, it wasn't like there wasn't also a part of her, which wanted to doubt that part of his as well.

"But, in my eyes Rui-chan being suspicious-."

She just couldn't see it, much less guess what it could be.

It wasn't just her, the "People of Shudrak" with them all were the same. Even they, who should have a better eye for this than Rem, couldn't see a single questionable thing about Rui.

That was to say, Subaru's reason for being overly afraid of Rui, was something that only he could see.

Which is precisely why it was scary that he could no longer be stopped without Rem.

"Medium-san and Taritta-san are with him, so they should attempt to stop him if he does try to do anything horrible to Rui-chan but…"

The cheerful Medium and the serious Taritta, they were the last line of defense for Rui.

From Rem's point of view, the men accompanying them aside from Subaru—Abel and Al both couldn't be trusted. Abel wouldn't prioritize Rui over his objective, and Al.

"…He seemed, like he hated me."

He hadn't said anything to her directly, or try to injure her in any way. It was just that, on the inside of that black metal helmet, Rem could feel that the gaze watching her held something dark.

While he seemed friendly to Subaru, that wasn't reason enough to re-evaluate him. Still, she could only say that Rui's safety is riding on top of Medium and Taritta's shoulders.

“What’s wrong, Rem. Why the long face.”

Thus, such a voice called out from behind to Rem, who’d stopped still and was looking up to the sky.

At the edge of her vision as she turned around, was Mizelda waving at Rem, the latter standing in a plaza in front of the city town hall. With her now short hair dyed back to red, she possessed a wide smile, her eyes filled with strength.

Seeing Mizelda’s figure, Rem’s eyes went wide with an “Ah”and rushed to offer her cane.

“Mizelda-san, you can’t just.”

“Hmph. Don’t treat me like a casualty. You act like I’m seriously injured.”

“I believe if you’re injured to the point you’re missing a leg, you are pretty seriously injured.”

Replying to the cross-armed Mizelda, Rem drew near until reaching her immediate front.

Having gotten used to using her impaired legs, she had become able to move at quite a speed while using a cane. Which was why, Rem could move without burdening Mizelda.

Although, having that done for her seemed to have made Mizelda dissatisfied.

“Good grief. You keep treating me like I’m fragile, and my other leg will shrivel up and fall off on it’s own.”

“Mizelda-san…!”

“I get it, I get it.”

Being glared at intently by Rem’s upturned eyes, Mizelda gave a strained laugh as she submitted.

Below the missing bit of Mizelda’s right leg, a wooden stick had been fitted, and so she walked around quite skillfully, by putting the tip of that stick to the ground. While in terms of her body and her recovery, it would be better if she took it easy, the fact she turned a deaf ear to it was Mizelda's own fault.

Even though as a result of losing her leg, she had been forced to hand over the role of chieftain to her younger sister, Taritta.

"If you're that healthy, you didn't need to rush and hand over your duty…"

"No, that could not be."

Mizelda so sharply stated to Rem's whisper, as she admired Mizelda's adaptability. The gentle light disappeared from her eyes and she continued with the gaze of the Shudrak, of those who had to live in a tough world.

"Someone who cannot fulfill the role of chieftain continuing to be in position, must not be prolonged for even a single second. Those who cannot draw a bow, must end their hunt unsullied."

"…"

Rem, who had meant to elaborate on her honest opinion, turned her face in embarrassment upon Mizelda's answer.

Again, she had spoken as if she knew anything while lacking in experience. Even though Mizelda herself, more than anyone else, would have thought about her own course of action.

Despite the fact that she had obviously noticed how anxious Taritta had appeared, having been bestowed with the role of chieftain.

"Don't make such a gloomy face, Rem. It's clear to me you're anxious about Taritta… About Subaru and Rui."

"To me, it seems like you do not understand a single thing…"

"If you say so, then I think I'll also not say anything too strongly."

"…Yes."

That indication, as if trying to hide the discomfort, did not fool the eyes of Mizelda who had led the Shudrak as chief.

Mizelda shrugged her shoulders, at the pleased Rem, who feebly nodded.

“Despite appearances Taritta has, ability to rival my own. What Taritta lacks is confidence and, the experience tied to that confidence. That, she should earn with this journey.”

“Confidence and experience, is it?”

“It would seem, that is something that could be said for Rem as well.”

Being looked down on by the tall Mizelda, Rem was slightly at a loss for words

That was in reality, because Rem had realized just how much that had struck the mark. Being given a great responsibility, seemingly about to be crushed by anxiety, Rem saw herself in Taritta’s shoes.

Of course, Rem understood that the great responsibility of chieftain that Taritta shouldered, and the personal issue of “My past self” that she shouldered, were rude to even compare to each other.

Regardless—

“I don’t feel Taritta’s issue as someone else’s… Might be because I, have heard that I also have an older sister.”

“Rem’s sister? I’m sure she is a very noble, excellent woman..”

“Is that, so…? It would be nice, if that is the case.”

Her yet-to-be-seen twin elder sister, her existence, despite only coming from Subaru’s words, she wholly believed in it, strangely.

Certainly, she must have a sister who was her other half. Subaru doing everything to protect Rem, must also be because his desire to have her reunite with her sister was strong.

There was a longing thought within that as well. It was simply that, on the other hand, she also held doubts.

To push through those doubts—

"—First, start by finding a Self to believe in."

That was sure to be connected to the logic behind the Confidence and Experience that Mizelda mentioned.

"Lady Mizelda! So this is where you were."

"Hmph."

Then, there was a voice calling out to Mizelda as she was talking to Rem, and so she raised her face. And when dragged by that, Rem also moved her line of sight, and a silhouette waving at them from within the city town hall came into view.

Plentiful unruly hair arranged in a round manner, a personage which gave a round and stout impression. However, in truth, he was a male possessing unusually excellent ability and humanity—Zikr.

Being entrusted with this city by Abel, he was presently acting as Rem and Mizelda's group's commander. With that charming countenance of his, his round eyebrows frowning,

"When I heard you were walking about, my blood ran cold. You are still in the middle of recovering from your injuries, you ought to be resting."

Like so, he walked closer while giving words of worry for Mizelda's body. However, as Zikr's words were the same as Rem's, sure enough, Mizelda's face adopted a displeased frown.

"So you would say the same, Zikr. I am sick, and tired of hearing that."

"Even if you say you are tired of it, I will continue to say it until it gets through. Should you have some spare time left over, I would like it if you could counsel me."

“Counsel, you say?”

“Yes, about the stationing of the Shudrak people.”

Though already handed over, it didn’t change the fact that Mizelda was the former chieftain of the People of Shudrak.

In Taritta’s absence, the one qualified as an advisor would be Mizelda. This way, rather than treating her as a casualty, her opinion being sought after would be more proactive.

“Can’t be helped. What Kuna and Holly lack, I must answer for.”

“Of course, I would prefer them to be present as well. For the defense of the walled city, is not a foreign matter to your people nor to us. —What will Lady Rem do? .”

Once Mizelda displayed willingness to give advice, Zikr moved the spotlight to Rem.

It was likely that he was likely aware that Rem would indulge in anxieties and worry her head if she had free time on her hands. For that mindfulness, and consideration of Zikr’s, she admired him.

“Thank you very much, Zikr-san. But, I’ve been called already.”

“Was that the case? I suppose, that person would be…”

Not taking any offence, Zikr very naturally retracted his proposal. Then, as he inquired further, Rem bowed. “Indeed,” she said. “I have an appointment, with Miss Priscilla.”

2

“—When it comes down to it, Beautifulness is the proof of excellence. Do you understand it as such, Rem?”

“Umm…”

“I must say, Beautifulness is not something limited to just appearances. It is not separate from your conduct, poise, or your way of thinking. For Beautifulness, is what lies within such essence..”

Saying such, she took that arm extended straight in her hands. Rem savored the feeling of her soft supple skin, and the paralyzing numbing feeling of her beautiful voice violently penetrating through her skull.

In front of Rem, sporting bathwear, Priscilla with her pale stretched-out arm was exposing her stark-naked body.

The place they were in was a bathing room, so, as they were in the middle of bathing, it was only natural. But overwhelmed by that white skin and body with bountiful charm being displayed freely, Rem could not even feel uncomfortable being there.

When Priscilla had first invited her to the bathing room, she had even wondered what for.

“Bathing, is also one of my favorite things.”

“…That’s the reason, for the biggest mansion in town?”

“…Why I requisitioned it? If that’s what you are inquiring, then yes. A cramped lodging, or a place such as the barracks where the soldiers rest at, do you think I would lay there? Who do you take me for.”

“…Miss Priscilla Barielle, in fact.”

“From now on, I must have you add ‘Lady’ there.”

With one eye closed, Priscilla looked at her with that crimson gaze of hers. While being scorched by the heat of that gaze, Rem ran a soft cloth through her nude body, and respectfully washed her.

As she had declared she’d keep her close, Priscilla used Rem as if she was her own attendant.

Preparing meals, attending to clothing, as well as helping with bathing this way, all were part of that. Frankly, she could say she had been chosen as an appropriate servant in this situation.

However—

“So then, can you now see that which you are missing, Rem?”

“…”

Washing down her body, hearing the soaked Priscilla’s query, Rem remembered the dry feeling in her throat.

That gaze and those words, showed in truth that her intentions for inviting Rem were not purely arbitrary. Soon enough, she recalled Priscilla’s previous words.

That beauty laid in the essence, she took time to understand the truth of why she had been told that.

“…”

Priscilla silently wrapped her nude body in bathwear, and gazed at the pondering Rem.

One might end up feeling dizzy if they took too long in the baths. However, with that at the edge of her thoughts, Rem did not feel pressured by Priscilla.

And without pressure, Rem slowly churned her thoughts、

“If beauty lies in the essence… Then does my healing magic, also qualify as Beautifulness?”

“By and large, such understanding is correct.”

Hearing Rem’s reply slowly surface, Priscilla lowered her shapely jaw.

However, before Rem could be relieved by that reaction, she resumed speaking. “Most importantly,” she began. “If I had to say, I could not bear to watch your healing technique. Your understanding of healing arts, circulating of mana, and way of circulating… they are all most careless.”

“Careless…”

“If that is to become something worth seeing, by necessity, we must fill your gaps.”

“…While I understand, what you’re saying.”

What she understood, was only really the superficial aspects of it.

If in Priscilla’s logic, she could understand that in what one excelled there was a kind of Beautifulness. In such a case, then in covering the gaps in Rem’s healing technique there would be a search for Beautifulness.

However, even if she understood the means through which she could acquire that, the effort to was—

“Foolish, for which reason do you believe I invited you to this bathing room.”

“Eh?—a.”

As she raised a sudden voice, her consciousness blanked out, and the next moment, her field of vision revolved.

She immediately attempted to hold onto her cane; however she had not brought it to the bathing room. With nothing to rely on, Rem’s body was thrown headfirst into the hot water.

“Puha… Miss Priscilla, what are y-…!”

“Silence. Simply, silently float.”

“…”

“You, are a part of the world. First, become aware of such.”

Not minding the protests of Rem, who had raised her body inside the bathtub, Priscilla quietly decided so. Taking that in, Rem had her forehead pushed by Priscilla’s slender finger, as she held her breath.

Her body fell backwards, and, just like how Priscilla had spoken, Rem’s body floated within the warm water.

She hadn't folded to Priscilla's pressure, she just naturally believed that it should be so.

"Irregardless of your memories being there or not, as you are here now, you are you. Lose sight of the world or curse yourself, the truth shall not falter. That, you must take in for what it is."

"…"

"Cast down your eyes, search within your cast down figure for an admirable part; what you seek is not my protection, but the cane with which you shall walk on your own."

Into the floating Rem's earlobe, Priscilla's words warmly permeated.

Clearly and concisely, was not how the road towards excelling in healing magic had been laid out for her. Perhaps some would've even dismissed it as a white lie to make one feel better.

However, within the not even roughly 20 days' worth of memories that Rem possessed, there were no recollections of ever having met a human being more beautiful than Priscilla. The People of Shudrak all, and Mizelda specially, could be felt to have a similar sort of Beauty. However, Priscilla was a stand out among even them.

"From your limbs, to even individual strands of hair, flow your self through, Rem. If you do so,, you might be able to naturally slip through the influence held in the Observer's hands, even.."

Eyes closed, slowly, the meaning of Priscilla's words, and her own heartbeat matched, and spread throughout.

Remembering the far-away Subaru who had promised to return, and Rui who had gone together with him—Rem, who'd simply, quietly become one with the world, had her heart no longer disturbed by that.

END

The Dragon Kingdom: Missing Child Search Chronicle III

"…As much as I try to understand, the only conclusion I can come to is that Mister Natsuki is cursed."

"Cursed? You mean, sorcery? How terrible… How could that happen to Subaru?"

"Oh, no, I mean, because of his surroundings… Ah, what a puzzling person he is!"

Otto sighed as he put his hand to his forehead, causing Emilia to tilt her head.

In the dining room of the Roswaal Estate, a room too spacious for the few people present, Emilia searched inside her mind eagerly, hoping to find a good idea, while a slight frown appeared on her face.

Two days after coming back from the Pleiades Watchtower, Emilia's group had returned Otto and Garfiel, who were convalescing in the Watergate City Priestella, to the Roswaal Estate, thus allowing the faction to assemble like they did before.

However, the one who was the subject of this conversation was nowhere to be seen…

"You're worried about Subaru too, aren't you, Otto?"

"Actually, I am more worried about what Mister Natsuki may do to those around him than about his situation. Mister Natsuki can probably find a way to fix his own situation anyway, so…Ouch!"

"Hey! Mister Otto, that's not a very nice thing to say."

When Petra heard Otto's honest response to Emilia, she delivered a sharp blow from her palm onto his shoulder, making him cry out.

The charming girl of rosy cheeks, clad in a servant uniform, pouted with unease and irritation.

“We’re all worried about Mister Subaru, including me and Lady Emilia. We thought everything was going to be fine after you came back, Mister Otto…”

“Your expectations of me are way too high! Look, I will admit I should have worded that differently…”

“Too late.”

Receiving Petra’s scolding, Otto held his head as he apologized. Despite that, Petra crossed her arms and turned her face away, keeping her anger visible.

“Kuhaha, Otto-bro, ya’re always gettin’ destroyed by Petra’s glare!”

“…You cannot judge me, Garfiel. As if anyone here really stood a chance against Petra.”

With a click of his fangs, Garfiel teased Otto as he cowered.

Garfiel, who had come back from the Watergate City along with Otto, laughed cheerfully at his adoptive brother’s dispiritedness, and then he broached a new subject:

“Man, I’ve read tha letter, but I just can’t believe it. Like, whatcha mean the ‘Divine Dragon’ is at tha top of tha tower, tha ‘Sage’ Shaula ain’t what ya expected, and even tha Sin Archbishop of ‘Gluttony’ was there?”

“…And to top it off, Subaru and Rem were engulfed by shadows and blown far away, I suppose. There were enough unexpected things to make my head explode, in fact.”

“Beatrice…”

Beatrice complemented Garfiel’s words with a disheartened expression. Emilia sensed tiredness and anxiety from her profile, so she came closer to the girl’s small shoulders.

“It’s been a while since we lost track of Subaru, but will your body be fine at least, Beatrice?”

“…I’m currently saving energy, so it won’t be a huge problem for now, I suppose. However, Betty’s heart requires its subaruline dose, in fact.”

“What even is a ‘subaruline’?”

“That’s the tranquilizer Betty’s heart receives when Subaru is around, I suppose.”

“What has Mister Natsuki done to you…?”

Beatrice answered, her countenance sad, and Otto covered his face with his palm.

Emilia felt really concerned about Beatrice’s despondent look; she wished to be able to get that ‘subaruline’ for her, but that would be difficult without Subaru present.

“I want to see Beatrice happy again soon, but I’m also worried about Subaru himself. Beatrice isn’t the only one who’ll be in danger if they’re not together.”

“Captain’s got a broken gate, ain’t he. The whole ‘Agrizeli going downhill’ thing’s spreadin’ to us, it ain’t even funny.”

“…I hope Mister Subaru is all right.”

Garfiel scratched his head, Petra cast her eyes down, both anxious about Subaru’s safety.

“I hope so too,” said Emilia with a nod, watching the youngest ones fret.

They were concerned about Subaru’s physical condition…but, as Otto said, Subaru was quite stubborn, so it was unlikely that he would immediately stumble upon serious trouble, even in the empire. Beatrice, as Subaru’s contractor, could guarantee that too.

The problem was Subaru’s peculiar constitution as a spirit user.

"Like Garfiel said, Mister Natsuki's gate is broken, so he cannot eject the mana created by his od. Thus, he depends on Beatrice to do so."

"Yes, in fact. Betty can only receive mana from the object of her contract, which means Subaru and I are a match made in heaven… He's my fave partner, I suppose."

"But now you're all shaky because you can't be together…Or could it be that Subaru is in bad condition too?"

That was one of the perils that Subaru was certain to encounter, and a cause for concern.

They were confident that, whether he was in a cruel empire or not, Subaru had what it took to survive. Nevertheless, his limitations as a spirit user were a major issue, and Emilia, being one herself, was well aware of it.

"Actually, I have rarely ever thought of Mister Natsuki and Beatrice possibly being apart, so, what would happen in that case?"

"First, Betty'd be extinguished, in fact."

"…! No, don't disappear, Beatrice, please!"

"Grrr!"

When Beatrice replied to Otto's question, Petra clung to her and squeezed her with teary eyes, making her growl.

Emilia found that intense affection lovely.

"I think it's likely to turn into a 'release period,' just like Puck's. However, Subaru's mana amount is sooo small compared to Puck's…"

"So the damage would be small-scale…Does that mean Mister Natsuki will explode or something?"

"Otto-bro, Petra's givin' ya tha glare again."

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!”

Condemned by Petra’s glare for his negative assumption, Otto apologized again, repeatedly.

Otto’s conjecture was not completely mistaken, though. Still, it was not like Subaru’s body would suddenly blow up into pieces and scatter everywhere.

“It’s actually not impossible for something similar to happen in the end, I suppose.”

“…That is what I get for trying to joke a little.”

“The first phenomenon to occur will be something like mana poisoning, in fact. That happens when one is constantly accumulating more mana than they can handle, I suppose. After that, his body will reach an abnormal condition and become unable to move…And finally, what lies beyond his broken gate will be left exposed, in fact.”

“Beyond his gate…?”

“The od. In other words, the soul, I suppose.”

Everyone turned to look at each other after hearing Beatrice’s straightforward explanation.

The od, soul, or whatever one might call it, was undoubtedly recognized as a ‘very important thing.’ No one wanted to have it exposed, nor to lose the ability to move.

Even Emilia understood how dangerous the situation was.

“We have to go get Subaru as soon as possible then…!”

Emilia pressed her lips tightly and clenched her fist as she made up her mind.

Subaru was far away, in a foreign land, all alone…No, he was with Rem. Ram had already told them about a certain possible problem, but for now it was safe to assume that Subaru and Rem were together.

To travel while carrying the sleeping Rem was no ordinary task. Going to find Subaru was more realistic than expecting him to return to Lugunica by himself.

Besides, Emilia yearned for one more second of seeing Subaru's face, of hearing his voice.

Ever since Subaru had disappeared from the Pleiades Watchtower, a confusing disquiet had seized Emilia's heart and never let go.

"I'm with Lady Emilia on this, but…How're we gonna do that?"

"Uh…It looks sooo hard. Vollachia made the security of its borders stricter a while ago, so we can't go in just like that."

"Lady Anastasia, who came to the mansion, seems to be endeavoring to help, too."

Emilia kept growing impatient, but the circumstances did not show her any mercy.

As she told Garfiel, crossing the border between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Empire of Vollachia was currently forbidden, and therefore one could not enter or exit so easily.

Anastasia, who had returned from the Pleiades Watchtower with them, was apparently trying to use the Hoshin Company's contacts and find a way to enter the empire.

"But, in that case, we'll have to go through Kararagi to arrive in the empire, and that'll take even more time than heading there directly."

"…I see, that is quite problematic."

"Tch, tha Captain's probably in danger and I can't even use my claws or fangs ta help. This shit ain't funny at all, dammit."

The way Garfiel clicked his tongue proved that everybody was, ironically, sharing this dilemma.

They had reached a complete standstill, with no means to go to the empire and confirm if Subaru and Rem were safe after being sent there…

"…"

Bitter silence spread gradually within the vast dining room.

No matter how much thought they put into it, they could not come with a breakthrough plan at this tough moment. If a problem could be solved by pure brawn, Emilia would tackle it boldly.

Yet, the moment she had to use her brain, she was completely out of options.

"I'm sure…Subaru would've already come up with something if he was here…"

With no means to help the aforementioned Subaru in sight, she was close to giving up.

However, just as Emilia started to despair…

"Mister Otto? Did you get an idea?" asked Petra, staring fixedly at Otto's face.

In response to the young girl's inquiry, Otto shook his head sideways.

"Well, it is not that great of an idea, and I do not believe it will fulfill your expectations either. But anyway, if relying on Lady Anastasia's Hoshin Company is currently our best bet…How about we try something venturous?"

"Venturous? What do you mean?"

"We'll do anything to get Subaru back, so stop with the big words and tell us already, in fact!"

"C-Calm down! Let me explain it then!"

Feeling the pressure from Emilia and Beatrice, Otto put his hands out, flustered. Then, Otto looked at the girls who restrained him and continued:

“Listen closely. I do think relying on the Hoshin Company is one of our most convenient choices. However, like Lady Emilia said, it will take too much time to arrive in Vollachia that way.”

“Yes. Even if we use a trade route, it might take around a month.”

Nearly two weeks had already passed since Subaru’s disappearance. Naturally, they could not help but hesitate to opt for a method that would add more days to that total.

“Gotta say it: a whole ‘nother month’s a huge no for us, sorry.”

“I know. Of course, it would be ideal to cross the border directly from Lugunica to Vollachia.”

“Way too ideal, I suppose. If we’re being idealistic, then I might as well suggest connecting Betty’s ‘Door Crossing’ to the empire and appearing in front of Subaru right now, in fact.”

“You can do that?!”

“I’d have done it long ago if I could, I suppose!”

Beatrice stamped her foot on the ground, and Emilia hung her head, disillusioned.

Emilia was regretting thinking that Beatrice could save them and becoming excited without thinking twice. Even though Beatrice had done nothing wrong, Emilia made her feel guilty.

After this interaction between Emilia and Beatrice, Otto gave a small sigh.

“Well, it is not impossible to turn those ideas into more than a mere fantasy.”

“…! Really?!”

“…Yes. The circumstances are a little complicated, though.”

When she heard Otto's unexpected claim, Emilia's eyes blinked expectantly.

Emilia was not the only one surprised, for Beatrice, Garfiel, and Petra were too. Especially Petra, who put her hand on her mouth and spoke:

"And here I was thinking Mister Otto wouldn't be of much help…"

"I was trying my very best to match all of your expectations, you know?!"

"S-Sorry. But that was impressive coming from you, Mister Otto."

"I cannot be glad to hear that, knowing it has a hidden meaning."

Hearing Petra praise him, her expression going from surprised to respectful, Otto smiled awkwardly. Emilia and Garfiel tilted their heads and looked at each other.

"Hey, what's wrong, Otto? You don't look very happy…"

"Yeah, Otto-bro, ya gotta be prouder. And now tell us what's the deal. How're we gonna go straight from Lugunica into Vollachia?"

"…Through Piqtat."

Otto's short reply was like a surprise attack, as if he was trying to generate more questions.

"Huh?" Emilia asked, not having caught well what he said.

In response, Otto's brow furrowed with visible discomfort.

"Piqtat, a city located south of Lugunica, also known as the Commercial City…If we go there, we might finally find a way to enter Vollachia."

"Piqtat…"

When Otto added that explanation, Emilia uttered the city's name again.

The Commercial City Piqtat took first place when ranking the five biggest cities in the Kingdom of Lugunica, excluding the Capital. Like the Watergate City Priestella and the Industrial City Costuul, which was close to the Roswaal Estate, it was considered one of the five major cities.

Therefore, it was not strange for Emilia, a Royal Selection candidate, to know its name. However, the cause of Emilia's surprise was not the name.

"If I remember right, Piqtat is also your hometown, right, Otto?"

"…Oh, you remembered. Yes, that is true. Piqtat is my hometown, and the Suwen Company, my home, is there."

"So, Otto-bro, ya mean yer family are expert smugglers?"

"Are you trying to insult me?!" Otto snapped powerfully against Garfiel's comment.

Ignoring the banter between those two, Emilia engrossed herself in the hope that she had just seen arise.

The city of Piqtat, location of Otto's home, was literally beside the border with the Empire of Vollachia. Therefore, if they were to find a way to cross the border from the Commercial City, they would have the shortest path to Subaru's whereabouts…

"Let's go to Piqtat, everyone. We have to tell Anastasia and Julius too."

"Everyone…Wait, Lady Emilia!"

Emilia clenched her fist tightly and prepared to seize the light before her eyes. But when Otto heard Emilia's declaration, he put his hands up with a nervous expression.

"Lady Emilia, do you intend to go to Vollachia personally? I cannot let you do that! A candidate in Lugunica's Royal Selection should not be in Vollachia, with how things are now…"

"I know it might be dangerous. But…"

"But what?"

"I want to be the one who finds Subaru, before anyone else. Though I don't know why."

Not understanding why she felt that so strongly, Emilia's speech faltered at the end.

Yet, the moment he heard that, Otto's mouth opened wide in shock. Garfiel patted Otto's shoulder violently from behind.

"Ya heard her, Otto-bro. We've got no choice but ta do our best."

"I always knew it was a bad idea to make a plan I know will make me suffer…"

Otto held his head, his face paling at the thought of the upcoming hardships.

"Sorry," Emilia told him, putting her hands together.

But even if she apologized, she was not going to take her words back.

"Of course, Betty approves, in fact. We'll find Subaru, no matter the cost, I suppose."

"Yes, we will. Subaru might be about to cry over there."

Imagining Subaru trembling out of loneliness and fear, Emilia felt her heart heat up.

Maybe she had found the method that she needed. Now, all that she had to focus on was putting her utmost effort into this.

"I'm sooo good at that anyway."

Once she knew what had to be done, Emilia did not dither. She was not going to stop.

Thus, Emilia raised her head, motivated and ready to save her best knight from the hazards of the empire.

END

Volume 29

Chapters 40-54

Chapter 40:
Nachuki Shubaru

Subaru: “…”

Subaru’s throat froze upon regarding his own face reflected in the mirror.

It was a face he recognized, but a face he felt reluctant to say he was used to seeing—which came as no surprise, as his face reflected in the mirror was a relic of the past, no more than a fading memory.

—For that which was reflected there, was the face of a young Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “What, is, this…”

The hand grasping the mirror trembled, the pale face of the young boy rocking minutely and repeatedly.

His other hand, the one not holding the mirror, reached for his face as if to check it, and fingers that were smaller than those in his recollections, ones befitting the young face, came into view through the mirror.

Judging from the facial features and height, that was a roughly ten-years-old Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru was a mischievous boy whose stature was slightly over average, having reached the average height for a Japanese person only once his limbs had fully developed; with certainty, he had been a pipsqueak back then, at the time of elementary school.

To speak of his perspective at the time, he had wished to grow up as fast as he could—

Subaru: “What the hell is this—Hk?!”

In the mirror, his lips and eyes appeared to shake, and not just because his hands were trembling.

It was also a clear sign that his soul was rejecting the abnormal situation reflected in his eyes.

It was a sight worth being dubbed a nightmare.

Were this simply “rejuvenation”, then more than a few people who dreamed of such a thing existed. Unfortunately, Subaru, as a flowering teenager, had nothing to do with such desires.

Even if it was a great wish of his, however, he would probably attach the condition that he wants to choose the right time and place.

That was how absurd this state of emergency was.

Subaru: “I-I can’t stay like this… Hk.”

After a long time, Subaru came to himself and rushed to his bedroom door.

By no means would the inn’s lodgings have a perk such as “rejuvenation”. It was natural to think that this was an attack from someone hostile.

He had to hurry and share the information with his friends staying at the same inn, to come up with a plan to overcome this obstacle—

Subaru: “Guys, we’re in trouble! You may be surprised by the suddenness of this…”

???: “Oh, I knew it, Subaru-chin got smaller too!”

Subaru: “Wha?”

The moment he twisted the doorknob, which felt as if it were higher and heavier than usual, and opened the door with great force, he was greeted by an unexpected sight—Nay, it was a sight he should have expected.

Outside his bedroom, in the living room where several people had gathered, Subaru was greeted by a girl with a lovely face and a cheerful smile, waving her hand.

Her clear blue eyes and golden hair with its characteristic weave—her unmistakable sunny clarity allowed Subaru to connect the girl to the woman in his recollections.

Subaru: “M-Medium-san…?”

Medium: “That’s right~! When I woke up, I was so surprised to see how tiny I was! But I’m relieved to see Subaru-chin’s tiny too. Buddies, buddies!”

The one who spoke these words with her hands in the air in jubilation, was a girl of about twelve or thirteen years of age, wearing a thin cloth wrapped around her bare skin—she had declared herself to be Medium O’Connell.

Albeit she was quite tall for a woman, having been caught up by the same phenomenon as Subaru, her size had shrunk considerably. However, she was still half a head taller than the shrunken Subaru.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “Not a situation in which you can simply be happy that you’ve found a buddy… Uwah?!”

???: “Uuk!”

As Subaru tried to swallow his initial shock, his body was blown away by an impact to his side, and someone pressed down on his upturned chest.

At the feeling of pressure, Subaru unconsciously raised a shriek like that of a squashed frog.

Medium: “Ahh! Louis-chan, you can’t do that! Because Subaru-chin’s so tiny!”

Louis: “Aa, uu!”

Medium: “Kya! I can’t lift Louis-chan because I’m too tiny~.”

Medium desperately tried to pull away the fierce beast flailing on Subaru's chest. However, her shrunken arms were not enough to stop the savagery of this evil and tyrannical being.

With that, the young Natsuki Subaru was about to be laid waste to, with no way to do anything about it—

???: "Louis, don't! Subaru's going to be crushed!"

Louis: "Aahk."

Along with a sharp reprimanding voice, the heavy monster on his chest was removed. When he looked, Louis, now away from Subaru laying on his back, for some reason had a sad look on her face.

The one to put her hands under Louis's armpits and lift her up was Taritta—her appearance, with her blue-dyed black hair, was no different from what Subaru knew.

Medium: "Haa~, Taritta-chan, thanks! I wasn't strong enough~."

Taritta: "N-no, it wasn't much… Subaru, are you okay?"

Subaru: "Oh, yeah, you saved me… I'm so glad you're the same, Taritta-san. And…"

He took the hand that Medium offered him and raised himself up, then looked at the back of the room.

There, sitting on the sofa, silently observing the flurry of events that had just taken place, was the dark-haired man whose face was covered by an oni mask—Abel.

Subaru was relieved to see him unchanged, but he also had a few thoughts on how he had not tried to help at all.

Subaru: "Nothing happened to Abel…"

His appearance, the fact that he was hiding his face included, had not changed since yesterday.

Whether it should be called a blessing or not could not be gauged at this point.

However, the fact that Abel, whose face he could not see, did not welcome this situation could be seen from the displeased air that came through the oni mask without a hitch.

In fact, as proof of his unsettled state of mind, he turned his gaze to Subaru and said,

Abel: “This is a disgrace.”

And with a mere sentence, he was able to disregard the situation.

Subaru: “…I think I’m rather cute and charming.”

Having received a blunt remark, Subaru’s gut reaction was to spit out a retort. However, Subaru himself knew very well that this was nothing more than a sarcastic remark.

The abnormal situation that had befallen him and Medium, which did not seem to affect Abel, Taritta, and Louis—

Subaru: “If that’s the case, the other one’s…”

???: “—Oh, I’m glad you’re paying attention, bro. I was afraid you’d forgotten about me.”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Just as Subaru was wondering about the last of his companions staying at the inn, the answer was presented to him.

Eyes wide open, Subaru turned around to see a dark-haired figure in front of him, one that had come out of another bedroom. He was a boy around the same age as Subaru, around ten years old—his strange appearance was quite eye-catching.

After all, the boy was wearing a suitably torn cloth wrapped around his face, as to hide his appearance.

Subaru: “Al, right…? What’s with the covering?”

Al: “…My helmet doesn’t fit anymore. The only thing I could think of was to wrap a cloth around my head instead. Don’t mind it too much.”

Subaru: “Even if you tell me not to mind it, it’s going to be on my mind…”

Then the young Al, his face hidden, waved his right hand at Subaru.

Because less was covered compared to the helmet he usually wore, his tied black hair, habitually hidden, was exposed. It reminded Subaru of the way Abel used to conceal his face with a piece of cloth before sporting the oni mask, but the way Al had wrapped his was looser.

He looked just like a cheap-looking killer in a movie.

Subaru: “…I know you can’t wear your helmet, but do you have to cover your face?”

Al: “Oh, that’s a statement without delicacy, bro. I ain’t wearing the helmet for style or as a whim, but as the manifestation of a complex. Even if I’m now a child in appearance with the intellect of an adult, it doesn’t make it any less real. —It ain’t like my arm’s grown back. That means the scars on my face haven’t disappeared either. It’s the same for you bro, right?”

Subaru: “That’s…”

As Al said this, he showed his left arm—which was unchanged, his upper arm still in a state of having been lopped off, proving that Al’s perception of the current situation was correct.

Those three people, made up of Subaru and Al, as well as Medium, were unintentionally rejuvenated. It was not that time had rewound, however, it was a clear change in their bodies.

Subaru: “…”

In response to Al’s words, Subaru also flipped up his own loose-fitting shirt, and confirmed that the old scars all over his body had not vanished. His small child body was covered with all sorts of scars that made him want to look away. —The years he had spent in this other world had not disappeared.

He had never really thought that there would be a day when he would be relieved by the existence of those scars.

Despite that, the scars had taught him something. That this was a situation in which his limbs had simply shrunk.

However—

Al: “A misfortunate destiny such as having our limbs shrunken doesn’t just happen at random.”

Medium: “Right~. Hmm, this might mean I’m not gonna be able to help big bro with his work. He’s way too weak, so this is a big problem!”

Subaru: “It’s definitely true that it’s a big blow to the O’Connell siblings’ business, but…”

It spelt trouble for long-term business plans for sure, however there was certainly also a heap of troubles short-term.

Currently, Subaru’s problem was that, due to him being misshapen, he did not have any clothes that fit. Such was not the case for Al and Medium, though.

Subaru: “Al, you mentioned that your helmet doesn’t fit, what about your weapons?”

Al: “Good catch. I can’t wield one with my cute lil’ arm.”

Medium: “It might be hard for me to hold both of them. But I should be able to manage one… Ah!”

Subaru: “Watch it!”

Medium drew one of her twin swords from the scabbards at her side, but the blade slipped through her grip and nearly sliced Subaru’s knee.

Albeit barely, the tip of the blade almost grazed Subaru then stabbed into the floor, bringing him horror.

Medium: “Wow, Subaru-chin, I’m sorry…”

Subaru: “I-it didn’t cut me, so… but that’s pretty bad.”

With a sullen sigh, Medium pulled out the stuck sword and carefully put it back in its sheath.

The weapons she had been able to use so freely just the previous day were now in a wholly unusable state. To Medium, whose expected active role was that of a fighter, this was a crisis that shook her to her core.

The same could be said for Al, though not in terms of his military prowess.

Subaru: “This means that Taritta-san’s the only one with any legitimate fighting strength at the moment, right?”

Medium: “What? I’ll do my best even if I’m small, you know?!”

Subaru: “I appreciate the spirit, but you don’t meet the labor standards…”

Medium’s undampened attitude was nice, but a realistic view of the situation was also required.

With both Al and Medium in this state, the only one able to fight properly was Taritta. —And even if she was assured of her abilities, it would be a lonely endeavor amidst enemy territory.

Taritta: “It’s only me…?”

In fact, Taritta was evidently accepting the pressure herself.

The reason for this was that the roles that would otherwise have been shared could no longer be divided, and must now be carried on her two shoulders.

He felt guilty to her for that, but—

Subaru: “It’s going to be quite a burden. But what do we do from here? It seems like they’d have eyes on us, but should we escape from Chaosflame?”

Al: “…So, you think it was that sexy lady castle owner who did this, bro?”

Subaru: “The three of us were the only ones affected.”

Having been asked that by Al, Subaru quietly nodded his head.

It went without saying that Subaru, Al, and Medium had a single thing in common: all of them had gone to the Crimson Lapis Castle as messengers the previous day. That being the case, it was perfectly legitimate to suspect Yorna’s involvement in the circumstances of their shrunken limbs.

Abel: “It seems that you are not as distraught as I had expected.”

Abel, who had been quietly ruminating about the contents of Subaru and Al’s conversation, interrupted them.

Sure, Subaru had been quite distraught right after waking up, but now that he had run into Al and Medium in the same situation, his agitation had lessened considerably.

In a way, it was possible to say that “buddies”, as Medium had put it, truly existed.

And yet—

Subaru: “Perhaps I just missed the timing to be surprised and panicked. Maybe after I find more inconvenient things with this body then I’ll realize the importance of my lost height and weight.”

Abel: “Even though you have shrunk, you are a man who always feels the need to talk.”

Subaru: “Adaptability and cleverness are two of my few selling points, that’s why.”

He was being increasingly scorned for ceaseless chatter, but Subaru still retorted without regard. Sure enough, Abel's gaze from behind the oni mask became sharper, and he muttered with visible exasperation, "You talk too much".

However, he did not stop at that, and resumed his words.

Abel: "You can discard your suspicions about Yorna Mishigure. Your transformations differ from the principle of the techniques employed by that thing."

Subaru: "Are you sure…?"

Abel: "As far as I can surmise, yes. It is up to you to decide whether this is worth believing."

Abel directly denied the suspicions held by Subaru just before.

However, it seemed that the basis for this denial lay only within Abel. Subaru's mouth curved in frustration as he was told that he was free to decide whether it was to be trusted or not.

Despite this, it did not take him long to mull it over.

Subaru: "—. I understand. But if it wasn't Yorna, then who was it?"

Abel: "Perhaps it was Olbart Dunkelkenn who caused it."

Subaru: "Olbart… That old man from yesterday?!"

Abel mentioned the name of the architect of this situation to Subaru, who, swallowing his dissatisfaction, placed trust in his speculation.

What had come from his mouth, was the name of the false Emperor's companion they had run into at the Crimson Lapis Castle the previous day, a diminutive old man who was said to be one of the Nine Divine Generals.

Among the Empire's strongest and labelled a General First-Class, he was a person who had been bestowed with the third rank from the top. Naturally, Subaru had anticipated him to be a man possessing might which was not to be taken as trivial, but—

Subaru: “I didn’t expect him to be such a freaky person who can bring about such nonsensical situations…”

Abel: “I know not the depths of his abilities. But you cannot deny what has happened… There are other possibilities aside from Olbart when it comes to forging one’s external appearance.”

Subaru: “…Unfortunately, it doesn’t look like a hallucination or anything.”

He had already tried pinching his cheeks and waking up from what seemed like a dream.

The possibility that magic or drugs were messing with his perception and making him hallucinate was null. The fact that his arms and legs were actually short, and that he had been unable to push back against Louis’s strength and weight, posed as pretty good evidence.

The physical effects on the body, such as the size of Subaru’s clothing and Al’s helmet, could not be overlooked.

Abel was probably also regarding it as unlikely. As he had not made any special effort to object to Subaru’s insistence that it had an actual, real effect.

Subaru: “First of all, it’s good that we don’t have to run away with our tails between our legs… How troublesome. Even the Emperor, Abel, doesn’t know how that old man fights? Who the hell is he?”

Abel: “He is the head of a group that has mastered a special technique called “Shinobi”.”

Subaru: “Shinobi… A ninja?”

Abel: “—. What is that?”

Abel questioned Subaru while raising his eyebrows, the latter having blurted something out unintentionally.

When one heard of the word “shinobi”, their first reflex would be to think of “ninja”, which had the same meaning. However, it appeared that the latter word sounded new or strange to Abel.

But to Subaru, much like when he had first learned about Kararagi dialect and Wafuu-style architecture, he thought it seemed to be knowledge of the world Subaru knew, or felt like a slight remnant of it.

Subaru: “These shinobi, do they use ninjutsu, or do they go undercover in the darkness of night to spy on or assassinate people?”

Abel: “I have never heard of ninjutsu, but you understand the main function of the shinobi… That too, is not supposed to be information that reaches the public easily.”

Subaru: “There’s something similar in my homeland, they’re called ninjas. Right, Al?”

Al: “Hmm? Yeah, right. They’re a quartet of turtles with a great sense of humor.”

Perhaps he felt the same tug as Subaru, but Al’s answer was a bit off the mark as Subaru thought about it. They were characters from a popular cartoon of yesteryear, though Subaru did not dislike them.

Anyway, even if he explained the details, Abel would not comprehend it; and it seemed the latter viewed it as a pointless topic to delve into as he did not make any attempt to ask him about the details.

Instead, Medium let out a “Oh!” with her big eyes open wide,

Medium: “If it was that Gramps of yesterday who did it, it could be that! You know, when we escaped from the Castle…”

Subaru: “When we escaped…? Ah.”

Medium: “When me and you were both struck in the chest!”

Medium’s cry was a bit misleading, but Subaru had an inkling of what was up.

It had come to pass the previous day, during their escape from the Crimson Lapis Castle—in the middle of the life-threatening battle to fulfill Yorna's nasty conditions.

Subaru and his group had escaped from the false Emperor's bodyguard Kafma's thorns, and broken through the walls of the Castle in an attempt to escape, only for each of them to be pierced by the blow of the pursuing Olbart.

However, that Divine General's attack had not caused any damage to Subaru's group.

—At that time, that had gone alright. But it could not have been harmless.

Subaru: "That said, it's normal that something like this couldn't have been predicted…! I mean, that explains me and Medium-san, but Al? Why did you shrink?"

Al: "Sorry, bro. I had a few run-ins with the old man before I jumped out. It wouldn't be surprising if he'd hit me at some point. I figured that if the wound didn't kill me, it'd be a no-count."

In a low tone—or, at least, in as much of a low tone as a boy whose voice had yet to drop could muster, Al blamed himself for his lapse with a grumble.

But it was wrong for Al to blame himself. Al had done his part and allowed Subaru and Medium to survive in that desperate situation. The same can be said for Medium.

So, it was Subaru who should have known.

If he could not be of use in a battle, he should have been aware of every eventuality.

The result of failing to do so was this "disgrace", as Abel had said.

Subaru: "I can't let Rem see me like this… If I'm the same size as Beako, Emilia will treat me like I'm younger than she is even more."

Al: "Even if I've been shrunken down, I don't think it likely that the

Princess'll treat me affectionately like she does Schult-chan, so I wonder who benefits from this development."

Taritta: "I'm surprised that everyone is so calm… I'm still confused…"

A pale Taritta revealed her innermost thoughts, as Subaru and Al discussed their shrunken bodies.

With Louis flopping in her arms, Taritta's bewilderment was palpable, due to being the sole remaining fighting force. It was almost as if she felt guilty for having escaped harm.

Of course, Taritta was the one who was physically and mentally normal in this situation.

Subaru: "Honestly, I feel like I'd start screaming if I didn't joke about it a bit."

Taritta: "I-is that so?"

Subaru: "Yeah… It's that revolting."

It was not his young body.

His own body had been unintentionally remade. The disintegration of the definition of the self was sickening.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru was rather proud of himself for having faced a variety of experiences in this other world thus far.

Although the experience of death was the most extreme, it was quite possible to say that the dense experiences of the past year and a half were incomparably richer in color, taste, and density than that of an ordinary person.

Compared to any of these experiences, the inexpressible disgust that came with the feeling of being remade stuck out.

Subaru: "This is what it feels like, to be one of Lust's victims…"

The sound of wings echoed in Subaru's mind as he hugged his thin, small shoulders and clenched his teeth.

It was the sound of the wings of those who had fallen victim to the Authority of the Sin Archbishop of Lust in the Watergate City—the memory of the victims whose bodies had been morphed into that of flies, and were still waiting to be saved.

The tragedy of these people, who had been transformed into something else, easily transcended Subaru's flimsy understanding of their situation.

The very act that had compelled such a sensation was—

Abel: "—Vicious, I would state."

With arms crossed, Abel accurately guessed Subaru's innermost thoughts, causing the latter's breathing to hitch.

Meeting Subaru's unsteady gaze with his own,

Abel: "Olbart's nickname is Vicious Old Man… And as befits his name, he makes use of the shinobi arts to carry out all kinds of special tasks, vicious and otherwise."

Al: "Special operations, huh? So does he get ridiculous requests like go make the target into a baby?"

Abel: "What kind of absurd instructions are those? —But witnessing this disastrous scene, I would guess that would not be impossible."

Al: "…"

Abel's response to Al, however, had a weight to it that could not be laughed off as a joke.

As a matter of fact, since Subaru, Al, and Medium were made this young, it was impossible to even guess the capabilities of Olbart's techniques, and their extent.

And with that as their grasp of the situation, the thing that made them most anxious at the moment would be—

Subaru: “This can be undone, right…?”

Abel: “I cannot state with certainty, but I believe it reasonable to assume a way to return you to normal exists.”

Subaru: “Wh-What makes you say that?”

Abel: “The only pretext for poisoning someone and not have them die immediately, is to negotiate with them.”

Hearing Abel’s speculation and their justification, Subaru was also convinced with no further words.

This phenomenon—which may be called “infantilization” for the sake of convenience, could be likened to the act of poisoning, and the other party’s intention would be to avoid immediate death.

This was a strategy to extract some kind of concession.

Taritta: “Then, if there’s some kind of contact from the other party…”

Abel: “I shall reiterate. I cannot state it with certainty. But—”

Abel looked over at Taritta, who was holding her breath, and said that her high hopes were poisonous. And just as Abel was about to resume speaking.

—From outside, there was a knock on the door of the room.

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Because of the previous conversation, everyone’s attention and tension turned to the door.

Subaru also stiffened, thinking of it as a possible sign of contact from Olbart, who had brought about the “infantilization”. However—

???: “—My apologies for disturbing you this morning. I am Yorna Mishigure-sama’s messenger.”

The voice that came through the door was a disappointing one at this point in time.

That disappointment was the reason as to why the tension that had been building up loosened at a sluggish pace. On the other hand, Subaru belatedly understood that a messenger from Yorna signified a reply to yesterday's letter.

In addition to that, he also noticed the owner of the voice bringing the reply.

Medium: "This voice's that of the deergirl from yesterday, isn't it? See, it's Tanza-chan."

Subaru: "Looks like it. Good. Then I can let her come in… right?"

With a nod to Medium, who held up a finger, Subaru asked Abel if he wanted her to enter the room. At Subaru's gaze, Abel paused for a moment, then nodded slowly.

Having received this cue, Subaru turned to go to the door and greet his visitor.

Taritta: "No, I will."

Interrupting Subaru, Taritta took the initiative and stepped forth. She left Louis in Medium's hands and ushered Subaru and the others back, away from the door.

As far as this matter was concerned, it must be said that Subaru was the one who lacked a sense of danger. Even if it had not passed his mind, he could not just open the door devoid of any protection.

And currently, the shrunken Subaru's vigilance was no different from being defenseless.

Tanza: "My apologies for disturbing you. I have come to deliver the words of Yorna-sama."

The one to bow and step over the doorsill to reveal herself was, just as they had thought, Tanza, the deergirl.

Just like yesterday, once the kimono-clad girl stepped into the room, she met the gazes of those greeting her and paused.

It was unclear what the expressionless girl thought of the unusually large number of children in the room. However, it should be noted that her gaze had lingered the longest on the suspicious man wearing an oni mask.

Anyway, after the girl surveyed the room,

Tanza: "What happened to the messengers from yesterday?"

Subaru: "Uh… They've left for a bit, should I go get them?"

Tanza: "—. No, if you could tell them later."

On and off, Tanza's attention would be drawn to Abel at the back of the room.

He thought she, as a child, was too good a servant, but there were some unexpectedly cute aspects to her, like the way she could not take her eyes off something interesting.

Nevertheless, the report she brought would have a tremendous impact on the future of Subaru and the others.

With quiet tension, they waited for Tanza's words.

And then—

Tanza: "After reading the letter, Yorna-sama will reply formally. Therefore, I would like to request you all to report to the Crimson Lapis Castle."

Subaru: "She read it…?"

Subaru felt relieved after Tanza had spoken so with a bow.

Albeit rude, after everything that had passed, he suspected that Yorna tearing up the letter on a whim was not an impossible outcome.

It could be said to be the same sense of insecurity as dealing with a high-strung cat, or Priscilla. As if he could not find the precise approach, that was the impression he got.

Al: “I ain’t denying that the Princess is hard to deal with, but even she discerns TPO… Well, I ain’t too sure about that actually.”

Reading Subaru’s inner thoughts from his expression, Al tried to defend Priscilla, but gave up halfway through. It was a sign that he, too, was having a hard time dealing with Priscilla, whom he had known for a long time.

Anyway, he was relieved that one side of the impending situation seemed to be going smoothly.

With this, the only major problem at hand was the infantilization of Subaru and the others—

Tanza: “I hope that the Master who wrote the letter and all the messengers from yesterday will come to the castle tower.”

Subaru: “—Gueh.”

Tanza: “—?”

Hearing the unintentional moan that spilled out, Tanza lowered her round eyebrows and tilted her head.

In order not to allow her to notice his inner turmoil, Subaru smiled amiably and shook his head, “Nothing, nothing”, forcibly deceiving Tanza’s suspicions.

Whether she was satisfied or not, Tanza straightened her tilted head and said,

Tanza: “We will be waiting for you at the Crimson Lapis Castle, at the time the bell of Fire Time rings.”

Abel: “I understand the details. Well done. You may leave.”

Tanza: “—. Yes, excuse me.”

The time specified—the bell of Fire Time, could be taken to mean roughly noon.

After informing them of the setting of the meeting with Yorna, Tanza performed a curtsy, and turned away to leave the room. “Excuse me”, Subaru called out towards her back,

Tanza: “Yes, what is it?”

Subaru: “I want to make sure just in case, but the main person invited is the person who wrote the letter, and the messengers from yesterday are an extra, right? In other words, if the messengers are unable to attend due to various circumstances…”

Tanza: “Yorna-sama has said to invite the messengers as well.”

Subaru: “…”

Tanza: “I hope that in this Demon City, you will not fail to follow Yorna-sama’s words.”

Tanza’s voice was plain, but it was a reminder of her absolute and unshakable will.

Leaving that behind, he watched the departing messenger girl and shut the door. After doing that, Subaru took a deep breath and turned around.

And then—

Subaru: “…Do you think we, in this state, meet the conditions she just mentioned?”

He stretched out his changed arms, and posed that question.

Chapter 41:
A Chat Over Tea

1

Subaru: "—Strategy meeting!"

In a room so quiet a pin being dropped could be heard, Subaru raised his short arm along with this suggestion.

There was no rebuttal to that remark. They all felt the need to discuss their situation.

The topic of discussion was, of course, the matter of making an appearance at the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Subaru: "Abel, who wrote the letter, and us, who went to the Castle yesterday, are indispensable…"

Looking down at his clothes with their sleeves and hems wrinkled, Subaru ruminated on the request from Yorna that had been left behind by Tanza, who had come as an envoy; a frown formed between his brows.

He was willing to accept the risk of sending Abel directly to the Castle, but his biggest concern was the condition that he should be accompanied by the messengers from the previous day.

Would Yorna appreciate it if he took along the shrunken Subaru, Al and Medium, he wondered. Worst-case scenario, there was a good chance that it would be considered a prank.

Alternatively, there was the option of telling Yorna all about their situation and appealing to her heart with sincerity, but—

Abel: "It is completely devoid of reason to show your hand when you do not know the future actions of your opponent."

Subaru: "I see… I can't say for sure Yorna'd even listen to me either, considering yesterday's exchange…"

Abel refused to reveal all his cards, and Subaru agreed with him on that point.

Although he had avoided saying so yesterday, if Subaru wished to describe the impression he had of Yorna, the expression "evil woman" would be a valid choice. The way she spoke and acted like a courtesan seemed to Subaru to be that of a temptress with excellent skills in toying with men in the palm of her hand.

The danger posed by Yorna went without saying, as, in addition to her position as the Lord of the Demon City, she possessed the aptness to be bestowed the title of Divine General.

She was the one they had first set their sights on as a potential ally among all of the Nine Divine Generals, however, as Abel had warned, she was not the kind of person to whom they could easily disclose their situation to.

Al: "If we spammed her full with our circumstances and she then asked about you, we'd be screwed. Considering the cross-dressing and all that, what should we do if she asks something like "You dare lie to me?"."

Subaru: "I don't want to think I'll be blamed like that, but if that's the case, why don't I just pretend to be Natsumi Schwartz in loli form…?"

Taritta: "Wait, please wait. I'm afraid I'll get more and more confused too…"

The dilemma of making up a lie to cover up another one was a common one, but the dilemma of having to cover up cross-dressing by still crossdressing after being "infantilized" would probably be unprecedented.

Unlike Al's helmet, the size of the wig could be adjusted, so cross-dressing itself was possible, but whether it was necessary to go that far depended on how the story proceeded.

Medium: "So, what are we gonna do? The bell of Fire Time's in about three hours, remember?"

Subaru: "…Pretty sure we should go to the Crimson Lapis Castle."

Medium tilted her head and asked, having hold Louis in her arms while listening.

While the two of them were the same size, and Louis was tilting her head to match Medium's, Subaru had to consult with his inner scales.

Taritta: "First of all, we don't have the option of not accepting Yorna's invitation, do we?"

Al: "Well, we went to a lotta trouble to have the letter read. If we don't accept it, the meaning of yesterday's hard work and us here having been shrunken would all disappear."

Taritta: "If anything, all that'd be left would be the damage incurred…"

Nodding at Al and Taritta's words, Subaru believed that retreat was not out of the question.

Not returning home until the money spent was recouped; this kind of mindset was a cliché for people losing everything through gambling. Cutting one's losses would be important, in some cases.

However, what would be lost in this "loss-cutting", was Subaru and the others' statures.

Subaru: "Should we see this as serious or trivial…?"

???: "Gettin' younger's better than growin' ol'. Isn't that like the secret to eternal life?"

Subaru: "Yeah, for sure—"

In a sense, "rejuvenation" meant an increase in chances, just like Return By Death.

If one could return to their childhood holding the knowledge and experience of an adult, they would be capable of training their physique in the most fitting way possible over time, and so, would be able to retry achieving the goals once given up on.

With those as the circumstances, it seemed like they'd found some situations which could be leveraged as an advantage, however—

???: "—That'd be what you'd think, right? But it's not that simple, is it? It's not something that ya can easily use, ya know?"

At that moment, a third party interrupted the discussion, and Subaru's breath stopped.

—No, Subaru's was not the only to stop. Everyone present in that room went rigid, unable to move at that moment, and froze at the presence of the owner of the voice.

However, the person in question was unconcerned about the growing tension in the room,

???: "I've taken the liberty of makin' tea for myself, does anyone else want some?"

With that question made in a casual tone, he lifted his steamy teacup.

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Taritta: “—Hk!”

Immediately after, Taritta moved with a bouncing motion, like a spring-loaded doll.

She drew her bow in an instant and aimed her arrow at the person who had just appeared—Olbart Dunkelkenn.

Her target was extremely close, there was zero chance she would miss or that he could dodge.

But Olbart shrugged his shoulders with a nonchalant, “Whoa, whoa”.

Olbart: “Don’t do it, don’t do it. I don’t like havin’ pointy things aimed at me. Ya know, ol’ people go ta the bathroom more often than not, and ya wanna scare ‘em into pissin’ their pants? I’m shakin’ in my boots here, yeah?”

Taritta: “You’re kidding me…! Who are you…”

Abel: “—Olbart Dunkelkenn.”

Taritta: “…”

The old man’s hostile but unconcerned stature made Taritta’s face flush with anger. Yet, in response to her question, the man in the oni mask, the one who had called out Olbart’s name, as if to reign her in.

The only one who had not moved at all, Abel, sitting on the sofa while donning his oni mask, exchanged glances with the man. To this, Olbart narrowed his eyes hidden by his thick eyebrows.

Olbart: “Well, I already confirmed yesterday that I’m a celebrity, so I’m not surprised, but ya got a pretty impressive face, ya know. Where’s that souvenir from?”

Abel: “Spare me the nonsense, old tree. What are you here for?”

Olbart: “It’s lonely these days ‘cause young people don’t wanna listen to ol’ people’s idle chatter. The people in my village are gettin’ better and better at ignorin’ me every day… Kakakakka!”

As he talked about the lonely circumstances of his old age, Olbart opened his big mouth and smiled cheerfully.

At the dialogue between Abel and Olbart, the confusion of Subaru and the others on the sidelines slowly melted away. However, it was impossible for them to completely let their guard down.

Medium: “But, Gramps, how did you get in here? It’s not like we weren’t keeping watch…”

Olbart: “Oh, doesn’t this lil’ thing look just like the dancer from yesterday. So if Gramps has ta answer, that’s just how it is. Ya let the deergirl thro’, right? And I came in with her.”

Medium: “Together? With Tanza-chan?”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! How I got in here’s a secret. Shinobi arts are like my tools of the trade.”

Medium’s simple query was laughed off by Olbart with the purpose of confounding them.

It was uncertain how serious he was about this, but in any case, the word “shinobi” had been mentioned by him himself, and he seemed to have no intention of hiding his true identity.

In that case, asking him directly about his true intentions for coming to their camp alone would be faster compared to probing him.

Subaru: “So…”

Olbart: “Hmm?”

Subaru: “So, what are you really doing here?”

Olbart’s gaze turned to Subaru after the latter asked the purpose of his visit. With that, the old man wrinkled his brow as if thinking for a while,

Olbart: “Ah, ya, was that’cha? Were ya the girl in red from yesterday? I couldn’t possibly mistake the dancer-like girl and the one-armed man, so I was really worried.”

So he confessed, he’d had a hard time figuring out who Subaru was.

Hearing this, Subaru look, and Al, casually repositioning himself, sneered. He cleared his throat through his mask, his voice more hushed than usual,

Al: “…That’s my bro. Even the shinobi head honcho didn’t know who you were.”

Olbart: “Oh, how impressive, how impressive! I wish the people in my village could learn from that transformation. How ‘bout bein’ a lecturer? You’d be welcome.”

Subaru: “Unfortunately, Natsumi Schwartz’s schedule’s quite full… Maybe I could make some time for you, though.”

Olbart: “Hoho, what’cha mean, “maybe”?”

He moistened his lips at how cross-dressing had unexpectedly landed quite the catch, and then, noticing the sensation of thirst in his throat, Subaru narrowed his eyes.

Regardless of how much he believed in this nonsense, he had to take full advantage of the opportunity to speak directly with Olbart. For the time being, about the abnormal situation that had befallen Subaru and the others.

As per Abel’s guess, the mastermind behind this phenomenon was none other than the old man in front of him.

Subaru: “If you got any idea who’s the reason we’re like this, be honest…”

Olbart: “Oh, that. I’ve done that myself. They’re interesting, aren’t they, the shinobi arts?”

Subaru: "…"

Without any bargaining, Olbart admitted that he had been the one to do it.

His statement drowning out the rest of his words, Subaru took a small gulp. And the old man laughed viciously as he watched Subaru stiffen,

Olbart: "If I killed'cha by accident, I wouldn't be able ta hear anythin' ya got ta say, and I'd be left with a lotta trouble, ya know? That bein' the case, there are many ways to squeeze info outta someone without killin'. —Interestin', isn't it?"

Olbart bluntly spoke those words, and sipped his warm tea.

2

—The "infantilization" that had struck Subaru, Al, and Medium.

From the testimony of the one acquainted with the Nine Divine Generals, Abel, it was almost certain that the offender was Olbart.

However, for it to be affirmed directly by the person himself was a different kind of surprise. Especially if the other party was not offended at all and was proud of it.

Everyone: "…"

Olbart: "Oioi, we shouldn't look at each other all scary. Didn't'cha learn that ol' people are to be cared for, not tortured?"

The tension in the room was rising again, and both Al and Medium, as well as Taritta, who had not lowered her bow from the onset, were gradually changing their positions.

In particular, Al was prepared to block the entrance door and obstruct Olbart's escape route.

However, Al, with his shrunken body, could not handle his cherished sword at will, and so could not aspire to go far in stopping the shinobi head honcho that was always on the prowl.

Louis: “Uu…”

Olbart: “You’re a lil’ girl who’s got nothin’ ta do with me, aren’t’cha? Then ya lookin’ at me like that’s kinda hurtful. Don’t’cha like the sweet smell of ol’ men?”

Abel: “Do not play games with me, Olbart. I shall ask you once more. What brings you here?”

Abel hurled a few words at the side of Olbart, who was trying to win over the snarling Louis. Taking a glance at Olbart, the latter looking over his shoulder, Abel expressed a sharp spirit that could be transmitted even through the oni mask,

Abel: “You have heard the thoughts of Yorna Mishigure, Lord of this Demon City. She recognized them as envoys. She has made it clear that they shall not be touched.”

Subaru: “Th-That’s right! Don’t touch us, that’s what yesterday’s game was about! We were risking our lives too! And yet, this treatment’s different from what was promised to us!”

Olbart: “Oioi, you’re gettin’ all excited and mixed up, ya know.”

Taking advantage of Abel’s aggressive move, Subaru also reiterated Yorna’s statement from the previous day. It was as Olbart had said, Subaru had gone as far as to even return to the state of mind of yesterday; regardless, that still did not change the truth.

Yorna had recognized Subaru’s group as messengers, and Tanza had made it clear that she would not allow anyone to interfere with them.

To disregard that, was to express hostility toward Yorna.

Abel: “Of course, if your intent is to destroy the Demon City, you shall not give that the slightest consideration.”

Subaru: “…Now that you mention it.”

With Abel’s additional words, Subaru’s heated blood ran cold.

In fact, the fake Emperor's faction, to whom Olbart belonged, had given up the right to negotiate with Yorna to Subaru and his party. Should they view it as a bad move, to just flip the table out of anger was also within their possibilities.

In that case, it would be inevitable that he would clash head-on with Yorna, who was esteemed as one of the Nine Divine Generals, in several senses of the meaning—

Abel: "If you are to challenge it with the intent of destroying it, you shall avoid destruction. Of course, you shall come out of it with some damage."

Olbart: "…Well, that foxgirl can be tricky ta deal with. However, it's no fun ta have that masked young'un see right through ya."

Subaru: "Masked, young'un…"

Olbart scratched his chin with his fingers and pretended to be in pain. Overhearing some of his words, Subaru looked at Abel out of the corner of his eye.

Abel's attitude was unchanged, but Subaru was on the edge of his seat at every step of this exchange. —After all, Olbart was one of the Nine Divine Generals.

Of course, they must have seen Vincent Vollachia, aka Abel, many times.

Even though he was hiding his face with a mask, if Olbart were to exchange words with Abel, who had not changed his speech or tone of voice, it would not be surprising for the former to realize his true identity.

Olbart: "…"

However, Abel, who responded in a dignified manner, did not display any such anxiety.

Olbart, too, showed no signs of having perceived Abel's true identity. With that as the case, Subaru was unable to identify him, and had no choice but to act by hiding his inner fears.

Anyway—

Subaru: “I still don’t have your answer, Olbart-san.”

Olbart: “—. Feels like I’m bein’ treated better like this, compared to bein’ just called an ol’ man. So I’ll let’cha off the hook for pretendin’ ta be a girl.”

Subaru: “Olbart-san!”

Subaru’s gaze sharpened on the old man, who had lost his nerve and dodged the question. Seeing this, Olbart raises his hands and says, “Okay, okay”,

Olbart: “The rewards for yer actions are just as ya said. The foxgirl and His Excellency both have told me ta stay out of it.”

Subaru: “If that’s the case…”

Olbart: “It’s just that, ya know. I poked ya folks before yesterday’s game was over, right? Then ya know what? If ya can’t complain ‘bout dyin’ from a sword wound ya got while fightin’, ya can’t complain ‘bout a shrinkin’ technique ya got hit with while fightin’ me.”

Subaru: “That’s quibbling…!”

Olbart: “Well, is it really quibbling? —But ya can’t change it, can ya?”

Raising an eyebrow at Olbart, who was laughing at his own cunning, Subaru was at a loss for words.

Olbart’s argument was quibbling, as he himself had admitted. But on the other hand, his argument was correct as well.

Even if someone lost their life because of a wound inflicted during battle, were the wound inflicted before the negotiation of a ceasefire, it would make no sense to hold someone responsible for the tragedy after the ceasefire began.

However, Subaru had the impression that there was a large difference between a wound, and “infantilization”.

Olbart: “That’s why I think that bringin’ ya back and the foxgirl’s order are two different things. Do ya get me?”

Subaru: “…”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Don’t look so stern. Yer cute face’s ruined… That pretty face was just a sham made with cosmetics! Ya got me there, hook, line and sinker.”

Olbart played with the teacup with his fingertips and showed some acrobatic skills to keep the contents from spilling. His words themselves could not be easily fought off; they had been chosen with deliberate care attained by experience.

However, even if Taritta, who was becoming more and more nervous, and Al and the others, attempting to block the escape route, were to fight their best, subjugating Olbart by force was nowhere in sight.

If there was someone here capable of defeating this cunning, it would be—

Abel: “Do not get carried away, Olbart.”

Indeed, only the man donning the oni mask tried to cut through his brimming ambition and cunning.

Abel, without changing his posture, shot Olbart with a look even sharper and colder, and made him stop playing with his teacup.

Abel: “I have already inquired you as to your purpose. How many more times must I ask until you feel like doing it?”

Olbart: “Whenever there’s a young’un whose expression I can’t see, I can’t help but wanna see the wrinkles between their eyes. I hope ya don’t mind.”

With one eye closed, Olbart mischievously responded to Abel’s domineering spirit. The old man scratched his head and voiced, “You’re a man with no time to spare”, Olbart: "The foxgirl aside, His Excellency also told me not ta lay a hand on ya folks, so I didn't come here to deal with'cha. But if we're gonna be yer enemies anyway, it wouldn't hurt ta weaken ya a wee bit, would it?"

Al: "…That may have been the reason as to why you shrunk us, but you didn't come all the way here to drink tea."

Olbart: "Looks like you're havin' a hard time now that yer helmet doesn't fit anymore, boy. Anyhow, guess you're right about that. Ah well, the reason I'm here's that I'm here ta listen ta what ya got ta say, honestly."

Subaru: "…What we got to say?"

While fiddling with his ear with the hand not holding the teacup, Olbart nodded to Subaru as the latter ruminated over the question, then spoke, "That's right".

With that, he then pointed out the window using the same finger that had been picking at his ear,

Olbart: "That performance at the castle yesterday, darn it if it didn't make me giddy. But there are a lotta people who've tried ta mess with His Excellency, and so far, they've all failed. So, I'd like ta ask ya why ya decided ta cross that dangerous bridge as well."

Subaru: "…What are you going to do once you hear it?"

Olbart: "Oh? Obviously I'll make a decision after hearin' it. And I'm gonna do somethin' ta make sure ya can't lie."

With Olbart's mouth open wide as he sent saliva flying along with his hearty laugh, Subaru's scrunched up into a scowl.

It was easy to dismiss his attitude, as was heard just a while ago, as just bad taste. But it was clear that the conversation could not just be shut down on him.

He was one of the Nine Divine Generals required to help Abel regain the throne, or to dispel the shinobi technique that had infantilized Subaru and the others.

Rather—

Subaru: "…A chance, is it?"

The position of the Nine Divine Generals was such that it was difficult to even contact them, nevertheless to get them on their side.

But presently, for whatever reason, Chaosflame was occupied not only by its Lord, Yorna, but also by Olbart in front of him, and Chisha, who seemed to be posing as a false Emperor.

Of course, even if cajoling the opposition posed by Chisha, who had taken the initiative, was an impossibility—

Subaru: "If Abel's reasoning from yesterday was correct, it doesn't mean that Olbart-san's confirmed as an enemy."

Abel's view was that hope remained regarding Olbart, who stood as one of the Divine Generals considered to already be the enemy's pawns. At the moment, Subaru had to say that Abel's judgment was a correct one, as he had managed to get to the point of negotiating with Yorna.

If they were to believe his speculation, there should be room for negotiating Olbart's position.

However, in order to get Olbart on their side here—

Subaru: "…"

In silence, Subaru glanced at Abel's profile.

Revealing the identity of the man sporting the oni mask and keeping his dignified stance, Abel—That was the absolute most important piece of information that they must disclose in order to conquer Olbart.

And frankly, Subaru did not have any further information that could resonate with Olbart.

Subaru: "…"

The oni-masked Abel did not even wince, as he met Subaru's gaze towards his side.

His face was hidden behind a mask, making it impossible to observe any of his emotions. However, there was no way that the intelligent man could not have thought of what Subaru had come up with.

At this juncture, just how much of his own heart could he bare to the other party, Olbart?

Subaru's thought was that this would be the focal point, but since Abel had not stirred, was he premature in his thinking? Or was he waiting to see what came to pass?

In any case, if they could get Olbart on their side, they would find a way to solve the problem of Subaru's "infantilization", their lack of strength, and the battle for the Nine Divine Generals.

Then, this would be the right time to play—

Olbart: "—Ya know, funny thing is, people's faces do say more than you'd expect, don't they?"

Subaru: "Hmm…?"

Olbart: "Yer gaze, the way yer face tenses up, the way yer muscles contract just a little… Ya don't actually gotta move yer mouth ta talk a lot."

Thumping his two fingers against his temples, Olbart spoke. The old man nodded as his gaze fell on Subaru, whose breath had been taken.

Olbart: "For example, the girl who looks like a dancer relies on the girl usin' the bow. The young'un with the cloth wrapped 'round his head and the wee one rely on ya. And, as for the one usin' the bow and ya… Well, both of ya rely on that masked young'un."

Subaru: "—Hk."

Olbart: "Ya can see the general direction of each pair of eyes. — When you're weak, it's even more obvious, isn't it?"

The words of Olbart, who flashed his white teeth as he said them, pierced Subaru's mind.

And Subaru belatedly realized that he had greatly misjudged Olbart's fundamental nature, a man who had even appeared seemed to be a good-natured old man.

Olbart had made it clear that he was the one who had "infantilized" them, and that he had done so in order to talk to Subaru and the others.

—He had never stated that it was to "negotiate" with Subaru and the others.

Subaru: "Didn't you come here to, talk…"

Olbart: "Comin' here ta "talk" and comin' here ta "listen" are similar but slightly different, aren't they? I don't mind chattin' like this, ya know? But…"

Subaru: "…"

Olbart: "Ya see, I'm also the shinobi head honcho, and I spend my time actin' as a representative of the people of my village. That's why… I can't trust the words of someone I haven't even tortured, 'cause it's too dangerous."

Without losing the air of an old man with an understanding of what he spoke about, Olbart expressed his thoughts in accordance with the shinobi's unwritten rules.

The bleakness and harshness of this world were certainly similar to that of the "ninja" world known to Subaru.

However, the feeling of enjoying it as a fiction was very unlike the feeling of being exposed to it first-hand in such a manner.

And—

Olbart: "So, with his uppity attitude of havin' no one to rely on, the masked young'un's the leader, right? Lemme ask ya, what was it that made ya come ta seduce that foxgirl."

Abel: “—. If that does not work, what will?”

Olbart: “Then you’ll just have ta find another way, won’t’cha? But since I’m forced ta stay out of it, there’s not much I can do ‘bout it.”

Olbart shrugged his shoulders, his gaze and attention were turned towards Abel. Of course, it was hardly believable that Olbart, the head honcho of the shinobi, would not be paying attention to the others.

Even if his head was not turned, his attention had not been diverted from Al nor Taritta.

However, even though a bow was being pointed towards him, to display any intention of attacking Olbart would be unwise for Subaru and the others surrounding him.

As per Yorna’s command, they were to be welcomed into Chaosflame as messengers.

Whether this would still apply after causing a disturbance in Chaosflame, and how she would deal with ill-mannered visitors, was a complete unknown.

In other words, the situation here was a stalemate for both Subaru and Olbart.

Both had no choice but to stare each other down, declaring their readiness to do harm.

And in such an extreme limbo—

Subaru: “…But, on the other hand, in these conditions, where can I even prepare it?”

Reflecting on the established situation, Subaru once again cast a question to the white space that had been born within his mind.

And once again, the thought arose, “Isn’t this an opportunity?”.

Bound by Yorna and the false Emperor, Olbart was unable to take any additional actions of hostility.

Subaru was judging which side Olbart was leaning; Supposing he was closer to the enemy's side, they would have to act on this timing, they would not get any other situation like the one they had here.

Everyone: "…"

At a slow pace, time progressed.

Along with this tense situation, there was also the matter of the time at which the bell of Fire Time would ring, as presented by Yorna.

Time was precious. —The more he wasted, the more his life diminished.

In silence, Taritta's fingers trembled as she gripped her bow, and Al and Medium too muffled their breaths. Even Louis miraculously was only letting out growls, perhaps instinctively sensing the danger posed by Olbart.

Perhaps they could not decide to stir. If someone could, it would be —

Subaru: "—Abel."

Abel: "…"

Quietly, Subaru called out Abel's name.

It was visible that his consciousness had turned towards him through the oni mask, upon hearing it. His eyes were invisible, as the oni mask blocked his gaze, but his attention was directed at Subaru.

The feelings there could not be seen. —However, Subaru could guess its intent, as he had felt it.

Subaru: "This is the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia."

Olbart: "…Ahhn?"

In reply to Abel's gaze, Subaru made that assertion, prompting Olbart to raise an eyebrow.

His eyes hidden by his long, rich eyebrows went open wide, as the old man was suspicious of Subaru's words. It was a natural reaction, but it was far from the reaction he was looking for.

So, in order to elicit the desired response, they would go deeper.

Subaru: "You want to know who's the faceless young'un, and what we're here for. Why did we come to see Yorna? The answer is…"

Olbart: "Oioi, that's not very funny, is it?"

Subaru: "I wasn't trying to be funny. —Abel."

At a loss for words for an instance, Olbart's voice was laced with a hint of surprise.

Perceiving that with clarity, Subaru called out to Abel at the back of the room. This far in the game, Abel did not try to refute Subaru's words and actions.

Just inaudibly, his gentle fingers reached for his face. And then—

Olbart: "—This is one hell of a thing."

A concealed visage was revealed in front of Olbart, the latter letting out a voice of astonishment. Before his eyes, the one gazing back at Olbart as his face was tense, was a dark-haired beauty—none other than the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.

Olbart: "Your Excellency? But that's too weird, isn't it? But then, who'd I come wi—"

Abel: "Let your old wits run wild, Olbart Dunkelkenn. You possess the answers. All that remains is to draw them out."

Olbart: "With the face of Your Excellency, sayin' things that sound like Your Excellency… Ah, so that's it."

At first he had been taken aback, but the old shinobi soon regained his composure.

Having revealed his face, Abel passed an order as the Emperor, and doing as he had said, Olbart seemed to come to a conclusion of the situation he was in with the information he had.

Olbart put his hand on his chin, and,

Olbart: “Then that’d be Chisha. He’s got it all under control… There’s another matter, tho’. It’s not like ya, Your Excellency, ta let somethin’ like that happen ta ya, is it?

Abel: “You think your eyes can peer into the depths of my mind?”

Olbart: “Oh, very scary, very scary.”

Waving both his hands in the air, he let out a parched sound at Abel’s answer.

In fact, as Olbart had stated, Abel’s situation was definitely a groggy one, but his overwhelming bluff did not show any of that.

Upon seeing the change in Olbart’s expression, however, the tension left Subaru’s shoulders as well.

Olbart understood the situation.

Abel had been ousted from his position as Emperor, and Vincent, the man he was accompanying, was a false Emperor.

Olbart: “A lotta things that’d been confusin’ me have become clear. No, I was wondering why ya suddenly came ta see the foxgirl in person.”

Subaru: “All of that… was to stifle the actions of our side.”

Olbart: “Hahaa, it’s hard for ol’ people ta keep up with the ideas of ya smart folks, actually. Young, smart, good lookin’, I guess that’s bein’ super-greedy. Don’t’cha think so, too? Don’t’cha think? Since you’re also so young. Oh, that’s because of what I did! Kakakakka.”

Olbart roared with laughter, trying to get a laugh out of them with what he had said, even though it was not funny.

Subaru's cheeks tightened at the sight, and he exhaled a long breath, suddenly looking at Taritta.

The Shudraq warrior still kept a wary eye, her bow trained on Olbart. He was attempting to get her to break her battle stance, and regain control of the situation.

Subaru: "Taritta-san, you can put your bow down now. Olbart-san's…"

Olbart: "Oh? No, ya don't have ta put it down, do ya? I think it's impossible for that girl ta lower her guard in front of someone she's not sure isn't an enemy."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Olbart himself, the target of Taritta's bow, was the one to halt Subaru's effort to get her to lower her guard and talk to him.

The old man took Taritta's caution as something natural, furthermore he did not do anything to try to deny the "naturalness" that was incomprehensible for Subaru. —In other words, the danger stemming from himself had not lessened.

However, then it would be as if—

Subaru: "Let's talk about this…"

Olbart: "Didn't'cha hear me? I said I'd make a decision after I listened ta ya. And I did."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru's throat clogged up, yet, faced with that, Olbart's attitude did not alter.

There was merely a quiet click of the tongue, and,

Abel: "This was one of those cards I did not know which way it would tend towards, but that is what you have decided, huh."

Olbart: “That doesn’t sound like ya, Your Excellency. No, it’s fatal that you’re seriously outta cards ta play… And ta boot, ya weren’t lucky on the draw here. Ya know, I’ve always wanted ta try it.”

Abel: “Ho, and that would be?”

Olbart’s plan was set, and the shinobi head honcho laughed at the words of the ousted Emperor.

A laugh, suitable for the man holding the title of “Vicious Old Man”,

Olbart: “With me being an ol’ man with not long left ta live, I’ve always wholeheartedly wanted ta try and kill the Emperor, ta have a glorious death.”

Everyone: “—Hk.”

The moment that vicious wish was spoken, movement occurred amidst that highly-strung environment.

That very moment, Taritta, Al, and Medium all moved to frustrate Olbart’s purpose, overriding the “no fighting” rule given to each one of them.

However—

Olbart: “Yesterday, I couldn’t understand what trick ya were usin’, one-armed one. But it stopped workin’ since ya turned little, didn’t it?”

Al: “Ka… Hk.”

Olbart: “Can’t use the skills ya learned at a later age when you’re young.”

Having spoken those words, Olbart twisted his neck and swung his hands.

Blood splattered from his fingertips, and a tragedy unfolded in Subaru’s field of vision, his eyes open to their utmost.

Medium and Al, who had stepped in and tried to subdue Olbart, had their necks gouged out and blood spouted out. The blood scattered within the room like a fountain, making a person wonder where had so much blood flowed within a small child's body.

Al: "Tch, ah… Hk"

Olbart: "Judgin' from this, looks like ya aren't able ta use yer last ray of hope. Still, I ended up doin' ya in before finding out how yer trick works, that's how it was, huh. I messed up, I messed up."

Al crouched there, holding the gushing wound. Medium's eyes went blank and she fell backward, motionless.

It was obvious that what they had suffered, was a fatal wound that could not be recovered from.

And Taritta, the only one ready to take on Olbart head-on—

Subaru: "—Ah."

Subaru had been wondering why a shot had not been loosened from the bow.

However, the suspicion that the attack that was supposed to take place did not, made Subaru direct his gaze in that direction.

Taritta was pinned to the wall.

Tall for a woman, Taritta's slender frame was rested against the wall, her body pinned in place. The reason for her immobilization was a throwing weapon protruding from the center of her cleavage —a shuriken.

As if some kind of joke, the star-shaped projectile had pierced Taritta's chest, skewering her back and pinning her to the wall. Her heart had been destroyed, it was clear she had perished instantly.

Abel: "—Even though you were told not to interfere, you could not help yourself."

Suddenly, a man's voice echoed in that room rife with death.

It had come from Abel, standing in a room that had become full of corpses terrifyingly fast. Having left his seat, the man looked down with a penetrating gaze at Olbart, the architect of all this death.

Bathed in that glare, Olbart wiped the blood splattered on his cheek with his finger,

Olbart: “Yeah. I wanna set off some big fireworks before I die. I’d be completely satisfied ta murder the greatest Emperor of all time, and be executed for it.”

Abel: “I couldn’t read your destructive tastes. My oversight.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! No, no, no, if my dreams of growin’ old were known, I’d be so ashamed that I wouldn’t be able ta live.”

Al had ceased moving, and Medium and Taritta had stopped breathing.

Under such circumstances, that conversation between Emperor and vassal seemed, to Subaru, to be something from another world. However, it was not another world. It was real. Real, overwhelming reality.

This was the reality that Subaru had arrived at, after making the wrong choice.

Olbart: “Once I’m done with Your Excellency, I’ll go back ta Chisha. I’m sure he’ll be able ta handle my death just fine.”

Subaru: “I’m… Hk.”

Olbart: “Oh? Oh, you’re still there.”

To Subaru, who had spoken up too late, Olbart turned around, the latter plunging into the atmosphere that marked finality.

The old man turned his neck with a snap to keep Subaru, his own face rigid, in check. Then, pointing to those fallen, Al, Medium and Taritta in turn,

Olbart: “That’s that. These guys tried ta kill me, so I killed ‘em back, but there really isn't a reason for ya ta die, right? I don't have the intention ta become a fugitive, so there's no reason ta silence ya as well."

Subaru: "Da, ah…"

Olbart: "Oh, guess I went ahead and spoke a lot again. It's obvious that ya got somethin' to say, so open yer mouth. I'm an ol' man with a short life ahead of me, so I can't wait that long tho', ya know?"

As Olbart continued to speak leisurely at his own pace, Subaru's thoughts turned white. —No, his thoughts were being dyed a bright-red. Whether it was anger or the color of the blood that Al and the others had shed, even Subaru himself could not tell.

But even so, whatever, at any rate, never, here—

Abel: "—Fool."

And so, those contemptuous words came from Abel.

Currently, his gaze must be piercing the back of Subaru's head. Feeling the pressure of his sharp gaze, Subaru was made keenly aware of the accuracy of his words.

There was no point in standing up for Abel now, with this.

If he had been able to act in such a manner before Al, Medium and Taritta had fallen, perhaps it would have been possible to change something,

Louis: "Uu…!"

Olbart: "Oioi, you're even usin' a lil' girl that's got no connection to me? Your Excellency's method of doin' things must have been somethin' that women and young children hated for sure."

In front of Olbart, who was putting his hand on his forehand, stood Louis. —No, Louis was not standing in front of Olbart, but in front of Subaru.

Subaru was shielding Abel, and Louis was shielding Subaru, the three of them standing in a straight line.

It was just some absurd form of a meat shield.

Olbart: “I thought Your Excellency was supposed ta die alone.”

Abel: “—. Not everything goes according to one’s calculations.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka!”

Abel’s inability to keep his mouth shut at this point was met with a sneer and a loud laugh from Olbart.

Within the eyes of the elderly shinobi, neither Subaru’s nor Louis’s presence were reflected. But he was not so kind as to overlook those who stood before him with hostility.

Henceforth—

Subaru: “—I’ll never forgive you.”

Natsuki Subaru’s young body spurted blood and sank into a cold pool of blood, searing into his mind the face of the shinobi as the latter guffawed viciously during his attempt to satisfy his ambition.

And so—

3

Blood flowed and a hot sensation gushed from the wound.

The hotness that overflowed endlessly, however, instantly drained the heat from his body.

That which had flowed out rapidly swallowed him, drowned him, rendered him invisible, and then, after he had sunk to the depths of the ocean, he would, he would—

Subaru: “…”

Instantly, the lost blood coursed through Subaru’s body, producing a loud noise in his ears.

Accompanying the sensation of having his hearing sharpened to the extreme, came the cacophony of blood flowing through him in a quiet space. While being struck by it over his whole body, Subaru let out a ragged exhalation.

With violence he bit his back teeth, his vision flickering on and off due to the distant pain and sense of loss.

He wished to find out where he had returned to—

???: “I’ve taken the liberty of makin’ tea for myself, does anyone else want some?”

A moment later, a vicious, unforgettable voice announced the overture of a new battle for Natsuki Subaru.

Chapter 42:
Beast Of Ambition

1

Olbart: “I’ve taken the liberty of makin’ tea for myself, does anyone else want some?”

The moment he heard the shrill old voice, the blood flow in Subaru’s body began flowing backwards.

His skin covered in goosebumps started aching, the air he had taken in froze over within his lungs. As if a heavy, sharp object had been buried deep in his chest, Subaru’s soul was urged to awaken.

—Return by Death had activated, and he had been thrust into this most terrible of situations.

Taritta: “—Hk!”

A moment later, before Subaru could react in any way, Taritta took aim with her bow.

The target was, of course, the uninvited visitor who had suddenly appeared in the room—Olbart Dunkelkenn. One of the Nine Divine Generals, and the old man who had murdered Subaru and the others just ten seconds ago.

Even without knowing the circumstances, the unmannered way in which he broke the ice would make one wary.

Nevertheless, in the same room, Olbart, while having an arrow pointed at him from ultra-point-blank range, as if to ridicule the caution displayed by Subaru and the rest, shrugged his shoulders and,

Olbart: “Whoa, whoa, don’t do it, don’t do it. I don’t like havin’ pointy things aimed at me. Ya know, ol’ people go ta the bathroom more often than not, and ya wanna scare them into pissin’ their pants? I'm shakin' in my boots here, yeah?"

Taritta: "You're kidding me…! Who are you…"

Abel: "—Olbart Dunkelkenn."

Taritta's face flushed with anger as Olbart ignored her piercing hostility. But it was the man with the oni mask, Abel, who drew the attention to him as if to interrupt her, calling out the old man's name.

Unphased by his appearance, Olbart's gaze turned to the man concealing his face, the one who had spoken his name.

And so it began, a gut-wrenching battle that left him with an awfully thirsty impression—

Subaru: "…"

While keeping the conversation between Olbart and Abel on the perimeter of his consciousness, Subaru matched the unchanging scenes of this world to that of his own memories. Just before, the events of around merely ten minutes prior. —In those was where he must search for a breakthrough in fate.

???: "Can you do it?"

Subaru: "—Hk."

While in those thoughts wishful of a breakthrough, a cold voice wedged itself in, catching him off-guard. Born of impatience and frustration, it was none other than the feeble voice of Natsuki Subaru himself.

Subaru: "Can you do it? He wiped out all your friends just a moment ago, ending in that mess."

The more he tried to remember what had just happened, the more the voice whispered to Subaru devoid of mercy.

Subaru's failure, his blunder, his irreparable mistake.

This second chance granted by Return by Death was not to make up for his mistakes.

The mistakes he had performed were irreversible. The only thing granted to Subaru was atonement which he could not really atone for. Because that was the sole product of the Authority in Natsuki Subaru's possession—

Subaru: "—Hk!"

Olbart: "Oh! What's up with'cha all of a sudden?"

Medium: "Whoa! What, what, what?"

Louis: "Uu?! Aa, uu!"

He slapped his cheeks as hard as he could with both hands, trying to shake off the snide remarks that had been whispered in his ear.

A dry sound echoed through the room. Olbart, Medium and Louis screamed at Subaru's sudden action.

Although they had not raised their voices, Al and Taritta were just as surprised.

Of course they would be. It was unfortunate, but it just was necessary.

Subaru: "…"

Once Subaru opened his closed eyelids, his vision, which had seemed wobbly and unsteady, became clearer. Within his field of view, in the midst of the people who had been surprised by Subaru's strange behavior, a single gaze was trained on him in silence.

Only the oni mask-wearing Abel was as unfazed and composed as he had been at the time of Olbart's first appearance. —What lay within his heart, was wholly unknown.

Subaru: "Sorry for surprising you… I had to motivate myself."

Olbart: "A lil' kid with red cheeks and a big smile on his face, how nice… Hmm? Aren't'cha that one? Aren't'cha perhaps the girl in red from yesterday? Ya startled me."

Detecting the eccentric-behaving Subaru's real identity, Olbart raised his thick eyebrows in interest.

Just like in the previous loop, Olbart had again now made the connection between Subaru and Natsumi for the first time. Going along this line, having confirmed that Olbart was the mastermind behind the "infantilization", it was possible to bring about negotiations.

However, they would be committing the same mistake, then. —Olbart was a dangerous man.

At the very least, Abel's circumstances could not be relayed as to get Olbart on their side.

As soon as he found out that Abel was the real Emperor, that Abel was Vincent Vollachia, he would disclose his own long-held ambitions and make an attempt on his life. —He was a potential enemy already.

The rest—

Al: "…That's my bro. Even the shinobi head honcho didn't know who you were."

Olbart: "Oh, how impressive, how impressive! I wish the people in my village could learn from that transformation. How 'bout bein' a lecturer? You'd be welcome."

Subaru: "…"

Olbart: "Guess it's impossible ta talk peacefully. Seems I've put'cha on yer guard a tad too much and made a tad too grand an entrance. I messed up, I messed up."

Olbart stuck out his tongue and admitted he had made a mistake.

However, the situation in which this would warm up or soften the atmosphere had long passed. Subaru had not the slightest intention of relaxing his vigilance toward the old man.

—Prior to his assault, Olbart had stated that human faces said a lot.

Probably, the combination of his good-natured attitude and casual behavior, as well as the surprise produced by his silent intrusion into the unprotected room, were all techniques to elicit the other party's true reaction.

If the shinobi of this world and Subaru's perception of "ninjas" were of the same nature, then the entirety of Olbart's conduct should consist of traps, poison and all kinds of ninjutsu.

He would spare no effort to achieve his goal.

Olbart: "Ya best not take me lightly 'cause I'm an ol' man with a short life ahead of me and all that, tho'. Gonna have ta get a lil' rough, takin' into account how much time I got left in me."

Taritta: "Rough… Are you going to fight us in this situation?"

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Well, it's true I might get a lil' jumpy with a bow pointed at me, don't'cha think? But fightin' isn't the only method for me ta get my way, is it?"

Medium: "Weeell~, what do you mean? What are you trying to say, Gramps?"

Taritta and Medium cast a question towards the sincerely-muttering Olbart, who shrunk his small body even further. The old man's cheeks twisted into a smile at the pair's questions, their height difference had been flipped around.

Then, with his hand, he pointed at Medium and then at Al, the two trying to block his exit route,

Olbart: "It's hard ta do this and that havin' been shrunken, isn't it? I did that. It's a kind of shinobi technique. Strange and interestin', right?"

Al: "Old man…!"

Olbart: “Don’t be angry, one-armed young’un. In fact, ya can thank me. I’d be miffed if I killed ya by accident before I could’ve asked ya any, so I just shrunk ya.”

With Al closing in on him for an answer, Olbart spoke and stopped his advance.

Upon understanding that the words spoken to him were indeed true, Al’s breath caught, and he fell silent.

Indeed, this statement of Olbart’s was both true and factual.

Had he so desired, he could have killed Subaru’s group during the battle of the previous day, at the Crimson Lapis Castle. He could have pierced their hearts with a simple thrust of his hand, instead of this infantilization technique.

The fact that Subaru and the others were still alive, even after becoming small, came down to nothing more than the whim of the old man.

So Subaru thought, but—

Olbart: “Well, even if I’d tried ta kill ya for real, you’d’ve blocked all my attempts at doin’ it, so I just did it outta desperation, ya know? Right, young’un?”

Al: “…I wonder what you’re talking about.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Ya won’t tell me ‘bout yer trick? I can’t really blame ya. If I could tho’, I’d ask ya how ta do it in detail and leave it in my book of secrets.”

Al: “It doesn’t matter how many times you say it. —I wonder what you’re talking about.”

His face covered by a piece of cloth, Al answered in a muffled voice.

That response should not match his expectations, yet Olbart nodded with a “Is that so, is that so”, seemingly enjoying Al’s reaction.

Subaru: "—?"

On the other hand, Subaru had no idea what could be the meaning of the current exchange between the two.

During that fierce battle in the castle tower of Crimson Lapis Castle, Al had done the work of several people to save the lives of Subaru and Medium. Or perhaps the one who had squared off against Al there, Olbart, had noticed something shimmering in his fighting style.

However, even if Olbart's words were true, Al's technique, influenced by the "infantilization", would not work on the shinobi.

Subaru had already been witness to the results of that, with his very eyes.

And derived from that, came about an absolute truth.

—That would be: under no circumstances whatsoever should they ever wage battle against Olbart. It was that simple.

Everyone: "…"

Olbart was lazily playing with his teacup using both hands. Taritta trained her bow and arrow on him, and Al and Medium likewise were ready for battle—but they would be killed helplessly.

There was a tremendous gap in strength between Subaru's group and Olbart.

If they fought Olbart, they would be annihilated. —No, even if they attempted to escape, one or two people may be able to escape, but the chances of that were incredibly small.

They needed to get Olbart to leave peacefully, at all costs. However, there was no time to have a discussion regarding that.

Subaru: "Why…?"

He could not help but lament that he had been forcefully returned to this moment.

He was aware of it being a thought terribly filled with pride and selfishness, as he had been granted a second opportunity by Return by Death. Had he at least returned before Olbart's appearance, he would have been able to consult with his companions at least.

Most recently, he had Returned by Death repeatedly when facing Todd in the Fortress City of Guaral with little time to deal with him; remembering this brought Subaru much suffering.

At that time, he'd had to restart while already being in the sight of the threat.

Currently, while the circumstances were different, the conditions were similar. In other words, the restart point had placed him in the same cage as the bloodthirsty beast.

Originally, the time traveled by Return by Death had not been consistent, but this was quite serious.

Or, perhaps, the Authority that had been bestowed upon Subaru had been compromised in some manner—

Subaru: "—Let's put that aside for now."

He should not curse the lack of time, and commit the folly of wasting what little time he had.

Subaru would not be the only one to pay for his own stupidity.

Subaru: "Olbart-san. You're…"

Abel: "—. You claimed your technique shrunk these people."

Subaru: "Oh…"

Subaru forced himself to change his mind and attempted to call out to Olbart.

In order to get out of this situation, he had to be careful about every word he said, every action he performed. He wanted time to discern the best choice of words or to put it another way, so he had spoken with the intent of buying time.

However, Abel interrupted him, covering Subaru's voice with his own.

His words discouraged Subaru at the outset. Now in an embarrassed state, Subaru looked at the man donning the oni mask, and then came to realize his aim. Abel did not even glance back; his real intention was to substitute for Subaru's role. —That would be, to give Subaru the time required, and draw Olbart's attention.

Olbart: "Oh, that's right, that's right. I forgot we gotta talk 'bout that too. Ol' people always go off on tangents. It puts a strain on my flesh and bones."

Abel: "You? Cease with the droll humor. If you claim your old age is weakening you, you should relinquish the rank of General First-Class as soon as possible. If you do not, you have already made up your mind."

Olbart: "Well, ya got a point. The mask makes it hard for ya ta see my body, but ya can peer into my thoughts just fine."

Abel: "Of course."

Devoid of hesitation, Abel nodded, and Olbart's eyes took on a curious look.

There was no longer any doubt that Abel's true intention was not to expose Olbart's true nature, but to buy time, considering his posture of dragging the conversation.

Subaru did not know how Abel had realized that he needed time, but—

Subaru: "This isn't the time to be distracted."

Putting aside his displeasure at having been seen through, Subaru thought about what to do.

If Olbart came to know of Abel's true identity, he would fulfill his ambition to murder the Emperor. Therefore, he could not disclose his hand to Olbart.

However, there was no way he would leave without seeing what they had to offer.

Abel: “You are a General First-Class, your rank presently that of Third, so it may be said that you rest at the top of the Empire. However, your nature is a greedy one. Even that position is far from satisfactory.”

Olbart: “Well, bein’ treated as a witherin’ ol’ man isn’t quite that bad, but I get the feelin’ bein’ called a greedy ol’ man isn’t all that nice. Kakakakka!”

Abel spoke of Olbart’s character, as seen through his own eyes.

Olbart listened happily, wearing a broad smile, but the darkness hidden in the depths of the shinobi was something that Abel, of all people, had misjudged.

—No, it would be more appropriate to say that he had not obtained an accurate reading.

Olbart: “So? What does a disgruntled man like me want?”

Abel: “—The seat of First.”

Olbart: “…”

Abel’s words were uttered in a quiet yet unwavering voice.

As soon as he heard this, the sound of Olbart’s breath disappeared, like dead leaves rubbing together. The old man’s eyes narrowed under his long, thick eyebrows, as he locked gazes with Abel.

Subaru did not know what was going through the shinobi’s mind, but he was sure what Abel had pointed out had made Olbart’s thoughts buzz.

But that—

Olbart: “One-armed young’un, don’t make any strange moves. Ya too, archer girl, you’re also makin’ it obvious ‘cause of yer breathin’.”

—Did not mean that Olbart's attention had been diverted, or that any chance had been created.

With Olbart's face still turned toward Abel as he spoke, Al and Taritta gulped.

They had been most likely searching for a faint opportunity the moment Olbart focused on Abel. But even that probing gesture did not go unnoticed by the seasoned observational prowess held by Olbart.

Al: "—Hk, you've got eyes in the back of your head?"

Olbart: "What I'm sayin' isn't that you're not diligent enough. Difference's in experience, experience. But from my point of view, most people are inexperienced. It's an ol' man's theory that cannot be beaten."

While displaying a toothy grin in response to Al's groaning, Olbart's gaze never left Abel's.

He could deal with any of Al and Taritta's tricks without even looking. —Even if he did not say it in actual fact, from this transcendental being's posture, it was clear that he was thinking it.

Moreover, they currently did not possess the ability nor the cards in their hands to overturn that.

Subaru: "Al."

Giving a shake of his head, Subaru advised Al to stay out of it.

Although Subaru did not have a complete grasp of Al's abilities and skills, he was probably a skilled fighter who specialized in defense. As showcased by the battle with Arakiya, and the previous day at the castle tower, his ability to survive the enemy's attacks despite being on the defensive was something that even Subaru had to admire.

And yet, in this state of having been "infantilized", he would not be able to wield it to the fullest and would end up being killed.

Olbart: "Ya surprised me by tellin' me I was aimin' for First, tho'. Why are ya blurtin' out somethin' that crazy, masked young'un?"

Abel: "It is evident. Your ambition is not so shallow that it shall dry up just because of your old age. —The shinobi push their bodies and minds to the extreme, and merely a scant few can reach such states. Goes without mention that you are their leader… And the hour upon which you are complete shall not come till the day you die."

Olbart: "Hmm."

Crossing his arms, Olbart nodded briefly at Abel's words.

It could be taken as missing the point, but the lack of response only made its credibility stronger.

In actual fact, Subaru knew that Abel's point was incorrect.

Olbart's true intentions, and the ultimate goal of the shinobi head honcho, was to "murder the Emperor". Different from rising to the top of the Nine Divine Generals.

However, Olbart's reaction was proof that Abel's point was not far off the mark.

Ultimately, what Abel was pointing out, was the "thirst" within Olbart.

What Abel had speculated as a way to fulfill that craving was to take the title of First, the absolute most important rank in the Nine Divine Generals, of which Olbart was a part of as well. —But it was not unreasonable.

He was a General First-Class, with plenty underlings as the shinobi head honcho, having lived a long, long life, now burdened with the typical fetters of old age—How had he come to notice that desire, of having his name go down in history as the shinobi who had murdered his own liege the Emperor, even if it meant abandoning everything he had gained in life?

Abel was arrogant and self-centered and had zero consideration for others, nevertheless he was the Emperor of Vollachia—as an existence upon the Imperial throne, the preservation of his own life held precedence.

He possessed the self-awareness to know that, with his loss, the Empire would become greatly unstable.

That was the inevitable awareness that possessed by the Vollachian Emperor, by Abel. And on the other hand, that should be a sense of responsibility held by everyone, even if not as strong as his.

—This was, that which Olbart Dunkelkenn did not have.

He did not mind dying, if so fulfilled his ambition. Even if it meant bringing trouble upon the people around him as a result, that did not matter.

That extraordinary thought of destruction was Olbart's darkness, and that which Abel had not been able to read.

However—

Subaru: "—Olbart-san, you're not after the seat of First, what you're after is the Emperor, isn't it?"

—Natsuki Subaru did know, the darkness of Olbart Dunkelkenn.

2

—A moment later, the color, smell, and feel of the air changed.

Olbart: "…"

Olbart did not even turn his line of sight towards Al and Taritta, whose hostility was accompanied by their ability to get things done. Olbart's gaze reacted to the infantilized Subaru's words.

While holding a teacup in one hand and stroking his chin with the other hand, the old man turned to look at Subaru.

That was because he could not allow what Subaru had just said pass by.

Olbart: “Boy, you’ve come outta nowhere again, I’m surprised.”

Subaru: “Are you surprised because I spoke up suddenly? Or was it…?”

Olbart: “Are you askin’ me if I’m surprised ya guessed right? If that were true, I’d be a very dangerous guy, kakakakka!”

Subaru: “…”

Opening his mouth wide, Olbart tried to laugh off Subaru’s words with gusto. However, Subaru was convinced that his inner thoughts were not as calm as they seemed.

Subaru had done nothing else but to recite to him his own long-held ambition.

In addition, this was a darkness that even Abel’s eyes had not been able to see through until the moment it was about to be acted upon.

Al: “Aiming for the Emperor and killing him? Bro, that’s a leap, even for you.”

Subaru: “It doesn’t make sense. Yeah, I know that. There’s no merit other than notoriety, isn’t that right?”

Olbart: “Well, can’t say I don’t understand the idea of bein’ infamous over not bein’ known. Like the one-armed young’un said, that idea’s a bit of a leap.”

Subaru: “But you’re not denying it outright, Olbart-san.”

Olbart agreed with Al’s doubting voice, but Subaru pressed Olbart on.

Honestly, he knew that he would be jumping into the danger zone, but even then he couldn’t not do so.

Abel had prolonged his conversation with Olbart, while Subaru had pondered it over.

As long as Olbart’s ambition was to murder his own liege, the

Emperor, Abel's true identity could not be disclosed, nor could he be told that the Emperor was Chisha, a fake. It was inevitable that this bargaining chip of theirs had disappeared.

Once this happened, in order to prevent Olbart's hands from unmasking Abel, Subaru had come up with a method of warfare that diametrically opposed the original "negotiation"—

—Namely, forgoing the disclosure of their own hand, but instead disclosing Olbart's own.

Subaru: "Our objective is as I told you yesterday in the castle tower. We're going to overthrow Emperor Vincent Vollachia, who currently sits on the throne of the Emperor. This should also align with your goal."

Olbart: "Wait wait, don't make me out ta be some kinda traitor! This is treadin' on thin ice, boy, you're makin' me so scared that I'm 'boutta piss myself."

Subaru: "But you aren't denying it nor stopping me from saying it for real. You're one of the Emperor's Generals of the First-Class."

With that future possibility caught with just his fingertips, Subaru moved forward in an attempt to fully reach it.

Of course, that did not mean that the threat posed by Olbart had diminished, nor that the danger had lessened. He was fully aware that with one wrong move, this place would become a bloodbath.

But Subaru was convinced that this was the kind of talk that was possible as of now.

Only after Abel's true identity had been revealed had Olbart decided to take action.

It was akin to some sort of suicide mission for Olbart, in which killing Abel would fulfill his life's purpose.

Without that conviction, Olbart would not be quick-tempered during the negotiations.

Even if he was a beast of ambition, devoid of the slightest sense of responsibility or loyalty, he would play the role of a Divine General who faithfully obeyed the order of “no interference” given by the false Emperor.

Olbart: “That’s, His Excellency’s ordered me ta stay out of it even tho’ you’ve declared war right ta his face. I’m not like Kafma, who gets mad all the time when it comes ta the Emperor. Not wise ta turn the foxgirl into an enemy, in this city.”

As expected, despite Olbart hearing Subaru’s appeal that could have just as well been derogatory, he nevertheless did not attempt to use force.

However, he did not take kindly to Subaru’s insistence, and his attitude naturally made Abel, Al and the others put into question whether the shinobi’s absurd ambitions were true, or not.

And—

Abel: “—So would that be the ulterior motive dwelling within your heart that I was unable to conjecture?”

Olbart: “Good grief, these guys just don’t get it. At this rate, I’ll just have ta give up and acknowledge it’s no use talkin’ ta ‘em.”

Among those who were skeptical, Abel was the first to accept the unbelievable details.

Pierced by the glint in his eyes, Olbart blurted out some excuse as if he didn’t feel like it. There had been no reason for Olbart to open his heart to Subaru and the others in earnest at this juncture from the get-go.

Naturally, Al and the rest of the fighters were getting more tense due to Olbart’s attitude—

Olbart: “Stop it, stop it, you’ll only end up losin’ if ya start a fight. I’m tellin’ ya, the reason I won’t use violent methods with’cha isn’t ‘cause I’m nice, it’s ‘cause I was told not to, aight? I’m prepared ta get even with’cha if ya folks make a move on me first.”

Taritta: “Guh… That may be true…”

They hadn’t fought yet, but they’d be back at square one if they tried to start something. Taritta’s cheeks tightened at Olbart’s warning, her narrowed eyes darting a glance at Subaru and Medium.

Seeing this, Olbart nodded his head as if to speak affirmatively,

Olbart: “Bring back the shrunken ones, ya say. That’s a tad greedy, don’t’cha think? I’m thinkin’ of leavin’ without doin’ anythin’, okay?”

Medium: “But Gramps, you made us small, didn’t you? Or is there anyone else besides Gramps who can bring us back to normal?”

Olbart: “I’ve never really thought ‘bout it… Girl, how old are ya, really?”

Medium: “Me? I’m what, twenty?”

Olbart: “Then maybe if ya wait ten years, you’ll go back ta normal? Dunno, tho’.”

Medium raised her hand and asked a question, her cheeks reddening at his blunt answer. Albeit it was just Olbart’s bewildering attitude, his answer was troubling for Subaru and the others.

But it was a fact that there was no way to get answers out of him by force, and no other method to undo what had been done.

And yet—

Subaru: “You know you can’t just pack up and go home. Olbart-san, I’m going to have to ask you to stay with us a little longer…”

Olbart: “I don’t wanna, tho’. Since you’re treatin’ me like an ol’ man and all that. I’m an ol’ man with a short life ahead of me, and I got the right ta choose who I talk ta with the lil’ time I got.”

Abel: “—Then, I shall present you with the opportunity to kill the

Emperor.”

Immediately after that, Subaru gasped at yet another change in atmosphere, and gazed the one who had spoken, Abel.

Abel had done nothing else than put his own life on the scales, that statement causing Olbart to scratch his head with an “Oioi”,

Olbart: “How many times do I gotta tell ya folks that yer premise’s wrong? Isn’t it pretty bad if ya can’t remember things better than me?”

Abel: “If your goal is the Emperor’s life, you have had many opportunities in the past. But you have not actualized it. —Because the Flame of the Yang Sword protects the Emperor.”

Olbart: “Oh…”

Abel: “I can divulge how to overcome the Flame.”

Olbart’s expression underwent a shift, becoming distinctly different from the facade he had held up until that point.

The old man raised his eyebrows and stared at the oni mask-wearing Abel with clear surprise. Abel, on the other hand, had risen from his chair, standing there majestically.

Subaru: “The Flame, of the Yang Sword…”

What that meant, Subaru did not know for certain.

However, it was true that for Olbart, the shock was such that it made it possible to see through to the other side, breaking through the ostensible emotions that he had put up to this point.

Based on the conversation, it was some sort of secret that protected the Emperor of Vollachia, and it was because of this that Olbart’s ambition had not come to fruition thus far.

A method to remove those fetters and overcome them, that was what Abel had claimed.

Olbart: "—. I thought all ya did was hide yer face and not care for the elderly, who the hell are ya? Ya shouldn't joke 'round 'bout such things."

Abel: "Is your belief really that someone who weaves sophistry and jokes in a place like this can raise a rebellion against this mighty Empire? If so, they would have to be either a madman bereft of sanity, or a great man with a lot of nerve."

Olbart: "You're neither of those things, are ya?"

Abel: "Naturally."

Consisely, Abel responded to Olbart's question.

Whether it was serious or just sophistry, Subaru could not decide. Or perhaps the man named Abel was the real deal, a madman, a great man, or all of those simultaneously.

Olbart: "…"

In reaction to Abel's reply, Olbart fell silent for a moment.

He raised his bushy eyebrows and brought his now utterly cold cup of tea to his lips. Then, once he gently placed the empty teacup on the desk beside him,

Olbart: "I believe you were talking about the bell of Fire Time."

Subaru: "Huh?"

With that sudden question, Subaru let out a stupid-sounding voice.

However, the one to reply immediately with "That's right~" and a nod was Medium. Her body now smaller, she pointed out the window, indicating the majesty of the Crimson Lapis Castle,

Medium: "Yorna-chan's calling us, so we'll be in trouble if we stay small."

Olbart: "Yorna-chan! Kakakakka! You've got real balls, lass."

Medium: “—?”

He tilted his head, amazed by Medium’s boldness in addressing Yorna with “chan”.

At the same time, Olbart did the same, now calmed down, gazing towards the Crimson Lapis Castle, pointed to by Medium, as he muttered “Right”,

Olbart: “Putting aside the topic of whether I’m aimin’ for His Excellency’s life or not, I sure am curious ‘bout how ta get past the Yang Sword that protects the Emperor of Vollachia.”

Subaru: “—Hk! If that’s the case…”

Olbart: “Oh, com’on, it’s too early ta tell. I’m the one who got yer hopes up, but I got a lotta things on my mind. —So, why don’t we play a game?”

Subaru: “…A game?”

Olbart: “Yes, a game. Ya like that, don’t’cha? Boy.”

Thrusting his finger right in front of Subaru’s nose as the latter leaned forward, Olbart so declared.

As his eyes had been wholly unable to fellow that movement, Subaru went stiff, stuck in place.

Olbart presented some kind of condition, or a “game”, as he called it as a preface.

Subaru was not sure if this was the way he wanted to avoid complete annihilation and improve this stagnant situation, but—

Subaru: “What if I said no?”

Olbart: “Then ya won’t be able to get anythin’ ya want.”

Subaru: “…”

Olbart: “By the way, since ya folks got what’cha think I want, the shinobi's techniques'll be comin' down on ya folks without relent."

As if it were an obvious answer, Olbart made that ruthless announcement.

The old man was smiling; the sight of the dark emotions stirring in the depths of his pale, cloudy eyes brought chills.

He may be having a peaceful and harmonious conversation on the surface, but under it, he was concealing a shinobi style of mercilessly reaping others' lives.

Abel: "What shall the game be?"

Avoiding a bout with Olbart had been made impossible once he presented his conditions. Abel had sensed the same thing, and made his question in Subaru's stead, the latter unable to open his mouth.

Olbart nodded his head to that appeal, and said, "Right",

Olbart: "We don't have much time before the fox girl calls ya, and I've been told not ta mess with'cha folks, so I'm in a bit of a pickle… Oh, that one's perfect."

Subaru: "Perfect for who, Olbart-san? For us?"

Olbart: "For both of us, me and ya."

With a toothy grin at Subaru's drawn-out question, Olbart showed his hands.

Then turning to Subaru and the others bracing themselves, he spoke,

Olbart: "—Tag."

Everyone: "…"

Olbart: "I'm used ta playin' it with the young peeps from my village. Easy ta understand, isn't it?"

Chapter 43:
Hidden Behind Your Eyelids

1

—That proposal spun by the hoarse voice greatly befuddled Subaru and the others.

Everyone: "…"

The "infantilization" that had assailed Subaru's group, and its mastermind, Olbart Dunkelkenn.

Subaru and the others, who sought to negotiate with Olbart in order to get him to release his infantilization off them, were presented a condition that was befitting of the old man—no, befitting of the monstrous old man who was toying with their bodies and minds alike; a strange condition, which would lead one's heart astray upon being heard.

After all—

Subaru: "Playing, tag…?"

Subaru, who had been dreading what kind of unreasonable request was going to be posed, ruminated on the words he had just been told.

At the sound of Subaru's voice, Olbart, his hands up in the air, frowned quizzically.

Olbart: "What's with the question mark? You're not gonna tell me ya dunno how ta play tag, are ya?"

Subaru: "Of course I know what it is. It's just that, it's not a word that should come up in this situation."

No matter how it was framed, it was merely a child's game of "tag".

It was hard to imagine that there was another meaning to it.

Although, since it would be the kind of game of tag played in a shinobi village, there was a good chance that it would have a unique set of rules.

For example, something like—

Subaru: "“Killin’ isn’t against the rules while playin’, tho’", something like that."

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Of course not. If that kinda nonsense were popular, the shinobi’d be extinct in no time flat. And that by my hands, with me bein’ their leader. That’d be bad, wouldn’t it?"

Although Olbart denied Subaru’s concerns, Subaru believed him to be a man willing to stain his own hands with the blood of his own people if necessary, taking into account his violent behavior and the things he had said and done so far.

To be honest, he would not have been that surprised if that shinobi village of his had already been destroyed.

Abel: "—That tag thing, how does it function?"

Rather than Subaru, who was burning with suspicion, it was Abel who urged him to go ahead.

His cheeks twisting into a smile, Olbart let out an "Oh",

Olbart: "You seem ta be more enthusiastic than I’d expected, masked young’un."

Abel: "Foolishness. We have already passed the point of not getting into this game, as soon as we divulged that we possess the information you covet."

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Well, guess you’re right."

Opening his mouth so wide that it looked like his jaw was about to come off, Olbart gave a hearty laugh without reservations.

In fact, Abel’s point was correct. Olbart’s idea was vicious. Regardless of whether he won or lost this game of tag, Olbart would obtain the information he desired.

The purpose of this game of tag was to allow them to choose how they wished to give up that information, whether after negotiations, or after torture.

Olbart: “So, there’s nothin’ really special about how “tag” works. One side runs away, and the other side catches the other… Oh, it’d be better if I were the one runnin’ away. Ya know, since chasin’ a large group of people ‘round’s too much for an ol’ man’s stamina.”

Medium: “So, if we catch Gramps running away, we win? That’s easy to understand.”

Taritta: “It’s easy to understand, but…”

To Olbart’s explanation of the rules, Medium reacted optimistically, and Taritta pessimistically.

Subaru’s opinion was also leaning more towards Taritta’s. Indeed, the rules were simple and there was no room for uncertainty to interfere. —In other words, it was all up to one’s ability.

And on the topic of ability, the total sum of the ability of Subaru’s group was nowhere near that of Olbart’s.

Olbart: “Well, might be hard with all the lil’ ones. Then we can loosen the conditions a tad.”

Taritta: “And the person who did it, doesn’t even feel guilty…!”

Olbart: “Don’t get so upset, ya know. If yer finger comes off the bowstring, I’ll have a good reason ta defend myself, and it’ll all become a lot easier.”

Taritta: “…”

As Olbart glanced at the faces in the room and shrugged his shoulders, Taritta clacked her molars together.

It was as the monstrous old man had pointed out; Taritta’s bow still remained trained on Olbart. However, the person in question, Olbart, ignored it with a straight face, and rather used it as a bargaining chip.

One could only imagine the mental turmoil Taritta was feeling. But the priority right now was—

Subaru: “What do you mean, loosen the conditions?”

Olbart: “Talkin’ ‘bout the way we’ll be playin’ tag, here. How ‘bout, ya don’t have ta catch me, but instead, if ya find me, ya win. But you’d have to do it thrice.”

Subaru: “Thrice…”

Olbart: “I’ll hide thrice. Ya folks’re gonna have ta try and find me three times. If ya can’t, ya lose. In this case, it’s no game of tag, it’s a game of seek… which sounds kinda weird.”

“It don’t sound quite right”, said Olbart, cocking his head in puzzlement.

Taking in the old man’s suggestion, the words that came from within Subaru, were—

Subaru: “—Hide-and-seek?”

Olbart: “Oh yeah, that’s a good name. We’ll just use that.”

With a snap of his fingers, Olbart clicked at the sound of “hide-and-seek”.

As he did so, Olbart held up one finger on each of his outstretched hands, and flashed them to the left and right on the spot for all to see.

Olbart: “In tag, ya only gotta catch me once. In hide-and-seek, ya gotta find me thrice. —I don’t think I need ta tell ya which one you’ve got a better chance of winnin’, do I?”

Once Olbart posed that question, shutting one eye, Subaru let out a gasp.

Olbart was right, this was a question that required no further thought. —Given Olbart's ability as someone transcendental, something Subaru was already aware of, there was no reason for them to opt for a game of tag.

There shouldn't, yet—

Al: "Ain't that so kind of you. Can't help but wonder if there's more to it, since you went to the trouble of suggesting a method that'd give us a better chance of winning."

With Olbart attempting to pass on the odds of victory to them, Al snapped at him.

As a substitute for the helmet he had taken off, Al now had a cloth wrapped around his face. His voice, now high in pitch as he had become younger, was a bit muffled through the cloth, albeit not to the point that it was difficult to understand.

Olbart, having listened to Al's words, shrugged his shoulders.

Olbart: "Oioi, don't make the mistake of thinkin' that I'm an ol' man who wants ta win at all costs, young'un. As far as I'm concerned, it'd be better if ya folks win, okay? I'm doin' this 'cause I wanna know if ya folks're worth listenin' to."

Al: "…"

Olbart: "As for me, I'm quite interested in what ya folks have ta say. But is it wrong for me ta be worried 'bout my retirement savings if I'm caught in some random lie and my loyalty to His Excellency's questioned? Ta prevent that from happenin', I'm usin' my sluggish brain ta come up with this plan."

Waving his left and right indexes, Olbart answered Al aloofly.

Hearing that answer did not dispel Al's suspicions. But it was a reasonable answer, and he seemed hesitant to pursue the matter further.

Subaru was not so easy-going as to believe that Olbart was being truthful.

However, there was too little time and not enough information to uncover what was within the mind of this accomplished shinobi mastermind.

During all of this, the time limit that Yorna had given was fast approaching, second-by-second.

With Olbart's two inconvenient choices—neither of which was the best option, the chances of coming up with a way to recover from this were close to zero.

To put it another way, Subaru had done everything in his power and still arrived at this situation.

Abel: "—If we are to take you up on your offer, we shall need to be clear about some matters."

Olbart: "Oh, whaddya mean?"

Abel: "You yourself have said so. If you wish to give us a higher chance at victory, you should not leave too much room for pointless exertions—What is desired from one another must be made clear."

Olbart: "—. Kakakakka."

Seemingly having reached the same conclusion earlier, Abel proceeded, one eye trained on Olbart.

Clarification of the rules of the game—what laid behind the demand for clarification was clear. It served as a sign that the decision was to accept the game, and its content.

Abel nodded, staring back at Olbart, who gave a low chuckle, his eyes bright and blazing.

And then finally—

Abel: "—Hide-and-seek it is."

2

—Following that, there were three major agreements made between the two sides.

The first commitment was, “do no harm to each other”.

Olbart was capable of murdering everyone if he wished so, to begin with. What discouraged him from doing so were the false Emperor’s orders and his wariness towards Yorna.

But this assurance was essential, because he would break this ban if the situation warranted it.

The second was, “limit the places of hiding to the city’s boundaries”.

If they were to believe in the pretense of leaving the odds in their favor, limiting the area was also essential to maintain fairness. Of course, even if it were limited to the city, the play area was quite large.

However, the conditions that Subaru had made him accept should do the job in this regard.

The third was, “clarify the conditions for victory”.

They had opted to play hide-and-seek because they believed that meant a better chance of winning. Then, no one would be able to say that it would be wrong to pursue victory.

So—

Subaru: “I know the odds are different for us in tag compared to hide-and-seek, but why three times? Don’t be stingy, can’t we only do this once?”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! That’s a tad greedy, young man. Tell ya what. If it happens once, it’s prolly a fluke. But if it happens thrice, it’s skill.”

Subaru: “Some people think luck’s part of skill, you know?”

Olbart: “Hate to tell ya, but I don’t believe in luck. I mean, that’s what most of the Empire’s people believe. Ya say some darned things, don't'cha?"

It was an unavoidable school of thought, typical of an empire based on the supremacy of merit.

There was no such thing as luck or misfortune, and everything was the result of one's own abilities. This attitude was seemingly suffocating for those unable to live without a refuge.

For example, the Subaru of his days as a truant had no place in the Empire.

Olbart: "In addition, why not do it thrice 'cause there are three among ya who've been shrunken? Sounds reasonable for a technicality I just came up with on the spot."

Abel: "Then, every time we find you, you shall undo the technique on one person?"

Olbart: "Oh, and now you're tryin' ta take advantage of me. Well, let's just forget that technicality."

Waving his hands in the air, Olbart refused to confirm Abel's statement.

Anyhow, with that matter settled, there was presumably nothing else left that required closer examination.

That meant—

Olbart: "Well, let's play."

Subaru: "Olbart-san, just double-checking a small detail… No hiding where we can't physically get to. There's nothing we can do if you're hiding in the middle of nowhere."

Olbart: "You're a real stickler for detail, ya know that? —Well, I would've done it if ya hadn't said that."

Subaru: "…"

Olbart: "Tell ya what, I was serious when I said I don't need ta win at all costs, ya know? Don't forget tho', this is yer test."

In other words, he was looking at them for their adroitness, shrewdness and intelligence too.

Olbart appeared to be generous and easy-going, but he was severe when it came to cutting someone off. Were he to deem someone unworthy of his attention, he would rip their vitals out without mercy.

Even now, if Subaru had not butted in, he would have done so in earnest.

But—

Olbart: "—I didn't think the masked young'un would've overlooked that."

Indicating Abel by cocking his chin, Olbart displayed him a cunning smile that did not hide his elderly age.

Despite this annoyance, Subaru signaled Abel and Al with his eyes, and once he made sure of their assent, he prepared himself to throw down the gauntlet.

Subaru: "If we win, I'll have you put us back to normal."

Olbart: "If I win, you'll have ta wait ten years ta get back ta normal. Well, if His Excellency and the foxgirl get any second thoughts, I'll go ask ya for yer secrets my own way."

That would be, a shinobi technique passed down in his shinobi village—Subaru felt a surge of fear as he regarded Olbart's dark eyes, feeling that the method the old man had suggested could lead to torture.

Then, before the old man headed to his first hiding place, he would ask a question,

Subaru: "—So what's the first hint?"

It was a question that would be dismissed as ridiculous if this were a serious game.

However, Olbart did not laugh at this. Because this was a condition for victory that Subaru had forced Olbart to accept for their game of hide-and-seek.

Now that Subaru had been “infantilized”, Olbart wanted to evaluate them not in terms of their fighting prowess or physical abilities, but in terms of their mindset and creativity, as mentioned before.

To put it simply, it was none other than the natural feeling called “not wanting to deal with idiots”.

Olbart: “First of all, a tryout… Near this inn, I’m gonna hide “behind the eyelids”.”

Subaru: “—Behind, the eyelids.”

Olbart: “Well, hang in there, young man. Let this ol’ man have some fun in what’s left of his short life, at least.”

With a fluttering wave of his hand, Olbart turned his back to Subaru and the others. —At that moment, Subaru felt the tension in the room rise as the man walked away leisurely.

Everyone: “…”

Who among them had not wished that they could pounce on Olbart and solve the problems of the “hide-and-seek” and the “infantilization” at once, in that very moment?

But nobody carried out that reckless act. And it was the right thing to do.

Olbart: “Kakakakka.”

Just before the door closed, Olbart laughed because he knew what Subaru’s hesitation was about.

His behavior lived up to the title of “Vicious Old Man”, his shrill laugh included, right to the end.

And so, once Olbart exited the room, and it was once again occupied only by Subaru and his allies—

Abel: “Taritta, lower your bow. There is no one to point it at anymore.”

Taritta: “…Okay.”

After the enemy had left the room, Abel had Taritta lower her bow.

Taritta’s face, as she followed the instructions, was filled with shame. Naturally so. Olbart had kept a cool face as she pointed her bow at him.

As one of the Shudraq—No, as someone who had already been entrusted with the role of being the next Chieftain, for Taritta, the old man’s attitude was a mockery of the power of the Shudraqians.

Subaru had allowed Olbart to underestimate the People of Shudraq.

This too, was due to his own lack of strength.

Originally, Taritta had accompanied Subaru to the Demon City to seek a pillar of support for her resolve to take over as Chieftain.

—This would only have the opposite effect, rather than her gaining the needed confidence.

Al: “Are you seriously gonna play along with that old man’s games, bro?”

And so, Al spoke up towards Subaru, who could not find any words to say to Taritta.

Al was wearing a face covering that did not quite fit, and his tone was filled with frustration and disapproval at this interaction with Olbart. He always had the impression of accepting everything rather easily, and of letting things go, so it was surprising to see him react that way.

However, since Olbart keeps outmaneuvering them, it was understandable as to why he would be frustrated.

Subaru: "I don't feel good about being put through the wringer like that either. But we left some possibilities open at the last minute, right?"

Al: "Possibilities, you mean…"

Medium: "There's a chance our original bodies can be restored, right? Subaru-chin."

Medium was sitting on the floor, holding Louis down as she struggled. She was restraining Louis, the latter's size now almost the same as hers, with her skills, not her arm strength.

Perhaps it was a skill she had developed at the orphanage where she had grown up.

As she calmed Louis, Subaru looked into her blue eyes and nodded, "Yes",

Subaru: "If we got him in a bad mood, our bodies would stay small… And that isn't something we can afford considering future plans, and our current course. It's a must that we return to normal."

Al: "…Well, that's exactly what we could've done, we could've surrounded the old man and beaten him."

Subaru: "Don't be stupid. The only reason we didn't die is because Olbart-san was intending to follow the Emperor's orders. We wouldn't be able to do anything about it if he felt like it."

Al: "—. You say that like you've seen it before."

Looking away from Subaru, Al sounded like he wanted to say that that should be impossible.

Al's remark was not off the mark, since Subaru's insight was because of a cheat transcending worlds. He had indeed seen it with his own eyes.

Events that he had thought to be impossible had happened, even if he wished not to admit it.

Nevertheless—

Al: “…”

Averting his gaze, Al did not argue further.

Due to the previous day’s visit to the castle keep, Al had also grasped a part of Olbart’s strength. Naturally, he would know that the old man had not been serious back then, and that the odds of victory would be slim were he to demonstrate his true ability.

That was why Al had made the decision to keep watching Olbart’s back as he left.

Subaru: “Whatever, we don’t have much time. If we’re going to meet with Yorna, I need time to do my makeup. I need thirty minutes for everything, so… the grace period’s a little over two hours.”

Taritta: “Is it really necessary to wear women’s clothes…”

Subaru: “It is, because the three of us from yesterday are being requested, too. And…”

As he said this, Subaru looked at Abel, who was silent.

As long as he did not interfere, Subaru guessed that he had the same basic policy as himself. Subaru did not believe he was getting lost in the emotions of having gone through a deadly situation.

Or maybe—

Subaru: “Shocked that Olbart-san’s trying to kill the Emperor, huh?”

Abel: “Nonsense. I knew he had ambitions beyond his size. Albeit, I did not think it would be the Emperor’s head. I thought there was nothing to be gained by such an attempt. But what he really seeks is a final sense of accomplishment and the posthumous notoriety.”

Abel shrugged his thin shoulders as if to say he couldn’t fully grasp it.

Regardless of even having been forced out of his position as Emperor and being driven into the most unfavorable situation, Abel never knew when to give up.

From his point of view, it was incomprehensible to give up his own life and seek posthumous fame, as it would be best for him to return to the throne alive.

On this point, Subaru agreed with him, though it was a very mixed bag of feelings. He did not want to be praised after death.

Subaru wished to be forgotten by his remaining loved ones after he passed away.

It was in Subaru's nature that he would rather be made a memory of and forgotten about in the moment of his death, than for everyone to grieve or suffer for it.

However, he had no intent to share that feeling with Abel.

Subaru: "…But Olbart-san's a bit of an outcast, isn't he? He's got all that ambition, but he doesn't even realize who you are in front of him."

Therefore, Subaru deceptively changed the subject.

But as soon as he heard that, however, Abel's eyes showed a suspicion that was clearly visible even through the oni mask.

Abel: "—. What in the world are you talking about?"

Subaru: "Huh?"

Abel: "I am wearing this mask. Hence why Olbart's reaction is justified."

Tracing the oni mask's cheek with his finger, Abel made that declaration nonchalantly.

Subaru raised an eyebrow at his words, his expression showing that he did not understand. Promptly, Abel's puzzlement turned into disappointment visible through his oni mask.

With that look in his eyes, Abel sighed deeply, and,

Abel: "This mask has the effect of distorting the perceptions of others. It is an effect that conceals the true identity of the wearer."

Subaru: "—! Is that really "cognitive disruption"? But that mask was originally supposed to be from the Shudraqian's village…"

Taritta: "Yes yes, that's right. It's said that in the past, when the Emperor and Shudraq formed friendly ties, the Emperor used it to visit the Jungle without being recognized."

Subaru: "That mask has actual history…?"

With the revelation of that surprising fact, Subaru's mouth was left agape. To that shocked Subaru, Abel's disappointment still lasted,

Abel: "You, did you really believe that I have been wearing this mask all this time for show, or due to madness?"

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "At last, your stupidity has reached its pinnacle. In the first place, there is plenty good reason to conceal my face. I believe we did not come to the Demon City for tourism."

Subaru: "You didn't have to say it like that, you could have just explained that at the start…!"

Certainly, it was Subaru's fault for thinking it was part of Abel's odd behavior and not asking anything, but Abel was also at fault for thinking it would be understood without explaining anything.

Thanks to that, he had to unnecessarily embarrass himself, and to worry himself without it being needed.

Anyway, he was now aware of the mechanism as to why Olbart had not realized Abel's true identity.

Abel had no intention of covering up his pompous speech and arrogant attitude, so Subaru's fears that he would reveal himself were unfounded.

Medium: “Heyhey, Al-chin, Al-chin. That’s what Abel-chin’s reason is, but is there a reason why Al-chin’s hiding his face?”

Al: “In my case, I have a complex about my facial scars… But let’s not talk about me. Hide-and-seek’s already begun. We gotta get a move on.”

As he said this, Al pointed out the window to the streets of the Demon City.

Chaosflame was one of the largest cities in the Empire, amounting to probably five times the size of the Fortress City of Guaral.

To find the shinobi head honcho hidden among all that was no easy task.

Find him three times, in just two hours and with only six people.

Al: “I know he said he was gonna do a tryout first, but there are a lotta possible hiding places just around the inn, man. Bro, do you or Abel-chan have some kind of plan?”

Subaru: “It’s not much of a plan, but…”

At least, there were some things Subaru had thought of that he wanted to try.

A “hide-and-seek” tryout—unsurprisingly, he’d had the same idea Olbart did. An idea that should be tried at least once to gauge the mindset of their opponent, the old man.

Just as Subaru thought that, Abel crossed his arms and nodded, “Of course”,

Abel: “There are a few possible moves. Although, my idea is probably different from that of the clown here.”

Subaru: “You’re demoting me from a military strategist to clown, you’re too uptight about that mask thing from earlier… No, it’s not like I cared about being your military strategist or anything.”

Subaru could only curve his lips in a snarl at the sound of Abel’s cold voice. It was as if the fact that Subaru had treated the oni mask's disguise as an oddity was really upsetting the latter.

Anyway, throughout that discussion here, time was being wasted.

Subaru: “I've got to get moving before I forget what having long limbs felt like.”

Al: “Well, dunno if there was ever a time when me and you had long legs, bro…”

Subaru: “I meant compared to the current situation.”

The group pushed aside Al as he teased that they were all short-legged, and prepared the minimum amount of gear.

Al carried his Blue Dragon Sword in its sheath on his back, Medium carried only one of her twin swords on her hip. For now, Subaru would also carry his whip. However, he was not confident he could handle it in all honesty.

All that was left was Abel and Taritta, who were in top condition, plus—

???: “Aa, uu!”

Medium: “Oh, Louis-chan, you're so motivated! Alright, let's work hard and find Gramps!”

Louis: “Uu!”

Medium raised a small fist at the sound of Louis's voice, not wanting to leave her behind.

In the end, Louis was likely to slow everyone down. Olbart had been forbidden to change his hiding place in the meantime, so they would like to believe that, even if he sensed the approach of the noisy Louis, he probably would not do anything of the sort.

Al: “Isn't it possible that he'll change his hiding places from time to time and claim that he's been hiding in one place the whole time?”

Abel: “I already corrected you on that, but Olbart’s goal is not his own victory. The reason he is performing such a roundabout move is to measure our capabilities through this game.”

Al: “Measuring our capabilities? That means…”

Abel: “He wishes to know if I am capable of making such a big claim to the Emperor’s throne.”

Abel made it clear to Al, who doubted Olbart’s true intentions.

Subaru also saw no falsehood there. It was hard to believe Olbart’s own words, but since his goal was the Emperor’s life, being able to believe the aim of Subaru’s group, and the information in their hands being the real deal would be convenient.

Olbart wanted to be convinced by their party’s demonstration of capabilities.

And for that reason—

Subaru: “I didn’t ask before, but what was that about the Flame of the Yang Sword…?”

Abel: “I am afraid I do not have the leisure to give a lengthy lecture on the history of the Emperors of Vollachia. Your shallow wisdom notwithstanding, my plan is not something that can be set in motion in a room at an inn.”

Subaru: “Tch, okay.”

Subaru clucked his tongue at this manner of saying that he did not want to reveal anything.

Nevertheless, if the exchange with Olbart were indeed true, it seemed to him that the Emperor of Vollachia, or rather Abel, had some kind of protection. As long as he did, no harm would befall him.

Subaru: “On second thought…”

So far, Subaru had never seen Abel lose his life with his own eyes.

Since arriving in the Vollachian Empire, Subaru's life had been threatened quite frequently, having actually lost his life and Returned by Death. However, Abel's death was an event that had never occurred. —Although Subaru had been in situations which seemed like they should have resulted in Abel's death.

When Olbart revealed his true nature the very previous loop, or when Todd had the Buddheim Jungle burnt down, Shudraqian village included, the life of the imprisoned Abel should have been lost.

But that was only because of the circumstances, not because Subaru had directly confirmed his death. —So, he wanted to confirm one thing.

Subaru: "That thing called the Flame of the Yang Sword, is it still protecting you?"

Abel: "How insistent. Will you perhaps turn against me as well, if you do not hear it?"

Subaru: "…There's no merit in me doing that."

His cheeks contorting due to that mocking remark, Subaru gave up the pursuit this time.

Then, Subaru looked around at the faces of his companions as they prepared to leave the inn,

Subaru: "Unexpectedly, we have to play a game. But if the condition is that we just need to find a person, then we should be able to compete even in a situation where half of our members have shrunk. In fact, since it's a game of hide-and-seek, that we've returned to our childlike minds and bodies might even be better for us in this game."

Taritta: "Wh-What's the logic behind that…?"

Abel: "Ignore him. It is nonsense, meaningless to listen to."

In fact, that was right, since it was nothing more than banter, but he just expressed his regret with a wrinkle between his eyebrows.

After doing that, Subaru shouted “Anyway!”, louder than he should have.

Subaru: “I want everyone to pay maximum attention to their surroundings. —Ok then, let’s go!”

Medium: “Oh!”

Louis: “Auu!”

Al: “…You’re really into this, bro.”

The enthusiastic Subaru was dressed in the clothes he had on hand, his figure looking quite unsightly. Al sighed as Medium and Louis followed Subaru’s lead, pumping their fists in the air.

On the other hand, Taritta, who had become the strongest fighter, had nervousness and anxiety in her eyes, while Abel was as irreverent as ever, with no expression behind his oni mask and no thing in his hands.

All of their members left the inn together.

First item of order, was to locate Olbart’s first hiding place. Full of eagerness, Subaru slammed the door with a loud bang and stepped out with great vigor—

Subaru: “—Then, we’ll return right away.”

Al: “Huh?”

With a hard step, he kicked the floor directly with his foot, and Subaru’s body made a half-turn. Al let out a dumb-sounding voice upon seeing the other side of door he had just gone out of.

With this in mind, Subaru pushed open the door of the room with force.

Then Subaru pointed into the room from which he and the others had just left—

Subaru: “—Found yooou∼, Olbart-san.”

???: “Kakakakka! Oioi, com’on, don’t’cha have a bad personality, for ya ta notice this right away? I’m blushin’ here, bein’ spotted this right outta the blue, it’s so embarrassin’!”

And Olbart, who had snuck into the room in Subaru and the others’ stead, laughed heartily at Subaru’s first declaration, as the latter pointed at himself.

3

Al: “Seriously, bro…!”

Al was surprised to see Olbart in the room, who was about to refill his cup with cold tea.

Much to his surprise, Medium and Louis followed suit, with an “Oh, it’s Gramps!” and an “Aa!”, respectively. Taritta widened her eyes, having peeked into the room as well.

Delayed by those reactions, Abel narrowed his eyes once Olbart’s figure finally came into view.

Abel: ““Behind the eyelids”, I see.”

He looked down at Subaru’s young profile and muttered.

Abel: “Did you know from the start that this was the place?”

Subaru: “The expression “behind the eyelids” and the surroundings of the inn made this the first place I thought of. The type of person who offers you this kind of game’s definitely going to try to do this at least once.”

A distant, nostalgic memory came to Subaru’s mind with that answer—the memory of his first meeting with Beatrice, at the old Roswaal Mansion.

Beatrice had attempted to have Subaru endlessly walk in the same space by creating a looping corridor using her magical ability. Unfortunately for Beatrice, Subaru had seen through her scheme at a glance and quickly figured out that the starting point was also the goal.

Now that Subaru thought about it, he was sorry that he had not gone along with the cute Beatrice’s ruse. But his opponent now was not the mischievous Beatrice, he was a monstrous old man, now wasn’t the time for holding back.

Therefore, he would distort his young face into a big grin and boast of his victory mercilessly.

Subaru: “Honestly, I saw right through you, Vicious Old Man.”

Olbart: “Oioi, don’t kick me while I’m down. This is an embarrassment I can’t let the young people of my village see at all. Why don’t’cha call yerself the Vicious Lil’ Boy?”

Subaru: “I’ll pass on that. I haven’t done anything to be called vicious, after all.”

Olbart: “Well, that’s just bein’ humble. —Ya even went ta the trouble of speakin’ in a loud voice for me ta hear as ya left the inn. It was some great actin’.”

Subaru scratched his cheek at Olbart, who raised one eyebrow and sneered at him.

As expected, his intentions could be seen through after such an exaggerated act. However, even if he had been able to notice Subaru’s true intentions, Olbart had no way to change his hiding place.

That was because this game was played by determining the hiding place they used first, and then giving clues accordingly.

Subaru: “I know it’s really early in the first round to be discovered, but you’re going to count it as one, right? You’re not going to be in a bad mood just because I refused to take on the name “Vicious”, are you?”

He wanted to avoid being dismissed “because these were anticlimactic results”, or something like that.

To Subaru’s request for confirmation born out of concern, Olbart closed one eye and said, “Of course”,

Olbart: “My fault that the results were brought in so quickly. It’s a bit unreasonable ta expect ya folks ta mop up my mess. Twice more, as agreed.”

Medium: “Oh~! You did it, Subaru-chin! We got the first win in about ten seconds!”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s good news.”

With Medium to his side overjoyed, Subaru patted his chest in relief.

For now, this concluded the first riddle from Olbart—indeed, it was a trial of sorts, borrowing the name “hide-and-seek”. It could be said that they were being asked to solve a problem on a test.

They were being tested to see if they were worthy of Olbart’s attention.

Subaru: “All of it is because of Beako’s…”

Help, he was about to say, as Subaru attempted to picture the adorable girl in his mind.

However, for a moment, that thought was bleached white, coming to a full stop.

Subaru: “…”

A feeling of slight discomfort and a slight tugging created a ripple in his heart.

Before he could pursue a definitive answer to what it was—

Olbart: “Well, I gotta redeem myself, so I’ll hurry ta the second hidin’ place.”

Subaru: “Oh, yeah, you’re right. So, what’s the next hint?”

Olbart: “Hmm… The next hidin’ place’s gonna be somethin’ like…”

Folding his hands behind his back, Olbart leaned his head and body in thought. However, he did not spend much time pondering, and so the old man contorted his cheeks.

Olbart: “…”An abyss with a great view”, ya might say.”

Al: “An abyss…”

Taritta: “With a great view?”

The words of Taritta and Al completed each other, as they ruminated on the bizarre hint left regarding the next hiding place.

But Olbart had no intention of leaving any further hints.

Olbart: “Ya were better than expected the first time ‘round, but the real game’s ‘bout ta begin.”

The old man smiled, his white teeth in full view, and then leapt backwards nimbly and gallantly. With that, Olbart opened the room’s window and put his foot on the windowsill without a care in the world.

Then, right before Subaru and the others looking on with eyes open wide, he jumped outside.

Olbart: “Next time, I’ll be sure ta hide a lil’ better!”

Al: “Wait, old man…! Shit, he’s gone!”

With haste and a yell, Al rushed to the window and looked around outside as he held his covered head.

In fact, it would be difficult to catch Olbart when he was dedicated to escape. His overwhelming ability to run away convinced Subaru that changing the game from “tag” to “hide-and-seek” had been the right call.

Anyway—

Taritta: “Subaru, that man’s next hiding place…”

Medium: “Hmhm, Subaru-chin, did you understand? Do you know what it is?”

Subaru: “Uhh… That’s…”

Taritta and Medium turned to look at him expectantly, yet Subaru was at a loss for words.

As for the second hiding place's hint, "an abyss with a great view", Subaru honestly found no clue that could lead to an answer.

Subaru: "Sorry. Can't think of anything right away. It's not like I can read minds or anything, I just can read the situation."

Medium: "I see~, I'm sorry! We can't keep just relying on you! We'll figure it out together!"

Taritta: "Yes, you're right. I'm not very good at using my head, but I'll keep thinking about it."

Subaru bowed due to his uselessness, to which Medium and Taritta responded.

The initial hiding place could also be called the starting point, a typical development of sorts that had been realized.

Even if that had been off the mark, they could have easily tried it out in part because it was a location so close that there was almost no time loss. However, from here on—

Subaru: "It's simply going to be a race against time."

Al: "—. Bro also doesn't have an idea of where he's gonna hide next. Well, it isn't anything surprising though."

Subaru: "That's right… Maybe I can't be depended on, but it's depressing to be told that in such a clear way."

At the start of the real game of "hide-and-seek", his allies stabbed him in the back.

Of course, Subaru took that as a fair assessment, but he really wished he would have been a bit less direct. Even close friends have some sense of consideration.

However, in response to Subaru's words, Al waved his hand and said, "Oh, that's not it", Al: “Well it isn’t unreasonable for you to not get it, bro. After all, I’m here with you.”

Subaru: “Hmm? I really don’t know what you’re talking about. Is it something like, my IQ goes down when you’re around, Al? What kind of system is that?”

Al: “That ain’t what I’m talking about, but it’s hard to explain… right?”

Subaru: “Even if you ask me to agree, I still won’t get it.”

As he spoke, Al’s way of speaking, holding neither confidence nor certainty, was curious.

He put Al aside, who was tilting his head, as he did not see how this topic could go any further in a constructive direction. The highest priority right now, was to figure out the “abyss with a great view” clue Olbart had left them with.

Subaru: ““Behind the eyelids” was the room where we started. “An abyss with a great view”, another way to phrase it would be…”

Taritta: ““With a great view” means it’s probably considered a high place, no?”

Medium: “But an abyss is a hole, right? If it’s a hole, wouldn’t it be in the ground?”

Alternatively, it was possible that there was a spot in Chaosflame described as such.

In any case, it was unlikely that they would be able to reach the answer with the amount of information they could get from their room at the inn. At last, they would have to go into the city.

Al: “…I can’t get my head around this. Which reminds me, what’s Abel-chan’s plan?”

Abel: “It is not something that can proceed here, as I have told you. It would be convenient to have as many people as possible… And in addition to that, a place where outsiders come and go.”

Al: “You mean a place where strangers come and go? I wonder where in this city…”

The implementation of Abel’s plan caused Al to tilt his head.

The true meaning behind the idea of looking for a place where outsiders entered and exited was unknown to Subaru, but there was a good chance that Abel would not tell him even if he asked him to until they actually reached the execution phase. It could not be called an act that benefited their opponent, but it was difficult to deal with.

Of course, he was a man who would even discard the cards in his hand without a second thought for the sake of winning.

Subaru: “If it’s a place with a lot of people coming and going, that should be… a place to drink.”

Taritta: “A tavern?”

Subaru: “Yeah, there. I think we should try to go there or somewhere similar.”

It was debatable whether it was more beneficial to search for Olbart without taking any detours or to help Abel’s plan come to fruition, but for now, it seemed like a good idea to prioritize Abel first.

With that in mind, Subaru and the others headed out of the inn with a renewed spirit.

Abel: “Attracting the attention of the public with this crowd of children is not ideal.”

Subaru: “Don’t complain because four-sixths of us are children. In the first place, you’re not one to talk about public perception because of that oni mask you’re wearing. Or maybe, the perception… Uhh, does the effect of the mask make it look like it has a different face?”

Abel: “The mask does not alter its appearance from an oni’s face, it merely hides my identity.”

Subaru: “Then you’ll definitely stand out…”

With a small shrug of his shoulders, Subaru sighed, parrying aside Abel’s misguided frustration.

After greeting the shopkeeper at the entrance of the inn and asking them about the locations of some taverns, they went into the street. With that, they all walked towards a tavern to accomplish Abel’s aim.

And suddenly, in the middle of it all,

Subaru: “Instead of having all of us going to the tavern, wouldn’t it be better if we split up? One group goes to look for Olbart-san, and the other goes to the tavern with Abel—”

It happened just as he was about to suggest that they split up.

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Suddenly, a scarlet light scattered at the edge of his field of vision, dazzling Subaru’s eyes.

And then—

4

???: “Oh yeah, that’s a good name. We’ll just use that.”

Subaru: “Ueh?”

An unexpected voice struck Subaru’s eardrums as he blinked, his eyes simmering from the vermilion light.

The sound and its suddenness made a silly voice leak out, and a giggle broke out right in front of Subaru. A low chuckle it was, causing Subaru’s eyes to widen at its sound.

???: “Kakakakka! What’s with the dumb voice? I was just complimentin’ ya on the good name.”

Subaru: “…Olbart, san?”

An old man stood in front of him, clearing his throat and shaking his thin shoulders as he laughed.

It had happened so suddenly that Subaru had to blink his eyes a few times, unable to understand it. Then, he swallowed his saliva, and said what he had to declare,

Subaru: “Oh, found you, Olbart-san.”

Olbart: “—? Why’s that? Ya already feelin’ like you’re playin’ the game?”

Subaru: “Huh…?”

He noticed a sense of incongruity upon taking that chance at the unexpected second discovery.

Olbart’s attitude as he tilted his head and spoke that, coupled most of all with the discomfort regarding the scene around him—he was supposed to be out in the streets of the Demon City, but Subaru was in a room somewhere else.

—No, not in some room.

Subaru: “…No way.”

Subaru was in a room at an inn. —The same lodgings they had just come out of.

And finally, there was the fact that Subaru was there, facing Olbart and talking to him.

Subaru: “…”

He had no choice but to accept that he had Returned by Death in contradiction to the rule that should have prevented that.

Chapter 44:
Shrinking Vision

1

—The incomprehensible situation overwhelmed Natsuki Subaru's small brain.

The situation was that shocking, it couldn't be said in any other way.

Without being aware of his death, Subaru had returned to the time of the rule bantering with Olbart—even if he did not want to admit it, he had to.

Subaru had lost his life, and had Returned by Death back to this moment.

Even so—

Subaru: "…It was in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek, in which death shouldn't happen."

Covering his mouth with his small palm, Subaru struggled desperately to recall what had happened.

The game of "hide-and-seek" with Olbart had begun, and, overcoming the monstrous old man's predisposition for wickedness, within the first room—there, he had succeeded in finding the shinobi hidden "behind their eyelids".

Going off that momentum, Subaru and the others had stepped out of the inn to identify the next hiding place of the mysterious old man. And then, suddenly, the world went dark.

The next thing he knew, he was back in this place.

Subaru: "…"

Abel: "—If we are to take up on your offer, we shall need to be clear about some matters.”

Olbart: “Oh, whaddya mean?”

Abel: “You yourself have said so. If you wish to give us a higher chance at victory, you should not leave too much room for pointless exertions—What is desired from one another must be made clear.”

Olbart: “—. Kakakakka.”

While Subaru was having those thoughts, the negotiations with Olbart continued on to the next step one their own.

The next step in the conversation between Abel and Olbart would be the selection of the game, and after that was the premise of the rules. In other words—

Abel: “—Hide-and-seek it is.”

And so, Abel once again declared that.

2

—After that, the terms of the “hide-and-seek” game were exchanged with Olbart.

It also ended up being exactly as Subaru knew it would be. No new conditions were added, and no necessary details were cut. Inevitably, it stayed the same.

Although—

Subaru: “Just to be completely sure, you’re only hiding, Olbart-san. You’re not going to sneak around and try to attack us…”

Olbart: “Oh, com’on now, you’re worryin’ too much, boy. Lemme tell ya, what I wanna test ya on’s yer quick thinkin’ and cleverness. If I wanted ta test yer strength, I could’ve done so yesterday at the castle tower.”

Subaru: “…”

Olbart's words had the intention to reassure him, but he could not accept them as honest ones.

As a matter of fact, there was no doubt that Subaru had lost his life and Returned by Death. And the most immediate threat to Subaru's group was none other than the one in front of them, Olbart.

Had he perhaps broken the rule that forbid him from interfering, and targeted Subaru and the others?

Olbart: "Good grief, you're suspectin' me plenty, aren't'cha?"

Al: "You're in no position to be trusted, old man. That's rather impertinent of you."

Olbart: "Kakakakka! That's a good point. We got along so well eight years ago, and now you're so cold."

Having sensed a strong sense of caution in Subaru's silence, Olbart shrugged. After that, he gave a toothy grin at Al's remark, followed up by a smug retort.

Naturally, Al seemed to be dissatisfied with the way Olbart was talking to him, and fell silent.

Anyhow—

Abel: "Olbart, this goes without saying, but there your hiding place is senseless if we cannot physically reach it. Do not attempt any of your petty tricks."

Olbart: "I gotcha, I gotcha. They're a wee bunch, aren't they? I wouldn't've done it even if ya hadn't told me."

Abel pointed out the same thing Subaru had in the previous loop. With Olbart's agreement on that, the start of the game was declared again.

In other words, the hint for the first hiding place would be presented.

Al: "So, where are you gonna hide first, old man?"

Olbart: “First of all, a tryout… Near this inn, I’m gonna hide “behind the eyelids”.”

For a moment, Subaru felt an unpleasant tension in his heart, but it ended up being unneeded.

He feared that Olbart would designate a hiding place different from last time’s, but that did not happen. After that, the flow of events was followed to a T, including the fact that Taritta and Al resisted the urge to pounce on Olbart, his dignified back turned to them. They could not do anything other than just seeing him off.

And so—

Al: “What’s up, bro? You’re looking a little pale.”

Taritta lowered her bow at Abel’s instruction, and in between studying her profile, Al called out to him. Those statements followed a slightly different flow compared to the previous loop.

Originally, he would have complained about the frustration of competing against Olbart, but this time he seemed to be concerned about Subaru’s complexion—Or rather, it seemed to be concerned about Subaru’s lack of talking.

That was only natural. Subaru himself was still confused and disoriented.

Since he himself was unable to recover from that sudden Return by Death and its psychological shock.

Subaru: “No, my bad. During that talk, I suddenly felt… really tired.”

Al: “Oioi, get a grip, please. Mine and Medium-chan’s abilities were halved because we were shrunken, but unlike ours, your strong points should still be intact despite being small, right bro?”

Subaru: “My strengths…”

Medium: “Of course! The great thing about Subaru-chin’s that he’s smart! Big bro’s amazing, but isn’t Subaru-chin amazing too? It’s all fine and dandy even if your boobies are small!”

Following Al’s encouragement, Medium also joined in with good spirits.

While holding Louis in her arms, she patted her chest, her own breasts now gone. Observing the state of those two, Subaru then let out a long sigh.

Those two people who had encouraged him were right.

There were almost no situations in which Subaru would be physically useful to begin with, regardless of whether he had been made smaller. Because of that, Subaru was the one least affected by having been made smaller.

This was not the time for Subaru to be dragging out his mental exhaustion on and on.

Subaru: “…I’ve told you already, don’t look at me like that. If you’re going to show off the full effect of the oni mask, that “cognitive disruption” feature alone should be enough.”

Abel: “You have regained some of your good judgment. But you have surprised me beyond my expectations. I took you as a fool on whom the effects of this mask had gone unnoticed for certain.”

Subaru: “…I wouldn’t have been surprised if you were just wearing the mask because of your eccentric behavior though.”

Encouraged by Al and Medium, Subaru raised his face and sent a retort straight back to Abel.

Abel, who had been patronizing him and regarded him as a useless man, saw that Subaru had regained the strength to raise his head, which seemingly made him refrain to use any further sarcasm.

The fact that he felt this was a concession led one to believe that Abel’s communication skills were not up to snuff, but there was no time to discuss it at this point.

Al: “So. I know he said he was gonna do a tryout first, but there are a lotta possible hiding places just around the inn, man. Bro, do you or Abel-chan have some kinda plan?”

With the purpose of moving the state of affairs along, Al turned his focus to Subaru and Abel.

As an answer to this, Subaru could present Olbart’s first hiding place—the very room they were talking in at the moment was where the old man would return to, in fact.

Given that the hint left by Olbart was the same, there was no need to worry about that having changed.

The problem was that after they found Olbart, they would have to go outside the inn.

Subaru: “It’s not a plan per say, but I can guess where “behind the eyelids” is referring to.”

Al: “Oh, seriously? That’s awesome, bro.”

Subaru: “…It’s just that there’s a good chance that another problem’s turned up besides this “behind the eyelids”.”

Some sort of threat had assailed Subaru—No, not just Subaru, it had affected their entire group. And it was necessary to share it with Al, Abel, and the others who were unaware of it.

However, Subaru himself had gotten so little information that he did not have many reliable ideas to share. If there was something could say with certainty, that would be—

Subaru: “The agreement we made with Olbart-san… that he would not interfere, is there any chance that he’d break it?”

Abel: “Oh? Oh? Are you trying to say that, since the beginning, he was planning on violating the preconditions?”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m thinking it’s possible…”

Abel: “—No, that is impossible.”

Due to the fact that he had been attacked as soon as he left the inn, Subaru tried to draw the attention of his friends to Olbart. However, that was denied by a very adamant Abel.

Once Subaru's eyes widened at his reaction, Abel folded his thin arms, and,

Abel: "Olbart would have nothing to gain with such a deed. Henceforth, that is impossible."

Subaru: "B-but Olbart-san had even been thinking about killing the Emperor! Even you said you had not imagined that at all… If so!"

Abel: "What you speak of, is the fact that the notion of posthumous fame is something I do not possess. But I do comprehend that such a thing does exist. And that there are those who desire it. However, this and that are two different stories."

Being shot with a sharp gaze through the oni mask, Subaru felt like his internal organs had been paralyzed by fear.

It was not as if Abel was emitting a special energy, one sharper than before. In spite of this, the feeling of being targeted did not disappear, and Subaru's breathing was disturbed.

While Subaru was struggling with this feeling, Abel continued with "May I?".

Abel: "It is as you yourself have spotted, and as per the rebuttal to that masked clown, there is no reason for Olbart Dunkelkenn to harm us himself. If his target is the Emperor's head, then he shall desire the intelligence I possess desperately. There is no basis for any such hypothesis whatsoever."

Al: "Ah, I'm with Abel-chan, bro. The old man's been ordered by the Emperor to leave us alone. If he was gonna break that promise, whether he does it inside or outside of the inn doesn't matter. Right?"

Subaru: "Uhh, does it…?"

Al: "Bro?"

Subaru: “Oh! No, you’re right! Yeah, I think so too. That’s for sure.”

Abel and Al’s continued talk caused Subaru’s comprehension to fall behind for a few seconds.

However, once explained in a solid argument, it was something that Subaru could agree with.

Abel and the others were unaware of it, but Olbart had a history of killing Subaru and the others.

Nevertheless, Olbart’s act was one that was driven by a logical train of thought for him, so Subaru was able to agree with the general argument presented by them. In that place, the only thing that had gone wrong had been the timing.

With that as the basis—that Subaru and the others had been killed as soon as they had left the inn was certainly strange according to the game rules Olbart had agreed to.

According to Al, if Olbart intended to kill them no matter what, it would have been better to murder them before they even left the inn, so that it would not be seen. Maybe he had a desire to kill them in a public place, but that would not make sense either.

Perhaps, though, he thought Subaru’s group would be in for a more painful surprise were he to kill them once they obtained some peace of mind due to his intent to not kill them.

Subaru: “If that was the case, then he’d make more of an appearance, right?”

If Olbart was aiming to disrupt Subaru and the others’ moods because of the badness of his character, would not he want to see their disappointment and despair with his own eyes?

Aside from that, he could not think of any reason for Olbart to kill everyone outside the inn.

Meaning—

Subaru: “What’s this supposed to mean…?”

Medium: “Hey, hey, Subaru-chin, what are you worried about? Are you worried about going outside?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Then, Medium peered into Subaru’s face, who had fallen silent in his haste to sort out the situation.

Right in front of him was a pair of round blue eyes, and Subaru involuntarily turned away with a “Whoa!”. As an immediate reaction to his own, Medium let out a “Wow!”, and quickly grabbed his hand.

And so—

Medium: “There there, Subaru-chin, calm down, calm down.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Medium then pulled his hand, and held Subaru’s head to her chest.

As she slowly stroked his back, he could feel the beating of her heart on his forehead and cheeks. Her heart beat in a steady rhythm, tenderly smashing Subaru’s frozen consciousness.

Medium: “When my head gets all messed up, I ask big bro to do this for me too~. Big bro also used to have people do this for him.”

Subaru: “…It calms me down, I can feel it.”

Medium: “Yeahyeah, good! So, we can stay like this and you can tell me what’s going on, ok? What’s Subaru-chin worried about outside?”

Medium’s voice, coming down from directly above him, did not rush Subaru to answer.

Subaru wished to be spoiled by Medium’s generosity and kindness that did not change even though she had been made younger. But he knew that the current time would not allow that.

So, as a trade-off, while having his head held by Medium like that, with difficulty he developed a thought.

Subaru: “It’s just that… I feel, like there’s a dangerous situation, outside the inn…”

Medium: “Is it dangerous out there?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. I think, someone’s trying, to kill us…”

Nodding her head, Medium listened to Subaru’s overly vague idea. To be honest, even he could notice that the statement was too unconvincing and unfounded.

Without being able to better word himself, he would never be able to convince Abel and Al, Medium regardless. Like, as an example—

Subaru: “Actually, if we go outside the in, that’s where we die—”

—At that moment, the world stood still.

Subaru: “…”

The clear, audible pulse of Medium faded into eternity, and her face and breathing, which were right in front of him, went out of reach.

Anything and everything, was faraway.

Color was lost, sound was lost, the flow of time was lost, the freedom to move was lost.

He could not move. He did not move. He was not moved. He was not allowed to move.

And then, with his voice, his breathing and even his eyes prohibited of freewill, something repulsive, terrifying, frightening slowly loomed towards the edge of Subaru’s consciousness.

Why, was he violating the Taboo; as if it were lamenting that, the sable shadow crept closer towards him.

Why, did he forget this; slender dark-pigmented fingers slid into his chest without effort.

Why, would he repeat this so many times; the voice of the Witch arrived, blotting out anything and everything.

???: “I love you.”

A voice that had not been heard in a very, very long time, dragged Subaru to hell.

His heart was gripped, and a tremendous pain tore Subaru’s motionless body to shreds. It tormented him. It violated him. Humiliated him. —Marked him, so he would never forget it again.

And then—

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Medium: “Subaru-chin?”

@ddukae

Suddenly, sound, color, the flow of time returned, and he felt the fierce flow of blood throughout his body.

His head remained pressed against Medium's chest, but what he picked up was not her tender heartbeat, but the resumption of his own blood flow and his own unusual, frightened, racing heartbeat.

The Witch's anger at having broken the Taboo was immense, to the point of losing his voice, to the point of breaking his understanding, to the point of violating his soul. Subaru cursed himself.

Why, had he put himself through so much pain and suffering, he wondered.

By no means, could he confide in others about Return by Death.

He could not even inadvertently speak of it in something like an analogy.

If he attempted to convey those intentions of his to anyone, that dark-colored evil hand—that of the Witch of Envy, would overcome any obstacle and reach for Subaru's heart.

Not to mention—

Subaru: "That was a close one…"

Muttering so, Subaru checked the presence of the one holding him, Medium, and that of the ones surrounding him, Abel, Al, Taritta and Louis.

The feeling of heat rising in the corner of his eyes was one of relief that they had not been harmed. —The confession of Return by Death carried alongside a risk utmost feared by Subaru.

That was, the possibility that the evil hand would lay harm on someone other than Subaru and that, unlike the threat Subaru faced, it would not dispel its power until it severed their thread of life.

If that possibility were not actualized, and the only one to suffer were Subaru, that would be the next best outcome.

Of course, it was undeniable that the optimal would have been if Subaru had not been subjected to any pain.

Subaru: “Medium, san… Thank you, I’m okay now.”

Medium: “Really? Like, you look even more pained than before…”

Subaru: “If I’m the only one feeling miserable, that’d seriously be the best thing in this situation.”

Raising his face towards her, Subaru was released from Medium’s embrace. Although Medium looked somewhat hesitant about it, she was unable to say anything more at Subaru’s insistence.

As much as her concern was appreciated, the situation did not allow for it. And without exaggeration, the fact remained that Medium had helped a lot.

Subaru: “I’m sorry if I sound weird and unsettling. But I really feel it’s… dangerous outside. So.”

Al: “Don’t go out there, you say? But then we wouldn’t play the game with Olbart. Of course, there’s always the option of not playing the game with him.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “In that case, we shall have no choice but to cancel our negotiations with Yorna Mishigure. This trip has been a long one, and you, the clown, and Medium have all shrunk as a result.”

Al: “Well, some people might desire the result of being rejuvenated for the rest of their lives, you know?”

He followed up Abel’s cold-hearted statement with an impotent tease; Al’s point, however, was squarely contradicted by Olbart’s statement.

Albeit the details were unknown, it seemed that the "infantilization" that had befallen Subaru and the others had some disadvantages. It was not just simple rejuvenation, it seemed.

In other words, this "infantilization" was, without a doubt, a bomb.

Al: "In any case, I can't stay small. Since we chose not to surround the old man and beat him, we gotta win the game of hide-and-seek."

Subaru: "I know. I'm not going to forfeit the game. It's just that it's really dangerous out there. So…"

Abel: "And so?"

Subaru: "Well, I want to be careful if we go out there. Also, I want you to believe me when I say very strange things."

Abel: "…"

Subaru appealed, looking straight ahead and up at the man standing before him.

He could see Abel's eyes narrowing through the oni mask at the off-hand remark. He could tell that Al was also subtly baffled, as well.

Certainly he was not persuasive, and he lacked the trial-and-error of trying to persuade them.

Taritta: "Nevertheless, Subaru does speak some truth. We've been caught in an enemy trap, and this is a place that should be considered enemy territory. So, there's no harm in raising our guard."

Medium: "Yesyes, I agree with Taritta-chan! Let's be careful! If I get any smaller, I won't be able to stop Louis-chan."

Louis: "Auu."

However, Taritta and Medium agreed with Subaru's opinion. It was unclear what Louis's intentions were as of her shout at the end, but it appeared that there had been no hostility towards Subaru there.

Taritta and the others who were in tune with him were not talking about anything difficult. They were just trying to increase their own awareness of the need to be careful, because there was no such thing as too much caution.

Subaru could not think of any reason for Abel's reluctance, aside from the fact Abel just didn't like him.

Subaru: "If you don't accept it, well then, I'll show you some proof."

Abel: "Proof, is it?"

Subaru: "Proof that my ideas shouldn't be ignored. I'll tell you where Olbart-san is. I'll tell you where he's hiding, where that "behind the eyelids" is."

Abel: "Do you believe that to be enough of a bargaining chip? One way or another, you must reveal it. It is you who shall suffer the disadvantage of concealing it."

Subaru: "Ugh…"

However, stubborn as he was, Abel refuted Subaru's opinion, which provoked a spontaneous groan from the latter, lost for words. Before he could say anything else, Al interrupted with "Now now",

Al: "Abel-chan, bro said he's gonna give us something to base a decision out of. In fact, what he said was so outta nowhere, that I can't get rid of the question mark over my head. But it's not the first time he's said something outrageous. Right?"

Abel: "…"

Al: "If you ain't listening to bro's opinion here, there's no point in bringing him along. And if you're still gonna say you'll disrespect him, well, then you're just gonna ruin my mood too."

Abel: "Ho."

As Al tried to cover Subaru with his back they changed positions, Al's voice, as he confronted Abel, dropped in tone.

Even though it was a deep voice at the level of a young boy, it was low enough to change the mood. Abel's gaze, looking down on him, also turned cold, causing Subaru to gulp.

Abel's relationship with Al was much more fragile than Subaru had expected, although he had not paid much attention to it so far.

Originally, Al had accompanied Subaru to the Demon City with the intention of going along with him. And, like Subaru, he was a human being belonging to the Kingdom of Lugunica, so he was not too concerned about Abel's return to the throne.

In blunt terms, it was the desire of Al's master, Priscilla.

Therefore, Al personally had no reason to support either Abel's cause or Abel himself.

Here it was manifesting itself as a distinct crack in their relationship.

Physically, Al had shrunk to a ten-year-old him, but could Abel really beat Al? Al's true capabilities in this state were unknown to him, and there was no benefit in letting this stare-off continue for long.

So—

Subaru: "Stop fighting! All right, I lost! I give up!"

Wrapping around his protector, Al, to put himself in front, Subaru raised his voice.

There was nothing good to be gained here in a disagreement among allies. It would be much better for Subaru to become the bad guy, than to continue such a useless struggle.

Besides, either way, he had been able to warn them.

Taritta, Medium, and even Al must have heard Subaru's plea. They would be very careful once they left the inn.

The problem would be, when death loomed in a way that made caution scarce.

At that point, Subaru would have to put his body on the line and do something about it.

Subaru: “We can’t be wasting time here! Everyone, ready up!”

Abel: “—. So, where do you believe “behind the eyelids” is?”

Subaru: “It’s…”

At any rate, Subaru insisted that they should avoid wasting time in this place. Abel finally responded positively to Subaru’s words.

The fact that this alone led to relief spoke volumes about the flawed people skills His Excellency the Emperor had.

Anyway, Subaru decided to answer with honesty.

Olbart’s first hiding place, that would be—

3

Olbart: “Next time, I’ll be sure to hide a lil’ better!”

Al: “Wait, old man…! Shit, he’s gone!”

Opening the room’s window, Olbart jumped out of the inn.

Al hurriedly followed the nimble-footed old man, but by the time he reached the window, the skilled shinobi had long since disappeared into the hustle and bustle of the city.

The speed with which he escaped was peerless, you could only be amazed by it or utterly frustrated.

Taritta: “Subaru, that man’s next hiding place…”

Medium: “Hmhm, Subaru-chin, did you understand? Do you know what it is?”

Everything has developed as it had before; with Subaru having found Olbart’s first hiding place without trouble, Taritta and

Medium both looked at him with expectation.

However, unfortunately, the second hiding place—the answer to "abyss with a great view", was unknown.

He was unable to give them a suitable answer, and Medium and the others slumped their shoulders, although they collected themselves again, following the same flow as last time.

Al: "So, how's it going, Abel-chan? Bro did a great job guessing right where that old man was, didn't he?"

Abel: "He deserves credit for his accomplishments."

Al: "…That's all?"

Abel: "As usual, we have no time to spare. We must uncover Olbart's whereabouts twice more. What else is there?"

Al: "…Is that so."

Perhaps because of the earlier conversation, Al, prodding Abel, drooped his shoulders due to the latter's answer.

Al's sentiment was nice, but that Abel would react like so was predictable. Subaru did not recall getting any comments on the results or anything in particular from Abel the last time around.

In fact, it was difficult to imagine him praising others, not just Subaru, honestly.

This time, it was just another act that did not betray Abel's character.

Taritta: ""With a great view" means it's probably considered a high place, no?"

Medium: ""But an abyss" is a hole, right? If it's a hole, wouldn't it be in the ground?"

Subaru: "I think you're both on the right track. To answer that question… Abel, I believe you wanted to go to a place with a lot of people?”

Abel: “…”

Taritta and Medium speculated on Olbart’s next hiding place.

To move that discussion forward, Subaru wanted to implement the plan from Abel that had not come to pass in the previous loop. As per his memories, Abel had originally planned to go to a crowded tavern.

As soon as they left the inn, a sudden “death” had befallen Subaru and the others amidst the street.

Putting it in another way, the moment in question was fast approaching.

Subaru: “Oi, Abel?”

Abel: “—. Your thoughts are not erroneous. A location with many people coming and going… It would also be preferable to be in a place with a lot of people.”

Al: “A place where people come and go…”

Subaru: “A place to drink… A tavern, was it?”

The conversation proceeded at a brisk pace, and Abel nodded in agreement once Subaru used that word.

And so, once they were all settled on leaving the inn and head for a tavern—

Abel: “We shall avoid the front, and leave using the inn’s backdoor.”

And it was Abel, of all people, to speak so.

Subaru let out a dumbfounded “What?” to that change in opinions. Al and Taritta raised their eyes, as well.

Medium: “Huh? Abel-chin, does that mean you believe what

Subaru-chin said?”

Abel: “There is nothing better than staying vigilant. Now that we have pinpointed Olbart’s whereabouts, there is room for consideration. What I am saying is nothing more, yes?”

Subaru: “…You, really are a piece of work.”

To those words laced with resentment from Subaru, Abel merely responded with a snort from his nose.

However, his haughty attitude aside, Abel’s decision was helpful to Subaru. Subaru was similarly hoping to somehow lead everyone to the backdoor.

Al: “I think, that means he has the intention to properly give you credit, bro.”

Subaru: “…Looks like it. Rather, that’s the way it’s always been.”

Somehow, he also doubted Abel’s attitude of “definite punishment or reward”.

If he could understand that aspect, it should help him to get a rough idea of a way to deal with Abel; Subaru himself was already supposed to start grasping him this way.

It was as if he were learning how to deal with Abel all over again.

Al: “But I’m still stunned that you were able to guess the old man’s location. I dunno how you did it. —It’s like, you read a strategy guide for this.”

Subaru: “A strategy guide, that sounds so damn nostalgic. Well, it’d be useful to have something like that, but that’s not remotely it. That was just experience coming into play.”

Al: “Experience? Of playing hide-and-seek?”

Subaru: “It’s similar, you know. Like before… Like before?”

As he responded to his achievement of finding Olbart being probed, Subaru's thoughts ground to a halt.

One of the reasons as to why Subaru had been able to tell that Olbart was hiding in the starting room, was because that was a typical development for the kind of behavior a person like him would have.

Still, someone must have done something similar to that predictable event before Olbart.

So, Subaru should remember it clearly.

Al: "Forgetting things? Forgetfulness's something old people do. Funny that, contrary to what you'd expect, although you're young now, you're forgetful too, bro."

Subaru: "Forgetful…"

Al: "That's it, isn't it? If it was someone else, it was someone close to you, bro. It shouldn't be the silver-haired girl, maybe the loli that was always with you…"

Subaru: "—Beatrice!"

Al: "Whoa."

Al's shoulders trembled as Subaru looked up and gave a powerful shout.

But Subaru had no time to deal with Al's surprise. Of course not.

Subaru: "Stop joking…"

No matter what he made of it, it was strange.

It was Beatrice, Beatrice. Subaru's partner, a Great Spirit both pretty and sweet. The clue to finding Olbart had been the first prank she played on Subaru.

If there was anyone that could take credit for that, it should be earned by Subaru and Beatrice.

And yet, it was impossible that he'd just let that slip away.

It was something that shouldn't have happened.

Taritta: "Subaru, Al, please come here!"

Suddenly, Taritta's sharp voice called out to the stunned Subaru.

Looking up at her in reflex, he saw Taritta at the back door of the inn, peeking out the crack of the slightly-open door to the outside. Her face, seen from the side, had a look of intense alarm.

The reason for this alertness was probably nothing other than the death that had struck Subaru and the others—

Taritta: "—We're already surrounded. There's probably close to a hundred of them."

Chapter 45: Konkon

1

—Tiger at the front gate, wolf at the back gate.

Strictly speaking, his situation was different, but it was a saying that crossed Subaru's mind.

The fact that it had taken him a while to come up with even that saying really showed the difficulty of Subaru's circumstances.

Al: "Nearly a hundred enemies?!"

Looking out the back door of the inn, Al's voice cracked as Taritta told them the startling news.

In response, Taritta nodded quietly saying,

Taritta: "Yes. We're surrounded. It seems more likely out of caution than hostility…"

Abel: "Sure, merely one or two people would be one thing, but it is difficult to ignore when they number close to a hundred."

Keeping his voice low, Abel spoke to Taritta, who shut the back door.

As Taritta lowered her chin at his words, Abel's gaze turned from her towards Subaru. His black eyes narrowed through the oni mask, his sharp glare pinning down Subaru's heart.

And then—

Abel: "—You have problems aside from being surrounded, do you not?"

Subaru: "—Ah."

Abel: “Against all reason, your limbs have shrunk. Anything could happen.”

Mixed with a faint sigh, Abel spelled that out, having guessed the abnormality with Subaru.

Because of his words, Subaru felt his cheeks become warm with shame. From the knowledge that Abel had been able to notice his disorder, and also from the awareness that he was holding them back.

He would rather even pretend that there was nothing wrong with himself.

However—

Medium: “Subaru-chin, are you okay?”

The voice of Medium, which had comforted the troubled Subaru just before, made him stop.

Being stubborn in this situation would not solve anything. In addition, not only Subaru, but also his friends, Medium included, would suffer the consequences of his stubbornness.

So—

Subaru: “Actually, I feel like… My memory’s getting weird. I’m having trouble remembering things that I should remember, and that’s probably not good.”

Al: “…That’s why you were so strange a moment ago, huh?”

Subaru swallowed his frustration and frankly spoke to Al, who was struck speechless.

Al, too, must have felt there was something strange about Subaru’s earlier behavior. Talking about the details made him feel uneasy as well.

What had happened to Subaru was no stranger to Al.

Abel: "—. Anything specific?"

Subaru: "…I couldn't remember the name of an important family member. No! Uh, it's just that it took a while before I could recall it."

Al: "Bro, this ain't the time to pretend you're fine…"

Subaru: "I'm not trying to pretend I'm…"

Subaru was about to reflexively answer, "Fine", but then he stopped himself, wondering whether he was or not.

He really didn't want to say it so plainly that he'd forgotten the name of someone so important. Subaru remembered Beatrice, remembered Emilia, and remembered Rem.

He also remembered the friends he had left behind at the mansion.

Subaru: "So it's not like I was trying to…"

Abel: "Tell me exactly what your condition is."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Abel: "Have you forgotten? Or does it take you a long time to remember? Which is it?"

Upon being asked this question, Subaru clammed up.

Abel's question, as he neared one step closer to him, was firm, and had a sharpness that did not allow for lies.

There was a numbing sensation in his brain, and he was unable to pull his consciousness away from the man in front of him. As Subaru fell silent, Abel asked again, "Which is it?",

Abel: "You cannot see what is occurring in your environs, and now you cannot see what is occurring inside your own head."

Subaru: "—N-no! It's not that I forgot, it's just that I'm having trouble remembering! That's right, just because I can't recall quickly, doesn't mean I forgot!"

Abel: "…It takes a while to remember, huh?"

Subaru quickly responded to the cruel inquiry, and Abel quietly accepted his answer.

It was an explanation that Subaru himself didn't know what to make of. So it was surprising that Abel did not outright dismiss it.

In fact, annoyed with Abel's behavior, Al intervened with "Hey",

Al: "What's the difference? Why's that a big deal to you in this situation?"

Abel: "There is a big difference. There is a world of difference between forgetting and having difficulty remembering."

Al: "Huh?"

Al grumbled in displeasure, but Abel did not answer any further.

He looked back at Taritta listening to what was happening outside, leaving the bewildered Subaru and Al to their own thoughts.

Abel: "What is happening outside? They have yet to move, correct?"

Taritta: "For now, they're just concealing their breath. Even though their encirclement should be complete by now."

Abel: "Then that signifies we have not met their requirements."

Taritta: "Requirements, is it…?"

Abel stroked his chin thoughtfully, without responding to Taritta's puzzled look, and then looked back at Subaru once more.

Unable to keep up with the speed of his thoughts, Subaru flinched as Abel turned back. Closing the distance between him and the one taken aback, Abel put his face close to Subaru's and asked,

Abel: "—What do we do for those outside to attack us?"

Subaru: “Eh…”

Abel: “Answer. The conditions for those outside to attack us are…”

Subaru: “Th-That, even if you ask me…”

The question was repeated through the oni mask, and Subaru caught his breath, tensing up.

“I don’t understand it, even if you ask me”, he thought. At any rate, even if he remembered what had happened before he Returned by Death, it had been such a sudden and unexpected death that he could not comprehend it at all.

If only he had more information, he’d be able to give Abel a better idea of what to do—.

Abel: “Answer.”

However, Abel trampled on Subaru’s hesitation and confusion, directing him a question. With Subaru unable to answer, the man donning the oni mask grabbed him by his young shoulders in a fit of rage.

Abel: “Answer! Natsuki Subaru!”

Subaru: “I-I don’t know! A-as soon as we go outside, they’ll attack us! That’s all I know!”

Replying upon being threatened, Subaru opened his eyes and clutched his chest.

Once again, he impulsively revealed the information he had obtained through Return by Death. He was afraid that the penalty for violating the Taboo might come back to haunt him. But nothing happened.

Neither the stoppage of time around him, nor the evil hand that made him pay for his stupidity, manifested.

But instead—

Louis: “Uu!”

Having gotten between Subaru and Abel with a snarl, Louis protected Subaru with her back towards him as she glared directly at Abel, who had adopted a hardline attitude.

Abel’s arm was forced away from Subaru’s shoulder by Louis, sending her a disapproving look. However, Louis was soon joined by a reassuring ally, Medium.

Medium: “Abel-chin! Don’t bully Subaru-chin! I’ll tell big bro!”

Abel: “…What should I do, being told that? In the first place, he just gave me necessary information. —Going outside is the trigger, huh?”

Abel shrugged his shoulders at Medium’s reproachful glare, without even feeling remorse.

His thoughtful expression caused Medium to say, “Geez!” as she put her hands on her hips, directing her eyes at Subaru rather than Abel.

Medium: “Subaru-chin, are you okay? Abel was scary, wasn’t he~?”

Subaru: “It’s not like I was scared. I was just a little surprised… Yeah.”

Medium: “Really? I hope so. You’re a strong boy, a strong boy, Subaru-chin.”

As she said this, Medium’s hand stroked Subaru’s black hair with gentleness.

The kindness of her touch, and the fact that he was being praised as a “strong boy”, made him feel ashamed once again. But in fact, he couldn’t deny that his racing heart was slowly calming down.

He thought he really was losing it.

The relief he felt at being comforted by Medium aside, more troubling were the unspeakable feelings of reluctance and fear he felt towards Abel.

He couldn't resist Abel's will, and so, he kept getting pushed around.

It was like—

Al: "It's like a child and an adult. And I'm not just talking about looks."

Subaru: "Ugh…"

Al's voice came from beside the downcast face of Subaru, as the latter gripped his chest.

Subaru's face tightened as he felt he was being judged by Al, whose tone of voice was harsh, still reeling from his earlier conversation with Abel.

Because of his words, "a child and an adult", Subaru's doubts were cleared up.

Yes, Al was right, that was the appropriate way to describe it. In fact, the current interaction between Subaru and Abel was similar to the power dynamic between a child and an adult.

Not just in appearances, but also in mind, as if the latter were being pulled along by the former.

Abel: "—Listen. I think I know who we are up against."

Taritta: "D-do you really…?!"

While Subaru was experiencing an unfathomable sense of dread, Abel spoke in a low voice.

Abel's words made Taritta's eyes widen in surprise. It was not only her who was surprised, but also everyone else present. To be more precise, everyone except Louis, who was not following the conversation.

At any rate, Abel got everyone's attention and nodded with a "Yes".

Abel: “From the conditions presented by Olbart, and the hundred enemies identified by Taritta… If we exclude those possibilities that cannot be, we can, naturally, narrow down the options.”

Al: “So, what do you think, oh clever Abel-chan? Who’s after us?”

Abel: “—It is Chaosflame”

Al & Medium: “Chaosflame… this city?”

In response to Al and Medium’s question, Abel nodded grimly.

He then looked over at Subaru and the rest, whose expressions showed that they still hadn’t put his answer together, and continued,

Abel: “Chaosflame… That is, the residents of the Demon City. Those standing outside poised to attack, I am sure they are the very people residing in this city.”

2

—Abel made a clear statement that the inhabitants of Chaosflame were the enemy.

Subaru: “…”

At Abel’s declaration, Subaru opened and closed his mouth in disbelief. —No, not only Subaru, but Al and the others had their own reactions of astonishment as well.

That would be natural. Considering they had suddenly been told that the people of the city had turned against them.

Al: “Are you sure, that can’t be right. What gave you that idea?”

Abel: “It is quite the natural thought. In the first place, there are only a limited number of people capable of mobilizing a force of a hundred men to surround the inn. At this point, there are only two choices… The Emperor’s group, and the Demon City’s forces. However, Chisha is disguised as me. Furthermore, he does not possess the leeway to do what I would not do.”

Al: “So that others won’t find out he’s not Abel-chan. So, what wouldn’t you do?”

Abel: “Brazenly sending my forces to the Demon City.”

Subaru nearly nodded at the conclusive statement, but he couldn’t decide if it was definitive information or not. If a hundred soldiers accompanied the king, would that be too many or too few?

He did not believe it strange at all, if that many were present.

Medium: “I dunno much about it, but how many soldiers are there at Abel-chin’s castle?”

Abel: “Are you inquiring about the number of troops at the Imperial Capital? If so…”

When Medium raised her hand to ask a question, Abel glanced at Subaru. He was unable to understand the meaning of his gaze; Abel touched the forehead of his oni mask, and after a moment of contemplation said,

Abel: “Some insignificant thirty-thousand. But this talk is not about the forces at his command. Whether or not the Emperor would allow them to accompany him, is the topic of this conversation. And —”

Taritta: “The real Emperor would never do such a thing.”

Abel: “That is what I meant.”

Abel nodded his head. He denied the possibility of the false Emperor making such a careless decision.

Subaru felt that there was a possibility that the other party could have been careless, but he kept his mouth shut. He would not be listened to, even if he had said it.

In any case—

Abel: “The Emperor declared it forbidden to touch us, and Olbart displayed an approach that adhered to that order. With that case as valid, dispatching a force at us would make no sense.”

Al: “…What about a theory like, he didn’t do it himself, or something like that?”

Abel: “Now, I shall ask you, do you believe I would ever allow that line of reasoning?”

Taritta: “I don’t think so.”

Synchronized with Taritta’s answer, Al similarly denied it with a shake of his masked head.

As long as the fake Emperor was disguised as Abel, his lines of thought must be the same as Abel’s as an Emperor. In other words, what Abel would not allow, the fake Emperor could not allow.

And so, the false Emperor would have to continue a pretense of being very narrow-minded.

Abel: “Kafma Irulux would not permit it, even if an attempt was made to reason with him. He is inflexible. And therefore, he is a valuable asset, but I am certain General Second-Class Kafma would not condone this crooked interpretation.”

Subaru: “Kafma… Would that be the straight-laced guy we saw yesterday?”

Abel: “He might be meek towards the Emperor, but he shall opine without hesitation even against a General First-Class. Even Olbart’s cunning shall be unable to bend Kafma’s principles.”

Al: “That lil’ bro’s got that much power?”

Abel: “At one time, he was approached for a promotion to Divine General. For a variety of reasons, he passed up on it.”

As a response to Abel’s answer, Al let out a frustrated “Ugh”.

If this was true, then two Divine General-class people had been present in the Castle yesterday—Nay, three, since the fake Emperor was one of them.

That may indeed be more reliable manpower compared to bringing in unskilled troops.

Subaru: "But if the false Emperor's not the enemy, then …"

Naturally, the conjecture that Abel had proposed became more and more realistic.

In other words, the inhabitants of the Demon City of Chaosflame were the ones waiting for them outside, and the leader who had made them move was—

Medium: "Are you saying Yorna-chan's making them attack us?"

Al: "…It's hard to think of anyone else, isn't it? There's no one else who knows about us and has a good reason to target us to begin with."

Subaru: "—. What does Abel think?"

Someone within the Demon City of Chaosflame who could move its inhabitants as pawns; naturally, the first person that came to mind was Yorna Mishigure, the ruler of the Demon City.

However, was it possible that she, being as unpredictable as Olbart—No, perhaps even harder to predict, was the mastermind behind the whole situation?

In response to Subaru's suspicion, Abel tapped his finger on the forehead of his oni mask,

Abel: "That is asinine."

And his reply was brief.

Subaru: "Asinine? Errr, does that mean you don't agree? Why?"

Abel: "It would be pride to believe that if you ask, you shall receive an answer for everything. —The missive."

Subaru: "The missive?"

Abel replied to Subaru's question while adding an unnecessary sentence.

The missive was the letter they had delivered to Yorna the previous day. Delivering that letter had been the purpose of the previous day's visit and was bound to be the reason for the current day's summons.

Abel had not told them in detail what he had written in the letter, though.

Abel: "In the missive, I wrote that I would reward her with that which she desires."

Al: "The thing that lady wants… In other words, the position of Empress?"

Medium: "To be your wife?"

Once Abel mentioned the contents of the missive, Al and Medium spoke in quick succession.

As they had been told the prior day, Yorna wanted the Emperor. Not necessarily Abel, but the Emperor's status.

So if it were true that he had written that he would give Yorna what she coveted, it should be like that.

Subaru: "How the heck did you decide to convey something like that in a letter?"

Abel: "Do not trivialize the problem using your own standards. Whatever it is, she shall achieve what she desires. Hence why we were summoned to the Castle. It is illogical for her to send her forces against us in spite of that."

Al: "Ahhh~, what if she hates being Abel-chan's wife so much that she wants to kill him…"

Or perhaps, the letter was so rude that she wanted to kill them.

Subaru thought that there was a very good chance that he would be treating the person he was going to marry in a pompous manner, because he behaved that way in person.

But Abel scoffed at the idea Subaru and the rest had.

Abel: “What she must do, she shall. Emotions are secondary. She is not like Priscilla.”

Al: “I did think that lady was just as troublesome as the Princess!”

Subaru agreed to that. Priscilla and Yorna were both scary.

He was afraid of Priscilla and Yorna both, but he felt that Abel had a point because it had been stated with such conviction. —Also, he recalled his memories of Yorna from the previous day.

Yorna: “As the Lord of the Demon City, I won’t speak lies in front of my attendants.”

So Yorna had said, her words spoken with a bewitching smile regarding the matter of the letter that Subaru and the others had present her with, a promise that she would not throw it away without reading it.

Subaru and the others fell into the stables afterwards, and then, Tanza, Yorna’s attendant, had declared that Yorna had recognized Subaru and his companions.

At the very least, Subaru did not take her as a woman who would change her previous statements at will.

He did not, so he wished to believe what Abel had said.

Taritta: “In any case, those outside should be getting impatient right about now. What should we do?”

Keeping an eye on the outside, Taritta questioned them about their next move.

Abel had spoken of a trigger for an assault—as in, the conditions that would make the other party attack them, but, so far, they could only guess that it would be them going outside. But with the other side prepared to attack them, they did not know when they may force their way in.

In addition, Subaru and the rest were in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek.

Subaru: “Even if we know the people outside are coming in, we can’t just not leave, right?”

Al: “Well, unless the old man outplayed our outplaying, and hid in the inn for a second time… Just in case, should we take another look at the room?”

Abel: “I would have considered that if we did not have the clue, “an abyss with a great view”.”

So Abel dismissed him, and Al hung his head in disappointment.

In fact, Subaru’d had the thought that Olbart would be hiding in the first room once more as well. But no matter how much he thought about it, he could not connect it to “an abyss with a great view”. So he had not touched on it.

In the meantime, their group’s course of action was being finalized.

Of course, there was no other choice for them but to make their debut. The question was, what kind of strategy should they use to make that option work?

Abel: “—Taritta, draw their attention.”

Subaru: “Abel?!”

A moment later, Abel gave what seemed to be the cruelest instruction of all.

Hearing this, Taritta’s cheeks hardened, and Subaru criticized Abel in a shrill voice. But Abel ignored Subaru’s voice, keeping his gaze on Taritta, and continued,

Abel: “Make a great ruckus and capture the attention of those outside. Meanwhile, we shall sneak out.”

Al: “Abel-chan, a better, understandable plan would be…”

Abel: “There is none. This is the best we can muster with the cards in our possession. If you had not been shrunken, we might have been able to find another method.”

Subaru: “That’s going too far!”

Louis: “Auu!”

Abel dismissed Al’s concern for Taritta’s safety.

Along with Subaru snapping at him for his cruelty, Louis voiced her righteous indignation as well. However, as a reaction to Subaru and the others—

Taritta: “Yes, understood. I’ll draw the attention of the group outside.”

Subaru: “Taritta-san! No matter how you look at it…”

Shaking her head sideways, Taritta was prepared to accept Abel’s reckless instructions.

Subaru wanted to find a better method that could ensure her safety, somehow. However, the only two things that came to Subaru’s mind at this moment were caution and anxiety towards the very dangerous enemies outside.

Abel: “Taritta, hand me that package. We shall need it later.”

Taritta: “Here it is. Once I have their full attention, please take advantage of the opportunity and escape. However, I don’t think I’ll have a chance to give you a signal…”

Abel: “I shall allow Medium to decide that.”

Medium: “Eh, me?”

Abel received the package Taritta was carrying, his slender form shouldering the bag. As Abel continued with the preparations, Medium, having been designated by name, widened her eyes.

Turning to face her, Abel nodded, together with a “Yes”,

Abel: “Shrunken or not, you still have eyes to watch for an opportunity. Out of everyone, you are the most competent.”

Medium: “Hmmm, gotcha. I’ll watch carefully! So be careful, Taritta-chan.”

Taritta: “Yes.”

The discussion was moving along at breakneck pace, leaving Subaru behind.

Putting Abel aside, Taritta and Medium had nerves of steel. Especially Taritta, who was being entrusted with the most dangerous role.

Taritta: “So, I’m off.”

Clutching her bow, Taritta put her hand on the back door. Facing her back, Subaru couldn’t help but shout, “Taritta-san!”,

Subaru: “Um, d-don’t die…!”

Taritta: “…”

He was disgusted with himself for saying something so obvious and discouraging. If he was unable to offer any useful opinions or winning strategies, he should at least say something that would boost Taritta’s morale.

And yet, all he could offer was a quavering plea. —But Taritta’s eyes relaxed slightly and,

Taritta: “Yeah, I’ll see you guys later.”

With a thin smile, Taritta’s body flew outward like a bullet.

Just before that, Abel hurled his final words towards Taritta’s back, as she headed for enemy territory.

Those were—

Abel: “Taritta, there is no need to hold back. Spare no quarter. —No matter who they are, no person in this city is easy to kill.”

It was ominous advice, which could not be called either encouragement nor a winning strategy.

3

—The moment she stepped outside, hostility swelled mightily quickly.

Tasting it on her brown skin, Taritta’s narrowed eyes scanned left to right over the entire area in one go.

For the People of Shudraq, who lived as hunters in the jungle, understanding the terrain and situation at a moment’s notice was an essential skill. Taritta was no exception.

—No, Mizelda, her sister, had entrusted Taritta with the role of chieftain.

Therefore, Taritta must excel in these skills, more so than her fellow Shudraqians. And indeed, she did.

Taritta: “—Ah.”

With a light gasp born at the back of her throat, Taritta assessed the number of hostile forces directed at her.

Around her, there were about a hundred people with the will to fight, but less than twenty of them had seized their hostility onto Taritta, who had rushed out the back door.

In addition, the number of those able to move quickly among them would be even smaller.

First thing would be to get the feet of those who turned around to—

Taritta: “—No good.”

Her mind flashed back to the advice given by Abel just before she had taken off, to spare no quarter.

Abel was a prideful, good-looking man. He met all the requirements of Mizelda’s taste in men, and Taritta was not good at dealing with him. She was weak to pressure and went along with the flow without resistance. Plus, when confronted with someone with a nature like that of her sister or Abel, she would be rendered unable to express any of her opinions.

That was why Taritta preferred someone who would listen to her. Particularly because she would take time to settle on an opinion, and would reel at being rushed.

From that perspective, Flop, who had stayed behind at Guaral, was quite—

Taritta: “—Hk, what am I thinking?”

Blushing red with momentary shame, Taritta drew her bowstring as if to vent.

A moment later, arrows were released from the bow—three, at the same time. Taritta’s archery skills manifested, with each arrow aiming at a different prey.

One flew straight and two flew in a curve, as they cut the wind along the alleyway outside the inn, and pierced their targets.

Three men who had turned to face the rushing Taritta and made an attempt to step towards her, were shot in the neck and chest respectively, instantly robbing them of their fighting power.

Taritta: “Hunting is comfortable.”

It suited Taritta, because she was not required to talk to anyone.

The prey did not expect Taritta to speak, nor did she want to communicate with them. The only dialogue that occurred was that of her arrows and their meeting the enemy.

Even so, the result dubbed life and death need not be produced at the end of a conversation.

???: “—ROHH!”

With a roar, several shadows rushed into the alley, replacing the men who had been shot through.

The first thing that entered Taritta's field of vision was an oxman; his body so massive that, to gaze upon it all, she had to look up. A man with short, thick horns at the top of his head was ferociously using his frame to charge, all while unleashing a battle cry.

A direct frontal hit would pulverize every bone in Taritta's thin body.

However, there was no way to escape to her back, or to her side. Even if she jumped upwards, there was a good chance she would be grabbed by the legs.

With that in mind, Taritta lowered herself and darted forward.

Oxman: "Wha—?!"

Perhaps because those actions were unexpected, the oxman's eyes widened and his throat tightened. Taritta extended her legs towards the oxman's face and used it as a foothold, punting him in the snout.

Bending her knees to stifle her momentum, Taritta's body revolved with ease in midair, using the face of the oxman, spewing blood from his nose, as a foothold. Then performing a half-turn, she adopted an upside-down position while airborne.

Taritta: "…"

As she spun around, she secured a three-sixty-degree view, including the area behind her, which she had not been able to see previously. She was able to assess the shadows of buildings, the rooftops and scaffolding present in the city, and even those attempting to attack her from these positions.

Taritta: "These won't be enough arrows."

As she said this, she pulled out the arrows from the quiver on her back, put them on her bow at a dizzying pace, and repeatedly fired three shots in rapid succession to reduce her enemies.

The number of arrows was disproportionate to the number of enemies she had assessed. With no choice but to cut down the enemies with the highest priority, Taritta used her intuition of many years to target the ones with the most ability.

Ignoring the uncomfortable feeling she felt at the sight of those who entered her field of vision—

???: “Woaaa—?!”

The raging arrows glided through the air akin to a tempest, and those pierced through were blown away by the impact.

Following Abel’s advice, Taritta attacked about thirty enemies with merciless attacks to the vitals, aiming for everyone’s chest and neck, and the eyes and mouth of those she could, hoping to inflict a fatal wound.

After this first engagement, however, she had already run out of arrows.

The only thing she could do now, to retrieve the arrows that had been utilized, and to continue serving as a decoy as long as possible —

Taritta: “…Well this is, a bit unexpected.”

As she moved to retrieve the arrow from the downed enemy, Taritta stopped in her tracks.

Taritta, as a warrior of Shudraq, had killed countless beasts in her life. Even if the beast’s shape was slightly different, the creature’s feedback to having its vital point pierced could be witnessed at the moment of her bow firing.

And based on that experience, she was confident that she had sowed the lives of those she had shot through.

???: “Guhgu…”

And yet, none of those who groaned and rose to their feet had lost their lives.

Even if they had not flat-out perished, they should have been on the verge of death. However, those that stood up stared at Taritta with eyes that were not bereft of the will to fight, let alone on the verge of death.

In those eyes that gazed at Taritta, a change occurred.

Taritta: “What, in the world is that?”

Taritta frowned and questioned the oxman as he stood up. The man did not reply, but the change that had occurred to him was so alien that it seized her attention.

—A scarlet flame was covering his right eye.

Oxman: “…”

Those whose pupils were ablaze were not restricted to just the oxman.

All those who had fallen after being shot by Taritta regarded her with a scarlet flame in one of their eyes, be it the right or the left one.

Those whose eyes were burning were not restricted to just those who had been shot by Taritta.

Those who had come to the scene later to surround Taritta had scarlet flames in their eyes as well. Flickering flames that burnt, all the while scattering sparks.

And amazingly, flames similar to those burned away and healed the wounds of the oxman.

The kicked and smashed nose of the oxman, and the arrow wounds of those who had been shot through, had all been undone, completely.

Taritta: “…A few words were not enough, Abel.”

The scene and Abel’s earlier advice came together, and Taritta let out a sigh.

Although she did not know for certain, her belief was that Abel had thoroughly anticipated this situation. If that were the case, he should have endeavored to make his words more understandable.

And beyond that, her head pounded with the desire for purely convenient thoughts, as she was not good with someone who hurried the conversation forward.

However—

Taritta: “My role is to be a decoy, not to annihilate the enemy.”

Hence, in terms of focusing on her role, it was safe to say that it was working well.

And then—

Taritta: “…They’re breaking the arrows, it seems.”

The arrows that had shot through them were breaking one after another, as they slipped out of their bodies. The arrowheads that she was supposed to retrieve were lost, and Taritta became unable to use her archery skills.

However, it would be a mistake to think that this would leave her with no options.

Taritta: “Both daggers and throwing stones can be used for hunting.”

As she said this, Taritta dropped low and held the dagger she had tucked inside her formal dress and the bow she had lost the arrows to shoot with together.

Taritta’s battle to fulfil her role had only now begun.

4

Subaru: “—Hk, Taritta-san, awesome…!”

Subaru’s voice trembled as he ran, at the sight of the people whose eyes and wounds were ablaze.

Taritta had been sent out for a fierce struggle, but her skill was far beyond Subaru’s imagination.

In all honesty, it was safe to say that Subaru had underestimated Taritta’s ability to be an effective member of Shudraq, given her reserved and quiet nature as a late bloomer.

Just before, he had also seen how helpless she had been against Olbart.

Of course, because Mizelda had nominated her to be the next Chieftain, he knew there would be no gap in ability between her and Kuna or Holly.

But the precision of her aim, the speed of her shots, and the way she was able to take on an overwhelmingly large number of people made it seem like she could be as good as, or even better than, Mizelda.

Subaru: “But still…”

Even evaluating Taritta to have a high level of skill, it was hard to shake off the strangeness of those attackers.

In the first place, their appearance was strange. After all, none of them wore armor, nor did they have any sort of weapons. They were unarmed.

From the looks of it, they were pretty much the same as many of the people they had been passing by since the previous day, in Chaosflame—they were just another citizen of the Demon City with an appearance that stood out somewhat.

These citizens had surrounded Subaru and the others, and after being on the other end of Taritta's transcendental bow-and-arrow technique, they stood up without a hitch despite being mortally wounded.

From a distance, it could be seen that the attackers included women and children, and Taritta must have been disturbed that they were not actually a group of strong warriors.

She had done a great job of attracting attention, and at Medium's signal, Subaru and the others ran out into the city. But should they really escape, and not back up Taritta?

Unsure of what was the right thing to do, those options kept spinning around and around in Subaru's mind.

Next to Subaru, Abel, carrying a bag on his back, witnessed the same scene.

Abel: "So indeed, the entire city is covered by the Soul Marriage Technique."

Al: "Konkon…? Oioi, Abel-chan, the hell's that?"

Abel: "It is the mechanism of the collective that faces Taritta without backing down."

Al, who was running in a daze, asked a question to which Abel gave an inadequate answer.

Although Subaru couldn't quite wrap his head around what was going on, one thing was clear. —Abel had a clue about the relationship between those burning eyes and the attackers.

Subaru: "Abel! Don't keep secrets from us! Tell us everything!"

Abel: "—. It is one of the supposedly lost secret arts spoken of in ancient literature. It is called the Soul Marriage Technique; by sharing a part of one's soul with others, value is added to it."

Al: "I don't get it! The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

Abel: “To put it another way, souls united via the Soul Marriage Technique share a fraction of their power. And in this city, there is merely a single wielder of the Soul Marriage Technique—”

Urged on from both sides by Subaru and Al, Abel gave them the most abridged answer possible.

Despite that, the content was still difficult for Subaru to understand, but, somehow, he managed to pick up its nuance.

In other words—

Abel: “—It means that everything that composes this Demon City shares the power of Yorna Mishigure. Therefore, this city is a land that shall not fall easily, no matter how many armies you dispatch against it.”

Chapter 46:
Childish Recklessness

Subaru: “The people of this city share the same power as Yorna…?!”

While running with effort along the alley, Subaru’s eyes widened at the words Abel spoke.

Subaru had no idea of the power of the foxwoman he had met atop the castle tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle, a woman who seemed to have an unfathomable presence—an existence that could also be called the Empress that ruled over the Demon City.

However, since she had been chosen as one of the Nine Divine Generals, and had been allowed to remain alive, maintaining her life, despite rebelling against the Emperor many times, she was definitely very strong.

Yorna was very strong, and to think that the whole city shared the same amount of power as her.

Subaru: “Just imagining it is scary enough! Soul Marriage Technique, you’ve got to be…”

Abel: “You think I am merely lining up words without pondering them over? Then, how do you explain the events that caused your limbs to shrink? The Kingdom and the Empire are different in the foundation of their techniques and the studies they have cultivated. Of course, there are certain phenomena you cannot possibly imagine. There is no end to the number of techniques that have been lost.”

Subaru: “Even if you say that…”

After all those difficult words, Subaru bit the inside of his cheek in frustration and turned his head.

His feet almost got tangled, nearly causing him to fall, but he held it together so that he wouldn't be left behind by his friends. Because of their shrunken bodies, none of them, Subaru, Al, or Medium, had shoes that fit their feet perfectly. So their feet were wrapped in cloth, like improvised tabi.

Were it to come untied, making him fall, they would have to stop. That'd be no good.

Even if Subaru could not keep up with the conversation, at least his body should keep up.

Abel: "Albeit, while I was thinking of it as a possibility, I thought it was an unlikely one."

Al: "…So you're saying that you didn't know that that lady was a user of the Soul Marriage Technique as well?"

Abel: "Even now, I am doubting if that truly is the case. It is that mad of a deed."

Abel replied, lightly breathing as he ran, his oni mask's gaze directed to their front. Al growled at those words, and Medium's face turned to Abel.

Even though she was smaller, Medium seemed to be the one with the most physical energy. Subaru was still doing fine, but he would probably run out of breath before too long. It was difficult for him to keep running.

Abel: "—Halt. It appears we have managed to shake off the ones around the inn for the moment."

Abel suddenly brought everyone to a stop, though he probably didn't do that, because he cared about their well-being.

With the exit of the alleyway in sight, the five of them ducked behind a collection of scrap wood and caught their breath while keeping a watchful eye on the street.

Medium: "I wonder if Taritta-chan's okay. Although she's a lot more mobile than I thought she'd be."

Subaru: “Eh? Y-yeah she was like jumping and bouncing up and down and shooting her bow and arrows going like “pewpew”…”

Al: “Bro, are you doing that on purpose? Or…”

Subaru: “Doing what on purpose?”

He tilted his head and frowned at Al’s question.

Had he said something strange, he wondered. He was just praising Taritta’s efforts in his own way, to match Medium’s admiration.

In response, Al shook his head and replied with “Never mind” as if it were nothing, and then turned his head towards Abel. And then,

Al: “What did you mean earlier, by calling it “that mad of a deed”?”

Abel: “—. As I stated. The Soul Marriage Technique involves ceding a portion of one’s soul to another. By soul, that would be the very root of one’s self, the Od.”

Al: “Ceding… Od.”

Ruminating on the words, Al’s voice trembled at the realization.

Od was, as Abel had stated, the root of one’s being—the center of not only the body, but also the more spiritual part of the being, the origin of one’s Mana.

In this world, it was often treated as it was the same as the soul. So, perhaps the Soul Marriage Technique could also be called the Od Marriage Technique. Although Subaru wasn’t too sure of this.

Subaru: “But why do souls become stronger when they’re joined together?”

Abel: “A similar example would be the relationship between a Spiritual Arts User and a Spirit. By entering into a contractual relationship, User and Spirit connect to each other’s essence. Thus, those connected can be said to draw power from one another. Physical separation has nothing to do with it. This ought to ring a bell.”

Subaru: “A connection in which they draw power from each other, yeah, I get it, but…”

As he heard Abel speaking of Spiritual Arts Users, Subaru’s chest tightened.

Subaru didn’t have power strong enough to take pride in, but he was still a Spiritual Arts User. He had contracted with a pretty girl in a cute dress—Beatrice, and was able to do many things with her help. Though a bit limited.

And then, there was Emilia too, yes, she was a Spiritual Arts User as well. Although he hadn’t seen that little cat for a while.

Medium: “What’s the matter, Subaru-chin?”

Subaru: “Oh, uhh, it’s just… making promises with Spirits is an awful lot of work, and doing something like that, and with a lot of people! That’s a bit…”

Medium: “Hmhm.”

Subaru: “I-I was just thinking of how difficult it must be.”

Subaru was able to honestly convey his thoughts to Medium, who, as a good listener, did not rush him, hearing what he said with care.

Respecting a Contract with a Spirit was very important, and it was difficult to do the same with many people. At least, Subaru could not do that with anyone but Beatrice.

It wasn’t only down to the fact Beatrice was a girl he held such a promise with from the get-go, but also, even if that was not the case, he wouldn’t have been able to do it.

Hearing Subaru’s doubts, Abel nodded, voicing a “That is correct”,

Abel: “Hence why I claimed it to be that mad of a deed.”

Subaru: “So, the Soul Marriage Technique is dangerous, that’s what you’re saying?”

Abel: “The Soul Marriage Technique itself can be thought as something much like the forging of a contractual relationship with a Spirit. However, it is difficult to believe that it can be performed on an unlimited number of people.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “Albeit I stated it was a portion, it is nonetheless the ceding of the soul. It is nothing more than tearing apart the very foundation of one’s being, and handing it over in an indiscriminate manner. Keeping one’s ego intact is not something that can be done, usually. Or rather… No, talking about this will bring us nowhere.”

With a slow shake of his head, Abel spoke of the unusual nature of Yorna’s Soul Marriage Technique.

To be honest, Subaru didn’t understand the situation as clearly as Abel did, but he managed to understand that it was very scary.

For Subaru, it’d be like sharing his soul with a bunch of people other than Beatrice. Of course, there were people with whom Subaru felt he could give away part of his soul as they wouldn’t do any mischief.

He didn’t think that Medium or Al here would do anything wrong. But if someone asked him if he could give it to Abel, his reply would be no.

And aside from that—

Louis: “Uu…”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

She plucked at the bottom of Subaru’s shirt, causing him to be distracted by the owner of that small, groaning voice.

Louis, with her long golden hair tucked behind her head, had been following Subaru and the others in their escape so far without a word. —No, it was not just this far.

Louis was surprisingly good at listening and didn’t even raise her voice, which Subaru had been worried about. She did not attract the attention of the enemy, and did what needed to be done in a timely manner.

And—

Louis: "…"

Even now, she pulled at Subaru's hem, as if looking for a way to help him cope with his anxiety, not to make him deal with her own.

Subaru: "You're…"

A horrible person. A scary person. An unforgivable person.

He had no doubts about it, having thought about that for a long time, more than enough time.

The reason why he couldn't dump her on the spot after being sent to the Vollachian Empire with her was because that girl, Rem, was trying to take care of Louis.

Even now, Subaru didn't want Rem to hate him, and that was the only reason why he stayed with Louis.

And yet—.

Al: "—But hey, doesn't this clear things up?"

Al suddenly said this to a worried Subaru, who did not shake off Louis's hand.

Al's gaze turned to Abel, the two of them, masked and covered in cloth, adult and child, facing each other. As Abel looked down at him, Al pointed his thumb to his own chest,

Al: "The people who attacked us are under the influence of Yorna-neechan's Soul Marriage Technique. Then it must've been Yorna-neechan who made them attack us, and that's a QED."

Abel: "—. That surely is an answer accepting the things at face value."

Al: “I don’t like the way you’re saying that. If these people are using Yorna-neechan’s power, there’s no other option.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that might not be quite right…”

Al: “Huh?”

Al reacted to Subaru’s gentle interruption with a harsh voice. Seeing Subaru’s shoulders tremble at the sound of his voice, Al touched the sheath of Blue Dragon Sword on his back and,

Al: “My bad. Didn’t mean to freak you out… Bro, you’re saying there’s another possibility?”

Subaru: “…Beatrice and I have a Contract, but I’m not connected to her all the time. No, we’re connected, but I don’t know what she’s doing right now or anything, so.”

Al: “So you’re saying someone can just borrow her power and secretly go on a rampage?”

Although reluctantly, Subaru nodded to Al’s blunt statement.

Even though he wasn’t aware of the scope and conditions of the Soul Marriage Technique in full, it was possible that causing such mischief is possible. And if so, it was not possible to say with certainty that Yorna was a bad person, right now.

Abel: “Worst case, if the enemy turns out to be Yorna Mishigure, we shall have no other option but to flee the Demon City. Our competition with Olbart shall not be able to continue.”

Al: “We’re being targeted by the whole city, y’know. I agree with you, but…”

Abel: “—If we capture just one person it would change things.”

Abel muttered to himself as he touched his cheek over the oni mask.

Hearing this, Subaru opened his mouth with a “Oh”.

Subaru: “S-sure! If we can just get one of the people from the other side to talk to us, it’d be a lot clearer! Why didn’t I think of that?!”

Medium: “Oh, it’s true~! Abel-chin, you’re a genius! That’s it, that’s it!”

Subaru: “Right!”

Subaru and Medium jumped for joy at the answer, which seemed to clear the cloudy sky. They clapped their raised hands together and looked back at Abel and the others with great joy.

However, their delight was interrupted by Abel and Al, whose true faces could not be seen.

Directing his gaze at the excited duo, Al slumped his shoulders,

Al: “Well, if we could do that, we wouldn’t have any trouble. But that’s what makes it so hard, y’know. After all, everyone on the other side’s receiving Yorna-neechan’s power.”

Subaru: “Ah, I see…”

Medium: “Um~, we could’ve done it if only Taritta-chan was here.”

Stomping her feet on the ground, Medium was feeling a great sense of regret about her lack of ability.

Subaru also felt frustration at her words. He lacked the information to take this one step further, and he had no means at hand to obtain it.

Subaru: “Something, anything at all…”

Putting a hand over his mouth, Subaru strived hard to remember what he had done so far.

Since arriving in Chaosflame, various events and troubles had occurred in this Demon City. The encounter they had with Yorna and the false Emperor at the Crimson Lapis Castle. Then the next morning, the sudden “infantilization”, the hide-and-seek game proposed by the Vicious Old Man, and the scary people waiting for them—.

They had to find a way out of this while Taritta was stalling for them.

If not, no matter how capable Taritta was, with that many people there, they would catch her and something terrible would happen—

Subaru: "—That."

Medium: "Subaru-chin?"

As he pondered over this and that, Subaru blinked his eyes as he felt something strange. Noticing this, Medium looked into his face.

But he didn't have the time to answer her call. He had to find out just what he'd caught on just now, such was his impatience. He needed to get to the bottom of it.

What he was worried about was Taritta, doing her best. —No, not Taritta herself, but the people who were facing Taritta, the scary hundred people who were after Subaru and the others.

He watched from a distance as the hundred of them fought Taritta. There was something strange about it. It was probably—

Al: "Thing is! I don't understand if it's really the Soul Marriage Technique, or if the enemy's Yorna-neechan or not, or if Old Man Olbart's lying or not, I just don't get anything anymore!"

Subaru: "—Hk."

Subaru was surprised to see Al barking at him, while violently scratching his own neck. However, Al did not seem to notice Subaru's surprise and kicked the wall impatiently.

Al had been getting less and less composed at an alarming pace. His original posture of being like an aloof willow branch that could take anything in stride seemed to be an illusion.

And Al, in his frustration, continued to pester Abel,

Al: “What are you gonna do, Abel-chan? I can’t keep going along if it’s gonna continue like this, y’know. I’m telling you, I got bigger priorities than getting you back on your seat. So…”

Abel: “What you wish interests me not. But there is a method to be certain of it.”

Al: “Be certain of what?”

Abel: “Of whether their strength is due to the Soul Marriage Technique.”

Pointing towards the exit of the alleyway, Abel declared so to Al, who pressed him for an answer.

Outside in the darkness, the sounds of people passing by, footsteps, and talking could be heard from the street. However, it didn’t mean that any of those people had noticed and were looking in.

Just the hustle and bustle, that was all there was.

Subaru: “The street? What are we supposed…”

Abel: “Pick one passerby at random, and harm them. Then we can ascertain if Yorna Mishigure’s Soul Marriage Technique envelops everyone in the city or not.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “If the wound heals, then they are under the influence of the Soul Marriage Technique. If they remain wounded or lose their life, they are outside the influence of the technique—Meaning, the assumption they are a user of the Soul Marriage Technique can be dismissed as incorrect.”

Abel continued nonchalantly, pointing to the street.

The content of the speech was so disturbing and outlandish that Subaru could not say anything. His brain was numb, he had given up even thinking.

No one would take such a stupid theory seriously—

Al: “I see… But there’s also the pattern of inhabitants not being eligible, just like us. What if we drew one of them?”

Abel: “You can tell the difference between a resident and an outsider by looking at their footwear. Of course, it is possible that only those surrounding the outside of the inn are under the influence of the Soul Marriage Technique. If such is the case, it shall be proof that Yorna Mishigure has consciously set her sights on us.”

Subaru got that Abel was nodding as if saying that either way they would gain information, as well as Al sinking into silence, as if to say there was still room for more consideration.

That discussion was difficult for Subaru to understand because it was based on complicated logic. However, even amidst the incomprehensible discussion, there were things that he understood.

That was, if things continued like that, someone was going to get hurt.

Subaru: “But that’s just—”

Abel: “—If you reject it, then what? Try presenting an alternative.”

Subaru: “…Hk.”

Abel looked down on Subaru as he anticipated him trying to retort out of reflex.

After feeling that his thoughts were being read, and that he had been called foolish, Subaru’s face grew hot. But he couldn’t be silenced. He didn’t want to just shut up and back down.

Subaru: “Y-you don’t have to hurt anyone else, there are other ways…”

Abel: “If you have one, say it. If it is something that merits consideration, I shall listen. —Although it would be unreasonable to expect that from you, presently.”

Subaru: “Well, that’s!”

Abel: “—You are particularly afraid of sacrifices.”

As if cutting through him, a ruthless voice pierced Subaru as he was getting worked up.

Feeling a pain like that of having been shot through, Subaru gritted his teeth and looked down.

Sacrifice, someone getting hurt or dying.

The less people died or were hurt, the better. This was a matter of course for allies, but he felt the same for enemies. The reason why Subaru thought so was because he was weak, naive and immature.

Subaru: “But why’s that a problem?”

Abel: “That is not a repudiation. It is merely a fact. If you are to obtain what you desire, you shall require either ingenuity or strength. If you lack those, you must compromise by cutting back on the desired results. Such is what occurred with the process and the results brought about by the bloodless siege you spoke of.”

Subaru: “…”

Abel: “If you want neither deaths nor wounded, you must possess the ability to bring about that result. —If you truly desire it, it would be a contradiction to refuse to pay the toll.”

Subaru’s cheeks stiffened, his eyes blinked.

Abel’s intentions were unclear. However, the black eyes looking through the oni mask were fixed on Subaru, attempting to find out the true intentions behind Subaru’s eyes, which had an incomparably weak light in them.

I don’t understand. I don’t understand. I don’t understand.

Really, I don’t understand. What was that supposed to mean, Subaru not willing to pay the toll. Subaru was trying his utmost to use his good-for-nothing brain to think, but nothing came out.

With his short limbs and small lungs, he could not jump or leap as well as Taritta. The whip he had brought with him was too thick and heavy for him to handle.

Still, if he didn't want anyone to get hurt, he should—

Subaru: "—If that's how it is, it'd be better if only I get hurt!"

His head a mess, Subaru shouted at Abel.

He knew very well he wasn't strong enough and that he didn't think things through. But that was a problem that had always existed, even before Subaru had become small.

Something hot came up from behind his closed eyes.

Before that could clearly turn into tears, Subaru turned his back and started running away.

Al: "Bro?!"

Medium: "Subaru-chin!"

Al and Medium let out a scream at the sudden movement.

However, not stopping at the calls of those two, Subaru threw himself out of the alleyway and into the street.

He didn't want anyone to get hurt. He didn't want them to die.

Subaru lacked both the ability and the smarts necessary for that. If something was to be traded to make up for what was missing, it was Subaru himself.

He would find it out. He would bring back information that could change the situation with him at the moment he got himself back.

For that reason—

Subaru: "Come on! I'm here!"

Subaru ran out into the street, arms raised, shouting at the top of his lungs.

A high-pitched child's voice drowned out the noise of the street, drawing the attention of those surprised. Being noticed by a number of wide-open eyes, Subaru felt a pain that made his heart shrink.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Only after having done so, would someone regret doing something prematurely.

The eyes of the people around him, looking at a child doing something stupid, made him feel a sudden sense of shame and fear. With that, Subaru held his breath and thought about going back to the alley.

???: "Wait."

Someone grabbed Subaru's arm as the latter stepped on the ground in a hurry.

His shoulders hitching, Subaru turned around; a short figure was grabbing his arm. It was a short boy with short, curly hair dressed in simple light clothing—no, his hair was not kept short, it only looked short because of the tight curls at its end.

Subaru's eyes widened at the appearance of the boy, who looked about the same age as Subaru currently was. He then tried to open his mouth to ask why he had stopped him,

Boy: "Sorry."

—The next moment, Subaru was flung away by the boy with a burning right eye.

Subaru: "—Eh?"

Overwhelmed by his spinning vision, Subaru had no idea what had happened.

The boy had suddenly thrown Subaru away. With a single upward movement of his arm, he had very easily thrown him into the air.

Subaru: "W-wahhh—?!"

He had run out into the street with enthusiasm so that no one aside from him would get hurt.

Why, how, those questions bounced around in his head, and he felt as if his insides were being wrung.

The ones who had been fighting Taritta had the same burning eyes as the boy. If that was the effect of Soul Marriage Abel had told him about, then Yorna had given him a portion of her power. To confirm this, he had jumped out, saying he would sacrifice himself.

All this was incomprehensible to Subaru, who was spinning and falling into the blue sky.

It was an apparent miracle that his body spinning with unusual force had not hit any of the surrounding buildings or decorations. Subaru didn't even know if the boy hadn't aimed him at anything.

However, Subaru was afraid of the obstacles that were passing by the edge of his vision at an incredible speed, so he fell into the blue sky, praying desperately that he wouldn't hit anything—and then he suddenly stopped.

Slowly, Subaru's thrown body reached maximum height, and was now falling headfirst towards the ground.

Subaru: "Ahhhhh—!"

The voice of the one who had left the ground now echoed, as it approached the ground again.

He didn't know how high he'd reached, but he had to brace himself. But he couldn't remember how to. In the first place, would he be able to manage to brace himself when falling from such a high place? Would he fall to the ground, and die with his whole body broken into pieces, his head crushed, his neck broken—.

—"Death" seemed to be close at hand again.

Medium: "Al-chin!"

Al: "Gotcha!"

Shortly after, mixed in with Subaru's own screams, he heard familiar strained voices.

And just like that, the sound of something stretched being slashed and the sound of several long, thin objects falling down came together, and without knowing what they were, Subaru's body hit the ground—Before that, he was caught.

Subaru: "Wah, wahhh, wahhhhh… Wagh!"

A soft sensation caught him, but his momentum couldn't be stopped, and Subaru's body fell on the softness with quite a bit of force. Once he reached the edge of that soft sensation, his thrown body rolled on the hard ground, causing a moan and the taste of sand to spread in his mouth.

His body ached everywhere. But—

Subaru: "I'm, alive?"

At the fact that he had not died, Subaru let out a dumbfounded voice.

Once he managed to pull himself up, he finally realized what had happened. —Al and Medium had saved Subaru with their quick thinking.

In order to catch Subaru as he was falling from the sky, they had jumped on a tent of a food stall on the street, detached its anchor and stretched it to make an improvised cushion.

Thanks to that, Subaru had not slammed into the ground, and his life had been saved.

However—

Medium: "Ah, ouchhhhh…"

Al: "Ahgh…"

The two people who had worked so hard to catch Subaru were not safe.

Subaru: “Ah, Al! Medium-san!”

As Subaru pulled himself up, within his field of vision were two figures lying in the street.

Of course, Al and Medium, influenced by the “infantilization”, could not perform like they usually would. They had set up a tent to catch the falling Subaru, and had been blown away by the crash.

And the bad news continued on—

Boy: “I was hoping that that would have been the end of it…”

The boy who had thrown Subaru away contorted his face in pain, as he said that.

Surveying Subaru, and then Al and Medium, also collapsed, he covered his face with his palms in anguish. —Unable to completely cover them, the flame was still present in his right eye.

Subaru: “Y, ou…”

Boy: “It’s necessary. Because this city… Because we cannot lose her.”

Subaru: “—?”

Managing to pull himself up, he drew the boy’s attention to himself.

Though determined not to let him lay his hands on Al or Medium—The boy’s answer was outside of Subaru’s imagination and far from his understanding.

It was just that the boy was desperate. And there was something else that made Subaru’s heart sway.

Subaru: “You too…”

It was the same thing that had stuck with him when he had been struggling to think in the alley.

While Taritta was fighting to help Subaru and the others escape, the faces of those facing her, with one eye burning—

—They all seemed to have the same pained look on their faces as the boy did.

Boy: “I’m sorry. I’m not going to ask you to forgive me.”

Shaking his head, the boy slowly stepped in front of Subaru, erasing any trace of hesitation in his eyes and his expression.

Even if he tried to crawl back in an attempt to escape, he could not. His legs wouldn’t move.

So he at least stared at the boy’s face, trying not to look away, and noticed something.

There was something nicely peeking out of the side of the boy’s head, from his curly hair—a small horn.

Seeing his white curly hair and horns, he thought he looked out of place, looked like a sheep.

After that, the boy with the burning eyes gave a large swing of his hand—

Subaru: “…”

Frowning and keeping his eyes open, Subaru watched, trying not to miss the boy’s actions.

???: “Uuu—!!”

A blonde girl cut in front of Subaru, and, with a dull sound and the scattering of red blood, she was sent flying, whirling around much like a leaf.

Chapter 47:
Unperishing ■■

1

Louis: “—~hk.”

Twirling and swirling, a petite frame whirled into the air with a feeble shriek.

The young girl slowly sprung from the ground, her momentum refusing to diminish, as she bounded a number of times towards the street’s edge. Colliding with the frame of the tent whose fabric had come undone, the lurched material crushed the young girl’s body beneath itself with a shrill note.

Subaru witnessed this spectacle, voicelessly.

He could not make excuses such as not being able to comprehend what had occurred in a matter of moments.

Even if it was true that he had not had the time to even stretch his hand out, all of what had transpired in a matter of moments had been definitely captured by these black pupils of his.

His mind utterly boggled, he sprinted towards the hazardous street devoid of thought.

As per usual, he was spotted by the enemy and posed with danger, when Al and Medium sustained wounds in order to save Subaru, and at the same pace—

Subaru: “…Louis.”

Louis, who had stood before Subaru and shielded him with both her arms spread open, had been strummed like a gum ball.

The one responsible was the young sheepman, horns growing amidst his white hair. His arms were slender, not too different from Subaru’s, but had thrown Subaru up to nearly ten meters in the air.

Louis had directly intercepted a single swing of the young boy's arm, subsequently getting blown away. He had noticed her blood scattering, so he could not possibly reckon she was unharmed.

Sheepboy: "Sorry."

Subaru's eyes shadowed Louis who was buried beneath the tent's wreckage. His eardrums quivered due to the enfeebled apology, and reflected in Subaru's wavering field of vision was the figure of the young boy, arms upraised once again.

He couldn't do anything so adroit as to dodge.

To begin with, Subaru's own limbs had been mangled due to falling from a tall height, so he wasn't even able to move his body properly.

Therefore, despite Louis defending him and everything, he rendered it futile as well—

Medium: "—Subaru-chin!!"

Subaru: "Ah."

Medium: "Stand!!"

A shadow leapt towards him with astonishing momentum and hammered her fair legs into the young boy's shoulders.

As the young boy stepped back, his expression one of surprise, the one to have cut into that locus was Medium, her long golden hair fluttering. Her face tinged with a shade of red, she accosted Subaru to stand up.

To Subaru, who had tumbled to the ground, rattling and trembling.

Medium: "Take care of Louis-chan!"

Yet, with no encouragement or consolation, Medium spoke to Subaru, and broke into a sprint.

Wielding the sole sword she had with both of her arms, with movements utterly separate from cool ones that appeared to be a dance, yet with all of her life, she attempted to pursue the young boy.

The young boy too put on a strong expression, seemingly surprised by her spirit rather than her strength.

Subaru: “Ghu, uuu…!”

Whilst Medium persevered, Subaru used his now trembling limbs and did his best to stand up. Afterwards, he dashed towards the tent beneath which Louis was crushed.

Removing the parts of the collapsed structure one by one, he attempted to recover Louis who was trapped beneath the wreckage.

Subaru: “Louis, Louis! A-Are you alive! Hey, Louis!”

Desperately calling, Subaru once again felt warmth well up within his eyes.

That bothersome warmth seemed to have been eagerly awaiting its time to come forth from the interior of Subaru’s countenance since earlier. Ignoring it, hurrying and hastening, he cleared away the scraps.

And—

Louis: “…Uu.”

Subaru: “Louis!”

A frail groan resounded, and Subaru discovered Louis’s form, sullied by dust and debris.

Having gotten buried beneath the broken tent, Louis rolled up within the space created by the fallen brace, and barely managed to not get pulverized underneath.

That was relieving. But immense anxiety instantly followed his relief.

Subaru: “I can’t, move this…”

The fallen brace was about as thick as Subaru’s torso, refusing to move whether pushed or pulled. Even via the use of the 『Principle of Leverage』, he couldn’t find a befitting weight as balance.

And whilst searching for a way to haul Louis out, he came upon something else.

—What was oozily sullying Louis’s white robes was not dust, but blots of red.

Subaru: “…Ah.”

Struck with terror, his limbs turned cold and thoughts froze.

This was what it meant to be deadened. It wasn’t as though he had shed any blood, but he had no clue where the blood flowing within him had gone. Shouldn’t a different spot be warmed by flowing blood.

However, solely his heartbeats, were loud enough to seem as though his heart would detonate.

Louis: “Aaa…”

Still leaking frail groans, the red blots on Louis’s robes spread.

His cold limbs unmoving, rather than assuming effort to remove the debris, he could not even comfort her by doing his best to remove it.

Subaru: “Louis, Louis…”

He continued to call Louis’s name, using his quivering voice.

His voice cracked, and he failed to do even this decently. His tongue went numb—no, Subaru’s heart, was callously rejecting calling her name.

Come to think of it, Subaru had kept even calling Louis’s name to a minimum.

Ever since he had been hurled from the colossal Tower along with Rem, he had always placed Louis beside him. Subaru had always been vigilant towards her, shunned her, maltreated her.

Yet, never even once had Louis done anything harmful or oppressive towards Subaru.

He did not wish for Rem to despise him. He did not wish for his surroundings to dread him.

Fearing these things, Subaru had always refused to come in contact with Louis, and always ultimately deferred deciding what to do with Louis.

Why did he fear Louis so much.

His benumbed brain, his chilly limbs, his parched tongue, his heart verging onto erupting, did not let him understand.

He couldn't remember very well, what Louis had done to him.

It seemed his memories had been befogged, in these moments, he was unable to open the drawer of reminiscences.

However, there was one thing clear to him, without needing to open that drawer.

That Louis had shed blood attempting to shield Subaru.

—That alone was a truth he could not forget, could not avert his eyes from.

Subaru: "Don't, die…"

Louis: "…"

Subaru: "Don't die, Louis! You can't, you can't die…! You can't…!"

Pushing his now small body into the brace's gaps, Subaru knelt beside Louis.

Instead of then hauling Louis out, he simply and unavailingly vocalised. Taking Louis's hand, gripping it tight with both of his palms, he desperately articulated whilst imbuing it with a prayer.

Subaru: "Please don't die…!"

Forgetting to even search for something he could do to prevent her from dying, he voiced an absurd wish.

To this trembling voice of Subaru's, Louis's eyelids faintly opened, and—

Louis: "—Ua, uu."

A weak voice escaped her, as the young girl's pupils regained faint strength.

2

Medium: "Hiya~a~a~a ~hk!"

Waving a single one of her dual swords she had gripped both of her hands, Medium opposed the young boy before her.

Whilst putting up a strong act, the young sheepman, however, easily blocked Medium's strike with his hoisted arm. —Verbatim, intercepted the blade with his arm, and repelled it.

Medium: "A~rgh, so solid! I can't cut through at all! So unfair!"

Since earlier, Medium had been slashing with her sword with the entirety of her might, only to be thwarted by the young boy's burly body on each instance.

His skin, his hair, his fingers, his head, all parts of him were so solid that she had been completely brought to her knees.

Him not sustaining any attacks was also a problem, but aside from that—

Sheepman: "—~hk!"

Medium: "Dangerous!!"

The young boy’s violently swung arm grazed past Medium and crashed into the ground, feeling tremors coming from the ground, a hole larger than the hammered arm was opened in the ground.

The stupendousness of the young boy’s attack power also made her dizzy. The reason why Medium managed to avoid getting wholly smote by the attack was thanks to the interlude in the young boy’s movements.

Medium: “Extremely sturdy, seems very powerful too, but his techniques are poor!”

It was as though he was a newborn who had taken birth into a large body, Medium pondered.

She had never seen a newborn who had taken birth into a large body, so she only contemplated what she sensed yet felt that annotation to be perfectly suited.

For now, all she had to do was to spar with that newborn, but—

Medium: “I need to hurry up, or others will gather here too…”

Attaining a flavor of mud upon licking her lips, Medium was scorched with the impatience to not overstay.

They had coincidentally dashed to a street with not many pursuers, but if they continued to be uproarious they would get immediately noticed and the young boy’s allies would assuredly all gather at this place.

If people bigger than the young boy or people with a good grasp on techniques were to arrive, then she may not be capable of crossing swords anymore.

Had she not been alone, then she could’ve at least had a plan of action, and yet.

Medium: “Al-chin! Are you listening, Al-chin!”

Medium raised her voice, whilst leaping and bouncing to the young boy’s large swings.

Medium was desperately calling for the veiled young boy crouched at the edge of her sight—no, for Al. On one hand, he was a child, in a condition that handling weapons was far worse for him than Medium, but she wished to rely on the possibility that the ways to counter dangerous situations were more than just herself.

Al: "…"

However, he did not respond to Medium's implores.

It wasn't as though he had hit his head and fainted when he got blown off, either. Al was conscious, and once had attempted to sincerely assist in combat.

At present, he had abruptly halted his feet and had knelt down, crestfallen.

Remaining crouched, Al was obstinately staring down upon his right hand through his veil—

Medium: "…Wh, y?"

She whispered with a shudder.

As though he had let go of, or had lost what he was supposed to have kept within his hand's grasp.

Medium: "Al-chin…!"

Gazing sidelong at Al who forbore to stand, diffidence was inserted within Medium's innermost mind.

Those very moments, strength waned from her hands wielding a weapon, and Medium powerfully gritted her teeth.

—This is how it's always been.

Once Medium's own feelings withered, so did the strength in her body companionably. Therefore, Medium always conducted herself as positive, loud, upright.

If her feelings were bright and lively, then Medium could work to her best efforts. The reason why her older brother Flop was always cheering her on with a “Do your best!” was to push her on and support her as well.

However, Flop was not here. Nor anyone who would tell her to do her best.

Everyone had their hands full with their own problems, and Medium had also become small, hence she was unable to wield anything more than one sword, and was on the verge of losing to a tiny boy.

???: “—There they are!!”

Medium: “Ah.”

A voice echoed, further augmenting Medium’s diffidence.

As she dodged the young boy’s waved arm and shifted her positions, Medium widened her eyes. What was reflected within her vision, from the opposite side of the street, appeared enemy reinforcements with flames harboured in one eye.

The ferociously rushing men drew near Al’s rear, who was knelt down. Even if she were to instantaneously rush towards that direction, she must evade the young boy in-between.

—I won’t make it. They’ll die. Al-chin, Subaru-chin, Louis-chan, they all will.

Everyone will die.

Verging on dropping the sword she grasped, Medium desperately called for her older brother within her mind.

If only she once more had her older brother’s voice, cheers, support.

However, the new troops approaching Al were far swifter than the reach of illusionary encouragement.

Al’s small body, was mutilated by the hand stretching from behind—

???: “—Will you yet not move, fool.”

Before those sharp claws could reach Al, a leg stretching from the side kicked his shoulder away. Al’s body toppled sideways, narrowly eluding the attack seeking to gouge his spine out.

And, the one to have undertaken this violent counteraction was a man with his face concealed by an oni mask.

Medium: “Abel-chin?”

His name spilled from her mouth, gaping wide in wonder, and Abel’s senses turned towards her for a brief moment.

Feeling the heat of exchanging a glance in spite of the mask, Medium’s shoulders slightly slumped. Abel, who had left it to Medium and the others to confront the young boy, now stepped forth into the battlefield himself.

He couldn’t stand onlooking anymore, she might get scolded with these words.

She disliked being scolded.

On copious instances in the past she had been scolded and hit. All the more when despite her small stature, Medium used to eat a lot. Getting hit, getting scolded, repeat.

Hence, upon gauging she would get scolded, her body curled up—

Abel: “Medium.”

Her name called, Medium slumped, dreading the reprimand that followed.

However, Abel ignored her fright, and resumed.

Saying—

Abel: “—Brace yourself.”

Medium: “…”

A brusque tone, dilating her eyes to the voice that quaked her eardrums, Medium powerfully grit her now-small teeth. Gritting, distorting her cheeks, making her gold hair flit.

Medium: “Mhm! I’ll do my best—!!”

Her back pushed by force surging to a nearly fictitious extent, Medium smote the young boy before her.

The young boy stepped back, startled by that attack, and she chased him, striking his chin up with her sword’s ridge bounding from below and kicked his defenseless build, trampling his stretched knees, and struck an identical kick to his head.

With Medium suddenly turning the tide, the young boy became one-sidedly defensive.

Whilst judging this to be akin to bullying, Medium brandished her fist and pounded again and again. In the midst of her punches, a voice was resurrected within her mind.

—That’s right. Paying ‘em back twice the fold of what they gave you feels pretty great, right!

Those were the words of the benefactor who had rescued Medium and Flop out of harrowing circumstances.

The benefactor who taught her how to fight, how to live; recalling those words, Medium smiled.

Smiling, she thought “It doesn’t feel good to hit someone much either~!”.

Medium: “Hiya~a~a~a!”

Thinking so, she thwacked a sweep of all her strength into the young boy’s head, and his small body was blown off.

An attack that normally beheaded from the side, was nothing more than a strike for the sturdy young boy. Even so, somehow finishing him off alone, she must head to assist Al and Abel—

???: “You spunky little…!”

Medium: “Auh! Oh no!”

Excessively concentrating on her battle against the young boy, she neglected having caution towards the opponent who drew from behind.

Her hair violently grabbed, Medium’s body was swiftly lifted. Feet suspended in the air, she failed to counterattack at once.

Medium: “Ugh~! A~h, enough!”

Lurching her legs, tearing up from the pain of her hair being pulled, Medium looked back to see the one carrying her was a rhinoman giant larger than Medium’s unshrunk body.

Skin and flesh thicker than that of the young boy, Medium’s kicks amounted to nothing for him.

Medium: “Sorry! I can’t escape!”

Writhing and struggling, Medium inclined her head and earnestly hollered.

Upon looking, the kicked Al remained collapsed on the street’s ground and the one responsible, Abel, had been surrounded by the arrived reinforcements and cornered to a wall.

Medium too was aware it would be impossible for the delicate Abel to finish them all off.

Thus—

Medium: “Abel-chin! Take Al-chin and run away!”

She wished for them to somehow aptly create a window and escape.

Upon Medium’s desperate voice, the men surrounding Abel clogged the escape route as to block his line of sight. With that, one of the men—a middle aged oxman, approached Abel.

Oxman: “I’m sorry but we can’t let you escape. Right here, you all will…”

Abel: “—You are an oxman, the one earlier was a sheepman.”

Oxman: “What?”

Abel: “The ones surrounding the inn were all horned as well… anyone can comprehend upon grasping the conditions until now. It is the horned races that are aiming for us.”

No fright saturated Abel’s voice, who was surrounded and supposedly posed with a predicament. Rather, words transmitted from his overbearing conduct despite being surrounded perturbed the men.

—No, what was perturbing for them was not Abel’s brazen attitude alone, but his remark itself as well.

Medium: “Ho, rned…”

Articulating so, Medium shifted her eyes and gazed at the rhinoman who clutched her hair.

The gigantic rhinoman’s focus too was concentrated on Abel’s comment just now. She discerned the presence of a single, stocky horn above the rhinoman’s large nose.

Now that it was pointed out, she recalled the young sheepman from earlier as well as the multitude of people Taritta had lured back at the inn, all had horns as well.

Medium: “But, what about it!”

Abel: “Fool. —Is that not the principal root of this situation.”

Medium: “Huh?”

Abel replied, as though having heard Medium’s outcry.

However, Medium could not see him from her side, and despite being told that was the reason, she failed to comprehend any of its significance. Rather than properly explaining such that she could understand, she wished for him to resume without her grasp on the matter. If not, at this rate—

Abel: "—You can try."

Oxman: "Eh?"

That was not a response to the outcry of Medium's heart.

For certain, those words, enounced with such solemnity, had been asserted whilst he glared at the oxman standing at the vanguard of the men surrounding him.

The oxman widened his eyes and fixedly glared back at Abel. To the oxman's reaction, Abel once again resumed.

Abel: "You can try, whether you can kill me."

Oxman: "…Will there be anything difficult about chopping your slender neck?"

The man's left eye flared scarlet as he stomped on the ground.

Even without the effects of Yorna's Soul Marriage Technique, it would be a simple matter for the man's bulky arm to shatter Abel's neck.

And, the resolve to kill necessary for fracturing his neck, had already been attained by the men.

Heedless, Abel intrepidly crossed his arms, and pierced the opponent through the black pupils of his oni mask—

Abel: "The answer to whether it is easy or not, lies ahead of action. Thus, you can try. If you have that caliber, flames shall extol you. However—"

Oxman: "H-However?"

Abel: "If you lack that caliber, flames shall scorch even your soul. —Now, what will you act upon."

Oxman: "…"

So asserted Abel, hands crossed, whilst the oxman drowned in silence.

He was losing the psychological battle against the insouciantly standing slender man before his eyes. Of course, it would be the man's victory beyond a smidgen of doubt when it came down to brute force. Yet, what was the deal with his composed attitude.

Was the answer to that not conceived within the seemingly deceptive words avowed just now.

Abel: "You can try. —Whether you can surpass the flames named judgement."

Oxman: "Gh, ugh, u~u~gh…!"

The pressed man quivered his bulky throat and groaned. The man was covered in copious sweat, tension straining his entire body, and not even his comrades reached out to him.

From the point of having seen Abel's eyes, they had been taken off the stage.

The qualification to respond to Abel's speech lay only with the man standing before him and nobody else.

A grating note of gnashed teeth echoed, echoed, echoed—

Oxman: "Agh, A~a~a~argh!!"

With a note of cracking gritted teeth, the man raised both of his arms as though pressed by that ache.

An attack that, rather than breaking his neck, sought to crush Abel's body and life altogether. With a blow from the man's arms, thick like a log, Abel's slender frame would get smashed to a pulp.

Medium floundered in an attempt to escape her constraints, but to absolutely no avail.

Al remained collapsed, paying no heed to Abel’s predicament either.

And Subaru and Louis as well were—

Medium: “—Eh?”

Louis had been buried under the collapsed tent, and Subaru subsequently rushed to rescue her. She could see Subaru crawl into the wreckage, and clasp Louis’s hand.

Seeing, the buried Louis faintly move, and—

—The next instant, the two’s form abruptly vanished from underneath the tent.

Louis: “Uu!”

That juncture, the vanished Louis shot through from directly below the oxman’s chin, who had both his arms upraised.

3

Subaru seemed to be unknowing of what had occurred.

He had clung to Louis, who had gotten buried under the tent, slowly shedding blood. And struck her with arbitrary words, telling her to not die rather than comforting or rescuing her.

Subaru thought she had moved upon those words, and on the immediately subsequent instant.

Subaru's field of vision altered, as he tasted a sensation of the world being overturned.

Subaru: "Uh, egh."

Not anything like extreme speed or halting time.

Subaru had truly been moved to a separate location in the blink of an eye.

That too—

Abel: "You…"

Abel uttered so, his breath halting ever-so-slightly upon Subaru's arrival before his eyes.

Abel leisurely reclined his spine on the wall, arms crossed; by his being and the presence of the men surrounding their environs, Subaru verged on falling to his feet out of stupefaction.

His tears that had welled up out of disquietude for Louis now retracted, occluding his throat.

And when it came to Louis, who had eluded his mind due to this sudden phenomenon—

Louis: "Aa, uu!"

Oxman: "Goagh?!"

Twirling her body, Louis pranced into the space between the men with the movement and agility of a pinball, striking the vitals of all, such as the head, torso and knees, compelling them to withdraw.

Distending their eyes to her ability and might, the men all simultaneously leaned backward and gaped.

And during the interval opened by the men's astonishment and anguish, Louis mobilized herself onto the subsequent action.

Louis: "Uaau."

Crossing the gap between the men, Louis escaped their encirclement. Her limbs on the ground like an animal, she pulled the ground from both of her hands as is and pared its surface.

An act like that of violently pulling a carpet spread on the floor—of course, a carpet couldn't possibly be spread atop a street in the middle of a town. However, it seemed like the ground shifted.

The men consequently all lost their balance, and tumbled on the spot.

???: "Wha?! What's, this kid…!"

Louis: "Au! Auau!"

???: "Shithead!"

Amidst the disbalanced men, solely a young deerman narrowly managed to stand firm, smacked his lips and then broke into a sprint in an attempt to seize Louis. Louis threw the ground's surface she had pared mere moments ago at the young man. The moment the young man immediately scythed it aside with his arm, the ground frictionlessly returned to its former state.

In other words, became a wall of earth accompanied by befitting mass and texture.

Deerman: "Bugah?!"

Colliding head-on with the wall of earth, the young man inclined backwards after getting a taste of the counterattack.

Subsequently tearing down the ruptured wall of earth, Louis flew outwards and her soles captured the young man’s visage, the young man this time for certain toppled over with a bleeding nose.

???: “You little!”

Louis: “Uaau!”

Uprighting themselves with a delay, the men went over the young man’s fallen body and drew closer to Louis. However, the moment their fingers reached her, Louis erased her form yet again like an illusion.

The following instant, the young girl appeared atop a wall about two meters above, and pulled the wall’s surface identical to what she had done with the ground earlier, and proceeded to return it back.

The wall’s surface came detached together with its mass and solidity, and rained upon the men.

???: “A~a~a~a~argh—!!”

Shrieks and bellows reverberated through the street, as the men endowed with immense strength were made sport of by Louis alone.

Subaru viewed this spectacle, slumped and stupefied.

Subaru: “L-Louis, that’s…”

Raising his arm with a trembling voice, Subaru cowered in terror towards the nightmarish spectacle transpiring before his eyes.

Nightmare, yes, a nightmare. This was, beyond a shadow of the doubt, the nightmare Subaru had feared.

Paring off the ground and wall per her will, teleporting short distances in the blink of an eye, demonstrating combat power on par with rare martial artists, Louis thrashed the men from next to next.

It was evident that was not transcendental might which the young girl possessed by birth—no, Natsuki Subaru was au fait with all up to even that power's origin.

That was, that was, that was the power that mustn't be, the ■■ that must perish—.

Abel: "I had reckoned she was no mere girl, I understand now."

Subaru: "Eh…?"

Beside Subaru, who was yet cowering and capable of naught but watching the circumstance in a daze, so muttered Abel.

As he murmured whilst watching the same scene, Subaru's eyes wavered, unknowing of his true intent. Keeping Subaru's state by the edge of his sight, Abel pointed forward, towards Louis who was one-sidedly thrashing their pursuers,

Abel: "So this is the reason why you had that girl accompany you around."

Subaru: "Y-you're wro…"

He instantly sought to snarl at him in repudiation.

However, if he were to then be asked why he had Louis accompany him around, then he would fail to provide any answer. That was how it had been so far, and that was how it would be now as well.

Rhinoman: "Stop! You better listen or this girl will be—gah?!"

Louis: "Auau!"

Beholding this, the rhinoman raised his voice in an attempt to halt the collapse of his comrades.

He attempted to take Medium, who was clutched within his gigantic arm, as a hostage but Louis's attack reached him before he could communicate his threat.

Louis warped for a few meters in distance, and knocked the man's head from both sides using both her arms with all her strength. His ears pounded by her palms, his eyes whirled and went white as he crumbled.

Medium: “Wah kya~h… L-Louis-chan?”

Louis: “Aaauuu.”

Suddenly released, Medium tumbled to the ground as Louis jumped before her. Patting Louis’s head, she surveyed the environs, staggered.

Within Medium’s vision, all those who had gathered on the street were lying on the ground, collapsed.

Louis, all by herself, had trounced greater than ten enemies.

Abel: “Yours and the clown’s true nature has been exposed. Well, it is no trouble.”

Subaru: “Th-This makes no sense… What the heck’s going on!”

Abel: “Do not create a racket. It shall lure the other men. You go and pick up the clown.”

Abel jerked his chin, devoid of emotion towards having escaped his predicament, and gave his command.

Ahead of where he denoted was an immobile Al crouched on the ground. Fearing if he had sustained a terrible injury whilst they were not looking, Subaru hurriedly rushed to him.

Subaru: “A-Al! Hey, are you alright! Are you wounded…”

Al: “…I’m not, alright.”

Subaru: “—! Are you wounded?! Where? We need to treat it immediately…”

Al: “That’s not what I’m saying!”

Subaru: “—~hk.”

Having rushed to his side, Subaru jolted Al's shoulders, at whom he yelled with a potent voice. His head hanging low, he elevated his shivering hand and tightly clenched his right palm.

Al: "—Useless."

Subaru: "…Th-That's not"

Al: "I'm useless. My present self's, gonna die."

Subaru: "—? What, does that"

Mean, Subaru attempted to ask Al, his voice quivering.

However, Subaru's doubt was intercepted by a distressed voice reaching from behind.

Medium: "Abel-chin! You mustn't do anything cruel!"

Abel: "Remain silent. There are things that must be enquired."

Medium: "But still…"

Medium's emotional voice, to whom answered Abel's calm voice. Turning around, it was to the edge of the street that the two had headed, fallen there was a young sheepman—the young boy who had thrown Subaru up in the air with all his might, when he had first arrived at this street.

The young boy awakened his body, a distinct terror on his countenance.

Understandable. He had not become smaller, but was a kid in accordance with his physicality. Having been utterly overwhelmed by adults, those adults surrounding him from all directions, and on top of that being looked down upon by a man masked with a devil's visage, there was no way he would not feel terrified.

Abel would display no mercy to the horrified young boy.

Seizing Medium's shoulder who attempted to stop him and compelling her to step back, Abel crouched before the young boy.

The distance between their faces shortened, the flames ablaze in the fearful young boy’s eye clouded his vigor.

And, Abel ignored the fearful young boy’s attitude and hurled a question.

A question, concise and straightforward—

Abel: “The mediator of horned races who devised this affair—that girl who named herself Tanza, where is she hiding. Divulge it, swiftly.”

So he enquired.

Chapter 48:
Purposes Entangling in the Demon City

1

Focusing on the sheepboy, Subaru's eyes widened at Abel's relentless questioning.

That was because the name weaved from his mouth was a far too unexpected one.

Subaru: "That young girl, Tanza…?"

The image of a deergirl in a kimono popped up in Subaru's bewildered mind.

What was striking about Yorna's attendant, the girl who'd shown up at the castle tower the previous day, was that she was very composed and unsociable, even though she was still a child.

Abel was asserting that the girl had been the one to plan this.

Subaru: "Th-That doesn't make sense! Why'd she do that to us… Bwha!"

Louis: "Uau!"

Once he raised his voice to hear Abel's thoughts, Subaru was shocked by an impact and flipped over. Looking over at it, Subaru saw a smiling Louis on his back.

In a tremendous rampage, Louis had knocked down nearly ten opponents in the blink of an eye. Involuntarily, Subaru gulped because of the innocent-looking girl.

—Louis's strength, during her rampage, was unmistakably the same thing he had seen at the Tower of Sand.

That power was not originally Louis's, but rather the very power stolen from someone else who had worked hard and honed it. In other words, she had used Gluttony's—.

Subaru: "…G-Get off of me."

Louis: "Au?"

Subaru: "Get the heck off of me!"

Pushing the shoulder of the little girl on his chest, Subaru forcefully raised himself up. And so, his momentum caused Louis to fall onto her butt—and then, coming into his view, was her stomach, covered in white fabric stained red.

Seeing that, he remembered that she was injured,

Subaru: "You're wounded! We need to get you treated…!"

Louis: "Au! Aauu!"

In a hurry, he rolled up the girl's clothes to check the injured area. But, because it felt ticklish to Louis, she lashed out, trying to resist by pushing Subaru's face and neck.

Ignoring her resistance, he somehow managed to roll up her clothes and check the wound. He found no evident wounds, although there was a trace of oozing blood.

Subaru: "It's healed…?"

Certainly, there were traces of bleeding but no wounds.

That stumped him completely, and then Louis violently pushed the dumbfounded Subaru's chest with both hands. The answer to the question of what would happen if Louis struck Subaru for real, however, was demonstrated by the many figures lying on the street.

In any case—

Abel: "—Answer me. Where is Tanza?"

While Subaru was making sure that Louis was okay, Abel's interrogation continued.

The terrifying, high-pressure interview seemed to be working not only thanks to Abel's gaze, but also due to Medium's blade, as she was standing behind him as a threat. Even without the intention of doing anything, just standing behind Abel would have had an effect.

Indeed, as the boy looked between Abel and Medium in turn, he made a sound from his thin throat.

Sheepboy: "Ah…"

Abel: "This makes it the third time. Answer me. Do not presume that there shall be a fourth."

It was a cruel tone of voice, so cold that it was as if it chilled Subaru to the bottom of his heart. Hearing that, the boy's mouth twitched a few times, and then the fire returned to his eyes a little,

Sheepboy: "A-as if you don't know! If it's about where Tanza is, then you guys should…!"

Abel: "…"

Sheepboy: "You guys've done something to Tanza… That's why! We've attacked you because of that!"

Following that biting remark, the boy's arms reached out to Abel in front of him.

With reckless disregard for his own safety, his fingertips tried to grab Abel's throat and crush it. But before he could reach him, a small palm pressed down on the boy's forehead, and—

Louis: "Au!"

Just like that, the back of the boy's head was slammed into the ground, causing him to faint.

Pitifully, a moan leaked out from the boy and he fainted. Rolling over, and he then let go of his consciousness.

Subaru: "L-Louis…"

Yet again, in the blink of an eye, Louis's figure disappeared and reappeared elsewhere.

It was something she had demonstrated many times at the Tower of Sand, the short-distance warping used by Gluttony—watching her mastery of it, Subaru felt as if his heart was going to break.

The fact that she still had that power meant that she was still Louis —Louis Arneb.

The girl from that white world, who had separated Subaru from his heart, and tried to take away his soul completely.

After having mistakenly thought of his Return by Death ability as a blessing, she had dubbed Subaru as a monster.

Abel: "We need to find Olbart immediately."

Without regard to the previous exchange that had nearly taken his life or, conversely, saved his life, Abel muttered while slowly standing up.

—Finding Olbart.

Subaru, of course, generally agreed with this approach.

Just, Subaru didn't know why he had said that once again, at this moment. Plus, it came right after the boy had told them something about Tanza that made no sense.

Medium: "Al-chin, can you stand?"

Al: "…Y-yeah."

Sheathing her weapon, Medium reached out to Al, who was crouching.

Al, his face hidden by a cloth, answered in such a terribly somber voice that, even though Subaru could not make out his expression, he could imagine that he'd gone pale.

Shelving his concern for Al, Subaru finally brushed off the dirt from his butt and stood up. Then he turned his face upward towards Abel,

Subaru: “What did you mean by what you said just now?”

Abel: “What are you asking about?”

Subaru: “That…! That the Tanza girl’s the mastermind, but that we should try to find Olbart-san anyway, and all that stuff! You know what I mean!”

Abel: “Hmm.”

With a tiny snort, Abel touched the cheek of his oni mask in a mocking manner.

Partly out of impatience and partly out of frustration, that gesture really got on Subaru’s nerves. So, Subaru flew into a rage and, taking a nimble leap, ripped the oni mask off Abel’s face.

Then, with a face that had not been exposed in a long time, Abel looked down condescendingly towards Subaru with disapproval.

Abel: “What in the world are you doing?”

Subaru: “That’s what I want to ask you! Don’t just figure it all out by yourself, explain it to me properly! We’re comrades!”

Abel: “—Comrades, you say?”

Subaru: “Uh…”

Subaru’s intensity rapidly decreased, being stared at directly by Abel’s true face.

Although he had called him “comrade” to his face, that expression might have offended Abel. To begin with, Subaru had some qualms about describing Abel as a “comrade”.

He regretted that he’d gone with the flow and spoken that. But he couldn’t voice that reflection, because it would be like apologizing.

Medium: “That’s right, Abel-chin. We’re comrades, so you have to explain it to us.”

Instead of Subaru, the one to speak was the one who’d made Al stand up, Medium.

Putting her hands on her hips, her entire small body was being used to protest against Abel. In response to her straightforward words, Abel’s dark eyes narrowed, and,

Abel: “The assassins at the inn and here, those people are all of horned races.”

Subaru: “Horned… You mean people with horns. And what’s with them?”

Abel: “—. The horned races have a history of persecution. Because the horns resemble those of Witchbeasts, they were shunned in the past.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Abel’s indifferent narrative caused Subaru to widen his eyes.

Having horns, and a history of being persecuted because of it. — Such prejudice was very close to Subaru’s heart, and therefore unforgivable.

Emilia had also been discriminated against in the past for similar reasons; because her physical characteristics and origin were similar to the Witch’s, many people had harbored hatred for her.

And demi-humans as well as those of the horned races dealt with a similar past.

Subaru: “But why would those people want to attack us? I know people’ve been scared of their horns, but I don’t get it.”

Abel: “You may be a young child, but you are still required to use your head a little. For those with a history of being persecuted for having horns, this city… The way things are in Chaosflame is their salvation.”

Subaru: “Salvation… that means a “safe haven”, right?”

Abel: “—Yorna Mishigure never lets go of what lies within her bosom. She has even revolted for the sake of one dead deergirl.”

Folding his arms, the Emperor, the target of the rebellion itself, spoke of the circumstances behind it.

The reason why Yorna, someone who had revolted many times in the past, had bared her fangs at the Emperor she served—was for the sake of one single person.

What Subaru thought upon being told this, was—

Subaru: “Then, she’s a good person…!”

Abel: “Fool. What a narrow, simple conclusion. —Yorna Mishigure is a woman devoted to those who love her. And she holds no mercy towards those outside that circle.”

Medium: “Really~, but I think it’s normal to be kind to the people you like!”

Subaru: “I think so too.”

Agreeing with Medium’s and Subaru’s view, Louis raised her hands and voiced an “Au!”. Abel took one look at them with cold eyes, then let out a small sigh,

Abel: “What is paramount is the fact that the horned races, with their past history of being persecuted, have found peace in this city. And the existence of Yorna Mishigure is indispensable for maintaining that peace. In other words—”

Subaru: “In other words?”

Tilting his head, he waited for Abel to continue.

But for a moment, Abel looked at Subaru, his head still tilted, while gathering his words. Subaru did not understand the meaning of this, but Abel took several blinks’ worth of time before continuing.

Abel: “In other words, for those of the horned races, our presence is an intolerable enemy that shall rock the very ground on which they stand, as we seek the support of Yorna Mishigure for a full-scale rebellion against the Imperial Capital.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

After those words, Subaru finally understood the true meaning of the sheepboy’s words and actions.

At the time he grabbed Subaru’s arm as he ran out into the street and threw him, the boy had looked pained—no, not only the boy, but all those who were attacking them looked pained.

Those were feelings of guilt for driving Subaru and the others away, and of fear that they would lose their place in the world. That was why the boy had apologized at the time he flung Subaru.

Subaru: “So these people have been putting in their utmost effort too…”

Abel: “Is that sympathy, or is it pity? Either way, you have no leeway for that. Don’t forget the fact that these people have turned their hostility against us. Everything that tries to live and everything alive, both possess their own circumstances.”

Medium: “Sheesh~, Abel-chin! The way you’re talking is awful! Also, I still don’t really get it, why did you ask these people about Tanza-chan? Plus, what about finding Gramps?”

Abel: “…From the way they were talking earlier, it must be true that they are unaware of Tanza’s whereabouts. For some reason, they suspect that we have concealed her location from them. Why would that be?”

Subaru: “Why, that’s… For what reason?”

Looking down at the unconscious boy, Subaru racked his brains over Abel’s question.

Before Louis knocked him out, the boy had snapped at Abel for asking about Tanza’s whereabouts. To Subaru, it seemed like there were no lies in the boy's attitude of fury.

So the boy, as well as his group, must have thought that Subaru's group had done something to Tanza.

Subaru: "So that's why they attacked us?"

Abel: "That is how it goes. But the fact that we have not harmed Tanza remains. Then where did that girl vanish off to? Moreover, where did the hundred-or-so people from the horned races appear from?"

Subaru: "From where? They were waiting outside, right?"

Abel: "On whose orders?"

And with that immediate response, Subaru was at a loss for words.

Letting his head work, he started to assemble a pillar of answers for Abel's questions. But before it could be assembled properly,

Al: "—That lil' miss must've instructed them in advance."

And so, from behind, Al stole the answer.

He had been in a state of being unable to speak just a while before. Subaru turned his head to the direction from which his voice came, calling him out with "Al…". Al's mood seemed like it had not returned to its usual state.

Al: "Sorry, bro, for worrying you… Well, things haven't gotten any better."

Abel: "Your mood has yet to improve? That too must be the effect of Olbart's technique."

Al: "…I don't disagree with that. I'd love to talk about it, but we should finish what we were talking about first. So, let's talk about Lil' Miss Tanza."

Waving his now-small hand, Al answered in a voice that consciously suppressed his emotion.

Al’s condition was worrisome, but he was right, they were in the middle of a conversation. —It was certain that Tanza had gathered all the people outside in advance.

Subaru: “Uhhh, well, so you’re saying that Tanza gathered her horned comrades around the inn ahead of time and was planning on them attacking us? But, if that’s the case…”

Medium: “Where’d Tanza-chan go?”

The question with which Medium completed Subaru’s words was the answer that had not appeared in him just yet.

Tanza had appeared at the inn to deliver the instructions from Yorna, and should’ve gone straight back. Even though he could understand how she had arranged everything, the reaction of her comrades outside was weird.

At least, that Subaru’s group had done something to Tanza was what the sheepboy had believed.

Al: “So her comrades mustn’t have seen her safe and sound… No, they probably didn’t see her come out of the inn in the first place.”

Abel: “That too is reasonable. It could be that they did not attempt any radical measures until we left the inn, in light of the possibility that Tanza was inside talking to us.”

Medium: “But! Where’s Tanza-chan then—”

Medium, with wide eyes and her head in a state of turmoil, let out something resembling a scream.

However, Subaru could understand Abel’s thoughts once they were so carefully ordered. Perhaps, this was what Abel was thinking.

That was—

Subaru: “That girl… If Tanza isn’t outside the inn, she’s hiding somewhere. —And that means Olbart-san’s helping her?!”

—To take back Tanza, a group of people belonging to horned races had attacked Subaru's group.

However, since they had been waiting outside the inn since the start, they must've had a meeting beforehand on what they should do if something happened to Tanza.

And within that inn, the only possible conspirator for Tanza was—

Abel: "—None other than Olbart Dunkelkenn."

Al: "…It's also possible that the inn's employees worked together to hide her, y'know."

Abel: "Naturally, I am not blind to that possibility. But I have firm assurance."

Al: "Firm assurance?"

In response to Al's questioning voice, Abel nodded deeply.

Why was he convinced that Olbart and Tanza were conspiring together? That would be because—

Abel: "He took the trouble to challenge us to a mere child's game of running and hiding. That is the sort of vicious plot the old man is fond of."

Subaru: "Find me if you can~, like that?"

Abel: "Correct."

Subaru couldn't help but make a disgusted face at Abel's affirmation as he corrected his posture.

Abel's guess, based on the badness of Olbart's character, was spot on. Yes, Subaru was also intuitively convinced of the reason for the disgusted look.

The fact that he had suggested "hide-and-seek" was itself a metaphor for hiding Tanza.

Subaru: “But if that’s why we were attacked, then it’s a rule violation!”

Abel: “Are you referring to the rule about not harming each other? He would get away with it by saying, “I did not do anything”. Even more so if Tanza is in league with him.”

Subaru: “Guh… Such an unfair scheme…!”

Abel: “Therefore, the priority shall be to locate Olbart. Then, Tanza’s whereabouts shall be simultaneously disclosed. But if the plan is revealed, the pretext for playing “hide-and-seek” may vanish.”

He had now understood how the fact that Olbart and Tanza could be together had been discovered. But he didn’t understand the part on how that would be the end of the game of “hide-and-seek”.

His eyebrows furrowing, a frown formed on Subaru’s face. Now facing him, Abel snatched the oni mask from Subaru’s hand with violence.

Startled, Subaru exclaimed an “Ah!” as, in front of him, Abel put the oni mask back on,

Abel: “Olbart’s goal is to ascertain if we are worth negotiating with. He is more interested in this than in childish ploys. Therefore, if we can unravel his true intentions, we needn’t go through the trouble of a contrived process.”

Subaru: “Ahh, okay, I think I get it…”

Abel: “—. Is the extent of your intelligence becoming poor in earnest?”

To Subaru, who was barely following his explanation, Abel muttered so with a sigh.

He couldn’t counter Abel’s point. Subaru, too, was aware that his head was clearly out of whack. However, he wasn’t aware of to what extent.

Perhaps his thinking was shoddy, his words didn't come out right, or he just wasn't very smart.

Subaru: "I wasn't even a smart guy to begin with…"

Abel: "As for your case, the issue is that you have lost your ability to comprehend and your creativity. The details of Olbart's technique are unknown, but one theory would be that the body reflects the ups and downs of its own Od."

Subaru: "Th-The Od's ups and downs…?"

Abel: "It means that there is a connection between the Od and the body, their growth and decay. So to speak, we can assume that Olbart has meddled with your… or rather, all of your Ods."

Abel looked over at Subaru, Al, and Medium, whose bodies remained shrunk.

That explanation didn't ring a bell to Subaru. As was the case with his broken Gate, which was used for magic, he had no real sense of the explanation about Mana and Od, whose existence he had originally been unaware of.

That was only true for Subaru, but not for—

Al: "—So, it's because that old man was messing with our bodies."

Subaru was surprised to hear Al grumble so hatefully.

Looking over to him, Al was touching his mask-covered forehead with trembling fingers. That he was clearly showing to be uncontrollably irritated often was evidence that he, too, was having psychological effects.

The mental capacity which they were able to have as adults was being lost as they became more childish.

Al: "That shitty geezer, I'm gonna get you for this…!"

Abel: "To do that, we need to find where this "abyss with a great view" is located."

Subaru: “Yeah… Speaking of which, we were going to head for a tavern.”

With Al boiling with anger beside him, Subaru cut off his words there.

As a result of being forced to stay in the street, Taritta was acting as bait with the rest going separate ways. However, no explanation of the true purpose was given.

Why did Abel want to rush to a tavern?

Abel: “The basis of our hunt is numbers. Ideally, it should be someone that knows the land. However, it is possible that all the inhabitants of this city are siding with Tanza. Consequently, it would be better to utilize outsiders.”

Al: “So you’re targeting a bar where strangers might flock together. Sounds like an idea bro’d have.”

Subaru: “Um, that’s…”

He wanted to continue with “wrong”, but then remembered that he’d looked for a bodyguard in Guaral.

That had happened when a man, Todd, had targeted him; just remembering him made Subaru shudder. Among the many ideas he had considered to save himself, he’d headed to a tavern, planning to hire a strong escort.

Unfortunately, the drunken swordsman he had hired that time was soon killed.

Subaru: “But you need money to get help, don’t you? We can’t find that kind of money just anywhere.”

Abel: “That concern is irrelevant. I have a reward.”

Having said that, Abel shook the bag he was carrying.

As he’d called it necessary when carrying it out of the inn, Subaru was curious about what was inside.

In response to the look in his eyes, Abel did not go as far as to open the mouth of his bag, but said,

Abel: "When leaving Guaral, I had Zikr open the City Hall's treasury. This is the most efficient way to obtain collaborators. Not making use of it will not do."

Al: "…That was a shrewd thing to do."

Subaru: "But walking around with a lot of money while wearing an oni mask's dangerous, and will make you stand out… Oh, I see."

As he was saying this, Abel tapped his finger on the oni mask, reminding Subaru of his misplaced concern.

Since the oni mask had the effect of "cognitive disruption", the idea that it "stood out" was an incorrect way of thinking to begin with. Since it had no effect on Subaru's group, the difference between their actual situation and the reactions of the people around them was confusing.

Al: "So, we ain't changing what we're gonna do? We're all gonna go to a tavern and look for someone to help us find that old dude?"

Abel: "—Yes, that was the original idea. However, things have changed somewhat."

Subaru: "Things have changed, how so?"

Abel: "If Olbart and Tanza were behind this from the onset, they should be able to find a method to increase manpower quickly. While Olbart alone would have no influence in Demon City, Tanza's addition makes it a whole other matter. That girl has the position of attendant to Yorna Mishigure."

As Yorna held the highest position in Chaosflame, being Yorna's attendant would mean that person would be like a secretary. In other words, Tanza was the second most important person in the city, after Yorna.

Or rather, that meant that she could conduct herself as such.

Subaru: “If they really want to keep us reigned in, they’d put people around the taverns.”

Abel: “There is no need to fall into an obvious trap. Though, there may be ways to force our way through.”

During that conversation that made a change of plans necessary, Abel’s gaze turned to the side as he spoke. Subaru followed his line of sight, and his cheeks tensed up.

Louis: “Uau?”

That was because Louis stood, at the place where line of sight of the oni mask was directed too, tilting her head.

Louis, who’d turned the tables on their attackers and at the end mercilessly knocked the sheepboy into unconsciousness, was combing her fingers feverishly through her own blonde hair beside Medium, who’d become attached to her.

Despite her overwhelming fighting power, there was no change in her very attitude of innocence.

This, in turn, sent a cold shiver down Subaru’s spine.

Medium: “Oh, Louis-chan was amazing just now! I’m shocked that you were hiding abilities like that~”

Louis: “Auau.”

Medium: “Hehehe, thanks for saving me.”

In disregard of Subaru’s state of mind, Medium stroked Louis’s head, defenseless. The latter accepted that palm with calm, but Subaru’s heart was pounding.

So Subaru immediately let out a “Wait!”, even grabbing Medium’s wrist.

Medium: “Wah, Subaru-chin?”

Subaru: “Errr, Medium-san, you shouldn’t get close to her…”

Medium: “—? Why? She saved me, right? She even saved you, Subaru-chin.”

Subaru: “Well, that might be true, but… However…”

Subaru was unable to express a reply to Medium’s innocent question.

In fact, her view was honest and correct. Louis had saved Subaru. She had not hesitated in protecting Subaru with her petite body, even at the cost of getting hurt.

Subaru had desperately pleaded, “Don’t die”, as well.

Al: “Come on now, tell us what’s up.”

Seeing Subaru’s clenched teeth, Al spoke in a low voice.

Subaru gasped and looked down at the gloomy eyes through his mask. —He recalled that a few days ago, during the trip to Chaosflame, he’d kept Louis’s circumstances a secret from Al.

At that time, Subaru could not come to a decision on how to treat Louis, so he had put his answer on hold.

However—

Al: “Come on, this isn’t a situation that can be overlooked with a smile anymore. It’s not just my concern, but a concern all of us have.”

Subaru: “…”

Al: “What secret are you keeping about that girl?”

His questioning gaze was so intense that Subaru reflexively sheltered Louis behind him.

It was because he did not know how Louis would react to that gaze, rather than because he was trying to protect Louis—no, Subaru didn’t know if that was true as well.

If there was one thing he could say, however, it was that he couldn't deceive them any longer.

And Subaru's young, deficient brain could not even make up a lie that sounded plausible.

That was why—

Subaru: "She's, Louis is… the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony."

And so, all he could do was to clearly reveal the truth.

3

—The true identity of Louis Arneb.

It was a secret that Subaru had kept from Rem, who had lost her memories, and from everyone else they had met ever since being sent to the Vollachian Empire.

Subaru expected that the trouble that would result from the discovery of Louis's true identity as an Sin Archbishop, both concerning him and others, would be a lot. —No, it was bound to be much worse than he could've expected.

That was why Subaru hid that fact from the world until this very moment—

???: "—Sin… Archbishop."

A faltering voice ruminated on the words, the facts that Subaru had revealed.

It would be no wonder if Al and Abel were astonished by that fact. It was only natural to be alarmed, to want to verify the facts, to shout out how ridiculous all that would be.

However, the one whose voice trembled first was neither that of Al, nor that of Abel.

???: "Louis-chan's, a Sin Archbishop…"

Louis: “Uu?”

Indeed, Medium was the one to let out a shocked voice.

Medium’s blue eyes widened as she gazed motionlessly at Louis. Medium’s gaze caused said Louis to tilt her head and make a silly sound, as if she had no idea what she was talking about.

And that was exactly the reaction that Subaru feared the most.

He’d thought optimistically that perhaps Medium—No, that perhaps the O’Connell siblings would take it in stride and laugh it off as nothing at all.

However, his optimism had been misplaced, as he came to realize that it had only been an idealistic dream.

Medium: “…”

That was the unmistakable and certain “fear” that flashed across Medium’s eyes.

Al: “Bro, that joke ain’t funny.”

Subaru: “I-it’s not a joke…”

Al: “If this ain’t a joke, it’s even less funny!”

Subaru, shocked by Medium’s reaction, could not respond adequately to Al’s words that followed.

Raising his voice, Al drew out the Blue Dragon Sword he was carrying on his back with violence. Of course, it was not something that a single tiny arm of a child could hold with ease, so the sword that had been pulled out had buried its tip in the ground.

Still, if he swung it using all his weight, it could still be used. Loaded with that sharp intent, Al’s gaze turned to Subaru and Louis behind him.

Al: “You can’t be right in the head, carrying a Sin Archbishop around. You haven’t forgotten what happened in Pristella, have you?”

Subaru: “Th-That’s…”

Al: “Me and Priscilla… No harm was done to the Princess, but that’s just happenstance. Your people and acquaintances got put through hell. One of the reasons why is that right there.”

There was no way to argue with the anger in Al’s voice, who leaned against the Blue Dragon Sword stuck in the ground.

Al was completely right. By all accounts, it was Subaru who was in the wrong. He should not have taken Louis with him, nor should he have let Louis run amok.

He should have revealed her true identity, tied her up, and held her captive, depriving her of her freedom.

But Subaru had not done that. Aside from that—

Subaru: “A-Abel…?”

He looked at Abel, wondering if the latter agreed with Al in his silence.

Now that Medium was afraid and Al was angry, Abel’s attitude was the last bastion—and Subaru couldn’t even tell for whom he was a bastion.

However, if everyone at this place chose to be hostile to Louis,

Subaru: “…”

For certain, Subaru could put a stop to this hesitation and start moving.

Abel: “I know not how they are handled in other nations.”

Just before Subaru as he took a gulp, a man in an oni mask carrying a bag met his gaze head-on.

Black eyes met black eyes, and Subaru’s chest was pierced by the cold gaze. His brain started shutting down, as if rejecting the words he should have waited for, and the content that was to follow.

That voice slowly penetrated into that numb brain of his.

That was—

Abel: “In the Empire, those who serve the Witch for any reason whatsoever are executed.”

A definitive declaration from an existence that stood at the pinnacle of the Empire, even though he had been ousted from his throne.

It was a verdict of execution that clearly asserted that they would never be able to see eye-to-eye.

The moment he heard this, Subaru tightly shut his eyes—

Subaru: “—Hk, Louis!”

Medium: “Subaru-chin!”

Just as he emotionally shouted her name, a small pair of hands went around Subaru’s waist.

Immediately after, Medium’s voice echoed like a cry, and Subaru’s legs left the ground and floated up into the air—no, Louis, who was attached to Subaru’s waist, leaped high up with Subaru.

Why, did he call out Louis’s name, what kind of meaning had been in there; Biting his molars, Subaru held back the tears coming to his eyes for some reason.

It just came to his mind.

Louis: “Uau.”

That he should not abandon this girl now, who was clutching him around the waist and was ooh’ing and aah’ing.

It wasn’t that he had returned the favor and saved her life because she had saved him. It wasn’t that Subaru mistakenly felt something like compassion and a need to protect her. It just came to his mind.

With the shrinking of not only his limbs but also the contents of his head, Subaru regretted that he had given an answer about this girl, who he didn't know what to think of.

That was Subaru's problem, something that had nothing to do with Rem or the many people they had met so far.

It was a problem that Natsuki Subaru absolutely had to face with all his might.

Al: "Bro! Get back here! Fucking—!"

Al, looking up, shouted at him, but Louis's feet did not stop as she kicked off the wall and leapt away.

While hugging Subaru's back, Louis kicked the wall of the building facing the street and ascended to the rooftop, then moved on to the next street without any trouble, and the next one after that.

In Chaosflame, a city covered with scaffolding, in which jointed paths could be freely created, Louis's boundless lack of restraint was truly unrivaled.

Subaru: "Bwah!"

After a few more leaps, Subaru dismounted and got down on his hands and knees, taking repeated deep breaths. It was painful, not only to defy gravity so many times, but also to have Louis's slender arms tighten like a vise around his torso.

Louis, the person in question, peeked at Subaru's face from the side. The fact that Louis was so energetic was loathsome.

But, this was not the time for him to loath her face.

Subaru: "Shit, Abel and the others…"

That was the result of his own actions. To say that he'd just strayed from the others would be too obvious of a lie.

But had he stayed in that place, who knew what orders Abel would have given; judging from Al's reaction, he would not have let Louis off peacefully.

He could also say that not much could be expected from Medium's ability to defuse situations.

That said, he blamed his heart for not obeying and handing Louis over to them.

Louis: "Uau?"

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Subaru raised his head and saw Louis's blue eyes looking at him innocently.

Subaru's attitude of not caring at all about things such as hostility and fear directed at him made him feel like an idiot, for letting his mind go around in circles like this.

Subaru: "I'm an idiot. No, I am definitely an idiot."

In fact, he was a big idiot.

Abel aside, it was idiotic to leave Medium and Al behind, and run away with Louis.

He had no idea what they were thinking or what they could do.

Subaru: "Still, if I make the decision now, I might regret it. This isn't something a little kid should be deciding."

The life and death of people, and ultimately the future of the Empire, were both very important matters, so he thought.

It was strange that such a big issue should be decided by a child of only about ten years old, subjected to the eyes of a ruthless adult. —It was wrong.

Subaru: "I'm sure the original me could make the right decision. So…"

He must dispel this "infantilization" as soon as possible, and return from being the little boy Natsuki Subaru to the young man Natsuki Subaru.

That way, he would be able to fret over whether or not to deal with Louis, and give a reasonable answer to the decision his companions had reached, and attain a satisfactory conclusion.

To that end—

Subaru: "—Let's find Olbart-san. I'm going to do everything I can, without relying on Abel and the others."

Louis: "Aa, uu!"

Louis raised her head in response to Subaru, lifting both her hands in the air with a cheerful look on her face.

Looking down on the landscape of the Demon City from scaffolding up high, two small children breathed alongside each other, aspiring to find the shinobi head honcho who'd turned against the residents of Chaosflame and the ousted Emperor.

—Unexpectedly, Subaru and Louis were the Oni in the game of "hide-and-seek" and the ones being chased by the Oni in the game of "tag".

Chapter 49: The Stars Aligned

1

Al: “Damn it! I can’t see them anywhere…!”

Looking up at the sky from the street, as his gaze swept over the numerous scaffolds, the masked figure of a boy—no, of Al, yelled as he stomped on the ground.

The unbelievable situation that had just occurred had spurred his frustration and made his heart boil with fury.

Absurd, that was all he could say about that turn of events.

Medium: “Subaru-chin, Louis-chan…”

On the other hand, in contrast to Al, his anger laid bare, Medium muttered so, her face downcast.

The young girl dressed like a dancer rolled herself into a ball, concerned for the two who had fled the scene.

However, the nature of the emotions in her murmur was complicated and confused.

It was difficult to say that it was only out of concern. It was undoubtedly related to the words Subaru had spoken before his disappearance.

Medium: “Louis-chan’s…”

Abel: “—A Sin Archbishop, he said.”

Medium: “—Hk.”

Upon finding the continuation of the words that had unintentionally leaked from her own lips, Medium’s eyes widened.

Disregarding Medium, Abel gazed upwards toward the sky, just like Al. He had put his mask back on and was no longer showing his face, so it was impossible for others to tell what he was thinking.

However, it was clear from his fingers tapping his crossed arms that this situation was not a welcome one, for him.

Medium: “Abel-chin, those two…”

Abel: “—. Our priority is to get this situation under control. Our course of action remains the same. Unfortunately, the number of methods we possess has once more abated by one.”

To Medium’s feeble question, Abel returned an answer in a cold tone.

He did not mention Subaru and Louis explicitly. But it was apparent that Abel did not intend to rejoin them immediately.

Hearing this, Medium felt both anxiety and relief deep in her heart.

There was a feeling of worry regarding those two, as well as a feeling of relief for not having to also confront them.

She also felt horrified that she had been told something that should not even be said in jest, in a situation where it could not be laughed off as a joke.

Al: “You want to leave him alone? Bro, and particularly now, when he’s got the mind of a child!”

Abel: “So what shall we do? The situation we are in will not be any different. I shall warn you, if you and Medium are no longer useful, I shall need to leave you behind.”

Al: “Guh…”

Abel: “Do not presume you alone hold the right to choose who we ally with or not, clown.”

Unable to speak, Al wanted to join up with the stranded Subaru and Louis, but this was coldly rejected by Abel. However, Al’s focus was only Subaru; Louis's existence was secondary.

Al's attitude regarding Louis, whose identity as a bomb had been revealed, was clear.

Al: "I can't leave bro and that brat together…"

As he muttered to himself, cupping his mouth, Al's hostility towards Louis was apparent.

Medium wished to complain about Al's attitude, but she herself could not come to a decision on her attitude toward Louis, and an uncharacteristic deliberation formed in that silence.

Abel: "…"

Abel, glancing sideways towards the two, once again looked up overhead.

Their figures no longer visible, Subaru and Louis had jumped somewhere into the Demon City, as nary a trace remained of them in this jumble of a sight his gaze lay on.

Abel: "Fool."

The single word that escaped his mouth, was a mutter to nobody in particular.

2

—And so, while in this unprecedented situation, Subaru had gone on his own, separate from his friends.

It had been a spur-of-the-moment act, he really couldn't say it was a decision he had arrived at after properly thinking about the future.

Even so, there'd definitely be some regrets about that situation if he did make a decision in a hurry. All he could say with certainty was that he'd taken that action to avoid having regrets.

And now, Subaru was already "regretting" the decision he had made.

Because—

Louis: “Au, uau!”

Subaru: “Stop it, Louis! That’s enough!”

Using a chokehold on Louis’s small body from behind, Subaru pulled her writhing body away. The one he pulled her away from, was a now-unconscious man who had pursued them before being straddled by Louis.

After parting with Abel and the others, they had managed to jump across the scaffolding in the city, and while looking for Olbart to restore the “infantilized” Subaru, the enemy caught up with them.

Apparently, the pursuers were aware of the appearance of the “infantilized” Subaru and of a target who had not visited the castle tower, Louis. It seemed Abel’s guess was correct.

In other words, Olbart and Tanza were accomplices, and the information they held was also passed to their pursuers— those of the horned races.

As a result, Subaru, who was traveling alone with Louis, had been chased and almost caught—

Louis: “Uu!”

Louis’s fighting skills, which she had shown on the street, exploded, and their pursuers were quickly neutralized.

That in itself was a blessing. Even before his limbs had shrunk, Subaru’s fighting ability was a disappointment. He would be no match even against those of the city who didn’t know how to fight, because Yorna had given them a portion of her power through the Soul Marriage Technique.

However, the problem was that Louis would not stop attacking, even after she had neutralized their pursuers.

Louis: “Auu…”

Subaru: “Don’t “auu” me! If you do that, they’ll die! These people are just scared, that’s all. That wouldn’t be good at all!”

Louis: “Uu.”

Her legs flailing, Louis calmed down after hearing Subaru’s warning.

He didn’t know whether she understood what he had just said, but at any rate, she seemed to understand that Subaru was angry. Seeing this, Subaru tended to the fallen opponent.

As he had no first-aid kit, all he could do was to lay his head up high and wipe the bleeding wound.

Subaru: “…These people as well.”

Louis: “Uau?”

Subaru: “They’re desperate. They don’t want their place in the world to be destroyed.”

The young men, a sheepman and a deerman, who had been beaten up by Louis, were still in their late teens or early twenties, not much different from the original Subaru. The people around the inn, and the sheep boy who had thrown Subaru in the street, were all of varying ages, there was nothing that made them seem like friends.

But there was a definite connection. That being, the horns that grew on their heads.

Depending on the person, they could be different for having one or two horns, but a horn was a horn.

The influence it’d had on their lives was not something Subaru, who knew of Emilia’s case, could scoff at.

Subaru: “I’m glad Rem isn’t here, I guess.”

As a member of the oni tribe, Rem had the characteristic horn that grew on her forehead.

Unlike those beastmen, the horns would not be grown out all the time, but as a someone from a horned race, it was possible she was not entirely unrelated to the situations they'd experienced in life.

Not like he'd ever heard something of the sort from Ram or Rem, though.

Subaru: "I don't think Ram'd give a crap of what anyone said about her."

Because Ram was the type to go her own way, no matter what the outside world had to say about her horn, it was certain that she would blow their words off with a snickering "Ha!".

With her strength that was not bound by race nor title, it was certain she would.

—Perhaps, such a girl could keep a level head upon finding out about Louis.

Subaru: "…I'm an idiot."

Louis: "Uau."

Striking his forehead with his fist, Subaru withdrew his shameful and selfish thoughts.

Seeing Subaru's gesture, Louis, who was crouching next to him, tilted her head.

Ram was not present. Emilia, and Beatrice as well, everyone was not present.

Even Rem, who was closest to him, was still in Guaral, far away from here—there was no time to comfort himself by relying on someone not present.

Subaru: "Anyway, it's bad if we stick around standing out. We need to hide quickly."

Honestly, considering his original plan, running and hiding would be a waste of time. Normally, he'd have to chase after the person running away and hiding.

And yet, Subaru had become the one being chased.

Subaru: “Maybe Abel won’t look for us… I guess. He’s probably angry, and might believe that finding Olbart-san’s more important, I guess.”

Louis: “Au.”

Subaru: “Should we join up with Taritta-san? Taritta-san’s being chased by a lot of people in a strange city… No, that’s no good.”

Placing his hand to his head, Subaru put on hold the idea of joining up with the clueless Taritta.

He didn’t feel like he could successfully explain to Taritta why he was not with Abel and the others. He’d have to lie, but lying wouldn’t solve the problem.

Medium was out of the question. Once Taritta found out that Louis was a Sin Archbishop, she would see her as dangerous, and distance herself from her, just as the others did.

Subaru: “I’m worried about Taritta-san, but I think Abel and the others might be looking for her over there.”

Right now, he didn’t want to join up with Abel and the others, from whom he’d just become separated.

Without an answer to how Louis should be handled, he thought it’d be more of the same with Abel and the others. Besides, he didn’t want to be hated by everyone for arguing with them like that again.

The past him, who had been unable to persuade everyone, also didn’t want to become hated.

Subaru: “Louis, let’s go. We need to find Olbart-san at “an abyss with a great view”.”

Louis: “Uau.”

While saying this, Subaru linked hands with Louis and pulled her along to make her walk away.

He had no idea of where to go originally, but after she'd unveiled her power—the Authority of Gluttony, his anxiety became even greater.

Therefore—

Subaru: "If you don't want to die, stay close to me. I don't want you to die either… now."

Louis: "Aa, uu."

Whether she understood or not, Louis nodded her head in acceptance. With that, Subaru let out a deep breath at the girl's smiling face.

Two children, wandering around in a strange city, aimlessly trying to solve a riddle—

Subaru: "This makes me feel like I'm truly a missing child."

That weak mutter was all he could muster.

3

—After that, Subaru and Louis's chase sequence, as well as their escape, was complicated.

Probably because Subaru did not have a good grasp of the city's layout, and because communicating with his companion was difficult, and genuinely because of Subaru's bad luck.

At any rate, he was being chased around inside the Demon City. Unable to find this "abyss with a great view", his time was running out with every moment that went by.

Subaru: "Louis! Stop fighting! Run, run, run, run!"

Louis: "Au! Uh!"

As Louis rushed out, Subaru stopped her by literally bumping her with all his weight.

He hopped onto her tiny back, forcing himself in a position of being carried by piggyback. Louis propped up Subaru's body to keep him from being shaken off as she then leapt high to escape from the ones chasing them.

???: "Don't let them get away!"

And the ones to shout that while chasing after them, were the horned beastmen patrolling the Demon City.

Apparently, their pursuers were really only those with horns. Regarding the inhabitants of Chaosflame, Subaru had seen many demi-humans without horns. It seemed that they had not been given the order to capture Subaru and Louis.

Subaru: "Seems like that Tanza girl doing this of her own free will…"

Tanza was a young deergirl, although she held something like the position of a secretary to Yorna, Subaru supposed there was a limit to how far she could make those under her command move.

As a result, there'd be no way to escape if all the inhabitants of Chaosflame were to become "it". It seemed that the girl was also fighting on the edge of how much she could abuse her power.

Even then, they were being cornered plenty on that edge. From Subaru's point of view, she could have even held back a bit.

Subaru: "Uh… They're coming after us! Louis, don't attack! We gotta get out of here!"

Louis: "Uu?"

Subaru: "Why not! The reason is, everything! Anyhow, this isn't working!"

With Subaru on her back, stepping on window frames of buildings and protruding scaffolds, Louis did not seem happy with this escape decided upon by a single person, as she went bounce-bounce all over the city.

She looked as if she wanted to say that they'd win if she fought; Subaru protested this by tugging on her cheek.

Indeed, if Louis did fight, she might be able to defeat their pursuers.

However, if Louis were to fight, those following them might get killed. Hypothetically, even if she knocked them unconscious, there was no telling if Louis would stop her assault there.

Actually, just a short while ago, if Subaru hadn't stopped her, Louis would've thrown their pursuers off the high scaffolding, dropping them to the ground below.

Louis had not seemed to have lost her almost infant-like innocence.

But, even with that innocence, the power of Gluttony had returned to Louis. Subaru dreaded that, as It seemed to be no different from the rampage of the original "Louis Arneb".

If this Louis ever went back to being "Louis Arneb"—

Subaru: "—That'd mean that Abel and the others' opinion is right."

In that case, there was no need to run away from the street and no need to strain his relationship with Abel and the others.

The existence of the girl known as Louis, was something Subaru was required to worry about, strangely.

Which was why it was no good.

Subaru: "I won't let you kill anyone else, any more."

As long as Natsuki Subaru's eyes were black, he would not let that happen.

Louis: "—Au."

Louis gazed forward quietly as Subaru tightened his hold upon her back.

It seemed she had retracted her complaining attitude from before for the time being, reconsidering doing what Subaru had suggested. For now, Louis tried to shake off the beastmen on their tails; bouncing and skipping repeatedly, she continued to run away as her golden hair whipped about.

However—

Subaru: “So, stubborn…!”

Maybe it was natural, since the only effort they were making to shake them off was running away, but it was difficult to give the beastmen chasing them the slip. In addition to knowing the lay of the land, because of the flame in one of their eyes—because of Yorna’s Soul Marriage Technique, the gap between them was shrinking, rather than growing.

Subaru: “If it goes on like this—”

They would get caught; as such Subaru bit down on teeth that were neither baby nor permanent.

It was at that moment.

???: “—You two, this way.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Louis: “Au?”

Louis kicked off the wall with force, as she tried to trick the eye of their pursuers with sharp movements. Before they could see if what they intended had been fulfilled, a voice reached the two as they landed on the street.

Taking a look at it, a young man with a thin face was beckoning Subaru and Louis to come over. There were no horns to be found on the young man’s head at a quick glance, but that didn’t put Subaru at ease right away.

Subaru: “Y-you’re…”

Young Man: “You’re being chased, aren’t you? From the looks of it, those people seem to be preeettyyy~ serious. This is some friendly advice so it’d be nice if you could be good and hear what I have to say.”

In response to Subaru’s wary look, the young man beckoned to him with a friendly smile. Just like that, he used his hand to point out a cart on the road to Subaru and Louis, the two out of breath.

Specifically, he was indicating a gap between several barrels in the back of said cart,

Young Man: “Since you two have small bodies, you’ll fit in there for sure.”

Subaru: “B-but even if we hide there it doesn’t mean…”

Young Man: “We don’t have any more time. The alignment of the stars changes every moment. It’s up to you, of course, to shun this alignment, or to accept it.”

Subaru: “…”

Young Man: “Hoooweeever~, I think it’s in your best interest to come with me.”

Waving his empty hands in the air, the young man laughed to show that he meant no harm.

Subaru hesitated quite a bit on whether he should trust that smile or not. But he was right, he didn’t have much time to spend hesitating.

Therefore—

4

???: “They must’ve come this way!”

A group of bloodthirsty men appeared, searching for any sign of the missing fugitives. As they went along, they spotted a young man standing near a cart, leaning his back against a wall.

???: “Hey, you there! Did two kids come by here?”

Young Man: “Huh? Umm, you wouldn’t be talking to me, would you? I’m sorry, but I was just taking a break for a sec here…”

???: “Like I said, I was wondering if you’ve seen them during your break… Oh, forget it!”

The oxman, who had approached the cart with noisy footsteps, gave up because of the young man’s dismissive words. But that didn’t mean that the oxman had overlooked the cart near the youth.

He stopped questioning the young man, instead refocusing his attention on the cart.

Oxman: “Say, what’s the cargo?”

Young Man: “Well, what do you think it is? What kinda merchant do I look like?”

Oxman: “Tch.”

At the elusive young man’s words, the oxman clicked his tongue and glared at the cart. Then, grabbing a pile of barrels, he tipped the load effortlessly, his right eye burning.

With a loud bang, the setup of unbalanced cargo was thrown about. The stacked barrels swayed from one side to the other; if anyone had been hiding in the back of the cart, they would have been struck by the weight of the barrels.

Seeing this, the oxman took his hand off the barrel and,

Oxman: “Sorry for disturbing you.”

Leaving behind those words, he walked away from the scene with his companions.

Behind him, the young man called out with “Please fix the barrels!”.

However, as the other part didn't reply, the young man gave a shrug of his thin shoulders

Young Man: "Good griiief~, they were arrogant people, weren't they? I dunno what to think of them."

Talking to himself, the young man approached the cart on the deserted street. He crouched down to look underneath the cart instead of at the load.

There—

Young Man: "You were right not to carelessly hide in the back of the cart. If you had hid there, every bone in your body would've been shattered by now. That would've been very painful, wouldn't it?"

Subaru: "…Don't say such scary things."

Louis: "Uu."

The young man made a dreadful remark in a light-hearted tone, with a smile on his face, as Subaru and Louis crawled out from the cart they had hidden under.

It was natural to think that, given the cart had been loaded with barrels, they'd be hidden there. Subaru, at first, did as he'd been told and tried to hide in the back of the cart, but as he'd had a bad feeling about it, he had decided not to.

Subaru: "But, since there was no time to run, I hid under the back of the cart."

Young Man: "I think it was a very good decision. I'm not very good at lying, and I would've told him right away if he had questioned me a bit too roughly."

Subaru: "…No problem, I wouldn't have expected any different because you're not one of us."

Having been underneath the cart, clinging onto its wheels, Subaru patted the dirt off his hands and clothes, and then patted Louis's equally dirty body.

Apparently, the pursuers had lost sight of Subaru and Louis, so he should be grateful to the young man for his help.

Subaru: “But, why did you help us?”

Young Man: “Why did I help? Hmmmhm, why, huh. Oh, how about the fact that I couldn’t stand to see children being chased?”

Subaru: “If you’re putting it as “How about”, you definitely just made it up…”

Young Man: “Have I been found out?”

Faced by Subaru’s doubtful eyes, the young man stroked his head in an annoyed fashion.

He smiled bitterly, but from what Subaru could tell, he was not a demi-human. Not only did he have no horns, but he also had no animal-like ears, skin, nor claws.

That aside, this human being right now gave off the atmosphere of being from outside of Chaosflame.

Subaru: “You’re…”

Young Man: “Oh, whoops, I’m Ubilk. I can understand why you might wanna doubt me, but there’s not much I can say.”

Subaru: “What do you mean, there’s not much you can say?”

Ubilk: “The only reason I helped you two was because I thought it’d be a good idea.”

Laughing, the young man—Ubilk, ran his fingers through his ashen hair.

His gestures and good looks made Subaru think that Ubilk was a man with a proper job. Even his travel clothes, which appeared to be lightly worn, looked like they had been paid for with a fair amount of money.

Subaru thought that he was surely a merchant, because he was hauling a cart.

Subaru: “Is that what you’d call a merchant’s intuition?”

Ubilk: “A merchant’s… Oh, me? Hahaha, no. I’m no merchant or anything like that. And this cart isn’t mine either.”

Subaru: “Huh?! But, you told those people…”

Ubilk: “I never said I was a merchant. Of course, I also never said that this cart belonged to me. It’s just a cart that happens to be sitting here. It probably belongs to the store right there, doesn’t it?”

After those words, Ubilk pointed to the nearest store and said, “I wonder if it’s that one? Or maybe it could be that one?”. He was kidding, but he didn’t seem to be entirely joking.

In other words, it seemed that he’d really simply bluffed his way out of that pursuit.

Louis: “Uau.”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah, I get it.”

As he kept up with Ubilk’s pace, Louis unexpectedly pulled on his sleeve.

Subaru, who was starting to wonder whether it was alright to stand still, reflected on his own carefree self who was being rushed by Louis.

Their situation hadn’t gotten any better, even though they had shaken off their pursuers.

Subaru: “Well, thank you for your help, Ubilk-san. But you should think and act more seriously next time. I’m sure you’re going to get into a lot of trouble because of this…”

Ubilk: “Whaat’s~ that, are you worried about me? Do I look so unfortunate? I think I’m a pretty worldly man, but you seem to disagree.”

Subaru: “No, not that I’m suspicious of you or anything, but we’re in a hurry.”

To tell the truth, he was suspicious.

In this case, the suspicion wasn’t that Ubilk was necessarily Tanza and Olbart’s spy, but rather that he could be a dangerous adult who was genuinely unrelated to them.

As the two of them, Subaru and Louis both, were just children as of now, dealing with suspicious adults was plenty scary.

If the other party were a dangerous adult, Subaru might not be able to stop Louis from beating him to a pulp. Dealing with dangerous adults was a bridge too far for children to deal with.

Subaru: “Well, we’ve got stuff to do, so let’s keep it at that. Thanks for helping us.”

With that, Subaru pulled Louis by the hand and quickly walked away after an expression of his gratitude.

However—

Ubilk: “Please waaait~ a minute. Don’t be so curt, let’s help one another. I think the spirit of mutual aid’s a wonderful thing.”

As he said this, Ubilk used his long, slender legs to jog around Subaru, cutting him off.

Immediately, Subaru’s Suspicious-and-Dangerous-Adult Index rose, and Ubilk’s standing with him was put into question. Going into details, Louis’s grip on his hand tightened and she voiced an “Uu?”, as she could sense Subaru’s caution towards Ubilk.

A case such as Louis leaping out as soon as she had Subaru’s approval, for her to then beat Ubilk to the ground and stuff him into a barrel, was possible.

Subaru: “Ubilk-san, are you flexible?”

Ubilk: “Me? Well, in my old work experience, the more flexible my body was, the more I could handle, so I was a flexible person. But, what are you asking me?”

Subaru: “No, no, it’s nothing… Helping each other, is there something you want us to help you with?”

Ubilk: “Oh, nooo~, that’s not what I meant. The spirit of mutual aid was just a slip of the tongue, not a request for help. Ahaha.”

Subaru: “…”

Once again, the Suspicious-and-Dangerous-Adult Index had increased.

This time, in addition to that, he felt that a novel Adult Index aside from the Dangerous one, the Adult-He-Didn’t-Want-Anything-To-Do-With Index, had just been newly established.

Anyway, this was not someone he wanted to spend much time with.

Ubilk: “Hahaha… Whaaat’s~ this, the mood’s colder than I expected. This is the same feeling I get when I’m surrounded by everyone. They hate me. Do you hate me?”

Subaru: “If possible, I’d prefer not to…”

Ubilk: “Ohhh~, you’re an honest one. Well then, since you seem to be in a hurry, and since you’re honest, and I like honest people, let’s have a quick serious chat.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

As Ubilk said this, he bent at the waist and brought his face closer to Subaru. Subaru’s head dropped as he gulped unwittingly, and Louis, stepping forward, put her hand out in front of him in response.

She then pushed on Ubilk’s cheek from the side, threatening him with an “Uu!”.

Ubilk: “Whoooops~, she hates me. I thought I had a good reputation with girls, but I guess it’s different if they’ve already got a companion.”

Subaru: “…Ubilk-san, it’d be best if you don’t make Louis angry. This girl, well, she’s more powerful than she looks.”

Ubilk: “I see, Louis-san’s her name, isn’t it.”

Ubilk nodded his head, and Subaru gulped at his response.

There was no problem with him knowing her name, but he knew that he’d given out information that he shouldn’t have. He didn’t want to give more information to someone without knowing what kind of adult they were.

Subaru: “Ubilk-san! You said it’d be a serious chat, yeah? If there’s nothing else, we should go!”

Ubilk: “—I wasn’t planning on walking about the streets today at all.”

Subaru: “What?”

Ubilk: “Fooor~ some reason though, I found myself wandering around aimlessly, wondering if something was going on, based on a feeling I had. So I came here on a whim, and killed some time next to this cart. And then…”

Placing his fingers on his forehead, he slid them to the gentle corner of his eye, to his clear, white cheeks, then down to his sculpted chin. At the end, Ubilk snapped his fingers.

Subaru was visibly stunned, transfixed by his behavior, and Ubilk, whose smile deepened at his reaction, waved his snapping fingers from side to side,

Ubilk: “You two appeared by nimbly leaping over my head.”

Subaru: “…”

Ubilk: “…Whaat’s~ this, perhaps that didn’t resonate with you?”

Tilting his head, Ubilk looked in turn at Subaru and Louis, both of whom didn’t react.

Louis simply might not have understood what was being said, but not Subaru. After hearing Ubilk’s answer, Subaru just could not speak.

He wondered if there was some grand, far-reaching reason hidden in there.

Subaru: “So you were just out for a walk, resting, and then we came along?”

Ubilk: “Haaa~, you can say it that way too, I guess. Buuut~, I think I can also say it this way. —I think all this is just the stars’ guidance.”

Subaru: “The stars’… fate, or something like that…”

Although it sounded very romantic, Subaru’s shoulders slumped.

It would’ve been romantic had it been spoken at the beginning of a story in which a man and woman met, but here there was a combination of the shrunken Subaru and the originally small Louis. And Ubilk, the weirdo.

This was not romantic at all.

Ubilk: “Are you amazed by me, perchance?”

Subaru: “Well, it’s alright. Even if Ubilk-san’s seriousness isn’t that serious, it doesn’t bother me so much because he’s a person I don’t want to see ever again.”

Ubilk: “You said some pretty harsh and hurtful things to me. That kinda sharpness is similar to that of my old friend’s.”

Subaru: “Ubilk-san, you’ve got a friend…?”

Ubilk: “Ahaha, that hurt!”

He couldn’t help but let out a rude, honest thought, but Ubilk didn’t seem to be offended.

For just a moment, he thought that there some sort of subtle, complicated feeling from Ubilk towards his friend, somewhere in his sentimental, straightforward and unserious attitude.

Ubilk: “Anyway, it’s by some kinda fate that we met here. Hmmm~, that’s it! I’m actually in the business of giving small consultations. What do you think, why don’t you ask me for counselling?”

Subaru: “Finally, there it is! No thanks… No, I heard on TV that way of answering’s convenient for scammers. I don’t want it!”

Ubilk: “I’m not a pushy salesman, and I’m not here to trick you, okay? I just wanna do my assigned role, thooo~.”

Subaru: “Your assigned role?”

Ubilk: “Indeed, there must’ve been a reason as to why I’m here today. It’s probably for the chance for you and Louis-san to consult me.”

Ubilk nodded repeatedly, crossing his thin arms and acting like he was the only one who understood.

Unfortunately, Ubilk’s conviction did not sit well with Subaru. It was simply that the Suspicious and Dangerous Adult Index was gradually increasing in value.

He’d rather just leave Ubilk here and run away if possible. He felt that even though Ubilk had given the slip to their pursuers, he was now entangled with a more troublesome opponent.

Ubilk: “Oh, it’s no use trying to escape. Iiif~ you try to run away…”

Subaru: “Then what?”

Ubilk: “I’ll shout, and tell the people who just came by where you two are. You’d be in trouble, right?”

Subaru: “We’d be in a lot of trouble…!”

If that were to happen however, he was willing to unleash Louis.

Of course, as he didn't want to let Ubilk die, Subaru would do everything in his power to stop Louis's rampage, but he was prepared to use her as his last resort if Ubilk wanted to call out to their pursuers.

Besides—

Subaru: "I'm sorry, but you don't want to know what's going on with us. If you hear about it, you might get involved and I don't think you can do anything about it."

Even if Subaru and Louis did nothing, Tanza and her comrades might hurt Ubilk. If that happened, it'd be Subaru and Louis's fault.

His thoughts were that he couldn't involve Ubilk in such a situation.

However—

Ubilk: "Oh, don't worry about it, I'll be alright. I said I'd give you a consultation, but I'm a consultant who's just fine without hearing any specifics."

Subaru: "There's something like that?!"

Ubilk: "Well, well, if you think you've been lied to, lend me your hand."

Subaru's concern was overshadowed by Ubilk's carefree smile as he gently took Subaru's hand.

Since his right hand was connected to Louis's, the hand taken was his opposite left hand. Surprised by the touch of Ubilk's slender, feminine fingers, Subaru hurriedly glanced at Louis.

Louis: "Uu."

Fortunately, Louis had not a temper short enough as to suddenly attack Ubilk, although she was staring at his movements.

But that meant that he'd have to watch over a situation that was much like a balloon that could burst at any moment, all while having to keep filling it with air.

Subaru: “Umm, Ubilk-san, I don’t have much time, and neither do you… “

Ubilk: “Whaaat’s~ that, you’re suddenly making me nervous too. — But I’m already done.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

While he was anxious about Louis’s line of sight aimed at Ubilk’s thin neck, after urging him on, Subaru’s arm was released from Ubilk’s grasp.

Removing his hand, Ubilk gently turned his palm towards Subaru’s face and,

Ubilk: “—The answer you’re seeking’s already within you.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru’s eyes widened due to those unexpected words.

At Subaru’s lack of understanding, Ubilk uttered “Ohhh~?”, and tilted his head.

Ubilk: “Maybe that didn’t ring a bell?”

Subaru: “It’s not that it didn’t ring a bell, it’s just that I don’t really understand what it means… “

The answer he was looking for was also vague.

He felt that it was similar to what fortune tellers used to say on TV back at his original world. It was a common phrase used to scam people by saying something that applied to anyone.

Subaru: “I don’t think there are too many people who aren’t looking for answers…”

Ubilk: “Hmmm~, I’m not talking about something as big as life itself. I’m sorry to say that I’m not a person able to see the movement of stars that well.”

Subaru: “Like a horoscope… “

Ubilk: “Maybe it’s the problem in front of you. You see, you were both being chased, right? That’s also a problem, isn’t it? What do you think about that?”

Subaru: “But, I know why those people were after me—”

Perhaps confident in his own ability as a counselor, Ubilk tried to get closer to the right answer by delving into Subaru’s inner thoughts.

He wasn’t sure about it; it felt a bit like a scammer’s trick, but once he took it seriously, there was a slight tug at Subaru’s heart.

Subaru: “…”

That tug seemed to be a very important one.

Of course, he didn’t know just how much of what he felt in his small Subaru head could be believed. However, even if he didn’t believe in the “thoughts” of a small Subaru, there should be room to believe in the “intuition” of a small Subaru, regardless of the size of the body.

The problem that Subaru was facing right now, was—

Subaru: “…”An abyss with a great view”.”

Ubilk had pointed out that the answer was already in Subaru.

He wasn’t trying to probe deeper into the kind of scam it was. But he felt it.

—That tug he felt, if he could rope it in, he should be able to find the answer he was looking for.

Louis: “Uau?”

Subaru: “I think I might’ve figured it out.”

Louis looked into Subaru’s face once he replied to her, whose shapely eyebrows distorted into a frown. With the sound of Subaru's voice, which had slightly regained its strength, Louis widened her blue eyes and then smiled happily.

Seeing the change in Louis's expression from the side, Subaru exhaled, then looked at Ubilk.

Subaru: "The consultation might've worked."

Ubilk: "Ohhh~, I'm glad. I'm relieved, too. If I'm gonna do this, I wanna do my job properly. Then?"

Subaru: "Yeah, I'll hurry. Thank you for everything, Ubilk-san. — Let's go, Louis!"

Louis: "Auau!"

In response to Ubilk, who closed one eye, Subaru pulled Louis's hand and began sprinting.

He started to run as fast as he could, stopping only once. And upon looking back, he saw that Ubilk's eyes were widened, possibly because he hadn't expected Subaru's actions.

Subaru waved his hand at him, and,

Subaru: "Ubilk-san, I won't say anything bad about you, so just go back to your parents'! And so that you don't seem so dangerous, behave yourself, and stop scamming people!"

With gratitude, that was all the self-serving "counsel" Subaru could give him.

5

After that, he watched the boy and girl leave in a hurry.

Ubilk: ""Stop scamming people", that's a bit harsh."

That young man who had been left on his lonesome in the street—Ubilk, smiled and scratched his cheek with his finger.

It had been a strange time, but judging from the boy's appearance at the end, he felt that he had been able to help in some way, which made him feel a tug at his heart.

And then—

Ubilk: "If I don't go back to my room as soon as possible, Kafma-dono'll be very displeased with me, and if something actually happens I'll be in trouble, so I gotta go back. But still…"

Once again, gazing towards the direction the children had left, Ubilk closed one eye.

And—

Ubilk: "—I dunno what the stars desire, even though that comes with the duty of a Stargazer."

Chapter 50:
A “Hole” With a Great View

1

After parting ways with the shady Ubilk, they’d stopped at a couple of small alleyways.

Surveying his surroundings by looking around, Subaru would make sure that no one was around. While he was naturally also carefully checking that that Ubilk wasn’t inadvertently following them,

Subaru: “—The answer’s within me.”

Louis: “Auu.”

Louis tilted her head as Subaru reflected on what Ubilk had told them.

With Ubilk having told them that he was working as an “counselor”, a job he didn’t understand the details of, Subaru’s impression of him as a conman didn’t go away at all, but he felt like his remark was rather on point.

Subaru really didn’t know whether Ubilk could see what he himself wanted or not, but—

Subaru: “…”An abyss with a great view”, I think I’ve figured it out.”

Ubilk’s words, that the answer was within Subaru, had given him a hint.

They did not mean that the missing Olbart was secretly hiding inside Subaru’s body. It was a metaphor, and Olbart’s hint was also a riddle.

The answer to the riddle “behind the eyelids” was the room they’d started in.

So, naturally, the “abyss with a great view” was a riddle as well, and the answer must be in there somewhere.

And the answer Ubilk had given, that it was within Subaru—

Subaru: “My train of thought was that it’s a place I’ve been, but it’s not.”

Louis: “Auau?”

Subaru: “There aren’t many places in this city that I’ve been to. If you leave the inn out, there’s only Yorna’s castle. But it doesn’t feel like an abyss. It’s not that at all.”

Louis: “Uu.”

Subaru: “Something like an abyss, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Olbart had given them the hint of “abyss with a great view”, but the expressions “a great view” and “abyss” were pretty much opposites to begin with.

A great view meant that there’d be a good vantage point. An abyss was a deep hole. Something like a hole with a view just didn’t add up.

So one of them was a lie. And since there was no possible lie in it having a good view, the only lie that could’ve possibly been told was about the abyss.

Subaru: “Things that are like an abyss, but aren’t an abyss…”

There was no such place in Chaosflame to which Subaru had been.

He was sure that the same went for Abel and the others who had not left the inn. —Subaru was unsure of just how much Olbart knew about the Demon City, to begin with.

But he did not believe that Olbart had been able to go around much either. Because his duty was to accompany the false Emperor—Vincent, and to protect him.

So, as it was a city he didn’t know much about, it was a place that definitely was not convoluted.

“An abyss with a great view”, as it’d been called, was not a place that existed only in Chaosflame.

That was—

Subaru: “—Louis, we’re going to higher ground.”

Louis: “Uau?”

Louis was surprised at Subaru, who spoke so after shutting his eyes.

He did not think that what he’d meant had been understood. But as long as he could confirm that Louis, holding his hand, would follow him quietly, he wouldn’t ask for anything more.

There wasn’t much time left. Although he was worried that it might be wrong, there was no choice but to give it a try.

Olbart’s hiding place was “an abyss with a great view”, and the closest place to it—

Subaru: “—We need to get to the closest place to the sky.”

2

Ubilk’s “counselling”, given in a one-sided conversation, had led Subaru to his answer.

“An abyss with a great view” was, put in another way, “a hole with a great view”.

An abyss was not just a hole, it was a deep hole into which one could fall forever and ever. To speak of it further, it was a hole so deep that there seemed to be no limit to its depth.

And, as Ubilk had stated, Subaru had experienced it before.

And that’d happened not too long ago, in real-time.

Subaru: “On that street, when that boy threw me.”

When Subaru had run out, completely out of his mind, a sheepboy had grabbed his arm. Having been hurled away while being apologized to, Subaru'd had a thought over and over again as he rose high towards the sky, spinning around in circles.

—That he was "falling" towards the blue sky.

Of course, taking into account what had happened, that was incorrect.

From the perspective of those around him, the real Subaru had simply been thrown high into the sky. But the person in question, Subaru, who had not known at the time which way was up and which way was down, had thought so.

He had thought he was falling towards the blue sky.

Falling into an endless, blue, bottomless "hole".

Subaru: "That's what the hole with a great view is… So it's the place closest to the sky in this city."

Subaru believed that was the place Olbart had been referring to as "an abyss with a great view".

So the idea was to aim for the highest place, but—

Louis: "Aa, uh!"

Whether she was aware of how Subaru felt or not, Louis, with a broad smile, pointed to a specific place.

As Louis cheerfully waved their joined hands and pointed into the distance with her free hand, Subaru covered his face with his own.

Not because Louis was fooling around, unable to follow what he'd said.

As a matter of fact, this time around was the only one in which Louis had understood Subaru's idea. She was pointing to the building that was nearest to the sky in the city of Chaosflame.

However, that same building was the cause of Subaru's concern.

Louis: "Uh!"

Subaru: "So you're thinking the same thing, too…"

As Louis pulled on his hand with vigor, Subaru looked up towards the building she was pointing to—the Crimson Lapis Castle.

It was the castle of Yorna Mishigure and the tallest building in the Demon City. And, for the still-shrunken Subaru, it was also a place from which he'd certainly be dismissed at the gate.

In the first place, the purpose of playing hide-and-seek with Olbart had been to answer Yorna's request to wait for her at the Castle. —The order for that had been reversed.

Subaru: "But if we keep the badness of Olbart's character in mind, then there's a good chance that is a stunt he'd pull."

Olbart also knew why Subaru and the others wished to go back to how they were before.

Having to go to the Crimson Lapis Castle at least once so that he could return to his original state, was the kind of trick Olbart, known as the "Vicious Old Man", would likely use.

The problem was—

Subaru: "How do we get into the Castle…?"

He could no longer call himself Natsumi Schwartz with his "infantilized" and shrunken appearance. If this option existed in the first place, he would have rather put off the game of hide-and-seek with Olbart.

He couldn't tell Yorna about the situation he was in. Especially because Tanza, Yorna's attendant, was seemingly in cahoots with Olbart.

In that case, it appeared that it would be quite dangerous to approach the Castle.

Louis: “Uau.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know… if Tanza’s hiding the fact that she’s cooperating with Olbart-san from Yorna-san, then she’s definitely acting of her own volition.”

It seemed to Subaru that there were relatively few of Tanza’s fellow horned demi-humans around the Crimson Lapis Castle.

If there had been a fuss in the Castle’s vicinity, Yorna would find out what was going on, no matter what. That wouldn’t be something to Tanza’s liking either.

Perhaps it would be better to snitch on Tanza for her mischievousness.

Subaru: “Waitwait, that’s too hasty. There’s always the chance that Yorna-san’ll take Tanza’s side. Or rather, it’s much more likely that she will.”

In a situation with two children, one of them beloved, the other one unknown, which one would be believed was a no-brainer.

No matter how he looked at it, the plan of telling Yorna what Tanza was up to, was one that should rather not be acted on.

But Subaru had a hunch that his feeling of the amount of enemies near the Crimson Lapis Castle being small was correct.

Subaru: “Best option’s to sneak into the Castle after all… Now we just have to pray that Olbart-san’s hiding there at the top. Louis, you got a sec?”

Louis: “Aa?”

Subaru: “That, warp of yours… it allowed me to fly with you, right?”

Staring into Louis’s blue eyes, Subaru posed that question.

The first time Louis had gone on a rampage in the street, she’d used a Blink to get out from under the collapsed tent, then teleported to another location as Subaru covered her.

At that moment, he'd felt something like the contents of his stomach being churned around, which was not something he wanted to experience again and again, but needless to say, it was very convenient.

There seemed to be a limit to how far they could fly, though.

Subaru: "With that power, we can get inside the Castle. Can you use it properly?"

Louis: "Au!"

Subaru: "You sure? If it's just "probably", we'll have problems. If you don't know how to use it properly, you and I both will be in danger. So."

Louis: "Uu…"

Louis puffed out her cheeks in frustration as Subaru continued to push her. As she did, she tightened her grip on Subaru's hand, using more force,

Louis: "Uau."

Subaru: "—Hk."

Poof, in the blink of an eye, the scenery around them changed.

Because he had been focusing on Louis in front of him, Louis's appearance did not change. However, the scenery around her quickly changed from a dimly-lit alley to a brightly-lit street, to a room in a building somewhere, then to the roof of a building, and so on.

As if to prove that she had proper control over it.

Subaru: "I-I get it! I get it, enough! That's enough!"

Louis: "Auu."

Subaru: “I lose! I give up, I lose!”

Louis let the air out of her puffy cheeks and relaxed them like she’d won. Kneeling beside her, having gone through that horrifying experience, Subaru felt a chill run down his spine.

While holding hands with Subaru, Louis had performed at least five short-distance warps in a flash. Each time, the scenery around them changed. What a ridiculous experience.

It was entirely akin to a nightmare.

Subaru: “But, this will do… Uh.”

Louis: “Uu?”

Subaru: “Ouehhhhhk!”

As he tried to clench his fists, a surge of gastric juices immediately burned his throat. While still kneeling on the spot, Subaru spewed the contents of his stomach onto the ground in a grand display.

The short-distance warp and the feeling of having his internal organs being churned about were inseparable.

But—

Subaru: “Th-That’s convenient. With this… Ouehk.”

Louis: “Uua.”

Still fighting the acidic urge rising inside him, Subaru glared at the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Next to him, Louis, wrinkling her nose, withdrew her hand for the first time, and waited for Subaru to finish vomiting from a distance.

3

—Pointing in the direction they should fly to, he squeezed Louis’s hand.

That was the signal that Subaru had taught Louis, to sneak into the

Crimson Lapis Castle.

It was like training a puppy to do tricks, but in reality, it was not that simple.

He wasn't going to treat Louis like a dog, or a puppy, which would've been much cuter. At least he wouldn't have to be scared of who she might jump on and hurt badly at any moment.

It was necessary to be very careful when dealing with her.

Subaru: "Stop."

Calling out quietly and pulling on her arm, he made Louis stop in place.

Subaru put his finger to his mouth, giving her an instruction with "Shhhh". Louis did the same, putting her finger to her mouth and mimicked an "Uu", then shut her mouth.

After checking the scene, Subaru kept Louis behind him and gently peeked around the corner at the end of the passage. —About ten meters away, there was a strong-looking gatekeeper.

The gatekeeper, sitting dignified in front of the gate with his arms crossed, was a demi-human lizardman, his face resembling that of a lizard. His whole body was covered with blue scales, making him look very tough and cool.

He didn't seem to be taking his job as a gatekeeper very seriously, because Subaru could see from a distance that he was opening his mouth wide, letting out a yawn. But it seemed unlikely that they could avoid him and make it through the gate.

So—

Subaru: "Louis."

He called Louis's name to draw her attention to himself. Then, in front of her, Subaru pointed his finger at the wall for her to see—the stone wall that surrounded the Crimson Lapis Castle.

And with that, he squeezed Louis's hand tightly.

Subaru & Louis: "…"

The next moment, Subaru and Louis's bodies had leaped over the wall of the Castle, and entered the grounds of the Castle.

It was an infiltration that skipped the process of arguing with the gatekeepers and of breaking through them by force—He felt sorry for the guards, since even his childlike mind conscience was aware of it being cheating.

No amount of tight security or vigilance would help in the face of Louis's teleport.

Maybe surveillance cameras could thwart their attempts, but no such thing existed in this other world. In a world where security had to rely on manpower, this instant warp was a complete cheat.

Although—

Subaru: "We can't afford to be seen, we've got to be very careful…"

He could make excuses for anything provided it was outside the Castle or outside its grounds, but if they were found after entering the castle grounds, he wouldn't be able to come up with something.

Louis' short-range warp was also limited to two uses in a row. If used three times or more, it would definitely make the user feel sick to the point of throwing up, or worse, passing out.

What if someone found them, and Subaru passed out while escaping?

Subaru: "No one'd be able to stop this kid."

Louis: "Uu?"

Louis tilted her head innocently and looked at Subaru as it appeared that she didn't understand his concerns.

He would not let her kill anyone else, any more. —That had been

Subaru's vow, after taking Louis and running away.

The shrunken, young Natsuki Subaru could not come to a proper decision about Louis. So at least, he wanted to come to the best conclusion that his current self could.

That was the only way to keep Louis from taking someone's life.

Subaru: "…We can't just grab onto the outer wall and then jump while taking breaks, can we?"

His aim was the "abyss with a great view"; even if that was the top of the Castle, reaching it by solely relying on Louis's warp and climbing up from outside could prove to be difficult.

They would probably slip and fall down at some point, and no matter how stealthy and secluded they were, if they were climbing the castle walls, someone would notice them.

Not to mention that this was Yorna Mishigure's castle.

Subaru: "It'd be the absolute worst if Yorna-san found us."

On their way here, they'd been in many fights against the pursuers who'd taken in a part of Yorna's power via the Soul Marriage Technique.

Even though Louis was a powerful fighter, yet unskilled, they would be no match for Yorna, a member of the Nine Divine Generals.

What would happen to Louis if they were to fight?

If they were forced to fight Yorna, Subaru and the others would not be able to accomplish what they had come to the city for in the first place. It would be a huge blunder. He wouldn't even be able to face Rem.

Subaru: "There's no other option but to zip through the Castle while being careful."

Based on the experience of entering the Castle once the previous day, there were very few people on patrol inside.

Even when there were visitors, they'd been left alone in the waiting room. When no one was around, the security would probably be even more full of holes. The yawn of the gatekeeper was proof of this.

Although Subaru wondered if he could be so careless in the castle of the city's ruler.

Subaru: "—It's no use complaining about it, is it? We're already in here, after all."

Louis: "Uu?"

Subaru: "Yeah, let's go… Let's pray no one's on the other side of the wall."

Since they were castle walls after all, there was no way he'd be able to hear what was on the other side, even if he put an ear to the wall. So it was completely up to luck whether or not people would spot them when passing through the castle walls for the first time.

In his experience thus far, Subaru could not say that he was lucky.

And yet—

Subaru: "…I don't see anyone."

They had not incurred the misfortune of being found all of a sudden in an almost deserted castle.

Subaru: "…"

Looking to the left and then to the right, Subaru shielded Louis behind his back and peeked into a corridor of the Crimson Lapis Castle, which Louis and Subaru had safely slipped into with her short-range warp. He had not paid it any mind the previous day, but when walking on the wooden floor, he had to be very careful of the sound of his footsteps.

Also, if they were to encounter someone in the hallway, there was hardly any place to hide on either side.

If the need arose, they would have to warp into a different room without hesitation.

Subaru: “As long as we don’t use it too many times in a row, we should be fine, I think.”

He himself was unaware of what backlash Louis would bear, but if Subaru were to do one teleport at a time, with some space in between, he could probably tolerate it without throwing up.

In some cases, they should consider using the teleport, not just left and right, but upwards as well. —No, perhaps they should rather actively try to go upwards.

Subaru: “Would that result in less time wandering around here, as opposed to looking carefully for stairs? But if we go up too leisurely, we might be found by someone.”

Of course, if Yorna lived in the Crimson Lapis Castle, she would always be present. And since she presided as the Lord of the Castle, the room in which she resided would be at the top.

Going to the top of the Castle meant getting closer to Yorna.

Subaru didn’t really get it, but there were people in the world experts in sensing the presence of others.

Even with Louis’s teleport, no matter how much he tried to suppress his breathing and footsteps, there were still some things he could not eliminate. How much of a disadvantage it was going to be, would be the coming challenge.

Subaru: “Anyway, we’re going to be as careful as we can. If we’re found—”

???: “—If you’re found, then what?”

That very moment, Subaru’s shoulders hitched in fright due to the bone-chilling voice coming from behind him.

The shock was also felt by the one holding his hand, Louis, her eyes widening in surprise. Subaru and Louis turned around with a snap.

And there, was—

???: “It’s so cute to see children holding hands with each other. I can’t help but feel like my cheeks will form a smile against my will.”

The one person they should not have run into, the beautiful Yorna Mishigure, was standing there.

4

Subaru: “—Ah.”

No one was supposed to be there.

Up until a moment ago, there had been no one in the hallway aside from Subaru and Louis.

Yorna had appeared out of nowhere, even though she had not been there until just a bit ago.

This woman was the sort of being that held the kind of power that ridiculed the caution and care of ordinary people like Subaru, kicking all sorts of thorough preparations to the curb.

—One of this other world’s transcendent beings.

Yorna: “Either of your faces are unfamiliar to me.”

Yorna looked down at Subaru and Louis’s faces, and muttered so, the smoke rising from the kiseru in her hand.

She was dressed in the same glamorous kimono she’d worn at the top of the Castle the previous day. However, having only seen her sitting most of the time, he felt overwhelmed upon being faced with her standing in front of him.

Yorna was taller than him, partly because Subaru had been shrunk. Though she wasn’t quite as tall as Medium, thanks to her tall-soled footwear, her line of sight was probably above that of Abel’s

As he stared into her blue gaze at that height, his throat froze over.

Yorna: “There’s no need to be so frightened. What brings you two to my castle?”

Subaru: “Uh…”

The tone of her voice was soft and flat, and the one being asked cursed himself for his stupidity.

Even though Subaru believed he’d snuck in with plenty of caution, he hadn’t prepared a single excuse in case he was discovered. Short-sighted, that was exactly what he had been.

As expected, Subaru stammered, unable to say anything, and Yorna narrowed her almond-shaped eyes. He’d look suspicious if he went on without saying anything, his heart pumping so hard it was about to explode—

Yorna: “Are you perhaps here for Tanza?”

Subaru: “Huh…?”

Yorna: “The reason that brings you to the Castle.”

Subaru’s frozen throat made a cracking sound as she pointed that out.

It was completely unexpected that she’d be able to see through him to such a degree in the few seconds he had spent unable to say anything. At the same time, Subaru realized that his true identity had been discerned.

In only a single glance, the long journey to the Demon City and everything else had been for nothing. He thought he heard Abel’s voice coldly dismissing him as a “fool”, inside his head.

Subaru’s reckless endeavor ended here, with the illusion that his feet had lost their footing, and that he was plummeting headlong into the depths of regret—

Louis: “Uau.”

The feeling of his hand being squeezed tight stopped his consciousness from falling into complete darkness.

Without thinking, Subaru looked next to him and saw Louis standing beside him, looking at his face. Louis's blue eyes, trembling slightly were conveying that they—that Subaru's instructions had been that she could fly at any time.

The intense look in Louis's eyes was enough to restore Subaru's unsteady spirit.

Once he looked up, he saw that Yorna was quietly waiting for an answer to her question, not even trying to rush Subaru. —It might still be too early to give up.

Yorna had asked if Tanza was the reason for Subaru and Louis's presence in the Castle.

That fit. But only half. To make up the other half, he would have to take a gamble.

Subaru: "Um, Yorna-san… Yorna-sama."

Yorna: "What is it?"

Subaru: "Where's Tanza-chan?"

Yorna narrowed her eyes at Subaru's question, who had now found his resolve.

For a moment that lasted for less than a few seconds, Subaru experienced a state of mind like that of a rat caught by a fox. Most likely, the actual difference in power between him and his opponent was bigger than that of a rat and a fox.

Faced with such an opponent, the few seconds that went by seemed like an eternity. Before the silent Subaru and Louis, Yorna put her kiseru to her mouth and exhaled purple smoke from her lungs, then,

Yorna: "I'm sorry, but Tanza's out on an errand. It should be time for her to return soon…"

Subaru: "…"

With Yorna's answer, Subaru squeezed Louis's hand slightly tighter. This caused Louis to look at Subaru, her eyes wandering to see if he was pointing anywhere.

He felt sorry for Louis's response, as that was not supposed to be her cue to fly. It was just that, the moment Subaru realized he'd won the gamble, he strengthened his grip.

He'd won the gamble, yes, he'd won.

Yorna's previous question was a sign that she hadn't seen through the true nature of Subaru and Louis's goal. Naturally, their true identity had also not been exposed.

It was a much simpler, gentler question.

In fact, after that answer of hers to Subaru, Yorna closed one eye and said, "Really",

Yorna: "I'm also worried about Tanza. Although devoting herself to me is fine, forgetting one's promise to friends isn't a good thing for a subordinate."

Subaru: "F-friends…"

Yorna: "She's a loyal child, isn't she? I've always told her that she can't always focus on me."

Remarking that, Yorna shrugged after giving a comment on Tanza's attitude.

Due to Yorna's words and gestures, Subaru raised his eyebrow in surprise.

The previous day, she was the malicious and unfathomable Empress of the Demon City that had shown herself atop the Castle.

That impression had done a 180, because Yorna's current attitude felt like something completely different. That attitude was one that was more familiar and easier to understand, the feeling of an adult who cared for children.

As if to support this impression, Yorna let out a small exhale followed by a “Hmm”,

Yorna: “Tanza does have some carelessness, but I can’t wait for her to return. —Let’s wait for Tanza’s return in my room.”

With that, Yorna turned her back to them, and walked away slowly.

Despite the thick soles of her shoes, her graceful walk remained silent on the wooden floor, making him not believe his eyes at how sophisticated she was down to her toes.

Then, with Subaru fascinated by the mere sight of her walking, Yorna suddenly came to a stop in front of him,

Yorna: “Come along now. I’ll show you the way.”

Subaru: “Ueh…?! Yorna-sama will?!”

Louis: “Au?”

Yorna’s unexpected kindness stunned Subaru. Louis tilted her head in surprise at Subaru’s surprise, and Yorna, watching the two of them, gently put her hand over her mouth and smiled.

Not a mean one however, just a gentle smile.

Yorna: “This is my castle. Of course, it’s my duty to entertain guests. And now that Tanza is out, there’s no one to keep the two of you company.”

Subaru: “Ah, umm…”

Yorna: “It’s also the first time a friend of that child has come here. Now, come along with me.”

Jerking her chin, Yorna commanded them to follow along. Following her gesture with his eyes, Subaru wondered for a second what he should do.

He suspected that this could be a trap, but quickly dropped the idea.

Because Yorna had no reason to lure Subaru and Louis into a trap. If she wanted to, she could subdue Subaru with a single finger and take out Louis with a couple.

In that case however, it meant that she really had volunteered to be their guide out of the goodness of her heart. That would be completely different from the impression Subaru had of the Yorna from yesterday, though—.

Louis: “Uau.”

As Subaru let the contents of his head whirl around and around, Louis tugged on his hand. Apparently, Louis had no objection to following Yorna.

Louis’s reaction was the final push to get Subaru’s feet moving.

Louis’s ability to perceive danger was probably better than Subaru’s. If Louis wasn’t wary of Yorna, he didn’t have to worry about her doing something to him anytime soon.

Yorna: “Children?”

Subaru: “C-coming!”

In response to Yorna’s reiterated call to Subaru, he responded with a faltering voice and started walking. Yorna’s eyes narrowed as she resumed her steps, keeping up with Subaru’s short strides.

He wasn’t sure if he should take this as good luck or not, but it was much better than being interrogated by her.

Yorna: “You children aren’t from here, are you?”

Subaru: “Eh…”

Yorna: “Faces I haven’t seen. You haven’t received my “love letter”, either.”

Unfamiliar faces, faces she hadn’t seen before, were the words she spoke. The expression “love letter” that followed was something Subaru had no idea about, so he nodded his head with a “Y-yes”, Subaru: “From out of town… with a scary grown-up, that is.”

Yorna: “Scary grown-up… That sounds like a lot of trouble. Why are you with Scary Grown-Up-san?”

Subaru: “I-it’s because…”

Subaru answered Yorna’s question carefully, but with a certain amount of truthfulness.

In reality, the fact that he was working with the scary grown-up—with Abel, was very much a matter of chance. Perhaps it should be in the past tense, as in, “we had been working together”.

It was hard to imagine that Abel would readily forgive Subaru for running away with Louis.

To begin with—

Subaru: “I don’t know if I should be forgiven…”

He didn’t believe it was fair to blame him for not being able to decide on how to handle Louis.

Sure, he was sorry that that he had hidden Louis’s true identity from them. But if this was the result of revealing the truth, then he’d been right to conceal it.

If there was anything to apologize for, it was that he’d been unable to hide it until the very end, and revealing it halfway through.

Yorna: “—. Looks like you’ve got some complex feelings about it.”

Then, Yorna suddenly slowed down and glanced back at him, tapping her finger on her brow. There was nothing wrong with the skin which the white finger was touching. She indicated not her own, but Subaru’s brow.

There were probably wrinkles carved deeply into it, made by unanswerable thoughts.

Yorna: “A child shouldn’t make such a gloomy face. —I’ll spank that scary grown-up for you.”

Subaru: “Spank… Huh, Yorna-sama will?”

Yorna: “Fufu, I’m quite powerful, despite my looks.”

Yorna raised her sleeves and made them flutter about gently; at her words, Subaru had a vision of Abel being spanked and immediately shook his head sideways.

There was a gap in Subaru’s usual impression of Yorna, in that he felt that Yorna’s punishment wouldn’t be as cute as it sounded. Which came as a particularly big surprise.

Subaru: “I’m glad you’re worried about me, but I’m fine! I mean, he’s probably someone who’d see reason once you talked with him…”

Yorna: “Is that so? If he’s someone who’d see reason with just words, it’d be the best. But there are many people in this world who have trouble finding reason in talks, you know.”

Subaru: “—. Yorna-sama.”

Yorna: “Yes?”

He wondered on whether to say anything or not for a moment, cutting his words off. Because of this, Yorna stopped in her tracks.

A mixture of things went through his head. Feeling bad for stopping her so many times, worry that Yorna would get angry if he told her what he wanted to say, his own thoughtlessness for blurting out what he did even though he knew it was a mistake.

Because he was smaller now, he felt that his ability to think and judge things were really decreasing.

However, the biggest problem seemed to be this impatience or lack of restraint, both in bringing Louis along and in sneaking into the Crimson Lapis Castle unprepared.

Although he’d hesitated to say this in that impulsive moment—

Subaru: “Well, Yorna-sama, you really are listening to what we say. It’s just that, I was sure that people of high status were scary…”

Yorna: “Hmmm.”

Realizing that he’d said something very rude, Subaru was unable to look Yorna in the eye while speaking. But upon hearing what Subaru’d said, Yorna giggled a teeny bit,

Yorna: “From the looks of it, you’re not demi-humans either.”

Subaru: “Ummm, yeah, that’s right.”

Yorna: “What does this city look like, from your point of view?”

Subaru: “This place…”

In response to that abrupt question, Subaru turned his gaze to a window in the corridor. The window high up on the wall was too tiny for Subaru to take a look outside through it, given his current height.

But he could tell there was a dim blue sky close-by.

Subaru: “It’s amazing, it’s such a busy city. There are so many sorts of people.”

Choosing his words carefully, Subaru expressed his impressions as honestly as possible.

The impression of a busy city had been there from the very beginning. The appearance of the city as a mishmash of things piled up, as well as the variety of people living in it, all gave this impression.

To his eyes and ears, it gave him a strong impression of a hectic city.

Yorna: “You’re a very honest child. It’s pleasant to hear you say that.”

Having heard Subaru’s thoughts, Yorna’s lips formed into a faint smile.

She then directed her gaze at the same window that Subaru was looking at—likely gazing at the outside view in a different way.

Yorna: “This city’s full of people who have a hard time living in other places. Those that became insignificant outside the city, children with nowhere else to go… children that would go unnoticed, even if they raised their voices.”

Subaru: “Even, if they raised their voices…”

Yorna: “If we don’t lend an ear to the children who’ve reached the last place they can go to, then who will?”

As she spoke so with the kiseru in her mouth, an elegant glow flashed in Yorna’s eyes.

Experiencing a sensation akin to his heart being stabbed, Subaru felt terribly ashamed of himself. —Now, after hearing Yorna’s words, he found that his impression of her had changed drastically.

Tanza: “She is a loving woman. Loves her allies and hates her enemies. —Lover of all things that reside in the Demon City.”

That was what the little deergirl Tanza had said when he asked her about Yorna the previous day.

Subaru’d had no clue whatsoever as to what that meant at the time. Once Abel had told them about the Soul Marriage Technique, he’d wondered if the girl had meant its power.

But perhaps that wasn’t what Tanza had meant, it was truly as she had said.

—It was, the answer to what Yorna Mishigure cherished from her heart.

Subaru: “I’m so sorry, Yorna-san…”

As soon as Subaru thought of this, Subaru couldn’t hold back again and apologized.

Hearing Subaru suddenly apologize, Yorna smiled, exhaling purple smoke,

Yorna: “There’s nothing to be sorry for. The reason why people in high positions always look scary is that if they didn’t, they’d be scared too. There’s also the logic, that people of high status wish to be feared.”

Subaru: “People of high status, wish to be feared…”

What was that? He felt that he’d just been told something he would do well to remember.

And it seemed to be a way of thinking that maybe Yorna was no stranger to.

Yorna: “Don’t worry, I’m not one to do something as disgraceful as to get angry with a child over something like this. By a stroke of luck, I’m in a good mood.”

Louis: “Au?”

Yorna: “Yes, that’s right. —There are signs that I might be about to get what I’ve wanted for a long time.”

Lowering the corners of her eyes, Yorna fluttered her sleeves around once more.

There was no trace of anger in her answer. As she had said herself, it was probably because she wasn’t the kind of person who dealt with children in a mature way, and more so because she was in a really good mood.

Perhaps the reason behind her good mood were the contents of the letter Abel had sent her—

Subaru: “…”

With that in mind, Subaru held back this time and thought carefully.

Yorna’s positive attitude toward the missive, and whether she kept her word or not, depended on whether Abel, Subaru, and the others could safely join her at the Crimson Lapis Castle.

But it was Tanza, Yorna's attendant, who was interfering with Subaru and the others' efforts.

From their earlier exchange, it was clear to him that Yorna really cared about Tanza.

If her own desires clashed with Tanza's, which ones would Yorna choose? —Yorna, who had in the past defied the Emperor for the sake of someone else.

Once Yorna found out the truth about the situation, what would she do?

Yorna: "—You're wrinkling your brow again, aren't you?"

With a tap, Yorna put her finger between her eyebrows and pointed out Subaru's distress. Following Yorna's gesture, Louis also tapped her forehead.

Looking at Yorna and Louis's appearances, Subaru let out a small sigh.

Maybe this too was a hasty idea.

But since he did not have the brains to think properly about whether it was the right or wrong thing to do—

Subaru: "Hey, Yorna-san, I need to ask something…"

5

—Over the roof tiles of the castle tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle, where red and blue brilliance mixed together, he laid his buttocks.

And so, while basking in the clear wind characteristic of this high altitude, he placed the gourd he kept in his breast pocket to his mouth. While quenching his thirst with alcohol, he rested his chin on his hand while the spectacle under his eyes unfolded.

???: “Kakakakka, what a superb view.”

Looking down at the unorganized streets of the city with various styles intermingling, an aged body’s throat rang.

His hoarse laugh was disturbed by the wind, disappearing into nothingness without reaching anyone. It was engulfed by the tumult of the Demon City, vanishing gradually every time the monstrous old man was amused.

He was fond of that which was chaotic.

The chaotic townscape, the melting pot of various races of demi-human, the motifs drifting to the left and right.

Even if something only meant that something else would fall into chaos, it would make him want to support it.

???: “It’s a bad habit of ol’ people ta scramble and eat whatever they can get their hands on. Anyhow—”

After taking a large gulp from his gourd, the old man wiped the alcohol spilling from the corner of his mouth with his sleeves and shrugged his shoulders. And so, still sitting cross-legged, he rotated his hips and turned around, raising an eyebrow.

It was a sight that would make an old man fond of chaos drool—

???: “Even if they reached where I’m at, they’re a way too unpredictable bunch, truly.”

In front of the monstrous old man who thus spoke, three figures were stepping atop the tiles of the roof of the castle tower.

???: “Found yooou~, Olbart-san!”

The one who was pointing at Olbart, was a young boy holding the hand of a young girl with blonde hair.

And standing behind them like a guardian was the Empress, the ruler of the Demon City.

Chapter 51:
The Demon City's Mistress

1

A placid breeze bathed in light gently caressed Subaru's bangs.

While savoring the ticklish feeling, Subaru felt the touch of a girl's hand linked with his, and the breath of the tall, beautiful woman standing to his back.

The location they were in was the top of the Crimson Lapis Castle, above the large room on the top floor. He stepped onto the roof tiles of the Castle, the "place closest to the sky", from which he could now view Chaosflame.

Subaru had led them to the place closest to an "abyss with a great view".

Subaru: "Olbart-san, I think you're a real jerk."

The hand not linked with Louis's beside him, the one that Subaru was pointing with, was being directed at a small old man sitting on the edge of the Castle's roof.

Sitting cross-legged, spinning around on his rear, the monstrous old man—Olbart, put his mouth to the gourd in his hand, gulping down the alcohol within.

And—

Olbart: "No way, boy. You're not hungry, are ya?"

Subaru: "…H-hungry?"

Olbart: "Yeah, that's right, ya hungry? After all, ya just woke up and had no time ta eat, did'cha? Yer hunger's got a lot ta do with both yer brain and yer body's functionin', ya know."

While saying that and setting down his gourd, Olbart pulled out another package from his pocket. Before a slightly alarmed Subaru, Olbart gave a small “kakaka”, and unwrapped the package.

Wrapped in the package was a black, round object the size of a golf ball.

Subaru: “That’s…”

Olbart: “It’s called a ration ball, it’s portable food for us shinobi. One of these’ll last’cha a day and keep yer head and body in shape. Tastes awful, tho’.”

Plucking a ration ball from its wrapper with his fingers, Olbart waved it about as to show it off.

From the way it looked, it felt like it was emergency food made without taste in mind. It might be nutritious, but Subaru didn’t think he’d want to eat it.

Olbart rolled it around in his palm, and said,

Olbart: “I’ve been a shinobi since I was young, so naturally, I’ve been familiar with this since I was a wee lad. And every time I ate it while workin’, I thought ta myself, “Like the great ol’ men of my village, I wish I could just retire and not eat this stuff anymore”.”

Subaru: “…Then, why not do just that? Olbart-san, you said you’re the head honcho of the shinobi village, aren’t you a big shot?”

Olbart: “Oh, you’re right. What I’m sayin’ is that, right now, I’m better and stronger than the ol’ men who used ta work me to death all willy-nilly… But somehow, I’m still eatin’ this stuff.”

With that, Olbart threw the ration ball that he’d been rolling in his palm into his mouth. He chewed and gulped down on his provisions, which the monstrous old man had described as not good.

After that, he opened his mouth to show that he’d eaten it all. Then,

Olbart: “After all, ya can’t break a habit, that’s what I’m sayin’. This mess of food I put together without regard ta taste or appearance’s the best food for me. Doesn't hearin' this make ya cry? No? Kakakakka!"

Olbart showed a toothy grin, causing Subaru to remember something eerie.

Unsure of what he was trying to tell him with the current conversation, Subaru thought this seemed to be something unrelated to his childish youth. However, it seemed it shouldn't be ignored in its entirety.

He felt that maybe it was Olbart's way of praising or complimenting him.

Yorna: "—Old Man Olbart, this is my castle, do you recall?"

After the conversation died down, Yorna Mishigure, the Empress of the Demon City, having come to the roof of the Castle along with Subaru and Louis, spoke up at last.

Staring into Yorna's blue eyes, Olbart stopped laughing and said, "Yeah",

Olbart: "Of course, I know that. To be looked down on by the Lord of the Castle while sittin' on her castle's a nice feelin'. Doin' what'cha love's the secret to a long life."

Yorna: "That's quite the indulgent hobby for a man of your stature. I would've never thought you'd do something like this."

Olbart: "Ho, how's that so?"

Yorna: "It's only natural, isn't it? —It'd be insane to know this secret of longevity and still shorten your own lifespan."

Subaru could feel the heat from Yorna, who smiled seductively while putting her sleeve gently over her mouth. Yorna's anger was contained in her gentle gesture, and of course it was Olbart who it was directed to.

Olbart must have noticed Yorna's anger, but the monstrous old man remained seated on his haunches, throwing the next ration ball into his mouth from the package open on his lap.

Olbart: “So, why are ya three gettin’ along again? A foxgirl and two lil’ kids aren’t friends in any way.”

Yorna: “Unfortunately, unlike the Vicious Old Man Olbart here, I have no taste for teasing children and no reason to torture them. When it comes to children, it’s only natural that I’d treat them with courtesy. What’s more—”

Cutting off her words there, Yorna twirled the golden kiseru around her finger. Then pointing the tip of the kiseru, the part from which smoke trailed, at Olbart, she continued.

Yorna: “If I hear that Old Man Olbart has misled these children and deceived my attendant… as the mistress of this city, I’ll do what I must.”

Olbart: “Hoho, ho.”

Gently stroking his chin, Olbart’s amused eyes turned to Subaru and Louis.

Subaru nodded deeply, sensing the intent of his gaze.

Subaru: “I’m sorry, but I had to tell on you. It’s not really a foul under Olbart-san’s rules. You had us get attacked too anyway.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! You’re never at a loss for words, boy. But that’s the right answer. I’m the one who sicced ‘em on ya, so ta whine ‘bout it if it’s done ta me’d be pretty pathetic. But…”

Subaru: “But?”

Olbart: “Good work comin’ up with that when yer mind’s gotta be havin’ trouble keepin’ up as well. Are ya mayhaps from the Vollachian Imperial Family? You’re a match for ‘em in underhandedness.”

Subaru: “Don’t say such scary things…”

Considering only the hair color of Subaru and the current Emperor, Abel, they had a lot in common, but there were too many differences in other areas. Their facial structure and the length of their legs were proof of this.

In the first place, to say that his personality was as bad as that of those of the Vollachian Imperial Family would be slander.

For example—

Subaru: "I always say thank you when someone does something nice for me."

Yorna: "And with a smile and a loud voice too. That's what a child should be like. I'm going to tell Tanza to follow your example. Anyway—"

Parting her lips, Yorna gave her evaluation of Subaru's naughtiness, then lowered the tone of her voice. After that her eyes narrowed, and the harmonious atmosphere came to an end.

Because—

Yorna: "I can't rebuke my faithful servant without her being here to respond to me. Now, where did you hide her, Old Man Olbart?"

Yorna's question was the main reason why she'd come along.

Olbart: "…"

Feeling Yorna's tense pressure and its aftershocks directed at Olbart, Subaru firmly bit his lip and checked the sound of his own beating heart.

—Yorna had found Subaru downstairs, just inside the Castle, and after getting to know Yorna's personality, which he did not the previous day, Subaru had taken another big gamble.

He told Yorna as much as he could about their situation and the "hide-and-seek" game that was happening here in Chaosflame.

Of course, Subaru did not mention Abel's true identity, and he didn't tell anyone that he and the others had been "infantilized" by

Olbart. What was important was that Subaru and his friends were playing “hide-and-seek” with Olbart, and that Tanza was helping the latter.

In order to appeal to her as sincerely as possible and clear up her suspicions as she listened patiently, Subaru had decided to prepare himself to face the situation with all his might, and confided in Yorna about the situation.

And after hearing Subaru’s appeal, Yorna thought it over for a while—

Yorna: “—I’m not a woman who can determine whether the words of a desperate child are true or false.”

Giving that answer, she then accompanied Subaru and Louis to the top of the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Subaru: “Honestly, I didn’t think she was someone I could talk to so much, but…”

Louis: “Auau.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know.”

Hearing Subaru’s murmur, Louis shook the hand she was holding and pursed her lips.

In response, Subaru told himself that this was a stroke of luck that had come about from a bunch of coincidences turning up. If any of those factors were missing, this situation couldn’t have been created.

That he had separated from Abel and his sinister designs.

That he had reached the Crimson Lapis Castle with the help of Ubilk’s “counsel”.

That he had been found by Yorna personally rather than by a guard.

That he had been together with Louis, not Al nor Medium.

And finally, that Subaru, the one most affected by the “infantilization”, had taken a gamble.

The main reason why Yorna had listened to Subaru’s words was because she’d seen no lie in them, and took them as a serious appeal from a child.

Just as there were grown-ups who wouldn’t take children’s words seriously and laughed them away.

Other adults would take them seriously because those words came from children, and because of that they would try to meet their expectations.

Subaru had not expected one of the Nine Divine Generals of the bloodthirsty Vollachian Empire to be one of the latter.

Subaru: “Who was it again that said Yorna-san’s crazy…”

Perhaps an argument would be that she was treated that way because she didn’t approve of Vollachia’s mantra of “survival of the fittest”.

At the very least, Subaru had no choice aside from thinking she did not, after being treated so nicely.

Yorna: “Old Man Olbart, I have two requests for you.”

As she said this, Yorna gently held up two fingers.

Subaru couldn’t say anything to step into the conversation between the transcendental beings that disregarded him. All he could do was to be aware of the touch of Louis’s hand so that he could move if something happened.

The only way to escape from the rooftop area would be to teleport downstairs.

Olbart: “Those demands of yers, let’s hear ‘em for the time bein’.”

Yorna: “First, you must return Tanza to me.”

Olbart: “Oh, com’on, that’s a bit unreasonable. I’m sure that girl’s got her own ideas. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t’ve planned somethin’ without tellin’ ya, Your Highness.”

Yorna: “—Silence.”

Olbart admitted that he had an idea where Tanza was somewhere in the middle there, but his mocking voice was cut short by a single, sharp word from Yorna.

The serene power of that word was enough to change the atmosphere.

In fact, even Subaru, who wasn’t the one the word was directed at, held his breath.

So Yorna, having silenced Olbart’s chatter, brought the kiseru she was toying with in her hand to her mouth and slowly filled her lungs with purple smoke.

Yorna: “Unfortunately, I’ve got no intention of hearing Tanza’s complaints or thoughts from anyone other than from her own mouth. And I don’t think I’d be able to bear to hear it after I’ve traced them to the tongue of the Vicious Old Man.”

Olbart: “Kakaka, seems no one likes me here.”

Yorna: “I’m sure down inside you know quite well why would that be, don’t you?”

Yorna smiled aggressively and tilted her head, her hair ornaments swaying noisily. Even the kanzashi stuck in her luxuriously-tied hair and her adorned beauty seemed to Subaru to be Yorna’s weapons.

—People of high status wished to be feared.

Yorna had been the one to tell Subaru about this idea. Maybe it was not only about scaring people, but also about making them feel her beauty.

Yorna: “One more thing, the game you’re playing with these children, you must stop it.”

Olbart: “A game, huh? It’s a game, but a serious one.”

Yorna: “As I said yesterday in the presence of His Excellency the Emperor. —I’d like the messengers to be left alone and, regardless of what His Excellency might do or say, they’ll be protected by me.”

—She would not let anyone touch Subaru’s group.

Unexpectedly, Yorna’s decision had been conveyed by Tanza’s own mouth. And as Yorna herself intended to abide by that decision, she was angered that her wish had been broken.

In conclusion—

Yorna: “Within this Demon City, you wish to make an enemy of me?”

Olbart: “Ohh, scary, scary. You’re a scary lass… Oh, in a way, I didn’t interfere with anyone, let’s say that’s my excuse.”

Yorna: “That is your interpretation, isn’t it, Old Man Olbart? —Whose town do you believe this is, anyway? Do you think I’m a woman so open-minded that I’d laugh and pardon it?”

Subaru felt the air boiling, his entire body covered in goosebumps.

He got that Yorna was getting worked up as she reached the second half of her words. Of course, Yorna was not one to lack the self-discipline as to show that in her tone of voice and facial expressions.

But he understood. Because Subaru had seen many really angry people.

When people were truly angry, with their lives on the line, their emotions would flare. And that much would be visible by just being by their side. There was very, very raw anger there.

Louis: “Uu…”

Feeling similar to Subaru, Louis gave a small growl due to the alarming atmosphere spreading.

On their way here, Louis might have proactively attacked the people who were chasing them, but the two people here were Yorna and Olbart—people who were entirely different in strength from their pursuers.

It was an animal instinct, she probably knew that she couldn’t win if she fought. Maybe she was worried about Subaru getting involved in the fight—

Subaru: “—Hk, Olbart-san!”

For a moment, Subaru felt his thoughts about Louis begin to soften, but he shook them off. With that momentum spurring him on, he called out Olbart’s name as he and Yorna continued their stand-off.

Olbart, still sitting on the roof, deftly kept one eye focused on Yorna and the other on Subaru.

Subaru: “H-how are you doing that…?”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Body control’s the foundation of the shinobi. Ya can’t be a shinobi unless ya can do different things with yer right hand and left hand, and yer right foot and left foot. What of it?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Olbart: “Ya called me just now. I’m tellin’ ya, I’m in the middle of the riskiest situation of my life. Ya shouldn’t be sparin’ attention to that.”

It seemed that, even though he hadn’t changed his laidback attitude, Olbart was perfectly aware that this was a critical juncture. If that was really the case, then Subaru was grateful that he’d spare him the attention.

Subaru placed a hand on his chest, took a few deep breaths, and said,

Subaru: “Oh, why don’t we call it even?”

Olbart: “…Mhm?”

Olbart, upon hearing Subaru's suggestion, opened his left eye wide. Drawing the attention of a single eyeball, Subaru raised his voice in frustration, "Like I said!",

Subaru: "We're even, we're even! Olbart-san, you tried to do something against the rules, and I told Yorna-san. Both are just as bad as each other, that's why we should…"

Olbart: "Quietly admit we're both at fault and leave it at, that's what ya wanna say?"

Subaru: "Oh yeah, yesyes! See, not bad, huh? We'll give Olbart-san what he wants, and that'll solve our problems!"

What Olbart desired was a secret of the Emperor, which was in Abel's possession.

Subaru didn't know the specifics, but if he could hand it over, it would make it easier to have Olbart withdraw. Originally, the "hide-and-seek" game was something like a test of wits, to see if the information could be believed.

Subaru: "We agreed on doing it three times, and we've only found you twice so far… Take it easy on us, though, we managed to get up to the top of the Castle."

Olbart: "Hmmm… By the way, you're the one who figured out this was my hidin' place? Not that other one, the oni-masked young'un?"

Subaru: "Y-Yeah, that's right. An idea about the "abyss with a great view" happened to come up in my mind… There was another spot I was thinking of too, though."

Perhaps Abel and the others were on their way there.

Even if they weren't right now, sooner or later, Abel's group would get to the answer and come to the Crimson Lapis Castle. Subaru had cheated with Louis's teleport skill and Ubilk's "counsel".

However, it might be easier to persuade Abel and the others about how to deal with Louis if they pulled off this achievement here. If it proved itself to be difficult, they could try to get Yorna on their side.

How Yorna would react once she found out about Louis's true identity was unknown, though.

Subaru: "Anyway! I wonder, Olbart-san. If you'd be willing to listen to my… No, to our suggestion."

Shaking his head and pushing away any negative thoughts, Subaru looked at Olbart.

The reason why Subaru had used "our", plural, was because he needed Yorna's cooperation in this proposal of reconciliation. If Yorna said she wouldn't forgive Olbart for luring Tanza into a devious scheme, Subaru's proposal, thought up with utmost effort, would be in vain.

However—

Yorna: "…"

With one eye closed and the kiseru in her mouth, Yorna did not object to anything. Subaru thought the fact she hadn't opposed it meant that she respected his opinion.

Subaru was extremely, extremely grateful. He wanted to thank her so much.

He wished to not waste the trust and kindness that Yorna had entrusted to him.

Subaru: "Olbart-san."

Once again, Subaru called out Olbart's name, hoping for a compromise.

In response to Subaru's hopeful black eyes, Olbart picked up the gourd he'd settled down, using his fingers. Putting his mouth to the gourd, he slurped down every last drop of the alcohol therein,

Olbart: "Ya know, boy. I dunno if that's somethin' only the current you could come up with, or if it's somethin' even the past you would've come up with…"

Subaru: "…"

Olbart: "—I don't like the idea of throwin' away a game I've set in motion halfway thro'. —This geezer's a stubborn man, ya know?"

The monstrous old man laughed, and with that, he crushed the gourd in his hand, shattering it to pieces that fell onto the floor.

With a peal the debris danced, causing Subaru to gasp.

Immediately afterwards—

Yorna: "An old man who won't take the hand offered by a child, will mourn his own stubbornness."

Yorna's long legs swung down as she rushed forth, and with a roar, the tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle split in two.

2

Her foot, wearing a thick-soled geta, was raised up high, then slammed straight down at tremendous speed.

A moment later, the castle tower, being hit directly by her heel, bent, cracked, shattered and, after a beat, burst open with a thunderous roar as if it had exploded.

As the blown-off roof tiles flew up in the air and a thick cloud of smoke rose, Yorna, having dished out that immense strike, turned around at the epicenter of the explosion, the hem of her kimono waving gallantly.

In a single breath, Yorna had performed a jump and an axe kick in sequence, the consequence of their immense calamitous force being the partial destruction of the Castle.

A single strike by Yorna's heel had literally caused the keep to collapse, ruining the beautiful scenery of the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Subaru: “Whoaaaa—?!”

Seeing that sublime destructive power, Subaru crouched down with his head in his hands.

He’d not been caught in the destruction of the exploding castle by the skin of his teeth, but the incredible tremors nearly sent him tumbling off the roof.

However, Louis held him by the arm, stopping that from happening.

Louis: “Uau!”

Subaru: “Shit! Why’s this happening…!”

He was pulled up by the tight grip on his arm, as he sat up, Subaru screamed with tears in his eyes.

The dancing cloud of dust had gone into his eyes, and because of that he had teary-eyes. Definitely not because that blockhead Olbart had rejected his proposal.

That also, was also rough obviously—

Subaru: “Yorna-san!!”

Yorna: “Stay back, don’t get swallowed up in this. I’m not very good at holding back, I’m afraid. —Nevertheless.”

Yorna, without looking back, responded to Subaru’s call from behind her.

Cutting off her words there, Yorna pulled her stuck foot off the roof, brushed the dirt from the hem of her kimono, and looked up high—

Yorna: “As expected, he’s a nimble one.”

Directly above Yorna, flying in a whirling motion, blending in with the billowing smoke and debris, was a small shadow—Olbart’s figure.

Basking in Yorna’s gaze, Olbart let out a “Ha!” with a toothy grin, and said,

Olbart: “Thought we were supposed ta leave each other alone… So, anythin’ goes now, right?”

Yorna: “I’m surprised you believe you can beat me in this city. If you’ve gone senile, then I recommend you relinquish your seat in the Nine Divine Generals to the younger generation.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Nah, no can do. I’m gonna be the longest livin’ member of the Nine Divine Generals.”

One of them in midair and the other atop the roof, their lines of sight intersected, the pair exchanging their intentions to attack, and prepared themselves to go against each other.

Yorna put the kiseru to her mouth, and Olbart flipped around in midair—she exhaled a plume of purple smoke, into which Olbart kicked the sky and dove with the speed of an arrow.

Olbart: “—Hk!”

His eyes blazing, Olbart’s sidekick collided head-on with the purple smoke Yorna had spread before her.

The smoke from the kiseru, which should be both weightless and not solid, received Olbart’s foot and scattered the impact with a motion as if it was bending.

Seeing this, Olbart’s smile grew,

Olbart: “Ooshyaaaa—!!”

His short legs spun at high speed, and ten, twenty kicks were unleashed with fierce vigor.

The purple smoke diffused the impact of one, two blows, but one after another the force of the kicks scattered it; at last, once the smoke finally cleared, it could no longer serve as a shield or armor.

Of course, that even just this could be done in the first place was completely nonsensical—

Olbart: “Interestin’ thing ya got there. Don’t have that written down in my book of techniques.”

Yorna: “My regrets. It’s a secret technique that can’t be imitated by shinobi who can’t love anyone.”

The moment Olbart broke through the smoke, the figure of Yorna appeared beside him.

Leaping into the air, Yorna waved the fancy-looking kiseru in her hand, aiming for the back of Olbart’s unguarded head.

It was too long and light to be considered a blunt weapon, however Olbart blocked it with an extremely rapid swing of his arm—or rather, with the kunai held in his arm.

Along with a shrill screech, the kunai that Olbart had concealed in his sleeve shattered.

It must have been fashioned from appropriate materials of course, yet the kunai was broken and Yorna’s kiseru was undamaged. What in the world was Yorna’s kiseru made of?

Olbart: “Kakaka, the elderly should be treated with kindness. Don’t’cha dare harass me, lass.”

Yorna: “I don’t deny that there are elders who should be treated with kindness. But, Old Man Olbart, you can’t possibly be one of them. That being the case…”

Olbart: “Oh well, I’ll just treat myself with kindness then.”

While exchanging banter, they hurled lethal attacks back and forth at each other.

Yorna’s slender arms and long legs delivered blows that, despite their beautiful appearance, were mighty enough to bring down even castle walls.

In comparison, Olbart’s attacks were not as flashy, and were generally fending off Yorna’s attacks and throwing in a little interference in between.

However—

Olbart: “Ya don’t need the power to collapse a castle to kill someone. Ultimately, one long needle ta the forehead’ll kill ya.”

Yorna: “If so, give it a try.”

Promptly after Yorna’s quiet provocation, Olbart’s cunning expression melted into the sky. —No, he began moving at tremendous speed, too fast for the eye of a run-of-the-mill human to follow.

There was a famous boxer of yesteryear who was said to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, and that was exactly what Olbart’s battle style was, the half-demolished castle tower as his stage.

If one had to pick a more apt description for him, saying that he was combining flight like that of a fighter jet and a shot like that of a sniper rifle, might be more accurate.

Yorna: “You’re a personage who flies about quite a lot. You’re too roguish for your years.”

Perhaps due to Olbart’s leg strength, the tiles he stepped on detonated and, in the following moment, Olbart’s figure materialized from somewhere else and dealt a blow to Yorna.

Yorna made good use of her superhuman reflexes to either catch it with her kiseru or dodge it. Both of them were transcendental beings, so much so that the fierce battle made Subaru forget to breathe.

Louis: “Au…!”

Next to Subaru, Louis, who was watching the same spectacle, made herself smaller, curling up her body.

At the beginning of the battle, at a time he could not bear the continued state of the situation, he had been anxious about Louis jumping out.

But, the battle between Yorna and Olbart was no longer of that caliber.

Whichever side won, there would be an enormous amount of devastation.

That too, was an outcome far from ideal for Subaru.

Subaru: “But what can I do? There’s nothing I can do to stop it…!”

With such a flashy battle, and considering the castle tower was being smashed up so violently, people everywhere in the city were most likely aware that something was going on at the Castle.

If so, it was possible that the people of the city, who loved Yorna, would come in droves, or that Olbart’s comrades, the false Emperor and his entourage, would make a move.

If that happened, it would be the beginning of a major war in the whole city.

That’s not what Subaru wanted.

Even if they had come to invite Yorna to enter the great conflict for Abel’s return to the throne, what tragedy would result from a battle brought about without enough preparations?

Olbart: “Shiiihaaaa!!”

Raising a shrill cry, both feet of the spinning monstrous old man pierced the roof in front of Yorna. Immediately after, a shock traveled through the roof, causing an eruption beneath Yorna’s feet and sending her body soaring high into the sky, resulting in a swap of their initial positions, between the one in midair and the one on the ground.

Olbart: “…”

As Yorna rose up into the air, shuriken thrown by Olbart came at her from all sides.

Subaru had no idea of when he had thrown them. Perhaps he had hurled them after Yorna was tossed in the air, or maybe he’d known that she would be flung there beforehand; but either way, there was no escape.

Up in the air, a shuriken made a brutal wound on Yorna's soft, fair skin—No,

Yorna: "You must understand. I am the ruler of this town, the leader of the Demon City."

As Yorna responded, all around her, the revolving blades of the shurikens were stopped in their tracks.

They were not halted by Yorna, who could move at extraordinary speed. Yorna didn't even have to move. What had stopped the shuriken were pieces of roofing tiles that shot upwards.

It was not due to an enormous stroke of luck.

Because, no matter how lucky a person was, more than ten shuriken coming at a person from all directions being blocked by tiles could not happen by chance alone.

Yorna gave a gentle shake of her arms, Subaru and Olbart both holding that within their line of sight, gawking at the scene.

Then, as her arms moved, the tiles that had blocked the shuriken swam in the air and then stopped in midair, forming a spiral staircase around her.

Leisurely, Yorna's thick soles used the tiles as steps, making her way down to the castle tower.

That scene was a display of illusions or perhaps psychokinesis. Of course, it could be called magic in other words, but it differed slightly from the magic Subaru knew.

Neither fire nor ice nor wind nor earth were being manipulated, the building parts themselves were.

Olbart: "Kah, you're a real pain in the ass, ya know that? So that's the magic trick Cecilus and Araki were talkin' 'bout? How'd'cha do that?"

Yorna: “I told you so. It’s a secret technique that can’t be done by shinobi who can’t love anyone… I’m a woman who takes good care of things, despite my appearance.”

With a smile, Yorna held the kiseru between her lips, then struck her now-free hands with a clap-clap.

As if on cue, a change occurred in the half-demolished castle keep. —No, it was no simple change. It was a magic technique, one that distorted reality like a dream.

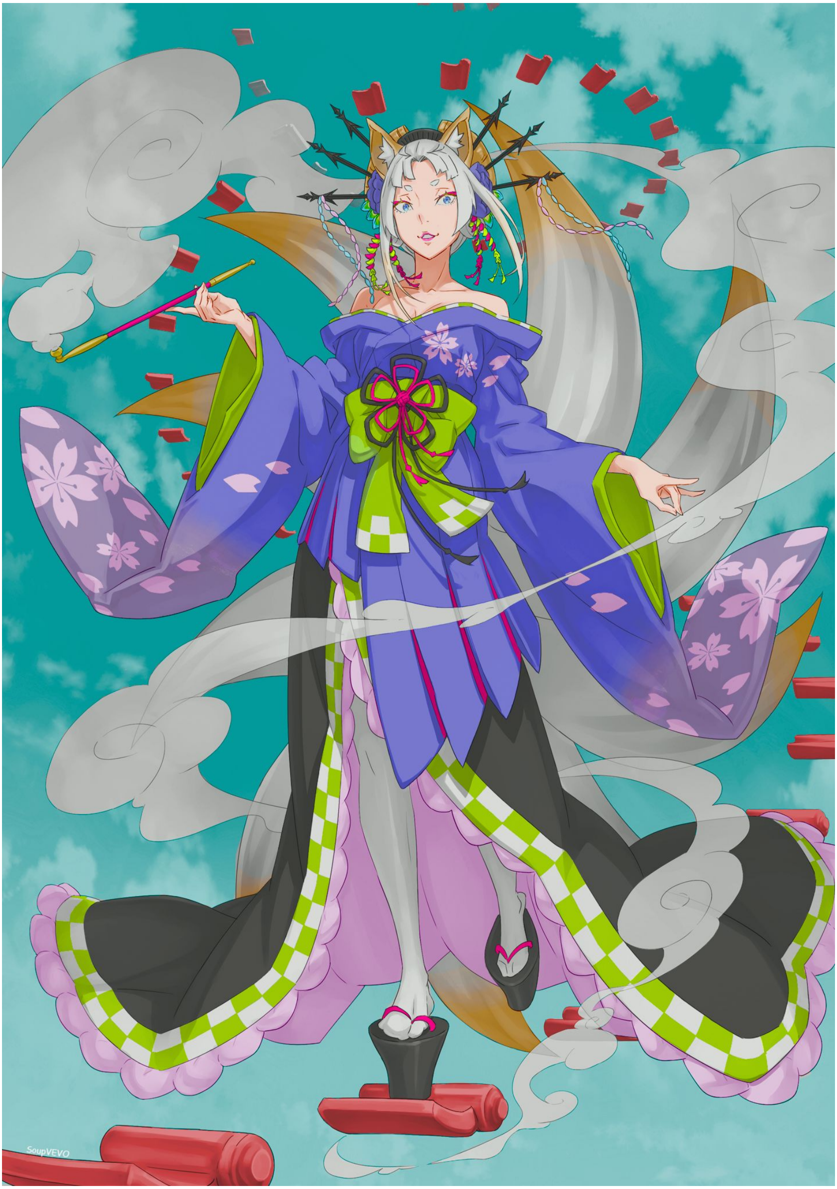
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Subaru: “Th-This is…”

The roof distorting beneath his feet, Louis hugged Subaru’s arm as he gulped. While supporting her body, an aberrant event happened under Subaru’s nose, as the half-demolished castle keep was restored before his eyes.

Little-by-little, the building repaired itself like a sped-up video of a wound being healed.

Combining Abel’s guess about Yorna being a user of the Soul Marriage Technique and her words from earlier, a theory came to Subaru’s mind about what happened.

It sounded very, very stupid, but Yorna Mishigure—

Subaru: “Sh-She’s using the same Soul Marriage Technique on the castle as well…?”

Indeed, he could not help but at a loss of words by the ability showcase of the ruler of the Demon City, a being literally out of this world.

Chapter 52:
Love Can’t Be Bequeathed

1

—By using the Soul Marriage Technique on the Castle, her Od was being instilled into even inorganic substances.

This was the reality of the extraordinary phenomenon of Yorna, who was using the spiraling roof tiles as a foothold.

Abel had spoken of her Soul Marriage Technique being applied to the more than hundred people chasing after Subaru’s group like it was already something unusual, but that was not even the strange part.

If he assumed she was handing out part of her Od, even to her own castle and kiseru.

Subaru: “That seems extremely bad for your body…!”

In the first place, the act of handing over Mana to someone else was quite tiring in itself.

In fact, Subaru had firsthand knowledge of how difficult it was, as he would regularly exchange Mana with Beatrice, with whom he had a contractual relationship.

While in the Sand Sea, on their way to the Watchtower, for example, Beatrice had taken a lot of Mana from him, and even though it had been only the necessary amount, he’d gotten dog-tired.

Additionally, the risk of trouble occurring with his Od tied to Beatrice alone—in Yorna’s case, by simple calculation that risk was more than a hundredfold.

On top of that, she herself had the power to unfold a heck of a battle.

In reality, the fact that she was supposed to be dog-tired because she was sharing her power with everyone was, considering she had split the Castle with an axe kick, quite unbelievable.

Olbart: “Hahaa, you’re usin’ some strange skills. Geez, no matter how long I live, techniques I dunno come out one after the other, it’s a real headache.”

Yorna: “That’s the kind of fertile ground we live on, so there’s no point for you to lament it. From my point of view, Old Man Olbart’s skills are also troublesome enough… It’d be better to make you disappear.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! I won’t be taken outta the picture so easily… Wuoh?!”

Olbart, laughing with his big mouth open, sprung backward in response to the hostility that followed that immediately.

Instantly, the roof beneath Olbart’s feet exploded, and roof tiles shot up from the impact from directly below. It was much like a reprisal for the previous attack that had launched Yorna.

And yet unlike Olbart’s single blow, Yorna’s attacks fired in rapid succession, as if hot on his heels.

Bang bang bang, with that sound, shockwaves chased after Olbart as he spun backward and hopped away. That had been accomplished by Yorna simply waving a supple finger of hers, using a roof tile fixed up in the air.

Olbart: “Yo! Ho! Huh! Take this!”

Yorna: “Old Man Olbart, you sure are a stubborn man.”

Olbart: “If ya got the impression they’re flies, ya dunno elderly opponents, lass. However—”

Cutting off his words there, Olbart twisted his body as he spun backward. As he did, with his back turned while in an upside-down position, the roof lifted like a wave to greet him.

Chased by shock waves from his front, and by surging waves of roof tiles from his back, he was being attacked on both sides—the sight of the castle tower surging like an ocean made Subaru want to doubt his eyes.

But doubting his eyes was what he'd want to do for what happened directly after that as well.

Olbart: "…"

As the roof tiles approached like a tidal wave, seeing that, Olbart kicked himself off the air itself, heading into the roof tiles of his own accord head-first.

Albeit it looked like a wave given its appearance, the tiles that made up the large wave had not lost their hardness and weight.

If he went in head-first, his whole body would be thrashed, his bones broken, and, in the end, his head would be tragically smashed. Without thinking, Subaru covered Louis's face as he hugged her, hearing her protest with a "Uu!".

But that cruel outcome never came to pass.

Olbart: "Ain't I amazin' for bein' able ta put the technique of hidin' in the ground into use without preparation?"

At the moment of collision, Olbart plunged soundlessly into the waves of roof tiles as if he were diving into water, and jumped straight out the back of the surge of roof waves. Scraping the torn-off roof tiles with his heels, Olbart flashed a cunning smile showing his white teeth, acting as if it had been nothing special.

In fact, Olbart had yet to display the depth of his abilities.

On the other hand, Yorna might have already exposed what terrors the Soul Marriage Technique held, but,

Yorna: "Will you be able to achieve your goal while merely running away like that, Old Man Olbart?"

With composure, she looked down from the sky towards the monstrous old man, who had still not sustained an injury.

Both of them had shown only a fraction of their power. That alone was enough to prove that the Nine Divine Generals, the Empire's greatest warriors, held tremendous strength.

However, if the fight continued in that way, it could be presumed their even match would continue, as both sides would not give in.

Apparently, Subaru and Louis watching from the sidelines were not the only ones with this impression.

Olbart: "Good grief, that's a painful thing to hear. Tho', if the Third stubbornly holds out against the Seventh, well, it can't be helped that His Excellency'd be angered."

Yorna: "Then, what shall we do?"

Olbart: "Good question. Well, it's not like I've been runnin' 'round aimlessly either…"

Raising her shapely eyebrows, Yorna asked that of Olbart, who stroked his chin. As he rubbed it, the monstrous old man's cheeks twisted, his gaze turning in another direction.

Those glowing yellow eyes turned to the two children watching the battle from the sidelines—

Subaru: "—Hk."

Yorna: "Old Man!!"

Suddenly, Olbart's gaze sharpened and Subaru drew back.

Immediately afterward, Yorna, her eyebrows raised, kicked off the roof tiles, throwing herself furiously at Olbart. Once again, Yorna rained down intense strikes on Olbart, similar to those at the start.

However—

Olbart: "It's 'cause of somethin' like that, that'cha haven't reached His Excellency even once despite so many rebellions."

Olbart spat that out, and a leg of his, incomparably shorter than Yorna's, sprung up. But, the sole of his shoe collided directly with the thick sole on Yorna's heel, sending shockwaves through the long hair of the two.

Yorna gnashed her teeth, Olbart clenched his own, and in a second the bodies of both were blown in opposite directions. Yorna and Olbart, each at the same time.

Then, as soon as he saw that there was a wide distance between them, Olbart plunged his left and right arms into his sleeves and then pulled something out. —Between his fingers, there were round and black lumps, four in each hand.

Subaru: "Ration balls?!"

Olbart: "Ngh, looks like that, right? But, things'd get messy if ya ate 'em. —For ya see, chunks of Fire Magic Stones are tightly stuffed in 'em."

Hearing Subaru's shriek, Olbart laughed and gave a grand swing of both his arms.

If his words were to be believed, those black balls were bombs. Propelled with an impact, they flew towards Yorna who was showing a large opening—No, that wasn't it.

Olbart: "In the latest rebellion, that lot were the bunch we fought, right? I wouldn't have used something like this against them, so it's fresh, isn't it?"

His cheeks distorted, Olbart threw the bombs over the roof into the open sky.

From the way he hurled them, it seemed there was no particular aim, and because of that, there was no doubt about it. —For Olbart, a bomb just needed to fall onto a place with people.

Only that—

Olbart: "I've heard it said that'cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

The size of the bomb was small, but the hidden power there-in was wholly unknown.

There was also the question of how many people in the city were under the effect of Yorna’s Soul Marriage Technique at the moment. In conclusion, leaving those bombs as they were would be far too reckless.

Yorna instantly drew that conclusion as well. Hence—

Yorna: “HaAAAaaa!!”

Stomping her foot hard enough to smash the roof, Yorna brandished her arm wide. Clutched in her hand, was the kiseru that had been used to attack Olbart.

At the same time, the smoke overflowing from the tip of the pipe traced the same arc as the full swing of her arm, and the mass of purple smoke flashed across the sky of Chaosflame like a horizontal slash.

—That mass of purple smoke had entirely caught the bombs scattered about.

Immediately afterward, the tremendous sound of chained explosions, thunderous booms and shock waves dyed the sky of the Castle. One of the explosions occurred near Subaru and Louis, blinding them and making it impossible for them to stand.

Subaru: “Kah—”

He faintly remembered seeing on the television or in a book that one should plug their ears and open their mouth when an explosion occurred.

As a result of failing to do both, Subaru’s body suffered great damage. His head was rocked, his vision was colored bright-red. That was how out of the ordinary Olbart’s bomb was.

Olbart was out of his mind to be carrying around so many of those things.

That he was going to scatter them all over the city without mercy was also clear—.

Louis: “Uau!”

There was a shout, and Subaru’s shoulders were shaken by a small hand.

Upon taking a look, he saw Louis projected in his deep-red, obscured vision and noticed that her facial expression was changed. Her mouth quivering in terror, tears were welling up in Louis’s blue eyes.

Seeing that before his eyes, Subaru went to reply with “I’m fine”,

Subaru: “—Ah.”

—At the edge of his red field of view, he caught sight of Olbart appearing behind Yorna.

Subaru: “…”

As she was busy dealing with the bombs that had been thrown, her pose was still the same, having done a full swing of her kiseru. Olbart, having appeared right behind her, was about to draw his arm in, and loosen a strike of his hand being used as a sword.

His aim was the center of Yorna’s back; if this were a manga, it would be a situation in which her heart would be pierced with one blow.

If it truly would play out like something out of a manga, he didn’t know. But enough had been seen in the fight so far to know that both Yorna and Olbart were superhumans with manga-like powers.

If it continued unchanged, Yorna would die. So—

Subaru: “Louis—!”

Grabbing Louis's hand that was on his shoulder, Subaru pointed towards Yorna and Olbart.

He'd told her the procedure in detail before entering the Castle, and Louis, setting it in motion, opened both her big round eyes—the next moment, Subaru's vision flickered, and the teleport happened.

And so—

Subaru: "Ah."

Before he could inhale once, Subaru leaked a dumbfounded voice.

The reason was simple, because even his blurry bright-red vision was taken away by a sudden warm feeling. Through that sensation, he understood that the cause for that was some kind of fluid that had been poured on his face without warning.

As he tried to wipe that sensation away with his arm, he noticed a sense of discomfort.

Louis's grip was too light.

Olbart: "The hell was that just now? Ya weaklings are supposed ta be over there."

The sound of Olbart's voice of curiosity made Subaru look up dumbfounded. Within his view was the monstrous old man, his head slightly tilted, shaking his hand vigorously.

Within Subaru's vision of red, an even redder arm waved with vigor.

Subaru: "Louis…?"

As he watched, Subaru called Louis's name, gripping her hand tighter.

He thought that they had to get out of that place at once. They would have to leap two times, maybe more. Perhaps he'd throw up, but that would be bearable.

He would bear it, so they had to get out of there, right now.

Because of that—

Subaru: “Louis! We’ve got to hurry…”

Olbart: “Nah, sayin’ somethin’ that absurd’s quite pitiful ta look at. There’s nothin’ left above her neck, is there?”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Hearing those words spoken so indifferently, Subaru was not able to understand their meaning.

Perhaps him being smaller and his brain younger was why he didn’t get them. He had been told something he didn’t get, something his little brain didn’t want to understand, and because of that.

And because of that, even if he were told that nothing of her head was left.

Yorna: “How dare… you do that!!”

Shortly after, with a shout of anger, something shot over Subaru’s head, and Olbart jumped sideways to avoid it. An impact shaped like a straight line ran through the place where Olbart had been just before, and the newly-repaired castle tower was once again destroyed.

But Olbart was unconcerned by the sort of dreadful power in that blow,

Olbart: “Oh, scary, scary. But ya should be grateful, foxgirl.”

Yorna: “What do you mean?!”

Olbart: “If it weren’t for the boy and lassie there, you’d be dead, ya know? Well, at this rate, it’s only a matter of time anyhow.”

Yorna: “…”

Shaking his upraised finger, Olbart continued in a carefree tone.

Yorna held her breath, and Subaru felt her attention going from the monstrous old man to himself. However, Subaru slumped on the spot, and the best he could do was pull Louis's lifeless arm towards him.

Subaru: "Lou, is…"

His vision was red, and he couldn't see Louis's figure properly.

If that was because of the disorder of Subaru's eyes, or because Louis's figure had turned bright-red, he couldn't even tell.

But there was one thing that could be said. —Louis had died.

Even though Subaru had not found any answer on what should be done about her.

She had acted as she had been told to by Subaru, and as a result, she died.

Subaru, had let her die.

Yorna: "Child! Child, look at me!"

Suddenly, Subaru's face cast downward was lifted by two hands clasping both his cheeks.

In front of him, in his red vision, was a beautiful woman's face. The reason as to why he had not been able to tell it was Yorna at first glance was because the expression on her face was one of grief.

It was different from the confident face she had shown the previous day to Subaru and the false Emperor, and their respective entourages.

It was different from the kind face that had tried to treat Subaru and the others politely this very day.

Right now, Yorna's eyes were shaking as she stared at Subaru with a pained expression.

He finally understood the reason why, due to the reflection of

Yorna's eyes before him.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Subaru dropped to his knees, with that face of his being in an awful condition.

His left eyeball had burst into bright-red, and his right one had popped out of its socket, held by a string. His eyeball had been pushed out of its orbit because of the impact of the explosion, which had not been dampened at all.

It was, like some special effects from a cheap-looking zombie movie, somewhat weird to look at.

Subaru: "Haaa."

Realizing his circumstances, Subaru's vision, solely that of his left eye, wavered as he let out an exhale. But Yorna's hands did not allow him to fall.

Yorna, moving her lips and staring into Subaru's face, spoke, "Child—",

Yorna: "—Love me. Right now."

With eyes looking straight ahead, she declared something utterly absurd.

To love, and to do it at this moment, was awfully absurd. In the first place, he didn't know what he should do specifically, and loving someone was no trivial thing to do.

He did believe Yorna was a nice person, and she was beautiful, but—

Yorna: "Child! If you love me, those wounds will also…"

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Oioi, that's one hell of a thing ta ask for, lass, for real. Not that I know much 'bout it, but love doesn't bud so easily, does it?"

Yorna: “Silence!”

Shouting out in anger towards Olbart behind her teasing her, Yorna’s eyes were tinged with a deep hue.

Watching that happen near him, Subaru repeated faint breaths to prepare, as to accept the waves of pain slowly arriving.

Even if one of his eyeballs had burst, and one of them had popped out, he did not have fatal injuries.

Unlike Louis, he still had his head. He knew that, soon enough, deathly pain would flare up. He was sure he would scream and yell and cause Yorna plenty of trouble.

He didn’t want to cause any more trouble—

Yorna: “Child.”

One word was spoken, and Subaru’s consciousness flickered up.

Then, much like an attack that made use of a gap of just one moment, Yorna’s serious face approached his own.

Subaru: “…”

Yorna’s lips, overlapped with Subaru’s own.

A soft sensation hit his face, and he could feel her breath right up close. It took him a while to realize that he was being kissed.

Partly because he was younger, and partly because he didn’t have much experience to begin with. His scarce memories were rather distant and he considered them to be very, very moving experiences, but this—.

Yorna: “My lips aren’t cheap. With this…”

The kiss ended, Yorna distanced her face, and she interrupted the words onto which she was clinging. However, Subaru vaguely understood what the words that were to follow would be.

What she wanted to say was—Can you love me now?

If Subaru were to love Yorna, the situation would change.

That was most likely the root of Yorna's power, or something like the origin of her strength.

However—

Subaru: "There's a girl I like, so…"

On the other side of his bright-red vision, the face of the girl he liked, located in a distant place, emerged.

When he gazed at her smiling face, his heart would throb. Therefore, Subaru could not love Yorna.

He could not love her, and so, upon hearing that, Yorna's face tensed up in grave pain. It was difficult to look at that.

Olbart: "—Well, things don't always turn out so well with men and women."

In a moment, along with that voice filled with something like disappointment, Subaru's field of view changed completely.

Subaru: "…"

Yorna's face, which was right in front of him, disappeared, and all he could see was the sky being dyed red.

Similarly to Louis's teleport, his vision shifted quickly—No, it was different from Louis's.

If it were like Louis's teleport, the world would reflect something different, more vivid, in an instant.

But what was happening to Subaru at the moment was much rougher and cruder. His vision was spinning, and there was no interruption like there would be in a teleport, and he saw everything from the ground, ground that was a continuous plane.

Just above him was Yorna on her knees, and Olbart's form standing before her. Next to Yorna, was the body of a fallen girl, perhaps that of Louis.

There was one other thing, something, or someone, standing between Yorna and Olbart.

That was—

Subaru: "—Ah"

—It was the body of the young Subaru, a child missing his head.

Olbart: "Good grief, it's mentally tough ta kill a child. Well, physically it's easier tho', isn't it?"

Yorna: "Old Man—!"

With a blood-curdling scream, Yorna's body plunged into Olbart. He met it head-on, and the bodies of the two clashed, causing the Crimson Lapis Castle to rock violently.

It rocked, it cracked, it shattered, and once again the destruction spread and spread, and then, something happened.

From that point onward, Subaru did not understand what was happening.

He did not understand anything anymore. Without understanding anything, Subaru's head bounced off the roof—

It bounced—.

2

—Dark, he was dragged into a dark space.

???: "…"

It was an empty space; he had no hands or feet and was floating; it was incomprehensible, neither sky nor ground existed, drifting about, nothing shook, nothing resisted, nothing was experienced, nothing shuddered.

It was like he had been acquainted with it many times before, it was like this was the first time he laid eyes upon it.

It was like it was drifting away, it was like it was infinitely close.

Amidst the seemingly everlasting darkness, in the space completely dominated by darkness, there was an echo.

An echo, of weeping, of someone's crying voice, one that made his non-existing heart beat, of a voice.

???: "I love you."

Those, were words of love.

Like an appeal for love, a request for love, a plead for love, a deferment of love, the voice had requested love for love.

???: "I love you. I love you. I love you."

That accretion of love, originally, was supposed to be that of words filled with various emotions.

The likes of happiness, of anger, of sadness, of pleasure; the whirlpool of emotions was filled with that sort.

And yet, that which filled the love in this everlasting darkness, was nothing more than a single emotion.

???: "I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you—"

Crammed among the entirety of those emotions, in the entirety of that whirling love, was only "sadness".

Sadness, of sadness, of sad, that love sobbed, saddened by sadness.

Unceasingly, there was sobbing.

Unceasingly, the sobbing made him yearn for death just because he was listening to it.

Love was sadness, love was made of sadness, love was made of sad, love was saddening sadness.

While sobbing, while carrying out love on love, while saddened by sadness, they united at the terminus.

???: “—Where are you?”

3

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

The whirling, spinning vision of red performed a rotation, and tense voices struck his eardrums.

One was that of an old man, and the other was that of a woman—he could understand they were Olbart and Yorna respectively.

He understood, but that was the only thing he could understand.

Subaru: “Huh…”

Yorna: “HaAAAaaa!!”

Immediately after letting out a dazed voice, there was a massive boom, and, stepping hard on the roof of the Castle, Yorna’s foot crushed it. At the same time, the golden kiseru in her hand was swung.

A large, horizontal, arcing blow from the kiseru, with tremendous speed and destructive power, spread a large plume of purple smoke across the skies of Chaosflame.

Subaru knew what it was for and what would happen next.

He knew, but it would happen before the knowledge he was aware of could catch up with reality.

—A bomb struck by Yorna’s purple smoke exploded, and a shockwave engulfed the area.

Subaru: “Gah—”

His whole body bathed by the same shock that had bathed it mere moments ago, Subaru’s field of vision was dyed bright-red.

He thought he heard a small sound like something being split, and he immediately drew the connection to his reddened vision. The sound had been the bursting of his eyeball. Hence, Subaru’s vision had turned red.

If so, before long, the other side of his field of vision would turn dark—

Subaru: “Ah, g-gyAHHHHHH—!!”

Covering his face with both hands, Subaru screamed as he was struck by two things, pain and “understanding”.

He had gained “understanding”. One of his eyeballs had been ruptured and the other one popped out. As long as his brain didn’t want to understand, it was possible to ignore the pain.

But, if he knew what had happened to begin with, he would not be able to ignore the pain.

Subaru: “AAAAAGH! AGH, GYAHHHH!!”

Louis: “Uau! Uauu!”

A small body clutched Subaru, who had collapsed onto his back on the spot, wailing loudly.

His name was being called. He did not understand. His ears were burning, and his own voice was too loud. The pain, the gushing of blood, he could hear it. He did not understand whether it was blood flowing inside or outside his body. It hurt, it just hurt. It hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt, it hurt.

Somebody, help. I don’t want pain. I don’t like pain. I don’t like, pain.

It hurt, it hurt because it hurt, it hurt because it hurt, because it hurt, it hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt—.

Subaru: “Wa—”

Olbart: ”Oioi, isn’t that a bad idea?”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Pain swirling around in his head, his red vision glazed over.

Right beside Subaru, there was a hand holding him down as he tried to roll around, but it was getting in his way. He wanted to scream louder, flail around more, and let the pain escape from his body.

No, it was his face that hurt. His eyes and his ears. So, if it hurt somewhere else, if this pain would go somewhere else.

Louis: “Uau! Auaa—”

Thud thud, he banged his head on the ground. A strong force pulled him up. Someone fastened their arms behind his back, making him unable to move. It hurt, he was afraid of being hurt. He hated it, he was scared, he was going to die.

Subaru: “Guh…”

Olbart: “Kakh, ya can’t be serious, foxgirl. What kinda body ya got that won’t die from that? So that’s what Cecilus was talkin’ ‘bout when he said he couldn’t lop off yer head?”

Yorna: “…There’s no way I’m going to reveal my womanly secrets to a lousy man who lays his hands on children.”

In the distance, someone was arguing. Caught between his own voice and the voice that was trying to hold him back, he couldn’t hear anything. He couldn’t understand. It hurt, everything was wrong.

Yes, everything was wrong. The red and the pain, everything was their fault. Everything was because of them.

Subaru: “It’s because of them…! That’s, that’s, that’s their fault! Not mine! Even though it’s not mine, uuuugh!”

Louis: “Uu!!”

Squirming and struggling, Subaru tried to push all of it somewhere else. What if he pushed everything to something else and was able to escape, what should he do if he could escape?

He would think about such a thing after he escaped. He would think about it after he escaped, so.

Olbart: “Wahwah, I can’t stand hearin’ the sound of children cryin’. —Shuddup.”

Yorna: “Wait…!”

A woman’s desperate voice and an uninterested hoarse voice.

After hearing them, something approached with the sound of scraping. From behind his head, fastening their arms behind his back, someone hugged Subaru tightly.

But, being embraced by them did not help.

Because a bright-red, heated light swelled up again, engulfing Subaru and the rest.

He was swallowed, and the pain went away, and then—.

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

A moment later, again he heard the voices he had heard just a while ago, and hearing them again, his consciousness turned white.

Subaru: "Huh…?"

Immediately after everything was suddenly and abruptly cut off, the replay began anew.

Other colors returned to his bright-red vision, he felt the sound of the wind in his deaf ears, felt the warmth of the soft girl right beside him, and—

Yorna: "HaAAAaaa!!"

The voice of a vigorous woman was raised in volume, and a moment later, an arm was swung with tremendous force.

The trajectory of the swinging arm was already known to him.

—A series of explosions rang out, and a shock dyed his vision bright-red.

Subaru: "GYAHHHH—!!"

Covering his face and taking in the pain of his ruptured and popped-out eyeballs, Subaru collapsed back-first onto the roof, and yelled.

Louis: "Uau! Uaau!"

Someone's voice, seemingly crying, jumped onto his fallen body.

As he felt it, as he listened to the world drowned out by harsh sounds, as he lamented the pain and suffering, Subaru's head was filled with tears, fear, and "why".

Perhaps, he was dead. He was dead.

He knew death. It was very painful and cruel, it kept him away from this place. But then it returned him to this place immediately, and then he died; it was painful however, due to the red explosion.

Even knowing this, Subaru repeated in his mind, “Why?”.

—This, isn’t it.

Vaguely, a sensation rang in his head, almost pushing him away with pain and redness. But it was a feeling of absolute certainty that he could not let go of.

An eyeball burst, an eyeball popped out, his eardrums ruptured, he was crying out in pain, he would soon after this die in a horrible way yet again despite wishing that the pain would be kept at a distance. Along with tears, snot, drool, and the leakage of some urine, his frenetic head thought such.

Subaru: “Tihs, isn…”

Louis: “Uau! Au, uu!”

Subaru: “This isn’t, mine…”

It’s not.

It’s not, it’s not, it’s not.

It’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not.

It’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not, it’s not.

It’s not, it’s not—.

Subaru: “Tihs is…”

Before the pain filled his head, he thought of something that he must never forget.

Again and again, Subaru was thrown into this world of red and pain, and this, this was—.

Subaru: “Not it…!”

—It was not Natsuki Subaru’s Return by Death, but something else.

Chapter 53:
What Lies Beyond the Eleventh Second

1

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

He heard voices he’d heard many times before.

The hoarse voice of an old man, and an anger-filled voice of a woman. And then—

Yorna: “HaAAAaaa!!”

There was an impact, that of the roof tiles being stepped on by a foot with force, and the kiseru and purple smoke were swung furiously. Chaosflame’s sky was scythed by a sideward swipe, scythed, scythed—

—Once more, a series of explosions echoed, and that red, intense pain arrived.

Subaru: “Geh, GAHHHH—!!”

Louis: “Uau! Uaau!”

The pain and shock of having an eyeball bursting and the other popping out made him collapse on the spot clutching his face. A light body jumped on him; he’d already known this would happen.

But although he knew it, he was not able to deal with it. There just wasn’t enough time.

Subaru: “Guhhhh! Agh, guh, UGHHHHH!”

A bright-red field of vision, a pain like that of his head being smashed, his soul crying out, “Why?”.

All of these caused Subaru to waste the ten seconds of despair that came time and time again.

The pain prevented him from thinking, the loss that made the world turn red prevented him from seeing his environs. Even if it would swiftly fade away, three seconds were all it took for him to freshly savor the same pain all over again.

Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. —It was repeated endlessly.

He was going mad.

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard. The pain and the redness ceased for only a moment.

But once more, he was so scared that his soul was torn to shreds, as he was going to taste the same pain.

Subaru: “AAAaaah—!!”

He didn’t want to hear anything. He didn’t want to feel pain. It was, scaryscaryscaryscary.

He opened his mouth wide and screamed; screaming to the point of rupturing his throat. Because he didn’t want to see anything, he closed his eyes and crouched down, his head in his hands.

And at the very next moment.

Subaru: “…”

Boom, the sound of an explosion resounded, and Subaru’s small body was repelled, rolling away. The sound became distant, and his soul cowered in terror as the pain and the red once again arrived.

However—

Subaru: “—Huh.”

That pain never arrived.

The pain of one of his eyeballs bursting and the other being popped out did not arrive. Although his hearing had been destroyed, the world had not reddened. What hurt him the most was his throat due to his loud scream.

Subaru: “Why…”

Louis: “Uau!”

Shortly after his stunned voice leaked out, a small body jumped at him.

It was Louis. She pulled on his arm, trying to get Subaru to stand up. But he could not, his knees had no strength, and he had not yet gotten an answer to his “why”.

His throat just tightened up and tears welled up in his eyes, happy to be away from that red pain, even for a moment. Unable to bear it any longer, he crouched and cried.

Yorna: “Chil—”

Olbart: “Oioi, isn’t that a bad idea?”

Yorna: “—Hk.”

Far away from the crouching and crying Subaru, a battle of a whole other dimension continued. —No, the scales had tipped grandly;

within his blurry vision, he could see that the woman had fallen to her knees.

Yorna, her knees bent, and Olbart, standing to her back.

Olbart waved his blood-red right hand, raising his eyebrows in surprise as he gazed down at Yorna, bleeding from the corner of her mouth.

Yorna: “Guhk…”

Olbart: “Kakh, ya can’t be serious, foxgirl. What kinda body ya got that won’t die from that? So that’s what Cecilus was talkin’ ‘bout when he said he couldn’t lop off yer head?”

Yorna: “…There’s no way I’m going to reveal my womanly secrets to a lousy man who lays his hands on children.”

Striking her molars, Yorna replied to Olbart in a voice devoid of any loss in intensity. Upon hearing that, Olbart let out his usual loud laugh.

After that, he waved his blood-soaked sleeve,

Olbart: “Ya say some funny things. I’ll show ya what it really means ta lay yer hands on a child.”

Yorna: “Wait—!”

A black ball pulled out from his sleeve—a bomb was thrown and flew towards Subaru and Louis.

Louis quickly stepped in front of Subaru and tried to repel it, but it was too late.

The red light exploded in front of Subaru’s eyes yet again, and Louis’s whole body, having rushed in front of him, along with Subaru’s own, were both engulfed in light and once more torn apart—.

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard.

2

—The moment the red and the pain disappeared, he closed his eyes and raised a loud shout.

Having repeatedly experienced the red pain many and many times over, and having only managed to escape it a few times, this was the absolute rule Subaru had obtained.

No matter what, once the red and the pain arrived at the same time, there would be nothing Subaru could do about it. He could only cry, scream, and then, die.

And just when he’d think he was dead, once more he would hear those voices and suffer the red pain from the explosion.

Don’t wanna do it anymore. Don’t wanna. Because I don’t wanna, because I’m begging, I’m scared.

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard.

At that moment, the pain and the redness receded entirely, and the momentary relief seemed to drain all the strength from his body. Enduring it, he did what he had to do.

Subaru: “AAAaaah—!”

Squeezing his eyes shut, he opened his mouth wide and howled.

Although he could not hear because of his own shouting, Yorna was probably brandishing her kiseru with a wide swing, attempting to detonate the bomb thrown by Olbart.

So, soon afterwards—

Subaru: "—Hk."

Subaru's whole body was pushed by the roar and blast wave of the explosion, landing on his butt atop the roof. The corner of the roof tile bit into his butt, the pain so sharp that he felt like he was about to cry.

But he did not cry. No, he did not want to cry and make his vision go blurry. Because—

Subaru: "I can see…"

Fearfully opening his eyes, he could see just fine; they had not burst nor popped out.

As usual, his ears were not working, just ringing, and his throat was burning, but he did not experience that red pain. It was alright. It was good.

If he closed his eyes and shouted out loud, he would not have to suffer that red pain.

Louis: "Uau!"

Louis rushed over to Subaru, she seemed to be on the verge of crying from emotion. While he could finally see Louis's face, her blue eyes were wide open as though worried about Subaru.

Without thinking, he hugged Louis's body back and shouted, "I'm fine!".

Louis: "Uu."

Subaru: "I'm fine! It hurt, and it was red… Yeah, but, now, I'm fine…”

Anyhow, once the pain and the red disappeared, he would close his eyes and shout.

As long as he remembered that rule, he would never have to suffer. As Subaru hugged Louis’s thin body, he felt certain of this.

Olbart: “Nah, you’re not fine at all ya know, look. O’er here, o’er here.”

Immediately afterward, Subaru heard a horrifying voice and reflexively looked up.

As Subaru’s eyes widened, Olbart, wearing a smile of satisfaction, cast shurikens that drew irregular trajectories, flying towards Subaru and Louis.

The shinobi’s dark-colored dull weapons, glinting with a shing, were all aimed precisely at vital points.

Subaru: “Hii.”

Yorna: “I won’t tolerate this sort of debauchery.”

Subaru’s throat tightened, and to his front appeared Yorna’s back. She intercepted the trajectory of the oncoming shurikens with her kiseru, striking them down in their flying path altogether.

Simultaneously, the roof tiles on either side of Olbart rose, and then slammed into the monstrous old man with the force of a mousetrap or a flyswatter.

However—

Olbart: “Kakakakka! What a flashy show, isn’t that an amusin’ technique!”

Olbart twisted his minute body to dodge the blow of the roof tiles.

Subaru used to believe that the bigger someone who labored in waging battle was, the stronger they would be and the wider the range of their attacks. However, Olbart's agility and quick wittedness defied that impression.

Olbart: "Well, I don't need this flashy stuff. Ultimately, a human bein' can be killed by a sharp needle ta the forehead."

Yorna: "Your words make my fox ears itch. —So, how about this instead?"

Olbart: "Oh."

Olbart avoided the showy attack, but right after, Yorna struck the roof with her heel. Then, one-by-one, the roof tiles rose and began to float, revolving around in midair.

Drawing an extremely large spiral across the entirety of the roof, the circumference of the whirlpool narrowed towards Olbart at the center. —Just like a tornado.

And then—

Yorna: "Why don't you show me some of your shinobi techniques on how to escape from a place without an opening?"

Before she finished speaking, Yorna's outstretched hand squeezed tight.

Immediately after, the whirling tornado of tiles engulfed Olbart and compressed him into the center in one fell swoop. The tiles collided with each other relentlessly, and the sound of a fierce, all-crushing impact rang out.

Even a somewhat robust human body would not be able to withstand the pressure at the nexus of this fierce destruction. It would be crushed, with no chance of survival.

Louis: "Au…"

Witnessing the same thing, Louis too gasped at its exuberant destructive power.

In response to Louis's reaction, Yorna quietly replied, "I'm sorry to have frightened you”,

Yorna: “I started all this on a whim of mine. I feel terrible about the way you look…”

Olbart: “Oioi, don’t’cha go thinkin’ we’re done here. I’m tellin’ ya, the fact that I’m still alive even tho’ I’m a geezer means it’ll take a lot ta kill me, ya know?”

Yorna: “—Hk.”

Just as Yorna was about to turn around, she heard that comment and her fox ears perked up. Taking a look towards it, the voice she’d heard had come from a whirlpool of roof tiles that had gathered at their center, crushing it—No, it had come from behind it.

Accompanied by a rattle, the voice that came from among the debris of the broken roof tiles was that of Olbart, unharmed despite the fact he’d been at the core of the vortex of devastation.

The monstrous old man waved his hand, smiling with a malicious look on his face,

Olbart: “Yo. And that’s the shinobi’s technique of escapin’ when there’s no openin’. Ya satisfied?”

Yorna: “—. Old or decrepit, you are still a Nine Divine General, it seems.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! That’s a terrible thing to say! First of all, I’ve been an ol’ man ever since I was chosen ta be one of the Nine Divine Generals, ya know? Even tho’ I’m old and decrepit, I’m still much stronger than most, and that’s why I was chosen. You however, lass, really need ta set yerself straight.”

Yorna: “Why’s that?”

Olbart tucked his waving hand into his sleeves and cocked his head, causing Yorna to frown.

In response to Yorna’s question, Olbart continued, “Ya see”, Olbart: “If ya didn’t have so many people ta protect, like the people of this city and the kids behind’cha, you’d be able ta handle me better.”

Yorna: “—Hk.”

Olbart: “You’re fightin’ ‘cause ya wanna protect others, but you’ve become weaker ‘cause of it. Yer priorities are all wack. That’s why ya can’t reach His Excellency, no matter how many times ya try, lass.”

Olbart’s yellow eyes seemed to pierce through Yorna to Subaru and Louis as he spoke.

In that moment, Subaru realized that they would once again be targeted. Perceiving this, he squeezed Louis’s hand right away,

Subaru: “Yorna-san, Louis and I will be going away! Do your best!”

He felt terrible that he’d gotten Yorna into this situation, only to then run away.

But if Subaru and Louis were present, Yorna would have to fight to protect them as well as herself. Olbart would take advantage of the opportunity and, sure enough, she would be killed.

That’d be no good. He had to avoid that from happening. Somehow.

Subaru: “Louis!”

Shouting this, Subaru squeezed Louis’s hand tight while pointing down towards his feet.

Making the connection between his touch and his instructions, Louis responded with her usual sound and a teleport happened.

Subaru and Louis’s bodies teleported directly below where they were, to the interior of the Castle, and they found their feet on a wooden floor.

Confirming this, Subaru clenched his teeth.

Subaru: “Uh…”

There was a feeling like that of the contents of his stomach churning inside him, and his head swayed. For a moment, his red vision and his pain flickered, but the level to which them hindered him was incomparable to before.

Now that Subaru and Louis were gone, Yorna would be able to fight to her fullest—.

Subaru: “—Hk, what?!”

Immediately afterward, there was the sound of an explosion occurring overhead, which triggered Subaru’s recent trauma.

A chain of tremendous roars from explosions followed, their shock reverberating through the roof and throughout the whole Castle, reaching Subaru and Louis. His knees came near to buckling involuntarily; desperately enduring that, Subaru looked up at the ceiling.

Although he couldn’t see it, it was most likely Olbart.

After all the bombs he had used, he was still carrying around even more.

???: “—Ah. Whoawhoa.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

In Subaru field of vision as he raised his eyes, a wrinkled face slipped through the ceiling and peeked down below.

Subaru’s breath hitched at the suddenness of it all, and then Olbart fell straight down, his face as well as his entire body slipping through the ceiling.

The old man was smiling meaningfully as he dropped from the ceiling,

Olbart: “Ya gave me the willies back there. I took ya as just a kid, I messed up, I messed up.”

Louis: “Uu!”

A moment later, Louis kicked out a thin leg at the approaching smiling face. But the monstrous old man responded with a short “Yo” and swung his arm, sending everything below her shin flying.

Spinning around, Louis’s white foot flew, spraying blood, and causing her to scream.

Louis: “Ah, UUUU—!”

Then, wide-eyed at the sight of Louis screaming, Subaru tried to pull her closer to him, hoping that perhaps he could help her.

Whether it was for the sake of escaping or out of concern for the girl who was crying out in pain over the loss of her foot, he did not know.

But either way, he couldn’t even manage to perform that fast action right.

Subaru: “Gaguh.”

Just as he thought he heard a whoosh, Subaru’s throat burned with more heat than when he’d screamed. The blood gushing out of his neck clogged his throat, rendering him unable to speak or breathe.

Olbart: “Can’t let’cha get away from me, it’d be too much trouble. I’m sure yer head’s enough ta get through ta that foxgirl.”

Having said that, Olbart’s finger then pushed on Subaru’s forehead. Once he did, his tilted head fell forward and Subaru’s head landed on his own crumpled knees.

His head was still attached by a small flap of skin from his neck; his now-dangling head touched his lap.

Olbart: “Just like an idakikubi.”

Unable to laugh, a terrible joke was heard, then he became unable to hear anything.

And then—

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard.

He knew what had to be done right away, and pulled Louis in close, so.

So, while he thought about it, the roar of an explosion echoed.

—His vision exploded into bright-red, and, once more, the pain engulfed Natsuki Subaru.

3

—The moment he heard the same voices, he covered his ears, closed his eyes, and yelled out loud.

That, was the principle of survival that Subaru had come to discover after repeating those ten seconds of despair tens of times.

However, he had yet to find any solutions to this puzzle beyond that.

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Olbart threw a bomb, and Yorna swung her kiseru to deflect it. A heavy impact, felt by his feet, made Subaru remember that he had returned and what he had to do, following his ingrained instincts.

He covered his ears, closed his eyes, screamed loudly, and then took the blow of the explosion.

He kept his ears plugged for the sake of his eardrums, he kept his eyes closed for the sake of his eyeballs; he did not know what the point of shouting loudly would be, but he always shouted when he was not in pain or when everything was red, so he could not imagine not shouting anymore.

He could not bear the thought of doing something a little different and experiencing the same pain again.

Once his timing was off, he would have to repeat the ten seconds of despair ten times or more, in order to get the same chance again.

He was done with it all. The pain, the fear, he was done with them both.

It did not get any easier at all. It always hurt. He was always scared. Beyond the pain, beyond the fear, death was always there.

So—

Louis: “Uau!”

With his ears and eyes fine and dandy, he caught Louis’s body as she jumped on him.

He had managed to survive the first explosion intact again for the umpteenth time. The rest was a cycle of events, recalling what would happen next, so up first was—

Subaru: “Shurikens.”

Olbart: “Don’t think it’s over just yet!”

Simultaneously with hearing Olbart’s voice, he remembered.

The next moment, a storm of shurikens, not a single one possessing the same trajectory, came flying from all directions, raining down around Subaru and Louis.

If one were to be hit by any single one of the more than ten shurikens, they would become unable to move.

To stop them, Yorna tried to rush out—

Yorna: “I won’t tolerate this sort—”

Subaru: “Yorna-san! It’s fine!”

Stopping Yorna from dashing in with his palm, Subaru then pointed somewhere with his outstretched hand. Then, he squeezed the hand that was tied to Louis’s with all his might,

Olbart: “—The hell’s that?!”

A moment later, their field of vision was switched by the teleport that had occurred, and a shuriken stuck into the place where Subaru and Louis had been.

Olbart’s eyes widened in surprise at what had happened and the lack of any warning signs of Louis’s teleport. Indeed, Olbart did not know of it, Subaru and Louis had been keeping it a secret.

Subaru had escaped into the Castle using it. But as he had been killed by Olbart, who had chased him down—

Subaru: “Even if it’s just once…”

Olbart could be caught off-guard.

And then, much to Olbart’s surprise,

Yorna: “You’re not allowed to look anywhere else—!”

Olbart: “Tch—guah.”

The soaring Yorna’s fierce axe kick was driven into Olbart from directly above.

His immediate reaction was delayed, and the leg he raised to intercept the attack failed to reach it in time, causing Olbart’s entire body to take the impact and fold in half. With that, the back of his head crashed into the roof, and with a resounding crash, Olbart’s figure disappeared into the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Even Olbart should have sustained damage due to that powerful blow—

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Ouchie, ouchie!”

Subaru: “No way?!”

Just after Subaru shouted in joy that she had scored a critical hit, Olbart returned.

Opening a hole in the roof different from the one he had been knocked into, Olbart jumped out, teeth bared and his right arm stained vermillion with blood.

He had taken Yorna’s heel with his arm, hence, it had been crushed out of shape like a dead branch.

Olbart was unfazed by the terrible condition of his arm, which made Subaru want to avert his gaze immediately. With his remaining left arm, he threw shurikens, simultaneously aiming at Subaru and Yorna in front of and behind him.

Of course, Subaru was unable to react. So Yorna flicked smoke at the attack approaching her own self with her kiseru and immediately wagged her finger, causing the tiles to rise, as to protect Subaru and Louis.

And then—

Olbart: “Here, it’s ninety years old.”

As he said this, Olbart suddenly resorted to violence.

He stretched out his bloodied right arm and cut it off below the elbow with the kunai in his left hand, sending the arm flying towards Yorna, spraying blood.

Yorna: “…”

Faced with this, Yorna was forced to make a split-second decision.

In other words, she could either parry the flying arm or dodge it.

However—

Olbart: “Too bad, either choice’s off.”

Yorna: “Guhh…?!”

Before she could act on her choice out of the options for the flying arm, a blast occurred beneath Yorna’s feet. There, was the hole that led to the floor below, into which the previous blow had knocked Olbart through.

From there a tremendous torrent of wind literally spouted, tearing through Yorna’s kimono.

Olbart: “It’s a basic principle of the shinobi. If ya gotta pick between right and left, then ya gotta pick up.”

Yorna: “You, cheeky old man…!”

Yorna’s cheeks scrunched up as her kimono was ripped open by the blades of wind that engulfed her entire body. With things as they were, she stepped in, ignoring the bluff of the flying arm, and tried to rush towards Olbart.

As Yorna advanced towards him, Olbart took a breath and spoke, “Ah yeah”,

Olbart: “When I said both options were off, I lied.”

—In the next instant, Olbart’s flying arm swelled from the inside and exploded.

Yorna: “—Hk.”

Subaru: “Yorna-san!!”

Yorna’s body was blown away by the explosion that occurred right beside her. With that, Subaru widened his eyes, and raised a yell from his hoarse throat, as her figure tumbled and rolled atop the roof.

The hole he had fallen into, the arm he had severed, all of those were traps to be used.

Ever since Subaru was first acquainted to the idea of shinobi as ninjas, he'd thought that they would be extremely troublesome opponents. But it had never occurred to him that they would be so "vicious".

Almost in sync with Olbart turning around, Subaru shuddered.

Subaru: "—Louis!"

Olbart turned around, and the moment he saw the ferociousness in his eyes, Subaru shouted.

Grasping Louis's hand tightly, he hoped that the timing on the second teleport would be such that there would be no interruption. He'd just point as far away from Olbart as possible to get some distance from him—

Louis: "Auau."

Louis's teleport occurred, and both their bodies moved in the blink of an eye.

Moving out of Olbart's line of sight, they'd move somewhere, a large distance away from Olbart. Since taking refuge within the Castle would not allow them to survive, there was nothing Subaru could do after escaping the initial explosion except to keep his distance, buy some time, and hope that Yorna would stop Olbart.

And—

Subaru: "Eh?"

As Subaru tried to hold back his nausea, something hit him at the tip of his foot.

His eyes shot wide open upon seeing what had hit him. It was a small, round, black ball.

A black ball that he had seen so many times, throwing him into the depths of despair.

Olbart: “I’ve been watchin’ ya for a while. You’ll fly in the direction ya point. I still got no idea how ya do that.”

That’s why I threw the ball in the direction ya were pointin’ at, and with that, Olbart shrugged his shoulders.

That gesture from the monstrous old man was poorly balanced, given he was missing one arm.

Louis: “Uau.”

Once again, Louis called out to Subaru.

Immediately afterward, light overflowed from the black ball that exploded beneath their feet, scattering countless shards of glass-like things within, shredding, shredding, and shredding Subaru and Louis to tatters.

Blood splattered bright-red, and shards flew into Subaru’s eyes and mouth, mutilating his entire body as the sharp pain engulfed him, dicing his limbs into bits.

Olbart: “Ya gotta eat it ta find out what’s stuck in it. Isn’t that interestin’?”

The pain, once more, was red, making him question his sanity.

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard.

Subaru: “—Hk.”

The moment he heard it, Subaru plugged his ears, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth wide. No loud shout came out. Merely a raspy voice. Even so, the roar of the explosion, and the accompanying wind, rushed towards him.

Striking his whole body, he was knocked down on his butt onto the roof. He couldn’t follow his rules. He couldn’t scream. Afraid of the pain and the red that would come. He just—

Louis: “Uau.”

A light touch made him jump, causing Subaru to let out an exhale.

And so, he checked to make sure that his eyes and ears and the rest of his body were fine. His eyeballs and eardrums were fine, despite the fact that he had not made a loud voice. His voice had nothing to do with it. Maybe his mouth was the cause.

I don’t know. I don’t know, but—

Subaru: “Guuhhh…”

Hugging Louis, Subaru sobbed through clenched teeth, unable for the life of him to find a way to survive the explosion.

And because he was incapable of finding a way, he sobbed, he cowered, he was unable to move once more.

Olbart: “Wahwah, I can’t stand hearin’ the sound of children cryin’. —Shuddup.”

Yet again, inevitable “death” engulfed Natsuki Subaru.

4

Again and again, he repeated cycles of red and pain, and at their end, experiencing a sense of helplessness, of pain and harshness and suffering and fear once more; he still could not reach it, even with this accretion.

Yorna: “—Love me. Right now.”

In his mangled state, how many times had he almost gotten help in this way?

Every time he was not able to act as he was being told, he felt sad.

Louis: “Uau! Uaau!”

Desperately pulling Subaru’s arm, Louis endeavored to somehow keep him alive, to keep him from dying.

That was why it was so painful every time they died before Subaru did.

Time and time and time and time again, ten seconds of death and despair.

In the red world, the only feeling that dominated was pain; a feeling of helplessness that, irregardless of how hard he tried, he could not reach the end, no matter how many times, he repeated it with no end in sight.

His mind, felt like it was about to break. His heart, felt like it was about to die.

This, was not Return by Death.

The thing surrounding Natsuki Subaru, was something apart from Return by Death.

He did not wish to believe that Return by Death was a mercy, not in the slightest.

But compared to these ten seconds and the endless accretion of loss, it was very much so.

—This was a loveless act, so much so that it seemed like there was love in Return by Death.

5

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard.

Olbart’s aloof voice and Yorna’s strained voice.

The immediate pain and loss vanished, and Subaru returned for a brief moment, for just a few seconds, to a sky of blue and a body free of pain.

Brain numbing, throat raising a continuation of the scream before death, knees buckling.

Nevertheless, the conditioned reflexes already imprinted in his soul made Subaru shut his eyes, cover his ears, and leave his mouth open as he continued to scream.

Yorna: “HaAAAaaa!!”

Yorna, howling, swung her kiseru, and several bursts of flame were born in the skies above Chaosflame.

The hot air, shock waves, and the sound of the explosion washed over Subaru and Louis, but at this moment, no matter how many times he tried, he could not resist falling on his butt.

Louis: “Uau!”

Subaru fell on his butt, and Louis’s light body jumped onto him.

Accepting it, he hugged it tightly. That too, was already a conditioned reflex. Because he had died god-knows how many times, he absolutely missed the warmth of people. That was all it was.

He had no other reason. He did not, and so, he clenched his molars together.

Subaru: “After this…”

There would be no time for relief, for the next attack that would kill Subaru would come rushing in.

Olbart: “Don’t think it’s over just yet!”

Alongside his words, Olbart hurled shurikens at Subaru and Louis. That the blades coming from all directions were more than ten, and that their sharpness could easily slice through a child's soft skin, he already knew.

He had already experienced being killed by shurikens many times. But to which pain they corresponded, he could not recall. There had not been a single painless death, so he did not know.

Yorna: "I won't tolerate this sort of debauchery."

During his confusion, Yorna cut in with her back turned to Subaru.

She swatted away the entirety of the shurikens with the kiseru in her hand, and then, as retaliation against Olbart, she made the roof tiles undulate and hit him with the castle from both sides, pinning him down.

Olbart: "Kakakakka! What a flashy show, isn't that an amusin' technique!"

Olbart used his agility to sidestep the attack.

Due to Subaru's belated reaction, the situation was following the same pattern. But there was nothing Subaru could do in this situation, a situation he had already witnessed countless times.

When Yorna was about to be attacked and he tried to protect her, when he succeeded in escaping into the Castle, when he rushed at Olbart because his head was messed up, he had died all the same.

What if all paths, all actions, led to death?

Olbart: "Well, I don't need this flashy stuff. Ultimately, a human bein' can be killed by a sharp needle ta the forehead."

Yorna: "Your words make my fox ears itch. —So, how about this instead?"

Olbart: "Oh."

Yorna responded to the provocation of the nasty Olbart, by striking the roof with her heel.

One-by-one, the roof tiles arose, and what emerged was a tornado of destruction swirling around the entire Castle. He knew it was awfully powerful, as well. But it could not defeat Olbart.

Subaru: “What should…?”

I do? He could not understand. He had a presentment that painful, scary things would arrive soon, once more.

Failure. How could it be avoided? The red world, the choir of pain.

Even if he wanted to help Yorna, he would be a burden to her.

Even if Subaru attempted to run away with Louis, they would be caught.

If only he had returned to an earlier point in time, he would never have gone to the roof with Yorna in the first place. If only he had left Yorna alone, if only he had not parted with Abel and the others, if only he hadn’t told them about Louis, Al, Medium, Taritta, if only he weren’t smaller, if only it were the original Subaru, Zikr, Flop, Mizelda, Kuna, Holly, Utakata, Priscilla, Rem, Rem, Rem, Rem, Rem—.

Rem, he must bring her home, and yet here he was, dying.

If Subaru were left behind in a world where death was inevitable, what could he do but continue to die forever and ever, what could Natsuki Subaru even do?

Over and over again, death, pain, and a sense of helplessness overwhelmed Natsuki Subaru.

It felt like it was going to crush his heart and body, and then—

Louis: “Uau.”

Gently, the warmth of the young girl holding his hand was transmitted, and Subaru gulped.

The warmth, suddenly, made Subaru realize.

That, for Natsuki Subaru, it was impossible, but.

Subaru: “—If everyone else were here, what would they do?”

6

Pain, red, scary, why, death.

Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death.

Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death. Pain, red, scary, why, death.

Ten seconds of despair, replayed time upon time upon time.

A never-ending hell of pain and helplessness accreted on top of one another, endeavoring to break Subaru’s mind again and again.

But after so many repetitions of those ten seconds of despair, he arrived at what laid beyond.

Pain, red, scary, why, death. —Beyond that.

Instead, after those ten seconds of despair many more possibilities branched out, but there still was no answer to the question of what was the how through which he could escape the pain.

Once more, Subaru died over and over again. Many times, in repeated pain and suffering, he died.

Not one of them worked.

Subaru would always make Yorna sad, let Louis die first, then die as well.

—But there was a time that laid beyond the ten seconds of despair.

He would utilize all of that time.

And even if he used all of it, and ended up dying, he would once again reach beyond the ten seconds of despair, over to the eleventh second, and think for dear life.

—If everyone else were here, what would they do?

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard.

At that moment, Subaru covered his ears, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth to endure the explosion. The roar and the impact of the explosion assaulted his whole body; unable to resist it, he fell on his bottom.

Immediately, a small body jumped at him, shouting, “Uau!”. Catching it, he hugged them back as if to reassure them, and while doing so, he contemplated.

—If everyone else were here, what would they do?

Subaru: “…”

Subaru had become smaller.

His arms and legs had grown shorter, and the contents of his head had most likely become those of a child as well.

If he were the original Subaru, he could have done many things and come up with many more ideas. But the original Subaru was not here. So, he could not come up with a way to fix this.

As such, then this problem could not be solved by Natsuki Subaru as he was currently.

That was why—

Subaru: “If everyone else were here…”

Up until now, they had encountered many problems and made many mistakes, but, together, they had overcome them in their entirety, and made it this far.

Now, Subaru was completely alone. He was in the Empire, where he knew almost no one.

However, there was something within Subaru, that he had received from everyone.

Subaru: “If everyone else were here…”

What would they do?

Otto, Garfiel, Roswaal, Frederica, Petra, Clind, Annerose, Meili, Puck, Ram, Beatrice, Emilia, what would they do?

Subaru: “If everyone else were here…”

What would they do?

Julius, Anastasia, Eridna, Ricardo, Mimi, Hetaro, Tivey, Reinhardt, Felt, Rom-jii, Tonchinkan, Al, Priscilla, Wilhelm, Felix, Crusch, Liliana, Shaula, what would they do?

Subaru: “All of them are so strong.”

He wanted everyone who could fight Olbart to cheer him on from behind.

It was not the turn of those people who seemed able to handle Olbart’s cunning and his absurd little tricks as well. I’m sorry. Thank you. I love you all.

Subaru: “They can use magic.”

The current Subaru could not possibly imitate everyone capable of helping Yorna.

He wanted to do something, to not become a burden to Yorna, a kind person. But, at this juncture, it was not healing magic’s turn. I’m sorry. Thank you. I love you all.

Subaru: “If so…”

What about imitating everyone who never gave up and was able to do their utmost till the bitter end?

Why not imitate everyone who was able to use everything in their possession to try and go beyond these ten seconds of despair, go beyond the eleventh second, and go even further beyond?

Yorna: “I won’t tolerate this sort of debauchery.”

A kiseru was waved, and the shurikens closing in on Subaru and Louis had been flicked away with a shrill rapport.

As that happened, the tiles on either side of Olbart rose and pinned the monstrous old man down in an attempt to crush him.

Subaru: “…”

As he watched the fight between Yorna and Olbart, he thought for dear life.

Hadn’t he died many times already, over and over again? Hadn’t he witnessed this scene many times already? Even if it had become hard to remember, he could remember the pain, couldn’t he?

Just the thought of it froze his body in horror. His heart shriveled, his soul became frightened.

It was as if the very existence of Natsuki Subaru was freezing over. But—

Louis: “Uau.”

The heat transmitted from the hand that held Subaru’s own would not let him freeze to death.

And because he would not freeze to death, he would be able to remember everyone.

There was no way to interrupt Yorna and Olbart’s fight.

Even if he wanted Yorna to win, Subaru and Louis, being Olbart's targets, would get in the way. The battle had already started, and this affair would not develop further without one of them being victorious.

Perhaps, it always ended with Olbart winning, and Subaru and the others dying.

So, would it be enough that Subaru and Louis just survive?

Emilia: "That's probably reaaally wrong, too. I mean, Yorna has to be kept safe, too."

Otto: "There must be a better way."

Garfiel: "Don't'cha stop thinkin'."

Ram: "Truly a fool."

Roswaal: "Giving up here would be a joooke~."

Frederica: "Assuredly, everything will be fine."

Petra: "Everybody's here for you."

Meili: "You wouldn't want to be in pain, would yooou?"

Clind: "All battles must be settled. Inevitable."

Annerose: "There has to be an opening."

Beatrice: "We're going to find that opening, I suppose. That's, the key to victory, in fact."

Subaru: "The key, to victory."

For whom? Of course, for the one fighting.

Then, which one of them was fighting, Yorna or Olbart—.

Subaru: "No."

Louis: "Uu?"

Subaru: “Nononono, NO—!”

In front of Louis, twisting her neck around, Subaru shouted in a loud voice.

No, I was wrong. I love all of you. So that’s why—

Subaru: “The one who wins—”

Once again, the red light and pain spread before his eyes, and then —.

Olbart: “I’ve heard it said that’cha and the folks of this city are awfully tough, but… Are ya tougher than the folks of my village were?”

Yorna: “—You lowlife!”

Once more, the same voices could be heard.

The moment he heard them, Subaru covered his ears, closed his eyes, and crouched down with his mouth open. Immediately afterward, the sound of an explosion and a shock wave smashed against his whole body, but this time he did not fall on his bottom.

In an instant movement, he removed his hands from his face and raised his head. And from there—

Louis: “Uau.”

With concern for Subaru, Louis jumped at him with a worried look on her face.

Catching Louis in front of him in his arms, Subaru took action right there. And,

Subaru: “Thanks.”

Louis: “Uh?”

As he looked towards his front, the words Subaru had spoken went over the surprised Louis's head completely.

The pain of his whole body being burned, of his bones being exposed, of his internal organs being mangled, was lingering still. He felt like he was going to scream, cry, and roll around if were he to not control himself.

However—

Olbart: "Don't think it's over—!"

As he said this, Olbart was just about to throw the shurikens he'd pulled out of his sleeves.

Olbart's eyes met those of Subaru head-on.

The eyes of the Vicious Old Man, someone devoid of mercy even in reaping the life of children. And the teary eyes of a child who had experienced despair many times, still struggling to hold back the tears.

As if he had seen something in those eyes, Olbart turned to him, the glint within his yellow eyes becoming even more intense.

He was not just aiming for Subaru as a tool to get Yorna's attention.

To murder Natsuki Subaru, the Vicious Old Man unleashed shurikens from his hands.

Shurikens with no trick to them flew.

Subaru's eyes couldn't perceive the threat, but he could feel them closing in on him; and so he thrust his lifted finger straight towards his front—to Olbart.

If everyone else were here, what would they do?

Thinking for his dear life of what everyone else would feel, he'd had a thought.

No matter how tattered he was, being plagued by the feeling of powerlessness, failing utterly, everyone placed faith in Subaru.

Regardless of how shameless, how unsightly the way he'd died was, in pain, with harshness, fear, crying, screaming, wetting himself, everyone placed faith in Subaru.

I love all of you.

Up on the top of the Crimson Lapis Castle, was this game to reach past the ten seconds of despair, and the eleventh second beyond that, and further on, dying over and over again; and, the one who wins is—

—The one who wins is always you, Master!

Subaru: "Louiiiis—!!"

Pointing to Olbart, he called out the name of the girl at the end of the linkage of warmth.

Then, he squeezed Louis's hand tightly and forcefully—instantly, the world changed.

Olbart: "—What the?!"

The opponent he was supposed to kill with his shurikens disappeared, causing Olbart to shout in astonishment.

That was an illegal technique, one outside Olbart's understanding that went wholly unnoticed by the cautious shinobi. The sole way to outsmart Olbart was the first use of this teleport, as he would be able to respond the second time it were employed.

And Subaru, who was teleported by Louis's power and flown—

Subaru: "AHHHHHH—!"

Olbart: "Huoh?"

Resolutely, Subaru clung to the back of Olbart's head, that was right in front of him.

He clung to the small old man in a desperate attempt to survive, not letting go of him, clutching at his gray hair with all his strength.

The moment of the teleport was unexpected to the point that even Olbart was unable to react to being grappled.

The small Subaru did his best to cling to the old man, who was not much taller than him.

Naturally, Olbart tried to pull him off of himself, and Yorna, suddenly awestruck, tried to run over to them.

Olbart: “Whoa! Th-The hell’s that! Boy?!”

Yorna: “Children! Get away now! Old Man Olbart’s…”

Olbart’s arm grabbed Subaru’s hair and tried to pull him down forcefully. Although she wished to stop that, Yorna feared meddling in that attempt, delaying her move.

Taking little notice of the pair’s reactions, while desperately clinging onto him, Subaru raised his voice—

Subaru: “—My win!”

And, shouted.

Olbart: “—What?”

At that moment, Olbart’s hand loosened as he tried to pull Subaru away, and Yorna’s eyes went wide, and looked over at him, wondering what she had just said.

Not paying attention to the reaction of the adults around him, Subaru clung on tightly to Olbart, refusing to let him go.

Subaru: “My win… It’s my win! It’s Olbart-san’s loss! Isn’t it?!”

Olbart: “But, what are ya sayin’…”

Subaru: “You said we only needed to do it once!”

Olbart: “Huh?”

As the energy he was putting in to shake him free petered out, Subaru finally raised his face and spoke to the back of Olbart’s gray head in front of him. Sobbing both tears and leaking snot from the excitement and his racing heart, Subaru's throat twitched.

Subaru: "Th-The game of tag! In hide-and-seek, we were supposed to find you three times… But in tag, we were supposed to catch you once…"

Olbart: "…"

Subaru: "That's why! It's my win! I caught you! This game's my win! Olbart-san, Yorna-san, you both lost to me! That's why, it's my ween—"

He thought to himself, that he was saying some absurd reasoning.

In the first place, Subaru and the others had been the ones to choose to play hide-and-seek as opposed to tag. To do something such as suddenly changing the rules of the game of tag was unfair.

It was unfair, but he still couldn't come up with any other method.

Besides—

Subaru: "It was Olbart-san who cheated first…"

Olbart: "…"

Subaru: "S-so that's why, I'm telling you, i-it's my win—"

Little-by-little, the tears and runny nose that came pouring out of his eyes became unbearable, and his voice became raspy.

Despite that, Subaru poured strength into his clinging arms, not letting go of his sly victory. He had caught Olbart and won the game of tag. He had won.

Yorna: "—What will you do now, Old Man Olbart?"

Suddenly, Yorna asked that of Olbart, who had fallen silent.

Glancing over, Yorna relit the tip of her kiseru and let out a plume of fresh purple smoke. Her appearance as she took it into her lungs was as beautiful as before she started fighting.

Still, depending on Olbart's answer, she would be willing to fight for and protect Subaru and Louis, with whom she had little to no connection.

And that wasn't the last of Olbart's troubles.

Louis: "Uau! Aa, uu!"

Olbart: "Thaaat hurts."

While Subaru was still clinging to Olbart, Louis, who had travelled with him, stomped on Olbart's foot. Louis glared at Olbart, her round eyes narrowed to their fullest.

In response to Subaru's complaint, Yorna's question, and Louis's glare, Olbart was silent for a moment, then violently scratched at his own head.

And then—

Olbart: "I'm the one who said he didn't like the idea of throwin' away a game he's set in motion halfway thro'. Didn't expect it ta be abused this way."

Yorna: "—Is that your answer, Old Man?"

Yorna's words were quiet, her eyes lowering to meet Olbart's.

Nothing happened. Because Olbart had plopped down on the spot, sitting cross-legged. With Subaru clinging onto his back, Olbart, flashed a toothy grin and said,

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Anyone can see I've lost. If I said somethin' like whether I win or lose doesn't matter, then I wouldn't be a shinobi, I'd be an animal."

After saying that, Olbart slapped his knee with his hand with "I lost I lost!", looking up at the sky.

Under the blue sky, atop of the beautiful, slowly-mending Castle, one second, two seconds, beyond the ten seconds of despair, from the eleventh second onward, the future was quietly, surely, being etched—.

Subaru: “It’s, my wiiiiiiiin…!”

Subaru’s nose went sniff-sniff, and while sobbing he continued raising complaints.

Listening to Subaru clinging to his back, Olbart let out a “Kakakakka!”, and smiling,

Olbart: “If ya keep sayin’ that, I’m gonna get angry. —Shuddup.”

And so, he tapped Subaru’s forehead with his hand.

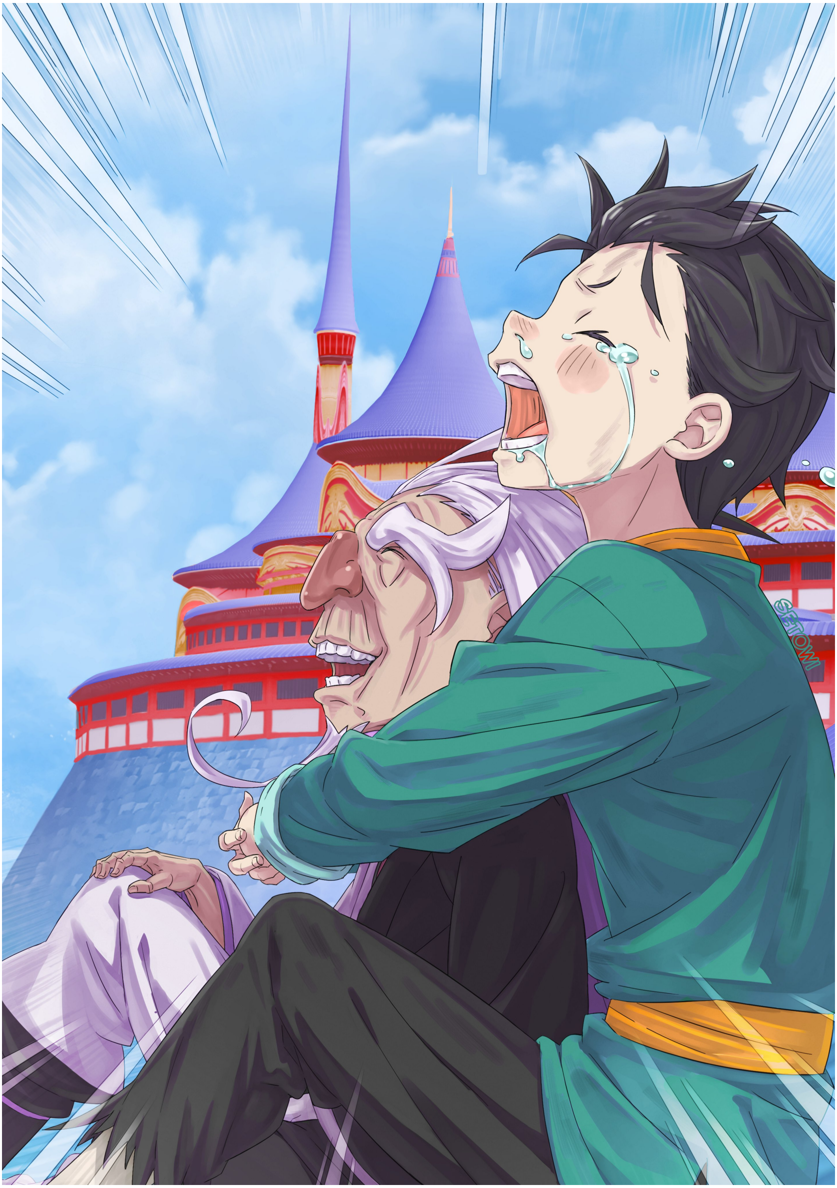
SETOWI

Chapter 54:
The Utopia of Chaosflame

1

Subaru: “Uh, ugh, uhh… Hk.”

Olbart: “Yeah, yeah, the snivellin’ brat’s cryin’, you’re such a handful, ya know.”

Sniffling his nose, Subaru was unable to stop his crying fit. With the boy latched to his back, Olbart gave a shrug of his shoulders, with nothing else to do but scratch at his cheek with a finger.

—It had been a dreadful, dreadful experience.

Those ten seconds of despair that had happened to Subaru, and the eleventh second that followed after overcoming that despair—to get here, just how many “deaths” had he experienced?

Through despair and heartbreak, it was a miracle that his worn-down spirit seemed to not have completely vanished.

But after such a hellish experience, he had finally reached the end.

Louis: “Uauu.”

Clinging to Subaru’s arm as he cried without end, Louis groaned.

Not that she’d had the same experience as Subaru, that of trial-and-error repeated more times than he could count, but Louis had suffered the same fate as Subaru many times over, having lost her life.

Jumping onto Olbart’s back in order to reach such a flimsy victory, would not have been possible without her presence.

Subaru: “I… Really, I don’t get you.”

Louis: “Uu.”

Subaru: “But without you, it wouldn’t have been possible… Thank you.”

Those were the feelings in Subaru’s heart, albeit in a complete chaotic mess.

He knew that Louis was guilty of various things, he knew in what way he and her were connected. He knew it, yet he was still overflowing with feelings of gratitude

And, it was not only Subaru’s gratitude that was overflowing.

Louis: “Ua, uh…”

Subaru: “Louis?”

The dam’s burst was sudden.

Having heard Subaru’s faltering words of gratitude, tears slowly welled up in Louis’s big round eyes, then trickled down her cheeks in the blink of an eye.

Pling-pling, tears fell down Louis’s cheeks, with such momentum that she did not know how to halt their course.

Subaru: “Louis, you’re crying, you’re really crying…”

Louis: “Uu, uu!”

Louis herself knew she was crying, yet did not attempt to stop or wipe away the tears that streamed down her face. All the while, she remained clung on to Subaru’s arm with a desperate look; one would have expected her to stop so she could wipe away her tears.

Subaru: “Your face, wipe it, you idiot, idiiiot…”

Seeing Louis cry like that, Subaru, who had tried to soothe down his emotional swings, was likewise on the verge of it himself. The tears that had been shed, the visible sobs, were by now innumerable.

It was like the pair made up of him and Louis would, at this rate, be crying forever and ever, without being able to stop—

Yorna: “—Well done, you did your best, you two.”

Subaru: “Ah…”

Yorna: “However much you cry isn’t an issue. I’ll allow you to do it, as the Lord of this Demon City.”

Long arms extended from behind Subaru and Louis, and tenderly embraced them.

The warmth and softness of those words made Subaru’s eyes widen in surprise, he became entranced by the beautiful profile near him. With long eyelashes, vermillion lips, and glimmering azure eyes that put one at ease, no matter the troubles and suffering; it was so sublime that it enthralled those who laid eyes upon it.

He already knew what type of person the owner of those eyes was.

Therefore, he knew that in her words and warmth both, there was kindness devoid of anything untoward behind it.

Because he knew that even if he entrusted everything to them, he would be forgiven.

Subaru: “Uh, guh… ah, uh, AAAaah!”

Louis: “Uau… Uauhk, ua, uh, uau…!”

Yorna: “There, there… Children have the privilege to cry, the privilege to cling onto an adult’s chest. It’s okay if you use my bosom, you may weep as many tears as you need.”

Looking up, tears flowed down Subaru’s face once more. Louis embraced Subaru as he was.

Holding them both together tenderly in her arms, Yorna patted their small backs. All the while, at that moment, at the end of the battle that had unfolded up on the castle tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle—

Olbart: “I dunno what kinda face I should be makin’ here ‘cause all this is happenin’ on my back.”

Yorna: “Silence.”

With that, the boorish interruption from the monstrous old man was shushed by the Lord of the Demon City.

2

Yorna: “So, how do you explain yourself, Old Man Olbart?”

Olbart: “Explain myself? Did I make any excuses? You’re the one who attacked me ‘cause of yer mood, right, foxgirl?”

Yorna: “…”

Shortly after Subaru had cried his eyes out, this time, they would have a calm conversation—so he’d thought, when the castle tower was abruptly engulfed by a precarious atmosphere.

Needless to say, the cause was the aloof and unapologetic one, Olbart.

Sitting on the roof, picking at his ear canal with the tip of his pinky,

Olbart: “I kinda did what I was told, yeah? Well, I did try ta use a few loopholes, but look, that boy called us even, aight?”

Subaru: “Ugh… B-but, that’s…”

Olbart: “Now now, ya should listen ta me, boy. —’Cause whatever ya say, I’m the one who’ll have the most ta gain. Kakakakka!”

Subaru stammered as Olbart opened his mouth open wide and roared with laughter.

In fact, Olbart was right. If Subaru were to argue against Olbart’s misuse of the rules here, it would turn into a no-holds-barred situation that ignored the rules as a result, probably making them unable to defeat the shinobi Olbart in any sort of manner.

Olbart had plenty of hidden techniques, and did not hesitate in dragging others into it. Since coming to the Empire, Subaru’d had more than enough experiences to know that such opponents were the number one in toughness.

Subaru: “Olbart-san, you sound similar to one of the scariest bastards I know…”

Olbart: “Really? In that case, ya should definitely kill me. I’m no decent fella, and will be a serious pain in the ass.”

Yorna: “In that case, Old Man Olbart, you must agree with me that I should stop you from breathing here.”

Olbart: “Oioi, that’s a lotta hate for me. Well, that’s only natural.”

The air was tingling, ripe with tension, but this was due to the one-sided hostility that Yorna had unleashed.

Olbart, the party it was directed at, was no longer in a fighting stance. Of course, this was just for show, and he could turn the switch back on in an instant.

Nevertheless, it was natural for Yorna to be angry, as Subaru held strong anger towards Olbart as well. However, there was a big reason as to why he could not act on that anger.

That was, because of his shrunken limbs, and his head that was not functioning properly.

Subaru: “Olbart-san, about the technique that’s being used on us…”

Olbart: “Oh yeah, that’s right. Of course, ya can’t fix it if I’m dead. No, there might be another way, but I’ve never seen anyone do it.”

Subaru: “I knew it…!”

Olbart: “Well, it’s like an insurance policy. It’s supposed ta be a secret technique back at my village, so basically, we deal with the dead bodies without leavin’ any traces so that they don’t come ta light.”

Quite indifferently, Olbart spoke some disturbing words.

At the same time, Subaru congratulated himself for having walked a really dangerous tightrope.

Even if Yorna defeated Olbart, and the old man died, the "infantilization" that had befallen Subaru and his friends would have remained unresolved. His state would always be that of being Natchuki Subawu.

Just thinking about it made Subaru shudder.

Yorna: "I don't know the details, but I've heard that you've treated these children in a cruel way."

Yorna looked at Olbart as she put the kiseru in her mouth and filled her lungs with purple smoke.

When asking her for help, Subaru had given her as much honest information as he could, but he left out the nitty-gritty details of their situation. That included the fact that Subaru had been shrunk due to the influence of Olbart's technique.

Once Olbart dissolved the "infantilization", Subaru would return to his original body.

Once that happened, he would do his utmost to apologize and ask Yorna for forgiveness. —Of course, he didn't think that'd be enough to completely reverse her impression of the situation.

He would like to think that Yorna was the kind of person who would see reason with just words.

Yorna: "Old Man Olbart, you've conceded defeat in your earlier match, right?"

Olbart: "Yeah, I admit it, I admit it. For sure, it's a complete loss. At least, I'm lucky I didn't die losin'. But I didn't think I'd lose."

Yorna: "It was unexpected that you'd lose?"

Olbart: "I thought it'd definitely be the boy's boss who'd gimme a good challenge."

Paying no heed to Subaru's concern, Yorna and Olbart proceeded with their conversation. Yorna whispered, “Boss”, quoting Olbart, and gently, sliding her hand into her kimono,

Yorna: “The sender of the missive, right? I’ve been looking forward to meeting him, but…”

Suddenly, Yorna cut off her words and narrowed her eyes at Olbart.

Olbart tilted his head at the sharpness of her gaze and uttered, “What is it?”,

Olbart: “There’s nothin’ scarier than bein’ stared at by a beautiful woman. What’s the hubbub?”

Yorna: “For crying out loud! I told Tanza to deliver a message to all the messengers, for them to come to the Castle. —Well, where’s Tanza off to?”

The air quickly chilled, to the point that Subaru felt like he was going to choke.

Yorna’s anger was always unleashed when harm was done to a resident of the city, or a child. This was even more so in Tanza’s case, who met both requirements by being a resident of the city and a child.

Nevertheless, Subaru suspected that Tanza had conspired with Olbart to prevent his own party from meeting Yorna. He would have to be careful how he approached this.

However—

Subaru: “I also thought Tanza was with Olbart-san. But she’s not… right? Is she hiding under some tiles or something…”

Yorna: “The Castle’s insides are much like my own. There’s no chance I’d miss someone entering or hiding within it.”

Subaru: “R-right. Yorna-san’s technique is amazing…”

Hearing Yorna’s self-assured answer, Subaru flinched at her unusual nature.

After wincing, Subaru realized that he and Louis had trespassed the Crimson Lapis Castle via the teleport, and that Yorna had found them immediately afterward.

At that time, Yorna had stated that she was walking through the Castle and found them by chance, but he guessed that was just a ruse. Truth was, she had noticed that Subaru and Louis had abruptly appeared in the Castle and moved to catch the intruders.

Perhaps the reason why she had not captured them right away, and instead treated Subaru and Louis as Tanza's friends, was because she had not been able to decide how to treat the two of them, Subaru and Louis, who were so young.

After all, ever since they had first met, Yorna had been protecting them.

Subaru: "…"

The more he came into contact with Yorna's personality, the more intense were Subaru's feelings of doubt on whether he should involve her in the great battle of the Vollachian Empire.

The same went for his feelings towards the people living in Chaosflame, the so-called "horned races", who had obstructed Subaru's group along the way.

They wanted to protect the safe haven they had finally found, after so much suffering and ostracism.

Could Subaru's group blame them for wanting to resume their peaceful lives? Especially considering their Lord cherished them.

—What was the difference between this, and the world desired by the girl Subaru liked?

Subaru: "…"

In silence, Subaru looked down from the castle tower, at the disorderly townscape of the Demon City.

A city where everything was chaotic, intricate, in a horrible mess, and without a sense of unity. Upon first arriving at this city, he had been bewildered by its disorder.

But after meeting Yorna and the people of this city, even if for a short time, Subaru had one thought.

Here, there was freedom.

There was freedom here, no need for a person to submit to someone, unbound by anyone. Ergo, one could express themselves as they wished, this overflowing chaos going undenied by anyone.

It was free, equal, and fair.

It seemed to him that a somewhat ideal picture of the future had been illustrated here.

Was it really the right thing to do, to pry Yorna away from such a place?

Yorna: “Old man, answer me. Where’s that girl, Tanza?”

Paying no heed to Subaru’s internal conflict, she continued to question Olbart.

Tanza was not inside the Castle. He’d like to believe that Olbart didn’t have a technique to make a person small enough to put them in his pocket.

Olbart: “No need ta have such a scary look on yer face, I’ll tell ya what I know. The only reason I made a deal with that deergirl was ‘cause I had just the right conditions to use her for the match.”

Yorna: “—Where is she?”

Yorna’s repeated questions were driven into Olbart, expressing that there was no need for superfluous talk.

In response, while tilting his head, Olbart turned his gaze towards the land surrounding the Castle—towards the Demon City, as if he were taking in the superb view, Olbart: “It’s not that hard ta guess. I’m an outsider, ya know? There’s only so many places where I can hide a single girl.”

That was his response.

3

—Just as Olbart had cracked under Yorna’s questioning, a little bit earlier.

Within the Demon City of Chaosflame, in one of its inns.

Neither was it large, nor was it very ornately decorated. —However, in fact, the walls and interior of the building were robustly constructed, and seldom did a sound ever pass through.

In Chaosflame, this was the only place where the atmosphere was so different from the rest of the city, prepared as an unlikely contingency as accommodations for VIPs.

The room that became the setting was a spacious one, said spaciousness resulted from its interior design being that of three rooms with their walls removed as to join them together. Even within the people that used this travelers’ inn, only a handful of them held the standing to be able to stay in such a spacious room.

There were no high-quality furnishings, no numerous works of art to delight one’s eyes, and no sort of fine alcohol available to soothe one’s palate, as many of the people who made use of this inn were of an utilitarian sort.

In a sense, this inn’s standing within Chaosflame was different.

The Demon City, with its popular name of “Land of Unlawfulness”, was worthy of being a symbol of “freedom”. Despite its chaotic existence, under Yorna, the ruler of the Demon City, the inhabitants of Chaosflame were remarkably unified in their will.

For those who shared a common vision, who did not tolerate foreign invaders, who had no mind to give mercy to those with their own troubles, there was no need for the kind of preparations that this inn offered.

Certainly—

???: "—The people of the Empire must be strong, that is the core tenet that this city of demons has overturned."

???: "Ah…"

???: "To some extent, governance is left to city leadership. But there are limits. —Is it because they do not know their limits, that they operate like this?"

As a man with crossed arms inquired this, the girl of small stature stiffened her cheeks and kept silent.

The man to question that of her, donning an outfit that combined red and black, his face concealed by an oni mask, was Abel. The demi-human girl bearing antlers opposite to him, wearing a beautiful kimono with her arms put through its sleeves, was Tanza.

In this city a face-to-face between two people with a presumably hostile relationship was happening.

—Nay; to be more precise, Abel and Tanza were not the only two meeting face-to-face.

???: "You all, you have stepped in here knowing what kind of place you are in…!"

Abel: "…"

???: "Answer me! Depending on your response, not a bone of yours will remain!"

Yelling so, was a man with dark skin reddening with wrath, General Second-Class of the Imperial Army, Kafma Irulux. Those words were directed at Abel, who had marched into the room, and the boy and girl who accompanied him.

He had nothing in his outstretched hand, but he had no need for a weapon. Any armaments were literally nestled within Kafma's own body.

That he would not leave any bone remaining was no mere declaration of a threat, but the truth.

—Because that was the true value of Kafma Irulux, the Fighting Insect General.

???: “Oi, Abel-chan, you serious?”

That voice, visibly strained with strong vigilance, came from a masked boy just before Kafma and his vigor; Al. He carried on his back a weapon he could not handle, the Blue Dragon Sword, and once he spoke, Abel glanced back at him, and,

Abel: “You, how many times shall you inquire that before you make up your mind?”

Al: “I’m asking that question again and again because, after you strolled, the jury’s still out on it. I mean, this is insane! Shit, I dunno why I followed you either…!”

Abel: “It should be obvious. —The current you is too much of a coward to be alone.”

Al: “Guh… Hk.”

Unable to speak further, Al was incapable of getting out any words beyond that. It was a reaction that revealed instantly that Abel had hit the bullseye. Yet the fact that Al could not even argue with him made it evident that he himself was aware of this.

For some reason, Al was currently no longer able to keep his composure for even a walk down the street.

???: “Abel-chin.”

Another companion, Medium, called out to Abel to protest on the behalf of Al, who was at a loss for words.

Medium, who walked alongside Abel with much effort, was protecting the now-useless Al; however, her facial expression appeared to have somewhat of a strong gloom to it.

All of this and more, had happened after becoming separated from Subaru and Louis midway through.

Medium: “I don’t think that’s a very nice way to put it.”

Abel: “Do you think, in this situation, we shall reach a mutual understanding with roundabout words? You and that clown both should be more conscious of the situation. One erroneous move, and, just as declared, not one bone shall remain.”

Medium: “All the more reason! You shouldn’t talk like that, it’s no good!”

Abel: “…”

Medium: “‘Cause you talk like that, Abel-chin, Subaru-chin and Louis-chan…”

She refused potently once, but afterwards her words tapered off.

That was inevitable, due to Medium’s own nature. Albeit she wished to blame Abel for all the problems that had arisen, she was far too compassionate to do that.

She understood clearly that her own attitude and gaze had been the factors that had driven Subaru and Louis to the brink. That, in turn, was likely a result of the education her brother had given her.

In any case, Al and Medium both were dysfunctional.

Abel: “Ergo, we do not intend to quarrel either. Put down your arm, Kafma Irulux.”

Kafma: “Are you… insane? You did not answer my question, just being stubborn in trying to follow your own will. With that conduct, do you believe yourself to be a king?”

Abel: “—. You are not far off the mark.”

Kafma: “You—!”

Kafma’s eyes became bloodshot, his anger, as someone with high loyalty towards the Emperor, reaching its limit.

By chance, Kafma came half a step short from coming into contact with the truth regarding the true nature of Abel's identity. That was the strength of the effect of "cognitive disruption" held by the oni mask obtained in the Shudraqian village.

In rough terms, with the exception of those whom the wearer intended to reveal his true identity, and those already possessing absolute certainty regarding the true identity of the one donning it, no one was able to see beyond the effects of the mask.

In other words—

Kafma: "Enough, I cannot take any more of this farce of bringing kids along! Regardless of what happened yesterday…"

???: "—Calm down, Kafma Irulux."

Filling his arms with strength, the tattoo patterns on Kafma's arm writhed. That impulse of his was stopped dead in its tracks by a voice behind him.

Kafma's eyes widened as he turned around; there, at the back of the room, the figure of a good-looking man sporting onyx hair was located, sitting leisurely in an armchair.

With black hair and black eyes, his dignified and exceptionally well-defined face was as if it saw through anything and everything in its path, unwavering in front of those uninvited guests.

Truly, Abel was impressed with how well the "mask" had been made.

Paying no heed to Abel's admiration, the handsome man in the back looked at each of the three, Abel included,

???: "There is no hostility within them. At least, in these circumstances."

Kafma: "But, Your Excellency! The insolence of this person, to not display their face before Your Excellency, not to speak that a feeling of reverence is not being displayed altogether, is that of a scoundrel's! Moreover, coming along with children…"

???: "What about it?"

Kafma: "No, coming with children in tow, makes very little sense…!"

Kafma, unable to hide all of his pronounced bewilderment, fought his anguish as he rubbed his temples.

To begin with, the man named Kafma had a bad habit of taking things too seriously. It was one thing to take things in earnest, but it was another to add to the room's worry.

With his excess of seriousness as pretext, he had rejected a position as one of the Nine Divine Generals for feeling himself unworthy. —Henceforth, barring his character, he was the owner of ability on par with that of the Nine Divine Generals.

Even if no one had fallen victim to Olbart's wily ways, and even if Taritta had accompanied them to this place, fighting a proper battle with Kafma as an opponent was an impossibility.

But on this point, the battle was in favor of Abel and his team. That was—

Abel: "I apologize for disturbing your sleeping quarters, but my business is with the girl there. At the present moment, I have no intention of bothering myself with you."

Girl: "Na… Hk"

???: "Ho. This one does talk up a big game before me. I shall commit that face and that voice to memory. Even more so if you truly are related to the envoy we happened upon at the castle tower yesterday."

Abel: "Hmm."

Snorting, Abel touched the chin of the oni mask while his opponent stared back at him—the one who Subaru had labeled a false

Emperor, and whom Abel knew as Chisha Gold, now assuming the form of Vincent.

Right beside Abel, Al and Medium carried complex frowns. The pair, as they were excluded from the effects of the “cognitive disruption”, were witnessing an exchange of words between Vincent’s possessing exactly the same voices.

The disguise of the White Spider, Chisha, was flawless.

With his voice and his conduct, there was no one else in the world that could perform a substitution of Vincent Vollachia as skillfully as Chisha Gold.

Rather, even contradictory thoughts such as him being more like Vincent than Abel was, could arise.

However—

Abel: “I have heard about how you responded to my subordinates. For the stern Emperor of Vollachia, you have been considerably magnanimous in forgiving the disrespect of an impudent woman.”

Vincent: “Even so, I am not enough of an eccentric to deal with people who do not know their place. But, if I properly recognize their relative value, they shall be treated accordingly. At any rate —”

Vincent responded to Abel’s sarcasm, and once there was a pause in the former’s words, their gazes intersected in midair, then their lips moved simultaneously.

Abel & Vincent: “—The people of the Empire must be strong.”

Indeed. That was the philosophy of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, their symbolic way of life.

The answer, from the ones fit as Emperors of Vollachia, that dealt adequately with those who had displayed a will to oppose them, could be said to be nothing but a magnificent one indeed.

Even if Abel had been asked the same question, he would have given the same answer.

No matter what laid within his heart.

Vincent: “Kafma, that girl there?”

Kafma: “Yes. Master Olbart requested of me to keep her at the inn… Said Master has since gone out into town, and has yet to return.”

Vincent: “I see.”

Kafma responded with an awkward look on his face, and, nodding at his reply, Vincent’s gaze now turned to Tanza.

The little girl, a tiny being in the corner of the room, let out an “Ah” as she attempted to devote herself to her duty and at least conceal herself, but her shoulders trembled at the sight of the one looking down from the pinnacle of the Empire.

Tanza’s reaction could not be described as neither timid nor frightened. Vincent, taking that in as inevitable,

Vincent: “Olbart’s involvement, yesterday’s agreement with Yorna Mishigure. In addition, the one associated with yesterday’s envoys has appeared looking for you, no less. I get the sense of the overall picture.”

Tanza: “I-I…”

Vincent: “Excuses are unnecessary. Of course, Olbart shall relay to me what happened in your stead, as I am not your master. Additionally, neither am I your enemy.”

Tanza: “Ah…”

Vincent: “Once you have initiated a battle, it is fine to fight it to your utmost earnestness, till the very end. Hence whether your destiny is to burn or not, remains your decision.”

Indifferently, Vincent declared to Tanza that he would not provide any further protection.

If one were to believe, however, that this had made Tanza feel the despair she had abandoned, that would be a mistake.

Tanza: "…"

Dwelling in Tanza's round eyes was the same light, perhaps the same flame of determination, the same beacon that dwelled at the time she had decided to take on that battle, that challenge.

That Tanza's life, as someone belonging to the horned races, had never been peaceful nor cheerful in the least, was a simple, yet plausible guess for Abel. Not to mention that, on the matter of the deerpeople from Chaosflame, that race had been the root cause for a rebellion raised by Yorna Mishigure previously.

Rather, it would not be surprising if Tanza herself was related to any of those casualties.

Tanza: "Vincent-sama, I apologize for the inconvenience. However, this occasion was not brought about by Yorna-sama, I was the one who orchestrated it."

Vincent: "As I said just now, excuses are unnecessary. The facts, I shall inquire of Yorna Mishigure. You may cease speaking yourself."

Tanza: "Yes. Thank you very much."

Tanza rectified her posture, then proffered a deep bow towards Vincent. Once she looked up, Tanza's gaze then turned towards Abel and the others.

Unlike the gaze directed at Vincent, this one was clearly hostile.

Al: "—Hk."

Due to that girl's aura, Al's throat rasped, despite his attempts to restrain himself.

He was a coward to the extreme, but it was also true that that aura was loaded with such fighting spirit that it made him feel pressure. And so, one could only imagine what circumstances had led her to torment herself this much.

All of this—

Tanza: "—Please, do not bring Yorna-sama into this war. She is a kind woman, who will surely fight for the sake of the weak masses, no matter how hurt or worn down she may get. Such a thing, I could never overlook. Yorna-sama is everything to me."

Medium: "Ah…"

Tanza: "Please, please grant this favor. Please…!"

With a small tremor in her words, Tanza's plea caused Medium to widen her eyes.

It seemed that, to Al and Medium, Tanza's motives had been unexpected. By far, the goal of the residents who had attacked them on their way here was maintaining the situation of the people of the horned races.

If they lost the protection of Yorna Mishigure, they would lose the safe haven that was the Demon City of Chaosflame, and would resume the long hard days of traveling in the wilderness. That was their fear.

That sentiment was probably held by a considerate portion of the residents of the Demon City.

But on the other hand, the likelihood that the feelings of most of the Demon City's residents favored Tanza was something Abel was well aware of.

And what convinced him of that, was that the Soul Marriage Technique had spread across the people of the city.

That was a secret technique that could not be formed by one-sided feelings.

If the residents loathed it, the mechanism that tied a vast number of people together would have driven them to madness; but since that was not the case, it only provided definite confirmation for the thoughts Abel had carried from the start.

Abel: “Yorna Mishigure shall be the one to decide. Bowing your head towards me shan’t make a difference.”

Kafma: “—Hk, you.”

For some reason, Kafma’s anger flared up at Abel’s response, the latter with arms crossed.

There was most likely no direct relationship to Tanza, but likely the man held some amount of affection for the girl due to her youth. In that respect, by and large, this was a man who could be described as being of the same ilk as Yorna.

And in regard to the true essence of the Demon City alone, that which was visible to Tanza, was not to Kafma. Hence, she kept her head down and continued.

Tanza: “No, she is not. It is not Yorna-sama’s decision to make, it is yours.”

Abel: “…”

Tanza: “Yorna-sama’s heart is vast and deep, she is a kind person… and, we attendants can only gaze at that unbelievably far dream, unable to help. The means to grant that dream, you must possess them, surely.”

Abel: “…The missive for Yorna Mishigure, are you aware of its contents?”

Tanza: “No.”

Having shaken her head, Tanza denied Abel’s suspicions. However, Tanza ceased shaking her head in front of him, instead casting it downward with a terribly fragile expression on her face,

Tanza: “Still, I understand. —Ahh, to witness Yorna-sama with the face of a maiden, for the first time.”

Abel: “The face of a maiden, is it.”

Tanza: “Yorna-sama, responds to the love directed at her. But for her to show that appearance of a maiden-in-love to someone… The reason would be no less than the answer to that letter.”

Abel: “Yorna Mishigure would not refuse, so you interfered. Therefore.”

Tanza: “—Yes. All of it was my plan.”

With her head sunken deeply, Tanza confessed to her plot.

All of it was not correct. Undoubtedly, Olbart must have had a hand in Tanza’s scheme, and distorted it to something more vicious.

However, Tanza intended to take responsibility not only for what she herself had started and what her will had led her to do, but also for whatever part Olbart had been involved in.

It was all too—

Abel: “—Beautiful.”

And so, an inaudible voice took form only within someone’s mouth, and went unheard by anyone.

Naturally, it went unheard by all; not even by Tanza, who bowed her head, nor by Al and Medium, both on-guard, nor by Kafma, who held back his anger, nor by Vincent, who rested his hand on his chin.

Abel: “I have a grasp regarding your participation. But, how does this matter?”

Tanza: “—. How, why…”

Abel: “Even after divulging your heart of hearts, you could continue your scheme if you desired. Even if you are beheaded, the residents of the Demon City shall still target my group. —No, if you are beheaded in the first place, Yorna Mishigure’s cooperation shall not be obtained.”

Tanza: “…”

Abel: “Or perhaps, having your own head lopped off was a measure you were willing to take?”

Casting her gaze downwards, a slight tension ran up Tanza’s neck. Having observed this, Abel was convinced that Tanza had left the option of taking her own life on the table.

Suffice to say, it was well thought-out. —Although there were a few things to ponder over until it could be put into action.

Al: “So you were gonna put your life on the line… You’re one hell of a girl.”

Medium: “No way! I won’t let you, ever! You won’t let her, will you, Abel-chin?”

At the revelation of the extent of Tanza’s resolution, Al was at a loss for words, as Medium probed Abel.

In case Abel voiced something contrary to her feelings, while the posture that Medium would adopt was something to be considered, it was a thought that may be regarded as meaningless.

Abel: “I should have already spoken such. If her own death is one of the measures she was willing to take, then taking her life would fulfill those plans. Unfortunately, I hold no interest in partaking in such schemes.”

Medium: “Abel-chin…!”

Abel: “People should die in a more efficient manner.”

Medium: “Abel-chin…”

A pawn that operated according to their own agenda was a nuisance, regardless of whether they were one’s own camp or the enemy’s.

Taking that into account, the being known as Tanza was a poison beyond their control. However, unless one was steeled to drink said poison, one would be unable to introduce stronger poisons.

Having made his decision, Abel fixed his gaze on Tanza, sitting on the floor, and said,

Abel: “I have no intention to take your life. But, I shall order you to call off the orders you gave your brethren.”

Tanza: “…So then, about my earlier request.”

Abel: “To not bring Yorna Mishigure into this war, hmm? —That is impossible.”

Tanza: “—Hk!”

Abel made a clear, definitive statement, and Tanza was rendered speechless.

From her point of view, it was the announcement of a future event that she wished would not pass, even if that meant that she had to sacrifice her own life. However, that was Tanza’s misconception. And it was a hopelessly mistaken desire.

Because—

Abel: “Even if I had not shown up, Yorna Mishigure would have been engulfed in the maelstrom of war. That is the position she has taken, making it unavoidable.”

Tanza: “What in the world do you see…”

Abel: “I shan’t speak to others of what is reflected in my eyes. However, I have measures for any possibility. No matter how it appears to those around me.”

While responding to the quivering Tanza, his eyes trained on her own, Abel abruptly took his gaze off the girl.

Instead, his dark eyes turned towards the silent Vincent, stock-still at the back of the room. Now sitting atop the throne of the Emperor, was the false Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.

No matter what motivation he’d had to topple him from his position —.

Abel: “My way of being remains unchanged. There is no altering that. My path towards retreat has been burnt down, a single path exists. —You would do well, to sear this into memory.”

Vincent: “—I shall keep that in mind.”

To Abel’s words, Vincent quietly replied.

That was all it took to inflame the atmosphere of the room, which lent the illusion of rising temperatures. In fact, everyone, with the exception of Abel and Vincent, were still, sweat beading on their foreheads.

Abel: “Girl, Tanza, raise your face.”

After the standoff between the new and old Emperor, Abel called upon the girl who regretted her lack of strength. Slowly, the girl raised her head with tears welled up in her eyes, as Abel sighed.

Abel: “From the onset, I did not call upon your mistress with the intention of wasting her. Her use requires thoughtful consideration, valuable assets must be made use of optimally. —People should die in an efficient manner.”

Tanza: “…Can I place trust in you in that regard?”

Abel: “Even if you do not believe me, that shall not change what I must do.”

Tanza attempted to cling onto her budding hopes, but that not-so-gentle response extinguished them.

Behind him, Al applied the back of his hand to his forehead, and Medium let out a sigh. However, after a brief hesitation, Tanza nodded her head.

Tanza: “Okay, I understand… Please, regarding Yorna-sama…”

Abel: “To fulfill that request, there are steps to be taken by your side. As it stands, I cannot merely stroll around this city.”

Al: “Yeah, that’s right. That’s what we came here for in the first place.”

Upon hearing the condition presented by Abel, Al seemed more lively as he spoke.

Presently, Al harbored fright for just about everything; it was possible to say that, for him, it was certainly a matter of life-or-death. It was imperative to get those chasing Abel and his allies, who were following Tanza’s call to action, off their backs.

Tanza: “But, how did you know I was here?”

Abel: “I made my decision with the fact it was Olbart’s doing in mind. Another possibility I considered, was that of him hiding in the Crimson Lapis Castle, but given the deployment of the pursuers, the matter of distance took precedence.”

Tanza: “—Ah.”

Abel: “Above all, you need to back off, for there are many lives currently in danger.”

Taritta was being hunted by a hundred people, and they had pretty much been separated from Subaru and Louis as a result.

Neither of them had their lives guaranteed, as long as they continued to be pursued by such hordes. Of course, Abel, alongside the powerless Al and the Medium at half-strength who accompanied him, were no exception.

In order to continue the match against Olbart, Tanza’s capture was a top priority.

Tanza: “…It is my loss, I guess.”

Abel: “That much is obvious. But, there is no need to feel shame.”

Tanza: “Eh…?”

Abel responded only that much to Tanza’s sole muttered word, then turned his back to her.

Without hearing an answer beyond that, Tanza blinked her eyes open in surprise. A voice then called out, “Girl”, to Tanza’s back,

Tanza: “Vincent, sama…”

Vincent: “As that one has spoken, there is no need to be ashamed.”

Tanza: “B-but, I…”

Vincent: “Lost. But, that means you threw the gauntlet. —Just as I hoped.”

Tanza: “…”

Vincent spoke those words while looking on at a distance, his chin resting in his hand, which caused Tanza to widen her eyes. However, as she lowered her head, the corners of her eyes slowly pooled with tears.

While she cast her eyes downwards, shedding tears, those drops softly, gently fell, and,

Tanza: “Yorna-sama, I apologize… I was, immature…”

And so, in a tearful voice, she apologized to her beloved master.

4

And so, with a tearful Tanza behind them—

Al: “With this, can we assume that the attackers will back off for the moment?”

Abel: “Yes. Of course, it is possible Tanza’s crying is part of a scheme against us…”

Medium: “No way! That absolutely can’t be!”

Medium, cheeks puffed out and in an imposing stance, lashed out at Abel’s concern.

At that menacing look, Abel closed one eye and traced his finger across the forehead of the oni mask.

Abel: “So, it seems there has been no improvement in your condition, right?”

Al: “Guh…”

Abel: “If you become useless, I shall have no choice but to discard you mercilessly. Albeit you are Priscilla’s clown, do not believe that it absolves you. Keep that in mind.”

Al: “I, get it… It’s not like I wanna be like this forever.”

Receiving that glare and a cold-hearted judgment, Al responded through gritted teeth.

There was no power in the voice of his response, Al’s fear had not abated. But regardless of Al’s physical and mental state, he would now be able to walk around.

Medium: “Then all that’s left is to resume the search for Gramps… Err, or would it be better to look for Taritta-chan? Or…”

Abel: “If the goal is to regroup, it would be ill-advised for us to act; Taritta’s eyes would find us much faster than we could find her. As for those fools…”

Medium: “H-hmm…”

Abel: “—. In any case, we shall stick to our plan of looking for Olbart. If we do, we shall find them in the process of looking for Olbart. That is, if we succeed in finding “an abyss with a great view”.”

Folding his arms, Abel murmured so, which made Medium widen her eyes in surprise with an “Huh?”.

Medium: “By any chance, Abel-chin, do you know where Gramps is hiding?”

Abel: “I have a guess on the second hiding place, at the very least. Crimson Lapis Castle.”

Al: “Wh-What are you saying? You mean, in that Castle?”

Abel: “Tanza’s reaction. When I brought up the subject of the Castle, she rapidly averted her eyes; Tanza herself was hiding in a traveling inn, but she must have known about Olbart’s hiding place as well. Although, it is not certain that she even had an inkling about the third hiding place.”

The procedure for Olbart and Tanza’s cooperation was that after Tanza delivered the message, Olbart would propose a game to Abel’s group. Then, after they discovered the first hiding place right behind them, the logical step was for Olbart to go outside and accompany Tanza to the traveling inn.

Of course, considering that Tanza could be apprehended, it was possible that Olbart had Tanza accept false information.

Abel: “The trick of hiding out in the Crimson Lapis Castle is also something to Olbart’s liking.”

Medium: “…Hm, I see. Well, we should go to the Castle as soon as possible.”

Al: “Yeah. We need to see that geezer immediately to get our bodies restored… If our bodies are restored, we should be fine. Same goes for bro and that pipsqueak if that happens.”

Clenching his fists tightly, Al grumbled this as if he were praying for it, as if he were cursing Olbart.

Al, having lost his mental capacity due to his own body having been shrunken, held extreme hostility towards the sort of relationship between the disappeared duo of Subaru and Louis.

When it came to him, he would like to get Subaru to how he was before as soon as possible, to ponder over a normal decision regarding Louis. However, Abel was doubtful that Natsuki Subaru would make a normal decision upon returning to his original body —And before that.

Abel: “No matter what your thoughts may be, I have no intention of letting Olbart’s technique be undone so simply.”

Al: “Huh?”

Medium: “Eh?”

Abel: “To be precise, I shall not interfere with either you or Medium. However, I have no intention of allowing the technique on Natsuki Subaru to be dispelled for a short while. It would be best to keep him in that state for the time being.”

Upon hearing Abel’s plan, the two were left astonished, their eyes and mouths wide open.

Then, after a pause,

Al: “Q-quit fucking about! The fuck’s up with that? You didn’t say anything like that before?!”

Incensed, Al, his voice trembling with anger, grabbed Abel’s collar —or rather, as he could not reach it due to his height, the belly section of Abel’s clothes was grabbed, lashing out at him.

However Abel, his countenance unphased by that powerless threat, replied with “It is as I stated”, Abel: “For now, I shall have him remain as-is, in his infantile form, for a while.”

Al: “Bastard…”

Medium: “Is that related to why you were bullying Subaru-chin?”

Exerting more pressure, Al inched closer towards him, while Medium grabbed his shoulders from behind. As she posed that question, she stared fixedly at Abel.

Upon her inquiry, Abel quietly exhaled,

Abel: “I do not recall bullying him, or any other low-level behavior of the sort.”

Medium: “Call it whatever you want! But, Abel-chin, you were trying to scare Subaru-chin on the way here, to get him to say something! Is it because of that?”

Abel: “…”

Medium: “That’s so unfair! If there’s something you wanna hear, just ask and they’ll usually tell you! It’s because of something like that…”

Abel: “—Unfortunately, there is no way that shall happen.”

Hearing the quiet, serene emotion in his voice, Medium could not help but stumble over her words, letting out only a “Eh?”.

Giving a sidelong glance to Medium’s surprised face, Abel brushed off Al’s arm that was gripping him with ease, and spoke,

Abel: “My thoughts have nothing to do with the wickedness that Medium suggests. It is merely a necessary thing.”

Al: “Necessary?! What the hell?! Why just bro… What about me and Lil’ Miss Medium!”

Abel: “You do not meet the requirements. You possess one arm, and Medium’s hair and eye color are the reasons for her.”

Al: “Wha…?!”

Not grasping the meaning of that statement, Al’s anger grew more and more intense. Medium, too, was left with a face that betrayed her lack of understanding of the true nature of Abel’s intentions, while a surprise of different origin still remained on her face.

And, Abel’s bottom line was—

Abel: “Even though the situation remains unaltered, the pieces are falling into place. Henceforth—”

Through his oni mask, Abel gazed out the window of a room in a traveling inn. Towards the outside, his eyes reflecting the Crimson Lapis Castle.

It was a gesture to stare at something far more symbolic than the Castle itself; and, in fact, Abel stretched his hand straight out as if to grasp something that could not be reached.

Abel: “—You shall accompany me, Natsuki Subaru. Blown by an unopposable wind, into the midst of war.”

5

Olbart: “That’s why that deergirl’s with His Excellency.”

Subaru: “…”

Olbart answered calmly, sitting cross-legged with his short arms crossed. Hearing his astonishing answer, Subaru was simply left dumbfounded.

He was not surprised because it was outside the realm of his imagination, however.

Subaru: “I thought she’d be at their inn, in case she wasn’t in the Castle…”

Olbart: “Oh, ya thought of it. Well then, boy, ya gotta have a terrible personality. Ya sure ya don’t have some of that Vollachian Imperial Family blood in ya after all?”

Subaru: “That’s really creeping me out, so don’t say that…”

It was perhaps Olbart’s comedic style, but not a single one of his jokes were really funny. As always, the person in question let out a “Kakakakka!”. In fact, he appeared to be in a good mood, which was probably the secret of his long life.

Paying no mind to others, not allowing stress to build up, laughing quite often; he was the very example of it.

Subaru: “There’s a saying in my hometown, that ill weeds grow apace.”

Olbart: “Oh, a proverb, is it? What’s it mean?”

Subaru: “Something like, the more you’re hated, the longer you live.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Well, I don’t have an excuse for that. Ouch.”

Louis: “Au!”

Louis’s angry fist struck Olbart, who was laughing hysterically at the meaning of the saying. Though it was a simple smack on the shoulder, the effort put into just touching it had led to this scene.

Perhaps Olbart, as a member of the most powerful of the Empire, would deal with the smack however he wished, were it anything akin to hostility or murderous intent.

In that sense, Subaru’s move in using Louis’s teleport as a playful touch of pursuit rather than an attack had been the correct option. Yes, he should be proud of himself.

Yorna: “Anyway, I now know where Tanza is… I heard that the residents of the city have been very unkind to you and the others, and I apologize for that.”

Subaru: “Huh, no, Yorna-san, stop it please! There’s nothing to be sorry about!”

Louis: “Uu!”

Yorna bending her knees on the spot in apology caused Subaru to be flustered. Even Louis jumped up involuntarily at the significance of having Yorna bow her head.

In fact, Yorna had taken him seriously, had not backed down at all against Olbart, and had tried to help Subaru again and again, and so on and so on—.

Subaru: "Uh…"

Yorna: "—? What's the matter, child? Your face is so red."

Subaru: "No, well, I just remembered some things…"

As the situation calmed down and the pain and suffering that had been pouring down like a nightmare receded, Subaru was reminded of the many times Yorna and him had exchanged a kiss, in those repeated moments of pain and suffering.

That memory had not remained in Yorna's memory, and Subaru was not in a position to remember the feeling of the kiss itself, so he only remembered it as an event that had happened.

Still, honestly, he admired and liked Yorna a great deal for her willingness to kiss him in order to make it so he'd like her, just so a dying child could be saved.

And because of that—

Subaru: "I don't want you to get mixed up in this."

An increasingly stronger resistance to bringing Yorna into the fray, to bring her into a war that would destabilize the entire Empire, was welling up within Subaru.

He was unsure if this was only because he had been made younger, or if he would think differently once he was back in his proper body.

But even if Subaru thought differently after returning to his original body, he would not believe that what Subaru felt and thought in this young body would be wrong, either.

Because if that was the case—

Louis: “Uau?”

Subaru: “I don’t want to leave the answer regarding you to someone else completely, even if that person’s my grown-up self.”

The question of what to do with Louis, the young girl who held his hand, was a question that Subaru’s mind was not able to answer.

If they joined Abel and the others, that was definitely an unavoidable subject. However, at the end of those ten seconds of despair, there was one thing that Subaru could not help but feel.

—He did not wish to kill Louis or to permit Louis’s death, that much was clear.

Yorna: “The restoration of the Castle will have to wait. First, I’ll go to see Tanza.”

Subaru: “Ah… Yorna-san, um, about Tanza…”

Don’t be too harsh on her, but from Subaru’s point of view, that was difficult to say.

Even if he believed that she had her own agenda and thoughts, Subaru had not heard them. It was just that—

Yorna: “It goes without saying that I’d never scold her without asking her to explain herself. Moreover, if that girl’s been overcome by her own feelings, I’d be to blame as well.”

Subaru didn’t need to worry; the Mistress of the Demon City knew what she had to do.

Because she was exactly like this, was probably why a great deal of people, Tanza included, adored her.

Subaru hoped that if she would not suddenly become cold once he returned to normal, if possible.

Subaru: “I might cry if that happens…”

That was rather, seriously heartbreaking to imagine. Sincerely, he hoped it wouldn't come to pass.

Anyhow, if Yorna could convince Tanza, the residents who had been chasing Subaru and his friends would withdraw. Subaru's critical second step would start from there.

But—

Subaru: "—There's nothing scarier than dying."

He told himself that, after going through such a horrifying experience, things were okay.

On top of that, Subaru also wanted to get out of the Castle with Yorna—

Olbart: "Wha, waitwait, boy. Why don't I turn ya back? Or do ya like yerself better now? I don't particularly mind if so."

Subaru: "Oh, sorry, no, of course not. I'll turn back, I'll turn back, I'll turn back alright. I mean, I'm getting used to being in this form, but I'm going to have trouble finding things to wear."

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Ya got a lotta nerve worryin' 'bout that."

Olbart called out to his back, and Subaru stepped on a roof tile and spun around.

In fact, although his body had been shrunk only for a few hours, he had exceeded the total number of deaths up until now, and so this became the body he had lived and died with the most.

He didn't want to say it was because of that, but his small body felt like a bad omen, so if he could get back he'd like to get back to his normal size sooner rather than later.

Right now, the only thing that scared him was the possibility that his views might change abruptly, but—

Subaru: "Don't worry, Louis. I'm going to face you properly."

Louis: “Uau… Au.”

Louis cast her head down after Subaru’s words, but then she gave a deep nod. Subaru pushed on Louis’s forehead with a finger, directing her towards Yorna.

Louis’s back struck her, and Yorna took her in.

Yorna: “Child, what is Old Man Olbart doing…”

Subaru: “Hm, I don’t fully trust him, but I’d like to think that he’s at least got just barely enough humanity left in him to follow the logic of victory and defeat.”

Olbart: “Oiii~, I can hear ya, ya know.”

Subaru: “I know that, that’s why I’m saying it.”

Subaru smiled wryly in response to Olbart’s teasing. To Subaru’s answer, Yorna narrowed her eyes as she hugged Louis tightly.

Yorna: “If you understand that, then I have nothing else to say. I haven’t been told what’ll happen exactly, but this child and I will be watching you.”

Louis: “Uh!”

Subaru: “Hmm, okay. Well, you know, I hope you’ll be on good terms with me after this, Yorna-san.”

Yorna: “—? Child, you’re quite the worrier, aren’t you?”

Being sent off by Yorna smiling at him and Louis’s cheerful face, Subaru went to Olbart’s side. Standing up, Olbart patted himself on the lower back, and spoke,

Olbart: “You’re talkin’ crap again. Oh geez, let’s get this over with.”

Subaru: “Yeah… Uhh, is it going to hurt?”

Olbart: “Did it hurt when ya shrank down? Then, that’s the answer!”

Giving a brief answer to Subaru's hesitant question, Olbart's outstretched hand gently touched Subaru's solar plexus.

Abel had conjectured that Olbart's "infantilization" technique interfered with the Od, and perhaps that Od resided somewhere around the heart.

At the same time, a memory came back to Subaru's mind. The previous day, he had indeed received a painless blow from Olbart as he fled from the keep right beneath where he was currently standing.

Subaru's "infantilization" had occurred, with the interference of his Od as a trigger.

Only a few hours had passed since his body had been shrunken, but it felt like that had been the biggest struggle he'd faced since coming to the Empire. Although, ever since he'd been in the Empire, he'd been struggling to begin with.

Even including the time outside of the Empire, those ten seconds of despair were some of the greatest—

Subaru: "Oh, speaking of which…"

Suddenly, Subaru remembered something he had been attempting not to think about.

Those ten seconds of despair, that seemingly hellish cycle of rebirth and death, were a far cry from the Return by Death that Subaru had come to know.

What had brought this about, and what had happened to Return by Death, the Authority that resided in Subaru?

???: "Found you."

5

—Everything that happened in that instant, was incomprehensible for all those who were present.

Olbart: “Ugh.”

Along with those words, Olbart withdrew his outstretched right hand in an instant.

But, too slow. Olbart’s wrinkled right hand, from the wrist onwards, vanished.

And then—

Yorna: “Chil—”

Louis: “Uau!!”

Her eyes widened in shock, Yorna pulled Louis into her arms and jumped backwards a great distance, hugging the girl struggling to break free.

Immediately afterwards, pure dark flooded Yorna and Louis’s field of vision, and, in one fell swoop, swallowed the castle tower, the upper parts, and the middle parts of the Crimson Lapis Castle, famous for its majestic and bright brilliance.

And then—

Kafma: “Your Excellency! That is…”

Vincent: “…”

From a distance, looking at the scene outside the window, Kafma, at the side of the Emperor he served to protect, and harboring a sharp fighting aura, felt as if all the bugs in his body shivered in terror.

In the meantime, Vincent had stood up, turning his sharp gaze towards the Castle dyed in black, allowing his deliberate thoughts to flow with all the peace in the world.

And then—

Tanza: “That’s, the Castle… Yorna-sama…”

Al: “Ah, ahhh, AHHHHHHH—!”

Medium: “Al-chin?!”

In a daze, the children stared at what had happened bug-eyed, in absolute shock.

Tanza feared for her master, who remained in the Castle; and Al, at the damage dealt to the city, screamed louder than anyone in the city—no, louder than anyone in the world.

Medium dashed over to him and supported Al’s shoulders. She stared at Abel as if clinging on to him in this inexplicable situation.

And then—

???: “Myyy~ oh my, how should I put it… This might be, a small bit I didn’t gaze.”

Taritta: “You—”

Watching the crumbling city from a distance, being swallowed by the shadows, Ubilk let out an easy-going mutter, using his hands as a visor, while the brown Shudraq standing opposite to him, Taritta, listened to him while grinding her teeth.

As if it were difficult to decide whether the shadow in the distance, or the man in front of her, were what she ought to pay attention to.

And then—

Abel: “—Is this, the true identity of the thing you had been carrying within?”

He directed his eyes to the same thing the false Emperor and the bawling children regarded, and Abel muttered so.

Clenching his fists tightly, he bit his lip, to the extent that blood flowed, hidden on the other side of the oni mask. As he glared at the jet-black mass, his countenance distorted to the point it resembled the terrifying visage of his oni mask.

And then—

6

—I love you.

—I love you. I love you. I love you.

—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

—I love you. I love you.

Love akin to a curse that would never, by any means, leave, transcending every conceivable dimension, was blotting out the existence called Natsuki Subaru.

A hellish world devoid of love; that, he knew.

That his own self was still loved; that, Natsuki Subaru knew.

However, at the same time, that not all forms of “love” should be something to be affirmed, that he also should know.

Exactly because of his ignorance, there would be retribution.

Exactly because of his ignorance, of why everyone dreaded it, ran from it.

—It morphed into a sable shadow, swallowing all things, cheering while destroying.

Cheering for reuniting, for coming together, for embracing, for being tied, for this predestination, for this forward march.

Cheering for confession, for regret, for suspicion, for its mysteriousness, for exaltation, for devotion.

A hellish world devoid of love, that he knew.

If he were to arrive at a world with love, what sort of hell would it be?

Subaru did not understand. He understood naught.

If there was something he could say, in this situation inexplicable to anyone, there was only one thing.

The utopia of those ostracized, the Demon City of Chaosflame.

—The ruin of this utopia, was brought about by the causality of none other than Natsuki Subaru.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy IV

1

—Man, what a weird situation for someone to be in.

Todd looked at the situation he was in as if it was someone else's business and grumbled in his mind like that. Basically, he disliked it when things didn't go his way. You might think that it was like that for everyone, but for him, everything was a matter of life or death.

Having such a mindset, he felt like his life hung in the balance whenever he made a mistake in his calculations. And that was something that the man named Todd Fang couldn't bear.

But it could be said that the situation Todd was in at the moment was an exception. Since—

"—So, you are the person who brought General Arakiya back to us."

The man who said that and looked at Todd in a room filled with elegant furniture from behind the elegant, custom-made desk, was an old man who had a full head of gently arranged white hair.

His narrow eyes that could be mistaken as being shut—which Todd felt was an ability sent down from on high since it allowed him to hide his emotions while talking—were a gift from the gods that hid the emotions in his eyes.

In reality, there was no doubt that that talent was a great help when you considered the man's position. It was because he was one of the top dogs in the world of political warfare full of trickery and deception.

That old man was Berstetz Fondalfon, the prime minister of the Sacred Empire of Vollachia himself—

“Lord Berstetz Fondalfon.”

“…”

“I am honored to have been blessed with an opportunity to meet you like this.” Todd knelt down on the carpet and bowed his head deeply at the man in front of him—Berstetz Fondalfon—and gave him a few words of greeting.

It’s merely a formality, but I’m sure I did it well enough.

Even if Todd was like that, he was the fiancé of a nobleman’s daughter, so he had been sensible enough to learn the bare minimum of etiquette so that he wouldn’t embarrass his wife-to-be.

But I never thought that I would have the opportunity to showcase my skills in front of the highest civil servant, the prime minister of the Empire, but it’s always good to be prepared.

All this was happening because—

“You don’t have to be so formal, it’s fine if you make yourself comfortable. Your actions have greatly contributed to the future of the Empire. So I simply wanted to show my appreciation and convey my gratitude.”

Berstetz conveyed his appreciation for what he had done with an air of dignity, not even trying to make him feel comfortable. The reason why the prime minister had invited Todd—a mere soldier—to his office and was entertaining him personally was because of the person he had brought back to the imperial capital. It was because he had acknowledged Todd’s achievement of rescuing Arakiya.

Arakiya—who had experienced an unexpected defeat in the fortified Imperial City of Guaral—was a member of the Nine Divine Generals, the strongest beings in the Empire. Losing her would have been a great loss for the Empire.

Thus Todd, without regard for his own safety, followed his righteous indignation and sense of duty and did his utmost to rescue Arakiya. At least, that was what the reports that got sent to the imperial capital said.

Todd himself let things be since he felt no need to correct it, but it ended up spreading around and wound up reaching the ears of the imperial prime minister himself, and so here we are. He hadn't thought lightly of it in the slightest, but he'd never expected he'd receive such treatment for saving Arakiya, and it made him seriously reflect on his naivety.

Anyway…

"I am not worthy of such words. I only did what anyone would do in that situation. General Arakiya is a person that this country needs, after all."

"Truly such exemplary loyalty. His Excellency the Emperor would be very pleased to hear that a man such as you is among his Sword Wolves."

With a respectful look on his face, Todd thought that his response was hollow. It was an open secret among the imperial soldiers that the Emperor and the prime minister of the Vollachian Empire were on bad terms.

The Vollachian Way had always been to appreciate anyone with good skills, but this way of thinking was even more pervasive during the reign of the current Emperor, Vincent Vollachia. There were many who were hired by him on merit who had once been his enemies.

Imperial Prime Minister Berstetz was one such enemy. Berstetz, whose master got killed, was serving the person who had ordered for their murder. Even Todd, who thought of himself as someone who could change his attitude on a dime, could imagine just how complicated his situation was.

"I think I heard about this from Jamal…"

Jamal, who had vanished into thin air in the fortified city, was as cunning as his appearance suggested, and he liked poking his nose into other people's affairs and got excited while talking about rumors. And yet, he was also an imperial noble, so he had no shortage of sources of such topics. Thanks to that, he got to hear about things without wanting to and thus became equally well-informed. So, even though he was meeting Berstetz for the first time, he did not feel like they were meeting for the first time.

In any case…

“General Arakiya has asked me to reward you handsomely. Though she said it in her own unique way, so that’s how I interpreted it… Is there anything you wish for?”

“Anything I wish for? Not particularly. Just…”

“Just?”

“In order to rescue the general, I lost a friend…not just my friend, but my fiancée’s older brother. The first thing I want to do is break the news to her and then be there for her as she grieves.”

With a docile expression and voice, Todd turned into a man being concerned about his lover that was about to experience a great tragedy. In fact, his heart ached with pain when he thought about how his fiancée would feel, so he wasn’t lying.

It was just that he could finally think of Jamal as his friend after his death. He felt relieved since dead people couldn’t get back at you.

“…” Berstetz became silent for a few seconds after listening to Todd’s earnest desire.

Todd couldn’t guess what kind of thoughts the prime minister had during that moment of silence since he couldn’t glean anything from his emotionless eyes. That made him realize that he wasn’t really compatible with him. It was someone he felt he needed to kill in order to feel safer. He couldn’t wrap his head around why His Excellency the Emperor would keep someone like him close just because he was capable.

Perhaps answering Todd’s prayers, Berstetz said “Alright” with a nod. “It is an imminent situation. Whatever you are going to wish for, you can do it after you calm your loved one down. We weren’t considerate enough of your circumstances. You may go now.”

“Yes, Your Excellency. I am grateful for your consideration.”

After exchanging the necessary pleasantries, Todd, who had been ordered to leave, felt relieved.

On the other hand, he felt a bit sympathetic towards Berstetz since he was in a position where he couldn’t forgo such troublesome exchanges. A man was bound by his position. That’s why Todd preferred to be in one that allowed him to be somewhat free.

Moreover…

“You have my gratitude for taking the time to meet me at a time when His Excellency the Emperor is absent.”

“—. Where did you hear that His Excellency isn’t around?” Berstetz quietly inquired as he raised an eyebrow at Todd’s farewell right as he was about to leave.

After being questioned, Todd said, “Oh no,” and gave a quick glance at the top of the prime minister’s desk. “I do apologize, but I just happened to see some of the papers sitting on top of the desk. I assumed that they were being approved by Your Excellency on His Excellency the Emperor’s behalf.”

The Emperor is probably away from the imperial capital on a military expedition or an inspection tour. I’ve heard that His Excellency, Vincent, moved around so freely that his subjects were having a tough time.

It was to the extent that imperial citizens joked about meeting the incognito Emperor while walking around the imperial capital. It was fine as a funny story, but it wouldn’t be so funny if it ended up being true. It was something that Todd couldn’t think of as someone else’s issue now, so he decided to at least store it in his memory.

Leaving that aside… “I will be leaving now. —Since I am making my fiancée wait.”

2

“—You complete pest!” a girl shouted as the vase she threw hit the wall and shattered, splattering its contents and the broken pieces everywhere.

He gave a quick glance at the vase that had hit the wall quite a ways away from him, then shrugged. “Did you miss because you care about me, perhaps? If so, there was no reason for you to throw money away like that.”

“I was definitely trying to hit you, okay! It just didn’t go where I wanted it to…so hold your tongue!”

“I haven’t said anything. Ah well…”

Todd smiled wryly after hearing a high-pitched voice reverberate inside his skull, then told the maid to clean up the shards and leave. As it was a chance for them to meet up after a long time, it would be natural for one to think that he wanted to be alone with her. However…

“I’m sorry about Jamal.”

“—Hic.”

The one in front of Todd’s eyes that he had just apologized to was a young girl who was at a loss for words, her cheeks tense. It was a girl with long, dark brown hair arranged in a braid, and her downcast eyes made her seem gloomy. The clothes she was fond of wearing were dark in color, and she exuded an aura that made even the people around her feel depressed. But her face was pretty, and her frizzy hair—one of her loveable flaws—was just like her brother’s.

Yes, she is perfect. She is a loveable flawed item that is perfect just as she is.

That was Todd Fang’s fiancée.

“—Katya.”

“How-How dare you show yourself in front of me!” Todd’s call made the girl’s—Katya’s—eyes flash with anger, and she threw the book next to her bed at him. It missed him once again, further fueling her irritation.

The things falling on the carpet of Katya's room—which wasn't luxurious or very magnificent at all—were the belongings she kept next to her bed that she kept throwing at Todd one after another.

All of them were gifts from either Todd or Jamal. They were everything that made up Katya's small world since she was weak from birth and didn't have much freedom. She couldn't bear children because she was prone to illness—she was a fragile person who couldn't even make herself pleasant to people at social gatherings. In Vollachia, which demanded strength, she couldn't perform any of the things expected of the daughter of a nobleman, so she was a pitiful girl who had been written off by society. Even in her family, only Jamal, her biological brother, cared for her. That made her the most attractive, ideal, and lovely girl to Todd.

"You abandoned…Jamal…my brother, and shamelessly returned… You should have…"

"Died in his place?"

"—Hic."

"You can't say it, can you? I know. I know every little thing about you."

When she hesitated to say something harsh in return, Todd closed the distance between them in an instant. He grabbed her slender wrist and snatched the book she was gripping tightly away while being careful not to break it, then put it back on the shelf. She couldn't hit him even if she tried, and just that was enough to make her start taking ragged breaths. She was frail and weak and couldn't live without relying on others.

Todd gently pinched the teary Katya's chin and stole her lips. He felt the soft sensation as well as a sign of resistance.

She immediately turned her face away and slapped him. "You…per-pervert! You vulgar man! What do you think you are doing…!"

"It's proof that I love you. And you are right."

"…"

"I let Jamal die and shamelessly came back. I know I'm not worthy enough to show myself in front of you. But I just wanted to see your face. I wanted to touch you," Todd said, gently caressing the cheek of the girl glaring at him.

"—Ah." Katya couldn't deny his words, and when she tried to move her quivering eyes away from him, her eyes darted to-and-fro.

But when Todd called her once, "Katya," she timidly met his gaze.

"…How was, my brother's, end?"

"He covered our retreat to save me and the general. He did not utter a single weak remark until the very end. I believe that the word brave was made just for him."

"If that's true, then you are a coward, Todd."

"You're right. But his death wasn't in vain, and I was able to return to you like this. I'm thankful that I'm a coward."

Even if the words I use to describe others are a lie, when talking to Katya, I feel like the words I use to describe myself are all true.

Todd was a coward, and it was because of that that he was able to return alive and meet Katya.

"I was able to achieve a great feat. That's why I'm sure that they will assent to my selfish request of wanting to stay by your side in the imperial capital. You won't have to be lonely anymore."

"Eve-Even if you aren't here, I would…"

"Jamal won't come see you anymore. Even if that's the case?"

Todd tried to get the words he wanted to hear out of Katya's mouth by talking cruelly.

Katya broke down in a fluster, on the verge of having a mental breakdown, after hearing the truth that she had been ignoring in her anger. She was made to realize, once again, that her brother, who had cared for her so very much, was dead.

And then…

“D-Did he, my brother, that brother, really die?”

Todd silently embraced the girl he loved, who had started to sob and shed tears. She timidly returned his embrace, wrapping her arms around his back. He then cradled her head, which was wetting his chest with hot tears, and thanked the heavens that the blood pumping through his veins was devoid of heat.

Because his body was like that, he could feel the heat of Katya’s warmth as he held her in his arms, and even the heat of the tears she was shedding too, which felt so sweet to him that it made his very soul tremble.

3

—At the same time Todd was enjoying his meeting with his fiancée…

“That private first class… Todd Fang, was it?” asked Berstetz.

“Yep,” Arakiya replied.

“So you want to make him one of your subordinates. I see.” Imperial Prime Minister Berstetz nodded deeply, narrowing his narrow eyes even further as he looked ahead.

It was almost evening in the imperial capital, and the person he was speaking to in his office lit up with orange light was Arakiya, who had come to visit him first thing after her wounds had been treated. It was reported that she had been greatly wounded, but she seemed perfectly fine at first glance. Donning her usual expressionless face that left people guessing as to what she was truly thinking, Arakiya had visited Berstetz and presented the proposal that had been mentioned in the beginning.

Berstetz touched his chin thoughtfully at Arakiya's unusual proposal. "May I ask what you have in mind? Are you saying that you want to recognize his feat of saving you from behind enemy lines and reward him for that?"

"…I won't say anything, difficult. I just want to give him a chance."

"A chance?"

"To avenge his friend."

Everything made sense to Berstetz after hearing Arakiya continue her words. Todd, who he had just talked to in his office a couple hours ago, had also told him that he had lost a friend in order to save her.

Naturally, Arakiya had heard about it on the way back. That's why she wished to give him a chance to avenge his friend.

"…" For a moment, Berstetz's mind went back to what Todd had said after he had asked him to leave. It was engraved in his memory that Todd was quick-witted since he was able to figure out that the Emperor was away just by looking at the papers on his desk. At the same time, it was also true that he felt a vague, dark presentiment.

He could not tell if it was just a groundless fear or an omen for something, but… "Anyhow, there's no way I could say no if you are the one vouching for it. I have no objections."

"…That's good. Then."

"However, there is something I need you to do before you return to the eastern front, General."

Arakiya's red eyes flickered in dissatisfaction. Seeing that out of the corner of his eye, Berstetz took out a document, the very one that had come into his view.

"I want you to go to the Gladiator Island. To fulfill a duty that only you are capable of fulfilling."

Thus, he ordered the general to get rid of the internal problem that was shaking the Empire.

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: There are No Oni Around the World

1

A tinge of blueness could strangely be felt in the air of this morning which had just welcomed dawn,

Whether what could be felt was the faint lingering notes of nighttime, or perhaps it's the impression given by the serene atmosphere of the morning coated in tranquility. She doesn't understand the fine details of it.

Nevertheless, Rem did not dislike that blue atmosphere which gave off a peaceful impression.

"…"

In the still early morning of the Walled City, Rem who had just woken up in the town's biggest Mansion, folded her beddings with haste and headed to the backyard with cane in hand.

For the cooking and cleaning, she has to draw water from a well. Because of the cane she's holding onto she was practically restrained to one arm, as such drawing the necessary water was a huge task.

Nevertheless, she simply did not wish to whine about a task she had decided to tackle by herself.

But then—

"—Ah"

Arriving at the well she had aimed for, Rem peeled her light blue eyes wide open and released a sigh.

In the vicinity of the well in the mansion's backyard, she perceived the traces of the well water having been drawn up in a water pail, and the necessary amount having been carried to the Cookhouse.

Then, the one who had done that in the stead of Rem who had come here hurriedly, had been—

"…"

The backyard of the mansion that falls into tranquility, faintly mixed in there was the cries of the trampled grasses, the sound of something sharp cutting through the wind, and the slightly labored breathing of a man.

Whence her eyes fell upon what she heard, the source of the sound, and who the offender who had drawn up the water from the well in Rem's stead was had become clear.

With the mansion's backyard as training grounds, continuing to swing his beautiful drawn sword, that was a person with red hair—with an unkempt beard across his profile and clouded blue pupils, he was a middle-aged man who gave no attention to his own appearance.

Those narrowed eyes were filled with negative emotions like they were cursing the world, even that profile with ragged breath seemed to be adorned by a deep resentment and rage.

—However, the path drawn by the sword he swung, just that swordsmanship looked beautiful to even untrained eyes.

"…"

These past few days, Rem had been made to think quite a lot about the meaning of the word Beautiful.

Understanding it, finding it within herself, ever since it was pointed out to her, that it would become the key to fill in something missing that Rem desired.

"…Oh, so you were here?"

The red-haired man noticed the presence of the silent Rem, who was pressing her hand tightly against her chest. The man stopped the hand with which he was swinging the sword, he wiped off the sweat flowing from his forehead using the sleeves of his shirt and the creases of his brow furrowed.

With that single gesture, an element of displeasure was added to the surprisingly well-proportioned features of this man.

Rem thought that, mixing in a hint of ugliness within something well-proportioned, perhaps had something that communicated much more anxiety and bitterness than something repulsive.

The man before her made her think that in particular—

"—It is Heinkel-san, who is early again this morning, it seems."

"Simple habit. A mediocre person like myself can't slack a single day or else he'll continue to slack more gradually after that. So it just happens that continuing is a lot more convenient."

"So then, is that why you're up this early in the morning?"

"That way I don't get any comments from the peanut gallery. At least until you arrived"

Huffing in displeasure, the man—Heinkel, told Rem she was a nuisance through implication.

While having been taken aback at the beginning, she had gotten used to that manner of speaking after several days. If she just thought of it as a slightly more tepid version of Abel's cold and dry manner of speaking, it was nothing special.

From the start, it was more unnatural that the majority of the people they had met such as Flop, the people of shudraq, and Zikr had been favorable towards her. Though it was obvious, just as there were people that were unconditionally kind to Rem, there were also people that unconditionally disliked her.

Heinkel was simply the latter. That, and a latter whom she had the reins of tightly held.

Heinkel, who was currently coarsely wiping his sweat, for all of his mouthiness and attitude, did not bring up any more trouble than that. That point must be because she also has the position of

Priscilla's servant.

In the end, no one could directly go against that beautiful woman, with hair red like blood.

It likely meant neither Rem, nor Heinkel, were an exception to that.

But regardless—

"Heinkel-san gives me the impression of being a bit of an inconsistent person."

"…What?"

On the spot, she verbalized what she was thinking, and those sky-blue pupils glared sharply at her.

However, sensing that he wouldn't show any aggression other than glaring, Rem shook her head with a "No".

"You drink nothing but alcohol all day, and yet you're actually training while calling it a habit. And you even drew water from the well, earlier than I arrive…"

"I told you. I'm just continuing my training because it'll be annoying later. I use the water from the well too to wipe my sweat. It's an eyesore watching you and that brat bumble trying to draw water too anyway."

"If so, you could've just shut yourself in your room so you don't have to see us"

"—. What I do and where I do it is up to me"

Twisting his face in annoyance, Heinkel protested thus to Rem's point. But, something about it could not help sounding like a poor excuse to Rem.

Heinkel's true feelings likely were that he considers strangers disagreeable, and would rather avoid others. On the other hand, the fact that he cannot completely isolate himself from those he finds disagreeable is shown through his actions.

Which is why, the impression Rem holds of him had become that he was Inconsistent.

Huffing with a “Hmph”, Heinkel makes noise and sheaths his sword into its scabbard. That movement and handling of the sword, that it by itself looked like something so polished, pushed that impression further.

Although he looks at the blade as if it’s something detestable, he still handles the sword itself with great care. It appeared to be a state in which you could say love and hate are mixed together.

“Like you wished, I’ll go back to my room. You do whatever you l-…”

“Before that, won’t you help me with the cooking while you’re at it? If handling blades is something you’re good at from habit, then I would appreciate it if you could help me by peeling vegetables.”

“Are you fuc-…hk”

Heinkel, who had swiftly turned his back, turned back around with eyebrows raised having heard Rem’s words.

It must have been an unexpected request. Of course, Rem herself wasn’t being serious. She simply wanted to make Heinkel’s surly face collapse for some reason.

If he had asked to help suddenly, she would be surprised, and find it difficult.

Perhaps Heinkel also noticed that Rem meant nothing more by it than to tease him—

“Shit! You need to learn some fucking respect for your superiors else-…”

Saying so, Heinkel plucked at his own red hair. As he seemed to draw closer and closer, Rem was about to give a retort when—

“—Aaah! I am so late! I have done it now!” Before that happened, a high pitched voice resonating through the early morning sky broke into the space between the two.

With the pitter-patter of his worked legs, a young boy of short stature rushed into the yard. Bright pink fuzzy hair and, though small, proper butler attire. His big round eyes and his adorable face flustered, his cheeks were flushed and his breath was ragged.

The boy, looking at the already drawn water from the well, and at Rem and Heinkel who were facing each other then said:

“Uwaah, Heinkel-sama and Rem-sama, you are both up so early today again it is frustrating! Once again, I was so very late!”

Tapping his small feet on the ground as he stomps in frustration, was the young boy—Schult.

Much like Heinkel, the young boy was Priscilla’s servant, and as he expressed that earnestness and naiveté through his whole body, he switched gears with a “But!”

“You have yet to finish preparations for breakfast, correct? In which case, I should actually be able to help! Rem-sama, please do ask anything you will of me!”

“…Thank you very much, Schult-chan”

“Yes! Ah, but, I am a man, so I would rather you not add “chan” to my name please. Al-sama, also calls me that! But…”

“I’m sorry. You were just so cute so…”

Schult petitions that as he fidgets while twiddling his fingers together, and Rem’s lips loosen.

Schult’s behavior was about as adorable as his appearance. Feeling a sort of fraternity to that youthfulness different from Rui’s or Utakata’s, Rem also unconsciously felt like bullying him.

Whatever the case—

“I am very glad that Schult-kun will be helping me. That’s right, why doesn’t Schult-kun tell Heinkel-san? So that he can help us with the morning preparations”

“Wha-…”

“Ah! Will Heinkel-sama help us? I am so glad! Let us do our best work for the sake of Priscilla-sama!”

Getting a smile from the hoppity jumping Schult, Heinkel is lost for words. He then turned his spiteful eyes towards Rem, but it was quite unexpected.

While the one who incited this situation was Rem, Heinkel’s actions brought the situation upon himself.

In the first place, if he wanted to remain consistent with his act of an unpleasant and stubborn adult, he could just trample upon Schult’s innocent attitude, and boldly turn his back to him.

However—

“So that Priscilla-sama may rejoice, let us do our best!”

“…I. can’t do anything other than peeling.”

He said such, and dropped his shoulders, thus he was incoherent all the way down.

2

“That thing’s way of life is so utterly ugly, you would likely sooner learn but to pity from it”

Such were Priscilla’s words to answer Rem who had inquired more about Heinkel.

Why had she made Heinkel into her servant? Was meant to be a question without much thought behind it, not even Rem had thought she would get such a scathing answer to it.

She had surely thought that Priscilla would tell her about Heinkel’s real strengths and his humanity from her point of view, and how she had evaluated those parts, however her assumptions were off.

“What’s this? you’ve got a dumbfounded look about you. Were you not the one who requisitioned mine answer?”

“Well, that might be the case but… Umm, how should I respond?”

“That you do not understand? Hmph, why do you think like so?”

“—. Since I thought that Priscilla-san, didn’t like things that weren’t beautiful.”

That she loved things that were beautiful, was something that Priscilla explained to Rem on occasion.

That Rem had, in this way, been serving at Priscilla’s side, and taking care of her daily needs had also been because Rem wished for Priscilla to correct what she lacked using her sense of beauty.

Priscilla had eyes that could discern through the nature of people and objects. —Through their short time together, Rem had many times witnessed cases that could make her believe such.

And she had come to call things with value, things that excelled, Beautiful.

That she, had kept Heinkel, who she had evaluated as ugly, by her side was something—

“That did not make sense, or rather, it felt like it was not consistent.”

“Hooh, you point at mineself, and note that I am inconsistent? You have quite the overspoken lips do you not?”

“If I’m wrong, that may be so. But…”

She hadn’t said she was wrong.

Rem gazed into Priscilla’s crimson pupils, and clearly asserted such.

“…”

Hearing that response from Rem, Priscilla touched her pale cheeks with her graceful finger. Gently tracing the tip of her finger through her cheek, the tip of her finger arrived at her lips.

“Heh. So you won’t show me your wavering?”

“I have no reason to waver”

“And why do you believe so?”

“Because I believe that Priscilla-san is not a person who strays from logic, even if she’s intense.”

Rem quietly gave that answer at Priscilla’s gaze that seemed to be speculating on her. The moment she heard that, Priscilla exhaled with Hah, a sound of amusement.

She sighed in relief once it seemed like her mood had not fouled. Just like she told, Priscilla is a person who does not stray from logic, though she didn’t think she wasn’t unreasonable.

Rem didn’t hold the belief that her mood wouldn’t foul for some reason unknown to her.

“Rem, what do you think of a garden filled with only beautiful things?”

“Eh?”

“A garden filled with only beautiful things. I shan’t say it thrice.”

Being told that bluntly, Rem’s thoughts went into overdrive from Priscilla’s words.

Following Priscilla’s philosophy, would that not be the most ideal of gardens? If there is value in what is beautiful, then you would be surrounded by valuable things in that place. However, if that truly is an ideal place, Priscilla should be able to put together that same thing.

While having that privilege, Priscilla holds onto Heinkel whom she had judged ugly. What is her true motive behind that? Churning her thoughts with utmost effort—

“In a place filled with just beautiful things, the beautiful becomes common place?”

“…”

“You see something as beautiful, once you know something that isn’t. If that’s the case, then in a garden filled with only the beautiful, the value of what is beautiful becomes lower…or somesuch?”

Voicing her own thoughts, Rem furrows her brow at just how prideful a way of thinking it is.

If this logic were to be right, Priscilla is keeping Heinkel in her grasp, to keep him who she had judged ugly as a point of contrast to her beloved beauty.

For instance that could be, as a foil to Schult the much similar servant which tags along with him.

“I believe that…to be quite egotistical.”

“Kuku”

“—hk, Wh-What is so funny?”

Putting the back of her hand in front of her mouth, a sound escaped Priscilla’s throat in response to which Rem’s eyes widened. But, she lightly shook her head to that questioning.

“That your thoughts strayed into speculation, such that you would rebuke me was most amusing. There was also something amusive about your thoughts before that. If you gather only beautiful things, in exchange the value of that beautifulness is lowered… Not bad. However, that is just the grief of those who have no external measure of beautifulness.”

“Ah…”

“To those who know the world outside of the garden, that logic wouldn’t apply. Is your world something that would shrink to a single garden with just one query like that?”

She felt like she got cajoled with sophistry, but at the same time there was also a sense of defeat from having been outargued with logic.

What she had realized from Priscilla's words, was the difference between the world she saw and her's—it likely meant that, that which could be called a difference in field of view, was something in orders of magnitude.

Not having any memories, or any reliable foundation to stand on was not an excuse.

Rem slightly hung her head at that bitterness. Then—

"Besides, while that certainly might be an ugly way of living… the manner in which he handles the sword is beautiful."

With the addition of Priscilla's opinion, Rem recalls Heinkel's form from the early morning.

That red haired swordsman with haphazard hygiene who spills all sorts of sarcasm and vulgarities—however, it certainly is as she said, his form as he swings his sword and his posture handling the blade, there was something to marvel at in that.

"The things that are beautiful from any angle, like mineself, are limited. Do not narrow your view of the world even a little bit. —Rem, try to take your cane some time."

"—? I'm always holding onto a cane though."

"Fool. Not a physical cane. A cane to walk far and wide around this world. That imparted knowledge onto Schult, and vigorousness onto Al. So you as well, take your cane."

Priscilla's speech was obtuse, and Rem had her hands full following it. But, feeling that she's always telling her important things, she was stuck endeavoring to work her head.

Today's Cane will likely have Rem pondering over it, much the same as Beautifulness did.

However—

“There are points you must see—You may entertain mineself as best you can.”

So, her lips relaxed and what she felt from Priscilla’s form posed with magnificence, that was Beautifulness, because at the same time she understood that what propped that up was the Cane she held.

“I also, want that”

That which makes the blood-like Scarlet princess before her eyes.

She who was left at the Walled City, Rem had been naturally made aware of what she wanted as well.

END

The Dragon Kingdom:
Missing Child Search Chronicle IV

1

“Well, I never thought I would hear that my son is working for the Royal Selection.”

“I’m sorry to surprise you. But it’s true. Otto is always helping us with a lot of things. Right?”

Mazeran, a man who flaunted a fine mustache, spoke in awe, to which Emilia replied and requested corroboration from her companions.

“Correct.”

A man with heterochromatic eyes answered Emilia’s call with a nod. His figure was clad in an elegant, well-sewn attire.

“Sir,” continued the man, staring at Mazeran, “as Lady Emilia stated, we rely on your son’s invaluable assistance on a regular baaasis. And despite that, we have been very impolite, never bothering to come and greet you formaaally.”

“Oh, not at all. You have nothing to apologize for. If you find my inexpert son worthy, feel free to use him as you please. I know he would consider it an honor, too. Right?”

“Do you expect me to just say yes to something like that?!”

The forceful racket of a third voice cut into the men’s peaceful conversation.

The sudden shout led all eyes to the youth who was panting and moving his shoulders up and down: Otto.

“Oops.”

He immediately put a hand to his mouth, becoming aware that he had just ruined the ambiance.

“My, my, take it easy. You have to behave, Otto. You’re being rude to Lady Emilia and Margrave Mathers.”

“But, M-Mom…”

“Excuse my child’s noisiness. Ironically, he used to be such a quiet kid when he was little; I don’t know what changed him. I’m so sorry.”

Otto’s face showed uneasiness that contrasted with the serenity exuded by the woman who made that comment.

After serving tea to the guests who rested on the living room’s sofa, the woman sat down next to Mazeran with utmost naturalness.

Mazeran and Framir from the Suwen household were a perfect match.

When she took a glance at her tender features and demeanor, plus details such as her eyes, Emilia felt quite impressed.

“She looks just like you, Otto. You really take after your mom.”

“Yet he inherited his eye and hair color from his father… I see, you have rather amusing origins, Otto.”

“At least Lady Emilia was not trying to be malicious…”

“Huh? Did I say something bad?”

Otto’s grumble made Emilia’s eyes widen in confusion. ‘Do not worry about it,’ Otto thought but did not say, sealing the reply inside his mind.

This sort of thing happened sometimes when she talked to him. However, it was proof that Otto, being smart as he was, often concerned himself with Emilia and everybody else in the faction.

“Otto, let me share your troubles from time to time. I don’t know if I can help you, but I always do my best to.”

"… Yes. Thank you very much. I have never doubted that, ever."

Despite how insistent Emilia was, Otto reacted with a nod, not taking it personally. Satisfied, Emilia stroked her chest down, and then Otto's expression turned glum.

The glumness was not due to Emilia, but to the fact that the Suwens, in other words, his own parents, were watching the exchange.

"Dad, Mom, why those faces?"

"Don't you look at me with those suspicious eyes. Who do you think you are, a veteran merchant?"

"Excuse me, I may not be a veteran, true, but I am literally a merchant!"

"Come on, don't yell at him. We're both relieved to know that you've grown into such a splendid, hardworking man. Even if you strayed from your path as a trader."

"Uuugh…"

To see Otto blushing and gritting his teeth was a fresh experience for Emilia.

She was used to hearing him raise his voice to complain, but him doing it with his parents had a different air to it. Whenever he talked to Subaru or Garfiel, his attitude was different, maybe simpler. Or more precisely:

"It seems like, grow as they may, kids will forever be kids in front of their pareeents."

"Ah, yes. That's sooo close to what I was thinking."

In response to her companion's words, Emilia clapped, and her lips broke into a smile. Frustration became even more evident on Otto's countenance, whereas joyful smiles appeared on his parents'.

Suddenly, Emilia found herself fond of Otto's family.

Nevertheless…

“It was pleasant to chat with you, but, to be honest, we have not come here with your son only to greet youuu. Would you mind if we made one slightly complicated requeeest?”

As soon as the companion, Roswaal L. Mathers, broached the topic, Mazeran Suwen, head of the Suwen Company, shifted his stance from a mere father’s to a merchant’s.

2

“Done, no way they’re gonna try ta kill Otto-bro again after how badly we scared ‘em off.”

“Or rather, after Ram talked them out of it with her eloquence.”

“Both Sister Ram and Garf did amazing back there.”

Petra delivered her report with childlike enthusiasm.

“I’m glad,” said Emilia, relieved.

They were in a room of the Suwen family’s house, which had been allotted for the guests to stay. Emilia received the report from her other three companions, who had been absent during the discussion with the Suwens.

Ram, Garfiel, and Petra had been entrusted to complete a certain task in the Commercial City Piqtat. And that was…

“Hah! I can’t believe I was forced to give closure to Otto’s woman issues.”

“Hearing that ain’t gonna help Otto-bro get over it, tho. I mean, it ain’t really his fault… Maybe it’s just his luck, or tha way he talks or acts, I dunno.”

“You make it sound like he deserved it…”

With an awkward smile, Petra listened to Garfiel defending the subject of Ram’s displeasure while trying to soothe her.

Even so, the story probably matched what Emilia had heard, thus, out of the two, she agreed with Garfiel the most. She did not believe that Otto was to blame.

“So, that woman, who’s acquainted with Otto, was engaged to many men, and got angry when Otto exposed her secret… Am I right?”

“… That’s more or less the gist of it. Still, I’m sure there was a better way to fix things, so Otto should’ve thought better of it before angering her to the point she hired an assassin.”

“An assassin…”

Holding her own elbows, Ram uttered an answer that made Emilia’s shoulders quiver.

That woman and the assassin were the reason that Otto had been, heretofore, unable to return to his hometown. In fact, his recent visit was still being kept secret.

However…

“It’s all solved now! Master’s name sure came in handy.”

“Roswaal’s name? Oh, yes, since he’s important in this kingdom.”

“Yes, exactly. If he’s always going to be bringing problems, then he might as well lend us his name for a good cause.”

Petra declared so, standing proud and dignified, a great display of fortitude. Emilia could only marvel at how dependable the girl had grown.

Petra’s collaboration was also very valuable for their plan to rescue Subaru.

“Really, thank you sooo much, Petra.”

“Wh-What brought that on, Lady Emilia? You don’t need to…”

“But I want to say it. Not only to you, but to Ram and Garfiel too. I want to thank all of you."

Although Petra was confused to see Emilia bowing before her, Emilia shook her head sideways and then bowed again before Ram and Garfiel.

"If it weren't for all the help you've given me, I'd probably have tripped midway and never found the strength to stand up again. That's why…"

"You wish to thank us? It might be a little too soon for that," said Ram, interrupting Emilia's speech and narrowing her pink eyes.

Emilia raised her eyebrows at the stiffness in that voice.

"Well," Garfiel clicked his fangs, "I can't blame Lady Emilia for those feelings. If Otto-bro's family's supportin' us, we'll have a method ta get ta tha empire and find tha Captain. And we're just one step away from that."

"You're right, but…"

"Still, Ram may be cold, but she ain't lying. Let's keep our emotions at bay for a while, or we might end up like 'Tarngen the Hasty.' A'ight?"

Garfiel flashed his fangs with a smile, and then looked alternately at Emilia and Ram. Being the recipient of his gaze, Ram breathed out a small sigh.

"Are you trying to flatter both Ram and Lady Emilia? How impudent. Disgusting."

"Hey, I was just tryin' ta give ya a power-up!"

"'Power-up'… So you've caught the Barusu syndrome. My condolences, get well soon."

"Grrr…"

Ram's ruthless attack robbed Garfiel of all drive. Seeing the pitiful scene, Emilia tried to find the words to comfort Garfiel.

"It's fine, Sis, let them be."

"Petra… But I feel bad for Garfiel, you know?"

"Garf likes it when Sister Ram treats him that way. In fact, it'd be even worse for him if you meddled… I want to see Subaru again."

"… Hm, I hope we do, too."

Petra whispered as she pulled Emilia's sleeve and contemplated Ram and Garfiel. When she noticed the weak, childish facet that the girl, despite being brilliantly mature, was showing, Emilia nodded in silence.

The two yearned equally to see Subaru return safe and as soon as possible.

However…

"… Though, I think your yearning might be a bit different from mine, Sis."

"Huh?! Petra, what do you mean?!"

And once again, the mischievous side that Petra hid manifested itself to torment Emilia without any mercy.

3

"If I am correct, Master and his colleagues are still busy negotiating with Mister Otto's parents."

"Yes, probably. I hope they can reach an agreement soon, though…"

After leaving the lively room where Petra's group sojourned, Emilia entered another one.

Upon arriving at the calm place, she encountered Frederica, who kept her maid uniform despite the trip, and…

"Is Beatrice still resting?"

“Correct. She has not stopped doing so ever since we arrived. According to her, that prevents the excessive use of mana.”

“Yes. She’s in… ‘battery saver mode,’ was it?”

Emilia turned to look at the bed at the back of the room, where Beatrice slept. The girl had been lying there, her eyelids closed and fringed by long lashes, during most of the day, including the journey to Piqtat.

However, she was not merely sleepy…

“Miss Beatrice is meant to stay in repose until she can rejoin Mister Subaru.”

“Of course, I know. I tried asking my lesser spirits, and Roswaal did some research of his own too, but, at the end of the day, we can’t do much about it without Subaru.”

The contract between a spirit and its user allowed them to exchange mana via their gates.

Due to her unique origins, Beatrice’s only source of mana to preserve herself was her contractor, Subaru. Therefore, the longer their estrangement grew, the more alarming it became.

As her mana deficit worsened, Beatrice slept in an attempt to combat exhaustion.

Were it possible to find a replacement for her, they would be very willing to search for one, but…

“Lady Emilia, Miss Beatrice would have trouble resting if she were to see you grieving.”

“… Well, you’re right. Beatrice is sooo kind, after all.”

Since it was impossible, they could not afford to lose both Emilia and Beatrice to debility. And if Emilia had to be the one who kept her spirit, she would.

“Ah, by the way, Petra and the others came back a while ago; did you go greet them?”

“Indeed, I greeted them as soon as they returned. I must admit that, when I heard that Petra would be accompanying you, I became concerned that she would act imprudently…”

“She said Roswaal’s name came in handy…”

“I heard so too. Oh, that girl… However, now I realize that Ram would have probably been incapable of using Master’s name in that way, thus Petra was the most qualified for the job. Besides, if Garf had lost his patience, he could have resorted to violence, spoiling the progress of your negotiations entirely.”

“Hehe… Come on, Garfiel isn’t that big of a hothead.”

Perhaps due to their closeness as siblings, Frederica assessed Garfiel in a loving yet stern manner. Since Garfiel was still fifteen years old despite his looks, it was natural, to a certain extent, for her to treat him like a child.

Nevertheless, Petra and Garfiel’s age gap was merely of two years.

“Every youngster looks sooo childish to people like Beatrice and me.”

“… Well, Lady Emilia, I beg to differ in regard to that matter. You cannot determine who is an adult and who is a child based only on ages.”

“…? What do you…?”

When Emilia tried to inquire more about Frederica’s thoughts, she heard something.

“Be quiet, I’m trying to sleep, in fact.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Emilia, putting a hand to her mouth, as soon as she heard that sleepy voice.

Then she walked closer towards the bed and found the source.

"I'm sorry, Beatrice. Did we wake you up?"

"Sure did, I suppose… You'd better not make Betty's efforts go to waste, in fact."

"My apologies, Miss Beatrice. I should have known better…"

Frederica begged for pardon with a flush on her cheeks.

"Fine, but be more careful, I suppose," replied Beatrice from her bed, and after a blink from her round eyes, she continued, "You're supposed to be discussing things at Otto's home, in fact."

"Yes, we're already there. Roswaal and Otto are doing the talking for us right now."

"… I'm sure Roswaal will find a way to win them over, I suppose. That man can't afford to lose Subaru, after all, in fact. But…"

"I know, the empire is way too big. That's why Anastasia will be helping us too."

Even if Emilia's group managed to arrive in the Empire of Vollachia, Beatrice's misgivings would not be easily dispelled.

They would need to track Subaru's movements, and by extension Rem's, in an empire of expanse much vaster than the Kingdom of Lugunica. That was no ordinary chore.

Therefore, Anastasia had promised to provide them with her collaboration throughout the search for Subaru.

While Emilia intended to enter the empire through Piqtat, the other group contrived to access Vollachia via the city-state of Kararagi.

"I don't want to cause sooo many inconveniences for Anastasia, though…"

"But it's for Subaru, I suppose."

"Yes. Once we get Subaru back, let's go thank them for everything."

Once everything was over, she planned to go express her gratitude with Subaru safe by her side.

And to see that happen tomorrow, she needed to borrow many others' strength and keep running with all her might today.

"Miss Beatrice, if you stay awake…"

"I'm done, in fact… Now, let me go dream of Subaru for a while, I suppose."

"Hm, rest well. Say hi to Subaru for me."

"Sure, in fact," said Beatrice, with her eyes shut, as her lips relaxed.

Petting the girl's forehead, Emilia nodded at Frederica, and so the two exited the room.

Then, leaning her back against the closed door, Emilia shut her amethyst eyes tightly.

"Wait for us, Subaru… We're all coming to see you soon."

And although Subaru was nowhere to be seen, she dedicated those words to him, making it clear that she would not stop until she fulfilled her fervent desire to have him again in the faction where he belonged.

END

Comic Alive Collection 7:

Lugunican Papers
(CA)
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

???: “Shorty! Shorty Megan!”

A man rushes down the hallway, shouting loudly. He is a man who makes a loud, booming sound in the hallway. He walked forward without paying any attention to the people around him, and opened the door of the room he wanted to go to with the momentum of almost breaking through the wall.

???: “Shorty Megan! There you are!”

Shorty: “Huh? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I’m here, I’m here, and I’m alive and well!”

The door was opened and in the room, a small boy literally jumped up at the sound of the man’s voice. He was wearing a large round hat that covered his head completely, and his bangs hid both his eyes. He was dressed in a pair of worn out work clothes and shoes whose only selling point was their sturdiness, and it was obvious at a glance that he had just worn them out.

This is not because of a personal sense of beauty or a desire to be unique and not conform to the trends of the world, but because of a lack of interest, wealth, and time.

This was evident in the fact that he didn’t have a home, but slept in his office, which was piled high with papers and other materials. The boy, Shorty Megan, wiped the edge of his mouth with a cloth, hiding the traces of a nap, and looked up at the man who appeared in the room, his eyes hidden by his bangs.

Shorty: “Mo, Mo, Mo, Editor-in-chief Morgan? What are you doing here?”

Morgan: “Yes, of course! I’m Morgan Frantz, the editor-in-chief of this “Dragon Nation Newsletter” And Shorty, you’re my man, my reporter, my hands and feet. Which one is it?!”

Shorty: “Of course, Your man, your reporter, and all of your limbs.”

Morgan: “Of course you are! But! You’re a little toe at best! If you’re going to write an article like that, I’m not going to trust you with the role of the other toes!”

It was Shorty’s boss, editor-in-chief Morgan Frantz, who was getting angry, his distinctive eagle nose, his face turning red. He is responsible for the publication of a newspaper that circulates within the Kingdom of Lugnica, the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” He is also a fearless worker who knows nothing about compromise. The editor-in-chief, who is not only tall but also loud and brash, is a genuine news addict who keeps a close eye on all the strange happenings in the kingdom and drools over the everyday events.

There’s only one reason why the news-addicted editor-in-chief went to the trouble of visiting Shorty, a small-time reporter. It means he saw Shorty’s article. The fact that he rushed here as soon as he saw the article only meant…

Shorty: “Yes, sir! I’m honored by your praise!”

Morgan: “Compliment why would I give you one? Look at my face! Look at my face! 70% or even 80% of my eagle nose is red. That’s the measure of my anger!”

Shorty: “Chief! It is 100% bright red!”

Morgan: “If that’s the case, I guess I’m angrier than I thought with this article!”

Barking, a dark red faced Morgan throws a stack of papers in his hand at Shorty. It hit him in the chest and fell to the floor. It was an article that Shorty had stayed up writing all night. It was a labor of his blood and tears, and this is how he treated it. In other words…

Shorty: “You want me to fix it?”

Morgan: “Oh, you idiot! All rejected! What are you getting a little greedy about? First of all, who’s going to be excited by the idea of a massive rat infestation underneath the Royal capital? I was wondering if there would be any surprises along the way, but then again, people’s words suck!”

Shorty: “Check for a follow-up report, go see it see for yourself…”

Morgan: “Shut up! Don’t lead the curious reader into the dangerous underground! Just call the guards and have them exterminate it! What if some readers die or get sick from challenging the big rats?”

Shorty: “In this case, is it a liability issue?”

Morgan: “Idiot! The problem is that the number of subscribers to the Dragon Nation Newsletter is decreasing.”

Shorty picks up the article on the floor, and Morgan sticks his finger in his nose. Shorty liked Morgan’s ideas, even though they were based on values that could only be described as press addiction. This was because Shorty was also a news addict. That’s why this article was also the result of his own hands-on research.

Shorty: “It was a great piece of work that interviewed people around the favelas and captured the details of the swarms of large rats that were breeding in large numbers under the royal capital. And now it’s all been rejected?”

Morgan: “Of course! Back straight and chin up! That is the motto of Dragon Nation Newsletter!”

Shorty: “We don’t publish anything that doesn’t make your heart tremble!”

Morgan: “That’s all there is to it!”

In front of Shorty, who was standing upright, Morgan spat in front of him and told him off. Shorty gritted his teeth in frustration as he got a large spray of spit in his face. Shorty wanted to argue. But nothing came to mind. In fact, Shorty didn’t have an answer to how the coverage of the great rat pack would shake the reader’s heart.

Shorty: “But once you start something, you feel like you’re losing money if you stop halfway…!”

Morgan: “I’ve always bought your resilience, but this time it’s been shown in a bad way. Speaking of bad things, I have the same impression about the drawing in this article!”

Shorty: “What? You can’t even draw? Aren’t the drawings really good?”

Morgan: “It’s too well drawn! It’s like a swarm of… rats that’s about to move!”

Snatching the article out of Shorty’s hands, Morgan opens the press picture in question wide. In front of Shorty’s eyes, a horde of rats… A realistic drawing of a horde of rats came into view. It was so close to the real thing that you could almost smell the animal scent of the rats in the air. Rather, Shorty was overcome with the memory and fear of an actual underground encounter with a horde of rats, a sensation that was both visually and olfactorily ironed out.

Shorty: “Uhhgg…”

Morgan: “Don’t throw up on your own article! But a lot of readers are going to have the same reaction to your article, you know? It’s Lulu Lara who drew this picture! didn’t She!”

Shorty: “If it was her…”

Shorty’s eyes wandered to the corner of the room as he fought back nausea. Following the movement of his eyes, “Yeah?” Morgan’s eyes widen.

In the middle of a mountain range lined with piles of papers, there was a shadow that was different from the piles of papers… There was a drawing book on her lap, and a young girl was absently working with a brush.

Shorty: Oh?! There you are, Lulu Lara!

Lulu Lara: “Under here…”

Shorty: “What are you doing in this messy room? It’s… or rather, it stinks! It stinks! You haven’t bathed since you got back from the underground, have you? Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no!”

The girl, Lulu Lara, glances at Morgan, who is picking his eagle nose and fighting the feeling of vomiting, and is silent. However, unlike her blank expression, her hand never stops drawing. That was her role as a news painter for the articles of the “Dragon Nation Newsletter”.

Nevertheless—

Morgan: “She’ s a real treasure! With her ability to depict reality as if you were really there, she can make even the most outlandish events convincing with her paintings. I’m sure you’re not embarrassed to have her draw a horde of rats, Shorty…!. Shorty?”

Shorty: “H… Here it is”

Shorty, who was buried upside down in a pile of papers away from Morgan, who was holding his head, answered. It was the result of Morgan being thrown off by Lulu Lara’s presence. He grabbed one of Shorty’s legs and said, “What are you kidding me? Morgan pulled the boy’s small frame out of the pile of materials. So Shorty, hanging upside down by one leg, smiled fondly, not knowing what to say.

He smiled and …

Morgan: “Don’t look so glum, Shorty.”

Shorty: “Uh…”

Morgan: “We need to shake the reader’s emotions, their true emotions. How can we do that if we can’t even be honest about our own feelings, I know you don’t!”

Morgan’s hand is quickly removed from his leg and Shorty falls headfirst to the floor, but he barks with exaggerated emotion, paying no attention to his subordinate’s state of agony.

Morgan: “Shorty! What in the world did you join the Dragon Nation

Newsletter for? Was it to chase a rat's tail and carve wrinkles between the brows of the subscribers of the Royal capital? What do you think?"

Shorty: "No, That's not true!"

Morgan's pitying words made Shorty bite back hard. Forgetting the pain in his head, he stood up and glared at his boss, who was forty centimeters taller than him. It was convenient that Shorty was hanging upside down and his head was bleeding. Thanks to this, Shorty could say what he wanted to say without shrinking his stomach, which usually shrinks when dealing with the editor-in-chief. So, if you ask me why I joined the Dragon Nation Newsletter…

Shorty: "I want to write articles that will change people's minds… and the world! I didn't become a reporter to torment people who hate rats!"

Morgan: "What would you do if it were the case! How can you waste Lulu Lara's valuable time and talent, and do it while you're napping in a pile of documents?"

Shorty: "If that was the… then… then…!"

Shorty clenched his teeth at his boss's words from above and let his gaze wander. In the corner of the room, Lulu Lara is still painting in the book on her lap. Her partner, Shorty, is the only one who knows how good she is at painting. Shorty knows her best, and Morgan is right in pointing out that he's giving her a job she doesn't deserve. Above all, Shorty himself was aware that his work was not commensurate with his passion.

"…"

Shorty choked up as he felt such a surge of passion. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an article on the wall of his office. The article was not written by Shorty, but it was pasted on the wall as if it were an important piece of paper or a memorial, because the content of the article was exactly what Shorty had envisioned as a model of a "world-changing article." And it is Shorty's deepest desire to write such an article…

Shorty: “The Royal Selection…”

Morgan: “What?”

Morgan’s one eyebrow twitched as he heard Shorty’s murmur. Shorty was able to make out a change in the sound mixed in with Morgan’s muttering. To shake the heart of the editor-in-chief, to be that “first reader” who sees the article before anyone else.

Shorty: “I’m going to interview the candidates for the Royal Selection…! This is the biggest concern of the people of the kingdom, the candidates for the Royal Selection that will shake the kingdom, listen to their real voices and get to know their true selves!”

“…”

Shorty: “Wh… What do you think?”

Shorty, who had chosen his words with vigor, was anxious about Morgan’s reaction to his silence. However, despite Shorty’s uneasiness, Morgan’s mouth twisted into a wide smile after a few moments of silence.

Morgan: “Nice! Good, Shorty! That’s what I’m talking about!”

Shorty: “Gyaah!, My shoulder!”

A large hand grabbed his shoulder, and Shorty screamed in pain as his bones creaked. But Morgan’s eyes lit up like a child’s, ignoring Shorty’s screams.

Morgan: “The biggest concern of the people, the Royal Selection! It’s been a few months since the start of the selection was announced, and at first everyone was talking about it, but gradually the buzz had faded away. Let’s try to turn the people’s attention back to the Royal Selection by ourselves… Not bad! Not bad at all!”

Shorty: “Oh, thank you!”

Morgan: “Shut up, you idiot! You haven’t done anything yet! Don’t be happy!”

Shorty: “Not at all, no.”

Shorty thought he was being praised, but then he got angry, and his emotions almost made his eyes roll. But Morgan laughed through his teeth and patted Shorty’s aching shoulder with his big palm. Then he sticks his finger in Shorty’s teary eyes and says, “Look!” spitting at him.

Morgan: “Now that you’ve decided that, hurry up, Shorty! Don’t let anyone else get the better of you! Get an interview with the candidates for the Royal Selection, and do whatever it takes to get the story out!”

Shorty: “I got it!”

Morgan: “In the meantime, have that rat article replaced with something else! Give it top priority!”

That was all he said, and Morgan grabbed the big rat article and ran furiously out of the room. The wind he created sent the papers in the room soaring, and Shorty’s long bangs were also shaken. But in the room after the storm had passed, Shorty clenched his fists in passion. He felt that he had spoken out of momentum, but the passion in his heart was still real.

Shorty: I’m gonna do it, I’m gonna do it, Shorty Megan! I’m going to change the world! Lulu Lara, you’re gonna be busy!

“…”

Lulu Lara: “Huh? Me?”

As Shorty turned around with a puffed up nose, Lulu Lara tore off a page from her drawing book and handed it to him. Shorty took it and looked at the drawing. Shorty’s nose was bleeding with excitement…

Shorty: “No, at least say it out loud!”

Shorty carefully folded the picture and put it in his pocket. Then he grabbed his interviewing gear and was ready to hit the road on his next reporting trip.

Shorty: “I’ve been told that after the big rat, the next candidate for king is going to be a tough nut to crack, but I’m going to do whatever I can to make this interview a success! Let’s go, Lulu Lara!”

Lulu Lara: “See ya…”

Shorty: “Don’t just say goodbye, you’re coming too!”

Shorty carries Lulu Lara, who has curled up. Together, they carry her bag of drawing tools in front of their stomachs, and preparations for departure are complete. Shorty sluggishly leaves the headquarters of the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” with Lulu Lara.

Lulu Lara: “…Slow”

Shorty: “I’m not slowing down! I’ve heard that the candidates are beautiful, so I’m sure your creative juices will be flowing! It’s going to be a blast!”

Shorty’s adventure began, calling desperately to his apathetic partner. His steps were heavy, his partner was lethargic, but Shorty’s eyes were shining. It’s a good day to start writing an article that will change the world.

Shorty: “I see it, Lulu Lara… the blue sky is blessing our way forward!”

Lulu Lara: “Hm, it’s cloudy…”

Shorty: “Look with your heart’s eye!”

Dragon Nation Newsletter is known as a small newspaper in the Kingdom of Lugnica. The limited pages of the newspaper are filled with the emotions of joy, sorrow, anger, and sadness that occurred in Lugnica. It could be the happy news of a peaceful day, or it could be the painful and sad news of someone’s life lost somewhere else. However, no matter what kind of emotions it provokes, there is a core to the Dragon Nation Newsletter that can never be shaken. And that is…

Shorty: “We don’t publish articles that don’t shake us to the core! That’s our company motto, Lulu Lara.”

Lulu Lara: “Blub… Blub”

Shorty: “Will you stop blowing bubbles and listen to me? I know it’s a habit of yours, but you’re not supposed to do that in any of the places we’re covering.”

Shorty raises his fist and expresses his enthusiasm, while in front of him, Lulu Lara’s face is devoid of motivation. They are in the midst of discussing their interview plans for the future, having left the office and having dinner in the commoner’s quarter of the royal capital. However, Shorty is basically the one who makes all the plans and gives all the explanations, while Lulu Lara just gives inappropriate advice. Anyway…

Shorty: “We’re going to be going around to the candidates who are participating in the selection. No matter, how much Lulu Lara knows about the Royal Selection, right?”

Lulu Lara: “…?”

Shorty: “You look like you don’t know what you’re doing! I’m scared! I’m afraid of your lack of interest in the public, even though you’re involved with a newspaper! The way you’re painting my face is also scary!”

With a quick movement, she drew a picture of Shorty’s pale face in her drawing book. As you can see, Lulu Lara is a genuine weirdo who draws news pictures for the press for a living, and has no interest in any other work. However, her drawing ability is a gift that no one else can imitate, and she is a very important and valued partner.

Shorty: “I’m going to tell you, my valued partner, about the subject of our upcoming interview. You can dismiss it as just an explanation to help me organize my thoughts.”

Lulu Lara: “Aye…”

For the time being, Shorty coughed a little, glad that he had gotten some feedback. Then he began to explain to Lulu Lara about the Royal Selection and the participants.

Shorty: “First of all, the selection of the king is a ceremony to determine the next ruler, which was proclaimed in the royal castle about six months ago. Three years from now, the king will be chosen from among the five selected candidates… So now we’re in the middle of a competition to see who will be the king.”

The story of the king and his bloodline all falling ill at the same time is probably one of the hardest disasters to shake in the Kingdom of Lugnica in recent years. As a result, the kingdom is now without a king, and the Council of Sages is running the affairs of state instead. However, this is still an unhealthy situation. In order to solve this problem…

Shorty: “It’s a throne selection competition, or the Royal Selection for short. The five candidates for the throne are Duchess Crusch Karsten, Chairman Anastasia Hoshin, Baroness Priscilla Barielle, Felt-sama and Emilia-sama.”

Lulu Lara: “Is that big?”

Shorty: “No, it’s a small number of people, considering the deadline… We don’t know how many candidates will be left on the day the Royal Selection is decided.”

Lulu Lara tilted her head and didn’t seem to understand the true meaning of Shorty’s words. But Shorty didn’t intend to explain any further. Lulu Lara doesn’t need to know. The possibility of a dark struggle taking place behind the glamorous stage of the royal selection, or even the circumstances of an assassination battle between candidates.

Shorty: “I mean, you can’t call yourself a candidate for the Royal Selection if you’re not prepared. In other words, all five of the selected candidates must be prepared for anything.”

The candidates are prepared to fight a bloody and dark battle to be elected king, and all of them are willing to use intrigue and force to compete for the throne, so they must have extreme humanity.

Shorty: “Besides, all of them are women… In this case, I should say heroines. Crusch-sama known as “Valkyrie”, Anastasia-sama has risen through the ranks of the Kararagi City States… And Felt-sama who I heard ruled the favelas, most importantly, I heard that she has the Sword Saint with her.”

Lulu Lara: “Mean… “Knight of Knights”?”

Shorty: “That’s right… Oh, and by the way, the Sir Reinhard was painted by Lulu Lara before.”

Lulu Lara’s reaction reminded Shorty of one of her previous paintings. She happened to run into the “Sword Saint” while walking around the capital on her day off, and he generously agreed to Lulu Lara’s request to use him as a model. In fact, Lulu Lara seemed to be very enthusiastic about it, and the finished picture was very good. However, Lulu Lara lost interest in the painting after she finished it, so Shorty saved all of her drawings. I’m sure she has that one in a booklet at work. Anyway…

Shorty: “If that knight Reinhardt pledges his allegiance to her, then Felt-sama must be an extraordinary person, and…”

Lulu Lara: “And…?”

Shorty: “Emilia…Sama…”

A feeling of dread envelops Shorty’s entire body as he tries to name the next candidate. The blood drained from his face, and Shorty clutched his thin shoulders in a squirming grip. Lulu Lara looked at him strangely, but she would have been just as frightened if she understood why. Emilia, one of the candidates for the royal selection, is a half-elf with silver hair and purple-blue eyes, and she resembles the “Witch of Envy” who once drove the world to the brink of destruction. She is said to be a devilish being, clad in a cold air that freezes everything and accompanied by a terrifyingly ferocious spirit. Rumor has it that she has permanently frozen the northern lands of the kingdom and enjoys ruining the lives of those around her by playfully inviting snowstorms. Of course, she is not the “Witch of Envy” herself… but she is dangerous enough to be rumored to be the second coming of the “Witch of Envy”.

“…”

Swallowing, Shorty scolded himself for being scared. In the first place, other reporters besides Shorty must have thought of taking on the same subject. However, he had never succeeded in interviewing all of the candidates for the Royal Selection. The most important reason for this was the existence of the fifth candidate, Emilia. If he was going to call this an interview with the candidates for the Royal Selection, we naturally need to hear from all five of them. However, everyone was hesitant to interview Emilia. Shorty, too, had felt like he was about to falter many times after setting his goal for the interview because of his fear of Emilia. But…

“…”

Lulu Lara is looking at Shorty’s frightened face… No, Lulu Lara saw Shorty’s face turn pale and began to run her brush through her drawing book. It’s drawn. It doesn’t help, and I can’t hide my surprise that she didn’t listen to my explanation at all, but it still gave Shorty a chance to breathe.

Shorty: “Change the world…”

Shorty clenched his teeth together as he remembered what Morgan had said to him. Shorty won’t lie about those words. Shorty’s vow, his dream, his mission, there are many ways to say it, but they all meant the same thing to Shorty.

Shorty: “This is no time to be scared. I’ll do it, Lulu Lara. I’m going to do my job.”

Lulu Lara: “And, That one…? “

Shorty: “Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, that’s right, that’s right, I know.”

At the same time as Shorty’s decision, Lulu Lara, who had finished drawing a pale Shorty, handed him the painting. Laughing at his own shameful self, Shorty carefully folds up the picture and puts it in his bag, and then remembers Lulu Lara's question, the last one.

Shorty: "The last one is Baroness Barielle, or Priscilla-sama, who has had so many unfortunate marriages that she is known as the "The Bloody Bride". She is still young and beautiful, and as a result she has been married many times, but all of them ended in tragic love… She's a tragic woman."

Lulu Lara: "Tragedy…"

Shorty: "She has a good reputation in her territory, and people seem to love her as the "Sun Princess". I guess she has a warm charm that makes people around her smile positively."

From the standpoint of having heard various previous stories, Priscilla Barielle is the one whose situation Shorty would personally like to support the most. A woman who is unfortunate enough to have to overcome the absurdity of her circumstances to achieve glory. It is a heroic tale and a story of success that will surely be exciting for everyone.

Shorty: "Whoa, whoa, not good. I have to be impartial. Above all, it would be disrespectful to the person who agreed to be interviewed in the first place."

Lulu Lara: "Other person…?"

Shorty: "Just as well, since she' s active in the Royal Capital."

As he said this, Shorty gulped down a glass of water from the table, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and looked behind him toward the noble district. In the center of the royal capital, in a district of nobles located in the vicinity of the royal castle, is the residence of the subject of this interview, a building that stands out from the rest. The person who is the most important figure in the kingdom, and is considered to be the most powerful person in the current Royal Selection…

Shorty: "Duchess Crusch Karsten…"

Lulu Lara: "Duchess…"

Shorty: “To be honest, I was the one who thought it would be the most difficult, if not the most difficult emotionally. First of all, I didn’t think she would accept my request for an interview.”

After all, she was the most prestigious woman in the kingdom. Shorty was certain that he would be turned away from an interview because he was a commoner, or even it was for a newspaper that was intended to be read by the masses. In that case, Shorty was going to ask for an interview dozens or hundreds of times and wait for them to lose their patience.

Shorty: “Should I think of it as a good start, or should I think of it of be prepared to face my biggest obstacle?”

Lulu Lara: “…?”

Shorty: “Crusch-sama is as martial as a woman can be. She made her father step down when he didn’t need to retire yet, and she’s ambitious.”

Otherwise, she would not be able to serve as a duchess who is called by the title of “Valkyrie”. Perhaps the offer of an interview was just an excuse to take a rude shot at a reporter from a newspaper. In that case, Shorty would be a pathetic sacrifice.

Shorty: “Relax, Shorty Megan. “Relax, Shorty Megan, even if you fall short of your ambition, I fought for you. That’s what’s most important…!”

Stomping on his frightened heart, Shorty stood up, kicking his chair. He then takes Lulu Lara’s hand, who is eating a piece of bread, and sets off. The first thing he wants to do is to uncover the true character of Crusch Karsten, the candidate for the Royal Selection. Even if the first one is the last one to be interviewed, I’m determined to do so. However, as it turned out, Shorty’s grim determination was unfounded. The reason why the Duchess Crusch Karsten was interviewed by the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” was not because of any hostility towards the recent reporters or any desire to make an example of the industry. On the contrary…

Crusch: “So, Shorty-san and Lulu Lara-san have been working together for two years, and even though you’re young, you’re doing a great job.”

Shorty: “Um, yes, when you put it that way, ha ha ha…!”

Shorty, blushing at the unexpected praise, Shorty pats his head on the top of his hat. In response to Shorty’s reaction, a green-haired beauty with a frighteningly flattering gesture smiled elegantly as she put her hand over her mouth and said, “Oh”.

“…”

Despite the casual gesture, Shorty couldn’t help but admire the woman. As he admired her, Shorty was aware that he was being swallowed up by the atmosphere of the place… or rather, the other person’s… and he desperately wanted to do something about it. Now, Shorty is in a large mansion that makes your mouth hang open and look around, in a large, spacious parlor, with his butt on an overly soft sofa.

His buttocks are on a sofa that is far too soft. In front of him is a beautiful woman who looks like a heavenly maiden, and he feels vague about whether he is dreaming or not. Yes, a heavenly maiden, that’s exactly how Shorty would describe her. Her long, luxuriant green hair hung loosely down her back, and her feminine, undulating body was wrapped in a graceful dress. The stole that softly adorned her slender shoulders must have been well-liked by such a worthy owner. This is how beautiful Duchess Crusch Karsten is.

Lulu Lara: “Tsu…”

Crusch: “Um, Is the lady next to you, Lulu Lara-san okay?”

Shorty: “I’m sorry to have caused you concern, yes. But this is her normal behavior, so if you could please forgive me…”

Shorty is not in a normal state of mind when Crusch tilts her head and pays attention to him. But Lulu Lara, who was running her paintbrush next to him, was in a different state of mind. However, Shorty couldn’t blame Lulu Lara for getting lost in it. The woman, Crusch Karsten, was a beauty beyond compare. Lulu Lara’s desire to paint something that moves her as much as the aspirations of the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” does not even give her the option of stopping the movement of her paintbrush. And then…

Lulu Lara: “kindly…”

Crusch: “Well, can I have it? This is… me, isn’t it”

When Lulu Lara took the picture, Crusch raised her eyes. If you take a look at it, you will see that it is a picture of Crusch, perfectly depicted in Shorty’s eyes. Lulu Lara’s ability to portray what is right in front of her eyes in a realistic manner was demonstrated without regret, and it was finished as a supreme piece of art. Don’t get me wrong, it was as good as Shorty would hope for.

Shorty: “I’d like to hang it in my room…”

Shorty accidentally muttered that to himself. Naturally, Shorty’s soliloquy was heard, and Crusch asked, “Huh?”, Shorty immediately searched for words to make up for his mistake.

Shorty: “Oh, no, I didn’t accidentally mean… I said I wanted to decorate, not…”

Crusch: “Hmm, yes, I understand. She did such a good job of drawing it, Ferri-chan would want to hang it in their room also.”

Shorty: “Yes, I know… Are you sure it was okay?”

Shorty’s eyes widened as he nodded his head in affirmation of his true feelings. Then a person who whispered a devilish laugh and sat down next to Crusch. The new girl who joined the scene was also a terrific looking person. If the description for Crusch was beautiful, the description for this girl would be dainty. The way she gestures, the way she looks at me, there’s a sophisticated charm to every aspect Shorty couldn’t take his eyes off her. But don’t underestimate Shorty, he is a reporter for a newspaper. He has already found out exactly who this girl-like person is.

Shorty: “You’re the knight, Felix Argyle-dono, aren’t you?”

That is right, I don't like the name Felix. It isn't cute. I prefer if you call me Ferris instead but you're welcome to call me Ferri-chan.

Shorty: "Hmm, I'll go with Ferris-dono then."

Felix: "Hehe, How cuute."

Felix… no, Ferris… smiles coyly as he puts a finger to his lips. His mischievous expression and gestures are deceiving, but he is a man. Crusch Karsten, a candidate for the royal selection, and Ferris, one of her knights. The two people in front of them, who were in a master-servant relationship, were the subjects of Shorty and his team's interview this time.

Crusch: "Ferris, I don't want you to tease the two reporters too much."

Felix: "Yesss, I'm sorry-nya, Crusch-sama. But it's really well drawn. Crusch-sama, did you take the time to model yourself to her?"

Crusch: "When you say that, it makes me feel like I've done something embarrassing… No, I didn't. I'm sure she's very good at observing things."

While appeasing Ferris' attitude, Crusch's amber eyes look at Lulu Lara. Her eyes are not only beautiful, but they are also accurate in their assessment of Lulu Lara. In fact, her eyes are very special, and that's why she can draw with such great skill. However, I can't make Lulu Lara do all the work. Shorty has a role to play.

Shorty: "So, now that we have the honorable candidate for the Royal Selection, Crusch-sama, and her first knight, Ferris-dono, here, may I ask you a few questions for our interview?"

Crusch: "Yes, I am honored that you have taken the trouble to listen to my story. I don't know if I can live up to your expectations, but I would appreciate it."

Shorty: "Ahh"

Crusch bowed with a refined posture to Shorty, who chose his words carefully and asked a question. The beautiful woman was so impressive that even her bow was different from that of an ordinary person, but more than that, a sense of fear struck Shorty's whole body.

Felix: "Crusch-sama, you're scaring Reporter-Kyun. Please be more gentle with him."

Crusch: "It's a difficult thing to sit down and relax. It's hard to be natural, isn't it?"

Felix: "Mmm, it's not exactly the same, but I guess that's okay. If Reporter-Kyun does not take a tougher stance, I'll be in trouble."

Crusch and Shorty: "I, I understand…"

The two of them nodded in agreement as Ferris gave orders to both Crusch and Shorty. It seems that Ferris is the one who has the most authority in this place. In addition, the one who is most free is Lulu Lara, who now seems to be drawing a picture of Ferris.

Shorty: "Well then, Crusch-sama, you're the leading candidate for the Royal Selection, and it's been a few months since the selection began, so I was wondering if you could tell me how you're doing."

Crusch: "You're welcome to be more natural with me."

Shorty: "Yes, this is the best I can do for now…"

While watching the flustered Shorty, Crusch put her hand over her mouth and said, "Well". The gesture and the gentleness of her words and actions are the reason why Shorty is so nervous… It's very different from what I've heard. She is one called "Valkyrie," and her beauty and dignity are the best in the kingdom. But her reputation does not match the beauty in front of him. It was beautiful. There was not the slightest hint of the rudeness that Shorty had feared before the interview. In front of Shorty, who had this impression, Crusch pondered the content of the previous question, saying, "is that so," and after a moment of silence, she moved her lips.

Crusch: "I think it's a waste of time to say that I'm the best choice for king. At the very least, I have a lot to learn, and I'm not sure I'm fit to sit on the king’s throne.”

Felix: “Crusch-sama?”

Shorty: “Huh? What is that opinion, eh? You’re not going to give up, are you?”

Shorty couldn’t help but to raise his eyebrows when he heard Crusch’s unexpected self-assessment of her lack of confidence and unworthiness. Ferris was also very surprised. The first interview with a candidate for the Royal Selection has a surprising a turn of events. Crusch Karsten, the leading candidate for the royal selection, confided in the reporter that she was…

Crusch: “No, please don’t misunderstand me…”

However, despite the confusion of the reporter and his companion, Crusch quietly puffed out her chest. The calm tone of her voice and the look in her amber eyes made Shorty’s heart quiet down as if it had been hit by cold water. It was a feeling that surprised even him. But he couldn’t be surprised. Because, just as the confusion has subsided, so has the fascination with Crusch. It was the result of a kind of charisma that no one else could have.

Crusch: “I am still in the process of learning a lot… If there is one thing that gives me an edge over the other candidates, it’s my birth and family background. That is not enough to fulfill the responsibility of being the king. Therefore, I will continue to work hard.”

Felix: “Work hard…”

Crusch: “May this inexperienced body become a vessel for the duties of the king. And may my closest followers and vassals lend me the strength I still lack.”

Felix: “C… Crusch-sama…”

Gently, smiling, Crusch’s hand rested on the shoulder of Ferris next to her. Ferris’s eyes moistened and his voice trembled as he was thrilled by the touch of the hand. It’s not hard to imagine the happiness Ferris felt when he received such kind words from his trusted and beloved master. Shorty also couldn't help but feel his eyes burning.

Shorty: "…I think that's a very noble idea. So, can you tell me about the white whale? I heard that you accomplished the feat of defeating the white whale, in cooperation with the other candidates for the throne."

Crusch: "Oh, for that matter…"

Felix: "Nyafter all, we have an indispensable contributor to the defeat of the white whale! That Wilhelm Trias is here, you know!"

Ferris interrupted Crusch's reply and said so loudly. He stuck his finger in Shorty and Lulu Lara's faces and smiled at them as they rolled their eyes. However, although I was surprised, it was exactly what I wanted to hear.

Shorty: "So, I wanted to ask you about that too! You see, the two main characters mentioned in "Sword Demon Love Song" and the white whale have a strong connection…"

Felix: That's it! Hold on a second! I'll get you Wil-Jii right now!

Ferris, his eyes shining, jumped over the table and ran out of the room. It seems that he is going to be allowed to meet the "Sword Demon" in question, which makes Shorty nervous. Then, at the sight of Shorty, Crusch gave a small laugh.

Shorty: "Oh, no, I mean, I'm sorry! I know it's an interview with you Crusch-sama, but…"

Crusch: "No, no need to be sorry at all. Besides, if it's about my followers or subjects, I think it's synonymous with interviewing me. Wilhelm's story is quite moving."

Shorty: "Well, if you say so… Oh, in that case, just one more thing."

He asks Crusch to take consideration of his words, even though he expresses his brazenness. If Ferris wasn't around, he feels he would be able to hear the pure opinion of Crusch. A few months have passed since the start of the Royal Selection, and many things have happened that have caused a stir in the kingdom…

Shorty: “Which camp is Crusch-sama most interested in right now?”

Crusch: “That’s…”

The question caused Crusch to pause for a moment. However, the thought and hesitation was only for a moment, and the answer came quickly to her. However, even though she was talking about her adversaries, she kept a smile on her face. And then…

Crusch: “…I think Emilia-sama’s camp… deserves the most attention.”

She replied to his question.

3

Shorty: “No… It was a very friendly interview from start to finish, totally different from the previous reports…”

Shorty muttered languidly and tiredly as he left the Duchess’s villa in the Noble District after finishing his interview with Duchess Crusch Karsten. Rather than physical exhaustion, in this case I would say mental exhaustion. Although there was no hostility toward the reporters from the other newspapers, which was a concern at the beginning, the tension of talking to a person in a position of authority was always kept high. One of the main reasons for his exhaustion was that he was overwhelmed by the civility with which his hosts greeted him. However, Shorty thought that the results were worth the physical and mental exhaustion.

Shorty: “Ferris-dono called me in to listen, though I didn’t expect the length of Wilhelm-dono’s story…”

Shorty wanted to know about the defeat of the white whale, and Wilhelm, with the Crusch’s permission, he spoke very smoothly. However, Shorty was surprised to hear that most of the conversation was about his wife, the previous “Sword Saint” who had been defeated by the white whale and lost her life. It was an interesting story, but the content was 80% love talk.

Lulu Lara "…hk"

Back in the commoner's district, beside Shorty who is lying down with his legs stretched out on the grass-covered meadow, Lulu Lara, who is furiously working on her paintbrush, is blushing with excitement. Apparently, the interview with Crusch and Ferris had had quite a positive impact on her as well. Her appetite for painting knows no bounds, and she is already using up her new drawing pad. Shorty could understand Lulu Lara's excitement.

Shorty: "After all, there's a difference between what you actually see, hear, and talk about, and what you only hear and talk about."

If I were to analyze the reputation of the swordswoman, the masculine and ambitious duchess, Crusch, I would say that she is a talented woman with a family background, but with an aristocratic nature that is somewhat on the nose. However, such an impression was erased from Shorty's mind when he talked to her directly. Crusch was always soft-spoken, feminine, aware of her lack of education, and a likable hard worker who never lost her ambition.

Shorty: "Whoever becomes king, I want them to be like that…"

Lulu Lara: "Selfish…"

Shorty: "What? No, no, no, not at all! Reporters are fair! Reporters are equal!"

When Lulu Lara heard Shorty talking to himself, he panicked and denied it. However, Lulu Lara, who had made him panic, continued to work on the painting with an indifferent face. Shorty stood up on the grass, thinking that she was a very annoying partner.

Shorty: "Anyway, I'll summarize what I've covered. Misunderstanding of the rumors surrounding Crusch-sama… It's our role to resolve the gap between rumor and reality."

Lulu Lara: "hk…"

Shorty rubbed the bridge of his nose with his finger, and Lulu Lara handed him a picture. When Shorty received it, he looked at it and raised his eyebrows. As expected of Lulu Lara, a genius at drawing pictures for publication, she draws what she wants the reader to see… It was a beautiful master-servant image of the two of them leaning together, holding hands.

Shorty: “Yes, this is a good one. That’s what I’m talking about, Lulu Lara!”

Lulu Lara: “Glad, beautiful girls…”

Shorty: “No, I’m not looking at them that way, and Ferris-dono is a man, okay?”

Shorty is not happy about being looked at with a questioning and disdainful look, but he has no worries about the content of the interview and the quality of the pictures. However, they only finished interviewing the first candidate for the Royal Selection.

Shorty: “There’s a lot more to come… It’s especially important to be careful about what we cover next.”

Lulu Lara: “Problems…?”

Shorty: “Don’t say that like it’s a joke! I really do…! After all, the next interviewee is not from the Kingdom of Lugnica, but from another country.”

Hearing Shorty’s words, “… another country,” Lulu Lara said, looking as if she had never heard of it before. I had been briefed in advance, so it was not new to me, But for once, Lulu Lara needs to be aware of the danger she is in.

Shorty: “Anastasia Hoshin-sama is the Chairman of the Hoshin Trading Company, a powerful business in the Kararagi City States. She has come all the way across the country to compete for the throne of the Kingdom of Lugnica… Do you smell that?”

Lulu Lara: “I took a bath…”

Shorty: “It’s not your smell! If you had smelled it in the first place, we would have been in a lot of trouble with Crusch-sama!”

In the first place, it was a mistake to ask Lulu Lara, whose nose might have been dumbed down by the paint fumes. Shorty's sense of smell should be better. That was the division of labor between the two partners, a role that Shorty played.

Shorty: "So far, if there has been any interference from other countries, it has only been from the Vollachian Empire to the south that we have been wary of. In fact, before the Royal Selection, there are stories that a representatives of the Council of Sages secretly went to Vollachia to sign a non-aggression pact."

Everyone assumed that it was the south that everyone should be on the alert for. Anastasia, who was now a candidate for the Royal Selection, could be said to be an assassin from the west…

Shorty: "You can't help but feel that there's something fishy about the "Finest of Knights", Julius Juukulius-dono, who has expressed his support for Anastasia-sama."

Lulu Lara: "Take a bath…?"

Shorty: "He's the one they call "Finest"! I would be a disappointment if I didn't! Even if you're black-hearted, I hope you've got your manners in order."

Of course, it would be better if he didn't have this gut feeling. However, I don't know the true intentions of a promising talent who was highly trusted in the Royal Guard, why he would invite a powerful person from another country to be the king. The Juukulius family is a family of knights that has been around for generations, and there was no record of them being disrespected by the Kingdom of Lugnica. Then there is one possibility…

Shorty: "Either Sir Julius is tremendously ambitious or he's a traitor…"

Lulu Lara: "Bad spot…"

Shorty: "I don't like it if that's the case, so it's like one of those things… Whatever it is, I'd like to find out what they're up to."

Tightening his fists, Shorty renewed his resolve. After the interview with Crusch, Shorty's confidence and a new sense of purpose were awakened in him. It was to uncover the truth about the Royal Selection. Needless to say, the rumors about Crusch differed greatly from her actual personality. This meant that there would be no guiding principle in deciding who would be the next king. If that is the case, then the Dragon Nation Newsletter will serve as a guideline for those who may be misinformed.

Shorty: "If not the Dragon Nation Newsletter, then who else would do it…"

Lulu Lara: "Big time…"

Shorty: "That's right! We've already started running. Then we have to keep running until we make it. I'll do it. For that reason…"

Shorty pulled out a new drawing pad from his press bag and handed it to Lulu Lara. She took it with a puffed up nose and a twinkle in her eye. Lulu Lara is full of energy, and Shorty is full of a sense of purpose. With this momentum…

Shorty: "I don't care what Anastasia-sama is up to or what plans she's hiding. I won't be fooled by the pleasant words, I'll find out what she's really thinking!"

4

Shorty: "Ku…!"

Shorty recoiled at the words of a woman with her elbows on the table and her cheek resting on her hands. The woman's demeanor, which was gentle and calm, but with the mischievousness of a noble cat, and her words and actions just before, shattered Shorty's caution head-on. I didn't expect to have my words affirmed with a big smile. This was the result of his spirited attempt to expose his opponent's intentions.

Shorty: "Anastasia-sama, I think that is somewhat inappropriate."

Anastasia: "Ara-ra, I got upset. My knight is too serious." (TL note I decided to keep her Ara's since I am not doing the accent)

The one who sticks out her tongue like that is Anastasia Hoshin, a woman who looks like the word “dainty” with clothes on. She has long, wavy, light purple hair, and even in the slightly warm weather, she is dressed in fluffy fur. She is short in stature and has a fragile appearance, but the way she speaks and the strong-willed light in her eyes are full of a rebellious spirit, and she has a charm that is not easy to ignore. Anastasia was also as good looking as Crusch, and Shorty was beginning to wonder what criteria were used to select the candidates for the Royal Selection. It’s hard to imagine that appearance is an important part of the selection criteria, though.

Shorty: “No, considering that you’re going to be exposed to the outside world in a variety of situations, it’s not surprising that a good appearance is an important item to keep in mind…?”

Anastasia: “What’s that? Something on your mind? If you’ve got something on your mind, you can tell me.”

Shorty: “Anastasia-sama and Crusch-sama are both so beautiful, so I wondered what was going on.”

Anastasia: “Ara”

Putting her hand over her mouth, Anastasia rolled her eyes. Seeing her reaction, Shorty blushed slightly, thinking that he had once again said exactly what was on his mind. However, that didn’t seem to offend Anastasia, and the man sitting next to her nodded while keeping his eyes framed by his long eyelashes down.

Julius: “Well, I can understand your admiration for Anastasia-sama’s appearance. Not only is Anastasia-sama a woman of great business acumen and intelligence, but she is also very attractive as a woman.”

Anastasia: “If you don’t take it seriously, you’ll be wasting the reporters’ time and effort in trying to make the place more relaxed. Right?”

Julius: “Oh, I didn’t realize that. Well, that’s a terribly unreasonable thing for me to do.”

Shorty: “Well, uh, uh, that’s right! Haha…”

He apologized for the way things went, and Shorty stroked his hat and smiled bitterly to cover it up.

What else can Shorty do? Royal Selection candidate Anastasia Hoshin and her Knight Julius Juukulius, both of them in front of him.

“…”

Shorty’s trip to interview the candidates for the royal selection went unexpectedly well, and he was able to request an interview with Anastasia’s group, who was just visiting the royal capital. Shorty was not sure how much the premise that Crusch had already accepted the offer worked, but Anastasia was also willing to accept the offer of an interview. Naturally, it is desirable that Julius, her knight, is also present, both from the point of view of her escort and as a journalist. However, if there was anything unexpected, it was…

Shorty: “Wow, I can’t believe you’re letting me do this interview in a store in the middle of Royal capital.”

Anastasia: “Well, we could have picked you up at our store, but then we’d be right in the middle of the opposition! The other reporters would be nervous, wouldn’t they? I don’t want to sound like I’m scaring you into writing an article that benefits us, you know?”

Anastasia, smiling as she said this, was sitting outside the building on the terrace of a store that faced the main street of the capital and was visible from everywhere. She was determined to prove that she had no intention of forcing Shorty to write something he didn’t want, or to hide something he didn’t want her to hear. The way she dared to be interviewed in a public place gave me a sense of cleverness that Crusch, who takes the straight and narrow, did not have, and I felt I could understand part of Anastasia’s way of thinking.

Shorty: “If that’s the case, why dare to say anything that might cause offense?”

Anastasia: “It’s hard to hear you say that. I just thought that if I said something that surprised her, I thought that this child would look at me poorly.”

Shorty: “The girl… Oh, you mean Lulu Lara?”

Anastasia pointed to Lulu Lara, who was working with a paintbrush next to Shorty. As with Crusch, the ill-mannered girl with her knees up on the chair is snorting hard as she tries to capture the beautiful men and women in front of her.

Shorty: “It’s a sign that she’s working better when she’s focused on her work at hand, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to leave it at that…”

Lulu Lara: “uncomfortable”

Shorty: “Lulu Lara! Get into the apologetic position with me right now!”

Anastasia: I thought you wouldn’t do it if I said that… I was going to continue, but you guys are so agile that I didn’t have time to interrupt you.

Anastasia smiles at Shorty, who quickly grabs Lulu Lara’s head and tries to make her bow down with him. Incidentally, It should be added that Lulu Lara’s neck strength was extraordinary, and Shorty’s power to make her lower her head did not move her at all. Anyway…

Julius: “She didn’t seem phased by all this talk. Shorty, you say? I’m amazed at how focused your coworker is. May I take a look at her work for a moment?”

Shorty: “What? Well, as long as you don’t talk to her, I think she’ll be fine with it.”

Julius: “Hmm, would talking to her disrupt her concentration?”

Shorty: “Rather, when I talk to her, she ignores me, which makes me feel worse.”

Julius: “I see. I know what you mean.”

Julius stood up and lined up behind Lulu Lara, who was painting, and seemed to be observing her work, as if he saw it as Lulu Lara's professionalism. Julius is Julius, and he seems to be an intriguing fellow… Perhaps he is wary of the possibility that Lulu Lara's painting might disgrace his master. In that light, his occasional exclamations of admiration and murmurs of "not bad," it came across as a disguise for an eager student.

Anastasia: "You have a vivid imagination. Maybe you should become a novelist or something."

Shorty: "What are you talking about? I'm a reporter, and my job is to vividly report what I hear and see. I'm not suited to be a writer who needs to fantasize and think outside of the box."

Anastasia: "Really? Well, let's just leave it at that."

It was an implied answer, but Shorty didn't pursue it further because he was afraid of falling into Anastasia's trap once again.

Shorty: "Now that you understand, I'd like to get back to our original topic:…"

Anastasia: "Did I ever finish telling you what I thought I was doing when I joined the Royal Selection? It was a pretty straightforward question to throw in at the beginning, but you didn't like my answer?"

Shorty: "It's not that I don't like it, but if you keep this up, I'm going to have to write the same answer you gave earlier."

It would be somewhat inconvenient for Anastasia, a native of another country, to declare that her reason for joining the royal selection was to obtain the kingdom of Lugnica. But at that suggestion Anastasia just smiled and said…

Anastasia: "I don't mind. It's what I really feel, and it's the same thing I said at the castle the day the election started."

Shorty: "What? Are you serious?"

Anastasia: "Isn't that why you're here, to seriously ask us what we really think…? But if we talk about the pretense, it's disrespectful to the reporter spirit."

"…"

Shorty's voice trailed off as Anastasia clasped her hands in front of her face, asserting her claim. But it wasn't surprise or dismay, it was the excitement of encountering something more magnificent. Shorty was greatly impressed by Anastasia's way of thinking, just as Crusch said she was still learning and in the process of building up. Then, in front of Shorty, who was eager to hear more about Anastasia, she said, "Is that so?" She closes one eye and tilts her head.

Anastasia: "So I wanted to make it a fun interview. So I thought of a lot of things to say to the reporters, and put a lot of thought into it."

Shorty: "A taste for us, huh? What the…"

Shorty's question about whether he was going to do it was interrupted by the sound of high-pitched, imposing shoes sounding behind him, and the sound of it approaching was very clear. Sometimes presence can affect even the sound of human shoes. Then, the owner of the sound of the shoes that interrupted Shorty's words stood in front of a store on the street.

???: "…What is it, little fox? How dare you call on mine self"

Yes, there was an illusion of a woman's voice clothed in an ineffable heat that burned Shorty's eardrums.

Shorty gasped for breath, the only sound was the strange noise of Lulu Lara beside him moving her paintbrush, and only now did he truly envy her ability to concentrate without regard to her surroundings.

5

…Shorty was tormented by the sensation of a burning, dry air playing on his skin.

Shorty, a reporter for the "Dragon Nation Newsletter" and in a position to catch special stories, is daring to interview the participants in the Royal Selection that will decide the future of the Kingdom of Lugnica. Initially, Shorty was worried that his requests for interviews would be turned down, but he received surprisingly positive replies from all of the candidates, and his plan has now come to fruition.

However, that doesn’t mean that Shorty is free from all the worries. Rather, the real work begins once the interviews are conducted. Shorty Megan, still young and inexperienced, has to be careful not to be rude to the candidates for the royal selection, but to get to know their real characters. That’s why Shorty was exhausting his mind and ignited his reporter’s spirit to cover the story. Shorty had already completed his interview with the first candidate for the royal selection, Crusch Karsten. Surprisingly, the interview ended peacefully, and he was elated to go to the next interviewee. And just as he was about to start on the second interview…

Shorty: “I…I’m not sure how to thank you all for coming on such a beautiful day…!”

Shorty struggled to choose his words, a dry smile tugging at his tight cheeks and pale face. An impossible situation, an unexpected turn of events, an event that can only be described as a surprise… the scene that exists in front of us is truly an amalgamation of such things. On the main street of the royal city of Lugnica, two women are sitting across from each other on a terrace overlooking the people passing by… one with long, soft purple hair, a gentle smile, and a warm atmosphere.

Her name is Anastasia Hoshin, and she is a first-rate merchant who leads the Hoshin Trading Company at such a young age, and is one of the most notable people in the kingdom today. And the person sitting opposite Anastasia was…

???: “…What is it, child? It would be impolite to stare at mine face.”

Shorty: “Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to…”

???: “If you are going to look, look with dignity. It is only natural that others should be attracted to mine beauty.”

She is a gorgeous woman with red eyes who is pointing at her own face with a fan in her hand. Her dazzling orange hair is adorned with jewels, and her beautiful, voluptuous body is wrapped in a dress the color of blood. And she was supposed to be a tragic maiden whose life was plastered with misfortune.

Shorty: “Priscilla Barielle-sama”

With Shorty’s murmur of her name being spoken, the woman – Priscilla narrows her seductive eyes. That one gesture alone has the power to grab your heart, and Shorty’s throat rumbled slightly. It’s not at all what you hear about her, but she too has a special charm that transcends mere mortals. It could be said that she was the one who was destined to be chosen as a candidate for the Royal Selection. If you ask Shorty why Priscilla and Anastasia are here together…

Anastasia: “Reporter-san. you have a great reaction, I’d rather like it, leave it in the picture.”

Julius: “Oh, Anastasia-sama, Don’t be so cruel.…”

Anastasia puts her hand over her mouth and watches Shorty happily as he panics. It was her idea to set up this situation. The situation was secretly prepared for Shorty in order to make the interview more interesting. It certainly seems to be the most interesting topic in terms of surprise.

Julius: “It’s Anastasia-sama’s strange plan, I see. I’m sorry to Shorty-dono and Miss Lulu Lara that it turned out to be a trick.”

Shorty: “I’m afraid I’m going to have to apologize to Sir Julius… Hey, Lulu Lara. Lulu Lara?”

Shorty shrugs his shoulders as Julius apologizes on behalf of his master for his deviousness. Shorty asks his companion to agree with his shrug, and Lulu Lara, who is less talkative, thrusts out a drawing she has finished to Shorty. When Shorty received it and checked it, he saw that the drawing was of Shorty’s face, foaming at the mouth.

Shorty: “Looks like you’re enjoying yourself.”

Anastasia: “What’s that? You’re really good. I wanted to leave it in the picture, and I was wondering if you could give it to me.”

Shorty: “Please feel free… as a memory of our interview.”

In response to the unexpectedly high evaluation, Shorty reluctantly offered the painting to Anastasia. It’s a strange feeling to have your flustered face in Anastasia’s hands, but I’m glad that Lulu Lara’s painting was put to good use. Anyway…

??? “That’s right? It’s the start of a so-called joint interview. because I’m not sure how well an interview with the princess would go over.

Laughing and shrugging his shoulders was a strange looking person sitting behind Priscilla. We’ve already been introduced to him, but for reasons other than Anastasia’s and Priscilla’s good looks, he has a rather striking appearance. His face is hidden by a jet-black helmet, and he is dressed like a bandit, Priscilla’s knight… Al. However, he claims not to be a knight, and Priscilla calls him a clown.

Al: “It’s understandable that you’re trying a different flavor of interview of the candidates than you did with the starting lineup.”

In response to Al’s words, Priscilla began to speak in a quiet tone. Covering her own mouth with a fan, she looked at everyone in the room in turn with her red eyes. She looked at Shorty, Lulu Lara, Al, Julius, and finally Anastasia, and said, “However.”

Priscilla: “Fox Woman, why did you choose to pair mine self with you?”

Anastasia: “Hmmm… I guess so. You’re right, the other two weren’t so bad. Felt-san and Emilia-san wouldn’t have refused if I had suggested it. But…”

“…”

Anastasia: “I thought that the princess would best understand the purpose of my proposal.”

Anastasia's answer was to place her upraised finger on her chin and smile wryly. When Priscilla heard this, she closed one eye and made a silent pause for a while. During this time, Shorty was still subjected to the tension that tightened his whole body, and he was stepping on his own consciousness and telling himself over and over again not to let go.

Shorty thought "You have to turn this adversity into an opportunity, Shorty Megan!" And…

Priscilla: "Well, well. There are those who deny the use of trickery, but mine self is not one of those stubborn people. Even a she-fox's schemes can have meaning."

Al: "Oh, wow. The princess broke. That business owner over there is really good."

At Priscilla's words of approval, Al whistled and praised Anastasia. Anastasia smiled at his reaction and Julius put his hand on his chest.

Julius: "Thank you for your understanding. Well, Shorty-dono I know the format has been a little different from what you planned, but will you continue with your interview?"

Shorty: "Yes, yes, leave it to me! At first, my legs trembled with surprise and nervousness, but if I retreated at this point, my journalistic integrity would be ruined! Please leave it to me!"

Anastasia: "Yes, yes, okay."

Priscilla: "Hard work is a virtue of children. Keep up the good work."

With the willingness of both camps, Shorty was finally able to devote himself to the interview. Once he had regained his composure, albeit a bit nervously, the first question he needed to ask came to mind. It was the same question he had asked Anastasia, if they were in the same position.

Shorty: "So, we'll be covering this at the same time… Priscilla-sama, this is a question I've already asked Anastasia-sama. What do you intend to do when you become king?”

Priscilla: “Ho”

Priscilla raised an eyebrow at Shorty’s question. Her gaze then flicked to Anastasia, and she waved her hand, meeting her gaze.

Anastasia: “My answer is the same as it was in the castle. The goal is to acquire the kingdom. Did you give a greedy answer like me?”

Priscilla: “If you are true to your own desires, there is no room for change in your answer. And what will mine self do as king?”

Shorty: “Yes. Please tell us about it. The people would like to know what kind of thoughts you have for the Royal Selection.”

The Royal Selection has been declared, and the struggle to determine the next king has begun. However, many of the royal citizens, including Shorty, are not even fully aware of the mindset and personalities of the candidates who are competing for the throne. Information can easily shift, change shape, and even change color. The three candidates for the king’s election that Shorty had contacted under the guise of an interview… all of them had already made it clear to him that their personalities differed greatly from their previous reputations. Priscilla was not a fragile maiden, colored by tragedy and misfortune. She was a dignified presence, clad in red, the color of both scorching heat and blood. What kind of future does she envision for her kingdom…?

Priscilla: “…Do nothing”

Shorty: “Huh?”

Shorty, who had been preparing himself for what kind of answer he would get, was taken aback. In his mind, which had stopped thinking, Priscilla’s answer was ruminated over and over again.

Shorty: “Well, doing nothing is…”

Priscilla: “You can take it at face value. Mine self has no particular interest in the kingdom or the common people. All things in this world belong to myself from the beginning.”

"…"

Priscilla: "Mine self doesn't wish to disturb the harmony of nature. Of course, it's good to maintain and prune. But the world is beautiful as it is… This world is made for mine convenience. Therefore, if mine self is on the throne, there is also prosperity."

Priscilla's nonchalant answer seeped into Shorty's brain as she rested her chin against her hand. It was so ridiculous that it seemed like a joke that should have been laughed off. Because such an arrogant idea was a fantasy that not even the pinnacle of the kingdom could truly hold. But what seemed like a joke did not sound like a joke to Shorty. It's not because Priscilla is scary that he can't laugh it off. It is because Shorty's soul has accepted that the words she says are not false.

Anastasia: "As usual, the princess's logic scares me… If that were true, then everyone but me would have no reason to go against her."

Priscilla: I'm sure. Other people's wishes can be fulfilled without taking the throne. But your greed is the only thing that cannot be compromised… You are mine enemy.

Anastasia: "Ara, thank you for the high praise. I think of the princess as an enemy, too."

Anastasia's response was also sharp, despite her carefree face. Shorty was expecting to hear some friendly conversation between the two candidates, but his expectations were dashed when he found out that they were going to be interviewed at the same time.

Shorty: "But that's why it's worth cutting in…!"

As for Priscilla's statement earlier, it is necessary to choose the right words so that they are not misinterpreted. But it's only a matter of right and wrong, no need to dramatize the facts. It's a statement from the undisputed candidate for the Royal Selection, and it's up to Shorty to convey its true meaning in full.

Shorty: "What are your impressions of the other candidates?"

Anastasia: “Currently, the most promising candidate is Crusch-san, right? She was thought to be in a solid position, but the question is how much support she will get for her policy.”

Priscilla: “The little girl from the slums was a bundle of big words, a fool who was so full of ambition that she couldn’t see her own feet. If she continues to be a fool, there will be nothing to see.”

In response to Shorty’s question, Anastasia and Priscilla put in a few words. The fact that they don’t interrupt the other person’s argument is a sign that there is no room for objection. Shorty frantically writes down the two quick-witted replies in his head. Crusch and now Felt are the answers. Then…

Shorty: “…How do you feel about the fifth candidate, Emilia-sama?”

Anastasia and Priscilla: “…Out of the question”

“…”

The question, which he was ready to cut deeply into, was cut back with a few, straightforward words. Shorty gasped at the strength of that brief statement, his nose white, his mouth agape.

Shorty: “Why is that? What are you thinking?”

Anastasia: “I’m not sure what to say, but I think Emilia-san’s origin is what’s holding her back in the first place. She’s a half-elf with silver hair and purple-blue eyes… the perfect combination of features that a half-elf should not have.”

Priscilla: “It’s not a matter of questioning the person’s qualifications. Whatever their nature, most common people are ignorant. They can only judge by what we want to see and hear.”

The words they use may be different, but the core of their story is the same. The situation surrounding Emilia, the last of the candidates for the royal selection, is so severe that she is no longer in a position to question her own status. And this was a feeling that Shorty himself was having as well.

Shorty: “I’ve heard that Emilia-sama, like Anastasia-sama and Crusch-sama, contributed to the defeat of the White whale, which was one of the three great Witch beasts, and the defeat of a Sin Archbishop of the Witch cult…”

Anastasia: “It’s not strictly speaking Emilia-san’s own work, but that of her knight. And the damage of the “Witch of Envy” is not so weak that it can be wiped out just by that. Right, Julius?”

Julius: “It’s sad to say.”

When Anastasia turned to Julius, he shook his head, his long-lashed eyes downcast.

Julius: “I don’t know how much both the White whale and the battle with the Sin Archbishop will touch the hearts of those who listen. However, as Anastasia-sama said, we cannot expect too much.”

Al: “It’s a shame. If you don’t get any recognition for that much work, then I don’t know what are you doing it for. Are you doing this so you can just lose?”

Julius: “Al-dono, that’s not the way to talk about…”

Al: “Not good? That’s the way it’s supposed to be, But what’s the difference between what you and I are saying? You agree with the princesses, don’t you?”

Julius wrinkled his brow, and Al acted somewhat hypocritical. He fingered the seam of the helmet with his one hand… and made a clicking metallic sound. The dry sound seemed to represent the unchangeable reality that lay before Emilia, and Shorty felt somewhat depressed. But…

Priscilla: “In all things, victory or defeat is a given. However, the conditions of victory are not something that can be easily determined from the outside.”

Al: Princess?

Priscilla: “There is no doubt that the half demon is not worthy of being discussed as a potential opponent in the Royal Selection. Is everyone involved so stupid that they can't understand that? Mine self doesn't think so."

Priscilla, the master, overrides the opinion of Al, the squire. As expected, Al tilted his head and said, "Oi, Oi"

Al: "I didn't expect to get shot in the back. Don't you agree with me, Princess?"

Priscilla: "The process is the same, but the results are different. The same can be said for the mindset of that half demon."

Al: "So, Princess, you're saying she doesn't want to be king? You're saying he has another goal in mind?"

Priscilla: "Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense. Besides…"

Al's slightly heated tone was laced with a hint of desperation. Shorty wondered about this, but there was no time to interrupt him. But that's just Shorty's case. That is not the case with a great talent comparable to Priscilla.

Anastasia: "I'll have to preface this by saying that if things continue as they are…"

Priscilla: "Hmm"

As Anastasia continued, Priscilla narrowed her eyes and snickered. The fact that she didn't dismiss it as misguided suggests that she shared the same opinion. This means that both of them have the same perception of Emilia.

Anastasia: "Interesting and fun, don't you think? It was a game that was inevitably going to be a total loss from the start, but Emilia-san and the others still challenged it. Even so, there's something that makes it possible to win."

Priscilla: "If your intention is to participate in the war for the sake of numbers, you are not worthy of being in mine eyes. If you prove yourself worthy, you will naturally be reflected in mine eyes."

Shorty was strangely moved by the conflicting reactions of the two women, both smiling and taunting. For some reason, both Anastasia and Priscilla's emotions toward the person they were talking about seemed to be expectations.

Al: "Hey, I feel like I'm being stepped on. It would be better if the princess really stepped on me instead of just thinking about it."

Julius: "Al-dono, we're both in front of the press. You're a knight, you'd better be more careful about what you say."

Al: "Thanks for the heads up. But I'm not a knight. I don't even want to be one."

Julius: "That's a shame."

In response to Julius's meditative answer, Al snaps the seam of his helmet and makes a joke of it. Behind the gesture, the desperation of earlier was nowhere to be seen. Or maybe that was just Shorty's misunderstanding of the situation.

Shorty: "Thank you very much for your valuable words. Now… if you could, please tell me how you feel about the person in front of you in the final confrontation…!"

Anastasia: "…You're awfully brave, Reporter-san."

Shorty asked a question that was a no-brainer, and Al let out a sincere exclamation. It was a question that made Julius chuckle, but not mentioning the other person who was being interviewed at the same time was a bit of a misdirection. Shorty thought it was a natural question to be asked, per-se. Anastasia and Priscilla looked at each other and opened their mouths at the same time. And then…

Anastasia: "…I'll kick you off."

Priscilla: "…Break you by mine by hand"

They exchanged hostility, which could be considered the greatest praise at the moment.

Shorty: “Jeez, that shortened my life span…”

Lulu Lara: “Tired…”

Shorty mutters, leaning languidly back in his chair, his face an ashen color. Somehow he managed to finish his simultaneous interviews with the two candidates for the royal selection, and has just returned to his home away from home, The Dragon Nation Newsletter, a place free from tension and anxiety. At Shorty’s side, the ill-mannered Lulu Lara, hugging her knees on a chair, gave him a rare word of encouragement, though it was not very emotional. It seems that even Lulu Lara, who is not at all concerned about the outside world, was able to understand Shorty’s distress at being sandwiched between Anastasia and Priscilla. In fact, Lulu Lara’s brush seemed to be in high gear, and she produced a record number of press pictures during the interview. All of the pictures show Anastasia and Priscilla from different angles and with different expressions, and Editor-in-Chief Morgan was very pleased with the results. Some of them depicted not only the two candidates, but also Julius and Al, and…

Shorty: “I know it’s a little late, but you’re a bit of a hassle.”

Lulu Lara: “…Is a misunderstanding”

Shorty: “If you compare the number of pictures of the two candidates for the Royal Selection with Sir Julius, and Al-dono, you won’t be able to convince me!, you only drew one picture of Al-dono!”

Lulu Lara: “…Draw only what makes my heart shiver.”

Shorty pulls out the one picture of Al from the pile of press pictures, and Lulu Lara answers with puffed out cheeks. Shorty was pressured by Lulu Lara’s concern, which Shorty did not understand, and Shorty looked down at the painting of Al, “Okay I get it…”

Shorty: “This is when… Al-dono was a little weird.”

Lulu Lara: “I drew it because it was a… fight.”

Shorty: “It looks… serious”

Lulu Lara’s drawing of Al was from when he was arguing with Priscilla. It was the moment when Shorty mentioned Emilia, but it was also the moment when Shorty felt trapped, and apparently Lulu Lara felt the same way.

Shorty: “…When this is over, we might as well cover the candidate’s knights next time. Emilia-sama’s camp is also interesting in regards to her knight.”

Lulu Lara: “But, next one is more important”

Although Lulu Lara usually loses interest in what she has finished, she already seems motivated by the target of her next press painting. Shorty couldn’t help but chuckle at the self-serving attitude.

Shorty: “After all, I think Lulu Lara is a bit of a mess.”

Lulu Lara: “Because… is misunderstanding.”

Shorty: “Okay, okay. I’m just going to do a quick summary of the article I just wrote.”

To appease Lulu Lara, who could not hide her impatience, Shorty wrote down the interview in his mind on a piece of paper and prepared a simple headline and the content of the article. One of Shorty’s few specialties is that he never forgets what he has covered once, but aside from the freshness of the material, passion has a temperature. It’s important to prep the food before it gets cold.

Lulu Lara: “What’s the next… candidate?”

Shorty: “You know… but maybe you’re too obsessed with knights to know? Is it possible you forgot?”

Lulu Lara: “Wasn’t there…”

Shorty: “I don’t even want to hear it!”

Without stopping to write it down, Shorty shook his head at his trusted partner’s memory. They finished interviewing three candidates for the royal selection: Crusch, Anastasia, and Priscilla. There were only two left, and in that order…

Shorty: “The next interview subject is Felt-sama… honestly, Emilia-sama is the most unique in terms of her origins, but she also has very unique credentials.”

Lulu Lara: “…Color!”

Shorty: “Not that color. but a different color, as in unusual! She grew up in the slums of Royal capital. That’s why her background is the same as ours, Lulu Lara.”

Holding the drawing book on her lap, Lulu Lara stares at Shorty in silence. Both Shorty and Lulu Lara now work as a reporter and a news painter for the Dragon Nation Newsletter, but they were originally abandoned by their parents and were among the kids scavenging for garbage in the slums. Most of the time, the miserable children are unable to climb out and either fall into the wrong hands or are used and preyed upon and die. But Shorty and his friend were different. Each of them has used their skills and passions to get where they are today. In that sense, could it be said that Felt also won? The throne of the Kingdom of Lugnica is in its eleventh generation, a position as a candidate for the Royal Selection the throne may be within reach.

Shorty: “But there are a lot of other false rumors flying around about Felt-sama. I’d like to hear about the truth of it, but the big thing is the presence of her knight.”

Lulu Lara: “…Saint!”

Shorty: “Yes, the impact of his declaration that he will support Felt-sama as her knight, the Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea… is enormous.”

Most of the people are more interested in celebrities whose names they have a chance to hear than the royalty whom they rarely see in person. In such a situation, the name of Reinhard, the current generation’s “Sword Saint”, has a great impression and will have a tremendous influence on the royal people. Even the people of the capital are more interested in the Sword Saint than the king. The difference is even more obvious when it comes to the people outside of the capital who don’t have the opportunity to interact with the royal family.

Shorty: “Of course, Felt-sama would want to win the Royal Selection. If that’s the case, there’s no way to avoid using the influence that Sir Reinhard has. That’s why…”

Lulu Lara: “Why…?”

Shorty: “In order to avoid being swallowed by the light emitted by such a Sword Saint, let’s keep our eyes on what we really need to discover!”

Shorty’s fists clenched in determination, Lulu Lara understood how far he was willing to go, and she held up her drawing pad with a pretense of willingness. He has been out of sorts many times so far, but that won’t happen in the next interview. No matter how dazzling the Sword Saint was, Shorty was determined to maintain a heart of steel.

7

???: “—Welcome to the Astrea domain, you two reporters.”

And so it was that Shorty and his companion were greeted by a fiery young man. He is a beautiful young man with dazzlingly bright red hair and blue eyes that trap the sky. Shorty had fallen in love with one of Lulu Lara’s paintings before, and the subject himself greeted Shorty and the other who had come to interview him with a smile… However, his attire was far from that of a “A knight of knights”.

Shorty: “You’re Sir Reinhard… right?”

Reinhard: “Yes, that’s right. Thank you for coming all the way from the capital today.”

When Shorty asked in a faltering voice, Reinhard nodded matter-of-factly. He was dressed lightly in a shirt and pants, having removed the uniform that indicated his affiliation with the royal guard. He was wearing a white towel around his neck and did not carry the Dragon Sword, which is synonymous with Sword Saint. His beauty makes him unusually eye-catching, but his attire is not in the least bit like that of a Sword Saint. Of course, Shorty didn't think that Reinhard would be forced to dress and act like a knight all the time. But still, the unexpected is unexpected. At any rate, what he had been doing until the moment he greeted Shorty and the others was…

Lulu Lara: "…You gardening"

Reinhard: "Oh, that's right. I'm taking care of the garden and flower beds at the mansion. The buds have just finally bloomed…"

Lulu Lara: "…Beauty"

Reinhard responded to Lulu Lara's question with a tilt of his head, indicating the flowerbed with his hand. Lulu Lara looked at the flower bed behind him and admired it as she hid behind Shorty. In fact, they are magnificent.

A field of red, white, and yellow petals in full bloom. The pruning of the trees in the garden seemed like fine craftsmanship to the untrained eye. As expected, Reinhard, the Sword Saint, is a versatile man no matter what he does.

Shorty: "No! That's a surprise, but don't they usually make you do something else?"

Lulu Lara: "Complain about saint…?"

Shorty: "I wouldn't do anything so foolish, though, would I?"

Shorty complained, rolling his eyes at the seeming waste of the Sword Saint. Immediately, Lulu Lara Kicked away the ladder, Shorty hurriedly tried to pull her support back. Reinhard tilts his head with a small smile at the exchange between the two.

Reinhard: "What do you mean, "something else"? I'm just asking."

Shorty: "Let me see, Sir Reinhard is such a big deal almost no one really knows him in the kingdom of Lugnica, so you can travel around to sell your name and face, solve the problems of powerful nobles to get their support, and so on.”

Reinhard: “…Yes, that’s right, Felt-sama.”

Shorty, who listed all the effective uses of Reinhard that he could think of, rolled his eyes at Reinhard’s comment, “Huh?” Shorty said. Then Shorty fearfully follows Reinhard’s gaze, and his eyes meet Lulu Lara’s, who is hiding behind him. But Reinhard’s gaze is further away.

“…”

Standing behind the two of them was a small girl who was their guide. The person who claimed to be a messenger from the Astrea mansion and took the trouble to come and pick them up at the dragon carriage stop… a person with dazzling blond hair, strong-willed red eyes, and distinctive teeth peeking out of her mouth… was the person who had told them many interesting stories along the way. The reason why Reinhard called the girl Felt now is because.…

Shorty: “Ah, uh, eh, oh…?”

Felt: “Oooh, he’s confused. Haha, look at his face.”

She pointed at Shorty, who was opening and closing his gaping mouth, and the girl couldn’t hold back her laughter. The gesture made Lulu Lara look at Shorty, too.

Lulu Lara: “…Tease”

Shorty: “Not at all! That’s not funny!

Felt: “Whoa! Don’t yell so loud!”

When Shorty peeled his eyes away from Lulu Lara’s too heartless comment, the girl was startled. However, Reinhard called out to the girl again and again with “Felt-sama”.

Reinhard: “It’s time to cut the antics, please. Shorty-dono and Lulu

Lara-san will be exhausted if we go any further."

Felt: "All right, all right. I thought I was starting to understand you a little better, but you're still nagging me, aren't you?"

Reinhard: "I've become more flexible. That's why I stopped picking you up."

Felt: "You had Flam and Grassis attached to me. I'm still pretty stiff."

The girl sticks out her tongue and responds with an attitude to Reinhard, who shakes his head loosely. No… Shorty doesn't want to keep running away from reality with this girl anymore. Reinhard respects her and is in a position to treat her like this. In other words, this girl is the one…

Shorty: "…It's a pleasure to meet you, Felt-sama."

Felt: "Ha, thanks for the greeting, it makes my ears itch."

Shorty, who managed to bite back his surprise and bowed, reacted without a second thought. Felt scratches her own ear with her finger and wrinkles her nose as she answers. She is Reinhard's master, one of the candidates for the Royal Selection.

Lulu Lara: "Here…"

Shorty: "Anh?"

Shorty gasped, but Lulu Lara unexpectedly stepped forward. She tore a page out of her drawing book and held it out to Felt. She takes it without pausing, and when Felt looks at the torn page…

Felt: "Buh-hah."

Reinhard: "Felt-sama?"

Felt: "Ha-Ha-Ha! Hey, look, Reinhard, here."

Shorty's reaction to Felt's sudden outburst made him wonder what Lulu Lara had done to him. The page jumped over Shorty's head and passed from Felt's hand to Reinhard's hand. And Reinhard, seeing the same thing, made a small "Ku" in his throat.

Reinhard: "This is…ha"

Shorty: "Even Sir Reinhard? What did you give them, Lulu Lara?"

Felt: "Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha!"

Felt laughed out loud and Reinhard couldn't bite back his smile. Shorty's face turned pale at the sight of the two of them, and Reinhard nodded and handed him the page in question. It was Shorty who was drawn on it. The Shorty who was looking at Felt with wide eyes and an open mouth, stunned.

Lulu Lara: "…Masterpiece"

Shorty: "Ehh, Thanks as always!"

Shorty shouted a desperate thank you to the boastful Lulu Lara.

8

Shorty: "Once again, thank you for making time for us today…"

Felt: "You look like you're not happy. Well, the fact that the picture earlier was so funny makes up for it."

Shorty: "Thank you…"

Shorty is shown into the reception room of the mansion and is greeted with a simple response. It was not because of nervousness, but because he was uncomfortable with Felt, who was slumped on the sofa with her legs and arms crossed in front of her. So far, Shorty has interviewed three different candidates for the Royal Selection. It's hard to say whether Shorty has been able to maintain a level head from start to finish with these women, who all give the impression of being extraordinary. Still, Shorty was able to look forward to interviewing these women because he felt a certain reverence for their looks, their behavior, and their beliefs. But…

Felt: "…? what is it?"

Shorty: “No, no, it’s nothing.”

Felt: “You can’t just stare at people like that and expect them to do nothing.”

Felt leaned forward and looked into Shorty’s face. Shorty’s cheeks tensed under her gaze, he felt a slight disappointment. The awe and respect he felt for the other candidates, the way they were clearly different from each other, he could not feel it from Felt. In fact, when she came to pick him up at the station in the guise of a servant, if it had been any other candidate, Shorty would have stopped in his tracks even if he didn’t know her face. Shorty was sorry, but he couldn’t feel it in Felt. Considering her history, she should not have been given the opportunity to hone those qualities, and that is understandable. However, he couldn’t help but feel disappointed. She was not ready to compete for the throne on par with the previous three. If that’s the case, it’s almost certain that Felt and Emilia will not be selected, and it will be Crusch, Anastasia, and Priscilla who will compete for the throne. So, including this moment, the interview with the last two people becomes a game of understanding.

Felt: “Isn’t it a little early to be finished judging me?”

Shorty: “Huh”

Felt: “No, I know it when I see it. You look blatantly disappointed.”

Shorty flinched when Felt said that with a pout on her lips. It is the role of the reporter to reveal the mind of the subject of the interview. It was as if he had handed over the reins to someone who could read his mind. However, Shorty decided that there was no point in trying to fix it and changed his mind.

Shorty: “Did your eye for people come from living in the slums?”

Felt: “Huh? You’re asking me something that’s hard to hear out of the blue. But I like you better when you have that kind of look in your eyes.”

“…”

Felt: “So, did living in the ghetto make me stronger? Yeah, I guess it did.”

Felt, however, was not offended by the unceremonious intrusion into his past. Rather, as she said, she was impressed by Shorty’s brazenness. With a hand on her cheek, she looks out the window… Under the distant sky, far away, is the Royal capital where she grew up. Shorty wondered if that’s what she’s thinking.

Shorty: “…You miss the capital, you miss the slums.”

Felt: “What? Not at all. I don’t even like the slums.”

Shorty: “What?”

Felt: “That’s just too much of a feel-good sentiment. I don’t miss it when I’m away from it. That’s what a slum is all about… You guys must feel the same way.”

Felt bent her lips and said so while scratching her head roughly. Shorty stopped when he heard that and almost replied, “That’s true”, but. The way she said it, it was as if she had figured out that Shorty and the others were from the slums. And as if to affirm that his suspicions were true, Felt sighed and said, “Geez”

Felt: “It’s true that my habit of looking at people came about because I lived in the slums. Borrowing small amounts of money from other people’s pockets has always been a specialty of mine.”

Shorty: “Well, me and Lulu Lara are reporters, in case you forgot…”

Felt: “That’s why I’m telling you. If it was okay for you to lie or make up whatever you wanted, I wouldn’t have accepted the interview in the first place.”

Shorty snickers as Felt proudly confesses to her past criminal activities. But Felt said she had no intention of hiding it, which made me want to ask her for more information.

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, Shorty-dono and the others are in a tight spot.”

Then Reinhard, who had opened the entrance to the reception room and showed his face, intervened. With a silver tray in his hand, Reinhard brought cups of steaming tea and served them on the table between Felt and Shorty.

Reinhard: “I think it’s a virtue of Felt-sama that she doesn’t dare try to hide it, but there’s no need to go out of her way to make it obvious. I think you know that.”

Felt: “Well, I guess the sermon has started again. In general, I’m…”

Reinhard: “Rom-dono and Ezzo sent me.”

Felt: “Gua…”

Reinhard’s added words made Felt’s cheeks tense up involuntarily. She reached for her cup, brought it to her mouth, and chose silence. He smiled at the sight of his master and offered tea to Shorty and the others, while he himself took his place behind Felt.

Felt: “Here’s your tea. Although it’s not as good as the tea served at the other candidates’ residences.”

Shorty: “No, no, no, not at all. The tea was made by the Sword Saint. This is a very precious opportunity. I want to take it home and display it.”

Lulu Lara: “Stupid…”

Shorty: “It’s just a joke to lighten the mood.”

Shorty regains his composure at Lulu Lara’s words. After all, shouting out loud is something that brings a sense of mental stability. While chewing on such a feeling, he once again faces the master and servant in front of him.

Shorty: “I apologize for starting the questioning a little early, while your knight was away.”

Reinhard: “Oh, don’t worry. I heard you.”

Shorty: “I’m sure you’re right. That’s a relief… huh? You heard

me?”

Felt: “Oh, come on, come on. If you take his comments seriously, the conversation won’t end anytime soon. I’ve got things to do later today.”

Reinhard’s comment bothered him, but he couldn’t delve into that when Felt told him she had business to attend to. Shorty cleared his throat.

Shorty: “So, once again… What do you intend to do as king, Felt-sama?”

Felt: “I’m going to destroy the invisible traditions of this country.”

Shorty: “…Yes?”

When Shorty heard the answer, he stopped writing in his notebook… What did Felt say she was going to destroy?

Shorty: “The invisible traditions of this country are…”

Felt: “All the unreasonable things we take for granted, all the things we’ve seen and heard and talked about and don’t like about them. The slums are just one of them.”

“…”

Felt: “That’s the way it is, that’s the way it’s supposed to be, that’s the way we’re supposed to think. Of course it’s hard to live in poverty in the slums. But I don’t like the idea that those born at the top will always be the winners and those born at the bottom will always be the losers.”

Before Shorty could fully digest Felt’s words, new information was being pushed out one after another. Shorty chewed on it little by little and tried to get to the bottom of Felt’s thoughts. It was not just the verbalization of the dim impulses of a child born and raised in the slums, who was jealous of her counterpart who was born elsewhere.

Felt: “Anyway, you don’t expect much from me anyway, right?”

Felt asks a direct question to Shorty, who remains silent. When Shorty was torn between what to think and what to say, Felt gave him a small snort and said, “Heh”.

Felt: “If you put it all in the right order, it becomes a bit cheap. I think it was a good decision for me not to say anything devious. In fact, I don’t think there are many people who are expecting me. That’s true. I’m just a little girl from the slums. I’m not as good as my opponents.”

So Felt cut him off, shaking her head, “No.”

Felt: “It’s better than my half demon-Neechan, but that’s about it. There’s no one who has any expectations of me… In that case, you have nothing to lose.”

Shorty: “Do you think this will lead to the breaking of invisible traditions?”

Felt: “I can’t make those hateful bastards bleed from the nose unless someone punches them. I’ll be the first one to hit them in the nose anyway. You’ll never know if the next one sticks until you try it.”

Felt concludes, rephrasing things in a violent back alley fashion. But her point, sadly, came through loud and clear to Shorty, who was also from the slums. Perhaps if Felt had listened, she would have understood Lulu Lara as well. At the same time, Shorty came to realize the strange potential of Felt. He wondered if the disappointment and pity he had felt for Felt before the interview, when she had challenged him to a contest he had no chance of winning, had been misplaced. As usual, Felt could not inspire the same awe that Crusch and the others had inspired in him. But if she looks like a mere girl with nothing to offer, that’ s wrong, too. Shorty strongly sensed in Felt the readiness of a challenger, the will to change, to be different, to be a reformer. Unlike the geniuses who have already perfected themselves and are naturally radiant and powerful, her vessel is still in the process of being formed. Perhaps the vessel will not be fired even after the Royal Selection is settled. But if her vessel is ever finished and people see it…

Reinhard: “The day will come when something invisible will be destroyed. Don’t you think so?”

Shorty: “Sir Reinhard…”

The same conclusion that Shorty came to was first mentioned by Reinhard. Looking, Reinhard turned his blue eyes to Shorty and Lulu Lara, then to Felt in front of him.

Reinhard: “In fact, Felt-sama is still in the process of doing a lot of things. For example, I’m sure I’m part of what she’s trying to destroy.”

Shorty: “You want to… destroy it?”

Felt: “It’s not that big of a deal. Reinhard, don’t say anything strange.”

Reinhard: “But I wanted to make sure that the fact that I was the first thing that Felt-sama tried to destroy was not hidden from the public.”

Felt: “Scary. What are you talking about?”

Reinhard’s gaze was gentle as he smiled, and Felt’s voice was truly stern as she responded. As far as Shorty can see, the two of them have a very strange master-servant relationship. Up until now, the relationship between the candidates for the king’s election and the knights, despite their differences in detail, had one thing in common: they were good. However, he felt that there is a gap between Felt and Reinhard that cannot be described in one word as a good relationship. It’s not bad, it’s not at odds. But the atmosphere is not smooth sailing.

Reinhard: “Shorty-dono, the only reason I tend to my garden and flowerbeds is because I’m following Felt-sama’s orders.”

Shorty: “Um, Really?”

Reinhard: “Yes. She told me to try growing some flowers. Unfortunately, I have the Divine Protection of Horticulture, so it’s not as difficult a challenge as it is trial and error…”

Reinhard breaks off there and looks at his palm. His fingers may be dirty from working in the dirt. But Reinhard's gaze was soft and somehow radiant.

Reinhard: "In fact, I feel like my feelings have changed. Maybe the transformation of the world can come from the accumulation of such small things."

Felt: "You're an arrogant bastard… You get carried away when I compliment you on your flower beds."

Reinhard: "I'm glad to hear it. It's what Felt-sama's words gave me."

Reinhard replies without hesitation to Felt, who blurts out with her tongue in cheek. Even Shorty, who was listening, was surprised by the comment, and Felt was no exception. She made a bitter face and glared at Shorty as if she was ashamed that he had seen her face.

Felt: "You're staring at me!"

Shorty: "Shit, I really don't see the point of this. If it's just going to make me feel uncomfortable, there's a limit to how much it's worth."

Reinhard: "Don't worry, the circulation of the Dragon Nation Newsletter is one of the highest in the capital. I don't think Rom-dono and Ezzo's strategy is wrong."

Felt: "Hey! Don't write what this idiot just said!"

Felt shows her sharp fangs and calls Reinhard an idiot. Shorty is not sure what Felt thinks of Reinhard, that she would let the Sword Saint tinker in the dirt or call him an idiot in the first place.

Shorty: "What did Felt-sama say about Sir Reinhard…?"

Felt: "Oh? What are you, a sleepyhead…?This is Reinhard."

Shorty: "Ah"

Felt: "It's nothing more, nothing less. You don't listen to me, but you talk a lot. It's a headache for me."

Felt crosses her arms and exhales heavily through her nose. Reinhard, who is standing behind her, doesn't say anything and just slightly lowers the corner of his eyes at the sight of her. Although he did not understand Reinhard's feelings, Shorty realized that he too had been poisoned by the "invisible traditions" that Felt had described. Shorty thought he understood the prejudices and preconceptions that prevailed in the kingdom, such as the noble districts and the slums, the nobility and the commoners and the poor. However, as Shorty continues to interview the candidates for the royal selection, he is constantly reminded that he is neither smart nor knowledgeable. Finally, Felt, who is also from the slums, makes the same realization… Shorty's fantasy of Reinhard van Astrea, the Sword Saint, is one of the things that Felt is trying to destroy because she doesn't like him.

Shorty: "Felt-sama, what do you think the outcome of the Royal Selection will be?"

"…"

Felt's red eyes narrowed as she stared at Shorty, who had asked her a question. Straightening his back, Shorty met her gaze head on. Here they were, and Shorty was not going to let his initial disappointment get in the way of underestimating Felt. It is true that Felt is an unfinished vessel compared to Crusch and the others. However, there is something about the size and shape of the vessel that makes Shorty anticipate what it will look like when it is fired. Shorty thinks that was the decisive push that made Reinhard choose Felt.

Felt: "Well, I think the rest of them are pretty impressive. When I first saw them at the castle, I didn't know what they were like because I didn't know anything about them."

Born and raised in the slums, it was not until Felt announced her participation in the royal selection and decided to live in Astrea Manor that she began to receive a decent education. Shorty remembers it too. In the beginning, he couldn't even read or write, and he couldn't even stand on the same stage without bridging the gap between what he knew and what he should have known. Felt has been through a lot of frustration, but she doesn't let it get her down and continues to fight.

Felt: “For now, it’s the Duchess who has the upper hand, followed by the merchant. Even if I join the reputation hunt, it’ll be hard to get to the position of my half demon-Neechan. I don’t know about that red woman, but…”

“…”

Felt: “I’m just as good, if not better, than her in terms of reputation. The future is bleak, and whether I can make up for this in three short years is my challenge.”

Shorty was impressed with Felt’s understanding of her current situation and her accurate assessment of the situation. This was proof that she was not throwing the game away, and that she was committed to doing everything in her power to win. The road ahead, however, was difficult. This is something that she is aware of, without a doubt.

Shorty: “Do you have any idea how you’re going to fight them?”

Felt: “For the time being, imitating other people won’t help you win. I have to do what only I can do. So…”

Shorty: “So?”

Felt: “In the meantime, I’m fighting with the black market guys. The business I’m going to do later is to meet with those executives.”

Shorty: “That’s a slanted answer!”

Shorty exclaimed to Felt, who laughed hysterically and gave an unexpected answer. In response to Shorty’s reaction, Felt laughs happily and says, “Ha ha ha”. In the background, Reinhard is putting his hand on his forehead, but it is Shorty who wants to cover his face. One of the candidates for the king’s election is cozying up to the Black Market and wants to win the Royal Selection.

Shorty: “And it’s too good to be true…!”

Even if Shorty showed it to Editor Morgan, he might think that he had fabricated the story. he didn't think Felt expected that, and Shorty didn't think she would talk about it openly.

"…"

While Shorty holds his head in his hands, Lulu Lara is quietly working in her drawing pad. Her attention is never far from Reinhard's, but she seems to be working on Felt's news picture as well. Perhaps she was becoming more aware of her role as a news painter, or perhaps she remembered that Shorty had asked her to draw Felt for the article. Perhaps it was neither, but Lulu Lara sensed the glow that Felt herself was giving off. Just as Shorty had changed his perception of Felt, the same thing had happened to Lulu Lara. The picture she drew would prove to be a glimpse of Felt's great talent. And then…

Felt: "So? What do you think of… the reason for participating in the Royal Selection? Any other questions?"

Shorty: "I've been asking the others… what is your impression of the other candidates for the throne, Felt-sama?"

Felt: "The others. I told you before. You think they're great."

It was Felt, calmly assessing her position. Felt is probably making an accurate assessment of the other candidates. The name that comes out of Reinhard's mouth every now and then may be the one that serves as the chief strategist in Felt's Royal Selection bid. I'd like to interview that person if possible. Anyway, the thoughtful Felt muttered, "Yeah."

Felt: "We didn't talk much, but I remember the Duchess looked like she had something to say to me. That piece of shit red bitch pisses me off so much, I'm going to take her down for sure."

Shorty: "Priscilla-sama was a person who was out of the norm in many ways…"

Felt: "I asked the merchant a bit of a favor the other day. I'm sure it was worth it, but it made me realize just how shrewd she is. And…"

Then she cut off her words and let the last person Felt had left her opinion of Emilia for the end… However, it wasn't a waste of time, it took a little while for Felt to come up with an answer. However, it was not because of any malice or hostility towards the half-elf, but because of the "invisible traditions" that she clearly stated had to be broken.

Felt: "That's the half demon-Neechan. You should go see her with your own eyes. You know better than anyone that rumors are unreliable."

Shorty: "I…I've been let down….!"

Felt: Well, it' s not that I don't like you. I do. But I owe Neechan a lot."

With her hands folded behind her head, Felt gave her an indulgent smile. In response, Shorty's shoulders slumped, but he accepted it with an "I understand." In any case, as Felt said, the next one is the most important one. Shorty will not be allowed to run away from this and write an article based on only what he has covered so far. Shorty's journalistic spirit, not to mention Editor-in-Chief Morgan's, would not allow it. And…

Lulu Lara: "Here…"

As she said this, Lulu Lara tore another page out of her drawing book with a sound. The news picture is offered again, and Felt takes it with a big "Oh" in front of her. She had laughed when she saw Shorty's picture earlier. Shorty was sure she was expecting that, but…

Felt: "Ack"

Then Felt frowned at him. Peering at the painting from behind his master, Reinhard rolled his eyes, "This is," he said, and then laughed. Shorty sneaked a peek at the painting to see what it looked like, and he agreed. The picture was of Felt slumped on the sofa and Reinhard with a soft expression on his face behind him… A moment of the uneven master-servant relationship.

9

…Shorty’s journey to interview the candidates for the Royal Selection began with an idea and momentum. Shorty’s research, which has taken a tremendous toll on his mind and body, is now reaching its final stage. At last, the last candidate for the Royal Selection and the biggest obstacle to this project. Emilia is rumored to be the second coming of the “Witch of Envy”, the worst evil that almost destroyed the world. She is said to be a witch who is not afraid to act in a hedonistic and evil manner. Even Lulu Lara, who has no interest in anything other than painting, trembles when she hears the name of the “Envious witch,” so the fear that has seeped into the people of the kingdom, the world… is extreme.

???: “…My name is Natsuki Subaru! I am the wind, thunder, and lightning, the unyielding guide!”

With a shout, he thrusts the fingers of his right hand into the sky and stands with his left hand on his hip. When he was greeted by a figure with dark hair and vicious eyes, Shorty realized that he had stepped into a magical world… The fact that the mysterious name of the dark-haired boy was the same name as the person Shorty wanted to talk to did not seem to register at this moment…

10

…Direct interviews with candidates for the Royal Selection.

Although the plan seemed reckless at first, it is now in its final stages. Once the project was realized, the candidates were surprisingly accommodating and willing to talk to Shorty and Lulu Lara. If Shorty was being honest, all of the candidates were very different from their initial impressions, and for better or worse, they were women who shook him and Lulu Lara’s sense of values as they interviewed them. Therefore, Shorty has received a solid response that makes him believe that this interview will be a good article. As a result, he will try his best to convey their thoughts and beliefs accurately to the readers without distorting them. However, whether Shorty’s determination and the many news pictures that Lulu Lara has drawn up to this point will be in vain or not will be decided later on. The last of the candidates for the throne of the

Kingdom of Lugnica, the one who will decide the future of the kingdom…

???: "…That's the reason why she's our Emilia-tan. Nice to meet you!"

Shorty: "Yes, please, thank you."

Shorty nodded, his cheeks tightening at the openness of the black-haired boy, Natsuki Subaru, who raised his thumb and flashed his teeth as he said this. The location was not far from the large city of Costuul, in the territory of Roswaal L. Mathers, Margrave of the Western Frontier of the Kingdom of Lugnica. Shorty and his friend came to Costuul in a Dragon carriage, and the one who was waiting for them was, Subaru. Shorty was thrown off guard and confused by Subaru, who loosened the corners of his vicious eyes and treated him with an increasingly familiar distance. It was still fresh in Shorty's mind that he was bewildered by the unexpected response when Shorty encountered other candidates for the Royal Selection. But this was the first time he had been greeted with such an enthusiastic welcome. In addition, the name Natsuki Subaru was familiar to Shorty.

Shorty: "You said so yourself, didn't you? You are Natsuki Subaru-dono?"

Subaru: "Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm pretty sure I'm Natsuki Subaru. In case you were wondering, the two of you came to interview me, Emilia-Tan… No, I'm playing Emilia-sama's knight."

Shorty: "I knew it! You're the one who helped defeat the White whale and "Sloth", aren't you?"

Subaru: "Oh"

When Shorty unintentionally leaned forward, Subaru was thrown back by his momentum. But Shorty, oblivious to Subaru's condition, puffed out his nostrils.

Shorty: "I've heard so much about you! I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?"

Subaru: “N, No, Of course, I was supposed to do that, but this time we’re talking about Emilia-Tan, not me.”

Shorty: “I’ve heard that you have crossed camps to ask for cooperation and have successfully defeated a great enemy! Where on earth did you get that much trust and ability…?”

Shorty’s curiosity got the better of him. Subaru was literally flabbergasted by his ferocity. And then…

???: “Ataa”

The back of Shorty’s head was hit by a light impact, and he turned around in surprise. Then there was Lulu Lara, holding up her drawing pad with both hands.

Lulu Lara: “Stop… talking…”

Lulu Lara with a slight harshness in the corner of her eyes, it was a reprimand that was so rare. Her attitude reminded Shorty of how embarrassed he was. In a panic, Shorty apologized to Subaru, saying, “I’m sorry,” as his face turned red.

Shorty: “I’m so sorry… I completely got carried away.”

Subaru: “Oh, yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine. I was overwhelmed, but on the other hand, I could feel the enthusiasm…”

Subaru laughed at Shorty’s flat and apologetic attitude. Saved by his generosity, Shorty bites down on his own shame.

Shorty: “I’m really sorry for the inconvenience…Waaa?”

???: “You, stay away from Subaru right now, I suppose!”

Shorty: “Waai…!”

It was the moment when the air had somehow almost been removed. An invisible shock-wave struck Shorty from the side, and Shorty’s small body was blown away. Seeing this, Subaru, who had his eyes peeled, turned around in a panic. Then Shorty saw a small figure standing in front of him with her hands on her hips.

???: “I’m not going to let my guard down, In fact. If it weren’t for Betty, Subaru wouldn’t have as many lives as he does, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Be, Beako, you…”

Beako: “Apparently, you’re too surprised and grateful for words, In fact. If you can’t talk, at least express your feelings for Betty through your actions and attitude, I suppose.”

As Subaru said this, a girl in a dress reached out her hands to the flustered Subaru. Subaru stretched out his trembling arms to the girl, whose long hair was coiled in a luxurious manner. With his hand, he pinches up the girl’s Appa-red cheeks.

Beako: “Gya? What are you doing, In fact, Subaru! I just saved your life and I don’t deserve to be treated like this, I suppose!”

Subaru: “You idiot! It’s true that my life is as unreliable as fluffy cotton wool, but I’m still brave this time! It’s the two members of the interviewing staff!”

Beako: “T…That’s, In fact”

With her cheek pinched, the girl looks at Shorty, who has blown away over Subaru. Shorty was blown away helplessly and crashed into a hedge, his outstretched leg being pulled by Lulu Lara.

Subaru: “You all right, Shorty-san? Sorry! My Beako made a terrible mistake!”

Shorty: “Heh, I’m fine, I’m fine… It’s not uncommon for me to run headfirst into something when I work as a reporter for the Dragon Nation Newsletter…”

Subaru: “That’s a great story! Anyway…here we go”

Lulu Lara was too weak to do it, so Subaru pulled Shorty out of the hedge with a single shout. Shorty is painted in foliage, with leaves tangled in his long bangs that hide his eyes.

Subaru: “Hey, Beako, apologize for being so brave. I’m sorry.”

Beako: “B…but I think this little-kid was being misleading is at fault, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Don’t say words you don’t understand!”

In front of Shorty, Subaru scolded the girl for being stubborn. However, as the girl became more and more stubborn, Shorty said, “Well, well, okay”

Shorty: “Don’t worry about it! I’m fine.”

Subaru: “No, I’ll make her apologize! It’s part of her education! Come on, Beako!”

Beako: “Nugu gugugu… Betty will never apologize, In fact…!”

The girl with her head held down resisted Subaru’s stubborn attempts to make her apologize. It’s a smiling exchange like a father and daughter, but Shorty can’t help but be perplexed. It seemed like there was nothing else to do but to wait for them to come to their senses, but…

???: “Natsuki-san and Beatrice-chan, what are you doing in front of our guests?”

The air in the stalemated place was held back by a soft voice filled with dismay. Subaru and the girl, who were engaged in a back-and-forth battle, turned to the person who had called out to them and changed their expressions to “Oh.” Shorty, too, turned his gaze in that direction. Standing there was a calm-looking young man with gray hair and green attire. However, Subaru and the girl… who was called Beatrice, her face tensed at the sight of the young man.

Subaru: “Ugh, there are circumstances that make this unavoidable…”

???: “Are those circumstances grounds for leaving our leafy guest alone?”

Beatrice: “A man who is irritable and relentless, I suppose…”

Subaru and Beatrice shriveled up in response to the honest truth.

Shorty raised his eyes at the familiarity and ferocity of the young man. Laughing at Shorty, the young man reached out and took a leaf from his head. And…

???: “I’m sorry for the trouble that these two have caused. I’ll make sure to scold them properly.”

Shorty: “Well, uh, thank you, And you are?”

???: “My name is Otto Suwen. Well, I’m related to the two people behind you… Yes.”

The young man, Otto, shrugged his shoulders and made a face that was a mixture of pride and reluctance. In the background, Subaru and Beatrice were both puffing out their cheeks. However, Shorty did not have time to touch on Subaru’s situation.

Shorty: “Oh, Otto Suwen-dono, is it?”

Otto: “…? Yes, I am, but…”

Shorty: “Ehh! Sor… I’m so sorry!”

When Otto tilted his head, Shorty knelt there in awe. Then he pulled the sleeve of Lulu Lara, who was in a daze beside him, and made her kneel down as well.

Shorty: “Lulu Lara! Lulu Lara, get down on your knees! Beg for forgiveness or he will gnaw your head off!”

Otto: “I don’t bite. What do you think you know about me?”

Shorty: “The militant internal affairs officer who was wanted for threatening a powerful noble in his hometown of Picoutatte, wiped out bandits nesting in Mount Gina, and the man burned down a Margrave’s mansion to negotiate a pay raise.…”

Otto: “It’s one thing to say those things, but isn’t this too terrible!”

Otto, raising his voice, however, does not deny those reputations. In other words, Shorty had an inkling. It was information that even Shorty thought was groundless until he saw the real thing. But there is no doubt that he has contained and completely tamed Natsuki Subaru, who has accomplished the defeat of the White Whale and “Sloth”.

Shorty: “Oh, please don’t kill me…”

Subaru: “Oi, Oi, Otto, you, no way…”

Otto: “I’m not going to take it. In other words, don’t be a jerk, Natsuki-san, and help me clear up this misunderstanding! This is getting out of hand!”

Subaru and Otto are arguing. Shorty beside them was shrinking and shaking. Sighing at the sight of these three, Beatrice suddenly noticed Lulu Lara’s hands as she crouched down. Lulu Lara was kneeling on the ground, where she was moving her paintbrush at a furious pace. Realizing that the object of her paintbrush was herself, Beatrice brushed her hair back.

Beatrice: “At the very least, paint a picture of Betty in all her splendor, In fact.”

Lulu Lara: “Draw, little…”

Yes, she nodded in satisfaction at Lulu Lara’s answer as she moved her paintbrush.

11

Although there was a stumbling block at the start…

Subaru: “Once again, welcome, you two. Welcome.”

Shorty: “Oh, thank you, thank you… very much.”

Shorty shakes hands with Subaru in a renewed welcome after leaving the dragon carriage boarding area. Contrary to the grandiosity of his reputation, Subaru treats him with a much more casual attitude. Shorty is also somewhat curious about his relationship with Beatrice, who is always holding his hand.

Subaru: “When I heard that I was going to be interviewed, I was really tense. After all, it’s common knowledge that image strategy… and public relations are important in campaigning.”

Shorty: “Tense…? Image…?”

Otto: “Oh, it’s some words that Natsuki-san uses from time to time, you could call it the Natsuki speak. He says it’s his native language…”

Subaru: “Well, it means thinking about your mood. If you’re confused, just ignore it.”

As you can see from their welcoming attitude, they seem to have a very positive impression of the upcoming interview. Otto, the internal affairs officer, also seemed to agree with this point and accepted Shorty and Lulu Lara.

Shorty: “But I didn’t expect to be picked up at the station… by a bunch of heavyweights.”

Subaru: “In fact, Emilia-Tan herself wanted to come, but the camp stopped her because they thought her appearance would scare you off.”

Shorty: “You, mean you yourself did?”

As for Shorty, just the fact that Subaru, one of the knights of the candidates for the Royal Selection, came to pick him up was enough of a surprise, but he couldn’t help but be surprised when he was told that it could have been more than that.

Subaru: “Oh, you’re still scared, aren’t you? Emilia-Tan is not a scary person at all”

Beatrice: “Even so, it is human nature to bow down to authority and position, I suppose. Both Subaru and Emilia are still lacking in that area of thinking, In fact.”

Otto: “I’m with you on that one. I hope they learn from this.”

Otto rubbed his brow with his fingers and muttered sadly. As well as Otto’s argument, the words and actions of Subaru and Beatrice are also noteworthy. It’s not surprising, since they are related to the camp.

Shorty: “What kind of person is Emilia-sama in the eyes of the three of you?”

The question was quite insincere in a way. It cut too close to the heart of the matter to be thrown out as a chat during the tour and before reaching the mansion. Naturally, Shorty expected a harsh response from all three parties.

Subaru: “…Well, an angel. Cute and hard working, an angel to say the least.”

Shorty: “Uh?”

However, after a moment of thought, Subaru’s answer came back to him.

Beatrice: “Subaru…The little reporter is dumbfounded. I suppose. I don’t think that’s what he’s trying to say, In fact.”

Subaru: “No, I thought that is what he meant. Then what would Beako say?”

Beatrice: “It’s obvious, I suppose. Emilia is a bottomless pit of optimism, a blockhead, In fact”

Subaru: “Isn’t Emilia-Tan a little too out of touch in Beako’s mind?”

Beatrice pulled on Subaru’s sleeve, her opinion also not in line with Emilia’s previous reputation. When Shorty was puzzled by this point, Otto scratched his cheek with his finger and said, “Ah.”

Otto: “I understand the purpose of your question, Shorty-san. In general, I’m aware of how Emilia-sama is regarded by the public.”

Shorty: “Hee! Please don’t be angry.”

Otto: “I’m not mad at you, though, am I? Anyway! Many of the preceding impressions are false. This is an opportunity for you to understand that.”

Otto is not as aggressive as Subaru, but he seems to agree with the expectations of this interview. At his words, Subaru nodded and said, “Right.”

Subaru: “I have to improve her image in order for people to understand the real Emilia-Tan. So, please write a good article, Shorty.”

Shorty: “I’ll only write about what I see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears. Even if threatened by the militant Internal Affairs Minister, I will never be deterred…”

Otto: “I’m not going to threaten you! Ugh… I wonder what my reputation will be like by the time the Royal Selection is over.”

Beatrice: “Don’t waste your time thinking about it, I suppose.”

Otto laments the uncertainty of this world, and Beatrice explains the uncertainty of this world. While they were talking, Shorty sensed something strong in all three of them. That is, all three of them have a fondness for Emilia and a dissatisfaction with her situation. A half-elf with silver hair and purple-blue eyes, it was a rebellion against the environment that surrounded her. The anger they feel, if it is justified…

Shorty: “…The real Emilia-sama.”

The difference between the previous reputation and reality, there was nothing that Shorty felt more keenly during this interview. There was a drastic change in his impressions of Crusch, Anastasia, Priscilla, and Felt. If so, could the same thing happen to Emilia? The more he thought about it, and the more anxiety and anticipation Shorty felt, the more he realized that…

Shorty: “I can’t wait to meet you in person.”

Lulu Lara: “…W…what, was scared.”

Shorty’s muttering, his fists clenched, only reached Lulu Lara, who had known him for a long time. What did she see in Shorty when he muttered that? As soon as she started to move her paintbrush, there was no doubt that Shorty had caught Lulu Lara’s interest. So, following the guidance of Subaru and the others, Shorty and Lulu Lara headed for the Margrave's mansion where Emilia was waiting. However, it was on the way there…

???: "…Oh? You guys came to the wrong place, didn't ya?"

Suddenly, there was a wild voice, and a figure jumped out of the grass with great force. It was a fierce-looking boy with golden hair and bared sharp fangs. Shorty gasped, expanding his eyes at the sudden appearance.

Subaru: "Whoa, bandits!"

Beatrice: "This is ridiculous, In fact… The end of the world, I suppose."

Subaru: "What? On a road near a big city like this?"

For a moment, Shorty was left behind in the situation, while Subaru and Beatrice, their faces pale, hugged each other and slumped to the spot. Seeing Subaru and the others, the blond-haired boy sniffed in a good mood and said, "Heh."

Boy: "You seem to know what is going on. If you don't want to get hurt, you'd better be quiet."

Shorty: "Heeii, please spare my life, please spare my life…"

Looking down at the trembling Subaru and the others, the boy licked his lips with cruelty. Quickly protecting Lulu Lara behind him, Shorty looked back at Otto for help. That's when it happened…

???: "…That's enough, scoundrel."

The air around them was completely taken away by the unexpected sound of a voice like a silver bell. When Shorty opened his eyes to see what was going on, the blond haired boy turned around grimly and said, "Ah?" Then, there was a rustling sound of grass, and a figure appeared. A beautiful girl with shimmering silver hair and eyes as purple-blue as jewels, once you see her, you will never forget her… and even Shorty forgot to breathe at the sight of her.

As they looked at her, the girl pointed her finger at the blond boy.

Girl: “I’m not going to overlook any more of your misdeeds. Get away from Subaru and the others.”

Boy: “Ha! Don’t tell me what to do, Who the hell are you…? aren’t you? … No way!”

Girl: “Yeah, that’s right, no umm. I am… I am…”

Boy: “…?”

The girl’s vigor rapidly faded in front of the boy who was bracing himself. She stiffens in a finger-pointing posture, raising her shapely eyebrows. And then, stealthily, she made eye contact with Subaru.

Girl: “…Subaru, Subaru, what was the next word?”

Subaru: “…That’s “Emilia, the next candidate for the throne of the Kingdom of Lugnica.” That’s it, Emilia-Tan.”

Emilia: “…Oh, right. Yeah, I got it. Let’s see.”

After exchanging words with the slumped Subaru in secret, the girl returned to her original position as if she had regained her composure, coughed lightly, and continued.

Emilia: “I am Emilia, candidate for the throne of Lugnica. In the name of the moon, I’ll punish you!”

Boy: “Aah! Oh no! It’ s Emilia-sama, a candidate for the throne. I can’t do it!”

Hearing the girl’s words, the fearful boy prostrated himself on the spot. Seeing this, the girl nodded profoundly, looking at Shorty and the others who were stunned.

Emilia: “Well, I guess that’s that. Are any of you hurt?”

The girl smiled at Shorty… no, there was no doubt about her identity, if what she said earlier was true. It was obvious from the features of her appearance.

Shorty: “Eh, Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “…! Yes, that’s right. I just happened to be Reeeally close walking by…”

With her chest puffed out, the girl, Emilia, replied. However, right after she answered, Emilia held her stomach and crouched down with an “ugh”. Immediately, Subaru in a panic rushed to Emilia, saying “Emilia-Tan?”

Subaru: “What’s wrong with you all of a sudden, are you okay?”

Emilia: “Uh, no, I’m fine. It’s just that when I lied to them my stomach suddenly started hurting…”

Beatrice: “This is… I’m sure it’s because he made you do something you weren’t cut out for, In fact. Subaru, enough…”

Subaru: “Don’t give up, stupid! We’ve made it this far. We have to finish it…”

Subaru and Beatrice were in a panic as they surrounded Emilia. The whole thing was so transparent that Shorty was seriously wondering how he should react. However, the one who gave Shorty the best solution to his thoughts was…

Otto: “No, this is a waste of time, it’s not even close, this is a farce!”

It was Otto Suwen, who couldn’t resist shouting. To the amazement of everyone in the room, he trudged over to Subaru and…

Otto: “Natsuki-san! I thought you rejected this plan, didn’t you? Why are you forcing it?!”

Subaru: “It was too good to throw away! We’ll be saved by a dashing Emilia-Tan when we get tangled up with some thugs! It’s a reenactment of an encounter between me and Emilia-Tan!”

Emilia: “Hey, Subaru. I don’t remember saving you like this…”

Otto: “It’s Emilia-sama who’s doing this! Can you please stop talking about your dreams?”

Subaru: “It’s true that meeting Emilia-Tan was a dream come true, but that was not a dream.”

Shorty was still being left behind, but one thing was clear. It was the image of Emilia that Subaru and the others had told him just before…

Emilia: “Both of you, stop fighting! Otto-kun, Subaru has thought hard about this, so don’t be too angry with him!”

While Otto was shaking Subaru back and forth, Emilia was raising her voice. From her earnest expression, Shorty didn’t get the impression that she is a cold and cruel “Witch”. he got the impression that she was just an ordinary girl who was at the mercy of the events in front of her.

Boy: “Yo, Beatrice… Is it possible that this was a mistake?”

Beatrice: “It goes without saying, I suppose. Originally, it was a foolhardy plan to get Emilia to lie, In fact. Sure enough, the plan is a mess, I suppose.”

Boy: “Damn, you mean “over-kneaded Gatsune”?” (TL Note this is one of the idioms/metaphors of the golden-haired “boy”)

The boy raises his prostrated head and scratches his own blond hair. Beatrice sighs next to him, and judging by the way she crosses her short arms.

Shorty: “Um, you’re all from the same camp… right?”

Garfiel: “There’s no point in hiding it now, is there? That’s right. My amazing self is Garfiel Tinsel, “The Strongest of Shields”. Remember, I’m no bandit.”

With a click and a snap of his sharp fangs, the boy… Garfiel, proudly announced himself as such. The thug’s performance was great, and the dominance he wore was extraordinary, and Shorty was relieved that his mental image was not wrong. Anyway, these are the grand impression operations planned by Emilia and her group…

Lulu Lara: “Behind…farce.”

Shorty: “Shh! Shh! Shh, Lulu Lara! I was about to say it too, and then I stopped!”

Shorty glanced back, wincing at Lulu Lara’s frank statement. It seems that Emilia and the others have just settled their argument. A disheveled Subaru was thrown to the ground, and Emilia was lending him her lap. With that, Otto bows to Shorty as he repositions his hat.

Otto: “Well, I’m sorry for showing you a bad time. As for this…”

Shorty: “No! I mean, I didn’t see anything…! I can’t say that, I think I have to react in some way…”

Otto: “That’s true. All I can say is, I’m sorry for the confusion.”

For the umpteenth time today, Otto laments greatly as he rubs his fingers across his brow. Even though they had only known each other for a short time, Shorty could sense his position in this camp. The rumors of his saga may have been spread while he was speaking out loud for the benefit of those around him.

Otto: “Even so, it’s true about wanted men and bandits being destroyed…”

Garfiel: “Otto-Bro, the Captain and Emilia-sama are sorry for what happened. Isn’t it about time you stopped complaining?”

Otto: “I don’t know why you did it in the first place. Garfiel is going to get a lecture from me later.”

Garfiel: “Gah! This is unnecessary trouble.”

Garfield gritted his teeth and regretted his gaffe. After all, Otto’s position in the camp seems to be that of a chaperone or an advisor. And in the midst of Shorty’s solidified impressions, the one person whose impression has yet to be solidified is…

Emilia: “I’m sorry for all the confusion. No one meant any harm…”

Shorty: “Yes, yes, yes. I can understand that, I think.”

Emilia: “Are you sure? I’m so relieved. I’m reeeally relieved.”

It was Emilia who smiled and patted her chest as if relieved. It was only a few minutes ago that Shorty thought that they should meet and talk to her in person. In this way, Shorty’s mental image was greatly stirred up in front of the real thing. The witch who froze the forests of her homeland and freakishly caused snow to fall on the Mathers territory has come back to life in the modern age.

Beatrice: “I told you, In fact… You’re a bottomless dunce, I suppose.”

Beatrice, who had come up next to Shorty, said so with a pout on her lips. In her current opinion, there were more omitted elements than in her earlier assessment of the person, but Shorty couldn’t disagree with her.

Emilia: “…?”

Emilia tilts her head curiously, even though she is being talked about herself. This was especially true when Shorty was surrounded by the carefree atmosphere she exuded.

12

???: “Okyakusama, please don’t misunderstand. As for that farce, Ram has stopped that charade from continuing. So it’s now up to Emilia-sama and Barusu.”

The maid who brought the tea to Shorty reminded him in a very cold tone. After the farce on the road was over, Shorty and Lulu Lara were once again taken to the mansion where Emilia was staying. A peach-haired maid brought them tea as they were ushered into the parlor. The first words were thrown out by the maid to Shorty and the others after a brief greeting. Shorty was too intimidated by the maid to say anything back. The fact that Lulu Lara’s brush never stopped painting the maid was proof that she was more than just a servant in the mansion.

Shorty: “Wow, that was one sharp maid… With Emilia-sama being like that, I thought the maid over there was more of a witch.”

Lulu Lara: “…Drew it”

Shorty: “Did you draw it? You’re so fast… It’s very intimidating.”

The picture of the maid who left the room clearly captured not only the beauty of her appearance, but also the oppressive feeling that cannot be expressed in writing. It is unlikely to be used as a news picture this time, but it is a picture of pure power that should be preserved. And so Shorty and Lulu Lara were enjoying the hospitality.

Emilia: “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. Subaru, had to go change clothes.”

Emilia appears in the parlor. She is accompanied by Subaru, who has changed his clothes, behind her is Beatrice, who is holding Subaru’s hand. It is an ideal combination of a candidate for the Royal Selection and her knight together.

Shorty: “But, Beatrice-sama…”

Beatrice: Well, Betty and Subaru are one in the same, In fact. Our relationship is a special one that no one can break, I suppose.

Subaru: “Actually, yes. I’m not kidding, if I’m too far away from Beako, I’ll pop and die. Oh, and please keep this off the record. It might be my… weakness, just in case.”

Shorty: “Oh, you mean, don’t talk about it. I understand.”

Beatrice was pulled in and placed on Subaru’s lap on the sofa. The two of them were sitting next to Emilia, who was sitting across from Shorty, they didn’t say anything about their situation, so it seemed to be normal. Shorty didn’t say anything about it either. Subaru’s tone was light, but Shorty could tell from listening to him that it was not a lie or a joke. It was a part of Shorty’s ability as a reporter that he could at least tell the difference.

Shorty: “Once again, thank you for taking the time to interview with us. I’ve already spoken to the other candidates for the Royal

Selection…”

Emilia: “Yes, I heard. So I guess that means we’re the last ones, right?”

Shorty: “Yes. I don’t have any other motives for the order of the interviews, so I don’t want to be misunderstood…”

Shorty’s words were interrupted when he tried to explain what had happened so far. That was because he was taken aback by the scene in front of him.

Emilia: “First of all, thank you for coming to talk to me. I’m also happy to talk to someone who is willing to listen to my story, so thank you.”

“…”

That’s what Emilia, who was sitting facing him, was bowing deeply. Next to her, Subaru, instead of admonishing Emilia, also bowed his head in the same way. The other candidates for the Royal Selection were relatively positive and gracious in accepting Shorty’s interview. But this was the first time they bowed to him with thanks. It was less a testament to the discipline and politeness of Emilia and the others. Rather, it was a clear indication of the bad situation they were in and the depth of their preconceptions. The fact that they were able to get a straight interview in this way was exceptional for Emilia.

Shorty: “Emilia-sama…”

Emilia: “Yes, what is it?”

Shorty: “Why did you decide to join the Royal Selection, Emilia-sama?”

Shorty found himself asking the question as if it had just slipped out of his mouth. It may have been too frank and rude to ask Emilia, who had politely and courteously accepted the interview just before. Shorty’s intent in asking that question would be obvious without thinking… Emilia’s, being a half-elf, the situation is just too bad. Even though she is a candidate for the Royal Selection, it is clear to everyone that she is going to lose. In fact, Shorty had to bow his head with all of his gratitude to her for accepting the interview with such a young and unproven man. The odds were slim to none. So, why did she challenge them? Shorty's question must have had a hidden purpose. But…

Emilia: "…I didn't think too much of it at first."

She was not angry, but even had a smile on her lips. In front of Shorty, who was gasping for breath, Emilia gently put her hand on her chest and narrowed her purple-blue eyes as if thinking back to the "first" she had just said.

Emilia: "I was living in the forest when Roswaal came for me. That's when I first heard about the Royal Selection and that the king was gone, at first, I didn't know if I could handle such a big responsibility, so I just took it on for my own selfish reasons."

Shorty: "For selfish reasons?"

Emilia: "It's about family, sort of. I wasn't doing it for the kingdom or the people around me at all."

Sticking out her tongue in a small way, Emilia replies in a bashful manner. That overly honest answer would clearly have a negative impact on her chances at the Royal Selection if anyone were to hear it. There are already too many reasons to poke at her. But that's a short-sighted way of looking at things. There is more to her words now.

Shorty: "So you think differently now?"

Emilia: "Yes… Subaru and Beatrice next to me, as well as Ram and Otto-kun, Garfiel and Frederica, Petra-chan, Ryuzu-san, and Roswaal. There are people who expect me to be strong and push me forward."

As she answered, Emilia moved her fingers on her chest. It was only then that Shorty realized that what Emilia was touching was the crystalline stone that she wore around her neck. She touched the crystalline stone, which was cracked and had lost its light, as if loving it.

Emilia: “Everyone has been good to me, and I’ve learned a lot in my own way, and it’s a difficult position to be in, like Shorty-kun and the others are so worried about me. But, but…”

“…”

Emilia: “But I don’t want to give up. I want to do my best so that people can see exactly how I was born, how I was raised, and how I think.”

“…”

Emilia: “I don’t want to be told that what I want to do or be is wrong because of who I am or who I’m not. That’s what I’m trying to do right now.”

Emilia said this as her purple-blue eyes looked straight at Shorty. Shorty’s eyes widened at the determination expressed by Emilia in her faltering words. At the same time, Shorty was ashamed of the prejudice in his heart. Even though he wanted to be as fair as possible and treat her without preconceived notions, Shorty was still stuck in a fixed mindset. As a half-elf with silver hair and purple-blue eyes, Emilia must have lived with more prejudice, preconceptions, and incredible obstacles than Shorty can imagine. However, Emilia does not lament her circumstances any more than necessary, but rather chews them up. She chewed them up and gave them a reason to rise up. She decided to fight on the side of other people who were suffering the same kind of pain and who were exposed to unjustified discrimination. There are plenty of conditions for people to cast people into a mold and look down on them.

It doesn’t have to be anything exaggerated to have the same characteristics as the “Witch of Envy” who once almost destroyed the world. It is easy to be branded as “weak” if you were born in a bad neighborhood, if you have criminal parents, or even if you were simply born poor. And people can be incredibly cruel to the “weak”. Shorty, who grew up in the favelas, knew this all too well.

Shorty: “So, Emilia-sama, are you saying? That you would save us.”

It was Shorty’s unfair question on behalf of the “weak”. Shorty, who until a moment ago was acting like a stranger who had nothing to do with Emilia’s challenge to the Royal Selection, shamelessly tried to be the first to run up to her banner of salvation. What if Emilia had stuck her chest out and affirmed it? In any case, he doesn’t know the answer in that case. Because…

Emilia: “I want to be able to help people. But I can’t promise anything as big as I can help everyone.”

“…”

Emilia: “If two people want something, if it’s something they can share, fine, but if it’s not, only one of them can have it, right? I can’t help both of them.”

Shorty: “Then how can we be helped?”

Emilia: “Uh… I can’t help you, But I think it’s strange that you say you want help since you can’t get involved with the competition. So I won’t let that happen.”

“…”

Shorty: “Yes, you’re right. I’m sure I’ll leave some possibilities open for you. It’s fair game for everyone.”

Emilia nodded to Shorty’s clinging words as if to confirm them. Once the words had been sorted out in her mind and spat out, she did not retract them. She did not retract them, but gave a straight answer to Shorty’s question. In response, Shorty quietly rewrote his impression of Emilia. And next to Emilia, who nodded…

“…”

Subaru: “Yeah, Emilia-Tan, you’re looking great.”

Beatrice: “Naah! Subaru! Don’t wipe your tears with the collar of Betty’s dress, In fact!”

Subaru: “It’s not tears I wiped, you idiot, It’s snot… Dah!”

Beatrice: “That’s even worse, I suppose!”

Beatrice head-butted Subaru, who wiped his eyes and nose with her dress. Emilia’s knight and his escort ruined the mood, but just as well. If Shorty couldn’t hear this story from Emilia, he wanted to hear it from her knight.

Shorty: “Natsuki Subaru-dono, why did you become Emilia-sama’s knight? Is it because you share Emilia-sama’s current beliefs?”

Subaru: “Me…? When I look back on how it all started, it was an ulterior motive.”

Shorty: “And the ulterior motive…?”

Subaru replied, holding up a finger without taking offense. Shorty rolled his eyes at the unexpected answer, and Beatrice shook her head in dismay. However, even Beatrice did not correct Subaru’s words or silence him.

Subaru: “I saw a glimpse of her on the street, and I fell in love with Emilia-Tan at first sight. And as I ran around wanting to help Emilia-Tan…”

Shorty: “So you’re in this position now? But, Subaru-dono has defeated the White Whale and “Sloth”, right?”

Subaru: “It was all part of trying to act cool for the girl I liked.”

Scratching his cheek with his finger, Subaru smiled shyly. He was not in his usual joking mood, which made Shorty believed that he was serious in his answer. In other words, the reason why Subaru became a knight and has continued to achieve so many successes is because he is in love with Emilia…

Shorty: “Were you not shocked by Emilia-sama’s appearance?”

Subaru: “No, I was surprised by how cute she was. Even now, when I see her in the morning without preparing my heart, I get surprised.”

Emilia: “Oh, you’re joking around like that again.”

As she said this, Emilia tugged lightly on Subaru’s ear with her outstretched hand. Subaru yelped, “Ouch” Emilia’s cheeks blushed slightly as she smiled at Subaru.

Emilia: “Please don’t write about that joke in the article. Subaru, you get carried away too easily.”

Subaru: “I think it’s better to be written off as a check on a romantic rival…No, the purpose is to improve Emilia-Tan’s image, so isn’t flirting with me a good idea?”

Emilia: “I’m not flirting. Also, I don’t think I’ve ever helped Subaru…”

Subaru: “My heart would creak if I went into detail about that…”

Emilia’s lips pouted at Subaru, who defended himself with his ears still pinched. Beatrice, who was on Subaru’s lap, was watching the exchange between the two. In spite of the disarming atmosphere, Shorty was struck by shock. At the same time, Shorty clenched his fists tightly in frustration. On the one hand, Shorty was glad that he could hear Emilia’s story here and now, but on the other hand, Shorty also thought… why he was the one who was here.

“…”

Emilia spoke seriously about her feelings, and her words certainly touched Shorty’s heart. Shorty nodded without exaggeration that it was a wonderful determination, thought, and resolve. However, this was only the shock that Shorty felt when he spoke directly with Emilia and received her voice and gaze with his own body. It is not an easy task to bring the same thing to the readers of the Dragon Nation Newsletter. And it was not Emilia’s fault, but Shorty’s lack of ability. If Shorty’s writing was good enough to convey what he saw with his own eyes to everyone who read the article, he wouldn’t have to suffer like this. But unfortunately, Shorty’s current writing doesn’t have that much power. Other than Shorty, that is, the current Editor-in-Chief Morgan, it might have been possible. Shorty is unable to convey the correct information due to his inability to do so. This is the most dreadful situation for a reporter. It is a situation that can affect his career as a reporter. So what can Shorty Megan do? Aware of his own inadequacies, but still with the truth that he must tell in front of him, what will the reporter of the Dragon Nation Newsletter do?

"…"

Unbeknownst to him, Shorty was at a crossroads in his life, and he looked to Lulu Lara, who was pouring her heart and soul into her paintbrush, for help. As usual, Lulu Lara continued to draw pictures for the paper, ignoring the interview. This was her way of working, so she had no complaints, and Shorty had no expectations that her words would help. Lulu Lara was just moving her paintbrush at a breakneck pace, capturing the scene in front of her with incredible accuracy. Shorty gulped as he looked at the vividly drawn news picture. On impulse, he snatched the drawing book from Lulu Lara's lap.

Lulu Lara: "…No!"

Shorty: "Sorry, Lulu Lara! Let me see!"

Suddenly, Lulu Lara was shocked as if she had been stripped of her other half. While holding her bitingly angry forehead, Shorty looked over the dozen or so pictures that had been drawn since the beginning of this interview… or rather, since he had encountered Subaru and the others at the station. When Shorty looked at each of the pictures on there, he muttered, "Yeah, I knew it."

Shorty: "It's this look on Emilia-sama's face."

Picking up one of the press pictures, Shorty nodded, lowering the corners of his eyes. He then stretched out his arms and turned to Lulu Lara, who was retrieving her work tools, and hugged her petite body from the front.

Lulu Lara: "…Unhappy"

Shorty: "Lulu Lara, thank you, thank you! Thanks to you! Thanks to you, I've seen the light! I'm no good. After all, without you, I can't do it at all!”

Shorty thanked Lulu Lara from the front as she rolled her eyes and froze. Thanks to her, Shorty had a breakthrough. Shorty still had to curse himself a lot for his lack of ability, but Shorty would like to thank the heavens that he had a partner in Lulu Lara. Shorty Megan, as a reporter, finally knew what he had to do.

Shorty: “Emilia-sama, Subaru-dono! Please go ahead and tell us about the two of you… and not just the two of you, but about everyone!”

Emilia: “About us? Don’t you mean the Royal Selection?”

Emilia tilted her head at Shorty, who turned around and spoke with authority. Subaru and Beatrice on his lap were also tilting their heads in the same way, and Shorty couldn’t help but smile at their smiling faces. “Yes!” Shorty nodded vigorously. Shorty understood Emilia’s ideals and her beliefs. So, now we just need to make sure that people other than Shorty understand them…

Shorty: “…First, let me fall in love with you all!”

13

???: “…Shorty! Shorty! Is Shorty Megan here?”

The door was violently thrown open with the sound of loud footsteps and a rumbling voice. Immediately, the documents piled up in the room flew up, and Shorty, who was drowning in them, jumped up. Shorty jumped up, looked around, and jumped up at the eagle-nosed, tall man standing at the entrance.

Shorty: “Wow, Editor-in-Chief Morgan! Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Shorty Megan, I’m right here, I’m here, I’m awake!”

Morgan: “Yes, that’s right, Morgan Frantz, Editor-in-Chief of the Dragon Nation Newsletter! And you idiot! Of course you’re awake! The starting bell has rung! We’re at work!”

Shorty: “Oh, I’m sorry!”

Because of the height difference, it was as if he was shouting at Shorty from above, and Shorty had no choice but to hold his hat in his hands and shrink back. Shorty hurried to clear his head, trying to order the articles he had to write and the tasks he had to take care of. But…

Shorty: “Huh? Well, today I’m working on…”

Morgan: “What’s the matter, Shorty? Don’t you know what you’re doing?”

Shorty: “I’m sorry! Uh, what was I supposed to be covering today?”

Morgan: “Idiot! You are the only one who can do it. If you do, you’ll be the first to know. Because…”

Morgan thrusts something at Shorty, whose eyes are blank. As Shorty recoiled from the blow, he took two or three steps backward. As he did so, he saw the whole thing that had hit him in the face.

Shorty: “This, this, this, this is…”

Morgan: “Of course it’s a copy of Dragon Nation Newsletter! And more importantly, an article! What’s in it?”

Shorty: “My article on the Royal Selection!”

Shorty’s eyes light up, he gasps, and he falls to his knees as he snatches the copy of the Dragon Nation Newsletter… the paper with his article, out of Morgan’s hands.

Morgan: “You have been busy, Shorty Megan!”

Shorty: “Because, because, because… Finally, finally, finally, my article is…”

Morgan: “Yeah, don’t let that get you down! Shorty Megan! The motto of the Dragon Nation Newsletter is…”

Shorty: “…! It will not be published unless it is a report that will shake your heart!”

Morgan's eagle nose turned red, and Shorty responded by reflex. He even stood up quickly, straightened his back, and stood upright. In response to Shorty's reaction, Morgan stroked his eagle nose and nodded generously.

Morgan: "…It was a good article."

Shorty: "Oh…"

While touching on the claims of each of the candidates for the Royal Selection, what is new is the focus on their personalities, which has not been deeply explored in the past.

Shorty: "It may not be enough for those that want to follow the selection closely…"

Cutting off his words there, Morgan patted Shorty's frozen shoulder forcefully.

Morgan: "I'm sure those readers will be impressed by the last sentence! Stay tuned for more information on the Royal Selection candidates in the next issue…! So you're going to continue?"

Shorty: "Yes, that's the plan! No, I mean, with the editor's permission… Yikes!"

Morgan: "Fool! Don't be a wimp! Who can stand in the way of this project?"

Shorty's body flew through the air and plunged into a pile of documents. But Morgan didn't pay attention to that devastation of Shorty's.

Morgan: "Well done, Shorty, you've taken the plunge! In fact, I've received polite thank-you notes from all the candidates for the Royal Selection. I'll leave the interview with them to you in the future!"

Shorty: "Oh, thank you… But, Editor-in-Chief, this interview is on…"

Morgan: "Mm… Yes, I know what you mean. I'll leave it to you and

Lulu Lara!”

Correcting his last words, Morgan taped the article to the wall of the room as if to slam it down. Then he takes another look at the article, then turns his gaze to the corner of the room.

Morgan: “Nice news picture. I knew I made the right decision when I picked you guys up.”

That’s all he said, and then Mr. Morgan left the room with loud footsteps. Shorty was impressed by his dignity as a leader of the news reporters.

Shorty: “Oh man, you’re no match for me… Oh, Lulu Lara, thank you.”

Lulu Lara: “…Good”

Shorty shakes his head and struggles to get out of the pile of documents. Not seeing this, Lulu Lara, who was in the corner of the room, helps Shorty escape. She took his hand and pulled him out, and Shorty stood taller. Then he looked again at the article Morgan had posted on the wall. There was the article Shorty had written about the five candidates for king, along with a selection of press pictures that Lulu Lara had drawn.

The smiling Crusch, Anastasia and Priscilla standing side by side, and Felt with the Sword Saint are all quite ambitious, but Shorty’s favorite of all is…

Lulu Lara: “…had a good response.”

Shorty: “Oh, I see. Yeah, I guess so. I’m glad it did.”

Shorty smiled proudly at Lulu Lara’s words as she lined up next to him. The one that received the biggest response was a group painting of Emilia, Subaru, and the people from her camp who had gathered together. Shorty doesn’t know the value of the painting, but he can tell you that it is a masterpiece. That’s how good this one was.

Lulu Lara: “…And this?”

Shorty: “That’s because I wasn’t strong enough.”

Lulu Lara: “…?”

Shorty: “My writing skills were not enough to convey Emilia-sama’s determination, resolve, and everything she wanted to say. There were too many obstacles in the mind of the reader to accept it.”

Preconceived notions, prejudices, and many other things that have been in the way of Emilia’s life in the past are going to have a negative impact not only on her herself, but even on the writing that talk about her. Sadly, Shorty’s writing did not have the power to dispel that… How can Shorty get rid of that obstacle?

Shorty: “That farce was really bad. But it really took the edge off my shoulders.”

Lulu Lara: “…Farce”

Shorty: “I thought that was the starting point, that Emilia-sama was someone completely different from the “Witch of Envy”.”

“…”

Shorty had a prejudice against Emilia as a kind of “Envious Witch”. The first thing that shattered this prejudice was the poorly executed farce that was shown on the road. They discussed it in the camp and planned it to dispel the preconceived notions going around about Emilia, that poorly conceived and poorly planned farce… but it was important. The real Emilia, the one who does such things seriously, is the fact that many people in the kingdom, who cannot remain unaffected by the Royal Selection, need to know. Emilia, in her quest for fairness, Shorty did not fully accept or affirm her claims. There are times when preconceptions, prejudices, and the like are useful. It is just as valuable to keep them from getting lost in judgment as it is to keep them from getting it wrong. That’s why he didn’t fully agree with Emilia. However, Shorty’s reporter-ly answer is to appeal to fairness, saying that her arguments are worth listening to as well. In order to do so, the first step is to make it clear that Emilia is not the same person as the “Witch of Envy”.

Shorty: “So, this article is going to touch on the candidates’ goals and their personalities. Of course, I’ll go into more depth in future follow-ups.”

Lulu Lara: “…Gonna do it?”

Shorty: “Yes, of course. I’m sure Lulu Lara will be happy to know that all of them are good subjects.”

Shorty shrugged his shoulders, and Lulu Lara fell silent with a blank expression. Shorty laughed, seeing a certain passion in her profile that made it difficult to see her emotions. They have known each other for a long time… more than ten years now, since the favelas. If it hadn’t been for Lulu Lara, Shorty would not have been able to become a reporter for the Dragon Nation Newsletter, he would have lived a poorer life, or he would have died a long time ago. It was a plain white wall of stone with a large painting on it by Lulu Lara… the power of the painting was so powerful that it drove Shorty to make sure she didn’t end up living here. Thus, as a reporter, there are too many things in the world that are just a waste of time to let Shorty have his back to the fire and run around. So…

Shorty: “We’re not there yet, but we’ll be together for a long time to come, Lulu Lara.”

Lulu Lara: “…Can’t be helped”

Shorty: “Yes, I have no choice. Without you, I would still be a novice reporter.”

Shorty smiled at Lulu Lara, who slumped her shoulders as Shorty repositioned his hat.

Yes, there’s more to come. Fortunately, it would be easy for Shorty to apply for the follow-up interviews with the candidates for the Royal Selection because of the good responses to the article. In particular, he received a good response from Emilia’s camp. It was significant that Subaru, Emilia’s knight, had focused on the value of the Dragon Nation Newsletter’s article. As for Subaru, he was very active in this article about Emilia. This is because of his many historical achievements, but most of all, he is a man of many talents…

Shorty: “I didn’t think there would be this much of a response to the “Lolimancer”.”

Lulu Lara: “…Think, mystery”

Shorty: “Oh, I don’t think you’re mad at me, are you?”

All of the knights who were candidates for the king’s election had titles as well as spectacular achievements. So, it was an idea after much thought to prepare something appropriate for Subaru as well. This was due in large part to the relationship between Subaru and Beatrice… he had assured Shorty that he would not be able to fulfill his duties as a knight without her cooperation. So, as a result of Shorty’s naming of him as the “Lolimancer”, there was a tremendous response. Perhaps in the future, the names of Natsuki Subaru and “Lolimancer” will be inseparable.

Shorty: “I don’t know what I’ll do if I’m denied an interview because of this…”

Lulu Lara: “…Too late”

Shorty: “No, I know, but! It’s a job I don’t want to give up to anyone else now…”

The more Shorty thinks about it calmly, the more he feels like he has done something wrong, and the more his blood runs cold. Seeing Shorty begin to worry with a pale face as he was, Lulu Lara picked up a paintbrush. Then, in her usual tone again, Lulu Lara began to draw Shorty’s upset face.

Shorty: “That’s exactly how Lulu Lara does things here… Why do you draw so many pictures of me when you only draw what interests you in the first place?”

Lulu Lara: “…You know”

Shorty: “I don’t know! It’s just weird to have so many pictures of myself drawn.”

Shorty's voice betrays the freaky attitude of his partner, who tilts her head. In the meantime, she continues to paint. In the first place, the earlier problem has not been solved.

Shorty: "Ah… Should I bring them an apology gift? But if he's not mad, I am a jerk… Wow, I'm scared of the future!"

Lulu Lara: "…Plate"

Shorty: "Lulu Lara is no stranger to this, you know?"

Lulu Lara waved her hand in a small way, and Shorty saw it and shouted a scream. Behind them, in a pile of documents, Shorty's written interview was left unorganized, and it slowly began to lean. Shorty and Lulu Lara's names will remain for a long, long time as the first two people to conduct interviews with the candidates at the heart of the disputed Royal Selection that will involve not only the Kingdom of Lugnica but also neighboring countries…

Shorty: "Waah…?"

Lulu Lara: "…Kyu" (Grab)

The two of them are crushed by the crumbling pile of documents and get lost together in the office, but for the time being, that's another story.

As a side note, this article was published in the Dragon Nation Newsletter, which became the highest-selling issue of all time, and most of the people of the kingdom waited with baited breath for further news on the candidates…

END

Sword Identity I

1

???: “—Let the conference commence.”

The solemn and austere proclamation echoed around the place of assembly.

It was not particularly loud, but that voice had the strength to cleave through the tense atmosphere, and forcibly shake the eardrums of those assembled.

It could be described in other words as self-confidence and ego. None of it was half-heartedly firm, but that was to be expected.

The reason being because the owner of said voice was the head of a country, the Emperor of an Empire that lived by the law of survival of the fittest.

—The Seventy-Seventh Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, Vincent Vollachia.

A fine figure of a man, with glossy black hair and dignified slitted eyes, his slender form adorned in ornamented attire without it being overly extravagant. He held an intelligent light in his dark eyes; he was praised as a wise Emperor who possessed ingenuity and possessed every corner of the Empire within his consideration.

Under his reign as Emperor, the Vollachian Empire had entered its first era of peace since its founding.

In the strife-ridden Vollachian Empire, the seven years following his ascension to the throne were spoken of as the most peaceful nights in history by the populace, day-after-day.

However, capability as a statesman was not proportional to a gentle disposition. —The current Emperor, like all previous Emperors of Vollachia, was ruthless.

The fact that this was well-known could be sensed from the atmosphere in the assembly hall.

Everyone: “…”

The Generals had gathered in the assembly hall for the conference. They were in charge of the powerful nation of Vollachia’s Military in various forms, and their expressions were stern as they stayed on their toes.

The Generals knew this. —If they displayed weak behavior in front of others, much less the Emperor, it would be fatal for themselves.

???: “Now then, on the agenda today, there are a considerable number of topics to discuss”

A cool voice followed Vincent’s words, somehow giving a leisurely impression in the strained, tense life-and-death air of the assembly hall.

He was a figure of nothing but white, from his white hair to his white face to the white outfit covering his whole body.

A great long table had been set up in the spacious assembly hall, with the Emperor at the head, and it was arranged so that the seats were filled in order of rank, starting with the position near the Emperor.

Thus, the all-white figure was seated directly at the side of the Emperor—It was nothing less than the most trusted and valued position to the Emperor.

Chisha Gold. —That was the name of the tall all-white figure, the Emperor Vincent Vollachia’s deeply-trusted chief strategist.

Chisha, who had contributed to the Emperor’s reign with his outstanding resourcefulness and profound discernment, was simultaneously one of the Nine Divine Generals at the top of the Vollachian Imperial Military. He was one of the nine people given the top rank of First-Class General in the General system of the Vollachian Empire.

Naturally, unlike the Second-Class Generals and Third-Class Generals, some of whom had been invited to the conference, all of the First-Class Generals had been called before the Emperor—□,

Chisha: “To begin with, first on the agenda… It is troubling that the gathering of First-Class Generals is the absolute worst.”

That Chisha had been the first to bring it up was also a serious matter.

—For a fact, Chisha’s words were not false.

For the one who should be the most esteemed in the Empire, the seats around Vincent were conspicuously empty. That meant, it was evidence that the attendance rate of the First-Class Generals—of the Nine Divine Generals, was poor.

???: “What a disgrace! If we, who ought to be the model for the Second-Class Generals, do this, how can we face the other Generals!”

???: “I, punctual. Naturally.”

The one ferociously and the other mechanically expressing their dissatisfaction, were the two of the First-Class Generals filling the vacant seats aside from Chisha—Goz Ralfon and Moguro Hagane.

Goz, a veteran soldier, and Moguro, who was known as a steel man of unique origin, both were highly loyal to the Emperor and, like Chisha, attended the conference as a matter of course.

Thus, it was only the three of them who filled the honored seats of the Nine Divine Generals properly.

Goz: “What happened to Groovy, the one leading the campaign, or better yet, Sir Olbart!”

Chisha: “I have received a letter of absence from Sir Olbart. …Well, let me put it this way: General Goz knows what he is doing by leaving out Cecilus and Arakiya.”

Moguro: “Expectations, futile”

Goz raised his voice at each absence. When Chisha smiled bitterly at that, Moguro affirmed it with a concise sentiment.

In the Vollachian Empire where the strong were respected, the requirements for being chosen as one of the Nine Divine Generals were plain and simple. There was nothing more to it than being a powerful person with great military prowess. As a result, compared to other countries the Empire had unparalleled military strength, but going up the ranks discipline tended to become lax.

It was no wonder that the two Goz did not expect to attend—Cecilus Segmunt and Arakiya, the First and Second Ranks of the Nine Divine Generals respectively, had been left out.

In any case—

Goz: "The conference taking place on His Excellency's time, what do they all take it for…!"

Vincent: "—The same old chirping and whining.」

Goz: "Your Excellency…!"

Goz's stern face flushed red with anger, as he was chided by the good-looking man at the head of the table, the Emperor Vincent Vollachia.

Vincent's slitted eyes narrowed at the empty seats of the Nine Divine Generals,

Vincent: "From the beginning, I had no expectation of their attendance. Even on a Shatranj* board, each piece moves in its own manner. If one disregards that and moves as one pleases, the board will go amok without regard to the intention of the move. Above all —"

???: "His Excellency did not revive the Nine Divine General system to demand good behavior. That is how I understand it, for one."

Vincent: "Mm"

His words taken halfway through, Vincent let out a small sniff.

The one unafraid of impiety in decisively interrupting the Emperor's speech, sat adjacent to Vincent—an aged man with tidied greying hair who sat facing the unfilled seats.

He was a capable person who held the most powerful position in the Vollachian Empire after the Emperor. As the Nine Divine Generals were the top of the military, he was the top of the civil office, the Prime Minister Berstetz Fondalfon.

Goz: "Prime Minister, to interrupt His Excellency's words…"

Berstetz: "My apologies. However, His Excellency is also occupied with government affairs. I thought it my duty as a loyal subject to expedite the conference, as much as possible."

Goz: "Are you suggesting that we interrupt the will of His Excellency!"

Berstetz: "Do not become overzealous, General Goz. I am afraid His Excellency's gaze is growing cold."

Goz: "Gu…hh"

Goz rebuked Berstetz's obtrusive deeds, but the experienced Prime Minister easily sidestepped.

Unfortunately, Goz and Berstetz were of different wits in a war of words. Goz had the full confidence of officers and men as a soldier who had worked his way up, and as expected his true value to be demonstrated on the battlefield.

And, where the battlefield laid depended on the nature of the person in question—Chisha was likewise more suited to a battlefield in which he was able to use his head rather than wield a lance.

Moguro: "Cecilus, Arakiya, those two, now."

Berstetz: "Yes, it is as Moguro-dono says. That the seats of those two, First and Second, would be empty has already been taken into account… I think we should get into the main issue of the conference promptly."

Vincent: “…It matters not. Chisha, begin.”

In the end, Goz was unable to recover after being backed into a corner, and the conference moved on.

Chisha sighed, with a sidelong glance at Goz, who seemed to be about to break the gauntlets of his golden armor from gripping them so tightly. He let out a “Well then,” and tried to go on to the issue at hand.

Every single time, before the beginning of the conference, the body and spirit would be wasted.

—This too, was how things were for today’s leaders of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

2

The term coup d’etat was one that frequently appeared in Vollachian history books.

As mentioned previously, in Vollachia where survival of the fittest was respected as the natural way of things, the instilled value of taking what one wanted by brute force was encouraged. That could be land for officers and men, or plundering a loved one, or fighting for accumulated wealth, the options are too numerous to mention.

Of course, there were also certain rules for demonstrating such might.

Without that, a world in which power ruled unchecked would be nothing more than a lawless land.

There was once a time in which such lawlessness went unpunished, but today’s Empire is different. —The Emperor of this age, Vincent Vollachia, possessed outstanding political skill.

He naturally governed the whole of the Empire by laying down laws, and sought prudence in how power was demonstrated.

As a result, many Imperial citizens benefited from this, and no small amount of relief spread among the weak. The weak who were expected to be oppressed and expended, had been saved.

But at the same time, he listened to the lamentations of the strong who had been the oppressors, and improved the laws put in place.

Since many related parties detested each other, and duels and the like had repeatedly destroyed many houses in a chain of retribution, appropriate authorities intervened, and devised ways to stop the flames of anger from spreading.

It could be called the beginning of an age where it was harder to die and easier to live, for both the strong and the weak.

However, it would be a mistake to think of Vincent as a merciful Emperor for bringing it about.

Vincent: “Although our national flag touts the Sword Wolf, even among wolves there are superiors and inferiors. And a pack cannot exist without individuals of various sizes. It is possible that the wolves may consume each other. However, the eating of bad meals that could destroy the pack will be suppressed. It is a necessity to make that known.”

That was Vincent’s policy, and the purpose for the altered Imperial laws.

Vincent’s politics kept the surface of the board arranged as neatly as he saw fit. For that reason, he did not balk if it distorted the Empire’s old conventions and ways of doing things, or if he trampled them underfoot.

In a way, he was a most unusual Vollachian Emperor, and a typical Vollachian Emperor.

Seven years had passed since Vincent had taken the throne—Vollachia had entered an era of peace since its founding. Therefore, the word coup d’etat was far from relevant.

Excluding the period immediately following his succession, the reign of Vincent Vollachia had suffered a situation that could be called a coup d'etat just once, in the beginning…

Chisha: "—The empty seat of the Nine Divine Generals, we need to fill it."

Vincent: "…"

Once the conference was underway and some of the items on the agenda had been digested, Chisha brought up the topic.

At that moment, the atmosphere in the assembly hall became chilly and tense.

Goz, who always had a stern look, had creases chiseled between his brows like a craggy rock, and even Moguro, whose face structure could not be easily understood, seemed to have vaguely changed in mood.

The Second-Class Generals and below without seats also felt the tension. The only two other than Chisha whose expressions had not changed were Vincent and Berstetz.

—A vacant position among the top military officers, the Nine Divine Generals. That was not something that should ever happen.

The sole qualification for the Nine Divine Generals was strength, which meant the position was synonymous with defeat being impermissible. To be missing signified death from defeat.

And, the reason for the loss of the Ninth Seat, was not confined to death from defeat.

Goz: "If only Balleroy hadn't been so stupid."

Goz grumbled with a disgusted expression, crossing his brawny arms. No one followed his remark, but that no one rebuked him showed their inner thoughts were the same.

Balleroy Temeglyph—The missing Ninth General, and one of the key players who had brought about the coup d'etat in Vollachia.

A plot by one of the Nine Divine Generals, involving the emissaries of a foreign country, had aimed to take Vincent's life. That was the reality of the greatest coup d'etat since the start of Vincent's reign.

Consequently, Vincent had received a nearly-mortal wound, but the coup d'etat had ended with the defeat of the man who had been the main culprit and the perpetrator, Balleroy.

That had taken place two months prior, and since then one seat of the Nine Divine Generals had remained empty.

Bearing in mind Vincent's unobjectionable return to governance, the seat could not be left vacant indefinitely.

The late proposal, it was justified.

Chisha: "As there is a necessity to keep the neighboring country in check, it is about time we think on it."

As silence fell over the assembly hall, Chisha once again stirred the waters.

Each person's attention understandably went to Vincent. Under their gazes, Vincent glanced over to the truly empty seat.

The empty seat whose back Balleroy Temeglyph had blithely leaned on.

Chisha: "Your Excellency."

Vincent: "It matters not. I have no time to waste on the deceased. Select your personnel swiftly."

Chisha: "Yes. I am grateful for your approval."

In an instant, Vincent narrowed his dark eyes and gave a parting shot.

Having received his words, Chisha bowed to the Emperor's judgement and continued. Then, he turned to face Goz who was sullenly crossing his arms,

Chisha: "General Goz, what do you think? Are there any capable generals that have caught your eye?”

Goz: “Mm, right… I can think of several who excel in military strategy, but if we are talking about those who could rank among the Nine Divine Generals, what about Second-Class General Kafma Irulux?”

Chisha: “Second-Class General, Kafma?”

Goz, who was in contact with a wide range of Generals, came up with a name that was naturally familiar to Chisha.

Kafma Irulux had risen to the position of Second-Class General at a young age due to his outstanding talent. He was a member of the Insect Cage Tribe, which was rare even for the racially-diverse Vollachian Empire.

The Insect Cage Tribe kept parasites called bugs inside their bodies, using them from a young age, and had a special technique to borrow the abilities of the bugs in an emergency.

But the problem was—

Moguro: “Kafma’s relatives, Balleroy, collusion”

Chisha: “As General Moguro says, the aforementioned Second-Class General Kafma is supposed to be on house arrest, is he not?”

The Insect Cage Tribe were among those who had supported Balleroy’s plotted regicide, and, at the same time, they were Kafma’s clan of origin.

Kafma himself seemed to have not been made aware of the treason, but he had been blamed for the participation of many of his relatives, and was currently also held in a state of confinement.

Chisha: “I have my doubts about whether he is worthy to be the next seat of the Nine Divine Generals.”

Goz: “If that’s the case, shouldn’t we give him the chance to redeem himself! He himself feels responsible for his relatives taking part in treason! As it is, he is even prepared and willing to take his own life."

Vincent: "Hmm…"

Goz: "Your Excellency! I know I am going out on a limb here but let me just say this! Kafma Irulux is a man too loyal to Your Excellency to lose! Please, judge him leniently!"

Standing out of his chair with a stomp, Goz leaned forward and put his hands on the table in a direct appeal.

Were it anyone else, they would be rightly accused of disrespect, but the burning in Goz's eyes and chest were nothing but the flames of loyalty and righteous indignation.

Goz: "Your Excellency!"

Vincent: "Do not raise your voice to me, you mere commoner. The volume with which you speak is pointless. Do not lean so far forward, your voice is echoing not just through the assembly hall but throughout the entire palace."

Therefore, Vincent does not rebuke Goz with the exception of the volume of his voice.

Vincent himself had told him, and Goz gulped weakly "I am sorry…!" yet still apologized loudly,

Goz: "Still! Please reconsider! The missing seat of the Nine Divine General and clemency for a loyal and faithful General, the two problems should be solvable in one stroke!"

Vincent: "—. Chisha."

Chisha: "Yes. To offer my opinion, General Goz's option is not a bad one."

To Vincent's request for his opinion, Chisha stroked his own sharp chin as he responded.

The surrounding circumstances had turned out poorly, but Chisha also knew of Kafma Irulux's distinguished military service. As Goz had said, losing one of the Empire's premier Generals could only be a heavy loss.

To say nothing of the fact that the Empire had already lost Balleroy Temeglyph.

Days after the incident, the Kingdom of Lugunica had signed an armistice treaty, but even so it had been for a period of three years, after which no one knew what would happen.

Something like a period during which it would be permissible for the Empire to be at reduced strength, would always be absurd.

Chisha: "I'm certain that General Second-Class Kafma has his own inclinations too, but I cannot imagine there is anyone in the Empire who would turn down a promotion to the Nine Divine Generals when approached."

Vincent: "Hm. As expected, that is a compelling argument coming from a man who unwillingly filled his seat."

Chisha: "…Jest all you like. I have already resigned myself long ago."

Drawing unexpected sarcasm from the Emperor, Chisha shrugged his slender shoulders in self-deprecation.

He would be deeply sympathetic about being approached in such a way, supposing Kafma was not prepared and aiming for the position of General First-Class. Additionally, Chisha would be happy to see more like himself.

Chisha himself felt heavily burdened by being granted an excessively high position like the Nine Divine Generals.

It was certainly more in his nature to handle a civil position than a military one.

Berstetz: "—Your Excellency, may I also say something?"

Goz had made a strong recommendation for a new, capable person to be offered the unfilled seat of the Nine Divine Generals. In the assembly hall that had seemed to reach a consensus, the one humbly raising his hand was Berstetz.

The Imperial Prime Minister, whose eyes were thin like thread and whose inner feelings could not be guessed, bowed his head reverently when Vincent permitted his opinion with just a glance,

Berstetz: “As Goz-dono has given Kafma-dono his recommendation, there is a person I would like to recommend to you as well.”

Goz: “What did you just say?!”

Goz’s eyes widened and glared at Berstetz, who had turned the discussion up till now on its head with his remark.

Just as Goz was hoping to bring good news to the General he favored, Berstetz had tried to pluck it from his hands. Goz’s reaction was quite natural.

Goz: “Prime Minister… You dare to meddle in the affairs of the Nine Divine Generals who head the Imperial Military!”

Berstetz: “With all due respect, my position as Prime Minister… obliges me to devote myself to the betterment of the Empire. That being the case, allow me to share my opinion.”

Goz: “—You”

In contrast to Goz’s indignation, Berstetz responded with consistent composure.

Growing impatient with that reply, Goz’s eyes quietly began to fill with fierce hostility. Like a predator before its prey, his posture showed his powers of concentration had been elevated.

It meant the rise of the fighting spirit of the one known as “The Lion Knight”, Goz Ralfon.

However—

Vincent: “Cease, commoner. After becoming accustomed to it, your voice is all the more clamorous. —Berstetz, you said there was one who you wished to recommend. Speak."

Goz: "Your Excellency! Please reconsider…"

Vincent: "I already told you, cease."

Goz: "—Tch."

Asked to close his mouth again, Goz kept silent, red-faced.

In response, Berstetz assented,

Berstetz: "I respect your magnanimous judgment."

Vincent: "Be silent. I will not tell you a third time. Speak, swiftly."

Berstetz: "Yes. The person I would like to recommend for the next of the Nine Divine Generals is Madelyn Eschart."

Hearing the much-awaited name he had prompted from Berstetz, Vincent's eyebrows drew together. It was a rare surprise, a reaction that would have been too modest for anyone other than him.

In fact, Chisha, Goz, and many of the other Generals in attendance, wore identical dubious expressions.

The reason being, the name of the person, Madelyn, was one no one happened to know of.

Moguro: "I, unknown name. Prime Minister, who is that?"

The taciturn Moguro asked the question representative of all present.

His opportunities to speak were few, and his words faltering, but by no means was Moguro not listening to the conversation, nor was he dull-witted. In a sense, he grasped things more flexibly than Goz, as he was a person who could sift out essential information.

To Moguro's inquiry, Berstetz touched his mustache,

Berstetz: "It is natural you would find it surprising. Since Madelyn Eschart… She has no experience working under the Imperial

Military, and no track record of leading a group.”

Chisha: “That’s… no matter how you look at it”

Goz: “—Out of the question!!”

Chisha was convinced with the divulged reasons as to why he would not have heard of her, and Goz, who had been ordered to be silent by Vincent, could not bear anymore and yelled out angrily.

But for once, no one could hold it against Goz. All the Generals gathered in the assembly hall, including the First Generals without exception, were skeptical of Berstetz’s idea.

No military experience, and no track record of leadership. In other words, it was evident this person had not achieved anything tangible. —Who would listen to such a recommendation?

Goz: “Are you ridiculing the honor of our Imperial Soldiers!”

Berstetz: “Do not be absurd. I told you. As the Empire’s Prime Minister, I would like to offer my opinion regarding the future of the nation. That statement is no fabrication.”

Goz: “How can you say such a thing…”

A blue vein popping on his brow, Goz’s patience was reaching criticality. But before he could explode, Vincent’s voice rang out, “Wait”.

His elbows propped on the armrests of his chair, Vincent rested his chin on his hands and turned towards Berstetz with an evaluative look. Drawing that gaze, Berstetz called to him, “Your Excellency”.

Berstetz: “Once again, I have no intention of conspiring against you, or disrespecting the position of the Nine Divine Generals. I am confident that Madelyn Eschart will surely be able to meet Your Excellency’s expectations.”

Vincent: “Do not speak of confidence so easily. What are her capabilities?”

Berstetz: "—She commands, sky dragons."

Vincent: "…"

At that moment, the air in the assembly hall became still.

Incidentally, as he listened, even Chisha gasped at how reckless that statement had been.

The technique known as Sky Dragon Riding, was a special skill involving the subjugation of the ferocious and brutal sky dragons found only in Vollachia. It took a long time and a lot of talent to be able to subdue sky dragons, and those who could become sky dragon riders were exceedingly few.

As such, sky dragon riders were considered useful, but that was not where the problem lay.

The one of the Nine Divine Generals who had committed treason, Balleroy Temeglyph, had also been a rider of sky dragons.

Everyone: "…"

For the deceased Balleroy's position's replacement, a dragon rider like Balleroy had been suggested.

Regardless of intention, his proposal could only be thought of as an act of provocation.

It could be said it was only natural that the Generals were speechless, and that Vincent also did not have the words to continue.

Wondering what he was thinking, it seemed the area around Goz was about to erupt.

However—

Vincent: "That is like you. Nevertheless, you cannot endorse a sky dragon rider just to replace a sky dragon rider."

Berstetz: "Yes, you have keen insight. Of course, I too, for merely being a sky dragon rider… Even though one possessed such a precious skill, I would not think them qualified to be ranked among the Nine Divine Generals. Even so.”

Vincent: “What.”

Berstetz: “I have just one correction. —I did not describe Madelyn Eschart as a sky dragon rider. She commands sky dragons, that is what I conveyed.”

With a smile that showed no true feelings, the Prime Minister answered the Emperor’s question.

It could be said it was typical for the sides of the conference for both to probe at each other’s true motives without conveying their own.

However cunning his opponents, for such a person to be placed in the seat of Prime Minister, that itself was proof that Berstetz was a competent man.

—Select for talent, and make use of that to create the board.

Vincent was by no means himself a man of exceptional valor, but that was his unconditional method for governing Vollachia, the land of the Sword Wolf.

Therefore, Vincent would once more exercise his own abilities to the fullest.

Vincent: “Kafma Irulux and Madelyn Eschart, summon them both.”

Chisha: “It is no problem for me, but is that all right?”

Vincent: “It matters not. I have an understanding of Kafma’s potential. If possible, an ascertainment of Madelyn’s is also required. If I am unable to see it, that means Berstetz is getting old. I am not so merciful as to provide a position for an incompetent old man. Understood?”

Chisha: “Understood, Your Excellency.”

Despite the callous looks towards him, Berstetz bowed showing no sign of fear.

He did not expect Vincent to show mercy, nor for him to take it lightly. He had absolute confidence in his own judgment, at any rate—

Goz: “Commands sky dragons, he says… Who gives a damn! Kafma can command bugs too!”

Moguro: “Goz, that, not important. I, think.”

Goz: “We do not need to rely on sky dragons, even bugs can carry His Excellency! Am I wrong, Moguro!”

Moguro: “Not wrong. But, I, dislike bugs.”

Berstetz’s view had been accepted, and Moguro quelled the irritated Goz.

With a sidelong glance, Chisha internally reprioritized governmental affairs.

The new replacement for the Nine Divine Generals was a high priority. He was not certain what would be the difference in merit between Kafma and Madelyn, but he assumed there was a high probability they would compete with force.

If that was the case, it would be necessary to establish a time and place—

Chisha: “Good grief, looks like things will be getting busy. Just when the matter of that insurrection was finally starting to settle down.”

Patting his shoulder in premonition of the hard work to come, Chisha accepted the resolution of the discussion for the time being.

It would be necessary to do something to deal with it, perhaps by saying something to Goz afterwards, but asking that of Vincent would probably be expecting a bit too much.

Since Vincent had already done more than enough in accordance with his own duty.

Chisha: "…In a country where the strong do as they please, the crowning role of Emperor is imposed upon and cannot act freely. I find that rather ironic."

Even so, it was a position he had desired and won, so it was an outcome he had to bear.

There were also a great many ways to escape if one really wanted to. He could think of some who had actually escaped the confines of the birdcage, but—

???: "—Oh, is everyone here? Please forgive me for this."

He spoke, just as the conference was about to come to a conclusion.

The doors to the assembly hall had been pushed open to reveal a person with a light tone of voice. The man with an easy-going smile peeked inside, wearing a large blue rope that hung from his head.

He was a character too detached from the tense air of the assembly hall.

At this person's entrance, even Chisha had faint disgust etched into his white face,

Chisha: "Mr. Stargazer, is it? On what sort of business have you made an appearance?"

Stargazer: "Oh no, I didn't know you were actually in the middle of a conference, sorry. You see, His Excellency has kindly allowed me to stay at the Crystal Palace, but I'm basically a good-for-nothing freeloader."

Without minding the unwelcoming atmosphere, the man—the Stargazer, answered flippantly.

To that, Chisha's response was limited to a hollow "I see".

Stargazer was not a position of the Imperial Military like the

Generals, nor a civil office like that of Berstetz, it was something unusual—it was the one and only such position in the Vollachian Empire.

He was not a personage welcome by anyone, including Chisha.

But—

Vincent: “I do not recall summoning you, jester.”

Save for the Emperor himself, who called out to him like that and made no attempt to keep him away.

While exposed to the vigilance and disgust of those around him, the Stargazer scratched his cheek in response to Vincent’s words. His attitude was like that of a child being rebuked for fooling around, but the situations were incomparable.

He acted as if he did not know he was legitimately riding the line between life and death.

Vincent: “We are in the midst of a conference. You have no role to play here. Leave, swiftly.”

Stargazer: “Of course, I will bear in mind my own position. Since it is at Your Excellency’s mercy that I am allowed to stay here. But, I have to play my part.”

Vincent: “Ho.”

At his refusal, Vincent closed one eye and let out an interested puff of air.

At the same time, Chisha and the other Generals went on guard all at once.

—No one liked or trusted this Stargazer.

But the prophecy the Stargazer would bring was a different story.

Vincent: “You could not even foresee Balleroy’s treasonous plot, so what have you seen this time? If you cannot say something beneficial, expect to have your slender neck wrung."

Stargazer: "Please don't say such scary things. As you can see, I'm just a stick of a man. If I'm threatened like that, my knees will break from shaking."

Goz: "Enough of your nonsense! His Excellency demands an answer! Hurry up and answer him!"

Stargazer: "Uwah!"

The Stargazer suffered Vincent's threat and Goz's enraged shouting. He jumped back in an exaggerated manner, and gave a strained smile under the Generals' gaze,

Stargazer: "It looks like I'm not welcome here. So I'll do as you said… Your Excellency, if you're having any problems, it seems your troubles will soon be over."

Vincent: "—. What do you mean."

Stargazer: "Uhh, if someone is competing for supremacy, this is the best opportunity to do it. It's a little hazy, but I think that's about all I can say…"

Vincent: "Is that so. Moguro, sharpen your arm."

Moguro: "Understood."

His head tilted in thought, the Stargazer spoke those words, and Vincent nodded and gave the command to Moguro.

Heeding the command, Moguro raised his huge arm, and the mineral-like smooth arm slowly transformed, and started steadily sharpening to a spear-like point.

Even Chisha knew that Moguro's arm was as sharp and dangerous as a sword. With an arm that could easily cut through solid stone, he could probably take off the heads of ten Stargazers at once.

Stargazer: "Your Excellency?! You're not seriously going to execute me?!"

Vincent: “Nonsense, why would I do such a thing?—First, let us start with the fingers.”

Stargazer: “Surely Your Excellency must also know that information obtained from torture is worthless?!”

Vincent: “With those who hold their tongues like you, firstly it is vital to make them speak. After they do so, one can examine the content with care. Is that not correct?”

Vincent’s severe and rational conclusion caused the Stargazer to shrink away, and his back hit the wall. Moguro, standing more than three meters tall, approached the cornered Stargazer.

Under that oppression, the Stargazer looked around as if searching for aid but,

Goz: “Hmm, we must not allow the assembly room to get stained with blood. Somebody go get a sheet!”

Goz in particular acted as though the torture were a decided matter, and there was no indication anyone would help. Of course, Chisha was the same. There was no reason for him to oppose Vincent and side with the Stargazer.

As it stood, the time when the Stargazer’s fingers would become shorter than the average person’s was at hand—

Messenger: “—Excuse me for interrupting the meeting! There is something I must report!”

Thus, following the Stargazer, a messenger burst into the assembly hall, and the bloody situation was temporarily shelved.

3

Fluttering, white and yellow butterflies flitted about before their eyes.

???: “…”

They gazed at the two butterflies, and their aimless, irregular movements fluttering their wings in midair, and pondered what was actually the relationship between the two of them.

Thinking without puzzling over it, they were probably family? But how could butterflies of differing colors, white and yellow, be blood relatives? Could they have inherited the characteristics of their parents, like humans do with hair color?

???: “But I feel like butterflies basically stick with their own kind.”

If it were a human and a demi-human, they had similar forms and would be able to communicate with language, so love could sprout between them, and a child might be born. The same could be said for butterflies, but strangely enough, they didn’t get the sense that those types of living creatures mated with species different from their own.

Like how birds also paired with similar birds, not different birds.

???: “Oh, but cats and dogs aren’t like that… Am I overthinking it?”

Absorbed in their thoughts, they kept racking and racking their brain to the limit, and then they withdrew from attempting the difficult unanswered question.

What if they abandoned the possibility of the two butterflies being family, and saw them as sworn enemies?

Thinking of it that way, it was curious that the dance of the butterflies, irregularly changing places with each other, looked like a life-and-death battle where none did concede an inch.

They also became curious about the techniques used by butterflies. Although human eyes could not see the regularity of it, perhaps butterflies use a sort of insect-killing martial art?

If learned, there may be an opportunity to make use of it in their own swordsmanship.

???: “Speaking of, it seems like the Insect Cage Tribe can come to a mutual understanding with their own bugs, though I don’t think there’s anyone who has a butterfly. If there were, my troubles would be solved.”

Basically, they had heard that the bugs the Insect Cage Tribe allowed to parasitize their bodies were mostly aggressive types. But if it were a butterfly that used insect-killing martial arts, wouldn’t that be sufficient qualification to be counted among the strong?

Preferably, they wanted to observe more closely, and turned their attention towards the butterflies—

—In a flash, red flames poured down from on high, and the field of flowers was instantly consumed.

???: “…”

The idyllic scene from a moment before vanished without a trace, flowers reduced to ash by the licking tongues of flames.

The world that had been painted in gentle hues of blue, green, and yellow, had been swallowed up and repainted into a red hellscape.

It was not just plants and flowers, starting with the butterflies, various bugs and animals had been turned to ashes in an instant.

And, the reason behind it was—

???: “A violent greeting as usual, huh.”

The young man with swaying blue hair looked back at the scorched field of flowers from a bit of a distance, shrugging his shoulders. Before his eyes, standing in the middle of the burning field uncaring of the scorching flames, was a half-naked young lady.

Her outfit left her dark skin mostly exposed, herself possessing floppy dog ears and silver hair, and an eyepatch concealing her left eye. She was the one responsible for the burned field of flowers.

Her name was—

???: "—Anya."

Anya: "…No, it's Arakiya. Don't make me keep saying it."

When called Anya, it was immediately refuted with an unhappy look by this girl—Arakiya.

He heard her answer, but the young man answered back "No, no", shaking his head. And so, without stopping his shaking,

Young man: "Sorry, but that's what I've called you since we were kids, right? I can't correct it now, my mouth has already learned this movement by heart."

Arakiya: "So, since forever, I've been saying…!"

Young man: "Yeah, yeah, I know. So I've also been saying since forever, right. —If Anya beats me, I'll humbly correct myself. And yet,"

Arakiya: "And yet?"

Young man: "And yet, isn't it Anya's fault for not beating me all this time? If you say it's my fault, I can only say I'm sorry for being too strong, yeah?"

He closed one eye and smiled charmingly at her. At that, Arakiya's face filled with rage, her whole body exuding fighting spirit and creating a frightening atmosphere.

Seeing that, the young man let out an "Oh dear", and once more opened both hands in front of his chest,

Young man: "C'mon, look, it's not safe here."

Arakiya: "…Butterflies?"

Fluttering, the white and yellow butterflies flew up from his open hands.

When Arakiya had rushed in along with her flames, he had promptly covered them with his hands and protected the two butterflies. Had he abandoned them, they likely would have burned along with the flower field.

Young man: “It’d be a bummer to have a long-awaited one-on-one duel spoiled by an interruption. If you consider yourselves indebted to me, I’d certainly like to hear who wins…”

White and yellow, the conclusion of the battle of two butterflies and what had led to it in the first place. It must surely be a delightful story, and the young man’s curiosity was inexhaustible.

But, it seemed hearing the rest of the story would be difficult, and the young man sighed as he sliced through an oncoming ball of flames.

Young man: “Really Anya, you’ve been tactless since you were a kid, y’know.”

Arakiya: “I was never Anya in the first place.”

Young man: “Say what you want, but you’re rather proud of it, aren’t you?”

Waving his drawn sword, the young man grinned at Arakiya with her hand turned toward him. At his remark Arakiya gave a baffled expression, but the answer was plain.

Anyhow—

Young man: “Since I, Cecilus Segmunt, the leading star of this world, personally gave that name to you. You can loudly and proudly call yourself Anya!”

Arakiya: “Cecilus, I’ll kill you.”

Cecilus: “Hahahaha! There you go again, talking about something you can’t do!”

Laughing at the straightforward comment, the young man—Cecilus Segmunt ferociously charged into the destructive force of nature that rained down incessantly.

On one hand, a deadly swordsman who cut through the destruction with the help of the two katanas on his waist.

On the other hand, a beautiful deviant who manipulated nature at will and twisted the way of the world.

—These were the Vollachian Empire's Nine Divine Generals First and Second ranked.

4

Cecilus: "Wow, Anya, you've gotten strong! Look, my kimono has a few scorch marks here and there! This will be super hard to send off for repairs!"

Arakiya: "Yeah, well…"

Cecilus: "So, as usual I'll leave the mending to you! You'll be repairing what you burned and tore yourself, so don't complain!"

Arakiya: "…Fuck off and die, Cecilus."

Arakiya spat a curse, lying sprawled on the burnt field. But, the curse's main target looked unconcerned as if he had heard nothing.

Beyond the effect of the curse, hostility and murderous intent were overflowing, and he was calm in the face of that, so cursed words were nothing significant.

After all—

Cecilus: "It's bad luck to say small fry lines like "die" and "fuck off". If you lower your own value as an actress, the roles that come your way will be unimportant."

Arakiya: "…Again, you make no sense."

Cecilus: "I don't think I'm saying anything that difficult though? Big shots only say big shot things. Small fry only say small fry things. That's how the world works, so paradoxically people who can say cool things are cool!”

Cecilus held up a finger as he spoke of his own philosophy. He plopped down cross-legged next to the fallen Arakiya. Though he was dirtied with ash and soot all over, he bore no conspicuous wounds.

Considering that, the area around them looked desolated as far as the eye could see much like it had been carpet bombed by magic stone artillery, it was hard to believe they had rampaged in the hypocenter.

Cecilus: “I can even dodge the rain if I really try, y’know.”

Arakiya: “…No matter how you look at it, that’s a lie.”

Cecilus: “So what! It’s up to yourself whether it’s a lie or not, I say. You can’t do what you think you can’t do. As long as you think you can’t, you’ll never be able to slice through clouds.”

Carping at the weak objection, Cecilus unsheathed the katana on his waist as he sat.

In a flash of lightning that left even the sound behind, the force from the drawn blade rose into the sky, and the thick clouds above the pair of them were cleaved in twain right down the middle.

Arakiya: “—Slicing clouds.”

Cecilus: “Well, it’s a bit of a startling feat, isn’t it? But if I had said that I couldn’t reach the clouds or whatever, I wouldn’t have been able to do it ever!”

Arakiya: “…”

Cecilus: “So Anya, instead of saying “die”, or “I’ll kill you”, you should speak with a more solid sense of purpose. —You have a goal, right?”

As he peered at her face lying on the ground, she turned away as if the gaze made her uncomfortable. He leaned over further trying to study her face, and Arakiya finally flipped over.

Amazed, Cecilus smiled broadly at the young lady's extreme attitude.

A clash between two of the Nine Divine Generals, which considering the surroundings was nothing but an inconvenience to others—It was a common occurrence between Cecilus and Arakiya.

There were various reasons for the Nine Divine Generals to fight one another, but Arakiya fought Cecilus to challenge the ranking order.

The Nine Divine Generals were ranked in order of strength from the lowest number, so the only person above the Second Rank, Arakiya, was Cecilus—That was to say, Arakiya wanted the seat of the First.

By obtaining that seat, she would be able to make her wish come true or some such.

Cecilus: "I'm also rooting for Anya's wish to come true. I won't go easy on you though."

Arakiya: "…Still hate you."

Cecilus: "Oh no, I get it, I get it. But I don't mind you hating me, in fact I like it."

As he spoke, Cecilus took off the outer layer of his kimono, and gently laid it over Arakiya's prone figure.

He was aware she would not like it, but in the midst of battle he couldn't worry about the clothes she wore. Since her light dress by nature was tempting, he would feel sorry for those around if he did not take care.

Cecilus: "Even though Anya's an especially beautiful woman, you have zero consideration, huh. If the other soldiers started feeling strange and turned the tables, you wouldn't even be affected by their eyes!"

Arakiya: "…What you're saying, I've no idea."

Cecilus: "That you don't get it is the problem, I think. Is it that the master of your heart has left you alone all these years, and no one has taught you anything? Do you want me to train you? Woof woof, woof woof.”

Arakiya: “…”

His outer garment wrapped around her shoulders, Arakiya sat up and seriously glowered at him.

In return for his courtesy, Cecilus was left in a lurch. Although he did not know the difficulty of being treated with kindness by an opponent he could not win against, he could imagine it.

Cecilus: “I wonder whether being comforted by Sword Saint-dono would be tough… Normally if someone you like is kind to you, you’d be happy even if you’re frustrated, right?”

Arakiya: “Hate you, Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “Oof, so stubborn. I’ll leave this one to Chisha after all!”

When troubled, Cecilus decided to rely on Chisha, the person he wholeheartedly trusted to solve his problems.

Once his mind was made up, Cecilus would act quickly. Just like a bolt of lightning.

Cecilus: “Well then, I’ll bring Anya back to… Oh? Come to think of it, it seemed like there was something going on at the castle today…”

???: “—G-General Cecilus! General Arakiya! Are you alright!”

Cecilus: “Ohh, over here, over here!”

Turning his head, Cecilus waved to the voice, smiling broadly.

Then, an Imperial Soldier gingerly set foot onto the burnt field. The young soldier looked around,

Young soldier: “Wh-What on earth… What happened?”

Cecilus: “Ahh, no need to worry! This area is Anya’s estate, we’re just using a place left untouched for our duel.”

Young soldier: “Ah, General Arakiya…?”

Hearing this, the soldier’s face stiffened and his eyes turned to Arakiya who had not responded. She just stared at the ground pouting, dissatisfied with her defeat.

A charred and desolate wasteland, that was the guaranteed damage each time Arakiya messed with Cecilus. It was not so much Cecilus, but when Arakiya raged it was like a natural disaster occured, so flashy damage was unavoidable.

The environmental damage was egregious, that excluding battlefields, Arakiya’s destructive activity was basically only permitted on private land she had attained through her own efforts.

Cecilus: “It’s by direct order from His Excellency. That’s why I live in a shack on Anya’s property.”

Young soldier: “I see…Huh?! A shack?”

Cecilus: “Yep yep. Look, see over there? That’s where it is.”

Cecilus pointed out a place a ways away to the astonished Imperial Soldier. Near a forest and a flowing stream was a shack, that was Cecilus’ dwelling.

In addition, a similar shack sat on the opposite side of the grounds, which was Arakiya’s residence, so the top two of the Nine Divine Generals each lived in their own hovel.

Young soldier: “Wh-Why, the two strongest of the Empire, in that sort of place…?”

Cecilus: “Because I buy all the treasured and excellent swords from all ages and places that I can get my hands on, which uses my entire salary. In Anya’s case, it’s because she doesn’t care.”

Young soldier: “…You live together?”

Arakiya: “No…”

He was not sure if he was right to, but curiosity got the better of the soldier and so he asked the question. Arakiya was quicker than Cecilus to deny his suspicion.

In fact, though they lived on the same land they did not live together, so it was the correct answer.

Actually, as to why Cecilus lived on Arakiya’s property,

Cecilus: “That’s also His Excellency’s order. See, if I lived in a bad place, and Anya’s temper exploded, it would cause a wide range of damage, right? Since that’s the case, if I’m always within Anya’s reach, the only one in danger will be me, he said…”

Young soldier: “Excuse me, excuse me! My comprehension is poor, so I don’t understand what you mean!”

Cecilus: “Hahaha, His Excellency’s judgement seems poor, right? There’s probably more to His Excellency’s words, but I haven’t heard details so I’m not sure.”

With a cheerful pat on the shoulder of the bewildered soldier, Cecilus smiled at him apologetically.

Honestly, not comprehending it was understandable. It was just that Cecilus had been living this way for many years, so he was not bothered by it now.

Arakiya: “…So, what do you want?”

And just as the bewildered soldier looked about to pass out, Arakiya asked the reason for his visit.

To her query, the soldier replied “That’s right!”, and regained his energy as if he had been rescued.

And then—

Young soldier: “General Cecilus Segmunt and General Arakiya, an urgent summons has come for both of you! Please hurry to the

Imperial Capital's Crystal Palace right away!"

Cecilus: "The Crystal Palace… Ah! By the way, is there a conference today? I always just doze off when I go, so lately I haven't been getting invited."

Arakiya: "Me too…"

Young Soldier: "I haven't heard much about that situation, but this time is different!"

Ignoring Cecilus and Arakiya's replies, the soldier straightened up and his face became stiff. Seeing the rising tension and unease in his expression, Cecilus moistened his lips with his tongue.

For some reason, it seemed a problem had occurred.

Cecilus: "Balleroy-san just did all that not too long ago, what's going on in Vollachia all of a sudden, huh? Maybe the start of a war?"

Arakiya: "…The Emperor Selection Ceremony, would be enough."

Cecilus: "Hmm, I guess I see Anya's point, but I'll be off my game, y'know. My pent-up frustration was cleared away by Sword Saint-dono, so… Sorry."

When two Generals started conversing, there was no reason a foot soldier should interrupt. While apologizing for interfering, the soldier said "No", with a shake of his head,

Young soldier: "The situation calls for both of your strengths."

Cecilus: "Oh ho, what for?"

Arakiya: "That's…"

The soldier paused there, swallowed his saliva in one gulp and continued.

The situation that he had introduced that required the strength of both Cecilus and Arakiya, it was—

Young soldier: “—The Seventh of the Nine Divine Generals, General Yorna Mishigure has raised a rebellion!”

Sword Identity II

1

—Yorna Mishigure, of the Sacred Vollachian Empire's Nine Divine Generals, had a bad habit.

It was customary in Vollachia for powerful people to be promoted and hold high positions.

The system of the Nine Divine Generals, revived by the current Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, was a representation of this. But given that the selection was based solely on the requirement of strength, naturally, humanity would not be guaranteed.

Strong people were able to be strong because they did not pander to others, nor concern themselves with the weak.

In accordance with such ideology, it would not make sense for them, for the people with ultimate strength, the Nine Divine Generals, to carry a modicum of ethics, or of a spirit of cooperation.

Consequently, many of the Nine Divine Generals had a sparse record of attendance even in conferences attended by the Emperor, and this state of affairs would go unpunished. Of course, that did not mean mere selfishness would be forgiven.

—For those people, there were roles only they could play.

On the condition that they fulfilled these duties, the Nine Divine Generals were allowed a degree of freedom beyond belief.

And naturally, should they be deemed unfit for these special privileges, they would be made to yield by a force greater than theirs.

That was the way of the strong, the custom of the Vollachian Empire, the Land of the Sword Wolf.

—Moreover, returning to the topic of the opening passage.

One of the Nine Divine Generals of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, Yorna Mishigure.

Standing at the pinnacle of strength in the Vollachian Empire, the ruler of the Demon City, holding unparalleled power and privilege to match, she had one incorrigible bad habit.

And that was—

Messenger: "—Seventh of the Nine Divine Generals, General First-Class Yorna Mishigure has raised a rebellion!"

A messenger rushed in through the opened doors of the assembly hall, and hearing the gasping soldier's pointed appeal, instantly, silence fell over the room.

It lasted for the length of time it took for the words to hit their eardrums, and permeate their brains.

Then, the information was digested by their brains, and after a beat each person's reaction became apparent.

Most of the Generals at the conference had wide eyes and tense faces, while each of the reactions of those seated at the center of the assembly hall were different from the ordinary officers, with no exception.

Some furrowed their brows, some were lost in thought, and some did not stir in the slightest. And the one with the fiercest reaction, raising his arms covered in golden gauntlets,

Goz: "Damn her, that vixen!!"

He brought down his stout arms in anger, pulverizing the grand table into splinters.

The might of the blow gave rise to wind, the violent shockwave making the hair and clothes of the participants flutter. The strike delivered in a fit of rage held the power to slay even a large Witchbeast in one shot, reminding all of the strength of the man feared as the Lion Knight, Goz Ralfon.

But then—

Vincent: “Your foolishness is not limited to your loud mouth, commoner.”

The Emperor’s eyes were icy as the grand table was demolished, his black hair swaying in the resulting wind.

Under Vincent’s gaze, the face of the one who had lost their temper, Goz, grew pale. The red color his face and neck had acquired upon hearing that report then vanished, and Goz knelt his huge body on the spot.

Goz: “Your Excellency! I am terribly sorry! Please punish me however you see fit…”

Vincent: “Nonsense. When would there be time to punish you? You are one of my Generals, yet you are too much of a fool to grasp the situation? Or are you suggesting that I am a fool?”

Goz: “My apologies! Everything is as you say!”

Goz was deeply ashamed of his blunder, forcefully prostrating himself.

For better or worse, being prone to emotional outbursts that could easily influence his own capability as well as his command of large armies was a characteristic of his. Perhaps, this too ought to be dubbed a bad habit.

Goz would do his utmost to rectify it were that pointed out to him. Yet, depending on the circumstances, that would carry the risk of reducing the most powerful manifestation of strength of the man in the Nine Divine Generals to that of a merely ordinary General.

Therefore, Vincent directed merely a single glance to the man on bended knee, and did not reprimand him further. Instead—

Vincent: “Is this what your prophecy foretold, Stargazer?”

Stargazer: “Probably. …But, I’m thinking to myself that there’s not much of a point in prophecies if I can’t tell you of them earlier, right?”

Vincent: “Hmph.”

Moving on from Goz to fish for further information, and hearing the answer of the Stargazer whose slender face was hidden by his robe, Vincent snorted with an expression that showed no trace of emotion.

The report of that treasonous plot concurred with the prophecy brought by the Stargazer kept in Imperial Capital’s Crystal Palace. In light of that, as well as the situation arising from the topic of the conference, he could see what ought to be done.

—What ought to be done by the one at the top of the Vollachian Empire, the Emperor.

Vincent: “Berstetz.”

Berstetz: “Yes.”

Resting his chin on his hands, elbows braced on the armrests of his chair, Vincent addressed the thinnish elderly man, who responded quietly. The Prime Minister bowed his head reverently, and Vincent turned his sable eyes towards Berstetz,

Vincent: “The name you gave a short while ago.”

Berstetz: “—It was Madelyn Eschart, Your Excellency.”

Vincent: “That one, is she willing to come when summoned?”

The Emperor’s query seemed to test him, and the wrinkles of Berstetz’s face deepened grimly.

However, before the old Prime Minister could answer, a voice called out to Vincent with “Your Excellency”. In the seat opposite to Berstetz was Chisha, who served as Vincent’s adviser.

While Chisha’s white face betrayed no emotion, he glanced over to Vincent, Chisha: “Are you certain you want to do this?”

Vincent: “It matters not. Should they fail to meet expectations, we shall just behead them, senile old fool and clown, both at once.”

Chisha: “…I also agree, as you wish.”

Receiving Vincent’s answer, Chisha obediently withdrew. The Stargazer ducked his head and looked like he wanted to say something, but Vincent paid him no mind.

Vincent: “You heard me, Berstetz. My intentions are clear. You also must do so.”

Berstetz: “Certainly, I understand, Your Excellency. Of course, I am prepared to sacrifice my life for the betterment of the Empire. — What is there to be afraid of?”

Vincent: “…”

Vincent said nothing to Berstetz’s reply, which was earnest to the point of feeling disingenuous.

Without further ado, Vincent turned his gaze to the top of the head of the large kneeling figure.

Goz still remained with his body flat, only the top of his head able to be seen as a result.

Anyway—

Vincent: “Commoner, the one you nominated, he shall likewise move at once.”

Goz: “—Hk! Of course, Your Excellency! He is currently in custody on the grounds… With Your Excellency’s permission, we shall do so at this very moment!”

Vincent: “Do not blurt out that which you cannot do. —Have him ready by the time the troops are deployed.”

Goz: “Yes Sir!”

Given conditions equivalent to those presented to Berstetz, Goz accepted with a voice like the rumbling of the earth.

As Chisha had also agreed, the course of action for leaders of the Empire was decided.

Vincent: “Yorna Mishigure’s rebellion shall be suppressed. The successor for the seat of Ninth of the Nine Divine Generals shall be decided based on the performance of those two, Kafma Irulux and Madelyn Eschart.”

Moguro: “Your Excellency, next, vacancy supposed to be Seventh?”

Receiving Vincent’s orders, this question was presented by Moguro.

As a steelman, his voice was stiff to the ears; the other Generals in the room were of the same opinion. Naturally, if the treasonous Yorna were executed, she would be stripped of the position of Seventh she had been anointed with.

Chisha: “Once that comes, General Second-Class Kafma and Madelyn-dono alike could join the Nine Divine Generals, or perhaps a new name will be raised by spectacular efforts. Of course, we must keep in mind the possibility that other Divine Generals may also be lost in this battle.”

Berstetz: “I would prefer avoiding such a dreadful situation. Still, I believe Moguro-dono’s concern is premature. Whether or not Yorna-dono is stripped of her position depends on the will of His Excellency, does it not?”

Continuing after Chisha, Berstetz’s narrow gaze pierced Vincent.

At the probing look in the old man’s eyes, so narrow that one might think his eyelids were shut, the Emperor closed one eye. To others, there was probably not much to interpret from that reaction but—

Vincent: “I am neither merciful nor lenient. However, as long as they play their part, nor shall I revoke the position I bestowed. Albeit.”

Then pausing for a beat, Vincent surveyed the personnel encircling the assembly hall, and resumed.

Vincent: “If a piece on the board does not obey my will, no longer shall that be the case. —And know, that goes for all of you present as well.”

Those words of Vincent Vollachia brought the present conference to a close.

2

—”The Flamboyant” Yorna Mishigure’s rebellion.

News of an Imperial General First-Class’s rebellion spread like wildfire throughout the Empire, its origin a large city located to the southeast of the country—an incident in the Demon City of Chaosflame.

Originally, it was common for each city in the Empire to be self-governed by city leaders that possessed private armies.

Nonetheless, there were forts stationed by Imperial Soldiers at strategic points and along the main roads that linked every city. In order to maintain public order in the Empire, which boasted the largest territory of the Four Great Countries, powerful troops kept a watchful eye, day and night.

Therefore, the first scene of this incident also occurred at the settlement of soldiers on the front line of the realm’s defense. The one who had destroyed the entirety of the forces there, had been none other than Yorna Mishigure.

???: “They’re saying even though there were some three-hundred soldiers at the fort, every last one of ‘em was killed. I’ve heard a lot of bad shit ‘bout General First-Class Yorna till now, but it ain’t gonna fly this time.”

??: “Yeah?”

In the bustling atmosphere of a cheap eatery, seated at the same table, a young man gave a half-hearted reaction to his colleague’s tale, and looked down at the meat on his plate.

The thick, slow-roasted meat was minimally seasoned with solt and peppa. The fragrance of herbs tickled his nostrils, and his saliva reflected the overjoyed cheers of his empty stomach.

“Meat you can heartily sink your teeth into” was the sales pitch of the shop, and there was no objection to be had regarding that point. But the young man’s taste was for meat that was not overcooked and remained a more reddish color.

All of this was the result of leaving the matter of ordering entirely to his crude companion.

It was entirely his own oversight, since he did know that his companion made decisions without a care.

He firmly vowed never to let this person make any sort of decision on his behalf ever again.

Anyhow—

Companion: “Oi, what’s with the half-assed response? This is a big deal for the Empire. It ain’t someone else’s problem.”

Just before he could sink his teeth into the meat that was not quite to his liking, his companion bent forward—an eyepatch on his right eye, Jamal dampened the mood in a sullen voice.

His partner glowered at him, and under his glare, the young man put back down the fork in his hand,

Young man: “I don’t really believe it’s someone else’s problem. It’s just that we’re in the middle of eating, you know? You’re the one who brought me to this reputable restaurant, and yet you’re making me wait, it’s not fair.”

Jamal: “Ya dipshit. You can eat meat basically whenever. But how often do you get a chance like this to show your mettle as an Imperial Soldier? You better take it serious too.”

Young man: “Serious, huh? You don’t look like it, but you’re a really earnest guy, aren’t you?”

Jamal: “The fuck?!”

With that unintentional expression of honest thoughts by the young man, Jamal’s face immediately turned red.

Contrary to his crude speech and demeanor, the strange thing about Jamal was his deep loyalty to the Imperial Soldiers. Though he was a weak Low Count, the fact that he was from an Imperial aristocratic family may have influenced him somewhat.

But then, Jamal had neither the self-awareness nor the readiness as the next head of the Aurélie family, and his only concern was rising up in the world solely by his own efforts.

To put it nicely, he was an honest man who did not rely on the power of his family. To put it badly, oneu could call him an absolute moron who took his ideal privilege and threw it down the drain without making use of it.

Of the two, he was closer to the latter, precisely because he remained on the same level as one of the ordinary soldiers despite being born a Low Count. The young man did not disagree with the view that Jamal was an idiot.

However—

Young man: “I commend you. Even though things may appear this way, I’ve enough brains to give due respect to the guy who’ll soon be my brother-in-law.”

Jamal: “You “commend” me? I don’t sense any respect in that tone of yours…”

Young man: “It’s not in my nature to be able to sing your praises outright. If I could, Katya’d also have an easier time putting her faith in me.”

Jamal: “Yeah, that’s probably true. She’s a stubborn one, I’ll say.”

The young man shrugged his shoulders as Jamal folded his arms and nodded his head in agreement. The words may have been perfunctory, but they seemed to be effective enough for Jamal.

He had no intention of letting their relationship sour. —He would be in trouble were he longer able to see Katya.

Because that young lady, blood-related to this crude man, Katya Aurélie, was the one and only thing the young man absolutely could not risk losing.

Jamal: “So, yeah. Talking about Katya aside, let’s get back to the subject of General First-Class Yorna.”

Young man: “Can’t I eat meat while we do that?”

Jamal: “What are you, a glutton? It ain’t gonna take that long, just listen.”

Kept away from eating the tantalizingly smelling meat, the young man pursed his lips and looked at Jamal.

His displeasure was laid bare, but Jamal seemed to take it as a sign of seriousness, and raised a finger, saying “You see?”, in a greatly satisfied manner.

Jamal: “I also heard the army’s being sent out to suppress General First-Class Yorna’s rebellion… And that it’ll be a test to decide the next member of the Nine Divine Generals.”

Young man: “Why’s that? I know a Divine General was lost a little while ago, but what’s that got to do with what’s going on now?”

Jamal: “Guess they can’t leave the seat of a Divine General empty forever. And they say that because of that, whoever helps quickly quell the rebellion is gonna get the empty seat. Whaddya think of that?!”

Young man: “I really don’t think anything either way.”

Jamal had been getting more and more heated as he talked, and, severely disappointed in that response, he proclaimed “What the hell!”. His butt fell off the stool, and he shook his head in dismay.

It was as if he were being called an idiot, and it irked him.

Young man: “Even if what you say is true, what’s that got to do with us? Seriously, don’t tell me you’re going to try and do some extraordinary feat here to get promoted to the Nine Divine Generals?”

Jamal: “Uh, ‘course I am!”

Young man: “I knew you were stupid stupid, but never thought it’d be to this degree.”

He was stunned to see Jamal showing his white teeth, coupled with a jab of his raised thumb towards himself.

The position of Divine General, the pinnacle of the Vollachian Empire’s military, was the aspiration of many officers. Jamal even more so; with the background of a Low Count, he held a strong sense of pride as an Imperial Soldier.

It was natural that he would aspire towards the Nine Divine Generals.

Young man: “Look here, Jamal… You and me, we’re ordinary soldiers of the Empire. You may be a Private First-Class, but you’re far from being a General, you’re a foot soldier.”

Jamal: “All the more reason to make a move to turn the tables here…”

Young man: “Such is life, there’s no way a chance like that’d fall into our laps. Besides, awarding the position of the next Divine General for the greatest results in suppressing the rebellion sounds fake anyway. Where’d you hear that from?”

As a man with an unexpectedly wide circle of acquaintances, Jamal collected all sorts of dubious rumors.

The young man was quite cautious in this regard, since Jamal had a history of being swept up by fake news. To put it bluntly, the young man had assumed it was false from the start.

However, “That’s the thing”, Jamal answered the young man’s question with a confident smile.

Young man: “Well, in your case, the level of confidence’s got nothing to do with the authenticity of the matter.”

Jamal: “Shut the fuck up, I ain’t gonna let you question it. I mean, I heard this from the lot that escaped from the fort General First-Class Yorna destroyed.”

Young man: “—The guys that escaped the destroyed fort?”

He ruminated on what he had heard, and Jamal held his head, having blurted it out without thinking.

But for now, the young man put off making any allusion to the degree of Jamal’s stupidity, and pondered. This time, Jamal’s information might not be as ridiculous as he had thought.

Young man: “Having escaped the fort, they’d be related parties to the situation…Given that they’d be briefed on the circumstances, could they be connected to the higher-ups? And, if that’s where you heard it.”

Jamal: “Oi, what the hell. What’s with all the mutterin’…”

Young man: “—Jamal. Your story might be no laughing matter, y’know?”

Jamal: “…”

Jamal, bitter-faced at his own blunder, gulped at that comment.

But he quickly changed his expression to a lively one,

Jamal: “What the hell’d you come up with? Let’s hear it right now, Todd.”

Todd: “Now hold on, don’t be in such a rush. Let’s take our time, settle down, and gather information. We’re going to get called in anyway. Wouldn’t be very fun if we died.”

Answering the impatient Jamal, the young man—Todd Fang, wore a twisted smile.

Smiling, he finally sunk his teeth into the massive piece of meat upon his plate

The meat had already gone cold, but his sharp fangs mercilessly tore the thick flesh to pieces.

3

The terrible scene of the overrun fort was not unlike the report of a one-sided-massacre.

Upon actually arriving at the scene and stepping foot on the soil where so many Imperial Soldiers had lost their lives, Goz Ralfon felt a torturous non-physical pain within his massive chest.

The corpses had already been carried away, and he did not witness the lurid deaths themselves.

However, the aftermath of the battle had been carved into each part of the fort, the numerous broken weapons, the traces of blood that had not been wiped away, presented the fierce battle that had taken place here.

His heart aching at the terrible scene, Goz looked down on the surroundings from the roof of the fort.

Those who had been mercilessly slain here, must have been honorable soldiers willing to defend the Empire.

To be helplessly slaughtered like that, even in the Empire that extolled the survival of the fittest, was a tragedy.

Goz: “Damn you, Yorna Mishigure…!”

His voice trembled with righteous indignation, and Goz clenched his fist, a fist the size of a child’s head.

That the one who had committed such high treason was a General belonging to the Nine Divine Generals like himself, meant Goz could not suppress the emotion boiling in his gut.

Why, why would a Divine General who must wield their power for the defense of the Empire, massacre soldiers gripping their swords under the same will, of all things?

Above all, at what point would Yorna Mishigure sincerely swear vassalage to His Excellency the Emperor?

Goz: “…”

Goz was a veteran who had worked his way up as an Imperial Soldier; as of the revival of the Nine Divine General system, he had been designated as one of the founding members, and had continued to hold that position to this day.

He did not believe his own abilities to be exceptionally superior compared to the other Divine Generals, but he was proud that his loyalty to Vincent, the Emperor of Vollachia, was second to none.

From Goz’s point of view, Yorna, who had raised rebellions against Vincent time and time again, was difficult to comprehend.

Each time the insurrection had been suppressed, Vincent graciously protected her neck and position in spite of it, and once more another situation like this was brought about.

Neither respect for Vincent, nor awareness of her role as a General First-Class, even existed.

For that reason—

Goz: “I shall definitely behead General First-Class Yorna for this rebellion.”

???: “Weeell, that’ll be a bit difficult, won’t it? I appreciate your enthusiasm, Goz-san, but y’know, Yorna-san’s holed up in the Demon City again, hasn’t she?”

Goz’s solemn face turned grim, and a lighthearted voice came from behind as if to put a damper on his ardor.

As Goz turned around, before him was a slender, blue-haired youth who had appeared on the rooftop unnoticed.

As he looked at the fort's devastation, just as Goz did,

Blue-haired youth: "Yorna-san's antics are as relentless as ever, huh. They said all of those who remained at the fort were done in by Yorna alone, but…"

Goz: "Indeed. That is what I have heard from those who got away. In fact, I am sure of it. With General First-Class Yorna's strength, allies would not be required to take down the fort."

Blue-haired youth: "Haha, yeah, if anything Yorna-san's stronger when she fights alone. My condolences to all the people she came across, and then, I'd like to send my thanks to the openin' act!"

In rather good humor, such was the declaration of the youth—of Cecilus Segmunt, and Goz shot him a reproachful look. That was far too little respect for the dead.

Cecilus responded to Goz's critical gaze with an "Oh?" and raised an eyebrow,

Cecilus: "Is Mr. Goz-san feeling displeased, perchance?"

Goz: "Naturally. To refer to deceased soldiers as "an opening act"… They had their own histories and their own lives. To put it in your terms, the stage was theirs."

Cecilus: "Oops, my apologies. But, lemme make one correction, Goz-san."

With a snap, Cecilus stuck up one finger, looking up at the taller Goz. With that slender finger pointed at his jaw, Goz's thick brows drew together, and Cecilus continued.

Cecilus: "Certainly, there's a saying… that every person's the protagonist of their own story, but to me that's escapism. It's impossible. In this world, there's but one stage program called this world… and there's only one shining star, only one person who's the stage's lead actor."

Goz: "…And you are' claiming that is you?"

Cecilus: “Yep, that’s right!”

Thumping himself on the chest, Cecilus asserted it with zero shame on display.

That was Cecilus’s philosophy, a creed no one could overturn—Neither Goz, nor anyone else in the Empire, could ridicule it as a foolish pipe dream.

Why?—The reason was that this was the Vollachian Empire, where the strong were esteemed, and Cecilus Segmunt was peerless, the strongest swordsman, and bore the title of First. The strongest in the Empire.

In accordance with the Vollachian Empire’s way of doing things, to ridicule his logic and deny it, one must be stronger than him. And there was no such being anywhere.

Therefore, no one could deny Cecilus’s philosophy.

???: “—This again. Cecilus, you’re so stupid.”

Immediately following his conclusion, an exception appeared, berating Cecilus’s philosophy as stupid.

The exception, shrouded in wind, slowly swooped down from the air and stepped on the rooftop of the fort. Unseen wind twisted around her, her short silver hair fluttering, it was the young dog woman, Arakiya.

That was a lineup consisting of the First, Second, and Fifth of the Nine Divine Generals.

Were an unknowing soldier to rush into this place, they would be in for an extreme shock.

But then—

Cecilus: “Oh, you’re late, Anya. We started running at the same time on “ready, go”, but I got to the fort quite a bit faster, didn’t I?”

Arakiya: “…We hadn’t actually decided where we were going.”

Cecilus: “Now that you mention it, that’s true, but since Goz-san was standing on the top of the fort like a shiny gold beacon, Anya also didn’t hesitate to come here, right? In that case, wouldn’t it be fair to say that I won because I reached Goz-san first?”

Arakiya: “Die, Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “You’ve a quick temper because you can’t argue!”

When Arakiya spoke with a scornful glare, Cecilus shot back, raising his voice as well.

Were any soldier to witness this childish back-and-forth, their shock would go beyond the simple fact that it was an assembly of Divine Generals, and amount to something more deeply rooted.

By nature, both Cecilus and Arakiya had a tendency to lack self-awareness as Divine Generals, but when put together, that tendency became increasingly notable.

Of the two, Arakiya was the more serious one, but tended to be engulfed by Cecilus’s atmosphere, and dragged down to the same level.

Goz: “General First-Class Arakiya, it shall be troublesome if you talk on the same level as Cecilus. You should have more self-awareness as one of the Nine Divine Generals, His Excellency’s own hands and feet.”

Arakiya: “…I’m sorry.”

Cecilus: “Woah woah woah?! Goz-san, did you possibly get the impression that Anya’s a better person to talk to than me? That’s really hurtful, or rather, I object! Seriously, Anya’s crazy too! She always cooks omelets on just one side, for one thing!”

Arakiya: “If you want them done on both sides, do it yourself.”

In response to the scowling Arakiya’s words, Cecilus pouted and let out a grumble.

With a sidelong glance at them, Goz once again narrowed his eyes at the terrible scene of the fort, and the brilliant Demon City that could be seen beyond.

—Far away in the distance, glittering in the heart of the Demon City, was the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Made of special magic crystals called crimson lapis, it was a castle that equaled the Capital's Crystal Palace in beauty. However, therein contained was the treacherous vassal named Yorna Mishigure.

Goz: "Come to think of it, that glimmer seems like the color of blood."

Cecilus: "Well now, I think that's stretching it a bit… Anyway, seems me and Anya are under your command this time, so what do we do?"

Goz: "I shall not bother tying you two down with logic. Once the battle begins, I shall leave it up to each of your judgments."

Cecilus: "That's Goz-san for you! How reasonable!"

Tasked with being a free agent, Cecilus clapped his hands, his eyes gleaming, overjoyed.

The required qualities of the Empire's Generals were individual strength and ability to command groups.

Goz had reached a certain level of competence in both, whereas Cecilus's qualities were completely concentrated in individual strength.

Likewise, Arakiya also stood out for possessing individual strength, in contrast to people like Chisha, who by nature showed extraordinary capability in commanding groups.

He laid out battlefields suited to each, where their strength could shine fully.

That was what it meant to deploy forces for battle, and it was also an ironclad rule of Goz's tactics.

Truthfully, with both Cecilus and Arakiya, even if the opponent held a sizable force, that would be no match for the two of them. However, that logic was no longer valid in cases when the opponent was a Divine General.

Goz: “Much less when the opponent is Yorna Mishigure… We must make absolutely sure everything goes flawlessly.”

Arakiya: “Yorna Mishigure…”

Arakiya tilted her head, listening to Goz mumbling with thick arms crossed. As she touched the eyepatch covering her left eye with her finger,

Arakiya: “I’ve, never met her. What’s she like?”

Goz: “Mm… That makes sense. Since General Yorna’s never shown her face at a conference, has she.”

Cecilus: “Speaking of that, me and Anya aren’t even invited to conferences! Things will proceed more smoothly if we’re not there, that’s what His Excellency said, from what Chisha told me!”

Goz: “I cannot deny that, despite the fact we are all a bit irritated by it.”

The topic of the low attendance rate of the Nine Divine Generals had just been raised at the most recent conference.

Although, with Cecilus, Arakiya, as well as Yorna not expected to attend, the maximum attendance was limited to six people. And considering they were presently lacking a Ninth, the limit was five people.

It was only just the other day at the conference that even the five of them could not all be present.

In any case—

Goz: “General Yorna is a fox woman who rules over the Demon City. Her arrogant demeanor and lack of respect for His Excellency in her conduct is evident, and I dislike it.”

Cecilus: “She’s incredibly beautiful, and her aura makes her appealing as a stage actress. Oh, and I’ve even tried to kill her twice before, but I couldn’t do it.”

Arakiya: “—Hk, Cecilus, failed to kill her?”

Arakiya goggled at the supplementary fact, lost for words.

Cecilus and Arakiya’s relationship—That Arakiya had attempted to kill Cecilus many times over in her quest for the position of First was well-known. Goz had also once happened to be there for their battle to the death.

Arakiya must have challenged Cecilus more than one-hundred times already.

From her point of view, an opponent that Cecilus, who was without rival in the Empire, could not kill, was unheard of.

Standing stock-still with her one eye opened wide, Arakiya stared and looked Cecilus up and down,

Arakiya: “Cecilus, do you hold back when your opponent’s a beautiful woman…?”

Cecilus: “Woah woah woah, I don’t hold back! No matter who’s my opponent, I’m not gonna cut corners intentionally! Anyway, if I were unable to take that stuff seriously because the opponent’s a beautiful woman, wouldn’t Anya also meet the same condition?!”

Arakiya: “…”

Cecilus: “What can I say, Yorna-san’s strength’s peculiar. I think it’s kinda similar to Olbart-san in that respect. Well, Olbart-san’s strength’s also incomprehensible, isn’t it!”

As Cecilus went on about Yorna’s strength, Arakiya’s expression showed mixed feelings.

Goz was also of the same opinion as Cecilus in that it was difficult to explain, as not much was known about the particulars of Yorna’s power. But Cecilus was right in that as long as the mechanism was unclear, she would pose difficult to subdue; it could be thought of as being in a realm of strength similar to that of the Nine Divine Generals' Third—Olbart Dunkelkenn.

Arakiya: "I'm getting more and more confused. Ultimately, how strong is she?"

Goz: "Ahh, do not blame Cecilus, General First-Class Arakiya. I would also find it difficult to explain General First-Class Yorna's strength. Still, if I had to put it into words."

Arakiya: "Put into words?"

Her head cocked to one side, Arakiya sought an answer to the question, and Goz pondered for a moment.

But ultimately only one answer came to mind, and so, he spoke.

Goz: "I guess you could say it is a power that changes in radiance from time to time, like her alias, "The Flamboyant"."

Arakiya: "…I don't get it."

Cecilus: "I know, right!"

Cecilus laughed loudly at Goz's explanation, and Arakiya tilted her head trying to see what was so funny.

Perhaps displeased by his attitude, Arakiya shot him a reproachful glare. It blew over the swordsman like a cool breeze, her indignation growing worse and worse.

In normal times, Goz did not get the impression that Arakiya was quick-tempered, and he was almost rather impressed by the degree to which Cecilus managed to get on her nerves.

The pair's behavior was unchanged from usual prior to battle, but whether that was thought to be a sign of reliability was a different matter—

Goz: "—For the sake of His Excellency the Emperor, we must carry out our mission."

Arakiya: “That’s right, yes.”

Cecilus: “I got no objection.”

For suppression of the current rebellion, Goz was the commanding officer of the dispatched troops. Cecilus and Arakiya’s response to his determined words were neither hesitant nor faltering.

As long as there was no doubt about his will or ability, there would be no desire for change.

That was the way of Vollachia, and the way things went in Vincent Vollachia’s reign.

???: “General First-Class Goz! General Second-Class Kafma Irulux has arrived!”

Goz: “So he has come.”

Rushing up to the rooftop of the fort, his subordinate delivered a report, to which Goz gave him a dignified nod.

The subordinate was astonished to see Cecilus and Arakiya, as he had not known of their arrival, but he quickly came to his senses and continued his report.

Subordinate: “About General Second-Class Kafma, there is a bit of a problem.”

Goz: “Hm, a problem, you say? Don’t tell me, did something happen during his house arrest?”

Hearing his subordinate’s lowered tone, Goz grimaced and asked that in return.

Kafma Irulux—A young man from the Insect Cage Tribe, holding a strong sense of responsibility, who sincerely regretted the reckless actions of his people who had revolted against the Emperor.

Goz had informed Vincent that Kafma was even willing to take his own life, and that was no exaggeration. In fact, Goz had exchanged words with the repentant man, and witnessed with his own eyes that the man had pushed himself to the point of endangering his life of his own accord.

Such was not his desire, but were his sense of guilt to increase more and more, he would have bestowed upon himself a punishment that would sever his very future.

If such a thing were to happen, as the one who recommended him as the next Divine General, Goz would also be held jointly responsible.

Goz did not care what happened to himself, but he did not wish to disappoint Vincent.

But to the latter question, his subordinate said “No, sir” and shook his head,

Subordinate: “Well, I believe it will be faster if you see it firsthand.”

Goz: “You are saying, you cannot tell?”

Subordinate: “Y-Yes, sir…”

Goz looked down, hand on his chin, and his subordinate nodded, cowed.

The phrasing was somewhat concerning, but it did not seem to overlap with the worst-case scenario Goz had feared.

Cecilus: “Not that it matters, but if you call for a General First-Class, we can’t tell if you mean Goz-san, me, or Anya. See, pretty much everyone here’s a General First-Class.”

Arakiya: “Have you ever done anything General First-Class-like?”

Cecilus: “I have! With the dignity of the Vollachian Empire at stake, I fought a one-on-one battle with the Kingdom’s strongest, the Sword Saint!”

Arakiya: “I heard you got your ass kicked.”

Cecilus: “Well, when we fought again in the Kingdom it was a draw!”

Stamping his foot on the ground, Cecilus responded to Arakiya’s comment by pouting.

Unfortunately, there were strict orders that anything related to Cecilus’s aforementioned embarkment into the Kingdom, including the incident he had caused over there, should not be relayed to others.

Later the bewildered subordinate who happened to overhear this would have to be told to keep his mouth shut.

Careful not to forget that, Goz told his subordinate, “Got it”.

Goz: “Let us head down to Kafma. Lead the way.”

4

Cecilus: “Hahaa, well well, oh dear, I see.”

With a hand on his slender chin, Cecilus closely inspected all over what was before him.

Watching from a little ways back, Arakiya hesitated as to whether she should launch an attack on his back which was full of openings.

Vincent had given her permission to go after Cecilus to her own discretion, but she thought to herself that she should choose an opportunity during the mission.

Not to mention, if she struggled against Cecilus here, she would end up causing trouble for Goz and the other soldiers, disregarding him.

Goz had a huge frame and a scary face, but Arakiya did not dislike him.

He worried about things and tried to take care of her, and if there was something he believed to be bad, he would caution her. Arakiya’s intuition was not the best, so it was helpful for her.

For that reason, even though it appeared to be a perfect opportunity, she did not attack Cecilus's back.

Cecilus: "Huh, you haven't tried to pick a fight with me, Anya. Did you perchance not notice I left an opening just now?"

Arakiya: "Die."

Cecilus prattled not with abusive language, but with language that seemed abusive, and she reflexively retorted back.

This was met with a wry smile, which made Arakiya feel extremely bitter.

Cecilus: "Anyway, I've never made his acquaintance, but he's a surprisingly unusual person, isn't he? You said his name is Kafma-san?"

Goz: "…Certainly, he has always been different from other people in some ways, but not to this extent."

Cecilus: "Ah, so it's like that after all. I'm glad. I didn't expect something even more inhuman than Moguro to join us, so I was bracing myself."

Taking little notice of Arakiya's state of mind, both Cecilus and Goz were in front—exchanging words before the object that had been carried to the cellar of the fort.

Goz's brows were deeply creased, and Arakiya could not guess what was going through his mind. Within her heart, there was resentment, but she also thought the same as Cecilus.

This, object called Kafma, would be difficult to get along with.

The reason being—

Cecilus: "—It's just like a chrysalis, isn't it?"

With a slight smile on his face, Cecilus frankly conveyed his impression.

Chrysalis—A state that was one of the processes by which bugs changed during their growth stage before emergence.

It had been placed there in front of everyone in the basement, covered in a reddish-brown shell, devoid of the slightest sign of movement.

Having been told that this was Kafma Irulux, Arakiya too, was at a loss.

Arakiya: “Why, is it like that?”

Her head cocked to the side, Arakiya inquired the soldier responsible for carrying the chrysalis. Thereupon, the soldier saluted “Y-Yes ma’am!”, shrinking back,

Soldier: “During General Second-Class Kafma’s house arrest, he put a new bug into his body…”

Arakiya: “A bug…”

Soldier: “It is a rather risky endeavor, so I am told.”

Though she nodded at the stiff soldier’s remark, she did not really comprehend it.

When Arakiya looked to Goz for an answer, he muttered “So that is what it is”, with a hand on his forehead.

Goz: “Immediately after they are born, people in the Insect Cage Tribe take a parasite, called a bug, that was passed down by their relatives and put it into their bodies. They coexist with those bugs, and sometimes borrow their power, which is the special trait of the Insect Cage Tribe…”

Arakiya: “But, he put a new one.”

Goz: “Yes, I have heard of that. Those in the tribe who excel, shall again usher in a new bug, and develop their abilities. Which means, General Second-Class Kafma…”

Cecilus: “—So in search of new power, he carried out this endeavor?”

Taking in the view of the chrysalis through narrowed eyes, Cecilus drew the conclusion of Goz's conjecture.

Even Arakiya, who took little interest in the affairs of the world, had caught wind of the Insect Cage Tribe's opposition to Vincent and the resulting punishment of a considerable portion of the tribe. Kafma Irulux too, though he had not taken part in the rebellion, hailed from that very tribe so he had been placed under house arrest.

During his house arrest, he put the new bug into his body, his mind was—

Arakiya: "Was he angry, and wanted to lash out?"

Cecilus: "Ahahahahaha! Of course he wasn't, he's not Anya!"

Arakiya: "…"

Cecilus: "The reason people with regrets want power's plain and simple; for a comeback. To kill the powerless self, and become a different self, stepping onto the stage of death. What else could it be?"

Arakiya thought it could be something else, but Cecilus had a point.

Arakiya too, had once wished for power of the sort. —No, she still did even now.

At the time her own power had not been worthy of protecting her precious person, Arakiya's life took a major turn. The sense of helplessness she had felt at that time was huge, and still affected her in the present.

What if the same thing had assailed Kafma Irulux?

Arakiya: "To change, into a stronger person."

Cecilus: "Literally, he's waiting to change by emerging from the chrysalis, huh. Nonetheless, I wonder how long it'll take to emerge from this state. Goz-san, do you have any idea? "

Goz: "—. I know not, but I can tell you this. We cannot wait for long."

With an anguished expression, Goz answered as though he was wringing it out.

As the one who had endorsed Kafma as the next Divine General, Goz surely possessed a strong desire to see him actively participate in this battle. However, as things were, it seemed that it would not come to pass.

And, regrettably, there was no time to wait for it.

Cecilus: "I see, I see…If that's the case, let's wrap things up without delay."

Arakiya: "Cecilus?"

Feeling sorry for him, Arakiya wanted to do something for Goz.

Cecilus spoke softly in front of Arakiya, and slowly unsheathed his sword.

He readied the faintly blue sword, pointing the sharp leading edge at Kafma's chrysalis.

In his honed swordsmanship, there was no sense of a joke or prank.

Goz: "Cecilus, what in the world are you doing?"

Cecilus: "Right, if I had to say, I'm questioning Kafma's resolve, perhaps? If we can't take long, then I guess he'll have to prove it to me. —How serious he is."

Cecilus responded to Goz's caution, his blue eyes mingling with the energy of the sword.

As the resonating energy of the sword swelled, Arakiya felt the micro-spirits lurking in the air surrounding her become frightened. —As a Spirit Eater, that was terrifying.

She could see why spirits would be afraid of herself, as she ate them. However, the spirits feared Cecilus's swords aura, because that power gave the impression of death without substance.

And it was the same for the tragic being of the Insect Cage Tribe that had turned itself into a chrysalis—.

Cecilus: "—Sh."

Cecilus gave a short exhalation, and the sword in his hand hummed with power.

A light flick of the wrist that emitted a flash of the sword, it was the technique called Cloud Cutting that Cecilus had shown in sport. But few could laugh at it as a street performance.

In particular, those with uncommon courage such as Arakiya's master, and Vincent.

For those without it, it would be enough to give them a sensation like that off their own flesh being cleaved in twain.

Henceforth—

Cecilus: "—Haha, of course."

Laughing, Cecilus inclined his head. Something like violet thorns burst out from the cracks in the chrysalis, and they jumped out as if to graze his cheek.

It was likely some sort of defense response to Cecilus's swords aura.

The thorns poured out from inside the unmoving chrysalis, and Cecilus dealt with them deftly with one sword, protecting himself.

And then—

Cecilus: "I think it's prolly safe to tear off the shell now. Since it responded to my sword's aura, now it's only a matter of time, I think."

Goz: "I-I see. …Yes, it would appear so."

At first Goz seemed surprised, but was convinced upon touching the outstretched thorns. Once he put force into the thorn he had touched, it cracked and shattered. The next, while flexible like a bird of paradise plant, had a hardness to it as though it were frozen.

It spread throughout the thorns extending from the chrysalis, and he confirmed that all of them had crumbled. Then Goz called out to his soldiers once more, and commanded them to tear off Kafma's chrysalis.

Goz: "No, you might be attacked by the thorns in the process of tearing it off. I shall perform that. I shall leave the recovery of the torn shell to you all."

Soldiers: "R-Roger that, sir."

They replied, and quickly set to work on the chrysalis, following Goz's instructions.

Viewing the state of affairs, Cecilus sheathed his drawn sword and looked back over his shoulder in good humor. Disgusted by his buoyant mood, Arakiya's gaze grew quite harsh.

Cecilus: "Oh, in poor humor, aren't you Anya."

Arakiya: "Your good humor is my ill humor."

Cecilus: "What with the weird link? I think it'd be healthier for you to determine your own humor without relying on me or the master of your heart."

Arakiya: "—Tch"

Arakiya's eyes burned with anger, having been told something she wished not to hear.

But, Cecilus brushed off the heat with his hand, "At any rate", he continued,

Cecilus: "The emergence of insects is an incredibly marvelous phenomenon, isn't it? After all, butterflies look totally different as larvae than as adults, don't they? The abilities they use to survive also seem different, right?”

Arakiya: “…Eating leaves, and sipping nectar.”

Cecilus: “Right, their food’s also different! In fact, they’re like totally different things. Even chrysalises, if you tear open the shells before they emerge on their own, the insides are mushy and it makes a huge mess…”

So Cecilus spoke, going that far.

In the background, from the direction of Kafma’s chrysalis, Goz’s deep voice and the noisy voices of the soldiers could be heard. Each one of them was peeling off the chrysalis’s shell, but she had a bad feeling about the noise.

As if it were related to the topic just now.

Arakiya: “Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “I thought it was alright, but was I too hasty?”

Tilting his head in a way that gave no sign he felt any particular sense of danger, Cecilus scratched his cheek with his finger.

Though she sighed at his irresponsible attitude, Arakiya left the matter of dealing with the chrysalis to Goz.

Instead, she stared intently at Cecilus’s profile with her one eye,

Cecilus: “—? What?”

Arakiya: “This mission, is about deciding the next Divine General.”

Cecilus: “Yeah, seems so. So, I was thinking I’d at least like to let Kafma-san give it a try too, but…”

Arakiya: “—I’ll make sure, you’ll properly call me by my name.”

Cecilus: “Oh?”

Arakiya quietly announced her determination, and Cecilus widened his eyes.

Then, his surprised expression changed into a satisfied smirk,

Cecilus: "So in other words, what you're saying is that I'll be surprised by the fruits of this battle?"

Arakiya: "Even you, Cecilus, couldn't kill Yorna. So, I will."

Cecilus: "So you'll try to kill Yorna-san. I see, I see… I know!"

Arakiya nodded, and Cecilus stepped forward in front of her, facing her with a huge grin. Without pause he quickly moved to take Arakiya's hand, and wildly shook it up and down,

Cecilus: "Sounds great, please do try to prove you're better than me! If the requirement's for you to beat me, no matter how much time passes, Anya won't be able to do it, so this arrangement's just perfect!"

Arakiya: "…"

Cecilus: "Oh no, what's the matter? Your brows are gathering ugly wrinkles. Since you're weaker than me, I think it'd be a good plan to at least maintain your loveliness as a beautiful woman."

Arakiya: "Let go."

Arakiya grit her teeth, shaking off Cecilus's arm, which had exceeded the limits of annoyance.

She had decided in her heart, that she absolutely would overturn that tranquil act, and transform it into a tearful face.

Not for the purpose of usurping the seat of First from Cecilus, nor because of the feelings that continued to burn deep in Arakiya's heart for her master.

Simply, it was a necessary rite for Arakiya to remain standing strong as Arakiya.

Cecilus: "Oh dear, Anya's so quick to anger. …Anyhow, I happily welcome such an attempt. I'm more blessed than even Sword Saint-dono, in that I've got someone to challenge me."

Indifferent to that sort of anger from Arakiya, Cecilus murmured with his hands linked behind his head.

The skyless underground ceiling, and the look in his blue eyes that seemed to gaze beyond it, was the most aggravating thing of the day to Arakiya.

It was the permanent figure of Cecilus Segmunt, acting like the absolute strongest, not even taking Arakiya into consideration, more than anything.

5

—At the same time, Imperial Soldiers were in the process of gathering at the nearest fort to the Demon City.

???: “At any rate, it appears we have an unexpected guest.”

In a comfortable, bewitching tone, a dominant voice filled the castle tower.

In a spacious room covered by a wooden floor, deep inside positioned at the seat of honor, was the Lord of the Castle, the heavenly beauty that held the Demon City of Chaosflame in her hand. A fox woman who dressed herself in a flamboyantly colorful kimono, numerous hair ornaments, and all sorts of decorations—Yorna Mishigure.

She was now the woman in the most perilous position in the Vollachian Empire, but her demeanor showed no sense of that.

For all who serve her, it was her calm presence that supported their hearts. Even if the whole Empire was watching, they would not be shaken in the least.

Clearly, this was the way of the beauty that had rebelled many times against the Vollachian Empire.

However—

Yorna: “Even the best may fail, but I did not expect to receive a guest like you.”

???: “Is that an answer to my, the dragon’s, question?”

Bringing the long-handled kiseru to her mouth, leaving a trail of purple smoke, Yorna’s voice was firm.

The voice was emitted from a small silhouette, sitting down on a lower seat looked down on by Yorna. If you looked only at her diminutive frame that carried childishness, her earlier words were nothing but the embodiment of disrespect towards the Lord of the Castle.

Still, there were not many who could press the other party on this matter.

Because the Crimson Lapis Castle in the center of the Demon City was receiving more guests than just the one before Yorna’s eyes.

Yorna: “…”

Intently, many yellow eyes were glaring imperiously inside the keep.

The owners of those eyes were known for their ferocity; whether their opponent was human or Witchbeast, it was their nature to swoop down and attack without mercy. As though to prove that such a tale was neither lies nor nonsense—

Yorna: “—Tanza, don’t move now.”

Tanza: “Y-Yes…”

With a glance, Yorna’s blue eyes flickered in the direction of a person on the balcony of the castle tower.

A deer girl with large antlers growing from her small head—Tears in her eyes, her entire head being held inside the gaping mouth of a flying dragon.

If the flying dragon closed its mouth on a whim, her head would crack as easily as an egg.

And, there were more flying dragons besides the one with the girl’s head held in its mouth. A large number had landed on the roof of the Crimson Lapis Castle, resting their wings while keeping the citizens of the Demon City in check.

Flying dragons held no love for people, and the techniques to make them obey were extremely limited as well. The one they obeyed, whose eyes shone with Yorna's face, was a young girl—

Yorna: "You are…"

Young lady: "—Madelyn Eschart."

Yorna: "…"

Madelyn: "You better listen to what I, the dragon, say. Since not everyone is as kind as me, the dragon."

So spoke the young girl—Madelyn, whose narrow golden pupils were trained on Yorna.

She was sitting in a well-mannered way, with black, twisted horns unlike those of an oni or a deer sprouting out of her head. —A race that was supposed to be lost, which had existed since antiquity.

—A dragonkin girl with the horns of a dragon, was advising Yorna to surrender.

Sword Identity III
(Translation Pending)

Sword Identity IV (Translation Pending)

The Scarlet League
(CA)

1

“Very well. Then, this is war,” the woman proclaimed, stunning and red as blood, proudly brandishing a raised fan in her hand. Those in her presence and anyone who heard her declaration found themselves filled with astonishment, perplexity, and in some cases, fervor. However, there was one unifying thread woven through them all—that being that each one of them were very young.

The enchanting woman’s resounding voice carried across the gathering of young boys and girls, all in their teens, with only a slight variation in age. On top of that, as children, they were far from war-savvy. Rather, they were simple boys and girls from the city. And while not entirely removed from the conflict, they were not expected to join the battlefield themselves. It was an audacious act to declare war to such youths, even attempting to draw them into its clutches.

An act that, even if said as a joke, could easily be misconstrued as malicious intent. Regrettably, however, in this particular instance, the person making the declaration showed not the slightest inkling of speaking in jest. The person was a tyrant for whom even the slightest suggestion of dissent would have the offender’s hand chopped off at the wrist. Be that as it may…

“We are going to war. Both sides should be well prepared,” declared the captivating Priscilla Barielle, repeatedly and with a distinct air of amusement. Her iron-helmeted squire, observing from behind, couldn’t help but think that perhaps it was more than the fear of losing his remaining arm that deterred him from challenging her outrageous words.

2

Several hours before Priscilla’s declaration of war…

"Lady Priscilla! We have a problem beyond my control!" The shrill voice of a child reverberated throughout the grand mansion. It wasn't due to the sheer volume of the cry, but rather because the maidservants had sporadically thrown open the doors and windows to ventilate the building.

The desperate tone in the voice carried a sense of urgency. However, having already figured out its identity, the women all pursed their lips into a smile and returned to their work. Amongst them, only one individual sat up heavily at the sound of the high-pitched voice while scratching their neck.

"Well, well, seems Schult's as peppy as ever today," remarked a man in a black iron helmet, rising from the comfort of the sofa where he had been resting with a hint of irritation. In contrast to his head, which was fully concealed with jet-black steel, the armor protecting his body from the neck down was noticeably lacking. On his feet were customized sandals that looked so out of place, they would surely be seared into one's memory.

Despite his eccentric appearance, however, only a select few were aware of the true nature of the role he fulfilled. In fact, it would be accurate to say that he himself hardly grasped what his position was. "Princess calls me a clown, but is she gonna pay me?" he wondered.

He knew that his mistress was very generous with the wages she paid her attendants. She was never known to be stingy, and her propensity to properly compensate them for their hard work had earned her their respect and admiration. However, his compensation did not come in the form of a monthly salary deposited into an account, so she must have handed it to him in some other way. But the exact details of this arrangement escaped his memory.

"I hadn't really thought about it. I don't really desire much, and she usually gives me pocket money when I ask," he thought. "But maybe I'm just a useless old man with a crappy resume and no savings." Saddened by his unintended self-analysis, the man headed for a room in the building without hesitation.

Considering the identity of the owner of the high-pitched voice and the nature of its cries, he had only one destination in mind. And sure enough, his intuition proved to be correct.

“I tried my best, but nobody would listen to me! At this rate, it will be all my fault that Your Ladyship’s… Your Ladyship’s…reputation will…!”

“Hmm, my reputation?”

“Th-They will doubt you! I can’t bear it!”

Peering into the room, the man’s gaze fell upon the hunched figure of a petite back. Clenching his tiny fist in frustration and trembling impishly was a boy with pink hair, a distinguished butler of the mansion who wore short trousers that complimented him well. This was Schult.

Seeing him in all his childish glory, and his valiant efforts to navigate the challenges before him, he had a charm that made one want to tenderly take care of him. The adoration bestowed upon Schult by all the attendants of the mansion was not only due to his age, but because of his own personality. Yet the attendants themselves were hesitant to openly express their affection for Schult, not because of their overwhelming workload, but for another, more fundamental reason. Namely…

“Your demeanor sure is adorable as always. Say, how can someone so small worry so much about me?” remarked Priscilla, the owner of the mansion, her narrowed eyes fixated on Schult as she doted upon him. Seated in a gaudy chair, her elbow resting on the armrest with her hand placed on her cheek, Priscilla lent an attentive ear to Schult’s heartfelt plea, with a book she had been reading left on her lap.

Priscilla, who was surprisingly well-read, dedicated much of her leisure time to reading. Princess’s time devoted to reading is sacred to her. Interrupting her during this time is like stepping on a landmine that triggers relentless verbal abuse. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if that person gets sent to the guillotine and bites the dust. Of course, the exception being Schult, that is.

"Wait, don't the maids get let off the hook too?" the man wondered aloud. "Which means, the only one getting special treatment is me, the one being abused."

Priscilla, having caught Al peeking into the room from the hallway, called out, "I thought I heard a crude, unusual voice. And indeed, it is you, Al."

"Well, this sucks," Al muttered to himself. He bowed his head as he appeared. Although he hadn't necessarily been trying to hide, he was well aware of Priscilla's unpredictable temperament, akin to the volatility of her own stock price—a frightening thing to say the least. One wanted to take as much time as possible to carefully gauge her mood.

Fortunately, Priscilla chose not to address his eavesdropping. Instead, she simply cocked her chin, and said: "Enlighten me, pray tell. Are you also here to bring me yet another report with a look on your face suggesting the end of the world?"

"Of course not, Princess," replied Al. "You think I'd work as hard as Schult without this helmet on?"

"Even if you did, such unsightliness shall not stir my heart in the slightest."

"Huh?!" Schult blurted out, unable to contain his curiosity at this particular part of Priscilla and Al's exchange. "Lady Priscilla, have you seen Sir Al's face?!" His curiosity having gotten the better of him, Schult immediately clamped his hands over his mouth in remorse for his lack of composure.

"I really am a mess, aren't I?" he lamented. "I should become a bug that does nothing but chirp…"

"Foolishness," Priscilla chided. "I have no desire for insects within the confines of my abode. If you wish to avoid being trampled upon, hatch into the best version of Schult as fast as you can."

"I will grow up!" he vowed.

"Seeing you in such haste, it is indeed adorable."

Al stepped forward, placing a hand on Schult's drooping head from behind. To Al's surprise, the child seemed more delighted than repulsed, a testament to his innocence. I really do hope this kid feeds on the favor of those around him in the future, and grows plump and fat.

"So, what's your complaint today, Schult? Princess making unreasonable demands again?" Al inquired.

"What do you mean 'again?'" Priscilla asked indignantly, furrowing her shapely eyebrows. "When have I ever made an unreasonable demand of Schult? Whenever he laments as such, it is usually due to his own self-indulgence."

"His own self-indulgence, huh?" Al chuckled, appreciating the cuteness of Priscilla's remark. "Well, that's pretty likely." He turned to Schult and tilted his head. "What's up? It's not unusual to see you all flustered, but I can't turn a blind eye to an emergency that affects the Princess's reputation. Tell me what happened."

"Well, you see…" Schult began.

"If I recall, you were supposed to accompany the maidservants into town this morning," Priscilla interjected.

"Surprise! I did!" Schult exclaimed. His reaction was to clutch his small chest, as if she had struck a chord.

Al, who had never witnessed someone exclaim "Surprise!" in such a manner, stared blankly out the window and mumbled, "Into town, huh?" In this case, the town Priscilla was referring to was Krufuna, located in the mansion's vicinity.

The city of Krufuna, which wasn't too far from the Barielle residence, held great significance and prosperity within the Barielle Domain. To be precise, it would be more accurate to say that it was Priscilla who made it flourish.

"I heard things were pretty bad when ol' Leip was the lord," Al remarked to himself.

The tyranny of Baron Leip Barielle, Priscilla's late husband and the former lord, was so extreme that it was almost impressive to watch from the sidelines, while the people suffered both body and soul. That's when Priscilla, Leip's "beloved wife," gallantly emerged to save them with her benevolent governance.

In retrospect, one could almost perceive Leip's excessive arrogance as a calculated strategy intended to boost Priscilla's future popularity. But from Leip's perspective, who died after succumbing to mental deterioration and a near-bedridden state, such an assessment would serve as nothing more than a rhetorical argument not worth entertaining.

"Schult, what did you do in Krufuna?" Priscilla asked.

"I-I was…utterly useless!" Schult moaned, biting his lip, his slender shoulders burdened by a weight too heavy to bear. The incident occurred earlier that morning when he accompanied the maidservants on a shopping trip.

"So basically, you couldn't mediate a siblings' argument about Princess?" Al summarized.

"Y-Yes…" Schult admitted, nodding slightly in agreement. Regret filled his eyes, growing moist with remorse. Al gazed down at him and tapped his helmet thoughtfully as he pieced together the details of what transpired. According to Schult, that was the crux of the matter.

While en route to Krufuna with the maidservants, Schult came upon a boy and girl quarreling in the streets. If it had simply been a trivial argument, Schult would have paid them no mind. However, it became evident that the two, presumably brother and sister, were engaged in a dispute concerning Priscilla.

"The older brother was saying bad things about Lady Priscilla! And the little sister was arguing back with tears in her eyes. But while they were arguing, the younger sister was pushed away…" Schult explained.

"And you just had to butt in," Al remarked. "But that brother sure had guts if he wasn't intimidated by the sight of you, Schult."

"Huh?" Schult looked at him quizzically. Yet it went without saying that he belonged to Priscilla's entourage. Schult was a well-known figure in the Barielle Domain, and there likely wasn't a single soul in Krufuna who would not recognize him. The boy had indeed displayed remarkable audacity to continue slandering Priscilla, even in the presence of Schult. He seems like the daring type of individual that would have been beheaded had he been born in a different era.

"Of course, I'm sure not even the Princess would do something so tyrannical—"

But before he could finish his sentence to defend what was left of her sense of righteousness, Priscilla was on her feet. "I shall make my way to Krufuna!" she declared.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! Calm down, Princess! You can't do that!" Al protested, attempting to appease her anger. Sure, there's nothing more foolish than for citizens to criticize their lord so openly in public, but—

"After all, they were only kids, right?" Al continued, "Those siblings weren't much older than you. Right, Schult?"

"Yes, that is right!" Schult agreed. "The brother was just a little older than me."

"See! No matter what he said, would you really behead a—"

"Foolishness!" Priscilla said, placing her fan against Al's throat before he could utter another word. Al, immediately silenced, felt a scorching heat searing his larynx from the outside, causing him to holler and roll over in agony.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow! Ain't this a bit too much?!" he moaned, clutching his scalded throat under Priscilla's piercing, fiery gaze.

"Too much, you say? If you cannot even comprehend the intentions of your mistress, then there is no point in keeping a fool like you by my side. Do not take your position for granted," Priscilla stated coldly, unfurling the fan that had left a mark on Al's throat.

"For granted?"

"Do not take it for granted that I will continue to keep you in my company," she threatened. She concealed her mouth with the fan as Al groaned. "I am not as short-sighted as you seem to believe. However, Schult will not stop crying about his lack of strength. If I do not take action, my reputation as a lord will suffer."

"What do you really want?" Al asked.

"I simply wish to alleviate my boredom," she confessed. "Additionally, I would like to know exactly what insults were spoken about me."

"Sounds like you." Al dropped his head in disappointment, convinced by Priscilla's characteristically straightforward response. He then scanned his surroundings with a quizzical look. "By the way, where'd Schult go?"

Just as Al was about to search for the vanished Schult, a voice rang out directly behind him. "Sir Al! Here you go!"

"Huh?!" As Al spun around to face the voice, his face was doused with a deluge of water. Upon closer inspection, a breathless Schult was holding a flower vase that had been on display in the hallway. He had carefully removed the flowers, using the remaining water to drench Al. Dripping wet with water that smelled and tasted distinctly of plants all over his helmet, he could do little more than stare in shock at Schult's abrupt and unanticipated act, asking, "Why?"

"You were burning up, Sir Al," Schult responded innocently. "So I thought I should cool you down…"

"I see…" Al nodded at Schult's explanation, then turned his attention to Priscilla with a snap of his head. "I'm gonna wipe down my helmet. Gimme a moment, 'kay?" he requested, indicating the need to postpone their departure.

3

"And that is why I have come here to see for myself," Priscilla declared, crossing her arms and causing her opponents to stiffen before her. Al sympathized with them from the depths of his heart. He sympathized, but there was little he could do about it. He had no power to stop her, nor had he intended to in the first place.

“You’d have to be a real wise guy to speak openly of the Princess,” Al remarked. In truth, it was a rarity for Priscilla to even listen to Al’s opinions, despite his role as her loyal servant. In fact, she hadn’t even waited for his return after cleaning his helmet drenched with vase water. Once he heard that Priscilla and Schult had already departed the mansion, he hurried after them. By the time he caught up, Priscilla was already standing before her intended audience.

“Ah… Oh…” A boy of around thirteen or fourteen stood there, eyes filled with fear as they darted around under Priscilla’s piercing gaze. With red-toned hair and freckles, he was a rather ordinary looking boy with no remarkable features. For a boy like this to receive a sudden visit by the lord of the land, he would surely wilt away. Even more so given the reason for her visit.

“The Sun Princess…! Wow, it really is the Sun Princess!” Beside the boy was a girl, bouncing up and down in excitement, hand over her mouth. She appeared around ten years old, and wore her hair in two red pigtails. Based on Schult’s earlier explanation at the mansion, these two were most likely the brother and sister in question—the siblings who had been arguing about Priscilla.

“And it’s the big bro who was bad-mouthing the princess…” Al muttered to himself. The expected scenario would have been for the sister, in defense of Priscilla, to confront her brother, who had been bad-mouthing her. Then, Schult would have joined forces with the sister, only to be defeated. Had the roles been reversed, however, with the older brother chastising his sister for her ignorance, there wouldn’t have been a problem.

Yet this was not the case. It was a much more delicate matter. Not to mention, the boy’s age is also a concern. Priscilla’s surprisingly patient with children, but this boy looks like he’s teetering on the edge of her tolerance. But when push came to shove…

“Would I have to put my life on the line to prevent rumors of her cutting down one of her subjects from spreading?” Al said to himself. “It’ll sure be a pain to convince the Princess, though.” In fact, it would require more than just pain—it would be a matter of life and death.

Regardless, Al stepped onto the scene on that late afternoon, ready to intervene at a moment’s notice, fully alert for potential confrontations. Just then, Schult spotted Al and called out, “Sir Al! You caught up with us! Um, is your helmet okay? Did it get rusty or damaged?”

“Nah, don’t worry, it’s fine,” Al replied. “Well, if it does break, just use your savings to get me a new helmet that suits me more, ‘kay?”

“A new helmet?” Schult asked, “But I think a hat would suit you better! It would be more fashionable. Plus, we would be able to see your face, Sir Al!”

“That curiosity’s one of the things that makes you so adorable, y’know, Schult,” Al remarked, glancing at the inquisitive young boy who eagerly desired to see his face. Then he turned his attention to Priscilla. “So, what’s up with you, Princess? Already making the kids cry?”

The stunning, sharp-tongued Priscilla dismissed him with a single word: “Foolishness.” She then elaborated, “Do you truly believe I would engage in such behavior? I simply clarified the nature of my visit to them.”

“The nature of your visit? How so?” Al inquired.

“I heard that he slandered me, and I was curious to know what kind of nonsense he had concocted.”

“How I pity them…” Al mumbled.

It’s awkward enough for the accused to know that his words had reached the person in question. However, to be confronted directly about it is undoubtedly an unbearable situation. Not to mention, the fact that the person in question happens to be the lord of the land in which he lived. He must feel like he's on thin ice.

The girl, unaware of her brother's distress and unable to comprehend the gravity of the situation, made a heartfelt plea to Priscilla. "Sun Princess! My brother is so mean! He said bad things about you! Please scold him! Tell him it's not nice!"

If Priscilla were to grant her request, there was a high probability that the boy would face more than a simple scolding. However, it was impossible for this girl to understand that.

"Hmmm, a scolding from me, you say?" Priscilla mused. "That sounds like quite an interesting proposal. What do you think, Schult?"

"U-Um… well, you see," Schult stammered, "it was my fault for not handling the situation properly. So it would be a bit odd for you to do it, my lady…"

"You are not being very articulate," Priscilla chided. "Can you not speak up?"

"I-I want you to watch me do my very best, Lady Priscilla!" Schult exclaimed, standing tall in front of Priscilla. Mustering his courage, he turned to face the boy, his face flushed with determination.

Al observed the scene beside Priscilla in admiration. Schult had apparently reached the same conclusion as him, although from a completely different perspective—that this matter should not be left up to Priscilla.

Schult looked up at the boy, who was only slightly taller than him.

"Why did you have to say such mean things?" he demanded. "Priscilla is incredibly beautiful and charming! And she is smart, too… There is nothing wrong with her!"

"W-Well…" the boy stammered.

"That's right!" the sister chimed in. Encouraged by Schult's words, the girl joined in on proclaiming Priscilla's beauty to her brother. "Whenever I said something nice about Lady Priscilla, you always denied it! Just look at her! She's so incredibly gorgeous!"

Priscilla, being complimented on her beauty by these two young children, did not so much as flinch under the boy's uneasy gaze. She proudly and unabashedly displayed her bold and blazing beauty to the public. However, the boy's gaze held a mix of complex emotions, contradicting what she had been told earlier. It appeared the tension he felt was not solely due to her lordship, but also because he was faced with the beauty of a woman that his eyes couldn't help but admire.

"Well, he doesn't seem to hate you, Princess," Al observed, "but… ain't it just that typical youngster bravado? Y'know, refusing to admit that someone's a looker even though everyone else says so?"

"I fail to see the point of your analogy," Priscilla remarked, brushing off his words, "but I suppose I have a good idea of his motivations. Al, do you happen to have any siblings?"

"Me? Nah, I'm an only child."

"Then it would be futile to expect you to comprehend," Priscilla retorted. Al grimaced at being told off so bluntly. However, his expression remained hidden beneath his helmet, invisible to the eyes of others.

"Cease your frowning. Your gloom is stinking up the air," Priscilla ordered, despite being unable to see Al's facial expression.

"Wha?!" he blurted out, startled.

Ignoring him, Priscilla stepped forward. The boy, cornered by both his sister and Schult, timidly retreated, shrinking once more under Priscilla's commanding beauty and power. However…

"You two siblings both have red hair, I see," Priscilla observed, combing her fingers through the petrified boy's red locks.

"Huh?" The boy appeared startled by the gesture. "Your sister's hair is a brighter shade of red while yours appears to be a tad darker, but it's safe to say they belong in the same category," Priscilla continued her observation, to which the girl eagerly affirmed.

"There aren't many kids with red hair," the girl continued, "so I told my brother how lucky we were to look just like the Sun Princess! But he got really mad at me for saying that."

"Simply having red hair is quite a rarity," Priscilla explained, "so it tends to attract the attention of others around you. Some people will pick on you over the most trivial of things. Has that happened to you?"

"You mean like people saying mean things? Yeah. But, when that happens…" the girl's voice trailed off. Priscilla's question seemed to have triggered a memory, and the girl's gaze shifted toward her brother.

The meaning behind her look was clear. Before today, the girl's brother would have stood up to any criticisms regarding their hair. That is, until a certain red-headed Sun Princess named Priscilla Barielle appeared.

"So that's it, huh," Al deduced, finally grasping the core of the siblings' dispute, albeit long after Priscilla had. In short, the brother's antipathy toward Priscilla stemmed from jealousy. "At first, he was the one defending his sister when she got picked on for being a redhead. Guess that all changed once the Princess entered the picture…"

The boy must have felt his self-respect and pride as an older brother stripped away, causing him to object to his sister's admiration of Priscilla. And then, at the most inopportune moment, Schult happened to pass by. Unable to take back his words, the situation had soon spiraled out of control.

"When you add it all up, the truth's pretty obvious," Al continued. "It's no one's fault, really. I'd just call it bad timing…or maybe just your stars were bad."

"Hmm? Did you figure something out, Sir Al?" Schult asked as Al nodded to himself thoughtfully. Schult turned and looked up at him, tugging at the hem of his vest.

"You're adorable, looking up at me like that," Al commented.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Schult asked. “It’s unfair to keep secrets from me! I want to know too! And I also want to see your face, Sir Al!”

“You’re really hung up on that, huh? It ain’t that big a deal. You really…” Al intended to simplify the situation by describing it as a case of adolescent sibling rivalry. He didn’t want to further drag out the story and embarrass this boy who loved his sister so much.

People were slowly beginning to gather, drawn in by Priscilla’s extraordinary beauty and captivating presence. Many of them were younger onlookers who were originally there after being caught up in the energy of the sibling rivalry. Al figured the situation would get out of control as the commotion escalated and more people began to flock around them. If there’s any moment to wrap up this mess, it’s now, he thought.

Then, a sudden declaration came forth, seizing control of the entire conversation and dominating the scene:

“Very well. Then, this is war.”

The sudden declaration of war left everyone, except Priscilla who held the reins of power, in a state of shock. Of course, Al and Schult were no exception. However, for the siblings, unexpectedly thrust into opposing roles, the astonishment was perhaps even greater.

The older brother’s face grew pale as his eyes widened in disbelief. The younger sister was genuinely taken aback, unable to fully comprehend the situation. Their whispered utterances of confusion made them look exactly identical in their panic.

Unperturbed by their reactions, Priscilla unfurled her fan as she proceeded to command everything within earshot of her voice. Priscilla was an unquenchable flame, engulfing everything in her path and dying it all red. Al wondered if this was really the right crowd for Priscilla to display this side of herself to. However, he couldn’t bring himself to interrupt her.

“We’re going to war. Both sides should be well prepared.” Her smile as she declared war was so magnificent, it silenced any objections.

“Just outta curiosity, why are you playing war?” Al asked, standing behind Priscilla.

“I am not playing. Do not selfishly dismiss it as a mere game based on your own perspective. When there is a clash of differing opinions and military power is involved, it can be considered war, no matter what,” Priscilla said, dismissing Al’s doubts. She peered down into the garden where the preparations for “war” were underway.

“Military power, huh?”

“Schult said that the brother made the first move,” Priscilla explained.

The commotion, which began with a trivial sibling rivalry, had unexpectedly, and quite literally, made its way into Barielle Manor. The siblings at the center of the commotion, along with every other boy and girl they considered friends, had been assembled and brought to the mansion in a dragon carriage.

There, the children, mesmerized by the unfamiliar surroundings and atmosphere of their lord’s mansion, were gradually being acquainted with the intricacies of war. Needless to say, this was not a war that would require actual swords or shields.

“Well, it’s a big relief to see wooden swords and mud balls and such,” Al admitted. “Knowing you, Princess, there was no guarantee the children wouldn’t have been given actual swords.”

“If you give them tools they cannot handle, they shall not be able to achieve their true potential,” Priscilla explained, “Not only are they not warriors, they haven’t even trained to be soldiers.”

“If you’d suggested giving them weapons if they had even a little training, I’m afraid you’d have been roasted.”

“Why would I suddenly go up in flames? Your words make no sense,” Priscilla countered, raising a shapely eyebrow at Al’s remark as she questioned the meaning of “roasted.” Al shrugged off her question, redirecting his attention to the children diligently "preparing for war," as they had been instructed. It was war, after all, and so they had been divided into two distinct camps.

In essence, there was an Eastern Army and a Western Army, led by the older brother and the younger sister, respectively. Although there were exactly 15 members on each side, the older brother's side boasted a higher average age since they were predominantly his friends. The male-to-female ratio was also skewed in favor of his faction, which unofficially suggested their higher probability of victory.

Of course, that wasn't to say that there were no boys on the sister's side. However, with Schult as one of them, despite his fervent enthusiasm, victory would be a challenge. "Let's do our best and work together to prove how amazing Lady Priscilla is!" he exclaimed with unwavering confidence.

Schult had naturally developed more slowly in comparison to other children his age. In addition, due to Priscilla's deliberate attitude towards him, he struggled to maintain a serious demeanor. He was highly unqualified to act as an effective soldier. His gusto could be described both as amusing and painful to watch. However, on the other hand, it was hard to believe that Priscilla was oblivious to these circumstances.

"Why the long face?" Priscilla said, gently touching her own lips.

"You can't see through my helmet! How could you possibly know what I look like, Princess?" Al demanded to know.

"Well, perhaps if I had never laid eyes on your face before," she retorted, "but we both know that is not the case, do we not?"

"Tch," Al clicked his tongue at her cutting remark, unable to find a suitable response as her gesture and cherry-red lips drew his gaze. The memory of that inevitable moment when she had glimpsed his true countenance came rushing back. However, Priscilla and Al played different roles. Despite their pretenses, neither could deny the fact that they had been caught in a moment of vulnerability.

"You questioned the purpose of this war," Priscilla addressed the silent Al. She sat in her chair, propping herself on her cheekbone. Al closed one eye at her words, having assumed that this conversation was over. Priscilla looked at the children below, and continued, "When both parties possess unwavering convictions, times will arise in which they must cross swords, even amongst parents and siblings. Blood ties alone do not dictate where one's resolve is tested."

"I get that, but is it really necessary to ask them that question now?" Al inquired. "Regardless of the little sis' excitement, the big bro probably didn't expect it to become such a big deal."

"As I have already informed you," Priscilla reminded him, dismissing his opinion with the same logic as before, "it was the brother who displayed his military prowess first."

Al scratched his head, unable to articulate his thoughts any further. He understood the cause of the siblings' quarrel and the brother's sense of obligation, but he couldn't agree with the brother's decision to use violence. So is this a form of punishment?

"But if big bro wins this 'war', won't that defeat the whole purpose?" Al asked.

"Indeed, if the older brother triumphs, it would," Priscilla acknowledged. "However, the morale favors the side of the sister. Plus…"

"Plus what?"

"The sister's side has received a little strategic advice from my end." This new information caught Al off guard, shattering his pessimistic expectations.

To be honest, Al did not know if Priscilla was familiar with battle tactics. He could not know, yet he held lofty expectations for her, believing there was nothing she couldn't accomplish. After all, this fearless Scarlet Princess seemed to possess an uncanny knack for receiving favor in all events. Precisely for that reason…

"Everything in this world is made for my convenience," Priscilla declared. And indeed, it truly appeared as if the entire world was united in advocating for her philosophy.

With these winds seemingly blowing in Priscilla's favor, Al couldn't help but voice a question. "Princess, do you happen to have a brother?" The query slipped out before he could contain himself, and he immediately regretted the possibility of upsetting Priscilla with his words.

However, regardless of Al's inner turmoil, Priscilla narrowed her eyes. "And just what makes you think that all of a sudden?" she challenged.

"Ah, well honestly, it just kinda hit me," Al explained. "It's like you understood the reason for the siblings' fight from the get-go, and then, uh…"

"Do not stumble over your words there," she said curtly. "Are you simply seeking my attention?"

"Well, you were pretty hung up on the big bro's antics," he continued. Yet, as he was speaking from a mere idea, he struggled to verbalize it, even to himself. Yet the more he pondered it, the more it made sense.

Thinking back, he recalled the first time Priscilla said she was going to Krufuna. It was not a mere whim on her part, nor due to Schult's perceived shortcomings. Rather, the decision came after hearing the details of the siblings' quarrel. The more he thought about it, the clearer it became.

Upon hearing Al's guess, Priscilla became unusually silent, keeping her mouth shut. Surprised by her uncharacteristic composure in response to his accurate assumption, Al leaned forward and peered into her face. However, in an instant, the tip of her fan extended and pressed under his chin.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!" Al winced as Priscilla's scorching punishment seared through his curiosity. "Agh! Ow! W-Wait, Princess!"

"Do not gaze upon my face with impure thoughts," Priscilla warned.

"It is natural for men to be captivated by my beauty, but those who desire more must be willing to pay the appropriate price."

"That's no reason to carbonize someone's vocal cords, damn!" Al grumbled in pain and frustration.

Having had his sense of superiority scorched by her scathing response, Al shrugged and withdrew, rubbing his throat in discomfort. Priscilla let out a small sigh as Al retreated, and replied, "I had numerous siblings. Older brothers, younger brothers, older sisters, younger sisters."

"Wow, I can't even imagine," Al commented, pondering Priscilla's family structure with a tilt of his head.

Priscilla responded to his reaction. "Hmm? What exactly is so difficult for you to grasp about it?"

"I know I asked if you had siblings. But seriously, Princess, you don't strike me as the kind of person who fits into the typical family portrait," Al confessed. "You don't really give off that big or little sis vibe, y'know? It's like my brain gets all buggy and glitchy when you tell me you fit in both categories."

"What was that, a 'bargain' on words from beyond the Great Waterfall?" Priscilla asked, a slight chuckle escaping her lips as she attempted to wield her recently acquired vocabulary. However, Al wasn't oblivious to the subtle undercurrent of nostalgia in her words.

Nostalgia, yes, nostalgia. I'm honestly surprised to know that even the Princess gets nostalgic about things. Not to mention hearing how many brothers and sisters she got. Or how she spoke of them in past tense…

"Lady Priscilla! Everything is ready to go!" Schult's voice rang out from the garden below as Al and Priscilla's conversation came to a close. Looking around, the scene revealed the children adorned in their valiant "war" attire deployed on either side of the garden, each exuding a fierce determination to prove their prowess.

It was evident that both the younger sister’s camp, already brimming with high morale, and the older brother’s camp, initially hesitant to engage in battle, now displayed a remarkable level of ambition.

“Things are gonna get messy,” Al commented with an unexpected touch of excitement. Priscilla rose from her chair in response.

“That is precisely why it was well worth the effort,” Priscilla proclaimed. Her profile as she spoke, and the fleeting emotion that passed through her eyes, captured Al’s attention. But before he could decipher its meaning, Priscilla thrusted her fan forward and continued, “Both sides must exert their utmost effort. For those who cannot abandon their wills, the only path to prove themselves is through victory. So, let the battle commence.”

“I am off!” called Schult.

The shrill cries of the children filled the air, echoing in response to the commanding voice of the Scarlet Princess. The “war” had begun within the grounds of Barielle Manor, with the brother and sister locked into fierce battle. Watching this scene unfold, a realization dawned upon Al regarding his earlier concern.

What he detected in Priscilla’s profile was the subtle flicker of anticipation. There was an expectation in her eyes, a glimmer of hope that she might witness what she desired.

5

“So what the hell was all that commotion about earlier?” the man grumbled, tilting his head as he stroked his stubble-streaked chin, his face flushed with booze.

He was a towering man with blazing red hair, sporting a shirt without any armor over his moderately fit physique. It gave him a distinct appearance different from his usual worn-out demeanor. However, it was questionable whether that was the impression he wanted to give.

That evening, on the balcony of Barielle Manor, Al found himself in a rather uninspiring encounter with a man, rather than in the presence of Priscilla or Schult. It wasn't that they had prearranged this meeting. They just happened to be in the same place at the same time, quietly spending the evening. Neither of them sought to seek out or avoid the other's company. Sometimes, a man simply needed a moment such as this on an empty balcony to reflect on things.

"Well, it's a complicated thing for dudes our age, y'know?" Al began to explain.

"What?" asked the man. Al shook his head and answered the man's frowning gaze with a gentle shake of his head.

"What I mean is, men are always going through puberty, y'know?" Problems keep piling up as we get older, but deep down, it's the same basic stuff. In the end, we're still asking ourselves, 'Who am I?' It's like we're stuck in this eternal adolescence.

"Well, whatever," the man grumbled. "And you still haven't answered my question, have you?"

"Oh, Princess's whim?" Al asked. "I'm still trying to figure that out myself, bro. It's a mystery to me."

"You're awfully laid-back for a supposed knight of the Sun Princess, huh," the man scoffed.

"Give me a break, bro. I've told you before, I'm not a knight," Al said dismissively. The man stayed silent.

Al detested being referred to as a knight, even in jest. He harbored a deep prejudice against those in the knight profession, considering them little more than chumps. And it wasn't only Al who held such resentment. Neither he nor Priscilla intended to glamorize their relationship with each other. Besides, this guy must also hate any topic involving knights and whatnot. After all…

"You're the father of the Knight Among Knights, Reinhard van Astrea," Al pointed out.

"Tch," the middle-aged Heinkel Astrea clicked his tongue in disgust at the reminder. His frown, unkempt stubble, and simple attire were far from impressive, but upon closer inspection, one could see that he indeed shared similar features to the renowned Sword Saint, with his well-defined face and blazing red hair.

This was only natural, given the fact that they were father and son by blood. Of course, there was no question that their relationship was certainly a complicated one. Otherwise, he would not have been able to serve a master from a different camp than his own son.

Heinkel, still silent, took a swig directly from the bottle in his hand. He was now a member of the Priscilla Camp, joining the ranks alongside those contesting for the royal selection. Nevertheless, Al had no idea what role he played. That was up to Priscilla. It was hard to fathom that his involvement held no significance.

“That ain’t really how I measure things, nor how I think,” Al concluded.

“But if you keep on like that, you’re gonna cause people trouble,” Heinkel remarked. “If Lady Priscilla is dead serious about the throne, she can’t afford to become some queen that nobody understands.”

“Not my concern, bro,” Al said, leaning against the balcony railing. He gently patted the area where Priscilla, fresh in his memory, had been leaning, and spoke with determination. “For Princess, I’ll do whatever it takes to make her win.”

Upon hearing Al’s reassurance, Heinkel glanced at him briefly, and sneered, “Well, isn’t that something. I thought you didn’t give a damn about the royal selection’s outcome.”

“Oh, come on, don’t go exaggerating,” Al said. “I think about it every day.”

“Right, let me rephrase that. I just assumed you didn’t give a damn about sticking your nose into the royal selection process. Lady Priscilla’s perfectly capable of handling everything on her own, right?”

"Oh," Al let out a voice expressing his amazement.

He was a bit taken aback by Heinkel's astute observation. Not because he said something unexpected, but because it revealed Heinkel's keen eye for what was happening around him. Nah, considering how Priscilla managed to see through my helmet twice today, perhaps I'm just not as hard-to-read as I thought.

"No. The reason I wear this helmet is because I already know that, isn't it?" Al wore his helmet with a sense of detachment, yet his overwhelming emotions remained palpable. Perhaps he should have become an actor instead of an outcast.

"Oh dear, you're refusing to answer this too," Heinkel remarked. "You're quite the secretive one, aren't you?"

"That's never been a secret," Al replied. "I mean, I hide my face. Ain't that normally the first thing you see? Well, you won't find anything interesting in my secrets. If anything…"

"If anything?"

"I think you and I are pretty much alike," Al shared, drawing from the bits of information he had heard about Heinkel's complex circumstances.

Between his legendary father, known as the Sword Demon, and his son, the Sword Saint, who was hailed as the greatest swordsman of all time, Heinkel was of a quiet generation, caught in the middle. A pathetic man afflicted by his melancholy and his position. A man deserving of intense sympathy. For Al painfully understood the fear of being overshadowed by one's own illustrious bloodline.

"You don't know a damn thing about me," Heinkel spat bitterly, wrinkling his nose.

"I knew you would say that, though!" Al chuckled wryly. It seemed that Heinkel neither desired nor cared to be understood. Al leaned his back against the railing, gazing up at the moon in the night sky.

"As far as I can tell, today's 'war' was just Princess's way of assessing things," Al said thoughtfully.

“War?”

“Let’s just call it boisterous merrymaking,” Al explained. “You got two people with their own stubborn opinions, rallying their buddies, breaking up into teams, then using all their might to prove their point. Ain’t that just what war is, bro?”

“Sounds like bullshit to me,” Heinkel scoffed. The use of obscene language was a telltale sign of him becoming drunk. The more drunk he became, the further removed from dignity and sincerity he grew.

Al observed this shift from the sidelines with amusement. Al didn’t drink, so he was unable to personally gauge the effects of alcohol. But the unappealing spectacle of an intoxicated stranger was enough to reinforce his aversion to it. In any case, Al’s examination of Priscilla’s awareness and intentions regarding the “war” served as a means of both affirming and analyzing her intentions.

“Princess had something she wanted to see, y’know? And she used that sibling showdown to figure it out,” Al commented.

“What the hell did she wanna see?”

“Unfortunately, she didn’t exactly spill the beans to me, so I can’t really say. My guess could be way off, y’know.”

“You’re useless,” Heinkel grumbled. “Might as well ask her to chop off your other arm.”

“Damn, you’re so vulgar when you’re drunk!” Al complained. “Someone with both arms intact might not get it, but this arm means a hell of a lot more to me than it would to y’all that still got both!”

It was a dispute that could have easily escalated to an all-out fight, yet Heinkel showed no remorse or apology. Not because he viewed others as unimportant, though. On the contrary, it was because he had little regard for his own self, which seemed to justify his reckless demeanor. In fact, Heinkel would gladly accept a duel that came about as a consequence of his outspokenness. However…

"I'm telling you, bro, once anyone finds out you're the father of the Sword Saint, they'll back off real quick," Al said.

"Tch." Heinkel averted his gaze and clicked his tongue in annoyance once more. No matter what they talked about that quiet evening on the balcony, they always seemed to circle back to the same question: Who am I? It was a question that nobody could escape.

A gruff, liquor-infused voice brought Al back down to earth as he gazed blankly at the night sky, contemplating the constellations above for which each of them were named. "So, you said she wanted to see something," Heinkel grumbled, his sky-blue eyes somewhat vacant as he gazed into his half-full bottle of liquor.

"Yeah," Al acknowledged.

"You also got something you want to see, Sir Al?" Heinkel asked.

"I'm surprised you're interested in me, bro. Thought you only cared about your own family." As soon as Al said this, Heinkel scowled and clicked his tongue once more, hurling his bottle of booze at Al.

Al ducked with a "Whoops" to avoid the spinning bottle as it sailed over the railing and into the garden, smacking the ground with a resounding crack. Heinkel turned away without sparing a glance, as if trying to distance himself from Al, who had clearly struck a nerve.

"Yes, I do," Al called out abruptly after Heinkel, walking away from the balcony. Heinkel paused for a moment, listening to Al's words without bothering to turn back. Al cracked a slight smile at his apparent curiosity, but had nothing more to add.

"I do have something I want to see," Al continued. "Princess in the bath!"

"Tch!" Another click of the tongue was the only way Heinkel could possibly respond to Al's mischievous joke.

"Well if that ain't the loudest tongue click I've ever heard in my life!"

“I am so happy that the siblings made up!” Schult beamed. His reaction was one of pure joy and innocence, with no uncertainty whatsoever. Priscilla closed one eye and drew her fan from the open bosom of her nightgown.

“Oh, so you think so too, Schult?” Priscilla asked.

“Yes, I do! I knew you could do it, my lady! I am so proud of you!”

With the tip of the fan, Priscilla gently lifted Schult’s chin and turned his head to the side, causing the boy to make a quizzical face. She could clearly see the reddish tint lingering on his right cheek. It was a visible remnant of today’s “war”, and what one might call a badge of honor.

“To me, considering a battle wound as a badge of honor is a reflection of one’s own shortcomings,” Priscilla remarked.

“Lady Priscilla?” Schult questioned.

“Does your cheek hurt?”

Tightly clenching his small fists, Schult demonstrated his unwavering determination. “It tingles a bit, but I’m fine! It was all part of our winning strategy!”

In addition to the redness of his cheeks, Schult bore scars all over his body from the war. He had scraped knees from falls, a bruised back from being hit, and possibly many other marks of battle. In moments of injury, pain often follows, and one may even shed tears. Indeed, Schult had shed a tear or two. However…

“This whole thing started because of me. Do you despise me?” Priscilla asked.

“Me? Hate you? Lady Priscilla? That’s impossible!” Schult exclaimed in disbelief.

“…”

"I was so happy to fight for you, my lady!" Schult's gaze shifted downwards as he marveled at his own modest display of bravery. "I would have been more scared than hurt if I just cowered in fear…"

His introspective posture, although typical of him, was at the same time as painful as the scars on his body. This mental anguish, however, was not particularly unique to Schult. It was a sort of "fever" that could afflict anyone, regardless of who they were.

"…"

After the tumultuous events of the day, Priscilla had finished her hot bath and lay on her bed. Schult, having changed into his own nightgown, nestled beside her—a customary routine that had become an endearing ritual. This small, adorable boy had become an indispensable cuddle pillow for Priscilla. However, Schult himself yearned for a more significant role than that of a mere cuddle pillow. A fact that Priscilla astutely recognized, as evidenced by the day's war.

The quarrel between the siblings, which Priscilla called a war, unfolded just as Priscilla had predicted. The younger sister's camp, guided by her counsel, emerged victorious. And Schult had played a significant role in securing their triumph. He was one of the first ones to fall, in a rather spectacular fashion, and left the other side bewildered.

"I thought my hard work would pay off, but I was wrong…" Schult said with a hint of disappointment. "Enemies appeared left and right. They were all over me… They were destroying me."

The title of the vanguard may have held a certain allure, but in Schult's case, the first sacrifice may have been more fitting. As the morale of the younger sister's camp dwindled, that of the older brother's only grew in strength and momentum. The sister's camp was driven back by the advancing forces of the brother's. However…

"Well, he is a big brother, after all," Schult said with a smile, acknowledging the reason for the brother's defeat. Despite countless setbacks endured by the sister's camp, once they finally reached their opponent’s leader, the brother hesitated to let his sister down in the face of victory. It was at that moment that Priscilla’s wiles came into effect, bringing the war to an end.

“The condition for victory is the downfall of the other team’s general,” Priscilla had explained. “Which means, if the opponent’s leader falls, even if you are the last man standing, if you manage to take down the other side’s leader, the victory is yours. Whether you win will be determined by the very last moment.”

In this respect, the sister heeded Priscilla’s words and displayed great courage. Priscilla’s advice was simple yet effective: “Your brother will hesitate to kill you in the very end. That is precisely when you should strike.” And indeed, true to Priscilla’s prediction, that is exactly how the conflict was resolved.

“In the end, it was amazing that the brother defended his sister from his teammates, even after she stabbed him,” Schult marveled. “That is why, as you said, Lady Priscilla, they were able to make up!”

However, the final outcome was not as heartwarming as the innocence Schult portrayed. The sister’s strategic move managed to topple her brother and his followers, who had been on the brink of victory. Naturally, they refused to accept defeat, instead directing their anger at the sister. Yet, it was the brother himself who bravely shielded her from their wrath head-on.

Originally, this situation came about due to the deep bond between the siblings. The brother could not bear to see his sister vilified, and the sister, amidst accusations and fear, reaffirmed her love and respect for her protective older brother. And thus, that was the conclusion they reached.

“…”

Pricilla maintained her silence. Despite witnessing the outcome, and the resolution unfolding somewhat as she had envisioned, an unsettling darkness lingered in her heart. In Priscilla’s mind, there were two potential outcomes: whether her advice would have proved effective or not.

Her intuition was right on the mark. The sister successfully stabbed her hesitant brother, thus claiming victory. However, this was not a triumph, but a certainty. It was proof of the elder brother's undeniable love for his sister. It was a war, albeit a false one. The death of the men may have been staged, and the wounds received may have been superficial, but nonetheless, it was still a war.

If she so desired, Priscilla possessed the power to incite and manipulate countless individuals to engage in real warfare, where real lives were at stake, just as she did today. She could sway naive, ignorant individuals like Schult, who mustered strength through blind faith. Priscilla was fully aware that she held that power, responsibility, position, and beauty. And the outcome of today's events only reinforced that. Why then won't the dark cloud in me dissipate?

"I knew I was not mistaken," Schult said as he sat beside Priscilla, lost in thought. The tone of his voice had suddenly dropped.

"Hmm?" Priscilla turned her attention to Schult. It was an unusual reaction for a normally cheerful boy.

Schult rubbed his cheeks with both hands. "Lady Priscilla, you looked kind of lonely," he mumbled with a hint of concern, dropping his gaze.

"Lonely? Me?" Priscilla asked with surprise.

"That is how it looked to me," Schult continued. "I thought you seemed a little lonely when you were watching that brother and sister…"

Could it be this child blames himself for not being able to mediate the siblings' quarrel? Does he blame himself for my own upset? If so, he couldn't be further off the mark. More so…

"Ha—" She gently put a hand over her mouth, but nevertheless, a breath escaped her, unexpectedly bubbling up from within.

"L-Lady Priscilla?" Schult stammered, taken aback.

It was a laugh that Priscilla had not intended, and one that Schult had unwittingly evoked. It was Schult's achievement that unveiled the true nature of the dark cloud lingering in Priscilla's heart.

"How dare you suggest that I, Priscilla, could be lonely? Oh, how dare you?"

"Wh-Wh-Wha—? I-I was wrong, wasn't I? I knew it…"

"No. I commend you, even though your choice of words may have been incorrect," Priscilla praised her young servant, suppressing his agitation. She placed her fan on the flustered boy's forehead with a smile.

Schult looked shocked at her statement, then patted his chest as if relieved. Foolish, ignorant, and thus innocent, Schult's crimson eyes may have caught a glimpse deep into the heart of the Scarlet Princess, continuing to burn with an intense, fervent heat.

"Schult, you must not divulge your observations about my emotions to anyone," Priscilla cautioned.

"About Your Ladyship appearing lonely?"

"I shall not admit to feeling lonely," she replied defiantly, "however, I do wish to avoid any misunderstandings. I order you to keep your mouth shut, my loyal servant with your radiantly burning eyes."

Schult's red eyes twinkled, and he paused for a moment before nodding his head. "Yes, I understand," he replied. Hearing his response, Priscilla placed her hands on her ample bosom, feeling the dark cloud gradually dissipate. How humiliating yet intriguing it is that this boy, Schult, was both correct and incorrect in his observations.

The siblings' war, driven by their love for one another, had ended precisely as Priscilla had foreseen. However, on the other hand, it was still not quite what she had hoped for. If one cannot conclude definitively that the thoughts, feelings, and love between siblings loses its radiance in the face of various factors, and their warmth and glimmer eventually gets overshadowed, then…

“Was it me who was lacking? Or was it you, Brother?” Priscilla murmured, gently poking the cheek of the sleeping child in her arms on her bed. She directed her question to a fragment of cloud that had dissipated within her heart. Naturally, there was no response. The opportunity to ask had long since slipped away. However, she held on to the feeling that an answer to her nagging doubts would come to light in the near future.

It would have been sufficient if I could simply forget about it and keep myself distant. However, if such a premonition were to resurface from the searing heat within my heart, the answer would undoubtedly find its way to me. Because after all…

“Everything in this world is made for my convenience.”

END

Short Story Collection 7

Lugunican Papers
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

???: “Shorty! Shorty Megan!”

A man walks down the hallway, his shoes thudding loudly. The people look at each other and quickly lose interest at the sound of his footsteps and his thick voice, as if to say, “Oh, here we go again”.

It is an everyday occurrence, a common sight, and not something worth talking about.

The man in question walked forward without paying any attention to the people around him, and opened the door of the room he wanted to go to with the momentum of almost breaking through the wall—

???: “—Shorty Megan! There you are!”

Shorty: “Huh? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I am here, I am here, Shorty Megan is here, and I am alive and well!”

The door was opened and in the room, a small boy literally jumped up at the sound of the man’s voice.

He was wearing a large round hat that covered his head completely, and his bangs hid both his eyes. He was dressed in a pair of worn-out work clothes and shoes whose only selling point was their sturdiness, and it was obvious at a glance that they were worn out.

This is not because of a personal sense of beauty or a desire to be unique and not conform to the trends of the world, but because of a lack of all the elements: interest, wealth, and above all time.

This is evident in the fact that he never goes home, but instead sleeps in his workroom, which is piled high with miscellaneous papers and materials.

The boy— Shorty Megan, wiped the drool edge of his mouth with his sleeve, hurriedly turning to face the person.

Shorty: “Mo, Mo, Mo, Editor-in-chief Morgan? What are you doing here?”

Morgan: “Yes, of course! I’m Morgan Frantz, the editor-in-chief of the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” And Shorty, you’re my man, my reporter, my limbs. Which one is it?!”

Shorty: “Of course, Your man, your reporter, and all of your limbs.”

Morgan: “Of course you are! But! You’re a little toe at best! If you’re going to write an article like that, I’m not going to trust you with the role of the other toes, it would be too dangerous if I did!”

He was Shorty’s boss, editor-in-chief Morgan Frantz, who was getting angry, his distinctive eagle-nosed face turning red. He is responsible for the publication of a newspaper that circulates within the Kingdom of Lugunica, the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” He is also a fearless worker who knows nothing about compromise.

The editor-in-chief, who is not only tall but also loud and brash, is a genuine news addict who keeps a close eye on all the strange happenings in the kingdom and drooled over everyday events.

There’s only one reason why the news-addicted editor-in-chief went to the trouble of visiting Shorty, a small-time reporter. It means he saw Shorty’s article.

Shorty: “So you went all the way to… yes! I am honored by your praise!”

Morgan: “Compliment why would I give you one? Look at my face! Look at my face! 70%… or even 80% of my eagle nose is red. That’s the measure of my anger!”

Shorty: “Chief! It is 100% bright red!”

Morgan: “If that’s the case, I guess I’m angrier than I thought with this article!”

Barking, a dark red-faced Morgan throws a stack of papers in his hand at Shorty. It hit him in the chest and fell to the floor. It was an article that Shorty had stayed up all night writing.

It was a labor of his blood and tears, and this is how he treated it. In other words—

Shorty: “Is it that you want me to fix it?”

Morgan: “Oh, you idiot! All rejected! What are you getting a little greedy about? First of all, who’s going to be excited by the idea of a massive infestation of giant rats underneath the Royal capital? I was wondering if there would be any surprises along the way, but the closing words suck again! Tell me!”

Shorty: “—You’ll have to see for yourself if you want the rest of the story!”

Morgan: “Shut up! Don’t lead the curious reader into the dangerous underground! Just call the guards and have them exterminate them! What if some readers die or get sick from challenging the giant rats?”

Shorty: “In this case, is it a liability issue?”

Morgan: “Idiot! The problem is that we are losing subscribers to the Dragon Nation Newsletter!”

Shorty picks up the article on the floor, and Morgan sticks his finger in his nose.

Shorty liked Morgan’s ideas, even though they were based on values that could only be described as press addiction. This was because Shorty was also a news addict.

That’s why this article was also the result of his own hands-on research.

Shorty: “It was a great piece of work that interviewed people around the favelas and captured the details of the swarms of large rats that were breeding in large numbers under the royal capital. And now it's all been rejected?"

Morgan: "Of course! Back straight and chin up! —The motto of Dragon Nation Newsletter is!"

Shorty: "—We don't publish anything that doesn't make your heart tremble!"

Morgan: "That's all there is to it!"

Shorty stood up straight, and Morgan spat at him. Shorty gritted his teeth in frustration as his face was covered with a large amount of spit.

To be honest, Shorty did not hesitate to ask himself whether this was the right thing to do during his interviews.

Shorty: "But once you start something, you feel like you're losing money if you stop halfway…!"

Morgan: "I've always bought your resilience, but this time it's been shown in a bad way. Speaking of bad things, I have the same impression about the drawing in this article!"

Shorty: "What? You can't even draw? Aren't the drawings really good?"

Morgan: "It's too well drawn! It's like the horde of… giant rats that are about to move!"

Snatching the article out of Shorty's hands, Morgan opens the press picture in question wide.

In front of Shorty's eyes, a horde of rats… A realistic drawing of a horde of rats came into view. It was so close to the real thing that you could almost smell the animal scent of the rats in the air.

Rather, Shorty was overcome with the memory and fear of an actual underground encounter with a horde of rats, a sensation that was both visually and olfactorily ironed out.

Shorty: “Uhhgg…”

Morgan: “Don’t throw up on your own article! But a lot of readers are going to have the same reaction to your article, you know? It’s Lululara who drew this picture! didn’t She!”

Shorty: “Sh, she is somewhere here…”

Shorty points a wobbly finger to the corner of the room as he fought back nausea.

Following the movement of his finger, Morgan said “Yeah?” as his eyes widen. In the middle of a mountain range of piles of papers— there was the figure of a girl who was absentmindedly running her paintbrush across the pile.

Shorty: “Ooooh?! There you are, Lululara!”

Lululara: “Under here…”

Shorty: “What are you doing in this messy room? It’s… or rather, it stinks! It stinks! You haven’t bathed since you got back from the underground, have you? Oh, Uhhgg!”

The girl— Lululara took one look at Morgan, holding his nose and fighting the feeling of vomiting, and is silent. However, unlike her emotionless expression, her hand continues to draw in the notebook on her lap.

That was her role as a news illustrator for the articles in the “Dragon Nation Newsletter”.

However—

Morgan: “She is a real treasure… When she can make any event come to life in a picture, she can make even the most outlandish event convincing. Isn’t it a pity, Shorty?!”

Shorty: “Eh! Uh it is, it’s…”

Morgan: “Don’t look so glum, Shorty.”

Shorty was surprised by this sudden change of attitude, and he couldn't help but smile amiably. However, when Morgan saw this, he turned red in the cheeks as well as the nose.

Morgan: "We need to shake the reader's emotions, their true emotions. How can we do that if we can't even be honest about our own feelings, I know you don't!"

Shorty: "Uh…"

Morgan: "Shorty! What in the world did you join the Dragon Nation Newsletter for? Was it to chase a rat's tail and carve wrinkles between the brows of the subscribers of the Royal capital? What do you think?"

Shorty: "That, that's not true!"

Shorty took a strong stand against Morgan's pitying words.

Forgetting the fact that he was overwhelmed by the moment, he stared at his boss, who was forty centimeters taller than him. Shorty's head grew hot as if on fire, drowning out the amiable smile and putting his true feelings to the tip of his tongue.

So, when asked why he joined the Dragon Nation Newsletter—

Shorty: "I, too, want to write stories that make a difference in people's hearts… and the world! I didn't become a reporter to torment rat haters!"

Morgan: "What then! How can you waste Lulularа's valuable time and talent, and do it while you're napping in a pile of documents?"

Shorty: "If that was… then… then…"

Shorty grits his teeth at his boss's words and watches his partner, who always forgets to eat or sleep and devotes herself to painting, pointing out that he is giving Lulularа work that she does most certainly doesn't deserve.

Above all, Shorty himself was aware that his work was not commensurate with his passion.

Shorty: "…"

Shorty choked up as he felt such a surge of passion.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an article on the wall of his office. The article was not written by Shorty, but it was pasted on the wall as if it were an important piece of paper or a memorial.

The content of the article was a perfect example of what Shorty envisioned a "world-changing article."

And it is Shorty's deepest desire to write such an article—

Shorty: "—The Royal Selection."

Morgan: "What?"

Morgan's one eyebrow twitched as he heard Shorty's murmur. Shorty was able to make out a change in the sound mixed in with Morgan's voice.

To shake the heart of the editor-in-chief, wanting to make the heart of that "first reader" who sees the article before anyone else tremble.

Shorty: "I'm going to… interview the candidates for the Royal Selection! We will hear the real voices and get to know the real faces of the candidates for the Royal Selection, women who are shaking up this Dragon-friend Kingdom and who are the greatest concern of the people of the Kingdom!"

Morgan: "…"

Shorty: "Wh, What do you think?"

Shorty, who had chosen his topic with vigor, was anxious about Morgan's reaction to his silence.

A reckless choice, he might have been reprimanded for it, but Shorty's fears were shattered by Morgan's broad smile after a few moments of silence.

Shorty's eyes widen at the intensity, and Morgan's huge palm grabs him by the shoulder.

Morgan: "Good! Good, Shorty! That's what I'm talking about!"

Shorty: "Gyaah!, My shouldeerr!"

A large hand grabbed his shoulder, and Shorty screamed in pain as his bones creaked. But Morgan's eyes lit up with Shorty's screams.

Morgan: "The biggest concern of the people, the Royal Selection! It's been a few months since the start of the selection was announced, and at first, everyone was talking about it, but gradually the buzz had faded away. Let's try to turn the people's attention back to the Royal Selection by ourselves… Not bad! Not bad at all!"

Shorty: "Th, thank you!"

Morgan: "Shut up, you idiot! You haven't done anything yet! Don't be happy!"

Shorty: "Yes, yes, indeed! I'm an idiot!"

Shorty is lifted up, then immediately dropped and emotionally swept away, to which Morgan spits at him, "Good!" Morgan spits at Shorty and sticks his finger in the air.

Morgan: "Now that you've decided that, hurry up, Shorty! Don't let anyone else get the better of you! Get an interview with the candidates for the Royal Selection, and do whatever it takes to get the story out! I'll replace the rat article."

With that, Morgan grabbed the article on the giant rats and ran furiously out of the room. The wind he created sent the papers in the room soaring, and Shorty's long bangs were also ruffled.

But in the room, after the storm had passed, Shorty clenched his fists in passion.

He felt that he had spoken out of turn, but the passion in his heart was still real.

Shorty: I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it, I'm going to change the world! Lulularа, you're gonna be busy!

Lululara: "…un."

Shorty: "Huh? For me?"

As Shorty turned around looking enthusiastic with a puffed-up nose, Lululara tore off a page from her drawing book and handed it to him.

—There, Shorty was painted with blood running down his nose in excitement.

Shorty: "No, you have to say this out loud!"

Shoving a cloth up his nose, Shorty carefully folded the picture and put it in his pocket. Then he grabbed his interviewing gear and was ready to launch the next part of the interview.

Shorty: "I've been told that after the giant rats, the next candidates for Royal Selection… are not going to be as easy, but we're going to do whatever we can to make this interview a success! Let's go, Lululara!"

Lululara: "…See ya."

Shorty: "Don't just say "see you later", you're coming too!"

Shorty carries Lululara, who has curled up ready to shut down. Shorty carries Lululara on his back, and together with her art supplies, they leave the headquarters of the Dragon Nation Newsletter in an awkward position.

Lululara: "…Slow."

Shorty: "I'm not slowing down! I've heard that the candidates are beautiful, so I'm sure your creative juices will be flowing! It's going to be a huge deal!"

Shorty's adventure began, calling desperately to his apathetic partner.

His steps were heavy, and his partner was lethargic, but Shorty’s eyes were shining. It’s a perfect day to start writing an article that will move the world.

Shorty: “I see it, Lulularа… the blue sky is blessing our way forward!”

Lulularа: “it’s, cloudy…”

Shorty: “Look with your heart’s eye!”

2

Dragon Nation Newsletter is known as a small newspaper in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

The newspaper reports a wide range of emotionally-charged events in Lugunica, from happy news that decorates a peaceful life to a painful and sad occurrence in which someone lost his or her life somewhere.

However, no matter what kind of emotions it provokes, there is a core to the Dragon Nation Newsletter that can never be compromised. And that is—

Shorty: “We don’t publish articles that don’t make your heart tremble! It’s our company motto, Lululara.”

Lululara: “…Blub, Blub”

Shorty: “Will you stop blowing bubbles and listen to me? I know it’s a habit of yours, but you’re not supposed to do that in any of the places we’re covering.”

Shorty raises his fist and expresses his enthusiasm, while in front of him, Lululara’s face is devoid of motivation.

After leaving the office, the two discuss their plans for the interviews at a restaurant in the royal capital. Shorty is in charge of making the plans and explaining them, while Lululara is solely in the role of lending a silent ear.

Shorty: “We’re going to be going around to the candidates who are participating in the Royal Selection. Regardless, how much do you know about the Royal Selection, Lululara?””

Lululara: “…Royal selection?”

Shorty: “You look like you don’t know anything! Scary! The attitude of total disinterest in the public’s interest, even though you’re in a position to be involved with a newspaper, is scary! I’m also afraid of the attitude that you’re going to start drawing that scared look on my face!”

As you can see, Lululara is a “press illustrator” who makes her living drawing pictures for the newspaper. Her drawing skills are the stuff of genius, and she is a weirdo who cares about nothing else.

Shorty needed to successfully manage this long-standing and troublesome partner.

Shorty: “I’m going to tell you, my precious partner, about this upcoming interview topic. You can just dismiss it as an explanation to help me organize my thoughts.”

Lulularа: “…yes”

For the time being, Shorty clears his throat with a small cough, glad that he had gotten some rapport. Then he began to explain to Lululara about the Royal Selection and the participants.

Shorty: “First of all, the Royal Selection is a ceremony to determine the next ruler, which was proclaimed in the royal castle about six months ago. Three years from now, the king will be chosen from among the five selected candidates… So now we’re in the middle of a competition to see who will be the king.”

The story of the king and his bloodline falling ill en masse may be counted as one of the most recent and unshakable cases of Great Calamity in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

As a result, the kingdom is now without a king, and the Council of Sages is running the affairs of state instead. However, this is still an unhealthy situation. In order to solve this problem—

Shorty: “It’s a throne selection competition, or the Royal Selection for short. The five candidates for the throne are Duchess Crusch Karsten, Chairman Anastasia Hoshin, Baroness Priscilla Barielle, Felt-sama and Emilia-sama.”

Lululara: “Is that big?”

Shorty: “No, it’s a small number of people, considering the deadline… We don’t know how many candidates will be left on the day the Royal Selection is decided.”

Lululara tilted her head and didn’t seem to understand the true meaning of Shorty’s words.

It is easy to imagine that if the struggle for the next throne requires a candidate to have certain limited qualities, it is easy to imagine that a dark struggle, including assassination, would take place.

Shorty: “I mean, you can’t call yourself a candidate for the Royal Selection if you’re not deeply determined. In other words, all five of the selected candidates must be prepared to do something extraordinary.”

These are the candidates vying for the vacant throne. All will have extreme ambition.

Shorty: “Besides, all of them are women… In this case, I should say heroines. Crusch-sama is known as “Valkyrie”, Anastasia-sama has risen to prominence in the Kararagi City States… And Felt-sama who I heard rules the over the poor districts, most importantly, I heard that she has the “Sword Saint” with her.”

Lululara: “Mean… “Knight Amongst Knights”?”

Shorty: “That’s right… Oh, come to think of it, Sir Reinhard was painted by Lululara before.”

Lululara’s reaction reminded Shorty of one of her previous paintings.

However, it was not an interview. She happened to run into the “Sword Saint” while strolling around the capital on her day off, and he kindly agreed to Lululara’s request to use him as a painting subject.

In fact, Lululara seemed to be very enthusiastic about it, using her brush excitedly, and the finished picture was excellent.

That one is also securely packed in a Shorty binder at work.

Anyway—

Shorty: “If Sir Reinhardt pledges his allegiance to her, then Felt-sama must be an extraordinary person, and…”

Lululara: “…And?”

Shorty: “Emilia… sama is”

A feeling of dread envelops Shorty’s entire body as he tries to name the next candidate.

Shorty's face is bloodless and his shoulders tremble, which makes Lululara wonder, but if she knew the reason, she would be just as frightened.

One of the candidates for the Royal Selection is Emilia, a half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes, the same characteristics as the "Witch of Envy" who once drove the world to the brink of destruction.

She is said to be a demonic being, with a terrifyingly ferocious Spirit clad in a cold air that freezes everything in its path. Rumor but it is said that it has permanently frozen the land in the northern part of the kingdom and enjoys ruining the lives of the local people by causing snowstorms for fun.

Of course, she is not the "Witch of Envy" herself— but she is dangerous enough to be rumored to be the second coming of the "Witch of Envy".

—Up until now, there have probably been other reporters besides Shorty who have attempted to write about the same subject matter.

The biggest reason why none of these interviews bore fruit was none other than "Emilia".

If he was going to call this an interview with the candidates for the Royal Selection, we naturally need to hear from all five of them. However, everyone was hesitant to interview Emilia.

Shorty too believes that the biggest barrier to these interviews is his fear of Emilia.

Shorty: "…"

But seeing Shorty frightened, Lululara runs her paintbrush through her drawing book.

The fact that it is drawn, didn't help, and the fact that she is not worried at all surprised Shorty, but it still gives Shorty the nudge to come back to himself.

Shorty: “Change, the world…”

Shorty clenched his teeth together as he remembered the challenge he gave to Editor-in-Chief Morgan.

Shorty won’t lie about those words. Shorty didn’t just bite down on his back teeth, he bit down on his dream.

Shorty: “This is no time to be scared. I’ll do it, Lululara. I’m going to do my job.”

Lululara: “…And, That one?”

Shorty: “Oh, ah. Ahh, yeah, that’s right, that’s right, I know.”

Lululara hands Shorty the drawing she has finished. Shorty smiles at his own paleness and carefully puts the drawing away in his bag.

Shorty: “The last one is Baroness Barielle, or Priscilla-sama, who has had so many unfortunate marriages that she is known as the “The Bloody Bride”. She is still young and beautiful, and as a result, she has been married many times, but all of them ended in tragic love… She’s a tragic woman.”

Lululara: “…Tragic”

Shorty: “She has a good reputation in her territory, and people seem to love her calling her the “Sun Princess”. I guess she has a warm charm that makes people around her smile positively.”

From the standpoint of having heard various previous stories, Priscilla Barielle is the one whose situation Shorty would personally like to support the most.

A woman who is unfortunate enough to have to overcome the absurdity of her circumstances to achieve glory.

It is a heroic tale and a story of success that will be a heartwarming experience for all.

Shorty: “Whoa, whoa, not good. I have to be impartial. Above all, it would be disrespectful to the person who agreed to be interviewed in the first place.”

Lululara: “Other person…?”

Shorty: “Duchess Crusch Karsten”

Shorty shudders as he says this, anticipating the beginning of a full-fledged interview.

She is a leading figure in the kingdom and the most favored candidate currently in the Royal Selection.

Shorty: “To be honest, I was the one who thought it would be the most difficult, if not the most difficult emotionally. First of all, I didn’t think she would accept my request for an interview.”

After all, the other party is the most prestigious woman in the kingdom in terms of nobility, and she is a woman of great honor.

He thought it was only natural that he would be turned away at the door for an interview with a newspaper that was published primarily for the pleasure of the general public. In that case, he had planned to apply dozens or hundreds of times for an interview, waiting for the other party to lose their patience—

Lululara: “Can they do it?”

Shorty: “I don’t know… Crusch-sama is as martial as a woman can be. She made her father step down when he didn’t need to retire yet, she’s an ambitious woman.”

Otherwise, she would not be able to serve as a duchess who is called by the title of “Valkyrie”.

Perhaps the offer of an interview was just a calculated way to use Shorty. In that case, Shorty would be a pathetic sacrifice.

Shorty: “Even if your opponent is nobility among nobles, with a hundred battles under her belt, Don’t let it get to you…”

First, they will uncover the untold true face of the first Royal Selection candidate, Crusch Karsten.

Even if the first one might be their last interview, Shorty Megan would fight to the end. —They were prepared to do so with such a grim determination.

3

But, as it turned out, however, Shorty's dire predictions were unfounded.

Duchess Crusch Karsten agreed to be interviewed by the Dragon Nation Newsletter, not because of any perceived hostility toward the press in the recent past, nor because she wanted to make a spectacle of the industry.

On the contrary—

Crusch: "Well then, Shorty-san and Lululara-san have been working together for two years… even though you're so young, you're doing a great job."

Shorty: "No, no, really, it's not that big of a deal, ha ha ha…!"

Shorty, blushing at the unexpected praise, Shorty puts his hat back on more deeply.

In response to Shorty's reaction, a green-haired beauty with a graceful and elegant gesture was smiling with her hand over her mouth, saying, "Well, what a modest one".

As Shorty admired the casual gesture, he was aware that he was being swallowed up by the atmosphere of the place— or rather, of the other party and was inwardly flustered at what he had to do.

Shorty and Lululara were received at the Karsten family's mansion in the Noble District of the Royal Capital. They were ushered into the large, spacious parlor, where they sat their butts on the too-soft sofa, looking like fools.

In front of him is a beautiful woman who looks like a heavenly maiden, and he feels vague about whether he is dreaming or not.

Yes, a heavenly maiden, She was a woman who truly deserved such a description. Her long, luxuriant green hair hung loosely down her back, and her feminine, curvaceous body was wrapped in a graceful dress— the beauty of Duchess of Crusch Karsten was enough to make Shorty's brain burn.

Lululara: "hk"

Crusch: "Um, Is Lululara-san next to you, okay?"

Shorty: "I, I am honored by your concern, but yes. This is her normal behavior, so please overlook this…"

Shorty was not at ease with Crusch, who was tilting her head and looking at him with concern. But Lululara, who was working feverishly with her paintbrush next to Shorty, was far from ordinary.

By nature, Lululara honestly followed her own inclinations. To put it politely, when she finds a superb subject nothing can stop her, not even Shorty.

Because in those situations, Lululara's paintings were truly amazing.

Lululara: "…please"

Crusch: "Well, I can have it? This is… me, isn't it?"

Crusch's eyes widen as she graciously accepts Lululara's offered picture.

If you take a look at it, you will see that it is a picture of Crusch, perfectly depicted in Shorty's eyes. It is a work that deserves to be praised as perfect even by Shorty, who is accustomed to seeing Lululara's paintings. Lululara's ability to realistically depict what is right in front of her eyes is demonstrated perfectly.

Shorty: "I'd like to hang it in my room…"

Naturally, Shorty's mutterings were picked up by Crusch, who asked, "Huh?". Shorty, in his haste, to make up for the situation, searched for the right words to say.

Crusch: “Yes, I know, I think so too. She did such a good job of drawing it, Ferri-chan would want to hang it in their room also.”

Shorty: “I know, right…! I hope you found it okay?”

Shorty’s eyes widened as he nodded his head in affirmation of his true feelings. Then speak of the devil that person arrived and whispered a “Nyafufu”, sitting down next to Crusch.

And so the newest addition to the scene is also a scarily good-looking person.

IIf “beautiful” is a good description for Crusch, then “cute” would be a good description for this person. Her gestures, the way she looks at them, and her charm and sophistication are so refined that one cannot take one’s eyes off of her.

But don’t underestimate Shorty, he is a reporter for a newspaper. He has already done his research to find out who this girl —or rather, someone who looks like a girl is.

Shorty: “Kn, knight, Felix Argyle-dono, correct?”

Felix: “That’s right, but that’s not the way to address me. I prefer if you call me Ferris, but you’re welcome to call me Ferri-chan.”

Shorty: “Oh, umm, then Ferris-dono please.”

Felix: “Kufufu, How kyute.”

Felix— no Ferris, puts his finger to his lips and puts a smile on his face, is a man. His mischievous expression and gestures are misleading, but he is a man after all.

Crusch Karsten, a candidate for the royal selection, and Ferris, her knight.

The two people in front of them, who were in a master-servant relationship, were the subjects of Shorty and Lululara’s interview this time.

Crusch: “Ferris, I don’t want you to tease the two reporters too much.”

Felix: “Yesss, I’m sorry-nya, Crusch-sama. But it’s really well-drawn. Crusch-sama, did you take the time to model yourself to her?”

Crusch: “When you say that, it makes me feel like I’ve done something embarrassing… No, I didn’t. I’m sure she’s very good at observing things.”

Rebuking Ferris’ attitude, Crusch’s amber eyes look at Lulularा.

Instantly, Lulularа, mesmerized by the beauty in her eyes, started on a second piece. Shorty, not to be outdone, coughed a little and said

Shorty: “N, now that we have the honorable candidate for the Royal Selection, Crusch-sama, and knight, Ferris-dono, here, may I ask you a few questions for our interview?”

Crusch: “Yes, I am honored that you have taken the trouble to hear me. II am not sure if I will be able to meet your expectations, but I am grateful for your kind attention.”

Crusch bowed with a refined posture to Shorty, who chose his words carefully and asked a question.

He was impressed by the beauty’s beauty, even her bow, but more than impressed, awe struck Shorty’s entire body, causing him to let out a strange “oof” under his breath.

Felix: “Oh, Crusch-sama is too polite, he’s intimidated. You really must have a more relaxed attitude.”

Crusch: “It’s hard to relax… Be natural, you mean?”

Felix: “Mmm, Well, that’s not quite right, but I think that’s all right. Reporter-kun needs to be a little braver than that.”

Crusch and Shorty: “I, I understand…”

The two of them nodded in agreement as Ferris gave orders to both Crusch and Shorty.

Apparently, Ferris is the one who has the most authority here. Lulularа, who has the most freedom, seems to have decided to draw the master and servant together in the second picture.

Shorty: “Well then, Crusch-sama, you’re the leading candidate for the Royal Selection, and it’s been a few months since the selection began, so I was wondering if you could tell me how you’re doing.”

Crusch: “You’re welcome to be more natural with me.”

Shorty: “This, this is the best I can do for now…”

The reason Shorty was flabbergasted by Crusch’s ladylike demeanor was, of course, her beauty, but it was also her behavior that was at odds with his prior information.

The ambitious Duchess, also known as the “Valkyrie,” is a warrior who has ousted even her father. Her reputation does not match the beautiful woman in front of him. The only thing that matches her reputation is her beauty.

In front of Shorty, who was under this impression, Crusch lowered the corners of her eyes slightly and

Crusch: “I think it’s a waste of recognition to say that I’m the most deserving of the Royal Selection. At the very least, I have a lot to learn, and I’m not sure I’m fit to sit on the king’s throne.”

Felix: “Crusch-sama?”

Shorty: “Huh? That’s what you think, huh? You’re not going to give up, are you?”

Shorty couldn’t believe his ears when he heard Crusch’s unexpected self-assessment of lacking confidence and unworthiness, much to Ferris’ surprise.

The coverage of a candidate for the Royal Selection is a complete disaster at the very beginning. Crusch Karsten, the leading candidate in the Royal Selection, confided to a reporter what was bothering her heart—

Crusch: "—No, please don't misunderstand me."

However, Crusch's dignified voice interrupted the confusion of the reporter and her Knight. Shorty was instantly surprised to find that his mind had calmed down.

It was a feeling that surprised even him. Breathless, mesmerized by the atmosphere the woman in front of him wore, and the fact that his mind was captivated.

Crusch: "I am still in the process of learning a great deal… and if there is one thing I have over all the other candidates, it is my family background. That alone will not be enough for me to fulfill the responsibilities of King. Therefore, I will keep on working hard."

Felix: "Working hard…"

Crusch: "May my inexperienced body become a vessel to bear the responsibilities of King. And may my closest followers and vassals lend me the help that I do not have."

Felix: "—Crusch, sama"

Gently, smiling, Crusch's hand rested on the shoulder of Ferris next to her, Ferris' eyes moistened, turning back to face Crusch.

Shorty also involuntarily experienced a feeling of warmth in his eyes at the beautiful sight of this master and servant.

Shorty: "…I think that's a very noble and thoughtful idea. But, changing the subject, could you tell us about the defeat of the White Whale? That feat was done in cooperation with the other Royal Selection candidates."

Crusch: "Oh, for that matter…"

Felix: "Nyafter all, Wilhelm van Astrea, the man who is indispensable to this feat and the greatest contributor to the subjugation of the White Whale, is in our camp!"

Ferris' eyes lit up in response to Crusch's reply. Although surprised by his vigor, this was exactly what Shorty wanted to hear.

Shorty: "Yes, I wanted to ask you about that too! You see, the two main characters in "Sword Demon Love Song" and the White Whale have a very close relationship…"

Felix: That's it! Hold on a second! I'll get you Wil-jii right now!

With that, Ferris jumps over the table and runs out of the room. Shorty is also nervous because he seems to be able to interview the "sword demon" in person.

Crusch gave a "Fufu" at Shorty's reaction.

Shorty: "Oh, no, I mean, I'm sorry! I know it's an interview with you Crusch-sama."

Crusch: "No, no need to be sorry at all. Besides, if it's about my followers or subjects, I think it's synonymous with interviewing me. Besides, I think Wilhelm's story should be widely known."

Shorty: "W, Well, if you say so… Oh, in that case, just one more thing."

He asks Crusch to take into consideration of his words, even though he expresses his brazenness.

If Ferris wasn't around, he feels he would be able to hear the pure opinion of Crusch. A few months have passed since the start of the Royal Selection, and many things have happened that have caused a stir in the kingdom—

Shorty: "Which camp is Crusch-sama most interested in right now?"

Crusch: "That's…"

The question caused Crusch to pause for a moment. However, the thought and hesitation were only for a moment, and it seems that the answer came quickly to her.

However, she remained smiling even as she spoke of her adversaries.

Then—

Crusch: "—I think Emilia-sama's camp, deserves the most attention."

And that was the answer.

4

Shorty: "Un… totally different from their previous reputation, the interview was very friendly from start to finish…"

Shorty muttered in exhaustion as he left the Karsten family's mansion after the interview.

In this case, the cause of fatigue would not be physical, but mental exhaustion. While his initial fears were unfounded, a sense of awe still remained more than he had imagined.

However, he could clearly say that the rewards were well worth the physical and mental exhaustion.

Shorty: "I didn't think the Wilhelm-dono's story would last that long, but…"

Shorty wanted to know more about the White Whale's defeat, and Wilhelm, with the Lord's permission, spoke very smoothly. However, it was surprising that most of his talk was about his love affair with his wife, the previous "Sword Saint" who was defeated by the White Whale and lost her life.

Lululara "…hk"

Shorty returned to the commoner's district, pausing in front of the fountain in the plaza, while Lululara, furiously working away with her paintbrush, blushed with excitement and was about to run out of pages in her brand-new notebook.

Apparently, the presence of Crusch and Ferris had a profoundly positive impact on her as well.

Shorty: “But I understand. After all… what you actually see and hear is totally different from the rumors.”

A masculine and ambitious duchess with a penchant for swordsmanship, Crusch, if one were to analyze Crusch’s prominent reputation, would seem to be a somewhat snobbish aristocrat, despite her family’s reputation for competency.

However, in reality, Crusch was always soft-spoken, well aware of her own inadequacies, and an ideal person who could stand up to others without compromising her ambition.

Shorty: “Whoever becomes king, I want them to be like that…”

Lululara: “…personal, feeling”

Shorty: “What? No, no, no, not at all! Reporters are fair! Reporters are impartial!”

When Lululara heard Shorty talking to himself, he panicked and denied it. However, Lululara, who had made Shorty so flustered, was oblivious to the situation and continued to work on her painting.

Sighing at the sight, Shorty put his hat back on deeply.

Shorty: “Anyway, I’ll summarize what we’ve covered, because it’s also our role to eliminate the gap between such rumors and the reality that arises from Misperceptions… that surround Crusch-sama.”

Lululara: “…hn”

Lululara rubs the bottom of her nose with her finger and hands Shorty the picture. Shorty looks at it and raises his eyebrows.

As expected of Lululara, a genius at drawing press pictures, and what she wants her readers to see.

—It was a beautiful master and knight image of the two of them leaning together, holding hands.

Shorty: “Yes, this is a good one. That’s what I’m talking about, Lulularа!”

Lulularа: “Happy, with beautiful girls…”

Shorty: “No, I’m not looking at them that way, and Ferris-dono is a man, okay?”

Although unsettled by the way they looked at him, and distorted his reporter’s soul, he had no complaints about the content of the interview and the quality of the news picture. —However, this is only the first interview.

Shorty: “We still have a long way to go… It’s especially important to be vigilant about the next subjects we cover next.”

Lulularа: “…that so?”

Shorty: “Don’t say that like you’re stunned! I really do! Because… the next candidate we’re going to interview is not from this country, it’s from another country.”

Shorty mentioned “…another country” and Lulularа looked as if she had never heard of them before. Shorty had already explained to Lulularа that this should not be the first time she had heard of them, but that was fine.

However, this time around, Lulularа must also share the same sense of urgency.

Shorty: “Anastasia Hoshin-sama is the Chairman of the Hoshin Trading Company, a powerful company in the Kararagi City States… she is one of the most powerful people in Kararagi. She has come all the way across the country to compete for the throne of the Kingdom of Lugunica… Do you smell that?”

Lulularа: “…I took a bath”

Shorty: “It’s not your smell! If you had smelled it in the first place, we would have been incredibly rude with Crusch-sama!”

In the first place, it was a mistake to ask Lulularа, whose nose might have been tricked by the paint fumes. Shorty's sense of smell for conflict was a sense that needed to be honed.

That is the division of roles between partners, and that is the role Shorty was supposed to play.

Shorty: "So far, if there has been any interference from other countries has only been from the Vollachian Empire to the south. In fact, before the Royal Selection, there are stories that representatives of the Council of Sages secretly went to Vollachia to sign a non-aggression pact."

Everyone assumed that it was the south that everyone should be on the alert for. Anastasia, who was now a candidate for the Royal Selection, is an unexpected threat from the west.

Then—

Shorty: "You can't help but feel that there's something fishy about the "Finest of Knights", Julius Juukulius, who has expressed his support for Anastasia-sama."

Lulularа: "…are they bathing?"

Shorty: "He's the one they call "Finest"! I would be a disappointment if they didn't bathe! Even if he's black-hearted, I hope he bathes!"

Of course, it would be better if he didn't have this gut feeling.

However, it is impossible to know the true reason why a promising talent, who is said to be highly trusted even in the Knighthood, would seek to install an influential person from another country in the position of king, for what purpose?

The Juukulius family is a family of knights that have been around for generations, and there was no record of them being disrespected by the Kingdom of Lugunica. Then there is one possibility—

Shorty: "Either Sir Julius is tremendously ambitious or he's a traitor…"

Lululara: “…Bad spot”

Shorty: “I don’t like it if that’s the case, so it’s like one of those things… what are they up to anyway? That’s what I’m trying to get at least a clue from this interview.”

Tightening his fists, Shorty renewed his resolve.

After the interview with Crusch, Shorty’s confidence and a new sense of purpose was awakened in him. It was to uncover the truth about the Royal Selection.

Needless to say, the rumors about Crusch differed greatly from her actual personality. Thus, there were no concrete principles for deciding who would be the next king.

The Dragon Nation Newsletter will serve as a guide for those who might have been misled.

Shorty: “—No, it’s not the Dragon Nation Newsletter, it’s us.”

Lululara: “Big time…”

Shorty: “That’s right! We’ve already started running. Then we have to keep running until we make it. I’ll do it. That’s why…”

Shorty pulled out a new drawing pad from his press bag and handed it to Lululara. She took it with a puffed-up nose and a twinkle in her eye.

Lululara is full of energy, and Shorty is full of a sense of purpose.

With this momentum—

Shorty: “—I don’t care what Anastasia-sama is up to or what plans she’s hiding. I won’t be fooled by her pleasant words, I’ll find out her true intentions!”

5

???: “My purpose? O’course it’s to get the Kingdom of Lugunica, ain’t it?”

Shorty: “Uhhgg…”

Shorty’s eyes widen at the words of the woman resting her elbows on the table and resting her hand on her chin.

She is a woman with a soft, gentle demeanor. Her mischievous expression, somewhat reminiscent of a noble cat, and her previous words shatter Shorty’s resolve directly.

Never before had he been affirmed with a big smile for his determined attempt to uncover his opponent’s innermost thoughts.

???: “What is it? That’s a very over-the-top reaction. It makes me so happy.”

???: “Anastasia-sama, you should not be so playful. I think it’s somewhat inappropriate.”

Anastasia: “Araa, they’re mad at me. My knight is too serious for that.”

The woman who sticks out her tongue is— Anastasia Hoshin, the young chairperson of a large company, The Hoshin Trading Company, who looks like the word “cute” dressed up in clothes.

She has long, wavy, light purple hair and wears fluffy furry clothes even in warm weather. Although short in stature and fragile in appearance, her light blue eyes are filled with a strong rebellious spirit, and one cannot help but be charmed by her uncomplicated persona.

Anastasia is as beautiful as Crusch, and Shorty wonders about the reasons for her selection as a candidate for the Royal Selection.

Shorty thought, No way, is it possible that they are screening candidates based on their appearance?

Anastasia: “Hm? You’re staring at my face, thinkin’ bout somethin’? If there’s something on yer mind, I’d like to hear it.”

Shorty: “No, I was just wondering what is going on, since both you, Anastasia-sama, and Crusch-sama are so beautiful.”

Anastasia: “Ara”

Anastasia put her hand over her mouth and rounded her eyes, her reaction made Shorty say, “Oh”, and he cursed himself for his bad habit of making careless remarks once again.

However, Anastasia laughed at Shorty’s words, and the person sitting next to her nodded.

???: “Well, I agree with you, Anastasia-sama, in addition to your great intelligence and business acumen, you are also a very attractive woman.”

Anastasia: “If ya don’t take it seriously, y’all be wasting the reporters’ time and effort in tryin’ to make the place more relaxed. Don’t cha think?”

???: “Mm… I am sorry about that. I should have taken more care on my part.”

Shorty: “Eh! Oh, uh, sorry, it, it’s so difficult to understand what’s going on here! Ha ha ha…”

Shorty apologized for his stream of words, and he fondled his hat and faked a wry smile.

What else could he do? The second candidate for Royal Selection — the master Anastasia, and her knight Julius Juukulius.

—The Royal Selection candidate interview tour is going much better than originally expected.

The candidate for the Royal Selection, shrouded in mystery, surely would not like such an interview. Shorty’s preconceived notions were repeatedly met with a flurry of offers for interviews.

Of course, there is a good chance that negotiations with the remaining three individuals will be very difficult down the road.

Shorty: “Now we have to make the most of our good fortune…!”

Fortunately, Anastasia, who was in the royal capital for a business meeting, agreed to be interviewed, and Julius, her knight, was also allowed to be present.

Lulularа, now standing in front of the two, is probably in agreement with him.

Shorty: “And by the way, was it… okay to do the interview in such an open area?”

Anastasia: “Hmm, we coulda welcomed em at our store, but that woulda made the reporters nervous, ya know? I didn’t want people thinkin’ I was threatenin’ em by asking em to write articles that would suit us.”

With that said, a smiling Anastasia turns her attention to the traffic in the royal city.

This place, where people come and go right in front of them, is the terrace of a coffee shop facing the main street. It was Anastasia’s hope to conduct the interview in such a public place.

Shorty’s intention was not to force an unwanted article on them.

The way Anastasia dared to be interviewed in a public place showed a strength not found with Crusch, which is more straightforward, and showed another aspect of Anastasia’s shrewdness.

Shorty: “But if that’s the case, then the statement about getting the kingdom is true…?”

Anastasia: “I ain’t hidin’ my true feelin’s, and I’ve said em in front of other candidates and the Council of Sages. …and I wondered if that child would look at me if I asked them something a little bit more dramatic.”

Shorty: “That child… Oh, you mean Lulularа?”

Anastasia’s gaze fell on Lulularа, who was sitting on a chair, holding her knees awkwardly, and she was painting with a paintbrush, ignoring the content of the interview.

Nevertheless, this was the best way to approach Lululara's work.

Shorty: "Actually, Lululara is at her best working in this style… and if you are not uncomfortable, please let me leave it this way…"

Lululara: "uncomfortable"

Shorty: "Lululara! Apologize with me now! Apologize… straighten your neck up."

Anastasia: "—What did I say to ya? I was going to continue, but ya were too quick, I didn't have time to interrupt ya."

He quickly grabbed Lululara by the neck and tried to make her lower her head, but failed because of the unusual strength in her neck. Anastasia laughed at Shorty's impatience.

Anyway—

Julius: "Well, I must say that she is very focused, Shorty-dono, may I take a look at her work? As a matter of fact, my brother paints too."

Shorty: "If your brother is… Oh, as long as you don't talk to her, I think she'll be fine with it."

Julius: "I guess, if I call out to her, it would disrupt her concentration?"

Shorty: "Rather, when I talk to her, she ignores me, which makes me feel worse."

Even though it is necessary for work, it is quite hard to be ignored for days, if not hours.

Julius, perhaps taking Shorty's response as a sign of Lululara's professionalism, said, "I understand" and went behind her back to observe her work without talking to her.

Should this be taken as pure curiosity, or should it be considered a check against the possibility of undermining Anastasia? The occasional exhale of admiration, "Indeed" may be an act to catch

Shorty off guard.

Anastasia: “You’re a child with a rich imagination. Maybe it would be better if ya became a novelist.”

Shorty: “What are you talking about? I’m a reporter, my job is to tell what I hear and see as it is. I’m not a writer who comes up with outlandish ideas and fantasies.”

Anastasia: “Oh? Well, If that’s what cha say, let’s just leave it at that.”

Her implied answer made Shorty feel like she was playing him every step of the way. If he continues to fall for her tricks, he will not be able to conduct the interview.

At this rate, the statement about taking over the kingdom is just a ploy to mess with Shorty.

Anastasia: “What, you thinkin’ I’m lying? But it ain’t a lie.”

Shorty: “Eh…?”

Anastasia: “Ya had the courage to apply for the interview, didn’t cha? But if we mislead em with lies and false pretenses, it would be disrespectful to their reporter spirit.”

Shorty: “…”

Shorty is breathless as Anastasia folds her hands in front of her face and gazes at him.

As usual, he was engulfed. But it was both surprising and inspiring for Shorty to be made to feel that way, not to think that they were lying to him.

Crusch drew Shorty in by talking about her own inexperience, saying that she was on the road to building up. Anastasia gave Shorty the impression of seeing something different, something spectacular.

It is a fascination that makes him want to hear more from her, both as an individual and as a reporter.

Shorty: “O, okay, so if you can answer some of my candid questions today, I’d love to hear from you…!”

Anastasia: “It’s a bit embarrassin’ to be so frank, though, ain’t it? Besides, it’s an opportunity for ya to write a good article… so we’ve added a little bit of extra flair to…”

Shorty: “A little flair, is it? What exactly do you…”

Shorty’s question as to whether or not they would do it was interrupted in mid-sentence.

The sound of the shoes was loud and clear. —Shorty learned for the first time that a person’s existence can even be affected by the sound of their shoes.

However, this sentiment is completely lost in the distance when the owner of the footsteps enters the scene.

???: “—You have got quite a lot of nerve calling upon on mineself, She-fox.”

Shorty’s throat tightened involuntarily as the indescribable heat burned his eardrums.

The beauty that appeared on the street and peered at Shorty and the others sitting in the storefront, the voice that was spun from her lips was full of magic that captivated the hearts of the audience, and Shorty was in fact captivated.

Shorty’s rigid appearance was met with a frown from the beauty’s shapely brow.

???: “What is it, child? It would be impolite to stare at mine face.”

Shorty: “Uaa! So, sorry…! I didn’t mean to…”

???: “If you are going to look, look with dignity. It is only natural that others should be attracted to mine beauty.”

The crimson-eyed, extravagant beauty presented herself with a fan in her hand.

She is violently beautiful, with dazzling orange hair adorned with jewels and a beautiful, busty body wrapped in a blood-colored dress. The features of her appearance and the air of absoluteness she wears— tell Shorty about this beautiful woman's true identity with her burning presence.

And then—

Anastasia: "Let me introduce ya, reporters. —She is a princess, a candidate for the Royal Selection, just like me."

Shorty could only reply in his mind, "I know who you are" as Anastasia said in an easygoing tone.

Shorty: "…"

And so, even as Shorty's thirst for sound and the illusion that his heart was splitting open, only the sound of Lululara's painting, her brush feverishly moving, was echoing incessantly.

—Only now he was seriously and deeply envious of Lululara, who could immerse herself in her own world.

6

Shorty: "I, I'm so happy to see everyone here, the weather has been so beautiful, and I'm struggling to think of how to thank you all for coming, but the sun is bothering my eyes, yes…!"

Shorty's heartfelt and honest words of greeting, which he managed to squeeze out with great effort, were mixed in with the second half of his speech, but if that was the extent of his roughness, it was amiable.

Even Chief Morgan, who is no stranger to the Dragon Nation Newsletter, would not be immune from a sense of urgency in such a situation. Shorty, on the other hand, is still a novice reporter.

Of course, this project was launched with a mindset of not using that as an excuse—

Anastasia: "—Reporter-san. you have a great reaction, Don't you think so, Princess?"

Priscilla: "I will admit that the child has a certain cuteness, but to agree with you is truly disgusting."

Anastasia: "Well, you're a very difficult person to deal with. I was expectin' that kind of attitude from ya."

When Anastasia put her hand over her mouth and smiled, the beautiful woman sitting opposite her narrowed her eyes disapprovingly, let out a small snort, and shook her ample breasts.

Shorty felt his preparedness shatter with a resounding sound in the face of both of them.

Of course, the beautiful woman facing Anastasia, —Priscilla Barielle, she is one of the candidates for the Royal Selection, competing for the throne of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

This means that two Royal Selection candidates will be face-to-face at this meeting.

And then—

Shorty: "This, This is so shockingly sudden, and without telling me"

Julius: "I'm sorry, it was Anastasia-sama's plan to be duplicitous, and I can not apologize enough to Shorty-dono and Miss Lululara."

Shorty: "I'm sorry you have to apologize Sir Julius. Hey, Lululara. Lululara?"

Julius apologizes on behalf of his master, but he is in awe of even that.

Shorty, suffering from severe heart palpitations, turned to his partner to at least share the heartache. But Lululara responded not with words, but with a picture taken from her notebook.

The picture depicted there was Shorty, foaming at the mouth and looking pale.

Shorty shrugs his shoulders as Julius apologizes on behalf of his master for his deviousness. Shorty asks his companion to agree with his shrug, and Lululara, who is less talkative, thrusts out a drawing she has finished to Shorty. When Shorty received it and checked it, he saw that the drawing was of Shorty's face, foaming at the mouth.

Shorty: "I'm glad you're having fun!"

Anastasia: "What's this? Woah, You're really good. Can I have this as a souvenir of today?"

Shorty: "P, please feel free… if you don't mind my face looking like that."

Shorty offered the painting to Anastasia due to its unexpectedly high praise.

It was a strange feeling to know that his flustered face would remain in Anastasia's possession, but Lululara was proud as a partner to know that she liked her painting.

Anyway—

???: "That's it, right? That's the start of the so-called "joint interview". Well, I'm relieved to hear that it's that way, because I'm pretty sure that on-the-spot interviews and the princess don't go well together."

A strange-looking man sitting behind Priscilla laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

We've already been introduced to them, but they look striking for different reasons than Anastasia or Priscilla's good looks, not that they're as handsome as Julius, or anything like that.

The man, Al, was dressed like a bandit, his face hidden by a jet-black helmet. Like Julius, a knight in the service of Anastasia, Al is a knight of Priscilla— though the man himself denies it.

Al: “I’m the princess’s clown. I’ve always hated knights. Oh, and I’m not talking about you, Finest-san, okay? I was just talking generally.”

Julius: “I do not feel nor think I was being provoked. Sorry, but, I have a fondness for knights. This, too, is a general statement, as Al-dono would say.”

Julius and Al exchange words of this nature as they stand behind each other’s masters.

As far as Shorty can see, the impression is that the masters are quite waspishly talking with each other, but not so much between these two, it seemed.

Shorty: “It helps… That you two Knights are not as argumentative, my heart couldn’t take it…”

Frankly, the situation is tantamount to being duped by Anastasia, but they were at least willing to give that much consideration.

Priscilla: “—It is understandable that you would try a different flavor to the interviews with the candidates for the Royal Selection than the one that preceded it.”

Shorty’s mind was completely distracted by Priscilla, who crossed her arms and quietly opened up the conversation.

She proudly flaunts her breasts on top of her slender arms and looks around at everyone here in turn: Shorty, Lululara, Al, Julius, and finally glances at Anastasia.

Priscilla: “I simply do not understand this combination. She-fox, why did you choose to pair mineself with you?”

Anastasia: “Hm… I guess so. For sure the other two woulda’ done the same thing. I don’t think either Felt-san or Emilia-san would have refused if I had been the one suggestin’ it. But…”

Priscilla: “…”

Anastasia: “I thought that the princess would best understand the intentions of my proposal.”

Anastasia smiles softly as she puts her raised finger to her lips. Shorty’s cheeks somehow relax at the silence.

—Shorty Megan, somehow turn this current adversity into an opportunity.

Priscilla: “—Well, no matter. There are those who deny that playing petty tricks is an evil thing to do, but unlike them, myself is not one of those obstinate people. The She-fox’s schemes have their own meaning.”

Al: “Oh, Woah. The princess can break too. That business owner over there is really good.”

Al whistled Anastasia’s praises in response to Priscilla’s slowing down of the pursuit. Anastasia responded, “Great” to which Julius put his hand on his chest.

Julius: “Thank you for your understanding. Now, Shorty-dono I know this is somewhat different from what you had originally planned, but would you be willing to continue the interview?”

Shorty: “Huh? Oh, yeah! Yes, you can count on me! At first, I was surprised and nervous and my legs and back were shaky, but if I retreat now, my journalistic spirit will become corrupted and burst! Thanks again for this!”

Anastasia: “Yes, yes, please treat us well.”

Priscilla: “Hard work is a virtue of children. Strive to work your hardest.”

With the willingness of both of these camps, Shorty was finally able to get himself back in the right frame of mind to cover the interview.

Once he was in the right state of mind, the questions he needed to ask came to him quickly. First of all, a question to Priscilla, who joined in late, the same question that he asked Anastasia earlier.

Shorty: So, let me ask Priscilla-sama first. I have already asked Anastasia-sama, but I would like to know what you intend to do after becoming King."

Priscilla: "Ho, what did the She-fox answer with?"

Priscilla raised an eyebrow at Shorty's question. Her gaze then flicked to Anastasia, and she waved her hand, meeting her gaze.

Anastasia: "My answer is the same as it was at the castle. Unless the princess has forgotten."

Priscilla: "If thyself is obedient to thy greed, there will be no room for that platitude to change."

Anastasia waves her hand in the air, and Priscilla opens the fan she has pulled from her breasts.

From Priscilla's answer, it appears that Anastasia's declaration at the castle regarding the reason for her participation that she would obtain— the Kingdom of Lugunica was true.

No doubt about it, but still, what spectacular Greed, Shorty couldn't keep his mouth closed.

Shorty: "I am amazed at the grandiose ideas of Anastasia-sama, but Priscilla-sama. But, what the public wants to know what all the candidates for the Royal Selection are thinking about going into the Royal Selection."

The Royal Selection has commenced, and the battle to determine the next king has already begun.

However, many of the royal citizens, including Shorty, are not content with just knowing the mindsets and personalities of the candidates participating in that Royal Selection, or even how they intend to lead the Kingdom into the future.

Information is easily transmitted, its form changed, and even its color and fragrance repainted.

Thus, three candidates for the Royal Selection were contacted for interviews —and Shorty was already greatly ashamed of himself because of the difference between their previous reputation and their personalities.

Priscilla is not a fragile maiden tinged with tragedy and misfortune.

She was a maverick with a magnificent temperament and charm, clad in a crimson reminiscent of both bright flames and fresh blood.

—What does she envision for the future of the kingdom?

Priscilla: "—Do nothing"

Shorty: "Huh?"

Shorty, who had been anticipating what the answer would be, was taken aback.

His mind goes blank, and Priscilla's reply reverberates over and over again.

Shorty: "N, nothing? Doing nothing means…"

Priscilla: "You can take it at face value. Mineself has no particular interest in the kingdom or its subjects. All things in this world belong to mineself from the beginning."

Shorty: "…"

Priscilla: "Mineself does not wish to disturb the harmony of nature. Of course, I will take care of maintaining and pruning. But the world is beautiful as it is. —This world is made for mine convenience. Therefore, if mineself is on the throne, there shall also be prosperity."

Priscilla's nonchalant answers seeped into Shorty's brain as she rested her chin against her hand.

It was so absurdly ridiculous in its logic that it seemed like a joke that deserved to be laughed out of the room. It was a prideful idea, a fantasy that not even the pinnacle of the kingdom could truly hold.

However, what seemed like a joke did not sound like a joke to Shorty.

It is not because Priscilla is frightening that he is unable to laugh it off. It is because Shorty's soul accepts that the words she utters were not untrue

Anastasia: "As usual, the princess's logic scares me… If that were true, everyone but us would have no reason to oppose her."

Priscilla: I'm sure. The other wishes can be fulfilled without them ascending to the throne. But your Greed is the only thing that cannot be compromised. —Therefore, You are mine enemy.

Anastasia: "Ara, thanks for the high praise. I think of the princess as an enemy, too."

Despite her composed appearance, Anastasia's retort was equally sharp.

Since both candidates for the Royal Selection were unexpectedly interviewed at the same time, one would have thought that they would have a somewhat more relaxed conversation, but such expectations were quickly discarded.

Shorty: "Although, that's why it's worth getting to the heart of the matter…!"

As for Priscilla's statement earlier, it is necessary to choose the right words so that they are not misinterpreted. But it's only a matter of right and wrong, no need to dramatize the facts.

Unmistakable statements from the candidates for the Royal Selection, thoroughly reporting the full extent of their true intentions.

Shorty: "What are your impressions of the other candidates?"

Anastasia: "At the moment, the most promising person is Crusch-san, ain't it? She's in a solid position, but the question is how much support she'll get for her policy."

Priscilla: “That young girl from the slums was the embodiment of the boast, was she not? She is the pinnacle of fools whose aspirations have only become so great that they cannot see their own shortcomings. If she continues to be a fool, there would be nothing to see.

In response to Shorty’s question, Anastasia and Priscilla lay out their words.

Is not interrupting the other’s statements a sign that there was no room for disagreement there? Shorty frantically wrote down the two quick-witted responses in his memory.

Crusch and now this is a response on Felt. Then—

Shorty: “—How do you feel about the fifth candidate, Emilia-sama?”

Anastasia and Priscilla: “—Irrelevant”

The question, which was prepared to cut deep, was answered with one simple word.

Shorty, breathless, and flushed with the intensity of those single, simple words, his mouth agape.

Shorty: “Wh, what is the reasoning behind that?”

Anastasia: “I don’t need to tell ya, but Emilia-san’s origins are a stumbling block to begin with. A half-elf… with silver hair and amethyst eyes would be a perfect example of tragic features if there were one”

Priscilla: “It is not a matter of questioning one’s qualifications. Whatever their nature, the common people are ignorant. They can only judge by what we want to see and hear.”

Despite the differences in the words they put together, the meaning of their story is the same.

The situation surrounding Emilia, the last of the candidates for the Royal Selection, is grim and is no longer in question as to her state of being.

And it was a feeling that Shorty himself had.

Shorty: “I’ve heard that Emilia-sama, like Anastasia-sama and Crusch-sama, were instrumental in the subjugation of the White whale, which was one of the three great Witchbeasts, and the defeat of a Sin Archbishop…”

Anastasia: “It’s not strictly speaking Emilia-san’s own work, but that of her knight. And the wounds of the “Witch of Envy” is not so shallow that it can be wiped out just by that. Right, Julius?”

Julius: “It is rather unfortunate to say.”

When Anastasia turned to Julius for affirmation, he shook his head, his long-lashed eyes downcast.

Julius: “I don’t know how much both the White whale and the battle with the Sin Archbishop will touch the hearts of those who listen. However, as Anastasia-sama said, one cannot expect much.”

Al: “It’s a shame. If you don’t get any recognition for all that, it’s not like you can say what you’re doing it for. Do you do it in order to just lose?”

Julius: “Al-dono, that’s not the right way to put it…”

Al: “Not good? That’s the way it’s supposed to be. But what’s the difference between what you and I are saying? You and the princesses agree on that, don’t you?”

Julius wrinkled his brow, and Al acted somewhat hypocritical. With his only arm— his right one, he used his hand and fumbled with the seam of his helmet, making a ticking, metallic sound.

The dry sound seems to represent the unchangeable reality that awaits Emilia, and Shorty too felt somewhat depressed.

However—

Priscilla: “In all things, there are winners and losers. However, the conditions of victory are determined by one's self. It is not a matter that can be easily determined based on external factors."

Al: "Princess?"

Priscilla: "There is no doubt that the half-demon is not worthy of being discussed as an adversary in the Royal Selection. Is everyone involved so stupid that they can't understand that? Mineself does not believe so."

The opinion of Al, the follower, is so overridden by Priscilla, the master.

Al was indeed surprised to hear this, and tilted his head and said, "Oi, Oi"

Al: "I didn't expect to get shot in the back. Don't you agree with me, right Princess?"

Priscilla: "The process is the same, but the conclusion is different. The same can be said for the mindset of that half-demon."

Al: "So, Princess, you're saying the girl doesn't want to be king? You're saying she has another goal in mind?"

Priscilla: "Otherwise, it would not make sense. Besides—"

Al's slightly heated tone was laced with a hint of desperation.

Shorty wonders about that, but doesn't have time to interject. But that is just Shorty's situation. Shorty's situation is nothing compared to the powerhouse that is Priscilla's.

Anastasia: "—I'll have to preface this by saying that if things are gonna continue as they are"

Priscilla: "Hmm"

Priscilla's eyes narrowed and she snorted at Anastasia as she continued.

The fact that she did not dismiss it as misguided suggests that they were of the same opinion. This means that both parties share the same perception of Emilia.

Anastasia: “Interesting and fun, don’t cha think? It’s a game that was doomed to defeat right from the start, but Emilia-san and her camp still took on the challenge. They gotta plan to turn this situation around. Ain’t that what you’re sayin’?”

Priscilla: “If your intention is to participate in the war for the sake of fixing the numbers, then you are not worthy of being in mine eyes. If you prove yourself worthy, you will naturally be reflected in mine eyes.”

Smiles and taunts, are two conflicting reactions, but Shorty is strangely moved.

For some reason, the emotions that both Anastasia and Priscilla expressed toward each other, both of them seemed to be expectations.

Al: “Damn, I feel like I’m being stepped on. It would be better if the princess really stepped on me, instead of my feelings.”

Julius: “Al-dono, we are both in front of the press. As a knight, you should be careful what you say.”

Al: “Thanks for the heads up. But I’m not a knight and I don’t want to be one.”

Julius: “That is regrettable. I truly mean it.”

In response to Julius’s meditating answer, Al rattles the seams of his helmet to scare him off. Behind the gesture, the original franticness is nowhere to be seen. Or maybe Shorty was wrong about that, as well—

Shorty: “Thank you very much for your valuable words. Now… if you could, please tell us how you feel about the opposing candidate, the person in front of you…!”

Al: “…You got a lot of courage, Reporter-san.”

Shorty asked a no-nonsense question, to which Al responded with genuine admiration. It was a question that made Julius chuckle, but there was no way not to ask it.

Both parties are right in front of each other. This is the perfect opportunity to express their true feelings without any judgment.

In fact, Anastasia and Priscilla probably thought it was a question that would be asked.

Anastasia and Priscilla looked at each other and opened their mouths at the same time.

Then—

Anastasia: “…I’ll kick ya out.”

Priscilla: “…Break you by mine hand.”

They exchanged hostility, which could be considered the greatest praise at the moment.

7

Shorty: “Th, th, th, that shortened my life…”

Lululara: “…Tired”

Lululara pats Shorty on the back as he leans back in his chair, his face an ashen shade of gray.

Holding her knees in her chair, Lululara was unusually attentive to Shorty, perhaps a little more aware of how much work Shorty had put in to get through the interview.

In fact, it was a marvelous interview, as evidenced by Lululara’s overflowing creative spirit.

The number of news illustrations depicting Anastasia and Priscilla from various angles were the best to date, and Editor-in-Chief Morgan was pleased with the quality of the work. Some of them include a shot of Julius and Al, their followers, and they are a perfect record of the coverage.

Shorty: “But this bias now, Lulularа… you have a rather strong interest in their looks.”

Lulularа: “…Is a misunderstanding”

Shorty: “If you compare the number of pictures of the two candidates for the Royal Selection, with Sir Julius, and Al-dono, it’s not very convincing! I mean, you only drew one picture of Al-dono!”

Lulularа: “…Draw only what makes heart tremble, like you said”

Lulularа used the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” as an excuse for dodging Shorty’s challenge. Shorty could scarcely resist.

The only thing is that there was one moment when Lulularа’s heart was shaken as well as Al’s.

Lulularа: “…drew it, because it looked so, serious.”

Shorty: “Al-dono is serious… Yeah, he looked serious.”

The piece Lulularа captured of Al is from a moment of his disagreement with Priscilla.

Shorty was caught off guard by Al’s response to a question about another candidate —Emilia.

Shorty: “—. After we are done with these interviews, maybe we can do a deep dive on the knights of the Royal Selection candidates, as it would be interesting to learn more about Emilia-sama’s camp, and its knight.”

Lulularа: “But, next one is more important”

Shorty chuckled at Lulularа’s eagerness to move from one subject to the next.

Shorty: “I still think Lulularа is a sucker for good looks. I think you’re obsessed with your next interview subject.”

Lululara: “Who is the next one?”

Shorty: “You know it, but you’re just oblivious! …No, maybe it’s the knight that you’re obsessed with, you’re not seriously forgetting!”

Lululara: “…Didn’t, hear you”

Shorty: “It… doesn’t matter why! It’s also a problem that you didn’t listen!”

Shorty laments the unreliable memory of his beloved partner, pen in hand, as he summarizes the content of the interview before it slips out of his memory.

However, unexpectedly, they were able to interview Priscilla at the same time, bringing the total number of candidates for the Royal Selection interviewed to three. Two more to go, and the next target of the interview will be—

Shorty: “—Felt-sama, she also has an unusual background, though she’s been overshadowed by Emilia-sama”

Lululara: “…Color!”

Shorty: “It has nothing to do with your paintings, it’s different, meaning unusual! Actually… Felt-sama is an orphan who grew up in the streets of the poor districts of the Royal Capital. —I mean, she’s just like us, Lululara.”

Shorty says this to Lululara, who is holding a drawing book in her lap, looking straight into her eyes.

Both Shorty and Lululara, who now work as reporter and news artist respectively for the “Dragon Nation Newsletter,” were originally abandoned by their parents and were among the children of the poor, scavenging for garbage in the slums of the city.

Most of the time, the children are stuck in that environment and end up doing evil or being preyed upon by the wrongdoers. Fortunately, Shorty and Lululara were spared from such a fate.

Both of them have earned their current positions by being recognized for the talent and passion they possess.

The same can be said for Felt. —However, her current situation is a lofty one, beyond the bounds of imagination.

Shorty: “There are many rumors flying around about Felt-sama, many of which are untrue. I’d love to ask her questions about that too… but it’s her knight that’s getting the most attention!”

Lulularа: “…Saint!”

Shorty: “Yes! The “Sword Saint” Reinhard Van Astrea, …He is the knight who supports Felt-sama, and his declaration of support has a huge impact.”

For many of the people who read the Dragon Nation Newsletter, the Royal Selection candidates who will live in the royal castle are above the clouds. This was no different for the royal family when the king was alive and well.

Therefore, if there is a celebrity that the people are interested in, it is the one whose name they have heard most often. In this respect, Reinhard, the “Sword Saint” of this generation, has the greatest influence in the kingdom.

Even the people of the capital are more interested in the “Sword Saint” than the king. The difference is even more obvious when it comes to the people outside of the capital who don’t have the opportunity to interact with the royal family or look up at the royal castle.

Shorty: “Of course, Felt-sama will use the influence of Sir Reinhard to win the Royal Selection, Because many are dazzled by the prestige of the “Sword Saint”, …that’s why!”

Lululara: “Why…?”

Shorty: “We will not let that prestige deter us, and we will truly find out what Felt-sama has to offer!”

Shorty’s fists clenched in determination, Lululara understood how far he was willing to go, and she held up her drawing pad with an unmotivated look and leisurely movements.

Fortunately, the coverage up to this point has been going smoothly, but it is hard to say that everything has gone according to plan, and that it is all just a result of the circumstances. So from here on out, they will be striving to make up for it.

No matter how dazzling the “sword saint” may appear, Shorty’s journalistic heart of steel was still trembling—

8

???: “—Welcome to the Astrea domain, to the both of you, reporters.”

And so Shorty and Lululara were greeted by a fiery young man. He is an unexpectedly beautiful young man with blazing red hair and blue eyes that encapsulate the clear sky.

Shorty had previously admired the quality of one of Lululara’s paintings of him before, and the subject himself greeted Shorty and Lululara who had come to interview him with a smile.

The “Knight Amongst Knights” greeted the guests —but their attire was far from knightly.

Shorty: “S, Sir Reinhard… right?”

Reinhard: “Yes, that’s right. Thank you for coming all the way from the royal capital.”

The young man —Reinhard, nodded to Shorty, who forgot his nervousness and faltered in surprise.

He was dressed in a white shirt and black trousers, a light, rustic look, without the uniform that indicates his position as a knight or member of the Royal guard. He is smiling with a towel around his neck, and he does not even have his “dragon sword,” a synonym for “Sword Saint,” at his waist. But, looking carefully, you can see that he has it propped up on the ground beside him.

It was a sign that he had shed his “Sword Saintness”.

The proof is in the fact of what he was doing right before he greeted Shorty and Lulularaa—

Lulularaa: “…You’re gardening?”

Reinhard: “Oh, that’s right. I’m taking care of the garden and flower beds at the mansion. This morning, I finally got the buds to bloom…”

Lulularaa: “…Pretty”

Lulularaa tilted her head and Reinhard answered her question by indicating the flower bed with a hand. Reinhard was proud of himself, and the flower bed behind him was a magnificent sight.

The flowers in bloom were red, white, and yellow petals. The most eye-catching feature of the garden is the colorful flowerbeds, but the carefully tended trees and shrubs also look like a work of a skilled craftsman to the untrained eye.

As one would expect from the “Sword Saint”, he was also very skilled in pruning the garden and using scissors for that purpose—

Shorty: “No, no, no! I’m impressed, but do they usually let you do that? I mean, you’re the “Sword Saint”, and you’re gardening!”

Lulularaa: “…Complaining about saint?”

Shorty: “I couldn’t and wouldn’t do anything so rash!”

Shorty’s eyes widened as he complained about the seemingly wasteful use of the “Sword Saint”. Immediately, he was hit by Lulularaa’s signature ladder removal, and he hurriedly pulled the ladder back himself.

Reinhard laughed a little at their exchange, took off the protective gloves he had on, and—

Reinhard: “I see, I guess tending a garden doesn’t suit the “Sword Saint”‘. What do you think I should do?”

Shorty: “Let me see, since Sir Reinhard is so famous that there is no one in the kingdom who doesn't know him, the usual way is to go around the country with you, sell your face and name, and get the support of the powerful nobles."

Reinhard: "—Yes, that's right, Felt-sama."

When Reinhard himself asked Shorty how to make effective use of Reinhard, Shorty listed the measures he could think of. However, what Reinhard said after that caught Shorty completely by surprise.

Involuntarily, Shorty sputtered, "Huh?" and followed Reinhard's meaningful gaze. —Shorty's gaze leads him to the person standing behind Shorty and Lululara.

It was a young servant girl who met them at the nearest town and guided them to the Astrea mansion. They took advantage of her hospitality and talked about this and that on the way to the mansion.

What did Reinhard call this young girl with dazzlingly beautiful golden hair, black ribbon, strong-willed red eyes, and distinctive protruding fang from her mouth—

Shorty: "Ah, uh, eh, oh…?"

Felt: "Oooh, he's confused. Haha, look at his face."

The girl can't hold back her laughter as she points at Shorty, opening and closing his mouth with a pucker and his eyes going blank. At this behavior, Lululara also looked at Shorty.

Lululara: "…funny"

Shorty: "Not at all! It's not funny!

Shorty retorts loudly to Lululara's all too heartless remark. The young girl was laughing so hard that tears were welling up in the corners of her eyes. Then Reinhard sighs and says

When Shorty peeled his eyes away from Lululara's too heartless comment, the girl was startled. However, Reinhard called out to the girl again and again with "Felt-sama".

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, I think it’s time to stop the antics, please. Shorty-dono and Lululara-san will be exhausted if you go any further.”

Felt: “Alllright, alllright. I thought I was startin’ to understand ya a little better, but you’re still naggin’ me, aren’t cha?”

Reinhard: “I think I’ve become more flexible. So I did not stop you from welcoming them.”

Felt: “Ya had Flam and Grassis lookin’ out for me. You’re still stiff enough.”

The young girl responds to Reinhard’s smile by sticking out her tongue. —She is in a position to treat Reinhard with disrespect and still be respected.

Above all, the name, which is repeated so many times that there is no mistaking it, is—

Shorty: “— It is an honor to meet you, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Heh, thanks for the greeting, it’s makin’ my ears itch.”

Shorty, who managed to bite back his surprise and bowed, to which Felt responds by scratching her ear.

At first glance, she appears to be just a simple town girl, but she is the fourth candidate for the Royal Selection.

Compared to the simultaneous coverage, however, this is about as good as it gets—

Lululara: “…Here”

Shorty: “Lululara!”

As Shorty gasps in nervousness, Lululara unexpectedly presents Felt with a page from one of her notebooks. Felt takes it with a raised eyebrow and looks at the picture.

Then—

Felt: “Buhaha, Ha-Ha-Ha! Look at this, Reinhard!”

Reinhard: “This is… ha”

Reinhard cleared his throat as he peeked at the painting from behind, as Felt called out to him, gushing.

Shorty’s mouth was agape at the Knight’s response.

Shorty: “Even Sir Reinhard? What did you give them, Lululara!”

Felt: “Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha!”

Felt laughing hysterically and Reinhard was unable to hold back his laughter.

As Shorty’s gaze wandered between the two and Lululara, Reinhard showed him the picture in question with a smile on his face. The person depicted was none other than Shorty.

Shorty, dumbfounded with eyes wide open and mouth agape, gazed at Felt in dismay.

Lululara: “…Masterpiece”

Shorty: “Yeah, Thanks as always!”

Shorty shouted a desperate thank you to the boastful Lululara holding up her paintbrush.

9

Shorty: “Once again, thank you for making time for us today…”

Felt: “Ya look like you’re not happy. Well, I don’t mind, since ya made me laugh earlier.”

Shorty: “Thanks…”

Shorty’s reply is one word as he is ushered into the reception room of the Astrea mansion and receives his welcome.

This is due to his difficulty handling Felt, stemming from the events that just happened. Of course, there is a sense of tension in dealing with a candidate for the Royal Selection, but it is much less oppressive than with the previous three.

Felt: “—? What’s up?”

Shorty: “No, no, it’s nothing.”

Felt: “How can ya stare at someone’s face like that and say it’s nothin’?”

Felt leaned forward and looked into Shorty’s face, his cheeks tensing at the look she was giving him, and Shorty felt a faint pang of disappointment.

It seems that if one is a candidate for the Royal Selection, he or she must have the qualities that distinguish them from other candidates, —the qualities that make them stand at the pinnacle of the nation.

For example, Felt picked up Shorty and Lululara dressed as a servant, but even if the same thing had been done by the other three, they would not have been able to completely fool them.

—Unfortunately, that is not how he feels about Felt.

Considering her background, there was no opportunity for her to hone her qualifications. It would be fair to say that this was inevitable, but he couldn’t help but feel a sense of disappointment.

She is not yet ready to compete shoulder to shoulder with the previous three.

This means that Felt and Emilia are almost certain to be eliminated, leaving Crusch, Anastasia, and Priscilla to compete for the throne.

So the interview with these last two people, including this moment, is like a game that has already been won.

Felt: “—Ain’t it a bit early to be finished judgin’ me?”

Shorty: “Huh”

Felt: “Nah, I know it when I see it. Ya look so obviously disappointed.”

Shorty falters as Felt’s lips curl and her gaze sharpens.

It is outrageous to undermine the credibility of a reporter with such a brazen attitude when the role of a reporter is to let the subject speak his or her mind.

Shorty: “—hk”

Shorty was about to apologize, but thought better of it.

It would be pointless to mend things now. Rather, he will get on with the topic that has been broached.

Shorty: “Did you develop that eye for people from living in the slums?”

Felt: “Heh? You’re suddenly askin’ me a tough question. But I like it when people look at me that way.”

Shorty: “Thank you.”

Felt: “So, did livin’ in the slums make me stronger? Yeah, I guess it did.”

Felt was not offended that someone had so cavalierly stepped into her past. On the contrary, she seemed to accept Shorty’s brazenness in a friendly way.

With a hand on her chin, crossing her legs, Felt’s gaze is directed out the window. The royal capital where she grew up is far, far away under the distant sky.

Shorty looked over at Felt’s face, thinking of her hometown, and saw the complex emotions in her red eyes.

Shorty: “…You miss the capital and the slums.”

Felt: “Ah? Not at all. I don’t even want to remember the slums. I hate ‘em”

Shorty: “What?”

Felt: “It’s just ya gettin’ swept up in the mood. I don’t miss’em, when I’m away from the slums is all a blessin’ in disguise. —You guys gotta feel the same way.”

Felt scratched her head roughly, her lips forming a line. Shorty, hearing this, almost replied, “That’s true, but…” before choking up.

Shorty: “I’m saying it now that Lulular and I are from the slums…”

Felt: “It’s ain’t a big deal that I saw right through ya. You’re right, livin’ in the slums, I’ve got a habit of watchin’ people. I’ve always been in the business of pickin’ the pockets of the stupidest people.”

Shorty: “Um, Lululara and I are reporters, you know…”

Felt: “That’s why I’m being honest with cha. If I wanted to lie or say whatever I thought was appropriate, I wouldn’t have agreed to the interview in the first place. Ya can write whatever ya want.”

Shorty was feeling let down as Felt proudly confesses her past criminal behavior.

Without a doubt, this fact reflects badly on Felt’s Royal Selection influence. However, Shorty, who is also from the slums, does not seem to be willingly complicit in the crimes she committed.

Driven by necessity, people do evil in order to survive. This is the future that Shorty and Lululara might have had, and in fact, even Felt has not continued to do so.

How could he be proud of his work when he reveals the unavoidable circumstances of her crimes and stated that it was true?

Shorty: “I will write down the facts. I’ll see if I can write an article about it later… Huh? My pen is…”

Felt: “This? You’re usin’ some pretty nice stuff, aren’t ya? I bet I could sell it for a pretty good price, right?”

Shorty: “I thought you were retired!”

Felt, smiling, shows off Shorty’s favorite pen, which Felt had somehow taken from his hand and waved it in the air. Shorty was impressed and amazed by her brilliant handiwork.

Reinhard: “—Felt-sama, Shorty-dono, and the others are in a tight spot.”

Then Reinhard interrupts, opening the entrance to the reception room.

Reinhard, with a silver tray in his hand, brought in steaming cups, which he served to the table between Felt and Shorty.

Reinhard: “I think it’s a virtue that you don’t bother to hide it, Felt-sama, but you don’t have to go out of your way to mention it in such a blatant way. Now, the pen.”

Felt: “Teh, I guess the sermon is startin’ again. In general, I…”

Reinhard: “This is an instruction from Rom-dono and Ezzo.”

Felt: “Gua…”

Perhaps the added remark was effective, but then Felt’s expression lost its composure. She then handed Shorty’s pen to Reinhard in frustration.

Reinhard laughs at the situation and turns around to return the pen to Shorty.

Reinhard: “Here you go. And please do have some tea. It’s something I’m learning…”

Shorty: “No, no, no, not at all! Tea that is brewed by the “Sword Saint”! A very rare opportunity, yes. I would love to take it home and watch it evaporate!”

Lulularа: “Stupid…”

Shorty: “It’s just a joke to lighten the mood.”

Lulularа's one-liner in return brings Shorty back to his senses. After all, shouting is good for mental stability.

Anyway, not wanting to yell too many times, Shorty cleared his throat softly.

Shorty: "I apologize for not waiting for the arrival of Sir Reinhard and starting the conversation early."

Reinhard: "Oh, don't worry. I heard you."

Shorty: "Was that so? Then that's a relief… What? Do you mean the conversation we had here? In the kitchen?"

Felt: "Oh, for cryin' out loud. If you take his comments seriously, we'll never get anywhere and we'll never finish. I got other things to do later today."

My interest in Reinhard's words is insatiable, but with Felt telling him he has plans for later, they cannot talk for too long. It was important to know Felt's intentions for the Royal Selection.

Shorty: "—So, once again, What do you intend to do as king, Felt-sama?"

Felt: "I'm goin' to destroy the invisible traditions of this country."

Shorty: "…Yes?"

Shorty stops writing in his notebook once he hears the answer that came back to him without any hesitation. What did Felt just declare that she would destroy?

Shorty: "This country's, invisible traditions…?"

Felt: "All the unreasonable things that are taken for granted, all the things that I've seen, heard, talked about, and I don't like. The slums are one of those things I don't like."

Shorty: "…"

Felt: "'cause It's the way it's supposed to be, and the way we are supposed to think. No wonder it's so hard for the poor to live in the slums. But I don't like the fact that those who are just born on top are forever winners and those who are just born on the bottom are forever losers."

Before he can fully digest the meaning of the words, her opinions are spoken one after another from Felt's mouth. Shorty tries to get closer to Felt's true meaning as he digests them little by little.

If you cut out the superlatives, it is just an act of a young orphan girl, born and raised in the slums, who speaks of her bitter, jealous impulses toward those who were born and raised elsewhere.

But Felt's eyes and tone of voice held a much greater, weightier, and adamant will.

Felt: "Maybe ya don't expect much from me anyway, did cha?"

Shorty: "—hk"

Felt: "Heh, words become cheap when ya string'em together properly, don't they? It was good on my part not to be so careless and misleadin'. In fact, there is hardly anyone who expects anythin' from me. That's right. I am a little girl who grew up in a poor neighborhood. I'm not as respectable as the other candidates."

Felt cut him off, shook her head, and said, "No."

Felt: "I'm sure it's better than the half-demon-neechan, but that's the kind of level I'm talkin' about. No one expects anythin' from me. If that's the case, then I got nothin' to lose."

Shorty: "Is that why you are challenging the invisible traditions?"

Felt: "If someone doesn't punch'em in the face, ya can't even make 'em bleed. I'm goin' to beat them up first anyway. I'm the one who got that damn ticket. I won't know if anyone will follow after me until I try."

Felt concludes so using the wild, brash, back-alley style.

Ridiculous and lacking in specifics, Felt's arguments were, however, painfully familiar to Shorty, who was also from the slums. Perhaps even to Lulularа if she was listening.

At the same time, Shorty stumbled over the potential Felt had.

Before the interview, he felt disappointed and discouraged with Felt, who seemed to have no chance to win the selection. As usual, —Felt did not have the dignity of a King that Crusch and the others had.

However, when it comes to whether she looks like a powerless girl with nothing at all, no.

—In Felt, he felt the determination of a person who is ready to take on the challenge and the will of a reformer who is willing to make change.

Unlike the gifted who have already been perfected and born to shine, Felt's vessel is still in the process of taking shape.

Perhaps the vessel will not be fired even after the Royal Selection is settled. But if her vessel is ever completed and seen by the public—

Reinhard: "—The day will come when something invisible will be destroyed. Can we have such expectations?"

Shorty: "Sir Reinhard…"

Reinhard was the first to come to the same conclusion as Shorty did.

Reinhard looked at Shorty and Lulularа with his blue eyes, then back at Felt, who was sitting in front of him.

Reinhard: "In fact, Felt-sama is in the process of trying many things as we speak. For example, I am probably part of what she is trying to destroy."

Lulularа: "…you want to destroy Saint?"

Felt: "It ain't that big of a deal, Reinhard, don't be weird."

Reinhard: “But I wanted to make it widely known that I was the first thing that Felt tried to destroy, so I didn’t want to hide it if possible.”

Felt: “Scary. What are ya talkin’ bout, man?”

Reinhard’s smiling gaze is gentle, and Felt’s voice is truly harsh as she responds.

As far as it appears so far, they are two people who have formed a rather strange master and knight relationship. So far, the relationship between the Royal Selection candidate and the knight has been good, with minor differences, but each has one thing in common.

However, one can sense a rift between Felt and Reinhard that cannot easily be described simply as a good relationship. Not sour or unfriendly, but tense, as if they were in the middle of a stormy wind.

Reinhard: “Shorty-dono, I take care of the garden and flower beds because I am obeying Felt-sama’s orders”

Shorty: “W, well is that true?”

Reinhard: “Yes. She told me to try growing some flowers. Unfortunately, I have the “Divine Protection of Horticulture”, so it’s not a difficult challenge as it is trial and error…”

Reinhard breaks off there and looks at his palm. He was wearing protective gloves and had been tending to his garden. His hands had been washed to serve the guests, and although there were no dirt stains on them, his eyes were filled with the clear signs of his work.

Shorty saw the “Sword Saint” Reinhard’s gardening efforts as a waste of time and effort.

Reinhard: “I actually feel like I’ve changed my mind. Maybe the transformation of this world can come from the accumulation of small things like this.”

Felt: “You’re an arrogant bastard… I praised yer flower beds for a minute, and ya immediately got on my case.”

Reinhard: “It is a pleasure to hear that, since it was given to me by Felt-sama”

Reinhard replies without hesitation to Felt, who blurts it out while resting her chin on her hand.

It was a surprising comment even for Shorty to hear, and Felt was no exception to that. She looked at Shorty with a bitter look on her face, as if regretting that she had seen his face.

Shorty: “You’re staring at me!”

Felt: “Shit, I’m really not seein’ the point of this interview. If it’s just going to make me annoyed, there’s a limit to how much I’m willin’ to lose.”

Reinhard: “Don’t worry, the Dragon Nation Newsletter has one of the highest circulation rates in the capital. I am sure that the strategy of Rom-dono and Ezzo is correct.”

Felt: “Hey! Don’t ever, ever write what this idiot said earlier!”

Felt shows her sharp fangs and calls Reinhard an idiot.

What does Felt think of Reinhard, that she would let the “Sword Saint” tend to the garden, serve as a waiter, and then call him an idiot?

Shorty: “What does Felt-sama think about Sir Reinhard…”

Felt: “Oh? were ya half asleep? —This is Reinhard.”

Shorty: “—ah”

Felt: “It’s nothin’ more, nothin’ less. He doesn’t listen to me, but he talks a lot. He gives me a headache.”

Felt crosses her arms as she exhales loudly through her nose, and Reinhard, standing behind her, says nothing in response, only slightly relaxing the corners of his eyes.

Shorty, noticing Reinhard's reaction, reflected on his own life and realized that he, too, had been corrupted by the "invisible traditions" described by Felt.

He thought he understood the prejudices and preconceived notions that were prevalent in the kingdom, such as the differences in status between the aristocratic and impoverished districts, the categories of nobility, commoner, and destitute, and the prejudices and preconceptions that they created.

However, as Shorty continues to interview candidates for the Royal Selection, he is continually reminded that he is neither smart nor well-informed.

Finally, Felt, who also came from the slums, made the same realization.

—Shorty's and other people's illusions about Reinhard van Astrea, the "Sword Saint", is one of the things that Felt is trying to destroy because she doesn't like it.

Shorty: "Felt-sama, what do you think about where the Royal Selection is going?"

Felt: "…"

Felt's red eyes narrowed as she stared at Shorty, who had asked her a question.

Straightening his back, Shorty met her gaze directly. Here, his initial disappointment in Felt was gone, and all that remained was a strange sense of anticipation.

What in the world will this poor orphaned girl from the favelas show us in the future? Such is his hope.

Shorty thought that this might have been the decisive push that made Reinhard choose Felt.

Felt: "Well, I think the rest of'em are pretty good. When I first saw'em at the castle, I didn't know what they were like 'cause I didn't know anything about'em…"

Born and raised in the slums, it was not until Felt announced her participation in the royal selection and decided to live in Astrea Manor that she began to receive a decent education.

Shorty remembers it too. In the beginning, he couldn't even read or write, and he couldn't even stand on the same stage without bridging the gap between what he knew and what he should have known.

Felt has continued to fight through a series of frustrating experiences, but has not been corrupted by them.

Felt: "Right now, that Duchess has got the upper hand, followed by the merchant. Even though they joined in huntin' the whale, it's goin' to be tough for the half-demon-nee-chan. I don't know about that woman in red, but…"

Shorty: "…"

Felt: "I'm just as good, if not better, than her in terms of reputation. The future is bleak, and whether I can make up for this in three short years is my challenge."

Shorty was impressed with the accurate analysis of her own situation.

Her grasp of the state of the competition is proof that she is not throwing the game away, and that she is determined to do everything in her power to win.

However, the road ahead is a difficult one. That is undeniable, as she too realizes it.

Shorty: "Have you decided on how you are going to fight?"

Felt: "For the time bein', I ain't gonna win by copyin' the others. I gotta do what only I can do. That's why…"

Shorty: "So?"

Felt: “In the meantime, I’m hittin’ up every single black market guy I can. I’ve got a meetin’ with some of their higher-ups after this.”

Shorty: “That’s an unexpected answer!”

Shorty exclaimed to Felt, who laughed hysterically and gave an unexpected answer.

Shorty’s reaction was met with a “ha ha ha” from Felt, while Reinhard, standing behind her, put his hand on his forehead. Shorty, however, is the one who wants to cover his face.

One of the candidates for the Royal Selection is cozying up to the Black Market and wants to win the Royal Selection.

Shorty: “And it’s too good to be true, no one is going to believe this…!”

Even if Shorty showed it to Chief Morgan, he might think that he had fabricated the story. Surely, one would not expect such a big confession with so little thought put into it.

Shorty: “…”

While Shorty is thinking, Lululara is silently brushing strokes in her notebook.

Her interest never left Reinhard, and she has been making a number of news illustrations for Felt as well. At last, she has become aware of the importance of being a news illustrator, and has understood the rule that she should draw all of the subjects she is covering.

Unfortunately, this is not the case; Felt’s way of doing things suited Lululara’s taste.

Just as Shorty changed his perception of Felt, the same thing happened to Lululara. The fact that she painted a picture and the quality of the picture is proof of Felt’s considerable talent.

And then—

Felt: “So? What else do you want to know about why I’m in the

Royal Selection… what I’m going to do?”

Shorty: “I’ve been asking the others… what is your impression of the other candidates for the throne, Felt-sama?”

Felt: “The other guys. I told ya that earlier. I think they’re great guys.”

This is Felt, who calmly completes her own analysis, which is not to be discounted.

Perhaps for other candidates, she likely has an assessment that is worth listening to. Though she was not present at any of these events, she is no doubt also an excellent strategist who puts in the work.

If possible, Shorty would like to talk to someone else in the Felt camp as well.

Anyway, Felt scratched her cheek as she thought about it and said, “That’s about right.”

Felt: “I haven’t talked to her much, but that Duchess is a tough one. When she saw me at the castle, she was the only one who didn’t judge me. I was told that she was originally the favorite, but I ain’t lettin’ down my guard… Well, I guess that’s not the only reason she was lookin’ at me.”

Shorty: “I see, Crusch-sama is… what about Anastasia-sama and Priscilla-sama?”

Felt: “The merchant… Anastasia has got a good eye for detail. I got in her debt the other day, so I’m not sure how that will sound. But I’m sure it was worth more than the price I paid. I trust ‘em not to get greedy in their dealin’s. Also, that woman in red is…”

There, Felt broke off her speech and wrinkled her nose in genuine displeasure.

Felt: “Not about it bein’ good or bad, just that I will fuckin’ kick her ass.”

Shorty: “That’s incredibly personal! …Priscilla-sama is such an extremely intense person.”

Felt: “Heh, I guess that’s one way to put it. Besides—”

Felt held her tongue, and makes him wait slightly longer for the last person —Emilia’s evaluation.

TIt is taking a long time for her to formulate an answer. However, unlike the one to Priscilla, there is no hostility there. It seems to be a different sentiment from the animosity toward the half-elf.

Felt laughed at Shorty, who was waiting anxiously in front of her to see what it might be.

Felt: “That’s the half-demon-neechan. Ya should go see her with yer own eyes. You’ll see more clearly than any of the others that the rumors ain’t to be trusted.”

Shorty: “W, what a letdown…!”

Felt: “Well, I don’t hate her. I owe Nee-chan a lot, ya know.”

With her hands folded behind her head, Felt kept her opinion of Emilia to herself. At the very least, Felt made Shorty notice there was a possibility that she had been involved with Emilia.

Shorty felt a sobering sense of purpose when Felt pointed out that he should go and see them in person.

The Emilia camp, which from the beginning of this project had been considered the most challenging emotionally —finally, the interview with the other Royal Selection candidates was over, leaving her as the last one.

And then—

Lulularа: “I drew it…”

As she said this, Lulularа noisily tore another page out of her drawing book.

Felt accepts the news painting again with an amused “ show me, show me”. She must have gotten a taste of the picture of Shorty from earlier.

Felt’s eyes lit up in anticipation, wondering what kind of laughs Shorty would be able to provide this time—

Felt: “Ack”

Reinhard: “This is”

Felt frowned, and Reinhard, peering at the painting from behind, was amazed at the picture and laughed.

Shorty also sneaks a peek at it to see what kind of picture was painted, and is pleased with it.

The picture depicted Felt slumped on the sofa with Reinhard behind her, with a soft expression on his face. —A moment of their awkward master and knight relationship.

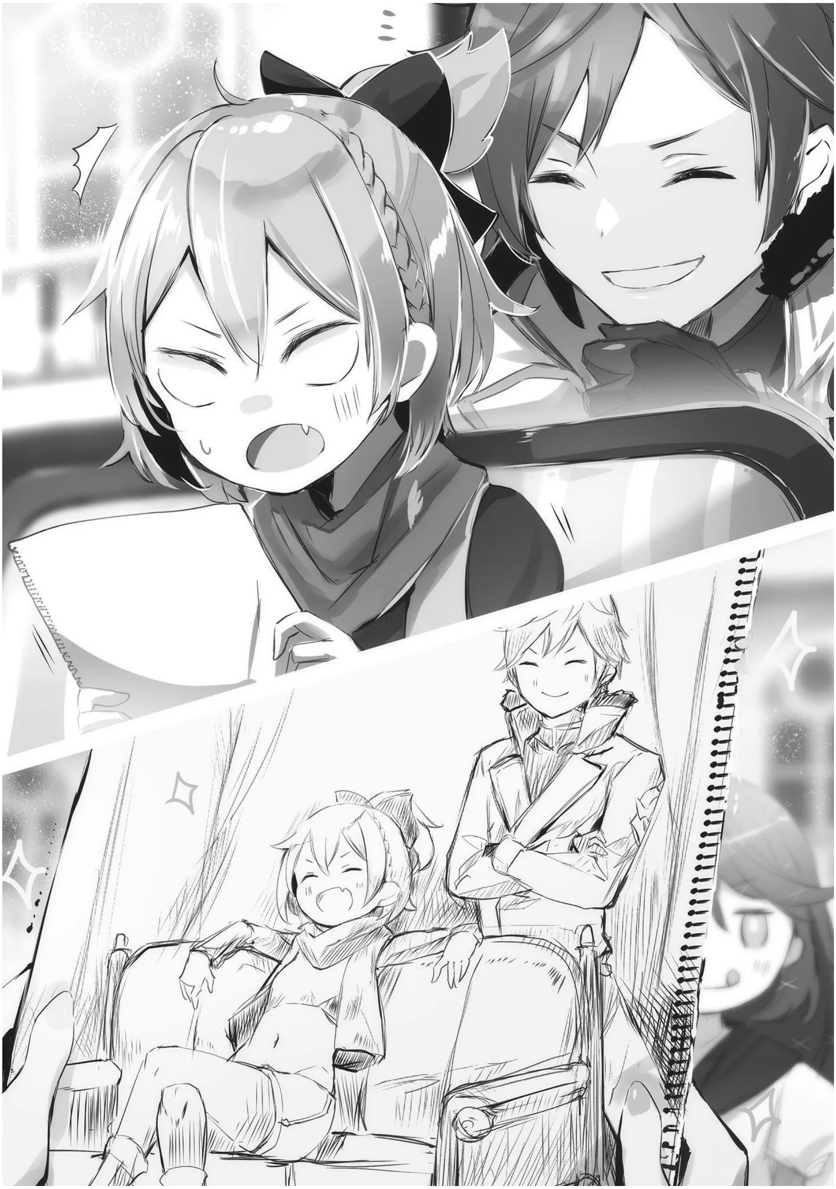

—An idea and a little bit of inspiration led to a series of interviews with the candidates for the Royal Selection.

These interviews, which have taken an immense toll on Shorty's body and mind, are now approaching the final chapter of the project.

At last, the final candidate for the Royal Selection, and the person who is considered the biggest hurdle to this project, is challenged.

Emilia is rumored to be the second coming of the "Witch of Envy," —the worst of the world's disasters that nearly destroyed the world, and she is known as a Witch who is not afraid to act hedonistic and wicked.

Of course, Shorty is more than aware of the unreliability of preconceived notions and previous information. Even so, the rumors about the "Witch of Envy" are irresistible.

Even Lululara, who has no interest in anything but painting, shudders at the mention of the name "Witch of Envy" so the fear that has seeped into the royal people - or rather, into people around the world —is understandably well-founded.

For this reason, she will be at an overwhelming disadvantage in the Royal Selection, so what sort of thoughts and objectives does she have in mind as she aims for the Lugunican throne?

To find out, Shorty and Lululara went to the Mathers domain—

???: "My name is Natsuki Subaru, and I am the thundering gale, the unyielding guide!"

With a shout, he thrusts the fingers of his right hand into the sky and stands with his left hand on his hip.

Shorty's eyes went blank as he was greeted by someone with short black hair and vicious eyes, not knowing where in the world he could have gotten his welcome customs.

The fact that the mysterious name of the dark-haired boy was the same name as the person Shorty wanted to talk to did not seem to register at this moment.

That is why Shorty's response to the name of the boy in front of him was delayed. —It was a name that as a news reporter living in this era, he should not have missed.

Shorty: "…"

Shorty, stunned, is at the stop of the hired Dragon Carriage.

They were going to visit the "industrial city" of Costuul, one of the five largest cities in the Kingdom of Lugunica, and the residence of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers was located close to the city. The plan was to go to Costuul, and interview Emilia there.

Shorty's start was unexpectedly thwarted—

Shorty: "Um, Natsuki Subaru-dono you said right?"

Subaru: "Huh? Oh, yeah, no doubt I'm Natsuki Subaru. In case you were wondering, the two of you came to interview me, Emilia-Tan… No, I was knighted, Emilia-sama…"

Shorty: "I knew it! You're the one who helped defeat the White whale and Sloth, aren't you?"

Subaru: "Woah!"

Shorty involuntarily fell forward, and the boy —Subaru was forced to jerk back at the forward momentum. Shorty's excitement did not subside, puffing out his nose as he approached.

Shorty: "I've heard so much about you! I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?"

Subaru: "No, no, of course, we're going to have you do that, but this time we're going to talk about Emilia-tan's story rather than mine."

Shorty: “I’ve heard that you have crossed camps to ask for cooperation and have successfully defeated a great enemy! Where did you get that much trust… and negotiating ability!”

Shorty, closing the distance with a snort and a curious look on his face, was hit on the back of the head. He looked to see that it was Lululara who had done it, brandishing her notebook.

She lowers the corner of her round eyes and shows Shorty her banged-up notebook.

Shorty: “That hurt, you used the corner!”

Lululara: “Hmm, too much, trouble.”

Shorty’s eyes fluttered at Lululara’s unusual reprimand, and he realized what he had done and hurriedly turned his head forward. Then he saw Subaru smiling at him.

Instantly, the heat rises quickly from his neck, his face becoming hot.

Shorty: “I, I’m terribly sorry…! I’m so sorry! I completely forgot myself!”

Subaru: “Ooh, no problem. To be honest, I was a bit intimidated, but on the other hand, I could feel your enthusiasm.”

Shorty: “You, can you forgive me? Oh, thank you so much! Sir Natsuki…”

Shorty, apologizing flatly, was moved by Subaru’s kind words. Then, as he was about to accept Subaru’s hand, Shorty bent down deeply at the waist and—

???: “—You, get away from Subaru immediately, I suppose!”

Shorty: “Waai…!”

A high-pitched voice from nearby, an invisible shockwave, and Shorty’s body sailed lightly through the air as he was struck by it. Subaru, awestruck by the sight, turned around to see a small figure standing there.

???: “There is no room for letting one’s guard down, In fact. Indeed, Subaru would not have enough lives if it were not for Betty, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Be, Beako, you…”

???: “Hmm, It seems you are so amazed and grateful that you are speechless. In fact. If you can’t talk, at least express your gratitude for Betty through your actions and attitude, I suppose.”

As she says this, the girl in the dress with luxuriously curled hair outstretches her hands to the flustered Subaru. Subaru reaches out his trembling arms to her, —and pinches her red cheeks.

???: “Gyaa! What are you doing, In fact, Subaru! Betty just saved your life and doesn’t deserve to be treated like this, I suppose!”

Subaru: “You idiot! It’s true that my life is as unreliable as fluffy cotton wool, but I’m still brave this time! That’s the two interview staff!”

???: “what’s that? In fact.”

With her cheeks pinched, the girl looks at Shorty, who was blown away past Subaru.

Shorty, who was blown away helplessly, crashed into a hedge and was being pulled by Lululara by his outstretched leg. Subaru rushed up to him in a panic.

Subaru: “You, you all right, Shorty-san? Sorry! My Beako made a terrible mistake!”

Shorty: “I, I’m fine, I’m fine… It’s not uncommon for a Dragon Nation Newsletter reporter to run head first into something…”

Subaru: “It’s going to make a great story! Anyway…here we go”

Subaru pulls Shorty’s body out of the hedge in place of the powerless Lululara. Shorty is covered in leaves, some of them tangled in his long bangs that hide his eyes.

Subaru: “Hey, Beako, apologize for being so rash. I’m sorry.”

???: “B, but this pipsqueak is at fault for being misleading, as well, I suppose…”

Subaru: “Don’t go making up excuses!”

In front of Shorty, Subaru scolded the stubborn little girl. But when Shorty saw the increasingly stubborn girl turn her face away, he intervened, saying, “Well, it’s okay”.

Shorty: “Don’t worry about it! See, I’m fine.”

Subaru: “No, I’m definitely going to make her apologize! Because this is an educational experience! Come on, Beako!”

???: “Nugu gugugu… Betty will never apologize, In fact…!”

Subaru is trying to get the girl to apologize, but the girl, who has her head squeezed, is resisting. It is a funny exchange, like that of a parent and child, but Shorty feels like he is missing someone.

Hesitant to interfere, and at a loss for what to do—

???: “—Natsuki-san, Beatrice-chan, what are you doing in front of our guests?”

The deadlocked atmosphere was brought to an end by a soft voice filled with dismay.

Subaru and the girl, who were engaged in a back-and-forth battle, turned around at the sound of his voice and changed their expressions with an “Oh”. —Standing where they looked was a young man with distinctive gray hair and green attire.

At the appearance of the calm-looking young man, the girl named Beatrice, lowers her eyes.

Beatrice: “Ugh, it is not what it looks like, I suppose. There are unavoidable circumstances for this…”

???: “Are those circumstances a good enough reason for both of you to leave our leafy guests alone?”

Beatrice: “You’re a prickly and unforgiving man, I suppose! Hrumph”

Beatrice turns away with a pouty look on her face after being candidly corrected. Subaru, patting her on the head, also looks disappointed. Shorty is impressed by the way he does it.

As soon as the young man appeared, Subaru and Beatrice both became quiet.

???: “I’m sorry for the trouble that these two have caused. I will make sure to have a word with them.”

Shorty: “uhh, well, thank you, And you are?”

???: “My name is Otto Suwen. Weell, I’m with the two people behind you…”

Shrugging his shoulders, the young man —Otto looks a mixture of pride and disappointment, while Subaru and Beatrice sulk behind him, saying “What is it?”.

However, the intense tremor that hit Shorty did not make him aware of these two’s circumstances.

Shorty: “Oh, Otto Suwen-dono, is it?”

Otto: “—? Yes, that’s me, but…”

Shorty: “Ehh! Sor, I’m so sorry!”

Otto tilts his head, and Shorty hurriedly kneels down on the spot. Shorty then pulled the sleeve of Lululara, who was standing there in a daze, and made her kneel as well.

Shorty: “Lululara, Lululara, get on your knees! If he gets in a bad mood, he’ll gnaw your head off!”

Otto: “I don’t bite, though! What sort of things did you hear about

me?”

Shorty: “The militant internal affairs officer who is wanted for threatening a powerful noble in his hometown of Picoutatte, wiped out bandits nesting in Mount Gina, and burned down a Margrave’s mansion to negotiate a pay raise.…”

Otto: “It’s one thing to say those things, but isn’t this too terrible!”

Otto, raising his voice, however, does not deny his reputation for them. In other words, he knew what he was talking about. It was information that Shorty thought was eyebrow-raising until he had seen the real thing.

But there is no doubt that he has managed to contain and completely tame Natsuki Subaru, who accomplished the defeat of the White Whale and Sloth.

Shorty: “Oh, please don’t kill me…”

Subaru: “Oi, Oi, Otto, you, no way…”

Otto: “I’m not going to take it! Or rather, don’t get carried away Natsuki-san, and help me clear up the misunderstanding! This is getting out of hand!”

Subaru and Otto argued with each other, with the small and trembling Shorty in between them. Sighing at the sight of these three, Beatrice suddenly noticed Lululara’s hands as she crouched down.

Lululara, kneeling on the ground, was moving her paintbrush at a furious pace. Realizing that the object of her paintbrush is herself, Beatrice brushes away her own hair.

Beatrice: “At the very least, portray Betty in all of her splendor, In fact.”

Lululara: “Draw, little one…”

Yes, she nodded in satisfaction at Lululara’s answer as she moved her paintbrush.

11

—Although there was a stumbling block at the start.

Subaru: “Once again, welcome, you two. Welcome.”

Leaving the Dragon Carriage stop, Subaru holds out his hand in a renewed attempt at a welcome.

Contrary to the grandiosity of his reputation, Subaru treats him with a much more friendly attitude as he shook his hand.

His relationship with Beatrice, who was always holding his hand, made no sense to Shorty at all.

Subaru: “Well, I was so excited when I heard that someone had asked to do an interview. After all, image strategy… and public relations can make the difference between winning and losing in an election campaign.”

Shorty: “Excited… Image…?”

Otto: “Oh, those are just some words used by Natsuki-san sometimes, you could call them Natsuki speak. He claims it’s his native language, but it’s…”

Subaru: “Well, I mean my thoughts and feelings. You can just tune it out if you want to.”

Subaru, responding with a laugh, seems to have a very positive outlook on this interview, as evidenced by his welcoming attitude. Otto, the internal affairs officer, seems to agree, showing no hostility toward Shorty and Lululara.

Shorty: “But I didn’t expect to be picked up by… some of the most important people”

Subaru: “In fact, Emilia-Tan herself wanted to come, but the rest of the camp stopped her because they thought her sudden appearance would scare you two off.”

Shorty: “It was you, wasn’t it?”

As for Shorty, just the fact that Subaru, a knight of the candidates for the Royal Selection, came to pick him up was enough of a surprise, but he couldn't help but be surprised when he was told that it could have been more than that.

Subaru: "Oh, you're still freaked out, Emilia-tan is not a scary person to deal with at all."

Beatrice: "Even so, it is human nature to bow down to authority and position, I suppose. Both Subaru and Emilia are still lacking in that area of thinking, In fact."

Otto: "I agree with you on that. I hope this time they will learn from this."

Otto rubbed his brow with his fingers and muttered sadly.

In addition to what Otto has to say about this, Subaru and Beatrice's words and actions are also noteworthy. It may be natural for Otto to say, since he is a member of the camp, but—

Shorty: "In the eyes of you three, what kind of a person is Emilia-sama?"

The question was, in some ways, quite insincere. It cut too close to the heart of the matter to be casually thrown out in the middle of being escorted, as a bit of banter before reaching the mansion.

Shorty: "…"

Shorty held his breath, expecting a stern response from the three silent parties, as he had expected.

Subaru: "—Well, she's an angel. Cute and hard-working, an angel to say the least."

Shorty: "Uh?"

However, after a moment of thought, Subaru's answer was this.

Beatrice: "Subaru… The little reporter is dumbfounded. I suppose. He is not saying what you think he is, In fact."

Subaru: “No, I thought that is what he meant. Then what would Beako say?”

Beatrice: “It’s obvious, I suppose. Emilia is a dimwit with bottomless optimism, In fact”

Subaru: “Isn’t Emilia-Tan a little too out of touch in Beako’s mind?”

Beatrice pulls on Subaru’s sleeve, her opinion also not in line with Emilia’s earlier publicity. Shorty was puzzled by this point, and Otto scratched his cheek with his finger with an “ah”.

Otto: “I understand the purpose of your question, Shorty-san. In general, I’m aware of how Emilia-sama is regarded by the public.”

Shorty: “Hee! Please don’t be angry.”

Otto: “I’m not angry, though! Anyway! Many of the previous perceptions are simply untrue. This is an opportunity for you to show that.”

Otto, though not as aggressive as Subaru, shared Subaru’s expectations for this interview, to which Subaru nodded his head and said, “That’ s right”.

Subaru: “We have to improve her image in order for people to understand the real Emilia-Tan. So, please write a good article, Shorty-san.”

Shorty: “I, I will only report what I see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears. Even if I am threatened by the militant Internal Affairs officer, I will never be deterred…”

Otto: “I’m not going to threaten you! Ugh… I wonder what my reputation will be like by the time the Royal Selection is over.”

Beatrice: “Don’t waste your time thinking about such pointless things, I suppose.”

Beatrice explains the impermanence of the world to Otto, who laments it.

As Shorty watched these exchanges, there was something that he sensed strongly from all three. That is, all three have a favorable impression of Emilia and are dissatisfied with her current situation.

It was a rebellion against the environment that surrounded her, a half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes.

The anger they feel, if it is justified—

Shorty: "…The real Emilia-sama."

The difference between the previous rumors and reality, Shorty has never been more painfully aware of it in this project.

There was a radical difference in impressions of Crusch, Anastasia, Priscilla, and Felt. So, could the same thing happen with Emilia?

The more he thought about it, and the more anxiety and anticipation he felt, the more he thought—

Shorty: "I can't wait to meet you in person."

Lulularа: "…W, What, you scared me."

Shorty's muttering, his fists clenched, reached only Lulularа, who had known Shorty for a long time. What did she see in Shorty's muttering?

As soon as she started moving her paintbrush, there was no doubt that Lulularа's interest was piqued.

So, following the lead of Subaru and the others, Shorty and Lulularа headed for Margrave's mansion, where Emilia was waiting for them. However, on the way there, they found themselves in the middle of a strange situation.

???: "—Ooh? Ya bastards came'ta the wrong place, didn't cha?"

Suddenly, a wild voice sounded, and a shadowy figure came running out of the grass with great vigor.

It was a fierce-looking figure with golden hair and sharp fangs bared. Shorty's eyes widened at the sudden appearance and gasped, "Eh".

Subaru: "Whoa, a bandit!"

Beatrice: "This is a terrible thing that's happened, In fact… The end of the world, I suppose…"

Subaru: "What? On a road near a big city like this?"

—Shorty is momentarily left speechless by the situation, while Subaru and Beatrice, their faces turning pale, embrace each other and slump into a heap on the spot.

Seeing Subaru and the others, the blonde bandit sniffed in a good mood and said, "Heh."

Bandit: "Well, it looks like ya know what's goin' on. If ya don't want ta get hurt, you're going ta have to be a good boy and give me what I want."

Shorty: "Heeii, please spare my life, please spare my life…"

Looking down at the trembling Subaru and the others, the boy licked his lips with cruelty. Quickly protecting Lulularа behind him, Shorty looked back at Otto for help.

It was then.

???: "—That's enough, scoundrel."

The air around them was completely taken away by the unexpected sound of a voice like a silver bell.

Shorty's eyes widened to see what was going on, and the bandit turned to them with a grim "Ooh?" Then there was a rustling sound, and a new figure appeared.

A beautiful girl with shimmering silver hair, jewel-like amethyst eyes, and an appearance that is unforgettable —Shorty forgot to breathe at the sight of her.

The girl, under the gaze of everyone, pointed a finger at the bandit with authority.

Girl: “I’m not going to overlook any more of your misdeeds. Get away from Subaru and the others.”

Bandit: “Ha! Don’t cha tell me what to do, Who the hell are ya? … No way!”

Girl: “Yeah, that’s right, no umm. I am… I am…”

Bandit: “—?”

The girl’s bravado quickly faded in front of the bandit, who was bracing himself. She stiffens in her finger-pointing posture, furrowing her shapely brow.

And then, surreptitiously approached Subaru.

Girl: “…Subaru, Subaru, what was the next word?”

Subaru: “…That’s “Emilia, the next candidate for the throne of the Kingdom of Lugunica.” Emilia-Tan.”

Emilia: “…Oh, right. Yeah, Okay. Umm.”

After exchanging a few words with Subaru, still slumped in a heap, the girl returned to her original position as if she had regained her composure, coughed lightly, and then continued.

Emilia: “I am Emilia, the next candidate for the throne of Lugunica. In the name of the moon, I’ll punish you!”

Bandit: “AH, Aaaah! Oh shit! It’s Emilia-sama, a candidate for ta Royal Selection. This ain’t gonna happen!”

Upon hearing the girl’s words, the fearful bandit prostrated himself on the spot. Seeing this, the girl nodded deeply and looked at the stunned Shorty and the others.

Emilia: “Well, I guess that’s that. Are any of you hurt?”

The smiling girl —no, if what she had just said was true, there was no doubt as to her true identity. Above all, her identity was clear from her distinctive appearance.

Shorty: “E, Emilia-sama, is it?”

Emilia: “—! Yes, that’s right. I just so happened to be Reaaally close by…”

The girl —Emilia answered with her chest puffed out. However, right after she answered, Emilia, crouched down, holding her stomach with an “ugh”.

Immediately rushing to Emilia, Subaru shouted, “Emilia-tan!”.

Subaru: “What’s wrong all of a sudden, are you okay?”

Emilia: “Uh, no, I’m fine. It’s just that when I lied to them my stomach suddenly started hurting…”

Beatrice: “This is… surely because he made you do something you aren’t suited for, In fact. Subaru, enough…”

Subaru: “Don’t give up, stupid! We’ve made it this far. We have to finish it…”

Subaru and Beatrice were in a state of panic around Emilia. Shorty seriously wondered how he should react since everything was being overheard.

But, the best solution to Shorty’s problem was—

Otto: “No, there is nothing good about this mess, this is a farce!”

It was Otto Suwen, who couldn’t resist shouting.

He quickly approached Subaru, much to the amazement of everyone there.

Otto: “Natsuki-san! I thought you rejected this plan! Why are you insisting on continuing it!”

Subaru: “It was too good to throw away! We’ll be saved by a dashing Emilia-Tan after we get tangled up with some thugs! It’s a reenactment of how Emilia and I met!”

Emilia: “Hey, Subaru. I don’t remember saving you like this…”

Otto: “It’s Emilia-sama who is in this condition! Can you please stop talking about your dreams?”

Subaru: “It’s true that meeting Emilia-Tan was a dream come true, but that wasn’t a dream.”

Otto grabs Subaru by the collar and shakes him, whereupon Emilia interjects from beside them.

While shorty was still left behind, one thing became clear. Emilia’s character was the one that Subaru and the others had told him about just prior to the meeting.

Emilia: “Both of you, stop fighting! Otto-kun, Subaru has thought hard about this, so don’t be too angry with him!”

While Otto is shaking his Subaru back and forth, Emilia is yelling at him, and from her earnest appearance, she does not give the slightest impression of the cold and cruel incarnation of a Witch.

She gave the impression of an ordinary girl at the mercy of the events in front of her.

Bandit: “Yo, Beatrice… any chance this bein’ a mistake?”

Beatrice: “It goes without saying, I suppose. Originally, it was a foolhardy plan to get Emilia to lie, In fact. As expected, the plan is a mess, I suppose.”

Bandit: “Damn, ya mean “Overly elaborate Gazzorena”?”

The bandit —or rather, the boy playing the role of a bandit raises his lowered head, scratches his blond hair, grumbling, and then, next to him, Beatrice sighs crossing her short arms.

Shorty: “Um, you’re all from the same camp… right?”

Garfiel: “There ain’t no point in hidin’ it now, is there? That’s right. My amazin’ self is Garfiel Tinsel, “The Strongest of Shields”. Remember, I ain’t no bandit.”

The boy —Garfiel, clicks his sharp fangs and proudly announces his name.

His performance as a thug was quite impressive, but because he exuded an extraordinary spirit, Shorty was relieved to know that his impression was not mistaken.

Anyway, these were all part of Emilia and company’s plan to create a grand impression—

Lulularа: “…farce.”

Shorty: “Shh! Shh, Lulularа! I was about to say it too, and then I stopped!”

Shorty turned to look at Lulularа, alarmed by her frankness. Shorty then looked back at Emilia and the others, who had just settled their argument.

Subaru, his clothes in disarray, was thrown to the ground, where Emilia offered to help him to her lap. With that in the background, Otto gave a sideling glance to them, then bowed his head to Shorty while repositioning his hat.

Otto: “Well, sorry you had to see something so unsightly. As for this…”

Shorty: “No! I mean, I didn’t see anything! …Well, I can’t say that, I think I have to respond in some way…”

Otto: “That’s true. Well, the only thing I can say is that I’m sorry for the confusion it has caused you.”

For the umpteenth time today, Otto laments greatly as he rubs his fingers across his brow.

Even though they have only been acquainted with each other for a short time, Shorty could guess what his position in this camp is like.

The various saga-like rumors surrounding him may have been spread while he was speaking up for those around him.

Otto: “Even so, it’s true that most of the wanted people and the bandits have been crushed…”

Garfiel: “Otto-bro, the Capt’n, and Emilia-sama are sorry for what happen’d. ain’t it bout time ya stopped complainin’?”

Otto: “It’s self-serving… to begin with, Garfiel, you and everyone who went along with this is going to get a lecture from me later.”

Garfiel: “Gah! Talk bout pokin’ the snake.”

Garfield gritted his teeth and regretted his gaffe. Suggesting that Otto’s position in the camp is that of a chaperone and advisor.

And while Shorty is still solidifying these impressions, the one impression that has yet to be solidified is that of—

Emilia: “Um, I’m sorry for all the confusion. No one meant any harm…”

Shorty: “Eh, um, yes. I understand that, I think.”

Emilia: “Really? I’m so glad. I’m reaaally relieved.”

It was Emilia who smiled and patted her chest as if relieved.

It was only a few minutes ago that he decided that he would like to meet and talk with her in person. Shorty’s mind was stirred up by the sight of the real thing.

The Witch resurrected in the modern age who froze the forests of her homeland and brought snow to the Mathers’ territory on a whim —What about the woman with such a reputation?

Beatrice: “It’s just as what was said before, In fact …You’re a bottomless dunce, I suppose.”

Beatrice, who had come up next to Shorty, said so with a pout on her lips.

In his current opinion, There were more missing factors than in the previous personal evaluation, but Shorty couldn’t dispute them either.

Emilia: “—?”

Emilia tilts her head curiously, even though she is being talked about herself.

This was especially true when Shorty was surrounded by the carefree atmosphere she exuded.

12

???: “Dear guest, please don’t be mistaken. As for that little farce, Ram and the others told them not to do it. So it would have been entirely up to Emilia-sama and Barusu.”

The woman who brought the tea was a maid, who reminded him in a terribly cold tone.

Shorty and Lulularа were once again led to the mansion where Emilia was staying after the farce on the road was over, and as they were ushered into the parlor, a pink-haired maid brought them tea.

The maid’s first words were to Shorty and Lulularа, without so much as a greeting.

Shorty was so intimidated that he could not respond to her, and the fact that Lulularа’s paintbrush never stopped painting the maid was proof that she was more than just an ordinary servant in the mansion.

Shorty: “That was a very shrewd maid. …I thought the maid there was a lot more like a Witch than Emilia-sama was because of that tone of voice.”

Lulularа: “…Drew it.”

Shorty: “Ah, you drew it? That’s great, you’re so fast… very intimidating.”

The picture of the maid who left the room clearly captured not only the neatness of her appearance, but also her oppressiveness, which is impossible to describe in writing. Although it is unlikely to be used as a news illustration this time around, it is a work of pure quality that should be preserved.

Shorty and Lulularа were enjoying the hospitality.

Emilia: “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. Subaru, had to go change clothes.”

Emilia appears in the parlor. She is accompanied by Subaru, who has changed clothes behind her, and Beatrice, who is holding his hand.

It is an ideal combination of a candidate for the Royal Selection and her knight side by side.

Shorty: “But, Beatrice-sama is…”

Beatrice: “Yes, Betty and Subaru are one and the same, In fact. Our relationship is a special one that no one can sever, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Actually, yes. No joke, if I’m too far away from Beako, I’ll pop and die. Oh, and please keep this off the record. It might be my…”

Shorty: “Oh, you mean… don’t talk about it. I understand.”

Beatrice is immediately positioned on Subaru’s lap on the sofa. Emilia, seated next to Subaru, does not say anything about the two of them, so it seems that everything is normal.

Shorty, for his part, said nothing as if it were business as usual; Subaru’s tone was light, but it was obvious from listening that it was not a lie or a joke of any kind.

Shorty accepts it, the stage is set, and he bows his head to Emilia and the others once again.

Shorty: “Once again, thank you for taking the time to interview with us. We have already spoken to the other Royal Selection candidates and have asked them about their positions…”

Emilia: “Yes, I’ve heard. So I guess that means we’re the last ones, right?”

Shorty: “Yes. I don’t want to be misunderstood, I didn’t have any ulterior motives for the order of the interviews—”

Shorty’s words were interrupted as he tried to explain what had happened so far.

That was because he was taken aback by the scene in front of him.

Emilia: “—First of all, thank you for coming to hear what I have to say. I’m also happy to talk to someone who is willing to listen to me properly, so thank you.”

Shorty: “…”

That said, Emilia, sitting opposite him, bowed deeply.

Next to her, Subaru, rather than admonishing Emilia, bowed his head in the same manner.

The other Royal Selection candidates were relatively forthcoming and gracious in accepting Shorty’s interview. However, this was the first time someone had bowed to them with gratitude.

This is not so much a testament to Emilia’s modesty and courteousness as it’s indicative of their poor circumstances and deep preconceived notions of their situation.

In this way, being able to get honest interviews is something exceptional for Emilia.

Shorty: “Emilia-sama…”

Emilia: “Yes, what is it?”

Shorty: “Emilia-sama, Why did you decide to join the Royal Selection?”

Shorty found himself asking the question as if it had just slipped out of his mouth.

It may have been too straightforward and rude of a question to ask Emilia, who had accepted the interview just prior to it, with great politeness and courtesy.

Shorty’s intent in asking her that question is obvious without even thinking about it. —Emilia’s situation, as a half-elf, is just awful.

Even though she is a candidate for the Royal Selection, it is abundantly clear to anyone who sees her that she is doomed to defeat. In fact, even for an interview with such a young, unproven young man, they had to bow down to him in a polite manner.

The odds were slim to none. So why did she take on the challenge? Shorty’s question surely must reveal her intentions.

However—

Emilia: “—I didn’t give it much thought in the beginning.”

Emilia, replied, not angrily, and even had a smile on her face.

In front of the breathless Shorty, Emilia gently puts her hand on her chest and narrows her amethyst eyes as if thinking back on the “beginning” she had just uttered.

Emilia: “I was living in the forest and Roswaal came for me. That was the first time I heard about the Royal Selection and that the king was gone… At first, I didn’t know if I could handle such a big responsibility. I just accepted it for a selfish reason.”

Shorty: “For selfish reasons?”

Emilia: “It was kind of about family. It wasn’t at all about the kingdom or for the people around me.”

Sticking out her tongue a little in a bashful way. Emilia’s overly honest answer clearly would have a negative impact on her chances in the Royal Selection if anyone heard it.

There are already too many things to scrutinize with her.

But that would be a short-sighted way of looking at things. Her current tone of voice goes beyond that.

Shorty: “In other words, you think differently now?”

Emilia: “Yes… Subaru and Beatrice, beside me, as well as Ram and Otto-kun, Garfiel and Frederica, Petra-chan, Ryuzu-san, and Roswaal. These are the people who expect me to be strong and push me forward even if I’m unreliable.”

As she answered, Emilia, moved her fingers on her chest. Only then did Shorty realize that what Emilia was touching was the crystalline stone that hung from her neck.

The crystalline stone is cracked and has lost its light, touching it lovingly, she said.

Emilia: “Everyone has been good to me, I’ve learned a lot in my own way, and I realize it’s a tough position to be in, as you Shorty-kun and the others are concerned about. But.”

Shorty: “…”

Emilia: “But I don’t want to give up. I want to do my best so that people can see exactly how I was born, how I was raised, and how I think.”

Shorty: “…”

Emilia: “I don’t want someone else to be told what they can or can’t do or what they can’t be because of me or anybody else besides them. That’s what I think now.”

Emilia said this as her amethyst eyes looked straight at Shorty.

This determination, spoken in faltering words by Emilia, struck a chord in Shorty’s mind. At the same time, Shorty was ashamed of his own prejudice.

Despite his desire to be as impartial and open-minded as possible, Shorty was still stuck in his rigid thinking.

As a half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes, Emilia must have struggled with more prejudice, preconceptions, and unbelievable obstacles than Shorty could ever imagine. Emilia, however, does not bemoan her situation unnecessarily, instead, she explains it plainly.

This simple explanation was her reason to move forward. —She is fighting on the side of those who are subjected to unjustified discrimination and suffering the same fate as herself.

There are plenty of other ways for people to cast people into categories and look down on them.

One does not simply have to possess the same characteristics as the "Witch of Envy" who once nearly destroyed the world. Those born in a bad area, with criminal parents, and those simply born poor can easily be branded as "weak".

And people can be surprisingly cruel to the "weak".

Shorty, who grew up in the slums, knew all about that too well.

Shorty: "So, Emilia-sama, are you saying, that you would save us."

It was an improper question from Shorty on behalf of the "weak".

Shorty, until a moment ago, was unrelated to Emilia's efforts in the Royal Selection, is shamelessly trying to be the first to run up the flag of salvation that she holds aloft.

What if Emilia had held out her chest and affirmed it?

In any case, it is impossible to know the answer in this case. Because—

Emilia: "But since I can't promise, that I could save anyone, I can't promise something so big as that."

Shorty: "…"

Emilia: "If two people want something, it would be nice if it's something they can share, but if it's not, then only one of them can have it, right? I can't help them both."

Shorty: "Then how are we supposed to be saved?"

Emilia: "Uh… I absolutely can't help you. But, I think it's strange that you say you want help since you can't get involved with the competition. So I won't let that happen."

Shorty: "…"

Emilia: "Yes, you're right. Let's leave the possibilities open. To everyone, fair and square."

Emilia nodded as if to confirm Shorty's clinging words.

Once the words were sorted out in her mind and spoken aloud, she did not try to take them back, but rather gave a straight answer to Shorty's question.

Shorty, in response, quietly rewrote his impression of Emilia further. And next to Emilia, who nodded her head—

Subaru: "E, Emilia Tan, You're doing great…"

Beatrice: "Naah! Subaru! Don't wipe your tears with the collar of Betty's dress, In fact!"

Subaru: "It's not tears I wiped, you idiot, It's snot… Dah!"

Beatrice: "That's even worse, I suppose!"

Beatrice head-butted Subaru, who wiped his eyes and nose with her dress.

Emilia's knight and his escort ruined the mood, but just as well. Since Shorty heard Emilia's, he wanted to hear something from her knight.

Shorty: "Natsuki Subaru-dono, why did you become Emilia-sama's knight? Is it because you share Emilia-sama's current beliefs?"

Subaru: “Me? …When I look back on how it all started, it was an ulterior motive.”

Shorty: “U, ulterior motive…?”

Subaru replied with a raised finger and without a hint of regret. Shorty rounded his eyes at the unexpected answer, and Beatrice shook her head.

But Beatrice did not even correct or silence Subaru’s words.

Subaru: “I caught a glimpse of Emilia-tan on the street, and I fell head over heels for her. And I was running around with all my heart to help her.”

Shorty: “So, you are in the position you are in now? B, but, Subaru-dono, you defeated the White Whale and Sloth, didn’t you?”

Subaru: “That was part of it too, trying to act cool for the girl I like.”

Subaru scratches his cheek with his finger and smiles shyly. There was no sense of deception, and there was no hint of a joke. In other words, the reason Subaru has become a knight and has achieved historical accomplishments over and over again is that he has fallen for Emilia—

Shorty: “Weren’t you at all surprised by Emilia’s appearance?”

Subaru: “No, I was surprised by how cute she was. I’m still surprised when I see her in the morning or when I see her without being mentally prepared for it.”

Emilia: “Jeez, you’re joking around like that again.”

Emilia reached out with her hand and lightly tugged on Subaru’s ear. Emilia’s cheeks flushed slightly at Subaru’s pained “ouch, ouch”.

Emilia: “Now that’s a joke, please don’t write about it in the article. Subaru, you get carried away so easily.”

Subaru: “I feel like it should be written in the sense that it’s meant to be a check on a love rival… no, this time, however, the goal is to improve Emilia-tan's image, so isn't it good that she's flirting with me?"

Emilia: "I'm not flirting. Also, I don't think I ever saved you Subaru…"

Subaru: "If I go into detail about that, my heart would creak…"

Emilia pouted her lips as Subaru defended himself with his ear pinched. Beatrice, who was sitting on Subaru's lap, watched the exchange between the two of them with a look of exasperation on her face.

In contrast to the poisonous atmosphere, Shorty was overcome with a sense of shock. At the same time, Shorty clenched his fists tighter in frustration.

On one hand, he was glad to hear Emilia's story here and now, but he also thought.

—Why was he the one here?

Shorty: "…"

Emilia earnestly spoke about her intentions, and her words certainly struck Shorty's heart. Without exaggeration, he could nod his head and say that it is a wonderful determination, thought, and resolve.

However, this impression was only felt by Shorty who directly spoke with Emilia and experienced her voice and eyes with his own body.

It is an extraordinary task to bring the same thing to the readers of the Dragon Nation Newsletter.

And it is not Emilia's fault, but Shorty's insufficient ability to do so.

If Shorty's writing were so well written that he could convey what he saw with his own eyes to all who read his articles, he would not have to suffer this agony.

Unfortunately, Shorty's current writing is not that good. Other than Shorty, it might have been possible for Editor-in-Chief Morgan, when he was still on the job, for that matter.

Because of his own shortcomings, he is unable to convey the information properly. This is the most dreadful situation for a reporter. It is the very situation that will determine a journalist's future.

If so, what could Shorty Megan do?

Aware of his own inadequacies, the "Dragon Nation Newsletter" reporter still had the truth that he needed to convey before his eyes, and what was he going to do—

Shorty: "—ah"

Shorty, who was at a crossroads in his life, looked at Lululara beside him, who was putting her heart and soul into her paintbrush, as if seeking salvation.

As usual, Lululara continues to paint the news paintings without regard for his reporting. That was the way she approached her work, and Shorty did not expect any support or comfort from her.

But Lululara is serious, continuing to confront the scene in front of her and keep her paintbrush moving.

Shorty gulps as he looks across at that vividly illustrated news painting.

Then, on impulse, he snatched the drawing book from Lululara's lap.

Lululara: "…hk!"

Shorty: "Sorry, Lululara! Let me see!"

Lululara was suddenly shocked as if half of her body had been torn off, clutching her forehead angrily, Shorty looked over the dozen or so drawings that had been made since this interview began —or rather, since he had met Subaru and the others at the station.

Shorty looked at each of the drawings and muttered, “Ahh, I knew it”.

Suddenly, Lulularа was shocked as if she had been stripped of her other half. While holding her bitingly angry forehead, Shorty looked over the dozen or so pictures that had been drawn since the beginning of this interview… or rather, since he had encountered Subaru and the others at the station. When Shorty looked at each of the pictures on there, he muttered, “Yeah, I knew it.”

Shorty: “This expression on Emilia-sama’s face.”

Picking up one of the press paintings, Shorty nodded his head as he lowered the corners of his eyes.

Then, with a sudden movement of his body, he turns to Lulularа, who is still trying to retrieve her equipment, and embraces her petite body in front of him.

Picking up one of the press pictures, Shorty nodded, lowering the corners of his eyes. He then stretched out his arms and turned to Lulularа, who was retrieving her work tools, and hugged her petite body from the front.

Lulularа: “…why”

Shorty: “Lulularа, thank you, thank you! Thanks to you! Thanks to you, I’ve seen the light! I’m no good. After all, without you, I would be completely and utterly useless!”

Shorty thanked Lulularа, her eyes wide and frozen, in front of him.

Thanks to her, a breakthrough was made. Although he still cursed his own lack of ability in many ways, he thanked the heavens that he had a partner in Lulularа.

Shorty Megan finally figured out what he should do as a reporter.

Shorty: “Emilia-sama, Subaru-dono! Please, tell me a lot about you two …No, not only about you two, but about everyone!”

Emilia: “You mean us? Not about Royal Selection?”

Subaru as well as Beatrice, who was sitting on his lap, tilted their heads in the same manner, and Shorty could not help but smile at their smiling faces. Shorty nodded vigorously.

Shorty understood Emilia's ideals and beliefs that she stood for.

So now Shorty just needed to make sure that people other than himself understood that—

Shorty: "—First of all, please let me fall in love with all of you!"

13

???: "—Shorty! Shorty! Is Shorty Megan here?"

A thunderous voice and the sound of heavy footsteps, and the door to the office was violently thrown open.

Instantly, the documents in the room were whipped up by the wind, and Shorty, who had been drowning in them, sprang to his feet. He jumped up, looked around, and looked up to see a tall, eagle-nosed figure standing at the doorway.

Shorty: "Wow, Editor-in-Chief Morgan! Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Shorty Megan, I'm right here, I'm here, I'm awake!"

Morgan: "Yes, that's right, Morgan Frantz, Editor-in-Chief of the Dragon Nation Newsletter! And you idiot! Of course, you're awake! The starting bell has rung! We're at work!"

Shorty: "Uhh, my apologies!"

Because of the height difference, Shorty, shouted out above him, holding his hat to his head. In his mind, he hurriedly chases away the drowsiness and tries to organize the work he has to do today—

Shorty: "Huh? My apologies! I was just trying to figure out what I'm covering today!"

Morgan: "What's the matter, Shorty? Don't you know what you're doing?"

Shorty: “I’m sorry! Uh, what was I supposed to be covering today?”

Morgan: “You idiot! Your job today is to rest! After any big job, you need to rest. Because.”

Morgan thrusts something into Shorty’s face as his eyes go blank. Shorty’s nose was suddenly pushed and he fell back, and something popped into his vision.

Shorty: “This, this, this, this is…”

Morgan: “Of course, it’s a copy of the Dragon Nation Newsletter! And more importantly, it’s an article! What’s in it?”

Shorty: “My article on the Royal Selection!”

Quickly snatching the “Dragon Nation Newsletter” from Morgan’s hand. —Shorty’s eyes light up, he gasps, and falls to his knees.

Morgan: “You have been busy, Shorty Megan!”

Shorty: “Because, because, because… Finally, finally, finally, my article is…”

Morgan: “Well, don’t let that get you down! Shorty Megan! The motto of the Dragon Nation Newsletter is!”

Shorty: “—! It will not be published unless it is an article that makes your heart tremble!”

Shorty responded to the red eagle-nosed Morgan’s words with a conditioned reflex. He even stood up straight, straightening his back.

In response to Shorty’s reaction, Morgan stroked his eagle nose and nodded generously.

Morgan: “—It was a good article.”

Shorty: “Oh…”

Morgan: “While touching on the assertions of each of the Royal

Selection candidates, it focuses on the personalities of these women, something that has not been explored in depth before, is a novelty. It may not be enough for those who want to carefully follow the developments in the Royal Selection but…”

Cutting off there, Morgan clapped the frozen Shorty forcefully on the shoulder.

Morgan: “Even those readers will be stunned by the last sentence! Stay tuned for more information on the Royal Selection candidates in the next issue! …So you are going to continue?”

Shorty: “Y, yes, that’s the plan! No, I mean, with the chief’s permission… Hkya!”

Morgan: “You idiot! Don’t be so wishy-washy! Who can possibly stand in the way of this!”

Shorty’s small frame was knocked back easily by Morgan’s shoulder and plunged into a pile of documents. But, Morgan was so emotionally energized, that he didn’t bat an eye.

Morgan: “Good one, Shorty, you’ve earned your share at the table! In fact, I have received polite thank-you letters from the Royal Selection candidates. I’ll leave it to you to continue to interview these ladies!”

Shorty: “Oh, thank you… But, Editor-in-Chief, this interview is…”

Morgan: “Mm… Yes, I know what you mean. I’ll leave it to you and Lululara!”

After correcting his previous statement, Morgan taped the article to the wall of the room as if to slam it into place. Then he takes another look at the article, then turns his gaze to the corner of the room.

Morgan: “Nice news paintings. I knew I was right to pick you guys up!”

With that, Editor-in-Chief Morgan leaves the room with his big feet making loud footsteps.

He has an impressive personality, like a storm, and is truly a man of dignity befitting the leader of a group of news reporters.

Shorty: “Oh man, you’re no match for me… Oh, Lululara, thank you.”

Lululara: “…good, one”

Lululara struggles to pull Shorty out of the pile of papers, but manages to pull him out. Then they crawled out of the pile and looked up at the article on the wall.

—Shorty’s coverage of what he observed and heard during his visit to the five Royal Selection candidates. It features a selection of Lululara’s press drawings.

A softly smiling Crusch, Anastasia and Priscilla side by side, and Felt with the “Sword Saint” is an ambitious work of art. But, Shorty’s favorite is—

Lululara: “…had a good response.”

Shorty: “hm, I see. Yeah, I guess so. I’m glad it did.”

Shorty smiles proudly at Lululara’s words as they line up next to each other.

The picture that received the greatest response was a group painting of Emilia, Subaru, and the people from her camp who had gathered together.

Shorty could not tell the value of the painting —but he could tell that it was a priceless masterpiece.

That’s how good a piece this was.

Lululara: “…And this?”

Shorty: “That’s because I wasn’t good enough.”

Lululara: “—?”

Shorty: “My writing skills were not enough to convey Emilia-sama’s determination, resolve, and everything she wanted to say. There were too many obstacles in the reader’s mind to accept it.”

Preconceptions, prejudices, and many other things that have been interfering so far in Emilia’s life are going to negatively affect not only the woman herself, but even the writings that talk about her.

Sadly, Shorty’s writing did not have the necessary power to dispel that.

So Shorty thought. —How can we get rid of those obstacles?

Shorty: “That whole farce was really bad. But I was able to get that thing off my back.”

Lululara: “…The farce”

Shorty: “I took that one seriously, I thought that was the starting point… that Emilia-sama was someone completely different from the “Witch of Envy”.”

Lululara: “…”

Shorty’s prejudice against Emilia as being similar to the “Witch of Envy” was first shattered by the poor farce shown on the road.

The camp discussed and designed that poorly conceived farce to dispel the preconceived notions that went around about Emilia — but that was the point.

Emilia takes these things very seriously. It is the straightforward and honest Emilia who needs to be known by the many people of the Kingdom who remain unaffiliated with the Royal Selection.

Emilia, seeking fairness, doesn’t fully embrace and affirm her claims.

Preconceptions and prejudices, such things are sometimes useful. There should be as much value in not letting them cloud your judgment as there is in letting them mislead you.

Therefore, Shorty was not taking Emilia's side entirely. However, Shorty's journalistic answer is to appeal to her impartiality, saying that her arguments are worth listening to as well.

To do this, the first step is to make sure that Emilia is someone other than "Witch of Envy".

Shorty: "So this article was oriented toward touching on the goals of the candidates and their personalities. Of course, I'll dig deeper in future follow-up coverage."

Lululara: "…Gonna do it?"

Shorty: "Yeah that's right, aren't you glad, Lululara? You have all these people who are good art subjects."

Shorty shrugged his shoulders, and Lululara fell silent with a blank expression. Shorty smiled, seeing a hint of passion in her emotionless face.

They've known each other for a long time. —For more than ten years together, since the slums.

Without Lululara, Shorty would not have become a reporter for Dragon Nation Newsletter, he would have lived a much poorer life, or he would have died long ago.

It was an unremarkable white stone wall, and Lululara had painted a large painting on the wall —The power of the painting enchanted him, and he was driven by a sense of duty to not let her end up here.

Perhaps it was a similar passion to that of Subaru, who struggled for the sake of love.

Thus, when it comes to reporters, there are too many things in the world that lit a fire inside Shorty and would be a waste if he just ran around. That's why—

Shorty: "Still we have a long way to go, so let's keep working together in the future, Lululara."

Lululara: "…Can't be helped."

Shorty: "Yes, it can't be helped. Without you, I would still be a novice reporter."

Shorty smiled at Lululara, who slumped her shoulders as Shorty repositioned his hat.

Yes, this is just the beginning.

Fortunately, it was easy for them to apply for follow-up interviews with the Royal Selection candidates because of the good reception to their article this time around. In particular, they received a positive response from the Emilia camp.

One of the most important reasons was that Emilia's Knight, Subaru had recognized the value of the "Dragon Nation Newsletter".

As for him, he was very involved in the article on Emilia this time around. This is true of his many historic achievements, but most of all—

Shorty: "I didn't think there would be this much of a response to the "Lolimancer"."

Lululara: "…Think, mystery."

Shorty: "Y, you don't think they're mad at me, do you?"

All of the knights who were with the candidates for the Royal Selection all carry titles along with their spectacular achievements. Therefore, after much thought and consideration, he decided that Subaru should also be provided with something appropriate.

This was due in large part to Subaru's relationship with Beatrice — he assured him that he could not fulfill his duties as a knight without her partnership.

So Shorty dubbed him "Lolimancer" and the response was tremendous.

Perhaps in the future, the names Natsuki Subaru and "Lolimancer" will be inseparable.

Shorty: “W, what should I do, if they refuse to do an interview because of this…”

Lulularа: “…Too late now.”

Shorty: “Yeah, I know it is! It’s a job I don’t want to give this up to anyone else now…”

The more calmly he thought about it, the more he felt he had done something wrong, and he felt his blood run cold. Seeing Shorty’s pale face as he began to worry, Lulularа picked up her paintbrush.

Then, again in her usual fashion, Lulularа begins to illustrate Shorty’s turmoil.

Shorty: “Also, Lulularа… why do you draw so many pictures of me in the first place, especially when you only draw what you are interested in?”

Lulularа: “…well, you know.”

Shorty: “I don’t know! It’s just a weird feeling to have a bunch of paintings of yourself made by you!”

Shorty’s voice trails off at the eccentric attitude of his partner, tilting her head.

In the meantime, her paintbrush has not stopped. To begin with, his initial problem still hasn’t been solved.

Shorty: “So, what should I do… should I bring them an apology gift after all? But if he’s not mad at me, then I’m just causing trouble… Wow, I’m afraid of what’s to come!”

Lulularа: “…go for it.”

Shorty: “You know, Lulularа, you’re no stranger to this!”

Lulularа waves her small hand, and Shorty sees it and screams.

Behind them, in a pile of documents, Shorty's written coverage remains unorganized, and it slowly begins to tilt.

Shorty and Lulularara's names will remain as the first to interview the Royal Selection candidates at the heart of the contentious Royal Selection, which will involve not only the Kingdom of Lugunica but also neighboring countries for a long, long time to come—

Shorty: "Waah…?"

Lulularara: "…Kyuu."

For the two of them, pressed together by the crumbling pile of documents, and happily lost in the confines of the office, that is another story. —A story for another time and place.

As a side note, the issue of the Dragon Nation Newsletter, in which this article appeared, became the best-selling issue of all time, and much of the public waited with baited breath for further news of the Royal Selection candidates.

END

Lugunican Papers Extra

1

Shorty Meigan, a reporter for the Dragon Times, was taking on the biggest challenge of his short life with extremely high expectations.

The challenge was to interview the candidates for the royal selection that would elect the next heir to the throne, a historic moment that would change the face of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica.

The royal selection encompassed a three-year-long electoral battle among the five candidates—a topic of mystery that captivated the attention of the kingdom.

Their personalities, backgrounds, and beliefs were all under the scrutiny of the public eye. Rallying up the public's enthusiasm was the inevitable task that fell to Shorty. His goal was to find out how each candidate really felt and make them known throughout the kingdom.

Undertaking this great feat together with Lululala, a news artist, sent Shorty on a journey full of peaks and valleys as he interviewed the five candidates of the royal selection. And after a long and winding road of turmoil and emotion, he had ultimately reached his final destination.

The last candidate he needed to interview was someone who caused much fear and trepidation among many journalists, except for Shorty.

"Lady Emilia is a very kind-hearted person."

After making his way to the Mathers estate with pathetic resolve, Shorty clasped the delicate hands of the young girl working in the mansion and pleaded with her to understand the situation.

She was a pretty girl with bright orange hair adorned with a large ribbon. She wore a stunning maid uniform and her large eyes sparkled in earnest.

The grand estate was the residence of the margrave, Roswaal L. Mathers, and was used as the base of the candidate, Emilia. Acting as the benefactor for Emilia's bid for the throne, Margrave Mathers was known as one of the most eccentric figures in the kingdom. He was a man decorated with the nickname "Demi-Human Lover," and rumor had it that despite his odd personality he possessed extraordinary magical abilities.

Perhaps that would explain the reason behind his decision to support Emilia despite her troubling physical likeness to a certain silver-haired half elf.

Anyway…

"Excuse me, miss, but you wouldn't happen to be a demi-human, would you?"

"No, I'm not… Oh, do you mean the rumors about Master Roswaal? That's got nothing to do with me," replied the maid. "If anything, Master Roswaal has nothing to do with me."

"Don't you think that's a rather nonsensical response?"

The young girl was sharp, grasping the intent of his questions with quick replies. However, some of her more irrational answers were fueled with emotions.

It seems that this maid called Petra—hates her master, Roswaal.

"But you don't think of Lady Emilia like that do you?"

"Of course not. Sister Emilia is…" began Petra. "I love her so much. But Subaru makes it a little complicated though…"

"Sorry? Do you mean Mister Natsuki Subaru?" asked Shorty.

At the mention of his name, Petra leaned forward. Now he had her attention. "Yes! Lady Emilia's knight is so cool and handsome!"

Her burst of enthusiasm struck a chord with Shorty.

Watching the scene play out before her, Lulululala ran her brush across her notebook. It seemed that something Petra said struck something within the artist and had unknowingly become her muse.

In Shorty's eyes, she was a sweet girl with a promising future ahead of her.

"How did you become a maid, Petra?" he asked.

"Me…? Ok, but don't tell anyone about this, got it?"

"Oh, is it a secret? I was hoping to include your story in the article for this interview, but…" Shorty nodded. "Ok, I won't tell a soul."

Shorty knew that these were the type of stories that were key to painting more color into his news article.

"Mister Subaru and Lady Emilia saved my village…" Petra's voice slightly trailed off. "From the Witch Cult."

"What?! You mean the incident where they defeated a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult?"

Petra shared with the young journalist the story of Emilia's knight, Natsuki Subaru, who had been involved in the eradication of the Sin Archbishop of Sloth. And before that attack, she talked about the part Subaru played in the defeat of the White Whale, one of the Three Great Witchbeasts. The maid recounted how the knight's reputation quickly became known across the kingdom after defeating the two major disasters that had plagued the world for so many years.

"I get it now…" said Shorty. "So it was because of his heroic acts that you came to this mansion…"

"Huh?" Petra shook her head. "That's not it at all. Subaru and Sister Emilia are usually pretty unreliable and careless, so I have to be here to help them."

"Eh?"

Shorty couldn't help but catch glimpses of love far beyond her years reflected in her eyes. He could see that she yearned for something, yet at the same time, her tender affections and hopes were lost in a wave of worry and fear.

“I’m very good at what I do. I figured that it would be better for those two if I worked here. Plus…” she added. “I get to work together with people I look up to and wear a cute maid uniform.”

“Huh, I guess you can make money and have fun too, right?” asked Shorty as he ran his fingers over his bangs.

Petra smiled and nodded confidently, replying with “Yes, that’s right.”

At that moment, Shorty felt a strong sense of connection with Petra. How could he put it into words?

“I think I get where you’re coming from. Hmmm, how should I put it? It might be arrogant of me to say it, but I just want to wish Lady Emilia and Mister Subaru all the best in their endeavors. They give me the impression that they want to help everyone.”

Shorty was honest about what he felt. Petra’s round cheeks flushed red, and she laughed as if she was showing off her treasures.

“That’s right!” she said. “That’s my Subaru and Sister Emilia.”

She said it so charmingly that Lululala immediately started working on her next illustration.

2

“I was talking with Petra and she mentioned that she was happy to work with a certain someone she admires…”

“Is that what Petra said? How embarrassing.”

The tall, beautiful maid with long, golden hair—the third maid in the mansion, Frederica—softly touched her cheeks in reply.

After his first shrewd impression of Ram, followed by the adorably confident Petra, there was still one more person he wanted to talk to in the mansion. Honestly, she was the most maid-like out of all of them.

Living up to Shorty's expectations, Frederica gently held the sides of her skirt and curtsied. "Speaking of which, I heard that my incompetent younger brother caused you some trouble. I heard that Mister Subaru, Lady Emilia, and even Miss Beatrice, were present too, but… I apologize for his behavior."

"Oh! No, not at all! I heard it straight from the horse's mouth." Frantically waving off her abrupt apology, Shorty tilted his head in confusion. "Hang on a sec…"

It seemed that Frederica was apologizing for the farce that took place after he and Lululala arrived in the town nearby when Subaru and Emilia guided them to the mansion.

But who was she referring to? Could she have meant…?

Shorty's lips parted as he realized Frederica's relationship to Garfiel.

"By any chance are you the sister of Sir Garfiel?"

"Yes, I am. He's my brother and we both work here at the mansion."

"Oh, I didn't know that! Actually, Sir Garfiel and Mister Otto were kind enough to allow me to interview them."

Upon closer inspection, Frederica and Garfiel did share similar features such as their hair and eye color. The two sibling's most striking feature were their sharp fangs. Seeing Garfiel's left quite an impression on Shorty that he wouldn't soon forget. But what impressed him the most about him, was the manner in which he was interviewed.

"Sir Garfiel was more than happy to answer my questions, which really helped me out!"

"…I'm sure he got carried away with himself. I hope Otto kept a good rein on him."

Shorty looked around sheepishly and replied, “Errr, you can read the article later for more details…”

“—. I guess I’ve got my answer then.” Frederica sighed gloomily.

She was as pretty as a picture, but in regards to her brother, her concerns weren’t far-fetched. Shorty would need to consider how much of Garfiel’s interview to include in the article.

“It’s hard to tell where reality and fantasy meet,” said Shorty. However, regardless of the length of his footnotes, some parts of Garfiel’s story remained consistent.

“There’s no mistake that Sir Garfiel adores Lady Emilia and Subaru.”

Hearing Shorty’s answer, Frederica glanced down and gently nodded. “I’m sure that’s true…” she murmured. “I also feel that way about them.”

Garfiel talked a lot about his activities, but he would always finish his answers accompanied with gratitude and hope for Emilia and Subaru.

Her brother’s words brought a smile to Frederica, who previously called him an incompetent brother.

“How did you come to be at the mansion, Miss Frederica?”

“I was um… Master Roswaal L. Mathers gave me a home here. I have been in his service for more than ten years now. It’s thanks to him that I have gotten to know Lady Emilia.”

“I see. And what do you think of her?”

“As I told you before, I love her as if she were my own sister. Besides that…”

“Yes?”

Shorty noticed Frederica’s distant look and waited for her to continue. She paused for a beat, then smiled. “Nothing,” she said.

"She's the one that might be able to turn my wish into a reality. And although that's not the reason why I stay here, I am rooting for her wholeheartedly."

"…May I ask you about your wish?" asked Shorty.

Her smile was so striking that Shorty was tempted to ask her what was on her mind.

Of course, her smile was frantically being drawn in a sketchbook by the mute Lululala. Unfortunately, it would not be possible to include all of her drawings in the article since a large part of conveying the thoughts and events to the reader rested on Shorty's penmanship. —For that very reason, I want to know what she's thinking about.

Shorty didn't want to miss anything important to the story.

"My wish is for everyone to have a place where they belong… I intend to serve my master with that very intention in mind." she replied sincerely.

From her fangs to her origins, Frederica's honesty echoed the same sentiments that had come up with his interview with Petra. The name "Demi-Human Lover" came to Shorty's mind.

Roswaal was called the Demi-Human Lover because he liked to have demi-humans as his followers and servants and provided them employment. In Lugunica, there was no difference between humans and demi-humans, but in truth, this was nothing more than an illusion.

Frederica had chosen to fight this reality and decided to serve Roswaal.

This was probably connected to Emilia's interview when she talked of her aspirations to become queen so that she could give everyone a choice.

"I've served Lady Emilia for my own reasons. I suppose this doesn't speak well of her character though, does it?"

"…I think it's difficult to entrust one's dreams and aspirations to a single person."

Shorty smiled bitterly at his own answer and shook his head at Frederica. Shorty had his own dreams as a journalist. Even if he couldn't make them come true on his own, he couldn't imagine giving up and letting go of his dreams.

Even if there was someone who could turn them into reality, he knew it was something he wanted to fulfill himself. It would have to be someone exceptional who he could entrust such an important part of himself to…

"I do understand what you're saying. I can only hope that you can one day trust Lady Emilia with your future aspirations. I'll be happy if you write about that."

Shorty thought that Frederica's pride in giving way to her own ambitions was the most convincing comment on Emilia's character.

3

Shorty read over the notes from the interviews that filled his notebook, and Lululala puffed her nose and murmured in agreement.

"I knew I was going to get a lot out of that interview…" murmured Shorty.

"…got lotsa good drawings," murmured Lululala.

Normally, Lululala could fill up an entire sketchbook or two if the mood struck her. But undergoing this trip to interview the candidates for the royal selection was unlike anything she had ever done before.

Several sketchbooks full of illustrations were lined up across Shorty's desk. He had the luxury of pondering which illustrations would best accompany his articles.

"My first priority is to feature the candidate's quotes, but…"

"…But what?" asked Lululala.

"If possible, I'd like to also include quotes and interviews from their supporters as well."

The closest people to the five candidates were those in the position of being called knights. However, Shorty felt that it was not the candidates themselves or their knights, but the people around them who drew a closer connection to the readers of the Dragon Times.

That's why it was so useful to hear from those individuals.

"Urgh! Why is there so much blank space staring back at me! If I could just write down what I heard, then I could recount it all as it happened. That would be the best way to go about this article, but…!"

Shorty mumbled away to himself when he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his neck. He looked up to see Lululala holding a paintbrush in her hand. Using the hardened tip of the brush, she poked Shorty's neck.

"Careful! That thing is hard enough to kill someone, ok?"

"Cuz you say stupid stuff, you get what you deserve."

"Are you saying I'm an idiot…?"

Lululala glared at Shorty, leaving him at a loss for words.

But with a reproachful look in his eyes, Shorty guessed what she was trying to say. "Yeah, you're right… I was wrong to think I could tell this story from just what I heard and saw. That's not real journalism. How naive and stupid of me."

"No kidding. So stupid."

"It is up to the reporter to tell the truth more clearly, more deeply, and more honestly than what one actually sees or hears. If I can't do that, then I'll never reach my goals!"

If he couldn't entrust others with his dreams and aspirations, then it was up to him to reach them.

Thanks to Lululala’s painful jabs, Shorty understood this and felt grateful for her support. In a way, Lululala was to Shorty as the people who supported the candidates were to the candidates. She was important to him because she kept him from straying down the wrong path. In her own way, she was helping him reach his dreams.

“I’m glad you’re here, Lululala… Ouch! Why did you jab me again?!”

Lululala pushed the tip of the brush harder this time. Shorty shouted, but for some reason, she didn’t answer him.

With tears in his eyes at her attitude, Shorty once again immersed himself in his journals and notebooks, thinking about what kind of article he would write.

“However, there’s just one thing… I don’t think I’ll be able to keep my promise to her…”

Lacking the space on the page, he was forced to edit down the contents of the article—meaning he wouldn’t be able to include the story about the Head Internal Affairs Official of the Emilia Camp.

Shorty felt sorry that he didn’t have enough space to keep the official’s tales of heroism.

END

Sword Identity (2.5 and 3)

10

—In the center of the Demon City of Chaosflame, a strange atmosphere engulfed the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Yorna: "…"

Deep within the tower of the castle's highest floor, Yorna Mishigure, the beautiful woman, listlessly observed her visitor.

She was the ruler of this Demon City, and one of the Nine Divine Generals who stood at the summit of the Vollachian Empire's military—most of all, she was currently in a position risking revocation of that title. Though, even when placed into a situation where her foundation wavered, the elegant expression of Yorna, who reigned over the Demon City, did not darken in the slightest.

That was also a matter of course.

It was not that she lamented the results of maintaining her own way of being, nor was it that she was permitted to do so as a General First-Class of the Imperial Military where cowardly soldiers were not permitted. However, Yorna's attitude held no connections to such weak-minded ideas.

Yorna's way of being was to detach herself from all incidents, and look down as she proceeded down a path paved by violent anger.

So then, that was merely the unchanging tale of being surrounded on all sides by a ferocious hostility.

Madelyn: "—Answer this dragon. Respond carefully."

A lovely voice called out to the silent Yorna, who was fiddling with the golden kiseru in her fingertips.

In front of Yorna, sitting on her knees atop the wooden floor, the owner of the voice was a young girl of a small stature. Sat in the center of the hostility dominating the castle tower, the girl had two black horns growing out of her bright sky-blue hair, and her golden eyes were fixed directly on Yorna.

However, those who would misjudge this young girl as merely a little child, were either fools who barely observe the situation, or pacifists who, by nature, did not measure the opponent's threat.

Unfortunately, Yorna was neither of those. Therefore, there was no way she would misjudge the level of danger this young girl posed.

Not to mention…

???: "…Yorna, sama."

On the balcony of the castle tower, the life of her attendant, Tanza, was still on the line.

Holding Tanza's head in its mouth, the enormous flying dragon threatened them with a ferocious roar. The rulers of the sky known to not bear any thought for people, one of them had grasped power over Tanza's survival.

Additionally, it was not just that one flying dragon perched on the castle tower. Countless flying dragons were using the roof and balcony of the castle tower to rest their wings, with their golden eyes pointed at Yorna.

Identical to the young girl in the center, with eyes of a golden hue —.

Yorna: "You, just what were you called again?"

Madelyn: "—? This dragon's name? Then, Madelyn Eschart. Burn it into your memory."

Yorna: "Madelyn Eschart… hmm, that is quite a high collar name, isn't it?"

Madelyn: "…"

The young girl, having responded with “Madelyn”, narrowed her golden eyes which matched the flying dragons. From Yorna’s point of view, they bore a striking resemblance to the quality of a dragon, that glint in the eye unique to the creatures of a rough temperament.

Of course, taking Tanza’s life hostage while accompanied by innumerable flying dragons, they were a group that were quite overpowering in negotiations. Nobody would believe that that was a nature which avoided conflict.

In any case…

Yorna: “It would be incorrect to say that you are on your own, but it was on His Excellency’s orders that you came to my place, wasn’t it?”

Madelyn: “His Excellency… Does that mean the most eminent man on the surface?”

Yorna: “—. Generally speaking, that is true.”

Madelyn: “In that case, yes… Wait, is that wrong? The one to directly tell this dragon was different from His Excellency. I was told by a senile old fool with a mustache.”

Yorna: “A person with a mustache…”

At Madelyn’s surprisingly honest answer, Yorna frowned her finely shaped eyebrows in rumination. Since it had seemed she was hesitant to respond, Madelyn slightly sharpened her gaze, and,

Madelyn: “I, the dragon, have answered your question. Now, make up your mind on where you stand.”

Yorna: “My goodness, what a passionate invitation. By the way, you are a magnificent Flying Dragon Tamer. Even in my memories, I have no recollection of someone who was obeyed by this many flying dragons. By what means have you tamed so many dragons?”

Madelyn: “—Is that an insult?”

That moment, Madelyn’s pupils narrowed, and the atmosphere of the wide castle tower grew chilly.

In Vollachia, where a warm climate persisted throughout the year, there were not many chances to experience the cold. If there were, they were an alarm to one’s very life unrelated to the temperature, an appeal from one’s instincts when facing a strong opponent.

Madelyn: “Dragons, do not obey anyone. Do not think of the dragon’s benevolence as obedient loyalty towards a master.”

Yorna: “…I understand. As expected, the dragonkin are not like us at all.”

Madelyn: “—Answer me. Lord of the stone castle.”

The glint in her eyes remaining unsaid, Madelyn pressed Yorna to make a decision.

Madelyn declared her intent to not continue any further with this idle chatter. As Yorna observed that, she removed her kiseru from her mouth, and once again directed her eyes towards Tanza on the balcony.

The fangs of the flying dragon were thrust at the life of Tanza, and as her dark eyes exchanged gazes with Yorna…

Yorna: “—Tanza.”

Tanza: “…Yes.”

Yorna: “Do you love me?”

At the question that seemed out of place, Tanza widened her dark eyes.

However, Yorna’s voice did not sound like a joke or prank. That was probably something Tanza also understood. A faint light resided within the girl’s widened eyes, and she deeply nodded.

Seeing that, Yorna silently smiled, and…

Yorna: “There you go, now return home without bringing back anything at all. —This is my castle.”

Madelyn: “—You have outraged this dragon.”

At Yorna’s inflammatory words, Madelyn stood up, turned to face the flying dragons, and waved her hand.

The contents of her directions were plain and simple, they were a command to “Shut the mouth”.

The giant flying dragon closed its mouth, and its force crushed Tanza’s head as if it were an egg. A light sound rang out, and the young girl’s head was easily demolished—was not what had happened.

Flying Dragon: “—Kiryararahhh”

Suddenly putting power into its jaw, the flying dragon gave a low roar as it tried to crunch Tanza. Its fangs were like sharp blades, however they did not pierce Tanza’s soft skin, and instead, the source began to fissure.

With that excessively absurd sight before her eyes, Madelyn widened her eyes in astonishment.

Madelyn: “WHA’DID’YA DO?!”

Yorna: “—. Your word-choice is really quite lovely.”

The momentary shock passing through her tongue, Madelyn caught her breath at what Yorna had pointed out. Although, at the occurrence of those unforeseen circumstances, the dragonkin did not merely demonstrate a foolish charm of just freezing up.

Madelyn : “—Hk.”

Holding her breath, Madelyn reached her hands out to the satchel on her back. Her white fingertips undid the latch of the satchel, and she grasped the revealed handle and wrenched her wrist. —Directly after, there was a sound made from the weapon unfolding.

That was a weapon meant to be thrown, carving smooth curves as it flew through the air, and it was known as the Flying Wing Blade. It was a hunting tool that, when thrown in order to spin at high speeds, would draw an arc through the air as it returned.

However, when held within Madelyn's hands, that was too big to be a match for the small girl's stature.

Madelyn: "RAH—!!"

Tightly gripping the Flying Wing Blade, Madelyn released a horizontal sweeping attack.

It was not that she had thrown it, rather, there was a tremendous shockwave accompanying the flash of the blade's sweeping attack, and the tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle had become a rampaging storm. It rushed directly towards Yorna, who sat on the chief seat.

However…

Yorna: "You truly entered my castle without knowing anything at all, didn't you?"

Madelyn's attack turned over the wooden planks of the floor as if it was tearing through flesh and blood. While remaining seated on the tatami chair, it was abruptly cut off in front of Yorna, who did not make even the slightest move.

The unclear phenomenon did not allow the Flying Wing Blade's fierce attack to reach Yorna. The revolving blade was obstructed by an invisible wall, protecting Yorna, and the wall behind her was torn apart, breaking through the castle tower.

Madelyn widened her eyes at the situation, and immediately after, the flying dragon's roar reached her eardrums. —No, it was not anything as valiant as a roar. That, was a flying dragon's shriek.

What entered Madelyn's vision as she turned around, was Tanza, who had raised her hand while on the balcony. With a face of mute amazement, the deergirl appeared to have torn out the fang with her hand and was now grasping it.

The roles had reversed for the definite predator, and the flying dragon was writhing in pain as the girl had literally preyed on its fang.

At the two unusual events of that reality and Tanza's reaction, Madelyn caught her breath…

Yorna: "To look away when you are before me, tis quite a cold thing."

Madelyn: "—Hk?!"

Directly after, the tooth of the geta Yorna wore on her feet thrust into the side of Madelyn's face.

Kicked away by an intense impact, Madelyn's body flew directly backwards. Then, bouncing off the floor, Madelyn crashed into the wall with a violent force, and half of her body was buried into the wall.

Having received the kick defenselessly, Madelyn did not comprehend planning against defenses to her attack. Though, Yorna, who had kicked Madelyn flying, had also narrowed her eyes at that unforeseen reaction.

From how it looked, Madelyn was around the same height as Tanza. However, what had received the impact from Yorna's kick, was far heavier than even a man large enough that she would need to look upwards to see his face.

It was just as if there was an unusual mass compressed into that small body.

Madelyn: "JEEZ, now I'm REAL ANGRY…!"

Uprooting the half of her body that was buried in the wall, Madelyn's voice quaked with anger. Any chance to comment on the change of her smashed-up tone had already gotten away.

Even so, now that they had begun, neither of them had the choice to cut corners.

Yorna: “…”

Yorna placed her kiseru to her lips, and Madelyn took a deep breath big enough to fill her small body.

Purple smoke and air, each filling their lungs with something different, the two of them exchanged gazes, and at that instant…

—A tremendous shockwave blew up the interior of the tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle.

11

???: “At this time, my failure has caused a great burden, for that, I offer my deepest apologies!”

Saying that, the young man vigorously struck his forehead against the table before him—No, pitching forward enough that a solid sound reverberated throughout the assembly hall, he sincerely apologized with a deep bow.

With brown skin and green hair, the person had a dauntless face with strong purpose in his eyes. Regardless of the details leading to that apology, the fact that he was able to meet them safely like this was a relief to everyone present.

At any rate…

???: “I sure was startled when that slush spilled out of the chrysalis! If you hadn’t hardened like that, there would be no helping the apprehensions about whether you could make it as an associate!”

Open-heartedly laughing, Cecilus expressed a somewhat unscrupulous thought as he reminisced on the incident from just before.

In reality, concerning the treatment of the chrysalis, there had been an uproar in the fortress for a while. Even Goz had just barely informed them that the death of a person with prospects of becoming an Imperial General would be a dishonor to the Emperor worthy of great shame.

Fortunately, within the chrysalis as it overflowed with a viscous liquid, the original form of the young man in question was contained.

Cecilus: “Well, this is just to confirm, but you are indeed Kafma Irulux-san, right?”

Kafma: “Yes! I am General Second-Class Kafma Irulux! After the height of the disloyalty that my tribe had toward His Excellency the Emperor was overlooked, the fact that I missed the chance I have been bestowed to recover… I am ashamed of my own lack of virtue!”

Cecilus: “Uwaa, you’re one of those terribly serious types. That personality probably isn’t my cup of tea. What do you think, Anya?”

Arakiya: “Die.”

With a loud voice, apologizing for his own oversight, the young man—Kafma Irulux, at his situation, Cecilus asked for the thoughts of Arakiya, who was seated to his side. And because of that, he had received an answer just as he had asked.

Aside from Cecilus, who pouted his lips at their usual exchange, Goz raised an “Yes!” with a bold voice. Stamping firmly on the floor of the assembly hall, he patted Kafma on the shoulder with his large hand.

Goz: “Lift your head, General Second-Class Kafma! I am not well versed in the customs and manners of the Insect Cage Tribe, but I hear that you have taken in a new insect. That is your matter. Even so, it is probably in order to clear the name of your tribe.”

Kafma: “General First-Class Goz, but… I am…”

Goz: “I do not doubt your consciousness, nor do I doubt your loyalty towards His Excellency the Emperor. It is something that not only I, but First-Class Generals Cecilus and Arakiya have also recognized. That is how it seems.”

Chiding the persistent Kafma, Goz turned back to Arakiya and Cecilus seeking agreement.

However, Arakiya did not return that so easily. Meeting Kafma for the first time, Arakiya did not have the answer Goz was looking for. And yet, even though he thought she was going to say at least something,

Arakiya: "…"

Cecilus: "Oh dear, your poor speaking never does seem to improve. Anya, with that kind of condition, how would you take care of yourself when neither Chisha nor I are there; I can only worry about the hardships that would surround you."

Giving a sidelong glance to Arakiya, who was unable to choose her words on the spot, Cecilus laughed with a carefree face. Then, with a rather indifferent look, he clapped his hands, saying "Indeed, indeed, there's no doubt!", and,

Cecilus: "It's just as Goz-san said, Kafma-san's hard work is quite a big deal. I couldn't do it even if you told me to. I mean an act like letting an insect into your own body!"

Kafma: "…Is that, an insult towards the Insect Cage Tribe ? "

Cecilus: "Huhh?! Even though I was extremely direct in my intention to praise you!"

Frowning, Kafma investigated Cecilus's true intentions. Raising both his hands at Kafma's doubtful gaze, Cecilus shook his head in denial.

Cecilus: "Don't misunderstand. Ways of mastering strength vary between people, and there are schools of thought for all kinds of different suitabilities. I'm a self-taught swordsman, but if the way of being for the Insect Cage Tribe is to coexist with insects, there's nothing incorrect about building your strength in that direction. After all, I think there's nothing particularly good or bad about my training methods."

Kafma: "That is… my apologies. I had taken a far-fetched viewpoint."

Goz: "There's no helping it. Cecilus's speech and conduct are always insolent after all.”

Arakiya: “Agreed.”

Cecilus: “What what what? Even though I intended on having a reasonably serious conversation, no one is taking my side?”

Cut off from the backs of Goz and Arakiya, Cecilus appeared to be making a surprised face. However, from Arakiya’s perspective, what was really surprising was that he thought she would take his side.

Something like Arakiya taking Cecilus’s side, that was absolutely impossible.

Especially if during the big battle, Cecilus exposed his defenseless back…

Cecilus: “You won’t hesitate to attack me. Well, even supposing you had that chance, since you wouldn’t be able to make anything of it, it’s an impracticable theory… it’s something like a contract for the sale of unpeelable dragon skin.”

Arakiya: “You talk too much.”

Cecilus: “Then, why don’t you try your best to shut me up?”

Faced with a provocative smile, Arakiya averted her gaze as she put up with the irritation. Reflected in the corner of her eye, she could see Cecilus shrug his shoulders with his hands tucked in his sleeves.

He was becoming a source of increasing displeasure for Arakiya.

Goz: “Well, let’s get on with it.”

With that, seeing that conversation reach a stopping place, Goz cleared his throat as he corrected the topic.

Goz put his hand to his stern face riddled with scars, and glanced down towards Kafma. Straightening his posture at that gaze, a tension remained on Kafma’s face, and,

Kafma: “Yes. What is it, General First-Class Goz?”

Goz: “Do you understand why you have been summoned to the eastern front like this?”

Kafma: “—. My ears had vaguely heard about it while I was in the chrysalis.”

Cecilus: “Wow, he can properly hear even when in that mushy liquid.”

Placing his hand over his mouth, Cecilus secretly started talking to Arakiya. Ignoring that, Arakiya watched attentively over the development of the matter.

Crossing his big arms, Goz gave an “I see” and a serious nod at Kafma’s response.

Goz: “If you have already heard, then this discussion shall be quick. The objective of this military campaign is to suppress Yorna Mishigure’s insurrection based within Chaosflame. Then, depending on your participation there…”

Kafma: “The missing seat of the Ninth, the next suitable person shall be decided.”

Goz: “That is correct. I have recommended you to His Excellency as a worthy individual.”

Clad in golden armor, puffing his chest up in pride, Goz boasted as though on Kafma’s behalf.

The endorsement of Goz, who was an active Divine General, since there was a demand for the vacant seat of the Ninth, there was no doubt that it would push him to want it desperately.

However, Kafma’s expression did not clear up upon hearing that, and Arakiya tilted her head in confusion.

Arakiya: “Do you not want it?”

Kafma: “—. No, I must clearly say that that is incorrect. Only, whether I am really that suitable, there is more than enough room for doubt.”

Arakiya: “Whether you are really that suitable…”

Kafma: “I have not atoned for the fact that the brethren of my tribe rebelled against His Excellency. In spite of that, to be requested to take the position of the Nine Divine Generals who serve as His Excellency the Emperor’s daggers…”

Arakiya: “…Even though you want it, you give up?”

Unable to understand the thinking of Kafma, who cast his head down, Arakiya unintentionally interjected.

Whether or not her voice had conveyed her doubt, the questioned Kafma stiffened his cheeks as if he had been reproached. However, for Arakiya, who did not have the choice to give up, his hesitation was truly incomprehensible.

There was something wanted, and there was the position needed for that purpose, so, there was the chance to acquire that.

In that case, there was no reason to not at least try. Try, and if it is not reached…

Arakiya: “Then, all you can do is die.”

Goz: “…Of course, do not fear death. If you fill the vacant seat of the Nine Divine Generals, I suppose General First-Class Arakiya will not have any objections?”

Arakiya: “…The person that fills it will fill it. Isn’t that all there is to it?”

Asked for her opinion, Arakiya honestly answered what she thought.

In truth, whether Kafma became the Ninth or not, Arakiya did not really care. Of course, it would be a different story if he was aiming for Arakiya’s position, and was trying to steal the seat of Cecilus.

Goz: “The current roster has been going for a long time, but even the Nine Divine Generals have had replacements… Though, I certainly did not expect Balleroy to drop out.”

Cecilus: "After all, Balleroy-san was a good person. He practically never made an unpleasant face when socializing with me, even at the stuff that I say, and since he was a good person, it's natural that he died."

Goz: "Balleroy supported a rebellion against His Excellency. He cannot be called good."

Cecilus: "I guess it's like that for someone like Goz-san, though."

Putting his hands on the back of his head, Cecilus gave a wry smile at Goz's aggressive tone.

The former Ninth was Balleroy Temeglyph—plotting to rebel against Vincent, he was a man who bravely lost his life, but Arakiya did not hate him either.

He was a well-spoken man, and he took the consideration to change his attitude based on who he was dealing with. He adequately discerned a distance with the untalkative Arakiya, and honestly, he was quite an easygoing conversational partner.

Given that usually, the one keeping her company was a man who did not consider even a single one of her feelings, she thought that of Balleroy even more.

Therefore, it had shocked her to hear that Balleroy had participated in a rebellion, and had lost his life.

Cecilus: "I never thought that Balleroy-san would be defeated by a knight of the Kingdom. If I take the head off of Julius-san, Balleroy-san may be able to rest in just a little bit of peace."

Goz: "The head of a Kingdom knight, hm? That certainly can't be your true intention."

Cecilus: "Indeed. Even if I behead Julius-san, Balleroy-san probably wouldn't be especially happy. —Though, it would probably a different story if it was the head of the Sword Saint -dono."

That instant, Arakiya, Goz, and Kafma all reflexively stiffened their bodies in response to the alarm bells going off from their instincts.

The source was Cecilus, who gazed into the empty sky, and the clear aura of swordsmanship overflowing from his entire body.

Vollachia's strongest swordsman pictured somebody within the empty sky, and the remaining waves of the aura of his swordsmanship directed towards them…

Arakiya: "…"

She did not like the look on Cecilus's face as he thought about the opponent who was beyond the national border.

Arakiya harbored a strange indignation for the likes of Cecilus and that Sword Saint. Arakiya was the one who would kill Cecilus, and take his seat of First.

It was just as if he was completely ignorant of his surroundings, such behavior could only be described as aggravating.

In any case…

Goz: "General Second-Class Kafma, I understand your thoughts, and that you feel like you are bearing a lot of weight on your shoulders. However, this opportunity does not take your circumstances into account. That is just the kind of thing it is."

Kafma: "…I understand, General First-Class Goz. What about the candidates apart from myself?"

Goz: "—. There is someone in the same position as you; they were endorsed by Prime Minister Berstetz."

Kafma's expression harbored apprehension at the serious reply of Goz, who was crossing his big arms. The fact that it was the endorsement from a civil officer instead of a military officer was probably a point that made him uneasy.

Goz: "We are already substantially past the arranged time of convergence. His Excellency is lenient with those who demonstrate ability, but my heart is not as big as His Excellency's. If we do not pour our heart and soul into ridding His Excellency of his troubles as soon as possible…"

Cecilus: “Now now, is it not the Vollachian way to not complain if results are achieved? Things like tardiness, you’ll think of it as a rather cute kind of flaw if you look back on it later.”

Goz: “In that case, if both parties produce results, then the one who is punctual would be valued higher.”

Cecilus: “Goz-san sure is quite good at allegory.”

Displeased due to the tardiness of the other candidate, Goz’s sharp tongue caused Cecilus to yield.

He probably did not really intend on arguing about the behavior of others. As soon as Cecilus gave up on advocating, he looked towards the assembly hall’s window, and let go of all intention to share any more opinions.

Seeing that, Arakiya looked towards Kafma once again, and,

Arakiya: “So then, what will you do?”

Kafma: “—. By “what will I do”, you mean?”

Arakiya: “Will you become a Divine General? Will you choose not to?”

He was not Cecilus, but ultimately, Arakiya did not have interest in how Kafma would proceed.

However, since Goz was the commanding officer of this operation, Kafma’s choice would probably have an effect on Goz’s thoughts. That was why it would be best for him to decide promptly.

Compromising even though there was something he wanted. She could not give even a smidgen of endorsement to that kind of thinking, but…

Arakiya: “It would be fine if you did as you pleased.”

Cecilus: “—Ah. Anya, Anya, do you have a moment?”

Arakiya: “…I don’t.”

With that, the voice of the obstinate Cecilus called out to Arakiya, who was urging Kafma to decide.

It was something she wished to ignore, but she knew that if she did not respond, he was a man who would continue to call out to her until she responded. Therefore, Arakiya reluctantly shifted her consciousness towards Cecilus.

When she did, Cecilus rested his chin in his hand on the table, and while pointing outside the window with his vacant hand,

Cecilus: “A flock of flying dragons has come from the sky, but they aren’t something that I would be allowed to kill, right?”

Indeed, with a carefree attitude, he gave quite an indifferent report on the abnormal situation.

12

Arakiya: “…”

Cecilus: “Woah, there’s an overwhelming thirst for blood. Y’know, it’s not often that you see this many flying dragons, even in Mezoreia.”

Arakiya: “Shut up, die.”

Within the maelstrom surrounded by fierce golden gazes on all sides, the tone of Cecilus and Arakiya’s conversation had not differed from usual.

On the other hand, there were the soldiers of the fort who clutched their weapons, with their feelings of tension swelling upon seeing the situation of being surrounded at a distance.

Since they were people of the Empire, there were too many chances to count for them to become aware of the ferocity of flying dragons. Occasionally called Flying Dragon Cataclysms, there were instances where flying dragons would completely devastate a settlement when they met for breeding season.

All of a sudden, a flock of flying dragons numbering over thirty had appeared. So, the soldiers’ caution could be easily understood.

Goz: “Settle down! They are not enemies! They are allies!”

Appealing with a loud voice, Goz proceeded forth as he kept the soldiers in check.

In the center of the fort’s courtyard, the flock of flying dragons had majestically perched themselves on the outer walls and lookout platforms. In the midst of the rough atmosphere’s domination, there was a single young girl standing at the center of the flock of dragons.

The young girl had slowly gotten off the back of a flying dragon, and was standing on solid ground; that girl must be…

Goz: “—You must be Madelyn Eschart. I have heard about you.”

Madelyn: “…About this dragon?”

Goz: “This dragon…?”

That moment, unable to comprehend her reply, Goz furrowed his brow.

The girl who had replied to Goz could not have been any more than half of his size. Her outward appearance was also young and cute. However, there was no diffidence whatsoever in her gaze as she looked up at Goz’s huge body.

Only, he could feel that she was trying to evaluate what the Living Being known as Goz was.

On the other hand, Goz was similarly trying to evaluate the young girl. —He could ascertain that based on the great number of flying dragons obeying her, she was not merely the young girl that she appeared to be.

The young girl was loved by flying dragons for no reason, such a thing could not be. The evidence of that was…

Goz: “It should not be possible, but those horns… could it be, you are a dragonkin?”

Madelyn: “…Correct.”

Goz: “SO THERE WERE SURVIVORS…!”

The two black horns sprouting from her head, the affirmation of the truth associated with that, had shocked Goz. However, that shock of Goz was not shared by the two Divine Generals behind him who were tilting their heads in confusion.

Instead, the one to share in Goz’s shock was Kafma, who was surveying the flock of flying dragons.

Kafma: “General First-Class Goz, a dragonkin… is that true?”

Goz: “At the very least, that is true according to the person in question… they are a race that has already perished, but I have heard that the dragonkin were able to establish bonds with earth dragons, water dragons, and flying dragons.”

Kafma: “Establish bonds with flying dragons… that is incredibly hard to believe.”

Goz: “Though, how else would you explain what is before our eyes?”

At Kafma, who was choked up for words, Goz jerked his chin towards the flying dragons.

Resting their wings at the fort, the flying dragons held back their ferocity as they patiently stood by. Even if one made use of Flying Dragon Taming to be obeyed by a flying dragon, they would only be able to establish a bond with one flying dragon. In other words, leading this many flying dragons, Madelyn’s secret could not be explained by Flying Dragon Taming.

In that case, it was natural that the girl’s—No, that the possibilities for Madelyn Eschart’s true identity were limited.

Goz: “Just where did Prime Minister Berstetz find such a girl…?”

As his shudders rode through his tongue, Goz clenched his molars as he thought about how Berstetz was a man with limitless connections.

As Berstetz had disclosed at the conference a few days ago, Madelyn neither had any military experience, nor did she have any guarantee for her lineage. Though, it was utterly unbelievable that he had found a talent who was not already in power.

The dragonkin were an existence with such an extraordinary history. Then, from just where in the world had that girl hatched out from an egg…

Kafma: "—Hk, General First-Class Goz!"

Just as Goz had thought that, the situation began to move.

Beside him, Kafma had widened his eyes, and he extended his arms out forward, which had been tattooed with the unique tattoos of the Insect Cage Tribe. Ahead of those arms, Madelyn unsheathed the Flying Wing Blade from the satchel on her back.

The Flying Wing Blade was far too big for the girl's body, and she fastened its sharp blade onto Goz's thick neck.

Then, Madelyn looked up at Goz with eyes that were the same hue as his armor, and,

Madelyn: "Do not insult this dragon. Those eyes of yours, they are an insult towards this dragon."

Goz: "…"

As if she had guessed the true thoughts within Goz's eyes and expression from moments ago, her voice was filled with rage.

The prideful dragonkin would never tolerate any scorn or disdain towards herself. She would put washing away any disgrace over her own life. It was precisely because of that way of being that led to the downfall of their kind.

In the time before the dragonkin themselves had perished, they had driven over ten other races to extinction. Though, since Madelyn had existed, it should probably be said that the dragonkin had not actually perished.

However, their destiny would also depend on Madelyn's actions in this place.

Kafma: "…Enough with this tomfoolery. I, too, have yet to become familiar with showing mercy."

At Kafma's quiet warning, Madelyn glanced down towards her own neck.

Creeping up the girl's pale neck, were green thorns extending from Kafma's arm. The thorny vines that had fired out while he was in the state of chrysalis, those were twining around Madelyn's neck.

It seemed that these thorns were the power of the new insect that Kafma had taken in when he had become the chrysalis. However, just as he had said himself, he was still far off from mastering control of the trembling vines.

Flying Dragons: "—Kiryararahhh!"

In addition, an abrupt uproar began among the flying dragons, as a threat was posed towards their esteemed daughter.

The flying dragons surrounding the fortress grew lively, their ferocious roars began to resound, and the soldiers which Goz had previously calmed down started to tense up; the atmosphere that seemed like they were going to draw their weapons even now still propagated.

At this rate, it was not unlikely for blood to spill among the soldiers enacting the attack on the Demon City.

Before that could happen, it was when Goz was concerned that he must restore the atmosphere in this place.

Cecilus: "Now now, everyone, calm down. —Don't you think that you're troubling Goz-san?"

And, saying that as he stepped in wearing his zori, the figure's brief comment engulfed the atmosphere of the entire fort.

Dressed in a kimono and leisurely readied, the conduct of the young man, Cecilus, had not changed from how it was before. Only, if there was one point that was different, it was that the hilt of his blade was in his hand.

—With just that, Cecilus Segmunt dominated the atmosphere of the entire fortress.

Madelyn: "—Hk."

As the swordsman walked forward, Madelyn widened her eyes.

Even more than the thorns which directly threatened her life, even more than Goz who disgraced the dragonkin's pride, Madelyn's eyes were captivated by the figure of Cecilus, who was merely walking at leisure, and she became unable to move.

Then, Kafma also noticed the fear spreading in his thorns, and it was the same for the flock of flying dragons, who had ceased their roars and had reclined their wings.

For the young hero of the Insect Cage Tribe, for the survivor of the dragonkin, for the ferocious rulers of the sky, all of them protected themselves before the natural disaster, and they could do nothing but pray for their lives to be saved. —In that case, Cecilus was the natural disaster itself.

The walking natural disaster known as the Blue Lightning, that was the swordsman named Cecilus Segmunt.

Madelyn: "Wh-Wha'th'heck, you…?!"

Cecilus: "Wha'th'heck? Just now, did you say wha'th'heck? Is that some sort of dragonkin dialect?"

Madelyn: "People like you are friggin' weird!!"

(Important Translation Note: Within this section, there is a substantial amount from the Comic Alive version of the story that is cut from the Tanpenshuu Version. Both Versions are Translated Below, and both end up back at the same point. So you can choose to read both versions, or just read one.)

Comic Alive Version (Long, More Action, Recommended)

Tanpenshuu Version (Much Shorter)

Comic Alive Version

Madelyn: “People like you are friggin’ weird!!”

At Cecilus, who cocked his head in puzzlement, Madelyn howled that in a loud voice.

Just as Cecilus had said, the impression given off by Madelyn’s speech was quite different than it had been just before. However, faster than Goz could touch on that, the situation had changed.

Kafma: “Guh…! Stop!”

Raising a cornered voice, the next moment, his thorns also pulsated in vain.

In an attempt to shut out the impulses, Kafma’s arms swelled up, and the thorn Insect that nested within his body rampaged, instinctively aiming towards the enemy.

That wild eruption simultaneously gave rise to other wild eruptions. That is to say, an eruption of the flock of flying dragons, and their esteemed dragonkin daughter who led them.

Kafma: “STOOOOOOP—!!”

Kafma was trying to suppress the Insects wriggling around within his body, but he could not stop the rampage of the Insects which were instinctively rejecting death.

The overflowing thorns winded around as they approached Cecilus, and for an instant, the flattened grounds of the fortress were blanketed by purple flames.

Those were…

Cecilus: “This is fascinating! Maybe it’s because I’ve never had a face to face encounter with plants before. No, this is an Insect, isn’t it? I have an inexhaustible curiosity in what kind of insect it is!”

While leaping a great deal backwards, Cecilus shouted with joy as he evaded the fierce attack of the thorns.

Kicking off the ground in order to slide on the soles of his zori, Cecilus left the thorns that were closing in on him like a surging sea behind using his speed, fast enough to overtake even the wind itself. Kafma’s thorn attack was suitable in quantity to gain total control over the floor, but Cecilus’s steps overcame that easily.

However, after evading the fierce attack of the thorns, the second wave assailed Cecilus.

Madelyn: “CHHAAAAAAA—!!”

Swooping down from directly above, was Madelyn spinning vertically with all her might.

Both arms gripping the Flying Wing Blade, the power of an attack similar to that of a sword slammed down; it had aimed to strike down Cecilus, and receiving the direct hit, the ground itself caved in as if it was trampled upon by a colossal beast.

A tremendous shockwave quaked the whole fortress and the earth below, and the cloud of dust that blew violently shrouded their vision.

However, even that shockwave could not catch up to the lightning speed which could overtake the wind.

Cecilus: “Ta-Ta-ta-ta-ta-tan, ta-ta-ta-tan!”

And, chiming his tongue within his mouth, Cecilus’s figure ran through the air.

Of course, Cecilus was the human referred to as the Blue Lightning. It was not that he was so inhuman that he could run through the sky. Only, he was just using the footholds of the sky.

The footholds of the sky—by using the heads of the flying dragons that rushed towards him as footholds, Cecilus was able to run around in the air.

Cecilus: “If this was before the people of the Flying Dragon Squadron, I wouldn’t be able to do something so rude, after all.”

Given the nature of Flying Dragon Taming, the relationship between dragon rider and flying dragon would become something even greater than the likes of a blood connection. Engaging in an act of savagery like walking over the heads of flying dragons before those people, getting cursed in return would be unavoidable.

Therefore, there should not have been a chance to skip about using the heads of an established flock of flying dragons.

Furiously, the attacks kept firing at Cecilus, who was running up in the air.

Madelyn: “—Hk!”

Stepping with both her legs onto the caved-in ground, Madelyn bent her waist and threw the Flying Wing Blade.

The Flying Wing Blade furiously spun at a high speed, drawing an arc through the air, and assaulted the defenseless back of the mid-air Cecilus. Madelyn’s armament was not designed with the goal to cut through material things, but with the vigor of throwing it with her extraordinary back strength, that power could probably bisect a human body.

That seemingly intense attack had reached Cecilus, who was still stepping on the heads of flying dragons, and…

Cecilus: “A-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I feel a bit dizzy—!”

Placing his feet atop the revolving Flying Wing Blade, Cecilus’s body spun at a high speed.

Standing atop the Flying Wing Blade as it flew in, at the literal exhibit of a superhuman feat, the soldiers could do nothing but watch in mute amazement.

Even if the incident that had occurred could be explained through words, it was a spectacle which the brain refused to comprehend.

Though, only those who did not lose their fighting spirit there would be able to reach the realm of those who knew the apex of the battlefield. —That was regardless of whether they desired it or not.

Cecilus: “Oohhhh—!”

Even now, the Insects which the host had lost control of continued to rampage, and the ivy of the thorns reached out towards the sky.

The thorns, spread out like a web, interrupted the path of the Flying Wing Blade, and they were ferociously broken before that destructive power, producing a sound like that of glass shattering. However, the amount of thorns was not normal, so even if one, two, or three were broken, then the areas surpassing ten or twenty would dampen the power of the Flying Wing Blade.

As a result, the Flying Wing Blade was entangled in the thorns, and on top of that, Cecilus gave a “Huhh?” as his body was blown away due to inertia. The dragon’s eyes would not overlook that.

Madelyn: “I’m not gonna let’ya get away!!”

Pulling down the broken thorn ivy and using it as a foothold, Madelyn’s body ascended to the sky.

Her objective was Cecilus’s back, and towards the opponent who had made fun of her time after time in a span of merely ten seconds, she would finally land a blow of anger…

Goz: “GET THIS OVER WITH ALREADY!”

A voice angrier than the rage burning within Madelyn washed hers out from directly above.

Madelyn’s head, which had its vision so narrowed that it could only see Cecilus, was grabbed by Goz's palm, who had run up the thorns the same way she had. Then, after the young girl groaned out an "Uah", Goz kicked the thorns and took a nosedive, mercilessly slamming her entire body into the ground, forming a second large hole.

The back of her head blasted into the ground, and half of Madelyn's body was buried into the earth.

Doing that, a heat wave scorched the back of Goz, who had planned to take control of the situation through sheer force.

Slowly turning around, Goz's vision was met by the heat of the red flames thunderously flaring up.

What was vigorously burning, were the thorns of Kafma which had filled the courtyard of the fortress. Then, the one who had done that was Arakiya, who was standing beside the fainted Kafma.

Using her unusual power, she burned away Kafma's thorns in one go. Goz wondered whether Kafma had fainted due to the influence of the Insects, or if it was due to Arakiya's attack.

Either way…

Goz: "Everyone, you do not understand your own positions! It is outrageous for both General Second-Class Kafma, and Madelyn Eschart, who is not even a General ! And then, Cecilus, that goes for you as well!"

Cecilus: "Ehh?! Me too? Even though I was one-sidedly attacked?!"

Folding his big arms, Goz raised an angry voice as Cecilus appeared right beside him.

After he was blown away by the Flying Wing Blade's inertia, even though his footholds of the thorns should have been burned away by Arakiya, it was an enigma how he had somehow returned safely.

However, aside from the suppression of the burned thorns, it seemed like she had the intention to erase Cecilus's footholds, and even Goz saw Arakiya frown when she laid eyes upon his safety.

Goz: “However, you two must settle your problems on your own. Leaving that aside…”

While speaking, Goz set aside the problems between Arakiya and Cecilus, and at the bottom of the big hole that he had made, he looked down at Madelyn as she slowly got up.

Madelyn: “…”

With half of her body having been buried in the dirt, Madelyn glared at the overhead Goz with a sullen face. But, although her hair and clothes were dirty, it seemed the girl did not have any striking wounds.

Contrary to the expectation that with such a sufficient power, the blow to the back of her head was that which no one would be surprised if she died, the lively Madelyn’s stamina even caused Goz to raise his eyebrows.

Goz: “If you have survived, I will hear what you have to say. Madelyn Eschart, have you calmed your head?”

Madelyn: “…Do not let that monster anywhere near this dragon.”

Goz: “That’s, indeed. Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “Was the monster you mentioned just now supposed to be me? No no, I think there are adequate words that are far better to properly represent me, but monster… isn’t that a tad cruel? Hey, Anya.”

Arakiya: “I don’t care.”

At Arakiya, who turned her face away, Cecilus expressed his discontent by saying “Ehh, How cold!”

Though, it was not as if she did not understand the feelings of Madelyn when she called that Cecilus a Monster. Both Goz and Arakiya had the confidence that they could stop the previous recklessness of both Kafma and Madelyn.

However, in a sense, it could be said that Cecilus restored order to the fortress without using his own sword. If asked if he could do the same thing, Goz would think it to be difficult.

Most of all…

Goz: “In the first place, the quarrel just now was also caused by your existence, though.”

Cecilus: “Come on, naturally those are false accusations! All I did was be there! As an actor, I feel blessed that merely my appearance is enough to enchant people, but I am firmly opposed to being labeled a bad guy after my one-sided vigilance! That is absolutely no good! Anyway, what even was it?!”

Arakiya: “You are a nuisance just by being here…”

Arakiya fell back as she grabbed the collar of Cecilus, who was obstructing the progression of the conversation.

While taking advantage of her consideration, Goz lent a hand to Madelyn, at the bottom of the hole. Even though Madelyn slightly hesitated, she took Goz’s hand, and climbed out of the hole.

Goz: “Well then, please calm your flying dragons. The soldiers of the fortress will not lower their weapons. I want to avoid any further unnecessary quarrels among allies. Do you understand?”

End of the Comic Alive Version. You can either read the Tanpenshuu Version Below both versions converge

Tanpenshuu Version

Madelyn: “People like you are friggin’ weird!!”

Raising a high voice akin to a shriek, Madelyn fell back a great deal. Removing the thorns from her pale neck, storing the insects away within his body, Kafma also caught his breath as he looked at Cecilus.

With both of their—No, with all the gazes inside the fortress converging on him, Cecilus tilted his head.

Cecilus: “Umm, I don’t hate receiving all this attention, but isn’t this direction a little different from the kind that I desire?”

Goz: “I will personally hear you out on your dissatisfaction later. Fortunately, it seems like she has calmed her head.”

Showing gratitude to the dissatisfied Cecilus as he patted his shoulder, Goz looked at Madelyn as she narrowed her pupils. While her entire body was on guard towards Cecilus, she reacted to Goz’s gaze.

Goz: “I apologize if my eyes were impolite, Madelyn Eschart.”

Madelyn: “…Do not let that monster anywhere near this dragon.”

Goz: “Very well.”

At the demand of Madelyn, who glared at Cecilus, Goz nodded his chin just as she had wanted.

Ceclius often caused problems, but this time, he had worked in the right direction. Him being useful in aspects apart from battling on the battlefield, Goz recalled that it was a rare experience.

Goz: “Most of all, there are instances where things get complicated just by Cecilus’s presence, but…”

Cecilus: “Come on, if you’re going to praise me, thoroughly do so until the very end, Goz-san! I’ll sulk if you don’t properly praise me, y’know! You must not be too strict, absolutely… right, Anya?!”

Arakiya: “You are a nuisance just by being here…”

Immediately ruining the part where he was useful, Cecilus’s collar was grabbed by Arakiya as she fell back. While taking advantage of Arakiya’s consideration, Goz put his hands on his hips and looked at Madelyn.

That they had fulfilled what they wanted to say, Goz jerked his chin to the surroundings as if it to indicate that, and,

Goz: “Well then, please calm your flying dragons. The soldiers of the fortress will not lower their weapons. I want to avoid any further unnecessary quarrels among allies. Do you understand?"

End of the Tanpenshuu Version. You can either read the Comic Alive Version Above both versions converge

Both Versions Converge (Direct continuation of both preceding versions, translated from Tanpenshuu 7)

Goz: "Well then, please calm your flying dragons. The soldiers of the fortress will not lower their weapons. I want to avoid any further unnecessary quarrels among allies. Do you understand?"

Madelyn: "—. Understood."

With a nod, Madelyn signaled with her eyes to the surrounding flying dragons.

It was not that she had called anything out to them in order to control them through a signal, instead, rather, it was the form of their bond permitting communication through the eyes.

As she naturally accomplished that, Goz was able to easily recognize her as a real dragonkin. At Goz's gaze, Madelyn narrowed her eyes with a "What?",

Madelyn: "Pointed towards this dragon, those eyes are rude."

Goz: "I apologize for my impoliteness. That and, it seems I have yet to introduce myself. I am Goz Ralfon, and with this fortress as our base, His Excellency the Emperor has appointed me as the commanding officer for the attack on the Demon City."

Madelyn: "…I, the dragon, am Madelyn Eschart."

Goz: "Ahh, I am aware. As for the others… I will explain later."

Arakiya had gone through the trouble of keeping the problem child at a distance. There was no need to expressly bring Cecilus up again and provoke Madelyn.

Madelyn repeatedly glanced over to Cecilus out of worry, and in order to obstruct her gaze, Goz changed where he stood, and,

Goz: “So, why were you late to arrive? For the military, many troops aim to move as a single living creature. If there is someone who throws that pace into disorder, that body will become unable to function.”

Madelyn: “…”

Goz: “It would be troublesome if the wings moved independently from the limbs and tail. Do you understand?”

While saying that, Goz explained with reference to Madelyn’s body—the characteristics of her body as a dragonkin apart from her black horns, the small wings sprouting from her back.

He had aimed to make the explanation easy to understand, but Goz’s common sense was just another thing cultivated within the Imperial Military. At least, Goz did not think that was everything. Only, since she was obeyed by the flock of flying dragons, Madelyn should understand the importance of acting as a group.

In reality, at Goz’s explanation, Madelyn slightly nodded her chin.

Goz: “I see. It is good that you understand. Well, let me ask once again. Just what in the world were you doing? If it is just that you got lost along the way, then…”

Madelyn: “—I, the dragon, was in the Demon City.”

Goz: “…What?”

It would have been fine if she was just unfamiliar with the geography, and was delayed in converging.

However, her reply betrayed his expectations, and looking up to Goz, who did not believe his ears, Madelyn repeated the same explanation once more.

Madelyn: “I, the dragon, was in the Demon City. —That woman, she told me to convey something.”

Goz: "…"

That instant, Goz hesitated on whether he should reprimand Madelyn.

However, that which should take priority here was not correcting Madelyn's common sense, nor was it her arbitrary actions that disregarded the strategic plan. The maximum priority was the careful examination of the information she had returned with.

Having mentioned "that woman", Goz immediately guessed just who that was referring to.

Therefore…

Goz: "Let us hear it. Just what in the world did that she-fox tell you?"

Madelyn: "—The lives of the soldiers who fled the fortress."

Goz: "…"

Madelyn: "The soldiers who fled the fortress, until all of them lose their lives, she has no intention of stopping."

Goz narrowed his eyes at the words Madelyn conveyed dispassionately, and he placed his hand over his mouth. While feeling the sensation of his beard in his palm, he silently ruminated.

Kafma: "The soldiers of the fortress… It can't be, General First-Class Goz!"

Goz: "I understand. —Though, I have my doubts on what the purpose of starting this rebellion was."

Goz gave a low response to Kafma, who raised his voice upon hearing the same report.

Killing all the soldiers of the fortress, Yorna Mishigure was disturbing the reign of Vincent, the Emperor. Just what was she thinking when she started this insurrection, and just what did she intend on using to conclude it?

It was none other than Madelyn who had spoke about a part of that, but…

Goz: "—Before we invade the Demon City, there is now a need for us to consult His Excellency."

Then, with a shameful state of mind, Goz glared over at the Demon City visible in the distance.

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???: "—The lives of the fortress' soldiers, was it?"

???: "I would have to say that it is out of the question, isn't it? Such a demand, I can hardly even call it a demand."

Hearing the information sent from the fortress on the front lines of the Demon City, even the Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital silently wavered.

Sitting at the desk furnished inside the rather bland office, Vincent looked away from the stern face of Goz which was visible through the mirror, and went into careful thought.

Facing the mirror in his place, Chisha Gold spoke to Goz.

The completely white man worked as the Emperor's Military Advisor, and as he caressed his sharp chin with his hand,

Chisha: "It is the way of the Empire to value those who are strong… Be that as it may, it would be troubling if people thought that all sorts of recklessness will fulfill their selfishness. First of all, speaking of that logic…"

???: "It would be strange if all my desires weren't fulfilled, right?!"

Chisha: "…"

Vincent: "Goz, shut that imbecile up. He is a nuisance to the discussion."

In place of the silent Chisha, Vincent issued instructions to the other side of the mirror. Then, there was a response of "As you wish", and he subsequently understood that the frivolous voice had grown distant.

The Conversation Mirror was an indispensable Meteor for communication over long distances, but its only flaw was that complete idiots who he had taken the trouble to keep at a distance were able to exchange words with him like this.

In any case…

???: "—It may be a little rash to dismiss General First-Class Yorna's demands as merely a joke."

Vincent: "Ho, even though that is information brought back by the one you endorsed, you are quite devoted."

???: "In this situation, the source would be more important than the one who brought it back, wouldn't it? Of course, I cannot say that I do not see this as favorably as the recommender."

Vincent: "Hmm. Rather than the one who brought it back, the one who sent her back with it would be more pertinent."

Snorting his nose, Vincent's sharp gaze was met by a bow from Berstetz, whose face was deep with wrinkles.

Gathered in one room of the Crystal Palace were the Prime Minister, the Military Advisor, and the Emperor. Carefully examining the information sent across the Conversation Mirror, it could be said that there were enough intellectuals to inform the group attacking the Demon City of their next course of action.

Naturally, the first thing on the agenda was to determine the intentions of Yorna Mishugure, who had used Madelyn Eschart to deliver a message.

Chisha: "I find it difficult to laugh it off as merely an act of disturbance. After all, if it was not for Madelyn-dono acting independently, that demand would not have had a chance to be conveyed."

Berstetz: “I wonder about that. In war, the way of ending it would have been something thought of at the time of commencement. I may be lacking in knowledge, but would it not be the same for an insurrection? In other words…”

Vincent: “From the beginning, she had planned to present a compromise to end the battle, hm?”

The three of them faced each other, and here they surmised the true intentions behind Yorna’s clear demand.

Of course, the worst answer would always be that it was thoughtlessly at random, but Vincent did not see that as a serious possibility. For the Nine Divine Generals chosen as the height of military power, he was consistent in his plans to make each of their intentions come true.

The only exception to that was the First, Cecilus Segmunt.

The problem was…

Vincent: “—What does this have to do with the lives of the fortress’ soldiers?”

At the start of this insurrection, the definitive way of ending it was the demand for the troops of the fortress. Only, they had not been chosen as a sacrifice to interfere with Vincent and the Imperial Capital.

There was a reason why they must be sacrificed. That was the presumed course of events.

Vincent: “Status on Groovy Gumlet, who was dispatched to the west?”

Chisha: “There is kindling for a revolt on-site. It is not a situation we can move.”

Vincent: “Olbart Dunkelkenn, who was absent from the conference?”

Berstetz: “I heard that he is dealing with an epidemic in his village.

He also said that he was getting older, but he has been working for over twenty years longer than I have. I don't think I can say anything too reckless."

Vincent: "Is the fortress in the immediate vicinity of the Demon City, ruled over by Yorna Mishigure, Chaosflame?"

Berstetz: "Indeed. The furthest reaches of the Empire, one of the few places where demi-humans and tribes deliberately choose to migrate to. Despite that, since nobody except Yorna-dono causes such problems that seem problematic, let me just say that it is an abnormal land."

Vincent: "Three hundred of the fortress' soldiers have died, and there were ten remaining individuals missing."

Berstetz: "The horrific situation was enough to make them want to turn away. Without leaving out a single person, it seems all of them had their heads carefully crushed. —Your Excellency?"

Indifferently grasping the information he should continue to contemplate, Vincent had an unusually long thought.

Even if he called it a "long thought", that would not exceed ten seconds for Vincent. The Emperor's brain would draw the best conclusion for everything in an instant, so it was just unusual for a thought to take ten seconds.

And then…

Vincent: "—The survivor of the dragonkin, you did well to find her."

He threw in a topic that would catch Berstetz off guard, however, Berstetz's expression did not waver.

With a "No, no", the gray-haired old man shook his head,

Berstetz: "The discovery and assignment of talents who are hard to come by, that is an indispensable factor of the Empire's prosperity, after all. I, too, am extremely relieved that I was able to fulfill part of my duty as Prime Minister by recommending a talented individual like that to Your Excellency.”

Vincent: “Hm, you say some clever things. However, this time I shall let you be of use to me.”

Berstetz: “As you wish.”

Displaying loyalty to the extent of transparency, Berstetz deeply bowed. Seeing that with his own eyes, Vincent called out to his right-hand man with “Chisha.”

Chisha: “Yes. What is it, Your Excellency?”

Vincent: “Head for the location. You should have already realized what I desire.”

Chisha: “You are evaluating me too highly. Simply giving me a clear order would allow me to complete this without any unnecessary worries.”

Vincent: “If you display a half-hearted face, it will be taken advantage of. At most, you should worry about that.”

Not receiving a full report, Chisha covered his face with his hands in a grandiose gesture that his hopes had been suppressed. Of course, Vincent did not retract his opinion there, nor did he glance at the dejection of the Emperor’s right-hand man.

Instead, Vincent once again directed his attention to the Conversation Mirror.

Vincent: “As you heard. That which you must do has not changed. Capture the Demon City, and inform Yorna Mishigure that she has overstepped her bounds.”

Goz: “Yessir! I understand! …That and, Your Excellency…”

Vincent: “What?”

On the other side of the Conversation Mirror, the attitude of the vigorous Goz became gentle. At Vincent, who frowned at that appearance, Goz puffed up his thick chest, and, Goz: “Forgive my rudeness for taking up your time. General Second-Class Kafma Irulux has requested to be granted a direct exchange of words with Your Excellency.”

Vincent: “Kafma Irulux? I don’t mind. It would be best for him to step before the mirror.”

Goz: “Yes, Immediately! In the meantime…”

Cecilus: “Hello Hello! Your Excellency, Your Excellency! There’s something I want to ask!”

Turning up to replace Goz was Cecilus, who should have been pulled back.

Misjudging the distance with the Conversation Mirror, the strongest swordsman of Vollachia had his face reflected quite largely on the mirror’s surface, and he quite literally ignored the proper sense of distance with the Emperor as he hurled out words.

Vincent: “If there was someone who could behead you, you would be punished on charges of disrespect.”

Cecilus: “You’re talking about things that can’t happen again! So, this is something I wanna hear, and even though it seems like we’ll be directly clashing with Yorna-san soon, is there anything you would like me to tell her?”

Vincent: “…”

Cecilus: “Come on, Your Excellency, doesn’t Yorna-san just want you to pay her some mind? This may be the final chance in this life, and I was thinking that she may be glad if you had some words that I could tell her so we can fight with no regrets.”

For a reason in a completely different dimension than the concerns of an ordinary person, Cecilus declared that he wanted to be given the Emperor’s words. Due to the difference with Goz’s formal register from just before, Vincent unconsciously let a laugh slip.

Of course, merely letting that slip, he did not let anyone see his figure with loosened lips, but…

Vincent: “Fine, there are some words I will have you deliver. It would do you well to carefully fulfill your role as a messenger.”

Cecilus: “Gotcha, you can leave it to me! How very extravagant, this is undoubtedly the feeling of being a messenger for His Excellency the Emperor.”

Vincent: “Do not mess it up. Then, when that is over you can promptly return to your original duty. You are—”

Cecilus: “—The drawn blade of Your Excellency. Of course, I’ll certainly bear that in mind.”

He was usually a hopelessly insensitive man, but for his judgment to be good here like this, he must have worked every part of his brain. Unfortunately, there were too many things Vincent had to do, so he was unable to investigate that thoroughly.

The Military Advisor and the Prime Minister, while receiving both of their gazes, Vincent solemnly chose his words.

The words to deliver would be straightforward, and above all else, would make the intention clear, so putting in some disdain towards the way of being of the rebel in question, they would be—.

Vincent: “Deliver my words alongside a blade. For that is precisely the meaning that should dwell within my blades.”

14

—Firing the opening shot of the decisive battle, lightning ran through the neighborhood that had become a battlefield.

Where many demi-humans chaotically existed alongside each other, the Demon City of Chaosflame was aptly teased to be the Chaotic City.

Buildings without a sense of unity crowded together, and the townscape had scaffoldings and extensions to buildings whimsically repeated over each other, so the name Chaotic was an adequately strange embodiment for it.

Even if one did not have a shred of interest in the scenery of the city, that sense of disorder would captivate one's eyes for a while. Although, that attention would not last long due to the noise pollution of the shadow running directly below.

Cecilus: "Well, it sure feels good to be the first to arrive, as expected! The rare chance to battle a fellow Divine General, there's no way that I'll let that slip! Ah, messing around with you is a different case though, Anya!"

Arakiya: "Die."

Kicking off the ground with the sole of his zori, the impudent speech of Cecilus as he fiercely cut through the wind thawed the city. Keeping up with that speed, Arakiya replied as she frowned her finely-shaped eyebrows.

It may sound like a terribly leisurely conversation, but both of them were among the Empire's strongest, and the events that occurred around them in this period were extraordinary enough to live up to their value.

Cecilus: "Whoa there, all you minor characters, excuse me. The main act is ahead of here, so let's settle this in between the lines!"

Then, accompanying a logic incomprehensible to a normal person, a slashing attack ran through the sky.

Lighting that could be missed by blinking struck down the figures blocking the path one after the other, and being unable to be touched by anyone, even its afterglow could not be caught up with as it scattered a bloody air.

And, for those lucky enough to not being standing in the lightning's path…

Arakiya: "In the way."

The incessant downpour of flame orbs that accompanied that direct phrase thoroughly burned through every bit of hostility that leaked out.

The one to accomplish that, her own legs clad in flame, was the Spirit Eater, who was flying without the need to flap wings like a bird or flying dragon would.

Cecilus and Arakiya, the two Divine Generals were unbeatable, and they traversed the townscape of the Demon City with a tremendous vigor. However…

Cecilus: "Even though this a rare rematch with Yorna-san, I don't get why I had to be accompanied by a kid like you, Anya!"

Arakiya: "I should be the one saying that."

Cecilus: "Goz-san sure doesn't have faith in us. If things go wrong now and Yorna-san goes to the other side, then I really don't understand why you came with me, jeez!"

Quarreling without any intention of cooperating, Arakiya sighed as she faced Cecilus.

Arakiya going together with Cecilus was the result of obeying Goz, the commanding officer. Honestly, since Arakiya did not have the brain to think about tactics, she was only able to make any objections based on emotion.

Regardless, if the tactics were for the sake of winning, she would reluctantly take on the role of Cecilus's chaperone. Ideally, it would be very nice if the victory was in a way that made Cecilus bitter.

For that purpose, ending it with a swing and a miss like this would be the easiest, but…

???: "—You've been behaving terribly restlessly, haven't you?"

Coming out of the city gates, Cecilus stopped in his tracks as he brazenly ran down the main street.

The owner of that voice was standing dauntingly in the middle of the main street as she fixed her eyes on them, a glamorous woman clad in a kimono. —At a single glance, Arakiya grasped that she was a formidable enemy.

Arakiya: “That’s…”

Cecilus: “Yep, that’s right, Anya. —Greetings, Greetings! Long time no see, Yorna-san!”

With her legs transformed into flames, Arakiya controlled her stance mid-air. Cecilus moved ahead of that floating girl, and gave a big wave of his hand to the woman blocking their way—Yorna Mishigure.

At Cecilus’s cheerful greeting, Yorna shook the kiseru within her hand, and,

Yorna: “Same as always, you are a man with a big voice. For you to be dispatched to me again, His Excellency must take quite a liking to you, doesn’t he?”

Cecilus: “His Excellency to me? No no, that’s not it, that’s not it. Whether he takes a liking to someone or not isn’t something you can gauge. That’s why he has a frown all year round! He is the peak of pessimism!”

Yorna narrowed her eyes at Cecilus, who put his finger on his brow as he spoke his thoughts.

From Arakiya’s perspective, those were thoughtless words with no value of listening, but with a face that seriously received that reply, Yorna glanced over towards Arakiya.

It was just as if those eyes were asking Arakiya for her opinion, and were a little troubled.

Yorna: “I believe it is my first time meeting you. Do you know about me?”

Arakiya: “I’ve heard. Arakiya. Best regards from now on.”

Yorna: “It was curt, but you properly introduced yourself. How very polite of you.”

Waving her arm and rolling up the sleeves of her kimono, Yorna dropped to her knees on the spot and gently bowed. She had given a courteous reception to that polite introduction, and she continued to speak with "So then", and,

Yorna: "Excuse me, there was a dragonkin girl who showed up here some time ago, did she pass on the message?"

Arakiya: "Message…"

Cecilus: "Ah, yes yes, we heard! It's the thing Madelyn-san told us about. Of course, Goz-san properly raised an inquiry about it to His Excellency."

Cecilus vigorously patted his own chest, and gave a powerful answer to Yorna's question. Yorna's eyebrows quivered at that reply, and a slight heat of emotion flashed within her gaze.

From Arakiya's eyes, it seemed like that was a glimpse of her hopes.

In that case, Yorna would probably be disappointed.

The reason was…

Yorna: "What was His Excellency's reply?"

Cecilus: "It was for the lives of all the soldiers from the fortress, right? Ahem. —It is needless to take this into consideration. You can atone for your foolish hopes through your own blood. That's what he said. Did I resemble him?"

After clearing his throat, Cecilus made an impression of the Emperor, Vincent. Such a thing was daring, but his imitation did not resemble him in the slightest. It was dubious if he was even trying to imitate him.

Arakiya was shocked at that recklessness, and Yorna, whose hopes were eradicated, took a small sigh, and,

Yorna: "Then, my answer is plain and simple… atonement shall be had through blood. The blood spilled from those who I love, through one-thousand-fold of that blood."

Cecilus: "Eh, it seems like we angered her. Anya, do you think it's my fault?”

Arakiya: “For the most part, it’s the fault of Cecilus and His Excellency.”

Feeling the sensation of the heat in the atmosphere simmering, Arakiya tightly gripped the long and narrow wooden branch in her hand.

Seeing Yorna leisurely shake her head as she silently raised her fighting spirit, Cecilus played innocent saying “My my, I’m beat”, and drew his katana of a blueish white blade.

Cecilus: “Well, I had intended on fighting from the start, so I think this saves me quite a bit of hassle! Alright, I’ll have you as my opponent, Yorna-san!—Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt.”

Arakiya: “—Spirit Eater, Arakiya.”

Ceclius leaned forward, and Arakiya increased the vigor of the flames her legs were clad in.

Facing both of their fighting spirits head-on, Yorna smiled without showing even a hint of fear,

Yorna: “—The Flamboyant, Yorna Mishigure. Won’t you do your best to vibrantly entertain me?”

15

The clash of weapons could be heard coming from the center of the city, and at that intensity, Goz knew that the true battle had begun.

As expected, Yorna had gone to the main gate; that reasonable decision was not surprising. Of course, even if she came towards them, he would engage her as one of the Nine Divine Generals using all of his power.

Goz: “It seems like First-Class Generals Cecilus and Arakiya have encountered Yorna Mishigure.”

???: “Unh, Is that true? How did you…”

Goz: “You can tell if you strain your ears. The clash of weapons can be heard.”

At Goz’s words, Kafma, who was running beside him, widened his eyes in surprise. He put his hands to his ears, and strained them as Goz had said to do, but,

Kafma: “Did you really hear it? Even in the midst of this melee?”

Goz: “Sound has all sorts of peculiarities. I may look like this, but I am quite fond of musical instruments.”

He was often told he was not suited to it, but Goz enjoyed music. Listening and playing, he thought of both rather fondly. Additionally, the occasion where he met his wife was actually a recital.

Music was something that enriched Goz’s life. Therefore, Goz was able to provide support when it came to the sounds of the battlefield.

The fact that he was born with ears able to recognize sounds on a level higher than average could be called one of the few treasures Goz had.

Goz: “However, this town is more troublesome than I had heard.”

Kafma: “Yes, I feel the same way.”

While speaking, Goz and Kafma advanced into the Demon City at the vanguard of the Imperial Soldiers. Meeting them as they stormed in from the back gate, the structure of the monstrous city of Chaosflame seemed to lead the invaders astray.

It was likely that the creator did not design it with any intentions of obstructing invaders. However, that townscape was just cobbled together based on each miscellaneous thought, and the feeling on that day.

So then, the people who lived in such a chaotically jumbled town, were residents befitting of the term chaos.

???: “OOOOOOHHHH—!!”

And, howling as they charged in, the residents of the Demon City did not seem to wield typical weapons.

Without wearing full armor, these people were no less powerful than the regular soldiers with just their vigor and morale. That was not a mere recklessness, the definite power that supported them was…

Kafma: “—The secret art controlled by General First-Class Yorna.”

Goz: “I am unfamiliar with the details of the technique, but all the residents of the Demon City possess an unusual strength. Therefore…”

Cutting off his own words, Goz jerked his chin forward, indicating towards the group of soldiers who directly intercepted the charge from the residents. —No, they tried to intercept it.

???: “Uwaaaaaa—?!”

The subsequent instant, five of the Demon City residents, each with a red flame alight in a single eye, blew away some soldiers readied with a large shield. Even after that, the charge of the man pushing forward could not be stopped.

Such a scene unfolded at each battle formation attacking the city.

Kafma: “That is the source of the Demon City’s impregnability…!”

Goz: “Yes, that’s right. It may vary slightly in each individual, but it seems all of the residents of Chaosflame have strength equal to ten soldiers. Therefore, General Second-Class Kafma, the power of both you and I is required.”

Kafma: “…”

Firmly gritting his molars, Kafma stroked his tattooed arms in dread. Seeing the hazy unease in that gesture, Goz questioned him with “Do you have any fear?”

Hearing that, Kafma suddenly raised his face, and,

Kafma: “The likes of fear, I have not!”

Goz: “However, in that case, why did you tell His Excellency that you are not qualified to be a Divine General?”

Kafma: “That’s…”

Breaking off his words, a grimace was etched into Kafma’s earnest face.

Before the battle had started, Kafma had spoken directly to Vincent across the Conversation Mirror, and had refused the promotion to Divine General recommended by Goz.

As the recommender, he certainly felt disgrace. However, Goz was not asking for an apology from Kafma. That was something Kafma understood.

What he wanted was not words of apology, but rather the intentions of Kafma who had reached that decision.

Kafma: “I thought that it was for His Excellency’s… not just that, but for the Vollachian Empire’s sake. During the times that are important, it would be difficult for an insufficient General to act in accordance with His Excellency’s will.”

Goz: “—. So, do you not intend on aiming any higher than this?”

Kafma: “No, this is just about my weak-minded self of the present.”

With a light housed in his dignified eyes, Kafma spoke as he looked directly in Goz’s face.

Declining the position of the glorious Nine Divine Generals, that was the resolve of the General Second-Class who took the path of righteousness and brought disgrace to Goz Ralfon, Kafma Irulux.

If he did not recognize that, the honor of Goz, who was appointed for the position of General First-Class, would collapse.

Kafma: “—Without hesitation, for the glorious sake of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, and the one who rules over it, His Excellency the Emperor!”

At Kafma’s grandiose declaration, Goz laughed with a “Fuhahahahaha!”, and,

Goz: “In that case, puff out your chest, General Second-Class Kafma. —Only when you achieve a military service that you and those around you are satisfied with, will I be able to regain my honor from recommending you for the Ninth ! “

Kafma: “Yes! Absolutely!”

Giving that response, transparent insect wings sprouted from Kafma’s back, and his slender body soared high up to the sky.

Seeing that in the corner of his eye, Goz hoisted his specialized weapon—his golden mace, and magnificently joined the battlefield. Violently rampaging, for the sake of demonstrating the eminence of His Excellency the Emperor, he played his instrument at loud volume.

What remained was…

Goz: “—Here, you are at the mercy of His Excellency. No matter the outcome, if it is to His Excellency’s wishes, we troops shall obey and wager our lives.”

16

At the sizzling smell of the burning battle, Madelyn Eschart snorted her nose.

The fight had broken out in the distant Demon City, a large amount of blood was spilled, and lives were lost in vain.

However, that was not a rare thing. No matter the place, lives would be lost, and no matter the place, blood would be spilled. That was no different in the fortress where Madelyn remained.

Madelyn: “…”

There was a terribly deep stench of blood hanging in the air of the fortress.

As if it had been exposed to a fierce attack, the entire fortress seemed to be in a partially destroyed state. The gathered soldiers had departed for battle, and the ones who remained were the minimum amount, so it was likely that this building would be abandoned.

It would be preferable for her to flatten it as a distraction from her worries, such a thought had floated to her head, though.

Madelyn: "I'm being friggin' stupid, aren't I? I, the dragon, should act more dignified."

Cautioning herself, she calmed her heart, which had become emotional.

Going on an emotional rampage, and snapping to bite at anyone was something she must not do. It was not that it was a bad thing, but she had heard that it was something which would deny her welcome to the world of humans.

She did not really intend on pandering to humans, but it would be troublesome if she was ostracized from them since they were so large in number.

In addition…

Madelyn: "…No one friggin' told me that such a human would be there."

As she muttered, Madelyn thought of the blue-haired man who wore the katana on his hip.

He was a person with an easygoing attitude and a smile that would not fade, but Madelyn understood that that man was an aberrant monster with a single glance. That superficiality, too, must have been a mimicry.

That was a negative emotion that Madelyn, descendent of the dragonkin, should have never experienced.

Dragons were always mighty and magnificent, and they must reign at the summit of all living things. In spite of that, she was overawed by that single person.

Madelyn: “It’s because I, the dragon, am still friggin’ small.”

Staring down at her hand, Madelyn’s murmur was filled with frustration.

If she displayed the intrinsic power of the dragonkin, she would have no reason to be afraid of merely a single human. However, Madelyn was still young, and as a dragonkin she was unripe. For that reason, she had disgraced the honor of her race.

In order to clear away that disgrace, she would eventually have to confront that katana user…

???: “—Aha, I see. That is indeed a figure that can be recognized at a single glance. Even having wings sprouting from your back, I am certainly impressed.”

Madelyn: “Kyaa!”

Leaning against the broken wall of the fortress while absorbed in her thoughts, Madelyn received a jolt to her shoulders. Her expression turned sour upon letting out an unpleasant voice to the person who had called out from behind her.

Madelyn scowled at the man quite a bit taller than herself, who had insolently mentioned her wings.

Madelyn: “Are you bluntly evaluating this dragon’s wings? Don’t get carried away, lowly human.”

Man: “Dear me, I have been terribly rude, allow me to apologize. It seems a little bit of my common curiosity had come to my mind.”

Giving a bow out of consideration, a prominent man with a pure-white impression answered Madelyn.

Rather, his strange appearance would be better described as having nothing except white. His hair and face were white, his clothes and shoes were all white, his appearance was just as if he had deliberately abandoned his own Color.

It could be said that the man clad in the shiny golden armor could be understood at a glance, but indeed, it was certainly an outward appearance that could be understood at a glance. Without a doubt, that person was precisely who Madelyn was supposed to converge with at the fortress.

Man: "…"

Narrowing his pupils, the man's calm attitude irritated Madelyn.

Yet again, this was someone who possessed the courage to not waver with Madelyn as their opponent. The glistening mistress of that stone castle, the man of golden armor who she met at the fortress, that man who smelled like the forest and that naked woman, it was the same for each of them.

Even leaving out that abnormal katana user, there were a plentiful amount of unpleasant people.

There were probably dragons who would extoll them as brave warriors. However, Madelyn had not matured to that extent. She believed that dragons were to be feared and respected.

Therefore…

Madelyn: "You, crouch down."

Man: "…Crouch down, that is a rather odd thing to say. For what reason should I do such a thing?"

Madelyn: "Never mind that, just crouch down. Will you not listen to this dragon?"

Pointing to the exposed dirt on the ground, Madelyn gave an unyielding order.

The man hesitated for a moment at that order, and then obediently crouched down on one knee. Then, as it finally seemed like she was looking down on him, Madelyn crossed her arms and got arrogant.

Madelyn: “Do not speak as if you are above this dragon. You and those other guys don’t understand the greatness of this dragon.”

Man: “—. By the way, these other people you speak of are?”

Madelyn: “The guys who were in this fortress. The man with shiny golden armor, and the naked woman. There was also that katana user.”

Man: “They are quite the memorable bunch, but having to clean up after them like this makes me want to resent the alignment of the stars. —Most of all…”

Madelyn: “—?”

Madelyn frowned as the man who had assumed an air of importance cut his words off there. Then, the man looked up at Madelyn as he kneeled, and on that white face, the sole color of his golden eyes wavered.

Man: “Somehow, it seems that it is my job to go around cleaning up after them. Regarding your anger, I am foolishly wondering about whether I should comply with it.”

Madelyn: “…”

Madelyn understood that the man, directly looking into her eyes, did not seem like his heart was kneeling, so she sensed that it had become meaningless for her to physically look down on him.

Unlike dragons, humans were liars. —Even without any vassalage in their hearts, they could kneel before someone without hesitation.

Madelyn: “…That’s enough. Stand.”

Man: “Oh, are you already satisfied?”

Madelyn: “I understood that crouching down means nothing for you. From now on, I’ll teach you about this dragon’s greatness.”

Man: “If you do that, I would feel truly very grateful. Whoops, I almost forgot to say.”

Gaining Madelyn’s permission, the man wiped his knees as he stood up, and bowed once again. She was sick and tired of that gesture, but her dignity prevented her from flaring up at that attitude of paying courtesy.

Giving a dubious smile, the man began to introduce himself as he looked down upon Madelyn.

Man: “My name is Chisha Gold. I have received the orders of His Excellency the Emperor, wise and arrogant, and I have directly obeyed them to reach this far away place. Please, I look forward to working with you.”

Madelyn: “Understood. This dragon will not introduce herself.”

Chisha: “I would be troubled if I did not know you, but I have indeed heard about you, Madelyn-dono. —Now then, where shall we begin? We do not have much time left.”

Looking all around the vicinity, the white man—Chisha, plainly asked.

Madelyn snorted her nose at those words, and then pointed to her nose. Therein lay the reason why the trouble had been taken to leave Madelyn far away from the battlefield.

Therefore…

Madelyn: “This dragon’s nose shall serve its purpose. I’ll teach you that I’m just of a different quality from the rest of you.”

Displaying her sharp fangs, in accordance with the pride of the dragonkin, Madelyn declared so.

17

???: “She has said that she will not stop until the fortress’ soldiers have all been rooted out. I have informed Cecilus to reply with “atone with your blood”, but you should understand what you have to do.”

With that, he wondered if being ordered to the on-site location should be called proof of trust. Or, perhaps he should lament about the undeserved pressure he was receiving from a powerful person he should not disobey; he struggled to make a judgment.

Even if he wanted to consult someone about this matter, he had ascended to a position where there was no one above himself he could consult. With a position he had not particularly desired, he found himself feeling terribly suffocated.

In any case, there were responsibilities that came with the position he was in. He must carry out the necessary work.

At the very least, those were the professional ethics of the man known as Chisha Gold.

Chisha: "Though, this appears to be a somewhat poor situation."

Madelyn: "—? Did you say something to this dragon?"

Chisha: "No, I was merely talking to myself. Please don't worry about me."

Shrugging his slender shoulders, Chisha's answers prompted a curt "Is that so?" from Madelyn. From there, she placed her hands on the ground, and promptly returned to sniffing her nose to chase down the smell.

That keen work ethic was something out of following the example of the many other Divine Generals. However, Chisha thought that looking at it from a pure outside perspective would probably receive the worst responses. After all, Madelyn, who appeared to be young, was sniffing the bare earth, and Chisha was following from behind her as she crawled around.

The dragonkin had a strong sense of self-importance, and they showed no mercy to those who dishonored their pride.

That rumor had not differed from his first impression, but that changed immediately as they came here.

Madelyn got offended by people looking at her horns and wings with curious eyes, however, it did not seem like her pride was especially damaged when seen crawling around on the bare earth.

That area could probably be called a difference in the sensitivities of humans and dragonkin. Thanks to that, it could be said that this manhunt would proceed fine if Chisha ignored the lack of respectability.

Chisha: “If Groovy were here, that lack of respectability would likely be forgotten, but… His Excellency is also persistently ill-natured. I do not think that he designed this expedition for this purpose, but…”

As one of the Nine Divine Generals, the sense of smell of the hyena-man Groovy Gumlet, was preeminent even among fellow demi-humans of beast-human lineage. He could probably catch someone if they fled from one end of the Empire to the other, so much so that that unfunny funny anecdote was circulated about.

And contrary to expectations, Chisha knew that it went beyond a kind of joke.

Chisha: “Even when I am substituting for His Excellency, if I do not devote one hundred percent, he will see through me.”

From the perspective of Chisha, who during times of emergency worked as Vincent’s body double, Groovy’s sense of smell was the ultimate indicator of whether he had been successful in the substitution.

Just as one would expect from the person Vincent had named to be the first to join the Nine Divine Generals, outside of Chisha and Cecilus, who were pieces under his control from the start.

As a stand-in to carry out Groovy’s function, Chisha was slightly doubtful of Madelyn’s ability. The duties of a Divine General cannot be fulfilled simply by being a rare dragonkin.

—Currently, Chisha and Madelyn are pursuing the survivors of the fortress which was in a catastrophic state after experiencing an attack from Yorna Mishigure.

However, they were not looking for outsiders who reported on the destruction of the fort, but the ten missing names who truly seemed to have escaped the disastrous scene—the survivors from hell.

Chisha: “The fortress suffered annihilation, and it was reported that three hundred soldiers were massacred. However…”

In military terminology, the word Annihilation had a slight difference that the general perception of the word.

Among troops, the word Annihilation meant a state where the ability to continue any further combat became difficult. That definition varies from nation to nation, but in the Vollachian Empire, if ninety out of one hundred people die, it can be considered annihilation.

In other words…

Madelyn: “There are ten survivors. That’s what you, and the most eminent man on the surface are thinking.”

Sniffing her nose, Madelyn picked up on the end of Chisha’s thoughts as she followed the scent. At her words, Chisha responded “That is so.” and propped his finger up to his chin, and,

Chisha: “Taking the disastrous scene of the fortress and the fact that their opponent was General First-Class Yorna into account, one would expect a lesser amount, but just who is it that remains, I wonder. Besides…”

Madelyn: “Besides?”

Chisha: “You may find this surprising from General First-Class Yorna, but she has a habit of loosening up on her final move. As you know, she even went as far as driving you away and entrusting you with a message, Madelyn-dono.”

Madelyn: “It-It ain’t like I got driven away!”

Chisha: “ain’t?”

In a flurried state, Madelyn’s change in speaking style caused Chisha to tilt his head. Though, Madelyn immediately mended her expression, and while displaying the sharp fangs within her mouth,

Madelyn: “Don’t friggin’ pry… Don’t pry into unnecessary things. Trying to peer behind this dragon’s scales will just result in your life being shortened.”

Chisha: “My goodness, I shall keep your advice within my heart… I fully understand the meaning of that advice, but may I quickly ask something?”

Madelyn: “…”

Suddenly turning to face forward, Madelyn resumed the manhunt on all fours. Considering the fact that his request was not verbally declined as a good thing, Chisha let out a “Now…” and went into rumination.

Madelyn Eschart had been recommended for the Nine Divine Generals by Berstetz. With her peculiar traits as a dragonkin, the details of how she made contact with Berstetz were unclear.

In the first place…

Chisha: “Madelyn-dono, what were the details of you undertaking this duty on this occasion?”

Madelyn: “…I heard that senile old fool’s request. If I accepted that request, he said he would become an ally of this dragon.”

Chisha: “An ally, was it? Prime Minister Berstetz would?”

Madelyn: “Was that his name? If you mean the second-most eminent man on the surface, then yes.”

If the Emperor was called the most eminent man on the surface, then calling the Imperial Prime Minister the second-most eminent man would not be considered as a mistaken thought, at least within the Vollachian Empire.

For the Nine Divine Generals, who held equal influence as the Prime Minister in military affairs, Cecilus, who had the seat of First, had let his own influence weaken.

Not to mention, there was nobody who thought that Cecilus was the second-most eminent man within the Empire.

Cecilus: “Ehh? I’m eminent? Please stop that, Chisha. Do you think I’m concerned with titles saying I’m eminent or not? My position of General First-Class, too, was given to me just because I’m strong, and in the first place, being an eminent person doesn’t really suit the leading actor. Rather, that sorta person seems like the one to get cut down!”

And, he clearly imagined the response of the person in question within his mind.

As expected from a relationship that had persisted for ten years, he was fed up with the fact that he had recreated him more than he needed to.

Madelyn: “But, it’s just as that senile old fool said.”

Leaving Chisha’s inner thoughts aside, Madelyn suddenly muttered that.

Chisha raised his eyebrow at that mutter, and Madelyn sniffed as she continued to face forward,

Madelyn: “This dragon’s blood is rare. Those I meet on the surface would probably look at this dragon unusually. They would ask to know about this and that, but I’ve been told to not take offense and gnaw their heads off.”

Chisha: “I see. I, too, would like to stay out of getting my head gnawed off.”

Madelyn: “Are there still things that you want to ask this dragon?”

Chisha: “Hmm, that is indeed the case.”

Since she had divulged that Bersetz had put an idea in her head, and also about the warning he gave her, Madelyn wanted Chisha to demarcate that he had no further intentions of having his questions answered.

Even for Chisha, it was not like Vincent had expressly ordered him to investigate her.

Therefore, it would not matter at all if he relinquished the opportunity to ask questions here.

However…

Chisha: “Yes, there are still things I would like to ask. Contrary to expectations, I have quite a nervous temperament, so in order to calm my small heart, I think that just gaining knowledge would be satisfactory.”

Madelyn: “You say some clever things. Don’t bother this dragon with useless questions.”

Chisha: “That is a matter of course. —Your origin, education, family structure, beliefs, favorite book, fighting style, the ecology of the dragonkin, the hometown of the dragonkin, what you like, what you dislike, your sense of justice, your sense of hatred, the number of times you eat per day, your sleeping hours, favorite food, dominant arm, dominant eye, whether you are diurnal or nocturnal, as well as many other various things.”

Madelyn: “…”

Chisha: “However, if I had to choose what I wanted to ask the most from among those…”

Chisha enumerated the things he wanted to know at length, then Madelyn stopped in her tracks and turned to look at him like he was a weirdo. That was a bit regrettable, but he thought it was the natural response, and continued.

Turning towards Madelyn, who was motionless as hatred floated to her eyes…

Chisha: “—Your name, I wonder about who gave it to you?”

Madelyn: “…Huh?”

Chisha: “I’m referring to your name. Madelyn Eschart, your name.”

That seemed to have been quite unexpected, as Madelyn's eyes greatly wavered with bewilderment and shock.

In accordance with her appearance, it was a childish reaction. Berstetz was prepared to make her hate her surroundings and keep her ignorant as a means to avoid having secrets exposed.

In reality, Chisha did not think he was gaining information that was hard to come by.

Only…

Chisha: "There are legends that the dragonkin, who are said to have perished, used to live together with a Dragon. I hear that among the Dragons, there are some that can understand words. Madelyn-dono, I have a suspicion that you received your name from a Dragon…"

Madelyn: "—Yer wrong."

Chisha: "Hm?"

Madelyn: "This dragon's name, it was somethin' this dragon received from her family."

Tightly placing her small hand onto her chest, Madelyn responded as if she was hiding something.

Chisha narrowed his eyes at the gentle sound of those words, as if they were delicately handling something fragile, and he easily believed that it was not a lie. In the first place, she probably would not lie.

Lies were the weapons of the weak, the invisible claws and fangs for the purpose of opposing the strong.

As a strong individual, she possessed visible claws and fangs, and had no reason to lie as a descendent of the dragonkin.

Madelyn: "…"

Thinking on the other hand, regardless of the name Madelyn, when touching on the family name of Eschart, what kind of benefits could be had? Chisha grew fed up with himself as he calmly thought about that.

Only, from the tone of her voice and side of her face, Chisha could sense that the Family which Madelyn was thinking of, was probably something truly irreplaceable to her.

In regards to that point, there was no difference between humans and dragonkin. —No,

Madelyn: "—For that reason, this dragon came to the surface."

Within the quiet words that followed, there was a cold heat that others must absolutely not pry into.

Upon hearing that, Chisha once again concluded that there was no difference between humans and dragonkin.

No matter what blood flows through them, no matter what lifestyle they pursue, the way of being for a Revenger was the same for all.

—The hatred that would not fade from within Madelyn's eyes, it was as if it was trying to make Chisha aware of that.

Madelyn: "…We're here."

When Chisha reached his conclusion, Madelyn stood back up after crawling on all fours. She clapped the dirt off her hands and nodded towards the entrance to the mountain trail, which led to the deep recesses of the mountains, dense with trees.

Giving a loose glance to the surroundings, the land was not located in a convenient place for habitation.

Madelyn: "There's humans that smell like the fortress, and a stench of blood mixed in. The people we're looking for are here."

Chisha: "Hm, I see. However, going inside the mountains would take quite a lot of effort. Personally, I don't have too much confidence in my legs."

Madelyn: "This dragon doesn't care about such things. Then, will you give up?”

Chisha: “No, no. Only, the trees and dirt here are wild, and it seems to be a mountain where no one is ever called in to tend to it… if Madelyn-dono would smoke out the people we are looking for from the mountain, it would be immensely helpful.”

Madelyn: “—Smoke them out from the mountain.”

The people they were looking for were lurking in the mountains, so a mountain hunt was unavoidable.

Unfortunately, there were no collaborators but Madelyn who could help Chisha with his duty this time. He wanted to lament about the harsh work environment, but most of the personnel were allocated to the attack on the Demon City, so he could not be rash with his words.

In that case, Chisha frantically worked his head, as he must take the best measures possible.

With the outstanding senses of his only collaborator, Madelyn, they uncovered the hiding place of the people they were looking for. Next up was to quickly smoke out the people they were looking for from the forest using her predominance.

Accepting Chisha’s request…

Madelyn: “—Do you find this dragon’s methods to be rough?”

Her golden eyes lit up with a blaze, and the girl turned back towards Chisha with her mouth forming a semi-circle.

That moment, as if beckoned by the girl’s smile, the sound of magnificent wings flapping descended from the high skies. Many of them piling on top of each other, it was a sight greater than the rumors that Chisha had heard, and they made a sound of splitting the very wind.

A flock of flying dragons totaling greater than thirty, that had descended to stand within Madelyn’s surroundings.

Madelyn: “This dragon’s hunting is ferocious. Don’t complain about it later.”

Madelyn gave a reminder to Chisha as she stroked the neck of the flying dragon that had descended to stand next to her. Accepting that dragonkin’s show of force, Chisha nodded with a “Yes”.

Then, taking a step to Madelyn’s side, he turned to face the forest.

Chisha: “It is unclear how much of the situation the fortress’ soldiers understand, but those who escaped from General First-Class Yorna, and those who are hiding in the forest cannot be unrelated. Consequently…”

Madelyn: “—?”

Cutting his words off, Chisha closed his eyes. Then, taking in a large breath…

Chisha: “—SOLDIERS OF THE EMPIRE, HIDING IN THE MOUNTAIN!! IF YOU HAVE PRIDE IN YOURSELVES AS SWORD WOLVES, COME OUT HERE AND GIVE YOUR EXPLANATIONS!!”

Madelyn: “…”

Chisha’s loud voice rattled the atmosphere, and reverberated even beyond the mountains.

This was not mercy or tolerance, but a necessary rite. To give a chance to explain themselves, at least for them to explain themselves as soldiers, in order for them to have a chance to protect their honor.

Whether providing that chance was something he should do, the scales within Chisha were not tipped to either side. Only, what had happened in that fortress, what had led to Yorna’s insurrection, Chisha had a guess.

If his guess was correct, then Chisha thought there would be no need to show them mercy.

Chisha: “Madelyn-dono, let us wait for a bit. If there is still no movement, I will leave you to deal with it, Madelyn-dono.”

While hearing his own voice echo within the mountains, Chisha sat down underneath a nearby tree. Looking at Chisha’s behavior, Madelyn exhaled quietly,

Madelyn: “Humans are so sluggish… Let me ask one thing.”

Chisha: “Whatever you like.”

Madelyn: “…A bit, what’s that?”

Madelyn frowned as she asked her question, and all of the flying dragons that had descended also titled their heads.

While observing the leadership of the girl who was obeyed by flying dragons, Chisha rubbed his own brow at Berstetz’s callous enforcement of ignorance.

A bit. Even though he had instructed that to Madelyn, she did not wait for a bit.

Then, exactly one moment later, the flying dragons attacked the mountain where the cowards hid. They probably tasted it there. The ferocity of flying dragons, and the terror of the dragonkin.

—As per the law of iron and blood, they would never show mercy to those who twisted their pride.

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With a graceful swing of the arm, her white fingertips tore through the air.

She had movements which seemed like refined dancing, however, it brought about an unusual phenomenon that seemed like a dream or illusion.

???: “Dance.”

—The road bounced like a living creature, and the buildings hurriedly moved side to side like they had been freed from their restraints.

???: “Sing.”

—The scaffolds that had been spread throughout the city lost security and rained down, they were freed from the lack of freedom in a free fall, and freely began to fly around the air.

???: “Destroy.”

—The brick buildings, the colorful glasswork, as well as the cultivated trees and flowers, their original way of being was bent, and freely transformed into a rampage.

Right in the middle of the wide and large street, in the surroundings of Yorna as she waved around the kiseru in her hand and danced, the townscape changed its form, buildings and scaffoldings danced in the air, and trees and flowers blocked the way like soldiers.

???: “This is…”

???: “Well, ever the same, it feels unpleasant to have no idea what you’re doing! But at the same time, it’s a work of art that I can’t take my eyes off of! It is indeed quite splendid!”

With the ominous sight right before her eyes, Arakiya was considerably astonished. But, seeing Cecilus act in his usual manner beside her, she immediately discarded her discomposure.

She understood that the Flamboyant, Yorna Mishigure, was a powerful person who should not be looked down on.

Arakiya: “Besides, if it’s a weird technique, the old man is also like that.”

Using someone she knew as an example, Arakiya suppressed her own astonishment.

Seeing Arakiya recover at his side, Cecilus took one step forward—and disappeared.

Yorna: “—Hk.”

Then, the disappeared Cecilus appeared before Yorna's eyes, and his katana, unsheathed at lightning speed, quickly made its way through the many obstacles that came up to block his way, and finally arrived at Yorna's slender neck, ready to slice it off.

However…

Cecilus: "Ahh, ever the same, your neck has quite the solid protection."

Yorna: "Rather, it is your way of doing things that is ever the same. Haven't you learned from our past encounter that you cannot cut off my neck?"

Cecilus: "Nah, it's because the me from last time and the me this time are different. To be constantly developing every second of every day is the special privilege of the leading actor. Rather, every time I rise to the stage, I get more handsome!"

Yorna: "You are a man whose impudent speech never ceases."

Receiving Cecilus's blade on the back of her nape, it did not cut through even a thin layer of skin, let alone Yorna's whole neck. The result of the slashing attack was that of a faint red mark.

Cecilus had said that he had not been able to kill her in the past. — He had been speaking literally.

Yorna: "Shi!"

Directly after, Yorna repelled the katana with her kiseru, and fired her elbow at Cecilus's gyrating body.

Cecilus dropped down in the blink of an eye to dodge that, but chasing closely behind his afterglow like arrows were countless bricks—parts of the houses that had been taken apart, fired at Cecilus one after the other.

As they missed him, they bore large holes in the ground, and it was just as if there was a rampaging storm of cannonballs. Then, within those flying objects that rained down incessantly, it became clear that the bricks were only the beginning.

Cecilus: “Whoa, this has turned into quite the flashy development!”

Yorna: “At the rare chance to entertain the Empire’s strongest, I have no intentions of cutting corners.”

The innumerable scaffoldings that were laid out across the city came falling down on Cecilus, who was looking up overhead.

One by one, the great mass suddenly drew near him, for the purpose of crushing the lone man of Cecilus, the structure of the city changed and ungrudgingly came down on him, and came down on him, and came down on him—.

Cecilus: “Ta-Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta—!!”

As the gigantic attacks rained down, Cecilus acted not carefully, but fearlessly accelerated and evaded them.

The ground would quake each time the scaffoldings hit the ground, and the lighting would run through and trample the disarrayed scaffoldings. Then, while Cecilus was putting his life on the line by challenging the foot race…

Arakiya: “I’m also here.”

Swinging the branch in her hand, Arakiya felt the heat of death of the Micro Spirit she had captured within her body.

The ability of the Spirit Eater was to burn through the lives of captured spirits and manifest them. The Micro Spirit she had captured in preparation for the battle with Yorna, she would release the glimmer of its death here.

The Demon City that was extolled for its impregnability, it was for the purpose of defeating that land’s mistress in one fell swoop.

—Instantly, with Arakiya at the heart, an inferno that engulfed hundreds of meters began to overflow.

Yorna: “—This is…”

Burned by the heat and vigor of the overflowing inferno, Yorna raised her eyebrows in surprise.

Usually, flames would spread gradually, and the range of that spread was somewhat enlarged, but Arakiya's flames did not burn sluggishly.

She had captured the Micro Spirit of Fire, and using its accumulated power, the other Micro Spirits in the range to feel the sensation within the atmosphere all ignited together; it was a technique to thoroughly burn in one fell swoop.

With the high speed of the inferno's expansion and its tremendous firepower, Arakiya herself transformed into flame, and aimed for the enemy.

This was Arakiya's fighting style after capturing the Micro Spirit of Fire—.

Yorna: "I had not felt that she should be disdained as a mere girl, but…"

Arakiya: "I'm good at thoroughly roasting things."

Within the thunderous spread of flames, a bright red shone in Yorna's eyes as they harbored caution. Receiving that gaze, Arakiya felt no resistance to her explosive inferno.

The town and objects, within all sorts of things that were burning, the scorching heat of the flames did not reach Yorna.

Cecilus's blade had been unable to take off her head, as if her white skin had repelled it, and the flames were also—.

Cecilus: "Anya! Hey! I'm going to get cooked as well, you know?!"

Arakiya: "…I'll take up that opportunity."

Cecilus: "Argh, jeez, you aren't getting the message! I'm so sick of it!"

While getting shrouded in the same inferno, Cecilus's blade hummed as he ran, cutting the building directly before him in half in the blink of an eye. Jumping onto that cross section, he ran up, escaping the flames that scorched the ground and reached the skies of the city.

Jumping into the eye of the storm of raining scaffoldings and building materials, slashing attacks surged forth like a bolt of lightning.

—That instant, all of the objects were minced up, and made useless.

In that time, Arakiya, who had transformed into flame, approached Yorna, and drove a kick of enormous firepower into her.

Yorna: "—Hk."

Drawing an arc of flame that extended past the length of Arakiya's legs, it mowed down the city as if tongues of flame were licking it. Grazing past the buildings and roadside trees, the kick drew near Yorna as it burned everything along the way, and it turned the Demon City into hell itself.

However…

Arakiya: "No one is here?"

At the spectacle of burning the Demon City to ashes, Arakiya realized that there was not a single victim.

The Micro Spirits in the surroundings, too, she did not feel a fluctuation of their lives. As far as she could tell, there was truly nobody in Arakiya's range aside from Yorna.

That is to say, this was evidence that the city's residents had placed all of their trust in Yorna, and believed that she could defend them from the enemy directly attacking.

Yorna: "They all knew that you would be coming directly. Thus, it is logical that I would entrust those children with the back areas of the city. —One or two members of the Nine Divine Generals, I can hold them back on my own."

Arakiya: "Incredible confidence."

Yorna: “That is my nature. Your eyes are wavering, aren’t they?”

The heel of her thick-soled footwear negated the curtain of flames, and pierced into the chest of Arakiya’s formless body. The fluttering hems of her kimono cut through the flame, and her counterblow split Arakiya vertically in half.

Of course, Arakiya, who had assimilated into the flames, was not vulnerable to physical attacks. Even if a sword thrust through flames, those flames would not be extinguished. And yet…

Arakiya: “I am, wavering?”

Yorna: “If you are this strong, it is the Vollachian way to do what you want to do… you see, it does not appear like you are enjoying yourself. Far from it, actually.”

Arakiya: “…”

Yorna: “It seems like you are lost, wavering about why you are here.”

Yorna stepped into the road, and the thrust of her palm blew away the side of Arakiya’s face. The scattered flames gathered, and her vanished head immediately returned to normal.

However, more than the fist, it was the words that bestowed a stinging pain to Arakiya’s chest.

Yorna’s way of speaking seemed just like she had seen through Arakiya, and so Arakiya felt a tremor within her heart…

Cecilus: “Please stop that, Yorna-san. Anya’s heart will quickly get uncomfortable.”

Just then, Cecilus’s voice interrupted, and the sole of his zori slipped through and fastened to Yorna’s abdomen. Immediately after, Cecilus put strength into his knees with a “Yo”, and Yorna’s tall figure was easily pushed upwards, fiercely kicked into the air.

And then, jumping up to chase after her, Cecilus’s unparalleled slashing attack rushed towards Yorna.

A merciless sword attack, while the vital spots of Yorna's body were exposed to that,

Yorna: "You are a man who never learns."

Cecilus: "Uwa, even this doesn't work! I thought it was surely something like the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits and that it would connect if you detached from the ground, but…"

Yorna: "—. Actually, it is surprising that you seem willing to learn."

Cecilus: "Of course, the real thrill is to focus as I try to search for an opportunity to win. Something like fighting without thinking about anything, that would be more like Anya."

Cecilus's slashing attack of lightning speed roared, and Yorna received that blow to her chest without stopping it. However, her voluptuous breasts rejected the cutting ability of the katana, and Cecilus protected against the counterattack using his scabbard.

The scabbard creaked as it received the backhand blow, and Cecilus's body furiously soared through the red sky.

Arakiya: "Cecilus!"

Following Cecilus with her eyes as he flew, Arakiya immediately looked back towards Yorna. However, an arm reached out and grabbed Arakiya's neck. It was Yorna, who had returned after being kicked up into the air.

With her white fingers, she gripped Arakiya's slender throat, her throat, which should have had no true form.

Arakiya: "Ack…"

Yorna: "It is because you are wavering. Your appearance blurred, and your true form shifted to a state able to be grasped. —You, for what purpose do you fight?"

Arakiya: "…"

Yorna: "Personally, I fight for love. What about you, for what reason have you burned this city?”

If strength could be directly connected to something one was holding, that was proof of Yorna’s strength.

Feeling as if she had been asked, Arakiya’s mouth repeatedly gasped, and visions from days long past appeared on the back of her eyelids—she was reminded of the existence of utmost importance to her.

No matter when, no matter where, the existence at Arakiya’s core would not change. —However, could it be said that Arakiya burning the city like this was truly for her sake?

Cecilus: “—Like I said, please don’t make Anya think about these things, Yorna-san.”

With a flash, the slashing attack cut directly in front of her, and sliced down towards the arm of Yorna which was gripping Arakiya’s neck.

Just like with her neck, her arm had not been cut off. However, a dull sound came from Yorna’s arm with that crushing blow, and Arakiya’s body was snatched away when her grip loosened. Looking at the fallen back Arakiya, holding her waist, her savior had been Cecilus, whose nonchalant face was enough to be abhorrent.

Even though to embrace Arakiya, who was still assimilated with the flames, was the same thing as holding flames in one’s arms, his nonchalant face still did not crumble.

Yorna: “—. Personally, the people I find hardest to understand are gentlemen like yourself.”

Cecilus: “Ehh, am I really that hard to understand? I was proud that His Excellency and Chisha both thought of me as hard and easy to deal with, but…”

Yorna: “Your arms are burning, do you not feel pain?”

With the sound and smell of flesh burning, the flames went through the kimono to burn his arms, however, Cecilus’s smile did not waver. Even with Yorna's question, he jested with a "Mmmmm", and,

Cecilus: "Instead of getting panicked due to the pain here, wouldn't it be way cooler to boldly smile?"

Yorna: "…"

His skin and flesh burning, while a smell akin to the heat reaching his bones was set adrift, Cecilus did not feel shame nor fear, but instead made a claim in accordance with his own philosophy.

Then, as he wore his smile, he gently caressed the head of Arakiya, whom he held within his arms,

Cecilus: "That and, I request that you refrain from giving Anya any needless ideas. I'm not denying those who attach great importance to the reasons and significance of fighting, but…"

Yorna: "Do you think that such things are unnecessary for strong individuals?"

Cecilus: "No, no, my own strength and the strength of others are different things, after all. The reason I don't want to make Anya think about that is because Anya becomes regrettably weak when she thinks about stuff."

Arakiya: "—Hk."

Being spoken of in an incredibly blunt manner, Arakiya immediately tried to object.

Though, her voice did not come out. The reason for that was probably because of the relationship between Yorna and the city's residents—Yorna, who held back the front lines by herself, trusting in her were all of the residents who protected the places she could not reach. It was because she was envious of that firm relationship.

The mutual trust between herself and her former master, she would be lying if she said she had not thought about it.

However…

Cecilus: “Anya, I won’t tell you to not think about it. But there is a separate time and place for that. Whether you become a leading actor or a minor role, that entirely depends on you, Anya.”

Arakiya: “…I don’t, understand.”

Cecilus: “For now, just act as a single sword. Or perhaps, would the master of Anya’s heart wish for you to die here?”

Arakiya: “…”

While his burning arms continued to make a smoldering sound, Cecilus posed that question with a grin on his face.

She did not like that face of his, she thought she should continue to seriously scorch his burnt arms, but she stopped. It was a very painful topic, but Arakiya’s true master would not desire that.

Besides, she did not want Cecilus to laugh at her and say “I knew you’d be up to it!”.

Cecilus: “Anya, how many Micro Spirits do you have captured?”

Arakiya: “…One hundred and twenty four.”

Cecilus: “Very well. Then please kill Yorna-san one hundred and twenty four times. —As the two highest ranking members of the Nine Divine Generals, that is the purpose requested of us.”

Giving a straightforward reason for fighting, Cecilus sheathed his katana. Then, with a “Yo”, he lifted Arakiya’s body, put his arms within his burnt sleeves, and entered a stance of watching from behind.

Seeing Cecilus’s series of movements, Yorna placed her kiseru to her mouth, and,

Yorna: “I thought without a doubt, you were a man who was only good for killing, but…”

Cecilus: “Yes?”

Yorna: “I was surprised that without using a katana, you were quite good at bringing her back to life.”

While exhaling purple smoke and narrowing her eyes, Yorna caused Cecilus to raise his eyebrows. From there, the Empire’s strongest man bent over laughing “Ha-Ha-ha”, and,

Cecilus: “In the end, I am nothing more than a swordsman. I can’t pull off a feat like reviving someone. If Anya came back to life, that’s entirely because of our long relationship. That and…”

Yorna: “That and?”

Cecilus: “Anya is seriously quite strong. After all, she even gives me the shivers every once in a while!”

Saying that with a face completely bereft of ill intent, Cecilus was detestable. So much so that she thought it would have been better if she scorched his head instead of his arms.

But, she would not do that. Since she would not do that, she would instead have something to say…

Arakiya: “Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “Yes?”

Arakiya: “—Die.”

Cecilus: “You really can’t honestly say “thank you”.”

As before, thinking that she wanted him to die, Arakiya’s entire body began to dazzlingly emit light.

Without thinking of the consequences, she performed the powerful move of invigorating all of the captured Micro Spirits within her body—laying her eyes on that, Yorna slowly shook her head, and,

Yorna: “You, too, fight for the sake of love, don’t you?”

Arakiya: “…Probably, you’re completely wrong!”

Saying that as she glanced over at Cecilus, Arakiya howled and charged forth.

The next moment, with the offense and defense of the Demon City of Chaosflame, the greatest destruction and light shrouded the battlefield.

And then…

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Receiving the unleashed force of a frontal kick, his body was blown away and slammed against the wall. Then, together with his cries of pain, the sole of a shoe swung downward and slammed the collapsed man's head against the floor.

His front tooth chipped off on the floorboards, and while listening to the shrieks of the man vomiting blood, the eyepatch-wearing man who had done that titled his head, and commented that "This ain't a challenge at all".

The setting was a room in some Imperial Soldiers' barracks, and the two men who had quarreled were both Imperial Soldiers in red.

Be that as it may, it unfolded rather one-sidedly. It was not a surprise attack or sneak attack. Both of them wielded weapons, and began to cross swords at the same time. The difference in sword power was as clear as day.

Generally, there were no enemies among Privates and First-Class Privates. —That was the true strength of the man named Jamal.

???: "If you were a bit smarter, you would probably be promoted to General without a hitch."

Jamal: "Shut the fuck up, Todd! Here you should just honestly praise my strength!"

Todd: "I thought I did praise your strength. No one doubts your sword skills, man. Well then…"

Shrugging his shoulders at the discontent hoarse voice, the person who Jamal called Todd stepped forward. Crouched down in that place, looking at them was the pitiful man who could not move after Jamal trampled on his head.

Most of all, whether this man could truly be called pitiful or not, would depend entirely on his following response.

Soldier: “You-You guys… this sort of conduct towards a fellow regular soldier…”

Todd: “Oi oi, aren’t you the one who attacked first? As far as I can see, Jamal merely countered your attack. For us to feel sympathy for you in your ragged state after that is… I guess that it’s safe to say that you didn’t find our questions to be convenient.”

Soldier: “—Hk.”

Jamal: “Hey, don’t try to run away. If ya mess around, you’re gonna have to match with me, ya know?”

Looking down on the man, whose face had gone pale, Jamal touched the eyepatch on his right eye. It was an obvious intimidation tactic, but the results were immediate. In reality, he probably thought that Jamal was capable of anything.

The man’s spirit withered before their eyes, and Todd nodded with a “Thanks”.

Todd: “Well, let’s continue from the earlier question. —You’re a survivor of the fortress that General First-Class Yorna destroyed, right? Why did General First-Class Yorna do such a thing?”

Soldier: “It-It’s because she’s crazy! You must’ve heard the rumors! Even before, that woman was… Gah!”

Jamal: “It’s a General First-Class, pay some respect. You think this is a bar and I’m your close pal?”

The longsword in Jamal’s hand danced, and the man, who was now down one ear, screamed out in pain. Vulgar comments were Jamal’s speciality, but this was his exception, to be particular about the hierarchy.

Thanks to that, the man would probably be even more careful in his answers.

Todd: “Because she’s crazy, I certainly understand that. Only, this is just my theory, but no matter how crazy someone may appear, even they would have their own logic. Even actions that may look meaningless to an outsider, that would be logical for them. Do you understand?”

Soldier: “ah, ah…”

Todd: “In other words, even General First-Class Yorna’s violence this time, I would guess it had the reason of a First-Class General’s logic. So, for the soldiers of a fortress to be massacred, I suspect it would be based on resentment.”

To become not just a massacre, but an exhaustive massacre, would require more deep-rooted motives.

When he began investigating, he found out that Yorna likely demanded the escaped soldiers. The Emperor refused that, and the result was a military conflict unfolding in the Demon City.

However…

Soldier: “If-If you… know that… what will happen…?”

Jamal: “Ah? If you’re worried about that…”

Todd: “Well, wait a minute, Jamal. I don’t really mind if you talk to him. —Depending on the situation, I think I can put an end to this war.”

Holding Jamal back by putting a hand over his chest, Todd faced the man with a smile.

While the man was gasping and fighting the pain in his chest and ear, he looked up at Todd with pleading eyes.

Todd: “If the origin was resentment, then the way you apologize changes. There’s nothing that would get on someone’s nerves more than being apologized to by someone who doesn’t know what they are apologizing for. Besides, we might be able to offer you a way to save yourself."

Soldier: "I-In… what way…?"

Todd: "It isn't anything difficult. Once we understand what happened, we'll make a report to the superior officers. Then, as the mediation of the internal struggle progresses, we can overlook it if you happen to disappear somewhere."

Catching his breath at Todd's proposal, the man gave him a probing look. However, though he had messed up on acting suspicious, Todd had no more particular plan than what he had said.

Ultimately, he had no interest in this man's survival or course of action. Currently, Todd's interest was in what had caused Yorna Mishigure's insurrection, and securing the information that could put an end to it.

To speak further, using that information to make an achievement, he could profit off the situation.

For that purpose, he had gone out of his way to cross a dangerous bridge and search for the fortress' survivors, and cleared out the barracks to create a situation where they could directly speak to people. It would be troublesome if it was not useful.

Soldier: "…At the beginning, we were just killing some time."

As if Todd's sincerity had reached him, the man accepted it and began to speak little by little.

That had been the impetus of this rebellion, and the cause which led to Yorna massacring the soldiers of the fortress, and the reason why she demanded the heads of the survivors and everyone involved.

Hearing the contents of that, Todd understood that it was just about what he had imagined.

As expected, the origin of Yorna Mishigure's violence was resentment, and it was righteous indignation.

Soldier: “Th-That’s all of it. Well, are you satisfied?”

His tone grew rough halfway through, and the man who ended his speaking with a heated manner of speech posed a question to Todd. At that man’s gaze, Todd stroked his chin as he gave a “Yeah” and nodded.

Todd: “Yeah, I’m satisfied. If I speak of such a situation, I think the superior officers would also lend me an ear.”

Soldier: “In that case…!”

Todd: “Only, you were a bit unlucky, man.”

At Todd’s added statement, the man was dumbfounded as he widened his eyes.

He probably did not comprehend the meaning of Todd’s words. Due to his poor perception, the man ended up needing to pay with his own life. He should have realized it sooner.

Next to Todd, hearing the same story, Jamal had been looking at the man with eyes filled with disdain from the bottom of his heart.

Todd: “Even though I thought it may end up like this, my bad, my bad.”

Todd stood up as he shrugged his shoulders, and the severed head of the man rolled at his feet. It was trivial. Jamal swung his sword, and beheaded the man in the blink of an eye.

Jamal: “Fucking prick. What a disgrace to the proud soldiers of the Empire.”

Todd: “You know, I don’t have the slightest idea of what your self-evaluation system is.”

Tilting his head, Todd firmly stretched out his body.

Quite literally, the man did not have any luck. As was his verbal slip at the feet of Jamal, and the same with the fact that Todd and Jamal had captured his whereabouts in the first place.

There were other escaped soldiers that had been located, but he had also been in the position easiest to lure out.

Most of all…

Todd: “Can’t say that the other two will be lucky for long, though.”

Jamal: “Yeah, let’s tear ‘em apart.”

Todd: “Hold on, don’t kill just as a distraction from your own worries. We need to hand this over to a superior officer, and it’ll become one of our distinguished achievements.”

At that identification, Jamal’s entire face exclaimed that he did not like it. Suppressing that nagging face with his hand, Todd sighed at his future brother-in-law’s recklessness.

Acting in a way unbefitting of himself by crossing a dangerous bridge like this, all of it was to do a meritorious deed for the sake of returning to the Imperial Capital. It was nothing other than for the sake of returning to the lovely woman who awaited him there.

For that purpose…

Todd: “—I have to at least take care of this hard to manage brother-in-law. In return for that, after I finish taking care of him, your heart will kindly thank me, after all.”

20

???: “—For the incident on this occasion, it began when the soldiers of the fortress tortured a deer girl to death, and then proceeded to disgrace the corpse. If the beast people under the protection of the Demon City are killed, how enraged would the mistress of that city be? Somehow, that was completely outside their expectations.”

Straightening his back, busy with paperwork in his office, the handsome black-haired man—the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia received such a report, and Chisha, who had returned, awaited him to respond with words.

He was not waiting for words to show appreciation for the hard work. Rather, he was pragmatically awaiting further instructions.

With Chisha before him, Vincent stopped his hand that was turning the pages of the documents, and without lifting his gaze,

Vincent: “So that was the origin for the massacre of soldiers who were present at the fortress?—Who disclosed this?”

Chisha: “Three of the escaped soldiers revealed it to a unit of soldiers that had converged. A Private First-Class who grasped the situation restrained one of them, and reported to his superiors. One of them died, and the other two have been secured.”

Vincent: “Send the two who were captured to the Demon City, to Yorna Mishigure.”

Not displaying his momentary hesitation, Vincent controlled the fate of the escaped soldiers, and Chisha silently obeyed.

They were part of the impetus for Yorna’s insurrection this time. At best, they would die a violent death, and become a consolation for the blood spilled during this battle.

At that brutal way of thinking, Chisha personally felt disgusted with himself. Even though he should have a more gentle and quiet disposition.

Leaving the conflict within Chisha’s heart aside, Vincent continued as his eyes ran over the official documents.

Vincent: “In addition, track down the one who appointed the General of that fortress, as well as all of the relatives. We will issue the news in due course.”

Chisha: “I am also aware of that. Incidentally, Your Excellency, this is about the soldier who captured the escaped soldiers, but…”

Vincent: “There should be a reward. You can bestow whatever reward they desire.”

Chisha: “I thought you would say that, so I have asked them directly. Of course, not with this face though.”

At those words, Vincent lifted his gaze from his documents to Chisha for the first time.

It was nice that he had captured his interest, and Chisha imagined the two soldiers he had directly met within his mind. The duo of the eyepatch wearing man with a rough atmosphere, and the gentle man who gave off a friendly impression.

With little information, they had reached the escaped soldiers, decided that they should report that spinelessness to the higher-ups, and had acted appropriately, all of those points were worthy of praise. Of course, he thought they should be compensated appropriately, but—.

Chisha: "—The people of the Empire must be strong."

Vincent: "…What?"

Chisha: "That's what one of the soldiers told me when I asked what they wanted for their reward. The ideology of the Vollachian Empire, he said that he was doing naught more than following it."

It was strange, since the one to declare that was the rough soldier who appeared to be ambitious.

Soldiers earnestly devoted themselves to the Empire's law of iron and blood, and what is more is that they detested cowardly soldiers who went against it. So much so that they would say they did not need to get rewards for their blood.

Of course, his partner at his side made a face seeming dizzy after he said that, though.

Vincent: "The people of the Empire are strong, is it?"

For the subjects of the Vollachian Empire, it was natural that everyone knew the principle of the Sword Wolf.

Hearing that one again, and repeating it with his tongue, Vincent slightly narrowed his eyes. Within those narrowed black eyes were all the profound thoughts of His Excellency the Emperor, and even Chisha was unable to read them.

Perhaps what was closest to that true essence, with principles rather than words, was a swordsman who did not think about things with logic, and who was completely divorced from his sense of responsibility and obligations to his position.

In any case, the genesis of the matter on this occasion, the management of its conclusion had ended to some extent. For the other points that needed to be reported, Chisha clapped his hands together saying “Indeed”.

Chisha: “I accompanied Madelyn Eschart, and I have no criticisms of her ability or strength, she is of a caliber worthy to be installed as a General. Only, without any military experience, and the fact that she is backed by Prime Minister Berstetz is difficult; I have my concerns about that.”

Vincent: “Since Kafma Irulux, who Goz recommended, declined, we do not have the freedom to put those with ability and backbone aside. Even if she has the support of that person.”

Chisha: “…I just think that there is no need to deliberately drink poison.”

Vincent: “This is your purpose, the purpose of the Divine Generals, my purpose.”

While speaking, Vincent once again turned his gaze towards his desk, and his hand began turning the pages of the documents again.

Demonstrating his attitude of no longer having any intention to continue the conversation, Vincent’s obstinacy and his audacity to be the first to put his hand into the ashes where heat yet remained caused Chisha to heave a sigh.

That he was that kind of person, he had become fully aware of that over the course of their long relationship, but…

Vincent: “—At the latest, two more years.”

Chisha: “Your Excellency.”

Before excusing himself from that place, Chisha was stopped by

Vincent’s quiet words. However, without responding to Chisha’s call, Vincent remained immersed in his paperwork.

Had he merely spoken to himself, or had that been a problem posed towards Chisha?

Whichever it was, he did not draw out any further words. —For himself, who understood that, himself, who understood that and could do nothing about it, how terribly abhorrent he was.

For what purpose, was he even here? He wondered to himself.

Chisha: “…It is not like me. For goodness sake, I’m beginning to think I’m cursed.”

While reminiscing about such things, as a dagger of the Vollachian Emperor—No, the swords were the others. Therefore, Chisha acknowledged himself not as a sword, but just as a trusted friend, and he left the office.

Chisha: “…”

The sky that peered through the hallway’s window was blue to a detestable extent, and it seemed just as if the extent of the lives wiped out every day within that magnificent view below did not weigh on his mind.

Chisha: “For goodness sake…”

—As one of the Sword Wolves, he could not help but think he was terribly cursed.

21

Cecilus: “Ah! Anya, you only cooked the fried eggs on one side again!”

Arakiya: “…If you want both sides fried, do it yourself.”

Inside the shack, Arakiya glared at Cecilus as he complained about the meal on the table.

A meal for two was laid out on the humble table, each having tableware of different colors laid out. In order to differentiate them from each other, the cupboard had been arranged with tableware of different colors.

She absolutely did not want to use Cecilus's tableware by mistake. Nonetheless, since Cecilus did not wash his dishes, it was not possible to completely avoid touching them.

Not to mention, it would be difficult to minimize the amount she had to touch them today.

The reason was…

Cecilus: "Ahhhhh~"

Arakiya: "…"

Cecilus: "Anya, come on now, my mouth is wide open. Ahhhh~"

Being pestered with that, Arakiya grabbed Cecilus's fork out of irritation. Then, she stabbed the fried eggs on his plate, and quite literally shoved it into his mouth that was awaiting food like a baby bird. She did it with enough force to fracture his front teeth, but Ceilus easily grasped the fried eggs in his teeth, and satiated himself.

If he was that skilled, he probably did not need help eating, and he was also good at pestering.

Since Arakiya burned Cecilus's arms, that pestering would continue until that wound recovered.

Because they lived together, she was ordered to deal with that amount of trouble.

Cecilus: "Nom nom… mm, it tastes good. If you exclude the fact that you only ever fry one side, Anya's cooking ability is nothing to scoff at. I can assure that as someone who knows how you've improved over the years."

Arakiya: "It would be different with Chisha, but Cecilus's assurance…?”

Cecilus: “Ah! Your face has no faith in me! You know, I have an eye for these things, Anya. Without that, I wouldn’t be able to separate old swords and excellent swords. I also have an eye for people, you know.”

Arakiya: “…Seems like a lie.”

Since he could not move his arms in the sling, Cecilus made an unpleasant expression of “Ehhh” as he swayed from left to right.

Disregarding that, Arakiya tried to quickly finish the part-meal part-torture session, so she brought the freshly made scorching hot food into Cecilus’s mouth one after the other. It was displeasing that he had dealt with that so skillfully.

To pass the time of that brutal breakfast, they also…

Cecilus: “However, did Yorna’s insurrection end in failure this time as well? Well, even His Excellency and company are doubtful about how serious she was to begin with, but…”

Arakiya: “…The cause was the deer human who died.”

Cecilus: “Indeed, yes yes. Chaosflame is the destination for those with special circumstances, so if you poke them playfully, you will get a befitting retaliation. Even if you don’t think that you will lose your fingers by sticking them in the nest, that’s something you should understand.”

Giving a cackling laugh, Cecilus made an indifferent comment on the insurrection. Only, Arakiya cast her eyes down at that comment, causing Cecilius to raise his eyebrows with an “Oh?”

Cecilus: “What’s wrong, Anya. Is there something bothering you?”

Arakiya: “Yorna, was strong.”

Cecilus: “She was, wasn’t she? Nah, I didn’t understand that trick this time either. Even though I thought I would be able to cut her head off, I still messed up.”

Arakiya: “Though, it’s the same with that ridiculous power.”

The city that could change its form in quick succession, and the overwhelming robust health of Yorna, who did not know what it felt like to be destroyed. Of course, that was also an abnormality, but it was her way of being that caused Arakiya’s heart to waver.

It annoyed her, but just as Cecilus had said in the midst of the battle, she dropped the idle thoughts and fought. However, looking at it in the end, Arakiya’s wavering—that problem had yet to be solved.

For what reason did she fight? Having been told that, Arakiya suddenly thought.

Arakiya: “Cecilus, why do you fight?”

Cecilus: “…”

Arakiya: “…What’s with that face?”

Trying to face her own problems, Arakiya asked a question and received a strange face from Cecilus. After a short while, she slowly realized that it was Cecilus’s face of surprise.

With that strange surprised face, Cecilus shook his head side to side with a “No, no”, and,

Cecilus: “It’s extremely surprising that you want to know something about me, Anya, so when you said that I was astonished. If I’m not mistaken, this is the first time since we were kids, isn’t it?”

Arakiya: “—. After all, even if I didn’t ask, you would talk as you pleased.”

Cecilus: “Indeed. I would have already told you about plenty of stuff such as the food I like, or my beliefs, or my resolve as the leading actor, but now you ask for what purpose I fight. Ha-Ha-ha.”

Arakiya: “Will you not answer?”

Cecilus: “No, I’ll answer. —It’s because I aspire for the Heavenly

Sword.”

Cecilus responded quietly, and with tranquility harbored in his eyes, he gave off an impression completely different to the person who was usually two or three times more noisy.

Every once in a while, the man called Cecilus Segmunt would display a face like this.

Hard to decipher, just like lightning which had no true form, a disposition which one’s eyes could not keep up with.

That was something she also felt within her life-long master, and the Emperor of this country, Vincent. That which Arakiya felt was the peculiar way of being for those who stand in a dimension wholly different to that of the ordinary person.

Their positions, and what they could see, were different; it felt as if they were trying to make that known.

Arakiya: “Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “Yes?”

Arakiya: “Die.”

Cecilus: “Why do you say that? Just now, I answered your question honestly without any obligation to do so!”

Cecilus’s noisy racket caused that atmosphere to vanish, and Arakiya heaved a sigh.

Then, feeling as though she had gained a slight bit of relief, Arakiya grimaced.

The master who Arakiya lovingly thought of, and the Emperor, were essentially on the same level. Those people and Cecilus, it was probably a relief to not need to view them on the same dimension.

Without a doubt, that was enough of a condition to irritate her.

Cecilus: “Nevertheless, it seems like I’m going to keep calling you

Anya for a while.”

Arakiya: “—. Before long, I’ll make you retract it.”

Cecilus: “In the time you’ve been saying that, seven years have already passed, though. Ha-Ha.”

Laughing in an easygoing tone, Cecilus opened his mouth again with an “Ahhh~”. With a sour look, Arakiya tossed a grilled fish that had not had its bones removed into his mouth.

While skillfully sorting through the flesh and bone with his tongue and teeth, the strongest Sword Wolf of the Empire laughed.

—The existence at the summit of the pack of Sword Wolves, while thinking about the far away Heavenly Sword, eating the fish that had been caught, grilled, and laid out on the table, he laughed in a good mood.

END

The Scarlet League

1

“Very well. Then, this is war,” the woman proclaimed, stunning and red as blood, proudly brandishing a raised fan in her hand. Those in her presence and anyone who heard her declaration found themselves filled with astonishment, perplexity, and in some cases, fervor. However, there was one unifying thread woven through them all—that being that each one of them were very young.

The enchanting woman’s resounding voice carried across the gathering of young boys and girls, all in their teens, with only a slight variation in age. On top of that, as children, they were far from war-savvy. Rather, they were simple boys and girls from the city. And while not entirely removed from the conflict, they were not expected to join the battlefield themselves. It was an audacious act to declare war to such youths, even attempting to draw them into its clutches.

An act that, even if said as a joke, could easily be misconstrued as malicious intent. Regrettably, however, in this particular instance, the person making the declaration showed not the slightest inkling of speaking in jest. The person was a tyrant for whom even the slightest suggestion of dissent would have the offender’s hand chopped off at the wrist. Be that as it may…

“We are going to war. Both sides should be well prepared,” declared the captivating Priscilla Barielle, repeatedly and with a distinct air of amusement. Her iron-helmeted squire, observing from behind, couldn’t help but think that perhaps it was more than the fear of losing his remaining arm that deterred him from challenging her outrageous words.

2

Several hours before Priscilla’s declaration of war…

“Lady Priscilla! We have a problem beyond my control!” The shrill voice of a child reverberated throughout the grand mansion. It wasn't due to the sheer volume of the cry, but rather because the maidservants had sporadically thrown open the doors and windows to ventilate the building.

The desperate tone in the voice carried a sense of urgency. However, having already figured out its identity, the women all pursed their lips into a smile and returned to their work. Amongst them, only one individual sat up heavily at the sound of the high-pitched voice while scratching their neck.

"Well, well, seems Schult's as peppy as ever today," remarked a man in a black iron helmet, rising from the comfort of the sofa where he had been resting with a hint of irritation. In contrast to his head, which was fully concealed with jet-black steel, the armor protecting his body from the neck down was noticeably lacking. On his feet were customized sandals that looked so out of place, they would surely be seared into one's memory.

Despite his eccentric appearance, however, only a select few were aware of the true nature of the role he fulfilled. In fact, it would be accurate to say that he himself hardly grasped what his position was. "Princess calls me a clown, but is she gonna pay me?" he wondered.

He knew that his mistress was very generous with the wages she paid her attendants. She was never known to be stingy, and her propensity to properly compensate them for their hard work had earned her their respect and admiration. However, his compensation did not come in the form of a monthly salary deposited into an account, so she must have handed it to him in some other way. But the exact details of this arrangement escaped his memory.

"I hadn't really thought about it. I don't really desire much, and she usually gives me pocket money when I ask," he thought. "But maybe I'm just a useless old man with a crappy resume and no savings." Saddened by his unintended self-analysis, the man headed for a room in the building without hesitation.

Considering the identity of the owner of the high-pitched voice and the nature of its cries, he had only one destination in mind. And sure enough, his intuition proved to be correct.

"I tried my best, but nobody would listen to me! At this rate, it will be all my fault that Your Ladyship's… Your Ladyship's…reputation will…!"

"Hmm, my reputation?"

"Th-They will doubt you! I can't bear it!"

Peering into the room, the man's gaze fell upon the hunched figure of a petite back. Clenching his tiny fist in frustration and trembling impishly was a boy with pink hair, a distinguished butler of the mansion who wore short trousers that complimented him well. This was Schult.

Seeing him in all his childish glory, and his valiant efforts to navigate the challenges before him, he had a charm that made one want to tenderly take care of him. The adoration bestowed upon Schult by all the attendants of the mansion was not only due to his age, but because of his own personality. Yet the attendants themselves were hesitant to openly express their affection for Schult, not because of their overwhelming workload, but for another, more fundamental reason. Namely…

"Your demeanor sure is adorable as always. Say, how can someone so small worry so much about me?" remarked Priscilla, the owner of the mansion, her narrowed eyes fixated on Schult as she doted upon him. Seated in a gaudy chair, her elbow resting on the armrest with her hand placed on her cheek, Priscilla lent an attentive ear to Schult's heartfelt plea, with a book she had been reading left on her lap.

Priscilla, who was surprisingly well-read, dedicated much of her leisure time to reading. Princess's time devoted to reading is sacred to her. Interrupting her during this time is like stepping on a landmine that triggers relentless verbal abuse. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if that person gets sent to the guillotine and bites the dust. Of course, the exception being Schult, that is.

"Wait, don't the maids get let off the hook too?" the man wondered aloud. "Which means, the only one getting special treatment is me, the one being abused."

Priscilla, having caught Al peeking into the room from the hallway, called out, "I thought I heard a crude, unusual voice. And indeed, it is you, Al."

"Well, this sucks," Al muttered to himself. He bowed his head as he appeared. Although he hadn't necessarily been trying to hide, he was well aware of Priscilla's unpredictable temperament, akin to the volatility of her own stock price—a frightening thing to say the least. One wanted to take as much time as possible to carefully gauge her mood.

Fortunately, Priscilla chose not to address his eavesdropping. Instead, she simply cocked her chin, and said: "Enlighten me, pray tell. Are you also here to bring me yet another report with a look on your face suggesting the end of the world?"

"Of course not, Princess," replied Al. "You think I'd work as hard as Schult without this helmet on?"

"Even if you did, such unsightliness shall not stir my heart in the slightest."

"Huh?!" Schult blurted out, unable to contain his curiosity at this particular part of Priscilla and Al's exchange. "Lady Priscilla, have you seen Sir Al's face?!" His curiosity having gotten the better of him, Schult immediately clamped his hands over his mouth in remorse for his lack of composure.

"I really am a mess, aren't I?" he lamented. "I should become a bug that does nothing but chirp…"

"Foolishness," Priscilla chided. "I have no desire for insects within the confines of my abode. If you wish to avoid being trampled upon, hatch into the best version of Schult as fast as you can."

"I will grow up!" he vowed.

"Seeing you in such haste, it is indeed adorable."

Al stepped forward, placing a hand on Schult's drooping head from behind. To Al's surprise, the child seemed more delighted than repulsed, a testament to his innocence. I really do hope this kid feeds on the favor of those around him in the future, and grows plump and fat.

"So, what's your complaint today, Schult? Princess making unreasonable demands again?" Al inquired.

"What do you mean 'again?'" Priscilla asked indignantly, furrowing her shapely eyebrows. "When have I ever made an unreasonable demand of Schult? Whenever he laments as such, it is usually due to his own self-indulgence."

"His own self-indulgence, huh?" Al chuckled, appreciating the cuteness of Priscilla's remark. "Well, that's pretty likely." He turned to Schult and tilted his head. "What's up? It's not unusual to see you all flustered, but I can't turn a blind eye to an emergency that affects the Princess's reputation. Tell me what happened."

"Well, you see…" Schult began.

"If I recall, you were supposed to accompany the maidservants into town this morning," Priscilla interjected.

"Surprise! I did!" Schult exclaimed. His reaction was to clutch his small chest, as if she had struck a chord.

Al, who had never witnessed someone exclaim "Surprise!" in such a manner, stared blankly out the window and mumbled, "Into town, huh?" In this case, the town Priscilla was referring to was Krufuna, located in the mansion's vicinity.

The city of Krufuna, which wasn't too far from the Barielle residence, held great significance and prosperity within the Barielle Domain. To be precise, it would be more accurate to say that it was Priscilla who made it flourish.

"I heard things were pretty bad when ol' Leip was the lord," Al remarked to himself.

The tyranny of Baron Leip Barielle, Priscilla's late husband and the former lord, was so extreme that it was almost impressive to watch from the sidelines, while the people suffered both body and soul. That's when Priscilla, Leip's "beloved wife," gallantly emerged to save them with her benevolent governance.

In retrospect, one could almost perceive Leip's excessive arrogance as a calculated strategy intended to boost Priscilla's future popularity. But from Leip's perspective, who died after succumbing to mental deterioration and a near-bedridden state, such an assessment would serve as nothing more than a rhetorical argument not worth entertaining.

"Schult, what did you do in Krufuna?" Priscilla asked.

"I-I was…utterly useless!" Schult moaned, biting his lip, his slender shoulders burdened by a weight too heavy to bear. The incident occurred earlier that morning when he accompanied the maidservants on a shopping trip.

"So basically, you couldn't mediate a siblings' argument about Princess?" Al summarized.

"Y-Yes…" Schult admitted, nodding slightly in agreement. Regret filled his eyes, growing moist with remorse. Al gazed down at him and tapped his helmet thoughtfully as he pieced together the details of what transpired. According to Schult, that was the crux of the matter.

While en route to Krufuna with the maidservants, Schult came upon a boy and girl quarreling in the streets. If it had simply been a trivial argument, Schult would have paid them no mind. However, it became evident that the two, presumably brother and sister, were engaged in a dispute concerning Priscilla.

“The older brother was saying bad things about Lady Priscilla! And the little sister was arguing back with tears in her eyes. But while they were arguing, the younger sister was pushed away…” Schult explained.

“And you just had to butt in,” Al remarked. “But that brother sure had guts if he wasn’t intimidated by the sight of you, Schult.”

“Huh?” Schult looked at him quizzically. Yet it went without saying that he belonged to Priscilla’s entourage. Schult was a well-known figure in the Barielle Domain, and there likely wasn’t a single soul in Krufuna who would not recognize him. The boy had indeed displayed remarkable audacity to continue slandering Priscilla, even in the presence of Schult. He seems like the daring type of individual that would have been beheaded had he been born in a different era.

“Of course, I’m sure not even the Princess would do something so tyrannical—”

But before he could finish his sentence to defend what was left of her sense of righteousness, Priscilla was on her feet. “I shall make my way to Krufuna!” she declared.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! Calm down, Princess! You can’t do that!” Al protested, attempting to appease her anger. Sure, there’s nothing more foolish than for citizens to criticize their lord so openly in public, but—

“After all, they were only kids, right?” Al continued, “Those siblings weren’t much older than you. Right, Schult?”

“Yes, that is right!” Schult agreed. “The brother was just a little older than me.”

“See! No matter what he said, would you really behead a—”

“Foolishness!” Priscilla said, placing her fan against Al’s throat before he could utter another word. Al, immediately silenced, felt a scorching heat searing his larynx from the outside, causing him to holler and roll over in agony.

“Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow! Ain’t this a bit too much?!” he moaned, clutching his scalded throat under Priscilla’s piercing, fiery gaze.

“Too much, you say? If you cannot even comprehend the intentions of your mistress, then there is no point in keeping a fool like you by my side. Do not take your position for granted,” Priscilla stated coldly, unfurling the fan that had left a mark on Al’s throat.

“For granted?”

“Do not take it for granted that I will continue to keep you in my company,” she threatened. She concealed her mouth with the fan as Al groaned. “I am not as short-sighted as you seem to believe. However, Schult will not stop crying about his lack of strength. If I do not take action, my reputation as a lord will suffer.”

“What do you really want?” Al asked.

“I simply wish to alleviate my boredom,” she confessed. “Additionally, I would like to know exactly what insults were spoken about me.”

“Sounds like you.” Al dropped his head in disappointment, convinced by Priscilla’s characteristically straightforward response. He then scanned his surroundings with a quizzical look. “By the way, where’d Schult go?”

Just as Al was about to search for the vanished Schult, a voice rang out directly behind him. “Sir Al! Here you go!”

“Huh?!” As Al spun around to face the voice, his face was doused with a deluge of water. Upon closer inspection, a breathless Schult was holding a flower vase that had been on display in the hallway. He had carefully removed the flowers, using the remaining water to drench Al. Dripping wet with water that smelled and tasted distinctly of plants all over his helmet, he could do little more than stare in shock at Schult’s abrupt and unanticipated act, asking, “Why?”

“You were burning up, Sir Al,” Schult responded innocently. “So I thought I should cool you down…”

“I see…” Al nodded at Schult’s explanation, then turned his attention to Priscilla with a snap of his head. “I’m gonna wipe down my helmet. Gimme a moment, ‘kay?” he requested, indicating the need to postpone their departure.

3

“And that is why I have come here to see for myself,” Priscilla declared, crossing her arms and causing her opponents to stiffen before her. Al sympathized with them from the depths of his heart. He sympathized, but there was little he could do about it. He had no power to stop her, nor had he intended to in the first place.

“You’d have to be a real wise guy to speak openly of the Princess,” Al remarked. In truth, it was a rarity for Priscilla to even listen to Al’s opinions, despite his role as her loyal servant. In fact, she hadn’t even waited for his return after cleaning his helmet drenched with vase water. Once he heard that Priscilla and Schult had already departed the mansion, he hurried after them. By the time he caught up, Priscilla was already standing before her intended audience.

“Ah… Oh…” A boy of around thirteen or fourteen stood there, eyes filled with fear as they darted around under Priscilla’s piercing gaze. With red-toned hair and freckles, he was a rather ordinary looking boy with no remarkable features. For a boy like this to receive a sudden visit by the lord of the land, he would surely wilt away. Even more so given the reason for her visit.

“The Sun Princess…! Wow, it really is the Sun Princess!” Beside the boy was a girl, bouncing up and down in excitement, hand over her mouth. She appeared around ten years old, and wore her hair in two red pigtails. Based on Schult’s earlier explanation at the mansion, these two were most likely the brother and sister in question—the siblings who had been arguing about Priscilla.

“And it’s the big bro who was bad-mouthing the princess…” Al muttered to himself. The expected scenario would have been for the sister, in defense of Priscilla, to confront her brother, who had been bad-mouthing her. Then, Schult would have joined forces with the sister, only to be defeated. Had the roles been reversed, however, with the older brother chastising his sister for her ignorance, there wouldn't have been a problem.

Yet this was not the case. It was a much more delicate matter. Not to mention, the boy's age is also a concern. Priscilla's surprisingly patient with children, but this boy looks like he's teetering on the edge of her tolerance. But when push came to shove…

"Would I have to put my life on the line to prevent rumors of her cutting down one of her subjects from spreading?" Al said to himself. "It'll sure be a pain to convince the Princess, though." In fact, it would require more than just pain—it would be a matter of life and death.

Regardless, Al stepped onto the scene on that late afternoon, ready to intervene at a moment's notice, fully alert for potential confrontations. Just then, Schult spotted Al and called out, "Sir Al! You caught up with us! Um, is your helmet okay? Did it get rusty or damaged?"

"Nah, don't worry, it's fine," Al replied. "Well, if it does break, just use your savings to get me a new helmet that suits me more, 'kay?"

"A new helmet?" Schult asked, "But I think a hat would suit you better! It would be more fashionable. Plus, we would be able to see your face, Sir Al!"

"That curiosity's one of the things that makes you so adorable, y'know, Schult," Al remarked, glancing at the inquisitive young boy who eagerly desired to see his face. Then he turned his attention to Priscilla. "So, what's up with you, Princess? Already making the kids cry?"

The stunning, sharp-tongued Priscilla dismissed him with a single word: "Foolishness." She then elaborated, "Do you truly believe I would engage in such behavior? I simply clarified the nature of my visit to them."

"The nature of your visit? How so?" Al inquired.

"I heard that he slandered me, and I was curious to know what kind of nonsense he had concocted."

"How I pity them…" Al mumbled.

It's awkward enough for the accused to know that his words had reached the person in question. However, to be confronted directly about it is undoubtedly an unbearable situation. Not to mention, the fact that the person in question happens to be the lord of the land in which he lived. He must feel like he's on thin ice.

The girl, unaware of her brother's distress and unable to comprehend the gravity of the situation, made a heartfelt plea to Priscilla. "Sun Princess! My brother is so mean! He said bad things about you! Please scold him! Tell him it's not nice!"

If Priscilla were to grant her request, there was a high probability that the boy would face more than a simple scolding. However, it was impossible for this girl to understand that.

"Hmmm, a scolding from me, you say?" Priscilla mused. "That sounds like quite an interesting proposal. What do you think, Schult?"

"U-Um… well, you see," Schult stammered, "it was my fault for not handling the situation properly. So it would be a bit odd for you to do it, my lady…"

"You are not being very articulate," Priscilla chided. "Can you not speak up?"

"I-I want you to watch me do my very best, Lady Priscilla!" Schult exclaimed, standing tall in front of Priscilla. Mustering his courage, he turned to face the boy, his face flushed with determination.

Al observed the scene beside Priscilla in admiration. Schult had apparently reached the same conclusion as him, although from a completely different perspective—that this matter should not be left up to Priscilla.

Schult looked up at the boy, who was only slightly taller than him.

“Why did you have to say such mean things?” he demanded. “Priscilla is incredibly beautiful and charming! And she is smart, too… There is nothing wrong with her!”

“W-Well…” the boy stammered.

“That’s right!” the sister chimed in. Encouraged by Schult’s words, the girl joined in on proclaiming Priscilla’s beauty to her brother. “Whenever I said something nice about Lady Priscilla, you always denied it! Just look at her! She’s so incredibly gorgeous!”

Priscilla, being complimented on her beauty by these two young children, did not so much as flinch under the boy’s uneasy gaze. She proudly and unabashedly displayed her bold and blazing beauty to the public. However, the boy’s gaze held a mix of complex emotions, contradicting what she had been told earlier. It appeared the tension he felt was not solely due to her lordship, but also because he was faced with the beauty of a woman that his eyes couldn’t help but admire.

“Well, he doesn’t seem to hate you, Princess,” Al observed, “but… ain’t it just that typical youngster bravado? Y’know, refusing to admit that someone’s a looker even though everyone else says so?”

“I fail to see the point of your analogy,” Priscilla remarked, brushing off his words, “but I suppose I have a good idea of his motivations. Al, do you happen to have any siblings?”

“Me? Nah, I’m an only child.”

“Then it would be futile to expect you to comprehend,” Priscilla retorted. Al grimaced at being told off so bluntly. However, his expression remained hidden beneath his helmet, invisible to the eyes of others.

“Cease your frowning. Your gloom is stinking up the air,” Priscilla ordered, despite being unable to see Al’s facial expression.

“Wha?!” he blurted out, startled.

Ignoring him, Prischilla stepped forward. The boy, cornered by both his sister and Schult, timidly retreated, shrinking once more under

Priscilla's commanding beauty and power. However…

"You two siblings both have red hair, I see," Priscilla observed, combing her fingers through the petrified boy's red locks.

"Huh?" The boy appeared startled by the gesture. "Your sister's hair is a brighter shade of red while yours appears to be a tad darker, but it's safe to say they belong in the same category," Priscilla continued her observation, to which the girl eagerly affirmed.

"There aren't many kids with red hair," the girl continued, "so I told my brother how lucky we were to look just like the Sun Princess! But he got really mad at me for saying that."

"Simply having red hair is quite a rarity," Priscilla explained, "so it tends to attract the attention of others around you. Some people will pick on you over the most trivial of things. Has that happened to you?"

"You mean like people saying mean things? Yeah. But, when that happens…" the girl's voice trailed off. Priscilla's question seemed to have triggered a memory, and the girl's gaze shifted toward her brother.

The meaning behind her look was clear. Before today, the girl's brother would have stood up to any criticisms regarding their hair. That is, until a certain red-headed Sun Princess named Priscilla Barielle appeared.

"So that's it, huh," Al deduced, finally grasping the core of the siblings' dispute, albeit long after Priscilla had. In short, the brother's antipathy toward Priscilla stemmed from jealousy. "At first, he was the one defending his sister when she got picked on for being a redhead. Guess that all changed once the Princess entered the picture…"

The boy must have felt his self-respect and pride as an older brother stripped away, causing him to object to his sister's admiration of Priscilla. And then, at the most inopportune moment, Schult happened to pass by. Unable to take back his words, the situation had soon spiraled out of control.

“When you add it all up, the truth’s pretty obvious,” Al continued. “It’s no one’s fault, really. I’d just call it bad timing…or maybe just an unlucky star.”

“Hmm? Did you figure something out, Sir Al?” Schult asked as Al nodded to himself thoughtfully. Schult turned and looked up at him, tugging at the hem of his vest.

“You’re adorable, looking up at me like that,” Al commented.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Schult asked. “It’s unfair to keep secrets from me! I want to know too! And I also want to see your face, Sir Al!”

“You’re really hung up on that, huh? It ain’t that big a deal. You really…” Al intended to simplify the situation by describing it as a case of adolescent sibling rivalry. He didn’t want to further drag out the story and embarrass this boy who loved his sister so much.

People were slowly beginning to gather, drawn in by Priscilla’s extraordinary beauty and captivating presence. Many of them were younger onlookers who were originally there after being caught up in the energy of the sibling rivalry. Al figured the situation would get out of control as the commotion escalated and more people began to flock around them. If there’s any moment to wrap up this mess, it’s now, he thought.

Then, a sudden declaration came forth, seizing control of the entire conversation and dominating the scene:

“Very well. Then, this is war.”

The sudden declaration of war left everyone, except Priscilla who held the reins of power, in a state of shock. Of course, Al and Schult were no exception. However, for the siblings, unexpectedly thrust into opposing roles, the astonishment was perhaps even greater.

The older brother’s face grew pale as his eyes widened in disbelief. The younger sister was genuinely taken aback, unable to fully comprehend the situation. Their whispered utterances of confusion made them look exactly identical in their panic.

Unperturbed by their reactions, Priscilla unfurled her fan as she proceeded to command everything within earshot of her voice. Priscilla was an unquenchable flame, engulfing everything in her path and dying it all red. Al wondered if this was really the right crowd for Priscilla to display this side of herself to. However, he couldn't bring himself to interrupt her.

"We're going to war. Both sides should be well prepared." Her smile as she declared war was so magnificent, it silenced any objections.

4

"Just outta curiosity, why are you playing war?" Al asked, standing behind Priscilla.

"I am not playing. Do not selfishly dismiss it as a mere game based on your own perspective. When there is a clash of differing opinions and military power is involved, it can be considered war, no matter what," Priscilla said, dismissing Al's doubts. She peered down into the garden where the preparations for "war" were underway.

"Military power, huh?"

"Schult said that the brother made the first move," Priscilla explained.

The commotion, which began with a trivial sibling rivalry, had unexpectedly, and quite literally, made its way into Barielle Manor. The siblings at the center of the commotion, along with every other boy and girl they considered friends, had been assembled and brought to the mansion in a dragon carriage.

There, the children, mesmerized by the unfamiliar surroundings and atmosphere of their lord's mansion, were gradually being acquainted with the intricacies of war. Needless to say, this was not a war that would require actual swords or shields.

"Well, it's a big relief to see wooden swords and mud balls and such," Al admitted. "Knowing you, Princess, there was no guarantee the children wouldn't have been given actual swords."

"If you give them tools they cannot handle, they shall not be able to achieve their true potential," Priscilla explained, "Not only are they not warriors, they haven't even trained to be soldiers."

"If you'd suggested giving them weapons if they had even a little training, I'm afraid you'd have been roasted."

"Why would I suddenly go up in flames? Your words make no sense," Priscilla countered, raising a shapely eyebrow at Al's remark as she questioned the meaning of "roasted." Al shrugged off her question, redirecting his attention to the children diligently "preparing for war," as they had been instructed. It was war, after all, and so they had been divided into two distinct camps.

In essence, there was an Eastern Army and a Western Army, led by the older brother and the younger sister, respectively. Although there were exactly 15 members on each side, the older brother's side boasted a higher average age since they were predominantly his friends. The male-to-female ratio was also skewed in favor of his faction, which unofficially suggested their higher probability of victory.

Of course, that wasn't to say that there were no boys on the sister's side. However, with Schult as one of them, despite his fervent enthusiasm, victory would be a challenge. "Let's do our best and work together to prove how amazing Lady Priscilla is!" he exclaimed with unwavering confidence.

Schult had naturally developed more slowly in comparison to other children his age. In addition, due to Priscilla's deliberate attitude towards him, he struggled to maintain a serious demeanor. He was highly unqualified to act as an effective soldier. His gusto could be described both as amusing and painful to watch. However, on the other hand, it was hard to believe that Priscilla was oblivious to these circumstances.

"Why the long face?" Priscilla said, gently touching her own lips.

"You can't see through my helmet! How could you possibly know what I look like, Princess?" Al demanded to know.

"Well, perhaps if I had never laid eyes on your face before," she retorted, “but we both know that is not the case, do we not?”

“Tch,” Al clicked his tongue at her cutting remark, unable to find a suitable response as her gesture and cherry-red lips drew his gaze. The memory of that inevitable moment when she had glimpsed his true countenance came rushing back. However, Priscilla and Al played different roles. Despite their pretenses, neither could deny the fact that they had been caught in a moment of vulnerability.

“You questioned the purpose of this war,” Priscilla addressed the silent Al. She sat in her chair, propping herself on her cheekbone. Al closed one eye at her words, having assumed that this conversation was over. Priscilla looked at the children below, and continued, “When both parties possess unwavering convictions, times will arise in which they must cross swords, even amongst parents and siblings. Blood ties alone do not dictate where one’s resolve is tested.”

“I get that, but is it really necessary to ask them that question now?” Al inquired. “Regardless of the little sis’ excitement, the big bro probably didn’t expect it to become such a big deal.”

“As I have already informed you,” Priscilla reminded him, dismissing his opinion with the same logic as before, “it was the brother who displayed his military prowess first.”

Al scratched his head, unable to articulate his thoughts any further. He understood the cause of the siblings’ quarrel and the brother’s sense of obligation, but he couldn’t agree with the brother’s decision to use violence. So is this a form of punishment?

“But if big bro wins this ‘war’, won’t that defeat the whole purpose?” Al asked.

“Indeed, if the older brother triumphs, it would,” Priscilla acknowledged. “However, the morale favors the side of the sister. Plus…”

“Plus what?”

“The sister’s side has received a little strategic advice from my end.”

This new information caught Al off guard, shattering his pessimistic expectations.

To be honest, Al did not know if Priscilla was familiar with battle tactics. He could not know, yet he held lofty expectations for her, believing there was nothing she couldn't accomplish. After all, this fearless Scarlet Princess seemed to possess an uncanny knack for receiving favor in all events. Precisely for that reason…

"Everything in this world is made for my convenience," Priscilla declared. And indeed, it truly appeared as if the entire world was united in advocating for her philosophy.

With these winds seemingly blowing in Priscilla's favor, Al couldn't help but voice a question. "Princess, do you happen to have a brother?" The query slipped out before he could contain himself, and he immediately regretted the possibility of upsetting Priscilla with his words.

However, regardless of Al's inner turmoil, Priscilla narrowed her eyes. "And just what makes you think that all of a sudden?" she challenged.

"Ah, well honestly, it just kinda hit me," Al explained. "It's like you understood the reason for the siblings' fight from the get-go, and then, uh…"

"Do not stumble over your words there," she said curtly. "Are you simply seeking my attention?"

"Well, you were pretty hung up on the big bro's antics," he continued. Yet, as he was speaking from a mere idea, he struggled to verbalize it, even to himself. Yet the more he pondered it, the more it made sense.

Thinking back, he recalled the first time Priscilla said she was going to Krufuna. It was not a mere whim on her part, nor due to Schult's perceived shortcomings. Rather, the decision came after hearing the details of the siblings' quarrel. The more he thought about it, the clearer it became.

Upon hearing Al's guess, Priscilla became unusually silent, keeping her mouth shut. Surprised by her uncharacteristic composure in response to his accurate assumption, Al leaned forward and peered into her face. However, in an instant, the tip of her fan extended and pressed under his chin.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!" Al winced as Priscilla's scorching punishment seared through his curiosity. "Agh! Ow! W-Wait, Princess!"

"Do not gaze upon my face with impure thoughts," Priscilla warned. "It is natural for men to be captivated by my beauty, but those who desire more must be willing to pay the appropriate price."

"That's no reason to carbonize someone's vocal cords, damn!" Al grumbled in pain and frustration.

Having had his sense of superiority scorched by her scathing response, Al shrugged and withdrew, rubbing his throat in discomfort. Priscilla let out a small sigh as Al retreated, and replied, "I had numerous siblings. Older brothers, younger brothers, older sisters, younger sisters."

"Wow, I can't even imagine," Al commented, pondering Priscilla's family structure with a tilt of his head.

Priscilla responded to his reaction. "Hmm? What exactly is so difficult for you to grasp about it?"

"I know I asked if you had siblings. But seriously, Princess, you don't strike me as the kind of person who fits into the typical family portrait," Al confessed. "You don't really give off that big or little sis vibe, y'know? It's like my brain gets all buggy and glitchy when you tell me you fit in both categories."

"What was that, a 'bargain' on words from beyond the Great Waterfall?" Priscilla asked, a slight chuckle escaping her lips as she attempted to wield her recently acquired vocabulary. However, Al wasn't oblivious to the subtle undercurrent of nostalgia in her words.

Nostalgia, yes, nostalgia. I'm honestly surprised to know that even the Princess gets nostalgic about things. Not to mention hearing how many brothers and sisters she got. Or how she spoke of them in past tense…

“Lady Priscilla! Everything is ready to go!” Schult’s voice rang out from the garden below as Al and Priscilla’s conversation came to a close. Looking around, the scene revealed the children adorned in their valiant “war” attire deployed on either side of the garden, each exuding a fierce determination to prove their prowess.

It was evident that both the younger sister’s camp, already brimming with high morale, and the older brother’s camp, initially hesitant to engage in battle, now displayed a remarkable level of ambition.

“Things are gonna get messy,” Al commented with an unexpected touch of excitement. Priscilla rose from her chair in response.

“That is precisely why it was well worth the effort,” Priscilla proclaimed. Her profile as she spoke, and the fleeting emotion that passed through her eyes, captured Al’s attention. But before he could decipher its meaning, Priscilla thrusted her fan forward and continued, “Both sides must exert their utmost effort. For those who cannot abandon their wills, the only path to prove themselves is through victory. So, let the battle commence.”

“I am off!” called Schult.

The shrill cries of the children filled the air, echoing in response to the commanding voice of the Scarlet Princess. The “war” had begun within the grounds of Barielle Manor, with the brother and sister locked into fierce battle. Watching this scene unfold, a realization dawned upon Al regarding his earlier concern.

What he detected in Priscilla’s profile was the subtle flicker of anticipation. There was an expectation in her eyes, a glimmer of hope that she might witness what she desired.

5

“So what the hell was all that commotion about earlier?” the man grumbled, tilting his head as he stroked his stubble-streaked chin, his face flushed with booze.

He was a towering man with blazing red hair, sporting a shirt without any armor over his moderately fit physique. It gave him a distinct appearance different from his usual worn-out demeanor. However, it was questionable whether that was the impression he wanted to give.

That evening, on the balcony of Barielle Manor, Al found himself in a rather uninspiring encounter with a man, rather than in the presence of Priscilla or Schult. It wasn't that they had prearranged this meeting. They just happened to be in the same place at the same time, quietly spending the evening. Neither of them sought to seek out or avoid the other's company. Sometimes, a man simply needed a moment such as this on an empty balcony to reflect on things.

"Well, it's a complicated thing for dudes our age, y'know?" Al began to explain.

"What?" asked the man. Al shook his head and answered the man's frowning gaze with a gentle shake of his head.

"What I mean is, men are always going through puberty, y'know?" Problems keep piling up as we get older, but deep down, it's the same basic stuff. In the end, we're still asking ourselves, 'Who am I?' It's like we're stuck in this eternal adolescence.

"Well, whatever," the man grumbled. "And you still haven't answered my question, have you?"

"Oh, Princess's whim?" Al asked. "I'm still trying to figure that out myself, bro. It's a mystery to me."

"You're awfully laid-back for a supposed knight of the Sun Princess, huh," the man scoffed.

"Give me a break, bro. I've told you before, I'm not a knight," Al said dismissively. The man stayed silent.

Al detested being referred to as a knight, even in jest. He harbored a deep prejudice against those in the knight profession, considering them little more than chumps. And it wasn't only Al who held such resentment. Neither he nor Priscilla intended to glamorize their relationship with each other. Besides, this guy must also hate any topic involving knights and whatnot. After all…

"You're the father of the Knight Among Knights, Reinhard van Astrea," Al pointed out.

"Tch," the middle-aged Heinkel Astrea clicked his tongue in disgust at the reminder. His frown, unkempt stubble, and simple attire were far from impressive, but upon closer inspection, one could see that he indeed shared similar features to the renowned Sword Saint, with his well-defined face and blazing red hair.

This was only natural, given the fact that they were father and son by blood. Of course, there was no question that their relationship was certainly a complicated one. Otherwise, he would not have been able to serve a master from a different camp than his own son.

Heinkel, still silent, took a swig directly from the bottle in his hand. He was now a member of the Priscilla Camp, joining the ranks alongside those contesting for the royal selection. Nevertheless, Al had no idea what role he played. That was up to Priscilla. It was hard to fathom that his involvement held no significance.

"That ain't really how I measure things, nor how I think," Al concluded.

"But if you keep on like that, you're gonna cause people trouble," Heinkel remarked. "If Lady Priscilla is dead serious about the throne, she can't afford to become some queen that nobody understands."

"Not my concern, bro," Al said, leaning against the balcony railing. He gently patted the area where Priscilla, fresh in his memory, had been leaning, and spoke with determination. "For Princess, I'll do whatever it takes to make her win."

Upon hearing Al's reassurance, Heinkel glanced at him briefly, and sneered, "Well, isn't that something. I thought you didn't give a damn about the royal selection's outcome."

"Oh, come on, don't go exaggerating," Al said. "I think about it every day."

"Right, let me rephrase that. I just assumed you didn't give a damn about sticking your nose into the royal selection process. Lady Priscilla's perfectly capable of handling everything on her own, right?"

"Oh," Al let out a voice expressing his amazement.

He was a bit taken aback by Heinkel's astute observation. Not because he said something unexpected, but because it revealed Heinkel's keen eye for what was happening around him. Nah, considering how Priscilla managed to see through my helmet twice today, perhaps I'm just not as hard-to-read as I thought.

"No. The reason I wear this helmet is because I already know that, isn't it?" Al wore his helmet with a sense of detachment, yet his overwhelming emotions remained palpable. Perhaps he should have become an actor instead of an outcast.

"Oh dear, you're refusing to answer this too," Heinkel remarked. "You're quite the secretive one, aren't you?"

"That's never been a secret," Al replied. "I mean, I hide my face. Ain't that normally the first thing you see? Well, you won't find anything interesting in my secrets. If anything…"

"If anything?"

"I think you and I are pretty much alike," Al shared, drawing from the bits of information he had heard about Heinkel's complex circumstances.

Between his legendary father, known as the Sword Demon, and his son, the Sword Saint, who was hailed as the greatest swordsman of all time, Heinkel was of a quiet generation, caught in the middle. A pathetic man afflicted by his melancholy and his position. A man deserving of intense sympathy. For Al painfully understood the fear of being overshadowed by one's own illustrious bloodline.

"You don't know a damn thing about me," Heinkel spat bitterly, wrinkling his nose.

"I knew you would say that, though!" Al chuckled wryly. It seemed that Heinkel neither desired nor cared to be understood. Al leaned his back against the railing, gazing up at the moon in the night sky.

"As far as I can tell, today's 'war' was just Princess's way of assessing things," Al said thoughtfully.

"War?"

"Let's just call it boisterous merrymaking," Al explained. "You got two people with their own stubborn opinions, rallying their buddies, breaking up into teams, then using all their might to prove their point. Ain't that just what war is, bro?"

"Sounds like bullshit to me," Heinkel scoffed. The use of obscene language was a telltale sign of him becoming drunk. The more drunk he became, the further removed from dignity and sincerity he grew.

Al observed this shift from the sidelines with amusement. Al didn't drink, so he was unable to personally gauge the effects of alcohol. But the unappealing spectacle of an intoxicated stranger was enough to reinforce his aversion to it. In any case, Al's examination of Priscilla's awareness and intentions regarding the "war" served as a means of both affirming and analyzing her intentions.

"Princess had something she wanted to see, y'know? And she used that sibling showdown to figure it out," Al commented.

"What the hell did she wanna see?"

"Unfortunately, she didn't exactly spill the beans to me, so I can't really say. My guess could be way off, y'know."

"You're useless," Heinkel grumbled. "Might as well ask her to chop off your other arm."

"Damn, you're so vulgar when you're drunk!" Al complained. "Someone with both arms intact might not get it, but this arm means a hell of a lot more to me than it would to y'all that still got both!"

It was a dispute that could have easily escalated to an all-out fight, yet Heinkel showed no remorse or apology. Not because he viewed others as unimportant, though. On the contrary, it was because he had little regard for his own self, which seemed to justify his reckless demeanor. In fact, Heinkel would gladly accept a duel that came about as a consequence of his outspokenness. However…

"I'm telling you, bro, once anyone finds out you're the father of the Sword Saint, they'll back off real quick," Al said.

"Tch." Heinkel averted his gaze and clicked his tongue in annoyance once more. No matter what they talked about that quiet evening on the balcony, they always seemed to circle back to the same question: Who am I? It was a question that nobody could escape.

A gruff, liquor-infused voice brought Al back down to earth as he gazed blankly at the night sky, contemplating the constellations above for which each of them were named. "So, you said she wanted to see something," Heinkel grumbled, his sky-blue eyes somewhat vacant as he gazed into his half-full bottle of liquor.

"Yeah," Al acknowledged.

"You also got something you want to see, Sir Al?" Heinkel asked.

"I'm surprised you're interested in me, bro. Thought you only cared about your own family." As soon as Al said this, Heinkel scowled and clicked his tongue once more, hurling his bottle of booze at Al.

Al ducked with a "Whoops" to avoid the spinning bottle as it sailed over the railing and into the garden, smacking the ground with a resounding crack. Heinkel turned away without sparing a glance, as if trying to distance himself from Al, who had clearly struck a nerve.

"Yes, I do," Al called out abruptly after Heinkel, walking away from the balcony. Heinkel paused for a moment, listening to Al's words without bothering to turn back. Al cracked a slight smile at his apparent curiosity, but had nothing more to add.

“I do have something I want to see,” Al continued. “Princess in the bath!”

“Tch!” Another click of the tongue was the only way Heinkel could possibly respond to Al’s mischievous joke.

“Well if that ain’t the loudest tongue click I’ve ever heard in my life!”

6

“I am so happy that the siblings made up!” Schult beamed. His reaction was one of pure joy and innocence, with no uncertainty whatsoever. Priscilla closed one eye and drew her fan from the open bosom of her nightgown.

“Oh, so you think so too, Schult?” Priscilla asked.

“Yes, I do! I knew you could do it, my lady! I am so proud of you!”

With the tip of the fan, Priscilla gently lifted Schult’s chin and turned his head to the side, causing the boy to make a quizzical face. She could clearly see the reddish tint lingering on his right cheek. It was a visible remnant of today’s “war”, and what one might call a badge of honor.

“To me, considering a battle wound as a badge of honor is a reflection of one’s own shortcomings,” Priscilla remarked.

“Lady Priscilla?” Schult questioned.

“Does your cheek hurt?”

Tightly clenching his small fists, Schult demonstrated his unwavering determination. “It tingles a bit, but I’m fine! It was all part of our winning strategy!”

In addition to the redness of his cheeks, Schult bore scars all over his body from the war. He had scraped knees from falls, a bruised back from being hit, and possibly many other marks of battle. In moments of injury, pain often follows, and one may even shed tears. Indeed, Schult had shed a tear or two. However…

“This whole thing started because of me. Do you despise me?” Priscilla asked.

“Me? Hate you? Lady Priscilla? That’s impossible!” Schult exclaimed in disbelief.

“…”

“I was so happy to fight for you, my lady!” Schult’s gaze shifted downwards as he marveled at his own modest display of bravery. “I would have been more scared than hurt if I just cowered in fear…”

His introspective posture, although typical of him, was at the same time as painful as the scars on his body. This mental anguish, however, was not particularly unique to Schult. It was a sort of “fever” that could afflict anyone, regardless of who they were.

“…”

After the tumultuous events of the day, Priscilla had finished her hot bath and lay on her bed. Schult, having changed into his own nightgown, nestled beside her—a customary routine that had become an endearing ritual. This small, adorable boy had become an indispensable cuddle pillow for Priscilla. However, Schult himself yearned for a more significant role than that of a mere cuddle pillow. A fact that Priscilla astutely recognized, as evidenced by the day’s war.

The quarrel between the siblings, which Priscilla called a war, unfolded just as Priscilla had predicted. The younger sister’s camp, guided by her counsel, emerged victorious. And Schult had played a significant role in securing their triumph. He was one of the first ones to fall, in a rather spectacular fashion, and left the other side bewildered.

“I thought my hard work would pay off, but I was wrong…” Schult said with a hint of disappointment. “Enemies appeared left and right. They were all over me… They were destroying me."

The title of the vanguard may have held a certain allure, but in Schult's case, the first sacrifice may have been more fitting. As the morale of the younger sister's camp dwindled, that of the older brother's only grew in strength and momentum. The sister's camp was driven back by the advancing forces of the brother's. However…

"Well, he is a big brother, after all," Schult said with a smile, acknowledging the reason for the brother's defeat. Despite countless setbacks endured by the sister's camp, once they finally reached their opponent's leader, the brother hesitated to let his sister down in the face of victory. It was at that moment that Priscilla's wiles came into effect, bringing the war to an end.

"The condition for victory is the downfall of the other team's general," Priscilla had explained. "Which means, if the opponent's leader falls, even if you are the last man standing, if you manage to take down the other side's leader, the victory is yours. Whether you win will be determined by the very last moment."

In this respect, the sister heeded Priscilla's words and displayed great courage. Priscilla's advice was simple yet effective: "Your brother will hesitate to kill you in the very end. That is precisely when you should strike." And indeed, true to Priscilla's prediction, that is exactly how the conflict was resolved.

"In the end, it was amazing that the brother defended his sister from his teammates, even after she stabbed him," Schult marveled. "That is why, as you said, Lady Priscilla, they were able to make up!"

However, the final outcome was not as heartwarming as the innocence Schult portrayed. The sister's strategic move managed to topple her brother and his followers, who had been on the brink of victory. Naturally, they refused to accept defeat, instead directing their anger at the sister. Yet, it was the brother himself who bravely shielded her from their wrath head-on.

Originally, this situation came about due to the deep bond between the siblings. The brother could not bear to see his sister vilified, and the sister, amidst accusations and fear, reaffirmed her love and respect for her protective older brother. And thus, that was the conclusion they reached.

"…"

Pricilla maintained her silence. Despite witnessing the outcome, and the resolution unfolding somewhat as she had envisioned, an unsettling darkness lingered in her heart. In Priscilla's mind, there were two potential outcomes: whether her advice would have proved effective or not.

Her intuition was right on the mark. The sister successfully stabbed her hesitant brother, thus claiming victory. However, this was not a triumph, but a certainty. It was proof of the elder brother's undeniable love for his sister. It was a war, albeit a false one. The death of the men may have been staged, and the wounds received may have been superficial, but nonetheless, it was still a war.

If she so desired, Priscilla possessed the power to incite and manipulate countless individuals to engage in real warfare, where real lives were at stake, just as she did today. She could sway naive, ignorant individuals like Schult, who mustered strength through blind faith. Priscilla was fully aware that she held that power, responsibility, position, and beauty. And the outcome of today's events only reinforced that. Why then won't the dark cloud in me dissipate?

"I knew I was not mistaken," Schult said as he sat beside Priscilla, lost in thought. The tone of his voice had suddenly dropped.

"Hmm?" Priscilla turned her attention to Schult. It was an unusual reaction for a normally cheerful boy.

Schult rubbed his cheeks with both hands. "Lady Priscilla, you looked kind of lonely," he mumbled with a hint of concern, dropping his gaze.

"Lonely? Me?" Priscilla asked with surprise.

"That is how it looked to me," Schult continued. "I thought you seemed a little lonely when you were watching that brother and sister…"

Could it be this child blames himself for not being able to mediate the siblings' quarrel? Does he blame himself for my own upset? If so, he couldn't be further off the mark. More so…

"Ha—" She gently put a hand over her mouth, but nevertheless, a breath escaped her, unexpectedly bubbling up from within.

"L-Lady Priscilla?" Schult stammered, taken aback.

It was a laugh that Priscilla had not intended, and one that Schult had unwittingly evoked. It was Schult's achievement that unveiled the true nature of the dark cloud lingering in Priscilla's heart.

"How dare you suggest that I, Priscilla, could be lonely? Oh, how dare you?"

"Wh-Wh-Wha—? I-I was wrong, wasn't I? I knew it…"

"No. I commend you, even though your choice of words may have been incorrect," Priscilla praised her young servant, suppressing his agitation. She placed her fan on the flustered boy's forehead with a smile.

Schult looked shocked at her statement, then patted his chest as if relieved. Foolish, ignorant, and thus innocent, Schult's crimson eyes may have caught a glimpse deep into the heart of the Scarlet Princess, continuing to burn with an intense, fervent heat.

"Schult, you must not divulge your observations about my emotions to anyone," Priscilla cautioned.

"About Your Ladyship appearing lonely?"

"I shall not admit to feeling lonely," she replied defiantly, "however, I do wish to avoid any misunderstandings. I order you to keep your mouth shut, my loyal servant with your radiantly burning eyes."

Schult’s red eyes twinkled, and he paused for a moment before nodding his head. “Yes, I understand,” he replied. Hearing his response, Priscilla placed her hands on her ample bosom, feeling the dark cloud gradually dissipate. How humiliating yet intriguing it is that this boy, Schult, was both correct and incorrect in his observations.

The siblings’ war, driven by their love for one another, had ended precisely as Priscilla had foreseen. However, on the other hand, it was still not quite what she had hoped for. If one cannot conclude definitively that the thoughts, feelings, and love between siblings loses its radiance in the face of various factors, and their warmth and glimmer eventually gets overshadowed, then…

“Was it me who was lacking? Or was it you, Brother?” Priscilla murmured, gently poking the cheek of the sleeping child in her arms on her bed. She directed her question to a fragment of cloud that had dissipated within her heart. Naturally, there was no response. The opportunity to ask had long since slipped away. However, she held on to the feeling that an answer to her nagging doubts would come to light in the near future.

It would have been sufficient if I could simply forget about it and keep myself distant. However, if such a premonition were to resurface from the searing heat within my heart, the answer would undoubtedly find its way to me. Because after all…

“Everything in this world is made for my convenience.”

END

Volume 30

Chapters 55-59B

Chapter 55:
The Cacophony of the Demon City

1

—At the heart of the Demon City of Chaosflame, the Crimson Lapis Castle collapsed, shadows overflowing.

That was the true nature of the thunderous roar that rocked the city, and the nightmarish spectacle witnessed through the eyes of those present.

Blending within a single stone of crimson lapis, red and blue colors danced. And the gorgeous Castle, fashioned from stacking these precious stones of whimsical beauty, crumbled as easily as a castle made of sand.

To those who knew the Demon City and to the residents of the Demon City, it was a shock, equivalent to that of the heavens falling.

What should not have come to pass had indeed happened, to the point of blurring the line between dream and reality—and this was no exception for those less familiar with the Demon City.

???: "…"

The tremors also spread to a room in a traveling inn that was prepared for outside visitors to the Demon City.

Some stared bug-eyed, glaciated in place; some stiffened their whole body in utmost alertness; some shrieked, having fallen on their rear; some drew nearer to each other, as to protect themselves from the quaking.

However, despite the differing reactions, the identity of what befell them was the same "threat".

While held captive by it, seized by instinctive fear for a moment, the irreparable situation was—

??? & ???: "—Everyone, quiet down!"

That moment, a sharp, resonant, "overlapping" voice cut through the interval of time marked by rigidity caused by the threat.

The two voices which resonated within the room—homogeneous ones at that, struck their eardrums, rousing even those minds that had fallen into ceased thought.

The pair to emit a sharp voice were the black-haired figures, the ones before them raising their heads in a snap.

The two men, one with a bare face and the other with his behind an oni mask, each reached out their arm towards the overwhelming scene of collapse that could be seen outside the window.

Abel: "Do not stop! If we delay in dealing with that thing, we shall all lose our lives."

Vincent: "That which has swallowed the castle and is still devouring the sky altogether is a great glutton. If we do not do something here, the number of victims shall multiply in the blink of an eye!"

Everyone: "…"

Abel & Vincent: "—Kafma Irulux!"

As if their thoughts were the same, the two men's gazes converged on one person.

The brown-skinned man to whom those steady stares were directed—Kafma Irulux, was thrust into the midst of confusion, unknowing of which way to turn his gaze of bewilderment.

But the confusion would not prolong for long. Because—

Abel & Vincent: "Stop that shadow! Know that the price for your procrastination is the lives of the people of the Empire!"

Kafma: “—Yes!”

The moment he was presented with the action needed to be taken and the clear purpose of what needed to be done, the hesitation in Kafma’s eyes vanished.

Kafma placed his fist on his chest, bowed, and spoke,

Kafma: “I shall leave your side. May the Divine Protection of the Yang Sword be with you!”

Vincent: “Your work shall be my Divine Protection. Exert yourself to the very last.”

Kafma: “To the utmost—!”

Giving a powerful reply, Kafma headed straight toward the window.

Using that vigor for a leap, Kafma sliced through the window with his outstretched arm and rushed out, scattering shards of glass. Immediately after, Kafma’s back bulged out, and six transparent wings spread out from behind his cloak, which he had cast off.

Fluttering wings that gave the impression of being those of a winged insect’s, Kafma’s figure flew through the sky of the Demon City as if cleaving the sky itself.

The course was straight for Crimson Lapis Castle, which was set to be destroyed by the overflowing shadows.

Abel: “How many people did you bring?”

Giving a backwards glance at Kafma’s flight, the man in the oni mask—Abel, asked a pointed question. The question was directed at Vincent, a black-haired handsome man, who had received a bow from Kafma.

The man now occupying the throne of the Vollachian Empire narrowed his eyes slightly at Abel’s question.

Vincent: “My retinue is as you can see, Kafma Irulux and the absent Olbart Dunkelkenn. The other one would not be of much help.”

Abel: “No pawns to lay down. Perhaps travelling light has backfired.”

Vincent: “The responsibility you are accounting me for is exceeding absurdity.”

Once Vincent revealed his cards without hesitation, Abel uttered an inconsiderate comment. Vincent responded with a complaint, to which Abel did not take kindly.

Abel, his hand on his chin and his fingers tracing the bottom of the oni mask, pondered for a few seconds, then glanced at the others in the room—the ones who were unable to hide their unease at the threat.

The two girls, both young in appearance, were able to react to that gaze, even though they did not speak.

One of them was Medium O’Connell with blonde hair and blue eyes; and the other was Tanza, a deerperson in a kimono with round, quivering eyes. Neither of them would be the deciding factor in this situation.

The only one who could potentially be some sort of key actor would be—

???: “Ah, ahhh… Why, why, why, at a time like this…”

Medium: “Al-chin…”

The frightened voice gave no heed whatsoever to the quiet Abel’s stare.

Holding his head with his right hand, terrified of the scene outside the window but tormented by the dilemma of being unable to take his eyes off it, was a dark-haired boy, his face concealed by a ragged piece of cloth that had been messily rolled-up.

Of all the people Abel had with him, this boy was, in a sense, the one who had not shown his true depths, but given this terrified look of his, which did not appear to be an act, Abel was hesitant to include him in the plan.

It was not out of consideration for the feelings of the person. —It was purely an appraisal of uselessness.

Vincent: “If so, not many measures can be taken.”

The profile of Abel in careful deliberation was struck by Vincent’s words, the latter standing next to him.

Standing side-by-side, the two men looked out the window—or perhaps, they ought to be called two Emperors.

Abel exhaled, dismissing the sentiment that momentarily surfaced as trivial.

Vincent was right; not many possible measures could be taken.

And in response to Vincent, who would have reached the same conclusion, he voiced scant words—

Abel: “—Link up with Yorna Mishigure. We require her strength.”

2

Taritta, smelling a change in the situation, moistened her parched lips with her tongue.

The change in the air, the scent of the pursuers, the feeling on her skin of bloodlust and hostility directed at her; all of those of which appealed to her differently than they had just before, making her pause for a moment to make a decision considering these sensations.

She impetuously wondered whether they really were a good thing or a bad thing.

However—

Taritta: “—Neither of those matter.”

If her conclusion were the same, Taritta would not be deeply concerned.

She was aware that she was not very bright to begin with. If this were Mizelda, her older sister, she would probably be able to deduce the correct answer based on her instinctive intuition, even if their minds were not so different.

But Taritta did not possess the same sense of smell as her sister. Probably, she also lacked the quick wit. She had absolutely nothing.

Spending vast quantities of time worrying about it would eventually lead to endless hesitation about which answer was the correct one.

Therefore, she decided to just, not waver. Once the outcome was clear, she could agonize endlessly about the pros and cons of it.

Therefore, Taritta did not change her approach, regardless of the change in the atmosphere of her pursuers.

???: “Gah, guh…”

Taritta: “You can’t break free. No matter how strong you are.”

Tightened around the struggling man with bloodshot eyes, Taritta’s jacket blocked his respiratory tract.

The sheepman with his right eye ablaze attempted to escape his restraints desperately, but Taritta, having taken off her jacket to use its sleeve to constrict his neck, cut a tendon in her opponent’s arm, preventing him from acting.

Frankly speaking, she was greatly tormented by the robustness of her pursuers, who kept getting back up even after she had gouged out their vital areas.

Taritta: “Even if I don’t know how to deal with it, even I managed it one way or the other.”

???: “…”

Eventually, the man’s panting voice became inaudible, and his body, losing its strength, went limp. Choosing that moment, Taritta removed the jacket from around the man's neck and pulled his collapsed body to the side of the road.

Taritta sighed as she exhaled, and behind her, the bodies of her pursuers, having been strangled by her, were lying in a row along the walls of the street.

After realizing that strikes and knife attacks were ineffective and that strangulation techniques were effective, she ended up fighting them off with that single technique.

Although the pursuers had been blessed with unusual strength and stamina, they seemed to be novices in the art of efficiently applying such power.

Thanks to this, Taritta's skills pulled through and she was able to continue to properly neutralize her pursuers.

—If she could have just let him die, this affair would have been done and over with much faster.

???: "—Do not kill anyone."

With that phrase flashing across her head, Taritta was forced into quite the struggle.

Abel had given her those words of instruction just before she parted to serve as a decoy, to allow everyone to get away from the inn.

Considering the circumstances into which she was put, perhaps she should have objected by calling them reckless words at the time. But would someone with eyes as discerning as Abel's give instructions that could not be carried out?

Or perhaps he had given that instruction with the belief that Taritta was capable of following it?

If so, it would mean that Abel had perceived Taritta's ability.

Taritta: "…"

Just to what extent was Abel capable of seeing things?

Of course, one only had to look at the mysterious techniques that had struck Subaru, Medium, and Al to see that Abel was not a person able to anticipate every eventuality and move with perfect foresight.

If such a thing were possible, it would no longer be the work of a human being, but the work of an extraordinary being.

It was a realm of reasoning that should not be ventured into, something that could not be considered possible of being violated by a human being.

One could not help but think if a human being able to reach what was just beyond their reach existed, that too was a deliberation.

As one of the Shudraq, Taritta possessed the skill to take down any prey.

Abel would have known that Taritta had mastered the art of strangulation, which was not supposed to work on beasts, and the reason for this—

???: "—Well well, thiiis~ is quite the spectacle."

Taritta: "—Hk."

While ruminating over that, a voice slipped into a gap in Taritta's consciousness, stopping her in her tracks.

Abruptly jolted back to reality by this, Taritta turned around with a dagger in her hand. Then, hoping to drive a blow to the assassin who had closed in behind her without any cue—

???: "Wahwahwah, waitwait! Wait, will you! That's a taaad~ premature."

Taritta: "—You?"

???: "—Oh, are you alright? Have you calmed down? Is it okay if I put my arms down?"

Just as she was about to disable her opponent's limbs, Taritta stopped wielding her knife in an instant.

In front of her, holding his head and awkwardly attempting to defend himself, was an ashen-haired, effeminate man in a hooded blue robe.

He was a man with a handsome face however; the flame common to her pursuers was not burning in his eyes, and above all, the amateurishness of his demeanor made him seem harmless.

However, the fact remained that he had evaded Taritta's vigilance and stood behind her.

Taritta: "…"

Delicate Man: "Myyy~ oh my, guess I'm distrusted a whole lot. I happen to be just a regular guy passing by this place…"

Taritta: "…I don't think an ordinary person would be able to look at this and remain calm."

The self-proclaimed "harmless" delicate man, gave one more reason as to why it was impossible for her to let down her guard towards him.

Regarding the bodies of her pursuers lined up on the wall—unless he approached them and checked whether they were alive or dead, it would not be surprising if he believed them dead; yet he remained unfazed.

Unless his heart had gone cold, she could not come up with an answer aside from him being accustomed to them.

At Taritta's wary look, the delicate man smiled bashfully.

For a moment, she was almost distracted by the smile of the finely-featured man, but her wariness of danger won out over her reaction to his beautiful looks. When it came to handsome men with delicate faces, Flop was plenty enough.

—Right now isn't the time to be thinking about him.

Delicate Man: “Ohhh~ no, I’ve been seen through. I certainly wouldn’t say it’s a familiar sight back home. I told you it was quite the spectacle. —Well, Taritta-san.”

Taritta: “—Hk.”

Delicate Man: “Oh, don’t gut me, don’t gut me! I’m not the enemy, even if I seem suspicious!”

Her caution, that had begun to slacken for a moment until just before that, was instantly reinforced

The man of delicate features in front of her called out Taritta’s name with a cool demeanor, as if she were something like an old acquaintance of his. Of course, the man before Taritta’s eyes was no sort of acquaintance.

There should be no one Taritta was familiar with and would call her by name here; that information should not have been acquired by him.

The only ones that could have possibly given him that information were Abel and the others, who had separated from her, but—

Taritta: “You, have you met my family?”

Delicate Man: “—? You’ve come with your family? Hmmm~, I’ve heard the People of Shudraq don’t come out of the forest often, was there a change in the Chieftain’s policy?”

Taritta: “How do you know that I’m…!”

Delicate Man: “Whaaat’s~ that, feels like it the more you speak. That’s all.”

With a wry smile, the attitude of the delicate man towards Taritta seemed to have deepened in familiarity, but in contrast, Taritta grew more cautious of him, her feelings of displeasure intensifying by his eeriness.

There was nothing like a sign of hostility, or anything of the sort.

However, the intensifying eeriness, little-by-little, instilled in Taritta the dangerous impression that she should, at this juncture, eliminate him.

And Taritta had an inkling of how the planted seedlings of suspicion would sprout, what buds they would develop, and what flowers they would bloom.

The reason was—

Delicate Man: "—Disgrace of the Shudraq."

Taritta: "—Ah."

Suddenly, Taritta's consciousness went blank as she heard the words woven by the delicate man's lips.

Taritta: "…"

Why did this man say those words? —No, why does he know?

Because the man who had spoken those words to Taritta before had already—

Delicate Man: "It's a commandment, isn't it? For you, who became the Disgrace of the Shudraq, Taritta-san."

Taritta: "A, commandment…?"

Delicate Man: "It's about something which can be described as the alignment of the stars, or their guidance. It's like, about people having their own destiniiies~? I'm in the business of gazing at them."

Taritta was left dumbfounded, and the delicate man shook his head saying, "Ohhh~".

Then he put his hand on his own chest, and, with his two eyes, shot straight through Taritta,

Delicate Man: "I guess you could call it a commandment for us."

Taritta: “…”

Taritta swallowed a breath, her throat making a noise, at that pronoun being spoken in the plural.

The loudness of that noise was accompanied by the illusion that the whole world was quaking. —No, Taritta’s gulp did not make the world quake.

However, as a matter-of-fact, the world was quaking.

That was—

Delicate Man: “Hoooly~ crap.”

The delicate man let out a carefree sigh which conferred on him the impression of a happy-go-lucky person.

However, what happened was an event so extreme that his attitude could not express it completely.

—In the distance, the beautiful Crimson Lapis Castle, which stood at the heart of the Demon City, far away from Taritta and the delicate man, crumbled with terrific force, its red and blue light being covered by black darkness.

It was no figurative expression, for a truly black darkness covered the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Something beautiful, something radiant, was being painted over by something foul, something accursed.

Delicate Man: “Myyy~ oh my, how should I put it… This might be, a small bit I didn’t gaze.”

Taritta: “You—”

The delicate man gazed at the collapsing castle and the flood of darkness, using his hands as a visor.

She suspected that this man, who seemed so unconcerned, could possibly be the cause of that abnormal event. But as if sensing

Taritta's doubt, he shrugged his shoulders and said,

Delicate Man: "Feels awkward to mention this immediately after I talked about a commandment, but that and I got nothing to do with each other. In the first place, that's the Kingdom of Lugunica's problem, isn't it? That's outside my responsibility."

Taritta: "Outside your responsibility, the Kingdom of Lugunica…?"

Delicate Man: "Maybe that child isn't aware that they're a Stargazer? If that's the case, His Excellency's made quite the daring gamble… Maybe he had no choice in the hand he was dealt?"

Taritta: "I don't understand…! If you know something!"

Intending to intimidate him into answering, Taritta stepped in and grabbed the delicate man by the neck. She pressed the man's slender frame against the wall, and placed the blade in her hand against his white neck.

If Taritta were to flick her wrist, a great deal of blood would gush immediately from the man's neck.

The feel of the cold blade should have given the delicate man a sufficient foresight of his future.

Delicate Man: "Mayhaps my life or death's got little to do with what's going on…"

Taritta: "—Hk."

Delicate Man: "I don't think your side should be spending a lotta time here. I'm not gaziiing~ the stars, so it's just a hunch on my part."

And yet, the delicate man nonchalantly continued to stare into Taritta's eyes, ignoring the feel of the blade.

The most discomfort she had ever felt towards this man was felt at this moment. Without any clear rationale that could be put into words, the urge to just cut off the man's head flashed through her.

However, just before she surrendered herself to that violent impulse—

Delicate Man: "—Killing me won't make things better. It was the same last time around, no?"

—Those few words were enough to stop Taritta from actually ending it all with the knife she held in her hand.

Delicate Man: "Whoopsie!"

Taritta: "Please, get out of my sight! Right now…!"

Gritting her teeth, Taritta, still grabbing the delicate man by his nape, threw him onto the street.

The man managed to somehow roll using his long legs and break the fall, stroking his roughly handled neck with his hand, looking at Taritta's face with a "You sure it's fine?".

Delicate Man: "You may be slitting your own throat here, literally… You may never have the opportunity to run into me like this again."

Taritta: "Then, that's the best. Looking at your face, it's like…"

Delicate Man: "…"

Taritta: "It's like, are you in the mood to make me face a nightmare I've had many times…!"

With a feeling like that of a curse, Taritta gave a swing of her hand as if to dismiss the delicate man.

The gesture caused the man to sigh, looking toward the collapsing castle in the distance,

Delicate Man: "Apparently, unlike me, you've got a task to do. Thaaat~ may be the trump card to suppress that shadow."

Taritta: "Me…? I have such power…"

Delicate Man: "—A commandment's already been handed down.

You know that, right, Disgrace of the Shudraq."

Taritta: "…"

Delicate Man: "You're free to fulfill it or not. As someone who hasn't received one, I don't envy you for being able to follow the path, though."

After saying so, the delicate man pulled the hood over his head and turned his back to Taritta, and started running.

Fast, but not fast enough. Although she could catch up with him if she wanted to, Taritta had no desire to chase him.

The fact that, deep down inside, she did not want to be involved with him anymore was true as well.

But the biggest reason of all were the words he had left behind at the end—

Taritta: "—A commandment, has been handed down."

She wished she had no idea of what he was talking about. But she did have an idea.

And that idea had been endlessly, endlessly plaguing Taritta over the past few days.

She did not want to worry before taking action.

She did not want to dwell on unfruitful anguish.

???: "Taritta-chan!"

Taritta: "—Hk, Medium?"

As Taritta was holding her shoulders tightly, casting her eyes downwards, a familiar voice called out to her.

Turning around in a jiffy, Taritta saw a little girl running toward her, waving her hand in her direction—Medium, who had shrunk in stature, was coming toward her.

Medium: “I’m so glaaad~! We found Taritta-san safe and sound right away!”

Taritta: “Glad you’re safe and sound as well… are Abel and Subaru and the others safe? Moreover, what in the world…”

With Medium rushing toward her, Taritta cast a flurry of questions at her.

She had not expected her to be alone and looking for Taritta. Of course, it would be odd if she and Olbart were still playing hide-and-seek during the collapse of the Crimson Lapis Castle, but it was not as if they had a break to discuss that.

At Taritta’s question, Medium gasped slightly,

Medium: “Abel-chin and Al-chin are safe! Subaru-chin and Louis-chan are missing! Also, we need to do something about the shadow that came out of that castle, so Taritta-chan, come as well!”

Taritta: “Subaru and Louis? And where do I…”

Medium: “From this moment on, we’re gonna stop that shadow with Yorna-chan! Taritta-chan’s power is also needed, that’s what Abel-chin said!”

Taritta: “…”

Wide-eyed, Taritta could not help, but be amazed at what she was told.

At the edge of her field of vision, she saw a black shadow about to cause such an insane amount of damage that even Taritta, shaken by her interaction with the delicate man, was forced to recognize the reality of the situation.

Neither stopping that thing nor challenging it were conceivable in Taritta’s mind.

And on top of that, she had been told that Abel was calling for her now—

Medium: “Taritta-chan, you’re not injured, right?! Can you still come? I’ll do my best, so can you do your best with me?!”

Taritta’s confusion was quickly dispelled by Medium’s unhesitating words.

Even if her stature had been reduced, the straightforward disposition she possessed suffered no reduction nor did it bend. As if guided by this, Taritta quietly nodded her head and said,

Taritta: “I, understand. —We’ll head there right away.”

Medium: “Mhm! Thank you!”

Taritta felt a pang deep in her chest due to the Medium’s relief and her big nod.

Anguish had been tormenting Taritta for a long, limitless amount of time. Forgotten by the immersion in battle, this anguish asserted its existence in anticipation of the great battle, the time for a resolution approaching.

Taritta: “—Commandment.”

Taritta also mumbled the words offered by the vanished delicate man, but only to herself.

Anguish seemed to bounce around in her chest, as if it relished being called by name.

3

—Time returned to the moment when the Crimson Lapis Castle was destroyed in a great flood of darkness.

Yorna: “Chil—”

Louis: “Uau!!”

In the nick of time, she pulled back the girl named Louis who tried to leap forward without hesitation.

Just like that, following the appeal of every nerve in her body towards that instinctive threat, unaware that the roof tiles of the castle tower would burst, she performed a mighty leap backwards.

Trampled by the heel of thick-soled shoes, the impact received by the tiles propagated to the surrounding tiles, spreading destruction.

However, the fact that the roof tiles were being shattered in this way was far too trivial in the face of the events that immediately followed.

Yorna: "…"

With a crash, the overflowing shadows, darkness, and deep blackness engulfed the keep, and the exploding roof tiles vanished.

—No, it was not only the keep that was swallowed.

Yorna's eyes caught the sight of the Crimson Lapis Castle's tower, plus its upper and middle levels, all being devoured by the deluge of darkness similar to a mud flow, disappearing from the world without a trace.

That was, a truly dark darkness which one must not be engulfed by.

A real darkness that could not be brightly illuminated, that allowed nothing to be saved once taken in, that obscured all hope by coating everything over and over with despair.

It could be judged instinctively. —That, was something that should not be.

Louis: "Uu!"

Restraining the struggling girl in her embrace, Yorna's eyes darted to the keep that was stained black.

The black-haired boy at the center of it and Olbart, who was touching the boy with his hand at the moment that the black shadow overflowed, were nowhere to be seen.

In that instant, she witnessed the arm Olbart had pulled back cease to exist.

That thing was so overwhelming that even Olbart, with his greed for life and keen sense for danger, could not avoid sacrificing his own arm.

Shortly after, she had given priority to leaping with Louis in her arms; because of that, whether Olbart was alive or not was unknown.

On one hand, she had believed that the monstrous old man would never die, while on the other hand, there was a cold voice within her mind, asking her if she could really have optimistic thoughts, looking at that jet-black thing.

Also, there was something aside from Olbart's life or death that gave birth to a distortion in Yorna's thoughts—

Yorna: "Child…"

That would be the boy who seemed to be at the heart of the sable shadow that had swallowed Olbart's arm, and his safety.

In Yorna's opinion, the boy had no abilities particularly out of the ordinary. His situational awareness was excellent, he made no mistakes as to when he should play his cards.

If she were forced to say something about it, those had been the primary factors in netting him the win in the confrontation with Olbart. However, the praise went to his decisiveness, not to his superior ability.

So she had to say that there was no possibility that the boy could have escaped at that moment.

Albeit, that would only apply if the boy were a victim.

Yorna: "If this is the deed of that child…"

Would this perhaps mean that the boy was lurking somewhere in that vast blackness?

Yorna realized then, that she did not want to believe that this had been something done intentionally by the boy. Acknowledging this, there was a decision that had to be made.

That was the duty that she must perform as Lord of the Demon City, the position that she must bear, the object of love that she must choose—

Yorna: "—Hk."

Just as she thought this, a change was produced in the darkness, before Yorna's eyes.

The shadow that had swallowed half of the Crimson Lapis Castle and was about to engulf the lower levels and walls of the castle in darkness, the portion of the shadow in control of the tower wriggled, extending "hands" towards Yorna and Louis in midair.

Yorna: "…"

Stretching out were literally "hands", which could not be compared to anything else.

Black hands stretched out towards Yorna and Louis, whom she was holding in her arms. The stunning aspect was that they numbered not one nor two, but ten or twenty or even more were extended at once.

The reason why the shadows stretching out did not have the idyllic calmness of silhouettes stretching longer and longer in the sunlight was that the arms, which should be devoid of expression, were overflowing with emotion.

The vast amount of shadows and black arms appealed to her with a single emotion, "hunger".

It was not simply "hunger" in the sense of being hungry.

It was an unfathomable "hunger", one that desired taking in just anything and everything possible.

Yorna: "Child, we're going to swing about. Be careful not to bite your tongue!”

Louis: “Uh, au—Hk.”

With the purpose of avoiding the growing shadow, Yorna made extraordinary maneuvers in midair.

She was unknowing of the nature of the shadows, and now that she had seen it doing damage to Olbart, she consciously established that touching it would be fatal, and so, she had no choice but to avoid it altogether.

Therefore, Yorna opened her eyes and, by pulling in the tiles that had burst out of their place due to her earlier leap and using them as her footholds, she created an escape route through the sky of the Demon City.

With a fluttering sound, Yorna’s figure soared high in the air, utilizing flying tiles as footing.

She attempted shooting a piece of tile into the shadow’s arm as to keep it in check, but, unable to pierce the shadow, it was engulfed into the part it was aimed at, disappearing into the void.

In accordance with the speculation that it should not be touched, Yorna followed the footholds to a higher altitude.

It would be best if the extending arms of the shadow were incapable of keeping up with the continuous ascent of Yorna’s tiles. Perhaps if the shadow’s range could be determined, it could be countered from there.

Although—

Yorna: “It’s awfully aggravating constantly being on the defensive.”

She was not being chased around.

While it was also humiliating of course, it went without saying that the Crimson Lapis Castle would take the most damage.

Crimson lapis was a beautiful and, above all, rare precious stone.

The mere thought of building a castle with it was the very essence of absurdity. It was not because of Yorna's wealth or power that the castle was built.

In the first place, it was not Yorna who had conceived the idea of building the Crimson Lapis Castle.

The ones to construct the castle of whirling red and blue, the Crimson Lapis Castle, had been the residents of the Demon City.

They decided that the castle of the ruler of the Demon City, Yorna, should not look shabby, so they each gathered precious stones and built that beautiful castle.

It was a rare, precious stone. It was difficult to handle, and one could not even imagine the amount of hardships that would go into building the castle. Same went for Yorna; she had never imagined such hardship.

Needless to say, Yorna watched the castle being built in its entirety.

Therefore—

Yorna: "You have swallowed my love, you ruffian—!!"

Yorna extended her long, slender fingers toward the shadow that engulfed the castle.

Nothing emanated from them, nor was it a necessary action. She just wished to confront the shadow, to remind it that this was a manifestation of her anger.

—A moment later, a ferocious strike came out from within the huge shadow engulfing the Crimson Lapis Castle.

Yorna: "…"

There was no way for Yorna to know whether the shadow had substance, much less intent.

However, Yorna was convinced that this had been a solid blow.

The shadow had swallowed the Crimson Lapis Castle—everything that composed it, down to each stone that formed its walls, the product of the residents' love for Yorna.

Why should she regard it as just a castle?

Why should she not love it?

The shock wave of the castle exploding from within the sable darkness drastically dampened its momentum.

As proof of this, every black arm hot on Yorna's tails dissipated, and so, with nothing able to catch up to her, she fled into the air.

Even Louis, who was writhing in her arms, widened her eyes in shock at the violent explosion of Yorna's love.

However, Yorna could not be pleased by the girl's reaction, which could be alternatively described as admiration.

Yorna: "After all, a castle's only a castle, and you may say it can be rebuilt. But…"

Louis: "Uu?"

Yorna: "No matter if I try to build a new castle, the castle I loved day after day was only this castle… Am I to think accursedly of my crumbling love, because my feelings weren't enough?"

Looking down at the Crimson Lapis Castle, more than half of it swallowed by the shadow, no longer remaining in its original form, Yorna's heart was struck with anguish.

But Yorna had no time to indulge herself in sentimentality.

Albeit the shadowy arms that pursued them may have disappeared, the great source of darkness was not gone.

To say nothing of—

Yorna: "My fair skin tells me that the threat isn't gone."

The impact of the explosion of the Crimson Lapis Castle was so powerful that it could have demolished the entire castle by itself. Nevertheless, even though the momentum had been lessened by the impact, the oppressive feeling given off from the black darkness did not waver in the slightest.

If the shadow was alive and well, then, of course, so was the threat.

In other words, she had to construct or find a way to dispel that jet-black thing at any cost, while the condition that it couldn't be touched remained the same.

???: "—Yorna-samaaa!"

As Yorna's nerves sharpened, a voice coming, from afar, from the ground, struck her eardrums.

Taking a glance at it, Yorna saw that the ones who had called her were the residents of the Demon City, attempting to gather at the collapsed Castle. They had been caught up in the collapse of the Castle, attempting to assist the rescuing of the Castle's soldiers, crawling out of the rubble.

From the perspective of the black shadow, they must have looked too much like coveted prey.

Yorna: "Everyone, run away—!"

Prompted by the signal of impending danger, Yorna called on the residents below to evacuate.

But she was far too high up in the sky to rush down towards them. The distance was too great, they were too far out of reach. And it was impossible to ask all of them to have the same sense of peril that Yorna had.

—As a result, Yorna could not do anything but powerlessly watch the shadows overflowing towards the residents who had gathered at the Castle out of concern for her, the Lord of the Demon City.

That—

???: “—Do not think I will make it effortless for you!!”

The residents stood stock still as a black shadowy arm reached out to each one of them, and just before they were swallowed up into the eternal void, their bodies were snatched from the side.

Dark green thorned vines, from afar they reached the residents to do so.

The vines, which Yorna had also witnessed before, stretched with furious energy, faster than the shadows. They caught the inhabitants’ bodies with their prickles, allowing them to escape.

Even in the Demon City, in which beings possessing exotic physiology had assembled, Yorna could only think of one person able to pull that off.

???: “Kafma Irulux, by decree of His Excellency the Emperor, I am at your service—!”

A man from whose outstretched arms thorned vines grew, flapping transparent wings from his back—Kafma Irulux, materialized at the center of the situation, causing Yorna to widen her eyes in surprise.

Not only was his peculiar appearance surprising, but it was also surprising that he had protected Yorna’s residents.

In the past, with the pretext of suppressing Yorna’s rebellion, Emperor Vincent had sent troops to gain full control of Chaosflame.

Kafma had been among those troops, and was one of those who had run rampant in Chaosflame.

So, for him to act to protect Yorna’s citizens was—

Kafma: “No matter who you serve, you are equally a subject of the Empire.”

Yorna: “…”

Kafma: “General First-Class Yorna! I know you and I have different ideas, but we must not let this stand! I will cooperate with you!”

Responding thus to Yorna's watchful eyes, the flapping Kafma soared furiously through the air.

Dancing freely in the air, drawing the attention of the shadows capturing Crimson Lapis Castle to himself, Kafma seemed intent on making full use of his mobility and control to buy time.

The question was, however; what to do with the time he had bought?

Louis: "Uh! Aauu!"

Yorna: "Child?"

Louis: "Uh!"

Yorna pondered her choice of action immediately afterwards, and Louis, still held in her arms, went berserk again. But the way she raged was not as impulsive and violent as before.

The girl spun herself around in Yorna's arms, pointing towards a spot on the ground while groaning.

Yorna looked at where Louis was pointing and guessed what she was trying to say.

And—

Yorna: "General Second-Class Kafma, I'll leave this place to you for a while."

Kafma: "If that is what you need, understood!"

Yorna: "And…"

Kafma: "What is it?!"

Kafma, who wished to avoid the growing shadows by circling about, and concentrate on confronting the strong enemy, raised his voice slightly at Yorna's words.

Yorna thought that it would be a mistake to fail to communicate this, even though she did not intend to hinder him,

Yorna: “For protecting my children earlier, I thank you.”

Kafma: “—. As a General, I did what I had to do!”

He was slightly puzzled by Yorna’s gratitude, however, Kafma replied with that.

Yorna changed her assessment of the man who returned to his role and bought the necessary time.

Although it did not change her impression that he was a hard-headed and inflexible person, if he carried through with those intentions of his, he truly was a virtuous person. If circumstances and conditions permitted, he would be one of the people she could love.

Although, Yorna’s number one position would not be overturned forever—.

Yorna: “We’re going to descend. Hold on tightly.”

Taking the tighter grip from Louis clinging onto her as a reply, Yorna travelled towards her destination utilizing the wreckage of the building, the overturned ground, and even masses of dirt, all floating in midair, as footholds.

Along the way, she instructed the residents, who appeared to wish further information, to, at any rate, distance themselves from the Crimson Lapis Castle—or rather, from the former site of where the Castle once stood, while she herself was heading for the rooftops of a house away from the Castle.

There, waiting leisurely for Yorna’s arrival, was—

Yorna: “Surely, I thought that His Excellency the Emperor would have come.”

???: “Hmm.”

Standing there majestically with arms folded was a dark-haired man, his face covered by an oni mask.

Once Yorna landed before the man's eyes, Louis left her arms and ran up to him, as if she had been waiting for him.

Then, Louis grabbed the man's arm and pointed towards the Castle, her long blonde hair bouncing about,

Louis: "Uau!"

Abel: "I understand it without you needing to tell everyone. After all, we had a disagreement regarding your treatment. You have quite some nerve, to show your face before me."

Louis: "Uu! Uh!"

Abel: "Do you intend to obey me? If so, I shall add you to our numbers."

The man responded to Louis's complaint in a nonchalant manner as she tugged on his arm. Louis looked annoyed at his answer, but eventually released his arm as if there was no other way.

Even so, the reason why had not just rushed out was probably because she had pondered it over just like a little girl would.

—She had to recover the boy who had been swallowed by that black shadow at any cost.

Abel: "Yorna Mishigure, you understand the state of affairs. This Great Disaster cannot not be left unattended."

Yorna: "I agree. As the ruler of the Demon City, there was no choice but to abandon that jet-black darkness that turns all to nothing with just a touch. To say nothing of the fact that it consumed my castle. —Were you aware that something like that would happen?"

Abel: "I thought there was something going on. But what it was specifically, was outside of my estimation."

Yorna: "…"

Squinting, Yorna attempted to gauge the sincerity of the man in front of her.

But the man’s heart was hidden behind the oni mask, and she could not see through it even if she wanted to. Even if the mask had not been there however, it would have been impossible to peer into his heart.

A solitary existence that did not allow anyone to know his thoughts, heart, or intentions—that was the way of the Seventy-Seventh Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

That was—

Yorna: “—Your Excellency.”

Abel: “Do not call me that carelessly. Unless you desire me to tear up your hopes within the missive.”

Yorna: “Pardon my discourtesy… How in the world did you find out what I desired?”

Abel: “There was no certainty. Not until you returned my messengers safely.”

Hearing his answer, Yorna was both impressed and dismayed by the thinking of the man in front of her.

He was going to determine whether his thoughts were correct or not by utilizing her meeting with his messengers the previous day, checking whether his messengers returned safely from there or not.

In this respect, Yorna felt bitter that she had been dancing on the palm of his hand.

But more than that—

Yorna: “Those child messengers should scold Your Excellency at least once.”

Abel: “That comes after all the matters are settled. Yorna Mishigure, follow my directives.”

Yorna: "—. If that's what's best for you, I have no choice but to comply."

The man's oppressive way of speech, however, caused a moment of hesitation and resistance.

Yorna had something to protect. The Demon City of Chaosflame and its inhabitants. All that was needed to protect it, was someone with the ability to handle this affair correctly.

Not in the meaning of ability to wage battle, but of ability to manage it.

Yorna also had her own pride in this power. But it would be wrong to use him as an object of comparison.

Who could compete in a bout of ability with a man who controlled and ruled the great Empire, the nation with the largest landmass?

Yorna: "So what are you going to do?"

Yorna asked, ready to take any measure to protect the Demon City.

Louis, who had lined up next to her before she knew it was also looking on in agreement with Yorna's intentions.

Meeting the gaze of the two, of Yorna and Louis, the man—Nay, the ruler of the Empire, nodded in assent.

And then—

Abel: "—Abandon the city and beat a retreat. The Demon City has no choice but to permit that shadow to swallow it."

Chapter 56:
The Great Disaster

1

—Abandon the city and beat a retreat.

In response to the declaration of the man in the oni mask, Yorna's cheeks stiffened and her gaze sharpened.

She had just now decided to respect the opinion of the man in front of her, because Yorna believed it was the best way to protect her domain, Chaosflame.

But contrary to Yorna's resolution, the man spoke of the abandonment of the city,

Yorna: "I cannot possibly accept such an opinion."

Abel: "Ho. Why is that?"

Yorna: "Is it not obvious? This is the Demon City of Chaosflame, the last place for those who have been pursued by the Empire and have no one to turn to, nowhere to go… To throw that away…"

Abel: "Is unacceptable, is it? —Worthless sentimentality."

Yorna: "—Hk, Vincent Vollachia…!"

Gritting her teeth and the coldhearted words spoken by the man crossing his arms, the ruler of the Empire, Yorna called out his name, accompanied by a stern gaze. In reply, the man touched the oni mask with his hand.

And once the black eyes, visible even through the oni mask, reflected Yorna,

Abel: "I go by the name of Abel now, so it is inappropriate to call me that. And if you are planning on begging benevolence from the Emperor, that would be quite thoughtless."

Yorna: "—. The people of the Empire must be strong, is it?"

Abel: "Indeed."

The Emperor—or rather, the man who called himself Abel, proclaimed that that exactly was the way of the Empire.

The Emperor, the pinnacle of the Vollachian Empire, must be the embodiment of the iron-blooded code which the people of the Empire believed in, revered. Whether it was true or not, the Emperor had to affirm it.

With Abel's assertion, Yorna admonished herself for wrongfully making a request.

Was Abel aware of the identity of that shadow to begin with? Of the titanic blackness that had engulfed Crimson Lapis Castle whole?

Was that why he had come to the callous decision to abandon the city?

Yorna: "Do you deem it so dangerous that we have to flee immediately? What in the world is that?"

Abel: "—The Great Disaster."

Yorna: "Great, Disaster…?"

What followed to Yorna's spree of questions were a scant few hushed words.

However, running opposite to the quietness of his tone, the weight of the words he had spun was enough to stir bewilderment in Yorna. —A large tragedy, it meant.

Yorna: "By "Great Disaster", what exactly do you mean?"

Abel: "Something that endangers the existence of the Empire, and brings about ruin that not even the light of the sun can reach… That was what the Stargazer spoke of it. When I first heard it, I assessed it as an overstatement."

Yorna: "…"

Abel: "Looking at that thing, you will find that there was not the least bit of exaggeration in the expression used."

Pointing at it with his chin, at the manifested darkness—at the Great Disaster that brought about ruin, as Abel had named it.

Yorna could not help but feel some bitterness inside as the word "Stargazer" echoed, spoken by his mouth. The existence of the Stargazer was one of the Vollachian Empire's evil practices.

At least, that was the only way Yorna could describe it.

To begin with, the genesis of Yorna's strong, fervent wish was by no means unrelated to the Stargazer.

Anyway—

Yorna: "So, will you take the Stargazer's word for it and turn tail and run away? If so, that'd surely be an expression of gutlessness. I think you're the embodiment of the Empire's way of doing things… A very, very good example of it."

Abel: "If you believe you are able to sway me with some cheap provocation, you would do better to correct that misconception post-haste. First of all, I was not the one who took the Stargazer's words at face value, and perpetrated this outrage."

Yorna: "…I see that you also have some thoughts on what the Stargazer foretold."

Abel: "Any owner of sound judgment would have no pleasant thoughts of it. But even if those are unnecessary and ignored, more shall follow. That is the troublesome thing about them. —Hm."

Louis: "Uu!"

As he spoke, Abel's words were interrupted by the eager Louis's growl.

She seemed to be reproaching Abel and Yorna for having a conversation not directly related to how the Great Disaster would be quelled.

That would be only natural. The Great Disaster had—

Louis: “Uau!”

Abel: “—.Yorna Mishigure, I want to make sure of one thing.”

Yorna: “…What, is it?”

Narrowing his eyes at Louis’s strong appeal, Abel pointed to the Great Disaster wriggling about wildly. Once he directed his question at her, Yorna narrowed her almond-shaped eyes.

She could roughly envision what words would follow, and what questions would be asked.

That was—

Abel: “If you and this girl are together, there must be one more person, a black-haired child. Where has that one vanished to?”

Yorna: “—. If you mean that child…”

As she took a glance, Yorna’s gaze conveyed the answer to the question far more eloquently than words would.

Yorna’s line of sight turned towards the Great Disaster, to which Louis was franticly pointing at. The boy was present when the darkness that had swallowed up the Crimson Lapis Castle first poured out.

—No, from what Yorna had seen, the Great Disaster had apparently overflowed from within the boy.

Abel: “As I expected.”

In response to Yorna’s silent reply, Abel placed the last piece of the puzzle, in his mind.

It sounded like an ultimatum, and Yorna looked at Abel, calling out, “You…”. But at the call, Abel gave a slow sideways shake of his head.

Abel: “Though our intentions have gone awry, there is no way around it. No point in obsessing over plans, if ultimately no results are obtained.”

Yorna: “So, that means?”

Abel: “The strategy is yet the same. Abandon the Demon City and beat a retreat. —But damage shall still occur. We shan’t be able to avoid it wholly.”

Yorna: “—Hk, I can’t agree to someth…”

And, at the moment Yorna was about to tell him that she could not accept such a decision, something happened.

Louis: “Aa, uh!”

Abel: “Guh…!”

Letting out a cry of pain, Abel fell to his knees on the spot, clutching his stomach in his hands.

Faster than Yorna could close the distance between him and herself, Louis rushed into the gap, driving a palm strike into him with her short little arm.

She threw a glare at the one who had made a ruthless decision, Abel, and growled in her throat with a violent snort,

Louis: “Uau… Uau!”

Exclaiming this, she turned around and disappeared from sight in the blink of an eye.

It was the instantaneous teleport that she had displayed during the battle atop the castle tower against Olbart. Not being able to teleport long distances, Louis teleported repeatedly, returning once more to the battlefield dominated by the Great Disaster.

Far in the distance, Kafma was stalling the Great Disaster using the insects within his own body.

For Yorna, it was hard to believe that the girl possessed anything that could deal a decisive blow against the Great Disaster.

If she did, they would have tried to rescue that boy on their own, instead of relying on Abel. So she was without a trump card.

If there was such a thing as a trump card, it would be—

Yorna: "—Wouldn't it be possible to oppose it with the Flame of the Yang Sword?"

Abel: "…"

Yorna: "You!"

Still clutching his stomach, Abel knelt on the roof of the building.

While she believed that Abel deserved the blow from Louis, Yorna also believed that Abel was the only one who held the key to overcoming the situation.

The Emperor of the Vollachian Empire was endowed with a truly Enchanted Sword, a sword counted as one of the Holy Swords.

With the Flame of the Yang Sword, even that Great Disaster's existence would—

Abel: "—I have no intention of drawing it out."

However, Abel's answer to Yorna's appeal was not the one she had hoped for.

And Yorna could not consider that this answer was one a normal person would have given. Even if she was aware that the Great Disaster was an unusual occurrence, one that prompted a readiness to abandon the Demon City in him while deeming the thing as something of utmost danger.

Yorna: "But still, you won't draw the Yang Sword… How could you possibly just let that be?”

Abel: “…”

Yorna: “Answer me, Vincent Vollachia! If you are the… If you are the Emperor of this Empire, then there must be a role for you to carry out! If you are the Emperor, then…!”

Her vision grew red, and Yorna grabbed Abel by the collar as he was kneeling down, making him face her gaze.

During all that, the city governed by Yorna, Chaosflame, was in dire peril. To what extent could Kafma and Louis resist the Great Disaster? To what extent had the impact of the Crimson Lapis Castle’s explosion assisted in diminishing the power of the Great Disaster?

She did not understand anything. What she did understand was that she could not leave things as they were.

At this rate, Yorna’s vow, her desire, would go unfulfilled.

For that, no matter what, whatever the cost, she required the cooperation of the man in front of her.

Yorna: “If you are the Emperor of the Vollachian Empire…”

Abel: “…I shall not utilize the Yang Sword.”

Yorna: “—Hk, you…”

By displaying her sharp canine teeth, Yorna attempted to intimidate Abel, stubbornly refusing to change his opinion.

Rarely would she make a gesture as crude as showing the fangs in her mouth. However, if such was her wish, these fangs of hers could easily tear the slender neck of the man in front of her to scraps.

But such threats were routine for the man in front of her, Abel.

The Emperor of the Vollachian Empire was an entity holding a position in which he was constantly confronted with the unceasing murderous intent and hostility of those around him. It was for this reason that the man held that sort of position—

Yorna: "If you are the Vollachian Empire's…"

Abel: "—When shall you understand, Yorna Mishigure?"

Yorna: "—Hk."

Abel: "The Emperor of the current generation, Vincent Vollachia, differs from the Emperor you envision. I am not obligated to perform the likes of acting according to your desires and ideals."

Faced with his stance, clearly severed from her own, Yorna let leak a small sigh.

Finally, her hand parted from the neck of the man it had grasped, and she took a single unhurried step backward. Stepping back, Yorna gnashed her teeth as she fixed her gaze on Abel, holding his own neck.

She understood it, without being told so.

With or without the oni mask, the man before her eyes did not bear the slightest resemblance to the man Yorna envisioned. Even if the blood of Yorna's beloved ran through his veins.

Yorna: "…I cannot accept your words."

Abel: "If you do not abandon the Demon City, you shall lose everything else as well."

Yorna: "This Demon City right now is my everything!"

Yorna answered with open arms, pulling out the kiseru she had inserted into her bosom and lit its tip. Immediately after, she sucked the smoke from the kiseru with all her might, before blowing it into the sky.

The purple smoke spreading out formed a massive, humongous cloud which headed for the outskirts of the battlefield in which the Great Disaster was stirring—over the heads of the people of the

Demon City, many of whom were terrified at the sight of that menace.

Following that, the puff of purple smoke slowly dissipated and fell down upon each of the residents—upon each of her children, purple smoke settling within their hands.

Yorna: "—Love me."

Yorna's murmur was so faint that only Abel, present in the same place, could hear it.

However, Yorna's will was understood by all those who held the purple smoke that had descended upon them. Therefore, although her voice did not reach them, they collectively tossed the purple smoke into their open mouths.

Yorna: "—Be loved by me."

Yorna's continued words, her mutterings did not serve anyone or anything.

If anything, the words were surely an indulgence offered to Yorna, by Yorna herself. It was a necessary ritual, an invocation, for the sake of pushing herself forward.

Those whom Yorna's purple smoke reached, those who ingested it, slowly, unhurriedly raised their gazes. —And, within one of the eyes of each one of them, a flame alighteth.

Those loved by Yorna, those who loved Yorna; their souls commenced blazing, looking up towards the Great Disaster.

Without a doubt, this was a communion of souls—the power of the Soul Marriage Technique completely enveloped the Demon City.

Yorna: "This city, the city of Chaosflame won't be lost. —I wish that you all, alongside me, get that ill-mannered guest of ours to return from where it came."

While adopting a stance, Yorna swung her kiseru in front of her.

What could be heard from all around and throughout the city, was the earth rumbling. Fiercely and fearfully, the noise of innumerable shoes resounded, of innumerable footsteps, of innumerable breaths, and of innumerable wills to fight.

In accordance with the loving call of the leader of the Demon City, the converging loved ones advanced.

Witnessing them, Yorna bent her knees slightly, then leapt high into the air.

The destination of this leap, that which awaited her, was the shadow of disaster, filled with great darkness.

As the one repelling all things that threatened the Demon City—

Yorna: "—I, Yorna Mishigure, the Flamboyant, will serve as your opponent."

2

As the sound of the earth rumbling echoed, there was a furious war cry, akin to the entire city clamoring.

With the world dominated by those, Abel dropped the hand from his neck, as he observed the battlefield.

Abel: "…"

Performing a reckless charge during her shout, Yorna easily manipulated the wreckage of the cityscape and the Crimson Lapis Castle alike, hammering a fierce attack on the Great Disaster.

Using a building to strike at something of ambiguous nature could be called quite the unorthodox attack; yet, due to that nature, the jet-black darkness nevertheless expanded itself—what effect the attack had borne on the Great Disaster remained unclear.

Had it been effective to some degree, or had it been wholly meaningless?

Abel: "—It sure shall not be wholly meaningless."

It was not that he was moved by Yorna's reckless assault, but, for certain, the enemy was not one that would be completely immune to such an attack, as was noticeable from how it stopped taking action as often.

Crimson Lapis Castle had been engulfed by the Great Disaster as of the latter's appearance; in spite of her attachment to this castle that had served as her long-time abode, Yorna had performed an attack by transforming it into a destructive force, certainly slowing the momentum of the Great Disaster.

If not for that, the Great Disaster would have continued to grow at its initial pace, and swallowed the Demon City whole, and in that manner, stretched its abyss to the entire Empire.

—However, the collapse of the Empire had only been delayed. If left in this current state, it was inescapable.

Abel: "That is the most detestable part about it."

Grinding his molars, Abel recalled the details of the man who had foreseen the Great Disaster.

A convenient being who had foreseen the coming threat, yet refused to be asked for more. Or should he call said being, a pawn of the Observers?

In any event, his resentment of that person did not help him here. If he had to, it was perhaps worth pondering about that individual as one in a similar position.

Abel: "—Natsuki Subaru, you are…"

With his focus on the Great Disaster that continued writhing about, muttering, Abel mentioned the name he had been avoiding.

And at that moment.

???: "Abel-chin! We're back!"

Abel: "…"

Amidst all the noise that was not unlikely to be swallowed by the rumbling and bellowing of the earth, a high-pitched voice firmly reached Abel's ears.

Turning his head back, the owner of the voice fell from the sky. Landing behind Abel with a light thud, was a girl waving her hand, and a brown-skinned woman holding her.

Abel: "You have returned, Medium, Taritta."

Medium: "Somehow! Isn't this situation different from what you talked about before, Abel-chin? Where's Yorna-chan?"

Abel: "—. Over there."

Freed from Taritta's arms, Medium directed a question at Abel as she descended onto the rooftop, to which Abel cocked his chin. Ahead of them, skipping about in midair, Yorna attacked the Great Disaster with physical strikes repeatedly by freely manipulating buildings.

In addition, Yorna was assisted in her challenge against the Great Disaster by another, by Kafma, who likewise had the means of using long-ranged attacks.

However, since Kafma's thorn vines were also "insects" raised inside his body, it was not a good idea to let them be swallowed up by the inexhaustible Great Disaster.

In addition, the residents of Chaosflame had assembled, each of them dismantling the buildings in their environs, then attacking by having several people throw chunks of buildings like cannonballs into the Great Disaster.

In the past, at the time Yorna had raised the banner of revolt against the Imperial Capital, the very city itself had been wielded as a weapon. A fearsome collective tactic that had caused great distress to the Imperial Soldiers to gain total control of the city.

However, it was unclear whether that tactic, which had been effective against a group of hostiles, would be effective against a Great Disaster whose strength was unfathomable.

To begin with, he could see from a distance—

Taritta: “The Great Disaster, is it getting bigger…?”

Medium: “That thing, we can’t leave it be?! Abel-chin, what should we do?”

As they witnessed the Great Disaster spread slowly but surely, Medium and Taritta requested for Abel’s decision.

Originally, the goal was to withdraw and abandon the Demon City with Yorna’s assistance, but that would go unfilled due to Yorna’s obsession with the Demon City.

In that case, the tide would change depending on what Vincent did. —No,

Abel: “—Or, before that, can you change the situation, Taritta?”

Taritta: “Eh…?”

With Abel having mentioned her by name in his question, Taritta opened her narrow eyes in surprise, at a loss for words.

However, that surprise was not because she had no clue as to what he was talking about, but rather because she had not expected that to be told to her at this time.

In other words, she had an idea of what Abel had just pointed out.

Medium: “Th-The way you said that was kinda strange, wasn’t it? What do you mean?”

Abel: “It concerns you not. Taritta, what did you call that thing?”

Taritta: “Wh-What are you talking about…”

Abel: “—The Great Disaster, that is what you called it. Where did you obtain knowledge of that name?”

To Abel’s pressing words, Taritta gasped.

The exchange between the two of them left the dumbfounded

Medium wide-eyed, letting out a “Grate Disastur…?”, as that was a term unfamiliar to her.

But Medium’s response was natural.

Laying eyes upon the existence of an unknown being such as that, and calling it a “Great Disaster”, did not mesh well. Only those who knew of its existence could rightfully call it the Great Disaster.

In other words—

Abel: “Have the stars taught you how to escape annihilation?”

Taritta: “—Hk! W-wait a moment, I…!”

Abel: “…”

Taritta: “I…”

Taritta advanced a single step, putting a hand over her chest, yet words beyond those got stuck.

Her face was pale, her eyes began moving frantically; Taritta’s appearance became an unusual one for her, and Medium rushed to stand beside her, to support her body with a “Taritta-chan!”.

However, Taritta did not have the luxury to respond to Medium’s compassion.

Perhaps she had believed she could hide it all along. She had believed that, just maybe, she could have remained silent forevermore.

Abel: “Fool.”

There was no such thing as a well-kept secret or an unexposed truth.

At the very least, if no effort was made whatsoever to cover up that secret or truth, the day when it would be revealed would surely come. All one could do, was to delay the inevitable.

Or perhaps, it could be delayed till death; the way she perceived it, she could keep it as a secret as long as she remained in the world of the living.

Abel: “Taritta, if you do know about the Great Disaster, do you regret it?”

Medium: “Regret? Regret what… Abel-chin! What are you talking about?! What’s Taritta-chan…”

Abel: “Is it not obvious. —I am speaking of how, back in that forest, you failed to kill me with an arrow.”

Taritta: “…”

Aghast, all color now drained from Taritta’s face, the light in her eyes wavering feebly.

Looking straight into her two eyes, Abel paused, let out a sigh, and continued.

Abel: “Or, shall you respond to that commandment above from this moment on, hunter of the jungle. No, should I instead approach you in this manner?”

Taritta: “…”

Abel: “The one who has inherited the commandment to prevent the Great Disaster, the one to become the new Stargazer.”

3

The tempestuous rumbling of the earth, the reverberation of howls, it was as if they were clamoring for the end of the world.

???: “Uh, uhh, uhhh… Hk!”

If he were to try holding his head and covering his ears, he would be unable to do so.

It was the curse of possessing only a sole arm. He was unable to use both his hands to cover his own ears, as to completely dissociate his consciousness from this end of the world.

Putting his right ear against his lifted shoulder, he stuck the fingers of his outstretched hand into his left ear, attempting to counter with an inadequate earplug. It was impossible.

The ground trembled. The air was terrified. The world was dying.

All of them were symbolic of the horror that was eating away at Al and robbing his whole body of strength.

Al: “Why… Why, here… Hk!”

His voice trailed off, as he cursed and cursed all the despairing events that had taken place until this moment.

Of course, such cursing meant naught. Because that was no curse at all. He was merely being a poor loser, doing nothing more than comforting himself after the game was over, saying that it would have been better to do it like this or like that.

He was prepared for this to happen, or so he had believed.

—No, he did not. He had never been prepared for it. He had just averted his eyes from it, pretending to be optimistic that it would not come to pass, even when the possibility crossed his mind.

The danger that this would happen, as long as he was working with Natsuki Subaru, was plenty. Not just a little, but more than enough.

Rather, this situation would not have occurred had he acted alongside anyone besides Natsuki Subaru.

Even so, it could not be helped. Because he could not leave him alone. There was no way he could have left him alone. Back then, Natsuki Subaru should not have given in.

As a result of that, because it was necessary, was why he himself—

???: “—Mymy, I was wonderin’ who was cryin’, turns out it’s ya.”

Al: “—Hk?!”

???: “Kakakakka! Look at how ya jumped just now! Ya were like a caterpillar, so funny, so darn funny!”

Hearing a sudden voice in the middle of the room, he jolted his body in a panic and turned his head.

Witnessing his overwhelmingly uncouth appearance, the other party clapped their hands—Nay, stomped their feet, as they let out a burst of laughter.

Unfortunately, clapping their hands was apparently not something the other person was likely to ever do again.

Because—

???: “Geez, the right hand that’s been with me for more than ninety years went on ahead without me. I’m screwed. How am I ever gonna make ration balls from now on? Kakakakka!”

Having said that, a cheerfully laughing, monstruous old man—Olbart Dunkelkenn, was waving, showing his right hand which had vanished from the wrist down.

Chapter 57:
I Can’t Live Wiser

1

—He was within a bleak, dark space.

Swaying. Wandering. Being tossed about. Being violated.

It was as if his four limbs, along with everything from his neck up, had been separated from his torso, each of those parts at different places, floating, drifting, rocking, being fiddled with.

His memory was terribly hazy as to what had happened and what was occurring.

Everywhere was pitch-black, leaving him to wonder as to why he had been thrown into such a completely empty space.

—.

——.

———.

————.

Nothing, came to mind.

There was no possible reason for him to be trapped in a place such as this, his head and limbs detached, and floating aimlessly.

If that were the case, there would be no pretext as to why he had to be in a place like this, in the first place.

???: “—I love you.”

Every time a thought of the sort flashed across his mind, a faint voice that restrained him from thinking reached his ears.

The voice was hard to hear, be it because it was faint, or simply because it was distant. But it was an impassioned voice that instinctively made him want to listen carefully to it, to lean his head in that direction so that he could hear it.

???: “—I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Every time he heard that voice, the thoughts he’d had till that moment would be reset, returned to zero.

The matter of which option was correct, of whether it should be called bothersome or unavoidable, was unclear.

However, with that being repeated over and over again, a novel issue came into being. Could somehow something be done about the distance of that audible voice?

???: “—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

As if to interrupt even that notion, the lines from that faint, pleading voice increased.

That was counterproductive, however. Since desiring to hear that voice, to be with the owner of that voice, was the pretext for the birth of that thought, for him to attempt to reach one, starting from zero.

Henceforth—

???: “Someone…”

With his limbs and head detached from his torso, he was unable to move, unable to do anything himself.

Ergo, he would prefer to rely on the help of those around him, those who would seemingly be able to do something about this situation.

Did someone, anyone, who could help him exist?

Someone who could be capable of lending him a hand, even in such a hopeless situation.

Was there someone who had treated him well?

If that someone arrived alongside him, surely, so would the solution.

—Based on that, for the sake of reaching the voice reverberating from so far away, he would extend his hand.

2

Al: "—Hk."

Olbart: "Oh? That was quite the spirited blow just now."

That instant, a large and potent roar echoed through the air, the tremors travelling across the ground and reaching the two men in the travelling inn.

Outside the window, a huge black shadow ran rampant, slowly eroding the Demon City from its center outwards, taking it into itself, digesting it, turning it into something not of this world.

It was, with certainty, the worst nightmare dreaded by every being in the world.

Reminding everyone of exactly that at a single glance, it was an embodiment of the end.

And the one to comprehend the horror brought about by the end of life, with their own skin—Or rather, to know it with their soul, more so than anyone else, was Al.

Abel and Medium, among others, were currently on the move to defuse the situation.

Instead of joining them, he was crouching here, holding his shaking head in his hand, in this predicament. How on earth could he have said that he would follow them and help them?

Al: "I'm… I, am…"

Had he followed them only to fully realize how powerless he was?

That being the case, for what reason was he, in the first place, doing—?

Olbart: “Good grief, here I am, hurryin’ my ass back, and all I find here’s just one young’un scared shitless on the ground? Well, it’d be a problem if His Excellency were here as well.”

Al: “…”

Olbart: “But Kafma’s fightin’ that thing, isn’t he? Does that mean that His Excellency ordered him to do it, and has no intention of runnin’ away? Do ya know?”

Having spoken so, Olbart walked up to him, sending a question his way.

The small old man cracked the bones in his neck and bent down to look into Al’s face, the latter crouching down. His brain, numbed by fear, barely assimilated the contents of that question.

Vincent, the absent false Emperor, had reached some kind of agreement with Abel, and—

Al: “H-he’s with a lil’ miss called Tanza…”

Olbart: “Tanza, you mean that deergirl? I dunno what he’s thinkin’, at this point… His Excellency’s a lil’ short on words, ya know. Would be nice if he’d left a note ‘bout what he’s gonna do.”

Al: “Y-you’re…”

Olbart: “Yeah?”

Olbart’s expression formed a frown as he stood up, hearing Al speak. Not wanting to let that monstrous old man distance himself even a bit, Al used his trembling tongue and throat to compose his words.

Olbart had returned to this place, but what would he do after this?

Al: “You’re gonna fight that thing, aren’t you?”

Olbart: “Oioi, don’t be stupid.”

Al: “Huh…”

Al was stunned by Olbart answering as if he had nothing to do with the situation.

Then, as Al stared on, stock-still in front him, Olbart pointed out the window.

Olbart: “Nah, got it at first glance. That thing’s pretty darn bad. I’ve got my right hand taken away, too, so I don’t wanna do anythin’ so dangerous.”

Al: “…”

Olbart: “The reason I came back here’s that I gotta get His Excellency out if he’s stayin’ here without a care. If he’s not here, we need ta find him and get him outta there… Do you happen to know where His Excellency went with that deergirl…?”

Asked by the ever-aloof Olbart, Al simply denied it with a shake of his head.

It was not a lie, but a fact. Most of the exchanges between Abel and the others that had taken place at travelers’ inn after that black shadow engulfed and flooded the Crimson Lapis Castle did not remain in his memory.

With some difficulty, he only remembered that Kafma had flown out as ordered, and that Vincent had left accompanied by Tanza. And that afterwards, Abel had left an useless Al behind, with Medium concerned about Al until the end. That was all.

Olbart: “We’re in serious trouble then, if so. Looks like this town’s bunch’ve been motivated by the foxgirl’s command, and it’s gettin’ harder and harder ta find His Excellency… I don’t wanna stay at this absolute cock-up for too long.”

Al: “—Hk, wh-what do you mean by that? No way, you’re running away?”

As he felt his train of thought reaching an unbelievable conclusion, Al’s voice cracked.

Faced with Al’s astonished look, Olbart shrugged his shoulders and voiced, calmly, “What else can I do?”.

Olbart: “Don’t feel I can do anythin’ ‘bout that thing. What’s important to me’s my life and my dream. I don’t see any reason to stay.”

Al: “Th-The Emperor! You gotta protect the Emperor, old man…”

Olbart: “The fact that His Excellency’s thinkin’ and actin’ on his own means he’s doin’ what’s best for himself. If he thinks he’s got my help here, he doesn’t get me either. That’s why him bein’ called the Wise Emperor’s also a cryin’ shame.”

Al: “Oh…”

Olbart: “Here’s some advice for ya, ya better run away too. Ya won’t get anythin’ by riskin’ yer life here. Meanin’, the one who lives wiser wins.”

Olbart’s philosophy, something that blended the deadly Vollachia-style iron-blooded code with the fact that his life as a shinobi had been long, was bloody and rock-solid.

This was something that could not be changed, no matter what an outsider such as Al said. —No, most likely, Olbart’s thinking could not be challenged by anyone other than Olbart.

No one should allow others to dictate and distort one’s life.

For that reason, this man, Olbart Dunkelkenn, reigned as the strongest shinobi. He was a shinobi who had been perfected with him not holding anything as precious, or having anyone to whom he devoted his heart.

No emphasis had been placed on the title of General, on the position of shinobi head-honcho, or on the sense of duty to protect the Emperor.

Not freedom. But lawlessness. —The world's greatest "outlaw", those were his true colors.

That idea would not budge. It could not be swayed. Not by anyone.

Then, having a back-and-forth regarding his ideology here would yield naught.

Al: "…"

Strongly, firmly grating his molars together, Al lowered the arm he had been pressing against his ear.

The audible booming roars and rumblings of the earth, the cries of the residents of Demon City as they confronted the black shadow, echoed like the scene was a depiction of hell on earth, shaking Al's heart.

His heart, was about to fracture. His mind, was about to shatter. His soul, was close to dispersing.

But I haven't. I haven't yet. If they haven't.

Al: "…Old man, lemme ask you one thing."

Olbart: "—? What is it?"

Al: "That… That black mass of shadows's got something to do with bro, doesn't it?"

Gritting his teeth to the point of tasting blood, Al assembled words, hiding the trembling in his voice for only a moment.

Al's deathly resolve—as that was concealed behind the cloth mask, Olbart perhaps understood so from the expression of the former's eyes, gone unseen, and from his tone. Bringing his left hand to his own goatee, he spoke,

Olbart: "Oh, right. To me, it looked like the shadows came out of the boy."

Al: "…"

Olbart: “After hearing that, have ya decided what you’re gonna do?”

Closing his eyes, Al masticated what Olbart had just told him.

It was something he already knew. Natsuki Subaru was beneath that black shadow. —No, Natsuki Subaru was at the center of everything.

If so, in that case, Al had to raise his face with the resolve of having his molars broken.

If Natsuki Subaru was there, Aldebaran needed to follow him.

Al: “You told me to live wiser, old man.”

Olbart: “Yeah, right. That’s what I believe.”

Al: “But I don’t agree with it. Old man, your way of life ain’t a wise one, it’s a cunning one. —I don’t wanna be a cunning adult.”

Boom, a powerful noise was heard.

Not from outside, but originating from right beside Al. He had slammed his own fist into the floor, the pain and momentum of the slam raising his body. He rested his uplifted body against the wall, having somehow managed to stand up.

Knees trembling, heart frightened, spiritually wounded all over, even though he had not even fought, and yet—.

Al: “This ain’t the time to sit around… Won’t be able to look my parents in the face if I do that, will I…!”

Standing up with his hand on the wall, Al bared his teeth inside his mask.

Hearing of his dogged determination amidst blood-curdling cries, Olbart raised a long, bushy eyebrow. Sending a sharp look out the window, closing one eye to Al’s howling back,

Olbart: “Yer enthusiasm’s good and all, but ya really think we got a chance ta win against that thing?”

Al: “No fucking way! No one can win against that! Even if I tried ten-thousand times, I couldn’t win! Winning against that thing… Only Natsuki Subaru can do that!”

With a large swing of his arm, Al turned around with a bang on the windowsill.

Looking at the monstrous old man directly in the face, Al stepped forward, both his eyes blazing in a conflagration,

Al: “Old man!”

Olbart: “Whoawhoa, you’re gettin’ fired up. I’m just gonna tell ya, if ya want me ta lend ya a hand, I gotta refuse…”

Al: “I don’t want it! Instead, just turn me back, ya shitty geezer.”

Olbart: “…”

Al: “If you want time to run away, then I’ll make some. So give me my Authority back!”

Stretching his stubby right hand straight out, Al bellowed that towards Olbart.

Olbart’s breath caught in his throat as he heard Al’s cry, a mixture of a bestial roar, of a mournful lament, and of a fiery sense of purpose.

Then, giving a slow sideways shake of his head, the monstrous old man,

Olbart: “Well, if you’re gonna go ta the trouble of playin’ the martyr, I can’t argue with’cha. The boy won the game in the first place, so I gotta keep my promise.”

Al: “Bro, won?”

Olbart: “That’s right. That boy actually caught me in a game of tag. It was a real big deal, in my opinion.”

As Olbart said this, Al went out to meet him face-to-face, Olbart greeting him with a wave of his left arm.

Having heard what Olbart had to say, Al felt a single note of relief and admiration ring out over his pulse ticking like a bomb.

At a time when even the sound of the wind caused Al to stiffen in fright, Subaru had carried out his task, going head-to-head with Olbart, and managing to ultimately pull off a win against him.

Surely, having accumulated defeats that could not have happened merely once—

Olbart: "Tho', I just wanna hear one thing outta curiosity."

Suddenly, a hoarse voice interrupted the beating of Al's heart, and he looked at the other man silently.

Displaying his teeth, Olbart smiled towards the unwelcome look in the other person's eyes, as he gently placed his outstretched left hand on Al's chest.

And then—

Olbart: "How do ya intend ta challenge an enemy ya can't win against even if ya try ten-thousand times?"

Al: "Pipe down, you shitty geezer. —I'll go and die, even if it's a million times."

3

Abel: "The one who has inherited the commandment to prevent the Great Disaster, the one to become the new Stargazer."

The moment this was pointed out, Taritta's world was rocked, dramatically so.

The Great Disaster's rampage was causing the Demon City to shake, earthquake-like roars could be heard without end. But the reason for the illusion of collapse beneath her feet was not that.

It was what the oni-masked man in front of her—what Abel had pointed out which gouged her heart of hearts.

Medium: “Star, gazer…?”

Standing by Taritta’s side as to gently support her unsteady body, Medium muttered that unfamiliar term as if to confirm what it was.

It was a term unknown to her, and one she did not need to know.

In reality, had Taritta continued to live peacefully within her hometown in the forest as a simple member of the People of Shudraq, she would have never had any need to associate with it, even.

But—

Taritta: “I…”

Medium: “Abel-chin! I have no clue what’s going on! What are you talking about?!”

On behalf of Taritta, her voice quivering, Medium lashed out at Abel.

She had been shrunk yet she remained steadfast nevertheless, her thin chest puffed out as if to protect Taritta, as she glared straight at Abel.

Medium: “What’s that Stargazer thing you’re talking about? Why is Taritta-chan becoming that?”

Abel: “—. A Stargazer is one who has taken on the role of foreseeing the future based on the alignment of the stars and their guidance. No, calling it a predestination, rather than a role, would be more accurate.”

Medium: “…Are you putting it in such complicated words on purpose?”

Abel: “That is not my intent.”

Abel, hearing Medium's words as she frowned and struggled to understand, gave a small sigh.

After that, putting Medium aside, Abel called out to Taritta once more using her name, "Taritta". Her shoulders hitched involuntarily; Abel, looking directly at her, spoke,

Abel: "The reason why I was ousted from the Imperial Capital in the first place is closely related to the Stargazers. Taritta, you should be aware of that matter, right?"

Taritta: "B-by the matter, you mean…"

Abel: "Of course, that the ruin of the Empire was foreseen. You knew that. —That is why you wished to murder me in the Buddheim Jungle."

Taritta: "—Hk."

Taritta's cheeks tensed up, and she lowered her head due to Abel's matter-of-fact statement, crossing his arms.

The shock of being called a Stargazer nearly overshadowed the fact that Abel had pointed out something that could not possibly be overlooked.

He had stated it with certainty. —Taritta was the hunter of the jungle.

Did she regret missing her opportunity to shoot him down?

When put into words—

Taritta: "Since when…"

Abel: "…"

Taritta: "Since when have you known I was after you…?"

Medium: "Taritta-chan?!"

Face turned downwards, Taritta raised this question without being able to look Abel in the eye.

Hearing Taritta's words, a voice of utter shock leaked out of Medium. Of course it did. From hearing her question, it was evident that she had no margin to deny Abel's pressure.

It was a confession of the truth. Taritta had attempted to kill Abel with her archery.

Abel: "The Stargazers' foreknowledge… Commandments are, for the most part, shared among fellow Stargazers. It was to be expected that my pursuers would come at me after I escaped the Imperial Capital, aware of that commandment. In addition…"

Taritta: "In addition?"

Abel: "That I would rely on the People of Shudraq, based on knowledge of the throne's mechanism, could be conjectured. In all probability, there is an assassin amidst the Shudraq."

Taritta: "…"

Abel: "I only obtained definite proof of the assassin's existence, however, when you targeted Natsuki Subaru, mistaking him for me."

Hearing Abel's line of reasoning, Taritta grasped the hem of her clothes tightly.

That was true. Taritta, living in one end of the Empire, possessed no way of knowing the countenance of the Emperor of Vollachia. All she knew was that black hair and black eyes were characteristics of his outward appearance.

Never would she have thought that multiple owners of such unusual features would appear in the forest on that day, at the same time.

Abel: "Your reaction to seeing the two of us, me and that one, trapped in the village's cage, was remarkable… For a pawn of the Observers, your nature is a far too honest one."

Taritta: "—Ah."

Abel: “You accompanied me in both the capture of Guaral and the journey to the Demon City that followed, but you were not at all willing to follow the commandment. Why is that?”

Taritta: “…”

Abel: “Why do you refuse to obey that commandment? From what I have heard, a Stargazer’s predestination is not something one can resist even if they are aware of it. I do not believe you have the will to resist that predestination.”

Had she that sort of strong will, of self-discipline, Taritta would not have accompanied them on this journey in the first place.

Abel’s judgment was harsh, but correct. Correct enough to draw blood.

Taritta did not possess the strength to abandon her own commandment.

If that were possible, she would have abandoned a burden of the sort much, much sooner.

For certain she knew that, if she did not obey that commandment, the Great Disaster would destroy the Empire—.

Medium: “—Oh my gosh! I don’t get it at all!”

Taritta carried on in anguish, while Abel continued on in pursuit.

Sandwiched between the two, and yet kept out of the loop, Medium exploded. She glared at Abel with her blue eyes, spreading both her arms in order to shield Taritta behind her back.

Medium: “I don’t know anything about Abel-chin being targeted, or that it was Taritta-chan who targeted Abel-chin! First of all, if Taritta’d have had her mind set on it, Abel-chin would’ve been killed by now! Right?”

Abel: “You, learn to watch your tongue.”

Medium: “Right! Abel-chin, can you run away from Taritta-chan?”

The shape of Abel’s mouth took contours of loathing after Medium spoke her words filled with vigor.

He could not deny her words. But doubts on this front had been posed to Taritta by Abel, already.

In other words, just as Medium had stated, she could have done it if she wanted to, so why hadn’t she?

That was—

Taritta: “…Because, I couldn’t find, a meaning to it.”

Abel: “—. What reason do you require, beyond saving the Empire from ruin?”

Taritta: “I! I didn’t even know that you were the Emperor, or how you were chased out of the Imperial Capital……! That’s because, to me, to me, as a Stargazer, I am—”

The anguish that had been locked away at the back of her chest for so long finally began to overflow with the opening of her mouth.

And what had unleashed the anguish she had been unsure of how to put into words for a long time, had been none other than Abel’s hounding.

But before she could clearly put it into words—.

Medium: “—Nooo!”

A wide-eyed Medium exclaimed, and Taritta and Abel’s attention quickly shifted upward.

Right above, black darkness covered the building directly above where the three stood—No, that was not it. It was not just sable darkness spreading, but rather a huge black arm.

Endowed with five fingers, it stretched itself upright, then swung down on the building from directly above.

As if attempting to smash the three people present at this place—

No, as if attempting to grab them with its huge hand.

Taritta: “—Hk, Medium! Abel!”

The moment she witnessed its approach, all extraneous thoughts disappeared from Taritta’s mind.

The scene of verbal assault from just before vanished into thin air; Taritta moved as her instincts dictated, embracing Medium in front of her, carrying Abel on her shoulders, and leaping directly backward.

With that, she attempted to escape the gargantuan black arm’s range. —Not enough, however.

Caught by the falling fingertips, they were helplessly snatched away from this world.

???: “I will not allow that to happen—!!”

However, just before the titanic arm reached Taritta and the others, a huge mass was wedged with great violence overhead, between the three of them and the giant arm.

Tightly entangled in emerald-green thorny vines, the castle walls had been torn apart and seized.

With tremendous centrifugal force, it became a dome that protected the group of three in which Taritta was included, trying to intercept the falling giant arm.

Naturally, the limb was not something that would be halted by anything of the sort.

Once the huge black arm touched the wall, the latter came undone as easily as candy, disappearing in a second like a leaf being devoured by a winged insect.

However—

???: “I won’t tolerate any further disorder in my city—Hk!”

A woman clad in a kimono dived right under the disappearing castle wall, the beast ears on her head all perked up, kicking her long legs upwards, propelling the wall towards the gargantuan arm.

A wave of pressure broke through, beckoning the collapse of the building it focused on. However, the unfathomable might of the woman's kick caused the gigantic arm on the other side of the wall to bend, halting the erosion.

But, it only stopped for a moment.

Still, that one moment was enough.

Taritta: "—Hk, we're safe!"

Narrowly escaping the giant arm's range, her heels grinding into the ground, Taritta exhaled.

Released from her arms, Medium and Abel also landed on the ground. The three of them looked up to see the building that had been their perch earlier being swallowed up by the shadows.

Medium: "Y-Yorna-chan is…!"

Abel: "She's safe. Though it looks like we are being pursued even more than we were a moment ago."

Jerking his chin, Abel answered as Medium cast her gaze all around her with a worried look.

At the place her glance was directed to, jumping around while being chased by the shadows running amok, was the kimono-clad woman who had just let loose a potent blow—was she Yorna Mishigure?

That transcendent force was worthy of qualifying for the Nine Divine Generals.

It was understandable that Abel would wish to have someone like her on his side. A person as powerful as her could easily accept a destiny that would determine the course of the world.

Unlike Taritta, there would be no hesitation if the time came.

Abel: “You saved me once more, Taritta.”

As if seeing through Taritta’s indecision, Abel examined the kneeling Taritta.

She was unable to calm her breathing down, for reasons aside from her exertion immediately prior. However, Abel would spare no quarter to Taritta, either physically or mentally.

Abel: “Had you not extended your hand, I could have lost my life without any effort on your part. And yet, you saved me; was that because you cannot fulfill the commandment you have received without getting your hands dirty?”

Taritta: “Th-That’s wrong…!”

Abel: “If so, how come? Your conduct is inconsistent with—”

Medium: “But more importantly, thank you for the help, right?!”

Once again, Medium came to Taritta’s rescue, rendered speechless after the accusation of inconsistent behavior.

Medium, her beautiful golden hair disheveled, was thrusting her finger at Abel right before the latter’s eyes. The difference in stature between the two was visible in her gesture, but even so, Medium did not let go or yield her claim.

Medium: “Abel-chan, you and I would’ve died if Taritta-chan hadn’t saved us, no? We gotta thank her, first of all. Taritta-chan, thank you~!”

Taritta: “H-huh…”

Medium: “Then, back on track! What’s up with that, Abel-chin? What do you wanna have Taritta-chan do?”

Medium looked back and thanked her, then quickly turned to Abel.

Her questioning was delayed somewhat by the exchange between

Abel and Taritta, with the former sighing that Medium could not keep up with her understanding of the situation.

Abel: “I already conveyed that to Taritta. I do not require that you understand.”

Medium: “If I don’t understand, I’ll just keep disturbing you ‘til I do, okay? How about that?”

Abel: “—. In order to quell the Great Disaster, I must lose my life. That is the future the Stargazer has seen, and the commandment bestowed upon Taritta.”

Medium: “—? I got no idea of what you mean. Why would that big black shadow calm down after Abel-chin’s death? That’s so weird!”

In response to Medium’s persistent pleas, Taritta bit the inside of her cheek.

Certainly, she could understand the foresight that the Empire would be spared from destruction as a result of fulfilling that commandment. How exactly would that be brought about, Taritta was unsure.

However, that being pointed out only made Medium realize Abel’s ruthlessness—

Abel: “—Is it not odd?”

But Taritta’s conjecture was stalled by the echo of Abel’s words that followed.

Baring her teeth, Medium voiced out “Odd”, in vehement protest. To which Abel, covering his mouth with his hand, once more repeated it, “Odd”.

Abel: “Taritta.”

Taritta: “Ah, wh-what is it?”

Abel: “The commandment you have received, to take my life to avert the Empire’s ruin. Are you certain of it?”

Taritta: "—Hk."

Being directed a question to again, hesitantly, Taritta nodded her head.

She had been told that the commandment she was unable to execute was necessary.

But after ascertaining this, Abel once more spoke, "If so",

Abel: "Would that not be what you know as destruction?"

Taritta: "Huh…"

Abel: "You know of the divination that a Great Disaster would bring about the ruin of the Empire. But you hold the belief that that thing, and the Great Disaster, are one and the same. Are you certain of that?"

With that question, Taritta's thoughts began racing, trying to discern its meaning.

What could one call that entity that evoked dread and horror, the black shadow gradually spreading from the heart of the Demon City, if not the Great Disaster?

Time and time again, a nightmarish spectacle was displayed to her repeatedly.

Every night, a nightmare, urging her to not forget, over and over again brought Taritta visions of the coming doom. That thing was certainly a manifestation of that, however—

Taritta: "Is that, the Great Disaster or not…"

Abel: "You have not obtained knowledge of it, is that so? Then perhaps some other Stargazer has."

Taritta: "Some other…"

After that sentence, Taritta's eyes began moving frantically.

Although Abel had stated Stargazers were connected to each other, Taritta was an exception. —No, “exception” was not the correct word. To begin with, they were different from the get-go.

That was why Taritta had no idea about the existence of other Stargazers.

Taritta: “Ah…”

If she were to have an idea about that Stargazer, it would be the person she had encountered just a few moments ago.

Taritta: “…”

That delicate man who did not let go of his carefree attitude, that obnoxious person who had not even given his name, was so well-informed that he had called Taritta the “Disgrace of Shudraq”.

He knew of Taritta’s sin. Perhaps due to the connection between Stargazers.

What had he, the Stargazer, said upon laying eyes on the Great Disaster?

If she recalled correctly, the man had stated—

Taritta: “That, it was outside his responsibility…”

Abel: “—. Truly, was that what the Stargazer said? I see.”

Medium: “Abel-chin?”

Hearing Taritta leaking that expression, dumbfounded, Abel nodded, then turned away.

Frowning her eyebrows at that, Medium wrapped around Abel as to go towards his front and peer into his face. And once she did, Medium’s round eyes widened. Startled.

The reason for her surprise was evident in Abel’s immediate reaction.

Abel placed his palm on his own face covered by the oni mask, and fixing his stare solidly on the heart of the Demon City, where the Great Disaster—or rather, where the all-consuming jet-black mass continued its rampage,

Abel: “—The Empire’s ruin, is it not that Great Disaster?”

With this murmur, Abel then cleared his throat slightly, letting out a short exhale.

To Taritta, who was unable to see the expression on his face, it had nearly sounded like a laugh.

Abel: “If so, there is no reason for you to stumble along the way. —I shall have you disappear from the board, you interloper.”

Chapter 58:
Those With No Place to Turn to

1

—Taritta first began being tormented by nightmares related to a “commandment” three years prior.

Up until then, Taritta had lived a life wholly detached from a “commandment”.

Of course, she had also been completely ignorant of the existence of Stargazers.

—Once people heard the word “commandment”, what would come to mind?

Fate and destiny, the inevitable trials and obstacles in the walk of one’s life.

When it comes to thinking of such, there was a clear difference between those and a commandment. Things that were unavoidable, very much like the falling rain when walking on unsheltered roads.

The People of Shudraq, too, had an understanding of something such as inevitable events.

Putting it in honest words, it could be said that death was the most inescapable fate among all.

Old age and illness, hunger and injuries as well, things associated with death were the curtain of destiny that would arrive without exception, something difficult to avoid.

No matter the person, one could not go against their destiny. Nor should they consider that they should defy it.

When a compatriot of theirs died, they prayed and sung, so that their soul would be welcomed into peace.

Singing, feasting, and seeing them off was the Way of Shudraq, a value Taritta believed in.

Her older sister, Mizelda, was an outstanding Shudraqian. Although she was not as prominent as her sister, Taritta had also inherited the blood of a lineage that continued to carry the role of Shudraq Chieftain for generations.

Being a Shudraqian was an unquestionable truth for Taritta.

Following the teachings of Shudraq was only natural, something not to be questioned.

Taritta had never been good at mulling over stuff. She was not one to be bothered with things, nor did she wish to add to her own worries.

She had believed that her life would be one of following her older sister's footsteps alongside the People of Shudraq, her own people, who shared her blood and her own path, from beginning to end.

That was to be her fate, her destiny—

???: "Hey, Taritta. I was chosen to be a Stargazer, and I have a commandment to fulfill."

—That was, until the one closest to her, her "soul sister", confided in her.

2

Abel: "—The Empire's ruin, is it not that Great Disaster?"

The man in the oni mask stared straight ahead at Taritta, her resolve shaken, wobbly on her feet.

The writhing, jet-black thing visible from a distance was instinctively recognizable at a glance as a "Great Disaster"; however, the man—Abel, ridiculed the notion of being afraid of it.

Abel: "If so, there is no reason for you to stumble along the way. —I shall have you disappear from the board, you interloper."

Abel stepped forward, stating clearly, and with much grit, that it was something undesired.

At that very moment, the small Medium shouted “Wait, wait!” from beside him. Grabbing the hem of Abel’s clothing, she halted his movements with all her might,

Medium: “You’re suddenly really determined, aren’t you?! But, it’s too dangerous for you Abel-chin!”

Abel: “Fool. It is clear what needs to be done. If that were likely to be the Great Disaster, I would lament that the preparations were beyond insufficient. If that is not the case, however…”

Medium: “Then what?”

Abel: “Then it is merely a sideshow before the real deal. There is no time for such entertainment. As far as that is concerned, we shall promptly put an end to it. —You too, shall become aware of that if you observe it from a distance.”

Jerking his chin, Abel indicated the Great Disaster to Medium, after her question. But, much like she was unsure of his intent, Medium frowned.

Back and forth, she took glances at Abel and the Great Disaster, sizing them up,

Medium: “I don’t understand a single thing you said! You’ve got a bad habit of putting on airs, Abel-chin!”

Abel: “Are you holding me responsible for your lack of intellect?”

Medium: “Like. I. Said! If I can’t grasp the point of this, then I’m going to get in your way! Abel-chin, you’re just getting in your own way! If you were smart, you’d realize that!”

Abel: “…”

Stomping on the ground and puffing out her cheeks, Medium would not let go of the hem of Abel’s clothing.

Perhaps thinking that he didn't have time to ponder over Medium's defiance, it being one of her strengths, Abel let out a small sigh, and then,

Abel: "If you have not noticed, that girl, Yorna Mishigure, Kafma Irulux, and the people of the Demon City, are struggling desperately to stop that Great Disaster."

Medium: "Mmm~, that bad habit of yours again?"

Abel: "—. That thing has a will. It has a clear, obvious, human will."

Abel spoke, and Medium tilted her head, "Will?".

Taritta, standing behind Medium, also raised an eyebrow at the latter's question. That Great Disaster, the embodiment of the end of the world, possesses a will?

Furthermore, Abel labeled it the will of a "person". Where could such a thing exist there?

In the first place, the idea of considering that thing as a living entity was one she could not even conceive.

The figure, which was whittling away at the world with all of its entirety, bubbling away, writhing, spelled the end of the world itself.

What in the world could Abel have seen that had made him conclude that it possessed a will?

Just when Taritta and Medium arrived at that very same question—

Abel: "Earlier, that thing reached out to you people."

Medium: "Huh?"

Taritta: "—Ah."

Abel's seemingly unexpected words made both of them let out dumb noises.

Medium happened to have no idea of that, but Taritta felt a faint discomfort. —When she'd snatched the two of them away from the shadows, that had come swooping down, Taritta had sensed it as well.

That, from that abhorrent jet-black thing, there was something akin to a slight attachment.

Abel: "Most likely, it reflects the will of the one struggling deep inside it. Seeking salvation, it keeps reaching out its hands. Behold."

Before Taritta's astonished gasp, Abel now extended his hand as to indicate the Great Disaster.

Taritta and the others, drawn by the gesture, looked at it, and now understood Abel's point.

Sitting at the center of the Demon City in place of the collapsed Crimson Lapis Castle, the Great Disaster spread unrelenting destruction and demise to the surrounding area, expanding—but that which the darkest of shadows extended to as to reap it, bringing its demise by taking it unto itself, were not buildings nor the very earth, but human beings.

And that, too—

Medium: "—Louis-chan and Yorna-chan are the only ones being attacked?"

Taritta had the same impression as what was contained in Medium's faint mutter.

As they watched the fierce battle against the Great Disaster from a distance, they could easily see the bias in the shadow's aim.

The two main targets were Yorna, who was unfolding a fight across several fronts, and Louis, who was evading the shadows she had attracted with instantaneous movement.

Even Taritta was impressed, her eyes opened wide, by Louis's incredible movements, but, wielding destructive power, Yorna's offensive and defensive abilities were a testament to her transcendent strength as one of the Nine Divine Generals.

But the man from the Insect Cage Clan was no less capable, demonstrating suppressive abilities comparable to those of Yorna, keeping the damage caused by the Great Disaster at a minimum again and again by use of his vines of thorns. And yet, the only attacks that flew in his direction, and in the direction of the building-throwing residents of the Demon City, were basically akin to stray arrows.

Medium: “If it’s targeting Louis-chan as well, it means it’s not going in order of who’s stronger.”

Abel: “Taking into account strength, and strength only, she is not too far behind Kafma Irulux. But, assessing it from a bird’s-eye view, it is self-evident. It possesses a will. Meaning it only makes sense for me to move.”

Taritta: “Wh-What makes you, so sure about that…?”

Abel: “It is a given. There is no way that thing is fond of me. Let us say that it is reaching out hands as if to cling onto someone, then the likes of me are not fit candidates for such a thing.”

Taritta found Abel’s disinterested manner of speaking a baffling, puzzling thing.

She understood Abel’s thought, defining the existence of the Great Disaster of being something with a will. However, it was peculiar that, using that as a basis, the Great Disaster’s selection criteria would be clear.

It was as if Abel knew to whom the will of the Great Disaster belonged.

Abel: “—It is Natsuki Subaru.”

Taritta: “—Hk!”

Medium: “Huh?!”

As if to push Taritta’s doubts and Medium’s lack of understanding out of the way, Abel trained his line of sight at the Great Disaster as he asserted that.

Viewing the two staring motionless and in shock, Abel gave a deep nod, and continued,

Abel: “It was something that overflowed from within Natsuki Subaru. Then, it is no wonder that his will intervened. All along, I had regarded him as a man of numerous secrets, but this is beyond my expectations.”

Medium: “W-wait a minute, Abel-chin… You’re saying, that’s Subaru-chin…?!”

Abel: “Strictly speaking, it is something that permits Natsuki Subaru’s will to be reflected. I’m not saying that it’s him, or something serving him. —Either way, the result is the same.”

Medium: “Abel-chin, why do you seem to be so calm about it?!”

Medium, her round eyes wide in surprise, complained in a voice that made it seem like she was about to cry.

Looking down at her small figure, Abel’s black eyes, on the other side of the oni mask, narrowed. Just like an adult troubled by the tantrum of a child.

Abel: “Do I look calm to you? He let that thing overflow from inside him, and my whole plan fell apart. Reconsideration is required for this, and yet I do not possess the time for that now. And yet you say I look calm to you?”

Medium: “No! No, that’s not what I’m talking about! It’s not that, it’s… Subaru-chin’s calling out for help, right? But even so, you’re so calm about that, why?!”

Abel: “—Would cuddling up with that thing in its suffering bring the situation at hand under control? Unfortunately, reality is not so accommodating nor benevolent.”

Medium’s fervent words, however, failed to sway Abel’s heart of iron.

That was because he was a cold man, incapable of understanding people's hearts—no, he was a man that regarded the human heart as unimportant, but who at the same time he was a man who could separate his priorities.

For those who stood at the top, like politicians and leaders, it was a quality that must be possessed.

The same would be required of Taritta, who had to assume the position of Chieftain.

But—

Taritta: "For me, I…"

She was unable to think in the same way as Abel did, nor could she have his decisiveness.

Much less, she was also unable to head-on say that she hated something if that was the case, just like Medium.

Abel: "I have no time to argue with you here. I shall take my leave. I must converse with Yorna Mishigure."

Medium: "…With Yorna-chan? But how?"

Stating that he could not spend any more time answering her questions, Abel attempted to step forward. But Medium interrupted him, her gaze testifying eloquently to the difficulty of proceeding.

Having declared the place he was going to, Abel, in his attempt to talk with Yorna, would find himself in the frontlines against the mad rampage of the Great Disaster.

The battlefield where a split-second decision from those transcendent people could mark the difference between life and death.

It was evident that Abel would only endanger his life, were he to step forth. In fact, he would not even be able to make a move that would change the course of the battle—.

Taritta: "…"

Taritta's whole body froze at the thought of a move that could change the course of the battle.

Or, perhaps, it was an option available only to Taritta. Only Taritta had the means to appease the disgusting harbinger of death that was the Great Disaster.

The only one aware of the commandment bestowed upon her for the sake of repelling the Great Disaster, Taritta—

Medium: "—I'm going to go to the front too."

Abel: "What?"

At the prospect of such a big decision, Taritta's body shuddered.

To Taritta's side, Abel's voice was filled with doubt as Medium declared so. Black eyes flickered as if peering into the heart of the little girl restraining herself,

Abel: "You, what are you thinking? To begin with, have you even been listening to me? The only grounds on which I shall be taking my leave, is because I believe that thing is not fond of me. If you go there…"

Medium: "I got that already! So I'm not going with you! I'm going where Louis-chan and Yorna-chan are fighting! I want Subaru-chin to find me."

Abel: "…"

Medium: "If it is as Abel guessed, Subaru-chin will reach out to me, right? If that's the case, Louis-chan and the others will have a teeny bit less trouble, won't they? Maybe that way Abel-chin won't be targeted either."

Abel: "To begin with, I am less likely to be targeted."

Medium: "Maybe then it'll be even less likely! Right?!"

Stepping forth firmly, Medium emphasized her own bid.

For a moment, it was clear that Abel was considering Medium's proposal in earnest. As per her words, if the Great Disaster reflected Subaru's will, then it was highly likely that Medium would be targeted.

However, Medium remained as a concern, her stature still diminutive, her mobility still hampered.

Even if she were to take on the role of attracting the attention of the Great Disaster, there was a good chance that she would be swallowed up by the shadows without being able to fulfill her role in any significant way. If that much were to happen, it would generate a mental turmoil to those around her.

He didn't think that none other than Taritta herself would be able to tolerate Medium's without batting an eye.

Energetic, full of life, and unafraid to be around others, Medium was one of Taritta's favorite companions. She would be incapable of facing her brother, Flop, either.

—In that case, she wondered if she, in her current state, would be able to face anyone.

Abel: "Denied."

Medium: "Abel-chin!"

Abel: "I considered it for a moment, but in your condition, you would not be able to fulfill the role of a decoy. The impact of your death on those around you would be a greater concern. I cannot accept such a gamble."

Adjacent to Taritta at a standstill, Abel dismissed Medium's proposal out of that very same concern.

However, gnashing her teeth out of anger, Medium's eyes transmitted a lack of satisfaction. At this point, it was quite possible that she would disregard Abel's opinion and leap onto the battlefield and raise her voice toward the Great Disaster.

And amidst that sort of perilous situation—

???: "—Then I'll protect Lil' Miss Medium. You shouldn't have any complaints then, right?"

Stepping over the rubble, the voice of a newly-arrived figure interrupted.

At the sound of the familiar voice the group of three, all in their own worlds, turned to look at the person speaking to them.

The Blue Dragon Sword hanging from their thick right arm and an ugly rag covering their face, they possessed a suspicious appearance. Although the sense of them being a particularly powerful person had never been there, for some reason, at this moment, in this place, the man standing there was brimming with a fighting spirit so striking that it was almost too much to look at—Al.

Medium: "Al-chin! You've gotten bigger… and back to normal?!"

Al: "Right, I just happened to run into the old man coming back. I didn't have time to go back to the inn to get my helmet, so you'll have to overlook this clumsy presentation for a tad."

Medium: "Not at all, so cool! But if Gramps is there…"

Barring the rags wrapped around his face, Al had returned to his original state. Medium's voice seemed sunnier due to his words, which made her look around restlessly as well

Naturally, as Medium was in the same state, she would opt for returning to her normal self.

But, Al appended with "Sorry" regarding Medium's situation,

Al: "Sorry, I couldn't bring the old man along. He said he'd be wise about it."

Medium: "Umm~, I see. Mhm, I get it! But I'm glad, even if it's just Al-chin who's back! Have you stopped being so scared now?"

Al: “Being scared, that’s something that ain’t gonna stop for the rest of my life.”

Medium switched instantly from having her eyes downcast for a moment as hope was taken away from her. Hearing her words, Al lowered the tone of his voice, shaking his head.

His voice was filled to the brim with unconcealable fear and anxiety. In the face of that Great Disaster, everyone held instinctive fear. No one could condemn them for that.

Whereas Al harbored true fear. However, whereas Al harbored no feigned fear of the sort,

Al: “Still, I gotta do it… Bring it on, oh inevitable fate.”

Medium: “Al-chin…”

Suddenly, Al raised the clasped Blue Dragon Sword overhead; Medium looked impressed by his determination.

Meanwhile, a small snorting sound interrupted their conversation.

Abel: “For a trembling, shriveled abomination, you sure talk big. That Olbart Dunkelkenn should have no ability to inspire others.”

Al: “And you’d be right. The old man just said a lot of things that pissed me off. It wasn’t that lil’ shit that made me stand up.”

Abel: “Then what did? After having been rendered unmoving, how will you convince me that you can be included in my future plans?”

Al: “…”

Abel, kept like that by Medium seizing the hem of his clothing and being held back, asked that of Al.

Those cold eyes of his, piercing his oni mask, were probably still thinking of the victory that had to be grasped. How would Al be able to convince Abel to add him to his ranks, here?

With Abel turning his gaze towards her, Taritta had trouble breathing, unable to imagine how he would convince him.

Under the watchful eyes of Taritta, Abel, and finally Medium, Al—

Al: “Sorry, but I ain’t gonna waste my words to convince you, Abel-chan.”

Abel: “Ho.”

Al: “The only master I got is the sexy-cute Princess. The reason I’ve gone along with you like this, is so that I can give bro some assistance… So that’s what I’m gonna do. Feel free to work my moves into your equations however you want, Abel-chan.”

Declaring so with a defiant attitude, Al shouldered the Blue Dragon Sword. That brisk and clear decision made Abel’s oni mask-covered face tense slightly.

But even if the answer was not in accordance to his own thoughts, Abel had neither the power to drive Al away nor a relationship valuable enough to hold him back. Exactly as Al had predicted.

No matter what, Abel would have to formulate a plan with the assumption of Al’s presence.

Abel: “If your sanity returned, then what has merely returned is just a bothersome clown. How do you plan to fight it?”

Al: “Trade secret. —Well, I ain’t gonna let you die, Lil’ Miss Medium. And don’t worry, I’ll protect you too, Abel-chan.”

Medium: “Al-chin…”

With the Great Disaster’s rampage right before his eyes, Al’s reply was far too reassuring.

What in those wordshad caused Medium to open her eyes wide, was the surprise that Al had recovered from what Abel had described as a “disgrace”, becoming an embodiment of honor.

Consequently, Medium strongly nodded, and, Medium: “I’ll do my best with Al-chin! Abel-chin, is that fine with you?”

Abel: “—. From the beginning, the presence of you two was not part of the plan.”

Medium: “Thank you very much. Just the apparent fact that we weren’t included among those with fighting power makes it feel like we’re getting special treatment.”

Shrugging at Abel’s answer, Medium lined up with Al, who stepped forward. Only then did Medium’s hand part with Abel’s sleeve at last.

Waving his released arm, Abel released out a small exhale, then turned to face the Great Disaster.

And then—

Abel: “—Taritta.”

Taritta: “Ah…”

Abel: “If you prefer to target my back, so be it. But take in mind. —Ultimately, you will have no choice but to make the decision of whether or not to follow your commandment by yourself.”

Rather than turning towards Taritta, he let her hear that from over his back; and then, Abel’s steps proceeded in the direction of the battlefield.

Medium and Al, both of whom were facing in the same direction as he was, also seemed to be accompanying him in his advance.

Taritta: “—Hk.”

Only Taritta was unable to move forward or backward. She could only see off the backs of those three people.

The words that Abel had just said to her kept echoing in her mind over and over again, as if a reminder to herself. To just shoot down Abel’s back by nocking an arrow to the bow in her hands would be an uncomplicated affair.

But if she could take the plunge into an uncomplicated affair without batting an eyelid, Taritta would not be so worried.

Taritta: “Obey or disobey, the commandment… I… I…”

Biting her lip with force, Taritta cast her head downwards while holding back the heat slowly rising in her body.

She was unable to muster the resolve to take aim with the arrow in her grasp, or the courage to spit out the thoughts rooted in her heart.

Amidst the demolished Demon City, dominated only by the continued violent tremors and roars, Taritta looked downwards.

—Similar to how, one certain day, she was swept away, ridiculed by the stars.

3

While she guarded against the encroaching jet-black darkness, a tempest swept fiercely within Yorna’s heart.

Yorna: “…”

Swinging her kiseru, the purple smoke produced served as a barrier that halted the offensive of the Great Disaster, restraining its expansion.

At intervals, parts of the city would be fired, akin to cannonballs, in an attempt to inflict even a single piece of damage to the Great Disaster.

By repeating this over and over again to deal with the extending shadows that would dispossess her of her life from just a graze, she would devote everything in her mind and body to manage it as best as she could.

However, she would not keep up these increasingly ineffective actions for long.

Yorna: "—Hk, what are you becoming so fainthearted about?"

To object to the timidness that had entered her own heart, Yorna curved her beautiful lips.

Regardless of its effectiveness, she held no intention of withdrawing the caustic words she had left Abel with. This city belonged to Yorna, and those who lived in it were under her protection.

The last stronghold for those with nowhere else to go, they could not afford to lose it—

Louis: "Uuaaauuuu!!"

Yorna: "Child…!"

Abruptly, copious amounts of black corruption poured down, targeting Yorna. Before Yorna could deal with it, a small shadow appeared and rushed over, moving towards her waist, and in the blink of an eye, the world changed immediately afterwards.

For nary a moment, there was the wobbly sensation of her head shaking, but upon seeing the ground a number of meters to her side becoming gashed right after that violent assault, Yorna grasped that she had been protected.

The one to pull that off, was a blue-eyed girl, her golden hair pulled back in a bun—Louis.

Her slender shoulders violently heaving up and down, Louis, her lovely face having taken a grim color, glared at the Great Disaster motionlessly with round eyes widened in grief.

What she was looking at was not the Great Disaster itself, however, but what was within it.

Yorna: "You're worried about that child, aren't you?"

Louis: "Uau…!"

A short reply to Yorna's words, and Louis's figure once again bounced like a ball and headed for the Great Disaster.

Louis was jumping around the top part of the Great Disaster—That bubbling, amorphous Great Disaster, in which there was nothing that looked like a head, but if there was one, she was jumping around the part that corresponded to it – attracting its attention.

Aimed at Louis's petite body, nearly a hundred shadowy arms were shot out in succession; avoiding all of those, Louis's contribution to preventing the spread of damage was immeasurable.

Were it not for her, it would be hard to believe that Yorna and the residents of the Demon City would have been able to contain the Great Disaster on their own. That only made it all the more horrifying.

Kafma: "Use that! Little girl!"

Louis: "Au!"

Assisting Louis to break through, was the wielder of thorny shrubs extending from both arms, Kafma.

Offering the vines of thorns which boasted significant suppressive ability as a scaffolding, he adroitly supported Louis's evasive maneuvers. Of course, those thorns late to retract would be swallowed by the Great Disaster, but Kafma seemed to not be affected by this; as could be seen by the earnest look on his face, his mute yet masterful performance would resume playing an active role.

Behind Louis, Kafma, and Yorna in their battle, the residents of Demon City continued to resist the Great Disaster, albeit on a lesser scale. Those with flames lit in one of their eyes were under the influence of Yorna's Soul Marriage Technique, their power increased.

However, there were individual differences and limits to how much the level of one's strength could be raised.

Moreover, Yorna's Soul Marriage Technique had the disposition of favoring the weaker ones.

It was a tool that enabled the weak to face the strong, not a substitute for the strong to face something stronger.

That was nothing more than the difference in the quality of one’s soul, something Yorna was unable to influence in any way.

Therefore—

Yorna: “—And yet, it’s only been a few minutes.”

It seemed as if an endless amount of time had passed, but only a few minutes had gone by since the Great Disaster engulfed Crimson Lapis Castle, when Yorna and the others began their all-out battle.

Nevertheless, the wear-and-tear on Yorna and her group was not negligible.

That was what it was like, being smack-dab in a place where you were always overly anxious of fatal injury.

That probably marked the difference between those considered true warriors, and Yorna Mishigure, a woman who just so happened to be endowed with power.

Were she a true warrior, she would challenge this Great Disaster that could erase her entirely without any discretion and wrest out a win, however she did not consider herself that blessed of an existence for such.

That self-awareness was a strong point of the leader of the Demon City, named Yorna Mishigure.

And thus—

???: “Hiyahhh—!!”

With a vigorous call to arms, a fresh fighting force entered the battlefield, which seemed to be tilting towards dire straits.

A girl of petite build, wielding a cleaver in her hands, charged in with a momentum such that the words “launch in” served as an apt descriptor.

The intrusion of the little girl, launching herself in with her long braids dancing in the air, all while maintaining a lively atmosphere, lead everyone on the battlefield into a state of bewilderment; Yorna included.

Of course. Just what would happen with the entrance of a lone girl on the battlefield? All that could be seen was a little girl who was displaying foolhardiness, and whose bravery would be her downfall.

Moreover, she was not the sole odd intruder.

???: “Let’s go, Lil’ Miss Medium! Let’s battle proudly!”

So barked a masked man that landed behind the girl, carrying the Blue Dragon Sword.

He was one of the people who had visited the castle tower as messengers the previous day, but unlike that time, hiding his face was not a helmet, but rather a mask of cloth, and the way he held the Blue Dragon Sword was bizarre.

For some reason, he had the blade of the Blue Dragon Sword tucked close to his own neck as he broke into a run in such a perilous stance.

One mistake, and just like that, he would inadvertently cut off his own head.

In any case, the battlefield’s atmosphere froze due to that passing party of two, which evoked only bewilderment.

However, that congealment only affected the defenders who were aware of this melee. —The Great Disaster, apparently devoid of any will, was unsurprised by these reinforcements.

Nonetheless, the fact that, perhaps having a sense of what one may perceive as annoyance, the majority of the shadows cast by the Great Disaster lashed out neither upon Yorna nor Louis, but rather at the girl who had just rushed out; almost as if in a state of emergency.

She had to protect them; Yorna made a sudden move, but—

Al: “To the right! Step on the scaffold and jump! Place the tips of your feet on the rubble, then up you go!”

Medium: “Urya!”

There was a shout from the masked man, and the girl bounced in time, raising an enthusiastic voice.

Doing as she had been told to by the man, the girl jumped to the right, stepped on a piece of rubble, and flew forward. Once the girl’s foot reached the rubble ahead of her, she used the strength of her fingers to fly upward in a big leap.

In turn, the shadow caressed, scraped, and encircled the places the girl had moved to.

The girl, however, barely managed to dodge it, achieving not being harmed.

Yorna: “That’s…”

This was the same scene she had witnessed at the tower as of the previous day; when messengers had partaken in a bout proposed by Yorna, and were targeted and attacked by the Emperor—or rather, by a man dressed as the Emperor, alongside the group he commanded.

That masked man had escaped the crisis by directing his allies to take preventative measures against Kafma’s thorns and Olbart’s attacks. Aside from that, the man seemed to have no special abilities.

Was it just tremendously good intuition, and no reason beyond that?

Whereas she viewed the latter to be most likely, she could not reach a conclusion as to why that would be exactly.

Even so, the situation had changed.

Medium: “Al-chin! What’s next?!”

Al: “Don’t rush me, I’m a nervous wreck! Hey, tattoo-bro over there, gimme a hand! I’ll tell you what to do! Obstruct that thing’s movements!”

Kafma: “I refuse! Why should I follow someone as suspicious as…”

Al: “Up there! Spread the vines wide!”

Kafma: “Wha?!”

Much like how he’d been called out by the little girl, the masked man—who had been referred to as Al by the little girl, now called out to Kafma.

Kafma was naturally reluctant to follow the other party’s command, as his competency was unknown, but the jet-black shadows that surged in concert with Al’s cries proved that this was no time for quarrels.

Thorn vines spread from Kafma’s arms as he bent down in haste and raised his hands above his head, as the great wave of shadows changed course to stream along the briars.

Of course, the vines of thorns could not totally withstand those all-consuming shadows, yet Kafma had saved his own life with that single second earned.

Bursting into a gap and having escaped that hardship, Kafma glared towards Al, “You…!”,

Kafma: “Can you read the movements of that Great Disaster?”

Al: “We have a bit of a connection. Are you ready to hear what I have to say?”

Kafma: “—. It is unavoidable, if for the sake of reducing damage. But I will not tolerate thoughtless words!”

Al: “You’re more flexible than I thought you’d be, thanks.”

With Kafma openly admitting his superiority, Al chuckled sarcastically and stepped forward.

Then instructing the girl and Kafma again, the Blue Dragon Sword still trained on his own neck, he began taking command of the front line against the Great Disaster.

And adjacent to that struggle—

???: “—Yorna Mishigure.”

Yorna: “You are…”

About to join the unexpected combat forces of Al and the little girl, Yorna turned her attention toward an oni mask making its way over, treading over the rubble—in the direction of Abel.

Few minutes had passed since their parting earlier, but he was not a man of such an affable nature that he would change his mind in such a short time.

In the first place, the disconnect between Yorna and him was not the kind of thing that could be easily wiped away with the passage of time. That sort of turbulence seemed to lay in the background.

And, as if in support of Yorna’s thoughts—

Abel: “Abandoning the Demon City; have you cooled down enough to consider that suggestion?”

Blithely and ruthlessly, Abel once again threw a proposal at Yorna that had been discarded once before.

Of course, “cooled” was a word unfitting of a mind aroused with fighting spirit. As long as the situation and their relationship remained the same, the answer on Yorna’s side would not change either.

Deeming arguing as pointless, Yorna turned her back on the cold-blooded Emperor.

Abel: “You stated this was the last place for those who had no place to go, no place to stay.”

Yorna: “…”

Abel: “My notion of it as worthless sentimentality remains. But allow me to correct your mistake.”

Yorna: “My, mistake?”

By that inexcusable argument, Yorna’s attempt to return to the battlefield was halted.

It was absurd, Yorna being mistaken in regards to the Demon City of Chaosflame. This was Yorna’s city. All of its residents were Yorna’s beloved children.

That towards them, Yorna would hold misconceptions or anything of the like—.

Yorna: “Just what exactly am I erring in, then?”

Abel: “It is not to this city that those weeping cling and rely on. It is you.”

Yorna: “…”

Abel: “The Demon City was originally built on desolate land, a city composed of the leftovers of warfare. The Crimson Lapis Castle was erected as a symbol, but the true symbol has always been its tower. Namely, you.”

Once more, Abel’s eyes were fixed on Yorna, as he concluded so.

Her eardrums struck by the power and the true meaning of those words, Yorna’s cheeks stiffened.

She understood the logic. But it was very much lip service.

Whether Yorna was a spiritual pillar for the residents of Demon City or not, the fact remained that when it rained, they needed shelter, and when they were hungry, they needed something to eat.

Whatever a city could provide, Yorna could not provide alone in comparison.

Yorna: “Or do you believe that these children would say that they would endure odious things, such as enduring an empty stomach or getting wet in the rain as long as I am there?”

Abel: “—They would!”

Yorna: “Eh…”

Abel: “Do you believe everything under your wing is a suckling baby? A baby, grumbling for comfort, waiting to be fed milk? —That is not my opinion.”

Due to Abel’s figure as he replied, Yorna quietly gulped.

Immediately afterward, a violent booming sound erupted behind them, and pieces of debris wrapped up in the maelstrom of the Great Disaster flew towards Yorna and Abel. One of the fragments landed right next to Abel, who stood still, as the impact struck the slender man, ripping the oni mask from his face.

Yorna: “—Hk.”

His pale face had become uncovered, and blood was running down his forehead, having been slightly grazed by a splinter, yet his countenance did not waver in the slightest. The handsome man picked up the oni mask that had fallen by his side, clutching it in his hands.

Donning his true face, Abel—Nay, Vincent Vollachia, stared at Yorna.

Abel: “The populace is foolish. If it does not hurt, they forget to resist, if they have no enemies, they do not even arm themselves. They know not how to unite without disaster, and they are so afraid of death that they avert their eyes from it.”

Yorna: “…”

Abel: “And for all that, it is that weakness and foolishness that makes them, them. The Empire rules its populace by means of iron and blood, and, in the Demon City, your way of being has served as guidance for the inhabitants’ own. Consequently…”

Cutting off his words there, Abel then turned his gaze in some other direction. The place towards which his eyes had been lured, was to those who had Yorna's love lit in their eyes; the form of the inhabitants opposing the Great Disaster.

Resolutely, they continued fighting valiantly to protect this city.

No—

Abel: "For your sake, they shall endure hunger and the rain. And, for the day when the sun shall rise again, for the day their stomach shall be full, they choose to desire with you!"

Consequently—

Abel: "Abandon the Demon City. Their destination is the same as yours. And the only place they can turn to, is yourself."

Yorna: "—Ah."

Abel: "Or do you lament that you cannot do that? Do your own desires and those of the ones who struggle for you not overlap?"

As he voiced this, Abel wiped the blood from his forehead with his sleeve, putting the oni mask once more on his face.

Yet again his expression was concealed by cognitive disruption, but the words declared just before penetrated deep into the depths of Yorna's heart, becoming a thorn that would not fall out.

From the moment Yorna read the missive, she understood that Abel knew what she desired.

But for that to come out and be used as a reference at this juncture, was far too barren of compassion. And that void of compassion was a quality desired in the Vollachian Emperor of the current generation.

It was for that reason, that taking all the necessary measures was—

Yorna: "If we abandon the Demon City and escape from that Great Disaster, what shall you do? That thing may drink this city dry, but it may not stop there!”

Abel: “Are you attempting to size me up this late in the game? You get what I am saying fully.”

Abandoning the Demon City, and allowing the Great Disaster to do as it pleases, just what was the true meaning of those words?

Abel responded to Yorna’s query with sullenness, jerking his jaw. That gesture of his indicated the Great Disaster itself—or rather, the base below the raging Great Disaster.

Put into other words, there, laid the site of the Crimson Lapis Castle, where the Great Disaster had first made its appearance—

Abel: “Do the same as you did when that thing swallowed the Castle, but now, for the Demon City. —The swallowed Castle was not enough to blow it away, but your beloved Demon City will be a different matter altogether!”

4

???: “…”

From a distance, the wind fluttered the hem of his outfit, piercing black eyes gazing upon the Great Disaster that laid ruin upon the city.

Yorna’s scheme to minimize the spread of the damage as much as possible, along with Kafma, the city dwellers and other unexpected contributions of military strength, appeared to be manifesting some effect.

However, that would not last for long, either.

To an undeniable extent, the threat that was the very darkness of the Great Disaster, was overwhelming.

Perhaps in ancient times, people would personally witness such things, and, resigning themselves for the end of the world, left behind legends to pass on their fears to the survivors.

The most extreme of these was the Witch of Envy. This Great Disaster was another, just like the former.

But—

???: "—The Great Disaster that would destroy the Empire, it is a disaster of a different sort?"

???: "It is, it is. Oh nooo~, this could be an issue, no? That it'd happen like this wasn't foreseen, I feel like forgetting my place and complaining to the stars myself."

With arms folded, standing still at an overlook, was a man—Vincent; and looking at the same sight to his side, was the blue-robed Stargazer crouched down.

Along their journey, the man had not even chirped as to give them advance warning, yet had yelled out "Aaat~ aaany~ raaate~, that's outside my responsibility" in regards to the thrashing Great Disaster, as to dodge any and all blame.

However, one of the few virtues of the Stargazer was that he would not lie about what he had seen.

So for a Stargazer to be so bold, this disaster, and the ruin of the Empire foreseen by the Stargazer, had to be a different problem.

In other words—

???: "Oh, comin', comin'. Geez, I was rushin' quite a bit."

Ubilk: "My my, Old Man Olbart."

Behind Vincent who squinted in thought, an old man with a faint presence appeared. The Stargazer was first to call the name of the elderly man—of Olbart, who nodded his head with an "Aye aye".

Shooting a sideways glance at Olbart lined up next to him, Vincent's eyebrows scrunched in a scowl.

Vincent: "You, did you leave your right arm somewhere?"

Olbart: “Just as I’d expect, you’re quite perceptive, Your Excellency. Actually, I keep my right hand tucked in Your Excellency’s breast pocket… Well, at least it’d be funny if I did. It was swallowed by that great shadow.”

Ubilk: “I seeee~. Sounds like quite the painful experience.”

Olbart: “Yeaaah, ‘twas painful. Even at my age, I was ‘boutta cry and whine like a lil’ kid. Embarrassin’, embarrassin’.”

With a flutter, Olbart ranted and raved as he waved his right hand, which was missing from the wrist down.

Leaving Olbart and the Stargazer’s charade aside, Vincent once more looked upon the battlefield.

At the former site of the Crimson Lapis Castle, the Great Disaster stirred. Plus, there was the city’s strength pushing it to keep it at bay.

The measures necessary to repel the Great Disaster were already being relayed to Yorna.

So after this—

Olbart: “But is it alright for Your Excellency to just casually stick ‘round at this place?”

Vincent: “It is of no importance.”

To the words of an Olbart tilting his head, Vincent responded quietly.

It was his role to transmit the plan to Yorna and persuade her. In return, Vincent had to carry out the role as Vincent would.

Therefore—

Vincent: “That move has already been made. —The move that should be made as Vincent Vollachia, Emperor of Vollachia.”

Chapter 59:
Taritta Shudrak

1

???: “Hey, Taritta. I was chosen to be a Stargazer, and I have a commandment to fulfill.”

The one to confide in Taritta, was another of the People of Shudraq, Mariuli.

All Shudraqians were born and raised in the Buddheim Jungle, and that, was where their lives would come to an end.

Hence, all the fellow villagers in the settlement were like family, and Mariuli was no exception to that.

For Taritta, however, Mariuli was a special and close friend. The reason for this was that she and Taritta had been born on the same day; soul sisters who had raised their birth cry in the same place.

—A belief of the Shudraq, was that the souls of children born on the same day were connected.

The connection was considered stronger than the one between one’s mother and sisters, they were treated as the very half of themselves.

It was an ancient Shudraq custom that soul sisters were connected by a deep and profound bond; Kuna and Holly were likewise soul sisters, having been born on the same day.

When thinking of the friendship between those two, the existence of a bond that transcended that of blood could be keenly understood.

The beautiful Shudraq, the woman named Mariuli, her black hair dyed a pink color at the ends, was Taritta’s soul sister.

She was gentle and calm, someone with good chemistry with Taritta, the latter someone anxious and shy.

Taritta also consulted her soul sister about her real sister often. She would ask her to listen to her anxieties and her lack of confidence in her ability to support her older sister, who would eventually take over as Chieftain of the tribe.

Any conflicts or embarrassing insecurities she had, she could naturally confide in Mariuli.

So when Mariuli told her she had a secret to disclose, Taritta was happy to be asked for advice, feeling compelled to repay her trust.

And so, she spoke.

—She had been chosen as a Stargazer, bestowed with a commandment to fulfill.

Mariuli: "To fulfill the commandment is a Stargazer's important role. It's a great honor, Taritta."

Taritta: "Well, I don't understand… What are the heavens telling you, Mariuli?"

Mariuli: "It's not the heavens, Taritta. It's the stars who tell us. The stars assign us a role to play. A very, very important role… In fact, I wasn't going to tell anyone, but…"

Taritta: "…"

Mariuli: "You, are my soul sister."

Looking over to the smiling Mariuli and her trust, Taritta was unable to say anything.

It was merely a topic that her soul sister, Mariuli, had confided in Taritta, trusting her. The thought of revealing it to anyone but herself was not one that Taritta possessed.

Besides, that sort of thing which seemed like an obsession, could quickly be forgotten as a passing delusion.

It was truly a passing delusion that really did not need to be taken seriously. By believing this, Taritta averted her eyes from the matter of Mariuli.

But changes manifested themselves, slowly but surely becoming anomalies.

And then, one day.

When Taritta and Mizelda returned from hunting, Mariuli, who was taking care of the village children, was singing an unfamiliar song. —That was bizarre.

The People of Shudraq, in the village, could be split into two roles.

One of those, was the role of the hunter, those who left the settlement and made it their profession to hunt prey; Mizelda, Taritta, and many other Shudraqians belonged to this group.

The role of the others, was that of a guardian who would stay in the village, raising the children, and defending the settlement.

Mariuli, she belonged to those with the role of guardian.

Her hunting skills never improved; her ability was so ruinous that should she draw the bow she would miss all shots out of one hundred. However, she was an excellent cook and seamstress, and her strong points were in singing songs and telling stories of the past to the children.

Henceforth, it was not surprising that Mariuli was singing.

Mariuli was an excellent singer, and at feasts, everyone would beg her to sing.

Taritta on the other hand, was useless at most of a guardian's duties, and was not very good at singing either. Truly, the two were halves of one person, or else they would not be able to fulfill one whole individual's worth of work.

And yet—

Mizelda: "—I can't remember hearing Mariuli's song before."

Taritta: “S-sister…”

Mizelda: “But, it’s a good song. Pleasant.”

Stopping to listen to the same song, Mizelda paid no mind to the abnormality.

The same went for the others, Kuna and Holly. They all noticed that Mariuli was singing a song they did not recognize, but they did not think twice as to its significance.

Only Taritta was fearful and apprehensive about the source of the song.

It was Mariuli who had spoken of the stars having informed her of the role she should perform, such as the commandment.

Surely, she would not say that even that song had been taught by the stars—.

Mariuli: “No, Taritta. That’s a misunderstanding. I didn’t learn it from the stars, I just sang a song I already knew.”

Taritta: “You know, the song?”

Mariuli: “Yes, I know the song… Not personally though, another Stargazer does…”

Taritta: “—Hk, I don’t understand what that means!”

It was not the answer Taritta had feared.

In a way, however, Mariuli’s answer had gone beyond what Taritta had feared.

This Stargazer remark was proof that she had not forgotten the tall tale that had come out of her mouth. It was proof that the fantasy still perdured. —No, it was proof that it was getting worse.

However, due to Taritta not understanding anything of what she spoke on the subject of Stargazers, Mariuli made a lonely face.

Because it had seemingly betrayed her trust, Taritta agonized due to something impossible for her to understand.

—After that, the honeymoon period with Mariuli's Stargazer continued.

She would spend her days demonstrating unfamiliar knowledge, singing unfamiliar songs, telling unfamiliar stories, and fulfilling an unfamiliar commandment.

It was a Mariuli that Taritta did not know.

Always, she would discuss everything with Mariuli.

There had never been a time in her life when Taritta did not seek Mariuli's advice on a decision. The same was true for Mariuli, even regarding her daughter's name.

Yet Mariuli's attention was always on the sky.

Seemingly prioritizing something other than the People of Shudraq, something aside from Taritta and her daughter, her life slowly and gradually became trapped by the stars, bound by the commandment.

Someone, someone who was not a star, was placing wisdom in her.

Suspecting this, Taritta had even attempted to indirectly pry around her surroundings. However, with her role as guardian she never left the village. There was no opportunity for her to gain knowledge of the outside world.

It was really as if the stars were whispering to her.

Taritta: "Are you the one who's misleading Mariuli?"

Looking up at the night sky, she inquired to the stars that could be seen through the gaps in the treetops.

The stars that spoke to Mariuli, however, did not speak to Taritta, to whom she was connected by soul.

Unfamiliar knowledge, the songs no one had ever heard, a commandment one must fulfill—.

Taritta: "—Give me my soul sister back."

Drawing her bowstring with force, Taritta took aim at the brightest star in the night sky.

As soon as she released the string, a sharp arrow roared up into the night sky—And naturally, it fell down aimlessly, not hitting anything.

The stars, refused to acknowledge even Taritta's rebellious will.

The stars did not speak; they did not hand down commandments.

Then, what exactly had changed Mariuli? She could not understand it.

She did not even know who she should let hear this lament.

All the troubles and sufferings that she could not express had been heard by Mariuli. Then, who should she turn to, to listen to her worries and sufferings caused by Mariuli?

She was certain that her older sister would not comprehend. Her older sister was strong and composed.

That she could dwell on anything or stand still was inconceivable. Besides, the horror of confiding in her older sister was larger than that of just not being understood.

The current Mariuli was antithetical to the teachings and to the way of life of the People of Shudraq.

Would Mizelda, now the Chieftain of the tribe, approve of that? Or was it possible that she would banish Mariuli from the village because of her dangerous ideas?

Some had been driven away from the tribe in the past, unable to return to the Jungle ever again.

She did not want to lose sight of Mariuli.

Even if now, Mariuli had changed from the one whose soul Taritta's own had been connected with.

Therefore, Taritta kept her anguish bottled up within her chest for a long time.

And then—

Mariuli: "—What should I do, Taritta? I'm a Stargazer, and yet…"

—And then the incident of that day, the same as the nightmares she saw every night, truly began.

2

Sensing the change in the state of the battle, everyone on the battlefield began acting in their own way.

As the situation was irreversible, no one was falling behind, their faces alert as a result of their nerves being on edge.

The Great Disaster raged on, the rampaging shadows engulfing and consuming the surroundings, chipping away, magnifying demise.

However, none of those who had steeled their hearts to resist the Disaster faltered. That was the hard-earned reward of those who had overcome the very first obstacle.

There was a condition for mounting a challenge on the Great Disaster.

They had to be warriors. —That meant that they must possess the strength to fight. Simultaneously, it also meant that they must possess a heart able to oppose it.

If either strength or heart were lacking, one could not stand on the battlefield as a warrior.

Conversely, as long as one could prove that they held both of those, there would be no other obstacles in their path to challenge the

Great Disaster.

Louis: “Uau!”

Raising a soundless voice, with clenched teeth Louis continued evading the shadow’s onslaught.

She had neither any attachment nor a connection to Chaosflame, no stake in whether the city would be destroyed or not. If the city were to disappear, it would not bother her in the slightest.

Albeit she appeared young and frail, she was endeavoring her utmost to survive the Great Disaster, but for other reasons.

If that conferred Louis with strength, with heart, no one had the right to hold her back.

And that was not limited to only Louis.

Medium, wielding a barbarian sword with her small frame; Al, holding the Blue Dragon Sword against his own neck; Kafma, mobilizing all the power of the “insects” within his body; and the residents of Demon City, one of their eyes ablaze; all those held a determination to not retreat against the Great Disaster equal to that of Louis.

Each of them had their own, different reasons for taking on the Great Disaster that was destroying the Demon City.

For those that had made it past this first hurdle, the Great Disaster behaved in a simple manner and, despite its danger, it was not too complicated to deal with.

—The Great Disaster was not a living thing. That, was the greatest factor.

The Great Disaster was no longer a disaster of that nature; instead, it could be said that it was a phenomenon of destruction itself.

Shadows that chipped away at everything they came in contact with; an amorphous figure, bubbling and writhing, that did not allow one to be sure an attack had been successful. —However, that was all there was to it.

Al: “It doesn’t even have the brains to respond to our attacks or to change the way it acts.”

Running across the battlefield using debris as footing, Al stared intensely at the Great Disaster while issuing directions to those around him.

Although there was no way to erase the panic leaking from the core of his body, via a show of bravado and with his grasp on the situation, he was able to give his mind some respite. Respite, for Al to think.

The behavior of the Great Disaster was, to put it simply, predictable.

It would shake off or absorb anything that drew near, and would wriggle and engulf its surroundings to cause further damage, were it to go undisturbed.

However, the defensive forces, Al included, would not permit the Great Disaster to proliferate further.

By driving attacks in, or by dispelling its attention from the goal of the overflowing shadows through becoming bait themselves, they would generate a pause on its engorgement, wasting its time. Repeatedly.

Had the Great Disaster been a living being, it would have learned, taken in how to react and change the tide of the battle.

Or else, it could have brought forth a change of its behavior because of emotional aggravation, which certainly should have generated a change in the course of the battle. But because that did not come to pass, even this fighting force was able to hold it back, albeit barely.

However—

Yorna: “—All of you, get ready to move back.”

With a single stomp the earth shattered, and the billowing shockwave split the Great Disaster's gargantuan body in twain.

Of course, not long after that the Great Disaster squirmed, quickly reverting to its original state, but it was the absolute suppressive ability of the Demon City's Mistress that allowed her to inflict a discernible level of damage.

The one who had performed that deed, Yorna Mishigure, her thick-soled geta producing loud sounds, blocked the shadows which came surging forth like waves of the rough seas, as if to sweep the earth and everything on it away.

Medium: "Yorna-chan!"

Yorna: "Stand down! Though it is frustrating, we'll do as that man says."

Medium: "You mean Abel-chin?"

As they conversed amidst the storm, Yorna's slender jaw went up and down in a nod in response to Medium's question. Her almond eyes regarded a handsome man wearing an oni mask, standing atop a hill overlooking the battlefield.

Even if he did not have the ability to join the fight, he was not running away, still present, perhaps because of some pride.

In any case, the plan he had elaborated via the perceptions circling in his mind had been conveyed to Yorna, and she had adopted it as her plan of action.

Then—

Yorna: "—I'll allow this city to be swallowed up, and then I'll blow it up from within. Aside from this, there's no other way to nip the buds of that Disaster causing this debauchery."

Kafma: "Can you do it?"

Yorna: "If one castle isn't enough, then it's just a matter of using one city. But if that's not enough, then I'll have to be made Empress and use the country.”

Kafma: “As one of his retainers, I must admonish you firmly for such a thing!”

Having heard Yorna’s plan, Kafma yelled at her, red-faced due to her unnecessary comment. Still, the honest warrior of the Insect Cage Tribe changed his expression at once and nodded his head in assent with an “Understood”.

That was probably because he had realized that Yorna’s decision to abandon her city was a choice that brought pain akin to cutting her own body.

Kafma’s short answer falling upon her ears, Yorna’s eyes were cast downwards slightly, followed by a charming, delicate smile.

Yorna: “There’s no need for your concern. With me and those who love me, a city like this can be established. —Me and them both have that solace.”

Yorna, putting her hand on her chest and stating as much, had no objection.

In fact, just how much power the ace up Yorna’s sleeve would demonstrate was unclear, but he fully understood that, aside from it, there was nothing else that could tip the scales against the Great Disaster, right now.

Henceforth—

Medium: “—We’re all gonna have to fight our way back together! As fast as we can!”

Those brief words asserted by Medium were the cue for the final gambit in the battle of the Demon City to be carried out.

3

—The nightmares she had every night started on one chilly night, under a moon pale and freezing cold.

After professing to be a Stargazer, Mariuli had gotten to the point where she was revealing unknown knowledge.

Her brethren did not care where this knowledge came from, but Taritta's fears grew day-by-day. However, she could not disclose the anguish she carried to anyone.

Mariuli had never told anyone aside from Taritta that she had become a Stargazer. Not because of self-interest, but rather because of the simple bonds between the two.

There were vows and secrets, which were only exchanged between fellow soul sisters.

Kuna and Holly, who both had a strong sense of belonging to the Shudraq, certainly also had their own secrets, which they had not told their other brethren.

In Mariuli's case, that would be her role as a Stargazer, which she had confided to Taritta. Plus, it was nigh unthinkable that a soul sister would let slip a secret, confided with such faith, to others.

And thus, Taritta's anguish continued to gnaw at her heart, unable to share it with anyone else.

However, those days would come to an abrupt end, in a way she had not conceived.

That would be—

Mariuli: "—What should I do, Taritta? I'm a Stargazer, and yet…"

Mariuli's words came as a shock to Taritta, who became so stunned that she was unable to move.

Because, what had come out of her mouth were not merely her frail laments, but also fresh, red blood, which drenched the front of her chest.

Her body had not been healthy to begin with.

The reason she had toiled as a guardian, instead of a hunter, was not just down to her inexperience in hunting skills, but also the frailness of her body.

Back when she was a kid, she would often be bedridden due to illness. But as she got older and those bouts grew less common, everyone must have let their guards down, assuming everything with her would certainly be alright.

And despite that, the demon of ill health had been slowly gnawing into her very core, to a point of no return.

Mariuli kept puking up blood over and over again, her face white as a sheet. Anyone could clearly see that her body was growing more haggard by the day, and that the light of her life was starting to flicker out.

Thus—

???: "The rest depends on Mariuli's willpower, Taritta."

Taritta: "Big… Sister…"

???: "Spend some time with Mariuli. Until her last. That's the duty of a soul sister."

Making her drink an infusion, Mizelda left those words behind, which weighed on Taritta.

The duty of a soul sister, that felt just like a commandment.

A commandment spoken to her by her big sister, no different to that of the heavens, saying that she must carry it out.

Other Shudraqians who had known Mariuli for a while, such as Kuna and Holly, each exchanged some words with her. They then took their leave, leaving behind a few words for Taritta.

Everyone understood that this was their last chance to talk to Mariuli.

And, the one who would see Mariuli's end with her own eyes, would be none other than Taritta. Her soul sister, who had been born on the same day as her, but would die on a different one.

???: “Maa…”

Mariuli’s young daughter, who still could not comprehend what was going on, clutched her mother’s hand and softly rubbed her own cheek against hers.

Prompted by their surroundings, mother and child finished their last farewell without a semblance of understanding. A farewell between an innocent daughter, who held no doubts in her belief that she would see her again tomorrow, and her mother who lay on her deathbed.

Mariuli: “Goodnight.”

Mariuli finished giving her farewells to her waving child, as well as to her brethren who had spoken to her in turn; now faced with her own death, was something special.

There was no doubt that Mariuli, who Taritta believed in and loved, was strong at her core.

However—

Mariuli: “What should I do, Taritta. I still haven’t fulfilled my commandment, and yet…”

Taritta: “Mariuli…”

Mariuli: “I still haven’t finished it… Why… Me…”

As soon as she was left alone with Taritta, the tension broke audibly.

Mariuli’s face turned even paler than it had been. What she was worried about was not death looming before her, nor the future of her child, but rather something incomprehensible like the whispers of the stars.

Mariuli’s eyes were filled with tears as she despaired, wondering why.

But Taritta was the one who despaired first, even before her tears and expression.

Taritta: “Y-you’re still going on about that…!”

Mariuli: “Taritta…”

Taritta: “Commandments or whatever, nothing of the sort exists. Absolutely not! You’re Mariuli of Shudraq! There’s nothing more to it than that, what more do you want than that!”

Live as a Shudraqian, die as a Shudraqian.

That should have been the most important thing, the biggest priority.

So, what needed to be done in order for Mariuli, one of the Shudraqs, to die as one, was—

Mariuli: “—Meaning for having been born.”

Taritta: “…Mea… ning?”

Mariuli: “That’s what I want.”

Mariuli’s words, which even at a time like this, saw worth in the commandment, pierced through Taritta.

Born like a Shudraqian, live like a Shudraqian, die like a Shudraqian.

Upon being asked what could she desire further, she replied by telling her she desired the meaning of being born.

—She had a daughter. She had Taritta. She had the Shudraq. And yet, she said she desired meaning.

In that very instant, she, Mariuli, had renounced the blood flowing through her, dismissing it as meaningless.

She had betrayed her blood, and declared that she found worth in the whispers of the stars, which were nothing but a sham, of all things.

This kind of betrayal was one very difficult to forgive, as far as Taritta was concerned.

So, for that reason—

Taritta: "—Enough already."

Mariuli: "…"

Taritta: "I'm, your soul sister… How can you even speak about the meaning of being born in front of me."

As if she were saying she couldn't bear to hear any more of this, Taritta displayed her intentions using her cold blade.

She had drawn out a dagger, its tip quietly pointed against Mariuli's pale throat. Taritta hoped Mariuli would be brought back to her senses, making her withdraw her words with how sharp and frigid the blade was.

Naturally, it could be that these threats would not get through to Mariuli, given she was on death's doorstep.

However, Taritta could not conceive of any other way. Henceforth, only this method remained.

Even so, that was the greatest mistake Taritta had made in her life.

Mariuli: "Right, Taritta. —I had you."

Taritta: "Huh?"

Her face white as a sheet, Mariuli focused on Taritta.

The hue of her eyes seemed different from what Taritta had ever known of Mariuli, and that made her body tense up.

That very instant proved to be a fatal one. —For Mariuli.

Taritta: "Mariuli…?!"

Mariuli’s thin hand pressed firmly over Taritta’s, pushing down the blade pointed at herself.

Taritta immediately tried to resist, but was prevented from doing so due to her momentary confusion and by how atypically strong Mariuli felt.

The blade was one that opposed the thick pelts of beasts.

With how sharp it was honed, the blade sliced through Mariuli’s body like it was water, shedding blood. There came a sickening sound along with a sickening sensation; there she knew that the tip of her dagger had fatally torn into Mariuli’s chest.

Taritta: “We need to…! We need to get you patched up immediately…!”

Mariuli: “No, Taritta! You have a role to play…”

Taritta: “Please stop saying these foolish things! This isn’t the time for that…”

Mariuli: “LISTEN TO ME!”

Taritta: “—Hk!”

She uttered a scream that felt like she was spewing up blood—No, she literally was spewing up blood.

Her chest had been torn into by the dagger, the light of her life growing ever dimmer by the moment; however, Mariuli’s arm would not let Taritta go. As blood foamed from the corner of her mouth, her eyes bored into Taritta.

Clinging to her life, which she was about to lose at any moment, she spoke while forcibly digging her nails into her,

Mariuli: “After… a thousand nights have passed… I’ll… You’ll… Come across a traveler…”

Taritta: “…”

Mariuli: “This traveler, is an ally of the Great Disaster that’ll bring this land to ruin… So, you must, kill them…”

Taritta: “Mariuli……”

Mariuli: “Must… kill them…”

Taritta: “Mariuli…? Mariuli!”

Her voice, filled with anguish and mixed with the coughing of blood, robbed Taritta’s arms of their strength.

But before she even knew it, Mariuli’s unbelievable strength fizzled out. That was when she should have stood up and called for someone. —No, it was too late to do that. It was too late for everything.

The grim reaper had already placed its fingers around Mariuli’s soul, and it was about to be taken away.

Delaying that for even a second was mere wishful thinking.

Mariuli: “A traveler, with dark hair, and dark eyes… Kill them.”

Taritta: “…”

Mariuli: “Stop the Great Disaster, Taritta… That’s my duty… I can’t fulfill it anymore… So, please… Taritta… My, soul sister…”

Taritta: “Y-you’re still saying tha…”

As she shed blood, Mariuli used the last of her strength for this entreaty; and for that, for the very first time, Taritta hated her.

All this time, Taritta had been desperately trying to keep her in check, due to how they were connected in soul. And yet, she had ignored this altogether and brought that up in her very last moments.

It was so despicable; those words struck Taritta in her very heart.

Hearing Taritta’s tearful voice, Mariuli’s eyes flickered slightly.

And just like that, strength ebbed away from Mariuli’s body, and her head slowly slumped down,

Mariuli: “…U… ta…”

Taritta: “Mariuli?”

Mariuli: “…”

Taritta: “MARIULI!!”

At the very end, a weak, hoarse breath escaped from her, and that was her last.

There lay Mariuli’s body, limp and with no pulse, a dagger still stuck in her chest. Taritta remained stunned for a few seconds, then quickly ran out from the cabin, in an attempt to call her big sister and the others.

However—

???: “—Ah.”

Taritta threw open the cabin door, and tried to run off outside, however she stopped in her tracks.

Sitting there, was a small silhouette that should not have been there.

Perhaps she had been worried about her bedridden mother, or perhaps she had felt a bad hunch as a child would.

Whichever one it was, the young girl, who had what it took to become an excellent hunter, had shown her qualities on a night in which she should never have done so, slipping past the eyes of the adults.

The young girl, Utakata, was staring at Taritta, who was soaked in her mother’s blood, shedding tears upon tears.

The shadow of the Great Disaster rampaged on, and a cataclysmic earthquake fractured the Demon City from the inside out.

Yorna's decision reached all residents of the Demon City, for each and every one of them to abandon the land that had become their home.

A bitter decision had been made. For them, this was the very final place that had welcomed those with no other place to go, that had permitted them the freedom of not having to run and hide.

The loss of all of this, how could one not lament it?

However—

Yorna: "If there's life, I'll save it. For the sake of witnessing a new Demon City with our own eyes, we must be quick, without delay."

Since the Mistress of the Demon City, the last stronghold of the helpless, had announced it, the people believed that they could rally and rebuild their home; they started running, turning their backs to their land, the home they were accustomed to living in.

Ruin engulfed, pulverized the Demon City; the responsibility for that lay within the Great Disaster, its scale ever-enlarging.

The shadows it wielded grew in density, the wriggling jet-black mass swelling exponentially before their eyes.

The increase in both its size and the number of shadows utilized going unchecked, signified that the Great Disaster posed increased danger.

As the area covered by the wave of destruction widened, the earth itself and the cityscape being gouged out, Yorna was astounded by the great efforts a certain meritorious person was undertaking to keep the human casualties at a minimum—Al.

Al: "Lil' Miss Medium! Back off! That's enough! You won't make it if you stay there any longer as you are right now, Lil' Miss! Time to go!"

Medium: “Uh~! So frustrating! But, thank you!”

Trusting the judgment of Al, shouting so, Medium, carrying the barbarian sword, fled at once.

A barrage of shadows shot out in pursuit of the young girl’s back, which were blocked by a wall of thorns of vine that sprang out from the side, allowing the girl, whose petite body had played the perilous role of a decoy, to escape.

Al: “Thanks for the save, Antenna-bro! But it’s about time you…”

Kafma: “About time? Are you going to tell me to retreat? If so, then I, Kafma Irulux, will not listen to such talk!”

Al: “No, y’know, I do consider you a character who’d say that, but I really mean it.”

Kafma: “What are you trying to say?!”

Al: “Whatever.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Al shook his head loosely at Kafma’s angry bellow.

As a result of going without Kafma’s support, the battle against the Great Disaster would have been much more precarious. Although Al was grateful for his assistance, his hot-headed disposition was annoying.

Anyway—

Al: “—Fox-babe!”

Yorna: “I’m not pleased with the way you’re calling me, but I got it.”

At the voice Al had cast her way, Yorna nodded in assent.

From the center of the city to the outer gardens, the operation to withdraw from the Great Disaster had reached its climax. Yorna’s decision to abandon the Demon City had been made known, and the evacuation of a significant portion of the population had been completed.

Just as they had decided, they would then let that which had swallowed the Demon City, the Great Disaster, feel its retribution. —If only there were some mistake about it, and there was no necessity for that.

Yorna: “Is there perhaps, a lingering attachment…”

The Great Disaster suddenly reaching its limit, collapsing, and vanishing beginning from its edges, or a weak point being suddenly exposed, allowing an attack just on that one spot; such convenient miracles would not happen.

They understood it without a hitch. —The Great Disaster, was a calamity that would continue on inexhaustibly.

Were it to go unstopped, it would not cease with the Demon City alone; much, much more would be caught up in its destruction.

To prevent this, they must sacrifice their precious Demon City.

Yorna: “…”

Closing her eyes, for nary a moment, she hesitated, regrets flashing through her mind.

Even in the history of the ability called the Soul Marriage Technique, Yorna’s own was unique.

In essence, the mass of souls that an individual was able to carry made no difference whatsoever, no matter how big the difference between them was. However, Yorna, because of certain circumstances, was in possession of a soul thousands of times more voluminous than others.

It was not a power she desired. If she were up-front about it, she even wished to relinquish it.

It had been useful in getting the position she was currently in, but she had not anticipated that an opportunity in which she was required to make use of it would come knocking. —No, rather, it should be stated that she had avoided thinking about it.

Hence why it had taken her so long to make a decision when the time came.

And that—

Yorna: "—That man."

Having been seen through by him, Yorna looked over her shoulder at the figure of a man wearing an oni mask, watching on in the distance.

Standing in the outer gardens of the Demon City, a place that could no longer escape destruction, the man with his arms crossed did not waver in the slightest. Perhaps his emotionless gaze was because he regarded the sacrifices necessary to halt the Great Disaster as a foregone conclusion?

Even so, the fact that he had stayed there, unmoving, to see the conclusion with his very eyes was perhaps the way of the man to display humanity to Yorna, urging her to make a decision.

Al: "—Hk, that idiot!"

A moment later, as she resolved to give her all to her opponent, the Great Disaster, Yorna's eardrums were struck by the sound of cursing.

Turning towards its origin, then seeing that it had been Al, and following the gaze from behind his mask directed to the Great Disaster, Yorna understood what he was swearing at.

A small body kept bouncing all around the Great Disaster, kicking debris and keeping it in check—Louis's.

Her golden hair dancing, her white attire stained with dirt and dust, her shoulders heaving up and down heavily, her whole body drenched in sweat, the girl continued mounting an assault against the Great Disaster.

Louis's goal was merely one. To find the black-haired boy who had been right where the Great Disaster had sprung—.

Yorna: "That child."

Because she had not found the means to rescue him, Yorna had agonized while coming to this conclusion.

It was equally as painful as abandoning the Demon City, or perhaps even more, bringing pain akin to cutting her body.

Once this plan came to fruition, what would happen to what the Great Disaster had absorbed? Perhaps if that were returned, the black-haired boy would be included.

But Yorna knew that had a pup's chance to happen.

For that reason, she also knew that Louis's dogged struggle would end in futility.

Kafma: "We have to bring that girl back!"

Al: "You gotta be joking! Leave the brat alone! In the first place, she's…"

Kafma: "What about that girl?!"

Al: "She's a… Hk."

Shouting at the sight of Louis bouncing about, Kafma glared at Al. Showered by Kafma's sharp glare, the latter choked on his words, seemingly holding some thoughts on Louis.

Yorna wanted to save Louis. —As long as Louis's desire could not be fulfilled, Yorna wanted to at least save her life.

Perhaps, she would be happier if they died together.

That was what Louis possibly desired from the boy absorbed by the darkness.

Al: "Shit, shitshitshit, for fuck's sake! Why do I gotta worry myself stupid ‘cause of her? I’m gonna resent you, bro!”

Shouting this wildly, Al started running with vigor that did not betray the tone of his voice.

At his destination was Louis, constantly leaping from side-to-side against the Great Disaster. Louis was agile enough to not let that jet-black monster set its sights on herself, however—

Al: “I can see through you!”

Louis: “Uh?!”

Dodging the rain of debris, the aftermath of the shadow’s actions, pouring down on him, Al wrapped around Louis as if he knew how she would move, then snatched the girl’s body in an underarm carry.

With the two as they were, still grappling with each other, the pair narrowly avoided a storm of shadows aimed at them. Al had unbelievably protected the two in a close-cut, just barely escaping the range of the attack.

Louis: “Uu! Uau! Aau!”

Al: “—Go to sleep!”

Louis: “Uhk.”

All the while, Louis struggled about in Al’s arm, trying desperately to reach out in the direction of the Great Disaster. However, Al drove a callous blow with the hilt of the Blue Dragon Sword, and Louis’s head fell, limp.

And with that, Al lifted Louis’s small body, then initiated a sprint, turning his back to the Great Disaster.

Al: “Antenna!”

Kafma: “It’s Kafma Irulux!”

In response to his urgent call, Kafma’s vines unfolded an escape route for the fleeing Al. The Great Disaster intensely pursued Al, attempting to corner him, as he dashed towards the thorny shrubs' path.

However, while they produced a path for Al, the vines also created barriers to the Great Disaster.

Al, carrying Louis, ran across the battlefield in a tremendous combination of offensive and defensive cover fire, then—

Abel: "—Do it, Yorna Mishigure!!"

In a final move, a shout urging for decisive action was raised from behind, and Yorna thrust her hands out in front of herself.

The gesture itself was meaningless. Very much like when the Castle was swallowed. It was merely a gesture for Yorna to make known how much she was willing to sacrifice in order to achieve this.

Yorna: "I, do not love you."

With those few words, unto the Great Disaster that had swallowed the majority of the Demon City of Chaosflame, Yorna's soul exploded. Its potency was certainly as if the very city had crashed down—

The impact of the explosion produced something akin to a blast wave, and a tremendous gale blew the Demon City up.

Rocked by the shockwave, all that composed the Demon City was broken, crushed, obliterated. Amidst all this, the Great Disaster at the nexus of the shockwave was engulfed by the destruction, and was certainly likewise destroyed.

With that, by a single blow unleashed in exchange for the city itself, the Great Disaster was negated—

Abel: "—Was it not enough."

Amidst the unrelenting tempest and the lingering plumes of smoke, the voice of a quiet man echoed.

Realizing that this was the voice of a man who never turned away, even in a situation where nobody could help but face down, Yorna, her body losing strength, held her breath.

It had suffered a blow into which she put her utmost, yet nevertheless, the presence of wriggling darkness remained on the opposite side of the columns of smoke.

It had connected. But it was not sufficient. This end result made her grind her molars.

Yorna: "—Ah."

Before she resolved to take action to paint over her disappointment, Yorna's voice escaped her.

The reason was simple. —Something had acted faster than she did.

However, the inextinguishable embers of the Great Disaster were not that something.

That—

Yorna: "—Tanza?"

Had been the small figure of a deergirl leaping out of the blown-up inn's basement.

5

Utakata: "Uu saw it. Maa stabbed herself, with Taa's hands."

The testimony of Utakata, Mariuli's daughter, the young child who had witnessed the whole affair, was the deciding factor.

Mariuli's body had been pierced by Taritta's dagger, the latter did not even make any attempts to wipe off the blood she was drenched in. To anyone's eyes, this horrifying spectacle would appear as if Taritta had murdered Mariuli.

However, Mariuli's daughter, of all people, disproved this view, annulling Taritta's disgrace.

—Killing their own kin disgraced their soul, forbidding them to return to the same soil as the spirits of their ancestors.

That was which the Shudraq abhorred above all else, the “Disgrace of the Shudraq”.

Utakata’s testimony denied this suspicion. Additionally—

Mizelda: “The way she was stabbed. If Taritta had stabbed her, she would’ve aimed for a spot that wouldn’t have brought suffering. It wasn’t my sister’s doing.”

The way the blade had pierced the body and, even more importantly, the location of the wound.

With just one glance, Mizelda was able to determine that Mariuli had stabbed herself.

The same thing was also noticed by other, more-perceptive-than-average Shudraqians, those among the most perceptive; those who were not, were convinced by Mizelda’s verdict.

They did not conclude that the Chieftain, Mizelda, was trying to cover for her biological younger sister, Taritta.

Rather, it was the opposite. —Only Mizelda had never attempted to defend Taritta. Not because of a lack of sisterly affection, but because Mizelda was a Shudraqian among Shudraqians.

Their strong Shudraq blood was the basis for Mizelda’s judgement.

It was decided that Taritta was not at fault, and that Mariuli, having taken the dagger from the former, had committed suicide using it.

Perhaps in an attempt to escape the agony of her illness, or perhaps to leave her death in her own hands, rather than the demon of ill health’s hand. From the Shudraq’s point of view, the latter option would have been seen in a better light.

But—

Taritta: “I, let Mariuli die……”

It was none other than Taritta herself who did not see it that way.

Taritta had drawn her dagger to shut Mariuli's mouth. To prevent her from speaking words she wished not to hear, to prevent her from leaving any more curses behind.

Without Taritta's imprudence then, Mariuli would not have died in such a manner.

And above all—

Taritta: "—A commandment."

On the verge of death, Mariuli made Taritta listen to the commandment bestowed upon herself.

Until then, Mariuli had never explained the slightest thing about the contents of the commandment to Taritta, although she had told the latter it had been handed down to her. Only on her deathbed did she let Taritta hear it for the first time.

Taritta: "—Great Disaster."

The commandment was to avoid destruction, and that destruction was the Great Disaster, so had Mariuli explained.

The implementation of countermeasures to prevent it, was Mariuli's commandment.

Taritta: "—A traveler, with dark hair, and dark eyes."

Would there truly be a thing such as a traveler who would appear a thousand nights from the present?

How could the death of the traveler stave off destruction large enough to even be called a Great Disaster?

But until the very end, Mariuli had believed in the commandment, in a Stargazer's duty.

Going without fulfilling it wholly made her feel as far as her life had been meaningless.

Taritta: “That it was meaningless…”

That it was absurd, was something Taritta could assert without doubt.

How many times had Mariuli’s words, Mariuli’s kindness, been salvation to her?

Due to her existence, Taritta had been spared from being crushed by the inferiority complex she held towards her own elder sister, worthy of bearing the name Shudraq. Devoid of her support, Taritta would not exist as she did this day.

This too, was Mariuli’s achievement. Taritta would not permit anyone to state that it had been meaningless.

Above all, Mariuli had Utakata, the child she gave birth to after a painful pregnancy.

Taritta: “I won’t let anyone say that all of it was meaningless…”

Biting her teeth with force, she raised her eyes to the night sky.

The sky replete of heavenly stars had not changed. They did not confer Taritta with any of their teachings.

Of course not. The stars spoke naught. Mariuli’s mind was trapped within a delusion.

Even so, even if she had sought salvation in that delusion, even if she had sworn a vow.

Taritta: “These stars or whatever, I wish they would shatter…!”

Simultaneously with directing her hatred towards the night sky, however, Taritta beseeched this.

As Mariuli had whispered, a traveler would come to the forest.

Mariuli’s soul, ruled by despair and regret, would continue to wander, unable to finally join with their ancestor’s spirits.

Without severing that despair and regret, her soul sister would not meet redemption.

What had happened in those final moments, was a secret that the still-young Utakata could not know.

It was a secret that even blood relatives should not meddle with, only soul sisters should.

Taritta: “Surely, my arrow—”

Would shoot the traveler dead, severing Mariuli from her lingering attachments.

For that end, she waited and waited and waited without end for the traveler’s visit, and finally—

—One day, Taritta drew her bow at the sight of her much-awaited traveler.

Subaru: “—Rem!!”

The shot set loose from the bow drawn tight missed its target, and the dark-haired, dark-eyed traveler leapt to the protection of the girl at his side.

Having fixed her aim towards his heart, Taritta’s heart sprung mightily, as she clenched her molars.

After a thousand nights, a black-haired traveler had made their appearance in the forest.

Struck by a shock akin to her heart being frozen over, Taritta nocked an arrow to her bow, and became a hunter.

Calmly, coolly, the tip of the arrow was steadied, aimed at its target.

But her soul was bellowing in fiery applause. Bellowing. Bellowing.

Bellowing, it was bellowing.

—The moment the deergirl jumped out, all sound vanished from the world.

The tremendous shockwave just before that, with the Great Disaster at its center, caused the world to literally shake; the force blowing the very city itself away in a violent explosion holding the energy to stamp out the Great Disaster.

Their entire bodies were engulfed in the violent winds of the shock, it was enough for them to hold the conviction that any existence engulfed in a shockwave thousands, tens of thousands of times more powerful than this one, would be shattered into pieces.

However, overpowering even that conviction, the Great Disaster survived this destruction.

Though it could not be said that to be alive and well, Taritta, having become a bystander, aware that she was shaking as she knelt on one knee, sensed the presence of the Great Disaster having escaped annihilation from beyond the plume of smoke.

Louis, Medium, Al, the people of the city, they were watching this desperate resistance.

Unable to decide how she should be, unable to confront the commandment she had continuously been controlled by, and recollecting Mariuli's face stained with the color of blood, Taritta was unable to move in the face of the Great Disaster.

Everyone carried out their own role, leaving the worthless Taritta behind.

Just as Yorna Mishigure, the ruler of the city, struck a blow at the expense of her beloved city.

Just as the deergirl, seeing that the blow was insufficient, jumped out of her hiding place.

Tanza: "…"

Running fiercely, her right eye alight, was the girl in a kimono, the messenger who had made her appearance at the inn.

At the destination of the girl who had introduced herself as Tanza, was the Great Disaster on the other side of the fluttering plume of smoke. Taritta did not understand just what in the world she was going to do.

However—

Yorna: "—Don't!"

Reprimanding her shaking legs, Taritta understood Tanza's aim and resolve by chance upon hearing Yorna's reaction, screaming towards the back of the girl running past.

Tanza was risking her own life, to challenge the Great Disaster by means of some technique.

Yorna, with a guess as to what she was doing, and because of her love for the girl, tried to stop her.

But to stop the young girl would mean missing a golden opportunity to destroy the Great Disaster, whose movements had been arrested by a single blow with the Demon City as a sacrifice.

Or perhaps, if Yorna, one of the Nine Divine Generals, was so inclined, she may be able to perform the clincher against the Great Disaster, and drive it away in some other fashion.

—But was that really true?

Taritta: "—Hk."

Cursing herself for trying to harbor such wishful thinking, Taritta gasped quietly.

Casting her sight to her surroundings, Taritta longed for the means to change the situation, for a chance to make a move. She even hoped that someone other than herself would take action.

However, the wreckage of the blown debris, and the people who were tossed and scattered by those, had no strength left to deal with this situation. —Only Taritta did.

Only Taritta, who had hesitated to participate in the frantic offensive, trying to weather the passing of the storm, was in possession of options at this point.

And then—

Abel: "—Taritta."

Taritta turned her gaze at the faint call, and saw the figure of a man standing up on a hill.

Abel. Blood flowing from within his oni mask, his dark eyes looked fixedly at Taritta. Rather than utilizing language, he silently pointed his finger towards the heavens.

To look to the sky, was not what he was conveying.

Abel indicated the heavens, or rather, the stars. —Namely, the commandment.

Being told to choose, Taritta was forced to make a decision.

Tarrita: "…"

The bloodstained Mariuli's final moments, and the commandment to kill the dark-haired, dark-eyed traveler were resurrected within her mind.

Were she to execute it, they would escape the Great Disaster. Mariuli's soul would be freed from its shackles.

Consequently—

Taritta: "…"

Taritta quietly, and without hesitation, drew an arrow from her quiver and, putting it on her bow, took aim.

It was a hunting procedure she had repeated thousands upon thousands of times; it transformed Taritta from a frightened, bewildered, and foolish girl who was unable do her job, into a hunter.

If she were told something as high and mighty as to choose a method to save the world with, this would be how she would elect to do it.

All along, Taritta's answer to the proposition of the heavens, to the whispers of the stars, had long since been decided.

In other words—

Taritta: "—I don't even know what sort of thing a commandment is."

The bowstring was released, and the nocked arrow flew furiously through the air, cutting through the wind.

And it did not miss its mark; as it pierced the leg of a tall woman who was about to get up and break into a run.

With a startled cry, the woman fell forward and stumbled over.

Impatience and surprise etched on her white face, the woman reached out her hand in grief, raising her voice.

SETOWI

Even in a world where all sound had vanished, Taritta understood very well that this voice was calling out the name of the girl pushing onwards towards the Great Disaster.

Even so, she had made her choice.

—Disobeying the commandment entrusted to her soul sister, she allowed the young girl to achieve her greatest wish, pushing on to stake her life.

Tanza: "—Yorna-sama."

Kicking off the ground, just before she burst into the opposite side of the cloud of smoke, the girl's lips invoked that name with loving devotion.

And then, her petite body was swallowed up by the Great Disaster that awaited her beyond the wisp of smoke—

—A monumental second shock, an extreme explosion comparable to the Demon City's own, blew the Great Disaster away this time.

Chapter 60:
The Planting of a Tumultuous Seedling

1

Vincent: "—Yorna Mishigure must abdicate the Demon City in an attempt to destroy the Great Disaster. The Soul Marriage Technique might succeed in this, but there is no guarantee."

Tanza: "…Supposing the Demon City were offered, and it's not enough…"

Vincent: "If that does come to pass, the Great Disaster, with no way to stop it, shall threaten to engulf the entire Empire, or perhaps even more, spreading outside its borders. With the Demon City as its epicenter."

Tanza: "…"

Vincent: "…"

Tanza: "Yorna-sama will not approve of giving up this city."

Vincent: "This is not a situation for sentimentality. Regardless of whether you want it or not, the city shall be abandoned. In the first place, it is not up to me to persuade you to do so."

Tanza: "You believe he can convince Yorna-sama?"

Vincent: "If he cannot, everything shall turn to dust. If he must, he shall undertake it. That is the type of person he is, he has maintained that way of being since forever."

Tanza: "…I don't understand. If you know that much, and are so sure about him, what do you want from me?"

Vincent: "You should already be aware of what I intend. You are young, but you are in a position to be utilized plenty by the ruler of the Demon City."

Tanza: “…”

Vincent: “In case the Great Disaster is not destroyed, Yorna Mishigure shall suffer tremendously. The Demon City shall be used against a Great Disaster that has yet to develop fully, but if that does not suffice—”

Tanza: “—I…”

Vincent: “…”

Tanza: “Yorna-sama… For Yorna Mishigure’s sake, the most magnificent among all, a lady akin to a compassionate mother, For that far away love I am to die a martyr’s death, I assume.”

Vincent: “—. It is a grand undertaking.”

Tanza: “I do not need consolation nor compliments. —Except, Yorna-sama’s tears.”

2

Yorna: “—Don’t!”

Tanza ran with Yorna’s voice behind her, the latter reaching out her hand, shouting with a pained expression on her face.

Pitching forward, Tanza nimbly kicked the ground, her right eye blazing red, her young body filled with strength that even heavily-armored Imperial Soldiers would be unable to match.

She was no exceptional fighter, nor did she excel in magic or special techniques.

Still, no one could stop her current self.

The reason for that was that she was aware of being loved by Yorna, more loved than anyone else was.

She supported Yorna by her side, was given affection, spoken to, helped, thought of, prayed for.

To love Yorna, and to be loved by Yorna, were the necessary qualifications to receive the maximum benefits of the Soul Marriage Technique—yet Tanza's love for Yorna was not out of self-interest.

One may perhaps say that love requested naught in return, speaking with a know-it-all look.

However, Tanza believed in that. —She believed that the feeling of loving someone was in itself a reward.

The thought of that person and the beating of their heart was the reward for love.

Then Tanza had to reciprocate it, with all of her little body, in return for what she had received.

That was exactly—

Tanza: "The reason why I was given this life."

The first time Tanza was granted audience with Yorna, having been driven away from someplace else, she was far too young. Concealed behind her kind older sister's back, unable to do anything besides looking up towards Yorna and her dignified conduct.

But, for the first time in her life, she had been promised that she could live her days without being threatened by anyone. Believing in that promise, she had thoughts more than fleeting about spending her days with her older sister.

The second time she was granted audience with Yorna, having had her older sister stolen by horrible things, Tanza snapped at Yorna in desperation; however, Yorna did not reproach her.

On the contrary, she listened sincerely to Tanza's pleas and even helped to avenge her lost sister's death. —Even if she would be stigmatized as a rebel, in return.

Why, should she not love her?

A kind person, who had given so much love and compassion to Tanza priorly.

She wept at the death of Tanza's older sister, regretted being unable to keep her promise, and apologized to Tanza.

—Why, should she not love her?

Tanza: "…"

In front of her, she could observe a horrifying, writhing black mass of stagnation gathering behind a plume of smoke.

The city beloved by Yorna had been destroyed, and yet her stubborn persistence remained unshattered. Tanza was not intimidated by the darkness that made everyone wish to avert their gaze from itself.

If fear was a reason to falter, then that was not what ruled Tanza's heart.

Accordingly, Tanza jumped forward using the debris as footing, pushing headlong into the flickering Great Disaster.

If she turned around, it would become a lingering attachment. She knew it would in turn become a curse.

But—

Yorna: "Tanza—!"

Hearing the one she loved calling out her name, Tanza's gaze was directed behind her back.

There she saw Yorna lying on the ground, reaching out her hand. A single arrow had painfully pierced her leg; she understood that the person wielding a bow far away from her had been the one to perform that deed.

Were it not for that arrow, Yorna would have rushed towards the Great Disaster, towards Tanza.

Tanza was thankful to the arrow's shooter, as she could not have done anything as drastic as that.

And then—

Tanza: “—Yorna-sama.”

Her lips moved.

Whether the words that followed reached Yorna or were inaudible, she would not know.

However, in that moment, just like she did every day before sleeping, every time she woke up had she even the slightest of time, she offered a prayer.

—May you, my beloved, be in good health each and every day.

3

The light blew away everything, white scorching the retinae of all.

As the light faded and the seared eyes gradually regained their capabilities, all beings witnessed the end of the Demon City.

???: “…”

The ground zero of the explosion had caved in, as if a circle had been gouged out, and, at the center of the Demon City, where the Crimson Lapis Castle should have been located, a titanic hole had been opened wide.

It was as if a giant’s arm had dug up the large pit, a literal mark that proved the existence of a fearsome entity that had swallowed up the entirety of the Demon City.

And the Disaster, which had been defied by the forces of concerted battle, had vanished abruptly.

It was the result of the trump card played by Yorna Mishigure, the Mistress of the Demon City, and all those who had participated in the battle knew that the final push had been performed by the little girl who had staked her life.

In other words—

???: “—We were saved by that girl. I am deplorable.”

A man so muttered as he peered into the bottom of the gaping hole, stretching out the vines of thorn he wielded—Kafma Irulux.

There was no falsehood; probably, those words were true, from his heart. As typical of a warrior a cut above the rest, this honest young man who adhered to the philosophy of the Empire reproached himself for having allowed others to correct his own shortcomings.

And making it all the more aggravating, was that a young girl’s life had been spent to cover for that.

Kafma: “Originally, I am at odds with you and your people. Now that things have settled down, I see that the truce should end here, and that we should turn towards that…”

???: “…Then, you’ll fight us?”

Kafma: “—. We should not.”

Looking back at the big hole behind him, Kafma shook his head at the question.

Facing Kafma was Medium, her barbarian sword, too large for her small frame, carried on her back. The query of the battered girl covered in mud was a shining ray of light, even amidst the devastation.

That beautiful beam of light was what Kafma believed necessary to keep things from deteriorating.

At any rate, the end result was that the Demon City of Chaosflame had been destroyed, and no building could be found standing straight. From here, the survivors’ struggle to pull through would commence.

Of course, Kafma’s role as a General of the Empire was to deal with those refugees and with Yorna Mishigure, who would lead them.

Kafma: “Right now, I am travelling as the bodyguard for a very important person. First and foremost, I must give priority to meeting up with said individual. Everything else is trivial at this point."

Medium: "Trivial? Trivial, you say? I think putting it like that is awful!"

Kafma: "N-no, that's not what I meant…"

Receiving an objection for being unscrupulous, Kafma flinched slightly at Medium's barbs. But, a somber voice called out to her just like Kafma, "Lil' Miss Medium", offering him some timely help.

Looking toward them, slowly coming their way, was a one-armed figure—

???: "That's just that guy's own concern. He's saying he's got more important things to do, so he won't fight us. So let's settle it with that, that about right?"

Kafma: "…I cannot say anything myself. I will leave how you interpret that up to you."

???: "Heyhey. Plenty of people like you around; y'know, roundabout like you here, big bro."

Shrugging his shoulders in exasperation, the one-armed man—Al, stood next to Medium. Looking up at him, Medium's eyes widened with an "Ah".

And then, once she pointed at his face.

Medium: "Al-chin, you actually managed to find your helmet?"

Al: "Yeah, somehow. It was lying in the vicinity of where the inn was, so it was a blessing in disguise. I just needed to find it, since I knew it wouldn't break."

Medium: "—? You mean it's tough?"

Al: "Yeahyeah, I mean tough. No one in this world can break it."

As he declared that, Al rapped his fingers on the jet-black helmet he donned. Medium nodded her head with a “Really~?” in reply, but Kafma shot a sharp look at Al.

Noticing the look in his eyes, Al tilted his head, asking “What do you wanna do?”.

Al: “Your opinion’s that you don’t wanna fight us, right? Of course, same goes for us… Or perhaps I should say that we’re all too worn out for that.”

Kafma: “You directed us brilliantly during that battle earlier. Why did you know how the Great Disaster would move?”

Al: “Trade secret. If I don’t tell you that, no truce?”

Kafma: “—. No, I will not retract my statement.”

Shaking his head, Kafma responded to Al’s answer with genuine sincerity. He then dusted off his tattered cloak with his hand, turning his back on both Al and Medium.

He turned to what he had stated was a very important person.

Kafma: “I cooperated with you this time because of these developments. But you and I are enemies… Lest you reconsider, we will see each other on the battlefield. At that time, I will not stay my hand.”

Al: “Even if you didn’t tell us that…”

Medium: “Same goes for us as well…! Thanks for helping us.”

Kafma: “I only did what I was supposed to do as a General of the Empire.”

With these words, Kafma spread his transparent wings across his sturdy back and flew away in one swift movement, the beating of his wings producing a loud noise.

Medium and Al watched his back as he moved away, a cloud of dust and smoke enveloping him as he kicked up dust. As Kafma disappeared from sight, Medium: "…Al-chin, thank you so much. Really, thanks. You saved my life."

Al: "Well, it's a win-win situation. If it weren't for your persistence, that big thing's assault would've been much more lopsided. There would've been a lot more dead people."

Medium: "Dead people…"

Hearing Al's answer, Medium gently lowered her eyes.

Looking at Medium casting her gaze down with a heart-rending expression on her face, Al fiddled with the seams of his helmet's visor with his fingers, and said,

Al: "I know you dunno what I mean, and I know it's not much consolation, but if that kid… If Tanza hadn't done that, we would've been wiped out. For sure."

Medium: "Maybe, you know, we could've tried harder."

Al: "Nah, that way wouldn't have worked out. —Experimenting with that went up in smoke."

The dejected Al's words really made no sense to Medium. However, she would have been lying if she said it was not comforting.

She understood that Al had said something for the sake of consoling Medium. So it was a genuine consolation.

Medium: "Thanks, Al-chin."

Al: "…You're welcome."

The words Al responded with, once again, made no sense to Medium.

4

???: "Have you finished settling your mind on what needs to be done, Yorna Mishigure?"

Yorna: "…Is that, you?"

Piles of rubble, the broken remains of buildings, and an unfathomably large hole had been created in the aftermath of the fierce battle.

While Yorna stood on top of a hill, surveying the spectacle of scars that remained as a result of the Demon City of Chaosflame going to all-out war against the Great Disaster, a man appeared beneath her.

Abel, his face hidden behind an oni mask, inquired as to her feelings in a tone of voice audibly devoid of even a hint of emotion.

Unhurriedly, Abel made his way through the rubble, desiring to see the same scene as Yorna; however, without inserting any emotion into his voice he spoke,

Abel: "What I can offer you is exactly as I wrote in the missive. Let us hear your answer."

Yorna: "Is that really what you should say when looking at this tragic scene?"

Abel: "Will comfort provide shelter, or pity a refuge? You and I both were born amongst the haves, part of those who chose their duty. As such, a second from us is not of equivalent value to a second from others."

Yorna: "…"

To not wish for comfort, nor for sympathy; he was someone who had chosen that way of being.

Understanding that, Yorna held back from rebelling against his attitude. Most importantly, Yorna would gain nothing by antagonizing him here for emotional reasons.

Yorna: "I've already lost too much today."

Abel: "The city, its citizens. It would be a mistake to add the time you took postponing this matter to those."

Yorna: “She was, Tanza.”

Abel: “…”

Yorna: “The beloved child who sacrificed herself to save us at the end… Her name was Tanza.”

With these words, Yorna pulled out the obidome from her kimono and showed it to Abel.

Abel threw her a sidelong glance as she scrubbed it in a circular motion, questioning her intentions mutely. The outer corner of Yorna’s eyes lowered slightly due to that questioning gaze,

Yorna: “This obidome was fashioned from the horns of that girl’s older sister. When mourning over her sister’s corpse, Tanza made it for me… and aside from that…”

Abel: “…”

Yorna: “Both these hairpins and kanzashi are tributes from my beloved children. These are the marks of those children who have been driven away from their homes, those children who have nothing, and gave of themselves to repay me.”

The colorful ornaments, the hairpins, the kanzashi were all tributes from the residents of the Demon City.

Some had removed their scales, some had gathered feathers, some had polished their horns and fangs, only to then offer them to Yorna, their way of life and gratitude giving them form.

To Yorna, they were more valuable than any precious gem and treasure, and for having been given such things, she felt that she had to live up to their love.

And yet—

Yorna: “I cannot afford to make any more mistakes in my promises…”

Abel: “—. Sooner or later, the departed Vincent Vollachia and his group shall begin moving. They shall not make a move here given the situation, but it is only a matter of time. There is no time to spare."

Yorna: "What will you do regarding the place where my children go to?"

Abel: "We shall have no choice but to use the Fortress City as a base at first. Along the way, we shall seize other towns and add them to our banner. With you and the inhabitants of the Demon City, it is possible."

With the loss of the Demon City's faculties, it was necessary to find a place to receive its stranded residents.

Abel's proposal was a forceful, absurd thing that forced the unreasonable upon others. But Yorna had similar priorities. To save those she loved, that was Yorna.

And aside from that—

Yorna: "Are you sure you're truly prepared to fulfill my wish that was in your missive?"

Abel: "I do not intend to speak of it twice. However, you must ponder it over carefully."

Yorna: "Ponder it over…"

Abel: "Which do you prioritize, your long-held wish or your own "love"?"

With Abel, whose emotions were not visible, Yorna could not tell whether his words, or rather what seemed to be his advice, were given out of favorability or unfavorability.

But Yorna, struck by his words, pulled a kiseru from her belt, fixed its crooked tip with her finger, set it alight, and let the purple smoke waft out.

Below, Yorna's loved ones were probing the broken city, gathering their lives, the parts that sustained them, preparing for what would follow.

It was up to Yorna to give them shelter, and be the light to show them the path towards tomorrow.

To give Abel the benefit of the doubt, and drag Vincent Vollachia—no, the fake who acted as him, off the throne, and make him fulfill the promise in his missive.

And on the contents of promises to be fulfilled—

Yorna: "—Shouldn't it be that parents die first, Tanza?"

And so, the beloved child who had decided her own destiny vanished, just like the purple smoke in the fleeting wind.

5

As she observed the purple smoke rising from a distance, she greeted the man in the oni mask as he walked out from underneath it.

The one being received, Abel, gave a small snort at the sight of Taritta standing stock-still there,

Abel: "If you are preoccupied with the leg you shot through, then it is nothing more than just needless worry. The wound has already begun to heal. It shall recover fully by tomorrow."

Taritta: "…I'm glad for that. It's not what I was worried about though."

Abel: "Ho?"

As Abel had stated, no physical discomfort was visible in Yorna's posture as she stood on the hill. Her kimono and disheveled hair, seen from the back, let off a sense of exhaustion, but her right leg, shot through with an arrow, gave off a different aura.

That in and of itself was possibly a benefit of the secret arts she manipulated. However, the result of inflicting the wound was heavier than the wound itself.

Of course, Taritta was well-aware of that weight.

Taritta: "…"

At that last moment, having been entrusted with a choice, Taritta herself had left the decision to an arrow.

If she were to follow Mariuli's commandment as a Stargazer, Taritta should have shot Abel through the heart with that arrow. It was true that this was the most promising possibility among Taritta's options, although it was hard to imagine what sort of causality would lead this to quell the Great Disaster.

But considering that Mariuli, who was so dear to her, had turned into an existence unbeknownst to her, solely obeying the stars, it was a decision not any different to one of cutting one's own life short.

—At the very end, that was the one point that had made Taritta settle on that decision.

Taritta detested the stars that had changed Mariuli. Thus, she did not follow the stars.

Perhaps just following the commandment would have meshed well with Taritta's personality, someone comfortable with being told what to do, with being shown the way, with being at the beck and call of others.

However, the meeting between Taritta and the stars had been a bad one.

If the stars had spoken to Taritta from the beginning instead of Mariuli, Taritta may have lived for the stars. But that was not what had happened.

Therefore—

Taritta: "—At that moment, I pushed the back of that deergirl who ran without hesitation."

As a result, the girl somehow gave birth to the light that would then destroy the Great Disaster from within.

In exchange, the young girl’s life vanished, and the amount of damage done to the land where the Demon City once stood was not negligible. It was possible to declare, however, that she had been able to protect that which she wished to protect.

Abel: “Yet in spite of that, you do not appear so pleased.”

Taritta: “…I was right, wasn’t I? Not following the commandment, and not shooting you.”

Abel: “As if I, in the position of the one not being shot, would tell you that you should have taken the shot. How correct or wrong your decision was, is not in the scope of the things I should speak of either. As clichéd as it may sound, the rightness of your choice can only be proven by your own actions later on.”

Taritta: “…Those words, I don’t think they belong to you.”

Abel: “Correct. From “Iris and the King of Thorns”… A quote from a classic.”

Having spoken of a matter Taritta did not understand, Abel shook his head sideways, stating “You needn’t comprehend it”.

He then surveyed Taritta from top to bottom,

Abel: “You may possess some trepidation even now, but you seem to have gotten over it to some extent. Now, what shall you do?”

Taritta: “I don’t know for sure. I just want to go back to that city and have a conversation with my sister and my people. I would like to talk to the daughter of my already-late soul sister.”

Abel: “A soul sister, which left a commandment to you, huh… That clarification as to why you yourself are not a Stargazer does make sense now. An increasingly abominable bunch.”

Taritta: “Abominable…”

Abel: “You are not who I was speaking of. I understand your general plan.”

Abel turned his head around in response to Taritta’s mutterings.

A large number of people marched into the streets that had become ruins, gathering household goods that had escaped damage, as well as materials that could be used for some purpose, and began prioritizing what was needed in order to stay alive.

Taritta was struck by the resilience of the way of life held by those from the Demon City.

Recalling the origins of the Demon City, they were probably accustomed to being persecuted, oppressed, and losing. Even taking that into account, that was.

However—

Taritta: “Those people, are you going to drag them into your fight?”

Abel: “Indeed.”

Involuntarily, Taritta felt daunted due to that short, definitive answer.

There was no hesitation; Abel observed the people trying their best in the devastated land, yet stayed consistent with his original purpose in coming to Chaosflame, putting his heels together with a noise.

Then—

???: “—Though Abel-chan’s opinion might be right, I wonder if the people around him are gonna obey so quietly. Even the foxbabe might have a hard time being on our side emotionally, right?”

While expressing a reasonable opinion, Al joined Abel and Taritta.

He had been out of sight for some time, but judging from the way he had set his familiar helmet back on his head and languidly walked toward them, it seemed that something aside from his normal size had been recovered.

At Al's side was Medium, who looked up at Abel with her round blue eyes,

Medium: "I feel the same way as Al-chin. I'd be happy if Yorna-chan was on our side, but after what happened with Tanza-chan and the city, I'm not sure she would want to be a part of this…"

Abel: "Are you saying that Yorna Mishigure shall not follow us, those who have brought along the existence at the center of the catastrophe? That idea is an overly sentimental one. She has already made up her mind."

Medium: "Really? Abel-chin, you didn't tell her something awful again?"

Abel: "Regardless of how heartless they are, I shall say what needs to be done. My intentions are clear."

Medium's cheeks puffed up at Abel's refusal to deny the question she had posed.

In fact, from what Taritta's ears had picked up, the exchange between Abel and Yorna had not been emotional, but it was far from being gentle, calm, and cuddly.

Still, the reason why Abel did not doubt Yorna's intentions like he did was because,

Al: "You're prepared to take advantage of Miss Yorna's weakness… After all, if she doesn't walk the same path as us, she can't protect the city's residents who've got nowhere else to go, right?"

Medium: "Good gracious…! Again with your heartless words, Abel-chin."

Abel: "What other choice do they possess? The only other option remaining for them is to stick with their meaningless obstinacy and die a dog's death."

Medium: "There's no other way, but there's another way to say it! Why don't you get that!"

Abel directed a frigid gaze towards Medium through his oni mask, the latter pressing him for an answer by raising her voice.

Taritta was fairly certain that Abel would make a callous judgement regarding Medium's complaints, but her emotions were close to Medium's.

However, as long as he followed the Covenant between the Emperor of the past and the People of Shudraq, Taritta was unable to abandon Abel and cut off their relationship.

The likes of allies by sentiment, held no significance on a very real battlefield.

Al: "You're right to be angry, Lil' Miss Medium. However, I personally don't dislike Abel's idea of using whatever he can. I wouldn't have any objection if Lil' Miss Yorna came with us just for utilitarian purposes."

Medium: "I'm telling you, I've got many objections with it. I hate you too, Al-chin!"

Al: "There's a pain in my heart from hearing that Lil' Miss Medium hates me. That aside…"

Cutting off his sentence there, while keeping Medium, who was glaring at Abel and himself, at bay, Al cast his gaze around, turning his attention toward the large hole in the center of the demolished area.

Once that movement captured Taritta and the others' attention, and, turning to it as well, he voiced,

Al: "Let's talk about one of ours. —About bro."

Everyone: "…"

As Al broached the topic, the parched air grew tenser ever so slightly.

It was a topic that they all knew must be talked about, but at the same time, it was a topic that they were all feeling a bit uncomfortable about, wondering what to say.

At any rate—

Medium: “Subaru-chin, where have you gone…?”

Medium’s somber muttering spoke of a damage of smaller proportions wrought by the Great Disaster.

Compared to the fact that one of the larger cities the Empire took pride in had completely disappeared, and the fact that the lives of two Emperors had been endangered, that damage could perhaps be said to be quite trivial.

However, for the group that came to the Demon City, it was damage that could not be overlooked.

Medium: “Yorna-chan said that the shadows overflowed from Subaru-chin.”

Al: “Old Man Olbart said that as well. He was smiling even though his right hand was gone. As someone with a long history of having one arm, it was unbelievable.”

Taritta: “The old man’s attitude, you mean? Or was it what he said?”

Al: “It’s frustrating, but here, it’s the attitude. As to what he was saying, I’m certain it’s true.”

With a click of his tongue, Al said that he trusted Olbart’s testimony.

Taritta also did not have a good impression of the monstrous old man, but it was also true that he had no reason to lie. As long as what he had stated matched up with what Yorna said, it was probably true.

Suddenly, what came to Taritta’s mind was the memory of Mariuli’s last will and testament, “A traveler, with dark hair, and dark eyes”.

Upon first sighting Subaru in the forest and aiming for his life, there had been no doubt in her mind about him. Later, once she learned of Abel's existence and identity, him being trapped in the village, she believed that she had misjudged her opponent without a doubt, but—

Taritta: "What if…"

What if it had been Subaru, and not Abel, the one responsible for the Great Disaster foreseen by Mariuli as the Stargazer?

That could be why the Great Disaster had overflowed with Subaru at the center.

Such doubts kept nagging at Taritta's heart.

Abel: "There is one thing we must unify our views on."

Taritta's anguish was put aside as Abel held up a finger at the center of the group.

Having caught their attention, Abel surveyed the faces of Medium, Al, and Taritta respectively, then declared,

Abel: "From your way of speaking, that thing's… Natsuki Subaru's survival is not something you hold doubts on. Do you believe in earnest that he survived that wretched scene?"

Medium: "—Hk, of course! Him dying's something…"

Abel: "Do not say anything such as not wanting to think about it. Even if it is difficult for you to accept, things that are meant to happen shall happen. The life and death of others walks a fine line."

Medium: "Abel-chin…"

Abel's matter-of-fact tone clashed head-on with Medium's emotional insistence.

As for Taritta, her sentiments here, too, leaned towards Medium. But she was not hopeful that Subaru could have survived, as he had been at the heart of this catastrophe.

Perhaps, it was because her daily life was spent hunting, coming into contact with the life and death of living beings.

The People of Shudraq were brave warriors, but even routine hunts were deadly. Sometimes, beasts would fight back in their death throes, and her companions would lose their lives.

People died. Easily. Whether those people were important or not made zero difference.

Taritta: “Unfortunately, Subaru…”

Al: “Bro’s alive.”

Medium: “—Al-chin!”

Shaking her head, Taritta tried to express her condolences. But her statement was interrupted by Al’s words full of conviction; hearing them made Medium’s face light up.

Naturally, Abel turned his eyes, which seemed to be in a foul mood, towards Al,

Abel: “Clown, how can you be so sure of his survival?”

Al: “Plain and simple, it’s ‘cause Natsuki Subaru’s that kinda guy. Or rather…”

Abel: “Rather?”

Al: “The world hasn’t been destroyed. That’s my basis.”

Taritta could not fully stomach the rationale and the logic that Al laid out. It seemed the same went for Medium, who also tilted her head with a look of incomprehension.

Abel too, cut him down in one go, telling him to “Quit being a fool” verbatim,

Abel: “I do not possess the leisure to listen to your nonsense. If you wish to be a clown, do it around Priscilla.”

Al: “I’d love to do just that, but unfortunately the Princess ain’t here. Speaking of that unfortunate fact, I’d like to ask the same of you, Abel-chan.”

Abel: “What is it.”

Al: “What do you think, Abel-chan? Do you believe bro’s dead?”

Touching the chin of his helmet, Al inquired Abel as to the latter’s thoughts. His opinion, however, seemed to be set in stone. He was the one who had originally started the questioning in such a tone, questioning their sanity for believing Subaru was still alive.

Naturally, for him, the belief that Subaru, who had been within the Great Disaster, had survived—.

Abel: “—Since that was not the Great Disaster, a role for him to fulfill remains. If he possesses the ability for that purpose, it would be premature to assume he is dead.”

Taritta: “Huh…”

Medium: “Abel-chin?!”

But what Abel actually declared was the opposite of what Taritta had expected.

The answer made Taritta become speechless, and even Medium, who should have obtained the answer she was looking for, rounded her eyes in surprise.

However, Abel, not meeting the gazes of Taritta and the others, turned his body immediately after, and slowly walked away from that place.

Glancing at each other’s faces, Taritta and Medium then followed him. Al followed the backs of those three as well, leaning his head in befuddlement.

Medium: “Abel! What do you mean, explain already?!”

Abel: “What is it you need an explanation for?”

Medium: “Everything! You were talking like Subaru-chin was dead until just a moment ago, that’s why.”

Abel: “I just said that, if you believe he survived, you need to present me with an argument other than an emotional one. I do believe he has a reason for surviving. That is why I think he survived. End of story.”

Medium: “~~Hk!”

Abel’s answer bereft of kindness made Medium go red in the face, and express her dissatisfaction. That, too, bore no effect at all on Abel; he did not even glance back.

Abel’s feet, with the three of them in tow, finally stopped after walking for a while. They did so right in front of the gargantuan hole made by the now-scattered Great Disaster, where the Demon City once stood.

And there—

???: “Uau…”

There, crouched at the edge of the hole, was a small girl—Louis, hanging down her head.

Her white clothes were completely stained with mud, and she was feebly shoveling soil with her bare hands. Her hands were filthy from the dirt, but it was also noticeable that they had been stained red due to the bleeding of her broken fingernails.

Medium: “Louis-chan…!”

In a panic, Medium rushed up to Louis and embraced the girl from behind; even with Medium’s embrace, Louis’s hands still would not stop.

Pawing away at the ground, or pushing aside debris, the girl kept searching for something. —No, not something.

Taritta: “She’s looking for Subaru…”

Al: “For better or for worse, I guess… Tch, it doesn’t leave a good taste.”

As they watched the back of the petite Louis, Taritta and Al each exhaled their own thoughts.

Unbeknownst to Taritta, Al’s attitude toward Louis had become terribly irritated. However, Al had been the one to protect Louis from the final strike, the one that blew away the Great Disaster. So Taritta could not quite decipher the relationship between the two in that regard.

Prodding into it now probably would not make anyone happy. She had a vague idea, but Taritta acted as she had not listened to the topic that had been delved into.

Abel: “Stop it already. Digging through the dirt and looking underneath the rubble shan’t help you find what you are looking for.”

Louis: “U… Aau!”

As Louis was hugged by Medium, Abel stood behind her. Turning her head to see the gaze of the oni mask directed at her, Louis made a face that was not quite one of anger, nor one of sorrow.

It seemed to be both condemning Abel and appealing for him to not stop her.

Abel did not care if it was the former, and even if it were the latter, it would reach deaf ears. So, he cocked his chin in the direction of the large pit to Louis’s side—

Abel: “Discovering him shall require much effort of you. At the very least, he will not emerge even if you paddle through the dirt alone. —Furthermore, you are not even aware of where he was blown off to.”

Louis: “Au! Aau! Uauua!”

Abel: “You may search like the simpleton you are, but you shall never find him. You would do good to recognize that.”

Louis: “Uu! Uuuu!”

Abel’s cold-blooded words caused Louis to turn red and open her mouth in vehement protest.

From her vigor and look of anger, it was evident that she would never give up looking for Subaru, and that she was keen that she would find him without fail.

And then—

Medium: “Abel-chin, is there a way to find Subaru-chin?”

Louis: “Uh, uh?”

Medium: “The way you just said it, about how Louis-chan can’t find Subaru-chin alone. Do you have a better method in mind? Or doesn’t it exist? Do you have one?”

While Medium posed a question to Abel, looking into his eyes, Louis grew more excited as Medium embraced her. As Louis’s vigor subsisted because of Medium’s words, Abel shut one eye, and,

Abel: “You are not very perceptive, but you have good instincts, don’t you? You and your brother are like two peas in a pod.”

Medium: “Of course, because big bro and I are brother and sister. More importantly, answer me properly! Is there a way to find Subaru-chin? Is there? Is there?!”

Expectations swelled, and Medium threw out the same question over and over. Sighing at Medium pitching forward, Abel paused for a beat, then added,

Abel: “It is not anything as proper as a search method. The original aim would not be to find someone who has disappeared, but to secure a pretext to stir trouble in the Imperial Capital.”

Medium: “Make it easier to understand!”

Abel: “…If that plan works, you and this girl’s wish may come true. After all, the whole Empire shall search high and low for that one person.”

Taritta: “The entire Empire, looking for Subaru… you say?”

Picking up on an intriguing part of Abel’s words, Taritta’s eyebrows frowned.

Like Medium, Taritta was not the most perceptive of people. The only difference was that Medium would say out loud that she did not understand what she did not understand, while Taritta would keep it to herself.

In any case, Abel’s explanation, which he had attempted voicing in an easy-to-understand manner, was not quite grasped by Taritta due to her lack of knowledge beforehand.

However—

Louis: “—Uau, auau?”

The intent behind those words had been only conveyed with certainty to the one whom it had been addressed to.

Louis, who had been on the verge of a violent outburst, relaxed in Medium’s arms; and, staring at a motionless Abel, she cast a question without the use of language.

In response, Abel nodded, voicing “Of course”. Although, he probably did not know its exact meaning.

Al: “So what are we gonna do? How can we implement this plan to find bro?”

Abel: “Nothing so difficult, just spread the word.”

Medium: “…”

Abel responded to Al’s question, and Medium glared sharply at him again. Then, Abel sighed, as if anticipating the hounding that would follow from Medium, and resumed.

Resumed with—

Abel: “—That Vincent Vollachia’s illegitimate son, a black-haired, black-eyed abomination, is seeking his father’s position. Precisely like a reenactment of “Magrizza’s Guillotine”.”

6

—On the same day, at the same time, in a certain place.

???: “—Hk.”

They forcibly pushed their soaking wet body up, pulling themselves nearer to ground, to which their fingers were just barely clinging to. There would be no returning if they were to let go of this feeling, even for a moment.

This person was literally in a struggle to the death—no, more like, in a struggle for their life.

The pitch-black water, which offered no refuge, sapped away their body temperature and stamina something fierce, so many times making them feel like they would breathe their last. They were unable to distinguish whether this was a dream or reality.

They felt as if they had been bitten over and over again by a large fish lurking beneath the water. They felt like they had drowned, all the while tasting blood, the inside of their lungs being filled with acrid water, unable to breathe. There mayhave been some times in which they had passed out from a hypothermia or lack of stamina, their life being snuffed out amidst sleep.

And so, while repeating that, piling that up, floundering, like so, finally they—

???: “Bah, bwaaah…”

They forced their body up onto the shore while coughing out water they had swallowed. This was tough, anguishing, and heavy. From the bottom of their heart, they wished that they could utilize both of their hands to make things easier. However, they could not do so.

Opposite to their right hand, which had clasped the shore, wrapped around their left arm, there was something which they could never let go of.

They had failed over and over before they had understood its identity. They had ended up letting go.

However, once they understood what it was, they absolutely could never release it. And so they had piled up so, so many mistakes; and yet, they had not given up—

???: "…"

Before they did so to themselves, they pushed the one wrapped around their left arm up onto the shore.

Though small in size, they were still heavy. The fact that the one doing the carrying was not in perfect condition, and that neither of them were dressed for swimming, was unfortunate.

Even more so regarding her, since she was wearing a kimono, and those had more cloth to them than normal clothing. Meaning, it would soak up more water.

They hoped she would forgive them for removing some of her kimono enroute, to make her lighter.

Something had also sharply dug into their flank and nape upon pulling her towards themselves. The reason for that, had been the splendid antlers sprouting from her head. —With this pain, they would prefer that she would interpret this as putting the two of them even.

All that was left was—

???: "Uh, guh…!"

They pushed the girl up to the shore, and now all that remained was to muster the last of their strength, and get themselves onto the coast as well.

However, perhaps because the thread of tension was cut once the girl had been put on the waterfront, they were incapable of procuring that last strength to muster, and their hands only clawed fruitlessly at dry land.

Their wavering head and the ringing in their ears chided them, conveying to them that they could not remain as they were.

It was the omen of their consciousness fading. And losing their consciousness here, meant death.

If the tension were cut, and their willpower to accomplish anything were severed, they would be stuck repeating dream and reality to obtain this luck once again.

Anything but that, they thought, struggling in earnest more, and more, and more, as to revive their consciousness.

Their consciousness, grew faint. Eventually, their hand let go of the shore—

???: "—Oops, careful."

At that moment, as they loosened their hold on the shore, and once again sunk into the water, someone held onto that hand.

Firm, slender fingers gripped their wrist, pulling their plummeting body up onto the coast. Their face rose from within the water as they gasped for air, and right before losing consciousness, they looked at the other person.

Just who was it that had caught their hand, however—

???: "Nah, let's not have that. You're on the verge of losing consciousness at any moment, right? That'd be a tad shoddy if so. Having gotten this chance, I'd rather kick things off in a more dramatic fashion."

Of all things, the hand opposite to the one holding onto them came to cover their eyes as they attempted to get a look at the other. What they observed, was no more than the wrinkles of the other person's palm.

The hand of an unknown someone with palm lines that were unusually long.

With that as the last thing they saw, their consciousness, faded away—

???: “However, nice job swimming all the way here! Really, such a strange coincidence, walking wherever the wind took me got me here! My my my my, real nice, isn’t it?!”

Caught by their fading consciousness, that cheerful voice accompanied them all the way until its end.

That voice, almost akin to a high-spirited thunderclap.

???: “—Don’t you just get the feeling that a grand tale’s gonna begin?”

With that unanswerable question, their consciousness—Natsuki Subaru’s consciousness, was lost without answering.

Chapter 54B: Covering the Blue Sky

1

—The piercing blue sky cast a majestic gaze down on the activities of the people beneath.

Brilliantly twinkling white sun, big white clouds flowing slowly.

A lukewarm breeze caressed their neck and ruffled their pale blue hair, as they breathed deeply and quietly.

Feeling the world with their entire body, realizing that they were part of it.

It was a quite pretentious phrase, and it felt as if someone had spoken an exceedingly difficult thing. However, having been told that this was what was required of them at the moment, they put it in practice first, and cast doubt on it later.

They had requested to be taught on their own volition, to boot. These were still the early days as well. Their temperament was not so short as to make them resign from those lessons.

Although—

???: "…I cannot lie about my impatience."

Gently placing their hand on their own chest, they awaited the inhaled air to exert its power within the lungs.

They could not quite tell whether this feeling would nurture them from inside. It was frustrating, and it made them feel hateful of their own petty nature to seek instant gratification.

—No, maybe it was not that it was in their nature to desire immediate results, but the reason was rather the situation they were placed in.

Not their own, but that of someone not present, who was endeavoring to fulfill their role elsewhere—

???: "—Ah! There you are!"

And then, a voice called out behind them to their quiet meditating backs, reminding them of the breath they had been holding. As they exhaled the air that had built up in their chest, they looked back, seeing a small figure running up to them.

It was a young boy with fluffy, pink hair. He was such a precarious child with a lovely face, cherry-red cheeks, and dazzling white bare legs in short trousers.

The boy, who looked about eleven or twelve years old, smiled as he made his approach.

Boy: "Priscilla-sama wants to see you! I would like you to come with me!"

???: "I understand. Thank you very much for taking the trouble, Schult-san."

Schult: "Absolutely not! This was not something that would merit such gratitude."

Carrying himself modestly, his cheeks being dyed by delight, the corners of the boy's—of Schult's mouth slackened due to the circumstances.

But the matter he had brought along was an errand. The two could not just keep talking and smiling with that in mind.

On that note, he tensed his relaxed cheeks and nodded with a small exhale, and then—

???: "So, shall we go together?"

Schult: "Yes, of course! I will join you, Rem-san!"

Bouncing up and down, Schult saluted them with a hand to his head, and the girl—Rem, somewhat surprised by Schult's vigor, nodded, and the two of them headed towards the one who had beckoned her.

Towards Priscilla Barielle, Rem’s provisional master in the Fortress City of Guaral.

2

The fall of the Fortress City of Guaral—About ten days had passed since that terribly absurd operation had been carried out, resulting in the capture of the city with minimal human casualties.

Fortunately, there was little chaos in the city, much thanks to the ability of Zikr Osman, commander of the Imperial Soldiers, and the leadership of Mizelda, whose influence did not diminish even after handing over the role of Chieftain to her sister.

The presence of those two exercised authority on those endowed with military might, preventing disorder and tragedy from occurring beforehand.

Of course, not only those able to fight were present in the city.

Rather, the overwhelming majority of those present would be the townspeople, who were divorced from any martial matters. However, even if they did not fight for a living, Guaral’s townspeople were still very much in the thick of the action.

Initially, reports of strong contempt for Zikr and the Imperial Soldiers had been rife, as they had been deprived of real authority after the City Hall had been taken over with little to no fight.

However, such complaints by the townspeople were soon drowned out.

That was because—

Priscilla: “It is the custom of the Empire to follow the strong. It should have been obvious to everyone that my actions were more righteous than those of people who only parlor.”

Rem: “That’s…”

Priscilla: “Those are the words of those unworthy of being heard, or perhaps of those who bow their head, bearing the tempest, crying aloud when the wind ceases, demanding that their abodes be repaired. Is the word of such a person worth anything?”

Rem: “No matter how you slice it, that sort of extreme is unfair in my opinion.”

It was not merely a simple standpoint, but a way of speaking of someone that looked down at another party from a higher position. In response to this way of sealing off one’s escape route, Rem calmly retorted in response.

There was a pause before her answer, and then arrived a slight scoff,

Priscilla: “You insult me as a coward? I see, you are quite daring, Rem.”

Rem: “It would be reckless if my life were at stake. But Priscilla-san isn’t someone that short-tempered.”

Priscilla: “You dare measure me by your own standards?”

Rem: “Because I don’t have anything else to measure others with, for starters.”

Crimson eyes stared her down, yet Rem steadfastly refuted it.

For Rem, who had lost her memories and had no real past, every thing she saw was new, every action she took was an unknown experience.

To dread something that may incur Priscilla’s displeasure as a result, would mean being unable to take a step forward. What was certain to her current self, whose existence had begun approximately twenty days prior—was that, for these last few days, Rem had been able to spend time with the woman in front of her without losing spirit.

Therefore—

Priscilla: “Hmph, what a petulant thing to say. What an uncute girl.”

Stating so, she buried the hatchet, not betraying Rem’s expectations.

Albeit Priscilla operated in absurd ways for reasons beyond Rem’s understanding occasionally, her impression of Priscilla was basically that she was a rational woman who kept her boisterous remarks to herself.

Priscilla sat upon a luxurious chair, resting her chin upon her hand, with a book open in her lap. She appeared quite picturesque, behaving as if she were the master of this palace, or perhaps mansion, albeit this was only a temporary abode.

Priscilla, currently sojourning in the Fortress City, had seized the largest mansion in the city, leisurely spending her days there. The mansion was, barring the City Hall, the largest building in the city; a luxurious waste of space that could accommodate twenty to thirty people.

Of course, there had been some protest from the original owners of the mansion regarding the seizure, but it was settled in the way of the Empire—the way of barbarism, accompanied by some shedding of blood.

In other words, for each side to force the acceptance of their claim, the use of force—

Rem: “…”

Quickly, Rem directed her gaze to one corner of the room.

In the room where Priscilla had summoned and gathered those in a position of servant, another person aside from Rem and the smiling Schult was present as well.

This man was the one who had brandished a sword in the “duel” over the management of the mansion.

Rem: “Heinkel-san.”

Heinkel: "…What."

Rem: "No, it seemed like you were looking at me in some kind of meaningful way, so I thought something was wrong."

The man who responded to Rem's call in a low voice made a sullen face due to the repeated questions. With that, he scratched his own red hair wildly,

Heinkel: "It's no big deal. I was simply stunned that you were such a reckless girl, talking to Miss Priscilla like that."

Rem: "After being called daring, I am now reckless, is that so? But that really isn't the case…"

Heinkel: "It just looked that way to me. Don't be petty about it."

With a small click of his tongue, the man waved his hand, scratching his head at Rem's answer.

The man with fiery red hair, a well-built, tall figure, and looks whose innate manliness became spoiled by his stubble, was a man named Heinkel, one of Priscilla's subordinates.

After Priscilla had arbitrarily decided to remain in the Fortress City of Guaral, Heinkel and Schult flew in from their original headquarters. Together with the man in the helmet—with Al, they made up Priscilla's followers.

Schult: "Of course, Rem-sama's also one of us now!"

Heinkel: "Don't decide that on your own whim, pipsqueak. This woman is friends with one of Miss Priscilla's enemies. Not only is she not on our side, but she's also a potential enemy."

Schult: "Ehhh?! Rem-sama, you were our enemy?!"

Rem: "Ehhm, that's on hold."

His perfectly round eyes widening in surprise, Rem responded to a panicking Schult raising a commotion.

Heinkel's way of putting things was extreme, but that Rem's position was complicated was something that could not be denied. Rem, having lost her memories, lacked the awareness and the information to confirm her affiliation.

Of course, that which contributed most to establishing Rem's tenuous standing was—

Rem: "…Him."

She knew that that black-haired boy's presence—Natsuki Subaru's presence, someone who had left the Fortress City to fulfill his appointed role, was something that brought certainty to Rem's vague position.

However, Rem's feelings were that she could not lend an ear to his words, nor accept them so meekly.

The reason as to why Rem could not accept his actions and words, was the horrific Miasma that surrounded Subaru's entire body—No, right now, that was not the sole reason.

The Miasma certainly did hinder Rem from taking Subaru at face-value, but she had already recognized that there was nothing deceptive or malicious in neither his words nor his deeds.

The reason for not accepting him so docilely, was that Rem's own foundation was unstable.

Who she was and what kind of relationship she had with Natsuki Subaru and the others, she wondered.

If she were unable to face it, Rem's frozen time and halted feet could not move forward.

Although Rem wanted to face Subaru in order to solidify her existence, in order to face Subaru, she had to solidify her own existence.

It was already a dilemma, akin to being lost in a maze with no way out.

Priscilla: “You appear to be experiencing plenty of turmoil. The crease between your eyebrows is clear evidence of that.”

Rem: “That… is true. I’m trying to put Priscilla-san’s advice into practice, but…”

Priscilla: “What is it?”

Rem: “Priscilla-san’s conversations are always so difficult to understand.”

Her eyes cast downwards, a Rem bearing shame explained that she herself was the reason for her own ignorance.

Speaking in riddles, Priscilla’s choice of words was esoteric and difficult to understand. More importantly, Priscilla was quick-witted, and on top of that, she rarely held any consideration for others.

The nature she possessed pretty much resembled that held by Abel—Or perhaps it should be rephrased as them having the same nature, rather than them being similar. Perhaps both Priscilla and Abel would be displeased if this were to be mentioned, so Rem would not bother bringing it up.

Heinkel: “Advice? What are you talking about, advice? Miss Priscilla advises this woman?”

Schult: “Yes, Heinkel-sama. I am aware of it! Rem-sama is studying with Priscilla-sama! And she takes care of Priscilla’s personal needs, just like me!”

Heinkel: “Oi, oioioi, are you out of your mind, Miss Priscilla? What’s in it for us? You’re just helping our enemies grow.”

Heinkel, who had not been told the details of the situation, was left blindsided upon learning of the Contract between Rem and Priscilla.

Striding up to Priscilla on the podium and pointing to Rem, he then opened his mouth,

Heinkel: “I thought you were just keeping them close to you as a lackey… So that they could give out information on their Camp. Going out of your way entirely to simply be in an unfavorable position, there's a limit to games…"

Priscilla: "Silence, simpleton. Do you intend to order me around?"

Heinkel: "Guh…"

Priscilla: "I have dealt you a number of painful blows, but you are a man who never learns, are you not? My hands are not free to beat you. Because their task is to turn the page of this book."

Tracing the cover of the book on her lap, Priscilla announced that to Heinkel with a glare.

There was no specific anger in Priscilla's voice, but Heinkel gasped in reaction, as if he had been confronted with a sword, taking a step or two backward.

Rem felt that Heinkel's fear was too exaggerated.

Of course, she had witnessed Priscilla's prowess and swordsmanship defeat one of the Empire's mightiest warriors, one of the Nine Divine Generals, with her very own eyes. Even ignoring that fact, Rem felt on her very skin that Priscilla was a woman of unparalleled power.

However—

Rem: "I don't think Heinkel-san is that far below her, though…"

But Rem needed to preface, that this was just from her point of view.

However, during the seizure of this mansion, with a swordsman representing the owner of the mansion as his opponent, Heinkel had triumphed without dispossessing him of his life by snatching away his sword before he could do anything about it.

His pure fighting spirit, and his superior swordsmanship, were such that even if the Imperial Soldiers in the area were to gang up on him, they would be no match to him.

Nevertheless, Heinkel's fear seemed to be the pinnacle of overreaction.

That said, Rem was an amateur, even at being "herself". The strong may have a way of looking at things in the world that was impossible for Rem to grasp.

Anyway—

Priscilla: "Setting my eyes on this girl is merely a whim. But it was also on my whim that I picked up Schult starving to death in a barren land, and that I summoned you when bloodied from your fruitless efforts."

Schult: "Yes! I was saved thanks to Priscilla-sama's good mood! I was very lucky!"

Heinkel: "Are you really fine with that…?"

Rapping her finger on the cover of the book, Priscilla declared that it all was dependent on her mood. Rem was overwhelmed, almost in shock because of those words, while Schult happily boasted of his good fortune.

Heinkel, too, seemed to be spared from the fear he'd had until then, but some wariness yet lingered in his eyes as he looked toward Rem.

Perhaps he was the one with the most straightforward view of things.

Rem: "So, Priscilla-san, what is your reason for calling all of us?"

Priscilla: "Hmm."

Rem: "If it's just about looking after your person, why not just me or Schult-san? There's no reason I can think of for Heinkel-san being here as well."

In terms of division of responsibilities, Rem and Schult were plenty capable of sharing the care of Priscilla's daily life at the mansion. Rem had become quite accustomed to living with a cane and simple household chores were of no worry to her.

Perhaps, she did something such as partaking in these duties before.

Since the work was divided in such a way, there was no reason for Heinkel being there.

If she were to go even further—

Rem: “What exactly does Heinkel-san do… I only see him swinging his sword, drinking, or playing with Schult-san.”

Heinkel: “…I’m telling you, I don’t remember playing with that pipsqueak.”

Schult: “That is correct! Heinkel-sama often takes care of me, but it is me who has been approaching him because I want to! Heinkel-sama always seems to be lonely when he is alone, so I thought I would make sure he does not get lonely…”

Rem: “Oh, I see, Schult-san is very kind.”

Schult: “Hehehe.”

The question that had arisen in her mind was resolved, and Rem gently stroked Schult’s curly-haired head. There was a strange charm about Schult that made Rem want to pet him like this.

Of those within the city, Rem also wanted to pet Utakata, who would come by every now and then.

Perhaps, she simply wanted to dote on younger people though.

Heinkel: “Eh, shit, I can’t keep up with you. Miss Priscilla! Just answer the question now. If you don’t need me, I’ll be at the tavern…”

Priscilla: “—It is about time for those who have left this city to arrive at the Demon City.”

Heinkel: “Ah…”

Priscilla: “If circumstances were to change, the likelihood that this opportunity would be made the most of is high. Do not lower your guard.”

The humidity in the air changed as Priscilla spoke this, resting her cheek upon her hand on the armrest.

The parched, stale air was a sign that attention had been correctly applied to Priscilla’s words; Heinkel’s expression sharpened, and Rem felt as if she had been prodded in the chest.

Only Schult, Rem’s hand on his head still, had shown appreciation for the group who had embarked on a long journey, saying, “Al-sama, thank you for your efforts~”.

Rem: “…”

If circumstances were to change, was what Priscilla had prefaced her statement with. But at least for Subaru and the others who had departed, it would bring about definite changes, both good and bad.

Negotiating with the only potential ally—this negotiation would certainly determine Abel’s decisions from henceforth.

Heinkel: “This whole thing about, this opportunity being made the most of… Miss Priscilla, is there something particular that you noticed?”

Priscilla: “No, it is nothing so concrete. It is merely a rule of thumb of mine.”

Heinkel: “Rule of thumb, is it? What is that supposed to…”

Priscilla: “When great things move, they move all at once, as if the quietness that had prevailed up to that point were a lie. It is as if by design, all at once, akin to lined-up building blocks falling down in a row.”

There was a kind of ineffable compelling force in Priscilla’s indifferent manner of speaking.

Ultimately, it was a singular point about not letting one’s guard down, yet Rem took a deep breath and looked down to regard her feet again. If she were to get hung up about Subaru and the others so much as to neglect what was close to her, that would be like putting cart before the Galewind Horse.

To begin with, putting something such as getting hung up over Subaru into words yet again made her realize just how unpleasant the situation was.

Rem: “Whether he’s around or not, he’s a troublesome person…”

Schult: “Rem-sama? Is everything fine? Your face is somewhat red.”

Rem: “It’s okay. Something was just surging within me. I was seething, angry.”

Schult: “It is not good to be angry! Rem-sama looks wonderful when she is smiling~!”

The corners of Rem’s eyes lowered due to Schult flapping his limbs and raising a potent appeal. Heinkel’s face, on the other hand, became serious after Priscilla’s admonishment,

Heinkel: “Miss Priscilla, if that’s all you want to talk about, then I’m going.”

Priscilla: “Do as you like. You are free to indulge in alcoholism or spend your time in sloth.”

Heinkel: “I’m not in the mood for booze. I’m going to go talk to the shaggy-headed commander at the City Hall.”

Answering right back with an earnest look on his face, Heinkel walked out of the room with broad steps. Seeing him off, Rem then turned to Priscilla,

Rem: “So, what is it you’re going to do, Priscilla-san?”

Priscilla: “Are you concerned about mine activities?”

Rem: “That is… a given. I don’t think that everything Priscilla does is correct, but…”

Still, Priscilla judged things with knowledge and insight that Rem did not have.

For Rem, who possessed very little, this was a valuable resource to determine what to decide next. At Rem's remarks, which were extremely rude in a sense, Priscilla let out a laugh,

Priscilla: "So you are not planning to become a doll without a mind of its own? Well, there would not have been any meaning in having you at my side in such a case."

Rem: "Priscilla-san?"

Priscilla: "Guessing from the answer to my question, preparations shall be laid out by that simpleton. The General and the People of Shudraq may also be used accordingly. With that, I shall…"

Rem: "Priscilla-san will…?"

With a slight gulp, Rem waited for Priscilla's next words. Unknowingly, next to Rem, Schult also clenched his fists in anticipation, waiting for their master's answer.

As she met the gaze of the two, Priscilla's almond-shaped eyes narrowed, and,

Priscilla: "—Prepare a hot bath. Float the petals and burn the incense."

Rem: "…Huh?"

Priscilla: "What, do not make me say it twice. I shall take a bath. Prepare the bathhouse as soon as possible."

With a fluttering wave of her hand, Priscilla urged Rem and Schult to hurry up.

Of course, Rem was incapable of hiding her bewilderment, letting out a "Wh-Wha?". But Schult saluted her in a snap,

Schult: "Understood, oh yes indeed! I will go and heat the water right away~!"

After answering cheerfully, just like that Schult ran out of the room with great energy. Seeing off his small back, Rem then turned to Priscilla.

Priscilla was still resting her chin on her hand, set to resume reading the book once again.

Priscilla: “Shall you not go? If left to Schult alone, I am sure he shall forget the plug and much hot water shall be wasted.”

Rem: “I’ll help Schult-san. It’s just, what are you thinking?”

Priscilla: “Your skepticism is also a sign of your preconceived notions. Do you regard me as this world’s Observers, who can manipulate every event at will?”

Rem: “I wouldn’t go that far, but…”

Persuaded by facts and logic, the momentum of Rem’s questioning deflated.

Priscilla scoffed at Rem’s behavior, and continued, “Listen”,

Priscilla: “Everything in this world is made for my convenience. But that does not mean that everything shall follow mine will. Such tedium is not what I desire.”

Rem: “Having everything according to your will, is tedium?”

Priscilla: “Where is the point of facing tomorrow if everything that can happen is as written? Rem, do you desire a world where everything has been over since the day you were born?”

Rem: “…”

Upon being asked that by Priscilla, Rem shut her mouth in silence.

Priscilla’s words were again esoteric, so she barely comprehended the point of the conversation. To live one’s days as desired meant never encountering the new or the unknown.

And that, was undesirable for Priscilla.

However—

Rem: “As someone who can’t perform many things properly, I will strongly disagree.”

Rem had seen Subaru off on his journey, remaining in the Fortress City beside Priscilla. Underlying this was a desire for the “Rem” that had been lost, and a search for a way or a chance to break free from her current inadequate self.

Priscilla’s way of enjoying what did not follow her wishes was incomprehensible to Rem, who suffered from being unable to do anything the way she wanted.

Even if that made Priscilla give up on her, regarding her as an uninteresting woman.

Priscilla: “I do not expect you to be like me, nor do I expect you to want the same thing. Do as you please.”

But Priscilla’s reaction to Rem, who was even prepared to speak out of her pathetic conviction, was unexpectedly soft.

Priscilla looked at Rem, eyes rounded in amazement, as if gazing at a helpless puppy,

Priscilla: “The world is beautiful just as it is.”

Priscilla’s quiet mutterings seemed to contain her true feelings without any compromise.

Posteriorly to thinking so, Rem dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Because if those were her true feelings without any compromise, they were far too grandiose.

Priscilla loved and cared for things far too grandiose.

Rem: “Caring for and cherishing is the exact opposite impression I get from Priscilla-san…”

Priscilla: “Did you say something?”

Rem: “No, nothing of importance…”

Rem shook her head loosely; the fuzziness in her chest had faded slightly.

Not all was clear, but that dark cloud that had just been there had disappeared. Indeed, Rem had just finished a step further into her self-analysis and—

Schult: “W-W-W-Wah~! Hot water, hot water is overflowing! I am drowning~!”

And so, they heard Schult’s urgent screams coming from the bathhouse of the mansion. Sure enough, Rem was reminded of Schult, the latter amidst an unexpected situation, and directed her face upwards.

Priscilla’s eyes meet hers, the former then jerking her white chin and commanding her, “Go”.

Rem: “I won’t move to your whim, Priscilla-san.”

Priscilla: “But you cannot ignore Schult’s screams. See, the victor is I.”

Rem’s resistance to at least not being at her mercy dissipated, as if ephemeral.

Because Schult’s safety was at stake, no further defense was raised.

3

—Priscilla’s advice, it had with certainty driven a wedge deep into Rem’s heart.

When things moved on a grand scale, they would pay no heed to every individual puny human.

With nary a worry for those who embroiled into it, they washed over the latter much like surging waves.

Rem believed she had experienced this first-hand.

Having woken up without memories, the current Rem's memories started in an unfamiliar place, with an unfamiliar someone holding her arm.

Running from that boy, coming across him once more, being captured by many Imperial Soldiers after that, being rescued from within the smoke and flames, she now spent her days in this city just going with the flow.

So much so that Rem believed that "turbulence" was just the word for what she had been through.

—However, the fact that even that understanding of hers was too naive was something that Rem would soon be made aware of.

Rem: "—Priscilla-san?"

Rem's brow creased due to Priscilla, who stood up after smoothly evading her hands.

Enveloped by warm vapor, Rem was in the mansion's bathroom, wrapped in a bath towel. The principal reason for which Priscilla had requisitioned this mansion was the existence of this splendid bathroom.

A bath that you could fill with hot water, stretch your limbs in, and be completely submerged in, seemed to have been made on the design of the mansion's owner. Nothing in the world could replace it.

While in actuality Rem would be allowed to bathe in it only after she had finished assisting Priscilla with her own bath, she'd had such an experience with it that she could even understand Priscilla's feelings of wanting to hog it all for herself.

At any rate, during her bath in the bathhouse, Priscilla stood up gently, distancing herself from Rem's hands which were washing her hair, and headed towards the bathroom's window.

Rem: "Priscilla-san, I'm still in the process of washing your body so… Ah!"

What are you trying to do, that question of Rem’s seemingly fell on deaf ears, as Priscilla, her beautiful body generously exposed, opened the bathroom’s window.

Cold open air which could not compare to the hot steam entered the bathroom, and Rem unconsciously drew in her body. However, Priscilla’s sudden actions did not stop there.

She leaned her body over the open window, and continued out towards the balcony outside the bathroom.

Rem: “Wh-What are you doing?! Others will see you! No matter if this is the top floor, you can’t just…”

In a rush, grabbing onto the cane and a towel, Rem pursued Priscilla who had gone outside. Draping the towel over her slender shoulders, she admonished herself for believing herself adapted to her suddenness.

However, ignoring Rem’s introspection, Priscilla with her gaze turned towards the sky、

Priscilla: “—It is the sky.”

Rem: “The sky… We’re not so high up as to be there. Come on, before the water gets cold, let’s—”

Go back in; as she tried to pull on her arm, Rem’s movement was interrupted.

Priscilla turned around, having gently and smoothly pressed her finger onto Rem’s lips. In front of Rem whose eyes had unconsciously opened wide, Priscilla’s blood-red pupils swayed and、

Priscilla: “Look to the sky, Rem. —It appears to be the end of this vacayshon.”

She did not understand that word, her tone had not allowed Rem to hold any doubt.

Her line of sight was simply carried up as if guided, and Rem too turned her eyes towards the sky Priscilla looked up at. Rem's blue pupils focused so as to see the same thing Priscilla had seen.

However, the fact that she had definitely not failed to notice it, was something that she could not enthusiastically declare.

As for why—

Rem: "That's…"

Above the balcony, overhead from Rem and Priscilla basking in the wind, in the sky that the overly big sun was shining upon, there was a black spot of light floating there, slowly approaching.

The black spot was a single one—Nay, two, three, slowly multiplying; as their blurry shape became more and more distinct, Rem's throat unwittingly released a gasp.

Their numbers increasing, the true identity of the approaching black spots was—

Priscilla: "—Hurry, and tell those below to make ready weapons. A flock of winged dragons is no laughing matter."

Priscilla's advice becoming more pronounced with reality, was something Rem perceived with her skin, with her soul.

4

—At the same time, gazing at a city surrounded by tall walls from above, golden pupils narrowed.

Body entirely wrapped by the azure sky, traveling through a grand space like they owned it, an existence that cut through the wind flying next to the clouds—This greatest of all the world's creatures, a swarm of flying dragons.

???: "—The Fortress City of Guaral."

Putting the target city's name on their tongue, their seething, burning fighting spirit fired up the blood in their entire body.

Responding to that rising fighting spirit, the spirits and enthusiasm of the flying companions surrounding them increased. The sound of neighing mixed with the flapping of wings in the sky, as their anticipation for the hunting time drew near before their eyes escalated.

Whoever rebuked this as rashness, would be nothing but a shame to the hunters of the azure skies, the dragons.

Whoever did not have their blood boil from this expectation, was a coward without the qualifications to be adjacent to the white clouds.

Dragon: "—Kiryararahhh!!"

???: "Understood. Let's do our job properly, as the senile old man said."

The appeal rising from below their feet was the expectation displayed towards the hunt from the one who's back they borrowed.

On the back of a flying dragon flapping its wings, the small figure of a person with arms crossed expressed their understanding of that excitement.

Sky-blue hair that met at the shoulders, and golden eyes that shone brightly. The florid dress that wrapped that seemingly dainty figure did not express in the slightest the ferociousness and savageness of that existence.

At a glance, some could even describe it as a charming appearance. However, that was only till one laid eyes on the two black horns that rested atop that figure's head.

Even in the Vollachian Empire, where horned races were not few, laying eyes upon black horns was something that seldom—Nay, never should come to pass.

Because that was nothing if not proof of an existence that should not be.

???: "Everyone, are you ready?"

The figure with black horns that should not be, their call beckoned innumerable neighing—the responses of the swarm of flying dragons, of the rulers of the sky, of the uncomeatable swarm of several hundred.

With the sun at their backs, crossing the blue sky, the embodiment of ruin advanced in droves.

A catastrophe should they swoop down, shouts and screams would reverb in the air. All life would be extinguished, vanishing to naught.

Strangely, at the same time a Great Disaster laid waste to a far-off city, a catastrophe in a different form approached the city protected by a fortress.

Before the curtain call of the absolute, inescapable, cruel hunt, that existence's golden eyes—those of Madelyn Eschart, narrowed, her cheeks contorting into a smile.

The Flying Dragon General, Ninth of the Nine Divine Generals, having been ordered to destroy the city, passed her judgment.

Madelyn: “Tremble in fear, try and flee. You all have nowhere to run. —For I, the dragon, have come.”

So she spoke.

Chapter 55B:
The Cacophony of the Fortress City

1

—Time goes back only a little further before the attack of the winged creatures.

???: “Ugh, I messed up again… I really am no good at this…”

A boy walked down the street, shaking his head crowned with pink fluffy hair.

The boy from the city’s largest mansion—Schult, was wearing short pants that exposed his white legs. With a sigh, Schult, looking downcast, held and opened his slender, soft, not-too-sturdy hands.

Schult, still young, had already decided that, for the rest of his life, he would only have one master.

Born in a poor village, Schult was reduced to a meager existence by the weight of the year’s tax collection, destined to starve to death on the side of the road after being evicted from his home. Hungry and thirsty, he ate mud and nearly made that the last meal of his life, but the radiantly beautiful sun came along and saved him—.

He had been saved by that way of life that scorched the whole world to the ground, and that posed as the reason why Schult existed right now.

That was why Schult sincerely hoped to devote his entire current, and future being, to his benevolent master.

And yet—

Schult: “I hate myself for not being able to help in any way…”

With a deep sigh—and even that sigh was weaker than the average person’s with his lung capacity as rationale, Schult’s head, chest, and heart were collectively aching due to his own inadequacy.

Recently, he had been struggling to fulfill his important master's mandated tasks, even messing them up completely.

To fill the bathhouse with hot water was a trivial task, but the water ended up overflowing, plus the magic stone used to heat the water had been mishandled, leaving everyone in a state of confusion.

He was still a newcomer to Priscilla's service, and that, too, had inconvenienced Rem, someone with faulty legs. And this time, he really was fed up with how pathetic he was.

Schult: "Priscilla-sama and Al-sama both tell me that I do not need to rush to change…"

He was glad for the kind Priscilla's and open-minded Al's intentions to console him like this.

But Schult hated himself for being unable to repay the two of them in any way. In this respect, Heinkel saw things in a distinctive manner compared to the two of them, and therefore, treated Schult differently, seemingly being more understanding of Schult.

Heinkel had also taught Schult to practice swordsmanship in a way different from how Al had done so, the former having stated that it did not suit Schult. Thanks to this, he felt that his biceps were more rigid than they were before.

Schult: "Heinkel-sama's way of swinging the sword every day was better for me than Al-sama's way of taking ten days off after one day of swinging. I can't tell Al-sama because I do not want to disappoint him…"

Regardless, with such signs of growth, Schult was also in a bit of a rut.

And the heavens did not forgive Schult's naivete nor his complacency. Schult reflected on the fact that this had been what led to the fiasco at the bathhouse.

By now, Rem was probably helping her master, Priscilla, bathe in the bathtub that had been refilled with hot water. Schult sincerely thought Rem could do anything and he respected her for it.

Schult: “Just like Yae-sama… Yae-sama, how are you…?”

Suddenly, the memory of a cheerful and bright maid named Yae Tenzen, who used to work for Priscilla, was revived in Schult’s mind.

She was previously in charge of Priscilla’s personal care, was always happily talking with Al and was kind to Schult; because of that, Schult was fond of her.

But one day, she had a family mishap and abruptly quit her job at the mansion to go back to the countryside. This left Schult with no time to say goodbye, making him feel quite desolate. The last one to see her off, Al, had told him to give Schult her regards.

Perhaps Rem could fill Yae’s shoes as the servant closest to Priscilla.

If the kind and hardworking Rem did become that someone, Schult would be quite glad about it; she got along well with Priscilla, and he was certain Rem would enjoy it too.

Above all—

Schult: “Everyone is so very happy when together with Priscilla-sama.”

His own personal experience underscored the magnitude of Priscilla’s presence in Schult’s mind.

Rem, too, was perhaps at a moment in her life in which she would be troubled by many things; she was often gloomy and preoccupied with her thoughts. Even if Rem carried such a gloomy, troubled face, perhaps the sun that was Priscilla would make her brighten up.

???: “Ah, Shuu’s here.”

Schult: “Mmm! That would be me!”

With this thought in mind, Schult, who had been moving his head up and down, stopped in his tracks. The reason for that was that he had heard a familiar voice. In front of him, he saw someone pointing in his direction.

Right in front of Schult walking down the street, pointing at him, was a young girl with black hair dyed pink at the ends. Next to the girl was a young man and upon noticing Schult and the girl becoming aware of one another, he let out a cheerful “Dear me!”.

???: “Isn’t that Butler-kun there? Princess-kun’s not with you, is she?”

Schult: “Priscilla-sama is at the mansion, Flop-sama. Were you and Utakata-sama in the middle of a stroll?”

???: “It’s rare for Uu to be called sama. It’s funny.”

The young man, donning a soft smile and waving his hand—Flop, nodded with an “Exactly” to Schult’s question. Utakata, the girl with him, also put her hand on her cheek, apparently deeply touched by the honorific Schult had given her.

Flop and Utakata were the first two people Schult had met after arriving in Guaral. According to what Schult had heard, Flop was a merchant who traveled from town to town, and Utakata was a warrior from a tribe called “The People of Shudraq”.

Both were fine people with their own places to be.

Flop: “Oh? That’s a rather depressed face you’ve got there, Butler-kun. I’m wondering if you’ve perhaps got a problem with your face.”

Schult: “Ehh?! Th-That is amazing! Flop-sama understands?!”

Flop: “Oh, of course I understand! Most people have their worries! And my little sister, who may look like she has no problems at all, actually does as well!”

Utakata: “Midii didn’t seem to have troubles.”

Flop: “She does have them! Surprising, isn’t it?!”

Putting his hands on his hips, Flop opened his mouth greatly and let out a burst of laughter. Seeing Flop's cheerful attitude, Schult also felt cheered up somewhat.

Flop, like Priscilla, was like the sun that brightened the world in their surroundings. Surely, many colorful flowers would be blooming around Flop.

Schult: "Like a prince in a field of flowers."

Flop: "Hahaha, I'm nothing as great as a prince. I'm merely a peddler! So, Butler-kun, what sort of issue ails you? Why don't you talk to me?"

Schult: "Are you sure? I thought you were on a walk…"

Flop's body leaned over, bending at the waist; Schult was grateful that he would listen to him. Glancing at him was Utakata, supposedly taking a stroll with Flop.

However Utakata narrowed her widened eyes and shook her head, not looking bothered in the slightest.

Utakata: "Uu has time. Playing with Fuu was just for killing time, so let's hear about Shuu's problems."

Flop: "Exactly. Oh, don't think of it as killing time. Every problem's important to the person suffering from it. So let's listen carefully."

So, after a not-so-tough chest thump, Flop led Schult and Utakata both to the end of the street, toward the edge of the curb of the flowerbed there.

So the three of them, putting their butts on the curb, started talking in the breeze.

Schult's problem, as aforementioned, was that of being useless.

For Priscilla, he wished to be more self-sufficient, to be capable of doing more.

Schult: "So how did you, Flop-sama and Utakata-sama, become the great people you are today?”

Flop: “Hoho, I see, how did we become the way we are now, huh? What a philosophical question!”

Schult: “Filosofical… Is that so…?”

At the smiling Flop’s answer, Schult braced himself at a hint of yet-undiscovered wisdom.

Without understanding what this filosofy was, could Schult’s concerns be answered? If so, he was willing to study that filosofy as well.

Utakata: “Uu became Uu, because Maa gave birth to Uu.”

Schult: “Maa, is it? That would be…”

Utakata: “Uu’s mother! She was good friends with Taa. But then she stabbed herself and died.”

Schult: “I-is that so…”

As she recounted the story of her mother’s death, Utakata swung her dangling feet.

Although Utakata’s attitude was a detached one, Schult was astonished to hear of happenings that he had not expected. Flop, opposite of him with her in between them, patted Utakata’s head gently.

Flop: “I see, your mother did such a thing. That’s a terrible thing, Miss Utakata.”

Utakata: “It was harder for Taa than it was for Uu. Everyone helped Uu grow up, so everything’s fine. I grew up just like that.”

Flop: “Yes, indeed, Miss Utakata’s growing up very well. I’m sure your mother’d be happy to hear that.”

Utakata: “—? Maa’s dead, so she wouldn’t be happy. You say weird things, Fuu.”

While he stroked her head, Utakata regarded Flop with a curious look on her face. However, being patted on her head by Flop did not feel so bad to Utakata, and so, she did not try to stop his hand.

Utakata's reaction was met with a quiet narrowing of Flop's blue eyes,

Flop: "Well, Miss Utakata's answer was very pleasant. In fact, if we're going to talk about how I became the person I am today, I believe my answer would be very similar."

Schult: "Similar… So, Flop-sama, were you raised by the People of Shudraq in the same way Utakata-sama was?"

Flop: "If that were the case, I'd be very pleased for having such a large family! But my family's dead, the only one I have left's my little sister, Medium. You may think it's very sad and lonely."

Schult: "…Is that, so?"

Flop employed in his usual stride for the first half of his speech, then his voice faltered a tad during the latter half. His eyes downcast because of his answer, Schult once again felt disappointed about himself.

He had inquired both Utakata and Flop about some very insensitive things.

Even Schult would be unable to give a happy answer to someone asking about the family that had abandoned him. He should have been more thoughtful before asking.

Flop: "It's nothing to beat yourself over, Butler-kun. You'll learn from this. And that's exactly what leads to the next part of my answer from earlier."

Schult: "From earlier… the one that is supposed to be like Utakata-sama's?"

Flop: "Yes, exactly, just like Miss Utakata, I've been influenced by the people around me to become the person I am today."

Spreading out his hands, Flop smiled as if to show off his current self.

His cheerful smile and reassuring tone of voice were both important elements of Flop's "Flopness". Were those also cultivated through the influence of others, Schult wondered.

Flop: "A long time ago, my little sister and I were living in quite the terrible environment. It was an orphanage, but there was very little food, they didn't pay us for our work, and the adults there would beat the children whenever they got into trouble. It was an awful place."

Schult: "Th-That's an awful place…! What is a child to do in such a place?!"

Utakata: "Uu'd burn it down."

Schult: "Burn it down!"

Flop: "Haha, that might've been a good idea. But it didn't turn out so."

Schult agreed with Utakata's suggestion of burning down Flop's harsh past. But Flop, laughing at their answer, had already moved past that.

How exactly had they gotten past it—

Flop: "Well, it was thanks to someone else's help. There was a benefactor who helped us. That was my little sister and mine's family. They're dead now, though."

Schult: "…They helped you, is that right? I'm relieved to hear that."

Flop: "Do you understand me, Butler-kun?"

Schult: "I understand… I was also saved by Priscilla-sama."

Gently placing his hand on his chest, he felt through his fingertips that he was no longer a body with nothing but skin and bones attached. That, was proof of what Priscilla had bestowed Schult with, to this day.

Schult's toughness, strength, energy, and respectability proved that Priscilla's actions on that day were no error, and Priscilla would not be made to regret them.

At the glint in Schult's red eyes, Flop chuckled a little, and,

Flop: "For the most part, I've got similar feelings. So I'm in the process of trying to make my big goal come true. It's a hard road, but I want to keep going and not give up."

Schult: "I hope you do not give up! Ah! But, please, be a little more specific. How are you doing your best, Flop-sama?"

Flop: "Hmm, I wonder. After mulling it over plenty… I'll tell you one thing, but not about me, about my little sister. I'm going to tell you about my little sister, who's taller, stronger, more energetic, and more skilled than I am."

Schult: "Ohhh, I see!!"

The reason why Flop put his hand so far above his head was because his sister, the topic of discussion, was that tall of a person.

This was not the first time Flop had mentioned his sister, but Schult had yet to meet her in person, as at the time he and Heinkel arrived at Guaral to meet up with Priscilla, Flop's sister had already left for another place.

Leaving that aside—

Utakata: "Midii's big and strong. Mii's impressed."

Flop: "The best thing about her, is that she's vocal and unafraid. And of course, she's also very skilled, which is something I, as her big brother, am very proud of! She's been working hard to become stronger."

Schult: "To be strong… is that so?! How virtuous!"

Undoubtedly, she had been working hard to become stronger, staying positive and never losing sight of her ambition.

Schult tried to accept that maybe the key to progress was to keep trying one’s best without losing spirit; however, Flop shrugged saying, “No, no”.

Flop: “You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But, by the way, Medium got stronger is a bit more negative.”

Schult: “N-negative? What does that mean?”

Flop: “Hmm, it’s simple. —When I was beaten up by adults, Medium, well, she always stroked my wounds gently.”

Speaking nostalgically of the past, Flop stated so, lowering the corners of his eyes.

Schult was bewildered by the discrepancy between the gentle tone of his speech and the content of his words, however. Being told that stroking a wound from a beating was the beginning of getting stronger made zero sense.

Schult: “I am so sorry that you were beaten up. But, Flop-sama, what were you doing when your sister was gently stroking those wounds?”

Flop: “Me? I was smiling. I was happy for Medium’s feelings. If I didn’t smile, she, the one being defended, would be worried sick.”

Schult: “…”

Flop: ”So, the first time I couldn’t cover for her and she took a hit, she was surprised from the bottom of her heart. When she stroked the wound she received from being beaten, she felt pain. It didn’t heal, nor did the pain go away. As regrettable as that is.”

Shaking his head loosely, Flop replied forlornly.

Hearing Flop’s answer, even the dense Schult finally understood his true intentions. He finally understood why his sister had desired to become stronger, and how had she managed to not give up along the way.

Utakata: "If you don't want it to hurt, you have to not get hit. Is this what Midii thought?"

Flop: "Well, that's precisely it! A very simple and good answer, even though she's my little sister. Thanks to that, Medium's stronger, and our siblings' journey's become safer!"

Flop exaggerated his smile as he spoke, but to Schult, it looked a little different.

Not only was it bright, but it appeared to be a proud one. Surely, Flop was proud of his sister from the bottom of his heart. That was something to be envied very much.

Schult: "I want to be stronger too. Just like your sister, Flop-sama…!"

Flop: "I'm sure Medium'd love to hear that. No, she might be embarrassed. It's not often you get to experience being someone's role model, that sounds like a lot of fun."

Flop smiled and gave his stamp of approval to Schult, the latter clenching his tiny fists.

While listening to the exchange of those two, Utakata looked at Schult and asked, "Shuu?",

Utakata: "If you want to be strong, will you practice with Uu? Practice the bow."

Schult: "Bow, is it? But I also practice the sword… Hmm, I will do it! I will do both! That way, I can be twice as strong!"

Flop: "If you're able to do both, then it's exactly as you say! How wise!"

Raising both his hands to the sky, Flop joined Schult in his burning determination. Utakata, too, puffed up her nostrils and pushed out her chest at the promise of training together.

Then showing Schult the bow on her back, Utakata: “Uu will work hard, like Schult, to become a master like Taa.”

Schult: “Well, I would like to meet Taa-sama, too. Utakata-sama, why do you want to become a bow and arrow master?”

Utakata: “Maa said something. For Uu to kill a traveler, with a bow and arrow.”

Schult: “I see. Wait, what…?!”

Because the answer was more extreme than he had expected, Schult’s realization was delayed for a beat.

To kill a traveler, was what she had said earlier, but what exactly did that mean? Schult, having just reflected on the situation, wondered if it would be okay to ask for more details.

—And so, while Schult worried over it, he was deprived of the time for enquiring about it.

Flop: “—Butler-kun! Miss Utakata!”

Schult: “—?!”

Utakata: “Fuu?”

Suddenly, a sharp voice called out to Schult and Utakata, and Flop’s expression morphed. Schult’s shoulders hitched because of the vigor, and Flop’s hands gripped his shoulders stoutly.

Then, Flop pulled Schult and Utakata, sitting on the curb, closer to him, and shouted,

Flop: “The sky’s starting to feel dangerous! Let’s just hurry up and get out of here!”

And—

2

—At the time the flock was seen in the distant sky, Heinkel was at the City Hall.

The people present were the appointed commanders of the garrison stationed in the Fortress City.

General Second-Class Zikr Osman and his men, who had originally been sent to the city but had joined Priscilla's ranks—or rather, the ranks of the man named Abel, to be precise, at the time of capturing the Fortress City.

And then there were the People of Shudraq, a tribe of hunters from the Jungle, smaller in number than the Imperial Soldiers present, yet no less powerful individually, alongside the one who led them, their acting Chieftain, Mizelda.

When Heinkel visited the City Hall, the two were in the midst of a face-to-face meeting to discuss the future.

Though Priscilla had spoken of omens that were much like predictions, Heinkel did not believe that Priscilla had the power to foretell the future, but he also knew not to underestimate the power of the eyes of a being so far from the norm.

Not only Priscilla, but those with special powers and destinies, had a higher perspective compared to ordinary people.

Those that could gaze at the world from a higher place would witness a scenery different from what others would. Those who could see farther compared to an average person—or rather, compared to an ordinary person, would never be able to understand the latter.

Heinkel had learned this painfully well over the past forty years of his life.

Therefore, he did not dismiss things without even lending an ear just because he did not understand them.

This was also the reason why he did not dismiss Priscilla's words and went to the City Hall.

And then—

Mizelda: "…"

The first to notice the anomaly outside the window was Mizelda, sniffing; her face was as if she had a hunch about something.

She was the former Chieftain of the People of Shudraq, who had apparently lost one of her legs in a battle during the capture of the Fortress City. To replace her foot, she wielded a stick like the tip of a cane attached to her right leg, which was missing below the knee.

Every time she walked, the cane made a sound, and when she turned around, the same sound was also heard.

The moment the profile of the rugged beauty Mizelda, owner of piercing eyes, stiffened, Heinkel and Zikr, who were present, instantly realized something was wrong and looked in the same direction.

Then, upon laying eyes on the swarm of black dots coming in from beyond the sky, Zikr muttered to himself.

Zikr: "—A flock of flying dragons."

Mizelda: "—Hk! Zikr! Give word to your soldiers! I'll mobilize the Shudraq!"

Immediately after realizing the danger, Mizelda would have leapt with a tremendous kick from the roof of the City Hall and over Zikr's wide shoulders.

However, she had just lost one of her legs. Instead of leaping out the window, she skipped down the stairs and ran out in a great hurry.

Caught up in her momentum, Zikr sharpened his blank expression and shouted,

Zikr: "Ring the bell! Enemy attack! They are coming from the sky!"

His shout gave a kick in the back to his aides so they would alert the entire Fortress City to the critical situation.

After seeing the reactions of all of them, Heinkel also put his hand on the sword at his waist. Then, as loud and sharp as the ringing alarm bells, he clicked his tongue.

Zikr: “Heinkel-dono! Priscilla-dono is…”

Heinkel: “Miss Priscilla’s at the mansion. She knew something’d happen. She’ll be on the move soon.”

As Zikr turned around, Heinkel turned his attention to the enemy shadows in the sky.

In mere seconds the swarm had clearly darkened in color and increased in size, approaching the city at tremendous speed. There was nary a moment to lose.

Heinkel: “Assuming this is an enemy attack, do you have any idea who the attacker might be?”

Zikr: “—. The number of flying dragons is extraordinary. The Imperial Capital does not have the strength to mobilize that many flying dragon riders, so… There is only one possibility.”

Heinkel: “So, what is that possibility?!”

Heinkel’s words became rough, as time was being cut shorter by Zikr’s roundabout way of talking.

Faced with Heinkel’s hounding him, Zikr paused for a beat, and then said,

Zikr: “The Flying Dragon General, Madelyn Eschart… She controls flying dragons. In other words…”

Heinkel: “Shit, one of the Nine Divine Generals… Hk.”

Heinkel scratched his head due to the mention of a familiar name.

He was not an expert on the inner workings of the Empire, but he was the Deputy Commander of the Royal Guards of the Kingdom of Lugunica. Because of his position, he was far more knowledgeable about information regarding other countries than most people.

He had at least heard the names and aliases of the Nine Divine Generals, the highest military force possessed by the Empire.

It seemed that all of them were warriors with extraordinary abilities, and only the best in the Kingdom, a group in which Marcos, the Commander of the Royal Guards, was also included, would be capable of being a match to them.

And, of course, there was the Kingdom's most powerful person, the Sword Saint, but—

Heinkel: "Didn't someone say something ridiculous like some guy fighting Reinhardt…"

The strongest swordsman in the Vollachian Empire was said to be as good as Reinhardt.

Of course, the Nine Divine Generals would possess their own strengths and weaknesses, but the thought of being attacked by a monster on the same level as that person, was Heinkel's worst nightmare.

Heinkel'd had no intention of coming to the Empire to begin with.

He had simply gone along for the ride when Priscilla decided to go to Vollachia of her own accord. He had no interest in the existence or destruction of this Fortress City.

But—

Heinkel: "I can't afford to displease Miss Priscilla… Even if Miss Priscilla becomes the Monarch, it'll all be meaningless if she drives me away."

Priscilla was eccentric, and, ultimately, he had no idea of what was in her mind.

Whatever had brought it on, she had Heinkel on-hand for now, but if he did not prove himself useful, he would be discarded of, and would come out empty-handed.

That must not happen. Priscilla was now the only person who was a straw for Heinkel to cling on to.

Heinkel: “We don’t have time for idle chatter. Let’s get rid of the flying dragon flock. Zikr, you’re here to oversee the whole thing!”

Zikr: “I intend to, but what about you, Heinkel-dono?”

Heinkel: “—I’ll do as I please.”

Unlike Zikr and Mizelda, Heinkel had no soldiers nor companions to lead.

Even if he did, his title as Deputy Commander of the Royal Guard was merely decorative. He had stopped studying the basics of military strategy a long time ago, and more importantly, no one would listen to his instructions.

So, from the beginning, there was only one thing that Heinkel could do.

Heinkel: “…”

Immediately after making this decision, Heinkel, without hearing Zikr’s reply, ran to the balcony of the City Hall and leapt from there to the city below.

He put his feet on the roof of a tall building, kicked off the rooftop, and then ran to the next building. He continued to leap repeatedly, bathed in the wind, as he headed to the top of the fortifications surrounding the city.

Jumping onto the towering fortress wall on the western side, where a flock of flying dragons was heading towards, he took a breath.

Alarm bells had already rung across the city to warn of an enemy attack; blended together everywhere in the city, was disorder among the people, with the bellows of the guards urging them to evacuate as to suppress the chaos.

Heinkel: “…Ahh, shit.”

The smell in the air changed noticeably, and the taste of spit on his tongue became bitter.

As the presence of the battlefield, of blood and steel, drew nearer, Heinkel was forced to listen to an illusory, high-pitched ringing in the depths of his ears.

In addition to Heinkel, Imperial Soldiers had also rushed to the western ramparts.

If Zikr's guess was correct, the attacker was one of the Nine Divine Generals. How were they prepared to fight against an opponent in the position of General First-Class of the Empire?

Did they not think that anything about that was wrong, even more so if they were under the same banner? Or was it all fine, as long as they could fight? If they were to die fighting, would they be satisfied with that?

Heinkel: "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck all of them, fuck all of them…!"

A boiling, throbbing, black heat poured out of his chest and into his entire body.

Heinkel gritted his teeth to the point of creaking as he savored the dark heat that began in his heart, traveled through his internal organs and lower abdomen, then onward to the tips of his limbs and fingers.

Heinkel's hand slowly reached for the sword at his waist, the sword bearing the name "Astrea", as he gripped the hilt tightly.

And then—

Heinkel: "—All of you can go to hell, motherfuckers!!"

With a howl of unbearable rage, Heinkel's sword flashed out, and the thick neck of a flying dragon passing by spurted blood, and split asunder.

3

Alarm bells rang as the screaming of people running away from the city overlapped in a quite exquisite, yet also frightening way, the Fortress City of Guaral having become a battlefield filled by auditory pandemonium.

The army of flying dragons encroaching from the western sky, composed of no less than several hundred specimens of majestic appearance, had shattered the hearts of the residents, who had been reassured by the fact that the city was protected by walls on all four sides.

If there was a weakness to these walls, which could withstand even the destructive energy of powerful Magic Stone Cannons, it would be none other than terrifying beings able to bypass even large walls.

Whether that be a being which could step over the walls, or a ruler of the sky that capable of flying over them.

Undoubtedly, it was no exaggeration to say that on this day, the Fortress City was being assaulted by its greatest, most formidable enemy.

Flop: "—This isn't very good."

Avoiding the main street in which screams echoed, Flop peeked out from an alley and frowned.

A few minutes after spotting the flying dragons in the sky, things took a turn for the worse; having yet again transformed into a battlefield much like had happened ten days prior, the Fortress City's brief respite was erased from its people's minds.

This time, however, compared to what had transpired ten days prior, this change was for the worse.

At any rate—

Flop: "Husband-kun was trying to cause as little damage as possible, but… this time, the opponent apparently doesn't seem to have that kind of consideration."

Subaru had aimed to pull off a "bloodless siege" by the bold means of crossdressing as a woman.

Although this goal had been foiled by an unexpected intruder, the amount of blood spilled would have been incomparably greater if a plan other than Subaru's had been employed.

The fact that the feelings of the Fortress City's residents, alongside with those held by the Imperial Soldiers stationed there, had not degenerated to an extreme degree, was something Flop wondered about; perhaps, that had been the result of Subaru's consideration.

This time, however, the enemy seemed to possess no such chivalrous thoughts whatsoever.

Schult: "Hii!"

Schult screamed beside Flop as a terrifying roar and earth-shaking impact traveled through the air.

It was no wonder. The enemy's assault with the flying dragons was just that severe and effective.

Flop: "Although they're just letting the flying dragons carry the rocks and then dropping them from high in the sky."

What they were doing was simple and straightforward, it was just a primitive attack.

However, though even a boulder the size of a human's head would cause serious injury, the rocks that had been dropping from the air for a while now, were as large as one or two heads.

The force of the rocks destroyed stone buildings, created huge craters in the streets. Of course, were someone to be hit, it would be a disaster one would wish to not witness ever again.

Flop and the others had rushed into the alley, but they had no confirmation that that place was a safe one.

Fleeing underground, or heading towards someone that was simply strong; if a safe place existed, those would be it.

Utakata: "Mii and the others are in the big building in the middle."

Schult: “P-Priscilla-sama is in the mansion…!”

Flop: “Oh, yes, of course. You’re both very smart, I agree with you. The problem is, we’re right in the middle of both those places!”

The called-upon Mizelda and Zikr were reliable in their ability to defend the city.

Although she was a fighting force of one person only, Priscilla’s ability was comparable to that of the Nine Divine Generals.

Flop was torn as to which direction to rush to, as well.

And while they were worrying—

???: “H-help… Uwahh!!”

Right in front of the alleyway where Flop and the others were hiding in, a figure fleeing down the street screamed, then disappeared. —No, he had not disappeared. The man’s body was snatched up into the sky by a shadow flying at great speed, taken away in one fell swoop.

Apparently, the flying dragons in the raid had different roles and were divided into two groups. The ones from earlier, those that let large stones fall, and those that attacked directly.

Or, more likely, there were flying dragons that had taken on other roles.

Schult: “J-just now, that person… Hk.”

Flop: “Even if we wanted to help, we wouldn’t be able to! And we can’t bypass them either. If we get caught in the claws or fangs of a flying dragon, the three of us will be taken into the sky together.”

Utakata: “Uu’s bow is here! With this, I can take down a flying dragon!”

Speaking enthusiastically, Utakata showed the bow and arrow in her arms. Had it been Holly, Kuna, or another adult Shudraq, Flop would have considered it.

However Flop, having once accompanied Utakata to bow practice, understood that her abilities were not enough for a real battlefield.

Flop: "—You want the best for children, was it? I get it."

With his eyes closed, Flop thought of the benefactor who had saved him and his sister from rock-bottom.

He always had a blunt and crude attitude, but in spite of that, his benefactor had never bent his principles. So, Flop wanted to be an "adult" he would not be ashamed of.

They could not stay hiding and holding their breath where they were forever. Whether they went to the City Hall or to the mansion, they needed to take some sort of action.

In order to get both Schult and Utakata to safety—.

Flop: "—I want you both to listen to me. From now on, I will…"

Taking a small breath, Flop attempted to convey his plan to them with determination.

And, in the moment in which the two children looked at Flop as the latter spoke.

???: "OHHHHHHH—!"

???: "—KIRYARARAHHHH!"

With a blood-curdling roar of anger, something huge fell from the sky onto the street. What slammed onto the ground accompanied by a mixture of angry screams and cries, was a flying dragon, black blood pouring from all over its entire body.

With its wings spread out, the flying dragon would be three to four meters in wingspan. Desperately trying to escape, it flapped its wings which had been broken from the impact of the fall.

Thereupon—

???: "Don't run away! Don't you dare, bastard!"

The flying dragon fell to the ground together with the figure, who rolled vigorously and jumped on its back. He then thrust his sword into the writhing flying dragon, skewering its heart from behind.

The screams of the flying dragon persisted for a long time; then, it collapsed in place as it shed tears of blood.

Then, having seen that the flying dragon's breathing had halted—

???: "Those little shits…"

A red-haired man came down from the back of the dead flying dragon, his shoulders heaving up and down. Upon sighting him, Schult, who was in Flop's arms, shouted an "Ah!",

Schult: "Heinkel-sama! So you were safe!"

Heinkel: "Haaahn?"

The high voice of Schult called out, prompting the red-haired man to turn around with a bad attitude. Immediately, Schult's throat caught, his words blocked because of the man's appearance, his entire body dyed bright-red.

Then, the wide-eyed Schult escaped Flop's arms, rushing to the man's side. Seeing Schult, the man wiped his bloody face with his sleeve.

Heinkel: "What the hell, it's you, pipsqueak?"

Schult: "You are all red, Heinkel-sama! Where are you hurt?!"

Heinkel: "Hurt? Oh, if you mean the blood, it's just the dragons'. If I'm hurt, it's merely a scratch."

Schult: "Oh, really? Is that so…?"

With a surprised look in his eyes, Schult touched the bloody man's body to make sure. Seeing that his attitude showed no concern for getting his hands and clothes dirty, the man looked down at the boy and sighed.

At this exchange, Flop let out the breath he had held due to his determination from before, and said,

Flop: “Butler-kun, I don’t think you need to worry. He doesn’t look to be putting up a strong-front, and he isn’t really hurt, right?”

Heinkel: “You’re… that weird man. You together with these pipsqueaks?”

Flop: “That “weird” part is a tad offensive, but you’re right! I was just running around with Butler-kun and Miss Utakata though. I’m relieved you’re here.”

When Flop smiled at him, the man covered in blood—Heinkel, looked away.

He was not embarrassed, that reaction was of being displeased. In fact, he even clicked his tongue. But it was true that he had slain the flying dragon, which had played a role in giving Schult some peace of mind.

Like Schult, Heinkel seemed to be one of Priscilla’s followers, and although Flop had expected him to be able to fight on the grounds that he carried a sword, he seemed to be more skilled than one would expect.

The tremendous amount of blood that stained his body vermilion could hardly just be attributed to the blood spurting from the flying dragon he had just killed. It was evidence that he had been exposed to blood spurting from multiple flying dragons.

Schult: “We were going to head towards Priscilla-sama now! What about you, Heinkel-sama?”

Heinkel: “To Miss Priscilla’s…? You’d be safer that way. But…”

Flop: “There are very few places in the city that are safe right now. If our enemies are all flying dragons, I think it’d be a good idea to find a building with a basement and a place where spices are kept.”

Utakata: “Spyce…?”

Flop interrupted Schult and Heinkel's conversation, while Utakata tilted her head at the part in the conversation she did not understand. Looking towards Flop, Heinkel's eyes were similar, holding confoundment.

It would not make sense to one unacquainted with the ecology of flying dragons.

Flop: "Flying dragons have a very good sense of smell. They can smell blood from a great distance. On the other hand, they don't like strong, pungent smells. So, if we sprinkle peppa all over our body, we may be able to avoid being caught by them."

Heinkel: "…You seem well-informed."

Flop: "I'm a peddler who travels from place-to-place! Also, I happen to know someone who knew a lot about flying dragons. He may've been the person most knowledgeable about them in the Empire!"

However, he had often heard about the good side of flying dragons from that person, so he had not expected to face them as a threat in this way.

At the very least, if the knowledge he had acquired was true, his plan to get covered in spices in order to escape the flying dragons should work.

It was fortuitous for Flop and the two children that they had been able to join up with the capable fighter that was Heinkel, but overall it was not fortuitous in this battle for the Fortress City.

Flop: "I can't say it's a good idea to use Redhead-san as our escort."

Heinkel, who could go toe-to-toe with flying dragons on his own, was a valuable asset to the city under attack by a countless number of them.

No matter how the battle turned out from here on, he would be one of the factors to influence the outcome of the battle. It was not a good idea to put him alongside the three non-combatants.

Therefore—

Flop: “We’re going underground to escape the eyes and noses of the flying dragons. Could Redhead-san accompany us to a nearby restaurant or warehouse? There, we can deceive their eyes… Or rather, deceive their noses? Once we do that, we can take care of the rest on our own.”

Schult: “Flop-sama…”

Schult’s face was aghast at Flop’s suggestion, as if the idea of splitting up had not occurred to him at all. But contrasting Schult’s surprise, Utakata nodded and said,

Utakata: “Uu thinks the same as Fuu. Uu and Fuu will protect Shuu. Don’t worry.”

Schult: “Utakata-sama will… as well?”

Utakata nodded her head in affirmation, and Schult’s round eyes lowered. A few seconds later, he looked up with a determined expression on his face and looked at Heinkel.

Schult: “I understand. I’ll do my best with Flop-sama and the others. So, Heinkel-sama, be careful of your injuries…”

Heinkel: “—I’ve been thinking this for a while, but don’t get yourselves all excited. Why should I suddenly start obeying what you guys tell me to do?”

Schult: “Eh?!”

However, Schult’s resolve was purposeless, as Heinkel frowned and bluntly stated this.

He wiped the gore from his sword with his cloak, indicating his surroundings with his chin,

Heinkel: “Let me say this now, I don’t owe this city anything. If I failed to protect this pipsqueak, Miss Priscilla’d probably be displeased, right? I’d rather avoid that.”

Flop: “W-wait, wait, wait, Redhead-san! Wait a sec! So you think protecting Princess-kun’s mood’s more important than protecting the city? That's…"

Heinkel: "—Correct."

Flop: "…"

The reply was so clear and definitive, that Flop could not help but involuntarily let out a disappointed look. Heinkel stared at Flop's face, his blue eyes glinting amongst the red filth covering his face.

Heinkel: "I got something more important than this city, more important than someone's life. And it's not this pipsqueak. Miss Priscilla, who dotes on this pipsqueak, has something I need her to give me no matter what. If that's what's needed to get that, then I don't care how many people die."

Flop: "Redhead-san…"

Heinkel: "Besides, I'm not that much of a big shot, and neither are you. You need to know your place. There's only so much you can do. Don't try to reach outside of that. You'll only make a fool of yourself."

Flop: "…"

Heinkel: "No one can be a sword."

As he spat this out, Heinkel's hand reached for Schult's shoulder.

As Schult's slender shoulder was gripped by his hand, the young boy turned his moist eyes toward Heinkel. The fright that filled those eyes—

Schult: "Heinkel-sama, you look like you are in pain."

—No, not fear, but rather compassion.

Heinkel's cheeks stiffened slightly, bathed by the boy's earnest gaze. But it did not move his resolute heart.

Heinkel: "I'm taking this pipsqueak to Miss Priscilla. You guys are on your own if you want to follow me. But don't make the mistake of thinking that I'll protect you."

With that, Heinkel grabbed Schult and turned his back on Flop and Utakata. He would step out into the street, heading toward the mansion where Priscilla was located.

Flop was hesitating on whether he should heed his warning, when —

???: "—You're the one killing us dragons?"

—A moment later, accompanied by those short words, a falling shadow landed on the ground with a furious roar.

???: "…"

A dense cloud of dust and debris was kicked up as an intruder suddenly carved up a large hole in the ground.

A small figure was standing with its short arms crossed in front of Heinkel as he tried to take Schult away, blocking their path.

—It was difficult to understand who it was, at a glance.

What had just happened, and the impression that the figure gave, did not match at all.

A small stature, a lovely face, blemish-free white skin, a sky-blue attire that enhanced their loveliness; as their appearance did not seem so different from Schult's or Utakata's, it was hard to believe that they had just appeared with a ground-shattering impact.

However, what had happened was all that mattered, and no one could deny what had happened.

The shadow that appeared narrowed its golden eyes, glared at the four standing in the street, and nodded.

And then—

???: "You have shed the blood of us dragons, and so in atonement, your blood shall be shed until there's none left. —You fools."

Chapter 56B:
The Flying Dragon Cataclysm

1

—The moment he saw the little girl standing amidst the plume of smoke, alarm bells went off in Flop's head.

Not the real alarm bell echoing throughout Guaral however; it was the clanging alarm of his own survival instincts as a living creature. So loud was its noise, that it made his head ache.

Quite frankly, Flop was unlike Medium; he was a man unable to fight.

Attempting to train his body had brought him some degree of frustration, and he wished to not detract from his sister's role, which she had chosen in her own way after much thinking, upon realizing that she was actually causing her brother pain by stroking his wounds.

Therefore, he possessed no warrior's intuition nor discernment.

And yet—

Flop: "That girl's bad news."

And then, he swallowed bitter spit as the little girl propped her leg out of the gaping hole made by the impact of the fall.

Girl: "…"

A young girl of short stature, the pupils of her golden eyes narrowed, glaring at Flop and the others.

She appeared to be two or three years older than Schult and Utakata, but the atmosphere she exuded was on par with that of Medium or Mizelda—no, even more dangerous.

It was almost like that of the imposing Divine General that had dispossessed Mizelda of her leg.

Flop: "…Redhead-san, do you think you can manage to create an opening? I want to let at least Butler-kun and Miss Utakata escape somehow."

The one to whom Flop gave that suggestion to in the form of a whisper was Heinkel, also the one person who held any fighting strength in this place.

Having demonstrated his swordsmanship by slaying a flying dragon, he would be more than capable of assisting in the protection of Utakata and the others, as opposed to having Flop become a meat shield.

Ideally, it would be great if Heinkel were strong enough to defeat that little girl.

Heinkel: "—Hk."

Flop: "Redhead-san?"

Leaving his guard up toward the girl, Flop questioned Heinkel, from whom there was no reply.

He was hesitant to take his gaze away from the threat before him, but working with Heinkel was the top priority. Having readied his resolve, Flop glanced at Heinkel to examine him.

—Heinkel's eyes were wide open in shock, his face pale with greasy sweat streaking across it.

Schult: "H-Heinkel-sama? Are you all right?"

Heinkel: "Uh, ah…"

Flop and Schult took notice of Heinkel's unusual behavior at nearly the exact same time.

Schult voiced his clear concern for Heinkel, and the red-haired swordsman's cheeks became rigid due to the youngster's words, an inarticulate voice escaping his throat.

It was difficult to tell, from looking from the side, whether the response was because he was aware of the girl's identity. However, regardless of the question, there was one clear, unequivocal fact.

That was—

Girl: "What's with you? Are you scared?"

The squinting girl's gaze was directed at Heinkel's legs as he stood there. His legs were trembling at both knees, so much so that he was barely managing to keep standing.

What was present there, obvious to anyone who laid eyes upon him, was plenty of fear and trepidation. In other words, despair.

Flop: "Hey there! I've never seen you before, little lady, would you mind talking to me for a bit?!"

Having observed Heinkel's despair, Flop immediately shouted that out.

Immediately, Heinkel and Schult's shoulders hitched, and the girl in front of them turned her eyes filled with suspicion toward him. Her gaze alone would not kill him, but the oppressive sensation coming from it was such that it was not be surprising if it did.

But Flop rallied his heart, loosened his cheeks, and spread his hands wide, producing a smile.

Flop: "I'm Flop O'Connell, a humble merchant. I'm in a rather difficult and bewildering situation. You seem to know more about it than I do, don't you?"

Girl: "—. Are you collateral damage? Then you're out of luck."

Flop: "Well, being out of luck's a phrase I'm not used to being told. I got a lot of things missing, but I'm proud to say that I do have luck. Why would I be out of luck?"

Girl: "You may kill everyone in this city. That's what the senile old man said."

Flop: “Everyone in the city.”

The little girl jerked her chin, answering by gesturing towards her surroundings, to which Flop gave a strained smile. But, deep inside, his state of mind was far from corresponding to that of a bitter smile, he was more panicked than anything else.

Would there be room for negotiation, given her objective was to annihilate the city’s inhabitants completely?

If only he could talk to the “senile old man” who had ordered her to do such a deed.

Flop: “From what I’ve heard, the senile old man seems to have made a mistake in telling you to wipe out the whole city. So why don’t you double-check that with your friends and colleagues who have come with you?”

Girl: “There are no friends or colleagues. There are only brethren and enemies with I, the dragon. —You, are mocking this dragon. It appears you don’t know fear.”

Flop: “Mocking you, that’s outrageous! I want to get along with you. For starters, I was just thinking about asking your name. Don’t you agree?”

Schult: “Y-yes, that is correct! I would like to know your name too! Mine is Schult!”

As the girl lay on verge of becoming ill-tempered, Flop clapped his hands, asking his allies for agreement. Schult, taking advantage of the situation, then said his name as he raised his hand.

With Flop and Schult now having been introduced themselves, the girl wrinkled the brow of her pretty face, and,

???: “—Madelyn Eschart. I, the dragon, am of the Nine Divine Generals.”

Heinkel: “Nine Di…!”

Unassumingly, the girl—Madelyn introduced herself via her title, to which Heinkel became at a loss for words.

His knees, which had been trembling ever since they had met, worsened further upon hearing her title, a corroboration of her strength. It was a miracle that he did not fall on his buttocks.

Even Flop was unable to laugh at Heinkel. Heinkel's opponent, whom Flop had considered to be as dangerous as a Divine General, turned out to actually be a Divine General.

And beyond that—

Flop: "—Miss Utakata."

Quietly, Flop noticed a change in the situation, invoking the name of the person who had caused this change.

Utakata, the girl called upon by Flop, stirred, focusing on Madelyn in front of her. Retrieving the bow from her back, she prepared an arrow, aimed at Madelyn.

The distance between them amounted to seven or eight meters; even considering her abilities, she would not miss.

If that were to be called an advantage, however, that could not be farther from the truth.

Utakata: "That enemy is the leader of the flock of flying dragons. She's the same as Mii was before, and the same as Taa is now. Defeat that enemy, and the fight is over."

Schult: "I-is that so?"

Flop: "Perhaps Miss Utakata's conception is correct. Unless there are other Divine Generals besides her."

When Flop took a glance towards her, Madelyn said nothing of it.

Judging from her attitude so far, she was a child who would respond to the words being spoken. If they were to state something obviously wrong, it would be more natural for her to react in some way.

In other words, Madelyn was leading the assault on the Fortress City. Utakata's view that defeating her would force the flying dragons to withdraw would be correct.

The only problem, was that it did not appear to be something that could feasibly be done.

Madelyn: "You're a warrior, you're a warrior, and you… won't run away. You're a warrior."

Schult: "Huh…Me, you mean?"

Madelyn: "Yes. You're a warrior as well."

Suddenly being pointed towards, Schult's eyes became rounder after being appraised as such.

To Schult's surprise, Madelyn pointed with her small hand to Utakata, Flop, and himself, describing them as "warriors".

Following on, Madelyn's finger was pointed at the last one, Heinkel —

Madelyn: "You're no warrior. Even though you slew a dragon, you're a coward."

Heinkel: "Guh…"

Madelyn: "Draw your sword. For I, the dragon, will strike you. For every drop of blood that has been shed."

As she said this, Madelyn slowly took a step toward him.

And so, slowly, Madelyn's feet closed the distance headed toward the flying-dragon-killer Heinkel, uncaring of being targeted by Utakata's arrow.

Utakata: "—Hit her!"

Synchronized with that declaration of intent, Utakata's arrow was loosed, aiming at Madelyn's chest. It flew straight at Madelyn, but was caught between two fingers of Madelyn's lifted hand.

Madelyn did not even look at Utakata. Her line of sight was trained straight towards Heinkel.

Flop: “Redhead-san!”

Schult: “Heinkel-sama!”

Realizing the danger, Flop screamed and Schult tried to pull on Heinkel’s arm. However, Schult’s lack of power was not enough to make Heinkel even twitch.

Rather, faced with Madelyn approaching him, Heinkel cleared his throat, shook off that arm of Schult’s attempting to pull him away.

Schult fell on his butt; Heinkel clenched his molars.

Heinkel: “Oh, ohhh…!”

Heinkel’s sword hand gripped tightly, infused with force. His cheeks turned vermillion as he clenched his jaw and mandible, the blood pumping through his body attempting to dispel the fright making his legs tremble.

Yet despite that, Madelyn did not halt, still closing her distance to Heinkel.

Compared to a flying dragon, this little girl was incomparably smaller in size.

Against the approaching petite child, Heinkel struck a blow with his sword—.

Heinkel: “—Oh.”

With a high-pitched clang, the sword tumbled from Heinkel’s trembling hand.

At the moment the full extent of his sword technique was to be unleashed, he was unable to raise his arm, letting his sword go.

And—

Madelyn: “After all, you’re no warrior.”

Madelyn’s contemptuous words were driven into Heinkel’s side accompanied by a fist.

The blow struck Heinkel’s stout frame, and with tremendous force, the red-haired swordsman was blown sideways. His entire body slammed into a stone building, cracking the stone wall in the shape of his human form.

The blow, that one hit, caused Heinkel’s eyes to roll to the back of his head, also producing an intense gale.

Regardless of having fired off a punch that produced a boom, that fist carrying energy not below that of the rocks being repeatedly hurled by the flying dragons at the city, Madelyn’s ire did not abate.

Heinkel: “Kah!”

As Heinkel slumped forward, Madelyn’s other fist smashed into his nose. The back of his head slammed against the wall, and as he ricocheted in return, a punt from the girl pummeled his torso.

The impact went through him, causing the house behind him to collapse thunderously, exposed to that destructive power. Grabbing Heinkel’s leg as it was engulfed in a plume of smoke, Madelyn brutally threw him in the opposite direction.

Heinkel’s body rumbled and tumbled vigorously as he fell back onto the ground of the street. The building across the street from the house that had just collapsed, now gave him a firm welcome.

Windows shattered on impact, the scattered debris showering down on Heinkel like rain. The fallen Heinkel did not even twitch as they left fine cuts all over his body.

Flop: “…”

Were it Flop, that onslaught would have been fatal.

Besides Flop, most people would have died to that assault. It was uncertain whether Heinkel was dead or alive, having been showered by a series of attacks that perhaps even Medium would be unable to survive.

But Madelyn, whose profession was fighting, would not permit such half-hearted denouement.

Madelyn: “Wimp.”

Madelyn’s hand reached behind her back, muttering in a voice that did not conceal her contempt. The belt on her back was unbuttoned, and immediately afterward, an item that had been stored there was opened with a noise.

It was a foldable, razor-sharp blade, a long weapon shaped like a wide-open pair of scissors. Flop recalled seeing something similar during the hunts of nomadic people across the wide, grand grasslands.

Called a Flying Winged Blade, a skillful user could throw it for dozens of meters, spinning the blade around and back to the user’s hand.

However, Madelyn’s weapon was as tall as she was small, a sharp weapon possessing a specialized handle that could be used for purposes other than throwing.

Devoid of mercy, she directed it at Heinkel laying on the ground, having entered that state after being beaten up by her bare hands. Were he to be struck by that weapon, assuredly no trace of him would remain.

Flop: “Won’t you stop, Miss Madelyn? I understand your anger. I know how angry you must be after your friends were killed. But if someone’s attacked, they have no choice but to fight back.”

Biting his lip to brace himself, Flop said this to Madelyn’s back. With the Flying Winged Blade in her hand, she turned away and responded to Flop, “Don’t be mistaken”,

Madelyn: “Dragons are the greatest creatures in the world. If you people snap right back at dragons, you deserve to be exterminated. Besides…”

Flop: “Besides?”

Madelyn: “Is it possible to tolerate the action of such a coward, I wonder?”

Madelyn’s golden eyes quaked with anger, and Flop realized the reason for her irritation.

Naturally, she was angry about flying dragon accompanying her having been murdered, but more significant was the fact that the one who had performed that deed, Heinkel, was unable to wage battle, having let go of his sword.

She was angered that her companion had been felled by someone so insignificant.

It was an insult not only to Heinkel, but to the life of the flying dragon he had slain—

Flop: “Uwah!”

Utakata: “Uh!”

A moment later, Madelyn kicked a pebble on the ground to stop Flop before he could move. The pebble struck Flop, about to make a move, and Utakata, who was about to nock her next arrow, hitting their legs and arms respectively, hence hindering their actions.

In the meantime, Madelyn raised her Flying Winged Blade as to snuff out Heinkel right beneath her eyes.

But—

Schult: “N-no, please don’t—!”

Unlike the two who were hit by pebbles, Schult, who was standing away out of precaution, rushed in-between them in desperation. The young boy held out his hands and stepped in between Madelyn and Heinkel.

Schult’s small body covered Heinkel, a shelter far too fragile to resist the storm that was approaching.

But Madelyn was not so kind as to hold back, upon seeing the boy's recklessness.

Madelyn: "Nobody was going to let you live anyway."

Madelyn's eyes narrowed, and the Flying Winged Blade was driven down into Schult's head.

2

???: "—Rem! Are you safe?!"

Shouting so, a slender woman opened the large door and rushed into the mansion.

Rem, who had been running through the hall, looked towards the familiar voice and replied with "Yes!",

Rem: "Kuna-san! And Holly-san"

Holly: "I'm glad you're okay~! The whole city is a huge mess already~!"

Before Rem's wide-open eyes, a pair of footsteps rushed towards her, one light and another heavy, belonging to two members of the People of Shudraq stationed in the city, Kuna and Holly.

Upon hearing the voices of those two, Rem's eyes eased in slight relief,

Rem: "I'm glad that you two are alright. Do you have any injuries?"

Kuna: "We're fine, for now. It's just…"

Holly: "…Everyone is so beat already~."

The tone of the two's voices drooping, they looked about the hall that Rem ran through, speaking their mind.

Around the three of them, residents who had been hurt and injured amidst the chaos that had sparked within the city were being brought in droves. The place gave the appearance of a field hospital, as volunteers helped in patching everyone up.

If the wound was shallow, it could be sewn shut and bandaged. However, if the wound was deep and life-threatening—

Rem: “I need to do something…”

Biting her lip tightly, Rem clenched her hands.

Her right hand, opposite the cane, was already smeared with blood that was not Rem’s. No matter how many times she tried to scrub it away, the blood on her hand had dried far too much.

Soon after Rem and Priscilla witnessed the flock of flying dragons from the bathhouse’s balcony, the black specks approaching from afar quickly turned into a threat, launching an assault on the city.

Some of the flying dragons hurled down large rocks from the sky, while some of them engaged in a cruel hunt, snatching the fleeing people from the ground to then drop them right back from great heights.

The citizens who lacked the strength to fight against either of these attacks, were nothing but easy prey.

Having been exposed to such danger, the people had rushed here for a shelter and center of treatment; that was the reason behind the misery currently present within the mansion.

One would think Priscilla to be greatly upset with such happenings, and yet—

Priscilla: “To begin with, the mansion was taken in order to make the precious healer’s whereabouts somewhere distinct, somewhere sound. Zikr and the others were also ordered to escort the wounded.”

Rem: “I-is that so…?!”

Priscilla: “What, did you really believe that I seized the mansion only for its bathhouse? The true reason, is for its bathhouse, and its spaciousness.”

And so, it should be noted that such an exchange had previously occurred.

In any case, Priscilla had allowed the wounded into the mansion. Apparently, Zikr, Mizelda, and other key personnel in the city had been informed of this.

Rem: “So then, I don’t know why I wasn’t told anything about it, being the most important aspect, but…!”

Because she felt that obtaining a satisfying answer was not possible, Rem did not probe it any deeper.

Above all, Rem had no time for worrying over Priscilla’s childish mischievousness. After all, injured people who required Rem’s help were being brought in one after another.

Rem: “Kuna-san and Holly-san, you two are…”

Holly: “Chieftain… Ah! Not anymore~! Former Chieftain Mizelda said this~!”

Kuna: “The more people die, the lower the morale will get. We don’t want fewer people to be able to fight, so we’re Rem’s guards. Leaving that aside…”

Cutting her words off there, Kuna narrowed her almond-shaped eyes. Because of the sharpness of the look, Rem stiffened, as Kuna indicated the wounded in the mansion with her chin,

Kuna: “Where’s that princess who was taking care of you? Don’t tell me, she’s relaxing in her room with all this mayhem going on?”

Holly: “If so, she’s a very heavy sleeper~. I am too, but even if I were snoozing and had my belly full, I’d wake up with this much noise~.”

To the pair’s questions, their tone differing in tension exquisitely, Rem shook her head sideways.

Certainly, Priscilla was the proprietor of a self-centered, arrogant personality, and it was understandable that the two of them would be concerned about her being so whimsical.

Rem: “Surprisingly, Priscilla-san is a very dependable person.”

And immediately following Rem’s comment on the absent Priscilla,

???: “—Kiryararahhh!!”

A high-pitched sound, like a strong wind blowing between buildings, descended headlong onto the front yard of the mansion.

Propping up a tremendous cloud of dust by scraping the lawn, was the massive body of a dragon possessing wings, which had just failed a landing from above. Its total wingspan would put the flying dragon at roughly four meters long; it landed in an unsightly manner, as if it had just flown for the first time.

Although, that was only natural.

The basic landing maneuvers that would normally have been founded in experience and instinct could not have been satisfactorily demonstrated, given its head had been smashed in.

Just then, right next to the crashed corpse of the flying dragon, a figure landed from the sky. A beautiful woman, the hem of her red dress fluttering, a jeweled crimson sword in her hand—Priscilla.

Priscilla: “You used me as a guard. This debt shall cost you greatly, Rem.”

Rem: “Thank you very much. I shall wash your hair as a show of my heartfelt gratitude.”

Priscilla: “How audacious of you, to attempt to get away with such a thing. I shall allow it. I am pleased with it.”

Priscilla acceded to Rem’s reply with a hawkish response given through the opened doorway.

She had been making full use of her extraordinary physical abilities to cut down and repel the flying dragons that had come soaring towards the mansion.

Witnessing this firsthand, Kuna and Holly, as would be expected, could not conceal their astonishment.

For some reason, Rem felt petty pride resulting from the reactions of those two. However, Priscilla, squaring off against the dragons, was not entirely free of concern.

The primary reason for this laid within the beautiful red-jeweled sword wielded in her hand—

Rem: “Priscilla-san, how is your Yang Sword doing…?”

Priscilla: “As you can see, the sun has darkened. For now, this is merely a blunt object that cannot be called a sword. Although…”

Having revealed that something was wrong with the Yang Sword, Priscilla turned back around.

In that instant, a flying dragon plunged towards Priscilla, its open mouth lined with ravenous fangs aimed at her back. Priscilla ruthlessly plunged the Yang Sword, dull as it was, into the dragon’s maw.

The fangs shattered as the tip of the Yang Sword pierced the back of the dragon’s throat with brutal force, killing it.

Priscilla: “Before me, a winged dragon amounts to naught, even with a blunt object that cannot cut.”

With a sweep of her sword, Priscilla tossed the dragon’s corpse to the edge of the garden. Having now easily disposed of the threat, she turned to notice Kuna and Holly standing beside Rem.

Priscilla: “Shudraqians, is it. I suppose you have come to protect Rem.”

Rem: “Priscilla-san, the two of them came to help the wounded…”

Priscilla: “Do not lose sight of reality because of romantic ideals. What use are the wounded on a battlefield? Who is the most valuable one here? Aside from me, it is you.”

Rem: “—Hk!”

Rem choked up, faced with Priscilla’s sharp rebuttal. Kuna nodded her head in affirmation of Priscilla’s ruthless assessment, “That’s right“,

Kuna: “It’s our role to protect Rem. And Rem’s role is…”

Holly: “To minimize the casualties, as much as possible~!”

Kuna’s hushed words were buttressed by Holly’s cheerful remark.

Burned by both of their words, and by Priscilla’s gaze, Rem admonished herself. Just the previous day, Rem had been feeling sorry for herself, for not being in such an important position.

No longer could she be complacent about her position. Above all, Rem herself had desired it.

Rem: “I will fight my battles myself. Kuna-san, Holly-san, thank you very much.”

Kuna: “Oh!”

Holly: “You’re the one in charge~!”

Kuna and Holly nodded, responding to Rem’s determination with encouraging smiles.

The two granting salvation to her feelings, Rem looked towards Priscilla. She had been defending the mansion until guards capable of protecting Rem arrived—

Rem: “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

Priscilla: “It seems to me that there are many situations in which you shall not be able to stand without me. Zikr will know how to dispense with the lack of strength, but he shall not be able to stand up to the enemy’s main force.”

Rem: “The enemy’s main force being…”

Priscilla: “—Naturally, that would be a Divine General.”

Rem gulped, as Priscilla answered with one eye closed.

The existence of the Nine Divine Generals was a critical factor affecting the tide of war in the Empire. In order to recruit as many of them as possible, Subaru, Abel, and the others had set out for Chaosflame.

Nevertheless, the fact that one of the Nine Divine Generals was attacking this city was no coincidence.

Priscilla: “Of course, this is the doing of someone from within the opposing party. Abel’s situation looks increasingly bleak. How come he built something upon such shoddy foundations?”

Rem: “I can’t say anything about that, because I don’t know much about how Abel works. Leaving it at that, I’m sure it would have been very difficult for the people around him…”

While Rem had many qualms about Subaru, she did not believe Abel’s attitude was a commendable one either. Abel, who stood out for his arrogant behavior stemming from his cleverness, foresight, and ability to read the situations, was a difficult opponent for Rem, who had no memories to support herself with.

Being at the top of the country, he must have been surrounded by a great many people. It was very unlikely that all of them would have accepted his ideas and obeyed him so easily.

That was also why a rebellion had been raised. However—

Rem: “Nonetheless, to allow something as terrible as this because of that…!”

Rem, who had built herself upon a fragile foundation, appealed to Priscilla with her gaze.

Priscilla produced a scoff, accompanied by a smile, due to Rem’s exclamation, as if suggesting she knew what she was thinking. As Rem’s eyes widened in response, Priscilla turned away, the smile disappearing as if it had never existed at all, Priscilla: “This flock of flying dragons can not be explained through the taming of flying dragons. This General First-Class must have sprouted during mine absence. If what Serena spoke was true, a comrade of hers became the Flying Dragon General.”

Rem: “Surely, the Ninth… That person should be somewhere in the city…”

Priscilla: “—The City Hall.”

Rem: “…”

Priscilla: “If the enemy is not too foolish, that is where they shall head. After all, they have a direct path to it, cleaving through the skies. There is no reason why they would overlook the commanding post.”

Rem’s thoughts became clouded for a moment due to the obviousness of such a remark.

However, as soon as those words registered in her mind, she was immediately struck by the urgency of the situation. However, Priscilla’s calm and nonchalant demeanor brought Rem to the verge of panic.

Rem: “I-isn’t it a crisis that the command post is being attacked?! Priscilla-san?!”

Priscilla: “Fool. Plump though he may be, Zikr yet remains a General of the Empire. He shall not perish that easily, nor he is so foolish as to keep by his side those who cannot do battle.”

Rem: “That is… Ah. Speaking of those who can’t fight, Schult-san!”

Reminded of the boy who had left the mansion before Priscilla and Rem started bathing, Rem grew anxious.

Hardworking but clumsy, Schult was a boy with no more power than those that needed Rem’s help.

If only he had someone, an adult he could rely on, to join up with, but if not—

Rem: “Priscilla-san, quickly, please hurry!”

Priscilla: “At the very least, it is your duty to earnestly beseech me for my safety. In fact, you needn’t be in such a hurry, Schult shall not die so easily.”

Rem: “Huh…?”

Replying with a casual demeanor, Priscilla snorted at Rem, who was impatiently motioning with her hand.

Rem furrowed her eyebrows into a frown, not understanding the meaning behind Priscilla’s words. Kuna and Holly, naturally, had no clue as to them as well, their faces conveying confusion with that child’s appearance as the reason.

How could she be certain that Schult, wielding only his cuteness and diligence as weapons, would be safe?

Facing the skeptical eyes of Rem and the others, Priscilla put her hand on the door of the mansion, keeping them out of the way of the flying dragons’ onslaught.

Priscilla: “—Because he has won mine favor with his charm and bravery, you know.”

And with that answer, the door of the mansion was closed.

3

A harsh, dull thud rang out, and Flop felt his soul crushed under the weight of his own helplessness.

The pain from the pebble stopped him in his tracks, a tragedy that did not even allow him to reach out.

He wished to shut his eyes, to avert his face from their demise, but he did not. Doing so, he believed, would mean running away from his responsibility, stemming from his powerlessness, from his inability to do anything.

At the very least, he himself had to ascertain the result of what he had done, and of what he had been unable to do.

With such modest resolve, Flop refused to look away.

And then—

Madelyn: “What, are you?”

Madelyn swung down the Flying Winged Blade in her hand, intending to slice her prey in two with its sharp edge.

Undoubtedly, she had tried to cut both of them in half simultaneously, the disgraceful Heinkel and Schult, who tried to protect him, alike. It was not as if she had paused midway through her attack.

And yet—

Schult: “Uhh, uhhh…!”

Gnashing his teeth firmly with a groan, Schult covered the fallen Heinkel.

His body had been neither torn nor crushed. However, Madelyn’s blow should have caught him squarely in the back of the head, shattering it.

In fact, Flop had witnessed the blow with his very eyes, and had heard its dull sound.

However, only the dull sound had echoed.

Madelyn: “—?”

Madelyn tilted her head, her curious eyes repeatedly moving back and forth between her weapon and the back of Schult’s head. Her head still inclined, Madelyn brought the Flying Winged Blade down on Schult once more.

Once, twice, three times, four times, over and over again, in rapid succession—

Schult: “No, no, please stop! It hurts!”

Madelyn: “That’s strange. I, the dragon, intended to kill. Why don’t you die?

Flop: “That… Maybe, your reluctance towards killing a person’s making your hand slacken just before the weapon hits… Guah!”

Madelyn: “Don’t make fun of this dragon!”

Lamenting about not understanding a thing, Madelyn’s ire was directed at Flop.

She sent a stone larger than the one she had used to stop Flop in his tracks previously flying with a punt; it hit him square in the chest, knocking him flat on his rear.

His sternum creaked from the force of the impact, leaving Flop no longer able to breathe properly.

However—

Schult: “O-ouch, it hurts…”

It was a fact that, Schult, having been struck again and again by the sharp blade, grunted in pain, yet did not die. This bizarre occurrence ultimately sparked an outburst from Madelyn.

As her hand grabbed Schult’s peach-colored hair, hoisting his body, Madelyn gnashed her teeth together.

And then,

Madelyn: “You, what in the world are you hiding…?”

Schult: “~~Hk!”

While being hoisted up, Schult screamed in agony. But Madelyn’s reaction, as she turned her angry eyes towards him, exceeded his.

Madelyn’s golden eyes widened, her lips quivering with a wince. Flop, teary-eyed with pain, could nonetheless make out what had made her react in such a way.

A dramatic change in Schult's appearance had been triggered.

That change was—

Utakata: "Schult's eyes, they're burning."

Utakata, witnessing the same scene, succinctly and accurately described it so.

At first glance, what Utakata had pointed out made no sense, yet there existed no better way to describe what was happening. From Flop's perspective, it was precisely as she had described it.

It was a thing most unusual; in both of Schult's red eyes, a flickering flame blazed.

Schult: "Eh, eh, eh…"

However, the one being talked about himself, Schult, was oblivious to this fact, blinking his eyes, his face conveying that he was unable to make sense of the reactions of the people around him. His wandering eyes eventually landed upon his own face reflected in the Flying Winged Blade that had struck him, then realized what it was that had drawn everyone's attention.

Schult's features, reflected in that curved blade, appeared distorted, but he could clearly see the fire burning in his eyes.

Schult: "Wh-What is this? H-hot! Ah! It's not hot!"

While running his hand all over his face, Schult exclaimed about his inability to feel the flames.

PRISCILLA'S
SERVANT

It appeared that, while it was not like his face had just burst in flames spontaneously, the cause of the fire was still inexplicable. However, only Flop and his companions were puzzled as to the meaning of the flames.

Looking into Schult's face, Madelyn found her cheeks stiffening in astonishment, as she recognized the conflagration blazing within the child's two eyes.

Consequently, she exclaimed her suspicion.

Madelyn: "You… can't possibly be friggin' related to that foxperson?!"

Schult: "Fox…"

Flop: "Person?"

Utakata: "—?"

Agitated, Madelyn batted her eyes because those three people had no inkling as to what she was talking about.

Without the mental leeway to notice her tone of voice breaking just before it actually did, she was overcome by strong surprise and confusion, staring at Schult.

The hand gripping Schult let go of him, and the boy, falling forward with a "Wah!", dropped to the ground. Madelyn kicked off the ground with force in front of the boy, who was again covering Heinkel.

Madelyn: "…"

In one go, Madelyn's figure leapt, ascending to the sky above the street.

Its abruptness and velocity made it appear to Flop as if she had simply vanished. However, the ground that she had stepped on caved in violently and in addition, the building she had utilized as a foothold to accelerate her motion crumbled.

Madelyn, having risen high up into the air in such a manner, lifted the Flying Winged Blade aloft in both her hands with all her might.

Madelyn: “Yer friggin’ getting in this dragon’s way again… Friggin’ disappear, YOU NUISANCE—!!”

That voice of protest echoed through the air, and the Flying Winged Blade swung down, furiously approaching the ground.

Its principle was the same as how the flying dragons threw their stones, but the force behind the readied blade was orders of magnitude greater. Unlike the large rocks being hurled without aim, this blade aimed to cleave Schult’s body in two.

By some underlying logic, Schult’s body had become sturdy.

However, being struck again and again still caused Schult to cry out in pain. Meaning that it was not that his body had become impervious to the impact from her blows.

Moreover, no matter how sturdy their body may be, a child would still cry out if they were in pain—

Flop: “If I don’t do something, Medium will be angry with me.”

Enduring the pain of his creaking chest, Flop rushed towards Schult.

He knew not just how much of a shield his body would be in face of that attack. But if he were to lessen the impact even ever-so-slightly, saving Schult, he would be satisfied.

Devoid of any more time to think, Flop exposed himself to the menace that was the Flying Winged Blade,

???: “—Well done.”

Unknowing of the reason, he clearly heard that voice even though it was not a loud one; there was a crash, and the impact of violent, mutual blows produced light that scorched Flop’s eyes.

Flop: “…”

This radiance, was produced by a bright-red jeweled blade clashing with the side of the rapidly spinning Flying Winged Blade approaching from directly above.

Crimson light burst forth silently, and Flop felt the false sensation of his whole body being enveloped by the wind.

With that over, what followed were the dull thuds of flesh hitting flesh.

Flop: “—Hk!”

Looking upwards, the figure of a person flew through the air at an angle accompanied with a cry of pain, crashing into a building on the ground. Flop quite belatedly realized that it had been Madelyn’s body who had so violently caused the stone building to crumble.

The one responsible for this was a beautiful woman adorned in red who landed in front of the breathless Flop and his companions.

Flop: “Princess-kun!”

Schult: “Priscilla-sama!”

Utakata: “Puu!”

Priscilla: “Should you not know by now? What you must shout at a time such as this, is praise.”

While leisurely brushing the hem of her dress, Priscilla stated such.

At a time the city was under siege by attacks from flying dragons, with even a Divine General being dispatched, her indomitable attitude and way of being was incomparably reliable.

In truth, she had just dealt a serious blow to Madelyn, and, in the process, rescued Flop and the others from a life-threatening situation.

Priscilla: “However, that you would have been kept at a place like this was something I was certain would not happen. I thought that you would naturally aim for the City Hall right away.”

Flop: “Yeah, we were struggling to decide if we should do so. Wondering if we should go to the mansion where Princess-kun and Wife-san are, or to the City Hall where Ballhead-kun is…”

Priscilla: “Absolutely not. That is precisely the target of the General First-Class who attacked the city.”

With a jerk of her chin, Priscilla stopped Flop from continuing, indicating the place where Madelyn had crashed into.

Hearing that, Flop’s mind was lost in thought for a moment, but readily dismissed that as unimportant for the time being. Then, he called out to Priscilla, “Princess-kun…”,

Flop: “Thank you for saving us. I’m going to find shelter together with Butler-kun and Miss Utakata, but please tell us where to go. I have to take Redhead-san with me as well.”

Priscilla: “Ho, so you can make a reasonable judgment? In that case, head for the mansion. It shall be safer there than in the City Hall, the focus of their assault. And…”

Priscilla’s line of sight shifted over, glancing at Heinkel, laying on the ground behind him. Priscilla narrowed her crimson eyes, then let out a minute sigh,

Priscilla: “Feel free to leave that behind. If it is of no help, then that is the end of it.”

Flop: “Unfortunately, that’s not going to happen. Redhead-san’s going to be a valuable asset once he wakes up, and most importantly, your precious Butler-kun went through a lot of pain to protect him.”

Priscilla: “…”

At the sound of Flop’s words, Priscilla’s gaze was suddenly set on Schult.

Water welled up in Schult's eyes, overwhelmed from having been saved in the nick of time by his master's appearance. Both his eyes still burned, the tears and the blaze making for a spectacle.

However, Schult did not express his anxiety over the strange situation that had befallen him; instead, he squeezed the leg of the fallen Heinkel,

Schult: "I-I will be carrying Heinkel-sama…! But, Priscilla-sama, what will…"

Priscilla: "There is some business that still requires being taken care of. Certainly, you comprehend."

Schult: "Y-es. Something great that only Priscilla-sama can handle…!"

How did that brave boy's faith, Schult's faith in her, affect Priscilla?

Priscilla, whose expression did not change, simply nodded mutely, accepting Schult's words. Without a moment's pause, she then glanced towards the alley,

Priscilla: "Avoid the main street, take the alleys at the side of tall buildings. Schult, you should recall the path."

Schult: "Yes! I walked down that path every day, diligently!"

Priscilla: "I shall give you my commendation."

After a brief note of praise for his efforts, Priscilla turned her back to Schult.

Her attitude was clear; time for chatting was over. Flop's instincts too, informed him that remaining in that place any longer was not a good idea.

If they stayed near Priscilla however, they would be safe from the threat of the flying dragons.

Flop: "Butler-kun, I'll need you to show me around. I'll somehow manage to carry Redhead-san. As for Miss Utakata, be on the lookout on the streets in our stead. I’m sure you’re used to hunting, I’ll be relying on you!”

Schult: “I-I understand. I will do my best to show you the way!”

Utakata: “…Uu understands as well.”

Utakata, visibly hesitant to run away for a second, nodded as she was given her part.

With this, the division of the roles was complete. All that remained was—

Flop: “Princess-kun! Thank you once again!”

Priscilla: “Gratitude or the like are needless. Nothing but words of praise towards mineself are required.”

With her back towards him, Priscilla responded to Flop’s gratitude. Chuckling at her frank demeanor, he proceeded to pick up Heinkel’s fallen body.

Tall and well-trained, his body was quite heavy. It was a good thing he was used to carrying Medium and escaping in times of emergency. Carrying his body over both shoulders like a piece of luggage, he was somehow still able to move.

Schult: “We must not forget this, either.”

And so, Schult picked up Heinkel’s fallen sword, gripping it tightly within his thin hand.

With that, Flop, Schult and Utakata briefly faced each other and nodded, only for them to then run into the alleyway, the mansion as their destination.

Before they had completely gotten away however—

Schult: “Priscilla-sama, this fire, was surely… Thank you so very much!”

With his burning eyes opened wide, Schult voiced his gratitude towards Priscilla.

4

—And so, after Schult and the others had left noisily and hurriedly.

Priscilla: “Schult, and that guy who named himself as Flop or something. Were that other man in such a predicament without such assistance, he would have been rife with bad luck.”

Amidst the street devoid of people, Priscilla quietly muttered this.

That comment was directed not to Schult, whose eyes blazed, nor to Flop, who made up for his inability with tact, nor to Utakata, her magnanimity too large for her size, but to the final person remaining.

He had survived in a situation that would have definitely killed him. It was nothing but the devil’s luck.

Although—

Priscilla: “It is doubtful that someone who does not perish when they should have, ought to be dubbed lucky.”

Not pity, but something close to pity had been inserted into those words.

It melted into the wind of the battlefield, laden with the scent of blood, and vanished, going unheard by anyone.

At that moment—

Priscilla: “…”

With a sound, the ornament that adorned Priscilla’s orange hair shattered.

By that, it did not mean that a fragile portion of the jeweled hair ornament had broken, rather that the entire ornament cracked and shattered to dust in one fell swoop.

Instantly, Priscilla’s long, collected hair unfurled, flowing down her back in waves.

And then—

Madelyn: “—You won’t friggin’ die either?”

Slowly, a shadow appeared in the street, alongside the sound of debris being kicked up.

There, a being whose entire body was smeared with dust, however, whose body itself was yet energetic—a figure with two black horns sprouting from her head, at which Priscilla narrowed her eyes,

Priscilla: “A dragonkin. Where was such an antique unearthed?”

Madelyn: “Are you friggin’ looking down on this dragon? Surely you don’t friggin’ believe you can get away without consequences, do you?”

Baring her teeth because of Priscilla’s words, the girl—Madelyn, squinted the dragon-like pupils of her eyes.

As she felt the draconic energy emanating from her small figure as if it were the wind, Priscilla gently stroked her unraveled hair with her hand,

Priscilla: “You seem to resent the fact that I am not dead, do you not?”

Madelyn: “Well, I should’ve friggin’ flattened those overinflated breasts. People who won’t die even if they have their hearts crushed are friggin’ annoying, no matter who they are.”

Priscilla: “—Even if their hearts are crushed, huh?”

Sighing at Madelyn’s manner of putting it, Priscilla looked downwards at the breasts the former had indicated; her own.

Priscilla’s ample breasts were more pronounced than usual, due to the constricting design of her dress, but Madelyn’s blow had certainly reached those prized breasts.

It had not been visible to Schult nor to any of the others, but battling in midair had been a painful experience.

Just as Priscilla's strike had sent Madelyn flying, Madelyn's counterattack had also struck a harsh blow to Priscilla's chest.

If it looked like Priscilla was looking at things like it was no big deal right now, that was because—

Priscilla: "Apparently, even my property itself is unwilling to see me lost to this world."

Madelyn: "—The Soul Marriage Technique."

As the unexpected words came out of Madelyn's mouth, Priscilla raised her eyebrows.

Madelyn kept glaring at Priscilla, pointing at a building in the street—No, far, far beyond it, far away to the southeast.

Madelyn: "You're the friggin' same as that foxwoman. Do you friggin' know her?"

Priscilla: "I do not. If you possess any idea about something similar to this of my own possession, then they are a rip-off of me. I am the original."

Madelyn: "—?"

Priscilla: "Do you not comprehend?"

Words she had never heard of before were hurled at Madelyn, confusion dawning on her visage. Consequently, Priscilla decided to make things simple in an attempt to clear up the confusion.

In other words—

Priscilla: "Much like someone with the awareness that this shall be a difficult affair for them, within yourself, you know you are no match for me."

Madelyn: "—Hk, are you making a friggin' fool of this dragon?!"

Priscilla: “Nonsense. As if you get to choose who you are. — Mineself is at the top, and everyone else is at the bottom.”

The moment she answered with a smile, Madelyn’s anger reached the boiling point.

The dragonkin, red-faced and with glowing golden eyes, roared, a threat looming before her eyes.

With Madelyn to her front, Priscilla glanced to the sky.

As if searching for the sky—Nay, searching for the hilt of the crimson treasured sword, which had the atmosphere as its sheath,

Priscilla: “Has the sunshine ceased? This shall be somewhat more complicated.”

5

—The shock and destruction began in one corner of the Fortress City, but did not end there.

???: “…”

The fierce battle had initially begun in the south side of the city, bringing forth a chain of destruction to a cluster of densely-packed buildings; in which seemed to be all too telling of the enormity of the cataclysm caused by the flying dragons, accompanied by a plume of smoke.

However, that which plunged the southern part of the Fortress City into a state of devastation was not the cataclysm brought by the flying dragons.

Of course, the hunt of the flying dragons, as they cast down large rocks from the sky, laying waste to the land below, was a calamity in itself.

When people running for cover in fear of the raining rocks showed up, the claws and fangs of the gliding flying dragons would rend and chew them to pieces, leading to the number of dead piling up on the streets.

Some would resist. Some would strike back by shooting their bows at the flying dragons, grounding them.

However, most people, exposed to the one-sided assault of the flying dragons, only sought salvation.

That, was just how immense and tremendous the damage caused by the flying dragons was.

But the fierce battle was so destructive, that even those flying dragons avoided approaching it.

Madelyn: “GaaaaaaaaaaAHHHHHHHHHHHH—!”

The howling, leaping little body clutched a mighty Flying Winged Blade with both arms.

The crooked blade adroitly sliced through the resistance of the wind and air alike, and, upon being thrown, would revolve to then return to its original position. For experts, it served as a throwing utility which could zone in on the heads of distant prey. However, it had been thrown with terrific energy, flying around, scything down everything in its path.

Its weight, sharpness, and destructive power all, were beyond comparison to the supposedly-small Flying Winged Blade.

If a conventional Flying Winged Blade were about the size of a one-handed sword, this one was as massive as two large swords joined together, and even heavier than ten large swords melted and cast together.

Once upon a time, ten swords, of Enchanted and Holy type both, holding special powers, were brought forth in this world.

This weapon, made of metal allegedly on par with those, fully demonstrated its power, a fiendish weapon that was far more deadly than it appeared.

With each throw, an area of several dozen meters would be shaved wholly; anything in its path, whether building or living creature, would be struck indiscriminately.

The dragonkin's unusual physical strength and mentality of caring naught for the resulting damage to the surroundings were the reason for these devastating tactics, which would have only been possible if the dragonkin had been able to destroy the south side of the Fortress City.

Those defying the flying dragons in various parts of the city, had no time to turn to look at the ground, ergo, did not come to notice it.

Of course, the sound of the roar and earthquake reached them, but they were far too occupied looking up at the sky, exchanging words with whomever was beside them, to pay any attention to the damage.

And that, was fortune amidst lack of it.

Had they been witness to the overwhelming destruction, they would have forgotten to even cling to the thin threads of survival, to drop to their knees.

To a certain extent, the existence of the rampaging dragonkin was a disaster of a kind apart from the catastrophe brought about by the flying dragons.

To be struck by two natural disasters simultaneously, in a single city, was nothing short of a nightmare.

And moreover, of those natural disasters, one was being brought about to destroy merely a single person.

Priscilla: "…"

Priscilla kicked the ground as if she were dancing, continuously avoiding the attacks in Madelyn's rampage.

Although the physical prowess of the dragonkin was not to be underestimated, Madelyn's fighting style lacked finesse. She had not learned any sort of martial arts. Perhaps, that was because she underestimated humans as inferior.

Priscilla: "Although, I have never learnt the martial arts myself."

If there was anything Priscilla recalled seeing well, the movements of those that wielded swords would be it. Aside from that, she held a perfect grasp of what her body was, and how it moved.

If there was a reason as to why she managed to handle the Yang Sword like a master, it was precisely because of that reason.

However, at a time she could not draw the Yang Sword, each blow of Madelyn's was a threat.

Priscilla: "…"

The daylight had ceased, the sun having dipped below the horizon.

There were certain rules for the utilization of the Yang Sword. The sun did not always shine. For half of a day, it shared its responsibilities with the moon, using the time to build up its strength.

If there was a sun that shone always, then that would be none other than Priscilla herself.

Although—

Priscilla: "The longer this takes, the deeper the wound shall be, is it?"

Priscilla was cautiously responding to Madelyn's attacks. Of course, the lack of the decisive Yang Sword was a pretext for her being unable to push through, but the high vitality of the dragonkin was also of concern.

If not slain in one fell swoop, Madelyn's counterattack would likely reach Priscilla.

Reaching a stalemate via mutual injury, much like how she had done the first time around, was not something that could be repeated over and over again.

If the conclusion of this kept getting postponed like this, the damage to the Fortress City would only spread.

Just as the southern part of the city had been directly razed by Madelyn’s destruction, elsewhere the casualties would continue to mount, as assault after assault by the flying dragons continued to rain down.

Besides—

???: “—Kiryararahhh!!!!”

Madelyn caught the Flying Winged Blade gliding in return, then planted both her feet on the ground; proof of her fighting spirit. The dragonkin’s continuously rising spirit, transmitted through the air, inspired the flying dragons in the city’s skies.

For humans, it would be a morale-boosting phenomenon, but it had the effect of arousing the instincts of the fiercest species living in the wild, an effect that ought to be dubbed as madness.

Were the flying dragons to become more and more ferocious, more and more aggressive, they would become literally unmanageable.

She desired to get things moving before that came to pass. To that end—

Priscilla: “I need one more move.”

To make the situation move forth, she needed some kind of grand move.

Priscilla: “…”

Ducking under Madelyn’s attack and taking a great leap forward, Priscilla stood amidst the collapsed cityscape.

The city touted as the Fortress City, its robustness the pride of its residents, a pillar of peace and tranquility, was now a shadow of its former self. Even after this calamity had been driven away, reconstruction would be no easy task.

However, all those things would only be an issue after the great disaster before it had been eliminated.

Madelyn: “Next, will hit…!”

As she continued to lay on these insipid attacks, which Priscilla was able to repeatedly dodge with ease, Madelyn roared like a beast.

But she was also slowly correcting her tactics, all whilst she kept on launching unsuccessful attacks. It would be excellent if she were an enemy possessing scarce will to learn; but as that was not the case, she would grow during battle.

Madelyn exhaled sharply a white breath in front of Priscilla, hoping to avoid any further development.

The dragon’s blood circulated through her body, the rise in body temperature provoking steam to rise from the girl’s diminutive frame.

Combined with the white breath, her figure seemed as though it were even enveloped in white smoke—

Priscilla: “—Nay.”

How odd, so thought Priscilla as she closed one eye shut as she peered towards Madelyn.

As the battle protracted further, it was no wonder that the dragon’s blood had awakened. It was also clear that Madelyn’s budding emotions, dragonkin as she was, were causing the flying dragons to become frantic.

However, amidst the climate of the Vollachian Empire, her exhaled breath was white and misty.

Not to mention—

Priscilla: “It is not possible for it to snow.”

Glancing around, Priscilla noted white flakes falling languidly at the edge of her vision.

Slowly but surely increasing, snow fell upon the Fortress City, while most of the shelters protecting its people were being lost.

Words like “rare” did not suffice to describe this event, one could call it a sort of natural disaster.

In Vollachia, there were more than a few people who had never witnessed snow.

To be struck by two natural disasters simultaneously, in a single city, was nothing short of a nightmare, as had been stated.

But what if there were a new natural disaster, a third one, that coincided with it?

Would that be a nightmare or—

???: “—That’s enough.”

A voice echoed from the ground, amidst the cold drops from the heavens slowly falling upon them.

A beautiful, yet resonant sound, akin to the ringing of a silver bell.

—This third natural disaster, if it were to coincide with the others, would it be a nightmare?

—Or could it be a grand move?

???: “I’m in a bit of a hurry, but I can’t let this pass. —I’m reaaally angry.”

In that place where anything and everything had met the onslaught of a great disaster, the footsteps of a silver-haired young girl echoed.

In search of her missing knight, a Witch, accompanied by snow, had come to the Fortress City.

Chapter 57B:
I Don’t Mind Being Called a Moron

1

—Once she became unaware of Natsuki Subaru’s whereabouts, Emilia panicked and made the biggest commotion of her life.

Emilia: “Please, Subaru… I really hope you’ll be alright with Rem.”

The tempest of the shadows which attacked the Pleiades Watchtower, that was when both Subaru and Rem were blown away—Nay, to be precise, it was not just those two. She knew there had been one more unknown component alongside them.

That Emilia had gotten through that without losing her composure, was because Beatrice and Ram, who had a connection to those two, had confirmed their survival.

Of course, even if they were alive, the possibility they could come face-to-face with something dangerous or scary still existed.

In fact, it was because he had to save the sleeping Rem in an unknown land, that it was definitely, absolutely assured that Subaru would act recklessly. However, because Subaru did not have Emilia, nor Beatrice with him, he must have been in quite the panic.

Emilia: “I have to hurry and find them…!”

With that resolution, Emilia and the group that had proceeded to conquer the Pleiades Watchtower moved out.

For starters, they had to find a way to enter the land to the south believed to be where Subaru had gotten blown off to, the Vollachian Empire—the country which had forbidden travel to and from the Kingdom of Lugunica.

???: “We’re gonna try ‘n tackle this one from Kararagi. Security might be laxer in Kararagi in comparison, as Lugunica and

Vollachia've been havin' a stand-off."

Those were Anastasia's words, promising to cooperate with the search for Subaru.

Anastasia's group, of which Julius and Echidna were a part of, were believed to not have much to spare by any means, having had such a torrid experience at Pleiades Watchtower.

But that they had still offered to do that for Subaru's group, was something that made Emilia very happy.

Emilia: "I'm very glad I became friends with Anastasia-san."

Anastasia: "Weeell, I think we're a wee bit different from friends. Like before, our positions'll stay that of rivals 'n whatnot. But…"

Emilia: "But?"

Anastasia: "After this Natsuki-kun 'n Royal Selection business's all done 'n dusted, how 'bout we become friends? I'm much like Emilia-san, in that I ain't got many friends."

Saying so with a light-hearted attitude, Anastasia promised to lend her strength to them.

Despite knowing that now was not the time, to Emilia, that promise —the one for Subaru's search, was something she was also glad for. However, the day in which the fulfillment of her promise for them to become friends was one she longed for.

And—

???: "If Anastasia-sama will devise a means to go through Kararagi, then us trying to simply find a way through the Vollachian border would be the best plan, wouuuldn't~ it?"

Having reunited with Emilia and the others once they came back from Pleiades Watchtower, Roswaal, understanding the urgency of the situation, respected Emilia's desire to search for Subaru immediately.

However, even using Roswaal's rank and power, it appeared that entering the Vollachian Empire was not a matter so simple. And even should they fly in, it seemed flying dragons would gnaw at them.

Even having earned Roswaal's approval, entry into the Empire would not be easy.

Above all, though it was called an Empire, it was very large. Even if they somehow managed to cross into it, they did not know if they could find Subaru's group right away.

In the middle of this increasingly agitating situation, a proposal to break this deadlock came from someone who yet again proved his reliability.

???: "About the way to get into the Vollachian Empire, I may or may not have an idea. However, it is not quite the commendable way, and there is some risk to it."

So was stated, breaking the ice with some hesitation, by the one whose return coincided with the Emilia group's return home, Otto.

That person, having stayed in the Watergate City of Pristella to recover, returned alongside Garfiel, who had remained alongside him, and indicated a path towards hope for Emilia's group, who was greatly troubled over their challenge.

However, those means were decidedly—

Otto: "—Entering via smuggling. In Picoutatte… One of the Five Great Cities to the south of Lugunica. I may be able to prepare a means for you to enter from that city, my hometown."

Entering through smuggling was the furtive passage into the nation, circumventing the regular procedures and arrangements.

As Otto had said, it was not a very commendable method, and it was undeniable that it was quite the dangerous choice were they to be found.

However, if there was no other way.

Emilia: “We have to do everything we can for them.”

Steeling her strong resolve, Emilia conveyed her resolution to everyone else.

Nobody said anything like “Let’s not” to Emilia’s resolve, even Ram and Otto who were under a lot of stress. Everyone prayed for Subaru’s safety.

Emilia was most proud of that, above anything else.

???: “No matter what it takes, we’ll bring back Subaru safely, in fact. We will do it, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right. —Let’s do our best.”

Her hand being gripped tightly by Beatrice’s own, the one most anxious about the estranged Subaru, Emilia answered gently, by tightening her grip in return.

And then, in Otto’s hometown, going through a quarrel with Otto’s old acquaintances that were after his life; going through Petra’s handsome negotiations with the group who would smuggle them across the border, and aided by the bridal panic concerning Frederica’s special constitution, the group searching for Subaru crossed the country, and—

Emilia: “—That’s enough.”

In the Fortress City with madness swirling about, Emilia, who brought down snow, proclaimed so.

2

???: “…”

Numerous buildings collapsed, as the once-beautiful cityscape collapsed with nary a trace of it remaining.

And yet, Emilia’s anger only soared as she observed large figures moving left and right through the sky from afar, making complete use of their wings to crush the lives of people.

Just how could they do such a terrible thing?

Could there have been a better way to do it, and had they even made a proper effort at finding it?

Nevertheless, even the one who believed this, Emilia herself, could not think of a way to halt the fight at this moment aside from using her own power, which was frustrating.

That was why, Emilia would be as frustrated as she could be, trying to not forget that feeling.

To that end—

Emilia: "—Ice Age."

Around Emilia, as she muttered this, the world started to lose its heat at a furious pace.

The air slowly cooled, white snowflakes began falling gently from the chilling sky. Rapidly, without exemption, Emilia blanketed the city's perimeter with cold.

With great care, adjusting the magic power, being cautious to not overdo it.

She could not afford to err, and let the city turn to ice like the Great Forest of Elior, Emilia's homeland. Needless to say, even if she had thoughts of melting it later, to cool it down to the point of suspended animation, like Regulus's wives, was strictly forbidden.

All Emilia had to do, was to bring an unbearable ice season to lands unacquainted with the cold, those of the Empire.

The biting cold wind, the falling white snowflakes accumulating, the white breath of the magical season of ice, would cover the Fortress City struck by this flying dragon cataclysm.

And then—

Priscilla: "Dragonkind is weak against the cold. And when it comes to flying dragons, which have never known freezing cold, the harshness will be even more pronounced on their wings.”

With that, a figure leapt onto the half-destroyed wall on which Emilia stood, accompanied by the light sound of footsteps.

Glancing over, Emilia then nodded with a “Yes”,

Emilia: “Before I took off, Petra-chan told me that flying dragons don’t like the cold. She’s reaaally good at studying, and learned a lot about the Empire very quickly.”

Priscilla: “So you relied on the wisdom of your servant? No wonder, you had me thinking it was a decent plan, for a half-devil devoid of wisdom.”

Emilia: “There’s no need for you to put it like that. Besides, how do you know that I’m a half-elf… Huh?”

And then Emilia rounded her amethyst eyes, her lips forming a pout because of how the other person had spoken.

A woman in a red dress, her long orange hair blowing in the cold wind; her hairstyle was different from what she remembered, but there, was—

Emilia: “Huh, Priscilla? Why are you here? This isn’t Lugunica, you know?”

Priscilla: “I shall return you with the same thing. Although, I have an idea as to why you have set foot in the Empire… How did you cross into the country?”

Emilia: “Oh, the method is a secret. I’m not supposed to tell you. I’m also supposed to hide who I am. So I have to be careful. I…”

Emilia was surprised to see Priscilla, a woman she had never expected to lay eyes upon in this foreign country to the south, yet she was strangely moved by the sight of her.

However, she could not stay just being surprised there. The manner through which Emilia had entered the Empire was an irrational act, something labelled as a misdeed.

Therefore, she did not want to make that clear to Priscilla unless necessary.

But—

Emilia: “—! Priscilla, look out!”

Interrupting what she was about to say, Emilia prompted Priscilla to pay heed.

The next moment, Priscilla, clicking her tongue, bounced away, and a blade—a Flying Winged Blade, spinning furiously, gouged out the spot she had been at.

The battered, near-collapsed wall, was cleanly sliced away by the sharpness of the blade, and conversely, it was miraculously spared from collapsing. Priscilla, having managed to avoid the blade, landed closer to Emilia this time, right next to her, the hem of her dress fluttering.

And—

Madelyn: “One after the other, what the frig’ are you people?”

The girl’s voice, full of wrath, reached Emilia as the former caught the returning Flying Winged Blade with a single hand.

Looking down towards the destroyed cityscape, amidst it stood a horn-wielding girl, her bright eyes glaring at Emilia and Priscilla standing side-by-side.

It seemed the one standing there was very angry. But Emilia was very angry as well.

Therefore, Emilia jabbed her finger out toward the girl,

Emilia: “My name is Emili… Emily! I’m just a Spiritual Arts User passing through!”

Almost giving out her real name in the heat of the moment, Emilia succeeded in giving a false name that had been previously agreed upon. Priscilla’s eyes narrowed at Emilia’s boldness, and the little girl, to whom Emilia had introduced herself to, muttered, “Spiritual Arts User…”, with a wary look in her eyes.

Madelyn: “Are you the friggin’ same as that doggirl…?”

Priscilla: “If Arakiya is the one you are thinking of, she is a Spirit Eater, not a Spiritual Arts User. That would be a misconception, Madelyn Eschart.”

Madelyn: “Guh…”

Priscilla’s point was as if she had read the thoughts of the little girl —of Madelyn, which made the latter’s cheeks become stiff. However, there had been something just now that Emilia could not help but hear more about.

Emilia: “What is a Spirit Eater? What do they do with Spirits?”

Priscilla: “It is exactly as you have heard, she feeds on Spirits. They take their power onto themselves and utilize it to the fullest. It is a practice near extinction, Arakiya being the last remaining user in the Empire.”

Emilia: “They eat Spirits?! How awful…”

For Emilia, a Spiritual Arts User who had forged Contracts with many Micro Spirits herself, this was a bewildering thing to hear.

If Puck or Beatrice were to meet a Spirit Eater, would their forms be gobbled up? Just thinking about it made her feel sorry for them.

However, rather than worrying about such things that had yet to happen, the priority right now, was the problem at hand.

Emilia: “You’re, Madelyn-chan?”

Madelyn: “…Do not belittle this dragon, you half-devil.”

Emilia: “Then let’s talk it through properly, Madelyn. You’re the one who’s having those flying dragons attack the city. I want you to stop this, right this instant.”

Turning her gaze into the distance, Emilia looked out beyond the place Madelyn had rampaged in, at a group of flying dragons resuming their assault on the other side of the city. Their movements seemed to be slower than they had been a moment ago, albeit slightly.

Emilia's power was lowering the temperature, which was in turn affecting the vitality of the flying dragons.

Were things to proceed in this manner, it would be possible to ground the flying dragons in the area. However, she wished to avoid doing that if possible. She did not want to have the flying dragons die, either.

Emilia: "If you care about the flying dragons, then please listen to my request."

Madelyn: "…"

Emilia: "Madelyn?"

As honestly as possible, Emilia tried to convey her words.

Perhaps Otto, Ram, and Petra could have communicated better. But upon seeing the city being attacked by a flock of flying dragons, Emilia had been the only one to rush towards it.

Now that Emilia had been first on the scene, she would do everything she could to help.

As a result—

Madelyn: "It's extremely friggin' conceited of you to make a request to this dragon, you human…!"

She would do so even if it sparked Madelyn's anger.

Priscilla: "—She cannot be persuaded by anyone, even were it not you. It is not an auspicious thing to listen to the words of a dragonkin, let alone one who is firmly grounded to the earth."

Faced with Madelyn's reply laced with outrage, Emilia held her breath upon hearing those words. Priscilla, who had been silently listening to the exchange between the two, expressed her observations regarding the breakdown in negotiations.

Emilia widened her eyes, as that seemed to be encouraging her.

Emilia: “Priscilla, I always thought you were so mean to me.”

Priscilla: “I do not consider it wicked to say that that which is not worthy, is not worthy. Do not pervert my benevolent words. —Now, how shall we go about this?”

Emilia: “Hmm.”

Nodding, Emilia created a hairclip of ice in her outstretched left hand. Presenting Priscilla with the hairclip, the latter closed one eye with suspicion.

Towards Priscilla’s reaction, Emilia nodded in assent, and,

Emilia: “Let’s stop that girl together. Don’t be mean.”

Priscilla: “Do not demean my deeds as a manifestation of childishness, you lowly half-devil.”

Striking back with an insult, Priscilla accepted the hair clip from Emilia’s hand, then gathered her long, flowing hair, and fastened it in place. Hearing the clasp of ice clicking together, with Priscilla’s mood returning to the one she was acquainted with, Emilia then turned to Madelyn below.

And—

Madelyn: “—People who are fearless regarding dragons are so friggin’ tedious.”

Emilia: “I just had a fight with a big Dragon a while ago. So…”

Madelyn: “—Hk.”

Emilia: “Even if you wanted me to be scared, I can’t be scared of you!”

Madelyn's threat as she brandished her white fangs was given a clear-cut answer by Emilia.

Immediately afterward, Madelyn's eyes narrowed like those of a ground dragon, and the Flying Winged Blade in her hand was hurled ferociously, targeting Emilia and Priscilla with tremendous momentum and speed.

Witnessing its spinning approach, Emilia created a large hammer of ice, holding it in both hands.

Emilia attempted to repel the revolving Flying Winged Blade with an upwards swing of her hammer of frost coming from below.

Emilia: "Hiya!"

Feeling a powerful recoil in both her hands, Emilia, rushing in, did her utmost possible with the upwards swing of the icy mallet. Though just barely, she deflected the trajectory of the Flying Winged Blade, which passed over the heads of both Emilia and Priscilla.

But the ice hammer shattered with incredible force, and Emilia looked down at her hands, speaking,

Emilia: "So strong… Maybe stronger than I am…"

Madelyn: "That's friggin' natural! It is wrong to compare I, the dragon, to people using the same standard—"

The petite form of Madelyn stepped forward in triumph over the pained Emilia. —Only for a block of ice more massive than the City Hall to come crashing down on Madelyn's head.

Madelyn: "—Hk?!"

The sudden appearance of the mass of ice, coupled with its size and weight, caused Madelyn to be at a loss for words, then her figure was flattened.

Shockwaves of cold surged in all directions, centered on her; white winds blowing away debris and crumbling buildings, eliciting tremendous destruction.

Priscilla: “You, how dare you destroy this city?”

Emilia: “Huh?! But it was already destroyed…”

Priscilla: “You have a rather superficial way of looking at things. I am sure that manservant must be very weary. Nevertheless, you shall finally understand.”

Emilia: “Finally, understand?”

Looking at the spot where the ice block had fallen, Priscilla crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. Emilia cast a question towards her profile, yet the answer arrived simultaneously, from Priscilla’s lips, and from the spectacle in front of her.

The ice block that should have crushed Madelyn against the ground, trembled slightly, as a loud sound akin to that of the world cracking, began to echo from within the ice block itself.

It originated from the piece of ice that was supposed to have made ground, from where the girl had stuck her arm in the air at the point of impact.

Priscilla: “—Just how troublesome dragonkin can be.”

Immediately after Priscilla’s words, the long block of ice broke in half with a thunderous roar.

The impact of the destruction was felt throughout the entire area, and the shattered ice turned into Mana particles starting from the outside. Amid this scenery of ice shards scattered about, the very incarnation of a Dragon, a dragonkin, leapt towards the duo with a roar.

3

—Freezing winds raged, beautiful women danced across the battlefield where the throngs of destruction roamed.

Were anyone to witness the battle from afar, they would not have believed their eyes due to the sheer majesty of it.

Was it reality, or was it merely a dream?

Madelyn: "—RRRRRRAH!!"

With enough force to shatter the ground she was standing on, the small dragonkin threw swirling death.

A flying blade of destruction traced an arc; with beauty that betrayed the atrocious danger it brought forth, it cleaved everything in its path, it severed, it tore through the world.

Had this been a painting, or even a beautiful pruning of the world, rather than destruction, it would have been a beautiful sight for anyone's eyes to behold merely based on aesthetics.

Madelyn Eschart's anger was refined, instinctual rage, to that much of an extent.

However—

Emilia: "Priscilla! Go up!"

A heavenly beauty of dancing silver hair created footholds of ice in midair, dodging the Flying Winged Blade thrown at her; then waving her hand down towards the ground, the streets, lost of their original form, froze over.

Rising from the frozen earth, was a beautifully adorned sword of frost.

A beautiful princess, running as she made her way through, pulled it from the earth in a fluid movement, and,

Priscilla: "The fingers of anyone but me would have fallen off. — But the embellishments are acceptable. I shall utilize it."

A pale-blue slash of ice flashed, slashing through Madelyn's body diagonally.

However, Madelyn, with whatever kind of power was concealed within her petite body, only recoiled slightly upon being struck by the blow. Instead, the ice sword that had delivered the blow shattered.

And after that, the approaching Madelyn reached out a hand to Priscilla, and,

Emilia: “Hya!!”

Not allowing that act of violence to go unchecked, Emilia’s two feet hit Madelyn as she fell from directly above.

Both her feet encased in ice as she spun and drove a blow from up high, Emilia smashed into Madelyn’s two shoulders with a merciless attack, causing the sturdy girl to totter a step back.

In that instant—

Emilia: “Please!”

Priscilla: “Do not tell me what to do.”

After Emilia landed on the ground and put her hands, Priscilla took the newly-created pair of ice swords and leapt over the crouching Emilia to slash at Madelyn.

The frost blades in Priscilla’s right hand and left hand each came at Madelyn from different angles, yet were quickly caught by the latter with the claws of her outstretched hands, causing a high-pitched clanging sound to echo.

Madelyn: “Don’t push your luck…!”

Emilia: “Eryaaa!”

Having dealt with the twin swords, Madelyn was about to go on the counter when an icy spike passed right next to Priscilla’s head. Madelyn immediately leaned forward, while Emilia, switching places with Priscilla, fired an ice spear with speed that could not be gauged by human eyes.

Priscilla: “My turn.”

Once Madelyn shrugged off the spear, Priscilla followed it up with an icy sword dance.

The hem of her red dress fluttered, the twin sparkling blue swords of ice were swung gracefully, and Priscilla's sword's dance among the glaciated world of white pummeled Madelyn's entire body, forcing her back.

Madelyn: "—Why, whywhywhy, why, why the frig' is it like this?!"

So exclaimed Madelyn, while being forced to deal with Priscilla's twin swords, now on the defensive.

But Priscilla's onslaught did not slow down. And to make matters worse for Madelyn, once Priscilla ceased her swords dance,

Emilia: "This! And this! Hyaa!"

Making full use of extraordinary reaction speed, Emilia, leaping out without sparing Madelyn time to breathe, created ice weapon after ice weapon, to slam them down with all her might.

—Priscilla was the skill, Emilia was the brawn, and through them, Madelyn's offensive and defensive capabilities were shut down completely.

The Flying Winged Blade cleaved, smashed, swung, was thrown.

The innate physical abilities of a dragonkin were incomparable to those of a frail human. Even a demi-human, who was relatively more robust compared to a normal human, was as good as a dried-up twig before a dragonkin.

The same was true even for the oni race, which, abhorrent as it may seem, would be able to stand on the same ground beside the dragonkin.

Dragonkin and the oni, were sometimes spoken of alongside each other as the strongest of races, but that was something outrageous.

After all, the oni were merely a race superior among demi-humans. Dragonkin were fundamentally different from them.

Dragonkin were not demi-humans. They differed from those species related to the human race at a basic level.

Dragonkin did not belong to mankind. —But why was it playing out like this nevertheless?

Madelyn: “What the frig’ are you people… What the frig’ are you?!”

Leaving her offense to her anger and continuously failing to connect a blow, she had finally used up all her anger.

And so, after the dragon’s wrath was spent, all that remained was the dragon’s creaking wail. The Flying Winged Blade in her grasp was swung sideways, Emilia ducked, and Priscilla dodged it with a jump.

Then, from both above and below, the two sides answered Madelyn’s wail at the same time.

What are you, she had inquired—

Emilia: “—Emily!”

Priscilla: “I am mineself.”

An upraised greataxe of frost and two flashing blades of ice all scored a direct hit on Madelyn.

The sharp horns upon her head struck by blades of ice, and her torso slammed by a fierce blow from an axe of frost, Madelyn was sent flying, unable to stop those blows.

During her struggle, Madelyn’s body bounced once, then twice, high in the air above a thin layer of snow and without losing velocity she plummeted into a pile of debris, for a white plume of smoke to then rise accompanied by a loud crash.

Madelyn: “…”

Having left Madelyn’s hands, the Flying Winged Blade pierced the wall behind her, and thus, the wall’s role of protecting the Fortress City from threats to the south now came to an end.

With one last look at the walls collapsing with a loud thud, Emilia slowly rose to her feet, looking guardedly at the pile of rubble under which Madelyn had been buried.

Emilia: "…I suppose we did it."

Priscilla: "There was fitting recoil. Unfortunately, there was no bite to it."

Emilia: "Bite?"

Priscilla stepped forward next to Emilia, the latter tilting her head as she watched the twin swords in Priscilla's hands turn to dust. For some reason, she could not help but look at Priscilla's mouth, though she had not eaten anything.

Priscilla met Emilia's gaze with her crimson eyes, and spoke,

Priscilla: "Is this really all there is to someone that is not only a dragonkin, but one of the Nine Divine Generals, is what I am saying."

Emilia: "What are those, Nine Divinn Generals, and what's a dragonken, too? That's a demi-human, right?"

Priscilla: "A race stated to have died out long ago. They were said to possess the ability to communicate with Dragons, a race no longer to be found in this world, but I guess that is merely a superstitious myth."

Emilia: "Dragons… Does that mean they can talk to Volcanica as well? Volcanica's a bit out of it…"

At Emilia shyly attempting to break the ice, Priscilla raised her eyebrows. She then gently pressed a finger to her mouth,

Priscilla: "I never thought such a word would come out of your mouth. Are you perhaps mistaking something?"

Emilia: "—? Oh, you think I'm joking, perhaps? I'm not joking at all. I met with Volcanica a little while ago actually, but they were all out of it because they'd been alone for so long…"

Emilia hurriedly defended herself from Priscilla's reaction of disbelief. But Emilia quickly remembered her priorities, speaking "Now's not the time",

Emilia: "Now that we've beaten her, Madelyn needs to stop the flying dragons!"

Priscilla: "Considering this cold weather, all these slow-moving flying dragons shall be hunted down in due time."

Emilia: "And there'll be people in danger in the meantime, still! Even Subaru and Rem could be in danger…"

Priscilla: "—Hm."

Emilia leapt out from beside Priscilla, heading toward the rubble under which Madelyn had been buried. Behind Emilia's back, Priscilla furrowed her shapely brow at the exchange that had just transpired.

That reaction, however, went unnoticed by Emilia, whose long legs straddled the debris. Fashioning a shovel from ice, she thrust it into the rubble in an attempt to dig up the buried Madelyn.

Nevertheless, Priscilla let out a small exhale as she watched her back.

It was a good thing that the grand move that had arrived unexpectedly had resulted in lesser consequences. However, the enormous damage caused by Madelyn and the flying dragons was not something they could get rid of.

Worst-case scenario, they would have to consider relocating their base to the Demon City of Chaosflame and relying on her collaborator, High Countess Serena Dracroy, to aid them.

Priscilla: "In any case, we shall first have to make her fold up her wings."

Pausing to ponder about what laid ahead, Priscilla peered up to the white, cloudy sky.

With the immense quantity of Mana Emilia possessed, albeit it possibly had a limit as to its range, she still had enough power to alter the climate, meaning that she had a multitude of ways to make use of her power.

Of course, what was valued in Vollachia was not necessarily valued in Lugunica. Rather, if she did decide to live in Vollachia, it probably would not end up being a waste of time.

But, her nature aside, Emilia's personality was one that would not permit her to live in Vollachia—

Priscilla: "…"

So, as Priscilla drew thoughts in the sky, her eyes flickered dimly.

Those jewel-like crimson eyes flickered, as they had perceived a slight disturbance in the skies above.

Then, just as Priscilla understood the nature of that disturbance—

Emilia: "There you are! Madelyn, I'll get you out now. But please be a big girl, and tell us your story…"

Madelyn: "—Ah."

Emilia: "Huh?"

Having found the little girl buried in the rubble, Emilia utilized the ice shovel to dislodge the building's remains. The dragonkin girl was lying on her back, herself and her clothes covered in soot and snow, dirtied.

Emilia listened carefully, as the girl's lips moved and a faint voice escaped.

Hoping for words that accepted defeat, that would make the flying dragons retreat.

However, Emilia's hopes were dashed; what Madelyn's lips weaved was no declaration of defeat.

Only one word was muttered. A name.

Madelyn: “—Mezoreia.”

—The very next moment, the roar of a “Dragon”, its origin above the clouds, rained down destruction onto the land.

4

The instant the white beam of light was fired from the heavens, Emilia and Priscilla both sprang into action at the same time.

Without any sound or warning, a tower of ice sprung into being, growing from the ground; two beauties of silver and crimson jumped atop.

The tower had risen to be over ten meters tall in an instant. Standing on its summit, Emilia raised both of her hands up to the sky, conjuring forth a huge dome of ice which covered the area where the white beam was expected to impact.

And within the conjured dome, another, yet smaller dome was added, and then, yet another smaller dome was added, and so this went on, until six domes of ice covered the sky.

As Emilia set up their cover made from ice and snow, Priscilla stretched out her lustrous fingers into the sky and drew out the Yang Sword, which took the void as its sheath.

The treasured sword was adorned with many eye-catching jewels and had a bright-red radiance to it. However, the light brimming from inside remained feeble, nowhere near what it was at its peak.

Even so, Priscilla took up her treasured sword and looked up overhead.

The very next moment, the looming white beam of light crashed against the outermost dome, and in less than a second, it pierced through the first, second and third domes, racing towards the ground.

PRISCILLA'S SERVANT

However, it would be wrong to say that the domes that had been pierced and broken through had not fulfilled their purpose at all.

The moment the beam went through them, its angle changed slightly.

There were only slight changes with the first, second and third one, yet those became heftier with the fourth and fifth one. Finally, the instant the sixth one was broken through, the beam's manner of entry had certainly changed.

The white beam raced straight down towards the tower of ice, towards the two who stood at its pinnacle.

And so to meet it, came a deep crimson shimmer, which beautifully, vibrantly morphed into a flash of resistance, and thus, was it unleashed—

5

???: "…"

All sound completely disappeared; for the first time in his life, complete silence could be savored, for what seemed like ten seconds.

Perhaps it lasted for less than a second in actuality, but once that burst, the spreading shockwave, originating from the southern portion of the city, engulfed the Fortress City in all directions, and everything flipped over.

Ground rose from the surface, as buildings were ripped from their foundations. Those without shelter were blown away like dead leaves, and even the flock of flying dragons soaring in the heavens were assailed by the tempest.

Without mercy, without bias, the shockwave which engulfed everything bore down on everyone in the city.

Naturally, Flop, who was running around to treat the injured in the city's largest mansion, having been turned into a temporary treatment center containing those injured, was also rocked by the impact, being thrown back against the wall.

Flop: "—Huu."

As far as he could comprehend, it could have been a few seconds, or a dozen seconds, or even a few minutes.

He felt a powerful impact on his back that made it feel as if all of his internal organs were being turned inside out. He did not register much pain, but the possibility that the pain would come later, or he might have suffered from something so painful that he could not feel anything, also existed.

If that were actually the case, he would have liked to go on with his uneventful life, watch his little sister Medium lead a safe and happy life, savor the sense of accomplishment that he would have achieved in successfully taking revenge on the world, and stay unaware of it until he was old and on the verge of dying.

Once there, it should be impossible to distinguish whether he had died from his wounds or from old age.

Flop: "Let's see, maybe it isn't too serious…"

Being extra careful, he would raise his body after carefully assessing his own condition.

His arms and legs moved, and every single one of his fingers were still on his hands. He seemed fortunate enough to not be missing his ears or nose, and his eyes had not been crushed either. He could not let his guard down, but he should not be overly pessimistic either.

Shaking his head, Flop stood up, wiped his blurred eyes, and gazed at his surroundings.

The once-stately and magnificent decorations had been changed entirely from what they were before, and the inside of the mansion had become a hellscape dominated by the smell of blood and the sound of groans. Add to that the shockwave that had just hit, and the grim situation of the site became even grimmer.

Some of those who had been treated may have had their pain rekindled or made worse by the shockwave. They needed to ease their pain, to give them a helping hand.

Flop: “I wonder if Butler-kun and Miss Utakata are okay too…”

Leaving Priscilla to deal with Madelyn, whom they had encountered, Flop and the others joined up with Rem in the mansion and helped deal with the wounded as best they could.

He had also helped with that, while worrying about Priscilla and Schult, the latter’s eyes still ablaze even after he managed to calm himself down somehow.

Flop would not be able to rest in peace if it had all come to nothing due to that explosive impact.

???: “What in the world is…?”

As Flop looked around at the state of his surroundings, he heard a voice speak in a pain-filled tone.

Directing his eyes towards that voice, he saw Rem, peeking out from the depths of the hall. She was one of the people who had been attending to the seriously wounded who were in dire need of healing magic, and also one of the people who had been rendered astonished by the crash from just before.

Rem, grimacing as she held her cane, looked out the window to see what had occurred.

Flop, too, was alarmed, wondering if something more terrifying than a flock of flying dragons or one of the Nine Divine Generals going on a full-fledged rampage had happened.

And right after that—

Rem: “—How terrible.”

Rem’s eyes widened and her expression turned grim, panicking as she rushed towards the mansion’s door. Flop shouted “Wife-san!” at her back as she rushed out, wondering what she had seen outside.

Despite his aching sides and knees, Flop chased Rem as she rushed outside. As she reached the front garden of the mansion, she crouched beside a fallen figure.

It was yet another injured person, someone who had been flung outside by the earlier impact.

As he approached the crouching Rem, who was confirming the state of the figure, Flop now understood the dreadful effects of the impact from earlier, which he had not been able to see from within the mansion.

Flop: “This is…”

Flickering, white snowflakes were falling upon Guaral. The southern sky was covered with layers of thick clouds, through which the sun’s rays were pouring down.

Exhaling white breath, Flop shivered at the almost fantastical sight.

Suddenly, the temperature in the surrounding area had dropped dramatically, and to boot, a sight as spectacular as this currently unfolding. Even in a dream, such a scene would be hard to materialize.

Putting it a different way, he had the paradoxical thought that it was not a dream, to which Flop shook his head.

Rem: “Flop-san, please help me. We need to carry this girl inside…”

Flop: “Yes, of course. Even under this mysterious sky, we can only do what we’re able to get done. We’ve got to do the best we can—”

Turning around, Flop tried to help Rem. Then, halting his speech mid-sentence, Flop widened his blue eyes.

The reason was obvious, and it laid to Rem’s back, who was asking for his help.

The figure behind Rem, having been blown away by the earlier impact, and whom Rem had suggested they should take inside the mansion for medical attention, was a small one. It was small and dainty, possessing twin black horns on her head.

Then, perhaps dazed, the girl slowly raised herself up behind Rem; about to casually swing her arm adorned with sharp claws.

Flop: "…"

Once again, Flop experienced the sensation of sound fading away, of the flow of time becoming distorted.

As she was looking towards him, Rem was unaware of the threat that loomed behind her. That very threat, the girl, seemed to be acting out of defensive instinct rather than out of an actual intent to hurt Rem.

She must have gone through a terrible experience. He sympathized with her, but it was something unfortunate and unmanageable that would not change with sympathy.

Flop: "…"

Kuna and Holly, in charge of guarding the mansion, would probably take a while to recover from the impact from earlier. There was no sign of the girls within sight, he could not count on them to deal with this.

Schult, his eyes in a conflagration, Utakata, who had been assisting with medical treatment and supporting the fighters' morale, even Heinkel, who had fainted and would not wake up; none of them could be counted on to help them either.

When he closed his eyes, he could see his little sister, at the back of his eyelids, smiling.

He was proud of his sister, who had sworn to herself that she would become so strong that her brother would never be hurt. Multiple figures, that of his benefactor, and of his sworn brother, those who had given him and his sister the chance to go out into the world, passed through his mind.

—Treasure your life, Flop. Self-sacrifice's for morons.

Once before, his benefactor had laughed at Flop's reckless way of life.

At this moment, Flop would state the same thing he had back then.

Flop: "I don't mind being called a moron."

Because all those who loved him, had clapped their hands and laughed at his answer.

Rem: "Flop-sa—"

He stepped in, and with an outstretched hand, pushed on Rem's slender shoulders, putting her out of harm's way.

And, in the path of that swinging claw, that moron wedged himself instead.

—Blood sprayed, and Flop O'Connell fell to the cold ground.

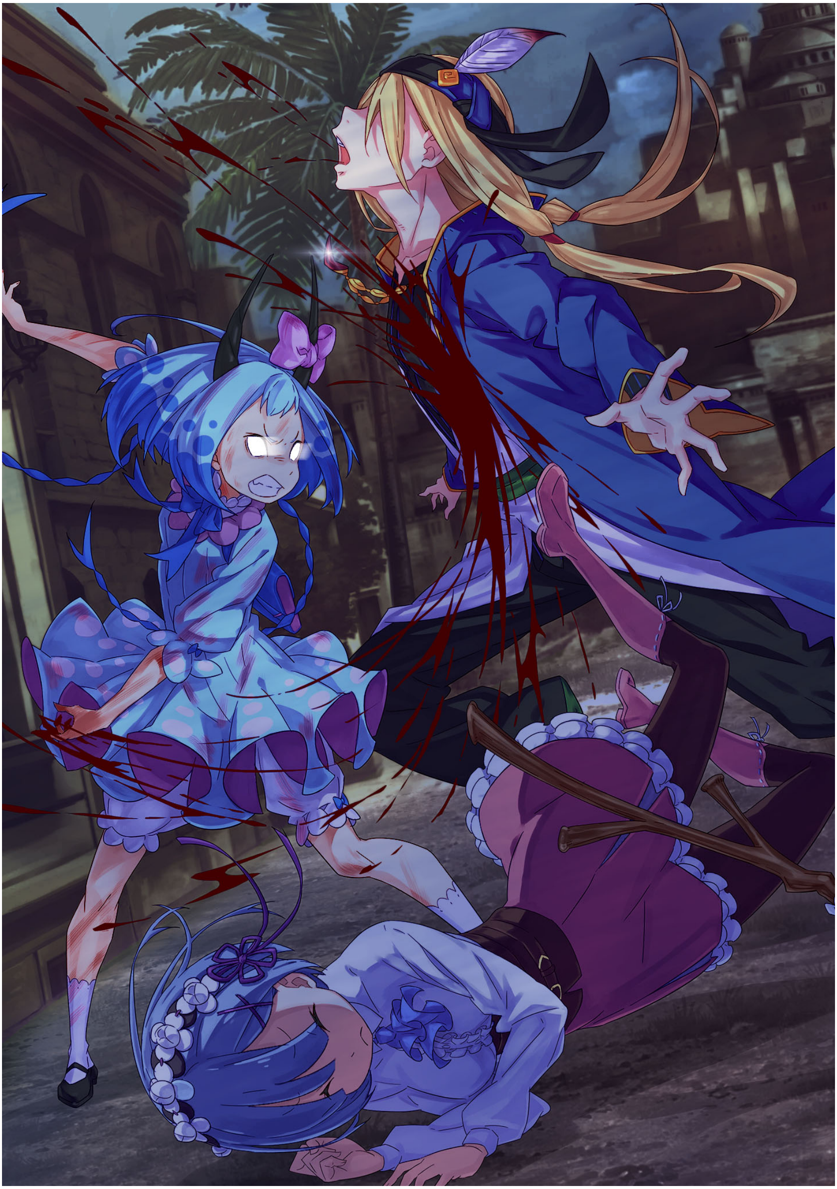

Chapter 58B:
Those Who Have No Place to Turn To

1

—It was humiliating.

Her fangs creaked, gnashing together, her insides seethed with rage, her soul cracked in indignation.

What was she doing? She was being toyed around with by lowly humans, she was being driven into a corner without doing what needed to be done, she had been forced to play her trump card, knowing that such a deed should not have been performed.

???: “How friggin’ unsightly.”

It was a shameful display, she had exposed a state of herself which those who were dragonkin should never have shown so easily.

If any other dragonkin were present, they would have probably covered their faces because of this terrible situation. They would curse Madelyn for this predicament and for the shame she had brought to the dragonkin, before killing her; Madelyn was half about to die in a fit of anger anyways, directed at both herself and everyone else.

But, that would never happen.

There were no other dragonkin. Madelyn had always been alone. That was why—

—That was why, no matter what it took, she had to slay the person who had killed the one she desired as her mate.

???: “Flop-san, please help me. We need to carry this little girl inside…”

From the fringes of her bleary consciousness, she heard a voice that felt like it was coming from someone.

No, not from someone, that voice came from a human being. Given there were no other dragonkin, everyone who spoke the language of men was human, beings that differed fundamentally from herself.

And so, her head grew hot, faced with an all-too-familiar humiliation obtained at the hands of beings that differed from herself.

A woman of crimson, attired in a dress, and a woman of silver, who brought snow with her.

Those women had cooperated together with dreadfully high precision, searing Madelyn's consciousness white.

She raised her body, like someone was guiding her, and stretched her arm out towards where the voice was coming from.

She would tear apart the slender back before her eyes, and then—

???: "I don't mind being called a moron."

She heard a voice coming from someone else, and right after that, the silhouette before her eyes was replaced with another.

With that slender back pushed away, before her eyes, stood a slender someone. And that was whom she swung her claws at, which was followed by the feeling of recoil from a sharpness rending flesh not-so-shallowly in her hand.

???: "…"

Blood splattered everywhere; the slender figure collapsed helplessly, struck by the strength of a dragonkin.

I did it, was not what she was thinking. Ironically enough, the lack of response made her realize that the slender figure she had torn up, was not the object of her burning hatred.

Even so—

Madelyn: "So, who's the next one…?!"

That wants to be torn apart by my claws, or so she tried to bellow out, baring her fangs.

She kicked her now-felled opponent’s body, moving to surrender her body to the ferocity of looking for her next prey. And while doing so, she looked at the figure of her fallen enemy—

Madelyn: “…Huh?”

A man was lying on the ground, his long, golden hair furled out on the floor, his pale skin soaked with blood.

She did not know him. She could only roughly tell apart the particulars when it came to faces of those belonging to the human races, however, that man was not within the ones she could distinguish.

Therefore, what had grabbed her attention had not been the man himself, but rather, what he carried.

On the fallen man’s weak chest, which had been torn and laid bare, covered in blood, was an ornament which he wore from his neck, made from the fang of a beast.

—No, not from the fang of a beast.

It was from… It was from… Itwasfromitwasfromitwasfromitwasfromitwasfromitwasfrom—.

2

Rem: “…”

With Flop running towards her, shoving her by the shoulder, Rem fell onto the garden’s grass.

She had not expected that force. With no time to support herself, Rem’s body tumbled sideways onto the greenery.

However, to inquire Flop about what he had done all of a sudden, was unrequired.

For a far more telling answer was splayed out in front of Rem, in the form of bright vermillion.

Rem: “Flop-san!”

With her hands to the grass, Rem’s voice cracked because of that scene.

In front of her, lying on his back where Rem had just been a few seconds prior, was Flop, his body bearing deep gouges from the shoulder to the waist.

Four wounds, like those performed by sharp blades, sliced vividly through the front of Flop’s body.

And Rem immediately recognized that the wound was the result of his attempt to protect her.

And that it was the little girl Rem had run towards to give assistance, who had performed that deed.

Rem: “…”

A girl with sky-blue hair stood still, having swung her arm, blood dripping from the tips of her claws after she had gouged out Flop’s flesh.

Flop had been injured while protecting Rem from the little girl, who had attempted to murder her.

Immediately, Rem tried to pull herself up, as to check on his wounds,

Rem: “Let me through! Flop-san! Let me see your wounds… Kya!”

But as Rem attempted to approach Flop, she was interrupted by the little girl’s thin arms. The girl took a step toward Flop, standing in front of Rem, then grabbed Rem’s shoulder and pushed her down.

As Rem feared that she may even plan to finish Flop off, her blood raced through her whole body.

And just like that, the little girl’s arm grabbed Flop by the neck and, handling him roughly, forced him to stand up.

And—

Madelyn: “Why is a dragon’s fang… Why is Carillon’s fang friggin’ hanging from your neck?!”

With desperation and grief plastered in her profile, the girl posed that question in something akin to a shriek.

For a moment, Rem’s train of thought paused, unsure of the meaning of the question. But in the meantime, the girl was still repeatedly directing a question of “WHY THE FRIG?!” to Flop, the latter’s eyes closed.

No response came from Flop, whose consciousness remained plunged into darkness. There was absolutely zero doubt, however, that the lingering embers of life were fading, as the wounds on his body kept bleeding unceasingly.

Madelyn: “FRIGGIN’ ANSWER ME! ANSWER! IF YOU CAN’T DO THAT…!”

Rem: “P-please stop! He’s unconscious! He’ll die!”

Madelyn: “—Hk.”

Rem gripped onto the arm of the little girl who was rough-housing Flop, as if to cling onto her. The little girl’s golden eyes turned around in anger because of Rem’s interference, but she and her spirit withstood the intensity of her eyes.

With Flop’s life on the line, there was no way she could be intimidated.

Rem: “Let me treat him right away! Otherwise, Flop-san…”

Madelyn: “What’s the friggin’ point of treating him?! If he’s going to die anyway, before that happens…”

Rem: “Healing magic! I can perform healing magic!”

Rem’s desperate plea caused the little girl’s arms to relax slightly.

There was no way that Flop, gravely wounded as he was, would be saved with mere simple medical treatment. But healing magic was a different matter. The little girl’s golden eyes reflected Rem properly for the first time.

Madelyn: “…You can save him?”

Rem: “—. I will do it. No matter what it takes…!”

Madelyn: “Then, friggin’ do it quickly.”

Did she trust Rem’s words, or did she understand that there was no other alternative?

In a one-sided decision, the little girl pushed Flop’s body, causing him to fall onto Rem. But there was no room for Rem to protest against her attitude.

Rem: “This looks terrible…”

Assessing Flop’s wounds as he was handed over, Rem muttered so to herself at the gruesome sight.

As if performed by the claws of a beast, Flop’s white skin had been torn apart, leaving four gaping wounds. The wounds were deep and painful, similar to mud being gouged out by a tree branch.

The blood that flowed in a continuous stream was contained by the cloth that Flop had wrapped around his head, and healing magic was applied over the wound—immediately after, Rem’s entire body was overcome by a sense of fatigue.

Rem: “—Hk.”

This came after she had already performed healing magic on many people who had been injured in the flying dragons’ raid.

Although she had limited her healing techniques to patients who absolutely needed it, as to reduce exhaustion, they required so much energy that fatigue was inevitable.

Then came Flop's treatment, someone on the verge of death. The mental burden was heavy as well.

Rem: "Still, giving up isn't an option…"

Hence Rem told herself that no possibility of the sort existed, and focused her attention on Flop's wounds.

As Rem concentrated, Priscilla's words were revived in Rem's mind. They served as advice for Rem, as she pondered over her memories, her circumstances, her duties.

Words given to her during the days spent by Priscilla's side in the city after parting ways with Subaru and the others—

Priscilla: "Look not at the wound, but at life itself. For the body of a living creature is not solely blood, but also all kinds of unseen things that circulate within it. Beyond that, is what the healing arts must grasp."

Priscilla: "What it is, I am not able to reveal to you, as I do not utilize the healing arts. I call it life for the sake of convenience. You may call it whatever you prefer. However—"

Priscilla: "Remember, Rem, you are a pitiful girl who has lost her memory, who has lost her foundation. You have lost everything, but you possess the power to heal people. That is your essence."

Priscilla: "—No one can escape from who they are. Strive to remember my words, be diligent."

Rem: "—See, life."

The painful wounds themselves were not that which needed to be patched up; rather, life itself, the very thing flowing out of Flop and in need of being preserved, had to be contained. Or, possibly, it even had to be magnified in order to save his life.

Healing magic was not solely about filling gouged flesh, sealing wounds, or relieving pain.

Essentially, the healing arts were not magic that healed wounds, but magic that saved lives.

If she were to invoke that awareness and technique, of interfering with life—.

—It should also be possible for Flop to retain his shrinking life, saving him from the brink of death.

Rem: "…"

Seeking the optimal use of her limited remaining strength, Rem's healing techniques, refined to the utmost limit, were brought to their true potential.

Connecting the threads of life that needed to be connected, stemming the flow of life that needed to be stemmed, and restoring vitality to the fading light of life. —She would save Flop's very life.

Rem: "Flop-san…!"

His breathing, which had become shallow and weak, and the color of his cheeks, which had turned pale and bloodless.

As both of these gradually began to display signs of stability, Rem tried calling out to draw firm responses. At Rem's call, Flop's long eyelashes quivered and his blue eyes opened only slightly.

Flop's consciousness remained vacant still. However, if she continued to apply healing magic, he would survive.

With that, as Rem was about to breathe a sigh of relief, Flop's lips trembled.

Then, with a faint exhale, he spoke.

Flop: "…Don't, heal me fully."

Rem: "—Huh?"

Those unbelievable words assailed her eardrums, and Rem let out a muffled gasp.

So much was the shock that her concentration was disturbed, and even the usage of healing magic was hampered by it. Flop's eyelids fell closed again and his consciousness slipped away before Rem could hurry to focus on her healing magic.

This time, Flop was completely unconscious; Rem focused her healing magic on the wound, half-confused about the meaning of his earlier words.

Why did Flop say those things?

What exactly did he mean that I should not heal him?

Rem: "Did you say something that strange because you were disoriented?"

That was a possibility. Considering the amount of blood that he had spilled, that he regained consciousness, even for a single moment, was a miracle.

It was no wonder that, with his awareness mostly misty, Flop would speak things that made no sense. However, even though they were brief acquaintances, Rem's trust in Flop was high.

Flop was someone who would think over things carefully and present his honest opinion, always.

Suppose too, that Flop's words just now were the result of him wringing out all he had.

Perhaps it would be too disingenuous to dismiss them as mere rambling.

Rem: "…"

Why did he say that he should not be healed?

—No, in the first place, what did Flop say? It wasn't "don't heal me". It was "don't heal me fully".

Rem: "Do you… not want me to heal you all the way?"

The phrase “healed fully” was strange.

She was not about to stop healing, but rather stop healing all the way. However, if she did not heal him all the way, then Flop’s life would remain in jeopardy.

There were limits to Rem’s Mana as well. In the first place, she did not comprehend the meaning of doing such a thing. She would save Flop’s life properly, and only then—

Rem: “—Ah.”

Thinking up to that point, Rem realized that her perception of the situation was off.

She had been concentrating on Flop’s treatment so desperately to the point of being completely blind to her environs.

Rem: “…”

The girl who had done this deed was standing there behind Rem, who was healing Flop’s wounds. More to the point, a flock of flying dragons was still flying over the rapidly freezing city, and fierce battles continued to rage in various parts of the city.

Nothing would change for the better. Even if Flop’s wounds were healed.

And that appeal by Flop, reminded Rem of a possibility.

That would be—

Rem: “—Just, who are you?”

Without turning around, Rem asked this question to the girl behind her.

Although Rem had not been facing her as she talked, the girl would have understood that the subject of Rem’s question was herself. Immediately after, there was a sound of snapping fangs from the little girl.

Madelyn: “You, this isn’t the friggin’ time to be talking like that. If you have time to worry, then hurry up and friggin’ get that man healed!”

Rem: “I too want to heal him! But…”

Madelyn: “But, what?!”

Rem: “But! I can’t concentrate because I’m wondering just who you are. If this goes on, I may not be able to continue the magic.”

Unable to come up with an excuse, Rem made a terribly childish response. If this were to provoke an angry response from the other party, it would be no wonder that the claws that had ripped through Flop would now be pointed at Rem.

But in reply to Rem’s poor rebuttal, the girl let out a turbulent exhale, and,

Madelyn: “…Madelyn.”

Rem: “…What did you say?”

Madelyn: “Madelyn Eschart! A friggin’ General First-Class of the Empire!”

In a tone of voice that could neither be described as angry nor impatient, the girl—Madelyn, answered Rem’s question.

Part of the surprise came from the fact that she even replied, but even more shocking was Madelyn’s title. She had called herself a General First-Class of the Empire, and Rem knew the meaning that position held, in this land.

And that understanding coincided with the possible suspicions that had sprouted in Rem.

In other words—

Madelyn: “—? You, what the frig’ are you doing? What for…?”

Rem: “…”

Madelyn: “WHY DID YOU STOP FRIGGIN’ HEALING THAT MAN?!”

Taking a deep breath once, Rem withdrew the hand she held over Flop’s wound.

Naturally, the healing magic to heal Flop’s wounds was interrupted, a fact that caused Madelyn to snap; she grabbed Rem by the collar, forcing the latter to turn towards herself.

Overpowered by the force of her arm, Rem stared back at Madelyn, courageously.

And then—

Madelyn: “FRIGGIN’ ANSWER ME! WHAT THE FRIG’ ARE YOU PLAYING AT?!”

Rem: “—If you want me to continue healing Flop-san, I have a condition.”

Madelyn: “Condition…? What, are you suddenly rambling about…”

Rem: “—Please make the flock of flying dragons attacking the city leave. Unless you agree to that condition, it won’t be possible for me to continue healing.”

And so, negotiations were offered directly to the little girl who led the flock of flying dragons.

3

—She must not heal him all the way.

This was how Rem had interpreted Flop’s cryptic words.

For reasons unknown, Madelyn was greatly concerned with Flop’s survival. There had to be a reason behind her attachment to Flop, and currently only Rem could decide what happened to him.

With Flop’s life as a bargaining chip, she could put a stop to the attacks on the city.

This act, which perhaps could be profaned as inhuman, was something Rem was determined to carry through.

She would not concoct any excuses by saying that Flop himself had desired it. Her thoughts currently were that, by utilizing Flop's life, she would save the Fortress City from its current predicament.

Even if this differed from the true intentions behind Flop's words, Rem had already started to follow through.

Madelyn: "Wha…?"

Madelyn exclaimed in disbelief at the demand posed at her.

It was only natural. Rem had been just as confused the moment she heard Flop's words. She understood that the same was happening to Madelyn.

However, she held no sympathy towards her. That was not something Rem could afford to have.

Rem: "…"

The agitation from having paused Flop's healing, slowly burned Rem's chest.

Deep down, all she wanted was to resume the healing magic immediately and do anything to save his life. His life, close to vanishing as it was, was hanging on those fingertips of her; its restoration would be decided at this critical juncture.

With each passing moment, Flop's chances would diminish more and more.

Rem: "What will it be? Please decide quickly."

Trying not to let her impatience show on her face, Rem pressed Madelyn into making a decision.

She attempted to plant the idea in Madelyn that she was the one being pushed into a corner, not herself. By doing so, she hoped to preserve Flop's meager chances as much as possible

The white light that had shaken the entire city a while ago still left a great impression; Kuna and Holly, who had been guarding the mansion, were nowhere to be seen. It would take some time for them to recover.

To hope that this deadlock would be broken from the outside was not an option. The outcome rested entirely in Rem's hands.

Rem: "Madelyn-san, there's no ti—"

Madelyn: "—Don't friggin' look down on this dragon."

Rem: "Guh…!"

Any further attempts at forcing her hand, were interrupted by the force of Madelyn's palm on her throat.

Madelyn's tiny hand clamped down on Rem's neck, preventing her from saying another word. —No, Madelyn refused to entertain the notion of negotiating in the first place.

Her golden eyes aflame with rage, she was unable to tolerate Rem's audacity in imposing her own terms.

Frightening, mighty draconic energy that betrayed Madelyn's childish appearance overwhelmed Rem, making her very heart to cower in fear; forming inside her, was a wish to withdraw her reckless act immediately.

She felt the urge to go down on her knees, to beg forgiveness for her hubris.

However—

Rem: "…"

She was reminded of Subaru, who stood in front of Rem in an attempt to protect her against an enemy that was as powerful as this one.

Albeit dressed in a ridiculous woman's disguise, presenting an unsightly and shameful display, Subaru nevertheless stood there, risking his life to protect Rem. —No, it was not restricted to that single occurrence.

In Rem's eyes, Subaru was neither special, nor was he strong.

Despite being frightened of the danger before him, however, Subaru did not back down, ever.

Rem, envisioning Subaru, scolded herself for being so filled with fear as to be unable to move.

He had never cast his gaze downwards, nor had he thrown in the towel.

He had never displayed such naive notions, nor had he ever displayed such tenuous resolve.

Rem: "Even…"

Madelyn: "What the frig' is it?"

Rem: "Even if you kill me… You'll lose…"

Madelyn's eyes widened in surprise at the sentence Rem uttered through gasps, as she was strangled.

If Madelyn were to murder Rem in a fit of rage, she would miss her opportunity to talk with Flop.

So ultimately, the nature and substance of the choice Madelyn was being confronted with had not changed.

To destroy the city, or to let Flop live; those were the two options.

As a General First-Class of the Empire, it was Madelyn's duty to fulfill the role entrusted to her. However, within her attitude and in her words, Rem had found a miniscule possibility for success.

Madelyn truly wished to exchange words with Flop. There was something she wished to make certain. How important was it for Madelyn to confirm that something?

Within that, Rem had seen something valuable that could decide the outcome of this battle—

Rem: "—What, will you do?"

Madelyn: "…"

Rem: "—Please choose. Will you kill, or will you let live?"

4

—Her white-tinted consciousness gradually cleared, and the world around her slowly gained color.

???: "—Ugh."

Alongside the awakening of her consciousness, she felt a terribly heavy oppressive sensation throughout her whole body.

It was as if there were rubble on top of her body, a heavy sensation that pressed down upon her entire being, making it difficult to breathe. She moved her arms in order to push it away in any way she could, and,

???: "Hnn, ngahhh…"

Once she stretched her arms out from their cramped position, the pressure disappeared with a loud thud.

Only then did she come to realize that it had not been her imagination; she really had been underneath a pile of rubble, suddenly understanding the reason why it had been so difficult for her to breathe.

Becoming convinced of it, she began to try and remember why she had ended up trapped underneath the rubble—

Emilia: "—Right. I was with Priscilla, fighting Madelyn."

Recalling the events just prior, Emilia observed the surrounding landscape.

What was spread out before her, was the now-barren debris of the cityscape. Buildings had crumbled, their collapsed debris blown away, the very earth flattened.

At this sight, akin to fallen leaves having been scattered by a powerful wind, Emilia let out a small gasp.

The white snow falling here and there was the result of the space of glaciation created by Emilia—a special technique Subaru had dubbed “Ice Age”.

What had tinted Emilia’s consciousness white, however, was another white something that had fallen from the sky.

It was—

Emilia: “—Gives the same feeling as Volcanica.”

The white light that had descended from the heavens to the earth, had been an attack triggered by Madelyn’s will.

Even though she had not known what was due to arrive, Emilia took swift action and joined forces with Priscilla, putting up ice barriers to intercept that white light.

The layers of ice shielding were shattered, and finally, Priscilla’s treasured sword of red flashed—

Emilia: “After that, I got buried and… This isn’t good! What about Priscilla?!”

Recalling what had occurred, Emilia began to look for Priscilla, who was nowhere in sight.

Since Emilia had been under the rubble, it was not surprising that Priscilla, who had been right next to her, would have suffered the same. If so, there was a possibility that Priscilla would be buried, unable to get out as opposed to someone physically strong like Emilia.

She had to help her quickly. It would be sad if she were shivering with inconsolable fear.

Emilia: “Priscilla! Priscilla, where are you?! Answer me! I’ll get you out right away…!”

???: “—Cease your chirping, half-devil.”

Emilia: “Priscilla?!”

Pushing her body through the pain, Emilia turned over the debris near her. Once there was an answer to her enquiry, Emilia hurriedly ran towards the voice.

And there, on the ruins of the collapsed city walls, at the other side of a mountain of accumulated debris, she found Priscilla.

Sitting on the wreckage, Priscilla snorted at Emilia rushing over to her.

Priscilla: “What ugly stubbornness. I suppose you are alive.”

Emilia: “Yeah, thanks for worrying about me. You’re fine as well Priscilla… right? But it’s a relief that you seem alright.”

Priscilla: “Hmph.”

Faced with Emilia stroking her chest in relief, Priscilla sighed, looking a little more tired than usual. Her gorgeous red dress was torn here and there, her fair skin stained with dust and bruises.

Because Priscilla was always so immaculate, it seemed all the more painful to look at.

However, upon Emilia lowering her eyes out of sadness because of that fact, Priscilla looked up at her with displeasure, speaking, “Do not look down on me”,

Priscilla: “Do not make me laugh with your anxious ponderings. You and I are enemies competing for the throne, first and foremost. Your true desire should be to wish for my downfall.”

Emilia: “Hmph, there you go saying mean things again. I don’t want Priscilla to get hurt. Besides…”

Priscilla: “What?”

Emilia: “You seriously think of me as an enemy. It’s a bit surprising.”

Emilia had presumed that Priscilla took no interest in her for certain.

This assessment was surprising and gratifying for Emilia, who was aware that she was behind the other candidates for the Royal Selection, such as Crusch, Anastasia, and Felt.

To be placed alongside those amazing people, felt like a recognition of her efforts.

Priscilla: “…”

Emilia: “Oh, but if you’re safe, Priscilla, we have to move quickly, we don’t know where Madelyn went and we have to get the city out of danger…!”

She could only be happy that Priscilla was safe and sound, now that the crisis the city was undergoing had ended.

True, she wished that Madelyn would stop the assault of the flying dragons, but since she had not been able to locate Madelyn during her search for Priscilla, it was likely that she had escaped.

If Madelyn could not be relied upon, Emilia and the others would have to drive away the flying dragons on their own.

Therefore, to assist in battle, she thought of making haste to the place with the largest presence of flying dragons.

Priscillia: “—Halt, half-devil.”

Emilia: “I’d like to wait for you, but we can’t rest. We have to hurry…”

Priscilla: “No need. —The situation is moving.”

Stopping her hurried run, Emilia turned around and let out a

“Huh?” as she stared in wonderment.

Priscilla, having stopped Emilia, jerked her head up while sitting atop the rubble. Emilia’s attention was caught by her gesture, and she gazed upwards, at the cloud-filled sky from which white snow sprinkled.

Only then did she understand the meaning of what Priscilla had stated.

Emilia: “…The flying dragons, they’re going away?”

Emilia’s vision, as that sentence escaped her mouth, was filled with the flying dragons that had previously overrun the city’s skies, hunting down people indiscriminately. Spreading their wings, they were slowly growing distant in the skies.

For a moment, Emilia was unsure of what that signified, then considered, “Maybe…”,

Emilia: “Madelyn listened to our request…”

Priscilla: “Foolish nonsense.”

Emilia: “I guess not? But I think Madelyn is the only one who can order the flying dragons to leave…”

The most pleasant possibility was shot down by Priscilla, and Emilia pondered on it.

Of course, even a flying dragon who followed someone else’s orders would not be suicidal enough to throw away their own life for naught. They would retreat if faced with likely defeat, and it was possible they would even flee in a hurry if, for example, the leader of the flock were defeated.

However, would Madelyn’s defeat count as the flock’s leader having been defeated?

Even if Madelyn considered herself as having lost, the blow from above the clouds, the one which Emilia and Priscilla had been unable to stop with their combined efforts, was also a thing.

Rather, it was Emilia and the others who were in danger.

Madelyn could have protracted the bout for quite a bit longer, had she continued battling with the flying dragons alongside her.

And yet—

Priscilla: “Then, there must be a reason as to why they withdrew.”

Emilia: “A reason why they withdrew? What would that be?”

Priscilla: “Even I cannot discern everything. Perhaps, Madelyn received an order to withdraw due to the presence of the Cloud Dragon being discovered. Or…”

Emilia waited to see what Priscilla would say, her hand over her mouth as she pondered this.

After letting Emilia’s anticipation last for a few seconds, Priscilla directed her gaze towards the flying dragons moving away from them.

Priscilla: “—Did she find something that should take precedence over the orders of the Imperial Capital?”

5

—Priscilla’s reasoning would be revealed to be right or wrong, after the flock of flying dragons had made their absence.

The attack of the Flying Dragon General Madelyn Eschart, the leader of the flock of flying dragons, had left the city on the brink of ruin, with a large number of its inhabitants and defenders alike suffering injury.

Then came the arrival of the ice season, unprecedented within the Vollachian Empire, alongside the dreadful white light originating from the heavens that wrought destruction upon the entire city—amidst this despair that made everyone believe the city would not escape doom, however, these threats suddenly disappeared. The city was rocked by this unforeseen, narrow escape from demise.

Even if they wished to rebuild, they would first have to ascertain the extent of the damage they had suffered, and whether the wounds could be healed. It would be a daunting and arduous task, akin to counting the drops of blood that had been spilled.

Before the survivors of the Fortress City commenced that, there was one fact that should be added to the list.

Madelyn Eschart, the Flying Dragon General, had retreated together with her flock of flying dragons.

Concurrent with her flying away from the Fortress City, accompanied by the flying dragons, two people also vanished.

—The merchant known as Flop O'Connell, and the girl named Rem, had both abruptly vanished.

Chapter 59B:
Flop O'Connell

1

Miles: "—Treasure your life, Flop. Self-sacrifice's for morons."

That was the advice Miles, the benefactor who had taken Flop out of a squalid environment, had given him.

It appeared that the orphanage where Flop and Medium had spent their childhood was a much worse place than they could have even expected.

A habitual saying of the grownups at the orphanage was that it was a place for children who had no family, no place to go, and no one to rely on, which provided them with a roof over their heads.

Caretaker: "You're blessed compared to so many other children who've got nothing to eat and no work to do."

In fact, that was what he also thought.

For him and his younger sister Medium, having been abandoned by their family, it was a harsh life of going through hell and back. In regards to food, they would eat grass, insects, and the occasional rabbit, which would cause great furor upon being caught. Worst-case scenario, they would have to munch on soil and moss to stave off the hunger.

In comparison, life at the orphanage was much better.

They were given blankets, albeit thin and tattered ones, meals were provided, albeit consisting of tasteless soup with a piece of bread. They were assigned with menial jobs where numbers mattered, and although they were beaten up by adults on a whim, it was only on occasion.

There was some truth in the grownups' words of admonishment, that the outside world was much more painful. And so, the idea of running away did not even pop up.

Be that as it may, he could not bear to expose Medium and the other children to the punches and kicks of the adults. Thus, Flop learned to act as cheerfully as possible to draw the grownups' attention.

Flop made up his mind that, every day, he would be the one to get the most attention from the adults.

Flop's conspicuousness would make the adults soften their attitude toward the other children. Even on days the adults were in a bad mood, it was Flop who, standing out as he did, would be the first target of the abuse.

Standing out, was a weapon in its own right.

Loud voices and gestures, exaggerated facial expressions and mannerisms. Luckily, it was not difficult to establish a habit of doing these things. It seemed that he had a natural talent for drawing attention.

Flop had shifted the focus of their anger from the younger children towards himself, and had gone through terrible hardships that had left him half dead. It was there, on that night in which Medium had comforted Flop's wounds all throughout, that he became convinced.

This, was the role he had to play in that place.

Amidst the excruciating pain, that was what Flop told himself—

???: "Of course not, you dimwit."

Flop: "Huh…"

???: "First time I've shown my face in goodness knows how many years, and looking at it, it's still the same disgusting place, with the same stupid kids doing the same stupid things. When it comes to crazy kids, Lil' Balle's more than enough."

Having identified the role he himself should take on, Flop was prepared to shoulder the worst aspects of the orphanage.

However, one night, Flop's plans were shattered abruptly.

The person who had appeared mounted atop a flying dragon was not a person with a neat appearance, to say the least.

He did not hide his ill-bred and violent nature, and the way he was ruffling his gray hair with irritation made Flop, even as a child, believe that he was the kind of person he would rather not have anything to do with. His features, reminiscent of a subservient rat, also contributed to this impression. A being around whom one should normally keep one's head down to avoid being punched.

That person—Miles, languidly betrayed Flop's unkind impression of him.

Miles: "I come from this institution like y'all. Well, it was a horrible place even back then. That's why I got the hell outta here and survived by roughing it out."

At night, the door to the children's room would be secured with a heavy, metal lock to prevent the kids from sneaking out at a time they were supposed to be sleeping.

Having broken the heavy lock quite violently and peeking inside, upon seeing nearly two dozen children crammed into a small room, Miles clicked his tongue with great annoyance.

He then escorted the children, startled and frightened by the appearance of an unfamiliar adult, out of the room; leaving them with a single word, "Wait", he headed for the adults' room.

And then—

Miles: "I was straddling the line between life and death day-after-day, but eventually my fortunes started picking up. Then, years later, I remembered our house of abominations and found… this."

Rolling the tied-up adults on the floor of the room around, and kicking them in the face while he insulted them as ingrates, Miles smiled vulgarly and spat, saying "Serves you right".

These children must have had a very hard time with the adults. That said, Flop could not help but tilt his head and wonder if he should be going to such extremes.

Turning to Flop, Miles raised his thin eyebrows, and stated,

Miles: “What, you wanna join in as well? Then go ahead and get even. Get even, a hundred times over.”

Flop: “Oh, no, I’m not …”

Miles: “—Come on!!”

Miles’ fiendish whisper made Flop hesitate in his response.

Only for Medium to then jump out from behind Flop, and proceed to punch the head of a tied-up adult without hesitation, using a branch she had picked up. —No, it was not merely Medium.

All the children, except for a stunned Flop, became enraged renegades.

???: “You were always hurting us!”

???: “I hate you!”

Medium: “This is for big bro!”

Stop stop, so went the screams of the adults, bound and unable to resist, drowned by the children’s screams of rage.

They clawed at the grownups’ faces, slapped them on the cheeks, and finally urinated on them, their pent-up anger exploding.

Miles: “Bwahahaha! Look at their faces! What a masterpiece!”

Flop, dumbfounded, watched the mutiny of his little sister and the other children, while Miles laughed hysterically at the vulgarity of it all.

Flop really could not bring himself to laugh at it. He just kept darting his eyes about as the others made the adults go through all this, wondering what would happen to them now.

Miles: “Well then, now do as you like… Or that’s what I’d like to say, but I dunno if Countess Dracroy’s gonna flip her shit at me if I abandon y’all.”

Looking around at the children after the conclusion of their emotional rebellion, Miles addressed his young juniors, now outside the facility. Continuing with “And so”,

Miles: “For now, I’m gonna take you to the Countess. You can do whatever you wanna after that. You don’t really need to follow me tho’.”

Receiving Miles’s crude invitation, the children looked at one another.

Anxiety and perplexity emerged in their faces. Miles had stated that they were free to follow him or not, but that was a “choice” that neither Flop, nor the other children, had ever had before.

Never had they possessed the right to choose anything, having followed the instructions of adults their entire lives. Therefore, upon suddenly being gifted that right, they were thrown into a state of confusion.

Towards the children’s hesitation, Miles shrugged his shoulders with an “Oioi”,

Miles: “It’s a lil’ too late now, how pitiful. —You’ve already made them pay their dues. You guys can choose what you wanna do.”

Only once Miles stated so, did the children realize it for the first time.

Just as Miles had said, they had already chosen to rebel.

—When all was done and dusted, none of the children opted to stay in the orphanage.

Of course, although he had not been complicit, Flop could not say that he would stay in the orphanage that had wronged him as such.

To begin with, Medium was quick to accept Miles's invitation, saying, "I'll go!", urging Flop to join her as well, voicing out, "Let's go!".

There was no way Flop could refuse Medium's wish, or choose to part ways with his sister. For these reasons, a tad more passive compared to those of the other kids, Flop left the facility.

He had done something outrageous.

Or, perhaps, he had gotten himself involved in something quite outrageous; regret tormented his heart.

However—

Medium: "Good night, big bro."

On their way to Miles's master or whatever, the words hit him as he and his sister slept somewhere without a roof, wrapped in blankets brought from the facility.

The sight of his sister, who abandoned herself to her relief. The view outside, devoid of the prison called shelter.

He realized that no longer did he have to worry about being beaten or about his sister being brought to tears.

Flop: "—Sniff."

And on noticing that, Flop cried.

He cried and cried and cried, savoring the salty taste of his freedom.

2

—In the distance, wings flapping, flying dragons flew away, out into the gray cloud-covered sky.

Zikr remained watchful until the distant shadow was as small as a pea, lest it be a prelude to the next attack, and only then did he relax his body.

For reasons unknown, the flock of flying dragons had retreated. Since the City Hall had not completely fallen, there were two possible reasons for the retreat—either they had achieved the objective of their operation, or they had found themselves unable to accomplish it.

From Zikr's perspective, the former was preferable.

Taking the dramatic events that had taken place during the intense assault, lasting only an hour or so into account, objectively, it seemed that the former was more likely.

Zikr: "A sharp drop in temperature, and catastrophic damage to the southern part of the city…"

Running a hand through his own abundantly bushy hair, Zikr touched upon two anomalies that he could not put a finger on.

During the battle, the temperature within the Fortress City had dropped in the blink of an eye, and then, once white snow began floating down, he doubted his eyes. Apparently snow was sometimes seen atop high, very high mountains, but if one were to see snow in Vollachia, the occurrence would be expected to be accompanied by some sort of natural disaster.

In other words, the snowfall that had occurred during the battle was nothing short of a natural disaster.

But that in itself had worked out to be fortuitous, for Zikr and the others.

Sudden changes in temperature made flying dragons vulnerable, even more so when it became colder. Their troublesome ability to fly had been noticeably reduced. Without it, the damage would have been much greater and more profound.

However—

Zikr: "What in the world was that white light…?"

Uncontrollable destruction had obliterated the southern part of the city flat.

It was something of an end-of-the-world spectacle, even the term "natural disaster" was insufficient to describe it. Even though no further damage had followed, the city had been dealt a painful blow by that single blast.

The chain of command had been thrown into disarray, causing the evaluation of the battle status to be delayed. Had the flying dragons pressed on as they were, it was possible that the city would have gradually fallen.

For that reason, it was fortuitous and strange that the flock of flying dragons had retreated.

Consequently, Zikr speculated it may have had something to do with their enemies.

Had someone struck a crushing blow to the enemy in place of Zikr and his men, who were forced to defend the city? In that case, the most likely candidates would be Mizelda, the leader of the Shudraqians, or Priscilla, who had a proven record of defeating Arakiya, a General First-Class.

Whichever one of them had performed this deed—

Zikr: "After all, women are wonderful. However, I do not want to take entirely for granted the shame of being protected behind a woman's back."

The fact that women were superior, was no excuse for Zikr to be inferior.

While women's splendor should be revered and loved, one's own shortcomings should be admonished.

Anyway—

???: "I never thought I'd be exposed to such an onslaught, but I suppose the advance preparations have paid off."

Zikr: "…Flying dragons are standard practice for attempting to capture a fortified city. However, it should have been expected that the Flying Dragon General would be sent, rather than the Flying

Dragon Squadron.”

Zikr shook his head at the words of his wounded Chief of Staff, the latter bleeding from his head.

The outlook was not good. The preparations for the flying dragons included placing most of the offensive weapons on the western wall, in anticipation of an attack originating from the Imperial Capital, yet the flying dragons had assaulted from all directions.

After the withdrawal of General First-Class Arakiya, they had assumed that it would take some time for the next General to be dispatched, but this had been a miscalculation—and given the circumstances, it was not surprising.

This was not just a rebellion restricted to one city, but the harbinger of a much larger political upheaval.

From the perspective of those schemers in the Imperial Capital, aware of the situation, it was to be expected that they would put all their efforts into extinguishing the flames of rebellion while they still remained small. They should have considered the possibility of the deployment of another General First-Class right after.

Zikr: “No, let us reflect on that later. Now that the city walls have been damaged, it will be easier to capture the city, even without flying dragons. Assess the damage. See if the walls can be repaired…”

???: “—Put your weapons down right now! That’s an order!”

???: “Pff.”

Swiftly identifying the aspects to reflect on, Zikr stored them in a corner of his mind.

Just as he was about to check on the damage and wrack his head over measures to be taken for the future, a sharp, tense voice shook the chilled air.

Looking over, a figure could be seen, surrounded by those who had repelled the flying dragons’ raid on the building used as the command post, that being the City Hall.

The weapons and attention that had been directed at the flying dragons until then, were now focused solely on the man glaring with a vicious attitude at those surrounding him. In both his hands were long swords, blood dripping from their tips.

However, that blood was not that of humans, but of flying dragons.

Zikr: “That is…”

Chief of Staff: “He’s one of the soldiers we sent out from the cellars to counter the flying dragons. Wielder of twin swords…”

Zikr: “Yeah, I was watching too. That was quite the mighty fight. — Hey, hold it!”

Zikr, nodding to the Chief of Staff’s point and extending his arms, commanded his men such. At Zikr’s command, one of his men raised his voice, “General Second-Class!”,

Soldier: “It’s dangerous! I let him out of jail because of the situation, but…”

Zikr: “So you want to just throw him back in jail as soon as the threat of the flying dragons is over? As if he would just meekly accept that. The sacrifices we would have to make him go back are the bigger problem.”

Responding to his tense subordinate, Zikr walked over to the man who had become encircled.

The twin-sword wielder’s ability was considerably higher than that of the average Imperial Soldier. In fact, without his inspiring performance, there was no certainty that they could have repelled the hordes of flying dragons that had raided the City Hall.

If that sword were to be pointed at them, it would cause more unnecessary damage.

Zikr: “Obviously, if you continue with such an outburst, your life will be forfeit as well. Which is why…”

Man: “Which is why, what?!”

Zikr: “…”

To a Zikr attempting to break the ice, the man responded with a sharp voice and demeanor. Instead, he pointed one of the two swords in his hands at Zikr, and let out a “Ha!” together with a fierce smile,

Man: “You want me to surrender so obediently? That’s no different from what the rest of those guys are saying, right, General Second-Class Womanizer.”

Soldier: “You! You dare taunt General Second-Class Zikr!”

Zikr was proud of his title, one which possibly sounded disgraceful; but there was a clear intent to ridicule it in the man’s statement from just now. This caused Zikr’s men to become irate and hostile as a result, but Zikr once again restrained them with one hand,

Zikr: “You are welcome to surrender, though that was not what I was attempting to suggest. Your work has been outstanding. Although we stand on different sides, the fact that you have contributed to the defense of the city is not diminished. Therefore, you will be released.”

Man: “—. You serious?”

Zikr: “Definite punishment or reward is a rule of Vollachia, and the wishes of His Excellency the Emperor.”

The Emperor of Vollachia, who evaluated people on the basis of their ability and achievements, was the foundation of the Empire’s meritocracy, a principle of loyalty that Zikr, too, respected.

However, as soon as the man heard Zikr’s answer, his attitude became blatantly prickly.

The ghastly aura overflowing from his entire body and his eye—As the right eye of the man was covered by an eye patch, he glared at Zikr with his left; all of his emotions were conveyed through it.

Man: “How can a rebel General who betrayed His Excellency the Emperor and the Empire, joining forces with the enemy, be so shameless as to say that…?! If it were me, I’d be so ashamed of myself that I’d just cut my guts out.”

Zikr: “…”

Staring fixedly at the man, Zikr only held his breath upon being faced with these words, the source of his intense hostility seemingly laying in his loyalty to the Empire.

This soldier, who had been put in the dungeon, was very likely one of the men who had resisted Vincent’s advice to surrender till the very end, as of the latter’s conquest of Guaral through his scheme. In other words, he was a man that adhered vehemently to the principles of the Empire.

Then—

Zikr: “If I were to inform you that I, like you, pledge unchanging loyalty to the Empire and to His Excellency the Emperor, would you be willing to listen to me?”

Man: “Ahhn?”

At Zikr’s question, the man opened his left eye wide and let out a boorish voice. He trained his eye on Zikr, seemingly unintimidated by the look in his eye, then after a brief pause, he tossed his swords to the floor.

The swords clattered upon the ground with a high-pitched sound, and the now-unarmed man raised both hands.

Zikr: “Can I take that to mean you are going to listen to me?”

Man: “For now, I’ll stop rampaging as I can die an honorable death. If I were to really try it tho’, I could at least chop the treacherous General’s head off…”

Looking around, the man gazed at Zikr’s subordinates in a provocative fashion. Their alarm was heightened by his gaze, but the man snickered, Man: “But I won’t. Tho’, if this talk you wanna have’s a boring one…”

Zikr: “I intend for this to be a reasonably interesting conversation. What is your name…?”

Having lowered his weapon so he could step closer, Zikr inquired the man as to his name. For a moment, the man hesitated to answer the question, but as there was no point in deception, scratching his own head, he,

Man: “—Jamal Aurélie. Private First-Class.”

Stated his name and rank.

In response to this attitude, Zikr also gave deep assent with a nod.

Zikr: “Jamal, is it? As you may know, I am Zikr Osman. Having been conferred with the rank of Imperial General Second-Class, I am also known as the Womanizer. Although…”

Jamal: “Ahn?”

Zikr: “I would feel much better if I were to be called the Coward now.”

That moniker, once considered a shame, now took on special prominence in Zikr.

Hearing Zikr’s answer, the man—Jamal, grimaced with incomprehension. It was evident that Jamal was skilled at arms, but not good at thinking or reasoning.

With that as the case, he may lend an ear if one preached righteousness.

And there—

???: “—Excuse me, you are the representative of this city, correct?”

Jamal had surrendered, and the City Hall was released from the tension about to burst. Following which, a voice slipped in, as if it had been waiting for the right moment to interrupt.

The quiet, soft tone of that voice struck the eardrums in a way that evoked a sense of relief in those who heard it.

Nevertheless, the unfamiliar voice made Zikr turn around and furrow his curly eyebrows.

The owner of the voice had made their appearance on the stairs connecting the top floor of the command center to the lower floor. Raising his hands as to display they held no hostility, a gray-haired man turned to look at him,

Grey-Haired Man: “Are you General Zikr Osman-san?”

He had not faltered in identifying Zikr as the General, among those wearing the same red uniforms.

Of course, considering the cloak he was donning, and the rank insignia on his shoulders, to spot Zikr as the highest-ranking individual in the room was an easy affair. —The problem was, the audacity to point that out.

The audacity, to show his face at a command post where there had been a battle just moments before, and name a commander they were unfamiliar with. Zikr wondered about the affiliation of this unassuming, yet unafraid man.

As they were not recognized as being part of the city’s inhabitants, it was likely that they had blended with them during the struggle.

The best answer, in that case, would be that they were—

Zikr: “A messenger from the Imperial Capital… Perhaps a messenger for us?”

Grey-Haired Man: “Huh? Oh, no no, not at all! It is more complicated for us to explain any more at the moment, but we are not related to the Imperial Capital or anything like that.”

Waving his raised hands in denial, the young man hurriedly denied Zikr’s suspicions. If he were to take his word for it, the young man’s position would become all the more incomprehensible.

So, in Zikr’s stead, as he furrowed his brow, Jamal yelled out a “Bastard!”, gnashing his teeth,

Jamal: “First dibs on him! You come in here after me… I’m gonna kick your ass!”

Grey-Haired Man: “I am very sorry about that. I do not expect that we will be able to have a calm conversation at this point in time. So, if you could just give me permission.”

Jamal: “Permission? Permission for what?”

Grey-Haired Man: “To assist in the treatment of the wounded and in the repair of the city afterwards… To assist with the aftermath of the battle, so to speak. I am certain my companions and I will be able to give a hand in some small way.”

In response to Jamal tensing his cheeks, the young man sighed, speaking “Although”. His own face, somewhat tired and somewhat exasperated, relaxed slightly, and,

Grey-Haired Man: “Since we have already started, approval would be retroactive, if only partially.”

Zikr: “—. I appreciate the offer itself, but it is…”

???: “It’s nothing so complicated, Zikr. There’s no lie in what the man said.”

Before Zikr could ask a litany of questions, a dignified voice that he could not help but listen to attentively interrupted him.

The sound of a cane on the floor echoed sharply, and a shadow approaching the stairs lined up with the young man. It was Mizelda, her valiant figure bathed in blood, which increased her ferocious beauty.

From the looks of it, the entirety of the blood that stained her beautiful body appeared to have been spilled by someone else, as there seemed to be no noticeable external injuries other than her leg, which had been injured previously. Zikr was relieved to see her back in one piece.

Having returned, Mizelda clapped the young man on his thin shoulder like she was familiar with him,

Mizelda: “This one’s companions have already started their work. I assure you.”

Zikr: “Miss Mizelda, I am so glad you are safe. And him?”

Mizelda: “I don’t know him. He’s not our enemy, he’s just a guy with a handsome face, so I let him through.”

Zikr: “Miss Mizelda…”

Mizelda’s aesthetic sense was somewhat different from Zikr’s, but she was certainly correct in saying that the young man’s features were pleasing, beautifully arranged.

The atmosphere he let off was somewhat neutral, but there was a strangely strong sense of purpose in his eyes.

That he was not a bad person, was what Zikr believed. But, he also had a gut feeling.

Zikr: “I do not believe that there would be anyone willing to help with this situation and not want something in return. Who are you?”

Grey-Haired Man: “As I said before, the situation is a complicated one to explain. However, I do not intend to be hostile towards you. —There are people who we are looking for, just that.”

Zikr: “Looking for people…”

Towards Zikr, repeating his words, the young man nodded, followed with a “Yes”.

Then, he removed the green hat he was wearing and placed it on his chest as he bowed, a polite gesture that displayed respect, but not in the way someone from the Empire would do such deed.

Grey-Haired Man: “My name is Otto Suwen. —I am looking for my friend, as well as my friend’s younger sister.”

Thus, with eyes like those of a cunning hyena, he stated his purpose.

SETOWI

3

—Miles's mistress, Serena Dracroy, was a High Countess and a woman of fierce character.

As a young woman she had fought hard against the upper echelons of the Empire's aristocracy, and, in accordance with the code of blood and iron that was the embodiment of the Empire, placed great emphasis on meritocracy, favoring the talented.

On the other hand, she also possessed integrity that did not allow the strong to humiliate the weak as they pleased. For that reason, the children brought home by Miles were not mistreated.

Serena: "I've heard about it. Miles, who avoids trouble, has even brought you to this house. He must've taken pity on your situation. You're free to do as you please in my territory."

Serena smiled broadly, as she welcomed Flop and the other children.

Flop was overwhelmed by the intimidating feeling of being in front of an entity more massive than him in height, which made him want to grovel in his childish heart; also, by the interior of the house, as he had never seen anything so ornate and spacious before.

Miles: "People such as the Countess ain't got a reason to go out of their way to bully those below them, even if they've got the leeway. After all, the adults who beat children were beaten by adults when they were children as well."

Miles responded as such with his usual coarseness to Flop and the children, who had been bathed in hot water, devoured a belly-filling meal, and changed into clean, good-smelling clothes.

Unlike Medium and the others, whose eyes were turned towards a world where everything they saw and touched was fresh and new, Flop was impressed by a world and way of thinking he was unfamiliar with.

In particular, he was greatly influenced by the philosophies that Miles spoke of so casually.

Without Miles, Flop would never have known that there were ways of seeing and understanding things that he had never known existed in the world.

Above all—

???: “Oh, we’re the same, aren’t we? Did Big Bro Miles pick you up too?”

Flop, following the back of his sister who had been given freedom to run around the mansion, stopped at a beautiful garden in the vast grounds.

At a time in which he was overwhelmed by the sight of large flowers in full bloom, an oh-so-soft voice called out to his back.

Albeit he was startled, looking around for the source of the voice, he could not find the other person in the garden. As Flop tilted his head at this,

???: “Over here. Sorry about that, I’m down here.”

Flop: “Whoa!”

???: “Oof, what a fall.”

As a head suddenly appeared right in front of him, poking out from just beyond the fence against which he had been leaning to peek into the garden, Flop involuntarily fell backward.

Flop blinked as he was laughed at for falling on his rear.

The person who laughed at Flop’s fall was an older boy, though he still looked somewhat young. He was around twelve or thirteen years old, with a charming face and brown hair.

Flop: “…You’re laughing quite a lot, aren’t you?”

Boy: “Oh, sorry sorry. But that just now was something worth seeing. I'd help you up, but I can't move right now."

Flop: "Can't move, you say…"

Standing up, and then patting off his backside, Flop walked around the fence towards the youth. Doing so, he happened upon the boy, sitting cross-legged on the ground with a round mass in his lap.

Upon seeing that, Flop opened his eyes wider in wonder.

Flop: "Is that an egg?"

Boy: "Yes, yes, it's a big egg, right? It's actually the egg of a flying dragon."

Flop: "What are you going to do with the egg of a flying dragon?"

Boy: "I'm going to hatch it, of course."

The size of the white egg required the boy to hold it with both arms, and as such, he held it close to his body as he gave Flop a broad smile.

—That was the first encounter between the sibling pair of Flop and Medium O'Connell, and Balleroy Temeglyph, the man who would become their sworn brother for the rest of their lives.

4

—It could be said that they had gained more than just knowledge on the threat of the flying dragons.

The threat of their claws and fangs, the breadth of strategies they could employ with their wings, the ferociousness with which they did not hesitate to harm their enemies; all those were more than keenly felt by the sight of the destroyed city, and of those who had been attacked, respectively.

Frankly, it was difficult to understand how anyone could think that such a dangerous creature could be tamed and used so effectively. It seemed like an irreconcilable adversary—one that was just as dangerous as the giant serpent they had encountered in the Jungle.

However—

???: "…"

Rem quietly squinted at the sight outside her window, watching the assortment present in the landscape.

In the garden of the mansion, a flying dragon was resting its wings, and a soldier was feeding it. The flying dragon, counter to the idea of it being supposedly terrifying and ferocious, had a soft look in its eyes and emanated a sweet tone, as it was fed by said soldier.

From Rem's perspective, having been told that flying dragons were ferocious and vicious, on top of having witnessed their danger firsthand, the appearance of a flying dragon being so friendly towards people was surprising.

She had been told by a girl who was apparently very familiar with dragons that they, proud as they were, were not fond of people. One would not blame them for thinking otherwise.

???: "You seem to be quite gloomy."

Suddenly, as Rem gazed at the garden, she heard a voice behind her.

However, Rem was not surprised; she was aware that someone was making their way, as the other party made footsteps in their approach.

However, hearing the voice of a stranger, and feeling somewhat tensed given the place she was in,

Rem: "I don't know if I'm being gloomy, but I do have some thoughts. It's not a place I wanted to go to, but I was brought here anyway."

???: "Hm, you are more straightforward than I expected. What a pleasant person."

Rem: "…You would be…"

In the room to which she had been assigned, in a building where even the rooms given to prisoners of war were opulent, Rem asked the identity of the old man who had made his appearance, all while the chair she was on, too luxurious to be comfortable, creaked.

He was an old man with white hair, a white mustache, and eyes as thin as a thread.

His attire was far from that of a warrior, and one could only assume that he was a person of high ranking.

His behavior and age, as well as the fact that the soldiers guarding Rem straightened their postures and bowed their heads, all suggested that he was in a particularly high position.

At Rem's unreserved stare, the old man gave a light wave of his hand, gesturing for the soldiers on guard to leave the room. The soldiers immediately obeyed, and bowing, they left the room.

And so, once the old man was alone with Rem in the room, with his hand he indicated the seat opposite the one in which Rem was sitting, and,

Old Man: "May I sit down?"

Rem: "…Go ahead."

The old man took his seat right in front of Rem in a lax manner, the latter having assented with a nod.

Facing Rem directly, he stroked his chin with his finger, and spoke,

Old Man: "Have you heard anything from her about me?"

Rem: "No, nothing. I've heard nothing but "heal him" and "rest", and "if you try anything funny, I'll kill you"."

Ruminating on the instructions of the master of the house—Madelyn, who would not listen to her, Rem shook her head.

Rem was under house arrest, guards posted on her. She had been given strict orders to not attempt an escape; while she had no intention of running away, it was true that it was not a very pleasant situation.

The old man then nodded his head, responding with “I understand”,

Old Man: “I possess a few issues regarding her attitude towards a guest. I shall give General First-Class Madelyn a word of caution.”

Rem: “…You can caution her?”

Rem was taken aback by the words of the unfamiliar old man.

Having spent neither a long nor a short time with Madelyn between the events at the Fortress City and being brought to this mansion, Rem was annoyed at her lack of communication.

Madelyn was obstinate and headstrong, although her having a persuadable candor had been her saving grace.

Rem: “I believed she was someone who didn’t like to be told what to do by others. That if someone were to tell her something, she would become angry and violent immediately…”

And having conveyed her own feelings to such an extent, Rem put a hand of hers on top of the other.

Now that she mulled over it calmly, she felt ashamed of herself, wondering what kind of face she was making as she declared that, as a person who had once broken another person’s finger because she had not harkened to what they had to say.

However, the old man broke a slight smile at Rem’s self-reflection with a “Hmm”,

Old Man: “Contrary to your expectations, you are not mistaken in that. Even if it pains me to hear it. In fact, she failed to follow my instructions correctly this time as well. However—”

Rem: “…”

Old Man: “This time, though, another factor was seemingly more important than the whims of General First-Class Madelyn.”

The old man maintained his lips relaxed, but the hint of a smile had disappeared from the tone of his voice.

Rem held her breath for a moment as she was shot by his gaze, something beyond those narrow, penetrating eyes seemingly assessing her. The gaze had eloquently regarded Rem as “another factor”.

And that factor, had brought undesirable consequences for the old man before her.

Rem: “…Who, are you?”

Old Man: “I apologize for the late introduction. I am the Prime Minister of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, Berstetz Fondalfon.”

Rem: “Prime Minister, Berstetz…”

The old man—Berstetz, reverently bent at the waist in response to the question.

As soon as Rem heard his name and position, her cheeks became even stiffer, and she tensed her shoulders even more.

She remembered hearing both the name and the position.

Rem: “So, you are…”

Berstetz: “Yes. —I am the enemy of His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Abellux.”

Rem: “…”

He asserted such without hesitation, and once again Rem was left unable to carry on speaking.

It was an affirmation of what she already knew, but she had not expected it to be spoken in such a straight-forward fashion. Additionally, at the same time, this was a major problem which she had gotten roped up in, regardless of whether she liked it or not. The fact that she had ended up being brought to the place closest to this maelstrom was something she could not help but conceive as being terribly out-of-place and ironic.

It should be Abel, Priscilla, and Subaru here, and not herself, to begin with.

With that point in mind, Rem was glad that Subaru was not at this place.

Rem: “Had he been here by himself, he would’ve been reckless, definitely…”

There was no room for doubt about the black-haired boy’s quick thinking and his ability to stretch the boundaries of one’s imagination. Even in this situation, he would cause outlandish events beyond Rem’s imagination.

In that sense, it was a good thing he had not been in the city at the time of the flying dragons’ raid. It was unlikely that he would have been able to do anything about it, and would only obtain even more injuries.

However—

Rem: “…”

However, I wonder, when he learns that I was taken away by Madelyn, how he will feel.

So terrible was it, that Rem’s chest was tormented by the pain of the sharp blade that was her imagination.

Rem: “—. So you know that Abel-san is the real Emperor, correct?”

Forcing herself to ignore the pain of the deep cut remaining in her heart, Rem asked Berstetz a question. To that, he responded with a curt “Yes”,

Berstetz: “Of course. Allowing him to escape was a blunder, but after that, things have been proceeding according to plan. Or should I say, they were. As, in fact, the destruction of Guaral was left unfinished.”

Rem: “Why did you do that to Abel-san? I can’t imagine what it must be like to come up with the resolution to do something like rebel… Is it because of Abel-san’s personality?”

Berstetz: "We do not seek individual personality in the Emperor, the pinnacle of the nation. Personal feelings and attachments are trivial, from the perspective of running a nation. If there is anything to look for, that would only be competence, and the trust and performance of a person able to fulfill their responsibilities."

Shaking his head leisurely, Berstetz responded with an emotionless voice and expression.

The tone of his voice never wavered, the expression on his face never changed in the slightest. Rem's lack of life experience, coupled with Berstetz's superior communication skills, made it impossible for her to read his inner thoughts.

He was emotionless and therefore lying, or he was being truthful; which was it?

However, it was her opinion that she wanted to believe what she was told, that Abel's character had not been the reason for raising a rebellion.

Rem had witnessed the blood and death of so many in the Fortress City. Not only those who had died, but also Rem herself, would not be convinced that Abel's bad character was the reason for it.

Therefore—

Rem: "Are you saying that you ousted Abel-san because he's unfit to be Emperor?"

Berstetz: "Ousting, was not my intention. That is merely hindsight."

Rem: "What about Abel-san was lacking? I don't know the burden that the position of Emperor carries, nor the abilities required, but I believe… he's an excellent person."

Rem wondered to herself why she felt compelled to defend Abel, but Rem chose her words to convince the nagging feeling inside of her.

In fact, his capability to fight aside, Abel stood out for his wit and his stores of wisdom.

The fact that Mizelda, Zikr, and even Subaru were willing to follow his reasoning, was evidence that he also possessed the leadership skills to convince others of such opinions.

Although she did not understand the particulars, Rem believed that was a quality of those standing at the pinnacle, as well.

And that would be something necessary for the one at the highest seat in the nation.

That—

Berstetz: “I have yet to hear your name, Healer-dono.”

Rem: “…Rem, it seems.”

Berstetz: “Hmm.”

Partly because of animosity toward Berstetz, she informed it as some sort of hearsay.

Rem had already accepted that her name was “Rem”, understandably so. Ever since she had identified herself to Priscilla with poise—or from the time she allowed Subaru to call her that.

Anyhow, familiarizing his tongue with Rem’s name, Berstetz let out a small exhale, and then,

Berstetz: “Rem-dono, how many successors do you believe His Excellency the Emperor has at present?”

Rem: “Succe… ssors… Uhh, you mean children, is that it?”

Berstetz: “Yes.”

As Berstetz nodded serenely, Rem pictured Abel in her mind.

Rem had no memories, but that did not signify she had lost all the knowledge acquired before she lost them. Rem had also kept the knowledge of how human beings reproduced.

However, it was doubtful that Abel would be able to establish a relationship as proper as that with another person. In the first place, Rem could not imagine a woman who would be able to stand on the same level as Abel.

Rem: “I can’t imagine it. I guess there aren’t any?”

Berstetz: “—. You understand very well. You are correct, none exist.”

Rem: “Oh, of course it’s like that. Though I guess that’s doing Abel-san—”

A discourtesy, Rem was about to continue, only for her to interrupt her words there.

Not that Berstetz had stated anything towards Rem, nor that she had been told to be silent; it was, however, that the narrowed eyes of the silent old man opened slightly. His expression, eyes visible behind it, came right up close to Rem’s face. Rem’s voice was silenced by an aura so ghastly that it was unfathomable.

Quietly, Berstetz placed his hand on the table between them. Silently overflowing from his entire body, was unimaginable, intense rage.

Berstetz: “There are no successors, you see. —Therein lies the problem.”

Rem: “—Ah.”

Berstetz: “The Empire must be strong. Otherwise, this nation will…”

As Rem before him let out a hoarse breath, Berstetz cut off her speech, opened his fist placed atop the table, and exhaled.

Then, once again hiding his eyes behind his eyelids, the old man looked at Rem.

Berstetz: “I beg your pardon. This is the first time I have been a rebel, and I must say that I have become slightly agitated.”

Rem: “…Why, are you saying this now, to me?”

Berstetz: "…"

Rem: "Telling me all this wasn't necessary."

Berstetz's words were loaded not with emotion, but with something much weightier and clearer.

Rem did not feel that it had been a lie, but that was exactly why she was questioning him. Why had he allowed Rem to hear such things?

Rem did not consider herself to be in such an important position, and in fact, she certainly was not in one.

There were times when Rem happened to be in a position close to Abel and Priscilla, but that was merely because of how things had come to pass, not because Rem was special.

Rem: "So why?"

Berstetz: "…You are a healer, and belong to the oni race. I would like to bring you in if possible. You are a precious existence."

Rem: "…"

Albeit not a lie, that answer was not entirely true.

However, Berstetz seemed to have resolved not to dedicate any more time to Rem, who was in search of further answers. Slowly, the old man rose from the chair in which he had been sitting.

Berstetz: "I would like to converse with you a little longer, but a man like me has things he must do. Excuse me for inconveniencing you for a while now, but I will offer to make things as accommodating as possible for those in the mansion, so please, be at ease."

Rem: "…Berstetz-san, what are you, in regards to Madelyn-san?"

Berstetz: "Calling me a collaborator would be most appropriate. Of course, there is the impression that, in her point of view, she is utilizing a wise human being. This mansion is also my mansion."

Unexpectedly shrugging his burly shoulders, Berstetz answered that, which prompted Rem to look around the room and towards the garden.

Since Madelyn spent her time there as if she owned the place, one would assume that it was her mansion, but it seemed that even that turned out to be wrong. However, the elegance of the building and its interiors convinced Rem.

Rem: “But I don’t think I can spend my time lounging around, nor do I want to.”

Berstetz: “A candid manner of speech, quite delightful. So, once again, good health to you, Rem-dono.”

Donning a minute smile, Berstetz once again bent at the waist and left the room.

She considered attempting to stop him, but unable to find the right words to say, and judging herself to perhaps be unable to stop him, Rem went without saying anything.

Replacing Berstetz who had left the room, the guards who had been sent outside returned.

Their stern stares directed at her, Rem once again looked out.

The flying dragon had just finished its meal, and was now slowly flapping its wings to take to the skies, on its back the man who had fed it.

Rem: “…”

Though it was a ferocious, fearsome flying dragon, to be carried atop its back in flight was exhilarating.

She had not had the leisure to enjoy it given the circumstances, of course; they had been transported from Guaral to their destination in less than a day, making her wonder just what had their journey so far been.

While Rem treated the wounded Flop, Madelyn had brought them here—

Rem: “—The Imperial Capital, Lupugana.”

The city where Abel aspired to reclaim his throne, after having been ousted from it.

With the Crystal Palace at the heart of the city in the distance, Rem was being held captive. Touching the unopenable window, and ascertaining the feel of the glass on her fingertips, she had a sudden thought.

Rem: “…Him.”

Would pain run through his heart when he learned Rem was gone?

A pain in his heart, just like Rem’s own, which felt like a blade piercing deep into her heart.

From where these sort of thoughts in her mind originated, Rem did not know.

5

—Flop slowly opened his eyes, and gazed upon the ceiling of an unfamiliar room.

Flop: “…”

He spent a moment organizing his thoughts, quickly observing his surroundings to assess the situation.

It was his habit as a peddler who often camped out in the wild. Of course, his sister, who possessed a sense of intuition sharper than his, would be in charge of staying vigilant, but that was no reason for him to slacken.

It was possible that his poor reactions could make the difference between life and death. So, getting out of bed as quickly as possible was a skill that he had learned as a matter-of-course in order to survive—

Flop: “This place… Ugh!”

The moment he tried to look around while being careful, he raised a scream as his chest spasmed from a terrible pain.

If this were outside in the middle of the night, he would have been very foolish to let beasts know of his whereabouts. Nevertheless, what had already been done, had been done.

So that he would recover, with labored breaths, Flop attempted to upright himself, and,

Flop: “Wh-What the… I can’t move at all…!”

Not only was he unable to put strength into his arms, but the soft bed sucked his weight in. His whole body sank softly, yet if he were told that it was acting as more of a cage than a bed, he would have believed it.

Nevertheless, he squirmed and struggled in a desperate attempt to somehow make it out,

Flop: “This, this…! This is really tough!”

???: “—. You’re quite the strange person.”

Flop: “Wha?! Who’s there?!”

Behind Flop as he struggled with the bed, a high-pitched voice was heard, hence he tried to turn around. But his efforts were in vain, his impaired body would not even turn around properly.

As Flop struggled like a fish on land, a deep sigh was heard,

???: “It is I, the dragon. Your wounds are in the process of healing, so stop getting worked up for nothing.”

The other party stepping towards the bedside as they spoke, Flop exhaled faintly.

A girl with sky-blue hair, golden eyes, and two black horns on her head—Madelyn. An Imperial General First-Class who had attacked the Fortress City, the existence known as the Flying Dragon General.

And, from what Flop last remembered—

Flop: “If I remember correctly, your claws ripped into me and it hurt quite a lot…”

Madelyn: “Correct. This dragon’s claws tore the life out of you… That girl friggin’ healed you.”

Flop: “That girl… Oh right.”

Averting her gaze, Madelyn muttered that with an uncomfortable expression on her face. Her words brought a visage to Flop’s mind, causing him to comprehend the event that had befallen him.

At the same time he remembered that, in his fading consciousness, he had asked her—he had asked Rem to do something horrible.

Flop: “Miss Madelyn, is that correct? I’ve got to ask, what happened to Guaral? That city went through an awfully large explosion, plus an attack by your friends.”

Madelyn: “…”

Flop: “So, seeing as I barely escaped with my life, I think Wife-san and I survived. But that result’s the second worst one in my opinion. Of course, the worst outcome would’ve been the one in which Wife-san and I both died.”

Holding up a finger, Flop kept talking and directed this question at Madelyn.

Madelyn maintained her uncomfortable expression as she looked sideways at his finger. Thinking this was a sign this was leading down a reluctant topic for her, Flop pressed on.

Flop: “I don’t know, Miss Madelyn. Your face makes it look like you’re unhappy or sulking. My little sister used to fidget like that too when sulking. The fact that she doesn’t look low-key at all when doing so, given her body’s so big, is cute; but I guess you’re like that as well?”

Madelyn: “…fe.”

Flop: “Yes? What is it?”

Madelyn: “The city’s friggin’ safe! I wasn’t able to friggin’ destroy it completely! Is that what you friggin’ want?!”

Displaying her sharp fangs, Madelyn roared back at Flop’s words. Flop breathed a long sigh of relief, feeling the illusion of a furious breath of air run over his body.

“Safe”, was not a very appropriate answer considering what Flop remembered of Guaral’s state, but Madelyn did state she was unable to destroy the city.

If that was the case, then—

Flop: “Wife-san used my life well, didn’t she…”

Flop thought back on his deed right before he lost consciousness, when his awareness was vague, his ears filled with a ringing sound.

Madelyn had been so greatly upset by the sight of Flop bleeding and on the verge of losing his life, that he had caught sight of it in the corner of his eye. She seemed to have been questioning Flop about something, as if clinging onto it.

So the thought that his life could be made useful had come to him. An agreement could be made, where, in exchange for saving Flop’s life, Madelyn could be granted the answer that she desired, meaning that the possibility of Guaral escaping its predicament did exist.

That the pacifist Rem would be capable of making such a cold-hearted decision was unthinkable to him. It must have put a tremendous burden on her, even though, considering the current situation, it appeared she had been successful.

Flop: “Where’s Wife-san, the one who healed my wounds?”

Madelyn: “…She was friggin’ brought along as well. That was the condition I, the dragon, proposed, and she accepted it. This dragon keeps her promises. I’ll make sure she friggin’ keeps her promise to this dragon, too.”

Flop: “Promise…”

Madelyn: “This.”

Flop was relieved to hear that Rem was safe. But then an ornament bearing the fang of a beast—or rather, the fang of a dragon painted red, was pushed into his view.

A precious item that Flop usually wore around his neck, and carried with him without letting it part from his skin.

It was held against the tip of Flop’s nose, as he laid prone on the bed.

Flop: “Oh, you picked that up for me? Thank you so much for that. It’s a very, very precious thing. I’d be incapable of living on just fine and make myself look happy. That’s why…”

Madelyn: “—Carillon.”

Flop: “…”

Reaching out, Flop attempted to retrieve the fang. But Madelyn easily dodged Flop’s hand and, instead of returning the object, she uttered a name.

The name caused Flop to hold his breath, and Madelyn continued.

Madelyn: “This is Carillon’s fang. Why the frig’ do you have it?”

Twice Madelyn voiced Carillon, he had unmistakably heard that name.

It would be impossible for him to mishear it. Because that name was—

Madelyn: “Friggin’ answer! Why do you have Carillon’s…”

Flop: “I was there when Carillon was born. I thought up its name together with them. With Big Bro Miles and Balleroy.”

Madelyn: “—Hk.”

Flop: “When its fangs were replaced by new ones, we received one as a commemoration. It was proof of the bond with my sworn brother… my family. That’s why my sister and I have Carillon’s fangs.”

Quietly, Flop replied, as if lifting the lid on a precious treasure chest deep inside his heart.

He responded to the questions about the origin of the flying dragon fang swinging in Madelyn’s hand. Their precious family members—their benefactor and their sworn brother, a memento of two people no longer in the world.

Upon hearing the answer, Madelyn was rendered speechless, her lips quivering, her eyes widened.

Based on her reaction, and on the fact that she was familiar with Carillon’s name, Flop also made some assumptions, and, prefacing with “May I?”,

Flop: “Where did you get Carillon’s name? You even recognized its fangs at a single glance. I don’t think that the relationship you had was a fleeting one. Besides, you…”

Madelyn: “—Hk.”

Flop: “You’re the girl who took Balleroy’s place as Ninth. Perhaps you’d known Balleroy and Carillon for some time?”

Her reaction expressed her pain; hounding the young-looking Madelyn like this made his chest hurt

However, Flop’s chest had once suffered a pain more intense compared to that of seeing Madelyn in pain, and because of that very same topic. Nothing in the world was more devastating than the face of his sobbing sister, for him.

So he did not hesitate in cornering Madelyn, to get to the bottom of what laid within her heart.

—Balleroy Temeglyph.

One of the Nine Divine Generals of the Vollachian Empire, a sworn brother to Flop and Medium, a rebel who had lost his life in a revolt against the Emperor. A kind and beloved man, who deeply loved his dear dragon Carillon and his benefactor Miles.

What was the relationship between him and Madelyn?

And—

Flop: "Why did you become a Divine General?"

Madelyn: "—For revenge."

There was a beat of hesitation before she gave her answer, but the words that came out were transparent.

Madelyn's lips quivered, her eyes widened; slowly, her expression changed as her golden eyes were filled by the fury that had wrought the distortion of her face—a radiant rage.

The violent rage of the little girl accompanied by dragons, scorched Flop's entire body as he lay down on the bed.

Madelyn's rage was of such violence as to make him hallucinate that.

Madelyn revealed that she had taken up the position of Divine General to seek revenge.

The word "revenge" was something Flop also had thoughts about. —For Flop, it was his life's goal. However, his target for revenge was not a single person, but rather the world.

Revenge against the world itself, a world in which people were forced to make decisions against their will.

The anger in Madelyn's eyes, however, was wholly different.

As for the violent emotion that burned in her golden eyes, he knew who it should be directed at.

Flop: “For whose sake do you want to exact revenge?”

Madelyn: “…For Balleroy, revenge for the man who was to be this dragon’s mate.”

Flop: “…”

Madelyn: “I, the dragon, will never forgive the one who killed this dragon’s darling. For that reason—”

She would exact revenge for Balleroy’s death; Madelyn’s small frame overflowed with rage as she replied.

Flop did not know how Balleroy and Madelyn had met, what experiences they had gone through, or what form their bond had taken.

However, he did understand that Madelyn lamented and mourned his death from the bottom of her heart.

And so, therefore, that was why—

Flop: “—Who is Balleroy’s killer? How can your revenge be fulfilled?”

If Medium were the one present here, she would certainly have embraced Madelyn out-right.

If it were Medium, who had shed a waterfall of tears and wailed loudly at the deaths of Balleroy and Miles, she would certainly have taught Madelyn how to cry.

Someone dear to her had been killed. And at that fact, Madelyn was furious.

She did not know how to grieve. As a being of tremendous power with black horns, a being to whom flying dragons obeyed, she could only think of a single way to grieve. Rage.

And it was the same with Flop, who had forgotten how to cry.

And so—

Madelyn: “The one who caused Balleroy’s death was—”

Flop’s question was answered by Madelyn, as she squeezed her small hands.

Her darling stolen from her, and having been dispossessed of a place to pour her love in, keeping it within her petite body, Madelyn allowed the embers of her anger to burn in place of shedding tears, resolving to exact vengeance.

Flop: “…”

And Flop, upon hearing that name woven by Madelyn’s mouth, closed his eyes.

He closed his eyes, kept his silence. For once, he forgot the ache of the still-healing wound which Madelyn had torn into his chest, and surrendered himself to the darkness behind his eyelids.

On closing his eyes, he could still recall the faces of those dear to him.

Miles: “You and Medium ain’t thinking straight. Those who should stay at the Countess’s place, I won’t be able to take care of y’all, good grief.”

Balleroy: “This is Big Bro Miles’s way of showing his concern. Though, if you were to stay here, he’d end up takin’ care of you forever. He ain’t very up-front, now is he?”

Miles: “Shut your trap, Lil’ Balle! Those who get ahead in life shouldn’t come back so often!!”

Balleroy: “Nah, that wouldn’t be like me. Spending time here with Big Bro Miles, Flop, Medi and the others, that’s far more suited to me. Ain’t that right?”

This brought back fond memories of Balleroy, who had gone out of his way to come from afar and stop by on the day of departure, and Miles, as well as those two's late-night exchange.

With a big wave of his hand, he and Medium both left the place that had taken care of them for so long, and then—

And then, having finally arrived at the Imperial Capital, Flop O'Connell's blue eyes were alight.

With those eyes of his lit up, his lips weaved words.

They were—

Flop: "—Balleroy's killer would be… Village Chief-kun. —No, the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia."

END

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Interlude:
The Frenzied Overture of the Empire

1

He felt himself stretching out a hand from the dark space he was confined to towards white light.

In this deep, dark place, which he couldn't free himself from, he yet sought freedom. He yet sought for help to somehow do something about that which remained hopeless.

However, right at the very end, a girl had jumped in with a look of determination. He'd stretched out his hand towards her not because he was seeking salvation from her, but because he felt he needed to save her.

And so, to silence the selfish insisting shadows, he reached out his hand…

He reached out his hand and…

???: "…It's so small."

Subaru took a look at his own hand as he muttered that. He could just barely see it in his blurred vision.

He raised it in front of him, palm facing outward. It was his hand, extending from his shoulder. It opened and closed exactly as he willed it to. Without a doubt, it was his.

However, it was a size smaller than Subaru had expected, the hand of a child.

Meaning…

Subaru: "I didn't turn back to normal…"

That had been his chance to get out of this hopeless situation, he should have gotten it after going through untold hardship. He'd literally put his life on the line for this, and yet, the result had slipped out from under these hands of his.

Just how many sacrifices had he made for what he'd relinquished?

Just how many had it been…

Subaru: "…?! That's right, what the hell am I doing?!"

Suddenly, a jolt ran through Subaru's bleary consciousness, making him put his hand - the one he'd been staring at - on his face.

The memories that came streaming back to him were those of the fierce game of tag he had with Olbart in the Demon City's Crimson Lapis Castle, as well as the Great Disaster after.

Then, something happened just after Olbart touched Subaru's chest to try and undo his infantilization.

It somehow felt like someone had whispered the very soul language of love into his ears, but…

Subaru: "I passed out after that, Then I… And then?"

Subaru tried to search his vague memories for what had happened. However, even when he pushed and pulled, the door that held his memories sealed within did not yield an inch.

Seeing how stubborn this door was caused Subaru to firmly clench his back teeth together.

???: "…Now, now, let's take it easy, no need to get flustered. Luckily, y'all made it out with your lives; so, you can take your time to do stuff after the lil' missy that came with you wakes up."

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Subaru suddenly heard a voice coming from right next to him. He turned to look at it, dumbfounded. There, as he lay on a makeshift bed, his eyes met with someone who was resting his chin in his hands.

This someone was grinning from ear to ear, peering right into his face.

Subaru: “WHAA?!”

???: “Whoa there. Love the reaction, but it’s best you keep things on the downlow. If we’re too loud, the management will have their eye on us and put together a bothersome fight to the death. But then again…”

Subaru: “…”

???: “Though it may be in bad taste, I don’t dislike that sort of idea, rather, I quite like it.”

Subaru jumped to his feet without thinking. Gazing at him as he did so, was a blue haired individual boasting that ever so nonchalantly.

He had his long hair tied up into a ponytail and was wearing Japanese-style garb, the likes of which were seldom seen here. Subaru was left astonished by how unfamiliar he looked; he took a deep gulp before he chose his words, and his question.

Subaru: “…Who are you? Where are we?”

???: “…Oh, how splendid! What a great question! I’d been expecting that!”

Subaru: “Bweh?”

Subaru carefully asked his questions, the tone of his voice hushed as the individual’s eyes twinkled happily. He then quickly stretched out his hand and took Subaru’s, causing the latter to dart his eyes about in surprise.

He spun around once on the spot, right in front of Subaru, and said,

???: “You, who have crossed the black lake and reached this Island □ The Gladiator Island Ginunhive □ You, with that unpleasant look to your eyes, swirling with such wonderful premonitions! I shall indeed answer you!”

Both his tone and gestures were theatrical, and for someone he'd just met, he was rather discourteous. However, he paid no heed to Subaru's impression, and instead brazenly stuck to his attitude, his theatrics.

Almost like he was an actor in a stage performance, basking himself in a round of thunderous applause…

???: "…Cecilus Segmunt."

He placed a hand on his chest, took a bow before giving his name.

It felt vaguely familiar to Subaru. He tried to remember where he'd heard it before, and as soon as he did, a frown appeared on his face.

He'd heard it from Abel. If he wasn't mistaken, his name belonged to one of the Nine Divine Generals…

Cecilus: "I am Vollachia's Blue Lightning. —The lead actor of this world."

Subaru gulped as he heard him grandiosely declare that.

Both his name and title were consistent with what Subaru remembered, however, there was just one thing that stood as a huge issue.

Subaru: "…Vollachia's strongest, is a child?"

…Smiling right before him, the fact of the matter was: Cecilus Segmunt was a child, around the same age as the shrunken Subaru, one that really had the same vibe as an obnoxious brat.

2

—At the same time, in a room of a certain mansion.

???: "You liar, you good for nothing liar! I wish you would just die!"

In a high-pitched, ear-splitting shriek, the woman wept and screamed.

In addition to her shouting, her anger took form in further ways. A vase was thrown and shattered with a resounding crash on the carpet. The man sighs quietly, with shards raining upon his feet.

???: “Katya, I feel bad too. This was really beyond my expectations.”

Katya: “Shut up! Like I care about your expectations! None of that matters to me!”

Shaking her head in disgust, the woman with her hair tied back in two, throws a violent temper tantrum, a habit inherited from her older brother.

Katya, a crippled woman sitting in a wheeled chair, stares at him with tears in her blue eyes, a look that defies her scarce vitality.

Sensing love in the sharpness of her gaze, the man —Todd closed one eye and stepped closer.

Katya: “Stay away!”

Todd: “I can't. Because I want to be with you every second, and as close as possible, even if it's just for one step.”

The answer to Katya's rejection was Todd's true feelings, without any exaggeration.

Katya bites her thin lip as Todd advances, ignoring her refusal. But she couldn’t resist in any other way than to reach out her hands, apathetically trying to push him away.

She is crippled, frail, and vulnerable to being loved. That is Todd's beloved fiancée.

It's hard to believe that I am related to Jamal, someone who is so insensitive and always manages to get into all sorts of trouble.

Todd: “Gotcha.”

Katya: “—hk.”

Katya's cheeks contorted as Todd gently grasped her outstretched hand and touched her. As if to offer some resistance, she spun her chair around, forcing Todd around to face her back.

Shrugging his shoulders at her stubborn attitude, Todd hugs his beloved woman from behind.

Katya: "…Don't touch me, you liar. You were always full of it. You didn't even bring… Nii-san home, and after that, you said you weren't going to leave."

Todd: "I'm not going to make any excuses. You know, I'm a huge liar and a promise-breaker."

While she turns away from Todd, he brushes his cheek against Katya's hair as she curses him.

She was right, and Todd piled lie upon lie on top of lie. He promised to bring Jamal back safely, but he let him die in the fortress city, and when he got back to the capital, he couldn't keep his promise not to leave.

However, Todd would like to make the excuse that both of these events were beyond his control.

Without Jamal as a decoy, Todd would not have made it out alive. The irony is taking her with him —the woman he saved, instead of Jamal, backfired on him.

Todd: "First General Arakiya has expectations for me. It seems like she is letting me avenge Jamal's death."

Katya: "—Nii-san's."

Todd: "But, only if I can prove to her that I'm useful, that is."

In response to Katya's hushed whispering, Todd's cheeks twisted inwardly in disgust.

To be honest, he really didn't care about avenging Jamal's death. It was a miscalculation on his part that the story he had made up for her comfort resonated with Arakiya more than he had expected.

Thanks to that, she apparently made a direct proposal to the prime minister to add Todd, having lost his best friend, to her ranks.

As a result, Todd becomes her sole subordinate and must leave the imperial capital because of it. In order to prove whether he is competent for the position, he has been given.

As a test for that, he will be accompanying Arakiya from now on—

Todd: “—Gladiator Island, Ginunhive.”

Katya: “…promise me one thing.”

Katya says this in a trembling voice as Todd holds her from behind.

Todd silently nodded to Katya, still demanding a promise, even though he had broken his promise so many times before.

Katya: “Please, I beg of, you… you to come back to me safely.”

Squeezing her from behind, Todd's arms hold her tightly, and Katya's fragile hand lays on top of his.

Todd kissed his beloved's hair as if to confirm the sensation.

Then, he decided,

—I will return to this woman no matter the sacrifice.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death Unto the Weak, No Mercy V

1

Katya Aurélie was stunned by the news of her brother Jamal Aurélie's death.

"My brother…is dead…"

Lying on top of her bed, she immediately regretted opening her mouth in front of her maid.

She wasn't supposed to hear about it. Even though she spent all of her time alone in her quarters, it was inevitable that she would eventually catch wind of it.

"…Leave me be."

"But my lady…"

"I said, leave me alone!"

Yelling at the maid for her superficial sympathy, Katya threw her pillow at her. Missing its target, the pillow rolled on the floor.

The maid tried to pick the pillow up, but Katya barked, "Get out!"

With a solemn nod, the maid curtsied and quickly made herself scarce.

Katya was left alone in the quiet room. After hearing the door close, she buried her face in her hands.

"Brother…"

She always believed that even if he was cut down in battle, he wouldn't die.

In fact, Jamal himself insisted that he wouldn't die even if he was killed, and although he was a crass and uncaring older brother, they had an unspoken trust.

And that trust was broken with Jamal's death.

It was a mistake to place her trust and hopes in such a fragile thing as unfounded faith.

Nothing in life goes as one wants it to.

"Bu…Buarghhh!"

Rising from deep within her, wasn't the sound of crying, but rather the broken cries of pain and disappointment crushing her lungs down.

Coughing miserably, Katya folded herself over her frail body.

Her hands searched for her familiar pillow, wanting to hold it tight before her chest, but remembered how she had thrown it across the room. She hated herself for not having the maid pick it up.

—Katya hated herself. She despised herself.

So she couldn't understand people who were kind to her, who helped her, who were friendly to her. She was afraid of them.

"Wh-Why…Why were you like that?!"

Why did he show me such kindness?

Jamal usually didn't feel a shred of concern for others, but he was always kind to her. Katya could not understand it at all.

"Why…?"

—Why did I speak so hatefully in my last conversation with him?

Filled with regret, Katya continued to cough as tears streamed down her cheeks.

House Aurélie was a low-ranking noble house of the Vollachian Empire that would likely die out in their lifetime.

This was Katya's understanding, as she was too weak to marry into another family or to fulfill a woman's duty of giving birth to strong children.

Since she could not be of any help to her family, they had placed all their hopes in her sibling. Unfortunately, the eldest son passed away, leaving their last hope with Jamal, the second and more problematic son.

Words could not describe the grief and anguish felt by the family when their eldest passed away.

Although he wasn't Katya's favorite brother, Picard Aurélie was an outstanding young man with a bright future ahead of him. Though he was gifted with extraordinary abilities, he was not blessed with luck, meeting his demise in a rockfall accident while riding in a dragon carriage.

The feeling of sorrow to those closest to him was further compounded by the fact that Jamal and Katya were also riding in said carriage.

They said, "Those two should've died instead of Picard."

"That would have been better."

Katya's heart broke into a million pieces when she heard the malicious gossip.

You could think whatever you want, however, the least you could do was not let others hear such sickening thoughts. It was cruel to place the blame on the two younger siblings. They weren't worthy as heirs to the empire.

Unlike Katya, who had given in to the gossip, Jamal had challenged all of the silent relatives to a duel and in accordance with the rules of the empire, he had beheaded them all.

"Now that Picard is dead, House Aurélie is ours. Wait and see, Katya. I'll make sure that you never have a reason to scowl again," radiated Jamal with a smile, drenched in the blood of a decapitated relative.

In spite of Katya's scowl in response, seeing the head roll away was almost enough to alleviate the cries of resentment that had wrapped hold of itself deep in her for so long.

Anyway…

"From this day forward, House Aurélie will begin its rapid march forward!"

She was no prophet, but as Katya watched Jamal's enthusiastic cries, she was convinced that the family line would die out.

3

With the death of their eldest and the rebellious new heir, their father, the head of House Aurélie, became desperate following the disappearance of the sibling's mother.

Both parents had little interest in their own daughter, who was born with poor health.

Even though they were traumatized by their eldest's death, Katya felt nothing. On the surface, he was good to others, but he was always cold to Katya and hated her.

Of course, Katya disliked him in return. Although she didn't wish for his death, she also didn't feel any remorse or sadness when he met his maker.

Jamal is the only one in the family who cares for me.

He was a hopeless brother, but Jamal was the only family she had. If Jamal wished it, Katya would willingly help him reach his rash ambitions.

She wasn't a great beauty and was of little use as a woman due to her poor health. But if Jamal thought she could be of use politically and wanted to marry her off, Katya was more than willing to help

him.

And so…

“Meet Todd Fang. My colleague.”

Deep in her heart, Katya knew that Jamal lacked the charm of a nobleman when he returned from a war zone, bringing back with him someone he wanted to introduce her to.

Katya had never discussed the future of the family with him.

Jamal had no idea that Katya had resigned her future away, but it didn’t matter. He remained confident in his plan, even though it wasn’t a very good one.

Even if it wasn’t an impossible plan…

“Mr. Todd, may I ask what position you hold?”

“Sorry? Oh, you mean the social standing of my family or my army title? Well, I wasn’t born into a great family, and I’m the lowest ranking soldier. But, I suppose this promotion would make me a Private First-Class, don’t you agree?

“I suppose so…”

“Damn right he is!” butted in Jamal. “Listen to this, Katya. He was awarded for his distinguished service in the army. He was the one that, well…beheaded the rebel leader.”

Jamal patted Todd on the shoulder with a look of pride on his face.

Introducing such a man to Katya felt like a cruel joke. There were still so many unanswered questions that demanded an explanation.

Such as what had happened to his right eye or why he burst into his sister’s—who was nonetheless a lady—private quarters without permission. And why he would introduce her to a stranger who was neither of an acceptable social rank nor held a high position in the army.

Katya’s mind was filled with such questions, but Jamal, with an open and unruffled expression, said to Katya, “I like this guy. How about it, Katya? How would you like to have him as your husband?”

House Aurélie might very well die out in our own lifetime, she thought.

4

“I don’t know much about the world of nobility,” Todd began, “but I understand that you and Jamal are in a bad position.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that,” snapped back Katya.

“You have every right to think that way, but Jamal doesn’t see it that way. That’s the problem, isn’t it? I’m not sure how he feels about it.”

Katya sighed as Todd leaned his head against her bed.

Katya made a strange noise with a mixture of emotions upon hearing Jamal’s gory introduction to Todd, provoking a fit of madness where she drove them away when she smashed a nearby vase with a pillow.

If a man was to see such eccentric behavior from a woman on their first meeting, he would be disillusioned, regardless of what he had been told beforehand. Katya doubted her brother had any of the charm required to make his friends and colleagues want to see her again.

But despite Katya’s attempts to drive Todd away with her sour attitude, he continued to drop by the Aurélie house to see her.

“…”

“Hmm? What’s up? Is there something on my face?”

“…Your face has shady weirdo written all over it.”

“Ha-Ha-ha-ha, what the heck? Saying I look like a shady weirdo is an awful thing to say."

Even when she gave him snide remarks, Todd would laugh them off.

Katya felt puzzled by the ordeal. Her attitude was not very ladylike, and yet he wouldn't even leave her room.

Katya didn't like to be exposed to the sun, so all of the windows in the room were covered with thick curtains and she rarely got out of bed except to use the bathroom.

"Are you feeling self-conscious because you can't go outside with me?" asked Todd "If that's the case, I'd appreciate it if you made use of my gift."

With a friendly smile on his face, Todd pointed to the chair with wheels in a corner of the room—a product of Kararagi origin. Apparently, it could be used to seat a person with a limp and push them around from behind.

"A chair on wheels is crazy. I'll fall."

"I've made it so that you won't fall out of it. It'll be tough to move around by yourself, but I won't leave you alone. That won't be an inconvenience to you, will it?

He had gone to the trouble of setting it up for Katya, and had given it to her as a gift.

I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. —I don't know what to do…why would Todd do that for me?

"…Do you like my brother, by any chance?" asked Katya.

"Oh, come on, that's a terrible misunderstanding. Don't tell me you think I'm trying to get Jamal to like me through you? That would just piss him off, don't you think?"

"…Yeah. I suppose so. You're kind of a weird guy. Odd and creepy."

That's why I haven't even laid a finger on that wheelchair. But I still don't get what he's after.

"I can't walk, I can't have children, there's not a single womanly thing about me, and I have a twisted personality. And on top of that, there's my troublesome brother."

"You're right, I can't love you for that last flaw."

"!!!"

Her breath stopped. This went against everything she knew. She had been ridiculed endlessly by others her entire life. She cursed herself for her inability to have children and here stood a man before her who claimed he loved her.

It was all a lie. It had to be. Todd was crazy to love a cursed woman like her. But what was the point of deceiving Katya like this? Was he after the Aurélie family fortune? They may have looked wealthy to a commoner, but this home wasn't worth ransacking.

"Todd, I don't understand you."

"I don't really mind, Katya. Even if you don't understand me, I don't give a single damn. But I want you to remember just one thing."

"…What's that?"

Todd reached for Katya, who sat up on her bed, her back resting on a pillow. He stood up, pulling her hands close to him. Katya's eyes widened and her shoulders tensed in response.

Todd gently stroked her pale cheeks and said, "I love you with every fiber of my being," before he went on. "This is no exaggeration. I love you, no questions asked."

"Oh…"

I'm not good enough to be loved. Jamal has always showered me with kindness, but that's because he's my brother. I had another brother who didn't care for me, Picard. But Jamal was the exception.

But what would that make Todd? I don't know. I don't know, and I'm afraid of not knowing.

"I want to make the world an easier place for you and Jamal to live in."

Katya could not say anything to Todd's gentle smile or the touch of his unusually cold hand.

After some time, their relatives disappeared without an explanation. They had often interfered in Katya's life and in Jamal's post as an imperial soldier. So, Katya was more than happy to stay in the dark about such reasons.

She accepted the fact that Todd Fang was a curious man, and when he asked for her hand in marriage, she accepted, entrusting their futures to one another.

—And so, the countdown had begun for the downfall of House Aurélie, or so she thought.

5

—Turning forward to the present, as Katya learns of the news of her brother's death.

Hearing the coughing Katya fall out from her bed, the maid rushed to the scene to help her. The strong scent of incense filled the room and Katya recalled the morning of her brother's departure for his next expedition.

Wearing the now-familiar eyepatch, Jamal was headed to the eastern territories with Todd. For some reason, when he returned from his mission, Jamal was more excited to talk about the wedding plans than the engaged couple themselves.

Even when he was alone with Todd, he would still bring the topic of the upcoming marriage up. It bothered her that he thought so highly of their partnership.

That's why Katya said those awful, childish things. There was always a chance that he might die on a mission, so she didn't want to make a big deal out of the ceremony.

I sent my brother off without even conveying a word of good luck and safety in arms. As a result, Jamal died. He promised me that he would come home safely, but he broke his word. But how could I blame him when it was me who was in the wrong in the first place?

So, you see…

“Lady Katya, Master Todd is here to see you.”

Katya gave a curt reply and went to her wheelchair. It was a gift from Todd, and one that she had been using for some time without any resistance. The wheels were hard to turn with her hands, but it allowed her to move freely around the room.

With some difficulty, Katya managed to turn the wheelchair towards the door.

“My brother…is dead…”

Why did this pathetic man who claimed he loved me come back?

I don’t know what to make of any of this. My entire life is filled with misfortune. —Oh, how I despise myself so.

“Katya, it’s me. I’m coming in.”

There was a knock at the door and a man’s voice lingered in her ears. Katya grabbed the vase on the table. The door slowly opened, and aiming at the man on the other side, she threw the heavy vase with all her might.

“You complete pest!” she cried, lashing out at her fiancé and cursing her misfortune.

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Laundry While the Oni are Away

"—Soul Sisters, is it?"

Hearing a word she was not familiar with, Rem returned that question with a puzzled look.

This was the garden of the biggest mansion within the Fortified City of Guaral. Near a well in the rear garden, they were doing laundry on clothes and bandages at a watering hole.

Recently, there was a commotion which, while small in number, left several wounded. As such, there was no harm in having as many spare bandages as possible. —Furthermore, it served the purpose of preparing for the future.

Of course, to Rem, it would be better if these did not have to be used in the first place.

In either case—

"That's right, yees~ Kuna and I are that Soul Sisters thing, yeees~"

Laughing with a wide grin, standing beside Rem as she did laundry, Holly was hanging the clothes that just finished washing up on a string. This girl who was a full head taller than Rem, contrary to her carefree way of talking, was hanging the laundry at a brisk pace.

Although she had grown used to handling her cane to a certain degree, comparing Rem, whose legs could not be described as flawless, to Holly would yield a night and day difference.

With the tips of her hair dyed yellow, donning healthy brown colored skin, was Holly. Rem also found herself thinking of their time together as quite long within her own subjective life.

That said, there were still many things about her that she still did not know.

“Holly-san, you seem quite versed in doing laundry.”

“Ehehe, you’re gonna make me blush, yees~. In truth, I originally didn’t have the role of Hunter, but of Guardian instead, which is why I’m good at this, yees~”

“Guardian, is it?”

While she understood the meaning of that word, she had not the faintest idea what specific duties it entailed from her answer.

From the flow of conversation, she understood that Guardians and Hunters were a set of words, but within Rem’s meager, unreliable knowledge, she did not have a big impression of those two going together.

In that manner, Rem furrowed her brow,

“What are you doing…Rem’s head is in shambles, ain’t it?”

“Ah, it’s Kuna~”

With nary a sound, a thin shadow appeared as it stepped into the garden’s field. Holly’s eyes glinted as she spotted her entrance, swinging a big hand as she called her name.

Giving an apathetic shrug to that call, the tips of her hair dyed green, was Kuna.

In contrast to the wide-eyed Holly, the sharp slit-eyed Kuna gazed at Rem doing laundry, and then at Holly who was hanging it respectively,

“Rem, titles like Guardian and Hunter, are actually the way we Shudrak operate. As such, you ain’t gonna come up with the answer no matter how much you wreck your head”

“I see, so that’s how it is… What do they mean?”

“…The fact that you ain’t got any hesitation there is another good trait of yours, Rem”

“… ? ”

Eyes narrowed, Rem tilted her head at Kuna who was scratching her cheek. Behind her, Holly tilted her head in much the same way, grumbling, “You say such difficult things Kuna, yeees~”

Sighing in disappointment at their reaction, Kuna raised a finger and said, “Listen ok?”

“Ain’t like it matters to me, but traditions are something that are directly connected to someone’s pride. Even if trying to learn while ignorant is something good, there seem to be people who consider direct questioning to be rude”

“For that…I’m sorry; I did not think far enough”

Hearing the warning from Kuna who had slightly lowered the tone of her voice, Rem meekly lowered her head.

It would be a simple matter to dismiss Kuna’s words as an exaggeration. However, for Rem, who, to a certain extent, knew as little of the world as a baby, what basis did she have to declare something an Exaggeration?

Holding those given words close to her chest, Rem deeply scolded herself.

“So then, what does it mean?”

“…Did you listen to what I just said?”

“Of course. However, if I had already asked once…”

As if asking to leave the reflection for later, she positioned herself to continue her questioning right here.

Kuna raised both hands at Rem’s curiosity, saying, “Fine, fine” in defeat.

“Ain’t no point in hiding it so I’ll talk… A Guardian is, someone with the role of protecting the village and raising the children while the hunters are away”

“Protecting the village, and raising the children…is it? That is a splendid job”

“A job for the leftovers is what it is”

Rem had been very satisfied hearing the explanation for the Guardians; however, Kuna’s answer was bitter. Averting her eyes, Kuna pursed her lips. In response to her trying to make Rem see things in black and white then,

“Geez~, Kuna, if you keep talking like that, you’re gonna trouble Rem~”

“Ah, no, if it was me who asked something inappropriate then…”

“No, not at all~ There’s nothing for you to apologize for~ It’s just, Kuna admires the job of a Hunter very much, so she doesn’t like the duty of Guardian~ “

Laughing at the bewildered Rem, Holly grabbed Kuna by the shoulders and jostled her. With the difference in physiques, Kuna was being handled like trees swaying in a gale.

And then, while Holly was swinging Kuna around—

“Kuna and I, we ended up switching roles to Hunter partway~. Because we came up with us doing the duty with Kuna as the eyes, and with me drawing the bow~”

“Eyes and Bow… Now that you mention it, you two had gone hunting together”

Previously, when they had traveled from the Shudrak settlement to Guaral, the two of them accompanied Rem as her bodyguards. En route, they were the ones who hunted prey, and procured ingredients.

At the time as well, while they seemed like an odd pair, their excellency in archery had moved her.

“And then we both became Hunters~ That and this as well, represent our bond as Soul Sisters~”

"…I'm telling you it ain't that crazy of a thing"

Kuna's cheeks lightly colored in embarrassment at the frank Holly's smile. Looking at that, Rem preambled with a "By the way"

"I missed my chance to ask this before, but umm, what are Soul Sisters?"

Souls and Sisters were not like Hunters and Guardians, but they were also a meaningful combination. Though she could guess that this was used to describe Kuna and Holly both from their tone,

"I believe it's both a very precious word and relationship, but what is the actual meaning?"

"You, how come you made such a meek face a moment ago…"

"—Was it, wrong of me?"

Glared at by Kuna with reproachful eyes, Rem sought answers hesitantly.

As she said, it was true that she was reflecting just a moment ago, but she could not stop this intellectual curiosity of hers. Kuna making a sour face at Rem's pleading look, but—

"Soul Sisters are, Shudrak babies who were born on the same day~"

"Ah! Holly, what the hell!"

"Geez~, this isn't something to hide and bully her over~; I'm telling you it's fine to tell her about it~"

Puffing up her round cheeks, Holly, who answered for Kuna, threw out her chest. However, Kuna poking those puffed-up cheeks of Holly、

"Don't be stupid. If it's around us then I don't mind, but what happens when Rem does the same thing with somebody who isn't us? They might get angry won't they?"

"Then when the time comes, we just have to protect Rem from that angry person~!”

“We ain’t always gonna be with her!”

“P-Please don’t fight over me!”

In the panic of the two having begun to quarrel, Rem jumped in to intercede. Standing up using her cane, she, literally, broke in between the two.

“Holly’s care and Kuna’s concern both make me glad. But, I do not wish for you to fight. You’re Soul Sisters, are you not?”

“Muh…”

“That’s right~”

It seems her eye is quite discerning, as the both of them calmed down when she referenced Soul Sisters. Whether it was to the Shudrak or to the two of them, it might carry the same meaning, but it seemed that phrase was deemed quite important, and something to be used with much care.

Seeing the relationship between the two, suddenly made Rem come to a conclusion.

“I’m envious of your relationship”

“What now?”

“Soul Sisters…Surely, it refers to sisters who don’t need a blood-relation right? And you two get along so well, and even hunt together “

Supporting each other, the two constructed an indispensable relationship.

For Rem who had nothing to lean on, she thought of that as something bright, something to be very envious of. Especially so, since she harbored an immense sentiment towards the sound of “Soul Sisters”.

“It seems I also, have an older sister. An older twin sister, as I’ve heard”

“Rem’s onee-san~?”

“Yes. That person said it though, and I don’t remember it, so I only half believe it…”

While she kept prefacing it that way, as expected she did not actually doubt the existence of her sister. That said, the unconfirmed existence of her sister was, after all, something that had an impression called an emotionally complex burden on Rem.

However, the one with the vague existence was the current Rem herself. In her current state where she was being manipulated by Subaru’s every action and his every word, what if she happened to meet her true sister?

“My current self, couldn’t face even my blood sister with a clear heart. That’s why, I’m envious of you two who are connected by an unseen bond”

“Rem…”

With Rem having verbally expressed her complicated state of mind, Holly flapped her hands up and down in panic. Her response meant that she did not really know what she wanted to say, nor what would be acceptable to say.

Realizing she had troubled the kind hearted Holly, Rem tried to say something to her when—

“—I think, ya ain’t gotta be so pessimistic about it”

Rem blinked her eyes with an “eh…” at Kuna who made that statement with one eye shut.

“You’re sisters, and also twins right? Whether it be twins or triplets, the connection between sisters born from the same belly is quite strong as it seems. From what I’ve heard, the Shudrakian term Soul Sisters, is taken from that bond I hear”

“Eeeh, was that so~?! I had no idea at all~!”

“It’s just what I’ve heard, okay?”

Kuna reminded such to Holly, who had placed a hand over her mouth in surprise.

Originally, whenever twins or more were born in the Shudrak, it was confirmed that there laid a special connection between them. Warped by the flow of time, the tale that was passed down was that of the special bond between 『Twins of the soul』 for children born on the same day.

“In short, Soul Sisters is all just make believe”

“Geez~! Kuna, you’re back at it with that wording again~! Kuna I’m really going to start believing that you hate being Soul Sisters with me~!”

“I ain’t saying that…but, it’s just that’s how I think. We can’t keep holding onto these old ass customs; we gotta advance or else the Shudrak’ll fall to ruin”

“Geez~! Don’t let the Chief…I mean, Mizelda hear you~!”

Kuna did nothing but shrug her shoulders at Holly who displayed her dissatisfaction while shaking both hands.

Watching those two, Rem looked down at her chest at their previous words. From the bottom of her quietly beating heart within her chest, there was a very faint twinge-like sensation.

What was that, the discomfort and sense of foreignness that she was reminded of, she had always wondered.

“My connection, with my flesh-and-blood sister….”

“Supposing perhaps, you prayed, tried to wish for it, then you might be able to feel it. If you wanna remember what you forgot, that may also be a way to go about it”

As if she guessed Rem’s confusion, Kuna said that in anticipation.

A temporary hesitation. However, she wished for that discomfort's true form after all, and so Rem surrendered herself to that probing feeling. She closed her eyes, seeking the answer from that warmth in the darkness.

"—ah"

—She felt like she could feel a faint, light pink warmth in a near faraway place.

"Did you feel something~? If so then that's amazing~!"

"I can't feel it super clearly…But I could feel like it was there. Is this, a connection?"

She once again felt like she had touched a part of her connection with that unseen someone, her yet to be known sister, so Rem mumbled.

As unreliable as that feeling was, and while it certainly made her feel like it was there, it also made her fully realize the huge gap which she was unable to pull that closer from.

That the current Rem, could not possibly close that enormous gap.

However—

"I very, very much felt it. Something which feels much more reliable than that person …"

"…Man, Subaru just ain't catching a break"

"And he's working so hard for Rem too; Subaru is so pitiful~"

Hearing Rem's words as she lightly complained, Kuna and Holly's stances leaned more towards Subaru.

Certainly there was no need to cite him as an example, so Rem reflected on that point as well. However, the one who gave information about her sister to the mentally unstable Rem was Subaru in the first place.

He himself did not have any bad intentions, and he even prefaced it with”Sorry”before telling her, but even then, Rem’s turmoil was very difficult for others to perceive.

His lack of attention to those things is what makes Subaru a Subaru.

“That’s enough about that person. We’re digressing”

“You were the one who brought Subaru into the conversation in the first place…”

“That is not true…It is not, right?”

After replying reflexively, she then lost confidence in her own statement. That said, if that were to be the truth, she would be a bit uncomfortable about Subaru always residing in some corner of her mind.

She had remained in Guaral away from him, for the sake of Subaru’s own independence as he had tried to remain next to her. And also because she is being roundaboutly told to reexamine herself by Priscilla.

“…Understood. Let us do laundry with a clear mind”

“The moment you say to have a clear mind, ain’t it like you’re no longer with a clear mind?”

“Geez~! Don’t speak out of turn~!”

Respecting Rem who wanted to renew her feelings, Holly, who had puffed up her cheeks, held Kuna tight. Buried under her chest due to the size difference, Kuna let out a “Mugyu”

Doing that and holding the wriggling Kuna tight, Holly smirked,

“I’m also going to continue helping Rem~! We’re doing some nice laundry after so long; it’s quite fun so join us Kuna~!”

“Wha-, why do I gotta join you guys…!”

“But Kuna, I joined you when you said you wanted to go hunting together~!”

“Ugh…hh”

As if that was in fact her sore point, Holly’s counter made Kuna stiffen.

Somehow, she felt like she had seen an unexpected power balance between the two, and Rem let out a small giggle. And here she had thought Kuna had seized leadership, while Holly merely followed her.

“Seems like Holly is the one who is actually more like an elder sister than Kuna.”

“Yeah yeah, Rem gets it~! I was the one who was born first~”

“Ain’t that like some tens of seconds difference or something?! No way we’re deciding it from that!”

Baring her fangs, Kuna escaped from Holly’s arms, and then turned towards Rem’s back. Glaring at the laundry being washed with well water that they’re holding, she sighed.

Kuna held dissatisfaction towards the role of Guardian, and decided to become a hunter together with her Soul Sister. There was no mistaking that this was a reluctant job for her—

“Alrght whatever, I’ll help out”

Perhaps because of consideration for Rem who was in a rush to finish her job, or because her Soul Sister had asked her with a cheerful smile, Kuna proposed so curtly.

Rem laughed in response to her attitude,

“Yes, your help is most welcome; we have to clear this job, lest helping Priscilla with her bath be delayed, and I incur her words of displeasure.”

“…You, seems like you have it tough.”

“We really have to help you with this after all~!”

Perhaps because Priscilla’s tyranny was quite well known, she keenly felt Kuna and Holly’s kindness.

Laughing bitterly at that truth, Rem got to work on finishing the remaining laundry, while being helped by the cooperation of sisters who, while having no blood relation, are truly linked through the soul.

Doing so, she poured her thoughts but for a moment, onto the perturbation she felt even now within the depths of her chest.

That was—

“I wonder just what kind of sister I was?”

She lunged such a question, which would not receive an answer, to her yet unseen older sister.

END

The Dragon Kingdom:
Missing Child Search Chronicle V

1

Diadora Regundra was the daughter of a wealthy, distinguished family of merchants from Piqtat.

Born into a rich household and blessed with good looks, the girl grew in age as she did in selfishness.

Whatever she wanted, she obtained, for nobody dared oppose one designated with her family's surname. Since she was a child, the circumstances gave leeway for her arrogance to thrive, supported by her house's power, which she, in her naivety, mistook for her own.

Hence, Diadora went on without ever meeting any lack, until one day, past her thirteenth birthday, she experienced failure for the first time.

She reached the stage where she began to acquire the features of a woman, along with a deep yearning for romance that she would aim to satisfy by using her beauty and status as weapons to conquer the opposite sex.

For some time, it was almost regarded as a show to see her parading around the city, accompanied by the men that she had caught.

Diadora was at her peak, no doubt… until she tumbled in the most unexpected way.

"Sorry, Diadora. I have some work to do at home. I'm thankful for the offer, but maybe next time."

Displaying a gentle yet mirthless smile, that man declined Diadora's invitation.

She could not believe it. To Diadora, the fact that she lost to a man's rejection was like a bomb dropped from the sky.

She continued to ask him time after time, under the assumption that he had made a mistake, but the answer never changed.

Eventually, the shame from those accumulated defeats opened a crack in Diadora's once perfect life. Desperate to fill up that crack, she committed herself to obscure her defeats with victories.

Or rather, to obscure her obsession with the one who rejected her, with the presence of a hundred who adored her.

But while she repeated that cycle, sometimes she would come to her senses. Was this going to fill up the crack in her heart in the end? Or was it just worsening it?

Since she could not have what she wished for in earnest, she questioned the value of what she did have in hand.

Diadora ignored, defied, dismissed those laments from her inner voice, and so she kept walking down this strenuous, thorny path…

"Looks like you're the eighth guy she's been with!"

And then came her second failure, wreaked by the younger brother of that same man who had jilted her.

2

"So that man is back in the city…?"

A manservant entered the mansion and gave a report that sullied Diadora's gorgeous profile with sourness.

Several years had passed since that disgraceful ice season, so she thought that the damage was repaired. However, the moment she heard his name, she felt blood gushing from the same wound that she thought healed.

The blood's vivid color and smell forced her to remember that nothing had ended yet.

"Well, it's been six years since that."

Putting a hand on her chamber's window, Diadora reminisced upon that dreadful day from the past.

During that one ice season, an unusual cold wave had assailed the south of the kingdom, and thereby Piqtat. Thanks to the gelid atmosphere, she had more time than usual to revel in interaction with the opposite sex.

Diadora longed for affection, but a certain man had misjudged that as the manifestation of a vile desire.

That man's futile, pointless diligence had resulted in a quite indiscreet disclosure of Diadora's relationships, and thus many people being hurt, including the aforementioned.

Therefore, she had decided to eliminate the cause itself. He was lucky to have escaped just before she could complete the task.

"If only he had never come back, I'd have turned a blind eye… What a stupid man."

Had he absconded and accepted that he would be forbidden to set foot in his hometown again, she would have exonerated him. But instead, the man had returned to Piqtat, almost as if he believed that he was welcome.

In doing so, he had reestablished their unsettled debt. And she was determined to collect her payment.

"Listen here. Call the mercenaries of this city. Get in contact with anyone who's interested in earning my favor or the Regundra family's. Now, at last, that man will…!"

"E-Excuse me, milady, that'll have to wait."

"What? We don't have all day. That man can get away any moment now. Seriously, he's as repulsive as those zodda bugs he…"

The opportunity for revenge had appeared, and Diadora was very eager to seize it. Her reprimand towards the manservant clarified that she would tolerate no hindrances.

However…

"Goaaah!"

"…?! Wh-What was that?! Who screamed?!"

All of a sudden, a hoarse scream blared outside the room, from downstairs, and astonished Diadora. To complement her surprise, the manservant at her side jerked his shoulders up, his countenance tense as well.

"Please listen! We have trouble, milady! There are some visitors claiming to be allied with the one you despise…"

"Allies of that man? What does that have to do with…? Agh, out of my way!"

Irked at the manservant's incoherence, Diadora pushed the scrawny man's chest away and exited the room in a hurry. When she espied the entrance hall on the ground floor, her eyes widened.

There she found the Regundra family's sturdy security guard facing a visitor…

"Ah, gh! Ugogogogo!"

"Quit kickin' up such a fuss! I'm tellin' ya, we ain't here ta pick a fight!"

And there she saw him shaking his legs midair as he struggled, with all his might, to release his chin from his opponent's grip.

The perpetrator was a boorish, golden-haired man, almost two heads shorter than the hefty guard. Said man's companion, a woman who was holding her own elbows, took a glance upstairs.

The woman, characterized by a maid uniform and pink hair, met Diadora's eyes with her own.

"You have guests."

That greeting, straightforward and impolite to the fullest, marked the start of their affair.

3

"Is this an attack against the Regundra family? Aren't you aware of how big our household is?"

"If there's something big here, it's your attitude. You're standing so firm now, you could almost fool me into thinking your knees weren't trembling when you saw Garf strike earlier."

"Silence!"

Shout as she may at her, the pink-haired woman, named Ram, would still not cease her supercilious stance.

Certainly, the scene in the hall had come as a shock. It was hard to believe that Gomuz, a guard with no merit other than his brawn, had been overpowered by somebody brawnier.

And on top of it…

"Sorry for what I did ta that guy. I cast some healin' magic on him, so let's just forget it happened, a'ight?"

"Garf, it's no use apologizing after you've done it. I'd feel bad asking for a favor that way…"

"Grrr…"

That somebody was the same youngster who now drooped his shoulders at a sermon from an even younger girl.

"… What a strange combination you make."

Diadora furrowed her brow at the odd visitors that had somehow ended up in her parlor.

Two maids and one man, a peculiar trio, had forced their way through the security and into the Regundra house.

Nevertheless, she could not afford to let the awe take the lead away from her.

“According to my manservant, you are all here to talk about a certain man.”

“That’s right. It’s a rather useless man we’re dealing with, but since his little problem might turn into a bigger thorn in our sides, we can’t ignore it.”

Ram nodded serenely when the manservant’s report was mentioned. From her unaffected affirmation, it could be presumed that they were acquainted with the man in question, and perhaps had helped him return too.

And while Diadora tried to pinpoint the motive behind their visit…

“Uh, sorry to interrupt. We’re looking for someone important to us.”

A lovely girl, the youngest of the group, took Diadora out of her thoughts. Her name was Petra, and her round eyes shone with seriousness as she pleaded to Diadora.

“And to find him, we have no choice but to go through Piqtat…”

“What she said. So, ma’am, we’re gonna need yer family… or rather, ya, ta cancel that one weird request ya sent.”

“Please!”

The youngster, nicknamed Garf, complemented Petra’s plead. Diadora watched Petra bow her head lower, then turned to look at Ram.

There, on the sofa, sat the woman, no humility whatsoever in her posture.

“What?” she narrowed her pink eyes, “Ram won’t say a word, no matter what face you make at her. At most, I can provide you with an insult.”

“Sister Ram! Don’t be like that. Let’s ask her together. I know you care about Subaru and Rem as much as we do.”

“Of course Rem has a place in my heart, but it’s not big enough to fit Barusu in.”

“Sister Ram…!”

Blushing, Petra urged Ram, who, in response, sighed and faced Diadora again.

“I take it back. Ram will ask as well. Withdraw it, please.”

“…”

“Withdraw the assassination order you placed against Otto Suwen.”

The moment that name came out of Ram’s lips, Diadora’s slanted eyes became sharper. That name belonged to the one who had cracked Diadora’s life for the second time.

No matter how much she tried to forget it, she could never.

“Must I? He’d be completely safe if he hadn’t come here in the first place.”

“Believe me, even he was reluctant. But necessity called, so he answered. That’s the kind of man he is at heart.”

“Necessity… Is that so?”

Every single part of Ram’s reply got under Diadora’s skin. If that man did act out of necessity, then, did that imply that shaming her had been necessary, too?

He and his brother had done nothing but humiliate her, disgrace her…

“I deny it.”

“Miss Diadora, don’t say that…”

“Oh, no, I sure will! I couldn’t care less what kind of life that man had outside this city. So he’s grown into such a wonderful person? Well, good for him!”

“Miss Diadora…”

“I will never, ever, forget what he did to me.”

With the aftertaste of disgrace in her mouth, Diadora glared at the visitors and spoke up.

That was her true intent, independent of the manservant, Gomuz, or the Regundra family.

When Ram heard those words, she lowered her gaze a little.

“Excuse us.”

“Huuuh? Hey, Ram, not yet. What’re we gonna do about Otto-bro?”

“We’ve tried everything. Ram doesn’t want to give up, either. However, I’ve concluded that, this time, the problem is only Otto’s. If we have to risk having him killed by an assassin, then we’d better leave him behind.”

“What tha hell are ya talkin’ about?! Ain’t that like ‘Giyugri’s Spinning Plates’?!”

Ram shrugged and prepared to retreat from the place, despite Garf’s insistence. Diadora, while dumbfounded, did not disagree with him.

If they were going to retire so early, why had they even bothered visiting?

At least, Diadora was relieved to see that Ram did not disregard her opinion.

“… We’re employees of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers.”

"Huh…"

"Mister Otto works at his mansion along with us."

Looking askance at Ram and Garf, Petra presented a shocking testimony.

Diadora was struck with amazement and confusion, and at a loss for words, when she found out about their unlikely job.

"Petra," Ram intervened, narrowing her eyes, "this is a wealthy household from Piqtat. Lord Roswaal's name shouldn't be used in such a…"

"Sister Ram, you go way too easy on Master. Besides, I think that he asked me to go with you, precisely, so that I could do this."

"…"

Ram endured Petra's rebuttal with uneasy silence. Once she blocked Ram's opposition, Petra continued talking to Diadora, whose mouth was also shut.

"Miss Diadora, I won't pretend I understand how you feel. But I do understand that Mister Otto did something wrong. So, how about this?"

"… About what?"

"I'll make myself responsible for bringing Mister Otto here, so that he apologizes. You may do whatever you want to him… as long as it's not too harsh, but still, that'd help you get back at him."

Diadora listened, wide-eyed, as Petra raised a finger and elaborated without hesitation. Who would have thought that a girl with a face and mannerisms so cute could say something so frightening?

But the scariest thing was her proposal itself.

Because one would not think about broaching that unless they were aware of the cracks in Diadora's heart.

“Mister Otto hurt you. And as a fellow woman, I get it.”

“…”

“Since I’ve already mentioned our Master’s name, we could go over your head and solve this. But, honestly, I don’t want to do that.”

She was searching for common ground, to satisfy her own worries and Diadora’s feelings alike.

In the end, Diadora would be obliged to withdraw the assassination order against Otto, regardless of her choice. And yet, she was being offered a chance to fill that crack.

“What do you think?” Petra inquired with innocent eyes.

The girl’s prospects seemed bright to an eerie degree.

“…Can you really do that?”

“You bet I can. People at the mansion always listen to me,” Petra boasted as she flexed her thin arm, a quite comforting gesture.

Behind her, Garf could be seen with a grievous expression, proof of the disquiet surging inside his mind.

Diadora placed a hand on her chest and thought about the invisible crack.

“May I ask just one question?”

“Yes?”

After accepting her defeat, Diadora spoke in a mild tone, to which Petra tilted her head. Ram and Garf stayed at the back, waiting for Diadora to continue.

In front of three different spectators, Diadora paused for a second, then opened her mouth:

“What’s so good about that zoddabuggerer, anyway?”

As soon as she said that, Ram and Petra’s visages twisted into displeased looks, much to Diadora’s amusement.

4

Petra kept her promise to the very end. And very firmly at that.

“I am sincerely sorry for what I did that day. I was very immature at the time, but I have reflected a lot since then.”

Watching the man bow his head and apologize for that past humiliation, Diadora breathed out a long sigh.

To hold a grudge against somebody for eternity would take its toil on her. Thus, it would be wiser to redirect that zeal and apply it in the search for her own happiness. Petra had taught her that.

It was enviable that, when asked why she had come, the girl could answer, ‘for someone important,’ with confidence. Just as enviable as being somebody whom that girl could cherish that way.

As the second crack closed, Diadora mustered her courage once more…

“If you’re really sorry, do me a little favor. Now, can you tell me what your brother… what Mister Oslo likes?”

The same man who, years ago, had scurried away while on the brink of death was now before Diadora, eyes full of a lively blaze that incited her to tackle the first crack anew.

END

Volume 31

Chapters 61-75

Chapter 61:
Welcome, to the Gladiator Island!

1

—He felt like he had been left behind in a cold, dark place.

The place was dark as if he had closed his eyes, cold as if he had pressed his cheeks against a discarded clump of iron. He desperately sought salvation, feeling his entire body bound by chains of captivity.

That was also why he kept stretching out his hand, as if in a trance, looking for anything he could find.

However, that was not why he had stretched out his hand towards the looming white light at the very end.

The light—rather, its identity was that of a girl, with a tragic look of determination hidden on her face. He had stretched out his hand towards her, not because he was seeking salvation from her, but because he felt he needed to save her.

And so, bending the chains that prevented him from moving his body even an inch, he reached out a hand, his own hand.

He reached out his hand and—.

???: "—It's so small."

As he muttered that, Natsuki Subaru stared at his own hand, now reflected in his blurred vision.

The hand being held up to the ceiling, palm facing out, was his own one, extending out from his shoulder. It clenched and closed, moving just as he willed. Without a doubt, it was his.

However, it was the hand of a child, a size smaller than Subaru had expected.

Meaning—

Subaru: “I didn’t turn back to normal…”

That had been his chance to get out of his hopeless situation, he should have attained it after going through untold hardship. He had literally put his life on the line over and over again for this, or so it seemed, and yet, the result had slipped from his hands.

Just how many sacrifices had he made for what had left his hands?

Just. How many. Sacrifices—

Subaru: “—?! That’s right, the hell am I doing?!”

A jolt suddenly running through his bleary consciousness, Subaru brought the hand he had been staring at to his face.

The memories that came streaming back to him were those of the strange situation he had encountered at the Demon City, as well as the dangerous game of tag with Olbart, where he had been put through the wringer; so much so, that that had been worse than the former.

Subaru had managed to seize victory after accumulating countless “deaths”. He should have succeeded in getting his victor’s dues—namely, in getting rid of his infantilization.

Subaru also recalled Olbart touching his chest to try and undo his infantilization.

And immediately after that, he felt like someone had whispered the soul language of love into his ears, and—

Subaru: “I passed out after that, and then… And then?”

Subaru attempted to search his fuzzy memories for what had happened. However, even when he pushed and pulled, the door that held his interrupted memories within refused to open.

Firmly clenching his back teeth together, Subaru grew more and more impatient, as he felt how stubborn this door was—

???: “—Now, now, let’s take it easy, no need to get flustered. Luckily, y’all made it out with your lives, so you can take your time to do stuff after the lil’ missy that came with you wakes up.”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Suddenly, Subaru heard a voice coming from right beside him, turning to look at it in dumbfoundment. As he lay on a hard bed, his eyes met with someone resting their chin on their hands there.

This someone was grinning from ear-to-ear, peering right up close into his face.

Subaru: “UWAHHH?!”

???: “Whoa there. Love the reaction, but it’s best you keep things on the downlow. If we’re too noisy, we’ll catch the Island Chief’s eye, and they’ll put together a bothersome fight to the death. But then again…”

Subaru: “Uh, ah, uh…”

???: “Though it may be in bad taste, I don’t dislike it, rather, I quite like it.”

In front of Subaru, who jumped to his feet without thinking and darted his eyes about in bewilderment, was a blue-haired individual, boasting ever so nonchalantly.

He had his long hair tied up into a ponytail, and was donning something reminiscent of Japanese-style garb, the likes of which were seldom seen here. Left astonished by how unfamiliar he looked, Subaru took a deep gulp before he chose his words, and his questions.

Not only the other party was unfamiliar, but also the place, the environment, the atmosphere—

Subaru: “…Who are you? Where are we?”

???: “—Oh, how splendid! What great questions! Just as I’d expected… No, it surpasses even my expectations!!”

Subaru: “Bweh?”

Subaru carefully tried to gauge his attitude; however, the other person, his eyes sparkling, quickly took Subaru’s hand, shaking it up and down with such force that the latter thought his shoulder might be torn off.

It was not like Subaru had been keeping his guard down. Yet, despite that, it felt like he could not react at all.

Before the flabbergasted Subaru, the individual let go of his arm with a “Whew”, and spun around once on the spot, as if dancing, and said,

???: “You, who have crossed the black lake and reached this island —the Gladiator Island Ginunhive! You, with that unpleasant look to your eyes, swirling with such wonderful premonitions! I shall indeed answer you!”

Both his tone and gestures were theatrical, and for someone he’d just met, he was rather ill-mannered. However, he showed no signs of knowing what Subaru was thinking, and instead brazenly stuck to his attitude, his theatrics.

Almost like he was an actor on a stage, basking himself in a round of thunderous applause like it was natural—.

???: “—Cecilus Segmunt.”

The way he stretched out his arms to the left and right as he voiced his name, made it look like he was doing a pose straight out of a kabuki.

Naturally, kabuki should not exist in this world, so he probably was not imitating an actual one. Even so, the pose he had struck had such a punch to it, that it robbed Subaru of his breath.

Then again, what had taken Subaru’s breath away was not merely his powerful pose, but also how familiar his name sounded. Where had he heard it before? As soon as he recalled, he frowned.

He had heard it straight from Abel.

If he was not mistaken, his name belonged to one of the Nine Divine Generals—.

Cecilus: “I am Vollachia’s Blue Lightning. —The lead actor of this world.”

Subaru gawked as he heard him grandiosely declare that before him.

Both his name and title were consistent with what Subaru recalled. —However, there was just one thing that stood as a huge issue.

Namely—

Subaru: “—Vollachia’s strongest, is a child?”

—Cecilus Segmunt, smiling right before him, was a child around the same age as the shrunken Subaru, with the very vibe of an obnoxious brat.

2

—The severe impact of “infantilization” was taking a toll on Natsuki Subaru’s mind and body alike.

The physical effects were easy to understand. As one would expect from Subaru’s current outward appearance, what he possessed amounted only to the physical capabilities of a kid roughly ten years of age. His arm and leg strength, and, naturally, his stamina and explosive strength, all had been reverted to a prepubescent state.

However, there were doubts as to just how useful Subaru’s original physical abilities were to begin with, by the standards of this other world. So it was probably safe to say that the difference was small, as much as he would hate to admit it.

Far more serious, however, was the impact to his interior, rather than his exterior.

Subaru: “Maybe my head’s all messed up…”

It was a misleading way of putting it, but it was a simple way of expressing the bad situation Subaru was in.

His ability to conceive, think, and draw on knowledge, was weakening. Although he was using the same desk as before, his ability to open drawers was weaker and he was unable to reach the drawers that were higher-up.

—At the tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle, the infernal game of tag unfolded, from Olbart’s authorship.

The abnormally high number of attempts he had taken to implement a countermeasure had very much been influenced by the regression in his ability to think. He was sure that before the shrinkage, he would have found the solution a little faster.

Probably, he would have come up with that idea, and put an end to that ordeal faster, to the point he would not have felt any pain.

Fortunately, at that time, it was not Subaru himself, but everyone who was important to Subaru that saved him.

He had felt everyone's voices, their support, echoing in his head, and—

Subaru: "No, no, that's not it…"

Suddenly, something slowly welled up within his heart, and Subaru hurriedly got rid of it with his hand.

The mixed feelings of relief and melancholy were probably a feeling more akin to homesickness. Before the infantilization, he would have been able to bear those feelings considering the chaos and his sense of responsibility, but it seemed that his childish body had even lowered the bulwark that protected against him tearing up. If he was not careful, he would likely break down crying.

Subaru: "… Don't cry, don't cry. Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot."

No matter how much he may mourn, he could not borrow strength from those not present.

Letting friction evaporate the tears, Subaru tried his utmost to get back to the main point. He had to, as it would be the only way he would ever get a chance to reunite with everyone.

What was important now, was neither his own weak mind nor his budding sense of nostalgia. Rather, what he needed to focus on most was the essence of his predicament.

Namely—.

Subaru: "Did I ever hear from Abel or Zikr-san about the age of the First…?"

Sniffling, Subaru searched his memory for the answer to his question.

Cecilus Segmunt—he had heard that he was the strongest amongst the Nine Divine Generals of Vollachia. That meant he was the most powerful person in the Empire.

The reason why they had gone to the Demon City of Chaosflame in the first place was to get Yorna, one of the Nine Divine Generals, to become their ally. In order to regain the throne, their side needed to attain as many Nine Divine Generals as possible.

Then, of course, it should have been natural to properly discuss the topic of the person who was ranked First.

So, he pried open that stiff drawer, searching for some answer, but —

Subaru: “The only things I can recall are that he’s unpopular, and therefore, not very reliable…”

He was not sure whether that was because that part had bore the greatest impact on him, or because that was all he had actually been told, but that was all the information Subaru possessed regarding the First.

Unfortunately, he was unable to find any information about his appearance, his age or anything of the like, which were what he wished to know at this moment.

Subaru: “But if it’s about being unpopular because he’s a child, then I can see why without a hitch.”

In the Empire, where the strongest were esteemed, it would be strange for the one most powerful to be unpopular.

If this were because the strongest person was a child, it would make sense. Many adults would be reluctant to follow a child, no matter how strong they were.

So, as Subaru came to terms with this prior information and his new knowledge,

Cecilus: “—It seems you’ve come to some kinda conclusion.”

To this statement, Subaru looked up to see a blue-haired boy—Cecilus, standing in front of him, donning the same grandiose pose he had adopted earlier.

Having left him standing there, Subaru, who had been lost in thought, blinked his eyes and said,

Subaru: “S-sorry, I left you there for a while.”

Cecilus: “Ah, no, not at all, don’t worry about me. I’m often left out of discussions, after all! I’m used to being left alone and not talked to, hahaha!”

Subaru: “I-is that so…”

Cecilus flashed his white teeth, blithely laying bare his sad situation.

Although he was taken aback by this attitude, he felt glad that his rude response had not spoiled his mood. After all, he had a lot of questions that he wanted to ask him.

He wanted to tilt his head in puzzlement, not knowing which of the many questions to start with.

Subaru: “Sorry for being rude, again, I apologize. I…”

Cecilus: “Like. I. Said! There’s no problem. Of course, that doesn’t mean that rudeness, disrespect, and acting without consideration for others are acceptable, but I’ve got the openness to tolerate those to some extent. If you’re intolerant, small, and superficial, then isn’t it just like playing a minor role and getting the short end of the stick?”

Subaru: “Y-yeah, you’re right. Thank you, that helps. On that note, I…”

Cecilus: “That reminds me! I didn’t ask you this because you were absorbed in your thinking, but how did you feel about that pose? Since I put my all into this pose, I’d gladly like to hear your reaction. I was thinking if adding this to my introduction would give it the last push it needed!”

Subaru: “W-wait a second, please, I was talking…”

Cecilus: “Oh yeah! There’s some other things I want to ask, I’m pretty interested in those! What do you think?! If you could tell me something about that in great detail, I’d—”

Subaru: “—Listen to me!”

Even though he attempted to speak calmly, all of his attempts were interrupted by the lightning-fast speech of the other party.

Fearing that he would be swept away by the momentum of the conversation, Subaru involuntarily let out a loud yell. After doing so, Subaru felt shock, as Cecilus’s almond-shaped eyes widened,

Cecilus: “Oh, by any chance, did I do it again?”

Subaru: “Nowadays you practically never hear that kind of level of a template response…”

Cecilus: “Lebel? Tenprate?”

Subaru: “Uhmm, it’s a phrase from my hometown, meaning something like standard or cliché.”

Cecilus: “Hoho, your hometown’s! That’s very interesting! Ah, I guess this one was no good.”

With a twinkle in his eye, the Blue Lightning was quick to pounce on the object of his curiosity.

Perhaps that nickname of his also symbolized his personality, which was too honest in regards to his desires, as if he were lightning searching for a high place to fall on. He was a completely restless character.

—But perhaps, he was rather concealing his true character with an act.

Cecilus: “Now now, what will you talk about? I can’t stop the throbbing in my chest, getting to hear what you have to say next! Haaa~, I feel so aliiive!”

Subaru: “…It doesn’t look like a performance, at all.”

With sparkling eyes, the boy desired that words from Subaru's mouth formed a story.

His attitude, seemingly entirely divorced from any deception or conspiracy, made Subaru wonder if Cecilus could even tell a lie. In the first place, what would be the point of setting such a trap for Subaru now?

Had he not been with Abel, Subaru would not have drawn any attention whatsoever in the Empire. —Of course, there were exceptions who had attempted to aim at Subaru's life without relent.

Subaru: "But those are exceptions, and I don't want to see them again if possible."

Cecilus: "—? What's wrong?"

Subaru: "Ah, I was just talking to myself. Also, I'm Natsuki Subaru… Gah."

With Cecilus tilting his head in confusion, Subaru voiced his name in order to dodge his doubt, but realized his carelessness in revealing his true identity.

At the time he had been cross-dressing, Subaru had assumed the name of Natsumi Schwartz, with prudence as to not spread his name in the Empire carelessly, but his childish thoughtlessness had ruined that.

If by some chance, by some small possibility, Cecilus, someone with the position of General First-Class of the Empire, were aware of the Royal Selection of the neighboring country of the Kingdom of Lugunica, and of the people involved in it, then—

Cecilus: "Natsuki Subaru, is it? It's got a curious sound to it, but somehow, it rolls off the tongue quite smoothly. By the way, which is the family name, Natsuki or Subaru?"

Subaru: "—. M-my family name's Natsuki, and given name's Subaru."

Cecilus: “Hahaaa, noted. Then I’ll call you Subaru-san! But if I find a better way to call you, I’ll just change it depending on my mood, so don’t be taken aback.”

Waving his hand in the air, Cecilus replied with a face that betrayed any hint of recognition.

Subaru was relieved to hear this, but at the same time, a slight doubt grew in his mind. —Was this child really Cecilus Segmunt?

Subaru: “…”

On second thought, anyone could just assert a potential identity. Of course the boy in front of him could do that, just like how Subaru identified himself as Natsuki Subaru.

Of course, the name and alias of the Blue Lightning, the strongest in Vollachia, were renowned.

It would be too much to expect to run into the strongest man in Vollachia in some unfamiliar, dodgy place like this one. Furthermore, it was more likely that this could just be some kid posing as the Blue Lightning because they admired the name and title. That would be a much more natural thought.

Cecilus: “Deary me. What’s with the suspicious look in your eyes? Is it something about me?”

Subaru: “…Are you, the real Blue Lightning?”

Cecilus: “There it is! They said it again! Just like every time!”

Since probing someone out was not his strength, he threw a fastball at Cecilus, who immediately let out uproarious laughter.

He wondered if he could continue to call this boy Cecilus, but it seemed that people other than Subaru also harbored doubts about the authenticity of his identity.

However—

Cecilus: “My words are genuine! Though exclaiming that is easy, it doesn't really prove anything, does it? On the other hand, about any hidden information that can be of use to prove my identity… Even if I told you anything of the sort, would you be able to tell what's genuine from what's not? Subaru-san, you don't know me that well, do you?"

Subaru: "That's… Yeah, you're right."

Cecilus: "Then, it's a waste of time to argue about the authenticity of my identity. Let's just cut out the useless stuff and move onto the next topic! That's way more constructive, even though I'm a specialist in destroying things!"

He felt like he was being cajoled by his momentum and eloquence, but with Cecilus advancing his arguments so ferociously and without pause, there was no opening for Subaru to object. Besides, what he had spoken was true, albeit extreme.

Within Subaru, there laid no method to tell if this truly was the Blue Lightning or not. Nor did he have a clue he could use. Then, even if he were to suspect this tentative Cecilus, he would never find the answer.

If that was the case—

Subaru: "…"

Once he set aside Cecilus as the target of his interest, the next question to rise to the fore would concern his situation.

As Subaru was about to let Olbart undo his "infantilization", his consciousness was engulfed by a void—no, something much darker engulfed him, and his consciousness vanished.

However, it was clear that he did not simply pass out, and that was that.

Case in point: Subaru was lying on a shabby bed, facing Cecilus.

Even with the limited resources of the village of Shudraq, efforts had been made to make the beds comfortable by using soft grass and wood. However, this bed showed no such consideration at all.

The only thing present there was a stand that was just good enough to lie down on.

Adding to this bleak impression was the room's empty, bare interior, devoid of anything but the bed.

The gray walls were dry and cracked, and the floor was stained with dirt that could not be removed. The damp, leaden air assaulted his lungs, and the environment was anything but comfortable.

It felt as if he were in a prison cell.

Subaru: "Um, Ceci, can I ask you something?"

Cecilus: "Ceci! What's that? Is that me, by any chance?"

Subaru: "I'm not sure if I can call you Cecilus when I don't know if you're real or fake…"

It was not like he was readying himself in case he met the real Cecilus, but rather it was the compromise Subaru had reached regarding the boy whose authenticity could not be ascertained.

Calling him "tentative Cecilus" would be rude and troublesome to begin with. Apart from being way too chummy to the point of being suspicious, his demeanor was very friendly and he wished to avoid being disliked.

Subaru: "Rather, he may be the friendliest person in the Empire… No, he can't compare to Flop and Medium. But I think he can put up a good fight."

However, he could not bet on that, as there were examples of people who had been friendly at first before changing their ways.

Then again, that Subaru had happened to meet the O'Connell siblings when he was with Rem had been a glimpse of uncharacteristically good fortune. Possibly, it was the most fortunate he had ever been his whole life.

Why had Flop called out to him back then, he wondered. Perhaps he had been unable to continue seeing Subaru and Rem like that.

Cecilus: "Ceci, Ceci, is it… What a special sensation! Exquisite sound! Now that I think back on it, I've never experienced being called a nickname. It's got a rich, fresh taste to it, doesn't iiit?"

Cecilus, on the other hand, was excited by his first nickname.

Subaru had picked a somewhat cheap name for him, but if he was so happy with it, hampering the latter's excitement would be undesirable, and he deemed it unnecessary to come up with an alternative. He really did not have any other ideas.

Subaru: "So, back to the subject… This isn't Chaosflame, is it?"

Cecilus: "Chaosflame… the Demon City, you mean? Yes, not at all. Rather, it's just on the opposite side of the Empire, from east to west! Like I said, this is the Gladiator Island Ginunhive."

Subaru: "Gladeator Islan…"

Subaru's lips curled as he felt the sound of that unfamiliar word, Ginunhive, escape from his tongue.

The name did not ring a bell, but the place's title gave him an unsettling feeling. If Chaosflame was called the Demon City because of the large number of demi-humans living there, then there had to be a reason as to why Ginunhive had that title, as well.

Gladeator Islan, that meant—

Subaru: "—Gladiator, Island?"

The word "gladiator" brought forth a certain image in his mind, as he remembered hearing it somewhere before.

If he remembered correctly, it was a word that Al would blurt out from time to time indeed. He had spent ten years and then some as a gladiator somewhere, always thinking that he was going to die.

Even though he had lost his left arm, he had managed to survive and escape that place.

Then, this place was—

Subaru: “No way, these are death game grounds…?”

Cecilus: “Deth gamu? Is that a phrase from your hometown too? What does it mean?”

Subaru: “…Something like a colosseum, a place where people kill each other.”

Cecilus: “Oh I see! Then you understood quickly! Exactly, these here are the “deth gamu grounds”!”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Cecilus laughed at Subaru, the latter overcome by a chill of horror after having mentioned this terrifying possibility.

The fact that he clapped his hands in front of his chest and spoke casually made Subaru suspect that he had misheard something. But no matter how long he waited, the words he wished to hear did not leak from Cecilus’s mouth.

—No, words leaked out, but they were not the words Subaru wished to hear.

Cecilus: “Once again, welcome to the Gladiator Island. It’s rare that people as young as me and Subaru-san come in, and even if we do, we don’t live long, so I wish you the best.”

Subaru: “Tha… Hk!”

Cecilus: “Tha?”

Subaru: “That’s ridiculous! There’s… There’s gotta be some kind of mistake!”

His face contorting, Subaru’s voice cracked at Cecilus in front of him.

It was too much to take in. To find himself in such a place, it had to be some kind of mistake.

Subaru: “Because I was in Chaosflame until I woke up, and…”

Cecilus: “Nono, you were on this bed while you slept as well. You were groaning as you slept. I understand groaning from the lack of comfort of sleeping here, but back when I was in Chaosflame…”

Subaru: “That’s not what I mean! Don’t you get it?!”

Cecilus: “Hmm.”

Irritated by the inscrutable Cecilus, Subaru’s spit went flying as he snapped at him.

Closing one eye at his complaint, Cecilus showed readiness to listen and did not interject. That demeanor of his made Subaru avert his eyes from him, instead looking around the room.

Subaru: “I… was in Chaosflame. Me being here must be some kind of mistake. I was doing stuff with other people too.”

Cecilus: “Even if you say it’s a mistake, you’re actually here, you know. If I accept that argument, that means I’d have to be the one sent flying, from the Island to the Demon City.”

Subaru: “Shouldn’t that be possible then, if I’m on the Gladiator Island?!”

Cecilus: “Beats me. —But if you want an answer to that, then I can present it to you very quickly.”

Shrugging his shoulders at Subaru’s tantrum because he would not listen, Cecilus calmly extended his hand. A slender finger of his pointed to a wall at the back of the room.

—No, it was not a wall. He pointed to a window with iron bars.

The window positioned high-up led the way outside the room, a damp breeze flowing through it.

Subaru: “No, no no no…!”

His lips quivering, Subaru jumped off the bed in a panic.

As soon as he stood barefoot on the cold floor, his head jerked and he felt weak, but he managed to suppress it, sprinting towards the window. He then jumped and grabbed the bars, forcibly hoisting himself up, placing his chin on the window frame as he wriggled awkwardly.

Then, somehow managing to lay his eyes on the view outside—

Subaru: "—Se… a?"

Cecilus: "Yeah, it's a lake."

Looking out the windows, Subaru muttered so in dismay.

Cecilus attempted to affirm what Subaru had said, having picked up on that mutter. However, Cecilus was wrong to affirm it, as Subaru had said "sea", not "lake".

Indeed, Cecilus had made a mistake. If he had indeed made a mistake, the scenery outside was possibly a mistake as well.

Or at least, Subaru understood that that was merely what he hoped to believe.

Subaru: "As far as I can see, it's a completely black lake…"

Cecilus: "The whole island's surrounded by a lake. The only way to get to and from the other shore's to "raise" the only drawbridge. Truly, a natural fortification, or rather, a prison!"

Unable to lift himself up, Subaru slid away from the window. Cecilus's mouth was in high gear as Subaru kneeled on the floor, drooping to his knees.

Why was he in such a good mood in such a hopeless place?

Subaru: "Why…"

Cecilus: "Hm?"

Subaru: "Why do you look so entertained?"

An adult Subaru would have probably hesitated to ask, rather than asking it straight-out.

Being a child with no self-control, the question just popped out, overflowing from his mouth. Cecilus turned to Subaru's way-too-straightforward question with a childish look in his eyes, speaking,

Cecilus: "That is, because I feel the end of the first act!"

Subaru: "First act…"

Cecilus: "Alas, though I don't really get it, I was thrown into these "deth gamu grounds", and I had to fight to the death in a whirlwind of blood! A new wind blew to me with a different scent of blood and a different premonition! With that being the case, it's only logical that the story will transition to its next phase."

He did not understand Cecilus's story at all as the latter spoke in a profound manner, his fingers raised. —No, it was not that he did not understand. It was that he wished not to understand.

Because if he were to try to fully understand what Cecilus was saying, that would mean—

Cecilus: "It wouldn't be interesting otherwise. You can't keep the star actor off-stage; that'd be a sacrilege in a proper story!"

—Vollachia's strongest, The Blue Lightning, was a drama geek.

3

Cecilus Segmunt, the drama geek, was a person of many words.

To the point of making one suspect, that if left to his own devices, he would continue to chatter on and on.

Cecilus: "So, I was just kinda moseying around outside, and there you were, just crawling up to shore. Amazing, isn't it? That doesn't happen very often. It was fated to be, absolutely! Or should I say, it was like something out of a story."

Subaru: "…"

Cecilus: “You probably don’t know this, but I’ve always had a good sense of intuition. Today as well, I found you when walking around because I felt as if the wind was calling me. So, I’m so favored by the world it scares me.”

Subaru: “…”

Cecilus: “Of course, you survived that situation, so you’ve got a good chance of being favored by the world too! Let’s show it our best, Suba… Baru… Hmmm~?”

Cocking his head, Cecilus pondered over something, accompanied by a mutter.

As he listened to the nonsensical and insubstantial words of conversation spilling from the boy’s lips, Subaru’s bare feet moved over the cold stone floor.

It would be reckless to go out and walk like this outside the room in which he had woken up, as this location was unknown.

Still, there was something he needed to confirm.

Subaru: “It’s as you said, right? That I wasn’t alone?”

Cecilus: “Eh? Ahh, yep, it’s true. I’d like to commend you for that as well. Not only did you come out of that situation with your life, but you also saved your companion’s life, which really is a feat of luck and courage… Something of a talent!”

Subaru: “Yeah yeah, sure, talent and guts and all that, right. So, that other person…”

Cecilus: “Was a little girl. More or less like you, Basu… Ah! Has a pretty nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

The conversation had derailed without effort, but he had been able to have the questions he wanted to ask answered.

Perhaps what Cecilus was struggling with, was what to call Subaru in response to the nickname of “Ceci” the latter had given him. As long as the nickname was not a terrible one, it did not matter to him what he was called.

What was most important, was the info he had been able to get from him—

Subaru: "—Louis."

Someone about the same age as himself—when it came to someone as old as Subaru was right now, the person who naturally came to mind was Louis. The situation right now was that Medium had also been reduced to about the same age, but since she had not been present at that tower, she was not a candidate.

Frankly, though, Subaru's mental impression of Louis was a jumbled mess.

Subaru: "I'm not going to ditch you before I have an answer to that question. Besides, maybe, with your power…"

If they could make use of Louis's teleport, they might be able to get off this dangerous island.

He did not yet know the whole island, and although Cecilus was the only other person he had met at this place, from what the latter had told him, it no doubt had to be the absolute worst possible environment for a child to spend time in.

So—

Subaru: "We've got to get off this island as soon as possible."

Cecilus: "That's quite the aspiration, but I think there'll be a lotta obstacles. From what I've heard, only one person's ever managed to escape from this place, and it's for that very reason that the "curse rule" was created."

Subaru: "Then I'll be the second person. No, you and my companion make three."

Subaru's determination interjected, replying out of reflex. And Cecilus, hearing this, looked over him as if he were something trivial, then gave a high-pitched whistle.

It seemed to somehow put him in a good mood, but there was no time to care about that.

And—

Cecilus: “Basu, here.”

After a short walk down a dimly-lit passageway filled with damp, cold air, Cecilus stopped abruptly. With his hands clasped behind his head, he jerked his chin towards a room with a dingy wooden door.

Looking up at the door, Subaru asked, “Here is?”,

Cecilus: “This is a healing room. It’s also called the corpse room. Many people become corpses here after failing to die in the arena.”

Subaru: “H-healing room, is it? And the healer is?”

Cecilus: “Healer, ha! There are some healers, sorta, but there’s no precious magic user of the sort here. There’d be fewer deaths if they were assigned here, but that’s not the policy of the Island Chief.”

Subaru: “…”

Receiving that frivolous reply, Subaru involuntarily shut himself up.

It’d slipped his mind completely, but in the Vollachian Empire, there were very few people able to wield healing magic. That was why Rem’s healing magic was treated as valuable.

But the fact remained that Louis had been put into a healing room devoid of a healer.

Cecilus: “The girl you brought along was very weak, that’s why. The purpose of this room is, at least in name, to treat the wounded, so there are some blankets and things to patch people up, at least. We gladiators are treated just as you saw earlier, and the sleeping conditions were terrible, weren’t they?”

Subaru: “…You’re the only gladiator here.”

Cecilus: “Ahhahaha, you’re right! Here, have an emotional meeting.”

Seemingly reading Subaru’s inner heart for the second time, Cecilus patted Subaru on the shoulder.

Pressured by his momentum, Subaru swallowed his saliva, steeled himself, and headed for the door. Pushing it open, he frowned at the unpleasant smell emanating from inside.

What flowed out of it, was the odor of a mixture of blood and decaying flesh, akin to the pinnacle of unsanitary conditions.

Was their sense of hygiene dead and gone, perhaps? Within that not-so-spacious room, worn-out tools and sloppily washed bandages could be seen, having been left hanging out to dry.

And in that not-so-great environment—

Cecilus: “That’s your companion sleeping over yonder.”

Subaru: “—Hk, Louis!”

Cecilus pointed to a bed in the back as Subaru looked around.

It seemed to be a room that served as an infirmary, with two beds that were a smidgen better than the one Subaru had been lying on, and a small bulging blanket at the far end of the bed.

Subaru rushed toward it, hurried by his stray feelings. He was in a hurry to get to Louis, but could not decide what he should tell her.

However—

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Having rushed over, and attempted to shake the little girl’s shoulder, Subaru froze in surprise.

Not because he was incapable of finding the right words to say. — But because he could not find anyone to whom he could say them.

The girl who had been said to be brought ashore along with Subaru, and laid to sleep there was not Louis, who stirred up mixed feelings in Subaru's heart.

She possessed a small head, two protruding horns, and flaxen hair that gathered at her shoulders. The girl had been stripped of the ornate kimono that wrapped her petite body, revealing only simple undergarments.

It was not Louis, nor was it his companion Medium, who had accompanied him to the Demon City of Chaosflame, who too had been made small by that technique of Olbart's.

The one there, was—

Subaru: "…T-Tanza?"

There was no response from the sleeping little girl to his trembling call.

But even if she did not answer, after laying eyes on her, he knew. He knew that she was neither Louis nor Medium, but Tanza the deergirl, the attendant of Yorna Mishigure, the Mistress of the Demon City.

Subaru: "Why… Why is this girl here…?"

Cecilus: "Uh-oh? Did I do something again?"

Behind Subaru, who was surprised to see a sleeping face different from the one he had imagined, Cecilus voiced something silly.

Of course, it was not that he was to blame. He was not to blame, but—

Subaru: "That's not what I was told! You told me Louis was here."

Cecilus: "Nahhh, I wonder about that. I believe I explained that there was a girl who came ashore on the Island with you, Basu. I'm as surprised as you are, that it's not the girl you thought it was."

Subaru: "Uh, kuh…"

Subaru was at a loss for words, unable to say anything in response to Cecilus's reasonable answer.

Indeed, it was Subaru himself who assumed that he had meant Louis by "the girl with him". Subaru could only apologize to Cecilus for that.

But this was odd. Why would Tanza be with Subaru?

For starters, if Tanza was the one with them right here, right now, then—

Subaru: "What about Louis…"

Putting his hand on his head, Subaru was anxious about Louis's wellbeing, someone nowhere to be found.

Having been told of who she was, Abel, Al, and Medium now saw Louis as a threat. Yorna could perhaps protect Louis, but only because she was unaware of her real identity.

Were she to find out that Louis was a Sin Archbishop, even she would change her mind, just like Medium had.

And he could not find any reason for Abel and the others to keep Louis's identity a secret.

Subaru: "I've got to get her back to Rem."

Louis's existence was very much like a thin and feeble thread connecting the amnesiac Rem and Subaru.

Even though Louis had followed him without permission, Subaru had a reason as to why he could not afford not to bring her back. Above all, Subaru had yet to decide what to do with Louis, deep inside.

And despite that, Louis's whereabouts were unknown to him, and Subaru was on this Island, for some damn reason.

Subaru: "I shouldn't be wasting time like this…!"

Subaru's thoughts would not settle at all, they were a muddled arrangement of many things.

Still, he knew he had to get off this island and return to Chaosflame immediately.

Subaru: "If possible, I'll take this child with me…"

Cecilus: "Oh, you sure? Wasn't this girl not the one you were expecting, Basu?"

Subaru: "No. She isn't, but there's no reason to leave her behind, right? Besides, Yorna-san has to be looking for her."

Yorna was so affectionate as to not hesitate to give of herself even for the sake of a young child she had just met.

Without her, he would have been unable to pick up a win in the game of tag against Olbart, or to get the monstrous old man on-board with the original bet, in the first place.

Therefore, returning Tanza to Yorna was the natural way to return the favor.

Cecilus: "I think your enthusiasm and consideration are admirable, but as I said before, I think it'll be difficult."

However, Cecilus's opinion rained on Subaru's parade.

Even though the way he spoke and behaved had remained the same since the outset, Cecilus's relayed circumstances were grave at their root. Yet, Subaru could not help but be frustrated by the harshness of his reality.

Subaru: "I heard you. You say it's hard to leave, right? But, if we look for a boat, or if we bring down the drawbridge you were talking about earlier, then…"

Cecilus: "You "raise" the drawbridge. That'd be a challenge I guess, but the problem lies elsewhere. The biggest problem's the curse rule, you know? The curse rule."

Subaru: “Curce… roule…?”

That word was an unfamiliar one, but it was impossible to ignore it, given it had been stated to be the biggest problem.

To Subaru, his eyebrows forming a frown, Cecilus let out a “Yes”, then tucked his hands into the sleeves of his kimono,

Cecilus: “The curse’s rules, or “curse rule”. A very troublesome and powerful rule laid down by the Island Chief who lords over this Gladiator Island. Break it, and you die! Disobey it, and you die! Resist it, and you die! —A curse of death!”

Subaru: “…Ah.”

Cecilus: “It covers the whole island. Do you understand?”

As he proclaimed so, Cecilus spun around in place, waving his sleeves in the air.

It was said in a light-hearted manner, without a hint of seriousness, but the existence of a death curse of this kind was far too aligned with Subaru’s image of the Empire for him to laugh it off as a lie.

Subaru: “S-so no one can leave here?”

Cecilus: “Yes, that’s right. If it weren’t for that, I’d be out of here by now. The Witchbeasts in the lake might be a formidable opponent, but I can run on the water if such is my wish. Do you know? How to run on water, I mean. You put your left foot out before your right foot sinks…”

Cecilus began relaying that ill-used and fanciful idea to a stunned Subaru.

It seemed to be the way ninjas ran on water, and it appeared that many of the superhumans in this world were actually able to do it. Nah, this was not the time to run away from reality like this.

Subaru: “Th-That Island Chief, are they the person putting a curse on the island? If so, how about having that person lift the curse? Because, I’m here by mistake…”

Cecilus: "Hahaha, that's a fascinating joke! Be it mistake, mishap or blunder, by the point you've come up on this Island and had the curse mark engraved on you, you're already one of the gladiators. Though you could say that the fact that the disposition of a gladiator won't sink in's proof you've got a bigger role to play."

Subaru: "—Hk."

The words he was clinging on to were denied, and Subaru swallowed his breath.

The word "curse" brought up nothing but bad memories for Subaru. And as one would expect, it was as if it had been decided that the bad memories would layer atop one another, to become seemingly even worse.

Subaru: "This isn't, a joke… Hk."

Before he even knew it, he'd been flung off to a place unknown to him, with a girl pretty much unknown to him. Not only that, but he had been told by someone almost unknown to him that, if he tried to leave the unknown place on his own, he might die because of a curse placed on him by yet another unknown person.

What on earth should he believe in, and what should he even do, in this situation—

Subaru: "…That's it. Yes, that's right! Ceci, you're one of the Nine Divine Generals, aren't you?"

Cecilus: "Oh?"

Subaru: "Then maybe you could contact the outside world or something? Let's see, like with this sleeping girl, she's from Yorna-san's place in Chaosflame…"

Eyes bloodshot at the thought, Subaru grabbed both of Cecilus's shoulders.

As Cecilus shut one eye in response to being touched, Subaru forgot his own shamelessness.

After having treated Cecilus as a boy-who-cried-wolf earlier, Subaru now expected him to be the Blue Lightning as he claimed himself to be.

Since he was one of the Vollachian Empire's Divine Generals, and the strongest in the Empire, and someone who was very approachable at that, he might listen to what Subaru had to say.

That was truly nothing more than a notion from a childish, self-centered way of thinking.

Hence, Subaru's speculations would end up as a fruitless effort as per usual.

Or, perhaps, had his thinking not been dulled by the "infantilization", Subaru might have come up with the obvious question on his own.

That was—

Cecilus: "Say, Basu."

Subaru: "Oh, yeah, what is it?"

Cecilus: "What are these Nine Divinn Generals you're talking about?"

Subaru: "Eh…?"

With Subaru holding both of his shoulders, Cecilus cocked his head in curiosity.

Subaru was astonished, not understanding what he was being told. Yet Cecilus resumed with "I mean, you know",

Cecilus: "In seriousness, I really don't know why I'm here. I think that there's some kinda development that'll move the story along, and I'm wondering if that's you, Basu."

What a bombshell it was, jamming even more confusion into the mind of the young Subaru.

Chapter 62:
The Island's Order

1

—The reason he was here, and the Nine Divine Generals, both were unknown to Cecilus.

Subaru's mind was engulfed in confusion as he failed to process that sudden bombshell announcement.

The impact was much more striking than being splashed with cold water, and he couldn't help but blink a few times.

Subaru: "Wh-What do you mean? Saying you don't know why you're here…"

Cecilus: "What I mean is just as I said. I found myself thrown onto this Gladiator Island, with a brand new environment and outlook for the future which had me in quite the pickle. Well, this is a rather comfy place for me to live, so it's not too much of a pickle, but let's just put it that way."

Subaru: "…"

Cecilus: "Oh? Are you perhaps thinking again? Maaan, Basu sure likes to think, huh. I mean, I think that's fine; I'm on the side that doesn't like to think too much, you see. I don't make fun of people deep in thought, nor do I wish to interrupt them, so I'll keep my mouth shut then!"

It took a long time for Cecilus to shut his mouth, but then he pretty much went quiet. That being said, during the time his mouth was shut, his legs were pitter-pattering and his eyes were darting about incessantly.

Although he may not have been fooling around, it was more than enough of a distraction.

But Subaru did not have the composure to deal with such things. If he was going to deal with something, then it should at least be something meaningful.

For example—

Subaru: “How come you don’t know anything about the Nine Divine Generals, but you know you’re called The Blue Lightning? That’s strange isn’t it?”

Cecilus: “Ah, the answer to that question is easy. It was none other than myself who came up with this shocking alias! Cecilus Segmunt, the Blue Lightning of Vollachia! What do you think? It’s a nickname that gives a very striking and elegant impression, don’t you think? One day, my name’s going to be so famous that everyone in the whole wide world will be dazzled by me as the lead actor! It’s a manifestation of my passion.”

Subaru: “A nickname, that you came up with…”

Hearing that proud response, Subaru’s shoulders sank in disappointment.

Puzzled by Subaru’s demeanor, Cecilus asked, “Huhh? What’s wrong~?” as he peered at Subaru’s expression nonchalantly. But Subaru had lost the willpower to answer that.

Whether the boy before his eyes was the real Cecilus Segmunt or a fake, he had reached a conclusion.

The theory that there were many adults who had no respect for children, as expected, lacked the power to overturn his outrageous statement that he had never heard of the Nine Divine Generals.

No matter how you look at it, there was no way a real General First-Class could have followed up on the statement that they had never heard of the Nine Divine Generals.

Subaru: “Not knowing that you’re a General of the Empire, you’ve got to be joking…”

It was completely pointless trying to sensibly proceed through such hole-filled logic.

Therefore, in Subaru's mind, any possibility that the boy in front of him was the real Cecilus had vanished. He was just a prankster, a boy-who-cried-wolf—a fake Cecilus.

And so, the thin thread of hope that sprouted at this dead-end had snapped.

If only one seed of hope still remained, it was that the fake Cecilus was just a liar, and perhaps that his earlier story about the very scary island was just another of his lies—

???: "—So this is where you have been at, Segmunt."

Subaru: "Uwaa?!"

The next moment, Subaru jumped as a man's deep voice hit him from behind while he was thinking.

A voice that was not that of the fake Cecilus, nor of Tanza, who was, of course, sleeping in bed. Subaru looked back at the entrance of the healing room, where he had heard it from, his surprise accumulating further.

—For the figure standing at the entrance of the healing room, was an unthinkably large man.

Subaru: "H-huge…!"

The man was so large that one could not help but marvel at his stature.

No, not only was he tall, but he also had a thickness to him both vertically and horizontally, his entire body fitting the description of being thick and large. His neck and limbs were as hefty as logs, and the black clothes he wore, similar to that of a police or soldier's, were so taut and tight that they looked as if they were about to burst.

Regardless of the fact that Subaru had shrunk, this was a man so giant that looking up at him would hurt your neck.

He was easily over two meters tall and possibly the tallest human Subaru has seen in this parallel world. Features like his colossal body, which carried a very stern face, his fangs protruding even when his mouth was closed, and his skin being blue in color were just way too numerous.

However, the most prominent feature had yet to be described.

That most prominent feature was—

Cecilus: “Yo, what’s up, Gustav-san! You’re looking splendidly prim and proper this morning! Your attention to every detail of your appearance’s the basis of a gentleman, I believe that’s a truly exemplary attitude!”

Gustav: “No need for compliments, I am glad to see that you are as excessively healthy as ever. A being such as you should be put to use in the gladiatorial arena, as I, as the official, in all fairness, have strictly judged.”

Saying that, the huge man—the one called Gustav, exasperatedly sighing in response to the wry words of the fake Cecilus, replied with his four thick arms crossed.

That’s right, four arms.

A large man with a face like that of a demon, whose large body was wrapped in a mass of muscles, had the feature of having four arms, with two arms sprouting from each shoulder. As he recalled, there was a race of demi-humans called the Multi-Arm Tribe that possessed such a trait; He’d heard of them from an old man that he knew.

An old man, that he knew—

Subaru: “Uhh… that’s right, it was Wilhelm-san.”

Even recalling the names of his acquaintances was difficult for Subaru.

Outside of Subaru’s hard struggle, the fake Cecilus laughed at Gustav’s words saying “Nahh”, Cecilus: “Your concern is much appreciated! I understand what you’re saying Gustav-san! On the off chance I die, it should be on the battlefield. I’m so grateful to have a sensible person as Island Chief, I really am a lucky guy!”

Gustav: “The mixing of public and private affairs is a hindrance to order. There is no sense in me, as the official, carrying out such a foolish practice.”

Cecilus: “Yes, yes, I understand! A big thank you to Governor Gustav for your consideration~!”

Gustav narrowed his intellectual eyes at the fake Cecilus when he donned a goofy smile and put his hands together.

In a subtle way, the “don’t mix public and private affairs” statement sounded to Subaru as if he personally disliked the fake Cecilus, but there was no point in delving into that.

Other than the fake Cecilus, there was finally someone Subaru could talk to.

Gustav: “So, Segmunt, about that boy over there.”

And right on cue, Gustav also turned his attention to Subaru.

SETOWI

Being looked down upon from such staggering height, just being gazed at was suffocating, it felt as if his whole body was enveloped in an air of intimidation. Those four crossed arms, the fists at the ends of them all around the size of a child's head, Subaru would probably die if he were to be hit by them.

Reflexively, Subaru gulped down his spit, while the fake Cecilus clapped his hands beside him.

Cecilus: "Oh yes, he finally woke up. And, since he was worried about his companion, the young lady, I brought him here. But it seems that the sleeping little lady was not the one he expected, and it seems a lotta discrepancies have arisen. The shock from that is now dissipating, so from now onwards, the story will unfold."

Gustav: "Thanks for the explanation. However, I remember ordering that if he had woken up, the first thing for you to do was to bring him before me, as the official. That would have been the condition for me, in my capacity, to give permission for this boy and girl to be allowed ashore on the island."

Cecilus: "Was it? Sorry, I'm forgetful."

Gustav: "…"

At Cecilus's blank response, Gustav silently rubbed his finger between his brows.

Doing so, the man who was much closer to the sky than Subaru and the others glared at the ceiling, grumbling to himself, "As the official, I am a guardian of order; I will not mix public and private affairs…"

Subaru was not sure what Gustav's relationship with the fake Cecilus was, but the latter probably gave him a very hard time.

Realizing that, though he felt sorry for Gustav, he was a bit relieved.

Subaru: "I'm not the only one who gets pushed around by Ceci."

Cecilus: “It’s outrageous to think that I’d push people around. I think I’ve given a proper explanation of what you wanted to know and accompanied you where you wanted to go, to see who you wanted to see.”

Subaru: “Yeah, you’re right, I misspoke. The explanation had a lot of detours, and the person I was allowed to meet wasn’t who I wanted to meet, and I was told I couldn’t go to the places I wanted to go, and that made me depressed.”

It seemed there was no malice in the fake Cecilus, so there was no point in saying so.

When Subaru told him so, the fake Cecilus let out a “Tch”, pursing his lip in dissatisfaction. With that, Gustav turned toward Subaru again, as if his frustration with Cecilus had been successfully dealt with.

And then—

Gustav: “Boy, if you have woken up, let us start our talk anew.”

Subaru: “I’d be happy to do so. I had also wanted to hear from someone else. If it’s with a person of high standing on this island, that’s even better.”

Gustav: “I see”

While Subaru was being careful with the words he was speaking, Gustav touched his chin with his two right hands.

At first glance, he had a stern outward appearance, but his speech and atmosphere were very quiet and calm, and there was an intelligent glint in his eyes, giving an impression quite close to that of the bushy-headed Zikr.

In other words, a representation of a sensible adult.

As if to confirm Subaru’s expectations, Gustav gave a deep and dignified nod,

Gustav: “As the official, my name is Gustav Morello, and I have been entrusted with the management of this island by His Excellency the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, the seventy-seventh Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire. Can you tell me your name and affiliation?"

Politely giving his position and name, he addressed Subaru directly.

Subaru was slightly astonished by this fact, then put his hand on his chest and bowed his head.

Subaru: "Th-Thank you for introducing yourself. My name is Natsuki… Natsuki Schwartz."

Gustav: "I see. Schwartz."

Subaru, though pressured, announced his name in reply to Gustav.

For a moment, after wondering whether to use his real name or a pseudonym, he gave a somewhat mixed answer, but at this point, it should be considered a success.

Honestly, he wasn't sure if lying to Gustav was the right or wrong thing to do.

However, it would not be good for Subaru's real name to spread. It may not have been a big deal to the fake Cecilus since he was a fake General First-Class, but you never know who might be knowledgeable on the Kingdom's affairs.

What can be hidden should be hidden. Even if Cecilus, upon hearing Subaru's current alias, had tilted his head grandly with a "Huh~?"

Gustav: "But if you are Natsuki Schwartz, then why did Segmunt call you Basu?"

Subaru: "I think Ceci's got his own reasoning for himself. Would you like to confirm it?"

Gustav: "—. No, let us not. Considering the duties entrusted to me as the official, I have no time to spend on pointless endeavors. I may not be a wise man in my capacity, but I do try to be wise."

Shaking his head, Gustav made a wise Subaru-like decision.

It was somewhat annoying to think that was due to the fake Cecilus's usual behavior, so it was better to consider this the result of Subaru's behavior.

In any case—

Gustav: "You are able to answer to your name and, from your appearance, you seem to not possess any physical impairments. According to the healer, your strength has been considerably depleted, do you feel that as well?"

Subaru: "My strength… I may have been feeling a little bit tired. But, thanks for everything you've done to help me."

Gustav: "Allow me to correct one thing, Schwartz. It was Segmunt there who helped you, not me. As far as I, in my capacity, am concerned, I have only agreed to accept you conditionally."

Subaru: "I-I see."

Gustav's well-reasoned responses almost made Subaru falter.

The way he spoke and the content of his words were not particularly welcoming towards Subaru, and the tone of his voice was somewhere between cold and emotionless, but his easy-to-understand explanations were genuinely helpful.

Compared to the fake Cecilus, how much he spoke, and the amount of information in his words, were much, much more balanced.

Even the question he had just asked seemed to be born out of concern for Subaru's condition after he'd woken up, and if things continued like this, it was possible that he would listen if Subaru just talked with him.

Subaru, and Tanza as well, had arrived at this Gladiator Island by mistake.

Subaru: "Gustav-san, me and this girl… Her name's Tanza, but is this girl some sort of blunder? We seem to have come here by some kind of mistake.”

Gustav: “The mistake, being?”

Subaru: “—! That is, I don’t know the reason. It’s just, we were so far away… You know of Chaosflame, right? We’re supposed to be in that city!”

According to the fake Cecilus, this Island and the Demon City were apparently quite far from each other.

That alone should be enough to make everyone, Subaru included, realize that what had befallen them was a severe predicament. Being sent from the Demon City to this Island, was far from being an everyday event.

Subaru: “I know it’s selfish of me to say this after all the help we’ve gotten, but we can’t stay here much longer. I’m sure our people are out there looking for us! If possible I want to let them know we’re safe and join them as soon as we can.”

Ideally, he would leave this place with Tanza if circumstances permitted.

Subaru did not know why he and Tanza were both on the Island, but he was certain that Yorna was worried about Tanza. Since the original goal was to get Yorna on his side, Abel would not get mad if he did something that made her happy.

Besides, Subaru was rather fond of Yorna.

If he could make that gentle woman happy, then all the better, so he thought.

Subaru: “So, I gotta get out of here as soon as—”

Gustav: “—Enough. That is enough, Schwartz.”

Subaru leaned forward, about to raise his voice, but a gargantuan palm stopped him. Two right hands were thrust in front of his face; silenced by those, Subaru cut off his words with an “Uhh”.

Crossing over his right hand, Gustav used his left hands to simultaneously stroke his chin and head.

Gustav: “I understand your point. I may say that I have a rough understanding of your situation. In addition, you must listen to what I, in my capacity, have to say. That would be only fair.”

Subaru: “Fair…”

Gustav: “Indeed, fair. It is just, it is strict, it is unbiased, it is absolute truth… it is essential to building what is called order, definite reason.”

Subaru was interrupted, and frowned at being assaulted by the litany of words spoken slowly.

Things like fairness or justice, they sounded quite easygoing from the perspective of someone in a rush. But Subaru nodded anyway, knowing that going against Gustav here would not help him.

At Subaru’s reaction, Gustav closed a single eye, letting out a “Very well”,

Gustav: “You remember what I spoke earlier, do you not? That it was Segmunt who saved you, and that the fact that I, as the official, allowed you and that girl to land here had conditions attached to it.”

Subaru: “That’s… Yes, I remember, but…”

His attention had been directed to the part about them being helped, not so much on the part about it having been conditional. But Gustav had indeed told that to Subaru, in an oppressive tone.

But just what were those conditions? What were the conditions under which Subaru and Tanza had been allowed to enter the Island?

Gustav: “Schwartz, the fact is you hold sound judgment, you are not so impoverished in knowledge as to not know how to answer my questions, you make use of your education to address me, as the official, by honorifics, you are in good health based on the healer’s diagnosis, and there is the fact that you yourself have not suffered from any self-reported physical ailments. Any objections?”

Subaru: “You saying it all at once makes me dizzy… I have no objections, I think.”

Gustav: “You think, that is a somewhat unconvincing opinion. Do you hold any objections or do you not?”

Subaru: “—. I have no objections.”

Gustav’s gaze did not allow Subaru to give a half-assed answer.

Overwhelmed by this, Subaru looked over at his opponent. His gaze was returned to Gustav’s frightening, statue-like face, the hue of his eyes and his expression unchanged.

The conversation was rather one-sided, and proceeded with Gustav having seized the initiative.

This was making Subaru feel a growing sense of dread, but he was unable to come up with a quick solution. As usual, he had no information. In other words, there were no options for him.

And in Subaru’s stead—

Cecilus: “See, I told you, didn’t I? Basu meets your standards in proper fashion, Gustav-san. It’s also just in time for today’s schedule, so you can’t complain, right?”

Gustav: “However, the girl is yet to wake.”

Cecilus: “As for that, uhh, there are ways to adapt and manipulate things under a Governor’s jurisdiction, right?”

Gustav: “Yes. Provided the girl does not wake up, we shall begin with one person fewer than stated by the regulations.”

Cecilus: “Well well, we’ve really stirred up the hornet’s nest, huh?!”

While Subaru was left perplexed, the one parlaying with Gustav was the fake Cecilus.

Although he could not perceive the main subject of that conversation, he could understand that it regarded him and Tanza. Also, he could understand that this fake Cecilus was incapable of conducting a conversation properly.

Moreover, Subaru had a feeling that the one to pay the bill for that failure, was not the fake Cecilus himself.

Cecilus: "I'm sorry, Basu. It seems that my assistance is only possible up to this point. You'll have to do the rest on your own. I'm sure you can do it!"

Subaru: "W-waitwaitwait! This whole conversation's just too ominous! What the hell was that exchange just now? Gustav-san! What were the terms of our stay on this island…"

Gustav: "—You must participate in Sparka."

Subaru: "Spaa… ?"

Subaru frowned at the unfamiliar word, dropped from on high.

If Gustav said they would be participating, then this Sparka had to be an event of some kind. Any kind of event held here, on the Gladiator Island—he could not help but get a nasty feeling about it.

Before, Al had said that life on Gladiator Island had been difficult and painful for him.

Events there were bound to be scary or painful.

Subaru: "Hold on, Gustav-san! Why do we need to participate in Sparka?! We didn't come to this island on purpose!"

Gustav: "Prisoners of war, slaves, criminals… The circumstances of those that land on this Gladiator Island may vary, but few come willingly. And the only role I, as the official, possess, is to perform my duty, as per the wishes of His Excellency, to my utmost, and bring order to the Gladiator Island, which holds all these outlaws."

Subaru: "His Excellency… The Emperor's wishes would be…"

Gustav: "—To transform this Gladiator Island into the most meaningful bloodbath in the Empire."

That declaration was so awfully emotionless, that Subaru's blood ran cold just after he snapped at him.

The hue of Gustav's eyes, the way he spoke, they seemed cold and unwavering, but that would be mistaken. There were more appropriate words to describe Gustav.

It was as if, indeed, as if he were robotic, inorganic and cold.

As Subaru sucked in his breath, stiffening at the alteration in his impression of Gustav, the latter addressed him with "Schwartz".

He then looked down at Subaru, who was much smaller than himself,

Gustav: "You shall call him His Excellency the Emperor. The first time a caution, the second time a warning, there will be no third time."

Subaru: "…Ah."

Gustav: "Also, I want to reiterate that I shall not allow you to refuse Sparka. If you refuse to take part in Sparka, you and the girl shall suffer your original fate."

Subaru: "Our original fate, what do you mean…?"

Gustav: "Segmunt's plea is rejected, and you are not permitted to make land. —Meaning that you would fall prey to the aquatic Witchbeasts that live in the waters of the lake."

Flatly, devoid of any vacillation, Gustav presented Subaru's future options.

This giant of a man would tell a child that refusal meant death. This was what it meant to be cold-blooded, and it also made Subaru desire to curse his own poor luck for facing nothing but painful experiences while he was shrunk.

Weren't people usually kinder to children?

Or was it acceptable in the Vollachian Empire, where the strong were revered, for children to be killed without pause for the sole reason that they were weak?

Subaru: "If that's the case, a nation like this has got to be destroyed…"

Gustav: "I know not what you mean, but I shall allow your cursing. If all speech is silenced, discontent shall build up. The seeds of great folly grow in the seedbed of discontent, watered by animosity."

Slowly shaking his head, Gustav grabbed Subaru's shoulders as the latter gritted his teeth.

Caught in a palm that could easily grasp his head, Subaru could do nothing to resist. Rather, Subaru thought about forcibly resisting and escaping from this place, but—

Cecilus: "I don't recommend that approach, Basu. You'll probably end up having an awfully bad time. This isn't outta kindness or anything, more like I just feel like that would be boring, so I'm strongly requesting this of you."

Subaru: "Thanks for speaking your heart. Go to hell, Ceci."

Cecilus: "Wow, I genuinely saved you, and you say those terrible things to me. Though, it's not that I don't understand what feelings made you say them, so I won't be angry with you."

With the fake Cecilus casually blocking the entrance, Subaru was robbed of his last bit of resistance.

In the end, even though he had attempted to express his indignation regarding the situation through swearing hurled towards the fake Cecilus, whose status as a friend or foe was unclear, reacting to his response was a waste of effort to Subaru.

At any rate, Subaru was forced to participate in this good-for-nothing event, Sparka.

If he refused, he would be fed to the fish, and if he did what they told him to—

Gustav: “Prove your qualifications and I, as Governor, shall take responsibility and welcome you as a gladiator.”

Subaru: “…Super.”

If he did well, he would become a slave, and if he did not, he would be fed to the fish.

Subaru had thought that nothing good had happened to him ever since he had been made smaller, but he had to correct that.

—Not a single good thing had happened ever since he arrived at the Vollachian Empire.

Subaru: “…I really hate the Vollachian Empire.”

Subaru’s hateful complaint, as if in consideration for Tanza who continued to sleep, was low, quiet, and minute.

And then—

2

—He felt the heat that enveloped the venue all over his body.

The eerie thing was, however, that despite the number of gazes pouring down on them, there was a little commotion.

It was a strange sensation of a deafening silence, rather than any muted excitement or fervor.

However, Subaru did not have the luxury of getting angry or complaining about it.

???: “Shit, shit… Ya gotta be kiddin’ me, this is the worst…!”

???: “I’m gonna do it, I’m gonna be the one to fucking do it…”

???: “Silence! Follow my orders obediently, all of you! Do so and you’ll make it out alive!”

Cutting through the noisy silence, were three men in Subaru's immediate vicinity.

A scaly-skinned lizardman with skin akin to rock, a bald-headed man with many tattoos engraved on his body, and a young man with a pleasant face donning long, rust-colored hair.

They all hailed from different backgrounds and races, but they all had one thing in common.

That was, that they disregarded Subaru when it came to manpower, and that the tension of this life-or-death situation dwelled within their eyes.

As it stood, although their dates of birth were different, their dates of death would be the same.

Gustav: "—Gentlemen, first of all, congratulations on landing upon this Island. His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia in the Imperial Capital shall be very pleased. As the Governor who has been personally entrusted by His Excellency the Emperor with the management of this Gladiator Island, I am pleased to present you with an honorable trial."

So he, Gustav Morello, Governor of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, and the director of this local entertainment, spoke loudly from a special seat atop the high wall overlooking the gladiatorial arena.

And then, beneath Gustav's feet—as the gate of the passageway that brought the warriors to the gladiatorial arena opened, a horrifying apparition slowly, slowly emerged from the darkness.

A face of a lion with eyes colored red, four hoofed legs like those of a deer. With twisted horns and fangs, and a frighteningly long tail, its huge body made even Gustav, tall as he was, appear small.

With drool and growls spilling from its mouth, the fearsome enemy, a Witchbeast—no, here it would be called a Gladiator Beast, arrived with hefty steps.

That, was precisely what Subaru and the other three must confront —

Gustav: “—As is desired by His Excellency the Emperor, prove your prestige as strong citizens of the Empire!”

—That was the examiner of Sparka, the barbaric trial to become a gladiator.

Chapter 63:
Sparka

1

—Let us rewind the clock a little.

Gustav: "—From now on, you gentlemen shall be tested to ascertain if you are qualified to be gladiators on this Island."

Subaru was taken out of the healing room and forced into another room, and Gustav crossed his four powerful arms, eyeing around the sight before him.

That mechanical, frigid stare was directed at a total of four people, Subaru included.

A lizardman with gray scales in filthy rags, a skinny man with tattoos all over his naked upper body and bald-shaved head, and a fearless-looking young man with rust-colored hair.

All of them had been crammed into the same room as Subaru had.

From what they had just been told, Subaru and the men were probably in the same situation, as far as Gustav was concerned.

However, there seemed to be some disagreement with that idea among those who had been pushed into the room.

???: "Wait, Governor Gustav! Are you going to start Sparka now? With this child in our ranks? We aren't playing around here!"

Seeing Subaru, whose back was pushed into the room, the young man with rust-colored hair cried that out.

He had a reasonably good-looking face, but his stubble and exhausted expression, along with the frustration on his face showing his dissatisfaction, cut down its quality considerably.

However, his appearance was irrelevant here. Proving this, two more people also lashed out at Gustav, as if caught up in the heat of the moment.

Lizardman: “Yeah, man! How’s a brat gonna help us?! My damn life’s on the line here!”

Tattooed Man: “Not making gladiatorial combat a cruel spectacle. That was the Governor’s policy, or so I’d heard, but…?”

Rust-Haired Man: “It’s exactly as they say. We’re going to need a good explanation. In the first place, even if we were to add the child to the group, we wouldn’t have enough people. Five people per group, that’s what you said!”

The lizardman, the tattooed man, and the rust-haired man all raised their voices in unison, their anger directed at Gustav.

Not fully understanding what Sparka consisted of, nor how it involved them, Subaru was in a situation where he could not easily butt in. However, somehow or the other, he had been able to grasp some stuff.

Apparently, Subaru had seemingly betrayed their expectations, and they were directing their dissatisfaction to Gustav because of that.

Subaru: “…Gustav-san, this is what everyone has to say, and yet…”

Gustav: “I heard them, Schwartz. In my capacity, I only have two ears like you, unlike the number of arms I have, but I intend on performing my duties to the fullest. Including this only head of mine.”

Rust-Haired Man: “If that’s—”

Gustav: “—Silence. If you interrupt me in my capacity, it is tantamount to obstructing the will of His Excellency the Emperor.”

With just those few words, any further remarks from the rust-haired man were shut down.

Gustav did not change his expression, nor the tone of his voice. Even so, the meaning carried in his words was much heavier than before.

The rust-haired man, as well as the other two, shut their mouths. Seeing this, Gustav nodded.

Gustav: “Very well, I shall continue. As I have declared, I shall now begin your Sparka. The audience is already set to be composed of the Island’s resident gladiators, with no visitors from the outside. This is a litmus test, to ascertain if you are capable of entertaining such important visitors.”

Subaru: “Audience…”

Quietly, with a sense of displeasure, Subaru muttered.

The fake Cecilus, who had been with Subaru up until he was pushed into the room, had told him “Good luck! I’ll be watching from up there!” as of their parting.

He did not confirm what sort of significance it held, but this gave him a rough idea.

Subaru: “Don’t tell me, you’re going to make us fight each other…”

Lizardman: “Ha! Ya really dunno anythin’, do ya, brat? If that were the case, surely, we’d be oh-so-happy to have someone like ya in the mix!”

Subaru: “Uh…”

As soon as he put his thoughts to words, the lizardman ridiculed him, letting out his long tongue.

But they had a point. If Sparka was to be conducted by the members present here, then a child would have been welcome amidst them.

Rather, what they were worried about, was that Subaru would not be a capable fighter—

Subaru: “Rather, all of us are going to fight something?”

Tattooed Man: “Yer pretty clever, kid. Me, I’ve got a short temper. So shut yer trap for a sec…”

Rather than gently praising him for being correct, with bloodshot eyes, the tattooed man gave him a warning.

For now, it felt like their teamplay had definitely started off in the dumps. Though this was no situation for him to speak casually like that.

Rust-Haired Man: “Just what in the world do you intend on having us fight?”

Gustav: “It will not be trained gladiators. You would not stand a chance against them. In my capacity, that is all I can tell you. — Because this enemy never appears in the light of day.”

Rust-Haired Man: “—? A riddle? That’s in poor taste.”

The corners of his mouth twisting into a grimace, the rust-haired man responded to Gustav’s words.

Then he took a small breath and continued, “So then”,

Rust-Haired Man: “Although you press me to be silent, let me at least ask you this. If that child is the fourth person, then what about the fifth person? Our Unit is…”

Gustav: “Your Unit, its fifth person is still asleep in the healing room. As long as that one does not awaken, only these people will undergo the challenge of Sparka.”

Rust-Haired Man: “Are you insane, Governor…!”

Gustav: “If necessary to abide as per His Excellency the Emperor’s will, I shall utilize either sanity or insanity.”

Faced with Gustav’s cold-hearted answer, the rust-haired man looked away, having gotten nowhere. Then, turning his gaze towards Subaru, he called out with a “You”.

Due to that threatening attitude earlier and being beckoned suddenly, Subaru's cheeks stiffened,

Subaru: "Wh-What is it…?"

Rust-Haired Man: "From the looks of it, you're just some poor kid, but what can you do? Any special skills? Any magic? Perhaps you'd have something strong and useful?"

Subaru: "U-useful special skills…"

Subaru's eyes darted around in a panic as he was asked a series of questions.

Unfortunately, after shrinking, he did not feel like he could handle the whip properly, and he was helpless when it came to magic without the adorable Beatrice. Other than that, even his various little tricks could not be used properly while he was shrunken down.

Subaru, unable to respond, kept silent. The rust-haired man put his hand to his forehead,

Rust-Haired Man: "Really, he's just a child… What a mess."

And muttered in a voice terribly laden with disappointment.

Lizardman: "He, hehe, we've got a brat, and we're lackin' in people. It's over. Over! OOOVEEER!"

Tattooed Man: "Don't raise yer damn voice, scaly bastard. Ya wanna die 'cause ya pissed me off…?"

Lizardman: "Ahhn? Can't hear ya, yer voice's way too quiet!"

The interaction between Subaru and the rust-haired man not to their liking, a big row began between the lizardman and the tattooed man. The two glared at each other, making it seem like a fight was only a few moments away from breaking out. Then, the rust-haired man broke in between the two, shouting "Wait!",

Rust-Haired Man: "Why are we fighting?! I know you're feeling sorry for yourselves, but listen to me! I used to be a warrior serving someone highly esteemed before I came here! If you follow my instructions, you'll…"

Lizardman: "Shut up! Ya were a warrior? Then why the hell are ya here? Because ya were beaten and taken prisoner, yeah?! That's not a good sign!"

Tattooed Man: "There's nothing more idiotic than to put one's life in someone else's hands. I won't let anyone control my fate."

Rust-Haired Man: "Y-you bastards…!"

However, both the lizardman and the tattooed man did not listen at all to the words of the rust-haired man that stood in between them.

To make matters worse, with the two talking back, the rust-haired man turned red and started getting angry. Given that what lay ahead was unknown, this definitely was not a good situation.

Subaru: "G-Gustav-san…"

Gustav: "Schwartz, there is nothing in my capacity left to be said. I, as the official, have already told you my intentions. Even a single drop of blood that is shed within the Gladiator Island shall be utilized for the prosperity of the Empire. Even a single drop."

Subaru: "Even if you state it once more, I still don't get it…"

The three had their scuffle, and the one remaining, Subaru, was unable to pick up on the meaning of Gustav's words.

As he gazed down at the four of them in their immensely desperate situation, Gustav would not speak anything further.

And then—

2

—The relationship between the four of them remained at its worst, and thus Sparka, the problem at hand, commenced.

Subaru: "…"

A circular field surrounded by high walls, that was the stage for gladiators called the gladiatorial arena.

On the other side of the wall, there was staircase-like seating for the audience. The seats were gradually filling up with the figures of people sitting down, and one could tell that a quiet enthusiasm enshrouded the whole venue.

What was eerie, however, was that those who overlooked the gladiatorial arena—the so-called gladiators if Gustav's explanation were to be followed, were doing so without complaint.

The way Subaru had imagined it, the audience in a place like this was expected to be a vulgar and boisterous bunch.

However, such a large difference from what he imagined was perhaps inevitable.

After all, it was Gustav the one who managed and controlled this island. —It was unthinkable that the big, unbending man would tolerate any vulgar attitude from the gladiators.

Subaru: "Just running down the hallway would probably have severe punishments."

Hence, Subaru was doing his best to put on a brave front while averting his eyes from reality.

Otherwise, he would have to force his trembling knees to run away at any moment.

—Slowly, from behind the opening iron gate, the glint of a Witchbeast's eyes emerged.

Gladiator Beast: "…"

The Witchbeast stepping out wore a lion's face, and Subaru recognized its garish body.

It was the large Witchbeast that had been brought into the mansion by a girl wearing braids in the past, and it was also the monumental opponent that had become the material for Subaru's whip.

Although, its name did not come to him immediately.

Subaru: “L-lion…?”

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOOOO!!!”

As if answering Subaru’s call, the Witchbeast, or rather, the lion Gladiator Beast, roared. The roar echoed throughout the gladiatorial arena, and Subaru could feel the sound reverberating within his body.

A Gladiator Beast larger than Gustav, even just seeing something of the sort at a distance was unbearably terrifying.

Rust-Haired Man: “If we don’t kill that thing, we’re not going to make it.”

Glaring at the lion, the rust-haired man spoke with an unpleasant voice.

Indeed, that was correct. That was the condition to end this Sparka, a challenge that Subaru and the three others had to work together to accomplish.

It was a dreadful challenge with no chance of victory in sight.

Lizardman: “Shit, damn it, why am I in this mess…?!”

Rust-Haired Man: “Enough with the whining! We need to do everything we can to survive! Look over there!”

Lizardman: “Huh?”

Covering his face with both hands, the lizardman lamented as if it were the end of the world. Tapping him on the shoulder, the rust-haired man pointed to what appeared to be the edges of the gladiatorial arena—to be more precise, to something affixed to the left and right edges of the venue, as seen by Subaru’s group located on the corner opposite to the lion.

There, they could see something stick at each of those corners—

Tattooed Man: "—Are those, swords?"

Subaru: "Oh, it looks that way to me too…!"

Upon agreeing with the tattooed man's words, what Subaru received was a cold stare. But even if his allies did not agree with him, it was not like what he saw disappeared like smoke.

There were indeed two swords lodged in the ground over there.

Rust-Haired Man: "They wouldn't simply feed us to that Gladiator Beast without weapons. So our first priority is to secure weapons. However, only the sword on the right is viable."

Tattooed Man: "…Yeah."

The tattooed man nodded in agreement to the rust-haired man's words. Subaru was of the same opinion, though he remained silent, as he thought he would be stared at if he spoke out.

After all, the sword on the right was small, while the one on the left was too large.

The sword on the left was so large, its blade so thick, not to mention how unwieldy it was, that it made him wonder if that sword was possibly for Gustav's use.

Even if Subaru had not been shrunk, it was so huge that it seemed impossible to lift.

Perhaps the rust-haired man and the tattooed man were also unable to use a sword that large.

Therefore, only the smaller sword could be used as a weapon. If they had a member who could use that large sword, it sure would have been reassuring.

Rust-Haired Man: "It's too large. There's no other way but to get a weapon, and aim for that Gladiator Beast's eyes. We stir up the insides of its head, and finish it off. That's our only way to win."

Tattooed Man: "…Can ya use a sword?"

Rust-Haired Man: “I told you. I used to be a warrior. I can use it better than you can.”

The rust-haired man answered confidently, and the tattooed man closed one eye and pondered. Coercively judging that silence as an affirmative from what it seemed, the rust-haired man turned back to Subaru and the lizardman,

Rust-Haired Man: “When he announces the start, I’ll go and secure that sword. In the meantime, as I’ll be defenseless, keep the Gladiator Beast away from me.”

Subaru: “H-how am I gonna keep it away?”

Rust-Haired Man: “You can draw attention by shouting or making sounds. At least figure that out on your own!”

Subaru: “G-Got it…”

At the rust-haired man’s powerful retort, Subaru nodded meekly.

It was a pretty reckless and scary strategy, but it was not like he could think of any other method. And if the rust-haired man’s swordsmanship was as good as his confidence suggested, they could take down the lion.

He needed to get this dreaded Sparka over with so he could figure out his next course of action.

Therefore—

Gustav: “—Well then, LET SPARKA COMMENCE!!”

With that bold, stark proclamation from Gustav, the unleashed lion poised itself to pounce.

Pressured by its intimidating presence, Subaru took a breath in preparation to get the Gladiator Beast’s attention, so he could buy time for the rust-haired man to secure his weapon.

Rust-Haired Man: “Guaa?!”

Subaru: “—Hk?!”

Faster than he could shout, he immediately became speechless as he saw the rust-haired man collapse to the ground right next to him.

The rust-haired man, who had planned to start running right after Gustav’s declaration, collapsed onto the ground. That alone was a surprise, but what was even more surprising was that a kick struck him in the face.

The one who did that, was the tattooed man, who was supposedly his comrade.

He had swept the rust-haired man off his feet as the latter was about to sprint, and launched a kick as the latter fell. Then, after ascertaining that the rust-haired man had tumbled over and laid sprawled out,

Tattooed Man: “I told’cha. I ain’t putting my life in someone else’s hands…”

With that said, the tattooed man ran off at a brisk pace, heading toward the small sword.

Subaru’s eyes widened at the suddenness of the situation, and panicking over what he should do,

Lizardman: “N-not me! I-I ain’t gonna die!”

Subaru: “Hey?!”

The lizardman screamed in a quavering voice and fled with his back to the lion. Like that, he stuck to the wall of the gladiatorial arena and slowly began to change the color of his scales.

His gray-colored scales blended in with the color of the wall, making his large body surprisingly difficult to see.

One person outmaneuvered his comrade, one person clung onto the wall, one person got beat up by his comrade, and the last person just widened his eyes in panic, completely confused by the situation.

—This was the worst possible start.

Subaru: “Wh-What can I…”

Possibly do, and as Subaru’s face went pale in shock, he looked towards the lion.

Looking at this group with zero sense of unity, just what kind of impression did the Gladiator Beast have? Or rather, Subaru was frightened that its fangs would pierce him the moment he turned around.

However—

Gladiator Beast: “…”

Subaru: “Huh?”

The start had been declared, and he thought that surely the Gladiator Beast would toy with them, foolish as they were. But the lion remained in the same poised posture it had made at the beginning, without even the slightest movement.

It was as if the beginning had not even been declared.

And, while thinking about that, Subaru realized it. —That things were progressing just as it felt it would.

Subaru: “I-It’s no good—!”

Reaching his hand out, he tried to speak right away, but he could not continue beyond that point.

After all, Subaru did not know his name. He could not call out the name of someone he did not know, so even if he called out to them, just how much impact would it have?

Because of that, Subaru’s voice was lost of strength, nor could it stop what was to come.

Tattooed Man: “Now that I have this, I can…”

Outmaneuvering his companions, the tattooed man, who had run so vigorously, reached the sword lodged in the ground of the gladiatorial arena.

Chuckling to himself, he pulled the sword out from the ground and felt it in his hands. Just how much courage did the feeling and weight of the cold metal give him, who had been unarmed?

Jauntily, he turned his head, his face was as though there were no enemies.

Gladiator Beast: "—AROOOO!!"

The tattooed man's face was blown off without mercy by the lion, with a swipe of its front paws.

Its sharp claws sent everything upwards from the man's neck flying, and with his body not yet recognizing its own demise, it took a little bit before blood violently spurt out.

Subaru: "Eek…"

At the sight of this horrific scene, Subaru's throat hitched.

At the same time, he cursed himself from the bottom of his heart for his stupidity in not realizing things sooner.

The lion had gotten up at the very moment the tattooed man gripped the hilt of the sword.

For the lion, that had been the true declaration that the event had begun. Up till then, Subaru and his team certainly still had time to refine their strategy.

However, through impatience, and through anxiety, Subaru's squad had ruined it all.

Gladiator Beast: "—AROOOO!!!"

Along with the high-pitched clang that rang out when the sword hit the ground, the tattooed man's headless body toppled over backwards. Indifferent to the death of its prey, the lion howled loudly, commencing a ferocious sprint using its four large legs. — Straight toward the wall of the gladiatorial arena.

Lizardman: “Stop, stopstopstop, getawaygetawayGETAWAAAAAAAAY!!”

He did not know what method the lion had utilized to find the whereabouts of the lizardman camouflaged against the wall. Although he did not know that, what he did know for certain, was that the lizardman’s inability to bear the lion’s approach, as he let out a scream and ran away, was undoubtedly what caused the decisive blow.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

The lion plunged headfirst into the wall, its powerful headbutt crushing the lower half of the lizardman before the latter could escape, causing the contents of his body to spill out like a frog ran over by a car.

Lizardman: “Gueh.”

Although he had taken the color of the wall, the organs ejected from his squashed mouth took on a vibrant red and pink color, and Subaru absentmindedly thought about how his innards remained the same.

With those thoughts, Subaru also understood, without a shadow of a doubt, that the crushed lizardman in front of him was dead.

And then—

Rust-Haired Man: “What… What, a stupid thing to do…”

Shaking his head, the rust-haired man feebly grumbled at the sight of these two deaths.

He had been desperately trying to get through this situation and to get everyone to join forces in his own way. But one of his companions had outwitted him, the other had tried to run away, thus completely nullifying that possibility.

The rust-haired man did not expect Subaru to be capable of doing what he had expected from the tattooed man and the lizardman, as well.

Even if he had indeed expected something of him, Subaru himself did not feel that he could meet those demands.

Perhaps having understood Subaru's inner thoughts, the man looked into Subaru's eyes.

Rust-Haired Man: "…Stay behind me."

Upon comprehending just how hopeless their situation was, how many humans could put on such a brave front and face their demise head-on?

The rust-haired man, devoid of weapons, devoid of comrades, could only hope to at least face his last moments with integrity.

With the child Subaru sheltered behind him, he glared at the lion who had turned around.

In response to his stare, the lion let out a short roar, then rushed toward Subaru and the man, lifting a cloud of dust as its four powerful limbs kicked off the ground.

Subaru: "Uh, uhh…!"

He could not wrap his head around the events that had occurred in that split second.

If only one of his reliable friends were here, would he somehow find a way?

If Louis, Medium, Flop, Taritta, Al, Abel, Mizelda, Holly, Kuna, Utakata, Rem—.

If any one of his friends were here, then could he somehow do it?

Subaru: "In a place like this…"

Am I gonna, and Subaru tried to wring the rest out of his trembling voice.

However, he was unable to. Because before he could do so, the lion had caught up to Subaru and the man—but not quite.

That was because Subaru's shoulders had been grabbed, and forcibly thrusted forward.

Rust-Haired Man: "No, I don't, I don't want to die—hk!!"

Screaming, the man with rust-colored hair pushed Subaru in front of the lion.

Staring in astonishment, he had no time to curse him out. Only, Subaru's body flew as light as a leaf from a tree as the lion rammed straight into him.

Subaru: "…"

What a frail body he had.

Subaru's body was quickly shredded by the Gladiator Beast's ramming attack. This did not mean he had been dismembered, but rather that his insides had been scattered into tiny pieces.

Bones, internal organs, all broke and crumpled, as if he had been hit by a truck.

Rust-Haired Man: "Save me! I made a mistake! I lied! Me being a warrior was a lie! I was just trying to make myself seem important! Let me out! LET ME OOOUT!!"

Below Subaru as he whirled around in midair, the rust-haired man screamed and shouted as he jumped against the wall. Desperately, he appealed to Gustav, high above the wall.

And yet Gustav, upon observing the man crying, snot dripping from his nose, stood with a nonchalant face, with nary a movement of his eyebrows.

Perchance, he was already aware of the rust-haired man's lie.

Perhaps, he was not at all interested in whether it was true or false.

Whichever it was, it mattered not.

Rust-Haired Man: “Save—”

As the rust-haired man pleaded and clung to the wall, he was struck by one of the lion’s paws, thrust from right behind him, and he was squashed like a tomato thrown at a wall.

The tattooed man, the lizardman, and the rust-haired man, all had fallen before the Gladiator Beast.

???: “—su, Basu, can you hear me?”

Suddenly hearing a voice amongst the loud ringing in his ears, Subaru limply shifted his head.

Only then did he realize that he had been blown away and that, before he knew it, he had fallen to the ground, tumbling about. Even if he had realized it, he was powerless to stop it anyway.

In addition, the voice he had heard was coming from atop the wall, where a figure was watching Subaru tumbling on the ground.

A boy with tied-up blue hair, and a somewhat detestable face.

Cecilus: “My bad, it seems like I was wrong in my expectations! I thought I’d be able to, but it seems like I’m not as good as my dad. It appears that I’m not a good judge of character!”

Subaru: “Ah, ah…”

Cecilus: “In the meantime, is there anything you want to tell your companion once she wakes up? I thought how story-like it’d be to pass a message, so why don’t I seize this opportunity!”

While he observed Subaru’s groans, the fake Cecilus’s demeanor seemed completely steadfast.

Thinking back on it, his attitude had never changed. Not when Subaru woke up, not when he and Subaru talked in the healing room, and not when Subaru was like this, on the verge of dying.

He felt that this insane view of life and death was an element that made the fake Cecilus, though he was supposedly just a boy-who-cried-wolf, seem a tad more authentic.

If that much were to be assumed, then he truly would be the most powerful General of the Vollachian Empire.

Subaru: "—It."

Cecilus: "Huh? What? Basu, please speak louder, as these are your last words! If I get the message wrong, I think I'll regret it forever."

Subaru: "I hate, it…"

Cecilus: "…"

So he declared towards the fake Cecilus, who had cupped his hands around his ears to try and hear Subaru's voice.

The fake Cecilus raised his eyebrows at these words. He would speak a bit louder, from the depths of his throat.

Subaru: "The Empire, I, really hate it."

Cecilus: "—Yes, yes, for sure. I'll remember that well and pass it on, Basu."

Holding tightly onto his resentment, he cursed the fake Cecilus, whose face looked like he was dealing with someone else's problem.

But whether that curse would destroy the Empire, Subaru could not be sure.

After all—

Gladiator Beast: "—AROOOO!"

Of the four that had been fighting against it, only Subaru remained; and so, the Gladiator Beast approached him, opened its gigantic maw, and mercilessly swallowed Subaru whole head-first.

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Though all the bones of his body were in pieces by now, the lion’s fangs tore every aspect of his body into ribbons.

The little mercy he received was that his body had become unable to feel pain due to how crumpled it had become, and so, he was incapable of feeling anything more than a slight displeasure at being devoured into nothing.

Then, he tried his best to raise hell and get stuck in the lion’s throat, but he was unable to do that either.

Because with one final bite, that sly head of his attempting revenge was crushed—.

3

???: “If we don’t kill that thing, we’re not going to make it.”

It was just after a few moments of being crushed by the writhing reddish-black flesh surrounding him.

Seemingly caught off-guard upon hearing that voice, Subaru was brought back to reality. However, it was a reality that was so hopeless that it was tempting to mistake it for a nightmare upon waking up.

The noisy sensation of that silent heat, and the dry sands were spread out the grounds of the gladiatorial arena.

The worst-case scenario had arrived right before his eyes, and his comrades—or rather, those who had simply wound up in the same situation as him, were each plotting various ways to protect their own lives as their number one priority.

Were he not to think of them as that, everything that had just happened would have been very hard for him to accept.

Subaru: “Uah, ahh, ahhh…!”

Though he had no need to, he still thought about it.

Because of that, Subaru's whole body remembered the Gladiator Beast's ramming attack, the fear of being chewed up, and his reckless anger towards reality.

As these thoughts surged, he could hardly stand up straight.

???: "Damn, he's just a child after all… Well, I've had enough! You guys, look over there!"

???: "Ahh?"

To the crouching Subaru's side, the rust-haired man directed the tattooed man and the lizardman to look at the large and small swords that had been prepared for them.

However, their attention had naturally focused to the side of the smaller sword. Disregarding the larger, unusable sword, their strategy was set on securing the other, and defeating the Gladiator Beast.

Tattooed Man: "…Can ya use a sword?"

Rust-Haired Man: "I told you. I used to be a warrior. I can use it better than you can."

The same things he had heard earlier continued unabated, and anxiety began to simmer within Subaru.

But, even in a state of being seized by fear and anxiety, that was a remark he could not let slide.

Subaru: "—That's a lie."

Rust-Haired Man: "…What?"

Suddenly, the men's strategy meeting was interrupted by Subaru's voice.

The moment he heard that, the tone of the rust-haired man's voice changed. The man turned around, and looked down towards Subaru as the latter crouched. Kneeling, Subaru fixedly stared at the man's face.

And so, he repeated himself once more.

Subaru: “That you used to be a warrior, it’s a lie. You’re just downright lying!”

Rust-Haired Man: “O-on what grounds…! You bastard, are you intending to insult me just because I called you a child?!”

Subaru: “Who’s the one insulting here?! Lying and trying to make yourself look like a big shot is a much greater insult! In a situation like this, what’s the point of playing the tough guy??!!”

Rust-Haired Man: “Gh, gh…!”

Perhaps he had thought that he could silence the child by yelling in a loud voice, but, instead, the rust-haired man was visibly flustered at Subaru snapping back in opposition.

The tattooed man who had spoke earlier had probably perceived his shaken manner as well.

Tattooed Man: “…Oi, is what that kid said true? That’cha weren’t a warrior for real, and that ya were trying to deceive me?”

Rust-Haired Man: “W-wait, that’s just a child’s ramblings! You can’t just go spouting such nonsensical things in a place where our lives are at stake…”

Tattooed Man: “Exactly, since our lives are at stake, why don’t’cha try and explain yerself…”

The tattooed man grabbed the rust-haired man by the collar, the skeleton-like tattoo on his face contorting with anger. The rust-haired man gulped down his spit at that threatening attitude, lowly panting as if suffocating.

Because he had thoughtlessly interjected, such a fight had broken out. The lizardman, not involved in the fight, was visibly stepping back slowly and beginning preparations to escape.

Although Subaru’s interruption had been the impetus, this team was once again in a state of disarray and fragmentation.

Moreover, whether Subaru and his team were in such a state or not —

Gustav: "—Well then, LET SPARKA COMMENCE!!"

Gustav would not procrastinate in his pronouncement of the battle's beginning.

Tattooed Man: "Care to explain, ya—Uh, AAHHHHHH—!!"

A deep voice boisterously declared the start of the battle, and immediately after, the cracking voice of a man cut through the gladiatorial arena.

Anyone looking over would see that the one who had cried out was the tattooed man, pressing the rust-haired man for an answer. Somehow, the rust-haired man had bitten the hands that were grabbing his collar, and he seemed to have bitten those fingers off.

While the rust-haired man's mouth was stained with blood, he pushed off the screaming tattooed man's chest and sprinted for the sword.

Lizardman: "N-not me! I-I ain't gonna die!"

And so, in contrast to the rust-haired man running towards the sword, the lizardman did as he did before and stuck to the wall of the gladiatorial arena, then started to change the color of his scales for camouflage.

Having lost two fingers, the tattooed man was crouched down clutching his right hand, and Subaru's knees were trembling in fear at the situation before his eyes, which was even worse than last time.

Rust-Haired Man: "Mind, your own…! If only you'd just done as I said obediently!"

Without care for Subaru or the others, the rust-haired man with bloodshot eyes had arrived at the smaller sword.

Cursing that his lie had been discovered and that the tattooed man had grabbed him, he reached out his hand and pulled the sword out of the ground, readying it like a warrior would.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

Then, having received the “start” signal, the lion pounced ferociously.

The resulting incident was practically identical to what had happened just before once the tattooed man had taken the sword. The rust-haired man did not even have the time to swing the sword he had readied, and both his arms were completely blown off as he was hit by the paws of the Gladiator Beast.

With a firm grip on the sword, the rust-haired man’s arms were torn off from the elbows down; and just as he stared in astonishment and let out a thin cry of “Ah”, the lion forcefully hurled itself at the man’s armless body and sent him flying, throwing him against the wall head-first.

The rust-haired man became a stain on the wall, and the roaring Gladiator Beast, ignoring Subaru and the tattooed man, ferociously sprinted straight for the rear wall of the gladiatorial arena.

Lizardman: “Stop, stopstopstop, getawaygetawayGETAWAAAAAAAAY!!”

The lizardman, having disguised himself as a wall, shrieked at the intimidating air of the lion running toward him.

Having given away his position by yelling, the lizardman hurried to change positions, but he did not have enough time. The lion’s charge crushed the lower half of his body, mortally wounding him as he vomited out his own internal organs.

Then, the lion that had murdered the two men in a blink of an eye slowly turned to Subaru and the tattooed man, and let out a bloody roar.

Subaru: “Eek…”

Tattooed Man: “Shit, it just keeps getting worse…”

His brain numb, his paralyzed thoughts slowly began flowing anew. Because of that, Subaru's body remembered the fear, his teeth clattered, and his internal organs tightened.

As the tattooed man grinding his teeth had stated, the worst kept piling on top of the worst, and as a result, it had become an even worse and hopeless situation.

There had been no significance in calling the rust-haired man a liar.

Although nothing good would have come from exposing the rust-haired man's lie there, Subaru had still done it without thinking. Because of that, everything was a mess.

Tattooed Man: "…Still wanna live, kid?"

Subaru: "Huh…"

Tattooed Man: "If ya wanna live, pick up the sword."

The man with the tattoos spoke this to Subaru, the latter's vision blurry, looking as if he was about to break down crying at any moment.

Gazing towards him, the tattooed man pounded the ground with his bleeding right hand, and stood up while breaking into a greasy sweat. As he did so, he jerked his chin to the sword lying on the ground—indicating what had fallen to the ground together with the rust-haired man's severed arm.

Tattooed Man: "I'll draw that monster's attention… Ya grab that sword, and throw it to me."

Subaru: "B-but…"

Tattooed Man: "Even if I'm missing two fingers, I can use it better than ya, kid…"

Having been told so clearly, Subaru was at a loss for words.

There were two swords, one large and one small, and although he had been referring to the smaller one, it was still a sword too long and large for a child's body to use. Just as the tattooed man had stated, even if Subaru were to wield it with both hands, the only outcome would be that he would tumble due to its length and weight.

However, when the tattooed man declared that he would take the sword and defeat the lion, Subaru thought of it as impossible, remembering his death last time.

And yet—

Subaru: "I don't… want to give up, either…"

Tattooed Man: "…Yer better than that fraud and that scaredy-cat."

Bearing the pain, the tattooed man contorted his lips, welcoming Subaru's determination.

And with that, the tattooed man glared at the lion who was carefully observing them, and, bit-by-bit, widened the distance between him and Subaru,

Tattooed Man: "It's Weitz…"

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Weitz: "That's my name, Schwartz."

Being called Schwartz, Subaru's eyes widened in astonishment.

Subaru wondered where the man had heard that name, but Gustav was the only one who had referred to Subaru as Schwartz. That was why the tattooed man—Weitz, remembered the name he had been called during their first meeting.

Of course, that did not really amount to anything, and he knew that last time, Weitz had been a coward as he tried to outmaneuver the rust-haired man.

He knew that, but—

Weitz: "—Go!"

Weitz's shout just then became his reason to rely on him and run without hesitating.

Subaru: "…"

Firmly enduring his urge to scream, Subaru ran along the ground of the gladiatorial arena with all his might.

Naturally, he was slow. His childlike body had short limbs, and his internal organs, contracted by fear and tension, were in terrible pain. Even though he already often suffered from a lack of strength under normal circumstances, this body was a far-too-lacking one.

Still, he ran, desperately. He ran, and ran, and ran, until he reached the sword.

Subaru: "Uh, kuh…!"

Both of the rust-haired man's hands still clung to the sword, and just looking at them made him want to retch. However, this was no time to throw up.

Peeling off the firm, rigid fingers one at a time, he forcibly detached the sword from the rust-haired man's hands.

Then, while breathing heavily, Subaru lifted the sword.

Subaru: "Yes, I got it out!"

Taking a large breath, Subaru hoisted the sword he had picked up. Then he turned around and was about to throw the sword over to Weitz's direction, when—

Weitz: "Schwartz!!"

Weitz's frantic voice made all the hairs on Subaru's entire body stand on end.

Subaru turned around, and filling his field of vision was a lion, its mouth gaping wide, barreling toward him. At that moment, he felt like a deer about to be eaten, and the lion's movements seemed to be in slow motion.

Subaru: "…"

Slowly, the scary-looking lion was drawing near.

It seemed as if he could dodge it, but since his own movements were in slow motion much like his vision, he would be unable to escape at all. Only, he continued to throw the sword that he brandished.

At the very least, he wanted to finish throwing the sword before the lion's attack hit him.

—Hurry, hurry, hurryhurryhurryhurryhurry!!

Within the frustrating slowness, the voice in Subaru's head cried out desperately, wishing upon his arms and fingers.

Would it reach him? The sword finally left Subaru's hand, whirling around and spinning vertically as it flew past the dashing lion and toward Weitz.

Weitz, his hand outstretched with missing fingers, was shouting something to Subaru, who was being hunted down by the lion. However, he did not understand the true form of that shout. Even though he did not understand, it was okay.

Anyway, he just needed to put the sword that had been thrown to good use.

Subaru: "Uh, WAHHHH—!!"

Right when he thought he had completed his part, the once-slowed world returned to normal.

The howling lion dived at him, and Subaru, screaming and expecting to be torn apart by the Gladiator Beast's claws or fangs, fell onto his butt. Tears and snot streaming down his face, Subaru accepted that he was going to make an incredibly pathetic dying face.

And yet—

Subaru: “—Huh?”

The lion’s attack, that which should have killed Subaru, did not reach him.

Because, the lion had stuck its front paws into the ground right in front of Subaru, dispelling its own momentum, then fired off its hind legs into Weitz directly behind it.

Weitz: “Buh.”

Having received the sword thrown by Subaru, Weitz slashed at the lion from behind. Weitz’s face, riddled with tattoos, was smashed to bits by the hooves of the lion’s hind legs.

Exactly as before, Weitz died having had everything above his neck exploded. The sword he had brandished fell out of his hand and rolled on the ground into the distance, fruitless.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

Then, the lion that had just killed Weitz slowly turned its attention back to Subaru.

There was no lenience there to let him off the hook, only a ferocious intent to kill.

???: “Basu! Basu! Excuse me, but do you think you can still recover from that?”

Behind him, calling out to him from the audience in the gladiatorial arena, was the fake Cecilus, who had been watching this pitiful fight. And as he looked down at Subaru, who had fallen on his buttocks,

Cecilus: “Like some awakening of a hidden power, or the release of some sealed technique triggered by the brutal death of a fellow comrade! Is it likely? Is it unlikely?”

Subaru: “…I don’t have anything like that.”

Cecilus: “Yeaaah~, seems about right. My bad, looks like I was wrong in my expectations! Do you have a message for the girl who was with you, or something? I wonder how story-like would doing something like that be!”

Unchanged from the time he had died earlier, being spoken to in such a relaxed tone, Subaru let out a “Ha”, exhaling. What was different from before was that the bones of Subaru’s body were not yet in pieces.

Even though he might be ripped to pieces after this, and even though he was scared to death, he had yet to die still.

Subaru: “Ceci, just one question.”

Cecilus: “Not a message, but a question? A so-called memento for the afterlife? Whether or not my answer would fulfill Basu’s question will be a test of an actor’s blossoming brilliance—”

Subaru: “That lion, why didn’t it kill me earlier?”

Cecilus: “—Hmm.”

Pointing to the Gladiator Beast in front of him, Subaru asked the fake Cecilus perched on the wall.

Subaru was not sure if he, the boy-who-cried-wolf that he was, would give the straight answer that he desired. He just comforted himself with the thought that it was not-so-bad for a useless struggle.

To Subaru’s question, the fake Cecilus spoke as he stroked his slender chin,

Cecilus: “That’s easy, Basu. —Even if it’s ferocious, a beast is a beast. In that case, a beast only hunts by instinct. Instinct is the power to live.”

Subaru: “…What do you mean?”

Cecilus: “If you were that beast, Basu, who’d you aim for?”

The riddle-like phrasing did not give Subaru that simple question-

and-answer sequence.

Irritated, Subaru pondered the meaning of the fake Cecilus's words. If Subaru were to be that lion, just who would he target?

If he were to aim for someone, what would be his reason—.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Suddenly, it dawned on him. So that was what the reason was, he understood.

And—

Cecilus: "When she wakes up, I'll tell her that Basu was brave. I suck at lying, so thank heavens you were brave!"

Hearing such an insensitive voice, he did not have any time to respond.

Having reached an understanding, Subaru widened his eyes, and the lion standing in front of him swung its paw towards him.

For the first time, Subaru truly heard the sound of his own body being crushed.

4

???: "If we don't kill that thing, we're not going to make it."

His skull had been crushed, his shoulders had been crushed, his body had been crushed, his hips had been crushed, every part of him had been crushed.

Slowly, Subaru experienced just that, a human body being dealt a blow of such unbearable power and speed that it would be brought to ruin in that manner, as if it were from someone else's perspective.

Of course, it really was not someone else's problem.

If possible, he would meet the end with the least amount of suffering. With the minimum amount of pain and fear. Still, Subaru's way of thinking was only possible due to how much experience he'd had at Chaosflame.

—Those ten seconds of hell.

Since that had happened, Subaru deeply understood the importance of a mere few seconds.

And because that understanding permeated his body—

???: "Shit, damn it, why am I in this mess…?!"

???: "Enough with the whining! We need to do everything we can to survive! Look over—"

Right beside him, the lizardman and the rust-haired man became desperate as they accepted the situation before them.

While listening to this already familiar conversation, Subaru called out.

Subaru: "Weitz! Hold that guy down!"

Weitz: "What…?"

The moment Subaru shouted that, the tattooed man—Weitz, had his facial tattoo distort in confusion.

That was natural. Although he had never once mentioned it, Subaru knew his name. But even if he had been called out by his name, he had no intentions of doing as he was told by some creepy kid.

But neither the bewildered Weitz, nor the rust-haired man, nor the lizardman, startled by Subaru's sudden loud voice, had time to stop his sudden action.

And then—

Subaru: "—Lion! Who are you aiming for?!"

Subaru's tiny hand grabbed the sword lodged in the ground with force as he shouted.

At that moment, without waiting for Gustav’s command, the Gladiator Beast howled, kicked its feet upon the ground, and ferociously barreled forward toward Subaru—.

Cecilus: “If Basu were that beast, who would you aim for?”

The words of the fake Cecilus, like a riddle, had been painfully seared into Subaru’s brain.

Indeed, that was it. If Subaru were the lion, he would go for the “dangerous ones” first. For instance, in this place, that would be the one wielding a weapon.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

Subaru gritted his molars, and faced the howling lion lunging at him. He had a visceral shudder of fear, but he would not be defeated, he would not run away, and he would not cry.

He had already been killed twice, and no matter how many more times he had to face this scary experience.

Subaru: “Don’t think that just because I’m a kid, I’m gonna cry and give up right away!!”

Cooperating with a coward, a scaredy-cat, and a fraud, with all his might, with all his power, with all his body and soul, he would fight through this Sparka to the bitter end.

—In that decisive moment, the lion’s powerful paw ferociously reaped the life of Natsuki Subaru, along with his third attempt.

Chapter 64: Magic Words

1

—An abominable technique left behind by the Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkenn.

By meddling with the Od of others, the shinobi's secret infantilization technique could remarkably reverse the growth of one's body.

All living beings were naught more than containers for that which came into existence from nothingness, the Od. Depending on the shape of the Od, the size and form of the container would vary accordingly.

Therefore, all living creatures would don different appearances, and establish themselves as unique life forms.

If this theory was correct, that the body only served as a container for the Od, then by altering the shape of one's Od, the form of its container could be altered freely.

By compressing one's Od, then the body, serving as the container, could also be shrunk—.

???: "Well, ta tell ya the truth, I'm not sure how the shinobi ancestors came up with those ideas. In the first place, not knowin' the methods ta train yer body ta the brink of death, nor how ta ascertain that limit, must've been scary, huh?"

???: "And so, that's what a shinobi is. When the time of tryin' to become one arrives, you're on the path of Shura, not ta mention that the tale becomes one of constantly walkin' over a mountain of corpses, ya see."

???: "There are lotsa techniques, but if ya don't test them with yer own life, ya can't leave them behind in a book of secrets, ya know?

My secret technique's… just one among several dozen, but even so, it's no exception to that."

???: "But, it's amusin' that the actual result and the effects deviate so much, ya know. I was sure they'd just shrink someone, ya know, but it goes as far as ta completely restore the brain ta its youthful state."

???: "Unfortunately, I really don't understand why either. Well, it's 'cause the Od's forcibly tampered with. Just as yer body shrinks ta fit yer Od, yer mind'd prolly shrink ta fit yer Od as well, yeah?"

???: "Well, it's a technique I don't use very often, 'cause I usually hafta kill the person I'm usin' it on, so I've never bothered ta find out the reason why. In fact, it's easier ta kill someone if not only their body but also the contents of their head shrink, so it's a perfect solution, ya know?"

???: "Altho', you'll sometimes get guys who've already got some serious resolve in them, from the time they were kids! Ya can't expect that trick ta work on those kinda guys, even if the stuff in their head's shrunk. —Ah, and…"

???: "…"

???: "…Oh, it's nothing. Anyway, I'm fond of it since it's one of the more amusin' shinobi techniques, ya know? It's easier to deal with a weak enemy, isn't it?"

2

—Anger, anger simmered up in Subaru, scorching his soul.

There was fear. There was also tension. Furthermore, there was also unease.

He thought that of all the negative emotions one could think of, he probably possessed them all.

But, all those negative emotions blazed, burning though every carefully folded and wrapped thing until naught, without exception, remained, his raging anger surged up.

Lizardman: “Shit, damn it, why am I in this mess…?!”

Shut up, idiot. No one’ll listen to your whining.

Rust-Haired Man: “I told you. I used to be a warrior. I can use it better than you can.”

Shut up, idiot. That’s a lie, you’re just trying to show off, it’s been obvious for a long time already.

Weitz: “I told’cha. I ain’t putting my life in someone else’s hands…”

Shut up, idiot. Like hell you can survive this alone. Look around yourself a little more.

—Yes, look around you, do so properly, at everything that you can put to use.

Subaru: “Weitz, take this! It’ll aim for the one who has the sword!”

The moment he grabbed the sword, a roar reverberated through the gladiatorial arena as the black lion broke out into a ferocious charge.

He already knew that it was aiming for him—No, at the prey that wielded the sword. So, grasping the sword he had pulled out, he tossed it towards Weitz, who was standing still.

When Subaru ran ahead, breaking out into a sprint at the outset, the three members of his team froze in surprise.

Among those three people stuck in place, the one to receive the sword that Subaru had thrown over proper was the tattooed man—Weitz, the only one to come to their senses in their last moments.

Weitz: “K-kid…!”

Witnessing the spinning sword lodge itself underneath his foot, Weitz immediately grabbed it by the hilt.

However, he had given a proper listen to Subaru’s voice, so he quickly understood that rather than being the key to defeat the lion, the sword was more of a flag to change its target.

The problem was—

Rust-Haired Man: “G-Give me that sword! I’ll take that Gladiator Beast and…!”

Subsequently coming to his senses, at Weitz’s side, the rust-haired man tried to snatch the sword the former had secured.

His mind riddled by tension and fear, the rust-haired man’s judgement was beyond repair. If this continued and became a scuffle over the sword, the two of them would both fall prey to the lion’s paws.

For that reason, he had to prevent that before it could happen.

Subaru: “Hiain! Behind you!”

Hiain: “B-behind me…?!”

Just before the rust-haired man grabbed onto Weitz, Subaru called out the name of the unaware lizardman—Hiain, convincing him that he was cornered by the imminent danger behind him.

Being the most cowardly among the three, he turned around in panic at Subaru’s voice to ascertain what was about to attack him.

But, there was nothing there. Subaru merely wished for him to turn around.

With his body stiffening in fear, Hiain turned around and—

Rust-Haired Man: “Guh!”

Instinctively extending his tail, Hiain struck the rust-haired man’s flank from the side. The latter was sent rolling at the unexpected obstruction, allowing Weitz to snatch away the sword.

Then, the lion came flying towards Weitz, who was properly standing on-guard, having changed its target from Subaru to him.

Subaru: “Get down!”

Weitz: “Tch!”

Hearing Subaru’s voice, Weitz crouched as the lion’s fangs bore down on the air right above him. Weitz’s tattooed face contorted into a grimace as he dove underneath the lion’s belly, releasing the sword before the next attack could come.

With a plop, the sword, thrown without force, settled itself atop Hiain’s chest, who instinctively grabbed it.

Hiain: “Huh?”

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

Hiain: “H-hyaaaaaaaaah—!!”

Naturally, the lion’s focus turned toward Hiain, who reacted poorly.

As if he did not fully understand the situation, Hiain turned his back to the lion with the sword held in his arms, and with his surprisingly fast sprinting speed, he immediately distanced himself from the lion.

The lion relentlessly chased him down, and proceeded to unleash an onslaught.

Subaru: “While that’s happening, I’ll…!”

While Weitz and Hiain were somehow managing, Subaru ran alongside the wall of the gladiatorial arena. What lay ahead of his gaze was a small handle installed in the wall—something akin to a lever.

At first glance, his eyes had been drawn to the two swords, one large and one small, lodged in the ground of the gladiatorial arena, but upon closer inspection, he noticed that a lever of sorts had been inconspicuously installed on the wall.

Subaru: “If I pull this, what’ll happen?!”

The lever was a little too high for the child Subaru, so he jumped up and pulled down the handle. Putting his weight on it, he forcibly lowered the lever, and a heavy sound reverberated.

Gears were interlocking, and the sensation of something beginning to rattle and move sent a tremor from under his feet. It was the sensation of something mechanical being put into operation directly beneath the gladiatorial arena.

With this, the situation had changed, and Subaru looked back at the circumstances of the gladiatorial arena,

Subaru: “U-uwaaah—!”

The next moment, making a sound as it split the gladiatorial arena in two, an iron fence rose from the ground.

It was a wall that had been raised to divide the circular gladiatorial arena into two semicircles; if utilized properly, it was possible to force the lion into the other side.

However—

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

This time, he had failed, he had corralled it on the wrong side.

The lion was on his side of the raised fence, so the fence only narrowed Subaru’s room to escape. With its hunting ground having become smaller, it felt as if the lion’s body had doubled in size, and the remains of what used to be Hiain were caught in its blood-stained mouth.

Rust-Haired Man: “GUAAAHK!”

Furthermore, at the lion’s feet was the rust-haired man, crying out in pain as he laid down.

It seemed that he had been right above the fence when it was raised. Because of that, he had been sent flying, and in a stroke of bad luck, had fallen on the side where the lion and Subaru were.

In contrast, an uninjured Weitz was dumbfounded on the other side of the fence.

Rust-Haired Man: “S-sto…!”

Raising its paw overhead, it then trampled on the rust-haired man collapsed on the ground, mercilessly fracturing his head.

A sound similar to that of ice being smashed rang out, and the rust-haired man’s screams were cut off there. The lion, unable to climb over the fence behind it, turned its gaze towards Subaru.

The way it stooped down ever-so-slightly made his skin crawl as it charged at him.

The sword was on the other side of the fence with Weitz, but it seemed that if the attack were unable to reach it, the lion would not consider it as dangerous.

That was why, it then ferociously charged at Subaru.

Weitz: “Schwartz!!”

Weitz called out. At these critical moments, Weitz called Subaru’s name every time.

Of course, only when he did not die before Subaru.

While also keeping that at the back of his memories—

Subaru: “—Next!”

As he howled that out, the Gladiator Beast’s sharp claws pierced Subaru’s chest.

In less than a second, together with the impact that felt like being struck by lightning, Subaru’s body was split in twain, and his consciousness went white—.

3

Subaru: “Idra! The fence won’t hold any longer! How’s the sword over there?”

Idra: “I can’t pull it out! It’s too heavy! There’s no way I can move it!”

Suffering the powerful ramming attacks, the iron fence was being tremendously warped, and the lion was thrusting its body over to their side.

He had heard that even humans would be able to pass through most narrow spaces, provided their heads could pass through. Even though its form was considerably different, given the Gladiator Beast’s face gave off the feeling of a feline’s, it was probably able to get through even more easily.

Behind Subaru, who was gnawing his molars in alarm, the rust-haired man—Idra, was desperately trying to pull out the large sword lodged in the ground, but it would not budge an inch.

The lever to raise the fence, and the two swords of large and small. What he had found after thoroughly searching, were just those two types of gimmicks. The rest would be a genuine contest of ability.

Idra: “Boy! What should we do?!”

Subaru: “Don’t be frightened! You’re the heir of your noble father, aren’t you?!”

Idra: “—Hk, th-that’s right! I’m… not going to chicken out!”

Panic ran through Idra’s voice, but Subaru’s words brought strength back into his eyes.

Idra was no warrior, nothing of the sort. He had drifted onto the Gladiator Island like this because he had become unable to repay his debts and was thus reduced to the status of a slave.

But, the reason behind his debt, was that he had taken it on to protect the family business he had inherited from his father.

Even though Idra was not a warrior, he wished not to be a man who would bring shame to his father; those were the true feelings on his mind.

Idra: “RAHHHHHHHH!!”

The untalented son of a miller, applying his weight, leaned to uproot the large sword. Subaru too, rushed to Idra’s side, and applied his weight to the large sword in a similar way.

The lion was coming at them from the other side of the fence, and behind it lay the corpses of Weitz and Hiain, both of whom had already been killed.

Now, there was hardly a chance of anything like winning. —Even so, Idra did not abandon Subaru and run away. This, was the first occurrence of that.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!!”

Subaru: “Idra, it’s coming!”

Idra: “I know!”

There was a violent sound of the iron fence creaking, followed by the lion finally coming over to their side.

Even if the broken fence had wounded the lion’s skin covered in black fur, it did not display the least bit of pain. Rather, blaming the pain on them, its motivation ignited as it charged at them.

Idra: “Ughk…!!”

Idra had somehow managed to get the tip of the large sword out of the ground, and through sheer force carried it on his shoulder. Subaru put his hands on the tip of the sword from below, and used the principle of leverage to help Idra to try and swing the sword, even if only a bit.

If Subaru pushed up the tip of the sword from below, the sword should be a little lighter to swing.

If that sword were to score a decent hit on the lion—

Subaru: “GOOOOOO—!!”

Idra: “RAHHHHHH—!!!!”

Subaru and Idra joined forces to swing the sword at the lion’s face as it lunged at them.

The large sword, swung with the force of a shoulder throw above Idra’s shoulder, aimed true at the lion’s head with miraculous timing.

But—

Idra: “—Oh.”

The obvious strike was repelled by the Gladiator Beast’s claws without a hitch, and Subaru and Idra were hit with the force of that ramming attack, blown away simultaneously.

Then, the two struggled midair as they slammed into the walls of the gladiatorial arena together, becoming one.

Idra: “Buh.”

Indistinguishable from each other, the blood from the two was spread out and stained the walls—.

Subaru: “…Ne… xt.”

4

—Anger, anger simmered up in Subaru, scorching his soul.

Weitz: “I was desperate for food, so I stole… If I let ’em think I was a dangerous person, surprisingly, I could avoid deadly situations.”

Weitz said this as he stroked his skin, which was so filled with tattoos that there was no spot left uncovered.

It seemed like he was apologizing for giving a false impression, but Subaru thought it was proof that Weitz had opened up to him in his final moments.

Hiain: "Y'all are gonna use me as bait to escape as well anyway! I'm… I'm not gonna be used anymore! Like hell I'm gonna be used!"

While abjectly avoiding eye contact, Hiain had said this as if wailing.

He had the ability to run and hide by changing the color of his scales, seemingly well-known among his own people. He had stated that he had always been given the most dangerous roles, and in the end, he willfully became the decoy and was made into a slave.

That timidity had been instilled in him by his surroundings. Hiain was not at fault.

Idra: "People I trusted deceived me, stole my family's business away from me, and in the end, I became a slave. If living honestly only makes me look like a fool, at least I'll be the last one standing…!"

Biting his lip in frustration and embarrassment, Idra sobbed those words out.

Unaccustomed to telling lies, he was unable to stick to them to the very end. In the first place, ever since he was brought to the Gladiator Island, he had been introducing himself as a warrior; that had been a lie, not much thought put into the consequences.

It would be exposed later, anyway. Sure enough, Subaru found out right away. Though it was the result of having cheated.

—Cooperating with a coward, a scaredy-cat, and a fraud, he would survive this Sparka.

Subaru: "Next…!" / "Next time!" / "Next!!" / "Next time for sure!" / "I'll do it next… Hk!" / "Next is…!" / "I can do it next…!" / "Next!" / "Next is…" / "—Definitely next" / "Neeext—!!"

The contradiction of accumulating Deaths in order to survive amassed more and more.

It hurts, it's difficult, it's scary, it's tough, I want to stop, I want to cry, I want to shout, I want to howl, I want to grieve, I want to scream, I want to resign, I want to refuse, I want to lament, I want to give up, I won’t give up.

He was nipping off the possibilities.

Out of those endless possibilities, crushing the paths which lead to dead ends, crushing them, crushing them crushing them crushing them.

He would twist his small body into that path unknown, laying ahead of the ones he was crushing.

Weitz, Hiain, Idra would die.

Of course, Subaru would die just as many times, and yet he raised his head still, and proceed forward.

Cecilus: “Basu, is there anything you want me to tell your sleeping companion?”

Subaru: “—Next!!”

Natsuki Subaru yelled back at the inconsiderate voice, and though his entire body was bathed in Death from the assailing claws, Natsuki Subaru still refused to desist.

Because, because, because—

Subaru: “I won’t lose.”

—Because he did not feel like losing in the slightest.

5

???: “Oh? Just now, were ya hesitatin’ ta say somethin’? Jeez, you’re a clever fella, aren’t’cha?”

???: “Oh that, I told’cha ’bout the guy who was troublesome even when he got shrunk, didn’t I? Even if the mind shrinks, the effect’ll only be half as powerful on whose resolve was unchanged from before. Of course, guys like that’ll also get their body shrunk, so they’ll also become seriously easier ta kill, ya know.”

???: “—Altho’, let’s imagine here. Supposin’ there was a guy whose body and mind were instead both perfect since they were little, what do ya think’d happen if ya were ta apply this technique onta that guy?”

???: “Ahh, I know, I know. I also don’t think there’s a guy like that in the slightest, ya see. But ya know, I’m an incredibly pessimistic ol’ man. I’ve always imagined the worst, so I can harass my opponents in the worst possible ways. Right?”

???: “That’s what I think’s the worst possible scenario against this technique. When the guy gets more dangerous when shrunk, that’s really darn frightenin’.”

???: “It isn’t limited ta just me, but gettin’ older means ya gotta give things up and compromise, ya see. What if those things were ta disappear from a guy like that?”

???: “—Scary as can be, right?”

6

Subaru: “Next!”

—That outcome, it was way too ironic.

The Vicious Old Man Olbart Dunkelkenn’s technique, and the harm of the “infantilization” it brought about, had transformed Natsuki Subaru’s body into that of a child, regressed what little intelligence he already possessed.

Gradually losing both his knowledge and memories, Subaru was reshaped into a weak and frail young boy.

Taking away threats both physical and mental, was the purpose of that technique.

For the shinobi, who would utilize all means possible to accomplish their objective, it could be said that secret art was a rather fitting secret technique.

The truth was, as his memories faded as if flaking away from him, the faces of those important to Subaru grew distant.

Thus, befitting of Natsuki Subaru's outward appearance, he had returned to being a young child of around ten years old.

Around ten years old—before, to the times Natsuki Subaru had been a child prodigy.

Subaru: "Next!"

Before, Natsuki Subaru had been a child prodigy.

Actually, that he was an existence overflowing with talent to the point of being called a child prodigy, was not that important. The important thing was, it was none other than Subaru himself who possessed that level of self-esteem.

As a young child, Natsuki Subaru had been overflowing with confidence, and held no doubt in his belief that he could accomplish anything.

Drawing in the children around him, his belief that he could reach that starry sky was unceasing.

Subaru: "Next!"

In accordance with his growth, his self-esteem wore down in the face of reality, and ended up being lost altogether.

His number one truth had been erased in spite of whatever he would do, and what remained in Subaru's possession were not feelings of almightiness, but rather feelings of uneasiness and powerlessness. Those shining stars were concealed by an overcast sky.

Together with the growth of his stature, Natsuki Subaru had lost his confidence.

Subaru: "Next!"

The moment in which Subaru's self-esteem reached its lowest, that had definitely been the day he was sent to another world.

After that, his encounters, his experiences, his conversations, and his actions, gradually wrapped Natsuki Subaru with new desires, and had also led him to the assessment that his own perseverance was not a bad thing.

And yet, he was still insufficient, his heart still lamented so.

Subaru: “Next!”

The things that Natsuki Subaru had gained through growth, the things he had lost with growth, had all vanished.

Together with their body turning younger, people would also regress mentally, so the person was supposed to become weaker. Physically, that was the case for Subaru. He had become weak. —However, what about mentally?

Subaru: “Next!”

Before, Natsuki Subaru had been a child prodigy.

Never knowing defeat, never knowing how to give up even when his dreams did not come true, even when he did his best but could not reach, even when he mourned his own inadequacy, even when he lamented a dead end, even when he sulkily withdrew, he had never known those.

From just being insensitive, to being flat out reckless, he firmly believed he could accomplish anything.

He recklessly believed he was the ruler at the center of the world, that was the kind of boy he had been.

Then, the magic words that sustained Natsuki Subaru’s sense of self —

???: “—He’s that guy’s child, after all.”

The unlimited power pouring from those words freed the heart of the young Natsuki Subaru from its shackles.

More than it was scary, it was revolting. More than it was painful, it was vexing. More than he wanted to cry, he wanted to smile.

In a country he hated, joining forces with comrades he had little emotional attachment to, in order to return to the place where the girl he liked and his friends should be waiting for him, just what point was there in hesitating?

Therefore, this time, because he had been summoned to another world—

Subaru: “—Next!”

—As the strongest existence, Natsuki Subaru would trample upon Ginunhive.

7

Everyone: “…”

Everyone was left speechless.

From the get-go, the gladiators had been under strict orders from the Island’s Governor, Gustav Morello, to witness the battle of Sparka quietly.

That was why, it could be said that it was inevitable that some sort of odd silence would envelop the gladiatorial arena.

However, this time the silence and stillness were not simply because Gustav had proclaimed it.

Even if Gustav had not given those instructions, no one would have been able to say anything. That bloodcurdling scene had overwhelmed them to such an extent.

Subaru: “Weitz! Idra! Scatter to the left and right! Hiain, I know you’re scared, but don’t run! Pick up the sword, draw its attention, then throw it!”

Ferociously roaring, the Guiltilaw, the Gladiator Beast, fiercely leapt around the gladiatorial arena.

The beast had been trained for use in Sparka, its horns broken off, now lost of its bestial obstinacy; in its place, the level of threat the humans known as gladiators posed had been thoroughly drilled into it.

That was why, it took the initiative to target opponents with weapons and eliminate them, since they were dangerous existences.

Only, since it had the bad habit of relentlessly following this devotion, one could imagine that the members of a Unit would be able to scatter its attention by passing the weapon between each other.

Although, it was not uncommon for Units to fail to recognize this at first sight, and consequently suffer total annihilation.

It could be said that once someone was able to recognize this, a certain level of excellence was guaranteed.

But even so, the scene this time was extraordinary.

???: “Hahaha! Amazing, amazing! You’re really doing your best, aren’t you, Basu!”

Among everyone who had lost their voice, welcoming the sight before him with a warm reception was only one boy, clapping his hands.

His long blue hair tied behind his head, he was a person whose charming face was adorned with a smile. Apparently showing indifference to Gustav’s commands, the boy cheered on the Unit fighting bravely in the gladiatorial arena.

Whether that cheering had any effect was unclear, but while dodging the Gladiator Beast’s onslaught by a hair’s breadth, the four men challenging the Sparka continued to fight desperately.

With no decisive blows, the progress of the deathmatch was, to a certain extent, boring.

However, one point was that even if it seemed like they were going to die, they would not forfeit their lives, and the other point was they were being supported by the continuous voice of the young boy; these two points made it unthinkable that the deathmatch was boring.

Following the boy's directions, the three men that continued to move too were desperate.

That was only natural, but they had the freedom to ignore the boy's instructions. However, the boy's instructions had now saved their lives from the Gladiator Beast many times; hence, that freedom had been closed off.

Like that, with the young boy at their center, it was as if their Unit was a single living being with perfect coordination.

That which had become a solely defensive battle, was it caused by their hopeless gap in fighting power, or perhaps—.

???: "—Just what, are you aiming for?"

In the hearts of all the gladiators overlooking the battle, the same burning anticipation began to dwell.

8

—Anger, anger simmered up in Subaru, scorching his soul.

With deaths piling up, and the pain and fear compounding with it, his arms, legs, and internal organs were all shriveling up. If he shut his eyes, on the back of his eyelids, the face, the fangs, and the inside of the mouth of the lion he had seen up close so many times would come to mind.

Unfathomable fear manifested. Though, while seething, together with it came something. —Anger.

Those vexing thoughts, invigorating his cowering viscera and limbs, Natsuki Subaru opened his eyes.

Those attempts which he had already gotten sick of counting, were all for the sake of snatching even just one step closer to victory.

That he had not the slightest intention of losing, for the sake of proving that to himself.

Subaru: “Hiain! Throw the sword to Weitz, then head to Idra!”

Hiain: “Shit! I ain’t got a clue on what’s happenin’!”

Furiously running on all fours over the ground, Hiain tossed the sword he was holding over to Weitz. Like that, he accelerated as to come to Idra’s side by the large sword.

Weitz narrowly caught the sword whirling around and spinning in the air, and as Subaru tried to direct their next course of escape, his eyes widened in astonishment.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

The roaring lion, having chased the fleeing Hiain until just a moment ago, had its legs halted at the other half of the circular gladiatorial arena.

Meanwhile, rather than being positioned in the other half of the circle, they were all right before him.

Everyone was still alive, and on top of that, this was the first time they had gotten to such an ideal position.

Subaru: “Weitz, get ready! Idra and Hiain too!”

With vigor akin to blood hurling out of his throat, Subaru cast roles at the three of them.

Though that may not have been enough to get everything across, Weitz readied his sword and faced the lion, and Idra and Hiain hurriedly jumped to the large sword.

Then Subaru, too, clumsily ran with all his might, heading towards the wall.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!!”

One step, two steps; during his frustratingly slow-feeling speed, the lion howled from behind them.

And with that, the lion kicked off the ground with an explosion-like force and charged toward Weitz, who had his sword at the ready.

Straight at him, with no pause, Weitz was holding his sword at the ready, but if he were to collide with that force, nothing would be able to stop it. One hit and he would die. He was well-aware of this.

However, it was certain that only Weitz possessed the courage to square off against the lion until the very last moment.

Weitz: “Uu, RAHHHHH—!!”

The foul-reeking mouth letting breaths escape, the mouth embellished with sword-like fangs, the mouth that had masticated Subaru and the other three countless times, was charging right at the one brandishing a sword, Weitz.

And right before it could dispossess Weitz of his life—

Subaru: “—GOOO!!”

The moment his fingertips were on it, Subaru used the entirety of his minute body weight to pull down the lever.

Immediately after, the sound of gears turning came from beneath their feet, and the iron fence that thrust upwards struck the lion’s head from directly below. Crashing into its jaw, the lion’s gaping mouth was forcibly shut.

The force of its charge slamming into the iron fence, Weitz, who had drawn the enemy until the very last second, with a “Woah?!” exclaimed his surprise at the shockwave and was blown away.

The iron fence was squashed by the impact, and the lion’s head emerged from the bent part of the fence. The lion, which had received a severe blow to the face, scraped the ground with its front paws, and after having stood back up somehow, seemed to be trying to break through the fence.

—But, it would not be permitted to do that.

Subaru: “Idra! Hiain!”

Hiain: “Uu, UAHHHHHH—!”

Idra: “RAHHHHHH!!”

In Weitz’s stead, who had just been blown away, Idra and Hiain rushed over to the iron fence. Clasped in the hands of the two, was a very unwieldy large sword.

It was a weapon that not a single one of them could utilize properly, however, there was no rule that they must use it alone.

There was also no rule that they could not use two people to lift it up and swing it down on an opponent unable to move.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

With all their might, the large sword swung by the two men fell from directly overhead onto the lion’s neck, which was protruding from the iron fence. As the large sword pierced the beast’s thick neck, the lion’s shrieks echoed into the sky.

Blood spurted out, and as if rejecting death, the lion violently struggled.

Hiain: “Die, diediedieDIEEEEEEEEEE!!”

Idra: “Please let it end—!!”

Hiain and Idra applied their weight onto the large sword as they bawled, and the blade was buried deeper in its neck. If they continued and beheaded the lion, the moment of their long-awaited victory would come.

Over and over again, those claws and fangs had killed them and killed them and killed them—.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

Hiain: “Gah?!”

Subaru: “Guys?!”

They had been just one step away, however, just like them, the lion did not want to die.

With the large sword lodged in its neck, the lion forcefully twisted its body and pulled his right paw to their side of the fence. That paw swept away the bodies of the two men grasping the large sword.

He was able to witness Hiain and Idra violently tumbling along the ground, raising cries of pain.

There was no telling just how deep the wounds that they had sustained were.

However, more so than rushing over to the two who had collapsed, jumping to that large sword was important.

Subaru: “As if I’d let you go!”

Not wanting to let it get away after coming this far, Subaru jumped to the hilt of the large sword. But he was too light. Taking the place of both Hiain and Idra’s body weight, the current Subaru was far too light.

The large sword dug a little deeper, but as if returning the favor, a paw swung back at him.

Just like the two before him, Subaru was also struck by its paw—

Weitz: “Don’t think… I’ll just let’cha, ya beast… Hk!”

Its front paw was skewered to the ground by the downward swing of a sword.

The one who had thrust the sword was the one who had supposedly been blown away by the charge, Weitz. With all of his might, teeth clenched and facial tattoos distorted, he had used the sword to pin the lion’s paw.

And then—

Idra: “Lying down here, just how can I call myself a warrior!”

Hiain: “Just die already, you shithead!”

Having gotten back up, Hiain and Idra leapt onto the large sword Subaru was dangling from.

With the strength of three—or rather, of two and a half men, the large sword bore deeper into the lion’s neck. With Weitz also keeping the front paw firmly pinned down, the four members of the Unit joined forces to lop off the lion’s head.

Howling, the lion greatly writhed in pain, and the iron fence violently creaked.

No more chances would come around. He could not lose, he did not want to lose, he must not lose, gritting his teeth, Subaru desperately clung to the large sword.

And yet—

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

Subaru: “UAHHHH—hk!!”

Shaking its head with all its strength, the lion’s huge body swept Subaru and his comrades away.

Tearing away the bodies clinging to the large sword, the three of them—No, including Weitz, all four of them sluggishly tumbled to the ground.

Due to quite literally exhausting his desperate efforts, he had no strength left in his limbs.

Subaru: “I-I have to get…”

He had to get up, he had to jump to that large sword once again and lop off its head.

Despite these thoughts, his body did not listen to what he was saying. It seemed that not only Subaru, but the other three were also in the same situation.

Even after all this, the lion was still the most vigorous of them.

Gladiator Beast: “—AROOOO!”

With the sword lodged about halfway into its neck, the lion groaned in a low voice.

Rather than weak, it was a voice that sounded like its stockpiled rage had reached its limit. Of course, it probably had bore effect, but its strength had not been depleted.

Subaru: “Darn it… Hk.”

Even after trying, and trying and trying, and finally being just one step away from reaching it.

Still, he could not reach it. Even though he had utilized everything he could think of, and reached this far.

That is why, next time, I won’t lose.

Subaru: “Next, time…”

He would definitely arrive at this same place and scene more quickly, Subaru firmly vowed so.

Oblivious to his vow, the lion slipped through the iron fence, raising its unharmed paw towards Subaru, and—

???: “—Excuse me.”

The next moment, the lion’s thick neck was chopped in one swift motion.

Subaru: “Huh?”

Facing death, Subaru stared in wonder at the death of not him, but his opponent.

Its decapitated head falling to the ground with a thud, the lion’s body slowly fell sideways. The one responsible for that was the large sword that had been deeply lodged in the lion's neck.

Like a surprise attack, a small figure had fallen from the sky, and, stepping on the large sword, pushed it in.

Thus, the lion had been decapitated.

And, the one to perform that deed was—

???: "…Um, why am I in such a place?"

And the girl—Tanza, had a visible expression of worry on her usually emotionless face.

At the girl whose kimono had been removed, clad only in hadajuban, Subaru let out a soft breath.

He was unable to respond in any way. However, when Subaru turned his head and looked back, the three others also seemed to have survived by a hair.

In other words—

Gustav: "—That is enough! You have done well to survive Sparka! By my jurisdiction as the official, I accept you all as members of the Gladiator Island!"

A loud, booming voice resounded from high above, and Gustav's declaration marked the end of the fight.

Immediately, having quietly watched over the battle until now, the spectators—no, the gladiators stood up and, all at once, in praise of Subaru and his comrades' victory, raised their voices.

???: "Well done!"

???: "That was a huge feat!"

???: "Ya sure got it in ya, lil' one!"

As the voices of the excited men rained down, Gustav crossed his four arms and said nothing.

Hearing the cheers of the crowd, Subaru threw himself to the ground with a thud. Tanza, approaching with trepidation, peeked down at Subaru’s face.

Tanza: “Pardon me, you are…”

Subaru: “Natsuki Schwartz.”

Tanza: “Huh?”

Seeing the round eyes on Tanza’s surprised face become even more rounded as he laid down, Subaru let out a long, long breath, and continued.

Subaru: “First of all, I’m Natsuki Schwartz, so it’s nice to meet you. There’s a lot I wanna talk about, but…”

Tanza: “Yes, but?”

Subaru: “…I want you to let me rest, just for a bit.”

He felt bad for Tanza, who tilted her head, but Subaru had reached his limit.

The strained thread of tension was severed, the heat that had been seething in his soul also fizzled out. Of course, his hate for this situation was still left smoldering within him.

Nevertheless, he had somehow managed to survive Sparka.

Subaru: “So please… Let me sleep for a bit.”

With that, as if falling straight down into a pit, Subaru’s consciousness slipped away.

9

Gustav: “…”

Looking down, Gustav narrowed his eyes at the boy who had lost consciousness while sprawled out on the gladiatorial arena below.

That it was an incredible battle, with an unexpected outcome, that he could say.

He would have never thought that the boy possessed such talents.

???: “Weeell~, that was amazing, wasn’t it, Gustav-san. Picking Basu was bang on the money. It’s great that you kept him instead of throwing him away! Isn’t this a glorious achievement for me?!”

Gustav: “…Segmunt.”

As Gustav was lost in his thoughts, Cecilus came over and relaxedly spoke towards him.

At the boy’s words, whose hands were crossed behind his head, Gustav rubbed his forehead and brow with his two right arms,

Gustav: “There was some truth in your proclamation. Is this what you had been anticipating?”

Cecilus: “I had my expectations, you know? I thought it’d be nice if this happened, and it did. It’s exactly the feeling where what you believe in is what saves you!”

Gustav: “…Such a frail possibility, and you would stake your own life on that.”

Cecilus: “—? Yes, I did, so what?”

Tilting his head, Cecilus made a puzzled face.

It was an attitude as though he was wondering if he had spoken something strange.

If the two people who he had pulled up—Schwartz and Tanza, could not be put to use, he would take responsibility for their lives, and pay with his own; he acted as if he had never even asserted that.

Cecilus: “Nothing really happened in the end, did it? It was a very generous offer from my perspective. I’m not the kinda person who’d succumb to idleness in a place like this!”

Gustav: “I, in my capacity, am unable to comprehend your logic. And aside from that, what did you do in that final moment?”

Gustav questioned Cecilus, who had puffed up his thin chest in pride while smiling.

In that final moment, in the midst of the Sparka that he had even staked his life on, only once, and only for a short amount of time, had Cecilus disappeared.

Given what happened after that, one could roughly imagine that—

Gustav: “Did you go to wake the girl?”

Cecilus: “Oh dear, if you know the answer you don’t have to ask me. In the first place, since there are five people per Unit, if that girl didn’t wake up, they’d have to do it while lacking in people, it was Gustav-san who said that, you know. That means she could join in anytime after she woke up, right?”

With one eye closed, Cecilus looked up at Gustav, their heights not level, and gave an “Or”, Cecilus: “Do you want to withdraw that now? Saying that this Sparka is found to be unjust.”

Gustav: “—. It is not unjust. His Excellency the Emperor shall be pleased with the birth of a magnificent gladiator as well.”

Cecilus: “Hahaa, it’s just my opinion, but it sounds like His Excellency the Emperor isn’t a decent person!”

Gustav: “Insults toward His Excellency the Emperor will not be tolerated. There shall be no second time.”

So Gustav commanded in a stern voice, as Cecilus shrugged his shoulders and backed down somewhat. Exhaling through his nose in that state, Gustav looked again at the gladiatorial arena.

Schwartz, the most meritorious, and three men were being carried out by the guards under Gustav’s command. In the healing room, they would receive treatment from a healer.

The young girl, seemingly aloof, also accompanied them for now.

Gustav: “Did everyone in the Unit survive, due to just one person?”

It was a conclusion that could not have been reached without everyone’s help, but it went without saying who had shown the greatest strength.

By not overlooking the weapons and mechanisms the gladiatorial arena had been prepared with, keeping an eye on his comrades in the same circumstances, and even observing the enemy’s movements whenever possible; they had crossed a fine thread.

As someone who had seen that final resolution—

Cecilus: “You see? Don’t you just get the feeling that a grand tale’s going to begin?”

Like that, Cecilus proudly asked for approval; while keeping his face stern, feeling that answering in any way would be annoying, Gustav silently crossed his four thick arms.

Chapter 65:
The School Food Fighter

1

???: “Chaosflame has been destroyed by a big, a very big disaster. The evacuation of the residents should have been completed by Yorna-sama, but as for anything beyond that…”

The ends of her gentle eyebrows lowered; with downcast eyes, the girl’s voice was filled with sadness.

He had always thought of her as a child who did not reveal many emotions; in fact, even now her expression could not quite be called one of sadness. However, he believed that anyone who did not consider this as sadness was an idiot.

Subaru was not very smart, but he did not want to continue being an idiot. Therefore, he decided to seriously accept what she—what Tanza had said, and sympathize with her pain.

However—

???: “Hahaaa, a disaster that’d destroy the Demon City’d be quite the big deal, wouldn’t it? While I’m like this, locked up on an island, the world’s going through loads of crazy developments. Goodness, I’ll need to keep this in mind so that I don’t get a late start, it’d be totally uncalled for!”

Subaru: “Ceci, can you shut up for a second?”

Cecilus: “Huh? Did I do something wrong again?”

The personage who completely disregarded Subaru’s inner feelings and Tanza’s heartache as he proceeded to talk, the fake Cecilus, received a stare as he tilted his head to the side, a confused look on his face.

Subaru was amazed and astonished and amazed by that attitude which never changed no matter what, both before and after the Sparka.

This was compounded upon thinking of the dozens of times Cecilus had tried to cold-heartedly listen to Subaru's final request.

Subaru: "…And despite that, it'd all been for nothing had Ceci not woken up Tanza at the end."

Cecilus: "Ah, there's no need to feel indebted over that. The moment you cornered it that far, it was Basu's victory, the final push was something like a bonus. Besides, whether this girl would wake up or not was a gamble!"

Tanza: "I apologize for worrying you."

The fake Cecilus was immodestly humble to the bitter-looking Subaru. Hearing that, Tanza slightly bowed her head, and beside her, the one she had saved, Subaru, was at a loss for words.

—Subaru had been able to surmount Sparka, the dangerous welcoming ceremony of the Gladiator Island.

After repeating that challenge that now felt distant over and over again, somehow or another, Subaru and his team had attained victory by cutting off the lion's head. Yet, he was obliged to say that it would have been difficult without the cooperation from Tanza and the fake Cecilus.

Had the fake Cecilus not woken up Tanza at the end, and had Tanza not lopped off the lion's head with the sword stuck in its neck—

Subaru: "I don't know how many more times we would've failed."

Of course, the option to give up did not exist, because that had been a constant struggle that could not be stopped until they were successful. Even so, whether they had the willpower to do so or not, would have greatly influenced the outcome.

And it was quite possible that, if the situation arose, they would not have survived in their entirety.

Had it turned out that way, he would have regretted it forever.

Subaru: “Weitz, Hiain and Idra, we all persevered together.”

Cooperating as one had been extremely difficult, but they would not have survived had even one of them not participated.

The fact that all of them had survived was the best-case scenario for Subaru. It was a great confidence boost for him, to have been able to do something typical of a leader.

With this, he had the confidence to say he was the son of Natsuki Kenichi with pride.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “Oh, sorry, sorry, I got lost in my thoughts for a bit. So well, um, about Chaosflame…”

Tanza: “—. Yes. I wish to get back as soon as possible to help with the reconstruction.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, that’s right. I want to get back and reunite with everyone as well.”

Returning to the original topic, with her face downcast, Tanza looked very pitiful.

It was only natural that she would worry about her family and hometown, and Subaru too, held those very feelings. Even more so having heard about the turmoil Chaosflame had gone through without him knowing.

He was worried about whether or not everyone he was separated from—Louis in particular, had been found by the unkind Abel.

He thought that if Yorna was with her, she would surely protect Louis.

Tanza: “…”

The forlorn Tanza was now back in the kimono outfit that he had seen in the Demon City as well.

Subaru had slept for a whole day after the Sparka was over, according to what he was told. At the time he woke up in the healing room, he was told by a toothless old man who claimed to be a healer that there was nothing wrong with his physical health, but he would feel drained and heavy mentally.

However, he could not afford to calmly be at a loss.

Subaru: “What about the other three… Weitz and the others? Has everyone already woken up?”

Tanza: “As far as those three go, they have already woken up and returned to their room. It seems that they are all sharing a room. Schwartz-sama and I are also sharing a room, as well as…”

Cecilus: “Yes, yes, that’d be me. You see, it’s the room Basu first woke up in, but that’s where our bedroom is going to be. I’m also glad that people that can share a room with me finally came. Well, rather than saying that you came here, it’s more like I pulled you up here by myself!”

Tanza: “Pulled up…?”

Subaru: “Don’t worry about it too much. It’s just a tale of me and Tanza falling in the lake after all.”

Come to think of it, he had a faint memory of swimming frantically and trying not to drown.

Whether he had swam through in just one go or drowned several times was quite vague, but it was not that important, so thinking about it would be futile.

Either way, he was relieved after hearing that the other three were also safe. Although it was unavoidable, he had learned a lot about their various circumstances in the midst of the Sparka event.

A coward, a scaredy-cat and a fraud. Though not very commendable personalities, they too had their reasons for being cowardly, timid, and fraudulent.

Subaru: “Yes, it’s just like I’m Superman, eh?”

Cecilus: “Oh my, your face sure is overflowing with an abundance of confidence. I think it even raises your level of manliness and gives it a pleasant feeling. To be so swept up in the situation that you worry about this and that, that’s the behavior of a minor actor or a member of the masses! Basu needs to stand tall!”

Subaru: “I don’t plan on going along with Ceci’s drama-geek mind, but I think so too.”

In the first place, it was not good to dwell on things too much.

Though for some reason, Subaru up to now had been far too passive regarding many things.

No matter what, taking a passive response would just cause the opponent to get overconfident. Whether it be a hated opponent, or fate itself, it was the same. And recently, fate had been getting a little too cocky.

Subaru: “From now on, I’ll be more proactive in moving towards achieving my goals with avarice.”

For now, Subaru’s goal was to escape the island.

Escape the Gladiator Island, and return to Chaosflame together with Tanza. Of course, the ultimate goal was to leave the Empire and return to everyone in the Kingdom, however—

Subaru: “You’ll fall if you’re preoccupied with big goals, after all. Even for summer homework, you’ve got to finish them one at a time. You can’t write a whole diary all at once.”

Despite what he seemed, Subaru was the type of person who did his homework diligently during summer and winter vacations.

Sometimes there were classmates who would come to school after the vacations without having done their homework, but he never fully understood the nerve they had, nor what they were thinking in pulling that off.

Though somehow, feeling like he had lost in terms of the idea and courage was a bit frustrating.

Subaru: “But I did the homework, so I’m the superior one…”

Tanza: “—Then, Schwartz-sama, may I have a moment?”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Tanza timidly called out to Subaru, who had placed his hand on his chin, watering himself with self-esteem.

Directing Subaru’s gaze to herself, she indicated the fake Cecilus beside her with her hand. And, sitting on the bed, watching as he dangled his legs with a carefree look on his face,

Tanza: “This one here is an ally, but… Um, Cecilus Segmunt-sama is…”

Subaru: “Hmm, yeah, he’s a boy-who-cried-wolf, he keeps insisting on that.”

Cecilus: “A-ha-ha, they do say I am insistent, y’know! And what do you mean by boy-who-cried-wolf? If it means I’m a werewolf, could you please stop with that bad-mouthing? Sure, I may say some incomprehensible things, but it’s only enough to make me dangerously attractive, right?”

Subaru: “Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

Showered by questions, Subaru spontaneously let that slip, and clutched his own chest.

When he closed his eyes, he could recall the face of a lovely young girl, and along with that, the faces of everyone who was precious to him. Still, he was certainly aware that the drawer of those recollections was becoming harder to pull out.

This situation could not be allowed to continue for much longer.

Subaru: “Aside from Ceci’s flippant comments, what has gotten you so worried, Tanza? A General of the Empire and a celebrity, is it any wonder that there might be a kid with the nerve to pose as him?"

Tanza: "That may be so, but… Well, I saw Cecilus-sama once before, and I was thinking he looked a lot like him…"

Subaru: "You've seen him before? Ceci?"

Tanza: "I have seen Cecilus Segmunt-sama. He was once sent in to assassinate Yorna-sama."

Tanza explained that she had only seen the real Cecilus.

Hearing this recollection, Subaru also remembered the story he had heard before. As he recalled it, Yorna would every-so-often raise a rebellion against the Emperor, and so time and time again a suppression force would be sent in.

However, now that he knew about Yorna's personality, from Subaru's perspective, that became quite an unexpected impression.

Subaru: "To try to kill Yorna-san, he must've been a really terrible guy…"

Tanza: "That is correct. Cecilus-sama is an atrocious fiend… No, that is not what is important; I am just curious about the fact that, although this Cecilus-sama here and that Cecilus-sama have an age difference, they are like two peas in a pod."

Subaru: "Exactly alike, just with an age difference?"

Tanza: "Yes. —Perhaps he is a sibling of Cecilus-sama."

Hearing what Tanza, who had seen both Ceciluses, spoke of that Cecilus and this fake Cecilus, Subaru fixedly stared at the latter.

He had not considered that possibility. Or rather, it was natural that he had not considered it. Subaru did not know the real Cecilus, so he could not judge whether they were similar or not.

However, it was fortunate that he had a partner who knew the real one. Giving up, the lying fake Cecilus submissively admitted to the lies he himself had told—

Cecilus: “Nono, that’s not correct. I’m an only child, so I don’t have a sibling that looks exactly like me! Of course, it’s possible that my dad made me a younger brother after we separated, but if we’re going by the current flow of the conversation, then he’d be my older brother, wouldn’t he?”

Subaru: “That’s right, but you don’t know when to give up, do you…”

Cecilus: “How very upsetting! But there’s a basis for it, y’know! My basis is that both of those, having an older brother or a younger brother, would be odd.”

He crossed his arms and leaned back as Subaru and Tanza fixedly stared at him. The basis for the fake Cecilus’s offended face, just how persuasive could it be?

For now, in response to Subaru and Tanza, who were eager to listen, prompting him with their eyes,

Cecilus: “The basis is simple. My existence.”

Subaru: “What do you mean?”

Cecilus: “If I had an older brother, then my dad would’ve gotten him killed when he had me! And if I had a younger brother, then it’d be strange if my father hadn’t gotten me killed! In other words, considering I’m alive, there’s no way that an older or younger brother of mine could exist! How’s that?”

Subaru: “…What do you mean?”

It was a theory that did not make sense to him at all, even though he said it with vigor as though it was self-evident.

By his description, it sounded like the fake Cecilus’s father was under some kind of curse to not have more than one child. Whether that was true or false, he felt like a guy who would rather abide by the curse.

As for Subaru, he would like to think that the liar fake Cecilus had piled more lies upon lies.

However—

Subaru: “With him being so brazen about it until now, I’m starting to feel like it’s true. What do you think, Tanza?”

Tanza: “…I would… like to be in accordance with Schwartz-sama’s notion.”

Subaru: “Hmm, that’s a serious responsibility.”

Being relied upon by the reserved Tanza, Subaru put a slender finger to his small chin and pondered.

The fake Cecilus tilted his head as if wondering why they were unable understand him; and yet even if they were to ask him about his family environment, it seemed that no answer would be obtained.

The only thing that mattered here was whether they believed the fake Cecilus or not.

If they did not believe him, it would be the same as it had been thus far; they would just treat the fake Cecilus as a mere boy-who-cried-wolf.

But if they were to believe the fake Cecilus in that he had no siblings, that only left Tanza’s testimony on how very much alike the fake Cecilus and the real Cecilus she spoke of were.

And if he were to fully believe her testimony and the fake Cecilus’s own awareness—

Subaru: “I’m afraid to ask this, Ceci, but perhaps your body has been shrunk?”

It was a prospect he wished to deny if possible, but it was a prospect he could not afford to ignore.

If it had been a pre-shrunken, grown-up Subaru that was here, he might have hesitated to ask so many questions after having put on airs. However, since the Subaru here was a post-shrunken, underdeveloped Subaru, harboring doubts for a long time did not suit him.

Sometimes he would carelessly ask questions with the intention of apologizing were he to offend them by asking.

At that specific question, the fake Cecilus slightly widened his eyes in surprise,

Cecilus: “Are you saying I’ve shrunken? A-ha-ha, you sure say some interesting things, Basu! If there was such an interesting thing as the human body shrinking, wouldn’t that be super fun?!”

Laughing hysterically, the fake Cecilus pat Subaru on the shoulder in a good mood as he spoke those words.

Subaru was very much lost in his remarks as he frowned.

Subaru: “Just, what is it then…?”

Was he playing dumb or not? And if he was playing dumb, was he doing it consciously or unconsciously?

Subaru himself felt that his memories were falling out in large drops due to effects of the infantilization, so it was possible that the fake Cecilus had forgotten all sorts of things for that very reason.

But when compared to Subaru, who still remembered many things, the fake Cecilus had even forgotten that he had been shrunken.

Was such a thing even possible?

If the fake Cecilus had been infantilized the same way Subaru had, was this fake Cecilus’s state of mind how Subaru would end up?

Subaru: “Th-That shitty old man… ! I mean, did Ceci also get smaller because of Olbart-san…?!”

If that were the case, then that would be a major incident—it would become a major incident among the Nine Divine Generals.

The fact that this was also the work of Olbart was a situation that he did not want to think about. But then again, he also did not want to think that anyone other than Olbart was capable of utilizing such an absurd technique.

Naturally, he was tempted to think that Olbart was also the one who had shrunken this fake Cecilus.

Subaru: "Wait wait, in other words, Ceci isn't a fake, but the real deal, so Olbart-san was the one who made the real Ceci smaller, and Ceci's, like, the ruins of what I'll become in the end?"

Tanza: "S-Schwartz-sama, are you alright? You seem to be quite confused…"

Subaru: "…I'm fine. I'm incredibly confused, but it's all coming together incredibly nicely."

The situation was narrowed down to approximately two possibilities in Subaru's mind, although hearing only the thoughts that leaked out of his mouth would sound rather disorganized.

One was that the fake Cecilus was an infantilized version of the real Cecilus Segmunt, dubbed "The Shitty Old Man Olbart" theory.

And the other was that, taking advantage of resembling the real Cecilus, he was true to his nature as a boy-who-cried-wolf and sublimated a lie, dubbed "The Shitty Brat Fake Cecilus" theory.

Subaru: "The shitty brat one and the shitty old man one, let's keep both of them in the back of our minds as we strategize."

Cecilus: "Hoho, that sounds somewhat interesting. May I ask you to tell me more about it?"

Subaru: "No dice. I don't think it'd make sense to talk to you about it, Ceci."

Cecilus: "A-ha-ha! What a cold attitude! That's a rather self-centered thought, but I don't dislike that way of going about things, rather, I quite like it."

Rather than being angry at the cruelty, the fake Cecilus—provisionally, but still the fake Cecilus, that reaction of his was helpful in many ways.

There were already so many things to worry about, so it was valuable to have someone that he did not have to worry about.

Subaru: "For the time being, Tanza, you should also shelve everything about Ceci. Because whether he's real or fake, the fact that he's unreliable won't change."

Tanza: "…Yes, that is correct. Since he is the one who tried to cause harm to Yorna-sama, I personally hold no favorable impressions towards him."

Subaru: "Thank you for being straightforward and honest. Now…"

Having thus reached some sort of conclusion, Subaru switched gears.

Now that they were awake, they were also done occupying the beds in the healing room. They would be heading to the room Tanza had been talking about earlier, the room that had been assigned to these three.

But, before that—

Subaru: "I'd like to feed my very empty stomach. You see, my stomach's been whining miserably for a while now."

So, rubbing his belly, Subaru made a shameless demand of the island he was imprisoned on.

2

—There was a saying that went, "You can't fight a war on an empty stomach".

Beyond this point, the obstacles which Subaru and his Unit would face would all be in the vein of battles. In order to fight them, Subaru's group must be in perfect physical and mental condition, otherwise, in case they were unable to act when push comes to shove, they would be in trouble.

To operate without sparing time for sleep, one should avoid making such a decision so rashly.

Subaru: “Seems to me that before I shrank, since I had more physical strength than I do now, I used to do those kinds of rash things often. I’ll likely get my due desserts if I misunderstand that.”

Such being the case, they wanted to treasure all the eating and sleeping time they could get.

Somehow, it seemed that due to fatigue from the Sparka, he had slept for a whole day; he accepted that as a sufficient rest, and now intended to find a chance to regain his physical strength.

Hence, now that it was time to eat, the fake Cecilus guided them to where they would receive their meals—

???: “…Eat, Schwartz, yer share’s this.”

With a thud, a large platter was placed before his eyes, and Subaru stared in wonder at the sight of the meat on the bone served on that platter.

When Subaru looked up to see what was going on, the brows on the man’s tattoo-riddled face scrunched as if to say “What?”. Though he was making that face, Subaru was actually the one who wanted to say “What?”.

What exactly was he supposed to do when something of this sort was done to him without any explanation?

???: “Weitz, say what you like, but I don’t think that’s going to happen. Look, Schwartz is frozen stiff.”

???: “Ha, are ya tryna say that we ain’t got anythin’ to worry about, huh? To begin with, there’s no need to pile up a mountain of meat for this midget. We’ll split it between us… Owww!”

Weitz: “It’s the portion we’d discussed and settled on for him… And if yer gonna ignore that, why don’t’cha try and convince me…”

As he said this, the tattooed man prodded the lizardman on his side with the fork in his hand. Screaming, the lizardman fled to the other side of the table.

Sighing at that sight, the rust-haired man looked at Subaru with a shrug of his shoulders.

???: “Sorry for all the racket, Schwartz. How’s your body?”

Subaru: “…It feels okay. Same there?”

???: “We’re not badly hurt either. Thanks to… you.”

After rephrasing this, the rust-haired man—Idra, bowed his head slightly toward Subaru.

It was not just Idra. The squabbling tattooed man and lizardman, Weitz and Hiain, raising their hands in surrender, both agreed with Idra by nodding their heads in Subaru’s direction.

Currently, Subaru was in a corner of one of the island’s areas that were open to gladiators, a large hall with tables and chairs, generally used as a dining space.

As soon as he appeared in the hall, Subaru had been immediately grabbed by three people who had come into his sight, and was suddenly brought to one of the tables, being presented with the platter in front of him.

Frankly, it was a dizzying, bizarre situation, and yet,

Subaru: “By any chance, did you save this for me?”

Hiain: “Ahh? What else could it be? Ungrateful brat… Owww!”

Weitz: “Don’t say that like yer taking credit for it, I’ll beat’cha up…”

Hiain: “I didn’t say that, and I’m grateful for what you did, damn it!”

Pointing to the pile of meat on the bone, Subaru had asked a question, resulting in the ensuing altercation.

This could not be called a very smart way to show it, but it seemed to be a sign of appreciation. For a feast like this to be served, Subaru became quite unsure about the way the gladiators were treated.

Subaru: “It’s like, even though you make them kill each other, you let them have their fill of food…?”

???: “Technically, it’s not killing each other, it’s a deathmatch, y’know. Also, Gustav-san’s policy is that should a gladiator die, it should only happen in the gladiatorial arena. Letting them die anywhere other than there’d only prove the incompetence of the management. So you can relax and enjoy your time here.”

Next to Subaru, who tilted his head, sat the fake Cecilus, who had pulled out a chair with great enthusiasm.

Subaru thought he would reach for his plate, given his brazenness, but surprisingly, he did not. Instead, he filled a chipped cup from a jug and took a sip of water.

Tanza: “Everyone believes that Schwartz-sama has done service of utmost greatness. Therefore, we have decided to prepare a treat.”

Subaru: “Tanza… Everyone, is that right?”

Tanza sat in the chair opposite the fake Cecilus, with Subaru in between. While in surprise at Tanza’s words, Subaru looked at the group of three of which Idra was a part of.

Idra nodded deeply at that gaze and said, “Yeah”,

Idra: “As I said before, it’s thanks to you that all of us are safe still. The night we survived the first Sparka, we were treated to a feast for the Unit, and I thought it’d be strange if you didn’t get your share of it.”

Weitz: “For the record, I’m the one who suggested it…”

Hiain: “Heh, tho’ I wasn’t gonna leave any for the brat!”

In turn, they told him why the platter of food had been saved for him. But at the words left behind by Hiain, Tanza next to him tilted her head,

Tanza: “I wonder if that is so. As I recall, I believe it was Hiain-sama who first said that he was uncomfortable eating with only those present.”

Hiain: “Huuuh?! I didn’t say that tho’! I dunno anythin’ ‘bout that tho’! Hey, you lil’ bitch, I won’t tolerate ya sayin’ unreliable shit like that!”

Idra: “Cut that out, Hiain. You can’t beat Tanza. That girl beheaded the Guiltilaw.”

Tanza: “I did indeed behead it.”

As Idra stopped him with a hand, Tanza bowed, and Hiain, unable to retort, concluded it with a “Guh”, and gave up his assault by turning his reptilian face away.

So this was a token of appreciation from all of them, including the not-so-honest lizardman.

Subaru: “I’m grateful, I won’t be shy at all about taking this meal then!”

Cecilus: “Oh, you’re a really gluttonous eater! The way you show your generous acceptance’s also terribly excellent, y’know.”

Weitz: “Don’t overdo it and get a stomachache…”

Subaru: “Don’t worry. I may look like this, but I used to be a famous school food fighter who ate up all the school lunches of those who were absent.”

Getting milk from the kids who would not drink it was a piece of cake, and he also brushed his teeth before breakfast; that was Natsuki Subaru’s school food fighter battle style.

The meat was cold and tough, but its generous seasoning was not that bad, so he couldn’t complain. Above all, it was a treat that everyone had saved for Subaru, and that was the best spice of all.

Yet, as he watched Subaru bite the meat off the bone like that, Weitz turned his pattern-covered face to the side and said, “No…”,

Weitz: “Don’t get any creepy misunderstandings… Not like I’m worried ’bout’cha…”

Subaru: “—? So you’re regretting the piece of meat you gave me now, or something?”

Weitz: “That’s not it either… It’s the deathmatchs…”

Subaru: “…”

Weitz’s words were low and hushed, but the words resonated very profoundly with Subaru.

That very instant, Subaru almost dropped the meat from his hand, but fingers from the fake Cecilus caught it from the side and quickly stuck it in Subaru’s mouth.

Subaru: “Ugguggu…!”

Cecilus: “Relaxrelaxrelax you’re going to choke. Besides, Tattoo-san over there was a little lacking in his words just now. Don’t worry, there won’t be a deathmatch anytime soon.”

Subaru: “Uggu… Is… that right?”

Tanza: “Indeed. Currently, we have not received any notice of that so far. However, we do not know at what time we will be informed of a deathmatch, it seems.”

After finishing off all the meat, leaving only the bone, and pecking the remnants on his plate, he looked at Weitz. Listening to what the fake Cecilus and Tanza had to add, Weitz nodded.

Weitz: “That’s what I said…”

Subaru: “No you didn’t! I thought they were going to make us kill each other soon!”

Idra: “It’s not that harsh a place, indeed. I heard it used to be handled in the way Schwartz was concerned about, until the Island Chief was replaced and the policy changed."

Subaru: "Before the changeover… So since Gustav-san took over?"

Idra nodded in response to the question, as Subaru reached for the next piece of meat.

In his mind, as he was reminded of Gustav's intense face, which did not reveal any emotion at all, Subaru puzzled over what kind of person he was.

He was ruthless enough to suddenly throw Subaru into Sparka as soon as he took a look at the latter after waking up.

He had thought he would be very much something like the violent rules of the cruel Vollachian Empire in person, but from the extent of what he heard, it was not like the gladiators were being forced into seemingly deadly battles straight away.

Subaru: "Or maybe they just like to do it slowly rather than all at once?"

Cecilus: "You can see that I'm not just a "do on a whim" kind of person. In fact, if Basu hadn't woken up, probably only these three here would be in the Unit facing the Sparka. If that'd happened, you'd probably have a much darker look on your face at this dinner party!"

Hiain: "Th-That ain't funny, you know! In the first place, why the hell are you even here?!"

The fake Cecilus laughed at Subaru's words, followed by Hiain pointing and barking back in his face.

Indeed, if one were to ask, it was true. The fake Cecilus was the one who had helped Subaru and Tanza get ashore on the island, but that was the only connection between them.

Idra: "I've heard that every Gladiator here joins a Unit for Sparka at some point or another. After that, depending on their success, they may break up the Unit depending on their performance, but your

Unit is…”

Cecilus: “Ah, if you’re worried about my Unit, don’t. Everyone except for me has died, and fortunately I’m already a gladiator who gets allocated solo deathmatches.”

Subaru: “What…?”

Cecilus: “I mean, I’m the strongest! No one can beat me, so you don’t have to worry about me at all, a-ha-ha!”

Subaru and everyone else clammed up as the fake Cecilus slapped his knee.

However, Subaru and Tanza’s reasons for keeping quiet were surely different from the reasons for the other three men. For that matter, both Subaru and Tanza’s were also a bit different at the core.

Idra and others would probably consider the words of the fake Cecilus as a huge lie, while Tanza was suspecting that the fake Cecilus was actually related to the real Cecilus Segmunt.

Then there was Subaru; who was thinking that he may be the shrunken Cecilus Segmunt, which, if true, then the fake Cecilus may still be the strongest even in this state.

If so, it would be very advantageous to have the fake Cecilus on their side—

Cecilus: “—You shouldn’t do that, Basu. Looking at your opponent with such greedy eyes’ll have you be scorned.”

Subaru: “Hahn?”

Cecilus: “A person with the attributes to stand on top and in front, they shouldn’t have that sorta avaricious, pleading look in their eyes. It’s not smart in any way, shape, or form, so you should stop it! If you want to impress me, don’t use words. Use actions, resolve, and a treasured signature catchphrase.”

Saying this, the fake Cecilus advised Subaru, by taking two of the bones from his plate and crossing them in front of his face, forming them into an X symbol.

Having been told something so astute that it was as if the fake Cecilus had read his mind, Subaru gulped down his saliva.

And then—

Subaru: "…You said it wasn't about words, but if a signature catchphrase is needed, then you need words too, right."

Cecilus: "Heyyy, that's true! That was quite sloppy! Just what has struck me, out of all people?!"

With wide-open eyes, the fake Cecilus leaned heavily against the back of his chair and then leaned forward as if being pushed forward. Subaru stiffened as his face suddenly got close to him; seeing that, the fake Cecilus shaped his whole face into a massive grin.

Cecilus: "Well then, sorry for interrupting you. I've also got a lotta matters to attend to, people to talk to, and ways to pass the time, so I'll leave you here for now. Don't worry, I'll be in the other room next to you, so if there's anything you still need to talk about, you'll have to go there!"

Subaru: "Ah, um, roger that."

Cecilus: "Rawjur? I don't know what that is, but it sounds rather gallant! Well then, roger that!"

While making a slight misinterpretation, the fake Cecilus raised his hand and ran off before there was time to stop him.

Although there had been no reason to stop him, Subaru was shocked at the lightning-fast speed with which he had left.

In actuality, he wasn't so much of a hindrance that he could be called an obstacle; as he just wanted to have someone around who knew the ins and outs of the Gladiator Island.

Subaru: "Well, it gets tiring hearing him speak roughly five times the amount of information I actually want."

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, please continue your meal.”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah, that’s right. I’ve got to get my strength back.”

No matter what Gustav was thinking, he had no intention of staying quiet until the next deathmatch was assigned.

In the first place, he had no intention of staying here as a gladiator for very long. His goal was to take Tanza and get off the island today or tomorrow.

Worst-case scenario, they could become hostile to Gustav.

However, if they did that—

Hiain: “What’s up, Schwartz?”

Subaru: “Umm, I was just wondering if you guys were worried. Can you do this without me?”

Hiain: “Ah? The hell ya talkin’ ’bout? Ya’re not thinkin’ of runnin’ away, are ya? If that’s the case then return the meat, the meat!”

Hiain opened his big mouth to yell at the anxious-looking Subaru.

Although they had every right to be angry, Subaru had people who were more important to him than they were. Should he consider leaving with not only Tanza, but also the other three together?

Subaru: “…Rather, maybe everyone on the Island could escape?”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “Ah, sorrysorry, I was just talking to myself. As you’d expect, that was just some rambling.”

It was a troubling idea that he couldn’t let other people hear carelessly, even if he was just talking to himself under his breath.

However, Weitz, Idra, Hiain, and of course Subaru and Tanza had been forced to come to the Gladiator Island despite the fact that they did not want to participate in the deathmatches here.

If that was the case for the other people as well, then surprisingly, perhaps Subaru's idea was not as ridiculous as one might think.

And, just as Subaru was thinking that.

???: "So you've finally woken up, kid."

???: "That Sparka the other day, that was a helluva big deal, ya know!"

???: "I screwed up by not goin' to watch it. I only got to hear rumors about this and that afterwards, man."

People gathered around Subaru as he reached for the meat on his plate.

The men who spoke to Subaru in such a friendly manner were all men who looked like they had a reason for being there—even without a detailed explanation, he was sure they were all gladiators.

Newcomers to the great hall and those who had been watching Subaru and his comrades from a distance both gathered there, creating a bit of a buzz around Subaru.

Subaru: "Uhm, you all are?"

???: "Can't you tell just by lookin'? We're your precursors on this island. You guys had quite the hectic and not-at-all borin' Sparka!!"

The men started laughing around Subaru, whose eyes widened in surprise.

Only, they didn't say it in a mocking tone, but in a genuinely complimentary way. Incidentally, while being surrounded by them, Idra had a forced smile, Hiain looked uncomfortable, and Weitz sulked silently.

Gladiator: "That girl's entrance at the end was a sight to behold. She's a lot stronger than she looks."

Tanza: "Thank you very much. It is all thanks to the grace of those who love me."

Gladiator: "Oh? I see. I don't quite get it, but that was a good deathmatch!"

Not getting too deep into what the bowing Tanza said, were the perfectly open-minded large men. While they talked about how Subaru and his team fought in Sparka with their every gesture,

Gladiator: "However, it's a big deal. That Gladiator Beast… That shadow lion's taken out a lot of Units."

Another Gladiator: "If you guys'd been taken out, I think the total number of Units knocked out by that thing would've been ten. The recent Sparkas continue to be rough."

Gladiator: "That's surely what Governor Gustav wants. Once you're welcomed as a Gladiator, you're gonna be treated well, as the entrance's the toughest part… The next shows're gonna be scary."

There was no shortage of topics to discuss as they raucously talked about the situation on Ginunhive. Subaru nodded along, urging each of them to continue while he collected information on the island.

It seemed that ever since Gustav had become the Island Chief, the policy had also become much different from before after all. Also, that lion seemed to be rather strong, and Subaru and the others who won were now rated highly.

Subaru: "I see, so it was worth all the hard work on our part… Shows, you say?"

Gladiator: "Yeah, we have regular shows here where nobles from all over the Empire get together and make a spectacle out of our deathmatches. Sparka and daily deathmatches are all trainin' for the real deal!"

Subaru: "Training…"

Gladiator: "Dyin' during practice won't be any good. The Governor knows that. If you work hard, you won't get any reprimands… Ah, there's an exception."

Subaru: "An exception?"

Subaru tilted his head at the sight of the strong, muscular man with a fierce look stroking his nose as if he'd had trouble saying that.

He was silent for a moment, then sighed deeply and continued,

Strong Gladiator: "I hate to tell you this 'cause you get along so well with him, but don't associate with that guy."

Subaru: "And that guy, would be…?"

Thinking of the strong man's phrasing and the one absent, there was only one person who fell under this category.

Subaru continued with a "Could it be..?",

Subaru: "You don't mean Ceci? If anything, he's following me…"

Strong Gladiator: "Yeah, he seems to have taken a likin' to you, but how much can you count on that? —He came here only twenty days ago."

Subaru: "Mhm."

Strong Gladiator: "At his first Sparka, he did nothing and watched as his Unit was annihilated, and once his allies were gone, he killed the Gladiator Beast with his bare hands, effortlessly!"

Subaru: "…"

Strong Gladiator: "After that, every time he was assigned a deathmatch, he had the nerve to cheer his opponent on 'til all others were dead. And, for some reason, he calls himself by the name of General First-Class Cecilus Segmunt."

As he spoke, the strong man looked at the entrance to the hall with a mixture of heartfelt suspicion on his face and in his voice. The entrance that the fake Cecilus—Cecilus Segmunt, had exited through just a moment before.

And it was not just the strong face speaking directly to Subaru that possessed such eyes.

Save for Subaru’s Unit comrades, who did not know of him, the same held true for everyone present.

He was a man who was friendly to Subaru, who had displayed his incomprehensibly narrative-driven brain to the point of having him fed up, who had tried asking Subaru, when he was dying, about his final will and testament, and who was fiercely disliked by the Gladiators, who were living side-by-side with death.

That was—

Strong Gladiator: “—Governor Gustav and that Death God are the central figures in the current Gladiator Island’s irregularities.”

Chapter 66:
Hiain Yatz

1

—Life on Gladiator Island Ginunhive, was not that bad for Subaru.

Subaru's performance during the Sparka event had been well received by the gladiators competing on the Gladiator Island, apparently. And so, where he went, he would receive the same reception he had gotten in that large hall.

Even in an environment where one would be forced to fight, the way of the Vollachian Empire remained unchanged.

Therefore, it seemed that the principle of the strong being valued was valid all the same, and the Sparka performed by Subaru and the others of the Unit suited said principle well.

???: "Even though he's just a scrawny brat, he's got grit."

That seemed to be the common assessment of Subaru.

It must have been quite amusing to them that Subaru, a child who could be throttled with one hand if such was one's wish, had put up a good fight against the lion Gladiator Beast.

The fact that Subaru seemed to be just an ordinary child for his age, in opposition to the fake Cecilus, his age the same as Subaru's, was perhaps helping this impression. Conversely, the fake Cecilus's reputation was just that bad.

Cecilus: "I guess what I really want to say is that I'm just living my life as myself, so I really don't care what everyone around me thinks of me. After all, none of you will be able to complain once you see the results. Oh, I don't mean physical results, but emotional ones."

Give or take, that had been his reaction at the time he overheard his reputation from the people around him.

He had already sensed that was the case in some way, but the fake Cecilus had no desire to change his way of being, nor did he care to live in accordance with the people around him.

He possessed a strong will to stick to his beliefs, and the strength to carry that through—both of which affirmed the fake Cecilus's outlandish ego.

And, as per the rules of the Gladiator Island and the Empire both, that was acceptable.

Idra: "But, being loathed for it isn't really beneficial. We cannot survive on the Island alone, because we are a Unit."

Weitz: "So yer saying that in there lies the power to survive, that so… Guessing from that brat's uncontrollable behavior, he seems to be confident in his way too…"

Hiain: "Tch, what a weirdo, it ain't any of our business. I mean, dealin' with these two creepy lil' brats is plenty enough."

That was the impression the Unit's members had of the fake Cecilus.

It might have sounded harsh, but it was an entirely natural thought. To begin with, unless they were very strong and in a safe place, all gladiators would struggle so they could survive day-in and day-out.

That was the norm, hence why they were left them with little time to care about the people around them.

Subaru: "Well, I do have a problem with Hiain treating us like creepy little brats, but what do you think, Tanza? About Ceci."

Tanza: "To me, it matters not. More importantly, Schwartz-sama…"

Subaru: "Yeah?"

Tanza: "—Schwartz-sama, do you really intend to leave this place?"

Having been asked this all of a sudden, her voice sounding half-exasperated and half-reproachful, Subaru's eyes widened as he turned around and mindlessly let out a "Huh?".

In the communal room given to the gladiators—a space that could be called a shared cell, Tanza, Subaru's roommate, furrowed her smooth eyebrows and took in a breath in a way that was almost dramatic.

Tanza: "This is not the moment for huh'ing. I see that Schwartz-sama has been having a good time with all of the gladiators over the past few days, but do you remember the plan you had at the beginning?"

Subaru: "The plan at the beginning…?"

Tanza: "—Hk, you were thinking of leaving the Island and returning to Chaosflame."

For a moment, Tanza's voice became voice towards Subaru's words that were as if he had no clue as to what she was alluding to.

And with that, the girl took her eyes off Subaru and prefaced with "My apologies", before continuing,

Tanza: "I was intending to follow Schwartz-sama's plan if possible. But if Schwartz-sama is not working proactively, then everything changes. I must rendezvous with Yorna-sama."

Subaru: "…"

Tanza: "Even now, I still do not know anything on what happened after Chaosflame, only that Yorna-sama is safe and sound, as evidenced by her continued love for me…"

As she stated this, Tanza touched her own right eye.

What this gesture meant was the change Subaru had witnessed in the residents of the Demon City—the same blaze within the eyes of those under the effect of Yorna's Soul Marriage Technique.

Beheading the lion in a single stroke was certainly not something Tanza could do naturally. It meant that the power given by Yorna's favor towards her, was still in play.

Subaru: "That means Yorna-san is well, doesn't it?"

Tanza: "…Physically. But, I do not know if she is well in heart."

Subaru: "That's… Well, yeah. Because Yorna-san treasured everyone in the city…"

Because she was too kind, she had been treated as a traitor on multiple occasions for failing to follow the policies of the Empire.

Subaru believed he somewhat grasped Yorna's circumstances and the feelings of Tanza and everyone else protected by Yorna's ideals.

So, it was understandable why Tanza wished to go back to Yorna right away.

Subaru: "But, you can't rush that. You can't get what you want by scrambling in the dark."

Tanza: "But! I cannot afford to be as leisurely as you, Schwartz-sama!"

Subaru: "L-leisurely…"

Tanza: "Correct. I thought you were walking around the Island looking for a way to escape for the past two days, but it turns out you were chatting with your Unit and with other gladiators…"

Using her fingers to count, Tanza criticized Subaru's behavior over the prior couple of days.

Indeed, for two days, all Subaru had been doing was talking to people. Not looking for a way to escape or figuring out how to work the only drawbridge that connected to the outside world.

Sometimes he would spend time with Weitz and the other people in his Unit, but he gave precedence to learning the rules of the Gladiator Island, as well as other interesting tidbits of information from those who had been on the Island for a longer time.

Those were very leisurely actions in Tanza's eyes, and perhaps it looked as if Subaru had been preparing to make the Island his home until his death.

But if that were the case—

Subaru: “That’s absolutely wrong, Tanza. I also have someone I want to see as much as Tanza wants to see Yorna-san. I absolutely have to get out of here.”

Tanza: “…Say, are those the people who were with you?”

Subaru: “That’s true with the exception of Abel, and there are others… In a big walled city. And also in the country next door to the Empire. I’ve been very busy, y’know.”

Tanza: “…”

Once Subaru replied that he had others he wanted to meet both there and elsewhere, Tanza fell silent.

Perhaps she was thinking that her singular love for Yorna was greater than Subaru’s love for multiple people, but she did not state that out loud.

That alone was enough to understand how earnest she was. One could only admire Yorna’s dedication to her education, had she been the one to teach her so many things.

Subaru: “Still, I probably can use my head better than you.”

Tanza: “—? What is that supposed to mean…?”

And something happened right when Tanza tilted her head at Subaru’s words.

???: “—Basu! The drawbridge’s going up! New people have just arrived!”

As he raised a boisterous shout, the fake Cecilus came running down the corridor and appeared before them. Tanza’s shoulders jumped at the intensity and loudness of his voice, but Subaru’s reaction was the exact opposite.

Exclaiming “Here they are!” as he leapt up on the spot, he continued, Subaru: “That’s a lot faster than I’ve heard it is, is this the usual pace?”

Cecilus: “Nah, like I told you, the latest Sparka, your group’s, was an exception. All but the three members in Basu’s Unit failed in their escape and ended up at the bottom of the lake… So, Basu and his team made up for the lack of manpower in a hurry.”

Subaru: “Ah, I see.”

As the fake Cecilus had said with a shrug of his shoulder, the previous Sparka had been held with irregularities.

The gladiator candidates who were originally supposed to enter the Gladiator Island with Weitz and the others, had attempted to escape en masse before arriving onto the Island proper. However this had ended up failing miserably, resulting in their carriage overturning. All of those who had escaped from the drawbridge into the lake then became food for aquatic Witchbeasts.

As a result, the Sparka had not been held for Weitz and the others as there were not enough members, and was going to be postponed until the number necessary to form a Unit was replenished, but—.

Subaru: “So back then, when Tanza and I came in, Weitz and the others must have been really down, huh.”

New recruits meant that they had to undergo Sparka, and not only that, Subaru and Tanza were the ones joining—and Tanza was unconscious.

Essentially, with the inclusion of one child with nasty eyes, it was a four-man Sparka.

All three must have thought it was the unluckiest day of their lives.

Subaru: “However, it was actually the luckiest day of their lives.”

Cecilus: “Oh, you have a very nice, confident look on your face. So, Basu, what do you want to do now?”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m going to check out the drawbridge. I’d like to talk to some of the people from outside as well.”

Cecilus: “That might be a lil’ difficult. I think this Sparka’ll start rather early in comparison to last time, so you may not get a chance to meet them.”

Subaru: “I see… It’s tricky, but if that’s the case, there are ways to make it work.”

With Subaru answer that while putting his hand on his chin, the fake Cecilus raised his eyebrows in response.

His interest, or perhaps his favorable impression of Subaru’s reply, was easily understandable from his reaction. His personality was the type of having trouble keeping secrets, but still someone they had to keep their guard up against.

There were few people in this world who could kill a person regardless of how much they liked them.

The rumored personality of the fake Cecilus on the Island was enough to make Subaru treat him as if he were a ticking bomb.

Of course, too much apprehension would only shorten the fuse, so finding the right balance was a good idea.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “Finally, there seems to be some progress. Tanza, what do you think?”

Tanza: “No, well, what do you mean? Are you and Segmunt-sama plotting something?”

Cecilus: “It’s nothing of that kind! I wasn’t told anything of Basu’s thoughts, and even if I was, it wasn’t anything big. He simply told me to inform him when the drawbridge was about to be raised. Everything planned afterwards, is inside Basu’s head, y’know!”

Tanza: “…Schwartz-sama?”

Seeing that there was no information to be gained from a Cecilus displaying himself as having not the slightest clue, Tanza's gaze turned to Subaru, as if to accuse him of hiding something from her. Although, Subaru had no intention of hiding anything from her.

Though, it was his intention to move rather cautiously.

Subaru: "For now, let's talk while we go check out the drawbridge. We'd all be stupid to miss it."

With Tanza looking as if she wanted to say something and the amused fake Cecilus in tow, Subaru left the common room and headed for the upper level of the Island, from where he could see the drawbridge. Atop the Island, gladiators were allowed a great deal of freedom in their activities, and except for those whose behavior was abhorrent on a daily basis, they were not restricted in any way aside for when they would go to bed or had their deathmatches.

There were certain rules when to bath or eat, which apparently needed to be followed, but it was a far cry from what he had imagined, which had been the life of a slave or an inmate in a prison.

The Gladiator Island had a gladiatorial arena at the center of the Island, which became the stage where grand events were held for the likes of spectators from outside the Island. As such, and because the gladiatorial arena and its surroundings were what the outsiders would be seeing, it was decorated in a rather flashy and stand-out style.

On the other hand, the rest of the gladiator's free-living spaces were simple, so, with the exception of the bare minimum facilities essential for living, the Island felt "gray" as a whole.

Subaru: "But there's also the healing room, and there's also a library, isn't it?"

Tanza: "It is said that they began taking in books ever since Governor Gustav became the Island Chief. Surprisingly, I hear that it has become the place where everyone spends their relaxation time together."

Subaru: “Yeah, there were a lot of books. Though it’d be nice if I could also read them.”

Whilst nodding at Tanza’s description, Subaru scratched his temple with his finger.

The letters of this world, which Subaru had supposedly studied, seemed to have been kicked out of his brain right after it was shrunk, so he could only read and understand them falteringly.

He remembered some bits vaguely, so it was not impossible to decipher them were he to try hard enough, but he had to use his mind like he was on a treasure hunt just to read a single page.

Subaru: “If nee-sama knew about this, she’d be extremely upset with me…”

The person who had given Subaru the most help in studying the letters was nee-sama—Ram. And so, were she to become aware of Subaru’s current predicament, she would be very angry.

Even discounting that, he had left Rem by herself. He was sure that Ram would be angry upon learning that. As for that, Subaru too wanted her to get mad at him.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “—In order for us to get off this Island, there are two things which will become our obstacles. One of them is the drawbridge that connects the Island to the other side of the river.”

Tanza: “…Yes, I am aware of it.”

The stage was for the purpose of running the gladiatorial arena, which was built on the Island in the center of the lake.

As half of it came from the Island side, and the other half from the riverbank side, the drawbridge could not be crossed unless it was suspended from both sides. It was problematic, because it was usually raised so that it could not be crossed.

Cecilus: “That’s why it’s usually lowered. It’s raised only when needed.”

Subaru: “That still doesn’t make sense to me, no matter how many times you tell me. That’s why I want to see the real thing.”

Although the tone of Cecilus’s voice was as if he was speaking to someone who just did not want to listen, at any rate, within Subaru the image of the drawbridge was without a doubt that of one bridge divided into two from the middle, with each side causing the bridge to withdraw.

Naturally, according to that image the drawbridge would be “lowered”.

Tanza: “Then, Schwartz-sama, the second obstacle is…”

Sweeping away the conceptual image in Subaru’s mind, Tanza inquired as to the direction of the conversation. At those words, Subaru let out an “Uh huh” and took a short breath, then,

Subaru: “Needless to say, it’s the curse rule. The one Gustav says is placed on all the gladiators.”

Tanza: “…”

As the ends of her gentle eyebrows lowered, Tanza made a complicated face.

Naturally, she would have understood the issue without even being told—it was the curse rule.

A curse mark was bestowed upon all the gladiators on the Gladiator Island, and it was activated on those who broke the curse rule, dispossessing them of their lives. That was the main reason why Gustav continued to reign as the absolute ruler of the Gladiator Island, as Governor.

No one could defy Gustav; defying him would cost one of their life.

Even if one did not defy him, as long as the curse mark was not removed, one did not know when their life would be terminated for violating the curse rule.

How to remove it, and the details of the curse rule, nobody except Gustav himself knew.

Subaru: “If you ask me what I’m scared of, that’d be that I don’t know the detailed rules. I could just be spending my time normally, and then inadvertently violate them and die without realizing it.”

Cecilus: “Well, from what I know there was that sorta unease when Gustav first became Governor, but lately, that unease seems to have faded away for the most part. That said, it seems like Gustav doesn’t want to reduce the number of gladiators all silly-nilly, so it’s a relief that he’s declared what should never be done.”

Subaru: “Declared… So that’d be stuff like, “Do not defy the guards” and “Fighting amongst fellow gladiators outside of deathmatches is prohibited” and “Do not flee from this Island without permission”, and so on.”

Cecilus: “Yupyup.”

Subaru: “—As I thought, the last one there is the problem.”

For maintaining the rules for living on the Island, Gustav had imposed the curse rule.

Nevertheless, it was true that this was in direct conflict with Subaru’s and Tanza’s objectives.

Subaru: “Aside from less-than-upright methods, there are other ways to break the curse rule and quit being a gladiator, right?”

Cecilus: “Yeah, there certainly are. That specific case’d be the large-scale show that they hold once a year. His Excellency the Emperor is invited, and it’s the famous reward for the deathmatch they hold in his presence. There’s also other ways, such as someone in the audience spending lots of money to take you out. Therefore, the gladiators also need to look good, meaning a necessity to charm them with magnificent beauty emerges.”

Subaru: “…For some reason or another, my mental image is that of gladiators.”

That was something that resembled the so-called gladiators from the Roman Empire.

He did not know much about the details, but it had a nuance along the lines of a slave that was made to fight with a sword, which could be said to be literally the same position as the gladiators of the Island.

He had heard that there was a person, seemingly a famous gladiator of old, who had brought about a rebellion alongside the other gladiators, but—

Subaru: “What I want to do is escape, not rebel, so I’m thinking more like a great prison escape.”

What could become a hint, would be the patterns of those who have escaped from prison.

However, knowledge of such movies and manga was also rather hazy within Subaru. It seemed that they would not be able to utilize that with things as they were, so Subaru still had to find the right answer.

Subaru: “Whatever the case, for the sake of getting off of the Island we have to do something about these two things, the drawbridge and the curse rule. For that reason as well, it is absolutely essential that we go observe the drawbridge, got it?”

Tanza: “…I concur. Still, that does not explain why Schwartz-sama was taking his time relaxedly up until the drawbridge moved.”

Subaru: “You sure are holding that against me…”

Responding to Tanza’s intent gaze, Subaru scratched his head as he made a troubled face.

While they were talking like that, the three of them headed to the vantage point they sought. Halfway up the mountain that got taller as it approached the center of the Island, a balcony had been built in a position that overlooked half of the lake.

Rather than a balcony, it was more accurate to call it an observation deck, but there were a few other people in attendance besides Subaru and the other two. The other gladiators seemed to have come here as curious onlookers.

Amongst the ranks of the onlookers, a figure suddenly turned and waved to Subaru and the others.

???: “That’s Schwartz, ain’t it? What’re ya doin’ here?”

Subaru: “Oh, Hiain, you’re here as well. Just looking at the goods?”

Hiain: “As if I could be doin’ somethin’ like that…! I’d heard the next sacrifices were on their way, that’s why.”

Averting his eyes, the lizardman Hiain was unable to continue with the rest of the words.

As a member of the same Unit as Subaru, contrary to his cocksure attitude, he was quite timid. He was not a bad person, but on the other hand his character was not something to be openly praised.

Even that excuse just now had not fully dispelled any part of that purpose of “looking at goods”.

Tanza: “Hiain-sama, did you want to take a look at the people who are coming next?”

Hiain: “Urgh…”

Tanza: “If you do not want to tell me, it does not particularly bother me, however.”

At the reserved Tanza’s question, Hiain curled his big mouth and hesitated to answer. But with the silence immediately becoming unbearable, Hiain said “That’s right!” with a trembling voice.

Resting his elbows on the railing, while scowled at the lake below, he spoke,

Hiain: “I wanted to see the faces of the guys comin’ here next. Is that wrong?”

Subaru: “That’s not wrong, but for what reason? Since you survived the Sparka, it’d be inconsiderate to come here to check if the next group of incomers can survive Sparka, or something of the sort.”

Hiain: “Like I’d do somethin’ that evil…! I ain’t sayin’ there aren’t guys like that tho’.”

I am different, and with that, Hiain denied Subaru’s suspicions.

He had decided to trust that answer for the moment. Subaru also earnestly understood that Hiain was not a bad guy, he was just a scaredy-cat. He also was the one that seemed to be the least accustomed to the rules of this Gladiator Island.

Hiain: “…So, why’d you guys come?”

Subaru: “We aren’t just looking at the goods, nor are we curious onlookers. Of course, we’re interested in the people they’re bringing this time around, but we want to see the drawbridge.”

Hiain: “Ya wanna see the bridge? What are ya, a brat…? Wait, ya really are a brat, ain’t’cha?!”

Subaru: “No, that’s right, and you sure talk loud.”

Subaru’s lips curved due to Hiain recklessly speaking very loudly, perhaps to cover up his own feelings. As he then stood alongside him, they looked over the lake below.

Albeit the sun was still high in the sky, the area around the Gladiator Island was faintly darkened by an overcast sky.

For some reason, it seemed the clouds in the area never seemed to clear up, and he had heard that the overcast sky was present all year round. Based on how the sky looked, this was a place that darkened people’s spirits.

Cecilus: “Well, there are a considerable number of people who enjoy that kinda environment, I rather like it.”

Subaru: “That’s surprising. I thought Ceci’d be a big fan of sunny days… But, you do call yourself “lightning”, so it’s possible you don’t care if it’s cloudy.”

Cecilus: “I see, it’s not something I ever cared much about, but now that you mention it…”

Shrugging his shoulders at the fake Cecilus, who put his hand over his mouth as his eyes gleamed at the surprising revelation, Subaru and the others lined up in front of the railing, waiting for the drawbridge in question to be raised.

Then, not too long after—

Subaru: “Oh, ohhh—!”

At first, the rattling sound of gears and mechanical parts moving could be heard from somewhere.

His thought was that it had to utilize the same mechanism the iron fence at the gladiatorial arena used to spring up, but the drawbridge’s was on a scale a world apart. After all, not constructing a bridge of tremendous length would not do, so, from what it seemed, they’d had to balance that with turning either large gears, or a large number of gears.

Before Subaru’s eyes, slowly, the drawbridge “rose”—.

Subaru: “…”

What had appeared so, so slowly, was the drawbridge that had been submerged deep within the lake.

Just like how the fake Cecilus had corrected him about it many times, moving in conjunction with the mechanism of rotating gears, it “rose” out of the lake to reveal itself.

Rather than lowering a drawbridge that had been raised, they “raised” a drawbridge that had been submerged.

In precise terms, it was not one singular bridge that was brought up, but multiple connected bridges that emerged from the bottom of the lake, apparently structured to form a single bridge. Once the bridge, divided into multiple sections, was lifted to the same level, it was then connected together to become one, which was completed while a large quantity of water was drained from it.

That very mechanism was also in operation on the river bank side, and so the drawbridge would also rise on the opposite bank. The two drawbridges raised in that way would then become one, releasing the Gladiator Island from its isolation for a limited time.

Subaru: “The thing that’s moving that bridge is…”

Cecilus: “There’s a tower that controls the drawbridge, so it’s pretty much operated in that tower, y’know. I’ve never actually been inside, so I don’t know what to expect.”

Subaru: “—Inside the control tower.”

As far as a bridge of that scale went, it would probably be difficult to raise and lower it covertly.

That said, crossing the lake in something like a small boat was also impeded by the presence of the Witchbeasts in the water. It seemed that his thinking was still insufficient to provide a realistic means of escape.

Tanza: “…Likely, that is the carriage carrying the next people.”

Beside the pondering Subaru, Tanza muttered that while looking towards the opposite shore.

Pulling a single carriage, a large sable Galewind Horse slowly crossed the drawbridge. The Galewind Horse appeared to be an army horse equipped with armor, and it seemed quite tough at a glance.

Guarding that carriage, positioned around it, were soldiers, riding something smaller than the Galewind Horse. It seemed that they were worried about the carriage overturning like last time, so their vigilance was increased.

Cecilus: “Oh, it’s Gustav-san. Looks like he’s coming in person.”

On the other side of the drawbridge, a group was waiting for the carriage to arrive. Among the guards in their black uniforms, Gustav stood, his extraordinarily large chest puffed out.

Was this also a precaution against the last time the carriage overturned? Or, considering it was Gustav, he would have been present regardless.

Subaru: “It’s a little over a kilometer to the other side of the river, maybe no more than two kilometers…?”

It was hard to tell because it was quite a distance away, although the distance of the drawbridge appeared to be more or less what he had guessed.

Even with the mechanism that allowed them to divvy up the weight of the bridge, a drawbridge of such length was unimaginable. Even if magic or some other special magical tool had been used as a basis, it was still quite a feat.

And so, as he was checking the state of his target, the drawbridge—

Hiain: “Ah—?!”

Hiain, who like Subaru and the others had been looking at the drawbridge, exclaimed, his voice cracking.

—No, he was not looking at the drawbridge, but at the carriage coming across. The carriage pulled by a huge Galewind Horse had finished crossing the drawbridge, the people inside exiting.

These were the people who would be handed over to Gustav as gladiators, or, more correctly, as candidates to be gladiators. Hiain’s eyes widened at the sight of these faces.

Hiain: “Those idiots… Ya ended up gettin’ caught…!”

With both hands covering his face, Hiain stared down below him through the gaps between his large, webbed fingers.

Upon laying eyes on the new faces, Subaru understood the meaning of his words. The people brought in were all much like Hiain—lizardmen. Although the color of their scales suggested that they were possibly of a different ethnic group, they could still be broadly categorized as such.

And Hiain's reaction was in response to knowing who they were.

Hiain: "…Even tho' ya went as far as to use me as bait to get away."

Subaru narrowed his eyes at Hiain, who muttered to himself bitterly.

During Sparka, when he had tried again and again to get to know Hiain and the others who had participated alongside him, he had been told the circumstances that had brought Hiain to the Gladiator Island.

He had told Subaru that he had been made to play a decoy with his ability to change the color of his scales and blend in, and that he had been used as a sacrificial pawn to buy time for his friends to escape from slavers.

That said, from Hiain's response, it was clear that they—

Subaru: "They're the ones who used you as bait, huh."

Hiain: "Guh…"

Tanza: "Hiain-sama…"

Hiain's expression changed once Subaru spoke his words, which made Tanza look at him with concern. Although Tanza was probably not fond of him, she probably held sympathy for a person with whom she had exchanged words.

But, once he saw that boy and that girl gazing at him Hiain sniffled "He", and.

Hiain: "S-serves 'em right! Endin' up makin' fools out of yerselves 'cause ya took advantage of me! After all the pain they caused me… Ridiculous!"

Cecilus: "Hmmm."

Hiain: “Wh-What, ya got a problem or somethin’?!”

The fake Cecilus closed one eye at Hiain’s words, the latter lashing out angrily, his mouth distorted, at the former. When Hiain recklessly snapped at him in response, the fake Cecilus shook his head, “No, no”,

Cecilus: “I’m not criticizing you. I was just surprised and impressed at the same time, because it was just a mediocre statement by a mediocre character who exists just to be beaten.”

Hiain: “I’m a character who exists just to be beaten…?”

Cecilus: “What else can I say? This is something I’ve been thinking about for quite a bit, but why do all these people who are supposed to be side characters always blurt out things that make them sound like they are side characters? Why don’t they just read one of those picture books, and understand how foolish it all sounds?”

In front of Hiain, whose voice trembled, the fake Cecilus clasped his hands up high together.

With a dry sound, the fake Cecilus drew the attention of those around him to himself,

Cecilus: “Look around and see for yourselves. I haven’t read every story I can find of the past and the present and of every location, but if you read ones that catch your eye from cover to cover, you’ll find that that there are many members to their cast. The famous ones say and do things worthy of their renown, and those who aren’t say and do things that are worthy of their stupidity. And this applies to reality outside pictures book more than you might think.”

Hiain: “Wh-What the fuck are ya talkin’ ‘bout…?”

Cecilus: “Weak people say things that seem weak! Strong people say things that seem strong! The leading actors say the coolest things, and the minor characters whisper in a voice that’s hard to hear! Oh, it’s all so bizarre and strange, don’t you think?”

Hiain: “…”

Cecilus: “Why are y’all so eager to play the smallest roles out of your own will? We’re all actors who need to live out our own lives. Of course, the lead actor can only be me.”

Keeping their gazes focused on him, the fake Cecilus lightly tapped on the ground under his zori, focusing not only their gazes but also their hearing all towards himself.

And—

Cecilus: “Why don’t you think things over before you say anything? That statement makes you sound kinda like a small fry who’s about to die.”

Hiain: “—Hk.”

Hiain swallowed as the fake Cecilus brought his face closer to him, staring at him from below.

With a smile on his face despite Hiain’s reaction, the fake Cecilus swiftly backed away. But Hiain seemed to be afraid of the fake Cecilus’s eyes, and found himself panting.

And with that, Hiain turned his back to run away from the fake Cecilus, and—

Subaru: “Hiain.”

Hiain: “What?! Leave me alone! The only time I’m getting involved with’cha is when we’re together as a Unit, and…”

Subaru: “What about those people down there? I thought they were your companions.”

Subaru stopped Hiain as he was about to leave, asking him a question. Hearing Subaru’s words, Hiain exhaled with a “Ha!”,

Hiain: “It’s as I said! They used me as bait and after that, they fucked up! I don’t give a shit ‘bout those idiots!”

Subaru: “—But, when you dropped that bag down the cliff, they shared their food with you, didn’t they?”

Hearing Subaru's words, Hiain's eyes widened with an "Ah".

To Hiain's astonishment, Subaru continued with "More than that",

Subaru: "They helped you get away from bandits, and when you couldn't start a fire, they did it for you… The last thing you remember about them might be a bad memory, but…"

Hiain: "…"

Subaru: "It's too lonely to think that the last thing you saw of them makes up everything about those people."

There was the saying that a person would show their true colors in extreme circumstances.

How ridiculous, Subaru wanted to say as to tell him to discard that logic.

It was ridiculous to assume that, when a person was placed in an extraordinary, uncontrollable situation, the actions they took there would determine everything about them.

Then, would what Hiain, Weitz, and Idra had done during Sparka be their true colors?

Would Subaru think they were a scaredy-cat, a coward, and a fraud… And that all that was all there was to them?

There were moments they would cooperate with Subaru without running away, without outsmarting them, without deceiving them, and that was why they were all here together like this, having narrowly escaped from death.

That was why—

Subaru: "If you talk to them, you might get a different story."

Even Subaru had been unable to love the people who he now loved from the get-go.

He had also seen the less pleasant sides of those people. Still, Subaru wanted to like everyone. And Subaru believed himself to not be the sole unique person in this regard.

Hiain: "…Ya're a creepy lil' brat. Always talkin' like ya know it all."

At Subaru's appeal, Hiain muttered something that sounded spiteful.

From his point of view, it had to be quite sickening, to be told a story that he did not remember telling Subaru. And yet, with a face portraying a thought that preceded the eeriness he felt,

Hiain: "They'll never get past Sparka. So, it's impossible."

With that, Hiain walked away from his perch, this time without stopping.

But did he realize it? Hiain's answer did not come from his feelings at that moment, but was merely an excuse as to why he could not do those things. Because the situation would become even more suffocating.

Did he realize that, if the circumstances changed, that excuse would no longer be tenable—?

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama, I am sorry to hear about Hiain-sama and his acquaintances, but…"

As Hiain turned away, Tanza gently touched Subaru's sleeve. Her round eyes were shimmering with impatience, accompanied with sympathy.

Out of the obstacles they had to overcome, one of them was the drawbridge. Because she had seen the bridge with her own two eyes, it must have strengthened her resolve to escape the Island.

Naturally, for Tanza, getting off this Island was much, much more important to her than Hiain's feelings. Of course, it was the same for Subaru.

Subaru also had things that were important to him, and things that he wanted to prioritize.

There was no need to compare Hiain with what Subaru had encountered in the past.

Yet—

Cecilus: "—Basu, that's what's called a thorny path."

Subaru: "Ceci…"

As Subaru fought the boiling, burning sensation in depths of his chest, the fake Cecilus told him that.

When Subaru turned to look at him, the fake Cecilus let out a "Hup", then stood nimbly atop the railing in front of him. It was a sight that made him feel a tad uneasy, but the fake Cecilus dexterously balanced himself on the narrow railing.

Cecilus: "It's rare that we get everything to be the way we want them, no matter how many of the best choices we make under the circumstances we find ourselves in. There's a precondition for those beings who obtain everything. The qualification of being the chosen leading actor. If you do not possess it, and you want something you're undeserving of—"

Subaru: "What if I do?"

Cecilus: "Only death awaits, isn't that so?"

As the fake Cecilus stated so, his body leaned heavily toward the other side of the railing. Seeing this, Tanza's eyes widened and she quickly tried to reach out her hand.

But faster than she could do so, the fake Cecilus, bending at the knees, killed the momentum of his fall. Then crouching, he came face-to-face with Subaru in front of the railing, and,

Cecilus: "So it's much easier to have things move along if you think of them as what needs to be done, whether you like it or not."

Subaru: "…What needs to be done?"

Cecilus: "Yes, that's right. Accepting what is in front of you as supremely natural, coming to the conclusion you can't change destiny. Those who cannot overcome obstacles with their own strength will inevitably stagnate on the road ahead. You've got no choice but to carve open your own path… That's what needs to be done, regardless of what you think about it."

The fake Cecilus said this while squatting down, skillfully maintaining his posture without moving a single muscle. As Subaru was bombarded directly by those words, the rumors about the fake Cecilus resurfaced in Subaru's mind.

It had been said that, in the Sparka which the fake Cecilus had participated in, he had not acted until all of his allies had been wiped out.

Then, as soon as he had been left alone, he had killed the Gladiator Beast by his lonesome, and since then, he had been fighting to the death without the members of his Unit at his side, taking the lives of everyone he came to face.

Subaru: "Is that why you don't help others, Ceci?"

Cecilus: "You must be able to clear your way through any obstacle by yourself. If you accomplish things by borrowing the strength of others, you won't be able to overcome the same thing the next time you encounter it. You can't borrow power forever. People'll eventually die. Even I, am not immortal."

His intentions were understandable. His logic, too, was not impossible to comprehend.

But that was a type of logic that only the fake Cecilus could declare because he was strong, someone who could cut through problems. It was very harsh, and unkind.

Subaru: "You say that, Ceci, but sometimes encounters can change a person, you know. Then, that changed person might overcome the next obstacle. Besides…"

Cecilus: "Besides?"

Standing on one foot on the railing, the fake Cecilus rested his elbow on his bent knee and rested his hand on his chin. Scowling at that face holding back a grin, Subaru bared his teeth.

As an ordinary person who was unable to live alone, to this superhuman who could get through anything on his own.

Subaru: "Ceci, you say to treat it as what needs to be done regardless of my feelings, but it's important to keep this feeling of not being able to do that."

Cecilus: "…"

Subaru: "This feeling of not being able to throw away my personal feelings to do something, is the driving force to save someone else. Even if I'm told this is the selfishness of a naive brat, because that's what it is."

Indeed, that was what Subaru would like to believe.

The size of one's body did not matter. This was something that Natsuki Subaru thought, no matter how big or small he was.

A belief. A naive logic that could not be disregarded by cleverness posed as mature.

Cecilus: "Aha!"

Hearing Subaru's declaration, the fake Cecilus's expression changed.

From a thin smile to a big, satisfied grin.

Seeing that out of the corner of his eye, Subaru decided what he needed to do and walked away.

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama! Segmunt-sama, what are…"

Cecilus: "Oh, that's great, Basu! That fits my logic as well. Cool people say cool things, strong people say things that seem strong. Both casts start by saying things that are worthy of their standing. That's the very spirit of someone who rebels against fate!"

Tanza: "Segmunt-sama!"

Tanza turned on the fake Cecilus, who was cackling on the railing. However, Subaru had no time to spend on these two people.

There were two places that he needed to go to, and although he could just stop by the first, he needed to have a little discussion, persuasion, or perhaps a somewhat baseless accusation for the other one.

That was something he would have to get ready for later, and—

Subaru: “Old Man Null!”

Quickly heading back inside the Island, Subaru rushed to the healing room. As he flung the door open, he saw the back of a panicked figure that had been secretly dozing off inside.

The old man with a thin body, an untended long beard, and the impression of a cotton swab was Old Man Null, the healer cooped up in the healing room.

Null shook his head and blinked at the visitor who had rushed into the room, Subaru. The latter prefaced his question with, “Sorry, sorry”, and then,

Subaru: “—The thing I asked for, is it ready?”

2

???: “Looks like they’re having the next Sparka… We should have a reason to go watch…”

Hiain loathed Weitz, who, unable to read the situation, had made such an invitation.

Since they had been assembled as members of the same Unit, they frequently had no choice but to be together, however, from the beginning, Hiain had never gotten along with Weitz.

In addition to that, he knew that this was where he himself, who would impulsively flare up at people, and who had poor chemistry with Weitz, who was genuinely courageous—he, who could not back down, would be the first to spew inflammatory words.

Even though he knew this, he had never been able to fix it.

Because of that, he had been through utterly terrible experiences up to this point. He had been sent to Ginunhive as a gladiator, that mess, too, had been caused by the disaster his mouth had made.

It was true that the people he had been working with had used him as a sacrificial pawn in order to get away from slavers. But, in the first place, it had been Hiain's own slip of the tongue which had drawn the slavers' attention to them.

Though frustrated for being incapable of even finding a decent job for merely a day, he had gotten into a bar room fight with a group of clearly dangerous people, and was held accountable for it.

After days and days of being on the receiving end of a harried pursuit, it finally reached the point of turning to direct violence. And, for his comrades to save themselves, a decision was made.

Hiain: "Damnit, I know that…"

Though he was a scaredy-cat, he was short-tempered and would flare up at people; that was the reason he had incurred problems, and yet, until the very end, his comrades did not abandon him.

Reluctant to keep relying on others, and trying to look good, he had told them, "If it becomes hopeless, please just abandon me". Despite having said this however, on his mind had been the thought that they did not have the courage to abandon him.

At the very end of the end, convinced that they were scaredy-cats just like him, that they would not have the courage to abandon one of their comrades, he had been taking advantage of them.

Hiain: "I know that I'm the most hopeless of 'em all, damnit…"

Being abandoned, being used as bait, being used as a sacrificial pawn; it had been foolish of him to make a big fuss about it.

That it had been a very foolish thing, Hiain himself understood that.

But, were he to go on without saying that, he would be unable to protect his own heart. He was not at fault, and yet his comrades had been the ones in the wrong that had made him suffer; he firmly wished to believe that.

At the very least, by cursing his comrades in that manner, cursing them, who had escaped harm, he wanted to justify himself.

Hiain: “Despite that, why the hell did y’all get caught, too…!”

After all the trouble he had gone through, getting himself caught like this, and thrown into such a hopeless situation, why had they gotten themselves caught as well? With his justification to curse them snatched away, Hiain was nothing more than an asshole.

Degraded to being merely an asshole, he had no choice but to watch his friends die helplessly, here.

???: “It appears a Unit’s been established with the people that were brought in this time. Unlike how it was with us back then, they’re being thrown in as soon as they arrive…”

With his arms crossed, with his voice trembling, Idra looked down upon the gladiatorial arena from his seat among the spectators.

Idra attempted to hide his trembling voice, but to no avail. Idra may be strong, but deep down, he was not very different from the scaredy-cat Hiain.

Even then, Idra had the determination to put on a guise of strength. Hiain did not. He was miserable.

Gustav: “—From here-on out, the Sparka commences!!”

As the seating crowded with gladiators, the heavy voice of Gustav, the Governor, reverberated through the crowd.

Although they’d had no leisure for noticing it during their own Sparka, in one corner of the gladiatorial arena, there was a stage from which Gustav could look out over the audience—or rather, a place where dignitaries would be seated during the shows.

From there, Gustav looked down upon the venue with his four arms spread aloft.

At that moment, directly beneath Gustav, a passageway leading to the back of the gladiatorial arena opened, and, from its interior closed off with an iron fence, a Gladiator Beast slowly emerged.

It was a Witchbeast different from the one Hiain and the others had fought, a very, very large rat with soft-looking fur wrapped around its entire body, and bird wings growing out of both of its arms.

However, the differences between the two amounted to only their appearance, and there was no sizeable distinctions in their ferocity or danger, that was what Hiain's instinctive alarm bells conveyed to him.

In other words, it would not be the case in which, just because it was a different Gladiator Beast, the difficulty of Sparka would be reduced.

Weitz: "So, looks like these are the participants this time…"

As he heard the low roar of the gladiator Beast, as Weitz had stated, the fence of the passageway in front of them opened, and from there the participants of this Sparka—the five lizardmen, emerged.

The scales of each and every single one of them shook with anxiety and tension, all of their faces were familiar to Hiain.

That final hope of having mistaken them because he had viewed them from a distance, had been crushed.

Suddenly turning his face downward, Hiain realized that there was nowhere for him to run.

Just what had caused this? The scaredy-cat Hiain had survived the Sparka.

Being brought to the same place as Hiain, his comrades would be unable to survive the Sparka, would end up losing their lives—just what in the world was this curse?

That they had to suffer through this, had it been a result of his cursing?

If so, the effect of Hiain’s cursing had to be a considerable one. Then, he would curse everyone on this Island with the exception of himself—no, he would rather curse everyone within this Empire, curse them until he ran out of curses, and yet.

Idra: “Idiot.”

Hiain: “—Ah?”

To begin with, if he were to curse anyone, he would start with the slavers who had left him and his comrades here.

Hiain, having been engaged with such fanciful and unhelpful retreats from reality, was brought back to his senses by Idra’s dumbfounded mutterings.

What had occurred? With his eyes wide open in astonishment, Idra stared at the gladiatorial arena. And, doing that was not just Idra, but was also Weitz next to him—no, was not just the two of them.

—The multitude of gladiators in the audience of the venue were all staring in amazement.

The reason for that was clear, and looking down at the gladiatorial arena, Hiain’s expression became the same as those of the others.

Because, beside the five lizardmen, was the figure of a sixth person who was not supposed to be—.

Hiain: “Wh-Wh-Wh-What the hell’re you doing, Schwartz—?!”

His throat trembling, Hiain called out the name of the one who should not be there, the name of the black-haired boy.

The boy from whom he had just parted at that vantage point, the boy who had spoken to him so cheekily, turned around upon hearing Hiain’s pitiful exclamation.

Then, present in the midst of the lizardmen trembling at the life-threatening Sparka before, with a snap he pointed at the face of

Hiain in the audience, and declared.

He had been asked what he was doing, and so—.

Subaru: “—The strongest reinforcement.”

So he declared.

Chapter 67:
Hidden Behind the Molar

1

At first, when Old Man Null heard Subaru's request, his mouth, with several missing teeth, distorted in a grandiose manner.

From what he'd heard, Old Man Null was a healer on the Island—in name only, as he had never done anything like treating others, hence he was acting as an imitation doctor.

Old Man Null had been at the Island before Gustav had taken over as Island Chief and Governor. In a period during which the Island had been much harsher and deadly, he had happened to obtain the role of a healer.

It had all started when he did nothing more but to apply a dirty cloth on an open wound of a gladiator who had lost their arm.

With that as the genesis of him treating people, the number of times he was being called upon increased, and before long, he was excused from having to stand in the gladiatorial arena as a gladiator, being ordered to work as a healer in the healing room.

From there-on out, he spent a long time as a healer, and befitting his position, came across plenty of bloody scenes.

Thanks to that, he became able to at least do stuff like stitching up wounds or mixing simple drugs. With the belief he would live peacefully as a healer until he died, he gave a smile with his yellow teeth.

Subaru also felt guilty for having caused Old Man Null's face to have distorted in such a grandiose manner.

However, if Subaru were to try and actualize the things that he wished to do upon the Island, the things that he had to do, then no matter what, that was an indispensable thing.

That was why Subaru had made a request to Old Man Null, who was doing a praiseworthy job of saving people.

Subaru: “—Can you prepare a poison that can instantly kill a person, just by biting or licking it?”

V!c.ll2o

2

He felt terrible for Old Man Null.

But, this was necessary. It would be a bigger problem for Subaru to pass out in the middle of a fight or survive some half-assed way—there had to be a way for him to start over.

And, once he obtained the means to do so, Subaru would be absolutely perfect.

Subaru: “Well, it’d help if my legs were a little longer.”

Such complaints were the opinion of those who came across a situation in battle where a single big step was not enough.

Of course, that one step was forcefully solved by rushing two steps ahead, even faster, to the next opportunity. By repeating trial and error to find the best action, he could grasp the desired future.

That was why—

Gustav: “—That is enough! You have done well to survive Sparka! By my jurisdiction as the official, I accept you all as members of the Gladiator Island!”

The resounding declaration conveyed in a baritone, commended the end of a fierce battle waged in the gladiatorial arena.

In the middle of the gladiatorial arena was the corpse of a Gladiator Beast, lying on its back with two swords, one large and one small, pierced into its body. Its two wings and long tail had been severed, leaving it in a pitiful state.

But, the way it had utilized its wings to move and its attacks used its sharp tail had truly, truly been troublesome.

Since conquering those two problems had been absolutely necessary to damage its body, he just wished to put it out there that they had not hurt it needlessly.

And—

Subaru: “Gustav-san, seriously?”

Breathing heavily, his shoulders heaving, Subaru looked up at Gustav standing at the seats positioned closest to the arena.

The Governor of the Island, with his four burly arms crossed, had overseen the Sparka’s conclusion. He seemed like an obstinate, inflexible man, but Subaru had not expected even his declaration of its terminus to be the same word-for-word.

It was hard to imagine that he had coincidentally used the same words for both this battle and for Subaru’s group’s, which made it seem that Gustav’s declaration was probably the same every time.

Anyway—

???: “We, did it… We did it, we did it! We survived! We survived!!”

???: “We’re alive…! Ah, uwaaaaaah!”

???: “Iiiiiiiii, heeeee…”

???: “…I can’t believe it. I thought it was the end of the world…”

???: “Maybe we died and went to Od Lagna…?”

Around the corpse of the Gladiator Beast were five people, each one with their own way of being stunned and rejoicing at their victory.

They were Orson, Hitz, Nadrey, Quonson, and Codley. All of them lizardmen, but no two were of the same ethnicity, and the formula for victory had been understanding everyone’s unique characteristics and how they worked together.

As had been the case with Weitz et al, victory would not have been achievable were any of them not present. —Of course, it would have been impossible without Subaru.

Subaru: “But, they won…!”

With a snap, Subaru pointed his finger towards Gustav at the seats closest to the arena.

Gustav's stern face remained unchanging even with Subaru's provocative attitude, only reacting by squinting his eyes.

Without saying a word, Gustav turned his back and walked away from the seats, returning to the Island.

Cleaning up the corpse and dealing with the surviving gladiators was left to the guards, his subordinates.

???: "Schwartz!"

Subaru: "Oh?"

As Subaru watched Gustav walk away, someone running toward him called out his name. It was Hiain, having jumped down from the stands and made a run for Subaru.

He seemed to have the scales of his entire body standing on end, and grabbing Subaru's shoulder with his large, webbed fingers, he voiced,

Hiain: "What the hell were ya thinkin'?! No, how did'cha end up back in a Sparka in the first place…"

Subaru: "Punishment, yeah? Punishment."

Hiain: "It was… punishment?"

Subaru: "Yeah. The other gladiators told me that if you disobey Gustav-san or the guards… the administration of the Island, you'll be warned at first, and punished thereafter. Malicious offenders are subject to the curse."

After speaking to several gladiators, he had made sure by corroborating it.

Everyone seemed to know Gustav's desire to not waste gladiators and have their numbers reduced as much as possible, and there was a common understanding of the rules laid out.

Punishment—in other words, forced participation in a Sparka performed by an unrelated Unit.

Subaru: “Sparka is a rite of passage for people who are going to become new gladiators, and those who have already become gladiators don’t participate. They have their own Units, so there’s no reason for them to do it.”

In addition, the Unit assembled for Sparka would be determined at random, composed of a selection of people who entered Gladiator Island at the time of the Sparka. In other words, choosing people one was compatible with, choosing people one liked, were both impossible.

Being paired with people whose capabilities, strong suits, or even identity were unknown, and being forced to work with them to defeat the Gladiator Beast in order to complete it, was quite the daunting task.

A dangerous deathmatch in which participation held no merit, but where the possibility of death was all too great.

It was unanimous among the gladiators’ statements, Sparka had been their toughest deathmatch on the Gladiator Island.

Subaru: “Well, now it seems that because of Ceci, there’s the perception that the deathmatches done with him are the worst.”

Hiain: “—. I get why ya joined that Sparka. But…”

Subaru: “But?”

Hiain: “In the first place! Why did’cha have to be punished? Y’know, it’s strange that ya could join the Sparka immediately after all that talk up there! It’s like…”

There, Hiain took a pause in his angered speech, letting his gaze wander.

Subaru shrugged his little shoulders at Hiain’s hesitance to speak the words remaining from that sentence. He sort of understood what Hiain wanted to say.

Subaru: “It’s like I was trying to help Orson and the others?”

Hiain: “—Hk.”

Subaru: “You’re not wrong. If I weren’t present, all of them would’ve been killed.”

In fact, even with Subaru, the situation of the battle was terrible.

Because to be as one with them, who were no better suited for fighting than Hiain, he had to start by becoming their ally, considering they were united as fellow lizardmen.

It was rather helpful, though, recalling seeing Chaosflame.

Subaru: “From what I got, you were all trying to get to Chaosflame?”

Hiain: “Wha…”

Subaru: “You should really talk about that kind of stuff. After all, you guys got to see each other again.”

As he said this, Subaru put his hand atop Hiain’s hand on his shoulder.

Hiain stared into Subaru’s black eyes with his slit-pupiled eyes wide open. Staring back at him, Subaru cocked his chin towards the five lizardmen.

The five, who had been basking in the joy of their survival, gradually regained composure enough to look around them; then one of them, Codley, noticed Hiain’s presence.

And then—

Codley: “Hiain! It’s Hiain! He’s alive… He’s alive!”

Codley’s voice rang out with a jovial look on his face, and then the other four looked at Hiain. They all expressed their delight at Hiain’s presence, reacting positively to him.

Witnessing Hiain’s face contort seeing his fellow lizardmen’s reactions, Subaru spoke,

Subaru: “This is the chance I risked my life for. Savor it, bro.”

Slapping his hunched back, Subaru sent Hiain off in the direction of his comrades.

Hiain hesitated a few times, but then moved forward with faltering steps, and—

Hiain: “S-Schwartz!”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Hiain: “…Thanks.”

With that said, Hiain walked up to the five lizardmen awaiting him.

Orson and the others held no animosity or malice toward Hiain, because Subaru already knew why the five had been captured and brought to the Gladiator Island.

There would be no reason for them to be at odds with each other, provided they were able to talk it over proper.

???: “…Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “Whoa!”

As he watched Hiain’s reunion with his friends, he was startled by a voice from behind.

Having hopped into the air, so surprised that he broke out into a coughing fit, Subaru,

Subaru: “Th-That was close… I almost died…! Don’t scare me like that!”

???: “That is what I ought to say! Why are you doing that so suddenly… Do you want to die?!”

Subaru: “No, I don’t want to die?!”

Tanza scolded Subaru, who turned around with his hand over his mouth, chastising him harshly.

The little girl's vehement protests had Subaru shaking his head helplessly. Tanza, however, looked not at all convinced by this excuse.

Tanza: "I was very surprised to see you join their Sparka out of the blue. And knowing it was the result of you defying Governor Gustav, I cannot help but think you were throwing away your life because you felt it unneeded."

Subaru: "That would be a misunderstanding. I don't think there's many people who understand the value of life better than I do, you know? That's why I saved Hiain's friends, too."

Tanza: "I am speaking about your own life… I am glad that you were able to save them because it turned out well in the end, but from my point of view, there were many times when you were in a dangerous spot. This is simply a miracle."

Subaru: "A miracle, huh."

Dropping the tone of her voice, Tanza chided Subaru's recklessness from a pragmatic point of view.

Just as she had stated, and it was probably true that there had been a number of harrowing moments as she watched. Subaru could understand why Tanza wished to call it a miracle. —But it had not been one.

Subaru: "Miracles come from God, but this one's my doing."

Ergo, it had been no miracle.

It was proof that Natsuki Subaru had kicked away such a shitty fate.

Tanza: "…You acted so recklessly just to help Hiain-sama's companions? Or, is this just retaliation for your tit-for-tat with Segmunt-sama?"

Subaru: "No, it's true that I was angry at Ceci, but I'd have to be really crazy to risk my life for that… You know, I had a good reason for saving Hiain's friends."

Tanza: "…"

Subaru: "Those eyes are awfully filled with suspicion!"

It was amazing how steep a drop there had been in the persuasiveness of Subaru's explanation.

With his shoulders slumped under Tanza's distrustful gaze, as if she were looking at a criminal caught red-handed, Subaru muttered weakly "It's true…".

Tanza let out a small exhale at Subaru's pathetic state.

Tanza: "Then, what is your goal, Schwartz-sama?"

Subaru: "It's…"

As Tanza changed her attitude and moved on from the topic, Subaru turned around once more to answer her question.

Hiain and his five companions were talking together. Subaru could hear a subtle rise in the pitch of Hiain's voice as he spoke.

That was why—

Subaru: "Maybe we should wait a little longer before we talk about it."

Tanza: "…Schwartz-sama?"

Subaru: "Those eyes are awfully filled with suspicion!"

Exasperated by such a lack of trust in himself coming from her, Subaru surreptitiously stuck his finger in his mouth. Then, he double checked the position of the package hooked to a molar.

Subaru: "…"

What laid there, was the last resort that Subaru had requested Old Man Null to concoct.

He had seized this loop by overcoming a desperate challenge, and he absolutely did not want to accidentally ruin it with an inadvertent mistake. He had to be very careful not to die from careless mistakes.

—Thinking this, Subaru stuffed the wrapped “drug” behind his molar.

3

???: “Accordin’ to what Orson’s group said, it seems Chaosflame’s been destroyed.”

Tanza: “…”

At the bitter-faced Hiain’s report, Tanza lowered her round eyebrows, her eyes cast downwards.

Even thought she had imagined the worst situation possible, that did not ease the shock of being told that it had actually come to pass. Even if someone knew they would trip and fall, it would hurt all the same once they fell down.

After Sparka was over, Orson and the others, having survived without a hitch and been welcomed as gladiators, were then led by the guards to show them around the Island’s facilities and common rooms.

Although they were comrades, they and Hiain were from different Units, so they could not be together, so Hiain had sheeply made his entrance in Subaru and Tanza’s room, who were in the same Unit as him.

And that was how he had shared the stories Subaru had wanted to know.

Hiain: “Ya wanted these kinda stories from the outside, right? Ya can’t get any information from outside if ya stay on this Island after all.”

Subaru: “It’s half and half. No, let’s make it about seven to three. The side with the seven’s the one where Hiain’s and Orson’s group are.”

Hiain: “What’re ya sayin’, ya creepy kid!”

Hiain spoke as if he meant it but, with his arms crossed, he turned away.

Subaru was glad to see that Hiain had gotten his feelings in order and had thought on what Subaru’s purpose in joining that Sparka had been.

Hiain’s expression seemed to brighten up somewhat, surely because he had been able to hear the important topics from Orson and the rest.

That was—

Hiain: “…Those idiots were caught tryin’ to get me back from the slave traders. There’s really no savin’ them.”

Subaru: “God and fate are both heartless. That’s why I helped them… Or should I say we?”

Hiain: “Heh, whaddya mean? In reality, ya’re the only one who participated in the Sparka.”

Subaru: “Hiain, you got down on your knees with snot running down your nose and requested earnestly, I beg of you to help me, please, Schwartz-sama…”

Hiain: “Don’t talk nonsense!”

A hand stretched out and grabbed his head and shook him about and about. Then, letting go of the now-dizzy Subaru, the sniffling Hiain noticed Tanza’s state.

Hiain called out to the girl with a “Pipsqueak” as she remained with her eyes cast down after hearing the story about Chaosflame.

Hiain: “Are you feeling down about Chaosflame? Why…”

Tanza: “…Chaosflame is my hometown. When the city was near collapse, it…”

Hiain: “I-I see… That, that’s it, that’s it, huh.”

Hiain’s eyes swayed from side-to-side, puzzled by the unexpected reply. His character of being vulnerable to accidents had slipped out, but he immediately shouted, “But!”,

Hiain: “It certainly seems that the town was destroyed, but story is, the people who lived there didn’t get wiped out. Everyone from that town went to a different place… Uhm, it ain’t easy to explain, but…”

Tanza: “It is hard, to explain…?”

Hiain: “Nah, I just dunno how much of it I should believe.”

With that preamble, Hiain hesitated about what words to say next. But, the interests of Tanza and Subaru were directed towards the follow-up to his story.

Having sensed that, Hiain breathed a heavy sigh and then,

Hiain: “Apparently, there’s a big rebellion goin’ on outside. The lot from Chaosflame’re said to be joinin’ that rebellion. Well, story goes that the head of the Demon City raised rebellions every-so-often, and the city was also obliterated as a result of her foolishness… Eek.”

Tanza: “—Yorna-sama is not foolish.”

Hiain: “I-I’m sorry! I ain’t really gettin’ why, but I’m sorry!”

Hiain, apologizing quickly, squeaked out a frightened voice at Tanza’s sharp gaze.

Once again, Hiain was incurring the wrath of someone else with his unnecessary bravado, but behind him, Subaru found some points of relief in what he had just said.

Of course, that was assuming he believed everything in what Hiain had relayed from his conversation with Orson’s group.

Subaru: "Chaosflame may be done for, but Yorna-san and the townspeople are fine. If there's talk of rebellion, it looks like Abel and the others are safe and sound."

The battle to retake the Imperial Capital would not be able to proceed with Abel gone.

In other words, Abel was still alive. He hoped that Medium, Taritta, and even Al were also safe. —Hopefully Louis was also safe by Yorna's side.

Subaru: "…As I thought, there's no time to waste."

Upon obtaining even a partial idea of the situation outside, Subaru's desire to go outside grew stronger.

Naturally, he was worried about everybody in Chaosflame, but also the people in Guaral, whom Yorna and Abel's group would try to converge with—about Rem.

He had a feeling that, if she were to find out he'd been shrunken, assuredly, she would get angry with him again.

Subaru: "—. Even though I really wanted to show Rem my reliable aspects."

Personally, he thought that he was now in better shape, his head clearer, but Subaru could not justify the fact that his outward appearance lacked persuasive power. The fact that Tanza was constantly shifting her eyes to him in suspicion, was probably not unrelated to his small body.

In any case—

Subaru: "Mhm, I got it. Thanks, Hiain, you helped me out."

Hiain: "The ones who got helped out were my… Well, whatever, as long as ya get it."

Hiain gave Subaru an awkward reply, the latter having thanked him. Giving a small chuckle at the way he was answered, Subaru was thinking he should follow-up on Tanza's side.

???: “—Schwartz, the Governor’s calling for you.”

Outside the common room, the voice of a guard of the Gladiator Island, clad in a black uniform, called out. Hearing that summon, Hiain’s expression stiffened, and Tanza’s eyes widened in surprise.

She looked at the guard,

Tanza: “Governor Gustav is calling for Schwartz-sama? Why…”

Guard: “I haven’t heard. There’s also no reason to converse. Obey, quietly. Or else…”

Subaru: “It’s alright! I’d go with you obediently even if you weren’t being so hostile… By the way, would you punish me in case I didn’t comply?”

Guard: “…”

Subaru: “Kidding, kidding.”

Faced with Subaru’s talkativeness, who had one eye closed, the guard, who was in the prime of his life, contorted his lips.

It was obvious that he was not very fond of Subaru. Of course he wasn’t. This guard happened to have been present when Subaru had been talking with Gustav before the Sparka.

This was because he was also someone who had seen the trigger for Subaru to participate in Sparka, or in other words, he had been present when Subaru had become subject to punishment. From his point of view, Subaru’s true nature would seem like a mystery.

Because he was ready to join a Sparka of his own volition, he was surely a kid who was out of his mind.

Subaru: “Well, I’m heading out for a bit. Tanza, please be a good girl and wait for me.”

Tanza: “…Though it is you, Schwartz-sama, do take care to moderate your mischief.”

Subaru: “Yeaah, I can’t argue with that.”

At Tanza’s stifled tone of voice, Subaru’s wry smile grew deeper and deeper. With that, obeying the guard who silently urged him to hurry up, Subaru left the room.

Just then, Hiain called out towards Subaru’s back with a “Schwartz”.

Hiain: “Uhm, well…”

Subaru: “Hmm? What’s up?”

Hiain: “Ah, no… T-take care of yerself. It’ll be us who’ll be in trouble if the number of people in our Unit decreases, even if ya are how ya are, after all.”

Subaru’s face became puzzled at those disingenuous words of concern. Then he immediately spit out a “Pfft” and nodded back at Hiain.

Subaru: “Yep, I know. Well, see you later.”

With a wave of his hand, Subaru temporarily parted from Tanza and Hiain. Then, while following the back of the guard walking in front of him,

Subaru: “Was Gustav-san angry?”

Guard: “…The Governor is not one to get emotional. Unlike me.”

Upon the implication that he should not provoke him with any unnecessary words, Subaru ducked his head in dejection.

4

—And thus, the two of them saw Subaru off as he was taken away by the guards.

Weitz: “Hey, what did that Schwartz kid do…”

Idra: “Just now, what the guards took him away for, was it for something other than the Sparka?”

With those words, Weitz and Idra showed up in the room where Tanza and Hiain had stayed behind. They, too, had watched Subaru’s Sparka from the spectators’ seats.

Naturally, there were many things they had wanted to ask Subaru, the perpetrator of such recklessness.

Although, while they had not been as cornered as Hiain had been, it was not like their tempers would have been as short as to make them jump down from the spectator seats, but—

Weitz: “Tanza, are ya aware of what’s going on?”

Tanza: “…I am both somewhat aware and unaware, it is complicated. It seems that Schwartz-sama is hiding things from me as well.”

Weitz: “He’s a suspicious guy… Tho’ he has some skills in his own way…”

After Tanza spoke, whose eyes were turned down, Weitz and Idra exchanged glances and heaved a sigh.

Listening to the conversation of those three, Hiain remained silently still. Although he was a lizardman, making it difficult to discern his expression, his eyes, swaying from side-to-side, made it obvious that he was worrying about something.

As a result, the three called out to him with “Hiain”, “Hiain” and “Hiain-sama” respectively, and,

Idra: “What’s with that face…”

Hiain: “No, ya guys… a-are also aware that, that Schwartz kid got mixed up in the Sparka on purpose… Right?”

Idra: “That’s… what it seems everybody thought, upon seeing that situation.”

Idra answered the faltering Hiain’s words, and Tanza and Weitz both nodded their heads in agreement.

This seemed to be the common understanding of all the gladiators who had witnessed the battle in the gladiatorial arena. Then, from anyone's perspective, the Sparka held during the present day would not have been a success without Subaru's active participation.

Weitz: "For me, I dunno what his intentions were in doin' that, but…"

Hiain: "—. I ain't got any idea either. But, but."

Weitz: "—? But, what?"

Hiain: "I ain't exactly sure why he did that, but why he was able to do that, y'know, maybe…"

Ya might get it, as he continued with that, the three aside from Hiain also seemed to understand.

The question was not why Subaru had joined the Sparka, but how Subaru had joined the Sparka and been able to survive. Tanza aside, that question was one not unrelated to Weitz and Idra.

Therefore, as he was met with a look of intense interest, Hiain gulped down his spit.

And then—

Hiain: "Somethin' I heard, uhh, from those people who just came from outside… is that there seems to be a rumor goin' 'round that the illegitimate son of the Emperor's out there somewhere. So, here's the thing—"

Everyone: "…"

Hiain: "—The rumor's 'bout a brat, with black hair and black eyes."

SETOWI

Chapter 68: Guidance of the Sword Wolf

1

Gustav: “—Wait for a moment, Schwartz. Now, let me look over this until I get to a good place to leave off.”

Having said this, Gustav did not even take a fleeting glance towards Subaru, whom he had summoned to the room. His gaze remained cast towards the desk, upon the letter in his hands.

Led by the guard, Subaru had been brought to the highest stratum of Ginunhive. Behind a door that looked luxurious, Subaru was greeted by a simple, plain room.

Contained inside the spacious room was nothing except a desk to be used for work, a bookshelf to be used for work, and a toolbox to be used for work. Since the room was too spacious for someone to know what to do with it, it was possible that there had been more things filling it originally.

The room to be used by the Governor, which had been stripped of everything unnecessary for his work, had a very tidy look to it; displaying Gustav’s no-playing-around nature pretty well, it was conversely reassuring.

Subaru: “You tell me to wait until you find a good place to stop, but there aren’t any chairs.”

Subaru was at a loss when Gustav had ordered him to wait in the room.

But having been told to wait, he had no other options. With nothing to do for the moment, Subaru looked around the room until his eyes encountered a person who gave off a feeling of being out-of-place.

Subaru had found them, or rather, found them casually waving towards himself, the other person a sodden look on his face.

???: “Heyhey, Basu, you sure worked hard. You got some business with Gustav-san?”

Subaru suppressed a sigh and walked up to the fake Cecilus, the one who’d spoken to him in such an easygoing tone.

Wondering what he could say, the relationship between Subaru and the fake Cecilus had become a bit more complicated again. To an extent, Subaru’s participation in Sparka had been the result of the fake Cecilus’s incitement.

Although Subaru did think he would have joined the Sparka even if there had been no dispute—

Subaru: “Ceci, I still really wanted to get back at you, there’s no doubt in that.”

Cecilus: “My! Getting back at me sure’s quite the ambitious goal. Is that why you joined Sparka? If so, then sorry.”

Subaru: “You’re sorry?”

Cecilus: “No, you see, I didn’t go to see the Sparka that was going on earlier.”

Subaru’s jaw dropped due to the fake Cecilus’s answer, the latter sticking out his tongue in a quite indifferent manner. However, a surge of anger for screaming “You bastard” arose immediately.

Subaru himself had become quite determined to prove him wrong, and Subaru himself had also rushed in for the sake of having Cecilus take back what he had said, by having him see it with his own eyes.

Subaru: “Y-you, YOU BASTARD…!”

Cecilus: “Nownownownow, don’t be angry! Okayokay, I do understand your feelings of wanting to be angry, but it happens to be the case that I have my reasons too!”

Subaru: “Then how about you let me hear them! They better be good, or else…”

Cecilus: "I mean, I knew the outcome even without seeing it, y'know? Basu would've finished it quickly with a perfect showdown. Then there'd be no reason for me to go, since my life wasn't on the line after all."

Subaru: "…"

Since he displayed no reaction to any amount of hounding, Subaru backed away from the fake Cecilus and his unchanging mannerisms.

Being honest with himself, Subaru was aware that for everything he had done, it was only natural for Hiain to call him a creepy little brat—

Subaru: "For someone on the outside, it'd be pretty fitting to also call Ceci a creepy little brat…"

Cecilus: "It may be that the people who achieve supremacy will always be incomprehensible to others, y'know. In this case, both Basu and I fall into that category."

Subaru: "Well, you really seem to think highly of me."

Cecilus: "Yes, by now I'm pretty much convinced. So rest assured, and continue to pull off unconventional, off-the-mark, daring and misguided acts!"

Subaru: "I don't want to be off-the-mark or misguided though!"

Subaru's lips twisted in protest at the fake Cecilus, who was half-mindedly spouting a bunch of words along that sort. Then, at the tail end of their back-and-forth, there was the heavy sound of a slam on the desk.

Upon looking, the one to have made that noise had been Gustav, having finished reading the letter.

Gustav rested his chin on two of his crossed arms, placing the remaining two arms atop the desk. Subaru was impressed that with four arms, he could do nifty things like these.

Subaru: "I wonder, if you were to put all four hands together, would it be too big to put your chin on?”

Cecilus: “Well, that’s a good question. Gustav-san’s got an adequately large face, so it may be that, surprisingly, stacking four hands on top of each other would make it the perfect size. Could you put them on top of each other for a minute?”

Gustav: “Do you two lack the consideration to be quiet? Common sense would dictate that, if you are waiting for someone to read a letter, silence would be valued.”

Subaru & Cecilus: “But you didn’t say anything…”

Their quibble had been a childish one devoid of logic, yet regardless, Subaru’s and the fake Cecilus’s excuses overlapped.

Because of that, Subaru’s feelings towards Gustav had become those of guilt. Sharing the same view as the fake Cecilus meant that Subaru had behaved in an absurd fashion.

Subaru: “Gustav-san, I’m sorry. I’m at fault here…”

Cecilus: “Aren’t those thoughts of yours sorta just thoughts of seeking acceptance? Be that as it may, since you’ve admitted your fault, I’m going to blame everything here on Basu.”

Gustav: “Schwartz is, in my appraisal as the official, humbler for having uttered an apology. In addition, I, in my capacity, do not recall granting Segmunt permission to enter this room.”

Subaru: “Oh, is that so? Well then, why are you here, Ceci?”

Cecilus: “Naturally, that’s because my plans are to be where I want to be, when I want to be there. No one on this island can put shackles on my freedom, so I think that’s a reasonable way to go about it.”

Nonchalantly, the fake Cecilus uttered about how he conformed to nobody. Subaru looked to Gustav with trepidation, but the Chief of the Island was still conflicted, his eyes closed and his brow furrowed.

It seemed that the fake Cecilus's remarks were no lie, but of course, Gustav was not willing to overlook the situation, is how his position seemed to be.

But—

Subaru: "No one can stop Ceci, huh?"

Cecilus: "Yes, that's right. It's so-called special treatment. Namely, towards the leading actor of this world."

Subaru: "I don't really get what that means, but…"

Although expressed in a peculiar way, it was not hard to understand what the false Cecilus had been trying to say.

Only, were the fake Cecilus to not be mistaken in his statements, another major inconsistency would arise. Such a contradiction was something that Subaru could not ignore.

Subaru: "Umm, so, Gustav-san, I was told you wanted to see me, but… is it okay if Ceci stays here and listens to us?"

Gustav: "—. Segmunt."

Cecilus: "Please don't bother. Nobody'd be able to drive me out. Don't worry, if what you talk about's related to me, it'll reach my ears, and if it's not about me, I'll forget about it quickly. My ability to forget's amazing. It's even possible that I'm forgetting a lot of important things at this very moment."

Subaru: "That's not amazing at all…"

Both Subaru and Gustav had given up because of the fake Cecilus's insolence, the latter puffing his chest out.

Finally, without the room's occupants changing, Subaru headed towards Gustav, just in front of him. The fake Cecilus watched on with his hands folded behind his head and his back against the wall.

It was an inspection by a terribly strange "actor".

Subaru: “Forget about Ceci in the back, you called me—”

Gustav: “Of course, it is a warning of punishment for your case of misconduct.”

Subaru: “…Aren’t you being roundabout on that?”

A low voice interrupted his statement, and Subaru frowned as he muttered.

As per the rules of the Gladiator Island, after the warning came the punishment, and supposedly, after that, lay a death at the hands of the curse rule. Regardless of the final conclusion, for a warning to come after the punishment was the incorrect order of things.

As Subaru pointed this out, Gustav’s expression did not even twitch.

Gustav: “Schwartz, you made a statement before me, the official, that threatened to disturb the order of the Gladiator Island. You ignored the warning, and consequently reached the stage to be administered punishment. Are you not aware of this?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, I am.”

Gustav: “Then, you must vow to never speak of it again before me, as the official. —Never speak that you are planning to escape this island, or that you possess any other plan to oppose the will of His Excellency the Emperor.”

His expression remained unchanging and unmoving. The look in his eyes and the tonality of his pupils also did not change. His tone of voice had a quietness akin to a giant boulder, yet it produced an overwhelming air of intimidation.

If he were a bit more emotional, such as being angry or annoyed, then it would be easier for Subaru to understand. However, neither anger nor annoyance resided within Gustav.

Subaru: “An absurdly strong sense of duty.”

Gustav: “…”

Subaru: “Gustav-san, do you owe His Excellency the Emperor a debt of gratitude?”

Gustav: “Are you attempting to sidestep the question?”

Subaru: “Nothing of the sort.”

He did not intend to sidestep it, nor was he in a position to.

Gustav did not seem like he was willing to let Subaru leave without getting a firm pledge from him. Therefore, Subaru’s question came from suspicion and interest towards the genuine Gustav.

Since, he roughly understood the position of the person Gustav called His Excellency the Emperor.

Gustav: “I have no personal connection with His Excellency the Emperor. As Governor, I have been entrusted with the management of this island. To endeavor, in my capacity, in the professional duties of my position, that is only natural, is it not?”

Subaru: “You’re saying that being overly serious is just your personality?”

Gustav: “It is somewhat dishonest to describe the performance of one’s natural duties as being serious, though, is it not?”

Subaru ducked his head, not having intended to make fun of him, but it had been taken as a slanderous remark.

Nevertheless, Gustav’s answer was not what Subaru desired. Whether this was Gustav’s true intention, or a front to hide it, he did not know.

It was something that was impossible to know about Gustav without learning more about him.

Subaru: “In Gustav-san’s case, I don’t think I’d be able to gain his trust even if I tried five or ten times…”

Subaru’s successes to date had been due to what he believed to be a kind of “suspension bridge effect”, created by the extreme conditions in which he had been placed.

In the midst of Sparka, where lives were on the line, Subaru's words, spoken with an air of knowledge, seemed to pull everyone's attention away from their own situation.

Getting to know them was the biggest reason why Natsuki Subaru had been able to surmount the Sparka.

However, this method was quite difficult to pull off outside of Sparka.

Gustav: "—Schwartz, what is with that face?"

Subaru: "No, I was wondering how I should melt Gustav-san's frozen heart."

Gustav: "There is no such correlation between heart and ice. I ask you to refrain from speaking in the same manner as Segmunt. For the sake of not increasing the seeds of headache burdening me, in my capacity."

Subaru's frivolous comments were answered seriously, and there was a hint of a laugh from the fake Cecilus in the back.

Subaru and Gustav exchanged glances as they cooperated to ignore it. Then, they returned to the question that had not been answered once more.

Gustav: "You must once again pledge, Schwartz. That above your activities as a gladiator of this Island, you shall obey me in my capacity as the Governor. —You shall refrain from doing anything that goes against the will of His Excellency the Emperor."

Subaru: "…"

Closing his eyes, Subaru repeated Gustav's statement in his head.

Upon making a proud declaration that he would leave the Island, Subaru had been given a warning by Gustav, and when he still did not correct it, Gustav had sent him to Sparka with the goal of punishing him.

If what the gladiators had stated was correct, the warning would be followed by a punishment, and if that had no effect, then the penalty of the curse rule would ensue.

Then, there was something Subaru had to make sure of no matter what. It was the confirmation that was absolutely necessary for Subaru and the others to get off the Gladiator Island—.

Gustav: “Schwartz, your answer—”

Subaru: “—Definitely, NO!”

Gustav: “…”

In response to the low, insistent question, Subaru proudly raised his voice, his chest puffed out.

Gustav’s brow furrowed at the answer as he went silent. After seeing this quietude, Subaru immediately understood that the true meaning of his words had not been conveyed in the way he had just said them, and so rephrasing them was necessary.

Subaru: “No means I refuse. I’m sorry, but I can’t accept what you say, Gustav-san. I’ve already decided that I’m going to get out of here, no matter how stupid it may be.”

2

Breaking down the words that may not have been conveyed, Subaru so declared once more.

That he would escape from Gladiator Island Ginunhive, spoken to none other than the Island’s Governor himself, Gustav Morello, with complete confidence.

Gustav: “…”

Subaru’s answer was not what Gustav had sought, of course. He let the astounding sternness of his face simmer, without changing his expression or the intensity of his eyes.

Simmering, like magma waiting to erupt—

Gustav: “Schwar—”

Cecilus: “Ah-hahahahahahaha!”

A moment later, a high-pitched laugh coercively disturbed the magma about to erupt.

The one laughing hysterically was the fake Cecilus, at the back of the room, nonchalantly eavesdropping on their conversation.

The fake Cecilus, as he laughed hysterically, wiped away tears from his eyes with his fingers.

Cecilus: “Definitely no! Definitely no, he says. I don’t know what “no” means, but I personally really like it because it gives me a strong sense of rebellion! Wooow, Basu, you just don’t know fear, do you? Well, I don’t dislike it, rather, I quite like it.”

Subaru: “I see. Well, I think of Ceci as a creepy little brat.”

Cecilus: “Ahahahaha!”

The fake Cecilus never stopped laughing, as he slapped and stomped his feet on the spot.

Despite the fake Cecilus’s uproarious laughter pouring cold water on them, Subaru’s words of rejection to Gustav had not wore away.

Gustav: “Schwartz, as the official, I have warned you and punished you for not recanting your comments. Furthermore, I have given you another chance to rectify your attitude, yet you still possess no intention of doing so?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, I don’t hate you or anything, Gustav-san. It’s the Empire I hate.”

Gustav: “In my capacity, I do not possess the right to twist your subjective opinion about liking or disliking individuals.”

Implication was, Gustav had stated he did not care if he was disliked, but it was true that Subaru did not dislike Gustav. Subaru did not know him well enough to decide whether he liked or disliked him.

To make a decision about someone based on first impressions would be such a ridiculous decision.

Subaru: “That is, unless they kiss the hand of a girl I like of course.”

Gustav: “—?”

Subaru: “I was talking to myself, about someone completely unrelated to this.”

Subaru glanced at Gustav, regretting the words that came out of his mouth so suddenly.

From Gustav’s point of view, Subaru must have been the most troublesome child to deal with. Even though he had sent Subaru to Sparka under the guise of punishment, Subaru had not shown any repentance.

Gustav had certainly realized that Subaru had not taken it as punishment.

And if that were to happen—

Subaru: “Will you actually reprimand me, aside from warning and punishing me? Gustav-san.”

Gustav: “—. If you do not recant your opinion, at worst, I, in my capacity, am compelled to do so in accordance with the power vested in me, as the official.”

Subaru: “I, see… Then, why don’t you do it?”

Gustav: “…”

Tilting his head, Subaru replied to Gustav as if it were nothing.

Hearing Subaru’s words, Gustav’s expression shifted slightly. It was not the action of wrinkling his brow, nor of rubbing it, but rather, his cheeks stiffened.

It was not that he was pondering it over, but it was rather the reaction of one who had been hit in a sore spot.

Subaru: “You can use it to punish me, the curse rule that’s been put on all the gladiators on the Island. I’m a cheeky brat who doesn’t do as he is told at all, and Gustav-san’s the Governor here, so making an example out of me should be perfectly acceptable. You can do it. But…”

Gustav: “…”

Subaru: “Gustav-san, you won’t do it. —No, I don’t think you can do it.”

There was no rebuttal from Gustav, who was thrust into silence.

Subaru probed for what the silence meant, as he continued with his thoughts.

The curse rule was the main reason why the gladiators of the Island were afraid and restricted in their actions.

The gladiators, having been inscribed with the curse mark, could be deprived of their life, at the will of the Governor, Gustav. Subaru suspected that Gustav was unable to utilize that deterrent.

Subaru: “I asked Old Man Null, the geezer gladiator who’s been living here for a long time. He said that, before Gustav-san’s arrival, the Gladiator Island was a lawless place, and more people died from injuries or illnesses. But things have changed a lot since Gustav-san arrived. Fewer people die.”

Gustav: “It is the natural duty of the Chief. To begin with, a gladiator should use their life for the Island’s shows, and they should avoid losing their lives due to other factors as much as possible. Other than shows, the same is true for daily deathmatches. Opportunities are provided to maintain tension and competence, but it is equally important to avoid dying in situations other than the real thing.”

Subaru: “Yeah, Gustav-san wants to prevent the unnecessary loss of gladiators as much as possible. I’ve felt that too, from the days I’ve spent here. Surprisingly, you've got good employee welfare."

Cecilus: "Emplowyi wellfaire, more words I don't know that get my heart racing!"

The fake Cecilus got caught on something in Subaru's questioning, but Subaru was not going to play dictionary.

Even for Subaru, this was a moment most important.

Subaru: "I think the reason deaths are allowed in Sparka is to maintain the quality of the gladiators, and maybe to keep the other gladiators on their toes."

Gustav: "…"

Subaru: "I said it earlier but, once you become a gladiator, the rules here are much more lenient. But, it's not desirable for gladiators to learn to slack off in their lives here. Therefore, they have to participate in Sparka. That makes them more nervous, but also… reassured."

Gustav: "Reassured, how?"

Subaru: "It's relieving that we managed to become gladiators. That's how we're reassured."

To Gustav's question, Subaru answered while clearly looking him in the eye.

When Subaru had thought about the purpose behind Gustav's actions, that was the feeling that seemed correct in more than one way. There was, of course, the possibility of having missed the point, but there was not much to lose by asking.

There would only be something to lose when being laughed at, or when being flatly denied.

Gustav: "…"

But Gustav chose neither; he instead remained silent.

Subaru: "…Gustav-san wants to prevent the gladiators' deaths as much as possible… On the other hand, he doesn't want gladiators to get carried away or become insubordinate. That's why Sparkas are used. When I think about it that way, it just feels right."

Gustav: "Sounds like a reasonable theory. But, it is not reasonable evidence as to why I, as the official, am not activating the curse rule. It is merely your wishful thinking."

Subaru: "There's one more basis for this… Someone who's rebellious and gets carried away, Ceci."

Cecilus: "Huh, what about me?"

Subaru stuck up a thumb and pointed towards his back, prompting the fake Cecilus to widen his eyes at Subaru. When Gustav's eyes glanced in that direction, Subaru nodded broadly.

The fake Cecilus was a cut above the rest of the gladiators in his unruly behavior, including him having openly participated in the discussion between Subaru and Gustav.

Naturally, some sort of warning and punishment should have been given to the fake Cecilus, but that bore no effect on him at all, in a way different from Subaru. If that was the case, it would not be surprising if the fake Cecilus would be punished before Subaru.

Subaru: "And yet, Ceci's safe. Although, it's possible that Ceci's Gustav-san's personal favorite, but that doesn't seem to be the case considering you, Gustav-san."

Gustav: "Quite discerning. As the official, I do not hold any favor towards Segmunt. I am firm in not letting any likes or dislikes reflect in my duties."

Cecilus: "Heyheyhey? Are you telling me that people don't like me? Good grief, sorry for taking center stage everywhere I go."

Subaru: "Your mental strength is too much…"

The fake Cecilus was quite unconcerned in spite of the rather direct accusation. It would be difficult to grow to have his kind of personality without having been that bold.

Regardless, the continued existence of the fake Cecilus was a fairly strong basis for Subaru's theory.

In other words—

Subaru: "Ceci isn't being punished either. I'm as much or more of an eyesore to Gustav-san as Ceci is. On top of that, what do you make of my refusal to do what you just said?"

Gustav: "…"

Subaru: "Do you intend to punish me with the curse rule…? Gustav-san, what will you do?"

Gustav's eyes narrowed subtly in response to Subaru's question.

Gustav, the man of the Multi-Arm Tribe, his four arms atop the desk, had his chin planted on two of them and the other two resting on the desk as if hugging it, while Subaru waited for his answer.

With those statements of his, Subaru's intentions had certainly been conveyed to Gustav.

Telling him to do it, provoking him—that was not what Subaru was doing. Rather, he was trying to confirm.

—That there was no such thing as a "curse rule" that held the gladiators' lives in its hands.

Gustav: "…"

Gustav was intimidating with his stern appearance and oppressive demeanor, but he believed him to be very careful in his management of the Island.

Whatever his intentions in following the instructions of the Emperor were, and despite his appearance, Gustav had managed to govern the gladiators of the Island not by violence, but with rules.

If one were to overcome Sparka and become a gladiator, because of their newfound situation, the gladiators would soften up and not become unruly. And if he were to keep them on their toes by holding Sparkas regularly, making them think that participating in another Sparka was not within their wishes, then he would not have anyone wanting to fall prey to the curse rule that laid ahead of punishment.

With that two-sided safety net, the non-existent curse rule's chain, so to speak, kept the gladiators' feet tied to the ground.

This was Subaru's understanding of the true form of the "curse rule" system that enveloped the Gladiator Island.

And whether this was correct or not, would be revealed by Gustav's subsequent actions.

If he were provoked and the existence of the curse questioned, all the rules that Gustav had laid down would be circumvented.

To prevent this, Subaru would definitely have to be punished by the curse rule.

Gustav: "…"

Subaru continued to stare at Gustav, attempting to discern the answer.

Faced with Subaru's gaze, Gustav remained silent for a while, and then—.

Gustav: "—. I shall punish you. Schwartz, I shall send you to the next Sparka."

—And so, as if giving in, Gustav did not dispossess Subaru of his life.

3

Cecilus: "That did give off the feeling of a complete victory for sure, but how are you feeling, Basu?"

As soon as they left Gustav's office, the fake Cecilus, right next to him, inquired that of him.

Seeing that carefree attitude, Subaru let out a big sigh.

Subaru: “What are you saying? Are you my enemy, Ceci? Or my ally?”

Cecilus: “Gosh, that’s an odd question. I’m the one who went to the trouble of pulling you and the deergirl out of the lake, remember? Considering that you and your companion might’ve died had I not been there, doesn’t it make my position obvious?”

Subaru: “Yeah, sure. Well, are you my enemy? Or my ally?”

Cecilus: “Which of the two do you think is more interesting?”

Subaru asked once more, paying no attention to his long, useless monologue, to which the fake Cecilus answered with a question.

It was a flippant question, making Subaru feel annoyed for a moment, but it possessed a wholly different tenor in comparison from his stare-down against Gustav.

The exchange with Gustav had been a critical turning point that could make a big difference going forward.

But, the question of the fake Cecilus was—

Subaru: “It doesn’t matter which one I say, Ceci’ll decide according to his mood at the time.”

Cecilus: “Spot on. By the way, I’ll say I’m leaning toward your side at this point. For now, my intuition’s whispering to me that it’d be more interesting to watch Basu’s bizarre activities. However, even I can’t trust my mood, so do be plenty cautious.”

Subaru: “I’d like you to at least have a good grip on your own steering wheel…”

Rather than simply being a moody person, the fake Cecilus was a very dangerous moody person.

He thought it was amazing how the protagonists of various games and manga chose their party members so well, like they were accompanied by battle freaks and berserkers.

When he thought about it, he had always struggled to select party members ever since he had come to the Empire. Because of that, Subaru felt sorry for himself.

Subaru: “My Emiliase and Beatromin deficiency’s about to reach lethal levels.”

Cecilus: “Hoho, again with the unfamiliar words. Are these also local words from Basu’s hometown?”

Subaru: “More like terms I coined, the dream substances that make up half of my being.”

Like a medicine half made of kindness, to say that half of Subaru’s being was made of affection for his loved ones would be no exaggeration. It was an exaggeration, but he would stand by it.

That was why the dialogue with Gustav earlier had been so significant.

Subaru: “It’s annoying that Ceci was right, but it certainly got the desired response.”

Cecilus: “Joining in the next punishment? Or…”

Subaru: “Naturally, I’m talking about not being killed by the curse rule. As for Sparka… Well, yeah.”

Subaru, against the wishes of His Excellency the Emperor, had publicly declared his intention to escape the Island. Seeing that Gustav had not punished him with its utilization, the invocation of the curse rule was a virtual impossibility—No, Gustav was unable to do such thing.

And because of that confirmation, he was given the punishment of participating in the next Sparka.

Cecilus: “In any case, it’s not a harsh blow for Basu, since he was planning to participate in Sparka anyways.”

Subaru: “I think it’s a bit of an exaggeration to say that I was planning to do it anyway. I wouldn’t want to participate in a scary event like Sparka if I didn’t have to.”

Cecilus: “I see, I see, got it. It’s a stock phrase to liven things up, right?”

Subaru: “It’s not though?!”

Subaru brushed the back of his molar with his tongue as he replied to the fake Cecilus’s unjust suspicion.

Should he attend another Sparka as he had this day, he would still have to rely on the “drug”. It was a depressing thought, but unavoidable.

In any case—

Subaru: “Another plan in my mind’s moved forward. I don’t know how much longer my relationship with Ceci’ll last, but don’t be… No, don’t get in my way.”

Cecilus: “I’ll keep those words in mind as they were spoken after all kinds of struggles. Now, what in the world are you going to do, Basu…?”

Subaru: “—?”

During this talk of theirs, Subaru and the fake Cecilus were descending to the living quarters where gladiators were gathered. Subaru’s eyes widened at the sound of the fake Cecilus’s strange remark, and he turned his head to look in the direction he was looking—

???: “—Schwartz-sama.”

The one to call out to Subaru, while standing at the end of the group that occupied the table in the middle of the hall, was Tanza.

In the hall where Subaru and the fake Cecilus had arrived, in the area for meals, the largest number of gladiators he had ever seen was present. And in their center, were the members of Subaru's Unit.

It seemed strange that the antisocial Weitz, the socially anxious Idra, and the reserved Tanza would be there. That Hiain, loud and full of false bravado as he was, was there was not so strange, though.

But what surprised Subaru more than the unexpectedness of such a line-up was the fact that—

Subaru: "Uhh, what's wrong with everyone? Everything got quiet all of a sudden."

Scratching his cheek, Subaru so asked of the people in the hall, wearing a forced smile.

For some reason, as soon as Subaru and the fake Cecilus entered the room, everyone went quiet and stared intently as if they were scrutinizing them.

Everyone: "…"

Keeping silent, they steadily observed Subaru and Cecilus—No, they observed Subaru.

That was the first thing that made him uncomfortable. He could understand the reason for their reaction if they had seen the fake Cecilus and sank into silence.

Because the fake Cecilus was a creepy brat, feared and hated by the gladiators.

However, it was not the fake Cecilus they were looking at, but Subaru.

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama, we have been awaiting your return."

Then, Tanza slowly approached Subaru, still puzzled over their reaction.

Her polite words made Subaru's skin crawl, as he responded "Oh, yeah". Even though Tanza's polite way of speaking was normal for her, for some reason there was a pervading feeling of tension.

Or rather, it was not Subaru and Tanza who were brimming with tension, but the atmosphere of the entire hall. The room was ill at ease, and that sense unconsciously made him choke up.

Subaru: "You said you were waiting for me to come back… Oh, you were wondering why Gustav-san called me, right? Sorry to worry you. It went fine and…"

Tanza: "No, that is inconsequential."

Subaru: "Inconsequential?!"

Tanza: "—More importantly…"

Subaru was surprised to be cut off so quickly, but was silenced by Tanza, who quickly approached him. He recoiled with an "Oof" at how forceful she had been, only to be caught from behind by the fake Cecilus.

Taking a look, Subaru saw that the fake Cecilus, who seemed as cheery as ever, had blocked his escape route, his face one that conveyed that his head was empty of thoughts. It pissed Subaru off.

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama, I have a question I would like to ask you. Would you please answer?"

Subaru: "O-ouh, um, yes, sure. If it's something I can answer…"

Tanza: "—Schwartz-sama, about your father."

Subaru: "…About my dad?"

Tanza posed him a question with a meek look on her face, and Subaru frowned, not understanding what she meant.

Tanza had come to Subaru with such momentum, putting on such important airs, querying him about his father. What was more, it seemed that the question was not being raised by Tanza, and only

Tanza.

Subaru: “…”

The heat in the gazes of the gladiators staring at Subaru was growing stronger.

Hiain, Weitz, Idra, and naturally the other gladiators too, were all holding their breath, seemingly paying undue attention to what Subaru would reply with to Tanza’s question.

None of it made any sense to him at all.

However—

Subaru: “Just so you know, if I tell you about my dad, it’ll be a long story, okay?”

Tanza: “Please try to be brief.”

Subaru: “You asked and then you put a condition on it?! Huh, come on, already!”

Scratching his head in a rough way, Subaru sullenly grumbled, “Ugh~”. But that sort of attitude did nothing to divert Tanza and the others’ interest.

Subaru did not understand why the topic of telling them about his father was brought up, but.

Subaru: “My dad’s my idol. He’s super cool, loads of people love him, and he’s always at the center of everyone’s attention. What can I say, he’s got charisma… Like he was born with the disposition of a natural leader, he’s amazing.”

Tanza: “—! Always at the center of a great number of people…”

Subaru: “He’s got a lot of people depending on him, and his work seems tough too, but he always has time for me and he teaches me a lot of things… I, you know, I respect him a whole lot. He’s super cool.”

Tanza: “…”

As he spoke, the face of his father, the face of his mother, the face of those who loved him came to mind.

Subaru felt a sudden surge of warmth behind his eyes and clutched at his chest. Now that he was in this other world, it was both joyful and very painful to remember the two of them.

But, as painful as it was, his cherished parents were the pillars that supported Subaru’s core to this day.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, that is…”

Subaru: “Yeah…”

Tanza hesitated for a moment before saying her next words, perhaps taking what she had been in Subaru’s expression into consideration.

But, having said all this, Subaru would not be offended no matter what Tanza asked him. Thinking this, Subaru waited for Tanza’s next words, and after waiting for a while, Tanza said—

Tanza: “Your father’s name, what is it?”

Subaru: “It’s…”

Subaru tried to answer Tanza’s question, but hesitated.

With a sentimental feeling, Subaru tried to answer “Natsuki Kenichi” as usual, but this would have been a bit complicated. Since Subaru was known as “Natsuki Schwartz” on the Gladiator Island, the combination of his family name and his first name was reversed.

On the other hand, telling them another name, such as “Kenichi Schwartz”, would have added to the complications, with little benefit.

So, Subaru wavered for a moment and then said—

Subaru: “Sorry. I can’t tell you my dad’s name.”

Tanza: "—Hk."

Subaru: "Tanza?"

The moment Subaru replied, Tanza's expression stiffened in plain sight.

Her eyes were wide and wavering, and her round cheeks were tense and tight. And, though he was surprised by Tanza's reaction in front of him, that was not the only one—

Weitz: "Seems it's no joke, apparently…"

Idra: "Is it possible? Well, no, but it was that conduct that led us here."

Hiain: "S-see, I told'cha! How 'bout that, am I still crazy? Well, oi!"

The gladiators in the hall, with the members of Subaru's Unit at the helm, began to make a commotion all at once.

Their mutual exchanges of glances, and their noisy chatter brought great puzzlement to Subaru. What could be the reason as to why everyone was so surprised?

Subaru: "Umm, guys?"

Everyone: "—!"

The commotion receded as soon as Subaru called out to them.

Subaru felt a pang of loneliness there and then—

Weitz: "Schwartz, whoever ya are, we're not gonna think any different of ya…"

And so, Weitz was the first to speak to the anxious-looking Subaru.

Weitz donned scary-looking tattoos on his face and all over his body, but the words he said were out of concern for Subaru, and were probably meant to reassure him.

Idra: "I-I agree. I mean, I have come to a point of understanding.

I'm more than ready to cooperate with you… Schwartz."

Hiain: "Yeah yeah, that's right! What's the matter with'cha bastards! He ain't any different! He's a gladiator just like us, he's my bro!"

Following Weitz's words, Idra thumped his own chest, and Hiain, running up to him, put his arm around Subaru's shoulders and turned back to the gladiators as he spoke.

Idra aside, Hiain's behavior had even Subaru bewildered, but—.

???: "—Right! Great kid, that Schwartz!"

???: "I knew ya weren't some run-of-the-mill guy! That's the only way ta explain it!"

???: "Yes, the guidance of the Sword Wolf we serve! Thank you for this day's charities and fortune!"

Triggered by the words of the three members of his Unit, the silent gladiators erupted in cheers.

The voices echoing through the hall were so loud that they sounded as if they might shake the entire Gladiator Island, and Subaru's amazement intensified as they went round and round.

But before he could fully process the surprise, Subaru was being vigorously pushed by Hiain.

Hiain: "Heyhey, we haven't even finished celebratin' today's Sparka yet! Ya're the one who made the big splash this time, so make some noise, bro!"

Weitz: "Hiain, yer totally self-interested?!"

Hiain: "S'all good ain't it, come on, open up a seat for bro! Bring meat and drink!"

Pushed by Hiain, wearing a big, undignified smile, Subaru was crammed into the middle of the large crowd of gladiators.

Orson and his teammates, with whom he had fought together in today's Sparka, having returned from the healing room, were present, raising a modest toast and welcoming Subaru's arrival.

Orson: "Thank ya so much for today, Schwartz. —It was good ya were with us."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru choked on the words in his throat as he was greeted by teary-eyed lizardmen.

There was a mountain of things he wanted to say and questions he had, but the words exchanged at this moment were more than enough to reward Subaru for taking on that Sparka.

Subaru: "Thanks for saving me, too."

And so, for the first time in three days, he shared with them the bone-in-meat that was brought out, one after another.

4

Cecilus: "—Miss, aren't you going to make a racket with them?"

Tanza: "…My position is complicated."

Whilst looking over the crowd of people noisily clamoring together, Tanza mixed in a sigh with her reply to the boy who was talking to her.

A boy who looked exactly like a person she knew, with the exception of his height and the length of his limbs. She was hesitant to express her feelings to him, unknowing of how much he knew about the situation.

Naturally, that was regarding the black-haired boy's surprising identity which Hiain had brought about, but also about the complex feelings Tanza had when facing that person.

Tanza: "Yorna-sama…"

As she joined her hands together with her kimono, Tanza thought of her beloved master.

And then, with the wish Yorna harbored, the personage not unrelated to that wish, and the boy seemingly not unrelated to that person, it all kept being churned around and around, chaotically.

Only, if there was something she wanted say clearly—

Tanza: “—I have no other way but to rely on Schwartz-sama.”

Was it really okay for her to believe that? Those doubts had been removed, at least that much was true.

Even if she did not know how far they could go together, after all that.

Cecilus: “I see, your expression truly is a complicated one of being at a loss, there’s indeed a sorrow afloat, isn’t there.”

Tanza: “…”

Cecilus: “Oh dear, Basu sure is a guilty guy too, isn’t he! Well, well, however.”

She glimpsed the boy beside her, bereft of any regard to her feelings, smiling brightly out of the corner of his mouth. But, that smile appeared to be more ominous than any smile the boy had shown until now.

Tanza felt a faint shudder as she listened to the boy’s next words.

Those were—

Cecilus: “—If things don’t start moving soon, my patience’s probably going to run out. Just kidding!”

Chapter 69:
Arriving from the Imperial Capital

1

—It was hard to decide which should be considered the main event between the second Sparka and the subsequent grand banquet, but three days had passed since both had occurred.

During that time, nothing of note happened on the Gladiator Island.

What had also been an anticlimax to Subaru was that there had been no third Sparka to welcome new gladiator candidates from the outside, and none of the usual deathmatches were organized.

The usual deathmatches were a preparation for the shows, a kind of practice match so the gladiators did not lose their strength.

However, even though they were just practice matches, there was still an invariance in that it was quite possible for those who lost their focus to end up as corpses, and there were also dangerous people who were capable of producing corpses regardless of whether or not they lost their focus.

And different from the Sparka, even if he received a punishment in relation to those deathmatches, since it seemed difficult for Subaru to interfere, it would be a great help.

Hiain: “The guards’re gettin’ awfully on edge. Well, guess they’re just scared of ya bro, and us as well, ain’t that right?”

Those were Hiain’s words, who had been interpreting the atmosphere of Gladiator Island for the past few days as feeling good.

It seemed as though this lizardman was very happy that his friends had been saved during that second Sparka, and since then, his friendliness toward Subaru had risen to a different league.

It had been Subaru who had called him a bro first, but he was treated like a bro by him as well.

Subaru: “Well, I don’t feel bad in the slightest.”

Despite being stunned by his self-centered personality, Subaru warmly welcomed Hiain’s attitude.

It would be more comfortable for everyone to get along peacefully, rather than have everyone on edge. The softening of Hiain’s attitude had been very striking, but there had been a change in Weitz’s and Idra’s attitudes as well.

Weitz had substantial trust in him, and Idra displayed some vague respect; that, was how they had been treating Subaru.

And that change in attitude was spreading to the gladiators on the Island in a positive way.

So then—

???: “Yo, Schwartz, ya got a good look in yer eyes today!”

???: “Ya’re overflowin’ with fightin’ spirit!”

???: “The guards really deplore ya. At this rate, they’ll lose all their Gladiator Beasts!”

The number of people who talked to Subaru in such a cheerful and friendly manner had increased tremendously.

His impression concerning this had been the same it had been as towards Hiain, so Subaru gave it a warm welcome. With the people he could talk to being as many as possible, it was easier for Subaru to gather the information he needed.

For now, the present situation was such that Subaru could forget about Gustav’s “curse rule”, since the information that Subaru wanted the most was—

Subaru: “—The control tower for the drawbridge.”

The sole means connecting the Island to the outside. How could he operate the dropbridge and enter the control tower?

Right now, that information was what Subaru desired most.

Subaru: “The control tower itself’s in plain view of everyone, but it seems like you can’t get inside…”

The control tower itself stood proudly on the island side, in the vicinity of the drawbridge.

There weren’t any guards posted at all, but the entrance was secured with a very impressive lock, and it was impossible to open the large metal door without obtaining the key.

Over the last few days, they had been trying to locate the key, but since Gustav apparently operated the drawbridge himself, it was very likely that the key was on his person.

Subaru: “Ummm, we’d stand little chance squaring up against Gustav-san.”

As a matter of fact, Gustav’s strength was quite unknown even to Subaru.

In appearance, he was equipped with four arms, after all. Besides, he had been entrusted with the management of the Gladiator Island, and given his position, that of ruling over the rough-and-tumble gladiators, there was no way he was weak.

Of course, if they fought one time, he could assess if Gustav was strong or weak, but—.

Subaru: “I don’t want to aggravate Gustav-san in the first place…”

From his standpoint, Subaru and Gustav had a confrontational relationship as a gladiator and Chief, but Subaru personally did not dislike Gustav.

In fact, in the Empire, where many people were rather difficult to talk to, he had never once raised his voice to Subaru. So, his impression of Gustav was that he was a valuable person whom he could have a proper talk with.

At least, it was much better than the fake Cecilus, who hovered on the border between friend and foe.

So, the ideal course of action would be to sneak in and steal the key from Gustav.

Subaru: “However, I don’t want to be hanging around Gustav-san’s side like Ceci.”

Now that the curse rule was no longer binding him, it seemed that Gustav, who was faithful to his duties, was no longer a danger to Subaru in a sense. Even so, Subaru was not as brazen as to be careless enough to go around openly looking for or asking about the whereabouts of the key.

The worst-case scenario for Subaru was that Gustav would find Subaru a nuisance, lock him up somewhere on the Island, and prevent him from doing anything.

If that came to pass, Subaru would have to fall back on the last resort behind his molar.

So then—

Subaru: “We’ll just have to keep investigating little-by-little.”

Scratching his head, Subaru grumbled as his lips pursed at the challenges that lay ahead.

In order to get information about the drawbridge, Subaru was investigating the people in control—in other words, the guards watching over the gladiators.

The guards who followed Gustav at the top were fewer in number than the gladiators on the Island, but their presence gave the impression that they were strong Imperial Soldiers, with little room for weakness or vulnerability.

Gustav’s guidance and instructions seemed to be so thorough, that even if the child Subaru attempted to talk to them, the guards would become more alert, rather than relax their guard. Perhaps this was due to the precedent set by the fake Cecilus, a child even less lovable than Subaru.

Either way, it was very difficult to get information from the guards.

Whether Gustav had also conveyed information on what Subaru was up to or not, wherever he was, their stern gazes would be directed at him, so perhaps he had made a bit of a mistake.

Although he had been trying to get to the bottom of the curse rule, it had caused Gustav to become alarmed.

Subaru: “If I had been punished for a different reason than that… Nah, no use in saying it.”

While reflection was important, nothing of value came forth from regret.

Regret was only what he wanted to do. Unfortunately, Subaru had no time to feel sorry for his own stupidity. No minute or second should be wasted.

If one guard gave him the cold shoulder, he would only have to tackle tens, hundreds of others.

Subaru: “Right, a great man once said that picking up girls is all about the amount. Even though I’m not picking up girls.”

With his fists clenched, Subaru referenced the words of the pros in different disciplines to help him regain his bearings.

And with that, walking about the Island briskly to make the guards in some other area hate him,

???: “Yer a restless guy, Schwartz…”

Subaru: “What, Weitz?”

Speaking in a low voice to Subaru as he walked around looking for the guards, was Weitz.

Seeing Weitz sitting on the ground, leaned against a wall, Subaru tilted his head. Their location was near the passageway connecting to the gladiatorial arena. However, the gladiatorial arena was not accessible outside of Sparka or on the occasion of a deathmatch, so an iron gate was lowered in the corridor.

In other words, this day was filled with nothing but dead-ends.

Subaru: “What are you doing in a place like this? Hide-and-seek?”

Weitz: “I dunno what that is, but prolly not… I came to see what’s going on in the basement, for a tad…”

Subaru: “Basement… Oh, over there.”

Weitz jerked his chin, and Subaru turned to glance in that direction.

Right next to the passageway to the gladiatorial arena, there was a door connecting to the basement of the Island. As per his knowledge, the Island floated atop a lake, so the basement did not lead anywhere.

Rather, it was more-or-less connected to the outside world, however —

Subaru: “It’s just a direct connection to the lake, so its purpose is to dump the bodies, they said.”

Weitz: “Gladiators and Gladiator Beasts that die in the deathmatches… They’re lumped together… If we’d lost, we would’ve been fish food in the same way…”

Subaru: “That gives me the shudders.”

By fish food, he was talking about the aquatic Witchbeasts that inhabited the lake.

Rather savage ones were loose there seemingly; the most common causes of death on Gladiator Island were deathmatches, but the second most common cause of death was falling prey to the Witchbeasts, whether by accident or by trying to escape.

Subaru, too, would become no more than fodder for those Witchbeasts were he unable to utilize the drawbridge.

Weitz: "Have ya heard… the story of the gladiator who escaped from the Island, in the past…?"

Subaru: "Huh? Oh, yeah, I heard. I heard it was because of what happened with that person, the previous Chief was fired, and Gustav-san was chosen as the new Chief."

Weitz: "Those poor conditions've improved… but now, the position of gladiator's become stable… What do ya think…?"

Subaru: "What do I think…?"

Weitz: "Should we… resign ourselves to the position of gladiator, to the position of being ruled over…?"

Subaru: "…"

Weitz's words made Subaru check to see if anyone was nearby on reflex.

Weitz's statement just now had been quite out-of-line for a gladiator of the Gladiator Island. If a guard with poor character were to hear it, it would be enough of an excuse to give him a warning.

Regardless, Weitz would probably be looked upon more harshly than other gladiators because he was in the same Unit as Subaru.

Subaru: "Uhh, Weitz, I think you shouldn't be too careless about what you say. It's fine with me, but I wonder what other people might think about it."

At that, Subaru tried to correct Weitz's thinking.

If it were only Subaru getting caught up in the next Sparka, there would be ways to deal with the situation. However, if Weitz were to be added to the mix, the level of difficulty would rise dramatically.

But, in response to Subaru's thoughts, "Schwartz…" Weitz continued, Weitz: "Why do ya think I went to the basement… It's so I can help ya…"

Subaru: "—Uh."

Weitz: "Ya intend on getting outta here… And, and I'm also going with'cha… I'm not gonna stay here as a gladiator… I owe ya a debt, too…"

While saying that, Weitz slowly rose to his feet.

Then, on his tattoo-covered face, he directed earnest eyes toward Subaru. Being gazed at intently by those eyes, Subaru gulped and stiffened up.

The atmosphere was not one to be making jokes about, or to deceive someone.

Subaru: "Weitz, I…"

Weitz: "I know who ya are…"

Subaru: "Huh?"

Weitz: "But, that ain't the point… Don't get me confused with Hiain and his sweet-talking… I ain't interested in the crown ya wear… I just wanna lend ya my strength. Remember that…"

The hairs on Subaru's body stood on end upon those words of Weitz, saying that he knew his true identity. But what Weitz said after that, made Subaru's whole body go numb. Even if Subaru was a nobody, Weitz had stated he would pay his debt, and lend him his strength.

That is, that is extremely—

Subaru: "…Reassuring, Weitz."

Weitz: "Hm…"

When Subaru gave a thumbs-up and laughed, Weitz looked away and sniffed his nose. Subaru took this not-at-all honest reaction in good humor, as it was typical of Weitz.

The reason why Weitz had come to explore the underground had been to find a way to operate the drawbridge—to help out Subaru, who was searching for a way to escape outside.

In the end, there was nothing of that sort here, and as expected, there was no way to leave aside from the drawbridge, and so it seemed the conclusion was for them to return to their original method.

Then, something happened at the moment Subaru reached that conclusion.

Subaru: "—Hk, this shaking!"

Weitz: "Is it the drawbridge…"

As a tremor seemed to shake from below the earth, and a low sound shakily resounded, Subaru and Weitz exchanged glances, having reached the same conclusion.

There were only two possible options for a big mechanism that could shake the entire Gladiator Island, those being the gladiatorial arena and the drawbridge. And, since the passage leading to the gladiatorial arena was already closed off in Subaru and Weitz's vicinity, the drawbridge was the only natural candidate.

Subaru: "Another new group of people…"

For people to arrive meant that the next Sparka would also begin.

Weitz looked at Subaru, who muttered to himself while experiencing a thirst in his mouth. Receiving Weitz's gaze, Subaru displayed a smile.

As if to reassure him that there was nothing to worry about.

Subaru: "—. Let's go take a look…"

Whether his smile had bore any effect or not, and how Weitz felt, it was impossible to tell, as the latter turned his back on him. But, following behind a Weitz who spoke scant words, him and Subaru ascended from the lower stratum of the Island to the middle stratum, and then to the high ground overlooking the drawbridge.

Subaru: “It’d be nice to see the entrance to the tower open and close if possible, though…”

???: “Schwartz-sama, over here.”

Subaru: “Tanza.”

A young girl’s voice called out to Subaru, as he wiped the sweat from his chin, short of breath as he rushed up the stairs. Tanza, who had reached the high ground earlier, waved her hand, and Subaru and Weitz joined her.

While Tanza was taking notice of Weitz,

Tanza: “It seems you were with Weitz-sama.”

Subaru: “We happened to meet downstairs and had an embarrassing conversation… What about you Tanza?”

Tanza: “…I was examining the tower. As expected, it seems that the key is in Gustav-sama’s possession.”

Subaru: “Ugh, I knew it.”

Tanza also knew that it was necessary to operate the drawbridge in order to escape the Island. Since they also both knew about the curse rule, the two children were conspiring to get off the Island together.

However, right then was when Weitz suddenly interjected,

Weitz: “If ya wanna take the key away… Should we fight with numbers…?”

Subaru: “That plan is awfully shortsighted! Most likely, you’ll get hit by the curse rule if you try something so reckless.”

Tanza: “—Huh.”

Weitz: “That’s right…”

Weitz’s shortsighted suggestion was dissuaded by Subaru using the curse rule as a pretext.

Hearing this, Tanza’s eyes widened, so Subaru put a finger to her mouth to quiet her.

The truth that there was actually no curse rule, was something he had yet to confide in anyone other than Tanza. Of course, the fake Cecilus who happened to be present in that place also knew, but on the other hand, the fake Cecilus had no friends to talk to about it with, so there were no concerns about the information spreading.

However, Subaru believed that this was a truth that would be very frightening to spread.

Subaru: “Part of the reason why the gladiators are so behaved is because of the curse rule.”

There were no major complaints about their treatment, since there was a curse rule which if disobeyed, would cost them their lives.

That was the reason the gladiators in Ginunhive were ruled so obediently by Gustav. If it turned out that there was no curse rule, people who thought similarly to Weitz would emerge.

Should that happen, an all-out war would begin between the gladiator side and the administration side.

In terms of numbers, despite the casualties, the gladiator side would perhaps win, however—.

Subaru: “Every guard’s got a Witchbeast with a broken horn, so they can deal a ton of damage.”

Not only were the Gladiator Island’s guards themselves strong, but the fact that they were accompanied by Witchbeasts was also a troublesome aspect of the guards.

Since all the Gladiator Beasts used in Sparka were Witchbeasts kept by the guards, there were still many more like the lion and rat, which Subaru and the others had found difficult to defeat.

That was why, they would be in trouble if Weitz were to become impatient at this juncture.

Tanza: “It seems to me, however, that it is not very practical to wait until Schwartz-sama has defeated all the Gladiator Beasts in Sparka.”

Subaru: “That’s just as reckless as it sounds… First of all, if the Gladiator Beasts were replenished, my spirit would be broken. I’m not planning that kind of strategy.”

Tanza: “If that is the case…”

Subaru: “I’ve been considering a lot of things, so don’t worry. You don’t have to believe me, but please trust my feelings that there are people I definitely want to see.”

Understanding that the secret was to be kept from Weitz, Tanza kept silent after Subaru said that. She slightly cast her eyes down, then continued, “Those that you wish to see”,

Tanza: “Are they, your family?”

Subaru: “Hmm? Well, they’re people as important to me as family, and there’s even a girl I like.”

Subaru replied to the slightly delayed question with a tilt of his head.

Having heard that, Tanza’s lips still moved as if she wanted to say something. Although, before she could say anything, Weitz pointed to the drawbridge below, saying, “Look…”.

From their side and the side over yonder, from both ends the drawbridge was activated, and the new residents of the Gladiator Island would be coming this way.

Subaru: “What kind of people will these new arrivals be…? Surely they aren’t Weitz’s or Idra’s acquaintances this time.”

Weitz: “Anyone who knows my face, I’d be fine with them all dying…”

Subaru: “Please don’t say such scary and lonely—”

Things, just as he tried to say that, he saw a carriage coming across the drawbridge, clearly.

The carriage was pulled by an armored black Galewind Horse, but there was something a little different about it from the one three days earlier, the difference being in how docile the people riding in the carriage were.

Last time, Hiain’s friends, Orson and the others, seemed to be riding obediently in the carriage, but the people this time were not like that. —Someone was standing on the roof of the carriage.

On the roof of the swaying carriage, with brown skin, was a slender-bodied woman—.

Subaru: “—Hk?!”

As soon as Subaru saw that face and the distinctive features of her appearance, he stifled a scream in the back of his throat, and hurriedly crouched down in place. Hiding behind the railing, he made his body smaller.

His heart was beating at a tremendous rate and the sound of blood pumping through his head was explosive.

Tanza: “S-Schwartz-sama? Is there something wrong, being like that all of a sudden…”

Subaru: “Tha…”

Tanza: “Tha?”

Subaru: “That, woman… is bad news.”

Next to Subaru as he crouched, Tanza, having similarly crouched down, widened her eyes.

But, Subaru could not afford to be concerned about Tanza's surprise.

Weitz: "Woman… That woman…?"

Hearing Subaru's mutterings, Weitz, leaning against the railing, looked toward the drawbridge. Even Weitz's eyes seemed to see the person on the roof of the incoming carriage.

Weitz did not seem to know who the woman was, but Subaru was aware of her identity. And being aware of that, he thought it was the worst possible time for her to be there.

That carriage, or at least the woman on the roof, was not a candidate for the next Sparka.

After all, the identity of that woman was—

Subaru: "—The name doesn't come to mind quickly, but she's a Divine General."

Because, she was an overwhelmingly strong woman, donning silver hair and an eyepatch, someone who had gone on a rampage in Guaral before.

2

???: "The visitors this time aren't gladiators, but apparently messengers from the Imperial Capital."

That, had been Idra's report, which he had heard leak from a guard.

Subaru and his comrades had been watching the arrival of the carriages from a vantage point, but the shock brought on by the woman on the roof—by that transcendent enemy, was too great.

???: "That woman noticed me and looked this way…"

Next to Subaru, who had immediately crouched down, Weitz, watching the carriage finish crossing the drawbridge in his stead, had his voice tremble upon witnessing something unbelievable.

Their impression was that they were a hundred meters away, but to feel a gaze, even from there, was monstrous. Subaru was right to squat, since she had looked in Weitz's direction, per his own words.

Of course, even if she were to look at Subaru now, she would probably not recognize him.

Tanza: "Half-dogperson, Divine General… In all likelihood, she is General First-Class Arakiya, I am certain."

???: “Ya also know her, Tanza?”

Tanza: “…She is one of the people who previously targeted Yorna-sama of Chaosflame. I did not see it with my own eyes, but I heard that she covered an entire city block in flames.”

???: “Y-ya’re just makin’ a tasteless joke. Right?”

Hiain tried to laugh off the seriousness in Tanza’s voice. But, there was no one present who could laugh it off.

Subaru, in particular, had received a considerable impact.

Subaru: “Guys who are just plain strong are usually the most troublesome for me.”

Subaru had a chance to win if there was an opening to be taken advantage of, or if the opponent could be managed with a little ingenuity.

However, when it came to opponents with simply too big of a gap in ability, he would be out of strategies. They were strong, after all. Cheap tricks did not work on strong opponents.

It was the privilege of a strong person to trample upon all his preparations.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, please do not be too pessimistic. Since she is a messenger from the Imperial Capital, it should not mean that there will be anything happening involving us. To declare them as an enemy now is…”

Subaru: “Too premature, huh. Yeah, yes, that makes sense. That totally tracks, but…”

Tanza: “…”

Subaru: “I can’t help but think of the worst-case scenario… You get me?”

Hugging his thin arms, Subaru answered that to Tanza who had encouraged him.

He appreciated Tanza's sentiment, and he was sure that she did not want to make enemies of the Nine Divine Generals herself. To put it mildly, Arakiya was as strong, if not stronger, than Yorna.

Being trapped on an Island like this, Subaru felt that he could not fight against such an opponent at the top-level of strength.

Hiain: "B-but why're ya so worried, bro? If that party came from the Imperial Capital…"

Idra: "Hiain, don't you get it? Right now, the Empire's split in two."

Hiain: "Huh? Ah, ahh! Damnit, so that's it…!"

Besides Subaru, who was deep in thought, Hiain and Idra were also discussing with serious expressions.

Subaru did not quite understand the flow of their conversation, but he did not have time to worry about it.

In fact, it was more likely that Subaru was overthinking it.

Subaru: "At the moment, I don't think that Tanza or I are that woman's…"

Tanza: "General First-Class Arakiya."

Subaru: "Arakiya's objective."

Even if Subaru and his comrades were somewhat conspicuous on the Island, it was unlikely that they were well-known outside it. And even if they were, it would be him, in this form.

It would be unreasonable for that to be considered a problem. Even if Olbart would want to do something about Abel, he could not think of any reason for Olbart to care about Subaru or Tanza.

Tanza: "So, for what purpose did a messenger come from the Imperial Capital to the Island?"

Weitz: “Thinking ’bout it… Perhaps for the Island’s show…?”

Tanza: “Show… That is the original purposeof the Gladiator Island.”

Weitz and Tanza came up with a possible reason for Arakiya’s visit.

The Island’s shows, the original role of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, was to make a spectacle of deathmatches between gladiators for spectators who hailed from other places.

It was an event in poor taste, but Subaru had heard that it helped to curb the fearsome desires of the people of the Empire.

Hiain: “If we have a show, a-are they gonna make us fight again…? But, with the rebellion happenin’ and all the panic everywhere, why’d they do it at a time like this?”

Idra: “There’s also the idea that it’d be precisely because times are like that. The purpose is to enforce the thought that the people of the Empire must be strong, in a situation where the Empire’s shaking…”

Weitz: “His Excellency the Emperor’s thoughts, huh…”

With Hiain’s voice cracking, Idra’s persuasive thoughts, and Weitz’s grave mutterings, the eyes of each one of them turned towards Subaru.

It was as if they were expecting Subaru to know the answer, but Subaru did not have the answer either. Subaru had no choice but to shake his head.

Subaru: “I think both Hiain’s and Idra’s ideas are possible. But…”

Weitz: “But?”

Subaru: “I wonder if the Emperor really cares about this place…”

Subaru already knew that the Emperor, who was giving orders in the Imperial Capital, was a fake.

Real and fake were both in Chaosflame, and since there was a rebellion going on, it was unlikely that Abel had returned without Subaru's knowledge.

So, as designation was that they were from the Imperial Capital, it had to be the fake Emperor's idea. It was hard to believe that Vincent, the fake Emperor who could devise a plan virtually as good as Abel's, would waste his time and energy on useless things.

Subaru: "There has to be a reason for this, absolutely."

What reason would they, and not the Abel who was supposed to be the real Emperor, possess, to send a Divine General to this lake Island stranded from the entire world.

Tanza: "General First-Class Arakiya, she did not barge in with a large group of people, did she?"

Subaru: "Yeah…"

Tanza: "I only saw it from a distance too, but it was a single carriage that came. There were at most five or six people. The only one that stood out was the General First-Class."

Subaru: "Is… that so?"

Eyes downcast, Tanza stumbled over the same thing as Subaru, not knowing what the other party was up to.

One could say that they were overthinking things and that they should just keep their heads down and wait for the storm to pass. That could also be a way to see it.

Weitz: "How 'bout, if ya think 'bout it the other way 'round… Hide in the carriage that the messenger rode in, and leave the Island…"

Subaru: "The hiding in the carriage bit, I believe that was already done back in Chaosflame."

Tanza: "I would be fine with the same method, as long as it works more than once…"

Weitz's suggestion was taken seriously by Subaru and Tanza. But

Hiain, who was listening to the three of them, said in a loud voice, “Wait, wait, wait!”.

The gray-scaled lizardman made them turn to him with his loud voice and,

Hiain: “Are ya seriously thinkin’ ’bout leavin’ the Island? Are ya nuts?! Ya’re gonna die!”

Weitz: “If ya stay here, ya’ll eventually die fighting something, idiot…”

Hiain: “But not today or tomorrow!! Schwartz… Bro, I need ya!”

Subaru: “I don’t intend to stay here forever, either. I mean, I don’t want to stay forever.”

Hiain quivered as his big mouth, lined with tiny fangs, gasped at Subaru’s plan. Perhaps, from Hiain’s point-of-view, he would be more comfortable living on the island than out there.

It was not an overstatement to say that, once someone got over Sparka and became a gladiator, their life was safe outside of deathmatches. It was understandable that one might be tempted to think like that.

Hiain: “Pipsqueak! Idra! Damn ya…”

Tanza: “Like Schwartz-sama, I have my own reasons for not wanting to remain here any longer.”

Idra: “I-I… would get out if I could, is what I think.”

Hiain’s words, who seemed to believe himself in an unfavorable position, received these responses from Tanza and Idra. Despite the differences between positive and reluctant responses, neither of them had positive feelings about the Gladiator Island.

Although, it was hard for Hiain to believe.

Hiain: “Th-There’s a limit to how reckless ya can be with yer life…!”

Subaru: “I’m sorry to put you on the spot, Hiain, but I want you to think about it too. Should you stay here forever?”

Hiain: “…”

Hiain looked at Subaru and the others, his eyes similar to as if he were looking at something terrifying.

But Hiain would know this, were he to think long and hard about it. The peace of mind and safety that they could get here was only a stepping stone, reached only after sacrificing many things.

Hiain: “…Even if ya leave, what are ya gonna do about the curse rule?”

After giving up with his knee-jerk denial, that had been Hiain’s next move.

The unseen chains that bound the gladiators of the Gladiator Island, the main reason why the gladiators still remained there, was something that Weitz too, had mentioned.

That they had already been neutralized, was something he did not want to say until the very end. But, as he remained cautious of that, Hiain continued to doubt Subaru and everyone else’s sanity.

So, Subaru thought to at least make him slacken his caution a little bit.

Subaru: “I’ll do something about the curse rule, too. In fact, I’ve got a hint on how to do it.”

Hiain: “—Hk?! About the curse rule?”

Subaru: “Yeah.”

Subaru nodded with a confident look on his face, indicating that it was not a good idea to waste any more time here.

The answer surprised not only Hiain, but also Weitz and Idra. Only Tanza, who was already aware that there was no curse rule, quietly observed the scene without saying anything.

Subaru could not speak the truth, but his chest puffing out here would aid in dispelling Hiain and the others' fears. Ergo, Subaru could not show a lack of confidence.

Even if Arakiya's objectives as an emissary remained unknown—.

Subaru: "Surely, I'll find a way to get off this island. So—"

When that time comes, I'll need your strength. —Was what he had wanted to say at that time.

But, Subaru did not say those words.

To be more accurate, it no longer made sense to continue them.

Hiain: "—Hk."

There was the sound of a snatched breath escaping, and Hiain collapsed, his eyes bloodshot.

Subaru: "…"

Trembling, slitted-pupil eyes bleeding, Hiain's large body toppled sideways.

Without any forewarning, Subaru was unable to react quickly to such a sudden and unexpected event, and was unable to support Hiain as he collapsed.

Subaru: "H… iain?"

With a heavy thud, Hiain's body fell limp to the floor of the common room. After collapsing, Hiain was motionless. All he did was spasm, his limbs twitching.

It was like a cicada, he thought. Like cicadas in the middle of summer, overturned on the road.

Hiain was dying, moving like a cicada.

—Hiain was not the only one.

Subaru: "…Ah."

There was a sound, light in comparison to the sound of Hiain falling, and Subaru turned around, stunned.

The three who had been talking to Subaru, Idra, Weitz, and Tanza, all lay on the floor, convulsing and trembling in the same way.

Subaru: “Tanza?”

He did not understand a thing. Not a single one, rendering him unable to react.

Crouching right next to the collapsed Tanza, he turned her slumped body over. Tears of blood streamed from Tanza’s eyes while she lay limp, her head slumped over.

Blood was running from her eyes, nose and ears too, dripping onto the floor with a trickle.

Subaru: “Eek!”

And, Subaru’s throat squealed, causing him to drop Tanza’s body.

He rushed to check on the other three. All of them had stopped moving, bleeding from their eyes and noses.

Subaru: “Wh…”

Why, a questioning voice started making a tremendous sound in his head.

Whywhywhy, Subaru’s head was whirling, the ringing in his ears was immensely loud, as his mind was filled with questions as to why and how the scene before him made no sense.

The feeling of his head splitting open was about to engulf Subaru—.

Subaru: “N-no…”

Holding his own head, Subaru looked up.

A sharp, intense pain struck his head, and blood trickled from Subaru’s nose. The ringing in his ears did not stop, and there was also a sensation of blood seeping out.

The sequence of events, was different. Subaru suffered from the same pain as Tanza and the others had, although slower.

He wondered, what the meaning of it was.

Subaru: “This… doesn’t make sense…”

Propping himself up with his hands to the floor and against the wall, Subaru managed to stand up. He got up and went out into the hallway to see what was going on.

Inside the room, Tanza and the others were already beyond hope. And, it was not just Tanza and the others that were beyond hope. Many, many more were.

Subaru: “…”

The adjacent common room, the passageways here and there, the main hall, the drawbridge area, everyone in them had been beyond hope.

With limping feet, flickering eyes, and the contents of his head feeling as if they were melting out of his ears, Subaru, his clothes covered in blood, looked around the Island.

Everyone, was dead. Absolutely everybody, was dead.

They were all dead, bleeding from the eyes, nose, and ears. They were all dead. Dead.

Subaru: “Why?”

So suddenly, the gladiators, the guards, and everyone else had died without any exception.

Everyone, and so suddenly.

Subaru: “Why?”

Everyone was gone. Suddenly, unexpectedly.

Unable to believe it, and unable to accept it, he had no choice but to totter and ask.

To whom, if one may wonder, then to the sky. If not to the sky, then to the water.

Subaru: “Wh—”

???: “—Hey.”

Suddenly, someone answered Subaru’s voice, which no one should have been able to answer.

Suddenly, without warning, Subaru had been left behind on an island where everyone had died abruptly. He himself was bleeding from both his nose and ears, making him worried. Scared.

So, at the sound of someone who might give him an answer, Subaru turned around, and then.

???: “—Hey you, what are you doing in a place like this?”

There stood a man that caused Subaru to freeze instantly, right after making him feel saved.

3

???: “As you can see, I’d thought every guy on the Island had died, but…”

While saying that, the man with the black bandana cracked the joints in his neck.

With his bright orange hair collected in a bandana decorated with lines of red, the slender silhouette wore the appearance of an Imperial Soldier.

At first glance, the impression his face gave off was that he was friendly. However, that was a terrible misunderstanding. Do not be deceived.

Both his gentle-looking face, and his voice that sounded as if he wanted to be good friends, were complete fabrications.

The name of the man who fabricated such things was—

Subaru: "—Todd."

Subaru, who was supposedly having an increasingly, albeit minutely so, harder time opening the drawer of his memories, had stored that name in a place so important that he could easily retrieve it.

Then, if one were to ask why that name was important.

Todd: "—. Hey you, why do you know my name?"

Because, upon being called out with only that single word, his attitude did a complete one-eighty. That was why the man closing the distance between them was a dangerous person.

Taking long strides, the man—Todd, was lumbering in Subaru's direction. Even if he tried to hurriedly run away from Todd, his body, having become worn-out on its own, would not permit him to do so.

His back had been immediately caught up to, and Subaru's body was violently forced against the wall.

Subaru: "Ouch…!"

Todd: "I sure don't recognize you. I never forget a face once I've seen it, but this is really a face I don't know. —No."

His face being forced against the wall of the building, there was a rough sensation on his cheek. Whilst Subaru writhed from the relentless pain, Todd's nose drew close to his hair.

Just like that, Todd sniffed his nose and got a whiff of Subaru's hair.

Todd: "Hey kid, you smell like a scary guy I know."

Subaru trembled as he was spoken to in a low voice, regarding just who Todd was talking about. It was just as if it were a combination technique, one that mixed the feeling that the one being referred to was himself, along with the unpleasant feelings that arose when facing Todd.

If possible, his face was a face he had wished to never encounter again, so then just why was it like this? Why was he on the Island?

Subaru: “Why, is…”

Todd, a man who should have fled from Guaral, in this place?

Come to think of it, as of his escape, Todd had taken the captured Arakiya along with him. He should have realized it. If Arakiya was here, then Todd was possibly present as well.

Something like that was absurd. Just because they had escaped together, did not mean something like being together in the next location was guaranteed.

Why? How? I don’t like it. It’s scary. Why, is, Todd, here?

Subaru: “Why has, everyone…”

Todd: “Been killed? Hey, I can’t answer that sort of thing. From my point of view, you surviving was a miscalculation. Well, if I leave it as-is then it’ll just be a matter of time, but…”

Subaru: “—Gulp.”

Todd: “Time and chance and whatnot, I’d dislike leaving it all up to stuff like that, you see.”

As Todd’s voice whispered close to his ear, something cold was gently pressed against his neck. It was the blade of the large knife that Todd had drawn from his waist.

A knife that seemed as if it could be used to flay the skin off a large animal, extreme to the point he thought if it was given even a slightly firm tug, then not only would Subaru’s neck be cut, but his entire head would probably come right off.

And, it seemed that even if his opponent was a child, Todd would certainly not hesitate.

Only—

Subaru: "…"

There was an highly unlikely scenario.

One in which Todd would not kill Subaru—No, one in which he would not kill him here, and possibly put it off for later. A possibility that he would try to enquire Subaru about something. If that were to happen, then things would become irreversible.

Things would become irreversible, a hopeless possibility.

That was why, he would sooner—

Todd: "Wait."

Subaru: "—Hk."

His head was aching, his nosebleed would not cease.

In the midst of the sensation of his consciousness wavering due to his loss of blood, to somehow make use of his last resort, Subaru fumbled his tongue around at his molars.

The subsequent instant, Todd thrust his fingers into Subaru's mouth.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Having the inside of his mouth invaded against his will with violence, Subaru squirmed with all his might. His stomach was going to regurgitate its contents. However, not worried about anything, Todd continued to move his fingers around.

Then, together with the regurgitated meal, he dragged that out.

Todd: "…What's this? No way, is this poison?"

Subaru: "…"

Todd: "Oioi, just what kind of brat are you? To go out of your way to prepare poison in your mouth, that's for committing suicide when you're down on your knees, isn't it? There's gotta be something wrong with you, for you to treat your life like this."

While wiping his dirty fingers on Subaru's clothes, Todd brazenly said that.

Though, it did not feel like he was making fun of him. He was seriously unable to believe Subaru's thoughts; that was the feeling his attitude gave off.

It was just as if to say that suicide was a foolish thought.

Todd: "I guess that's about right. It's not like I particularly care if you suffer. Feel free to use it."

Subaru: "Is, that…"

Todd: "Ah, if you'll die, then even suicide's fine. Then I'll also complete this without dirtying my knife."

With that evidence, Todd shrugged his shoulders, and put the wrapped "drug" back into Subaru's mouth.

Carefully placing it on one of his molars, in a position so that if he bit down with force the package would tear. Then the contents would leak out, and Subaru's life would be snuffed out. That, he understood.

Todd: "I'm fine with either. As long as you die."

Grabbing his shoulders, he spun Subaru around to face him.

With Todd's form right before his eyes, Subaru's back was pressed against the wall. One way or another, he wanted to retaliate against Todd with a retort, but his body was rapidly losing strength, and he went numb.

Slowly, the same Death that Tanza and the others had experienced, was eating into Subaru.

Why that came so, so slowly, he did not understand, however.

Todd: “Running out of time, suicide, or knife.”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “Choose.”

The destination ahead remaining unchanged, Todd raised three fingers as he pressed Subaru for an answer.

Extremely, extremely silently, Subaru abhorred Todd.

Tanza, Hiain, Weitz, Idra, had all died.

Orson and the others, Old Man Null, even the guards, everyone had died.

For what reason, was Todd alive? For what reason, was Subaru also going to die?

Subaru: “—Hk.”

While experiencing these thoughts tearing away at his chest so, so terribly, Subaru bit down hard on his molars.

The package tore, and the “drug” contained inside leaked out. Gradually, that flowed into the crevices of his tongue and teeth, it flowed in, and then—.

Subaru: “—Buaah.”

A large quantity of blood filled his mouth, and resolutely, he spit it out towards Todd who stood before him.

To take him down along with himself, his intentions were not anything like that. Feeling vengeful, he thought to soil his clothes. However, Todd’s perception was excellent. The instant Subaru readied himself, he flew to the side.

Because of that, the blood did not hit him. So, having merely spat blood out, Subaru collapsed.

Collapsed, he collapsed, and then, and then, and then—.

Subaru: “Ah, uh, ah, ooooah…!”

As his whole body was quaking in fear, the poison circulated with incredible vigor.

From his nose and from his ears, blood poured out with more vigor than ever before, his eyes swelled up, bulging to the extent it seemed like they would explode, and in unison, both the flesh and bones of his body started to groan.

No, it only sounded like they were groaning. His whole body, was screaming.

Subaru: “Uh, guh, gugueh, gueeeeh…!”

The heat was akin to blood burning. The heat, was akin to being plunged into a boiling pot.

His whole body was boiling, just as if he had been skinned, and then things like wasabi, mustard, and all sorts of other spicy substances were being thoroughly smeared all over his body, just as if a mountain worth of needles were stabbing into him, just as if his whole body was being scraped away on a fine grater, it hurt, it hurt, it hurt, it hurt.

With only pain, he started wanting to die.

With only suffering, he started wanting to die.

Todd: “Hey you, there’s gotta be something wrong with you.”

As he fearfully struggled like a fish that had been reeled in, he headed towards death.

While looking at Subaru drowning in a sea of blood, Todd was muttering something. Whatever he was saying, Subaru could not understand, he did not understand, it was not something he could understand.

He could not understand anything, anymore. He could not understand, any—.

Todd: “—If you’re using poison to kill yourself, wouldn’t you normally prepare one that wouldn’t make you suffer?”

The voice, was distant; his consciousness, went white.

And yet, until the very end, until, the end, the pain, and the suffering, and the blood was, bloodwasbloodwasbloodwas, bloodbloodbloodbloodblood, bludbludbludblud, blud—.

There was a pop, and blood, and his eyes could not see.

4

???: “I know who ya are…”

Subaru: “…”

???: “But, that ain’t the point… Don’t get me confused with Hiain and his sweet-talking… I ain’t interested in the crown ya wear… I just wanna lend ya my strength. Remember that…”

Whittling away at his whole body, was roasting, burning, pain.

Just when he felt such pain suddenly come to an end, Subaru found himself within chilly, cold air.

And then—

Subaru: “Ah, ah…”

Weitz: “Schwartz…?”

Subaru: “AAAAAHH—!!!”

Cradling his own body on the spot, Subaru opened his mouth wide and screamed.

Screamed, he screamed, trying to expel the poison from within him. He tried to expel the poison that should no longer be present in his body. He got the feeling it yet remained, a poison which brought the end through death.

A deadly poison that would make Subaru suffer, it would make him suffer, it would certainly bring him death.

No matter how many times he tasted it—.

Subaru: “Gah, hu, AHHHHHHH…!”

The Death brought about by that drug, was a reminder to Subaru that there was no easy way to die, the guardian of the last bastion from which he must never escape from.

Chapter 70:
One Thing

1

—The most important thing for him when asking Old Man Null for a “drug”, had been its reliability.

For starters, Old Man Null wasn’t exactly an eager student of medicine.

He was just an amateur who had been allowed access to the healing room after treating a fellow gladiator and, somehow, he had ended up staying there.

So it was obvious, that those on the administrative side of the Island would not give Old Man Null, one of the gladiators, a highly effective drug that could be either poison or medicine.

That was why it was impossible for Old Man Null to concoct a drug—an immediately effective “strong poison”.

The only thing Old Man Null could make was a deleterious concoction of as many drugs as he could get his hands on, which would kill someone by disrupting the blood flow throughout their body.

If one were to swallow it, they would definitely die after suffering tremendously—however, its existence, if you thought about it, it was somewhat convenient for Subaru.

Subaru: “After all, my foundation is being a lazy, giant idiot.”

Considering Subaru’s over-reliant nature, a poison that killed without causing suffering was out of the question.

He would immediately think about starting over on something trivial and start relying on the poison’s potency. In doing so, Natsuki Subaru would become a monster.

An inhuman monster that did not understand human pain or suffering.

Subaru: “No way, definitely NO!”

Already, the memory and realization of the time when his arms and legs were fully grown were both fading away. Even so, Subaru would not allow his experience and ideals to be twisted any further.

That change in nature would be a betrayal to everyone who had accepted Subaru as he was.

He could betray himself, but not everyone, not his family.

While Natsuki Subaru could be set side, Natsuki Subaru’s ties could not.

Therefore—

Subaru: “…Sorry, Old Man Null, for lying about using it against a Sparka opponent.”

Even if Natsuki Subaru were to experience hellish pain, he could not withdraw his outstretched hands.

Because that was that one tenet that would not bend, even on this Gladiator Island of isolating waters.

2

Though he had tried to put on a strong front—

Subaru: “Gah, guh, geh… hk”

Gritting his teeth to the point they were seemingly about to break, Subaru endured pain that tore his heart to shreds. —No, he was not enduring it. The pain to endure had already passed.

He had died, he had returned, so the suffering from which that death originated was nowhere to be found.

Still, his soul dragged on. That was why, both tears and snot, did not cease trickling out.

Weitz: “Oi, Schwartz…! What’s the matter, all of a sudden…!”

Subaru: “I-I’m fhine…”

Weitz: “How can ya be fine… in such an ugly state…!”

Weitz’s voice trembled as Subaru cowered on the spot, his face smeared with various fluids.

He rushed over to hoist Subaru up, and without hesitation, wiped his runny nose with his bare hands. Every time, Weitz’s attitude would impress Subaru, always.

To be able to act without believing dirty people were dirty, that was an incredibly respectable thing.

Subaru: “Ahh, uh…”

Violently wiping away his runny nose and tears, Subaru put his hand to his dazed head.

Little-by-little, as the shock of dying in the past faded away, he accepted the slow present of being alive. Switching over to an easygoing consciousness happened generally every time Subaru died from the “drug”.

He had prepared the “poison” behind his molar as a trump card in order to ensure his death, but surprisingly, it had not come into play as Subaru’s cause of death on the Gladiator Island very often.

The overwhelming majority of his deaths during Sparka had been caused by the claws and fangs of the Gladiator Beast drawing near to him.

However, when he was unable to die, or when he was unsure of how to be up to the task in a situation where casualties had been made, he had no choice but to have this “drug” carry out its purpose.

That was, the excruciating anguish Natsuki Subaru had to bear.

After all—

Subaru: "…Since it's my fault for screwing up."

If the person who should be able to, somehow, do the most failed, what could the rest of them do?

Subaru had a responsibility. The responsibility of having the highest probability to somehow accomplish something.

Although that power was not one he had desired to obtain, provided it was Natsuki Subaru, he would be able to master it.

Because he was that person's son, Natsuki Kenichi's son.

Weitz: "—Hk, what…?!"

Subaru: "The drawbridge…!"

He pressed his fist against the dirty floor and, as he tried to raise himself up, the entire island creaked and shook.

From Weitz in front of him and the gloomy cold atmosphere, Subaru realized that the place he had died and returned to was the lower stratum of the Gladiator Island—just before the drawbridge had been raised.

Connecting the Island and the outside world, the only bridge that stood.

Subaru: "—They're coming."

That scene, akin to a painting of hell itself, along with the utmost horrid adversary who painted it.

Once more, he would face a person he even prayed to never meet again—he would have a rematch with Todd.

Subaru: "…"

Trembling, Subaru hugged his shoulders as fear engulfed him.

As soon as he closed his eyes, what came back to him behind his eyelids was the disastrous scene riddled with corpses. The faces he knew, blood pouring from their eyes and noses, trembling with fear while lying on the ground, that was the utmost horrid memory.

Weitz before him, wiping Subaru's runny nose, was no exception.

Subaru: "That kind of, never again…"

He must not let it happen, that sense of duty fired up his chest.

However, even though he was so enthusiastic, his thoughts stopped at the question of what to do. How in the world was such a desperate situation even created?

Hailing from the Imperial Capital, under the name of envoys, and entering the Gladiator Island, were Todd and Arakiya.

Just having a Divine General who had once opposed him standing in his way was enough to give him a headache, but to have Todd, the human devil, join the fray was the worst possible nightmare.

In the first place, just why were Todd and Arakiya together?

Subaru: "…I'm an idiot, I remember. The one who let Arakiya escape after she was captured, it was that guy."

It could be considerably shocking, but memories related to Todd were surprisingly clear.

The end of Subaru and Todd's shared fate had been in the high-walled city—in Guaral, during an operation to occupy the City Hall. The end of it had been when Subaru, dressed as a woman, had interacted with him.

After that, the rampaging Arakiya was done away with by Priscilla, clad in crimson; then Arakiya, who had supposedly been captured, had been released by somebody, somebody who Subaru had suspected to be Todd.

If they were together now, it appeared that his guess had not been incorrect.

Subaru: “Damnit, even though you said you wanted to go back to your fiancée, why are you here? Had you just returned to your hometown quietly… That big lying bastard…!”

Even if he groaned about things differing from what he had promised, it was not like it would make Todd disappear. Though he understood this, he had to let out his pent-up anger at least once.

After doing that, he inhaled a deep breath, exhaled, inhaled, exhaled.

And then—

Weitz: “The next victims for Sparka…?”

Subaru: “Not necessarily. Weitz, can you help me out a little?”

Weitz: “—. Did’cha forget what I said just now…?”

The tattoo on Weitz’s face contorted as Subaru heard this, feeling the tremors under his feet.

At this time, Weitz had spoken some words. Subaru’s head was in a panic because of the aftermath of the “drug”, but he remembered them because they’d had a great impact.

Subaru: “Just lending strength, right? So please, lend me your strength.”

Weitz: “As long as ya get it, it’s fine… So, what do ya want me to do…?”

Naturally, they were going to see the next candidates for gladiator come across the drawbridge.

He was thinking that would probably be his proposal, but Weitz, with his arms crossed, switched quickly. That strong sense of duty, and the rule he had once decided for himself, which he obstinately abided by, were truly helpful.

With great appreciation for Weitz’s personality—

Subaru: “Just a little is fine. I need you to stall the people who came to the Island just now.”

3

—Natsuki Subaru’s only weapon, the Authority of Return by Death.

Ever since coming to the Vollachian Empire, and all while surmounting various obstacles, it had clearly been malfunctioning.

The biggest reason that came to mind was that the ongoing “infantilization” assailing Subaru was its origin.

Because his body had shrunk like it had, Return by Death had yielded behavior that was completely abnormal.

A prime example of that, were those horrible ten seconds on Chaosflame’s Crimson Lapis Castle.

It seemed those endless ten seconds had not been for the sake of saving Subaru, but rather bestowed for the sake of causing him despair; immediately after that had passed, the situation remained poor, even on the Gladiator Island he had been sent to.

It was not as bad as those ten seconds atop the castle tower, but the grace period granted now was unusually short.

This time too, he had been able to return roughly thirty minutes to the past—when taking the time limit until everyone on the Island would begin to die into consideration, that time would become even shorter.

In other words, Subaru had to overwrite this situation in under thirty minutes.

For that purpose—

Subaru: “First, I need time to think. —Remember remember remember, what just happened.”

He was depending on Weitz’s benevolence, who had vigorously declared he would undertake that request to delay the arriving envoys from passing through.

However, he had also said that there would be no strategy involving Weitz himself going on a rampage.

The reason was simple, even if Weitz went on a rampage, should Arakiya be there, he would be stopped in an instant. Furthermore, if Todd were present, Weitz would be killed without mercy.

Both of those, were events Subaru wanted to avoid.

Subaru: “As they died, everyone was bleeding from their faces… Poison gas? Some sort of magic?”

He was in the middle of revealing that he intended to escape from the Gladiator Island.

Hiain, Weitz and Idra had all collapsed one after the other, and Tanza, too, had been no exception to that. Everyone died the same way, together, so he thought that probably there was no mistaking it.

If that meant the cause of death had been the same, then the other gladiators who had fallen had also—That was not it.

Subaru: “The guards, they were also part of those who had died.”

Remembering the events that had occurred properly, there really were no exceptions in that hell.

Unable to think straight at the time, he had not checked to see if the Gladiator Beasts in the cages were still alive, but at least all the humans, without exception, had died—that was not it, either. There had been exceptions.

Subaru: “Me, and Todd.”

Indeed, only Subaru and Todd had met face-to-face on the Island without dying.

However, though Subaru had not died, he had still felt the pain of being near death, and just like everyone else, the phenomenon of blood streaming out his face had also occurred to him. That did not seem to apply to Todd.

Since it was difficult to imagine he would be able to endure that nonchalantly, it was certain that Todd had not been subject to those means of dying.

Subaru: "If it's poison gas, did Todd take an antidote before coming here or something? If it's some kind of magic, was it Arakiya who used it…? Come to think of it, Arakiya was nowhere to be found."

Although he'd had no intentions of the sort, he had briefly checked the corpses of all his acquaintances.

Tanza and the others who had collapsed in front of him, Orson and the others whom he had saved in the second Sparka, Old Man Null in the healing room, and even the guard he recognized, who had treated him coldly and harshly.

Everyone, absolutely everyone, had become motionless with blood streaming from their faces.

Subaru: "But, there are just three people I didn't see."

—Those were Arakiya and Gustav, alongside the fake Cecilus, making it three people.

Subaru: "…"

Of course, Subaru did not remember every gladiator on the Island either, so he could not really declare that all of them had died. However, he could not be certain about those three.

Arakiya was someone on Todd's side. Since she was Todd's ally, who was probably the mastermind behind the massacre, it was only natural that she would not have died in the massacre.

However, just what had happened to the other two?

Gustav, the Chief of the Island holding the position of Governor, and the fake Cecilus, the enigmatic and suspicious juvenile.

Even on this Gladiator Island, those two held special positions—.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Indeed, just as he remembered these two special people, a bolt of lightning suddenly ran though Subaru's mind.

The massacre that had occurred on the Island, he suspected that it had been brought about through the means of magic or poison gas. However, while a feeble possibility, there was one more thing that came to mind.

Something which possessed a large influence on the Gladiator Island only—the "curse rule".

The Gladiator Island Ginunhive's gladiators were shackled by the binds of an unseen impairment.

The curse rule, if disobeyed, would even put one's life in peril. The prospects of its candidacy were rising.

Subaru: "However, the curse rule was just an empty threat, it shouldn't actually exist."

Subaru himself had increased his belief in that, by risking his life in a back-and-forth with Gustav.

He had been clear in telling Gustav that he was escaping from the Gladiator Island, thus displeasing him and defying the will of the Vollachian Emperor, to whom Gustav swore allegiance.

If a curse rule truly were to exist, Gustav would have used it against him right there and then. If he did not make an example of Subaru with it, the Gladiator Island's order would crumble.

Had he circulated the fact of there being no curse rule, there would be a rather major incident involving a riot from the gladiators.

Subaru: "No matter how much Gustav-san doesn't want us to die, it wouldn't be logical to bend on there. So there shouldn't be a curse rule… No, I'm overthinking it."

Gustav's policy of doing as much as he could to keep his gladiators alive, whether true or not, there were grounds that made it easier to deny the curse rule's existence. There were many, many of those lying around.

The guards had also died, not just the gladiators, was it not?

Subaru: "Gustav-san's got no reason to kill all the guards… If you put it that way, there's also no reason for him to kill all the gladiators out of nowhere."

The more he thought about it, the more Gustav's intentions seemed unrelated to the massacre.

If that were the case, narrowing down the reasoning to backtrack to the initial two options, either the mastermind Todd had scattered poison gas, or cooperating with Arakiya, had made use of some outrageous magic.

However, both of these had the exact same problem.

Subaru: "Why was I the only one on whom the effect was so weak?"

Excluding Todd, who would have taken precautions beforehand, Subaru had been the only one with mild symptoms.

What was it about Subaru that had made him alone different from everyone else who had died?

Was it because he was a child? —No, Tanza had died.

Was it because of his behavior being different from theirs just before? —No, Weitz had died.

Was it because race made a difference? —No, Hiain and Idra had both died together.

Was it because he was from another world? Because he had spent time in the Kingdom? Because he had a contractual relationship with a super-cute Spirit? Because he was continuously stalked by the Witch? Because he had been "infantilized" into a smaller body? What else, what else what else what else what else, what else was there?

—Only Subaru was different from everyone else, just what was that something?

Subaru: “What’s—”

???: “—Oh, Basu, something troubling you?”

Subaru: “Woah?!”

A voice came from behind Subaru, who had been frantically racking his brain in search of possibilities.

Because it was so sudden, and because he had erased the possibility of the speaker from his mind, Subaru, squealing, turned around with eyes wide open.

Behind Subaru, walking with his hands in the sleeves of his kimono, was the fake Cecilus.

Subaru blinked his eyes in surprise several times at that attitude of his, carefree as always.

Subaru: “C-Ceci…?”

Cecilus: “Yes that’s correct, but what’s up with that reaction? You look as if me being here is an outrageous, world-shattering development. It’s true that I’m the leading actor of this world, so I can understand why you might feel daunted, but my intention was just to spend my time close to Basu at a distance where I can talk to you and touch you, y’know?”

In this way, the fake Cecilus, approaching from his front, looked down into Subaru’s face at a distance close enough that he could almost feel his breath on his face.

And with that unchanging attitude and gesture, Subaru involuntarily backed away.

Just then, from Subaru’s side, the fake Cecilus quietly looked at the view below—from Subaru’s side as he ascended, the fake Cecilus gazed at the already-submerged drawbridge.

Cecilus: “It seems that the carriage wasn’t carrying participants for the next Sparka, but rather more distinct guests. It’s what everyone on the Island’s talking about.”

Subaru: “…Ah, they seem to be emissaries from the Imperial Capital. I don’t know what they came here for, though.”

Cecilus: “When it comes to emissaries from the Imperial Capital, I can imagine that they came to inform us about the situation outside, or to make preparations concerning the next show. As you want to leave this place, Basu, wouldn’t that be good news for you?”

Subaru: “—. I’m not going to deny it.”

Subaru gave a curt response to the fake Cecilus as the latter looked at the surface of the lake, sheltering his eyes with his hand.

Frankly, this unforeseen encounter with the fake Cecilus had made Subaru unsure on how to behave toward him.

He did not believe that the fake Cecilus had committed the massacre alongside Todd and Arakiya.

But, it was true that he, who was supposedly the most feared gladiator on the Gladiator Island, had vanished in the midst of the massacre.

Subaru: “Though, it’s questionable whether my eyes were working properly…”

In such a horrific situation, by no means could he be said to have been mentally stable.

Even so, if someone had quarreled or battled within the Island, it would have been impossible for him to fail to hear it.

That was why, if he were to think about what had become of the fake Cecilus back then—

Subaru: “Did he die somewhere I couldn’t see him, or was he not on the Island?”

But if he had not been on the Island, then where, and how?

Even at this very moment, while he was talking to the fake Cecilus, the clock was ticking down towards the time limit. Until that absurd eventuality, even though the fake Cecilus had no time to spare either.

Cecilus: “You’re not going to deny it. But your face says that you’re worried about other things, y’know.”

He thought and thought, yet Subaru got nowhere, and the fake Cecilus instinctively picked at his ambiguous words.

It was probably just guesswork, and not something like a reading of Subaru’s expression, speech, or conduct. It was intuition. Reeling in the correct interpretation was something that people like the fake Cecilus were capable of.

Since a handful of those kinds of monsters were crowding this world, Subaru’s resolve came into question.

That he would not lose, that he must not lose, that resolve.

Subaru: “Ceci, something terrible’s about to happen on the Island. Probably, those guys from the Imperial Capital are responsible. I can’t tell you the details, but…”

Cecilus: “Judging from how serious your atmosphere is, it’d be too horrifying to even put into words as well… That little deergirl and the people of Basu’s Unit are in a predicament. No, is it more like a certain-death-kinda feeling?”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Cecilus: “Weeell, Basu’s response has a splendid feeling to it, how nice! However, is that really so? I’m delighted that there are finally signs of things happening. I was so tired of waiting that I was about to die!”

Laughing with his mouth open, the fake Cecilus cheerfully stomped his feet.

Taken aback by his reaction, which was as if he were warmly welcoming trouble, then, while baring his teeth, Subaru rushed to shorten the distance between themselves.

Subaru: “Ceci! It’s not a joke! Everyone’s in trouble!”

Cecilus: “More gravitas! It’s wonderful if you’re not joking. I’d welcome it, since it’d be souring to be told that everything here was just you thinking too much, a made-up story. Crisis, predicament, and hardship, such great relief!”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Cecilus: “Or could it be, that you truly thought I’d take your side unconditionally, Basu?”

When Subaru complained that Cecilus could not understand the gravity of the situation, Cecilus lowered his voice. It was just as if the glint in his eyes wanted to say that Subaru was the one who could not understand.

Experiencing blade-like coldness from those long-slitted blue eyes, Subaru swallowed a breath.

As the fake Cecilus broadly smiled at the silent Subaru,

Cecilus: “—Here, right here.”

Then, assailing Subaru with straightforward words, he did a twirl on the spot and outstretched his hands.

On the mountainside of the Gladiator Island, in order to set the high ground from where they overlooked the Island and half the lake as the stage. The fake Cecilus looked up to the sky, opened his mouth wide, and—

Cecilus: “This is undoubtedly the divide! You’d asked if you could get me on your side unconditionally, but allow me to inform you that, at this very moment, you’re able to fulfill those conditions.”

Subaru: “Right now, this moment…”

Cecilus: “Yes, yes, that’s right! Basu, you enthrall me through your premonitions! Connect with me through anticipation! Make me laugh through your negotiations! And, you’re proving yourself right at the climax!”

Subaru: “…”

Cecilus: “Come along now, oh wolf pierced by swords! All you Observers who look down upon these harsh and ruthless vast lands, see him clear! In this world, he, who is enthralling me, this very Cecilus Segmunt!”

It seemed that if he were not convinced of those existences, of spectators present beyond the heavens, he would not have been able to make that outstanding utterance.

Without exaggeration, it would be natural to doubt the sanity of the fake Cecilus’s given his eccentric behavior. Certainly, anyone on this Island would avert their eyes and not lend their ears to his conduct, however, Subaru had acquired a peculiar confidence.

That the fake Cecilus was—No, that Cecilus Segmunt was the real deal.

This bonafide monster truly held faith that he could speak to the world, and that if the world truly possessed a mind of its own, then it would be unable to take its eyes off him.

This little monster had been overflowing with that much presence and cogency.

Subaru: “I’m…”

Cecilus: “What was that?”

Subaru: “I’m going to make you my comrade. I’m gonna work you hard, that’s what I’ve decided.”

While being overwhelmed, though it was not the time for it, Subaru put his hand against his chest and spoke out.

Firmly setting his eyes on the other person, he declared that.

Cecilus: “—That impulsiveness, I don’t dislike it, rather, I quite like it.”

He conceived a smile as he spoke, however, this had not been the same carefree smile Cecilus had wore until now, but rather a smile of merely relaxing his lips as he responded to Subaru.

Perhaps it was a sign that Cecilus had undoubtedly recognized Subaru as a contender.

Immediately following that—

Cecilus: “—I see.”

Tightening the lips that had just displayed a smile, Cecilus gently stroked his chin with a finger.

His chin, onto which blood had trickled down from his finely shaped nose, then from which it fell.

Subaru: “Wha…?!”

Seeing fresh blood spilling from Cecilus’s nose, Subaru hurriedly looked over the hand railing.

It was not like he could see inside of rooms or into the basement by looking down onto the Island, but even so, from what he could see here and there, he understood that there many figures, collapsed, belonging to many people.

The massacre, had begun.

Begun, in the time Subaru had been using to put the situation in order and consider the possibilities carefully.

Death had violently ravaged the people throughout the island, harvesting lives without exception.

Indeed, without exception—.

Cecilus: “Uh-oh.”

Subaru: “Ceci?!”

As he pulled himself away from the railing, Subaru also felt a sting inside his nose, but he was more worried about Cecilus, who had sat down next to him.

Cecilus rested his back against the railing, perspiring as he slumped down into a cross-legged sitting position.

He had an easygoing attitude, but the blood coming from his nose, which he was holding down with his hand, had not ceased.

Subaru: “A-are you, okay?”

Cecilus: “Well, this sure seems tricky. This is a quite formidable enemy, Basu. Concerning this opponent, does there happen to be any shortcomings you’re aware of?”

Subaru: “Is this the time to be saying that?! You’re bleeding from your nose, and from your eyes too!”

Cecilus: “I see… Even though I was proud to say that I’d never spilled a drop of blood ’til now.”

Even as they spoke, blood flowed from the sitting Cecilus’s eyes.

Cecilus’s state was becoming so awful that it was hard to look at it, but it was frightening that even with the blood pouring out of his nose, his tone of voice had not changed in the slightest.

However, the scariest thing about Cecilus, had not been that.

Subaru: “Aren’t you… afraid of dying…?”

Cecilus: “People die, after all.”

Subaru: “…”

While understanding that what was drawing ever closer to him was imminent Death, Cecilus responded without any hesitation.

Without hesitation, without bewilderment, without fear, without anxiety, without nervousness, without regret.

Unlike Subaru, no place should lay beyond his death.

Even so, Cecilus held no fear towards Death, supposedly the most feared thing among living beings.

And so, without showing any fear of Death—

Cecilus: "…"

The hand holding his nose down dropped, and as if to conceal the bloodstain, his sleeve enshrouded his arm, and, with his back resting against the fence, Cecilus became motionless.

His eyelids were closed and cast down, and without even a twitch, he became unable to move.

Subaru clearly understood what that meant.

And then—

Subaru: "Khoff"

The hand he placed over his coughing mouth was stained with blood; Death had been looming closer to Subaru as well.

4

The same, the very same devastating scene dominated the Gladiator Island in its entirety.

Subaru: "…"

Slowly dragging his feet, Subaru wandered around the Island, searching for survivors.

However, now that even Cecilus was out of the running, as if living up to Subaru's tattered expectations, there was no occurrence of such an entity appearing.

Subaru: "Tanza, and the others too, and even Old Man Null…"

Every single one of them had collapsed, and lost their lives.

Shutting the eyelids on everyone’s astonished faces, as they were unable to comprehend the events that had occurred, and cleaning their faces somewhat, was the best that Subaru could do for them.

Subaru: “Sorry, Tanza…”

He had failed. He had erred in his procedure.

He should have told Tanza and the others about the danger as well, he should have had them take some kind of precautions.

If only they had stayed together, after converging with Tanza and the others and before ascending to the vantage point. If only he had been able to make her at ease and not let her die. That girl, who was anxious about this place in which she could not rely on anyone, who knew nothing of the situation.

Until he found their bodies, he had not even thought about such an obvious thing.

Subaru: “…”

Having wandered around the Island, he had seen that all the guards were dead as well.

The way they had died was the same as the gladiators; everyone had bled to death, blood coming out from their faces. Along that way, he had gone go see the cages where the Gladiator Beasts were locked up, and there Subaru saw that all of them, too, had died.

They had collapsed in their cages, bleeding from their eyes and noses, having died in the same way the humans had.

Subaru: “…I guess that means I’m more durable.”

While near death, he made a joke that the lifeless Gladiator Beasts did not laugh at.

It was difficult to breathe because his nose was completely blocked by blood. His eyes had also become moist and misty, and upon wiping them with his fingers, it was like a faint red curtain would cover them.

Towards Subaru, and Subaru only, slowly approached an absolutely disgusting Death God.

To that disgusting Death God, Subaru erected his trembling middle finger.

And then—

???: "—Hey you, what are you doing in a place like this?"

In the middle stratum of the Island, in the place known as the courtyard, the Death God muttered as he cracked the bones in his neck.

Wearing a black bandana and giving the outward appearance of a friendly young man, was the Death God—Todd. As he looked at Subaru, who had raised the middle finger towards him, he gradually drew closer.

Todd: "As you can see, I'd thought every guy on the Island had died, but…"

Todd skillfully pulled out a large knife, wearing a puzzled face as he looked at Subaru.

In many ways, he was probably thinking he had gotten into an unexplainable situation. Meeting a living person here must have been outside of Todd's expectations.

The feeling of falling into an ambush, certainly had also been ominous to Todd.

However, Subaru knew that if he waited here, he would come.

If he could finish this without meeting him, he would rather have that, but this was a confrontation he could not avoid no matter what.

There was no one else left alive anymore, and in the time until

Subaru died, the only one to have any chance of speaking to him was this Death God.

Todd: “…”

The look in his eyes lacked negligence, but there was no hesitation in his approaching steps. It was not so much an attitude of looking down upon Subaru, but more of an attitude of not viewing Subaru as a problem.

That he was underestimating Subaru because he was a child, could not be the case.

Without letting out jokes or metaphors, Subaru was already at the point of death. If one were to be overly cautious towards a helpless child about to die, that would not be cautiousness, but rather cowardice.

Though, Todd could be spoken of as cunning and cautious, not as cowardly.

—Facing him, Subaru, who had let the girl’s Death go by through his stupidity, was thinking.

Even though Todd had appeared just as he had wished, he was not sure if things from now would go as he wished.

Even if he had a chance, Todd was not a person who would give hints easily. He did not have the kindness to give a helpless dying child something to help them die in peace.

If so, against this cold-blooded Death God, how could he bring back some form of information?

Maybe, there was just one thing.

Even if he did extremely well, the information he could get was just one thing.

That one thing, he had to make it something worth his while.

Todd: “…”

Step-by-step, the distance between Subaru and Todd diminished.

As soon as this distance reached zero, it would not be surprising for the other party to stab Subaru and bring him death mutely. With his head and body lacking oxygen, he had to draw the correct answer.

It was Todd who committed this massacre on the Island. There was no use in asking.

Who was still alive? It would be useless to ask that. There would be no meaning.

Where was Arakiya? As much as he would like to know that, he did not think Todd would answer him. It would be useless.

What had happened to Gustav? That, like Arakiya, would be a useless shot.

Then, what remained, was it the method behind the massacre?

Todd: "…"

Poison gas, was not it. Subaru had erased that option from his mind.

Halfway up the Island's mountain, Subaru had happened upon Cecilus at the vantage point, and had decided to stay there after all. —If the answer to the massacre were to be poison gas, then he would have been safe with the strong winds of the vantage point, probably.

But as it turned out, neither Subaru nor Cecilus had escaped the carnage of the massacre. The possibility of poison gas was quite low, considering those outside and on the Island had also collapsed.

Then, the other possibility was—

Subaru: "—Ah."

Magic, from Arakiya. Arakiya, who had appeared together with Todd, had utilized some kind of slaughter magic to annihilate the gladiators, the guards, and the Gladiator Beasts on the Island.

If he could acquire that certainty, then, next time, next time he would go about things in actual proper fashion.

If he could, acquire that certainty—.

???: "—Here, right here."

That instant, an auditory hallucination dominated Subaru's mind.

The voice of the star actor, who should no longer be among them, yielded a heat within Subaru's weak thinking.

And then, as if that heat was urging him to do so, he opened his mouth and—

Subaru: "—THE CURSE RULE!!"

The possibility he had once erased, albeit unable to do it fully; he shouted it in a loud voice toward the Death God.

That bloodcurdling voice from Subaru was an inescapable attack, one which seized hold of the Death God. And then, the instant he heard that shout, the Death God—Todd, moved.

Todd: "Die."

The hint of suspicion, the bothersome air, just about everything disappeared, leaving only the intent to kill.

If one were to see it in a sane state, that murderous intent was so thick and dense they would almost faint. With that in his eyes and a knife in his hand, Todd leapt at Subaru in a single breath's time.

Subaru: "Kah."

The thrust of the cold blade buried it deep into Subaru's chest.

Without a shred of mercy, the knife clawed through everything vital within his chest, and was wrenched out with a twist, to ensure that he would never be saved.

A gush of blood spurted, staining Todd's blank face with fresh blood.

Subaru: “—Ghuh.”

He had been stabbed, and then, the blade had been yanked out; the force of that had flung his body onto the hard ground. The blood rushed through his throat with a vigor he had never experienced before, as he spit out a gulp of blood alongside the packaged “drug”.

He had bit down, but failed to tear the envelope. But, this wound did not require the “drug”.

Todd: “From the inside of your mouth, are you sane?”

As he picked up the red-tinged package with his fingers and sniffed it, Todd muttered. Could he tell from the smell alone that the contents were dangerous, or had he guessed because it had come out of Subaru’s mouth?

Either way, it did not matter. It was something that Subaru could no longer reach.

Only, only, if there was something he wanted to say, that would be.

Subaru: “…thing.”

Todd: “—What?”

Subaru: “One, thing.”

The one thing, he had grasped it.

His expression changing, giving it precedence above all else, he hastily killed Subaru.

That was why, Subaru had grasped it.

Subaru: “Curs—”

He had grasped it, he had grasped it, and then, died.

In exchange for dying, he had grasped it.

—That which had been responsible for the killings upon the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, was the “curse rule” that supposedly did not exist.

Chapter 71:
Water

1

—The "curse rule" that supposedly did not exist, had been activated to kill everyone on the Gladiator Island.

What had taken Subaru's life at the very final moment, had been the sharpness of a cold knife.

However, just before that, the sensation of slowly dying from edges of his body had eaten into Subaru without any room for doubt, working to ensure he died a cruel death.

Ultimately, everyone aside from Subaru—the gladiators, Tanza and the others included, as well as the guards and Gladiator Beasts, which were supposedly on the administration side of the Island, and even Cecilus, had died in an instant for reasons unknown.

As somewhat of an exception, Subaru had been the only one to outlive it, but just why in the world had that been?

Perhaps that question was one for which an answer could not be produced, even if one thought about it.

There was no person he could ask for the answer, and he thought it was not worth the time or brain cells.

Instead, he needed to focus on the information he could reliably gather.

Subaru: "That reaction from Todd… The answer is the curse rule."

On the verge of death, with a brain short of blood, he'd had to choose between two options, but he had obtained the correct answer.

Had Subaru not rethought things there, fixated on the idea that it had been due to Arakiya's magic, he would not have been able to return with that conviction.

Precisely because he had struck true, Todd had made the decision to kill Subaru in that split second.

He had concluded that Subaru was not a child on the verge of death, but a risk which he must kill immediately.

The speed with which Todd had switched gears, was the basis for Subaru's conclusion that the culprit had been the curse rule.

Subaru: "But, why the curse rule?"

Now that the possibility of poison gas had been eliminated and evidence in favor of the curse rule had emerged, he no longer intended on entertaining the idea that the curse rule was just a scare tactic and did not exist.

But if that were the case, then Gustav's behavior was now far too unnatural.

The basis for Subaru concluding that there was no curse rule, was that Gustav had not punished him using the curse rule, even though the Subaru had defied the rules of the Gladiator Island and had dangerously attempted to destroy order.

Certainly, Gustav did not seem eager to let the gladiators die, but when comparing the Island's order to Subaru alone, it made no sense for him to hesitate to make use of the curse rule.

That was why, thinking about it the other way—

Subaru: "—When I provoked him, even though Gustav-san wanted to use the curse rule, he did not use it. But, when everyone on the Island was killed, had the conditions to use it been fulfilled?"

For the time being, that was the arrangement of the events that had taken place that he could consider with the information he currently had.

Subaru: "…Gustav-san's an enemy, huh?"

Since the curse rule had been employed, in all likelihood, the Chief, Gustav, was an enemy to Subaru and the others.

In other words, with Gustav joining Todd and Arakiya, and it could be said that those were the three enemies. It was good to know with certainty that Cecilus was not an enemy, but at the same time, it was not enough for him to be pleased.

Since that curse rule was a threat of such caliber, that it had even taken Cecilus's life.

Subaru: "…"

In exchange for the information he had obtained, more and more bad ingredients were thrown into the cauldron.

Was it possible to filter through the contents of a cauldron of darkness boiling gently, and see all the way through to the bottom?

Thus, as far as the bad ingredients were, those were things he had to get rid of.

The reason was—

???: "Schwartz…!"

Subaru: "—Hk."

???: "This shaking is…"

Subaru was crouching down, clutching his chest where no wound was present, only the leftover shock of being stabbed.

Weitz, who had been worrying over Subaru, was surprised to feel a tremor coming up from under his feet. Of course, Subaru had known this was coming, and what the reason for this shaking was.

He knew, but there was a big problem.

—The grace period until the drawbridge would begin to move, had been shorter than it had been for his previous retrial upon Death.

2

If he turned away from what he did not want to think about and covered his ears, the matter would be settled without him having to feel down.

But if he were to do that, and were to turn his mindset into one of a loser, there would be no way to overcome the impending defeat.

That was why, no matter how unpleasant reality was, he could not close his eyes and cover his ears.

—Even if that reality was, for instance, the restart point having moved forward by ten seconds.

Subaru: “…”

The Authority of Return by Death possessed by Subaru had been yielding abnormalities, which had been particularly acting up recently.

In addition to setting unusual restart points, this time there was a slight discrepancy in time—the grace period had been shortened by ten seconds.

This was an anomaly different from previous cases, in which grace periods would be extremely limited, making it a perfect situation for fueling Subaru’s sense of anxiety and despair.

This time it had shortened by about ten seconds, but there was no guarantee that it would not shorten further.

If this anomaly continued to occur over and over again, until finally the time to death became less than a second, or if it even became impossible to Return by Death in the first place anymore, what would be left for Subaru to be able to do?

Even if he did not wish make plans based upon Return by Death, he would still consider the possibility of using Return by Death.

Now that he was smaller, Subaru was more helpless than before he shrank. This Empire’s realms were not so kind as to allow him to rest on his laurels only because he was adorable.

Therefore—

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???: “O-oi, Schwartz… Are we seriously just gonna sit there?”

Subaru: “Seriously. I’m begging you, this is a big one, don’t freak out this time, Hiain.”

???: “I won’t! I won’t, but…”

Thus, Hiain, who was right beside Subaru, bit his teeth and hesitated to speak, his voice trembling so much that everyone could tell he was just acting strong.

Subaru could understand why Hiain would be frightened and try to get him to reconsider.

If they were found, they would not get a free pass; Hiain had no idea why Subaru would want to do such a reckless thing.

However, if Subaru were to talk about the events that would ensue with honesty, whether he believed it or not, there was no doubt that Hiain would not cooperate with Subaru.

For that reason, Subaru had tricked Hiain into cooperating under false pretenses.

He was willing to be somewhat reckless with Hiain in order to obtain information that he could not ignore.

That information that Hiain also could not ignore was—

Hiain: “Shit, envoys from the Imperial Capital’re comin’ to talk ’bout a show…? Ya gotta be kiddin’ me…!”

Subaru: “—. I’ve asked Weitz to buy us some time. We’re gonna go get the details.”

Hiain: “Got’cha, I got’cha, I really do…”

Impatient and frustrated, Hiain was concerned about the island's events—a showcase of deathmatches involving the gladiators, the primary reason why Ginunhive was being run.

After having survived Sparka, and having been provided with an environment in which it was difficult to perish in a deathmatch between gladiators for the purpose of training, the biggest threat to one's life would be an event being held.

Falsely claiming to have information about the upcoming show, Subaru had requested help from Hiain.

As a result—

???: "—Come in. Allow me to hear what you have to say."

With a stern voice, the sound of a door being opened echoed through the room.

Two log-like arms threw the entrance open, and the atmosphere turned heavy with the return of the room's owner.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru shut his mouth at their entrance and tapped Hiain beside him on the shoulder. Hiain too, responded silently, as if resolving himself for a situation they could no longer back out of.

It was only natural. Subaru and Hiain could no longer afford to screw up.

The reason being—

???: "General First-Class Arakiya, and…"

???: "Todd."

A straightforward female voice answered Gustav's words, the person of a large build who had opened the door. There was a hint of a strained smile at that short, unkind answer,

Todd: "Private First-Class Todd Fang. For the time being, just until this task is finished.”

So followed the voice of a man, as if it were crushing Subaru’s very soul.

With no regard for Subaru’s feelings, the two people who being guided—Todd and the brown-skinned woman with an eyepatch, Arakiya, entered the room.

The room was Gustav’s office. The room to which Subaru had also been summoned for a stern warning the other day; Todd and Arakiya stepped in, as emissaries from the Imperial Capital.

Todd: “Though it’s for someone with a position like that of Governor, it’s a terribly plain room.”

In the middle of the room, standing to the side of the guest sofa, Todd surveyed his surroundings.

Admittedly, the things contained within Gustav’s room were few. With a work desk and bookcase, it could be said to be a room that matched its label as an office, containing naught but the necessities for carrying out his work.

It was understandable why he was paying attention to that point. But, Subaru wished that he would not look around.

And especially, not in the direction of the bookshelf in the corner of the room.

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Gustav: “—. It is an office. I have assembled everything I, in my capacity, need. Are you here to conduct an inspection?”

Todd: “Not at all, I’m just General First-Class Arakiya’s assistant. The General is very particular and has no subordinates but me.”

Arakiya: “Few in number, but elite.”

Todd: “Saying I’m elite, I feel that evaluation’s a bit impolite to my superiors.”

Todd shrugged at Gustav, who closed the door to his room and headed for his work desk. Todd slowly sat down on the sofa, his expression unchanged by Arakiya's subsequent words.

With that gaze now removed from the bookshelf, inwardly, Subaru took a very, very big sigh of relief.

It had been an unthinkably tense moment.

No matter how much he thought about it, the one who had repainted the worst situation with fear had been Todd.

That was why, from the bottom of his heart, he was afraid that he might be noticed again.

—Beside the bookcase, while covered by Hiain camouflaging against the surrounding scenery, Subaru was listening intently to this situation.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru had asked Weitz to stall the incoming carriage, and during that time, he and Hiain had trespassed into Gustav's office, hiding themselves using camouflage.

While there was a precedent of stalling being successful, whether the camouflage could be detected or not was something that could not be known without trying. He thought that he had understood the mechanism of Hiain's camouflage through the first Sparka and their conversations afterwards, but his conviction in it was a different matter.

The precision of Hiain's camouflage was influenced more by his nerve while remaining motionless, rather than the state of his mind and body. Were he to have the guts to stay still, he would be almost invisible, being assimilated into the scenery. He could hug Subaru's small body, so that the same effect would apply on him as well.

However, as soon as he moved, the ambience of the camouflaged scales would become disorderly, and turning it very much like a child playing hide-and-seek; they would be in full view of everyone.

In their fight against that lion-like Gladiator Beast, his scaredy-cat nature had caused him to die many a times. It was Hiain's own weak heart that hampered his strong points.

—However, the camouflaging he was performing right now should be able to tackle those weak points, to better them.

Subaru: "If they don't find us, we won't have to worry about them doing anything to us. The coming emissaries are a Divine General and her sharp-eyed second-in-command, but as long as your camouflage doesn't waver, you'll be fine. Besides—"

Hiain: "B-besides…?"

Subaru: "—I'll be with you."

Before they went into the office, Subaru looked him straight in the eye and told him that.

Even though they were the words of an audacious child with short arms and legs and a voice that had yet to become deeper, they had reached Hiain, whose friends' lives he had saved. Indeed, it seemed to resonate with him.

—That was why, this was the "first time" Hiain's camouflage had gone undetected.

Just what had Arakiya, and her second-in-command Todd, have come to the Island to discuss with Gustav beyond this point? This was the first time that conversation was able to begin.

Gustav: "General First-Class Arakiya, would you care to take a seat?"

Arakiya: "…I'll stand. Since, I can't settle down."

Gustav: "You cannot settle down?"

Arakiya: "It seems various things have happened since I came to the Island. I guess, it's because a Dragon's nest is nearby."

Even when encouraged to take a seat, Arakiya shook her head and remained standing. Her second-in-command, Todd, sat on the sofa, with Arakiya standing behind him.

Even so, the picture of Todd with his boss behind him did not feel out of place to Subaru, perhaps because he had too much of an image of Todd as someone very powerful and dreadful.

The moment Hiain's camouflage had become slightly distorted, he had gone straight for the kill, so it was impossible to not be cautious of someone like that. But—.

Gustav: "If that is fine with you, then it is no problem to me, as the official. So, the purpose of this visit is…"

Todd: "I appreciate being able to get right to work. We don't want to take too long either. General First-Class, permission to hand over the letter?"

Arakiya: "Do as you please."

Todd: "I'm grateful. Governor, this is a letter from the Imperial Capital, from the Prime Minister."

While Arakiya was quite literally standing there like a decoration, Todd took the letter out of his pocket and handed it over to Gustav. Now in Gustav's hand, the letter was sealed with a proper waxen seal, as to indicate the sender.

Though Subaru was unable confirm the imprint mark.

Subaru: "Imperial, Prime Minister…"

As Todd explained who had entrusted them with the letter, his words made Subaru's tongue dry up.

As he recalled, according to what Subaru had heard from the disagreeable Abel, the person in the position of Prime Minister was one of the main culprits for Abel having been driven out of the Imperial Capital.

Gustav had received a letter from the wicked Prime Minister who had chased out the Emperor of poor character. Moreover, the one who had delivered the letter was the human devil, Todd.

Considering the massacre that would occur on the Gladiator Island after this, this letter was nothing but a bad premonition.

Todd: “High Count Gustav Morello, I heard that you were assigned to this island as Governor by the order of His Excellency the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.”

Gustav: “There are no discrepancies in your understanding.”

Todd: “Even though it was by the order of His Excellency the Emperor, a loathed job such as the management of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive isn’t suitable for someone such as a blood relative of the hero of Vollachia, Kurgan, the Eight-Arms.”

As if to support Subaru’s premonition, the atmosphere of the room tingled with an intent to kill.

The cause was Todd’s rude, rambling manner of speaking. And Subaru knew what made Gustav the angriest based on their previous encounters.

The reason behind Gustav’s anger, more-so than what had been said about himself, was—

Gustav: “—That manner of speaking, do you doubt the honorable judgment of His Excellency the Emperor?”

That anger was due to disloyalty towards His Excellency the Emperor, or in other words, disloyalty towards Abel, who was Vincent.

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Todd: “…”

At the stern air Gustav emitted, Arakiya suddenly lined up next to Todd.

Arakiya’s face did not show what she was thinking, but that action alone made Subaru think that Gustav’s extreme loyalty would be crushed with force.

However, saying “General First-Class” while holding up his hand, it was none other than Todd himself who stopped Arakiya’s threat.

Todd: “Just now, I went too far with my words. The Governor’s anger is justified.”

Arakiya: “…But, I won’t let you die. You need to exact vengeance for your friend. Right?”

Todd: “—. Ah, of course, that’s right. Right now, that’s the purpose I live for.”

Despite reprimanding Arakiya’s attitude, Todd’s face showed sadness as he answered.

Vengeance for his friend, so had Arakiya pointed out towards Todd; Subaru could not help but bend his lips as he tried to not miss a single thing they said.

Todd, and vengeance, they were words with such terribly poor compatibility.

Subaru did not know Todd well enough to say that, but he supposed it meant that Todd had people who were important to him.

Neglecting his fiancée despite wanting to see her so badly, he had come to this island to kill a lot of people.

Todd: “I’m sorry for speaking so thoughtlessly, Governor. General First-Class Arakiya and I have some external concerns. Because of that, my behavior was inadequate. I apologize.”

Gustav: “…I accept your apology. But, going too far with what you say can invite disaster.”

Todd: “As far as that goes, it is painfully true to hear. I’m very, very aware of that.”

Todd, who had held Arakiya back, made a bitter face at Gustav’s advice. Ignoring Todd’s reaction, Gustav cracked the wax seal with his thick fingers, and opened the letter.

The Imperial Prime Minister, the person who was responsible for the current havoc within the Empire, the contents of his letter were —

Gustav: "—This is…"

Todd: "It was the intention of my impolite talk earlier, I didn't mean to offend. I just wanted to say that if the Governor's tired of managing the Gladiator Island, that's completely fine."

As Gustav ran his eyes over the letter, small wrinkles were notched into his rock-like face.

Gustav ran his eyes over the letter and carved little wrinkles in his rock-like face. Todd closed one eye as it seemed like a crack had been made on a real rock, and that crack was spreading.

Leaving Arakiya silent, Todd continued, appearing as if he was the main representative emissary.

Todd: "The gladiators of this Island are liable to cause internal conflict. In accordance with His Excellency the Emperor's wishes, they are to be disposed of, all at once."

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Matter-of-factly, with a deadpan delivery as if he were just talking about taking out the trash on garbage collection day, Todd had made a firm request to Gustav for the gladiators of the Gladiator Island—for several hundreds of people, to be disposed of.

Subaru: "…"

The only reason Subaru had been able to stomach that forecast of the worst outcome being right on the mark, was that he had already seen the massacre actually killing everyone on the island, and had henceforth steeled his heart.

Thus, it was a miracle that Hiain, who had received a bolt from the blue, did not scream.

Although, it would be more accurate to say that he was far too dumbfounded to grasp the situation.

Subaru: “…”

That singular voice had been so devoid of any sense of reality, that Hiain had forgotten to even move.

However, although they had gotten past through the lucky break of the camouflage not coming undone, Subaru could not help but bite down on his molars.

This request, it had led to the activation of the curse rule that would kill everyone on the Island.

As expected, it was just as he feared, Todd and Arakiya, and finally Gustav, had become his enemies.

As long as he could not stop those three from committing that heinous act, he would not be able to prevent that massacre.

Gustav: “Fear of internal trouble, you say…”

Todd: “Internal trouble is internal trouble, it’s something that, with its insolence, darkens the gracious influence of His Excellency the Emperor. Be that as it may, the Prime Minister does not believe that it is something Gustav is sheltering. The Governor’s loyalty is the real thing.”

Gustav: “…”

Todd: “For that reason, it must cause your heart to anguish. I am told that ever since the Governor was appointed to this Island, the quality of the gladiators unveiled at the shows is incomparable to what it used to be.”

While ordering the disposal of those gladiators, Todd’s attitude was one of showing appreciation for Gustav’s work.

As he looked down at the letter, Gustav's expression did not shift. Just how had Todd's words been resonating within him? Lacking freedom as he watched the situation, Subaru did not comprehend.

Gustav: "—. By decreasing the risk of needless deaths, by allowing them to acquire the foundations of how to fight, and by having them stand side-by-side rather than outmaneuvering others, the quality of the gladiators who survive shall improve."

But, in Gustav's own notions, having performed the administration of the Gladiator Island, it felt as if there had been something like pride in the tone of his voice as he calmly responded.

Instead of making the gladiators into a mere spectacle, Gustav had trained them, nurtured them, and reformed the rules of the Island in order to win the favor of both the Emperor and his subjects.

Probably, gentleness akin to attachment or affection towards the gladiators had not been present there.

It was Gustav's decision as the person placed in the position of Governor, and only that.

Arakiya: "Finished? Talking, that is."

So Arakiya asked of Gustav, who had placed all four of his hands atop the desk on which he had placed the letter as he closed his eyes.

It was an insensitive question that completely ignored the flow of the conversation, something that Subaru might have reacted to with anger and a flushed face, had he been in Gustav's shoes.

But, Gustav did not object to it, and Todd simply took it as a given.

Todd: "I've heard of a curse rule that'd be very convenient for the disposal. It seems that you have a curse tool given to you by General First-Class Groovy Gumlet, of the Nine Divine Generals. Using that, you can get them all in one go, or something."

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Gustav: “It is possible.”

Todd: “Then this’ll be a quick affair. Let’s get this over with and head back to the Imperial Capital together. We’ll need some time to prepare the new gladiators, so we’ll have to shut down Ginunhive for a while—”

Todd spoke as one might at the end of a class, putting away all the supplies he had used. The lack of seriousness in the way he spoke interfered with Hiain’s ability to reboot, his thinking still shut down.

However, even if Hiain had yet to reboot, it seemed like they were running out of time towards the great trigger.

If Gustav were to activate the curse rule in accordance with the written decree brought by Todd and Arakiya, total annihilation would follow.

Knowing that it was a capricious and unstoppable future, the only way to stop it was for Subaru to make a move here. But, just how should he act?

He already had the perfect notion that if he were to himself without a plan, he would be killed on the spot.

On the other hand, even if they tried to take the one who was probably able to make use of the curse rule, Gustav, he was significantly stronger than both Subaru and Hiain—.

Gustav: “—I refuse.”

And so Gustav declined Todd and Arakiya’s demands, so he would take advantage of that. Take advantage.

Advantage, taking advantage, what would that be?

Todd: “…What?”

Subaru, desperately trying to wrack his brain, was just as scrambled in his thoughts as Hiain was.

In contrast to Subaru, who had lost his train of thought, Todd's voice was unfeeling and sharp.

Subaru felt as if the atmosphere in the room had become more thick and viscous.

That change in temperature was fundamentally different to the time Gustav had gotten offended by Todd's manner of speaking. It was not the heat or moisture in the atmosphere, but rather, what had changed was its very color.

Clad in that atmosphere, staring at Gustav, who had his hands on his desk, Todd said,

Todd: "Is there any discrepancy between the contents of the written decree and what you understand from our end?"

Gustav: "No. The letter contains the same information you have just given me. The Prime Minister's name and his seal are not misprinted."

Todd: "If that's the case, then what kind of intent are you expressing?"

Spreading his arms out, Todd asked this of Gustav, who had thrust aside his demands.

Subaru, too, did not understand anything that was going on. Gustav had rejected the demands Todd had brought from the Imperial Capital to purge all the gladiators on Gladiator Island by utilizing the curse rule.

Just why? The reason was—

Gustav: "—As the official, I have been ordered by His Excellency the Emperor. In preparation for emergencies, strive to develop the gladiators, trained in both body and mind."

Todd: "The seal of the Prime Minister reflects the will of His Excellency the Emperor. Are you saying that, because it conflicts with what your orders from beforehand, you're unable to make a decision? The written decree is the real thing, you know."

Gustav: “I do not suspect forgery. I accept it as a written decree from the Prime Minister.”

Todd: “…But it’s still not worth considering?”

Frowning, Todd turned his discerning eyes toward Gustav, someone he could not understand.

For just this time, Subaru shared the same opinion as Todd. Even though he was grateful that Gustav had brushed off the demands, he had no idea of the true motives behind that.

Then, in front of Subaru and Todd, who were harboring identical bewilderment, Gustav continued.

Gustav: “From His Excellency the Emperor, I have directly been given orders.”

Todd: “Like I said, the written decree is retracting that, and telling you to obey the next orders…”

Gustav: “The order of His Excellency the Emperor, came when I was installed as the Governor of this Island.”

Interrupting Todd’s words, Gustav was stating the basis for his option. Several years ago, the time when Gustav had been appointed as Governor of the Gladiator Island.

That was—

Gustav: “His Excellency the Emperor told me this. “—Even if you receive orders from me, do not disobey this first order.”“

Todd: “…”

Those were undoubtedly the words that would guide Gustav, who had been placed in this situation.

Those words had foreseen that Gustav would be placed in this situation. Something like “proper preparation” was not adequate in the least, so it was an order that could not have been established without prescient foresight.

Because of the Vollachian Emperor, Vincent—no, because of Abel, there were preparations for the future.

Todd: “So, what you’re saying is, because you have previous orders from His Excellency the Emperor, you cannot obey His Excellency the Emperor’s current orders?”

Gustav: “He also told me that I need not know the reason. As the official, I agree. Regardless of whether I know or not, the duties that I, in my capacity, must carry out, do not change.”

Shaking his head, Gustav firmly responded to Todd’s question.

Todd slightly narrowed his eyes as he faced Gustav, who maintained his resolute attitude. That his gaze was trying to somehow persuade Gustav, was not what his face suggested he was thinking.

After all, he no longer had any reason to exhaust his words trying to persuade the resolute man who refused to listen.

In other words—

Todd: “Arakiya. —Negotiations have broken down.”

Gustav: “—Hk!”

Like that, Todd spoke to Arakiya in a flat voice.

The subsequent instant, before a fatal situation arrived, Gustav grabbed all four sides of the desk with all four of his arms, and was about to lift it up and throw it at the two visitors.

As the muscles in his thick, strong arms bulged, he easily lifted the desk, which seemed to weigh close to a hundred kilograms—

Arakiya: “Slosh—”

Together with that unfeeling chant, Arakiya pointed the wooden branch she held towards Gustav.

Immediately subsequent to that, an immensely powerful jet of water spurted from the tip of the wand, blowing away Gustav’s stone-like face in its entirety alongside everything else above his neck, and that life of his transformed into a deceased one.

There was a heavy thud, and the desk whose legs had been lifted for a moment fell to the floor. A beat later, as if trying to throw the desk using his entire being, Gustav's body, having lost everything upwards of its neck, collapsed to the ground.

A large amount of blood gushed from the wound on his neck, where he had lost his head, which dirtied the floor of the office non-stop.

The fresh blood that spread seemed to insist on Gustav's quick death, which did not feel real.

Todd: "People of the Multi-Arm Tribe, they sure are the same no matter how many arms they got. If anything, just go and get some more heads."

Todd cracked the bones in his neck while looking at the dead Gustav. Then he looked back at Arakiya, who was staring intently at the tip of her branch, and asked "What's wrong?" as he tilted his head.

Todd: "No way, you couldn't be surprised by your own power, right?"

Arakiya: "Incorrect. But, I'm surprised… So much power, with mere water."

Todd: "Oh, that, huh. If you're aiming for a crowd of people who are spread out, then fire's better, but if your opponent is one person, then water's definitely the best. Next time, just put one glass of water's worth or thereabouts inside your opponent's head, that'd be enough."

Arakiya: "Understood… Todd?"

While suggesting some frightening things, Todd walked up to Gustav's corpse. As she cast her eyebrows down, Arakiya called out to him, who had drawn a somewhat large knife from his side.

Not answering her call, Todd went around behind the corpse atop the desk, and thrusting his knife into its thick back without mercy, he sliced it open vertically.

It was a method sparing no quarter, as if carving up a fish.

There was a large quantity of blood flowing from the neck, but the spurts of blood from the already-dead body were minimal; even so, while basking in an amount of blood that was not small in the least, Todd dissected Gustav's body.

Subaru: "…"

Reflexively averting his eyes from that scene, Subaru became aware of his own trembling.

Until now, Subaru had considered Todd to be a dreadful enemy, but this was the first time he had seen him involved in such grotesque conduct. —To think that he would take a person, and dissect them as if they were an animal.

Todd's violence was consistently focused straight on the goal of eliminating enemies and danger.

If he had such a liking towards defiling a corpse in this way, Subaru wondered if every time, after Todd had killed him, his own corpse had been defiled in the same fashion.

Thinking this, an unbearable sense of dread and feeling of revulsion dominated his entire body.

Amidst the unpleasant noises that made him want to plug his ears, Subaru was unable to do so.

Even in a scenario that made him want to kill his emotions by instinct, he never knew what could be lurking there. Perhaps when running away from Todd, if there were corpses nearby, then he might get distracted by them.

And why he was thinking about such a stupid thing was—

Todd: "—There it is."

Arakiya: "—? What is?"

Suddenly, that unpleasant wet sound came to an end, and Todd and Arakiya's conversation shifted.

Arakiya, too, had lowered her voice at Todd's vulgar taste, to which Todd had replied quite indifferently, wiping the blood splattered on his cheek with the back of his hand.

Todd: "It's the curse tool y'know, the curse tool. I figured someone like him would keep it embedded in his body somehow."

Arakiya: "Curse tool…"

Todd: "It's necessary to activate the curse rule… Ah, it's fine if you don't know. Anyhow."

While saying that, what Todd had pulled out of Gustav's body was what appeared to be a black orb, which had been embedded dead center in his large body.

The orb Todd had called the curse tool was around the size of a golf ball, at most.

Even so, it was the curse tool necessary to activate the curse rule.

In other words—

Todd: "As long as I have this thing, it doesn't matter whether the owner lives or dies. —He sure did something stupid."

Fiddling with the curse tool in his hand, Todd moved away from Gustav's corpse's back, which had lost its head under heroic circumstances, while calling out to it.

There was neither pity nor sympathy in his voice. Instead, there was a tinge of indifference and disgust.

Todd: "It's strange that you thought you could compete against a monster."

Todd muttered as he tilted his head, presumably referring to

Arakiya, who had killed Gustav in the time of a single breath.

However, neither Gustav, who had lost his life, nor Subaru, who had been present at the scene, could help but think that the “monster” in question was undoubtedly Todd.

Subaru: “…”

—Thus, by any means necessary, he must steal the curse tool from that “monster”.

Todd: “Arakiya, give me water. I need to rinse off the blood, then, as for the guys on the Island—”

Todd’s attention turned to Arakiya after tearing Gustav’s corpse open, wanting to wash his bloody knife and hands.

Putting the curse tool in his hand onto the work desk for one moment, Todd turned to Arakiya’s side.

—Instinctively, Subaru decided that it had to be then.

Arakiya: “Ah.”

And, prompted by Arakiya’s word, her mouth wide open, Todd turned back around. Noticing a child having appeared in the middle of the room all of a sudden, reaching his hand out to the curse tool on the desk, Todd’s eyes opened wide.

Hiain’s camouflage came to an end, having completed its job.

So thoroughly, that neither the meticulous Todd nor the monster-grade Arakiya, had noticed Subaru and Hiain’s presence.

Subaru: “Hiain!”

The instant he caught onto the curse tool with his fingertips, Subaru called out to Hiain, who had concealed himself by assimilating with the floor he lay down on.

However, his gaze was in a completely different direction—the entrance to the office.

Facing that way, he raised his voice,

Subaru: “Blow away the whole room!!”

Todd: “—Hk, Arakiya!”

Hearing Subaru’s strained shout, Todd immediately called out for Arakiya. While also keeping vigilance towards the door, Arakiya clung close by Todd’s side.

If an outrageous attack were to be cast from near the door, they would be able to respond to it.

However—

Todd: “—It’s a bluff?!”

In one second, a moment in which nothing happened, Todd saw through Subaru’s intention. But by being given just that second, Subaru was able to fulfill his objective.

He grasped the cursed tool, and just after—

Hiain: “Wooooooaaaah!”

While howling, Hiain came flying towards the waist of Subaru, who had gotten a hold of the curse tool, and grabbed him. Just after, Hiain held Subaru in his arms as they plunged into the side of the room opposite to the entrance—into the window of the office.

The entire weight of their bodies crashed into it, and Subaru and Hiain flew out as the window frame was destroyed.

The moment they jumped out—

Arakiya: “Splash—”

And, with power unimaginable from such an unfeeling chant, a flash flood devastated the office.

Water with tremendous pressure blew away the upper stratum of the Gladiator Island, and the furniture and bookcases that Gustav, the owner of the room, had so meticulously arranged, were swept away without mercy.

However—

Arakiya: “They’re gone.”

Watching the items in the room streaming out of the broken walls one-by-one, Arakiya, the one responsible, stepped on the wet floor and muttered so.

Looking towards the exterior of the broken office, downwards, a white cloth tied along the wall could be seen.

If one were to grab it and let their hands glide, they would be able to descend to the bottom.

Arakiya: “This…”

Todd: “So they were fully prepared to ambush us, huh? —That kid, just what is he.”

Next to Arakiya, also looking out the wall, Todd put his hand over his mouth, murmuring.

Narrowing his eyes, Todd, in careful thought, let out a small sigh,

Todd: “Arakiya, go recover the curse tool. It’s alright to kill.”

Arakiya: “Understood. What about you, Todd?”

Todd: “The things I’m going to do, you don’t need to know about them.”

With a shake of his head, Todd brushed off Arakiya’s question like that. However, Arakiya was unbothered by that, and instead leaned out of the broken wall and dropped straight down.

Without cheap tricks, without any assistance, from dozens of meters high.

And then, seeing Arakiya off as she chased after the intruders, Todd heaved a sigh, and,

Todd: “…That brat sure had a nasty smell.”

And, muttering so, his eyes lacking any expression, he clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Chapter 72: Ludicrous Rumors

1

—The sheet dangling from the office's window had been insurance, in case the worst came to pass.

Inside Gustav's office, a discussion between him and two emissaries, Todd and Arakiya, had been in progress, although only led entirely by the two of Todd and Gustav—getting to the crux of the pair's visit to the Island had taken quite a lot of trial and error for Subaru and Hiain, as they had eavesdropped.

The events that would occur, the words that would be employed, a way with which to calm Hiain down, the blind spot for him and Hiain to hide in, an escape route; those were the requirements.

They would have to deceive Todd, a meticulous person, and Arakiya, one of the Nine Divine Generals.

They had no problems in being similar to characters in a manga that could feel any presence. For the purpose of deceiving them, Subaru had needed to pull out all the stops.

He had asked Weitz to buy some time, Tanza to bring herbs with strong odors on the way to the office, and Idra to gather people on the vantage point so as to distract them, even if only a little.

By doing all those things, they would raise their suspicion to the utmost, but only so much that they still would not act on it.

Those fortifications, built upon thin ice, had allowed them to overcome their opponent's own defensive fortifications.

However—

Hiain: "Schwartz, what's the plan now?!"

Subaru: "Still thinking!"

As he clung on to Hiain's body, having barely avoided a fall to their death, Subaru bellowed.

Being a lizardman, his hands and feet could attach to the walls in a manner akin to actual lizards. However, Hiain's body was bigger than a lizard's, and furthermore, he had been saddled with a weight, that being Subaru.

A closer description would be that they had descended rapidly, borrowing the dangling sheets' assistance to avoid injury.

Having been lowered from Hiain's arms to the courtyard, Subaru then confirmed the feeling of the curse tool in his hand.

The black ball, still sticky and wet with blood, had been inside Gustav's body—just where exactly it had been placed, he did not know, only that it had been ripped out of him.

Subaru: "Guh."

Enduring the nausea rising from within, Subaru frantically planned his next move.

The very instant Todd let go of the curse tool had been the instant Subaru thought he had to act. Since he had attained the curse tool this way, he had not been mistaken in that.

But at the same time, there was no doubt that it was a move made without any thought on what to do afterwards.

Subaru: "Anyway, let's use your camouflage in those bushes!"

Hiain: "A-are ya sure we shouldn't run?"

Subaru: "No, we can't just run away without any thought, she'd find us right away! Quickly!"

Between the options that popped into his head, "running" or "hiding", he had immediately chosen "hiding".

As they had already aroused the hostility of Todd and Arakiya, there was no doubt that they would face Death either way. So he had opted for a path that would give him better insight into future events.

If they were to run away, they would have to continuously stay on the run.

But if they hid, they would be able to continue mulling over what to do next for as long as they stayed silent.

Subaru: "…"

Pulling the arm of the bewildered Hiain, Subaru dove behind a plant in the corner of the courtyard. Then, Hiain camouflaged himself while covering Subaru, hiding themselves from those around them.

With Hiain's body pressing down on him, he felt his heartbeat on his back, beating with an inordinate force.

He was frightened, cowering. Still, he had to endure this.

Because if he could not—

???: "They're not here."

With a light thud, a girl overcame the height that Subaru and Hiain had struggled to descend.

The one landing barefoot in the courtyard was Arakiya, holding a thin tree branch in her hand. One of her eyes covered by an eyepatch, she turned, surveying the courtyard with her sleepy-looking eye.

Could Hiain's camouflage truly deceive her eye as she searched?

Even if they could elude one's perception provided the person was unaware of their existence, they would not be able to conceal themselves in the blind spot were their existence to be known. If she just searched for Subaru and Hiain with the slighest bit of extra attentiveness, would heighten their anxiety on being found.

There was nothing Subaru could do about that. But they absolutely could not let themselves be found.

Not because he had obtained a curse tool capable of killing or saving everyone on the Island.

For a more pressing reason, a reason directly related to Natsuki Subaru's own state, was why he could not afford being found, was why he could not afford dying.

Arakiya: "Hm—"

He wished that she would turn around and walk away in the wrong direction.

But in the end, that wish of his was in vain; wrinkling her brow and letting out a small growl, Arakiya approached the shrubs where Subaru and Hiain were hiding.

Their presence, their smell, their breathing, the sound of one of their heartbeats, he did not know which one had tipped her off.

Or perhaps, it was some sort of aura that only the strong were able to sense, something Subaru and his partner could not. If she was feeling anything along those lines, it would be beyond foul play. To corner them with something they had no way to counteract should be against the rules.

But it seemed that, in Arakiya's point of view, those rules were laughable at best—.

???: "Oioi, the hell's this? The Governor's room's been blown up!"

???: "Who's this beautiful woman, is she a guest?"

???: "What is it, did something happen?"

Just before these bitter thoughts completely filled his head, just before Arakiya reached the garden shrubs, the courtyard's atmosphere was disturbed by the voices of multiple men.

Looking over, five gladiators had lumbered over and made their appearance in the courtyard. They were probably onlookers of a

Unit who had caught the sound of Arakiya blowing Gustav's room up.

Their attention was focused on Gustav's room, with its blown-out walls, and on Arakiya, a beautiful, unfamiliar girl standing in the courtyard.

Arakiya, too, turned towards them as they appeared, tilting her slender head with a thoughtful look.

From her perspective, it was as though she was suspecting that those that had now appeared were comrades of the ones she was chasing, Subaru and Hiain. But Subaru did not mind that, not in the least.

Their appearance in this juncture had been completely unforeseen by Subaru, they were intruders summoned by coincidence.

Even if she were to question them, she would obtain no information in regards to Subaru and Hiain. In fact, Subaru and Hiain would wait for a chance to sneak away while she attempted to make them talk.

They were a lifeline provided by the heavens, different from what Subaru and Hiain had prepared themselves—

???: "—Listen!"

???: "—Hk."

Not wanting to miss their chance, Subaru and Hiain, who had been watching Arakiya's movements intently, heard a voice emanating from the room with a broken wall above them.

The one who the voice belonged to was Todd, the last person remaining in that room.

Regaining his fear of Todd, whose existence had momentarily been put out of his consciousness due to focusing on the threat of Arakiya in front of him, he psyched himself up as he trembled.

He braced his fearful heart, so that he would be able to deal with whatever Todd was about to say.

Todd: “Governor Gustav Morello has been killed! The two perpetrators are a black-haired child, and a gray lizardman! Kill them as soon as you find them!”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “I repeat! Governor Gustav Morello has been killed! The Governor’s role will be taken over by General First-Class Arakiya! If you don’t want to die due to the curse rule, kill them both!”

His voice was not rough, neither did it overwhelm with emotions, but it possessed emotional control necessary to be heard by a large number of human beings and make them act.

That voice lingered in one’s eardrums, forbidding those who listened from forgetting its contents, even if they lagged behind in understanding.

The moment Todd spoke, Subaru’s eyes widened as he realized that they had been outsmarted.

The blame for Gustav’s death was now being attributed to Subaru and Hiain. Even if they claimed they were being falsely accused, there was no hope that a proper investigation or trial would be held on this Island.

To begin with, if they were caught by someone even once, everything would be over for Subaru and Hiain.

In other words—

Todd: “—Now, let Sparka begin!!”

The evil custom of Gladiator Island Ginunhive, its Lifeblood Ritual, would begin with the entire Island as a stage.

Todd: “Arakiya!”

Declaring the commencement of that cruel ceremony, with those who had heard it still unable to move, Todd called out to Arakiya in a less strident voice.

She looked up and their eyes met, and Todd silently pointed to the courtyard below. For a moment, Subaru's heart palpitated, but Todd was not pointing at him and Hiain.

He was pointing at the gladiators, the heavenly lifeline that had appeared in the courtyard at the last moment.

Todd, after pointing at the gladiators, brought that very same finger to his neck, and,

Todd: "—Kill them."

While his voice had been inaudible, even Subaru had been able to tell that his lips had moved as to speak that.

Moving his finger along his neck was a ruthless cue for lopping off someone's head. Arakiya, having witnessed the same sight Subaru had, slowly turned her gaze toward the gladiators.

The gladiators were puzzled, being stared at by Arakiya, through the one red eye of hers that was uncovered by an eyepatch.

They had yet to digest the meaning of Todd's prior words.

Gladiator: "Lil' miss, ya know somethin' 'bout that? That thing 'bout Gustav being dead, is that…"

Arakiya: "I'm sorry. I was told to."

Gladiator: "Huh…? Told what?"

A gladiator tilted his head, the combination of that sudden order and the pair of people unknown to them being the reason. And Arakiya, responding to the gladiator, produced a great sideways swing of her right hand, which held the branch.

That was all she did. That alone, was enough.

Gladiator: "Buah…"

The next moment, the heads of all five gladiators facing Arakiya exploded from the inside.

To be precise, the effects had been split. Some'd had their heads burst from the inside, some had died because the contents of their faces had been pushed out of their eyes and noses, and some had died because their heads had swollen in bizarre fashion.

Although it probably had not made much of a difference as far as they were concerned, since the results had been the same regardless.

Arakiya: "To not talk to dead people."

With their heads destroyed, the gladiators fell limp.

Only after a while did Subaru realize that her mutter, let out while looking at the fallen gladiators, was the answer to his question from earlier. His mind was too occupied for him to pay any attention to it.

His mind was too occupied in processing what that monster, Arakiya, had done.

—It was probably, water.

Todd had given Arakiya advice at the time Gustav was killed. To put water inside her opponent's head, perhaps that was what she had done.

The heads of the gladiators had been blown up from the inside, with the water that materialized there being the cause.

Arakiya: "One glass of water's worth…"

As she voiced that, Arakiya fiddled with the tip of the branch in her hand with her other hand.

While her ruminating tone lacked emotion, to Subaru it sounded somewhat like she was expressing dissatisfaction she felt. —A dissatisfaction that only amounted to her being unhappy about not reaching that amount.

Having feelings of that sort after murdering people, it was far from normal.

That was why she was a monster. Arakiya, and of course, Todd was one too.

???: “Anyone here?! Did anyone hear that loud-ass voice just now?!”

Arakiya’s inhuman deeds made Subaru’s mind grow darker; and while Hiain froze, forgetting to even breathe, yet another voice arrived at the courtyard.

Another gladiator. One gladiator after another rushed there, understanding that it was the most likely spot everyone was gathering at since they were able to look up at the Governor’s office, from which they had heard that voice.

And so, that meant—

Gladiator: “Oi, you, where did you come from! The Governor’s…”

Arakiya: “I was told to. —To not talk to dead people.”

That the victims of the Spirit Eater, of Arakiya, would increase.

Hence, it commenced.

—A massacre on the Gladiator Island commenced, for a reason different to the curse rule being invoked.

2

The situation that Todd had set up was so horrid, that it was hard to believe that it had been a sudden flash of inspiration.

One-by-one, Arakiya would kill the gladiators indiscriminately.

Naturally, there was not even a single person able to take her on and return a blow, given that she was a Divine General. Entering her field of vision was a calamity of such magnitude as to signify instant death.

Certainly, Arakiya should have been able to manipulate waterspouts and explosive flames, but the fact that she had not utilized those kinds of powerful techniques that seemed like they could engulf the entire Island, at the very least, truly provided some modicum of relief.

Perhaps loathing being unable to check the corpses in that case, Todd had ordered her as such.

And Arakiya aside, the Island's guards were also troublesome.

From what it seemed, the guards had somehow believed Todd's words that Arakiya had taken over Gustav's role after the latter's demise. Subaru did not know how someone could actually take over an official position of the sort, but he did not believe Gustav would wish his murderer to succeed him.

A portion of that matter had become that Subaru and Hiain had killed Gustav, so as far as the guards were concerned, there was no reason to doubt Todd's words.

Subaru disliked being misunderstood by the guards like that, but his biggest problem was—

???: "Shit! They've really done it! The guards have unleashed the Gladiator Beasts onto the Island! They're coming at us! Runrunrunrun!"

Such bellows and screams were continuously raised throughout the Island as it descended into chaos.

The unleashed Gladiator Beasts—the ones employed as enemies during Sparka, were, as far as Subaru could see, Witchbeasts who'd all had their horns broken off, and currently, they were obeying the guards.

Those Gladiator Beasts, complying with the orders given by the guards following Todd, were on the prowl for the pair of Subaru and Hiain on the Island. —However, the Gladiator Beasts could not distinguish between each gladiator.

That was why, one after another, the Gladiator Beasts had also begun attacking the gladiators indiscriminately.

???: “Where are ya?! Hurry up ‘n c’mon out, Schwartz! Ya creepy lil’ brat!”

A guard yelled, his eyes shimmering with hostility, as he patrolled the corridors with a large two-headed dog next to him.

The guards did not make active attempts to communicate with the gladiators, so this marked the first time Subaru had seen them lay their emotions bare in such a way. The thought that they had always harboured hostility in that way, also brought sadness to Subaru.

Only, it did not just bring sadness, it also brought a realization.

The guards looking for Subaru and Hiain appeared to be impatient and irritated, and moreover, they appeared afraid. Probably, that was not unrelated to the fact that the guards too would die when the curse rule was activated.

The guards, too, were taking many things into consideration as they chose to obey, so that they themselves would not die.

Arakiya and the guards, from Subaru and Hiain’s perspective, were dangerous enemies prowling the Island.

Had Todd, the one controlling them like pawns, been operating on his own, or had he been spreading his instructions? The fact that his whereabouts were unknown considerably diminished Subaru’s capability to think.

The whole time, because he had continuously been on the lookout for Todd, his strained heart was on the brink of cracking.

And to pour salt on Subaru’s wounds—

???: “Oi, where’s Schwartz?! Was he there?”

???: “Haven’t seen him! I’m more worried ’bout the guards! If they find us, we’re dead!”

???: “So, if we hand Schwartz over to them…”

???: “Ya moron! They’re killin’ anyone they find! They ain’t makin’ any distinction!”

???: “Then what’re ya gonna do?! Are ya gonna just shut up n’ die’?!”

???: “B-but, if those rumors about Schwartz are true…!”

Heard were the voices of gladiators, desperately keeping on struggling as best as they could, in order to survive.

Faced with the threat posed by Arakiya and the guards, among the desperate gladiators, opinions were split.

Either stand up to the tyranny, or do as they were told and hand Subaru over; there were those who had resigned themselves to the fact that both were futile, some who lamented this unreasonable situation, others who tried to cling to a papier-mâché hope devoid of any basis, among various others.

Even amongst the gladiators, Subaru had enemies, as well as a great number of people that could potentially become enemies.

In a way, compared to Arakiya and the guards, who could all be classified as enemies, this group may be far more formidable.

Since he could not tell friend from foe, Subaru could not rely on them so carelessly.

Arakiya, the guards and the Gladiator Beasts, the gladiators whom he could not know if they were friend or foe—and finally, Todd.

With the commencement of the pursuit after Subaru and Hiain, the Gladiator Island headed for destruction.

It had indeed come to pass. The massacre. Even though he had struggled so desperately to try and prevent it.

Subaru: “Old Man Null!”

Dashing through the island that had become a catastrophe, Subaru barged into the room just around the corner.

The healing room on the lower stratum of the Island was the workplace of Old Man Null, where he had taken care of Subaru many times. The entrance to the room had been demolished, and because of that, Subaru felt a bad premonition as he rushed into the room.

And that bad premonition of his came true.

???: “Schwartz-sama…”

Greeting Subaru as he ran into the healing room, was a hoarse hail of a young girl. It had come from Tanza sitting in the back of the room; lying next to her petite form, was the corpse of a rat from which wings protruded.

Tanza had probably defeated that Witchbeast single-handedly. Subaru thought that that was very incredible.

But before Tanza had come along, that Witchbeast had devastated the healing room, and killed a person.

At Tanza’s feet as she crouched down, was a collapsed cadaver whose head had been bitten right off, the cadaver of a feeble old man who was nothing more than skin and bones.

Hiain: “S-Schwartz…”

Hiain, having burst into the healing room alongside Subaru, had his voice tremble upon witnessing the same sight.

That he had been able to remain hidden until Arakiya left that courtyard in which she executed that heinous act of murdering gladiators as they came along one bye one, had only been thanks to Hiain.

Without him, it would have been utterly impossible for Subaru to return to this place.

However, if they just repeatedly ran and hid, in the end, they would not win.

???: “Schwartz, you’re back?!”

???: “Hmph, ya didn’t die either, lizard bastard…”

Idra and Weitz also rushed over to Old Man Null’s corpse, in front of which Subaru and Hiain were hanging their heads. All the members of his Unit, who had helped him sneak into the office, were present.

Considering the state of the Island, that no one had died and they had been able to reconvene was akin to a miracle.

However, if it truly were a miracle, shouldn’t the results they had procured be much, much better than this?

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, are the stories floating about true? About Governor Gustav’s fate?”

Subaru: “That it was me and Hiain? There’s no way we could’ve done that. Gustav-san was killed by the emissaries from the Imperial Capital… By Arakiya. No, it was Todd, who made use of Arakiya.”

Tanza: “Todd…? Who is that…”

Subaru: “Someone scarier than a Sin Archbishop.”

At least, that was Subaru’s current perception.

From what he recalled, Sin Archbishops were not good people either but when compared to Todd, they still had some charm, was what it seemed like. No, it did not seem like that. No matter what they were compared to, scum remained scum.

But the way Subaru had put it seemed to make Tanza and everyone else understand just how dangerous Todd was.

Tanza: “Do not give such a reckless example. Even if we comprehend they differ from the likes of the Sin Archbishops, it is still bad for the heart.”

Subaru: “Ah, sorry, but I’m quite familiar with them. After all, I’ve happened to encounter them plenty of times.”

Tanza: “You have encountered Sin Archbishops plenty of times? That is, as expected…”

Subaru: “As expected, what does that mean? Do you know something about me?”

Everyone: “…”

Partly out of frustration, he spoke in a way that sounded like he was reproaching Tanza.

Subaru regretted this, but Tanza’s reaction, her eyes downcast, was not due to being reproached, but seemingly in concern for Subaru’s previous comment itself.

That was a little strange to Subaru.

No way though, that any of these people knew of Subaru’s circumstances—that every time he Returned by Death, his Miasma, which was seemingly connected to the Witch, got stronger.

Idra: “So, what should we do? If Governor Gustav is dead, then the curse rule that binds us must be gone as well. Should we raise the drawbridge and head off the Island?”

Hiain: “Y-ya idiot! We ain’t got the key for that! Besides, if we move the drawbridge, we’ll be targeted immediately!”

Weitz: “So, ya prefer to keep on fighting everyone else on the Island…? If the enemy’ll be a Divine General, then sooner or later… There’ll be no way left for us to retreat…”

As Idra and everyone else discussed how to overcome the situation, Subaru’s attention also turned in that direction.

Idra’s suggestion of escaping via the drawbridge was a good one. Of the various conditions that had changed, because the curse tool was present in Subaru’s hands, and the curse rule was no more, they could now leave the Island.

However, as Hiain had said, if they were to escape by using the drawbridge, they could be ambushed in two places. On the control tower for operating the drawbridge, and on the drawbridge itself as they crossed it.

On the other hand, not leaving the Island was an idea that kept getting worse and worse, so as per Weitz's statement, they would not choose it.

In addition to that—

Subaru: "—Gustav-san."

If things continued at this rate, the island's gladiators, who were still losing their lives, falling prey to Arakiya one-by-one, and Old Man Null as well, would remain dead in a world that would live on.

That was something unbearable for Subaru.

Even if he had succeeded in recovering the curse tool, and the fear of the curse had disappeared, deciding that this was the "very best" and moving forward was not what Natsuki Subaru had originally desired.

—Such a path was not what the son of Natsuki Kenichi ought to choose.

Subaru: "At least, if I can reduce the number of people I have to deal with…"

His eyes shut tightly, Subaru was stuck amidst a maze of deliberations.

As he murmured, Tanza beside him bit into her thin lip. In a situation where the entire Island was hostile, certainly another different choice would also emerge if their circumstances were even a bit better, but—

Hiain: "…Hey, heeey, in that case, can't'cha just stop hidin' it?"

Subaru: "…"

Hiain: “Oi, Schwartz, I mean you. I’m talkin’ to ya, man.”

Subaru: “…Huh?”

As Hiain suddenly started talking, a feeling of trepidation in his voice, Subaru widened his eyes in wonder.

It had happened as he was pondering over things, but even more than that, since he had no idea what the hell Hiain was talking about, Subaru had been slow to reach.

To stop hiding it, so Hiain had told Subaru.

So he had told him, but—

Subaru: “To stop hiding it… Hiding what?”

Hiain: “C-cut it out! In this situation, keepin’ it a secret ain’t the right move!”

Weitz: “Oi, stop it, lizard bastard…!”

Hiain snapped at Subaru with an intense vigor, the latter without a clue as to what the former was going on about. Weitz intervened to stop him, but Subaru was too surprised to thank him.

But Idra, also making a serious face, prefaced with “Schwartz” towards Subaru,

Idra: “The way he’s putting it aside, I understand how Hiain is feeling. Isn’t it about time you come forth with it?”

Subaru: “No, like I said, I have no idea what you’re talking about…”

Idra: “—It’s, about your father.”

Subaru: “…My dad?”

With seriousness, with unbelievable seriousness, Idra declared so to Subaru.

But despite being told that with such seriousness, Subaru’s confusion only grew more and more. He did not understand why it was so necessary to talk about his father right now.

Subaru's father was, in the eyes of his son, in the eyes of his wife, a man of paramount splendidness, a person who ought to be respected, the very object of Subaru's admiration, but—

Subaru: "But, he's an ordinary salaryman…?"

Hiain: "Don't pull the wool over my eyes! I already know! Ya're His Excellency the Emperor's illegitimate son, ain't'cha?!"

Subaru: "…"

Subaru's voice, as he attempted to explain that that information would not be useful in this situation, was drowned out by Hiain's own, as the latter's arms were held behind his back.

It was drowned out, but the volume of water employed to do so was so overwhelming, that Subaru's mind was unable to comprehend the vastness of the wave that had washed him over.

Just now, what did Hiain say?

Subaru: "…I'm, His Excellency the Emperor's, child?"

Hiain: "Yeah, that's right! It's bein' talked about outside the Island! With black hair and black eyes, the illegitimate son of His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia's somewhere in the country! That's…"

Idra: "—Schwartz, it seems that'd be you?"

Taking over from Hiain, Idra spoke towards Subaru, his voice and eyes serene.

The eyes of Hiain, seemingly depending on him, and the eyes of Idra, which had faith in him, when they appeared as if they had not just told an unfunny joke in this situation, Subaru looked to Weitz.

His tattoo-covered face contorting, Weitz spoke,

Weitz: "I believe I told'cha… I know who ya are… But, I don't give a fuck ‘bout that, I’ll lend ya my strength regardless…”

Were it not for these circumstances, those faithful words would have been far more moving.

Back then, when Subaru had been told that in the lower stratum, just how much resolve had it taken Weitz to go and say that, its weight only now becoming clear.

And that too, came from a wholly mistaken idea.

Subaru: “W-wait, wait a sec… Me, the child of the Emperor, why?”

Idra: “For someone of such young age, your ability for judgment, command, and survival are unimaginable. You were the one who saved us and Hiain’s people during Sparka, Schwartz.”

Subaru: “That’s…”

It was true that Subaru had defied fate by making full use of his ability.

But he had no idea that it would cause such a preposterous misunderstanding among Idra and the others.

In the first place, for them to have even gotten such a wrong idea of him.

Subaru: “Tanza, why didn’t you tell them they’re wrong…”

Tanza: “—Schwartz-sama, I have been viewing it with my own eyes.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama… You were accompanying His Excellency the Emperor at that place.”

With Tanza gently holding the hem of her kimono in place as she asserted so, Subaru was left speechless.

What she was talking about, had taken place at Chaosflame. Indeed, Subaru had been in his shrunken state alongside Abel, donning his ridiculous mask.

Since Tanza was Yorna's attendant, it would not have been odd for her to be aware of the truth.

And Tanza had seen the shrunken Subaru, together with the real Emperor, Abel.

And that had appended onto Idra and the others' mistaken assumption.

Subaru: "But, Tanza was working with Olbart-san… No."

Subaru's guess had been that Tanza had been conspiring with Olbart in various deeds.

Perhaps she had been acting to protect Yorna, so he thought, and he did not really feel like blaming her for that. And Olbart would not reveal his hand, even to an accomplice.

Tanza was unaware that Subaru was a shrunken Natsumi Schwartz.

If so—

Subaru: "Tanza, who do you think I am…?"

Tanza: "—. Um, the black-haired woman and His Excellency the Emperor's…"

Subaru: "…"

And the rest, was silence.

Tanza spoke no further, but he understood what she was thinking. Having understood that Subaru was speechless, and he also comprehended that it would be difficult to explain it.

He could offer no evidence. There was no other way but for Subaru to become larger, right here, right now, all of a sudden.

Subaru: "…This thing about the Emperor's illegitimate child, why's that relevant?”

Idra: “—. Right now, a rebel army has been raised outside the Island, against His Excellency the Emperor. The one considered to be the leader of that rebel army is…”

Subaru: “The Emperor’s illegitimate son?”

Idra nodded at Subaru’s suspicion.

And so, even if with some difficulty, the theory was making sense within Subaru’s mind. A power struggle between an Emperor and his child. The battle initiated by Abel and his group outside the island, had become a story along those lines.

In truth, it was a battle between a real Emperor and a fake Emperor.

But what was made known was that it was a battle between the real Emperor and a rebel army led by the Emperor’s child.

He could envision just who had concocted that, and how they had done it.

Subaru: “That bastard…!”

Immediately, Subaru comprehended that the situation had been set up by Abel, and that the rumor had been spread by him.

Then, that was not Abel harassing him; it was a justification for the internal conflict itself, and also a means through which they could find Subaru, who had disappeared from Chaosflame.

To think that this situation had arisen from him considering that Subaru was not dead. He would never, under any circumstances, say “I believe” on the matter of Subaru not being dead.

Subaru: “…”

Tanza and the others watched Subaru, having fallen silent with his hand over his mouth.

Weitz released Hiain, the latter having grown quieter; the attention of all four people turned to Subaru.

During all this, outside the healing room—battles were taking place all over the Island, with the gladiators' situation a precarious one in which they would possibly even lose their lives, that much was understood.

To be silent, to be calm, to take their time, to think, they had no leeway for any of that.

That was why—

Tanza: "—Schwartz-sama."

Tanza beckoned him to instruct him that they had no time, even if that much was understood.

Feeling a slight sense of awe in that call of hers, Subaru surveyed the faces of everyone in his Unit.

He surveyed, and he decided. —That, in the current situation, he would fulfill what was asked of him.

3

—Sensing the turning of tides, Todd Fang calmly stroked his chin.

Todd: "—What an unsettling feeling."

Back in the office, they'd blown the uncooperative Governor's head off, literally replacing the head of the Island; however he had this feeling that, afterwards, things had moved sluggishly.

Of course, if it were just to wipe out everyone on the Island, Arakiya alone was more than capable of doing it.

That Divine General did not have the brains to think for herself yet was extremely powerful, in stark contrast to how simple she was; if she felt like it, she could engulf the entirety of the Island in flames.

Her doing that would be too much trouble for Todd, so he had gone ahead and told her not to do that.

And to begin with—

Todd: “I really didn’t want to come to a place like this.”

Every single one of their actions, which he had marked as being necessary, had backfired. And for that, Todd felt bitter.

The purpose of rescuing Arakiya from captivity in the Fortress City had been to recoup something despite the fact that the city had fallen, return to the Imperial Capital alongside her, and there, have his wishes of being reassigned granted.

In fact, he could say that he had indeed been reassigned, but the way that had come to pass had been far from his expectations.

Todd had been appointed as the sole subordinate of General First-Class Arakiya, someone who’d had no underlings previously.

All that because of one singular lie he had told to deceive Arakiya.

Todd: “Jamal, even when dead, you’re a pain in the ass.”

Although Todd’s lie begat the situation, Arakiya had no doubt that Todd sincerely wished to avenge Jamal.

Because that lie had been necessary to win her over, Todd was unable to renege on it now.

Frankly, he did not know what would cause that woman to bring down her anger on him. Considering the possibility of being turned into charcoal the instant he incurred her wrath, he was unable to retract his comment so carelessly.

As a result, Todd had been made Arakiya’s subordinate.

Arakiya had been given orders by Berstetz Fondalfon, the Imperial Prime Minister, as his pawn; thus, Todd had been sent to this paradise of madmen, to the Gladiator Island.

Berstetz’s command had been to dispose of the problems within the

Island. They had been told that Governor Gustav held the means to do so, and that ordering him to carry it out would be an easy task.

Falsehood, all of it.

An easy task was never all that easy to solve. He knew what to expect. Hence why he had been prepared.

Most things could be handled by being prepared in advance. Only unforeseen freak incidents could not be avoided, but the risk could be minimized by averting situations in which these incidents could happen.

And yet, an unforeseen incident had happened.

Something very much out of his hands, like a child, having gone unseen, jumping out from a blind spot in that place.

Todd: “When it comes to killing people of higher rank, I can think of numerous ways to do so, but…”

He really had never given much thought on ways to kill a child.

Nothing about it felt nice, and he doubted he would have a whole lot of opportunities to employ them. As such. he had used something from his short array of leftover candidates, in conjunction with his method of killing for the Gladiator Island.

—If the guards, the Gladiator Beasts, and half of the gladiators were dragged into it, it would be possible to target specific individuals on the Island.

With Arakiya in the mix, it would be odd if the child did not die.

Then again—

Todd: “—There’s no such thing as perfect, isn’t there?”

Twisting his head, Todd muttered such as he walked through a corridor littered with corpses.

The bodies were all gladiators hailing from the Island, their attires shabby. Whether that had been the result of internal conflict, Arakiya's aggression, or the savagery of the Gladiator Beasts, was of no interest.

A corpse was a corpse, so if they were dead, he could erase them from his mind.

???: "Private First-Class Fang, there's no need to go this far…"

Todd: "Of course there is. Governor Gustav was killed. The gladiators have organized and readied themselves. They have planned to turn this island inside out with their armed revolt. I don't know just who's involved, but can you guys tell who's the enemy among them from those who aren't?"

???: "Uh…"

Faced with Todd's query, one of the two guards following behind fell silent.

They were the two guards who had rushed in as soon as Todd declared Sparka after sending Arakiya out of the office. They were obeying him since he had made a display of their fetters, the curse rule. However, since the situation allowed for excuses, they were being weirdly stubborn, even though they should be obeying him without questioning him.

Todd had been the one to make them do this, so they could just blame him.

Their hesitation was pointless, since they were still going about what they had to do with looks of guilt on their face.

Todd: "Stop putting on the airs of being an upstanding person. First and foremost, right now you're being made to work as guards here, so both you and your friend there must have shady pasts. Uniform aside, you're almost the same as them."

Guard: "—Hk."

Todd: "But that uniform's your lifeline. Make sure you comprehend that thoroughly."

Patting the young guard on the shoulder and smiling at him, bitterness still evident on his face, Todd sighed inwardly. — Uniforms or no uniforms, it really just amounted to that, so they ought to be grateful.

Each and every single one of the guards on the Gladiator Island were Imperial Soldiers, their backgrounds such that it would not be at all strange if they had ended up as gladiators.

It was a place of exile where half-wits who disregarded orders, assaulted others in their corps, or failed to follow the iron rules, were sent.

They were a bunch of dullards who'd had their lives bound by the curse rule, and thanks to that, had finally learnt to obey. Coupled with their half-baked act as human beings, one could not help but be compelled to say it was indeed comical.

Todd: "Well, whatever, it doesn't matter."

What was needed of them had not been so much their abilities as guards, but rather the Gladiator Beasts bestowed to them.

If it were possible to sidestep them and get the Gladiator Beasts in his possession, one could do away with the guards as well in one fell swoop. But the guards must have been put in-between to prevent that from happening.

Perhaps that too was a failsafe prepared by the dead Gustav, or perhaps that had been a decision made by His Excellency the Emperor, the one who Gustav so obstinately followed.

Todd: "Anyone who willingly wishes to go to war, anyone who stands by it, is out of their mind. Please, don't disturb mine and Katya's peace…"

Both the signs of rebellion that had cropped up in the Fortress City, and the subsequent events in the Demon City of Chaosflame, to Todd, were nothing but an irritating racket.

He cared not if the apex of the Empire changed, as long as the Empire became a better place to live. And if it did not change, he was fine with the way it was already.

If nothing came to pass, and the days with his beloved woman continued, then—.

Todd: “—That reminds me of something detestable.”

The matter of Todd recalling the rebellion caused a terrifying being to flash through his mind.

A child of war, who loved war, and was loved by war. He would rather that he had died during a tempestuous battle, but he did wonder what had happened to him in actuality.

If he were aligned with the insurgents in terms of position, once that calamity spread, he would appear.

If he were to wage violence, then he would take his leave together with Katya—.

???: “—Todd Fang!!”

Todd: “…”

The moment a high-pitched voice invoked his name, Todd felt agitation in his chest for reasons unknown.

As though the concern envisioned in his head had opportunely manifested itself as reality.

And then—

Todd: “…The hell are you thinking?”

Todd turned around. Before his eyes, at the end of the hallway, was the boy who was supposedly being chased after turning the entirety of the Gladiator Island into an enemy.

A child with black hair, and mean-looking eyes. He was sullied here and there with blood and mud, but all his limbs were still attached; and even more, it seemed like he had not lost anything.

In other words, Arakiya and the guards had missed him altogether.

Todd: “I can tell there’s something there which I can’t express by mere words such as “luck”. But, why did you bother to show your face here? It doesn’t make sense.”

Boy: “…”

Todd: “It’s not as if you’re invincible because you’ve got friends you can count on.”

As he said this, Todd surveyed the boy and the four people who had come alongside him.

A gray lizardman, and a man with tattoos all over his body. Then there was someone of medium build, who had no distinguishing characteristics when compared to those two, as well as a young deergirl garbed in a kimono for whatever reason.

It did not seem that these four were exceptionally powerful people, even in Todd’s eyes. From the aura they gave out, all of them were amateurs; only the tattooed one’s expression and the deergirl’s stance merited attention.

The tattooed man had no hesitation, while the deergirl appeared to be strangely confident in herself.

And thus—

Todd: “It’s hard to read that look in your eyes. I can’t quite tell if this is just you being confident or…”

Boy: “Todd, surrender. And make that woman… Make Arakiya stop, too.”

Todd: “—. First of all, why should I?”

At that absurd, senseless request he was given, Todd raised his eyebrows.

For now, he had urged the conversation onward with a pretense of interest, all while silently signaling with his hand to the two guards standing beside him.

Each of the two guards were accompanied; one by a black great eagle, the other by a frog Gladiator Beast that looked like a lump of rocks.

Like that, Todd and his group squared off against the boy and his own companions. Right beside Todd's group, outside the passage, the great eagle soared through the sky as the frog crawled across the wall, and little-by-little, they closed the distance to their opponents.

If the Gladiator Beasts could slay them and retrieve the curse tool, that would be the best.

Of course, there was the possibility that the curse tool was hidden somewhere, so trouble would remain all the same. But if he could deal with the boy and the lizardman, things would be settled for the time being.

It would be much easier if Arakiya were present—

Todd: "Where is she being held up…?"

There was no way that Arakiya was one to enjoy hunting gladiators.

Some soldiers revelled in murder, but Arakiya was not a person of such ilk. Arakiya was a soldier whose purpose was to put her everything against important opponents; nothing more, nothing less.

He should give consideration to the fact that her not fulfilling her main task meant that some kind of interference had cropped up.

However, if something like that had happened, then the situation was different.

Todd: "So, what reason are you going to give me?"

Boy: "A simple one. —The curse tool that controls the curse rule of this Island is in my hands."

Guard: “Wha…?!”

The boy answered Todd with a shrug of his shoulders, his words causing unrest in the two guards.

Of course they would. The main reason they were following Todd was because the latter held their lives in his hands, a circumstance they could not go against.

However, Todd dismissed it with “It’s a bluff”, as he continued,

Todd: “Worthless bargaining. First of all, a curse tool? Even if you have something like that…”

Boy: “—Here you go.”

Todd: “Oi, oi.”

Even though no demands to see it had been made, the boy pulled something out of his own pocket. It was a black sphere, wiped clean of blood, and very recognizable even at a distance.

It had been in his hand only for scant time, but there was no mistaking it.

It was the real thing, the curse tool that had been inside Gustav’s body.

If it were Todd, he would definitely hide it somewhere on the Island and use the item and its whereabouts as a bargaining chip.

What was the purpose of bringing the real thing instead of doing so?

Todd: “What’s with that dirty orb? Don’t tell me you think you can invoke the curse rule with it? If so, give it a try. Try reducing the number of guards in your way.”

Guard: “Wha?! D-don’t! If he does that…”

Todd: “I told you, it’s a bluff. Or perhaps you do not believe the words of a messenger from the Imperial Capital?”

Having once more conveyed that to the guard who had lost his composure, the guard fell silent, his face pale.

The reaction made Todd a bit uneasy. It was understandable that he would be anxious, doubting the authenticity of the claim of the black orb being a curse tool; however, his reaction was peculiar.

It was as if the guards possessed a reason, a well-founded reason as to why they could not dismiss the words of that child and his companions—No, the words of just the child, as a bluff.

Todd: “What the? Is there a problem with that chi—”

???: “—Listen closely, you boor.”

Todd: “…”

Seeking an answer to his uneasiness, Todd attempted to question the guard. But before he could, a high-pitched voice echoed down the passage, drawing his attention to the deergirl.

She rolled up the sleeve of her kimono up to her arm, and gently pointed her hand towards the boy beside her.

Deergirl: “If you hail from outside the Island, you have probably already heard about it. About the great upheaval currently shaking the entirety of the Empire, and the numerous rumors circulating on that topic.”

Todd: “…”

Todd shut one eye at the girl’s appeal, which felt dignified, even majestic.

Regardless of how they had secured the means to obtain information while on the Island, the girl was correct, the public would gossip about this thing or the other to their hearts’ desire.

As far as the insurgents went, various sayings already existed; one of those was that one among the Nine Divine Generals had already joined them.

Some of those were quite ridiculous, but—.

Todd: “Hey, no way.”

Deergirl: “—This gentleman right here is the one at the heart of the situation shaking the Empire. This esteemed gentleman, who has stood up to correct the erred ways of the Empire, the one endowed with the legitimate credentials to do so.”

After a beat, after a pause, the young girl looked over at him.

In the recesses of those round eyes of hers, Todd caught a glimpse of a thought that swelled the concern that had been brewing in his heart—

Deergirl: “—He is the son of His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, Natsuki Schwartz-sama.”

The illegitimate son of His Excellency the Emperor, with the curse tool in his hands.

Those ludicrous claims had been delivered by the girl carrying herself with utmost dignity. Her demeanor was as though she’d had plenty of actual experience in scenes of the sort, and was accompanied with persuasion; such that one was unable to doubt the truth of those ludicrous claims.

Indeed, among those ridiculous rumors, there had been something of this sort.

The leader of the insurgent army was the illegitimate son of the Emperor, possessing black eyes and black hair, or so the rumors went. Of course, Imperial Soldiers with their head screwed right would have doubled themselves over in laughter, struggling to take such absurd nonsense seriously.

If he did indeed exist, even Todd thought that spelled trouble.

But the idea that he would just happen to be on this Island by chance, was far too ridiculous to contemplate seriously.

However—

Guards: "—Hk."

The guards gulped, their complexion changed. The guards' reaction had not gone unnoticed by Todd.

Perchance they had heard something similar to the information Todd had just been told. They had heard something of the sort by accident, and that had nurtured the seeds of suspicion within their hearts.

Henceforth, upon the boy's—upon the child named Natsuki Schwartz's declaration, that of possessing the curse tool, they were incapable of laughing it off as a bluff.

They were possessed by an illusion that he could perhaps be more credible than Todd, with his position as a messenger from the Imperial Capital, and as Arakiya's subordinate.

Hence—

Deergirl: "Now then, all of you belonging to the guards, let us quickly—"

The girl had tried to run her mouth and say something in quick succession.

Before the girl's request could reach them, Todd brought his arm to his waist and grabbed a hilt, sweeping it sideways with all his strength.

Guard: "—Hk!"

The arcing blade of an axe swept towards the two guards standing beside Todd. The head of the guard to the right was chopped off, while the head of the guard to the left was cracked open and slammed against the wall.

Both were granted instant death, the momentum of them still wavering having prevented them from joining the others.

And then—

Todd: “—Let’s go!”

Rushing to the head of the guard he had chopped off, Todd punted it forward as hard as he could. The head splattered blood as it flew, soaring towards the boy and his group, eyes wide in amazement.

They looked on as though they had not understood the meaning behind his actions in the slightest—

???: “—GYAOO!!”

The next moment, the colossal body of the black great eagle plunged into the passage from the side, engulfing everything nearby in destruction; the flying guard’s head, the boy, and his companions.

Chapter 73:
Weitz Rogen

1

—Weitz Rogen had never believed he could live or die honestly.

Either way, the thing called society tended to undervalue the word “normal”.

“Normal” was employed to convey the meaning of “average” or “ordinary”, something that did not stand out, but from the viewpoint of those that were less than human in particular, it was an unreachable standard.

The City of Iron and Blood of Glarasia, was the name of Weitz’s hometown, where he had been born and raised.

It was an unhinged city where the weapons and armor used throughout the whole Empire, as well as the numerous tools necessary for battle, were manufactured. Where craftsmen worked diligently to make arms for the sake of wounding others, forging their steel day and night.

About half of the residents were involved in some form of arms manufacturing, and Weitz had been no exception. He’d had no parents around at the time he had been gaining awareness of the things around him, and had been forced to do chores in a craftsman’s workshop, so he had neither interest nor pride in such work.

He would perform his job in order to eat, and perform chores at workshops for no other reason than the fact that the place he had been born in was the City of Iron and Blood.

If their main occupation were horse gear, he would help to make it, if it were agriculture, he would carry a hoe.

Without fixation or interest, Weitz had worked silently under the sidelong glances of the craftsmen forging steel. Unable to know what he had been thinking, there had been those who called the antisocial Weitz a hard worker, but most had probably thought of him as a mysterious and creepy guy.

Weitz had not been concerned about that as well. He had not been thinking of getting along with anyone.

He thought that, since he had been alone since birth, it was natural to be alone upon his death.

Such an ephemeral indifference, that way of life was probably loathed by others.

When suspicions arose that the materials stocked from the workshop he frequented were being sold through illegal channels, Weitz had been the first one to come under suspicion.

Weitz, who had often worked by his lonesome, possessing no partner whatsoever to protect him, had been in possession of absolutely zero means to clear up the suspicions that had been cast on him.

Ultimately, unable to clear up the false accusations, Weitz was tried for a crime he had no memory of committing, and became a criminal. —The first tattoo inked onto him was evidence of his punishment, in order for him to be recognizable as a criminal at a glance.

There were no people who wore clothes with long sleeves, since the city was constantly enveloped in hot air from the forging of steel; and so, his tattoos had constantly been laid bare upon both his forearms.

Even if he were to wear long-sleeved clothes, it would have been immediately blatant that it was because he had something to be guilty of.

Once the evidence of his crime had been inked onto him, he could no longer live the same life as before.

It may not have been an excellent life until then, but that was when he gave up the idea of being “normal”.

No longer able to work in a workshop run legitimately, Weitz turned to thievery to earn his daily income, starting to steal materials and sell through illegal channels. In the end, he had become a real criminal.

—In short, his supposed sin had now caught up with reality.

When he had been suspected of selling through illegal channels, and no one had been willing to listen to Weitz’s side of the story, Weitz had not been a criminal. But afterwards, Weitz ultimately became a criminal.

Perhaps it was something such as an inevitability.

Weitz: “If I’m a repulsive fuck, then I’m fine with that…”

Inked with tattoos and having become a criminal, in anyone’s eyes, he would appear be detached from the concept of “normal”. Even while committing crimes in order to earn money, it was the same as before; he had been unable to get along with others.

In that case, he should have severed all troublesome relationships and the like from the get-go.

The tattoos which had only been on his forearms, now inking shoulders and chest, had been enlarged by his own hands. Before long, they had covered his upper body, his legs, and had even reached his face and head.

Tattoos on one’s arms was evidence of a criminal, but tattoos across one’s entire body was the sign of someone dangerous, someone who ought not be approached.

Make way, everyone, fear and relent. The once-pitiful man, forsaken by all and fallen to crime, was no more. What remained was merely someone “less than human”, some troublesome, with nothing left to lose.

That was why—

???: “—Halt, criminal scum! Don’t think you can get off unpunished!”

Encircled by the city guards with their weapons pointed at him, Weitz quickly surrendered.

By his feet, bloodstained and collapsed, had been someone from his former workshop—from the place where Weitz first became a criminal, it had been a man who worked as an apprentice craftsman.

The man’d had his ear bitten off, crying and shouting as the tears and blood flowed. On that day, he had falsely accused Weitz of being a criminal, and hearing that rumor leak out over a drink, Weitz had retaliated.

Spitting out the ear he had been holding in his mouth, Weitz was seized by the guards and thrown in jail.

Weitz was notoriously known within the City of Iron and Blood. Without anything like a path of salvation granted to him, soon after, it was decided that as a criminal slave, he would be sent to the infamous Gladiator Island.

Without the will to oppose, he accepted it. Without the intent to resist, he crossed the lake.

At the place where he had been sent, having been put together with a group of seedy-looking people in similar circumstances, he had been forced to participate in a ceremony to fight an extremely dreadful Witchbeast.

I don’t care what happens. I ain’t got any intention of dying.

No matter who I must sacrifice, no matter who I must outsmart, I’ll survive, and then, one day.

One day, I’d be treated—.

Subaru: “—Weitz! Grab the sword! I’m counting on you!!”

—I’d be treated as a “normal” human being, that was my wish.

Weitz: “Take cover…!”

The moment he saw the head belonging to the guard flying through the air, having been kicked, whirling around as it sprayed blood, Weitz immediately thrust Schwartz, standing next to him, towards Tanza.

Dressed in a kimono, this girl, contrary to that youthful appearance, possessed great strength.

However, she had not mastered that power. The strength of her body and her mind were misaligned, it was far too risky to rely on her. —With Schwartz, they made a good combination.

Weak in body, but strong in mind, was Schwartz. If it was him, Tanza would probably be put to good use.

Therefore, at this moment, pushing him towards Tanza, strong in body, but weak in mind, had supposedly been the right choice.

And then, Weitz himself, the performer of such deed—

Weitz: “A-AHHHHHHHHH…!!!!”

Running forward, he swung his arms up and slammed the guard’s head flying towards him into the floor of the passage.

Beheading his ally in an instant, then punting that head to make it fly, that utmost shocking deed was a scheme that had put the thoughts of Weitz and the others to a standstill—But, it did not seem to be just that.

In reality, the judgment of the four people aside from Weitz had been one beat too slow, but Weitz had made a move.

Schwartz had been so vigilant of that man, so it did not seem like that was all he was aiming for.

And it happened right after Weitz had thought that.

Weitz: "—Hk?!"

Right beside Weitz, who had been glaring towards the man in front of him, who had taken an axe into his hand, the monstrous black bird—the Gladiator Beast, had charged in, destroying the wall of the passage.

Smashing the wall half a step behind Weitz, it laid waste to the passage of the Island's upper stratum right beside him.

Aiming for Weitz and the others, the flying Gladiator Beast approached to slaughter—no, that was wrong. It was not wrong that it was a Gladiator Beast, but that bird had not been aiming for Weitz and the others.

Gladiator Beast: "—GYAOO!!"

Having smashed the wall and made its appearance, what had been pierced by the monstrous bird's beak was the head of the guard that had been decapitated.

Aiming for the head of the decapitated guard, the monstrous bird had crashed into the passage. Neither did he understand what that meant, nor did he have the time to think about it.

Weitz: "I'll…!!"

While his back was showered with wounds from fragments of the wall bursting open from the tremendous impact that had occured half a step behind him, as well as the sharp wings of the Gladiator Beast, clenching his teeth, Weitz did not take his eyes off the man.

Even having inquired about Schwartz's lineage, he had not bowed down, but rather enhanced his intent to kill—he was dangerous.

He was a honest-to-god threat, different from Weitz's tattoos, which only created a sense of danger.

No matter what, he would stop it.

Todd: "…"

Seeing Weitz moving forward, the man ruthlessly narrowed his eyes.

Just from the look in those eyes without uttering a word, Weitz could tell his opponent intended on killing him. Without a pause, seeing the man raise the axe overhead with his left arm, Weitz raised his own left arm.

That was the arm that had been the first to become inked with a tattoo, becoming evidence of him being criminal, the impetus for him drifting to this land.

Resolutely channeling all his strength, he would try to receive the blow unleashed by that man—

Weitz: “Guh, geh… Hk.”

Without mercy, the swinging axe took aim at Weitz’s head from the left.

Forcing his raised arm into its trajectory, Weitz’s arm did not meet the blade of the axe from up high, but rather from the side. At the moment of impact, the bones of his elbow were shattered, and the bones of his upper arm and shoulder were pulverized alongside his flesh.

Through the impact and pain, his vision turned a deep red, and his left arm was dyed with darkness completely different from the color of the tattoo.

But—

Weitz: “I endured it…!”

He had not been waiting for it, rather, by stepping forth, he had been capable of weakening the power behind the axe slightly.

That was the main reason why it had not smashed Weitz’s head in, why it had not ended his life. From the start, he’d had the grit from being called abnormal, but he had not possessed the judgment to match that.

The unification of that grit and judgment, had been the result of encountering a child far more reckless than himself.

Hence, that encounter allowed Weitz's arm to reach the man—

Todd: "You haven't."

With his left arm destroyed, he tried to seize the man with his remaining right arm; at that moment, the form of the man had vanished.

—No, the form of the man had not vanished, Weitz had just become unable to see it.

Exiting his field of vision, he became unable to see the form of his opponent in the dark, blurred space.

Something akin to that had happened. However, it was strange. It had been strange. Suddenly, on the right side of Weitz's vision, the portion he could not see expanded in the span of a breath.

Just as if something had suddenly crushed the right side of Weitz's vision.

???: "Weitz—!!"

Unable to find the vanished form of the man, Weitz harbored physical unease as someone called out to him.

Slowly turning to look behind him, there was the destroyed passage and plumes of smoke. Then, he saw the head of the monstrous bird that had destroyed the passage, sent flying by a downward swing of the axe of the man who had vanished.

Weitz: "…"

Beyond the man who had beheaded the bird monster, he could see four people standing above the crumbling passage.

There were also some who had fallen on their butts while retreating, but it seemed that all of them had avoided the monstrous bird's intermission. That he himself was relieved about that, Weitz was a little surprised.

While surprised, there was one thing he wanted to tell them, who were watching him in amazement.

His broken left arm ached plenty. For some reason, the right side of his face had also started aching plenty.

While making use of that pain to somehow keep a grip on his consciousness, which had been getting distant,

Weitz: “It was the first time…”

???: “Weitz…!”

Weitz: “Anyone’s said, they believed in me…”

Muttering, Weitz understood that that had been the thing lodged within his heart.

Understanding that, he lost the strength in his legs, collapsing right then and there.

???: “Weitz—!!”

While hearing his name cried out with such emotion once more, he closed his eyes.

For some reason, it had been an awfully pleasant feeling.

SETOWI

3

As he tried to rush to the collapsed Weitz, he was stopped by the slender fingers reaching out to him.

Tears in her eyes, shaking her head when Subaru turned to look back at her, the kimono-clad girl did not permit Subaru to take impulsive behavior.

And then, before he could shake those fingers off—

???: “—GWOGOBO!!”

There was a hideous, ear-splitting screech, and the ceiling of the passageway was crushed from above.

Right overhead of the collapsed Weitz, the passage succumbed to the weight and collapsed with a violent screech; directly under the falling ceiling, Weitz was engulfed, and the floor gave way.

The destroyed passage had opened a hole to the lower strata, and Subaru witnessed Weitz falling headfirst together with the gigantic gray frog which had crushed the ceiling.

To Weitz, who had taken an axe to his left arm, and suffered a blow from a knife to his right eye, he must.

Subaru: “WEITZ—!!”

Subaru screamed as he reached his hand out towards the falling passage, towards the crumbling floor and ceiling.

Weitz had fallen. Weitz, who had rushed forward to protect Subaru and the others. Quickly, quickly, they had to jump down there, and save Weitz.

Todd: “It sure is lucky that the second one fell. Witchbeasts are a pain to kill.”

In front of Subaru, whose thoughts had gone astray, Todd muttered, giving a sidelong glance to the collapsed passage.

At his feet lay the corpse of the decapitated giant black bird. The Witchbeast had been killed by Todd with an axe after it had crashed into the passage.

The events that had occurred had done so far too quickly for Subaru to digest.

What Todd had done, what had occurred before his eyes, anything and everything. Until he was finished dealing with them, he would be unable to think about anything else. —He would be unable to think about Weitz.

What had happened with Weitz, and what had become of him, he would be unable to think.

He would be unable t—

Todd: "—As for Witchbeasts, they'll eat the corpse of the guy who broke their horn."

Subaru: "…"

Suddenly, Todd had said that, resting the axe on his shoulder.

Subaru, much like everyone else, had yet to fully accept the situation before them; their breaths hitched due to Todd's words, turning to face him.

Receiving the gazes of those four people, Todd pointed to the dead body at his feet.

Todd: "When someone breaks a Witchbeast's horn, they can make it obey them, but it seems that over the time they give it commands, some resentment will surely accumulate. When that person dies, the Witchbeast'll eat their corpse in revenge. Disgusting, isn't it?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Todd spoke about this little-known ecology of Witchbeasts.

Neither did Subaru want to know how Todd had found out about that, nor was the information itself the type he would benefit from knowing in the first place.

However, it did provide an adequate explanation of what had happened there.

The reason the giant bird had crashed into the passage was because the guard who had been beheaded was the one who had broken off its horn, and Todd had known in advance that it would home in on his corpse.

Kicking that head into flight, he had tried to get Subaru and the others engulfed by the large bird as it aimed for that.

But, that had not happened. Because, because, because.

Because—.

Subaru: “Weitz.”

Todd: “He sure looked like a guy who cared for his companions. —That’s why he died.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Unbefitting of Todd, it was a thorough explanation of the events that had taken place.

Without listening to anyone, notifying anyone, explaining to anyone, to kill without giving any information whatsoever, that was Todd’s way of doing things. Despite that, why had he spoken incessantly, allowing them to hear all that just now?

Letting them hear, letting them understand, to let Subaru’s mind move on to the next question.

The relationship between the two guards who were killed and the Witchbeast who had charged in.

Once that was settled, Subaru’s thoughts could move to the next. Next, was about Weitz.

About how Weitz had died, and that there was nothing he could do regarding it.

Subaru: “A-AHHHHH—!!”

He should not have died. Weitz, should not have died.

While facing the horror that was Todd, he should not have attempted to protect Subaru and the others. This monster who would kill someone for opposing them, should not have been opposed by him.

After all, if he were to die here—.

Todd: “Your expression’s finally started to look like a brat’s.”

The moment he understood that Weitz had died, Subaru’s head was filled with regret and impatience.

Seeing that reaction, Todd smiled as if things had gone according to plan, and raised his axe overhead.

The purpose for Todd’s careful explanation, had been to let Subaru put his thoughts in order.

Forcing Subaru to confront Weitz’s death, which he had unconsciously tried not to think about, had been so that his heart would be crushed, in order to turn an enigmatic enemy into a mere human being of flesh and blood.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama—!”

Subaru’s legs had come to a halt in shock, and Hiain and Idra’s minds were still unable to recover. The first to move before the three of them could, had been Tanza.

Tanza set her eyes on Todd approaching them; with her arms outstretched, she stood in front of Subaru.

However, Todd frowned at Tanza’s conduct and,

Todd: “Hey you, you’re doing it all wrong.”

Tanza: “Huh.”

Saying that in front of Tanza, who had been standing in the way, Todd dropped to his knees on the spot. While Tanza’s eyes had been captivated by that movement, the crouching Todd extended his arms up to her inner thighs, and hoisted her up.

Just as that happened, Tanza’s small body floated upwards, and was thrown to the side. —Through the large hole in the wall destroyed by the giant bird, which connected to the outside.

Tanza: “Ah.”

Even though she wielded physical abilities that were unthinkable for a child, she could not defy gravity or the laws of physics. Naturally, her body was not even heavier than an adult’s, as Tanza’s weight was that of a single little girl.

Instantly, Tanza reached her arms out, but her slender fingertips had nowhere to reach, and her body was thrown to the other side of the Island.

Todd: “Have fun.”

Thrown into the air, Tanza’s screams quickly faded as she descended.

Thus, with Tanza who had been standing in the way now gone, there was no one left to protect Subaru and the others from Todd’s axe.

Idra: “He’s His Excellency the Emperor’s…”

Todd: “Yeah?”

Idra: “He’s His Excellency the Emperor’s son! Are you insane?!”

Glaring at Todd, who had turned around, Idra cried that out.

Eyes bloodshot, his friendly facial features burning with anger, he reproached Todd for not being swayed by the “lie” that Subaru was the illegitimate son of the Emperor of Vollachia.

However, Todd's answer to that complaint was simple.

—Wordlessly, he merely swung his axe to bash Idra's head in.

Idra: "Woaaah!"

Just before his head was smashed in, Idra, his clothes having been yanked, fell on his butt. The axe missed and landed behind Idra, whose eyes widened, while Subaru, who had yanked him down, shook his head hastily.

It was impossible, words would not get through to him. From the start, this threat itself had been a mistake.

Subaru had tried to rely on taking the easy way out.

As punishment for that, he had found him into this situation.

Todd: "You dodge that huh, my bad, my bad. However—"

Readjusting his grip on the axe, Todd turned to the side with a disgusted expression. At the point his gaze had been directed to, near Subaru and Idra, who had fallen on his backside, Hiain camouflaged himself against the surrounding scenery.

Assimilating with the destroyed floor and walls, he would be incapable of telling that Hiain was there.

But, it was not like he had been able to move quickly.

Todd: "Disappearing right in front of me, what's your plan?"

Hiain: "Schwa—"

Meeting eyes with Todd, Hiain flinched, and his camouflage was instantly disrupted.

Until then, his assimilation with the scenery had been perfect; as if part of a painting had been ruined, it then became something exceedingly unsightly, unbearable to look at.

This time, it was red paint that had been applied to the picture, gushing out of Hiain.

Hiain: "…"

Taking the blow from the axe on his shoulder, it cleaved through to his lower chest, and Hiain collapsed. As his blood profusely flowed out of him, the camouflage of his body was undone, and the remains of the gray lizardman fell over with a thud.

Weitz had died, Tanza had been thrown out of there, and Hiain had been killed as well.

One after another, before Subaru's eyes.

And then—

Idra: "I-it's a duel… Hk."

His voice trembling, taking his eyes off the slain Hiain's corpse, Idra stood up.

Pointing his finger at the man who, just a moment prior, had killed his comrade before his eyes, gnashing his teeth, Idra's face was red with anger, blue with fear, and as if he knew not what to do, his face turned white while glaring at Todd.

At the location Sparka had taken place, he had told a lie to inspire Subaru and the others, and to encourage himself.

Different from Subaru's cheap lies, the lie about his title carried ideals.

Idra: "If you too, are a warrior—"

Those ideals of Idra's, ideals that were perhaps too idealistic, were betrayed.

Todd: "Wow!"

Idra: "—Hk."

There was no doubt it had been a faint hope, but Idra's offer had been frantic and earnest.

Shouting in a loud voice to cut him off, Todd had attacked Idra as he tried to be strong, even if it had been merely bravado, while he was unprepared. Thus, he thrust his blade during that unpreparedness.

Idra: “Gah!”

Todd: “I’m not a warrior, I’m a soldier.”

Idra, fallen to his knees, raised his trembling hands to his neck. Lodged in the middle of his throat was Todd’s knife, its sharp tip protruding from the back of his neck.

Even so, Idra’s hands grabbed the handle of the knife to pull it out. And then, before he could pull it out, the axe smashed through Idra’s head from directly above.

Idra: “—Ah.”

Idra fell forward, and Todd pulled the knife out from his body. Idra’s corpse, having fallen over clumsily, and Hiain’s corpse were lined up, like something out of a nightmare.

Some place far, Weitz’s body was buried in the debris of the collapsed rubble.

Had something happened to Tanza, who had fallen from up high and had not returned? That reminded him, the frog that fell together with Weitz was supposedly down there as well.

If so, Tanza, and the gladiators of this Island as well—.

Todd: “What’s actually happening here?”

Subaru: “Huh…”

Todd: “You, are you really the child of His Excellency the Emperor?”

Todd, carrying the axe on his shoulder, looked down at Subaru, who had slumped down with blank eyes.

Having lost his comrades, lacking the willpower to run away, as the man gazed at his state, Subaru understood why he had been kept alive until he was the last one remaining.

The lie Subaru had told, that he was the Emperor's illegitimate son, had driven an actual wedge into Todd.

He, too, had been considering the possibility that Subaru really was the Emperor's illegitimate son.

Subaru: "Then…"

Todd: "Hmm?"

Subaru: "Why don't, you just surrender, or something? I'm the Emperor's…"

If he had considered the possibility that Subaru was his son, then there was supposedly some room to consider the appeal of Subaru and the others.

Subaru had decided to go along with Tanza and the others' misunderstanding by using this strategy, because he had thought it would be the best way to put his Unit on their feet again, and because it had been a gleam of hope for them.

It was possible that Todd, instead of picking the option to have them kill one another, would choose to raise the white flag in order to survive.

But as a result of that, Subaru had lost all his comrades, while Todd had kept his grasp on his life.

Subaru: "Why, what is it? You're…"

Todd: "If I did something like surrender, I'd get killed due to some half-minded justification, and there'd be nothing I could do."

Subaru: "…"

Todd: “I’ve decided that it’s always better to inquire about the authenticity of a matter when the situation’s in my favor. I can devote my thoughts to making a decision, and it’s also harder to make a mistake. —That and, it gives me peace of mind.”

At the last reason, which seemed to be the most important with the way Todd had put it, Subaru took in a breath.

It felt just as if, all this time, Todd had been strangling his neck.

Todd: “Regardless of whether you’re the Emperor’s illegitimate son or not, it’s your name I’m curious about.”

Subaru: “My, name…?”

Todd: “Natsuki Schwartz, that’s similar to the name of a scary guy I know. And to top it off, the way you smell is really similar to that scary guy as well.”

With a small sniff, Todd looked at Subaru with cold eyes.

Something about his smell—he had been told the same thing back during the first massacre, when he had first come to know that Todd had arrived at the Gladiator Island.

Having been informed that it was about his smell, an unpleasant hunch emerged within Subaru’s mind.

Subaru: “Do you know about the Miasma?”

Todd: “Miasma? Ah, no, that’s not it, that’s not it, don’t get the wrong idea. It really does smell, your body odor. I have a bit of a good nose. That’s why it’s so strange.”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “—Hey you, do you have an older brother or something? If so, I’d be happy to keep you alive as a bargaining chip with him.”

Denying Subaru’s question, what had followed was a surprising proposal.

I'd be happy to keep you alive, to think such a thing would come from Todd's mouth. Furthermore, the older brother Todd had spoken of, was in all likelihood none other than Subaru himself.

He had thought that the Subaru with longer limbs was the older brother of the shrunken Subaru.

Moreover, Subaru seemed to remember introducing himself to Todd while he was dressed as a woman, he might be suspecting that Subaru was related to "Natsumi Schwartz" because of that.

In any case, if "not killing" had become an option in Todd's mind.

Subaru: "…"

Weitz's, Hiain's and Idra's deaths, had occurred right next to him.

If he closed his eyes, the deaths of Gustav and Old Man Null also came to mind. He could also see the deaths of the many gladiators, see their their remains, which he had witnessed along the way.

Absolutely everyone, had ended up dead. They had ended up dead, thus.

—Thus, because Subaru absolutely must not die.

Subaru: "…You know, about Nii-chan?"

Taking advantage of Todd's misunderstanding, he switched gears to advancing the conversation.

If Todd was somehow cautious of the big Subaru, then by using that caution, the small Subaru could live.

If he could survive this place in that way—.

Todd: "—Wait."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Subaru opened his mouth and tried to string together some words that would get him through this. Todd outstretched his palm and grabbed Subaru's face as it made an expression, and Subaru could see his eyes through the gaps between his fingers.

Crouching down while grabbing Subaru's face, Todd gave him a terribly cold look.

And then—

Todd: "—Hey, you tried to manipulate me, didn't you?"

With a dull thud, a sharp sensation slid into his chest.

Feeling the chill of the blade's tip inside his body, Subaru widened his eyes. Then, one beat later, a pain so great that his limbs went numb screamed in the back of his head with potency.

And due to that potent scream, Subaru's own mouth also screamed.

Subaru: "GYAAAA, GEEEEE!!"

Todd: "My bad, my bad, there's no room for carelessness or weakness."

An oversized knife had been lodged deeply within Subaru's chest.

It was not a matter of pulling it out or not pulling it out, it was simply too big. It had pierced him. Having stabbed him, it was probably destroying that which was important within his chest.

Blood frothed at the edges of his mouth, and while spilling red saliva, Subaru's body trembled.

Coughing violently, a red-stained package fell out of his mouth.

It did not matter. It no longer mattered. He could not use it. It was not like he could use it. Die, he must not die. If he died, it would be terrible. If he died, dying would be, he must not die.

Todd: "Don't move."

Lying down, trying to crawl away from that place, Subaru's abdomen was stepped on by Todd as he spoke. So that he could not move, so that he could not get away, he had been stopped.

Having stopped him, in front of Subaru, Todd raised his axe overhead.

It hurts, it's scary, and it's awful, it's dangerous, at least, at least, this red, this cold pain, this, at least this, I must, stop this.

Subaru: "I must, not, die…"

Todd: "One, two aaand three!"

Weakly, he raised his hands to shield his head. Useless.

The head beneath Subaru's hands, and his very life, the blade of the falling axe pulverized all of those—.

4

Subaru: "—Hk."

As his head was smashed in, everything contained inside of it had spilled out.

Feeling as if he had been watching that horrific scene, a scream exploded from the depths of Subaru's throat. Reaching out both of his trembling hands, he touched his own head.

It had not been smashed. A head that had not been smashed, a chest that did not ache, a life that had not been snuffed out, it was all there.

Upon ascertaining this, as he breathed a sigh of relief, Subaru raised his head to the sky, and—

Subaru: "—Ah."

There was a man covered in tattoos that, slowly, turned to look back at Subaru.

His left arm mangled by the axe, his right eye stabbed out by the knife, he was shedding a tremendous amount of blood. Weitz.

Weitz: “It was the first time…”

His lips quivering, the bloodied Weitz spilled those words.

Seeing that, Subaru let out an “Ah” along with a truly, truly pathetic breath of air.

Weitz: “Anyone’s said, they believed in me…”

Subaru: “AAAHHHHHH—!!!!”

Spilling those feeble words, Weitz’s body collapsed to its side.

Even if he were to extend his hand, no matter what he did, Weitz’s body could not be saved any more, definitely.

He should not have died. Subaru, should not have died.

He should not have let it become absolute.

Subaru’s starting line, restarting at the point of Death, continued to move forward—.

Subaru: “AAAHHHHHH—!!!!”

—Because once it happened that someone could not be saved, Natsuki Subaru’s “heart” would be shattered.

Chapter 74:
Idra Missanga

1

The sound of footsteps, the sound of steadily approaching footsteps, paralyzed Subaru's heart.

It was absolutely necessary to prevent the massacre brought about by the arrival of Todd and Arakiya from the Imperial Capital.

Frantically, earnestly, for the sake of brushing aside the malice and absurdity that befell him, he struggled with all of his might. He struggled and struggled, he continued to struggle, however, the worst case scenario had occurred.

The restart point continued to move forward, having made Death its starting line.

This time, what Subaru feared the most was not Death itself. Rather, he feared that upon meeting his Death and returning, reality would become absolute.

—That a life he could not save had carried over, was what he feared the most.

That, the inescapable Death of someone, gradually drawing closer, was what he feared the most.

Subaru: "AAAHHHHHHHHHH—!!!!"

At the scene before him, the collapsed and bloody form of Weitz, Subaru's throat shrieked.

Screaming as he tried to run away, the fingers protruding from the sleeve grabbed him, and forbade his movement. Grabbing him was Tanza, the girl whose gentle eyes were filled with tears, as she shook her head desperately at Subaru.

This too, he had seen. He had already seen. Looking, he looked at it, it was something he knew the sight of.

The same scene, the scene he had witnessed just a minute ago, he observed it once more.

???: “—GWOGOBO!!”

Immediately after, there was a hideous, ear-splitting screech, and the passage was crushed along with Weitz’s collapsed body, which as it was, would fall through the floor down the side of the island’s mountain.

That debris, falling down together with the large body of the gray frog, engulfed Weitz, and he vanished from sight.

Subaru: “No, nonoNOOOOOO—!!”

Tanza: “Schwartz-Sama?!”

Frantically waving his arms about, Subaru shook off Tanza’s hand. Abandoning the voice of the shocked young girl behind him, Subaru sprinted towards where Weitz was falling.

If he rushed right now, he could pick up the falling man, block up the wounds the man bore on his eye and left arm, wrap bandages around him in the healing room, if he could just give everything treatment then surely, surely, surely—

Subaru: “Not yet—”

Todd: “You sure are weaker than I thought.”

To save Weitz, he sprinted with reckless abandon.

Subaru was met head-on by something swinging to mow him down. Only after a hard, heavy sound emanated as his field of vision began rapidly spinning did he realize it had been the blade of an axe, dirtied by a dark red.

In Subaru’s field of vision, rapidly spinning as it ascended up high, he saw the body of a child, clumsily sprinting. Seeing it pitch forward and collapse, he understood it had been his own headless body.

In that case, where had his head gone? More importantly, Weitz, he must, must, mustmustmust.

× × ×

Spinning round and round, then abruptly being fixed to one spot, Subaru's brain was thrown about.

With a vigor akin to a ferociously revolving camera coming to an abrupt standstill, his semicircular canals that were not actually moving gave him a disorderly sensation.

With the surging nausea and confusion, that from there he must save Weitz, that this wasn't the time to stop his legs, that impatience was—

Weitz: "It was the first time…"

Then at Subaru, whose vision had returned, the bloody form of Weitz muttered so.

One second later, the form of Weitz crumbled, an immense quantity of blood flowing from his left arm and right eye.

Weitz: "Anyone, has said, that they believed me…"

Subaru: "AHHHHHHHHH—!!!!"

The reality that could not be undone, had crushingly trampled upon the soul of Natsuki Subaru.

2

Slowly but surely, the tremors of ruin were creeping near.

The massacre commenced, and Subaru, without preventing it, began to run.

However, starting with the restart point having moved ten seconds forward, the reduction of the grace period felt as if it was being shaved off, distancing from a miracle, erasing all hope from Subaru's heart.

Sneaking into Gustav's office, he learned the truth of the massacre through cooperating with Hiain.

Many times, they were discovered before Todd and Arakiya's conversation with Gustav could reach its crux, mistakes piled up, repeating through Trial & Error so that next time—it had become irreversible.

The restart point, it had moved forth to when he was hiding with Hiain in the office.

Subaru: "…"

Since that moment, Subaru had been hearing the grand voice of ruin laughing from within his heart.

Hanging over Subaru, while he heard the heartbeat of the frightened Hiain, probably beating more violently than that had been Subaru's heart.

Unable to stop the massacre, what would he do if the restart point had moved past that?

If the point of restart had made this a place of no return, filled with despair, Natsuki Subaru wondered just what in the world he could do.

And then—

Arakiya: "Slosh—"

Along with that unfeeling voice, Gustav's head had been blown off, that was when Subaru knew.

He absolutely must not die anymore. Dying, and returning to before, if that was after Gustav had been killed, that his life could no longer be saved, would become absolute.

If he made anybody's Death absolute, then that was already the same as Subaru killing them himself.

Letting a world that could not be saved become absolute, no matter whose hands had brought about that Death, Natsuki Subaru would be the murderer.

That was why, he was desperate in order to not die.

Even if Gustav died, even if Old Man Null died, even if the Gladiators died, even if the guards died, even if anyone died, he was resisting desperately in order not to die.

If Subaru died, they who had been killed would die for real.

Though he understood it was an unreasonable notion, Subaru could not do anything but struggle like that.

If Subaru did not die, there remained a possibility that he could finish things without letting his dead comrades die. If he did that, he could finish it without them really dying, that was why—.

If he does not die for the rest of eternity in this way, he could finish things without anyone dying, such a fantasy it was.

Such a fantasy, it had been nothing more than a fantasy, the life of Subaru, who had uncouthly died, was proof of that.

3

How many times had he welcomed Death already?

???: “Disappearing right in front of me, what’s your plan?”

???: “Schwa—”

A voice that was about to call his name was cut short in front of Subaru, who was slumped over on his knees.

The axe, swung devoid of mercy, hacked into Hiain’s body, taking his life with it, causing him to clatter loudly onto the floor, eyes wide open.

Flowing blood gushed out, spreading onto the floor, mixing with the blood from Idra's body, who'd fallen earlier.

Idra, whose head had been split open, had been killed before Hiain.

Subaru had failed to save him from Todd's first attack. Idra had been killed first, then Hiain, and finally Subaru was left alone once again.

And all that was after Tanza had already been thrown by Todd, and fallen out of the hole in the wall.

The world had already been rewound to the point where the screams of a falling Tanza could be heard.

Weitz, his arm and face injured, swallowed by the collapsing passage along with the frog Witchbeast, along with Tanza, thrown out while trying to protect Subaru, were "locked" into a reality that could not be changed.

And then—

Todd: "What's actually happening here?"

Subaru, who was slumped over on the spot, his knees stained with their flowing blood, was posed a question by Todd carrying his axe atop his shoulder.

Subaru's numb brain received a jolt, telling him the words that would follow.

The question from Todd, which he had been asked so many times already, was—.

Subaru: "You, are you really the child of His Excellency the Emperor?"

Todd: "…Quit predicting what people are about to say."

Todd let out that mutter with a tone of voice that indicated displeasure in response to Subaru, who still had his head hung down.

He did not know how he actually felt about being beaten to the punch, but to Subaru, it did not feel like things were precarious to the point Todd would instantly become enraged and try to kill him.

Not that he was trying to create a sense of danger, that had just left his mouth in a fit of panic.

But if Todd's pace were disturbed even slightly—

Subaru: "If you don't want to die, stay put."

Saying this, Subaru pulled out a black orb from his pocket—the curse tool that had been placed in Gustav's body. He held it out as to display it to Todd.

The black orb, having wiped clean of blood, and possessing a texture and feel akin to that of a glass ball, was far heavier than a golf ball.

What it was made of, and what material it was made of, knowledge of that did not really matter.

The important thing to remember was that it concealed a very great and cruel power.

If this was truly the key needed to activate the curse rule, that which Todd desired, then he could use it.

It could possibly, supposedly be a second chance for him to be listened to.

Subaru: "This, it seems, is what you need for the curse rule. If you don't want to die…"

Todd: "—. Hey you, what you've got there is…"

Subaru: "—I'm the one! Who's doing the talking! Right now!! I said "if you don't want to die", you heard me damn well, didn't you?!"

Subaru barked as he waved his hand with the curse tool, spittle flying.

There was no room in his head, crammed with regret and despair, and no leeway for him to examine Todd's every word. Intense anger welled up in him as he just commanded him to do as told.

Todd: "Good grief, I got you, I got you."

Seeing Subaru's anger, Todd let out a small sigh and raised his hands, lowering his axe.

Subaru was astonished to see Todd following his instructions so readily. His reaction made Todd raise an eyebrow.

Todd: "You're a weird one. Aren't you the one who told me to do this?"

Subaru: "W-well… It's not so simple…"

Unable to argue back with Todd, Subaru's eyes darted around, clearly flustered, as he strongly rued his own foolishness.

Using being Emperor's illegitimate son had been mistaken, he should have just used the curse tool as a shield from the start. He had been scared and impatient, so he had jumped to the easy option. And because of that, he had ruined everything.

Gustav, Old Man Null, Weitz and Tanza, all because of Subaru.

All because Subaru had not made proper use of his head—.

Todd: "By the way kid, you know how to use that?"

Subaru: "Huh…?"

As he condemned and rued his own foolishness, a voice interrupted his thoughts.

Due to that question cast by Todd, his hands raised, Subaru let out a hoarse voice and looked at the curse tool in his hand. As far as how to use it went, he did not know. It did not have an easy-to-understand switch or a mechanism that told him how to use it just by holding it.

Subaru: "—I guess."

Todd immediately saw through the threat just by how much his gaze wavered.

Todd: "If you knew, you wouldn't have done this, there'd be no need for threats."

Subaru: "Ah."

Immediately after, Todd kicked Subaru's hand away with an upswing of his foot, his hands still raised.

Having kicked the hand which was holding out the curse tool, the black orb flew up directly overhead. Subaru reflexively followed it with his eyes; once again, he was acting foolishly.

Looking up was the same as offering your neck to the enemy.

Subaru: "…"

His gaze chased after the flying curse tool, until it was abruptly interrupted.

Just before the interruption, he thought he heard a thunk coming from his left side to his right, but he had no way or reason to know for sure what it was.

And he had no choice but to admit something.

—He was unable to conceive a way to stop Todd Fang.

4

—A fool who had everything taken away from him, after playing the good guy and having been made fun of.

That was how the people around Idra Missanga, a man who had lost his family's business, ended up on the street, and became a slave, evaluated him.

A small farming village in the northwestern part of the Empire was

Idra's home, the land where the Missanga family had kept the family mill business going for generations.

Idra had heard that the mill had been established in the generation of his grandfather's grandfather, who had apparently been a very skilled person during his lifetime.

He had been entrusted by his lord to manage the waterwheel built along the river in the village and the mill that used it, and he was in charge of milling the entirety of the grains from the village.

The rewards were high, the labor was low, and Idra came from a privileged background in the eyes of those who had to rely on the Missanga family to mill the crops they produced.

However, neither Idra himself nor his family were using their business to have a life they could boast of.

There was no doubt that they were well-off compared to their neighbors. At the same time, however, they had also acted as members of the village, taking on roles that should normally be performed by the village head, such as paying taxes to the lord on behalf of the villagers in times of crop failure, or going directly to negotiate with the lord.

—Do business honestly, and strive to earn widespread trust and confidence.

This was the family motto and philosophy of the Missanga family as millers.

In the process of milling using a waterwheel, many would pocket some of the grain. Indeed, Idra, and his father, had been sternly told by their own parents, who were in charge of the family business, that the world looked harshly at millers, and that exactly was why it was important to be humble.

Because he had a role in which he could easily arouse suspicion, he had always kept an open mind when interacting with people.

Never monopolizing wealth, sharing joys and sorrows with those around them. Even if this was not the right way to live in the

Vollachian Empire, which respected the strong, it had been honored as the correct way to live in the remote rural village that was out of reach of the iron and blood rule of the Imperial Capital.

Idra was also one of those who had grown up with its benefits since childhood.

So even after his seriously-ill father handed over the family business early on, he had tried to keep the tradition alive.

???: “It’s an honest and good life, isn’t it? I’m jealous.”

Envying Idra’s life, was a man who stopped by the village’s bar.

A man, exuding the atmosphere of a veteran soldier, had revealed his identity as a mercenary who had traveled across battlefields wielding a large sword.

Since people from the outside were rare, Idra shared drinks with him, listening to his various stories.

For Idra, who had not possessed much knowledge of the outside world, the world the man had spoken of was full of surprises.

Unlike rural villages where time passed slowly and peacefully, the world in which that man lived was dangerous, and cruel. But at the same time, it was filled with an unforgettable heat.

By that time already, Idra had held a vague yearning for it.

As a person born in the Vollachian Empire, he had wondered if any option other than him taking over the family business existed, a hope that he had not taken very seriously.

The life of a warrior who respected his own strength and faith, would never choose a lowly way of life.

Man: “Idra, you have a cousin. Actually, I’ve taken an interest in her…”

Idra became close with the man who visited the village every few months and drank with him each time.

And so, after several nights spent together, the man had confided that in Idra, donning a serious face. His younger cousin was still unmarried, and Idra was fond of that man as well.

So, without hesitation, Idra introduced him to his cousin, set the stage for the couple to bond, and celebrated the birth of their new family with drinks on the night of their nuptials.

A month later, that man conspired with his cousin to steal the family business of milling.

The man insisted that Idra's cousin was also entitled to run the family business of the Missanga family, and spoke further lies, that Idra and his father, who had been working at the mill until now, had falsified the results of their milling to the villagers.

Of course, Idra asserted that that was not so, but the suspicion attached to the profession of a miller itself could not be dispelled, and the opinion of the village was split down the middle.

Before a settlement could be reached, his father, who had been very sick, died of his illness, and his mother, suffering from heartache, passed away, as if chasing after him.

Idra: "I've run out of patience. I will protect my household at all costs…!"

Mourning his parents, Idra decided to fight back, even cursing his own carelessness.

If his cousin and the man planned to do something nefarious, Idra would surely reclaim his rights. For this reason, Idra requested the presence of the villagers to bring the man to justice.

He believed that the trust that the Missanga family had developed through their honest business practices would bring justice.

However—

Idra: "—Why, what in the world?"

No one showed up at the place that had been agreed upon, and on the contrary, preparations for an armed uprising were found in Idra's home.

Abandoned and brought to an unwanted trial before their lord, Idra had desperately pleaded innocence, but none of the villagers defended him.

His cousin and the man orchestrated the whole thing.

The villagers chose the man who lied but contributed profits over the honest Idra.

There had not been even a single shred of hope to win.

Deprived of his family business and reduced to slavery, Idra was sent to the Island by slave traders.

A place for those who had nowhere else to go, a horrible Island where the only thing they had left, their lives, would be toyed with. Ginunhive.

In that place where fighting for his life was made a spectacle, Idra felt his heart fall in despair and his soul rotting away, and he decided to follow his despair.

Isn't it enough already?

How can I still be motivated to work hard, when I worked so hard and was not rewarded?

What I believed was a lie. What I relied on was a mistake.

Everyone's looking to take advantage of everyone else, trying to save only themselves.

If that was the case, then there was nothing wrong with him doing that as well.

Indeed, Idra was nothing.

It was only natural that no one would choose him.

He had no trained strength, nor any ability to be of any special use. Who would choose Idra?

Even Idra would not choose Idra.

And yet, who in the world would choose Idra, who was merely honest to a fault, that Idra—.

Subaru: "—You wanted to be a warrior, right, Idra?! If so, now's your chance! Now is the time to do it!"

—The day for him to be rewarded for living an honest life, was not supposed to arrive.

5

Idra: "…"

Feeling a throbbing, aching sensation in his head, Idra had become completely unable to move.

His tongue was numb, and as if his throat were blocked, he was unable to breathe. The sensation in his limbs was distant, he was assailed by a fear akin to that of his own body having been torn asunder.

Fear, he could no longer avoid facing it.

Considering what had happened just before, even back in his hometown, when nobody took his side, that cold sensation of the blood freezing throughout his body was a far cry from this fear.

Weitz was killed before his eyes, and the brave Tanza was thrown outside the passage.

As he watched, Idra simply stiffened, unable to do anything. It would be too ironic if that cowardice was the reason he had been able to outlive Weitz and Tanza.

Would these few seconds, maybe around ten, suit the humiliation that burned through his chest?

Unable to do anything, he watched as two people who could have done something died.

The despair and regret that this fact brought to Idra was even heavier than in the past, when the family business had fallen victim to his careless behavior.

Idra: “—Heh.”

Thinking that much, Idra laughed at his own inexperience in life.

Regardless of joyful experiences, he could not think of any painful ones, other than the downfall of his life when the family business was taken from him. —He truly felt that he had been blessed and plentiful.

Perhaps it had been his way of living, that which had provoked the man who had stolen his livelihood away from him.

Even if that were the case, there was no way he could forgive that man for what he had done.

Idra: “…”

With excessively ragged breathing, his vision blurry, Idra checked his surroundings.

Just what had happened? Were the pains throughout his body and this lack of ability to comprehend related somehow? Was this even real to begin with?

That everyone on the Gladiator Island could be killed, that Schwartz was the illegitimate son of the Emperor, that Weitz and Tanza had both been killed, he wondered whether it was all a dream.

It was all a dream, and Idra still had the luxury of being bored with his privileged life—.

Todd: “You’ve sure done a bold thing, you know.”

Idra stiffened in horror, forgetting the pain in his body as he heard a cold voice.

The blood throughout his body felt frozen beyond a mere chill, and Idra slowly realized that the footsteps of the owner of the voice were approaching.

And then—

Todd: “It’s better than standing still, but that’s what happens when you jump off without a plan.”

The man’s seemingly fed-up voice was not directed at Idra.

Because the voice had directed somewhere a short distance away from him, Idra took in his relief. Then, with a wistful glance, he looked to the place the voice had been directed.

And there—

???: “—Ah, ugh.”

He saw the crawling form of a ragged, bloodied, black-haired boy.

Idra: “…”

The sight of the crawling boy and the fact that this was not the passage of the upper stratum he had seen a moment prior reminded Idra of what had happened before his consciousness went blank.

Weitz had been murdered, Tanza had been projected outside, Idra had yelled at the heinous man’s incomprehensible thinking, and just before his demise, Schwartz had moved in.

Ranting and raving, Schwartz had clung onto the waist of the frozen-still Idra and Hiain, and jumped through a hole in the wall opposite from where Tanza had been thrown down.

Via the holes in the wall created by the large bird plunging through, Tanza had fallen to somewhere else on the Island, and Schwartz had jumped in with Idra and the others into a hole on the side opposite to that—still, the chances of them surviving had been slim.

They had been scraped by the wall and hated by the protrusions, then slammed to the ground from a great height, and left to die.

It had been a reckless and desperate escape, with a nine out of ten chance of dying, but it had been the only way for them to escape.

That he had been able to grab that one chance to save his life could be said to be a miracle. However, the miracles stopped there.

Neither the crawling Schwartz, nor the collapsed Idra could escape from the man who was chasing them.

They were unable to lay eyes on Hiain, either because he had not managed to fall onto the mountainside scaffold they were on, or probably because he was using his camouflage to hide and lurk.

Even in case he were hiding, Hiain's courage could not be counted on.

He was by no means a bad guy, but he was not brave. Though he was subservient and cowardly, though he would get carried away, though he was attached to Schwartz, one could not expect more from him.

Even so, if there was any chance for him to get through this without dying, then he should hold his breath and hide.

If the miracle that Schwartz had so desperately grasped would keep Hiain alive, then that was fine.

At least that much should be repaid to Schwartz.

Idra: "…"

Suddenly, he had a thought.

Now that he had fallen from a great height and was in tatters, and now that that man was paying attention to Schwartz, maybe Idra, too, would be overlooked as having died.

He was a scary guy, but there was no way he would go around crushing the heads of all the corpses.

Depending on Idra's condition, if he could make him think he was dead with a convincing performance, then he could possibly get through this without dying. Like this, he could survive, even if only by himself.

Idra: "…"

It was time to choose.

In order to survive, what would Idra Missanga sacrifice, what would he do?

In this cruel world, where the strong and cunning got whatever they so wished, just what kind of person would Idra Missanga choose to become?

If he was honest, then people would have faith in him; and foolishly, honestly believing that he would then be trusted, this man who had lost everything—.

Todd: "—One, two aaand three!"

He raised the axe; gripping it with both hands, he was about to swing it down onto the crawling boy's head.

Holding his breath, shutting his eyes, he hid his face from just about everything.

—What in the world could be saved with that?

Idra: "N-NOOOOOOO—!!!!"

He forced his whole body to move, tearing it off from the ground it seemed to stick on to, and ran clumsily, spitting up a lot of blood.

He ran and threw himself onto the man's back. He could not move his left hand, so he just used his right hand to grapple that body, desperately trying to bite it.

Todd: "I knew you were alive."

A moment later, as if to mock Idra's resolve, the man dropped the axe he had raised over his back. His empty hand immediately pulled out a knife, and turning around, in a flash, Idra's right forearm was blown off at the elbow.

Since he worked the waterwheel as a miller, his unworn, thin arm, which had never known hard labor, flew away.

However—

Idra: "—TAKE HIM AND GOOOOOOOO!!"

As scorching heat crawled up from the severed arm, Idra's vision was stained a deep red. But for just that moment, forgetting the pain, Idra shouted with all of his might.

The man in front of him slightly raised his eyebrows at the volume of that voice, as Idra still vomited blood.

He probably did not understand the purpose behind Idra's shout and actions.

And yet—

Todd: "Tch."

The man turned around with a click of his tongue, and threw the knife that had slashed Idra's arm.

The man had thrown it behind him, aimed at Schwartz who was crawling on the ground—no, he was no longer there. Escaping while carrying Schwartz, was the scenery, moving.

It was Hiain.

Having held his breath as he laid in hiding, Hiain had taken Schwartz on his back and escaped. Seeing that, Idra gritted his teeth and threw himself onto the man's back.

Since he had lost his right arm, and could not move his left arm, he bit down and clung to the man's clothes.

Idra: "Bft."

He was struck in the chest by an elbow over his back, and his bent-over body was kicked to the ground. However, his left arm, which had been struck by the impact of the fall, began to move instead of being in severe pain. His dislocated shoulder had been popped back in.

And then adding to the series of miracles, the axe that the man had dropped lay next to his left arm.

Todd: “Did you not think that he had escaped?”

Not letting go of his knife and having lost his axe, the man tilted his head as he looked at Idra.

Even though he had lost his weapon, he did not look disadvantaged in the slightest. That was a matter of course. The blood Idra had shed, and the blood that he was shedding, was ceaseless.

It was a miracle that he was alive, and too many miracles had already happened.

Henceforth, Idra shook his head at the man’s question.

Idra: “No, I thought he had escaped. But, I also hoped.”

Todd: “…”

Idra: “I hoped he wouldn’t leave me behind.”

A man who was just subservient and cowardly, who would easily get carried away, but was not a bad guy.

That it would be good as long as Hiain had not run away, Idra had foolishly and honestly believed that.

After all, people did not change so easily.

He had tried to deceive and use the people around him by making them think he was a warrior, a lie that had been exposed quite quickly.

He had to be honest, and he had to be widely trusted and relied on.

Even if they pointed and laughed at him for being a good person.

Idra Missanga would become neither a warrior nor a fraud.

Brandishing the axe with his left hand, while shedding blood, Idra shouted.

Idra: “I am Idra Missanga! The son of a miller!!”

Todd: “Never heard of him.”

Now, mustering up the strength he possessed to the fullest extent, Idra lunged at the man who wore an apathetic face.

—He was glad that, thanks to Schwartz, he had not become a liar on that day.

6

Carried on a body that was running for its life, he had been taken from the jaws of death.

He was shaken violently, without concern for his wounds or safety, but that was only natural.

Subaru too was battered, but given the state of the other person’s body, this was not the time to be concerned about that.

Subaru: “Hi, a… Hia, in…”

Having been gripped around the waist painfully, Subaru dug his nails into the other person’s body. He was not even sure where he was clawing. The person he had clawed at already looked an utter mess.

It was not that they were all scraped up or anything, but the colors, the patterns, everything was all messed up.

As they mimicked every bit of the surrounding scenery nonstop, he could not even accurately gauge what was supposed to be correct. The figure, running on in such a state, abruptly lost their strength and fell forward.

Hiain: “Gahk!”

Of course, if they were to fall, Subaru would also follow suit.

Hurled in front of his collapsed companion, Subaru tumbled across the cold stone floor. Since he had been unable to catch his fall, it felt like the impact had broken his front tooth.

Without pause, he raised his oozing, aching face and looked back while sprawled on the ground.

And right there—

Hiain: “Huu, huu…”

Literally barely breathing, Hiain lay collapsed on the ground.

Listlessly lying prone, Hiain had a large knife stuck deep in the middle of his back. Subaru had no idea when he had been stabbed.

Regardless of whether it had been when they were running away, or before that, or even prior to that, there was nothing he could do.

If Subaru were to die, he would come back to just before Idra’s head was smashed open.

Maybe it would be after it had already been smashed. —No, he had jumped outside so that would not happen, so perhaps it would be before their fall, after their fall, or while they were in midair.

No matter how it was done, it was difficult for three people to fall in a way such that none of them would die, and, the first time they had succeeded, Todd had come.

Idra’s voice, and Hiain’s breathing, were so distant.

Before long, they would be in a place where nothing could reach them.

Hiain: “It’s… strange…”

Still collapsed, Hiain’s feeble voice made its way to Subaru’s ears as the latter tried to crawl to him.

The reason he sounded like he was talking while breaking the water's surface with his head, was probably because his throat was rife with blood. He probably needed some kind of treatment, sort of like draining the blood, or something.

That was what he had to do. Even if he was not a doctor, he had to.

Hiain: "I once heard that… life's like a… flower, ya pick the beautiful ones first…"

Subaru: "D-don't talk… I'm coming now, right now…"

Hiain: "If that's the case, it's strange that someone with a fucked-up personality, like me'd die first… Ah."

He crawled. He kept crawling.

So that he could pull Hiain up, who was drowning in his own blood on the ground.

And yet, he could not move his body forward, not even a little.

Hiain: "But…"

Since he could not keep going, he would not be able to get there.

Hiain: "…It'll be better, if I'm first, yeah?"

He was crawling slower than a turtle. Crawling too slow, with movements smaller than those of an ant.

He crawled and crawled, and by the time he finally got there, it was far too late.

Hiain's color had returned to its original gray.

With a knife in his back, one arm broken, and blood running down his body, it would not have been strange if Hiain had succumbed on the way running here.

Maybe he had been running while dying. That must have been the case.

Everyone was already dead, with Subaru unable to help them.

Subaru had as good as killed them.

Since he had been unable to save everyone, it was as if he had killed them.

Subaru: “Guh!”

Was it blood, tears, or snot that was sullying his face?

He did not know which was which, what was what, who was who, what the answer was, anymore.

He just, he just, he just, he just, he just did not understand anything anymore.

???: “—Oh my, is that you, Basu, groaning there by any chance?”

Subaru: “…”

???: “Yeah, I knew it, Basu! Dear me, what an unexpected coincidence it is to meet you in a scene like this. Things’ve gotten quite lively, doesn’t it excite you?”

A lighthearted voice called out to Subaru, who lay there stunned, feeling like he had let go of everything.

He could not turn around to the place the voice had come from. Using all the strength in his body, he was going to pick himself up, somehow, and look the person who had uttered those stupid words in the eyes, and say somethi—.

???: “You don’t have to bother risking your life turning around.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

???: “After all, this isn’t the place to overdo things, is it?”

And with that, they themselves circled around to Subaru’s front—Cecilus looked into Subaru’s face as he spoke.

With the left half of his body scorched black, the Blue Lightning was smiling carefree.

Chapter 75:
I know

1

—In that wretchedly hopeless scene, such a cheerful voice and smile were terribly out of place.

It was evident at first glance that his kimono was violently smoldering, and despite the left half of his face also having been scorched black, Cecilus's attitude as he gazed at Subaru was the same as it had always been. That was far too abnormal.

It was not just him. —Right now, those who remained alive upon this island, all of them were abnormal beings.

The people who were upright, all of them had certainly died already.

Cecilus right in front of him, Todd pursuing him, Arakiya on her killing spree, and Subaru, the great sinner.

Every single one of them, because they were not upright, but instead, shameless people, they had been able to survive like this.

That was why—

Subaru: "Ce, ci…"

Cecilus: "From the looks of things, it seems like you've also had a considerably hard time. On that note, lizardman-san's also died, and at this rate, the lil' deergirl and your other friends from your Unit are all gonna be annihilated, won't they?"

Subaru: "—Hk."

Cecilus: "Oh, is it possible you've yet to realize that he died?"

Through the tremors of the eyeballs of a trembling Subaru, Cecilus was reading through all of his heartfelt thoughts.

Right then, outrage surged forth. Despite seemingly reading Subaru's heart like that, why was he completely unable to sympathize with Subaru's current feelings?

Hiain had died; having been told that, just what would become of Subaru's feelings. And, just why?

Just why, would he speak of that death so frivolously?

Cecilus: "He really died y'know, absolutely and irrevocably… Only, the face he died with wasn't too bad."

Subaru: "Even though, he, died… Hk."

Cecilus: "Are you thinking it doesn't matter whether it was good or bad? That seems to just be a difference in opinion, then. If they had a good way of living, then they'd also have a good way of dying. It's rather tactless for us listeners to butt in with how we feel about it, so let's stop with that. Lizardman-san had a good death. That face of his is proof of that, y'know."

Subaru: "…"

Cecilus: "It's the face of having died after fulfilling one's duty, I also want to go out like this."

Subaru did not say a single thing to Cecilus, who incessantly spewed his nonsense.

He had not been cajoled by those words, rather, he thought them to be meaningless. He had not seen the visage Hiain had made upon his demise, so it was utterly unthinkable that he could comprehend Cecilus.

That was why, there was not even a fragment of a reason for Subaru to engage with his point.

Cecilus: "Well then, though we happened upon each other here and have been blathering on, in truth I'm actually quite busy right now. I'm in the middle of a fantastic showdown with the half-naked woman who's been rampaging around the Island."

Stretching his crooked back with a jerk, Cecilus continued to speak as he pleased.

The person who had been mentioned in conversation, Subaru knew it to be Arakiya without even needing to think.

Arakiya had commenced a massacre upon being told to do so by Todd. Todd's lack of outstanding fighting strength had been his only good aspect, but that had disappeared once paired with her, making him an impeccable evil.

He imagined he would not lay eyes on her again after she had begun turning the gladiators' heads into water balloons, but it seemed like the one who had been keeping her in check was Cecilus.

Even with the latter weakened, could it be that a Divine General was being suppressed by a fellow Divine General?

Cecilus: "But, as you can see I'm in the middle of getting cooked in a close fight. Well, I'm beat, I'm beat. Seems like she's here, the person who can compete with me toe-to-toe, that is. Though I'd always thought that, without a doubt, the path to reach the Heavenly Sword was something that had to be climbed on one's own."

Subaru: "…Why?"

Cecilus: "Pardon? What was that?"

Subaru: "Why, do you seem, like you're enjoying this…?"

Quite literally, at the end of the agonizing struggle that had seemed to wring out his soul, the venting of his anger rushed forth from his mouth.

Indeed, it was just him venting his anger. In this hellish situation, on this island where Weitz, Tanza, Idra, and Hiain, and just about everyone had died, Cecilus's smile was revolting.

Why was he smiling? In this situation, just what was so amusing?

Subaru: “Why…?!”

Cecilus: “Ah, you’ve got cause and effect backwards. I’m not smiling because it’s enjoyable, I’m smiling to make the situation of this play more enjoyable.”

Subaru: “—Ah?”

Cecilus: “In this cruel world, everyone’s in pursuit of their own ideal happiness. The myriads of different people in existence, the philosophies they each follow, that pursuit remains constant in all of them, but whoever it may be, they have to herald a faith that suits them. Thus, the faith I herald, is the reason behind this way of being.”

While he spoke, Cecilus touched his scorched left cheek with his right hand. Though his tattered and charred skin was peeling and flaking away, even in the midst of seemingly unimaginable pain, his smile did not deteriorate.

Without relying on any cheap tricks like not feeling pain, Cecilus kept on smiling.

Cecilus: “I’m the leading actor of this world! Therefore, I’m not going to adhere closely to the script, but instead the script will adhere closely to me. If you ask me why I smile, then that will be my response.”

Subaru: “…”

Cecilus: “For whose sake do I laugh for, it’s for my own sake. —May it be so that the Observers in the heavens above never feel any shame whenever they might look at me.”

Subaru: “…”

Cecilus: “Well, Basu, what kinda faith do you herald?”

That was Cecilus’s philosophy for maintaining his smile while half of his body was smoldering.

That was something Subaru could not comprehend in the slightest, but as if something were making him hesitate to kick Cecilus for relying on his emotions, he had felt something akin to that peculiar faith.

Observers, Cecilus had once spoken of the same thing before.

That someone, or rather something, of an ethereal nature had been observing them, that seemed like what he had wanted to say.

Even in the situation they were in, he staunchly stuck to that recitation of his, so certainly nobody would be able to bend it.

That was why—

Cecilus: “Would you look at that, seems the intermission’s over.”

As he said that, even when witnessing Arakiya’s figure descend, coming from the passage of the lower stratum, his smile did not vanish.

Surely nobody among the gladiators would have stood a chance against Arakiya, her whole body clad in flame. And yet, the wooden branch in her hand had snapped, and she had lost the eyepatch that concealed one of her eyes.

Loathing the fact that she was able to see with the eye under that eyepatch, Arakiya was concealing her left eye with her vacant hand, and her face, which had been emotionless in the past, was contorted, expressing utterly complex emotions.

Arakiya: “Cecilus…!”

Clenching her teeth as she glared at Cecilus, the woman’s pupils flickered with turmoil and ire.

Having sprouted from her back, wings of flame danced; the force of their blaze wavered as if in tandem with her emotions, immolating, continuing to permeate the passage with terrific heat.

The scent of burning was in the air, the woman proceeding to incinerate everything encompassing her surroundings.

The walls and floor of the passage, the candlesticks and doors, and even Hiain's collapsed remains—.

Subaru: "—Hk."

Cecilus: "If we all burn to death here, together, would that be proper recompense for the face he died with? That was a pretty uncharacteristic thing for me to say. By all means, do as you wish, feel free to either stay or leave."

Seeing bits and pieces of Hiain's body catch fire, Subaru's expression changed as Cecilus's voice fell upon him. Firmly, Subaru put his arm to the floor, and little-by-little, tearing his body away from the ground as it began to heat up, he stood up.

His head was aching. His blood was lacking. His chest felt like it was overcome with feelings of powerlessness.

Even so, just why, was Subaru still standing? He would neither burn to death here, nor would he bite down on the "drug" placed behind his molar, just why?

Cecilus: "Then, 'til we meet again in this life."

The reason why he had started sprinting unbeknownst to him, Subaru turned his back on the flaming passage.

Running, limping, he was running at far too slow a pace.

Faster, if only he had been able to surpass this speed, would he not have been able to finish things without letting them, Idra and Hiain, Weitz and Tanza, die? And while he lamented such things.

Subaru, still continued to run away.

2

Cecilus: "—Well now, Basu's disappeared as well, huh ."

Arakiya: "…"

Cecilus: "Dear me, seems like I'm hated an awful lot."

Feeling the presence of that faltering sprint grow distant, batting one eye shut, Cecilus produced a wry smile.

The woman clad in flames cast him an intense glare; he understood that he himself was the target of her ire, yet he did not quite understand what the source of said ire was.

Only, he felt that it was neither his opposition, nor him interrupting her slaughter of the gladiators, that had originated that rage.

Perhaps, there were other reasons beyond that.

However—

Cecilus: “In general, I do have the special skill of angering the people I come into contact with, but, as is usual in those situations… I don’t have the faintest clue why!”

Arakiya: “—Hk, for how long, will you keep joking around…!”

Cecilus: “Hmm, I’m joking around, huh. May I go as far as to ask what part exactly am I joking around about?”

Arakiya: “That! That… appearance, just what is it…!”

Those red eyes glaring at him, his appearance had been pointed out.

She had asked what was up with it, though it had been none other than her who had cooked him until he was seared on only one side.

Cecilus: “But that’s not what you mean, is it? Is it possible that maybe you and I happen to know each other?”

Arakiya: “Joking around…”

Cecilus: “I’m really not, but that being said, since I can’t provide any evidence for you to believe me, I can do nothing but insist and insist on it. However, I see, if I think about it that way it feels like many things make sense.”

While he spoke, Cecilus whirled around an extended finger of his right-hand, and nodded as he spun the eyepatch he had stolen from her in the midst of battle.

His memories up until the uproar on the Gladiator Island were terribly unclear. That it was in accordance with what Subaru had asked before, this was fact. That he had not paid much heed to it, was also fact. Nonetheless, just when he had thought that some of those were present, the woman before his eyes had made her entrance, her face looking as if she knew him.

If that woman were present within his vanished memories, he felt that was somewhat too good to be true. If she was capable of this much, he had expectations of what could happen.

On the path, to reach the Heavenly Sword—

Arakiya: "Always like this… Nobody, no one will tell me anything…!"

Cecilus: "Oh?"

However, in front of Cecilus as he pondered over, as the woman's voice trembled with frustration, powerful bitterness began mixing in with her turmoil and fury.

From red to blue, the flames upon her back shifted in hue. They had a graceful charm to them.

As that graceful transfiguration was brought about, the breaths she took seemed strained,

Arakiya: "The Princess, His Excellency as well, are both hiding… I was, always…"

Cecilus: "Are you having painful thoughts about having been left behind?"

Arakiya: "—Hk."

As if that brief comment had somehow hit bullseye, her facial expression stiffened.

Witnessing those red eyes wavering as if a deep emotion had throbbed from the faded beyond, ultimately, even if said deep emotion had not throbbed, her relation to him was something he was unsure of.

Cecilus: “Well, it’d be strange for you to try killing me if we had a good relationship, so surely it was a rather harsh relationship. That lines up with this situation perfectly!”

Arakiya: “Cecilus…!”

Cecilus: “The audience will get bored from such long-winded dialogue. It’s about time we get this stage moving. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to give you any answers whatsoever, but a some small weight may be removed from your chest.”

Slowly concealing the aching half of his body, grasping the spinning eyepatch tightly, he came to face her.

Thereupon ending the conversation, his attitude was that of wishing for the conversation to not enter the realm of unnecessary words. Then the woman, after remaining silent for a while, slowly lowered her left hand.

Beyond that, was a red eye bereft of all light. Meeting its gaze with his own eyes, Cecilus produced a wry smile.

Cecilus: “Feel free to go all out. —Every single time, you only cook your fried eggs on one side.”

Arakiya: “—Hk.”

Cecilus: “Eh? Did something slip out just now?”

Cecilus cocked his head, wondering about the words that had left his mouth as if by reflex.

Albeit, it seemed that had spurred her ire further.

Arakiya: “…”

Furiously, the sprouting blue flames proceeded to incinerate the lower stratum of the island as they rose.

Devoid of the leisure to concern himself with his surroundings, as he plunged into the inferno, Cecilus himself became Blue Lightning.

3

Subaru: “Haaa, haaa…”

Feeling the heat of the inferno on his back, Subaru frantically fled from the lower stratum.

Fled, indeed, he was fleeing. Not resisting, nor struggling, but fleeing.

That it had been a strategic withdrawal, or a valiant escape in order to follow-up next time, he could not make those excuses.

After all, he had nothing at all to follow-up with beyond this point.

Everybody had died, there was no getting anyone back anymore.

Although Weitz and the others had staked their lives so he could escape, he was unable to do anything whatsoever.

Everything, and anything, his intention had been to succeed in both.

In reality, he had intended, by overcoming Sparka on two occasions, helping out the comrades of his Unit as well as Hiain’s comrades, to surmount every hardship.

It had been a terribly mistaken presumption.

To begin with, Subaru had died many times. Even if he died, as long as he had the chance to do everything over, it would turn out well; thus, it could no longer turn out well.

If he really were a capable person, he should have made everything turn out well, dying not even a single time.

Just as though he were that dreadful existence, just as though he were Todd Fang.

Without even possessing the Authority to start over through death, he had the capability to surmount every situation through his own power.

Lacking any outstanding fighting strength, he was identical to Subaru, so then why, why was Subaru unable to do the same things as Todd.

Since he could not do those things, Subaru, had ended up killing a great number of people—.

Subaru: "Damn it… Hk!"

Rushing out of the island's lower stratum, just as he felt the open air, his vexation swelled unbearably. Bashing the outer wall he leaned against, Subaru cursed himself for his own weakness.

His small fist, his frail body, his non-functioning mind, his useless Authority. Were he to start enumerating the reasons for his defeat, what came to mind was unending.

Rather, just what did he, this shitty brat with scary eyes, possess—.

???: "—Hk."

Subaru, ceasing his footsteps in regret and cursing himself, stifled a scream from his throat at the unexpected sound.

A sound at this place, his whole body trembled violently as he imagined the worst possible thing. Could Todd, who Idra had desperately tried to fend off, have caught up to him?

However—

???: "Schwartz, sama…"

Subaru: "—Tanza?"

As the sound of the hoarse voice continued, Subaru received a shock, although it had not been one of dread.

Calling out to Subaru through feeble breaths, was the one who had been thrown out of the passage by Todd's hand, whose safety he had been uncertain of thereafter, Tanza.

The girl's entire body was drenched as it limped, and having discarded her kimono, she was dressed in her white juban. She was in a battered condition, with one of the two horns sprouting from her head having been broken off.

But even so—

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama, thank goodness, you are alright…"

As her gentle eyes wavered with relief, Subaru felt an agonizing sensation stemming from the bottom of his heart.

Upon seeing the soaked girl, he understood that she had been thrown into the lake from the upper stratum. The lake was inhabited by aquatic, savage Witchbeasts, her fractured horn serving as proof that they should not be glossed over as anything trivial.

It was a figure one would expect to cling to an adult, crying out "It hurts, It's painful, help me".

And yet Tanza had found Subaru, letting out a "Thank goodness" with a content look.

This, Natsuki Subaru, who could not do anything at all, finding him —.

Subaru: "—Ah."

And, it happened the moment he had that thought.

The strength in his legs sapping away, Subaru sank to the floor where he stood. The thread of tension snapped, the insides of his head, which had only been ranting and raving, swiftly grew silent.

That he had become relieved upon coming face-to-face with a living Tanza, was not what had happened.

Neither had he somehow gotten a sense of accomplishment by finding a breakthrough solution, nor had he shaken off his fear directed to Todd.

—Merely, he had run out of patience with himself.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama…?!”

Seeing Subaru fall to his knees, Tanza ran towards him, her expression a changed one.

The way she dashed was odd, perhaps she had sustained an injury to her leg. Looking closely, he could see that the sides of her drenched white juban were slowly being dyed red.

Despite having sustained a wound seemingly of awfully immense pain, she was still worrying about Subaru.

When he realized he could not live up to any of Tanza’s expectations, he lost all strength.

Resignation, had overwhelmed his inner heart.

Subaru: “…”

It was neither pain, nor fear.

That which dealt despair to Natsuki Subaru, was not something as easy-to-understand as hardship.

He had been unable to meet the expectations, the wishes, placed upon him.

That, above everything else, was what brought Natsuki Subaru despair, a despair that had become deadly poison to him.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, compose yourself… The others, Idra-sama and Hiain-sama…”

Arriving at his side, Tanza touched Subaru’s shoulders as she fret over the two people not present.

She had not called out Weitz’s name. That was a matter-of-course.

Tanza too, had witnessed Weitz be slain through her very eyes. Then, regarding the two people not present here as well, she had surely felt a bad premonition.

That premonition, was accurate to a hopeless extent.

Subaru: "The two of them… They died…"

Tanza: "—Hk."

Subaru: "Both Idra, and Hiain, protected me…"

Everyone, had died. It was not just that he had not been able to save them, but they had saved him.

Weitz, Idra, and Hiain, all three of them had perished while protecting Subaru. That Tanza was close to death, was also because she had attempted to defend an immobile Subaru.

Everyone dying, was Subaru's fault.

Everyone being killed, was also Subaru's fault.

The horrible tragedy that had befallen the Gladiator Island, all of it had been Natsuki Subaru's fault.

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama… Let us leave this place. At once, we must hide somewhere."

Subaru: "Even if we hide, it's pointless… No matter what, we'll be found immediately."

Tanza: "Even so! Shall you do nothing at all, and wait like this until you are killed? Then for what purpose did everyone in our Unit lose their lives?!"

Subaru: "…"

Shaking her head side-to-side, Tanza let out a frustrated cry directed at Subaru, still unmoving.

Her tearful appeal, however, far from kindling Subaru's heart, only brought about a cold understanding.

Indeed, Subaru, for whose safety the three had staked their lives, was utterly, completely useless.

In other words, he had let the three of them die in vain. Because, all of them had tried to protect Subaru.

He had not been capable of living up to their expectations. Even though he had gone as far as having lied to them, deceived them.

It would have been better had they not believed that lie. Had he been unable to deceive them to the end of the end, or had there been no gain for Subaru in telling that lie, if they had not believed such a lie.

Had that been the case, then the three of them would have not tried to die in Subaru's stead.

It had not been for the Emperor's child's sake, nor for Natsuki Schwartz's, but for Natsuki Subaru's; that, they would never come to know.

And now that he thought about it, there was another person whom he had deceived with the same lie.

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama! If you collapse here—"

Subaru: "…Everything, all of it was a lie, Tanza."

Tanza: "…"

Subaru: "Me being the illegitimate child of the Emperor, that's a downright lie. I'm the child of a praiseworthy, incredible and cool dad… but, I'm nothing of the sort of a child of the Emperor."

Casting his gaze down, Subaru willingly confessed that he had carelessly tried to rely on that lie and their false expectations.

If only he had done this sooner—no, he should not have told such a lie to begin with.

Tanza: "…"

As her already-round eyes widened further, Tanza was rendered speechless due to Subaru's admission.

That was natural. Given the situation, to think he would tell a lie made Subaru himself want to curse his own self. Having been deceived, it would not be strange in the slightest for the girl to surrender herself to anger.

Rather, even if he were to be killed by Tanza's hand, that was something unavoidable.

The same went for everyone else as well.

The chance to exact rightful punishment on the deceitful Subaru, had been lost by those he had deceived.

So, even if Tanza were to do that.

Tanza: "…Schwartz-sama."

Subaru: "…"

Tanza: "Quickly, let us move from here. I shall carry you upon my back."

Subaru: "Huh…"

Subaru, who had shut his eyes in preparation for the fact that whatever came out of her mouth would be only natural, lifted his head upon hearing Tanza's words.

Pursing her thin lips, Tanza tried to pull on Subaru's arm. Earnestly, she attempted to take Subaru upon her back and get out of this place; a "Wait" leaked out through his voice at that development.

He had conveyed everything, every single thing. He had said it had been a lie.

Subaru: "You didn't hear me, did you… I'm…!"

Tanza: “Not the illegitimate child of His Excellency the Emperor, I heard you. We will address that later…”

Subaru: “It’ll be just as shit later, won’t it?! I’m unrelated to the Emperor! And as such, right now, something like a reason to save me is…”

Nonexistent. For pretending that something that did not exist, actually did, had been Subaru’s sin.

That was the very thing that had taken the lives of those three away —.

Tanza: “—Schwartz-sama, is that truly what you believe?”

Having shaken off the small hands touching his shoulders, Subaru ceased his movement.

In front of him, Tanza, crouching, was looking straight into Subaru’s eyes with intent. Unable to take his eyes off of hers, he struggled in understanding the meaning of the words she had stated towards him.

Regardless of what she thought, everything, all of it was just as he had said.

Tanza: “Weitz-sama, Idra-sama, Hiain-sama, the reason everyone put their lives on the line to protect you, Schwartz-sama, was all because of the falsehood you spoke, do you truly believe that?”

Subaru: “A-after all… After all, I said I was the Emperor’s child.”

Tanza: “Myself and everyone else, all of us believed it. Nevertheless, those three… Those people, a scaredy-cat, a coward, and a liar, do you think they would wager their lives out of loyalty and patriotism to the Empire?”

If Subaru were the illegitimate child of the Emperor, he would be known as an Imperial Prince.

That was why, for those three, as people of the Empire, it would have been only natural for them to try to protect Subaru. But, once again, he slowly digested Tanza's words, pondered them over.

As a scaredy-cat, Hiain had tried to run away so he could save himself.

As a coward, Weitz had struggled to survive by outmaneuvering those around him.

As a liar, Idra had tried to make himself look bigger so as to be able to control everyone.

Not one of them felt like someone he would get along with. Assuredly, the three of them had held similar feelings.

Despite that, in the end those three had staked their lives, standing to defend Subaru. Protected him. Allowed him to escape.

Why had it been so? Because the three of them had believed Subaru to be the illegitimate child of the Emperor.

Though, it was possible. —It was possible, that if that had not been the case.

Subaru: "Just, why…?"

Tanza: "It is because, Schwartz-sama, you actually got close to those three."

Subaru: "…"

Tanza: "You engaged in actual conversations with them, answered them, and attempted to actually come to an understanding with them… By doing that, Schwartz-sama, you became close to everyone."

His understanding lacking, as Subaru voiced that question, Tanza spoke as she looked into his eyes.

What had Subaru done? Why had those three tried to save Subaru? She was trying to inform him as to the answer.

Even so, Subaru did not comprehend the meaning of what Tanza was saying.

After all—

Subaru: “That kind of thing, it’s natural. I haven’t done anything even remotely special.”

Conversing with the companions he had been cooperating with, and coming to understand them, had been only natural to him.

Things that he was unable to do certainly existed. Things that he wanted to do, but could not. But, doing something so natural with everybody, getting close to them, that was not such an extraordinary thing.

Tanza: “Personally, I understand how they all felt. I too, was once rescued by Yorna-sama. I was able to grow close to her. Without a doubt, it was the same for those three, with how they felt about you.”

Subaru: “…”

Tanza: “Nonetheless, there was meaning in them staking their lives on just that… There are times when one is made to feel so.”

Unfair, those words had been unfair.

Had she only had her experience with Subaru, it would be impossible for Tanza to say such a thing to his face. But, Tanza spoke of her own experience on what she had received from Yorna.

Yorna Mishigure, the Demon City’s Mistress, a city where many tribes lived—as far as Subaru knew, she was the kindest woman in the Empire.

Putting him on the same level as Yorna, what an absurd proposition. Even disrespect had its limits.

Tanza had appraised Subaru far too highly.

However—

Subaru: "…"

However, for those three, for Hiain and Weitz and Idra, just how had it been?

In all likelihood, Subaru knew more about those three than they had thought.

Hiain's self-hatred, Weitz's false accusations, Idra's downfall, he knew about all of those.

He knew that, having gone through tough times, having gone through miserable times, having been unable to rely on anyone, they had all been sent to this island.

He had not given much thought to that. Because, surely, all three would have also had their chances.

And despite him having thought that they would die here, to think that that would be their end.

Subaru: "I wanted to save, everyone."

Tanza: "You have saved them. To the extent that they would stake their lives in order to protect you, Schwartz-sama."

Subaru: "No, you're wrong. It's not like that…"

By some chance, perhaps it was just as Tanza said.

By some possibility, more than Subaru had believed, those three had perhaps thought of Subaru as their comrade.

Subaru had possibly, by some chance, saved the hearts of those three.

But, just their hearts, was not enough.

It would be unthinkable for him to merely save their hearts and leave it at that. What he wanted to save, was everything.

Subaru wished, for those who had kindly taken his side, for those who had treated him well, for everyone, to have their hearts and bodies alike be saved by his own self.

Were he unable to do so, then, he would be no son of Natsuki Keni—No.

Subaru: "—I, hate it."

With him hopelessly bawling out, with everything in his surroundings dying out, this world was ending.

Before he knew it, the Gladiator Island had been engulfed in black smoke, burning in spite of being an island floating atop a lake, burning, its tongues of flame spreading, bringing the lives carried within it to an end.

Subaru: "I won't…"

Permit anything of the sort. I don't want to allow anything of the sort. I don't want my knees to buckle because of an end like this, unable to save everyone.

I can't accept an ending like this, with everyone sacrificing their lives.

I cannot accept it. Therefore—

Subaru: "—I, don't want, to lose to you."

???: "I don't really care about stuff like winning or losing, though."

From behind the ascending black smoke, tapping his shoulder with the axe in his hand, the man responded as he tilted his head.

4

For but a moment, Subaru had mistaken the man, who had made his appearance with relaxation as he carried a bloodstained axe on his shoulder, for someone else.

Missing his trademark bandana, his orange hair hanging down, he lent a vastly different impression from the man Subaru was acquainted with.

However, that pair of eyes—those green irises, the malice there-in unable to be fully concealed, could not quite falsify his identity.

Subaru: “Todd…”

Todd: “You sure have the devil’s luck. Even though I was chasing you, it took some time to catch up to you since the passage was on fire. I told Arakiya to put her water to use, but…”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “Somehow, it seems like Arakiya’s got her hands full. She’s useless at the times that are actually important.”

Saying that with bluntness and annoyance, Todd, partly due to his lowered hair, had no hint of positivity. The fabricated aura of a friendly young man from their first meeting had evaporated, and what was present now was only a chilly thirst for violence.

Perhaps even that violence was also a misunderstanding on Subaru’s part, and was possibly another fabrication.

He was a man who would tell only the needed lies if push came to shove, utilizing those around him, a fabrication as was typical of Todd—

Tanza: “Please, refrain from coming any closer than that…”

Glowering at Todd as he tried to take a step forward, Tanza picked up a nearby rock.

With the arm strength Tanza possessed, power unthinkable for a child, then even an ordinary stone would be enough as a lethal weapon when thrown. In the case Todd was the opponent however, Subaru did not feel like a rock would not have any usefulness beyond being a rock.

And in fact, Todd was no coward, instead narrowing his eyes,

Todd: “Even though you fell in the lake, you’re quite stubborn, little miss. Are you the same as that lot from earlier?”

Tanza: “…If you are referring to everyone from the Unit…”

Todd: “That’s a troublesome look in your eyes. I also don’t intend on underestimating just how dangerous that desperation is. If I did, it’d be troublesome, as we’d render each other unable to move.”

As he stated that, Todd ran his hand through his own hair. Transmitted from that gesture, was that the removal of his bandana had been an achievement left behind by Idra.

It was not that he had been able to defeat Todd, nor was it that he had injured Todd, even, it was just that he had snatched Todd’s bandana away.

And that notwithstanding, because Idra had carried out a single retaliation, Todd was exercising caution towards Subaru and Tanza.

Tanza: “What… Just what is it exactly that you desire?”

Todd: “—? I just want to go home to my fiancée, though?”

Having brought his legs to a halt, that was Todd’s reply to Tanza’s question.

Devoid of any apparent hint of jest or sarcasm, Todd vocalized his desire plainly. He just wanted to go home, that was the sole thing he desired. That was what Todd had declared.

Perhaps, then, that had not been a lie of any sort.

Tanza: “—Hk.”

Subaru: “Tanza, you don’t need to speak to him anymore. The one to speak to him, will be me.”

Pulling Tanza back, who had cast Todd a stern look, Subaru silently trained his gaze on him.

With the pair of tattered children before him, Todd shrugged his shoulders.

Todd: “I’ve got nothing to talk about, boy.”

Subaru: “I’ll keep you company as you look for an opening. Or could it be that you’re scared of a kid who’s this close to death?”

Todd: “Sure is scary. A brat still trying to provoke me despite the situation, being scared is unavoidable.”

Not letting himself be provoked in the slightest, nor relaxing even a shred of his vigilance, he would not cut corners even if his opponent was a child.

In truth, against an opponent troublesome to no end, he thought it only natural to be driven to a corner like this. Though, he also considered something else. Todd was someone who cautiously used his wits and did not overestimate his own ability, such a way of doing things was—.

Subaru: “You’re someone who tries to manage everything all on your own.”

Todd: “—. It’s impossible to do everything. I know the extent of my own ability.”

Subaru: “Although you came alongside Arakiya as comrades, you really don’t trust her in the slightest.”

He could not feel any consideration towards Arakiya in Todd’s attitude.

Not because he was not confident in Arakiya’s strength, nor because he believed there was no way she would lose, but rather because, regardless of her strength or weakness, Todd simply did not care about Arakiya.

And that was unrestricted to just Arakiya. That way of thought applied to everything in Todd’s vicinity.

That was why, his thoughts, his actions, his ideals, all were fulfilled entirely by his own self.

Subaru: “I don’t want to lose to a guy of that sort.”

Todd: “It’s not about winning or losing. I don’t particularly mind. It’s fine if you win, as long as you die.”

Subaru: “My defeat, won’t just be my defeat. It’ll be Tanza’s, Hiain’s, Weitz’s, Idra’s, everyone in the Unit’s defeat.”

That, was absolutely loathsome.

All together, Subaru and the others had fought, they had resisted, and they headed towards victory. As a Unit.

That was why, they would win. —With everyone, he would go and win.

Subaru: “…”

Kneeling, his body close to death, Subaru put a hand to his own chest.

Though Todd scowled at those words, he did not heedlessly shift his vigilance away from Tanza. Naturally, were Subaru to attempt any discernible action, Todd would surely move to impede him.

Though, as Subaru remained kneeling on the spot, he did not move. He would not move.

Subaru: “Todd.”

And, he had no need to move. —There was just one thing, he had to say.

Subaru: “—I can… Return by Death.”

Powering through his slight hesitation, Subaru spoke so.

Prepared for what could happen should he say that, with his hand still upon his own chest, Subaru clearly spoke those words.

And then—

Todd: “…What?”

After an instant of nothing, because of Subaru’s words, Todd wrinkled his brow, creating deep creases.

Unable to grasp the meaning of those words, Tanza returned signs of doubt all the same. From the reaction of those two, and from the lack of pain hailing from his chest, Subaru discerned the origin of the discrepancy.

Although his body had shrunk, he could not forget those memories of agony.

Were he to speak of that, a disaster should, without fail, befall Subaru. Unbearable pain would be bestowed upon him as punishment for breaking the Taboo, by the black shadows that governed the world of stopped time.

That did not arrive. For what reason? —The Witch had lost sight of Subaru.

At the tower of the Crimson Lapis Castle, during the Sparka on the Gladiator Island, during the massacre triggered by Todd—a discrepancy had accompanied the spirals of Death that had occurred at every single one of those scenes.

Instinctively, unconsciously, Subaru had understood that.

Akin to how a bird would not forget how to fly. Akin to how a fish would not forget how to swim.

Natsuki Subaru, would not forget how to use his own Authority.

Was being sent to the Vollachian Empire the reason? Was the onwards march of Infantilization the reason?

Before this, way before this, he could have noticed it.

Even during Sparka, even while the massacre was ongoing, the moment the unleashed Gladiator Beasts—the Witchbeasts, did not rush towards Subaru, it was made certain that he had been parted from the Witch's hands.

Henceforth, he shouted.

Subaru: “I can Return by Death!”

Todd: “—Hk, you…”

Subaru: “I… can Return by Death! Return by Death! You understand? Return by Death!”

—Return by Death, was something he must not reveal to anyone.

Because accompanying it was a penalty of unbearable pain, and beyond that, there was a possibility that it could directly lead to despair akin to one’s heart cracking.

To sow the life of those listening by abusing that mechanism, he did not expect anything of the sort.

He did not stop it from reaching Tanza’s ears either. He even bestowed Todd with information he did not want him to hear.

However, the one he truly wanted to hear it was not Todd, nor was it anyone else on the Island.

Subaru: “—I… can Return By Death!”

Raising his eyes to the heavens, Subaru projected his voice towards the same overcast skies black smoke was ascending to.

With his body in tatters, the reverberation of his loud voice brought pain to his viscera. He was near death. Nevertheless, Subaru’s resolve was settled, for the pain he wished for was nothing of this sort.

May it be so the Observers did not feel shame, those were the rambling words left behind by Cecilus.

It was unlikely that Subaru and Cecilus had been envisioning the same thing. In the first place, there was a high probability that it had merely been one of Cecilus’s thoughtless remarks. Yet, those thoughtless remarks had aided him in realizing.

Similar to the Observers Cecilus was aware of, there was something that was supposedly observing Subaru.

That existence which was supposedly observing Subaru, were it watching over Subaru even now, without parting from him, then these loops bereft of hope, bereft of Love, would not come to pass.

Subaru: “—I can Return By Death!”

I’m right here. Come find me.

I know that it’s selfish. But, I want to save everyone.

With my, with Natsuki Subaru’s Authority and nothing more, it just isn’t enough.

That’s why—

Subaru: “…Come find me, Satella.”

???: “—I love you.”

SETOWI

It happened the moment that name was called out.

Subaru: "…"

The world abruptly lost color. The loud throbbing that resounded, the ringing in his ears vanished into the distance.

He was incapable of moving his limbs. His tongue became parched and numb. He became unable to both move his eyes and breathe. The force restraining his free will, the threat slowly disrupting the beating of heart, all of that had been, because.

—Donning a dress weaved from jet-black shadows, the Witch he yearned for appeared before his eyes.

???: "I love you."

As she spoke so, the Witch's magic hands of black stretched out towards him.

Caressing Subaru's cheek, tenderly cherishing him as she slid down the back of his neck, tracing his collarbone down towards his solar plexus, to then finally arrive at the place she sought.

???: "I love you. I love you. I love you."

While she whispered the love his ears had grown accustomed to, her fingers phased through Subaru's, through that child's chest, then finally wrapping themselves around the organ where the facilities of life were contained with gentleness.

???: "I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

Subaru had somehow managed to do it, that much was certain.

The countless whispers imbued with the power in the word "love", the fingertips wrapping his heart which seemed to run contrary to that, the ensuing pain that lasted seemingly until the end of this world, he had longed for all of it.

Therefore—

???: “I love you. I love you.”

—Even if this repulsive world was fully permeated by the power in those words, Natsuki Subaru would not be broken.

5

As the world regained its color, as his once-vanished tinnitus returned, as the sensation in his limbs and the numbness of his tongue both faded, as he took gruff breaths, the flow of time for everything outside of Subaru was set in motion.

Subaru: “Guh…”

With that, it seemed both Todd and Tanza did not understand what Subaru had meant, the latter with a strong clutch on his chest as he groaned.

Nevertheless, the subsequent change ought to have been noticed by the two of them right away.

Todd: “What…?!”

Eyes sharpened, his expression stiffening in terror, Todd shifted his focus to his surroundings.

The cause of that was not something visible to the eye, but an approaching, audible report—in more detail, roars. The Witchbeasts still remaining upon the Gladiator Island were howling in unison, as though they had arranged this beforehand.

Furthermore, having been stimulated by an unordinary trigger, the aura was of such menace that it seemed as if they had lost their senses.

Todd: “—Hk.”

That instant, casting his mind back to the sense of crisis, Todd immediately detected Subaru as the cause.

It seemed that even Todd himself did not know the meaning of that “Return by Death” Subaru had shouted out. But he had no necessity to comprehend it; so casting that aside, he put his intent to kill into practice on the spot.

While remaining vigilant of Tanza’s counterattack, Todd’s body ferociously charged towards Subaru.

Opposing Todd, Tanza hurled the stone in her hand at great velocity. The stone flew true, rocketing towards the very center of Todd’s being.

And yet—

Todd: “Shit…!”

Letting out a minute grunt, Todd gnawed his molars at the pain originating from his left arm, which had been struck by the stone.

Unable to allow him to dodge, Tanza had set her aim to the largest possible target, his torso. Catching wind of that, Todd had sacrificed his left arm, and thus minimized the damage he had suffered.

Following that, Todd brandished the axe with his right arm, and tried to cut Tanza’s petite form down.

However, Subaru would not permit such a thing.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama?!”

Her shoulders sent flying due to a thrust from behind, Tanza called that out as she fell on her side.

The one to send her flying had been Subaru, who she had been protecting with that small back of hers just before. Tanza had vanished from the range of the axe's downswing, but Subaru had entered it in her stead.

For but an instant, Todd's pupils constricted, however, the momentum of his axe did not cease, his swing being brought to completion.

The blade drew near without haste, it would send Subaru's head flying—it happened then.

Todd: "—HK?!"

A firm sound and a weighty impact gave rise to a hollow echo, and Todd's body flailed around in midair.

Todd, having been blown away, now on his back upon the floor, promptly got back up. And yet, droplets of blood dripped from the grand gash now on his mouth, whereas his knees really seemed to be on the verge of buckling.

Todd: "Guoh… Just now, that…!"

Unsure of what had just occurred, Todd's eyes darted about.

Thrusting his finger towards that Todd, Subaru—

Subaru: "—Invisible Providence."

What the meaning behind that punch to his defenseless jaw was, Subaru politely explained it to him.

Subaru: "Next, I'll blow your head off."

Todd: "…"

Having withdrawn his thrust-out finger, Subaru now erected his middle finger and asserted such.

Perhaps because his jaw was broken, his hemorrhage did not cease; while spitting out blood, Todd suddenly squinted his eyes. With that, he would begin his retaliation over that broken jaw, or so they had thought—

Todd: “…”

While quietly training his gaze on Subaru, Todd slowly retreated into the background. His legs backing up to enter the ascending black smoke, without any faltering, he vanished into the fumes.

As soon as he noticed that the situation had become unfavorable to him, discarding just about all of his reluctance, he had chosen to escape.

Subaru: “Well, I thought… he’d do that, but…”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama!”

Seeing Todd’s disappearance with her own eyes, Tanza rushed over to Subaru, her facial expression altered. Before he could take Tanza’s hand, Subaru slipped and tumbled down right where he was.

He had already been on the verge of death, even before reaching this place. Most likely, at the time he had descended alongside Idra and Hiain, he had sustained serious wounds of having multiple bones broken.

The Authority of Sloth, which he had not utilized for a long time, was providing a strong stimulus to Subaru’s brain as per usual; blood was trickling out his nose, and yet he was incapable of staunching it.

Though in any case, even if he could staunch it, it would not make much of a difference.

Todd’s axe had pulverized Subaru’s right shoulder with its final blow, and was currently lodged there.

The fact he had not inadvertently lost consciousness, was proof that Subaru’s life had already drifted away, so much so that pain or anything else were already irrelevant.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, Schwartz-sama…!”

Clinging on to a sobbing Tanza, Subaru’s innermost feelings were entirely those of guilt.

With this small body, with earnestness, Subaru nestled closer to her, to the girl who had desperately tried to keep him alive, to whom he must leave something behind.

Only—

Subaru: “Take, this…”

Tanza: “—Hk, the curse tool?”

From his pocket, he retrieved the black orb, and entrusted it to Tanza’s hand.

It was not that he’d had some sort of idea. He thought he should at least leave something behind to Tanza, even if he would soon perish.

Subaru: “Ceci, is… over, there, with Arakiya…”

Tanza: “U-understood…! I understand, since I, understand…”

Subaru: “Todd is, already… You don’t… need… to worry.”

As far as Todd’s personality went, Subaru could not imagine that the former would consider challenging him once more after having had an experience that painful. That was a detestable aspect of that man, and yet, simultaneously it was a belief that he could trust on, and make use of.

Like that, whilst enduring tears, Tanza touched Subaru, who was frantically stringing words together.

Until the end of the end, for the sake of Subaru, who was worrying about her, she felt she had to do something, desperately so.

Though, that was wrong.

That order of things, was completely backwards.

Tanza had treated him kindly just before. She had remedied just about all of Subaru's thoughts.

That Natsuki Subaru was, until the end of the end, someone better off not giving up; she had aided him in remembering so.

Thanks to that, once more, was he still able to fight.

That was why—

Subaru: "—Next, time."

Indeed, at a Subaru softly vocalizing his resolve, Tanza widened her eyes.

Still, for the girl, that must have sounded like a final show of obstinacy from a Subaru about to pass away.

As tears accumulated in her eyes, firmly enduring those emotions, Tanza's small hand, her slender fingers, gently wrapped around Subaru's minutely trembling hand.

And then—

Tanza: "Yes, that is correct, Schwartz-sama. Next time, without a doubt, we will not lose."

Taking care as to not disgrace Subaru's final wish, while crying, Tanza uttered that.

Aligned with each other, they did not become. Even so, they were aligned in their desire to save one another.

That was sufficient.

With that sufficient desire, while bearing the feelings of this moment—

Subaru: "—I will…"

—Save everyone.

With that resolve in his final moment, the life of Natsuki Subaru burned to ashes—.

6

—Dark, dark, a world of utmost darkness.

Nothing but darkness existed in this space where light could not flow in, this ultimately distant land a place neither prayers nor wishes could reach.

Always did that place gnaw at his heart, imposing a feeling of helplessness, bringing about grief and sorrow; a cursed land untrodden by any being.

However, this time, this very moment, did his thoughts wish, anticipate this arrival.

Subaru: "…"

The darkness he could not stand a chance against by his lonesome, was engulfing everything, taking away everything.

Even if he was being tortured by that feeling of helplessness, abandoning everything in his vicinity, even himself, the feeling of defeat that originated from being unable to do anything anymore had scorched his body.

???: "—I love you."

Subaru: "—It may not be everything. But, I know."

The things he could accomplish by his lonesome, were not that numerous.

He was not a human being ambitious to such an extreme extent. That was why, he could also make mistakes, and why his resolve too could bend.

Even so—

???: "—I love you."

Subaru: "I know that as well, I really do. —I know."

Having parted ways, it was something he knew at last.

Simultaneously, he became unsure on how he should retain the emotions he'd had up to this point.

Still, as he had indeed been thinking that he wanted to know.

The most important thing, he knew it, he really did.

Subaru: "Thank you. —I'll be heading off now."

To that place, to that land of isolating waters, where all life had been wiped out—for the sake of losing no longer, for the sake of not allowing those he held dear be trampled upon, once more, Natsuki Subaru would rise.

—Once more, he would rise.

7

—Through his buttocks, he felt the Galewind Horse-pulled carriage shake with a rattle.

It had not been too comfortable of a journey.

It was not about how comfortable the ride had been, but rather about how comfortable he had been. In regards to the former, it was likely that this was a rare privilege, even within the Empire. He did not feel overly grateful about that.

As to why he felt so uncomfortable in such a luxurious carriage, was due to the scarcity of windows, and to the fact he was not in control of the reins. Naturally, both left some margin for one to be targeted in exchange, so whichever was preferred varied from person-to-person.

Quite simply, it was just that he hated his response being delayed because he had left things to others.

The horse-led carriage itself had been made quite solid through the protection of earth magic, and when it came to being vigilant towards their surroundings, it was being handled by someone who possessed considerably greater senses than he did.

Man: “It sure does leave nothing to be desired. Apart from it being a journey I hadn’t wished for.”

As expected from the customs of a country that esteemed the strong, the extravagant praise the Generals received was quite an extreme thing.

In other words, considering he was being treated like this, he could even say that it seemed that he had been placed amongst the powerful, but in his true opinion, that in itself was a bothersome kindness.

His personal opinion was that, as long as he was not precisely the summit of the world, he would lose far more than he would gain by being thought of as strong. Being thought of as weak was much, much easier.

It was from this reason, that the discomfort from this treatment had become the logical conclusion.

???: “—Are you bored?”

Suddenly, his closed eyes slowly opened, the voice that had come from atop the roof as a culprit.

The owner of the voice he was hearing was located there; the interior of the coach was empty, himself excluded. The lack of people was rather splendid, as it would be suffocating for him if others were present, but his companion was intolerable, someone unbefitting of being a civilized person.

That notwithstanding, they were not someone who ought to do the talking themselves. He would rather have someone else take charge of both her education and her discipline.

He did not have much intention of engaging with her for long, either. Though she seemed to be empathetic in regards to his intentions to exact revenge, it would be better for him if he made up a story and chose someone at random as his enemy.

???: “Are you listening?”

Man: “I heard you. I was just thinking about something. What about you, do you remember your instructions properly?”

???: “Even I can remember that much.”

Unthinkable, was what he wanted to say, but there was room for doubt as to whether it was something he could believe.

In the first place, he had never heard of a General that delegated full control of their plans to a subordinate, who himself was no more than a Private First-Class, only because they were not very good at thinking. He had been told to stop speaking politely, and he had responded exactly in tandem with her wishes, but what was on her mind was wholly unknown.

Perhaps she had taken to him. If he thought of her as a female version of Jamal, there did not seem to be much of a difference.

Although it seemed more difficult to find a place to abandon her in, than it had been to do so for Jamal, which was bothersome.

???: “The Island, I see it. Are you prepared?”

Man: “As long as I don’t lose the Prime Minister’s letter, all that’s left is to get the Governor-sama we heard about to follow the orders. There’s no need to get in a fight with anyone, it’s an easy job, you know.”

Atop the roof, Arakiya listened as she looked at the coach’s destination, on the other side of the drawbridge it was crossing over.

As he answered, he ascertained the feeling of the letter within his pocket. Indeed, their role was something akin to messengers; as long as they got him to follow the directives, it would be fine.

However, if ordinary messengers really would have been sufficient, there was no reason to bother with sending Arakiya.

That was the sole thing that bothered him.

Man: “It should be an easy job, kinda.”

Arakiya: “…The objective is the annihilation of the Island. Is it possible?”

Man: “Provided the Governor agrees to activate the curse rule obediently.”

Governor Gustav Morello, the manager of the Gladiator Island, the place where their goal lay, had imposed an absolute regulation called the “curse rule” for the sake of ruling over the gladiators assembled on the Island.

The curse rule was invoked when someone who had been engraved with the curse mark from Gustav violated the rules. That life would then be taken without any room for argument. It truly was a convenient thing.

A curse tool created by one of the Nine Divine Generals, the Master of Enchanted Items, was serving as the trigger for the curse rule, and the conditions to invoke it were plain and simple—

Man: “—At a fixed distance, those who go too far from the curse tool will die.”

Arakiya: “…Any concerns about the people of the Island?”

Man: “The safe zone seems to be roughly the whole area of the Island. At any rate, even if they try to slip away covertly, they’ll die if their curse mark hasn’t been removed. It can prevent their escape even if they get frightened into crossing the drawbridge. That ability to restrain them is enough to keep them inside.”

In truth, if they were to let one gladiator die as an example of the curse rule’s effect, then probably, nobody would try and do the same to double-check it. No fools that reckless existed.

It was a curse activated without taking the trouble to look the recipient in the eye, or pressure them in any way. On top of the Island’s special characteristic, he honestly admired how that restraining device was thoroughly drilled into them.

However, were they to realize that the curse rule could not be utilized freely, it would rouse an uprising right away.

Man: “Well, I intend on annihilating them when that time comes, so it’ll be fine to just throw the curse tool into the lake.”

The water surrounding the Gladiator Island was quite deep. Were it not for the large drawbridge, its coast would be unreachable, much like an island amidst isolating waters, but the distance to the bottom of the lake was even deeper.

If the curse tool were to be thrown into the lake, by the time it reached the bottom, they would be in the range of activation of the curse rule.

In the worst-case-scenario, that of the Governor not cooperating, throwing the retrieved curse tool into the lake would also enter the realm of possibility.

Man: “It’s essential to prepare for the absolute worst. The hiding place of the curse tool included.”

For one to untactfully hold pride in their work, it would trouble him should that be a cause for difficulty.

It would be best for him to cooperate in slaughtering all the gladiators, obediently, being reasonable without incident. He wanted to return home as soon as possible, after finishing their task like that, and thus fulfilling the objective of their journey.

Man: “Katya…”

Because they had been separated for so long, their short reunion had strengthened his attachment.

It was a cruel action, one akin to spilling a single drop of water into his parched, water-craving throat. He wished to ingest water until his stomach burst. That could perhaps be called a natural emotion for a human being, he thought.

Even if it made it just one second faster, he would finish his task, and return to the Imperial Capital. If it were for that purpose—

Man: “—I’m completely fine with any sacrifices.”

Indeed, that was when one of the switches within himself flipped towards violence.

Arakiya: “—Todd, something’s strange.”

Called out by his name, the man—Todd, lifted his head with a “What?”.

Her tone lacked seriousness, but that was the kind of manner she conducted herself with more often than not. Nonetheless, having ascended to the rank of Divine General, her true abilities were nothing to be made light of, and it was also true that a normal person would not be able to guess them.

That which she had pointed out, was their objective, the Gladiator Island, which they were steadily approaching—they were already nearing halfway through the drawbridge, at a place between the two shores where the coach would cross over to the island half of the bridge. Having been called out precisely just before they entered their opponent’s lair, a bad premonition overcame him.

And then—

Todd: “—Stop!”

???: “Huh?”

Todd: “Right now! Stop! Turn back!”

The instant he looked closely at the path outside the window, Todd yelled that out, bewildering the soldier on the driver’s seat.

Clicking his tongue at the slowness of that reaction, Todd immediately climbed onto the driver’s seat, snatched the reins away from the soldier, stopped the carriage, and whipped the Galewind Horse to make it turn around post-haste.

After that, he ignored the befuddled coachman and looked back toward the roof, Todd: “Arakiya, keep an eye on the Island, be alert! If there’s movement, fire at will.”

Arakiya: “—. Understood.”

Coachman: “Come on now, our responsibility as emissaries from the Prime Minister is…”

Todd: “…”

Coachman: “Ah, uh…”

Arakiya obeyed without complaint, the coachman voiced his sense of duty. Disregarding the former, and glaring at the nearby latter, who had a poor understanding of things, Todd quietly narrowed his eyes.

At that gaze of Todd’s, the coachman, his spirit withering away, choked on his words and shut his mouth.

That was the right choice. Were he to try to persist on the issue, he would have been pushed off into the lake.

It would be better if they were saved the trouble of not losing their coachman for their return, and that that had happened had been Arakiya’s achievement, who had noticed something abnormal before they finished crossing the drawbridge. —Seemingly, the situation had already changed.

Arakiya: “Todd.”

Todd: “It seems Prime Minister Berstetz’s concerns were valid.”

With that as his response to her short call, Todd turned the Galewind Horse to the opposite direction, retracing the path they had come from.

They could not afford for the drawbridge to be withdrawn on them. Those in control of the drawbridge on the farther shore were not restricted to people not cooperating with their opponents.

At any rate—

Todd: “—For them to be waiting for us fully prepared, they’re being led by a pretty dangerous person.”

Arakiya: “We can’t win? Even though I’m there?”

Todd: “Yeah, that’s right.”

Quietly, while hearing Arakiya’s voice raise in tension, Todd gave a nod.

With a shudder, as he felt dread run down his back—

Todd: “—It’s not an opponent we have any chance of beating. At least, for today.”

So he spoke.

8

???: “…I thought that they’d turn back, but that decision to cut their losses seemed way too quick.”

While viewing the coach turn around exactly halfway into the drawbridge, retreating without any hesitation, he vented a sigh.

He had been amazed and impressed by the speed of their judgment, but even so, it had been within range of his expectations. Had he truly intended to perform a surprise attack, he would first quietly lure the opponent onto the Island.

However, that situation would have never been settled with both sides remaining unscathed.

As someone aware of the massacre that would ensue in the case they lured the carriage in, he had been unable to take such a risky gamble.

—That was, because he had already thrown himself head-first into the riskiest gamble available.

???: “Schwartz-sama, the emissaries are…”

Subaru: “Yeah, they ran away. As expected, they thought it strange that we’d just line up to welcome them. Though, that was what I wanted them to think, so it was a bluff.”

???: “Is, that so…? I am relieved that we did not end up making the Second an opponent.”

A girl in a kimono stood next to Subaru, who was shielding his eyes with his hands to his forehead as he gazed towards the drawbridge. Gently patting her own chest, Tanza digested the relief over the plan’s success.

The two horns atop her head were intact and well, and there were no wounds visible on her beautiful and youthful skin whatsoever.

With absolutely no problems at all, she was healthy and well. An admirably perfect Tanza.

Tanza: “—. E-excuse me, Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “Hmm?”

Tanza: “No, um, I was just wondering why you were patting my head…”

Subaru: “Ah, sorry sorry, it was by reflex.”

At Tanza’s question born of embarrassment, realizing that he had been subconsciously stroking her head, Subaru apologized. But regardless of his apology, he did not stop patting her head.

Then, as Subaru continued to caress her head, Tanza pursed her lips and did not resist.

For her sullen face to appear childlike once again, Subaru thought he would continue patting her head no matter what, as long as he was not shaken off, however—

???: “—How long are ya gonna do that for?! Is this really the time for brats to be flirtin’ with each other?!”

Subaru: “Huh.”

Just as a vigorous voice came from behind him, Subaru's hand stopped patting. Parting his hand from Tanza in haste then, Subaru bent his lips in displeasure and turned around.

With Subaru's line of sight falling upon him, the lizardman—Hiain, saying "Wh-What is it…" as he stiffened his face, looked at the two beside him in turns as if asking for help,

Hiain: "Why do ya hafta look at me with those kinda eyes?! Even tho' I just said somethin' obvious! Am I wrong?!"

???: "It seems that it's more about the way you said it, and your timing in saying it was terrible. Though, it isn't something that I'd say, even if the timing was appropriate."

???: "He's a better person than ya… Have some consideration, lizard bastard…"

Hiain: "Huhaa?!"

Betrayed by the two people on his flanks—by Idra and Weitz, Hiain's eyes darted about in bewilderment.

Due to Hiain's reaction, Idra produced a wry smile and Weitz gave a snort of his nose. At the figures of those three lining up, Subaru remembered his deep emotions.

In response to Subaru gazing at them like that, Idra frowned and,

Idra: "Schwartz, that somewhat meaningful look in your eyes is unsettling…"

Subaru: "It's nothing. It's just, I was thinking about how far I've come."

Idra: "—?"

As Subaru rubbed his finger under his nose, Idra cocked his head in puzzlement. Regardless of Idra's reaction, right next to him, Weitz crossed his burly arms with a mutter of "I get it…".

While distorting frightening tattoos on his body, Weitz glared at the other side of the drawbridge, and,

Weitz: “We chased away the messengers from the Imperial Capital… With this, we don’t have a path of retreat. Ain’t that so…?”

Subaru: “—. You’re a little bit off-the-mark, but that’s also true.”

Weitz: “A lil’ bit off-the-mark…?!”

His appearance of looking like he understood the most out of everyone crumbled, and Weitz’s eyes widened in surprise. Producing a sarcastic smile to that reaction, Subaru reflected on how the deep emotions he harbored differed from the impression those three had given off with pride.

Those three—rather, no one knew anything at all, but that was completely fine.

And Subaru, he would remember every single thing.

And then—

???: “—Apparently, their verdict has been passed.”

Turning around due to that weighty and imposing voice, he saw a personage who had been awaiting the emissaries in the vicinity of the drawbridge.

The horse-drawn carriage that the emissaries were riding on had turned back, and having made sure it finished its crossing over to the other shore, he stared seriously at Subaru, with a terrifying expression like that of a demon.

As the giant of a man wielding an intimidating aura slowly approached them, and while having the light impression that Hiain and the others behind him were getting overwhelmed, Subaru shrugged his shoulders, and spoke,

Subaru: “With this, do you believe me?”

???: “No objections. The imperial command bestowed upon me, as the official, by His Excellency the Emperor, the time has come for it to be fulfilled. That is to say—”

Subaru: “That is to say?”

???: “All the gladiators of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, they are to be placed under your command. —Your Highness, Schwartz.”

While declaring so, interlocking the hands and fists of his four arms in front of his chest, demonstrating his dignified stance was the Chief of the Gladiator Island, Gustav Morello.

The guards under Gustav, exchanged glances at his statement, and all took an identical stance in unison.

Weitz: “This ain’t pleasing…”

Discontent with the attitudes displayed by Gustav and his group, Weitz muttered.

Subaru looked back, and Weitz jerked his chin as he closed one eye,

Weitz: “I object to ya deciding by yerself that all the gladiators are to obey… Even if yer the Governor and Island Chief…”

Gustav: “Weitz Rogen, keep your opinions within your heart. However, there are things that take precedence over one’s personal intentions. I would be troubled if you forgot that, in my capacity, I have means to have you do as I say.”

Weitz: “Ya wanna fucking go…?”

Weitz gave a snort of his nose, and Gustav also harbored silent intentions within his eyes. With things as they were, it seemed that the two would come to fight each other, and before Subaru could intervene,

Idra: “Governor, please don’t act hastily, Weitz, you lowlife… You never use enough words. Seems to me you were asking for a misunderstanding because of that.”

Weitz: “I don’t mind fighting ‘cause of that in the slightest…”

Hiain: “Others are gonna mind, y’know! Ahh, damnit! Governor, we ain’t gonna do somethin’ as shameful as to obey your orders outta fear!”

As Idra held Weitz back, Hiain stepped forward in his place, and declared so devoid of any shame.

Hiain would not look Gustav in the eye were the situation to be unfavorable to him, but, not letting his lack of nerve show, boldly pointing at Subaru with his hand, he spoke,

Hiain: “Even without that strange threat of yers, we’re goin’ with Schwartz. Hey, ain’t that right, ya assholes! Y’ain’t afraid, are ya?!”

???: “—Don’t make me laugh, lizard bastard!”

???: “Who’s afraid? Who?!”

???: “Aight, aight, let’s go, Your Highness, our Imperial Prince!”

???: “Let’s wrest it away from yer nasty ol’ man, it’s the start of our Empire—!!”

Hiain’s oh-so-loud call was responded to by a crowd of voices.

Rising one after another from all around them—no, from all throughout the Island, were the voices of the gladiators who had all come together to welcome the emissaries.

Mixed along with the voices of the many men with their blood boiling, were the voices of Hiain’s comrades, Orson and his group, and the voice of Old Man Null, who most unusually was present outside the healing room.

Quite literally, the Gladiator Island Ginunhive had become one.

Subaru: “—Thank you.”

While hearing the cheers from his excited surroundings, Subaru clutched his chest and muttered.

To the comrades in the surroundings, then to himself, and above all else, to the one who had granted him this chance, he was grateful.

Then, Subaru slapped both of his cheeks with his hands, raised his face, its expression cheerful, and,

Subaru: “Well, we’re going now, but what are you going to do, Ceci?”

???: “—Hahaaa, guess you’re right about that.”

As Subaru, having tilted his head, asked a question, a silhouette twirled around as it descended. Having watched over the events as they unfolded from a vantage point up high, Cecilus made a light sound as he landed.

He did not have one side of his body scorched, and his manner was unchanged from the time it had been scorched. Gazing over Subaru as well as the large crowd of people surrounding him,

Cecilus: “…As one’d expect of you, you managed a totally unexpected result. No matter how I slice it, I didn’t expect you to get this far, truly, I must say bravo. However, I got just one question.”

Subaru: “Ehhh? What is it?”

Cecilus: “Kindly, carefully, and thoroughly going around back and forth to several places, your ability to win everybody over’s truly superb and praiseworthy. But indeed, that’s just it, y’know. —Aren’t you going to persuade me?”

His two hands concealed by his sleeves, Cecilus asked that of him with a face that showed curiosity from the bottom of his heart.

Unable to comprehend it, the smile Cecilus always had plastered on his face had disappeared. Seeing that expression, Subaru slightly widened his eyes, then gave a satisfied nod.

That was correct, Subaru had not attempted to persuade Cecilus.

Despite having persuaded Gustav, Hiain and Weitz and Idra, Orson and the others and Old Man Null, as well as Rex and Milzac, as well as Kashew and Moizo, as well as Deeroy and Creegkin, as well as Codroe and Phenmelle, and even that stubborn lone-wolf Jawsrough, he had ignored Cecilus.

The reason was—

Subaru: "—Ceci, I wanted to see you make that face."

Every single time up until now, the one Subaru had failed in connecting with at the crucial moments had been Cecilus.

He was not enough of a fool to cross a dangerous bridge for revenge, but the result of all his thinking that, for better or worse, this was the best way to have an effect on Cecilus.

And thus, when it came to pass in reality, Cecilus's eyes went wide upon hearing that, and only then did Subaru give him the announcement.

Subaru: "I'm gonna work you hard if you come with us now, so, are you coming?"

Cecilus: "Ha, hahaha, hahahahaha! Ahh-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Shrugging his shoulders, Subaru winked. Just after Cecilus heard that high-handed invitation, he opened his mouth wide, then delivered a round of explosive laughter while bending his back.

Flailing his legs around on the spot, Cecilus was having a hearty laugh. Having had a thorough burst of laughter, he wiped away the tears emerging from the corners of his eyes, and,

Cecilus: "You're kidding me! You're kidding me, you've got to be kidding me, from this very me! From this very Cecilus Segmunt, the Blue Lightning! From the leading actor of this world! From me, whom you ignored, you ask that?! To please come together with you?! That's, that's… completely preposterous, Basu!"

Subaru: "…So, what will you do?"

Cecilus: "I'll go with you, of course! I'd like to say something like "Though it's annoying to be taken along", but it's incredible how you've talked me down to think it's not annoying in the slightest! Ah, incredible! It's a pleasure!"

While clapping his hands with force, Cecilus got fully on-board, his actions aligned with Subaru's expectations. While relieved by the merit of that decisiveness, Subaru placed his hand on his chin.

In truth, this was something he had been thinking from the very start, but—

Subaru: "That way of calling me, Basu, it just doesn't sit right with me in the slightest, you know."

Cecilus: "Woah-ho, adverse winds! To rupture things like that just after I answered I'd come along with you, you're awfully poor at communicating, but then, do you have an alternative I should use to call you?"

Subaru: "Guess you're right, huh…"

As Cecilus pitched forward, Subaru thought for a bit.

He suddenly thought about how Cecilus's mouth would have grown accustomed to saying "Basu". Hitting upon an idea that was, unexpectedly, not so shabby, Subaru smiled with a wicked face, and,

Subaru: "—Boss."

Cecilus: "…"

Subaru: "From now on, call me Boss."

He did not intend to be pretentious, but surprisingly, going along with Cecilus's penchant for being a drama geek didn't feel so bad.

As Subaru responded in that manner, Cecilus sighed with a "Hoho",

Cecilus: "Boss, Boss, Boss Boss Boss… It's got quite a nice ring to it! Though I've got no clue whatsoever about its meaning, I don't dislike it, rather, I quite like it."

Subaru: “It means leader. Just right, isn’t it?”

Cecilus: “Yes, indeed, Boss! Then, shall we begin?!”

Cheerfully smiling, the words of the high-spirited Cecilus were met with Subaru nodding and letting out a “Yeah”.

Starting with Cecilus, Subaru then looked over at Hiain, Weitz, and Idra, the comrades of his Unit, as well as the other gladiators, after that making eye contact with Gustav and the guards who accompanied him.

As the result of his utmost grand experience, with the comrades who had become one—

Subaru: “—Let’s go, everyone! Let’s go give my shitty old man in the Imperial Capital a wallop to the cheek!!”

Everyone: “YEAHHHHHHH—!!”

At Subaru’s rousing shout, the people of the Gladiator Island returned that grand reply.

While basking in that intense spirit, so intense it seemed to make the entirety of the island floating on the lake quake, Subaru suddenly noticed Tanza’s gaze trained on him.

Subaru: “Don’t worry, Tanza.”

The one and only person who actually knew that Subaru was not the illegitimate child of the Emperor; giving her a reassuring nod, Subaru resolved himself to head from these western lands towards the Imperial Capital without resting.

As the son of Natsuki Kenichi, with the trust of his comrades, he would push forward.

Therefore, from now on, because he had been summoned to another world—

Subaru: “—This time, it’s our win.”

—As the strongest existence, Natsuki Subaru would trample upon the Vollachian Empire.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VI

1

“Miss Katya, do you have a minute?”

The moment she heard the girl’s voice, Katya thought to herself, “Oh no.” She may have thought that, but she couldn’t do anything about the voice coming from behind. It would look bad if she ran away in a hurry, but more than that was the fact that her body wasn’t capable of such a thing. Katya sat upon a wheelchair—a tool that enabled her to move around freely on her own, but it wasn’t simple to use. It was an impossible task in particular for her, who easily became overwhelmed. And while she was flustered…

“If it’s okay, let me come with you to your room. I don’t have anyone to talk to right now,” said the girl, and Katya—who had lost her chance to escape—was now caught up with the owner of the voice.

The one beside Katya was an individual with distinctive footsteps—no, it would be more accurate to say that an extra sound was mixed in. The reason was clear: she walked with a cane.

As the one with the cane came to stand in line with her, Katya deliberately averted her gaze. “…Go find someone more suitable,” she said.

“Everyone seems to be busy.”

“So you thought of me and assumed that I would be free? What a shame, I have things to do too.”

“Do you? What exactly do you have to do?” replied the girl without hesitation, as Katya was trying to get away by using appropriate words.

And when asked for an example, she was at a loss for words. She didn't have anything she should be doing; it had just been an excuse. No one actually expected her to do anything. She had never been given a role.

Suddenly, thinking how no one ever expected anything from her, a thought crossed her mind. "I…"

"Miss Katya?"

As Katya let out a small sigh, the other peered at her face. It was a girl with pale blue hair and a lovely face with round eyes. She may use a cane because of her bad leg, but unlike myself she's someone who can bear and raise children.

"…A letter."

"A letter?" repeated the girl. "Oh, could that be to your fiancé?"

"I… My fiancé… It's not that kind of relationship…"

Katya had once again fumbled over her words. The excuse that had come out of her mouth had failed to convince herself, let alone the one in front of her. After all, if she didn't have that kind of relationship, she wouldn't have been there in the first place. She was being held captive like this because it was known to all that she was that person's fiancé; there was no other reason for her to be deemed worthy of being taken into custody. Nonetheless, even though she knew it was foolish, she still considered it a comfort that at least she was, in fact, wanted.

"…Yes, I'm writing him a letter," responded Katya. "So I don't have time to talk to you."

"I understand," said the girl. "Let me give you a hand."

"Wha—"

"I'm sure we'll come up with more ideas together than if you were to ponder on it all by yourself. If you're already a good writer, then maybe writing something different for a change would be a good idea. Your fiancé might enjoy that."

Katya had clenched her hand into a fist and tried to divert the conversation, but her plan was spoiled by that girl.

Katya opened and closed her mouth several times because of how pushy she was, while the other tilted her head and said, “You seem to be very eager, so let’s go straight to your room. It’s this way, right?”

“You… Can’t you see that I don’t want to?”

“I’ve learned to pretend that I don’t see what is inconvenient to see. I’ve spent a long time around someone who acts all stubborn and stays unhinged.”

“…They lack basic human decency, don’t they?”

“Not all of their behaviors are respectable, but there are many I wish to imitate. Now that I’m no longer with them…it seems like a good time to do so.”

With this response, Katya pouted, and she had no choice but to give up. Moreover, she now had to write the letter that had been meant to be an excuse she made to escape. It seemed that her bad habit of strangling herself with her own words had now reached a climax.

“Miss Katya, I’m going in without your permission, alright?”

“Who do you…”

Cane in hand, the girl took a large step and turned to give her name. “I’m Rem.”

Her chest was somewhat puffed out, her back straight. Katya raised her eyebrows feeling that her words carried a strange weight.

In front of Katya, the girl, Rem, put a free hand upon her chest. And with that, continued, “For the time being, I’ll start by trusting that there are no doubts that that is who I am.”

2

Katya Aurélie was currently under house arrest in the mansion of the Imperial Prime Minister, Berstetz Fondalfon. Once again, this was a situation that made her wrack her brain to understand why. Katya Aurélie came from a non-outstanding, low-ranking noble family. With the next in line—her older brother—having passed away, she was the formal heir, with nothing more than the title of nobility to her name.

In the Vollachian way of thinking, which respects strength above all, Katya would be considered a piece of trash not even worthy of existence. Whereas in terms of self-awareness, it was a feeling of alienation that she had felt since her brother was alive—no, even from the moment of her birth.

Anyhow, it was no trivial matter that Katya, in these circumstances, was hidden away in the mansion of the imperial prime minister, a situation that not even a high-ranking count would easily be able to find themselves in.

But then… "We are hostages," Katya began, "and if we don't understand that, then we might get in trouble."

"I understand that," stated Rem.

"…And yet you've been walking about the premises quite freely."

"As long as we don't try and escape, they said we can do as we please."

Katya looked bitterly at Rem, who immediately betrayed her previous statement with her next words. Seeing the girl asserting her opinions so confidently made her feel uneasy, as though she was the one in the wrong for being anxious.

Objectively speaking, the one who understood best about their hostage situation was Katya. So why should I be the one feeling inferior when it comes to hostage-ness? she thought.

In the room she had been assigned, where every luxury had been arranged so she would feel that nothing was missing, Katya was forced to turn to the desk to take responsibility for her words. She had a quill and letter paper in hand, which Rem observed closely from nearby. Wanting neither the former nor the latter, Katya found herself incredibly annoyed.

“What do you normally write to your fiancé?” asked Rem.

“I hardly ever write letters,” Katya replied flatly.

“Oh, really? Why did you decide to write this time then?”

Rem intervened to help out, surprised that Katya was having a hard time deciding how to begin such a letter. In reality, Katya had rarely written letters herself. Even with a body like hers, she would sign a letter if necessary because of her status, but nothing more. To me, letters are something to be received. The sender had always been my brother Jamal, and these past two years… “I only ever receive them, so I thought I’d send one this time…”

“…That’s… I think that’s really nice.”

“…Tch, what do…” Katya was about to snap and ask what exactly she knew about such things, but she hesitated. The reason being Rem’s expression as she stared at her.

Even Katya, who scattered her hostility indiscriminately, was thrown off by the girl’s soft, downcast eyes. It wasn’t mockery or pity. On the contrary, it was an expression that made her more miserable than being mocked or pitied.

“…You were loved as a child, weren’t you?” Those feelings of envy burst past her lips, leaving Katya to once again regret speaking.

Rem, however, merely replied with a bitter smile, “I wonder about that.”

What a strange answer, thought Katya. “What do you mean ‘I wonder’?” she asked. “The way you said it makes it seem like you’re thinking of someone other than yourself.”

“I lack a sense of self, and it feels like someone else’s life. Since I’ve only been alive for a month, so…”

“Huh?” Her response having been unexpected, she looked Rem from head to toe. It’s nonsense that shouldn’t be taken seriously, but I really don’t understand the point of the joke.

“It’s a figure of speech. The truth is that I have no memories… Whether it’s about me, or the things around me, I remember nothing. I built my current self up from the ground up.”

“You have…no memories…?”

“So just as you said, I have no idea whether or not there were people who cared for me. However, I do think I’ve been lucky enough to meet some good people this past month,” she replied, and seemed to be counting on her fingers while thinking of the people who had met her empty self and that she was lucky to have met them because of that. If she really were lucky, however, she wouldn’t be here.

Her situation was not so different from Katya’s, being a sort of hostage. And if that was the case, then in keeping her there, Berstetz should be able to keep the people close to her in check as well.

“I can’t understand what you’re talking about. Are you saying it was by chance that the last encounter you had was bad?”

“I think there are many kinds of fate… And to me, I think the worst encounter was the very first one.”

The very first one… If what she’s saying is true, then does she mean her newly-born state with no memory? Unwittingly, Katya, who had become engrossed in Rem’s story, asked with her gaze what exactly that terrible encounter had been.

In response to her gaze, Rem replied, “Well…” and raised a finger to her lips. “When I came to, they were holding me in their arms and staring at me with tearful eyes. Helpless, lonely eyes, like those of a child.”

“…They weren’t rough with you or anything like that?”

“If anyone was rough, it was me. I smelled something I simply couldn’t…stand, so I strangled them…”

Katya was about to say “How violent,” but held back as she remembered her own outbursts. Out of frustration, she had thrown vases at her fiancé, or even scratched him a number of times. It wasn’t a particularly smooth way to build a relationship, but it was something she was known for. However…

“I shook them off once…but they caught up with me again and kept following me. And during that time, the stench persisted—it was suffocating.”

“Following you around… That must have been tough.”

“Yes, it was tough… I didn’t remember anything. I could only trust in my own senses, and because that person really did smell like a bad person…”

“…That man did?”

“Because someone like that was trying so hard to protect me…”

Rem’s eyes suddenly became downcast, those words making Katya’s breath catch in her throat without a sound. She had tricked Rem into revealing that the person in her story was a man merely because of the way she looked when talking about him. If they were courting her, of course it would be a man.

But for some reason her expression and situation did not feel like someone else’s problem to Katya. Rather, she understood what Rem was feeling.

Not being able to understand why this person was approaching her, and being treated this way and that, all causing doubts and dislikes to accumulate—but at the same time, being touched by that. It was as though their minds were being twisted to follow someone else’s will.

It’s awful, and painful, and annoying, it’s— “Disgusting, but you don’t want it to stop…”

“…Yes, that’s right.”

It had become so natural to live with that sense of suffocation that they could no longer imagine what it would be like without it. In fact, they had forgotten how they had breathed when that feeling of oppression wasn't there. Even though she knew it was the life of a pitiful doll-like woman, with nothing else to cling to.

"So you also have someone like that?"

"…"

Naturally, when you meddle in someone's affairs, they will equally meddle in your own. While Katya regretted having said unnecessary things, at the same time, she also thought this:

Rem, who truly knows that suffering, will probably understand her own.

"For me, my fiancé…is the man doing that to me. From the moment we first met, he was over-familiar. He approached me of his own accord, and then…"

"…"

"I don't understand why he chose me. As you can see, I'm disabled, and unable to perform my duties as a woman. I'm worthless. Even so, he whispers to me that it doesn't matter." I can't give anything that should be given. After nearly twenty years of suffering, I had finally accepted it, but then he showed up. That made me hopeful that maybe the last twenty years of suffering had been a mistake, and that this was to make up for it. But I also knew deep down that there was no way that could be the case…

"…You… You're not saying the usual comforting words."

"The usual comforting words?" Rem parroted.

"Looking at my body, and saying that's not true; that who I am on the inside is all that matters, and that he only cares about that…the underhanded words that only sound pretty on the surface."

"…I don't know you well enough to say anything like that. When someone is hurt and even if you long to comfort them, telling them something that doesn't come from the heart is wrong."

That's a noble way of thinking. It sounded astonishingly different from the superficial words used by cowards that Katya hated—words which would only make themselves feel good about them comforting someone.

"So what are you going to write to your fiancé?"

"…After what we just spoke about, you're still trying to make me write it?"

"You're right… Well, shall we do this then? I'll also write a letter. Just as you're doing—to the person with the horrible stench."

"…What's the point of that?"

It was offered as an exchange, but there was no actual reason for Katya to accept it.

At Katya's puzzled expression, Rem thought for a moment, then said, "There's no way for the letter to reach that person. But it would be a bit sad if no one read it, so it would be nice if you could."

"I understand even less. Why would I read a letter written to a person you hate? It's nonsense; I don't understand."

"I was hoping you, who are in a similar situation, would help me put my feelings into words," Rem admitted, sticking out her tongue a little, as Katya was trying to quickly respond to refuse the bargain.

Katya widened her eyes and was thus convinced that she had grown up being loved by those around her. There'd be no way she would know how to be spoiled by someone like this; she wouldn't be able to do something like this otherwise, she thought.

"So, what do you say?" Rem pressed. "Do we have a deal?"

Katya sighed as Rem repeated her question, wondering how she had interpreted her silence. I still have no idea exactly why she is being held captive, but I can't be bothered. "I wasn't sure what to write in the letter before, but I think I've thought of something: that there's a woman staying in the same place as me I don’t get along with.”

At least, that was Katya’s honest impression with regard to Rem.

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Whether Oni or Snakes Live There

1

Abducted to the capital city Lupugana in the middle of the battle in the Walled City of Guaral, and placed under house arrest.

She understands that it's objectively the situation she had been placed in but…

"—I do not, truly feel that I harbor as much of a feeling of endangerment as that makes it sound like."

Cane in hand, Rem gave a sigh while walking through a hallway expansive in width.

In position, Rem was meant to be what you'd consider a prisoner of war and hostage, however she had no soldiers attached to her to watch over her while she walked through the mansion as she's doing. Of course, there are human guards posted around the premises here and there, but there were none keeping constant watch over Rem.

Should she call this carelessness? Or perhaps she should think of it as them looking down on her?

"…It is probably, neither."

If she had to say, this must be them aptly appraising Rem's judgement.

Rem is the one captive here, but she understands the meaning of her being used as a hostage. And of the fact that even if she was allowed freedom within the premises, she was not given the freedom to go outside.

If Rem considers her position, it is proof that she's being valued by the other party—The lord of this mansion, the one who has locked Rem up, the chancellor of the Empire, Berstetz Fondalfon.

—Berstetz, while holding the office of Chancellor, also led a rebellion against the empire.

From Rem’s point of view as someone who had been thrown about by the Empire’s civil war, she couldn’t really approve of Berstetz actions, but Rem herself didn’t hold a bad impression of Berstetz. Of course, it was hard to hold a positive impression, but the fact they exchanged words directly made her think so.

Berstetz had not rebelled out of selfishness, but had acted out of concern for the future of the empire.

If she had only heard that reason, because the problem would be on Abel’s side so she would be unable to defend him.

However, as far as Rem knew, the person known as Abel, is the reason for Berstetz rebelling, and he was not the kind of man to thoughtlessly leave that main cause alone.

“Abel-san has his own way of thinking… Even if I understand that, I wish he would have shared that with Berstetz.”

Perhaps, if she was told that if they had been able to talk things out, then this rebellion wouldn’t have taken place, then would that help things? Or not? That was something Rem failed to tell.

Could Rem say that the situation she was left in was a bit better even then?

Would Rem have been able to reach her current state of mind without the Empire’s civil war?

“—I’m-.”

Rem thought about herself, who has nothing outside of the memories of approximately this single month, and she pressed down on her chest.

What had driven Rem, who had woken up in a completely empty state, to her wit’s end, was the existence of Subaru, who knew Rem and had tried to hold on to her somehow.

While it was difficult to hold the same impression she had of him at the beginning, that of the owner of such an evil stench, it was undeniable that such a way of facing him had only come about because various circumstances had held her down.

While not the best way to put it, you could also say it was necessary for her to shelve her quarrel with him, so she cooperated with him, and while she kept that shelved, she lost the chance to unshelve it.

However the case—

“When that person comes back to Guaral, he will surely be very surprised.”

Guaral had been attacked by a swarm of flying dragons, and ended up in a half-destroyed state. There, a great number of their allies had been injured, and then Rem had been abducted.

What would he, Subaru, think of that?—That she was sure that he would not be able to help but think of it, was something that somehow made Rem uncomfortable.

It was likely precisely because of that—

“—I see you’ve got a long face, Wife-san.”

That the moment she opened the doors to the room she arrived upon, the inner side of her heart was read immediately by Flop, who was laying down in the center of a bed.

2

Hovering her hands above the resting flop’s wounds, as he lays on the bed, she performs healing magic on him.

On his bandaged body, even now painful looking claw marks still remain carved. His wounds now having closed quite a bit, it was fair to say now that he has escaped any danger to his life. But even then, frustration remained.

If she could draw out the former power of this healing magic more, she could have healed this heavy wound in but a moment. —This heavy wound of Flop's that he received by protecting her.

"However, if the Wife-san could have instantly healed my wounds, then Madelyn would lose any reason to abduct the Wife-san."

"Ah…"

"Perhaps, wouldn't she lose any reason to spare the city… Guaral? So, this is all in how you think about it, Wife-san. It was because your healing magic was crude that lives were saved. If you think about it like that, there's nothing wrong with being green right?"

When she was lowering the hands that were aloft his wound, it was once again that the insides of her heart were read.

Rem was surprised by that, so Flop closed one eye and tried to poke a bit of fun at her.

She thought herself pathetic at the fact he was being attentive to her while being injured. She felt a reliability from him and honest admiration for Flop's unchanging attitude even when he's in that state.

That Rem wasn't more depressed than was necessary in this condition, was undoubtedly thanks to the bright Flop being put in the same situation as her.

"That I cannot allow the injured Flop-san to exert himself is also a reason for why we can't create any opportunities to escape from here though…"

"Woah there, bit harsh there aren't you, Wife-san! But well, it's indeed a fact that I'm in a half-dead half-alive state where I'll die if I move around carelessly, so I really can't argue with you there. However, I believe it'd be difficult even if you didn't have me with you. Because this mansion, is her turf."

"…Madelyn-san's right?"

Flop, having laughed wryly, gently nodded to the name Rem whispered.

The flying dragon general Madelyn Eschart, she was the General first-class who had attacked the walled city with a swarm of flying dragons at her command, and the one responsible for abducting Rem and Flop into the capital. If she, who is one of the top power houses even in the empire, came at them, they would have their lives taken in the blink of an eye.

That it hasn't come to pass, was because of the ties between her and flop—

"Flop-san, what is Madelyn-san…"

"We have a shared acquaintance you see. That we just both hit it off so well because of that… would be quite inaccurate to say, but the fact remains that it is the one reason for her overlooking me. However, know that it might only be on the scope of overlooking. It's likely we'll be bitten should we try anything careless."

"In that case, it seems like it would be difficult to request our release."

"That would be tough, yes. Of course, I also wish for that. —For I am so worried about Husband-kun's jealousy should I keep the Wife-san with me for too long."

"—That might not be, quite as you put it."

"Is that really so?"

For a moment, she turned her eyes away from what Flop pointed out, and she became lost for words from the preceding question.

This was the aftershock of what she had been thinking by herself before arriving at Flop's room. What Flop had said was not wrong. She believes, he might be worried about her.

Though of course, she doesnt believe that it is because she is with Flop.

"I don't believe he's jealous. More that he's worried about me and Flop. But, Medium-san also qualifies for that.."

“Goodness, that is quite true indeed! I really have scarcely experienced being separated from Medium for this long, so I think it’s likely it’ll become a bit of a pickle. Well, my sister’s a bit of a special case who can always be cheery, but I may have taken being away from my sister a bit harder than I thought I would.”

His tone remains bright, but it’s unlikely his feelings for his far away little sister are a lie.

Just how much of flop’s usual attitude is his true self, and how much is a strong front construct he made to not have Rem be concerned? Rem can’t quite tell.

And precisely because she can’t tell, Rem scolded herself as she cannot allow herself to be too pampered by that.

“Let’s both do the best we can, even in this situation. In the meantime…”

“Meantime?”

“Flop-san, you rest, you must hurry your recovery if it’s even one day sooner.”

Negotiations or use of force, whichever of those they choose, he needs to get his body in perfect shape or else their options will narrow.

To increase the hands you can choose to play, it is first important to solidify your foundations.

Hearing such fighting spirit from Rem, Flop’s blue eyes widen. His puzzled, surprised face is so rare, Rem calls out to him with a “Flop-san?”

Hearing that, Flop shakes his head to the sides sluggishly.

“No, it’s just that, don’t get mad at what I’m about to say ok?”

“I will endeavor not to.”

“I want you to try your best. You see, the Wife-san’s words just now, felt like they had something to them that somewhat resembled Husband-kun. So I was just thinking how married couples do resemble each other after all."

To those words the laughing Flop gave as an answer, Rem gave a small gasp.

—She tried so hard, but not getting angry was difficult.

3

"Oni girl, how is Flop?"

Once she finished her conversation with Flop, Rem returned to her room, and what welcomed her was a brusque voice.

On the other side of the room, was a window thrown open through which wind blew in, on that windowsill sat with bad manners a girl whose sky-blue hair was swaying. —Her hair which had two, very prominent black horns poking out of it.

"Hey you, did you listen to what The Dragon said?"

That sudden arrival with no greeting, and her appearance that held onto one's gaze had birthed a momentary silence, at said moment, she grew discontent, and her yellow eyes narrowed.

She thought she lacked patience, and that even if she narrowed her eyes to intimidate her, she could not diminish the cuteness of her outward appearance. But Rem did not dare express that out loud.

She is the personification of a powerful dragon hiding its strength—She is Madelyn Eschart.

"Even if say, she cannot hurt me due to being entangled by various conditions."

"Wassat?"

"No… Could you not come in by knocking the door instead of from the window??"

“Are the likes of you intending to limit what The Dragon can do?”

“Again, no. It’s just that this is the second floor.”

Perhaps to Madelyn there was not much difference between the first and second floors, but there are stairs for a reason, so she would like her to be understanding of that.

On the topic of being understanding—

“Would you please refrain from referring to me as Oni girl?”

“Why? Just as The Dragon, calls The Dragon, The Dragon, it is an obvious to call an Oni an Oni.”

“Even if you refer to me as an Oni, I don’t feel as such to me, so it makes me feel restless.”

Oni girl, is what Madelyn kept fully confidently referring to her as, which Rem was now fed up with.

It’s not that she wants to reject the fact she’s an Oni. But it is simply that she has no memory of such, and it registers to her referring to her previous self who was an Oni.

“Please call me Rem. You also call Flop-san his name do you not?”

“…Flop’s special. You should bear that in mind.”

“Then could you also have me—”

“—You.”

Be special as well, was what Rem wanted to continue with, but Madelyn’s serious intimidation pierced through her.

Instantly, Rem felt the sensation of her innards shrinking inwards, and couldn’t mouth any more words. Looking with eyes that had become slitted at Rem who had been silenced, Madelyn came down to the floor from the windowsill and said,

“You’re being allowed to be on that hag’s words, and because of

Flop’s treatment. Do not misattribute The Dragon’s kindliness and clemency. When it comes to saving Flop, I have other means too.”

“…I will bear that, in mind.”

“Hmph.”

Scoffing, Madelyn’s slitted pupils returned to normal, and Rem was released from the pressure she was being put under.

If just a single word was out of place then literally, she would have incurred Madelyn’s wrath. Rem, now remembering once again that she was balancing on a tightrope, took several deep breaths.

After which, with her gaze silently fixed on Madelyn…

“Flop’s injuries are, currently, stable. While I believe it necessary that he rests for a while, he’s past the worst of it.”

“—. Are you retarded?”

“Eh?”

“If Flop is healed, then The Dragon will have no more business with you. And yet, you report stupidly honestly to The Dragon, do you not want to keep your life?”

Madelyn told that while looking straight at Rem, who had answered the question she was asked at the beginning, about Flop’s condition.

Rem said “No”, at Madelyn’s eyes which seemed to be looking at something hard to believe, and shook her head side to side.

“Of course, I want my life. I can not go dying.”

“…Then, why?”

“I could’ve lied, and put a stopgap on that for the moment…but establishing a relationship without lies with Madelyn, was something I believed to be the correct choice right now.”

“…”

Hearing Rem's answer, Madelyn goes wide eyed.

She was caught by neither anger nor displeasure, but the simple astonishment of being caught by surprise, Rem walked closer towards her, to the windowsill, and gazed at the view outside.

She could see the well-arranged garden, together with the heavy number of imperial guards deployed in it. At the far reaches, glances of the imperial capital here and there, and there was also a very beautiful and outstanding palace built out of crystal.

It was a world unknown to Rem, this imperial capital of Lupugana's sights—

"But, being in an unknown place where you know nothing is something that comes naturally to me. Which is why, I've decided to challenge it."

"Challenge…"

"Madelyn-san, though you have nothing that would bond you to me…even for just a moment, there may be something that could perhaps make you hesitate."

Rem doesn't think anything could get Madelyn to turn to her side. And she's not shrewd enough to warm herself up to anyone like Flop does either.

But, perhaps if it were just a single moment that's not even a second, Rem might be able to create that gap when it all comes crashing down. That, is what Rem considers her own little way of fighting.

Abducted to the imperial capital, and held captive—Rem had taken that into consideration as something that he would be worrying about. She can already picture him trying to push his limits. And that he likely wouldn't even lend his ears to her telling him, that she wishes he'd stop.

In that case, if she can't avoid him coming, then at least she will remove the pebbles from the road.

That was Rem's captive way of fighting.

"…The Dragon doesn't understand what it is you're thinking. But."

"…"

"The Dragon pays no mind to the petty ways in which weak humans resist. If you keep to what The Dragon tells you here, then do whatever you want after."

Depending on things, that previous anger was at risk of flaring up again in that exchange. However, Madelyn overlooked Rem's resistance, and didn't attempt to challenge it.

Unlike with Berstetz, she was looking down on her clear as day.

However, it was precisely because she was thought of as harmless, that there should be something that only Rem can do.

"By the way, there was another outsider in the mansion other than me and Flop. Do you know who that is, Madelyn-san?"

"Only heard that she's someone the hag guest…Spirit eater brought along."

"Spirit eater…"

Rem realized she meant the Empire's general first class that had attacked the walled city once before, Arakiya.

The one Rem talked about was a woman strolling around in a chair with wheels on it that she saw around the Residence—is it likely, that she who was thought to be under a similar position as Rem and Flop, was also under house arrest?

If she hears her out, she may gain a reason to progress on the situation, and to go against her feelings of impatience.

"…To depend on something other than power, what a strange Oni girl you are."

So whispered Madelyn with her golden eyes narrowed side-eying

Rem who was silently deep in thought.

Not paying any mind to the evaluation from the dragonkin, within this residence that could be called a dragon’s den, Rem continued to grope for a means to rebel against the situation she’s in, with seemingly the diligence of a certain someone, somewhere.

END

The Dragon Kingdom:
Missing Child Search Chronicle VI
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—The plan to infiltrate the Vollachian Empire illegally had at last entered its final stage.

Emilia: “So then, since Petra-chan wrapped up the talks with Diadora, and Otto-kun properly said “I’m sorry” and apologized, they’ll introduce us to a method for illegal entry.”

Beatrice: “…While Betty wasn’t aware, things became awfully complicated, in fact.”

Emilia: “Mm, that’s true—sorry. I really wanted to consult Beatrice too, but…”

Saying that, Emilia gently stroked Beatrice’s hair as she dozed on the bed.

Beatrice accepted the feel of Emilia’s palm—part of it was that she had opened her heart to her, but more than that, she seemed listless about doing anything, and watching that was very painful.

Until she could have her reunion with Subaru, who had been flung away, Beatrice had been spending her time with an “energy saving” mindset, sleeping for most of the day.

It was because they could only choose this time while Beatrice was awake that the matter of the scuffle in the Commercial City of Picoutatte had ended up being reported after the fact.

—“Scuffle”—that was how Emilia chose to describe the events of this city.

Emilia: “It was a scuffle Otto-kun hadn’t been able to resolve for years, so I think it being resolved was reaaally good. It’s the second good thing about this time.”

Beatrice: “If Otto’s homecoming is the second, what was the first, I suppose?”

Emilia: “That I could confirm my knight is cherished by all sorts of people.”

As for the search for the vanished Subaru and Rem, Emilia and the others were aiming for illegal entry as their method, while from Kararagi in the west, Anastasia and company were trying a different approach.

The hole created by Emilia’s camp being absent from the Kingdom would be filled by their supporters, beginning with Annerose and Clind, and no one tried to stop Emilia.

Of course, they offered cautions and advice, but no one opposed that they had to bring Subaru back. That made Emilia happy.

Emilia: “Everyone knew properly that Subaru is always working hard.”

Beatrice: “Subaru is a hard worker, in fact. The bad part about Subaru is that he doesn’t quite look the part, I suppose. …And so, Betty understands Emilia’s feelings, in fact.”

Emilia: “Hehe, right?”

With Beatrice understanding, Emilia felt warm and fuzzy.

Even if she tried hard at looking for good things, there were only about that many which could distract from the worry over Subaru and the others being gone—so they had to work hard.

Surely, Subaru was also doing his best so he could return to Emilia and the rest.

Emilia: “When we go to get him, Subaru might cry from being surprised.”

Beatrice: “In that case, making him cry soon would be better, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right. Very soon, our preparations to slip into the Empire will be in order…”

Just as they were saying that, the sound of someone knocking on the door echoed through the bedroom. When Emilia turned around, from beyond the door came Frederica’s voice—“Emilia-sama”—and then,

Frederica: “Would now be all right? There are a few things about what comes next that I would like to discuss.”

Emilia: “Yes, it’s fine. Beatrice is awake right now too, so I think it’s just right.”

Frederica: “Beatrice-sama as well. It seems the timing was good.”

Hearing Emilia’s reply, Frederica slowly stepped into the bedroom. Seeing her figure, Emilia softly widened her eyes with an “Ah.”

It was because Frederica—whom they usually only saw in her maid uniform—had changed, on this occasion, into a different getup—something like men’s clothing that did not sacrifice neatness.

At Emilia’s surprise, Frederica faintly smiled and said,

Frederica: “Since we must conceal our identities in the Empire, Petra selected an outfit that would change the usual impression. I hope it does not look strange.”

Emilia: “Not strange at all. It looks reaaally good on you. Right, Beatrice?”

Beatrice: “…If Petra chose it, there’s no mistake, in fact. To Betty’s eyes as well, it doesn’t look bad, I suppose.”

Frederica: “Th-Thank you very much.”

Praised, Frederica brought a hand to her cheek and blushed faintly.

However, she soon cleared her throat with an “Ahem” and switched gears, Frederica: “Enough about myself. I must ask both Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama as well to act so that your positions will not be known in the Empire. I trust you understand.”

Emilia: “Of course. We’re going to be entering illegally. If my identity is exposed, that would be a big problem, right?”

Frederica: “Yes. There is a high possibility it would develop into a diplomatic issue… To put it plainly, if your identity were revealed, Emilia-sama, it could even lead to war.”

Emilia: “That’s a heavy responsibility. But it’s okay. I’ll do my best, and… ugh.”

Frederica: “Emilia-sama? What is the matter?”

Frederica worried over Emilia, who had grimaced and trailed off. To that concern, Emilia shook her head with a “No,” and said,

Emilia: “I’m fine. It’s just, hiding who I am means telling a lie, right? When I think about that, my tummy suddenly starts aching…”

Beatrice: “If this is how you are just from thinking about telling a lie, without even telling one, the road ahead is worrisome, in fact.”

Frederica: “Indeed. Emilia-sama must swallow this expedient.”

Emilia: “I-It’ll be fine—I promise. This is a necessary lie. I’m sure Puck won’t get angry and will forgive me.”

It was Puck who had taught Emilia that lying was bad, to be honest.

Granted, in Puck’s case, it seemed to have been advice based on his thinking that Emilia was ill-suited to lying, and from Emilia’s own thinking as well, lying was something bad.

Even so, as she herself had said, this time it was a necessary lie for Subaru and the others.

Emilia: “So bring it on. I’ll tell any lie—about ten of them!”

Frederica: “I appreciate your enthusiasm, but ten will not be necessary. In the Empire, you shall go by the name “Emily.” And as for Emily’s position, she is the bodyguard to a young lady traveling to the Empire incognito—yes, please remember that.”

Emilia: “Ah, Emily! Leave it to me. I’m used to that lie.”

Puffing out her chest, Emilia answered brimming with confidence, together with a great sense of relief.

“Emily” was the first alias Emilia had ever claimed in her life; she remembered that she had given that name when she first met Frederica.

When she had left her home forest, Emilia had spent a few days as Emily.

Emilia: “So I’m used to it. And, about this “bodyguard” thing…”

Frederica: “Your purpose is to protect Petra-ojōsama, and her sister, Beatrice-sama.”

Beatrice: “…I see, so that’s how it is, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Eh, how is it?”

From Frederica’s explanation, Beatrice immediately looked like she understood, and Emilia tilted her head at that.

Beatrice: “You do not need to overthink it, in fact. Emilia—and, while we are at it, Roswaal—cannot have their true identities exposed, I suppose. So Betty and the rest will altogether falsify our backgrounds. Then, to the question of who sits at the center of Betty and company for the lie we tell, the answer is…”

Frederica: “The two of Petra and Beatrice-sama, correct.”

Emilia: “Ah, I get it. We’ll say Petra-chan and Beatrice are close sisters, and we’ll lie that we’re their bodyguards, and slip quietly into the Empire.”

Having it explained simply, Emilia at last managed to catch up in understanding. At the same time, she was impressed at how well thought out the plan was.

Emilia: “Patrasche-chan is worried about Subaru too, and if we took her along, since she’s a reaaally beautiful ground dragon, people would take it the wrong way.”

Frederica: “Considering the long journey, we also cannot carelessly use a cheap dragon carriage. So that our affiliation will not be known, we have had a new one prepared through the help of the Suwen Company.”

Beatrice: “In that case, we should leave unhidden the part about this being the journey of an influential person, in fact. The strategy is to conceal only the identity of that influential person, and who the truly important one actually is, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Reaaally smart… Was it Roswaal who came up with this plan? Otto-kun?”

Frederica: “Let us say it is the crystallization of both of their craftiness.”

With a hand to her lips and an elegant smile, she looked like the usual Frederica. From that impression and her answer, Emilia felt reassured.

The two whom Emilia thought ranked first and second in wisdom within their camp were very good at thinking about such things, and if those two had cooperated, she could trust it.

Therefore—

Beatrice: “…If Otto thought it up together as well, then we need not worry about Roswaal putting in any mischief, I suppose. We can feel at ease, in fact.”

And Emilia agreed with Beatrice’s remark.

2

And then, before they knew it, preparations advanced in a short span of time, and the morning of departure arrived.

At the entrance of the Suwen Company, which had taken care of them for several days, there were two dragon carriages, inconspicuous yet sturdy, readied for this illegal entry and waiting with imposing air.

Each would be pulled by two ground dragons—Patrasche and Frufoo—reliable companions who would accompany Emilia and the others wherever their harsh journey led.

Otto: "Frufoo, for her part, is saying, "Please don't make an old lady go on a long trip," though."

Emilia: "Frufoo-chan is elderly?"

Otto: "She only says that. She's always had a tendency to be a bit lazy."

Saying so, Otto gave a wry smile as he stroked his beloved dragon's neck. Blessed with the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, Otto could speak with any living creature, and he got along very well with his dear Frufoo—it was heartwarming to see.

Otto: "Emilia-sama, you also got along well with the Great Spirit with whom you're contracted, didn't you? I have yet to speak with him myself, but…"

Emilia: "Yes. I think we'll be able to meet him before long, but I'm sure Puck will get along with you too, Otto-kun. Puck's the kind of child who can get along with anyone."

Ram: "—Ram has some slight objections to that assessment."

Just then, Ram cut in like that while Emilia was talking with Otto.

Having finished her travel preparations, Ram—like Frederica the day before—was dressed for the road in a way that wouldn't be recognized as a maid. Since Otto and Garfiel were in their usual clothes, that felt fresh.

Emilia: "But I might have gotten used to seeing Ram not in a maid outfit, since we’ve been together like that for a while.”

Ram: “That may be so. Ram, in fact, has forgotten all the duties of a maid.”

Otto: “Isn’t that a matter entirely unrelated to your clothing?”

Ram: “Hmph!”

Snorting through her nose, Ram dismissed Otto’s words. Having his words tossed aside, Otto shrugged his shoulders, and Emilia gave a small laugh at the two’s back-and-forth.

Meanwhile, the others also started gathering one after another around the dragon carriages.

Petra: “Emilia-nee-sama, are you ready?”

Trotting over as she said that was Petra, clad in a fluffy outfit. Though it didn’t use as much fabric as a dress, it was a combination that seemed to mix cuteness, ease of movement, and elegance as hard as she could—showcasing her stylishness perfectly.

Emilia: “Yes, I’m just fine. Petra-chan, you look reaaally cute yourself. You give off the feeling of a young lady—it’s very lovely.”

Petra: “Ehehe, thank you very much. I have to properly look like Beatrice-chan’s older sister, and like your mistress, Sister and everyone else’s.”

Clenching both fists tight, Petra’s enthusiasm was most reassuring. Her desire to bring Subaru and the others home was strong, and Emilia was also encouraged by Petra’s attitude.

That delicate girl with the cherry-blossom-pink cheeks would, from here on, take the position of Emilia and the others’ mistress. Emilia felt a surge of determination that she must protect her properly.

Garfiel: “Gettin’ all fired up’s a good thing, Petra-ojōsama. Long as ya handle sittin’ there all calm-like nice ’n’ easy, the rest of us’ll guard ya proper.”

Ram: “Yes, do it properly. To begin with, if Garf hadn’t been slacking off in the Water Gate City, the situation at the tower should have been settled more easily.”

Garfiel: “Gao…”

Garfiel, rolling his shoulders, wilted at Ram’s words. But as Emilia saw it, Ram’s words meant that if Garfiel had been there, he would have been dependable, so there was no reason for him to be dejected.

And—

Emilia: “You’re coming with us this time. I’m counting on you, Garfiel. Together, let’s do our best to take Subaru and the others back. First, protect Petra-ojōsama properly.”

Garfiel: “O-Oh, r-right, Emilia-sama! ……Er, I mean, Emily!”

Falling into step with the downcast Garfiel, Emilia gave a firm nod with a “Yeah!” And among everyone gathering around the carriages, the last to arrive was a tall figure.

With his usual makeup removed and his long indigo hair tied back, the man shed his fluttery, fabric-heavy clothing and donned a butler’s suit like Clind—Roswaal.

Like Emilia, Roswaal, concealing his identity, bowed deeply and said,

Roswaal: “It seems we are already all present—how wonderful. Petra-ojōsama, are your preparations complete?”

Petra: “Garf-san loaded our luggage, and Otto-san’s family helped us get ready, so we’re fine. You make sure you’re proper on your end too, Dudley.”

Roswaal: “Yes, yes, most reassuring. Precisely so. —Now then.”

Called by his alias “Dudley” by Petra, who was already acting as the party’s mistress, Roswaal’s smile deepened, and his gaze—those mismatched eyes of his—turned to Emilia.

And just like that, everyone else's eyes gathered on Emilia as well.

Beatrice: "Emilia, before we depart… before you become Emily, give us a few words, I suppose."

So said Beatrice, explaining the reason for the attention, as Frederica held her in her arms beside the dragon carriage.

From here on, the group would enter the Empire as a party centered on Petra. But before they became that fabricated group, at this point the one in the center was Emilia.

It was none other than Emilia who had insisted that they would go to save Subaru and the others herself, without leaving it to anyone else.

Emilia: "Everyone, first of all, thank you for lending me your strength. You even listened to my selfishness, and prepared all this like this—I felt really, really blessed."

In a situation like this, with Subaru and Rem perhaps in danger right now, and her heart constantly worried and flustered, she didn't know if it was right to feel that way—but still.

Emilia: "Of course, Beatrice, who worries most about Subaru and Rem, and Ram as well; Otto-kun, who mustered the courage to return to his hometown; Petra-chan, who took on a difficult role; Garfiel and Frederica, who are lending their strength as usual; and also… he's keeping a calm face, but Roswaal, who worked so hard making the arrangements."

Everyone gathered there—and in particular, Roswaal, who had been named last—slightly raised an eyebrow.

Emilia could not even imagine how much the usually easygoing Roswaal had run around to get everything ready so that he and Emilia could go to the Empire. But within the scope she could imagine, she thought he had probably done the hardest thing—and so she was grateful.

Emilia: "My knight and Rem, a precious comrade I still haven't been able to speak to even once, were flung far, far away to the southern

Empire, and I think I was the most flustered I've ever been in my life. If I had been alone, I'm sure I would have been so at a loss that my eyes would have been spinning. But because everyone blazed the trail, we have today."

Time and again, Emilia keenly felt that she could do nothing by herself. And yet she couldn't feel that as frustrating or pitiable—and she felt a little proud of herself for that.

It was thanks to Emilia's knight, who wasn't here, that she could feel that way.

Emilia: "So let's go to bring Subaru and the others home. If everyone's here, it'll surely be all right. From this time, I was able to feel that way."

To keep on facing troubles and problems like this, and to keep on living together with everyone from here on. As the big, big first step for that—

Emilia: "—Everyone, let's do our best at illegal entry!"

Beatrice: "That rallying cry sounds far too bad to onlookers, in fact!"

At Emilia's spirited call, Beatrice's high voice rang out like that.

And thus Emilia's camp set off on a journey to search for the missing knight and the young girl who was their comrade.

Even if their path was full of unease and nail-biting, as the great nation awaited them ahead, their feet would not halt.

—Beyond this, someone very, very important was waiting. There was not a single reason to hesitate.

END

Comic Alive Collection 8

Stand By Me Pleiades I

1

Natsuki Subaru had disappeared from the Pleiades Watchtower.

In short, that was what the letter sent to the mansion said.

Pausing for just a moment, Roswaal L. Mathers rested a finger on his pointed chin and closed his heterochromatic eyes.

"Your handwriting has certainly seen much improvement, Lady Emilia."

He read the letter and muttered a leisurely remark contrary to the dire circumstances it described.

The writer of the letter was Emilia, whom Roswaal was backing in the royal selection to make her the next ruler of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

When Roswaal met Emilia for the first time in the forest, she was living all alone with a spirit who was her only family, and she knew nothing of the manners and general knowledge of the outside world. It took a great deal of effort to bring her up to scratch; just teaching her how to read and write, along with the bare minimum of education, took a considerable amount of time.

However, Emilia was honest and driven, so she continued to grow in many ways.

Of course, she had a lot of room for improvement—but he was happy to see her growth as her teacher. If it wasn't for the royal selection coming up in the near future, it would've been entertaining to further explore her full potential.

In any case…

"It seems like now is not the time to be taaalking about such leisurely things," Roswaal muttered, pinching the edge of the letter with a sigh.

Currently, Emilia was traveling with companions to the Augria Sand Dunes east of the Kingdom in order to reach the Pleiades Watchtower where the Sage lived.

Shaula, the Sage who lived in the Watchtower, was rumored to have knowledge of the entire land, but crossing the sand dunes was difficult—to the point where even the Sword Saint had failed to find a passage through the desert.

If Natsuki Subaru wasn't there, Roswaal would never have approved the journey.

Natsuki Subaru was Roswaal's trump card.

He wasn't the person that Roswaal could trust the most. Subaru would reject that line of thought, and it wasn't true to begin with.

Subaru was someone who Roswaal could trust the most when it came to his 'objective.'

For Roswaal's ultimate goal, Emilia becoming ruler was a necessity. And Natsuki Subaru's existence would turn that 'necessity' into an absolute.

Because of that firm belief, Roswaal had allowed Emilia to journey to the Augria Sand Dunes. As long as Subaru was there, Emilia's safety—and the safety of her companions—was assured. And in fact, the letter had stated that all of her other companions were safe—but the issue mentioned at the beginning still existed.

"Lady Emilia has been separated from Subaru. This should be considered an unforeseen situation."

Roswaal knew that Natsuki Subaru's Authority could bring forth the best-case outcome.

With that in mind, the current situation indicated that they might come across a problem. And a roadblock to Roswaal's goal.

This must be corrected—no matter the price.

His way forward decided, Roswaal squinted for a moment and opened the window of his office. His tall, lithe figure swiftly leapt out of the window, letting his cape flutter about him as he landed in the mansion's front garden.

The office was on the top floor of the building, but the drop posed no risk to the softly landing figure. However, there were others who weren't pleased with this type of behavior.

"Master! What are you doing? It is ill-mannered to jump out of a window like that…"

"Frederica."

The maid who had spotted Roswaal jumping down and ran over was Frederica.

Her long blonde hair fluttered as her emerald-green eyes flashed with anger.

"What?" she replied in displeasure to her name being called. "I'm not listening to any excuses. If Petra had spotted you, then you'd be getting even more of an earful than from me, so you have to…"

"A carrier bird from Lady Emilia arrived—it's an emergency. Begin preparations."

Frederica stopped and inhaled sharply at Roswaal's words. But she was an ideal maid nevertheless, so she immediately corrected her posture. "Understood. What are you going to do, Master?"

"Currently, I need someone who can move faaast… I will be requiring Clind's assistance. So I'm heading to Annerose's place. I'll return in three hours."

"…Understood. I will let Petra know."

For a moment, Frederica looked displeased upon hearing Clind's name, but her personal feelings weren't important right now.

Frederica and Clind are both competent individuals, and I want them to work together well if possible—but they have a complicated relationship, and they aren't compatible.

But as far as Roswaal knew, they had been close when she was little.

"The situation is as seen here. If it's true, then there is much that must be done. Think carefully and prepare accordingly," Roswaal ordered before handing Emilia's letter to Frederica and turning his back to her.

Frederica was capable enough to know what to do once she read the letter. Roswaal just had to lay down the foundations of his plan without cutting corners.

"I'll be going then… We'll meet up later," said Roswaal before lightly kicking off the ground and flying up into the air.

It was flying magic: a combination of wind, earth, and yang magic mixed together into a practical form, yet fairly difficult to replicate—it could reach speeds similar to a migratory bird and was faster than using an earth dragon.

I was asked not to use it outside of emergencies by an old friend and the royal palace, but…

"…This is definitely an emergency now," Roswaal said in an unexpectedly serious tone as he cut through the blue sky.

And so, left behind in the mansion's front garden…

"Sister Frederica, was that the master flying off just now?"

Amidst the swaying grass caught up in the downwash, a small girl in a maid's dress—Petra—came scuttering into the garden.

At Petra's query, Frederica, who was bowing, took the letter from her master, straightened her posture, and replied, "Yes," before continuing. "It was an emergency, so he is heading towards Lady Annerose's mansion. He said that he requires Clind's help."

"Clind? That's so sudden… Ah, that means…" Frowning, Petra was questioning Roswaal's actions when her doe-eyes suddenly went wide upon seeing the letter in Frederica's hand.

Smiling awkwardly at Petra's quick observation, Frederica opened the letter.

"A letter from Lady Emilia. It arrived by carrier bird a moment ago."

"I knew it! I had a feeling something was approaching from the sky, so…"

"You felt something approaching from the sky…?"

Petra clapped her hands with joy, but Frederica was more surprised at her statement.

Carrier birds were a method to send letters over a long distance, and the birds required special raising and training methods. In order to make sure that a letter would be received by the correct person—and that the letter could not be intercepted or lost in flight—it was standard practice to conceal their presence and profiles with magic seals.

It was a method first suggested by Roswaal's grandmother, who was the head of the house two generations ago, and became a standard method of communication in the kingdom after it was established over thirty years ago.

Of course, due to the cost of raising the birds, the survival rate of carving the magic seals, as well as other reasons, it wasn't widely available to the common person yet. But that wasn't where the problem lied.

The important part was that it was a form of communication used by those who held important positions in the kingdom—such as Roswaal—so letters sent to him should not be so easy to track.

But Petra was able to instinctively sense the carrier bird's arrival.

"I know that she has been learning magic under the master this past year, but even so…”

Frederica was aware that Petra was a fast learner, even with her work. But despite that, it appeared that she had underestimated Petra’s potential.

One could say she possessed a talent that heaven only granted to a select few.

“Sister Frederica? What did Lady Emilia say?”

“…Ah, right. The master was quite serious about this.”

“The master, serious…?”

Frederica could find no words to placate Petra’s doubt. Unfortunately, the suspicion towards Roswaal in Petra’s mind was difficult to erase.

Frederica thought that only natural, and Roswaal seemed fine with it.

But regardless, Roswaal had hurried off towards Clind, leaving Frederica in charge of preparations, so there was no doubt of the situation’s seriousness.

Readying herself, Frederica turned her eyes towards the letter…

“So? Are Subaru and Sister Emilia okay?” Petra asked, trying to sneak a look at Frederica’s face as she went silent.

The last letter they had received from Emilia was right before they had entered the Augria Sand Dunes. It had stated that they were going to enter the desert from the town closest to it.

Petra’s curiosity at any letter describing the things that had happened after that was natural.

However…

“…How do I explain this to Petra?”

Frederica was well aware of Petra's feelings for Subaru. Knowing that the letter was the cause of Roswaal's urgency was enough to make Frederica find herself at a loss for words.

2

While Frederica was struggling to explain the contents of the letter to Petra, Roswaal, who had just arrived at his destination, was received with cold eyes and forced to provide his reasons.

"As always, your visits are so sudden, Uncle."

"I am well aware of my ruuudeness. But it is an emergency. Please forgive me."

"It'd be more troubling for you to arrive on my balcony if it wasn't an emergency."

She sighed as Roswaal landed on the balcony outside the study and leaned against the handrail.

However, to have such a reaction to someone suddenly flying in was proof enough of the owner of the mansion's upbringing and mental fortitude—a girl only nine years of age.

In response to Roswaal's unspoken admiration, the girl raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm not nine years old; I'm ten years old now. Don't get that wrong."

"Oh? I didn't saaaay anything."

"Your eyes gave it away. Could you please be more proper? People accept your appearance and your attitude because they believe that at least your mind is normal."

"Oh my, quite harsh coming from you."

Roswaal smiled wryly at the banter of Annerose Miload, the small girl shrugging her thin shoulders. It was pleasing to see such growth from her. He knew of no other girl at her age that could act so noble.

And as if to prove such an impression, Annerose continued. "So what is it? It was urgent enough for you to fly here. Do you need something from me…? Or is it from Clind? Or perhaps from both of us?"

"Veeery perceptive. Am I so easy to read?"

"Yes, you are. You always choose the most expedient method, Uncle. You're always afraid of roundabout ways or indirect methods failing."

"That's quite harsh to saaaay…Indeed, I require the assistance of you and Clind."

It was miserable to be at the receiving end…but Roswaal figured that not talking back would be the best way to keep the damage to a minimum. In the first place, he couldn't see an outcome where he was going to win an argument against Annerose.

Due to the circumstances of her birth and her parents, Annerose was Roswaal's Achilles' heel. His weakness was that he had a lot more weaknesses than the others believed him to have.

And so, ignoring Roswaal's self-evaluation, Annerose closed her eyes. "Clind, come here. You're here already, aren't you?"

"…Yes, it is as you say. Well-noticed."

A voice responded to her call, and then the door to the study opened slowly. The man who appeared quietly had a thin face with a monocle and gave a sharp impression.

This man, with his neatly-worn butler uniform was Clind, chief steward of House Miload. And the person Roswaal was seeking out, along with Annerose.

"You were eavesdropping, weren't you?" she asked. "Then you don't need me to fill you in on the situation at hand."

"Forgive my rudeness. I apologize."

"You did it because you knew that it was Uncle, right? I won't scold you for that… Uncle.” Kindly forgiving the servant who was bowing to her, Annerose called to Roswaal, beckoning with her hand at the balcony where he stood. “How long do you intend to stand outside? Hurry and state your business. Despite appearances, I do not have time to idly stand around and chat with you.”

“I thought it prudent to wait for the owner’s permission.” Smiling, Roswaal entered the study under Annerose’s sharp glare. And so, without the need for long-winded explanations, he entered into the heart of the matter.

And that was…

“A letter from Emilia arrived. Apparently, due to things concerning Subaru, it is necessary to travel towaaaards the Empire. I wish for your help in dealing with my family’s issue.”

“…Emily…and Natsuki Subaru,” Annerose muttered thoughtfully, frowning.

For the upcoming royal selection, Annerose’s House Miload was a crucial supporter for Emilia. Due to their close relationship with House Mathers, she had been informed of Emilia’s journey.

And of course, she had probably guessed that the current problem was related to the Pleiades Watchtower.

She called Emilia by a pet name and had complicated feelings about Emilia’s knight Subaru, but Annerose had the ability to know what to prioritize and make the correct decisions.

Meaning…

“…While you are out, you want us to manage House Mathers, correct?”

“Yes, that is what I wish. I don’t have other people I can rely oooon.”

“You can stop with the pleasantries… Are you going to leave someone behind?”

“I was thinking…either Ram or Frederica. It’s actuaaaally quite complicated. The issue appears to not only be with Subaru but also with Rem.”

Shaking his head, Roswaal thought back to the contents of the letter.

It had only been touched on briefly, but the letter also mentioned that Subaru wasn’t the only one who had been separated. Rem had been as well.

The reason why Ram accompanied them on their journey was to find a way to get her sister, Rem, out of her coma. Though to Roswaal, that was only a minor issue compared to Subaru’s disappearance.

Having fallen victim to Gluttony, Rem had disappeared from everyone’s memory, Roswaal’s included. However, Rem’s place in Roswaal’s current plans was unknown. At worst, she could disappear and there wouldn’t be a problem, but that line of thinking was unnatural.

As long as she was a part of the mansion with Ram, she must’ve had some sort of role.

…As to what that was, Roswaal had a guess.

And if Ram found out, she would never forgive him.

“I understand, Uncle. For now, I will take care of your house. Please ensure that Frederica prepares for Clind to…” Annerose tried to continue the conversation while Roswaal was trapped in thought. And so as her words drifted off, she looked up at Clind with her almond-shaped eyes.

Taking in the gaze of his mistress, he bowed respectfully and spoke up. “If I may speak? Question. What would you have me do, my Lord?”

“…There’s another problem regarding Subaru,” replied Roswaal. “We cannot allow Beatrice to be separated from him for a long period of time. Our time is limited.”

“Mr. Subaru and Ms. Beatrice’s spirit contract. Time limitations and restrictions.”

Roswaal nodded bitterly at the quick understanding of both the mistress and the butler.

Subaru and Beatrice were Contractor and Spirit, but the two were codependent and covering for each other’s shortcomings.

Subaru had lost his gate, and with it, the ability to release mana built up in the body. Beatrice’s shortcoming was that she could only support herself with mana from her contractor. It was a mutually beneficial relationship, allowing the excess mana (with nowhere else to go) to support the existence of the spirit.

The two of them would argue against it being a relationship built on self-interest, but as long as the result was the same, there was no need for debate… The problem was that such an ideal agreement could be easily destroyed.

If Subaru and Beatrice were to become separated, they could both easily fall together.

“If this goes on for too long, Subaru will die from mana buildup,” Roswaal explained. “And without any other means to replenish her mana, Beatrice will disappear as well.”

“And that would be terrible for you, my Lord, and for me. Complete loss.”

“Right. I can’t afford to lose a card as valuable as Subaru.”

“I apologize, I was referring to Ms. Beatrice. Apologies.”

Roswaal put on a sour face at Clind’s hollow apology.

Putting a stop to the two of them, Annerose spoke up. “Anyway, I understand your situation, Uncle. And so, what do you want to do?”

“As I mentioned before, I believe I’ll be heading to the Empire. The situation is quite delicate, so I will need to travel to many places. And for that, I would like to use Clind’s power.”

"…That's only possible within the kingdom," replied Annerose.

Nodding at Annerose, who had lowered her tone of voice, Roswaal turned towards Clind for confirmation. "Of course, I am aware. Can I ask you this favor, Clind?"

In response, Clind rested his hand on his chest. "If Your Lordship wishes, and if Lady Annerose agrees. No problem. However…"

"You require compensation, correct? Yes, I'm well aware of that, too," Roswaal replied, showing minor displeasure at Clind's pretentious response.

It couldn't be helped, but paying compensation came with an immense pain that made you feel as if a part of your body was being cut off. And if asked, Clind would mostly likely respond that if it didn't, then there'd be no point.

"Three…no, four magics is what I'll provide in compensation. And so I wish to use your Authority."

"Four, oh my, quite a bold decision. How daring."

"To be frugal and fail is the biggest mistake one can make." Closing one eye, Roswaal stared at Clind with his yellow eye.

There was little time. Not only for this issue in front of him, but for all the choices that would determine the outcome of his desire. Roswaal had no room for failure from now onwards.

He would not have the luxury of waiting for the next chance.

"First things first: I need you to go meet with Lady Emilia's group. Be sure not to let them find out about your Authority or the compensation."

"Understood. Lady Annerose, shall I? Confirmation."

"…If that's what Uncle has decided, then I have no objections. This is for Emily's sake as well."

Annerose closed her eyes and nodded in confirmation at the decision that would normally be too much for one her age. Accepting that, Clind bent over deeply at the waist… At the next moment, he disappeared from the room.

He quite literally disappeared. He wasn't hiding, nor did he become invisible.

Most likely, he had arrived at the town closest to the Augria Sand Dunes, Mirula.

"If he wanted to, he could probably reach the Pleiades Watchtower," Roswaal posited.

"He said so himself that he couldn't," responded Annerose. "Something about the tower being hard to reach…but I'm not sure why that is."

"I can't imagine him lying to you, so it must be true."

Talking about Clind, who had just disappeared, Roswaal let out a long sigh. Noticing his behavior, Annerose pursed her lips and called out to him considerately. "Uncle, are you sure about this?"

"…I thought you weren't going to object to my decisions."

"I'm not objecting. I'm just confirming. To you, magic is a very important thing. A very, very important thing."

"…True. And that's why."

With Annerose's large eyes gazing at him, Roswaal gave a small wry smile. Clutching his chest, he bore the pain of being sliced up… He had a goal to fulfill. A person he wanted to see. For that, he would sacrifice anything.

Even if it was the blessing he had received from that very person.

"Uncle, please don't get too lost in your thoughts."

"It's the opposite, Annerose… I have no reason not to be lost in my thoughts."

Roswaal shook his head at the younger girl's sympathy.

He knew she meant well by warning him, but he could never heed it. That was the path that Roswaal L. Mathers—no, that Roswaal Mathers had chosen.

3

In an instant, the world changed completely, and they found themselves standing in front of the mansion.

They had traveled hundreds of kilometers in a heartbeat. In terms of time, it would've been more than a week's worth of travel. But how was one supposed to react to crossing such a distance in the blink of an eye?

For starters, Otto Suwen pinched his cheeks to confirm that he wasn't dreaming.

Upon feeling the pain, he sighed with the confirmation that this was indeed reality.

"Well, this much doesn't really surprise me anymore…" Otto muttered.

"You're much bolder now, Otto-bro," replied Garfiel. "Or were ya always that way?"

"Ha-Ha-ha. I don't remember what I was like a year ago, so let's say it's both."

Hearing Garfiel's guffaw in response—even though he had experienced the same thing—made Otto start to think that worrying was pointless. Though even if he were to let go of his immediate worries, it wouldn't necessarily release him from them. And that was due to Otto's current position.

"Anyway, now that we've established that the strange occurrence was a strange occurrence, could we now hear the details?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but it's forbidden to speak of," answered the chief steward. "All I can say is that it's not easy to do and that it's not dangerous. Rest assured."

Otto nodded reluctantly at Clind's words. "I see…"

He knew that Clind was an ally, but he still was a mysterious character. He was apparently an old friend of Roswaal, as well as the person who taught Frederica her skills as a servant. He had also taught Subaru how to use a whip and was a key figure in Petra's education.

In other words, he was a key support character for the entire Emilia Camp.

"I didn't expect ta jump from Priestella to the mansion in one go," commented Garfiel. "Is this the Door Crossing that Beatrice used before?"

"No, it is fundamentally different from the Yin Magic that Ms. Beatrice uses," explained Clind. "Very different. Please refrain from asking about the details. Forgive me."

"You don't sound like you're trying to hide it though…" muttered Otto.

"My apologies."

Otto gave up trying to get an answer, seeing as he was clearly not budging as always.

What's important isn't the teleportation…there's no other way of naming that phenomenon…but the reason why Clind brought us back to Roswaal Manor using such drastic means, thought Otto. "Mr. Natsuki and Ms. Rem were flung to the Vollachian Empire, huh?"

Garfiel answered with silence as his gaze hardened. The light-hearted atmosphere from moments ago vanished, and in its place stood a tiger ready to pounce. "I knew I shoulda stuck by 'em."

"It was a group decision. People were needed for the restoration of Priestella. And your power was needed to find the Witch's Remains."

"But still…" Snapping his fangs, Garfiel still regretted not traveling with Subaru's group. But after much discussion, it had been agreed upon by everyone that this would be best.

If he were to push the argument, one could say it was because Otto couldn't be left behind healing in the water city by himself. Meaning the fault lied with Otto receiving his wound.

He wasn't trying to evade taking the blame. It was just that there was no end to the excuses that could be created.

"You could say it would've been better if Mr. Natsuki hadn't been flung away."

"Ain't that puttin' too much fault on the captain?"

"I think so too. That's why thinking about who to blame is meaningless. Well, Ram would probably blame Subaru mercilessly either way."

Despite only knowing Ram for a year, Otto knew that while she might say such things out loud, she would never seriously think that.

In any case, thought Otto, everyone involved in the camp would most likely lament their lack of power. Either because they have a strong sense of responsibility or they're underestimating themselves.

"The only ones with a reasonable evaluation of themselves would be me and Petra," Otto reflected aloud.

"Huh?" asked Garfiel.

"Oh, it's nothing."

In terms of underestimating themselves, Garfiel was no exception. Though his experience in Priestella seemed to have forced him out of it more or less.

In any case…

"Clind, have Lady Emilia and the others already arrived?" asked

Otto.

“Yes, they have already returned,” replied Clind. “All arrived. They are waiting for you two to return. Long-awaited arrival.”

“‘Long-awaited arrival’ feels like stretching the truth, but understood.”

The place they were flung to wasn’t safe. What was important now was to combine everyone’s knowledge and personal connections and figure out how they were going to get Subaru and Rem back.

However, thought Otto, it would have been better had they been flung to the North or the West.

“Why did they have to be sent to the country with the most enemies…?”

“That sounds like the captain, though. Sounds like ‘The Father King’s Trial of Magrizza.’” Garfiel seemed to feel the same frustration as Otto.

From Otto’s long experience as a traveling merchant, the Vollachia Empire was considered the most difficult to deal with out of the four great countries—though the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko was a close second.

“Even so, we might be able to talk things through in the frontiers of the Holy Kingdom, unlike the totally strict Empire.”

“Otto-bro, yer quite knowledgeable about this, huh?”

“If the borders weren’t closed, then I’d be selling oil in the Holy Kingdom right about now.”

With the borders closed due to the recently announced royal selection, Otto’s plans to travel to the Holy Kingdom ended. If not for that, he wouldn’t be working with almost no rest in the Emilia Camp. Life is such a strange thing, he thought.

And he didn’t want to lose Subaru, who had started him on this strange fate.

“Anyway, Lady Emilia and Beatrice are probably fretting themselves. Shall we join them?”

“Heh. No need to worry, Otto-bro. My amazin’ self ain’t gonna be much help coming up with a plan, but I’ll be very useful for breakin’ into the Empire!”

“…I’ll try my best so it doesn’t come to that.” Otto felt bad for the pumped-up Garfiel, but he had no intention of creating an international incident.

In any case, they wouldn’t want the royal selection to be impeded, and if it came to that, even Subaru would be crushed under the responsibility. And if Subaru fell, then the possibility of Otto being crushed as well was high.

If only I could flee before that happens… he thought.

“But I stopped trying to run away from my problems a long time ago.”

The time when he would give in to his fears was when he viewed the boy snickering next to him as a ferocious opponent and not the friend and brother he was today. Ever since then, Otto had never thought about running away from his fears.

4

“Julius, do ya think ya could learn that magic the monocled butler—Clind, I think it was—used?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but using Yin Magic is reliant on Nes’s growth…”

“Ah, don’t take it seriously. Even I know it ain’t easy to learn.” Anastasia Hoshin lightly brushed off the concern of her proper, serious knight standing beside her and reflected on her action. I made him needlessly concerned once again, she thought.

Ever since they had reaffirmed their master-knight relationship at the Pleiades Watchtower, their interactions remained awkward. It couldn’t be helped though, as his memories had yet to return.

“It’s because you didn’t like that, that you hid yourself within me,” Echidna interrupted. “Easy to understand.”

“Ya don’t have to say that each time, you naughty girl,” Anastasia responded to the invasion of her inner thoughts, sticking out her tongue at her scarf.

It wasn’t a figure of speech; it was actually directed at her scarf. Her white fur scarf was in fact an artificial spirit, Anastasia’s long time companion, Echidna.

Anastasia was prone to pout at Echidna’s jabs, but due to her absence, Anastasia had to hear how much hardship they had gone through. She didn’t have much room to respond.

On top of that, all the hardship had amounted to nothing in the end because of her, which was also a reason that she couldn’t talk back.

“You didn’t come out so that the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony’s Authority wouldn’t affect you,” Echidna commented.

“And it didn’t accomplish anything, because I couldn’t handle it. I really have no patience.” Anastasia rested her hand on her cheek and sighed at her own failings.

“That’s not true at all,” Julius called out. The handsome knight took issue with Anastasia’s self-admonition. “At that time, your voice was the one thing I needed to push forward. If you weren’t there, my sword would never have reached Reid Astrea.”

“Do ya really think that?” replied Anastasia. “You ain’t just exaggerating things for my sake, are ya?”

“I speak only the truth. I swear on my sword and my loyalty.”

“Well, if yer goin’ that far…”

Julius’s yellow eyes pierced deep into Anastasia’s blue-green ones. Seeing the unwavering resolve in them, and hearing the strength in his words, all of Anastasia’s doubts drifted away.

What abundant confidence he has in me, though, she thought. “We really must’ve been good together. Was there some kinda spark that started it?”

“The reason I serve you?”

“Yeah. I’m a foreign merchant, and you’re a true-born knight of the kingdom. Even if ya know my motives, I don’t understand yours.”

She did have some knowledge about Julius’s circumstances. He was the heir to House Juukulius of the Kingdom of Lugunica and a knight of the royal guard. That was clear from his behavior and sword skills. But she didn’t understand why someone of such noble birth would reach out to her.

“…There are various reasons, but…”

“But…?”

“The main reason is that… I saw a ray of hope in your potential.”

At Julius’s completely honest trust and expectations, Anastasia could only stand there dumbfounded. She believed that he would have a larger and more personal goal in mind.

And so, as Anastasia stood there frozen for a moment…

“Aha-ha-ha!” Echidna suddenly burst into laughter around her neck.

“Woah.” Anastasia squeaked in surprise and looked down at her, finding her black eyes looking back.

“Ah, sorry,” said Echidna. “It’s just that I didn’t expect you to answer with something so relatable.”

“Relatable?” parroted Julius.

“It’s nothing special. Just something I thought, as someone who has very big expectations for Ana’s future. Oops, maybe I should say ‘as an animal’,” Echidna jested lightly, as Julius frowned at her remark.

But yes, Anastasia felt like it was similar to how she and Echidna had met. It reminded her of when she had been told something similar by Ricardo when she was a little girl.

“If it’s like that, wouldn’t people think that I persuade others the same way each time?” Anastasia questioned.

“What’s wrong with that?” Echidna replied. “Even if you have other means of negotiation at your disposal, if you have a great tool, there’s no reason not to use it.”

“I see, wise words,” Julius responded seriously, while Anastasia could only smile wryly.

“Is that how it is?” she said.

Echidna was always like that, but she had to question whether or not to let it slide upon seeing Julius’s ability to see wisdom in everything.

Perhaps if we still had the relationship we had in the past, I wouldn’t be worryin’ about this.

“I can’t say. I believed I interacted with you without any trouble. But in order for me to think that way, you’ve worked to the best of your ability, Lady Anastasia.”

“…Cheeky boy. Did ya read my thoughts?”

“It might’ve slipped your mind, but I’ve always been the closest to you.”

Lifting her hand to her mouth, Anastasia giggled lightly at the knight’s behavior. “Such a playboy.”

A lingering concern remained. However, this knight who looked as if he could do anything, and elegantly, firmly kept in mind their master-knight relationship.

Meaning they could do well together… Handling adversity was one of her strengths, after all.

“Also, I was able ta remember Ms. Emilia, so that should mean maybe I’ll be able ta remember ya too, Julius.”

"That would ultimately be the best option," Echidna chimed in. "Her and Julius were both hit by Gluttony's Authority. Though we don't know the means of recovery…"

"There's no need to rush. That's what I think now. And I'm proud of that." Julius smiled honestly, placing his hand on his chest.

Seeing that, Anastasia closed her eyes in acceptance. "I see, I see," she said, nodding.

And with that, they got an idea of how to reestablish their relationship as master and knight, and the stagnant negotiations were over.

"Like we said in the tower, we're helping find Subaru and Ms. Rem," Anastasia said. "I ain't sure if Ms. Emilia remembers, but this third Gluttony concerns me."

"Yes," replied Julius. "If they were sent to the Empire with Subaru and Ms. Rem, then the situation is dire."

"However, that country is unlikely to listen to us," Echidna added. "Which begs the question of how we're going to find them."

Once they decided on a direction, Anastasia, Julius, and Echidna quickly brainstormed a plan.

With all the issues having been brought up, Anastasia smiled, placing her hand against her white cheek. "Even if it came with conditions, Ms. Emilia and Subaru are the reason we're still here. If we don't repay this debt and just walk away with the product, then my name as a merchant will suffer."

"Then what shall we do?" asked Julius with closed eyes.

Anastasia shrugged as she gave her answer. "We'll do what only a merchant can do."

Luckily, Anastasia's way with words had just been proven by the other two people there. Although…

"Shouldn't it be the person and the animal instead of two people?"

asked the scarf around her neck, sticking its tongue out playfully as it danced ticklishly around her neck.

5

“Everyone’s working so hard to get that man and Rem baack…”

Meili sat with her elbows on her knees and her face in her palms, uninterested.

Within the hurried atmosphere engulfing Roswaal Manor, Meili couldn’t find any nostalgia in it. Even though she had spent a year within those walls.

“In my case, I spent most of that time as a prisoner. Seeing it all become so lively like this is actually refreshing.”

The reason Meili met Emilia’s group in the first place was because of her assassination contract.

She had attacked their old mansion that had burned down and become their prisoner after being defeated. Normally she’d be tortured or killed, but somehow fate had led her here.

They had no sense of danger, letting her out in the mansion like this without even restraining her.

“Don’t they think I might betray them and go on a rampaage?”

She didn’t have any weapons, but Meili never needed them in the first place.

With one call from her, she could summon the witchbeasts from the nearby forest if she felt like it. It was feasible that she could try to exact revenge for Elsa’s death at any moment.

But the moment she thought that, she found herself smiling.

“But Elsa’s the last person who’d want revenge for her deaath.”

She didn’t care the slightest about the afterlife while she was alive, so it was hard to imagine that changing after her death.

In actual fact, Meili had plenty of opportunities to learn about Elsa while she was alive. But she didn't take them, and now she thought that was for the best.

Back then she thought that if she never learned, then she would never go anywhere. "…But I was taught that that wasn't the caase."

She was told to find her own path, that there were other people she could follow.

But the person who said that had gone far away to where she couldn't follow.

"Ah! Meili!"

"Oh?" At her name being called out, Meili leaned her head back off the edge of the chair she was on. In her upside down vision, she spotted a familiar, adorable face.

It was the girl who had visited her along with Subaru and Emilia while she was a prisoner.

"Petra, how have you beeen?"

"I've been doing good. It's good to see that you're doing good as well. I was so worried."

"After Subaru, Emilia, and Beatrice, riiight?"

"Don't say that. I don't have rankings when I'm worried about people." Pouting with reddened cheeks, Petra put her hands on her hips in protest. Giggling at her response, Meili straightened herself on her chair to face Petra properly.

Even from this angle Petra looked the same as when she saw Meili off. Of course, it had only been twenty days, so not much could change.

Normally though, it would've taken the same amount of time to get back, but…

“You came with Clind right? What kind of magic was it?”

“…Who knows? I am not being secretive, I really don’t know what it waas. He just came, talked with the others for a bit, then both dragon carriages were sent here.”

“It must be Yin Magic… I don’t want to, but I’ll ask the master about it later.”

Hearing Meili’s strange experience brought out Petra’s burning passion for knowledge.

I’ve heard about how Petra has been improving rapidly in various fields, and her passion and talent being directed at magic. So much so, that people speculated that she would eventually learn the magic that Clind the butler used.

But in any case…

“Petra, you don’t seem that torn up about Subaru.”

“What are you saying? I’m very worried. And angry too!”

“…Geh.”

Meili gave her honest opinion, but Petra responded by giving an angry smile. Meili lost the ability to form words upon seeing that.

Indeed, Meili was mistaken. Petra was very angry.

But the girl in front of her wasn’t just releasing suppressed emotions. She was capable of using terrifying methods that Meili couldn’t even imagine to relieve her rage.

One year ago, while Meili was still being treated as a prisoner, Petra spoke some words that still made Meili shiver to her bones even to this day.

Meili had just attacked the mansion and put even Petra’s life in danger. Yet, when Petra had walked up to where she was imprisoned she declared this:

"I'm gonna get you to like me no matter what. Then you won't think of anything scary like killing, right? Relax, I won't bite."

And after that, Petra did in fact become friendlier with her.

Even though she was aware that Petra could perform such calculated acts of self-interest, Meili felt an honest goodwill towards her instead of disgust. Thus…

"S-Sorry."

"…? Why are you apologizing, Meili? You did your job correctly. You saved them when they were surrounded by witchbeasts."

"That's true, but I couldn't saave Subaru."

Those words were not born from fear of Petra but were Meili's honest regrets.

Petra calmed her rage as she empathized with Meili's remorse. "Thank you for apologizing. And sorry for making you apologize. I'm the worst, since I couldn't even go with everyone."

"That's not…"

"That's why next time I'll definitely go. I swear it," Petra declared strongly, making fists with her small hands.

Feeling that strength in her words and her eyes, Meili went wide-eyed, then laughed as all the tension left her body. "Subaru's a lucky maan," she smirked. "He has so many people who care so much for him. From you, to Emilia, to Beatrice…"

"Yeah. Oh, but I care about you too, you know?"

"Yeaah, yeaah."

It was just a side statement, but Meili didn't mind it. She had been taken in by Petra's innocent charm, and it seemed like she was completely under her spell. It probably wasn't just her, either…

"I can't go with theem to search for Subaru."

"…I know, I heard. You're going with Clind and Ms. Annerose to the capital, right?"

"Yes. There we have to talk about how to cross that deseert." Meili nodded in response, thinking of the Augria Sand Dunes that had changed completely.

Originally, the Augria Sand Dunes was said to be impossible to cross, and the Pleiades Watchtower behind them was impossible to reach. But now, with the reason for the sand dunes hostility, the Sage Shaula and her duty, gone, it was possible to enter.

The Trials that Emilia undertook also cleared out the sand storm that surrounded the tower. With that, there was very little left to defend the Books of the Dead that the tower held.

And so, thought Petra, the only thing stopping the abuse of the Pleiades Watchtower is… "The Divine Dragon that Emilia befriended and Meili…"

"When you say it like that, it sounds too much like Emilia."

Even the massive, intimidating Divine Dragon grew meek in the face of Emilia. Regardless of what Meili thought, Petra's statement wasn't wrong.

And right now, the only things protecting the Pleiades Watchtower were the Divine Dragon living there and the witchbeasts that lived in the Augria Sand Dunes. And both of those things the Emilia Camp could handle.

"…I feel like I'm being forced into this group as atonemeent," Meili whined.

"…? Why are you bringing that up now?"

"Petra, that face is scaring me, please stop that."

She looked as if everything had gone according to plan—or at least that she had stated the obvious. However, it was still the role assigned to Meili.

In order to fulfill her promise with Subaru and Emilia, Meili had to cooperate with them as well.

“Meili, will you be okay?” Petra asked. “Clind is a really kind person, but he’s got his own demons, so be careful.”

“Thanks for increasing my anxieety. But relaax. I won’t be alone. Riiight?” Closing an eye, Meili shook the hood of the robe she was wearing.

“Eh?” exclaimed Petra, her eyes going wide as a shadowy figure jumped out. Using its multiple legs, the crimson scorpion crawled up Meili’s shoulder until resting on her head. “Is that…?”

“My bodyguaard. Her name is…well I haven’t decided on a name yeet. For noow she’s Ms. Crimson Scorpion.”

“Crimson Scorpion…” Repeating the name under her breath, Petra stared at the scorpion. At her gaze, it raised its small body to make it look bigger and snapped its pincers.

It wasn’t obvious whether it was an act of intimidation to protect Meili or not, but…

“Take care of Meili, Ms. Crimson Scorpion,” she said.

Pinching that little pincer with her fingers, Petra did something like a handshake.

The scorpion appeared to acknowledge her gesture by waving its tail as if it was satisfied.

And so…

“Let’s both do our joobs,” said Meili. “That’s what’s best for us.”

“Yes, that’s right,” replied Petra. “And once Subaru comes back, let’s talk about it together.”

“Yeah, that’s riight. I have lots of things I want to talk with him about tooo.”

Meili smiled gently as she answered Petra's declaration. But as Petra heard that, she tilted her head to the side. "Huh, it's like, I'm curious about your reaction."

"…What about iit?"

"I don't know… Did you happen to see Subaru's cool side?"

Hearing Petra say that in such a timid manner, Meili's eyes went wide. She wanted to say 'not at all,' but she hesitated before she could say it.

Part of it was because she wanted to get back at Petra, but there was also hesitation around what happened at the Pleiades Watchtower.

In any case…

"You're such a worrywaart, Petra."

The scorpion on top of Meili's head snapped its pincers again—though whether in confirmation or denial, it was unclear. And it only increased the worry that Petra felt.

6

…And so, the many allies gathered to rescue Natsuki Subaru formed their resolve.

Everyone knew Subaru's judgment and bravery, along with his ability to succeed at the last moment. But at the same time they also knew of his recklessness, so their resolve was important.

And amongst them, the one who worried the most about Subaru was…

"…Lady Emilia, please calm down."

"…It's really obvious that I'm not calm isn't it?"

Placing her hand on her chest, Emilia smiled and looked to her side. In her amethyst eyes, Ram, who had traveled with her on her journey, straightened herself.

Seeing Ram compose herself, Emilia realized that she had to collect herself as well.

Ram's probably worried a lot about Subaru too. On top of that, it wasn't only him that disappeared from the Pleiades Watchtower, but Rem too.

"You must be all anxious too, with Subaru and Rem missing."

"Disregarding Barusu, Ram is worried about Rem. Disregarding Barusu."

"You don't have to repeat yourself, I suppose. Betty's worried enough for Subaru, but she will worry for him in your place, too… We have to believe that those two are okay, in fact." Beatrice responded naturally to Ram's tough front.

Linking hands with Emilia, Beatrice's expression was dark with worry. That was because she was worried about Subaru's condition, but there was another reason.

With Subaru being missing, Beatrice was running low on mana.

"Ms. Beatrice, how's your body?" Ram asked.

"Betty's getting by conserving energy, I suppose. You're supposed to be tired though."

"Ram is going to jump into Master Roswaal's arms later tonight."

"…Betty can't understand your tasteless behavior, I suppose."

"Ram could say the same to you…no, to the both of you."

"Eh? Me too? Why?" Emilia spoke up at suddenly being involved in Ram and Beatrice's back and forth. However, the two of them didn't give a response.

And with that, the relaxed atmosphere that had formed between them disappeared the next moment—the moment the three of them, who had returned to the mansion, reached the door to Roswaal's room.

"…We managed to gather everyone extremely fast thanks to Clind, but we still have to hurry."

They had sent the letter to Roswaal via carrier bird and were preparing to return from Mirula when Clind appeared, which had surprised them, but they were more surprised by the teleportation afterward.

But thanks to that, they were able to return sooner. However, since they couldn't use the same method to travel to the country where Subaru was, they had to find another method.

That's why…

"…Roswaal, we're coming in." Calling out, Emilia grasped Beatrice's hand and entered the room with Ram following behind. Emilia's group was the last to arrive, with everyone else already gathered ahead of them.

There was Frederica, who had protected the mansion in their absence, and Clind, who was the main reason everyone could gather so quickly. Otto and Garfiel, who they had separated from at the Water Gate City Priestella, and who had managed to return to the mansion safely.

There was Anastasia and Julius, and Echidna, who had returned with them from the Pleiades Watchtower and promised to help them search for the missing Subaru and Rem.

And there was also Meili, with a crimson scorpion resting on her head, and Petra next to her, who was looking on with a serious look.

And at the back was Roswaal sitting proudly at an ebony desk.

"…Thank you for gathering, everyone." Feeling all eyes on her, Emilia felt her hand being tightly grasped by Beatrice's; she squeezed in return, and faced everyone directly.

She knew that everyone was of the same mind, so she urged her anxious heart to be good and not cause her to lie or overthink things.

“No matter what, we’ll find Subaru and Rem, who were flung away.”

…And so she called out to everyone, hoping to be reunited with her lost knight.

Stand By Me Pleiades II

1

“We’ll make our move from Kararagi. Lugunica and Vollachia have always kept an eye on each other, so it might be easier to find a way in from there.”

Anastasia’s proposal came as a pleasant surprise to Emilia.

Of course, it was completely understandable for Anastasia, Julius, and Echidna to worry about the missing Subaru and Rem. She knew that, but those three were from a different camp. They had originally headed for the Pleiades Watchtower for the same reason but from a different standpoint. Having safely returned, they had no obligation to go along with the search for the missing children.

“I agree with Anastasia. Considering the relationship with Vollachia, we have a better chance with Kararagi than with Lugunica. Moreover, it has the headquarters of the Hoshin Trading Company.”

“We can use our connections to the fullest. Those ain’t bad odds.”

“Anastasia, Julius…!” Emilia was rather moved by the two who planned to help with the search for the two they had lost, and her eyes involuntarily began to blur as she felt their enthusiasm—tears filling her amethyst eyes. “I’m so happy we became friends, Anastasia.”

“Well, friends might be takin’ things a bit too far,” Anastasia responded, dampening Emilia’s enthusiasm. “We’re still rivals, just as before, but…”

“But?”

“How about we become friends once both the Natsuki thing and the royal selection are done with? I don’t really have friends, either. Just like you, Emilia,” Anastasia replied to Emilia’s emotional words with a gentle smile.

That answer, too, brought a warm feeling to Emilia's chest.

"By the way, she's not saying it out of embarrassment—it's true. Ana doesn't have many friends."

"No need ta say somethin' so unnecessary." Anastasia silenced her fox partner—Echidna—with a pinch, who was currently draped around her neck in the form of a scarf.

Emilia giggled at the scene and rubbed her chest reassuringly. She was happy at the thought of becoming friends with Anastasia, but she was even more happy at having settled on a plan to find Subaru.

"But don't start jumpin' for joy just yet," Anastasia cautioned. "Goin' through Kararagi may give us a better shot, but it'll also take more time… And Natsuki ain't got much time, right?"

"Probably not," Emilia replied. "We need to meet with Beatrice as soon as possible."

"The contract as a spirit arts user, and the defectiveness of Subaru's gate…" Julius spoke, sharing his insight. As one who used spirits himself, he understood the predicament Subaru had been placed in. "If we can't compensate for both, it will be unfortunate for both Beatrice and Subaru."

If they were to remain separated for a long period of time, both Subaru and Beatrice's lives would be in danger. And although Emilia was happy that the two of them had become so close, having to be together to such an extent was a major drawback.

"If you come with us, the certainty may be higher, but it'll take time. So—"

"Yes. We'll use a different method than Anastasia's group… We'll do our best using the method that Otto thought up." Clenching her hand into a small fist, Emilia returned the gaze of Anastasia's pale blue-green eyes.

Anastasia's group would try entering Vollachia from Kararagi. And if possible, Emilia's group would aim to enter Vollachia using their own strategy.

Emilia raised her eyebrows as a serious look crossed her face. “We’ll do our best to sneak in!”

“…”

“…? What’s wrong?” Emilia asked, confused by their reaction. “You two… No, all three of you have a weird look on your face.” Having been so enthusiastic, Emilia tilted her head at their reactions. I thought they would for sure cheer for us.

Anastasia elegantly touched her cheek. “Talkin’ to you seems to soften both the good and the bad. It’s quite funny.”

“Really?” Emilia asked with uncertainty. “I don’t really understand what you mean, but that’s better than hardening it, right?”

“Maybe. What do you think, Julius?”

“M-Me…?” Julius asked hesitantly. “I think that it’s…a virtue of yours, Lady Emilia.”

“Umm, thanks.” Emilia thanked Julius earnestly for what sounded to her like praise, but Julius only grew flustered by her response, causing Anastasia to laugh mischievously. Emilia didn’t seem to notice, but there was most likely a deeper meaning to it.

“It’s fairly rare to get an opportunity to cheer on the act of smuggling,” Echidna continued, “but this seems like the right time. Both I and Ana will be looking forward to your efforts.”

“…Yep. Right,” Anastasia affirmed. “Although it seems a bit too serious a situation to look forward to. You’re aware of your position, right, Emilia?”

“…Yes. Because everyone keeps nagging me about it.” Accepting what Echidna said, Emilia nodded at Anastasia—who had a serious look in her eyes. Smuggling was, in short, sneaking into another country without permission. It’s illegal, right? That means we’d probably get a good scolding if we’re caught. But as a candidate in Lugunica’s royal selection, I—

"I might end up causing the empire and the kingdom's relationship to sour… My qualifications for the royal selection might be taken away too."

"You're going to do it despite that?" Anastasia asked. Her question carried both intensity and kindness. "Don't you have goals you want to achieve, Emilia?"

Indeed, my desire is to become the monarch. There are people I want to save, and dreams I've fostered since the royal selection began. By sneaking in, won't I risk chances at both?

"But those were all things that I wanted to do with Subaru. So I'll do my best."

"…Subaru is one lucky guy," Julius muttered, lowering his gaze as he heard what lay in Emilia's heart.

He sounds a little relieved. He must be worried about Subaru. They've both grown so close over the course of our journey, so the feeling is most likely genuine. However, Julius is a little wrong about one thing.

"Subaru isn't lucky—I'm the lucky one."

Subaru has always done his best to save me, several times over. So if something happened to him, saving him is my first priority.

Being able to think this way, Emilia was surely quite fortunate.

"Yes, yes. I understand what you're saying, Emilia. I'm quite full now," Anastasia said, clapping her hands together as if she had just finished a meal.

"Quite full…" Emilia just stared. I know she didn't eat anything while we were talking. Why would she say she's full?

Anyhow—

"Ana and the rest of us will aim to enter the country from the direction of Kararagi," Echidna informed. "From what Margrave Mathers said, it seems we can use that butler's power."

“Clind?” Emilia asked. “He’s a steward, not a butler. That’s what he told me.”

“Either way, we can shorten the time it’ll take to reach Kararagi’s border…” Julius said decisively. “Although I’m quite curious what kind of magic he has, personally.”

“Put that curiosity to the side for now,” Anastasia warned. To Julius, who loved magic, this was rather disappointing, but Emilia didn’t really know anything about Clind’s strange powers either. However, since he had never shown it to her before, she assumed that it was a power he couldn’t use without a special reason. It could well be a power that he couldn’t handle—just like Emilia.

Perhaps Clind is also scared of hurting people.

“Emilia,” Anastasia called out, drawing her attention away from her thoughts. “As you already know, we’ll do our absolute best to find Natsuki and Rem. So I’ll leave it to the rest of you to take the tower story to the capital.”

“…Yeah, that’s fine. If Anne—”

“—This is a sign of our trust.” She interrupted Emilia as she spoke, piercing her chest with a single word. Seeing the seriousness in Anastasia’s gaze, Emilia’s eyelashes and lips trembled.

The Divine Dragon, Volcanica, had been placed atop, but with the Sage, Shaula lost, and the sandstorm gone, the Pleiades Watchtower was now in a vulnerable state. Although the witchbeasts of the desert would obstruct their path, there were several methods to reach the tower. She had also heard rumors that other nefarious individuals as well as the Witch Cult might have set their sights on it, too.

“To prevent them, we’ll need the Kingdom’s assistance,” Julius suggested. “The purpose of our journey was to search for a means to rescue victims of the Witch Cult from the start. The library with the Books of the Dead might help…”

“If you read through them all, it might be possible…” Echidna added. “However, it won’t be easy.”

Indeed, the Pleiades Watchtower was full of possibilities. And whether those possibilities were good or bad depended solely on the individual wielding its power. In order to prevent a worst-case scenario from unfolding, it was necessary for the tower to be managed by the kingdom.

“Travelin’ across the Augria Sand Dunes, and securing the Pleiades Watchtower… You’re hoggin’ all sorts of glorious achievements, ain’tcha?” Anastasia said playfully, stirring the stiff atmosphere.

It was more of a prickly affirmation than discouragement—or rather, that’s how Emilia understood it. Determined not to rely too much on their kindness, she nodded her head sincerely. “Yes, leave it to me. I don’t ever want to do something that would disappoint my friends.”

2

“Betty thought for certain you’d have prepared a way to face the empire, in fact.”

Her words—which were as blunt as usual—resonated sharply with Roswaal.

She folded her short arms arrogantly as if to say she didn’t expect much. But, on the contrary, her obedience was clear from having entrusted him with such an urgent request. The style of her lettering also told of her dwindling expectation that he would resolve her anxiety and impatience.

“I’m sooorry. But there was no way I could have known about the situation with the empire. It seemed like something that could be settled within Lugunica.”

“That seems to be a rather shameful thing for the holder of the Book of Wisdom to say, I suppose. Betty wanted you to show her you were different from herself, whose book has been blank for four hundred years.”

“…”

"Wh-What's with that ominous face?"

Facing him across the desk, Beatrice spoke openly, which rather startled Roswaal. The wounds her blank Book of Wisdom had caused for four hundred years were deep and painful. They were wounds that anyone would fear, avoid, and pretend didn't exist.

And these were the wounds Beatrice was so casually speaking of now.

"…Subaru makes me jealous."

"Betty doesn't understand what you're saying! The one who is in trouble right now is Subaru, I suppose! Roswaal, hop over and see if you can't bring those two back."

"I'd let a flying dragon bite me on the butt, if that's all it tooook," Roswaal replied, laughing sarcastically at the unreasonable request. Still smiling, he called out to Beatrice. "We're working on it as fast as we can—even using Clind. I won't let you disappear, no matter what."

"…An unnecessary concern. The one you need is Subaru, and Betty has no problem with it, I suppose."

"What an extremely stubborn thing to say. Have you been spending too much time with Anastasia, I wooonder? Ah, speaking of which…" Stopping in the middle of his sentence, Roswaal closed one eye and directed the yellow one at Beatrice. "That artificial spirit that Anastasia has with her…"

"…It's just a name," she replied. There was no pause or hesitation in her reply. Gazing at one another, Roswaal and Beatrice's complex feelings swam in their eyes.

The artificial spirit Anastasia had with her was a fox in the form of a scarf, and she had named it Echidna. It was an existence that Roswaal found hard to ignore. And the same should go for Beatrice. So, considering her response, she must believe—

"Betty doesn't think she knows anything about it, I suppose, nor does she think she's pretending not to."

“Couldn’t that just be what she wants you to think?”

“After revealing it’s an artificial spirit? What reason would there be, I suppose?” Beatrice snapped, her gaze mingled with irritation.

Seeing this, Roswaal thought deeply about her answer. What reason would there be to lie about it? In fact, there could be a great number of reasons. But ultimately, those who lie do not need a reason to. Considering it from that perspective, Beatrice’s thoughts are far too kind and gentle. She has a naive honesty uncharacteristic of a spirit who’s been around for so long.

—That was enough.

“I understand. It’s a friend of yours that you’ve gone to great pains to make. Please don’t call me insensitiiiive.”

“Sh-She’s not a friend! Betty wishes you wouldn’t say weird things, I suppose!”

“Yes, yes. Come on, you also need to get ready. You wanted to leave as soon as possible, right?”

Being talked down to, Beatrice made an unamused face and pouted. “Hmph…” Perhaps because she couldn’t find the words to retaliate, her shoulders slumped. “Are you even ready yourself? Your preparations—”

“Frederica will have it ready for me. That’s what it means to be the head of the maaaaansion.”

“How irritating, in fact…!” As her face reddened, Beatrice stamped her feet, articulating her emotions through her departing steps as she left the office. Her stout-hearted back that desperately hid her anguish disappeared behind the closing door.

“…Are you finished?” asked a voice from Roswaal’s lap once Beatrice had left the room. Roswaal glanced down, his gaze clashing with a pair of light pink eyes right beneath him.

Feeling the weight and warmth of that gaze on his knees, Roswaal shrugged. “My feelings are quite complicaaated. If Subaru had returned, then Beatrice would probably have never come to see me alone. However, with Subaru absent, Beatrice is not at all like herself. That is the value of a contractual relationship with an ideal spirit.”

“It’s because you love Beatrice, Roswaal.”

“…Hmm.” Having had their exchange summarized openly, Roswaal’s lips curved. Watching him with a soft gaze, and lying down, using his lap as a pillow was Ram. She had been in this position the whole time he had been talking with Beatrice and had heard it all. Of course, she had a reason for being in this position, and it was a situation Beatrice knew of as well.

“It seems I’ve overdone myself,” Roswaal said. “Even without the situation with Subaru, it seems like it was the right choice to call me back with Clind.”

“The anxiety and stress had piled up,” Ram noted. “The difficulties in commanding Barusu and Emilia were as you’d expect… Ram would have relied on Otto, but she couldn’t.”

“He needed time to recuperate. It’s not his fault. Besides…”

“He proposed an alternate plan. So Ram’ll turn a blind eye to it.”

Roswaal chuckled at Ram’s unsympathetic attitude. It could be said that this was—in her own way—the greatest praise you could receive from her. It was proof of her recognition of Otto. Or perhaps Roswaal simply misunderstood. After all, he had failed to fully understand her in the past, when he thought he had her completely figured out.

“…”

Holding onto the silence, Roswaal placed a finger on Ram’s forehead where her horn had been and poured a delicately adjusted amount of mana in. It was a task he had entrusted to Emilia and Beatrice on the journey, but it proved difficult for Emilia, with her carefree nature, and Beatrice, whose reserves were unreliable. If Subaru had vanished, and Beatrice could no longer manifest, the situation would have been utterly hopeless.

“I’m glad you came back safe.”

“…Roswaal.”

“Ah.”

Roswaal was shocked at himself for letting the words slip out so casually. Then after the surprise, a strong feeling of self-hatred bubbled up inside him. Anger at letting his feelings show was natural, but what dominated Roswaal was the revulsion he felt towards his own shamelessness. What right do I have to spew out words of happiness at Ram’s safety?

And yet—

“…Yes. Like this, Ram has returned.”

Roswaal’s statement elicited a smile from her, one that tore at his chest. It showed her deep compassion. He could only imagine the swirl of grief in her heart at the loss of Subaru and Rem, and yet, he himself was the reason she was smiling like this.

“I’ve realized the reason I sent your younger sister Rem into the mansion,” Roswaal said, responding to the effects of her smile. He tried to confront the fact that he did not have the qualifications to face that smile.

I get the reason, now. The reason I allowed Rem into the mansion, despite Ram being enough. The reason I couldn’t figure out after Rem’s existence was wiped out due to the Authority of Gluttony. The reason I knew was there, considering I’m not the type of person who would ever do something without a cold, calculated reason. That reason was—

“…To be a replacement for Ram’s horn, right?” Ram answered for him.

“…”

“What a shame. Try again.”

Ram’s gaze conveyed an unspoken message: “If you want Ram to hate you, that is.” Roswaal’s breath hitched. What do I have to do to lose this girl’s affection, I wonder? He couldn’t bear the uncertainty, so Roswaal focused on his fingertip and continued to send the life-saving mana to the oni girl.

3

“Anne, I’ll leave Meili and the tower to you. I’ll do my best too!” Waving her hand energetically, Emilia and her companions were transported to their destination.

It was over in the blink of an eye, leaving those who actually experienced it in the same state. Of course, Annerose—who was observing from the sidelines—could only watch them disappear like a puff of smoke.

“That really is a straange power. Very handy, though,” a young girl said as she patted the ground with her shoe, swinging her three-strand braid from side to side. Until that very moment, a dragon carriage towed by two dragons had been present, but that had disappeared with the rest of them. It was understandable why the young girl thought it was such a strange power.

“At any rate, even I could never quite understand Clind.” As the head of the Miload family, it was none other than Clind who had taught Annerose to act in the superior way she did. The steward had maintained his firm posture and sharp intelligence for as long as Annerose could remember. But despite that—

“You should be careful of Clind,” Annerose warned. “He is talented, but he can also be dangerous.”

“I’ve been told that by both Petra and Fang’s older sister, but I still don’t understand whyy. Does it have something to do with him liiking little children?”

“Frankly speaking, yes.”

“Reeeally? That’s all? Doesn’t seem like something to be concerned about,” Meili replied quite calmly, waving a hand. Annerose widened her eyes at that reaction and carefully observed her once more. Meili, moving with an unsteady gait, appeared vulnerable despite being about two or three years older than her. She possessed an unusual combination of both adorable traits and a pessimistic demeanor, which gave off an air of danger.

If what she'd heard before was true, it was understandable.

"Umm, Meili was the child who burned down the old mansion… No, it wasn't just her, but her older sister as well… But she's not a bad kid! She has the power to tame witchbeasts, which put Subaru in danger… But she's not a bad kid!"

Although Emilia had tried her very best to defend her, she was a dangerous person without a shadow of a doubt. However, taking into account the fact she had been entrusted to Annerose, and that she had a job she had to accomplish in Emilia's stead…

"I will protect you," declared Annerose Miload with unfaltering confidence. However, to Annerose's powerful words, Meili turned around with a puzzled expression.

"…"

"Huh. Is my assurance not enough for you?" Annerose said, furrowing her brows at the wholly unexpected response.

"It's not thaat, it's not that it's not enough or anythiing. It's just that, you're younger than me, riiight? Unless you're like Beatrice."

"Beatrice… She's the spirit with Natsuki Subaru, isn't she?" Annerose asked. "No, I'm not like her—I'm a human who just turned ten the other day."

"See? Incidentally, I'm thirteen, so that would make me your older sister."

Meili's gaze fixated on something far away as she re-uttered the word "older sister." It was difficult to guess what was in her heart as she muttered it, but it would be unwise to make a judgment on dependability based on age alone. After all, Emilia isn't dependable at all despite being a half-elf of over one hundred years of age.

"In fact, Emily is quite unreliable without me. Don't you think so?"

"Um… I think mentioning Emilia is a little unfair," Meili mumbled, cheeks stiffening at having her weak spot exposed, much to Annerose's delight. Just as expected, Emilia acted as Annerose's strength even when she wasn't around. If they returned home safely, she'd have to devote herself to thanking her abundantly.

In any case—

"Uncle also entrusted you to me. Do you think that he would choose to do something that would cause even a little bit of concern?"

"…I don't know the margrave very well, but he is very persuasive," Meili said with consideration, placing a finger to her lips. As she did, the collar of her robe quivered, and a small shadow leaped onto her head from the inside of her hood.

It was a small scorpion with a red body that reflected the light. As the scorpion raised its stinger, it shifted its pincers on either arm in a display that appeared like a vow to protect Meili on its own.

"You seemed to have a good enough knight by your side," Annerose commented.

"Right? I'm not worried… So, we'll take good care of you for the time being, my lady."

"Call me Annerose. Ideally, Lady Annerose."

There were quite a number of people who looked down on Annerose because of her age, so she was fairly experienced in responding to it.

Now that I think about it, this is similar to when I first met Emilia. I saw her as nothing more than an elf with poor manners. I never imagined that she would become such an important person in my life.

"I'm looking forward to seeing if we develop a bond, too," Annerose mused, putting her hand over her mouth, faintly smiling.

"…I was told something similaar by Petra. Is this the way this mansion teaches persuaasion?" Meili asked suspiciously.

"…No, I think you've misunderstood. Correction."

"Aiiieee?!" Meili let out a high-pitched shriek as Clind appeared out of nowhere and touched her back. Her startled reaction caused the scorpion to fly from her head, which Clind nimbly caught before it hit the ground.

"Careful," he cautioned. "Rescue."

However, rather than being grateful for the rescue, the scorpion displayed anger at him for causing its fall in the first place.

"It has your finger—serves you right," Annerose retorted.

"What an inconsiderate comment," Clind replied. "However, I will gladly accept it. Delightful."

"I'd prefer it if you didn't treat the scorpion and my criticism as equal!"

Clind had returned as quickly as he'd left—in the blink of an eye. Fed up with the steward—from the finger of which the scorpion dangled—Annerose focused on Meili. Despite having previously insisted that Clind was nothing to be concerned about, the shock had left her wide-eyed, holding her head in her arms.

"As you can see, he has certain mannerisms," Annerose began. "That's why…"

"That's why…?!" Meili interrupted.

"That's why I thought we should become more acquainted," she continued, narrowing her eyes and relaxing her lips into a smile. Meili gulped, holding back her words. Though she might never get the chance to say them again, it was certainly the right decision to leave them unsaid at this moment—because accepting that the repugnant face belonged to a relative of Roswaal's was simply too humiliating.

“Actually I’m a wanted person in my hometown…” Otto confessed apologetically. “Well, it’s not entirely accurate to label me as ‘wanted’, but I can’t exactly walk around in public.”

Frederica couldn’t help feeling a sense of satisfaction, having suspected as much.

As the one in charge of domestic affairs within the Emilia Camp, Otto was considered indispensable by everyone in the mansion. That wisdom and drive were not something that could be replaced, and alongside Subaru and Petra, it could be said he was one of the big three within the camp.

It would be questionable to say I’m happy about that—I’m a little bothered by the fact those two have been placed on the same level as Petra. While Otto was certainly a valuable asset, Frederica was somewhat skeptical about where he’d refined his exceptional courage and acquired his merchant tales from. He was dependable, but being too dependable posed its own challenges. If he had a trustworthy lineage like Roswaal, a polished career like Emilia, or had been a shining gem like Petra, then it would be a different story. However, neither Otto nor Subaru fits those categories, leaving Frederica uncertain how to react to their amiable friendship.

However, for the time being, she could at least quell the doubts she had about Otto.

“I’m relieved,” Frederica replied. “Just as I thought, Mr. Otto. You truly possessed the ability to be a fugitive.”

“Just as you thought?!” Otto exclaimed. “And you’re relieved?! Why?!”

Frederica smoothed down her chest in relief, and Otto stared at her in wonder.

Dropping her long-harbored suspicions, Frederica had subconsciously let her real feelings show and placed her hand to her mouth. “Oops,” she said, covering her sharp fangs. “It’s nothing; don’t worry about it. It’s just my personal opinion.”

“If you say that, I’m definitely going to worry about it!” Otto cried out. “Miss Frederica, did you naturally come to the conclusion that I was a wanted man?!”

“I thought it must be something like that, otherwise… it wouldn’t have made sense,” Frederica said candidly, mouth still covered, averting her eyes.

Otto, on the other hand, appeared utterly flabbergasted, as if the world had just turned upside down. His eyes wandered to the others in the camp traveling with them, mouth opening and closing as he searched for the right words. “The rest of you aren’t going to say the same, are you?” he finally managed to utter.

“Don’t worry, Otto-bro,” Garfiel reassured. “My sis is just exaggeratin’.”

“I’m not sure whether or not Frederica is exaggerating,” Emilia said thoughtfully, “but I’ve heard this before, so I’m not surprised. Don’t worry, everyone in my hometown fears me, too.”

“I think Otto’s circumstances are a little different from yours, Lady Emilia,” Petra chimed in. “Please don’t make that face. Otto just had to go and say something so unnecessary…”

“Now it’s my fault?!” Otto exclaimed.

One by one, Garfiel, Emilia, and Petra replied to Otto. However, after his outburst, he recalled that this conversation had begun with talk of his reputation in his hometown. Immediately covering his face with his palm, he sighed dishearteDly. “This time was a rare example where I truly messed up…”

“Good to see you’ve accepted it yourself,” came another voice. “But what now? It must be difficult to return to your hometown, but how long do you intend to hide from the public?”

Otto stared at the sky. The one who had hit him with such sharp words was Ram, who stood there with her arms crossed. But despite the lack of kindness behind her words, she had a point. Using Clind's power, they had jumped from Roswaal Manor to their destination—the commercial city of Picoutatte. To avoid drawing too much attention by appearing downtown, they instead planned to jump to a forest just outside of town and merge with the traffic of people on the road. However, it was there that Otto made his confession: the reason he was reluctant to return to his hometown was that he was a wanted person.

"But in Picoutatte, we might find a way to enter the Empire," Ram continued. "The one who proposed that was none other than you, Otto. It'd be ridiculous not to include you in it."

"Of course it would…" Otto acknowledged. "But it might cause problems for all of you, and I'm more or less just a normal human, so it would take a lot of courage for me to set foot in a place that has it out for me."

"Just a normal human…"

Leaning against a tree, Otto found his words unexpectedly echoed—proof that everyone, including Frederica, shared the same doubts. Otto wasn't a demi-human, nor were they doubting his belonging to the human race, but—

"To call yourself a normal human is complete hogwash, in fact," Beatrice retorted in exasperation.

"It's not!" Otto shouted, expressing his dismay at the disparity between his own self-assessment and the one people around him gave.

Unfortunately, Frederica—and everyone else in the party—didn't find it appropriate to regard Otto as a normal human.

In any case—

"Otto, if you really don't think you can do it, then please say so, okay?" Emilia reassured him. "It's only natural to want to get Subaru and Rem back, but if it's going to cause you pain, then I'm sure Subaru will end up sobbing as if it's his own tragedy."

“I would like to see Mr. Natsuki sobbing…” Otto retorted.

“Otto, be serious,” Petra said, her adorable eyes growing serious at his complaints.

No one in the Emilia Camp could match her when it came to her commanding presence. The only ones who could resist it were the dauntless Ram and the easygoing Emilia. Everyone else would be crushed by it, even Frederica.

“It’s not because I’m succumbing to pressure,” Otto said, regaining his composure. “But it’s okay, Lady Emilia. In order to move the conversation forward smoothly, I think I should be there. Besides…”

“Besides?” Emilia tilted her head.

“…I think the time has come for me to face my past and my hometown,” Otto said with determination, eyes focused on something distant. In the direction of his sight lay the commercial city, Picoutatte. Otto’s situation might never be called peaceful, but…

“Luckily,” Otto continued, clenching his fists, “I’m accompanied by our entire military force, with the weakest link absent. There won’t be a better opportunity to visit my hometown than this!”

“Otto, be serious,” Petra scolded him sharply.

“Huh?!” Otto reacted.

As a wanted man in his hometown, he regarded their military force as a form of security upon his return. It was exactly this attitude that earned him the title: Militant Internal Affairs Officer.

“For someone so smart, it’s always baffled me how Otto can never see himself properly…” Frederica thought aloud, voicing what appeared to be the honest opinion shared between her and the others.

Passing through the necessary inspection for entering and leaving the city, Garfiel clicked his fangs as he felt the change in atmosphere wash over him. “The atmosphere of such a big city sure is different,” he thought aloud.

Plonking himself down on the roof of the dragon carriage, Garfiel tilted his head as he checked out his surroundings. Having lived in the Sanctuary’s village deep in the forest, the world was everything he had seen in the short year since he set foot outside of it. The population and size of the city of Costuul, which sat near the mansion, had amazed him, but the more recent shock was Priestella—the watergate city.

Despite it also being counted among the Five Great Cities of Lugunica, each had its own distinct features and were completely different from each other. In that regard, Picoutatte was full of new and exciting things.

“Everywhere in the city has a different smell,” Garfiel mumbled to himself. “Normally, cities have just one smell ‘bout ‘em…”

“Ah, I know why!” Emilia responded to his mumbles, looking around restlessly from the inside of the car. “Picoutatte is separated into five different parts—East, West, South, North, and Central. And each part sells completely different things.”

“Really? Ya sure know a lot, Lady Emilia!”

“He-He, right?” Emilia’s studies on the political situation, the state of the kingdom, the organization, and various other things seemed to be going rather well. The knowledge she’d shown in Priestella, she was also demonstrating here in Picoutatte.

Understanding Emilia’s explanation, Garfiel sniffed. “Gotcha.”

Just as she had said, the difference in smells wafting from each part of the city resulted from the variety of goods handled in each district. Countless shops lined the city streets, which exuded all the energy of a bustling market. It was a large, tumultuous city that lived up to its name as a commercial city.

“Now that’s a food I ain’t ever smelled before,” Garfiel continued his mumblings. “Ain’t never seen that fabric before, either. Hey! That knife looks perfect for munchin’! Stop the carriage a sec…”

“Garf,” scolded Ram from inside the carriage, as Garfiel’s eyes sparkled, gaze fixed on one particular stall. “Don’t forget, we have a goal here.”

“Gah…” At Ram’s scathing words, Garfiel felt a deep sense of disappointment, having no choice but to watch as they moved further from the shop.

Garfiel’s fangs never stopped growing as a half-human, half-beast, so he needed to regularly crunch on hard things to shave them down. That knife woulda been perfect for filin’.

“The handle was so cool,” Garfiel said, still fixated on the knife. “Bet you woulda liked it, too.”

“Garf, we’re working right now,” Frederica reprimanded. “Get ahold of yourself,” she added, her hands on the reins as the driver, putting an end to his lingering attachment to the knife.

“Tch. Ya don’t need to tell me,” he scoffed. “I’m doin’ it.” Being somewhat aware of the fact he was supposed to be at work, he stuck out his tongue and withdrew. Then, placing a hand on his crossed legs and narrowing his green eyes, he said, “Otto-bro, people really do seem to have it out for ya.”

Sporadically, he took sniffs of the people gazing at their carriage and scratched his neck. Although Otto couldn’t really be seen from outside the carriage, the city guards had seen his face when they inspected the carriage as they entered the city. They must’ve been the ones who ratted him out. They’ll resort to anything to get what they want, huh.

“Ya must’ve done something really horrible to make ‘em go to such lengths, huh, Otto-bro? To sell ya out the second ya return… What the hell didja do?”

They’d not heard the particulars of the story, but just from the speed of their movements, it seemed clear he'd made an enemy of a very powerful person—to such an extent that they had not let their guard down even after several years. It musta been something huge to make someone so powerful hate him. What he do, disclose some big crime, or unearth some cover-up scandal or somethin'?

"If so, then we're bound ta have nothin' but enemies here," Garfiel speculated, subconsciously opening and closing his fist, and licking his lips. Quite some time had passed since the decision of the watergate city, and it seemed appropriate that his body had begun to ache. Considering Subaru's situation, this wasn't the time for pulling unnecessary weeds. However, if they proved to be an obstacle, harvesting them mercilessly was Garfiel's role. However, Garfiel felt somewhat resentful.

"If I ain't allowed ta punch 'em, I got no choice but to rely on that bastard Roswaal…" It had been decided outside the forest that it would become complicated if they were any person of social standing. In a world where such rules existed, Roswaal would be the strong presence that dealt with them, and that made Garfiel angry. He had been unhappy about Roswaal accompanying them on this journey from the start.

"I mean, yeah, the bastard's status could be handy," Garfiel admitted, "but whether he's actually dangerous is as factual as the existence of the Shy Man Allegro."

The safety of Subaru and Rem, who had been flung to the Sacred Vollachian Empire, remained uncertain, so the camp had to unite as a group in order to save them both. Given the circumstances, they didn't want to embark on a journey with anyone feeling uneasy. Even Garfiel felt sorry that he had not accompanied Emilia, Subaru, and the others when they had headed to the Pleiades Watchtower. Of course, he couldn't deny the fact that he had gained a lot of insights by remaining in the watergate city.

"…It's pretty tough havin' ta go step-by-step, Cap'n."

If Subaru could see Garfiel right now, perhaps he'd tell him not to panic. However, Subaru's reassuring words would be ineffective without his actual presence. Even Garfiel knew that only through persistent effort could he break through this wall of anxiety.

“Garf,” Frederica called out from the driver’s seat. Hearing the severity of her voice, Garfiel immediately followed her line of sight. He focused his attention along the road of the carriage, in the direction of the blue and black heads of the earth dragons. At that moment, he immediately understood Frederica’s reaction.

“What the hell?” Garfiel’s eyebrows furrowed, unsure of whether he should be on guard or not. In the direction of their gaze, the attention of the two half-beast siblings was captivated by a sturdy man, waving his arms in the middle of the road. The man was clearly determined to attract their attention and stop the carriage from moving forward.

The man flashed a charming smile at the perplexed siblings and said, “Don’t worry! Come to the Suwen Trading Company! Friends of my son!”

And with that, Otto was so taken aback by the unexpected greeting from inside the carriage that he bumped his head.

6

“Welcome,” greeted the well-built man, Mazeran, openly welcoming his guests. “You’ve come a long way. I’m Mazeran Suwen, head of the Suwen Trading Company.”

Observing his charming smile, Ram narrowed her light pink eyes and commented, “The apple certainly doesn’t fall so far from the tree.”

“You definitely didn’t mean that in a good way, did you?” Otto noted wryly at Ram’s pithy remark.

To which she only sniffed, “Hah.”

With a few well-chosen words, Ram could have easily crushed Otto’s spirit, but she was too merciful to cruelly torment a child in front of his own father. Even more so since it hadn’t only been his father, but his mother, too.

“Besides, Otto always comes home so abruptly,” remarked Framir Suwen, Otto’s mother. “It’s always been a constant worry for me, having a child who, once they make up their mind, becomes oblivious to everything else around them.”

Emilia, Frederica, and Petra enthusiastically engaged in conversation about Otto as they gathered around the elegant woman.

“Ah, but that might not have changed even now,” commented Emilia. “Otto is always causing a stir by doing crazy things with Subaru.”

“I’ll refrain from being too honest about Otto,” Frederica said flatly.

“My answer is the same as Sister Frederica’s,” Petra chimed in.

“…”

“What’s yer deal, Ram?” Garfiel asked. “Ya’ve been glarin’ daggers at Otto-bro’s folks for a while.”

“Nothing,” Ram said dismissively. “It just seems as though Otto takes after his parents. Ram was just erasing the impression she had that he was found abandoned under a bridge.”

“Is it really necessary to harbor such suspicions?!” Otto protested. “Even though I’m the middle child of three brothers?!”

“Just keeping it in mind,” Ram replied without elaboration.

“What for?!” Whether because he disliked Ram’s answer or was just excited by being home after so long, Otto was two or three times louder than usual.

Amongst the group’s lively chatter, Roswaal raised his hand. “Can I speak?” he asked, and turned his attention to Mazeran, who had been calmly observing the group he had invited into his house. “It appears you came out to greet us before our carriage had even passed by your hooouse. But as your wife said, Otto has returned home quite unexpectedly, without sending any letters.”

Roswaal cut straight to the heart of the suspicions that both Ram and Garfiel had been holding. Just as Roswaal pointed out, Mazeran had stopped their carriage before they could even inform him of their business with the Suwen Trading Company, or Otto's home. In other words, Mazeran somehow knew of his son's return, and of their intentions. Due to Clind's assistance in getting them there, there shouldn't have been any period of time for him to find out.

"Is that what you're asking?" Mazeran asked, snapping his finger at Roswaal's question. "I see. I'm sorry for surprising you. It's so completely common in this city that I didn't think to bring it up."

"Common…?"

"Yes," Mazeran affirmed with a nod. "This is a commercial city—a place where every single thing is considered tradable. That's not limited to cargo or labor; it includes information as well."

"…I see. So that's how it wooorks," Roswaal said, drawing in his chin in satisfaction with the response.

Seeing this, Ram's realization came a little late, and her gaze shifted outside—toward the path their carriage had traversed, and where the city inspection had taken place. It was clear that the inspector had examined not only the cargo but the people, as well. If that information had leaked, Mazeran could have easily caught wind of it.

However—

"Is it not a trust problem that the soldiers at the city's gates are so loose-liiiipped?"

"To consider them loose-lipped would be absurd," Mazeran stated in their defense. "They only tell the facts to the people who should be told. There is a certain trust in that. You could call it a contract."

His statement intertwined the words 'business opportunity' and 'opportunity to win' as if they meant the same thing. In Picoutatte, greedy merchants were cut-throat and prevalent, so sustaining a business for generations demanded favorable results. To meet those demands, Mazeran had chosen to do what he must.

Receiving information of his son's return so promptly indicated that he had been informed through the gate inspection. However, the possibility of Otto riding in the Mathers family carriage couldn't have been anticipated without first knowing where and what he was doing in the first place. In other words, every aspect of this encounter was the result of prior coordination and meticulous preparations.

"Ram is even more convinced that these are the parents of this child," Ram remarked.

"…It will improve our chances, I suppose," Beatrice whispered in response to Ram's mutterings. She sat by herself on the sofa, choosing to spend her time in a state of energy conservation until her reunion with Subaru. She had decided this was the best way to deal with the exhaustion of being unable to draw mana from anywhere else.

Regardless, it was painfully obvious to Ram—who also had someone she wanted to reunite with—that Beatrice's mutterings came from her feelings of impatience.

"Just as Beatrice said, their keen attention to our movements is a bit disconcerting," Ram pointed out. "However, it has raised our hopes for the sake of our goal."

"Goal…" Mazeran gently caressed the mustache under his nose, contemplating Ram's determination.

Ram nodded, sensing the great influence he's had on his son from his gentle tone of voice and soft expressions, and urged: "Otto, please speak."

"Right now?!" Otto responded, surprised at the sudden encouragement to speak. As Ram pressed him on, he continued reluctantly. "Okay, I guess… Father, I have something to discuss. I'm sure you understand that things are tense right now, but it's about the Vollachia Empire."

“Oh, Vollachia?” Mazeran asked, raising his eyebrows. Everything about the gesture seemed exaggerated, as though it were a technique to manipulate the thoughts of the one speaking. However, perhaps this was reading too much into things, considering that he was talking to his own son.

“Sooner or later, we have to enter the Empire,” Otto confided. “All of us, if possible. However, we can’t cross the border using legitimate methods. So…”

“You want a way to cross it illegally. And for that reason, you’re asking for my help?” Mazeran summarized.

“Yes, uh, exactly.” Taking off his hat, Otto disclosed their situation to his father with an honest face. “A way and information—that’s what we need.”

Understanding their goal from his explanation, Mazeran narrowed his eyes in thought. Then as he opened his mouth to speak—

“In other words, you need the help of the Suwen Trading Company, yes? If that’s the case, then it’s not something to discuss, Otto.”

“Mother…”

Before Mazeran could reply, Framir had breached the subject.

The woman who had been speaking with Emilia and the others seemed to also have been listening in on her husband and son’s conversation. Smiling kindly at Otto, he turned to her as she spoke. “I’m certain I taught you how to speak properly, didn’t I?” she said. “The situation remains the same, whether you’re dealing with family or not. Do you remember that, too?”

“Uh… Yes, I remember,” Otto affirmed.

“Good. Then, if it’s not a discussion…” Maintaining a composed posture, Framir kept smiling as she extended her hand to Otto.

Bewilderment swept over Emilia and Frederica. Even Garfiel watched the scene unfold with a look of confusion on his face. The other half—Roswaal, Ram, and Petra—all sensed something was amiss, and Otto’s face seemed to convey a particular realization.

Affirming their suspicions, he heaved a big sigh. “I didn’t come here to discuss, but to negotiate… Let’s talk. A fruitful negotiation between the head of our group—Emilia—and the Suwen Trading Company.” Otto made a show of holding his hat to his chest, to which the married couple burst into smiles.

“Good.”

“That’s my boy.”

The strangeness of this family exchange was beyond description. However, despite Ram’s impression of it, Emilia made a different observation regarding the scene she’d just witnessed. “Otto, you truly are the spitting image of your mother and father,” she said warmly, in response to the wholesome interaction.

Ram simply let out a sigh.

Stand By Me Pleiades III

1

A secret business negotiation was under way at the Suwen Company in the commercial city of Picoutatte. The focus of the negotiation revolved around gaining entry into the Vollachia Empire, which had sealed its borders and prohibited crossings between the two countries. The topic was how to sneak themselves in.S

Needless to say, smuggling was illegal. Getting caught would have severe consequences, especially in a country known for its harsh policies. Accomplices to this crime would also face severe repercussions, should they be caught. To complicate matters further, one of the individuals involved in this risky endeavor was none other than the Kingdom of Lugunica's esteemed Head Court Magician and Margrave of the Western Domain, Roswaal L. Mathers.

The other key player was Emilia, who stood as one of the candidates for the throne in the royal selection, the process by which the next monarch would be determined. While news of Roswaal's attempt to cross the border would indeed cause ripples throughout both the Kingdom and the Empire, the impact of Emilia's presence would be far more dire.

"Had it only been limited to the Master, the consequences would be limited to him getting beheaded. But if word gets out about Sister Emilia, it could spark a full-blown war with the Empire…" Although her words hinted at her bias, Petra understood the graveness of the possible future.

In her earlier life as a simple village girl, Petra's world had been small and limited. But it was Subaru who opened her eyes to her narrow-mindedness. Thanks to him, she had come to know the vastness of the world and the warmth of love. However, setting aside her own personal revelations for the moment, the current issue lies in the stark contrast between the perspectives of Petra the ordinary village girl, and her responsibilities as an attendant to royal selection candidate Emilia.

Petra Leyte was always busy, constantly on the move. Ever since departing Earlham Village, she had become a diligent and responsible person, immersing herself in her daily lessons and tasks. Her duties as a maid, her education as a servant in Margrave Mathers's mansion, her own personal physical and mental training. The list of responsibilities seemed endless, and she hardly had enough fingers to count them.

As she hurried through her hectic days, Petra couldn't help but notice the growing tension between the Kingdom and the Empire. Both countries had engaged in multiple conflicts over trivial matters, exacerbating the already strained relations.

But regardless of the size or significance of these conflicts, they were nonetheless clashes between countries. They held no comparison to the harmless scuffles her childhood friends Lucas and Mild had. These conflicts resulted in countless lives being affected and suffering great harm. According to history, Petra had learned that even the most minor of issues could escalate into something far more destructive. And if a mere spark could ignite a full-blown war, then Emilia's involvement was akin to tossing a drunken Otto into a warehouse full of fire magic stones.

"I need to be careful not to drag down Sister Emilia," Petra murmured, sitting atop her luggage and gathering her resolve.

"Petra, can I have a moment?"

Just then, she sprang up with an "Eek!" upon the sound of a sudden voice. However, it wasn't only the abruptness of the voice that startled her, but also because the individual in question was none other than the person she had just imagined tossing drunkenly into a warehouse full of fire magic stones.

There stood Otto Suwen, raising a brow before her as she turned around to face him. He chuckled at Petra's reaction. "Oh, did I startle you? That was an adorable yelp."

"No, no, I'm fine," reassured Petra. "It's just that I was imagining you in a warehouse full of fire magic stones a moment ago."

"You put me in a warehouse full of fire magic stones?!"

"Oh, just ignore that. No big deal."

"It is a big deal for the me inside your head," Otto lamented, to which Petra lightly waved her hand, dispelling her imagined version of him. He dissipated into a haze, revealing the real Otto, looking on with a tinge of sorrow. "But that is exactly what makes you seem like Frederica's number one apprentice," he continued.

This was perhaps the highest form of praise Petra could get. Frederica was Petra's role model, and her goal in life was to catch up to her. The reason Petra pursued her studies so diligently was undoubtedly to become more worthy of Subaru, the person she loved. However, it was equally important for her not to burden Emilia, whom she served faithfully. She had also vowed to herself to never bring shame upon Frederica, her mentor. For this reason, it delighted her to be told she resembled her.

"However, I'd prefer if you saved your flattery for more significant moments," Petra remarked. "Don't go doing so too casually."

"To be honest," Otto began, "it was not intended as flattery. You are an amazing individual with so much ambition. I think there are many people who could learn from your example."

"Is that so? I thought you were the kind of person who found more satisfaction in rewards positioned as hard-earned achievements." Wouldn't people rather be praised for accomplishing something difficult than for something easy? There'd be a greater sense of accomplishment, not to mention praise from other people.

"Hmm, I suppose there is a degree of truth in that." Otto placed his hand on his chin and nodded in agreement. "Oh, whoops. Our appointment is drawing near. Preparations appear to be going… smoothly, it seems?"

Directing his gaze at Petra, Otto spoke with composure, recalling his original objective. Petra extended her arms and twirled gracefully as she stood, revealing a striking transformation in terms of her attire. Her usual maid's uniform had given way to a captivating ensemble suitable for travel.

She wore an outer layer with ample sleeves and a knee-length skirt, accompanied by trousers underneath for enhanced mobility. Her outfit exuded elegance and practicality for their journey, hinting at Petra's careful contemplation for the role she was expected to play.

"I don't want to draw attention and cause trouble for Sister Emilia… Anyway, what do you think?" Petra asked.

"Yes, it is quite nice," Otto replied. "I have grown used to seeing you in your maid uniform, so the change is rather refreshing."

"Mmm, that's not exactly what I meant," Petra clarified. "I was asking if it looks cute or not."

"Ah, I see. Sorry," Otto apologized. "It is cute. It suits you well."

"I know, right?" Petra said, a satisfied smile playing on her lips having received her desired response. While a maiden would never wish to attract negative attention, neither would she desire fading into the background. This is the result of my pursuit of perfect balance. So wouldn't it be nice to receive genuine praise? I sure wish I could show Subaru… I'd love to hear his opinion.

"Do not worry," Otto said reassuringly. "You will surely be able to see him soon."

Petra fell silent. Otto tilted his head quizzically, sensing her change in attitude. "Huh? Something wrong?" he inquired. His reaction was vexing, seeming oblivious to the strangeness of his words, as if he had an uncanny ability to read her mind.

"You always seem to hit the nail on the head when it comes to things like this," she mumbled.

"Wait," Otto started, "am I being scolded, by any chance?"

"I'm complimenting you, albeit unwillingly."

“I do not feel any satisfaction, despite it being a complement…” Otto whined, his expression tinged with bitterness as he scratched his head. Petra couldn’t help but feel a hint of contentment at his reaction.

“So,” she continued, casting her gaze toward the entrance hall of the manor, “our guide is arriving soon, right?”

The reason Otto had come was to inform Petra of the eagerly anticipated arrival of a certain individual. He closed one of his eyes and nodded in response. “Yes. Thanks to the help of the Regundra family, we’ve acquired the person who will help us sneak into the Empire. Are you adequately prepared for what lies ahead, my lady? I mean, not only in terms of appearance, but on an emotional level, too?” His words carried a teasing edge, as if gauging the extent of Petra’s dedication to her role.

2

“If we be makin’ our way ‘cross the border, I reckon I’ll hafta dig us through the earth beneath,” declared the man who had been designated as their guide.

His face was obscured deeply by his hood. He was short in stature, with visible dirt stains clinging to his hooded robe. Although his face remained hidden, Petra speculated that he might be around the same age as her father.

Few words were exchanged, yet he carried the air of a man of experience. His demeanor was dignified, despite having been summoned by the esteemed Regundra family, who were some of the most prominent merchants in the bustling city of Picoutatte.

“The least I can do is be keepin’ me humility,” he said, “but I ain’t gonna let fear get the best o’ me, ye know? Folks wit’ jobs like ours be outta business if we ain’t taken seriously, miss.”

“Uh…” Petra started.

“Me apologies,” he said. “That be mighty impolite of me, peerin’ into yer faces despite not showin’ ye me own mug…hehehe.”

Petra felt called out, as if she had been caught staring rudely at him. She quickly averted her gaze. At that moment, Garfiel took a decisive step forward, putting himself between Petra and the guide.

Shielding her behind him, he fixed a stern glare at the guide, whose face remained hidden. “I’m sayin’ this for yer own good,” Garfiel threatened. “Quit intimidatin’ our lady. Yer treadin’ dangerous ground if ya don’t.”

“Dangerous ground?” the man inquired. “An’ I reckon yer gonna be the one causin’ a stir wit’ me?”

“Nah, not my amazin’ self. Those guys,” Garfiel stated firmly, arms crossed as he gestured with his chin. The guide looked around, his gaze settling on the two figures Garfiel had pointed out: Frederica and Ram. Similar to Petra, they weren’t donning their maid uniforms, but were clad in practical travel attire. They narrowed their almond-shaped eyes. Despite their dashing looks, an aura of intimidation surrounded them.

Meeting the guide’s eyes, they smiled. Ram spoke up first. “Ram understands that those in your line of work cannot afford to be underestimated. However…”

“We would like to assure you that we are not quite as delicate as we may appear,” Frederica added.

The man conceded. “Me bad. Seems the odds ain’t swingin’ in me favor.”

Yielding under their gaze, he retreated further into the depths of his hood, acknowledging defeat. Petra’s heart swelled with pride at the reliability of her elder sister figures. The surprise she had experienced only a moment ago had faded into the background. She tapped Garfiel’s back, who had stepped in to shield her, and offered her gratitude. “Thank you, Garf.”

“Ha, don’t sweat it,” he replied. “Protectin’ this camp’s my amazin’ self’s job while the cap’n is away. Jus’ quit scamperin’ off so much.”

“Jeez, I didn’t scamper off. Quit treating me like a child,” Petra pouted. Garfiel laughed, revealing his sharp fangs. Regardless, their intention wasn't to make the guide feel bad.

"Ummm," Petra began, "I apologize for staring at you before, Mr. Guide. You are…"

"The name be Musica," the guide interjected.

"Musica, you're going to take us there, right? To the Empire?"

At Petra's query, the guide, Musica, paused briefly before responding with a profound nod. Witnessing that response, Petra felt a quiet surge of hope well up in her chest. Finally, we found the key to our journey to the Empire. To where Subaru is…

A smuggler's intermediary was a perilous occupation. It required significant effort simply to establish contact with such an individual. They had leaned on the Suwen family–Otto's family–ultimately securing an introduction in the form of a business engagement. Yet it was this person with the "contacts" who posed a challenge.

"Miss Diadora, thank you for the referral," Petra said gratefully.

"No need to thank me," the woman responded, turning her back to Petra. "After all, this arrangement serves my interests as well."

This woman, with her opulently coiled hair, was Diadora Regundra, the daughter of the esteemed Regundra family, prominent merchants within the city of Picoutatte. It was she who had forged the link between Petra and Musica. It was also she who had been responsible for hindering Otto's ability to return home, and the mastermind behind Otto's status as a wanted man.

The feud between Otto and Diadora, in which both parties held some fault, found resolution through Otto's apology and his acknowledgment of his own recklessness as that which bore the greater fault. Although certainly, Diadora's hiring of assassins to target Otto could be deemed somewhat excessive.

"If my impulsive actions driven by desperation and my lack of consideration for my surroundings are deemed enough to warrant my life, I cannot argue against it,” Otto confessed. His words were an introspective reflection on his past behavior, thus bringing their conflict to an end.

It had been none other than Petra who proposed that Otto apologize after hearing Diadora’s side of the story. However, she was genuinely taken back by the sincerity of his heartfelt apology not limited to only words. “I must say, Otto is quite odd…” she thought aloud.

Diadora’s attention, however, was elsewhere. “In any case…” she started, hurrying toward Musica. Towering above the comparatively shorter man, the tall, slender Diadora inquired, “Did you come here on your own? Is the chief not joining you?”

“Father ain’t feelin’ too well,” Musica responded. “Gonna take some time to recuperate. I reckon he’s gonna retire. So, bit by bit, I’ll be takin’ over.”

“I see… I wish him a swift recovery. However, work is a separate matter. These individuals are important guests, not only of myself, but of the entire Regundra family. It is critical that they encounter no inconveniences,” Diadora instructed.

“Aye, well aware o’ that,” Musica acknowledged, bowing reverently. His face—or rather, his voice—showed no signs of displeasure at Diadora’s authoritative tone.

Judging by the flow of the conversation, it was evident that this business was overseen by his father, and that Musica would be inheriting his role. A generational business centered around smuggling people was a world entirely foreign to Petra’s previous imaginings.

“Lady Petra,” Diadora spoke. For a brief moment, Petra found herself taken aback by the formality of the address. However, she concealed her anxiety, responding with a gentle smile to Diadora, who had turned to face her. It’s the role that I am expected to play and the script that I must follow…

Ram and Frederica, donning their travel attire, waited alongside

Garfiel and Otto in quiet anticipation for a response from the girl who had been called “Lady” Petra. That’s when another voice spoke up.

“Don’t be so tense, Lady Petra. Relaaaax.” It was Roswaal.

“Yes, that’s right,” Emilia chimed in. “You can count on us for sure!”

Petra felt her face tensing up as the two addressed her, yet she managed to maintain her composure. I have to keep it together. I’m a daughter of nobility in a rather complex situation.

“Thank you,” Petra finally replied, remembering her role as the respectable master of Roswaal and Emilia. “I’m putting my trust in you… Dudley, Emily,” she added, calling the two by their chosen aliases.

3

The primary objective behind their illicit entry into the Vollachia Empire revolved around safeguarding Emilia’s true identity, while also ensuring that Roswaal’s true identity remained concealed. Given the delicate nature of the relationship between the Kingdom and the Empire, the mere revelation of their identities could result in war, as they had previously been made aware. Therefore, it was imperative to maintain utmost secrecy regarding their identities during the illegal border crossing.

To achieve this, they had devised a carefully-orchestrated setup. Petra assumed the role of a noblewoman with complicated circumstances, while the individuals accompanying her took on the roles of her guards and attendants.

“This might sound somewhat insensitive, but it feels reaaally exciting,” Emilia remarked. Going by the alias of Emily, Emilia was to act as Petra’s guard, dressed in her usual cognitive disruption robe. Between Frederica and the other maids, and Garfiel and Otto, assuming the roles of military and civil officers, respectively, there wasn’t anything conspicuously out of place. However, Emilia’s presence felt quite out of place.

Emilia had been rather inept at lying and hiding things to begin with. Being so good natured, straightforward, and honest to her core, she was susceptible to stomach aches whenever she resorted to lying. Of course, her motivation was genuine, however that motivation often backfired, leading those around her to scrutinize her words and actions. On the other hand, in contrast to her heaping mass of insecurities—

“Lady Petra, pray, may I inquire if you find yourself parched?” Roswaal queried. “If there be aught that requires attending, do not hesitate to commaaand me.”

“Your face is annoying me, sir,” Petra groaned.

“Oh, I implore you to desist,” Roswaal responded unperturbed. “Engaging in such formal colloquial discourse with individuals of lower standing is rather inappropriate. Maintaining your customary air of arrogance would scaaaarcely be remiss.”

“Your face is so annoying… Get out of my sight,” Petra insisted, pursing her lips. She spoke in a manner of which she was well aware lacked any semblance of charm, directed at the individual who was earnestly attending to her in the dragon carriage.

Unperturbed by her harsh attitude, Roswaal joyfully backed away, giving her space. His nonchalant demeanor irked her even more. He was visibly enjoying their predicament much as Emilia was. Perhaps, even more.

Assuming the alias of Dudley and acting as Petra’s butler, Roswaal’s attire differed from his eccentric norm. Rather, it was fancy yet practical travel attire befitting of the long journey ahead, tastefully accented rather than excessively expressive so as to not to overshadow his mistress.

His long hair was tied back, and his natural face was unadorned by makeup. This butler character hardly bore any resemblance to Roswaal L. Mathers at all, more so to those who knew him well.

“It really bothers me how effective that makeup is…” Petra remarked to herself.

In the sense of how substantially his impression had changed, the impact of his usual eccentric attire and makeup was clear. He didn't require any form of cognitive disruption like Emilia did, as his usual whimsicalness was more than effective. Petra felt bitter, but refrained from commenting, as she knew full well that this transformation also played a role in rescuing Subaru.

"I know how ya feel, Petra," Garfiel sympathized. "Like they say, 'Appas from Kue look sweet but are sour.'"

Petra smiled wryly at Garfiel, who understood her emotions. He was similar to Petra in that neither of them had a good opinion of Roswaal. In essence, they were part of the "Let's Keep a Harsh Eye on Roswaal" alliance. Otto was another member, along with one more.

"Beatrice…" Petra whispered. The young girl on her lap offered no response to her voice. Beatrice, in a state of energy conservation, slept on her lap as a pillow. She gently stroked the cheek of the young girl's white, doll-like, slumbering visage. It may have appeared quite disrespectful of Beatrice to be in such a position in the presence of an outsider, considering Petra's role as a noblewoman. However, this was not an issue, thanks to the script Petra and Beatrice adhered to. They had explained to Musica that they were sisters. Notably, Petra played the role of the elder sister, while Beatrice assumed that of the younger one.

"She got all angry, saying 'Betty is far older, in fact.'" Petra smiled as she remembered Beatrice's red-faced complaint. It was certainly something Beatrice would say, however, as Petra was taller, the situation couldn't be helped. A year had already passed since she had met Beatrice, and Petra had transformed from a girl to a lady in that span. She was different from the spirit Beatrice, whose adorable appearance remained unchanging.

"The gap between us is going to only get wider while you sleep like that," Petra whispered, gently caressing Beatrice's soft cheek. While Petra deeply yearned to reunite with Subaru, Beatrice remained a dear friend, and her forced sleep proved more agonizing than separation.

"How's yer lil' sis holdin' up?" Petra's concern for Beatrice was met by Musica's inquiry from where he had been riding beside the dragon carriage. Atop his earth dragon, he led the party toward their destination. According to their plan, Petra served as the group's representative. This led her to suspect that Musica's inquiry was either an exercise in courtesy, or a means of ingratiating himself. What a cynical notion, Petra thought, shaking her head.

"Thank you for the consideration. I suppose her condition hasn't changed," Petra said.

"Me apologies 'bout that," Musica apologized. "That be a daft question. If she were to manage recoverin' after gettin' rattled by this here dragon carriage, there'd be no need for a journey like this in the first place."

"Right…" Petra gave a short answer, admonishing herself for her persistent air of caution. Although she thought of Musica's questions as probing, they could also be interpreted as dutiful adherence to Diadora's orders, and consideration for her important guests.

It was often the case that things perceived maliciously tended to become malicious, while those approached with goodwill tended to result in positive outcomes.

"Were you really that concerned about my sister?" Petra asked.

"That be it, too," Musica replied, "but it ain't like I'd go outta my way showin' it, with them guard of yers givin' me them glarey eyes… We be approachin' me workplace soon."

"Workplace…"

Although Musica's expression remained hidden by his hood, Petra understood his gesture, indicating what lay before them. Following his gesture, she peered ahead to where Otto was positioned on the coach box. The highway had long since disappeared, and they were now traversing lands not usually frequented. However, their destination lied straight ahead.

“This be Shamrock Valley. Me workplace,” Musica confirmed. Petra wordlessly squinted her eyes at the location ahead.

Shamrock Valley, situated east of the commercial city of Picoutatte, was one of the most notorious spots in the entire Kingdom of Lugunica, known for its shady stories and ominous tales. The area was shrouded in an ever-present mist and saturated with a high concentration of mana. It was rumored that the souls of the deceased, referred to as hollows, wandered the region. It was an eerie reputation that discouraged most people from venturing into the area.

“Such a shady reputation must be exaaactly what makes it that much more convenient for crossing the border in secret, riiight?” Roswaal asked.

“Aye, ye be right,” Musica responded. “It be a blessin’ from the gods, both for us and fer them guests puttin’ their trust in us, don’t ye reckon?”

“Well, ya ain’t wrong. I jus’ hate how ya put it,” Garfiel said.

Musica shrugged in response to Roswaal and Garfiel’s exchange before shifting his attention to Petra. He appeared to gauge her feelings, considering the foreboding canyon looming ahead. However…

“Just make use of whatever you feel is most convenient. Even if it’s Hollow’s Mecca or whatever. You don’t have to keep checking up on me,” Petra reassured.

“I get it,” Musica remarked. “Ye got guts, I’ll give ye that. Yer reassurin’ answer actually eases me mind a bit.”

His voice carried a note of astonishment at his incorrect assumption, and he reverently bowed. Petra nodded with satisfaction, and Garfiel and Roswaal each acknowledged Petra’s courageousness with a voice low enough that an outsider couldn’t hear them.

“No shock, comin’ from the chillest one in our camp,” Garfiel commented.

Roswaal added, “I made the right decision in recommending you from the staaaart.”

Petra accepted the praise from Garfiel, and half of the praise from Roswaal, as she anticipated their arrival at Shamrock Valley. It wasn’t an act of bravado. Petra simply lacked the fear commonly associated with hollows and unfounded superstitions. She was eager to traverse the misty valley as soon as possible.

However, a slight hint of unease lingered. Divided into two dragon carriages, Petra couldn’t help but worry about the resolve of those in the carriage behind theirs. “I hope Sister Frederica’s side is faring well,” she said to herself.

4

Shamrock Valley was enshrouded in an ever-present mist and a high concentration of mana. It was a literal ‘loophole’, a passage between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Vollachia Empire, carved deep within the ominous lands.

“It may look spooky, but as long as we have a guide, there is no need to fear,” Otto assured.

“You don’t seem the type to fear hollows, anyway,” added Petra.

“Well, that may change if I ever happen to come in contact with a real one in person,” Otto said, gripping the reins. “But so far, I have yet to encounter anything like that, so I have no reason to be afraid.” Living humans were far more frightening, not to mention experienced merchants–a sentiment to which Petra also agreed.

In fact, even along this bumpy terrain, the earth dragon’s Divine Protection of Wind Evasion allowed Otto’s beloved dragon, Frufoo, to pull the carriage with no issue. Naturally, the same principles would apply to the carriage pulled by Subaru’s dragon, Patrasche. However…

“Eek!” Frederica’s scream pierced the air. “W-Was that a face floating in the mist over there?!”

“It is only the wind stirring up the mist,” Ram said rationally. “It only happened to appear that way.”

“Ah, wait, Ram!” Emilia interjected. “I think I heard someone calling for help in the fog! It sounded like, ‘The only way out is death!’ That’s so distressing! We have to help them!”

“It is the wind,” Ram repeated. “We are in a valley, so it probably just sounded like a human voice.”

Unlike those of us progressing smoothly, Ram’s side seems a bit on edge. Even if Sister Frederica tries to hide it, she’s a bit of a scaredy-cat, and tends to overreact to things like hollows and unexplained phenomena. Now that I think of it, I heard that Sister Emilia was also fearful of hollows before, but in her case, that was because she couldn’t distinguish between hollows and humans. But so long as she perceives cursed words as a call for help, she’s far off from Frederica’s level.

“Ram is content with her never reaching that state for all eternity,” Ram muttered. “Babysitting one person is enough for Ram.”

“I can’t disagree with you there, Sister Ram… I mean, Ram,” agreed Petra.

Nonetheless, thanks to Ram’s physical control of the reins and her role as a leader, they successfully traversed the valley without incident, reaching their destination—the loophole.

“So this is…” Petra began.

“This thing here be what we call the Everlasting Darkness,” Musica explained. “Folks say this tunnel’s been dug out by our grandfolks’ grandfolks, way back when.”

“Dug by your ancestors, Musica?” Petra asked.

“Yep, with these here claws.” Musica slowly removed his hood before Petra, who was overwhelmed by the sight of the cave gaping on a small hillside in front of them. Petra and the others gawked at his previously hidden face, now revealed.

“Sorry ‘bout bein’ so rude all this time,” Musica said. “It’s ‘cause we be hated, plain and simple.” Saying that, he waved his hands—hands with thick, sharp claws that had also been hidden under the robe—and smiled, face covered in short, dark brown hair.

With his round nose, large mouth, and small ears, his face resembled a rat. Despite his slight stature, it was clear that his round body wasn’t fat, but rather packed with dense, powerful muscles. His eyes were obscured by the short hairs, similar in color to the soil, which rendered them invisible even without the cover of the hood. Yet, Petra knew exactly what Musica was.

“Are you a moleman?” she asked.

“Aye, aye. We ain’t an easy bunch to come across, ye know? So, seems to me the only way yer familiar with us is either ‘cause yer well-read and savvy, or ‘cause of our notorious rep.”

“I think it’s because I’m so studious.”

“Tch, tch, how nice of ye,” Musica said with a chuckle that could be taken as either sarcasm or gratitude. Petra speculated that Musica’s self-deprecation was likely connected to the rumors surrounding the mole people and their history of persecution. It wasn’t entirely irrelevant to Emilia’s ideals of winning the royal selection.

“Iris and the King of Thorns,” Petra said, referring to the title of a play. Musica silently affirmed. It was a popular play originating from the Vollachia Empire, said to be based on true historical events.

The story followed a girl named Iris who fell in love with the King of Thorns. To save him from a dire situation, she faced calamity with the help of many people. At first glance, it sounded like a universally beloved tale. However, its enduring impact arose from its tragic ending.

At the end of the play, the protagonist, Iris, perished after driving away the calamity. She had been betrayed by her companions, right before reuniting with her lover. The story ended without her ever meeting her beloved again. And as the play was based on historical facts, the characters also reflected historical figures. Many signs indicated that the King of Thorns represented the Emperor of the Vollachia Empire at the time. Iris, the girl who died before their reunion, was also confirmed to have been real.

"Those who betrayed Iris and brought about the tragedy were the same ones who had helped her counter the calamity—the mole people and wolf people," Petra summarized.

"'Cause o' that, we ain't had no place in the Empire fer generations," Musica said. "Them wolf folk, they ain't be knowin' how to make 'emselves scarce, and got 'emselves wiped out. Then our forefathers dug this here tunnel and…"

"And that's what led to this Everlasting Darkness?" Petra concluded.

He nodded and gave a small smile, clearly impressed, as the darkness loomed behind her. "Ye really got that studious streak in ye."

"Why are you sharing this story with me?"

"There's folks out there who be gettin' all riled up just 'cause the tunnel been dug by a buncha mole people," Musica answered the skeptical Petra. "It'd be a right pain if ye start gripin' once ye get inside, so think if it as givin' ye the chance to bugger off at the entrance if ye fancy."

"You can also think of it as reassurance," Otto added, joining the conversation. He raised a finger in response to Petra's puzzled gaze, also looking out at the Everlasting Darkness. "As Musica mentioned, there may be people who'll become apprehensive after learning about the mole people's notoriety. At the same time, though, once they learn the past about his ancestors escaping from the Empire, it can also serve as a reassurance to prove that this cave does in fact connect the two countries."

"Oh, you mean as a way to prove he has no intention of deceiving us and trapping us inside?" Petra asked.

"That is correct. What do you think? Though I imagine that you would have explained it even if I had not brought it up.” Otto closed his eyes, directing his inquiry at Musica, who raised his arms in surrender.

“Blimey, ye lot can be quite frightenin’, can’t ye?” he said. “‘Fraid I’ll have to kindly ask ye not to hinder me business, mate.” It appeared that Otto’s assumption was indeed correct, and that Otto had indeed disrupted his work.

“My apologies,” Otto said. “Please understand that the impact is not as great on those of us who are already aware.”

“Otto, you probably shouldn’t say that out loud…” Petra cautioned Otto on his critical attitude toward others.

“My apologies,” Otto formally apologized to Musica after Petra’s scolding. He appeared to have been oblivious of his actions. He was undeniably dependable, but whether due to his merchant nature or his own disposition, he tended to interact rather coldly with those outside his inner circle. Despite his competence as a domestic affairs official and adeptness at facts and figures, there were still times in which he fell short.

“It’d sure be great if Subaru were here for moments like these,” Petra reflected.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Musica said. “Look at that, ye got yerself a mighty tender look there chatterin’ ‘bout that Subaru. Who in tarnation is the feller?”

“He’s my fiancé,” Petra beamed unapologetically.

“Buh—” Otto attempted to suppress his laughter, but burst into a fit of amusement. Petra stuck out her tongue at him and shifted her gaze to the gaping mouth of the Everlasting Darkness. Now fully aware that this immense tunnel led to the Empire and why it had been dug, there was only one task left.

Petra clenched her fists. “We need to pass through here to accomplish our goal.”

“Y’know, even reckonin’ it be all fer the sake of yer sister, ye still one brave lass," Musica commended her determination with a sigh of admiration.

Her companions had informed the impressed Musica that the reason for their journey to the Empire was for Beatrice's sake. They explained that the cure for Beatrice's ailment, stuck in a state of light sleep, was in the Empire.

In fact, the cure for Beatrice's situation was Subaru. Thus, they hadn't lied about anything. They simply worded it differently. And the same went for Petra, who was also in need of the same cure.

"So, what's the deal?" Garfiel asked. "Ya gonna guide us through that tunnel like how ya brought us here?"

"Loosely speakin', yeah," Musica replied. "But wit' a moniker like 'Everlasting Darkness', ye best believe the insides be pitch-black. Ye won't be catchin' a breath if ye bring fire in there…"

"So what?" Garfiel pressed.

"From here on, all 'em folks from me clan gonna go alongside ye," Musica answered straightforwardly. Little by little, a dozen figures emerged from the depths of the tunnel, all mole people like Musica, dressed in similar robes with prominent stains of dirt.

"We'll be headin' in with our Divine Protection of Wind Evasion down, so kindly pay heed an' make yer moves accordingly," Musica instructed. Leading the group of mole people, he maintained his role as their guide through the Everlasting Darkness they would soon face, instructing Petra and her companions to brace themselves for a journey that promised to be anything but pleasant.

5

As Musica had warned them beforehand, the journey through the Everlasting Darkness was full of challenges. For starters, they had been engulfed in an overwhelming pitch-blackness as they moved through the walls of soil.

The passageway through the soil of Shamrock Valley was a place that received scarce sunlight. Lagmite ores positioned at regular intervals along the path provided faint sources of illumination. However, the gaps between them were quite wide, and Petra, who was unaccustomed to such circumstances, found them difficult to rely on. The mental strain of the inability to see one's surroundings far exceeded her expectations.

Despite having been pre-informed of the dark path they would traverse, experiencing it firsthand was an entirely different story, and her initial resolve seemed to have easily dissolved within the oppressive blackness. Reclaiming my courage will be no simple task in this endless expanse of darkness.

The thing making her gloominess further melancholic was the humid air inside the Everlasting Darkness. Maybe it was due to the fog of the canyon entering it, the humidity underground was really strong, and she also felt it being slimy. On top of that, if she began sweating due to the heat then it would have been worse, but she had narrowly escaped that agony. But then cold dampness was bad for your health too and one needed to be careful not to get sick from it. And the greatest difficulty that surpassed the darkness and humidity was…

"My butt hurts…" Petra muttered before lifting her butt off the seat and massaging it. She was trying out different things, like adjusting her position or sitting on luggage, but nothing seemed to work, so it tormented her without end.

As has been previously explained, the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion didn't work within the Everlasting Darkness. To be precise, it couldn't be activated as it didn't meet the requirements for doing so. It was a divine protection that was bestowed upon all species of earth dragon that allowed them to run unhindered by wind resistance or rough terrain, or any other factors that might prevent them from running smoothly. It was a crucial element for long journeys, but in order for it to activate, the earth dragon had to be running; standing still or going at a slow pace didn't count.

Due to the darkness of the Everlasting Darkness, they had to move forward carefully, as they couldn't see ahead of them. It was because of that that Petra's butt was dealt devastating damage.

“Guh, the pain won’t go away no matter how much I massage it…” she complained.

“Are you alright, Lady Petra? Would you like to sit on my lap?” asked Emilia, who was riding in the dragon carriage with Petra, unable to bear seeing her in pain.

“Emily…”

Emilia was treating her as her mistress, acting in the way she should in the role she had been given. They were both in the same boat with the divine protection not being active, but Emilia looked energetic as ever even in the dim light.

“Doesn’t your butt hurt, Emily?”

“It hurts a little, of course, but it’s nothing I can’t manage. Say, I think it would be more comfortable to sit on my lap than in a seat, so how about it?” Emilia asked again, weakening Petra’s frail resolve by patting her thighs.

“I-I’m flattered by the offer, but…” She felt like it would make her feel significantly better if she accepted her attractive offer to let her sit on her lap. But how would Musica and his companions react to seeing this? It would do no good to make them have doubts about us just because my butt hurts. “But it hurts so much that it makes me want to cry…”

“You can just take it easy, Petra. Subaru lies at the end of this dark path, so I can endure it.”

“I’ll endure it as well, then.”

“Huh?! Why?!” Emilia cried, widening her eyes in surprise at Petra’s sudden change of heart. Considering her position, Petra couldn’t lean on her after hearing her say something like that. Emilia had unintentionally changed the pain she was feeling in her butt into a competition to see whose feelings for Subaru were stronger, so now she was determined to win, the trivial pain be damned.

Her resolve to endure the pain, however, was immediately interrupted by a chuckle. “Hah.”

“…What’s so funny, Dudley?” Petra asked, glaring at the one who had laughed—Roswaal—who was sitting across from her. She could barely make out his face due to the dim conditions they were in, but even so, it was clear to her that he was grinning. “That face really makes me sick,” she muttered.

“Oh my, can you see it from all the way ooover there?”

“Yes, but even if I couldn’t, I’d be able to tell since you’re always looking at me like that, Dudley,” Petra seemingly accused without remorse. As expected, despite her stern tone, Roswaal just chuckled as if it amused him.

His casualness was what irritated her in the first place. He was fulfilling his role as a pretend butler with perfection, and even seemed to be enjoying his disguise. We’re on a journey to rescue Subaru and Rem, yet he doesn’t seem to be taking it seriously, she thought. Maybe Ram and Garfiel should give him a good whipping.

“No matter what I say, he just doesn’t listen,” Petra lamented.

“Yeah, you’re right. I think so as well,” Emilia said, agreeing with the offended Petra. “That’s not very nice, Ros—Dudley.”

Roswaal gave her a provocative look. “Hm, whatever do you mean by that? I’m ever curious to see how you plan on correcting me, Emily.”

“Hmph.”

Roswaal normally showed Emilia respect, but their temporary disguises as Dudley and Emily had them in the same class. Petra’s face soured at Roswaal’s taking advantage of it. However…

“Status isn’t what matters here,” Emilia asserted. “You know very well that Lady Petra is working reaaally hard but are still being a meanie… That’s childish and uncool.”

“What are you saying? That you should constantly be worried with a serious frown on your face while traveling?”

"That's not a nice way to put it, either. I'm worried about Subaru and Rem too, but I don't think we should always be gloomy." Emilia pulled Petra closer and hugged her shoulders as she confronted Roswaal.

"Emily…" Petra whispered.

A shadow hung over her face, but her bright amethyst eyes were brimming with energy. She hugged the surprised Petra, then continued. "Isn't this what you were trying to say, Dudley? But you refuse to put it into words and think it's fine that it doesn't get conveyed…and that's childish."

"…"

"If Subaru were here, he'd be upfront about everything he's done and wants to do. I'm not good at picking up on how people feel, so it helps me understand if he's happy or not. Do you understand?" she asked, as if speaking to a child. Then she turned to Petra. "Lady Petra."

Petra stiffened up as Emilia's glittering amethyst bore down on her.

"Dudley acts like that, but he doesn't mean any ill will… Or perhaps he does, but he's not directing it toward you or me but at himself."

"Ill will towards himself?" Petra asked.

"Yes, despite being all grown up, he's still a wee child."

Correction, she thought. Emilia's tone wasn't one she'd use with a child, but rather one she'd use to scold a naughty child. Petra couldn't hold back her laughter at the way Emilia had phrased it. Her worldview is so gentle that even these brutal topics feel as though they're wrapped in silk. She even made Roswaal's mean personality seem like that of a spoiled child.

Roswaal offered no retort to refute her claim. Covered in darkness, he let out a sigh at Emilia's words. "Anyway, Lady Petra. May I suggest engaging in the practice of magic to take your mind off things?" he asked, attempting to divert the center of attention away from himself by introducing a different topic.

“Practicing magic? Here? In the dark like this?” Petra asked.

“You maaay find it easier to concentrate in the dark. Meditating and taking hold of the mana within you is the first step towards mastery.”

“Are you certain it’s not just an excuse to weasel your way out of the difficult situation you find yourself in?”

“I cannot entirely dismiss that notion; however, the mana density here is quite notable, you see. Therefore, it is mooost suitable for detecting mana.”

“…”

I’m not sure what kind of expression Roswaal is making in the dark, but I know he’s serious, and that he wouldn’t lie or use the topic of magic to escape the situation. That was the genuine conclusion she arrived at after being Roswaal’s magic student for the past few months.

“Are you going to give it a try, Petr—Lady Petra?” Emilia asked.

Petra nodded. “Yeah, I will. Though it displeases me that I’m doing as Dudley wishes,” she said, making sure to add a jabbing comment at Roswaal. It would be dark whether she closed her eyes or not, but she closed them nonetheless and looked inward. Whether it be through one’s chest, stomach, limbs, or back, mana circulated through one’s whole body like blood. Unlike blood, though, which circulates through the body with each heartbeat, flowing mana was soundless. That was why the flow of mana was difficult to grasp, but…

“Try to grasp it with color and heat rather than sound,” Roswaal instructed.

“…”

Following his advice, Petra imagined that her body was transparent behind her closed eyes. Inside her transparent body, she could see the ebb and flow of mana, like water being taken up by a plant. Imagining pink mana, a path of mana formed in her body like a blooming flower. The circulating mana flowed through her fingertips, chest, and neck. And then…

“Wow…” As soon as she opened her eyes, Petra was taken aback by the transformed scene within the Everlasting Darkness. She saw the previously pitch-black world where she could barely see her own hands in pink. To be precise, she could see people and things in light shades of pink. It was like they were clad in a pale pink light. Roswaal’s face started turning pink, but his facial expressions were clearly visible as well.

“…”

Roswaal looked at her as if he were looking at a toddler that had just stood up on its own. Realizing that, she averted her gaze, feeling awkward.

She was then startled by a giant lump of pink next to her. “Waah?! Is that you, Emily?!”

“Huh? What? What happened? Did I do something weird?”

“It’s not that you did anything weird, it’s just that you turned into a lump of pink…”

“Pink…seems reaaally sweet,” came an innocent, child-like response by the pink lump, as well as a belated realization that it was indeed Emilia. It was perhaps due to her environment that Petra could see the flow of mana. Whether it be people or things, anything with even a bit of mana could be seen in the darkness.

In short, Emilia was a lump of incredible mana. Petra had always wondered what kind of trick she’d used when she saw her freeze a wide area around her in the mansion while practicing a special move with Subaru. But there wasn’t much to it at the end of the day. It was just that her special move required an enormous amount of mana, which had been provided.

“Just as I surmised, Beatrice is a lump of mana as well…”

Beatrice, who was lying on the seat next to Emilia, was also a lump of mana. Her outline was practically indistinguishable due to the sheer amount. Emilia had the upper hand when it came to volume, but Beatrice had a stronger concentration. I suppose it's the result of her being a spirit, who're made up of mana.

"But this is like… Do you always see the world like this, Dudley?"

Roswaal shook his head. "Not to thaaat extreme, no. It is becaaaause, Lady Petra, the magic element you happen to excel in is the Yang element, which is known for its influence on the body."

"The Yang element…" Petra muttered at his explanation, glancing down.

The Yang element was one of the six magic elements of the magic system. It was a rare affinity, and its counterpart was the Yin element. Petra had learned that people were normally born with the Fire, Water, Wind, or Earth element, but since she received the Yang element, she wasn't the norm.

Once you learned which element you had an affinity with, it changed how you studied going forward. This is a huge step for me as a student of magic, but…

"So I don't have an affinity for the Yin element like Subaru and Beatrice. I'm disappointed…"

"No, no, this one is also rare, you knooow? Having the Yang element isn't something to get disappointed about."

"I don't care if it's rare or not," Petra huffed, giving the pushy Roswaal an ice-cold response. She wasn't trying to put him down or anything, it was just how she really felt. I get that some people want that rare, special power, but what matters is whether I can use it properly or not. With rare affinities, the downside is that few people can wield them, so there's less precedent.

Petra was running around busily, incredibly occupied. She couldn't use youth as an excuse in the fight she was preparing for. She needed power and skill that she could utilize immediately and the assurance that it could keep evolving.

“But that’s amazing,” Emilia praised. “So you can see in the dark?”

“It would seem so, yes,” Petra replied, before looking around in response to Emilia, who was holding her hands together in front of her chest. “I can see the dragon carriage behind us being pulled by Frufoo, and I can see Frederica and everyone else inside pretty well…”

To Petra’s eyes, the darkness known as Everlasting Darkness was clear as day. It wasn’t like she could see through walls or the path ahead, though. At best, she could see what the mole people being led by Musica were up to as they guided the dragon carriages, or Ram lying on Frederica’s lap.

“Other than that, a bit ahead there’s…” She looked ahead towards the end of the path and noticed a spot emanating a radiant mana light. It was 10 or more meters away and seemed much more mana-condensed than its surroundings. I guess that’s what they call a mana pool. Though it wasn’t even close to Emilia’s level, it grabbed Petra’s attention since the pooled-up mana was far more condensed than the mana around it.

“Lady Petra?” Emilia said.

“Oh, sorry. So, the ground in front of us is glowing and…” Petra quickly pointed out.

“…Right in front of us?” Roswaal asked, his voice slightly stiff. He didn’t seem like he was about to start explaining what mana pools were. In fact, he never started to do so. Before he could, things took a turn for the worse.

“Ah-uh,” Petra cried in agony as a sudden impact shot up from beneath the seat. It happened right as they passed over the mana pool. The cause was the dragon carriage getting thrown into the air, but that wasn’t all.

“…Petra!” Emilia shouted, scooping Petra up in her arms and cradling her head. The dragon carriage tilted forward, shaking violently, before rolling down into the depths of the Everlasting Darkness. Yes, it was falling, deeper and deeper into its depths, with great force.

“Dodogyuuun!” You could hear Patrasche’s screams along with the creaking of the dragon carriage. It went without saying that if the carriage was falling, so too would the earth dragon. The dragon carriage carrying Petra, Emilia, Roswaal, and Beatrice was then hit with a violent impact. It was if they were insects in a cage that was being shook around…

The impacts that seemed to last an eternity finally came to an end.

“…D-Did it stop?” Petra muttered, exhausted and out of breath, while her head was being tightly hugged by Emilia. Right after that, she realized what was going on, and was especially concerned about the vulnerable Beatrice.

“Beatrice…” she whispered.

“Please do not worry. I kept her safe.”

“Ah…”

The one who’d responded to Petra’s anxiety was Roswaal, who was kneeling in the tilted dragon carriage. Still being able to discern her surroundings by their amount of pink mana, Petra saw Roswaal holding Beatrice securely in his arms. He had protected her from the fall and the impact.

Relieved and sincerely grateful for this, Petra turned her attention upwards. I wonder what happened. As soon as we passed over the mana pool, the dragon carriage fell, and…

“Are you okay, Musica…?”

“…Apologies fer takin’ extreme measures, miss,” came a rough voice from outside the dragon carriage, interrupting her question. His strong tone of voice was one thing, but the reason she stopped was because of what he said. He said ‘extreme measures’ rather than that he made a mistake.

“Is this your doing? What are you planning?” Emilia pressed after hearing Petra gasp. Her resolute words were full of determination. In short, she was willing to resort to force if necessary.

However, contrary to Emilia’s resolve, Musica gave her a warning in the dark. “Kindly hold off. I’d advise against pickin’ a fight in the Eternal Darkness wit’ us. This here’s a cramped, deep, and damp domain—this be our world.”

“…What are you going to do with us?” Petra inquired. Having gotten to this point, it being an accident was no longer a possibility. Since they did this on purpose, they must have had a good reason.

Musica, who emitted a weak pink light, let out a tired sigh, then let out one last sigh before he made an offer that Petra and her companions would find…inconvenient. “Ain’t lookin’ to cause ya trouble if ye stay put. All we’re after is you and yer companions to use as a kind of hostages fer our negotiations wit’ the kingdom, ya.”

Stand By Me Pleiades IV (Translation Pending)

Stand By Me Pleiades V (Translation Pending)

Stand By Me Pleiades VI (Translation Pending)

Poltergeist Story
(CA)

1

—Thunder rumbled.

Lightning flashed outside the window, and the magic lamps lighting the mansion went out all at once.

It was an ill prank pulled by fate that the moment they got covered in darkness, the cupboard fell and the dishes shattered, making a crashing noise.

Swiftly following the blackout and the continuous sound of destruction, a high-pitched scream was let out.

“Noooo—!!”

The one who had screamed was a maid with beautiful long blonde hair. She was slender and tall yet had an attractive figure rich in feminine charms.

Her almond-shaped eyes looked like jade gemstones, and her mouth, the origin of said scream, was adorned with a row of beautiful white teeth.

However, even though some of her teeth were sharp and giving her a rather ferocious look—

“Eek! Eeeek! It’s a hollow! A hollow is here! Hey, Petra?! Are you okay?! Petra! Ram!”

She was shaking with tears flowing down her face. Her appearance was anything but ferocious, but in fact emphasized the fragile, feminine part of herself.

In the darkness, the woman grabbed a piece of cloth within her reach and desperately pulled it close to her body. “Pe-Pe-Pe-Petra…? Or is it you, Ram? Anyway-Anyway, I’m glad you are safe.

We need to get out of here before it’s too late…”

“—Sister Frederica?”

“—Ha! Petra?! Is that you?”

The woman turned around towards the direction of the voice—but said voice came from the opposite direction of the person she was holding.

Her pupils narrowed in the darkness, and what appeared was a young, dainty girl. It was a lovely girl wearing a maid outfit with a big ribbon on her head—Petra—the girl whom Frederica adored the most like a younger sister.

Frederica felt relieved after seeing that Petra hadn’t been harmed in any way.

“Oh, Petra… I’m glad you’re safe. That must mean I have Ram in my arms. She is being quite docile…”

“What are you saying, Frederica? Ram is over here.”

“Huh?”

After hearing an unapologetic voice, the owner of said voice appeared next to Petra. It was a girl with short pink hair and a pretty, plucky face. Standing with perfect posture strangely suited her, and it stood true even in the abyssal darkness.

“Oh, oh my, Ram…so you were with Petra. Well, in that case…”

“Yes, Ram was with her. —What did you mistake Ram with?”

“I was trying not to think about that…!”

Frederica turned her head with a creaking sound in response to Ram’s merciless question. She then looked down at the person she was holding tightly in her arms. Just at that moment, there was a flash of lightning, brightly illuminating a mysterious figure.

“…”

It was a doll around the size of a toddler with a missing eyeball. When the doll's single eye met Frederica's, it relaxed its lips and smiled.

"—Noooooo!!"

Frederica let out a scream, which was just one of many she had let out that day.

2

—It all started two days ago.

"Cleaning the villa and replacing the furniture?" asked Frederica.

"Yes, thaaat's right," Roswaal replied with a gentle smile, his hands clasped together on the desk. "I wanted to aaask you guys to do that."

Roswaal directed his gentle smile at the three maids who worked in this mansion. Lined up by height and ordered by size starting with the largest, the three girls were Frederica, Ram, and Petra.

The three were colleagues that worked at Roswaal Manor, but it was rare for them to be summoned all at once by Roswaal.

—No, it was their first time.

Petra tilted her head while widening her large eyes at the instructions from Roswaal. "Villa… Is that different from the old mansion that burned down?"

"Ah, it's diiiferent. I liked that mansion though, but…"

"Oh, I'm not asking you, Master. I'm asking them."

Petra brushed Roswaal, who tried to answer her question, off with a smile.

"Petra…"

Frederica, who was Petra's mentor, held her forehead at that and

Roswaal, who got rejected by her, snickered.

Even from Frederica’s point of view, Roswaal and Petra’s relationship was shattered into pieces and would be difficult to piece back together. As someone in a subordinate position, her attitude wasn’t all that great, but Roswaal was the one who caused her to behave in such a way to begin with.

It would be a different story if Roswaal showed more remorse for what he did, but their master seemed to enjoy Petra’s bad behavior, so that was not likely to happen.

Therefore, Frederica could do nothing but worry about their relationship, but Ram, who admired Roswaal, wasn’t all too happy about it.

She narrowed her pink eyes and glared at Petra, who had been disrespectful towards her master. “Ram won’t tolerate such an attitude toward Master Roswaal, Petra.”

“I’m sorry, Sister Ram. But even if I get scolded, I want to make our master feel bad…”

“So you’ve already made up your mind. It’s fine, then. Since it also creates a job that only Ram can do, which is to console Master Roswaal whenever you hurt his feelings.”

“Enough with that, you two!” Frederica exclaimed. “Not even I would be able to tolerate it!”

Feeling like the conversation between Ram and Petra was going to take a grave turn if left alone, Frederica finally interrupted them. Then, stepping closer to her disgruntled juniors, she said, “Master, don’t just enjoy yourself, you need to give her a proper warning. Otherwise, it will cause trouble for me by disturbing the public morals of the mansion. To make matters worse…”

“To make matters worse, aaaand then what?”

“To make matters worse, Mister Subaru and Garf are already disturbing it…”

Frederica thought of the black-haired boy that lived in the mansion and her incompetent younger brother. If you added in the young man in charge of internal affairs, that would be all of the men working at Roswaal Manor. They all acted their age, or rather, were a bit immature.

“Mister Otto seems normal,” said Frederica, “but he becomes the most dangerous of the three when the other two get involved…”

“Oh, I get what you mean,” Petra replied. “Otto has a face saying, I’m perfectly normal, but he says the most menacing things out of the blue.”

“Everyone agrees that he is the most dangerous of the bunch,” said Ram.

“Oh myyy, I can’t ever allow Otto know of what was spoken here todaaay.”

The young man, who was being talked about in a place he wasn’t present, sneezed at his workplace.

After getting off track… “Anyway.” …Frederica returned the conversation to the main topic. “It has been a couple of months since we moved to the main residence and we are finally settling in, so what made you want to work on the villa?”

“A most natural question indeed. But the reaaaason isn’t that complicated. It has been several months since the royal selection kicked off officially, and the candidates have each started making their moves, so we can’t afford to get left behind. As for the negotiations with influential people from various areas… I know I am in no position to talk, but there are a looot of nefarious characters in the Western Margrave Domain. Negotiations aren’t going to be easy by any means.”

“—? What does that have to do with the villa…?” Petra wondered.

“It’s simple, Petra,” Ram began. “In short, Master Roswaal and Lady Emilia will soon be going to different places themselves to do things. And for such occasions, it’s better to have as many lodging options as you can get… Fortunately, House Mathers owns villas in various regions, so it's quite convenient."

Ram took over Roswaal's explanation, and Petra nodded after understanding what it meant. "Oh, so that's how it is…"

Glancing at Petra out of the corner of her eye, Frederica continued. "Well then," she said. "Is the reason why we are going to the villa as Ram surmised?"

"Yes, that's correct. I have a few villas in mind, but I want to get Viscount Torion Arus on our side for now. So it would be beeest to start with the one closest to his mansion."

"In that case, would it be the mansion in San Fantrus? It's a little far though…"

Following Roswaal's suggestion, Frederica spread the map on the wall on the desk and tried to locate the villas owned by House Mathers.

However, Ram stopped her there. "—No, not there," she declared, then pointed at a forest not too far from their objective. "Here it is."

"Here?" inquired Petra. "But there is nothing marked there, Sister Ram."

"On a normal map, yes. But an old mansion owned by House Mathers is there. That's correct, right, Master Roswaal?"

"Weeell, it seems it's still fresh in your memory despite it being something from around 10 years ago."

"That's because Ram has memories with you there, Master Roswaal," answered Ram like it was nothing, making Roswaal frown and scratch his head.

Ram has been speaking like that to him for a couple of years now, but it seems like Master's response to it has changed a little, thought Frederica. As someone who has known them personally for a long time, I am deeply moved by this, but…

"I see that it is a mansion that even I do not know about. Well, what is it…"

"Well, it would be a bit of a stretch to call it a villa since it hardly functioned as one," Roswaal explained. "My predecessor used it as a kind of workshop…but it's been abandoned for several years now."

"A workshop, I see," parroted Frederica, touching her cheek and thinking about it.

Roswaal's predecessor—Roswaal K. Mathers—was the genius of the century who devoted himself to the development and practical application of magicreation tools that used magic stones as their source of power.

Since the head of the Mathers family took on the name of Roswaal generation after generation, their names never changed, so it made things a bit complicated.

At any rate, the current Roswaal in front of her eyes—Roswaal L. Mathers—her master, was also without a doubt an unparalleled genius when it came to magic.

"Even though I called it a workshop, it was more or less emptied before it became abandoned, so it would be better to call it an empty mansion. Either waaay, the building will likely need repairs, which is why I need you to go inspect it."

"—. I see, so that is how it is."

When that much was said, Frederica guessed what Roswaal's aim was.

If the job was as Roswaal had just described, there was clearly no reason for all three maids to go there. However, since he wanted them to do this together, the reason was obvious.

—It was to get them to learn how to work together.

Including the contrasting attitudes of Ram and Petra towards Roswaal before, the communication between the three maids working at Roswaal Manor was not yet perfect. However, as mentioned above, the royal selection had already begun. That’s why they couldn’t continue to work inefficiently like they had been until now.

So by completing the task he gave us, the three of us will learn to work together and not be haphazard about our work, thought Frederica. That’s probably what Master is aiming for with this. “I understand, Master. Please leave this task to us. I will fulfill your wishes, both the obvious and the hidden one!”

“The obvious and the hidden…?”

“Yes, you can count on me!”

Roswaal frowned for a moment at Frederica, who had thumped her chest. But the enthusiastic sentence that followed made him say, “I suppose that’s fine,” before nodding. “Alriiight then, I’ll relay your orders once again: you are to investigate the mansion that used to be my predecessor’s workshop, make repairs, and make it habitable by replacing the furniture and tidying it up.”

“—Yes! Leave it to us!”

With these instructions from Roswaal, the three girls quickly finished their preparations and departed for their destination: the workshop.

3

“So this is the previous Master’s mansion?”

Petra blinked as she looked at the completely dilapidated mansion in front of her. It was natural for her to do so, since its appearance starkly contrasted from the other villas owned by House Mathers. The mansion was in the middle of a dense forest, exposed to ivy, weeds, and ravaged by wild animals, and at first glance, it didn’t seem like it was currently fit for human habitation.

However, the three of them would have to spend the night in said mansion.

“It will rain soon, so going back to the nearest town isn’t a realistic option," said Ram as she looked at the mansion's exterior and turned around.

"Uuh, I'm sorry…" replied Petra, hunching over in front of her.

"It is not your fault, Petra," Frederica consoled. "That wild bird's cunningness is to blame."

By the time the three of them arrived at the mansion, night had already fallen, and the world had been plunged into the pitch-black abyss of darkness. They were originally scheduled to arrive during the day, but the reason why this did not happen was the reason why Petra was so completely deflated.

"If only I hadn't let the bird steal the luggage…"

"Talking about "what-ifs" won't change anything. We need to be thankful that you didn't get kidnapped by that cunning bird. Birds like that can easily kidnap children."

"I'm not! I'm not that small! I'm not that much different from you!"

"Ha-Ha, that's right. We're like a speck of dust compared to Frederica."

"A speck of dust is going a bit far! What do you think I am?!"

Frederica raised her voice in response to the absurd claim and then Ram brushed it off with an "Alright, alright."

She knew that that conversation was for Petra to not feel unnecessary remorse, but she thought that there were other ways to do so. "Such things about you haven't changed at all since the olden days…"

"But Sister Ram is right. We can't go back to the town, can we? So, are we going to stay in this mansion…or rather, what used to be one?"

"I guess so. In this place that used to be a mansion, we have to—"

Frederica stopped when she was about to say that they had to spend the night there.

"—? Sister Frederica?" Petra said as she looked up at Frederica by her side, who had become quiet.

Frederica, however, couldn't respond to Petra right away. She looked confused as she stared at the dilapidated mansion in front of her. "…A night in this mansion?"

She didn't want to bring herself to say that she would be spending the night there. Saying it out loud would only seal her reality. She knew that it was a futile resistance, but she refused to bow down to her sealed fate.

"Yes, we have no other option but to stay here," Ram declared. "Let's hurry up and go inside."

"You-You-You-You are such a…!"

"What are you making such a fuss about? Could it be that you're… scared?" Ram said, squinting as she lowered her voice.

That gave Frederica goosebumps. "—Gh!"

As she involuntarily choked—

"Sister?" Petra said, pulling on her sleeve. "Are you really scared? Sister Frederica?"

"I-I am not scared! Not at all, it is not like that! It's just that… Um, I only wanted to say that it does not look very safe."

—It was a lie. She was scared.

Frederica bluffed greatly in front of her beloved sister.

Frederica was basically someone who never sung her own praises or wore a mask in front of others, but when it came to Petra, whom she adored, it was different. She wanted to be an admirable sister figure for her.

Ram and Garfiel were children who weren't cute at all compared to

Petra. That's why she wanted the cute Petra to see her cool side.

"I'm just not sure if we can survive a night in a rundown mansion that has been abandoned for decades. It would be wiser to find a cave in the woods that's facing a cliff."

"Searching for a cave that we don't even know exists is wiser?" asked Ram. "Frederica, do you have a fever or something?"

"I-I know! It was just a joke! I didn't mean it! Let's just start chopping the trees over there down and build a cabin for the three of us to live in for a while and…"

"S-Sister? Are you sure you're okay? I think you'll feel better if you sit and rest for a…"

"Arrrgh…!" Her brain, dominated by fear and shame, couldn't come up with a good idea. "It's true that I'm not good at building things. That I couldn't even realize that, is such a…"

"Ram thinks that the problem lies elsewhere, but never mind."

She ignored Frederica reflecting upon her words and stared at the exterior of the mansion. She then shrugged lightly and looked back at Petra, not Frederica.

"After a quick glance, it doesn't look as unfixable as it first appeared. Ram will take care of the luggage, so can you kindly go around back and take a look around?"

"Yes, alright, Sister Ram. Sister Frederica, you can rest here…"

"No-No, I can't let you go alone. I will accompany you."

I am grateful for their concern, but I can't afford to lose heart here, she thought. Neither can I let Petra act alone in a place that gives me such an ominous feeling.

"—. Can you move?"

"I can move. Who do you think I am? I am the head servant of Margrave Mathers, Frederica Baumann!" she proudly declared, a hand on her well-endowed chest.

Petra clapped, exclaiming, “Big Sister, you are so cool!”

For a split second she felt a questioning gaze from Ram as though saying “Was there a reason to introduce yourself like that here…?” Frederica chose to ignore it and rallied herself up.

“Well then, let’s get going, Petra. Let’s hold hands.”

“Huh? Ah, ok, that’s right. Let’s go, Sister Frederica.”

Frederica started walking with Petra, who had grabbed her extended hand and seemed excited. Ram sighed while looking at the two from behind and then started doing her job.

“…”

Trying to go around the mansion proved to be quite challenging due to the overgrown ivy. Since they were heading into the forest, Frederica and the others wore clothing that allowed more movement than their usual maid attire, but they still struggled to cross through the dense vegetation.

“I didn’t think it would be this bad, so I didn’t bring any knives with me.”

Of course, if she wanted to, Frederica could use her beast claws as one, but she did not want to do so in front of Petra, nor did she see the significance of going that far.

“Oh, Sister!” shouted Petra while touching the ivy when they were about to lose their way. “The ivy is soft here, so we can move it and go forward.”

Frederica looked at it and determined that it wasn’t too tangled, so they could make a path by spreading it.

“I am surprised that you were able to notice that.”

“It’s because I used to play in the forest with Lucas and the others… with my friends…before I started working at the mansion.”

"I see… It's been a long time since I last played in a forest."

Unlike Petra, Frederica had become Roswaal's servant more than a decade ago, which was around the time she and her brother played together in their hometown, known as the Sanctuary, so she was more familiar with life in the city than life in the forest now.

"Seems like you know your way around a forest because of that. Ah, but be sure not to touch the ivy or trees with your bare hands…"

"I'll be fine. I made sure to wear gloves," Petra said, presenting her gloved hands to Frederica, who then patted her head.

"Ha-Ha, you are sharp."

With that enthusiasm, Petra moved the ivy out of the way and made a path along the wall of the mansion, and then they proceeded to the back.

"Oh." While they were making their way, Petra noticed something. "…The walls of the mansion got damaged over time, forming a hole here."

"You're right… The size is a little disconcerting."

If you looked at it, the hole in the back of the mansion was as big as a child, so it was large enough for Petra, and even Frederica could get through it if she bent down.

Whether this was simply the result of the building material being damaged or a wild animal being mischievous was unclear.

"The door being locked or not won't matter with this huge hole over here," commented Frederica.

"I think it's a little too late to be worrying about that since the mansion has been abandoned for many years already…" replied Petra.

"There is also a possibility that someone is going in and out of the mansion without permission… Wait, Petra?"

While Frederica was examining the hole in the mansion, Petra suddenly bent down and slipped right through it.

“Wait, are you alright?”

“Don’t worry, Sister Frederica. I’m not stuck or anything. I figured I could fit through this gap,” said Petra.

“Well, in that case, it’s fine… You had me worried there for a second.”

Hearing that from the other side of the hole made Frederica feel relieved. But then she swiftly came to the conclusion that it would be difficult to go any further around the building.

“Come back, Petra…”

“Oh! What was that?!” exclaimed Petra. “I’ll go take a quick look.”

“Ah, Petra, don’t go! Oh, no!” cried Frederica.

Petra went further in. Frederica frowned at Petra’s courage and sighed.

“I guess it can’t be helped. But I can’t let Petra go alone…”

Then, using the hole Petra used to go in, Frederica also went into the mansion. There was no source of light, so it was just as dark as the forest, but…

“—?” The moment she went inside, Frederica instantly felt the temperature change. It was a strange sensation, as if there was a chill in the dusty air. But before she could wrap her head around this anomaly, she heard the sound of the floor creaking. She figured that whatever was making that sound was someone light. She naturally assumed that it was Petra.

“Petra, don’t do anything rash.” Frederica called out. “My heart will not be able to take it.”

“…”

“Petra? What’s the matter? Why aren’t you replyi…”

The creaking sound got closer and closer, but there was no reply from Petra at all. Frederica frowned and quietly stared into the darkness.

Frederica had naturally good night vision, so there was nothing she couldn’t see, even in the dark of night.

Therefore…

“—Huh?”

—She knew in a single glance that the human-shaped figure that appeared vaguely in the darkness was a human-shaped doll.

“…”

For a moment, she thought she was hallucinating.

Right after that, she was blinded by a white light. “—Argh,” she groaned in agony, feeling a numbing pain in her eyes.

The cause was the light, or more specifically, the light from the magic lamp. The magic lamps installed in the mansion turned on all at once, causing Frederica, who was using her night vision, to groan due to the glare.

“Th-This is…”

“Sister Frederica! The lights are on!”

Petra came running to Frederica’s side whose sight was still white due to the dazzle. For a moment she felt a sense of relief knowing Petra was unharmed.

“Petra! Be careful! There was something there!”

“What?!”

Frederica looked around while telling the approaching Petra to be cautious. The brightly lit room seemed to be one of the mansion’s guest rooms.

She glanced around the abandoned room. There was an old, wardrobe that had seen better days and a bed frame and a—

“It-It’s not here! Where did it go?!”

Shocked, Frederica quickly scanned the room for the doll that she was certain she had seen earlier.

Maybe I bumped into it and knocked it over? Perhaps it fell under the bed? Or it slipped behind the wardrobe…?

She tried to search for it with her sense of smell, but she didn’t know its scent. Not to mention the room, but the entire mansion was filled with the smell of dust and mold due to being neglected for so many years. Making her nose stop working, she had to rely on her eyes, so she laid down on her belly and peeked under the bed.

“Si-Sister?!”

“Don’t worry, Petra. I will protect you no matter what happens. Anyway, I need to search for the doll from before and…”

It wasn’t under the bed. Maybe it fell behind the wardrobe or the cupboard—

“—What are you doing?”

“…Ram?”

She pushed herself up from the floor and looked back at where that voice had come from. She saw Ram standing there with her arms crossed. Looking baffled, she looked Frederica up and down. Frederica, her beautiful long hair included, was covered in dust.

And then…

“—What are you doing?” Ram asked, repeating her question.

"It was really there! I saw it with my own two eyes! So, I am absolutely certain that that doll is…"

"Alright, alright, Ram understands. The doll was there. But it's gone now. That solves it."

"That doesn't solve anything!"

After moving towards the hall, Frederica frantically tried to explain what had happened before. Ram listened, but she didn't seem to believe her at all.

"Uuh. Petra… Petra, you believe me, right?"

"Yes, I believe you. But for now, we need to do something about your clothes and hair rather than worry about that doll…"

Petra gently wiped her dirty hair and ran a comb through it. Frederica was glad that she believed her and shot a glare at Ram.

"What was it then?" asked Ram.

"I don't know, but let's assume that I mistook something else for a doll. It was probably a wild animal or a… "

"Or a doll that moves on its own."

"You-are-such-a…!"

Frederica felt frustrated by Ram mocking her and tried taking a swipe at her, but Ram swiftly moved away from her range. "Sister!" exclaimed Petra as she brushed out Frederica's dust-covered hair. "Jeez, stay still. You'll ruin your pretty hair—"

It happened right after Petra said that.

"—Eek?!"

From far away, on the first floor of the mansion, they heard something that sounded like an explosion, making Frederica's shoulders jump.

The noise wasn't the sound of footsteps or a building creaking in the wind. The sound was more clear. It sounded like a burst of air.

"Wh-What was that sound?!" exclaimed Frederica, looking towards where the sound came from.

"It sounded kind of weird," said Petra.

Frederica immediately grabbed Petra's shoulders and stepped back.

"Now do you believe me?" said Frederica with a shaky voice, looking over at Ram "It seems like there is definitely something else here. We need to…"

"—? What are you saying, Frederica? Are you saying that you heard something?"

"Wha…?! St-Stop joking around. At a time like this…"

Ram's words made Frederica doubt herself. Ram, however, was tilting her head. She looked just as indifferent as always, and it didn't seem like she was playing a trick on her.

"Huh-Huh… Petra, you heard it, right?"

"Huh? Ah, yes, I heard it. It was a weird pow sound."

"See! Petra also heard it! Ram, you must've… "

"Ram didn't hear anything like that. Ram doesn't have a reason to tell trivial lies, either. But if you really insist, then we can go check it out."

Saying that, Ram took a short breath and placed her foot on the stairs that led to the first floor from the hall.

"Wait!" Frederica shouted, grabbing her sleeve to stop her from doing something reckless. "We-We have no idea what could be up there. If something happens to you, then what am I going to tell Garf?"

"You may tell Garf that Ram went somewhere far far away. As for

Master Roswaal, Ram is still thinking about that… Frederica, you're overreacting."

"It isn't like that! Look, even Petra is shaking a lot!"

"Sister, stop, my arms hurt… Ah. Th-That's better."

Petra complained since she was about to be hugged to death. Frederica reluctantly let go of Petra and hugged Ram instead.

"…What are you doing?"

"There's definitely something in this mansion. The forest is dark at night, but we should get out of here for now. It's necessary for everyone's safety."

"That doesn't answer Ram's question. Why are you hugging Ram?"

"I-I-It's not what you think!" stammered Frederica. "I'm not scared!"

Frederica was unaware that she was spilling the beans herself. While burying Ram in her well-endowed chest, she slowly backed away and headed towards the entrance.

"I'm not scared," said Frederica, trying to convince herself and failing, "but we should head back now. Come on, Petra, there's nothing we can gain from staying here for too long."

As she said this, Frederica pushed the door open with the side of her hips.

And then—

It was raining cats and dogs outside.

"It's really coming down," said Ram.

"…"

"The road to the town is going to be quite muddy in this rain," Ram continued.

"No, we can reach it in a flash if I beastify and run with you two on me.”

“Sister Frederica?!” When Frederica started to unbutton her uniform in preparation for her beastification, Petra grabbed her arm. “No, don’t! Please calm down!”

“Le-Let go of me, Petra. I do not like beastifying without taking my clothes off! It causes problems for me later since I end up having nothing to wear!”

“No, just don’t transform at all! It’s fine, you have nothing to worry about!”

Upon hearing Petra, who was holding on to her tightly, Frederica couldn’t bear to resort to using force. Watching Petra rebutton her clothes, she sighed deeply.

“What should we do…” she wondered.

“Let’s just go ahead and find out what made that noise then,” suggested Petra.

“Th-That noise? Petra, are you serious?”

“Yes!”

Unlike Ram, who seemed to have selective hearing, Petra must have heard the same sound as Frederica. But unlike Frederica, Petra showed no fear.

“I guess this is how it feels to be surpassed by someone younger than you…”

“That’s a really quick declaration of defeat,” said Ram. “Haven’t you only been her mentor for two months?”

“Yes, yes, you are right! There are also those who do not respect their seniors and don’t even try to improve no matter how many years they are taught!” Frederica said, glaring at Ram, before turning to Petra in order to confirm her resolve. “But…are you sure, Petra?”

Petra, however, did not change her mind after getting asked a second time, saying, “Yeah, you can leave it to me,” with an energetic thump of her small chest.

She looked up at the first floor of the mansion with eyes full of enthusiasm. “Did the noise from before come from an animal? Or was it made by a hollow… But it could also be a moving doll. It’d be pretty amazing if it was…”

“Petra? Petra? Hey, what’s with that look in your eyes?”

With a snap of her fingers, Petra deduced that the sound was coming from upstairs, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. Her cheeks slightly red, the girl smiled at Frederica’s query and…

“I’ll go,” she said, making her way up the stairs. “I’ll do something about it no matter what awaits me there!”

“Wait! Don’t do it, Petra! Wh-What are you doing Ram?! Quick, we need to go after her!”

“With you weighing so much, you’ll only slow Ram down, Frederica.”

“No, I don’t! You’re just being mean!”

Following Petra up the stairs, Frederica and an unwilling Ram also headed to the first floor. The uneasiness made Frederica hesitate for a moment, but her love for Petra was stronger. She took forceful steps up the stairs—and then, with a loud crash, the staircase gave in.

“Ha-eek?!” With a scream, Frederica fell through the middle of the stairs.

Frederica’s face instantly turned red, and Ram looked down at her from above. “You weigh too much, Frederica.”

“No, I don’t!!”

An angry voice reverberated once again.

Falling through the floor had made her lag behind Petra, who had swiftly climbed the stairs.

“Haa…”

“You sighed again! I have told you many times that I do not weigh that much!” Frederica screamed, getting red in the face.

“Ram hasn’t said anything,” Ram replied, shrugging her shoulders and brushing her off. “There is a limit to how self-conscious a person can be.”

Frederica looked towards the hallway of the first floor and searched for Petra, who had gotten there before them. But she couldn’t find her. It was possible that she had gone into one of the rooms since she was nowhere to be seen.

“Jeez, is she in one of the rooms?” Petra! Where are…eek?!”

Frederica heard the explosion again the moment she called Petra’s name. It was closer this time, from right behind her. She quickly turned around, and her eyes met Ram’s, who was holding her elbow.

Looking completely unperturbed, she squinted her pink eyes. “—What is it?”

“Yo-Yo-You really can’t hear anything? Or are you acting like that on purpose to make me feel anxious?”

“That’s a false accusation. Ram doesn’t know what you are talking about.”

“Uuh…I don’t know if you’re being serious or not, but this isn’t the time for it!”

Despite knowing her for a long time, she couldn’t tell whether Ram was being honest or was trying to fool her. That made her feel miserable, and she felt a momentary hatred for her.

"—Get out!"

"—Hic?!"

This time, Frederica clearly heard an unfamiliar voice. She slowly turned her neck, so slow that it felt like it was creaking, towards the source of the voice. But all she saw was a window of the mansion exposed to the wind and rain and slightly shaking.

"N-Now! Now!" stammered Frederica. "You heard a weird voice, right?! It said, 'Get out'!"

"…How arrogant of you. In this weather? You want Ram to get soaked?"

"It wasn't me! Something else said that!" cried out Frederica.

"You probably mistook it for wind or something. You are being oversensitive."

"And aren't you being too insensitive? Do I look like I am lying?!"

Despite her best effort to convey her message, Frederica's words failed to change Ram's mind.

Unable to bear Ram's distrustful gaze, Frederica said, "Fine then," giving up. "If you love it so much, you can spend the night here alone! I'm going to leave with Petra as soon as possible!"

"Ram doesn't know what you're so upset about…"

"Hmph! That! Anyway, I need to—"

Fueled by her anger for Ram, Frederica pushed down the growing feeling of anxiety and fear, and opened the door closest to her.

—A tremendous amount of rainwater poured out from within, sweeping Frederica away.

"Eeeeeek?!"

Caught by surprise, Frederica wasn't able to put up any resistance in time and fell into the hallway. She had instantly gotten soaked from head to toe in rainwater.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What just…”

“Rainwater must’ve leaked in and collected in this room.”

“Is something like that even possible?!”

“What else could it be?”

Ram lent the soaked Frederica a hand and helped her up. While she was standing up, however, she heard the sound of pottery breaking from the room at the end of the hallway.

“Eek?! What is it this time?!”

“Just the wind. It probably knocked over a vase or something,” said Ram.

And then…

“—Curse you.”

A voice passed by Frederica’s ears.

“I-It said ‘curse you’ this time?! Ra-Ra-Ra-Ram! What was that voice…”

“Just the wind. Wind comes in from everywhere since it’s an old building.”

“Wind doesn’t sound like that!!” cried out Frederica

After wringing out the water from her sleeves and skirt, Frederica took to the hallway again, her mind filled with worry for Petra.

Petra might also be going through the same scary experience as Frederica. Thinking that was the case, Frederica couldn’t help but be anxious and think about rescuing her right away.

So, that’s—

"—Hic!!"

The moment thunder rumbled, and when the room became dark, and even when the cupboard fell and the dishes shattered and made a loud noise, which seemed like some sort of an ill-conceived prank, Frederica's first thought was about Petra.

And then…

"—Noooooo!!"

—The story went back to the beginning the moment she screamed while hugging the smiling doll.

6

—The moment that Frederica let out a scream.

"…"

She reflexively let go of the doll, and it seemed like she was about to faint right then and there. However, the moment she let go of it, it thundered yet again, and a flash of lightning lit up her surroundings.

The doll that had gone flying was promptly caught by Petra. In her slender arms, before there could have been any sort of reaction from the doll—

"—I won't let you!!"

Pulling herself together, Frederica unleashed her survival instincts kicked into survival mode. Her maid uniform exploded from within, from which the beautiful golden fur of a leopardess emerged. She transformed into a beast at a frightening speed, and once her hindlegs emerged, it was complete. She then charged forward like the wind and swept Ram and Petra off their feet.

"…"

Dragging their bodies along, the transformed Frederica moved to the other end of the hallway in a single instant. Not even Garfiel could catch up to Frederica when she raced at full speed.

She undoubtedly had the strongest legs in the Emilia camp. However…

"—Get out."

"Eek."

She once again heard the doll she had left in the dust.

Frederica looked back and held back a scream. The doll had grabbed hold of her tail after she beastified.

She chomped her fangs. "Ram! Take care of Petra!"

Not waiting for a reply, Frederica left them in the hallway and then jumped straight up, breaking through the ceiling and going above the roof in one fell swoop. She rose rapidly in the rain, going towards the black clouds. The doll was still holding on to her tail despite now being in midair, but since the two people she wanted to protect were safe in the mansion, she didn't feel like she had to hold anything back. She swung her tail forcefully, making the doll lose its grip and fall and smash into the roof.

"I will for sure—"

Deliver the final blow this time, Frederica thought, turning around in midair. She was about to charge in and sacrifice herself, but then she noticed something: nearly identical dolls were crawling up onto the roof from the mansion one after another.

"Wha—"

Frederica was at a loss for words. At that sight. At the pure horror in front of her. They all looked identical, including some that weren't wearing clothes; nearly a hundred of them had followed her up to the roof. All of their eyes fell on her above their heads. —Their eyes shined brightly.

"—Ah."

Her fear, which had been replaced by her fight-or-flight response, resurfaced in that moment. Her legs trembled, her fangs chattered, her fiery eyes turned moist, and then the strength drained from her entire body. Frederica's beastification was undone, and then she went into free fall right above the dolls.

And just like that, poor Frederica became their prey—

"—Catch her!"

"…"

Just when she was thinking she was about to be beaten to a pulp, Frederica heard a firm voice and then widened her eyes in surprise. Right below her, inches away even, the dolls had their hands extended in her direction, and she imagined herself being torn limb from limb by those tiny hands. However, that didn't happen.

The dolls caught the falling Frederica gently with their extended hands.

"…Huh?"

By using their many arms, the dolls tried to lessen the impact of the fall to the best of their ability. Frederica opened her eyes in surprise since the impact was softer than she had expected. When she turned her head, she met the gaze of the doll with cracks on its face. It was the very doll she had encountered in the hallway—

"You're—"

"…"

Frederica couldn't detect any malice on the doll's face. Right when she noticed that and went to say something to the doll… "Ahgeek?!" …she fell through the roof of the mansion that hadn't been able to handle the impact or the weight of the dolls and then crashed into the hallway.

Ram stood in front of Frederica shaking her head and said, "—This confirms it. You weigh too much, Frederica," repeating it unapologetically for the third time.

7

“So, what are all these dolls anyway?”

Petra brought up the topic after roughly sealing the hole in the ceiling that Frederica had made in order to stop water from coming in. Many dolls were lined up on the floor of the entrance in front of her eyes. They were the source of the commotion that Frederica claimed to have seen and appeared about a hundred times more than she had assumed. They were quiet now, but if Frederica’s story was true, they had been vindictive in their attempts to get rid of her, saying and doing things in their attempt to do so.

The dolls—which were a foot shorter than Petra—looked so lifelike that one would definitely be surprised if one came across one in the dark.

“This is a magicreation tool that was left behind in the mansion,” Ram revealed, putting her hand on the heads of the dolls.

Petra muttered, “Magicreation tool,” after hearing that, widening her eyes in surprise.

A magicreation tool is a special tool powered by a magic stone. They can be used in a variety of ways, such as an iron plate that emits heat when cooking, or to help create wind without the use of magic.

However, the fact that a moving doll was a magicreation tool was outside Petra’s common knowledge.

“I didn’t know that such cute magicreation tools existed,” said Petra.

“They aren’t a common type though. Master Roswaal’s predecessor was a pioneer in creating magicreation tools, so he left behind many prototypes like these. Perhaps these are some of them.”

“It’s a ma-magicreation tool…?”

“Oh, Sister Frederica.”

While they were talking about magicreation tools, Frederica returned. She was completely drenched, not to mention naked since her beastification destroyed her clothes, so she gathered whatever fabric she could find in their luggage and around the mansion and created an outfit of some sort.

“Such a shameless appearance.”

“What was I supposed to do?!” said Frederica angrily. “The change of clothes I brought and everything else in there got soaked because of the heavy rain, and there’s no way I could wear anything until it dried…but it wouldn’t have been an issue if you had just dried it all with your magic.”

“You want Ram to use her precious stamina for the sake of drying clothes? At least you can keep working despite your shameless appearance, unlike Ram who’d be unable to move. Endure it.”

“Stop saying shameless over and over,” Frederica said, frowning.

“Geez! Stop fighting!” Petra exclaimed, going in between her two sister figures who were arguing and serving as a mediator. “More importantly…”

She pointed at the dolls that were lined up.

The dolls moved their heads in unison and looked at Frederica menacingly.

“Eek! Wh-Why, why am I the only one being treated like an enemy…!”

“It’s not fair,” complained Petra. “I was more excited by the thought of meeting a hollow, but only Sister Frederica gets favored…”

“It’s not quite like that. Ram admits she doesn’t know much about this magicreation tool, but she can guess why it treated us differently.”

Ram began her explanation, and Frederica and Petra looked at each other and cocked their heads, making them look like real sisters. It was a lovely sight, but Ram didn’t smile at all.

“Listen here,” she said, holding up a finger as she stood in front of the dolls. “This doll’s job is most likely to protect the mansion. Though the mansion has been abandoned for a long time, they are still following the orders they were given. So they just were trying to drive out intruders.”

“B-But, why only me? Leaving Petra aside, it’s unfair that you aren’t soaking wet too!”

“This isn’t a matter of fairness. And the reason we were treated differently wasn’t because of favoritism.”

“What was the reason then, Sister Ram?”

“It’s simple.”

With that said, Ram slowly walked across the entrance hall and stopped in front of the door. It was quite literally the front door that connected the inside of the mansion with the outside—

“—People who enter through the entrance are guests. And people who enter from other places are intruders.”

“—Ah.”

Frederica gasped in surprise upon hearing Ram’s guess. She had certainly not entered from the front door but had indeed entered through a whole in the back of the mansion. But if it that was the condition to draw the dolls’ ire then,

“Question!” quipped Petra. “I entered from the hole too. But they didn’t try to scare me away.”

“But you heard the sound that Ram couldn’t, right? If so, then there is a difference in the way people are treated.”

“A difference in treatment…so do they differentiate between adults and children then?”

“Ram thinks so. Adult intruders are treated like burglars, while child intruders are treated with more leniency… Ram isn’t sure what sort of criteria they use, but she guesses they use something like height.”

“Argggh…”

Things weren’t looking good for Frederica once things like height and build entered the equation.

Anyway, Ram’s hypothesis is probably right, thought Frederica. In fact, the dolls are surprisingly receptive to her orders since she is a guest. And the picture of her ordering them around really suits her.

“I don’t know why, but making the dolls follow you really suits you, Sister Ram.”

As Frederica was thinking that, Petra expressed the same thing.

“Obviously,” Ram replied, running her hand over her pink hair. “The innate qualities Ram was born with are on a different level, and they’re dolls, so their purpose is to follow orders. And they were doing that earlier.”

“You’re way too confident about this, but I’m relieved. If we were being taunted by hollows this time, I would’ve um…”

“What would you have done, Sister Frederica?” asked Petra.

“I would have run as fast as I could in the rain, soaking wet with you and Ram on my back…”

Good thing only one of us got soaking wet, Frederica thought. Though she wasn’t sure if she should think like that, she forced herself to come to terms with it.

“But this is great,” said Petra “If the dolls help out, it’ll take no time at all to fix the mansion up. By the way, you were so cute, Sister Frederica.”

“Pe-Petra?! What do you mean by ‘cute’…”

“She’s referring to the way you tremble and run around like a headless chicken. Looks like Ram isn’t the only one with a twisted personality.”

“My Petra’s personality is nothing like yours!”

Ram ignored Frederica’s furious protest and responded to it with deafening silence. Brushing off Ram’s comment, Petra looked around at the dolls who were seemingly waiting for their master’s orders, and then lightning struck her with an idea.

“Hey, Sister Frederica, I have a favor to ask…”

She turned back to her two sisters and decided to convince them to humor her sudden idea.

8

“I was quite surpriseeeeed. I didn’t expect Petra to caaall me to come down here and see something in person.”

Roswaal chuckled in a good mood when they came to pick him up in the nearest town.

Petra’s expressions were complicated and strange when Roswaal talked to her, so Frederica was anxious with the worry that her younger sister might explode. She really wanted to hold her head at Roswaal’s bad habit of provoking Petra while being fully aware that she would get mad.

“I was wondering what it could be, but from the looks of you all, it seems like it isn’t anything daaangerous, so should I assume that you three found something really interesting then?”

“Yes. It was Petra’s idea, but it will surely live up to your expectations, Master Roswaal,” replied Ram.

“Oh myyy, it’s making me exxxcited.”

“Master, don’t provoke Petra too much or I will get angry,” threatened Frederica.

While they were on their way, Frederica acted as a buffer between Roswaal and Petra and glared at Ram for not helping her out. Ram did not seem to notice it, however, and was just looking straight ahead. She seemed different than usual.

The mansion eventually came into view, and Roswaal squinted his heterochromatic eyes. “Aah…This brings back memories. It’s been so long since I last came here.”

“—? You mean when you were a child, Master?” Petra asked.

“Was I speaking in riddles? Anyway, what’s the thing you wanted to show me?”

Roswaal gave a vague answer to Petra’s question and then impatiently looked around. Seeing his reaction, Frederica and the others looked at each other and nodded, then reverently opened the front door.

Upon stepping into the mansion, Roswaal’s eyes widened in surprise.

“This is…”

“…”

Welcoming him were one hundred and eleven neatly maintained dolls with clothes and makeup on—courtesy of Petra.

“They’ve been guarding the mansion for a long time… It only felt right that they be acknowledged for their work. They must’ve been waiting for their someone’s return for a long time.” said Petra to Roswaal, who just stood there.

That was Petra’s wish which Frederica and Ram had accepted. Petra’s kindness was met with a nod of approval from Frederica from the beginning and even though Ram didn’t say no she acted like it was a drag.

Petra put her heart into improving the dolls’ appearances with a touch of makeup. To her, these dolls were their seniors and had been in service longer than Frederica when she first arrived at Roswaal Manor.

“You guys stayed here all this time?” asked Roswaal, looking at the sea of dolls.

"…"

"I see… You increased your companions in order to fulfill your duty. All this time you have been protecting this manor and yearning for the day that its master would return."

Their eyes were fixed on their master—Roswaal—as if they were hanging on to each and every word. As if moved by their gaze, Roswaal gently stroked the head of the doll in the front. "I'm back now. —I'm sorry for keeping all of you waiting."

The dolls bowed their heads reverently in response to Roswaal's words of gratitude. "—Welcome home, Master."

As Frederica, Ram, and Petra felt various emotions while looking at that scene they suddenly noticed something.

"What…? They aren't-moving…?"

The dolls had stopped moving after lowering their heads. There was no response to the confused Petra's mutter, and Roswaal let out a sigh.

"They have fulfilled their duty to the mansion," he said. "After tirelessly dedicating themselves, they can finally rest now."

"But…"

"—Thank you. For giving me a chance to right a wrong," said Roswaal before turning back around to face a teary Petra and placing his hand on her head.

At that moment, Petra bit her lip hard and pulled away from Roswaal's touch. She hid behind Frederica and glared at him. "Master, you dummy! Selfish! You are always like this!"

"You're right. I am always like this. You can expect to be veeeeery busy now that I'm here."

He ignored Petra's roaring anger and smiled wryly while taking in the scene around him. All he saw were lifeless dolls and a still-unrenovated mansion. In the end, they couldn't rely on the dolls for help, so they had to renovate the mansion themselves. But…

“I think I’ll do something myself for a change… What should we start with?” asked Roswaal.

“Hmmm, are you sure?” replied Frederica, “I am warning you, this won’t be easy.”

“Why, you can most certainly cooount on me.”

Frederica smiled and said, “Alright. Then go ahead and work him like an earth dragon, Petra.”

“Yes! With pleasure!” replied Petra.

The master rolled up his sleeves, which didn’t suit him, and the raging Petra told him what to do. Watching the comical scene unfold before her, Frederica smiled and turned towards Ram.

She was kneeling next to the doll that had completed its duty and whose time had stopped and was gently caressing its cheek.

“Thank you for your service, great seniors. —You can leave Master Roswaal to us now,” Ram said kindly.

To Frederica, seeing Ram do something like that was rarer than a hollow.

END

Very Very Rough Justice
(CA)
(Translation Pending)

Short Story Collection 8

Stand By Me Pleiades
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—Natsuki Subaru had vanished from the Pleiades Watchtower.

In short, that was the substance of the letter delivered to the mansion.

Roswaal: "—Lady Emilia has gotten remarkably better at her penmanship, she has."

Narrowing his mismatched eyes as he scanned the letter, Roswaal L. Mathers rested a slender finger on his chin and voiced an observation wholly unrelated to its contents.

At the time they first met, the sender of the letter, Emilia, had been ignorant of the world to an excessive degree.

Living a secluded life with her family's Great Spirit in her home forest, she had lacked common sense, and Roswaal had foreseen the headaches involved in giving her the various lessons required for the Royal Selection.

Yet, thanks to her sincerity and desire to improve, Emilia had produced tangible results.

Of course, she still had plenty of immaturities, but as an instructor he found her growth gratifying. If the Royal Selection were not constrained to three years, cramming even more disciplines into her regimen would have been delightful.

Roswaal: "It seems this is hardly the time to be indulging in such idle musings, however~."

Having bought himself a moment to sort out his thoughts through that bit of escapism, Roswaal closed his eyes.

Some time earlier, Emilia, together with Subaru and the others accompanying her, had set out for the Augria Sand Dunes at the kingdom's eastern edge—the Pleiades Watchtower where the «Sage» resided.

Their aim had been to meet the «Sage» Shaula and rely on her knowledge, famed as being nearly omniscient.

However, the attempt on the tower was expected to involve trials—trials even the «Sword Saint» Reinhard had failed—and Roswaal had judged it utterly impossible without Natsuki Subaru.

In fact, though how Subaru's presence had contributed remained unknown, Emilia and the others had safely reached the Pleiades Watchtower and achieved their goal—leaving only the issue mentioned at the outset still unresolved.

Roswaal: "So dear Subaru-kun has left Lady Emilia's side, hm. —It appears to be an unforeseen circumstance."

Arranging every circumstance into its optimal state—that was the Authority Roswaal knew Subaru to possess.

A problem had arisen that even that power could not fully compensate for. Subaru leaving Emilia's side—nothing else could explain it; and that, to Roswaal, constituted an emergency.

It had to be corrected—no matter what sacrifices it demanded.

Roswaal: "…"

Narrowing both eyes, Roswaal threw open the study window, leapt out, and, his cloak billowing, alighted in the front garden of the mansion.

His landing was flawless, yet there was someone ready to raise a fuss over such sudden behavior.

Frederica: "Master! Whatever are you doing all of a sudden?! Such discourtesy is like Garf's…"

It was the maid Frederica who, having spotted Roswaal after his leap, hurried over and said so.

Shaking her long golden hair, emerald eyes flashing indignantly, she closed the distance at once, ready to deliver a proper scolding regardless of the fact that the target was the master of the estate.

Frederica: “Please refrain from such childish antics. Had Petra been the one to find you, she would have been even more severe with her lecturing—”

Roswaal: “Frederica.”

Frederica: “What is it! I shall have you know, I do this only for your sake, Master—”

Roswaal: “—A bird-letter has arrived from Lady Emilia and the others. The matter seems urgent. Make the preparations.”

Frederica: “—Understood. What will you do, Master?”

Cut off mid-lecture, Frederica straightened at once before Roswaal’s serious tone—the speed of the switch befitting a model maid—and in answer to her question, Roswaal pointed to the sky.

Roswaal: “Given the situation, I need swift legs. —I shall summon Clind. I will be back within a few hours.”

Frederica: “Understood. I shall inform Petra myself.”

For a split second Frederica’s eyes twitched at Clind’s name, but Roswaal made no comment on her aversion.

Frederica and Clind—once inseparable—were now somehow awkward with each other; getting those two capable servants to coordinate smoothly remained a vexing issue.

At any rate—

Roswaal: “These are the details of the bird-letter. I leave the particulars to you—see that you think carefully and make the necessary arrangements.”

He handed Emilia’s letter to Frederica and turned his back on her. Once she read it, Frederica would make the proper arrangements.

Leaving that trust behind, Roswaal lightly kicked off the ground and lifted himself into the air.

A flight magic achieved through a composite of wind, earth, and yang magic—it was prized for allowing a speed rivaling that of migratory birds, yet, surprisingly, few were able to imitate it, for it belonged to the domain of advanced magic.

Because so few could use it, both the royal court and certain old friends had told him not to employ it too freely, and yet—

Roswaal: “—Right now qualifies as nothing less than an emergeeency~.”

Unconsciously casting their warnings aside in that earnest tone, Roswaal tore through the blue sky.

Frederica: “If only you always showed nothing but that earnest side of yourself, those around you might ease their glare a little.”

Raising her head from a deep bow, long hair rippling in the wind stirred by her departing master, Frederica murmured the complaint at once deft yet clumsy Roswaal.

From the speed of his response and his seriousness, it was clear Roswaal’s concern for Emilia and the others was genuine. Naturally, the underlying premise of his own objectives remained, but that did not alter his actions.

If only he would show that side of himself to Petra, Otto, and Garfiel—the ones forever keeping a wary eye on his every move.

Frederica: “Is this, too, merely my debt of gratitude to Master clouding my eyes?”

Letting the corners of her brows droop, Frederica heaved a heavy sigh and lowered her gaze to the letter in her hands.

She reflected on the bird-letter before her—a delivery technique that used birds specially raised and trained to carry correspondence over great distances. It had been devised by Roswaal’s grandmother two generations back; despite the many issues, such as the high cost of raising the birds and the need for concealment runes against theft or crashes, it remained popular among the kingdom’s upper classes.

The very fact it had arrived from the Augria Sand Dunes at the kingdom’s eastern frontier attested to its impressive speed and range—but what exactly was in it that had made Roswaal so serious?

Frederica: “This is…”

Scanning the letter, Frederica even forgot to raise her hand to cover her mouth—an unconscious gesture she would never normally neglect—so shocking was its content, and—

Petra: “Frederica-nee-sama! Just now, didn’t Master go flying off?”

Recently taking magic lessons from the detestable Roswaal, Petra had sensed the disturbance of mana in the manor and rushed into the front garden. Knowing the tender feelings of the girl who was practically her little sister, Frederica grasped what Roswaal had meant by “I leave the rest to you” and silently resented him for it.

Frederica: “…And how am I supposed to explain this to Petra, pray tell?”

Gazing up at the sky where her master had vanished, Frederica murmured feebly, wondering how she could possibly relay Emilia’s note—the note that had sent Roswaal hurrying—to Petra.

2

—Several hours after Frederica’s muttered complaint, Roswaal—who ought to have been the target of that resentment—was confronting his intended counterpart inside the intended mansion.

Annerose: “As always, Uncle, your visits are so sudden.”

Roswaal: “I am aware it is impolite, I knooow. But this is urgent business on my end as well—please forgive me.”

Annerose: “I would be far more troubled if you turned up on the balcony when it was not urgent at all.”

Glaring at Roswaal with young yet stern eyes was Annerose Miload, mistress of the mansion he had clambered onto from the balcony and head of the long-associated Miload family.

Granted, the longstanding relationship belonged to the Miloads; with Annerose herself—now ten years old—Roswaal had known her only since the day she was born.

He felt a deep, fond amazement at how splendidly she had grown into a young lady, and yet—

Annerose: “Uncle, I am no longer nine; I have turned ten. Please do not forget.”

Roswaal: “Oh dear, I do not believe I said anything out loud, thouuugh.”

Annerose: “Your eyes said as much. Please compose yourself. The only reason your behavior, attire, and lifestyle are tolerated is because everyone mistakenly believes you are at least reasonable on the inside.”

Roswaal: “Goodness, if you say so, I have no defense.”

Shaking his head with a wry smile at her words, Roswaal rocked the back of the reception-room sofa. Thankful for her poise in calmly receiving a guardian who had literally flown here, he searched for an opening to broach his main topic—but:

Annerose: “Since you went to the trouble of arriving from the sky, this must be a request for me… or for Clind, perhaps? Or for both of us?”

Roswaal: “How reassuuuring~. Am I really that easy to read?”

Annerose: “Indeed you are. You always choose the quickest, best move. You cannot risk convoluted or roundabout tactics for fear of failure, can you?”

Accepting that the wisest course was not to argue with her childlike provocation, Roswaal yielded—Annerose knew exactly how much he valued her. Snapping her fingers, she said:

Annerose: “Clind, do come in. Or rather—you are already here, are you not?”

Clind: “Indeed, as you say. Your insight is peerless.”

As the thin-faced man in impeccable butler attire stepped through the drawing-room door—one eye hidden behind a monocle—Roswaal relied on Annerose’s efficiency and plunged straight to business.

Roswaal: “A bird-letter has arrived from Lady Emilia. It seems I must head to the Empire over a matter involving Subaru-kun. I wish to borrow the two of you to handle matters here and make the necessary arrangements.”

Annerose: “…Emily and Natsuki Subaru, is it.”

The Miloads were major supporters of Emilia in the Royal Selection, and Annerose—who called her “Emily”—would spare no effort for her sake, even if the issue concerned her complicated rival, Natsuki Subaru.

Annerose: “In short, while you move to resolve the matter yourself, I am to take charge of House Mathers?”

Roswaal: “Precisely. I wish to entrust it to you; there is no one else I can truuust.”

Annerose: “Spare me the flattery. …Will you be leaving anyone behind?”

Roswaal: “I thought of leaving either Ram or Frederica… but that seems difficult. The problem appears to involve not only Subaru-kun but also Rem, who traveled with us."

Emilia's letter had revealed that both Subaru and Rem had vanished; Ram's agitation would be immense. She had joined the journey precisely to find a way to save her sleeping sister—who had now disappeared altogether. Telling her to stay quietly at the mansion was unthinkable.

Roswaal: "Therefore, at best I could leave Frederica alone… naturally, I will chooose carefully."

Annerose: "In any case, a handover from Frederica to Clind is essential. Very well, I accept the task of overseeing the house. As for the rest—"

Her almond-shaped eyes turned toward the butler standing behind her. Prompted by his mistress's gaze, Clind bowed respectfully.

Clind: "Then allow me to enquire. Question: —What is it that you desire of me, Master?"

Roswaal: "There is a problem Subaru-kun is carrying. We cannot keep him separated from Beatrice for long. Our time is limited."

Clind: "The contract between Lord Subaru and Lady Beatrice—its term, its limitations, its deadline."

Roswaal grimaced; master and servant truly were fast talkers. Subaru and Beatrice were a pair whose mutual deficiencies made them perfectly complementary: Subaru's gate was shattered, leaving him no means of expelling the mana his body produced, while Beatrice could accept mana only from her contractor. Their bond was ideal—until separation spelled mutual ruin.

Roswaal: "It is wonderful that they are so close, but once apart they fall into mortal jeopardy. Subaru-kun faces death from an excess build-up of mana, Beatrice faces disappearance from mana deficiency."

Clind: "That loss would be intolerable—to you, Master, and to me as well."

Roswaal: “Indeed. I cannot afford to lose the card that is Subaru-kun.”

Clind: “Forgive me. I was speaking of Lady Beatrice. My apologies.”

Annerose clapped her hands softly.

Annerose: “I understand. So that is why you need Clind’s help, Uncle. …But his ability to shorten distance works only within Lugunica.”

Roswaal: “Of course, I knooow that. Even so, if we are to head for the Empire, many arrangements are required. May I rely on you, Clind?”

Clind: “If it is your wish and Lady Annerose consents—no problem. However—”

Roswaal: “You mean the payment of the price, yes? I am aware—though it pains me deeeply.”

Selling off memories—an ironic act for one who clung to the past—always tore at Roswaal’s heart, yet that very pain was proof of the price paid.

Roswaal: “Three… no, four spells I will offer as payment. In exchange, I wish to borrow the power of your Authority.”

Clind: “Four—such a bold, decisive choice.”

Roswaal: “If I hold back and come up short, I could not bear it. Time is short—for me as well.”

One eye closed, the yellow eye fixed on Clind. Time was precious for every step toward his long-sought goal; Roswaal could not afford a single failure, nor the luxury of waiting for another chance.

Roswaal: “First, go and collect Lady Emilia and the others. Take care not to divulge your Authority.”

Clind: “Understood. Lady Annerose, do you approve?—Acknowledged.”

Annerose: “…It is for Emily’s sake. Do as Uncle says, Clind.”

At her nod, the butler bowed deeply—then vanished. He had quite literally disappeared, not merely hidden himself. By now, his figure was likely in Mirula, the town nearest the Augria Sand Dunes.

Roswaal: “Should he wish, he might even reach the Pleiades Watchtower itself.”

Annerose: “He says that is impossible—there is apparently a reason the tower is hard to approach… though he would not explain further.”

Lowering her eyes as she spoke of Clind’s Authority, Annerose fell silent, then at length:

Annerose: “Was it really all right, Uncle?”

Roswaal: “Isn’t it a bit meen~ to ask only after it becomes irreversible?”

Annerose: “Magic is extremely precious to you, is it not? Very, very precious.”

Roswaal: “…Precisely because it is.”

Her large eyes reminded him irresistibly of her parents’ earnestness. Clutching his chest, Roswaal endured the pang of accusation from his past. To fulfill his long-cherished wish—his reunion with that person—no sacrifice was too great, even if the price was the very blessing bestowed by that person.

Annerose: “Please do not torment yourself too much, Uncle.”

Roswaal: “Quite the opposite, Annerose. There is no reason for me not to keep packing my feelings in.”

Though admonished by one so much younger, Roswaal shook his head. Even recognizing her counsel as heartfelt, he could not accept it—for this was the story Roswaal L. Mathers—no, Roswaal Mathers—had chosen.

3

"…"

The scenery changed in literally the space of a blink, and Otto Suwen found himself standing in front of the mansion.

A journey that should have spanned several hundred kilometers and taken more than a week had been erased in an instant, leaving Otto to gather his thoughts for a few seconds.

Exactly five seconds later he let out a deep sigh.

Otto: "Well, I'm not about to panic over something like this anymore …"

Garfiel: "Ya sure got thick-skinned, Otto-bro. Or were ya born that way?"

Otto: "I can't remember what I was like a year ago, so either answer works."

Shrugging the shoulder Garfiel had just smacked, Otto tossed the immediate questions aside and glanced at the suave man standing quietly nearby.

Otto: "This is awfully handy, but is it safe for us to hear the details?"

Clind: "As you surmise, any disclosure is forbidden. I can only guarantee it is not to be used lightly and that it causes no harm to the human body. Rest assured."

Otto: "That wording isn't exactly reassuring, but … very well."

Reluctantly nodding at the butler Clind's reply, Otto reminded himself that although Clind was certainly an ally, he was an ally shrouded in mystery. Long acquainted with Roswaal, he had trained Frederica as a maid, taught Subaru whipwork and martial arts, and even tutored Petra—according to the students themselves. In short, he was indispensable to the Emilia camp.

Garfiel: “Hard ta believe we jumped straight from Pristella to here. Is this that ‘Door Crossing’ Beatrice used?”

Clind: “No, it operates on principles utterly different from Lady Beatrice’s yin-magic—vastly so. Regrettably, the particulars must remain sealed. Forgive me.”

Otto: “You don’t sound very determined to hide it …”

Clind: “Forgive me.”

That same elusive quality Otto had always sensed in Clind was clearly present again. Yet what mattered right now was not the “transfer” itself, but why Clind had gone to such lengths to bring them back.

Otto: “So Natsuki-san and Rem-san were blown all the way to the Vollachian Empire … is that correct?”

Garfiel: “Tch … shoulda gone with ’em, after all.”

Garfiel’s face hardened at once. Otto shook his head.

Otto: “We all decided together. Pristella needed hands for the rebuilding, and we couldn’t have located the ‘Witch’s Remains’ without you.”

Garfiel: “Yeah, but still—”

Otto: “If we start playing what-ifs there’s no end. Take every cause away and we end up at ‘it would’ve been best if Natsuki-san hadn’t been hurled off in the first place.’”

Garfiel: “That sounds like somethin’ Ram’d say. Bit rough on the cap’n, ain’t it?”

Otto: “Which is why blaming yourself is pointless.”

Unless it helped prevent a recurrence, assigning responsibility was futile. The fact was simple: Subaru and Rem were gone, and they needed to enter the Empire to retrieve them. Otto and Garfiel had been summoned for precisely that.

Otto: “Still, of all places, they end up in the most troublesome country …”

Garfiel: “That’s the cap’n for ya. Like in that tale—‘The Father-King’s Trials, every last one in Magritza.’”

Otto: “In that story the hero suffers nonstop hardship and dies unrewarded at the end.”

He slumped at the comparison, already dreading the ordeals ahead. In his years of peddling Otto had visited countries beyond Lugunica, yet the one great nation he had never entered was southern Vollachia. Tense relations with the kingdom and the sheer number of border conditions were part of it, but the main reason was simpler:

Otto: “—Because in that nation, a person’s life is lost more easily than anywhere else.”

In Vollachia the strong were revered and the weak oppressed; to anyone ill-suited to that climate it was a living hell. There was no debate which side Subaru belonged to.

Clind: “Lady Emilia and her party are already awaiting you both inside. Anticipation.”

Opening the door just as Otto finished composing himself—Clind truly was thorough. Straightening his naturally hunched back, Otto said:

Otto: “Being ‘anticipated’ is a heavy burden, but Lady Emilia and Beatrice-chan must be in quite a whirl. Let’s go join them.”

Garfiel: “Heh, relax, Otto-bro! If we gotta crash into the Empire, I’ll show my worth!”

Otto: “…I shall do my best to keep it from coming to that.”

He had no intention of sparking an international incident; that would wreck the Royal Selection, and even Subaru might be crushed under such a catastrophe—dragging Otto down with him. He might have escaped the sinking ship long ago, but—

Otto: “I threw away that chance a long time ago.”

If he had truly wished to flee, he would have had to do so back when the snorting youth beside him was still a savage enemy rather than a junior comrade. Since then, Otto had not once considered running.

4

Anastasia: “Couldn’t Julius learn to use that handy magic of the butler?”

Julius: “…My apologies. If it were an application of yin-magic, perhaps once Nes matures, but—”

Anastasia: “Ah, ya don’t need to take it that seriously. Even magic-ignorant me knows it ain’t simple.”

The knight’s earnest reply made anyone facing him want to sit up straighter; Anastasia Hoshin waved a hand, chastising herself for making Julius worry yet again.

Once more she had needlessly burdened him—how troublesome.

—Since their master-servant bond had been restored at the Pleiades Watchtower, the two remained awkward. Julius was undoubtedly her knight now, but his memories were still missing, and they struggled to grasp the right distance between them.

Eridna: “For my part, it’s pleasant to see such a rare side of you, Ana.”

Anastasia: “Quit sayin’ that every time. How wicked you are.”

Teased about her unease, Anastasia stuck her tongue out at the muffler around her own neck—literally. The white-fox scarf was an artificial spirit and her long-time partner, Echidna. At the sly chuckle of this conspirator, Anastasia pursed her lips; after all the hardships Echidna had borne while she was absent, she could hardly retort—especially since she had undone those efforts at the last moment.

Eridna: “To escape the Sin Archbishop of ‘Gluttony,’ you hid your consciousness inside and left control of your body to me—a dangerous gamble.”

Anastasia: “And I ruined it because I couldn’t hold out. Really got no patience.”

Exasperated with herself, she touched her cheek, but Julius stepped in. Placing a hand to his chest, the elegant knight said,

Julius: “Lady Anastasia’s single word was the decisive blow. Without that final push, my sword would never have reached Reid Astrea.”

Anastasia: “You really think so? Not just talkin’ me up?”

Julius: “It is the plain truth. I swear it on my sword and my loyalty.”

Anastasia: “Well, if ya go that far, then fine.”

His golden eyes held her pale-turquoise ones without wavering, and she shelved her doubts. Still, such deep trust amazed her.

Anastasia: “We must’ve worked mighty well together. What started it?”

Julius: “The reason I came to serve you, my lady?”

Anastasia: “Right. I’m a foreign merchant; you’re a Kingdom knight. I know my motive, but yours?”

Of his background she knew the basics—heir to House Juukulius, Royal Guard knight—yet why had a man of the Kingdom joined hands with a Kararagi merchant?

Julius: “…There are various reasons, but—”

Anastasia: “But?”

Julius: “Above all, I found hope in Lady Anastasia’s capacity.”

After a brief thought, that was his answer. Its unadorned trust widened her eyes; she had expected some grand ideal more typical of him. As she stiffened—

Eridna: “Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

The scarf spirit burst out laughing, startling Anastasia.

Anastasia: “Echidna! Don’t scare me like that.”

Eridna: “Sorry, sorry. It sounded too familiar to ignore.”

Julius: “Familiar? How so?”

Eridna: “I’m another who invested in Ana’s future; can’t see it as someone else’s story.”

Anastasia: “Now that ya say it, maybe I heard that before… Wait?”

She recalled similar words on meeting Echidna—and even earlier, when Ricardo had smiled that he looked forward to her future.

Anastasia: “Does that mean I always woo folks the same way?”

Eridna: “Nothing wrong with that. If Ana has a trump card that works on everyone, all the better.”

Julius: “Nicely put.”

She smiled wryly at his seriousness. Echidna’s tone was as ever, but Julius seemed able to find merit in anything—which made her wonder if leaving him like that was wise, or if such things hadn’t troubled their former selves.

Julius: “I can’t say. I believed nothing stood between us, though how much you labored behind the scenes…”

Anastasia: “Readin’ my mind, are ya?”

Julius: “During your missing time, I was at your side more than anyone.”

Anastasia: “That’s a killer line.”

Hand to her mouth, she laughed softly and let the impudent knight be. There was unease, yes—but he remembered what she did not, and adversity was her strong suit.

Anastasia: “Besides, I suddenly recalled Emilia-san; I might remember Julius any moment too.”

Eridna: “Ideally, yes. She and Julius both suffered ‘Gluttony’; no one knows how to restore what was lost, but…”

Julius: “There is no need to hurry. —Feeling that way now is something I’m proud of.”

Hand over his heart, he smiled without bravado. Anastasia nodded: “That so.”

With their footing regained, stalled business could wait.

Anastasia: “Like we said at the tower, we gotta help find Natsuki-kun and Rem-san. Emilia-san might not remember, but the third ‘Gluttony’ worries me too.”

Julius: “If they were hurled off together, the Empire is in danger as well.”

Eridna: “That great nation won’t heed us easily. Now, how do we find them?”

Once their direction was set, discussion among the three sped along.

Anastasia: “Not every problem’s solved, but the fact we’re here is thanks to Emilia-san and the others… If I don’t repay that favor, my merchant’s name’ll cry.”

Julius: “Then, what will you do?”

Anastasia: “Why, make a pitch—the Hoshin Company way.”

Answering his winked question, she shrugged. Her sales talk’s charm had just been proven—though perhaps:

Anastasia: “Two’s not right—maybe one and one beast is more accurate?”

With that playful tongue-poke, the muffler at her neck danced in a ticklish flutter.

5

Meili: “Everyone’s scurrying around, trying to bring Big-Brother and the others back, aren’t they…?”

Resting both elbows upon her knees and propping up her cheeks, Meili murmured the words in an even tone.

The air of bustle spreading through the Mathers Mansion felt worlds away from the “old home” she was supposed to have here—though technically, Meili had spent a full year beneath this roof.

Meili: “I mean, the place I stayed was the tatami cell, so having it this lively is kinda refreshing.”

Originally, Meili had been an assassin dispatched to kill Emilia’s party.

She had raised the old manor, failed, and been captured. Ordinarily she would have been tortured—or worse—yet by some twist of fate here she was, left utterly unrestrained.

Meili: “…Do they never worry I’ll suddenly betray them and start a rampage?”

Weapons were unnecessary; should she wish, she could summon the nearby witchbeasts and turn them into pawns. If she felt like it, she could even launch a revenge match for Elsa.

At the notion, Meili gave a small laugh.

Meili: “A revenge match, huh. Elsa would probably think that’s the most pointless thing ever.”

Elsa had never cared a whit about what happened after her death; she had been careless enough when alive, and there was no reason to believe that would change afterward.

Meili had once been offered a chance to learn what her partner had truly thought—but she had missed that chance, and now she felt that was for the best.

Meili: “…After all, somebody already told me I could decide my own future by watching all sorts of people walk ahead.”

Though the one who had said so had flown beyond her sight.

Petra: “Ah! Meili-chan!”

Meili: “Oh?”

Loafing in the lounge, Meili reclined over the chair-back until an upside-down, familiar, cherubic face entered her view—the girl who had visited even during Meili’s captivity alongside Subaru and Emilia.

Meili: “How’ve you been, Petra-chan?”

Petra: “I’m fine! I’m glad you came back safely too, Meili-chan—I was worried, you know.”

Meili: “You worried right after Big-Brother, Big-Sister, and Beatrice-chan, though?”

Petra placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her rosy cheeks.

Petra: “Don’t say that! I never rank the people I worry about.”

Chuckling at her reaction, Meili flipped herself upright to face the girl properly. Petra looked just the same as at their parting a month ago, which was only natural; a return journey should have taken as long as the outward one, yet—

Petra: “You were with Brother Clind, right? What kind of magic did he use?”

Meili: “Beats me. Not being mean—really don’t know. He showed up, chatted a bit with Big-Sister, and pop, both dragon-carriages were in front of the mansion.”

Petra: “Hmm… Must be yin-magic. I hate asking, but I’ll ask the Master later.”

Meili watched the studious Petra nod along. The girl was blooming day by day in countless fields, including magic; given time, she might well unravel the mysterious butler’s spell.

Meili: “You don’t seem as down about Big-Brother as I expected, Petra-chan.”

Petra: “—What do you mean? I’m incredibly anxious, and very angry.”

A smile that never reached her eyes froze Meili’s tongue. She had misread: Petra was furious. Yet the girl in front of her would not explode; she would vent her feelings by means Meili could hardly imagine.

A year ago, when Petra had often visited the tatami cell, the terrifying declaration she had made still sent shivers through Meili whenever she recalled it:

Petra: “I’ll make you love me. Then you’ll never think about killing me again, right? So it’s okay—go ahead and love me.”

That dreadful stratagem had, over the course of a year, utterly disarmed Meili; she no longer entertained the faintest thought of harming Petra.

Meili: “…I-I’m sorry.”

Petra: “Hm? Why are you apologizing? You did your job, didn’t you? They said you helped in that place full of witchbeasts.”

Meili: “That’s true, buuut… I couldn’t save Big-Brother.”

Those words were not driven by fear of Petra, but by Meili’s own regret.

Meili: “I’d stepped away when he was hurled off, but… I’d be lying if I said I never wonder what might’ve happened had I stayed.”

Excuses like “the battle was over” meant nothing; Meili had neglected her vigilance, and everyone had paid. She could not fathom what Subaru and the others now faced in the Empire.

Perhaps sensing her sincerity, Petra’s eyes softened.

Petra: “Thank you for apologizing—and sorry for making you feel you had to. I couldn’t go with them at all, so I’m far worse than you.”

Meili: “That’s not—”

Petra: “—Which is why I will go this time. That’s my absolute resolve.”

Clenching her small fist, Petra declared it. Meili blinked, then laughed as her tension melted away.

Meili: “Big-Brother’s blessed, isn’t he? Having Petra-chan care so much.”

Petra: “He is! Oh, but you’re very important to me too, Meili-chan.”

Meili: “Yeees, yeees.”

Though tacked on, those words brought Meili no displeasure—proof of how thoroughly this determined girl had won her over. Likely Meili was not the only one.

Meili: “Petra-chan, I can’t join the Big-Brother search, you know.”

Petra: “…Right. You, Brother Clind, and Lady Annerose are headed for the Capital, aren’t you?”

Meili: “Uh-huh. Seems we’ve gotta explain how to cross that sand sea.”

She nodded, picturing the drastically changed Augria Sand Dunes. With the ‘Sage’ Shaula’s role finished and the testing sandstorms lifted, the defenses around the Sand Tower holding the Book of the Dead had crumbled. Guarding the Pleiades Watchtower now depended solely on the senile Divine Dragon stationed within and the hordes of witchbeasts in the dunes—both of which Emilia’s camp could command.

Petra: “Lady Emilia became friends with the Divine Dragon, and Meili-chan can control the witchbeasts.”

Meili: “Never thought I’d be mentioned in the same breath as a Divine Dragon, y’know.”

Meili gave a rueful laugh. To secure royal approval of that arrangement, she herself had to appear at the Royal Castle, meaning she would act separately from Petra and Emilia.

Meili: “It’s a bit of a downer, but I’ll entrust Big-Brother to you, Petra-chan.”

Petra: “I’ll do my best. …And you be careful, okay? Brother Clind’s very kind but has a tiny bit of a problem, so watch out.”

Meili: “Please don’t scare me like that. …Still, I’m not alone, am I?”

With that, Meili lightly shook the hood of her robe. Petra’s eyes widened as a crimson shadow popped out, scuttling across Meili’s shoulder to perch atop her head—a crimson scorpion.

Petra: “That creature…”

Meili: “My little bodyguard, I suppose. I’m still debating a name, so for now I call her Crimson-Scorpion-chan.”

Petra mouthed the name and stared; the scorpion puffed itself up and clicked its sharp pincers.

Petra: “Take good care of Meili-chan, Crimson-Scorpion-chan.”

Pinching one tiny pincer as though shaking hands, Petra did not laugh; the scorpion, perhaps accepting the gesture, waved its tail in satisfaction.

Meili: “Let’s both do our jobs properly, okay? That’s surely for the best.”

Petra: “Right! Once Subaru’s back and everything’s settled, let’s all play together again.”

Meili: “Yes, indeed. I’ve got heaps to tell Big-Brother, after all.”

Meili’s smile prompted Petra to tilt her head.

Petra: “Hm? Something about that reaction… Did you maybe see Subaru do something cool?”

Startled, Meili nearly denied it, yet hesitated—perhaps in mischievous payback, or perhaps recalling the events at the Watchtower. Either way—

Meili: “My, my, Petra-chan, how worrywort you are.”

Above Meili’s shy grin, Crimson Scorpion clicked its pincers—neither agreeing nor denying—only deepening Petra’s unease.

6

Ram: “—Lady Emilia, have you calmed down?”

Emilia: “…Yes, a little. I’m sorry for making you worry so much.”

Having finished changing and stepped out of her room, Emilia lowered her brows to Ram, who had been waiting for her. She was glad for the concern, yet painfully aware of how much trouble she was causing.

With Subaru and Rem gone they all had to pull together, and she could not afford to mope.

Emilia: “Subaru and Rem disappeared, so you must be frantic too, Ram.”

Ram: “Barusu aside, I am certainly worried about Rem. Barusu aside.”

Beatrice: “No need to rub it in twice, I suppose. Betty is worrying over Subaru for the both of you… We believe they are both safe, in fact.”

Hearing stubborn Ram’s answer, Beatrice—holding Emilia’s hand—looked down. Her pallor came not only from worry over Subaru but also from the problem of her contract as a spirit.

Ram: “Lady Beatrice, how is your body?”

Beatrice: “Betty is surviving on energy-saving mode, in fact. You should be far more exhausted.”

Ram: “I shall throw myself into Lord Roswaal’s arms after this, so there is no problem.”

Beatrice: “…Betty can’t understand your awful tastes at all, in fact.”

Ram: “I return those words unchanged to you—both of you.”

Emilia: “Eh? Me too? Return what?”

Before she could get an answer, the three stopped in the corridor—they had reached their destination, Roswaal’s study on the top floor.

Emilia: “…Thanks to Clind we got back really fast, but we still have to hurry.”

Calling through the door, she drew Beatrice along and stepped into the study. Inside, their reliable companions were assembled, waiting. Every face here was anxious for Subaru and Rem and ready to lend strength.

Emilia: “—Thank you, everyone, for gathering.”

Feeling Beatrice’s little hand squeeze, Emilia returned the grip and looked each person straight in the eye. Knowing they all shared the same feelings bolstered her; she reminded her rushing heart not to panic and stumble.

Together they would be all right.

Emilia: “Let’s definitely find Subaru and the others who were blown away.”

At her call, the whole group nodded as one—and to Emilia, nothing was more reassuring.

Stand By Me Pleiades: Return of the Good-For-Nothing Son (LQ AI Translation)

1

Anastasia: “We’re gonna head in from the Kararagi side. Compared with Lugunica and Vollachia, who’re locked in a staring contest, Kararagi’s bound ta keep its guard a mite looser, ya see.”

Emilia found Anastasia’s proposal an utterly delightful surprise.

Of course she understood that Anastasia, Julius, and Echidna were worried about Subaru’s party. Even so, they belonged to a different camp.

Originally, all of them had gone to the Pleiades Watchtower for the same reason, yet from different stand-points; now that they had come back safely, none of the three were obliged to help her look for the missing pair.

Julius: “I share Lady Anastasia’s opinion. Beyond the political entanglement between Empire and Kingdom, that city-state happens to be the home base of the Hoshin Company—Lady Anastasia’s own stronghold.”

Anastasia: “Means I can use all my connections. Not what ya’d call a bad gamble, right?”

Emilia: “Anastasia, Julius…!”

And yet they were offering their help as if it were the most natural thing in the world; Emilia felt a surge of gratitude.

Tears welled quietly in her amethyst eyes.

Emilia: “I’m so glad I became friends with you, Anastasia.”

Anastasia: “Well, “friends” might be stretchin’ it a bit. You an’ me are still rival candidates, remember. But—”

Emilia: “But?”

Anastasia: “Once Natsuki-kun’s business and the Royal Selection’re all wrapped up, how ’bout we be friends then? Same as you, I ain’t got many pals.”

Emilia’s heartfelt words drew a gentle, blooming smile from Anastasia.

Eridna: “For the record—that wasn’t bashfulness. Ana really doesn’t have many friends.”

Anastasia: “Quit flappin’ yer gums, will ya.” pinches Echidna’s nose

Watching the bickering pair made Emilia giggle and soothe the flutter of hope and worry in her chest.

Then Anastasia’s tone sharpened slightly.

Anastasia: “But don’t go celebratin’ too soon, okay? Routin’ ourselves through Kararagi means our way’s gonna take time… and Natsuki-kun doesn’t have much of that left, does he?”

Emilia: “Right. We can’t dawdle… So we’ll do our best to enter the Empire by another route, different from yours.”

With a small clenched fist, Emilia met Anastasia’s pale-teal gaze head-on.

While Anastasia’s group searched for a path from the Kararagi frontier, Emilia’s party would aim for Vollachia by their own means.

Determined, Emilia tightened her expression and—

Emilia: “—We’re all going to work hard and sneak in illegally!”

Emilia: “Huh? What’s wrong? You two… no, all three of you are makin’ reaaally weird faces.”

Anastasia waved a hand, half laughing, half exasperated.

Anastasia: “When I talk with ya, Emilia-san, even the bad ideas get soft ’n fluffy. It’s kinda funny.”

Emilia: “Really? I don’t get it, but soft sounds better than hard?”

Anastasia: “Dunno ’bout that. Julius, what d’you think?”

Julius: “Me? …I would call it one of Lady Emilia’s virtues.”

Emilia: “Um, thanks!”

Because it sounded like praise, Emilia thanked him honestly; Julius, however, wore a complicated look, and Anastasia sported a mischievous grin.

Situations like this usually meant there was some deeper meaning Emilia hadn’t noticed.

Emilia: “Nobody ever explains things much to me.”

Eridna: “Well, chances to cheer on an illegal border crossing don’t come often. Yet this may be one of those rare times. Ana and I will both be rooting for you.”

Anastasia: “Sure thing. Emilia-san, ya do know it’s a risky bet, right?”

Emilia: “Uh-huh, everybody’s scolded me thoroughly about it.”

Picking up Echidna’s words, Anastasia’s eyes turned serious, and Emilia nodded back.

Sneaking across a border meant slipping into another country without permission—plain wrongdoing. If they were caught, punishment would be severe, and Emilia herself was a Royal Candidate of Lugunica.

Emilia: “Because of me, relations with the Empire might sour, and they could even strip me of my candidacy."

Anastasia: "And ya still intend to go? Don't ya have goals ya wanna achieve, Emilia-san?"

Anastasia's question was strict, but kind.

Indeed, Emilia had wishes she wanted to grant as queen—people she wished to save, dreams and ideals sprouted since the Selection began.

Emilia: "But I want to realize all of them together with Subaru. That's why—I'm off to do my best."

Julius: "…Subaru is a fortunate man, it seems."

Emilia: "Subaru isn't the fortunate one; I am."

Julius, who had become good friends with Subaru during their journey, looked worried; Emilia gave him a gentle smile. Subaru, ever earnest and hardworking, had helped her countless times. If something had happened to him, she wanted to be the very first to extend a hand.

Anastasia: "All right, all right. Emilia-san, I've heard ya out aplenty—gochisosama."

Emilia: "Gochisosama…?"

Anastasia clapped her hands as if finishing a meal. Of course, they hadn't eaten a thing while talking, so Emilia had no idea why she suddenly said that blessing over food.

Julius: "Ana and I will be leaving before long as well. Luckily, according to Margrave Mathers, we can borrow that butler's power."

Emilia: "You mean Mr Clind? He says the title's not butler but karei, household steward."

Julius: "Either way, it should shorten the time to Kararagi's border—though, personally, I am quite curious about the kind of magic it entails.”

Anastasia: “Curiosity later, Julius.”

Magic-lover Julius looked disappointed, but Emilia herself didn’t know the secret of Clind’s mysterious power. He had never shown it before; she guessed it was a force he could only use under special circumstances, and she was grateful he had chosen to help Subaru’s party.

Perhaps the choice had not been Clind’s alone—but still.

Anastasia: “Emilia-san.”

Emilia: “Ah, sorry—yes?”

Anastasia: “Like ya heard, we’ll put our full weight behind searchin’ for Natsuki-kun and Rem-san. In return, takin’ the matter of the tower back to the Royal Capital—that’s on your people.”

Emilia: “Right. Annerose will—”

Anastasia: “—Consider this our sign of trust.”

The single phrase, cutting off Emilia’s answer, thudded heavy into her chest. Eyes wide, she listened as Anastasia continued solemnly.

Anastasia: “With the Sand Wind and the “Sage” vanished, the Pleiades Watchtower is far more defenceless than before. Sure, there’s a Divine Dragon roostin’ on top, which is amazin’, but that still ain’t anywhere near perfect. If schemers or the Witch Cult set their sights on the tower, it’d be catastrophic.”

Julius: “To guard it from such threats, the Kingdom’s strength will be required. From the start, our journey’s aim was to find a way to save the Witch Cult’s victims; perhaps the Stacks of the “Books of the Dead” are that breakthrough.”

Eridna: “Reading every volume to draw out an answer… It’ll take many hands—an uphill path strewn with thorns.”

Anastasia, Julius, and Echidna each stressed the gravity of the matter.

Just as they said, the tower's possibilities were limitless; depending on its wielder's heart, it could be used for good or for unspeakable evil.

To prevent the latter, the tower had to be placed under the Kingdom's stewardship.

Anastasia added a playful lilt, breaking the tension from a moment before.

Anastasia: "So, conquering the uncharted Augria Sand Dunes and securing a watchtower brimming with unknown potential—pretty big spoils, huh? Don't hog the whole haul, all right? Make sure ya split it nice and neat."

It was less a threat between rival candidates than a friendly, slightly thorn-tipped reminder—or rather, Anastasia was letting it be taken that way. Emilia understood that much.

Therefore—

Emilia: "Leave it to me. I'd never do anything to disappoint a friend."

Resolving not to lean too heavily on Anastasia's kindness, Emilia packed as much sincerity—and a dash of impishness—into her nod.

2

Beatrice: "I honestly assumed someone like you would already have a way to slip in and out of the Empire, I suppose."

Her usual brusque tone came bundled with a transparent show of bravado.

Arms—short for her size—folded tight, chin tilted in a look that screamed I expected nothing from you anyway… and yet that very face betrayed how desperately she was hoping. The girl's straightforwardness laid everything bare.

So, uncharacteristically, Roswaal offered a downright sincere apology.

Roswaal: “Sorry~. Never imagined we’d have to dash off to the Empire right in the middle of the Royal Selection. As far as I knew, the whole affair was supposed to stay neatly inside Lugunica~.”

Beatrice: “Hmph! Some proper owner of an “Tome of Wisdom” you turned out to be. I was hoping to see the difference between you and Betty, who spent four hundred years clutching a blank book, in fact.”

Roswaal: “…My, that jealousy toward Subaru-kun…”

Beatrice: “Don’t be ridiculous! Subaru’s already in big trouble—don’t you dare pile more burdens on him. If you’re so eager, why not fly to the Empire right now and fetch them yourself?”

Roswaal: “If all I had to show for it was a flying dragon nipping my backside, that might be fun in its own way~.”

The outrageous suggestion earned only a wry smile. Keeping that smile, Roswaal spoke her name.

Roswaal: “Beatrice. I’ve taken every measure I can. No matter what, I will not let you be erased.”

Beatrice: “Spare me the needless concern. You need Subaru, not Betty. And Betty has no problem with that.”

Roswaal: “You wound me. Surely you know I love you as well.”

Beatrice: “Enough of that nonsense…!”

Roswaal: “Another sad misunderstanding. What has you so~, that reminds me.”

He broke off, closing one mismatched eye. The yellow iris fixed on Beatrice as he asked, with an air of casual curiosity—yet the topic was one neither of them could dodge.

Roswaal: “—That artificial spirit Lady Anastasia keeps.”

Beatrice: “…Just the name, that’s all. From what Betty could tell, she doesn’t know anything, in fact.”

Exactly as he had expected, her answer held no hesitation.

The fox-fur-collared spirit who called herself Echidna—an artificial spirit—was far too significant for Roswaal and Beatrice to ignore.

Beatrice plainly wished to believe the spirit knew nothing important, but—

Roswaal: “And what if she only pretends so? Perhaps she’s deceiving you.”

Beatrice: “She’s already admitted she’s an artificial spirit. What would be the point of lying?”

Her prickly reply made Roswaal narrow his eyes.

Why lie?—Reasons were endless. In the end, some people lie for no reason at all. By the standards of such ill-natured minds, Beatrice’s view was far too naïve; she hardly seemed a great spirit of four centuries.

And yet, Roswaal let out a small sigh. That naïveté was fine.

Roswaal: “Very well. She’s a spirit friend you finally made; I’ll refrain from bad-mouthing her~.”

Beatrice: “She’s not my friend! Stop saying weird things.”

Roswaal: “All right, all right. Anyway, are your travel preparations done? If you fall behind—”

Beatrice: “I don’t need you telling me, I suppose! Hmph!”

Cheeks reddening, she turned away and pat-pat-patted out of the office—her steps small, yet carrying the weight of someone stomping. The stalwart back refused to show the pain of Subaru’s absence, until it vanished beyond the door.

???: “—Have you taken care of everything, then?”

Once Beatrice had left, a voice rose from Roswaal’s lap. He glanced down; soft pink eyes met his from mere centimetres away. Feeling the weight and warmth of the head pillowed there, he shrugged.

Roswaal: “Just an essential conversation. Asking if I’m satisfied sounds a tad odd~.”

Ram: “Because Roswaal-sama loves Beatrice-sama.”

Roswaal: “…Such a ticklish remark when you bring it back up.”

The teasing twisted his lips. Gazing up at him with gentle eyes was Ram, lying sideways, using his lap as a pillow. She had listened like this through the whole talk with Beatrice. Beatrice, understanding the reason, had said nothing.

Roswaal: “You pushed yourself dreadfully on the journey. Even without Subaru’s plight, hurrying home was the right call.”

Ram: “Mental strain atop physical exhaustion. Shepherding Emilia-sama and Barusu was, as you can imagine… Had Otto been there I’d have made him do it, but he was useless.”

Roswaal: “He was recovering from his own wounds. Forgive him. Besides—”

Ram: “—He offered an alternative. So I shall overlook it.”

Her eyes remained closed, yet Roswaal laughed softly. That, from her, was the highest praise; proof she held Otto in esteem.

While they talked, his fingertips touched the scar where her horn had broken. Carefully regulated mana flowed in, flushing the stagnant circuits inside her body.

Just confirming that turbid, parched circulation was enough to imagine her pain.

Roswaal: “You… made it back safely. Thank you.”

Ram: “…Roswaal-sama.”

The words slipped out on impulse, and Roswaal himself gasped.

At once a fierce self-loathing scorched him. Anger at his lapse of composure—no, anger at the shamelessness of daring to rejoice in her safety.

With what mouth do you dare speak such things?

And yet—

Ram: “…Yes. Ram has returned, just like this.”

Her gentle smile tore at his chest.

Kind-hearted as she was, he could well imagine the storm of worry inside her over vanished Subaru and Rem; still she smiled, for his sake.

Because that smile worked exactly as she intended, Roswaal found it unbearable—so he sought her disappointment instead.

Roswaal: “I have finally understood why I took your sister, why I brought Rem into the mansion.”

He meant to confess a fact that would make him unworthy of her smile—something he had long pondered. In what way could Rem, forgotten by all through Gluttony’s Authority, aid his centuries-old designs? Why keep her, even dormant? Only now had a plausible answer formed—ugly, thoroughly Roswaal-like, sure to earn Ram’s unforgiving wrath.

Roswaal: “It is…”

Ram: “—As a replacement for my horn, correct?”

Roswaal: “Eh—”

Ram: “Too bad. Try again next time.”

If you want Ram to hate you—that was the message between the lines. Closing her eyes, she drifted off, leaving him utterly at her mercy. He could only continue the mana treatment, knowing full well how pathetic he looked.

He no longer knew how to extinguish the fervour Ram held for him.

The “Tome of Wisdom” that ought to show his path had been burned—by none other than the girl resting on his lap—and would never reveal the future to Roswaal again.

Even so, more than ever he craved its words right now, this very moment.

3

Emilia: “Anne, please look after the tower with Meili. We’ll do our very best!”

With a broad, vigorous wave of her hand, Emilia and her companions shot off toward their destination.

It all happened in the blink of an eye—quite literally so for those who experienced it. To the one left behind, Annerose, they simply vanished like smoke.

Meili: “For real, it’s super handy, but kind of spooky, ya know?”

Saying so, the girl with the swinging braids brushed the ground with the sole of her shoe. Only a moment ago there had been a dragon carriage, drawn by two ground dragons; it had disappeared along with them.

Even though she had seen it with her own eyes, the girl could not help tilting her head at the uncanny sight.

Annerose: “Why, I myself have yet to fathom the true nature of Clind’s abilities.”

It was none other than Clind who had educated Annerose, head of

House Miload.

Guardian, tutor, and steward all in one, that unflinching, razor-sharp man had never once changed in attitude or appearance—nor had he ever explained why.

Hence—

Annerose: “You must be careful. He is highly capable, but equally dangerous.”

Meili: “Petra-chan and that fanged big-sis said the same thing, but what does it mean? That he likes little kids or something~?”

Annerose: “Put plainly, yes.”

Meili: “Oh, that’s all? That doesn’t bother me one bit, yaaay.”

Waving her hand with airy nonchalance, the girl—Meili—answered blithely. Annerose closed one eye and fixed her gaze on the girl’s seemingly defenseless back.

She was two or three years older than Annerose, her cute face belying a vaguely worldly air that made her feel precarious. Given what Annerose had heard beforehand, that was only natural.

Emilia: “Um, see, Meili’s the girl who burned down her previous mansion… well, she didn’t do it alone, she did it with her sister. But she’s not a bad kid! And she can control witchbeasts, which put Subaru in danger… but she’s not a bad kid!”

Emilia had defended her earnestly, yet there was no doubt Meili was a perilous individual.

Still, with the girl now entrusted to her care—and with a duty to fulfil in Emilia’s stead—Annerose’s stance was set.

Annerose: “I shall be the one to protect you.”

Meili: “…What’s with that face? As if my safety under your guarantee makes you nervous?”

Annerose’s proud declaration earned Meili’s suspicious look over her shoulder. When pressed, Meili stuck out her lips, muttering:

Meili: “You’re younger than me, aren’t ya? I’m the big-sister here, uh-huh?”

Annerose: “Does reliability hinge on age? By that logic, Emilia would be the most reliable of all.”

Meili: “Ugh… Bringing up Emilia-onee-san is totally cheating, ya know.”

Stung, Meili pouted while Annerose basked in triumph; even absent, Emilia lent her strength.

Annerose: “Besides, my dear uncle also placed you in my charge. Do you imagine he would entrust the future to any situation that worried him, even slightly?”

Meili: “…Can’t really read that margrave, but I guess he does sound convincing.”

Pressing a finger to her lips, Meili pondered. The collar of her robe squirmed; from within the hood, a tiny shadow crawled onto her head—a small red-shell scorpion, brandishing its pincers toward Annerose.

As though insisting it would guard Meili.

Annerose: “My, you have brought a most dependable escort.”

Meili: “Right~? So I’m not worried at all… Fine, I’ll let you protect me for a while, little miss.”

Annerose: “It is Annerose. Ideally, address me as Lady Annerose.”

Many dismissed Annerose due to her youth; she was well-practised at handling such reactions.

She recalled her very first meeting with Emilia—an equally ill-mannered elf girl she had never expected to cherish so dearly someday.

Annerose: “I look forward to seeing whether you can become my friend.”

Meili: “Petra-chan said something similar… Does this mansion teach everyone to sweet-talk like that?”

Hand to her mouth, Annerose smiled; Meili eyed her, dubious.

Then—

Clind: “—No. That is a misconception. Correction.”

Meili: “Kyaaah?!”

Clind appeared out of nowhere, right behind her; Meili shrieked, high-pitched.

Startled into a hop, she sent the scorpion flying. Danger. Rescue. With lightning speed Clind's hand caught it, yet the scorpion's fury was not soothed.

Annerose: "Your finger is being pinched. Serves you right."

Clind: "How heartless. Still, I shall accept the pain—delicious."

Annerose: "Kindly refrain from equating the scorpion's spite with my own sharp tongue!"

Clind had returned as swiftly as he had departed, scorpion dangling from his finger. While she grimaced at her steward, Annerose glanced at Meili.

Hands clutching her head, eyes wide at the sudden event—the very girl who had boasted Clind was nothing to fear.

Annerose: "As you see, his quirks are… pronounced. Therefore—"

Meili: "Th-Therefore?"

Annerose: "I believe it best if we get along, don't you?"

Narrowing her eyes, lips curling in a smile, Annerose spoke; Meili gulped, ever so softly.

She never voiced it, but swallowing those words was the right choice.

—Because admitting that nasty face made perfect sense once she heard he was Roswaal's kin would have been far too humiliating.

4

Otto: "The truth is, back in my homeland I am … well, calling me "wanted" would not be entirely precise, yet I am in a position where I cannot walk about openly."

When Otto confessed with such a grave expression, Frederica could not help admitting to herself, So I was right after all.

Otto, the internal affairs officer of Emilia's camp, whose intellect and initiative made him indispensable, could, together with Subaru and Petra, be called one of the camp's three greatest finds.

Frederica: "I must say, placing Petra and you two side by side does rub me the wrong way, however…"

At any rate, Frederica had long wondered by what journey and experience this reliable Otto had honed his dependability.

If he had possessed a pedigree as certain as Roswaal's, a polished résumé like Emilia's, or shone as an uncut gem the way Petra did, she would have understood, but for Otto—and Subaru—to fit none of those molds was, frankly, unnerving.

Yet at last the fear she held toward Otto could be laid to rest.

Frederica: "I am relieved. It seems you truly are someone who would become a wanted man, Otto-sama."

Otto: "Truly?! And you are relieved?! Wh-Why?!"

Frederica: "Think nothing of it; it is merely my personal opinion."

Otto: "That makes it more worrying! Frederica-san, did you honestly think it only natural I was on a wanted poster?!"

Frederica: "…Anything less simply would not fit the facts."

Covering the fangs at her mouth with one hand, Frederica averted her eyes and spoke her candid mind.

Otto's jaw flapped like a fish out of water, as though the world had flipped upside down, and he turned for aid to their traveling companions.

Otto: "Surely the rest of you do not agree with her, do you?"

Garfiel: "Don' sweat it, Otto-bro. Sis's makin' it sound worse'n it is."

Emilia: “I cannot tell whether Frederica is exaggerating, but I had heard about it before, so I am not surprised. People were afraid of me back home as well.”

Petra: “Emilia-neesama’s case is a little different from Otto-san’s! Please stop making that face. This is because Otto-san said something unnecessary again…”

Otto: “Am I really the villain here?!”

Garfiel and Emilia, then Petra in turn replied, and only after shouting did Otto remember the cause lay in his own status back home.

He covered his face with a hand and murmured weakly,

Otto: “For once, I truly have only myself to blame…”

Ram, arms folded across her chest, struck the heaven-gazing Otto with a merciless remark.

Ram: “Self-reflection is all well and good, but we cannot stay here forever simply because returning home is difficult.”

Harsh though she sounded, she was correct. By using Clind’s Authority they had leapt from Roswaal Manor to their destination—the commercial city of Picoutatte.

Leaping directly into the city would have drawn too much attention, so they had materialized in a nearby forest, intending to merge onto the highway; it was there that Otto’s confession sprang out.

Because he was wanted in his homeland, he found returning difficult.

Roswaal: “Even so, it was Otto-kun himself who proposed that in Picoutatte we might find a way into the Empire. Leaving you behind is not an option~.”

Otto: “Of course. …It is simply that I will trouble everyone, and, being an ordinary man, marching into a place where I am hunted requires some courage.”

All: ““Ordinary man…”“

Leaning against a tree trunk, Otto spoke toward the ground, and everyone shared the same thought.

Beatrice: “To call yourself an ordinary man… what an amusing boast, I suppose.”

Otto: “It is not boasting!”

He lamented the gulf between his self-image and their appraisal, but setting that aside—

Emilia: “Otto-kun, if it truly becomes impossible, please say so, all right? I definitely want to bring Subaru and Rem back, yet if you suffer for it, Subaru would surely sob as though it were his own pain.”

Otto: “I-I would not mind seeing Natsuki-san sniffling, but…”

Petra: “Otto-san, be serious.”

Petra’s adorable eyes turned sharply stern—an authority none in Emilia’s camp could defy save the bold Ram and easygoing Emilia; Frederica too raised her hands in surrender.

Otto: “I am not bowing to pressure, but rest assured, Emilia-sama. For smooth negotiations, it is better if I am present. And besides—”

Emilia: “Besides?”

Otto: “—It is high time I faced my homeland and my past.”

Tilting her head, Emilia watched Otto fix determined eyes on the distant city.

A triumphant return to the homeland entwined with fate—his feelings could hardly be calm.

Otto: “Fortunately, the most worrisome element of our camp is absent, and all our strength is gathered here. I doubt a better chance for a homecoming will ever arise!”

Petra: “Otto-san, be serious!”

Otto: “H-Hey?!”

Petra’s sharp rebuke flew at Otto as he clenched his fist.

Wanted in his homeland and counting armed force as assurance for his return—such an attitude was precisely why he had earned the epithet “Military Internal Affairs Officer.”

Frederica: “That the clever Otto-sama fails ever to see what lies at his own feet is, to me, the greatest mystery of all…”

So Frederica could only think, with utter sincerity.

5

—After they cleared the checkpoint at the city gate and rolled into the commercial metropolis, Garfiel couldn’t help clacking his fangs at the shift in the air.

Garfiel: “Costuul, Pristella—big as they are, the feel here’s real different, ya know.”

Sitting cross-legged on the roof of the dragon carriage, he craned his neck while taking in the surroundings.

Raised in the closed forest of the “Sanctuary,” Garfiel knew how narrow his own experience was. Even after a year outside the woods, the world still brimmed with unknowns.

Costuul the industrial city, Pristella the water-gate city—both he had seen with his own eyes. Picoutatte, the third great city before him now—each counted among Lugunica’s Five Major Cities, yet every one dazzled him with its unique flavor.

Garfiel: “Whole darn place’s got different smells at every turn… Normally a town’s got some sorta unity goin’.”

Emilia: “Oh, I know this! Picoutatte’s divided into five wards—north, south, east, west, and the center. Each ward sells completely different goods, apparently.”

Garfiel: “Heeey! ’Milia-sama, you’ve been studyin’, huh!”

Emilia puffed up proudly:

Emilia: “Fufu, right?”

Politics, the kingdom’s structure, how cities formed, business policy—Emilia’s studies were evidently on track, and the knowledge she produced at moments like this often drew nods.

Just as she said, the drift of scents throughout the city likely stemmed from the goods each ward handled. Permanent shops lined the avenues side by side with day-only stalls; the whole city throbbed with a market-like energy worthy of the title “commercial metropolis.”

Garfiel: “There’s grub I ain’t smelled before over here… that’s cloth I ain’t never seen… Oh! Knives that look nice t’ bite on! Let’s pull the wagon over—”

Ram: “Garf, do not lose sight of our goal. Stay alert.”

Garfiel: “Gao… I-I’m doin’ it even if ya don’t say so!”

Eyes sparkling at a stall’s knives, Garfiel drooped under Ram’s scolding. With regret he tore his gaze away, resting his cheek on a knee while his emerald eyes narrowed—he could feel eyes on their carriage, and he snorted.

Garfiel: “—Otto-bro is bein’ tailed, ain’t he.”

Scratching his neck, he groused at the overt hostility. They had hidden the “problematic” Otto inside the wagon where he couldn’t be seen, yet ever since they’d entered the city pricking gazes had dogged them.

Garfiel: “Sheesh, can’t believe they’re chasin’ him the second he’s back… Otto-bro’s piled up too many grudges.”

He didn’t know the details, but the enemy was moving fast—like Otto had busted some giant crime or dug up a buried scandal years ago. If Otto had turned a mighty power against him, Garfiel could only sigh. Should the watchers attack all at once and rely on brute force, he’d smash ’em back—but,

Garfiel: “Anybody punchin’ won’t work on, we gotta lean on Roswaal…”

Out here, the world’s rules weren’t decided solely by fistfights, which made things hard. In that world Roswaal’s titles carried terrifying weight—something Garfiel hated. And he hated something else: Roswaal coming along on this trip in the first place.

Garfiel: “Everyone knows “that sociable Allegro” is a downright dangerous bastard, as well as bein’ useful ’cause of his rank.”

Subaru and Rem had been hurled to the Vollachian Empire, their safety unknown; the group needed unity, yet Roswaal was a clear liability. Garfiel already regretted not joining the journey to the Pleiades Watchtower—though he wouldn’t deny what staying in Pristella had gained him.

Garfiel: “…Gotta push forward one step at a time, huh, Captain.”

Subaru would probably tell him “Don’t rush, don’t panic.” But with Subaru absent, those reassuring words were just empty hope. Hard work alone became the pickaxe to chip through the wall of unease.

Frederica: “—Garf.”

Her voice from the driver’s seat snapped him back. Tightening his focus, he followed her gaze straight ahead of the carriage—and froze.

Garfiel: “…What the hell?”

Blocking the road stood a plump gentleman waving broadly, and beside him a refined lady smiling serenely—both middle-aged. Their breezy obstruction left the half-beast siblings baffled until the man boomed:

Gentleman: “No need to worry in the slightest! Friends of our son—welcome to the Suwen Company!”

Within the carriage came a thud and Otto’s shrill “Whaaaat?!” as he smacked his head against the wall—an exclamation that echoed far down the bustling street.

6

Mazeran: “Welcome, and thank you for coming all this way. I am Mazeran Suwen.”

So saying, the head of the trading company—Mazeran Suwen—greeted his unexpected visitors with a smile.

Shown into a reception room, served fragrant tea and delicate sweets, and treated to a genial grin, no one could possibly feel ill-used.

Ram: “Like child, like parent, I see.”

Otto: “That is definitely not meant as praise, is it?”

Ram: “Hmph.”

She could have flayed Otto with far nimbler words, but the merciful Ram would never torment a child in front of his parents—especially when both father and mother were present.

???: “Honestly, Otto turns up with no warning at all. He’s always been the sort who, once he gets an idea, stops seeing the people around him—we had our hands full with him.”

Emilia: “Ah, but that hasn’t changed a bit. Otto-kun still does the most outrageous things with Subaru and leaves us wide-eyed.”

Frederica: “Out of regard for Otto-sama I shall withhold my frank opinion.”

Petra: “I’ll give the same answer as Frederica-nee-sama!”

Thus, the refined lady chatting amiably with Emilia and the others was Otto's mother, Framir Suwen. And so the Emilia camp at last found itself face-to-face with Otto's parents.

Garfiel: "Oi, Ram-nee, what're ya starin' at Otto-bro's folks for?"

Ram: "No reason. Otto seems to have inherited his parents' blood quite strongly, so I merely erased the "found under a bridge" theory from my mind."

Otto: "Was there any need for that suspicion?! I'm the middle of three brothers, you know!"

Ram: "Better safe than sorry."

Otto: "Safe for what?!"

Perhaps buoyed by being home after so long, Otto was even noisier than usual. Excitement before one's parents was understandable, but still—the boy ought to settle down.

Roswaal: "We seem to be enjoying a lively chat; may I—?"

Raising a hand once first impressions were exchanged, Roswaal looked toward Mazeran, who was welcoming them with open arms.

Roswaal: "Allow me, on behalf of everyone, to thank you for your warm reception. All the more so because it surprised us: we sent no letter of return, yet you greeted us even sooner than we could pass by."

He voiced the very question Ram had held: how had Otto's parents managed to await them, although the party, leaping by Clind's mysterious power, had sent no word of Otto's homecoming?

Mazeran: "Ah, if that startled you I apologize. Such things are commonplace in this city, so I thought no special comment needed. —Otto."

Otto: "Y-Yes, sir."

Mazeran: "Explain why you informed none of the people caring for you. Surely you will not claim you simply forgot?"

Otto: “Er… I, uh, let it slip my mind. I repent deeply…”

The father’s quiet reproach left Otto hanging his head, eyes darting. Rare indeed to see Otto bested by sheer reason; Ram watched with mild interest while Mazeran stroked the seasoned beard beneath his gentle face.

Mazeran: “I beg pardon for my ill-mannered son’s lack of explanation. Truly, however, this is nothing special. In this commercial city everything is traded—cargo, people, and information alike.”

Roswaal: “I seeee—so the checkpoint exists partly for that.”

Mazeran: “Precisely.”

Catching up at last, Ram turned her pale-crimson gaze toward the gate where the carriage had passed inspection. Cargo and passengers were examined; when that information flowed outward, both Mazeran’s timely welcome and the shower of thorny stares made perfect sense.

Ram: “But if the city guards gossip so freely, does that not damage their credibility?”

Mazeran: ““Gossip” is a grave misunderstanding. They merely convey the truths that should be conveyed, to those who should hear them. There is firm trust there—call it a contract.”

An utterance that made one feel chance and commerce shared the same sound and near meaning. In Picoutatte, where greedy merchants jostled and clashed, a house that had traded for generations must continually deliver results. To do so, Mazeran had chosen the method of not choosing his methods.

Detecting the son’s return within moments of the checkpoint report—that, too, was proof. Yet even that required knowing what wagon Otto currently rode in, and where he belonged—preparation bordering on obsession.

Ram: “Now more than ever—like child, like parent.”

Beatrice: “…Agreed, I suppose. Still, thanks to that, our odds of getting help look better.”

Beatrice sat deep in the sofa, leaning on Petra’s shoulder; until she rejoined Subaru she had to remain in “low-power mode,” conserving mana she could not replenish. Ram felt her frustration keenly. She herself longed to hug—not Subaru, but Rem—this very instant.

Ram: “It will be worth the risk if we gain aid. —Otto, speak.”

Otto: “All the risk does fall on me, you know… ahem. Father, I need your advice. I know the current climate is severe, but this concerns the Vollachian Empire.”

Mazeran: “Oh? Vollachia.”

He lifted his brows theatrically, altering his tone—a merchant’s trick to guide his listener’s thoughts. Hoping the son would pierce it, Ram waited.

Otto drew a breath, face solemn.

Otto: “We must soon travel to the Empire—ideally with this entire party. But by legitimate means the border cannot be crossed. Therefore—”

Mazeran: “You want a way across, and wish our assistance?”

Otto: “Yes. For your means and knowledge I have come home.”

Removing his hat, Otto laid out his purpose. Mazeran narrowed his eyes in thought—only for another voice to interrupt before he could reply.

Framir: “So you wish to employ the power of the Suwen Company. In that case, Otto, this is no consultation at all.”

Otto: “Mother…”

Framir: “Haven’t I taught you to choose your words precisely? And family is no exception. You remember that.”

Otto: “Y-Yes, ma’am.”

Framir: “Good. Then what you have brought us is not a consultation but—?”

Back straight, smile unbroken, Framir reached out a hand. Unease flickered across Emilia and Frederica; Garfiel’s eyes darted. Ram, Roswaal, and the perceptive Petra all sensed foreboding and focused on Otto.

Under combined gazes, he sighed as though resigned.

Otto: “What I have brought is not a consultation, but a business negotiation.”

The instant he drew that line, Ram felt the room’s atmosphere pivot.

The gentle, kindly faces of Mazeran and Framir did not change—yet their essence shifted dramatically. It was, in a word, the air of a duel. From that moment on, this house was no longer Otto’s home, but the headquarters of their counterpart in trade.

Otto: “—Let us talk, Father, Mother. A fruitful negotiation between our band, led by Emilia-sama, and the Suwen Company.”

Mazeran: “That’s the spirit.”

Framir: “He is our son.”

Hat pressed to his chest, Otto struck a pose; husband and wife both smiled. To outsiders it was a bizarre, even ominous scene beyond description—yet it left no doubt they were blood family.

And once again, an old realization stirred in Ram. Beside her, unperturbed by the tension, Emilia remarked cheerfully:

Emilia: “Otto-kun really does look exactly like both his father and his mother, doesn’t he.”

At that heart-warming observation Ram could only sigh, her head suddenly feeling very heavy.

Stand By Me Pleiades: Petra’s Manly Negotiations (LQ AI Translation)

1

—A hushed business negotiation with the Suwen Company was being held in the Commercial City of Picoutatte.

The representative was Emilia, a Royal Candidate; backing her was Margrave Roswaal, and the posture of Mazeran Suwen and Framir Suwen—who made no allowance at all for the fact that their son Otto had returned home after a long absence—was so thoroughly merchant-like one almost wanted to applaud.

All the same, the “goods” being sought were what they were; caution was only natural.

The crux of the talks was a means of entering the Vollachian Empire to the south, whose borders were sealed and all traffic between the two nations forbidden—in plain terms, arranging an illegal entry.

It went without saying that illegal entry was against the law.

And when the opponent was the Empire, infamous for its harsh policies, discovery would by no means end lightly.

On top of that, the positions of those involved—namely Emilia and Roswaal—were highly problematic.

Because they were so close to her, it never felt real, but the two of them were important dignitaries of the Kingdom. In particular, Emilia was an incomparably important figure, even next to Margrave Roswaal.

Petra: “If it were only the Master, it might end with the Master losing his head, but if Big Sister Emilia were exposed, it could turn into a war with the Empire…”

Even though it was a biased conjecture, Petra knew it was no exaggeration.

—Petra Leyte was busy, terribly busy, and kept on running.

Having left her hometown of Arlam Village, Petra, striving as a responsible individual, had a mountain of things to learn each day: her maid duties, the culture required of one who served the Margrave Mathers, and the training of mind and body toward her own goals—there were not enough fingers to count them on.

According to what Petra had learned in her hectic days, relations between the Kingdom and the Empire were exceedingly poor, and conflicts had flared up many times over the tiniest spark.

Among the numerous records left in history books, there were countless wars that had begun for trifling reasons. Compared with such sparks, Emilia's existence was no mere spark at all.

It was as reckless as throwing a drunken Otto into a warehouse full of fire-magic stones.

Therefore—

Petra: "I absolutely must make sure not to hold Big Sister Emilia back."

Otto: "—Miss Petra, may I?"

Petra: "Eep!"

Seated atop her packed luggage while renewing her resolve, Petra's shoulders jerked violently.

Not because someone had suddenly called out to her. It was because the speaker was Otto—the very Otto she had, in her mind just a moment ago, plied with drink, made drunk, and tossed into a warehouse crammed with magic stones.

Hastily turning around, Petra saw Otto standing in the doorway, and at her exaggerated reaction he gave a light laugh.

Otto: “That was quite the cute little scream. Did I surprise you?”

Petra: “N-No, I am fine. It is just that I had just finished shoving you into a warehouse packed with fire-magic stones.”

Otto: “You shoved me into a warehouse full of fire-magic stones?!”

Petra: “Ah, please do not worry about it. It is nothing significant at all.”

Otto: “It is a huge problem for the me inside Petra-chan’s head… Somehow, that makes you seem exactly like Frederica-san’s star pupil.”

Removing from her head the imaginary Otto together with the whole warehouse, Petra opened her eyes wide at those words.

It was a delightful compliment: Frederica was Petra’s idol and life’s goal.

Petra studied many things, of course to become worthy of her beloved Subaru, but also so as not to trouble her mistress Emilia, and absolutely never to shame her instructor Frederica.

Therefore, being told she resembled Frederica made her happy.

Petra: “But if possible, I would like you to save that compliment for a more important moment.”

Otto: “It was not necessarily a compliment just now… Truly, Petra-chan, your desire for self-improvement is admirable. There are plenty of people who should learn from you…”

Petra: “Really? I feel that you too, Otto-san, are the sort of person who finds it more rewarding when the prize is on a high shelf.”

Otto: “I see. Now that you mention it, that may be so.”

Receiving praise for something easy was less gratifying than being praised for accomplishing something hard.

Nodding at Petra’s opinion, Otto then raised his brows. Otto: “Oh dear.”

Otto: “It is about time for the appointed hour. That is why I came to fetch you, and it looks as though you are ready.”

Petra: “Yes, perfectly.”

Remembering his original purpose, Otto watched as Petra spun lightly on her heel. Her attire had changed completely from her usual maid uniform to freshly prepared travelling clothes.

A jacket with somewhat wide sleeves and a knee-length skirt, with trousers underneath to allow easy movement—her own attempt at co-existing fashion with travel practicality while considering the role required of her.

Petra: “I was careful not to stand out in a strange way—how is it?”

Otto: “Indeed. I believe it looks very nice. Since I always see you in a maid’s uniform, seeing you like this feels refreshing.”

Petra: “Mmm~. I was not looking for admiration; I meant whether it is cute.”

Otto: “Ah, pardon me. It is cute. It suits you.”

Receiving the answer she wanted without delay, Petra smiled in satisfaction. A maiden heart must not stand out badly, yet does not wish to be buried either; having aimed for that exquisite balance, she needed it properly assessed.

If possible, she would have liked to show this get-up to Subaru and hear his thoughts in his own voice—.

Otto: “It will be all right. You will definitely meet him.”

Petra: “…”

Otto: “—? Is something the matter?”

Tilting his head at the silent Petra, Otto did not think his statement odd at all, which made it all the more aggravating—he had read

Petra's feelings completely, and made no show of it.

Petra: "—. Otto-san, in times like this you always get the right answer on the first try."

Otto: "Oh, am I being blamed?"

Petra: "I am praising you—though unwillingly."

Otto: "Even when I am praised, I cannot feel entirely satisfied…"

Grumbling while scratching his head with a wry face, Otto made Petra relax her puffed-up cheeks. Then her round eyes turned toward the mansion's entrance hall.

Just as Otto had said, the appointed time—the long-awaited moment when their guide would arrive—was near.

Petra: "The guide should be arriving soon, correct?"

Otto: "Yes. Thanks to the cooperation of the Regundra family, the smuggler who will take us into the Empire is on his way. —Not only that cute outfit, but have you also readied your valiant heart, milady?"

Petra: "Do not get cheeky, servant boy."

And so, teased by Otto as he verified her "role," Petra laughed haughtily and answered in accordance with her own "role."

2

???: "—To cross the border, you folks will have to slip under the ground."

The guide, face hidden beneath a deeply drawn hood, declared this to the party in a gloomy voice.

Short in stature and wrapped head-to-toe in a robe caked with dried mud, the figure showed no face, yet Petra guessed they were about her father's age.

The person was not talkative, but one could tell they had seen their share of jobs; after all, even when summoned by the great merchant Regrundra Family of the metropolis Picoutatte, they had stood their ground with composure.

???: “Be modest if you must, but do not quake more than necessary. In our line of work, miss, let folk walk over you and the business falls apart.”

Petra: “Ah…”

???: “Pardon me. Rather unfair of me to hide my face while watching yours for every twitch, isn’t it… whoa now.”

Feeling as though her rude stare had been called out, Petra dropped her gaze—only for Garfiel to stride between them, glaring at the guide with a fearsome scowl.

Garfiel: “Listen up, quit menacin’ our princess. Keep it up and you’ll have a bad, bad day.”

???: “A bad day, hm? You saying you lot will give me one?”

Garfiel: “Not just me. All of us.”

Baring fangs, Garfiel jerked his chin, directing the guide’s eyes outward. There stood Frederica and Ram, both in travelling garb rather than their usual maid attire, narrow eyes half-lidded—their beauty only sharpening the pressure they exuded.

To reinforce that pressure, the pair smiled sweetly into the guide’s line of sight,

Ram: “A trade where one must not be looked down on—quite admirable. But,”

Frederica: “Please understand, we are far less delicate customers than appearances suggest.”

???: “…My apologies. Seems I am at the disadvantage.”

Pulling the hood even lower, the guide yielded to their combined gaze. Proud of her two big-sister figures, Petra poked the broad back before her.

Petra: “Thanks, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Hah! Only did what’s right. While the Captain ain’t around, it’s my job to guard the camp’s mates. So don’t you go zippin’ about too much, Lady Petra.”

Petra: “I do not zip about! And stop treating me like a child.”

Cheeks puffed at Garfiel’s teasing, Petra swatted the back she had poked. Then, not wishing to sour relations, she turned to the guide with a small bow.

Petra: “Sorry for staring earlier. Um, Mister Guide, you are…”

???: “Musica—that’s my name.”

Petra: “Musica-san, you will escort us, yes? All the way to the Empire?”

At Petra’s question, the guide—Musica—gave a deep, wordless nod. A quiet swell of hope rose in Petra’s chest: at last they could truly begin the search for the missing Subaru and the others.

—Dealing with a smuggler came bundled with its own difficulties.

The greatest hurdle had been negotiating with the wealthy Regrundra Family, who were connected to Musica; talks had bogged down even with the Suwen Company mediating—or perhaps because the Suwens had mediated.

Petra: “Lady Diadora, thank you for the introduction.”

Diadora: “—Think nothing of it. I stand to profit as well; no thanks are needed.”

So replied Diadora Regrundra, a woman with luxuriant, elegantly curled hair; it was thanks to her that they had met Musica. Yet Petra’s relationship with Diadora was exceedingly complicated: Diadora was the very influential figure whose feud with Otto had so often halted his trips home.

The rift between Otto and Diadora had faults on both sides—though Otto's rash behavior bore the greater blame—and Otto's sincere apology had finally mended it. Of course, hiring assassins to target Otto had been too extreme, but—

Otto: "If one says my past, reckless disregard for those around me merited death back then… well, perhaps my actions did warrant it."

Reflecting on himself, Otto confessed his fault without reserve. It had been Petra who, after learning the circumstances from Diadora, suggested Otto apologize, and because it was no mere lip service, it had moved Diadora's heart. Watching Otto face the problem so earnestly, Petra could only think:

Maybe Otto-san really is a little strange somewhere…

Diadora: "—Lady Petra, are your preparations complete?"

Petra: "Ah…"

Jolted from her musings, Petra blinked. For an instant the form of address felt wrong, but catching Diadora's gaze she recalled her "role," masking herself with a practiced smile.

Travelling-clad Frederica and Ram, along with Garfiel and Otto, awaited Petra's words as naturally as though it were only proper to call her "milady." And not just them—

Roswaal: "Do not be so tense. Rest at eeease, Lady Petra."

Emilia: "Indeed. You can rely on us veeery much."

Hearing the two voices behind her, Petra nearly let her cheeks twitch, yet she held back—the part she played was that of a lady with a complicated background.

Petra: "—Thank you. I'm counting on you, Dudley, Emily."

So she said, to the two who now bore false names—her dignified retainers, Roswaal and Emilia.

3

—When planning an illegal entry into the Vollachian Empire, the greatest concern was, of course, keeping Emilia’s identity—and, secondarily, Roswaal’s—hidden.

Given relations between the Kingdom and the Empire, discovery of either would all but spark a war, as stated earlier. Therefore, during the infiltration, their true identities had to remain concealed throughout.

Thus a “backstory” had been woven: Petra would pose as a young lady with circumstances, while the rest would disguise themselves as her attendants or elite guards.

Emilia: “It feels a little improper, but I’m sooo thrilled.”

That remark came from Emilia, cloaked in her familiar “cognitive obstruction” robe and masquerading as a bodyguard under the alias “Emily.”

Frederica and the other maids, and Garfiel and Otto—the soldier and the bureaucrat—were acting in roles not far removed from their usual stations, so they aroused no sense of incongruity, but Emilia’s presence most certainly did.

Emilia had never been good at lying or keeping secrets to begin with. Good-natured and straightforward to the core, she even had the weakness of getting stomachaches when she lied. Of course she was brimming with eagerness, yet that eagerness often spun its wheels, so everyone kept their nerves on edge at her every move.

By contrast, opposite this bundle of unease—

Roswaal: “—Lady Petraaa, are you not thirsty? Should you need any thing, pleeease~ do not hesitate to command this humble servant.”

Petra: “…That face of yours is really irritating.”

Roswaal: “Oh my, pray refrain. There is no need to use honorifics with the lowly. Feel free to address us as loftily as usuallly~

dooo~, if you pleeease~."

Petra: "…Your face is irritating, so go away."

Inside the dragon carriage, Petra curled her lips at the solicitous fussing and replied in a voice she herself knew lacked all charm. The target of her words withdrew with evident amusement, which only fanned her irritation.

Indeed, the one vexing Petra—enjoying the situation as much as, if not more than, Emilia—was Roswaal.

Under the alias "Dudley," he played Petra's butler. Rather than his usual flamboyant garb, he wore stylish yet travel-ready attire—stylish, that is, only insofar as it served to accent his master, never to outshine her.

His long hair was tied in one; the clown makeup removed. Any who knew Roswaal L. Mathers would hardly connect that image to this butler.

Petra muttered under her breath.

Petra: "It is so unfair how effective that makeup of his is at changing impressions…"

All at once it became clear how his usual garish dress and face paint served as disguise. Unlike Emilia, he could transform without relying on cognitive-obstructing robes—proof that his daily antics were strangely effective. Seeing that while they were scrambling to rescue Subaru left Petra bitterly speechless.

Garfiel: "I feel ya, milady. "A kua fruit looks sweet but tastes sour," as they say."

It was a relief that Garfiel understood Petra's feelings. He, like her, had his own thoughts about Roswaal—in other words, they belonged to the Keep-a-Harsh-Eye-on-Roswaal Alliance. Otto was a member as well, and there was one more—

Petra: "—Beatrice-chan."

Beatrice: "…"

Receiving no answer from the small girl on her lap, Petra gently stroked Beatrice's doll-like white cheek. Beatrice, maintaining her "low-consumption" state, slept using Petra's small lap as a pillow.

In the presence of an outsider, such discourtesy toward "Lady" Petra might have been grave, but it posed no problem: Petra and Beatrice had been explained to Musica as sisters. Incidentally, Petra was the elder and Beatrice the younger.

Petra recalled how Beatrice had flushed red and complained, "Betty is waaay older, in fact," and her lips curved softly. Beatrice's words were so like her; yet Petra had grown taller, and, a year and a little since their first meeting, the girl was becoming a young woman—unlike the spirit Beatrice, whose lovely form never changed.

Petra: "While you're resting like this, time between us is stretching again."

Caressing the soft cheek, Petra lamented to Beatrice's sleeping face. She longed to reunite with Subaru quickly, but Beatrice was a dear friend; being forced into slumber was far harsher than mere separation.

Musica: "How fares your little sister?"

The voice of Musica, riding a ground dragon alongside the carriage, reached Petra's ears. Was his concern for the representative "lady" Petra and the girl on her lap mere courtesy, or an attempt to curry favor? Petra shook her head at the uncharitable thought.

Petra: "Thank you for asking. My sister's condition is unchanged, I think."

Musica: "…Ah, forgive the foolish question. Were a bit of carriage sway enough to revive her, we would not need such a pilgrimage in the first place."

Petra: "—Indeed."

Answering tersely, Petra chided herself for her constant wariness.

Musica might seem probing, yet he was dutifully following Diadora's instructions as a valued supplier and showing concern for guests. Often, ill intent could be found—or not—depending on how one chose to perceive things.

Petra: "Did you go out of your way to worry about my sister?"

Musica: "Partly, yes, but there is no need to draw the guards' glare just for that. —We are nearly at our workplace."

Petra: "Your workplace…"

Though his hood hid his face, the gesture indicating straight ahead was clear. Following it, Petra peered past Otto on the driver's seat. The highway had ended some time ago; they had entered terrain people normally avoided, and their destination lay farther in. That place was—

Musica: "Shamrock Valley—this is where we work."

Hearing Musica's words, Petra narrowed her eyes. Shamrock Valley, east of the Commercial City of Picoutatte, was known even within the wide Kingdom of Lugunica as an ill-omened land, steeped in many dark tales. Perpetual mist hung there, and dense mana pooled; it was said that the souls of the dead, the Hollow, wandered those parts—a demon realm shunned by almost all.

Roswaal: "Which is precisely why it is perrrfect~ for a quiet border crossing, yes-indeed-ee-ee~."

Musica: "Exactly so. For us, and for guests who must rely on us, it is a blessing from the heavens, would you not agree?"

Garfiel: "Ya ain't wrong, but I don't like the way ya put it."

With that exchange between Roswaal and Garfiel, Musica's attention shifted to Petra, gauging her expression before the ill-reputed Valley. Yet—

Petra: "If it works to our advantage, we will use anything—even a Holy Land of the Hollow. No need to keep checking our faces."

Musica: “…I see—bold indeed. Your forthright answer is most reassuring.”

Voice tinged with surprised admiration, Musica bowed deeply. As Petra nodded loftily, Garfiel and Roswaal spoke in tones too soft for outsiders to hear:

Garfiel: “Told ya—she’s got the steadiest nerves in the whole camp.”

Roswaal: “Indeed, recommending her first was the riiight choooice~.”

Petra accepted Garfiel’s praise straight, took Roswaal’s half-seriously, and looked forward to arriving at Shamrock Valley. It was no mere bravado: she lacked the dainty timidity to fear Hollows or hesitate at unbelievable rumors. She was ready to cut through the misty valley at once.

If there was one small worry—

Petra: “I hope Frederica-née-sama and the others are all right…”

Yes—she fretted over the fortitude of those riding in the second dragon carriage trailing behind them.

4

—Shamrock Valley, shrouded in unlifting mist and dense mana.

The literal “escape route” leading from the Kingdom of Lugunica to the Vollachian Empire had been dug deep within that infamous demon realm.

Otto: “Even if it is a demon realm, so long as one has a guide there is nothing to fear.”

Petra: “Otto-san, you are not the sort to be frightened by Hollows anyway.”

Otto: “Well, once I see one in the flesh I may feel differently, but for now I have never encountered anything of the kind, so I find there is nothing to fear.”

The living—especially battle-hardened merchants—were far more terrifying; that was Otto’s opinion as he held the reins, and Petra largely agreed. Even on that rough, uneven road, Frufoo, Otto’s beloved ground dragon, pulled the carriage without trouble under the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion. Of course the other carriage, drawn by Subaru’s Patrasche, enjoyed the same advantage—yet…

Frederica: “Eek! S-Someone’s face just floated on the far side of the mist!”

Ram: “It is only the wind. The mist was stirred and happened to look that way.”

Frederica: “Ah—wait, Ram! It sounds as though someone is calling from the mist! Um… “You will never leave until you die,” they say. Terrible! We must help them!”

Ram: “It is the wind. Voices echoing in the valley merely sound like people.”

While Petra’s carriage advanced in quiet order, Ram’s side clattered noisily. Frederica, though she tried to hide it, was in truth timid, reacting far too sharply to Hollows and uncanny phenomena. Emilia had once feared Hollows as well, but in her case she first had to learn to tell people from Hollows. So long as Frederica could mistake a curse for a distress signal, that state of serenity was distant indeed.

Ram: “No need ever to reach that state. One child to mind is plenty.”

Frederica: “Sister Ram… no, I cannot argue with you, Ram…”

Thanks to Ram, who held the reins both literally and as mediator, the trailing carriage too traversed the Valley without incident and arrived at the intended escape route.

Petra: “So this is…”

Musica: “—We call it the Everlasting Darkness. They say the passage was dug over a hundred years ago, by my grandfather's grandfather."

Petra: "Your ancestors dug it, Musica-san…?"

Musica: "Aye—using these claws."

Facing the cave mouth that yawned midway up a low hill, Musica removed his hood. The face he had kept hidden at last lay bare, and everyone's eyes widened.

Musica: "My earlier discourtesy, forgive me. We, you see, are widely disliked."

He waved the stout, sharp-clawed hands that had been concealed beneath the robe, the short face covered in dark-brown fur splitting in a grin. A round nose, a wide mouth, small ears—he resembled a mole. Though small he was solid, packed with dense muscle. Even without the hood his eyes were lost beneath fur the color of earth, yet Petra immediately grasped what he was.

Petra: "Mole-people?"

Musica: "Indeed, indeed. One seldom meets us in person; I wonder, did you recognise me because you are learned, or because our ill fame is so well known?"

Petra: "I imagine it is because I study diligently."

Musica: "Tch tch tch—how kind you are."

His small laugh could be heard as either irony or gratitude. The self-mockery at its root was easy enough to imagine: tales and long persecution of the "mole-people" he had named. Those tales were not unconnected to the ideals Emilia pursued in her quest for the throne.

Petra: “Iris and the King of Thorns—”

Musica’s silence affirmed her point. That celebrated play, drawn from history, had originated in the Vollachian Empire. Iris, the heroine, fell in love with the one called “the King,” and to save him from peril gathered many allies to confront disaster—a grand epic. It lingered in the public heart above all because the ending was tragic. At the climax, Iris, about to reunite with her lover after averting the catastrophe, was betrayed by an ally and died; the story closed before the lovers could meet. Records indicated “the King” was the Vollachian Emperor of the time, and Iris herself had truly lived. In that tale—

Petra: “It was the mole-people and the wolf-people, who ought to have driven back the disaster with her, that betrayed Iris and caused the tragedy.”

Musica: “Which left my folk forever without a place in the Empire. The wolf-folk, who did not know how to flee, were destroyed, and my ancestors took to digging…”

Petra: “And so the Everlasting Darkness was made?”

With the pitch-black void spread behind him, Musica nodded, then gave a small laugh.

Musica: “Truly, you are industrious in your studies.”

Petra: “Why tell such a story now?”

Musica: “Some balk the instant they hear a passage was dug by mole-people. Better they turn back at the entrance than grumble within—an old woman’s precaution, so to speak.”

Otto: “And in a sense, selling reassurance as well, perhaps.”

Raising an eyebrow, Otto joined the exchange, still gazing into the Everlasting Darkness.

Petra: “Ah—so you are not luring us in only to trap us inside?”

Otto: “Precisely. Had we not asked, I suspect Musica-san would have explained for us anyway.”

Musica: “Heavens, you folk are fearsome. Pray do not hinder my trade.”

Otto’s single-eyed observation struck true; Musica threw up both hands in surrender. Otto was trustworthy, yet whether by nature or as a travelling merchant, he was all too severe with outsiders—a flaw, and doubtless the reason Diadora had once taken offense.

Petra: “That is why having Subaru here would be just right.”

Musica: “Oh? A gentle smile—that Subaru is…?”

Petra: “My fiancé.”

Otto: “Bff!”

Otto spluttered magnificently at Petra’s calm declaration. Sticking out her tongue at him, Petra peered into the gaping Everlasting Darkness. She had learned why the tunnel existed and gained confidence that it did indeed reach the Empire.

Petra: “We pass through here, enter the Empire, and achieve our aim.”

Musica: “Brave words, young lady—especially when it is to save your little sister.”

He believed the secret purpose of this infiltration was to cure Beatrice; Petra had told him Beatrice’s “sickness” required a special medicine found only in the Empire. It was not, strictly speaking, a lie—Petra herself needed that cure just as much.

Garfiel: “So—whaddaya say? You’re guiding us inside too, yeah?”

Musica: “In general, yes. But as the name Everlasting Darkness suggests, once inside is pitch-black, no light at all. Bring in flame and you will soon be unable to breathe, so…”

Garfiel: “And?”

Musica: “From here on, the whole of my clan shall accompany you.”

His answer became plain at once: footsteps sounded on the earth, and from the darkness emerged a dozen Figures—all clad in robes stained with the same earthen mud—more mole-people.

Musica: “Within, the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion ceases to function. I must ask you to obey our instructions to the letter. Otherwise—”

Petra: “Otherwise, what happens?”

Musica turned to Petra, lowering his voice. Though the location of his eyes was still impossible to discern, Petra’s cheeks grew taut as she met his unseen gaze. He smiled, and finished the thought.

Musica: “Otherwise you may wander forever in the deep, deep Everlasting Darkness.”

5

—Just as they had been warned beforehand, the journey through the “Everlasting Darkness” proved exceptionally arduous.

First came the overwhelming darkness of a tunnel hemmed in by earthen walls. Dug beneath Shamrock Valley—where daylight scarcely reached—this passage admitted not a single ray from the outside. Glow-stones set at intervals provided light, yet the gaps between them were so wide that, to an unaccustomed Petra, they were of little use. The mental strain of seeing nothing at all was far greater than one might imagine.

Even knowing in advance that the road would be dark, actually experiencing it swallowed any resolve in shadow. Worse still was the clammy air: perhaps due to the valley’s perpetual mist, the humidity underground was high, the air almost viscous. At least the chill spared them perspiration, but that was only avoiding the very worst of discomfort; the damp and cold could still ruin one’s health.

Yet those hardships were merely the beginning. The greatest trial of the Everlasting Darkness was—

Petra: “My butt hurts…”

She stroked the seat-sore spot with a hand, shifting position and wedging baggage beneath herself, but nothing solved the problem: Petra suffered endlessly from the pain. The ground-dragons’ Divine Protection of Wind Evasion was indispensable on long journeys, yet inside the Everlasting Darkness its conditions could not be met. It required a certain speed and that the dragon never halt—an impossible demand on the pitch-black, uneven road.

Emilia: “Petra-sama, are you all right? Would you like to sit on my lap?”

Petra: “Emily…”

Emilia—faithfully playing her role and treating Petra as mistress—seemed perfectly lively even in the gloom.

Petra: “Your butt doesn’t hurt?”

Emilia: “Of course it stings a little, but I can still bear it. I thought my lap might be easier than the seat—how about it?”

Petra: “I-I’m flattered, but…”

She patted her own thigh, tempting Petra’s weakening heart. Accepting would surely be easier, yet how would that look to Musica and his people? Being suspected over a sore backside would defeat the purpose of secrecy.

Petra: “But it hurts so much I could cry…”

Emilia: “Don’t overdo it, Petra-sama. I’m fine. This dark road leads to Subaru—so I can bear anything.”

Petra: “Then I’ll bear it too!”

Emilia: “Eh?! Why?!”

Roswaal’s soft chuckle drifted through the murk the instant Petra made her stand.

Petra: “…What’s so funny, Dudley?”

Roswaal: “—Surely, Lady Petra cannot see my face in this darkness?”

Petra: “Even without seeing I know it. You always make the same face at me.”

She could scarcely see beyond her hands, yet she knew he was smiling.

Emilia: “That isn’t nice, you know, Dudley.”

Roswaal: “Oh? And why ever not? I find it fascinating what you wish to say to me, Emily.”

Enjoying the lack of rank between “Emily” and “Dudley,” he baited her. Petra pursed her lips—

Emilia: “Because Petra-sama is doing her very best, and you pretend otherwise. That’s childish and uncool.”

Roswaal: “Then you would have us all travel with stern faces, steeped in anxiety?”

Emilia: “There you go again. I am worried for Subaru and Rem, but that doesn’t mean we must brood the whole way.”

Petra: “Emily…”

Emily drew Petra to her side, glaring across at Roswaal. Her violet eyes glimmered even in shadow.

Emilia: “You feel the same, don’t you? But you won’t say it—you think it needn’t be conveyed. That’s childish.”

Roswaal: “…”

Emilia: “Subaru tells us what he’s done and what he wants to do. I’m not very perceptive, so that makes me happy—understand?”

Having scolded him like a troublesome child, she turned gentle eyes downward.

Emilia: “Dudley acts that way not out of malice toward us—well, maybe a little—but mostly toward himself.”

Petra: “Malice toward… himself?”

Emilia: “Mm-hmm. He may be an adult, but he’s still a little spoiled.”

Petra couldn’t help but let out a small giggle. Emilia had wrapped even Roswaal’s nastiness in soft cloth. Proof enough was his lack of rebuttal; instead he sighed and—

Roswaal: “Lady Petra, to distract yourself, why not practice magic?”

Petra: “Magic? Here? In this darkness?”

Roswaal: “Darkness may help you focus. Meditation—grasping the flow of mana within—is basic training.”

Petra: “You’re only changing the subject.”

Roswaal: “I would not deny that… but the mana density here is high; conditions are ideal.”

He would never spout nonsense about magic merely to deflect. Having studied under him these months, Petra knew that. Reluctantly, she closed her eyes and turned inward. Sight made no difference here, yet forcing her vision shut did help her sense the mana within—blood flowed with heartbeats, but mana flowed soundlessly. Tracing it was difficult—until—

Roswaal: “Do not listen for it; see it with colour or warmth.”

The perfect advice changed her world before she could bristle. She tinted the coursing mana her favourite colour—pink—and it spread like water through a plant: chest, head, limbs—

Roswaal: “Now, open your eyes.”

Petra opened them—and gasped. The Everlasting Darkness, once pitch-black, now appeared in shades of pink: people and objects distinguished by variations of light, everything faintly aglow. Even Dudley's expression, washed in pink, was clear. He looked at her as one might at a baby standing for the first time, and she averted her gaze—only to startle at a huge pink mass beside her.

Petra: "E-Emily?!"

Emilia: "Eh? What? Did I do something weird?"

Petra: "You're a great big pink lump…"

Emilia: "A pink—mm, sounds sweet."

So much mana! Emilia truly was extraordinary. Even Beatrice, sleeping nearby, was a dense core of mana; Emilia's quantity dwarfed hers, but Beatrice's concentration was tighter—evidence of a spirit's body of pure mana.

Petra: "So this is how the world looks to you all the time, Dudley?"

Roswaal: "Not quite so extreme. It is because your affinity is Yang—mana that acts upon the body."

Petra: "Yang…"

Of the six attributes of magic—Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, and the rarer Yin and Yang—she belonged to Yang. Discovering one's attribute was a great step, yet—

Petra: "I wanted Yin, like Subaru and Beatrice…"

Roswaal: "How extravagant. Yang is rare—a real treasure."

Petra: "Rarity isn't what matters."

Rare meant few guides, a narrow path to mastery. She could not afford such handicap.

Emilia: "Still, amazing, Petra-sama. You can see even in this dark?"

Petra: "Seems so. I can see the other carriage behind us, and

Frederica-née-sama inside… and the road ahead is glowing a bit?”

She peered forward and noticed a patch of ground thick with mana some ten-odd metres away. Dudley murmured, “The road…?”—but had no time for a lecture. Events changed too quickly.

Petra: “—Ah!”

The seat lurched upward; the moment the carriage rolled over the mana patch, it bounced violently, then tilted, rocking front and back, side to side.

Emilia: “Petra-chan!”

Arms wrapped around her, shielding her head. As the carriage bucked, Petra realised they were falling—the entire carriage, ground dragon and all, dropping deeper into the earth. Patrasche shrieked, wood groaned, and still they fell—until suddenly they stopped.

Breath ragged, Petra whispered:

Petra: “…It… stopped?”

Remembering Beatrice, she tried to rise—

Roswaal: “She is secure—see?”

Roswaal, kneeling in the tilted cabin, cradled Beatrice. Relief came first; then questions. The ground had seemed to vanish the instant they hit that mana pool.

Petra: “Musica-san! What happened? Are you safe—”

Musica: “—My apologies for rough treatment, young ladies.”

His voice from outside brought not relief but alarm—too calm for one caught unawares. He had said rough treatment, not an accident.

Emilia: “Was this your doing?”

Determination burned in her voice: if necessary, she would act by force. Musica seemed to recognise that.

Musica: “Best not pick a fight here. Narrow, dark, damp—this world is ours.”

Petra: “What do you intend to do with us?”

Her question dispelled any hope of chance mishap. A purpose lay behind this. In Petra’s pink-tinted sight Musica sighed, looking oddly tired for one who held the advantage.

Musica: “Stay docile and no harm will come. We merely need hostages—bargaining chips with the Kingdom, nothing more.”

6

—Forced to endure hardships: that had been the preface to their illegal entry via Everlasting Darkness.

Told they would have to slip past prying eyes and proceed through a dark, clammy cavern, Petra had steeled herself to face Everlasting Darkness, resolved not to bend to any inconvenience if it meant winning Subaru and the others back.

Of course, she had not expected even a shred of comfort on the journey—

Petra: “…I hadn’t reaaally thought about inconveniences like this, you know.”

Musica: “That’s how you react to our situation? Truly, you’re some young lady.”

Musica let out a low laugh at Petra’s unmeant remark. The muffled gloom of that voice, on top of their shut-in predicament, made Petra’s shoulders sink.

The mana pool Petra had spotted was apparently a pitfall prepared by Musica’s party. Though there had been room to see through it beforehand, she had missed it in her inexperience, and that vexed her.

Because of it, they had been dropped to a depth below the subterranean, and their dragon carriage now lay toppled on its side.

Petra: "Our girl… Is Patrasche safe?"

Musica: "—Hm? Ah, this lovely ground dragon of yours? She was startled, sure, but we softened the soil. She's dirty, yet unhurt."

Petra: "hk!"

Musica: "There, see for yourself."

As if Musica's words were not reassurance enough, Patrasche's cry echoed in the dark. Unlike Otto, Petra had no way to converse with a ground dragon, but she sensed the cry held no distress. Relieved a little—Patrasche was an important comrade, after all.

Worrying over Subaru and the others, spirited away to the Empire, was hardly the concern of humans alone.

Petra: "I'm glad Patrasche is safe, but… it means we've been split from the carriage behind us—with Frederica-nee-sama and the others, right?"

At present the two dragon carriages inside Everlasting Darkness were cut off from one another: Petra's group below, Frederica's above, contact severed. That arrangement too must have been contrived by Musica's party to pin down their movements. To this point, everything rested in her palm.

And the reason they had gone so far was—

Roswaal: "—Negotiations with the Kingdom; that, it seems, is what you claimed to want."

With a voice kept quiet and as emotionless as possible, Roswaal—unconscious Beatrice at his side—spoke while his gaze tracked with precision the positions of Musica's party outside the carriage.

Roswaal: "Did I mishear you? Negotiating with the Kingdom from the dim bottom of a hole?"

Musica: “You heard right. We’ve taken you young ladies hostage. Nobles of good standing, yes? Then the Kingdom should be willing to listen.”

Petra: “Y-You’re going to tell the Kingdom about us?”

Musica: “Exactly. …Oh, worried your illegal entry might leak? You’ll have to chalk that up to bad luck. The fact you ladies asked to pass through our home today can only be called destiny.”

Musica’s group misread the agitation in Petra’s voice.

Judging their poor perception would be cruel—Petra’s party were hiding their identities. Musica had no path to the truth.

Still, whether Musica’s grasp matched reality or not, contacting the Kingdom would unquestionably spell trouble for Petra—and by extension, the Emilia camp.

Petra: “Emilia-nee-sama’s illegal entry will be exposed…”

This incursion would be disastrous enough if the Empire found out; if the Kingdom did, it was equally ruinous.

Should a Royal-Selection candidate be caught breaking the law, the election would not remain untouched, and they would likely be watched and barred from leaving the Kingdom.

Emilia: “We are doing something wrong, so we’ve no right to get mad about being tattled on… but it would reaaally hurt us.”

Musica: “We hold no grudge against you ladies, so my heart aches for your little sister there. Yet, taking that into account, you will still obey us.”

Emilia: “Must we, absolutely?”

Musica: “Yes. We’re not playing around. I wouldn’t recommend resisting.”

Emilia sought a peaceful solution, but Musica offered not even a foothold. In response, the cold air of Everlasting Darkness seemed to grow still colder—no, Emilia herself was lowering the temperature.

Emilia: "—I see. That's reaaally unfortunate."

Facing Musica's reply, Emilia let her brows droop, and the air literally chilled.

Emilia, surprisingly quick-tempered, was nearing her limit; Petra noticed, and Roswaal surely did too, yet he did nothing to stop her. The reason was obvious—he was confident the matter could be settled in an instant by force.

Petra: "I do feel sorry for you, Miss Musica and company, but…"

Thinking of the pit above, Petra knew Garfiel was aboard the separated carriage. With Frederica, Ram, and Otto's quick wits there too, that side could hardly be called desperate.

The first pitfall had surprised them, but Musica had chosen prey he never should have; thus, his aim would not be achieved.

Petra: "Why go that far? What did you want to discuss with the Kingdom?"

Roswaal: "Lady Petra? There is no point in speaking with them further—"

Petra: "Dudley, it's fine."

Cutting Roswaal off, Petra pressed Musica for his motive. She did not intend to negotiate—she was simply curious. Ransom demanded too great a gamble; surely another purpose existed.

Musica fell silent for a moment, then—

Musica: "—You young ladies know about the Royal Selection, don't you?"

Emilia: "—Eh?"

The unexpected direction made Emilia catch her breath, and Petra too was stunned. She had guessed Musica had some special reason, yet connecting it to the Selection was unforeseen.

As though perfectly aimed, the topic left Petra's group rigid. Whether Musica noticed or not, he continued from outside the carriage.

Musica: "It will shake the whole nation. Do you ladies have a favorite candidate?"

Emilia: "Um… well, we're still right in the middle of deciding, I suppose."

Musica: "A cautious, modest answer—in a good sense. Naturally, we're watching the Selection too… only, in a bad sense."

Emilia: "…What do you mean? Watching it in a bad sense?"

Musica's suggestive tone was frustrating; Emilia inevitably pressed for the truth.

Ignoring Petra's silent doubt, Musica answered Emilia's question. It was—

Musica: "We intend to petition the Kingdom to make the half-elf candidate—Emilia—withdraw from the Selection. You ladies are to be the hostages for that."

It was, indeed, an admission of purpose catastrophically ill-suited to the Emilia camp.

7

???: "Emilia's withdrawal…"

Hearing the softly-murmured words, Petra was struck by fierce regret.

She should never have lent an ear to Musica's talk. She should have pushed the ruthless Roswaal forward and smashed the scheme without debate.

Because she had not, she had carelessly ended up hurting Emilia.

Petra: "—What does this mean?"

No sooner had she regretted it than Petra decided to drag Musica's true intentions out of him.

Having him explain his reasoning in detail might wound Emilia even more. But the spear already loosed had pierced her chest; they had to know whether its tip was poisoned and how much force was behind it.

Without knowing the wound's depth, they could not know how to treat it.

Petra: "Mister Musica, you yourself said the Royal Selection is extremely important to the kingdom, didn't you? And its rules won't change that easily. Even if you take us hostage…"

Musica: "You mean the kingdom wouldn't be shaken over the lives of a few young ladies?"

Petra: "…Yes."

After that cool exchange, Petra's chest filled with doubt.

Both she and Musica spoke logically; his answers never faltered, nor did he try to silence her.

He was calm—yet that calmness made his act bristle with contradictions.

Petra: "In status alone, we're on the wealthy side. But that's only from a broad view; I believe the people at the kingdom's very center think differently."

Musica: "You claim this is pointless. So, young miss, you intend to persuade us?"

Petra: "If you'll let me."

Musica gave a wry smile; his judgment was clearly intact.

He surely knew that, on the surface, Petra's presence was no decisive blow that could force Emilia from the Selection.

In truth it was far more than decisive—and that complexity was the problem.

Roswaal's silent eyes flicked over; Petra jerked her chin toward Emilia, and the perceptive Roswaal would grasp her aim at once.

Emilia's heart, already crushed by fear for Subaru and the others, could not bear another sudden weight. That weight had to be removed—for Emilia's future.

Petra: "You save emergency measures for a real emergency."

If things became truly hopeless, they could always choose the method that erased everything.

Yet Subaru would reach for that only after thinking it through to the end, sacrificing something, and finding no other path.

Petra felt she had grown, yet she wanted Subaru's philosophy at her core—and to practice his convictions.

So she refused to abandon dialogue with Musica here.

Petra: "Please tell me how you feel, Mister Musica. I need material to persuade you."

Musica: "…What a demand. We intend to negotiate with the kingdom, not satisfy you, young miss."

Petra: "If your argument can't even defeat a little girl like me, I doubt the kingdom will listen."

Musica: "—If you're stalling for time, it's meaningless."

Petra: "That isn't my intent."

Under the steady gaze from outside the dragon carriage, Petra lied boldly.

It was time-buying, yes—but the time she bought was for Musica and his group, not herself.

End the talk and Roswaal would sweep them away, letting Petra and Emilia escape.

But then the thorn in Emilia's heart would stay.

Petra: "That's absolutely no good."

Time might solve thorn and pain, yet they were heading into the Empire's danger and unknown.

Taking a heartsick Emilia there frightened Petra—and she hated leaving Emilia to suffer.

Petra: "Why do you want Lady Emilia to quit the Selection? Is it because she's a half-elf?"

Musica: "What else is there? That alone is reason enough for her to step back."

Her first question hit home; Petra pursed her lips.

It was an all-too-familiar logic. Most who disliked Emilia cited her birth; Petra knew how deep that problem ran.

Still, each time she heard it she smarted—at the reality that strangers' "half-elf" and her beloved "Emilia" were lumped together.

Petra: "I've heard that claim so often I'm sick of it."

Musica: "Doesn't that prove how many feel the same? A would-be ruler can't succeed if the masses turn their backs."

Petra: "Even so—"

—no one else used strong-arm tactics like Musica.

She bit off the words, not from fear but because they sounded too right.

Indeed, most people saw Emilia as Musica did, yet they didn't riot to make her withdraw.

A silver-haired half-elf could never be chosen as king—that was common sentiment. So why had Musica acted?

Because those with no voice and Musica's group stood in different positions.

Petra: "Is Lady Emilia's candidacy inconvenient for the mole-folk?"

Musica: "—hk"

His sharp reaction told Petra her guess was not far off.

Why was Emilia's rise bad for the mole-folk?

As they had said en route, the mole-folk were exiles from the Empire; the tale Iris and the King of Thorns, drawn from history, robbed them of their homeland.

Musica's ancestors fled that Empire; their descendants still live in Shamrock Valley, eking out a living by aiding illegal entry and the like.

Petra: "—Why?"

This was not the Empire; Musica need not cower.

Iris and the King was famous in the kingdom, yet its treatment here differed vastly, and still the mole-folk hid.

Refusing the outside world, living as one clan, was just like—

Petra: "…like the Sanctuary."

The Sanctuary—hometown of Frederica and Garfiel, a demi-human settlement with tangled circumstances.

Petra visited once when the Sanctuary affair ended; the closed village was dismantled, its people moved to domain villages.

Now only a few—beginning with Ryuzu, Frederica's grandmother—

remain as guardians of a forbidden tomb.

The Sanctuary's life and the mole-folk's in Shamrock Valley both closed themselves off.

If so, the trigger for that choice might also be the same.

Petra: "Could your wish to pull Lady Emilia from the Selection relate to the Demi-Human War?"

Musica: "…Young miss, can you read minds?"

Petra: "I can't—though sometimes I wish I could."

Ram or Otto sometimes seemed to read hearts; leaving Otto's tact aside, Petra wished to emulate Ram's keen eyes.

Her goal was to absorb everyone's good points and be better tomorrow.

At any rate, Musica's reaction proved her reasoning right.

Petra: "…Demi-Human War."

—A vast civil conflict that erupted in Lugunica several decades earlier.

Humans and demi-humans clashed fiercely, countless died, and it lasted nearly ten years. A small spark lit it, but long resentment between the races fueled it.

And the root of that resentment was—

Musica: "—the Witch of Envy, and by extension, ill feeling toward demi-humans, elves included."

Musica himself concluded Petra's thoughts.

At the words Witch of Envy, Emilia's face clouded further, and Petra saw how personal Musica's act was.

As he said, the Demi-Human War sprang from hatred of demi-humans—especially in the kingdom, where damage from the Witch was great, persecution of elves was thorough.

It spread to other races, rising into a great civil conflagration.

Hearing all this, Petra finally grasped Musica's motive.

A dreadful war that wounded, tormented, and took countless lives —

Musica: "The world has spent four hundred years carefully healing those old scars. If a half-elf with no hope pokes them open again and blood flows, that would be a fine mess, wouldn't it?"

It was fear of that calamity's return that drove Musica and his companions to act.

8

Musica's low voice sounded as though it had been worn thin by fear and exhaustion both.

Petra could not fully digest the tangled feelings packed into that voice. Of course she couldn't; in her brief life she could hardly hope to weigh the thoughts of someone Musica's age—roughly that of her parents.

Besides, those thoughts did not belong to Musica alone; they bore the weight of four hundred years.

Musica: "We'd rather not shoulder any more collateral damage. We've already had more than enough of it, thank you."

Petra: "Collateral… damage…"

Musica: "That's right—the fallout from something our great-grandfathers' generation set in motion. A studious young lady like you should know that well enough."

Musica: "If our parents or siblings had been the ones who did wrong, we could at least resign ourselves. But a great-grandfather we've never even seen? And because of someone like that we're supposed to live our whole lives burrowed underground?"

Petra had no answer for Musica's words.

She herself had enjoyed Iris and the King of Thorns simply as a single book. But there were indeed people who, as parties directly concerned, were not allowed to view it objectively as a tragic tale.

Those people were Musica and his folk, forced to bear the sins of ancestors who lay generations beyond a "grandfather's grandfather."

Petra: "But in that case, isn't it the same for half-elves? There isn't another person alive who's the same as the Witch of Envy, and yet —"

Musica: "And yet you'd get in the way of someone who's doing their best? I told you: we're done being collateral damage."

In sharp contrast to Petra's quavering tone, Musica's voice was being drained of feeling. His matter-of-fact delivery laid bare how much grim reality he had already witnessed.

Musica: "I may have put it bluntly, but we've already come to terms with our lot. Just as some people are born rich and some poor, there are people like us—mole-folk—destined to live in the dark, to dwell in the shadows. That's our fate."

Petra: "That's such a horrible way to put it…"

Musica: "Harsh, isn't it? Yet even we who've accepted that lot don't want things to get worse than they are now."

Emilia, listening in, breathed the words: "Worse… than now?"

Remembering that there were listeners besides Petra, Musica turned the dryness of his voice into a heat meant to carry a little farther.

Musica: "A half-elf royal candidate—especially one with the very same silver hair and amethyst eyes as the Witch of Envy… There's no telling what she or the people propping her up are thinking, but to us it's nothing but an eyesore."

Petra glanced toward Roswaal, the very mastermind behind that support. Naturally, Roswaal offered no reply, and Petra did not expect one.

Yet whatever Roswaal's motives, Emilia's intentions had been made public.

Petra: "Lady Emilia's thoughts have been clearly announced, Musica. Surely even you—"

Musica: "Improving the standing of those born without options and forced into hardship… Yes, that noble sentiment has reached our ears. A completely unwanted act of charity, if you ask me."

Emilia: "Un… wanted…"

Musica: "Exactly, little bodyguard."

Unable to stomach the weary sarcasm, Emilia tried to chew through the words—at which point Musica's spear of accusation turned on her.

Musica: "A half-elf—of all things, one who looks exactly like the Witch of Envy. Tell me, who in their right mind wishes for such a person to become king?"

Emilia: "Y-You can't be sure! For example, what if I do?"

Musica: "Then I'd like to whisper in the ear of that supporter and warn them how precarious their backer truly is."

Emilia: "Mmh…"

Every time Emilia spoke, Musica countered; there was no chink in his stubborn armor. Petra felt herself driven back, yet beside her Emilia cried "Wait," raising her voice once more.

With earnestness she could not hide blazing in her violet eyes, Emilia said, Emilia: “Please, tell us a little more. About this ‘unwanted charity’ and this ‘collateral damage’ of yours.”

Musica: “…You’re really not stalling for time? Waiting for those people in the dragon carriage behind you to make a move?”

Emilia: “That’s not—!”

Petra, in her place, answered clearly: “They aren’t banking on that.”

It was the truth. Petra did not expect Frederica and the others who had been separated to break the deadlock—a task that, if it were merely to seize Musica and his fellows, could be done at once.

The carriage behind surely shared that judgment. That they still made no move was proof they had chosen to observe. The decision had been left to Petra and the rest.

Petra: “So please, feel free to tell us everything you’re thinking.”

Musica: “Brazen words. I’ve no reason at all to trust them… but about that ‘charity’ and ‘collateral damage,’ was it?”

Indeed Petra offered no grounds on which Musica should believe her. Even so, he maintained a solemn air and showed a willingness to answer Emilia’s question; perhaps it was his own way of showing sincerity to those he had dragged into this.

Musica: “Do I need to explain why it’s ‘standing out in the wrong way’? A half-elf doesn’t stand a chance. Simply entering the Royal Selection means drawing attention in the worst sense.”

Petra: “That’s just prejudice!”

Musica: “It would be laughable if one so diligent were ignorant only there. You know full well how feared the Witch of Envy is. And the gravest problem is that Lady Emilia makes everyone remember they know.”

Petra tilted her head. “Makes them remember…?”

It was odd phrasing. Word of the Witch of Envy’s deeds was universal common knowledge; no one could forget it, so remembrance should not be necessary.

Musica clicked his tongue softly at Petra's doubt.

Musica: "People do remember, miss. When a half-elf appears in public, everyone recalls that the being they've been pretending not to notice actually exists."

Petra: "…I don't really understand."

Musica: "For us it's common sense. That the Witch of Envy is terrifying, that having dealings with half-elves who produced her is nothing but ill omen."

Musica: "But common sense can also mean something you can forget so long as you never look at it directly. They had finally managed to forget. Yet the royal candidate Emilia forces them to remember—that we were afraid of it."

His cold, dark words hung damply in the unlit "Hollow."

Listening, Petra remembered—for the first time in a long while—that she too was nothing but a village girl who feared the Witch of Envy.

She could not recall when she had first heard of that Witch. But by the time she was aware of things she already knew: the very words Witch of Envy were enough to keep her awake at night, sobbing in terror.

A primitive fear had been driven deep into the heart of the young girl.

Petra: "…I was… really scared."

She had truly feared that unseen Witch, whom she had neither met nor spoken with. She had spent sleepless nights brooding over a taboo she must never touch.

In time that fear dulled; the Witch ceased to surface at sunset; she was pushed to the corner of Petra's mind. But it had never been conquered; at odd moments the slightest trigger brought it back.

—Such as the appearance of a half-elf royal candidate.

Petra: "…Everyone in the village was terrible, too."

She still remembered the changes that swept Arlam Village when the start of the Royal Selection was formally proclaimed. The moment it became known that the mysterious silver-haired girl coming and going from the lord's mansion was that half-elf, villagers began treating her with marked reserve—even when she pleaded desperately to protect them, they would not listen.

Emilia: "And how does that connect to the trouble you're afraid of?"

In the same clear bell-like voice she had used when the villagers rejected her, Emilia sought the true motive driving Musica.

Emilia: "If people think of the Witch because Emilia enter the Selection, yes, I can see that. But why does that hurt you?"

Musica: "It won't cause anything right away. But just as every gentle river flows downstream, problems drift until they reach the lower banks sooner or later."

Emilia: "?"

Musica slowly shook his head, raising the heavy issue.

Musica: "If focus turns from a half-elf to the Witch, the past might repeat itself. I fear that will descend upon us."

Musica: "Helping the weak—how lofty. But that's no different from some child bragging he'll beat the Sword Saint: a promise that can't be kept. If it were mere childish lips it could be ignored. Unfortunately…"

Emilia: "…Because they can't ignore Emilia, it's really troublesome…"

Musica: “Well, to put it sweetly, yes.”

Feeling the path to a conclusion finally clear, Musica nodded. His point reached Emilia, whose shapely brows knit in anguish.

Of course Petra, too, understood him all too well.

Yet that understanding—

Musica: “We won’t have it. Another Demi-Human War.”

Petra: “That’s—!”

It was pessimism layered upon pessimism; nothing more than a dismal fantasy, almost paranoia. Petra’s reflexive objection, however, was halted by the chill in Musica’s voice as he asked, “Really?”

Musica: “Are we truly being overly pessimistic? Back when the Demi-Human War began, didn’t everyone think, ‘No way, that’ll never happen’?”

Musica: “Call us pessimistic if you like. But perhaps it’s just in the nature of us mole-folk, always digging in the dirt—we feel it, the rumbling of the earth.”

Petra: “Rumbling…?”

Musica: “Yes. The tremor that warns something huge is about to collapse.”

Though it sounded like superstition, it weighed heavily on Petra’s chest.

Having heard Musica at length, Petra cursed her own shallowness. She had not only failed to pull the thorn from Emilia’s heart; she had skewered her own as well. The barb fitted with hooks would only tear wider if pulled. Perhaps she should have cut the talk short while the wound was shallow enough to hope.

Because—

Petra: “I… I don’t want to doubt Sister Emilia…”

Petra could not deny Musica’s reasoning; aside from being too pessimistic, it had no faulty logic. Hostility toward the Witch had sparked civil war once before; no one could guarantee it would not happen again. You cannot prove a negative.

Petra knows Emilia; therefore she can trust her. But how could she make those who cannot tell Emilia from the imagined half-elf believe in her—when she could not even persuade Musica without hiding Emilia’s identity?

Petra: “E-Emi— I…””

She nearly called her Emilia out of agitation but bit it back. Petra’s helplessness at failing to ease Emilia’s pain was unbearable—

Emilia hugged Petra, pulling her into a warm embrace. From right above came her gentle voice.

The steady heartbeat in that warm breast sounded calm, like an emblem of Emilia’s kindness.

Emilia: “I’ve been thinking. There must be many more people like Musica. What can I do to put them at ease?”

Petra: “Wh-What will you…?”

That was precisely the answer Petra most wanted. How would Emilia persuade, admonish, and convince someone like Musica, mired in a gloomy future?

Emilia smiled: “I think the best way is to talk and let them know Emilia is nothing like the Witch of Envy. So I guess I—no, Emilia will run.”

Petra: “R-Run…?”

Emilia: “Yes! Whenever things get tough because of misunderstandings or differences, Emilia runs to that person and talks. She keeps talking until they understand. If they won't listen, she keeps trying until they will!"

Petra was left speechless by the sheer force of that statement—so very like Emilia's philosophy, but was it really the right method here? Even if Petra, who knows her, accepted it, would Musica?

Emilia: "May I say something about your story, too, Musica?"

Musica: "…What is it, little bodyguard?"

Emilia: "I completely understand not wanting another Demi-Human War; I feel exactly the same. But there's one part of your tale I just can't accept."

Emilia: "You said no one thought the first war would happen, and that's why it did. But now we all know it happened, and we all know nobody wants to repeat it."

Musica had buttressed his case with precedent, arguing Emilia was dangerous. That precedent gave him persuasive power—enough to shake Petra. But Emilia turned that same precedent on its head—no, she probably wasn't being crafty at all; she was simply, earnestly taking the past as a lesson to brighten the future.

Emilia: "Since everyone hates the idea and knows it, that rumble you heard is just your imagination. That's how Emilia sees it."

Musica: "Strange… Talking to you feels as though I'm speaking with the very person I'm trying to make withdraw. Are you truly just a supporter of hers?"

Musica's suspicion was natural given Emilia's words and Petra's reactions. Their disguise was in tatters. Petra could neither deny nor affirm.

Petra loved Emilia's out-and-out, almost reckless declaration. But it was hard to share such hope so easily—

Emilia: "It's all right. I'm not the Witch of Envy, and I'm not alone."

Boldly citing Petra's existence and that of her other friends as proof, Emilia's words struck Petra's chest harder than all of Musica's gloom.

At the same time she remembered—how the villagers who once shunned Emilia had come to accept her: by talking with her, knowing her, touching her; by realizing Emilia was not frightening at all, but a gentle, lovely half-elf, nothing like the silver-haired, amethyst-eyed half-devil of legend.

Suddenly Petra noticed something odd. Recalling all that had been said in this dark Hollow, something stuck out. What did it mean? Her thoughts quickened. Perhaps their gaze had been led astray all along.

Seeking an answer to that budding doubt, Petra lifted her head from Emilia's chest and looked toward Musica outside the carriage.

Petra: "Musica, you haven't called Lady Emilia a half-devil even once, have you?"

With that, she tugged on the little catch she had found.

9

Most of the people who hate Emilia, just like Musica and her companions, do so because of her lineage.

That point is almost shockingly uniform, and the majority of such people call Emilia "half-devil," a term Petra absolutely loathes.

Petra: "But Mister Musica has never once called her that. I remember it for sure."

Although Musica wished for Emilia to be disqualified from the Royal Selection and warned at length of the danger she posed, he consistently referred to Emilia as "half-elf."

That constancy was not some convenient sign that Musica did not actually hate Emilia; it was surely connected to his own lineage—

not Emilia’s, but Musica’s.

Petra: “Mister Musica is one of the mole-folk who have been looked at with the same unpleasant eyes by those around them.”

Because Musica himself had long been subjected to prejudice, he must have hesitated to brand Emilia as a “half-devil.”

To Petra, that very stance seemed to be the linchpin of this whole plan.

Petra: “Mister Musica, how are you going to negotiate with the Kingdom while holding us hostage?”

Musica: “—. It is not complicated. The Regundra Family is aware that we are with you young ladies. We merely relay that fact to the Regundras and have them inform the Royal Capital—”

Petra: “But you already know the plan will not work, right?”

Musica: “…”

Petra: “Even if you take us hostage, the Kingdom’s bigwigs will never listen, and you and your people must have known that from the start.”

The presence of the real Emilia still complicated matters, yet if Petra’s group really were only a party of noble young ladies, as Musica believed, the objective would never succeed—assuming Musica’s true aim was to make Emilia withdraw.

Musica: “…We simply believe there is meaning in casting a single stone.”

Petra: “And you wanted to be the first to throw that stone, didn’t you?”

Musica: “Wh-What…?”

Petra: “Because then the mole-folk could become the brave people who first stood up to remind everyone of the terror of the Witch of Envy.”

Those words truly shook Musica's voice for the first time. That reaction made it clear that all his earlier responses had been a scripted harmony.

Petra: "I should have found it odd that you protected Pattrash-chan from being hurt by the pitfall trap and that you have stayed here talking with us like this."

They had safeguarded the ground dragon they themselves had snared and patiently conversed with their captives. Though Musica said he would not indulge in stalling, he had gladly gone along with Petra's own stalling for time.

As the talk progressed, the anxiety Petra felt toward the rumors about half-elves—all of it was groundwork for when their appeal failed. Once Petra's party was safely released, they expected today's story to spread by word of mouth.

—That allowing Emilia into the Royal Selection might ignite a second Demi-human War, and that the mole-folk, to prevent that catastrophe, had bravely raised the first cry even at great risk to themselves.

Roswaal: "Taking royal nobles hostage is for publicity toooo~. The greater the crime, the more people want to know. —The mole-folk's heroically barbaric act, grieved for the world."

Musica: "G-Gh…!"

Choosing those razor-sharp words, Roswaal's statement gouged deep into Musica's heart.

Hearing that, Petra made a sour face—not only at his nasty method, but also at realizing Roswaal had reached the same conclusion far earlier than she had. Proof of that lay in how markedly quiet he had become through the latter half of the discussion; who knew at what point he had seen through Musica's design, yet he had watched in silence all along, and the reason for that was irritatingly obvious.

Petra: "But I am even angrier. …This is the same as mass suicide for all the mole-folk."

Emilia: “Eh…?!”

Emilia, unable to keep up with the subtle turns of the discussion, widened her eyes at Petra’s words. That was unavoidable; such a line of thinking would never occur to her.

Musica and her people had resigned themselves to dying as the courageous ones who worried for the Kingdom’s future.

That was probably—

Roswaal: “A rebellion against persecution rooted in history, against a fate condemned to absurdity… Your own battle to erase the prejudiced gaze fixed upon the mole-folk, is that it?”

Petra: “…I also think they truly do not wish for another Demi-human War.”

Roswaal: “Ho, as expected of Lady Petra, how kind you aaare~.”

Petra stuck out her tongue at the unpleasant flavor of his added sarcasm, deepening her dislike of Roswaal.

Musica’s deeds were hardly praiseworthy, and they were a terrible nuisance to Petra’s party. Even so, dismissing all of their motives and schemes as base was a one-sided view—no different from refusing to see Emilia as anything but a “half-elf.”

Petra: “Miss Musica and the others, which is it?”

Musica: “…Seems we’re truly cursed by fate to have nothing go right.”

Her voice, mixed with a dry laugh, conjured the image of slumped shoulders.

Musica: “Just as you young ladies surmised, that wretched plan was our design… the foolish wish of descendants who betrayed Iris and incurred the wrath of the King of Thorns.”

After laughing himself out, Musica spoke as though he were resigned.

Petra and Roswaal’s conjecture had been correct: they were fighting the specter of their ancestors’ deeds.

Emilia: “Um, Mister Musica, I—”

Petra: “Emily, wait.”

Unable to bear the anguish in Musica’s voice, Emilia’s words took on a tone of resolve, yet Petra stopped her just in time, halting her decision. Emilia was about to reveal her own identity and face Musica head-on. That intention was noble and very like Emilia, but if she did so, confusion and darker ideas might once again take root in Musica’s mind.

Thus, this was not the moment for Emily the escort, but for Lady Petra who led the party.

To those who sought a future in which the mole-folk would be hailed as the brave souls who prevented a second Demi-human War—

Petra: “—Mister Musica, rather than negotiating with the Kingdom, will you negotiate with me?”

10

—As the passage through the Everlasting Darkness leading toward the Vollachian Empire reopened, the dragon carriage rocked.

Petra: “My butt hurts…”

Perched on the swaying seat of the carriage, Petra kept shifting her hips as she muttered.

Hearing Petra’s words, the person seated beside her was about to offer some gentle words—

Ram: “Think of it as punishment for your recklessness—suffer the pain quietly.”

—but they never came.

Petra: “…Ram-nee-sama, that’s not very kind.”

Ram: “I’m not kind. Besides, I’m not your nee-sama to begin with. Am I, Lady Petra?”

Pierced by Ram’s light-crimson eyes, devoid of mercy, Petra slumped her shoulders with a small “Uu…”.

Frederica: “Ram, please stop teasing Lady Petra.”

Petra: “Frederica-nee-sama…”

However, before Petra and Ram could continue, a rescuing hand was extended—

Frederica: “I am not your nee-sama, Lady Petra. And while I shall chide Ram, I am angry as well. Hmph, I’m absolutely fuming.”

—yet it never quite reached her.

Across from them, Frederica folded her arms and turned her face away, leaving Petra flustered. Just then, a merry “kuhahaha!” echoed from the roof above.

Garfiel: “Fer a bit, ya just gotta live with it, Lady Petra. My amazin’ self gets why Sis and Ram wanna speak their minds. Still, spookin’ that bastard Roswaal sure felt good!”

Frederica: “Garf, please don’t speak so lightly! Lady Petra, if you notice any change in your condition, say so at once.”

Petra: “I-I understand. And… I’m sorry for worrying you, Frederica—Frederica.”

At Petra’s bowed apology, Frederica let out a “Good grief,” her eyebrows drooping. Her face showed reprimand, but even more, deep concern.

Ever since she’d been placed aboard this follow-up carriage after regrouping, Petra had been apologizing nonstop.

But that was only natural.

Otto: “To think Lady Petra conducted the negotiations to win them over… Leaving Emily aside, what exactly was Dudley doing?”

Petra: “He just grinned and watched, wondering whether I’d fail. How tasteless.”

Otto: “That doesn’t sound far from the truth, but your bias misses the crucial point…!”

Up on the driver’s stand, Otto’s cheek twitched at Petra’s caustic answer. Her slightly warped preconception was at work, yet it was not entirely a lie.

Having seen through Musica and his companions’ ulterior motives so quickly, Roswaal had left the subsequent talks to Petra and the others and watched in silence; Otto could think of no other reason.

Of course, he understood Roswaal hadn’t been silently hoping for their failure.

With an increasingly disgruntled Petra in the corner of his eye, Otto adjusted his hat with a weary “good grief,” and said,

Otto: “So, are you truly all right, Lady Petra?—Any effects from the Oath?”

Petra: “…There’s nothing at all. Honestly.”

Adding anything more would make it sound like a lie, but it was the truth.

In fact, there was no problem with her physical condition. Mentally, she felt a twinge of remorse for acting rashly, but the sense of accomplishment was stronger.

At last, she felt she’d been of real help to Emilia’s camp as one of its members.

Otto: “That feeling is dangerous if you get hooked on it, so please be careful.”

Petra: “It’s already too late for you, isn’t it, Otto-san?”

Otto: “I’m painfully aware, so I’d rather you not say it!”

Listening to Otto’s falsetto squeak, Petra looked down at her own body and focused on the mark of the Oath carved on the skin beneath her clothes.

That was the price Petra had negotiated and paid for all of them—including Musica and his group—to escape the Everlasting Darkness safely.

Proof of a vow that could never be broken, a promise of the future.

Having their plan exposed and with Petra’s group standing in their way, Musica and his companions might have lost patience, so Petra opened negotiations before that could happen.

The contents were—

Petra: “Not through something like this, but by proper means, I want people to know that the mole-folk worked hard so the Demi-human War would never happen again.”

Ram: “And in exchange, you promised to prepare an opportunity for them to meet and speak with Lady Emilia directly. …Placing the very person right next to them—such a wicked promise.”

Frederica: “What the mole-folk seek is to wipe away their ancestors’ disgrace. In that case, the current generation can repaint it with a fresh appraisal. I believe it’s a fine compromise.”

Ram’s judgment was harsh, Frederica’s gentle, as they each assessed Petra’s Oath and its aim.

However—

Frederica: “Even so, I question the wisdom of risking the same danger as Master.”

Frederica’s added glare was severe, leaving Petra to shrink and offer a meek apology.

Over her little sister’s bold act, Frederica was angrier than ever before, and Petra had no idea how to quell her wrath.

Petra: "…Garf-san, Garf-san, do you have any good ideas?"

Garfiel: "Huh? Dunno, but maybe ya oughta give her somethin' real hard ta chew on? When my amazin' self's teeth get itchy, gnawin' helps calm me down, ya know."

Petra: "Mm, got it. I won't ask you again, Garf-san."

Garfiel: "Gao…?!"

Leaving the unsurprising evaluation to shock Garfiel unattended, Petra touched her own chest, reaffirming the source of everyone's concern.

—Petra's decision, which had angered Frederica—and likely Ram as well—was the Oath that bound the fulfillment of her promise to Musica and his companions to her very soul.

If she broke that Oath, Petra would not escape unscathed.

Its terms were simply a dialogue between Musica's group and Emilia, so the conditions were lax.

Petra: "As long as we all get back to Lugunica safely, there's no problem."

In that sense, the existence of the Oath was Petra's declaration of resolve.

A vow that she would reunite with Subaru and return to the kingdom with everyone.

Still, she admitted there was one childish part of her that deserved Frederica's anger.

Petra: "I just wanted to wipe that "I know everything" look off Master's face, so I stubbornly made the Oath for that. Maybe that was a little childish…"

—And thanks to that, Roswaal's face when I suggested it had been priceless, though.

11

—And so, while Petra was being scolded by the friends she had rejoined.

Emilia: “…I realized I’m reaaally blessed.”

Dudley: “Blessed, you say? Even though your very existence as Lady Emilia drives people like them into such desperation?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. I can’t agree with what Mr. Musica and the others were thinking or trying to do, but… Petra-chan’s feelings made me happy. Unlike Dudley, Petra-chan tried to put my feelings first.”

Emilia: “Oh, but I’m still angry that she went ahead with the Oath on her own!”

Dudley: “An Oath, huh…”

Emilia: “Roz… Dudley?”

Roswaal: “No, that truly astonished me—both the idea itself and the firmness of her resolve. Above all, her willingness to save even someone who had harmed her. It’s just like…”

Emilia: “Just like Subaru, right?”

Roswaal: “Indeed, though Emily’s influence seems present as well. Good grief, at this rate…”

Emilia: “Hm? Why are you speaking as if it’s someone else’s problem?”

Roswaal: “…What is it?”

Emilia: “You’re the one teaching Petra-chan magic and everything else, Dudley. So it’s your influence too. Don’t forget that.”

Emilia: “Ah, I’m going to check on Patrasche-chan. I also have to ask Mr. Musica and the others how much longer until they can leave the Everlasting Darkness.”

Beatrice: “…Ya know, you’re wearing quite the solemn face, I suppose.”

Dudley: “Oh, you’re awake?”

Beatrice: “Just for a bit, in fact. …While Betty was sleeping, did something happen, I suppose?”

Dudley: “Yes, while you were asleep…”

Beatrice: “—?”

Dudley: “Something occurred—an experience that leaves one with a feeling far, far too difficult to put into words.”

Stand By Me Pleiades:
Frederica’s Blood Bride
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—The instant the long-imprisoning darkness lifted, Frederica felt her heart soar.

She did not especially remember ever longing for the sun, yet after more than a full day without its light she could not quell the poignancy of finally bathing in it again.

Indeed, she keenly felt that human beings were kept alive by the sun.

Petra: “I am so relieved we finally got out of “Everlasting Darkness,” nee-sama.”

Whispering so to Frederica, mindful of those around them, was Petra.

Dressed like a noble young lady, the little sister-figure whose pitifulness and cuteness were bursting forth was currently giving a splendid performance as the central figure of the traveling party. Frederica’s true feelings were to answer that fact with praise, applause, and an embrace, but circumstances prevented it.

One was the need for both Petra and Frederica to remember the differences in the roles they were playing.

Petra was a noble lady, and Frederica her attendant-guard. A servant embracing her lady in praise would be unseemly for any normal master-servant pair.

Any element that might arouse suspicion or doubt had to be eliminated as far as possible.

And the other was—

Frederica: "—Lady Petra, are you experiencing any after-effects from the Oath?"

Petra: "U-U… I-I am fine. I am happy, but you worry too much, nee-sama."

Frederica: "It is a servant's duty to look after her mistress's body. Also, please refrain from calling me nee-sama, Lady Petra."

Petra: "Uu~"

Moistening her round eyes at Frederica's rebuke, Petra gripped the seat of the dragon carriage tightly and hung her head.

Petra may have been sulking, but Frederica was not being unkind without reason. No matter how cute a teary-eyed Petra was, that alone would never make her act mean.

Frederica: "Besides, Petra, you are far cuter when you are smiling."

Thus the thorniness in Frederica's tone was for another matter—the Oath they had just mentioned, and the circumstances under which the girl had carved it into her young body.

A band of mole-people who ruled the "Everlasting Darkness" and ferried illegal traffic between kingdom and empire had tried to hold the party hostage to negotiate with the Kingdom. It was none other than Petra who had persuaded them head-on.

The deed itself deserved praise, but the method was hardly commendable.

In exchange for a certain promise, Petra had secured both a change in the mole-people's plan and the continuation of their guidance through the clandestine route. As proof she would keep the promise, she had chosen to brand herself with an Oath that would inflict severe punishment should she break it.

The promise she had sworn to fulfil would not be difficult if Emilia were present, but—

Frederica: "—What I cannot approve of is that your method was precisely like the Master's."

Petra: "…Yes, I am reflecting on it."

Casting a side-long glance at the dejected Petra, Frederica quietly shut the lid on her urge to comfort her.

Unless Petra felt the sting here, she would not change her mindset. It would be troublesome if she continued thinking that exposing herself to needless danger was the best course.

For that reason Frederica had to steel her heart and make her feelings plain.

Frederica: "If you do not, we will be unable to deal safely with the Empire's ways from here on…"

Passing through the long, long tunnel known as the "Everlasting Darkness" toward the incoming light, they emerged to a slowly opening vista of fertile green land.

The Kingdom of Lugunica could hold its own, yet a closer look showed a clearly different flora, proof that the world awaiting them beyond the tunnel had changed completely.

It was a dignified—no,

Frederica: "Since we are entering illegally, our arrival is anything but above-board."

With that modest appraisal, Frederica at last described their arrival upon the road to the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

2

Musica: "Once you are through the tunnel, travel for a while and you will meet a large road. Stay on it and you should reach a town. I recommend deciding what to do there."

???: "Yes, thank you. You and the others have taken good care of us, Musica."

Musica: “Please, think nothing of it. We were the discourteous ones. …We want you young ladies to return safely, so you can fulfil your promise.”

Leaving those considerate words behind, the guide Musica and the rest of the mole-folk slipped back into the Everlasting Darkness.

Because of her promise to Petra, they must have wanted to watch over the journey, yet mole-folk had no place in the Empire. Musica had half-jokingly said they would be cut down on sight, but Frederica did not think that was an exaggeration.

The Empire’s harsh national character, combined with its prejudice against mole-folk, made merciless treatment all too likely.

Human beings could become terrifyingly cruel toward those who differed from themselves.

At any rate—

Roswaal: “It is delightful that we have entered the Empire like this. However, our objective does not end here; it lies further ahead. Everyone understands that, riiight～?”

Garfiel: “Ya don’t gotta tell me that. Quit askin’ us every damn thing—what’re ya schemin’, huh?”

Ram: “Watch your mouth, Garf. Dudley is warning us not to lower our guard.”

Garfiel: “Tch, I know that without bein’ told.”

Clicking his tongue, Garfiel averted his eyes from Ram’s warning. Narrowing her pale-crimson eyes at his foul language and brusque attitude, Ram offered Dudley—no, Roswaal—an apology with her gaze. Roswaal himself seemed unconcerned, merely shrugging.

After parting from Musica and the others, before heading for the town they had mentioned, the party gathered inside the two halted dragon carriages to discuss their next steps—the reason they had entered the Empire, the rescue of Subaru and Rem.

Roswaal: "“Rescue” may be overstating it, but let us assume the worst. Of course, if it amounts to simply “reuniting,” we could hardly wish for more."

Petra: "…It's hard to imagine Subaru not jumping straight into danger."

Otto: "I feel the same."

With a worried droop of her brows, Petra spoke, and Otto, hand to his forehead, nodded. Frederica—and indeed everyone present—shared their view.

In truth, they had hurried into Vollachia largely because, if they did not, they could not know what trouble Subaru might encounter. Even aside from that, there were many urgent reasons—such as Beatrice's contract—for reuniting quickly.

Thus, swift action was required even after entering the Empire—

Emilia: "But Vollachia is sooo huge. I've heard it's bigger than Lugunica, so how are we supposed to find Subaru and the others…?"

Roswaal: "There are, broadly speaking, two measures we can take regarding that. —Otto-kun."

Otto: "Yes, yes, I presumed as much; allow me to explain."

At Emilia's question, delivered with a finger to her lips, Roswaal nodded and prompted Otto. Adjusting his hat, Otto looked around the group and asked, "Shall I?"

Otto: "The two measures Dudley mentioned are, simply put, gathering information and hiring manpower."

Emilia: "Manpower…? You mean paying people to look for Subaru and the others?"

Otto: "That would be prudent. Searching this vast Empire with only the eight of us is hardly realistic. Still, that too will not be easy."

Emilia: “Eh… will it cost a looot of money?”

Otto: “Well, I doubt it will be cheap.”

Hearing the expense, Emilia drooped, muttering, “I thought so…”

When it came to finances, it was not Emilia’s place to speak. Of course, the cost of this journey was borne by House Mathers. Including hush money, a suitable sum had been paid to Musica and the others who guided them through the Everlasting Darkness.

Emilia: “By the way, can I ask how much?”

Ram: “You’re better off not knowing, Emily. Your eyes would pop out in shock.”

Emilia: “Eek, scary…”

Frederica: “So, what did you mean by saying it is difficult to hire people?”

At Emilia’s pale-faced shudder, Frederica pressed Otto for his true meaning.

In response, Otto said, “Just what I said.”

Otto: “First, our status carries no weight in the Empire. Since we are neither nobles nor royal candidates here, we cannot expect special treatment. On top of that, relying on connections is hard.”

Garfiel: “Connections, meaning acquaintances, yeah? Otto-bro, ya ain’t got anybody in the Empire?”

Otto: “Regrettably, entering the Empire would have meant approaching my homeland, so I always avoided it. Thus, I have no one here I can rely on. …In Gusteko or Kararagi, perhaps, but not here.”

Slowly shaking his head, Otto bit the inside of his cheek in frustration. Though knowledgeable and well-connected, his merchant-era network did not function in the Empire.

Just then—

Roswaal: “Regarding the problem Otto-kun just raised, I may be able to address it. We are not bosom friends, but I do have an acquaintance in the Empire, you seeee~”

Emilia: “—! Then we might be able to borrow some help?”

Roswaal: “I cannot guarantee it. Still, they are not someone incapable of reason. However, I cannot lie about our identity even to them, so I will have to tell the truth. Therefore—”

Ram: “Dudley will go alone? Unacceptable. I am coming with you.”

Roswaal: “Mm…”

Roswaal, who had interrupted Otto’s misgivings, was in turn interrupted by Ram. His one-eyed blink proved her point.

Frederica: “Surely you were not planning to depart alone? That is far too much…”

Roswaal: “Given the situation, however, that is the optimal course. Whether they listen or not, the only thing required is my presence… there is no need to expose Emily and the rest to danger.”

Ram: “—. In any case, if I part from Dudley, my body will not last long. I see no reason to refuse my company.”

Roswaal: “Good grief… I thought that decision was mine to make, fuuuture~”

With Ram calmly blocking every escape route, Roswaal gave a wry smile and muttered.

From Frederica’s perspective, both Roswaal’s idea and Ram’s opinion made sense. If anything, the problem was Roswaal’s hesitation to be alone with Ram.

Petra: “There really isn’t anyone who would side with Master over Sister Ram in this matter.”

Garfiel: “…For the record, I’ll say I ain’t thrilled.”

Pressing her hands together before her chest, Petra smiled; Garfiel responded with a sour face.

Yet, setting sentiment aside, Garfiel understood what was reasonable. Roswaal would have to obey the majority, the price of past deeds.

Emilia: “If there’s someone we can rely on, we can leave the talks to Dudley, right? Then do your best with Ram helping you.”

Ram: “Understood. Dudley, you have no objections, do you?”

Roswaal: “—. None, I suppooose.”

Given the final push from the guileless Emilia, Roswaal surrendered under Ram’s gaze.

Thus, the matter of securing manpower was entrusted to Roswaal and Ram—

Garfiel: “Otto-bro, what d’ya mean by information gathering?”

Otto: “Just what the words say—pursuing information about Natsuki-san’s whereabouts and movements. However, this side brings its own difficulties.”

Frederica: “And what might those be?”

Otto: “Surely, once Natsuki-san realized he was in Vollachia, he would not introduce himself as “Natsuki Subaru”.”

Emilia: “Ah, you mean like me and Dudley using other names?”

Eyes widening, Emilia spoke, and Otto nodded, “Yes.” Frederica likewise grasped the obvious precaution.

Though thrown into the Empire by unforeseen events, once he got his bearings Subaru would immediately recognize the instability of his position.

Naturally, he would also realize the danger of his name spreading within the Empire.

Frederica: “Then, even if we search for Lord Subaru, rather than the name Natsuki Subaru…”

Otto: “If he does anything noticeable, he is likely using an alias. I only hope it is something obvious enough.”

Garfiel: “The Captain’s alias, huh…”

Folding his arms, Garfiel tilted his head, but little hope existed of producing the answer. Only Subaru knew Subaru’s mind.

To Frederica, Subaru’s ideas seemed to sprout from another dimension.

Petra: “Then what we need to ask about is not Subaru’s name but his features—his hair color, eye color, clothes, his sharp look.”

Emilia: “Right. …If only Subaru had kept wearing that “jersey,” he would stand out more and be easier to spot.”

Ram: “In that case, Barusu’s identity would be exposed and he would not escape the stake.”

Frederica: “Burned at the stake is rather much… r-right?”

Clutching her elbow, Frederica asked the others, but regardless of their depth of knowledge about the Empire, no comforting answer came.

At any rate—

Emilia: “Dudley and Ram will go ask that acquaintance for help, and we’ll head to the nearby town and see if there are any rumors about Subaru and the others… is that okay?”

No one voiced objections to Emilia’s summary.

Being separated in an unfamiliar land was unsettling, but—

Frederica: “Master… with Dudley and Ram together, they will not do anything reckless, will they?”

Ram: “Rest easy. Even if there is a bit of recklessness, Dudley and I will force our way through.”

Frederica: “Please do not be reckless?”

Whether reassuring or not, Ram’s answer made Frederica’s cheek twitch. Ram’s dismissive “Hmph” might be taken as proof of calm.

Otto: “Since we will split up, how shall we meet again?”

Roswaal: “If I were alone, I would simply raise some conspicuous signal, but with Ram here I can catch up using Clairvoyance however I like. No need for concern.”

Garfiel: “We ain’t worried ’bout you, we’re worried ’bout Ram.”

Meanwhile, Roswaal was being grilled by Otto and Garfiel, responding nonchalantly with his makeup-less face.

Once everyone’s tasks were clarified—

Roswaal: “—Well then, we shall be off. Let us hope for good news on both sides. Should some problem arise and you need to reunite with us…”

Emilia: “Um, we should head for Dudley’s friend… Miss Dracroy, right?”

Roswaal: “Yes, that is correct. She is rather temperamental, though.”

At Emilia’s confirmation Roswaal nodded loftily, then quietly reached out. Ram, seeming to need no instruction, stepped into his arms.

Nestled against Roswaal’s chest, Ram turned while being lifted.

Ram: “Frederica, I am counting on you.”

Frederica: "—. Yes, without being told."

Chosen by name and entrusted, Frederica bowed deeply.

With that, Roswaal and Ram began to rise, floating higher and higher until they slipped into the clouds.

The moment had come for Roswaal's flight magic to display its overwhelming mobility.

Garfiel: "Tch, flyin' higher than usual… tryna pull that "Hanfan's courtship soars higher than anyone" crap?"

Otto: "It is the Empire. If someone spots him flying, they won't just say, "Oh, the Margrave Mathers," and leave it. Keeping out of sight is unavoidable."

Garfiel: "Yeah, yeah. So what now, Emily?"

Seeing Roswaal and Ram vanish into the clouds, Garfiel turned with poor manners. At his words, Emilia clenched her fists.

Emilia: "Let's start moving so we don't fall behind them. First, we find a place to stay in the nearby town, then we gather information."

Thus, their very first plan of action within the Empire was set in motion.

3

—The nearest town beyond the «Everlasting Darkness», «Mozotto», left a decidedly lifeless impression.

The Empire was reputed to possess fertile soil and, aided by its warm climate, to be a land blessed with plentiful harvests all year round. Although her own time trekking through the Empire since leaving the cave had been brief, the lush forests, the sweeping grasslands, and the pleasantly humid air all reinforced that preconception.

Yet, in stark contrast to the warmth inherent in that nature, the man-made streets felt somehow desolate and inorganic, impossible not to view as arid.

Bare, unpaved ground packed hard by countless feet, buildings whose cracks and damage had been left unrepaired, and a palette that seemed to have abandoned any intent to please the eye—only gray scenes stretched on.

She had never been especially conscious of it before, but the effect of color on the heart was, without her realizing it, this great.

Uniformity alone fostered an acute sense of constraint. Whether deliberate or arbitrary, Frederica could not tell, but—

Emilia: “It feels reaaally lonely, somehow.”

Apparently the sentiment was not hers alone; she felt a small relief at Emilia’s comment, but it could well impede their aim, so she could not rejoice.

What Frederica and the others sought in Mozotto was information that would lead to Subaru’s trail.

However—

Petra: “If the town doesn’t have much pep, the comings and goings of people and rumors are kinda suspicious, aren’t they…?”

Garfiel: “They shoulda run that cave a lil’ farther to someplace with more spirit, ya know.”

Petra: “That’s asking way too much of Mr Musica and the others… but I agree with Garf-san.”

While darting her eyes about the streets, Petra exchanged words with Garfiel. The wrinkles on Garfiel’s nose made it clear that his growing frustration was written all over his face.

Originally, Garfiel’s role lay largely in the application of force; on this journey, where decisive action was difficult, there were many occasions for his resentment to build—no, the fact he had few chances to be useful surely bred his own impatience and powerlessness at worrying for Subaru.

Frederica: “Garf, impatience is forbidden. There will certainly come a time when your strength is needed.”

Garfiel: “I get it without ya tellin’ me, Sis… I get it, I do.”

Garfiel turned his gaze aside, forcing down his irritation. Seeing her younger brother clearly understood the point, Frederica answered, “I know.”

Even so, they had at last reached the long-desired Vollachia.

All of them shared the same urge to suppress their itch and begin searching in earnest for the missing party.

Otto: “We can’t expect much information, but in any case we should secure an inn. We need a place to leave the dragon carriage, and I’d like to avoid camping outside town if possible.”

Emilia: “Everyone’s bodies are all stiff from sleeping in the carriage.”

Otto: “It is certainly better to rest properly in beds—and we need a base of operations. We will also need Petra-chan to watch over Beatrice-chan.”

Petra: “Eh?”

Hearing Otto say this while handling the reins, Petra’s eyes rounded.

To look after Beatrice at the inn meant she could not join the canvassing. For the girl who worried deeply for Subaru, that was a cruel blow.

However—

Frederica: “Lady Petra, I share Master Otto’s view. Given our roles, it would be odd for you to take the lead in gathering information… you do understand.”

Petra: “U… that’s true, but…”

Garfiel: “See, our amazin’ selves’re the guards for Lady Petra and Lady Beatrice. If our wards go wanderin’ around, we can’t ever relax, ya see.”

Petra’s enthusiasm was clear, but this journey had its division of duties. Besides—and Petra would surely resent hearing it—the Empire’s ways were still a mystery to them, and they wished to avoid exposing the young girl to danger as far as possible. No matter how precociously wise or courageous she might be, a girl was still a girl.

Emilia: “I understand how frustrating it is, but leave this to us, Lady Petra.”

Petra: “Emily…”

Emilia: “Betty can’t wake up many times a day, and if she opened her eyes with no one around she’d feel reaaally lonely. Since Subaru can’t be with her now, staying by Betty’s side is an important part of our job too.”

Petra: “…That’s unfair.”

Even if Emilia had no such intention, invoking Beatrice left Petra no choice. The feelings she cherished for Beatrice were every bit as dear as those she held for that black-haired boy; hence her strong resolve for this journey—enough that she would gladly carve a Oath sigil into her own body.

Otto: “Horses for courses. Besides, Petra-chan has already accomplished a major task. It is about time we adults earned our keep—please grant us the chance to redeem ourselves.”

Petra: “Unlike Emily, I don’t like how insinuating you sound, Otto-san.”

Otto: “Did I say something wrong?!”

Petra: “You didn’t. It’s the way you say it.”

Petra puffed out her reddened cheeks, turning away in protest. But the clever girl could immediately verify the justice of their words—no doubt she also saw through Frederica's deeper intent of keeping her from harm.

Petra: "…I don't want to understand, but I do. I'll wait at the inn with Beatrice-chan. But make sure you bring back good information, all right?"

Frederica: "With you staying with Beatrice, Lady Petra, we can go without worry. We will definitely pin down Subaru's whereabouts!"

Otto: "Striking the main prize at once may be expecting a little too much, though."

Yet without at least that much determination, finding just two people in this vast Empire could hardly be easy.

While Frederica smiled at Emilia's resolve—

Otto: "Frederica-san, may I have a moment?"

He called softly, so the others would not hear. Whenever Otto did this, the matter was usually important; once again, that impression proved true.

Otto: "In our canvassing ahead, we will of course ask about Natsuki-san's appearance and any recent events in the country."

Frederica: "Yes, that is correct. And?"

Otto: "I would rather not think of it, but… please also keep an ear out for signs of damage caused by "Gluttony."

The single word "Gluttony," distasteful as the preface had been, was indeed enough to make Frederica knit her brows—but she understood well the validity of his concern.

Frederica: "Subaru-sama and Rem were not the only ones to disappear from the tower."

According to Emilia's report, the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony had attacked the Pleiades Watchtower they had visited seeking an audience with the «Sage» Shaula. Though Emilia's group had defeated and captured more than one of them, a third Archbishop had suddenly appeared at the end, and vanished together with Subaru and the rest—

Frederica: "Since we did not witness the scene, it is not impossible someone vanished for reasons unrelated to Subaru-sama and the others, but…"

Otto: "That Natsuki-san could be free of trouble? Impossible."

Frederica: "Indeed, impossible…"

Contrary to his own wish, Subaru could never remain unconnected to calamity. If a seed of disaster had been nearby, thinking it had clung to his clothes as he flew off was only natural—though the fact that seed was a Sin Archbishop was no joke.

Otto: "Had Natsuki-san fallen victim to Gluttony, we would have been spared the trouble of coming to the Empire, for we could not search for someone no one remembers."

Frederica: "Otto-sama…"

Otto: "I will not let Emilia-sama or Petra-chan hear that. I dislike being scolded."

Frederica: "I would scold you as well."

Otto's somewhat off-hand tone earned Frederica's warning. He could act cynically at times, but it was his way of coping, and he did choose his audience carefully—arguably a rational approach.

Frederica: "At any rate, we should listen for damage caused by Gluttony—whatever form it takes—since it may well be gruesome."

Otto: "Precisely. We do not wish for it, yet it is better than having zero leads; difficult, then, to say whether we should hope for it."

Whenever the Witch Cult rampaged, there was always harm one wished to turn away from. As Otto said, lacking clues was undesirable, but one could never voice a wish that a disaster occur to obtain them.

Emilia: “What are you two whispering about?”

Otto: “Oh, just confirming a few things. Anyway, let’s arrange our teams. This is not a large town, so—”

As Otto said, Mozotto was a small town, likely with fewer than five hundred inhabitants—adequate as a way-station for provisioning a long journey, but hardly dependable as a hub for gathering information from across the Empire.

Otto: “Petra-chan and Beatrice-chan—the two young ladies will stay at the inn, and the remaining four of us will canvass for information. Frederica-san, could I ask you to accompany Emily?”

Emilia: “Eh, aren’t we splitting into four separate groups?”

Otto: “A lone woman walking in an unfamiliar land is dangerous. I would rather not furnish Natsuki-san with a reason to yell at me when we reunite.”

At Otto’s smooth reply, Emilia reluctantly nodded, “I see…” Of course, that was Otto’s pretext; the truth was his anxiety over letting Emilia move alone—not for fear she might be hurt, but quite the opposite.

Frederica: “Emily, since this is our first time here, let us protect one another. I am sorry that it is my unease that prompts this…”

Emilia: “Ah, no, I’m totally fine. You’re right; I haven’t been watching my surroundings properly. I’ll make sure to protect you, Frederica.”

Frederica: “That is most reassuring. —Garf, do your job properly.”

Garfiel flexed his knuckles with enthusiasm at being assigned solo work, so she nailed him down with that caution.

Garfiel: “I said I got it, didn’t I?”

Garfiel: “Then, Otto-bro, what now?”

Otto: “Very well. Once the young ladies are settled at the inn, three hours from now—precisely at the end of Fire Time—we gather in the middle of town.”

Garfiel: “Ohh, gotcha.”

All of them, starting with Garfiel, nodded at Otto’s raised finger.

Then, as a final word before they set out—

Emilia: “Alright everyone, let’s be careful. If our true identities get exposed it’ll be reaaally bad, so make sure nothing dangerous happens.”

With that caution from Emilia, each of them set about their tasks.

4

???: “A traveler with black hair and black eyes…? No, I haven't heard anything special. But if we're talking about appearances, you girls better be careful. After all—”

???: “Two girls, one with blue hair…? I don't know anything about that, try someone else. However, with looks like yours, you should remember this—”

???: “Something unusual? Nothing particular has come to my ears. Ah, but since you're quite the beauty, let me warn you—”

Frederica: “—Everyone warned me about the same thing. Be careful of kidnapping marriages.”

Garfiel: “Kidnapping marriages, huh?”

The center of town, where they had agreed to regroup, was little more than an open space. Despite being called a square, it was merely an area in the middle of town, where a small market was being held.

Standing at a distance from the market, Frederica, Emilia, and

Garfiel met up after three hours of gathering information, exchanging their findings.

Otto had yet to join them, but everyone had an oddly high trust in him to dig deeper into the information Frederica's group had collected, so his lateness was considered a minor issue.

Unfortunately, nothing definitive had been discovered regarding Subaru's features, such as his black hair and black eyes, or any girl resembling Rem. They had also inquired about damages from Gluttony, but received no notable information there either—whether that was good or bad remained uncertain.

Nevertheless, Frederica agreed that the most concerning information they'd learned was the initial topic.

Frederica: "Kidnapping marriages… Apparently, it's a custom where one forcibly abducts someone they've fallen for and brings them home to marry…"

Garfiel: "Scary tradition… Does it only happen to women?"

Frederica: "No, it seems men can be kidnapped as well. In those cases, apparently, groups of women or the woman's family and friends help out."

Garfiel: "That ain't a scene ya can jus' laugh off. Didn't expect ta hear somethin' so imperial-style outta nowhere."

Garfiel folded his arms, and though inappropriate, Frederica found herself agreeing with him.

The idea of a group of women teaming up to kidnap a single man was an extraordinary sight. If encountered, Frederica felt she would likely freeze, unable to act.

However, Garfiel then tilted his head,

Garfiel: "Emily 'n Sis got warned by everyone, but no one said anythin' ta me. Why'd they keep it from me?"

Emilia: "Now that you mention it, you're right. I wonder why?"

Frederica: “…Perhaps simply because they couldn't imagine a reason someone would kidnap Garf. Those who warned us probably thought we were, well, beautiful.”

Garfiel: “Sis? C’mon, what kinda eyes did those folks— Ouch! I didn’t finish!”

Frederica: “You nearly finished that sentence! Such a rude child!”

Frederica, red-faced, pulled on Garfiel’s ear as he looked dumbfounded.

Of course, Frederica wasn't bold enough to call herself a beauty. Emilia was right there beside her, and there were adorable girls like Ram and Petra around as well.

Compared to them, Frederica was tall, with sharp fangs. She thought her eye color and facial expressions weren’t bad. In fact, she'd often been complimented on them in the past.

Though that had stopped as she grew older, making her suspect it had all been mere flattery.

Frederica: “…”

Garfiel: “Ouch, ouch, ouch! How long ya gonna pull my ear?!”

Frederica: “Oh dear, I'm sorry. I put too much strength into it.”

She'd been dwelling on unpleasant memories, unintentionally tightening her grip. As soon as she released him, Garfiel hid behind Emilia, holding his ear.

Emilia, observing this, giggled quietly,

Emilia: “It’s okay, Frederica is cute. Garfiel just finds it hard to compliment his older sister.”

Frederica: “Th-Thank you… Although, the word 'cute' doesn’t quite suit me. It's a special term, after all.”

Emilia: “Is that so? Then beautiful works just fine!”

Frederica: “Uuh… I-I wonder what's keeping Otto-sama. He's awfully late!”

Frederica fanned her face with her hand, flushed by Emilia's sincere and innocent compliment. Emilia looked around, saying “You’re right,”

Emilia: “I wonder if he's gotten caught up chatting with someone… Otto-kun does get very talkative when he's had a drink.”

Garfiel: “Only Emily’d call Otto-bro's drunken rambles like that… But yeah, I’m worried ‘bout him bein' late.”

Garfiel clicked his teeth, agreeing with Emilia, who was biting her lip in concern. Even Frederica, standing next to Emilia, felt uneasy as she considered Otto’s lateness.

Frederica casually mentioned it, but it was truly unusual for Otto. Emilia had a point—Otto sometimes made mistakes with alcohol, but only in places where he could relax without caution. It was unlikely he'd make such a mistake in enemy territory.

A growing, unpleasant feeling arose that something might've happened—

Garfiel: “Speakin' o' that, that kidnappin' marriage thing ya mentioned before?”

Emilia: “Yes, kidnapping marriage. Now that I think about it, Regulus almost forced me into marriage… I wonder if that was a kidnapping marriage too…”

Frederica: “The situation you were in was indeed unfortunate, but… Garf?”

The conversation was derailing, but Frederica gently called Garfiel back on topic. He shook his short blond hair roughly,

Garfiel: “Might jus' be overthinkin', but didn't ya say earlier even guys could get kidnapped?”

Emilia: “That's how everyone described it, yes.”

Garfiel: “Ya don’t think Otto-bro was targeted, do ya?”

“…”

Garfiel's words brought a momentary, awkward silence.

But quickly, that silence was broken by the relaxed thought of “it can't be.”

Frederica: “N-No way, that's impossible, Garf. You’re overthinking it; it's too far-fetched.”

Garfiel: “R-Right? Otto-bro ain’t reckless ‘nuff ta get caught easily, and even if targeted, he ain't that careless…”

Emilia: “Th-This is terrible! We can't let Otto-kun be in danger!”

Frederica & Garfiel: “Emily?!”

However, Emilia, completely ignoring their assurances, rushed off, panic on her face.

Frederica and Garfiel chased after her after a moment’s hesitation.

Frederica: “Emily! That's just overly cautious…”

Emilia: “If it’s just me worrying too much, then that's fine! But if I'm right, we can't afford to be wrong!”

Frederica felt struck by Emilia's words.

She was right—it was better to overreact than to regret later. If their fears were unfounded, they could simply apologize. But if Otto really was in danger, they had to move immediately.

Frederica: “Garf, can you smell Otto-sama…?”

Garfiel: “Sis, ya know Otto-bro’s scent’s faint ta begin with. Even worse, neither of our noses are workin’ right on imperial soil yet.”

As half-beasts, Frederica and Garfiel had superior sense of smell compared to humans, but both their senses were dulled due to unfamiliarity with the Empire's unique environment.

With frustration, they finally caught up with Emilia, who stopped at the stall they'd previously visited.

Emilia: “Shopkeeper-san!”

Shopkeeper: “Oh? Ah, you girls again. Why the panic?”

Emilia: “It’s about the kidnapping marriage you mentioned before! Can you tell us more?”

Shopkeeper: “More details? Well, there's nothing more than what I already told…”

Garfiel: “Tell us anythin’ ya know! Our friend might be in danger!”

The shopkeeper, alarmed by Garfiel's urgency, lowered his voice slightly,

Shopkeeper: “When you say your friend might be in danger, are you sayin’ they got kidnapped?”

Emilia: “We don’t know. But he hasn’t arrived at our meeting place, even though the agreed time has already passed… He’s normally ve~ry punctual, so it’s unusual.”

Shopkeeper: “I hate to ask this, but is this friend of yours attractive?”

Emilia: “Attractive… Yes, I think he’s good-looking. Right?”

Frederica: “It’s true that he’s good-looking. Although he doesn’t usually give off that impression…”

Frederica faltered slightly, having to respond directly to Emilia.

Frederica considered the most accurate way to describe Otto would be “good-looking when quiet.” If he gave a different impression, it was due to everyday interactions. With Subaru or Garfiel around, his expressive personality overshadowed his good looks, making “funny” a stronger impression than handsome.

At any rate—

Shopkeeper: “Good-looking, huh…? Then there’s a strong chance he was taken by the Batfolk.”

Emilia: “Batfolk…?”

Shopkeeper: “They’re the ones doing these kidnapping marriages. It’s happening not just in this town, but in towns all over the area.”

With a hand pressed to his forehead, the shopkeeper gave them a sympathetic look. Frederica, Emilia, and Garfiel exchanged tense glances.

Frederica: “B-But even if they’re experienced, I doubt Otto-sama would easily…”

Garfiel: “How do these kidnappers operate?”

Shopkeeper: “From what I hear, they hit from behind without warning and tie you up.”

Frederica: “Of all things, the one method he’d struggle most against…!”

Otto was adept at dealing with most situations, but his weakness was undoubtedly a scenario where there was no room for negotiation.

Garfiel: “Even Otto-bro wouldn’t stand a chance if they caught ‘im off guard…”

Frederica: “Neither Subaru-sama nor Otto-sama are the type to win in a straightforward fight…”

Their worst fears were being confirmed one after another, turning Frederica’s and Garfiel’s faces pale.

Since the kidnappers’ goal was marriage, it might not be life-threatening. Still, accidents happen—people sometimes lose their lives through unintended outcomes.

It had only been a few hours since entering the Vollachian Empire. Encountering a situation unheard of in the Kingdom of Lugunica in such a short span went beyond mere bad luck.

Frederica: “What should we do…”

Emilia: “Um, shopkeeper-san, how do you know the kidnappers are Batfolk?”

Frederica: “Emily…?”

While Frederica was overwhelmed by thoughts of Otto’s danger, Emilia stared intently at the shopkeeper. Even through her robe’s cognitive disruption, Frederica felt Emilia’s intensity.

The shopkeeper, clearly pressured by Emilia’s gaze rather than her identity, stammered,

Shopkeeper: “W-Well, the reason it’s obvious is simple. It’s the blood.”

Emilia: “—Blood?”

Shopkeeper: “Right, blood. The Batfolk drink human blood. They choose their targets based on the quality of their blood, and…”

The shopkeeper hesitated briefly, but Frederica could guess what he was about to say.

If blood quality was the deciding factor, then naturally they’d first test it. Thus, the kidnappers would taste blood at the scene, leaving unmistakable evidence pointing to the Batfolk.

Shopkeeper: “The Batfolk move around the country looking for suitable targets. This town and its neighbors are their current hunting grounds. That’s why I warned you girls earlier.”

Emilia: “Can’t those people be stopped?”

Shopkeeper: “The Batfolk? Trying to fight them head-on is a terrible idea. If no one resists, only as much blood as they drink will flow. But if someone defies them, a lot more blood will spill. It’s obvious which is preferable.”

The shopkeeper slowly shook his head, cautioning Emilia against doing something foolish. He returned to his work, clearly advising that sacrificing one person was wiser than picking a fight with the Batfolk.

It was practical advice from someone who lived here, genuinely meant to help, yet—

Emilia: "—Even if he says that, I have a reason why I can't back down."

Emilia thanked the shopkeeper deeply, expressing gratitude while firmly stating she had reached a different conclusion.

Then, turning away from the shop, Emilia asked Frederica and Garfiel,

Emilia: "What do you two think? Do you think Otto-kun was kidnapped?"

Garfiel: "—I don't wanna think so, but him bein' late 'n hearin' how these guys operate, even Otto-bro might've been caught."

Frederica: "Different lands have different customs. Otto-sama's usual skills might not be enough here… That possibility certainly exists. But…"

Emilia: "—We can't just cause trouble for the people here."

Frederica hesitantly nodded to Emilia's cautious addition.

If the shopkeeper's information was correct, the Batfolk who potentially kidnapped Otto were clearly dangerous. If outsiders like Frederica's group stirred things up, the Batfolk's anger might shift onto the townspeople instead.

Emilia: "I understand that worry. I really do…"

Frederica: "Emily…?"

Emilia: "I understand… But right now, I'm reaally angry. Is it wrong to feel this way?"

Frederica: "…"

Emilia: "I think marriage is reaaally wonderful and important. So using force to kidnap someone and making them marry… I hate that method. And if Otto-kun is in danger, I want to do something even more."

Though Emilia spoke gently, her anger was clear.

Frederica had felt overwhelmed by the term "kidnapping marriage," but she agreed that it was intolerable. Emilia had almost experienced something similar in the Watergate City, from a Sin Archbishop.

Emilia: "Back then, Subaru came to rescue me, and I was reaaally happy. Now it's my turn to do the rescuing. Though it's not Subaru—it's Otto-kun."

Frederica: "…You're serious? Making enemies could hinder our search for Subaru-sama and the others."

Garfiel: "But Sis, that's—"

Frederica: "Garf."

Frederica firmly silenced her brother with one word.

She understood Garfiel's concern. But she had asked because she wanted Emilia to acknowledge the risk.

In response, Emilia's amethyst eyes sparkled resolutely,

Emilia: "We just arrived, and we might already make things noisy. But even if that makes it harder to move later, it's still much better than losing Otto-kun, right?"

Frederica: "…If you're prepared, I can't object. Though I'm sure Ram will scold us severely later."

Ram had entrusted them to behave responsibly, so she had every right to be angry. Though Otto would probably bear the brunt of her scolding.

Garfiel: “Looks like we’re decided. So, whaddya wanna do?”

Garfiel bared his fangs eagerly, ready to act. Emilia pondered for a moment,

Emilia: “According to the shopkeeper-san, the Batfolk target people whose blood tastes good… How do we make blood tasty?”

Garfiel: “I like meat, but blood’s definitely not my specialty…”

Frederica interrupted, rolling up her sleeve slightly,

Frederica: “Emily, Garf, I have a proposal.”

Emilia: “You thought of something?”

Frederica: “Yes. It’s not a method I’m fond of, but…”

Frederica traced her finger over her pale skin, revealing faint veins.

Frederica: “I don’t know good blood from bad. But I do have a guess regarding blood considered tasty—my own.”

Emilia: “Frederica’s blood…?”

Garfiel: “—Sis, ya can’t mean…”

Garfiel’s face turned grim as he grabbed Frederica’s shoulder, gripping it tightly with anxiety. Frederica gently peeled away his hand, touched by her brother’s genuine concern.

Garfiel’s worry was justified.

Frederica: “Emily, the blood running through my veins is special. It’s called ‘Rareblood’.”

Emilia: “Rareblood…?”

Frederica: “I personally don’t have any strong feelings about it, but…”

It was Clind who had informed Frederica that her blood was unique.

More precisely, she’d learned this from Clind after an incident caused by people seeking her blood. Clind had resolved the incident and explained it to her afterward.

Frederica herself had never felt any benefit from her blood’s uniqueness. In fact, she vividly remembered it causing trouble more than once.

Still—

Frederica: “If what we’ve heard is true, then my blood should certainly attract the Batfolk. At least it’s a clue to find Otto-sama.”

Garfiel: “Clind specifically said not ta let anyone taste yer blood, Sis.”

Garfiel spoke urgently, his demeanor shifting from eagerness for a fight to deep concern for his sister’s safety. Frederica was grateful and deeply touched.

Frederica: “But if my blood can ever be useful, there might never be another chance. Clind’s warning was about the risk, correct?”

Garfiel: “Ya think it’ll be fine as long as it’s for Otto-bro…?”

Frederica: “Yes, I do. —Emily.”

Frederica turned to Emilia, who had been carefully considering Frederica’s arm—and by extension, the blood beneath her skin. Emilia’s eyes reflected the same concern as Garfiel’s.

The final decision rested with Emilia. If she prioritized Frederica’s safety, they'd have to find another way. But Frederica held a certain belief—no, a certain hope:

Emilia: “—Let’s do it. Garfiel and I will absolutely protect you.”

When faced with necessary decisions, Emilia possessed the strength to make them.

5

—Pressing down on his throbbing head, Otto bitterly reproached himself for his blunder.

Otto: “I was being careful, or at least I thought I was…”

He had deliberately avoided deserted alleys and refrained as much as possible from interacting with suspicious characters. In an unfamiliar place, his ability to respond to trouble was limited. Avoiding danger from the start was crucial.

However, all of Otto’s carefulness had been effortlessly shattered by his opponent’s boldness. —If he had to choose another word, it might have been closer to recklessness or aggression rather than boldness.

Either way, it was during a brief moment when no one was around that he had been struck on the head.

Otto: “Looks like I’m the only one here.”

Holding back the pain, Otto observed his surroundings and muttered to himself.

Having been knocked out and transported somewhere, Otto was now locked inside an iron cage. It was just barely large enough to lie down in, far from what one might call comfortable.

Apparently, aside from Otto, there were several others in similar predicaments. From all around came sobs and moans, everyone engulfed in despair.

However, seeing that none of his close acquaintances—such as Emilia or Frederica—were among them was, at least, a small comfort for Otto.

Otto: “But kidnappers again, huh… Honestly, it seems I have a real knack for getting bought and sold.”

When kidnappers were involved, the goal was probably human trafficking. Otto had already experienced being kidnapped once before; perhaps he truly was cursed.

Then again, if he started thinking along those lines, he would have to reconsider his life of constant trouble—

Otto: "—?"

Suddenly, Otto shivered at the sensation of the air growing colder, squinting at the space outside his cage.

Given the dim surroundings and cold air, Otto assumed he was somewhere underground or inside a cave, but the sudden chill did not bode well.

And indeed, Otto's instincts proved correct.

???: "—Gentlemen, I apologize for keeping you waiting so long."

With those words, the space outside distorted—and a black silhouette appeared.

Standing there was a tall, slender man in black clothes, his green hair slicked back. At first glance, he seemed cold, but he was strikingly beautiful in a way that sent chills down Otto's spine.

But perhaps due to the dim lighting, his complexion appeared eerily pale, like that of a corpse.

As Otto was reflecting on this eerie impression, the man bowed deeply and spoke again,

Jacques-Rosé: "I am Jacques-Rosé Blau. My methods may seem somewhat uncouth, but there is a reason why I have gathered you here. Indeed, an unavoidable reason."

Speaking solemnly, the man—Jacques-Rosé, as he introduced himself—continued.

If by "uncouth" he meant knocking people out and abducting them without warning, Otto would have preferred a more sincere apology.

But making unnecessary wisecracks and incurring hostility wouldn't do him any good.

First, he should hear out the man's demands and then decide how to respond. Otto congratulated himself inwardly for holding his tongue, a decision he was immediately thankful for.

After all, the words Jacques-Rosé uttered next, as he raised his head, were—

Jacques-Rosé: "—The reason I've gathered you all is that you are candidates to become my Blood Bride. As one who inherits ancient blood, I seek a partner with suitable bloodline."

Captives: "…"

Jacques-Rosé's melodic voice resonated through the air, freezing the sobbing voices and creating a momentary silence, as if time itself had stopped.

Making the most of this moment, Otto carefully reconsidered Jacques-Rosé's words and observed his surroundings—and finally noticed.

—Every other person confined in the cages was female.

Otto: "…Then why am I here?"

Otto was deeply puzzled but managed to keep the question to himself.

Had he voiced his confusion, drawing attention, who knew what might have happened? But whether or not his silence would actually improve his circumstances, Otto couldn't be sure.

The only thing he was sure of was—

Otto: "—Ram-san and Petra-chan are definitely going to scold me later."

That he would most certainly get an earful from the two scariest women in his camp.

—A tall woman was walking along a dark alleyway in the town of Mozotto.

Walking quietly, with gentle footsteps, was a woman with long golden hair cascading down her perfectly straight back.

The glimpses of her neck and ears through the gaps in her hair, and her slightly exposed skin, were so fair they seemed almost translucent. Even just from her back, one could imagine a beauty that made one gulp involuntarily.

However, for those who gazed at her from behind, who almost gulped at her sight, the woman's greatest allure was the fragrant scent of blood tickling their nostrils.

Apparently, the woman had suffered a wound on her left arm, as evidenced by the bandage glimpsed at her wrist through her sleeve. The bleeding had already stopped, and the injury was not serious.

Yet even if the wound posed no danger, the fragrant aroma of blood was something that could not be hidden.

Therefore—

“…”

Holding their breaths, two hunters exchanged glances within the shadows, communicating their mutual intent.

All reasons for hesitation, all excuses to refrain, vanished before the alluring scent of blood. Tasting the shuddering sensation running through their bodies, the two slowly stepped out from the shadows.

They silently slipped behind their prey, without sound or presence. To be out alone amidst the sunset gloom, despite rumors surely having spread, was the height of carelessness.

Still, they wanted to thank her deeply for remaining so careless until today. It was worth enduring all the humiliation and scolding they'd suffered for failing to provide tributes.

They would attack from behind and knock her unconscious in an instant—even if, when catching her, their claws inadvertently scratched and drew blood.

Yes, just as they were licking their lips,

???: “—You've gotten greedy, haven't ya? That ain't allowed.”

???: ““Huh?”“

Startled, the two whirled around as a rough voice's owner tapped their shoulders from behind. There, standing behind them who had supposedly gotten behind the woman, was someone else.

In the alleyway darkened by dusk, a figure with emerald eyes and sharp fangs emerged—.

???: “—hk!”

A chill of terror raced up their spines, and their bodies moved instinctively.

It had been instinct that had drawn them towards the sweet scent of blood, and instinct again that made them reflexively raise their claws. However, neither of the actions commanded by instinct came true.

???: “Up ya go.”

Their raised arms were effortlessly seized by their opponent's casually raised hands.

Not just one, but both arms were seized. The two who had reflexively moved found themselves simultaneously restrained. Shocked and frozen by this, their opponent twisted their arms forcefully upward.

???: “Behave yerselves!”

Their vision spun wildly, and they crashed helplessly onto their backs. Struck by the sensation of losing their breath, unable even to groan, their consciousness faded in a flash of white.

Literally unaware of front or back, unable to grasp what had just happened, their consciousness drifted far away—.

???: “Garf, that was too much!”

Garfiel: “Couldn't be helped! My amazin’ self didn't think it'd end up like this either!”

???: “Wait, you two! Ah, no! They're passing out!”

As their consciousness faded, they heard the comically pointless argument at the edge of awareness.

While pessimistic thoughts about possibly dying passed through their mind, they found it unbearably distasteful that these might be the last voices they'd hear.

And so, desperately wishing that it wouldn't be so, they continued praying right up until their consciousness slipped away.

7

Otto: “—I see, kidnapping marriage, is it?”

After calming down the weeping women trapped within the iron cage and managing to gather information from them, Otto quietly stroked his chin with his hand.

He had suddenly been struck in an alleyway, tied up, and brought here—this place apparently served as the hideout for individuals who carried out the rumored “kidnapping marriage,” a hot topic in Mozotto and nearby towns.

The tall man from earlier who had introduced himself with exaggerated gestures and tone as Jacques-Rosé Blau was apparently the ringleader, the representative of the Bat People who were the culprits behind this act.

Otto: “…”

Sorting out the situation in his mind, Otto first cursed his own poor luck.

He was aware of his predisposition for repeatedly getting involved in unfortunate incidents everywhere he went. But recently, having settled with Emilia's camp, he might have grown slightly careless.

Moreover, this was the Vollachian Empire, where Otto's common sense didn't apply. Reflecting, he acknowledged he should have been more cautious about the possible risks of acting alone.

Otto: "Still, if I overly blame myself, even the incident at Pristella might end up being considered my bad luck, so I'd like to keep that in moderation."

In the first place, if it came to misfortune wherever he went, Subaru and Emilia had equally troublesome predispositions. It was somewhat depressing to think that their misfortunes combined, including his own, led to their current bonds. Still, without this bad luck, he would never have encountered them in the first place.

In any case—

Otto: "Considering the circumstances, did they mistake me for a woman…?"

It wasn't something he wanted to think about, but circumstantial evidence strongly suggested that this was indeed the case.

Around twenty prisoners were confined within these decidedly uncomfortable iron cages, and all of them were women. Given that the groom for this "kidnapping marriage" was Jacques-Rosé, that scenario would be logical.

The only inconsistency here was none other than Otto himself.

In fact, Otto intentionally chose clothing that obscured his build. With his admittedly androgynous features, he understood how he might be mistaken for a woman. His less-than-intimidating face and build had sometimes served him well in negotiations.

Otto: "When things like this happen, I become jealous of Natsuki-san and Garfiel's intimidating gazes…"

Though intimidating gazes weren't ideal for negotiations, they had their advantages when it came to avoiding troublesome incidents. Of course, intimidating appearances could also invite trouble of another kind, so not everything was ideal.

In the end, people could only play the cards they were dealt.

If only one could freely swap their gaze, face, voice, or height to suit the situation perfectly—but that was overly ambitious. Perhaps it was even a loss to one's valuable personal capital.

Otto: "—The appointed meeting time must've passed by now."

According to the women, rumors of the "kidnapping marriage" had spread even to Mozotto. Emilia and the others could easily link Otto's disappearance to those rumors.

Normally, it would be dismissed as nonsense, but Frederica and Petra knew Otto had cross-dressed before, making the idea not too far-fetched.

However, he disliked that Subaru and Roswaal's frivolous imaginations might actually be useful here.

Otto: "Blaming the Margrave for that would be too cruel, I suppose. After all, it was Natsuki-san who set that bad precedent."

In any case, Otto concluded it was wisest not to escalate matters and to await rescue from Emilia and the others.

Attempting an escape could endanger not just himself, but also the other kidnapped women. It was frustrating, but patience was the best option here.

As long as no one discovered he was male, observing the situation shouldn't be too problematic.

Otto: "To avoid attracting attention, perhaps I should try to speak in a higher pitch…"

If Subaru were in his position, Otto was sure he'd perfectly impersonate a woman to an alarming degree. Garfiel, even if discovered, could resort to brute force to resolve the matter.

Essentially, the problem was that Otto, the most middling among them, had gotten caught.

All he could do was hope Jacques-Rosé and his companions would take their time selecting a bride—

Jacques-Rosé: "—The time has come! It's time to choose my Blood Bride!"

Otto: "Wait, whaaat?!"

The moment he had prepared himself for a prolonged wait, that enthusiastic voice rang out, and Otto inadvertently reacted. He quickly covered his mouth, but it was already too late after such a dramatic reaction.

Jacques-Rosé appeared, his footsteps echoing across the hard ground of the eerie cave filled with iron cages holding the abducted women, cold air, and darkness.

The imposing man with a piercing gaze fixed his purple eyes upon Otto, who still covered his mouth.

Jacques-Rosé: "What is the matter, my bride candidate? To think you'd raise your voice in surprise."

Otto: "Ah, well… I just thought it was quite hasty. I was under the impression you'd take more time, carefully choosing a bride suitable for your ancient blood."

Otto shook his head slightly, hiding his mouth with his sleeve as he spoke.

He deliberately pitched his voice slightly higher, lowering his gaze as if frightened, assuming a posture intended to obscure his gender.

He'd preferred not to converse much, but given the situation, he had no choice.

However, ignoring Otto's inner reluctance, Jacques-Rosé crossed his muscular arms with a nod.

Jacques-Rosé: “Bride candidate, your words make sense. However, neither I nor my brethren have much time left.”

Otto: “But, surely choosing a Blood Bride shouldn't be done so easily? Given the dignity of ancient blood, you shouldn’t be able to find a suitable partner casually…”

Jacques-Rosé: “What you say is correct. However, I never expected to find someone worthy of ancient blood easily from the start. That would be unrealistic. Rather, it is essential to elevate the chosen bride to match the ancient blood, isn't it?”

Otto: “Ah, well, that’s certainly a commendable idea, but…”

Otto was confused, having received a much more rational response than expected.

Jacques-Rosé’s reply was surprisingly sensible, showing he was more realistic than Otto had assumed. Indeed, viewing ancient blood as lineage and not setting overly ambitious expectations for a bride was logical.

The problem, however, lay in their method of bride selection being kidnapping in the first place, and the impossibility, at least in Otto’s cultural understanding, of fostering friendly relations with brides chosen that way.

In short, Jacques-Rosé’s approach stumbled at the starting line.

If this was the custom of Jacques-Rosé and the Bat People in selecting their mates, Otto could feel the cultural gap keenly.

Jacques-Rosé: “However, you seem genuinely concerned about my brethren and me.”

Otto: “Excuse me?”

Jacques-Rosé: “Most girls we abduct grieve and refuse even conversation. But you, even with a trembling voice, maintain a different attitude. Perhaps…”

Listening to Jacques-Rosé’s impressed tone, Otto felt a very, very bad premonition. But even if his soul burned with dread, he couldn't control Jacques-Rosé’s intentions.

Hence, Otto had no means to stop it—

Jacques-Rosé: “Perhaps you truly are suitable to become my bride.”

Otto: “…”

Otto thought to himself: “He really said it.”

Whether it was narcissism or not was highly questionable, but he had felt the conversation taking that direction. It was a sense of inevitability.

Jacques-Rosé’s gaze penetrated Otto through the iron bars. The surrounding women stopped weeping, their eyes filled with faint hope and curiosity.

Otto understood their hope—once a bride was chosen, the other captives might be freed. But their curiosity? That he did not want to know.

Jacques-Rosé: “What is your name?”

Otto briefly considered impulsively replying with his real name, but knew emotional actions often led to reflection and deep regret later. He held himself back.

Suppressing his impulse, Otto decided he had to maximize the situation to his advantage.

And thus, making his decision, he answered,

Otto: “—My name is Audrey Souffle.”

8

Emilia: “Then, Jagi and Moses's older brother is the groom for the «Kidnapping Marriage», right?”

Jagi & Moses: “Y-Yeah…” “That's right.”

Emilia: “I see… But if he's looking for his own bride, I think your brother should search for her himself. Instead of making his younger brothers or friends do it.”

Lowering her eyebrows, Emilia made a somewhat off-target remark. The two boys who were being scolded by her, their limbs restrained by ice—Jagi and Moses, the bat people—wore bitter expressions.

From their perspective, they were not only beaten down but also lectured. Naturally, they wouldn’t feel like obediently listening or repenting.

Moreover, if their actions followed their tribe's laws, feeling remorse would be even harder.

Frederica: “I understand Emily's argument, but the gap between races is difficult to bridge…”

Garfiel: “Even then, we can’t let these guys off. Otto-bro’s chastity’s at stake here, y'know?”

Frederica: “…I understand already.”

Slowly shaking her head, Frederica shot a reprimanding glance at the outspoken Garfiel.

It was a blunt remark, but considering Otto's situation, they couldn't laugh it off. Frederica even went out of her way to play the decoy role because of such anxiety.

—The decoy operation, aimed at luring out the bat people who were performing the «Kidnapping Marriage», had Frederica as its bait. The deciding factor was the “rare blood” flowing in her veins.

It was dangerous enough for a lone woman to be in a deserted alley. Given that the culprit's objective was a woman and the blood flowing through her veins, Frederica was undoubtedly the ideal candidate.

In reality, they easily lured out their target.

Frederica: “Although, considering our opponents are children, perhaps I wasn't necessary after all.”

Her gaze fell to Jagi and Moses, who were restrained and sitting on the ground. They looked like boys around Petra's age.

Their way of hiding their presence and footsteps was sloppy, making Frederica nervous as she waited for an attack, suspecting some kind of trap, until Garfiel finally captured them.

Frederica: “In reality, they were just inexperienced children…”

Jagi & Moses: “That's not true! Your blood smelled delicious!” “That's right!”

Frederica: “That's not a compliment!”

Frederica's voice rose sharply at the irrelevant consolation.

In any case, they'd successfully captured their targets. According to the two boys, the purpose of the «Kidnapping Marriage» was to find a Blood Bride for their older brother—the Chieftain of the bat people.

Apparently, for the bat people, it was a noble endeavor to pass down their ancient and precious bloodline.

Garfiel: “So your noble endeavor involves forcibly kidnapping someone, huh? Some great noble endeavor that is.”

Jagi & Moses: “It’s our tribe’s traditional way. Big bro isn’t wrong!” “That’s right!”

Emilia: “…I suppose your tribe has its own problems and struggles that outsiders like me can't easily interfere with.”

The boys argued back at the exasperated Garfiel. Emilia, with a serious look, cut into their exchange, gazing intently at them with her clear, amethyst eyes.

That earnest gaze made Jagi and Moses choke up with an “uh.”

Emilia: “If that method only feels good to you and hurts everyone else, I think you should find a better way. At least, we feel reaaally sad about this.”

Jagi & Moses: “…”

Emilia: “Do you always look for brides this way?”

Jagi & Moses: “…Usually, it's different.” “That's right…”

Jagi and Moses answered Emilia's question with lowered heads. Emilia murmured, "I see," while Frederica raised her eyebrows in surprise.

She had assumed this method was deeply ingrained among the empire’s bat people.

Frederica: “If it’s usually different, then why use this method for finding a bride?”

Jagi & Moses: “Because big bro said it was necessary.” “That's right.”

Garfiel: “Your brother’s reasoning, so you guys don’t know the details, huh? I don’t like the sound of that.”

Garfiel growled unhappily, making the brothers shrink their shoulders.

Was Garfiel irritated at the two for obediently following their brother’s words, or at their brother who commanded the «Kidnapping Marriage»?

Just as Frederica was pondering Garfiel's inner thoughts,

Emilia: “—Can you take us to your brother?”

Jagi & Moses: “Eh?!”

Looking straight ahead, Emilia boldly stated her request, surprising the brothers.

Frederica rubbed her brow at Emilia’s characteristically straightforward approach. Frederica had intended to propose the same thing but had been searching for an appropriate way to ask.

She thought deceit or conciliation might be necessary. Emilia's straightforward request surely wouldn’t get them to agree—

However—

Emilia: “You two also think this method is strange, right? That's why earlier you looked so uncomfortable and dispirited.”

Garfiel: “Could just be 'cause they got easily beaten and feel depressed, right?”

Emilia: “Maybe. But, I feel that's not the case.”

Emilia answered Garfiel, then squatted down to meet Jagi and Moses's eyes and repeated her question,

Emilia: “How about it?”

At Emilia’s repeated question and earnest amethyst eyes, the brothers hesitated, and eventually—

Jagi & Moses: “Big bro seems a bit rushed lately…” “That's right…”

Emilia: “Rushed? Is he hurrying to marry? Is that why he resorted to kidnapping?”

Jagi & Moses: “Yeah…” “That's right…”

Emilia: “Did your brother tell you why he’s rushed?”

When Emilia tilted her head slightly, the two shook their heads.

They didn't know why their brother seemed off. But they agreed something felt wrong, and they didn’t appear to be lying.

Why had their brother resorted to «Kidnapping Marriage»? To know the reason—

Emilia: “—Please let us meet your brother after all. Let's hear his true feelings.”

Jagi & Moses: “But… it'd feel like betraying big bro.” “That's right…”

Emilia: “You two were looking for a bride for your brother’s sake. But knowing if this really is for his sake is also because you care about him. If that's the case—”

Pausing for a moment, Emilia gently placed her hands on Jagi and Moses’s shoulders.

Then, nodding at them seriously,

Emilia: “Don't hesitate. You should learn the truth so you can really stand by your brother. I don't think that feeling is betrayal at all.”

Jagi & Moses: “…”

Receiving Emilia’s words, the doubt in Jagi and Moses’s eyes wavered. Frederica could clearly see that Emilia’s words resonated deeply in the hearts of these young boys.

If Roswaal or Otto had said this, one might suspect underlying motives. But Emilia spoke earnestly, and no such motives existed.

That was why Frederica thought Emilia’s presence and ideals had great meaning.

Thus—

Jagi & Moses: “Will you talk to big bro with us?” “…That's right.”

Emilia: “Yes, of course!”

Hearing the young brothers' timid request, Emilia agreed cheerfully. Seeing her attitude, Garfiel proudly puffed out his chest, and Frederica couldn’t help but feel admiration as well.

9

Jacques-Rosé: “This tranquility is but a fleeting one. Eventually, the thin ice shall surely crack, and the frigid waters beneath shall seep out. Before that happens, we must regain our strength.”

Jacques-Rosé emphasized this, tightly clenching his large hand characterized by notably long fingers.

Listening to the man’s voice colored heavily by concern, Otto’s shoulders slumped in utter dejection at his own extraordinarily ill-fated talent for attracting misfortune.

Of course, it was a necessary act. He was compelled by necessity; an excuse he had no choice but to utter.

However—

Jacques-Rosé: “You understand, don’t you, Audrey?”

It would be a lie to say Subaru’s bad influence had nothing to do with his decision to adopt that name.

The name he’d introduced himself with to Jacques-Rosé, "Audrey Souffle," was intricately linked to complicated memories, essentially filled with predominantly unpleasant recollections for Otto.

But to keep Jacques-Rosé under the misunderstanding that he was a woman, he couldn’t afford to give a man’s name. Hence, Otto had no choice but to reopen unpleasant memories.

Jacques-Rosé continued passionately, oblivious to Otto’s introspection.

Jacques-Rosé: “With the ascension of Emperor Vincent Vollachia, the previously war-torn Empire has attained temporary peace. But I can see clearly. That peace shall inevitably awaken or be cast aside, and erupt in flames. That’s why—”

Otto: “…Following your tradition of kidnapping brides, you’ve selected us as bride candidates?”

Jacques-Rosé: “As I’ve told you, I fully acknowledge this is a selfish request. Since this imposes inconvenience and restriction, I intend to grant as many of the bride’s wishes as possible. Of course, duties must still be fulfilled.”

Otto: “And by duties, you mean…”

Jacques-Rosé: “Naturally, the role of the Blood Bride—that is, to accept the blood that flows through your pure bodies.”

Standing beyond the iron bars, Jacques-Rosé proudly puffed out his sturdy chest.

The black attire wrapping his mighty frame resembled formal wear, perhaps his way of dressing up for the occasion, carefully chosen to honor the assembled bride candidates.

Though his methods were exceedingly poor, Jacques-Rosé appeared innately earnest by nature. It seemed his actions were not motivated by personal desire, but genuinely out of concern for his clan’s future.

Whether or not his anxieties were grounded in reality, Otto, who had been in the Vollachian Empire for less than half a day, couldn’t be certain.

Otto recognized the current Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, as someone who skillfully managed the Empire, notorious for constant conflict, to forge the present tranquility.

Naturally, perspectives between insiders and outsiders would differ.

If the Empire’s citizens claimed the Emperor’s reign had reached its limit and showed signs of collapse, such a possibility couldn’t be ruled out.

However, Jacques-Rosé’s paranoia was also a significant possibility.

Otto: “Is the Empire’s future really so bleak?”

Jacques-Rosé: “His Excellency the Emperor is remarkably capable. However, our senses as beings who willingly dwell in darkness, even during daylight, are acute. The curtain of night approaches.”

Otto: “Thus, the Bat People must unite. Hence the Blood Bride?”

Jacques-Rosé: “Long ago, when fierce winds of war ravaged the Empire, our ancestors, the Bat People, boasted unparalleled strength. That strength was only possible due to the presence of the

Blood Master, who led our bloodline, and the Blood Bride who supported him. We shall reclaim the strength of those ancient times."

Jacques-Rosé declared powerfully, pupils narrowing within his purple eyes.

The faint creaking sound of bones indicated the sharpening of two prominent canine teeth inside his mouth. This shift toward a body adapted for combat, distinct from beastification, represented individual differences among demi-humans. In other words, Otto could confidently state—

Regardless of the Empire's actual state, Jacques-Rosé's strength alone was undoubtedly genuine.

Otto: "That's even worse…"

He couldn't entirely deny the possibility of paranoia, yet clearly understood the speaker was powerful.

Since attempting to deceive him posed the danger of violence, Otto hesitated to spin any more elaborate lies.

"…"

Fortunately, Jacques-Rosé's penchant for talking allowed Otto to prolong the conversation unintentionally. However, Otto's ingrained merchant instincts accurately grasped Jacques-Rosé's strength and had already raised a white flag concerning any chance of escape.

Considering the Bat People's nature, their excellent night vision and extraordinarily acute hearing made things even worse.

Even Otto, who typically devised solutions using his Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, couldn't risk carelessly opening his mouth—even if speaking incomprehensible words—due to the risk involved.

His capture was unfortunate, but his inability to escape was purely due to the strength of his opponent. The worst possible compatibility.

At this rate, if unluckily forced into marriage, the marriage would certainly end disastrously.

Otto: “…Incidentally, how do you select a bride?”

Jacques-Rosé: “When I see someone suitable, I’ll naturally know… or so I’ve heard. Right now, I’m waiting for my younger brothers to return with candidates, but I’ve already set my heart on someone.”

Otto: “…Might I hear more details?”

Jacques-Rosé: “Don’t behave so shamelessly.”

Jacques-Rosé’s heated gaze from beyond the bars made Otto envision a marital life destined to collapse on the wedding night.

Otto desperately hoped Jacques-Rosé’s brothers would delay returning, thus postponing any decision. But as soon as he wished for it, Otto realized his mistake.

In the first place, when he had first caught Jacques-Rosé’s eye, it was right after praying for no further trouble—.

Bat Guard: “—Jacques-Rosé.”

Almost simultaneously, as Otto cursed his luck, a bat-person guard arrived at the location where the kidnapped victims were gathered. Hearing the call, Jacques-Rosé raised his head.

Jacques-Rosé: “Call me Blood Master.”

Bat Guard: “Understood. Blood Master, Jaggi and the others have returned. They’ve brought brides.”

Jacques-Rosé: “I see, they've returned. However, use your words correctly. They're merely bride candidates, not brides yet. Though I doubt they’ll meet my standards, my brothers finally seem to be recognizing their duties as siblings of the Blood Master…”

Bat Guard: “And they've brought back three.”

Jacques-Rosé: “Three?! W-Well, they’ve developed a greater sense of duty than I’d expected. I’m delighted.”

Jacques-Rosé cleared his throat, calming himself after receiving a report exceeding his expectations.

Jacques-Rosé: “But I won’t give preferential treatment just because my brothers chose them. What matters is whether they match our ancient blood. The quality of a Blood Bride depends not on numbers, but on blood and resolve.”

Bat Guard: “Indeed. …Be careful, Jacques-Rosé.”

Jacques-Rosé: “I told you, call me Blood Master. …What do you mean, careful?”

Jacques-Rosé corrected him, tilting his head at his companion’s vague words. The guard, who had already seen the bride candidates, lowered his voice.

Guard: “Earlier, you told me to use correct terms.”

Jacques-Rosé: “Yes, I did. But—”

Guard: “I was using correct terms. …What’s coming is a bride.”

At those clearly definitive words, Jacques-Rosé knitted his thick eyebrows.

Jacques-Rosé: “—Ah.”

Jacques-Rosé slightly twitched his nose, immediately raising his head in shock. His expression conveyed amazement, astonishment, and finally joy.

Otto couldn’t grasp the meaning of Jacques-Rosé’s reaction. However, the answer soon became clear even to Otto.

That was—

Jagi & Moses: “—Big bro, we’re back.” “That's right.”

Two young boys, still young yet bearing some resemblance to Jacques-Rosé, appeared, accompanied by three figures behind them—especially catching the attention of Jacques-Rosé and the Bat People was a tall woman.

A beautiful woman with long, golden hair and jewel-like emerald eyes. Seeing her, Jacques-Rosé's purple eyes instantly turned bloodshot.

Jacques-Rosé: "You… are…"

Frederica: "It is my pleasure to meet you. —My name is Frederica."

With a graceful bow in an unfamiliar attire yet familiar elegant posture, Frederica Baumann's appearance completely changed the atmosphere in the cave.

Otto breathed a deep sigh of relief at this change, even if it wasn't wholly clear whether it was entirely welcome or not.

Otto: "After continuously drawing bad hands, has my luck finally turned…?"

He weakly relaxed the corners of his mouth, feeling the collapse of his doomed marriage recede.

10

Led by the brothers Jaggi and Moses, the group arrived at a cave cleverly hidden within a rocky cliff, deep in a forest not far from the town of Mozotto.

Jagi & Moses: "Finding natural caves like these is a specialty of eight or nine outta every ten batfolk." "Damn straight."

Emilia: "Another cave…"

As the brothers proudly boasted, Emilia muttered anxiously while looking at the cave.

Her reaction was understandable. After all, not even half a day had passed since they entered the Empire guided by the molefolk.

Considering they had spent more than two days traversing through the Everlasting Darkness, being reluctant to dive back into another cave so soon was perfectly reasonable.

Emilia: “Ah, no, it's fine. During Musica and everyone else's situation, we made Lady Petra push herself too hard. This time, I'll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

However, Emilia didn't try to hide the cause of her anxiety, earnestly addressing Frederica and the others.

Frederica shared Emilia’s sentiment, deeply reflecting upon how Petra—who had remained at the inn with Beatrice—had pushed herself.

Their immediate goal now was rescuing Otto, who was prone to reckless actions just as much as Petra, before he inadvertently became the third person to be marked by an Oath Curse.

Garfiel: “Relax. No matter what happens, I won’t let nobody lay a finger on ya.”

Frederica: “…Yes, that’s reassuring.”

Frederica nodded to her younger brother, who was confidently pounding his fists together in front of his chest.

Truthfully, Frederica had strong reservations about this plan. Still, they had the enthusiastic endorsement of Jaggi and the others, as well as the pressing need to avoid unnecessary chaos.

Ironically, the very measures taken to ensure that had led Frederica to regard Garfiel with a complicated look—

Garfiel: “—It's Garnet.”

Declaring that without a hint of hesitation or change in his tone, Garnet—or rather, Garfiel introduced himself proudly.

Frederica had given her own name, Emilia had introduced herself as

"Emily," and when it came to Garfiel’s turn, he confidently gave this name.

Currently, Garfiel was wearing an overcoat provided by Frederica, attempting to hide his physique and face as much as possible. Honestly speaking, aside from his small stature and pretty eyes, his appearance couldn’t convincingly be called crossdressing or even feminine. Nonetheless, he had managed to bluff his way here.

Normally, such a disguise wouldn't hold up. They should have convinced Emilia—who proposed this idea—to reconsider. But just this once, it worked.

—Because Frederica's Rareblood was depriving the batfolk of their normal judgment.

Jacques-Rosé: “…”

Jacques-Rosé, the large man staring fixedly at Frederica, had to be the representative of their kin in this cave—judging by how Jaggi and Moses had called him "brother."

His gaze completely ignored Emilia and Garfiel, who had just introduced themselves, instead remaining locked intently upon Frederica.

Though it was fortunate that Garfiel's amateur disguise wasn’t discovered—

Jacques-Rosé: “…”

The way Jacques-Rosé’s stare penetrated Frederica felt unpleasantly like he was scrutinizing the blood flowing beneath her skin. Frederica understood well enough that her appearance wasn't merely cute or pretty, but she didn’t dislike compliments about her looks or attire.

Of course, compliments on her work ethic or character weren’t unwelcome either.

However, being valued for her blood gave her a sensation entirely different from being praised for her long hair or her beautiful emerald-green eyes.

Jacques-Rosé: “—Incredible, just as I heard! I knew that once I encountered the right person, I would recognize her at first glance…!”

Frederica: “Umm, is…that so?”

Jacques-Rosé: “Frederica, the blood flowing within you is fragrant and fresh. Without a doubt, you are the Blood Bride that we, my kin, have been searching for all this time!”

Dropping onto one knee, Jacques-Rosé proclaimed passionately, his eyes bloodshot.

From Jaggi, Moses, and the other batfolk covering their mouths in surprise, Frederica vaguely realized how passionate Jacques-Rosé’s proposal had been.

He’d probably praised her immensely. However, none of it resonated with her.

It felt oddly like being complimented for having breath that turned white in the cold—a trait certainly related to her, yet one for which she couldn’t claim any personal credit.

Of course, given the batfolk’s cultural habit of licking blood, Frederica understood this was likely considered the greatest possible expression of love.

Frederica: “Um, Jacques-Rosé-sama, I…”

Jacques-Rosé: “Then, let us send the other bride candidates back. Jaggi, Moses, help return them home. Treat them courteously. They are now our important guests.”

Jaggi & Moses: “Jacques-Rosé-sama!”

Jacques-Rosé: “Naturally, Frederica, you are special. You're not a guest, but my Blood Bride to be welcomed… Ah, yes, Audrey. Sorry for getting your hopes up.”

Swiftly rising, Jacques-Rosé moved things along briskly. The moment he set his eyes on Frederica, he immediately acted to send back the other kidnapped victims.

Frederica raised her voice at Jacques-Rosé's stubbornness, but upon hearing his remark towards the jail behind him, she, Emilia, and the others tilted their heads simultaneously and said: “"Audrey?"“

In the cage behind Jacques-Rosé, a figure was captured similarly to the other abductees. That "Audrey" turned out to be—

Frederica: “O-Otto-sama?!”

Otto: “…No, I’m Audrey.”

Frederica: “How can you say that so calmly! …Ah, I see, that's what’s going on here?”

Within the cage, waving weakly, was Otto—the very reason Frederica’s group had come here.

Realizing Otto’s safety—and the fact he had indeed been kidnapped—Frederica sagged with relief, quickly comprehending why Otto referred to himself as "Audrey."

He'd clearly been kidnapped by mistake as a woman and had been carefully hiding his true identity.

Frederica: “But really, Garf calling himself Garnet, and now Otto-sama calling himself Audrey…”

Otto: “Ha ha ha, what an unpleasant coincidence. Let’s all forget this the moment we escape.”

Otto responded to Frederica's astonishment with a dry laugh and earnest pleading.

Previously, Garfiel and Otto had used these aliases when crossdressing for certain complicated circumstances. Now they’d again resorted to those same disguises. Imagining Subaru joining them again in crossdressing was a disturbing joke to entertain.

At any rate—

Jacques-Rosé: “According to tradition, the Blood Bride has been found. Now, all that remains is to perform the wedding between myself—the Bloodlord—and my bride…”

Emilia: “—That's enough.”

Jacques-Rosé: “Mh?”

Interrupting Jacques-Rosé's determined speech, Emilia, slender and resolute, stepped between them and stared up at him fiercely.

Clad in a robe that disrupted recognition, her hood mimicking cat ears making her adorably charming, Emilia’s serious gaze caused Jacques-Rosé to furrow his thick brows.

Jacques-Rosé: “Frederica's companion, hm? If you're with Frederica, then perhaps you should participate in the ceremony.”

Emilia: “Yes, I'd reaaally love to attend a wedding. But only if the bride and groom are looking towards the same future, promising to be happy together.”

Jacques-Rosé: “That is…”

Emilia: “Are your brides truly satisfied with your methods? Before Frederica arrived, the others were constantly weeping. Even Otto-kun…”

Otto: “Audrey!”

Emilia: “Even Audrey!”

Jacques-Rosé stroked his chin thoughtfully, displeased by Emilia's forcefulness.

Emilia: “I don't like traditions that hurt others, and I’m not alone in that. Jaggi and Moses, your brothers, think the same.”

Jacques-Rosé: “What? You two, is that true?”

Jacques-Rosé’s fierce glare intimidated Jaggi and Mose, who were supported from behind by Garfiel.

Jaggi & Moses: “Th-That's right, big bro. This ain't right after all!” “Yeah, seriously…”

Jacques-Rosé: “…Was this your doing?”

Emilia: “Don’t call it plotting. We properly talked it out!”

Jacques-Rosé: “Silence—!!”

Jacques-Rosé's roar bore down on Emilia, but she stood firm, bravely meeting his oppressive presence head-on.

Emilia: “You can't intimidate me like that. If I backed down now, I'd be letting Jaggi and Moses down after they worked up their courage.”

Jacques-Rosé: “—Kh.”

Emilia: “Instead of shouting and pushing us away, let's talk it through properly. Jaggi and Moses said they were helping you find a bride because you needed one. That's…”

Otto: “—To prepare for the impending collapse of the Empire, apparently.”

Emilia's earnest inquiry was answered by Otto, who had spent the most time conversing with Jacques-Rosé here.

Having seemingly spent considerable time with Jacques-Rosé as "Audrey," Otto lifted his chin from within the cage and spoke:

Otto: “A major upheaval is approaching the Empire. For that time, they want to regain the strength the batfolk once possessed. That's what he said he believes.”

Emilia: “The batfolk’s past strength… Ah, that’s why you restarted the old custom of marriage by abduction?”

Jacques-Rosé: “—Traditions become traditions for a reason, and they have their benefits.”

Emilia widened her eyes at the realization, and Jacques-Rosé didn't deny her conclusion. The large man acknowledged the reason behind commanding his brothers and fellow batfolk to gather candidates for the Blood Bride.

Emilia: “But, I heard the Empire is reaaally peaceful now. There hasn’t been any major conflict for years.”

Jacques-Rosé: “I said the collapse draws near. An imbalanced scale will inevitably lose equilibrium. When that happens, the water in the suspended vessel will overflow.”

Garfiel: “That's why ya want a Blood Bride, huh?”

Jacques-Rosé’s aim was preparation for the impending collapse of the Empire—actions taken to protect his clan.

Had it been a shallow excuse, Frederica would’ve dismissed it as nonsense. Ironically, the sheer absurdity of the claim gave it an odd credibility.

Jacques-Rosé’s intentions might genuinely be sincere.

But still—

Frederica: “On what basis do you believe the Empire’s order will collapse?”

Jacques-Rosé: “A batfolk's intuition.”

Frederica: “…Intuition?”

Jacques-Rosé: “Don’t underestimate it, Frederica. Especially my intuition—it’s incredibly keen.”

Emilia: “But Jaggi and Moses were caught pretty easily…”

Jacques-Rosé: “That’s because my brothers are only half-fledged batfolk!”

When he began adding exceptions, it became unclear how much to trust Jacques-Rosé's words.

But it seemed the stubborn Jacques-Rosé had no intention of retracting his opinion or reconsidering through discussion. His convictions were exceedingly strong.

If this continued, Frederica feared Emilia might settle the matter by freezing the entire cave along with the batfolk.

But that quiet worry of Frederica's—

Garfiel: "—Batfolk intuition and traditions, huh? Sounds like a load of vague stuff yer holdin' onto dearly."

—was cut off by Garfiel, who clicked his fangs together and shed the coat he wore.

Though barely qualifying as crossdressing, his clearly masculine form now revealed caused Jacques-Rosé's eyes to flicker with surprise. But the true shock came immediately after.

Garfiel pointed at Jacques-Rosé with a "Yo",

Garfiel: "Why ya so attached ta traditions? What good comes from clingin' to 'em?"

Jacques-Rosé: "…Once, the batfolk were feared warriors worth a thousand men. That was when we were strongest. By observing past traditions and welcoming the Blood Bride—"

Garfiel: "Ya think ya can reclaim yer glory days and become invincible again? —Sounds interestin'."

Again clicking his fangs, Garfiel squared off with the taller Jacques-Rosé, glaring fiercely. Despite claiming interest, Garfiel showed no amusement on his face.

The two men faced off fiercely, primal ferocity radiating from both.

Garfiel: "Ya lick her blood, and that makes ya a super-strong batfolk?"

Jacques-Rosé: “Not just anyone’s blood. It must be the Blood Bride's—specifically, Frederica’s in this case. A blood beauty like her is exactly the existence I've been searching for.”

Frederica: “Ugh, that feels subtly unpleasant…”

Jacques-Rosé spread his arms, attempting a gesture of warmth, but clearly misunderstanding direction. Garfiel, standing before Frederica, let out a scoff.

Garfiel: “Fine then. I'll give ya the blood ya want so badly.”

Emilia: “Garfiel?”

Frederica: “Hold on, Garf! What are you saying? I…”

Emilia and Frederica immediately reacted to Garfiel’s rash declaration.

They had already been uneasy using Frederica’s blood as bait to lure Jaggi and Moses. The idea of directly having it licked—even indirectly—was deeply uncomfortable.

Yet—

Otto: “—You must have some kind of plan, correct?”

Quietly, Otto, still confined within the cage, questioned Garfiel.

Receiving the inquiry, Garfiel shrugged and replied “‘Course I do”,

Garfiel: “Once someone realizes they’ve been relyin’ on the wrong thing, they'll start listenin' ta others. “Thus Spoke Garfiel Tinzel,” as they say.”

11

—Garfiel's actions and their outcome were clear and straightforward, and thus impossible to distort.

Persuaded by Emilia and Otto, Frederica offered her blood to Jacques-Rosé—her own blood, called Rareblood—thus fulfilling Garfiel's wish.

To be frank, Frederica cared little for the special value attributed to her blood.

But seeing Jacques-Rosé’s vigor surge through his body after licking the blood, visibly enlarging his tall frame, she could understand the reasoning behind his insistence that the legendary, invincible Bat People required a Bride of Blood to fulfill their potential.

However—

Jacques-Rosé: “—Gah, guh!”

His face pummeled by a fist, Jacques-Rosé lay collapsed on his back, thoroughly defeated.

The Bat People's Blood Lord, whose face now bore the imprint of Garfiel’s fist, and whose proud nose and fangs were broken, had fully activated his body by absorbing the Rareblood, reaching a state surpassing perfection.

Jacques-Rosé himself had proudly declared he felt lighter than ever before in his life. He surely must have believed himself to have reached the legendary level of the Blood Lord spoken of among Bat People.

Yet, it took just a single punch from Garfiel, who had requested the fight, to silence him.

Garfiel: “If just followin' tradition gave ya power strong enough to weather the Empire’s chaos, the world wouldn't be half as complicated as it is.”

Garfiel, who’d defeated his opponent in one strike, spoke these words without any of the joy typical of a victor.

The Bat People, who'd gone so far as to attempt a "kidnap marriage" to recreate their legend, witnessed firsthand both the revival and the crushing of their legendary strength. Garfiel’s fist had delivered the ultimate rebuttal.

Frederica, too, found herself speechless at her younger brother’s astonishing growth.

Frederica: “He claimed strength was all he had going for him, but…”

During the commotion around the Sanctuary, Frederica had been greatly impressed by Garfiel’s prowess when he repelled the attackers at the mansion. Yet, at that time, she'd been more overwhelmed by their reunion after more than a decade, and even during subsequent training as a warrior in their camp, she hadn’t seen such drastic growth.

However, in the deadly battles in the Watergate City she’d heard about, Garfiel had clearly broken through his limits.

Frankly, Frederica knew she stood no chance against Jacques-Rosé after he’d tasted the blood.

Yet Garfiel had effortlessly defeated that same Jacques-Rosé, literally with one hand.

Jaggi & Moses: “Brooo! Are you alive?!” “Yeah, hang in there!”

For several seconds, everyone was dumbfounded by the result. Then, snapping out of it, Jaggi and Moses frantically rushed toward their fallen brother. Lifting him, they desperately called out to Jacques-Rosé, who groaned, blood dripping from his broken nose and teeth, eyes unfocused.

Jacques-Rosé: “I… I am…”

Garfiel: “It’s my win.”

Jacques-Rosé: “—Ah.”

His consciousness, fractured by the devastating blow, returned to reality upon hearing this declaration. His violet eyes focused on Garfiel standing over him, fist outstretched.

Seeing that fist, Jacques-Rosé understood clearly his own and his ideals’ defeat.

Jacques-Rosé: “…Was my capacity insufficient? Or perhaps strength is always doomed to be crushed by greater strength?”

He’d followed tradition, found the Bride of Blood, and became the strongest among the Bat People—only to suffer defeat. To Jacques-Rosé, who worried deeply about the future of his bloodline and had sought power, this defeat must have felt like the deepest despair.

In response to Jacques-Rosé’s muttered words, Garfiel narrowed his eyes slightly.

Garfiel: “No matter how much ya cling ta tradition, there's a limit. Don’t rely on shortcuts or easy paths. — My fists didn’t get this strong by takin' it easy.”

Jacques-Rosé: “Ah…”

Saying this, Garfiel opened his clenched fist, placing his hand above Jacques-Rosé. A soft glow flowed from it, beginning to heal Jacques-Rosé’s injuries.

Feeling the pain fade due to the healing magic, Jacques-Rosé blinked in disbelief.

Jacques-Rosé: “Why… are you…?”

Garfiel: “My name’s Garfiel Tinzel. Same as you, I was once a fool who got smacked down for tryin' ta shoulder everything alone.”

Jacques-Rosé: “A fool…”

Jacques-Rosé whispered weakly, being healed. Gazing at his hands, he faced the reality of his ideals and envisioned future crumbling before his eyes.

For someone who sought strength for his race to the point of relying on superstitious tradition, this defeat had undoubtedly carved a permanent wound upon his soul.

Cruelly, though, it meant the kidnappings would cease. In exchange, the Bat People’s future appeared bleak. The Empire’s uncertain future loomed large, and the path forward had vanished like dew.

And yet—

Jacques-Rosé: “This is all because I… was weak…”

Garfiel: “Yeah, yer weak. — So just get stronger.”

As Jacques-Rosé cursed himself, Garfiel’s voice overlapped with his. The Blood Lord’s eyes widened at these words.

Jacques-Rosé looked up at Garfiel, eyes wide with surprise, unable to believe what he'd just heard.

Jacques-Rosé: “Get stronger? Even with the Bride of Blood’s help, I couldn’t beat you…”

Garfiel: “Strength ain't just about raw muscle, ya know? If it were, the strongest guy I know would be absolute garbage.”

Emilia: “Garfiel, you shouldn't speak like that. Subaru would cry if he heard you.”

Chided gently for his comment, Garfiel shrugged his shoulders with a slight grimace. But the fierce irritation he'd shown earlier had vanished from his rough smile.

His gaze at Jacques-Rosé held the warmth reserved for a kindred spirit.

Garfiel: “I already said, didn’t I? I used ta be just like you. But now my muscles're pretty good, and the kind of strength the cap'n measures ain't so bad either. There's more than one kind of strength.”

Jacques-Rosé: “…”

Garfiel: “You've got the futures of your brothers and your bloodline on your shoulders. I get why you're desperate. Not wantin' ta rely on anyone, feelin' ya can't trust anybody with it—all that crap.”

There was a risk Jacques-Rosé might be overwhelmed by the harshness of Garfiel's blunt words. But Frederica, along with Emilia and Otto, didn't interrupt.

Because Garfiel’s words held no intent to demean Jacques-Rosé.

Those words undeniably came from Garfiel’s own heart. Words born from his own struggles, doubts, suffering, and determination, culminating in a single answer.

At the moment that answer was conveyed, Garfiel’s expression mixed embarrassment with pride.

After all—

Jacques-Rosé: “The strongest guy I know asks for help when he's in trouble. He reaches out to help when someone else is hurtin’. He never leaves anyone alone, never lets anyone be left alone.

Recently, I finally figured out how ta put that into words."

Jacques-Rosé: "That's…"

Garfiel: "It might not fit the Empire's way. But what's the point clingin' ta an Empire's tradition that's about ta break anyway?"

With a wink, Garfiel withdrew his outstretched hand. Jacques-Rosé's face was healed, his broken nose repaired and small new fangs growing back in.

His eyes regained focus, and his brothers wiped away the blood from their astonished leader's face.

Jaggi & Moses: "Bro, we might not be the most reliable, but…"
"Yeah, that's right."

Jaggi and Moses grabbed hold of Jacques-Rosé's sleeves, shame-faced over how they'd abandoned thought, believing obedience was for their brother's sake.

The other Bat People, too, gathered around their Blood Lord as he sat on the ground, calling his name—"Jacques-Rosé".

Looking around at the faces of his blood kin, Jacques-Rosé sucked in a breath, and then—

Jacques-Rosé: "…I told you to call me Blood Lord."

Spoken in a tone that regarded his earlier defeat and bleak outlook just a bit more lightly, Jacques-Rosé proclaimed his pride as their Blood Lord once more.

From Jacques-Rosé's words, and the Bat People's response, Frederica could tell that what Garfiel had wanted to convey had gotten through.

Jacques-Rosé: "Garfiel, was it? My defeat… no, all of us have lost. We'll return the women we brought safely to their homes. Let's call off the resurrection of the ancient Bat People."

With his kin at his back, Jacques-Rosé knelt on one knee and looked up at Garfiel.

Unlike when he'd been intoxicated by the discovery of a Bride of Blood, this time, he'd reaffirmed his stance and decided himself to return the candidates of "kidnap marriage" back to their homes.

And on top of that, Jacques-Rosé's eyes gleamed as he continued,

Jacques-Rosé: "In place of our traditions, I wish to accept Frederica as my bride. …I can hardly imagine meeting a woman surpassing her in the future."

Frederica: "That is, of course, a great honor. However…"

Though his declaration wasn't laced with desperation or neediness, it did touch Frederica's heart more than before. Still, it wasn't enough to sway her into sincere consideration.

Frederica: "There are surely many women greater than myself. Though I am flattered by how highly you regard me based on your values…"

This wasn't something Frederica sought to be praised for. Moreover, she had more pressing duties with those she loved than to choose a partner from some dramatic encounter.

And so, Frederica politely declined his proposal, prompting Garfiel to step up beside her and speak bluntly as he grabbed her shoulder, roughly positioned at his head's height.

Garfiel: "This here's my Sis. I ain't handin' her over to some half-assed guy. At the very least, not to anyone weaker than my amazin' self."

Frederica: "Garf!"

Grinding his fangs, Garfiel threw that challenge at Jacques-Rosé and the others. Frederica, flashing her sharp fangs in protest, scolded her unreasonable little brother.

As she had already stated, she had no intention of accepting Jacques-Rosé's proposal. But after witnessing the earlier fight, Garfiel’s terms were far too demanding.

Frederica: “Are you trying to doom me to a life of eternal singleness?”

Garfiel: “Hah! Better that than lettin’ some weakling marry my Sis.”

At Garfiel’s shameless reply, Frederica rubbed her brow with her fingers. And as she did, it didn’t feel all that unpleasant—just a bit complex, mixed with relief that things had finally settled.

12

Emilia: “Garfiel is at that age where he wants to rely on his big sister. He’s reaaally cute.”

It had been quite a harrowing incident, but, according to Emilia, that was how she summed it up.

In truth, they really had been lucky. The goal of the “bridal kidnapping” had been earnest; the bat-folk led by Jacques-Rosé possessed at least a modicum of decency; there had been someone able to calm the abducted women so they did not plunge into utter chaos; and there had been a pair of strong arms willing to crush tradition underfoot.

If even one of those gears had slipped, none of this would have come together.

Frederica: “I did not take offense at Garf’s words, but the outcome is not cute at all.”

The decisive blow that put an end to Jacques-Rosé’s courtship had been Garfiel’s remark, but were Frederica to take Emilia’s impression at face value and remain unmarried for life, it would be truly pitiable.

Frederica, too, wished for a happy marriage—though no specific partner sprang to mind.

Frederica: “At the very least, I would prefer they look at me, not at my blood.”

Otto: “For someone like you, Miss Frederica, I do not believe you would have any trouble finding a partner.”

Frederica: “I wonder. I am hesitant to take a gentleman’s flattery at face value.”

Like many of the women, Otto had been rescued from the bat-folk’s clutches. Frederica responded to his praise with an ambiguous smile, smoothing her long blond hair.

Embarrassing though it was to admit, Frederica had been courted before. Yet, as a maid serving Roswaal and Annerose, her dealings with outsiders were frequent, and lately she had often been targeted for her Rareblood.

Frankly, if she could swap out her blood and be rid of that “Rareblood,” she would.

Emilia: “But you used the blood you don’t really like and rescued Otto. I’m thinking that…”

Otto: “You are thinking, ma’am?”

Emilia: “I’ve suffered because of my hair, my eye colour, because of how I was born. But if I didn’t have those, I don’t think I could be with Subaru and… with everyone now.”

Emilia fumbled for words as she tried to convey what she meant.

It was the pleasant worry born of her wish not to trouble anyone and her straightforward desire to share her feelings properly.

It was a considerate, delightful thought—far too good an ending for an affair whose closing act had been Garfiel knocking out bat-folk who had mistaken Otto for a woman and despaired of the future.

Garfiel: “Buut it’s good, Otto-bro. Ya almost got made somebody’s bride by mistake. Would’ve been crazy, comin’ lookin’ for the cap'n and endin’ up like that.”

Otto: “Indeed, truly so. I could already foresee the collapse of that married life, so your arrival saved me, Garfiel.”

Emilia: “Right, really. If Subaru heard that Otto-kun was almost made into a bride, he’d be reaaally shocked, too.”

Otto: “Er, the one who was clearly proposed to was Miss Frederica, so rather than making this about me, should we not call it Miss Frederica’s bride commotion?”

Emilia: “Eh? But…”

With his inherent mental toughness, Otto was ready to forget the wrong done to him. Yet, trying to switch the story that would be told later would surely never fly.

After all, it had begun with Otto’s abduction and their move to rescue him.

Still, of those present, only Frederica could spare a thought for Otto’s feelings.

Frederica: “Very well—when we re-join Master Dudley and the others, I shall report it thus. Naturally, when we meet Lord Subaru as well.”

Otto: “I am indebted to you, Miss Frederica.”

Frederica: “Yes, do feel indebted to your heart’s content.”

When Frederica gathered up the blame, Otto’s shoulders visibly lightened.

Emilia still looked puzzled—“It feels kinda weird, though…”—but with repetition she would surely accept it. Garfiel might tease Otto about it from time to time, however.

Frederica: “However, regarding the calamity of the Empire Jacques-Rosé mentioned—”

Otto: “Should we consider it merely a pessimistic forecast, or…? Given the circumstances, I was unable to ask the women in the other cages."

Garfiel: "Even before Otto-bro vanished, when I went askin' around town, I couldn't dig up any story like that, ya know?"

Changing the subject brought them back to the question: Jacques-Rosé and the bat-folk had been driven to crime by a vague anxiety about the Empire's future.

Jacques-Rosé had said it would be soon—yet was it truly close at hand? If so, Frederica and the others would not remain untouched.

Jacques-Rosé: "When the coming calamity arrives, we bat-folk will overcome it together as one. If necessary, call on us anytime—us bat-folk will rush to your side."

Those had been Jacques-Rosé's words, not to curry favor with Frederica, but brimming with gratitude for having his twisted nature literally beaten straight.

Frederica thought it best that they never have to rely on that strength.

Even so, the future was not bright for Jacques-Rosé and his people, reformed though they were.

Given the scale of their deeds, even if the victims returned home safely, matters would hardly end neatly. The Vollachian Empire's way of dealing with crime was unknown, but harsh punishment was a real possibility.

Yet—

Emilia: "The Emperor of Vollachia is working hard to keep the country peaceful, right? Then I'm sure he'll listen to Jacques-Rosé and the others' story, too."

Seeing Emilia believe so firmly in a bright future made Frederica want to believe as well.

True, the Empire's long-standing peace might have been maintained by blood-soaked methods Emilia could never imagine…

Otto: "However, while we are searching for Natsuki-san, we have no need to fear that right now."

Though he reached the same conclusion, Otto had no intention of sharing it with Emilia. His words were cool yet reassuring—enough to make one forgive today's blunder.

Not that the blunder belonged only to Otto; in truth, it was shared by everyone present.

Garfiel: "Still, bringin' Otto-bro back safe is great, but I ain't lookin' forward ta tellin' Petra and Beatrice. My head hurts just thinkin' about it, ya know."

Frederica felt the same as Garfiel, who scratched his head roughly.

Petra, who had repressed her impatience and stayed at the inn, must be trusting that they would bring back some clue to Subaru's whereabouts.

If they returned late and with no leads, how crushed would she be?

With such worries weighing on them, they headed back to the inn—

Petra: "—Everyone, it's terrible! "Natsumi Schwartz" has appeared!"

Petra, who had been waiting at the front desk for their return, blurted this the moment she saw them, freezing everyone's thoughts.

Emilia: "Eh? Natsumi's in the Empire? Why?"

—No, only Emilia tilted her head in a different kind of surprise.

Because she alone did not know the true meaning of that name, but first they had to confirm Petra's statement.

Frederica: “Natsumi Schwartz, you say? What does that—”

Beatrice: “There is apparently a city called Guaral some way west of here, in fact. The commotion there seems to involve the “black-haired maiden,” Natsumi Schwartz, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Beatrice! Is it all right for you to be awake?”

Beatrice’s explanation shocked the group, especially as she had to “store energy” while separated from Subaru.

Beatrice: “I cannot simply sleep soundly after hearing a story like this, in fact.”

Garfiel: “Yeah, makes sense… But how’d a tale like that reach ya ears, Lady Petra?”

Petra: “I wanted to know even a little about Subaru… but it’s not just that.”

When Garfiel patted Petra’s head in praise, she usually brushed his hand away, yet now she glanced around restlessly.

It felt like a preface to some very bad news.

Frederica: “To begin with, the name Natsumi Schwartz coupled with the epithet “black-haired maiden” is producing a migraine-inducing atmosphere, yet what exactly has happened?”

Petra: “Um, it seems this “black-haired maiden” has captured that city, Guaral.”

Otto: “Captured… a city?”

Petra had chosen her words carefully to soften the blow, but they were too soft; their meaning did not quite reach Frederica and the others.

One normally did not say someone “captured” a city unless—

Garfiel: “I didn’t think he’d stay quiet, but…”

Otto: “What in the world is he doing…?”

Frederica, Garfiel, and Otto all arrived at the same stunned state. Petra and Beatrice must have, too.

Subaru, thought to be in grave trouble after being hurled into the Empire, with luck simply keeping Rem safe—such a simple picture shattered to pieces.

Moreover, capturing a city was outright rebellion against the established order.

Frederica: “Could it be that what Jacques-Rosé spoke of was…?”

Jacques-Rosé had keenly sensed the imminent collapse of Imperial order. Whether it was true or not had been uncertain, yet now it took on sudden reality.

And all because of someone they knew only too well—

Emilia: “Natsumi’s name is…”

Beatrice: “It is Subaru we are talking about, Emilia, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Subaru is?”

Beatrice informed the only one who had not yet caught up—Emilia.

Learning that Natsumi Schwartz was Subaru in disguise would be shocking for Emilia. Though no one had been hiding it, Frederica felt an unreasonable guilt, as though she had shared in the deception.

Yet Emilia clapped her hands. “Oh, I see,” she said, and—

Emilia: “So Subaru is using a different name so he won’t become famous in the Empire. It’s like what Otto-kun and Garfiel did.”

Otto: “Eh?”

Emilia: “Because you two borrowed the names Audrey and Garnet, right? That’s the same as Subaru borrowing the name Natsumi.”

Emilia nodded vigorously, reaching that conclusion with only the information she possessed.

Frederica and the rest exchanged looks—indeed, with Emilia's data, her answer was natural.

And there was little reason to unravel that tangled rope and reveal the truth.

What mattered was—

Emilia: "—Subaru is using a name we can recognise. I think he's telling us where he is."

Frederica, Otto, and the others agreed with her nod.

To be honest, after racing about to rescue the soon-abducted Otto in the Empire they reached by passing through Everlasting Darkness, they were exhausted in body and soul—but—

Emilia: "Tomorrow, once morning comes, let's set out. Umm…"

Beatrice: "Guaral, the fortress city, in fact."

Emilia: "—Yes, to Guaral!"

Emilia clenched her fist and declared.

At last they had information that might bring them closer to the vanished Subaru and Rem. The ominous atmosphere and smell of gunpowder clinging to the Empire made it hard to stay calm, but—

Emilia: "Everything will be fine! We'll all make it back together."

No one had the heart to deny Emilia's powerful declaration.

The rumor they obtained here of the "black-haired maiden" Natsumi Schwartz was indeed about Natsuki Subaru.

However, the fortress city they reached was in the throes of the greatest crisis since its founding, and reunion with Subaru's party was not easily won.

The collapse of Imperial order feared by Jacques-Rosé Blau truly began, shattering the peace of the Vollachian Empire and leading to unrest unparalleled in its history.

Yet—

Emilia: “Wait for us, Subaru, Rem. —We’re all coming!”

The eyes of the party supporting Emilia, who stared firmly ahead, wavered not in the least.

Poltergeist Story

1

Thunder rumbled.

Lightning flashed outside the window, and the magic lamps lighting the mansion went out all at once. It was an ill prank pulled by fate that the moment they got covered in darkness, the cupboard fell and the dishes shattered, making a crashing noise.

Swiftly following the blackout and the continuous sound of destruction, a high-pitched scream was let out.

“Noooo—!!”

The one who had screamed after hearing the final death throes of the dishes was a maid with beautiful long blonde hair. She was slender and tall yet had an attractive figure rich in feminine charms. Her almond-shaped eyes looked like jade gemstones, and her mouth, the origin of said scream, was adorned with a row of beautiful white teeth. However, even though some of her teeth were sharp and giving her a rather ferocious look—

“Eek! Eeeek! It’s a hollow! A hollow is here! Hey, Petra?! Are you okay?! Petra! Ram!”

She was shaking with tears flowing down her face. Her appearance was anything but ferocious, but in fact emphasized the fragile, feminine part of herself.

In the darkness, the woman grabbed a piece of cloth within her reach and desperately pulled it close to her body. “Pe-Pe-Pe-Petra…? Or is it you, Ram? Anyway-Anyway, I’m glad you are safe. We need to get out of here before it’s too late…”

“Sister Frederica?”

“Ha! Petra?! Is that you?”

The woman—Frederica—turned around towards the direction of the voice—but said voice had come from the opposite direction of the person she was holding.

Her pupils narrowed in the darkness, and what appeared was a young, dainty girl. It was a lovely girl wearing a maid outfit with a big ribbon on her head—Petra—the girl whom Frederica adored the most like a younger sister.

Frederica felt relieved after seeing that Petra hadn't been harmed in any way. "Oh, Petra… I'm glad you're safe," she said. "That must mean I have Ram in my arms. She is being quite docile…"

"What are you saying, Frederica? Ram is over here."

"Huh?"

After hearing an unapologetic voice, the owner of said voice appeared next to Petra. It was a girl with short pink hair and a pretty, plucky face. Standing with perfect posture strangely suited her, and it stood true even in the abyssal darkness.

"Oh, oh my, Ram…so you were with Petra. Well, in that case…"

"Yes, Ram was with her—what did you mistake Ram for?"

"I was trying not to think about that…!"

Frederica turned her head with a creaking sound in response to Ram's merciless question. She then looked down at the person she was holding tightly in her arms. Just at that moment, there was a flash of lightning, brightly illuminating a mysterious figure.

It was a doll around the size of a toddler with a missing eyeball. When the doll's single eye met Frederica's, it relaxed its lips and smiled.

"Noooooo!!" Frederica let out a scream, which was just one of many she had let out that day.

It all started two days ago…

“Cleaning the villa and replacing the furniture?” asked Frederica.

“Yes, thaaat’s right,” Roswaal replied with a gentle smile, his hands clasped together on the desk. “I wanted to aaask you three to do that.”

Roswaal directed his gentle smile at the three maids who worked in the mansion. Lined up by height and ordered by size starting with the largest, the three girls were Frederica, Ram, and Petra.

Amongst the three that he had summoned to his room, it was Petra who raised her hand. “A villa… Is that different from the old mansion that burned down?”

“Ah, it’s diiifferent. I liked that mansion though, but…”

“Oh, I’m not asking you, Master. I’m asking them.”

Petra brushed Roswaal, who tried to answer her question, off with a smile, causing Frederica to hold a hand to her forehead. “Petra…”

Even from Frederica’s point of view, Roswaal and Petra’s relationship was shattered into pieces and would be difficult to piece back together. As someone in a subordinate position, her attitude wasn’t all that great, but Roswaal was the one who’d caused her to behave in such a way to begin with.

Roswaal tended to forgive Petra’s attitude and was in a good mood despite her rude response just now. Meaning Frederica could do nothing to correct her behavior.

Even so, Ram, who admired Roswaal, wasn’t all too happy about it, but…

“Ram won’t tolerate such an attitude toward Master Roswaal, Petra.”

“I’m sorry, Sister Ram. But even if I get scolded, I want to make our master feel bad…”

"So you've already made up your mind. It's fine, then. Since it also creates a job that only Ram can do, which is to console Master Roswaal whenever you hurt his feelings."

"Enough with that, you two! Not even I would be able to tolerate it!" scolded Frederica.

Despite their opposing responses to Roswaal, who stood between them, they somehow get along quite well.

Stepping closer to her disgruntled juniors, Frederica said, "Master, don't just enjoy yourself, you need to give her a proper warning. Otherwise, it will cause trouble for me by disturbing the public morals of the mansion. To make matters worse…"

"To make matters worse, aaaand then what?"

"To make matters worse, Sir Subaru and Garf are already disturbing it…"

Frederica thought of the black-haired boy that lived in the mansion and her incompetent younger brother. If you added in the young man in charge of internal affairs, that would be all the men working at Roswaal Manor. They all acted their age, or rather, were a bit immature.

"Mister Otto seems normal," said Frederica, "but he becomes the most dangerous of the three when the other two get involved…"

"Oh, I get what you mean," Petra replied. "Otto has a face saying, I'm perfectly normal, but he says the most menacing things out of the blue."

"Everyone agrees that he is the most dangerous of the bunch," added Ram.

"Oh myyy, I can't ever allow Otto know of what was spoken here todaaay."

The young man, who was being talked about in a place he wasn't present, sneezed at his workplace.

After getting off track… “Anyway.” …Frederica brought the conversation back to the main topic. “It has been a couple of months since we moved to the main residence and we are finally settling in, so what made you want to work on the villa?”

“A most natural question indeed. But the reaaaason isn’t that complicated. It has been several months since the royal selection officially began, and the candidates have each started making their moves, so we can’t afford to get left behind. As for the negotiations with influential people from various areas… I know I am in no position to talk, but there are a looot of nefarious characters in the Western Margrave Domain. Negotiations aren’t going to be easy by any means.”

“—? What does that have to do with the villa…?” Petra wondered.

“It’s simple, Petra,” Ram began. “In short, Master Roswaal and Lady Emilia will soon be going to different places themselves to do things. And for such occasions, it’s better to have as many lodging options as you can get… Fortunately, House Mathers owns villas in various regions, so it’s quite convenient.”

Ram took over Roswaal’s explanation, and Petra nodded after understanding what it meant. “Oh, so that’s how it is…”

Glancing at Petra out of the corner of her eye, Frederica continued. “Well then,” she said. “We’ll start communicating with the various villas in order. Am I correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. For now, I want to get Viscount Torion Arus on our side. So it would be beeest to start with the one closest to his mansion.”

“In that case, would it be the mansion in San Fantrus? It’s a little far though…”

Following Roswaal’s suggestion, Frederica spread the map on the wall on the desk and tried to confirm the villa Roswaal had indicated, but Ram, who was watching from the side, raised an eyebrow. “No, not there,” she declared, then pointed at a forest not too far from their objective. “Here it is.”

“Here?” asked Petra. “But it’s just a forest with nothing marked there, Sister Ram.”

“On a normal map, yes. But an old mansion owned by House Mathers is there. That’s correct, right, Master Roswaal?”

“…Oh myyy, it seems it’s still fresh in your memory despite it being something from around 10 years ago.”

“That’s because Ram has memories of being there with you, Master Roswaal,” answered Ram in her frank manner of speaking, causing Roswaal to lower his eyebrows and give a faint wry smile.

Ram’s speech and conduct haven’t changed over the years, but it seems like Master’s response to it has, thought Frederica. As someone who has known them personally for a long time, I am deeply moved by this, but…we should be talking about the mansion that isn’t on the map.

“I see that it is a mansion that even I do not know about. Well, what is it…”

“You wouldn’t know of it, of course—it’s not a villa, it’s a workshop,” Roswaal explained. “My predecessor used it…but it’s been abandoned for several years now.”

“A workshop, I see,” parroted Frederica, touching her cheek and thinking about it.

Roswaal’s predecessor—Roswaal K. Mathers—was the genius of the century who devoted himself to the development and practical application of magicreation tools that used magic stones as their source of power. Since the head of the Mathers family took on the name of Roswaal generation after generation, their names never changed, and each of them was a genius that displayed remarkable abilities.

“If that’s the case, was anything left behind by your predecessors?” asked Frederica.

“No, anything useful will have been taken ooouut, so it should be completely empty. But its positioning is ideal. I’d be very grateful if

I could use it."

"I see, but then we don't really need three peop—" Just as she was about to say that, Frederica guessed what Roswaal's aim was.

If the job was merely cleaning and repairing the old villa, there was clearly no reason for all three maids to go there, Frederica could do it all by herself. However, since he wanted them to do this together, the reason was obvious: it was to get them to learn how to work together.

Including the contrasting attitudes of Ram and Petra towards Roswaal before, the communication between the three maids working at Roswaal Manor was not yet perfect. However, as mentioned above, the royal selection had already begun, so they couldn't just wait around for their trust to deepen.

So by completing the task he gave us, the three of us will learn to work together and strengthen our communication, thought Frederica. "I understand, Master. Please leave this task to us. I will fulfill your wishes, both the obvious and the hidden one!"

"The obvious and the hidden…?"

"Yes, you can count on me!"

Roswaal frowned for a moment at Frederica, who had thumped her chest. But the enthusiastic sentence that followed made him say, "I suppose that's fine," before nodding. "Alriiight then, I'll relay my orders once again: you are to investigate the mansion that used to be my predecessor's workshop, make repairs, and make it habitable by replacing the furniture and tidying it up."

"Yes, sir! Leave it to us!"

With these instructions from Roswaal, the three girls quickly finished their preparations and departed for their destination: the workshop.

3

"So this is the previous Master's mansion?"

Petra blinked as she looked at the completely dilapidated mansion in front of her. It was natural for her to do so, since its appearance starkly contrasted with the other villas owned by House Mathers. The mansion was in the middle of a dense forest, exposed to ivy, weeds, and ravaged by wild animals, and at first glance, it didn't seem like it was currently fit for human habitation.

Nonetheless, the three of them would have to spend the night in said mansion.

"It will rain soon, so going back to the nearest town isn't a realistic option," said Ram.

"Uuh, I'm sorry…" replied Petra sulkily.

"It is not your fault, Petra," Frederica consoled, patting her shoulders to limit the extent of her depression. "That wild bird's cunningness is to blame."

By the time the three of them arrived at the mansion, the sun had already set and it had become dark. They were originally scheduled to arrive during the day, but the reason why this did not happen was written on Petra's downcast face.

"If only I hadn't let the bird steal the luggage…" she lamented.

"Talking about "what-ifs" won't change anything," asserted Ram. "We need to be thankful that you didn't get kidnapped by that cunning bird. Birds like that can easily kidnap children."

"I'm not! I'm not that small! I'm not that much different from you!"

"Ha-Ha, that's right. We're like a speck of dust compared to Frederica."

"A speck of dust is going a bit far! What do you think I am?!"

Frederica raised her voice in response to the absurd claim, which Ram brushed off with an "Alright, alright."

I know that that conversation was to get Petra to not feel unnecessary remorse, but I still think there were other ways to handle it. “Such things about you haven’t changed at all since the olden days…”

“But Sister Ram is right. We can’t go back to the town, can we? So, are we going to stay in this mansion…or rather, what used to be one?”

“I guess so. In this place that used to be a mansion, we have to—” Frederica stopped when she was about to say that they had to spend the night there.

“—? Sister Frederica?” Petra said as she looked up at Frederica by her side, who had become quiet.

Frederica, however, couldn’t respond to Petra right away. She had suddenly come back to her senses as she stared at the dilapidated mansion in front of her. “…A night in this mansion?”

So I have to spend the night here. Frederica faced the reality that she didn’t want to face and froze. Thinking that saying it out loud would only set it in stone, she swallowed, bitterness mixed in with her saliva.

“Yes, we have no other option but to stay here,” Ram declared. “Let’s hurry up and go inside.”

“…R-Ram…How can you just say it so bluntly…”

“What are you making such a fuss about? Could it be that you’re… scared?” Ram quipped, squinting as she lowered her voice.

That gave Frederica goosebumps. “Gh!”

As she involuntarily choked—

“Sister?” Petra said, pulling on her sleeve. “You aren’t scared, are you? Sister Frederica?”

“I-I am not scared! Not at all, it isn’t like that! It’s just that… Um, I only wanted to say that it does not look very safe.”

—It was a lie. She was scared.

Frederica bluffed greatly in front of her beloved sister.

Frederica was basically someone who avoided singing her own praises or pretending to be someone she isn't, but when it came to Petra, whom she adored, it was different. She wanted to be an admirable sister figure for her.

Ram and Garfiel are children who aren't cute at all compared to Petra, she thought. That's why she wanted the cute Petra to see her cool side.

"I'm just not sure if we can survive a night in a rundown mansion that has been abandoned for decades. It would be wiser to find a cave in the woods that's facing a cliff."

"Searching for a cave that we don't even know exists is wiser?" questioned Ram. "Frederica, do you have a fever or something?"

"I-I know! It was just a joke! I didn't mean it! Let's just start chopping the trees over there down and build a cabin for the three of us to live in for a while and…"

"S-Sister? Are you sure you're okay? I think you'll feel better if you sit and rest for a…"

"Arrrgh…!" Her brain, dominated by fear and shame, couldn't come up with a good idea. "It's true that I'm not good at building things. That I couldn't even realize that, is such a…"

"Ram thinks that the problem lies elsewhere, but never mind." She ignored Frederica reflecting upon her words and stared at the exterior of the mansion. She then shrugged lightly and looked back at Petra, not Frederica, who was useless. "After a quick glance, it doesn't look as unfixable as it first appeared. Ram will take care of the luggage, so can you kindly go around back and take a look around?"

"Yes, alright, Sister Ram. So are you going to stay here and rest, Sister Frederica…?"

"No-No, I can't let you go alone. I will accompany you."

I am grateful for their concern, but I can't afford to lose heart here, she thought. Neither can I let Petra act alone in a place that gives me such an ominous feeling.

"—. Can you move?"

"I can move. Who do you think I am? I am the head servant of Margrave Mathers, Frederica Baumann!" she proudly declared, a hand on her well-endowed chest.

Petra clapped, exclaiming, "Big Sister, you are so cool!"

For a split second she felt a questioning gaze from Ram as though saying, "Was there a reason to introduce yourself like that here…?" but Frederica chose to ignore it and rallied herself up.

"Well then, let's get going, Petra. Let's hold hands."

"Huh? Ah, ok, that's right. Let's go, Sister Frederica."

Frederica started walking with Petra, who had grabbed her extended hand and seemed excited. Ram sighed while looking at the two from behind and then got to work.

So, having left Ram at the front, the two headed around the back, only to find themselves in a difficult spot. The back of the villa was several times more eroded than the front, and Frederica's clothing was only intended for cleaning the vacant villa—it was in no way fit for this.

"I didn't think it would be this bad. What should we do…"

"Oh, Sister! Sister!" shouted Petra. "The ivy is soft here, so we can push it aside and get through."

"Oh my, I am surprised that you were able to notice that."

Petra was incredibly proud of herself for checking her surroundings just as they were on the verge of losing their way. "Ehehehe," she giggled cutely at the praise. "It's because I used to play in the forest with Lucas and the others…with my friends…when I was in the village."

“It’s such a different experience… It’s been a long time since I last played in a forest.”

Frederica had left the Sanctuary and started working under Roswaal more than a decade ago. She used to play in the forest with her younger brother Garfiel before that, but that was now a distant memory. I used to throw him around and play with him when all he could do was toddle.

“We shouldn’t be reminiscing right now. Let’s move the ivy and make a path through. Ah, but be sure not to touch the ivy or trees with your bare hands…”

“I’ll be fine. I made sure to wear gloves,” Petra said, presenting her gloved hands to Frederica, who then patted her head.

“You are sharp. I’m impressed.”

With that enthusiasm, Petra swiftly moved the ivy out of the way and created a path to the back of the mansion. “Ah,” she exclaimed upon reaching the back. “…The walls of the mansion got damaged over time, forming a hole here.”

“You’re right… The size is a little disconcerting.”

If you looked at it, the hole in the back of the mansion was as big as a child, so it was large enough for Petra, and even Frederica could get through it if she bent down. Whether this was simply the result of the building material being damaged or because wild animals used it to get inside was unclear.

“It’s a house in the middle of the woods, so surely no one is using it… Wait, Petra?”

While Frederica was examining the hole in the mansion, Petra suddenly bent down and slipped right through it.

“Wait, are you alright, Petra?!”

“I’m sorry, Sister Frederica,” apologized Petra. “I’m okay! I just got an urge to go through…”

"Just got an urge… Jeez, this isn't a game."

Hearing that from the other side of the hole made Frederica feel relieved. But it was problematic of her to disappear out of sight.

"We'll close the hole up later, so come back for now…"

"Oh! What was that?!" exclaimed Petra. "I'll go take a quick look."

"Ah, Petra, don't go! Oh, no!" cried Frederica.

Upon finding something of interest, Petra made an exclamation of surprise and then disappeared further in. Frederica admired her courage, but it was an issue that she forgot she was working.

"I guess it can't be helped. But I can't let anything happen to Petra…"

If it had been any smaller, she'd have had to just accept the situation, but the hole was of the right size, so that Frederica could also enter it. After a slight hesitation, she made up her mind and followed Petra through the hole. There was no source of light, so it was just as dark as the forest, but…

"—? What's up with this?" The moment she went inside, Frederica instantly felt the temperature change and tilted her head. It was a strange sensation, as if there was a chill in the dusty air. She couldn't wrap her head around the anomaly since she heard the sound of the floor creaking before she had a chance to investigate it. She figured that whatever was making that sound was someone light and thus naturally assumed that it was Petra.

"Petra, don't do anything rash," Frederica called out. "My heart will not be able to take it."

"…"

"Can you hear me, Petra? Why aren't you replyi…"

The creaking sound got closer and closer, but there was no reply from Petra at all. Frederica frowned and quietly stared into the darkness.

Frederica had cat-people ancestry, meaning she naturally had good night vision. There was nothing she couldn't see—even in the dark of night—if she focused. Therefore, she could clearly see that the thing making the footsteps was not Petra, but another being entirely.

"Huh?"

"..."

For a moment, she thought she was hallucinating—or rather, she hoped she was.

Right after that, she was blinded by a white light. "Argh," she groaned in agony, feeling a numbing pain in her eyes.

The cause was the light, or more specifically, the light from the magic lamps. The magic lamps installed in the mansion had turned on all at once.

"Th-This is..."

"Sister Frederica! The lights are on!"

As Frederica rubbed her eyes due to the sudden brightness, Petra came running towards her. She felt relieved for a moment upon hearing her voice, but then immediately returned to a state of caution. "Petra! Be careful! There was something inside the mansion!"

"What?!"

Petra, who had come running towards her, opened her eyes wide in surprise. Frederica wrapped her arms around her shoulders and pulled her close, then scanned the brightly lit room. It seemed like the hole in the wall was connected to the guest room.

She glanced around the abandoned room. There was an old wardrobe that had seen better days and a bed frame, but what she was searching for was the figure she had just seen. "A doll... It must have been a doll! A doll walking around on its own..."

“Sister? A doll…?”

“There was a doll walking about! Did you not see it?! exclaimed Frederica while shaking Petra, who answered with a shake of her head. That’s impossible, she thought to herself. Shocked, Frederica quickly scanned the room for the doll that she was certain she had seen earlier. She had definitely seen a doll around where she’d heard the footsteps. She couldn’t convince herself that she’d been mistaken.

“Could it have hidden itself somewhere? Under the bed? Or behind the wardrobe?”

Frederica tried to search for it with her sense of smell, but she didn’t know its scent. Not to mention the room, but the entire mansion was filled with the smell of dust. But there was no way to forget seeing such a thing. In an effort to find the doll, she searched haphazardly around the room.

“Sister Frederica, there’s so much dust!” Petra spluttered while coughing.

“Just endure it for now! More importantly, stay close. I’ll protect you no matter—”

“What are you doing?”

In the midst of explaining the importance of the situation to Petra, whose eyes were still watering from her coughing, she was interrupted by a familiar voice. Looking over towards the entrance, her eyes met Ram’s. Baffled, she looked Frederica up and down. Not understanding her puzzled stare, Frederica looked down at herself and let out a gasp. During her panicked search of the room, she’d gotten covered in a thick layer of dust and dirt.

“Seriously, what are you doing, Frederica?” Ram asked, repeating her question.

“Umm… Well…”

“You’re supposed to be setting an example for Petra. How embarrassing.”

At a loss for words due to her sound reasoning, Frederica's face reddened, and then she cast her eyes downwards.

4

"It was really there! I saw it with my own two eyes! So, I am absolutely certain that that doll is…"

"Alright, alright, Ram understands. The doll was there. But it's gone now. That solves it."

"You don't believe me! You don't believe me at all!"

After moving towards the hall, Frederica frantically tried to explain what had happened before. Ram listened, but she didn't seem to believe her at all.

"Uuh. Petra… Petra, you believe me, right?"

"Yes, I believe you. But for now, we need to do something about your clothes and hair rather than worry about that doll…"

Petra gently wiped her dirty hair and ran a comb through it. Frederica was glad that she believed her and shot a glare at Ram.

"What was it then?" asked Ram.

"I don't know, but let's assume that I mistook something else for a doll. It was probably a wild animal or a…"

"Or a doll that moves on its own."

"You-are-such-a…!"

Frederica felt frustrated by Ram mocking her and tried taking a swipe at her, but Ram swiftly moved out of her range. "Sister!" exclaimed Petra as she brushed Frederica's dust-covered hair. "Jeez, stay still. You'll ruin your pretty hair—"

It happened right after Petra said that.

"—Eek?!"

From far away, on the first floor of the mansion, they heard something that sounded like an explosion, making Frederica's shoulders jump.

The noise wasn't the sound of footsteps or a building creaking in the wind. The sound was more clear. It sounded like a burst of air.

"Wh-What was that sound?!" exclaimed Frederica, looking towards where the sound came from.

"It sounded kind of weird," said Petra.

Frederica immediately grabbed Petra's shoulders and stepped back. "Now do you believe me?" she said with a shaky voice, looking over at Ram. "It seems like there is definitely something else here. We need to…"

"—? What are you saying, Frederica? Stop joking."

"Wha…?! You st-stop joking around. At a time like this…"

Ram's words made Frederica doubt herself. Ram, however, was tilting her head. She looked just as indifferent as always, and it didn't seem like she was playing a trick on her.

"Huh-Huh… Petra, you heard it, right?"

"Huh? Ah, yes, I heard it. It was a weird pow sound."

"See! Petra also heard it! Ram, you must've…"

"Ram didn't hear anything like that. Ram doesn't have a reason to tell trivial lies, either. But if you really insist, then we can go check it out." Saying that, Ram took a short breath and placed her foot on the stairs that led to the first floor from the hall.

"Wait!" Frederica shouted, grabbing her sleeve to stop her from doing something reckless. "We-We have no idea what could be up there. If something happens to you, then what am I going to tell Garf?"

"You may tell Garf that Ram went somewhere far far away. As for

Master Roswaal, Ram is still thinking about that… Frederica, you're just overreacting."

"No I'm not! Look, even Petra is shaking a lot!"

"Sister, stop, my arms hurt… Ah. Th-That's better."

Petra complained since she was about to be hugged to death. Frederica reluctantly let go of her and hugged Ram instead.

"…What are you doing?"

"There's definitely something in this mansion. The forest is dark at night, but we should get out of here for now. It's necessary for everyone's safety."

"That doesn't answer Ram's question. Why are you hugging Ram?"

"I-I-It's not what you think!" stammered Frederica. "I'm not scared!"

Frederica was unaware that she was spilling the beans herself. While burying Ram in her well-endowed chest, she slowly backed away and headed towards the entrance.

"I'm not scared," said Frederica, trying to convince herself and failing, "but we should head back now. Come on, Petra, there's nothing we can gain from staying here for too long."

As she said this, Frederica pushed the door open in an improper way by using the side of her hips.

And then—

"…"

It was raining cats and dogs outside.

"It's really coming down," Ram observed.

"…"

"The road to the town is going to be quite muddy in this rain," she added.

“No, we can reach it in a flash if I beastify and run with you two on me.”

“Sister Frederica?!” When Frederica started to unbutton her uniform in preparation for her beastification, Petra grabbed her arm. “No, don’t! Please calm down!”

“L-Let go of me, Petra. I do not like beastifying without taking my clothes off! It causes problems for me later since I end up having nothing to wear!”

“No, just don’t transform at all! It’s fine, you have nothing to worry about!”

Upon hearing Petra, who was holding on to her tightly, Frederica couldn’t bear to resort to using force. Watching Petra rebutton her clothes, she sighed deeply. “What should we do…” she wondered.

“Let’s just go ahead and find out what made that noise then,” suggested Petra.

“Th-That noise? Petra, are you serious?”

“Yes!”

Unlike Ram, who seemed to have selective hearing, Petra must have heard the same sound as Frederica. But unlike her, Petra showed no fear.

“I guess this is how it feels to be surpassed by someone younger than you…”

“That’s a really quick declaration of defeat,” said Ram. “Haven’t you only been her mentor for two months?”

“Yes, yes, you are right! There are also those who do not respect their seniors and don’t even try to improve no matter how many years they are taught!” Frederica retorted, glaring at Ram, before turning to Petra in order to confirm her resolve. “But…are you sure, Petra?”

Petra, however, did not change her mind after getting asked a second time, saying, “Yeah, you can leave it to me,” with an energetic thump of her small chest.

She looked up at the first floor of the mansion with eyes full of enthusiasm. “Did the noise from before come from an animal? Or was it made by a hollow… But it could also be a moving doll. It’d be pretty amazing if it was…”

“Petra? Petra? Hey, what’s with that look in your eyes?”

Petra’s eyes sparkled with curiosity as she deduced that the sound was coming from upstairs.

“Wait! Don’t do it, Petra! Wh-What are you doing Ram?! Quick, we need to go after her!”

“With you weighing so much, you’ll only slow Ram down, Frederica.”

“No I don’t! You’re just being mean!”

Following Petra up the stairs, Frederica and an unwilling Ram also headed for the first floor. The uneasiness made Frederica hesitate for a moment, but her love for Petra was stronger. She took forceful steps up the stairs—and then, with a loud crash, the staircase gave in.

“Ha-eek?!” With a scream, Frederica fell through the middle of the stairs.

Frederica’s face instantly turned red, and Ram looked down at her from above. “You weigh too much, Frederica.”

“No, I don’t!!” she yelled, her face red, at Ram, who was looking up at her, before violently pulling herself out.

But falling through the floor had made her lag behind Petra, who had swiftly climbed the stairs.

“All of this and that is happening because… Haa…”

“You sighed again! I have told you many times that I do not weigh that much!" Frederica screamed, getting red in the face.

"Ram has said no such thing," Ram replied, shrugging her shoulders and brushing her off. "There is a limit to how self-conscious a person can be."

Frederica looked towards the hallway of the first floor and searched for Petra, who had gotten there before them. But she couldn't find her. It was possible that she had gone into one of the rooms since she was nowhere to be seen.

"Jeez, is she in one of the rooms?" Petra! Where are…eek?!"

Frederica heard the explosion again the moment she called Petra's name. It was closer this time, from right behind her. She quickly turned around, and her eyes met Ram's, who was holding her elbow.

Looking completely unperturbed, she squinted her pink eyes. "What is it?"

"Yo-Yo-You really can't hear anything? Or are you acting like that on purpose to make me feel anxious?"

"That's a false accusation. Ram doesn't know what you're talking about."

"Uuh…I don't know if you're being serious or not since you usually act this way!"

Despite knowing her for a long time, she couldn't tell whether Ram was being honest or was trying to fool her. That made her feel miserable, and she felt a momentary hatred for her.

"Get out!"

"Eek!"

This time, Frederica clearly heard an unfamiliar voice right after complaining to Ram. She slowly turned her neck, so slow that it felt like it was creaking, towards the source of the voice. But all she saw was a window of the mansion exposed to the wind and rain and slightly shaking.

“N-Now! Now!” stammered Frederica. “You heard a weird voice, right?! It said ‘Get out’!”

“…How arrogant of you. In this weather? You want Ram to get soaked?”

“It wasn’t me! Something else said that!”

“You probably mistook it for wind or something. You are being oversensitive.”

“And aren’t you being too insensitive? Do I look like I’m lying?!”

Despite her best effort to convey her message, Frederica’s words failed to change Ram’s mind.

Unable to bear Ram’s distrustful gaze, Frederica said, “Fine then,” giving up. “If you love it so much, you can spend the night here alone! I’m going to leave with Petra as soon as possible!”

“Ram doesn’t know what you’re so upset about…”

“Hmph! That! Anyway, I need to—Kyaaaaaeee?!”

Fueled by her anger for Ram, Frederica pushed down the growing fear and opened the door closest to her. A tremendous amount of rainwater had poured out from within, sweeping her away.

Caught by surprise, Frederica hadn’t been able to put up any resistance in time and fell into the hallway, instantly getting soaked from head to toe in rainwater.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What just…”

“Rainwater must’ve leaked in and collected in this room.”

“Is something like that even possible?!”

“What else could it be?”

Ram lent the soaked Frederica a hand and helped her up. While she was standing up, however, she heard the sound of pottery breaking from the room at the end of the hallway. “Eek?! What is it this time?!”

“Just the wind. It probably knocked over a vase or something,” said Ram.

And then…

“Curse you.”

A voice passed by Frederica’s ears.

“I-It said ‘curse you’ this time?! Ra-Ra-Ra-Ram! What was that voice…”

“Just the wind. Wind comes in from everywhere since it’s an old building.”

“Wind doesn’t sound like that!!” cried Frederica.

After wringing out the water from her sleeves and skirt, Frederica took to the hallway again, her mind filled with worry for Petra. Petra might also be going through the same scary experience as me. Thinking that was the case, she couldn’t help but be anxious and think about rescuing her right away. So, that’s—

“Hic!!”

The moment thunder rumbled, and when the room became dark, and even when the cupboard fell and the dishes shattered and made a loud noise, which seemed like some sort of ill-conceived prank, Frederica’s first thought was about Petra.

And then…

“Noooooo!!”

—The story went back to the beginning the moment she screamed while hugging the smiling doll.

—The moment Frederica let out a scream, she felt her consciousness slipping away.

"…"

She reflexively let go of the doll, and it seemed like she was about to faint right then and there. However, the moment she let go of it, it thundered yet again, and a flash of lightning lit up her surroundings.

The doll that had gone flying was promptly caught by Petra. In her slender arms, before there could have been any sort of reaction from the doll—

"I won't let you!!"

Pulling herself together, Frederica unleashed her survival instincts and went into survival mode. In that moment, her maid uniform exploded from within, from which the beautiful golden fur of a leopardess emerged. She transformed into a beast at a frightening speed, and once her hindlegs emerged, it was complete. She then charged forward like the wind and swept Ram and Petra off their feet.

"…"

Dragging their light bodies along, the transformed Frederica moved to the other end of the hallway in a single instant. Not even Garfiel could catch up to her when she raced at full speed.

She undoubtedly had the strongest legs in the Emilia camp. However…

"—Get out."

"Eek."

She once again heard the doll she had left in the dust.

Frederica looked back and held back a scream. The doll had grabbed hold of her tail after she'd beastified.

She chomped her fangs. “Ram! Take care of Petra!”

“Hey!”

Not waiting for a reply, Frederica left them in the hallway and then jumped straight up, breaking through the ceiling and going above the roof in one fell swoop. She rose rapidly in the rain, going towards the black clouds. The doll was still holding on to her tail despite now being in midair, but since the two people she wanted to protect were safe in the mansion, she didn’t feel like she had to hold anything back. She swung her tail with force, making the doll lose its grip and fall and smash into the roof.

“I will for sure—”

Deliver the final blow this time, Frederica thought, turning around in midair. She was about to charge in and sacrifice herself, but then she noticed something: practically identical dolls were crawling up onto the roof of the mansion one after another.

“Wha—”

Frederica was at a loss for words. At that sight. At the pure horror in front of her. They all looked identical, including some that weren’t wearing clothes; nearly a hundred of them had followed her up to the roof. All their eyes fell on her above their heads—their eyes shined brightly.

“—Ah.”

Her fear, which had been replaced by her fight-or-flight response, resurfaced in that moment. Her legs trembled, her fangs chattered, her fiery eyes turned moist, and then the strength drained from her entire body. Frederica’s beastification was undone, and then she went into freefall right into the swarm of dolls.

And just like that, poor Frederica became their prey—

“Catch her!”

“…”

Just when she was thinking she was about to be beaten to a pulp, Frederica heard a firm voice and then widened her eyes in surprise. Right below her, inches away even, the dolls had their hands extended in her direction, and she imagined herself being torn limb from limb by those tiny hands. However, that didn't happen.

The dolls caught the falling Frederica gently with their extended hands.

"…Huh?"

By using their many arms, the dolls tried to lessen the impact of the fall to the best of their ability. Frederica opened her eyes in surprise since the impact was softer than she had expected. When she turned her head, she met the gaze of the doll with cracks on its face. It was the very doll she had encountered in the hallway—

"You're—"

"…"

Frederica couldn't detect any malice on the doll's face. Right when she noticed that and went to say something to the doll… "Ahgeek?!" …she fell through the roof of the mansion that hadn't been able to handle the impact or the weight of the dolls and then crashed into the hallway.

Ram stood in front of Frederica shaking her head and said, "This confirms it. You weigh too much, Frederica," repeating it unapologetically for the third time.

6

"So, what are all these dolls anyway?"

Petra brought up the topic after roughly sealing the hole in the ceiling that Frederica had made in order to stop water from coming in. Many dolls were lined up on the floor of the entrance in front of her eyes. They were the source of the commotion that Frederica claimed to have seen and looked to be about a hundred times more than she had assumed. They were quiet now, but if Frederica's story was true, they had been vindictive in their attempts to get rid of her, saying and doing things in their attempt to do so.

The dolls—which were a foot shorter than Petra—looked so lifelike that you would definitely be surprised if you came across one in the dark.

“This is a magicreation tool that was left behind in the mansion,” Ram revealed, putting her hand on the heads of the dolls.

Petra muttered, “Magicreation tool,” after hearing that, widening her eyes in surprise.

A magicreation tool is a special tool powered by a magic stone. They can be used in a variety of ways, such as an iron plate that emits heat when cooking, or to help create wind without the use of magic.

However, the fact that a moving doll was a magicreation tool was outside Petra’s common knowledge. “I didn’t know that such cute magicreation tools existed,” she said.

“They aren’t a common type though. Master Roswaal’s predecessor was a pioneer in creating magicreation tools, so he left behind many prototypes like these. Perhaps these are some of them.”

“They are ma-magicreation tools…?”

“Oh, Sister Frederica.”

While they were talking about magicreation tools, Frederica returned. She was completely drenched, not to mention naked since her beastification destroyed her clothes, so she gathered whatever fabric she could find in their luggage and around the mansion and created an outfit of sorts.

“Such a shameless appearance.”

“What was I supposed to do?!” cried Frederica in anger. “The change of clothes I brought and everything else in there got soaked because of the heavy rain, so I can’t wear any of them…but it wouldn’t have been an issue if you had just dried it all with your magic.”

“You want Ram to use her precious stamina just to dry some clothes? At least you can keep working despite your shameless appearance, unlike Ram who’d be unable to move. Endure it.”

“Stop saying shameless over and over,” Frederica said, frowning.

“Geez! Stop fighting!” Petra exclaimed, going in between her two sister figures who were arguing and serving as a mediator. “More importantly…”

She pointed at the dolls that were lined up.

The dolls moved their heads in unison and looked at Frederica menacingly.

“Eek! Wh-Why, why am I the only one being treated like an enemy…!”

“It’s not fair,” complained Petra. “I was more excited by the thought of meeting a hollow, but only Sister Frederica gets favored…”

“It’s not quite like that. Ram admits she doesn’t know much about this magicreation tool, but she can guess why it treated us differently.”

Ram began her explanation, and Frederica and Petra looked at each other and cocked their heads, making them look like real sisters. It was a lovely sight, but Ram didn’t smile at all. “Listen here,” she said, holding up a finger as she stood in front of the dolls. “This doll’s job is most likely to protect the mansion. Though the mansion has been abandoned for a long time, they are still following the orders they were given. So they were just trying to drive out intruders.”

“B-But, why only me? Leaving Petra aside, it’s unfair that you aren’t soaking wet too!”

“This isn’t a matter of fairness. And the reason we were treated differently wasn’t because of favoritism.”

With that said, Ram slowly walked across the entrance hall and stopped in front of the door. It was quite literally the front door that connected the inside of the mansion with the outside—

"People who enter through the entrance are guests. And people who enter from other places are intruders."

"Ah." Frederica gasped in surprise upon hearing Ram's guess. She had certainly not entered through the front door but had indeed entered through a hole in the back of the mansion. But if that was the condition to draw the dolls' ire then…

"Question!" quipped Petra. "I entered from the hole too. But they didn't try to scare me away."

"But you heard the sound that Ram couldn't, right? If so, then there is a difference in the way people are treated."

"A difference in treatment…so do they differentiate between adults and children then?"

"Ram thinks so. Adult intruders are treated like burglars, while child intruders are treated with more leniency… Perhaps they use something like height difference."

"Argggh…" Things weren't looking good for Frederica once things like height and build entered the equation. Anyway, Ram's hypothesis is probably right, she thought. In fact, the dolls are surprisingly receptive to her orders since she is a guest. And the picture of her ordering them around really suits her.

"I don't know why, but making the dolls follow you really suits you, Sister Ram."

As Frederica was thinking that, Petra expressed the same thing.

"Obviously," Ram replied, running her hand over her pink hair with a somewhat pleased look on her face.

"But I'm relieved. If we were being taunted by hollows this time, I would've run as fast as I could in the rain, soaking wet with you and Ram on my back…"

Good thing only one of us got soaking wet, she thought. Though she wasn't sure if she should think like that, she forced herself to come to terms with it.

“But this is great,” said Petra. “If the dolls help out, it’ll take no time at all to fix the mansion up. By the way, you were so cute, Sister Frederica.”

“Pe-Petra?! What do you mean by ‘cute’…”

“She’s referring to the way you tremble and run around like a headless chicken. Looks like Ram isn’t the only one with a twisted personality.”

“My Petra’s personality is nothing like yours!”

Ram ignored Frederica’s furious protest and responded to it by covering her ears. On the other hand, the conversation went off track, so Petra didn’t go out of her way to answer. She looked at the dolls who looked as if they were waiting for their master’s orders, and with a twinkle in her eyes, said, “Hey, Sister Frederica, Sister Ram, I have a favor to ask…”

She turned to her two sisters and decided to convince them to humor her sudden idea.

7

“Ahh, this takes me back. I wonder how long it’s been since I was last heeere,” Roswaal muttered with deep emotions while squinting his bi-colored eyes.

After telling him they had something they wanted to show him, the usually busy Roswaal flew—quite literally—over to the villa to see them.

Frederica was bitter about his twisted personality, thinking that Petra would most likely soften up a little if he were to show that side of him more often.

Anyway…

“We have something to show you inside the villa.”

“Hmm, it was Petra who made the effort to call me. I wooonder if it’s okay to get excited?”

"How annoying, it was my idea. But from here on out we're only supporting characters."

"Supporting characters?" Roswaal repeated her words, tilting his head at her prickly expression.

Being forced to stand in front of the broken entrance, Frederica respectfully opened the door for him. Inside, Ram was waiting for his arrival, but that was not all.

Roswaal's eyes widened at the sight of so many figures who came to greet him.

"This is…"

"…"

Welcoming him were one hundred and eleven neatly maintained dolls with clothes and makeup on—courtesy of Petra.

"They've been guarding the mansion for a long time… It only felt right that they be acknowledged for their work. They must've been waiting for their someone's return for a long time, "said Petra to Roswaal, who just stood there.

That was Petra's wish, which Frederica and Ram had accepted. Petra's kindness was met with a nod of approval from Frederica from the beginning, and even though Ram didn't say no she acted like it was a drag.

The three of them all shared the burden of changing the dolls' clothes and make-up. None of them even considered cutting corners. Because, of course every doll was created by the previous Roswaal K. Mathers. And when it came to serving the Mathers family, they had fulfilled their duties for far longer than Frederica and the others. They were their seniors.

Taking in the warm welcome of the dolls, Roswaal took a step closer. "You guys stayed here all this time?" he asked, looking at the sea of dolls.

"…"

"I see… You increased your numbers in order to fulfill your duty. All this time you have been protecting this mansion and yearning for the day that its master would return."

Their eyes were fixed on their master—Roswaal—as if they were hanging on to each and every word. As if moved by their gaze, Roswaal gently stroked the head of the doll in the front. "I'm back now—I'm sorry for keeping all of you waiting."

The dolls bowed their heads reverently in response to Roswaal's words of gratitude. "—Welcome home, Master."

As Frederica, Ram, and Petra felt various emotions while looking at that scene, they suddenly noticed something.

"What…? They aren't…moving…?"

The dolls had stopped moving after lowering their heads. Seeing this, Petra grumbled, and Roswaal shook his head slowly at her. "They have fulfilled their duty to the mansion. After tirelessly dedicating themselves to their duty, they can finally rest now."

"But…"

"Thank you. For giving me a chance to right a wrong," he continued, before turning back around to face a teary Petra and placing his hand on her shoulder.

At that moment, Petra bit her lip hard and pulled away from Roswaal's touch. She hid behind Frederica. And while hiding behind Frederica, she leaned to the side and glared at him. "Master, you dummy! Selfish! You're always like this!"

"You're right. I am always like this. You can expect to be veeeeery busy now that I'm here."

He ignored Petra's roaring anger and smiled wryly while taking in the scene around him. All he saw were lifeless dolls and a still-unrenovated mansion. In the end, they couldn't rely on the dolls for help, so they had to renovate the mansion themselves.

But… "I think I'll do something myself for a change… What should we start with?” asked Roswaal.

“Hmmm, are you sure?” questioned Frederica. “I am warning you; this won’t be easy.”

“Why, you can most certainly cooount on me.”

Frederica smiled and said, “Alright. Then go ahead and work him like an earth dragon, Petra.”

“Yes, ma’am! With pleasure!” she replied.

Their master rolled up his sleeves, which didn’t suit him, and the raging Petra told him what to do. Watching the comical scene unfold before her, Frederica smiled and turned to Ram. She was kneeling next to the doll that had completed its duty and whose time had stopped and was gently caressing its cheek.

“Thank you for your service, great senior—you can leave Master Roswaal to us now,” Ram said kindly.

To Frederica, seeing Ram do something like that was rarer than a hollow.

END

Poltergeist Story Extra

“Master, what exactly are you going to do with those dolls?” Frederica asked, forcing the window with stiff hinges open to let some fresh air in. Behind her, Roswaal was organizing a bookshelf.

The villa had been unearthed in order to be used as a base while traveling during the royal selection. Originally, having been the residence of previous generations of House Mathers, it was the personal workshop of Roswaal K. Mathers, who was a celebrated genius in the creation of magicreation tools. Despite him having passed away, magic dolls had continued to protect the residence of their previous master.

In all honesty, Frederica’s first meeting with the dolls hadn’t been the most positive. But since they both served the same Mathers household, if she thought about it from an alternative perspective, they could be called colleagues.

Going along with the one who came up with that idea—Petra—both Frederica and Ram had cooperated in order to help the dolls achieve their deepest desires.

Although he was of a separate generation, the dolls had welcomed the head of the Mathers household, and, after having finally achieved their goal, ceased all movement. The one-hundred and eleven dolls had been placed in the villa, primarily for safekeeping purposes, but—

“That doesn’t mean they should be left here forever, and it would be pitiful to put them into storage,” said Frederica. “We should bury them with respect or something along those lines.”

There exists a superstition that hollows can easily reside in dolls that are made into images of people or animals.

It wasn’t that she had chosen to believe such a thing deliberately, but the dolls were a type of magicreation tool, and as such needed to be inscribed with formulas that made it easy for mana to circulate within. In other words, it was the kind of thing that was likely to attract evil spirits and the like.

If they were to come alive like that, it would certainly be humiliating for the dolls themselves. “Besides… Yeah, Petra might get scared. Emilia and Beatrice could also be in for a shock when they find out… Yes, we should definitely deal with them.”

“Sorry for getting you so wooorked up, but you didn’t think I would just get rid of them, did you? In fact, I plan on reuuusing them.”

“Reusing…them?” Frederica, who had been intently focusing on the feather duster in her hands, turned around. Her green eyes widened at Roswaal’s response.

“That’s right,” he replied, tracing a line in the dust on an old book with his finger. “After all, you and the others put so much effort into tidying them up. A lot of the dolls have broken and aged parts, but if we replace those then we should be able to mend them. It might even be possible to replicate a gate in a pseudo-fashion if we can fiddle with the formula or improve the quality of the magic stone used inside them.”

“H-H-Hold on a second. When you started speaking I was like ‘Master…!’, but by the end I was like ‘Master…?!’.”

“I don’t understand what kind of change of heart you’re alluding to here.”

“Suddenly deciding to try and recreate an artificial gate is absurd!” The feather duster she had been gripping so tightly suddenly started creaking in her hand. It was, however, only natural that she was as surprised as she was.

Originally, gates were organs that were said to direct the circulation of the mana that existed inside every living thing. The quality of a gate was said to have a direct link to the abilities a magic user possessed. It was something you were born with, not something you could train.

The important point here is the fact that this was an organ that living things inherently possessed.

“Creating an artificial gate would be almost like adding a heart…”

“Of course, it won’t be comparable to an organ like the heeaart. But magic is my specialty, so this shouldn’t surpriiise you,” Roswaal replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“Even if it was half as difficult as a heart, it’s still completely implausible.”

His nonchalant response was unbelievable. Despite having the titles of Margrave and Court Mage of the Kingdom of Lugunica, he doesn’t take it as serious proof of his competency, thought Frederica. If you look at him in a positive light, he is a genius, but if you look at him in a negative light, he seems to have a sincere lack of interest in anything but himself.

“You may say it’s easy enough to do, but they’re the creations of your predecessor—a rare genius inventor… Even for you, Master, it isn’t that simple…”

“Ooh, it sounds like you’re saying my knowledge of magicreation tools is inferior to that of my preeedecessor. How unexpected, Frederica.”

“…A statement overflowing with confidence. How typical of you, Master.”

However, that she didn’t wave it off as a joke or a bluff was proof of Roswaal’s true potential.

Roswaal doesn’t make showy statements about himself without grounds to do so. In other words, the remark he had just made could be taken as absolute fact, and it was very possible that he could restore the magic dolls without a problem. That in itself was very pleasing. But the aforementioned surprise at his unexpected remark had not disappeared.

“They say that if you study, there is nothing you cannot achieve… And if you believe something like that, someday you’ll probably be able to make the impossibles of this world completely possible with magic…”

“…? Of course I will. That’s the true objective of magic.”

Overwhelmed, Frederica had mumbled a sort of philosophical statement that rather sounded more like resignation. Roswaal heard it, however, and answered as if to say that it was completely natural. It was very clearly the behavior of someone who had made it their purpose to ponder upon and challenge what she had muttered about time and time again.

Making every impossibility in the world possible—that was something that could be possible with magic.

“Ultimately, magic exists to fulfill one’s wishes.” Roswaal gave a childish smile, unbefitting of his age, making Frederica go silent.

She wondered to herself if that was the ideal for the use of magic that Roswaal L. Mathers had decided upon. Or rather, the ideal that those of the Mathers family, who had continued the Roswaal name for generations, had decided upon as their goal.

“That is the most important reason behind continuing our bloodline, Frederica. Distinguished families with a long history exist to pass on ideals and knowledge.”

“The reason to continue your bloodline? I don’t understand, personally…”

“That’s understandable. To you and Garfiel, the concept of passing down your bloodline might not make much sense. You may be able to understand sibling relationships, but as for parent-child ones…”

“Normally, you should hesitate a little more before starting this kind of conversation!”

Despite avoiding specific examples, Roswaal had deliberately trampled over that thoughtfulness.

“Sorry, sorry.” To Frederica’s objection, Roswaal gave a smile with a face that showed little remorse.

Sighing at his attitude, Frederica attempted to use the duster, having lost sight of the conversation. "Even if that's the case, trying a big experiment like creating an artificial gate and trying it out on the dolls that were abandoned and forgotten is very like you , Master. I can't tell if you are attached to them or don't care much for them."

"You're hitting me where it hurts, but if I succeed, the burden on you all will be somewhat lifted, no? If I put dolls in every villa, then maintenance will be done automatically even when no one is there."

"Mainta—what?"

"Maintenance. It means repairing or adjusting. It's Subaru-speaaak," Roswaal unapologetically explained to Frederica, who had furrowed her brows at the unfamiliar word.

Subaru-speak was a term they had coined on their own, referring to words or phrases that were unique to one of their camp members—Natsuki Subaru's—hometown, which he used from time to time. Roswaal and Garfiel in particular seemed to enjoy it, and they were occasionally found copying him here and there. Garfiel would probably really hate it if he found out, though.

"Good heavens, I need to warn Sir Subaru. That it will be a problem if I can't understand even more of the Master's words…"

Frederica was thinking of complaining to Subaru, although it wasn't his fault at all, when her breath suddenly caught in her throat after having realized something in the middle of that thought. Lifting her head, she looked over at Roswaal. "By any chance, you wouldn't be recreating the artificial gate…for the sake of Subaru and Beatrice, would you?"

"…"

"Sir Subaru's gate is broken, and doesn't function properly without Miss Beatrice. The two are quite close, and I think it's lovely that they're always together, but…" Things are always accompanied by exceptions and unavoidable circumstances, thought Frederica. For example, it might become the worst possible scenario for the both of them if they are separated, and their separation goes on for too long. “Isn’t that why you went out of your way to look into such an unnecessary technology? Since your gate is probably the best in the whole kingdom.”

“I want to both deny and correct you on thiiiis. First, my gate is of course outstanding, but the best gate in the kingdom lies elsewhere. Also, the one who researched the unnecessary technology was not me, but the generation before last.”

“The generation before last…”

“I heard that Roswaal J. Mathers had the most inferior gate amongst my distinguished bloodline. She was probably researching it because she desired some kind of external means of doing things. She did not succeed within her lifetime, however.”

“…”

“I just continued the basics of her work from there… Of course, if it functions correctly, there’s a possibility it may work as a treatment as you descriiiibed,” Roswaal explained with a shrug of his shoulders, having delivered both the denial and correction he declared he would.

Eying his deliberate ignorance—or possible mockery—Frederica let out a long sigh.

“So for the sake of one of our own… No, with Beatrice that’s two. If you’ve secretly been taking measures for the sake of those two, then you should show us more of what you are doing.”

“It’s a shame, but I can’t get on board with your proposal, Frederica. I diiislike showing my efforts. I like to look as though I’m doing everything smartly, without any issue.”

“Smaartly?” Coming across another word she did not know, Frederica was quietly baffled.

It was Roswaal’s personal way of making amends. Having tried to bring about a rather lethal, and decisive disservice to the camp, everyone expected him to make up for his mistakes.

On the other hand, the one who couldn't forgive Roswaal the most, was Roswaal himself.

So he didn't want to do it in a way that would show anyone that he was doing things for the sake of the party, nor the opportunity to recover. Frederica didn't think it would be strange at all even if Roswaal had already completed the technology for the artificial gate and given it to Subaru in some form.

The effectiveness and difficulty would most likely be incredibly different depending on whether it was amongst Subaru's belongings, or etched into his body itself. But for Roswaal, he would not be concerned no matter how challenging.

That was just who Frederica's master was, the kingdom's most powerful magic user, Roswaal L. Mathers.

"…I understand, Master. I may think otherwise, but I'm just a maid at the end of the day. I have no complaints about your opinions. Although, I do wonder about them," Frederica said, prickly.

"What a splendid way of giving an opinion. It seems I'm blessed with good servants… Far too blessed, actually," Roswaal added with a smile, as if he was having fun.

From the tone in his voice, Roswaal seemed to be talking of the magic dolls. It was definitely convenient to keep them, but it was more likely that he wanted to repay them. Remaining in the villa after being left alone for so long, they had demonstrated invaluable loyalty; they were his precious servants.

"Please don't be too hard on yourself," warned Frederica. "Of course, if the dolls could move, then it would certainly be helpful just as you said. But your body is far more important."

Frederica did not say that out of competitiveness or a sense of rivalry, but in response to the attitude of the magic dolls. While she hoped the magic dolls would have a bright future, it would be meaningless if Roswaal collapsed to make it happen.

So Frederica decided that they would work hard until the day those magic dolls could move once more…

"Ah, no need to worry. As we've been talking, I've put the formulas together inside my head. It may take time to create them, but they should be able to work as expected in two or three daaaays."

"You're immediately undermining my resolve and concern!"

"I thought it would be better to do things quickly. I don't understaaand," replied Roswaal, expressing that Frederica was being unfair by shrugging his shoulders.

It was certainly an issue to be suffering such hardship so frequently in the face of having such a substandard master. But she also considered him to be worth serving, so it had both its advantages and disadvantages.

"Regarding such things as this, both myself, Petra, and Ram, all have different opinions."

Ram didn't consider it a master and servant type relationship, but adored Roswaal as a man. She was devoted to him in a similar way to Frederica, but her passion was of a different kind. On the other hand, Petra saw it as a master and servant relationship, and so repressed her emotions to quite an extent. If there were no employment-based relationship, there would be nothing to stop Petra from exploding.

Frederica was different from both of them. She had made an oath of servitude to Roswaal, and her personal feelings of gratitude were strong. In a different way from Ram, she would probably go so far as to risk her own life for him.

It's thanks to him that I can be together with Garfiel and Ryuzu, who is like a grandmother to me.

Roswaal suddenly cut into her inner thoughts. "Frederica, this may be none of my business, but…"

"…What is it?" Looking over her shoulder, Frederica raised her eyebrows in surprise. It was a rare sight to see Roswaal be hesitant.

At her response, Roswaal closed one eye—and spoke with his blue eye open. “We were just talking about the meaning of continuing one’s bloodline, right? …If you or Garfiel ever wish to look into your blood relatives, please let me know. I’ll help you.”

“…”

Frederica stared in wonder at the unexpected proposition, and after a brief silence, said, “I’ll never wish that. My family consists of only Garf, my grandmother, and my deceased mother. That’s it.”

“So, what abooout Garfield?” Roswaal asked, the instant Frederica shook her head.

She looked disappointed for a moment, but already had an answer. “That’s something you should ask Garf, Master.”

“…Ask Garfiel directly? Is that a joke? It’d be like trampling over his heart with dirty shoes. He’d never forgive me.”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with trampling over my heart!” Frederica snapped, flashing her sharp fangs in resentment, after figuring out that he had done it on purpose.

Of course, she knew that Roswaal didn’t propose that out of spite—he was just thinking of Frederica and Garfiel in his own way. She knew it was done out of consideration as to whether or not they were both ready to face a situation they’d been avoiding.

However, there should be both those who need it, and those who don’t.

“You don’t need to be worried, I’m okay. Plus, they say that hesitating to do a good deed is a bad deed. I’ll finish tidying the bookshelf, so you see to the dolls, Master.” Collecting herself, Frederica took over Roswaal’s work for him.

When she stretched out and snatched the book away from him, Roswaal expressed reluctance. “Can’t we just continue with the bookcaaase? There’s so much to do, and so many books to see…”

“You’re under the influence of the cleaning and tidying demon! The act of reading is like a witchbeast that steals time when you are trying to clean things. So, please go!” Clutching the book she’d snatched to her chest with one hand, she drove Roswaal away with the duster in the other. Afterwards, she realized that Petra was having an influence on her.

“My my.” Roswaal thought so too, sweeping away the dust with a sigh. “If Petra’s supporters increase any more than this, I won’t be able to act freely here… I won’t happen to create even more enemies once I revive all those dolls, will I?”

“If you don’t like the sound of that, how about correcting their personalities in the formula?”

“I see, what a great idea. Do you have a specific ex—”

“I was joking! It’s cruel to try and change the way someone is, even if they’re just dolls.” Not to mention the fact that the dolls had served the Mathers family for so long without trying to change a single thing.

As Frederica pointed this out, Roswaal waved his arms, saying, “I understand. I understand,” in a dismissive manner. “Well, I’m not sure whether you can consider them your seniors or juniors, but I’ll contribute to increasing our workforce. I’m quite the hard worker, myself.”

“That’s only something you can boast about once you can demonstrate it in front of Ram and Petra.”

“That’s harsh…”

Accepting his defeat, Roswaal took his leave meekly with slumped shoulders. Or so she thought, until he paused in the doorway. “Frederica,” he called. “This is my bad habit of pestering reemerging—I’ll leave it to you guys to prepare one-hundred and eleven names.”

“…Understood. I’ll prepare some wonderful names.” Placing both the duster and the book on a cabinet nearby, Frederica held her skirt and gave a curtsy.

After seeing that, he left, and Frederica gave a little sigh as she watched him go.

Roswaal was too kind for his own good, but if she found it worthwhile to support him, then she couldn’t be that different.

END

Very Very Rough Justice
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—On that day, an unusual incident was occurring at the Roswaal Mansion.

Subaru: “Eh, you’re telling me Emilia-tan’s going out without me…?!”

Emilia: “Honestly, Subaru, don’t be so surprised over something like that. I can manage a little outing even if you’re not with me.”

Surprised, Subaru’s knees quivered, and Emilia puffed out her cheeks in protest.

The two of them were speaking in the mansion’s entrance hall. Emilia, already dressed for going out, had stopped Subaru when he tried to tag along, and that was how it all started.

Since the knighting ceremony, Subaru had officially become Emilia’s knight, and thanks to that he usually accompanied her whenever she left the mansion.

Emilia truly appreciated that in itself, but—

Subaru: “And yet Emilia-tan’s going to leave me behind… Did I mess something up?!”

Emilia: “Ah, n-no, that’s not it. See, Subaru, you’ve been with me nonstop lately, haven’t you? So I thought you might like to rest once in a while…”

Subaru: “Ehh?! There’s nothing more restful than absorbing pure Emilia-ese right at Emilia-tan’s side though?!”

Emilia: “Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

Flustered, Subaru gulped, and Emilia answered with her eyebrows drooping.

Really, she only wanted Subaru to take a break for once, but how could she make him listen?

While Emilia was worrying over that—

Ram: “Hah! What a pathetic fuss you’re making, Barusu.”

Subaru: “N-Neesama…!”

The dependable Ram arrived, her heels clicking briskly across the floor. After looking Subaru up and down, she raised a finger and said,

Ram: “Honestly, worrying about whether you’ve displeased Emilia-sama at this point is far too late. If you’re anxious about your own blunders, Barusu, start searching back to when you were still tied to your mother by the umbilical cord.”

Subaru: “Ah—crap! So I’d have to regret kicking Mom’s belly too much from the inside! I’m not repenting for anything I did while soaking in amniotic fluid!”

Ram: “A man who refuses self-reflection… he will not rise high, surely.”

Subaru: “Quit stabbing me in the heart like that!”

Watching Ram and Subaru’s friendly back-and-forth, Emilia let out a small laugh. From the moment they first met, the two had been perfectly in sync, and their exchange was heart-warming even to an onlooker.

She could have watched them forever until their talk ran dry, but—

Ram: “All right, conversation’s over. Subaru, didn’t you promise Petra-chan and Frederica something today? ‘Applique’, was it? You said you’d teach them.”

Subaru: “Ughh! My missionary zeal as an apostle of embroidery has backfired…!”

Raising the needle and thread in his hand, Subaru dropped to his knees. Even as he hung his head, the cloth in his hands quickly filled with a cute stitched cat.

Subaru had always been dexterous, but his recent improvement was enough to make one gape.

That hardworking side was something Emilia could boast about in her knight, yet seeing him so dejected left her at a loss for words.

At any rate—

Emilia: “Really, there’s nothing to worry about. Remember that lightbug uproar the other day? I’m just going to talk with the city chief of Costuul to see how things have settled down.”

Subaru: “The Costuul city chief—that huge guy with the scary face, right? He stared down at me from way up there and scared me pretty bad, but you’ll be fine, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “Eh, I’ll be totally fine. He’s reaaally a kind person, after all.”

Hearing Subaru’s reason for anxiety yet unable to sympathize, Emilia knit her brows quizzically.

Leno Rex, the city chief of Costuul—the industrial city nearest the new Roswaal Mansion—was tall and looked frightening at first glance, but he was an admirable man who put the citizens’ lives first.

Recently, naturally occurring pests called “lightbugs” had rampaged in Costuul, causing enormous damage. Emilia and the others had helped quell the disturbance, but she was curious about the aftermath, and today’s outing was to hear how things were progressing.

Emilia: “So there’s really nothing to fret about. Ram’s coming with me, and…”

Garfiel: “—’Cause your amazin’ selves are bored ta tears, I’ve decided ta tag along too!”

While Emilia was explaining to Subaru, the final member of the party arrived—a boy with short blond hair, a well-trained body, and impressively sharp fangs: Garfiel.

As the Military Officer of Emilia’s camp, he would act as her escort today, though no one thought such pomp was truly necessary.

Ram: “Unlike Barusu, the riffraff around here wouldn’t stand a chance against Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “Nngh, can’t argue with that, which makes it hard to retort…!”

Garfiel: “Hah! Relax, Captain. It’s the next town over, yeah? Whatever happens, my amazin’ self’ll guard Ram and Emilia-sama proper.”

Subaru: “Well, that lightbug mess in that ‘next town over’ ended with Frederica getting kidnapped behind the scenes… Ahh, saying it’s pointless! I’m counting on you, Garfiel!”

Garfiel thumped his chest with a broad grin, and Subaru patted the boy’s shoulder before turning back to Emilia.

Subaru: “I’m sure you’ll be fine, but be extra careful, okay? About carriages and men. And bad guys, too.”

Emilia: “Geez, Subaru, you’re such a worrywart. But it’s all right. Carriages and men aside, if we meet any bad people I’ll beat them fair and square!”

Subaru: “Mmm, that’s not exactly what I meant, but E-M-T.”

—And so, seeing Subaru’s complicated expression, Emilia and the others departed the mansion.

Until they were out of sight, Subaru kept waving to the three of them from in front of the mansion.

2

After that exchange before setting out, the three of them finally left the mansion—yet…

Garfiel: “Saay, ain’t it rare fer the three of us ta be movin’ around together?”

Emilia: “Ah, you might be right. Ram and Garfiel are always such good friends, but I’m usually with Subaru, so this is unusual.”

Ram: “That is an impression Ram would rather amend, however…”

With a grim-faced Ram sandwiched between them, Emilia and Garfiel chatted happily.

Just as Garfiel had said, this truly was an uncommon trio. It happened to be the same day Roswaal had business outside and Subaru had promised to spend time with Petra and the others—meaning Otto, who had not been mentioned at all, was surely being dragged around by Roswaal even now.

Emilia: “Roswaal seems awfully fond of Otto, doesn’t he?”

Ram: “—Aggravating as it is, Otto is unexpectedly useful. Among Barusu’s strays, he is quite the find. Aggravating as it is.”

Garfiel: “Callin’ Ottobro a stray—does that mean the Cap’n’s picked up other stuff too?”

Ram: “Petra could also be called one of Barusu’s strays.”

Garfiel: “Aa, Petra sure dotes on the Cap’n…”

Scratching his own head roughly, Garfiel nodded along with Ram’s words.

Thanks to Subaru, both Otto and Petra had ended up joining the camp. Because the two of them got along reaaally well with Subaru, they were welcome allies in Emilia’s eyes as well.

Emilia: “If Subaru brings back even more friends at this rate, things will get so lively!”

Ram: “Ram does not find that especially advisable. Increase the sample size, and pebbles mix in among gems. Ram very much doubts such good fortune will continue."

Garfiel: "So Ram's admittin' Ottobro an' Petra were good picks after all, eh? Bet Ottobro'd be thrilled ta hear—ouch!"

Emilia: "Ram?! Why did you just yank out Garfiel's hair?!"

Talking like this as they went, Emilia and the others arrived at their destination, Costuul.

As planned, they met the mayor inside a temporary building substituting for City Hall—the original having collapsed in the recent lightbug incident and still awaiting reconstruction.

Leno: "—I am grateful that you came all this way."

Greeting them without a change of expression in the reception room, Leno Rex said this flatly.

Leno was so large that, at first glance, he looked more suited to life as a mercenary than as a mayor. But one mustn't judge by appearances. Despite his size he was capable of delicate consideration, and Emilia thought it a good thing that Leno was the one serving as mayor.

Paying Emilia's impression no mind, Leno immediately broached the business for which they had come.

Leno: "Regarding the affair the other day, the turmoil within the city has finally settled, and reconstruction has begun in various places."

Emilia: "That's good to hear. We wish we could've come to help sooner, though."

Leno: "Perish the thought. Rather, your chief warrior over there was of immense help to us."

It had been Garfiel and Frederica who rescued Leno and the city staff from the collapsing City Hall during the recent uproar. Having his deeds praised head-on, Garfiel rubbed his nose, not altogether displeased.

Garfiel: “Still, gettin’ the rebuild goin’ only now… ya sure took yer sweet time, huh? Ain’t like some “Catch-the-Brahavac” race. Why’d it take that long?”

Leno: “There are several reasons. First, even after that, exterminating the lightbug took time. The other main reason—”

Ram: “—would be that the workshops for magicreation tools suffered damage, and rebuilding them will cost both time and money.”

Leno: “Spot-on.”

Magicreation tools—that very technology was the greatest reason Costuul bore the name of the Industrial City, a strength no other city possessed. Powered by magic stones, those tools allowed tasks impossible by human hands; they were, one could say, modern Meteors.

However, the workshops that used those tools, and the factories that produced them, had taken heavy damage in the lightbug incident, dealing a severe blow to Costuul’s industry. With the lightbugs finally eradicated, the work of restoration to regain the title of Industrial City had begun.

Yet—

Leno: “A serious problem has come to light.”

Emilia: “Eh? A serious problem?”

Leno: “While the damaged workshops were closed, their craftsmen naturally had no work. Many without employment therefore went to other towns to earn their keep, but…”

Garfiel: “Well, ya gotta work ta eat. That’s not the problem, right?”

Leno: “Working elsewhere is no issue—provided they come back. If they do not…”

Emilia: “They… aren’t coming back? Those craftsmen who went out?”

Indeed, if that were true, it would be a huge trouble. It was normal for craftsmen to seek jobs elsewhere while their workshops were closed, but unless those craftsmen returned—

Emilia: “Even if the workshops are restored, there won’t be any skilled hands to run them, right?”

Leno: “Handling magicreation tools requires considerable experience. With most seasoned craftsmen gone, and if we must train new ones from scratch…”

Ram: “The losses during that time would be immense. At worst, Costuul, once called the Industrial City, could collapse entirely.”

Emilia: “Ram, that’s a bit harsh…”

Leno: “It is the truth. At this rate, the city cannot sustain itself.”

Ram: “So, what is it you want us to do? Let me remind you: even the Mathers family cannot cover a city’s financial shortfall, nor are we obliged to.”

Leno: “This city is within the Margrave’s western domain, is it not?”

Ram: “The administration of his own lands is Lord Roswaal’s responsibility, but the running of the city itself tests the mayor’s skill. Do you intend to set aside your own incompetence and blame Lord Roswaal?”

Garfiel: “Come on, Ram!”

Emilia: “Please don’t be so on edge. The mayor is in a tough spot too. Besides…”

Leno: “Besides?”

Emilia: “We should hear him out to the end. He wouldn’t just ask us to open our purse with no thought behind it, right?”

Leno bowed deeply.

Leno: “Allow me to apologize for any misunderstanding. As Lady Emilia says, I do not intend to ask the Margrave to fill our coffers; that is indeed my duty.”

Garfiel: “Then what do ya want from us?”

Leno: “—From the Margrave Mathers, I would like manpower.”

Emilia: “Manpower, as in… household help?”

It was clear the shortage of hands was serious, but could that be covered by extra servants? Moreover, the mansion had its own work, so sending Ram and the others out would be difficult. Frankly, the only one they could loan was Subaru.

Emilia: “Even Subaru might not be able to fix a manpower shortage in such a big city…”

Garfiel: “Heh, what’re ya sayin’, Emilia-sama? We’re talkin’ about the Cap’n!”

Emilia: “Garfiel… you’re right! If it’s Subaru, maybe he really could do something.”

Ram: “Emilia-sama, Garf, kindly stop expecting dreams from Barusu.”

Ram turned back to Leno.

Ram: “Ram’s head has cooled a little. The manpower you want is—”

Leno: “—for searching. I wish to know the whereabouts of those craftsmen who have not returned.”

Ram: “If there is a criminal element, maintaining order in the domain falls under the lord’s duties—Lord Roswaal’s purview.”

Emilia: “But what if the people who went out found reaaally good jobs and are working so hard they lost track of time?”

Ram: “Even so, any adult should at least send a word home. And the problem is they haven’t contacted even their families. Correct?”

Leno: “—Precisely.”

Having heard this much, Emilia wanted to solve the problem somehow and send those missing craftsmen back to their families.

Emilia: “After all, families ought to be together whenever possible.”

Garfiel: “Aa, got no argument from my amazin’ self there. All right! Let’s do this, Emilia-sama!”

Buoyed by Garfiel’s forceful agreement, Emilia stood up.

Emilia: “All right, Mr. Mayor. We’ll help look for the craftsmen who disappeared. No—we insist on helping.”

Leno: “If you would be so kind…”

Emilia: “Then let’s start searching right away! Garfiel, you’ve got a reaaally keen nose, don’t you? Can we count on you?”

Garfiel: “Hm?”

Garfiel, however, noticed nothing of Leno’s bafflement and answered Emilia with vigor.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’s half a tiger, y’see, and I ain’t losin’ ta any mutt or kitty when it comes ta sniffin’. No matter who’s missin’, I’ll track ’em down in a flash!”

Emilia: “That’s reaaally reassuring! All right, then—”

Garfiel: “Yeah—let’s get this started!”

Garfiel bared his fangs in a grin; Emilia clenched her fist with determination. Then, as though released from a spring, the two spun around, fixing Leno with spirited gazes.

Emilia: “Wait for us—we’ll definitely find the missing people!”

Garfiel: “The Wings of Mokkalka outstrip the wind!”

Leaving those words behind, Emilia and Garfiel nodded to each other and dashed out of the reception room.

Overwhelmed by their momentum, Leno could only stare after them in blank astonishment. Once the initial shock passed, he glanced toward Ram, who had been left behind.

Leno: “…Honestly, all we needed was for them to arrange some manpower.”

Ram: “Ram thinks so as well, so Ram will inform Lord Roswaal later. Until then—”

Leno: “Until then?”

Ram: “It would be wise to humor those two until they tire themselves out.”

Savoring the tea that had been served, Ram let out a quiet good grief and shook her head in elegant resignation.

3

Emilia: “Ah, you’re late, Ram. I was about to leave you behind, you know?”

Ram: “My apologies, Lady Emilia. The tea and confections were far too good to abandon half-finished… And, the results?”

Ram caught up with Emilia and the others only after they had dashed out of the substitute City Hall and some time had passed.

Just as she had told Emilia, Ram had left the building only after fully enjoying the welcome tea and sweets, but in that time Emilia and the others had apparently been darting all around the city.

When she asked about their results, Emilia leaned forward and cried, “That!”—

Emilia: “Garfiel and I talked to all sorts of people. They kept thanking us for fighting during that lightbug uproar the other day…”

Ram: “I see. That is good to hear. It seems Garf’s rampage was not in vain.”

Garfiel: “Well, that whole mess was kicked up by some perverted bastard gunnin’ for Sis in the first place, so I dunno how much we oughta be celebratin’.”

Ram and Garfiel traded impressions while Emilia, looking a little embarrassed, listened.

Digging too deeply into the truth of that incident would entangle all sorts of troublesome circumstances for Emilia’s camp, so they could not speak openly about it. Even so, the fact that solving the uproar had earned Emilia the townspeople’s goodwill was something to be simply pleased about.

Ram: “In other words, your results are zero. Very well, let us return. We must once again request Lord Roswaal to arrange reinforcements.”

Emilia: “Hehe, that’s what you’d think, right? But that isn’t the case at all. Isn’t that so, Garfiel?”

Garfiel: “Hell yeah. My amazin’ nose and Lady Emilia’s canvassin’ paid off. This is what ya call Jōten-and-Geten tag-team sumo, y’know.”

Emilia: “Is that what that is?”

Emilia and Garfiel puffed out their chests side by side; watching them, Ram remained silent. Seeing her silence, the two tilted their heads in puzzlement, but undaunted they continued.

According to the results of their inquiries—

Ram: “A brokerage that finds work for migrant laborers, is it…?”

Emilia: “We don’t know if those people are suspicious, but it sounds like they were talking jobs with the townsfolk who have disappeared.”

Garfiel: “If those punks turn out ta be the kidnappers, then things’ll move fast, yeah?”

Emilia: “That’s what I think, but what about you, Ram?”

Garfiel, looking triumphant, and Emilia, glancing up at Ram for her opinion—listening to the two, Ram fought the urge to clutch her head.

Truth be told, Ram had not expected anything at all from their canvassing, but judging from what she had just heard, they had achieved more than she had imagined.

—Migrant laborers who never return, and a shady brokerage.

Ram: “…Suspicious.”

Emilia: “—! I knew it! You think so too, Ram?”

At Ram’s involuntary mutter, Emilia’s eyes sparkled. Beside her, Garfiel folded his arms with a satisfied “See?” plastered across his face.

Ram: “You are in quite high spirits, Garf. It is certainly a fine achievement, but…”

Garfiel: “Whoa there, Ram, thinkin’ we’re done here’d be far too sweet. Sweet as sugar.”

Emilia: “Super sweet. If those people really are the kidnappers, we’d be in trouble if they get away, right? That’s why I asked Garfiel…”

Garfiel: “An’ my amazin’ nose pinned down the direction their dragon carriage headed, see.”

Emilia: “That’s what he did.”

Saying so, Garfiel, with a snort, pointed outside the city. Presumably, that was the direction the shady brokers’ dragon carriage had gone.

Ram: “You two are being far too efficient… Are you really Lady Emilia and Garf?”

Emilia: “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you praising us?”

Ram: “No. Yes, I suppose so. The two of you were thinking much more than I expected, and Ram is quite surprised. You have grown, it seems.”

Garfiel: “Isn’t it weird ta doubt that we will grow instead of admit we have grown?”

Ram’s true feelings slipped out, but the crucial Emilia did not seem to catch on, so Ram merely tugged Garfiel’s cheek to silence him.

At any rate, if the investigation had stalled it would be one thing, but seeing as it was progressing smoothly, it was hard to call it off here.

Therefore—

Ram: “For now, let us follow the carriage’s trail as far as we can.

The scent might cut off somewhere; if that happens, we can pull back.”

Emilia: “Mm, got it. Don’t worry, I’m sure it will lead us right to their destination. Garfiel, it’ll be hard work, but please.”

Garfiel: “Ya can leave it ta me. The Captain an’ Ottobro both told me, over and over, ta take care o’ Lady Emilia. I won’t be slackin’ off.”

Emilia: “Subaru and the others said that… Ah, but in this case the thing that won’t slack off is your nose, right?”

Garfiel: “Whoa, that’s true! Wahaha!”

Emilia: “Hehe, that’s funny.”

Garfiel burst into hearty laughter, while Emilia laughed softly.

Accompanying those two carefree investigators, Ram racked her brain over how to arrange a graceful exit.

Ram also felt that the brokerage the two had tracked down was highly suspicious, but events were proceeding far too smoothly. It was unthinkable that the other side was leaking information, so the only explanation was that Emilia and Garfiel had simply been too lucky.

Personally, Ram believed she had already fulfilled her obligation to Leno at this point, and that leaving the rest to the Costuul side would be perfectly acceptable. If they happened to solve the entire problem at this pace, there was a risk of embarrassing Leno, the city’s mayor.

Thus, while Ram thought it best to hand the investigation over to the Costuul side at some stage, bringing along the strangely enthusiastic Emilia and Garfiel—

Emilia: “Look, Ram! That dragon carriage—could it be the one we’re chasing?”

And so, when Garfiel’s nose-guided pursuit had neatly sniffed out what seemed to be the kidnappers' base, Ram felt an even stronger urge to clutch her head.

4

—Things had gone so smoothly, one good break after another, that stepping back was no longer an option.

Dragged into such an unusual situation, Ram's stern expression showed no sign of softening.

Emilia: "That dragon carriage seems to be creeping into that mountain… Is that a magic-ore mine?"

Garfiel: "Looks like it. Seems they're gatherin' folks from all over. The scent of the carriage we were chasin' got mixed up with the others, but that's the place for sure."

Emilia and Garfiel crouched low, peering from the bushes at the scene below.

Following the lingering scent of the broker's dragon carriage that had left Costuul, the three of them—Ram's wish to turn back ignored—had arrived squarely at their destination: a magic-ore excavation site.

Ram: "However, as far as Ram knows, there is no registered magic-stone mine in this area."

Garfiel: "Maybe it's just that ya don't know about it, Ram—ow ow ow!"

Ram: "Do you imagine there is anything concerning Lord Roswaal's domain that could escape Ram's notice?"

Emilia: "W-Wow, that's incredibly convincing…"

Pinching Garfiel's ear to silence him, Ram turned her gaze back to the same scene as the other two.

As Ram had just said, no declaration for a magic-ore mine existed in this area. In other words, this was an illegal, hidden dig—grounds enough for a raid by itself.

Yet the problem did not stop there.

Garfiel: “Dragon carriages keep showin’ up one after another outta nowhere.”

Emilia: “Really, they’re nonstop.”

That was the problem.

Just as the pair had observed, dragon carriages were slipping into the mine one after another, each one modified so its windows were sealed from the outside. It was practically an open admission that something shady was happening within.

Ram: “…Sloppy.”

Their work, their concealment—perhaps even their entire plan—could only be called sloppy. The fact that Ram’s party had come this far was not the fruit of any painstaking investigation.

To put it bluntly, both Emilia and Garfiel tended to act with broad strokes.

That held true here as well; with pursuers as unsubtle as those two closing this distance, it had only been a matter of time before the culprits were exposed.

However, the sloppier the enemy’s operation appeared, the harder it became to decide whether to pull back.

Unlike a methodical foe, a planless one was impossible to read; if they made a misstep, the other side might blunder even worse.

Ram: “I’d like to see what’s happening inside, but… I suppose there’s no helping it.”

Emilia: “Ram? What are you planning to do?”

Ram: “Ram wished to avoid the strain, but I am considering using Clairvoyance. If Ram can find someone inside whose wavelength matches, we can confirm the situation without effort.”

Emilia: “Uh… but Clairvoyance makes you reaaally tired, right? Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

At Ram’s self-sacrificing proposal, Emilia voiced her misgivings.

Emilia: “If it comes to that, couldn’t we just stop one of those carriages and ask directly? If they’re up to no good, they’ll show it right away.”

Ram: “If Lady Emilia were the only person in this world, that might resolve the issue, but things do not proceed so simply. Please think carefully.”

Emilia: “A world with only me in it…”

Garfiel: “The Captain’d probably be over the moon at that idea, though.”

Having her suggestion rejected, Emilia fell silent, while beside her Garfiel tilted his head. Keeping it at that angle, he went on, “But ya know—”

Garfiel: “This amazin’ self of mine agrees with ya on not pushin’ Ram too hard. And just so it’s clear, it ain’t ’cause I’ve got a crush on ya. Even though I do.”

Ram: “Quiet. In that case, what do you intend to do?”

Garfiel: “We can’t just storm the place, right? No tellin’ what those folks inside might pull.”

Surprisingly showing more insight than Emilia, Garfiel said as much. Receiving that, Ram narrowed her light-crimson eyes, and he turned his emerald gaze toward the mine’s entrance.

What his eyes followed were the dragon carriages coming and going —

Ram: “—Garf, surely you don’t mean…”

Garfiel: “Oh, I sure do. “Plates, water, and Gezigelei,” ya know?”

Emilia: “Um, what are we going to do?”

Understanding his intent, Ram exhaled. Unlike Ram, Emilia had no idea what he meant. Flashing his fangs in a grin at her, Garfiel declared,

Garfiel: “No point jawin’ about it from out here. —Let’s sneak inside.”

5

Ram: “…Sloppy.”

While pulling her hood down lower and surveying her surroundings, Ram could not help but mutter that.

The infiltration plan into a dragon carriage that Garfiel had proposed had succeeded far more easily than expected.

They had simply slipped into the bed of one of the dragon carriages going in and out of the mine, yet none of the look-outs had checked, so they passed straight through and made it inside.

Just in case they were discovered, they had put on workers’ robes as a disguise, but no one’s eyes stopped on them, so the measure came to nothing.

Anyway—

Emilia: “We made it inside without a hitch. I’m reaaally starting to get nervous…”

Saying so, Emilia looked around the inside of the mine with quick glances.

It could not be seen from outside, but despite being an illegal digging site, excavation work was proceeding smoothly, and quite a spacious passage had been made inside the tunnel. The dragon carriages passing back and forth were also used to carry out the excavated earth, and that might have been why inspections were lax.

Even so, there was no excusing such carelessness and gaps in security.

Ram: “To think they did all this right under Roswaal-sama’s nose.”

What welled up in Ram’s chest was anger at the discourtesy done to Roswaal.

Ordinarily, now that the situation was clear to this extent, Ram would promptly contact Leno, have guards dispatched to close the mine, and then strictly punish the people involved—that was the formal procedure.

There was only one reason Ram was not doing that: she wanted to punish this discourteous person with her own hands.

And—

Emilia: “We’re only one step away from the culprit now, right?”

Garfiel: “Oi oi, Emilia-sama. That ‘one step’ is the dang’rous bit, ya hear? From here on, treat it like the ‘Treasure of Karakari Pass,’ got it?”

Emilia: “You mean ‘be careful no matter what’? Mm, got it.”

With faces full of fighting spirit, Emilia and Garfiel pressed on; their presence and momentum pushed at Ram’s back. —In any endeavor there is such a thing as momentum.

In terms of problem-solving ability, Ram neither overestimated nor underestimated Emilia and Garfiel. Leaving aside roughhousing, their ability to deal with other problems was average.

However, at times momentum could link to results beyond one’s ability.

In that sense, the two of them now had tremendous momentum. Otherwise how could everything have gone so smoothly up to this point?

Ram: “Fortunately, no guards are passing by… Let’s head deeper.”

Garfiel: “Ha! Ram, you’re keen too, ain’tcha. A’right, let’s do it.”

Ram: “Indeed, we’ll kill them all.”

Garfiel: “Didn’t say we’d go that far?!”

Leading the two who had all that momentum, Ram merrily advanced into the depths of the mine.

Perhaps the effect of their good fortune, for on the way they did not run into even a single guard. Relying on the faint sounds echoing from within, the three of them drew close to the core of the mine.

And—

Emilia: “This is…!”

Too surprised for words, Emilia opened her amethyst eyes wide.

Spread out below them was a multi-tiered excavation space, and there stood people swinging pickaxes at the walls, engaged in mining work.

Of course, if it were merely excavation work, it would not be so surprising. However, if those workers were clad in shabby clothes, and if crude collars were fastened around their necks, that was another matter.

Ram: “—Those are ‘Collars of Subjugation.’”

Emilia: “‘Collars of Subjugation,’ the kind that were put on slaves in the distant past?”

Ram: “They were abolished in Lugunica quite long ago, but in Vollachia and Kararagi the practice still lingers. Even in Lugunica and Gusteko, it likely survives in the underworld.”

Hearing Ram’s answer, Emilia fell silent.

The ‘Collar of Subjugation’ was a kind of “Meteor” that forced the person wearing it into servitude. It was said that disobeying the master caused terrible pain; this was Ram's first time seeing one in person.

In any case, an environment where people were made to work with 'Collars of Subjugation' could hardly be called an ideal workplace.

Emilia: "More rotten than I imagined…"

Garfiel: "Bet some of the folks in that crowd are the Costuul guys. What d'we do? Break in, smash things up, and let 'em all escape…?"

Emilia: "No, we can't. If the 'Collar of Subjugation' activates, it'll hurt reaaally badly. If they use that as leverage, some people might refuse to run away with us."

Garfiel clicked his tongue, but said nothing more.

Emilia's concern could indeed become reality. Even if Garfiel rampaged here, that would not give them control over the collars. The slaves were also hostages.

The enemy might even drive the slaves at them on condition the collars wouldn't be triggered. That would be putting the cart before the horse.

Emilia: "So we have to find a way to deal with the collars. Umm, maybe we should talk to the person in charge here?"

Ram: "Please don't suddenly revert to being useless when we were making such good progress."

Emilia: "…Useless."

Ram: "As I said earlier, not everyone in the world is like Emilia-sama. Don't expect to resolve everything through discussion."

Emilia: "…Useless."

Garfiel: "Then we keep lookin' for a key fer the collars, yeah?"

Ram: “That would be wise. For that we must—”

Ram was about to say, “remove the slaves’ collars and then string up the ringleader,” when—

???: “Huh? What’re you lot doin’ here?”

At the gruff voice from behind, Ram and the others slowly turned around. Looking, they saw a rough-looking man peering at them from the far end of the passage they had come.

One glance at his neck made it obvious: the man was not on the used side but the using side. He was surely one of the group forcing the workers to wear ‘Collars of Subjugation’ and making them toil.

Beating this man alone would be no trouble, but if they did that, they would circle back to the earlier problem.

While Ram knit her brow slightly, wondering what to do—

Emilia: “Um! The truth is, we were just brought here as newcomers!”

Before Ram could choose any breakthrough, Emilia raised her voice. Turning to the man with some tension, she continued, “Umm—”

Emilia: “Right! The collars! We can’t work here unless we put on those collars, right? But this person couldn’t find a spare, so he’s in trouble.”

Garfiel: “Huh? Me?! …Y-Yeah, that’s right. Without a collar, I’m in deep trouble, but I’m new here. So I couldn’t find one.”

Man: “New, huh?”

At the little play put on by Emilia and Garfiel, the man’s face twisted nastily.

Seeing that, Ram slipped a hand toward the staff hidden under her skirt. If the man showed an opening, she would bury him in the wall at once.

Man: “Tch, useless bastard. This here is the work site; the collars are kept in the storehouse, obviously. This is what happens ’cause ya don’t remember after bein’ told once.”

But ignoring Ram’s resolve, the man easily swallowed Emilia’s story.

For a moment Ram suspected a high-level psychological ploy, but since he turned his back on them without hesitation, she judged it wasn’t.

Man: “C’mon, this way.”

Emilia: “Okay, thank you. Let’s go.”

Answering their guide, Emilia winked at Ram. Her look seemed to say, “It worked,” and Ram found herself too weary to reply.

But Ram’s headaches did not end there—

Man: “Yeah, y’know, when I first came outta the sticks I wanted to be somethin’ big. And now look at me, doin’ scut work in a place like this…”

Emilia: “I see. …But if that’s the case, then you can look forward to it.”

Man: “Look forward? Look forward to what…”

Emilia: “If you’re reaaally down right now, that means tomorrow you can be better than today. If this is the bottom, all that’s left is to climb uphill.”

Man: “…Little miss…! Yeah, you’re right. Guess I’ll give it a try…”

Thus ended the conversation between the man ahead and Emilia, pledging mutual effort for the future.

Emilia had fearlessly struck up conversation with him on the way, and thanks to an oddly good match of personalities the talk remained peaceful to the end.

It was good that he did not get suspicious, but there was no particular harvest either.

Emilia: “I was hoping to get some information…”

Ram: “What you learned is that Mr. Zaksen here has four younger sisters back home and struggles to send money to them.”

Emilia: “That’s not the information I meant.”

All Emilia had gained was knowledge of the man—Zaksen—his personality, and his family situation, which only made it harder to knock him out.

Zaksen: “Here. This is the collar storehouse.”

Guided by Zaksen, the three of them arrived in front of the warehouse where collars were stored.

In the usual flow newcomers were probably brought here, fitted with collars, and thereafter forced into endless hard labor.

However—

Ram: —

Emilia: “Mr. Zaksen? What’s wrong?”

Zaksen turned around, gripped Emilia’s shoulders, and spoke seriously.

Zaksen: “Run! Right now, this instant!”

Emilia: “But—”

Zaksen: “No buts! If you stay here, you’ll be worked to the bone too. Once a collar’s on, there’s no escape. So run while you can. Yeah—take this, whack me and get away!”

Emilia: “Eh?!”

As he spoke, Zaksen pressed the baton at his waist into Emilia’s hands.

Emilia: “If I do that, you’ll be—!”

Zaksen: “If you hit me and run, it’ll just mean I was a fool who let you escape. So—”

Ram: “Hmph!”

Zaksen: “Gwah!”

Since things were about to get complicated, Ram snatched the baton midway and struck Zaksen once. With that single blow he collapsed unconscious onto the passage floor.

Emilia: “R-Ram! What are you doing all of a sudden! Oh, that bump looks painful…”

Ram: “This is no time to be getting friendly. Yes, it is true your actions produced considerable effect, but that and this are separate issues. Garf!”

Garfiel: “Yeah, the warehouse’s contents. If we find a key for the collars, that’d make things quick…”

While Emilia tended to the fallen Zaksen, Ram and Garfiel searched the warehouse.

As Garfiel said, finding a way to unlock the collars would be best. Even failing that, some kind of bargaining chip would do—

Garfiel: “Oi, Ram. Aren’t these the collars?”

Saying that, Garfiel hauled a large box down from a shelf. Inside the rough box were objects that certainly looked like collars, which was strange.

Ram: “Though not especially rare, the ‘Collar of Subjugation’ is still a ‘Meteor.’ To think they’d store them so carelessly… I can’t say it’s impossible, considering how slipshod everything has been.”

Recalling the sloppiness up to this point, Ram denied her own preconception. Hearing her reply, Garfiel took one collar from the box.

Garfiel: “But these don’t look like the collars those folks were wearin’, do they?”

Ram: “I’m beginning to think that might be the case. Yet… Wait, hold on.”

Garfiel: “Huh?”

Ram grabbed the collar Garfiel was dangling from his finger, stared at it intently—and then,

Ram: “…This is—”

6

Bald Foreman: “—What’s going on, what happened?!”

Having heard the racket in the quarry, a middle-aged, bald-headed man bellowed in anger.

He was the owner of the mine, the mastermind who had been forcing a great many people to toil here. That vile scheme of his was now on the verge of collapsing right before his eyes.

Subordinate: “Boss! The labor force is bolting! Not a single one of ’em will listen!”

Another Subordinate: “Then let’s just fire up the “subjugation collars!” Make an example of—no, hell, make every last one of ’em suffer! Once they feel the pain, they won’t have any fight left!”

Unable to reign in the turmoil, the underlings gave up on pacification and made that proposal.

Their reaction was only natural: the quarry held slaves brought in from all over—on the order of a hundred. If they all rose up at once, their sheer momentum would swallow the overseers whole. That, after all, was why the “subjugation collars” existed.

Subordinate: “Boss, we’ve gotta hurry!”

The laborers were throwing down their pickaxes and swarming toward the mine entrance. Watching them, an underling urged the activation of the collars.

The mastermind drew a breath, raised an old staff ostentatiously, and barked,

Bald Foreman: “Oi, you lot, quit movin’! Stop right now or you’ll be sorry!”

Those laborers who had been shoving and scrambling to escape froze at the foreman’s roar. In the eyes they turned back on him flickered anxiety, fear—and doubt.

That glint of doubt made the mastermind’s mouth go dry.

Voice in Hood: “…You certainly do talk big.”

Three figures stepped out from the line of laborers, drawing his gaze: two people with hoods pulled low and a boy with spiky golden hair who radiated a strange intensity. The speaker was one of the hooded pair, and from the voice he knew it was a woman.

Bald Foreman: “I don’t keep no women in my crew. A slave talkin’ big to me—now that’s rich.”

Hooded Woman: “Given the situation, it’s amazing you can still act high and mighty. Need I remind you the numbers are overwhelmingly on our side?”

Bald Foreman: “Numbers, maybe, but quality’s different. Take a look at the collars around their necks.”

He jabbed a finger at the laborers’ shackles. At that, the workers traded uneasy glances.

Bald Foreman: “The power of a “subjugation collar” is somethin’ else, y’know? Once you get hit, you’ll never wanna defy me again.

Bones creak, flesh bursts, yer piss turns bright red with blood. Unless you fancy that—"

Hooded Woman: "And unless we do?"

Bald Foreman: "Then take your pals and get back to your posts. But first, lose the hoods."

Hooded Woman: "…Our hoods? Why?"

Bald Foreman: "Depending on the looks, you might be worth more sellin' elsewhere than diggin' rock, that's why."

Sighing at his demand, the hooded woman spoke over her shoulder.

Hooded Woman: "It seems he insists, Lady Emilia."

Second Hooded Woman: "Eh? If you say so, then… all right."

Bald Foreman: "—Huh?"

Slowly, the two women removed their white coverings, and the foreman could only gape.

Not only the foreman—his underlings and even the laborers stared, petrified.

Standing there were a girl with peach-pink hair and a girl with silvery hair—both stunningly beautiful. But that was not all.

Bald Foreman: "Silver hair… amethyst eyes… a half-elf… and did you say Emilia…?"

Emilia: "Yes, that's right. Oh, you know who I am?"

Bald Foreman: "Know ya? Yer one of the loudest troublemakers in the whole kingdom! What's a royal candidate doin' here as a slave? Talk about busy!"

Emilia: "He-He, actually I'm not a slave. I was only pretending to be one!"

Tossing back her silver hair, Emilia declared it with fearless confidence. Inside, the mastermind screamed: “This is bad—really bad!”

He had managed to deceive many and work them like mules, but taking on a royal candidate was far beyond his pay grade. Someone entrusted with the kingdom’s future was far too much for a petty villain like him to handle.

Emilia: “You should give up already. You can see you have no chance of winning.”

Bald Foreman: “N-No chance? And what’s that based on…? We still have the collars! H-Hey! If you lot don’t wanna be punished, grab these three—”

Peach-Haired Girl: “Enough. The trick’s already been exposed.”

Bald Foreman: “What did you say?”

Peach-Haired Girl: “Still don’t get it? Then how about this?”

With a chill in her voice, the peach-haired girl withdrew her arm from her cloak.

Before the foreman’s wary eyes, she produced a collar—identical to those on the laborers’ necks, likely taken from storage—and fastened it around her own throat without hesitation.

Peach-Haired Girl: “There. I’ve put one on. Why don’t you activate the “subjugation collar”?”

The Foreman swallowed hard.

Ram: “Right now you could hurt poor, delicate Ram as much as you like. If Emilia or Garf sees me suffering, they’ll be powerless to resist you, no?”

She flicked the collar with a finger while calmly laying out the foreman’s victory scenario.

It was probably true. Emilia watched her with anxious eyes, and the golden-haired boy’s fury warped the very air around him. Yet both respected the girl's resolve and made no rash move.

Subordinate (whispering): "B-Boss… the girl's right. It's now or never…!"

But the mastermind, slick with cold sweat, could not answer.

Of course not—the girl's action had proven it. The trick was blown.

Ram: "You stockpiled a heap of collars and slapped them on slaves, then made them believe they were "subjugation collars." And lo and behold—"

Subordinate: "Ah…"

Ram: "They thought they might win in revolt, but someone would be the first to suffer. No one wished to be that first victim. You exploited that fear beautifully."

Her cold gaze pierced the mastermind's entire scheme.

Hope filled the laborers' eyes, while his subordinates turned on him in shock and anger—yet amid that storm of stares, the foreman barked a laugh.

Bald Foreman: "So ya've uncovered my plan and feel satisfied? What a petty thing to be proud of, royal candidate!"

Emilia: "Eh? Me?"

Bald Foreman: "That girl's words—you put her up to 'em, didn't ya? Impressive. But I ain't wrong, y'hear? The world's full of swindlers and the swindled. Live without thinkin' and you'll get used—that's how it goes! So what's wrong with me usin' that fact?!"

Emilia stepped forward and jabbed a finger at him.

Emilia: "Obviously the one who lies is the bad one!"

The extreme retort met with an extreme rebuttal, yet the mastermind did not back down; he stepped forward instead.

Bald Foreman: “Listen! This kinda thing happens everywhere. You royal candidates may be stirrin’ up the kingdom, but whoever gets the throne, our lives won’t change. Somebody’s always payin’ the price. No king can see every corner of the realm!”

Emilia’s eyes widened at his roar.

From behind, the peach-haired girl laid a hand on Emilia’s shoulder and shook her head.

Ram: “Please, Lady Emilia, don’t listen. It’s mere sour grapes—words meant only to cloud your heart.”

Emilia: “Even if it is… I can’t ignore it!”

Gently removing the hand, Emilia’s lovely face hardened with firm resolve.

Her amethyst gaze struck the mastermind breathless. Then she pressed him.

Emilia: “You’re right: even a king would find it hard to look after every corner. But if I become queen, I’ll remember today. I’ll do my best so I can hear everyone’s voices.”

Bald Foreman: “From that lofty throne? Don’t make me laugh!”

Emilia: “Then I’ll come down from the throne and speak to people—just like today!”

Bald Foreman: “Guh…”

She thrust a finger right under his nose, silencing him. He groped for a retort, but before he could—

Man with Knowing Smile: “—Looks like we’ve lost, boss.”

A man with a knowing expression lightly patted the foreman’s shoulder from behind.

Emilia: “Mr. Zaksen!”

Emilia called his name before the foreman could. The man nodded brightly at her recognition.

Something snapped inside the mastermind. Like hell he would accept defeat here.

Bald Foreman: “Don’t be absurd! I ain’t finished yet! Not in a dump like thi—”

Ram: “…I see. Lady Emilia spoke at length, yet you persist. Then there’s nothing more to say.”

At the sight of the trembling, furious foreman, the peach-haired girl’s voice held pity.

Stepping forward now was the golden-haired boy who had watched events unfold. Cracking the bones in his fists, baring sharp fangs, he asked,

Golden-Haired Boy: “Hey, Ram. We good ta go?”

Ram: “Yes. Lady Emilia, Garf—finish it.”

The instant that final order was given, the golden-haired youth became a savage gale that tore through the quarry, while Emilia unleashed freezing air from her hands to restrain the underlings.

Overwhelmed by their power, the mastermind realized the vast gulf between them and himself.

Yet—

Bald Foreman: “Even a villain’s got his pride—raaah!”

Knowing he could not win, he still clenched his fists and leapt at the boy—

—and in the very next moment, the mastermind’s body was sent flying, high and light, with ridiculous ease.

Zaksen: “I’m gonna get myself a brand-new, spotless body and come back home. Till then, stay healthy, Lil’ Miss.”

???: “Sure. You take care too, Mister Zaksen.”

And with that humble meeting and parting, the illegal mining site was shut down.

The mastermind and his cronies who had turned a blind eye to everything were apprehended, while the people tricked into wearing collars were safely liberated and sent back to their respective hometowns.

Of course, that included the missing persons from Costuul as well—

Leno Rex: “…I never imagined it would be wrapped up in a single day.”

Ram: “They were louts who chose to commit evil in Lord Roswaal’s domain. Naturally, they were disposed of swiftly.”

Leno Rex, the city mayor, peered at Ram and the others who had finished the grand roundup, wearing a rare look of stupefaction. If Roswaal heard about it, it would surely make for a delightful souvenir story.

Thus, the large-scale fraud case that had embroiled the Industrial City of Costuul and its surrounding towns came to a close—so smoothly, in fact, that it scarcely felt real.

Garfiel: “Still, there sure were some real nutjobs cookin’ up crazy schemes, huh?”

Ram: “Indeed… To plot something that foolish in Lord Roswaal’s territory.”

Garfiel: “Nah, I ain’t talkin’ ’bout where they did it but what they did, my amazin’ self is. Guess the world outside the forest’s chock-full o’ more danger than I figured.”

Scratching his head vigorously, Garfiel reflected on the day’s events as they made their way home. For him, who had spent his life within the Sanctuary, every custom and happening in the outside world was fresh; today's experience would surely be recorded as yet another new page in his story.

If possible, he deserved brighter, more uplifting experiences as well.

Garfiel: "Hm? Ram, somethin' on my amazin' face?"

Ram: "Your eyes, nose, and fangs are all stuck on in the most ridiculous places."

Garfiel: "There ain't nothin' ridiculous about 'em!"

Ram dodged the question about having been staring at his profile, and Garfiel let out a deep sigh. Then he went on,

Garfiel: "…Still, Lady Emilia's last bit back there was pretty good, yeah?"

Ram: "…True. That declaration of hers was not bad at all."

Garfiel: "Comin' down off the throne like that's great. A king like that's real interestin', if ya ask my amazin' self."

At the sight of Garfiel baring his fangs in a grin, Ram allowed her lips to soften ever so slightly. Indeed, shutting up the mastermind and all, it had been a satisfying remark. Above all, it rang with Emilia's trademark resolve and vow.

Plucking out evil by the roots and hearing Emilia's proclamation made the day's hectic turmoil worthwhile—Ram could admit that, at least to herself.

—However,

Ram: "—What? Staring so intently, how indecent."

Garfiel: "Nah, well, it's like… I'm thinkin' Ram's a fine woman even with a collar on, believe it or not."

Ram: "…"

Garfiel: “Ow-Ow-ow-ow-ow!”

She pinched the cheek that had offered up needless words, forcing tears into his eyes and drawing a shriek from him. Around Ram’s own neck was a rugged iron collar—the key had vanished when the mastermind went flying, leaving it impossible to remove.

In the end, after everyone at the mansion had teased her to no end about the collar, Roswaal removed it with his own hands, causing Ram’s feelings for her master to grow ever hotter.

A side note, but—

Subaru: “Ah, Emilia-tan, you’re awfully late getting back. Petra and Frederica’s appliqué skills have leveled up like crazy over here, but did something happen on your end?”

Emilia: “Mhm! We beat up the bad guys properly and helped reaaally lots of people who were in trouble!”

Subaru: “All in the one day I wasn’t around?!”

Thus, there was even a scene where the knight on house-sitting duty was left aghast by his mistress’s innocent report, but in its own way that, too, served as a fitting close to this broadly sketched, chaotic day.

END

Volume 32

Chapters 76-96

Chapter 76:
Chance Meetings at the Imperial Capital

1

It was while Rem was strolling through the mansion where she was held under house arrest, that she noticed a certain woman.

In the heights of the battle at the Fortress City of Guaral, in order to treat a wounded Flop O'Connell, Rem had been abducted from the city along with him—taken, to the Imperial Capital, and placed under house arrest in what was probably one of the most magnificent mansions in the city.

However, while it was called house arrest, Rem still possessed relatively ample freedom.

She was not confined to cramped rooms or prisons, nor was she subjected to excessive violence or verbal abuse. While it could have hardly been called tranquil, it was possible for one to say that the treatment she got was mild.

Food was prepared for every mealtime, and a time for bathing was also available. In some ways, it was definitely a better place to live than in the village of the People of Shudraq.

However, even though she was not imprisoned, she still could not go outside the mansion, as the Soldiers responsible for security—the private army of Berstetz Fondalfon, kept watch, reminding her of her limitations.

In any case, leaving aside the topic of whether she was more free than not, the situation at hand was not one she wished for.

Naturally, she had made Kuna and Holly experience some inadequacy, and it would not be surprising if she were now the object of Priscilla's indignation, having left as she pleased.

Above all, how would the people that had left for the east react upon their return?

Louis, Medium, and the boy named Natsuki Subaru—.

???: “—Ah.”

And, it was while Rem was lost in her own thoughts that brought her heartache, that she heard a painfully feeble voice.

Upon turning her face toward the direction of the voice, she saw an unfamiliar figure in the garden in the center of the mansion—one likely used more as a courtyard for the purpose of mounting and dismounting flying dragons, than for preserving a lush green landscape.

Although she had not met all of the Soldiers and servants working in the mansion, she could tell at a glance that the person was neither of these.

For the reason, was because that very person did not walk on their own feet, and sat in a chair with wheels attached.

???: “Kuh, ugh…”

She was a fair-skinned woman with unruly dark-brown hair, which was parted in two on either side of her head. Her long-lashed blue eyes flickered, and then she put strength into her slender shoulders and leaned forward.

What those trembling arms were putting strength into was the wheeled chair she was sitting in—specifically, the wheels of her wheelchair. They possessed large rims, which the person sitting in the chair could turn by hand to move forwards or backwards.

However, it seemed one of the wheels had got caught in a ditch in the corner of the path and, unable to get out, she had been stuck there.

???: “…”

Biting on her thin lips with force, the woman strenuously tried time after time to turn the wheel.

Still, her slender arms did not provide the necessary strength, and the wheel just wiggled back and forth fruitlessly. If she were to raise her voice and call for help, someone would have rushed to her, and yet she did not.

She did not want to rely on anyone. Rem felt a sense of kinship with such obstinacy. Of course, she did not know due to what emotional state she was like that, but—

Rem: “—I’ll help you.”

???: “Ah…”

Unable to leave her be, Rem walked over to the woman stuck in the ditch, and called out to her from behind.

Immediately rolling her eyes, the woman looked over her shoulder and gasped at Rem’s presence. But soon her look became one of embarrassment, chewing on her lips as she went silent.

Rem, once again feeling a sense of kinship to her reaction, placed her hand on the back of the wheelchair.

The back of the wheelchair had handles on either side, so that a person standing behind could push it. And so, putting her hands there, and pushing it,

Rem: “One, two aaand three!”

Rem put her strength into it, the wheel bounced with a bang, and the wheelchair escaped from the ditch in which it was stuck.

Using her hands, the woman stopped the wheelchair which had moved slightly forward with too much momentum, then abruptly spun the wheels on the spot and looked back toward Rem.

And then—

???: “…Who asked you, to do that.”

And what came, was a very particular greeting.

Rem: "…"

Reflexively, Rem's eyes went wide and blinked in surprise, as she was taken aback by the woman's words.

Meanwhile, the woman averted her eyes from Rem, chewing on her lips,

???: "I would've been fine without help for something that trivial. I mean, what do you think you're doing, when you need a cane yourself? Y-you should rather worry about yourself."

Rem: "Ummm… Thank you for your concern."

???: "I'm not worried or anything! Are your ears perhaps not working properly? If not, then I guess the problem's in your head, yes it's rather in your head."

Rem belatedly realized that those stammered words were apparently meant to be a cutting remark.

Her tone was harsh, but since the subtle sense that she was not accustomed to such speech hung in the air, she lacked the talent to deal damage with such sarcasm.

Frankly speaking, from Rem's point of view, after encountering Priscilla, the difference in the potency of this woman and Priscilla, was about the same as that between a puppy and Mizelda.

???: "N-now, get lost. I don't have the free time to be concerned about… about you."

Rem: "If you don't have any free time, does that mean you have some role to fulfill?"

???: "A role…! Y-yes, that's right. I have a proper role. Unlike you…"

After having been asked a question in return by Rem, the woman answered, her cheeks stiffening. As she answered, she scrunched up her thin eyebrows and looked Rem over top to bottom as if scrutinizing her.

Then, she brought her right thumb to her mouth, chomped at it ever-so-slightly, and,

???: "…A face I haven't seen, and a presence I hadn't noticed. Who are you?"

Rem: "—. My name is Rem. Because of some circumstances, I was abducted to this mansion."

???: "Abducted…"

Rem: "Yes. Hmm, may I ask for your name?"

In order to approach the woman biting her nails and muttering, Rem asked for her name.

She thought that, perhaps, the likelihood of receiving an unfriendly rejection was higher.

???: "—Katya."

However, surprisingly without reserves, she—Katya had introduced herself as such.

Rem did not know if it was due to some ulterior motive, or if she had named herself reflexively while she was lost in thought, but Katya seemingly deliberated as she continued to bite her nails.

Katya: "By abducted, do you mean that you're a hostage too?"

Rem: "Hostage… That may very well be the case. It does not seem appropriate to request that I play such a role…"

Unmistakably, Subaru was probably the only one that would worry non-stop over Rem's disappearance.

Of course, she felt the Shudraqians and the O'Connell siblings would be anxious as well, and Priscilla might at least move an eyebrow, but that would not affect the overall situation.

Rem's existence would only affect the overall situation, when Subaru affected the overall situation.

However—

Rem: “I wouldn’t expect that person to go that far.”

To Rem, it did not seem likely that he could do it, nor did she think that he should.

In a short time, she had been shown, time and time again for a short period, a figure resisting and resisting earnestly with their lack of ability as he was tormented by absurdity. His figure, as he kept on shouldering the burden of having to do everything by himself.

Rem could not stand it at all. It was not because she disliked or hated him.

It was still difficult to verbalize why that was, though.

Rem: “…”

Katya: “…Hey, don’t just go silent on me?”

Rem: “Ah, sorry. I was just lost in thought… Katya, what are you to Berstetz?”

Called out to by Katya, whose eyes had sharpened, Rem apologized for her silence, then posed a question.

Since she was in this mansion, there was no doubt that Katya also had some connection to Berstetz. However, it was difficult to imagine their relationship.

If she were someone with fighting strength like what Madelyn possessed, or if she were to look like an Imperial Soldier, the relationship would be obvious, but Katya’s appearance made it difficult to establish any sort of connection.

If there was anything that came to mind—

Rem: “Berstetz’s daughter or grandchild, perhaps?”

Katya: “A relative of Prime Minister-sama? Oh, stop it you. In the first place, Berstetz-sama isn't married, and supposedly doesn't have a family. I'm not that big of a deal."

Rem: "Is that so? That's surprising."

"Surprising?", Katya said as she tilted her head, but Rem shook her head as to gloss over her words' true meaning.

Once before, at the time Berstetz and Rem had met face-to-face, he had explained the reason for his own rebellion against the Emperor —that was, his distrust of an Emperor that would not produce an heir. From Berstetz's standpoint as someone working for the nation, the Emperor's actions would seem like a dishonorable dereliction of duty.

Rem had been satisfied with that logic, even if it was difficult for her to sympathize, having been dragged into it.

However, the fact that Berstetz had started a rebellion for such a reason was unconvincing when he himself, just like the Emperor, did not have a family.

Of course, she believed Berstetz had his own reasons.

Rem: "But, if you're not either of those, why are you in the mansion?"

Katya: "…You're an unperceptive woman. I asked if you were also hostage."

Rem: "—. Does that mean, that you're a hostage as well, Katya-san?"

With Rem returning with a question, Katya begrudgingly nodded, the bitter look on her face unchanging.

Katya, too, was being held captive in the mansion as someone's hostage. —Slightly surprised at that fact, Rem spun around and surveyed the mansion.

A spacious mansion amidst the Imperial Capital, a mansion enveloped in a majestic atmosphere.

However, there were probably many other secrets lying within, of which Rem and Katya, as well as the injured Flop, were a part of.

Having confronted Berstetz directly, Rem recognized the old man as someone of great intellectual stature, a formidable wall standing in the way of Abel's attempt to regain the imperial throne.

However, Rem's imagination and speculation would probably never be able to wholly gauge just how dreadful Berstetz could be, should he be willing to scheme and target his enemy's weaknesses.

Rem: "Your family must surely be very worried about you having been taken hostage."

Katya: "…I wouldn't be so sure about that. To him, I might be nothing more than a replaceable tool. I-if I get in the way, he'll drop me like a hot potato."

Averting her gaze, so spat out Katya.

Even though her speech had not faltered, Rem could tell that those seemingly hateful words were not her true feelings. She had a clue as to what lay behind Katya's attitude.

Rem: "…"

After all, that was the same shade of obstinacy belonging to none other than Rem.

She did not know what kind of person Katya would curse and keep at a distance. However, this complaint was more for the sake of convincing herself rather than it was for Rem to hear.

It was a lie told because she did not want herself to have too much faith in or too high expectations for that person.

It was a lie precisely because she did not want to admit that the other person thought her irreplaceable, nor that the other person was irreplaceable to her.

It was a lie specifically to deceive "herself". Not anyone else.

Rem: “Katya-san, would you like to talk some more?”

Katya: “Wh-What… Doing something so selfish, to Prime Minister-sama…”

Rem: “I don’t think he’ll be angry. If he does get angry, then tell him I forced you to do it.”

Katya: “But, it isn’t actually like th… Ah, wait!”

With trembling lips, Katya attempted to reject Rem. Quickly moving around behind Katya, Rem tucked her cane under her arm and gently gripped the handle of her wheelchair.

While pushing the wheelchair, Rem could support her own body in addition to the other person’s. With this, she would not fall even without the cane, and surprisingly, it was not a terrible position.

Katya: “J-just doing as you please… As if I would…”

Rem: “In which direction is your room, Katya-san? My room is on the west side.”

Katya: “…O-on the opposite side, the east side.”

Rem: “Understood. Well then, let’s head that way.”

Hearing Katya’s feeble reply, Rem pushed the wheelchair and started walking. Only at the start was there a slight resistance, but Katya soon detached her fingers from the wheel, and went along for the ride.

She was aware that she was being a bit forceful in moving the conversation forward, but Rem was anything but hesitant in pushing it.

In honest truth, she did not possess any ulterior motives, such as befriending Katya to make visible a way out of this deadlock, or her holding knowledge of an important secret to the mansion.

Probably, Katya’s presence would not be useful in moving the situation along.

Faintly so, she understood that the reason why Berstetz, who held Rem and Katya's beings hostage, had no family himself, was so that he would have no weaknesses.

And yet, there were several reasons why Rem was trying to come to terms with Katya in this way, but—

Rem: "—There are so many things I have to know."

After having become a captive, she had the belief and resolve that she could not be the kind of weak person who would only spread the seeds of anxiety and worry in the people who knew her.

Therefore, Rem would make every effort. Even if she did not know how to, she would do things her own way.

Priscilla: "—No one can escape from who they are. Strive to remember my words, be diligent."

There were more pressing things to do than to repudiate her own helplessness.

Indeed, for the sake of putting into practice the words of that person, to not remain at a standstill.

2

—Flop slowly opened his eyelids, having felt the presence of someone else in the room.

Flop: "…"

Shaking off the restless hand of drowsiness that entangled him, Flop's consciousness returned to reality.

In the view of his now-open eyes, a clean white ceiling was visible, and he quickly came to the understanding that he was in the room of the mansion where he was being held captive.

He was way past the point of panicking because of this realization. It also did not catch him off-guard anymore, and, as a result, he did not make himself experience pain by suddenly moving his body because of his surprise.

But still, it was still too early to say that he was acclimated to the situation, considering there was still some feeling of uneasiness left.

Flop: “As a merchant, I can’t help but be impatient, being bedridden for days like this, alright.”

He was a peddler whose efforts on a given day determined how much money he had at its end.

He could hardly call it his strong suit, but having an elaborate business plan was the shortcut to success. And even if he did not succeed, he still needed to earn even just a little bit.

Thus, being tied to a bed in this manner, agitated and distressed him despite the quite leisurely position he found himself in.

Wondering how Medium would react if she knew he was being held captive, only made it worse.

In any case—

Flop: “I can hardly ask Wife-san to bring me to perfect condition at this very moment. What an irritating situation.”

In order to treat Flop’s injuries, Rem was also being held captive in the mansion.

For Subaru’s sake, as well as the others who worried for her, Rem had to be brought home safely at any cost, but her situation was far from being secure.

Rem’s current position, that of being Flop’s healer, would become quite uncertain once Flop made a complete recovery.

He had hoped that Rem would not immediately be disposed of, as someone who no longer had any use.

Flop: “I guess you could say that depends exactly on your mood, Miss Madelyn.”

Having collected and organized his thoughts, Flop proceeded to cast this particular subject of conversation towards the room's entrance.

Flop had been awakened by the presence of a certain someone. The other person's voice could not be heard, but it was obvious that someone was in the room and there were only two people who usually visited him.

Only two; whether it be Rem who came to treat him, or Madelyn who appeared more frequently.

Leaving aside Rem, who had been given unexpected freedom within the mansion; around Madelyn, Flop had to be somewhat careful.

Despite her childish appearance, she had tremendous physical strength and could easily rip and tear through Flop with her claws. In addition, she was a proud member of the dragonkin—someone who Flop, despite having been through many different paths in life, had no idea how to deal with.

Besides, Flop did not want to mislead Madelyn, nor deceive her with lies, even though she would possibly scold him for being blind to the situation.

Even Flop had not gone through life without telling a lie. He was proud of the fact that he had relied on the power of words more than anyone else in the Empire, precisely because of his apparent lack of strength.

Being that, the reason as to why he wished to avoid doing anything that would make Madelyn believe he was trying to win her over, was that she genuinely cared about Flop's precious "close friend".

He imagined a particular "close friend" of his would be appalled at his seemingly stupid way of life.

Flop: "That's the way I live my life, nothing I can do about it."

Flop was spending his time at the mansion with the determination to take the offensive.

Therefore, engaging Madelyn in a battle devoid of lies, in which he would make full use of his conversational arts and power of his speech so that her interest would not be exhausted—was something he expected to happen on this day.

But it was not to be. Since—

Flop: “Miss Madelyn? I thought you might be here to ask me to continue our conversation from yesterday. What was the surprising thing Balleroy said the first time Carillion flew in the sky? I cut off the conversation at that point where—”

???: “—While that sounds like an interesting topic, it shan’t be the one discussed now.”

Flop: “…”

Flop, who was lying on his bed, talking to the person who was supposedly there, fell in silence upon being answered by a voice different from the one he had expected.

Flop had assumed it was Madelyn at the entrance, but the answer was returned through the voice of a man. A voice he had heard before.

It was only his small pride, but Flop would never forget a voice having heard it once.

Even if it came from a corner of a busy market, Flop could recognize it. Which was why he had not mistaken the voice.

However, after hearing the voice in question, Flop’s feelings became complex to the extreme.

After all, his relationship with said party had changed quite drastically, at least as far as Flop was concerned.

Flop: “Village Chief-kun… No, perhaps I should say, His Excellency the Emperor-kun?”

???: “You rephrase yourself, and yet you came to that? Either way, it seems there is no substitute for the profane name you have dubbed me with.”

Calling out quietly, Flop strained his trembling arms and sat up on the bed. He still felt a faint numbness in his upper body and a tightness in his skin, but it was not unbearable.

Then raising his gaze, he finally caught sight of a figure standing at the entrance to the room.

Standing there was a young man with black hair, fair skin, and sharp eyes.

His attire was dominated by vermilion and his slender figure matched what he had seen many times before. His face, his eyes, his nose, everything was familiar.

Abel—No, Vincent Vollachia.

That was the name of the current Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, the rebellious wolf who had been driven from his throne, presently seeking to reclaim it.

Having been called disrespectful by the very man behind it all himself, Flop smiled and bowed his head.

Flop: “Excuse me, perhaps I should rephrase. No, perhaps I should also change my speech in general. How embarrassing, would you mind if I start over from the beginning?”

Vincent: “No need. Starting over shan’t make up for the deeds you have committed. More importantly, are you a citizen resolved to pledge allegiance and devotion to the Emperor of Vollachia?”

Flop: “I wonder. His Excellency is the Emperor of the country in which I live. Since the reign of His Excellency Vincent Vollachia, disputes, including skirmishes between tribes, have decreased dramatically. I’d say I’m grateful for a country that has become a better place to live.”

Vincent: “That is a very suggestive way of putting it. You dare play with idle words in front of the Emperor?”

The Emperor shrugged his slender shoulders and slowly stepped forward.

Flop's eyes widened as the figure became more clearly visible up close. For all intents and purposes, the figure was that of the very Abel he was already acquainted with.

But he knew that the man in front of him was not that Abel.

Flop: "I'm very embarrassed by my lack of knowledge, but you really have made a good likeness of him, haven't you? It'd need to be that good to befit the role of a body double, I guess."

Vincent: "If you continue to speak so frivolously, I shall have no choice but to muzzle you. It is naught more than the wish of the Flying Dragon General, Madelyn Eschart, that has provided you shelter here. But where shall the scales tip towards, the General's wishes or mine whims?"

Flop: "I'll accept your advice to take care in my words. However, I cannot promise that I'll be able to put it into practice! My feelings are very mixed, after all! I'd very much like to remark further on that face of yours!"

Vincent: "…"

Being pointed at with a snap, the other party remained silent after that loud insistence from Flop.

Flop was at a loss on how to address the other party—the one who was not Abel, who, for the sake of convenience, he had decided to call Vincent.

Flop knew that Vincent was a false Emperor, a man who had plotted to usurp the throne. However, Flop did not possess any reason to denounce him per-se.

If Flop and Abel were bound by a firm friendship, having built a relationship in which they would be willing to speak out on each other's behalf at every such event, then it would only be natural, but that was not the case.

Rather, Flop and Abel's relationship was more complicated as well.

Flop: "Unfortunately, the person I really want to give my remarks to is someone else, someone who's got the same face as you. But still, it truly looks very much alike… I helped Husband-kun do Village Chief-kun's makeup, it looks just like his bare face."

Vincent: "—. The matter of the Fortress City has reached my ears, so you were a part of that scheme too? I can only imagine that you have all tried to besmirch the Emperor's rule in some ungodly fashion. It was an act of barbarism, and one beyond measure."

Flop: "Is that so? It was a fun venture. And most importantly, there were no casualties."

Vincent: "That is just a justification based solely upon the results."

Flop's cheeks relaxed, and he thought about the plan for the fortified city that he, Subaru, and Abel had collaborated on.

It was a plan that Flop had found astonishing, but it was the funniest of all the plots in which Flop had ever been involved.

Everyone involved in that operation had certainly wished for its success.

Flop: "Miss Taritta and Miss Kuna did, and I did, as well. —That's why I can't unravel it."

Vincent: "…"

Flop: "Husband-kun, His Excellency the Emperor-kun… I wonder why he, who I still don't know how to call, was ousted from the Imperial Throne and put in that position."

Flop looked at Vincent, cutting him off, "More to the point".

He looked towards the usurper of the throne, whose expression did not even waver, his face a mirror image of the Emperor's.

Flop: "Just why did you and your people have to make our rock-solid Empire quake, why did you have to raise this disturbance?"

Vincent: "—. You are quite the talkative man, are you not?"

Flop: “It’s a tool of the trade. I’m a merchant. Also, my dear sister often compliments me on my good looks. That’s another tool of the trade.”

Vincent: “I see. In that case—”

Flop had a toothy grin on his face; Vincent nodded at his words, composed, before suddenly grabbing Flop’s face with his outstretched hand and pulling him closer.

Forced to lean forward, his wounds sore, Flop moaned out a “Muggh”. However, Vincent paid no heed to his cries of pain, but stared at Flop closely.

Vincent: “I can take your face and mouth right here and now to atone for your disrespect.”

His voice slid coldly into Flop’s eardrums with an intimidating quality that went down from his head to his body and froze his heart.

For a person who would not shut his mouth like Flop, disrespect towards the Emperor was considered to be unforgivable, yet Vincent’s reply was level-headed with a hint of resentment.

Even as he contemplated what it meant—

Flop: “…If you mean that I should watch my mouth, it might make more sense to take away my voice.”

Once again, Flop looked back at Vincent with an ugly look on his face, which was still being gripped, giving an answer that was likely to provoke him and make him even angrier.

For a moment, Vincent’s dark eyes narrowed at Flop’s answer, but the emotion that passed within was swept away without being expressed overtly.

Vincent batted one of his eyes shut, letting go of Flop’s face. His look was one which Abel, whom Vincent mimicked, used to do often when observing other people.

Vincent: “I made it clear that it was to be understood which of these is more important, mine whims or Madelyn Eschart’s wishes. However, then there would be no avoiding her defection nor rebellion. Is the attitude you have one of reading this far?”

Flop: “Huh? Oh, ah, I see. Miss Madelyn would get angry for sure if I die. That’s not good for you either… I hadn’t thought that far ahead, but surely…”

Vincent: “…”

Flop: “If I, as a prisoner, had risked my life to try and get one over on His Excellency the Emperor-kun, I could’ve at least encouraged Miss Madelyn’s defection. —Unfortunately though, I can’t do that now.”

At Vincent’s suggestion, Flop reassessed the value of his life.

With Madelyn’s interests now focused on himself, if Flop’s life were to be taken away unnecessarily, it would be difficult to tame the bestial danger she would pose.

If Madelyn were to defect from Vincent, the rebellious Abel side would have an advantage.

It was understandable that Vincent would suspect that he was provoking him due to that.

Vincent: “I hear that you will not yield to any threats and that you will not hesitate to risk your life. It is just as Berstetz said, you seem to be some kind of ill-begotten misfortune.”

Flop: “It seems that I’ve been put in such a position unknowingly. Now, what do you think, Fake Emperor-kun? I’m very difficult to deal with!”

Vincent: “I hear there was a healer girl who was brought here with you. If you care about that girl’s well-being, you shall refrain from unnecessary words and behavior, and remain quiet.”

Flop: “I’ve been completely shut down!”

With Rem being used as a shield, Flop suddenly had no more moves to make.

But there was probably no helping it; he had to get Rem back home safely, no matter what it took.

Besides—

Flop: “I myself can’t decide what I should do.”

Ultimately, one could say Flop’s position had become the same as Madelyn’s.

Should he, like Madelyn, join the rebellion she was part of, and then plot viciously to eliminate Abel, whom they had ousted, and slowly make him pay for his crimes?

A merchant whose only merit was that his little sister complimented him on his goodness.

Vincent: “Even without Madelyn Eschart, Berstetz shall not do you any harm. Bear in mind what your position is and make sure you spend your time here without stirring up any discord.”

Vincent declared that with his eyes fixed upon the silent Flop.

From what he said, Flop understood that he was trying to end this face-to-face meeting. That Vincent had determined there was nothing to be gained out of Flop, or that he had served the purpose of this discussion, and having thought as much—

Flop: “Fake Emperor-kun, why did you come to this room?”

Vincent: “…”

Flop: “It’s hard for me to imagine, having never rebelled, but still trying my best to realize the power of my imagination here, I reckon the position of His Excellency the Emperor must be rather busy. Even though things are already tough, when there are people like His Excellency the Emperor-kun, who keep acting wildly without giving up, it’s no wonder your business knows no bounds.”

Flop was not saying that his usual peddling was easy, but when there were loads of products that fit exactly with the buyer's needs, one's business was incomparable to the usual.

The position of the Fake Emperor would never be held secure while the real Emperor was still alive and well.

Under such circumstances, why had Vincent bothered to specifically visit Flop?

Well—

Flop: "Perhaps you were wondering how His Excellency the Emperor-kun was doing and wanted to hear it from me?"

Vincent: "Hypothetically, if I were a usurper, as your nonsensical nickname implies, it would be in poor taste, would it not? I would be attempting to find out what happened to the person I had ousted from the ones in that person's vicinity."

Flop: "The importance of gathering information is not so different in commerce or in battle, I guess. If we assume that, I don't think it's in bad taste to try to find out what's going on with your opponent."

Vincent: "—. Even if that were the case, you are misguided. I have seen with my own eyes how that person is doing without needing to hear it from your mouth. We even exchanged a few words."

Flop: "Is that so…"

A painful evasion after having hit the mark.

Flop took Vincent's answer as not having been such a frivolous statement.

What the circumstances were that he saw Abel in person and exchanged words with him, Flop had no room but to imagine, but he could not believe it to be an outright lie.

Although he was also concerned about Medium, Taritta, and Subaru, who were supposed to be by Abel's side, it seemed unlikely that he would be able to get an answer by digging deeper into the matter.

At the very least, he could not have done anything to Abel when meeting him face-to-face.

If he could have, it would not have been odd for him to have declared victory immediately. He found it hard to believe that he was tasteless enough to bother to come to do that; however, it would have been equally tasteless for him to continue this discussion while withholding that fact, and it did not seem to be either.

In other words, Vincent was not here to converse with Flop.

If so, there was only one possibility that came to mind.

Flop: “If you didn’t want to ask me something, is it because you had something you wanted to tell me, maybe?”

Vincent: “Troublesome, I believe that was Berstetz’s evaluation of your position, however, even if you look at it from my point of view, your way of being is one that falls into the troublesome category.”

Flop: “Am I to take that as a compliment? It’s more positive for my mentality to think so, so I’ll just take it as such.”

Flop reckoned his words were what made Vincent stop in his tracks as he was about to take his leave.

Flop: “…”

Frankly, Flop did not know whether stopping Vincent in his tracks here was good or bad for him.

If Vincent’s plan were fulfilled and the usurpation of the Imperial Throne were brought to completion, Abel would surely be forced out from his position in the Empire, but also in this world.

Was that what he really wished?

Was that what he wished for the person who was involved in the death of his precious “close friend”, Balleroy Temeglyph? Was that what he wished for the person who had taken everything away from him, for him to lose his life?

Flop: “Until now, I never knew what I wanted…”

Trying to think if there ever was a time, Flop quickly reconsidered his thoughts.

He did not need to recall anything. Before he had met Balleroy and the others, he had spent all his time trying to protect Medium and had no desire for anything else.

He was the same as he had been then. Then, the answer and the way he arrived at it was the same as then, too.

???: “You guys can choose what you wanna do.“

He remembered that blunt voice pushing Flop’s back like that.

So, rather than being swept away without knowing anything, Flop wanted to choose to set out walking knowing something.

Flop: “Can I ask you something, Fake Emperor-kun? What is it that you have come to tell?”

Flop asked him point-blank, interrupting the Fake Emperor busy in his usurpation of the Imperial Throne.

In response to his question, Vincent’s lips curved with a slightly different impression than the man Flop knew, and spoke.

That it was—

Vincent: “—The Great Disaster, regarding the reason for the destruction it brings.”

Chapter 77:
Twist of Fate

1

Otto: “—This is a report on the damage caused by the attack of the flying dragons.”

Emilia lowered her eyebrows with a pained expression at Otto’s explanation as he tapped the documents close at hand.

The Fortress City of Guaral had been hit by a “flying dragon cataclysm”—Several days had passed with them repairing the city and dealing with the injured, until it could be said that things had settled down for the moment, the results of which had thereafter become clear.

From Emilia’s point of view, the city was in a terrible state.

The splendid defensive wall that surrounded the city had been destroyed, and the numerous boulders that had been dropped from on high were still scattered around the city. The damage to the buildings was extensive, less than half of them having survived unscathed. A fair number of people had died, and the house where Emilia and her group were sleeping, with its second floor collapsed, was one that no longer had residents to return to it.

Emilia: “If only…”

If only they had rushed there just a little bit sooner.

Such regrets kept poking at Emilia’s chest like sharp needles; however—

Otto: “It’s pointless to speculate whether we could have rushed here earlier, so let’s quit with that.”

Otto was able to read Emilia’s thoughts, but he cut her off immediately. Emilia’s face dropped at his sharpness, but Otto gave a curt nod with his chin, indicating the outside of the window.

Otto: “Back then, the reason we allowed this to take priority was because a group of flying dragons passed by us overhead. Without that, we wouldn’t have had the option to hurry. In other words…”

Emilia: “In other words?”

Otto: “There was nothing we could have done to prevent it, you know. It’s a matter of cause and effect. You can’t have one without the other. It would be irrational to worry about that.”

Emilia gave Otto a strained smile as he slowly shook his head while explaining that.

His opinion felt like he’d read what Emilia truly felt inside, and that in itself, was of no surprise. Otto was a very good judge of people, so that was normal for him.

On top of that, she imagined Otto’s words to her were his way of consoling her.

He was telling her that worrying about “what if” scenarios was not constructive consideration.

And so Emilia was convinced, however—

Petra: “But the issue lies with how you said it. I hate the way you put it.”

Petra turned her face away in a huff looking really upset.

Sitting in a chair in front of Emilia, Petra was in the middle of combing her bright brown hair and polishing up to her usual cuteness. This role was one Emilia had been entrusted with lately, but Petra’s attitude of never skimping out on taking care of herself, even during their journey, was one that always left her impressed.

She must have been exhausted from running around the city yesterday, but now that a new day had come, she was properly remodeling herself into a new self.

That too was a boon of Petra's awareness of her position and sense of responsibility.

After all, she was—

Otto: "—To hear that from our Mistress, Lady Petra, is very upsetting."

As Otto remarked, Petra was in charge of organizing Emilia's group as the lady employing them.

—Emilia's group had entered the Vollachian Empire in search of Subaru and Rem, who had disappeared.

After many twists and turns and various hardships, they arrived in the Empire, but as they had expected, it was difficult to cross the border by regular means, and they ended up smuggling themselves into the country.

In doing so, they had to use aliases and fabricate a false story about the purpose of their journey, since things would get bad if Emilia and Roswaal's true identities were discovered.

As a result, Emilia was assigned the role of "Emily", the guardian escort, and the ones she had to protect were—

Emilia: "Lady Petra and Lady Beatrice."

Otto: "The reason we came to the Empire was to restore Lady Beatrice's health… and this is a goal that will actually be fulfilled once we collect what we are after, so it is not entirely a lie."

Petra: "I understand, but somehow… you know, it's fine after all."

Otto: "You stopping halfway has got me concerned, so it would be better if you just told me."

Petra: "I suppose? Like you know Otto-san, could it be Master's bad habits are spreading to you?"

Otto: "I knew I shouldn't have asked…!"

Otto had ended up cradling his head in his hands, so Emilia hastily retracted the words she was about to say.

Otto looked really uncomfortable with it, but as for Emilia, she found Roswaal's intelligence to be very dependable. So it was very encouraging to see two of the smartest people in the camp thinking alike.

Although it seemed that saying that would cause Otto even more undue suffering.

Anyhow—

Emilia: "We've also got far less injured people in the city thanks to Garfiel, yeah?"

Otto: "That is, without a doubt, true, and I think it is a great credit to Lady Petra, Frederica-san, and of course you, Emily, for helping out."

At Otto's nodded response, Emilia could finally release the tension in her cheeks.

Garfiel's hard work, Frederica and Petra's help, all made Emilia proud. It was a struggle of which she and her dear friends could be very proud of.

Emilia: "Otto-kun did a reaaally good job of talking with Zikr-san and the others, too."

Otto: "Fortunately, Zikr-san was a person who can be reasoned with, so the difficulties were minimal. I am also grateful to Mizelda-san, who I happened to run into, and she was able to run me through everything."

Petra: "Otto-san's face is Mizelda-san's favorite, isn't it?"

Otto: "I have never had someone be so open about something like that, so I was quite perplexed."

Otto gave a strained smile at Petra, who held up her small fist with a grin.

Mizelda, with whom Emilia had also exchanged words, was a very strong and kind woman. She had been kind to them from the beginning of their acquaintance and had shown them a lot of consideration.

Although part of her wondered why Otto and Garfiel were being treated differently.

Emilia: “I know she likes Otto-kun’s face, but Garfiel is cute, too…”

Petra: “Maybe it’s because Garf-san often has wrinkles between his eyebrows and nose. Also, perhaps it is because he is annoyed at being separated from Ram nee-sama.”

Otto: “…I am going to go ahead and not say anything at all.”

Petra, placing her finger properly on her own shapely nose, gave this appraisal of Garfiel.

Emilia thought that Garfiel’s changing facial expressions were also charming, so she wanted Mizelda to look at Garfiel more properly.

All such digressions aside—

Emilia: “But if the city’s cleanup is getting close to finishing its first stage…”

Otto: “Yes.”

Otto nodded at Emilia’s words and then looked out the window once more. Ahead of Otto’s gaze was the face of the city, still standing despite the damage—the City Hall.

Gathering there were the influential people of the Fortress City of Guaral.

In other words—

Otto: “Finally, I think we can start talking about progressing things forward.”

And as Otto said that, the discussion began.

2

???: “Hey, ya never thanked me, Pops.”

Ascending the walls of the half-destroyed city, Garfiel called out to the back of the previous visitor.

In honesty, they were not someone he wanted to call out to, but turning right back around the moment their back came into view would have made him feel like he had lost, so his competitive spirit won out over his disinclination.

In the first place, why did he have to be the one to turn around?

If anybody had to turn tail, unable to bear the awkwardness, it ought to be the other person, rather than himself.

With that in mind, he had kicked things off with words like those of a punk, but—

???: “—Tch.”

With the reply being a mighty click of the tongue, Garfiel immediately regretted his choice.

As a result of his stubbornness, he went through an even more unpleasant experience. Inside his head, he could hear Otto’s reaction, a “Well, of course” of exasperation.

Be that as it may, it was someone he was not fond of.

Although Garfiel had not been present when this previous visitor had been disrespectful to his people, upon hearing of it later, that affair had been more than enough to make him dislike the guy.

That had been Garfiel’s unchanging impression of Heinkel Astrea.

Heinkel: “…”

In light leather armor, a fine sword at his hip, Heinkel stood guard.

However, Garfiel had come to judge it as more of a display to cover up that he had nothing to do and no place to be, rather than it being an admirable desire to keep the peace in the city.

The scent of alcohol wafting from his back, the empty liquor bottles lying around him, were proof of that.

During the flying dragon cataclysm, Heinkel had apparently gone on an utmost ferocious rampage against the advanced flock of flying dragons, yet came to suffer a painful defeat against a Divine General.

Nevertheless, the tiny Schult had talked his head off in defense of Heinkel, but Utakata was frank, saying “He couldn’t do a thing”. That probably was the truth.

As evidence of this, among those Garfiel had to deal with while going around performing healing magic on the wounded, Heinkel had been amongst the ones with the most severe injuries. The damage he had received had been quite hideous, so much so that he would probably still be bedridden without Garfiel’s healing magic.

Garfiel: “Is that tongue-clickin’ supposed to be a thanks? Gee, that’s hella different from the social etiquette my amazin’ self’s aware of, oi.”

Even while bearing the other party’s situation in mind, Garfiel spat abuse.

Garfiel, too, had experienced defeat. He understood how frustrating it was, so he did not wish to heartlessly poke at the fact that he had been defeated.

However, with the other party refusing to be polite, Garfiel was tempted to make at least one snide comment. Not to mention that he did not have a favorable impression of Heinkel.

Garfiel: “This is the Empire. There may be some social etiquette my amazin’ self ain’t aware of, but… You’re from the Kingdom, ain’t’cha? On top of that, you’re the father of the Sword Saint, yeah?”

Heinkel: “…”

Garfiel: “As my amazin’ self said, he’s one tough asshole. Ya’d think that someone that strong’d have great parents, but ya didn’t even have the decency to be polite—”

Heinkel: “—No matter how great the parents are, it doesn’t mean their kids are just as great.”

Garfiel looked daunted, having continued his sarcastic nagging towards a back that would not even turn around.

He had assumed he would still be ignored, but an unexpected rebuttal had arrived. Garfiel’s eyes went wide, but Heinkel, still without turning around, said,

Heinkel: “And vice-versa. There’s no reason at all why the parents of a monster also have to be monsters.”

Garfiel: “Oh…”

Heinkel: “You’re way too bad at hurling insults. If you want to provoke someone, take a lesson from Miss Priscilla. As you are, you’ve failed.”

Garfiel: “Gahk.”

His attempt to get the upper hand through insults was seen through, and was replied to in kind, ultimately.

Having just been told what true provocation really was, Garfiel faltered. As things were, the conversation was finished. But were he to turn his back and leave, he would be the one defeated in the true sense of the word.

In the end, Garfiel stuck around out of stubbornness, sitting a short distance away from Heinkel, gazing over the southern horizon devoid of the ramparts with which to guard the now-defenseless city.

Having been assailed by countless flying dragons, the walls of the famed Fortress City of Guaral had been severely damaged.

The damage yielded by the boulders thrown from a high altitude had been extensive, and although the crumbling, demolished walls were being repaired as fast as possible, the city's defensive abilities were considerably lowered.

In particular, the city's southern wall had been the one to suffer the greatest damage.

The western wall, which had borne the first attack, was also in a rather horrible state, but that was nothing compared to this. Forget about the wall, the entire area had been razed to the ground.

Garfiel: "I heard that Emilia-sama… No, Emily and the Princess they call Priscilla fought a Divine General but…"

The ferocity of the battle could be perceived in clear terms, judging from the disastrous scene below them.

Most of the buildings had not retained their original shape, and a terrible shockwave had mowed down anything and everything in its path.

The battle with the dragonkin, that which is one of the "Nine Divine Generals", had its denouement orchestrated by a white light—Garfiel, too, had been in the city when the shockwave blew him away. Emilia had explained what it had truly been.

Garfiel: "—A Dragon's roar."

While ground dragons, water dragons, flying dragons and the like were species of dragons, Dragons were a cut above them.

Dragons possessed power said to be beyond all reason. With merely a single breath, everything was uprooted.

There was a fear that, had the duo of Emilia and Priscilla not strived to oppose it, the damage would have spread even further.

Garfiel: "…No matter what, my amazin' self's always in the wrong place at the wrong time."

As he praised Emilia and, while he was at it, Priscilla for their accomplishments, a bitter feeling brewed in his heart.

By failing to accompany them to Pleiades Watchtower, Garfiel had missed the chance to come face-to-face with the Divine Dragon Volcanica, whom Emilia had met. Not only that, but this time he had missed the chance to come into contact with yet another Dragon despite being in the same city.

In a Subaru-like way of saying things, he had to say that the fish got off the hook.

Heinkel: "…"

His sulking was not at all because he had been unable to meet a Dragon, an existence that had been spoken of since ancient times.

It was because Garfiel's role was to fight and defeat powerful enemies. To defeat those who would try to disrupt the Camp's goals, and to carry out his role as a military officer.

Going around treating the wounded was absolutely not a part of those duties.

Garfiel: "More than that, my amazin' self also couldn't do a thing when enterin' the Empire."

In the act of smuggling themselves into the Vollachian Empire, Garfiel had been useless.

They had relied on Otto's family, on the Suwen Trading Company, for getting into contact with the people that would guide them across the border. And when they got into a disagreement with them along the way, Petra had concluded negotiations in a dignified manner.

After that, when problems arose as soon as they entered the Empire, Frederica used her own blood to overcome the situation, and all Garfiel ultimately did was to knock out a guy he did not like, as to get him to shut up.

At the very least he had found hope in the name of the black-haired valkyrie, "Natsumi Schwartz", who was rumored to be in the Fortress City, but just when he had thought his reunion with Subaru would finally come to be—

Garfiel: “Just missin’ each other after the Captain left… Unlucky ‘til the very end, seems like absolutely everythin’ was my amazin’ self’s fault…”

Of course, he was fully aware that this was paranoia due to overthinking.

Just as Garfiel and the others had had a great adventure arriving in the Empire, Subaru, having been hurtled off into the Empire, had also been on a great adventure there. Nothing more, nothing less.

Getting involved in a major incident straight away, even in a place he had been hurtled off to, was a situation that was very much like the Subaru that Garfiel knew.

Garfiel: “—A scramble for the top of the Empire, that’s one hell of a big deal, Captain.”

A sign of great war that would engulf the Fortress City—no, that would engulf the entirety of the Vollachian Empire.

What kind of causality had led to him being right in the middle of such a situation? However, Garfiel thought, Surely this was the result of Subaru being who he is.

While eagerly, desperately struggling to return to his place beside Emilia and the others, he had bonded with the people he had encountered on the way, and unable to abandon them, he kept running.

Right now, he was someplace far away, in a big city to the southeast, seemingly negotiating with influential people.

Regardless of the outcome, it would be nice if he were to return safely—

Heinkel: “—Hey, brat.”

Garfiel: “Ahhn?”

Heinkel: “Your teeth’ve been clattering like hell for a while now. Can’t you behave and shut your mouth?”

Heinkel suddenly spat those words at Garfiel, who had been lost in thought.

The seemingly annoyed red-haired man glaring his way put a finger in his own mouth and traced his canine in demonstration. That was to say that Garfiel's habit of clacking his teeth was getting on his nerves.

Garfiel: "Ha, why should my amazin' self hafta listen to anythin' ya say? If it's that hard on the ears, ya can leave whenever ya want."

Heinkel: "Is that your best insult, you petulant brat? I was here first. Know your place."

Garfiel: "—Hk, the guy who chickened out against a Divine General shouldn't be so arrogant!"

Loathing the idea of being cornered in the same way as before, Garfiel forcefully shouted that back.

After asserting that, Garfiel realized he had made a rash remark. However, his opponent was his opponent. Retorting to such an extent, needing to feel guilty about that was—.

Heinkel: "Ahh, that's right, isn't it. —I got scared. That's why, it turned out like this."

Garfiel: "Pops…?"

Heinkel: "I also wrecked Miss Priscilla's mood so now I'm getting dead drunk. Aah, how irredeemable."

However, the words that Heinkel offered in return were weak, leaving Garfiel puzzled.

Lifting the bottle of alcohol in his hand to his mouth while he sipped its contents, Heinkel grumbled in a low voice which seemed to curse the world—No, seemed to curse his own being.

Just as if the very world itself had abandoned him, his demeanor seemed to have fallen to utter desperation.

Garfiel: "…Yer opponent was a Divine General. They're the Empire's strongest military force, s'natural ya couldn't beat 'em, Pops."

Unable to stand watching that pathetic appearance, he vocalized that comfort.

Despite having said it himself, Garfiel was astonished by the fact he had made that remark without shame. Just before, he had verbally abused Heinkel for losing to a Divine General, but now he was comforting him by saying it was natural for him to have lost.

It was incoherent, and probably completely failed at being comforting. If Garfiel had been in the same position as Heinkel, he might have flown into a fit of rage at being told the same thing.

However, Heinkel gave a spineless laugh at Garfiel's comfort,

Heinkel: "I may not have won, but I had a duty to carry out. All the more so if I'm to reap the benefits of going with Miss Priscilla… Heh, what a fucking masterpiece."

Garfiel: "It's, a masterpiece?"

Heinkel: "The thing I've been chasing for over ten years keeps slipping through my fingers. No matter how far I go, I'll never be able to change my piss-poor nature."

At Heinkel's incessant self-derision, Garfiel began to see him differently.

At first, due to the reckless actions Heinkel had taken at the Watergate City, Garfiel's impression of him had been enmity and disgust. After just a short period, the very moment he thought it had been affirmed, seeing Heinkel curse himself made Garfiel reevaluate his impression.

There stood a weak, exhausted, miserable man.

The words that spewed from his mouth were blades to himself and to others, though their sharpness was pathetic. If those were only directed towards others, Garfiel would merely scorn them and be done with it.

However, when he realized Heinkel directed them at himself as well, Garfiel felt an unpleasant sensation in his chest.

Garfiel: “Bastard, why’d’ya got the nerve to be rottin’ away like that. You’re still livin’. Then…”

Heinkel: “—. I wonder, why am I still alive?”

Garfiel: “—Hk, Ya really dare to say that in front of the person who saved ya?”

Heinkel continued to grumble words of self-abandonment which invited Garfiel’s wrath.

At Garfiel’s response, Heinkel glanced at him and muttered “Ah”, as if realizing it for the first time.

Heinkel: “Now that you mention it, you were the one that healed me. Be careful next time.”

Garfiel: “Aah?!”

Heinkel: “Don’t miss the opportunity to abandon the guys you hate to spare yourself from future troubles.”

Heinkel gave a spineless chuckle as he asserted so.

The moment he heard that, Garfiel felt the sensation of his vision being stained a deep red, and he found himself clutching the man’s collar and scowling at his face reeking of liquor from a close proximity.

He heard a light smashing sound of a liquor bottle shattering by his feet.

That was because Garfiel had seized him by the collar, and lifted his body up through sheer force, causing the liquor bottle, with its contents still remaining, to fall from Heinkel’s hand to the bottom of the ramparts.

Following the fallen liquor bottle with his gaze, Heinkel heaved a sigh.

Heinkel: “That’s just a waste, isn’t it?”

Garfiel: “Bastard, is that all ya got t’say?”

Without resisting, Heinkel turned his lethargic eyes towards Garfiel.

His blue eyes, bereft of spirit, were of the same origin as that of both Reinhardt, whom Garfiel had spoken to, and Wilhelm, whom he had gone under the gaze of.

Nonetheless, Garfiel could hardly believe that they were the same.

Just how could human eyes become so dull?

The emotions whirling in the utmost depths of those two eyes, over just how many months and years had they been degraded for?

Garfiel: “The fuck’s with that? Why’re ya lookin’ at me like that?”

Heinkel said that he had displeased Priscilla, having suffered a loss against a Divine General.

The truth of the matter was unclear, but Garfiel believed that it was far too inconsiderate to blame someone for lacking the power to be able to put up a good fight against a Divine General.

At least, that was Garfiel’s perspective, who had not arrived in time to have a chance to fight.

At Garfiel’s gaze and words, Heinkel’s eyes wavered slightly.

His eyes, which had not even been focused on Garfiel, the man right in front of him, finally connected with Garfiel so that he was clearly reflected in them.

And then—

Heinkel: “—My wife…”

Regardless of the fact that he had just been gulping down alcohol, the lips of Heinkel, spilling out that hoarse voice, were parched.

But, when he finally received words that held meaning, Garfiel clenched his molars, and decided he would hear what the wavering man had to say beyond that.

However, the words Garfiel expected, yet again were not heard.

Heinkel: “—Ah.”

Garfiel: “Oi?”

Still being clutched by the collar, Heinkel’s eyes lost focus of Garfiel once more. His gaze went past Garfiel, and directed themselves towards what lay behind him.

Garfiel thought that was frustrating and irritating, however,

Heinkel: “It’s a horse carriage.”

Garfiel could not help but turn around, at the words that had been spoken.

Garfiel: “…”

Since he was grabbing Heinkel, Garfiel’s back was facing the south side of the city—from beyond that horizon, there was indeed a small contour that could be seen approaching their direction.

Straining his eyes, even Garfiel was unable to tell if it was a dragon carriage or a horse carriage, but if he believed Heinkel when he called it a “horse carriage”, that was—

Heinkel: “—Hah, so it’s the honored return of the bunch who went out.”

Through different words, Heinkel affirmed the thoughts of Garfiel, the latter catching his breath.

The contour was still only the size of a fingernail, but its outline was becoming slightly more visible; that might be the carriage that the person whom Garfiel was eagerly waiting and searching for was riding in.

Heinkel: “Oi, let go of me, brat.”

Garfiel’s eyes sparkled with anticipation and excitement, an air of liquor-reeking breaths hanging over him. A frown crossed his face as he looked in front of him and was greeted by Heinkel’s sullen look.

The profile of a man who was just about to speak from his heart was no longer there, and all that was left was the face of a hateful man, spewing disgusting and reckless remarks to those around him.

The moment he realized that, Heinkel tilted his neck and broke free from Garfiel’s hands.

Garfiel felt that was both an escape physically, and an escape emotionally. What should have been caught by the tips of his fingers, had coldly slipped away.

Heinkel: “The person you’re waiting for seems to be coming. Why don’t you hurry up and go meet them?”

Garfiel: “…Bastard, you…”

Heinkel: “I’ll serve my duty as a lookout. My job is to report it if I see something after all. Even if I’m drunk, I can at least do that much… Though it’s probably not going to score me many points.”

With a wave of his hand, Heinkel drunkenly staggered as he turned his back to Garfiel.

For a moment, he hesitated if he should call out to that back to try to stop him, but in the end no words came out. Just as Heinkel had pointed out, Garfiel’s heart had already started to get impatient.

As soon as possible, he wanted to rush over to the contour approaching from beyond the horizon.

Heinkel: “It’d be tragic to miss the opportunity, wouldn’t it? Those final words, you’ll end up chasing them endlessly.”

Leaving just those words behind, Heinkel jumped off of the ramparts before Garfiel. Surprisingly landing safely inside the city, he headed for the center of the city.

That final comment, the earnest emotion contained therein, Heinkel had asserted that they would stab into Garfiel's heart like a thorn.

However—

Garfiel: "Now is—"

Shelving the existence of that thorn for now, Garfiel jumped down the opposite side of the ramparts that Heinkel had.

Landing outside of the city, Garfiel stretched out his bent knees and broke out into a vigorous sprint. His legs kicking off the ground like explosions, faster than even the wind, he ran directly for the oncoming contour.

Garfiel: "Captain…!"

Through the crevices in his sharp fangs, Garfiel's unbearably deep emotions leaked out.

It was intimidating to consider the feelings of Emilia, Beatrice, Petra, and the others, but Garfiel was also one of the people who had been earnestly awaiting a reunion with Subaru.

That was why, transforming his feelings of excitement into running strength, he headed for the carriage at a breakneck pace.

Just a little further, just a few dozen more seconds of running, he would be reunited with Subaru, and—

Garfiel: "—Ah?"

And so, those overflowing expectations turned to unexpected feelings of confusion.

His speed, fast enough to leave the wind behind, came to slow down, and before long the wind overtook him. On the contrary, he became fast enough to leave everything except the wind behind, and finally came to a standstill.

In Garfiel's trembling emerald eyes, the single carriage that had come from beyond the horizon—no, the multitudes of carriages and ox carts that were approaching were reflected.

Garfiel: "Th-this is…"

Hoping that he would be able to meet Subaru without hesitation, Garfiel blinked his eyes.

Considering the purpose for which Subaru and the others had departed from the fortified city, the current view was indeed one of the possibilities, but at that time, Garfiel had not thought that far ahead.

In any case, stopping in its tracks before the overwhelmed Garfiel, at the head of the convoy heading down the road towards the city, was the carriage drawn by an excellent Galewind Horse which he had brazenly arrived at.

And then—

???: "—You, what are you fooling about for. If you are a messenger of the city, surely there is something you ought to be doing."

So, examining his expression, the man in the Oni mask caused Garfiel to catch his breath.

3

???: "You must be exhausted, Miss Frederica."

At the aroma of the tea being gently offered to her tired and thirsty self, Frederica looked at the person's face with faint surprise.

A smile on his gentle face, he who showed appreciation for Frederica was a man whose point of view was close to the ground.

By nature, Frederica, who was tall in stature, often surpassed men in height, but even disregarding that, the one in front of her was a short person of a small build—however, over the course of several days, Frederica had recognized that in contrast to his height, he had a large heart, and possessed good will.

Frederica: “—Zikr-sama, I accept your consideration with gratitude.”

At the top floor of the City Hall, amidst the busy people, the man—Zikr Osman, had personally brewed her tea, and she accepted it with gratitude.

As the soft, warmth-infused scent crept into her nostrils, Frederica could not help but smile.

Originally, such a role should have been the responsibility of Frederica, who was a maid. However, Frederica’s current position in the Empire made her hesitant to engage in the work that had been ingrained in her over the years.

Ostensibly, Frederica’s role in the Empire appeared to be as a guard of dignitaries—in hindsight, since Otto and Garfiel’s roles were the same, there had been no need for Frederica to leave her role as maid, but it was too late to change things.

That was why, accepting the goodwill offered by the commander who despite being burdened with responsibilities in this place had personally brewed her tea, she quietly concentrated on gently hydrating her tongue and throat.

In fact, as might be expected of him for taking the initiative, Zikr’s tea-brewing ability was quite magnificent.

Frederica: “For a General of the Empire, you seem to be very talented at this kind of thing.”

Zikr: “Haha, I am honored by your praise. However, I am unable to bear responsibility for the taste of the other Generals’ tea. In my case, I was trained by the many older and younger sisters of my family.”

Frederica: “Well. If that is the case, I must thank Zikr-sama’s esteemed elder and younger sisters. Even in such a hectic situation, we can still enjoy the taste of tea.”

Zikr: “Indeed, you never know what will be useful in this world… Of course, my enthusiasm in being prepared is more for a beauty like you, Miss Frederica, than for my own family.”

There was no ulterior motive in Zikr’s casual repartee, and Frederica naturally accepted his praise.

Those words were not falsehoods, perhaps it was the influence of having spent time with so many sisters. His admiration for women was so deep and reverential that it was almost embarrassing.

At first, when told that the personage who took the name of The Womanizer was the head representative of the city, Frederica had been quite nervous and wary of the situation.

Frederica: “I would be troubled should something happen to Emily, Lady Petra, or Lady Beatrice.”

However, that concern had been dispelled upon meeting with Zikr in person.

The fact that they had been involved in lifesaving efforts in the city, which had fallen into turmoil after the devastation of the flying dragon cataclysm probably had some influence, but Zikr and the others had willingly taken in Fredrica and her group.

She was also grateful for Otto’s decision to speak with city representatives the moment he arrived in the city.

Frederica: “I heard that he wooed Mizelda-san as soon as he met her, Otto-sama is truly reliable during times like these.”

If Otto himself had been listening, he would have said, “I think that is somewhat misleading!” as his voice quavered; while thinking this, Frederica nodded quietly.

Although she thought of him that way, Frederica was helped considerably by Otto’s presence.

The responsibility of the two senior members of Emilia’s group, Frederica and Otto, was quite heavy. —After all, Roswaal and Ram were off doing something separately.

Frederica: "…"

In the search for the whereabouts of Subaru and Rem within the Empire, it had been decided that the group smuggling themselves into the country would split up into two.

The split groups consisted of Roswaal and Ram, as well as the six including Frederica and the others.

After separating from Emilia's group, which was searching for Subaru and his group through steadily asking around, the pair of Roswaal and Ram headed for an Imperial Noble with whom Roswaal was acquainted.

Frederica had never imagined that his reach extended to the Empire, although Roswaal was originally unable to make contact with this person whom he was close with.

In any case, with the choice to rely on his acquaintance, Roswaal headed there for negotiations, while Frederica and the others began to search for the whereabouts of the two people in a different direction.

As a result, the roles of Frederica and Otto had inevitably become more important.

Frederica: "Although, Emilia-sama seemed to be rousing herself up to do her best."

Frederica's lips parted at the thought of Emilia's enthusiasm, overflowing with motivation and responsibility at the fact that she was the most senior member.

If one strictly applied seniority to the Emilia camp, the utmost seniors would be Puck and Beatrice, followed by Emilia.

Having been separated from Subaru, it had become difficult for Beatrice to replenish her mana, and she was thus in a state of "Eko-mode" to keep her usage within limits, spending most of the day sleeping. That was why Emilia, the next oldest, was inspired to do her best.

Of course, the final decision had been left to Emilia, but the discussions leading up to that point had been carefully considered mainly between Frederica, Otto, and Petra.

The reason they had traveled to the fortified city was because of a rumor so incredible that she had doubted her ears.

Frederica: “A rebel army rising against the Empire, and the black-haired maiden who is supporting its ringleader…”

When Frederica had heard her name was “Natsumi Schwartz”, she had been unable to grasp its meaning, and her thoughts had come to a complete halt.

Frederica had also wondered if someone with the same name as the one she had previously heard of also unexpectedly existed in the Empire.

Frederica: “If Otto-sama had not recognized the true intention behind it, I wonder if I would have been able to realize it.”

Ultimately, it had been Otto who had explained that the name of the person being propagated through rumors was a message from Subaru.

Otto: “After all, that man has a tendency to think that cross-dressing is an all-purpose solution… In fact, I am afraid that it might encourage him to assume that it might be considerably useful.”

That had been Otto’s response, with a face somewhere between exasperation and acceptance.

The group had more or less concluded that since Subaru’s position in the Kingdom of Lugunica was known, he had taken measures to avoid having his name brought up within the Vollachian Empire.

By the end, only Emilia had been left tilting her head in confusion at the fact that the name of a woman she knew was being used, “Why, Natsumi’s name…?”.

In any case—

Zikr: “It will not be long before Miss Natsumi will be back. Finally, Miss Emily and Miss Petra’s wishes will be fulfilled.”

Frederica: “—Yes, absolutely.”

Zikr gave a nod to Frederica, who was engrossed in her thoughts while enjoying her tea’s aroma.

Just as he said, their reunion with the two people they were searching for—or at the very least, their reunion with Subaru was expected to come true in the not-too-distant future.

Frederica and her friends had been correct in assuming that the name Natsumi Schwartz was a message, and Subaru had indeed been confirmed to have been present in this fortified city.

The problem was that after he had left the city to resolve another matter, another situation had befallen Rem, the other person they were in search of—

Zikr: “…If only we had been able to protect Miss Rem.”

Frederica: “That was the extent of the situation. There is no reason to blame you, Zikr-sama, nor anybody else. Though, I certainly do regret the outcome.”

Frederica loosely shook her head at the words of Zikr, whose eyes were downcast.

When Frederica and the others had arrived at the city, it had not only been Subaru who had been missing, but also Rem. On top of that, Rem had disappeared in the midst of the flying dragon cataclysm.

It was said that, in order to make the Divine General assailing the city withdraw, she had made herself a hostage.

Frederica: “—. As soon as you wake up, I would be convinced that you were Ram’s younger sister.”

While she worried about Rem, Frederica lips spoke of such sentiments.

Frederica did not remember Rem, whose “name” and “memories” were stolen by the Authority of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. At least, she had no memories of her being awake.

All Frederica knew was what Subaru had told her about Rem’s personality and that she looked exactly like her twin sister, Ram. However, it seemed that she was also bold and daring like Ram.

Otherwise, she probably would never have been able to negotiate with one of the Nine Divine Generals and save a city which had its very existence in jeopardy.

Frederica: “…”

Then having accepted her negotiations, the other party had a reason to keep Rem alive.

Having considered it logically, that belief had been their sole salvation. If it had not been for that, Frederica and the others would have immediately pursued the whereabouts of the now missing Rem.

Of course, to tell the truth, she still could not help but to want to rush after her.

Frederica: “If Ram had been there, she would have… No, that girl is clever, she probably would not have done that.”

It was hard to judge which option Ram would have taken, in the opinion of Frederica, who was well acquainted with her.

Ram was wise. But at the same time, she also had a deep love. Frederica knew that she had been visiting her younger sister’s room as much, if not more, than Subaru, who had visited Rem every night.

She had wanted to reunite them. —After all, no matter how brash she was, Ram was her beloved protegee.

Zikr: “Miss Frederica, please do not worry too much about it. Conditions in the city have calmed down for the time being. Finally, we can begin to talk about the future.”

As Frederica gently placed her hand on her chest, Zikr spoke as such out of consideration for her.

As he said, the scars left by the flying dragons that had attacked the fortified city had finally been patched up, and the conditions were now suitable for discussing what to do in the future. Of course, what happened next would depend on the direction of the discussions, but—

???: “—General Second-Class Zikr!”

It was at the moment Frederica was about to reply to Zikr’s statement.

A sharp voice strained with deep emotion that was something different to being cornered, and reverberated through the City Hall. Running up the staircase, and rushing towards them was one of Zikr’s subordinates.

Zikr turned to him and said, “What is it?” as the man placed his fist in front of his chest, and,

Subordinate: “We have a report. Numerous carriages are arriving on the south side of the city, all from the Demon City.”

Frederica: “—! From the Demon City. Then…!”

Involuntarily, Frederica proactively reacted to the report to Zikr. Normally, her embarrassment would have outweighed her reaction, but at this moment, that did not bother her in the slightest.

Zikr nodded deeply at Frederica’s enthusiasm, and,

Zikr: “Have they returned? As expected, you are an ally with impeccable timing. Call Miss Priscilla, Miss Petra and the others at once.”

Subordinate: “Yessir!”

Frederica’s heart pounded at the good news that the person she had been waiting for had returned.

Her somber feelings of concern for Rem's safety had considerably improved from just before. At least for the time being, she thought that with this, half of their objective should have been fulfilled.

Zikr: "Everything is well, Miss Frederica."

Zikr gently smiled at Frederica, who stroked her chest in relief.

At his words, Frederica tried to thank him with an "Indeed".

However—

Subordinate: "—General Second-Class, the truth is, about that…"

Frederica's words were interrupted by those of the Imperial Soldier. Furthermore, as he began to speak with a tinge of unease, Frederica held her breath.

Zikr seemed to feel the same concern and turned to his subordinate, who had spoken in a low voice, and questioned "What's wrong?" as the tone of his voice lowered.

In response, the subordinate slightly hesitated, and then—

Subordinate: "The carriage has returned from the Demon City, but Miss Natsumi Schwartz is not present… they say that they lost track of her whereabouts in Chaosflame."

Indeed, it was a cruel declaration that the twists of fate would continue once more.

Chapter 78: A Volatile Reunion

1

Breathing deeply, she ran as if flying, doing her best to not shake the head of the girl held in her arms.

A caravan of wagons had arrived on the south side of the city, and the moment Emilia had overheard that so many had arrived from the Demon City Chaosflame, her silver hair had danced in anticipation of her long-awaited reunion.

Emilia: “Very soon, we’ll meet Subaru, Beatrice…!”

The girl she held in her arms, who had been asleep with closed eyelids—Beatrice.

In order to wake up the girl, who had been sleeping for a long time to avoid exhausting her mana, it was absolutely necessary for her to make contact with Subaru, whom she had a contract with, so that she could receive her mana supply from him.

Subaru also needed Beatrice to take his mana or he would be in trouble, so the two were truly intertwined with the same fate.

Their relationship, which usually appeared to be one in which they always got along endearingly, hand in hand, meant serious trouble now that Subaru had been flung off into the Empire and separated from them.

Subaru and Beatrice had to be reunited as soon as possible.

And in addition—

Emilia: “—Subaru.”

Emilia herself wanted to make sure Subaru was safe as soon as possible, even if only by one second.

She hadn't felt this restless since Puck unilaterally violated the contract and disappeared on his own accord—no, it was more than that.

Puck may have been fine on his own, but Subaru was not.

Someone who was able to understand Subaru should be there for him.

Emilia: "Ughhh, I'm sorry!"

Opening her eyes, Emilia took a shortcut to the front of the City Hall.

Although she should have entered through the doorway and then climbed the stairs to the top, her impatience was such that she instead formed a pillar made of ice. Riding atop the ice formation rising from the ground, Emilia, holding Beatrice, rose all at once to the top of the building.

It startled the guards and the townspeople, but she couldn't resist.

Now, finally—

Emilia: "Subaru!"

???: "Huh, Emily?"

When the ice elevator reached the top floor's height, Emilia jumped from there to the building.

When she landed and looked up, she saw that a decent number of people had already gathered in City Hall, and everyone seemed surprised by Emilia's sudden appearance.

In the midst of all this, it was Mizelda, a girl with a prosthetic leg who left a strong visual impression, and also the one that brought together the People of Shudraq, who accepted Emilia's appearance with a sense of ease.

She poked the floor with the tip of her wooden leg and looked at the icey pillar behind Emilia, then, Mizelda: “You use magic very conveniently. You are so different from us.”

Emilia: “Mhm, I was in a reaaally big hurry, so I went to… Oh, I’m sorry I startled you! I’ll dispel it in a second!”

At Mizelda’s impressed reaction, Emilia hurriedly dissolved the ice into mana.

In the Kingdom, it was rather common to do various things with magic, but in the Empire, it seemed as if there were not so many magic users. Considering how many people were said to want to fight in the Empire, it felt weird.

Mizelda: “Most of the time, if you hit them before they use magic, it’s the end for them.”

Emilia: “I do know that. But that’s only if you’re close by, not far away.”

Mizelda: “When you’re far away, that’s when my bow comes in. Taritta is better with the bow than I am, though.”

At the smiling Mizelda, Emilia returned a smile, with a “that’s right”.

The name “Taritta”, which she heard several times, must have been the name of Mizelda’s little sister. Taritta, who was apparently Mizelda’s pride and joy, had been with the group that left Guaral for the Demon City in the southeast—

Emilia: “—! That’s right. The people who went south are back, right?”

For a moment, her mind drifted elsewhere, but that was the reason Emilia had rushed over in such a big hurry using her magic in the first place.

Holding Beatrice closer to her chest, Emilia surveyed the hall on the top floor.

The fact that there were people in unusual travel clothes amongst the crowd proved that the group who had arrived at the Fortress City while traveling by horse and carriage were here.

In the midst of it all—

Emilia: “Subaru, are you there?! We’re all here to pick you up! Otto and Petra-san… Lady Petra will be here soon!”

She looked around, searching for the long-awaited black-haired boy in the crowd.

When Emilia heard at the house in which they had been staying that a carriage had arrived, she picked Beatrice up in her arms and hurried to the City Hall ahead of Petra and Otto.

They also would be running to the City Hall to meet Subaru in a big hurry.

Knowing she felt the same way as those two, but still running ahead while gasping for breath, Emilia knew she was unjust. Even so, she wanted to meet Subaru as soon as possible.

Beatrice was the same too, but Emilia had her own reasons to see Subaru—

Emilia: “—Hk, Subaru!”

Suddenly, her shoulder having been tapped from behind, Emilia reacted as if she had been flicked away.

It was so sudden that the person who had tapped her on the shoulder became startled and widened their eyes. However, the surprised person in front of her was not Subaru.

???: “Emily…”

Emilia: “Frederica… You got here first. Um, well.”

It was kind of awkward, and Emilia didn’t know what expression to put on her face.

Of course, Frederica was also worried about Subaru, so it was no surprise that she arrived at City Hall first.

Emilia: “Well, did you get to talk to Subaru? Look, I want to take Beatrice to see him. I, too, would like to talk to Subaru, but Beatrice first…”

Frederica: “—. There is something I must tell you.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Frederica lowered the corners of her beautiful emerald green eyes and spoke in a somber voice to Emilia, who was sweating and talking as if looking for excuses.

She did not know why Frederica had such an attitude.

Emilia: “Ah, Garfiel…”

Upon looking, it was not only Frederica, but also Garfiel who had arrived at City Hall earlier. When Petra and the others arrived a little later, all of Emilia’s companions who had come to Guaral would be present.

All of them would greet the previously separated Subaru.

Or so Emilia was hoping, but—

Frederica: “Unfortunately, Subaru-sama has gone missing again, in the Demon City of Chaosflame… Subaru-sama was not among those who returned via carriage.”

Thus, Frederica painfully conveyed such a heartbreaking report.

2

???: “What do you mean, big bro and Rem-chan were taken away?!”

Widening her big round eyes, the girl shouted as she stomped her feet with a pitter-patter.

She was a golden-haired girl with a strange hairstyle of braids, ties, and various knots. The girl, who appeared twelve or thirteen years old, was taking a look at the adults around her with a face filled with bewilderment.

Gathered in the spacious room of the uppermost floor of the Fortress City of Guaral's City Hall, were those who had been assigned various roles within the commotion of this city, or rather, this Empire.

In the middle of such turmoil, Otto Suwen felt like hugging his head due to the fact that they had somehow been caught up in it.

Although, this was in front of the people who hoisted flags depicting a wolf pierced by swords. Believing that it would be unthinkable to show such a weak attitude, he kept his expression stiffened.

Strange-hair Girl: "I've come back and now the city's a mess, the walls are missing as well, it's a disaster! Among other things, big bro and Rem-chan aren't here, I'm startled and I feel dizzy!"

???: "Aa, uu!"

Just as she said this, the girl's eyeballs and head spun round and round as she frustratedly stomped. And to her side was a separate girl of about the same age, in order to follow suit, this young girl with blonde hair began to groan.

The adults looked puzzled and perplexed by the girls' two-person appeal.

The situation called for someone to take the lead, but Otto was wondering whether he should step in as he felt overwhelmed by a mysterious unease that prevented him from moving.

Otto: "…Um, have I seen this groaning girl somewhere?"

Next to the girl who took the initiative to speak, Otto could not help but feel that the girl who did not utter a meaningful word was somehow familiar to him.

Although Otto was generally careful not to forget people with whom he had exchanged words, his memory of times when he drank too much were vague. Since he started working in the Emilia Camp, he tried to avoid getting so drunk that he would lose his memory, but he wondered whether this was a child he came across in an inebriated mood.

Strange-hair Girl: “Hey, how’s big bro and Rem-chan doing? Does anyone know…”

Zikr: “—Before I go any further, may I make one thing clear, young lady?”

Strange-hair Girl: “Hmm? What’s that, Zikr-chin?”

While Otto was lost in thought, it was Zikr, the city’s representative, who approached the girl.

Otto had already exchanged words with him many times, and he regarded him as a trustworthy partner. Just the fact that he was someone he could communicate with in the Empire made him a rare find.

Zikr raised his thick eyebrows and looked at the girl from top to bottom,

Zikr: “If there is no mistake in my perception, is this young lady definitely Miss Medium?”

Medium: “Huh? Of course, what’s wrong? You can tell just by seeing.”

Louis: “Uu!”

The girl with her hands on her hips and her chest puffed out—she was called Medium, and next to her, who nodded her head, the girl he could not remember had taken the same posture.

At these words, Zikr looked at the person next to Medium with a troubled countenance.

And—

Zikr: “—Abel-dono, this is…”

Abel: “It is due to Olbart Dunkelkenn’s technique. The reason why her reply was off the mark was because of her original education, not because of this condition.”

Zikr: “I see. General First-Class Olbart’s technique… I am very glad you are unharmed.”

Abel: “If you are capable of calling this unharmed, that is.”

After hearing the explanation, Zikr gently put his hand on his chin and looked as if pondering. Having clarified this for Zikr, Abel calmly folded his arms and glanced at Medium.

Abel: “The ones that stayed behind are astonished. To see that you have shrunk, that is.”

Medium: “Me? …Ah! I see! Sorry, sorry everyone! I was so used to being shrunk, but now I’m tiny! Together with Subaru-chin!”

With a small body, Medium raised her hand and explained her situation. Even having heard that, Otto couldn’t come to grips with it at all, but the original imperial group seemed somewhat convinced.

This side, while confused and unable to deny that they did not know enough, thought that, more importantly, there was something in what she just said that Otto and his friends couldn’t miss.

???: “—Subaru”

Louis: “Uau…”

And at the same time, a faint whisper was uttered, probably with the same meaning.

It was the girl with a downcast face next to Medium who put a tone into the sound that was clearly differentiated from the groan that had come before. And the one who emitted the sound that had the same connotation as that of the girl was,

Emilia: “Are you worried about Subaru, too?”

Yes, it was Emilia who lowered her eyebrows at the girl's appearance.

Emilia, with Beatrice sleeping in her arms, was one of those who was particularly disappointed to hear that Subaru was not in the group returning from Demon City.

Compared to her and Petra, it would be presumptuous to call Otto's feelings disappointment. But it wasn't because he had a premonition that it might not be so easy to meet again.

In any case—

Louis: "Uu, aau."

Emilia: "No, I don't think it's your fault. I'm reaaally disappointed that Subaru isn't here, but this is no time to mope around. Subaru has been through so much more."

Louis: "Uu…"

Emilia: "You're worried about me? Thank you. I know you've been through a lot, too."

The depressed looking girl and Emilia were communicating with each other in this way.

The words spilling out of the girl's mouth had no clear meaning, but Emilia looked her in the eyes and exchanged words as if she understood what they meant.

That in itself attested to the heartbroken Emilia's determination, and it was an exchange that Otto couldn't help but feel relieved about. However—

Abel: "—I never expected that Natsuki Subaru's companions would come all the way here to visit."

It was a voice that blew through the hall like a cold, dry wind.

Emilia lifted her gaze and turned towards the person who had spoken with that voice—the man with the Oni mask on his face who had just exchanged words with Zikr and Medium.

Emilia’s amethyst eyes narrowed at the sight of the dark-haired man with the Oni mask covering his face.

Emilia: “Are you a friend of Subaru, too?”

Abel: “I have no friends. Nor does he think of me in that way. Our relationship is one where we are together while working towards a goal.”

Emilia: “So, you’re a comrade. He called you Abel, could you be the person Zikr-san was talking about earlier?”

The man’s response was stiff and sharp, but Emilia was unfazed and turned to Zikr. In response to her question, Zikr straightened his back while stating, “Yes”.

Zikr: “This is the one who is in the position to lead us, Abel-dono. I was only entrusted with the city under his direction.”

Abel: “Speaking of which, there certainly has been a lot of wear and tear.”

Zikr: “…For that, I am truly ashamed.”

With a grimace, Zikr bowed deeply to the man—to Abel over the damage the city had suffered.

Instead of dissatisfaction with unreasonable reprimands, Zikr’s bitter face was filled with remorse at his own inability to do his job.

Otto, who was present at the actual scene, thought that Zikr and everyone else in the city did their best to prevent it from being completely destroyed, but—

Medium: “Abel-chin, don’t say mean things like that! Everyone tried their hardest!”

Abel: “Even so, are you not angry as well, having had your brother taken away from you?”

Medium: “Big bro worked so hard he was taken! If big bro hadn’t been taken away, we would’ve been in big trouble! That’s my big bro! Even taken away, big bro is so cool!”

It was Medium who took a vigorous swipe at Abel’s statement.

Judging from the flow of the conversation, her brother was probably the male peddler who had been kidnapped alongside Rem. Mizelda had said that he was a gentle and friendly lady-killer.

According to other stories by Kuna and Holly, that man and Rem both being taken was the decisive factor causing the enemy, a member of the “Nine Divine Generals”, to withdraw the flying dragons.

In other words, Medium’s remarks about her brother were not far off the mark.

Abel, who had just returned from Demon City, had no way of knowing about this situation—

Abel: “Zikr.”

Zikr: “Sir.”

Abel: “Disregard what I previously said. From the beginning, you were dealing with Madelyn Eschart and a group of flying dragons. You deserve recognition for your work in a situation where the city may have needed to be abandoned.”

Zikr: “—! I am honored.”

The words that continued without hesitation were not the result of being struck by Medium’s persuasion.

From the start, these words were already prepared to be said to Zikr. From the very beginning, he had no intention of blaming him for the damage suffered by Guaral.

Medium: “…Abel-chin, your personality is awful!”

Louis: “Uu!”

Abel: “Stop.”

Medium and the girl attacked Abel from both sides as he stood with his arms crossed. Abel gave a short rebuke as the two of them clung to him, pulling his sleeves and poking him in the waist.

One could get a rough idea of their relationship over there—

???: “—So? When are we going to progress on this?”

Meanwhile, the woman who had been quietly watching the developments finally moved her lips.

It was a fox-eared beauty with a presence terribly out of place and an excessively glamorous personality—in a sense, a person who, just by being there, one could not help but be aware of; like Emilia, who had uncommon beauty and Abel, whose eccentric Oni mask was eye-catching.

It was obvious even if not explicitly stated.

She was the reason why Abel and Medium left the walled city for the Demon City, Chaosflame.

???: “General First-Class Yorna Mishigure.”

Who muttered these words?

Perhaps someone in the room called out the name. However since no one voiced a correction, it was self-evident that it was correct.

—Yorna Mishigure.

She is the ruler of the Demon City, Chaosflame, and a member of the “Nine Divine Generals”, the most powerful military officers in the Empire.

Having her on their side will be a major boon that would shake up the state of this broad Empire.

The journey on which Subaru went missing was originally intended to recruit her.

Zikr: “General First-Class Yorna, first of all, I would like to thank you for your visit. I am Zikr Osman, a General Second-Class of the Vollachian Empire.”

Yorna: “I have heard your name along the way. In person, you seem to be a good-looking man as Medium and Taritta said.”

Zikr: “Miss Medium and Miss Taritta?”

Zikr, who had begun speaking sternly, blinked at Yorna’s response.

This was not the time for this, but his gaze turned to Medium and another tall woman. The brown-skinned woman in male attire, she was probably Taritta, the topic of discussion.

The two responded to Zikr’s gaze with a smile and a nod. Zikr, who was known as the “Womanizer” for his gentle, manly behavior, may have been embarrassed but he seemed very happy.

With a cough, he cleared his throat as if to calm his emotions,

Zikr: “So, would General First-Class Yorna be willing to fight alongside Abel-dono?”

Yorna: “You may think of it that way. I have my own agenda, but my interests… are aligned with Abel’s.”

Abel: “It is settled. There is no issue in the pact with Yorna Mishigure.”

Yorna wore a luxurious kimono and held a golden kiseru in her hand. Although her previous reputation gave the impression that she was quite a worrisome woman, her demeanor was calm and collected.

Otto’s group had heard that Chaosflame had been severely damaged.

That is why a huge caravan of carriages arrived at Guaral, and why they had to accommodate such a large number of people at once.

And in the midst of all the devastation that the Demon City suffered

—

???: "—Subaru was sent somewhere."

???: "…"

It was Emilia, with a voice that sounded like a silver bell, who broke into the conversation.

Entering the story from a different angle, Abel's gaze through the Oni mask turned towards Emilia. Emilia didn't flinch, despite the obvious unwelcoming gaze.

Beatrice was in her arms, Petra and Frederica stood quietly by her side, and Garfiel had a stern look on his face. Otto may have contributed a little to that as well.

Indeed, Emilia's statement may just be some noise to them.

However, they had their own circumstances. It would be a problem if the conversation proceeded while ignoring them, who had rushed across the border to reach there.

Emilia: "Once more, let's start over from the beginning. —I am Emily, and you are Abel, right? Subaru's friend… No, his comrade."

Abel: "—. Yes."

Emilia: "Subaru had gone to another city with you… Well, to Yorna-san's and then something terrible happened and you got separated. Is that right?"

Yorna: "Yes, that's right. Something terrible doesn't quite cut it, though."

Both Abel and Yorna nodded at Emilia, which raised her well-shaped eyebrows as she confirmed what had just been described. After receiving their reactions, especially Yorna's words, Emilia accepted them with an open heart and said, "That's right.".

From the perspective of the parties involved, the superficial words of an outsider could be offensive, and Emilia, too, was careful to choose her words with care, knowing that her words fell into that category.

Emilia: “You couldn’t say where Subaru got whisked away to after getting separated from the rest of the group. Even though everyone searched, you could not find him, and there were many people without homes. So, that is why you came back to this city like this and we are discussing this here… Is that right?”

Abel: “There is nothing to correct. Still, that was a tragedy of that magnitude. Considering the scale of it, it’s hard to believe that the missing person is safe—”

Emilia: “—Subaru is fine. That’s for sure.”

Emilia interrupted Abel, speaking up in a low but powerful voice.

The trust in her voice made Abel’s black eyes narrow through the Oni mask. Abel’s eyes, tinged with deep thought, sought the basis of Emilia’s remark.

Sure enough, Abel took a pause and then asked Emilia, “What makes you so sure?”.

Abel: “You do not know the details of what transpired within the Demon City. Under such circumstances, disappearing when one wrong move could cost him his life —How can you be so sure that he would survive in that situation?”

Emilia: “…”

So far, all Otto and the others had heard were the news of the destruction of Chaosflame and the rumor that it was caused by an unbelievable calamity.

The genuineness of Abel’s words was unknown, and it was impossible to gauge the extent to which he had dramatized the facts. But Otto could be sure that it was not a meaningless bluff.

At the same time, there was a small hitch in the way he spoke.

Abel’s tone was cold, but he could sense his intention to learn more about them. —No, it was more about finding out about Subaru through Otto and the others.

He seemed to think that Subaru was hiding something from him. If it was about Subaru's position within the kingdom, they could not carelessly hand over that information.

Otto: "Emily, this is…"

Emilia: "I believe in Subaru, and I believe that Subaru is going to do his best until we get there to get him. No matter how hard things are."

Fearing leading questions, Otto tried to control the conversation, but Emilia had answered ahead of him. However, it was a statement of trust based on idealism, not a concrete basis.

It was not what Otto feared, nor was it what Abel wanted. So, naturally, Abel was disappointed and lowered his gaze.

Abel: "This is all wishful thinking without any persuasive evidence. Disappointing that this is your rationale."

Emilia: "Yeah? I think it's reaaally nice and important for people to believe in me. I feel safe when I can trust someone, and it gives me strength when they trust me. Are you different?"

Abel: "After all, feelings are just feelings. It can hardly be the deciding factor beyond that."

Emilia's eyes wavered at Abel's answer, shaking his head and closing one eye.

Otto missed the opportunity to interject, but that was enough for him to understand that the two were water and oil. That is to say, such was the difference between Emilia, who believed in the value of the heart, and Abel, who did not.

This rift was likely to be a difference in outlook on life and was not likely to be easily bridged.

Therefore—

Abel: "—No one can say for sure whether Natsuki Subaru is alive or dead. Just because he has always avoided death by a hair's breadth, there is no guarantee it will be the same this time."

That affirmation seemed to have been Abel's conclusion in this conversation.

As Emilia heard that and her lips pursed together,

Emilia: "Do you mean Subaru—"

She quickly looked at Abel and was about to say something.

But, one girl straightened up faster than she could proceed with her words. It was the little girl in Emilia's arms, who had her eyes closed.

Beatrice: "If you need confirmation that Subaru is alive, Betty has it, in fact."

Emilia: "Beatrice!"

Frederica: "Sama!"

Embraced within her chest, Beatrice opened her eyes, which had a characteristic pattern to them. Emilia, whose eyes widened, immediately called to her, to which Frederica hurriedly added the honorific title.

Whether or not it was enough to disguise things, Beatrice's words had a certain effect in attracting Abel's attention and the attention of others who did not know what was going on.

Abel: "Why is it that you have the certainty of Natsuki Subaru's being alive or dead?"

Beatrice: "It's a simple matter, I suppose. It's because Betty and Subaru are connected by the soul, in fact."

Yorna: "—Ah, so that's how it is. If this and that child are deeply connected, I can see the logic behind that."

Emilia: “Yes, they are in a contractual relationship. That’s why…”

Abel: “This girl is in her debilitated state? That makes sense.”

Despite the lack of a clear explanation, Abel and Yorna were able to figure out the situation.

Revealing the fact that Beatrice was a Spirit was not good for Otto and the others, who had entered the Empire under false identities, but the two in question had likely already realized it.

It was hard to imagine, however, that Abel and his group, whose purpose was to rebel against the Emperor in the Imperial Capital, would do anything about them on the grounds that they have violated the decree of the Empire.

Otto: “If you are convinced, then you understand. Apart from Natsuki-san’s comfort and location, we do have means to confirm whether he is alive or dead. Since Beatrice-sama says so, we can be certain that no matter where… Natsuki-san is alive in the place where he was sent to.”

Yorna: “—Is that so? Then perhaps Tanza will be a little better off.”

Yorna’s eyebrows lowered slightly at Otto’s additional words.

She whispered these words, which seemed to be a person’s name. Someone who lost their life from the way they spoke. —It would seem that this, too, was not unconnected with the destruction of the Demon City.

To delve into this, though, one would have had to be prepared to venture into Yorna’s world.

Petra: “Um, can we backtrack a bit?”

Emilia: “Petra-chan.”

Frederica: “Sama!”

Suddenly, not wanting to miss the momentary silence, Petra raised her hand and asked for the right to speak; Emilia carelessly called out to her again, and Frederica immediately came to her aid.

With Petra standing proudly beside her, she drew the attention of a group of adults who were strangers to her.

Petra: “Earlier, Medium-chan said that she was made tiny. Is that true?”

Medium: “Ah, yes, it’s true! I used to be really tall! About the same height as that blond boy over there… Umm, no, it was about the same height as that woman!”

Garfiel: “First, why did ya write off my amazin’ self?”

Frederica: “I know what you mean. Although, I am not too happy to hear about my height, either.”

Having been pointed out by Medium, Garfiel and Frederica each responded in turn.

However, Medium’s story was probably true, as no one had refuted it. It’s hard to believe, but apparently something mysterious happened to cause a person’s body to shrink.

Perhaps that meant—

Petra: “Has Subaru been made tiny, too?”

Petra asked in a serious, slightly firm voice.

That was a big question that Otto and the others could not afford to ignore. It would have been difficult enough just to meet up with Subaru, who was sent to the Empire, but they were not expecting a situation in which his body would be shrunken.

Otto, feeling like praying that he had heard wrong, was convinced, however, that his prayer had never been and would never be fully heard.

Not knowing Otto’s feelings, Medium nodded her head lightly and said, “That’s right.”.

Medium: “Subaru-chin is just like me! Maybe a little smaller? Anyway, they made him so tiny! But I heard that Subaru-chin and Yorna-chan beat up Gramps together, so Subaru-chin is amazing!”

Emilia: “Yes, Subaru is amazing!”

Petra: “Yes, Medium-chan is right.”

Beatrice: “Naturally, I suppose. He’s Betty’s partner, in fact!”

While the content itself was difficult to welcome, Medium’s unhesitating praise was music to the ears. In fact, Emilia, Petra, and Beatrice were in a good mood after hearing the praise for Subaru.

Neither Garfiel, Frederica, nor Otto felt bad. They did not, but as that praise was accompanied by unwelcome information, Otto became rather concerned.

Otto: “If Natsuki-san is also shrunken… I guess, he became a child? Not tired of just dressing up as a woman, now he’s becoming a child… infantilized? What a restless person…”

Frederica: “Indeed, pestering Subaru-sama for having a partner is regrettable but… But I’m worried, I can’t let him meet with Clind.”

Otto: “That’s one thing, but I’m sure there are other concerns that are more important…”

By what means was such a phenomenon caused?

Since this event was so far removed from reality, there were concerns about whether or not it could be reversed, and if so, whether or not there would be any after effects. In the worst case scenario, there was even a possibility that Subaru would return to the Kingdom of Lugunica as Emilia’s knight while remaining small.

Otto: “Well, in terms of ability, it’s not much different, anyway.”

Subaru would indeed be outraged were he to hear this, but if they could find him, then this would be acceptable as tolerable damage.

If he could grow up properly from then on, he wouldn’t have too many problems with his relationship with Emilia, a half-elf. She would be able to wait until he got older.

Otto: “I should not… Maybe I am a little out of my depth too.”

It seemed like the order of priorities for concern was in disarray.

For the time being, it was a setback that they could not meet up with Subaru, but thanks to Beatrice, they were now certain about his survival.

Now, with Zikr and the others—No, if the representative was Abel, they should decide if they wanted to continue this line of cooperation with them or not.

Garfiel: “—Beatrice-sama? Why do ya look so outta it?”

Otto: “—?”

With a hand on his chin, about to consider the options, Otto casually directed his attention to the words uttered by Garfiel.

Garfiel’s gaze turned to Beatrice in Emilia’s arms. She woke up, but wanting to avoid exhaustion, she remained in Emilia’s arms, with her good mood from the earlier praise of Subaru being short-lived, as her eyes widened.

What her trembling eyes were looking at was not Medium.

There was another girl, snuggled up beside her as if they were sisters. Beatrice stared at her, not even having heard her name yet.

Beatrice: “…Why are you here, I suppose.”

Louis: “Uu?”

Beatrice: “Answer, in fact! No, do not do anything unnecessary, I suppose!”

Immediately after asking the question in a trembling voice, Beatrice’s voice rose as her expression changed.

At the sound, the little girl who had her head tilted, jumped in surprise, and naturally, Otto and the others were surprised by Beatrice's reaction.

Otto: "B-Beatrice… sama, what's wrong? You suddenly yelled at that girl…"

Beatrice: "Yelling is the reasonable thing to do, in fact! Otto! Did you not realize it, I suppose?"

Otto: "Me? What do… ah."

Faced with that reprimand, something asserted itself in the back of the bewildered Otto's mind.

At first, when he saw the girl, it was a nagging, nebulous feeling that had been there from the start, but that gradually became clearer and clearer because of Beatrice's attitude.

Yes, Otto had recognized this girl. A sense of déjà vu that should not have cropped up in the Empire, a place he was visiting for the first time.

Otto: "Unbelievable, she is…"

Otto stared at the girl, as a startling possibility surfaced in his mind.

The possibility that drifted in the air was something that seemed to be placed in the corner of Otto's hazy memory. At that time, Otto's leg had been sliced open, and he was slipping in and out of consciousness from the pain and blood loss.

So, although he didn't see clearly who it was that had done it—

Emilia: "Beatrice, Otto-kun, what is it? Both of you, just looking at that girl…"

Confused by the reaction of Otto and Beatrice, Emilia addresses her without honorifics, but no one complemented her words. And then, that was no longer needed.

That was because there was no reason for the confusion to stay as confusion any longer.

Beatrice: “—It’s Gluttony, in fact.”

Emilia: “Eh…”

Emilia’s eyes widen as Beatrice speaks up in a calm, but hard tone of voice.

However, it was not only Emilia who froze, but everyone else who heard her voice, and it was at this moment that Beatrice’s voice had the attention of everyone in the room.

Therefore, everyone overheard the identity of this little girl.

Beatrice: “That girl is, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony… a girl named Louis Arneb, I suppose.”

3

—The moment Beatrice’s words were uttered, an atmosphere of volatility overtook the room.

Garfiel: “You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me. A Sin Archbishop? What the hell do ya think you’re doin’?”

Understandably, shock, horror, and confusion spread as Beatrice’s words echoed.

That was what the young girl had said. Ordinarily, no adult with sound judgment would accept a thing like that without hesitation. However, that was not the case for Otto and the others.

Naturally Otto, who vaguely recognized the girl’s—Louis’s appearance, as well the members of the camp who believed Beatrice would not tell a lie, immediately accepted it as a fact.

Accordingly, Garfiel had stepped forward, cracking his knuckles and baring his fangs.

Immediately, Garfiel narrowed the pupils of his green eyes and glared at Louis.

Garfiel: “On top of that, it’s Gluttony? Isn’t that the one who’s been hoggin’ the top spot on our amazin’ selves’ list of bastards to beat up? Is this the way of the Empire?!”

Medium: “W-wait! That’s not right! Louis-chan isn’t a bad girl!”

Blocking Garfiel’s view, Medium spread her arms to protect Louis.

Her wish to protect the girl behind her was commendable, but it was exceedingly unlikely that she could stop Garfiel’s wrath. In the first place—

Otto: “You say she is not a bad girl, but are you being serious? Just so you know, both of my legs were painfully gouged by her. I still have some garish scars, should I show them to you?”

Medium: “That wasn’t… L-Louis-chan, maybe it was a different girl…”

Otto: “Sorry but, she had clearly introduced herself as such. There were victims other than me… undoubtedly, an incalculable number of them. Some were our friends, and the friends of our allies.”

Medium: “B-but, but but…!”

With her eyes tearing up, Medium desperately searched for some words of rebuttal.

However, whether her intelligence was as childlike as she looked, or even if it was only her appearance that had shrunk, Otto intended to shut down this war of words.

In any case, it was impossible for anyone in the world to defend a Sin Archbishop.

Sin Archbishops and Witch Cultists were abominations of such a degree.

That’s why Emilia, identical in appearance to the Witch of Envy who was the cause of it all, was unable to escape ridicule for her impossible dream.

Medium: “Maybe, Louis-chan was like that before… but Louis-chan is different now!”

Garfiel: “Different from before? What the hell are ya basin’ that on?”

Medium: “Because! She was friends with Big bro, Subaru-chin, and Rem-chan! I’ve been with her this whole time… and she hasn’t done a single bad thing! She didn’t!”

Otto: “—With Natsuki-san?”

Medium’s desperate, futile resistance, shouting as she frantically searched for words, had hit his ears with something strange that was too large to ignore.

Subaru had acted together with Louis. —Surely it was not because he had not known who Louis was. Subaru should have quickly guessed Louis’s true identity.

Petra: “Otto-san, Subaru couldn’t have gone as far as losing his memory or something right?”

Otto: “For a moment, that fear washed over me, but from what I’ve heard from Mizelda-san and Zikr-san, I think that is not much of a concern.”

To Petra’s anxious words, Otto dismissed his anxieties due to the evidence put forth for consideration.

If it were the case that he had worked together with the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis, who was here; a situation where Subaru had been robbed of his “memories” was certainly scary.

Since he remembered Subaru, there was probably no concern that his “name” had been eaten; but whether his “memories” had been was a question of Subaru’s own personal symptoms.

However—

Emilia: “—The stories of Subaru we’ve heard in this city are still of the Subaru we know. So there’s no need to worry about that, Petra-chan… Petra-sama.”

Petra: “Thank you, Emily.”

At the words of Emilia, who had reached the same conclusion, Petra also finally showed an expression of relief.

Though that was the reasoning for why they could say Subaru’s “memories” had not been eaten, it was hard to say it was a basis for making a decision on how to deal with Louis who was here now.

Of course, there was no denying the question of why Subaru had not done anything about Louis one way or the other, but—

Otto: “Since it’s Natsuki-san, it probably was not a matter of getting his hands on a young-looking girlfriend or something like that. —Is it possible he was concerned about the Authority’s nullification requirements?”

Frederica: “We’ve talked about it before. Even if we defeat the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, we don’t have any definite proof that everything that was lost would come back.”

Otto: “It is troublesome, but if that’s the case then it is understandable why he did not act rashly.”

As Garfiel had said, crushing the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony was an ardent wish of theirs, as well as the Royal Candidates, and also for the world, that was hard to let go.

However, this was not because of a simple desire for revenge; their primary goal was the restoration of the damage Gluttony had wrought.

If taking Louis’s life would return the victims of her Authority to how they were before, there would not be a problem.

However, what would they do if the victims were not restored? Subaru might have been wary that if they acted rashly, the way to return the victims to normal may be permanently lost.

Garfiel: “—I know what you’re thinking Ottobro. But that doesn’t mean we hafta let the pipsqueak go free.”

Despite understanding Otto’s thoughts, Garfiel arrogantly declared that.

In truth, he was right. Even though he was afraid that taking her life would eliminate the possibility, it was hard to believe taking her into custody would cause any problems.

Rather, the danger of leaving a Sin Archbishop alone was likely far greater.

Therefore in times like these, Garfiel, who tended to make snap decisions, was reliable.

Bit by bit, Garfiel closed the gap in order to pin down the dangerous Sin Archbishop. At Garfiel’s approach, Louis shrank her small body down with an “Uu.”.

Medium: “Abel-chin! Say something!”

Protecting Louis behind her and facing off against Garfiel, Medium called for Abel.

Abel, who had not interjected during this course of events, turned his attention to Medium’s appeal.

Abel: “What do you want me to say? Handling this is your business.”

Medium: “But, I can’t persuade them well!”

Abel: “Don’t foist the responsibility of your vice on me. After all, it is unneeded.”

Medium’s eyes wavered as she was told it was unnecessary.

Perhaps Abel’s cruel way of speaking had given her the impression that he had forsaken Louis. However, in truth that had not been the case.

Abel had said there was no need for himself to get involved.

Garfiel: “M, My amazin’ self’s not goin’ to go easy on ya even if you’re a woman!”

???: “That’s splendid. Since otherwise, you might end up using my beauty as an excuse for your shoddiness.”

In front of Garfiel, who had paused, Yorna had stepped in directly between them and stood leisurely.

Wearing thick soles on top of being tall to begin with, Yorna looked down on Garfiel, kiseru in hand. Returning her gaze head on, Garfiel fiercely bared his fangs.

Yorna would defend Louis, and had declared her intention to do so.

Since she had originally come to Guaral from the Demon City alongside Louis, they had known she had no intention of eliminating her, but that in itself was hard to believe.

Otto: “I will say it again, but she is a Sin Archbishop. Surely you’re not saying that the horrors of the Witch Cult are not known in the Vollachian Empire?”

Yorna: “We know the deeds of those ruffians, and their repulsiveness. Naturally, we also know the malice of those calling themselves Sin Archbishops.”

Otto: “I hear the wounds of the Fortified City of Garkla still have not healed.”

The large imperial city had been destroyed in a rampage of Greed, a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.

The offender, Greed, was defeated in Pristella, but it was common knowledge throughout the world that there was no choice about where the Witch Cult would rampage. Naturally, in the Empire as well.

In spite of that, the fact was that they had left Louis at large.

Otto: “Do you think you can win them over? I have to say that is imprudent.”

Abel: “If something is useful, I shall consider how to use it. It is you people that are severely mistaken in thinking that all would take your side.”

Otto: “…”

Abel dodged Otto’s questioning, and effortlessly pointed that out condescendingly.

As he had said, the reaction of those gathered on the top floor of City Hall was mixed. Of course there were those who appeared disgusted and hostile upon hearing that Louis was a Sin Archbishop. However, like Medium and Yorna, a considerable number of them showed reluctance towards eliminating Louis.

In particular—

Mizelda: “—I’ll say this: Subaru and Rem are both our friends. Since they were the ones who brought Louis with them, they are the only two who have the right to decide Louis’s fate.”

Frederica: “Mizelda-sama…”

Mizelda: “Of course, if the Chieftain disagrees then I will yield.”

With eyes conveying a strong sense of purpose, and having cast a piercing gaze that way, Mizelda would try to take the side protecting Louis. Frederica, who had had many opportunities to exchange words with her at City Hall, gasped under that strong gaze.

Mizelda was the representative of the Shudraq, and the other Shudraqians would follow her. —No, more accurately, they would follow the Chieftain who had returned to the city.

The target of Mizelda’s words and gaze was the woman dressed formally in black, who had been entrusted with the decision. Taritta, the new Chieftain of the Shudraq was asked by her older sister, “What should we do?”.

Taritta: “My opinion is the same as Sister’s. However, this decision wasn’t because Sister said so, as I am protecting Louis for my own reasons. Since I owe Louis a debt of gratitude.”

Mizelda: “Ha, I see.”

At Taritta’s clear answer, Mizelda relaxed her lips and nodded.

Otto’s side did not know what these sisters’ relationship was like, but it seemed like Mizelda had happily accepted Taritta’s assertion.

However, they did not have the luxury to consider that heartwarming.

Beatrice: “A Sin Archbishop, on top of that someone like Gluttony; turning a blind eye cannot be done, in fact. Will you all cool your heads, I suppose?”

From Emilia’s arms, Beatrice’s words were filled with strength.

She had come this far by suppressing her exhaustion, but in an emergency it was necessary for her to display her abilities. Like Subaru, not hesitating in such situations was a bad habit of Beatrice’s.

Emilia: “That’s no good, everyone calm down! Fighting like this—”

While the spirits of Beatrice and Garfiel, alongside those of Yorna and the Shudraq, had risen in preparation for battle; Emilia tried to stop the dispute with a heartbroken look on her face.

In fact, if it came to seriously stopping the dispute through brute force, Emilia was the one with the ability best suited for doing so.

If she were to use her immense mana to freeze Guaral, Otto would aim to secure Louis in the meantime. At worst, they would cut ties with everyone in Guaral.

Emilia: “Is more dangerous than turning a blind eye to a Sin Archbishop—”

That was when Otto watched for an unguarded moment.

???: “—What is the matter, you plebeians, have you not yet fought enough? That is quite hot-blooded, is it not?”

Otto: “…”

Suddenly, a powerful new voice shook the atmosphere within the large chamber of City Hall.

It belonged to a woman whose shoes clacked loudly as she leisurely came up the stairs. Some time ago, Otto had said that Emilia, Abel, and Yorna had presences that were impossible to ignore, but the owner of that voice too, was cloaked in an air which did not match that impression.

With the hem of her blood-red dress swaying, a beautiful woman leisurely appeared.

She had fair skin and orange hair, and had boldly adorned herself with numerous ornaments, but even the glitter of those jewels lost out to her natural beauty—Priscilla Barielle.

In the Fortress City of Guaral, the final person who had an influential voice had appeared.

Following behind her as she walked unhurriedly, was her attendant Schult, whose small, humble movements drew attention, as well as Al, with his unforgettably eccentric appearance.

Together with Abel, Medium, and the others, Al was also one of the people who had headed to Chaosflame with Subaru. On his way back, he had gone to meet up with Priscilla, and now it seemed they were entering in together.

Originally there was supposed to be one more person, Heinkel, who was nowhere to be seen, but that was a minor detail.

More importantly, from Otto’s point of view, a being had joined in who seemed like she would make this volatile atmosphere even worse.

Fickle and powerful, Priscilla carried such a presence that was impossible to predict as to which side she would choose.

Rather, it almost seemed like it would be better if they could just conclude she was an enemy.

Priscilla: “I made my way here after hearing that Abel and the others had returned, but I had not expected this kind of atmosphere so soon. Even if the city is this devastated, it seems a starved dog cannot choose where it barks.”

Emilia: “Priscilla! Everyone is reaaally tense right now! Don’t say strange things.”

Priscilla: “Nonsense. If I had not come, you would have made it snow once again. Let me tell you, no matter how chilly you make it, I shall not stop baring my shoulders. Still, it does get cold.”

Emilia: “I’m sorry about that, but…”

Emilia had an absurd exchange with Priscilla as she entered, then apologized.

However, the reason the end of that sentence had lost its strength was not because of Emilia’s remorse.

It was because the high-pitched clatter of a hard object falling had reverberated throughout the large chamber.

Medium: “—Yorna-chan?”

Suddenly, Medium turned her head and murmured, looking up at the woman standing just in front of her. Her blue eyes stared at the single kiseru that had fallen at Yorna’s feet.

Yorna had been fiddling with it in her hands, a fine item that did not seem cheap.

Louis: “Uu…”

With a groan, Louis, who was at the center of the conversation, picked up the fallen kiseru. However, Yorna did not accept the picked up kiseru when it was offered to her.

Instead, Yorna’s gaze was solely on Priscilla; the presence that had just set foot into the large hall.

Staring at Priscilla, Yorna's eyes widened.

Yorna, who usually seemed imperturbable and unflappable, was astonished.

Her painted crimson lips were wide open, trembling.

Yorna: "Pr, Prisca…?"

She called Priscilla that. —A different name that didn't sound familiar.

Frozen in shock, the wide-eyed Yorna addressed Priscilla by that similar but different name. Three people present responded to that name.

One was Zikr, another was Abel, and the last one, needless to say, was Priscilla.

Zikr looked at Yorna speculatively, Abel contemplatively, and Priscilla scornfully.

Priscilla: "What, you? Why do you behave like that towards me… no."

Priscilla looked back at Yorna with her crimson eyes, not concealing her displeasure.

Without pause, her sharp tongue seemed ready to strike her, but right before; she stopped short. Priscilla again gazed intently at Yorna.

Yorna's blue eyes and Priscilla's blood-red eyes had locked with one another, and a moment of silence passed.

Then Priscilla let out an "Ahh" like an exhale,

Priscilla: "—If I think about it, you are indeed mine dear mother, aren't you?"

Like that, a remark which would give rise to an explosion distinct from the already volatile situation, had been stated matter-of-factly.

Chapter 79:
A Roar of Scarlet Laughter

1

—Priscilla's sudden appearance had brought forth a whirlwind through the power of her words.

???: "…"

But at that moment, a certain silence and blankness pervaded the hall, giving everyone the illusion that time had stopped.

It was a statement that could not be misheard, but she didn't quite understand what it meant. She couldn't get the meaning correctly from the sound, that's the impression she had.

"Dear Mother", it took some time for her to search her brain for the word that the sound means.

However—

Emilia: "—? Yorna is Priscilla's mother?"

Emilia tilted her head curiously, and as soon as a different sound for "mother" came forth from her, "Dear Mother" and "mother" connected, and she understood the essence of "Dear Mother" and "mother".

Controlling the fluttering sensation in his own head, Otto compared the two people who had his attention — Yorna and Priscilla. Yorna who was staring at her, unable to move, and Priscilla who was looking at the former with a calm expression.

They had different hair and eye colors, and they were of different races to begin with.

Of course, in the case of mixed blood, there were individual differences in which the blood of a parent was stronger, but Priscilla and Yorna had no similarities in appearance.

If one could say so, they both had lustrous good looks but—

Otto: “If we treated people like family at that level, the world would be full of big families.”

Concluding this, Otto held his confusion in check.

Still, hearing about Priscilla and Yorna’s relationship made some sense. —Priscilla’s stern attitude and personality certainly gave off a strong sense of imperial style.

Priscilla: “I can feel the unpleasant eyes that are fixed on mineself, but that is okay.”

Otto gasped at the warning look in Priscilla’s eyes, reading the intent of her gaze. Leaving Otto aside, Priscilla looked at Emilia and said,

Priscilla: “Half-devil, it is as you say. To think that she had become one of the “Nine Divine Generals”. Since I was a child I supposed so, but how strange it is.”

Emilia: “Well, I’m surprised. But now that you mention it, I guess you both look a lot alike.”

Priscilla supported her chin with the fan in her hand, and Emilia nodded in reply.

Just before, Otto had denied to himself any similarities in external appearance between the two, so while Emilia’s unexpected judgment worried him, he had set that aside for the time being.

The problem was—

Yorna: “—Wait.”

Priscilla’s words were deterred by Yorna herself, who had been unexpectedly singled out by her. She closed her eyes for a moment, and erased the apparent turmoil from her expression,

Yorna: “I was a little surprised, but that is an unacceptable statement. Why do you think I am your mother…”

Priscilla: “Stop making up trifling evasions. If you plan to trick me, you must change your soul. No matter how you change your appearance, you cannot deceive my scarlet eyes.”

Yorna: “—Hk.”

Yorna’s expression of feigned calm once again stiffened at Priscilla’s decisive response.

Priscilla’s language was conceptual and, in addition, held no intention to compromise with others. This made it hard to take in the exact meaning of what was said, but it seemed to have been fatal to Yorna.

Yorna was clearly flustered by Priscilla’s gaze and the sharpness of her tongue.

However, Yorna wasn’t the only one who showed strong turmoil on this occasion—

???: “—Absurd.”

Clearly, the amazement towards the situation at hand spilled over.

It was faint, so faint that it could have been missed, but it was coming from the other party, and Otto did not miss the voice that spilled out from behind the Oni mask.

Abel, a man who seemed cool-headed rather than calm and unperturbed, made that one comment.

“Priscilla” he called out, while hiding the slight agitation behind his mask,

Abel: “Are you serious? Yorna Mishigure is Sandra Benedict?”

Priscilla: “—I see, you did not know that either, Abel. I do not blame you. I have no way of knowing except by my own words.”

Emilia: “But, you noticed that Priscilla isn’t being told anything, right?”

Priscilla: “Do not interrupt me. Shut up, you half-devil.”

Emilia: “You don’t have to say it that way…”

Priscilla, who responded to Abel’s question in a nonchalant manner, glared at Emilia, who had interrupted her, in order to silence her.

Whatever the case may be, this was an exchange that left out those in the Kingdom, including Otto, and those in the Empire who did not know what was going on. Otto was especially interested in the content that delved into Priscilla’s internal affairs, as she was also a Royal Candidate, but—

Garfiel: “—Put off the unexpected reunion talk. Right now, the priority is this kid’s story!”

Garfiel snarled as he bared his fangs, undaunted by the change in the air.

The opponent who those green eyes pierced was Louis; still protected by Yorna and Medium. Garfiel was right, they could not move forward or backward until they decided what to do with her.

Of course, the conclusion in Otto’s mind that Louis should be restrained and deprived of her freedom was unassailable.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self isn’t sayin’ to kill her, but I’m sayin’ to tie her up and roll her over. That’s the one thing my amazin’ self won’t compromise… “Tinos limbs are going away.”“

Al: “—That’s probably going to be something bro doesn’t want to hear.”

Garfiel: “Huh?”

Garfiel, who concurred with Otto, bared his fangs at the remark.

The person who interrupted them was Al, who had come up to the top level with Priscilla. He was still the same eccentric looking guy, scratching the nape of his neck with his one-armed hand in a somewhat unenthusiastic manner.

Al: “First of all, lemme apologize to you first. —I’m sorry I couldn’t bring bro home after we went to Chaosflame together.”

Emilia: “Al… no, thanks for apologizing. But I’m not the only one disappointed that I didn’t get to meet Subaru, Beatrice is the one disappointed the most.”

Al: “Oh, then I’m sorry to that child and to the others as well.”

Al bowed his head as he uttered an apology for Subaru’s absence.

Al’s usual frivolous attitude notwithstanding, his apology seemed genuine. However, a sincere apology does not necessarily lead to forgiveness or a good impression.

Otto: “If anything, an easy apology will only increase the number of people who will take advantage of you. In fact, if you’re willing to apologize, I would prefer that you don’t interfere.”

Al: “That’s harsh. But, as I said earlier, doing such a thing to this lil’ girl is something that bro… Natsuki Subaru doesn’t wish for.”

Garfiel: “So, why the hell?! You’re just sayin’ random things…”

Al: “—I too, tried to kill the lil’ one and was stopped by bro.”

Garfiel’s irritated words were drowned out by Al’s dry words. At this response, that caused Garfiel’s breathing to hitch, Al shrugged his shoulders and nodded at Louis,

Al: “You guys are like that. Isn’t it natural that I’d consider killing her? But even then…”

Otto: “Did Natsuki-san reject it?”

Al: “To be honest, I couldn’t believe my ears. Originally, I was thinking that he had some lil’ stranger girl with him, but then I found out that she was a Sin Archbishop. He was trying to protect her with his body. I thought I knew that bro had a lot of crazy ideas, but he exceeded my imagination.”

As he said this, Al’s gaze shot through his helmet at Louis. Under the gaze, Louis groaned “Uh—…“, but instead of hiding behind Medium and the others, she looked straight back at him.

The light in those blue eyes was neither dull nor feeble.

Otto: “…”

As he watched, Otto examined Al’s testimony.

Otto himself believed that the reason Subaru was not able to get his hands on Louis was “naivete”.

The “naivete” that Subaru and Emilia possessed was both a weakness and a strength.

Once you let go of it, you can never get it back, and even though Otto felt like it was difficult to handle, he never wanted it to be gone.

Otto: “We, the people around us, can make decisions without such “naivete”.”

Al: “I understand, bro. But it’s hard now. After all, we’re talking in front of all these people. There is no going back from that.”

Frederica: “…Otto-sama”

Frederica stepped firmly and called out to Otto’s profile. Her beautiful eyes flickered with concern and anxiety at the prospect of taking action here.

Otto also felt that it was a mistake to mention the identity of Louis here. —No, to start with, the problem was that Louis had already been accepted by the people involved.

Taritta and Mizelda’s resolution became prevalent in the Fortress City.

Therefore—

Otto: “So, you are saying you are just going to let her roam free?”

Al: “Sure, I wouldn’t have forgiven her if she’d done something wrong. But…”

Medium: “Louis-chan was always trying to protect Subaru-chin. She never misbehaved while she was with us. She never will!”

Medium raised a frantic voice, taking in Al’s words.

Her statement was just wishful thinking, and Louis’s actions to date did not guarantee what Louis would do in the future. That was the biggest focal point of the issue.

Petra: “I watched the Master do it, so maybe I can make an oath magic seal…”

Otto: “—. We should not do that. I thought, for a moment, that was possible.”

Petra hesitantly suggested the idea, but Otto rejected it.

Petra spoke of a “magic seal,” a binding of the soul to make the recipient keep their word, something Roswaal has inscribed on his body that, if broken, would kill him.

Roswaal, as the mastermind behind the events that occurred in the “Sanctuary” and at the former Roswaal mansion, personally inscribed it to demonstrate his surrender to the camp.

As the words suggested, a “magic seal” was clearly “magic.”

Superstitious as it may seem, some say that magic would eventually rebound on the user. If one continued to bind others through magic, the magic would eventually burn one’s soul as well.

He had no intention of having Petra take on such a burden, and even if she were able to do so and inscribe a magic seal that would bind Louis’ actions, it would be no more than insurance.

Otto: “Because we do not have a full picture of what we can bind to buy us peace of mind.”

The Authority of a Sin Archbishop, no one knew its full extent.

As long as they did not know what hidden curveballs would be thrown out, ultimately, no matter how they were bound, Otto's wariness of Louis could never be lifted. That is, unless they took a life.

If so, then not making use of anything like a magic seal, which could lead them to carelessness, was what would keep their vigilance steady.

Otto: "Regrettably, that is my conclusion."

Garfiel: "Ottobro! Ya sure about that?! That's a Sin Archbishop!"

Hearing Otto's thoughts, Garfiel raised his voice in a scream.

Even though he was absolutely right, Otto understood the frustration of being forced into a situation where he felt he was being stifled, wanting to empathize with his younger brother's heartache.

Otto: "However, discussing it here will not get everyone's approval. With the current situation in which there is still a lot left to be heard, I do not wish for things to break down with all of you."

Priscilla: "Therefore, if we are to use force, it should be after hearing what they have to say, correct? How obstinate."

Otto: "I do not intend to do such a rash thing, but I will take that in itself as a compliment, Priscilla-sama."

When Priscilla brilliantly expressed Otto's sentiment, he at least attempted to put up a good front.

Whatever the case, to Garfiel, the answer was a frustrating reality.

Abel, who has considerable influence in the city, and the "People of the Shudraq," who have shown their non-negotiable stance on the treatment of Louis—there was no way to dissuade them.

There was no basis for eliminating Louis beyond her being a Sin Archbishop.

Since that did not work, there would be no other recourse remaining on their side but to use force. However, killing Louis would not necessarily erase the effects of the Authority of Gluttony, and would it be worth it to have the disadvantage of turning all of the Empire against them thereafter?

Emilia: “Fighting like that just makes all of us a little less anxious. That’s how it is, right?”

Otto and Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel, fangs gnashing, and Otto with one eye closed.

Emilia’s amethyst eyes flashed as she traced the flow of the conversation and came to this conclusion. Beatrice, in her arms, called out her name, “Emily.”

Emilia: “I’m sorry, …Lady Beatrice. You’re worried a lot, I know you are.”

Beatrice: “…As long as you understand properly, good, I suppose.”

They exchanged glances and words very close to each other, and Beatrice’s round eyes were downcast. Emilia nodded her head, understanding Beatrice’s feelings, and turned her gaze toward Louis and Medium.

The girl who leans on her like a sister returned her gaze.

Emilia: “That little girl… Louis might be reaaally dangerous. That’s just what Otto-kun and the others have said, and you know that, don’t you?”

Medium: “…Yeah, I know.”

Emilia: “But you didn’t see Louis do anything that was dangerous or bad; did Louis do anything to you or Subaru?”

Medium: “Hmm, she tried to protect us. It’s true; I’m not lying. Isn’t that right? Abel-chin, Al-chin, Taritta-chan, and Yorna-chan?”

Staring directly at Emilia, Medium was trying her best to choose the right words. As she decided, she asked those who had returned from the Demon City with her to agree.

Abel and Yorna, both still recovering from their earlier exchange with Priscilla, reacted sluggishly, but Al shrugged and Taritta nodded.

Taritta: “Yes, Louis certainly tried to protect everyone. She was very fond of Subaru, in my opinion.”

Otto: “I would say “As expected of the Lolimancer”, but the atmosphere’s not one that can be joked about like that.”

Beatrice: “…That moniker, Betty does not like it very much, in fact! Be careful, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s disgruntled, low voice slightly relaxed the hostilities that had been present just up till a moment ago; perhaps Beatrice had decided to leave it to Emilia’s judgment as to how to proceed with Louis.

Even with the same conclusion, Emilia would softly adjust it to what Otto and Beatrice had presented.

Then, Emilia spoke, looking at Louis.

Emilia: “You were concerned about Subaru. I don’t believe that’s a lie. So, I want to believe in you as much as this girl who is trying so hard to believe in you.”

Garfiel: “—Hk, Emilia-sama, she’s!”

Emilia: “Even Garfiel was so biting towards us at first. But now he’s reaaally good friends with us, isn’t he?”

Emilia’s discourse was a bit disingenuous, given that Garfiel and Louis were in different positions and under different circumstances. However, when Emilia said it, it was true that it was hard to respond back.

As the situation progressed, Garfiel’s cheeks hardened in bitterness. Emilia’s response was a small apologetic “Sorry.”

Emilia: “It might be difficult. But I think it’s best to start there, if you can talk about it properly, instead of going all in and just being so hostile at the beginning. Of course, sometimes you have to be hostile from the start…”

Garfiel: “…”

Emilia: “I’m here with all of you, and I think it would be nice if everyone here could get along with me. I want to tell them that I want to be friends with them. For that, I have to open my clenched hand first.”

Saying this, Emilia looked down at Beatrice in her arms. Beatrice looked at her gently and then gave a small nod.

Seeing Beatrice’s nod, Emilia slowly stepped forward.

Right in front of Yorna, past the glaring Garfiel, and in front of the small Medium sheltering little Louis behind her back.

And then—

Emilia: “This is reaaally a roundabout way of saying this, but… I believe in Zikr-san and Mizelda-san and others who have been so kind to Subaru and Rem, and I want to believe Medium-chan and everyone else who believes in them. So please let me believe in you, who Medium-chan believes in.”

Louis: “…Ah, Uu.”

Emilia: “Not us, but for these children that are being very nice to you, it’s reaaally nice to know that there are people who believe in you.”

As she said this, Emilia gently held out her right hand to Louis.

With Beatrice being held with her left hand, Emilia lowered her waist, moving towards Louis. Emilia’s action made even Medium, who was trying to protect Louis, suddenly move towards her.

Emilia: “Louis-chan.”

And so she called out to them.

Perhaps it was her appeal that prompted Louis to extend her hand, or perhaps Emilia's words had some meaning for the Sin Archbishop bereft of a human heart.

As Emilia held out her right hand, Louis placed her own right hand on top of hers.

Otto was momentarily concerned about the possibility of the Authority being activated on Emilia as a result of this, but Otto regretted this concern and felt that he should despise it with all his heart.

Either way—

Louis: "Uau."

Emilia: "Hmm, I'm worried about Subaru, too."

Embracing each other's hands, Emilia smiled in reply, and that was the resolution for both Otto and the Emilia Camp. The conclusion was "put on hold."

—However, Otto was proud of Emilia, because even though the pitfalls were the same, the way Emilia said it and the way he would have said it would have been different.

2

Garfiel: "—My amazin' self won't take my eyes off of ya, y'know."

Regarding the handling of Louis, it had been decided to be placed "on hold".

In response to that, Garfiel, who until the very end, had declared that he could not accept it, asserted his stance towards Emilia and the girl she had shaken hands with.

Since Garfiel's concerns and warnings were natural, Otto would not interject.

Otto: “A Witch Cultist, let alone a Sin Archbishop is not something I can imagine changing their ways, after all.”

Otto’s dry, pragmatic thinking came to that conclusion.

Even if it had been a touching historic exchange between Emilia and Louis. However, while he thought that it was not like himself, Otto had also thought this.

—The defeats of the White Whale, the Great Rabbit, and the Sin Archbishops of Sloth and Greed had also been unimaginable.

It had been Natsuki Subaru who had, in little over a year, brought these things about many times.

The world saw these as achievements of the Emilia camp, but everyone in the camp understood that Subaru’s contributions were especially significant. Therefore, he had to thoroughly consider the possibility.

It might have been that, once again, Natsuki Subaru had done something unthinkable.

Otto: “I do not like it…”

The question of how the people around them would evaluate Subaru, when that actually happened, had him feeling crestfallen.

He thought that others should also get to know Subaru’s true humanity quickly—.

Zikr: “Once the discussion has settled down, if I may?”

In the large hall where the mood of the discussion had relaxed, Zikr had raised his hand and, with those words, began to speak.

Having drawn attention to himself, he gave the preface of “With your permission” to his remarks.

Zikr: “Although I am very interested in the relationship between Miss Priscilla and General First-Class Yorna, there are some things I want to first confirm with Abel-dono.”

Abel: "—. You may speak."

Zikr: "Yes."

Abel, who had been keeping his mouth shut, assented when this topic had arisen.

Although he had not interjected regarding how Louis would be handled, it seemed he had put a brief pause to the shock from before. Having been addressed, he gazed at Zikr, his black eyes urging him to continue speaking.

Zikr: "I am aware that General First-Class Yorna's cooperation has been acquired, and that the collapse of Demon City of Chaosflame… That as a result, Miss Natsumi has fallen into danger. What I wanted to inquire additionally was about a rumor that has spread over the past few days—"

Abel: "—A rumor."

Zikr: "Yes. —The rumor that somewhere, the child of His Excellency the Emperor, a Crown Prince of black hair, is present."

Zikr reverently bowed his head, as he informed Abel.

That rumor—one which alluded to the existence of the son of the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, had been spread, and had even reached Otto's ears.

On top of that, the rumor said that the Emperor's son had a rebel army—that is to say, he was the leader of the group gathered at the Fortress City of Guaral, and that he was flying the banner of revolt against the Emperor, or something of the like.

However, he did not remember seeing anyone who had looked like that in the city.

Zikr: "According to the reports, this rumor had spread from the East. It has already spread all over the Empire, but its source…"

Abel: "It is as you have guessed, it was spread from the Demon City. —It takes power to threaten the throne. And power will only gather under a great cause.”

With his arms crossed and shaking his head slowly, Abel answered dispassionately.

That answer was convincing, but in the first place, an effort to threaten the Emperor’s throne was not an issue their camp really wanted to be involved with.

As for Otto, his focus had turned to how to curb the possibility that Emilia would say she could not abandon these people, having met them once.

Due to that, it could be said that he was late in noticing the possibilities he normally would have noticed.

Therefore—

???: “…A black-haired, Crown Prince.”

Petra, who seemed to be pondering, was the one who had muttered that bit by bit.

She had been brooding over something, forming a small crease on her pretty eyebrows. Then, she timidly expressed her thoughts.

Those were—

Petra: “Um, according to what Medium-san and the others had said earlier, Subaru became smaller right? Like me or Beatrice-chan.”

Frederica: “That is what has been said. I cannot really imagine it, but if it was Subaru, it is possible to have encountered such a misfortune… Ah.”

Otto: “—!”

Nodding at Petra’s words, Frederica’s eyes widened as she sorted through the information. Almost simultaneously with Frederica’s realization, Otto had also understood what Petra had been thinking.

And now, he had to curse how off-the-mark his own thinking had been.

Petra: “Could it be that the rumored child of the Emperor is Subaru?”

In the place of Otto, who had cursed that possibility, Petra had directly cut to the heart of the matter.

Unmoving, the girl’s eyes were fixed on Abel, and through the Oni mask, his black eyes met them. Without the slightest waver, Abel calmly nodded in assent to Petra’s questioning,

Abel: “Correct.”

Petra: “—hk, Something like that…”

With the look in her eyes sharpening at that short answer, Petra had tried to raise her voice.

However, faster than Petra could respond,

???: “—Ku, hahahahaha!”

Like so, a wholeheartedly amused voice resounded.

Laughter that had not paid heed to the circumstances, shattered the mood in the large chamber. However, the reason no one could raise their voice immediately after that outburst was because that loud laughter was Priscilla’s.

She held a fan to her mouth, as if to not show her teeth while she laughed.

Priscilla: “Of all things, that foolish commoner as the Crown Prince, that makes me laugh. Ahh, Abel, you, do you plan to kill mineself with laughter? You have considerably changed your way of doing things, have you not?”

???: “Princess?”

Priscilla: “What is it, you should laugh as well, Al. No, did you also take part in this conspiracy? If so, how skillfully have you made mineself laugh! I must say you have performed the duties of a clown splendidly.”

Turning towards a surprised Al, Priscilla looked pleased while commending him. The unpredictability of Priscilla’s reaction had temporarily taken away the zeal in the large chamber.

Of course, that did not mean it had erased all the confusion.

Emilia: “Umm, what do you mean? There’s no way that Subaru is the Emperor’s child, right? After all, Subaru came from beyond the Great Waterfall.”

Frederica: “Emily, that is one of Subaru-sama’s jokes.”

Emilia: “Is that so? Then, for real?”

Otto: “As for the question of whether he is a child of the emperor, it is not true. A fabrication.”

Emilia: “Eh? Eh? Eh?”

A dizzied Emilia expressed that she did not understand a thing.

In short, Subaru’s infantilization and the goal of Abel’s group had luckily aligned.

Frederica: “To be precise, I think it would be more proper to say they made use of it once it happened.”

Otto agreed with what Frederica had said, that this had been an effective use of the situation.

When Abel and the others had raised a rebellion, they wanted a good pretext like that. To act as a figurehead for that purpose, there was no one more convincing than the Emperor’s child.

Of course, it was quite possible that using someone who did not exist as the leader would be a double-edged sword.

Otto: “Since Natsuki-san does really exist, do you intend to use him as a double edged sword?”

Abel: "An insolent manner of speaking, but it is to my liking. In that case, you should also understand."

Otto: "—Though, it is frustrating."

Rightfully, Otto and the others would be justified in resenting Subaru's circumstances being exploited.

However, although his reply that it was frustrating was not a lie, it was true that there was a certain noticeable value in the course of events Abel had devised.

That was because—

Frederica: "—For Subaru-sama, whose whereabouts are unknown, it would cause the likelihood of him losing his life to be greatly reduced."

Otto: "…Yes."

Otto nodded bitterly at Frederica's understanding.

Emilia and Garfiel were slow in comprehending Otto and Frederica's thoughts. With the two showing their confusion on their faces, they racked their brains and asked "What does that mean?"

Emilia: "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, but…"

Garfiel: "My amazin' self gets that Captain's been given a weird title. But, wouldn't makin' him the Captain of the rebellion be even more dangerous?"

Otto: "No, it would draw attention, but the threats to his life would be lightened more or less. Because the value of the Crown Prince can only be effectively demonstrated while he is alive."

The Crown Prince, a dissident threatening the reign of Vincent Vollachia.

This existence within the rebel cause had utilizable value to both allies and enemies of the current Emperor. It goes without saying for the rebelling side, but if he was kept alive there were many ways to use him on the Emperor's side as well.

Executing him would dampen the spirits of the rebel army, while a living Crown Prince could be used to force them to give up their righteous cause.

Otto: "That is to say, no matter where Natsuki-san was hurled off to, and even if he was taken into custody, the likelihood of him avoiding being killed on the spot is high. Instead of that—"

Emilia: "Instead of that?"

Otto: "…The struggle for the Vollachian throne, any way out of this rebellion has vanished."

Receiving a blessing goes hand in hand with having to bear responsibilities.

Regardless of whether he wished for it or not, Subaru was right in the middle of the rebellion of the Vollachian Empire, at the highest position, placed as the figurehead.

For that reason—

Priscilla: "—Well, how can you not help but laugh?"

And with those words, they could finally guess why Priscilla, who had gotten the answer well before, was cruelly laughing.

Chapter 80:
Iris and the King of Thorns

1

—The complicated discussion in the large chamber was approaching a temporary conclusion.

Zikr: “To be frank, the situation had been vastly different from what we had expected at the start. However, it can be said that averting the fall of the Fortress City, as well as acquiring the cooperation of General First-Class Yorna are certainly good results.”

It was Zikr who promptly gathered the topics fluttering about and began summarizing them.

The man with the fluffy hair looked over the faces of everyone in the large chamber with those wide eyes of his. At Zikr’s words, Emilia said, “Yes, that’s right,” with a nod.

Emilia: “Some disheartening things also happened, but the fact that everyone is gathered here is because we did our best. This time, let’s rely on that and fulfill everyone’s goals.”

Zikr: “As expected, thank you for your beautiful response, Miss Emily. It is as you said, let us strive to fulfill the goals of everyone here. To that end, there is one more thing I must tell you.”

Otto: “In the end, there is one more thing? …Assuming it is a continuation from our discussion just before, I do not really have a good feeling about it.”

Seeing Zikr’s single raised finger as he nodded at Emilia’s words, Otto grumbled as his cheeks stiffened.

As if supporting Otto’s unpleasant hunch, Zikr continued with an “Indeed”,

Zikr: “This would be a continuation of the previous discussion. This discussion also involves Miss Natsumi, who is being treated like the black-haired Crown Prince."

Emilia: "Natsumi… huh? But, isn't it Subaru who's being treated like the child of the Emper…"

Frederica: "Emily, we do not know how Subaru-sama is introducing himself in the Empire."

Emilia: "Ah, I see. That's right. I'm sorry, I got it all mixed up in my head."

Having interrupted the discussion, Emilia placed her hand over her mouth.

The alias "Natsumi Schwartz" that Subaru was introducing himself under in the Empire was his plan for concealing his true identity, while informing Emilia and the others searching for him of his whereabouts.

For that reason, Subaru was intentionally using the name of someone Emilia and the others knew—he was using the name of Emilia's friend, Natsumi Schwartz.

When Zikr met Subaru, it was when he had been using that alias.

Therefore, Zikr was using "Natsumi" to refer to Subaru. That was what had gotten mixed up inside Emilia.

Emilia: "Huh? But, if that's the case, why is he being called Miss Natsumi…"

Beatrice: "Keep talking, in fact, shaggy-head. It will soon be time for Betty to sleep again, I suppose."

Emilia: "Ah, I see. That's right. I'm sorry, I have to think about Beatrice right now."

The question that had emerged within Emilia was sunk down by the voice of Beatrice in her arms. If it had anything to do with Subaru, it was natural that Beatrice would want to hear it even more than Emilia.

For the sake of the girl who could not stay awake for very long, she had to set aside her present questions.

Prompted by Beatrice’s and Emilia’s gazes, Zikr started by saying, “As a matter of fact”.

Zikr: “Strictly speaking, it is not about Miss Natsumi herself. I am worried about her welfare as her whereabouts are unknown, but I believe that just as Abel-dono had thought, wherever she is found she will be courteously protected. However—”

Emilia: “Is there something making you uncertain about Subaru being in danger?”

Zikr: “As I prefaced, it is not about Miss Natsumi herself. A separate situation that has extended from that…the existence of His Excellency the Emperor’s child is now well-known publicly, causing changes in the Empire’s internal situation. In other words—”

???: “—Even in other lands, the flames of war have begun to rise?”

Cutting off Zikr’s words, speaking so in a quiet voice had been Abel.

Zikr bowed his head reverently with a “Yes”, and Abel ran his fingers along the cheek of his Oni mask without looking Zikr’s way, hiding the expression on his face.

However, just before his hand could hide his expression, Emilia’s eyes had surely grasped it.

—That Abel’s lips had very slightly taken the shape of a sadistic smile.

Emilia: “Though, I don’t think this is an amusing discussion at all…”

???: “As the half-devil said, it is quite an unpleasant subject. That those who straddle the fence would take advantage of these convenient circumstances.”

Priscilla agreed to what Emilia had muttered as she looked at Abel, who had hidden his expression.

While she declared that she would not wear a coat no matter how cold it was and shrugged her white shoulders,

Priscilla: “If you have a righteous cause, and have acquired the chance to fulfill your own desires, all that is left is to decide under what ”timing” you shall act. If too early, then even yourself shall be made to bleed, but if too late, even should you take part, you shall come home empty-handed. Even if it is a period for ascertainment, try to think about it.”

Otto: “Uprisings in various places… Although, I had heard that Emperor Vincent Vollachia’s reign was stable and that people of the Empire were enjoying the peace.”

Abel: “In the end, peace and the like are nothing more than fleeting, ephemeral, dreams.”

At Priscilla’s and Otto’s words, Abel lowered the hand he had placed on his face. Out of the lips where any trace of the smile Emilia had seen had already disappeared, Abel continued speaking dispassionately.

Abel: “The true nature of the people of the Empire—no, the true nature of mankind lies in conflict, and as long as there is life, the blaze known as belligerence shall not be extinguished. Even if you try to put a lid on it, the heat therein shall continue to fester inside.”

Otto: “And eventually, with no place left to go, it will be a huge explosion?”

Petra: “That’s really unfortunate…”

Otto and Petra each expressed their own impressions of Abel’s manner of speaking.

Emilia also thought she understood the intention of Abel’s abstruse expression. Looking at the outcome that had occurred, it was not possible to deny that idea.

However, she did not like the idea that fighting was natural for humans.

Emilia: “I don’t really get it but, that sounds reaaally lonely.”

Abel: “Lonely? On what grounds do you think as such, half-devil.”

Emilia: “After all, even though the Emperor of the Empire must have worked as hard as he could. For all of that to get destroyed, to not be rewarded for that hard work, wouldn’t that be lonely? Whether he wins or loses, I think it would be painful.”

The Emperor of Vollachia, whom she had never directly met, seemed extremely pitiful to Emilia.

It was also true that Abel, Zikr, and the others were raising a rebellion in this manner, and that once the people of the Empire had joined in, they started to raise their voices together.

In her studies, Emilia had also learned that the fact that the Vollachian Empire had not had a large battle these past few years was Emperor Vincent Vollachia’s achievement. Setting aside what Vincent was thinking, at least he had been continuing to create a society without war.

With that having been destroyed, if he lost, the country would be taken from him, and even if he won, he would have ended up having waged a war himself.

Emilia: “Times like this, when somebody gets mad, it’s like they’ve already decided for it to become painful.”

For that reason, Emilia could not help but find Vincent pitiable.

If it were possible, she thought it would be good if they could properly discuss just what in the world he was thinking, and what they could do to arrive at a good ending for everyone.

Abel: “—. I see, regardless of which came first, I understand that thing’s way of being.”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Abel: “Without a doubt, you people are of the same kind as Natsuki Subaru.”

Emilia silently held her breath at Abel's brief comment, his arms crossed.

Faced with the glint in Abel's black eyes, which could be seen behind his Oni mask, Emilia had realized it. —Sure enough, with what had just been said, the impression she had felt was not wrong.

Even though Subaru and Abel were comrades, and had been continuously working together until Emilia and the others had entered the Vollachian Empire—

Emilia: "—You, is Subaru someone you reaaally hate?"

Abel: "…"

Emilia: "I'm sorry if I'm wrong. Still, I don't think I'm wrong."

His black eyes narrowing, Abel went silent in response to Emilia's question. Seeing his reaction right in front of her, Emilia did not retract her opinion.

Abel hated Subaru. —Emilia felt that was so.

It was not because Abel was quiet, or because he said haughty things in a manner that somewhat resembled Priscilla. When he spoke to Otto or Zikr and the others, there was a definite difference.

Emilia felt that it was the hatred Abel harbored regarding Subaru.

Abel: "—Zikr, coordinate with those who have begun raising their voices in revolt. Give rise to even stronger winds, and fan the force of the flames. Until the black smoke reaches the Imperial Capital."

Zikr: "Will that be all right? The original objective was the Nine Divine Generals…"

Abel: "In the end, that is a secondary objective. The important thing is to enact upon the war situation. The standpoints of Groovy and Moguro are cause for concern, however, the situation has changed."

Abruptly, Abel, who had taken his eyes off of Emilia, began to give instructions to Zikr beside him.

Emilia thought she had been ignored, but that was Abel's declaration that he did not intend on continuing their current conversation any longer.

Was the reason he did not respond because she had been off the mark, or was it something else?

In any case—

Abel: "—We may be ready to advance on the Imperial Capital sooner than expected. Do not lose even the slightest bit of focus."

—In order to reunite with Subaru and Rem, the choice to change paths and separate from Abel and his group, was not one that Emilia and the others had.

2

Beatrice: "Emilia, you have to be careful, in fact. Betty and the others are the only people in this country who genuinely care only for Subaru, I suppose."

Beatrice spoke again shortly before she fell back asleep after their discussion in the hall.

The conversation veered off to the left and right, but if one focused solely on Subaru, it would be hard to say that it was the best situation for him. Even if the threat to his life could be reduced, even if only a little.

Emilia: "Subaru is not someone who would be okay with that, with everyone arguing around him."

Beatrice: "In fact."

Otto and Abel surmised that his life was guaranteed no matter on which side of the Empire he was captured on. It was what the smart kids thought, and they may have been right.

But when had Subaru ever behaved exactly the way Emilia and the others thought he would?

If people around him were in danger, Subaru would move immediately, neglecting himself.

She could not believe that she was the only one who would accept being safe in such a situation.

That was why—

Emilia: "—I want you to remember that we all still care about Subaru and Rem, so we're going to work with the intention of putting them first."

Priscilla: "And why are you bothering to proclaim this to me?"

Emilia: "Because, if I did it on my own without telling anyone, everyone would get in trouble, right?"

It is important to communicate one's goals and principles properly.

Not telling Frederica and Petra whether or not they would be back by dinner would be a waste of the meal that they had prepared for them.

Emilia: "Subaru also used to say that spinnuching was important. But I am not sure what spinach is…"

Priscilla: "On what haphazard foundation did you have the nerve to approach me with such vague knowledge? Was that courage you had cultivated from your experience of being persecuted as a half-devil?"

Emilia: "No, I don't think so. When I was in my home forest, and everyone hated me, I didn't feel like I was getting used to it or getting stronger."

When she was living in the Great Forest of Elior, she was hurt no matter what anyone said to her. Expecting the slightest thing, being betrayed, and not learning anything, despite repeating it over and over again.

So, given that Emilia now looked a little bit stronger.

Emilia: “That’s thanks to Subaru and everyone else… I left the forest, participated in the Royal Selection, went through a lot of hard times, and became the person I am today. Priscilla, isn’t it the same for you?”

Priscilla: “Do not compare yourself with me. I was born perfect.”

Emilia: “Yes… but, I won’t lose to you either.”

Priscilla: “You can attest for yourself whether you are worthy of the words that have passed your lips. Whether or not it catches the corner of my eye depends on that.”

Priscilla responded to Emilia’s tightly clenched fist with a shrug of her shoulders.

After the discussion in the hall was over and Beatrice was returned to the inn, now having fallen asleep, Emilia was looking for Priscilla to tell her about the previously mentioned plans.

Perhaps she was busy, she thought, but fortunately, she was listening to her.

Emilia: “When I think back, Priscilla always gets things right, doesn’t she?”

Priscilla: “Ho, it appears that some unpleasantness is about to ensue for me.”

Emilia: “Should I stop?”

Priscilla: “Fine, you are forgiven. You may continue.”

Emilia responded with a nod to Priscilla, closing one eye and urging her to proceed.

Leaving the City Hall, they walked alongside one another down the street. Emilia, not seeing her companions Schult and Al, looked around for the two of them.

Emilia: “It’s been that way since the beginning of the Royal Selection; Priscilla says nasty things and interrupts her opponents in mid-sentence, and yet she does a good job of listening to what they have to say while also lending an ear."

Priscilla: "Even I have not the ability to surmise everything in the world. Shall I not be curious to see what kind of drivel will come out of the mouth of someone other than mineself?"

Emilia: "Well? But, I remember Anastasia-san said to me, "I'm not going to talk to you.""

Priscilla: "That she-fox?"

Emilia: "Yeah. Oh, I'm not saying I'm holding a grudge, okay?"

With Priscilla walking leisurely by her side, Emilia thinks back to her exchange with Anastasia.

Initially, at the Royal Selection, Anastasia tried to snub Emilia from the discussions. That in itself was not an unusual treatment, and she did not hold it against Anastasia.

However, the point she wanted to make was—

Emilia: "—I'm friends with Anastasia-san."

Priscilla: "…"

Emilia: "To put it correctly, I promised that we would be friends. I said we would after the Royal Selection… I felt like we could do that, no matter where we started off. That's why."

Priscilla: "Surely you do not wish to form a friendship with me as well?"

Emilia: "Eeh. Is that no good?"

Because of her successful experience with Anastasia, Emilia mustered up the courage to try.

Most people, if it were Anastasia and Priscilla, would have had the impression and assessment that Priscilla was more difficult to deal with. However, Emilia was different.

For Emilia, who had few relationships, Anastasia and Priscilla were valued nearly equally.

Therefore, it could be concluded that this was what led to this kind of offer.

Then, in response to Emilia's offer, Priscilla pulled her fan out of her cleavage and,

Priscilla: "Behold, more drivel that even I could not have predicted suddenly sprang forth."

Opening her fan with a sound, she cut Emilia's words off abruptly.

At Priscilla's response, Emilia's eyes widened, and she let out a tiny giggle. Seeing her smile, Priscilla's eyes narrowed.

Priscilla: "And what follows drivel must be absolute japes? Either way, you are provoking my displeasure."

Emilia: "Oh, no, no, sorry. However, I felt that you might say no, Priscilla, so I just knew that. I'll ask again tomorrow."

Priscilla: "Tomorrow or not, my answer shall remain the same."

Emilia: "But, you never know what tomorrow will bring."

For the time being, Emilia believed that it was not wrong to take up the challenge boldly.

Of course, there was the worry that she would think it was harassment and hate her even more.

But if Emilia thought so, then Priscilla was—

Priscilla: "Do as you please."

Emilia: "Yeah, I'll do that."

Even if she dismissed it as futile, she will not use force to keep her from doing so.

Emilia also felt like she was taking advantage of the situation, though, because she was in a difficult position to do so.

In any case,

Priscilla: “Well? Was that the conclusion of your ambush on me?”

Emilia: “No, that was only the first one… not the second one, because of what happened with Subaru. There’s something else I still want to talk about.”

Priscilla: “Now, what is the purpose of discussing the first matter with me? As long as your proposed plan does not interfere with my course of action, I will have nothing to do with it.”

Emilia: “But, Priscilla is good friends with Abel and Zikr, right? You seem to be discussing a lot of things, and I was wondering if you could tell everyone.”

Priscilla: “I withdraw my previous statement. Your drivel dances beyond my imagination. It is not often that I change my words.”

Emilia: “—? Is that something I should be happy about? Is that bad?”

Her crimson eyes looked to the side toward Emilia, who bent her lips when she didn’t get an answer.

It was probably not very welcome, but if one did not know what exactly was wrong, there was no way to fix it, even if one thought it should be fixed.

Priscilla should be good friends with Abel and Zikr, so would it be a mistake to want to convey to everyone what Emilia and her group’s policy was aside from that?

However, Emilia and her group would be much better off going to talk to them in person.

Anyhow—

Emilia: “I don’t know if I can get along very well with Abel…”

Priscilla: “Ku.”

Emilia: “Priscilla?”

Holding her open fan to her mouth, Priscilla let out a small chuckle. When Emilia looked over to her face in profile, Priscilla slightly relaxed the corners of her eyes and said,

Priscilla: “Being hated by you, who even tried to talk to me, would truly be the epitome of his tactlessness.”

Emilia: “Gh, I don’t hate him. I just thought he might not quite be my cup of tea to deal with.”

Priscilla: “Your being aware that someone is hard to deal with, as well as your aversion are accumulations of the main factors behind those things, called your likes and dislikes. However, it is probably natural for you people to evaluate Abel in such a manner. — Mineself wonders if your judgement is correct.”

Emilia: “…Priscilla, do you feel the same way?”

To Emilia’s question, Priscilla remained silent and did not respond.

However, to Emilia, it felt as if that silence was saying that she shared Emilia’s opinion that Abel hated Subaru.

Emilia: “Priscilla, do you know why? Up until a little while ago, you were talking to Abel and the others, weren’t you?”

Priscilla: “Unfortunately, the discussion that had kept mineself back had no relation to your foolish commoner. Those like him do not even become an ounce of the subject of conversation… No, having heard the tale of the Great Disaster which destroyed the Demon City, mineself will not say it was completely unrelated to that foolish commoner.”

Emilia: “Demon City… Ah, then, you were talking to Yorna? To Priscilla’s mother.”

In the middle of the discussion in the large chamber, the topic of the parent-child relationship between Priscilla and Yorna came up.

In the end, it had been washed away by the matter of how Louis should be handled after that, but that probably was not the case for the people involved.

Naturally, the reunited mother and child should have discussed it.

Emilia: “Still, I was also surprised. That Priscilla also has half demi-human blood…”

Priscilla: “Nonsense. Do not equate mineself with you. I think it surely must not be the case, but did you draw close to me because you had felt an affinity over that?”

Emilia: “That wasn’t it at all, but is it not true? Then, is Yorna-san Priscilla’s foster parent? If that were so, that would also be surprising. After all, I also…”

Priscilla: “Nonsense, do not make me repeat myself, you fool. That too is your impulsiveness.”

Emilia: “Ehh? Then, what do you mean?”

If Yorna and her were biologically parent and child, her foxkin blood should have flown inside Priscilla, but that had been denied.

If you were to then think that meant a foster parent, that had also been flatly denied.

Emilia, being a half-elf raised by her mother and aunt by blood Fortuna, had thought Priscilla was the same in some ways.

Emilia: “Not blood related, and not a foster parent… In that case, how is she your mother?”

Priscilla: “Is there any reason why mineself must explain everything to you?”

Emilia: “No, I don’t think so. But if you don’t tell me, I’ll be reaaally curious.”

Knowing it was selfish, Emilia had tried asking Priscilla for the truth. Of course, the possibility that just as she had rejected a friendly relationship, she would refuse to give her an answer, had been high.

However, Priscilla was silent for a moment, and then,

Priscilla: "—Iris and the King of Thorns."

Emilia: "Eh?"

Priscilla: "It is an old story. Do you know it?"

Emilia: "Well, I do know it. Umm, Lady Petra likes that kind of thing."

At the words that had abruptly left Priscilla's lips, Emilia's eyes widened as she nodded.

She had been taught that "Iris and the King of Thorns" was an old story that had been passed down from long, long ago, and was a historical account that originated from the Vollachian Empire.

Emilia, too, had also heard no more than a brief outline, but from the story she heard from Petra, it seemed like it was a love story between an emperor of Vollachia from long ago called the "King of Thorns," and a girl named "Iris."

Unfortunately, Emilia had said that she still did not understand what was so interesting about it, but—

Emilia: "What about that story? Is it a story that Priscilla likes?"

Priscilla: "It seems you are a half-devil who cannot put two and two together. Naturally, it is bound to be related to the course of the conversation thus far."

Emilia: "Thus far… Priscilla and Yorna's parent-child relationship and this old story?"

Priscilla: "—Iris and the King of Thorns had joined hands to bring about an end to the civil war that had swallowed up many races in the Empire. However, right before the pair that were linked heart-to-heart could be wedded, they were betrayed, and the story ends."

Emilia: "…A sad story, isn't it."

At the gist of the story Priscilla had told, Emilia muttered this as the corners of her eyebrows dropped.

It was very disheartening when people who had worked their hardest were not rewarded. Now, just as she despaired at the situation the Emperor of Vollachia was placed in, she held the same feelings for the end of the couple that had long ago been made into a story.

At Emilia's reaction, Priscilla exhaled with a "Ha",

Priscilla: "However, the story and the historical facts differ. Historically, having lost Iris to betrayal, the "King of Thorns" descended into madness, and decided to eradicate the wolfmen and molemen that had raised their blades. For the few that had escaped, even now, as soon as they are found in the Empire, they are burned at the stake."

Emilia: "It's understandable to be angry about that, but… still, the people in this day and age—"

Priscilla: "Have no relation with that? You are no stranger to that yourself, having been persecuted as a half-devil."

Emilia: "…"

The sharpness of Priscilla's phrasing had stung, but Emilia's skin was hard as iron against that kind of insult. However, even if she did not bleed, the pain of being struck remained the same.

Deciding she would properly complain about that later, Emilia was more curious about where things went from there in the rest of Priscilla's story.

What had the King of Thorns done after losing Iris and taking revenge on the traitor?

Emilia: "With that, is the story of the King of Thorns over?"

Priscilla: "—. With having merely given in to anger, it could not possibly be said that he had only descended into madness. Thus, after that, the King of Thorns had directed his madness towards Iris, who he had lost."

Emilia: "Towards Iris?"

Raising her eyebrows at the story's unexpected turn of events, Emilia repeated back the words she had heard. Priscilla nodded at those words and turned her crimson eyes to the sky.

Frustrated, Emilia's lips trembled as she sought Priscilla's next words.

Emilia: "The King of Thorns, what did he do to Iris?"

Priscilla: "He laid a curse upon her."

Emilia: "A curse? That's…"

Was that something you would put on someone precious to you, much less someone whose loss caused you suffering?

Indifferent to those doubts of Emilia's, Priscilla spoke of the curse's details.

That was—

Priscilla: "—The secret art of dragging a lost soul back, without handing it over to Od Lagna."

Emilia: "A dead person's soul?"

Priscilla: "It is said that there is a secret art called the Sacrament of the Immortal King which can even revive the dead, but its existence is considered questionable. However, this Commandment of Thorns is a curse born of insatiable yearning."

The dead coming back to life was astounding, but more important than that now was that which was called a curse.

The subject of the souls of the dead and their fate was also discussed at the Pleiades Watchtower through the Books of the

Dead, in which the memories of the deceased were imprinted within them.

The existence of the Books of the Dead convinced them of the existence of the soul within humans.

Emilia: “But, what does it mean to drag down a soul? Does it mean they come back to life?”

Priscilla: “It does not work that way. Iris’ body was torn apart after her death, and even if her soul returned, it would not bring her back to life. In the first place, the Commandment of Thorns has no such power.”

Emilia: “Then what would happen? If there was no body—”

If there were no place for the returning soul to enter, where would the soul go?

In response to Emilia’s question, Priscilla quietly lowered her gaze. Instead of looking at the sky, her crimson eyes looked into Emilia’s amethyst ones, and—

Priscilla: “The usual. If the soul does not return to Od Lagna, it will return to the earth, and without receiving the proper treatment, it will enter its next vessel. —You could call it resurrection, or even reincarnation.”

Emilia: “…”

Priscilla: “So long as the curse is not undone, so long as the Commandment of Thorns that entangles them is not undone, the departed soul shall continue to rise again. Again and again it will repeat itself, pilling up the lives and deaths over and over again. —One of these lives, the life before Yorna Mishigure, was that of mine dear mother.”

3

Abel: “…”Sandra Benedict”, that caught me by surprise.”

Yorna: “You are the one who is far too ill-natured, for you hid the matter of Prisca.”

With firm, cold voices colliding, a quiet heat intermingled in a stone room.

Exchanging their gazes, choosing their words in order to search for what lay in each other’s hearts, were Abel, displaying his true face with the Oni mask that covered his face removed, and Yorna, puffing the purple smoke from her kiseru.

Until just now, there had also been a third person present in this place, Priscilla.

However, as soon as she deemed that the essential discussions had concluded, she immediately excused herself from this place. Abel accepted this attitude, but it did not cause Yorna’s turmoil to vanish.

That was a matter of course. —For even the mistress of the Demon City could not easily come to grips with the change within her own child.

Yorna: “How about we both honestly admit that our secrecy has had harmful results?”

Abel: “I had my reasons for keeping it a secret. Even you should be able to guess.”

Yorna: “—. That’s… indeed.”

Casting her eyes down at Abel’s answer, Yorna ruminated while her long eyelashes quivered.

Her unexpected encounter with Priscilla brought about an enormous ripple through Yorna’s heart. That was a reality that she had never expected, nor harbored even a fragment of hope for, as it had been an absolute impossibility.

In negation of that, a healthy Priscilla appeared before her in such a way, and while it filled Yorna with joy, there was no doubt it had been a tremendous gamble for Abel.

The situation of Priscilla = Prisca still being alive was one that should not have been possible.

Behind the scenes of that impossible event, there was no doubt that Abel was involved.

Yorna: “Just what are you—?”

Abel: “—That which I promised you, was a means to dispel that Commandment of Thorns. Perchance, if you desire the answer to that question, I have no reason to grant you any other reward.”

Yorna: “…”

Straight to her face, Abel rejected Yorna’s query.

Abel refused to speak of that answer, forcing Yorna to weigh it against her greatest desire.

For so, so long already, piling up lives and deaths time after time, this soul continued to view the world.

Even though she could barely remember the face of that person anymore, that was why—.

Abel: “Yorna Mishigure—No, thou who the King of Thorns fell in love with at first sight, Iris.”

Indeed, using the name that long, long ago, Yorna’s beloved person had used many times to call out to her, the man at the front of however many generations had piled up with the blood of her beloved person, called out to Yorna.

Abel: “Muster up more of your courage. For your dearest wish, and above all—to keep Prisca Benedict, the daughter who you should have lost, alive in the future.”

In a voice so cold that it was incomparable to that of her beloved person, he imposed so.

Chapter 81:
The Fierce Lady and the Clown

—The Sacred Vollachian Empire, under the reign of its current emperor, Vincent Vollachia, was enjoying an era of peace and tranquility unprecedented since its founding.

There had been small skirmishes, but other than the rebellion of Yorna Mishigure, there was no situation where thousands of people were involved in a conflict.

As long as the relationship with the Kingdom of Lugunica, which had been in a standoff for many years, remained stagnant, no civil war or even a situation of falling into territorial disputes with other countries could happen.

It was easy to say that the times were on their side, but that did not bring peace of mind to all the hard work that had gone into maintaining this peace.

To begin with, was this a feat that could be accomplished simply by having the times on one's side?

To continue to take the very fact of wars away from the Vollachian Empire, which had been a constant source of strife and reason for conflict, for nine years of its reign, was a contradictory act of kindling a bonfire on thin ice.

It was due to the skill of Vincent Vollachia, the current emperor, who had even been called a "pacifist".

However—

???: "—Though I'm sure His Excellency would never be happy about being called a "pacifist" himself."

???: "Reaaally~? You don't feel bad about being recognized for your deeds, regardless of whether they were right or wrong, do you? In fact, the stability of the country is what His Excellency the

Emperor wants, isn't it?"

???: "So you're proud to be called a "Demi-Human Lover"?"

???: "Undeniably. I'm the one who popularized the name in the first place!"

???: "Good grief, this looks to be the wrong person to make an example of. These days, my old friends who visit me are an odd lot. It keeps me occupied, though."

The woman donned a wild smile on her beautiful face and narrowed her green eyes as she brushed her bangs back from her forehead.

She was tall and slender with a supple, well-trained body.

Her long, smooth-skinned arms and legs and feminine curves were enclosed in a merchant marine-like garb, and she carried a curved sword in its scabbard beside the fine chair on which she sat. Her whole body was filled with the high spirits characteristic of a warrior, as if to prove that it was not an ornament but a practical weapon.

Above all, on her left cheek, there was a long, large, white scar that ran from her forehead to her chin.

It was an eye-catching scar, and once you saw it, it was burned into your mind and difficult to forget.

However, even the scar was nothing more than an ornament to the person who gave others the impression that she was beautiful, the "Scorching Lady" as she was called.

—The "Scorching Lady" High Countess Serena Dracroy.

That was the name and title of the fierce lady before them, one of the greatest nobles in the Vollachian Empire.

To Roswaal, her counterpart, she was a friend with whom he had been in contact from across the country since before this all happened.

Roswaal: “Of course, aaaaas long as you are serious when you call me an old friend.”

Serena: “Friends or not, I’m not going to play such trivial games with you. First of all, when you are a high countess, all anyone wants to do is to talk about profit and loss. Sometimes I want to have luxurious small talk without such things. Is that too much to hope for?”

Roswaal: “I’m not saying it’s too much to hope for, but I’m heartbroooken~ by that sorrowful plea.”

With a small chuckle, Roswaal reached for a cup from the table in front of him and sipped his tea, enjoying the warm aroma. The aromatic warmth danced on his tongue. —Unfortunately, Roswaal could not glean much more than that from the food and drink.

The lack of taste in anything he eats or drinks is part of the burden Roswaal had to bear, and the price he had to pay, in order to get to where he is today.

At any rate, there was no way he could not thank her for the hospitality she had extended to him as a guest.

There, Roswaal glanced at the petite figure sitting next to him, the one who had probably enjoyed the taste of the tea on Roswaal’s behalf, who had let out a small sigh,

???: “These tea leaves have lost their potency. It’s recommended that you change the waitstaff.”

Her sharp crimson eyes narrowed, and she commented on the tea with an even sharper statement.

Roswaal closed one eye at her relentless and dismissive tone, while its recipient laughed in amusement with a “Ha”,

Serena: “Something so clearly stated. Should the waitstaff be changed?”

???: “Yes, they are being disrespectful to the tea leaves.”

Serena: “In fact, with everything in the household being so busy, I was the one who brewed this tea.”

???: “Is that so? Then, it would be for the best if you did not make it at all.”

Serena: “A girl who doesn’t know how to show due consideration, I like that. You have a fine wife.”

With teeth showing in response, Serena looked at Roswaal mischievously.

As usual, she was a woman of great magnanimity, or perhaps, a woman who showed a forgiving attitude toward rudeness and impoliteness. Despite her position as a prominent noblewoman, she did not have the usual personality of being obsessed with authority.

This way of thinking and being had not changed since the first time they met.

Roswaal: “However, I’m not the kind of person who caaan’t~ tell the difference between rudeness and an insult. Please watch what you say, Ram, because this is only marginally humorous.”

Ram: “That is understood, dear.”

Roswaal: “—. Serena, I must correct you; she is my servant, nooot~ my wife.”

Serena: “I see, I guess it wasn’t like your demi-human tastes were finally caught. The relationship between our two countries was tense, but I had thought not having an invitation to the ceremony was rather standoffish.”

Roswaal sighed at Ram, who had calmly accepted what he had pointed out and then unconcernedly moved closer. Serena’s response as she chuckled to herself also seemed slightly off from Roswaal’s intentions.

However, from experience, Roswaal had known for a while now that the deeper he dug into this subject, the more detrimental it would be. Therefore, he would not delve any further.

In any case—

Ram: “Even so, Ram was surprised when she heard it. That is, that Roswaal-sama and Countess Dracroy had such a close relationship.”

Serena: “I doubt I could unscrupulously call a relationship without contact in years “close”. When I think about it, to come visit me without contacting me in this hectic situation… If you were to be that overtly rude, I would surely end up wanting to burn you to death like my father.”

Roswaal: “Serena, that joke isn’t very funny if you’re not from the Empire.”

Serena: “Hmm? Is that so. In high society, it’s usually a sure bet at making people laugh.”

That statement, which had unintentionally made Ram be taken aback, was a joke which poked fun at one event from her succession conflict—In fact, it had come from the true story of how she had burned her father to death and seized control of the Dracroy household.

Since she had said that the sword wound on her cheek was also inflicted by her father before she killed him, it had made Ram reflect on her courage in having ended up deciding it was a funny anecdote, and on the attitude of the Empire that laughed it off.

When Roswaal had gotten to know her, she had still been a teenager—Serena had visited the Kingdom of Lugunica on business, and had endeavored to resolve a dispute that had occurred there.

To put it simply, since he saved Serena's life when she had been targeted by assassins, and moreover, revealed that the attempt was orchestrated by her father who had shunned her, his ties to the Dracroy family were unexpectedly deep.

However, Serena's personality had not changed before or after that fierce experience, so she must have been born with her fortitudinous, fiery demeanor.

Roswaal: "It's true that I want to reminisce over old stories, and behaviour in your high society, but… As you might have guessed, there was a reason why we suddenly visited without contacting youuu~."

A pleasant chat with an old friend was also enticing, but there was nothing important to Roswaal other than the fulfillment of his long-cherished wish.

Everything in Roswaal's life was for the sake of a wish that had sunk to the deepest recesses of his heart. —Therefore, his visit to the Empire, and even his blinking and breathing, were all contributions for the sake of his dearest wish.

Roswaal: "…"

Currently, Roswaal and Ram had parted ways with Emilia and the others, visited the territory of High Countess Dracroy in the northwestern part of the Empire and were having an audience with Serena Dracroy, the lord.

Needless to say, the purpose of the visit was to secure Subaru and Rem, who had disappeared from the Pleiades Watchtower and were believed to have been hurled to the distant land of the Empire. For Roswaal, it would have been enough if he could secure Subaru, but he had not done a foolish thing like saying that aloud.

In any case, they would bring their missing friends back to the Kingdom. That was the purpose of this journey.

However, even if they were to say that their goal was to merely bring them home, the matter was not that easy or straightforward.

For the four major countries other than the Kingdom of Lugunica, they all had their own reasons for why coming and going was difficult. The Kararagi City States, which required connections and a lot of money, were relatively preferable, and one could say that the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko was excusable in its ease of understanding, as long as one didn't err in their timing and approach to their faith.

From that point of view, the Empire, which did not get along with the Kingdom, surpassed the rest in difficulty.

Relations between Lugunica and Vollachia had historically been bad for a long time, and although they had now miraculously confirmed a non-aggression pact, that too was doubtful in how far they could freely trust in it.

Rather than being proof or a sign of friendly relations, the confirmed non-aggression pact gave the strong feeling of a warning that, since it was time for both countries to shift their focus inwards, they should be careful not to interfere with each other unnecessarily.

It appeared likely that there was a connection between the matter of the national border now being blocked, and the backing for the non-aggression pact.

Or possibly—

Serena: “—This major incident shaking the Imperial Capital was also a plot by a faction that wants to annul the non-aggression pact or something? There’s a limit to how suspicious you can be. It’s an idea unbecoming of a man of the Kingdom.”

Serena’s green eyes suddenly narrowed as she guessed exactly what was on Roswaal’s mind.

This fierce lady was rather sociable, though had catastrophic tea-brewing abilities; however, she was one of the very few in the Empire entrusted with the role of High Countess, with powers of observation that were genuine.

Imperialism, unlike the way things were done in the Kingdom, did not question age or origin if one had ability. Inevitably, the more capable one was, the higher the position one obtained.

Accordingly, Serena Dracroy had earned and continued to hold the position of High Countess.

The point she just made was another possibility that Roswaal had considered and taken to heart.

By the time Roswaal and his group had entered the Empire, the fuel of the rebellion was already bearing smoke. Until now, the efforts to quench the fires, which had been done at the first sign of trouble, had not borne fruit.

If the high probability that this would lead to full-scale rebellion was seen, then naturally they must have been some cause present there.

That was why—

Ram: “—A war for territory with the Kingdom of Lugunica, that is what they are looking for.”

When Serena pointed out that she was skeptical, Ram placed her hands on her lap, and spoke in a quiet voice.

The eyes of the fierce lady turned to Ram, and she stared straight back at them with her light-crimson eyes.

Ram: “Above the reign of Emperor Vincent Vollachia being threatened, there are those who do not desire the peace that has been created. If that is the case, then after destroying the peace and quiet, what would those people want? It is natural to wonder if that is the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

Serena: “Is that so? There are people who revolt just because they don’t like the idea of anyone being superior to them. Such was the case last year with the leader of a band who raised their swords against me.”

Ram: “Let’s leave those peculiar instances out of the discussion.”

Serena: “I wouldn’t go as far as to call it peculiar, but you certainly missed the point.”

With a finger running along her shapely chin, Serena scrutinized Ram’s opinion.

Roswaal did not interject during the discussion because he saw nothing in Ram’s opinion that needed correction. He had never discussed these impending issues with Ram, but he was not surprised that she was also concerned about the same possibilities as he was.

In any case—

Roswaal: “Serena, surely you don’t wish to go to war with the Kingdom of Lugunica either. Of course, it’s a different story if you’re so outraged that you want to rebel against the Emperor.”

Serena: “Fortunately, I’ve never been dissatisfied with His Excellency’s meritocracy. The behavior of General First-Class Yorna, whose tantrums from time to time are also a stranger to me as someone who possesses territory far away from the Demon City. It’s just…”

Roswaal: “It’s just?”

Serena: “That I don’t wish for war with the Kingdom, what kind of speculation did that view arise from? Supposing you say that our side will stand little chance, my heart will also start to waver with the wind.”

Serena’s lips relaxed while she looked at her, her gaze infused with a tingling sensation.

It was her way of expressing her own pride in Roswaal’s words. She was called the Scorching Lady, and as a woman who held the position of High Countess with her prowess, it was inexcusable for her to be looked down upon.

That was not the basis on which to compare Ram’s remarks about tea.

Serena did not pour her heart and soul into tea, but she did pour her heart and soul into her family name.

Serena: “How about it, Roswaal. Am I mistaken? Or, was it your slip of the tongue?”

Roswaal: “Hmm…”

Serena questioned him in order to block off his escape routes, and as he looked back into the green eyes of his old friend, Roswaal noticed Ram next to him, peering at his side.

From the change in the atmosphere, she could probably sense that the result would be poor depending on how he answered.

In addition, if Serena’s good mood were to be soured, it would make it very difficult for Roswaal and the others to move around in the Empire. Not simply because they would lose their backer or supporter, but also because Serena knew of Roswaal’s background.

Taking all of that into account, and adding Serena’s personality and humanity into the mix, the best answer that Roswaal could give in this situation was—

Roswaal: “Indeed, sorry about the misunderstanding. Let’s rectify that. —If it comes to war with the Kingdom, a large amount of blood shall be shed in futility. That of the Empire, too. That’s why I don’t recommend it.”

Serena: “Oh?”

Serena’s eyebrows twitched and lifted at Roswaal’s matter-of-fact response.

The pale sword-inflicted scar on her face trembled, and the pupils of her eyes narrowed slightly. It had not yet connected to an outburst of emotion, but depending on the words that followed, such an outcome may arise.

But he had already decided on the words that would follow. Neither did he intend to attempt any lies nor pretense on her.

Were the Kingdom and the Empire to battle, a great deal of Imperial blood would be spilled.

The heart of the matter was—

Roswaal: “After all, the Kingdom has the Sword Saint, Reinhardt van Astrea. Every Imperial Soldier who comes across the border will amass into a great river of blood.”

Serena: “Oh come on, that’s an illegal move!”

Roswaal: “Even if you call it an illegal move, as long as it exists, there is no choice buuut~ to place it on the table for discussion. Though as you say, it’s a trump card that destroys the discussion. However…”

At that point, Roswaal cut off his words, and closed one of eyes, which differed in color between left and right, leaving only blue side open,

Roswaal: “There will be no hesitation whatsoever to play this trump card at the outset.”

Normally, trump cards and secret weapons are meant to be saved if at all possible, but this was not the case with the Sword Saint. To draw that card at the outset would be the most effective, and the results would also be stupendous.

Above all, the person in question would accept the duty with pleasure.

Serena: “Good grief, not even having the decency to let me do a thought experiment, you’ll make me cry, military strategist.”

Suddenly, the atmosphere from just before dissipated, and Serena flumped her weight against the back of her chair. She pouted her lips as if she were a sulking little girl,

Serena: “In the Empire, I have only been able to hear rumors, but… From your point of view, is that which is called the Sword Saint a supernatural monster?”

Roswaal: “Up until the previous generation, the Sword Saints also haaad~ a certain charm to them, but the current generation’s Sword Saint is more appropriate for that expression. If you do not know the real thing, you won’t be able to actually feel that, though.”

Serena: “The way you speak, it’s just as if you have seen all Sword Saints up until now. However, I see…”

Raising a wry smile at Roswaal’s response, Serena frowned with her shapely eyebrows.

Due to their long relationship, Serena believed that there was no way Roswaal was going to speak words without much thought put into them, and was thoroughly scrutinizing him.

However, for all Imperials other than her, whether they would be reasonable had yet to be decided.

Roswaal: “If you overestimate your own power, or underestimate the power of the Sword Saint, you will be unable to escape the tragedy. So, I shall blow an adverse wind into your mind. You shoooould~ not go to war.”

Serena: “…”

Roswaal: “Annnd~ well, supposing you choose to wage war against the Kingdom, then at that time, I’ll become your opponent. Shall I show you? The ruthlessness of the relentless onslaught of magic from an altitude so high that you would not be able to do a thing.”

Although he shrugged his shoulders and jested about showing her, Roswaal was also quite the strategic force to be reckoned with.

Although not as powerful as the Sword Saint, he could still suppress thousands of common soldiers by simply flying through the air and wielding magic. If he chose battlegrounds he had a strong compatibility with, it was also possible that he could overcome the war front by his lonesome.

Serena: “In that regard, I can easily believe it, unlike the hearsay about the Sword Saint. After all, I have seen a glimpse of that with my own eyes.”

Roswaal: “That was also over a decade ago. Currently, I can show you far more developed magic now than I did back theeen~.”

Serena: “You’re an unfathomable man. Be that as it may, outstanding power comes with its own set of shackles. I guess that’s the reason why you are unable to wield it freely in the Empire.”

Roswaal: “Correct.”

This time, having been cornered, it was Roswaal’s turn to put his hands where she could see them.

In fact, if the tactics they had just discussed were to be put into action, Roswaal would continuously rain magic from high in the sky, out of reach of people, and would be able to reduce the Empire into naught but scorched earth until his mana was exhausted.

However, even when speaking in terms of the wide world, there was no one except Roswaal in the world today who was capable of doing such a thing with magic. It would be more or less the same in the places he used discretion.

Showing his preeminent magical talent within the Vollachian Empire was similar to exposing his true identity.

Therefore, Roswaal had to refrain from any flamboyant behavior after having entered the Empire.

The same reasoning and restrictions had been imposed on Emilia during their time apart.

Ram: “Though in the situation over there, there’s a chance that she’ll forget about that and flare up right away.”

Roswaal: “I’m going to have to rely on the children she has with her over theeere~. Well, if I take the circumstances into account, Garfiel should also be able to keep her in check, so I shouldn’t worry too too much.”

Or rather, if he was unable to place trust in them, he would not have gone separate ways in the first place.

That it would be okay to entrust decisions over there to them, because he had trust in that, the current state resulted. —Such a way of putting it like “trust”, he thought that if Otto and Petra were to hear it then they would certainly make a disagreeable face.

Serena: “—Let me guess, you were not the only ones who entered the Empire under these circumstances, were you?”

While Roswaal and Ram exchanged words, Serena, who raised her posture from the back of her chair, continued. As she met their gazes, she traced the sword-inflicted wound on her cheek with her finger, and,

Serena: “Something you’re looking for… no, someone you’re looking for? It appears to be someone greatly important to you guys.”

Roswaal: “Even in the relationship between you and I, your way of asking sure makes it difficult to nod alooong~.”

Serena: “Nevertheless, your actions serve as proof for that. Otherwise, one would not go through the trouble of crossing the locked down border to come into Vollachia. —Unless it is destiny.”

Narrowing her eyes just slightly, Serena muttered in a quiet voice.

Unable to understand what she meant, Roswaal frowned with a feeling of unease. However, before he could question the true meaning of those words, Ram was quick to nod and say, “Yes”,

Ram: “There is someone I must bring back at all costs. Someone equivalent to Ram’s very life.”

Roswaal: “Ram.”

Ram: “No amount of hiding it or deception is going to work with her.”

Although he chided Ram, who easily disclosed information that was not unlikely to become a weak point, Ram retorted, and Roswaal was instead unable to offer a rebuttal.

If the action itself could be said to be the answer, then the truth was just that.

Roswaal: “However, even if you’re going to show weakness, then you should have some presentation techniques.”

Serena: “Don’t condemn Ram like that. Isn’t it a commendable thing? What surprises me more is that you went to such lengths for the sake of what’s important to her. She appears to be very important to you.”

Ram: “Yes, because there is no replacement for Ram.”

Roswaal: “That is an undeniable fact, but I’m somewhaaat~ concerned about the way you put it.”

Roswaal and Ram claimed that there is someone they wanted to bring back, although that someone differed between the two of them. This in turn, seemed to have caused a misunderstanding for Serena, who did not know that this was the case.

Since they wanted to secure assistance, they would share detailed information about the people they were searching for afterwards.

Serena: “—Whatever the case, I understand why you warned us not to start a war.”

With the conversation having returned to Roswaal’s warning, the discussion before this last one, Serena’s expression had suddenly stiffened. She looked at the naturally tense faces of Roswaal and Ram, and with a mindful gaze, she continued, “But”,

Serena: “I’ll listen to your advice, but I can’t vouch for the attitude of the other citizens of the Empire. Most of them would go into a frenzy, even if they were to be told they had no chance of winning a fight against the “Sword Saint”.”

Roswaal: “That is a point of difference with the Kingdom, where there is no need to explain the true power of the “Sword Saaaint∼”.”

Ram: “Yes, that is correct. In the Kingdom, if you had the chance to get a glimpse of the “Sword Saint” Reinhardt, there would be no need for any further explanation.”

Since the four great countries shared a treaty prohibiting Reinhardt from leaving the country of Lugunica, the people of other countries had almost no chance of ever seeing him.

If they could have gotten that chance, there also would not have been any need to bother with this kind of roundabout persuasion.

—One look at the “Sword Saint” Reinhardt van Astrea, and anyone could have sensed right away just how foolish it would be to oppose him.

Only lunatics living in a world completely detached from reason would not understand that.

Serena: “If it is really as grave as it sounds, I guess I can only hope that His Excellency will suppress the rebellion without incident, or that the rebel side taking his place is reasonable.”

The rebellion had already broken out, and caused the public to take interest in what really their objective was.

If the rebel side had concrete ideas and no unreasonable ambitions like fighting the Kingdom, the war between the two countries and the massive bloodshed Roswaal had spoken of could be avoided.

Of course, there would be nothing better than if the Emperor's side could suppress the rebellion properly.

Roswaal: "No matter how this civil war is resolved, it would be troubling if an attack is aimed at Lugunica afterwards. Because a quarrel with the Empire would be an incident I have not planned for."

—All of Roswaal's actions were a path leading towards a dearest wish that must be granted.

Thus, the fact that he had acquired the opportunity to have an audience with Serena in the Empire was also no exception.

It wasn't any different in regards to desiring assistance for the sake of bringing Subaru back, or persuading her, an influential person within the Empire, of the futility of going to war with the Kingdom.

For Roswaal's dearest wish, Subaru's presence was indispensable.

Furthermore, a fight with the Vollachian Empire, or something of that sort, was not included in the path Roswaal had to follow. So this was not the time for a war between the Kingdom and the Empire.

There must be no interference until the day of the "Dragonkindling Ceremony", when the covenant between the Kingdom and the Dragon will be renewed.

Issues that hinder the Royal Selection must be removed.

And for that—

Roswaal: "—We must have His Excellency the Emperor quickly suppress the rebellion, and far extend this first time of peace and tranquility since the founding of the Vollachian Empire"

Serena: “Hmm? I haven’t seen that evil look in a long time. Some kind of sinister plot?”

Hearing Roswaal’s words, Serena raised her eyebrows in amusement.

He himself was not aware of the evil face that had been pointed out, but from what she said, he must have had such an expression. Nevertheless, Roswaal’s plans should not run counter to Serena’s expectations either.

She was also a member of the Imperial nobility, and as long as she did not take part in the rebellion herself, she should naturally side with the Emperor.

Ram: “Countess Dracroy.”

Suddenly, next to Roswaal as he was thinking that, Ram started her own conversation with Serena.

At that call, Serena looked at Ram and,

Ram: “May Ram have a moment?”

Serena: “Sure, I don’t mind. Though, please don’t call me Countess Dracroy. I just want to chat with a friend …Serena, please”

Ram: “Then, Serena-sama. —It seems you are really close with Roswaal-sama, correct?”

Serena: “Yes?”

Serena’s eyes widened when Ram, who had changed on what to call her, focused her gaze on her. However, her face instantly turned into a mischievous one, and she nodded and said, “I see, I see.”

Roswaal had a bad presentiment about what it was she had just realized.

Serena: “You’re curious about how I met this guy, right? From the looks of it, you guys also seem to have known each other for a long time but…”

Ram: “It’s been exactly ten years.”

Serena: “In that case, we’ve been acquainted just a little longer. Ram, can you drink?”

Ram: “It is not at the same level as with tea, but Ram is pretty picky if it comes to alcohol.”

Serena: “Alright!”

Serena slapped her knees with her palms and gave Ram a smile of her own.

It seemed like it would come to them having a good drink with reminiscent talks serving as a snack. Moreover, if they were going to talk about when he had met Serena, Roswaal also had a few youthful indiscretions.

Roswaal: “Serena, I appreciate the invitation, but we have some urgent business to attend to. About those matters—”

Serena: “You want my help for that, don’t you? If that’s the case, all the more reason you shouldn’t spoil my mood. If you haven’t seen me in a while, then at least have a drink with me”

Roswaal: “…Ram.”

Giving up on trying to dissuade Serena from her unheeding attitude, Roswaal looked at Ram.

Just as Roswaal wanted to bring Subaru back, Ram had come to the Empire to bring back her other half, Rem. She thought since she had sincerely answered Serena’s earlier questioning, she might be able to bring her mind from wine glasses back to a constructive discussion.

However—

Ram: “Barusu aside, Ram does not think it would be wise to refuse Serena-sama’s offer for Rem’s sake.”

Roswaal: “Really, is that the only reaaason~?”

Ram: “Of course, if Ram could also hear stories about Roswaal-sama before he met Ram and the others, then even if we end up in the same stalemate, Ram could say it was an excellent plan.”

Ram was not ashamed if it could serve her goals and have real benefits at the same time.

And much to Roswaal’s regret, Ram and Serena were exceedingly compatible. There was no doubt that their drunk talk would also be lively, and that they would get along well.

That would very well be the beginning of a headache for Roswaal.

Roswaal: “In a sense, I should perhaps see this as a necessary price to pay?”

All so that they could reach their goal, then leave the Empire and return to the Kingdom.

When he called on an old friend and asked for help, he was prepared to pay some kind of price. However, he had by no means thought it would turn out like this.

Serena: “Just now, another guest left right before you guys arrived. She sure was a merry one, so I was about to feel lonely.”

Ram: “Because they were also close to you?”

Serena: “Technically, it was the husband of the guest with whom I had been close, but yes. She should be back soon, so I’ll introduce them then. Right now, rather than that—”

Having stood up, Serena headed to the display cabinet in the corner of the room. When the door opened, lined up inside were a variety of bottles of alcohol, large and small, and they could see she had great taste.

Serena chose one of them, and while she was returning with three glasses from the shelf,

Serena: “It was when I was serving as an emissary representing my father, that I happened to meet Roswaal. I was targeted by assassins while heading to the Kingdom… they were sent by my father, but Roswaal saved me there.”

Ram: “So that is how it was. Continue.”

Then, alcohol was poured into the glasses on the table, and the old stories began.

The conversation between the curious Ram and the talkative Serena was lively, and while Roswaal felt uncomfortable, he decided that this was a necessary moment and surrendered himself.

Roswaal: “…”

All for the fulfillment of his dearest wish, and to regain the pieces necessary for that—.

—Roswaal’s predictions had missed their mark, and he was compelled to prevent getting even more deeply involved in the Empire’s civil war, when two days later, the name of the black-haired maiden siding with the rebel army, “Natsumi Schwartz,” reached Countess Dracroy’s manor and Ram seized control of High Countess Serena Dracroy.

Chapter 82:
The Rebels' Intent

Serena: "—Ultimately, subduing my person will keep the Dracroy domain from making a move. As I thought, you've got yourself a fine wife, haven't you Roswaal?"

Roswaal: "…It's troublesome that I have had to correct you countless times already, but Ram is my atteeendant~."

Met with Serena's comment, who was unusually brave considering the circumstances placed upon her, Roswaal unpleasantly replied while feeling like he was at his wit's end.

Visiting Serena's territory, the Dracroy Domain, he was searching for someone in the Vollachian Empire—In order to secure the missing persons of Subaru and Rem, he had requested assistance two days earlier.

Holding the position of High Countess, Serena was widely known throughout the Empire. It was hoped that she would be able to obtain highly accurate information, with the condition that it was about "A boy with black hair, black eyes, who would stand out whether he wanted to or not."

No matter where he was whisked off to, it was hard to believe that Subaru would keep quiet, so the degree of their expectations were high in that sense as well.

Therefore, it was inevitable that this would happen, and at the same time it was unexpected.

Roswaal: "Ram, let me ask just in case, but the reason for this reckless action is…"

Ram: "—It is Natsumi Schwartz."

Roswaal: "Isn't thaaat right?"

The sound spun by Ram's lips, it held the meaning of a name that was difficult for Roswaal to disregard.

Having been sent off to the Empire, Natsuki Subaru, isolated without support, directed a distress signal to those who understood the meaning of that name—Roswaal and Ram also immediately picked up on its intent.

In indicating that he was here, Subaru's judgment was unusually praiseworthy. Indeed, Subaru's actions themselves were without fault.

If there was a problem, it was the "side" from which the beacon of that distress signal had been raised.

Therefore, Ram resorted to what could be called a surprise attack or reckless action.

The result yielded a scene of Ram holding her wand thrust forward, forcing Serena to keep seated on the sofa. However, this could not be blamed solely on Ram's reckless behavior.

The reason was—

Serena: "—The black-haired maiden leading the rebellion, Natsumi Schwartz, is the person you're searching for?"

Ram: "To be precise, that person is an added bonus for Ram."

Serena: "Though, that is not the case for Roswaal. Thus, what is not so for Roswaal, must be extraordinarily important to you."

At the words of Serena, whose movements were being restrained by the wand pointed at her, Ram held her tongue.

Even while Ram prevented her from moving about, Serena's thinking remained sharp. In these circumstances, she did not lose her composure, and had a general understanding of Roswaal and Ram's situation.

—"Natsumi Schwartz" was something like a pseudonym that Natsuki Subaru had been using.

Although the exact meaning of the name was more complicated than that, if one considered the reasoning behind Subaru's deliberate use of it in the Empire, his intention in using the pseudonym was clear.

Roswaal too, would like to respect that intention if possible, but—

Roswaal: "Of all the things, to be on the side of the rebel army is…"

Even though he could pick up on the intention of using a pseudonym, the direction from which the beacon had been raised had been unexpected.

The rebellion that had occurred in the midst of them smuggling themselves into the Empire was already cause for concern. It was no exaggeration to say that not only had it sprouted, but had also blossomed into a poisonous flower.

For better or for worse, it was truly Subaru-like to not proceed as they had expected.

Roswaal: "Ram, have you also received any of Subaru-kun's baaad~ influence?"

Ram: "That is unthinkable. There is not a single breath of Barusu's influence on Ram's behavior."

Serena: "Even though you have been put into this situation as the result of his actions in the first place?"

Ram: "Roswaal-sama, the discussion with Serena-sama."

As soon as the situation deteriorated, she changed the subject and pushed for the initiative.

Closing one eye at Ram's boldness in speaking, Roswaal turned to face Serena once again.

Currently, Roswaal and Ram had been summoned to her office, and had just heard about the "black-haired maiden" from none other than Serena's lips.

Having been told about the features of Subaru and Rem, the people being searched for, she probably had the impression that it was just to the extent of a conversation topic with the detail of “black hair”. However, it was something holding a meaning which Roswaal and Ram could not miss.

Serena: “Regarding the problems that have occurred in the Fortress City, as a High Countess, I must make some sort of declaration of my intentions.”

It happened directly after Serena had declared this. —That Ram moved to suppress her.

The bold nature of Serena, and the fact that she did not have guards stationed in her office would be the ruin of her.

Her personal guards were standing by in the hallway outside the office, oblivious to the high tension in the room. Of course, as soon as Serena raised her voice, they would storm into the office.

Ram: “In that case, I will tear Serena-sama apart.”

Serena: “Oh, how frightening. I like it when I can tell you’re serious and not just making threats. Roswaal, you are…”

Roswaal: “She is not my spouse, but my servant… that discussion is already settled. I’d rather make an effort to return to a peaceful rapport between the three of us, without changing the nature of our relaaationship~.”

Serena: ““Us”, what a terribly laudable way of putting it. For you, who always deems everything as the matters of other people, to harbor the problem as your own is refreshing.”

At the chuckling Serena, Roswaal sighed with one eye closed.

It was certainly just as she said, as because of what Ram had done, it could not be the matters of other people. It was not about the master-servant relationship or responsibility, but it was also an emotional issue.

Besides, while Ram’s action was certainly hasty, it could simultaneously be said that the haste was the value of the reckless action.

After all, if Ram was not suppressing Serena—

Roswaal: “Your pride, the Flying Dragon Squadron, will burn the rebels to nothing in the blink of an eye.”

Serena: “…”

At Roswaal’s words, Serena Dracroy slightly narrowed her eyes.

The Flying Dragon Squadron owned by Countess Dracroy—That was, commanding the numerous flying dragons that inhabited the Vollachian Empire, the attack force that flew around the Empire’s tallest summits freely.

Originally, flying dragon riders, who possessed the technique of taming flying dragons, allowing them to command the flying dragons that bore no thought for people, would display overwhelming fighting strength on the battlefield. Because Roswaal could take flight, and thereby had the capability to completely defeat most opponents, he understood. —He understood that mastery of the air was the ultimate move to dominate the battlefield.

Therefore, in the Vollachian Empire, it was easy for the houses with excellent flying dragon riders to elevate their military gains.

Surpassing the trend that has been going since before the previous generation Count Dracroy, Serena Dracroy’s era is considered to have the strongest Flying Dragon Squadron.

If she truly wanted to mobilize the Flying Dragon Squadron, an ordinary rebellion would be no problem whatsoever.

Serena: “Unexpectedly, the person you are looking for is now in the rebel army, and you are troubled that I will deploy my troops. But, you can’t just stand here and stare at me forever, can you? How will you proceed?”

Ram: “Serena-sama, what about your family?”

Serena: “It’s pointless if you’re looking for a relative. I haven’t found a good partner since Roswaal dumped me.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama?”

Roswaal: “Don’t take jokes to be the truth. In general, such a thing as fellow aristocrats of the Kingdom and the Empire, the relationship between both countries makes it impooossible~. Serena, this is not the time to be making jokes.”

Even when disregarding Roswaal and Serena’s relationship, Ram could not be said to be very patient right now.

Although it was hard to tell from a quick glance, Ram strongly regretted the events at the Pleiades Watchtower. She blamed herself for losing Subaru and Rem and being separated from them.

There was no doubt that her impatience was behind her extreme actions this time as well.

Roswaal: “Let’s not provoke Ram unnecessarily, shall we not try to aim for a good landing together?”

Serena: “A good landing together, huh? If that’s the case, what exactly do you guys specifically want?”

Roswaal: “…”

Serena: “There are no fools who would fly on a flying dragon without a destination. In such a case, the mileage would be bad, and my riders are also precious. If you’re going to call anything here unnecessary, it would be just that. You should understand my concerns. Right?”

Resting her chin upon a single one of her hands, Serena gazed at Roswaal as if testing him.

Considering that Subaru had joined the rebel army, since it was highly likely that Rem was also there, it was not unreasonable for Ram to have made a quick decision. Blaming him for that in itself was meaningless as long as time could not be turned back.

If they wanted to, there was the means of harming Serena, then taking advantage of the chaos to flee from the territory.

However, that would be nothing more than a foolish act which abandons their original goal, and creates needless enemies. Even in an Empire where strength meant everything, soldiers were not so foolish as to gratefully accept when their masters were defeated by foul play.

To dampen the power of the Flying Dragon Squadron under Countess Dracroy's possession, such a thing may have been welcomed by the rebel army, Roswaal held doubts about if that action was worth his old friend's head.

Of course, if it was a necessary sacrifice for his dearest wish, Roswaal would not hesitate to take Serena's life.

Though, if the sacrifice was not needed, then he did not think he would go out of his way to make it.

Therefore, the words that Roswaal offered here to Serena were—

Roswaal: "—In this situation, would you like to join the rebellion together with us?"

Serena: "Huh?"

Roswaal: "If you do that, then the discord between you and us will be buried. If our goals become the same, Ram will lose her reason to point her wand at you. Essentially, we'll be able to settle things between us peacefully."

Serena's eyes widened at Roswaal, who said this bluntly with his hands folded in front of his chest.

Shock and astonishment flashed in those eyes of hers, and so did a little bit of inquisitiveness. With the meaning of her interest being piqued, she did not give a remark that was completely off base.

Relying on that, Roswaal began to work on his relationship with her.

Serena: “Settle things peacefully you say, but it seems that would only be about here. What awaits at the end of your invitation is an insurrection. My territory has received relief from His Excellency the Emperor, what gain would there be unnecessarily aggravating the situation—”

Roswaal: “—You have no dissatisfaction with His Excellency the Emperor. Is that truly the case?”

Serena spoke logically about the security of her foothold. However, interrupting her mid-sentence, Roswaal looked her straight in the eye.

As a High Countess of the Empire, she was a talented person who appeared to be broadminded and good at actualizing her intentions. For this reason, he had to look her firmly in the eye when he told her this.

Emilia: “When somebody is speaking with you, you should look at their face!”

Suddenly, those words flashed through Roswaal’s mind.

Unexpectedly, he felt like he had received a push from those words, and—

Roswaal: “It’s not like I spent the last two days passing the time quieeeetly~. While you were busy, I’ve been pricking up my ears as much as I could.”

Serena: “So instead of keeping my alcohol company until morning, you’ve been hard at work eavesdropping?”

Roswaal: “With the workload you have, I recommend you change your lifestyle of drinking until morning every day.”

It would naturally be different with the conditions that guests were being welcomed at a time of peace, but even then, his earnest wish as her old friend was for her to curb the amount she drinks.

In any case, putting his concerns over Serena’s liver aside, Roswaal would present the fruits of his attentive listening. The secret circumstances that this Dracroy Domain held, that was—

Roswaal: “—I heard a rumor that the incident from the year before last, in which a Divine General conspired in an attempted assassination, has had quite the lasting impact.”

Serena: “…”

Roswaal: “I heard that the perpetrator of that incident, the Divine General who lost his life, was a flying dragon rider… and in addition, that person was also one of your subordinates. His name was…”

Serena: “—Balleroy Temeglyph.”

Saying that in a low, quiet voice, Serena interrupted Roswaal.

She was still resting her chin against her hand, however the heat housed within eyes had changed from before. In some way, the hue of enjoying this situation had disappeared into a silence resembling the surface of a lake bereft of wind.

With those quiet eyes, she looked over to Ram, who was behind and to the side of Roswaal, and,

Serena: “Lower your wand, Ram. I’ll talk even if you don’t point it at me.”

Ram: “But…”

Roswaal: “Ram, do as she says. Serena doesn’t go back on her word.”

Roswaal held her back through those means, and Ram reluctantly lowered her wand.

Of course, she immediately repaired her readiness, but Serena could not find fault with that vigilance either. Only, she turned her face towards the window, to the scenery extending out there—No, she looked up to the sky.

To the sky where flying dragons flapped their wings, and flew about freely.

Serena: “Do you think it has freedom? This sky?”

Roswaal: “…From your way of speaking, that doesn’t seem soooo~.”

Serena: “In the Empire, the water, the soil, the air, even the flesh and blood of its people, all of it belongs to His Excellency the Emperor. Even the sky is no exception to this. —Who do you think’s been claiming that?”

Roswaal: “I wondeeer~, limiting it to “who” makes it quite difficult, doesn’t it? After all, that is something everyone«s been thinking.”

At Roswaal, who shrugged, Serena gave a short reply of “Is that so?”.

The name she mentioned—Balleroy Temeglyph, was a former member of the Nine Divine Generals, and the perpetrator of the assassination attempt on the Emperor that took place in the Imperial Capital the year before last.

Originally, he was a capable person appointed to an important position in the Dracroy Domain by Serena, and because of his remarkable strength and excellence as a flying dragon rider, there seemed to be good prospects that he would work his way up and advance to the rank of General First-Class.

As a matter of course, Balleroy turning his blade on the Emperor had also put Serena, who had recommended him, in a bad position.

Although the position of High Countess was not even taken away, the Imperial Capital’s feelings were poor, the expectations they held in her Flying Dragon Squadron were lost, and she was also never given an opportunity to recover.

And to top it all off, the person who had been installed as Balleroy’s replacement in the Nine Divine Generals was—

Roswaal: “—The Flying Dragon General, Madelyn Eschart, is a selection akin to a snide remaaaark~, isn't it."

Serena: "With no military experience, a being that suddenly rose to the position of General First-Class on the Prime Minister's recommendation, it seems her lineage is surprisingly that of a dragonkin. With a dragonkin who can control flying dragons without the secret technique of taming flying dragons, taking the time and effort to train flying dragon riders would be useless, wouldn't it?"

Ram: "That's not the position of Serena-sama, who has a Flying Dragon Squadron."

Serena: "Woah, don't look down on my Flying Dragon Squadron. Not needing riders has both advantages and disadvantages. It's true that the time needed for training is eliminated, but a flying dragon without a rider can only rely on its instincts for tactics. On that point, a flying dragon rider can understand and apply tactics."

Ram: "…"

Roswaal: "Most importantly, the dragonkin in question seems to crush them with force in numbers."

Vollachia's secret of taming flying dragons—even Roswaal did not know the details of the technique to employ the ferocious flying dragons that bore no thought for people. However, he had heard even though a talented flying dragon rider could discipline a single flying dragon, they would need to stay with them at all times.

In other words, flying dragon riding had to consist of one flying dragon and one person.

In contrast, the existence of the Flying Dragon General, who could command countless flying dragons without putting in all that time, was the natural enemy of Serena, whose strength lay in the Flying Dragon Squadron, as well as a thorn in her side.

Serena: "Balleroy was a trusted friend who was at my place for a long time. If he went against His Excellency, and even pointed a spear at him, it could be said to be inevitable that the fault would turn towards me. But—”

Ram: “Whether you are willing to resign yourself to that disgrace is a different story, isn’t it?”

Serena: “—. Each and every thing you say appeals to the depths of my heart.”

Ram: “Ram is obliged.”

Responding to Ram’s bland expression of gratitude, Serena sighed deeply.

Serena did not deny what Roswaal and Ram had pointed out when being pressed by their respective voices. By the time she had Ram lower her wand, she had already resolved herself.

That was a sign of her willingness to talk on an equal footing, rather than divulge the circumstances under threat.

In other words—

Serena: “—Even with all this, I didn’t mean to cause trouble while you were here, okay?”

With those words, Serena Dracroy touched the white scar on her face and smiled fiercely.

Her strikingly ferocious smile was the same one Roswaal had seen in his younger days when he met her; the ambitious one she had shown before she stole the position of head of the family from her father.

However, now her smile was directed not at her father, whose eyes had clouded when his daughter began to steal the trust of his retainers from him, but at the fearsome being who ruled this vast Empire—.

Roswaal: “—I see, Serena, you”

Seeing that smile, Roswaal belatedly realized his misunderstanding.

In an attempt to prevent the situation caused by Ram's snap decision from getting worse, he had tried to guide Serena's thinking by clarifying the position the Dracroy territory had been placed in, but that was a mistake.

There was no need to steer her in the direction of supporting the rebellion.

Even the rise of the rebel army with the "Black-Haired Maiden" was nothing more than a chance for her. Serena had already decided where she would stand, and in her own way, had shown consideration for Roswaal and the others.

She showed consideration in her own way by not dragging in an old friend that had come to find a missing person and did not know anything.

However, Roswaal and the others had thoughtlessly stepped into the opposing camp. Without realizing the Magic Stones had already ignited, they had poured additional mana in.

In other words—

Serena: "I was as careful as I could be. Only this once, would it be alright to regret meeting a clever wife. Or maybe, that you went out of your way and turned down my marriage proposal."

Roswaal: "Serena."

Serena: "Don't worry. If I were to reveal your identity, I'd be suspected of having colluded with the Kingdom. In that case, a war on two fronts would be pure insanity. If I'm going to do it, I'll fight a battle where there's a chance of winning."

Control of the discussion was stolen, and the situation with Serena had reversed.

Since their positions overlapped, there was no reason for Roswaal and the others to harm Serena. On the other hand, Serena had the leeway to make full use of Roswaal and the others' circumstances.

Ram: "Roswaal-sama, could it be…"

Roswaal: “Aah, we’ve stepped straight into the hunting grounds of a beaaast~. —Serena, if we hadn’t broached the subject?”

Serena: “In that case, I would have given you the appropriate hospitality for a few days, and then let you escape before the civil war was in full swing. But if I’m invited to fight together by an old friend, then there’s no helping it, right?”

Roswaal: “So barefaced…”

It was unclear whether she had intended to act in concert with this rebellion, or take action independently. Nevertheless, Serena had already decided to rebel.

They did not know whether that was anger at the Emperor’s cruel behavior, or connected to the fact that her confidant lost his life.

If only one thing was certain—

Serena: “His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, there is an exceedingly great amount of people who have accumulated discontent with his peaceful reign. If great flames of war rise once, those flames will spread in one swoop.”

Roswaal: “…Those flames of war, might you have any idea aboooout~ them?”

Serena: “I wonder what it could be. You’re the one with an idea, aren’t you?”

Chuckling, Serena seemed to have an ace up her sleeve that Roswaal did not know about.

Roswaal, on the other hand, also had an idea of a singularity that would be no matter to be trifled with if left unchecked, although he was unsure how it would affect this unfamiliar land.

If it was him, no matter what predicament he fell into, he would get through it one way or the other. All that remained was who he met in that predicament, how much he wished to save them, and how his influence would spread.

Or perhaps—

Roswaal: "—Have you also gone and set the whole Empire ablaze, Subaru-kun?"

If that were to happen, how should Roswaal act?

Of course, for his long-cherished wish that must be fulfilled, it was necessary to return to the Kingdom with his reputation intact. Even if that was not the case, there were the promises he exchanged with Subaru.

It was unilaterally imposed on him, but unlike Subaru, he could not revoke it. The future that someone else lacks was something that was difficult for him to accept, as he had decided to pick up the pieces.

Even without his promise to Roswaal, he would probably struggle as much as he reached out.

At the very least, Roswaal would only act to reduce the number of his attempts.

Then it becomes just a matter of not letting Subaru realize things had turned out in an undesirable way.

Serena: "Well, thanks to Ram endangering my life, my ill wills have ended up vanishing. I'll forget about my duties for today and open a celebratory drink."

Ram: "Having pointed the wand, it might not be Ram's place to say this, but are you sure about that?"

Serena: "We both needed to cultivate stronger unity toward the same goal. That's why we should drink and get to know each other. Considering who we're going to challenge, it's a very natural activity."

Serena nonchalantly invited Ram to have a drink with her, with a face that blithely forgot her previous outburst.

Ram was unusually perplexed by Serena's big-heartedness, as she seemed to be relieved that she no longer had to hide things from Roswaal and Ram.

That said, it was unthinkable that Serena would eloquently trick Roswaal and the others and catch them off guard with a shallow move like that.

In doing so, Serena would risk her own strength, and even her own life, in exchange for Roswaal's freedom in the Empire.

Roswaal: "So, are you going to wait for the flames of war to rise? Or will you become them yourself?"

Serena: "I at least know where I stand. No need to rush, it's not far off. —Or is it your idea to stay put quietly?"

Roswaal: "…That's not it."

Serena: "Right? It's the same for me."

Although both parties may have had different ideas of these "Flames of War", they seemed to have had a similar perception of what they had in mind.

Roswaal crossed his arms thoughtfully as he noted that fact. Serena, meanwhile, had nonchalantly gone to her display cabinet and started looking for a drink to loosen their tongues.

Ram: "Roswaal-sama, in the Fortress City of Guaral."

Roswaal: "In terms of position, Emilia-sama and the others are closer to us, attacking from the East. The same rumors will be heard over there, so if they can join us, they will. Of course, it would be frustrating for you."

Ram: "…No."

Shaking her head, Ram replied with a bottled frustration.

She would like to be reunited with Rem as soon as possible. With rumors of Subaru all over the Fortress City of Guaral, Rem was most likely to be there.

On the other hand, even with Roswaal's flight magic, a vain attempt would be a heavy setback.

Finding people in a wide Empire required a certain mind-numbing rationality.

Roswaal: "For that reason, let's wait and see. As she says, the flames of war that will rise.."

Ram: "—Yes."

With some hesitation and her wavering voice, Ram nodded her head in a healthy manner.

—A few days later, the "Flames of War" that Serena Dracroy had spoken of, rose.

The momentum of the rebellion, led by the son of Emperor Vincent Vollachia, spread throughout the Empire and also to rebel groups in various regions.

Among them, it was said that the first to declare their intention to join the rebel army was the High Countess Dracroy, and it was said that the brave lady had a handsome stranger and a lovely servant at her side.

Chapter 83:
Warfare and Warzones

—Steadily, the rebellion's flames of war spread throughout the Vollachian Empire.

Over the past few days, the Empire had been bustling as if the tranquility of the past few years was nothing but a fabrication, stirring up the thirst for blood built up within it until it had turned to sludge.

The history of the Vollachian Imperial Family had been a river of blood for generations, and the current Emperor was expected to put an end to this horrifying tradition.

In fact, during the reign of the Emperor, although there were some skirmishes, the situation that was considered a major upheaval was avoided.

The people were supposed to be enjoying "peace" for the first time since the founding of the country.

However—

???: "When you look at it from the outside, the people of the Empire didn't want a peaceful and safe life."

On his knees sitting in his chair while looking at a map showing the state of the war, he muttered in a compassionate mood.

Vincent Vollachia, the Emperor; it wasn't known what principles he used to run the country, but it is not like he maintained peace by chance either.

Exhausted physically and mentally on a year-by-year basis, he built an unprecedented era of peace in the Empire.

One could only imagine the disappointment in their hearts when they found out so easily that they were not wanted. —The people were stupid, and the Emperor was pathetic.

???: “From my point of view, I don’t know why they bother to increase the possibility that they might die… I don’t know what goes through the minds of those insane people. That guy… uh, yeah, and Jamal and others.”

He remembered how he used to advocate for the pride of the imperial people in his spare time.

Todd Fang braced himself as he tried to remember the man whose face was no longer blurred. It would be troublesome if he made a careless remark and was found to have forgotten Jamal.

At the very least, Jamal still has to live within his heart and mind in front of a woman who should be treated with care and respect.

???: “—Todd, are you tired?”

Suddenly, at the edge of Todd’s vision as he unfolded the map, he saw the face of a woman leaning over.

Frankly, it was heart-wrenching. She must have been on the roof of the carriage just before. Todd’s perception could not grasp when she had arrived next to him.

However, there were countless such masters in the world. The world would be a very difficult place to live if they were frightened by the existence of opponents whom we could not beat in a fair fight.

Most people faltered because they confused not being able to win with not being able to kill.

Even if one could never win, there were some people who they could easily kill.

Todd did not consider such an opponent a threat. Hence, neither did the woman next to him—Arakiya.

Arakiya: “Todd?”

Sliding in through the open window, Arakiya sat on the carriage bench—or, rather, squatted on the seat with her knees bent, unceremoniously.

Even though she had been living in the Imperial Capital for a long time, she had not mastered the manners of the city at all.

This was either because the person in question did not have that kind of education, or the people around her did not raise her right. It was commonplace to leave strong people like her to their own devices because they were strong.

In Vollachia, the strong took precedence over all qualifications.

Hence, a vicious cycle was established in which no one could blame the strong Arakiya for any unseemly or disrespectful behavior. Of course, if one were stronger than she was, one would be allowed to complain about her manners—

???: “Because “The Blue Lightning” is a name worthy of an even greater weirdo than Arakiya.”

If one was in the Vollachian Empire, one would have plenty of opportunities to hear rumors about the Empire’s most powerful, the First.

For better or worse, each and every rumor about the First were considered bad even by the esoteric values of the Empire. Above all, they were ill-suited for someone with Arakiya’s upbringing.

As a result, this behavior of Arakiya’s had probably not been enforced.

Of course, Todd had no reason to correct that, but he did anyways—

Todd: “Arakiya, sit down properly. It’s unsightly.”

Arakiya: “Sit? Me? In the chair?”

Todd: “What else is there? What do you think a chair is for?”

Hearing the inquiry with a strange look on her face, Todd replied with a grimace. In response, Arakiya wondered, but obediently assumed the correct way to sit in the chair.

However, since her legs were spread, he hit her knees to make her put them together.

Todd: “People down there see how the strong behave. In the Empire, anything goes as long as you’re strong, but that’s the thing, soldiers have hearts too. Even you don’t have to think about whether it’s easier to fight a superior officer with good or ill will, do you?”

Arakiya: “…Is there a point in doing that? Anyway, I’m going to fight alone.”

Todd: “After you ravage the battlefield, what about hunting down the survivors? Who’s going to clean up the corpses? Who will negotiate with those who surrendered?”

Arakiya: “…”

Todd: “In fact, if you want to be alone, why am I here? Your words are full of contradictions.”

After a mild argument, Arakiya, who made a difficult face, fell silent.

Fortunately, he now knew that this was not the face of the vigilant second most powerful person in the Empire with pent-up frustration, but rather a face of acceptance that he had a point.

In the beginning, he was careful about pointing things out, but now he did not hold back.

Once he got the hang of it, Arakiya was like training a sheepdog.

What makes it different from a sheepdog was that the dog itself was also a wolf with tremendous strength.

He laughed at himself for thinking like that, though.

Arakiya: “Todd, are you tired? I knew it.”

Todd: “If I’m tired, it’s because of the long journey. You are a hard worker. I can see why His Excellency the Emperor and the Prime Minister and others find you useful.”

Arakiya: “…Necessary, so.”

Arakiya again expressed her concern for Todd, who had fallen silent. After Todd lashed out to dismiss her concerns, Arakiya’s eyes dropped to the floor.

Arakiya was probably aware that she was being used as a convenience.

She was not the type to indulge in life stories, and since Todd was not interested, she did not delve into the topic, but considering future treatment it might be worth asking.

If people who know Todd can feel closer to him on their own accord, it was a worthwhile deal.

Todd: “You—”

Arakiya: “The map, what were you looking at?”

However, his attempt to speak was completely squashed by Arakiya, who changed the subject. “Mmm,” Todd choked on his words, and tilted the map so that Arakiya could see it.

The map showed the entirety of Vollachia, but it was a simplified version that only showed the major cities and topography, on which Todd had drawn this and that according to his own senses.

Arakiya stared at it, her well-shaped eyebrows risen a great deal,

Arakiya: “…I don’t get it.”

Todd: “No doubt.”

Arakiya spoke of incomprehension, but Todd did not blame her for being ignorant of it.

In fact, it was not due to Arakiya's learning shortcomings, but simply because the map was written in such a way that no one but Todd could decipher it.

No special words or symbols were used, but the meanings were reworded, or intentionally incorrect symbols were used so that information could not be extracted by others.

Even if the map was inadvertently dropped, Todd's actions would not be exposed from it. Also, in the unlikely event that he was captured, he may be kept alive for the purpose of deciphering the map.

It was worthwhile since this move called the third hand avoids suffering setbacks.

Todd: "Significant notes record the location and scale of the battle. Nonsensical notes are just a distraction. I won't tell you which is which."

Arakiya: "I don't know, so even if you tell me …Do you have a lot?"

Todd: "Yeah, I've never seen a situation this out of hand since His Excellency had acceded to the throne."

Although a subjectless question, Arakiya's question referred to the rebellions that had taken place throughout the Empire.

Not only was it an expression of rebellion against the Emperor, but there had been frequent clashes between actual Imperial Soldiers and rebels, and the call for rebellion was high and widespread throughout the region.

However, this was just a catalyst, what became the symbol of the righteous cause of the rebel army planning to usurp the Imperial throne was—

Todd: "The illegitimate child of His Excellency The Emperor, the black-haired Crown Prince."

Arakiya: "His Excellency's child… for real?"

Todd: “Well. What’s important is not whether it’s true or not, but rather that such a rumor is being spread, and that the force of the flames is continuing to grow stronger without being extinguished.”

Arakiya: “…”

Todd: “That’s why hardworking people are being recruited all over the place. Incidentally, I was as well.”

As one of the Nine Divine Generals personally selected by the Emperor, it was natural that Arakiya was in a position allowing her to speak with Emperor Vincent Vollachia who supposedly resides on an unreachable plane of existence.

It was a mystery to what extent Arakiya’s sense of values could be trusted, but even from her perspective, it seemed the existence of the Emperor’s illegitimate child being held up by the rebel army was questionable.

However, as Todd himself had said, whether it was correct or not was not important.

Todd: “If they didn’t want people to think this rumor was important, they should have extinguished the fire while it was still small. Because this fuddled uproar is the result of having fallen behind there.”

Arakiya: “—. Is it connected? The thing with Gladiator Island.”

Todd: “That was…”

Having closed one eye, Todd was interrupted by the muttering Arakiya next to him.

She had mentioned the matter of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, which was the first task for Todd’s group as well as a secret order by Berstetz, the Prime Minister of the Empire, and they had failed it spectacularly.

It had happened just a few days prior, but having been ordered to kill all the Gladiators on Gladiator Island, Todd and Arakiya had proudly headed there in high spirits—and retreated just before they went ashore, ending the matter without anything happening.

Naturally, Berstetz reprimanded him for failing to fulfill his duty, but Todd's instincts for sniffing out danger led to him firmly refusing to land on that island.

He had sensed that there was a threat over there that he absolutely should not confront.

Todd: "…"

Todd, who placed absolute faith in that feeling, did not regret not landing on the island.

The fact that after that, the Gladiator Island was taken over by the Gladiators and was contributing to the spreading flames of war as a part of the rebellion happening all over, could not possibly compare to endangering his own life.

Even if Todd were to regret that decision, it would be—

Todd: "Ridiculous. That's not like me at all."

Arakiya: "Todd?"

Todd: "It's nothing. You worry too much. Rebellions are happening all over the place, but none of them will last long. —They're just dreaming."

Todd took the time to deny the question Arakiya had begun to ask earlier, and then shrugged.

He had not intended to mislead her or play her for a fool. Truly, the rebel army was dreaming. It was the kind of nightmare that felt good while in that dream-like state of mind, but the self-hatred when they woke up would make them want to die.

Or perhaps, it had been a nightmare unfolding to its end before they could wake up.

???: "—General First-Class Arakiya! Private First-Class Fang! We are arriving!"

It was right after Todd spat that out, that the sharp voice from the coachman's seat of the horse carriage had reached them.

The shaking spreading from beneath their seats gradually subsided, and the speed of horse carriage heading towards their destination had decreased. Then the carriage slowly stopped, and Todd and Arakiya exited out the door.

Todd: "…"

The two had lined up on a small hill, and the weather was dark and overcast with thick clouds, which seemed to Todd as if the sky was apprehensive about the future of the Empire as it plunged into an unending civil war.

If he lowered his sight to capture this poetic impression, what could be seen was a battlefield on a sprawling wide plain with a group of familiar uniforms fiercely clashing with another unfamiliar group of uniforms..

—With the Western Plains as the battlefield, the clash between the Imperial and rebel armies had already begun.

Todd: "Who is the opponent?"

With the Imperial soldiers having already set up an encampment, one of them came over to the pair on top of the hill.

That person looked daunted, having received Todd's question as soon as they opened their mouth. Judging from his cloak, he was probably a "General". To his bewilderment, Todd, who was nothing more than a Private First-Class, started speaking to him quite overbearingly.

However, upon noticing Arakiya next to Todd, they straightened up,

General: "The citizens of Kunohelemente are in high spirits after killing their consul. It seems the consul had just arrived after being appointed."

Todd: "Seems like an ill timed move. That consul was also unlucky… So, is that pest with that group who are burning with enthusiasm?”

General: “It has not been confirmed. We believe he is not here.”

Todd: “If he was, he should have shown his face at the beginning. —General First-Class Arakiya.”

Arakiya: “Mm…”

Nodding after receiving the report from the “General”, Todd called for Arakiya. Turning around with a sigh-like reply, she was ready for this opportunity to fully demonstrate her abilities as ranked second within the Empire.

With that out of the way, all that remained was for Todd to make sure that no unnecessary obstacles were introduced.

Todd: “Give the signal and let your troops retreat. I recommend completely focusing on withdrawing. Otherwise—”

General: “Otherwise?”

Todd: “General First-Class Arakiya’s flames do not choose who they incinerate.”

It was not a statement particularly intended to threaten, but it seemed to have had the same effect on the “General” who heard it.

They gasped slightly and glanced at Arakiya. Arakiya with her usual stoic expression noticed that gaze and looked at the “General.”

Faced with the crimson eye not covered by her eye patch, the “General’s” cheeks stiffened,

General: “Sound the drums! Pull back the troops!”

The “General” immediately switched gears and issued directions to the subordinates in the camp in a sharp voice.

Unlike the unreasonable common soldiers, a battlefield with a proper “General” thankfully meant a conclusion could be reached more quickly. However, that did not make the battlefield pleasant, so they should finish their unpleasant duties quickly.

Todd: “Arakiya, don’t hit the soldiers who withdraw after hearing the drums.”

Arakiya: “And the others?”

Todd: “Do as you please.”

Arakiya’s eye flickered with a slight bewilderment at having been told to do as she pleased.

Todd immediately reflected that the way he said it had been poor. She was a woman with the power to do unthinkable things, but Arakiya did not seem to particularly like fighting.

So it was not appropriate to tell her to do as she pleased on the battlefield—

Todd: “—Kill anyone who opposes you.”

That was the best possible way to issue commands.

Arakiya: “…”

As soon as the sound of drums echoed through the air, the battlefield they could look down upon from the hill transformed.

The audible sounds of steel and steel exchanging blows in a sword fight faded away, and in its place angry roars and battlecries, the great volume of the pursuers and the pursued, began to sweep over the battlefield.

However, that would not last long either.

—The raining explosive flames turned those wannabe-hunters pursuing fleeing backs to ash.

It was when the ally in front of them, the compatriot beside them, or even one of their own limbs was engulfed in flames, that they were freed from their crazed pursuit and noticed.

That they were not the hunters, but merely the hunted.

Todd: “…”

Gripping a branch in one hand like a child playing and lighting the lower part of her legs on flames, Arakiya rose above the hill, higher and higher, high up in the sky, and then made flames rain down from the sky incessantly.

A terrifying tactical weapon that seemed to change the color of the world, that was an appropriate description for this spectacle.

Flames headed full speed at the ground, burning enemies in accordance with the commands Todd had issued. Those who stopped upon seeing their enemies being burnt, these lecherous bystanders thought twice about stopping to stare.

If they stopped, Arakiya’s flames would not be able to choose who to scorch.

General: “Sound them sound them sound them!! Sound the drums! Everyone, fall back—hk!!”

Witnessing the war situation being rewritten, the “General” raised his voice with all his might.

Although all Imperial Soldiers face the battlefield with the readiness to die, that was not the same as not being afraid of dying in vain.

Even if they remained there, they would not obtain any more prestige than a stray dog that burned to death.

Therefore—

???: “—Private First-Class Fang! Stop General First-Class Arakiya!”

While he watched as the flame devil engulfed the battlefield, collapsing the battle formation of the rebels, an angry roar hit Todd’s eardrums, who felt like he had already accomplished his job.

When he turned around, a different Imperial Soldier, from the “General” who ordered the soldiers to withdraw, was shouting with his soot black stained face making a desperate expression.

As Todd frowned, wondering what the meaning of this was, the soldier's face illuminated red from the flames,

Soldier: "The other side has come forth to surrender! The battle is over!"

Todd: "Can we allow such a convenient offer? I don't like saying this, but unlike the situation where if we didn't pull back we would also suffer damage, we can now unilaterally annihilate them all. It's better to cut off any unnecessary sources of the trouble and make an example out of them."

If Arakiya's ability was used well, their side could secure victory without losing a single soldier.

Todd thought that it would be more appropriate to make an example of them, and make them regret their decision to join the rebellion, rather than allowing them to surrender and get the upper hand.

However, Todd's opinion was overturned by the soldier's appeal that followed.

Soldier: "We can't! Those who have surrendered are accompanied by the Crown Prince!"

Todd: "—What did you just say?"

At the Imperial Soldier's report, Todd reflexively grabbed him by the collar. The soldier choked out a "Guh", but Todd did not care as he brought his face closer,

Todd: "Why has the Crown Prince turned up here? I thought you said he wasn't here."

Soldier: "Th-they hid him… and now, he's emerged…"

Todd: "Tch, was their intention to use a trump card? Those guys don't even know the value of their hand."

Releasing the soldier whom he had grabbed by the collar, Todd gave a deep exhale.

He then looked up at Arakiya circling overhead and hesitated on whether to call out to her. And then, after careful consideration,

Todd: “Drag the messenger here.”

Soldier: “Huh? But…”

Todd: “Bring him here. If they don’t want to get annihilated, make him run desperately.”

The soldier began to argue with Todd’s nonchalant instructions, then quickly realized that it was pointless and turned away.

Todd also did not want to wield Arakiya’s brute power either, but he had no choice but to do so while it helped the discussions move forward quickly.

—Especially in the worst case scenario, when the other party had the Crown Prince.

Soldier: “Private First-Class Fang.”

Not long after, the soldier from earlier returned to Todd.

Beside him was a ragged-looking young man, and in contrast to the bravery of the armor he was wearing, his face appeared dismal and depressed as he realized his defeat.

There was no helping it. Even Todd felt the same way when he saw Arakiya’s violence against the other side.

Although he felt pity for him, there was something he needed to confirm.

Todd: “I hear you guys have the Crown Prince. Is that the justification for your revolt?”

Messenger: “Ye-yeah. The Crown Prince desires the Imperial Throne. We sympathize with that aspiration, and in order to pave the way for that ally…”

Todd: “—That’s a lie.”

Messenger: “Ah?”

Staring intently into the face of the person who was saying something significant, Todd interrupted. Hearing that, the man’s expression was one of bewilderment, and a shiver ran through him.

That reaction convinced Todd. —They were all talk, but no show.

Messenger: “Ack.”

The next moment, Todd swung the axe at his waist and smashed the upright standing man’s head open.

The man with the axe thrust into the top of his head grunted softly and fell to the ground with his eyes rolled back in his head. In response to Todd’s immediate action of slaying the messenger, the soldier slightly widened his eyes,

Soldier: “Private First-Class! Such arbitrary actions are…”

Todd: “This guy lied. The opponent doesn’t have such a thing like the Crown Prince on their side. These people chose the low road when it came to surrender. —General First-Class Arakiya will continue to do as she has been doing.”

Soldier: “Guh… If… if the Crown Prince is truly here then…”

Todd: “He’s not.”

At Todd’s declaration, the soldier was unable to continue with any further words, and kept silent. As Todd then gave a nod, he dragged the corpse of the fallen enemy at his feet.

Todd scraped the flesh and blood from the axe with his fingers and let out a long sigh.

Together with Arakiya, he traveled around the country crushing the seeds of rebellion, but each time he did so, the presence of the

Crown Prince stood in his way.

The illegitimate son of Vincent Vollachia, the only possibility to give legitimacy to the rebellions that erupted across the Empire— How many would attempt to revolt under the guise of that illegitimate child.

Even worse was Prime Minister Berstetz's order to capture the Crown Prince unharmed if at all possible, and bring him back to the Imperial Capital.

Todd: "Ahh, good grief, I can't help but say it. —How long until we can go back to the Imperial Capital?"

Every attempt to return to the Imperial Capital was unsuccessful, somehow it became a journey that took them all over the Empire.

Todd bit his lip as he thought of his fiancée, who even now was still waiting for him to return to the Imperial Capital.

The flames engulfed everything on the battlefield, and those who chose to resist were regretfully burned to nothing.

He pitied those who had failed to see this future and ended up choosing to stand on the wrong side, but at the same time he scorned them.

The uprising was crushed. No matter how much they raised their spirits, they would never be able to gain victory over the weight of the Empire.

While he was thinking that there was absolutely no doubt about this, Todd suddenly had a thought.

Todd: "…"

The beginning of a genuine uprising, and the rebellion's flames of war spreading in every place.

Just as if it was by somebody's design, beyond the blaze of warfare spreading throughout, somebody was present.

Endlessly, endlessly, Todd's survival instincts were being made to throb, by somebody.

Todd: "…"

With warfare spreading its flames, and the literal burning battlefield coming to a close before his eyes, Todd came to a standstill.

This warfare engulfing the Vollachian Empire, just who in the world desires it? Whatever the case, Todd would read through it, and obtain what he wished for no matter what.

For that purpose, he would spare no effort, no consideration, and nothing whatsoever. If there was one thing that concerned him.

Arakiya: "—. Is it connected? The thing with Gladiator Island."

Flashing through the back of his mind was Arakiya's question, posed just before arriving at the battlefield.

Fundamentally, Todd did not look back to the past. No matter what he did, it would be made correct by the future. Nevertheless, that incident was the only thing that continued to bring him unease.

Without stepping ashore, Todd had abandoned the Gladiator Island, withdrawing.

That decision was sure to have been the right one. He was supposed to hold no regrets.

However, possibly, by some chance, if there was some reason to have regrets, that was—.

Todd: "—The retreat on that day, it was the only time my life had been in checkmate."

Chapter 84: Tea Chamber

1

—As the flames of rebellion spread throughout the Vollachian Empire, signs of unrest were growing with each day.

More than nine years had passed since Vincent Vollachia ascended to the throne as the Emperor, but this was the first time domestic affairs were burnt to a crisp, and people's hearts have been in turmoil.

The history of the Vollachian Empire was a history of war.

Even if a historically unprecedented era of peace had arrived, conflicts occurring in places beyond the reach of the eyes and ears of the Imperial Capital could not be completely prevented. As a result, people were never truly at ease.

But even so, the people living in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana had had a semblance of peace.

As the Imperial Capital was under the Emperor's heel, it was only in that magnificent city that conflicts did not occur. In a way, this safety rested upon Emperor Vincent Vollachia's authority—However, that was a thing of the past.

The year before last, an attempt to assassinate the Emperor had occurred in none other than the Imperial Capital. The Emperor had been so severely wounded as to nearly lose his life, the perpetrator a Divine General.

Since that incident, the people learned that they were never truly safe within the Empire. After they learned it, they also anticipated this.

Therefore the Emperor's status remained unshaken by the spirit of rebellion of the Nine Divine Generals at the peak of the Empire's military might and the Vollachian Empire would not collapse no matter how much it was shaken to the core—.

???: "—The safety and expectations of the people have been greatly shaken as of late."

A report acknowledging the cracks in the basic principles laid out in the Empire.

When this report echoed through the majestic throne room, every person trying to close their ears to these unpleasant words could have been mercilessly beheaded on the spot, so it was not surprising everyone was so hesitant.

The civil officials and military officers, lined up here in the Imperial Capital's Crystal Palace—even if their respective battlefields differed, all the people gathered here at the very core of the Vollachian Empire were doubtlessly warriors. Even those people could not help but hesitate, because to be seen here as a cowardly warrior was directly linked to nothing but death.

It was not death that any of them feared. What they feared was dying in vain.

They feared they would meet a death unbefitting a brave warrior of Vollachia.

Therefore, the generals paid respect to the white-haired wise old man who proposed it, Prime Minister Berstetz Fondalfon. And then, they awaited the response of Vincent, to whom the Prime Minister issued his report.

Vincent: "…"

The large throne, enclosing the entirety of his slender body, had been continually passed down as a symbol of authority since the era of the first Emperor of Vollachia.

With the national flag hoisted behind the throne, the national emblem of a wolf pierced by swords looked down upon the troops. With the Sword Wolf behind him, Vincent sat calm and composed.

Leisurely leaning back against the throne, Vincent showed no sign of military might.

In fact, no one had ever heard a rumor that this Emperor, endowed with unfathomable wisdom, would excel at martial arts. It was unlikely that anyone had seen him wield a sword or express an interest in hunting.

As long as an Emperor resided on the Imperial throne, he was expected to rule the entirety of the Empire without exception.

Even though the Empire valued strength above all, martial arts skill was not a requirement for the Emperor at its top. That was because the Emperor's sword was none other than his peerlessly powerful followers.

However—

???: "—Hk"

A large part of the troops were pressured by the Emperor, who did nothing but sit there silently.

Not only would they lose nothing from trying to cut him down, the throne was merely a few seconds' worth of distance away. If it was natural for the strong to oppress the weak, then the Imperial troops did not have the slightest reason to fear this Emperor.

Nevertheless, the distance and the unopposable presence of the Emperor were unassailable.

Vincent: "The safety of the people, hm?"

Suddenly, breaking the silence till then, these words left the Emperor's lips.

Just as it seemed that the tension pervading the throne room would subside, it grew heavier instead, constricting the hearts of the troops.

Vincent narrowed his almond-black eyes and gazed at Berstetz, who had continued to pledge his fealty with his palm and fist put together in front of his chest,

Vincent: “Since when had the emperors of my country begun to take notice of its people’s anguish?”

Berstez: “…I understand what you are saying, Your Excellency. However, the reality is that the people’s rumors have raised concerns about Your Excellency’s reign. If this is neglected, this poisonous blood will spread like a disease throughout the Empire.”

Vincent: “Are you advising to spill all this poisonous blood?”

Berstetz: “Most humbly, even Your Excellency the Emperor would lose his life if he were decapitated. Would it not be imprudent to lose one’s head to spare a limb?”

Vincent: “…”

Berstetz: “Of course, it would be ideal if this matter could be repressed with just fingers, ears, and nails.”

Concluding his final remark with a bow, Berstetz thus stated his own opinion.

That frank, or, in other words, inconsiderate proposal, made the other troops shudder. But at the same time, they admired him for speaking for them and saying what needed to be said.

After all, Berstetz expressed the collective opinion of all the troops about the rebellion spreading throughout the Empire.

The Imperial Soldiers were furious at the people resigning to Vincent’s reign, bandwagoning with the ones occasionally raising their voices, and rising up in rebellion all over the place.

If one were to be a part of that first group, they would also be qualified to take the stage as a valiant adversary. But what of the shamefulness of those that followed?

Fighting, winning, and securing were the fundamental principles of the people of the Empire.

The people of the Empire must be strong, too many people misinterpreted the intent of that saying, and used it for their own gain. Wouldn't exterminating them be the only way that the intent of "the people of the Empire must be strong" could be truly embodied?

However, Vincent had not taken proactive countermeasures against these rebellions and relied on the spread out garrisons to fend them off. Although—

Berstetz: "Dispatching all the Generals of the First-Class just to nip the rebellions in the bud will not fundamentally resolve the situation."

Vincent: "—Quite eloquent, Berstetz. Facing me directly, with all the troops in formation behind you, makes it look as if you were the head of the rebellion."

Berstetz: "You jest. I am not prepared to lead a rebellion and drive Your Excellency away from the throne."

Vincent: "Hmph."

With a small snort, Vincent paid no mind to Berstetz's refutation.

Nevertheless, it was understandable why Vincent would say such a thing. After all, all of Berstetz's words had been spoken on behalf of the hearts of the Imperial troops for quite a while.

Including the point where he mentioned the anticipated deployment of the Generals of the First-Class, and advised against it as being insufficient.

Setting aside the blood-soaked, sharp-tongued exchange that followed—.

Berstetz: "Your Excellency, this rebellion is…"

Vincent: "I have heeded your counsel. However—"

Berstetz: "…"

Vincent: "—I too have a plan."

Vincent's gaze swept over Berstetz and the assembled generals and troops, erasing any lingering distrust they might have had of the Emperor.

When the meeting was called and they were initially assembled in the throne room, each of the troops had their own feelings about Vincent's reluctance to take a stand against this rebellion.

In fact, it was Berstetz who advocated on behalf of the troops, but the feelings of the troops were shared by all of them, which became all the more amplified when they heard what he had to say.

Those feelings, which in a sense were about to spread like the flames of rebellion, were extinguished.

Like a great fire being doused by wind and water, they were slowed, weakened, and drowned out.

And then—

Vincent: "Or, do you doubt my words?"

Berstetz's eyebrows quivered as he was asked by the Emperor, the owner of such profound wisdom.

What kind of emotions were flickering behind those thread-like narrow eyes, uninferable by the rest, was unknown to anyone in attendance.

Only one thing was certain.

Troops: "—No, absolutely not!"

It was that the troops were in unison with their voices, and they answered the Emperor's question in a gallant manner.

Stamping their feet, the military officers drew and raised the swords from their waists. The civilian officials clasped their palms and fists together in front of their chests, each making the most respectful bow appropriate for their position and responding as such to the

Emperor’s question.

No one could decipher the thoughts of Emperor Vincent Vollachia.

However, if the question being imposed here was whether to dismiss that which they could not comprehend as being something untrustworthy, then that was a no.

If what was needed for trust was words and accomplishments, Vincent had demonstrated a proven record.

His achievements were worthy of note, beginning with his “Imperial Selection Ceremony” to become emperor, which was followed by a reign free of major turmoils.

Having demonstrated his performance, the Emperor had also spoken the words necessary for trust.

—Do you doubt my words, he had asked.

Vincent: “I’ve given this rebellion a great deal of thought. So, unless I tell you everything, from beginning to end about this, is it the case that you cannot even satisfactorily obey?”

Troops: “—No, absolutely not!”

Vincent: “Then if that is so, prick up your ears, and do what needs to be done before your eyes wander about. I have no intention of sugarcoating the veneers of your position for those who fail to do what needs to be done.”

The Emperor’s speech was both cold and sharp, which was why he seemed so familiar to the troops.

Vincent’s gaze and tone of voice had the power to manipulate the zeal of others’ souls. His devilishness, which was capable of being hot or cold, made the hearts of the troops burn at that moment.

The troops’ eyes glazed over with anxiety and suspicion as they wondered what he was thinking.

No concrete answer was given. But the clouded eyes of the troops cleared. —Because their Emperor made it clear to them that he was working his deepest machinations.

Only then could the many Imperial Soldiers trust in victory and fight on.

Berstetz: “What would you like to divulge to me and the troops, if only a little?”

Vincent: “For what purpose? If I reveal it, it will cast a shadow over my strategy. Instead, what would be gained? Peace of mind for you, and those troops who are frightened of what lies ahead?”

Vincent brushed Berstetz off with a harsh tone, as if to say there’s no merit to comparing these.

But the troops supported Vincent’s answer. They no longer had the feeling in their hearts from earlier that Berstetz’s words spoke for them.

Rather, they even felt angry and frustrated at Berstetz’s proposal. Vincent made it clear that he had his own thinking. That should be enough.

Vincent: “You may disagree. I, however, do not intend to offer an explanation based solely on the prestige of the Empire.”

Looking at the silent Berstetz, Vincent added to his words.

At the sound of the Emperor’s voice persuading his unconvinced opponents, many of the troops inwardly shook their heads. No further words were needed. And yet, the Emperor continued.

Vincent: “But as I stated. I have no desire to reveal my intentions to you. Instead, I have only one word for you.”

Berstetz: “Your Excellency…”

Vincent: “The people of the Empire must be strong.”

Berstetz: “…”

Vincent: "—I shall prepare a battlefield befitting the way of the Sword Wolf."

Nodding deeply, Vincent promised the assembled troops, over Berstetz.

A beat later, a scorching passion burned through the troops' bodies. The inferno that clad them was no less ferocious than the fires of rebellion spreading throughout the Empire.

If the rebellion was a flame of distrust of the Emperor, then the burning within the troops became a flame of confidence in the Emperor.

Vincent and Berstetz: "…"

Vincent and Berstetz looked at each other silently as the heat quietly built among the troops.

The Emperor and the Prime Minister, both of whom occupy the highest positions in the Empire thanks to their ingenuity; the surrounding troops could not guess the intent of the glances exchanged by the two.

However, Berstetz did not make any further statements that would undermine the Emperor's intentions.

But instead—

Berstetz: "—Your Excellency, with all due respect, I have one more question."

Vincent: "More questions and suspicions? Unlike the first time, those behind you do not appear to be on your side."

Berstetz: "It is very difficult for one in the position of Prime Minister to decide whether or not to make a recommendation based on the presence or absence of allies."

Vincent: "Your mouth works. Speak."

Vincent urged him to do so, giving a jerk of his thin jaw.

In response, Berstetz prefaced his remarks with the words, “Then,” and then continued.

That was—

Berstetz: “—The Crown Prince with the black hair.”

Vincent: “…”

Berstetz: “The ones who rebel throughout the land, have championed him as their leader. He is a black-haired, black-eyed boy, and his origins are… that of being an undisclosed Son of His Excellency.”

Like Fire Magic Stones infused with mana, Berstetz’s act of throwing them in, for better or for worse, once again made the troops around him, who couldn’t grasp their surroundings clearly, speechless.

The troops had heard the rumors about this. Even for them, it would be a lie to say that they did not care about the truth of the rumors. But they did not have the courage to confirm them.

Berstetz questioned this directly, and yet again there was anticipation, as the troops, who should have been overcome with animosity, seemed to do an about-face.

The existence of the Crown Prince was now the sole focus of attention of all the people of the Empire.

How it appeared to Vincent’s eyes, how his ears heard it, and how his mouth spoke of it.

After a short pause, Vincent called out to the Prime Minister with a “Berstetz”.

And then—

Vincent: “Do not be swayed by such frivolous rumors. I have no children. If necessary, find out where these rumors come from and bring the heir to the throne before me. I will keep him as a clown for my amusement.”

And with a wicked smile on his face, the black-haired Emperor assured them so.

2

Berstetz: “—Is the Crown Prince truly not Your Excellency’s son?”

It was the same question that was posed a few minutes ago in the presence of a large crowd.

However, the tone of emotion in his voice was slightly different and carried more weight. It was a serious question and a voice that only those who heard it would understand.

After all, it was a matter of life and death for the old man who asked the question.

The location was neither the throne room nor the Crystal Palace, but the Prime Minister’s residence within the Imperial Capital.

Although they were both in charge of the government of the Empire, the tension between Vincent and Berstetz was always on edge and the perception around them was that they did not get along, to put it politely.

For that reason, their dialogue was sure to be a great shock to those who witnessed it.

Vincent Vollachia secretly visited Berstetz Fondalfon’s mansion and they faced each other in a room in this way.

Of course, if you went by the meaning of the word “shock”, it would be far more on the side of reality.

Vincent: “…”

Vincent narrowed his black eyes at the question, fixed his eyes on his partner and remained silent. Rather than simply deliberating, the Emperor took pauses in order to drive his opponents into a corner, so Berstetz was in no hurry.

He was an old man who knew the effects of both silence and pauses.

In fact, although it was called a “matter of life and death”, there was not a trace of anxiety, agitation, or self-preservation in Berstetz’s appearance as he posed the question and waited for an answer.

Indeed, there was not the slightest hint of self-preservation. That was what was most alarming about this old man.

Vincent: “Obviously.”

Berstetz: “…”

Vincent: “The answer changes not. I have no heirs. All of that is nonsense.”

Berstetz: “As I told you before, the discussion here will not leak out. Even if it were General First-Class Olbart, his strained ears will not pick up anything. You know this.”

After a long pause, Berstetz responded to Vincent’s answer.

The “tea chamber” in Berstetz’s mansion was a small fortress with all the necessities for the sole purpose of holding secret talks. There was talk that within Vollachia, the mystical barriers that used rare magic were employing things like mysterious curse arts or Meteors.

It was rumored that this “tea chamber” alone cost enough to buy an entire city.

Berstetz: “I have received the necessary stipend. I will offer it to you after my death, so you may put it to good use.”

Vincent: “Do you think a room named “tea chamber” would suit the Crystal Palace?”

Berstetz: “The name and interior are not important, so you can redecorate it as you like. What’s important is its function… Here, you don’t need to wear a false skin.”

Rather than using implied meanings, Berstetz spoke in a frank register to strip him of his mask.

At that, Vincent closed one eye. It was not contemplation. The answer was obvious. This was just another pause, another period of silence.

Even though he knew it would have no effect on the old man before him, he would not cut corners.

He was not going to deviate from what he had already decided. He had been told bluntly by easygoing old acquaintances that it was not a game, but it was in his nature.

Vincent: “I have no reason to follow your lead. You and I are in a relationship of mutual struggle based on our mutual interests. Do not misunderstand that.”

Berstetz: “I see. If that is the case, I would like you to dispel my doubts.”

Vincent: “…”

Berstetz: “I will ask again. You do not have a son, do you, Your Excellency the Emperor?”

Vincent: “—. The answer remains the same.”

Vincent repeated the same answer over and over again. Berstetz responded with a short, “I see,” without a trace of disappointment or relief on his face.

If he considered the goal of this old man, he understood just what he had to respond with, but as Vincent was connected to the matter at hand, he asked a question in return.

Vincent: “For the sake of argument, if I had a child, what would you do?”

Berstetz: “If His Excellency had a son, it means that His Excellency was willing to fulfill the duties of the Emperor. The son would be secured as soon as possible and we would have the real His Excellency return to the throne.”

Vincent: “Hmm. Then, what about me?”

Berstetz: “As to how traitors meet their end, we both know, don’t we?”

Berstetz was thorough in his response, which was matter-of-fact and calm.

It was refreshing to see a man who had come all this way to the extremes of selflessness in order to serve the Empire’s way of being. The fact that there was not a speck of uncertainty in his appearance made the abnormality stand out even more.

With that, despite Berstetz’s thoughts—

Vincent: “—The rumors about the Crown Prince must have been spread by the man himself, who keeps on getting away.”

Berstetz: “Do you think it will provoke rebellion in various places? Is it possible that there were children of whom even you and General First-Class Cecilus weren’t informed?”

Vincent: “It is not possible.”

Berstetz: “Even you don’t know everything about His Excellency.”

Vincent: “—It is not possible.”

Vincent shook his head at Berstetz, who liked to iron out the finest details.

This was not wishful thinking, a desire, or pretending to understand. It could not have happened. He could assure him without a shred of doubt.

Regardless of authenticity, Vincent Vollachia did not have a child.

The man must have been very thorough to leave no room for such suspicions or even a glimmer of possibility. To eliminate any doubt, he had never even shared a bedchamber with a woman.

A steel will to never close his eyes in front of others, that was what made him stick to his way of being.

Therefore—

Vincent: "—Vincent Vollachia does not have a child. Your actions were just."

Berstetz: "Just? If this can be called just, then I ought to usurp the throne with my own hands. When that cannot happen, it is not just. To begin with…"

Vincent: "…"

Berstetz: "With these arms that feel like the withered branches of an old tree, I am unable to protect the might of the Empire."

The old man's flat tone of voice seemed to be more of a frenzied obsession than anything else.

Many people believed that they were doing the right thing and acted accordingly. Otherwise, they would not be able to fully demonstrate their abilities and, of course, they would not be able to validate themselves.

Just how many people in this world could remain unwavering while they were realizing that they were making mistakes? Unwavering, they returned with only these results.

So then—

Vincent: "…"

—So then, as they moved forward while making mistakes, just what awaited on the path ahead.

Berstetz: "If all doubt has been dispelled, what I ought to do shall remain unchanged."

While Vincent was contemplating, Berstetz was speaking in an unconcerned voice.

Perhaps he did not anticipate the existence of a Crown Prince in the first place. If he was told by his closest confidant that there was no such possibility, he could withdraw his doubts for the time being.

Consequently, Berstetz's attention and topic of interest also quickly moved to the next subject.

Berstetz: "Then, how do we deal with the rebels who turn their blades against you?"

Vincent: "Were you unsatisfied with the exchange from the throne room?"

Berstetz: "I dared to represent the troops, but I am ultimately in a different position from them since they have complete trust in your wisdom and authority. —We have sent General First-Class Arakiya and General First-Class Madelyn to various parts of the country to crush the seeds of rebellion, but that alone is not enough to compensate."

Vincent: "…"

While propping up his chin in his chair, Vincent listened silently to Berstetz's report.

In fact, Berstetz's behavior in the throne room was not arranged. But given the situation within the Empire and Vincent's position, it was the best tactic possible.

With that, the troops' frustration and suspicion were redirected. However, Berstetz, who had knowledge of the fact that Vincent was merely sitting on a vacant throne, was doubtful about his authority.

Berstetz: "Normally, this is the point in the plan where the commanding ability of either General First-Class Chisha or General First-Class Goz is required. Since it is difficult to mobilize both of them, an alternative plan… how about bringing General First-Class Groovy back?"

Vincent: "—The movements of the Northwest are awfully suspicious. Whether it is Kararagi or another party, we have no option of moving them away from that border at this time."

The original duties of a General First-Class was to uphold domestic security and keep external threats in check.

This situation was caused by Vincent and Berstetz's collaboration, but if it jeopardized the Empire's footing, it would be like putting carriage before Galewind Horse—strangling it to death because of self-centered leadership.

Groovy Gumlet's deployment was also an indispensable linchpin in the defense of the Empire.

Berstetz: "Then, how about General First-Class Olbart?"

Vincent: "We do not want to carelessly move him away from the Imperial Capital and unnecessarily expose him to the rebel forces. It is essential to keep him in the Capital and deploy him at strategically important points. At least, for now, as long as he is willing to follow us."

Berstetz: "There is also the recuperation for the arm that was lost in the incident in the Demon City. Given the circumstances, it will not be too difficult to keep him in the Imperial Capital. If that is the case, then General First-Class Moguro."

Vincent: "For him, there is a duty that only he can fulfill."

Tapping the floor with the toe of his shoe, Vincent dismissed Berstetz's suggestions one after another.

The Nine Divine Generals had all been given critical assignments. There were only a few of the Nine Divine Generals that did not fall into this category.

Berstetz: "Is General First-Class Cecilus still an unknown?"

Vincent: "It is extremely difficult for him to distinguish between friend and foe. His beliefs do not change no matter what principles or great causes one has. Therefore, I have removed him from the board."

They had known each other for a long time, suffice it to say. But not once had they felt like they understood one another.

Perhaps no one but Cecilus could understand Cecilus. His ability with the sword was undisputed, but there was no room they could afford to leave for the uncertainty in his standpoint.

Though for Cecilus, who desired to stand on the grand stage, it seemed to be quite a regrettable story.

Vincent: “In any case, there is no chance of him returning. More than ones that can not be used, pawns that are troublesome when used will only derail the calculations. In general, the rebels should be looked at in a similar manner.”

Berstetz: “—. If he is not returned to the board, I have no objections. If so, what war potential do you have in mind to engage the Crown Prince, insolently presenting himself as His Excellency’s son, the rebels gaining momentum, and General First-Class Yorna?”

Vincent: “Arakiya, Olbart Dunkelkenn, and Madelyn Eschart.”

Berstetz: “…”

Vincent: “If you think it insufficient, add in Chisha Gold and Moguro Hagane.”

At the word “insufficient”, Berstetz shook his head and just said, “Not at all”.

Although it was doubtful how open-minded one could be about this, it was an extraordinary situation to have five of the Nine Divine Generals face off against an adversary. In addition, there were also the Generals of the Second-Class, with Kafma Irulux at the front, who could virtually be called a General First-Class in terms of strength, and were not few in number.

Therefore—

Vincent: “—In the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, we shall engage the rebels.”

Berstetz: “Perhaps the rebels will change their war strategy once they assemble all their forces.”

Vincent: “A black-haired Crown Prince to gather forces, and a bunch of collaborators using him as a symbol of deception? How can such a group of people be so united in their insistence on the authenticity of a non-existent Crown Prince? In the short term, this might be a clever move to light the fire of rebellion, but discrepancies will inevitably build up over time.”

The rebels took advantage of this opportunity to raise their voices, many of them under the banner of a fake crown prince.

Even if all the rebel forces from all over the country were to gather in the Capital, they would not be able to coordinate with each other. However, Vincent Vollachia certainly had not failed to consider such a possibility.

With that in mind, it left some element of unease. And, speaking of unease—

Berstetz: “—A decisive battle in the Imperial Capital, hm? Ever since the founding of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, for a group of rebels to march on the Imperial Capital, it’s just like in “Magrizza’s Guillotine”.”

Vincent: “Berstetz.”

Berstetz: “Yes?”

Vincent: “You certainly seem to be enjoying yourself.”

At Vincent’s remark, Berstetz gave an unusually confused “Huh?”. However, when he pinched his cheek with his fingers, he became aware of these feelings for the first time.

Thoroughly probing for the joy that had slightly spread, and for its true origin,

Berstetz: “I am terribly sorry. I know it’s me of all people, but I offer my heartfelt apology.”

Vincent: “Apologies are unnecessary. Why do you smile?”

Berstetz: “A smile …It’s just, I thought it was as expected.”

Vincent: “As expected?”

Berstetz: “As expected, the depiction of a maelstrom of war, that very thing is the Vollachian Empire itself.”

To anyone outside the Empire, it would have sounded like a silly thing for an old man to say.

However, this was probably a sentiment held by almost everyone in the Vollachian Empire, young and old, and Berstetz was not unique in this regard.

—No, of course, it was rare for anyone to say such a thing, even in this position.

Vincent: “Is the existence of the Vollachian Empire entirely determined by that?”

Berstetz: “We each have our own picture of the future we envision. Your Excellency… no, I’m sure you do too.”

Vincent: “…”

In the tea chamber, there was no margin for eavesdropping, nonetheless, he had said a bit too much.

This kind of talkativeness was uncharacteristic for Berstetz, and perhaps it was proof that human blood flowed through his veins. If that was the case, then perhaps Vincent may not have human blood in him after all.

The reason was—

Vincent: “—You said too much, Berstetz. Just who do you take me for?”

Indeed, in the quiet words of his response, the elation and lamentation that should have been there, had not been present whatsoever.

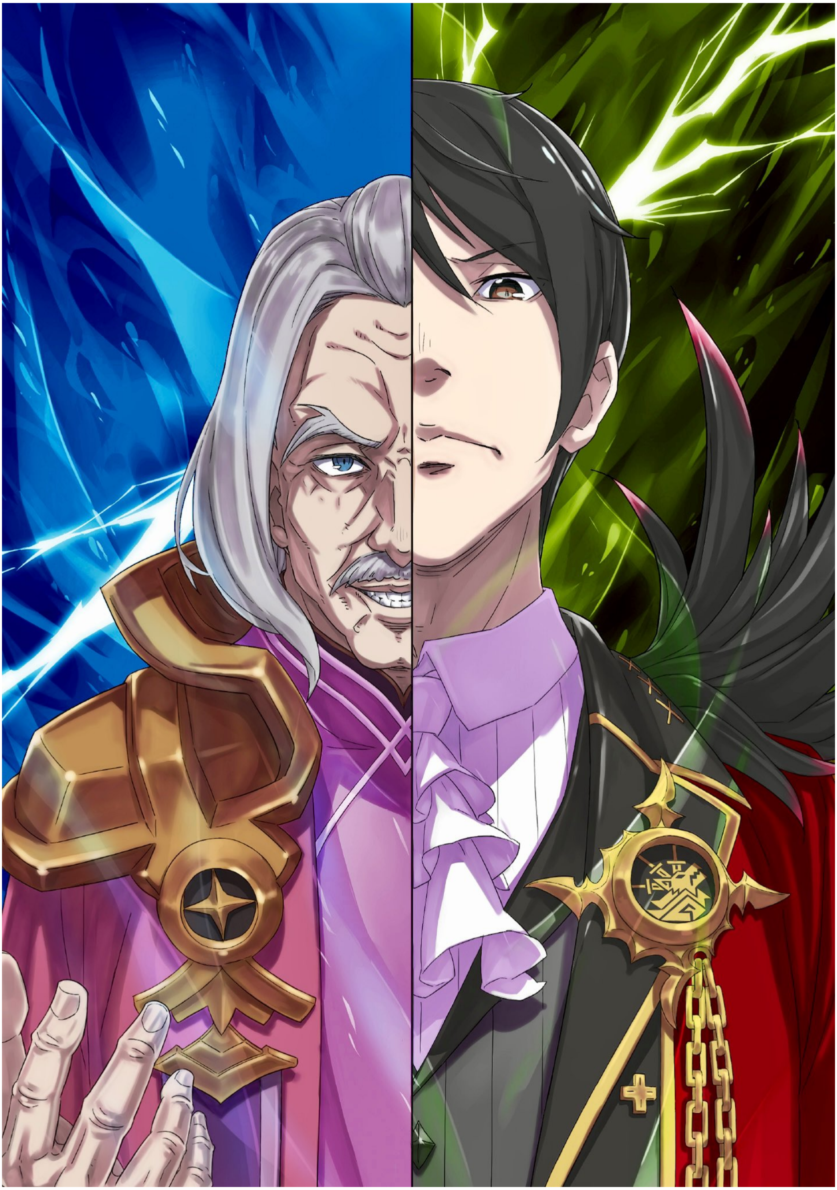

Chapter 85:
Fhrend

1

???: “A rather gloomy atmosphere has spread within the mansion over the past few days, don’t you think?”

Rem quietly muttered at the tingling sense of tension in the air.

The dry air and cold winds brought in from outside seemed to be mixed with faint human anxiety and irritation surging up on the battlefield.

Although it was only for a short time, Rem had roughly experienced what it means to be on a battlefield on a few occasions.

If one yielded to that feeling, the tension they experienced on their skin would increase day by day, waiting for the moment to collapse. Even the soldiers guarding the mansion appeared to be gradually losing their composure.

That being said, that too was probably due to the influence of the current circumstances.

Rem: “I heard that the rebel army has the upper hand… Now rebellions are taking place in various parts of the Empire. The Imperial Army has been so busy dealing with them that they haven’t been able to respond proactively.”

Ironically, what had ended up triggering those rebels’ simultaneous uprisings was the battle at the Fortress City of Guaral, which also caused the abduction of Rem and many others—the Imperial Army’s all-out offensive, with even a Divine General having been dispatched, had been narrowly staved off by the hodgepodge rebel army.

The rebel army—It was a conflicting way of referring to them for Rem who knew the fact that Abel, the one leading them, was the real Emperor, but she had heard that the resistance forces were continuing to grow.

There even was a rumor praising an indomitable city which splendidly repelled the merciless attack led by the Flying Dragon General, further boosting the belief that there was naught to fear from an Imperial Army helplessly driven away.

Rem: “It could perhaps be said that they’re not lying, but…”

From Rem’s perspective as someone involved, the commander of the flying dragons Madelyn did not retreat for strategic reasons, and it was questionable to conclude that a city damaged to such an extent was the winner.

Of course, from the rebel army’s point of view, a victory was still a victory, and there was also no reason to pass up the perfect opportunity to spread their agenda. Because of it, insurgents from all over the place have been joining the surging rebellion.

Strategically, there was nothing strange about it. —Indeed, nothing strange at all.

There were also other reasons why the rebels have been in high spirits.

Rem: “…”

One other reason besides the narrow victory of the Fortress City that explains the unprecedented success of the rebel’s uprising, being that the ruler of the Demon City of Chaosflame, General First-Class Yorna Mishigure, has joined the cause.

The defection of this capricious General First-Class known for her exceptional capabilities had sparked the rebel’s momentum.

And that in particular was Abel’s plan from the start, as well as the plan of Natsuki Subaru who went with him.

Rem: “…He could’ve just been following along, and there’s the possibility he wasn’t useful at all.”

What proportion of these events have been set in motion by Subaru?

After mentioning the possibility that he had not been useful for anything, Rem herself admitted how unconvincing those words were. Hypothetically, if he had actually been useless, then it was only because all of Subaru's words and actions had been blocked off.

And since she could not imagine Subaru keeping his mouth shut and not acting in the slightest, he probably accomplished at least something. —Or even convince a General First-Class to change sides.

Then again, she is probably overthinking it.

Rem: "Do I…?"

An undeniable premonition made her ask herself that question.

The rebels had risen up simultaneously, and the foundations of the Empire were shaking unlike ever before. Winds filled with the scent of blood and steel were blowing in the Imperial Capital as well, even reaching Rem and the others who had been taken captive.

To what extent had Abel possibly foreseen this situation?

Rem: "Was even the initial self-directed hostility part of his calculations?"

He had probably even calculated the spread of the rebellion and that the fake Emperor would assemble his forces in the Imperial Capital following the successive outcry of the rebels.

Even Subaru was simply used as a pawn by Abel to realize his greater plan.

Subaru probably had not been told the full details of the plan to begin with. In the end, Subaru was nothing more than a pawn to be used for Abel's goals. —Not that she was not aware of the reason for it.

She was shameless to feign ignorance of such a deception.

Rem: "…"

At this rate, would the small rebellion sparked off in the village of the People of Shudraq engulf the entirety of the Empire and turn into a political upheaval for the history books?

If so, how would Abel and Subaru, who were at the center of it, end up being spoken of?

And in the midst of it all, just what exactly should she accomplish—.

???: "—Hey."

Rem: "Ah…"

???: "What are you spacing off for? Y-You're the one that said you wanted to do it. Properly, yes, properly take responsibility and do so until the end."

With those words, Rem snapped back to reality from being lost in thoughts with wide open eyes.

At her first glance, Rem noticed a woman playing with her dark brown hair—Katya. She had been staring sternly at Rem through the mirror on the dressing table in front of her.

Her unruly hair was tangled around Rem's fingertips. That was only natural, as Rem had been right in the middle of doing Katya's hair.

Rem: "Sorry. I was thinking about something."

Katya: "You don't need to tell me, of course everyone always has something on their mind, haven't they? Don't report every single thing like it is an excuse."

Rem: "…"

Katya: "—Ah, not that I am saying you shouldn't, but."

Thinking she might have gone too far, Katya awkwardly corrected herself.

The apologetic Rem inadvertently ended up feeling delighted at the attitude of the puppy-eyed girl.

Katya Aurélie—A woman held captive in Prime Minister Berstetz's mansion and, just like Rem, was under house arrest.

Unlike Rem, who had been brought along as a healer for a wounded Flop and put under house arrest by a concerned Berstetz, it seemed she was here because of different circumstances.

It was not like they exchanged the details of their respective circumstances, but compared to their meeting, even being able to talk like this meant they considerably warmed up to each other. Katya was the kind of person that would snap at the slightest remark, and double the distance to someone going through the trouble of getting close to her.

Katya: "…What's with that expression? It is quite irritating."

Rem: "Sorry. Even now, I also haven't properly gotten used to seeing it either. It's almost like it's from a stranger."

Katya: "C-Could you not say scary things? After hearing the story about you losing your memories, I can no longer tell when you are serious, it's scary!"

Staring in a gloomy manner towards the mirror, Katya brought her own finger to her mouth and bit at it.

Whenever something went awry, Katya had the habit of biting her nails like that. Rem had only known her for a short while, but for better or worse, she would often resort to that when feeling on the edge.

Biting her nails, Katya's reproachful gaze was reflected in the mirror as she glared at herself and Rem standing behind her. Behind the woman sitting in the wheelchair, Rem was still staring at her reflection in the mirror on the dressing table.

After all, what she had told Katya was an exaggeration.

Even Rem, without her “memories”, had long since accepted that this was not the expression of a stranger, but her own. She could ill afford to snap at everything she sees and touches.

If she starts doubting the kindness of Louis, the People of Shudraq, Medium, Flop, Priscilla or Schult, wouldn’t nothing be left her but an empty self?

Since she knew that, wasn’t it about time for the very first person to lend her a helping hand to—.

Katya: “…You’re good at doing hair.”

Rem: “Eh?”

Katya: “Like I said, you’re quite good at doing hair. Maybe, before you forgot everything, you were doing this as your job… but there’s no way, right?. I-I said something stupid. Forget about it. Just forget it. Forget it.”

Looking away from her reflection in the mirror, Katya blushed at the sight of Rem absent-mindedly doing her hair. Before she even noticed, Rem had finished doing her hair and her skill was clearly worthy of praise.

Using both hands to softly hold the pigtails steady, hanging down on either side of her head, Katya glared at Rem, her lips trembling.

Katya: “You’re spacing off again… I-If I’m such a boring person to talk to. Then! Please don’t and look, yes, look to someone else!”

Rem: “No, everyone else in the mansion is in the middle of working.”

Katya: “Then, am I just the only one loafing around? And then, coming to me of all people…”

Rem: “It’s not like that. Please don’t put me in the spot like that.”

Katya: “Which one of us…!”

Turning the wheels of her wheelchair, Katya fled to the back of the room. There, biting her nails and glaring upward, she was as ferocious as a cat whose territory had been violated.

Rem's unclear attitude made Katya uneasy.

Rem: "Katya-san, I am sorry for the misunderstanding. I didn't come to Katya-san's room because she was the only one free in the mansion."

Katya: "Then, then, what are you saying?! Why did you come to me…"

Rem: "That is…"

Asked for an appropriate reason, Rem thought for a moment.

Just as she had answered to Katya, Rem did not take her position lightly enough to seek out someone to kill time in this situation. However, after a little contact, she realized that Katya was not a particularly important person, nor did she hold any of the Empire's secrets.

From Rem's point of view, who was in a hurry to do something, there was no doubt that there was little to be gained by interacting with her.

Still, Rem actively tried to get involved with Katya because—

Katya: "Wh-Why? Tell me! If you won't say…"

Rem: "I think it's because Katya-san and I are friends."

Katya: "…"

Rem: "Katya-san?"

She seriously tried to look inwards and search for words that seemed to fit, but all that came out were hazy thoughts.

Rem did not have any sort of shrewd thoughts when it came to Katya. So, she could not give Katya a reason why she wanted to be there.

Rem would be in trouble if she could not convince Katya.

Katya: “Fhrend… Who the hell is Fhrend!”

Rem: “Huh? Ah, that’s not someone’s name. Friend means something like a companion.”

Katya: “Fhrend… eh, com… panion?”

Katya looked wide-eyed in astonishment, as if she had heard an unbelievable word. Katya’s reaction made Rem suddenly think that referring to her as a friend was too familiar.

To begin with, the relationship with Katya was one that Rem was forcing on her.

It may have been a bit thoughtless to call two people friends when they got to know each other while being unwillingly placed under house arrest in Berstetz’s mansion.

Rem: “I’m sorry, that was self-serving. It’d be better to say “fellow house arrestee” or “house arrest companions”…”

Katya: “Fr-friend!”

Rem: “Yes?”

Katya: “I said we’re friends. Yeah, I said it… We’re not particularly good friends, but still…”

Putting both hands on her face, Katya said so while looking away.

When Rem blinked at those words, Katya exhaled “Ah.”,

Katya: “But if you don’t like it, you know, you can stop anytime?”

Rem: “I understand. Then…”

Katya: “You, you want to stop?”

Rem: “I don’t want to stop. No, I mean that Katya-san and I are friends.”

Unexpectedly, Rem nodded, hoping that the person in question agreed. Katya’s eyes widened, then she pulled her hair down, bit her nails, and muttered, “Yes.”.

@ddukae

Rem had analyzed that she bit her nails when feeling anxious, but since she just did it right in front of her just now, Rem was wondering whether she offended or scared her.

However, she didn't look upset, so Rem decided to reconsider why she was biting her nails.

Including that hard-to-understand part, Rem felt that Katya was someone who could not be left alone. Rem did not know much either. However, this would be enough to meet the requirements of a friend.

Katya: "…Despite that, you, that is…"

Rem: "That is?"

Katya: "Yes, umm, that! …You seem to know a lot about the rebellion out there."

Katya, who had been biting her nails and closing her eyes, changed the subject as if she suddenly remembered.

For a moment, Rem was confused as to what she was saying, but quickly realized that she had just been lost in thought while doing Katya's hair.

Rem: "I'm not sure if I know enough about it to say I'm well informed, but I have an interest in it because I was originally brought in from a battleground. Is it different for you, Katya-san?"

Katya: "…Not exactly, no. However, I don't want to think about it too much. My older brother… My stupid brother died, and I hate war."

Rem: "—Oh."

Dropping her gaze, Katya muttered while intertwining the fingers of both hands in her lap.

The death of Katya's brother was not news to Rem. He must have been very important to Katya. She often spoke of her dead brother like this.

The most recent part of Abel's rebellion resulted in the death of Katya's brother. Perhaps his death was not unrelated to the battle in which Rem was involved.

Rem would also hate fighting if someone close to her died. Even now, she wished that there was no conflict.

Rem: "Still, even if I block my ears, it won't go away. I was told that Katya-san's fiancé is also on the battlefield. I'm sure you're worried."

Katya: "Not him…! H-He won't die no matter what. However."

Rem: "You thought the same of your brother, right?"

Katya: "…"

Perhaps it was something that could not be avoided if you were born into this Empire, especially if you were born into an aristocratic family.

Her brother died in battle, and her fiancé also went off to war. Rem had mixed feelings about going into battle as an Imperial Soldier. —Abel would show no mercy to his enemies.

The same was true even if the soldiers were formerly supposed to be his subordinates.

Rem: "It's strange…"

To begin with, Rem was not inspired by, nor in agreement with, Abel's philosophy.

Originally, she was taken prisoner in the Imperial camp, and Subaru enlisted the help of Abel and the People of Shudraq to take her out of there. In order to pay off that debt, Subaru cooperated with them —Rem also acted with them in an effort to make amends, but there should have been no obligation to do so.

Yes, it should not have happened, but it was already in the past.

Rem: “For Louis-chan, Priscilla-san, Mizelda-san’s group, Flop-san, and so on…”

One could say that the people related to Rem were either taking care of or looking after each other.

Such people shared the same path as Abel. Before she knew it, Rem had a hard time closing off her heart from it. But such things did not concern either the hostile Imperial Soldiers or Katya.

If Katya knew the reality of Rem’s situation, would she forgive Rem?

Katya: “…”

Due to Katya grieving the loss of her dear brother, Rem did not have the courage to open her heart to her.

Katya: “…You?”

Rem: “Ah, no, it’s nothing. If I seem to know the details of what’s going on outside, I think it’s because of the people who have been assembled somewhere else in the mansion grounds as of late.”

Katya: “Somewhere else in the mansion grounds… Ah, those guys.”

Hearing Rem’s story, Katya’s voice lowered a notch and her eyes grew stern.

That unsettled reaction by Katya was understandable. To begin with, Katya was shy and distrustful of people, and it took a lot of effort for Rem to approach her.

From her point of view, it was unwelcome to have more and more people in the mansion. And even more so with the flags of rebellion gathering from all over the country.

Katya: “There are so many of them, do you really think he’s there, among them, His Excellency the Emperor’s…”

Rem: “—Illegitimate child”

Katya: “…I’ve already been found out, so I have nothing to hide.”

Cutting off Rem’s reply, Katya made an uncomfortable face.

Another redundant word, she seemed to think, but Rem paid it no mind. More than that, the meaning of the word was far too captivating.

In Berstetz Fondalfon’s mansion, in a separate part of the mansion where Rem had also been under house arrest, a large number of youths from the battlefields throughout the Empire had been assembled.

—All of them were teenage boys, a trait shared by the black-haired Crown Prince.

Katya: “There were all these stories about how strange it was that His Excellency doesn’t have a son, well, there was…”

Muttering this in a hushed voice, Katya reminded Rem of the time when she met Berstetz one-on-one right after she was brought to the mansion.

Berstetz, who ousted Abel from his throne and replaced him with a false emperor, was claiming that Abel resigned from his role as Emperor as the reason for his treason.

Their neglected role was the lack of an heir to the throne.

Katya: “His Excellency never took an Empress, and …all the previous emperors have had many spouses and children …so it falls to them to select the next Emperor.”

Rem: “That is the conventional practice to do so. And yet, Abel-san, …No, Emperor Vincent did not abide by that. Then there were rumors of a black-haired Crown Prince.”

Katya: “It seems that you are saying that the Empire cannot be left in the hands of His Excellency. Utterly ridiculous.”

Rem: “Ridiculous, you say?”

Rem raised an eyebrow at Katya, who muttered with heartfelt hatred while looking downward.

It seemed like Katya’s rebellious remarks stemmed from her anger towards the people who started the war rather than her irritation at the causes of the war.

Rem: “Katya-san, what is your judgment about Emperor Vincent?”

Katya: “I, I would never do anything so presumptuous as judging His Excellency the Emperor! …But, in an Empire where the strong dominate, there is no place for someone like me, and …in peaceful times, there is not really a difference between the two. So it was comfortable.”

Rem: “Comfortable, is it…”

Rem’s eyes were downcast as Katya stammered and faltered as she revealed her feelings.

It did not seem like Abel’s capabilities were lacking, and Berstetz said that he would not have contemplated rebellion if it had not been for the heirship matter. In fact, the Empire had been at peace for so long that there were probably more than a few with opinions like Katya’s.

While there was no fighting, there would be fewer people risking their lives.

Katya’s brother died as soon as the fighting started, and her fiancé was dragged off to the battlefield. From Katya’s perspective, it would be difficult to have a good impression of the war.

However—

Rem: “I don’t think there’s a real Crown Prince to be found in that place.”

Whether or not Abel really had a child, Rem had come to that conclusion.

Hearing Rem's answer, Katya asked in a hushed voice, "Why?". Rem averted her gaze by turning her head towards that far-off person.

Rem: "The ones being held captive in that separate area are the Crown Princes who participated in the rebellions all over the country… At the very least, they're calling themselves that."

Katya: "Th-That's what I've heard too, but… But, can it be?"

Rem: "If you asked me, a self-proclaimed son of His Excellency the Emperor instigating a rebellion, and promptly getting himself captured does not sound like a well thought out situation."

Katya had difficulties ascertaining such a thing with certainty. There were just too many circumstances and bits of information she could not talk about.

Not only had these Crown Princes been taken prisoner from many battlefields, they had also been taken alive so that the facts could be ascertained. They had been assembled at this separate section of the mansion, as to wait for the time the matter of their position would be addressed.

Since Rem already knew the character of Abel, the real Emperor, he would be more cautious when it came to his child. At least, she did not think he would be that foolish.

In the first place, shouldn't supporters of the rebels side cooperate with Abel since he is their leader?

Considering that father and son would be working together to oust the fake Emperor, it was hard to believe that this Crown Prince so effortlessly captured was actually the real deal.

Rem: "Of course, there is no way to be sure…"

Even Rem could not state that her thoughts and impressions were absolute, either.

Even Abel was not almighty. Surely there was a scenario where he could be captured and rendered unable to act by some unforeseen mistake. However, being defeated in battle and taken prisoner was a different story.

If there was a calculated plan to include getting captured, she might consider it, but it was not clear that one of the Crown Princes in the separate house had planned to do so.

Katya: "I, I am by no means confident, but what are you to, …His Excellency the Emperor?"

Rem: "—. I have never met him. I think the man himself would even insist on it. But, I wonder if the people who would share my opinion on this far-away Crown Prince are that few."

Katya: "You mean, they're deceiving people with a fraud? What's even the point of such a dreadful thing…"

Rem: "…It's probably just a good way to recruit people."

Using the Emperor's biological son as a propaganda move would be the best possible pretext to claim the throne.

From what she had heard, there were no instances in the Vollachian Empire in which the Imperial throne had been superseded by usurpation. However, the logic of the Empire does not forbid usurping the Imperial throne.

If one seized the Imperial Capital, took the throne, and beheaded the Emperor, that person would become the next Emperor.

It was very convenient to support the next Emperor candidate as a pretext for gathering the necessary manpower to carry out such a plan.

Rem: "In addition, the Crown Prince has never been seen publicly, and we don't know anything about him except that he has black hair and black eyes, first come, so people are free to make up claims for their own benefits."

Katya: "…Um, who are the people who started saying that?"

Rem: "I guess it means they're part of the rebellion…"

Katya's question made her think about the people around the captive Crown Princes, rather than himself. These so-called "comrades" would not get away scot-free if the Crown Prince had been taken from them.

There was only one destination for those who defy the Emperor.

Katya: "They use you, they get taken advantage of, and then they get killed or arrested for it. …such stupid people."

Rem: "Katya-san…"

Katya: "Wha, what? Did I say something wrong? Or did you just say you're a hostage too? Are you saying that they are better than me?"

Katya's voice faltered as if she was having a tantrum, causing her eyes to tear up.

Perhaps the reason why she insists on being different from those far-off people in such an exceedingly malevolent way was because she came to realize how much she has in common with them contrary to her belief.

Katya often cursed herself for her own inadequacies, because the awareness of her captivity and the remorse she felt were a burden for the ones around her—first of all her fiancé.

Rem: "…"

Because Rem knew how she felt, she was at a loss for words.

She would be called a fraud if she was to oppose, and any words of understanding would be met with insults for being arrogant. At this point, she was not convinced that they had grown close enough for her to relieve Katya's heart without causing an argument.

Pondering about what she should say, Rem gripped her cane in frustration.

And then—

???: "—You're friggin' noisy, girl."

Rem: “…”

With those words, a terribly cold voice echoed through the room, and Rem and Katya held their breath. —No, Rem may have been able to settle for this, but not Katya.

Shocked, Katya faced her wide-eyed gaze behind Rem to the room’s window that looked out onto the courtyard. The voice had come in from the window, so in other words, the person speaking was there.

Katya made direct eye contact with the other person, and had ended up completely frozen in place.

Katya: “Ah, uh…”

???: “Enough of your grating voice. Quit being an eyesore. It is a mark of disrespect before this dragon.”

Wide-eyed after having let out a ragged breath, Katya was struck by a cold voice. As if her whole body was being gripped tightly by that voice, Katya’s throat had not even been able to properly respond.

At the sight of Katya trembling violently, Rem bit her lip and turned to look back.

There—

Rem: “—Madelyn-san”

Madelyn: “Healer-girl, what are you doing here? You should be fulfilling your duties. Did you get carried away in the absence of this dragon?”

Rem: “That was not my intention.”

With the focus of that strict voice directed towards herself, this time Rem was the one feeling intimidated. However, Rem shielded Katya behind her from that gaze and faced the other party directly.

Standing in the courtyard, outside the window of the room, was a petite girl in lovely clothes and two black horns growing out of her head—Madelyn Eschart.

She was one of the Nine Divine Generals, and the person responsible for bringing Rem to this mansion. When she made her return after leaving the mansion on Berstetz or Vincent's command time and time again, Rem would be surprised at the appearance of the girl.

It was not about her appearing. Because of her fierce appearance.

Madelyn stood confidently in the courtyard, her appearance stained with sticky black blood.

Rem: "Is that blood? Are you injured?"

Madelyn: "Don't change the subject. I, the dragon, surely told you to heal that man's wounds."

Rem: "I'm not changing it. Flop-san's wounds are being properly handled one step at a time. More importantly, please answer me. That blood is…"

Madelyn: "—. It's not this dragon's blood. This is the blood splatter of victims."

With an annoyed frown, Madelyn pulled at her clothes and answered Rem's question. The crispy sound it made was probably because the dried blood had already stuck her clothes to her skin.

Rem caught her breath upon being told that that large amount of blood was that of victims. In just what way could you have hurt someone else, or perhaps how many people would you have had to hurt to be bathed in that much blood?

Rem: "Have you been fighting?"

Madelyn: "A fight is something done with an opponent you recognize as an equal. Do you think there is anything that could stand on equal footing with this dragon? What this dragon has been doing is hunting. Hunting with bothersome limitations."

Rem: "Bothersome…"

Madelyn: "Let those with black-hair live. Kill the rest."

Rem could not respond carelessly to Madelyn’s direct manner of speaking.

However, she was able to understand that Madelyn bore the duty of bringing back the Crown Princes from various battlefields in order to be held prisoner in a separate building.

As expected, Berstetz was probably the one who ordered the securing of the Crown Prince.

Given the original purpose for bringing about the rebellion, if Abel truly had an illegitimate child, that fundamental reason itself would end up being lost.

Rem did not know whether Berstetz feared that or welcomed it.

She did not know, but—

Rem: “If he’s saying to capture, and not to kill… l”

If a real Crown Prince was found, she had a feeling that the old man would die satisfied.

That was a supposition that chilled Rem’s heart.

In any case—

Rem: “So, did you return to stick another Crown Prince in the separate building again? Or, to make sure I was not slacking as Flop-san’s healer?”

Madelyn: “Chattering, does this dragon have a reason to chat with you? Don’t get carried away, you. At this stage, even without you, the Imperial Capital has plenty of healers…”

Rem: “Will those healers be able to keep a secret? If the Prime Minister hasn’t appointed them, finding such a person will be very difficult.”

Madelyn: “—Don’t friggin’ get carried away, you.”

Rem, unintentionally forceful in her reply, was not trying to be pushy. Madelyn stepped up to the window and narrowed the pupils of her golden eyes, as if she had been offended by it.

At the sight of this fierce, chilling presence, Rem felt a slight shiver run down her spine.

Katya: “I-Idiot! Don’t say anything you don’t have to! It, it’s not true at all!”

And then, with squeaking wheels, Katya came rushing out in a great hurry.

Katya, with her pale face turning more white, turned to face Madelyn who was looking through the window, her throat quivering beneath her gaze.

Katya: “Y-you don’t have to take anything she says seriously, don’t worry… don’t worry about it! Sh-she just doesn’t know anything, because she forgot everything, she’s an idiot.”

Rem: “K-Katya-san…”

Katya: “She’s an idiot, but it’s better if she’s here, so, st-stop it. … Um, properly! I’ll let you do your job properly. And she’ll fix the one with the blond hair, too…”

Rem quietly gulped at Katya’s frantic choice of words. Madelyn’s eyes narrowed at Katya’s vigor, and she stared at her.

Then, wondering what to do in the case there was an outrageously dangerous expression on her face, Rem waited for Madelyn’s next move, ready to protect Katya with her body.

And then—

Madelyn: “—Do not defy this dragon, such a weak thing like you. There will be no next time.”

Katya: “Eek!”

Madelyn placed her hand on the window sill and squeezed it as she spoke indifferently. With a violent sound, Katya’s throat caught as the masonry was crushed with a light touch.

However, despite finding Katya’s attitude to be inexcusable, Madelyn seemed to have decided to let it slide—

Rem: “Please correct what you said, calling Katya-san a weak thing. A weak person would not have chided you like that.”

Katya: “S-Stop! Stop, idiot! Die! Idiot! Stop!”

Rem: “Katya-san! But…”

Katya: “No buts! Just stop! Die! Stop!”

Katya collided into Rem, who was walking with her cane and had tried turning around to face Madelyn. Since she was frail, it was a weak ramming attack, and even Rem could easily stop it, but since Katya looked desperate after that as she extended her arms, naturally Rem could not shake herself free.

As for Rem, she had wanted Madelyn to retract her excessively condescending statement about Katya, but if Katya frantically stopped her like that, there was nothing she could do.

Madelyn snorted and turned her back on Rem, who had thus abandoned her direct appeal.

Madelyn: “Watch your mouth, girl. I’ll seriously arrange for a replacement healer.”

Rem: “Please wait. Where are you going?”

Madelyn: “To that man’s place. This dragon has something to discuss with that man.”

Rem: “If you are going to Flop-san’s place, please go after you’ve washed off the blood and changed your clothes. Since he is injured, you need to also take heed of his state of mind. Please take this into consideration.”

Madelyn: “You…”

Without hesitating, Rem declared that to her back when she was about to leave. There Madelyn once again made an unpleasant face, and Katya said, “Die!”, as she pulled on Rem’s sleeve.

However, Rem could not die, and she could not let Flop die.

Covered in blood as she was, it would be extremely filthy and unsanitary. No matter the common sense of the dragonkin or the Empire, on that alone Rem would not compromise.

Rem: “Take a bath.”

Madelyn: “…Got it.”

Rem: “Please also change your clothes. We have lots of cute clothes to change into properly…”

Madelyn: “I friggin’ said I got it! Friggin’ persistent girl!”

Baring her fangs and raising her voice, the overpowerment in Madelyn’s scream struck Rem, and incidentally Katya, like the wind and made them catch their breaths.

Still, Madelyn also probably understood that she should not go against Rem’s instructions. That was Flop’s major achievement for having successfully won her over.

Some day, would he be able to get Madelyn to change sides in that way?

Madelyn: “Don’t look at this dragon with insolent eyes, girl. — Everything you scheme is futile.”

Rem: “I don’t think you can say it’s futile. No matter what you do.”

Madelyn: “That’s not what I friggin’ mean. I’m friggin’ saying there’s no time to do anything.”

Rem: “No time?”

Tilting her head, Rem narrowed her eyes and tried to search for the true meaning of Madelyn’s words.

However, there was no need for her to search for the true meaning. Madelyn should have hated Rem, but even still, perhaps because of the dragonkin's pride and way of life, she hated things like lying and deceiving.

Therefore she properly explained clearly the meaning of the words she had said.

She had said.

Madelyn: "The decisive opportunity to settle things with those who defy the Emperor is friggin' near. It was for that purpose that this dragon was called back. —Your role also friggin' ends there."

So she spoke.

2

With that, leaving behind these seemingly hopeless words, Madelyn departed from the garden.

Since she did not head straight for Flop's room, she presumably would follow Rem's advice to bathe and change her clothes, and from there she would pay a visit to his room.

Flop would be welcoming of that in itself, and if he was not going to be hurt, then Rem had no reason to stop her.

However—

Rem: "—The decisive battle, with the rebel army."

Katya: "Sh-she didn't say where though…"

Rem: "…"

While biting her nails and still worrying about the movements outside the window of Madelyn, who had gone away, Katya was harboring the same apprehensions that Rem was.

The concern she had was about the decisive battle between the Imperial Army and the Rebel Army—Specifically, the time and the place.

From Madelyn's words, she indicated that it was not far off. But where would the location be? Was there somewhere suitable for an all-out confrontation?

With rebels rising up all over the Empire and battlefields scattered here and there, if you could prepare to take down such an opponent in one fell swoop, it would be—.

Katya: "…Sheesh, they really are just idiots. You too. You're a big idiot!"

Rem: "Katya-san…"

Katya: "Th-that was a Divine General, a dragonkin who can't be communicated with, right?! And yet, that kind of behavior could have resulted in death! If you want to be stupid, go ahead and die on your own! Die, you idiot!"

Katya blamed Rem in a tearful voice, replacing the anxiety of waiting with the frustration of the immediate situation.

Unlike Rem, who had settled her resolve, Katya had been pushed too much. In fact, if Katya had not intervened, it was quite possible that Madelyn's anger could lead to Rem getting hurt, if not killed.

Rem: "My apologies, thank you. But I couldn't keep quiet after she said bad things about Katya…"

Katya: "L-like I care! I'm used to being told what to do! And yet, that kind of idiot…"

Rem: "It is ridiculous to get used to being told what to do. So no matter how many times you say it, I would argue the same way again in the same situation."

It was not a good feeling to hear Katya belittling herself. Still, humiliation had its due reason and consideration. Though, Rem could not bear to see blades turned on a complete stranger.

—I think it's selfish to look back at myself, though.

Rem: “That’s what I think, so I…”

She knew it was selfish, but she did not want to cease having a voice.

Katya’s eyes blinked repeatedly and her mouth fluttered at Rem’s answer.

Then she glared at Rem with sharp, teary eyes and bit her nails.

Kayta: “L-like I care… Things like your matters, like I care! S-stop it. Just stop. We’re not friends. For me, I’ll just stop…!”

Rem: “No, I should have the choice whether to stop. I refuse.”

Katya: “Such a one-sided conversation!”

Rem smiled wryly as Katya retorted to her, with her throat choking up.

While softening the tightness in her chest slightly, Rem thought.

—The decisive battle of which Madelyn spoke, if that is so close at hand.

Rem: “…I wonder, just what can I do?”

In her empty self with nothing contained therein, was it even possible for something to resound?

That was the only thing which continued to make Rem’s heart pound so badly.

Chapter 86:
The Five Bastions

1

—The “Giant Eye” Izmail, was a valiant warrior of the Cyclops Tribe and the hope of his clan.

In the center of his valiant face, a large blue eye fixed its gaze clearly on the future without hesitation.

As the name suggested, the Cyclops Tribe was a race which had no more than a single eye. If one took into account the fact that most races were born with a pair of eyes, a single eye could almost never have an advantage in survival.

In that case, was the Cyclops Tribe a pitiful race with an inferior ability to survive?

—Absolutely, that could be denied.

For the Cyclops Tribe, which had only one eyeball, in exchange for their weakness of their survival ability diminishing with the loss of one eye, that single eyeball possessed many peculiarities.

With the basis of an eyesight that could see much further into the distance than other races, and while it varied based on the individual, there were many who could see the concentrations of mana or heat, or those who were abnormally superior at seeing movement.

The Evil Eye Tribe was another race with an eye that possessed peculiarities, but unlike them, who were often born with weak bodies in exchange for their unique abilities, the Cyclops Tribe was also physically strong.

In a sense, the “Eye” was superior to all other abilities in battle.

Needless to say, in day-to-day life, the amount of information obtained from what one could see accounted for the majority of perception, and that became even more obvious on the battlefield where it was more directly tied to survival.

Therefore, the Cyclops Tribe could be called a superior species that was well equipped for producing excellent warriors.

Returning to the topic at hand, let us speak of the “Giant Eye” Izmail.

Having turned twenty-one, Izmail was a fighter who wielded an enormous battleaxe with his well-trained body. As mentioned before, a single blue eye blinked in the center of his face, and had become something which members of the Cyclops Tribe trembled at due to its excellence, and members of other tribes trembled at due to its intimidating air.

For the sense of beauty of the Cyclops Tribe, there were many ratings for the beauty in the shape and size of that eye, as well as its color and radiance, but Izmail’s eye was an exceedingly first class item in each category.

With a beautiful big blue eye, he was expected to follow a different path from the ordinary as soon as he was born, and was nicknamed “Giant Eye” from a young age, and along with the hopes of his clan, he became a boy, he became a young man, and he became a warrior.

Wielding a battleaxe taller than himself, the “Giant Eye” would tremendously mow down the battlefield—If he was in an era where war raged in the Vollachian Empire, that name would be famous not only in his clan, but throughout the country.

However, the times had not waited for him to grow up, and he complacently plunged into a state of stagnation and relaxation.

Many cursed that bad luck of Izmail’s. However, fate had not abandoned him.

The torchlight of rebellion that had begun in the East, before long it had spread its flames throughout Vollachia, and invoked Izmail, deprived of the opportunity to fight, to the battlefield.

Izmail: “As long as I have a chance to fight—”

Then with this battleaxe, I will achieve results in battle that no one can imitate.

That was Izmail’s pride, and the promised future that everyone in the clan believed in without question. In the Empire, at the peak of military prowess were those known as the Nine Divine Generals, but if the same chance that those people had been blessed with had presented itself, he would astonish all of them.

Therefore, when Izmail the “Giant Eye” shouted that the Emperor must be defeated, not a single member of his tribe dissented, and they also had actively helped search for the black-haired child.

Just as the signs of rebellion had spread throughout the Empire, so too did the existence of the black-haired Crown Prince—It was not about whether he actually existed or not that was important, but that there was a bill making a justifiable claim.

Simply put, having a black-haired boy was the qualification to join the great uprising that had begun in the Vollachian Empire, and those who failed to see the opportunity undermined the righteous cause they were joining at that point.

Those who quietly observed these circumstances, standing by and watching the competition for supremacy from outside, went against the ways of the Empire.

—The people of the Empire must be strong.

To this day, it was a teaching that had been spread throughout the Empire, even to the people that were unconnected to its capital. Those who could not understand that principle were not qualified to participate in this great uprising, nor were they qualified to live in the Empire afterwards.

When Izmail fulfilled his ambitions, he would uproot all of them and create a more powerful nation.

For that purpose—

Izmail: “—It is I who shall reign supreme over this Vollachian Empire!”

Pressing the tips of his feet against the base of the colossal stone wall, Izmail’s body ascended to the sky.

A wall that had probably been thought of as insurmountable for the people outside, with the people inside absolutely not allowing any hostility to pass through it whatsoever, easily traveling over that, he planted his feet on the wall.

Seeing Izmail, who had landed atop the rampart, the soldiers there who had drawn their bows were in chaos, and they panicked as they tried to draw the swords at their waists, but they were too slow.

Izmail: “What unsightliness for soldiers of the Empire!”

Gripping the handle of the battleaxe he carried on his back, the muscles in his right arm swelled, then, a flash.

The huge blade that was released swept through the air without a sound, and the upper bodies of the five soldiers in its path were obliterated simultaneously. Having lost everything above the waist, their lower bodies slowly collapsed, a great amount of blood flooded out, and the surrounding soldiers screamed.

His eardrums grasped that those people were filled with intense caution and a meager amount of trepidation,

Izmail: “Boorish.”

Rather than warriors that harbored vigilance and nervousness, the ones who succumbed to cowardice were exceedingly disappointing. Izmail blinked his blue eye once, and switched the world he could see.

At that moment, bright colors vanished from the vividly-colorful world and his field of view was filled with dark colors. —No, not just dark colors. Red, yellow, and blue lights emerged from the darkness. Those were the emotions carried by living things, perceiving them as colors was the special trait of Izmail's eye.

With the power of his eye, Izmail could catch a glimpse of whether or not the enemy had the will to fight, what kinds of skills they had mastered, and their history as a warrior.

Possessing a field of view of those omitted colors, Izmail chose his enemies.

Namely—

Izmail: "Disappear you cowards!"

Stepping forward, the battleaxe swung towards the mediocre people who harbored a blue light, with their minds already detached from the battlefield, those who were trying to prioritize self-preservation.

Mowing down the backs turned towards him, denying the legs that tried to run away, smashing the faces of those who tried to beg for their lives, death and blood were spreading atop the wall.

And thus he rampaged, seeing the blue lights increase one after the other, his disappointment intensified.

Izmail: "What the hell is this? This should be the Imperial Capital, the territory at the side of His Excellency the Emperor of the Vollachian Empire!"

Pointing his battleaxe towards the interior side of the rampart, Izmail shouted his fury from atop of the wall.

Out in the distance at the center of the Vollachian Empire, the symbol of a powerful nation that no one had ever been able to defeat, the Crystal Palace, considered the most beautiful castle in the world, could be seen, and Izmail could reach it in less than a few minutes.

He would rush into the Crystal Palace, defeat the soldiers arrayed there, and take the head of the Emperor sitting on the throne.

That was what Izmail wanted. However, that was—

Izmail: “It’s not such a cheap honor that can be obtained by tyrannizing such cowardly soldiers!”

Feeling betrayed by what he believed in, Izmail’s angry voice sounded like lamentation.

Even so, the diligently forged battleaxe was precisely aiming for the enemy’s life, and with each and every step, life was wiped out, and the disappointment grew more intense within the “Giant Eye”.

Following Izmail as he did so, warriors of the same Cyclops Tribe reached the top of the wall one after another. They, too, used their weapons to drive away fleeing soldiers, knocking them down and taking their lives.

He wanted to be proud of that. He wanted to make it known that the Cyclops Tribe was here.

Izmail: “But, that’s not going to happen if our opponent is you guys…”

???: “W-wait! St-stop…!”

In front of the sorrowful eyes of Izmail, the man he was chasing collapsed.

The man ran away from the warriors and fell in front of the person who was the most dangerous to approach, seeing Izmail with a sneer on his face, and yelped “Aah!” with a quivering voice.

Putting both his hands forward, he scooted back on his buttocks while he grudgingly shook his head at Izmail.

Soldier: “Don’t kill me! I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna die!”

Izmail: “—. Stop it already. Don’t live in such dishonor any longer.”

Soldier: “Ah, aaaaah!”

Izmail: “That’s enough.”

Izmail’s face contorted at the soldier’s attitude, which was so miserable and pathetic. When it was too disgusting to hear any more, he raised the battleaxe up high in his hands.

With a gleam, the blood-soaked blade shined dully, and the soldier's eyes were stained with despair,

Izmail: "If you're a warrior, I'll at least give you a fitting end—"

Soldier: "Y-you're wrong! I'm not a warrior! I'm not a soldier!"

Izmail: "What?"

As he swung his battleaxe down, his arm stopped just before he was about to split the life out of his opponent along with his skull. With a snap, the axe stopped near the skin on his head, and the man exhaled a "Phew" as he slackened.

Though, it was not that he spared that life on a whim. The brief comment from just before, that was what stopped him.

Izmail: "Not a soldier, what do you mean? You're currently equipped as a soldier."

Soldier: "They made me wear it! Wearing this, taking a bow and fighting! If I do that…"

Izmail: "If you do that?"

Soldier: "I'd be pardoned! They'd release me, and I could leave the prison…"

Izmail: "…"

He peeked at the desperate man's face. There was no lie to be found in his pale, cold complexion.

A reasonable amount of trembling would be created in the face of someone who was lying and trying to conspire against you. Izmail's eye, which did not overlook the subtleties of this case, did not find any deception.

Izmail: "There's no way."

Now, taking in what he had just seen, Izmail's looked around the top of the wall.

Pursued by the Cyclops Tribe who had climbed the wall, the Imperial Soldiers had fallen into disarray atop the wall—All of them had a cowardice that made him want to close his eye, but no matter how much they resisted, it would never be enough.

On the way to attack the Imperial Capital, the soldiers of the garrison with spears still put up a better fight. Izmail was disappointed that the regular soldiers in charge of the defense of the Capital were in such a state.

Were they not regular soldiers, but criminals who had been given equipment?

If so, for what purpose did they—.

Izmail: "…"

After thinking about it, Izmail suddenly realized the answer.

If his thoughts were correct, then right now, the only people on top of the wall were the warriors of the Cyclops Tribe which he led, and the criminals they were doing battle against.

In other words—

???: "—Burn all at once."

Suddenly, a quiet voice struck Izmail's eardrums amidst a sky reverberating with angry shouts and screams.

The volume of the voice, which should not have been audible and the fact that it was heard, made his whole body alert. A rare phenomenon on the battlefield, the kind of thing where power resided in even the voice of a powerful being.

A somewhat idiotic voice seemingly lacking in seriousness reached the ears of the "Giant Eye."

Izmail: "…"

Widening his large single eye, Izmail looked up at the sky of the Imperial Capital.

Inside the ramparts of the city, protected by solid walls where the buildings were lined up in an orderly manner, there was a brown-skinned woman floating in the sky with her legs having become fire.

With one of her eyes covered by an eyepatch, she turned her blood-red eye toward him, and the woman—

Izmail: “RAAAAAHHHHH—!!”

The moment he saw her, Izmail let out a war cry, and kicking off the ramparts, he soared.

Swinging his large battleaxe, he furiously swooped down on the woman in the sky. It was such a mighty blow that even if it did not hit a vital point, but only grazed a part of the body, it would send a painful blow throughout her entire body.

The cells in his body were screaming that he had to fire a shot with all his might, a shot that was an order of magnitude different from the one he had fired at his cowardly opponent on the wall, and that he could not win without unleashing it.

Without missing, he plunge it into the slender body of the woman floating in the sky—

???: “Disappear.”

Following the woman’s single word, a light filled his vision with white that enveloped Izmail’s world.

2

???: “Kah…uh…hah…hk”

Coughing and suffering from a burning sensation all over his body, he sat up.

His throat burned, and when he reached for his throat quickly, his ragged, charred skin and fingers began falling off. Witnessing the damage, he realized that it was a miracle that he had managed to survive.

—No, it was not a miracle.

Right away, he had used his battleaxe as a shield to protect himself from the oncoming flames. Even that was only possible because of the scorching heat that seemed to overwhelm everything and anything in its path.

Only, Izmail understood that he was probably the only one who had barely managed to survive.

Izmail: "…"

When he forced his trembling eyelid open and looked up, he saw the ramparts of the Imperial Capital glowing red hot, and that the warriors of the Cyclops Tribe who had been fighting ruthlessly, as well as the mobilized criminals, had been burnt to nothing all at once.

There was no doubt that most of them were engulfed by the flames without knowing what had even happened. Or perhaps they had understood, and those who were able to react had their suffering prolonged.

Suffering and still being the only one left alive, this death was a cruel one.

And, most cruelly of all.

???: "—What, there are still survivors? You had good luck…no, would it be bad? You sure are a bad guy."

Amidst the smell of the burning vegetation and human flesh, stepping on ground which had been covered with ash and soot, a single man appeared.

The man that carried an axe on his shoulder tilted his head and looked down at Izmail in the burnt field. Looking into his terrible, cold, parched eyes, Izmail felt an instinct.

Stationing the criminals on the rampart, and burning them together with Izmail and the others who were fighting them, this man was the one responsible for carrying out that brutal strategy.

Izmail: “Y-you… everyone is…”

???: “—? Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not the one who burned them. I couldn’t have done such an outrageous thing. It was done by a monster who could do it. If you’re going to hold a grudge, hold it against them.”

Izmail caught his breath at the tone of the man’s voice, neither mocking nor playful, but as if he sincerely believed that from the bottom of his heart. Then, he quickly switched the vision of his single eye, and concentrated it in order to see through the man.

However, Izmail was then astounded. —He was blue.

Those who harbored a strong fighting spirit would be red, if they had a strong degree of nervousness and anxiety they would be yellow, and if they turned their back on the battle with panic or fear, they would be blue.

Despite the fact that he had managed to successfully trap and round up Izmail and the others, he was blue.

This man was not even a warrior. Nor was he a coward. He was something far more horrifying.

Izmail: “I cannot let you live—!!”

Indeed, acting in accordance with the appeal of his instincts and the world seen by his single eye, Izmail jumped up.

The flames showered upon him had scorched his internal organs, and his left arm was completely lost to the fire from his shoulder onwards. Due to the wounds he had sustained all over his body, his movements were slow compared to when he was in his best condition. However, even the melted and misshapen battleaxe lying beside him was enough to strike his opponent dead.

With all his might, he swung his battleaxe straight at the man, hearing the creaking of his burnt arm and the cracking of his flesh.

???: “I agree that we can’t keep you alive. Also, this is something that I’ve been thinking about for a while, but…”

Izmail: “—Hk?!”

???: “There’s no way that a guy with only one eye could be strong.”

In front of the eye of the charging Izmail, the man threw a small package from his waist. The package opened while mid-air, and spilled out its contents of black powder.

It was a kind of spice, and there was no way for one to avoid it from being used against them as a smoke screen. The right arm gripping his battleaxe could not shake it off, and it was needless to speak of his left arm that was missing, and as a result, his vision was blinded by the black powder.

Letting out a grunt of “guh”, his battleaxe attack was interrupted and he flew backwards.

Although those of the Cyclops Tribe possessed excellent eyesight, his weakness was exploited nicely. However, they should not be underestimated. Targeting the eyes of the Cyclops was a common practice, so there were countermeasures prepared.

The large eyes of the Cyclops Tribe could secrete a large amount of tears in an instant, laced with—.

Izmail: “—Oh.”

Izmail had stimulated his tear glands to secrete tears, but he did not open his eyes again.

The next moment, a shell from a Magic Stone Cannon hit Izmail, who had closed his eyes, and completely blasted away that “Giant eye” altogether.

3

Todd let out a sigh when, before his eyes, the Cyclops Tribe was blown to pieces by cannonballs.

He finished it without having much trouble since he had precisely set a trap for them, but if he had originally tried to have a fair fight, he was not sure if he had a chance to win; that was the kind of expert he was.

Todd: “Insurance is something you gotta have.”

While looking at the corpses of the Cyclops Tribe that had been blown away and the traces of cannonballs that had caved in the surroundings, Todd raised his clenched fist to the sky, communicating to the gunners on the wall that there was no need for a pursuit.

Make the enemy’s vanguard ascend the ramparts, and keep them there using allies whose deaths do not matter. Then, use massive firepower to burn everyone on the opponent’s side to a crisp, it was really a simple strategy.

However, the result was immediate.

Todd: “In most cases, the people with confidence are the first spears to breach enemy lines.”

When it came to battles like this that involved a great number of people, those who volunteered for the role of the vanguard were eager in their desire for glory, or they thoroughly understood the importance of a preemptive attack in war.

For example, no matter who the opponent was, if their thrust went through, it would become troublesome later. In a double sense, it was necessary to stop the vanguard.

Todd: “Well, we’ve crushed the opponent’s initial charge, but how will they proceed?”

Even if they had defeated the utmost vigorous Cyclops Tribe, there was no shortage of those who would dare to try killing His Excellency the Emperor. It was an exhibition of the belligerent tribes that had assembled from all over the Empire.

In addition to the Cyclops Tribe, he was preparing for a mountain's worth of people with differences in the number of limbs and eyes, in the size of body parts, in the color of their skin and blood, and in languages, such that it was troublesome to even think about how to deal with them.

However—

Todd: "No matter how many strange tribes the opponent gathers, I don't think it's going to have a considerable impact. At any rate…"

As Todd muttered that, Arakiya flew overhead, her whole body clad in a swirling wind.

The charge of the Cyclops Tribe, there should have been attacks at the same time, but to the lot that had missed that opportunity, he felt like attacking. Additionally, at the bastions of the star-shaped ramparts that surrounded the city, at the four places separate to the one Todd's group was in charge of, the guardians in charge of those places had commenced their attacks.

—Purple thorns rampaged, mowing down the large army of half-man, half-horse Centaur People who were trying to advance.

—The exceedingly huge Flying Winged Blade tore through the sky, and the Weaponkin, who used one part of their body as a weapon, were chewed to pieces.

—The fists of stone golems which sprang up from the ground, struck down the pitiful Winged People who grew wings incapable of flight.

—A group of deviants who had mastered the art of slaughter, massacred the Glow People, who each had a scintillating stone embedded in their foreheads.

Todd: "If the circumstances involve monsters, then our side will have a good match."

—Becoming one with nature, and reducing the Cyclops Tribe to ashes with bright red flames as if it was the same as just breathing.

Five monsters, equally capable, stood at the bastions of the wall that protected the Imperial Capital of Lupugana. With five monsters at five bastions, did the rebels, who had only spirit and ambition, have a way to surpass this?

Todd: “In any case, if it was me, even if I was asked I would absolutely refuse. Nevertheless…”

There was a plan to keep them from approaching the walls, a plan for how to kill those that did, a plan for those they failed to kill, and a plan to escape.

It would be best if they did not end up all the way at that last plan, but the circumstances in a battle were hard to predict.

In the first place, the fact that the rebels arrived at the Imperial Capital like this, and that this battle had even begun, exceeded what Todd had imagined before the war moved into full-swing.

Todd: “Because of that, even though I’ve returned to the Imperial Capital, I haven’t been able to meet with Katya… Just how long must you get in the way of my meeting with Katya before you are satisfied.”

It was not a discontent which he could say about anyone or towards anyone, and if he had to say it would be towards the world, so while he did that, Todd looked up to the sky thick with the scent of death, and kicked off the ground of the burnt field.

Many more, many more, many, many more people would die.

Just how many more people would have to die for a decisive person to lower their weapons?

Todd: “Enough with this, you war-mongering freaks.”

4

???: “—Unfortunately, you guys are out of your depth! I shall not let you go any further!!”

In an imposing stance atop the rampart, he spread both arms wide as he caused peristalsis throughout his entire body.

Immediately after, the inside of General Second-Class Kafma Irulux's body pulsated, and purple thorns were released from those arms with tremendous vigor, flying towards the group of Centaur People fiercely galloping across the farmland—with their upper-halves as human, and their lower-halves possessing horse-like characteristics, the bottoms of their feet were mowed down, their torsos were pierced, and they were sunk into the solid ground.

Evading the thorn attack, the brave men came even closer to the rampart and brandished their spears, throwing them.

The leg strength and vigor of a horse was transmitted to their upper bodies, and the hurled javelins' power was no less than that of a Magic Stone Cannon. Unlike Magic Stone Cannons which took a huge amount of money to get in sufficient numbers, as long as the Centaur People had spears and some run-up distance, their javelins would exhibit more than enough destructive power.

It was the defensive wall safeguarding the Imperial Capital. Inscribed with the Divine Protection of Earth, it would not collapse under ordinary attacks, but if it was struck by hundreds of spears of that power, some damage could get through.

However—

Kafma: "It was your ill fortune that you happened to choose the bastion I am protecting."

Declaring so, Kafma spread the arms which had let the thorns loose wide open. In accordance with that movement, the thorns would mow sideways across the battlefield, and deal the warriors of the Centaur People that had tumbled a finishing blow.

However, the javelins and the brave men who threw them evaded the thorns' pursuit.

Therefore, Kafma invoked not thorns, but a different "insect" that had entered him.

Kafma: "—hk!"

There was a sound of bones creaking with pain, and Kafma's chest wearing light armor burst open from inside. White ribs opened outwards from inside his body, and they pointed their sharp tips downward while trembling.

The brave men of the Centaur People galloped forth, and at that group was aimed the gap of the ribs exposed from Kafma's open chest, as they readied themselves for whatever that may happen.

However, even if they readied themselves, there was no use.

—Immediately after, Kafma's entire body rebounded violently, and the recoil sent his tall figure sliding back. His heels that had been firmly dug in, pared through the rampart, and Kafma looked forward as he endured the tearing pain.

Below him, the line of fire that Kafma's ribs had aimed at was completely hollowed out, and it swallowed up all the Centaur People who should have been on their way, annihilating them.

Like the thorns, it was a new "insect" suitable for taking on a large number of enemies at once—He had been nervous that he would once again be in a pupa state during an essential scenario.

Kafma: "…But, I made it in time. As long as I am here, you shall not pass by the protection of the Imperial Capital."

Firmly, he stroked down his torso that had moved the Centaur People aside, and his ribs closed back inside his open chest.

The new "insect" was powerful, but the backlash was just as great. It was a double-edged sword that completely took away the strength of his mind and body, and it should not be fired rapidly.

However, even if he had to reach out to such a menace, there was value in attempting it.

Kafma: "You damn rebels are thoughtlessly trampling on the peace that His Excellency brought about through his ability."

As a "General", he had seen the reign of Emperor Vincent Vollachia up close.

As a man of the rare and constantly shunned Insect Cage Tribe, he had lived in the world created by Emperor Vincent Vollachia.

As the person known as Kafma Irulux, he had seen with his own eyes the magnitude of Emperor Vincent Vollachia's great accomplishments.

For what reason, should a blade be turned to Vincent Vollachia?

How could anyone else rival the supremacy of a man who attempted to change the state of things in the Empire, and who was in fact continuing to change it?

Therefore—

Kafma: "I cannot afford to let the likes of you lot proceed to the front of His Excellency the Emperor."

???: "—Gee, y'sure got quite th'great resolve, don't ya? I don't hate it."

Evading both the thorns and the white bombardment, a figure kicked off the farmland and leapt up to the rampart. While looking down at his short opponent, Kafma narrowed his slitted eyes.

He was a newcomer, and had enough skill to reach the spot the brave men of the Centaur People had not. —Simply put, he was a formidable enemy.

From the start, he had not been good at cutting corners. He was also not very good at going easy or playing around.

However, Kafma had determined that this was an opponent with whom he would not have an ounce of leeway.

Kafma: "General Second-Class of the Vollachian Empire, Kafma Irulux."

Thus introducing himself with that, six transparent wings protruded from Kafma's back, tearing through the cloak he had worn from the inside. Seeing that preparation for war—No, rather than preparation for war, he accepted that as an introduction.

It was proper for a warrior to give their name when taking on another warrior. Of course, on the battlefield, there were more than a few who did not follow that way of doing things—

Garfiel: “—Garfiel.”

Kafma: “…”

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’s the “Gorgeous Tiger” Garfiel Tinzel. —In truth, my amazin’ self was told not give my name, but there are times where I ain’t got a choice.”

With that, the man with a ferocious smile on his face—Garfiel, brought both of the beautiful gauntlets on his arms together in front of his chest, making a pleasant sound like an instrument would.

Entrusted with guarding the ramparts of the Imperial Capital, Kafma had been prepared to stick it out till the end, no matter how many days it took.

—The crucial bout that had arrived on the first day of the war, the strongest man of the Empire’s Second-Class Generals had not misjudged it.

Chapter 87:
Decisive Battle at the Bastion

1

The siege of the Imperial Capital Lupugana by the rebel army, for the purpose of defeating the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, rebels had gathered from all over the country in cooperation, and it had begun as a united front—was not what had happened at all.

There was certainly a great number of rebels who were currently gathering around the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

Gathered from all over the Empire, they laid siege to Lupugana, the heart of the Vollachian Empire, and prepared a force that overwhelmed the number of Imperial Soldiers the Imperial Capital held.

In most cases, battles were decided by numbers.

The larger the scale of the battle, the more decisive this rule became, and it could be said that the rebel forces, which had been able to gather more than double the number of troops in simple forces ratio, gained an overwhelming advantage in their attack on the Imperial Capital.

However—

???: "—That is, if the assembled troops can function as a cohesive unit."

In the innermost place of the Imperial Capital Lupugana, seated atop the throne in the audience chamber of the Crystal Palace, Vincent's black eyes narrowed as he received reports of the all-out offensive with the rebels that had begun.

The Capital was surrounded by rebel forces and attacked with an overwhelming difference in troop strength. Despite being in a predicament unprecedented in the history of the Empire, there was no sign of fear or impatience in his cold, demonic appearance.

This was largely due to the analytical factor that he had just mentioned himself.

Vincent: “The objective of the assembled rebels may be united around my head, but there is no room for compromise in the methods used to be able to do it. From the beginning, they were the ones who strived to stand at the front after things began to occur.”

???: “The harder they try not to be outdone, the more difficult it is for them to come to terms with the idea of coordinating with the others. This sure gets me to remember, back to the times of the Imperial Selection Ceremony.”

Vincent: “…”

???: “In order to determine the next Emperor, a blood ritual in which the siblings of the Vollachian Imperial Family vie for the Imperial Throne… Even on that occasion as well, those who refused the alternative were removed from the board. Most of all…”

With that, Berstetz, who was standing next to the throne, cut off his words and accumulated them for a moment. Within those eyes as narrow as a single thread, the old man’s emotions could not be read, but one could get a rough idea of what he was feeling.

After all, Berstetz was yet another one of the people who had experienced the bloodshed of the Imperial Selection Ceremony.

Berstetz: “At that time, there was wariness regarding the personality of His Excellency Barthroy, who had created the largest faction, and as expected, he was quickly removed, though.”

Aside from those inner thoughts of Vincent, Berstetz touched the moustache under his nose as he vocalized the end of his accumulated words.

The way he spoke about it was as if it were some other person’s business, that was terribly ingenuine.

Vincent: “You dare to speak of such? Was it not none other than you and Lamia who removed that elder brother?”

Berstetz: “While it is shameful, I followed the judgment of Her Excellency Lamia. In addition, I was unable to see the true intentions of His Excellency Barthroy, so even now I continue to live in disgrace.”

Vincent: “Elder brother Barthroy’s intentions, hm.”

Berstetz: “Indeed. It was a conspiracy hatched by none other than His Excellency Vincent and His Excellency Barthroy.”

Deeply drawing back his chin as he gave that response, Berstetz’s expression did not change.

Considering the events that took place, one might expect him to harbor a grudge, but he was a man free from such miscellaneous human emotions. And, moreover, he was reasonable enough to know that it was useless to say anything to Vincent.

That deed was Vincent Vollachia’s—no, it was the result of the actions of Vincent Abellux, from before he became the Emperor,

???: “Since the real His Excellency is outside the walls at this time, the feelings of His Excellency the Prime Minister, who gets lost at the brunt of offense, are something that I can understaaand~.”

Berstetz: “…”

???: “Hmm~? The two of you are giving me stern looks… Did I say something unnecessary?”

The gentle man who shrugged his shoulders in an aloof manner as he faced Vincent and Berstetz, the highest ranking members of the Empire, was an unorthodox being who was permitted to visit the Crystal Palace regardless of his rank—the Stargazer, Ubilk.

It was not that the heckling Ubilk suddenly broke into the conversation. He was there from the beginning when Vincent and Berstetz spoke with each other, he just had not interjected.

Nonetheless—

Vincent: “Even if no one else is around, it is not something you should feel relaxed discussing.”

Ubilk: “Ah~, it was unnecessary to top it off with the title of “real”, wasn’t it. No wonder His Excellency the Emperor and His Excellency the Prime Minister would get so angry. Though, if I don’t let it out once in a while, it may inadvertently come out through an outburst. —Don’t you feel sorry for the soldiers who, even now, continue to risk their lives to protect the Imperial Capital.”

Vincent: “…”

Ubilk: “If it were to be inadvertently revealed that His Excellency the Emperor Vincent, who everyone is all trying so hard to protect, is actually a fake…”

Putting his hand over his mouth, Ubilk brazenly spoke aloud what he had just been rebuked for.

His abilities had made him a valuable asset, but his behavior certainly had the frivolity of a clown. However, the duties of being a clown could not be seen as merely a permit for making practical jokes.

Even if his abilities as a Stargazer were excellent,

Vincent: “Your repeated rudeness cannot be written off. If everything until now comes to fruition, I will cut off your head myself.”

Ubilk: “Of course, I’m aware of this. But, Your Excellency… No, you are a prudent one. Until the very, very last moment, I had been assuming that my life couldn’t be taken.”

Even when he was pierced by a glare from the throne, Ubilk met his gaze with a smile. He continued, “More than that,” and looked over to Berstetz,

Ubilk: “I’m more afraid of His Excellency the Prime Minister. It seems that within him, he is hiding hell itself.”

Berstetz: “It’s not like the Stargazer to be afraid of someone like me.

Why not ask the stars whether someone like me is deserving of your fear?”

Ubilk: “My apologies, Your Excellency the Prime Minister. The stars look down on this world from high in the sky, and unless they assert their dazzling selves, they cannot be seen.”

Those who are insignificant are not reflected in the future that Stargazers see.

Whether that was a facade or his true thoughts, was impossible to read from Ubilk’s speech and conduct. But peacetime nonsense aside, Ubilk’s words could not be ignored when he was performing the role of a Stargazer.

Nine years had passed since Ubilk began serving the Vollachian Empire as a Stargazer—Perhaps it could be said that his achievements have been building for the sake of this very moment.

Ubilk: “—Woah.”

Suddenly, a thunderous roar from the distant sky reached the audience chamber, which had fallen into silence.

A slight tremor was felt under their feet, and the atmosphere of a fierce battle could be felt even in the depths of the Crystal Palace. That said, the phenomena which caused this thunderous roar was probably someone on the side of the Imperial Capital for the most part.

Ubilk: “Even though In terms of numbers, the rebels surrounding the Imperial Capital should outnumber ours…”

Vincent: “In the end, it is just a disorderly mishmash of people… No, they are not even cohesive, but a bunch of outlaws who may even drag each other down in some cases. That is no way to compete with the pack of Sword Wolves who are governed by the law of Iron and Blood.”

Ubilk: “I see. However, no matter how out for blood the Imperial citizens are, they will not invade the Imperial Capital without a chance to win. Isn’t that why each tribe will throw in their own hero?”

Vincent: “Have you forgotten what you said in front of me just now?”

Vincent spoke to Ubilk, who tilted his head, shifting his attention to the battle outside due to the shaking. Ubilk closed one eye at those words, and Vincent rested his chin on one hand,

Vincent: “If there is dazzling light of the stars above the ground, you said that you would notice it. In that case, it would not be strange if a glittering star that could move this war situation had let you gaze upon it beforehand.”

Ubilk: “Ah~.”

Vincent: “Has there been such an occurrence? Stargazer.”

Narrowing his black eyes, Vincent quietly posed a question. Ubilk laughed at the question as he scratched his cheek with his finger, and,

Ubilk: “Unfortunately, I haven’t heard anything of the sort.”

Berstetz: “In that case, it aligns with your own role as well, I guess that’s how it is.”

With that statement, Berstetz put Ubilk’s forced smile to an end.

Ubilk was at a loss with an awkward look on his face, but there was no sense of being cornered. To begin with, regardless of whether Ubilk was a Stargazer or not, it was something he thoroughly understood.

Certainly, all the insurgents would come to take the head of Vincent, the one sat upon the throne. For that purpose, each tribe would dispatch their strongest warriors to try and proclaim their supremacy.

But, that notion was misguided to begin with since it was based on a widespread misconception.

It was bound to happen. —Just what did they think the Nine Divine Generals were?

Vincent: “They were already setting themselves up for failure by measuring the heroes of each tribe based on such small standards. To begin with, what other criteria do they believe were utilized to select the Generals of the First-Class, the Nine Divine Generals?”

Vincent Vollachia had gathered the strongest entities within the Vollachian Empire.

The unofficial heroes within the lands of the Empire were no match for them. If a sleeping giant of the sort did exist, it would never have gone unnoticed by Vincent.

No matter what it took, he had kept them close at hand and bestowed them status befitting their abilities to take precautions for the future.

Once they failed to meet Vincent’s expectations, a hero was subpar compared to a monster.

—The Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire had assembled “monsters” that no hero could ever hope to stand a chance against.

Lupugana, the impregnable Imperial Capital, was protected by star-shaped ramparts which had never permitted outsiders to trespass, ever since the founding of the Empire. And, at the five bastions of the points of the star wall, these “monsters” awaited any invader.

All those superior transcendent entities would, without mercy, crush the arrogant heroes that had gathered. Upon witnessing this scene of devastation, even the most hot-headed among them would come to realize.

That they had averted their eyes from reality, casting them towards a dream called madness.

Berstetz: “However, it would be difficult to expect all the rebels to be well-behaved.”

Vincent: “It seems so. In that case, what shall we do?”

Berstetz: "I know it is not my place to come out from the curtain when the prominent Generals have already chosen their battlefields, but… Merely sitting idly by is unbearable."

Ubilk: "My myyy, that's awfully… our ally, His Excellency the Prime Minister is awfully out for blood."

Bending at the waist, Berstetz gave a bow towards Vincent as Ubilk pierced him with those words. But the old Prime Minister took that being pointed out in stride, and,

Berstetz: "In the end, I am also a man of Vollachia."

And, leaving those words without even showing his smile, Berstetz walked out of the audience chamber. Without stopping that back, Vincent silently saw the old veteran off as he made his departure.

With the door closing and Berstetz taking his leave, Ubilk shrugged with a "Is that fine?",

Ubilk: "As he said himself, there's nothing His Excellency the Prime Minister can do to influence the current war situation. I also think that, but…"

Vincent: "Contrary to my expectations, he endured it with perseverance. He has always been someone who has restrained himself for the sake of his ideals. If I were to put it in a way that you would, I would like to avoid an outburst."

Ubilk: "I see… By the way, is His Excellency the Prime Minister in the know?"

Hooking his thumb on the hem of his robe, over his chest, and wriggling his other fingers, Ubilk posed that question. Vincent, understanding the significance of that unfriendly question, closed one eye.

Receiving that silence, Ubilk nodded and said, "As I thought",

Ubilk: "I had a hunch about that, so I just refrained from being overly careless with my words… But whether I should be happy or sad about my hunch coming true, I have pretty complex feelings about it, y'know."

Vincent: "Sad? Can you even comprehend such human emotions?"

Ubilk: "What a terrible thing to say. You make it sound like I'm not even human, so I feel very hurt. Compared to the First and the Second, I'm much more reasonable, don't you think?"

Vincent: "If you raise Cecilus as an example, he stands little chance in most topics. Arakiya is also a girl that lives by the logic of a beast rather than that of a human, but she can be managed once she has settled on an owner. However…"

Cutting off his words there and then, Vincent's black eyes pierced Ubilk. His presence was unwavering to whatever cruel gaze was cast at him as paying no heed to his own life was his way of living.

Vincent: "You are but a husk in the shape of a man, made of human flesh."

Ubilk: "…Oh, that really hurts my feelings."

At Vincent's words, Ubilk lowered his eyebrows with a forced smile on his face.

Doing so would make him appear sad or bitter. A forgery of emotions, as though someone had taught him to do so; at the very least Vincent's eyes perceived it as such.

With an expression that did not betray that impression, Ubilk placed his hand on his chest and,

Ubilk: "By your logic, all those with the same role as me… all the Stargazers lending an ear to the "commandments", are husks?"

Vincent: "I do not know any Stargazers aside from yourself. I have no inclination to answer you."

Ubilk: "There you go again, you don't need to lie like that. I don't think you would put that much trust in me. Of course, I expected you would track down and torture every Stargazer in the country instead."

Vincent: "…"

Ubilk: "I fully believe that you wouldn't thoughtlessly base your decision of what the Stargazers are solely on me."

Confronted with Ubilk's trick question, Vincent's expression did not budge an inch.

He did not state whether the former's points were factual or mistaken. The only thing he was convinced of, was that every single Stargazer who had been bestowed a commandment, without exception, had a mental disorder.

He also did not intend on going out of his way to state how he had reached that conclusion.

Vincent: "Otherwise, how could you possibly commit an act as barbaric as to destroy your own Evil Eye, just to prove your identity?"

Ubilk: "Ah~, that was quite painful. The feelings of loss weren't normal either. But thanks to that, you became willing to listen to me, didn't you?"

While he spoke, Ubilk pulled his hand on his chest further back, exposing his bare skin. Directly in the center of his slender chest, a large burn mark had been painfully seared.

In the past, Ubilk used a branding iron to burn the Evil Eye at that spot to crisp, leaving nothing but that scar.

He destroyed his very meaning for existence as a member of the Evil Eye Tribe. —A deed just to prove that he did not pose any danger, and if he had not been stopped, he might have even crushed his own limbs.

Henceforth—

Vincent: "I do not demand an honest answer from you. Just, answer carefully."

Ubilk: "Your wish is my command."

Vincent: “There is not even a whisper of a new commandment in your ears. Without any doubt.”

Ubilk: “—Yes. I, for one, wouldn’t lie. No new commandment has been handed down. In the first place, without completing the previously passed down commandment, one wouldn’t try for a new commandment to be passed down, however…”

Shaking his head loosely side-to-side, Ubilk smiled.

With a truly inhuman smile lacking any resemblance of joy or abasement, he continued.

Ubilk: “The board you have created won’t be thrown into disarray by any interference from the heavens. —Virtually everyone across the Empire resides in the palm of your hand.”

Vincent: “…”

Ubilk: “Is anything the matter?”

As those assertive words did not yield the desired effect, Ubilk appeared puzzled. To his question, Vincent shook his head with a “No”.

He did not believe Ubilk’s statement just now had been a lie. He was a man who valued the whispers of the mysterious stars more than his vassalage to the Emperor, but his lack of selfishness was genuine.

Therefore, Ubilk himself probably had no ulterior motives with his declaration.

It was just that—

Vincent: “—The people of the Empire are in the palm of my hand, you say?”

Those decorative words that had been deliberately left unspoken, had left an unease in the mind of the man playing the role of Emperor.

2

—And then, that unease on the throne proved to be correct.

???: “Oh, Ooooooooh—!!”

At one of those bastions of the star-shaped wall, a war cry rose up and a tiger rushed furiously.

With both arms mantled with shining silver gauntlets, he stepped right in front of an enemy with lightning speed in order to be able to reach someone who had pulverized a group of Centaur People in a dreadful manner.

One step, two steps, and Garfiel Tinzel charged forward in a blink of an eye.

However—

???: “Indeed, many-on-one is my specialty, but—”

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

???: “Even a one-on-one fight, won’t cast any clouds over my brilliant technique!”

In opposition, Kafma Irulux readied both arms to intercept that brave voice.

His tattoo-covered dark-brown skin bulged from the inside, and immediately after, an enormous amount of thorns shot out, completely filling Garfiel’s field of view as he charged head-on.

The speed of the thorned vines growing countless spines gave the impression of a carnivorous beast leaping at its prey. In other words, it was the fastest attack to reap the life of an opponent.

Garfiel: “Brash—!!”

Atop the rampart, the considerably thick wall for the protection of the Imperial Capital was quite broad as a place to stand, but compared to an open battlefield the restricted mobility felt like being strangled.

With the thorned vines spreading sideways and surging forth like a great wave, closing off any means of escape, rather than poorly evading, Garfiel chose to hold up his gauntlets and plunged into the thorny vines.

Trusting in the strength of his gauntlets and legs, he went in a straight line into the storm of vines—

Kafma: “That resolve is admirable, but your decision was a mistake.”

At the same time Kafma muttered that, Garfiel made contact with the leading edge of the surging thorned vines, but the next moment, Garfiel clenched his teeth at an impact greater than what his gauntlets could presumably receive.

Garfiel: “—Guh.”

Even if unleashed in such an unusual way, vines were still vines, and from the size of the ivy and thorns, he had readied himself for a certain degree of power. However, the actual power of the vines far exceeded his assumptions, and the speed of Garfiel’s advance faltered.

Without exaggeration, the pressure was like that of a whole forest crashing into him.

Upon being struck down by a literal forest of overgrown thorns brought forth by a single person, Garfiel adapted his approach.

Garfiel: “Then, what about this!!”

Kafma: “What?!”

Clenching his teeth so hard they creaked, Garfiel swung his foot down fiercely after being struck by the surging wave of thorned vines. The force spreading from the sole of his shoe rose up the portion of the wall he was standing on and tilted Kafma’s foothold on the opposite side of the vines, causing the stunned “General” to lose his position.

It was an effect of Garfiel's Divine Protection of Earth Spirits. Essentially, the Divine Protection made it possible to receive power from earth and conversely interfere with it, but the scope was largely depending on the interpretation of the Divine Protection's wielder.

In Garfiel's case, as long as his feet were on solid footing, that was the earth.

Garfiel: "As long as I'm not flyin'!"

It would be a different story with the dragon ships that are carried by the famous flying dragons in the Vollachian Empire, but otherwise, Garfiel could firmly believe it was the earth.

Kafma shifted his footing not once, but two, three more times as the rising foothold pursued him, and the man of the Insect Cage Tribe dealt with it while flying backwards. Meanwhile, dealing with the thorns disrupting the precision of his attacks, Garfiel pushed forward while his cheeks and shoulders were torn up by the thorns he failed to block.

Bright red blood splattered and sharp pain cut through his entire body, but the distance between them shrank and shrank.

And just when the distance remaining between them was nearing a few meters,

Kafma: "Then I'll just cut deep!"

Abandoning his mid-range thorn attack, Kafma, who was about to fall back, reinitiated his attack.

For a moment, he was still wary of the unleashed shockwave that mowed down the Centaur People, Kafma did not open up his chest, but he severed his control over the thorned vines from his arms and started buzzing the wings on his back.

Momentarily, those wings fluttered so fast they were difficult to see, and at the same time, the sight of Kafma having kicked off the rampart appeared right beside Garfiel. Rather than just being quick, he varied his speed.

Via this method, he went around and entered from behind Garfiel's awareness.

However—

Garfiel: "I won't let ya!"

Forcibly shutting off his circumvented directional awareness, Garfiel roared.

Along with his roar, the released back-handed blow was striking into Kafma's face that had appeared beside him. Against that, Kafma threw up his arms in defense—both being covered with black carapaces.

Like Garfiel's gauntlets, it was protection for himself. However, with thorns, wings, ribs, and now carapaces, he already had four abilities. Just how many "insects" did he have in his body?

Kafma: "Sh—!"

One blow was struck, but the pair's battle did not stop there.

Ultra-close range was favorable for Garfiel. He took a full swing with his left fist using the momentum of turning all the way back around from the position where his back-handed blow had been stopped, and then drove a headbutt into his opponent who had tried to parry the blow.

Impacts and cries of pain bursted between the two, and from there fierce punches aimed at vital organs were exchanged.

Garfiel & Kafma: "—Hk."

Gauntlets and carapaces, both sides exchanged blows with their reinforced fists. However, his prior pride was not misguided. Being within reach was favorable for Garfiel, and getting beaten from that position was out of the question.

Garfiel: "Gah, aaaaaaaaah!!"

He turned and caught the incoming fist, in return, he drove a fist into his opponent's chest and torso. From below, Garfiel's opposite fist shot up into his loosely dangling jaw and then he drove a knee into his torso that had bent backwards. With a cry of pain, Kafma flapped his wings and greatly leaped backwards.

Garfiel: "Yer not gettin' away!!"

Kafma: "—Guh."

Seizing Kafma's leaping legs, he forcefully slammed him back down against the rampart. He then pressed Kafma's body to the ground and started dashing ferociously to tear the wings from his back.

On the wall, Garfiel ran while raising a plume of smoke, and Kafma's back spurted out blood as one wing, two wings, were torn to shreds. At that rate, he was about to—

—A moment later, Kafma's chest opened as the wings on his back flapped powerfully, lifting him off the ground. Beyond his protruding ribs, his eyes caught a glimpse of the golden "insect" within his chest.

Garfiel: "…"

Following the urging of every survival instinct, he abandoned Kafma's body and leaped directly to the side. It was the correct decision. Right where Garfiel had previously been, the golden insect had gouged out the entire top of the city wall in its line of fire. As short hairs on his body were shaved away, Garfiel felt a chill run his spine.

Kafma: "—I admit my lack of insight."

Garfiel: "Oh?"

Immediately after experiencing the sensation of bloodlust, Garfiel was drawn back by his voice.

His gaze caught Kafma kneeling on the wall, touching the torn wings on his back, looking at Garfiel with admiration and reverence in his eyes.

He wiped the blood running down the edge of his mouth with his hand and rose to his feet.

Kafma: “I was unaware of the existence of a brave warrior like you. I am ashamed of my ignorance.”

Garfiel: “Heh, I don’t blame ya if ya didn’t know. I’d be more worried if ya did.”

Kafma: “—? What do you mean?”

Raising a chivalrous eyebrow, Kafma questioned the truth of Garfiel’s words.

From his point of view, it would have never occurred to him that a person from another country, especially from the Kingdom, would be involved in such an important event within the Empire.

Otto: “If they find out who we are and where we are from, it could lead to a very difficult diplomatic incident. For that reason, please avoid being provoked by the other side, and carelessly saying unnecessary things.”

Otto, who remained behind at the main camp, had said this to Garfiel before he jumped into the battlefield.

Kafma had already identified himself to him, and he has already identified himself back, but if he gives any more information, there was a possibility that Kafma, who seemed to be smart, would be able to guess all of this.

There was no way they could turn this insurrection in the Empire into a gigantic war that involved the Kingdom.

Garfiel: “Sorry, but I was only lettin’ ya’ know about my name. But I can let one thing slip. About “Two-Faced Kurulukiak”, that is.”

Kafma: “—. I have no doubt that you are a person of great skill, whether you keep your mouth shut or not. That’s why I’m also regretful.”

Garfiel: “…Regretful?”

Kafma shook his head and lowered his voice, causing Garfiel to frown; there was no falsehood in Kafma's delivery, and it was laced with regret, with no intention to provoke.

But the regret was not attributable to Kafma himself—

Kafma: "If it weren't for the circumstances, I would've liked to have had a straightforward conversation with you."

Garfiel: "What the—"

It was the moment he was thinking about whether he should question the meaning of his words.

Taking a step forward, Garfiel's knee gave out, and he knelt down in place. With an "Ah?", a gasping breath leaked out, his eyes growing bloodshot as he held his own chest.

His heart was beating and pounding so very loud and perilous. —Garfiel realized what he heard: the alarm bells of his horrified instincts pleading for his life.

—There was something crawling around inside of him.

Garfiel: "Gaag…"

Kafma: "If you were going to fight in close quarters with me, you should have avoided getting hit."

Kafma stuck out his hand to Garfiel, whose teeth were trembling, bitter tears streaming down his face. At the tip of Kafma's five bent fingers, could be seen a tube holding a white, wriggling "insect".

An "insect" had implanted an egg through these tubes in one of the wounds inflicted by the thorns. It hatched inside Garfiel's body and crawled around inside him.

Garfiel: "Guooo…"

The moment he realized this, Garfiel embraced himself and activated his healing magic.

Intense healing waves enveloped Garfiel's body in a pale light, forcibly healing the wounds he had sustained. Witnessing this, Kafma slightly raised his eyebrows, revealing his surprise.

Kafma: "Healing magic, which means you are also a healer. Its versatility is something to keep an eye on. However."

Garfiel: "—Hk, Aa, oh."

Kafma: "The purpose of the insects that circulate inside you is not to wound you, but to make your body a seedbed for their own. —You can heal the wound, but you cannot heal the transfiguration."

Kafma's cruel declaration, it was proven correct by the unhealable malaise.

Garfiel gasped in agony and cursed the result of clawing at his own chest, thinking that he had, in fact, blocked the escape route of the "insects" in his body.

His breathing became agonized and his vision turned bright red. Unable to bear the sight of Garfiel's agony, Kafma stepped forward with a somber look on his face.

Kafma: "Your skill and prowess, I, Kafma Irulux, will surely bear them in my heart. —Sleep valiantly."

His right arm was once again encased in a black carapace, and his fist thrusted into Garfiel, who was unable to move. The impact smashed his skull, causing blood to spray and his body to tumble violently.

He rolled, and rolled, and rolled, and bounced right off the edge of the ramparts, consumed by a sense of floating, and fell.

Garfiel: "—Ah."

Garfiel's faint death cry escaped his throat, and his powerless body fell unprotected beneath the city ramparts.

Otto: “Listen, Garfiel, please remember this well.”

Otto: “If they find out who we are and where we are from, it could lead to a very difficult diplomatic incident. For that reason, please avoid being provoked by the other side, and carelessly saying unnecessary things.”

Otto: “Though I do say that, since it is you, I am not expecting you to be so patient. I am not telling you to exchange words in a tit-for-tat as a merchant would. Therefore—”

Otto: “Therefore, make sure you properly remember this one thing.”

Otto: “If you get caught up in an exchange of words—”

4

—In the battle against the Insect Cage Tribe, it would be impossible for many to avoid being killed upon first sight.

The “insects” that they put inside their bodies had evolved and grown beyond the bounds of human imagination, and their abilities could be said to be of an infinite variety.

In addition, if they harmonize with the “insects” bred within their own bodies, and hasten the development of their skills even further, then the Insect Cage Tribe did not yield two warriors who were the same.

Not to mention, Kafma Irulux had been born as a genius among the Insect Cage Tribe.

Kafma declined to be promoted to the Nine Divine Generals because of his own beliefs and philosophy, and his abilities were recognized by Emperor Vincent as being on par with those of the Generals of the First-Class.

As a warrior of Vollachia, he was an exceptional individual who was allowed to stand atop the summit.

Naturally, since he was born into the Insect Cage Tribe, he had no hesitation or guilt in borrowing the power of “insects” and using their abilities as his own.

Including the power of “insects”, that was the strength of the warrior known as Kafma Irulux.

And yet—

Kafma: “I am not without my own thoughts.”

Unable to expect anything but victory, Kafma, who demanded the destruction of as many enemies as possible, did not have the time to fight against just a single warrior.

Therefore, using an underhanded move in order to bring down his opponent as fast as possible, he defeated the enemy.

Kafma: “…”

The ritual of inserting “insects” into the body was the culmination of careful preparation, even for the Insect Cage Tribe.

From the time they were newborn babies, their bodies were altered in preparation for the future insertion of “insects,” but the ritual was forbidden until they reached the age of twelve. That was to say, it took at least twelve years of preparation before an “insect” could be inserted into the body.

If the process was skipped and an insect was implanted, the subject’s body would not be able to withstand it.

Henceforth—

Kafma: “It pains me to have to settle this with you in this way.”

Declaring his regretful feelings, Kafma closed his eyes and offered a silent prayer to his vanquished opponent. But, the time he immersed himself in sentiment was short-lived, and Kafma quickly turned around and once again looked beyond the rampart.

Although he had fended off the initial attack of the Centaur People, the second group would launch their attack on him. No matter how many times they rushed at him, it would be fine. Each time, he would fend them all off—It was the moment directly after he thought that.

Kafma: "—Hk, What?!"

In an imposing stance, Kafma tried to call forth the thorn "insects" that were circulating in his body, but there was a thunderous roar that erupted right nearby him—He widened his eyes at the tremendous impact which appeared to be an explosion.

For a moment, Kafma suspected that the rebels had brought out some kind of weapon to breach the rampart, but he quickly realized that he was mistaken.

However, that understanding did not lead to relief.

The reason was—

Kafma: "—Garfiel Tinzel."

In Kafma's shuddering vision, Garfiel stood, having crawled back up the fallen ramparts.

Taking on the form of an enlarged ferocious beast, the mad warrior, his entire body wrapped in a blazing fire, stood.

5

It was a blessing in disguise that the place where he fell was on top of an open field.

If he had fallen down onto the ramparts, he might not have been able to muster the strength to get back up. By virtue of falling onto the ground, the earth itself had taken Garfiel's side.

Still, the damage done to his body was severe, with his head split, the sensation of his body being stirred up from the inside beckoned for death to encroach on Garfiel's life with every passing second.

A split head could be restored with healing magic. However, an "insect" was preventing the activation of it. Since the "insect" was not actually attacking, healing magic could not get rid of it either.

In the first place, there was no time to use the healing magic, and with the interference of the “insect”, his head was split and the blood was, blood was, blood was, blood was.

Garfiel: “Gah, ough.”

Clenching his back teeth and holding on to his tenuous grasp on life, he stopped using his head.

Naturally, it was a split head. It could not be relied upon. What was needed was the instinct to live, to follow it, to move the body forcefully, and then.

And then, the Magic Stone Cannon that had been prepared on the wall, ready to intercept the enemy coming from outside the walls, he had swallowed the magic stone loaded inside it and crushed it in his belly.

Instantly, the mana that had been stored within swelled up inside Garfiel, burning the “insect”. Once the “insect” was burned, all that Garfiel was left with were fierce scars.

—No, it was just the wounds, and the enemy.

Otto: “Listen, Garfiel, please remember this well.”

Otto: “If they find out who we are and where we are from, it could lead to a very difficult diplomatic incident. For that reason, please avoid being provoked by the other side, and carelessly saying unnecessary things.”

Otto: “Though I do say that, since it is you, I am not expecting you to be so patient. I am not telling you to exchange words in a tit-for-tat as a merchant would. Therefore—”

Otto: “Therefore, make sure you properly remember this one thing.”

Otto: “If you get caught up in an exchange of words—”

Garfiel: “If, I got…”

Speaking inarticulately, while his rationality became dim due to the reflexive beastification to heal his severe injuries, what Garfiel heard endlessly in his brain were the words of someone akin to his older brother, the man he could count on in any situation.

Ahead of where he looked as he slowly turned around while being burned by the swaying flame, there was a fearsome enemy confronting him.

That enemy was needed.

To carry out what his older brother told him to do, an enemy was needed.

After all, he had said that to him. —Otto Suwen had said that to Garfiel.

Otto: "—Make sure to beat that opponent up until their legs can no longer stand!"

Garfiel: "I'll fuckin' crush yaaa—!!"

The roar of the beast rose again, and the transformed Garfiel, now a raging beast, trampled and smashed as he soared across the ramparts. Upon witnessing such a display of might, the enemy in front of him—Kafma opened his eyes and smiled.

Grinning, Kafma raised both of his arms overhead, and rushed forward.

Kafma: "Come, Garfiel Tinzel!!"

Garfiel: "AARHAAAAaaaaaaaa—!!"

The furious attack of the golden tiger, baring his fangs as he leapt in, crashed right through waves of purple thorns cramming his vision from directly opposite to them, and a crack was formed at the bastion on one of the star's points.

Undoubtedly, it was just as if that was substantiating the unease harbored by the Emperor on the throne—.

Kafma: "…"

—It was the retaliation of the crack engraving the falls of the indomitable heavens upon the history of the Empire.

Chapter 88:
New Wind

1

—The siege of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana had begun with a fierce battle that neither side would willingly concede.

By all rights, there was no need for Emilia and the others to take part in this all-out war between rebels, who bore discontent against the current Vollachia, and its national military, who were trying to protect these peaceful times.

Originally, the reason for Emilia's party entering the Empire was in search of people.

Of course, they harbored a sense of compassion and duty for the people they had met on their travels after they successfully entered into Vollachia in secret.

Regardless of the borders of The Kingdom and the Empire, there were people whom they wanted to make happy, and even those they wished to lend their strength to. Everyone in the party agreed on that.

However, no matter how unmistakably soft-hearted Emilia's party was, they still had their priorities.

To ignore their original objective would be getting their priorities backward, and the party had people (Otto, Petra) with the judgement to admonish the others (Emilia, Garfiel) whose conscience made them reflexively try to save others.

After being attacked by flying dragons, they only had taken part in the ultimately hellish battle of the Fortress City because they had reason to believe the friends they were searching for had been in that city.

Since things had gone contrary to their expectations, logic would normally dictate that there was no reason for Emilia and the others to join in on the rebel army's attack on the Imperial Capital.

In fact, even as they heard about the Empire's domestic affairs being burned to crisp day after day, Emilia's party had steeled themselves to be minimally shaken in their sense of purpose.

No matter what—

???: "—Since the one who abducted that girl was "The Flying Dragon General", she is likely located in the Dragonkin Madelyn Eschart's residence, the mansion of her owner."

Positioned in front of a map spread in a room on the topmost floor of the Fortress City's City Hall, Abel had answered Emilia's question while touching the Oni mask that concealed his face.

Hearing Abel's answer, Emilia muttered, "Madelyn's owner…".

—Time looped back, to a few days before the siege of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

With their hopes of uniting with Subaru dashed, who should have returned to Guaral after heading to the Demon City, and having just missed the awoken Rem, Emilia's party had been unsure as to what course of action to take from then on.

They pondered whether they should prioritize the search for Subaru, whose whereabouts were completely unknown after the destruction of the Demon City of Chaosflame, or Rem, for whom they have only identified her abductor so far.

The opening words had been what Abel told Emilia, who wanted some basis for making the decision.

Abel: "It was not like one would ever hear from the fractious Dragonkin, but she was a General First-Class recommended by Prime Minister Berstetz Fondalfon. If anything were to happen, she should return to his side."

Emilia: "…"

Abel: “What? Do you have doubts?”

Emilia: “No, it’s not that… I just thought “owner” was a reaaally mean way of putting it.”

Emilia, who had exchanged only a few words with Madelyn, but rather fiercely quarreled with her, had thought that Madelyn would get extremely angry at the way Abel just formulated that.

Remaining silent at what Emilia had pointed out, Abel narrowed his eyes behind his mask. She hoped he would reflect on his statement and realize that it had not been nice.

In any case, Abel’s knowledgeable opinion was helpful for understanding the circumstances of the Imperial side of things, which Emilia and the others had not known.

With the rising rebellions all throughout the Empire in the air, the look of the sky and the dryness of the air growing worse made Emilia have this sense of foreboding, even though she wanted to think things through as much as possible.

Since they had failed to meet the people they were looking for at every possible opportunity, their time in the Empire had been nothing but poor.

Emilia: “But if Madelyn went back to that Berstetz guy, then Rem also…”

???: “If Rem-chan’s there, then so is big bro!”

Emilia retraced the flow of the conversation, and Medium, who had been holding onto the operations desk placed there, joined in.

Emilia’s lips relaxed as her eyes met Medium’s, who vehemently stretched her small body to its fullest. Together with Rem, her precious brother had also been taken by Madelyn.

Medium, surely very anxious and worried, did not show any sign of being weakened.

That undauntedness made Emilia think how she could learn a thing or two from her.

???: “Prime Minister-san… Berstetz Fondalfon-sama is this very talented and capable man, said to be the keystone of the Empire.”

Next to Emilia, who had been struck by Medium’s admirableness, was Petra cutting into their conversation.

Unable to let Emilia go alone, Petra leapt, sticking close to her. Putting a finger to her lips, Emilia murmured, “Is that so?” and tilted her head.

Emilia: “The “keystone of the Empire” sounds like a reaaally remarkable evaluation, but isn’t that the Emperor?”

Petra: “Of course, I think The Empire always being peaceful was because of the capabilities of His Excellency the Emperor. However, His Excellency the Emperor’s capabilities also include properly utilizing his talented subordinates.”

Emilia: “Ah, that’s right. Even if the Emperor is reaaally strong and reaaally smart, that doesn’t mean he can do everything all by himself.”

Despite her assiduous efforts, Emilia could not imagine seeing things the same way as Vollachia’s Emperor. However, since she eventually needed to, she had to keep trying her hardest.

However, no matter how hard she tried, Emilia would always be reliant on everyone’s help.

That should have been the same for the Emperor of Vollachia.

However, while Emilia and Medium were impressed, Abel seemed to harbor a completely different impression. His sharpened gaze radiated through his Oni mask directly at Petra.

Abel: “What exactly are you trying to accomplish with this blatantly obvious rationale? Do you honestly believe there is room to listen to the words of a young child? We hardly have the time to spare.”

Petra: “My apologies, that was roundabout. I just wanted to ask you this. —If he is His Excellency the Emperor's important right-hand man, then Prime Minister-san's residence is in the Imperial Capital right?"

Abel: "…"

Petra was not afraid of that sharp gaze, and Abel remained silent at her question.

Abel's scary gaze should have felt like having a blade pointed at her, but Petra had not wavered in the slightest. That was how strong Petra's resolve was.

That was enough to make her fellow campmate, Emilia, want to proudly puff out her chest.

Abel: "The answer to your question is affirmed. Inevitably, both of the individuals taken by Madelyn Eschart …Rem and Flop O'Connell, should also be under the care of Berstetz in the Imperial Capital."

Abel responded in a low voice, as if he was yielding to Petra's gaze. Emilia was about to praise Petra for her words.

But, Petra's expression was not good; on the contrary, she sighed visibly and,

Petra: "…It's like we are being manipulated, and it's not funny."

Emilia: "Huh? What do you mean by that?"

Unsure of the meaning of Petra's response, Emilia blinked her eyes. In response to Emilia's words, Petra's voice dropped in tone with a sour look on her face.

Petra: "We have nothing to do with the problems unfolding within the Empire. I know that there is going to be a very large battle, and I am worried about Medium-chan and Utakata-chan, but…"

Emilia: "—. Yeah, it's okay. I know exactly what you mean. We came looking for both Subaru and Rem."

Preempting Petra's reluctance to speak, Emilia chose her words gently.

She understood Petra's fears and concerns. After all, Emilia, if nothing else, would like to continue to work with Abel and the others on the sly, as she wanted to help everyone she knew.

However, if they only focused on immediate problems like that, they would never get to Subaru and Rem, which was their original goal—

Emilia: “Huh?”

After thinking that far, Emilia got stuck in her own head.

As she answered Petra, Emilia remembered her group's goal was to bring Subaru and Rem back safely. So even though it was painful, they must pass by the battle going on in Vollachia unnoticed.

At least, she thought so, but.

Petra: “But I think Rem might be in the Imperial Capital now. If that's the case…”

Emilia: “—We have to go to the Imperial Capital, too.”

As Emilia's icy doubts started to melt away, her eyes met Petra's on the other side of the ice.

Petra had a very bitter look on her face because she was the first to realize that fact. To back up Emilia's amazement, Petra glared at Abel.

And then—

Petra: “It's not fair. You were silent until we said it ourselves.”

Abel: “It was a principle that naturally led to one conclusion if you thought it through. It would be arrogant of you to call me despicable, considering your own ignorance of how slow on the uptake you are.”

Petra: “So please tell us. You mentioned that there are two places for Madelyn, the “Flying Dragon General,” to return to the Prime Minister’s residence in the Imperial Capital and another one. But you only talked about the Imperial Capital, so that Emily would not pay attention to the other one.”

Abel: “…”

Petra: “Taking advantage of someone’s ignorance is called shamelessness where I come from.”

Insistently, Petra glared at Abel reproachfully. As Petra spoke, Emilia, who had been deceived by the missing information, lowered her eyebrows.

On Abel’s side, too, Medium, who was peering at the map next to him, looked up to admonish him for his methods “Abel-chin…”.

She reflected on it very much. At the same time, Emilia understood why Petra was angry.

Aside from the concealment of information, Abel was right that Emilia could have noticed it if she had thought it through without being told after the fact.

Of course, Emilia did not intend to rely on others for every single matter.

Emilia: “Abel, you also said you didn’t have time. That’s true for both of us, but you don’t have to be mean about it.”

Abel: “That’s just what your pride makes you say. Why should I go to the trouble of explaining to you in detail why things are the way they are?”

Emilia: “—? If you want our help, you will have to say please.”

Abel: “—. What an aggravating woman.”

Crossing his thin arms, Abel exhaled a long, heavy breath.

However, in response, Emilia asked, “Is that so?” and had a completely different opinion. It was not that they did not mesh well, but that Abel did not want to consort with her at all.

Emilia: “Isn’t that right? After all, if you have to fight an incredibly troublesome battle in Vollachia from now on, you must feel compelled to ask us for help. Since we are reaaally strong.”

Petra: “Emily, it is a little worrisome how you say that.”

Emilia: “We are reaaally reliable!”

Petra: “We are reliable. Especially Emily, and Garf-san.”

Emilia rephrased her statement, and Petra, next to her, also spoke as such and puffed out her chest.

As for Emilia’s group—Garfiel was unquestionably a strong fighter, and Emilia was proud to say she was quite formidable, too; Otto and Petra were very smart, and Frederica had always been a master in being considerate.

Beatrice could not afford to strain herself until she was reunited with Subaru and was currently resting, but the thought of protecting her let strength surge up within Emilia.

That was why—

Emilia: “It would definitely be easier to fulfill Abel’s goals if we were here, right? And yet you are only talking like that because you don’t want us to think you are asking us to help you?”

Abel: “…”

Emilia: “Roswaal is also not very good at saying please…”

Abel, like Roswaal, probably had a personality that did not want to expose weakness to his opponents.

Because of this, they tried to get other people to say something instead of themselves. Perhaps that was how things had always worked out for them, though

Emilia: “I think you should stop before you get smacked reaaally hard like Roswaal by Medium-chan, Yorna, or Zikr-san.”

When he had been involved in a devious scheme involving the mansion and the “Sanctuary”, Roswaal received a slap on the face from everyone, including Emilia.

As someone who took part in it, Emilia described how painful it was, but Roswaal was simply rebuked and got away with a swollen face, so who knows what would happen to Abel?

And that was even without being considerate of Abel’s well-being.

Emilia: “Is what I’m saying totally off the mark? If so, I’m embarrassed, but please say so. Then I’ll apologize and think of something else.”

Abel: “Something else?”

Emilia: “I don’t think of you as someone who can’t think ahead or of anything at all. It’s important to keep thinking about what you might be thinking about.”

Previously, Emilia had been quick to give up on things she did not understand.

She was quick to blame it on something, give up, and naively assume that doing as Puck said was the right thing to do. Lately, she had been enlisting the help from others who were good at thinking, like Ram and Otto.

But she did not want to turn into a person who simply changes the people to rely on.

Petra mentioned that the emperor of Vollachia was very good at utilizing people. But even an emperor who was good at manipulating people still needs to think about what he was going to use them for.

And those in important positions, those who are in the center of everyone else’s lives, must be able to do that.

That was what Emilia had chosen to work towards.

???: "—Oh dear, your encouraging thoughts are so elating, Emily."

A voice from behind complimented Emilia, who was faced sharply toward Abel. The voice was familiar even without turning around, and its owner was the ever-reliable Otto.

He was on a different mission to investigate something, but the City Hall was—No, he probably had some business with Abel.

Emilia: "Otto-kun, did you have business with Abel, too? Are you okay on your own?"

Otto: "Thank you for your concern. But you do not need to worry so much…"

Emilia: "Yeah? But, Otto-kun, there was a time when you were kidnapped while we all weren't keeping an eye on you…"

Otto: "Do not put me on the spot like that! …Well, I was prepared for that, too."

Otto's voice rose at Emilia's concern, and Garfiel appeared right behind him, apparently following Otto's investigations.

Relieved, Emilia patted her chest,

Emilia: "Thanks, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "Ha, I don't need to be thanked for that. What were Emily and Lady Petra talkin' about?"

Emilia: "Well, many things …But thanks to Lady Petra, I wasn't persuaded. I wasn't persuaded, was I?"

Petra: "Yes, everything's fine, Emily. I was very surprised at how reliable you were."

Emilia: "Hehe, isn't that right?"

Emilia and Petra high-fived in front of Otto and the others. In the end, it was a worthwhile effort by her as well as Garfiel to protect Petra as best they could.

As Otto lowered the corners of his eyes at the sight of the two, he turned to face the person donning the oni mask on the other side of the operations desk, and spoke, prefacing with “Abel-san”,

Otto: “I can imagine what you were discussing with Emily and the others. About how Rem was taken by a Divine General, and that we are already in a position to become enemies of the Empire if we head to the Imperial Capital of Lupugana. Isn’t that about it?”

Emilia: “—! Amazing! Otto-kun, did you secretly listen in on us?”

Petra: “Were you eavesdropping?”

Otto: “Not only Emily, but even Lady Petra …there is no way I am eavesdropping!”

Emilia: “I see. Then you are amazing after all.”

Petra: “…Was he really not eavesdropping, Garf-san?”

Otto: “Emily aside, Lady Petra is…”

Emilia was impressed, and Petra confirmed the truth with Garfiel, and while smiling at the two extreme reactions, Otto cleared his throat after guessing the conversation from before.

Then turning his now fading, playful eyes to Abel, he said,

Otto: “I have just been listening to the people who have come to town from the outside. It’s the same with the rebellious voices in many places, but they are gathering here one after the other.”

Abel: “It is no surprise given the circumstances and the fact that The Flying Dragon General has retreated. Yorna Mishigure has brought the residents of the Demon City with her and has made this her new base.”

Otto: “Yes, That is right. —It is excellent handiwork.”

Abel responded to Otto's nodding with a curt response.

The content of the exchange itself was something that Emilia already knew of. Over the past few days, people had been gathering in Guaral, and Emilia had been lending a hand in repairing the damaged housing.

However, Frederica and Petra cautioned her not to do too much heavy lifting, so her role was solely to participate in repairing supports by magically freezing them.

Anyway, there was nothing new in the matter. Still, what Emilia found modestly disconcerting was perhaps Otto's attitude.

As usual, Otto was quiet, smart, and dependable—But what Emilia felt in his soft demeanor seemed to be a hidden, but not fully concealed, anger.

Otto: "How far did you go with the planning?"

Abel: "…"

It was these words that confirmed Emilia's suspicions.

Abel was silent in response to Otto's question. But Emilia took it as a pause; this was not because he was thinking of an answer, but to hurry the other party along.

Because Abel's gaze never wavered and his eyes never changed. The answer was already decided, but he was simply too pompous to let them hear it.

Otto: "I wonder how far you're willing to go to get what you want."

Again, Otto asked the same thing, but in a different way.

It did not seem like a matter of being rushed or being outlasted. While he did not like to talk about victory and defeat, it was already set in stone who would win and lose at this point.

Otto's attitude was meant to ask why he lost, and that his defeat did not come as a surprise to Emilia and the others; it was essentially the same question.

Abel: "—I only learned of your existence when I returned to this city. If you want me to include you in the plan, you need to become apt in reciting the stars."

Otto: "So, you think this is just a coincidence?"

Abel: "I am not going to dismiss it as a coincidence. After all, fortune is ultimately nothing more than one of many factors."

Shaking his head once from side to side, Abel categorically denied Otto's words.

Seeing Otto's cheeks harden at Abel's words, Emilia could not resist pulling on his sleeve. In doing this, she put an end to his feeling of bearing this burden of defeat all alone.

Emilia: "Otto-kun, what does that mean?"

Otto: "…Just now, there was a report about the situation Natsuki-san is in. I thought it was quite the ridiculous development."

Petra: "It's just like Medium-chan; he's smaller, right?"

Hearing Otto's story, Petra glanced at Medium, who was standing next to Abel.

Medium spoke of being attacked by an enemy in the Demon City and being transformed from an adult into a child. She had informed them how Subaru had been put in a situation similar to hers.

Furthermore, in order to protect Subaru in such an uncertain state,

Emilia: "Abel must have spread those rumors that the boy with black hair and black eyes was the child of the emperor. That way, in case Subaru was discovered by people thinking badly of him…"

Otto: "They at least would need to keep him alive to confirm the matter. I thought it was an ingenious idea at the time, as well. No matter what, it would lower the level of danger Natsuki-san was in. However—"

Garfiel: “As it turned out, it ain’t no longer just a matter of safety for the captain.”

Garfiel crossed his arms and spoke up, referring back to Otto’s statement. Emilia turned around with a “Huh?” as Garfiel gnashed his sharp fangs.

Garfiel: “There’s a lotta people comin’ into the city, and they’re all tryin’ to fight the Emperor. My amazin’ self’s got nothin’ to say about that. But if the captain is in danger, that’s somethin’ else.”

Emilia: “Subaru is in danger…”

Petra: “…I see, that’s how it is.”

Emilia’s eyebrows rose, and next to her, Petra muttered as if she had noticed something. Then she sharpened her round eyes and glared at Abel the same way Otto did.

Petra: “A boy with black hair and black eyes …Whether he is the real illegitimate son of the Emperor or not, the soldiers could no longer just leave him be either.”

Emilia: “Yes, yes, I know. So, Subaru is safe and…”

Petra: “But his safety only lasts until they make sure whether the boy is legitimate. This begs the question, where do you need to go to accomplish this?”

Emilia: “Where … ah.”

After listening to Petra as she organized her thoughts, Emilia finally caught on to the main points.

Because of Abel’s rumor and Subaru becoming a child—Boys with black hair and black eyes were being sought out, and any children found were taken into custody to verify their legitimacy.

The place, of course, was—

Emilia: “—The Imperial Capital, where the Emperor is?”

Abel: “By fortune or not, both of the persons you are looking for are in the Imperial Capital. Two birds with one stone, one would say.”

Petra: “Utterly shameless…”

When Emilia arrived at her conclusion, Abel nodded deeply, as if he had been expecting it. Immediately, Petra raised her voice at Abel and strongly denounced his attitude.

But Abel, for his part, shrugged his shoulders at Petra’s anger.

Abel: “I should have told you. Your existence is not something I expected. I merely spread the rumor as a means to an end in order to fan the flames of the rebels’ presence.”

Petra: “—Hk.”

Abel: “Or what else do you expect me to say? After deliberately shrinking Natsuki Subaru and making him disappear, I spread rumors to mislead the entire Empire, and incidentally had one of the “Nine Divine Generals” kidnap an Oni girl with the ability to use healing arts, as well. That I had orchestrated all of it. —I must be quite the busy man.”

Petra’s expression stiffened as he spoke to her as if mocking her.

Of course, neither Otto nor Garfiel were pleased to have Petra treated that way. So Abel should be relieved that it was Emilia who made the first move.

Emilia stepped forward to protect Petra and stared intently at Abel with her arms crossed.

Emilia: “I don’t think of you as someone who knows everything about everything. Don’t bully Lady Petra with your misleading way of putting things. If you do that again…”

Abel: “What if I do it again?”

Emilia: “I’m going to be the first one to make good on what we talked about earlier!”

Emilia said this with her clenched fist out in front of her.

Emilia, too, believed that everything should be ideally resolved through dialogue, but if someone was just unwilling to listen and impossible to get through to with words, a clenched fist becomes your only option.

Especially if someone was not talking badly at Emilia herself, but rather a valued member of her camp.

Abel: "—. A completely open book. Are all of your leaders like that?"

Otto: "Yes, I do often have a hard time getting them to pick the right words. But—"

Garfiel: "That's the kind of guy that makes it all worthwhile. Way better than some asshole who stubbornly follows the same path and removes every obstacle with some stupid ass logic."

Abel's eyes narrowed, and Otto and Garfiel each responded in kind.

Somehow, Emilia felt that the topic that was being discussed was about her, not Petra, who was supposed to be their provisional representative, but Emilia did not press that point too deeply.

Now, they all had to cover for Petra and talk about—

Garfiel: "To cut it short, it's possible that both Rem and the captain could be in the Imperial Capital."

Otto: "And since there is a strong possibility that the decisive battle between the national military and the rebels will be in the Imperial Capital, we have no choice but to find a way past it."

Petra: "No shame whatsoever…"

Subaru and Rem might be in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

Theoretically, Rem could also be in a different location and Subaru might be brought together with other black-haired boys to the Imperial Capital, but this might just be wishful thinking.

Even so, it was the most likely scenario just as everyone said.

Emilia: “I’ve decided. Let’s all go to the Imperial Capital. We have to find Subaru and Rem.”

Otto: “Emily, the decision is reserved for Lady Petra.”

Emilia: “Oh, of course! Um, what do you say, Lady Petra? Are you willing to go along with what I’ve decided?”

Petra: “—. Yes, it’s fine, Emily. The truth is, I do not like the fact that it seems like everything is going to play into this guy’s hands.”

With a fixed stare, Petra glared at Abel, yet quickly softened her expression.

She was willing to take the frustration of Abel’s outburst on behalf of Subaru and the others. Petra’s concern was appreciated, and Emilia turned to Abel and said, “Yes, that’s right,”

Emilia: “Hey, Abel, Lady Petra said everything was exactly as you wanted it to be…”

Abel: “I told you. It is impossible for me to control and guide everything. Or do you, like that girl, consider me to be just that extraordinary?”

Emilia: “No, I don’t believe that. I think you are a smart person who wears a funny mask, and …is a bit of a klutz too.”

Putting a finger to her lips, Emilia replied, while tilting her head.

When she mentioned the mask, Abel’s hand gently touched the Oni mask, and right behind him, Otto, Garfiel, and Petra could also be heard laughing quietly.

She was pleased with their reaction, and Abel asked, “What sort of assessment is that?”.

Abel: “I have never heard anything like it. Why are you describing me in such a way?”

Emilia: “About being a klutz? Well, the reason I thought that was… Yeah! I meant Subaru.”

Petra: “It’s Subaru’s? What do you mean?”

For a moment, Petra’s eyes widened as Emilia searched for the path leading to her conclusion.

Petra, who saw Abel as a master of subterfuge, may not have quite understood what Emilia meant; even though Emilia also thought of Abel as a master of subterfuge—

Emilia: “That’s what Abel said, right? That it was pleasantly unexpected for him to have us.”

Abel: “Do not embellish my words.”

Emilia: “It’s true that you would be better off if we were here, right? Abel never once said that it wasn’t. So let’s get back to that, shall we?”

Abel: “…”

Emilia: “Maybe it was unexpected for us to be there, but Abel’s rumor of the black-haired boy for Subaru was planned …And if that makes it more likely for Subaru to be in the Imperial Capital, then that part went according to his plan, right?”

Whether planned or unplanned, Emilia had said it so many times that it nearly jumbled her thoughts, but she chose her words carefully and organized them to try to reflect Abel’s thoughts properly.

Even without Emilia and the others, he had lied about the Emperor’s child cooperating with the rebels. In doing so, there would be less dangerous scenarios for Subaru as a child, and if anyone caught him, he would be brought to the Imperial Capital to find out if the lie was true—

Emilia: “The lie Abel told was a lie in order to make it a little more likely that Subaru would be in the Imperial Capital when we all fight there… am I right?”

Garfiel: “—Hk, that may be so, but why’d that guy have to be the captain?”

Emilia: “That’s obvious. —Because Subaru is reaaally reliable!”

It was difficult for Emilia to decipher all by herself what all these various speculations were all about and for which purpose. But the answer to the question Garfiel mentioned was straightforward.

Abel’s many devious plans were designed to bring Subaru to the scene of the decisive battle.

It would have been really awkward if his preparations were actually made so that he would not be discovered.

But even if they were—

Emilia: “If you had asked for help, I’m sure Subaru would have listened to you.”

It may be that it was more difficult to say the word “please” at times than it was to manipulate someone. Emilia had never thought about manipulating anyone, so she was unsure about that, but there were times when she could not say please.

And by how many could this even reduce the number of situations in which one could not say “please”? How much could one rely on the other party saying “please”?

It was now Emilia’s goal to be able to draw that line properly within herself.

Emilia: “…”

Emilia looked at Abel, waiting for his answer.

While their black and amethyst eyes met each other, Emilia suddenly realized that behind the Oni mask, —Abel never blinked with both of his eyes at the same time.

One of his eyes was constantly open. She wondered if his eyes would become dry.

—She wondered if she could push herself that hard without drying out her mind.

Abel: “Well, what are you waiting for?”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Abel: “Is there any reason why I should ever respond to your incoherent babbling about this and that? Do not expect my whims to last forever.”

Medium: “Abel-chin!”

Abel was about to end the conversation after a long period of silence. Emilia was so astonished by his remark that it was Medium who raised her voice instead.

She watched the conversation in silence, tugging at Abel’s sleeve beside her.

Medium: “That was so uncool just now! Even from my point of view, you lost, Abel-chin!”

Abel: “I do not recall making this a competition to see who will win, or lose. Do not pull on my sleeves. There is no replacement.”

Medium: “When you run out of clothes, dress up as a girl again! It suits you, Abel-chin!”

Brusquely, she firmly tugged his sleeve once more, and then Medium stuck her tongue out at Abel. She quickly walked around the operations desk and approached Emilia and the others.

Medium: “I don’t know anything complicated either. But if Rem-chan is in the capital, I’m sure big bro is there too… I want to see them again, and Subaru-chin too! That’s why, that’s why, that’s why…”

With faltering sincerity, Medium bowed her head with a jerk. Her long golden hair fell over her head as if it was tossed over, and fell at the feet of Emilia and the others.

However, Medium was oblivious to such things.

Medium: “Please! I know Abel-chin is how he is, but Emily-chan and the others can help!”

Medium pleaded so desperately that her voice trembled as she spoke.

At her pleading, Emilia involuntarily narrowed her eyes. Then she looked over to Abel, standing beyond the bowing Medium.

Emilia: “Abel, I think this is what it comes down to.”

At Emilia’s prompting, Abel looked at Medium’s back as she bowed her head. Then, without letting his black eyes show what he was thinking behind the Oni mask,

Abel: “You shall also join the attack on the Imperial Capital. I regard this as a statement of intent.”

Petra: “Shameless!”

Medium: “Abel-chin—!”

And the angry voices of the two young girls scolded Abel, who could not say please.

2

—With that interlude, Emilia’s party had decided to take part in the decisive battle at the Imperial Capital.

Truthfully, they did not know how far Abel had calculated and set up the board.

Perhaps, just like they had told Petra, everything about Subaru and Rem might have been completely according to Abel’s calculations, or everything could have actually been a mere coincidence.

If there was one thing they could say,

Otto: “Without getting too caught up in Abel-san’s utterances and presence, let us carry out our own objectives.”

Petra: “Yes, I also think it’s best to do as Otto-san said… So what about Dudley?”

Otto: “For the time being, he is at a friend’s, a minor target… It seems they were able to join up with High Countess Dracroy, and apparently, the aforementioned High Countess was eager to rebel.”

Petra: “Then, that High Countess and Dudley… Roswaal, too, will be going to the Imperial Capital?”

Otto: “It seems to be the likely outcome. —It keeps getting more and more exhausting.”

It seemed like Roswaal was also torn between successes and problems on his independent mission visiting an acquaintance that was in the Vollachian Empire.

However, it seemed like both Roswaal and Ram would also apparently be heading to the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

If Subaru and Rem truly were in the Imperial Capital, everyone would end up gathering there at once.

Frederica: “However, what awaits us on our way there is the center of a great rebellion that is engulfing the entire Empire… And to be honest, the situation has completely changed from what we had originally envisioned.”

Garfiel: “Hey, big sis. Don’t tell me you’re scared now?”

Frederica: “I’m not frightened, but I’m a little worried. It’s a problem to interfere in the quarrels of other countries, and when it comes to the battlefield…”

Frederica, her eyes downcast, her expression hardened, and she hesitated to say anything beyond that.

What she was unwilling to put into words, everyone around her could imagine—If their destination were the decisive battle in the Imperial Capital, there would be a lot of damage to both parties.

The inevitable great surge, which should have been an event in a neighboring country.

Petra: “Frederica nee-sama, I am glad you are concerned about me. But…”

Frederica: “Of course I’m worried about Petra, but I’m afraid for myself. I’m sorry for being a scaredy-cat.”

Petra: “Nee-sama…”

Frederica shook her head steadfastly, and Petra hung her head at that compassion-filled voice.

It was likely a battle where many people would be hurt or even lose their lives, and Frederica’s apprehension about taking Petra to such a place was understandable.

That anxiety and reluctance was shared among everyone, not just Frederica.

That was why—

Emilia: “If we weren’t in the Empire, we’d frown at it as something that happened in a neighboring country and just dismissed it. But.”

Garfiel: “But?”

Emilia: “By being here, we’ve gotten to know the people who are going to join the fight, so even if we can get away from here, we can no longer stand idly by and frown on it.”

Even if the lives to be destroyed were the same, the feeling of it happening to a person you know compared to a person you don’t know would be different.

Life is very precious and cannot be compared to anything else. So if life could be compared, it would only be with another life. —This was surely a very self-righteous way to think about it.

However, if they were prepared to follow through with their selfish ideas, then it was already decided.

Emilia: “If we participate, I think we can reduce the number of casualties.”

Otto: “Emily… No, Emilia-sama. That is quite a thorny path.”

In response to Emilia’s words, who had put her hand on her chest, Otto corrected what he called her to say those words.

Otto, who had stubbornly used a pseudonym to avoid misnaming, even in a place where there was no one but friends around, gave them a glimpse of his seriousness.

It would be rude not to respond to that seriousness, so Emilia nodded in a serious way.

Emilia: “Hmm, I know. No, maybe Otto-kun is having a way more difficult time than I thought, but I’ll do something about that too.”

Otto: “Our goal is to bring back Natsuki-san and Rem-san. If only two people die in this decisive battle, and those two people are Natsuki-san and Rem-san, we will have failed. Conversely, if the people of the Empire are annihilated, but those two are safe, we win.”

Garfiel: “Otto-bro, not every end justifies…”

Otto: “I am talking to Emilia-sama now.”

Garfiel was about to interrupt Otto with a quiet string of words. However, Otto cut him off and asked only Emilia for an answer.

Looking back into Otto’s eyes, Emilia’s amethyst eyes shook slightly.

And then—

Emilia: “I’m sorry, Otto-kun. You’ve been working so hard since we came to the Empire… No, since before we came to the Empire, when we had to go help Subaru and Rem.”

Otto: “…Because that is what I am supposed to do. So, I will share my thoughts how I go about it.”

Emilia: “Yeah, I know. —We need to be at our best. And since we need Otto to give it our all, we’re going to ask him to hang in there until we meet Subaru and Rem. Even if Otto-kun collapses, I’ll forcibly carry him on my back. So.”

Otto: “…”

Emilia: “So let’s try reaaally hard to both save Subaru and Rem and keep the people of the Empire from dying as much as possible!”

Emilia was aware that she was saying something very unreasonable, and she knew it was a very selfish request. Even so, Emilia had stopped giving in before she even started trying to do what she wanted to.

For that reason—

3

Emilia: “—Let us blow a new wind into this battle.”

A fierce cold wind blew violently, filling the verdant grasslands of Vollachia with a blanket of white air.

Struggling with the falling temperatures and chilly atmosphere, many people stopped in their tracks.

In the vicinity, ceasing their movements and exhaling white breaths, were the people equipped with one part of their body as an eye-catching feature. Male or female, regardless of age, they all had one thing in common; a weapon had been cultivated on their bodies.

There was one who had swords for arms, and someone else whose entire leg was made out of steel, someone whose head had become a hammer, and also one whose entire back had become a shield.

She had heard Vollachia was home to a wide variety of demi-humans, but as so many people had gathered from so many different parts of the Empire, it was indeed a battlefield that never ceased to amaze her.

However, even if their bodies were weapons, it neither destroyed nor protected them from all the problems in front of them, as evidenced by their wounded and fallen.

So then, taking a big breath in,

Emilia: “Everybody! Get away from here! I’ll reaaally try to do my best here!”

Saying this to the people who had fallen—to the Weaponkin, Emilia hurried forward with long strides.

In order for no further pursuit to be made against them, Emilia tried to draw the opponent’s attention to herself. However, Emilia’s idea was unnecessary.

It was not that it did not work. Enough had already been done, and the other party’s eyes were drawn to Emilia.

The reason was waiting at the bastion of the city walls, where Emilia was headed—

???: “—So it’s friggin’ you again?”

Emilia, astonished at seeing Weaponkin for the first time, felt her strong feelings dampen with the existence that could not be seen even within the melting pot of diverse races that was the Vollachian Empire.

Eyes shining gold, and two black horns dully gleamed on her head. Catching the return of her thrown Flying Winged Blade in her small hands, the little girl was clad in an intimidating air unbefitting of her small stature.

Looking up at her opponent standing there, Emilia pointed a finger at her in a sharp gesture and said,

Emilia: “Yes! It’s me again, Madelyn! A passing Spiritual Arts User, Emily!”

Madelyn: “You’re a friggin’ irritating girl. You couldn’t beat this dragon in battle the other day—”

Gnashing her teeth with strength, Madelyn's expression shifted to a rather bloodcurdling one.

Viewing Emilia as an enemy, in an attempt to make up for the recent battle in Guaral, Madelyn raised her Flying Winged Blade at Emilia below—

Emilia: "—Hiyah!"

In the subsequent instant, similar to the previous time, a block of ice larger than the City Hall crashed into Madelyn like the very falls of the heavens, and together with a thunderous sound, the battle between Emilia and Madelyn broke out.

Chapter 89:
Kafma Irulux

1

—Even in the land of the Empire, where a wide variety of demi-human people lived, there were those who were regarded as heretics.

The “Insect Cage Tribe” was exactly that, and even in an empire where demi-humans of various species were intermingled, the reality was that they weren’t free from being seen as strange and heterodox.

In appearance, the Insect Cage Tribe did not differ significantly from the human race.

Many of them were brown-skinned and they had a custom of tattooing, but did not have any other obvious characteristics like the “Cyclops Tribe” and “Evil Eye Tribe” with their distinctive eyes, or the “Multi-Arm Tribe” and “Long-Leg Tribe” with their distinctive arms and legs, or especially the “Beastman Tribe” and “Halfbeast Tribe” who could not be any more distinctive.

Still, there was a reason why the Insect Cage Tribe were looked at in a peculiar way by other races: their way of living.

That was due to their way of living in symbiosis with “insects” within their bodies, which was a unique characteristic of the Insect Cage Tribe.

As mentioned above, compared to other demi-humans, the Insect Cage Tribe had little difference in appearance from the human race. If they did not have “insects” in their bodies, it would have been possible for them to live as a part of the human race.

However, that was not the case. The tribe had “insects” in their bodies and inherited their characteristics.

It was, so to speak, the acquisition of characteristics of demi-humans after birth, and the forbidden art of transforming the body in which one was born—That was the primary reason they were shunned by other demi-humans.

This distinguished them from the Weaponkin, who were born with a metallized part of their body that they could reforge into a weapon of their choice as they grew up, and from the Glow People, who were believed to take in the souls of the people they killed, thereby increasing the radiance of the pyroxene crystal that grew on their forehead.

The way of life of the Insect Cage Tribe, who did not mingle with others and never left their homeland, was shrouded in mystery.

Since falsified knowledge was often spread with prejudice, some of the rumors would be hard for the Insect Cage Tribe to avoid laughing at if they had the opportunity to hear them.

However, there were few opportunities for the rumors to be corrected, and there were again no opportunities for the misunderstandings to be cleared.

The most common misconceptions were the timing of when the insects were introduced into the body, as well as the connection between the insects's way of living and the Insect Cage Tribe—In other words, it was about the history of the Insect Cage Tribe.

To begin with, it was quite dangerous to implant "insects" into the body.

In the southern region of the Vollachian Empire, deep within the village where the Insect Cage Tribe lived, there was a cave where "insects" lived, and the cave was called the "Abyss" because of the deformed creatures and poisonous air that pervaded it. The "insects" inhabiting the cave had a strange appearance and were fundamentally different from the insects that were commonly thought of.

Just who had come up with the idea of taking in these mysterious creatures, was unknown.

The consensus was that it was probably an extraordinary method discovered by shamans, shinobi, and other aberrants with abnormal principles in order to gain power that could not be obtained through conventional methods.

In any case, given their existence, the existence of the Insect Cage Tribe was merely a byproduct.

The ancestors of the Insect Cage Tribe were the ones who wished to live in symbiosis with their natural powers by implanting mysterious “insects” into their bodies, and this madness had been passed down to the present day.

Returning back to the original topic. —The Insect Cage Tribe waited until they were twelve years old to receive their first “insect”.

Until that age, they trained their bodies and minds to be suitable vessels for the “insects” so they were recognized as an “insects” host during the actual ceremony and the time of hatching could be appropriately arranged.

After that, the symbiotic “insect” would only recognize its obedience towards the host if they had complete mastery over it, thus they were then allowed to call themselves a full-fledged member of the Insect Cage Tribe.

The ritual was forbidden until the age of twelve, because taking in “insects” was a risk to one’s life.

Those who challenged the ritual before they were physically and mentally ready would be eaten alive by the incorporated “insects”. The minimum age to challenge the ritual was twelve, but as long as the vessel was not ready, the age was allowed to be extended to fifteen. If the vessel was not ready by then, they would be deemed unqualified to be considered a member of the Insect Cage Tribe and thrown into the “Abyss” as food for the “insects”.

The suffering associated with the ritual of taking in those essential “insects” was indescribable.

There were different types of blood among the human race, and trying to compensate for a lack of blood via the transfusion of a different blood type could endanger one's life. The suffering of the "insect" ceremony was similar to that.

The feeling that all of the blood flowing through one's body was poison, rotting one's organs and burning one's brain.

The "insect" grew into a chrysalis that tested the host to see if it was worthy of being its vessel, and then spent three days and three nights deciding whether to use it as its vessel or to dissolve and devour it.

When the chrysalis finally hatched, if the human form was still intact, the ritual succeeded and the "insect" became a symbiote.

The first physical change occurred in the Insect Cage Tribe when an "insect" was taken into the body and hatched from out of their chrysalis.

Some acquired antennae and wings, some developed compound eyes, others grew multiple arms and legs, and others covered their fingers and bodies with a shell.

The fact that these characteristics were similar to those of real insects was the reason why the Insect Cage Tribe was called as such, despite the fact that the "insects" they took in were not actually insects at all.

Of course, even in a different shape, their essence remained unchanged.

However, it was also true that there were those who viewed the Insect Cage Tribe as these abnormal people performing rituals to retroactively transform themselves to become vessels for "insects".

This was the prejudice that awaited them at the end of their suffering, and yet the way of the Insect Cage Tribe remained the same.

In order to be recognized as a member of the Insect Cage Tribe, a person must take in a single "insect". However, the more "insects" one took in, the more powerful one became as a warrior.

Therefore, the best warriors of the Insect Cage Tribe had taken in at least three “insects”.

However, with more integrated “insects” the risk of them cannibalizing each other inside the body and endangering the life of the host increases. Therefore, the number of symbiotic “insects” is directly related to the quality of the warrior.

The current chief of the Insect Cage Tribe was known as a warrior among warriors, and was revered and respected as the hero of his tribe for having taken eight “insects” into his body.

—And Kafma Irulux was a monster that had taken in thirty-two “insects”.

The birth of a monster that overshadowed even the feats of heroes, a monster that went against the code of the Insect Cage Tribe from the very beginning.

The ritual of implanting an “insect” was not supposed to be performed until the twelfth birthday for fear of endangering the vessel’s life, but Kafma had taken in his first “insect” when he was only a few days old.

As the elder brother of the Chief, his father turned mad because he remained inferior to his younger, brilliant brother and directed it towards his own child.

Once Kafma gained awareness of his surroundings, he was made to known of his circumstances by his father.

His real father was executed by his younger brother, the Chief, his true intentions remaining unknown. However, his father had declared his son dead soon after his birth, isolating Kafma, and performing the ritual of implanting an “insect” into him every year.

Ironically, when Kafma’s existence was discovered, and he was first taken out of hiding at the age of twelve, the same year his brethren were to undergo the ritual of implanting “insects”, and Kafma was already a monster living in symbiosis with thirteen “insects”.

Even among the Insect Cage Tribe, opinions were divided on how to deal with Kafma, an existence inconceivable to the tribe.

With his father already dying after he was emotionally executed for breaking the law and cursing his child, the reason Kafma had been able to incorporate over a dozen "insects" was completely unknown—Eventually, his uncle, the Chief, declared that he would take responsibility for Kafma's existence and allowed him to live.

This was not a lie, and Kafma Irulux was grateful to the chief.

His blood-related uncle, for better or worse, maintained a certain distance and discretion when dealing with Kafma, and did not direct any excessive blame or apologies towards him because of his father.

His uncle's attitude of not being neither particularly kind nor heartless showed his awareness to not give Kafma special treatment as a member of the Insect Cage Tribe, for which Kafma was grateful.

No matter how my uncle treated me, the fact of the matter is that I am an anomaly among the tribe.

Yet the generation that was still unaware of the pain of implanting "insects" kept Kafma at a distance, while those who already incubated insects feared Kafma for the unimaginable number he took in.

The Insect Cage Tribe was regarded as heretical by other tribes, and Kafma had become even more heretical among them.

Of course, Kafma had no reason to be blamed or persecuted.

Kafma could have ignored the stares he received and continued to live the life he had as an unrelated outsider. However, despite being raised differently from others, Kafma's character was virtuous.

I did not appreciate the environment in which my own people were afraid of me.

To become a member of the Insect Cage Tribe, one was required to implant an "insect" inside one's self.

However, Kafma had passed through that stage before he became self-aware. So he spared no effort in understanding his brethren in different ways.

He actively interacted with others, learned how to be a warrior from his chieftain uncle, and showed that he was not different from them by being tenacious in his interactions with all generations.

In order to be respected as a warrior of the Insect Cage Tribe, he challenged the ritual of implanting a new “insect” into his body.

There was some opposition. Since Kafma was unique in the history of the Insect Cage Tribe, who had already taken in thirteen “insects”, there were high expectations for how much growth he would achieve simply by growing up.

They had said it was a mistake that should not have happened, that he would lose his life before it even hatched.

Kafma knew what those old men were thinking, but he did not think it was a good idea to stop.

Before receiving permission, Kafma took the “insect” and went through with the ritual unsupervised. Kafma later learned that he had inherited this reckless behavior from his father.

But this time, Kafma recklessly took in his fourteenth “insect”, and after three days and three nights of suffering and vomiting blood, he survived.

And so Kafma Irulux had finally hatched as a member of the Insect Cage Tribe.

Kafma, despite his peculiar birth, was possessed of virtuous spirit and won the outstanding respect of his tribe, making him the strongest in the history of the Insect Cage Tribe.

In the Vollachian Empire, it was the strong who were honored and glorified.

Shouldering the hopes and expectations of his entire tribe, Kafma also set out to make his mark as a “General” of Vollachia and make the strength of the Insect Cage Tribe itself known.

Naturally, there were those who liked to gossip everywhere. Sometimes, he received heartless abuse and harassment from those who believed false rumors about the Insect Cage Tribe. But these were trivial matters.

It was trivial for Kafma once he got to the outside world. Yes, it was trivial.

—Kafma Irulux was a “monster” born out of the history of the Insect Cage Tribe.

With a virtuous spirit and a sense of camaraderie with his fellow countrymen, he took the initiative to fight the enemy and protect his tribe.

However, no matter how much effort he put in, his tribesmen continued to draw a line between Kafma and themselves. Because they knew the difficulty of coexisting with insects, they could not see Kafma as one of them.

Therefore, for Kafma Irulux, leaving his homeland was his aspiration.

Only in a place without his tribesmen, the Insect Cage Tribe, could Kafma see the light that he sought.

By all rights, everyone in the Insect Cage Tribe was supposed to undergo the process of hatching as they grew up, to eclose, and to recognize that they are only one, until finally—

2

Garfiel: “—RRRRRRAH!!”

Kafma gnashed his molars hard at the howling, furious, golden tiger that had leapt in front of him.

Kafma did everything in his power to meet the enemy, who explosively enlarged his upper body and raised his sharp animal claws—A warrior who called himself Garfiel Tinzel.

Kafma: “I apologize for underestimating you!”

With a flap of his back-torn wings, Kafma released purple thorns from his outstretched arms.

Although a newcomer among the “insects” that Kafma had adopted, Thorns were used frequently because of their ease of use. However, even with its suppressive power, it could not halt Garfiel’s momentum.

With one fell swoop of his claws, he mowed down the tip of the thorns in every floor of the rampart, and the sensation of the insect screaming within shook Kafma’s brain.

The seemingly endless amount of thorns were part of the “insect” that Kafma had taken in.

Naturally, if they were hurt, there would be a proportionate backlash. They just suppressed it through their sheer vitality to make it seem like there is no reaction at all.

Garfiel: “Gaaaah!!”

Garfiel stepped forward with unstoppable momentum, and out of the corner of his eye, Kafma slid down the ramparts with the acceleration of his wings and slipped past the fierce tiger.

The impact, a thundering roar, echoed just off to the side, and Kafma was horrified by how much the margin for evasion had been narrowed down.

Every attack was even faster and more powerful than the previous one.

Either one grew in battle, or one drew on one’s dormant strength, neither of which was realistic. Almost every change in force that occurred on the battlefield is a reduction in power.

Of course, any perfect condition set up before a battle is lost with every second that passes once the battle commences, until one’s energy reserves are depleted and the optimal results can no longer be achieved.

That was why it was important to unleash the greatest firepower and skill within the first move of a battle.

Of course, Kafma was no stranger to this rule, unleashing maximum firepower and fighting techniques on the enemy.

And Garfiel ought to have been the same, too. —It should have been that way, so it did not make sense.

Such an increase in power and speed over the course of a fight, regardless of the particularities of beastification.

Kafma: “And you, you must be seriously injured—Hk!”

Kafma’s earlier attack, it could have been described as a sneak attack or a poisoned assassination of sorts.

Whether the means were good or bad, Kafma did not abstain from the act itself. If elegance was the difference between life and death in battle, then one should choose the means that suit one’s desired outcome.

If those fixations were related to whether or not a person was capable of performing at their best, then it would be a different story.

Kafma: “…”

Whatever the case, Garfiel’s overall injuries were unusual.

The largest injury he had sustained was head trauma from Kafma’s attack, but the “insects” that had burrowed into him were also quite resounding. However, the same methods would not work again.

Having swallowed the Fire Magic Stones, Garfiel’s body was still burning red-hot.

His whole body was covered in flames, but inside his body must have been in an even more unmanageable state of conflagration.

While the host body was at risk when implanting an “insect”, an “insect” without a host was also extremely vulnerable and could easily die off if in an even slightly harsh environment.

There was no such thing as an “insect” that could live in a continuously burning body.

Kafma: “The thought of it is terrifying.”

Even if one could use healing magic, it could not kill “insects” with it. Instead, the “insect” needed to be removed in order for the magic to heal the wound.

This was the best way to break through that antinomy, but it seemed unlikely that he could think this up on his own.

Rather, it was probably the result of following instinct rather than thinking with one’s head.

If he had thought it through with his head, he would have never been able to swallow the magic stone and burn his body.

Kafma: “—Hk.”

The moment he slid to an unguarded side, red antennae shot out from Kafma’s shoulders like cannonballs.

Garfiel’s body was blasted off the ramparts with a roar as the tips of the “insects’” horns from Kafma’s transformed shoulder bones pierced through his steel-like abdominal muscles.

A crushing blow, but Kafma did not come out unscathed.

Kafma: “Guh.”

Kafma’s cheeks tensed up at the bone-numbing pain of having two of the antennae snapped off at the base. If victory came at the cost of pain, it brought Kafma down to his knees.

But, Kafma was not foolish enough to kneel here.

Because—

Garfiel: “Gaa! Ohaa! Ruuuaahh!”

Garfiel, supposedly blown away, crawled up the ramparts, his claws piercing the walls, and leapt up high before Kafma's eyes.

Red steam erupted on the side of his body where the horns had supposedly pierced, and the wound closed up. Kafma exhaled as the healing magic's pale light violently glowed with phosphorescence, and the wound healed rapidly and unexpectedly.

Kafma: "Ha."

Kafma put a hand over his mouth, realizing it was an impulse to laugh.

Then, as if giving up, he put his hand down and shook his head loosely.

Kafma: "Refreshing."

He admitted it.

Kafma Irulux had enjoyed his battle with Garfiel Tinzel to the fullest.

Garfiel: "Oaaaah!"

The howling Garfiel brought his arms down and they fell as vertically spinning golden discs. Kafma raised both arms and decided he could not stop them, so he pushed forward, and decided to go beneath Garfiel's groin and behind him, aiming for his exposed back, which he could see from the side.

However, Kafma unleashed his winged slash without turning back and was knocked away by a rising stone right between them. Just before Kafma's attack could reach him from beneath his groin, Garfiel placed his outstretched leg on the floor and activated his Divine Protection, blocking the attack.

Moreover, his wings struck against the hard stone and were torn noisily—On the other side, Garfiel's hind legs were violently unleashed.

Kafma: "—Hk?!"

With their backs to each other, Kafma's body went flying after a powerful blow.

His efforts to stay on his feet turned out disastrous, and his outstretched body had failed to dissipate the impact, bouncing off the floor, spitting blood, and sending Kafma's tall body bouncing over the wall.

Once, twice bouncing higher, he saw Garfiel's face as he spun around over his rolling momentum.

To the bottom—

Kafma: "A second time—Hk!"

His chest opened, and his ribs spread apart; his reddish organs stored deep within rumbled, and the shockwave emitted from them surged forward straight into Garfiel.

This, Kafma's trump card, was not the result of introducing a new "insect", but a new organ created by the coexistence and symbiosis of the thirty-two "insects" that had been inserted up to that point.

The functions of multiple "insects" were combined to release a shockwave that engulfed and destroyed everything in its path with a ferociously precise vibration, a destructive blow pulverizing everything into pieces.

The moment any warrior was exposed to it, invisible to the eye, it turned them into a bloody mist.

Kafma: "—Buh."

That conviction remained unshaken as Garfiel's golden hair was now stained with blood.

Any warrior would be turned into a bloody mist. Therefore—

Kafma: "—A monster."

Braking his tumbling body with an arm thrust against the floor, Kafma looked up.

Then, Garfiel, with his blood-stained upper body trembling, mouth wide open, rushed in. Straight towards him, the “monster” struck a blow that would have killed any warrior.

Garfiel: “…”

The swing of that huge fist caught Kafma in the face, and a reflexive counter-punch rocketed upwards to his opponent’s jaw. Like that, a violent brawl ensued, red flowers of blood blooming across the wall.

It was an epic battle that no one could interrupt, a clash between monsters.

Kafma: “Ha.”

Exhaling and looking beyond the pain, Kafma poured all of his energy into it.

He was an extraordinary monster yielded from a peculiar origin, that was the reason for Kafma Irulux to be so distinct from his tribesmen, a fate which he had cursed with his very being.

Leaving his closed-off hometown and stepping forth into the wide world, Kafma had tried to discover.

He had tried to discover evidence, so that he may puff up his chest with pride that he was not a monster.

However, that was not the case in reality.

Even in the outside world, Kafma’s remarkable true strength was beyond the norm and thereby regarded as heretical. Many that he stood shoulder to shoulder with as regular soldiers feared Kafma’s prowess, and they kept away from his abnormality.

That no matter where, he was a monster, that in the end, it was a fate he could not escape, such was as Kafma had thought.

However—

???: “—Rise up, General Third-Class Kafma! Together, let us do everything in our power for the glorious sake of His Excellency! What, don't think too much about it, for just like you, we are all monsters!"

With a loud voice, the words of the large man who gave that masculine laugh had been a heavenly blessing for Kafma.

Wanting to deny that he was a monster, Kafma had tried to ingratiate himself with his tribesmen. Since that wish had not been fulfilled, he had tried to seek it outside, and still he had failed.

However, what if he looked upwards?

Gathered together were monsters that even Kafma Irulux, who was feared as a monster, was no match for.

It was not that Kafma wanted to be told that he was not a monster.

It was just that he did not want to be in a loneliness that could not be shared or understood by anyone.

Even though he was a monster, the world had not left Kafma behind.

Therefore—

Kafma: "—And with my fight against you, yet another."

While Garfiel's entire body was bathed in a four-pronged barrage of antennae fired at an ultra-close range, he endured it with sheer force by healing his wounds as soon as he sustained them.

The uncommon defensive power, vitality, and extreme regenerative abilities that likely included the power of a Divine Protection, were the gimmicks of the "monster" before Kafma's eyes, and the cause of his enthusiasm.

The thorned vines released from his right arm had wound around the fierce tiger's entire body, and the thorns were forcibly shaken off while they were tearing the skin to bits. His fists, covered in carapaces that thrust aside every slash, directly collided with Garfiel's shining silver gauntlets, and the carapaces shattered tremendously.

The “insect” eggs that had been planted with a flick of his left hand burned in the flames, and the shockwave emitted when he was forced down to his knees, which had caused his internal organs to churn, was still unable to overcome that recovery ability, and fell flat.

Refreshing. Ahh, how refreshing.

In the end, he was a military man, and no matter how he may try to pretend, he was a monster, and going along with the “insects” that cheered from within him, before he knew it, a smile had stuck to Kafma’s cheeks and would not come off.

The thirty two “insects”, the beings that had become one with himself and were closer to him than his own family, were delighted that they finally had a chance to show their full heart and soul, and began to rant and rave.

Victory must be wrought.

For the sake of a great cause, for the glorious sake of His Excellency the Emperor who guides the Empire, for the sake of repaying his benefactor who raised him to this domain, and for the sake of his tribesmen who wished to improve the status of the Insect Cage Tribe.

Garfiel: “—Bastard, where th’fuck d’ya think yer lookin’?”

He heard a voice amidst the pain, the suffocation, and the accelerating thoughts that filled his brain.

Even though they were both pounding each other’s vitals with such ferocious vigor and might that it would not have been strange if one of them died, and even though there was no room for a proper exchange of words, he heard it.

A pair of emerald green eyes fixed their gaze onto him from in front, and a bloodshot glint pierced his soul.

The sharp fangs made a noise as to slurped flesh and blood, and the sound of creaking bones made all of his perception feel distant.

So while everything was being put to use for the stage of battle, the monster before his eyes, howled.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self, is right here.”

Kafma: “…”

Garfiel: “For just this moment, I ain’t gonna let anythin’ get in the way.”

That instant, color faded from the world, the sound of the wind and the ringing in his ears went silent, and that large enemy before his eyes became all that remained in Kafma Irulux’s world.

Kafma was ashamed of his own inadequacy, thinking how tactless he had been.

And then, he quickly tossed that shameful tactlessness aside, and nodded.

Kafma: “—Ahh, it’s just you and me.”

That moment, their fists crossed and slammed into each other’s faces, and time accelerated.

An open palm caught hold of his face, and Kafma’s skull screamed from that extraordinary grip strength. But Kafma also put his hand in his opponent’s mouth, and from there he poured thorns into his opponent’s body.

Since he could not break through from the outside, then he would do it from the inside.

The overflowing thorns rampaged through the inside of his body, and the conclusion of devouring him from the inside was imminent. However, while the thorns were flowing into Garfiel, he swung Kafma’s body up, and then swung his body down, slamming him into the ramparts.

Kafma: “—Hk.”

As his back was buried into the rampart, he was lifted up and dropped again. Lifted, and dropped. Lifted, and dropped. Lifted lifted lifted lifted, dropped dropped dropped dropped, and he was trampled upon.

A crack formed in the rampart where his entire body was buried, and the tip of the bastion of the star-fortress was split in two. His vision was dyed a deep red, and in place of his breaths, blood gushed out.

Nevertheless, the thorns did not lose their power, and they continued to flow into Garfiel's body.

Until Kafma exhausted all of his strength, the "insects" would hunger for victory.

Garfiel: "—Gah."

The open mouth of the large tiger was not able to bite through the bulky bundle of thorns. No matter how much his claws tore into them, the undulating layers of thorns were too thick. No matter what he did, Kafma would not let him go.

The thorns were also finite, there was a limit to how much he could send forth.

If Kafma were to send them all forth at this point, he would be giving up his best chance of defeating the other insurgents who were closing in on the ramparts. However, this victory would be worth it.

—No, the monster known as Garfiel Tinzel, would be worth it.

Kafma: "Ah, ahh, RAAAAAAAAAAAHHH—!!"

Ignoring the pain of the broken bones in his body, Kafma's throat raised a war cry.

The overflowing thorns filled Garfiel's body to the brim, and the pressure of the deadly thorns, having no place to go, would cause a rupture that led to death.

No matter how hard he tried to twist his body, no matter if he completed his beastification, it would not let him escape.

Concentrating the remaining power of all the "insects" in his body, Kafma suppressed Garfiel and pitched forward to wrest victory—and then he bore witness to the unbelievable.

Kafma: "—Wha…"

The large tiger with golden-fur had swelled up to the verge of bursting from thorns that poured into his mouth. Before that body could burst, the pressure in the thorns was rapidly lost.

Why was that? —It was because an escape route had been created for the thorns that entered his body.

Garfiel's sharp claws tore across his own abdomen, and thorns poured out from the wound.

His terrifyingly desperate tactics were acts of barbarism which brought him close to death's door. If thorns rushed into a wound that was created, the wound in the stomach could be opened for the same reason that the mouth could not be closed. Then his body would be split in two, and it would be the conclusion.

Indeed, to merely invite death like that, it was an act of barbarity far too foolish.

However, the instant Kafma witnessed that barbarism, the momentary emptiness in his mind gave Garfiel, who was on the verge of tearing himself apart, a moment to catch his breath.

He closed his jaws. There was a sound of thorns being torn apart, and the large tiger's large mouth closed.

Kafma lost the decisive blow with his thorns, and before he could realize it, Garfiel stepped forth and his fist struck Kafma's face with a hard impact of his silver gauntlets.

Collapsed on the top of the wall, a fist slammed into Kafma's face as he lay sprawled out on the floor, and now, the impact that was deeply hammered into him inflicted decisive damage to the rampart.

A thunderous roar resounded, and the ramparts of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, extolled to be impregnable, began to crumble.

While he felt the collapse through the sound behind him, Kafma looked straight ahead to Garfiel, who pulled back his fist.

Slowly unraveling his beastification, the boy regained his original human form—the wound in Garfiel's abdomen, from when he had torn himself open, was closed with a plume of blood.

It was a fatal wound, but seeing him forget about it even happening so terrifyingly quickly, Kafma bursted into laughter.

What an absurd sight.

Kafma: "…A monster."

Thus, right after he muttered to himself as if to catch his breath, the collapse was fully realized and the ramparts crumbled.

Falling amongst the crumbling ramparts and rubble, Kafma's consciousness slowly faded away, faded away, and faded away until there was nothing left to hold on to—.

Kafma: "Your Excellency, I apologize…"

Until the very end, while he thought shamefully of himself for putting on airs of a loyal retainer, he fell.

—The voices of the "insects", which he had been hearing since he was born, also seemed to be awfully quiet.

3

Forcefully grabbing the man's body as he fell defenseless, he kicked off on the rubble to escape the scene of the collapse.

Grazing the ground with his heel, he killed his momentum and turned around to see the ramparts crumble with a thunderous roar, opening a large hole in the strong fortress.

Garfiel: “I fuckin’ opened it, a hole for th’new wind.”

The words had been spoken before the start of the battle, remembering Emilia’s order, his cheeks contorted. Feeling pain in the corners of his mouth, which had been torn wide open, Garfiel screamed, “Gah!”

He hurriedly placed his hand on the wound and activated his healing magic.

Garfiel: “Argh… shit… that hurts… but…”

Roughly healing his torn mouth, Garfiel intently stared down at his hands.

The sudden fierce battle, and being put into a condition where, frankly, it would not have been strange if he died—But the horrific wounds all over his body had closed up, and the seeping pain became a lingering sensation.

Even while in his beast form, he thought that he was able to maintain a certain degree of composure while continuing to fight. Thanks to that, he was able to recover from his wounds quickly. —Was that really all there was to it?

Garfiel: “…Has my amazin’ self gotten stronger?”

Clutching his opened hand tightly, Garfiel spilled that out.

He had not been entirely sure. Perhaps it would be better to call it fortunate, but until now, Garfiel had not faced an opponent to whom he had to give his all.

Except for the battle against Kurgan, the Eight-Arms, in the Water Gate City, the battles in which Garfiel was not able to use the entirety of his strength had continued.

With those shackles removed, and the result of once again being able to fight with all his might, he had a definite sensation.

He breached the wall at a level stronger than he was before. That was what he had ascertained during this battle.

That was why—

Garfiel: "—Ya called me a monster, but I'd say the exact same thing about ya."

With that, Garfiel lowered his right arm, dropping Kafma's body to the ground, and snorted his nose.

Kafma's chest was slightly falling and rising, and he was still breathing. This was war, and in order to think of it as true victory, he should not let his opponent live, though he understood this.

Emilia said they should try to reduce the number of people who would die by their hands.

And Otto, likewise, told Garfiel to beat them up until they could no longer stand on their own feet.

Indeed, Emilia had shared these words from the bottom of her heart, and Otto had said them out of concern.

He wanted to fulfill that.

Therefore, in this place—

Garfiel: "—It's my amazin' self's win."

And so, having defeated one of the bastions on the points of the star, Garfiel pumped his fist into the air.

SoupVEVO

Chapter 90:
The Cradle of Hell

1

???: “—No doubt about it! In front, the first bastion is the Second Ranked, Arakiya!!”

???: “It’s presumed to be the Ninth Ranked, Madelyn Eschart, at the second bastion! A herd of flying dragons is circling overhead!”

???: “The guardian of the third bastion, still unidentified!”

???: “Also, no confirmation on the guardian of the fourth bastion! Unable to confirm!”

???: “Fifth bastion, such a flashy attack… Not a General First-Class! It is General Second-Class! Kafma Irulux!”

The battle conditions were coming in one after another in a loud voice, almost like an angry shout or a scream.

The soldiers assigned to the role of long-range observers took up as high of a position as possible, their eyes bloodshot as they tried to obtain as much information as possible by looking at the majesty of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana in front of them.

The decisive battle for the Imperial Capital had finally begun. If one considered the simple difference in the number of soldiers as the difference maker, the military strength of the rebel forces was nearly twice that of the regular army of the Imperial Capital. If all of these troops were to run out onto the plains at once and clash head-on, it would be obvious who would win the battle—.

???: “I never wanted to be on the attacking side of Lupugana, the robust Imperial Capital.”

Shaking his distinctive hairdo from side to side, Zikr Osman wrinkled his brow as he documented the reported battle situation on a map he had spread out in the simple command center.

As a General Second-Class of the Empire, he carried out his duty as a General and still had a high level of loyalty to Vollachia, so it could be said that the Imperial Capital was the armor that protected the heart that he needed to protect.

He would never have considered himself being in a position where he had to capture the Imperial Capital and vanquish the existence of the one who, perversely, called himself the Emperor on the throne.

???: "The situation, however, will not wait for your incessant whining to cease. —No, not only you. Time passes equally for everyone."

Zikr: "Abel-dono…"

Abel: "Return to the battle situation. Obtain the reports from the long-range observers. Priority should be given to the third and fourth bastions… No matter how trivial it is. We will identify the guardians there."

Zikr: "Right away! Strengthen the long-range observations on the third and fourth! Without a doubt, a General First-Class is on the battlefield!"

Zikr nodded and ordered his nearest subordinate, causing the air to fluctuate at a dizzying pace.

Savoring the dry air on his skin, Abel squinted from behind his Oni mask at the Imperial Capital in the distance, outside the cloth-covered command center, where the star-shaped ramparts protected the city.

As noted previously, in terms of military strength, the rebels outnumbered the regular army.

However, the assembled rebels lacked a sense of coordination, a rabble that rushed off in haste likely as to not relinquish glory and military achievement to others.

In addition, the enemy, whom they needed to attack, was confined to the innermost part of the Imperial Capital, which painted a picture of robustness and solidity.

As was discussed when capturing the Fortress City of Guaral, some held the belief that in cases where the attacker was attempting to defeat the defender, if it only boiled down to pure military strength, they would require three times the number of men.

Considering that the defensive measures of the Imperial Capital were far superior to those of Guaral, the difference was all the more pronounced.

Above all—

Abel: "—The existences that disturb the balance of military strength the most are the powerful who are equivalent to a thousand men in strength."

Zikr: "It is a decisive battle in the defense of the Imperial Capital. Although the battle has started earlier than expected, how many of the Nine Divine Generals have been recalled?"

Even though the rebels could be surmised as a rabble, if they were to get hit on the head and doused with water, they would turn tail with their ears ready to listen. If that happened, then they would be able to incorporate them into their tactics and shape them.

That is, if the water was simply a wake-up call and not something that made them close their eyes forever—Which was no easy task when confronted with the "Nine Divine Generals".

Abel: "At minimum, Arakiya, Madelyn Eschart, and Moguro Hagane will be in play. Kafma Irulux is equivalent to a General First-Class on merit alone, and Olbart Dunkelkenn may refuse to participate due to his injured arm, but that is unlikely."

Zikr: "There will be no participation by General First-Class Goz or General First-Class Groovy. Is that what you expect?"

Abel: "Goz Ralfon may or may not be alive, and Groovy Gumlet may or may not have been recalled from the West, it depends, but the latter is difficult to mobilize. The uncertainty concerning the West’s movements is neither orchestrated by this side nor theirs. — But it smells fishy.”

In the first move of the rebellion, Goz had taken up resistance to allow Abel to flee as he was ousted from the Imperial Capital. He was likely to have died, as no further information about his whereabouts was known.

Goz, who possessed the extraordinary support of his soldiers because of his superior command capabilities and personality, would be one of the greatest threats in the war if he were to become an enemy. But then again, knowing the identity of the impostor sitting on the throne, there was practically no chance that Goz would join the other side, making him nothing more than a dead pawn that was hard to deal with.

Abel: “The only possible effective use of a dead pawn is to utilize its death… Something around the lines of taking Goz Ralfon’s death and pinning the blame for it on the rebels to stir up the morale of the soldiers.”

Zikr: “…I do not wish to think about it. If I had remained unaware of the situation over there, I would have also taken up the sword for the sake of General First-Class Goz, even if it meant dying.”

Even Zikr, a “General” in his own right, mourned the supposed death of Goz.

It was a feat of trust and achievement that Goz Ralfon had built up, and in fact, if they were to resort to such a scheme, it would be necessary to re-evaluate the strength of the regular army.

But, if they had intended to do so, the best time would have been before the war had begun.

Abel: “Either he deliberately passed up on the opportunity, or he did not want the uncertainty of any fluctuation in force due to improved morale. Either way, he is going to be pulling the strings.”

Running through his thoughts, Abel put his hand on the edge of his mask and tried to grasp the other party's intentions.

When it came to reading one's intentions, there was no room for being worse at it against most opponents. However, this time, the opponent was outside of the "most" category, and in addition, he was an enemy who knew the hues of his mind better than anyone else so far.

The conditions here were the same; however, different win conditions mean different options. And so, to the place where Abel was staring at the map was—

???: "—Abel-chin, Abel-chin!"

A lively voice sounded through the entrance of the tent, and with a quick movement, a little girl jumped into the room. She took her place at the desk and turned to Abel, her blue eyes shimmering with immense emotion.

Medium: "I want to go, too! Big bro is there, remember? I can't wait anymore!"

Abel: "Nonsense. We do not need more contingencies. How can you be sure that your brother is in the Capital?"

Medium: "There was a girl named Madelyn! She's the one who took big bro and Rem-chan! If she's there, then maybe the two of them are there too! Right?"

Abel: "That hardly sounds like a guarantee. Furthermore, your brother and that girl are of little strategic value in the current situation. Do not confuse our priorities."

Medium: "But there is nothing more important to me than big bro and my friends!"

With a banging on the desk, the girl—Medium snapped at Abel's words.

This was an emotional and implicit opinion. Ultimately, as he said, there was no reason other than emotion to give priority to Flop and Rem, who were both kidnapped under the circumstances of this war, and therefore was a worthless decision for Abel.

There was a liberating alternative for Medium, though.

Abel: "—. Causing needless dissension, hmm?"

Medium: "—? What?"

Lowering her eyebrows, Medium tilted her head unconcerned about her own worth. Or was she encouraged by the rightful appraisal of herself? Abel quickly dismissed it as overthinking.

In any case, he could not afford to devote much time to her.

Abel: "No matter how much you voice your aspirations, you should be aware how lofty your goal is right now. If you cut loose your shackles and head for the battlefield, you needlessly throw away your life."

Medium: "Mm! But that…"

Zikr: "Miss Medium, Abel-dono is concerned about your safety. And I share his opinion; I cannot just let you go."

Looking up and down, Abel and Medium glared at each other respectively, and Zikr, who interrupted them, rebuked them in a calm tone.

Zikr, the General in command, was also aware of the unpredictable situation of the battle. Nevertheless, he must have been quite distressed trying to keep the unreasonable Medium at bay.

Without revealing any of these emotion with his expression, the man called "Womanizer" exchanged glances with Medium and spoke, "And what do we do about that?".

Zikr: "That solid city wall is made up of five bastions. One cannot attack the Imperial Capital without considering these five bastions. At the very least, we need to understand our opponent's intelligence and eliminate any ambiguity before we talk about this again—"

Medium: "That is why! I'm also properly taking this into account! I really want to hear from Madelyn about my big bro, but it’s hard to do that, so from an unguarded spot, I’m going to go inside…”

Abel: “—Wait.”

After Zikr’s attempt at gentle persuasion, Medium emotionally tried to push him away. However, Medium’s statement made Abel think of something so he interrupted them.

Abel grabbed Medium by her slender shoulders and turned her to face him, causing her to widen her eyes.

Abel: “You said, “an unguarded spot”. If you mean one of the bastions, from where did you get that information?”

Medium: “From where, you say? …Oh! That’s right! Sorry, Abel-chin!”

Her complexion changed at the question, and Medium grasped Abel’s hand on her shoulder with both hands. As she continued to hold his hand tightly, her blue eyes again wavered emotionally, and,

Medium: “I should’ve told you this! Well, the third bastion is full of golems, and the fourth bastion is nothing but black shadows… neither of them has a person like Yorna-chan!”

Abel: “…”

Medium: “Abel-chin?”

Abel’s eyes widened slightly at the message from Medium’s mouth. However, this reaction was immediately quashed with a blink of an eye, disappearing in a silent sigh.

These uttered words, there was no need to scrutinize their content. He fully understood their meaning. The question was how the information was obtained—

Abel: “Who made you tell me this?”

Medium: “Huh?”

Abel: “Who?”

Opposite his gripped hand, with his left hand, he held the back of Medium’s head and turned her to face him.

Medium gasped as he looked straight into her blue eyes. Then she moved her pale pink lips to answer Abel’s question.

The answer, to that question was—

2

—Otto Suwen closed his eyes while being engulfed in a vast, raging, whirlwind of information.

Otto: “…”

A storm of voices, voices, voices poured in.

From right to left, from top to bottom, from front to back, an unending assault of voices.

It was the second coming of the cradle of hell, where he once spent for as long as he could, almost like a triumphant return to his nostalgic hometown.

Otto’s Divine Protection of the Soul of Language was said to be one of the “outliers” among the many Divine Protections that existed in this world.

This Divine Protection, which allowed one to understand and communicate in every creature’s language, had too many flaws to be considered a strength obtained at birth.

First of all, a newborn child would have no ego or self-consciousness, and only a vague sense of self.

Since children cannot firmly establish themselves, they have no choice but to rely on their surroundings, but for the owner of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, these surroundings would be far too vast.

It would not be about up, down, left, right, or depth, but literally everything.

More specifically, a child with the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language could not even distinguish between human, animal, insect, wind, rain, or the ringing in one's ears.

Such a living creature, bereft of definitive judgment and attention span, could hardly survive.

The only reason Otto was able to last through that period without dying was because of his circumstances.

It was the devotion of his wealthy and loving parents as well as siblings who never dismissed or denied their brother despite not being able to understand each other that kept Otto alive.

But even after establishing oneself as a living being, the suffering of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language did not end. Rather, it was just about to begin.

Those who possessed the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language were able to communicate with everything around them, but they risked being isolated from everyone in return. This was a major factor in their lacking sense of belonging.

Assuming that talking, touching, and cultivating bonds were the foundations of life, the owner of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language could establish relationships with any creature.

There was no need to merely bond with human beings.

One could communicate with any animal, insect, and even fish because of a Divine Protection allowing one to connect with all living things, thus making it easy to isolate oneself.

One could be trapped in an eternal prison of doubt as to who one was.

Due to that, all of the previous holders of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language met an early demise.

Otto did not even want to think about how many of his fellow possessors of the Divine Protection had died without even being able to speak their names, let alone realize the power of their Divine Protection or make it known to their surroundings.

What was the value of living in the midst of unrelenting downpours, uninterrupted storms, and utter helplessness knowing one would never be understood?

In fact, he had never heard of any accomplished possessor of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language.

And Otto understood that feeling all too well.

Literally, the cradle of hell was a place where one was forced to listen endlessly to lullabies enticing one to death.

Otto: "…"

In this nostalgic hell, Otto consciously narrowed the focus of the voices he had lent an ear to.

It was the same way people picked up only the voices in a crowded place or at a party that talked about topics that were relevant and interesting to them.

It was a domain only a handful of possessors of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language had been able to enter in which could adjust the effects of the Divine Protection.

It was that kind of constantly active Divine Protection that would lose its impact when its effect were adjusted. Otto, too, usually set his Divine Protection to the lowest setting so that his head was not filled with so many words.

He increased the volume of the weakened Divine Protection and raised its intensity to the maximum.

Otto: "…"

When Subaru pestered him about the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language before, he had called it a "channel". He thought that

that did not sound so bad, so he opened a “channel”.

The countless “voices” that popped into Otto’s ears and mind were all related to the battlefield centered around the Imperial Capital. Many of them were accompanied by avoidance, loathing, fear, and anger, and pretty much useless, but he scrutinized them all.

Anyhow—

Otto: “I have asked a lot of Garfiel, too…”

When Emilia made the decision to enter the battle for the Imperial Capital, Otto concluded that it was Garfiel who would have to shoulder the most difficult role in this battle.

Because of their prowess as combatants, Emilia and Garfiel were the ones taking on the dangerous enemies in battle. However, they could not let Emilia fight to the death.

Of course, Emilia’s life took top priority, even before recovering Subaru and Rem.

Therefore, if Emilia was in danger, he would make her back down, no matter what she said.

Everyone in the camp, except Emilia, had been notified of this commonly acknowledged fact. However, it was not an option to come all the way to the Empire and return empty-handed; they must bring Subaru and Rem back home with them.

In order to achieve this goal, Garfiel was responsible for sustaining the most wounds and spilling the most blood.

Otto: “Garfiel may or may not be aware of this.”

Did Garfiel understand how reckless and cruel the instructions were for the role he was entrusted with?

Otto was certainly aware that he had been terribly self-serving and unreasonable in his instructions, and Garfiel probably thought he was being reckless, but did he truly get the gist of it?

Or perhaps Garfiel took it as a sign of trust?

Otto: "I do not like this…"

Muttering a few words, Otto thought of Garfiel's innocent look of trust.

Even if he was giving unreasonable instructions, Garfiel believed that Otto had an idea and that it was his role to see it through. In the same manner, Otto anticipated Garfiel would see his instructions that way and entrusted him with a role only he could fulfill.

At first glance, this was an exchange of mutual trust. However, Otto, as someone involved, believed that this was not a fair balance of what each side had to bear.

Garfiel was the one in harm's way wherever they went. Not Otto.

All I do is sit back in my comfort zone, feeling pain and guilt. And when all is said and done, Garfiel would say, "As I'd expect of Otto-bro!" I am not sure how I feel about that.

You've gotta be kidding.

Otto: "If I can bear it, I should bear it myself. Do not run away from your responsibilities, Otto Suwen."

Otto placed his hand over his mouth as he reminded himself.

When their camp had finally decided on a course of action to take on the Empire's upheaval, Otto warned Emilia, "You're going down a thorny path".

In response to Otto's words, Emilia stoutly held her chest and chose her path.

It was probably a stupid idea, a foolish path. If Otto were alone, he would never have chosen this approach of all danger and little gain.

But there was something important in the little that was gained, and Otto was relieved that Emilia had chosen a path that he never would have chosen on his own.

He was inwardly delighted. Thus, he could not be the odd one out.

Out of several possibilities, it was Otto who had chosen this path.

If blood needed to be spilled for that purpose, he did not want to leave the bloodshed to others.

Therefore—

???: “Otto-san, you can be a real dummy sometimes!”

Suddenly, amidst the flood of meaningless “voices”, he heard a clear “voice” and blinked his eyes.

In an instant, the sound of hellish rain and storms faded away, and before Otto turned around to squeeze through the channel, his eyes met Petra’s, whose eyebrows were lowered with dismay.

She went up to Otto and offered him a white handkerchief saying, “Take this”.

Petra: “Your nose bleed is really gushing. I’m a little scared.”

Otto: “Nose… Ah, I failed to notice it.”

Petra: “So it seems …Please sit down. You don’t have to stand, right?”

Otto looked at the handkerchief offered to him in a daze. Irritably pulling Otto’s hand, Petra made him sit down on the grassy field.

She then put a handkerchief against Otto’s face and wiped off the blood.

Petra: “Is that what happens when you overuse your Divine Protection?”

Otto: “…Yes. If I increase the number I am listening to and the range, this is what happens. I do not really resort to this, but it is an emergency.”

Petra: “So that you don’t lose to Garf-san?”

Otto: “…”

Petra: “As I thought. Otto-san, you really are an idiot.”

As Petra stared at him, Otto scratched his head saying, “Guilty as charged”.

Petra’s point was correct in a broad sense, although subtly different from what she was trying to say. If she had been smart, she might have known what Otto really meant and rephrased it.

Petra, the fastest-growing member of the camp, was getting sharper and more strong-willed by the day.

Petra: “Even if Otto-san has lots of nosebleeds, I don’t think he can ever be like Garf-san.”

Otto: “Certainly, the amount of blood we shed can not be compared with each other. Unlike Garfiel, I bleed to death much more easily. But I should at least be prepared to bleed myself.”

Petra: “Is it because Otto-san told everyone to go?”

Otto: “I truly am no match for Petra-chan.”

Otto laughed as his nose was pinched to flush out the blood that had accumulated.

Considering only the events that had taken place, it was Emilia who had decided that she would participate in this battle, and it was Emilia who had declared that they would do it, so Petra’s point was way off the mark.

But the reality was that Petra was correct, it was Otto who had led her to say that.

—No, those were precisely the words Otto had wanted her to say.

Otto: “In fact, I am not hurting myself for nothing either. I hate to say this, but my Divine Protection is very useful in war. I can not afford not to use it.”

Petra: “…”

Otto: “It is difficult to find someone that can help us because of the circumstances, but it is worth just getting the information. I just entrusted Medium-san with a message. I-If Abel-san can make effective use of it, then the state of battle… Petra-chan?”

Petra: “Haa~”

Otto attempted to at least make amends by explaining the usefulness of his actions, but Petra’s response was one of cold and growing dismay.

Saying “Good grief”, Petra ran her hand through her light brown hair and looked into Otto’s round eyes.

Petra: “I am not the slow-witted child you believe me to be, Otto-san!”

Otto: “No, um, yes. I think Petra is a very quick-witted girl.”

Petra: “In that case, Otto-san, I don’t think you’re as smart as you think you are.”

Otto: “That is… a tough one to respond to.”

I am not so conceited to believe that I am one of these all-seeing schemers no one else can match.

Otto’s self-assessment for why he had been able to make it this far would be the number of rules of thumb and small tricks he had, as well having excellent crisis management skills.

If they started comparing intellect, he would fall far short to the all-seeing schemers.

However, it seemed that this notion of Otto’s had missed the mark here.

Petra: “Right now, that’s not the kind of intellect I’m talking about.

Otto-san, I have no intention of being the kind of helpless child you think I am.”

Otto: “—. That is.”

Petra: “I believe I can be of proper assistance. For instance…”

Saying that, Petra tightly squeezed the hand of the baffled Otto. Then her small hand gave off a white glow, which then permeated through Otto.

At that moment, the ringing in Otto’s head abated slightly.

Otto: “Is this… Yang magic?”

Petra: “It’s part of the magic that I have been learning from the Master. Even though it is just the absolute basics.”

Otto: “…”

Petra: “Otto-san, I also know the time calls for unreasonable actions. But, that doesn’t mean taking on more suffering is an admirable thing to do.”

Otto, who had been determined to put himself in harm’s way earlier, held his breath at Petra’s words.

Petra sighed a little at the sight of Otto,

Petra: “Even though that’s the kind of thing that Otto-san would always say. I won’t tell everyone, Otto-san, but you’ve been fretting all along, haven’t you?”

Otto: “Um.”

Petra: “You have been angry the whole time. I know how you feel, but your voice and attitude are too harsh.”

Hearing that, Otto bowed his head and could not even make a sound.

As Petra had said, Otto had made some uncharacteristic misjudgments as if he got stuck in a vicious cycle of misunderstandings.

Through Petra's small hands, he felt that he could grasp what she was trying to say.

Otto: "The admirable thing to do is not getting a nose bleed, but getting done what you need to."

Petra: "Yes. What would you like to do, Otto-san?"

While holding the hand of the still sighing Otto, Petra lifted hers,

Petra: "If I'm present, you can do your best more efficiently. And yet, you want me to stand back because it's something children are not supposed to see?"

Otto: "That is a bad way to put it!"

Petra: "Would you like me to back off?"

With a smirk on her face, Petra put pressure on Otto. He had succumbed to that pressure. Giving in willingly to it, Otto let out a long sigh.

Otto: "…"

Even now, countless "voices" popped in as soon as he opened a channel. Just when he was about to be washed away in the midst of the furious momentum, Petra's hands held onto Otto into place.

A little more, distantly, many, just so you might listen to them, or so they would have you believe.

Otto: "I will have Frederica scold both of us later."

Petra: "Yes! I'm glad to hear Otto-san say that he would rather have a nosebleed with me than have a nosebleed alone. I don't like nosebleeds, though!"

Otto smiled radiantly and closed his eyes at the sight of Petra, who had decided to help him.

There was no way that this clever girl could not have noticed the slight tremor in his tightly clenched hands.

It was Petra’s first time seeing war, a battlefield where her loved ones were involved, and the safety of her friends who were sent away was in jeopardy, and she wished she could do something about it.

Imagine their thoughts. —Use the hand at my disposal when I can. Be a merchant.

Otto: “Petra-chan, please lend me your hand. —I will control the channels on this battlefield.”

Petra: “We will control them!”

Otto chuckled at Petra’s brisk reply, “Well, then”, he replied, and opened the channels to dive back into the cradle of hell.

—So Otto returned to his nostalgic hometown, with the only difference being that he was no longer as lonely as he once was.

Chapter 91: Racing Across the Battlefield

1

She took off her robe and stretched out her arms and legs that always tried to stay ladylike.

???: “…”

She kicked the ground strongly and sent her supple body flying forward. The feeling of the gallant golden hair cutting through the wind was pleasant, and she cautioned herself in her mind as she ran across the grass.

This was a battlefield, a place where many lives would collide with each other, a terminus for lives that would be scattered.

Even though she knew this in her head, the scent of blood that slipped through her nostrils and the numerous fighting spirits that reached her through the air threatened to embolden Frederica, who had turned into a beast.

Frederica: “It is unpleasant…”

Without looking away from her exuberance, Frederica muttered with an emotion detached from her instincts.

Fortunately or not, Frederica had not suffered any notable disasters despite being a member of the camp and standing beside the great vortex.

Certainly, no disaster had passed that was comparable to when the old Roswaal mansion burned, where she and Garfiel had met for the first time in over a decade, during the fight with Meili and her female partner at that time. In the truest sense, it was such a desperate battleground where she barely escaped with her life.

It was precisely because she had lived those relatively peaceful times, that she realized, whether she liked it or not.

That the blood that flowed within her, the mixture of human and beastly natures, was biased. Without sufficient awareness and consciousness, it would be easy to lose sight of what was important to her.

What troubled Frederica was a kind of fate tied to her half-beast body.

An instinctual appeal that her brother Garfiel could unconsciously control at a high level. Frederica was very annoyed with her own inability to control it.

The source of the blood that shaped her seemed terribly vile and merciless—.

Frederica: "—I do not have time to feel sorry for myself. When Garf and Emilia-sama, as well as Petra and Otto-sama, are doing their best."

Finishing the conversation within herself, Frederica faced forward while snapping her animalized limbs.

Both the exuberance that swayed her and the anxiety about the uncertain future were negative emotions induced by Frederica's own uncertain position within her camp.

—Naturally, Frederica and her comrades were represented by Emilia.

Although each one in the group had their own opinions on their strategy, Emilia would ultimately make the final decision. Moreover, Emilia herself was a powerful Spiritual Arts User and could be relied upon in a fight.

Garfiel was perfectly competent as a military officer, and Otto set the course with his excellent judgment even in a neighboring country that had entered a state of war. Both Garfiel and Otto were a little overwhelmed by Subaru's absence, but the former sought opportunities to vent on the battlefield, while Petra handled the latter well.

Frederica: “If she becomes too dependable, I will feel desolate as well.”

Although she mumbled sulkily, Frederica was proud of the growth of the girl she loved like a little sister. That it was accompanied by a feeling of loneliness was kind of her being softened.

Otto, using his Divine Protection of the Soul of Language and listening to every living thing around the battlefield, had probably gained the most information in this great upheaval.

Petra, standing by his side, was applying her newly learned yang magic—which would improve both physical and mental functions, to herself and Otto, reducing the repercussions of overuse of his Divine Protection while also helping them discern the information he gathered.

Petra, who had been learning as a new maid under herself for the past year, had grown incredibly through her own tireless efforts, in addition to her memory and her ability to complete tasks.

In terms of her level of growth, she probably was the best in the camp, surpassing even Emilia and Subaru.

While still young and forbidden to step onto the battlefield because of her immaturity, she didn’t waste away and instead sought a role, supporting Otto, who was in peril, and fulfilling her unique role.

She was proud. While at the same time, reflecting back on herself.

Unable to fight like Emilia and Garfiel, she had neither the intelligence nor the ability to assist like Otto and Petra.

What could she, one who simply ran across the battlefield as a beast, suppressing her burning instincts, do.

Frederica: “…”

Use your Divine Protection to the fullest and dominate this battlefield.

That is what Otto was prepared to do and, in fact, Frederica believed was happening. Thanks to Otto's efforts, which leaned on Petra's assistance and minimized thinking about the future, the collected information was brought to Abel's headquarters one after another.

The tactics that could be assembled expanded once Abel was able to grasp the currently ongoing events and progression of things, and the battle of the rebel army progressed. —Certainly, to his advantage.

Of course, Abel's instructions did not reach all of the rebel army.

The other rebels, who had begun fighting without waiting for the arrival of his group, which included Emilia and her party from the fortified city, showed no signs of coordination or cooperation.

However, it was Otto's and Abel's opinion that this frustrating situation would not last forever, and signs of that were already beginning to appear.

Carried away by the momentum of the uprising, the ones who met the rebels that had attacked the Imperial Capital in one fell swoop were the elite chosen by the Emperor who ruled the Empire, the "monsters".

The rebels would have been hit head-on with their strength and were shocked and horrified from it.

They're holding the expectation that if they could only get them out of the state where they can only see the enemy in front of them, and the glory that laid ahead, they would listen to their side.

During the frustrating time until that happened, Frederica could only—

Frederica: "—I found you! Taritta-sama!"

Taritta: "—Hk?! What?!"

A moment later, Frederica rushed over to the person she was looking for in the fast-changing battlefield.

Taritta turned around and widened her eyes in shock at the sight of the four-legged beast running furiously, kicking at the grass. However, her agitation was short-lived as she picked up her bow with a terrifyingly cold eye, the tip of the nocked arrow was pointed unhesitantly at Frederica and—

???: “Wait, Taritta. It’s an ally.”

It was Mizelda, holding down her sister’s bow from above, who saved Frederica from being nearly shot through. Seeing Taritta’s eyes widen at her sister’s words, Frederica landed on her feet and apologized in a loud voice, “I am so sorry!”

Frederica: “Please excuse my appearance. I am Frederica.”

Mizelda: “I see, it’s you, huh. —That is a beautiful beast transformation. If I didn’t know it was you, I’d want to skin you and display your fur in the village.”

Frederica: “I-, I should take that as a complement, right? Ahem, I have something to tell you. —This is a message from the head of the main camp, Abel-sama.”

Facing Mizelda, who had crossed her arms, Frederica went straight to the point despite feeling troubled by her praise.

Frederica turned into a beast and ran across the hellfire raining down on the battlefield, to serve as a messenger. She had come to pass along the information that Abel had scrutinized which had been gathered by Petra’s supporter, Otto.

Mizelda: “From Abel… what did he say?”

Wary of the presence of the enemies guarding the star-shaped citadel and its five bastions, and fearing a melee with the rebels who had set out ahead of her, Taritta, who had been on the offensive, leaned forward.

Although the combat power of the “People of Shudraq” was threatening, their true strength lied in their ability to fight in groups, and they could only be truly effective when they were prepared for a situation that could be described as “hunting.”

They could not take full advantage of their strength in the field on open land.

If these girls could climb over the wall, the defenses of the Imperial Capital would be quickly reduced. For that reason, the selection of the wall to attack was considered important.

And that was—

Frederica: "—At the headquarters they have concluded that the third bastion would be one we need to break through the most."

Mizelda: "The third… over there?"

After receiving the message that had been handed down, Mizelda turned her eyes to the rampart in question.

In the distance, a group of rebels had taken the lead to topple the walls, one person after another, and attempted to get over the sturdy rampart that protected the Imperial Capital of Lupugana. However, seemingly slicing through that fervor, blasts and screams mocked these approaches of recklessly leaping in and showed them how mercilessly they would be cut down.

There was no doubt that powerful beings guarding the Imperial Capital were positioned at all five bastions. However, the reason the third bastion could serve as a breakpoint was—

Mizelda: "—. Stone golems seem to be moving there."

Taritta: "Is it the Steelman? However, there should only be one of the Nine Divine Generals."

Frederica: "…"

Frederica was struck speechless at the sisters that conversed nonchalantly as they gazed at the rampart in the distance.

As a half-beast, Frederica currently had better eyesight than usual in her beast form. Even so, she could see nothing other than the cloud of dust that hung over the wall the pair were gazing at.

Even though they were a tribe that hunted to survive, she had once again felt disgusted at her lack of ability.

Mizelda: “Frederica, what did Abel and the others say about the dolls?”

Frederica: “—Ah, yes, well, Abel-sama said that they were the troops of Moguro Hagane, one of the Nine Divine Generals.”

Taritta: “Nine Divine Generals…”

Gazing off into the distance, Taritta’s cheeks stiffened after she heard those words.

Frederica painfully understood the reason for the slight tinge of anxiety in her mutterings.

Naturally, since Taritta was going to participate in the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, she must have considered the possibility of a clash with a member of the Nine Divine Generals. However, even if one considered the possibility, there was still a certain uneasiness that could not be dispelled.

In the same manner, the fear of the Sword Saint remains even if one knew for a fact he was not there.

Mizelda: “Taritta, don’t worry.”

Taritta: “Sister…”

However, it was Mizelda who chuckled at her sister’s tense appearance. She clapped her sister on the shoulder so firmly, her powerful eyes shining brightly.

Mizelda: “Even if it’s against a Divine General, we’ll never be outdone again. If it’s that Divine General, I’ll get my revenge, and if it’s not that one, then I’ll be mad. Any questions, hm?”

Asking Taritta with a shrug of the shoulders, Mizelda showed her right leg—which had been replaced below the knee by a wooden stick.

Frederica could not decide if these were words of true madness, or if they were meant to encourage her sister—

Taritta: "—No, no questions."

Taritta blinked once, then twice, and nodded, and the next moment, with blinding speed, she drew and nocked an arrow, and shot it right over their heads.

Immediately afterward, Frederica looked up hearing cries of pain high in the sky, and saw a flying dragon spinning and falling to the ground a short distance away from the three of them.

The arrow that hit the flying dragon under its chin pierced all the way through to the top of its head, killing it. While Frederica was amazed by Taritta's overwhelming archery skills, Taritta exhaled and,

Taritta: "When the time is right, we will breach the wall ourselves. If we get past the walls, we win."

Mizelda: "So, as expected of the Chief of the Shudraq. —Frederica, what about you?"

Mizelda turned to Taritta, nodding her head in satisfaction at the determined look on her face. Frederica, who was almost overwhelmed by the pressure of the sisters, came to her senses at the mention of these words.

Frederica: "I will relay this message to the others. If all those who are willing to listen to me will gather in one place."

Mizelda: "One hole breaks the dam."

Frederica: "Yes. —One hole for a new wind."

That was the course of action the Emilia camp and Frederica must take.

Because she knew how her position still teetered on the edge within the camp, she was determined to do the best she could within the scope of the role she had been entrusted with.

Frederica: “Taritta-sama, Mizelda-sama, please have good luck in battle. Do not throw your lives away.”

Taritta: “Yes, Frederica, be careful too.”

Mizelda: “If you die, we Shudraq will pass on your pelt for generations.”

Frederica: “Unfortunately, I have no plans to give it to you!”

Freed from a little bit of tension, Frederica ran off accepting the send-off by the sisters.

Like a gale, she kicked through the grass and ran ahead to relay Abel’s instructions; the collaboration between Petra and Otto could not be in vain.

In turn, this would help Garfiel and Emilia in their struggle, and also Subaru and Rem, who might have been in the Imperial Capital.

Frederica: “But for now, I just have to keep on running.”

2

Leaving a slight trail of swaying grass and lingering shadows, the beastified Frederica disappeared.

She was a golden leopard, a four-footed beast that bore no resemblance to her original tall beautiful looks, yet was so refined that even a hunter would have to admire her beauty.

According to the information provided by Frederica, Taritta and Mizelda were ready to mobilize the Shudraq to challenge the third bastion.

And, just when she had made up her mind to do so—

???: “—Tsk, I can’t cut them down! There’s too many of them in the way!”

With a crude voice, a man with an eye patch holding twin swords dropped from the sky.

Dexterously handling his two long swords, the man slashed away the wings of a flying dragon and then jumped to the side of the other flying dragon that dropped down at the same time, cutting off its head as it tried to bite him.

A brilliant sword strike, and the one who unleashed it and turned around was—

Mizelda: “Jamal, I guess?. Your face isn’t satisfying to look at.”

Jamal: “I don’t know what you’re talking about! I’m so sick of this shit! If we don’t get into the Imperial Capital somehow, I’ll never know if Katya’s safe or not… Todd, you bastard, I hope you’re protecting her.”

Sputtering and swearing, Jamal yelled, scratching his dark brown, curly hair.

As an Imperial Soldier captured in the Fortress City, he was in the rare position of joining forces with Abel after learning of his true identity, but nonetheless he was a man of great ability—Unfortunately, his face was revealing his crude nature and did not meet Mizelda’s approval as someone caringly deeply about looks.

In any case, Taritta could not stay ignorant about how frustrated he was about his family being left behind in the Imperial Capital.

Anyhow—

Mizelda: “Regardless of us, the other rebels will probably take what they can get their hands on.”

Jamal: “I already know that! That’s why I’m going to end this ridiculous charade by chopping off the head of this fake emperor as soon as possible.”

Mizelda: “Since you are so raring to go, I’ve got some good news for you. We’re about to head to the third bastion. Word is that we have a chance to strike there.”

As Jamal stomped his feet, Mizelda revealed Frederica’s earlier message to him. Hearing this, however, Jamal frowned dubiously with a ” ‘ay what?”

Jamal: “A chance? Who told you that…”

Mizelda: “Abel, it seems.”

Jamal: “Tell me about that quickly! Oi! You guys, get ready! We’re going to the third bastion!”

Jamal was quick to switch gears, and he harshly called to the other soldiers to start assembling—those in the same situation as him who joined them in the fortified city.

His voice was loud, his will was clear, and he boasted some genuine strength. Surprisingly, he might have the makings of a “General”.

Seeing Jamal’s back, Taritta moved to catch up.

Taritta: “Sister, we also need to call Kuna and Holly to get ready… ah?”

When they called out, Taritta reflexively held her breath.

Eyes widening, she reached for something that fluttered and fell before her eyes. Just when Taritta gently reached out her hand, something white disappeared from her palm in less than a second.

It was a white light that slowly and furiously danced across the sky of the burning battlefield—No, it was a cold grain of ice, a snowflake.

Taritta: “Why is this happening?”

Mizelda: “—. Right, guess you didn’t see it, Taritta.”

Taritta: “Sister?”

Beside Taritta, who was stunned by seeing the presence of snow for the first time in her life, Mizelda nodded her head.

For some reason, unlike Taritta, Mizelda seemed to know exactly what she was seeing; in fact, she recognized it.

Mizelda: “It’s Emily.”

Taritta: “Emily…”

The name Mizelda gave belonged to a silver-haired girl in the same camp as Frederica.

It was still fresh in Taritta’s mind when she revealed herself as a half-elf, yet somehow she was the one who had caused this snow to fall. For what purpose was she doing it?

Perhaps because she had experienced something outside of her imagination, Taritta felt a slight shiver and softly hugged her own shoulders.

Mizelda: “The world out there is really that big, huh. The Shudraq’s chief and former chief come together too often, and we are left on the bottom. This snow is no different. Besides…”

Mizelda, who was looking up at the sky as snow fell, turned her gaze in the other direction. It was the grass Frederica had stepped on earlier, and the direction in which she had disappeared.

The thought of this outrageous duty to continuously carry the message of the latest information from Abel across this vast battlefield without losing your breath—

Mizelda: “—A beautiful beast keeps us alive. Wherever we go, it is the hunter’s delight.”

And, she extolled that other person, who sold herself short way too much.

Chapter 92: Rekindling Old Ties

1

—The air screamed, and the world slowed little by little.

A heat had dominated the battlefield. —No, it was not the battlefield that was dominated, but the Empire.

The heat had overtaken the entire Empire, and the land was engulfed in an unprecedented upheaval.

Many raised their voices, raised their weapons, proclaimed their ideals, and heated their enthusiasm.

It propagated outward, becoming bigger, wider, faster, stronger, and hotter.

The heat was one that had been smoldering in the hearts and minds of Vollachia's citizens for many years.

It is a heat that has been endlessly pushed into a box, losing its opportunity to dissipate. Nevertheless, the trapped heat continued to grow stronger during that time, and it finally exploded when it found an opportunity.

Things that had started that way, in and of themselves, were not to be denied.

There are many different ways of thinking where many people live. In addition, different countries have different ways of thinking, and different ways of living are rooted in different kinds of soil, water, and air.

No matter how much one meddles in, no one would listen to one's complaints.

Therefore, it was out of place to talk about right and wrong here.

In such a place where so many things were intertwined, if there was only one thing that could be said,

That will be—

???: "—I, reaaally hate this."

The voice murmured literally changed the atmosphere of the battlefield.

The farmlands, grasslands, and the expanse of green surrounding the Imperial Capital of Lupugana were covered with flakes of white snow, a scene that would not have been possible in an Empire known for its warm climate.

???: "What, is this…"

It was the Weaponkin collapsed to the ground, who cried out in confusion in front of the snow they saw for the first time.

They were born with parts of their bodies made of metal, which they reworked into weapons for use on the battlefield. They challenged the Imperial Capital, and were crushed by a powerful enemy.

Just as they regrouped and prepared to take on the enemy once more with those who were still able to fight, the white scene slowly appeared.

Taken aback for a moment, they quickly turned their attention back to the battlefield.

It would have been no surprise if the enemy had taken advantage of that split-second opportunity to take their lives. However, the enemy did not seem to regard the Weaponkin as a threat anymore, and did not take advantage of the opportunity.

They pooled up their humiliation, wielded their anger in their blades, spears, and axes to destroy their enemies for the dignity of their race, and it was at this time,

—That they realized that their bodies were numb and unable to move as they intended.

Again, the Vollachian Empire was a country where the climate remained warm throughout the year.

Of course, if one’s hometown was situated high in the mountains, along the border with neighboring countries, or close to the Great Waterfall, one had the opportunity to experience a different climate, but this was not the case for the Weaponkin.

That said, one could hardly blame them.

Who could possibly know to be concerned?

Who could imagine that even now, at midday on the battlefield where blue skies and sunshine were peeking through, a body heated to the point of sweating got cooled down all at once, and a freezing wind blew so hard that it made one’s blood run cold!

???: “Everybody! Get away from here! I’ll reaaally try to do my best here!”

As they forced their numb bodies to move, a voice struck the astonished Weaponkin.

In the cold air, making it difficult to even grasp a weapon, a figure could be seen moving forward with large strides across the meadow, silver hair flowing in the air.

A beautiful girl with fair skin, amethyst eyes, and a tremendously well-defined facial profile stepped forward majestically, taking the spectacle around her as a given.

As they admired the sight, the Weaponkin realized. —They understood by whom this was brought upon them.

???: “—So it’s friggin’ you again?”

The astonishment of the shivering Weaponkin continued.

As the silver-haired girl advanced forward, a voice called down to her—Madelyn Eschart, the small figure standing on top of the city wall, a dragonkin with two black horns on her head.

She was the “monster” who reigned supreme as the Ninth of the Nine Divine Generals and had crushed the Weaponkin’s battle line with a single stroke.

Looking down below in disgust, Madelyn held in her hand her Flying Winged Blade, an armament too large for her stature, yet she was a master at manipulating it, though it was heavier than it looked.

Even in an empire filled with demi-human tribes, the rare species of dragonkin was so intimidating that even a mere confrontation with them would make a weak-minded person cower and kneel.

However—

???: “Yes! It’s me again, Madelyn! A passing Spiritual Arts User, Emily!”

Emily, the girl who met the golden glare of the dragonkin, did not care about that sharp look.

An unfearful exchange, that was all that was needed for the Weaponkin to understand. They understood the disparity between the stage that they, Emily, and Madelyn were standing on, and the disparity in the height of the viewpoints they saw.

Weaponkin: “…”

There was disappointment and frustration at the reality of the situation, but immediately afterward, a welling sense of elation.

It was the anticipation of the battle that was about to unfold before their eyes, a battle that transcended human understanding.

It was about to begin. The battle of the top classes, that could never be reached simply by being born strong.

A warrior’s shiver occurred, irrespective of their blood cooling with the drop in temperature.

And then—

Madelyn: “You’re a friggin’ irritating girl. You couldn’t beat this dragon in battle the other day—”

Madelyn’s face, which could even be described as adorable, turned fiendishly serious.

Raising the Flying Winged Blade in her hand, the angry dragonkin poured all her strength into her slender arms, heedless of the extreme cold that hindered the Weaponkin’s movements.

They intuited. The moment that Flying Winged Blade was wielded, a battle that would be remembered throughout history would begin.

Emilia: “—Hiyah!”

—The next moment, a block of ice as large as a castle crashed to the ground just beyond Emily’s reach, and Madelyn’s figure on the ramparts was swallowed up in the icy shards beyond with a roar.

2

A large block of ice slammed into the rampart, and Emilia thought, “Good” in her spirit.

The battle between the rebels surrounding the Imperial Capital and the regular army trying to defend it had begun, and it left Emilia’s head in quite a mess.

Let’s do the best that we can and reduce the number of people who die by all means.

That was the policy that Emilia had set forth, a goal that her colleagues accepted without opposition, even though they knew that would be difficult.

Yet, when Emilia and the others arrived at their destination, the rebels who arrived earlier had already begun the battle.

???: “From the Imperial Capital’s point of view, they are all the same rebels, but each tribe has its own agendas. It was not a battle that began in an orderly manner, with all the tribes lining up to fight. One can understand that without even thinking about it."

Abel had said rather nasty things to the impatient Emilia, but they themselves, who had entered the battle from the fortified city, took up positions and joined the battle, albeit delayed.

Of Emilia and the others, the two main players in the battle were herself and Garfiel; Beatrice and Petra could not fight, and Otto and Frederica both had other roles to play.

It was very frustrating for Emilia, as she could only fight, but she had learned that the division of roles was very important, so she decided to leave it all up to everyone's specialties.

Abel: "Lupugana, the Imperial Capital, is surrounded by star-shaped ramparts. It is a city that is hard to attack and easy to defend. The only way to conquer the city is to capture the five bastions."

Emilia: "The five bastions?"

Abel: "It is a star-shaped wall. You can command the battlefield in depth and at a distance from these five bastions. Conversely, if we take these points, we can greatly reduce the opponent's strength. For that reason…"

Emilia: "For that reason?"

Abel: "From the rebels who strike first, we will determine the enemy's force distribution. If they can reduce the opponent's strength, even if only slightly, then that would be satisfactory."

Emilia: "Then the people who strike first will be in danger! You absolutely can't do that!"

Even though it was Abel's role to come up with a winning strategy, Emilia could not accept that approach. Hence, she had departed for battle, for the sake of capturing the much-needed bastions at the vertices of the star.

Honestly, though, she was unable to find the decisive factor as to which one she ought to rush to.

Otto: “Emily, I will tell you where to go. —I have a plan.”

As Emilia was about to take off, Otto offered to help her.

Emilia was unsure what to say to Otto, due to him looking so reckless to her that she was not sure what to say to him.

Petra: “Don’t worry, Emily. Leave him to me.”

Because Petra told her so, Emilia could believe her, and she was able to start on her way.

Garfiel: “Emily! My amazin’ self is over here! Let’s blow open a new hole!”

After pledging good luck to the spirited Garfiel and to each other, they all split up on the way to their respective bastions.

Frederica: “Emily… No, Emilia-sama, I will also be racing around for my role. Please be safe, and do not be too reckless for Subaru-sama’s sake!”

Frederica, running alongside her, turned into a beast and ran across the battlefield with blinding speed.

Everyone was scrambling to do their role.

Emilia: “I also have to work reaaally hard.”

With a strong determination in her heart, Emilia arrived at the bastion to do what needed to be done.

Closing her eyes tightly, she laid her left hand on her right hand, which was placed on her own chest. Before the battle began, Beatrice, regretting not being able to participate in the fight, had held her hand and said,

Beatrice: “It is infuriating, but Betty is asking you to take Betty’s place, in fact. After Betty, the next person who can do their best for Subaru is Emilia, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Yes, I truly want to believe that.”

Whether it was because of Beatrice's trust, or because of everyone's cooperation, Emilia's body and mind were in surprisingly good shape.

Her flustered heart and her confused mind had calmed down, and she was very calm.

Very calmly, Emilia balanced her role with what she wanted to do.

Emilia's role was to defeat Madelyn, who was guarding her bastion.

What Emilia wanted to do was to prevent as many people from dying as possible.

Madelyn and her would fight from this point on. In order to keep a lot of people from dying.

Emilia: "…"

Opening her eyes, Emilia concentrated on her gate deep inside her body, releasing all her accumulated mana at once and dropping the temperature of her surroundings at a furious pace.

Vollachia was a warm country, so many people did not like the cold, according to the studious Petra. Otto, an animal lover, also told her that flying dragons in the sky also did not like the cold.

Then again, when it got cold, it made people want to curl up, according to the siblings Garfiel and Frederica.

With everything else and with none-other than her experiences, Emilia realized.

That was—

Emilia: "When it's reaaally cold, people can't be in position to fight."

Once, at the Roswaal mansion, the one before it had burned down, the area around the mansion was completely covered in snow when Puck, before he fell asleep, had a problem releasing his mana.

The problem spread to the nearby Arlam Village and caused quite a commotion, but it remained a strange memory for Emilia, who had never felt cold in her entire life.

The experience and knowledge gained from that time were put to good use.

Emilia: “I know that I can’t easily sway everyone’s opinions or feelings regarding this fight. I wish I could talk to them and understand them better if possible, but I don’t have the time.”

Therefore, Emilia decided.

She would use force—No, she would hold everyone down with coldness.

Everyone’s fingers would get numb, they would be unable to pick up their weapon, they would be unable to use their skills with their knees shaking, their teeth would not stop chattering, their gaze would be unsteady, and their breath would be so white that they would be shocked.

If they came to realize that, then everyone would be incapable of even thinking about fighting.

And yet, if there was an opponent who still raised a strong body and mind to fight—

Emilia: “—I’ll be your opponent!”

Madelyn: “Stop messing around and don’t friggin’ get carried awaaaaaaaaaay!!”

Emilia’s cry of determination was covered over by the roar of the ice blocks that had fallen onto the ramparts.

Emilia was not surprised like others, when she heard an energetic response from Madelyn even after the direct hit by a block of ice larger than a house. It was the same as when she encountered her in Guaral a few days ago.

That time as well, the fight started the same way, with ice blocks striking her opponent.

Madelyn: “You lack skill.”

A high-pitched sound echoed through the air, and the next moment, the huge piece of ice broke in half vertically .

Emerging from behind the scattered pieces of ice was an energetic Madelyn, holding her Flying Winged Blade above her head.

The pupils of her golden eyes narrowed as she watched the shattering ice splinter into shards, particles, then reduce to mana.

Madelyn: “Even after going through an experience that terrible, you haven’t changed your mind, half-devil…”

Emilia: “An experience that terrible… That last one was a surprise, but I think Priscilla and I were about to win that fight. You shouldn’t lie.”

Madelyn: “—Hk, don’t friggin’ underestimate this dragon, half-devil!”

Madelyn bent her knees, preparing to jump off the ramparts, her eyes angry at Emilia’s rebuttal. Emilia’s eyes widened at that action, and after glancing at her surroundings,

Emilia: “Hiyah!”

She waved her arms and made an ice block rain down on Madelyn, as she had done before.

It was not even a diversion for Madelyn as expected, and was repelled and shattered by her weapon, which she raised annoyingly, rendering the attack ineffective.

However—

Emilia: “Hiyah! Hiyaah! There’s still more! Take this!”

Madelyn: “Wha—”

One after another, she created ice blocks in the sky and dropped them repeatedly onto Madelyn on the ramparts.

Since speed was prioritized over power during the process, the size of the ice was much smaller than at first, about the size of a fist at most.

Even so, if they were to hit one's head, they would undoubtedly cause tremendous pain, and Emilia's hands would produce ten, twenty, fifty, or even a hundred of them, which would then rain down on top of the ramparts.

Ice pebbles—Though, it was not as pretty as pebbles; it was an ice storm.

Madelyn: "Don't! Get carried away—!"

Against that downpouring ice storm aimed at her, Madelyn wildly fought back.

Using her whole body, which was unaffected by the cold, she used her Flying Winged Blade not as a throwing weapon, but as a swinging one, swatting down the falling storms of ice chunks.

A chain of concussions and cracking noises repeated and a flood of ice chunks rushed toward Madelyn as she sprinted along the ramparts.

Madelyn dodged, flipped, sidestepped, and spun around with the gait of a dancer, or even a gymnast, as she dodged the icy barrage.

Her mobility was also eye-popping, but it was not Emilia's purpose to hit. It was an attack that was supposed to be avoided, and its purpose was to buy time.

That was to say—

Emilia: "Everyone, get away! The fight between Madelyn and I will be dangerous for everyone around here!"

Emilia called out to the surrounding rebels as she hurled a storm of ice into the air.

The beaten Weaponkin were huddled together, seemed to be looking for a chance to recklessly join in, but they were shivering from the cold, and many of them had lost their weapons.

The difficulty in moving their limbs was extremely egregious because of what Emilia did, but she hoped that they would do their best to move those limbs and withdraw with their allies.

And then—

Emilia: "—Hk, Oh, wait, no!"

Through Emilia's monotonous attack that prioritized quantity, Madelyn's Flying Winged Blade was unleashed, breaking through the finely shattered ice pieces.

Emilia quickly dodged the Flying Winged Blade, which roared furiously as it cut through the wind, but as it circled back the battlefield with its roar, the Flying Winged Blade returned with frightening precision.

The whirlwind of death that reaped everything in its path came to Emilia, mercilessly shredding everything. Therefore, Emilia ran to prevent collateral damage on the slow-moving Weaponkin.

Emilia: "Uhyaa!!"

Emilia intervened in front of the Weaponkin, who were unable to dodge the oncoming whirlwind of death.

With her upraised foot, she kicked up the Flying Winged Blade's edge. The impact made every bone in Emilia's body creak, but she gritted her teeth and endured it without hesitation. Launching it with all her might, the blade went over the heads of Weaponkin and herself, flying toward their backs.

Emilia: "Now you can't…"

Madelyn: "Did you friggin' think it was over?"

Emilia: "—Hk"

Before she had any time to feel relief, a voice spoke from behind her.

Beyond her flowing silver hair, the Flying Winged Blade that Emilia had sent flying was grasped, Madelyn's figure brandishing the blade being reflected in her amethyst eyes.

A downwards slash, to dodge it would put everyone in danger.

Emilia: "Ice Brand Arts!!"

With no other choice except to receive the blow, Emilia immediately formed an ice sword in order to meet the Flying Winged Blade.

A duel with swords locked together, it did not turn out to be. The moment the opponent's blades came into contact, the ice sword abruptly cracked and shattered. But, that was only one of them. With a second one in the other hand, the hand losing the first blade produced a third one; even if they keep on breaking, Emilia's relentless barrage of ice swords keeps roaring out.

With a large turn, she kept on striking the side of the Flying Winged Blade, striking, barely parrying it, falling.

Emilia: "—Kyaah?!"

The Flying Winged Blade that struck down hit the ground, and a moment later, a shock wave impacted Emilia's entire body.

Hit by the same force, the Weaponkin that had failed to escape were blown far away. The Dragonkin's raw strength was absurd, even more so than the already strong Emilia.

Emilia: "Still…"

Jumping up as her body rolled, Emilia slapped her cheeks and looked in front of her.

Pulling the Flying Winged Blade from the ground, Madelyn glared in displeasure at the still lively Emilia, and then looked around.

Madelyn: “So it’s just friggin’ you? What about that woman?”

Emilia: “That woman? …Ah, do you mean Priscilla?”

Madelyn: “Do you think that this dragon would think to memorize a human’s name? I mean that friggin’ crimson woman.”

Emilia: “That’s Priscilla. I’m Emily. Priscilla has, someone she wants to meet.”

While Abel was forming his strategies back at the encampment and Emilia’s team were running across the battlefield, both Prisicilla and Al had also stepped onto the grounds of other battlefields.

However, unlike Emilia’s team who wanted to bring back Subaru and Rem, and Abel’s team who wanted to somehow overthrow the Emperor, Priscilla’s goal was hard to comprehend.

When asked, she never answered properly either.

Emilia: “Even Yorna, wouldn’t tell me what they spoke about…”

Since it was a reunion of mother and daughter, she thought that they must have had a lot to talk about.

Thinking about the day she would reunite with Puck after he eventually awakened from the magical stone around her neck, Emilia wanted to ask them for some advice.

Of course, she also just wanted to simply hear Prisicilla’s joyful tale.

Madelyn: “Would like to meet…”

Emilia: “Er, they’re somewhere on this battlefield I think. She said that it was her problem, and I also prioritized my knight but… Ah! Umm, Lady Petra’s! Knight, maybe!”

Madelyn: “…”

In the Vollachian Empire where she had to disguise her social position, Emilia hurriedly corrected herself, Madelyn looking at her suspiciously.

All the suspicions aside, Emilia was simply not good at lying. When she thought about how trying too hard would just increase the likelihood of being exposed, she just shrugged her shoulders in resignation.

Emilia: “No, that was a lie. Yes, Subaru is my knight. Sorry for tricking you.”

Madelyn: “In the first place, even if you tell me that, he isn’t even friggin’ here!”

Emilia: “Oh, really…?”

Madelyn: “What a little girl like you thinks, is completely irrelevant to this dragon. —It’s friggin’ frustrating that that crimson woman is not here, but even so, it’s friggin’ convenient.”

With these words, Madelyn’s body slowly began releasing steam.

In the cold air, dyed white by her exhaled breath, her body continued to heat up as it radiated her visibly rising fighting spirit.

As this visible fighting spirit began to pour over, Emilia instantly produced a pair of swords in her hands.

Emilia held a vigilant guard, at which Madelyn let out a savage laugh,

Madelyn: “One by one, those who make a mockery of this dragon shall be massacred.”

Her blazing golden eyes shone as she charged forward.

With a step causing the frost-covered earth to explode, the distance between them vanished in a single breath, Madelyn raised her Flying Winged Blade over her head as Emilia prepared herself.

And then—

Emilia: “Even without Priscilla, I’m not alone!”

Madelyn: “What—”

Are you saying, is what Madelyn was about to shout out.

But, an unforeseen figure did not allow her to finish as it halted the strike of the brandishing Flying Winged Blade. Madelyn opened her eyes wide at this, looking at the figure that had jumped on the Flying Winged Blade.

That was, a body that blocked the attack by colliding with it, a Natsuki Subaru made of ice—

Madelyn: “Wha…?!”

Emilia: “Hiyaa!!”

Towards the stock-still Madelyn, Emilia’s twin blades of ice thrusted forwards.

3

Battles began on the bastions of the star-shaped ramparts that surrounded the Imperial Capital, and the nature of the warfare changed.

It was almost comical how many were being eliminated by such a small force, nearly a singular force; it was like a microcosm of the Vollachian Empire, a land where the strong were revered.

No matter how many weak people gathered together, one swing of a strong person easily plucked away their hope.

In fact, even a battle that was enthusiastically labeled the “Decisive Battle of the Imperial Capital”, would result in every single rebel being cut down if left unchecked, and those with smoldering fighting spirits would become docile in a year’s time.

It was possible for that to be weeding out the rebels, but it was doubtful if that was currently the Emperor’s expectation.

Although—

Yorna: “—Even so, that would have also been the story if His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia hadn’t been ousted from the throne.”

With a kiseru in one hand, Yorna Mishigure looked down upon the battlefield and uttered a few words tinged with purple smoke.

Daring to start that small fire himself, those thoughts that had slacked during times of peace needed to be braced. It was something the Emperor would probably take care of, but it would not be something he would do by giving up the throne himself.

However, if she had not known the truth and had not been invited as one of the Nine Divine Generals who ruled over the Demon City, which side would she have joined?

Yorna: “I don’t have time for such useless sentimentality. —I have a role to play.”

Yorna quietly looked forward, abandoning the implausible alternative.

Vincent Vollachia, the true Emperor, had kept the peace in this Empire. The future under the reign of the false Emperor who ousted him, and where it would lead, was marked in a deep darkness.

Yorna believed that this was the case.

Yorna: “My beloved children and the people who live in the land of His Excellency’s beloved Empire.”

Her beloved children foolishly lost their Demon City and continued to adore her even though she failed to show the might she should have shown.

The people of the Empire loved by a man who she once loved, and who she still continued to love with undiminished affection.

Moreover, she wanted to give none other than her children, with whom she had shared her soul, a world appropriate for them to live in.

That was—

Yorna: “—I would rather have the peace of a true Emperor than a future built by a false one.”

As Yorna said this, she slowly began to swirl the earth around her as she spun her kiseru, drawing a spiral. This was Yorna’s technique of imparting the Soul Marriage Technique to inorganic objects and making them do as she willed.

A technique that others could never imitate due to the capacity of their souls—However, unlike in the Demon City, where she had spent a long and intimate time imbuing her thoughts and feelings, the soil of the Imperial Capital was slow to move.

Perhaps Yorna’s own mixed feelings about the Empire were not unrelated, though.

Yorna: “I’m sorry I am not in the best of shape, but I shall be your partner.”

In front, Yorna’s gaze looked up at the top of the ramparts, and then further above them.

The reason for that was plain and simple, her opponent who she should pierce with her gaze was higher than the ramparts and flying freely in the sky above the battlefield.

Transforming her shins into flames, the Spirit Eater concealed the destruction contained within her slender body—.

???: “—Yorna.”

Yorna: “General First-Class Arakiya, you are still fighting as flamboyantly as ever. Even from a distance, I could recognize you at a glance.”

The brown-skinned dog person with a tree branch in one hand and an eye patch over her left eye—Arakiya.

She casted a wary eye at Yorna, who appeared below her, and while her skin scorched with hostility, Yorna looked around her surroundings, narrowing her eyes at the burnt farmland.

It was at this bastion, Arakiya's, that there was the most flamboyant of interceptions in response to the rebels' attack.

Of course, this was due to the fact that she herself was powerful, but perhaps it was also meant to show off her power to those around her.

Yorna was not the only one who had spotted Arakiya at first glance as the guardian of this bastion.

Even if one of the military men did not know who Arakiya really was, it was easy to recognize that she had tremendous power.

More than just Arakiya's own aims, that was—

???: "Did somebody put that idea in your head, Arakiya?"

Arakiya: "—Hk."

Yorna: "You…"

Behind her, stepping onto the black grassy field that had been burnt to a crisp, the voice of the arrived person shook the battlefield.

Both Arakiya and Yorna gasped, and their eyes widened. Yorna raised her eyebrows at the appearance of a voice that should not have been audible, but was.

And then, walking far enough to Yorna's side so she did not need to turn around,

???: "What is it, Dear Mother? Even after having died once, are you still unable to let go of your child?"

Thus, opening the fan in her hand with a sound, the crimson-eyed Priscilla cruelly laughed.

Yorna was caught off guard at that unexpected appearance and the words that followed, and she spilled out a long sigh.

Yorna: "Prisca, it is natural that you cannot forgive me, but…"

Priscilla: “Unfortunately, the girl who bore that name is dead. If you are concerned about her, it would do you well to visit her grave. Mine name is Priscilla Barielle. Strive not to get it wrong.”

Yorna: “—. Was it not that Abel had said that this place was to be entrusted to me?”

Priscilla: “Was it not that at the same meeting where I said mineself shall not do what Abel tells me to?”

Priscilla, who had a comeback for every remark, responded mercilessly, and Yorna was at a loss at Priscilla’s attitude. However, Priscilla snorted with a “Hmph”, and the smile on her face disappeared.

Immediately after, her crimson gaze shifted towards Arakiya overhead.

Arakiya was one of the strongest Divine Generals, and Yorna was assigned to be her opponent because it was understood by everyone that no one but Yorna would be a match for her.

Nevertheless, the prudent Priscilla came to this place because she had a reason to confront Arakiya regardless of such factors as strength and tactics.

As evidence of that, Arakiya was clearly shaken by Priscilla’s entrance.

Even in front of Yorna, her expression, somewhat detached from the world, did not waver, but as soon as she saw Priscilla, her mask crumbled.

That was unmistakable proof of the special relationship between Priscilla and Arakiya,

Priscilla: “Arakiya, have you made up your mind?”

Priscilla’s profile was sagacious as she asked the question, her gaze so sharp that she looked as if she was about to kill the target of her gaze. However, the words spun by her lips somehow felt gentle and even benevolent.

A harshly embellished gentle question, to which Arakiya caught her breath and nodded.

Arakiya: “I’ll take back the Princess. —I’ll kill His Excellency… the Princess is the real Emperor.”

Priscilla: “You desire a formal resolution of the “Imperial Selection Ceremony”? That shall do fine.”

Hearing Arakiya’s answer, Priscilla closed the fan in her hand. She tucked it into her cleavage, raised her empty hand to the sky, and pulled her treasured sword of crimson out of thin air.

The heat emitted around the blade was such that the air seemed to waver, it was the Yang Sword that only the Emperor of Vollachia was permitted to wield—Unconsciously, Yorna gazed at it in admiration.

It was as if an image of Yorna’s beloved man, who once wielded that treasured sword of deep crimson, came back to her behind her eyelids.

Priscilla: “This is no time to admire, Dear Mother.”

Yorna: “—. All of those selfish ramblings… Although I was not the one who raised you, why did you grow up to be this way?”

Priscilla: “Well, now. There is no particular reason why I am mineself. Additionally, there was one thing I failed to tell you.”

At Priscilla’s sidelong glance as she readied the Yang Sword, Yorna’s whole body tensed up, and she, too, entered a fighting stance. Having adopted that posture, Yorna turned to her daughter with a questioning look in her eyes.

Without meeting her gaze, Priscilla pointed the tip of her Yang Sword at Arakiya, and,

Priscilla: “She is my foster sister. Dear Mother, after your death, she was raised together with mineself as if we were sisters. Now, it seems her goal is to place mineself on the throne.”

Yorna: “Wha…”

Priscilla: “It’s coming.”

Yorna’s eyes widened at the revelation, and the unsympathetic pronouncement was made almost simultaneously.

Swelling flames covered the sky, and in order to turn the already burnt field into grounds of scorched earth, that enormous heat rained down.

Beyond that, painting the world a color of red, Arakiya shouted.

Arakiya: “I will take the Princess back, with my own power!! — That’s what I’ve been told.”

4

Gazing from afar at the flames controlled by Arakiya’s excessively setting the world ablaze, Todd Fang sensed that the atmosphere of the battlefield was changing with the direction of the wind.

Todd: “—There’s no doubt that the first move was effective, but…”

The great firepower broke the fighting spirit of the invading rebels, and the first invaders would always be people who were recognized for their ability.

There was no way that a group could maintain its morale while it was being burned without any way to do anything about it.

Hence, of the five bastions protecting the star-shaped ramparts, he had guessed that the bastion with Arakiya, which he had been assigned to, was the safest, and the place where the enemy’s attack would be weakened.

In fact, Todd’s judgement proved true, and after the Cyclops Tribe that had bravely marched in was wiped out, the attack of the rebels, fearing Arakiya, was in tatters, and the battle was practically won.

The cause for this change of mood was the repelled first group of rebels being joined by a second group that had arrived late.

After being struck on the head and losing their fighting strength, it seemed like the first group had been about to collapse, but they had been absorbed by the second group that had come around later, and they were attempting to restore their fighting strength.

Of course, even if the losers came together, it should not have a significant impact on the outcome, but the ones that came after brought together the group whose morale should have been broken and kept the damage to a minimum.

Thinking that there was likely a very quick-witted commanding officer in the second group, Todd shuddered at that frightening possibility.

Todd: “No way, was arriving late also part of their plan?”

Without keeping an equal pace, with each person fending for themselves, the empty-headed rebel army had charged in. Seeing that painful experience of the first group, and from there the battle was about to end with the regular army’s overwhelming victory.

However, after the first group lost powerful people and grew disheartened, when they had their hot-headedness cooled, the nuisances that did not have the ability to listen to a discussion had been completely lost.

In that case, to snatch a victory in the battle they had undertaken, the group had no choice but to join the ranks of the other party for a better chance of success and frantically perform for the sake of receiving a share of the leftovers.

Todd: “Rather than the vanguard, which was full of idiots, is the second group the true contender?”

Even when it came to taking on Arakiya as an opponent in battle, the true contender was likely to have countermeasures prepared.

It was hard to imagine that Arakiya would be defeated, but Todd did not think an opponent who could calculate to this extent would come without plans in hand for an assault on the Imperial Capital.

There were some sort of preparations for not only Arakiya, but also the guardians of the other bastions as well.

In addition, other than those guarding the bastions, the soldiers of the regular army, whose role should have been only to hunt the survivors, were starting to spend time on the rebel's movements, even if it was not a hard fight.

It felt troublesome, as if eyes and ears that could reach great distances, and even skillful limbs were following the brain of a demonic enemy.

It would be best to leave the strong enemies to Arakiya and the guardians.

However, Todd thought that the truly troublesome enemy in this conflict was something else.

Therefore—

Todd: "—I've got to deal with the guy who is up to no good."

Chapter 93:
The Stone Army

1

An arrow pierced the head that had no eyes, ears, or a nose, and the golem, made of stone, was thrown a great deal backwards.

However, the head, without any human-like parts, could not be a human-like vital point, so the advancing enemy's footsteps were undeterred, whether it was pierced by an arrow or part of its head was missing.

???: "If crushing its head ain't enough… Holly!"

Holly: "Got it~!"

Shuffling, the stone golems rushed towards them with outstretched hands.

The sight of them, no bigger than human beings, coming at them with their inhuman movements evoked a sense of disgust. Channeling that antipathy into her fingers as she drew the bowstring, the strong bow made a sound like a thunderclap.

Three arrows were released at the same time. They struck the stone golem's torso, not piercing it nor hitting a critical point, but smashing it to pieces, stopping the golem's movement.

If its whole body were broken to pieces, even the stone golem would cease to move.

However—

???: "With this amount, you can't take them out one by one!"

Kuna looked up to reach the target rampart, the third bastion, which she had been told was a hole in the enemy's formation, but when she managed to reach it, the number and nature of the enemy soldiers deployed made her feel hopeless.

The third bastion was supposed to be guarded by Moguro Hagane, one of the Nine Divine Generals.

Fortunately, Moguro themself was not visible on the rampart. Was it because they had not reached Moguro yet, or was Moguro themself somewhere else?

Either way—

Holly: “It’s as if they’re ants gathered around a tree’s sap~! I can’t knock them down like this~!”

Kuna: “This is no time for your whining! Shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot! Shoot as many as you can!”

Holly: “Geez~! Kuna, you’re so strict~!”

Raising her voice in a way similar to a shriek, Holly pulled an arrow from the quiver on Kuna’s back and fired them one after another from her powerful bow. Two or three stone golems were destroyed with each shot, but that was not enough to keep up with the number of enemies.

—Because there were hundreds, thousands even, of stone golems, too many to count.

Kuna: “Tsk, what are we supposed to do…!”

Clicking her tongue and distancing herself from the enemy, Kuna cursed Abel for giving her these orders.

She only knew of them from rumors, but Moguro Hagane was a special kind of demi-human called a “Steelfolk”. Unlike the Weaponkin, whose bodies were only partially made of metal, she had heard that they were existences whose bodies were entirely made out of minerals.

In that case, were all the countless stone golems in front of them also Steelfolk.

Holly: “They all look so lifeless~! They really look like dolls~!”

Kuna: “I have the same opinion! What kind of a gimmick do these guys have?”

While maintaining a moderate distance, she glared at her surroundings and looked at the crowd of stone golems. Thanks to their lack of eyes, the stone golems did not seem to have any self-consciousness.

They simply surrounded those who approached them, beating and bludgeoning them to death with their tough limbs and monstrous strength. Those who had been unable to escape were caught up to, and died tragically as they were exposed to the violence of the sheer numbers.

The rebels who challenged the third bastion and were trampled by the hordes of stone golems would have literally had their corpses stepped over, and their remains would not have remained intact outside of the shape of their formation. And this was not an event that Kuna and the others could laugh at as if it were someone else’s problem.

If they continued as they were, they would be trampled by an overwhelming number of enemies, unable to stand a chance against them.

Before that happened—

Kuna: “If things get really bad, we’re going to have to retreat, but…”

Holly: “Hey! Kuna! Look at that~!”

Kuna: “Huh?”

Both of them were forced to stomp the grass of the farmland that had now become a battlefield and shoot while running away. As Kuna turned around at the sound of Holly’s voice, something surprising entered her field of vision.

A figure stood still on the battlefield, and then the stone golem rushed in and slammed their stone arms down on them. It seemed as if the target would be knocked down by the blow and left to die in a puddle of blood—

???: “—Don’t get in my way, you stone golem!!”

It was Mizelda who howled, her ferocious beauty contorted in anger.

As she shouted angrily, she swung her club held in both her hands, crushing the head and upper body of the stone golem that had leapt towards her, effectively beating it at its own game.

—No, she was not the only one who had chosen to attack the stone golems rather than run away from them.

???: “Get out of my way, get out of my way, get the fuck out of my way! You’re all shame of the Empire who don’t understand the authority of His Excellency the Emperor, so don’t fucking get in my way!”

The slash was released with a guttural cry, and it brilliantly separated the stone golem’s neck and torso, and further split the flying head vertically in mid-air. If that was not enough, he slashed the torso diagonally, slashed off the arm from the shoulder, and when he saw that it had stopped moving, he kicked it down and moved on to the next one.

A rough-looking man with an eye patch similarly dove into the stone golems, as Mizelda had.

The relentless attack power of these two attackers in hand-to-hand combat thwarted the stone golem’s ability to launch an attack.

But what truly stunned Kuna and Holly was not either of them.

Kuna & Holly: “…”

A powerful sword roared, and mowing down the stone golems , it blew them away.

It was a rough and violent slash that could hardly be described as brilliant. However, it was the most appropriate swordsmanship to use against the stone golems that needed to be destroyed in order to keep them suppressed.

Swinging that sword and burying the onrushing horde of stone golems was a red-haired swordsman—A man who she only knew as a follower of the proud and haughty Priscilla, Heinkel.

A man who looked somewhat dead inside had joined the war front before anyone could notice, and cut down the stone golems one after another without speaking, the scene lacked a sense of reality, much like a nightmare on a night of poor sleep.

Looking only at the events that were taking place, regardless of whether they were circumstances that Kuna and Holly should welcome, they were unsure of whether they should accept it with delight, and there were negative thoughts swirling around in them.

Surely the reason for this was the expression of Heinkel's face as he wielded his sword.

Holly: "It seems like it's full of pain~."

After witnessing the same thing, Kuna could not help but agree with Holly's mutterings.

She could not understand Holly's thoughts as the latter expressed that, but from Kuna's eyes, it looked more like he wanted to die.

Sometimes, warriors would head to the battlefield in search of a place to die.

Even in Shudraq, there were times when those without much longer to live would choose their final moments by taking a bow and challenging the large creatures hidden deep in the forest.

It was probably not an ending that Kuna would choose, but she could understand such thoughts.

However, those of Heinkel's were different from those of a warrior seeking a place to die.

Wanting death while fearing death, the figure that fiercely fought against death only exacerbated how pathetic it was to look at. Even though she knew his presence was dominantly supporting the warfront, Kuna wished for him to collapse and die right away.

He was a man who swung a sword surrounded in melancholy to the extent that it made those around him think that.

???: “Kuna! Holly!”

With those words, the mood of the battlefield still continued to shift, ignoring that mental image Kuna and the others had.

The one who called their names and overtook them as if she was flying through the grassland was Taritta. Carrying her quiver on her back and having returned to the typical Shudraqian attire, she arrived in front of the two of them,

Taritta: “It’s dangerous to stop moving. This is the path Sister and Jamal have created.”

Kuna: “I understand that even without you telling me, Chieftain. …I was just a little bit distracted.”

Taritta: “Heinkel, was it?”

Looking at her fondly, Taritta perfectly guessed Kuna’s embarrassed, gloomy feelings.

Taritta was Mizelda’s younger sister, and she succeeded her as Chieftain of the People of Shudraq. Previously she was shy and indecisive, a girl that had stood out for being more cowardly than careful.

However, as a condition for taking over as Chieftain, the experience of going along on the journey to the Demon City of Chaosflame seemed to have been significant, quieting that cowardice and leading her to acquire a refined strength.

Her pointing things out now had also probably accompanied that.

Holly: “Chieftain, don’t you find it creepy~?”

Taritta: “I think creepy is too direct, but…If it’s true that he’s desperate, and that he will become our war strength, then I have no objection to fighting alongside him."

Kuna: "What a magnificent answer. …That's fine with me too."

Even though there were things that were unaccounted for, there was no need to account for them at this moment.

Originally, Taritta was good at changing her approach in hunting situations, if not in everyday life. Now, as the Chieftain, she could successfully adjust to any situation.

As Kuna evaluated the situation, Taritta looked at the quiver on her back,

Taritta: "The number of arrows left has decreased a lot. While we have the chance, let's collect the fallen arrows. It'd be best not to use too many arrows on one person."

Kuna: "In theory, yes, but…"

Holly: "I can't seem to kill them in one shot~!"

Taritta: "There is a trick to dropping them in one shot. Aim for the heart. —Like this."

Before the struggling duo, Taritta quickly fired three arrows from her bow. As three stone golems approached Mizelda's back in the distance, the arrows pierced the three bodies through their back, head, and thigh, killing them.

Kuna: "Wait, wait, wait! Why did they die in one shot?! The heart?"

Holly: "They're stone golems, so I don't know where their hearts are~"

Taritta: "Is-Is that so? If you look closely, I think you can see where their vital spots are, but…"

Taritta's brow lowered with a troubled expression as Kuna and Holly pressed her.

Apparently, she really did not do much more than look closely. Taritta was indeed Mizelda's sister, although her personality was so opposite to hers that it was difficult to tell.

As one of the People of Shudraq, Kuna was proud of the high degree of purity in her Chieftain sisters.

Kuna: "Since that consultation wasn't helpful, let's do this our way. Pick up arrows, and if there aren't enough, use a club or whatever. Then, we'll beat the enemy to death."

Holly: "Let's put an end to this doll game~!"

Taritta: "I think that's the spirit. But, at some point, the real Divine General is going to come out of the woodwork. …As was the case with Yorna, the Nine Divine Generals are anything but standard. Be very careful."

Holly: "You should probably tell that to Mizelda~."

At the serious-faced Taritta's opinion, Kuna shrugged her chin at Mizelda, who was already rampaging on the front lines.

The former Chieftain, who had a prosthetic leg, had given up her position to her sister and was now running rampant with her lightweight physique. At this rate, if the Divine General were to appear from the enemy lines, she would be the first to collide with them.

Even without one leg, Mizelda was capable of putting up a good fight against any serious challenger—

Taritta: "Sister, please don't go too far! You will die if you are alone!"

Mizelda: "…"

Taritta shouted, taking a single shot at the head of a stone golem blocking the way ahead of Mizelda. At the sound of Taritta's voice, Mizelda gave a big wave of her hand, communicating that she understood what was happening.

Kuna was genuinely surprised and impressed by Taritta's judgment in her statement.

Taritta had truly stopped hiding behind her sister's back.

Kuna: "I didn't see what happened at that time with Mariuli, but…"

Holly: "Taritta, you're flourishing, so we're also happy for you~."

Taritta: "Is this really the time to say that?! Both of you, please go fight!"

Holly shot the stone golems that surrounded them with her bow, Kuna bashed them with her short hatchet as she gave a remark, and in response, Taritta said that with a sharp voice.

Kuna and Holly nodded to each other and obeyed without hesitation at the direction of their ever-reliable Chieftain.

A Covenant of old, a promise exchanged between a former Emperor of Vollachia and the People of Shudraq, a promise that was now far removed from the present, which Kuna and the others could not be blamed for having forgotten.

This battle began to fulfill that, however, it was now certainly a battle that Kuna and Holly, as People of Shudraq, absolutely must gain victory in.

2

Stone golems charged directly towards him.

Without faces, they had neither hostile intent, nor intent to kill. Swinging his sword at those opponents, while cursing the puppeteer who had inconsiderately chosen those golems, Heinkel Astrea looked out onto the battlefield.

For what reason, was he swinging his sword in the vast lands of the Empire?

For what reason, was he still swinging his sword after exposing so much of his shame?

For what reason, on the lands where the person who must see him being useful was not present, was he there?

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

Slashing upwards from the elbows of those extended arms, the upper body of his opponent was blown away by the aftermath of the attack.

The opponents were stone golems, and above not being able to dampen their fighting strength by merely cutting off their head or limbs, what was required more than a refined swordsmanship was to drive the opponent into a position where they could no longer do anything, an attack akin to that of a barbaric tribe.

Changing his grip on his sword, he spread his legs wide and decided on a stance.

He unleashed the sword he had readied by his waist, and it obliterated the stone golems in its path to an amusing extent. It was not amusing. There was nothing about this that was amusing.

He had no such memories of the sword ever being enjoyable to swing.

For him, the sword had never been anything but a shackle that was heavier than it appeared.

Heinkel: “Fuck.”

While spewing curses, he landed a blow on the enemy that had entered his sword’s range.

Filling his head was nothing but the doubts of “For what reason,” and blowing away all those hindrances in the way of his vision, he swung his sword. He swung it. He swung, swung, swung, and swung it about—.

Heinkel: “Fucking hell.”

Free your mind from all obstructive thoughts, such was how he had been instructed during his training with the sword.

Strengthen your concentration, become free from obstructive thoughts, hone your skills to become one with the sword. —No matter how many times he was told this, he had no idea what the instruction was trying to say.

Heinkel: “Fucking hell.”

He was told to not think, but if he tried to put that into practice, he would end up thinking about “not thinking,” so there was no way his mind could become free from obstructions.

Completely focusing on nothing but the sword, how could humans do such a thing?

If one lived, they would get hungry. They would also breathe. They would probably feel itches in their body, and also get assailed by drowsiness. Their worries would be endless, and their families would always present in the corners of their minds. Anxiety about tomorrow and anxiety about ten seconds later never ceased, and the failures from ten seconds earlier, let alone the failures from yesterday, and failures from even before that were things they eternally worried about. Piling up, on and on, on and on, the thoughts were everlasting.

How could one possibly become free from obstructive thoughts?

Completely cutting off the thoughts that were naturally born from human activity, such a thing was surely unthinkable for a human. In that case, was a swordsman who could free themself of obstructive thoughts not truly human?

Was that why he was not truly a swordsman?

Heinkel: “Fucking hell goddammit!”

That limitless stream of profanity, no matter how much he let out, it could not disappear from his mind.

As if to mow that all down in one go, Heinkel recklessly swung his sword, and proceeded to turn the stone golems blocking his way into a mountain of gravel.

Just how much value was there in these actions?

Failing to do the things he had to do in the place he had to do them, and letting the person he wanted to win favor with clean up his mess, in the end he owed a debt to yet another person who helped him survive.

Doing these kinds of actions over and over, just how much would he be recompensed, and for what?

???: “Sorry Pops, but my amazin’ self ain’t got any idea about what yer dealin’ with.”

In his head, mixed in with his own profanity, he heard the voice of another person.

Still young, the voice that he heard could even be called unripe, and it had been from he was drunk on the lookout platform. Even though he expressed that he did not want to speak with anyone and had secluded himself, it was the voice of the boy who had tactlessly barged in back then.

???: “I ain’t got any idea about if ya failed, nor how badly ya messed up either. But ya know, if it’s an experience of failing, then my amazin’ self has also got that.”

After chasing him away once by saying careless things, the boy started to show up again and again.

Then, even though he himself also had a face which seemed to hold doubts, he tried to interject into Heinkel’s worries and things had become like this.

That was also terribly childish and cheap, those naive and idealistic ideas made him want to laugh scornfully.

???: “There ain’t no one but yerself who can make a distinction of what ya’ve messed up. That’s why I’ve been tellin’ ya Pops, if yer gonna do it—”

Heinkel: “Shut the fuck up, you damn shitty brat!!”

Encouragement or consolement, pity or sympathy, whatever it was, he did not care.

Everything directed towards him was troublesome, and there was absolutely nothing that he desired from them. There was not even a single thing he desired from other people. There was nothing he desired. There was just a person who he wanted to offer this to.

There was value in what he would receive from that person. So, everything other than what he would receive from that person, were merely stone weights which he would drag as he walked.

Heinkel: "—Hk."

The ominous stone golems silently creeped up, and before his eyes, he slashed them with his sword, vertically splitting two of them into two halves each. As if to take advantage of his large swing, another came flying in from the side, so he smashed its face area with the tip of the scabbard, and followed by drawing the beloved sword "Astrea" back, and skewering it for the kill.

Opponents without faces, only using moves they had been taught, if it was that kind of match, then he could cut them down no matter how many there were.

As long as he kept breathing, then he could take on ten or twenty with no problem. However, just what significance did that have?

Scoring these kind of points without even showing it to the person he must show it to, just what—

???: "—Pops, if yer gonna do it, ya gotta restore it through yer own sword."

Heinkel: "Fucking shithead…hk"

It was laughable that he was still clinging to a fading light which may or may not even be there.

On that note, he again collided with the notion of why he was even still living.

Just what did he want to prove through this sword? What did he want to gain? What was it that he desired?

Heinkel: "…"

When it came to the quantity of main threats, everyone in the surroundings would successively launch an attack on that.

Charging in was Heinkel, the woman from the tribe of hunters wielding a club, and also the eyepatched twin sword user who employed elegant sword skills unbefitting of his face. However, with the orders of the hunter tribe's Chieftain, who mainly used a bow, the warfront was resolutely upheaved, and the other rebels who had once stepped aside had each regained their spirit.

A hole in the enemy's line of defense, pointing that out had been worthwhile.

Compared to the other four bastions, it was evident that just this bastion had a weak defense. The fact that Heinkel could cut his way through was proof of that.

One person, indeed, if there was even one person who was truly strong, then it would be impossible for Heinkel to lead the charge like this.

???: "Follow after that back—!"

???: "Don't let the red-haired man get all the achievements! We'll also push forward!"

???: "That swordsmanship isn't too bad. If he shaved his beard, his face would become more visually appealing."

Lagging behind Heinkel, who led the charge, the many people raising their voices were unthinkable.

He did not have the time to be captivated by them as a phony.

Heinkel: "Fucking hell… bring it on, bring it the fuck on! With just this, I won't even be able to…"

Score points, trying to accept the situation before his eyes more severely, more pragmatically, Heinkel lifted his head.

The stone golems standing directly opposite him, their formation was blown away from a sidewards sword slash, and trying to look at the imminent ramparts, he funneled power into his knees as he leaped towards them.

Immediately taking hold of the ramparts, if he eradicated the enemies atop the wall, then the capture of the third bastion—to be clear, it was not that he would slay some enemy General, so would it really be a contribution?

So then, to compensate for his failure in that Fortress City, would Heinkel be the one to connect the spider threads of what Priscilla wished for?

At the very least, even if it was only a little—

???: "—You, killed me, most."

Heinkel: "…"

Indeed, the moment he recklessly took hold of the ramparts, a voice struck Heinkel.

His lungs felt paralyzed, and a hoarse breath leaked out of his throat. It was not that he had suffered an attack, nor had he avoided an attack, it was just that he heard a voice.

With that alone, Heinkel's entire body trembled with fear.

The various thoughts from just before flashed through his head, about being free from obstructive thoughts, about his own desires, about recovering for his failures, they were all painted over with white, and vanished from sight.

What he did understand was what he had happened across. —A threat to which he could not do a single thing about.

That was—

???: “Killed, me, most. Therefore, I also, kill, you.”

An emotionless voice resounded, and before Heinkel’s eyes, the tall and thick wall began to change.

It was not the stone golems lined up atop the wall.

It was not the stone golems deployed to try and protect the ramparts either.

The bastion on the ramparts of the star-fortress, on the thick wall which they called the third bastion, a change arose.

Heinkel: “—ah”

In the vision of Heinkel, who leaked out breaths, countless “lights” were born upon the ramparts which stretched both to his left and right. —No, whether those could be called “lights” was a matter of divided opinion.

The “lights” born upon the ramparts, they were fist-sized orbs which glowed a bright green, and at a glance they seemed like harmless things from which no danger could be felt.

However, those had not originally been on the ramparts.

On the wall where there had been nothing, the countless “lights” from orbs had suddenly sprung up. To Heinkel, they appeared to be just like the eyes of a living thing. It seemed that all at once, he locked eyes with those “lights”.

He became frightened when simultaneously, those “lights” seemed to glare at him.

Heinkel: “Eek…”

That moment, Heinkel’s entire body froze, and his grip on the sword loosened—

???: “Fly away.”

That instant, in contrast to that monotone voice, making an unbelievable thunderous roar and clad in a strong wind, a gigantic stone fist seized the leaping Heinkel, and threw him away.

Heinkel: “Kah…”

Thoroughly beaten from head to toe, Heinkel was blown away to the sky with nothing he could do.

Similar to how he was handling the opponents of stone golems until a moment ago, the expression of being kicked around would be fitting. Heinkel was spraying blood everywhere as he soared, and then he saw it.

Within his revolving vision, the circumstances of the surface had completely changed. That was not the result of the blown away Heinkel’s consciousness being hazy, as there was a definite change that was hard to look away from—

Moguro: “—Eighth of the Nine Divine Generals, Moguro Hagane.”

It was the etiquette of a warrior on a battlefield, a grand estimation in its own introduction—however, that scale was far too abnormal.

Heinkel: “…”

The rampart of the star-fortress, which they should have captured, the third bastion itself moved.

That was unmistakably one of the Nine Divine Generals, the mighty being which introduced itself as Moguro Hagane.

SoupVEVO

Chapter 94:
Determination for the Sake of Whom

1

—A roar, like distant thunder, shook Beatrice's consciousness as she closed her eyelids.

Beatrice: "…Such an unpleasant sound, I suppose."

The little girl's faint whispering brought back memories of hearing similar sounds over and over again in her mind.

Four hundred years ago, in the age of Witches, during a time of constant warfare; it was not uncommon for large numbers of people to clash with each other, exchange blows, and fight for their lives.

Beatrice was not intimately familiar with the battlefield.

She was born and raised in the mansion of her mother, Echidna, a place free from human conflict. Even though the battles were far below her notice, they were still aggravating.

As time passed, she spent four hundred years with the book entrusted to her, during which the world outside was far from the madness of those days, although it could still be turbulent.

Yet, this once far distant madness was now close at hand.

—That being, a struggle for countless lives all around the Imperial Capital.

???: "Umm, I am worried. I am anxious."

???: "I know how you feel, Shuu. I guess Uu and the others should be leaving too?"

???: "Au! Uau! Aa, u!"

???: "Tha, that's no good! Our job is to wait! We are waiting!"

Beatrice, endeavoring to close her eyes and conserve energy, overheard the exchange.

What could be heard were the voices of children she had become quite familiar with over the past few days—Schult, Utakata, and Louis Arneb.

Beatrice and the other children were settled behind the main camp—where they waited in a tent that overlooked the battlefield from a hill, and although it sounded good to say that they protected the rear of the camp, at least Beatrice knew that this was just a pretense not to be expected of them.

Normally, it would be wise to leave non-combatants like children behind in the Fortress City.

Similarly, the non-combatants among the residents who had relocated from the Demon City with Yorna Mishigure and were unable to survive the battle, stayed away from the front lines and focused on cooperative support like logistics instead.

The reason why children did not do the same was because of their guardians.

Priscilla: “A skirmish is one thing; however, it would be pitiable to keep them at a distance when it comes to the big stage. The fringes of the battlefield shall be acceptable to me. Wherever you may be, you shall not mistake my brilliance.”

Mizelda: “Utakata is one of the Shudraq. Cowards who turn their back on the battlefield and the hunting grounds are not fit to be a member of the Shudraqian people. Naturally, they’ll be taken to the battlefield.”

These were the respective statements of Schult and Utakata’s guardians; opinions that could not be dissuaded since Schult and Utakata were both highly determined.

Both may have spoken from different morals and beliefs, but Beatrice had no right to interfere as long as the parties involved were in agreement for the time being.

To be honest, as a Great Spirit, Beatrice had not been pleased with the situation in which she and these children were being treated as a package. Nevertheless, since everyone in the camp had their own role to play, it was only logical that Beatrice was assigned here considering how restrained her actions were.

The role entrusted to her was—

Louis: “Uu, au.”

Like Schult and Utakata, Louis had also been ordered to stay behind in the tent.

Beatrice: “…”

Except her treatment was distinctly different from that of other young children.

Unlike with Schult and Utakata, there was no obvious guardian; however, the main focus was “keep an eye on a certain person”.

Of course, that was the Sin Archbishop. The danger would never diminish, no matter what those who knew her in the Empire said.

So, unlike the other children, Louis was the only one they had no choice, they could not leave her by her lonesome.

Otto: “Currently, she is a bomb with the least inclination to make a move. Beatrice-chan, I do not wish to burden you too much, but please keep an eye on her. We cannot tell Emilia-sama or Garfiel about this, at least we need to remain level-headed.”

Had been Otto’s statement before he decided to participate in the full-scale rebellion.

It may have been a precaution so that Beatrice would not be discouraged by the helplessness of having no role to play and staying in wait to conserve her energy, but it was also an unsettling statement because she started losing the ground under her feet.

The fact that he purposely tried to keep a calm look on his face was unsettling. —Both Petra and Frederica had the same concerns, so perhaps they could have done something about it.

In any case—

Beatrice: “You shouldn’t fidget around so much, in fact. Calm down, I suppose.”

Utakata: “Bae, is awake?”

Beatrice: “Betty has been awake the whole time, in fact… Also, that name you used is unpleasant, I suppose. It kind of makes one feel like they’re being Akanbe’d, in fact.”

There were no beds in the camp tent to lie on, and no lap of Emilia nor Petra to borrow either. Consequently, Utakata’s lips pouted at Beatrice, who had had her eyes closed as she sat on a simple chair.

Opening her eyes thinly at the reaction, she looked at the three restless people in the camp.

Schult was anxious, Utakata couldn’t handle the fighting spirit, and it was hard to tell what was going in Louis’s head as she impatiently bounced her shoulders at each sound of the battle.

Beatrice: “…”

Looking at the behavior alone, there appeared to be nothing suspicious about Louis.

A child who was simply hypersensitive to changes in her surroundings—other carefree people, who were unaware of the threat of Gluttony, would have inadvertently regarded them as a normal child.

But that was not the case for Beatrice.

Beatrice: “Emilia and everyone else are doing their best to help Subaru and the others, I suppose.”

The reason Emilia and her group were willing to intervene in this rebellion and fight for their lives, despite having no obligation to do so, was that they were likely to find their friends, Subaru and Rem, there.

If Beatrice was unable to fight alongside them, she would at least be able to cut down on distractions by keeping a close eye on Louis.

So, Beatrice braced herself through shallow breathing and—

Louis: “Uu?”

Beatrice: “…You, what are you up to, in fact?”

Beatrice’s lips pursed, as a small hand caressed her head. She glanced at Louis, who was looking at her with lowered eyebrows.

For a moment, her body stiffened at the risk of being touched by Louis’s hand, but she did not feel threatened by her, nor did Louis make any gesture to snatch Beatrice’s “name” away.

As far as Beatrice knew, Gluttony required calling out the other person’s “name” and eating it in order to activate the Authority, but Louis’ mouth never even uttered the right sounds to begin with.

Of course, if Louis only required awareness, there was still a possibility for her to activate the Authority; so Beatrice was nervous about Louis moving the hand that touched her head to her mouth.

If Louis ever showed the slightest gesture to eat Beatrice’s “name,” then—.

Utakata: “Bae, your face is scary. Do you still hate Lou?”

Beatrice: “What a way to comment on Betty’s adorable face, I suppose. Besides, Betty does not hate this girl, in fact… Despising would be more fitting, I suppose.”

At the sight of Beatrice glaring at Louis, Utakata pushed up both of her own eyes with her fingers while saying her face isn’t adorable and Beatrice let her true feelings come out in the end.

So yes, I find myself hating Louis.

Not just Louis, but the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony in general. —

Everything that caused Subaru and the others to suffer.

Beatrice: “Regretful, in fact.”

For the Emilia camp, and above all for Subaru, Gluttony’s biggest victim had been none other than Rem. Watching Subaru suffer over the girl who was indefinitely asleep, made Beatrice constantly regret the time wasted before she had been contracted with him; when she was indifferent to the world around her.

Wondering what could have been.

If Beatrice had opened up earlier and shown a willingness to cooperate with Subaru and the others, things might have turned out differently. Not allowing the White Whale, the Witch Cult, and the like to do whatever they wanted; Subaru would not have ended up displaying such a neverending expression of sorrow beside Rem as she continued to sleep.

That was why she decided to never let Subaru suffer like that again, and stay by his side for the rest of his life; yet here she was.

After being separated from Subaru, she could not help Emilia and the other members of the group to the fullest extent because she was forced to conserve energy. —The meaning of her existence was in tatters.

Schult: “Bea, Beatrice-chan, you can’t talk like that to Louis-sama…”

Beatrice: “Betty doesn’t feel sorry for her, I suppose. You’re being imprudent to begin with, in fact. Why do you refer to Betty as “Chan” when the others are called “Sama,” I suppose? You lack respect, in fact.”

Schult: “Ugh… I’m terribly sorry, Beatrice-chan.”

Picking up a sense of danger, Schult interjected as she stared at him.

How did Schult, who did not waver despite being terrified, see Beatrice? Could it be that he thought she was a little girl since she had been asleep all this time?

Beatrice: “In any case, do not fatigue Betty, I suppose. The whole purpose of being left here is to prevent everyone here from doing anything unnecessary, in fact. As much as a pain it is to do exactly that…”

Louis: “Uu.”

Beatrice: “It is much better than letting you run amok, I suppose.”

Beatrice grabbed Louis’s hand resting on her head and made the startled Louis sit down in the chair right next to her.

In the end, she decided to hold on to Louis’s hand and not let go of it.

Beatrice: “You too, in fact. Schult, stop moping around, and Utakata, if you do not have anything to do, just take care of your bow, I suppose. So…”

???: “—It appears that there is no need for me to interject.”

Beatrice: “Wah…?”

As she was dealing with the restless children, she suddenly heard a calm voice enter the camp tent. When she looked, she saw a man with curly hair, Zikr Osman, peeking inside.

Beatrice furrowed her brow at his appearance since he was supposed to be at the main camp, commanding alongside Abel.

Utakata: “Zee! We’ve been busy, but now you’re here! It’s time for Uu and the others!”

Beatrice: “You wish, in fact…! But what business do you have, I suppose?”

Zikr: “My apologies Miss Utakata, but it’s not your time. However, there is a possibility that we may move the camp at a later date, so I thought I would let you know in advance.”

Schult: “Moving the camp, you say?”

Zikr’s intellectual, round eyes made Schult tilt his head. Zikr nodded “yes” in response, as he pointed at the battlefield behind him.

Zikr: “Currently, we are devoting our forces to breaching the city walls, but once a bastion has been opened, we will venture forth to the Crystal Palace in the Imperial Capital. At that time, the commander must also go to the front.”

Beatrice: “Abel does not seem capable of fighting, in fact. He is safer in the rear, concentrating on giving orders, I suppose.”

Zikr: “You are right… however, then the troops will not follow us. In the case of us paving the way for His Excellency the Emperor, then no one would allow him to sit on the throne.”

Beatrice: “—. Such bothersome national ideals, in fact.”

The fundamental principle of the Vollachian Empire, was that the people of the Empire must be strong.

However, this apparently applied even to a leader taking over the nation. If the supreme leader did not possess any strength to boast of, they would be overthrown by their subordinates in the blink of an eye.

Zikr: “Yes, it’s bothersome. But that is what our homeland is about.”

Shaking his head gently, a slightly wry smile appeared on Zikr’s mouth.

It was hard for Beatrice to discern what emotions were being mixed in there. He may not have been entirely comfortable with it, but neither was he negative about it.

Schult: “Zikr-sama, could it be you are heading into battle?”

Utakata: “Zee?”

Suddenly, beside Beatrice, who was watching Zikr’s lips, Schult asked him a question, while Utakata called out to him in a quiet voice.

At the children’s gaze, Zikr raised his eyebrows slightly, then,

Zikr: “As you have guessed, I will also be participating. Even though we outnumber them, we are still at a disadvantage in terms of “generals” below General Second-Class, so we have to change that situation.”

Beatrice: “…Why is that, I suppose?”

Zikr: “—? Pardon?”

Beatrice: “Why do you bother to come here, in fact? In your position, you could have just ordered your men to do it, I suppose. What purpose is there in you showing up in front of Betty and the others, in fact?”

Zikr: “Oh, that’s what you mean.”

If one was about to head into battle, one would want to be even more focused at this point in time.

Nevertheless, Zikr showed up at a camp tent full of children, who could not be left behind on this battlefield.

When he was asked his reason, Zikr put up an embarrassed smile,

Zikr: “There are only men at the main camp since the women of Shudraq are also on the front line. If we are in need of encouragement before going into battle, only women can make you truly exhilarated.”

Beatrice: “Huh?”

Schult: “I see! Certainly, Utakata-sama and Louis-sama are here, as well as Beatrice-chan!”

Hearing his unexpected answer, Beatrice’s eyes widened. In contrast to Beatrice’s reaction, Schult looked convinced, and Utakata nodded with her short arms folded.

Then she turned to the astonished Beatrice and said,

Utakata: “Give it up. Zee, it’s been like this from the start.”

Beatrice: “It, It was a big mistake to think this guy was the only normal one, I suppose…”

The signs were there. For some reason, he was called a “coward,” and instead of trying to argue about it, he was proud of it. However, there was no reason for her to get deeply involved, so she just didn’t say anything.

As a result, Zikr’s eccentricities ended up on display at the last minute, with it resulting in an awkward situation—.

Zikr: “Besides, if you are aware of what is behind you, you have a better chance of not getting lost.”

Beatrice: “—. You, have a family, in fact?”

Zikr: “A mother and numerous sisters. But when I joined this side, their position became much worse. It’s a terrible misfortune for my family.”

Zikr was originally a “General” on the side of the Empire as a General Second-Class. Since he defected, it was only natural that his family would be affected.

Zikr was prepared for that and still considered it worthwhile to choose this side. Beatrice wondered if Abel was worthy of this choice, but no one but the man himself knew the reasons.

She was simply curious.

Beatrice: “What is it you fight for, I suppose?”

Zikr: “…”

Beatrice: “You are not supposed to be like those guys who fight for the sake of fighting, in fact. Why is that, I suppose?”

A simple soldier may have been fine with this, which made the

Vollachian Empire such a terrifying place since many of its warriors were of a similar mindset, but that was not the case for a "General," much less Zikr.

At Beatrice's perception, Zikr raised a thick eyebrow in slight contemplation, then,

Zikr: "Of course, it is for the sake of the future of the Vollachian Empire for which I place my faith and to which I owe my loyalty."

With a strong voice, he replied, and then he continued with, "Of course,"

Zikr: "I am a "coward," after all, so I doubt I could resist. So, may I ask you, Miss Beatrice?"

Beatrice: "…What, in fact?"

Zikr: "The obvious. —The blessing of a lovely maiden."

As he said this, Zikr pulled out the sword from his side and presented it to Beatrice.

After narrowing her eyes and looking down at the proffered item, Beatrice sighed and,

Beatrice: "For the record, Betty does not know much about the proper etiquette, I suppose."

Zikr: "In such matters the feelings are what's most important. As long as the giver and the receiver's hearts are in tune with each other, the etiquette is of no significance."

Beatrice: "Since when are our hearts in tune with each other, in fact? Good grief…"

Muttering, Beatrice accepted the sword. In front of Beatrice, Zikr reverently dropped his head and kneeled down.

His seriousness reminded Beatrice of a ceremony she had attended one day when Subaru was knighted by Emilia, and she followed her example.

With the sword she received, she tapped each of the kneeling Zikr's shoulders once.

Beatrice: "To see this through properly, I suppose. For the sake of no one else's but your own wish."

Zikr: "As you command."

At Beatrice's blessing, Zikr looked up in somber acknowledgment. He sheathed the sword returned to him by Beatrice and looked towards Utakata and the others by his side.

Seeing the look in his eyes, Utakata called out, "Zee,"

Utakata: "Uu is a Shudraqian warrior, so we don't do things like Bae. A send-off in the style of a warrior."

As she said that, Utakata pulled out the knife from her waist. With the knife made from the tusk of a beast she cut a thin slice of skin from her palm to cause a small bleeding.

Beside Schult's pained face, Utakata gently pressed her blood-soaked palm against the armor Zikr wore, marking it with her handprint.

Utakata: "Shudraqian blood, the blood of strong warriors. Make Zee strong, too."

Zikr: "With gratitude."

Schult: "Uh, well, I can't think of anything like Beatrice-chan or Utakata-sama, so I'll cheer for you! Hurray! Hurray! Zikr-sama! I'll be there!"

In response to Utakata's action, Schult also shouted a loud cheer to Zikr. Zikr accepted it with a smile and stood up in place.

And then—

Zikr: "Uh-oh."

Louis: "Au, Uuu"

Louis slipped out of Beatrice's hands and hugged Zikr's waist as he stood up. Zikr was startled by the little girl's embrace, as he patted her on the shoulder with a frown.

In Beatrice's eyes, Louis' behavior was an indication of positive feelings towards Zikr. The fact that she could not control her at a moment's notice was also because there was no sign of unpleasantness.

Zikr: "Zikr Osman, as I depart for battle. —Please, remain in good health."

Schult: "May you have success in battle!"

Breaking free from Louis' embrace, Zikr exited the tent with a cheerful look on his face. Schult waved his hand, while Utakata narrowed her eyes as they watched him go.

As Beatrice watched Zikr's back grow distant, she understood that he headed into battle fully prepared to die. —Just like it was the case four hundred years ago.

When war was happening in faraway places.

However, there were frequent visitors to her mother's mansion, and they all sought the Witch's knowledge and cooperation. All with a strong desire to improve bad situations.

That being noted, it was up to every single person to realize whatever advice one received from the knowledgeable.

After seeing the possibilities within the future of her mother's advice, many turned their backs on the mansion and headed toward their own futures. —Zikr's back appeared to be just like one's from that time.

Beatrice: "You."

Louis: "U?"

Watching Zikr leave, Beatrice addressed Louis.

Turning around, Louis stared back at Beatrice with her already wide eyes becoming more wide upon her childish face. Completely thoughtless—no, that would be a mistake.

Yet, looking at her face, which seemed to be devoid of any plan, she asked,

Beatrice: “Which side are you really on, in fact?”

2

???: “—Hk?!”

With a full swing, the pair of ice swords struck her chest, and Madelyn, her eyes wide open, flew a great deal backwards.

As Emilia chased after her, she called out “Thank you!” to the beings that prevented Madelyn’s movement—to the sculptures of Natsuki Subaru made from ice.

—To fight alongside the seven soldiers of ice was a tactic Emilia had developed as a last resort when she had taken Volcanica’s Trial at Pleiades Watchtower.

On her own, she may have lacked manpower.

Without time to waste on her vague apprehensions, these ice soldiers were the result brought about by her confidence that “I’ve been watching Subaru closely!”.

As for an official name, she intended on asking Subaru to provide one, once she showed them to him.

Emilia: “So for now, just do your best as soldiers!”

There was no direct reply to Emilia’s words, but one by one, the seven ice soldiers pumped their fists up, giving a response to Emilia’s cheers.

While she thought of that reassuringly, Emilia and the ice soldiers drew near Madelyn, who had been blown away. It probably looked just like a scene where eight people were bullying a small girl, but

—.

Madelyn: “GAAAAARR!!”

If one were to see the howling Madelyn swinging her arms, blowing away the upper bodies of two ice soldiers, such a leisurely impression probably would not come to mind.

Even without her Flying Winged Blade, Madelyn’s dragon claws and superhuman strength were exceedingly frightening.

Emilia’s ice had been made hard and firm, and even if it was not to the extent of iron, it was at least as hard as a strong boulder. If one were to carelessly strike it barehanded, it was hard enough to reasonably break their hand instead.

So easily, so easily had it been destroyed by Madelyn’s fingers merely wrapping themselves around it.

Emilia: “I’m sorry.”

The soldiers resembling Subaru were destroyed, and Emilia could hear the screams of Beatrice in her mind.

Apologizing to the Beatrice inside her head, Emilia remained vigilant for Madelyn’s counteroffensive. While she was vigilant, she chose not to back down, but instead to continue stepping forward.

Emilia: “Hiyah! Yah yah! Teryaa~!”

Brandishing a pair of ice swords, she proceeded to rain down attacks on Madelyn, who had not been able to fully halt the momentum of the initial strike. Although, when the pair of swords struck the shoulders of Madelyn, her arms widespread, they shattered into pieces.

The tough skin of the dragonkin remained unyielding to the sword slashes of ice. She needed to use even heavier attacks.

Emilia: “With this…!”

The shattered pair of swords became shards of ice, and what Emilia had made to replace them was a large ice mallet.

As Emilia brandished it, two of the kneeling ice soldiers linked arms to create a foothold before her eyes, then she stepped on that and jumped up high. Gaining speed immediately after, Emilia drove the ice mallet into Madelyn with enough force to make her own body spin vertically.

Madelyn: “—Hk.”

Without any defense, Madelyn received Emilia’s blow directly on her head. Landing before Madelyn, who had turned downwards as of the impact, Emilia used the recoil to put power into a second strike—

Emilia: “Huh.”

As soon as she gripped it tightly, the handle of the ice mallet shattered. —No, it was not just the handle, the entire thing had been destroyed.

The ice mallet that had struck Madelyn’s head was the one unable to bear the opponent’s hardness. Emilia widened her eyes upon seeing that, and simultaneously, the claws below her eyes rose sharply.

The moment the claws moved within the edges of her vision, a small shield of ice intercepted its trajectory.

Emilia: “Oww!”

However, the ice shield was smashed at that instant, and cries of pain erupted.

After having poured energy into her body at an earned moment, the side of her head was slashed by the claw tips, and at the slight impact of her silver hair being grazed, Emilia’s vision greatly and violently shook.

Nevertheless, the attack did not end with that.

Madelyn: “Do not mock this dragon!!”

The howling Madelyn raised her claws overhead. The wind of destruction that followed turned over the surface of the ground.

She promptly flew backwards as to avoid the claws, but the wind that arrived afterward struck her, and Emilia's body was flicked away, having been hit in kind. Engulfed by the ground turning over like waves, Emilia's body bounced, bounced, being blown away.

Emilia: "—Ru-ru-ruuu!!"

With eyes just like those of a dragon or a snake, Madelyn caught up, and raised her Flying Winged Blade overhead. As it swung down, it accelerated with aim for Emilia's lower back.

In an instant, Emilia funneled power into her abdomen to try and withstand the oncoming strike, but she immediately concluded that it was something that she must not be hit by—reaching out her hand, she tightly grasped a cold and solid sensation.

Emilia: "…"

Her arm was jerked up with force, and Emilia's body, now having been pulled up, escaped the trajectory of the Flying Winged Blade.

The one which had done that was an ice soldier who caught up to the blown away Emilia as fast as it could, and pulled her arm while diving into a forward somersault.

The ice soldier forcibly pulled Emilia up, and heaved her away just after. Emilia's body spun around as it was sent flying, and in her field of vision, the ice soldier was overpowered and shattered by the Flying Winged Blade which she had evaded—.

Emilia: "Subaru—!!"

It was not Subaru, but Emilia had called out with the feeling that Subaru had received harm.

Catching up to Emilia, who had again been sent flying, was an ice soldier different to the one which had been destroyed. Without a pause, she was thrown over to the next ice soldier, received, then thrown over, and was escaping from the dragonkin.

Madelyn: “Enough! Quit friggin’ messing around!!”

With an angry bellow and a flash, the solid earth fissured where it had been stepped on by Madelyn, her face red, and with her firm foothold, she threw the Flying Winged Blade with a tremendous and ferocious vigor.

The Flying Winged Blade revolved at a velocity so intense and extreme that to the eye, it did not appear as anything but a disk. It was a disk that cut down anything and everything in its path, and clad in a strong wind, it approached Emilia.

Emilia: “I’m counting on you!”

Before that could reach her, the ice soldiers, receiving Emilia’s voice, rushed out one by one.

They lined up in single-file, and wedged themselves into the gap between the flying Emilia and the disc flying towards her. All of them took an ice weapon in their hands, and used them to fight against the Flying Winged Blade.

—As a result, the sounds of ice shattering at high speed chained together, and the Subaru ice soldiers were completely annihilated.

However, just before each Subaru was shattered, they each landed as much of a hit as they could onto the Flying Winged Blade.

The change in the danger of the Flying Winged Blade was something that ordinary people would not know, but that revolution had very slightly, just a little, a wee bit, weakened. She felt like it had weakened.

Emilia: “Umm! It weakened!!”

She declared it in a loud voice, and it truly appeared like it had become like that.

Using the leeway that the ice Subarus had made for her, Emilia equipped her legs with thick-soled ice boots, placed the two arms of her airborne body on the ground, and met the oncoming Flying Winged Blade with her two legs.

Emilia was well-aware. —That legs were just a little stronger than arms.

Emilia: “Hiyah, yaaah—!”

Firmly clenching her teeth, Emilia extended her knees using all of her might.

The direct impact from the Flying Winged Blade delivered a shock to Emilia’s entire body, and from head to toe, all the bones in her body were creaking. Firmly withstanding that, withstanding it, withstanding, she would withstand it to the end.

Fully extending her legs, which were experiencing resistance, even while crevices started to form in her ice boots, Emilia’s kick shot the Flying Winged Blade up into the sky.

Madelyn: “Wha?!”

It seemed like it was beyond Madelyn’s expectations for it to have been stopped, so she raised her voice in surprise. Facing that, Emilia got up and leaped, reaching her hand out to the Flying Winged Blade which had been kicked up.

She tightly grasped the edge of the Flying Winged Blade, and into that arm, she poured a considerable amount of strength.

Emilia: “This time… I’m returning the favor!”

The Flying Winged Blade was much heavier than it looked, but Emilia was also someone who possessed indomitable power.

It was difficult with a single arm, so she twisted her body in order to change to a two handed grip. From there, with all her might, she resolutely flung the Flying Winged Blade away with a “Hiyah!”.

Madelyn: “—Hk!”

Seeing the Flying Winged Blade flung away, Madelyn widened her eyes.

Receiving the vigor of rapid spinning, the Flying Winged Blade soared. Although it paled in comparison to when Madelyn had thrown it, the dangerous weapon still cut through the wind as it flew.

Flying, flying, flying—towards an incorrect direction, it had flown away amazingly.

Emilia: “Ummm.”

Madelyn: “…You, what the frig’, is your intention.”

Emilia: “I may have messed up…”

She was trying to return the favor and deal damage, but she was completely unable to handle the Flying Winged Blade well, so it had flown away. On the forehead of Madelyn, who had been angered by that, a vein had begun to bulge very quickly.

Immediately after, Madelyn’s cheeks stiffened, and she stepped forward in order to chase after the Flying Winged Blade which had flown away.

However—

Emilia: “That’s a no-no!”

Then, Emilia, her hands outstretched, created a wall of ice ahead of where Madelyn was proceeding.

The wall of ice erected from the ground was thick, and she had also made it fairly long horizontally. Going around it or jumping over it, neither feat would be managed so easily.

She had not been able to utilize the Flying Winged Blade very well, but it would be dangerous if Madelyn were to wield it.

It was not as though that was her aim, but she thought that the current situation of it being at a distance was the most beneficial.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you retrieve that weapon. If you are to continue, then it shall be without that.”

Madelyn: "…"

Emilia: "If you surrender, I will properly accept that. Actually, if you do that, it would be reaaally helpful. What will you do? Will you continue?"

Emilia posed a question to the back of Madelyn, who cast her eyes downward as she faced the wall of ice.

If Madelyn, who had lost her weapon, were to surrender, that would be the best scenario. In order to get Madelyn to believe she was at a disadvantage, Emilia once again created the Natsuki Subarus of ice, which had once been annihilated, in her surroundings, and she crossed her arms as she stood.

Eight against one, this time, in a state without her weapon, Madelyn was in a much more unfavorable position.

With all this, then…, Emilia was enthusiastically thinking as such.

But alas—

Madelyn: "—Why the frig' do you think that I, the dragon, would give up?"

Muttering, Madelyn gently placed her hand on the wall of ice before her eyes.

Gazing at that gesture, Emilia reflexively caught her breath with an "Ah". —With a crack, the very moment that high-pitched noise reverberated, the entirety of the gigantic ice wall began to fissure with the pattern of a spiderweb.

The origin was naturally Madelyn's palm, so the fissures that extended across the entire ice wall were centered on her.

Emilia had gone all out when creating that ice wall.

The hardness and density of the ice were just as previously mentioned, and even though it was not something that could be destroyed easily.

Emilia: “Madelyn, you…”

Madelyn: “When talking to you humans, this dragon’s head gets friggin’ weird. You, that healer, that senile old fool, all of you are in this dragon’s way…”

Emilia: “…”

Turning her back, without revealing her downcast face, mixed into Madelyn’s trembling voice were complex and intricate emotions. Anger, sorrow, and all sorts of other things.

It seemed just as if Madelyn herself did not understand which of her own emotions was the strongest.

What she had spoken of were those who were in her way.

Of course, Emilia understood that she herself was in a position confronting Madelyn. Outside of Emilia, the ones she called a healer and a senile old fool, did they also happen to be her enemies?

As a dragonkin, as an ally of the Empire, Madelyn opposed Emilia and the others, and went on a rampage.

Emilia: “Madelyn, for what purpose do you fight?”

Madelyn: “…”

At the question, Madelyn swayed her head to a tilt.

Her two black horns at a slant, Madelyn’s golden eyes stared at Emilia from above her shoulders. Though she was getting a horrifying, blood-curdling sensation, Emilia did not avert her gaze.

Going against the instinct to turn away, Emilia fixed her eyes on Madelyn.

Thinking about it now, she should have done it sooner, she should have tried to talk like this from the very start.

Both this time and last time, even though Madelyn, who was blocking in the way, had been brimming with fighting spirit, Emilia had gotten caught up in it, and suddenly begun an attack, but—

Emilia: “If we can talk with each other, then I really think that talking is the best scenario. Madelyn, why do you fight? For the sake of whom?”

Madelyn: “…What about you? Why?”

Emilia: “…”

Wondering if it would really be necessary to say that, Emilia realized that Madelyn was trying to continue.

The fact that she had responded with that, was something very difficult for Emilia. The reason that Madelyn had given Emilia something she must speak of, that unfortunate occurrence was something which Emilia could not be prepared for.

If Emilia were to refuse her dialogue, and if the result of that refusal was claws being swung, Emilia would wield an ice weapon as expected, and would need to oppose Madelyn.

In that manner, upon Emilia’s cheeks stiffening,

Madelyn: “You, why do you resist? There’s no friggin’ chance you’ll come out victorious in resisting this dragon.”

Emilia: “—ah.”

Madelyn: “Why… do you… why do all of you friggin’ resist?”

That was the question posed from Madelyn’s side.

Unknowing of Emilia’s circumstances, she responded as such to words she should have brushed off.

On the contrary, being questioned about that, Emilia cautioned her own slow-mind.

She thought she could not respond with anything. However, it was not like that. Just as Madelyn had said, if Emilia could not get Madelyn to speak, then she herself should be the one to open up her heart first.

After all, this battlefield was harsh, so Emilia prioritized the things she herself wanted to do, and the things she herself wanted to say. But even so, at just this moment, for what reason did she think to try and have good manners?

Why, did she fight? For what reason, was she here?

The answer to all of that was—

Emilia: “I came here to meet my treasured knight… No, everybody’s treasured knight.”

Saying that, Emilia touched the shoulder of one of the ice soldiers—the imitations of Subaru, directly next to her. She thought she had made them well. She had replicated his hairstyle and “tracksuit” quite proficiently.

Though, no matter how well they imitated him, Subaru’s reliability could not be reproduced.

His positive words, his reliable attitude, his kindness which gave her delight, just about everything.

Natsuki Subaru’s Natsuki Subaru-ness, just thinking about it made Emilia’s chest grow pleasantly warm, and it was impossible for anyone except the person in question to possess.

Emilia: “He’s a reaaally treasured person. That person, and the girl who should be with that person, many people are awaiting their return, so that’s why I am here. For that purpose, I’m trying my very best.”

Madelyn: “…”

Emilia: “The reason I fight, that’s it. Madelyn, what about you?”

She probably had someone, or something, which she wanted to protect.

If that was the case, they could make a promise to not hurt the other's treasured thing, and they could probably stop fighting.

Subaru and Rem, it would open the path to reach the two who she wished to bring back.

Those hopes and wishes that Emilia held were—

Madelyn: "—Balleroy Temeglyph."

Emilia: "…That, name is?"

Madelyn: "That… was the name of the man who was to be this dragon's darling. —He is this dragon's entire reason for fighting."

—They were betrayed by Madelyn, who fought for the sake of someone who had already been lost.

Emilia: "…"

Hearing her voice lose all spirit, Emilia caught her breath.

She was unable to find the right words to say at the spur of the moment, and because she was not close enough to reach her hand out, Emilia could not make it in time.

For that reason—

Madelyn: "—Kill the man who killed Balleroy. That is this dragon's long-standing desire."

A violent sound rang out, as Madelyn crushed the ice wall with her grip.

There was no other way to describe it than "crushed it with her grip". She tightened her grip with the hand placed on the wall, and from there, the destruction spread throughout the entire ice wall; it had been shattered in one fell swoop.

Taking the Flying Winged Blade present on the other side, Madelyn looked to the figure facing her once more, and while Emilia digested those bitter feelings, she and the ice soldiers headed towards Madelyn.

Having lost someone dear to her, the dragonkin girl was desperate to fill the empty hole in her chest. Stepping forward to chase her, that was the moment.

Madelyn: “MEZOREIAAAAAAAA—!!”

Facing the sky as she bathed in the fragments of the shattered ice wall, Madelyn cried out.

As though it was ripping apart the sparkling ice shards as they danced down, the loud voice echoed throughout the sky of skies. Hearing that, Emilia’s eyes grew wide, and she looked to the sky.

The sound Madelyn had made, Emilia had heard it once before.

Her lips had previously spun that sound, and at the time when it was spun, at that time.

Emilia: “At that time, there was a reaaally big attack.”

A white corona rained down incessantly, and mowing down the Fortress City in the blink of an eye, the very terrain had been altered.

Since Emilia was together with Priscilla at that time, they were somehow able to defend against it. Supposing the same thing happened here, Emilia wondered if she would be able to stand a chance against it on her own.

That would be very difficult. Above the head of the panicked Emilia, the same thing did not occur.

However, despite the fact that the same thing had not occurred, Emilia could not greatly rejoice.

After all—

???: “—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies.”

Spreading its wings of pure white, a body of colossal scale, clad in the very essence of an overcast sky—The Cloud Dragon Mezoreia, invoked by Madelyn Eschart, swooped down upon the skies of the Imperial Capital.

Vic.ll2o

Chapter 95:
Enemies on All Bastions

1

At that moment, everyone on the battlefield caught sight of a being clad in clouds of pure white, having descended to above the ground.

Excessively magnificent and majestic, the transcendent being that, from the foundations of its existence, was in a completely different dimension from worthless mediocrity—Everyone understood that with just a glance.

???: "—That's, a Dragon."

Widening his emerald green eyes, Garfiel muttered beside the crumbled rampart.

After his fight to the death with Kafma Irulux ended, while taking rough breaths with his shoulders, just as he looked around searching for the battlefield where his next duty would be, that had happened.

In the distance, a colossal presence that made it look like the sky itself had fallen, had appeared on the battlefield where the most fighting spirits were flaring up in this Empire, at the decisive battle on the bastion which had been frozen white.

Garfiel: "Emilia-sama…"

Possessing a gate with absurd capacity, using her mana without needing to be subtle, taking the heat away from the world was undoubtedly the work of Emilia getting serious.

The five bastions of the ramparts, if she was fighting an enemy guarding one of them, their opponent would be a Divine General or a being of equal strength, even at the minimum, that opponent would be on the same level as Kafma.

Even though that alone was enough for them to be an enemy he did not want to make Emilia fight, it had been particularly absurd that the additional fighting force that had appeared there was a mythical being.

Garfiel: “Did th’ Flying Dragon General call ‘em down? Shit, I gotta get her outta there right now…!”

Gnashing his fangs, Garfiel decided in his heart to shift battlefields.

Emilia fighting, and letting Emilia fight, were simply not connected. Emilia herself would probably object, but letting her fight was a distressing decision for the camp.

Originally, Emilia should have been in a position overseeing everything from a place without concern for injury.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self wouldn’t be able to face Captain.”

It was natural that Emilia would not want to leave the whole situation to someone else.

He thought that narrow-sightedness, in a good sense, and thoughtfulness were desirable traits. But, he could not permit all of that, and could not let her do what she wanted.

It went without saying that Garfiel was a military officer of the Emilia camp, and his role was to repel all the sparks that rained down on the camp, and defeat the enemies standing in their way.

Garfiel: “…”

Closing his eyes, Garfiel quietly ascertained his own condition.

He got severely wounded from his battle with Kafma, his entire body had been mangled, his insides had been spread outwards, he had burned his own body to kill the “insects” that had nested there, and yet Garfiel was still alive and well.

It was a situation where the only thing he had to boast about was that he was alive and well.

Garfiel: “It may be exaggeratin’ to say I’m full of life… but I’ll do it.”

Even now, he was absorbing power through the soles of his feet planted on the earth, and through invoking healing magic with all of his might, Garfiel’s body healed at a furious pace, both inside and out.

Normally, this would be a load on the body that could potentially reduce his life span, but the events in the Watergate City forced Garfiel to break out of his shell, both physically and mentally.

Though it was not visible, Garfiel tore through the shell that was certainly there, and stood tall.

With the steam rising from his many bloody wounds, as if his body were truly blazing hot, Garfiel settled his resolve to face the Dragon in the distance.

Garfiel: “Everyone! My amazin’ self tore down the rampart! Hurry the fuck up and get yer asses in there!!”

Opening his mouth, Garfiel howled at the group of rebels who were watching him from afar.

They were the group that had challenged Kafma before Garfiel, and were mowed down. Although a considerable number of them, including those wounded but supported by their comrades, should still be capable of functioning as a fighting force, but they had all stayed away from Garfiel and Kafma’s battlefield, and remained motionless even after the battle had been concluded.

There were those that might say that this was just because they were overwhelmed by Garfiel and Kafma’s battle.

However, it was not just that.

???: “You’re the one who broke through the rampart! So, you should be the first to go through!”

Garfiel: “…”

???: “Brave warrior, we respect your might! No one, whoever they may be, would dare to desecrate that.”

One of the Centaur People had thus gallantly answered Garfiel’s words.

Having defeated Kafma, Garfiel deserved to be the first to climb over the ramparts. That was why they had stopped, and fixedly waited for him to cross over the rampart.

It seemed that this was not his opinion alone, but the opinion of everyone who saw the duel just prior. Those who started the battle for selfish reasons, hidden within them was the historic warrior’s pride.

It seemed that in their judgment, Garfiel’s way of fighting had been radiant.

Their consideration, in and of itself, was heart-warming, but—

Garfiel: “My bad, but there’s somewhere my fuckin’ amazin’ self has gotta go. This ain’t the “Whipfrock who came back”. —It’s the one over there.”

Garfiel jerked his chin towards the white Dragon reigning over the distant sky.

In both the Pleiades Watchtower and the Fortress City of Guaral, there had been opportunities to meet one. Garfiel had continued to let them get away due to his poor timing, and he was finally in a position to take on a Dragon.

It was not that he wanted to fight it. It was an opponent that must be fought.

Rebels: “…”

After seeing Garfiel’s gesture, the rebels also gasped at the sight of the white Dragon.

It was a matter of course, but they had also become aware of its existence. Fearing that, though it was the unusual spirit of the

Imperial citizens to not bend their knees or hang their heads, whether or not they would challenge it was a different matter.

Garfiel would challenge it. Therefore—

Garfiel: “I’ll leave crossin’ the rampart to you guys.”

If the rebels crossed over the collapsed rampart and surged into the Imperial Capital, the situation would change.

If all five bastions were defended by the greatest military powers of the Empire, then there was also the possibility that the defenses were thin in the area around Emperor Vincent Vollachia, who should be in the Crystal Palace.

There was a possibility that a literal decisive blow could be fired through the big hole that he had opened in this rampart.

Garfiel: “That’s why—”

After handing over the vanguard of the attack on the Imperial Capital to the rebels, Garfiel would begin his battle with the white menace.

Then, it had happened when he had been about to embark towards the bastion where the Dragon was.

—Garfiel shuddered as all the hairs on his body stood on end.

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

Free from obstructive thoughts. He was free from obstructive thoughts.

Without hesitation, without question, following the sensation that his brain had brought to his attention, he unleashed a blow using the full force of his body.

The backhand blow of steel that was able to shatter rock, striking the wind dead, about to hit what lay ahead of his instincts—

???: “—Oh, so ya can see through my invisibility. Isn’t that a bit dangerous?”

Such a hoarse voice could be heard from beyond his strong fist.

Garfiel: “Kah.”

That instant, his backhand blow should have hit the shadow behind him.

Undoubtedly, there was a sensation of something touching the surface of his gauntlet. Nevertheless, a bitter sound escaped his own mouth, and Garfiel stared in shock as his thoughts were struck by that impact.

The impact had struck him in the back. Someone’s small foot or toe was perfectly placed on Garfiel’s back. An absurd kick—No, that was wrong.

???: “That was entirely yer own punch. I just let it pass through my body, and returned it to ya.”

A voice answered his doubt, and every bone in Garfiel’s body creaked as his eyes widened.

Whether it was true or a lie, Garfiel’s vision was greatly shaken as his internal organs and brain were jolted by the force equivalent to his blow using the full force of his body. Cuts, bruises, broken bones, and ruptured organs could all be healed immediately.

Even if he could not fully heal, he could bring it to a point where he could move through sheer force.

However, an attack that resonated throughout the core of his body could not be negated.

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

At the numbness of his whole body, he gritted his teeth, and Garfiel’s entire being was on alert for a follow-up attack. He moved his limbs, which were slow to react, and somehow managed to protect the vital points of his neck and head.

However, the follow-up he feared did not come.

Instead, what was done with the time for that follow-up was containment.

???: “Actually, it’d be a pain in the ass if they got past the wall and went inside.”

With a sigh mixed into his words, the pained cries of ten people rang out at once.

Exhorting his collapsed knees, what filled Garfiel’s vision as he raised his head was the group of rebels which had accepted his command and were moving to push their way into the Imperial Capital. Those lined up at the vanguard of their formation had fallen.

Centaur people, and beastmen, had their lives taken away in an instant by having black iron flying blades—throwing blades called kunai, punctured into their foreheads and chests.

Even if he were to rush in and cast a healing spell, he would not make it in time. It was an attack that caused instant death.

As warriors, they must have also had the ability to take on the Imperial Capital. Even if they were not as good as a General like Kafma—

???: “If ya die, you’re a small fry. What does it matter if you’re a warrior?”

Garfiel: “…”

???: “Kakakakka! Yer eyes look like ya aren’t too pleased, youngster. You’re also the one who busted down the rampart, aren’t ya? Ya know, it’s real troublin’ when dangerous guys keep coming out one after the other, isn’t it?”

The small shadow laughed with an open mouth and ran a finger through his long white eyebrows as he spoke.

At last, Garfiel kicked off the ground with his foot, and filling his vision as he moved in, was an old man even shorter than Garfiel, who himself was considered to be short.

However, an old man of small stature was not a very fitting description of this monster.

Garfiel: “Damn you…!”

???: “Oh, wait, wait, I’ll be yer opponent in a bit. Uh, there we go.”

Garfiel: “Huh?”

Garfiel glared at him with hostility, his hair standing on end, but the old man stuck out his arm, his right hand missing from the wrist, to hold him back.

Garfiel raised an eyebrow at the missing arm, and the old man shook his leg at the same time.

A moment later, not knowing what he had done, a horizontal sweeping kick drew a deep line in the earth. It also split the space between Garfiel, the old man, and the rebels behind him.

And then, the old man turned to the rebels on the other side of the line and told them.

???: “Try stepping over that line ta get over here. You’re all gonna die.”

Rebels: “—Hk.”

???: “My my, it’s a relief that ya guys are so attentive. I want the the young peeps of my village to learn from ya. Lately, they’ve been disobeyin’ me every time when I say something. I’m the village chief, aren’t I?”

Shrugging his thin shoulders, the old man chuckled, showing his white teeth.

It was an attitude of not caring at all about the threat he had made to the rebels just prior to this moment. However, everyone here was made to understand instinctively that the threat was neither a lie nor anything else.

Garfiel also understood. —Just who the old man in front of him was.

Garfiel: “The Vicious Old Man… Olbart Dunklekenn, ain’t ya?”

Olbart: “I say this every time someone calls me that, but I really don’t like it. It’s like slander, isn’t it?”

Garfiel: “—. What the fuck do ya think yer doin’ here?”

Towards the old man tilting his head—towards Olbart, Garfiel posed that question.

Olbart appeared carefree and natural, which was why Garfiel could not let his guard down in the slightest. Olbart stood behind Garfiel without any sign of his presence.

Right here, in the middle of this plain with good visibility.

Garfiel: “…”

It would still be understandable if he were out of sight, hiding behind a building, and approaching stealthily.

Even still, that was more than enough of a threat, in that case, he could be satisfied with the events that took place. However, how could he perceive a being that intruded into this space without a hint of a presence?

Though, he was a being that could not be perceived as anything but a threat.

Before the trembling Garfiel, Olbart raised an eyebrow with his unchanging attitude and let out a “Ho?”,

Olbart: “Why am I here, ya ask? Isn’t that how it always was? Even though it’s our job ta keep the rebels out, Kafma had the nerve ta be a failure, and now I hafta clean up his mess.”

Stating that, the old man pointed out Kafma lying on the ground with his arm missing a hand. Then, with an “Oops,” he retracted his right arm and pointed correctly with his left instead.

Olbart: “I drew the short end of the stick, seriously. That’s why I told ‘em that it would be dangerous if they didn’t bring out Chisha or call back Groovy, but sure enough, he had the nerve to lose.”

Garfiel: “Sure enough? Old man, you ain’t got the fuckin’ right to laugh at this guy.”

Olbart: “Ho?”

Olbart closed one eye and looked displeased. In order to obstruct the old man’s gaze, Garfiel wedged his way in between Olbart and Kafma, and exhaled a heated breath.

Kafma was an enemy. That would not change, but no one was qualified to speak about how Kafma fought except Garfiel, who had exchanged fists with him head-on.

Garfiel: “This guy was fuckin’ strong. My amazin’ self was just stronger.”

Olbart: “—? Well, ya I know that from just looking, yeah? I’m not gonna try and deny that, ya know. So just what are ya trying ta say, you?”

Gafiel: “I’m sayin’ I don’t like yer damn attitude! Is that how ya talk to a fellow General on yer own side?! Huh?!”

Opening his mouth wide, Garfiel snapped back with a howl. At the ferocious roar, Olbart frowned, and tilted his head.

Seeming like he was truly doubtful, the old man continued, “Do ya know?”,

Olbart: “I’m a General First-Class, Kafma’s a General Second-Class. We’re not even remotely the same.”

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

Unapologetically, Olbart’s remarks were just conveying the obvious facts. Garfiel's pupils narrowed as he felt an incomprehensible gap.

The moment the carnivorous beast determined his prey, he raised his tail and pounced on the old man.

He felt like he should pay respect to Kafma. However, he did not feel that for the enemy before his eyes.

The old man, too, neither wanted it nor would he give it.

Within battle, the things he placed value in differed to his opponent, and recognizing that—

Garfiel: "I'll fuckin' crush ya!!"

His arms, both raised overhead, closed in on Olbart.

With a strong arm that could not measure by feel, he wondered if it was different from when he smashed the ramparts, and it probably exceeded all the might he had used then; he had put enough destructive power into it so that it was more than enough to destroy that small old body.

Then, without letting him get away, his arms smashed into Olbart's head.

Boom, the impact of the crash shook the earth, and a cloud of dust ascended from the smashed ground as if there had been an explosion. The dust rained down upon the heads of the rebels who had been stopped by Olbart.

Perhaps, Olbart would be smashed to pieces after being struck by so much firepower.

However—

Garfiel: "Wha… Hk."

Garfiel's eyes widened at the sight before his eyes.

Before him, Garfiel's fists slammed into Olbart's head from both sides, as if sandwiching him. There was a definite impact and resistance, which Garfiel felt through the recoil in his arms.

Despite this, the old man, with his head caught between Garfiel's fists, showed his white teeth and laughed, and then,

Olbart: "Incredible, isn't it? I just released the power of yer attack onto the ground."

Garfiel: "—Ah."

Olbart: "Well, the ground exploded 'cause you've got some dangerous arm strength, though."

Immediately after finishing his words, the old man's face, trapped between his fists, slipped out from under. Garfiel followed him with his gaze, but,

Garfiel: "Gugh?!"

As his eyes followed Olbart, who should have slipped below, an impact struck the top of his head.

Even though Olbart should have crouched down, something had hit him from above.

Olbart: "Up when ya think it's down, down when ya think it's up, that's the basics, the basics."

Garfiel: "Ga, AAAAAHH—!!"

At the crouched Olbart's flippant words, Garfiel furiously swung his fists downwards. They thrust into Olbart's head of gray hair.

That moment, a sharp impact pierced the back of Garfiel's head, his back, and his buttocks.

Garfiel's fist, swinging downwards, whiffed, and struck the ground with a tremendous impact.

Instead, the voice of Olbart, who disappeared in an instant, was heard from directly above.

Olbart: “That’s why, if ya think I‘m below ya, I’ll be above. Those who don’t learn’ll be left behind, ya know?”

Exerting his body, he faced the voice and raised his arms overhead. The moment his fingertips caught hold of something, Garfiel swung it down forcefully, trying to smash it into the ground.

Smashing it into the ground, preventing its movement, and then struck it with all his might. He thought that if the feet were separated, then acrobatics like the ones before would not be possible—

Garfiel: “…”

The appeal from his fighting instincts ceased when he realized that it was not Olbart within the grasp of his fingers, but Kafma’s body that the old man had thrown over Garfiel’s head.

Stopping his movement to throw the body to the ground, Garfiel’s lips quivered.

At that instant—

Olbart: “Listen here, you, why do ya think there are fifty Second-Class Generals and only nine First-Class Generals? —It’s ‘cause we’re so stupidly strong.”

The voice and shock bore into Garfiel’s head from both left and right.

2

—As a massive flame descended, that wrath of the sky intended to consume the world in its entirety.

It gave Yorna the illusion that the world was being dyed in red before her eyes.

If one could greatly rouse its wrath, the world would probably take out all of the anger it had saved up to this point on that single individual.

The ground had already been turned to scorched earth, and the rebels and plants were all burned with the same method. That devastating firepower rained down upon them to scorch them down to their entrails the same way the corpses had been.

However, facing that, Yorna made not even the slightest movement, and,

Yorna: "—Yang Sword."

Priscilla: "My my, making your daughter use such a terribly rough thing."

The sound spun by Yorna's lips was the signal for the treasured sword of deep crimson to swing vertically.

It was a beautiful sword that would capture the eyes of those who saw it, burn their hearts, and even captivate their souls. That bewitching nature was only an accessory to the treasured sword, it was not even a sliver of its original purpose.

In other words, when it fulfilled its original reason for existing, the brilliance of the treasured sword would become even stronger.

Yorna: "…"

The Yang Sword, the tip of which was swung vertically upward to intercept the tremendous fire that was raining down upon them.

That instant, the mighty flames that had permeated their vision disappeared. —It was not that they were cut away. Quite literally, they had disappeared as if they had never even existed.

Priscilla: “My Yang Sword burns what I wish to burn and slashes only what I wish to slash.”

That logic was far too violent, far too irrational, and far too absurd of an imposition.

However, that sight had materialized before her eyes, and the inferno that seemed like it could destroy even the world vanished.

Pouring in an appropriate amount of power, she had released that great firepower with the intention to dampen their first move, but at the sight of its erasure with a single swing of a sword, even their opponent was not able to stay calm—

Priscilla: “Do not look down on her, for that is the Spirit Eater.”

Regardless of whether it was an explanation or a warning, it was impolite, and with those words Priscilla’s figure flew to the right.

Similar to Priscilla, flying to the opposing left, was Yorna—In between the two of them, a massive flash flood rushed through.

Yorna: “—Hk.”

It was as if the entire contents of a well had been unleashed, and Yorna, while successfully evading, felt that her enemy—that Arakiya had heightened her capabilities above her previous impression.

This was not the first time Yorna had fought Arakiya.

They had previously crossed paths just once before, during an “uprising” considered to be brought about by Yorna.

At that time, Vollachia’s strongest was looming behind Arakiya, and the stage was set in Chaosflame, where Yorna herself was in a perfect position to face them, so the preconditions were already variously different.

Of course, Yorna was serious about fighting, but her true intentions at the time were not really serious about killing them.

During past uprisings, especially the one which resulted in a clash with Arakiya, Yorna's goal was retribution against those who had meddled with the residents of the Demon City, and to make known the righteousness of doing so.

In other words, her objective was a kind of protest, and Vincent, who faced her across the board, must have been aware of this intention, and it was a clash in which a reconciliation seemed possible.

However, Arakiya was unaware of those circumstances at that time, and probably did not hold back in her fight against Yorna.

Since then, Yorna had assumed that Arakiya's strength completely surpassed those of the other troops, and so she was expected to serve as a stand-alone force comparable to an army.

However, that perception was not only incorrect, but also naive.

Yorna: "So, disregarding Old Man Olbart, is this what it means to be the Second?"

Letting that out together with a long sigh, Yorna glanced behind—through the pressure of the unleashed water, the land itself had been split vertically all the way until the horizon.

She understood the rationale that pressurized water posed a threat.

However, when she saw how extraordinary it was, Yorna rolled up the sleeves of her kimono.

In preparation for the decisive battle, she had worn her favorite kimono.

Even so, she wondered if it would be possible to stop Arakiya's blow.

Yorna: "Before, you only used fire, so you had burned one half of my city to the ground, but…"

In one breath, Arakiya had burned one half of her city, and today, she also burned the rebels to nothing by the ramparts.

Arakiya had assumed that a defensive line of fire, which was well-suited to stone structures, and a battlefield where one did not need to pay attention to one's surroundings, would be convenient for her, and that she had no reason to change her battle strategy now.

Priscilla: "This idea was also planted in your head, though it would have been so much more charming if it had not been directed towards mineself."

After saying so, Priscilla kicked off the ground, and closed in on Arakiya.

With one of the bastions of the star-fortress behind her, as if to protect it, Arakiya flew through the air, her legs ablaze below the knees.

Even just the unrelenting firepower that rained down from high above was enough of a threat.

First, Arakiya needed to be lured down to an approachable position.

Priscilla: "Dear Mother!"

Yorna: "—Hk, got it!"

Priscilla shouted as she rushed through, causing a momentary disturbance within Yorna.

She had yet to obtain a proper sense of the intimacy between her and her now-reunited daughter. Rather, she was doubtful of Priscilla's pompous attitude toward her mother, who had changed appearance.

Since they parted when she was a suckling infant, she had no way of knowing how Priscilla was raised.

Yorna: "Dance."

Taking the Kiseru out of her mouth, Yorna swung the tip of it and struck the ground with her thick-soled shoe.

Then, in front of the advancing Priscilla, the trembling earth slowly peeled up and rose to become a foothold to support Priscilla's path.

Yorna's Soul Marriage Technique also worked on inorganic objects.

However, it was a system in which the strength of its efficacy was proportional to the amount of time and devotion she had put into it. Therefore, she had an apprehension. —How much could she really love the land where she had spent time with the man she loved?

Though, the results were clear.

Priscilla: "Your work was for a great cause."

Leaving her mother with a statement that did not make her feel like a mother, Priscilla hopped to the footholds directly in front of her.

Of course, the footholds did not stop there; they emerged one after another to create a path towards Arakiya. A single straight path would be targeted, so she continued to take the consideration to create multiple paths.

Because of that—

Arakiya: "—Nuisance."

As Arakiya swung her arm holding the branch, the great wind that was released completely uprooted the floating earth and mowed down all the paths.

Rather than a storm, the great wind was powerful enough to be equivalent to being hit by a giant palm, and the force of it was such that even Priscilla could have been completely crushed by it if it hit her directly.

Priscilla: "To drive that into mineself so mercilessly, would you not miss mine beauty?"

Arakiya: "I've made up my mind. Even if you lose your limbs, Princess is still Princess."

Priscilla: “Would it not be more accurate to say your mind has been made up for you?”

Narrowing her eyes, Priscilla hit Arakiya with those words as she descended from high in the sky.

Just before the great wind mowed down the foothold, Priscilla quickly escaped into the sky. She barely managed to avoid being hit by the wind, a feat of sheer perception, but she was still vulnerable to a second blow.

Truly erasing the hesitation from her eyes, Arakiya took aim at Priscilla’s limbs as she was forced to fall, and raised her arm in a merciless attempt to take away her fighting ability.

And then—

Yorna: “I would be troubled if you forgot about me.”

Flying up from directly below, Yorna’s kick was delivered towards Arakiya, who was preoccupied with Priscilla being above her head.

Yorna’s long legs thrust upward, as her meticulously maintained thick soles, which she treasured greatly over time, followed her decisive blow.

Priscilla: “It is unbecoming of someone your age to be more eye-catching than mineself.”

Synchronizing with Yorna’s kick, Priscilla swung the Yang Sword held overhead straight down. Arakiya had been caught in a cross-generational pincer attack of mother and daughter.

In perfect unison, the two enchanting strikes worthy of self-praise struck each other. —Yes, they had struck each other.

Priscilla & Yorna: “—Hk?!”

The strike that should have caught Arakiya was bereft of a hit reaction, rather, the expected impact had been slightly off and produced a solid sound instead.

From the look of it, the thick sole of Yorna's upwards kick collided with nothing other than the blade of the Yang Sword Priscilla had swung down.

Their pincer attack had missed this crucial opponent and they had rather astoundingly struck each other instead.

What was more surprising was that the collision of both Yorna and Priscilla's attacks had been inside Arakiya's seemingly flickering body.

Yorna: "It, passed through her?"

Priscilla: "How impudent."

Immediately after Yorna's astonishment and Priscilla's irritation spilled over simultaneously, Arakiya's body, having seemingly taken in both attacks, glowed white, as a counterattack was unleashed.

It was as if Arakiya's whole body exploded—No, it had, in fact, exploded.

Arakiya's body scattered into rays of white light, dispersing with terrifying force spread in every direction like buckshot, hitting Yorna and Priscilla like a fountain of water.

Yorna: "Kuh…—!"

In an instant, Yorna gathered the fine pieces of whirled up dirt by the previous gale, and clad herself and Priscilla in a cloud of dust.

Rather than "cladding" them in clothing that stuck to the body, it was a delicate technique that circulated around one's figure at high speed to repel attacks.

If Arakiya's buckshot merely had the firepower one would discern at first glance, this would have sufficiently reduced its power.

However—

Yorna: "—Hk!!"

Easily penetrating the cloak of earth, Arakiya's rays had pierced Yorna and Priscilla.

Blown away by the impact, Yorna dropped to the ground while screaming in agony. With all her strength, she instantly burrowed her stretched out feet in the ground to avoid an unsightly fall.

She could not afford to collapse, much less miserably falling on her back.

Yorna: "To lose the ones in love with me…"

The weight of the soul Yorna held was sustained by the presence of those that loved her.

Therefore, Yorna needed to respond to said love with all her might. To respond to love was not something to be done half-heartedly.

She must aspire to be appropriate in her movements, speech, conduct, and even emotions.

Whether it was in everyday life, in the bedroom, or in the middle of a battle, it was all the same.

—With a faint bang, the hairpin that held Yorna's hair in place shattered. Hanging on which were ornaments made of layering scales.

Priscilla: "Was that a gift from someone? Dear Mother."

Yorna: "—. It was a gift from my beloved children."

Shattered; Yorna caught the pieces of dust from the hair ornament with her fingers, and gently gazed upon them.

Most of the items that Yorna wore were gifts. Her kimono, footwear, and even her hair ornaments, be they woven, carved or molded, the inhabitants of the Demon City had gone to great lengths to craft these beautiful items with their own hands, which became imbued with the souls of their creators.

The ones that received Yorna's love received the capability to be crushed on her behalf to protect her in return.

Yorna: “You too?”

Priscilla: “Unfortunately, I do not boast the same fidelity as you, Dear Mother; merely what I have had on hand from the very beginning, the tribute from my already late husband.”

Saying this, Priscilla gently displayed her ear. In this motion, it was revealed that the green jeweled earring that should have been there had disappeared.

She too, had transferred her life force to those she loved, providing her a longer life.

Yorna: “Your husband? Priscilla, you also—”

Priscilla: “What a meek expression to make. These missing earrings, I received them from my fourth husband, I believe.”

Yorna: “Fourth…”

Priscilla: “Eight times I was bestowed a husband. Of course, that does not rival you, Dear Mother.”

At Priscilla, callously stating this unexpected answer, Yorna’s mouth was left agape from the shock. However, this shock was negated by Priscilla’s grasp of the radiant Yang Sword.

That strange phenomenon from earlier was.

Yorna: “Priscilla, if that is the Yang Sword, then it should be able to reach any opponent. Provided, their soul hasn’t been severed by the Life Sword…”

Priscilla: “Even without you telling me, Dear Mother, I am painstakingly aware of that. However, there is something you are mistaken about.”

Yorna: “Mistaken?”

Priscilla: “My Yang Sword burns what I wish to burn and slashes only what I wish to slash.”

Saying that, Priscilla slowly raised the tip of her Yang Sword.

What assembled beyond the tip of the Yang Sword, as Yorna followed it with her gaze, was Arakiya, scattered white light forming her figure little-by-little.

Reflecting the nature of the Spirit they had devoured, the Spirit Eaters were said to be able to house the strength they possessed in their bodies—While the true nature of this rare ability was unknown, the capability for its capabilities to be expanded upon was remarkable.

Just now, the principle behind transforming light into a body—by thinking it through, it became clear.

The Yang Sword that slashed what it wanted to slash, a treasured sword that could reach all things.

Priscilla: “—Is that fire, water, or wind? If that becomes indistinguishable from light or shadow, there is no doubt that it becomes difficult, even if I can still reach you.”

Arakiya: “…”

Priscilla’s crimson eyes narrowed, meeting the gaze of Arakiya whose eyes were the same color.

The owner of the Yang Sword that could reach all things, and the transcendent being, possessing the ability to transform into anything, confronting each other—.

Yorna: “I see, you were raised with quite a troublesome opponent.”

Had this been Chaosflame, Yorna may have been able to properly take down Arakiya.

But, this was not Chaosflame, and Yorna was hardly at full strength.

Therefore, the one to deliver the decisive blow was not Yorna but—

Priscilla: “At any time, it is I who resides at the center of the stage after all.”

The girl blazing red as the sun, who turned any hardships she faced into sustenance for herself, smiled graciously.

That smile was dazzling, even for Yorna who stood alongside her.

Set ablaze by Priscilla’s dazzle, if there was only a single being capable of remaining in her vicinity without being scorched to naught, for that being to be Arakiya, standing in Priscilla’s path, what an ironic twist of fate it was.

3

—Otto Suwen sensed a change in the direction of the wind.

At first it was a hunch, then it changed into an omen to be received, and finally it became a conviction.

The war situation that was gradually and slowly changing, moving, and tilting—As Otto opened the channels that were supposed to be kept closed and immersed himself in the task of picking up all kinds of “voices”, he was fluxing in a sense of omnipotence, as if he himself was at one with the world, and was fleeting.

Things that could only be found in such a situation were submerged in an overwhelming vortex of information. In order to retrieve them, one must dive deeper and deeper—

???: “—Otto-san!”

Otto: “—Hk.”

A voice from outside of his consciousness was heard very close by, and at the same time, a thirsting shock destroyed the whirlpool of “voices”.

It was as if a water tank had been broken and the water inside flowed out, as if grains of sand had been scooped up from a sandbox and spilled out through the cracks between one’s fingers; the “voices” escaped.

Though he felt empty without it, and finding himself regretful,

Otto: “Oh, my… Thank you for saving my life, Petra-chan…”

Petra: “You had a horrible complexion right now… Please wipe up your nosebleed.”

Otto: “Oh, that is a big help… I feel like I am bleeding just as much, though I am not fighting.”

Otto took the offered handkerchief and squeezed it against his nose.

The dripping blood was wetting the grass beneath his feet, and he was acutely aware of the heavy load that using his Divine Protection beyond its limits was putting on him. In fact, the amount of blood that had been spilled was seemingly no joke to him.

As expected, it was not as bad as when his legs were carved in Pristella, though.

Otto: “It comes quite a bit, if I try to dive far and deep…”

Petra: “Am I not being helpful?”

Otto: “No, if it was not for Petra’s support, it would probably be worse. The exhaustion of the interior of my head… I guess I should call it brain fatigue. And that is because it is pretty heavy.”

It was difficult for them to understand each other, even among those who possessed Divine Protections, but the way in which Divine Protections placed a burden on their users varied greatly depending on their effects. For example, the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion possessed by a ground dragon was almost a perfect type of Divine Protection with no flaws, except for the drastic difference in its burden between when it was deployed and when it was not.

Garfiel’s Divine Protection of Earth Spirits also had a positive effect while he was standing on the ground, but at the same time, it placed a high burden on his body in order to maintain his physical well-being.

It just happened that Garfiel was physically strong, so he was not affected by the negative effects, but if a normal human were to possess it, they would need to regularly take breaks and relieve the burden on their body by lifting their legs from the ground.

From that perspective, Otto's Divine Protection of the Soul of Language focused the majority of its burden on his brain.

Since the brain converted the "voices" of living beings that entered through his ears into voices that Otto could understand, it was natural for the burden to be concentrated there.

Otto was trying to pick up the "voices" that were normally kept closed off and grasp all the sounds he could hear.

Therefore, he asked for Petra to use her freshly learned yang magic to physically strengthen Otto's body, focusing particularly on his head.

For a skilled warrior, it was said that physical strengthening through mana was done naturally, but in this case it was being done through external interference.

Of course, even with the functions of one's head being strengthened with yang magic, Emilia's intuition would not suddenly become as sharp as Ram's. The expectation was that Petra's yang magic would improve Otto's endurance, rather than the functions of his brain.

By strengthening the capabilities of his brain, Petra would allow Otto to keep the channels open for longer, much like how improving cardiovascular function would allow someone to stay underwater for longer.

Without Petra's cooperation, the results would have been less than half of what they were then, without a doubt.

Otto: "That said, there are many times when I almost get too greedy and try to go deeper…"

Petra: "If I feel like you're in somewhat danger, I can just give you a slap to the best of my power, right?"

Otto chuckled at Petra, practicing her slap with reassuring readiness.

In fact, if Otto was in danger, it was in his best interest to have Petra pull him back. The fastest and surest way to do this was to forcibly disconnect the channel.

As he followed the sound of a "voice", he would begin to lose track of his own position.

Of course, the "voice" that Otto focused on naturally when he talked to Petra was the correct one, but if he lost sight of that connection, he would probably lose his ability to recognize languages.

If the closest voice became unrecognizable, Otto would have to keep the channel open forever in order to communicate with anyone. —If this were to happen, it would be easy to see a future in which even the mere sound of the wind or the rustling of clothes would be perceived as a "voice" and Otto would lose his sanity.

Otto: "When it becomes so, I too will become a member of the people who have lost their lives because of their Divine Protection like many others who had this same Divine Protection."

Though he was lucky enough to be able to overcome his childhood without dying, now he would lose his established self due to his own decision to open the channel.

Too many pitfalls in the way of life of a bearer of a Divine Protection.

Though it could be said that the more difficult the path was, the more rewarding it was—.

Petra: "So, what happened?"

Otto: "…The first and second bastions are useless. There is no one left that I can listen to. The first was burned to the ground, and the second… that is Emilia-sama's."

Petra: "Ah, Emilia-neesama…"

Petra reacted with a complicated face at Otto who was muttering with a handkerchief on his nose.

The first bastion was guarded by Arakiya, one of the highest-ranking members of the Nine Divine Generals. Her power, wielded through her Spirit, had burnt the entire field, causing the “voices” of all living things that Otto could have heard to be completely destroyed.

If birds, small animals, or insects had not survived, then even if Otto had opened up his channels, there would have been no “voices” for him to pick up in the first place.

Petra: “If the field is burnt, wouldn’t the ground beneath the surface be fine?”

Otto: “Even if they have survived, underground creatures often do not speak. Besides, as I told Petra-chan, the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language is…”

Petra: “It only allows you to understand the speech of audible creatures, it doesn’t make your ears better.”

Otto: “That is right.”

Otto nodded emphatically at Petra’s words, who was leaning in front of him.

As Petra had just said, Otto’s Divine Protection of the Soul of Language was only able to understand the “voices” he heard and allowed him to converse with others who spoke a different language.

In other words, the Divine Protection could not be employed properly unless living beings were in a location where their “voices” could be heard.

Petra’s application of her yang magic to strengthen Otto’s head also played a role here.

By having his hearing and listening abilities enhanced, he was able to pick up “voices” over a wider range than usual.

However—

Otto: “There is no chance for the first and second bastions anymore. They were burnt by Arakiya and frozen by Emilia-sama, respectively.”

Petra: “E-Emilia-neesama isn’t as malicious as to do that!”

Otto: “I know. And even if Emilia-sama had not done anything, the reaction from the others at the second bastion was already quite negative. —Probably because the other creatures were afraid of the dragonkin.”

Petra’s way of saying that malice did not exist in Emilia, rather than Emilia having no malicious intent, had been a perfectly fitting way for Petra to put it.

Since there was no malice present in Emilia, there was no way to display any. Regardless, with such shared views aside, Petra’s advocacy was also deceptively true.

The guardian of the second bastion was Madelyn Eschart, the dragonkin who had almost plunged the Fortress City into a state of total destruction—and was part of a demi-human race so exceedingly rare, people questioned its very existence.

Since the dragonkin were related to the Dragons, which reigned at the pinnacle of all existence, they were feared by animals, no matter how large or small, leaving them no choice but to flee.

Emilia lowering the temperatures in the area to extremely cold degrees conveyed the impression of a last-ditch effort.

Anyway—

Otto: “—As for the fifth bastion, Garfiel should handle it well. The fourth bastion is under constant attack by a group of Glow People. As instructed, the Weaponkin and Cyclops Tribe survivors will join them there.”

Petra: “And at the third, the Shudraqian people joined the other groups fighting the stone golems. What about the other way around the bastions you wanted to explore?”

Otto: “It looks like there is a direct path from the first bastion to the castle that had been filled up ahead of time somehow. I am unexpectedly getting sick of Abel-san guessing correctly.”

Petra: “But since someone doesn’t have to go and check it out, we can make the next move faster.”

After bringing the mental image of the “voice” distribution in order, he compared it with the map Petra spread out in front of him. Otto added the information he had just obtained to the map, which already had a number of characters drawn on it, and Petra assigned arrows and other markers to it.

With brain fatigue and even a strange feeling of heaviness, as if warm water was accumulating within his head, Petra’s presence was critical in pulling together these visually unshareable images.

For the Emilia camp, Petra’s inclusion might have been the most significant. At the very least, Otto took it as Subaru’s greatest achievement that Petra was here now.

Otto: “Since Natsuki-san is the reason we are doing this, it balances out to zero, but…”

With a deep, bloody breath forced out of his nose, Otto checked to see if his nasal passages were still open. Petra’s handkerchief was already stained with Otto’s blood.

Assuming he would buy a new handkerchief later and give it to her, Otto slowly got to the point of switching to a different channel.

There was—

???: “—Otto-chin! Petra-chan!”

Otto: “Ah, Medium-chan.”

A small figure ran to them in the meadow, waving her hands in a wide arc.

Her long blonde hair danced in the air as she ran restless across the battlefield. She ran in a straight line to Otto and Petra.

Medium: “You’ve been very helpful, Otto-chin! Abel-chin wants the next report!”

Otto: “I am absolutely sure that you did not mean to say that in a cute way; however, I appreciate it… if it helps you. There is nothing to be gained by giving something to someone who does not understand its value.”

Petra: “Why so sharp-tongued, Otto-san. Although it is understandable.”

Otto and Petra smiled slightly at Medium’s report, who had a twinkle in her eye.

Unintentionally, Medium had been acting as a soft intermediary in the chain of command—focusing on gathering information was reassuring for Otto since he could easily leave the management of that information to Abel and his group.

This was another scheme that would not have been possible without Medium.

Medium: “It might have been doable, but also more awkward, for sure.”

Otto: “Probably. Especially since Petra-cha… Lady Petra and I are the ones who have to take a hard stand against Abel-san.”

Medium: “—? Am I getting praised? Hooray!”

Otto and Petra’s exchange was met with great delight by Medium, who raised both hands in the air.

Slightly behind her were four soldiers who were sent to Otto and Petra to make contact with the main camp. This was probably a result of the importance Abel attached to the value of the information Otto brought.

Normally, it would be easier for Abel if Otto were also in the main camp.

Medium: “Otto-chin, you have to wander around to hear the “voices”, right?”

Petra: “It’s because Otto-san’s ears are not that big, you know.”

Otto: “Both are different ways of saying the same thing!”

In contrast to Medium’s ingenuous remark, Petra responded with banter, yet both were tricky in their own regard. Although, it was generally true, so there was no denying it.

At any rate, they handed over the map they had just drawn to the messengers and received a new map in return that reflected the ongoing changes in the state of the battle.

Otto: “Please use this well. There are a few typographical errors, but the arrows and other symbols that the Lady added should be understandable.”

Messenger: “Understood. Be cautious for scouts, Analyst-dono.”

Otto: “Analyst…”

Otto looked bitter at the title given to him, along with the map they exchanged.

First a peddler, then an Internal Affairs Minister, then a Warrior-Grade Head Internal Affairs Minister, and now an Analyst. How many positions would he have to hold before the Royal Selection was concluded?

Or would these troubles continue to haunt him even after the Royal Selection was concluded?

Otto: “I guess I should put such blissful worries off to the side.”

At the very least, the tomorrow Otto envisioned would not come to pass unless he completed what was in front of him.

Tomorrow was something Otto had no choice but to face on his own.

That was why—

Petra: “Otto-san, let’s move.”

Otto: “Dear me, how about a minute’s rest, my Lady?”

Petra: “Says the person who usually doesn’t rest even when someone tells him to. You can drink until you pass out when everything is done, so try to do your best.”

Otto: “That makes me sound like the biggest drunkard in the world!”

When Otto raised his voice about the reputational repercussions, Petra stuck out her tongue to gloss over it.

In such a way, he was feeling cared for without becoming too serious; Otto slapped himself on the cheek free from blood stains to regain his focus.

He was not sure whether he wanted to ask Petra or Garfiel how frightened he looked or if he could even afford it.

All of those things were normally the responsibility of Subaru, who was not there.

Otto: “I might as well get the victory benefits. That is why—”

Immediately after Otto opened up the channel to gather more information.

A loud noise shook Otto’s mind.

Otto: “…”

Petra: “—Otto-san?”

Seeing Otto’s stiffened face, Petra called his name.

However, Petra’s voice did not reach Otto’s ears. It was because they were covered with deafening screams filling up the world.

Otto: “Ugh, ah…?!”

In an instant, Otto’s mind felt like it was boiling over, and he held his head in shock. However, just before his consciousness was blown away, Otto managed to just barely hold out.

Terrible screams still engulfed the world.

The reason was—

Otto: “—Ah.”

As Otto was struck by the sudden shock, the two girls, Petra and Medium, looked at the sky and dropped their jaws.

Before the sight of those girls, as it fell straight from the sky to the ground, majestically spreading its wings just before it crashed—was a presence that, even from a distance, conveyed a palpable sense of why the world screamed.

It was no wonder why every living thing in the world screamed.

???: “A Dragon…”

It was not clear whether it was Petra, Medium, or one of the messenger soldiers who said this.

Otto could say for certain that it wasn’t himself.

Why was it that—

Otto: “—!”

At the moment when everyone on the battlefield was captivated by the white Dragon that had appeared, there were only two people whose consciousness were not stolen by its presence—one of them, Otto, pulled Petra with one hand, while pushing Medium’s shoulder with the other.

Petra: “—Kyaa!”

Petra let out a scream and collapsed onto Otto’s chest, who had fallen backwards forcefully. In the lower part of his vision, the pushed back Medium had fallen onto her rear.

Those were the minimum evasive actions Otto could do at that moment.

—A mass of red-hot flames scorched the air as it passed over the heads of the grounded Otto and Petra as well as Medium sitting on her butt.

Petra: “AAAAAHHHH!!”

After being pulled down, Petra’s slender throat let out a scream.

But being able to scream was a kind of safety signal. If the situation had been more horrendous than that, there would not even have been time to scream.

In fact, just like the messenger soldiers who were out of Otto’s reach.

Otto: “…”

A mass of flame flew over the heads of Otto and the girls, while hitting the messenger soldier holding the map.

In the next moment, the entire body of that soldier clad in a red and black military uniform was instantly burnt to a crisp. Due to the map in hand, there was no chance to prevent it.

And, upon catching sight of such devastation, they were not even permitted to raise their voices in astonishment.

???: “—! Watch out!”

Immediately after the girl’s high-pitched scream came the sound of steel striking steel echoing through the air.

The one who spoke up was Medium despite being pushed by Otto. She straightened her long childlike legs from her sitting position and pulled out a barbarian sword from behind her waist in a low posture.

Yet, she still managed to bounce back the deadly blade descending upon Otto with all her might.

Petra: “Stand up, Otto-san!”

Otto stumbled forward as Petra pulled him up by the arm.

When he stepped back and looked behind him, he saw Medium, with both of her hands gripping a barbaric sword too large for her petite frame, as she stared down the assailant head-on.

Then—

???: “—My bad, my bad, and here I was going to get them all at once.”

Saying that, the grumbling man who faced Medium—was the only one apart from Otto who consciously ignored the presence of the white Dragon creating this abnormal situation on the battlefield.

It was an Imperial Soldier with a bandana wrapped around his head. He held a long-handled one-handed axe and judging from his armband, he was not a high-ranking opponent.

A common soldier. The question was, why was that man here?

While his channel was focused, he had remained vigilant.

So how had this man managed to avoid Otto’s monitoring of “voices”?

With the utmost caution possible, Otto protected Petra behind him with his arm and glared at the man facing Medium.

Otto: “No mercy for women and children? That’s pretty barbaric, don’t you think?”

Todd: “It’s easy to just answer “There are no women or children in the battlefield”, but that would fit the residents of the Imperial Capital perfectly. Besides, wouldn’t that be a bit too convenient?”

Otto: “Convenient?”

Todd: “If you were non-combatants who’d just been left behind on the battlefield, your current logic might’ve held. But I don’t recognize a man who serves on the battlefield as a non-combatant.”

He was the type of person who would mercilessly ambush with full intent to kill them.

It was unlikely that a reasonable negotiation would have worked from the beginning, but in the face of his thoroughness, it could be said that hope was completely dashed.

But still, it did not make sense.

Otto: “Me and these kids are here for work? And what kind of work, so far away from the camp…?”

Todd: “Who knows. But my gut is telling me. You’re the root of all evil in this war. And my gut also tells me this.”

Otto: “…Such as?”

The man who looked at Otto and the others in a nonchalant, dismissive manner cut off his words there at once.

When Otto urged him onward, the man looked at the three of them in turn and,

Todd: “—It’s better not to waste time with you guys either.”

His axe swung with that pronouncement, gleaming as it mercilessly aimed to take the lives of Otto, Petra, and Medium.

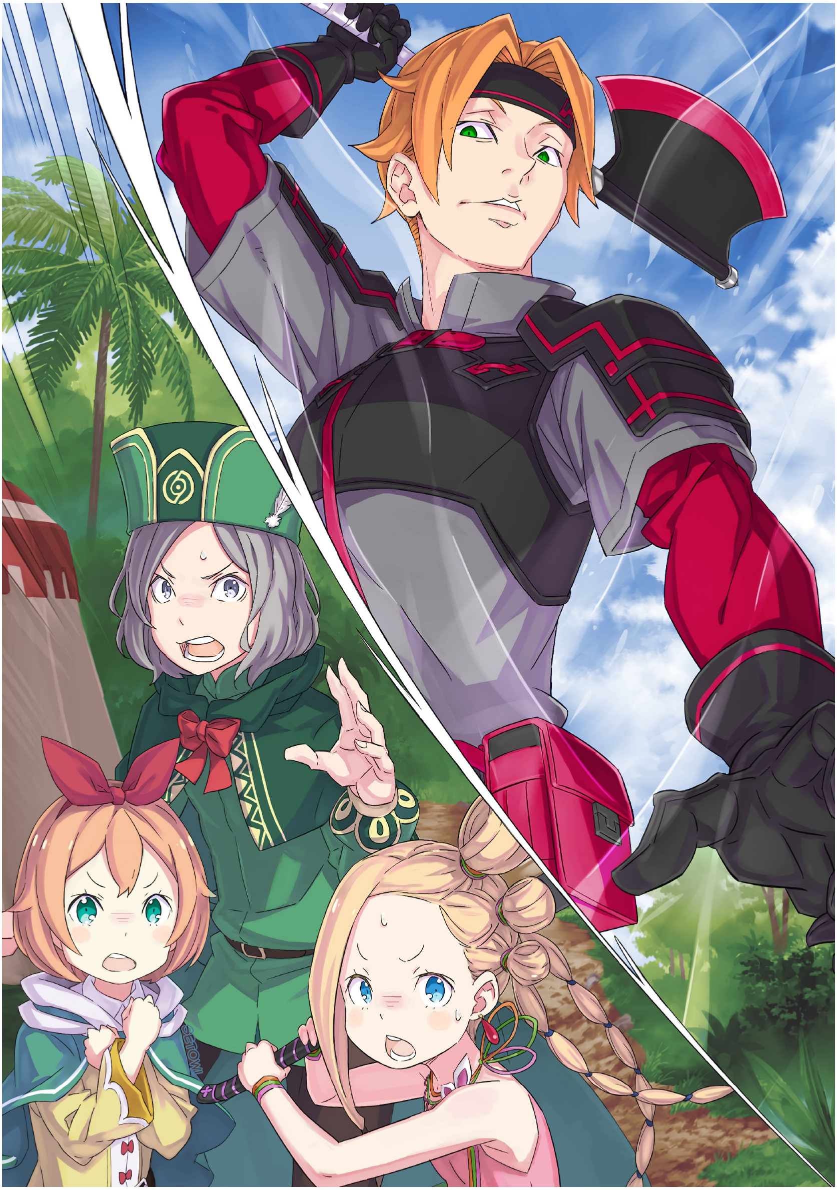

Chapter 96:
Painting with Deep Love

1

—One of the Nine Divine Generals, the Steelman, Moguro Hagane.

That fact that they were not truly a Steelfolk was known to only a select few even within the Vollachian Empire.

Originally, the bodies of the Steelfolk were composed of inorganic substances like minerals and metals, and they were born as beings in the space between people and objects. It was conceivable that the Weaponkin, whose bodies possessed one part made out of metal, were a race that branched out from the Steelfolk, and there were many parts of their abnormal ecology that were obscure.

Although they were not as rare as the dragonkin, the Steelfolk were distinguished from human tribes not only in appearance, but also in mentality, so in the sense that they were more difficult to communicate with, they overwhelmed the dragonkin.

Existences more difficult to make contact with than spirits, which could be conversed with if one had certain training, those were the Steelfolk.

Henceforth, climbing to the top of the Empire at the seat of a General First-Class, and also being said to be easier to contact than the other problem-riddled Divine Generals, Moguro was recognized as a heretic from within the Steelfolk.

However, that was not the case in reality, and Moguro took advantage of their own outward appearance, as well as the special trait of lacking involvement with others from the Steelfolk tribe, and was an existence who merely self-proclaimed themself as the Steelman.

So then, regarding the true identity of Moguro Hagane, Abel considered this as an absolute truth.

—It was certain that within this decisive battle to capture the Imperial Capital, Moguro would be the greatest obstacle.

2

???: "…"

Launched up by an impact that seized his whole body, he met eyes with an excessively mighty being.

Immediately after, he received another blow; he could not avoid the future of his life being scattered, and he was convinced that he had finally reached the final destination of his fate.

—That was what should have happened.

???: "Cough—Hk."

His lungs, deflated to the utmost limits, expanded, and that pain reawakened Heinkel's consciousness.

His interrupted consciousness returned, and the first thing he felt was the firm and large sensation of his back being supported—it was the ground. Launched up to the sky, his body which should have been flying through the sky was on top of the ground.

Recognizing that fact, bewilderment occupied the insides of his head. For what reason? How? What had happened?

Only, at the same time as his brain had comprehended that he was still alive—

Heinkel: "My sword is…"

In the empty hand of his body, besieged with pain, there was no feeling of a sword's hilt. Even when his other hand immediately reached out to his waist, there was no weight in the scabbard that hung there.

Turning his head, within his vision that was being vigorously shaken along with his brain by the loud ringing in his ears, in a place some ways away from him, Heinkel saw his sword thrust into the earth at a slant, and leaked out a breath.

That it had vanished, or it had been lost, he felt his entire body bouncing around as if his heart had become those unthinkable feelings of unease—

Heinkel: "—Fuck."

Since he had gone through all those things, he began to hate himself for worrying over losing the sword.

The fluctuation of his heart in that moment seemed like a representation of his half-assed self.

Heinkel: "Just what…"

As the causes for him to hate himself increased, Heinkel broke away from his loathsome sentimentality.

He was not dead. He still lived. However, that in itself was a strange thing.

At that moment, Heinkel had met eyes with an existence which introduced itself as a Divine General, and a definite intent to kill had been directed towards him. —It had clearly declared that it would kill him.

In truth, having been launched up to the sky, then from there, being scattered by another attack with nothing he could do, Heinkel's life should have been lost.

For what reason had that not come to fruition? Seeking that answer, he looked around—

Heinkel: "—Ah?"

Unconsciously, an astonished voice slipped out.

However, that was a matter of course. What Heinkel saw was absurd enough to warrant that. It was far, far too detached from reality.

—The world itself was divided in two from where Heinkel was, and separate hells were unfolding.

On the right sky, the massive clouds formed from the bright red flames engulfed the scorching world.

On the left sky, the majestic figure of a colossal scale, clad in clouds of pure white, spread its wings as it lorded over the frozen lands.

Heinkel: “A burning sky, and a white Dragon…”

Gazing at the sight which should not have been there, Heinkel muttered in blank amazement.

It was possible that he had been mistaken when he felt he had not died. This sight made it seem like Heinkel was already dead, and that was why he was seeing this kind of world.

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

At the world which went beyond what he could take in, thoughts of wishing to escape reality threw him into disorder.

That which had done so to Heinkel, causing his whole body to straighten up after lying down on the ground, was the black shadow which suddenly came over him.

No way, he did not want to think that there was a second Dragon passing right above him, but—

Heinkel: “Woaaaaaah—!”

Looking up to the sky, Heinkel’s throat screamed as he saw the origin of the shadow.

Passing over him with a tremendous force, flying through the sky as it spun, was an enormous boulder that could be mistaken for a house—Even then, it was not just one or two.

One after another, the throwing stones of an abnormal scale passed over his head, clad in an extremely strong wind, they flew from above Heinkel’s head towards where his feet were pointed.

And then, at the end of where they were headed—

Heinkel: "…"

The impact of the crash quaked the world, and it shook Heinkel's buttocks, giving him the impression that the ground was coughing violently.

As those were continuously fired out, reverberating upon their crash, Heinkel got up from that place in a panic.

The one who was continuously being targeted by those boulders, suffering direct hits one after the other, was the figure who was also on an abnormal scale—standing up, it was the rampart itself.

Heinkel: "…Moguro Hagane."

That was one of the nine most feared people within this Empire, and from what he could see, Heinkel felt that with his whole body and soul.

What he saw just before his consciousness was blown away, he thought that it might have been an optical illusion, or a hallucination he saw when paralyzed by fear, but it had been neither.

—With a large body that probably exceeded tens of meters, quite literally as the third bastion that Heinkel and the others originally were supposed to capture, Moguro blocked their way.

Literally, yes, quite literally.

Perhaps this very situation was an existence in this world most suitable for the word "literally".

In that place, the rampart had gotten up on its knees and taken the shape of a golem, and using the pavements from the upheaved farmland as its own arms and torso, it carried out an unbelievable defensive measure.

Swarming at the feet of that massive body were the stone golems, which Heinkel had cut down when he had gotten desperate, and the giant fist struck downwards from above their heads was just like a town crashing down.

Heinkel: "…"

Aiming for that massive body, were the large boulders which had been fired countless times just a bit before.

Those were from both the stone pits along the way to the site of the decisive battle, the Imperial Capital, as well as the rocks prepared from the crumbled cliffs of the steep mountains to be used in the siege.

So then, continuing to throw those towards the large Moguro, were those who were awaiting an opportunity to attack from back at the stronghold—

Heinkel: "—The subordinates of Yorna Mishigure."

To be precise, they were the citizens of the Demon City of Chaosflame who Yorna directed.

Races with horns and lizardmen, beastmen and those from the Multi-Leg Tribe, they were a mixed force without a sense of unity, and there was only one thing in common which tied them together into an assembled formation.

—Each one of them housed a red flame in one of their eyes, and housed within was their high morale, that could be said to be what they had in common.

This was also quite literally, a group whose fighting spirit burned within their eyes, and several of them were able to lift up the unbelievably big boulders, and were able to throw them across an outrageous distance.

However, even if one said that Moguro suffered a direct hit from those large boulders, Heinkel's judgement was somewhat doubtful.

Of course, through the direct hits of those large boulders, Moguro's construction of the rampart and farmland crumbled, and was broken. However, in order to repair those broken parts, Moguro made the boulders crashing against him into the next materials which formed its massive body, and was certainly offsetting the attacks.

Even when looking from afar, the meaninglessness of those attacks was deeply communicated.

Even so, the reason why they still did not cease to throw them was plain and simple. —While their attacks were keeping Moguro's large body at bay, the other rebels were fiercely attacking.

Heinkel: "…Foolish."

Heinkel had also heard it. That this third bastion had the weakest defense compared to the other bastions.

However, that would have been before Moguro had erected like that, and began to use its entire massive body to block their way. Despite that, the strategy had not been updated, and the rebels who had chosen to withdraw from the other battlefields were converging, and even now they continued to swell up their military strength here.

In the midst of that, the People of Shudraq, who Heinkel had fought alongside with, were also present.

Heinkel: "Foolish."

Heinkel's deep feelings had leaked out with a sound more clear than before.

Foolish. It could not be called anything but foolish. What else was there to say? Looking right or looking left, looking up or looking down, looking forward or looking back, there was nothing to see but hell.

Just what else could Heinkel have possibly said?

Heinkel: "You-you're all out of your fucking minds… You guys! Everyone! What the hell is wrong with all of you!!"

Before he realized it, Heinkel had jumped towards his sword, thrust into the ground, in order to cling on to it.

Putting his weight onto the hilt of the sword thrust into the ground, he grit his teeth as he exhorted his trembling knees. What was wrong with everybody? He was unable to understand their mentality.

Like he thought, he could not do it. He could not do it, he could not do it, he could not do it, there was nothing he could do.

Heinkel: "What the hell, is wrong with all of you…"

While powerlessly leaning against his sword, Heinkel's throat feebly trembled.

In the surroundings of Heinkel, who had limply lowered his head, the world was shaken by the flames, by the Dragon, and by the huge army. Was it really such a sin for him to not fight against all that?

In that case—

Heinkel: "I…"

It was directly after Heinkel had let that leak out.

The sound of nimble hooves resounded, and the chestnut-colored Galewind Horse passed by Heinkel's side as it stomped on the ground. As his red-hair swayed in the wind produced by that Galewind Horse, Heinkel looked up.

And then—

Heinkel: "…"

For but a moment, Heinkel exchanged gazes with the man with a spherical hairstyle, who sat atop the Galewind Horse.

It was Zikr Osman. Working as the right-hand man of Abel, giving orders to the rebels from the stronghold, while he was also a General of the Vollachian Empire, he was a part of the rebellion against the country.

He himself had declared that his fighting skill with his sword was poor, and from Heinkel's point of view, his individual war potential was really difficult to count, but he had overtaken Heinkel.

—The moment Zikr passed him, he left a scornful gaze upon Heinkel, who had bent his knees here.

Heinkel: "I really…"

Going past Heinkel, who had bent his knees, the Galewind Horse ran towards the battlefield.

As if to follow the majestic figure of Zikr, the rebels who had gathered from various warfronts headed forwards. Towards Moguro Hagane's rampart, they charged forth.

As he watched them, Heinkel still continued to lean on his sword, unable to move.

And as he was unable to move—

Heinkel: "…It's just like I thought, I really can't do it, Louanna."

3

When he overtook the red-haired swordsman, who bent his knee on the battlefield and hung his head as if his fighting spirit was disheartened, what flashed through the mind of Zikr Osman was sympathy for following the natural course of life.

The brave woman of crimson who introduced herself as Priscilla Barielle had boldly taken part in this rebellion. The swordsman, participating in the war as her follower, was probably not even a person of the Vollachian Empire.

It was far too cruel to impose the Empire's way of being that the people of the Empire must be strong on a guy like him.

Zikr: "I can hardly say that I myself follow that way of being."

Sword in hand, Zikr self-deprecated as he shook atop the back of his beloved horse, Leidy.

He was currently feigning bravery like this, but it had been largely due to the power that the previous generations of House Osman had accumulated that Zikr had taken up the seat of General.

If Zikr was not part of a lineage of military men, and he had to work his way from the ranks of private like the other soldiers, then he, without any skill in the sword, would probably not have been able to find any success in life.

It was not that he lamented that. Of course, Zikr was a man of the Empire.

Due to that, he swung his sword on the front lines, and the first time he swung it, his heart yearned for him to exist in a way reminiscent of the Nine Divine Generals, who would be able to alter the war situation.

However, to make sure that nobody would be able to take up Zikr's position, Zikr was once again unable to feign reality by turning that yearning into his personal matter.

Therefore—

Zikr: "—I am a Second Class-General of the Empire, the Coward, Zikr Osman!!"

Raising his voice to a loud volume, his beloved horse galloped across the battlefield where a tremendous change had been accomplished.

In most cases, Leidy was used to light sprints for the purposes of both strolls and military campaigns, however, this time she could guess what Zikr was feeling, so she displayed the best sprint of her life.

At seeing his beloved horse put on a brave sprint, completely irrelevant from her fear and anxiety, Zikr could only fall in love again.

Leidy's excessively beautiful sprint ignored Zikr's unaccustomed war speech, and sparked a flame in the hearts of many rebels as she continued to dash.

Zikr: “Glow People on the right wing! Weaponkin on the left wing! Everyone, move in accordance with the orders! Everyone else, follow me! We shall defeat the Steelman, Moguro Hagane!”

Everyone: “YEAHHHHHHH—!!”

Hearing Zikr’s orders, the assembled military strength roared as they charged towards Moguro. The boulders which flew overhead were thrown by the volunteer soldiers who Yorna loved dearly, as a means of providing cover.

If those drew Moguro’s attention, and a disturbance was yielded in the command of the stone golems, and above all else, if the charge of Zikr and the others reached its feet, their aim would be successfully accomplished.

???: “Fire—!!”

A valiant shout could be heard in the distance, and the fired arrows rained down on the stone golems blocking the way, sewing them to the ground.

Commencing from far away, having opened up a distance on Zikr’s orders, was the overwhelming display of offensive ability by means of the People of Shudraq’s archery, and the archery of the rebels skilled in the bow.

He accepted the cover from the beautiful and high spirited women, and pushed forward. Including the battle formation that those women had reasonably lowered, it seemed too good to be true, so Zikr clenched his molars.

Zikr: “No, if anything is too good to be true, it would be that blessing.”

Gripping his sword tight, looking towards its drawn blade, Zikr slightly loosened the corners of his lips.

Right before he departed for battle, the one to bestow Zikr with a blessing as he visited the camp enclosure, was the sweet girl whose eyes somewhat inspired a sense of reverence—Just as if it was a gaze that had lived an amount of time unimaginable to Zikr, it graciously met his entreaty.

It was not that the Coward had been blown away.

Only, thinking about the duty he must accomplish himself, Zikr wished for a blessing. Even if there was only a slight chance, he had wanted to rely on his superstitions.

???: “General Second-Class Zikr! Please fall back! We can handle things here!!”

Zikr: “Do not speak nonsense! There is no path of retreat! Nor is there room to fall back! I shall also move forward!!”

???: “—Hk.”

Straddling his Galewind Horse, he shook his head at the appeal of the soldier riding next to him; Zikr would not abandon his duty.

For a moment, the subordinate attempted to say something, but he did not get in the way of Zikr’s determination any further. Grateful for that consideration, he tightly, tightly gripped the reins.

???: “Hah! To think that General Second-Class Zikr Osman, the Womanizer, would proceed to the front lines!”

Then, opposite of the subordinate riding next to him, a figure sprinting at the same speed as a Galewind Horse caught up to them. Looking at him, he was wearing an eyepatch, a soldier wielding twin swords—Jamal Aurélie.

He became a prisoner of war during the fall of the Fortress City, and after that, since he displayed strong loyalty towards His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, he was taken under the command of Zikr as a swordsman.

Zikr: “Private First-Class Jamal, how is their response?”

Jamal: “The fucking best! Whether I look left or right or directly in front, there’s a fuck ton of enemies! I’m having an absolute blast!”

Zikr: “Ahh, it is indeed quite magnificent. It is the honor of an

Imperial soldier. From here, I intend on removing General First-Class Moguro from the seat of Eighth, so will you follow me?!"

Jamal: "Only if you order me! If you want, I can head over there and open up the path!"

An uncouth yet charming smile emerged on his face, and Jamal accelerated after saying that. He easily overtook Leidy's speed, and charged right into the group of stone golems directly in front of them.

While chasing after his back, on the other side of Zikr thinking his bravery was reliable, he felt guilty for taking him along. — However, he immediately discarded that hesitation.

He would fulfill what he needed to do in the place that he needed to do it.

That had been requested of him, so it was none other than Zikr himself who desired to meet those requests.

What remained was—

Zikr: "—Your Excellency, you are free to do as you wish."

Indeed, it had been practically at the same time as when Zikr offered up a prayer.

—The Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital Lupugana, the Magic Crystals upon its summit began to glow.

4

—In this decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, there were several people painting over the picture Abel had painted.

One of them was the existence of Priscilla, who joined the battle of the first bastion which Yorna Mishigure faced.

One of them was Otto, who through use of his Divine Protection, demonstrated his ability to gather information on the details of the war situation.

One of them was Garfiel, who instead of being in a deadlock with Kafma Irulux, was able to crush him.

One of them was Emilia, who angered Madelyn Eschart more than had been assumed, and caused her to invoke the Cloud Dragon.

And yet, even if that added some change in the coloration of the picture Abel had painted, they were not incidents that greatly changed its final form.

If one of the five bastions on the points of the star-shaped ramparts that defended the Imperial Capital were to be broken through, then there were means to seize victory even if the other bastions were locked in stalemate.

For those who painted over the picture, the main reason why it could not be swayed, no matter what they did, was Moguro Hagane —No, it was the Meteor which governed the Crystal Palace, the heart of the Vollachian Empire.

The Crystal Palace which boasted beauty of preeminent status within the world, the magic crystals that formed the crystal portion of the palace were especially pure even among magic stones, and it made the palace itself into a weapon to attack outside enemies.

The mana stored within the palace could be passed through the magic crystals located everywhere in the building to amplify it, and then be released through the Magic Crystal Cannon installed on the highest layer of the Crystal Palace.

That power was able to bring about enough destruction to wipe out the entirety of a large city, and in the past, when it had been used hundreds of years prior—Legends say that its target had been a Great Disaster.

Henceforth, the Magic Crystal Cannon of the Crystal Palace remained only a thing of legends, but since the existence of the real thing had been known, it had been serviced to be made possible to use, so the threat was restored.

As irony would have it, that Magic Crystal Cannon had become a fang pointed towards Abel himself, but as long as it was present, there was a high probability that the war situation of the decisive battle of the Imperial Capital could be easily overturned.

Therefore, no matter what, there was a need for this Magic Crystal Cannon to be fired.

That too, was not a decisive blow in order to change the war situation, but part of the damages taken into his consideration.

For that purpose—

Abel: "—Will you desert and run away, Zikr Osman?"

That was what Abel had asked Zikr, who mounted his Galewind Horse, and headed towards the battlefield of the third bastion.

Zikr had a choice. Managing the rebels who had chosen to move away from the battles of the other bastions, and converge on the third bastion, raising their morale, facing the massive body of Moguro, who blocked the way, he had the choice to desert that warfront.

However, Abel had a hunch that he would likely not choose that.

Was it because of Zikr's prudence as the Coward, who feared even the slightest possibility that his goal would not be fulfilled, or was it perhaps because he was one of the brave and righteous members of the Imperial Army?

Whichever it was, Abel, who was not Zikr, could not surmise.

However, whatever the reason for his determination may be, Abel would not discourage it.

The life or death of Zikr was a position which held no final impact on the picture that Abel had painted.

Speaking on the grand-scale of things, ultimately, within his picture, even the life or death of Abel himself—.

???: "—Reporting from the lookout! The Magic Crystal Cannon of the Crystal Palace is beginning to operate!”

Abel: “…”

???: “Its target, the third bastion!!”

The resoundement of the bellowing voice throughout the stronghold was proof of Abel’s aim being fulfilled.

The Magic Crystal Cannon was fired upon it. Upon the third bastion—that is to say, mowing down the battlefield of Moguro, who had turned into the rampart itself, it would likely wipe out the rebels in one fell swoop.

Even if that happened, as long as Moguro’s true body of the Crystal Palace was going strong, then neither would the Steelman, Moguro Hagane, be defeated, nor would the third bastion be overcome.

However, the Imperial Capital would forfeit the firepower of the Magic Crystal Cannon, which had the ability to overturn any war situation.

Everything was for that purpose, after all, it had been painted on that illustration.

Therefore—

???: “—There is something unusual in the line of fire of the Magic Crystal Cannon!!”

Abel: “…What?”

—Upon the moment his plan had succeeded, that report was an incident completely outside Abel’s hypothesis.

5

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One of them was Emilia, who angered Madelyn Eschart more than had been assumed, and caused her to invoke the Cloud Dragon.

And then—

???: "—Impossible."

In the distance, beyond the hulking, writhing city walls of Moguro Hagane, lay the Crystal Palace, the very heart of the beloved Imperial Capital and the symbol of the Vollachian Empire's authority.

At the top of that beautiful palace, only a few people even knew of that weapon, and in fact, even the General did not know of the existence of the Magic Crystal Cannon until he had heard about it from Abel.

Zikr Osman risked his life to make them misfire that single, precious shot of this decisive weapon that, if fired, would cleave the horizon and completely disrupt the tide of battle.

Riding his beloved horse across the front lines, he appealed loudly that they had the chance to win the battle, and while rallying up the rebels, he appealed for their support in order to get the Magic Crystal Cannon to focus on them.

All this in order to mislead them into believing that this was the best opportunity to make a decisive change in the battle.

Hence, the moment the pinnacle of the Crystal Palace glowed, Zikr was convinced that he had accomplished the task.

His mind was filled with images of his mother, of his elder sisters, and of his younger sisters, those women so crucial to the formation of his own self, and he even smiled at how much like him that was.

A prayer far too beautiful to let die in one's embrace, a demise that was supposed to come peacefully, but was replaced with astonishment before the wide-eyed Zikr.

Because of—

Zikr: "—Miss Beatrice?"

6

Beatrice: "Figured this is what it would be, in fact."

Beatrice muttered to herself while in free fall, her dress and long curly hair fluttering in the air.

When confronted by Zikr, who had come to Beatrice and the others' camp tent to ask for her blessing as a warrior, Beatrice had a gut feeling that he intended to die.

Four hundred years ago, in that time of constant warfare, there were many with the same look in their eyes.

Back then, Beatrice was not able to reach out to them. Some did not want to be reached out to, and some did not know how to reach out.

Perhaps even if Beatrice were to repeat that time again, it would be hard to imagine that she could have approached it better.

Surely she would experience the same helplessness again, watching them go to their deaths.

But that is—

Beatrice: "—No reason to do the same here today, I suppose."

???: "Aa, u!"

With their characteristic pattern, Beatrice's eyes faced forward, and there was a little girl holding Beatrice's thin shoulders from behind as if she were holding her tightly.

Beatrice did not forgive the little girl with golden hair and blue eyes.

It was true that her actions, unknown to her, had made many people miserable.

But still, for this one moment, she thought.

For this one moment, she believed in some other feeling other than the “naïveté” of Natsuki Subaru.

Beatrice: “…”

Beatrice and the little girl—Louis were high up in the sky, even higher than the city walls.

After a series of short range “teleports”, as if with no other means, Louis brought Beatrice to this place as if to prove her worthiness.

Just now, Louis demonstrated her worth.

In which case, Beatrice was next to respond to those deeds.

Beatrice: “Betty can just see everyone’s angry faces, in fact.”

Angry, or perhaps concerned, but in the end, still angry.

Beatrice’s lips suddenly relaxed as the loving faces of her companions came to her.

But, there was no choice not to do it. Because Beatrice was—

Beatrice: “Betty is Subaru’s partner, I suppose.”

At the moment she muttered those words, the entirety of the beautiful Palace, visible from a distance, glowed with a dazzling light so bright that it was able to transform the shape of the world, aiming at the rebels who were pushing forward on the ground in a straight line.

Zikr and his men, who were leading the charge, would be engulfed by the shot that would be far too destructive for them. Interrupting the line of fire with Louis, Beatrice clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

And then—

Beatrice: “—Al Shamak.”

—Then, the hole into another world that swallowed even the light that would change the world, opened then closed.

SETOWI

7

How many were there that could have properly grasped the events of that instant?

In truth, if things had come to pass as Abel had painted them, the damage would have been enormous, even if it had been within the range of what had been expected, the impact it would have provoked on those fighting at the other bastions would be immeasurable.

However, the Magic Crystal Cannon did not deliver the damage it was intended to unleash, and Zikr Osman, having been ready to sacrifice himself, continued on with that same vigor and began to fight the horde of stone golems.

The descent of the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia and Emilia's battle with Madelyn who had brought it along continued, and the aged skill of The Vicious Old Man Olbart was cornering Garfiel.

Yorna, The Flamboyant, and Priscilla, a mother and daughter, were forced into a fierce battle by The Spirit Eater Arakiya, who had decided to shake off everything to achieve her own ends. Otto and Petra, who had planned to establish control of the battlefield and, in fact, accomplished it partly, confronted the malice along with Medium.

There was no significant impact on the state of those battles.

Merely, the possibility that the state of those battles would substantially lean unfavorably was now lost.

In exchange for this tremendous achievement—

Louis: "Ua! Ahu! Auu!"

The presence of the little girl in Louis's arms faded as she fluttered through the air in a tight embrace.

It was, quite literally, the sight of the little girl's figure gradually fading away. As if to deny it, Louis embraced the girl, Beatrice, but it served no purpose.

As if scattering into the air, Beatrice's body was about to turn into light.

Louis: "Aa! Aa, AaAa!"

Screaming, Louis tried hard to deny the situation before her eyes.

But no amount of lamenting and screaming could stop the crumbling of Beatrice's existence.

In order to save the lives of many, she blew into the beyond the light of destruction that was released.

As compensation for that overwhelming power, Beatrice's existence had become disperse. Even if one reached out their fingers to the light waning from as if it were being peeled off, those fingers would not be blocked, instead passing through.

Louis: "Aa…!!"

With tears welling up in her ragged, wide blue eyes, Louis screamed.

Screaming, screaming, even though screaming did not help, she screamed desperately .

There was nothing else she could do, and she could not find anything more she could do, so she screamed.

And so she frantically screamed and ranted and raved—.

Louis: "—a?"

With a plop, her large tears scattered freely into the air, and then Louis turned her face away from her face, and out into the distance.

Embracing Beatrice in her arms, she looked not at the little girl about to disappear, not at the sky that had turned white, not at the sky that had turned red, not at the ground where many people were shouting in anger, but at this moment, forgetting everything that formed the battlefield, she looked out into the distance.

And then, she leaped toward that distance.

Louis: “U—”

Midair, the distance that she could leap at a time was about ten meters; using it over and over again in a sequence placed a strain on her organs, like they were being squeezed, but she did not care.

Taking on all of the burdens that would be placed on Beatrice, Louis leaped.

She leaped, leaped, leaped, leaped, leaped, leaped, leaped, and then finally—

Louis: “…”

Upon reaching the ground, Louis fell forward as if crouching. Ignoring the general lethargy of her body, Louis held up the incredibly light little girl in her arms in front of her.

Beatrice, whose very presence was becoming thinner and thinner, was put in front of her.

And then—

Louis: “Uau…”

???: “—I know. The two of you, you’re both being too reckless.”

Then, suddenly, there was a sigh that sounded like a bitter laugh, and the little girl was snatched away from her outstretched arms. — No, she was not taken from her. She was gently held up.

Then, Beatrice’s body was embraced in front of the kneeling Louis’s eyes.

It was there, in the arms of the black-haired boy who was there, that he gently, cherishingly, tightly held her.

Receiving this embrace, visibly so full of love, the girl who had accomplished a great task, her eyelids framed by long eyelashes trembled, and her eyes slowly opened.

Then her eyes, with their distinctive pattern, flickered—

Beatrice: "—You left me so worried, in fact."

???: "Yeah, I love you too."

To that whispered deep affection, he responded with proud deep love, and the hands that should have been joined became joined.

The boy laughed in front of Louis, who was watching it from the front row and letting out a small exhale.

He laughed and said,

???: "Well, shall we begin? —Bring it on, oh inevitable fate."

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VII

1

“You said you lost your memories, but exactly how much is missing?”

The one asking the question was Katya, who sat across the table, after having had meals brought to her room for them to eat. With a mouth full of potato, Rem’s eyes widened as she placed a hand over her mouth.

It was in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana—in the mansion of Berstetz Fondalfon, the Imperial Prime Minister—where Rem had been taken to and placed under house arrest. Here she had been given the role of Flop’s caretaker—an injured person also under confinement. But outside of healing Flop’s wounds with magic, Rem did whatever she wanted with her time, and in the past few days had grown quite close to Katya, who sat opposite her now.

Katya had also been placed under house arrest for reasons unknown—she was a captive just like Rem—and Rem’s nature was such that she couldn’t leave her alone; they had gotten closer to the extent that they shared meals like this, but…

“…What is it?” questioned Katya. “I won’t get annoyed even if you make me wait until you swallow that.”

“…Okay, I’ve swallowed it,” replied Rem. “No, I wasn’t thinking about making you wait and all.”

“Then what is it?”

“Surprisingly, I’ve never really been asked anything regarding my memories before.” It wasn’t hesitation or discomfort on her part, but genuine surprise. In fact, thinking about it, Rem felt that all the people she had met until now had tiptoed around the subject of her lost memories. Of course, she wasn’t going to accuse Katya of having a lack of consideration, but…

"…A-Are you implying that I lack consideration? That I should think about others before I speak? Are you badmouthing me?!"

Even if Rem said nothing, Katya would end up saying it herself. That was the difficulty with her personality.

Katya glared at Rem and resentfully bit her lip. Part of the reason why she has such an aggressive—or rather demeaning—attitude, is because of her bad legs, thought Rem. Supporting her body weight is something called a wheelchair. Unable to use her legs freely, she depends on a tool to move about—something she belittles herself for.

"Though I can't make it the sole reason since I'm also using a cane…"

"D-Don't…act like it isn't just a decoration. Mine is…it's not…the same. You're…more proper than I am…"

"I don't get the feeling that I'm being praised."

"I'm not praising you! This is like… W-We're just licking each other's wounds."

Lowering her gaze, Katya returned her knife and fork to her plate. As far as Rem knew, Katya tended to only eat small amounts, but more than half the food had been left on the plate. There's no way she's full, she thought.

"Miss Katya, you've left far too much food…"

"What's wrong? Am I not being considerate enough to the chef? Are you going to blame me for that, too?"

"No, I was thinking you might get hungry in the middle of the night. Would you like to save some bread for later?"

"S-Stop talking like some poor peasant!" she shouted, shoving the breadbasket back at Rem. If she were to persist, Katya, with her stubborn nature, would only get angrier. Rem was aware that giving up was crucial, and so secured the bread herself so she could give it to her later.

“We got off track a little, but I believe we were talking about my memories.”

“…W-Were you actually going to tell me? I thought you were evading the question since you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“I already told you—I was just surprised; it’s not that I didn’t want to be asked. Even if I had something I didn’t want to be asked, I wouldn’t remember it.”

Of course, Rem probably did have a secret or two, but, unfortunately, with her memories completely gone, she couldn’t recall what they were and thus had nothing to hide or be shy about. In all honesty, I’m not sure I’ll be able to give Katya the answers she’s looking for, she thought.

“You really don’t remember anything? For example… For example, about your family?”

“A person who insisted they knew me before I lost my memories told me that I have a twin sister. We look like two peas in a pod according to him, but…”

“A twin… Did the person who insisted this seem trustworthy?”

“No… No, nevermind… Wait… Maybe not?”

“Which one is it! Why can’t you make up your mind?”

Unable to make a decision, Rem was caught between hesitation and distress, and Katya glared at her. Rem wasn’t entirely sure why she was finding it so difficult to answer that. If she were to be forced to give a reason, however, she would say it was just like bad-tasting medicine.

“If I don’t take it, my body will get worse, but it’s bitter and difficult to take…or something like that.”

“Are you…talking about a person? Not a food you don’t like?”

“It’s not that I dislike him… But I don’t like him either.”

The first words that she’d said had been entirely reflexive, but she immediately altered them with more conscious thought. At Rem’s response, Katya’s lips trembled, and she let her eyes wander. She knew exactly how the flustered Rem felt—and she was struck by a sudden feeling of guilt that she might have said something mean.

“I think that’s enough about me? Let’s talk about you instead.”

“M-Me…?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“That’s an absurd way to begin a conversation…” Her lips trembling, Katya’s face reddened. But due to the guilt she felt from before, she sincerely searched for a topic of conversation. “You just mentioned you had a twin… I had an older brother.”

“Katya… You don’t…” Her cheeks tensing, she tried to stop Katya from talking about it.

She knew of Katya’s brother, as it had been mentioned here and there. He was an imperial soldier who lost his life during the rebellion here in the fortified city of Guaral.

It was her who had pursued the topic in the first place, but she did not want to hurt Katya, nor open old wounds. However…

“It’s okay.”

“But…”

“No buts! Y-You’re the one who started this conversation. So… So listen to me! I’m not trying to make my brother into a painful memory.”

“…”

“He wasn’t the type of person who deserved admirable treatment… hic.” Biting her nails, Katya forced the words out of her mouth.

To Katya’s sincere appeal from the heart, Rem suddenly felt the same guilt at bringing up such a topic as Katya had moments before. In other words, I’m the one who’s actually lacking in consideration.

Rem had mistakenly considered it a kindness to avert her eyes and try to avoid opening up old wounds. “What sort of older brother was he?” she asked, having accepted that it was rude of her to have thought that way.

Katya looked around aimlessly at Rem’s query, then started stammering some words about her dead older brother. “He was a thug, and selfish, and his voice was too…it was too loud… I hated him.”

2

“My household had three children in it… I was the youngest, and the older two were my brothers. My oldest brother died in a rockfall accident, which left just me—who wasn’t very good at anything—and my brother.”

“Both your brothers…”

“…Well, the brother I want to talk about was the second son. My eldest brother didn’t like him very much… But they’re both dead now.”

Seeing that Katya had started talking, Rem was careful not to interrupt her story, and could guess how she felt as she told it. Since it was no easy task to say that talking about it would make her feel better.

“But he was good to you, right, Katya?”

“H-He didn’t have a lot of consideration for others, so there were a lot of times where he did unnecessary things. For example… If you didn’t already know, I’m the daughter of a lowly count…a part of the Empire’s nobility.”

“I…didn’t know that.”

As Katya explained while touching her shoulder, Rem's eyes flickered to her wheelchair. She didn't have a particularly vast knowledge of it, but she knew that the chair she sat in had been specially made.

In the beginning, Subaru had made a chair that he strapped to his back to carry Rem, whose legs were bad. Even so, merchants like Flop had tried to purchase it because of its rarity, so she understood the precious value of such a wheelchair.

"By any chance, did your brother also make that wheelchair…"

"Not my brother, but someone my brother brought along… Well, that's a different story. Anyway, I am the child of a nobleman and it was a school where people like me were enrolled."

"Schools nobles attend…"

If she were to be honest, Rem did not understand the differences between nobility and other people. Roughly, Katya was a noble, Flop was a merchant, Mizelda was a Shudrak, and Priscilla was someone who made their own path… I guess that's one way to look at it?

"Are you saying that that school is what made you who you are today?"

"…No. Have you been listening? This is a story about my brother. This has nothing to do with me, but that isn't the main topic."

"Haa."

"Anyway! Ch-Children of nobles all have high self-esteem, do nothing but boast, and are incredibly dislikable. I was a good outlet for them." Katya gently pointed to herself with both hands as she spoke of such terrible things, but for some reason she did not speak of it sadly, but with a hint of excitement.

"If you were harassed by those around you, aren't they bad memories?"

"See…seeing my brother, beat them up was rather, refreshing."

"Beat them up… was that okay?"

Rem also wanted those who had done bad things to Katya to receive punishment, but was he really fine with being outnumbered, or rather acting violently in a public place?

"O-Of course not. Both me and my brother were kicked out immediately," Katya affirmed to Rem's question with vigor.

Sure enough, Katya and her brother were expelled from school, and most likely stripped of their noble qualifications.

"Actually, no. W-We just had very little value living as lowly counts who had not been educated. My brother was fine, actually, as he was talented in swordplay and such."

"What did you do? If you couldn't go to school…"

"Our eldest brother was alive at that point, so it wasn't too serious. Normally, we'd be able to depend upon a tutor at home, but…"

"But?"

"When no one was around, even that tutor…" Gripping her arm, Katya's face twisted in pain.

The rage and hatred that collected on her face made it obvious that she'd been harassed by the tutor too. Even ignoring the wheelchair, the impression you got from Katya in one glance screamed 'frail'. Such a disposition was unfortunately the kind that inspired sadism in others.

And guessing from where the story is going that tutor…

"When my brother realized I was acting strange, it was a bloodbath…"

"A bloodbath…"

"I-It served them right, but…it was the final nail in the coffin. My brother and I became outcasts in the family, and then our eldest brother had his accident."

"…How is your family now?"

"My mother…disappeared. My father…destroyed his body with heavy drinking." Katya's family's situation worsened, as though tumbling down a hill. It was as though they were cursed, she thought, and Rem wanted to complain to fate for not having any mercy. Katya, however, seemed to be taking it very differently.

"My brother says we must be lucky or something."

"…Even though you went through all that?"

"…He's always said that it's our enemies who get the worst end of the stick. S-So, no matter what we have to deal with, it's always for our benefit." Placing a hand over her chest, Katya divulged the words she had received from her brother in days gone by.

The absurdity and—to a certain extent—arrogance of such a thing shocked Rem so much that her jaw dropped. If only taking into account the particulars of the story, it's true that everyone has encountered misfortune—the students in the school, her tutor, her eldest brother whom she and her brother didn't like, and even her parents. But laughing it off like that while being in the middle of such misfortunes is…

"You think it's foolish too, don't you?"

"Umm… I'm not sure how to answer that."

"That's the same as just saying it is foolish…but that's right."

As Rem averted her eyes at the difficult question, Katya glared at her with her gloomy eyes. Katya had voiced the derogatory remark that Rem hadn't, but she didn't seem to be feeling negative about it. There were some violent and unsettling parts to the story, but even so, the unforgettable memories she's sharing are important to her and her brother. And it…

"…If we're talking about my brother's foolishness, we've not even scratched the surface."

…is obvious from her timid appeal that she isn't done yet.

"O-Of course, it's fine if you're tired of listening, or think it's pointless…"

"…If I'm being honest, then I think it will be difficult for me to have a good impression of your brother."

"That's a bit too honest…"

"But I believe, as we talk, we're getting closer to your objective… I'm of the thought that you don't want the memories of your dead brother to only be sad ones."

Having forgotten so many things, Rem's past was lost to her. Whether or not she should regain her lost memories, or how to face her lost past, Rem hadn't found a clear answer yet. But the way of thinking that Katya had chosen was one answer to the question. I don't think that it's fine not to know. But acting like you know something when you don't is not just arrogant but cruel, she thought.

Rem had always ignored Subaru. It was partly because she found his scent difficult to bear, but also that he clearly knew of her past, which she actively refused to let him tell her about. If she'd let him, he would have clung to her—probably not with any bad intentions, but not with particularly good intentions either.

"But even so, I do think there is a minimum amount of consideration that is necessary…" As she pointed out her understanding, and also posed a challenge, Rem looked at Katya in front of her. Her cheeks hardened at that look. "Katya," she called out. "Please tell me your brother's story, until you're satisfied to your heart's content."

"…Hearing that makes me not want to say anything at all."

"Don't make this difficult. Please stop complaining. Now, go ahead."

"I really dislike the way you worded that! Umm… Where should I begin…" As her lips trembled, Katya's eyes wandered, and then she started talking about her next memory.

As Rem listened to Katya's unsteady words, she furrowed her brows and gave it some deep thought. If it were right here and now, I wouldn't mind hearing Subaru's story either—or even all about my past and my lost memories. It used to be uneasiness and impatience that dominated my thoughts, but I'm sure my feelings will be different moving forward. I'm incredibly grateful for the fact I was able to meet Katya—a troubled girl who helped me to feel such things.

As Rem examined her feelings, she also came to one other conclusion:

Katya's brother is good-for-nothing, though I'll never let her hear that herself.

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Like Holding the Oni by the Neck

"You need to listen when you're spoken to."

Pushing the back of a wheelchair, Rem was talking while walking about the grounds she was captive in, when the words of Katya, the owner of that wheelchair, made her eyes go wide.

In the Imperial Capital Lupugana, is the estate of Prime Minister Berstetz Vondarfon—That was where Rem was held captive. Being burdened with the roles of healer and hostage, it was where she had been put under house arrest.

While the position of a hostage might have a dangerous ring to it, she had not been as forcefully restricted, and aside from not being allowed to exit the mansion, she had no restrictions to her roaming within its grounds. While on one part, there were some rooms she was forbidden from entering, it was still exceptional treatment.

And while under that exceptional environment, Rem was still not so sweet so as to remain a slavish captive.

She thought about finding some way to acquire even a single method of certain escape as soon as possible, and to get away from this life of house arrest.

Perhaps having seen through that mentality, Katya's gaze was particularly severe. With that intense look, Katya bit her own hand's nail and said、

"I-It's not something you said. But even then, it has me on edge… Th-There's limits to how rude you can be. Are you trying to ridicule me?"

"No, I never…"

"Someone like me! A woman who can't even go out for a walk without needing help, all you need to do is give me whatever random… Yeah, whatever random half-hearted reply you need to, that's what you're thinking. Right? Just fuck off…"

Lending no ears to Rem's protests, Katya lowered her frizzy olive-haired head and began a slew of self-deprecation.

An exchange that happened quite often, or rather, an exchange she could say she was quite used to: Katya's outbursts. This woman she had met at the mansion had a rather difficult-to-approach aspect to her.

However—

"F-Fine. Leave me alone, do as you please…"

"—Katya-san!"

"—Wh-Wh-Whuh."

"Please listen to me. And, I would have you stop speaking ill of yourself. You can do both, right? One, two—"

"—Hic."

Wrapping around the wheelchair, Rem asserted so strongly while meeting Katya's eyes. Being told so, Katya blinked her eyes and drooped her head with a red face, silent.

She was a cute one, honest and obedient; her blood simply rose to her head a little too fast.

Who do you think Rem had spent all this time with before being dragged here? If you compared Katya to Priscilla, she was like a newborn puppy.

That aside—

"I apologize for making you worried. It is not that I was not listening to you. I simply wanted to look at the surroundings a little bit."

"The surroundings, you say…this isn't just a garden. Doesn't have even a single interesting thing to it.”

“Quite right. This does not seem to be a garden meant to entertain people.”

Katya did just have an outburst, but it was Rem’s behavior that had made her do so. When she apologized for that, Katya, though still red in the face, properly humored her conversation.

It was just like Katya said: their surroundings—the courtyard, which was where they carried their feet under the pretense of a stroll, Rem looked at it with her light blue eyes narrowed. Reflecting its master’s nature, inside the estate, the buildings and furnishings, while all opulent, were so utilitarian so as to be dry.

The courtyard gave the most extreme impression of this since, while it made up for all the greenery lacking in the mansion’s scenery, the real purpose of it was in the landing platforms for the flying dragons that occasionally came by. There was a reasonable amount of wind produced by the flying dragons when landing and taking off, so it was clean of the decoration of even a single flower that could scatter petals.

There’s no fun in watching, was only a natural thing for Katya to say.

“And yet, what are you trying to get from gazing at a garden like this…”

“Well, I did not come here in search of amusement. I wondered if I could find even a single thread of some kind to escape from here.”

“Hey you, you just apologized for making me worry, didn’t you? In that case, don’t make these kinds of jokes!!”

“Jokes…?”

“Stop! Dumbass! That’s the scariest response you could give…It’s scary! Dumbass!”

Looking at the behavior of Rem who was tilting her neck, Katya opened her eyes wide and panicked.

It actually was not a joke; however, she had to pretend it was a joke, or else who knows how long Katya's heart might remain disturbed.

As such, Rem poked her tongue out and said, "It's a joke."

"Gazing at the garden is… That's right, it is because there is really no other place to experience the outside; let us leave it at that."

"I-I'm a bit concerned about how you phrased that, but it feels like it'd be nothing good if I dug deeper, so I won't ask."

Rem's words, overflowing with consideration, were somewhat lacking in effectiveness it seemed.

While Rem slumped her shoulders at the misfire, Katya breathed a sigh while looking at her and said,

"Don't feel down… I, really don't understand you."

"That is no wonder indeed. As I, do not really understand myself either…"

"And how am I supposed to react to that response! How am I to know what's appropriate to say, and what isn't appropriate to say! I-It's a liability! A liability in fact, that amnesia!"

Rolling the wheels, she grabbed onto by herself, Katya turned around and screamed in anger at Rem.

A result of that statement with no ill will: if Rem had to say it was in fact meant in consideration of her, as such, Katya's reaction was terribly upsetting, though she had purposefully spoken of her own amnesia in an attempt to make her think she was not too bothered by it.

"Haaa, Haaa, being with you makes me tired…Does this happen to everyone else?"

"I do not make much of an attempt to change my behavior to the tune of others, but Katya would be the only one to raise their voice to such an extent like this."

“Y-You picking a fight just because I can’t move my legs…!”

Once again, Rem strained a smile as something was received in a different way to what she had meant. Somehow or other, Katya remained in a stance which did not allow for her to push her wheelchair, and so Rem took the cane held under her arm, and firmly stretched herself up.

Once so done, Katya, who saw Rem’s actions and cane said,

“…Hey, for what reason are your legs not working?”

“Unfortunately, many things happened to my body that I have no knowledge of…”

“What the hell is with your body, it’s terrifying…! Well, I guess I’m also on the same boat of not knowing my body that well. I don’t know why it is that I’m so sickly and the like.”

Katya reflexively raised her voice, and quickly reflected on herself. Looking at her hair whorl as she held her head down, Rem looked down at the cane that propped her own body up.

This cane was something that was made for her by the People of Shudraq at their settlement for her impaired legs. She suffered to get used to it, so it was likely that the original Rem had not used a cane.

“Somehow there are some things my body is used to, because it seems a cane was not one of them.”

“…S-So, it’s not like you forgot how to walk along with the rest of your memories then.”

“I am not that dumb-…Ah, was that perhaps a joke?”

“Take notice! Just move on, dumbass!”

Once so said, Rem reflected on the fact that she had made a waste of Katya’s joke. As soon as she said it, her face quickly turned red, so Katya must have mustered quite a bit of courage as well.

With her face still red, Katya clicked her tongue and said, “Aah, c’mon.”

“Whatever I say is hilarious… then how about the opposite, what do you remember?”

“Eh?”

“I’m asking, what is it you remember? It’ll be fine once I hear that.”

Implicitly, since Katya still planned to talk to Rem, she was trying to find a way to not fail in conversation with Rem in the future.

Her thoughtfulness made her happy, but also troubled Rem could not remember anything about herself. She wanted to respond to Katya’s expectations, but she could not.

She racked her head, as she simply did not want to stay quiet forever and trouble Katya—

“—Now that you mention it, it seems that I have a twin sister.”

“…I feel like you’ve mentioned that, yes. Do you remember her?”

“No. What I remember is just that she looked very much like me, and was a very reliable person, or so I have heard…”

While speaking, what she remembered was the voice of Subaru who wanted to talk when he showed his face during unnoteworthy times as they were traveling from the settlement to town, and the content of his talks.

Though she thought it was done with good intentions, Subaru’s talks about Rem before she lost her memories were incessant.

She did not believe those were fabrications of his, and no small number of them were convincing as well. Particularly the ones related to the existence of her twin sister were verified to be true by a twinge deep in her bosom.

However, being told about things she did not remember was a half-and-half bitter and sweet feeling. Though it was after she honestly told him that, that Subaru reigned it in.

Once she had heard Rem's answer, Katya narrowed her eyes with a "Hmmm" and said:

"What kind of person is that?"

"…I heard she's someone who looks well at her surroundings, and is very attentive to details. And that while her slightly mean side is her one flaw, that was still the way she expressed her sisterly love."

She had no way to confirm it, but nevertheless, Rem half-believed and half-doubted that high praise.

Even though he had prefaced it by saying she was reliable, that was still way too reliable. Perhaps one could say Subaru only saw the good parts of that Sister.

Or maybe, perhaps for the sake of Rem who was missing her memories, he was avoiding referencing any of her bad parts.

"Whatever the case, it appears he's giving her quite the special treatment. …If she really is that splendid of a sister, I would wish she could come help me any time soon."

"Th-That phrasing felt kinda thorny there. Even if you might not be conscious of it, she's your sister, right?"

"Even though I am not conscious of it, she is my sister. Though I did not particularly mean that in a harsh manner."

Hearing the words of Katya, whose cheeks had slightly stiffened, Rem leisurely shook her head side to side.

She was aware of the fact that it was an unreasonable protest herself, but she did not intend to be harsh to her yet unseen sister. If forced to say, perhaps her antipathy towards the one who let her know had slipped onto her tongue.

On Rem's self-awareness, Katya followed her words with a "Be that as it may"

“When I hear about your twin, I really can’t believe that you’d have such an outstanding sister.”

“What… Do you mean by that?”

“W-Well, you have so many personality flaws, don’t you?”

“What?”

“—Hic, I-It’s nothing to get angry about.”

At that statement that made her doubt her ears, Rem asked her to repeat it, and Katya, seeing that, spoke in falsetto. But, that Rem had gotten angry was just unthinkable.

She had merely just asked her to repeat the libel she had no clue about.

“I am not angry. Don’t talk such nonsense.”

“Well, you made that face, and no matter how you look at it…”

“Did I not say, that I’m not angry…?!”

“~~, See, you’re angry…”

Hanging her head in despondency, Katya looked at Rem reproachfully while biting her nails. Putting a hand to her forehead, Rem gave a deep sigh at that gaze, and sat her inner-self down.

She really was not angry, but if she was being perceived as angry, then that must be revised.

“I-In the first place, we’re getting off topic! I didn’t ask you about your twin, I asked you about, about the person that told you about her.”

“The person that told me about her? Why are you interested in that person?”

“Well…That’s because, when you talk about that person, your face kind of…”

"My face?"

Tilting her head, Rem had genuine doubts about the fact Katya held an interest. However, when being questioned, Katya let out a small "Ah" and sighed, and then her eyes swam.

Then, after a moment of hesitation,

"N-Not gonna say it after all. You seem like you'd get angry."

"Why? I will get angry."

"Look, just like I thought! Yo-You're angry!"

"I was saying in advance that I will be angry, I am not angry now though…"

At Katya's half-hearted attitude, Rem tapered her lips as if expressing her displeasure.

When she hesitated strangely, she was made extremely curious about it somehow. And what's more, when the topic involved Subaru, it was like a little fishbone clearly asserted its presence inside of Rem.

Meaning that she needed to extract it, this dangerous foreign object that would not disappear no matter how much time passed.

"As such, please speak at once. That is for your sake, Katya-san."

"A- a threat…! That's pretty much just a threat!!"

"This is also, for Katya-san's sake."

"You're absolutely lying! Don't lie with a nonchalant face!"

Katya, who put up quite an intense resistance, moved the wheels of her wheelchair and attempted to escape. It was quite a risk for Katya, but unfortunately for Rem, her speed was slower than a jog.

Once she put her body weight strongly on her cane, Rem began chasing after the escaping Katya. Also, a guard, who was looking after the pathway, turned his gaze to the two's game of tag. Waving a hand to indicate there was no need to worry, Rem hurriedly chased after the escaping Katya, cornered her, and caught her.

"Ugh, urk, fucking shit…"

"You talked of being a lady of nobility, yet is it fine for you to mouth such foul words?"

"I also said both school and house tutors were useless, didn't I?! S-So persistent…"

Rem held on tightly to a wheel with one hand, and even though Katya tried to fight against it with both hands, the wheel would not move. The fight ending from her complete lack of force in a contest of strength, Katya went limp.

At that loser Katya, the winner, Rem, called out "Now" to her,

"I have caught you, so please calmly speak. What were you about to say?"

"…But it's not like it was that important."

"If it was not that important, then can you not say it?"

"What are you, a torturer that won't listen…?! I'll say it, I just need to say it right!"

Meeting Rem's demands, Katya finally spoke.

Somehow, Rem had turned excessively obstinate too, but having this exchange with Katya was fun, so she hoped she would forgive this as an extended category of their friendship as well.

In contrast to that pleasant thought from Rem, Katya's side was putting on a face like she had made her pathetic peace with things, even if Rem said she would accept it placidly no matter what she told her.

To Rem thinking that, Katya heaved a very deep sigh and said, "It's just, when you talk about that someone, your face, relaxes or something…"

"What?"

"Look at that, you're angry, aren't you!"

At Rem questioning her with a grave voice, Katya raised a shriek like she was about to cry.

The reason being Katya had wonderfully poked at the "If you tell me that" bit of Rem who had thought "no matter what you tell me."

"My face was relaxed? That does not seem logical; it is displeasing."

"Man, I'm done talking with you…Hic."

"Please wait. Let us talk this out. This misunderstanding is a misunderstanding needing clearing."

Katya attempted to escape, but circling around behind her hastily, Rem grabbed onto the handles of her wheelchair, and once again put the cane back under her arm.

That concluded the walk, and she would correct the previous wrong impression on the way to returning Katya to her room.

"S- save me! You people, come save me!"

Having her wheelchair irreparably pushed by Rem, Katya sought help from the guards on patrol.

The guards turned towards that appeal, but with a wave of Rem's hand, they assented, and Katya's complaints could be assumed to be ignored.

Though it was difficult whether that should be called a neglect of their duties, or a high crisis awareness.

"In the first place, if we are to talk about my face, then, Katya-san, you as well, when you talk about your fiancé, you make a face you don't show to others."

“~~Hic, d-don’t just say whatever! Dumbass! Let go! I’m breaking things off with you! Break off!”

Flapping her legs desperately, Katya gave a meager resistance. While hearing her voice, Rem did not slow the speed of her legs with the intention of discussing with her till the end.

While Rem had forgotten many things, there was one thing that she had clearly confirmed.

—Her self, before losing her memories, surely was also thoroughly jerked around by that boy.

END

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record

1

How did it come to this?

"There's no need to be so nervous… Well, even if I say that, it probably won't convince you, will it?" As he spoke, the red-headed youth standing before her gave a faint wry smile. With hair like fire, and eyes like a clear sky, his well-defined face and neat appearance would dazzle anyone reflected within those captivating eyes.

This youth was undoubtedly breathtakingly beautiful, but Meili's shaking, at least, was not due to any kind of surprise at his appearance. The feelings she harbored towards him came more from a primitive instinct than anywhere else. In other words, it was fear that stemmed from coming face to face with him—a person whose existence was totally different and on a completely different level than hers.

And what had pushed Meili's heart into further chaos, was—

"I don't mean to frighten you. I only want to ask you a question, first of all," he said, looking down at Meili, who had gone stiff, his eyes wandering down towards her shoulders.

Her braid rested over one shoulder, but the blue-eyed youth seemed to see straight through it.

Something was concealed behind the braid.

Thus he spoke…

"…How did you tame that witchbeast?"

"…"

The way he spoke as though it was a completely normal day-to-day question made her blood run cold more than any angry voice ever could. Her shoulders shifted involuntarily, and she felt the faintest tickle at the nape of her neck. By the time she realized, she was too late.

Escaping through Meili's hair, it leapt up onto the girl's head and raised its stinger, swinging its small pincers in an attempt to intimidate them.

"Whoa," the young man said, raising his eyebrows slightly. But the surprise that spread around him was not quite as tame. Seeing what had jumped so suddenly onto the girl's head, those in the meeting room were a mixture of surprised, cautious, dumbfounded, and openly hostile.

There was quite a commotion, and in the middle of that, Meili Portroute covered her face with her small hand while listening to the pincers snapping on her head and thought again: How did it come to this?

2

Meili was frequently suspicious that her life might very well be a dream.

"Even if it is a dream, it's difficult to decide whether it's a good or a bad one," she muttered, plopping down on a step and placing her arms on her knees before resting her chin in her hands.

Her original profession was a job that frequently involved taking the lives of others. She had evoked people's resentments, and there was such a thing as karmic retribution in the world.

Meili had the awareness to question illogical stories. When she was arrested and locked away in a confinement room at Roswaal Manor, she recalled playing with Subaru's handmade dolls and stuffed toys by herself—items she had never asked him to bring.

A monster kidnaps the princess, and the prince takes along his friends to go and rescue her.

Meili also had the awareness to conjure up common stories such as this.

"If that's the case than me being safe and sound would be an illogical story."

If she were to allocate the roles in a puppet show, Meili would be the villain. She was either a monster, or the evil sorcerer who cooperated with the monster. The villain had to exit the story once they stirred up enough trouble.

But in this puppet show, the prince and princess had held a hand out to the villain.

"It's weeeird," she grumbled to herself, pouting her pink lips.

The sorcerer understood that it was weird and wrong, so they had the option to reject the outstretched hand. But they already knew that if they did that, it would make the prince and princess terribly sad.

"…That's a very serious face."

Meili was reflecting upon her complicated situation before someone called out to her from across the garden. Glancing up, she saw a small girl walking her way—a girl she identified as Annerose.

Examining the state of Roswaal Manor's gardens, Annerose carefully looked over the red petals of the flowers that lined the flowerbed. "If you're going to make such a glum face, how about you admire these flowers? Getting these Agares flowers to bloom in such a beautiful way is a rare sight."

"I think they're pretty, buut staring at flowers won't improve my mood. Are you sure it's okay though, Annerose?"

"Is what okay?"

"To be relaaxing in a place like this," she answered. Against the background of flowers in full bloom, the girl turning around and tilting her head made for an incredibly picturesque scene.

However, this serene ambiance and the situation she had been placed in did not go together. Emilia's group—which also included the lord of the mansion, Roswaal—had set out to the southern empire in order to search for their missing companions. In reality, though, they had set out in order to search for a way to get there.

In the meantime, Annerose was left in charge of the house, and Meili was also given things to do. Everyone is surely soo busy now, and yet—

"For us to be so relaxed is…"

"Things are in motion whether or not you fret like this. Besides, I am inspecting the routine work of the servants. I told you this already, didn't I? Agres flowers are difficult to take care of."

"…Petra takes care of the flowers."

"Yes, what a talented child. Both Frederica and Clind also praised her a lot."

She didn't mind that Annerose was complementing Petra, but the point she had made before that wasn't very funny. Meili wasn't fretting or anything like that—she was just a little anxious.

"Uncle is always rushing through life. Although, since he has a responsibility towards Emily, it's obvious he'd be working so hard."

"You seem to be quite ruthless towards the margrave, Annerose… Or rather, everyone is."

"If you think about the mess he made, it's only natural. If anything, if it weren't for Emily and the others pleading on his behalf, I'd have sent Uncle into retirement and taken over for him in the royal selection." Unable to hold back her anger, Annerose narrowed her slanted eyes even further, and her lips twitched as she spoke of Roswaal.

Although, her complaints were completely justified.

In reality, Meili didn't really understand why Emilia and the others had forgiven Roswaal, either. She didn't understand, but—

"It's because they're like that that I'm here right now…" she muttered to the empty sky. The right or wrong of such a thing was unknown to Meili, who seemed to be somewhat ignorant in the ways of the world.

"…My lady, Miss Meili. You've both waited long enough. Complete."

"Eeeeek!" A voice unexpectedly called out from behind, and Meili inadvertently let out a scream.

In contrast to her scream, however, Annerose was rather unaffected. "Oh, Clind. Don't play such pranks—it's a bad habit of yours. Where are Lady Anastasia and the others?"

"They were sent away safely. Success. As for the shock, it was quite by chance that I happened to return here and so was an unfortunate accident. False accusation."

"What a shameless thing to say. Are you okay, Meili?"

As they spoke over her head, Meili eagerly climbed to her feet and took a step back.

The one who had appeared behind her as she sat upon the steps of the entrance to the mansion was Clind. "I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head modestly with an unreadable wire-like face.

"…It's just like Petra and Annerose said, I need to be caareful."

"My lady and Petra were talking…about me? Delight."

"How about you actually listen to what's being said?! It was a stern talk about that attitude of yours… Jeez." With drooping shoulders, Annerose shook her head. Then, sighing as she regained her composure, she looked over at both Meili and Clind. "If Lady Anastasia and the knight Julius have no problem with it, it's fine. I've completed my preparations. What about you, Meili?"

"I'm fine. But is it okay?"

"…? Is what okay?"

"It's not that I don't trust you, Annerose, as a noble, but won't it be difficult to get them to listen to you in the castle?"

The capital of the kingdom of Lugunica and its castle were where they had to go to make a certain report and have a negotiation. This was the reason why Meili was here with Annerose and the others. Of course, there would naturally have been some sort of report made to the castle already, but the people from their side were just the two girls and a steward.

To the anxious Meili, Annerose nodded. "Ah, no need to worry. Of course, the people in the castle will probably be busy, but circumstances are circumstances. Besides, I also have a plan that Uncle has created."

"That the margrave created… That's worrying."

"Well, I do understand what you mean… Clind." After putting her hand to her mouth in mock surprise, Annerose called for Clind. As a response to the call, the slim face of the butler obediently stepped forward. Then Annerose stood alongside Meili, with Clind behind them. "Do you have sufficient compensation? It takes far too much time by dragon carriage, after all."

"Certainly from the master. I consider the degree to be within the scope of my payment. Extenuate."

"Then that's fine. Please go ahead."

Meili had no idea what the conversation was about, but once it was completed Clind placed a hand gently on each of the girl's shoulders. Meili had no time to prepare herself, for it was finished in an instant.

"…What a truly strange poweer," Meili drew in a breath in astonishment.

The scene before her had changed within a blink of an eye.

Meili and the others had jumped from the garden of Roswaal Manor that they had just been in, to another garden entirely. Petra spent every day keeping the mansion garden in beautiful order, but this garden also seemed absolutely wonderful.

Clind's teleportation—the principles of which were not understood—was, as far as she'd heard, the unique ability that allowed him to jump anywhere within the kingdom. Making use of that ability, he'd taken Meili and Annerose to this garden.

"Soo, whose garden is this in the royal capitaal?"

"You'll find it out soon enough. See—here they come," Annerose jerked her chin in answer, and Meili turned round to look. Seeing the figures rushing towards the three of them in the garden, her eyes widened.

They were soldiers who wore a cloak over their white clothes, and a beautiful decorative sword that hung from their waist. Or rather, they were not soldiers, but knights. At their apparent strong sense of duty and vigilance, Meili's breath caught in her throat.

Staring at them, the leader of the group, with a face like a rock, stepped forward. "Exactly where have you come from? Did you commit this atrocity while being aware that this is Lugunica Castle?" he asked in a low voice, and Meili—who had wondered whose garden they were standing in—was suddenly enlightened.

The perpetrator Clind had a rather unruffled air about him, and his mistress Annerose took the lead. "Yes, we know. We also know how terribly rude it is. However, Uncle told me things would be settled more quickly this way."

"…Uncle?"

"Yes, Roswaal L. Mathers, the western margrave," she replied boldly, leaving the knights with a bitter face.

3

"Even so, to think you were related to Margrave Mathers. Well, the margrave does often surprise. It seems it runs in the family, too."

"Oh, as someone who knows exactly how Uncle behaves, I certainly can't take that as a compliment," Annerose replied with a smile to the old man, who was nodding again and again as he stroked his extremely long beard.

Her posture was dignified, and Meili was dumbstruck to such an extent that it turned into admiration. It seemed almost as though she'd been invited here—a situation that was highly irregular for an outlaw who had just entered the castle without permission.

The three of them had been caught by the captain of the knights, and not just knights, but the Royal Guard, in the garden, and—after disclosing her lineage—were immediately taken to a conference room within the castle. There, the ones who welcomed them were the prominent figures of the kingdom and they were in the middle of a talk, the old man with the white beard seemed like their representative.

"…I received word from Margrave Mathers regarding the urgent matter. However, he did not come himself to explain, and the representative he sends in his stead seems to be a small child," replied a bald man who stared at Annerose with thick eyebrows and crossed arms in the seat next to the old man.

Although he looked down at her in disdain, Annerose didn't seem intimidated in the slightest. On the contrary, she seemed to be aware of how to deal with those who look down on her because of her age, and laughed. "Is my age a problem? I'm afraid if that's the case, I could make a similar comment to all of you, no? Everyone in the Council of Wise Men seems to be pretty old."

"I—"

"Ho-Ho-ho. Well, well. She has you there, Bordeaux."

At Annerose's warlike response, full of impoliteness and disrespect, the man who'd spoken fell silent. Only the old man with white hair seemed to find enjoyment in their exchange.

At his laughter, the one called Bordeaux drew in a deep breath. "I don't think this is a time for laughter, Miklotov. It's a grave situation, this. If we take the message Margrave Mathers sent by carrier bird as truth, then…"

“Yes, I understand the gravity of the situation… Young lady.”

The old man Bordeaux had named as Miklotov looked over at Meili. “…Oh, are you referring to mee?”

Thinking that her time to speak had not yet arrived, Meili had let her mind wander, and suddenly straightened her back under the weight of his intellectual gaze.

To Meili, Miklotov gave a deep nod of his head. “I have a rough idea of the circumstances, but is it true? Can you drive away the witchbeasts and clear a path through the Augria Sand Dunes?”

“Umm, well I don’t really understand the difficulty of clearing a path, but if you grandpas are scared of those witchbeasts in the sand dunes, then I can make them go away.”

“To actually be able to manipulate witchbeasts…” At Meili’s careful reply, they looked at each other, and then a commotion spread amongst the people in the room.

Even during all the hubbub, Miklotov never lowered his gaze, continuing to stare into Meili’s eyes. Meili was somewhat overwhelmed by the old man’s gaze, which seemed to almost peer directly into her heart, but—

“Hold it together. We’re with you on this,” Annerose announced from her side, which helped to drown out her feelings of timidness.

She didn’t know Annerose enough to call her reassuring, but her words allowed her to remember. She could recall the kind words of Subaru and Emilia, who had pointed her in the right direction.

“…Those are good eyes,” Miklotov appraised, his gaze softening slightly.

At those words, Meili felt a weight lift from her shoulders and was suddenly overcome with exhaustion. The exhaustion brought on by a mere exchange of glances was immense. This old man is definitely not an ordinary person.

“Then, do you believe us now?” questioned Annerose.

“Hmm, that’s the problem,” Miklotov replied. “I didn’t sense any lies in that young lady’s eyes, but we still need to do some fact checking… And actually, I have the perfect person for it.”

“Perfect person?” Annerose asked, furrowing her well-defined eyebrows at Miklotov’s words.

Meili’s eyes widened too, puzzled at a sentence she didn’t understand the meaning of. At the two girl’s response, Miklotov narrowed his eyes as he caressed his beard. “…Bring the knight Reinhard here. He knows the sand dunes, so we should listen to his detailed explanation.”

Upon hearing the demand for the attendance of the Sword Saint who resided in the capital, Meili’s cheeks stiffened.

Although it may be obvious, the discussion in the castle to decide Meili’s fate from here on out seemed unlikely to be settled particularly easily.

END

Volume 33

Chapters 97-110

Chapter 97:
Arriving From Beyond the West

1

—Battles unfolded with the Imperial Capital of Lupugana as their stage, and in every single one of those locations, the climax approacheth.

A Dragon, clad in the very clouds themselves, swooped down to the sky where white snow was falling, and vermilion flames scorched the sky into a turbulent cloud. Stone golems were colliding against soldiers donning desperate expressions, a beast's powerful arms clashed against crafty elder malice clashing against malice riddled with craftiness arisen from age afront a collapsed rampart; the status of the conflict seesawed back and forth unending.

However, at this moment, at this very instant, the greatest focal point of this battlefield laid with the innermost part of the Imperial Capital—the most beautiful castle in the world, known as the Crystal Palace, a white light had been emitted.

Utilized throughout the entire construction of the castle were Magic Crystals—Mana crystals purer than most Magic Stones. By amplifying the Mana stockpiled therein, the Magic Crystal Cannon was a strategic weapon able to lay devastation upon its target.

To be precise, it was the Crystal Palace's trump card, the artillery of the highest firepower within the possession of the Vollachian Empire. The ultimate attack, which could quite possibly decide the outcome of a battle with only a single shot, even in this battlefield.

In the first place, only a limited number of people possessed knowledge of the existence of this Magic Crystal Cannon.

It went without saying that Abel, who had been on the seat of the Emperor, and Zikr Osman, to whom the outline of the operation had been conveyed to, would be aware of it. In addition, there was also Priscilla Barielle, whose possible prior awareness of this information would not strike as odd were she to actually possess it, alongside a very limited number of personnel on the side of the rebel army.

Probably, things would be more or less similar on the Imperial Capital's side, amounting to the fake Emperor Vincent Vollachia, who led the insurrection, and his accomplice, the Prime Minister, Berstetz Fondalfon. Along with Moguro Hagane, who was the Crystal Palace itself—it was a secret weapon that even the other Divine Generals had not known about.

And then—

???: "—The power of the Magic Crystal Cannon is limited to just three uses, but it shall not be used more than once on this battlefield."

That was Abel's judgement, and therefore, an awareness Vincent shared as well.

For a variety of reasons, the Magic Crystal Cannon was the trump card of national defense in every sense. The reckless act of using up all its remaining ammo was not something that could be done with the future in mind.

Of course, if Vincent intended to deplete it on this battlefield without any consideration for the future, then that was another matter.

Abel: "You could not possibly engage in such desperate behavior."

Abel did not especially think about what to call that conviction.

However, conviction was conviction, and without discarding what had budded within him, Abel had prepared the battlefield. Hence, he chose to give rise to the certainty that the Magic Crystal Cannon, which could only be fired once, would fire a fruitless shot.

That expectation had been lured out of them by the "decoys"; Zikr, a valuable asset when it came to warring potential, the high-morale soldiers under his banner, and the other various tribes, had all been put together.

Abel: “—Use the elite as decoys. The enemy shan’t be able to turn a blind eye to them.”

Then, having seen the unfortunate turn of events at the third bastion, the Magic Crystal Cannon was directed to the battlefield protected by Moguro.

The flaw of the Magic Crystal Cannon was that it may cause tremendous damage even to allies, but on Moguro’s battlefield, those worries were unnecessary. Because the stone golems scattered across the battlefield were nothing but forces that had split from the Divine General, and even the titanic Moguro, who had become one with the rampart, was not the Seven’s main body.

Therefore, the expectations of both sides overlapped, and the Magic Crystal Cannon would wipe out one group of rebels upon being fired, however, it would also eliminate the possibility of the rebels being defeated with nothing they could do about it. —Or so it was to have passed.

Abel: “…”

That instant, a large number of people on the battlefield bore witness to a black light engulfing the shot of white light.

Just what had brought that about? Where had the tremendous shot disappeared to without doing a sliver of damage? Was that an action belonging to friend or foe?

Countless thoughts zipped past in the emptiness of mind birthed, everyone left dumbfounded as they ceased their movements.

At the rebel command post, Abel was no exception. That had been an incident outside of what he had hypothesized.

He, too, had had his mind enraptured by the unexpected phenomenon, and a brief emptiness was yielded in his thoughts. —What was different about him was that he recovered faster than anyone else from that state.

Who, how, where, he did not know any of it, but—

Abel: “—Fire it up, just as planned!”

If one was met with a situation better than expected, there was nothing greater.

In many cases, what was utmost necessary on the battlefield was a quick decision, rather than a correct decision. Then, by updating the decision based on the events that had occurred due to that very choice, it could be transformed into the correct one.

Removing his gaze from the battlefield that the white light had been expected to lay wreck to, Abel gave the order. At that voice of Abel’s, the stiff soldiers of the command post widened their eyes, and lowered their gazes.

To the several gazes which could not conceal their trembling, Abel responded with his own black eyes through his oni mask.

Abel: “Fire it up immediately! Give the order! Any delay shall lead to the death of Zikr Osman!”

Soldiers: “—Hk!”

Abel: “Hurry, move!”

Soldiers: “Yes sir—!!”

The soldiers around and within the command center were all Zikr’s good subordinates.

Originally, the plan had included Zikr’s life in the equation. It was hypocritical of him to refer to Zikr’s life, however, the soldiers grasped that, quickly beginning to move.

Rather than Abel’s decisiveness, it was the trust that Zikr had built which had allowed for that.

Abel: “You have fulfilled your duty as suicide corps. Nevertheless, do not slacken your hands, Zikr Osman. If you have survived, it means that you still possess a role to fulfill.”

In the distance, at the third bastion of the city walls that protected the Imperial Capital, a clash that would supposedly never have happened, had occurred. A battle headed by Zikr, with the People of Shudraq and many other tribes accompanying him.

The battlefield had become a true contest of strength to see who would be able to break past Moguro and into the Imperial Capital.

Watching the unforeseen hard-fought battle from afar, Abel touched his own oni mask, and muttered.

Abel: “—Inevitably, the role I must play is also close at hand.”

Behind Abel as he muttered that, the soldiers fired a Magic Stone Cannon into the sky as they had been ordered.

That was an indication of the situation having developed, a retaliation against the Imperial Capital’s faction, who had used up their trump card, the Magic Crystal Cannon—a sign that the rebel army’s side had also played their own trump card.

Beholding the cannon’s light with his eyes, Abel shifted his gaze to the side opposite to the third bastion—

Abel: “—The one who seems to have entered the board from the west, who are you?”

2

???: “—That surely cannot be.”

As he cast his eyes toward the distant battlefield from the top level of the Crystal Palace, the aged throat of Berstetz Fondalfon quivered a smidgen.

The Imperial Prime Minister, an individual who was usually unflappable, was bewildered, shaken to an extent such that it had taken the guards by his side by surprise.

Berstetz: “…”

Once he sensed the gazes of the soldiers to his side, Berstetz instantly tightened his cheeks.

Displaying any sort of indolence would make light of the Empire. Even if those around him did not believe likewise, as long as he himself did, he would not stand for it. That was the way of the Vollachian Empire.

This was exactly how Berstetz himself envisioned an ideal Vollachia.

Berstetz: “Naturally, since the Imperial Capital is being advanced on, figuring out some sort of countermeasure is a must, but…”

Getting a hold of himself, Berstetz tackled the events that transpired head-on.

What had spilled from his lips was a reflection of the events that had taken place just before—a reflection on fact that the first blow of the Magic Crystal Cannon, the trump card of the Crystal Palace, had failed to hit its mark.

The existence of the Magic Crystal Cannon was considered to be top secret, known only to very few people in the Empire.

However, since they had to take on the true Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, the secrecy of the Magic Crystal Cannon’s existence was completely meaningless. However, even with its existence known, it was a fact that there was no way to thwart the Magic Crystal Cannon’s extraordinary firepower, the value of its very existence, in the first place.

Therefore, Berstetz had surmised that Vincent would either avoid a decisive battle in the Imperial Capital or not deploy his army in a situation where the Magic Crystal Cannon would be used.

However, Vincent had entered the battlefield; moreover, amidst the battle, he had taken command of the rebels who had gone ahead before him. This way, he began handling the state of affairs. Presumably, pushing expendable fighters all the way into the line of fire of the Magic Crystal Cannon had been a last resort of his.

Then, seeking maximum efficiency, Berstetz had pointed the Magic Crystal Cannon at the third bastion.

Even if Vincent's plan had been to have them shoot at the area of the battlefield with the highest concentration of rebel troops, as to minimize the overall damage to his allies—the fact remained that the opponents would still suffer.

Putting down the sacrificial lambs, they would then utilize the power of the Nine Divine Generals to crush the enemy's plans. —With this in mind, he had beseeched the other Vincent on the throne for forgiveness.

And then—

Vincent: "Once each side's chicanery is gone, only the sheer difference in troop strength shall remain. —Do it."

Seeing that Vincent and he were in agreement, Berstetz had fired the Magic Crystal Cannon.

Once homed in on a target, the burst of enormous destructive power, having been unleashed, would rush into the battlefield in a flash, vaporizing many heroes in the process, supposedly sending them to the great beyond.

Therefore, with victory and defeat decided after the Magic Crystal Cannon had mowed down the rebels, he would give thought on the steps that would follow the redefinition of the battle's status, however—

Berstetz: "The damage done by the Magic Crystal Cannon is nonexistent?"

Considering the achievements of the restored Magic Crystal Cannon sealed in the Crystal Palace, it had not occurred to him that Vincent could possibly possess some means of offsetting it.

Keeping cards well-hidden until the last possible moment was indubitably a habit of Vincent's. Berstetz lamented over the fact he had been completely outwitted, but at the same time, he felt a rush of excitement in his heart.

More than anything else, he thought. —What a shame it was.

Berstetz: “Your Excellency, I am regretful from the bottom of my heart.”

Since it was the way of the Vollachian Empire to revere the strong, Vincent’s approach to rule the Empire with wits rather than violence as the one at its pinnacle was a combination of boredom and horror.

To possess the political skills to avoid any major war was something that he himself esteemed and, at the same time, shunned. Still, he had no complaints about serving Vincent.

So long as he fulfilled his duties as Emperor and protected the glory of the Vollachian Empire.

Berstetz: “What shall you do upon your return, Your Excellency…?”

What would he do with the Empire after returning to the throne and executing all those who had rebelled against him? Would he leave the Empire as it was before, and once again relinquish his duties as Emperor?

Even the most outstanding Emperor had no right to remain on the throne if he was content with letting that happen.

Berstetz: “—Prepare the Magic Crystal Cannon for the next shot.”

Since the number of charges for the Magic Crystal Cannon was fixed, depleting them was unacceptable.

Nevertheless, if the situation needed to be changed, Berstetz would utilize the plenitude of his jurisdiction. However, if the opponents did possess two trump cards with which to counteract the Magic Crystal Cannon, he could not make the same mistake again.

Until he figured that out, he could not see it through.

Soldier: “—! Prime Minister Berstetz! Look at that!”

Suddenly, one of the soldiers standing by Berstetz raised his voice.

Following the soldier’s gaze, the light of the Magic Stones emanating in the sky far behind the battlefield could be seen—probably at the place where the rebel main camp had been positioned.

It was some kind of signal.

A terribly unreliable one, as the sky above the battlefield was dyed white and red, but it would be effective enough for anyone waiting for the signal to come.

Berstetz: “A signal…”

Behind his narrowed eyes, Berstetz surmised his opponent’s intentions.

After the Magic Cannon had fired, they would have thought the situation had supposedly changed as well. If so, was that signal an instruction to the soldiers on the front line? However, if the intention was to inform the soldiers fighting on the front lines, that signal was way too unreliable.

Therefore, it was not for informing the soldiers on the front lines—

Berstetz: “—Reinforcements.”

But simultaneously, Berstetz gave it careful rumination.

With the majority of the rebels who had gathered from all over the country already wrecking havoc on the battlefield, with that group having already been crushed by the power of the Nine Divine Generals, what kind of forces could function as reinforcements?

Reinforcements were not pieces one would simply withhold.

They ought to be a trump card in the proper sense, deployed to change the war situation in decisive fashion. Of course, they were meaningless lest they packed a sufficient punch.

Just what kind of forces could they possibly be? —With those thoughts, Berstetz widened his slit-like eyes and turned them to the distant west.

Berstetz: “It cannot be.”

Slowly reflected in Berstetz’s vision as he muttered faintly, were shadows arriving from the western sky—spread across a vast expanse of those skies, were the supreme rulers of the sky making their calm approach. A flock of flying dragons.

A large number of flying dragons resided in the Vollachian Empire, however, taming a flying dragon required treasured techniques and masterful skills—and the one who had gathered many of those under their banner was a leading noble, who possessed preeminent power within the Empire.

A High Countess who had refused to participate in the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, on the grounds of maintaining order within her own territory, the one in command of the Empire’s strongest Flying Dragon Squadron—

Berstetz: “—High Countess Serena Dracroy, is it?”

Spotting a dragon ship sporting flaming red sails among the Flying Dragon Squadron approaching from beyond the sky, Berstetz understood the threat of the reinforcements that the rebels had prepared.

When it came to controlling flying dragons, his faction also possessed one of the Nine Divine Generals, Madelyn Eschart. In front of said dragonkin, all flying dragons were slaves to her will. —However, the only exceptions to that were the flying dragons who had forged bonds with a tamer, through the technique of flying dragon taming.

Berstetz: “Even so, it would merely be a struggle for air supremacy. No, if she has summoned the Cloud Dragon, then that presumption must also change.”

Despite the shock of the Magic Crystal Cannon’s nullification, Berstetz had not neglected his grasp of the battlefield.

During the fierce battles that had unfolded at the five bastions, even the colors of the heavens and the earth had experienced erratic changes due to various battlefields. And in one of those battles, the descent of the mighty Dragon had been spotted.

As a dragonkin, Madelyn was able to summon the Dragon which was connected to her ancestors.

Up until now, she had never called the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia to the ground—her summoning it would change the flow of the battle, drastically.

Of course, the circumstances under which Madelyn would summon Mezoreia were impossible to intuit, meaning it was possible that simply driving her into a corner could suffice.

Berstetz: "Be that as it may, in the case that flying dragons fight each other for air supremacy…"

In both quantity and quality, Berstetz believed that they held the advantage.

The determined decision of High Countess Serena Dracroy to side with the rebels must have been a rage-inducing mistake for the men of Vollachia, yet—

Berstetz: "—?"

Thinking this, Berstetz was staring towards the western sky as he realized something.

He had been completely fixated on the slowly approaching Flying Dragon Squadron, but that had not been the sole change that had occurred in the west.

—A closer look to the hills to the west revealed the shape of a group deploying anew.

For a moment, they appeared to be the forces of High Countess Dracroy, but Berstetz quickly changed his mind as it became evident that this was not the case.

The reason for that was simple. The flag that group was hosting.

It sported neither the crest of High Countess Dracroy, that of a flying dragon with a scar on its cheek, nor the national emblem of the Vollachian Empire, the wolf pierced by swords, but an entirely different flag.

Slightly troubled by what was portrayed on it, Berstetz said,

Berstetz: "—Is that, a star?"

3

???: "Oi bro, what're ya doin'?! We're completely late already?!"

???: "Stop with the fussin' lizard bastard… Schwartz's in the middle of somethin'…!"

???: "Sure, he's in the middle of something, but Hiain has a point. What are we going to do? Should we join the ranks of the rebel army like this?"

???: "Wow, do you see that, Boss? The right and left are all over the place, it truly is a great, decisive battle! Where should we go, I can't stop my chest from throbbing!"

Subaru: "AHHHH, SHUT UP!! Can't you see that I'm in a very moving scene right now?!"

As a group of familiar voices barged in, making a huge ruckus, Natsuki Subaru rebuked them. He was reminded how dangerously accustomed he had become to being Natsuki Schwartz these days.

Although Natsuki Schwartz was ultimately just an alias, he felt strongly about his real name, the one he ought to be called by, being Natsuki Subaru.

Rather—

Subaru: "It's fine to take that as you calling my name, right?"

Louis: "Uau! Uau, uau, uauuu~!"

Subaru: "I get it! I get it already so don't spill your snot all over me!

Yuck!”

So Subaru responded, and with force he pushed away the face of the blonde-haired girl clinging to him—Louis, as she drenched him in her tears and snot.

But he was unable to shake Louis off with full resolve, since he was also greatly indebted to her for the far too valuable contributions she had amassed.

Subaru had already asked too many things of Louis he could not make amends for.

Although he could exculpate himself for having no other recourse.

Subaru: “If I do that, I don’t deserve to face you. So I’ll do it right.”

Louis: “Uuu~…”

As she rested her forehead while clinging on to Subaru’s back, Louis groaned.

Whether that was her way of forgiving him, or whether she was just happy to be reunited with him, Subaru sighed, accepting that she did not seem to harbor any negative feelings.

Not only did he have to apologize to Louis, but he also owed her many thanks.

But the one he was most thankful for—

Subaru: “—Beatrice.”

Tightly, he hugged her and invoked her name, stroking her ample hair. The one true reason why the owner of such a sheer volume of curly hair and a gorgeous dress, a little girl ill-fitted to the battlefield, was present on it was, no matter how one looked at it, Subaru.

She had certainly done something incredibly reckless, for her to come near to disappearing as she had.

That was why—

Beatrice: "—Subaru."

As those lips uttered his name indeed, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief.

His name was truly "Natsuki Subaru", once again—.

???: "—Excuse me, Schwartz-sama?"

Subaru: "Uwah!"

Feeling relieved, Subaru's shoulders jumped upon hearing an unexpected whisper close to his ear. He turned around by reflex, and present there was a lovely, familiar face—Tanza's.

The deergirl clad in a kimono stared at Subaru with her usual expressionless face, while the latter sat on his butt holding Beatrice in his arms, and with Louis clung to his back.

Tanza: "I apologize for interrupting your amusement. But Hiain-sama and the others are correct. We do not have enough time to spare for leisure activities."

Subaru: "Leisure activities? Isn't that a bit harsh…"

Tanza: "We do not have enough time to spare for leisure activities."

Subaru: "Sorrysorry, my bad…! I understand your feelings, Tanza. Yorna-san will probably also be somewhere on this battlefield."

Rushed by a cold, firm voice, Subaru admitted his wrongdoing, displaying his understanding. Thereupon, Tanza slightly lowered her round eyebrows and muttered, "Yes".

Tanza, who had ended up accompanying Subaru following a series of events, was a girl who had originally been a servant to Yorna Mishigure, the ruler of the Demon City of Chaosflame.

While suppressing her desire to meet up with Yorna as soon as possible, Tanza had joined Subaru on his journey, and finally, their reunion was close at hand.

Being in such a restless state of mind, it was fairly understandable of her to feel the urge to interrupt Subaru who was getting a head start on his own joyful reunion.

However—

Beatrice: "…Subaru, what is the deal with this… this impertinent deergirl?"

Writhing in Subaru's arms, Beatrice looked up at Tanza, declaring thus in a somewhat dissatisfied voice. Promptly, Tanza gazed towards Beatrice,

Tanza: "My name is Tanza. Due to a series of events, I have been serving as Schwartz-sama's attendant."

Beatrice: "Hmph, I understand, in fact. Thank you for your hard work, I suppose. From now on, Betty and the others will take care of Subaru, so you can consider yourself dismissed, in fact."

Tanza: "You will take care of him? In that state? It appears like you cannot even move properly without Schwartz-sama holding you in his arms…"

Beatrice: "Subaru's purpose in life is to hold onto Betty, so this is fine, I suppose."

Subaru: "Waitwaitwaitwait, why are we fighting?! As fellow little girls, shouldn't you get along?!"

For some reason, a perilous atmosphere had broken out all of a sudden between the two girls; caught in the middle, Subaru's voice involuntarily cracked.

For Tanza, typically composed as she was, this attitude was both unbefitting and unendearing, but in a good way. Not that Subaru was unaware that he should not tell a young girl how immature she was being.

Subaru: "Tanza, Beatrice, don't fight, you two. You're allies, both of you. Come on."

Tanza: "Beatrice-sama was poking her nose first. Also, Yorna-sama told me to respond in kind to contemptible people who act heedlessly."

Subaru: "She really told such a Code of Hammurabi-type of thing? I didn't know that… Then, you should be sorry… Beatrice?"

Subaru attempted to mediate between them as Beatrice's round eyes stared at him motionlessly. Enthralled by the characteristic pattern of her pupils, Subaru tilted his neck, asking "What's wrong?".

Then, Beatrice's lips trembled and quivered, and she spoke,

Beatrice: "Just now, you called that girl's name before Betty's, in fact. What's the meaning of this, I suppose."

Subaru: "Huh? Did I?"

Beatrice: "You did, in fact! How utterly infuriating, I suppose! I won't stand for this no matter what, in fact!"

Her eyes flaring up in anger, Beatrice grabbed his collar and shook her head back and forth. Upon hearing this unexpected ruling, Subaru also became dizzy.

And then, getting fed up with this back and forth going absolutely nowhere,

???: "—Schwartz, even I, as the official, have limits to my patience. You should be aware of this, correct?"

Beatrice: "Mya!"

Subaru: "Oh."

A baritone, oppressive voice fell upon them; Beatrice screamed even before Subaru. Tracing Beatrice's baffled gaze, Subaru understood her surprise.

Standing there, in a black overcoat with four folded arms, was a stern-faced Gustav Morello staring down at them.

Being the Governor of the Gladiator Island, his position would normally be that of keeping Subaru and his men captive, yet he now was a collaborator of those who were now brazenly travelling outside of the island—No, he was a comrade of theirs.

This was not limited to just him. Gathered at that very place was not only the large number of people accompanying Subaru from the Gladiator Island, but also companions who had joined them in the meantime as comrades.

Beatrice: “S-Subaru, this man…”

Subaru: “That’s Gustav-san. He looks scary, but at his core he’s frighteningly diligent. Gustav-san, the one on my back is Louis, and this girl is Beatrice. She’s my…”

Gustav: “…Your?”

Subaru: “Um… I mean, you know, that.”

Stroking Beatrice’s back as she curled up, Subaru was at a loss for words coming up with an explanation for Gustav. Witnessing that, Gustav, Tanza and Beatrice all frowned.

At the numerous stares directed towards him, Subaru awkwardly scratched his head and,

Subaru: “…I’ll fill you in on the details later.”

Gustav: “Hey now.”

Beactrice: “Wait, I suppose! Subaru, could it be that not only your appearance, but also your mind has been… slightly…”

Gustav accepted Subaru’s overly sloppy misdirection in his overly serious way of being. But, as Beatrice was about to hit the nail too straight on the head, Subaru covered her mouth.

And then, he whispered to Beatrice’s ear, who was struggling noisily.

Subaru: “Explaining that I’ve shrunken is going to be complicated. So I’m going to keep it to myself for now.”

Beatrice: “…Do you really remember Betty, in fact?”

Subaru: “I really do love you, that’s why I have to do this.”

Seeing Beatrice’s questioning look, Subaru replied then squeezed her hand, intertwining the fingers of his small hand with those of Beatrice’s also small hand.

As soon as he did so, Subaru was momentarily assaulted by a dizzying sense of emptiness. But it did not last forever; only the initial pang had been large.

Subaru: “I couldn’t go on living without you. Isn’t that so?”

Beatrice: “…Betty gets the feeling you’re quite skilled at pulling the wool over her eyes, I suppose. Besides…”

Subaru: “Besides?”

Beatrice: “—. Subaru, something is off, in fact.”

Warmth flowed from within Subaru to Beatrice as they held each other’s hands in front of one another. Instinctively, Subaru was aware that this was not a bad thing, but rather a reassurance.

His memory of Beatrice had become slightly hazy in some parts, as only some details had become blurry, but he was somewhat optimistic it would all be alright once his body was returned to normal.

In any case, close to Subaru as he viewed the situation in such a positive view, Beatrice furrowed her shapely brow, apparently pondering something.

Subaru: “As adorable as your thinking expression is, what exactly feels off?”

Beatrice: “…Subaru, while you were separated from Betty, you had no method of expelling Mana, I suppose. So it’s natural that Mana would pile up, but this amount is…”

Subaru: “—?”

Beatrice’s long eyelashes trembled as she tightened her fingers as if to confirm. Before Subaru, whose head was tilted, her lips spilled a voice bereft of sound.

Certainly, she had muttered something of this sort. —That it was “too much”.

But before the truth of the situation could be ascertained—

Hiain: “—Ah, bro, bad news! That Cecilus guy went ahead!”

Subaru: “Whaaa?!”

Hiain’s shrill voice rose like a scream, and Subaru hurriedly turned his head. Hiain pointed in the direction his own gaze was being cast, to a battlefield where fierce relentless clashes ensued unending, a cloud of dust raging on towards it without stopping.

It was the evidence of an impatient, unruly boy rushing down the hillside.

Weitz: “What now? Should I bring him back or…?”

Subaru: “No, as much as I appreciate your thoughts, that’d be too much for you, Weitz. To begin with, it’s impossible for anyone to stop Ceci… Flag.”

Idra: “Got you, Schwartz.”

While harboring annoyed thoughts at the distant cloud of dust, Subaru took into consideration the positive aspects of the boy’s rampage, since he knew full well from his journey so far that would be unable to rein him in.

Having regained his composure, Subaru made his next request, and it was Idra who moved keenly. Alongside Weitz, they slowly raised the flag right there.

And this action was followed by a massive number of their comrades in arms surrounding them.

Flag after flag was raised; to those in their environs, the appearance would be that the group upon the hillside was firmly united.

Subaru: “Louis, could you get off my back.”

Louis: “Ahh, uh!”

Subaru: “I’m not going to disappear out of the blue again, I assure you. I’ve made peace with what caused me to get whisked away.”

Subaru persuaded Louis, who was still traumatized by his disappearance and reluctant to leave Subaru’s back. She was still skeptical, but in the end, she left Subaru’s back by her own will.

Still, her reluctance was evident of a certain lack of trust.

Beatrice: “—. Betty has no intention of ever leaving, in fact.”

Subaru: “Yeah, you stay with me. —Tanza, is everything ready?”

Tanza: “Yes. —The Pleiades Battalion is ready to go at any time.”

Behind the bowing Tanza, Subaru smiled to himself as he watched his comrades raise their flags, their weapons, and their fighting spirits.

Their morale was high, their motivation filled to the brim, their objective was in sight. All that was left was to seize it.

Subaru: “Since Ceci probably knows my plan without me telling him each and every detail, that’s just his usual amusement… Well, let’s get started, everyone!”

Everyone: “YEAHHHHHHH—!!”

Beatrice: “—Hk.”

There was a tremendous response to Subaru’s call, as Beatrice’s breath got caught in her throat.

If one were to hear it for the first time, this would come as a guaranteed surprise. However, Subaru's ears had already grown accustomed to it, and it was a very important pre-fight ritual.

Louis: "Uau?"

Beatrice: "Subaru, just what do you intend on doing, I suppose?"

Louis and Beatrice, who had just joined Subaru, looked up at him, not knowing the details of the situation.

Closing a single eye as to meet their gaze, Subaru took a step forward, excitement welling up from deep within his body, which he firmly contained in his slender legs.

And then, he declared.

Subaru: "Isn't it obvious? —We're gonna ruin this stupid war that my shitty father started."

Chapter 98:
The Pleiades Battalion

1

—The Kingdom of Lugunica. The Vollachian Empire. The Holy Kingdom of Gusteko. The Kararagi City-States.

Each of these nations, commonly referred to as the Four Great Countries, had developed its own culture, which was tailored to its land; Most notable amongst them, were the pro-dragon mentality of the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Spirit-focused creed of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko. The Four Great Countries had taken different paths, as if by design.

This was true not only in terms of national customs and culture, but also in terms of the quality of their "warriors".

In the Vollachian Empire, "magic" had hardly developed at all.

Whether people were within its borders or not mattered naught, as the Gates that people possessed, and other prerequisites of that ilk, differed in nothing from those possessed by those of another countries. But compared to Lugunica and Kararagi, the Empire lagged far behind the others in this area.

The Empire, however, did not take that fact to heart.

Of course, falling behind other countries in any field was not welcome, but the fact that the field of magic was not developed meant that other fields had been developed instead.

Compared to the technological prowess of the Kararagi City-States, the Spiritual Arts and Curse Arts of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, and the magical disciplines of the Kingdom of Lugunica, the Vollachian Empire excelled in the martial arts.

???: "Sometimes it's faster to just swoop in and hit them than to use magic, right?"

And, while this not-Spiritual Arts User-like statement was one that ought not be espoused by one such person, the gist of the general attitude towards magic in the Vollachian Empire was more-or-less that.

Though it was a highly misunderstood fact, the kind that had gone unwritten in any books at that, the use of Mana in the human body was not only limited to casting magic.

No small number of martial arts techniques had their foundation in the use of Mana, in the same way it was used in Spirit Arts, Curse Arts, and in the activation of some Meteors.

It was perfectly natural for an elite warrior, especially, to use Mana to strengthen his own body.

Supposing an occasion where one possessing unnatural physical abilities were to be compared to an ordinary person, the trick would lay in the handling of the Mana that circulated within the body—a technique called the Flow Method, which was done consciously.

However—

???: “Cha-cha-cha-cha!”

With a thump, only one foot touched the ground, and in an instant the distance closed by a dozen meters.

Tracking the figure, from the perspective of a bystander, would seem as if time had been stolen, given its extraordinary body movements. But that was no optical illusion, nor was there present an anomaly in said bystander’s eyes.

The anomaly was none other than the blue-haired boy running through the battlefield.

Following the explanation given immediately before, the boy’s sprinting, which effortlessly transcended human limitations, was without a doubt brought about by the Flow Method. However, there was no caveat to the boy’s young age and sharp good looks; no record of the days spent learning such techniques was present, apparently.

In the world, beings of the sort were seldom seen. —Beings who were born unknowingly exercising the Flow Method, which was even said to be the pinnacle of martial arts, beings that left those shackled by the natural order in the dust.

Running down the hillside in a single breath, the boy plunged into the battlefield in search of the honor of being the vanguard.

Although—

Blue-Haired Boy: “If the battle’s already begun, the honor of being the vanguard isn’t there, but let’s not fret about the details!”

Intruding upon the battlefield hailing from the western lands, he gazed at the great army surrounding the star-shaped ramparts in the distance. The long, slit eyes of the boy were blazing, moist with excitement unthinkable in a battlefield where grief and joy alternated.

A being that went into battle without proper footwear, without armor or a helmet, without a cause of any kind—a barbaric act that could be seen as hostile by those inside and by those outside the walls both; by those who wished to protect the current Empire, and by those who wanted to destroy it.

However—

Blue-Haired Boy: “The high level of ambition is a point worthy of note. With or without it, the appeal of your speech that flows from your mouth changes. It’s just—”

???: “Who the?!”

Small groups dressed in red gear and crude armor, each composed of dozens of people clearly hostile to one another, were engaged in skirmishes. The young boy, unconnected to either, intruded; a soldier wielding a sword cried out.

‘Twas an admirably clear tone of voice, holding a mixture of anger, frustration, excitement, but fighting spirit prevailed. It was a clever move, one which incited caution towards someone who had intruded on the battlefield.

Blue-Haired Boy: “—But it’s fatally slow!”

???: “Kah!”

Shouting had been the right choice, but stopping and asking their identity had been a misstep.

The right choice would be to assume any being who appeared on the battlefield without revealing his or her allegiance to be an enemy. The soldier should not have stopped at only alerting his surroundings, he ought to have attacked with his sword upon hearing that voice.

Still, the enemy was faster, and if needed, ten or twenty other faults could be pointed out.

Blue-Haired Boy: “Oh, and if what you just said was a line that came out because you didn’t ask my affiliation, but because you had no idea who I was, then, sorry for being too lightning-fast, I’d say.”

Behind the boy babbling nonstop, a soldier opening his eyes wide collapsed onto the ground. As they passed each other, the former had driven his hand akin to a sharp blade into the other’s neck. The boy had expected himself to be capable of chopping the soldier’s head off, but the blow had not been powerful enough.

Shaking and swinging his arms around, he twisted his head as he felt that something was off after all.

Blue-Haired Boy: “It’s so frustrating when you feel able to do something, but actually aren’t. Not that I have any plans to mix up my ideals and wishes with what’s realistically feasible. Well, if I accidentally let him die, I’m going to sink in the Boss’s estimation, so let’s call that a good result!”

Immediately after shaking off his uncertainty so brusquely, the laughing boy’s figure turned into a blur.

A moment later, he avoided a sword strike descending on his position, and the back of the boy’s zori hit the soldier’s face from the side, launching him in the opposite direction. Furthermore, the boy leapt off the soldier as he kicked him, and landing amidst the group who was tailing the soldier, he delivered a single blow to a vital point of each one of them before disengaging—Rather, taking the opportunity as he withdrew, he slipped right into a group nearby, cutting off the consciousness of another five or so. All had happened in the blink of an eye.

Both the follow-up and the main objective were a criminal act to bereave the surrounding soldiers of their time.

In other words, the mastery of this boy over his own body was beyond human comprehension and could not be pursued with raw strength—one could call it the ultimate lineage of martial arts developed in the Vollachian Empire.

Of course, it was not so easy for anyone to analyze such a situation on the battlefield, or to swallow the fact that a child twelve or thirteen years of age could be capable of such a thing.

Above anything else—

Blue-Haired Boy: "—Tactless."

???: "…"

Blue-Haired Boy: "It's tactless to try to undermine the skill and good looks of a star actor during his performance. On stage, nothing more is needed than to be admired, to enthrall and captivate. Of course, if I were to ascend to the stage in the same way, I'd have to assert a more flamboyant appearance by means of an opponent… worthy of it."

The group gasped at the boy frowning down upon his surroundings, as he stood in the middle of the Imperial Soldiers slowly becoming discouraged.

The soldiers on both sides were supposed to be clashing weapons and fighting for their lives, yet were overwhelmed by the boy's presence, bereaved not only of their time, but their very lives.

Blue-Haired Boy: "Hmmm, the blessing of an actor…"

Was to bereave others of their lives. The boy got a certain satisfaction from that realization.

As the boy was savoring this sense of accomplishment, among the numerous defeated soldiers bereft of their time that were opposing the Imperial Soldiers, was one poorly-armed warrior who opened his mouth with a “You”,

Soldier: “Where’s this guy from? Is he one of ours?”

Blue-Haired Boy: “Hmm, hmmhmm, whose side am I on? That’s quite a good question from you. What do you think I am? Friend or foe?”

Soldier: “…”

The warrior clammed up once he had his question returned with another question delivered in such a “I can’t be bothered” fashion. The boy’s smile deepened at this, shaking his head, letting out “No, no”,

Blue-Haired Boy: “I wasn’t teasing you. I was just thinking about it seriously, too. I’m constantly thinking about that stuff. I didn’t really listen to the Boss, so I don’t really know who’s on my side.”

Soldier: “Huh?”

Blue-Haired Boy: “So for now, I’m just going to act as the herald of justice for both sides.”

The warrior widened his eyes with amazement, then his startled face became a horizontal blur, and in the moment subsequent to that, he was flipped over onto the ground.

The smirking boy’s figure vanished into thin air, and this time he sneakily intruded into a group of warriors who had been fighting the Imperial Soldiers he had just defeated, and vigorously he beat them all down.

As the blue hair danced, as the sound of sharp strikes seemingly echoed through the air, the consciousnesses of the warriors were erased without as much as a bitter cry. This violence, was just like a storm—No, it was like,

???: “A Blue Thunderbolt…”

Blue-Haired Boy: “Oh, marvelous. That’s precisely the alias I was thinking of calling myself, too.”

The warrior, who spilled a breath snatched in shock, was rendered unconscious after the end of that sentence.

It was the Vollachian way to respond to both friendly and hostile attitudes with equal violence—yet, this savagery would probably even make the Emperor of this country raise his eyebrows.

But no one was capable of stopping the boy.

Yet it remained absolutely the correct thing to do according to the way of the Empire.

???: “OOOOOOOOOOOOOHH—!”

Belayed did the warriors respond to the threat posed by that small whirlwind of a boy.

No longer were there any distinctions between Imperial Soldiers and rebels, but everyone was united in the thought of stopping that boy. It was, in a sense, the scene of a great achievement, that of stopping a civil war single-handedly, if only in this small space.

However, the steeled resolve of these heroes was not met with a peaceful answer.

Lean back to avoid the blade. Dance backwards to avoid fist strikes. Slip between the legs to avoid axe blows. Dodge arrows, dodge spears, dodge fangs, dodge shields, avoid, avoid, avoid, avoid, duck, duck, duck, duck, evade, evade, evade, evade, dodge, dodge, dodge, dodge—.

???: “Without any weapon…”

Blue-Haired Boy: “Yeah, that’s quite a predicament. I’d like to embellish my highlight poses by showing off my skills with a weapon rather than with my bare hands, but I don’t want to use something half-baked either. After all, the best only know the best.

Ah, look at me sounding like the Boss.”

???: “Bosu…?”

Blue-Haired Boy: “Right. —He’s our, the Pleiades Battalion’s, leader!”

The boy’s smile grew deeper as he boasted, effortlessly dodging the killing intent and hostility being hurled at him. The unfamiliar words uttered by the boy’s mouth filled the warriors with a sense of inexplicable fear.

Any of them were supposed to have been willing to risk their own lives in the battle to decide the course of this Empire.

Nevertheless, they did not know the affiliation of the boy toying with them, the limit to his strength, the true meaning of his words and deeds, or anything else.

Even though they did not know what was going on, everything seemed to be going as per the boy’s wishes—.

—The next moment, a tremendous war cry was heard, hailing from the direction of some hills in the far distance.

Who could blame the warriors for shuddering with a “Hk—”? Similar turmoil and confusion spread to the other warriors as well.

Hence, the smile on the boy’s mouth became larger, not because he was mocking the frightened state of the warriors, but due to something more straightforward.

Blue-Haired Boy: “Well, thus concludes the first climax, Boss. —Make sure to finish it off flamboyantly.”

2

At this point, it is necessary to mention a very unfortunate fact about “magic”.

It would be an issue different from the one described previously, that of the Vollachian Empire having only developed physical martial arts and the Flow Method, rather than having developed magical techniques.

Amidst the six magic attributes in which the magic system of the world was divided, Yin Magic and Yang Magic had only a few wielders, but the neglect they suffered was justified by reasons other than their study being difficult.

Manipulating temperature, the Fire attribute produced flames and even ice.

Interfering with an organism's life force, the Water attribute facilitated the healing of wounds and illnesses, saving lives.

Arranging the environment by interfering with the atmosphere, the Wind attribute was able to even secure habitable areas in inhospitable regions.

Manipulating the earth's power, the Earth attribute could fertilize as well as starve out the land.

Compared to each of those attributes, the usage of which could be clearly envisioned, the Yin and Yang attributes were basically thought of as effects that either enhanced or hampered the performance of one's body.

While technically a misconception, the fact that such an image had taken hold was a major factor as to why the development of magic of the Yin and Yang attributes was so lacking.

And albeit surprising, the one that still possessed a reputation for being especially out of place and useless was the Yang attribute—which held the power to enhance people's capabilities.

Knowing the primary effects of Yang Magic, many may be tempted to question the assessment it received.

However, the more one attempted to take advantage of the features of Yang Magic, the bigger and more unavoidable its problems became.

For example, when it came down to performance on the battlefield, those who enhanced their physical abilities via Yang Magic would suffer complete defeat by the enemy, in most cases.

The reason was simple. They could not handle their own enhanced bodies at all, they were unable to demonstrate their strength whatsoever; it was as if they were in control of someone else's body.

Enhancing one's abilities could perhaps be summed up as strengthening the five senses, such as eyesight and hearing; enhancing physical abilities, such as arm and leg strength; and strengthening defenses, such as increasing bone and muscle density.

However, warriors would always train their own bodies, would always take to the battlefield with a complete grasp on their own skills.

As for those targeted by Yang Magic, they would discard their normal selves and head to the battlefield in a new body donning enhanced specs. As a result, many of them would perish without achieving anything.

The problem went even further, as the efficacy of Yang Magic was greatly affected by the skill of the caster themselves, as well as their physical and mental condition that day.

Even if a warrior who had been subjected to Yang Magic were able to adapt to his enhanced body, there was no guarantee that the same enhancement being performed by the same caster on the very next day would be as effective.

Yang Magic was not expected to improve one's ability to fight consistently; on the contrary, it was recognized as a flaw that prevented one from demonstrating one's usual abilities in adequate fashion. —This, was the reason why Yang Magic had been neglected.

In the past, the Vollachian Empire had also focused its attention on the power of magic, and it'd had an Emperor who had intended to amass the most powerful army. The Thirty-First Emperor of the Vollachian Empire, Murkia Vollachia, had planned to utilize Yang

Magic to turn a powerful army into an even more powerful one.

Taking into account the aforementioned shortcomings, he had enlisted Yang Magic users into his powerful army, training them so that their enhanced state would become their natural state, and then went into actual battle.

However, the results that had unfolded had been disastrous; the powerful army became dependent on the enhancements, being defeated before any Yang Magic could be applied. The skills of the casters, so essential they were, varied; and being unable to function in a cohesive fashion, the army had been sent packing by forces superior in numbers. Even the Emperor's life had been in jeopardy.

The war finally concluded when Viva the Dissector, a close ally of the then-Emperor of Vollachia, ended the enemy leader. But because of this colossal defeat, Murkia Vollachia was engraved into history with an ignominious alias, "The Emperor of the Great Defeat".

Because of this precedent, the value of Yang Magic, and thus the value of magic as a whole, was reduced in Vollachia, leading to the spread of the idea that mastery of martial arts was the mark of a strong soldier.

This had not changed to this day, and Vincent Vollachia, with all his wisdom, had dismissed the use of Yang Magic in group battles as something that dispensed consideration.

In fact, given a user of Yang Magic was only capable of enhancing one target at a time, the deployment of an army that required a plurality of soldiers working in unison was a pipe dream.

Therefore, Yin Magic had remained as a means of harassment, in the sense that it inflicted unusual physical effects on the enemy, but magic had declined in the Vollachian Empire—even in other countries, Yang Magic was considered a cursed practice that was seldom used barring for self-enhancement.

—However, as with everything, there were exceptions.

???: “Let’s do it, you guys—!!”

With a large inhale, the boy’s voice, still shrill, was raised in the hills off to the distant west of the battlefield.

With the boy at their heart, the warriors who spread out atop the hill—a band of no fewer than several thousand people raised their flag, one after the other, for the sake of expressing the unity and will of the group.

A symbol of a will to fight that must never subside, one of the large flags was also held aloft beside the boy by a man whose body was covered in tattoos, accompanied by a gray lizardman, and a man with a dull appearance that yet contained a dignified look in his eyes.

Depicted on the hoisted flag, recognizable even from a distance, was an emblem with the shape of a star.

It was not the crest of one’s family nor the national emblem, but merely the proof of where their hearts lay; a declaration of war of that kind, and naught else.

The group assembled was a diverse one—without exaggeration, it was composed of many races.

Even within Vollachia, where a gargantuan number of species lived and coexisted, there were few relationships consisting of cooperation across racial boundaries. One of the few exceptions which had been able to function as a city was the Demon City of Chaosflame, and even during the siege of the Imperial Capital, there had been no semblance of cooperation among the rebels.

And yet, this group was different.

One could look at it as if they were merely working together for the sake of the same goal. However, that alone would not be able to gather them under a flag to demonstrate their collective will.

It was not that they possessed the same goals, rather, they possessed a shared will.

Hence why this group—Nay, why the Pleiades Battalion, was capable of serving as a trump card.

Spearheading those banners and the comrades he had gathered, a boy of black hair—Natsuki Subaru, exclaimed.

Subaru: "—WE, ARE THE STRONGEST!!"

Pleiades: "STRONGEST! STRONGEST!! STRONGEST—!!!"

A war cry was raised in unison, thundering throughout the sky, as tremendous fighting spirit spread through the battlefield like tongues of flame.

Beatrice, embraced within Subaru's arms as he yelled, covered her ears, staring bewildered. Likewise, Louis also jumped onto Subaru, though only those two young girls were surprised.

Subaru: "—WE, ARE INVINCIBLE!!"

Pleiades: "INVINCIBLE! INVINCIBLE!! INVINCIBLE—!!!"

Hiain, Weitz, Idra, Gustav, Orson's group, Old Man Null, Rex, Milzac, Kashew, Moizo, Deeroy, Creegkin, Codroe, Phenmelle, Jawsrough, Tanza; each one of them roared loudly.

The ground quaked as they stamped their feet upon the soil, the quaking beckoning further quaking, as they roused their fighting spirit.

The recesses of his chest were burning.

That burning, burning, oh so burning, promising, irresistible something, coursed through the entirety of his body.

Letting that burning, promising, irresistible something ride off his tongue—

Subaru: "—OHHHHHHHHHHH INEVITABLE FAAAAAAAATE!!"

Pleiades: "BRING IT ON! BRING IT ON!! BRING IT ONNNNNNN—!!!"

The group bellowed in unison, and all of their eyes turned to the fore, to the battlefield at the foot of the hill.

And then—

Subaru: "—Here we go."

3

The sensation of the sky, of the ground, of the world shaking was felt by everyone on the battlefield at that moment.

Among those who could not treat it as somebody else's problem, were those on the western ramparts who would come to meet the flag-bearing groups running down the hillside from head-on—in other words, the Imperial Soldiers that had been ordered to defend the fourth bastion, which was closest to said posse.

???: "But—"

Not giving in to their fighting spirit, Imperial General Second-Class Gudda Dialmo, the Tiger Hunter, held his ground.

For a moment, they had been overwhelmed by the sudden appearance and high morale of the opposition, but the Imperial Soldiers subordinate to the Tiger Hunter, were not so wet behind the ears as to be overwhelmed by loose cannons of the sort, however.

Above all, the wear and tear on Gudda and his men was almost minimal as far as this battlefield was concerned.

A tremendous siege had been laid against the Imperial Capital, but the harsh attacks made against the other bastions had brought on almost no effects on this fourth bastion.

Without a doubt, that was Olbart Dunkelkenn's achievement, who reigned as the guardian of the fourth bastion. It could be called a demonstration of the Vicious Old Man's capabilities.

???: "In the first place, it's a good idea ta cut off the opponent's legs before they even make it here. Basic rule of warfare's ta sever everythin’ ya can’t fight without, be it water or weapons.”

The Vicious Old Man described the reason why the enemy’s offensive was overwhelmingly weak compared to other bastions with cruelty such that it sent chills down the spines of the troops imagining the horror of not being on the same side as him.

However, even Olbart had been forced to rush to another bastion to fulfil his role of protecting the Imperial Capital, as it was about to be broken through.

Therefore, the fourth bastion was currently lacking the power of the Divine Generals, the greatest strength of the Empire.

Olbart’s legacy, his trained superhuman shinobi, were needed to deal with the Flying Dragon Squadron that had appeared from the sky in the same direction the approaching army hailed from, the west.

Since they did not possess any ranged weapons, the shinobi’s techniques were their only means of defending themselves against the Flying Dragon Squadron.

And in regards to the group fiercely rushing in—

Gudda: “—I’ll deal with you with all my soul!”

With these words, Gudda Dialmo stared at the enemy in front of him, carrying the signature armament of the Tiger Hunter—two metal clubs, each weighing nearly a hundred kilograms.

Gudda’s alias was attributed to the fact that, back when he was still a General Third-Class, he had decimated a group of tigerpeople who were tyrannizing the country, taking the head of the enemy leader who had killed the General Second-Class previously in command.

As a result of that heroic fight to the death, the muscular body of the over two-meter-tall Gudda was scarred from head to belly with white marks left by tiger claws, so he came to be known as the “Tiger Hunter” after word of that fierce battle had spread.

Gudda’s will to fight had remained unshaken even as his army was on the verge of collapse after its General had been killed.

Henceforth, why should he be afraid of being outnumbered, with the heavy burden that laid at his back?

Gudda: “We’ll take you on!”

With a yell like a cannon firing, Gudda’s huge body kicked off the ground and closed in on the enemy horde.

Following Gudda’s lead, his subordinates, each carrying their weapons of choice, rushed toward the star-bearing flag looming from the west.

Gudda: “—That one.”

As his own feet brought him closer to the moment of the groups’ clash, Gudda strained his eyes, focusing ont the vanguard of the enemy—in front of the group that was causing the ground to rumble, was present a red Galewind Horse charging in.

What had caught his attention was the man pulling the reins of the Galewind Horse—Nay, that was false. The man was merely a reinsman, rather, what had warranted his attention was the small figure the man riding on the Galewind Horse carried.

A black-haired boy holding a girl in his arms was looking straight at them with his dark eyes.

In that moment, the only thought passing through Gudda’s mind was that the boy was neither running ahead nor deviating from his position, but was charging forward as if it were natural for him to be in that position.

A boy of black hair and black eyes, just like the black-haired Crown Prince in the rumor that had been spread since before the start of the war.

Gudda: “—Hk!”

Gudda killed off the thought by clenching his molars, focusing on what he must do.

Taking advantage of a ridiculous rumor, the rebels had prepared a large number of black-haired Crown Princes and challenged the Imperial Capital to a decisive battle, foolishly so. Therefore, the Generals who had been tasked with defending the Capital—or rather, all the troops, Privates and Generals alike, had made up their minds.

The authenticity of the black-haired child is of no concern. —There is but one Emperor we ought to look up to.

Gudda: "—You damned traitors, stabbing our Emperor Vincent Vollachia in the back!!"

Dual-wielding his two heavy metal clubs, Gudda roared like a tiger, symbol of what he hunted as per his name, and drew nearer to the boy charging at the front of the pack.

At the front, was a boy riding a red Galewind Horse whom the rebels were following.

Being a General himself, Gudda wished to crush the enemy's fighting spirit with a single blow by mowing them all down, so he did. The impact of the strike was so tremendous that it would cause fragile eardrums to explode.

Gudda's thick arms also felt a satisfying feedback, but his eyes widened.

The black-haired boy was supposed to have been crushed together with the Galewind Horse, but what the metal clubs had perceived was neither the boy, nor the Galewind Horse he was riding—

???: "I have to protect Schwartz, as it is now my duty as the official."

With a body larger than his Gudda's own, with four thick, strong arms, he held a large shield in his hand, which he used to directly block the blow—or rather, both blows from Gudda's metal clubs.

Gudda's throat choked up at the sight, one that was astonishing even taking into account the physical capabilities of the Multi-Arm Tribe.

Slipping into that momentary delay—

???: “And… it’s my job to beat up Schwartz’s enemies…!”

Gudda: “—Hk!”

The voice, hushed yet courageous, and filled with a strong sense of pride and honor, had its owner pummel Gudda in the torso, launching the latter’s massive body into the sky.

The man who Gudda had seen strike him as he let out a “Gah” donned tattoos all over his body and wielded a large two-handed hammer.

He was well-trained. But with his physique and amateurish movements, how could he have—No, the correct thing to question was not merely what had happened to his own body.

Rebels: “OOORAAAAHH—!!!”

Gudda, who had taken the lead, was blown away, and the clashes between the rebels and Imperial Soldiers continued afterwards.

Even if Gudda’s head were to be chopped off, he had trained his men well enough so that they would not lose their will to fight. It was precisely because of this pride that they could hardly believe their own eyes.

All at once, before they could even mount a decent resistance, the Imperial Soldiers were utterly crushed and pulverized by the offense of the oncoming rebel horde.

The sight was so shocking that Gudda’s entire body was filled with an indignation greater than the one he had felt back when he had witnessed the head of his General crushed to bits right before his eyes—

Gudda: “—This is absurd.”

And so, the battle-hardened General let out a hoarse breath at an utterly incomprehensible sight.

4

—As with everything, there were exceptions.

The sole exception was the Pleiades Battalion, a threatening group of amateurs that had crushed the mighty General that was Gudda Dialmo, and the strong warriors he had trained.

They possessed not techniques they had practiced, they possessed not fine armaments, they possessed not even a firm cause.

All they possessed was a really, really strong will to unite, and a vow to themselves that they would not back down no matter what.

And that was precisely the kind of thing that made the Pleiades Battalion an extraordinary group of people.

Recall the lengthy lecture on the shortcomings of Yang Magic.

Its use, which depended on the skill of the caster and the number of people, would often disrupt people's coordination, being labelled as foolish as it had earned the former Emperor the stigmatic moniker of "The Emperor of the Great Defeat". Even Vincent Vollachia, who was proclaimed as a wise Emperor, had quickly abandoned the idea of utilizing it at the consideration stage.

But what if, hypothetically, something like it was possible?

Hundreds, or even thousands of troops, in their entirety, being given a uniform enhancement of the same effectiveness? And yet, none of them suffering from the gap between their original fighting ability and the skill level of their strengthened selves?

And the key to that being the lack of a need to have the number of Yang Magic users being the same as the number of troops? —If such dreamlike or miraculous conditions were met, would it not be feasible?

It was a pipe dream that Vincent Vollachia would laugh at and discard, were he to hear of it.

A group of incidental coincidences that would even be said to be possible only in this time of war, in this situation, in this circumstance.

Only those who accepted Natsuki Subaru—or rather, “Natsuki Schwartz”, as the center of themselves, those who sincerely thought of him as their comrade, those who sincerely believed in him as their companion, would be able to achieve a miracle.

—The strengthening effect of the Yang Magic would be applied to each of the individuals Subaru shared the effect of Cor Leonis with; that was, all of the allies who worked alongside him.

The power of the Little King, originally intended to share wounds and burdens, would now be abused; the power which the King alone could not handle fully, would now be handled together with the comrades that supported him.

Hence, the Pleiades Battalion—

Subaru: “—I love you, all of you!!”

The thousands of “non-combatants” who traveled with Natsuki Subaru were transformed into an army of warriors, beginning to lay waste to every battlefield in this battle for the Imperial Capital.

Chapter 99:
Those Who Rule the Sky

1

—The word “war cry” was appropriate.

Quite simply, it was just a yell.

An exclamation raised to inspire oneself, one’s allies, and a troop’s morale in the face of a match, contest, or any kind of bout; it provided courage and strength to move forward.

Forming a circle before a fight and raising a battle cry before charging onto the battlefield, magic words for coming together as one—in this world, this could truly be called “magic”.

???: “…Unbelievable, I suppose.”

Beatrice was speechless at the destructive power of the Pleiades Battalion led by Natsuki Subaru, a group of amateurs who furiously charged into the enemy forces, crushing the well-prepared and well-armed Imperial Soldiers.

As the red Galewind Horse moved vigorously, causing the ground to rumble, a man with a shoddy beard named Idra held the reins, as Beatrice and Subaru rode at his front in an awkward position. The group advancing under this banner were all under the influence of powerful Yang Magic.

The method through which this had been achieved could only have been—

Beatrice: “—Magical Shroud Excitation.”

The scant words Beatrice muttered were a term referring to a fleeting technique that had existed hundreds of years prior, yet had never been considered valuable, far from being put to practical use.

Even the Witch Echidna, who systematized all of magic, had given it a provisional name, leaving it as an ancient “fantasy”. A technique that could not be reproduced by an individual.

Magical Shroud Excitation was a way of forcibly manifesting the Flow Method, utilizing the Mana circulating within the body to strengthen it, and inducing an effect similar to that of Yang Magic, despite the different approach.

Superhuman force was a term sometimes used to describe the breaking of one’s own physical limits when facing a dangerous situation, producing strength incomparable with one’s original condition.

That was acknowledged as a thing that actually existed, in this world.

In a situation of mental or physical urgency, Gates present in one’s body, which would normally go unused, could be opened, resulting in the person entering the same state as those able to execute the Flow Method.

It was possible that those with superior abilities had been able to teach themselves how to use the Flow Method through an experience of the sort; but for now, further explanation will be omitted as it is beside the main point.

Most important was the fact that Magical Shroud Excitation was a method of forcibly bypassing human limitations, and that it was being used on the entire Pleiades Battalion, which numbered in the several thousands.

Originally, Echidna had witnessed what could be called Magical Shroud Excitation on the battlefield, being used by a small tribe of warriors raising a battle cry which had triggered a similar effect.

They continued to raise their voices before, during, and after the battle, as that was their custom on the battlefield.

Their morale-inspiring roars were accompanied by a Yang Magic-esque effect which raised the strength of the tribe as a whole, and as a result, they had stood out in battle despite their reduced numbers.

However, even they were unable to resist their numerical disadvantage, thus vanishing during the war. Afterwards, similar groups cropped up and were destroyed, and no proper remnants of that custom remained.

A group gathered at random would not produce the effect, overabundant numbers would not produce the effect, and a single competent person would not be able to reproduce the effect. Therefore, Magical Shroud Excitation had died out without ever seeing the light of day.

In modern times, only individuals of exceptional ability mastered the Flow Method, and shouting on the battlefield was something that only boosted courage.

However—

???: “STRONGEST! STRONGEST! STRONGEST—!!!”

What had been shining through all the members of the Pleiades Battalion who were advancing along with Subaru as they shouted this, was the radiance of the Magical Shroud Excitation that was thought to have been lost.

It was truly an ideal environment, they were united with strong trust built around Subaru, becoming a force that equaled an army, devoid of people powerful enough that they would disrupt their flow with incautious Yang Magic.

The effects of the Magical Shroud Excitation that had been triggered were, in Yang Magic terms: enhancement of the five senses, a significant increase in physical capacity, a surge in physical toughness, as well as a bewildering increase in cognitive ability, in addition to reaction time, in what could only be seen as an irregular state of multiple enhancements.

Faced with the Pleiades Battalion, with each and every one of its members having become a warrior worth a thousand warriors in the literal sense—confronting them without any prior information, the Imperial Soldiers were overwhelmed by their momentum, and the battle lines were patently “melted”.

Like ice struck by a hot iron, the formation the enemy had assembled melted starting with the front, as the group of amateurs made headway through the middle of the enemy line with frightening momentum.

Even more astonishing than that was,

Subaru: “—Overwhelm them, but don’t kill them! Make them think they stand no chance in a fight!”

???: “OHHH—!”

???: “Got’cha, Boss!”

???: “In the same way we were saved by you!”

In a battlefield full of people risking their lives in battle, the leader of the advancing battalion declared that no casualties would occur.

It was an idea that would be laughed off as ridiculous and childish nonsense by anyone familiar with the battlefield, but this group of wet-behind-the-ears amateurs now broke through with destructive force.

Blow after blow struck the body of one Imperial Soldier after the other and blew them away, but what was left behind was not a pile of corpses, but a mountain of physically and mentally incapacitated people bearing wounds.

Keeping the enemy soldiers alive so they would be able to rescue their fallen comrades had been no tactical decision. Rather, Natsuki Subaru simply did not have the courage to have people die.

Instead of this courage, Subaru harbored a wish that was being granted by this overwhelming force.

Beatrice: “Subaru, how far have you thought this through, in fact?!”

Subaru: “Eh? Oh, sorry everyone is being so loud! But if we are all shouting emphatically “Let’s do this! Let’s do this! Let’s do this!”, it gets us all hyped up!”

Beatrice: “Eh~~, that’s ludicrous, I suppose!”

Coincidentally, Beatrice had ended up voicing the shared conclusion of everyone witnessing this bizarre battlefield aloud.

But there was no reason to blame them. It was a completely natural thing to say.

Beatrice immediately understood Subaru’s answer. —Subaru, and all the people around him, knew nothing about Magical Shroud Excitation, so there was no way that they could understand it.

While simply believing that fighting while shouting wholeheartedly made them stronger, they had actually perfectly recreated and weaponized an impossible theory even a Witch had given up on.

And even Beatrice was completely oblivious to the fact that Natsuki Subaru was the only one in the whole world who could turn this theory into practice with his Authority of the Little King.

Beatrice: “That’s precisely why…”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Beatrice: “That’s precisely why you’re Betty’s partner, in fact!”

In the arms of Natsuki Subaru, who could do what nobody else could, Beatrice affirmed her situation as her depleted Mana was resupplied during their long-awaited reunion.

Within the Pleiades Battalion, a group full of amateurs, no one needed to understand the current situation, nor did anyone actually understand it, so Beatrice contemplated on behalf of her partner Subaru.

How could she involve herself in this historical moment that might never be reproduced again?

Beatrice: “If you intend to take the wind out of the opponent’s sails, I could prevent them from reorganizing, I suppose.”

With a slight movement, Beatrice directed her small palm towards the large number of Imperial Soldiers that had been blown away.

Taking into account Subaru’s wishes, the bloody battles between the warring parties, as well as the way of the Empire which took hold of the battlefield, what Beatrice performed was,

Beatrice: “—El Shamak.”

As a member of the Pleiades Battalion, Beatrice wielded her own exceedingly enhanced power.

A black haze descended upon the heads of the Imperial Soldiers defending the fourth bastion one after another, robbing them of their thoughts, stifling their will to fight, depriving them of the opportunity to counterattack.

—Within minutes of the Pleiades Battalion joining the battle, the fourth bastion, which had thus far suffered minimal damage during the siege of the Imperial Capital, was completely and utterly collapsed.

2

The onslaught of the Pleiades Battalion’s ravenous rush reached Abel’s ears in the main camp, instantly.

At that point, however, the name of the Pleiades Battalion did not reach him, hence it was only reported that a group had appeared from the west and clashed with the Imperial Soldiers with overpowering might, collapsing the defensive line there.

In any case—

???: “—Good grief, they showed up just as we were about to play our trump card, and completely stole the spotlight. How exhilarating.”

A gallant voice echoed through the main camp as a beautiful figure arrived with coolness, taking that fact in with grace.

The one making their entrance was an imposing-looking woman, her wavy hair swinging from side to side, on her face a white scar produced by a sword. She was dressed in a garb a ruffian would favor, one unbefitting of her noble status; the name of the woman of character stepping into the main camp was Serena Dracroy.

She was one of the most distinguished High Countesses in the Vollachian Empire, but rather than being currently on the side of the Empire, she was instead a rebel against the ruling power—and one of Abel's original trump cards.

Upon Serena's visit, Abel folded his arms as he gazed out at the battlefield beyond.

Abel: "I was under the impression that your reinforcements would comprise of the Flying Dragon Squadron."

Serena: "Rest assured. I have no intention of changing the fact that the utmost elite of my forces are the Flying Dragon Squadron. The ones currently captivating the battlefield are an unexpected matter."

Abel: "Is it not by your own doing?"

Serena: "I would put them under my wing if they approached me, but unfortunately, it seems like they're only looking up to one person. They wouldn't even bat an eye at me."

As she answered, Serena's long-legged figure walked up to Abel's side.

Peering into Abel's face with her almond-shaped eyes, she narrowed her eyes at the face covered by the oni mask.

Abel: "Surely you cannot work with someone who hides his face from you?"

Serena: "Why would I say something so dull? There's no difference between those who hide their true intentions behind makeup and those who hide their true faces behind masks. If your reason is hiding a scar, I'd say you're not as bad as I am."

Abel: “I shall not state my reason, but it is not because of a scar. I wear this out of necessity.”

Serena: “I figured you would. I could gather from your words that you don’t do anything unnecessary. And now that we’ve actually exchanged words like this, that impression has deepened even more.”

As Serena ascertained this from Abel, she smiled fiercely with her hands on her hips.

Of course, as he was the actual Emperor, Abel and Serena were acquainted with each other. The cognitive disruption effect of the oni mask could slightly alter such malaises, but it did not change Abel’s evaluation of Serena.

She was a fierce, progressive, and courageous general who was willing to snap at the Emperor when necessary—exactly what her moniker, the Scorching Lady, suggested.

However, if it were not for such a temperament, he would have never counted her as one of the cards in his hand to assist him in this rebellion.

Serena: “Is your assessment that no one else fancies things as I do?”

Abel: “It was necessary to think about how to prepare the grounds to win you over. But my main reason for choosing you, was so that the odds of winning the battle would increase.”

Serena: “To think that my Flying Dragon Squadron would be valued to that extent, when the Imperial Capital’s given me the cold shoulder.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Serena gave that sarcastic remark; but despite the content of her words and the expression on her face, her reaction showed that her blood was boiling due to that very fact.

The existence of the Flying Dragon Squadron in the hands of High Countess Dracroy was the core reason why the Dracroy Domain was revered and respected throughout the Vollachian Empire, where the strong were held in high esteem. In other words, for Serena

Dracroy, it was a source of pride that ought not be wounded.

Even if someone from the Dracroy territory were to commit an evil act—in other words, even if they were to act against the Emperor himself, no doubt ought to be brought forth against their capabilities.

That was why—

Abel: “You have accepted the invitation on this occasion. The flying dragons that rule over the skies of the battlefield… those who obey the dragonkin, Madelyn Eschart. Force them out of the way, and claim supremacy over the air.”

Serena: “As a matter of fact, your enticing proposal is not the only reason I accepted your invitation… but fulfilling it is also an important role for me at the moment. May you have your wish. —My Flying Dragon Squadron.”

Abel: “…”

Serena: “No longer will those sudden reinforcements annoy me and steal the spotlight.”

Having assumed the role expected of her, Serena once again directed Abel’s attention to the western battlefield. Her words guided his gaze again, and his black eyes narrowed behind the oni mask.

As Serena had stated indeed, that group had come as an absolute surprise to everyone. —If he were to be honest, any deviation from the path he had laid out was not welcome, no matter how favorable it could possibly be to the progress of battle.

Serena: “So that’s the battalion that turned the west of the Imperial Capital on its head. You have probably heard of them, haven’t you?”

Abel: “I have. However, I was unable to decipher what their purpose was, and from the reports of their position, I judged they would not have made it in time for the decisive battle either. Therefore, I did not include their fighting strength in my estimations.”

Serena: “In that case, they’ve clearly defied your expectations. From what I’ve heard, they’ve been ceaselessly running through day and night to arrive on this battlefield in time.”

Abel: “—. Even though such conduct makes sense in theory, it is completely nonsensical in reality. One can only imagine the amount of running a day to make it in time. And even if they made it in time after all of that, they would have way too many deserters to even put up a fight.”

This might be self-evident, but the more one increased the size of a group, the greater the amount of effort that was required to even get to it to move.

On top of the logistics, supplies, and fighting required to maintain a large army, over time they would become more frantic and accumulate more and more fatigue, more easily would they lose the will to fight, and their hearts would drift away from the banner they raised.

Even bringing someone under these conditions to a battlefield was no small feat, let alone waging war on the battlefield with them.

But—

Serena: “So, Oni-Masked Grand General, does this look like a battle waged by people with low morale to you?”

Were Serena to have asked him this, Abel would have had to deny what he was seeing with his own eyes.

Barely visible in the distance, the fighting of the battalion charging right into enemy lines within a whirled-up dust cloud defied all expectations. Even though their war cry could not be fully heard, its aftereffects had reached the main camp, noticeably so.

Only a disillusioned fool in complete denial of reality would point at that scene and feign that the troops were low in morale.

Serena: “Their leader seemed to be one of the black-haired Crown

Princes who was on everyone's lips. I thought this whole story about His Excellency Vincent's illegitimate offspring being present here and there across the entire Empire was laughable, but that surprisingly stands out like he could be the real deal."

Abel: "—. So that is how it is."

Serena: "Hm?"

Squinting at the dust cloud lingering in the distance, Abel's thoughts clicked into place.

Being related a story he himself seemed aware of, Abel remarked on it, prompting Serena to tilt her head. But, Abel did not respond to her question, instead simply closing one eye at the conviction growing within him.

A group with exceptionally high morale and unity that traversed an inconceivable distance and remained on its feet just to fiercely step into this battlefield—finally, he could perceive its true nature.

Namely—

Abel: "—Are you able to make proper use of your own power at last, I wonder."

If that was indeed the case, then the unforeseen presence of the invading group from the west would make complete sense. And it would be even more unexpected for the false Emperor sitting on the throne of the Imperial Capital.

This black-haired Crown Prince possessed an ability that truly lived up to the rumors—or at least, that person was supposed to be capable of performing to that level.

Abel: "It is unnecessary for our side to make any moves on the western battlefield. However, the third bastion is still the most crucial spot to break open. And I harbor no intention to relent. — High Countess Dracroy."

Upon her name being called, Serena nodded her head and spoke,"I know".

Looking at what laid beyond Abel's line of sight, she directed her gaze at the fluttering flying dragons dominating the sky.

Serena: "Let's show His Excellency the Emperor, who appointed that crude and impudent dragonkin, the difference between wild flying dragons and the disciplined Flying Dragon Squadron."

Indeed, while being completely ignorant of the fact that the true Emperor stood right next to her, she undertook this mission with a frenzied smile on her face.

3

—Overlooking the entire battlefield from the rear, the main camp allowed them to keep a watchful eye on any anomalies all-around.

Having arrived there as a reinforcement, Serena Dracroy held a grudge against the flying dragons that obeyed one of the Nine Divine Generals, the dragonkin, Madelyn Eschart.

These ferocious flying dragons would never get along with humans without a special secret technique, yet they rampaged here, in the battle for the Imperial Capital, wielding their natural ferocity and peril on full display, posing a great threat to people.

Albeit Madelyn had only explained it in rough terms, she had seemingly made arrangements so that the flying dragons, who could not distinguish between enemies and allies, would not cause damage to allied Imperial Soldiers. For that reason, casualties were not as indiscriminate as had happened on the attack on the Fortress City of Guaral.

Nevertheless, they would swoop down on the rebels, reminding them of the threat posed by the claws and fangs dancing in the sky; plus, the damage from the occasional stone bombardment making ground could hardly be ignored.

However, flying dragons could only make such attacks against warriors who attached more importance to the group rather than the individual, and could not interfere in a battle between beings with overwhelming strength.

The Nine Divine Generals who defended each bastion, and the elite of the rebels who clashed head-on with them—there was no way for the dragons to barge into their battle, a battle on an entirely higher level.

Therefore—

Mezoreia: "—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies."

Emilia: "—Icicle Line!!"

Waving both hands, Emilia jumped, redrawing a line of white ice on the world she traced.

Immediately after, a tail cleaved the snowy ground where Emilia had been just moments before with tremendous speed, instantly rupturing the ground and evaporating the snow.

The one to perform such a deed, was a mighty being with a huge body of white scales, clad in clouds flowing in the sky—called by the dragonkin, Madelyn, a threat to the world had descended upon its surface.

Emilia: "Mezoreia…!"

Thinking in the corner of her mind that there was a city bearing the exact same name in the Vollachian Empire were she not mistaken, Emilia clenched her molars at the powerful attack she had avoided by the skin of her teeth, and encouraged her own heart.

Along the line of frost redrawn by Icicle Line, a wall of ice rose up from the ground with a sound. It was not as high as the walls surrounding the Imperial Capital, but it was high enough to keep the airborne Mezoreia from escaping the battlefield.

Emilia: "I can't let you go where everyone else is."

Amidst the battlefield as it grew colder and colder—No, rather, it was becoming colder of her own volition, Emilia exhaled white breath while expressing her determination.

Indeed, Emilia had been in quite a lot of trouble when Madelyn had summoned Mezoreia.

Taking on Madelyn alone had already been a Herculean task, but it was obvious that adding Mezoreia to the equation would make things even more troublesome.

But Emilia's intuition told her that it would be quite difficult to get anyone to help her.

Emilia: "It'd be nice to fight alongside someone like Priscilla though…"

It was not Emilia's forte to fight in sync with those around her. That was because she had trouble thinking while fighting. That was why she respected people who could think while fighting, and believed she could join forces with such a person.

But even that would be difficult in this fight with Madelyn and Mezoreia.

Emilia: "Because it's getting colder and colder."

The ice barrier created by Icicle Line did not only prevent Mezoreia from getting out, but also limited the space in which Emilia could lower the temperature.

It had been a suggestion from Petra, but most ground dragons were vulnerable to cold. If flying dragons and water dragons shared the same roots as ground dragons, they probably had similar vulnerabilities to cold.

In fact, unlike earth dragons, both flying dragons, who flew high up in the skies within cooler temperatures, and water dragons, who swam through cold water, had varying tolerance levels against cold, but this misconception was irrelevant in face of overwhelming cold.

Because at the current moment, Emilia was bringing forth extreme cold that far exceeded that limit.

Emilia: "—Just like Puck's Magic Release Period."

Before Roswaal’s mansion burned down, there had been an episode where Puck had almost turned it completely to ice on accident because he had not let out Mana in due time. The battlefield’s cold temperature, at this moment, rivaled that instance.

Any normal person would have found their hands numb, having been made unable to hold a weapon, having been made it so that moving their body was incredibly difficulty. Even a strong person would be affected by no small amount.

Precisely because Emilia had chosen this fighting style, she could only fight on her own.

At the very least, this time.

Mezoreia: “—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies.”

The sky was covered with low, thick clouds, and Emilia’s amethyst eyes twinkled as she heard a voice from overhead that sounded so heavy that she wondered if the sky itself had spoken.

There was a declaration of its supernatural presence, and in the very subsequent moment, a blow beyond human understanding was unleashed.

The mere flick of its tail could rip the earth apart, the swing of its claws could rend space in two, its great breath was powerful enough to blow away nearly half a city. It truly was extraordinary.

It was unmistakably a Dragon, a legend which Emilia had now encountered twice in just a short period of time.

Emilia: “…”

There was a jerk from its unfurled wings, and the wall of ice Emilia had erected was effortlessly torn apart. Although not quite as solid as iron, she had done her best to harden it. And yet, it had been easily broken, and before Emilia could feel any disappointment or surprise, she was hurriedly dodging bullets of ice hurtling towards her.

Having been minced and sent flying by the Dragon’s wings, countless chunks of ice, large and small, rained down as scattered lumps. If one were to clash against these pieces of ice, some as large as one’s head, taking no care, they would end up being rendered immobile, completely, against their Dragon opponent.

That, would be a lethal injury to a diminutive being fighting a mighty Dragon.

Emilia: “Hiyah! Yah! Huff! Yikes!!”

And thus, Emilia avoided the chunks of ice as if she were dancing, sweeping away and enduring with a sword and shield of ice she had created for the ones she could not completely dodge.

The fact that she never broke eye contact with her opponent during all of that was due to her recent firsthand experience of fighting the Divine Dragon Volcanica at Pleiades Watchtower.

The Dragons’ power was so far beyond the imaginations of Emilia and her comrades, that even the slightest movement, even one that did not look like an attack, could be incredibly dangerous.

Emilia: “When fighting Volcanica, I nearly got blown away by a puff of its nose.”

Remembering that time, she again felt glad that she was the one present at this place.

If one did not know how to fight Dragons, they could inadvertently trip up on the first something or another, resulting in their doom. But that was not the only thing Emilia recalled during her fight with Mezoreia.

Following Madelyn’s call, the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia had pushed the sky aside, descending unto the battlefield—of course, it was very difficult to contend with the ridiculous way of fighting that was unique to Dragons.

Emilia: “Mezoreia! Please, just listen to me! I don’t want to fight with Madelyn…”

Mezoreia: “—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies.”

Emilia: “Ah, just as I thought…”

Emilia appealed loudly, but brushing those words aside, Mezoreia shook its long whiskers without listening and looked down at the tiny Emilia on the ground with its eyes.

Bearing its direct gaze, Emilia firmly gritted her teeth, becoming keenly aware of something as every nerve in her slender body was filled with energy.

Namely—

Mezoreia: ”—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies.”

Emilia: “You’re just like Volcanica, you’ve grown too old and forgot everything!”

For the second time in her life, she had encountered a Dragon, a supernatural being—Mezoreia, the Cloud Dragon, the one who ruled the sky, had grown senile, just like the Divine Dragon she had encountered at the Tower.

Chapter 100:
A Myriad of Changes at the Bastions

1

—The Cloud Dragon Mezoreia’s senility.

The startling revelation of the truth drove Emilia into a tremendously difficult corner.

Emilia: “I didn’t have to beat Volcanica at the time, all I had to do was do my best and complete the Trial, but…”

Her encounter with the Divine Dragon Volcanica on the highest floor of Pleiades Watchtower had concluded once she touched a stone monument at a peak even further above the Tower’s peak.

As for Emilia, she was still unsure as to whether she had properly resolved Volcanica’s Trial; however, the ancient Dragon had presented one of its claws as proof of the denouement to Emilia.

So, for now she considered this a symbol of approval.

However, her fight with Volcanica had fundamentally been a defensive one, as she’d had no intention of beating him, so it had been no battle at all.

And this situation was the same, even if the opponent had changed from the Divine Dragon to the Cloud Dragon.

If anything—

Emilia: “I’ve got no other choice but to beat it, but Mezoreia has lost—Ah!”

As she was saying this, Emilia sprung from her spot and closed in on the Dragon that was airborne.

Shaking its long whiskers, without anything being displayed, reflected in its eyes, the Dragon mercilessly slashed its claws at the puny existence flying towards it.

It was a simple attack, but just one strike would be more than enough to kill someone were it to connect.

The Dragon’s claws were much sharper than any run-of-the-mill sword, able to cleave Emilia’s body in twain with ease.

Emilia: “Soldiers!”

However, Emilia was able to avoid this attack by jumping even further into the sky.

The midair foothold that Emilia had made use of had been provided by an Ice Soldier who’d leaped alongside her, then putting up both of its arms for Emilia to bounce off.

Naturally, the Ice Soldier had been incapable of escaping in time, thus falling prey to the Dragon’s claws, which smashed it to pieces.

Emilia: “Eiya!!”

Keeping this sacrifice in her heart, Emilia’s long legs kicked Mezoreia in the face.

The leg Emilia had utilized to deliver this kick had been equipped with footwear made of ice, donning an enlarged spike with extreme sharpness, making it an awfully lethal weapon.

Since Emilia had used her foot, she did not pull any punches with this merciless kick—so an absurdly brutal blow slammed into the side of Mezoreia’s defenseless head.

However—

Emilia: “It’s not working at all!”

Mezoreia’s huge body did not budge an inch from getting kicked in the face.

However, it appeared to be irritated. Feeling hostility on her skin, Emilia greatly swung her upper body to do a midair flip, using another Ice Soldier to dodge the incoming thrust from the Dragon.

Lagging behind the one that had been shattered, another Ice Soldier had leapt even further up and stretched out both of its legs from above. Aligning both their soles, Emilia launched herself off of them towards the ground below.

While the sound of shattering ice resounded in her eardrums, Emilia landed atop the white ground on her hands, then looked up towards the majestic cloud-wreathed Dragon calmly floating in the air.

Mezoreia: "—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies."

Emilia: "Geez… Even after all of that…!"

Even after being kicked in the face and smashing apart two Ice Soldiers with its claws, Mezoreia's words and demeanor did not change at all compared to when it had first descended upon the battlefield.

Emilia: "…"

It certainly did consider Emilia an enemy.

It was precisely for this reason that it was brandishing its claws towards Emilia as she made her approach, all the while it flapped its wings and turned its unfocused white eyes towards her.

But she just could not initiate a conversation. Just like with Volcanica, it was incredibly difficult to find common ground.

The only potential clue was, possibly—

Emilia: "—Madelyn! Just listen to me!"

Madelyn: "Shut the frig' up! Don't friggin' address this dragon so casually!!"

Emilia's last ray of hope faded into the distance as her outstretched hand was violently shaken off.

Even though Madelyn had lost the Flying Winged Blade she was able to wield with remarkable skill, Emilia's silver hair was still disheveled as she leapt away in evasion. A small shadow followed right behind her—that of Madelyn Eschart, who let out a white exhale as her golden eyes were set ablaze, the ground cracking with every step she took as she brandished her arms that wrought destruction.

Narrowly avoiding it, Emilia bit down on her molars.

The tactic of rapidly lowering the temperature had served its purpose of keeping the rampaging Madelyn and Mezoreia away from the others on the battlefield, but it was difficult to push it any further.

Madelyn: "Human, human, human…!!"

A wicked glint in her eyes, Madelyn's petite body was cloaked in white steam. It felt like she was matching the cloud-wreathed Mezoreia, but there was a difference.

Madelyn's body temperature was so absurdly high that every single snowflake evaporated upon coming into contact with her—no, that happened before they could even reach her.

The same thing was also happening around Mezoreia, the "Puck Copycat" tactic was not really effective on these two.

That being the case—

Emilia: "Icicle Line—!"

With the ice wall separating the battlefields still in place, Emilia changed the flow of cold air. Aborting an ineffective strategy to preserve her strength, was not what she was doing.

As she had covered too large of an area, it had not had the desired effect on Mezoreia and Madelyn, and so.

Emilia: "How about all this cold!"

Drawing invisible white lines around Madelyn approaching her directly, Emilia concentrated the cold air permeating the battlefield around the second bastion into a single spot.

Wrapping around Madelyn's small body was not just any ordinary cold, it was a truly extreme cold, one that changed steam into snow, causing the dragonkin's body temperature to plummet below freezing temperature instantly.

Madelyn: "—Guh?!"

Even Madelyn had her whole body frozen still by this unforeseeably extreme cold.

Madelyn's eyes widened as her vision whited out; however, Emilia threw away her last bit of pity and focused on pouring all her power into temporarily freezing her solid.

Emilia: "Please…!"

Directing all of her power towards freezing Madelyn, Emilia seemed to harbor prayers in regards to Mezoreia's actions.

The participation of the cloud-wreathed Cloud Dragon in the melee would force Emilia to halt her attack prematurely. However, in the corner of her field of view, she saw Mezoreia floating in the sky with an empty expression and no indication of wanting to interfere with Madelyn's predicament.

Emilia: "Weird, but—"

In this situation, Mezoreia staying still helped her out a lot.

When Mezoreia had made its appearance from the sky, being summoned by Madelyn's voice, Emilia's realization had been that she had been cornered into an even more hopeless situation.

However, by the looks of it, Madelyn and Mezoreia were not cooperating at all, continuously switching between one of them attacking on their own and the other standing idly by.

From Emilia's perspective, it was pretty much a one-on-one in which the opponents would tag-in and tag-out.

Of course, Emilia’s stamina was still slowly being whittled away, and she could not think of Madelyn, nor of Mezoreia, as opponents that she could easily take down in a one-on-one fight.

Nevertheless—

Madelyn: “Y… ou…!”

Emilia: “Sorry, Madelyn. I think it would’ve been better if I could’ve had a proper chat with you. But, since you refuse to listen, I’m going to need you to be obedient now!”

Madelyn: “Guh—!”

Madelyn’s whole body violently creaked, and she flashed her sharp fangs as her eyes blazed.

However, once the inner part of her body had been chilled to the very core of its core, even the extremely stout and vigorous dragonkin was unable to avoid having her freedom snatched away.

Madelyn: “…”

Her blood and flesh, her bones and skin, all of it was frozen white, and Madelyn was imprisoned in ice by Emilia.

It had concluded just before Madelyn’s hand, which she had suddenly stretched out, could reach Emilia’s chest. With her hands still pointed at Madelyn, Emilia looked at the immobile girl and let out a long exhale.

Emilia: “That… was a close one…”

Patting her chest in relief, Emilia lowered her eyebrows at the young girl that had been colored white.

She did not feel delighted nor regretful for having won or lost. Above all else, this did not mark the end quite yet.

Emilia: “Mezoreia! You may not understand what I’m saying, but you need to stop fighting! If you really can’t communicate no matter what, then go home for today!”

Emilia had considered the possibility that Mezoreia would become incredibly angry the moment she defeated Madelyn, so she was slightly relieved to see that Mezoreia had not made any movement. However, unable to let that relief slip through to her expression, Emilia glared at Mezoreia with a sharp look on her face.

She was trying to act like she still had plenty of strength left in her.

However, the truth was that Emilia did not have much strength remaining, in actual fact.

Although she had succeeded in freezing Madelyn in ice, she would need to keep Madelyn chilled in order to maintain her in that frozen state. That, too, required the continued use of energy.

Hence, even though she had stopped Madelyn, it would be very difficult to fight Mezoreia.

If possible, the best thing Mezoreia could do would be to turn back from here.

That was why—

Emilia: "In the case that you still want to keep going, then I also have a plan."

With a sharp glare in her eyes, Emilia declared such to Mezoreia. —A lie, it was.

Even though she had stated it with immense confidence, her glare set on Mezoreia, it was an outright lie that Emilia had any kind of plan. She thought that if she insisted, perhaps Mezoreia would think Emilia was dangerous and run away.

It was a bluff, something that seldom came from Emilia, and one that followed Subaru's and Otto's examples.

Mezoreia: "—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies."

A bluff to which, a deep, low voice from Mezoreia's mouth replied so.

Emilia became disheartened by Mezoreia's undecipherable behavior, as it was unclear whether or not it could see what was before its eyes, but she was determined not to be defeated and did not decrease the severity of her gaze.

And then—

Mezoreia: "—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine…"

Emilia: "…Huh?"

Mezoreia: "In accordance… with the voice… the voice of… mine dear child…"

Mezoreia's words, which it had repeated over and over and over again no matter what she herself spoke, were cut off halfway through, immediately began to falter, and did not continue after.

It was not just that. Mezoreia, who had been staying peacefully within the snowy sky, frowned somewhat painfully, its large head starting to sway from side-to-side.

Emilia: "What's wrong all of a sudden? Does your head hurt?"

Seeing the changes born in Mezoreia, Emilia's amethyst eyes widened in surprise.

It would only be natural that Mezoreia would lash out in anger after Madelyn had been encased in ice. It would be very troubling were it to do just that, but that would be easier to accept than this kind of weird reaction.

Overhead, with those worries in Emilia's mind, Mezoreia's movements came to an abrupt halt.

Mezoreia: "…"

The Dragon, which had been shaking its head in pain, suddenly looked down with a serene expression. Met with the gaze of those white eyes, on a face that had grown out a long beard, Emilia let out a short "Ah".

Now, for the first time, she felt as if she had been “seen” by Mezoreia’s eyes.

In other words, it was a sign of will and intelligence dwelling within Mezoreia’s eyes—

Emilia: “Finally, we can talk—”

Mezoreia: “I do believe I told you, human.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

With a low voice, resounding as if the sky had roared, the Dragon turned its head to face Emilia. She was pierced by its gaze, however, Emilia’s body stiffened because of a different shock.

She had been gazed upon by something mightier than herself; that was not what had surprised her.

The reason was because the violent emotion in its voice was just like the one that had just been directed at her just a few moments before—No, because it was exactly the same.

Indeed, as if to confirm the stiffened Emilia’s surprise, the Dragon continued.

Mezoreia: “This dragon doesn’t friggin’ have anything to say to you.”

Emilia: “Madel—”

Upon seeing something unbelievable, Emilia involuntarily ceased her movement.

Turning towards Emilia, the Dragon opened its mouth. Then, it simply exhaled. —That breath became a white light, and the true essence of the Cloud Dragon filled the world.

The dreadfulness of when a definite will dwelled within the Dragon’s power rained mercilessly down upon Emilia.

The influence of the battalion intervening from the west had spread across every corner of the battlefield.

Of course, the ones most affected by this battalion were those of the garrison at the fourth bastion, which was brought to the brink of collapse after suffering unparalleled damage in one fell swoop.

However, even if it had not been affected directly, it could be said that the third bastion was influenced the most by the changes the Pleiades Battalion had had on the state of the battle.

Originally, the soldiers sent to the third bastion with the purpose of nullifying one of the trump cards of the Imperial Capital Lupugana, the Magic Crystal Cannon, had supposedly been forsaken.

Zikr, having been told of the plan by Abel, had been prepared to sacrifice himself. Thanks to his maneuvering, some of his forces—the People of Shudraq, had escaped the Magic Crystal Cannon's line of fire, a minor deviation when compared to the damage that was supposed to have been dealt to the third bastion.

In any case, at this point in time, the expectation was that the forces at the third bastion would have been lost.

Once they had not been lost, remaining in the field, Abel's initial calculations, which had been based on the premise that the rebels would suffer a painful defeat, had been thwarted. However, there should be nothing wrong with those forces surviving. Immediately correcting the miscalculation, Abel adjusted the original strategy to the current situation.

As a result—

Zikr: "—That is High Countess Serena Dracroy's Flying Dragon Squadron."

Amidst the battle with the stone golems, the sword-wielding Zikr whispered this while on his beloved horse, Leidy.

His round eyes turned towards the azure sky, half-deprived of its color to tonalities of white and red—flying above the various battlefields, winged brethren clashed, turning their fangs onto each other.

On one side was a flock of natural-born flying dragons rampaging as per the orders of the Flying Dragon General, Madelyn Eschart, their untamed ferocity unleashed.

Pitted against them was a squadron of flying dragons carrying their partners, the flying dragon riders, on their winged backs, their blades of ferocity in their trusty sheaths.

The wild, unmanned flying dragons clearly outnumbered the flying dragon riders, but anyone would agree that the latter were far more skillful in aerial combat.

While the wild flying dragons were overflowing with ferocity, swinging their claws and fangs with violence, the skills of the flying dragon riders were far more splendid and refined in comparison. Avoiding the fangs with dexterous moves that completely disregarded their airborne state, the flying dragon riders employed their weapons to pierce the wings of the wild flying dragons, felling them one after another.

Zikr: “What a staggering difference…”

Only Zikr, who was acquainted with the flying dragon riders’ General as a General Second-Class of the Empire, could tell which of them was hopelessly outclassed. The wild flock of flying dragons being led by Madelyn.

Nonetheless, the violence of numbers was difficult to handle, and the fact that the fortified city had been completely overwhelmed by their sheer numbers was a deep thorn in his heart. This perception was about to be overturned once again.

For better or worse, he was about to witness the true strength of Flying Dragon Taming, a tradition of the Empire, with his own eyes.

Zikr: “I must push onward, to inform His Excellency about the success of his plan.”

As Abel played his card, the Flying Dragon Squadron of High Countess Dracroy, the air supremacy of the flying dragon flock was diminished, allowing Zikr to ascertain his surroundings.

Although he had charged at the front for the sake of the troop morale, Zikr was by no means competent as a fighter during live combat. He would instead order timely formation instructions and advance further into the heart of the enemy lines.

He would advance further towards General First-Class Moguro Hagane, who had assimilated with the castle wall, a threat which had all but abated thus far.

Zikr: “I pray Miss Beatrice is safe…”

And so, as Zikr raised his sword, a corner of his mind was occupied with the girl with pale-colored hair wearing a gorgeous dress—the all-but-certain savior of his life, Beatrice.

The moment the Magic Crystal Cannon had been unleashed, as Zikr was prepared to face death, he saw the figure of a girl throwing herself in front of the incoming light to repel it somehow.

Beatrice was small to begin with, but high up in the sky she appeared to be the size of a pebble. Still, Zikr was convinced that that had indubitably been Beatrice.

To never mistake a woman he had once beheld with his eyes, that was Zikr’s special skill.

Therefore, Zikr was able to say with definite certainty that the one who had been able to deal with the Magic Crystal Cannon’s shot had been Beatrice.

The problem was, that he too was certain that no one could accomplish such a feat without a cost.

Zikr: “Please, be unharmed—!!”

He would wholeheartedly raise his voice for Beatrice to be awarded with the greatest medal of honor for rewriting this predicament, but above anything else, he wished for her to be safe and secure.

But Zikr, who had avoided certain death in the middle of the battle, had a role to play as a General.

So all Zikr could do was pray.

—That the entirety of his remaining fortune may fall to that girl.

Meanwhile, much like Zikr, who was praying for the safety of the one who had just contributed so much on the front line, Taritta had witnessed the moment the Magic Crystal Cannon had unnaturally vanished, and just who had accomplished it.

Taritta: "I was told to back off, but luckily I had a clear view of the battlefield…"

The rebels had been hit hard, but had managed to get back on their feet. Zikr, who had been about to launch an assault with them, had ordered the People of Shudraq to provide cover from the rear.

The decision to not include the Shudraq in the general strike, to which Mizelda had obviously raised a complaint, had been accepted by Taritta, since Zikr of all people would have thought this order through.

As for that, however, there was no way—

???: "There's no way that only we are unable to help in any way. We Shudraq are being looked down upon."

Taritta: "Sister…"

Looking back on what had happened, Mizelda had every right to voice her anger.

The Crystal Palace in the Imperial Capital was originally the castle where Abel lived. It was hard to believe that Abel did not know about the Magic Crystal Cannon, and Zikr's unnatural instructions were also difficult to take in.

Perhaps it had been Zikr's own judgement to have the Shudraqians stand down.

Zikr had been ready to become a sacrificial pawn, and the

Shudraqians had been prevented from following suit—Mizelda had stated they were being looked down upon, but that probably was not entirely true.

It had been Zikr's decision, born of compassion.

However—

Taritta: "—I too, feel the same way as you, Sister. I'm not happy with Zikr's concern."

Taritta came to the same conclusion as the belligerent Mizelda.

Known as the Womanizer, Zikr knew how to treat women with more than just a certain amount of respect, and neither Taritta nor anyone else had any right to say anything about how he should behave.

However, neither Taritta nor anyone else from the People of Shudraq had any obligation to let anyone dictate their ways.

So, Taritta gripped her bow with force, then declaring,

Taritta: "Let's take that complaint directly to Zikr."

Mizelda: "Hm, a good response. At this rate, Zikr and Jamal will take all the good stuff from us. —You hear that, brethren!!"

Mizelda, dexterously thrusting her prosthetic leg into the earth and raising a large machete, called out to her compatriots.

All of the arrayed Shudraq responded to Mizelda's words and Taritta's readiness with their eyes, faces, and voices, as if they were of the same mind.

Then, with great enthusiasm, they headed towards the front line of the third bastion protected by Moguro Hagane. Just as the Shudraq's group was about to march on—

???: "—Seems like there's quite the motivated group here."

Hearing a cold, dry voice, Taritta and Mizelda turned around.

Taritta instantly grabbed an arrow from her quiver, nocking her bow, and lowered herself to a ready stance. The appearance of the other party had been so abrupt that it made the People of Shudraq raise their vigilance.

However, the caution of Taritta and the others quickly melted at the sight of the other person's appearance.

Slowly stepping on the grass, approaching from the rear of the People of Shudraq's party, was a girl with pink-colored hair swaying in the wind—and above all else, a girl with a familiar face.

—No, that was not accurate either, the reason being that the girl before them was a person different from the one bearing the face that Taritta and the others knew.

???: "—? For some reason, you people are staring at me with complete wonder. Is it because I appeared out of thin air? In that case, the answer to that mystery is, I jumped off of a flying dragon."

Taritta: "N-no. That's not what we're surprised about."

???: "If so, then out with it."

Mizelda: "—Your face looks exactly like that of a girl we know."

The pink-haired girl tilted her head at the Shudraq's gaze. Once Mizelda answered the girl's question, she took a light glance at the girl's light-crimson eyes.

Then, with a short breath the girl let out an "Is that so",

???: "Did you get along well with that girl bearing the same face as I?"

Mizelda: "At least, we were rather fond of her."

With a stern nod, Mizelda answered the question of the girl with light-crimson eyes.

It was perhaps a statement made on behalf of all of them, but Taritta had no objection to it. And all of Shudraqians had an inkling of the identity of the girl in front of them.

Natsuki Subaru had once mentioned it. —He had stated that the girl had a twin sister.

The twin sister donning a face identical to that of the girl Taritta and her group were acquainted muttered an “Is that so” once more, and then,

???: “In that case, Ram is sure she and you guys will get along just fine.”

While stating that, the girl—Ram stepped forward as if the way had been cleared for her, standing before Taritta and Mizelda like it was a matter of course.

As she gazed into those light-crimson eyes, Taritta nodded.

Taritta: “Yes, I hope so. What’s the situation?”

Ram: “Ram has gotten the gist of it. I assume that there aren’t any cowardly women here right now, am I correct?”

Looking around at the faces of the Shudraq, Ram quietly spoke.

She was able to see through the reason why the People of Shudraq were positioning themselves so far away from the battle for the third bastion occurring right in front of them.

After seeing through it, and acknowledging the thoughtfulness of the matter, she spoke,

Ram: “Men say things like “I’m worried about yooou~” and “You’d better stay baaack~”, but Ram would rather prove them wrong. —And tell them to mind their own business.”

Taritta: “I agree.”

Stating that, standing beside Ram, who was holding a wand, Taritta repeatedly nodded silently.

Compassion, care, and concern on the battlefield were not welcomed by the Shudraq. Rather, these ways they had once discarded had to be taught to them.

With Ram feeling a certain realization, she faced forward with Taritta following suit. Then Mizelda lined up across from Ram, bearing a wild smile on her face.

And—

Taritta: “I’ve never met you before, but I’m convinced. —You, just like Rem, are a warrior.”

3

With a thud, there came a shock that resonated to his very core, as if his internal organs had taken a hit from a heavy weight.

Those out-of-the-ordinary sensations continued once, twice, thrice, four times, while the strain seemingly increased.

As the feeling of shackles around his hands and feet impeded his movements, one after another, he gave in to his violent urges to shake them off and step over them.

However—

???: “Your approach’s too straightforward. Kafma might let’cha get away with this, but I ain’t gonna head into a fight with an opponent all haphazardly from the outset.”

???: “Kah.”

With five fingers of his outstretched, the old man’s face sank into the ground and disappeared, leaving behind his ridicule.

Immediately after looking him in the eye, he recalled the signs happening behind himself, and launched a backhand, splendidly so. From the tremendous response he felt, his opponent’s spine had been shattered, but the rebound he had sensed told him that he had hit something that was not the old man.

Looking at it, it appeared to be one of the corpses on the battlefield, which the old man had flung out from the sunken ground. By the time he realized that he had been successfully duped, it was already too late.

???: “Lookie here, you’re gettin’ caught again.”

The body flung over the backhand, and his shoulder was struck from behind. In other words, the Vicious Old Man—Olbart had not moved from the ground he had dived into, but simply leapt to another location.

The small old man, having only casually touched his shoulder, escaped backwards while showing off his fine set of teeth.

He had merely touched him. He had neither struck nor slashed him. Was he just playing around? Or was he insulting him? —No, Olbart never did things without meaning. There was always a meaning, a meaning, a meaning—.

???: "—Huuh?!"

The moment his thoughts turned red-hot, an even greater heat arose on his right shoulder, where he had been touched.

Taking a glance, Olbart's handprint stood out, having been stamped in red upon his shoulder. From the handprint blood seeped and smoke was emitted, as it attempted to burn skin, flesh, and bone.

Immediately after determining it to be poison, there was no hesitation.

Garfiel opened his mouth wide to bite off the shoulder on which the red handprint had been imprinted, tearing off the poison eating away at him. The taste of his own poisoned flesh and blood was terrible, as the bones his fangs grazed brought him unbearable pain.

However, the pain was only momentary. The deep gouge that was the shoulder wound emitted steam originating from blood, as the wound was restored by a tremendous surge of flesh—.

Olbart: "That might be the best move, but ya sure are a reckless'un."

Garfiel, breathing heavily, was then struck square on the nose by a kick from Olbart.

His head snapped back from the astonishingly powerful kick of the puny-looking old man, his nose was broken, and Garfiel was blown off his feet. With that, he tumbled and flipped across the rough ground, then coming to lie with his whole body stretched out, spread-eagled.

Were it not for Garfiel's sturdy neck, the kick would have detached his head and sent it flying.

However, his head and torso had remained connected. Slowly lifting his hand, he placed it on his broken nose, and with one breath, he put it back in place. A harsh sound echoed, and the flow of his nosebleed ameliorated.

Olbart: "…Geez, bein' hard ta kill's a weapon in its own right. Not in the sentimental sense, but in the physical sense. You're too much trouble, y'know?"

Looking at the painful sight, Olbart sighed in exasperation.

Just how many times had this Vicious Old Man, who was waving his left hand in the air, attacked Garfiel with such relentlessness?

At the very least, the Vicious Old Man could not count them with the fingers on his only remaining arm.

Garfiel: "—Shut the fuck up, old man. This ain't over!"

With blood-colored mist emanating from his shoulder with intensity, Garfiel slowly rose to his feet.

Bearing countless scars on his bare upper body, with the aftermath of his fierce battle with Kafma Irulux still fresh in his mind, he clashed with one of the strongest in the Empire, yet his fighting spirit still remained unwavering.

Even by the standards of the Empire, many soldiers would recognize his bravery as impressive and admirable, but unfortunately, he was facing a monstruous old man, a person who cared not for the values of a warrior in the slightest.

Shrugging, Olbart looked at him with an expression devoid of any admiration whatsoever.

Olbart: "I can't hassle myself too much with'cha alone, can I? For some reason, the walls I've been slippin' thro've got more of a weird smell ta them. There are some troublesome people out there, so things might get problematic if I don't head back, y'know?"

Garfiel: "Some troublesome people…?"

Olbart: "Ya can probably hear 'em if ya prick up yer ears. Don't tell me ya can't hear better than an old geezer like me?"

As Olbart cupped his hand to his ear, Garfiel realized it himself as he narrowed his vision. Vexing as it was, once he did take a careful listen, he understood what Olbart was talking about.

Indeed, he was able to feel the sound of many, many extraordinarily powerful footsteps were shaking the earth, sensing the very atmosphere of this battlefield in his eardrums and on the soles of his feet as well.

Olbart: "Nah, ya can't be for real. How brave do ya gotta be ta leave yerself defenseless in front of me?"

A moment later, explosives thrown by Olbart during this gap in attention exploded to the left and to the right of Garfiel's head.

A thunderous boom and red light spread alongside searing heat, exhibiting power that would easily reduce a human being to dust, and Garfiel's figure disappeared in the resulting blast of flame.

Olbart: "Well, that's a tad—"

And, right after Olbart focused his eyes into the flames raging on.

Garfiel: "GAHHHHHHHH!!"

The moment Garfiel had been swallowed by the explosion, he had rushed towards Olbart shouting, using the flames as a distraction.

He had supposed that Olbart would make a move were he to show an opening. He did not know what exactly he had been plotting, but he gambled successfully.

Garfiel's arms closed in on Olbart, who had been blinded by his own attack, and—

Olbart: “So green ya are, young fella.”

His outstretched arms were crushed, and opening his eyes in surprise, Garfiel took an upwards punt to the jaw. As his face rose in height, Olbart leaped, stamping a foot of his on Garfiel’s face.

On one leg, Olbart stood on Garfiel’s face on one leg as the latter looked upwards, and in that position, the evil old man looked off into the distance, as if to tease the boy.

Olbart: “The troops Kafma pulled back’ll be enough ta defend this place… No one’s gonna get outta here without’cha.”

With this deliberate statement, Olbart declared his intent to no longer continue this battle.

With bloodshot eyes, Garfiel raised his arms despite his elbows being broken, attempting to crush Olbart’s miniscule frame atop his face. But Olbart jumped just in time to avoid both arms; during his flip, the right sleeve of the monstruous elder fluttered in the wind.

Olbart: “I do suppose you’ll die if yer head’s blown off, won’t’cha?”

Following this cold death sentence, Garfiel felt the sensation of a drawn blade running down his spine, so he put all his strength into his neck muscles, and attempted to leap away from his spot—

???: “—The chest.”

The next moment, guided by the voice he heard, he unconsciously brought his fists together in front of his chest.

“Ugh”, a hoarse voice faintly groaned, followed by a series of violent noises ringing out, noises of steel being shattered.

What his fists had shattered, having been knocked against each other in front of his chest, was a blade that had been thrust—in front of Garfiel, was Olbart, having lunged as to pierce his opponent’s heart with a concealed blade that took the place of the right arm he had lost.

With the tip of the blade shallowly buried in his chest, Garfiel's body stepped towards the back.

Had he been even slightly slower to react, Garfiel's heart would have been carved open, undoubtedly taking his life. No matter how powerful his regenerative ability was, even he could not replace a missing heart.

Had he disobeyed that advice, and stayed vigilant about his neck, he would have perished.

Even though he knew that—

Garfiel: "…Fuck off."

???: "Oh, that rudeness is so disheaaartening~ to hear. I thought I'd at least get to hear some words of thanks."

As Garfiel clicked his tongue, his back was being supported by someone standing behind him.

Even more, once his body weight had pressed on the one to his back, he could just feel a hint of a wry smile coming from the one supporting him. Feeling even more annoyed from this, Garfiel's nose wrinkled up.

In general, Garfiel was not good at hating people, but amongst the types of people he hated was the one in front of him, Olbart. However, the person he unmistakably despised the most was standing right behind him.

Being caught in between two hated people, this was the worst possible situation for Garfiel.

Garfiel: "After my amazin' self crushes that old man, you're next…"

???: "Your habit of taking things out on me finally reaches its peak, huh? In a way, isn't me being the one who has come here a stroke of luck? You wouldn't want Ram to see you in this state, would you?"

Garfiel: "Gah…!"

Garfiel's throat growled frailly as a nerve was struck.

The one behind Garfiel chuckled at the latter's reaction. Olbart, whose concealed blade had been shattered, watched this back and forth from a short distance away, speaking,

Olbart: "I did say those who pass that line on the ground over there are pretty much gonna die, aight?"

???: "Pardon me, old man. I didn't quite hear anything about that. After all, I just came down from the sky."

Olbart: "From the sky, ya say?"

Glancing skyward, Olbart closed one eye.

Even his seemingly lethargic appearance was just part of the trickery employed by this old man to lead his opponents around by the nose. Garfiel exhaled as he restrained himself from inadvertently leaping forward.

He pulled the tip of the blade out of his chest, filling in the wound as he did so, and,

Garfiel: "If you're here…"

???: "Ram is on a different battlefield. I told her to back off, but she didn't listen."

Garfiel: "…To no one's surprise. And ya went outta yer way to come here."

???: "Of course, I also intend to be somewhat useful. I wonder if I should I dub you fortunate, though."

As he said this, the duo set their gaze upon the troublesome Vicious Old Man, and the man no longer stood behind Garfiel, but next to him. Not wearing his usual makeup, instead exposing his unfamiliar real face, the man—Roswaal L. Mathers, closed his one blue eye as to hide his identity.

Roswaal: "—After all, I've fought to the death with shinobi, in the past.”

With a deeply vicious smile, one that rivalled his enemy’s, he stated thus.

4

—The moment the light was released, its power imbued with will, Emilia had a vision of her own Death.

Her competitive spirit was strong, she never lost hope under any circumstances.

For Emilia, who had strengthened her guts with that attitude, it had been a devastating thing.

Emilia: “—Ah.”

In her head, a small Emilia was screaming that she needed to move immediately.

However, her body would not respond with which way she should move, right or left. Even though she would usually move without thinking, she was unable to do so.

The reason for that was that her heart, rather than her head, had immediately sensed that there was no place to escape, be it right or left, be it forward or backward.

Emilia: “Icicle Line.”

So, instead of running away, Emilia had chosen to guard against it —No, to deflect it.

She created a thick wall of ice in front of herself, which would make the light slide over its slanted surface. Whether she would indeed be able to pull it off or not, she would do it with the conviction that she had to do it.

When the Dragon’s breath had been loosened from Guaral’s skies, Emilia had immediately chosen the same manner of defense. However, Priscilla had been present at the time, and she had managed to cut through and disperse the light that Emilia had weakened, even if a little, with the red treasured sword in her possession.

This time, Priscilla was not there. Emilia was alone.

She did not know if she would be able to do the same thing. However, she had to accomplish the same thing.

Emilia: “Me, and the people behind me—”

At a glance, Emilia knew that there was no chance that the power of the light that had been released would blow away her and her alone.

Earlier, a light of a similar kind had been fired in the distance, but it only resembled this one. This light would assuredly sweep the battlefield whole, and destroy everything.

So—

Emilia: “—Do your best, me.”

She braced her legs, created a wall of ice in front of her body, and tightly squeezed the sword of frost in her hand.

She had created the ice sword because Priscilla had used her treasured sword to cut through the breath. This ice sword did not hold power similar to the power the treasured sword held, but she had created it to give her good luck.

That, and Emilia’s bracing, where she put forth her all, was—

Mezoreia: “Friggin’ disappear, human—”

The breath was released, and white light poured down, closing in on Emilia.

The fact that the voice had come forth from Mezoreia’s throat, the origin of the anger dwelling in its eyes, in that moment, she forgot all of it. She forgot, and braced herself.

And then, the moment when that breath obliterated the wall of ice, swallowing even Emilia—

Emilia: "—Eh?"

After trying to align her ice sword with the light, Emilia's eyes widened in surprise.

The light that had been emitted would have reached Emilia—but instead, it had just slightly veered off to the side. Even so, an enormous shockwave was produced, almost tearing off Emilia's silver hair and clothes.

While bracing herself and enduring it, Emilia looked at Mezoreia to see what had happened.

Mezoreia had released a breath, but its head was turned upwards and to the side.

It was not that it had changed its mind right before it happened. The orientation of its neck had been forcibly changed. —Due to an impact from a deadly weapon that had struck it in the face from the side, the Flying Winged Blade.

Emilia: "That's got to be what I threw over there…"

It was Madelyn's weapon of choice, the Flying Winged Blade, which Emilia had accidentally hurled far away when trying to cast it right back at the former.

It had slammed into Mezoreia's face. "No way", Emilia said, her eyes widening.

Emilia: "Could it be that it now came back after I threw it?"

???: "Hahahahaha! That's a really dreamy and wonderful thing to imagine! But, unfortunately, no! It was stuck over yonder, so I just kicked it off!"

Emilia: "Kyaa?!"

Having imagined a miraculous coincidence, Emilia was greatly surprised by the voice of a smooth-talking companion.

Once Emilia turned around flustered, she came to see the owner of the voice crouching down right beside her, staring fixedly at the ice sword in her hand.

???: “This is wonderful, quite the beautiful craftsmanship. I’ve been thinking that a legendary sword is what’s appropriate for me to carry around, but were I to carry things just for looks, I’d want to put this on my list of candidates.”

Emilia: “Uhhh, thanks?”

???: “No, no, if anyone should be saying thank you, it should be me.”

The person to whom that voice belonged—was a boy with blue hair tied back, smiling cheerfully at Emilia, who had not expected to be praised in such a situation; hence, she thanked him out of reflex.

He straightened his bent knees and stood up, then,

Blue-Haired Boy: “The blue sky, split and shared by lights white and red! I was wondering which way to go, but once I came rushing in, I found a big Dragon and a beautiful woman waiting for me! As expected of me! Don’t you think my pull is too strong?!”

Emilia: “Uhh?”

Blue-Haired Boy: “Don’t you think it’s too strong?!”

After being asked once more with those sparkling eyes, Emilia felt compelled to answer, replying “I think it’s reaaally strong”.

At Emilia’s response, the boy’s smile deepened into a satisfied smirk, and,

Blue-Haired Boy: “Right!”

Saying that, he took a step forward from beside Emilia, into the gaze of the Cloud Dragon.

Emilia hesitated in saying “That’s dangerous” in an attempt to stop him. There was a sense of pressure. But it was not caused by the gigantic Dragon, but by the small back in front of her.

Because of what that out-of-place, cheerful boy had caused—

Blue-Haired Boy: “The grand stage has come around! Everyone, come and witness! Don’t blink, don’t miss out on the big moment of the Blue Lightning, of Cecilus Segmunt, or you’ll regret it for the rest of your life!”

Not taking even a single step back in the face of the transcendent Dragon, the boy—Cecilus Segmunt, thus loudly and majestically proclaimed.

Chapter 101:
Love is a Flame

1

—Among the battlefields that painted the struggle for the Imperial Capital, two places had transformed into scenes that stood out in particular.

One of those places was the second bastion, where the Cloud Dragon that had arrived from beyond the skies majestically spread its wings, the scene having been dyed white in order to prevent damage from spreading to the surroundings.

The other place was the first bastion, where the scorching hot sky had been colored red—at the center of it all was the power of a young woman, having made the environment so harsh that the survival of any living organism present was in peril.

???: "…"

Flickering much like a shimmer of hot air, Arakiya cast her bodies onto the vermilion heavens.

Making an ample display of her capability as a Spirit Eater, Arakiya had transformed the world; it was already a hellscape that ate away at the lives of those who lacked power that transcended the realm of rationality.

Arakiya: "I, will definitely—"

—Take back the Princess.

That was the primary reason, the single reason that Arakiya had taken to the battlefield like this.

It had not been out of loyalty or patriotism as a General First-Class of the Empire, it had not been for pride or dignity in being one of the strongest existences that were the Nine Divine Generals, it had not been out of anger for her kind, it had not been for any malicious thoughts such as own ambitions whatsoever.

The other Divine Generals each possessed their own motivations and reasons for fighting.

She possessed not any such noble basis on which to support such strength, nevertheless, serving as the strongest force on the side of the Imperial Capital, Arakiya, the Second, reigned supreme over the battlefield.

However, considering her origin—considering the fact that she was a Spirit Eater, that was a matter of course.

Having strength being demanded from them, and employing it not for themselves but for the sake of others, was the way of being of the Spirit Eaters, and Arakiya was no exception to that.

In the first place, Spirit Eaters were extraordinary creatures that could only have such a nature.

Spirits were beings present everywhere throughout the lands far and wide, in addition to the skies.

By eating those Spirits, taking in their power, the Spirit Eaters would become one with them—it was an outlandish action equivalent to taking nature itself into one's own body, so inevitably, there would be a wide variety of effects, both large and small.

If one took in a Fire Spirit, their body temperature would rise; if one took in a Wind Spirit, there was the danger that the inside of their bodies would be torn apart. If one took in a Water Spirit, it could put the circulation of one's blood at risk; if one took in an Earth Spirit, it was possible that they would become one with the earth, and the possibility of even losing their human form existed.

In fact, because of those side effects, many aspiring Spirit Eaters had ceased to be human.

Created in ancient times to oppose a lone Witch who charmed all, whom even the wordless Great Spirit obeyed, they were beings devised for the purpose of fighting, much like the Oni Clan that could sense Miasma.

After the death of that Witch, the Spirit Eaters of the present day had lost their original purpose, but zeroing in on that power and utility, a faction within the Vollachian Empire sought to restore them.

Arakiya too, was nothing more than a single person recognized for her rare abilities within that endeavor.

Her rare talents were the two foundations required for a Spirit Eater—That was to say, she possessed a body that could withstand taking in a Spirit, and a soul that could remain human even after subsuming a Spirit.

In the first place, the method by which the Spirit Eaters extracted power from Spirits was an unconventional technique, and the method of bypassing various conditions to extract nothing but their power was accompanied by a great many risks. That was the big difference between them and the Spiritual Arts Users who borrowed the power of Spirits, and also the Acolyte Knights from the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko who gained their power through a system of vassalage.

For the latter two, effort was required to establish a relationship with the target Spirit, but if a Contract had been established, there was no danger in using their power as long as the relationship with the Spirit did not break down.

On the other hand, even just to maintain their power, Spirit Eaters needed to constantly replenish themselves with new Spirits, and they would be constantly terrified by the possibility of losing their physical and mental selves with each replenishment.

If their mind and body succumbed to the Spirit even once, their body would permanently lose its original form, and their mind would assimilate with the Spirit, dragged into a dimension that was not that of humans.

On the other hand, an overly strong ego would greatly hinder one’s affinity with Spirits, making it impossible to achieve the full potential of a Spirit Eater in the first place.

Therefore, in order to be in harmony with the power of the Spirit they had taken in, a Spirit Eater would be required to have an almost diluted sense of self and ego. However, as mentioned above, an ego that was too weak would invite an easy assimilation with the captured Spirit, and there was a high chance that they would lose their humanity.

To prevent that from happening, Spirit Eaters were bestowed with a pillar—that was to say, a "core", one which took the place of their weak ego and sense of self and kept them from losing sight of themselves.

The function of imprinting, akin to when a newly-hatched bird would think of the first one it gazed upon as its parent bird, was deeply rooted into the instincts of the Spirit Eaters, forming their foundation, just like a pillar.

The tremendous power of a Spirit Eater would be wielded for the sake of that pillar, and the naïve mind of a Spirit Eater would then be occupied by that pillar.

Doubtlessly, a Spirit Eater's precise reason for existence was their pillar.

—Devoid of any ambition for betrayal, a Spirit Eater would continue to selflessly pledge service to their pillar.

After many sacrifices, so numerous as to make one feel depressed if they were counted, the Spirit Eaters of ancient times had been resurrected in the present day. Even the people of the Empire could not possibly justify this success considering the number of lives that had been paid.

Therefore, the girl who had become the sole instance of completion, as an existence with invaluable abilities, was presented to the Emperor of the time, Drizen Vollachia, and Drizen had bestowed her as a foster sister to one of the daughters that had inherited his own blood.

It was unknown what impression the Emperor Drizen Vollachia had harbored for the girl that had been presented to him, or for what reason he had bestowed her to his own daughter.

If there was one thing that could be said, it was that the girl functioned exactly as the faction that had planned to revive the power of the Spirit Eaters had desired, so Drizen had decided on the pillar for the girl who was presented to him.

And above all else—

—As a Spirit Eater, Arakiya had been perfected as an existence that was more obstreperously powerful than any of her predecessors who had once been called upon to fight against the Witch.

2

After the world had begun to overheat in a complete mockery of common sense, the mere act of breathing would sear one's lungs, the blood vessels running through one's body would swell due to the heat, even the teardrops with which parched eyes were moistened would evaporate.

In that environment where life was being consumed moment by moment, any half-hearted approach would not permit someone to do as much as to draw near enough to make them able to ascertain the color of Arakiya's eyes. No matter their nature, they would be left behind, thirsting, withering away and dying, unable to keep up with the world transfigured.

For that reason, with the exception of Arakiya, the one at the center of this alteration of the world, only two people stood on that vast land overlooked by a red sky, Yorna and Priscilla.

Even Yorna and Priscilla were unable to escape the feeling that their lives were being slowly eaten away.

Yorna: "—Hk."

With a noise ringing out a fourth hairpin broke apart, and Yorna's cheeks stiffened at the sense of loss.

Due to the effect of the Soul Marriage Technique, the many offerings made to Yorna would be granted the ability to stand in for her life. Thanks to this, Yorna had not suffered physical injuries, and her movements were unhindered, even when fighting the literal monster that was Arakiya.

However—

Yorna: “If only I could get rid of this pain in my chest.”

Standing in for Yorna’s life was, in and of itself, proof of the love that had been put into these gifts.

The hairpins were by no means outstandingly designed, nor were they expensive. They were merely various things that had been offered by the residents of the city under Yorna’s protection, using their own horns, scales, and body parts.

There was only love, respect, and trust. Therefore, no price could be put on them.

Priscilla: “The hairpin shattered? Just like the other hair ornament a moment ago, they are slowly being whittled away, Dear Mother.”

Then, as the shattered pieces of the plain ornament trickled through Yorna’s fingers, Priscilla landed next to her with the train of her red dress fluttering.

Wielding the dizzyingly radiant Yang Sword, Priscilla’s beautiful profile revealed her fearless expression. —At her remark, Yorna slightly narrowed her eyes, and spoke,

Yorna: “Needless to say, to treat the gifts of my beloved children as a mere number of substitutes for my life is utterly loathsome.”

Priscilla: “What an adorable thing for someone extending their life by transferring it for nigh an eternity to say, Dear Mother. Are you hesitant to call me, who has never presented a single gift to you, your beloved child?”

Yorna: “…”

Priscilla: “Incapable of playing along, are we? —Then I shall speak pragmatically, just as you wish.”

Shrugging her exposed, pale shoulders, Priscilla turned her gaze forwards. To this attitude and tone Yorna retorted “Pragmatically, you say?”.

In response to this, Priscilla slightly raised her chin.

Priscilla: “How much longer can we fight with that thing, I wonder?”

Priscilla turned her crimson eyes up towards the sky. —Immediately following, a torrent of water spears rained down upon Priscilla and Yorna.

Yorna: “—Hk.”

Gritting her teeth, Yorna braced herself for the fierce downpour of rods of water by lying face-down.

While the beams of water had each been compressed to be as thick as a single finger, it would be better if the power employed to achieve were not belittled as the strength of a single finger.

The densely compressed torrent, piercing through everything standing in its path, felling any potential threats without mercy, was capable of tearing someone limb-from-limb in a single fatal blow.

To wield such a delicately difficult technique that required an enormous amount of water to crudely split the ground open so effortlessly; except for the inherent danger, none of it seemed consistent.

Yorna: “—Hk, Priscilla!”

Laying face-down and pouring all her efforts into evading the downpour of water beams, Yorna called out the name of Priscilla, who was utilizing the Yang Sword to deflect the torrent of water.

As she brandished this radiant treasured sword, Priscilla successively cut down streams of water, rendering them completely ineffective, even though double the number of water spears had been aimed at her in comparison to Yorna.

Between Yorna and Priscilla, it was easy to guess which one Arakiya attached more importance to based off the sheer volume of water.

Yorna: "…"

The dance-like swordsmanship of Priscilla whirling the crimson blade through the air was a mesmerizing sight of gracefulness.

However, one could hardly say that she had fully repelled Arakiya's assault.

Just like how she had alluded to the remaining ornaments on Yorna's body a moment ago, Priscilla had also had much of the jewelry adorning her beauty shattered over the course of the battle.

It was not only Yorna who had a limited time remaining.

Priscilla: "Even if you blow off my limbs, was it? —What a macabre hope to be entranced in."

As Priscilla received a piercing attack to her ample bosom, a jewel of her necklace exploded.

Priscilla's crimson eyes did not bat at the fate of the jewel standing in for her life, but instead they were fixated solely on Arakiya's figure in the sky.

However, seeing Priscilla's profile looking at Arakiya, Yorna could not believe her eyes. For a moment, it was hard to believe what flickered across those crimson eyes.

It was—

Yorna: "Do you regret it, Priscilla, the way Arakiya is?"

Priscilla: "Nonsense. —Everything in this world is made for my convenience."

Snorting in response to Yorna's question, Priscilla leaned forward to run.

The way she had left her mother behind to rush to her estranged foster sibling made it seem like she was hiding her feelings for both of them, in order not to look into their eyes.

Yorna: "I'm full of regrets as well."

Yorna did not know what kind of encounters and partings there had been between Priscilla and Arakiya.

Albeit she had been in a position to know, the opportunity to learn about it had been snatched away alongside her life. In her previous incarnation, Yorna had lost her life while delivering Priscilla, a difficult childbirth it had been.

After that, the Imperial Selection Ceremony had taken place, and the daughter of Vollachia's Imperial Family—Prisca Benedict, had also been defeated in battle, losing her life.

That was supposedly the entirety of the life belonging to the daughter Yorna's previous incarnation was aware of, Sandra Benedict.

And yet—

Yorna: "…"

For some reason, time had passed, and circumstances had unfolded in such an implausible way, and thus Yorna had been able to reunite with Priscilla.

They had met each other once more not as Sandra and Prisca, but as Yorna and Priscilla, and through a miracle that should never have been possible originally, mother and child were going through this red hell together.

—Yes, they would go together.

Arakiya: "Princess."

Muttering this word briefly, Arakiya's entire body literally overflowed with power.

Whether it was fire or water, wind or earth, light or shadow, the being of infinite transformations that used the entire composition of the world, poured all of her energy towards Priscilla coming in hot.

Priscilla charged in with a shout as if to make her stance apparent, about to take on the streams of water and flashes of lightning rushing toward her with nothing but her body and sword—

Yorna: "—Love me."

A moment later, Priscilla's Yang Sword was held aloft, and the attacks of water and lightning right before her both disappeared into thin air as they were about to clash. —No, they had not vanished as if smoke.

Undoubtedly, they had been cut away by a slash of the Yang Sword.

However, the sword flash drawn by the treasured sword of crimson was even more refined and blindingly fast than before.

Priscilla: "This is…"

With a slight, surprised exhalation in her voice, Priscilla's well-shaped brow furrowed.

Winds of reddish flame approached her from all directions. But, Priscilla did not hesitate to slash away the scorching winds with a strike, easily cleaving them away.

As if to reaffirm it, Priscilla then adjusted her grip on the treasured sword, and came to gently touch her own face. Her fingertips gently caressed her eyes, but she likely did not sense anything unusual.

Yorna already knew. That it was something entirely different from a tangible effect accompanying the flame.

—It was the bond Yorna shared with her beloved child, taking form as the flame that burned in their eyes.

Priscilla: "…"

Priscilla stood straight, with the treasured sword of crimson in hand, and her left eye ablaze.

This was the proof of Yorna's protection, which had been bestowed to the inhabitants of the Demon City of Chaosflame. By conferring the Soul Marriage Technique upon them, a portion of Yorna's power could be shared with the target she sought to protect.

Originally, it was a secret technique Yorna would bestow as to protect those children of hers that lacked the strength and skills needed to fight by themselves, as they shared a bond no warrior could be endowed with.

But an exception to that rule arose here and now.

A being equipped with the power and technique to fight, which held a treasured sword no one outside the Imperial Family of Vollachia was allowed to wield, had fulfilled the requirements of a beloved child Yorna wished to protect, regardless of her power.

Yorna: "Priscilla—"

Priscilla: "At last, you are willing to recognize mineself as your own child, Dear Mother."

Yorna: "How impudent. —I won't be a foolish mother who just looks as you walk off into the distance. If you're going, then I'll be going to the same hellscape as well."

She did not intend to let Priscilla go any further by herself.

Priscilla sniffed at Yorna's answer and permitted her resolve as she stood beside her. As proof of that, Yorna felt something strange on her face causing her to gently move her hand there.

The cause of that discomfort was in her eye—Most likely, there was a flame harbored there, the same as Priscilla.

The two users of the Soul Marriage Technique, which could not be performed without qualifications, fulfilled each other's conditions, and complemented each other’s souls. —A phenomenon that truly could never happen, had happened.

And then, having witnessed that,

Arakiya: “…Why?”

A faint voice escaped, and a gaze fell to the ground, as if a curse.

Staring at Yorna and Priscilla side-by-side was Arakiya, placed in the sky. She ran her hand over her face and the eyepatch covering her left eye.

Then, she tore it off as if wrenching it away, and,

Arakiya: “Why! Why, why, why, do you have, the Princess’s…!”

Laying her anger bare, Arakiya displayed the red eye bereft of all light under her eyepatch. Reflected in that eye incapable of sight was Yorna; and so, with that pair of red eyes on her, Arakiya called out.

Called out to Yorna, whose eye harboured a flame, having received the blessing of the Soul Marriage Technique from Priscilla.

And doing so was Arakiya, whose eyes harboured no flame, unable to receive any blessing from Priscilla.

Arakiya: “The Princess… is mine… Hk!”

Priscilla: “Make no mistake, Arakiya. Even supposing your wishes were to be tolerated, and even supposing I were to concede, you would still be mine, and I would never become yours.”

Arakiya: “—Hk.”

Priscilla: “And, mineself would never concede to anyone.”

At Priscilla’s decisive gaze, Arakiya gasped slightly.

However, after that stern declaration by Priscilla, a small sound of protest had interjected.

That was—

Priscilla: “Dear Mother, for what reason did you strike mineself on the head?”

Yorna: “You should not speak in such a manner. I don’t remember raising my children to be so high and mighty.”

PRISCILLA'S SERVANT

Priscilla: “Dear Mother, I do not recall being raised by you in the first place.”

Yorna: “In that case, it seems that chance has finally come around.”

Saying that, Yorna lowered the kiseru that had struck Priscilla’s head with a clunk, and slowly shook her head before looking up at Arakiya.

In her eyes, there was an invariant anger, and a slight discomposure at what had just occurred.

Staring fixedly there, Yorna put the kiseru in her mouth and inhaled the purple smoke as she stood among the hellscape.

And then, giving a somewhat cheerful smile that did not fit the situation,

Yorna: “Finally, you’ve set your eyes on me, General First-Class Arakiya. —The chance has come for me to atone for my lack of virtue in failing to discipline you, together with Priscilla, as I should have.”

Arakiya: “What do you…”

Yorna: “To put it simply—”

Yorna exhaled purple smoke as she took in the bewilderment that was carried in those words.

Wrapped in the smoke overflowing from her lips, her eye burning with her daughter’s trust, Yorna Mishigure, the mother that was once Sandra Benedict,

Yorna: “—I am not a parent who cuts corners in disciplining her children. Prepare yourselves, little girls.”

Thus, she harshly declared.

Chapter 102:
Wall of Resolve

1

—Todd Fang did not consider himself to be particularly cautious or meticulous.

The result of him single-mindedly probing things as if were “a matter of course” was to close every conceivable loophole, to cover all potential outcomes, and to assume the worst in order to reduce missteps to the extent of one’s capabilities.

Even if all of this were to be executed, the opponent could still have prepared a strategy, action, or trump card which rendered one completely helpless with no recourse.

He was aware that this was the extent of his innate abilities, a reality he had to come to terms with.

Fortunately, I’ve never encountered such beings and even if I did, I’ve been able to avoid any decisive conflict, which has allowed me to survive to this day.

However—

Todd: “—At any rate, I’ve been quite unlucky as of late.”

Looking back over the past month or two, a rather short period of time, Todd lamented to himself.

The woes had begun upon being incorporated into a group of troops deployed from the Imperial Capital to the east. Just as he had been reminiscing about his separation from his fiancée Katya, he had made the worst possible discovery.

A man and a woman had been swept down the river near their encampment—setting aside the woman, the man had set off all the bad luck that had befallen Todd thereafter.

As previously mentioned, Todd did not consider himself special, yet he could not make heads or tails of that man whatsoever. —He was ordinary, yet extraordinary.

Few words had been exchanged, and their interactions had been short-lived, but the person in question had been completely unaware of that.

Before and since then, Todd had seen several of those so-called heroic beings.

While everyone was aware of the fact that their own existence was outside the norm and that they had no choice but to walk their own unique path, that man was the only exception to the rule.

It was terrifying. So, the only thing he could think about afterwards was to kill that man at any cost whenever the opportunity arose.

However, once it had become clear that said goal was unobtainable, Todd immediately abandoned his plan to exterminate him, instead choosing to stay away from that pest. It was best not to get involved.

It had been likewise necessary to sacrifice Jamal, the umbrella that protected him from the rain, as his only desperate recourse to rescue the captive Arakiya. He had thought that by winning the favor of the more powerful and influential Arakiya, he would be able to escape from the unwanted position he had been placed in. —But his plan had backfired completely.

As to chase vengeance for Jamal, vengeance that he did not desire, Katya had ultimately been left behind in the Imperial Capital, while he had to somehow make use of the empty-headed and utterly selfless Arakiya, finding himself in the middle of a major rebellion against the Emperor raging throughout the entire Empire.

Absolutely nothing, truly nothing, was going smoothly.

It seemed like the beginning of all this misery had been brought onto him by that pest. So he was hoping that, at the very least, his calculations here would work out—.

Todd: “—My bad, my bad, and here I was going to get them all at once.”

Sneaking deep into enemy territory, he had launched a preemptive surprise attack.

Todd grumbled to himself as he looked at the remaining enemies after the first round of armed troops had been disposed of.

There were three opponents—two girls and one delicate-looking guy. Even though he had finished off the entire contingent of soldiers present from the get-go, Todd did not consider it to be the best outcome.

Rather, he accepted that the military gain had been minimal.

Originally, the reason why Todd had left his post and ventured into the enemy camp was to take out an opponent who was demonstrating extraordinary capabilities in information warfare—who would be a nuisance in this battle for the Imperial Capital.

In a large-scale battle of this magnitude, the accurate dissemination of information was a critical factor which could be the difference between life and death.

Frankly, Todd believed that this was the main reason why the rebels could keep up with the Imperial Army’s solid defenses and one-man armies, being the Nine Divine Generals, despite their only boast being strength in numbers.

Speaking in terms of a human body, the commander of a group would correlate to either the head or to the heart. The crushing of both of those would be fatal, and since this was common knowledge, they were naturally protected. However, no matter how hard the head or the heart were to work, if the vessels which allowed blood to circulate did not function, the body would not be able to last.

In that sense, the “blood vessels” were the most crucial enemies to eliminate on a battlefield, since they fulfilled the most vital role in deciding the course of the battle.

Todd: “It’s easy to just answer “There are no women or children in the battlefield”, but that would fit the residents of the Imperial Capital perfectly. Besides, wouldn’t that be a bit too convenient?”

Todd appraised his opponents, exchanging words that should not be exchanged.

The three opponents appeared to be as described above, but there was no definitive proof as to which of them was the “blood vessel” Todd was wary of.

The two young girls hardly seemed appropriate for the battlefield.

They appeared to be in their early teens, much like the Flying Dragon General Madelyn Eschart, but while she was instantly recognizable as a being on a higher level, both these girls were likely human.

However, the very fact that they had no right to be here raised suspicion that the girls were meant to be here as they were.

Todd: “If you were non-combatants who’d just been left behind on the battlefield, your current logic might’ve held. But I don’t recognize a man who serves on the battlefield as a non-combatant.”

On the other hand, the delicate-looking man openly confronting Todd was not a warrior, but he came the closest to his impression of a “blood vessel.”

In terms of powerlessness, he was not much different from the girls, but there was something off about the look in his eyes. A shrewd look, the kind that turned one’s own life into a tool with impunity, hiding behind a thin facade.

He could not let his eyes be drawn to the delicate-looking man, nor could he let his guard down against the two girls.

One of the girls had a strangely determined look in her eyes, and the other unmistakably had the readiness and posture of a warrior. Even though this was not uncommon in Vollachia, the latter had probably already taken a life or two.

If one had experience in killing, even if they were a young girl, they had overcome the wall of resolve.

In other words, he could not afford to let his guard down.

Todd: “Who knows. But my gut is telling me. You’re the root of all evil in this war. And my gut also tells me this.”

Three opponents, each of whom caused Todd to be wary in their own way.

It was also unacceptable that he was also trying to look for openings, or plotting to create one, while Todd was conversing with them—Although he still had trouble picking out who to prioritize as a target.

Todd: “—It’s better not to waste time with you guys either.”

They were all targets that must be killed, that was Todd’s irrevocable conclusion.

2

—Otto Suwen often cursed his own carelessness.

Although he had wound up in the stickiest of situations in coming to the Vollachian Empire as a result of both Natsuki Subaru and Rem disappearing, there were also many other factors to consider.

Petra had just rebuked him for was one such matter on which he needed to reflect deeply.

Using the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, he ruled over the battlefield of the siege of the Imperial Capital.

This plan, which he had declared with confidence, which had been carried out with Petra’s assistance, had changed the arrangement of the battlefield without prejudice or conceit.

The power of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, combined with Petra’s Yang Magic magnifying Otto’s hearing—kept track of the ever-changing battlefield formations and positions, providing ongoing information.

Of course, the information gathered would be a wasted effort if it could not be used accordingly, but personality aside, Abel had met Otto's expectations in terms of his abilities, utilizing it splendidly.

Too few people knew how much Otto's work contributed to this battlefield, but Otto was not concerned with his evaluation.

In any case, nothing that had occurred in the Vollachian Empire could be divulged to the outside world.

It would be worth publicizing were they in the Kingdom of Lugunica, but an evaluation of his work in the Empire would be nothing more than a useless risk. So, evaluation was of secondary importance.

Otto: "All we need is an outcome that brings back Natsuki-san and Rem-san… And, without sacrifice."

Sacrificing themselves for the sake of bringing back Subaru and Rem would be getting their priorities mixed.

Those were the minimum objectives of this journey, and simultaneously the greatest achievements. —Rather, it was not that there were more important goals, but that there were no other goals to begin with.

Therefore, he had been prepared to employ all the cards held by his hand on the battlefield, and had thus been admonished by Petra for his recklessness.

He had reflected a lot on that—and yet, it had not been enough still.

And the result of failing to compensate for his carelessness, was the Imperial Soldier with an axe in his hand standing before him.

Todd: "—My bad, my bad, and here I was going to get them all at once."

An Imperial Soldier with a bandana wrapped around his head looked at them while gripping a long-handled axe.

Otto, with Petra behind his back as to defend her, cursed his own carelessness greatly in the face of an opponent demonstrating a thoroughly ruthless and pragmatic judgment.

How the gathered information was handled had been left to Abel, the one able to utilize it best.

But the crux of information in warfare lay in how to obtain the information to handle in the first place. Most of the time, people would overlook that part and be tempted to target the main body that handled the information instead.

However, the man in front of him was different.

Todd: “It’s easy to just answer “There are no women or children in the battlefield”, but that would fit the residents of the Imperial Capital perfectly. Besides, wouldn’t that be a bit too convenient?”

The man who thus appeared before Otto and his comrades had clear intentions—to target Otto and his comrades who gathered the information, rather than the main camp where Abel utilized the gathered information.

Regardless of their status as people with little vigilance and few guards, the outcome would be the same if they were decapitated. The less information there was to handle, the less precise Abel’s command would be. There was no reason for him not to do it.

Otto himself would have done it if he were in the same position as his opponent.

That was why—

Todd: “If you were non-combatants who’d just been left behind on the battlefield, your current logic might’ve held. But I don’t recognize a man who serves on the battlefield as a non-combatant.”

He observed the man in detail, while feeling that his statement was reasonable.

There were two main questions, however; how had he shown up at this place without being detected by Otto's channel, and how had he located Otto and his team?

It was safe to assume that the two questions could probably be answered with the same reason.

That this man's peculiarities of some kind had allowed him to bypass the channel and locate the source of the transmission.

Todd: "Who knows. But my gut is telling me. You're the root of all evil in this war. And my gut also tells me this."

He had wished to find clues to this from the conversation, but the man was thorough, as per his initial analysis.

The man understood that not saying much would allow him to defend himself. Unlike the kind typical of the Empire, who used overwhelming force to subdue their opponents, the man had a cunning attitude.

These enemies, were formidable. —An opponent who assessed himself as weak was a threat.

Because of that—

Todd: "—It's better not to waste time with you guys either."

The man leapt straight at him, swinging his long-handled axe.

In response, Otto gritted his teeth whilst pouring all his energy into avoiding the first blow. He poured it in, then braced himself. —He wondered how far he could get against the man, with the minimal preparation he had.

3

—Petra Leyte regretted her lack of discipline whenever she was put through adversity.

Due to her young age, Petra was often spoiled by her peers in the Camp, but she had decided that it would be a different matter to resign herself to her position as a child and accept her own immaturity.

If this were because of a mistake she had made in her daily life at the mansion, in the course of her duties as a maid, she might not have had to take it so seriously.

However, complacency of the sort, complacency that depended on the situation, would eventually lead to a serious mistake.

There was no need to go as far as saying that she ought to be tense all the time.

However, she must, at all times, achieve what was expected of her. That was Petra's approach to thinking about things, or at least that was the immature ideal she aspired to.

That was why—

Todd: "—It's better not to waste time with you guys either."

Resisting her own trembling from head-to-toe, she looked up at the Imperial Soldier swooping in with an axe in his hand.

At the edge of her vision, which was soaked with welled-up tears, she could see the charred corpse of the messenger who had been burned by the raging flames.

If Otto had not frantically pulled her out of the way, she too would have lost her life. That fact left a crack in Petra's spirit, and at the same time—

Otto: "Petra-chan!"

As he called out her name, Petra was moved by the great faith Otto had in her.

Abandoning his attitude towards the role of a "young lady" that Petra had provisionally played, Otto's voice jolted the actual Petra and broke her free from the fear and regret petrifying her.

Thereupon—

Otto: “—Number seven!”

At Otto’s signal, Petra reflexively lifted her arm.

A moment later, Petra’s mind was filled with anxiety. She had been entrusted with this role after proclaiming that she could do it, but there was no denying that it had been a spur-of-the-moment course of action.

She had practiced the whole time. So she was aware of her own strength to fight when it came time to perform.

And then there was—

Petra: “—Subaru.”

Calling out the name of the one she loved to scatter the surplus of anxiety, she simply gritted her teeth.

Petra: “—Jiwald!”

With that chant, a ray of white light shot out of Petra’s fingertips.

It was one of the few offensive spells Yang Magic boasted, a spear of light that pierced anything in its path—but only when wielded by a first-rate master, and Petra, inexperienced as she was, did not meet that standard.

Petra’s Jiwald would inflict a burn at best, rather than killing a living target.

Nethertheless, that was fine.

Petra: “…”

The white light emitted from her fingertips was directed at the man who had leaped at her—that was false, it was directed at the ground diagonally behind him. It was their rehearsed move “number seven”, disguised as to not look unnatural.

Its purpose was not to burn the man. —The aim was to ignite what had been prepared.

Todd: “Wha—”

Otto’s specialty, a ground trap using Fire Magic Stones.

Ten traps had been prepared in case Otto, who searched for enemies using open “channels”, and Petra, who assisted him, were targeted.

Because of the number of Magic Stones he could carry and the fact that he had to move around while searching for enemies, he could hardly be perfectly prepared. Even so, Otto had indeed stated “You never know what might be useful”, his almost insidiously meticulous preparation now coming to fruition as the ground behind the man exploded.

Todd: “—Hk.”

Instantly, the man’s vigilance shifted slightly towards his back.

As Petra had been instructed, the explosion did not blow up under the man’s feet or even close to him, so the shock and heat of the explosion did not reach him. Merely, it drew his attention backwards ever so slightly.

That was enough for the girl looking for an opening on which to pounce.

???: “Oyraaa—!”

Swinging the barbarian sword in her hands, Medium dove into her opponent’s chest.

The blonde girl was not much taller than Petra, however, with bravery entirely different in nature to Petra’s she rushed in, slashing away at the axe-wielder’s arm.

Todd: “Tch.”

The man, distracted and clicking his tongue, twisted his wrist and quickly returned Medium’s blow with his axe. They both shrugged off each other’s initial blows, and returned to square one—

Medium: “Another! Another! Anotheeerrr!”

Despite the initial expectations, Medium was not that weak-willed at all.

Even with her barbarian sword having been parried by her opponent’s strike, she made use of the momentum of the parry to revolve and unleash a sword strike empowered by that same momentum. If her opponent did dodge that strike, she would use the momentum to spin around again for yet another sword strike.

Her sword dance, was akin to an unstoppable flow of water from a rising river—

Otto: “Number four!”

Petra: “Yes!”

Tapping the captivated Petra on the shoulder, Otto’s next instruction came flying in.

Once the signal was given, she would shoot magic at the designated spot without thinking. —At the time she agreed to accompany Otto on his travels around the battlefield, she had been told that this was the most important condition.

Therefore, Petra was determined to follow those instructions, forgetting all fears and anything else.

Petra: “Jiwald!”

Magic was fired once again, but this time the ground exploded at a much closer spot than before.

Perhaps the man may have thought they would avoid embroiling Medium since they were in the middle of crossing swords. But that was a naïve thought.

Otto: “If necessary, we will involve Medium-san.”

Petra: “I’ll cast a healing spell on you later, okay?”

Medium: “Uoooh! I don’t really get it, but I can’t stop now!”

The explosion detonated a few meters away and struck them in a way betraying such naiveté.

Ruthless as it may have been, Petra agreed with Otto’s way of thinking. Them surviving having suffered some wounds was more important than the ideal scenario of all three getting through unscathed.

Despite her skin being scorched by the heat of the explosion, Medium’s momentum did not stop.

With a sense of gratitude and guilt, Petra, alongside Otto, devoted all their energy as to repel this assassin—

Todd: “Oioi, give me a break.”

The moment they looked closer, the man asserted thus within the sound of the explosion.

It had sounded awfully clear, and present there was not even a sliver of anger or impatience from having suffered any setback. It was more like a strange, out-of-place sentiment.

Rather, the man’s voice was filled with exasperation.

Todd: “Are we thinking the same thing?”

The moment Petra heard that, goosebumps ran all over her body.

Even without understanding these words, the intent behind them felt clear as day.

Otto: “Number two!”

Just when Petra was about to realize the true nature of the shiver in a little more detail, at Otto’s scream she promptly abandoned all thought and immediately obeyed.

The Jiwald she fired off transferred heat to the magic stone hidden in the ground, just as before. —However, Petra’s finger was now pointing beneath their own feet.

Petra: “…”

A white light flashed under their feet, turning red and causing a shockwave.

After doing it, Petra realized that it was the emergency escape plan, something that Otto had prefaced with, “I would rather not use it, because it will hurt”.

And in fact, Petra’s small body was launched into the air as her soles bounced off the overflowing light. However, she did not ascend unprotected.

Gripped by an arm that reached out with a “Guh”, Petra’s body was embraced by Otto’s slender frame.

Of course, Otto’s body had also been sent flying by the same impact, but Otto had chosen to avoid making the mistake of flying away in a direction where they would be separated and unable to support each other, and to at least to minimize the damage Petra’s body would suffer.

Otto’s decision had allowed Petra not to complain nor stiffen, but to use Yang Magic as quickly and strongly as possible, to make Otto’s body ever-so-slightly resistant to the impact.

And she had managed that. Their bodies bounced off the ground. And immediately after that—

Petra: “…”

With a bang, a powerful detonation occurred at the same spot Petra had made one happen before—that was, where Petra and Otto had been until just before.

Catching a glimpse of the identity behind the explosion’s sound, Petra’s eyes witnessed a flame which seemed to be the same thing that had immolated the two messengers.

Said flame had aimed to scorch Petra and the others from behind.

Petra: “That axe…”

He had made Petra and Otto think that he was going to cut them down, but his real goal had been the Fire Magic Stones planted behind them.

The man’s favorite approach was the refusal to engage in a head-on confrontation, and the fact that it overlapped with Otto’s preparedness was probably the true explanation behind the man’s grumblings.

Petra: “Ugh!”

Petra arrived at the same thought as Otto did, who was tumbling to the ground while holding Petra in his arms, almost simultaneously.

Grunting in pain as he rolled on the hard ground, Otto gritted his teeth while being bombarded by shockwaves. However, Otto immediately got to his knees on the spot, turning to face the man while lifting Petra’s body up.

Propped up by Otto’s body, Petra also glared at the man who was some distance away.

However, contrary to the concerns held by Petra and Otto, the man did not immediately give chase.

They understood right away why that was, as well as his intention behind it.

Todd: “I don’t really want to do that though.”

While spilling that out, the man turned his head to check, an axe pointed at them.

Ascertaining the feeling of the ground beneath his feet, where the explosion had occurred, the man sniffed the black smoke rising from the burnt grass, and spoke,

Todd: “There, and there. And then, over there.”

Petra widened her eyes at what followed, after the man had quietly muttered something.

The man had turned his head, and the ground had exploded in his line of sight. It was number six. Then number nine and number one, followed by number five and number eight, and so on.

Petra: “B-But how…”

Otto: “…No way, a Spirit?”

It was a surprise that he had seen through the traps’ hiding places, but they could not comprehend how he had blown them up.

Otto’s words had made Petra gasp at the mysterious method of the man, who had displayed no signs of using magic the same way as Petra had in inducing the explosion.

If he truly was a Spiritual Arts User, that would make him the same as Subaru and Emilia.

As for Petra, she was severely reluctant to admit the man in front of her as being a person similar to two people whom she loved so dearly in many ways—

Petra: “But, there’s no Spirit to be seen here…”

Todd: “There’s more than one way to get them to comply. If they don’t want to be eaten, that is.”

Petra: “Eh?”

Otto: “I am not just saying this out of spite, but it is probably for the best if we do not listen to him.”

Petra, unable to understand his reply, froze with wide eyes. And then, with a tap on her shoulders, Otto immediately brought her back to her senses.

It was impossible to tell whether the man’s reply had been intended to create an opening, or whether he was partly telling them the truth.

However, one thing could be said for certain.

Petra: “I despise you.”

Medium: “I feel the same!”

In response to Petra, a small shadow flew, clenching her fists tightly whilst shouting.

It was Medium, who had been wary of the mysterious man’s peculiar skill, hence she had chosen an opportune moment to strike. Slipping into the smoke created by the series of explosions the man had set off, she aimed at his back by lunging her barbarian sword all the way from the other side of the smoke.

After enduring for a long time, patiently so, her bold blow went straight for the man’s back—

Todd: “Of the three of you, you’re the easiest one to read.”

Medium: “—Ah.”

Leaning his body to the side, the man escaped the downward trajectory of the barbarian sword.

And following on, the man turned himself around and thrust his axe towards Medium behind him.

Todd: “You’re the only one who does things according to the way of the Empire. It’s absolutely sickening.”

Petra: “Medium-chan!”

The sight of the man’s relentless axe was absorbed by Petra’s trailing shriek, looming towards Medium’s wide-eyed face.

4

—Medium O’Connell did not put too much thought into things.

Strictly speaking, Medium had a lot to think about on her own.

She was always worried about her brother, Flop O’Connell, and at the same time, she trusted him. Upon hearing that he had been taken away from the Fortress City, the surprise and worry were to an extent such that her chest had been about to burst. But her brother would have probably panicked, had he found out that her body had been shrunk while on her lonesome.

So she thought that they were about even in terms of worry and trust.

Flop: “Dear sister! We arrive at way better solutions when we think with our hearts, rather than racking our brains. That seems especially the case for you, so keep that in mind!”

Those words that her brother had said a long time ago had served as an important guiding light within Medium, irrespective of her chest being shrunk or not.

Since thinking about things with one’s heart tended to be linked to completely nonsensical, outrageous statements, it was also detested by some. Abel in particular seemed to find it quite disagreeable.

But what her brother had stated was great. In fact, that approach had worked out great for Medium.

Medium: “As expected, big bro’s awesome!”

Of course, if that made everything go well, she would not have become smaller, her brother would not have been taken to the Capital, Rem would not have disappeared, Natsumi would not have been flung away, Chaosflame would not have been destroyed, and Emily and the others would not have been all over the place, probably.

There was no way everything would go well.

However, as far as Medium’s actions were concerned, it was the best way to achieve the optimal outcome.

For that reason, the moment an axe had swung violently towards her defenseless face after her surprise attack from behind had failed, Medium did not panic, even as she thought “Ah, I’m gonna die”.

It was similar to feeling no regret after taking the best possible action and fulfilling one's role to the end, but one would still end up losing because the outcome was inevitable.

Of course, she hated the thought of dying here, since being unable to reunite with her brother would leave her heartbroken, and she was full of regret for not being able to help her new friends like Rem and Natsumi.

However, after thinking through things with her heart, Medium had executed the best possible option she had come up with.

The results came down, for want of a better word, to luck—were it to not work out her life would be forfeit, as per the way of Vollachia.

However—

Medium: "…"

Just before it slashed into her face, sparks flew off the thick blade of the axe, and it was repelled.

While just barely feeling the scent of steel in her nose, Medium exhaled slightly,

Medium: "As expected, big bro's awesome. I haven't died even once doing things this way."

???: "—Oh, I'm jealous of that. I've completely lost count."

Medium, expressing how the method taught to her by her brother had saved her once again, attained an answer from the person who had bounced away the axe that should have taken her life.

What had been swung, was the Blue Dragon Sword, as thick as the axe that had been repelled—the person gripping it was quite strange, with his appearance earning high marks from Medium's perspective.

Todd: "You're…"

Todd turned his gaze to the person that had stepped in, the man who had protected Medium when it had been all but certain that she would have been killed, and moved his lips in displeasure.

The man who had interrupted him—a one-armed wanderer with a jet-black helmet hiding his face let out a “Sorry to interrupt your good mood”, then continued,

One-Armed Man: “I was wondering where things looked worst, but as people say, “It’s darkest right below the lamp post”. But man, is it seriously troubling when the future’s this dark.”

Todd: “…”

The man who had quietly come to kill the non-combatants assumed a cautious stance.

However, it was not the stance of a lion cutting corners against a rabbit, but that of a hunter wary of the possibility of the rabbit having disguised itself as something else, and seeing that, the wanderer—Al, shrugged.

And then—

Al: “That dark future’s out of my hands. After all, I can’t even see the stars.”

Thus, he declared his participation in the battle.

Chapter 103:
Countdown of the Stars

1

—As tremors shook the world, as the sky split into white and red, as the clashing of lives brought forth an event of calamitous proportions, Rem had made a decision.

Rem: “If I’m going to make a move, it’s now or never.”

In the Imperial Capital, where a battle of unimaginable scale was seemingly taking place, Rem remained imprisoned in Berstetz’s mansion, her freedom having been greatly restricted.

Even as she felt a burning smell getting stronger and stronger day-by-day, Rem had been unable to do anything of use. Feeling deeply ashamed of that, the choice of staying silently in place for a second more was no longer acceptable to her.

In the end, Rem had not once come face-to-face with Berstetz, the owner of the mansion and the perpetrator behind her confinement, ever since their first chance meeting. For that reason, there had been no way for her to examine what that old man, who had been concerned about the future of the Empire because of his own philosophy, having thus deposed the then-Emperor Abel, would think of all that having led to the great battle engulfing the entire Empire.

However, even supposing there had been an opportunity, he and Rem would not have understood each other, most likely.

Rem: “After all, Berstetz-san and I stand on entirely different sides.”

Even if it sounded cold, that was the conclusion Rem had ultimately come up with.

Only the strong, or those with the leeway to do so, could sympathize with and take into account the circumstances of those in a different position. Since Rem was neither, she had been forced to make a decision.

Who would she turn into an enemy, and who would she regard as an ally?

Leaving that aside, Rem bore no hostility towards Berstetz or Madelyn. That, in particular, made Abel's inability to explain things properly, alongside Priscilla's unreasonable requests, much more difficult to deal with.

Therefore, what Rem would be trying to do from now on originated not from hostility or rebellious intent towards them, but from nothing more than the result of having chosen where she would stand.

Rem: "…"

With the battle for the Imperial Capital having begun, even though Berstetz's mansion had surely been constructed quite deep within the city, the effects of the fierce battle could be felt there nonetheless.

Naturally, the mansion had also been placed on high alert, and being more or less a prisoner of war, Rem too had been ordered to wait in the room provisioned for her. Hence, her freedom was even more restricted than usual.

However, from the perspective of the mansion's security, Rem was nothing more than a hobbling girl anyway, and the security system in place had not been set up so that a guard would be left as a sentry in front of her room day and night.

—Taking advantage of this negligence in security, Rem had silently slipped out of the room.

Holding her breath, Rem crawled from the skylight of her room to the roof of the mansion.

Since she had been careful not to make a sound, the security had not noticed Rem's stealthy maneuvers. It would be harsh to blame this on their negligence—they probably would never have even thought that a girl with a cane would sneak out from a room in this kind of way.

That would be the case, if Rem truly were a girl unable to walk as she wished without a cane.

Rem: “I expected to prepare for the worst, but…”

Of course, it was not a lie that Rem had complained of her handicap and used a cane up until this point in time.

However, with her incomplete Memories troubling those around her, she could not let her impaired leg stay as-is forever, and because of that she had been constantly practicing walking.

As her efforts bore fruit, and she began being able to stand on her feet somewhat, it struck her. —Were she to lead them to believe she had a limp, it would perhaps come in handy.

In fact, she had not yet thought as far as to how exactly it would come in handy.

On the contrary, if her secret devoid of use were to be discovered, she might have put everyone on alert inadvertently. However, since her troubles actually proved useful, she could probably say that she taken a gamble, and successfully so.

However, she absolutely could not let down her guard. Since she could only say that winning the gamble had paid off once these actions started leading to some kind of results.

Going out of one’s way to gamble would become meaningless unless it turned into a win.

In the first place, Rem had been trying not to think about just whose influence had made her take a risk as she was doing.

In any case—

Rem: “—If only I could stay undetected until I get away.”

Rem’s goal in getting on the roof, had not been for escaping the mansion.

That had been an option difficult to discard as well, but other than Rem, Flop too was being held captive in the mansion. There was no way he could have gotten out alone, and the mansion was surrounded by a high wall to begin with. Climbing over it would have been difficult, unlike the roof, so there appeared to be no point in even considering it.

Therefore, Rem had escaped from her room to make contact with those in a building separate from the mansion, located within this same plot of land—the Crown Princes, which had been captured all over the country and gathered at this place.

The black-haired Crown Prince had been hailed as the leader behind the rebellion, according to what she had heard. Despite the doubts about whether this person was truly Abel's legitimate child, he probably had one or two things in his mind about the current state of the Empire.

If Rem could make contact with them, a sliver of hope to get her out of the situation she had been put in might emerge.

Rem: "I need to ensure that I, Flop-san, and Katya-san as well, are safe."

Rem felt that she was in need of allies that could cooperate with each other.

She had been carefully making her way along the roof towards the edge, taking great care not to make a sound. Despite her effort to step softly, there was no guarantee that the guards would not find her, or that she would be able to get away successfully.

In order to not let this opportunity go to waste, she was fully prepared to risk her life in case she were spotted. This was also the reason she could not stand idly by.

That was—

Rem: "—Hk."

Suddenly, strange occurrences popping up in the distant sky caused Rem to jump out of her skin.

Witnessing the battle taking place all throughout the walls of the Imperial Capital at the edge of her vision, as the looming sky changed into a peculiar spectacle, Rem gasped.

Being so distant from the event, Rem had no way of knowing the details, but at the very moment the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia had descended upon the top of the star-shaped walls protecting the Imperial Capital, the Spirit Eater Arakiya turned the clouds into flames, and Moguro Hagane rose up as the very rampart itself.

Without knowing the actual reality of the situation, Rem stiffened as she sensed those dangers by instinct. At the very same moment, she lost the strength to remain standing on the roof.

Simultaneous with a hoarse “Ah” escaping from Rem’s mouth, her body slid down the slope of the roof. She almost tumbled all the way down, but, instead, she quickly grabbed the edge of the roof with all her might.

Rem: “That, was close…”

She would have had no good excuse, were she to have screamed or fallen down below.

Barely hanging on from the edge of the roof, Rem exhaled a sigh of relief. Slowly, she tried to get herself back on the roof and then—

Rem: “—? This is…?”

With her objective still far away, her dangling from the roof had only been a mishap on her way there. As Rem held onto the edge, however, a door set up at the very end of the large building caught her eyes.

Even though Rem had been allowed some relative freedom in going to and fro’ within the mansion, and thus having looked around everywhere, this was the first time she had spotted a door to a section that was off-limits just like the detached building. By going around the mansion along the roof, she had wandered onto a section that would normally be inaccessible.

Rem: “A hidden door…? What in the world?”

As questions about her discovery arose within her mind, Rem was briefly arrested by hesitation.

Her preliminary goal had been to make contact with the “Crown Princes” at the other building in the mansion ground. This would have given her a clearer picture of the situation, as well as a better chance of finding a way out of it.

On the other hand, the unexpected hidden door could just ultimately turn out to be a mere liquor cellar. Was it really worth taking the risk to get in?

Rem: “…”

She did not even need to think to know what the rational option was. —And yet, Rem chose the irrational option.

Releasing her grip from the edge of the roof, she descended to the passageway with the hidden door. She took care in her attempt to be as quiet as possible, yet her footsteps could still be heard. However, the sky that had startled her earlier remained unusual, so the mansion’s guards should be quite distracted.

Risking it and relying on that, Rem put her hand on the hidden door and threw it open.

Rem: “Stairs leading to a basement…”

The door had not been locked, probably due to it being unnecessary, rather than due to carelessness.

It hardly seemed like a place uninvited guests were supposed to go into. Since Rem, who had more-or-less arrived at the mansion with an invitation, was the one entering it, she had no reason to complain.

Greeted by stairs which emanated cold air, and a dim space with no light, Rem inhaled lightly as she headed downstairs with her hands tracing the wall.

There was the possibility that something of unbelievable dread waited for her.

It was also possible that Berstetz had trapped something outrageous and horrifying.

However—

Rem: "—Is, someone there?"

With some kind of mysterious conviction, Rem asked a question within the darkness of the basement she had reached.

It was poorly lit, in darkness, but one could sense that the basement was not that spacious. There was also a large presence in the back of the room which could only be vaguely discerned.

Although large, it was by no means monstrous.

It was a human bearing quite a large physique; such a presence had been chained and held captive against the wall on the other side of the basement.

And finally, that person, upon hearing Rem's question, spoke—

???: "I must… His Excellency…"

Rem: "…You're?"

???: "I must, protect… His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia…"

A low, passionate voice caused the stale air within the basement to shake, pitifully so.

The echoes of sincerity contained within the voice were strong and powerful, filled with selfless loyalty.

Rem: "…"

With those words, Rem decided to take one step after another, and closed the gap between her and the other person.

In doing so, the figure of a bulky man all chained-up vaguely emerged in the darkness. His body was truly huge, white scars etched all across his face—

Man: “…Goz, Ralfon.”

A beat later, Rem realized that what he had mumbled was probably a name.

In fact, it did sound familiar.

If she recalled correctly, that was one of the Nine Divine Generals, one of the most powerful and renowned beings in the Vollachian Empire—.

Goz: “I must protect His Excellency from the Great Disaster—”

The man was like a lion, roaring heroically as his scar-ridden face contorted.

2

???: “—Abel, you did say this, right? That you’re the one who spread the rumor about the Crown Prince?”

Serena Dracroy, a woman of character who was overlooking the state of the siege of the Imperial Capital from the main rebel camp, standing there with her arms crossed, asked this of Abel. Slowly, he raised his face covered by the oni mask.

Serena’s Flying Dragon Squadron had appeared from the far west as reinforcements. With the participation of first-class flying dragon riders who possessed the ability to tame flying dragons, air superiority had suddenly tilted towards their side.

Of course, there were some battlefields in which the flying dragon riders were at a disadvantage due to the presence of the Cloud Dragon and the Spirit Eater, but having the entire battlefield under their control was unnecessary.

All it would take was a single breach and even the walls of the Imperial Capital, renowned for their solidity, would begin collapsing starting from there.

There were measures in place to achieve this; at least, Abel thought so. Hence, knowing that there were places on the battlefield in which they were at a disadvantage, and others they had arrived at a stalemate, he would issue orders on and off.

Abel: “Does it look like I have time for your idle chit-chat now? If anything, should you not be keeping an eye on the movements of your subordinates?”

Serena: “Yes, of course. But it’s disheartening that you dismiss this as chit-chat. I took a stance because of your letter and swiftly joined your side. Since me coming was so vital to your strategy, treating me with a little more care wouldn’t make you lose your face.”

Abel: “Spoken like a good-for-nothing commoner.”

Serena: “Even if I spoke like a philistine, I’d rather not act like one. I’m just too curious about that reaction from before.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Serena took her gaze away from the sky, directing it towards Abel.

The reaction she had referred to was likely his reaction to the reinforcements from the west—to the arrival of the military forces that were not Serena’s Flying Dragon Squadron.

Although she had an idea about the unforeseen reinforcements and who was leading them, she found the carelessness of his earlier words and actions vexing.

Hence, it had led to the words Serena had kicked off her idle chit-chat with.

Serena: “You’re the one who spread the matter of the black-haired Crown Prince. And isn’t this Crown Prince the one leading the group right in the middle of that glorious rampage?”

Abel: “In short, you believe that this racket spreading across on the battlefield was orchestrated by the illegitimate offspring of the Emperor?"

Serena: "No, my apologies. It was just a figure of speech. I don't believe that the black-haired Crown Prince is truly His Excellency's son. In all likelihood, His Excellency has no children."

Shaking her head at Abel's words, Serena replied with a rather confident tone. When Abel raised an eyebrow at her confident answer, she continued, "In any case",

Serena: "His Excellency never took a consort, and there's been talk of him never having gotten intimate with a woman. I've tried to seduce him before, but he completely ignored me. This should serve as strong evidence."

Abel: "—. Are you sane?"

Serena: "Of course, I'm entirely serious."

Abel: "I did not ask if you were serious, I asked if you were sane."

Being presented with a rather unconvincing reason to base her argument on, Abel's gaze grew stern.

Serena was one of the more prominent High Counts in Vollachia, and because Abel held her abilities and ambition in such a high regard, he counted her as one of the forces necessary for this decisive battle. However, if Abel were to judge matters using criteria that could not be understood, that in itself meant there was room for consideration.

Serena, who was trying to see matters through Abel's eyes, let out a "Wait" as she uncrossed her arms and raised one hand, then continued,

Serena: "I'm not kidding, that's just the most significant reason. That I couldn't seduce His Excellency is frustrating, but that also hints at something at the same time."

Abel: "…"

Serena: “His Excellency has no interest in women. To put it more bluntly, he has no intention to bring forth an offspring.”

Abel looked on at Serena without speaking a word, and the latter continued with, “That’s got to be it, right?”,

Serena: “I’m not saying he is a philanderer, but His Excellency hasn’t sired a child. At the very least, not at this point in time. But even supposing His Excellency swings the other way, he could still have children provided he so wishes. There are two possibilities then, either he’s sterile, or…”

Abel: “He is intentionally not procreating.”

Serena: “Exactly. In any case, I don’t think there’s anything like a Crown Prince. That’s why this talk about an illegitimate child feels questionable in the first place. But if mere doubtful tales can spark a civil war such as this, our country splendidly lives up to its name.”

With a small twist of her cheeks, Serena’s smile was genuine and joyful.

Abel went without mentioning her attitude nor the speculation she had offered. Notably, Serena did not need Abel’s opinion either.

People like her were capable of confirming their own ideas without affirmation from others.

In other words, what she sought from Abel was not affirmation—

Serena: “For what purpose have you made up the existence of the Crown Prince? After our side is victorious in this battle, who will sit on the vacant throne, and what will you do with your Empire?”

—She asked if they were going to leave the future of the Vollachian Empire in the hands of the Crown Prince.

Abel: “…”

At Serena’s quiet question, Abel softly closed one eye.

Some would perhaps wonder if this was the right time to be exchanging questions and answers of the sort, as the battle was just about to reach its climax. But it would be too foolish not to think about what would happen after they won, during the melee.

Naturally, since they were fighting with the intention of winning, they needed to plan for the aftermath of the war as well.

Abel: “Why do you inquire this of me?”

Serena: “I don’t mean that the Crown Prince is the… illegitimate son of His Excellency, but I believe that he’s your truest representative to lead this great civil war. If you and the Crown Prince are going to join forces after the war, isn’t it obvious who we should ask regarding the future of the Empire?”

Abel: “—Ha.”

As Serena continued her thoughts, a breath escaped Abel’s mouth upon hearing them.

Simultaneously, he himself was impressed by the effectiveness of the cognitive disruption effect of the mask covering his face.

It was impressive how well it could conceal his identity and true feelings.

Serena: “What’s wrong? Did I say something wrong?”

Abel: “I am not laughing at you. Rather, I admire your discernment. It is just that, when the conclusion is mistaken, the process to reach it is even more off. Not unreasonable, is it?”

Serena: “Hmph…”

Serena’s lips curled in frustration at Abel’s comment.

But exactly as he had stated, her abilities to discern things were impressive. It was only natural to think that Abel’s goal was to win this rebellion and seize the throne of the Vollachian Empire.

He put a person calling themselves the Crown Prince in place, who would seize control over the throne. And if possible, the shadow

Emperor could perhaps even murder his puppet at some point, thus taking the throne for himself.

But—

Abel: “Have no doubt, I hold no intention of handing over the throne. Your assessment is misguided.”

Serena: “So you’re saying all my conjectures are completely off?”

Abel: “Not all. You are correct, I spread the word about the existence of the black-haired Crown Prince with the intention to find that one over there wreaking havoc on the battlefield. But you are mistaking the overall importance.”

Serena: “Overall importance?”

Abel: “How important is it to have him front and center, relative to how important it is to keep him at hands’ reach. The latter is not that essential. —In any case, that naiveté of his cannot condone the sacrifices of others.”

Serena twisted her head, perplexed beyond comprehension.

However, Abel was not obligated to explain everything to her either. For the time being, he had probably provided her with the answers she sought, and resolved the concerns she held for the post-war.

One possibility was, Serena could even end this rebellion by beheading Abel here and now, then take his head with her to the Crystal Palace.

Everything would be nipped in the bud, but to a certain extent, at the expense of Abel’s gratifying sacrifice.

Abel: “Cast aside hesitation and mercy, and make the most of your naiveté. That is what makes you truly special. —Natsuki Subaru.”

The person Serena had called the Crown Prince was probably still ravaging the battlefields of the west.

Even Abel did not have a completely consistent image of the person whose name he just uttered, in his mind. From what he recalled, he had been a hectic handful to deal with as an unvarnished crossdresser, and even while donning the appearance of a child.

With that image of Subaru floundering about, hectically moving bout in confusion upon being tossed into some situation, laying his naiveté and inexperience bare, Abel's lips twisted. With firm disgust.

—No, with hatred, or perhaps, a more appropriate way to describe it would be rage.

Soldier: "—Who are you?!"

As Serena was about to continue questioning Abel, as he concealed his negative emotions behind the oni mask, there was movement in the camp.

Several soldiers guarding the main camp had drawn their weapons, showing utmost caution. Upon taking a look, the soldiers pointing their weapons at a slender figure who had made its appearance from outside the encampment could be seen.

The figure raised its empty hands and chuckled, looking around at the faces of the soldiers pointing their weapons at them.

???: "Myyy~, I wasn't expecting such a warm welcome. I'm quite the popular one, aren't I?"

Soldier: "Don't mess around! Where did you even come from?!"

???: "Guided by the stars… Doesn't that sound a little too poetic, though?"

The anger of the soldiers, believing that they were being made fun of by that ambiguous answer, flared up.

However, the man's attitude did not change in response to their threatening demeanor. Abel knew very well that his attitude would not be swayed by this.

And that was why—

Abel: "—Lower your weapons. That thing does not pose a threat."

Soldier: "B-but…"

Abel: "Even if you were to give him a knife, he would still be unable to do a thing. He is a clown whose only skill is to play with words."

???: "Whaat~, that's a nasty thing to say. I'm hurt, you know?"

He called out to the soldiers that were on-guard to lower their weapons. However, expressing his protest towards that command, the gentle-looking man Abel had spared with a pout of his lips.

Then Serena, who was standing next to Abel, also directed a quizzical look at the man.

Serena: "Why are you here? Aren't you the Stargazer—"

???: "—Ubilk, if you'd be so kind. Pleased to make your acquaintance, High Countess Dracroy. But then again…"

As the gentle-looking man—Ubilk, introduced himself, he smiled bewitchingly with the oddly refined face he possessed.

Ubilk was supposed to be in the Imperial Capital, and more specifically at the Crystal Palace. With pompousness, with the utmost maximum of pompousness he cut off the words he had been stating before, and then, delivered a declaration.

Ubilk: "—That's a conversation for after the Great Disaster, if you happen to survive it, right?"

Chapter 104:
Bastions in Chaos (I)

1

—With that sound, the expression “Great Disaster”, Abel’s black eyes narrowed behind his Oni mask.

The person responsible for this utterance, Ubilk, had a smile on his face, going without revealing the depths of his heart.

He was a gentle and affable man who treated everyone equally. His attitude and entire being had not changed ever since the first time he had appeared before Abel.

Ever since the time he had appeared in the audience chamber out of the blue, without any collaborators, or a shred of concern, nothing had changed.

Presenting himself as a Stargazer, Ubilk had correctly predicted disasters that had befallen the Vollachian Empire, over and over again. No matter what events he foresaw, his own feelings had never once wavered.

Almost like—

Abel: “—Is confronting me here just another event you have anticipated since long ago?”

Ubilk: “Nah, nah. Not at all. You’re giving me way too much credit. I’m faaar~ from being such a big deal.”

Abel: “If all you have to say is nonsense, I shall sever your tongue with glee.”

Ubilk: “Ohhh~ dear, I’m so, so scared. What a stomach-turning thought, as usual.”

While shrugging his slender shoulders, Ubilk boasted this completely unfazed. When Abel sniffed at this attitude, Serena, who was standing next to him, let out a “I don’t get it”.

While comparing Ubilk’s profile with Abel, she raised her hands, then spoke,

Serena: “I’ve seen you before. The Stargazer who strolls in and out of the Crystal Palace… You must be one of the jesters that His Excellency the Emperor keeps at his side. Are you acquainted with him, Abel?”

Abel: “Irredeemably so.”

Serena: “Hmm… I didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers until all of this was over, but may I ask one thing? Just who is hiding their face behind that oni mask?”

As Serena harbored doubts on Abel’s identity, a ray of understanding dwelled within her slit-like eyes.

Certainly, she had held some serious suspicions on that front from the very beginning. About the person who had successfully assumed the commanding position of the rebel forces amidst this great civil war shaking the Empire—including the fact that he kept his true face hidden, he was more than a match for Ubilk in regard to being inscrutable.

However—

Abel: “Answering that question is not a priority at this moment.”

Serena: “There are means to remove that mask by force. I am also quite confident in my abilities in that regard.”

Abel: “Do not. Consider this a warning.”

Serena: “Ho, you’re warning me?”

At Abel’s words, Serena slowly narrowed her eyes belligerently.

Assuming a stern approach, and making full use of the moniker she had been given, the Scorching Lady, Serena Dracroy—had made it this far because she had reduced to ashes all the scorn, all the provocations hurled at her till now.

Due to her creed, Abel's answer was more than enough to inflame tensions.

Ubilk: "Wait, wait, waaait~! Let's calm down a bit! How can me just showing my face like this create such a tense atmosphere?!"

Abel: "If you keep quiet and observe, you may contribute your fair share to this battle without lifting a finger."

Ubilk: "Oh, I don't wish for such a thing. I'd hate to have one, or even both of you bite the dust here, all the mooore~ if I'd be the one to set it all into motion!"

Serena: "—I don't get it."

As the two were at each other's throats, Ubilk raised a relatively flustered voice, reaching out to both of them. Due to Ubilk's reaction, Serena responded the same way again.

Immediately after, she closed one eye as she played with the hilt of the sword at her waist.

Serena: "If you truly are to stand by the side of His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, your duty should be to attack me and this man commanding the rebel forces. If you stay put, this man is as good as dead. Shouldn't this be welcome for you?"

Abel: "Who gave you permission to kill me? You can go ahead and die yourself."

Serena: "I'm sorry, but I'm talking to this Stargazer right now. Please don't interrupt our conversation."

Abel: "…"

As Serena pushed her own subject, she stopped Abel from cutting in for the time being. Once she looked at Ubilk again, with a blank expression the latter declared,

Ubilk: "An interesting and intriguing spectacle. But please don't make such a scary face. I’m unarmed, after all.”

Serena: “Being unarmed is no reason for me to let my guard down. Go ahead and give me a reason to remove my hand from the hilt of my sword. Just to let you know, I don’t hesitate to cut someone unarmed.”

Ubilk: “—I can’t be cut down. By you, at least.”

Serena’s tone became gradually harsher, and at the end, her words became a threat. Ubilk, whose face had been looking utterly exhausted just prior, rejected that threat with no more than a few words.

The moment his mouth spoke those words, color faded from Ubilk’s countenance.

Even if the whole picture of those emotions could not be seen, the intent behind these emotions he wanted to display faded away, leaving behind a merely blank, empty, and colorless face.

Serena: “…”

Serena was not incensed by this provocative declaration, and neither did she draw her sword.

What filled her mind, even more than anger, was Ubilk’s very existence—No, rather, it was this suspicious sense of eeriness and a touch of uneasiness towards this being dubbed a Stargazer.

It was as if this person before her very eyes was confronting her, without even confronting her properly.

Serena: “…We should probably kill you right here and now.”

Ubilk: “Ahh, how awful. I’m gravely hurt by this. What do you think?”

Abel: “Every so often, I share the same thoughts Serena Dracroy possesses right now. However, this man has survived to this day. That’s a fact.”

Remaining indifferent to everyone meant never knowing when he had trodden on somebody's toes.

Ubilk, with his complete inability to adapt on the fly, trod on the toes of many in the Vollachian Empire, thus incurring the wrath of countless people. At times, he'd even had a blade pointed at him.

Despite all of this, Ubilk had survived to this day—

Ubilk: "It's the will of the stars. Oh, Ubilk… it's too early for me to die yet, waaay~ too early."

Clasping his hands together before his chest, Ubilk stated thus in a light-hearted manner, to which Serena's cheeks stiffened.

There was no point in debating whether that was true or not. The fact that Ubilk had appeared here—No, the fact that he had first appeared at the Crystal Palace, meant one thing.

Ubilk would not die.

The stars he spoke of—it was as if he was saying that his life was secured, that he had been placed under the protection of the Observers, omnipresent as they ridiculed this world.

Abel: "…"

In the middle of this thought, Abel exhaled, feeling the silencing zeal in that assertion.

Abel's personal feelings towards Ubilk and the other Stargazers mattered naught. What was important, was that Ubilk had appeared before Abel's eyes.

This clown, who was aligned with the stars in every possible scenario, had shown himself before Abel—

Ubilk: "You stepped off the stage once before; rather, it's more appropriate to say that you were forced to, but do you plan to rise up once again?"

Completely ignoring Serena, Ubilk's gaze turned to Abel.

Unsure what to make of those words, Serena frowned her well-shaped eyebrows. But, Abel had no intention of responding to her in either a kind or thorough manner.

Above all, that question was truly infuriating for Abel.

Abel: “I shall tell you something.”

Ubilk: “Yes?”

Abel: “I never had any intention to step off the stage even once, as you put it.”

Folding his arms, he started by correcting Ubilk’s misconceived original suggestion.

Having been ousted from his throne and driven to lands far to the east, Abel had been put in dire circumstances on many occasions. However, his will to fight had never wavered.

He had never forgotten the role he was supposed to play, nor had he ever thought of abdicating it.

Abel: “You cannot comprehend it, Stargazer. As you have never once stepped upon the stage.”

Ubilk: “—. A painful thing to hear, iiisn’t~ it?”

Abel: “You cannot comprehend even that, as well.”

With a series of fitting words and facial expressions, Ubilk attempted to communicate with Abel. However, Ubilk’s emotionless words did not convey an understanding of Abel’s true intentions.

And, that already seemed to be the limit for Ubilk, as Abel had already dismissed it.

For that reason—

Abel: “The time is nigh. That is probably why you have traveled here.”

Ubilk: "…Indeed, but you already knew I was coming, didn't you?"

Abel: "Nonsense. I am nothing like you. I may speculate a second ahead of time, but I am not certain. —Blind acceptance might be a more fitting way to describe it."

Ubilk: "…"

With Abel's comment, Ubilk's expression changed slightly.

The slight quiver of his eyebrows was derived from his seldom-displayed negative emotions. Be it either anger or discomfort, it was nothing short of a rare response.

Unfortunately, there was no such thing as cheap satisfaction to be found in Abel's mind.

Serena: "And now what will you do, you should be at His Excellency's side no matter what. Should I send your decapitated head?"

Abel: "The Emperor would not even bat an eye. If anything, he would be a bit aggravated that he did not issue the order himself, but that would be the end of it. More importantly…"

Serena: "More importantly?"

Even though Serena did not understand the details of the dialogue between Abel and Ubilk, she nodded her head as she saw it heading towards a conclusion.

Abel briefly paused as he saw her wavy brown hair sway over her shoulders in the corner of his eye.

And then, he declared.

Abel: "I shall leave you with a great role to play. —A role that no one but you can fulfill on this battlefield."

2

Kicking off the white snow that had piled up, a shadow raced unhindered across the battlefield.

The ground, covered with a thin layer of ice, was slippery all over the place, the lingering temperature was so exceedingly cold that it seemingly cut through one’s skin, and an enemy, so formidable that it paralyzed one’s instincts, was looming from above. Outright rejecting these various circumstances, at lightning speed, the shadow ran past from behind.

Mezoreia: “You, you, you—”

Cecilus: “Ahahahaha! Instead of “you”, you should call me Cecilus Segmunt! You are more than welcome to address me so loudly that it echoes all over the battlefield…”

Mezoreia: “CECILUS SEGMUNT—!!”

Cecilus: “Yes, exactly!”

Leaving behind a grinning afterimage, the very next moment the soles of his zori pierced the side of Cloud Dragon’s face.

With an explosive sound, its head flamboyantly bounced back, and Mezoreia’s giant body swayed wildly in the air. Emilia was surprised by how a boy much smaller than her had accomplished this.

Emilia: “That boy, he’s amazing…”

Not only had he stopped the Dragon’s breath as it was about to sweep the battlefield, but he had also proudly stated what was likely his name as he began to fight the Dragon without backing down a single step.

Emilia was captivated by the blue-haired child, who had proclaimed himself to be Cecilus.

It was exactly like she was witnessing the boy upon the grand stage he so boldly spoke of.

Emilia: “…”

Cecilus's body moved in and out of Emilia's vision as if he were a phantom or an illusion. Repeatedly, he entered and exited Emilia's field of view from side-to-side, from top to bottom, at a tremendous speed.

He was much too fast for Emilia's eyes to keep up with, so they started spinning round and round.

And it was the same for Mezoreia, whom Cecilus coiled around.

Mezoreia: "—Hk! You are! This dragon's! This dragon's adversary!"

Flapping its wings in the air, the claws and tail of the Cloud Dragon swung about uncharacteristically recklessly.

This was directed at Cecilus, who cheerfully jumped around using a wall of ice that Emilia had built—to keep Mezoreia from leaving the battlefield.

However, the Dragon's attacks merely hit spots Cecilus had long since passed by, leaving her important, real target unscathed.

On the contrary, as soon as Mezoreia's tail hit the wall, Cecilus jumped on it and ran up onto its back in one fluid motion, and,

Cecilus: "Go, go, go, go, go!"

With kicks so swift it was as if he possessed several more legs than he actually did, he knocked Mezoreia towards the ground.

Emilia: "I-it's falling…!"

While it flapped its wings violently, Mezoreia flipped over in midair and crashed into the ground.

After a tremendous roar and tremor, the snow that covered the soil was projected upwards and scattered; Emilia, while being showered with cold wind, was almost unable to withstand the breathtaking spectacle.

But admittedly, this was a ridiculously lucky situation that she could not afford to miss out on.

Emilia: “At this rate, we can defeat Mezoreia…”

Cecilus: “Oops, that won’t do. You’re going to have to hold off on that.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Though she thought it was a bit unfair, Emilia honed the Mana around her and tried to drop a large block of ice on top of the fallen Mezoreia.

But when Emilia was about to do so, Cecilus slipped in front of her and stuck his finger on the tip of her nose; startled by his action, she stopped moving.

Cecilus, having quickly poked Emilia’s nose, made her blink in surprise, and spoke,

Cecilus: “Listen up. Just now, I saved you from a dangerous situation in the nick of time, didn’t I? And now my one-on-one battle with the Dragon has begun… You know what you should do from here, don’t you? Yes, you should have faith in my victory and nobly pray for me! That’s the role of a princess.”

Emilia: “Umm… But I’m not really a princess? But I’m not entirely unrelated to a throne, though.”

Cecilus: “Princess is just a figure of speech. More precisely, it’s the flower of the story falling madly in love with me, the hero who came to her rescue. The perfect role for someone as beautiful as you, don’t you think?”

Emilia: “Ah, I’m sorry. I’ve already decided on the person I’ll fall in love with.”

Cecilus: “Oh, is that so? Then there’s no way around it. Please continue.”

Despite being incessantly spoken to at a staggering pace, Emilia had not missed anything essential. Accordantly, Cecilus understood it immediately as well, and thus backed away.

Since he had pulled back, Emilia once again raised her hand out towards Mezoreia,

Emilia: “Hiyah—!”

And with that, a giant block of ice fell at full speed from the sky, aimed at Mezoreia who had fallen to the ground.

A boom echoed after it stabbed Mezoreia’s belly, who had been lying face-up on the ground. While hearing the Dragon’s low-toned cries of pain, Emilia readied the next one, saying “One more time”,

Cecilus: “Pardon my impoliteness.”

Right after that, Emilia had her legs swept out from under her as she readied herself, and as she screamed out an “Ahk!”, her body was gently lifted, withdrawing with momentum such that it was like she was being forcibly pulled away from her location.

The next moment, a strong wind raged where Emilia and Cecilus had been, and the shockwave that the Dragon had used the ground as a conduit for gouged that place, making all the soil in a certain range of that spot shoot out.

Had they moved to the side any slower, they would have died.

Cecilus: “As expected, with a Dragon as an opponent, nothing is straightforward, but at least I got a chance to show off every second. But this came just in the nick of time because of all my pent-up frustration from being paired up with all those extras.”

Emilia: “Th-Thank you, for saving me.”

Cecilus: “No, no, don’t worry about it! Beauties who already have a loved one just need to be charmed in a different way. Just remember to invite me to the wedding!”

Cecilus, who had picked her up and saved her just in time, smiled heartily at Emilia’s gratitude.

Strictly speaking, Emilia did not have a loved one, but rather someone whom she might fall for, but right now was neither the time nor the place for quibbles. What was important was—

Emilia: “Use these, Cecilus!”

Cecilus: “Use what? Even you tell me that, I don’t know what I’m supposed to use… Ohh!”

Emilia lowered herself to the ground, as to place her hands on it, and the eyes of Cecilus, his head tilted, started sparkling. In his vision were swords, spears, axes as well as various other weapons of ice, all growing out of the ground.

Ice Brand Arts, which forged weapons out of ice, manifested a row of weapons in front of Cecilus all the way to Mezoreia.

Cecilus: “This is quite spectacular! I like it, it’s cool! To tell you the truth, I only wanted to hold a suitable, excellent sword of some kind, one that’s legendary or magical, but…”

Emilia: “Then are these no good?”

Cecilus: “No, it’s not like I told anyone about this rule, so I’ll just change it in secret! In this scene, it’d be flashier to swing a weapon against a Dragon!”

While saying that, Cecilus stretched his small body’s arms as far as he could and pulled out the two swords of frost on either side. As soon as he did so, Emilia realized her mistake with an “Ah”.

The ice sword had been created by Emilia. Therefore, Emilia would not feel the cold, but it might be too cold for Cecilus, who had not created them.

Emilia: “Come to think of it, Priscilla never said it was cold either, but…”

Cecilus: “Rest assured. I can make up for this inconvenience with the Flow Method, so both myself and the people in the Battalion are fine. Well, I tend to get out of my flow when the Boss and the others are involved, but it’s a fact that I’m especially special for handling it naturally!”

Emilia: “Speshul…”

As unfamiliar words were let out one after another, Emilia could not help but ponder.

This abnormal sensation reminded Emilia of talking to Subaru—after thinking it over, she came to realized, with a “Maybe?”.

Emilia: “Hey, Cecilus! Did you learn those words from Subaru?”

Cecilus: “Subaru-san, is it? Nope, sorry, but you’re mistaken. It was the Boss who taught me these words, but his name isn’t Subaru-san.”

Emilia: “I see, my bad… Looks like I jumped to conclusions.”

Due to her hastiness, Emilia was left disheartened by Cecilus’s answer. However, not wanting to be discouraged, Emilia quickly slapped herself on the cheeks to cheer herself up.

Then, like Cecilus, she picked up an ice armament, a spear, herself, and spoke,

Emilia: “I pulled myself together… Let’s fight Mezoreia together!”

Cecilus: “That’s a really nice change of heart. Come to think of it, I haven’t even heard your name yet.”

Emilia: “Me? I am Emilia… No, I mean Emily! Emily!”

Cecilus: “I see you have your reasons! But I think it’s best if I refrain from saying anything thoughtless here, so I’ll do you a favor and leave it at that, Emily-san. This might be sudden, but I’d like to request something from you in return.”

Emilia: “A favor? From me?”

Cecilus: “Yes. —While you’re dealing with that Dragon, could I ask you to move that thing out of the way?”

After she gave him her name, Cecilus asked Emilia for a favor in a hushed voice. Having said that, he pointed to the ground a short distance away from the spot upon which Mezoreia had fallen onto the ground.

Seeing what Cecilus's finger was pointing to, atop the snowy soil, Emilia's eyes widened with an "Ah".

And then—

Cecilus: "Then please do that, Emily-san. I'll do my job… and how about I do it so flamboyantly, that only the star actor of this world could manage it?!"

After saying this, Cecilus kicked off the ground without waiting for Emilia's reply.

The snow scattered, and Cecilus's body, gripping two swords of frost, ran straight for the dragon. Mezoreia instantly sensed the danger of the small threat rushing towards itself on its scales.

Mezoreia: "Don't friggin' push your luck—!"

A shudderingly enraged roar was raised, and Mezoreia clawed at the block of ice that was about to crush its torso. In an instant, the gigantic mass of ice, as large as a small mountain, unable to withstand the claw strike for even a second, fissured, the cracks running through its entirety with tremendous velocity, then, it shattered all at once.

Once the weight of the ice block was gone, Mezoreia immediately rolled over to face the ground, ready to unleash an attack on the leaping Cecilus—

Emilia: "Hiyah!!"

Emilia threw the spear she brandished at Mezoreia, which struck it squarely on the nose.

The sharp tip of the ice spear did not bury a sliver of its tip into Mezoreia's scales, but the force of its impact had been enough to snap the Dragon's head away as to delay its attack on Cecilus.

Then, Cecilus dove in, his velocity nearly matching that of the thrown spear.

Cecilus: “No blinking allowed, or you’ll go without offering well-deserved applause!”

While weaving eloquent prose, Cecilus’s twin blades of frost shot out with white light.

With a light sound, its scales were penetrated, and the Cloud Dragon was flicked to the left and to the right. Due to the sword dance, it was deprived of its vision, it was deprived of its freedom, it was deprived of any opportunity to counterattack.

Despite being a wee one still, Cecilus’s skills were absurd.

Both in terms of handling her body and weapons, Emilia had believed herself to have become quite respectable, but this was a dimension to which she could not compare herself to. Perhaps he even had the potential to become as absurdly strong as Reid, whom she had happened to meet at Pleiades Watchtower.

Emilia: “But please, don’t become a meanie like Reid.”

Setting aside his ability with the sword, Reid possessed a terribly nasty personality, so she hoped that Cecilus would not turn out that way.

With that wish in mind, taking a sidelong glance at Cecilus, who was attracting Mezoreia’s attention, Emilia rushed to a point a short distance away from the battle.

The favor Cecilus had asked of Emilia earlier was quickly drawing near.

Emilia rushed to the destination, and there she found—

Emilia: “—Madelyn! This is no time to sleep! Wake up, convince Mezoreia!”

Emilia held up Madelyn Eschart’s motionless body, which was buried in the snow, and desperately called out to her.

Chapter 105:
Bastions in Chaos (II)

1

Pressing his fists to the ground, he stood up by overexerting his shaking knees.

The force of the heavy blows had reverberated to his very core, his internal organs, which seemed like they had been scrambled, bellowed.

Lacerations and bruises could be reliably healed by simply sucking up the power of the earth via the soles of his feet. However, the techniques used by his opponent, their nature unknown, would overcome any crude protection of the sort.

His attitude abhorrent, his character loathsome, his enemy was one of the strongest in the Empire.

His techniques, perfected through training that transcended human understanding, toyed with the foolhardy Garfiel around without relent.

However, lack of experience or age was no reason for him to cower.

Garfiel, who was incapable of anything dexterous, required victory, simple as that. Any other answer could not be chosen, and above all—

Garfiel: “As if my amazin’ self could just keep on cowerin’ right next to ya.”

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel looked up and let out a guttural groan from his throat.

His gaze remained fixed directly towards his front, though his attention was set not on the one that was, without doubt, his enemy, but on the man standing beside him, his personal enemy.

???: “Oh dear. Your unrelenting spirit is a virtue, but isn’t it more reasonable in this situation to direct it at the old man over there, rather than at me?”

Garfiel: “That’s just “Kagricon puttin’ things aside”. You’re the one blabbin’ nonsense. Ya did it long before he did.”

???: “That was about a year and a half ago now… Excluding the things you’re already aware of, I do think that it’s not that unforgivable.”

Shrugging his thin shoulders, the man—Roswaal responded curtly.

Without his makeup and clown costume in order to conceal his true identity, he retained the aura of a proper nobleman.

It was a masterful disguise that did not let show just how twisted he was at his core.

Without the advice of the detestable Roswaal, Garfiel’s life would have been in peril, that much was true.

And because Garfiel was aware of this, a feverish anger rose from the pit of his stomach.

On the other hand—

???: “—I’m a tad confused ’bout ya sayin’ you’ve been in a fight with shinobi before.”

The one to mutter so was an old man of diminutive stature, a man who could easily have been mistaken for a dwarf.

Waving the sleeve of his right arm that was missing below the wrist, he donned an expression that made him look like a good-natured old man, yet it was completely unfathomable how terrifying this old man actually was.

Garfiel was painfully aware that it was also part of the shinobi’s techniques.

Everything about him, his gestures, words, actions, even his feeble appearance, were all tools to bring nothing but death to his opponents—Shinobi utilized their entire being as a deadly weapon to finish off their targets.

The shinobi head honcho, the monstruous old man was staring at Garfiel and the other man—or rather, he was staring just at Roswaal. He was not accusing him for rudely intruding into a one-on-one fight, but he was concerned about something else.

—Concerned that he had fought a shinobi before, and the boastfulness of that statement of his.

???: “The basic rule of fightin’ a shinobi’s ta lose yer life. In the case the shinobi’s killed durin’ their attempt, the village’s notified, and the next one’s dispatched, and this happens ’til the other person croaks. So, how’re ya still alive?”

Roswaal: “It’s a little complicated in that regard. Apparently, the shinobi I encountered also had their own circumstances. I don’t know if that’s the right word, but they were runaways.”

???: “Runaway shinobi…”

Stroking his long white eyebrows with his fingers, Olbart whispered.

Even Garfiel had not comprehended the words Roswaal had uttered. The existence of shinobi was merely a slightly credible rumor to begin with, but even then, their actual existence was dubious.

Naturally, no one knew the true situation. He had never even heard of the term “runaway shinobi” before.

Olbart: “Shinobi who’ve escaped from the village, that couldn’t have happened in quite a while now?”

However, instead of denying those words unfamiliar to Garfiel’s ears, Olbart was nothing but frank about their content.

It sounded as if he was aware of the situation concerning the village, those shinobi, as well as everything else; the statement probably was true. He grasped what was in his hands, not out of obligation, but as a way of life.

That was the secret for success in life, of the shinobi named Olbart Dunkelkenn—.

Roswaal: “I don’t know how long a while is for you, so it may be more or less than a while. At any rate, I met those shinobi almost forty years ago.”

Olbart: “Huh?”

Roswaal answered with a shrug of his shoulders, to which the Vicious Old Man, Olbart, raised a voice of doubt.

A similar doubt emerged within Garfiel. Rather, it was more likely that everything Roswaal had stated thus far had just a casual utterance, hence he admired the nerve of the man.

Although he had never bothered to ask Roswaal’s age, he was at most around thirty-years-old—he was unlike Emilia or Beatrice. He had not even been born forty years ago.

And with this ridiculous, spurious trickery targeted at Olbart—

Olbart: “—Shasuke and Raizo, right? Those are the runaway shinobi you’re talkin’ ’bout.”

Roswaal: “Ho.”

Olbart: “They left the village forty or fifty years ago, and the only ones who’re still alive are their brothers. The others’ve been killed off, so there ain’t any other candidates.”

Garfiel dismissed that affair as a joke, yet Olbart played along even more tenaciously. Next to Garfiel staring in bewilderment, Roswaal batted one eye shut.

Looking back at Olbart with his eerie yellow eye, he spoke,

Roswaal: “Well, do I really have the obligation to answer whether you’re right or not?”

Olbart: “Nah. It’s also valid ta hold yer opponent in suspense when a fight ta kill’s on a knife’s edge… Ya might have talent as a shinobi.”

Roswaal: “I appreciate the compliment, but I decline. The talent I desire and the path I want to walk have been decided long before forty years ago.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! I see, I see. —Well then, it can’t be helped.”

Roswaal, shaking his head, ignored Olbart’s praise.

Olbart laughed without paying heed to that, and immediately afterwards his figure became hazy. In the blink of an eye, the distance between the two vanished. With a leap, the eerie old man’s foot was slammed on his target’s neck.

And that—

Garfiel: “Hk!”

Feeling a gentle breeze on his neck, Garfiel held his breath.

A deadly shockwave scattered where the nape of his neck had been, barely scraping his skin. Olbart’s kick had been unleashed, only to be stopped just in time.

Roswaal: “After that conversation just now, you aim not for me, but him.”

Olbart: “Diminish yer enemies. Easiest ones first. Pretty textbook, ain’t it?”

With strength and proficiency one would not expect from such a small stature, even Garfiel’s well-trained neck would not be able to take a direct hit from Olbart’s kick and remain unscathed.

What had stopped that reckless clash from becoming a reality was a distinctively shaped dagger cutting between Garfiel’s neck and Olbart’s kicking foot—Rather than having blades, however, the weapon possessed parts to strike with.

Called a sai, it was an obscure weapon often employed in the western country of Kararagi, and even Garfiel was now seeing it for the first time.

That, had just saved Garfiel's life.

The owner of the sai was Roswaal, adding the humiliating fact that he had saved Garfiel for the second consecutive time.

Garfiel: "OHHHHHHH!"

The moment he was set ablaze by this humiliation, Garfiel's right arm launched up, killing the wind.

Naturally, the target was the old man, who remained suspended in midair with his kicking leg as his pivot. Since he had no way to escape in midair, he would smash through his torso, thus rendering him unable to fight.

Olbart: "Whoa there."

However, just before that powerful arm struck him, Olbart ducked with an unusually adroit movement of his body, leaping down and to the side, with only his toe hooked in Roswaal's sai.

Evading the unleashed fist by diving under it, Olbart pulled out of range in a crawling position. Immediately, Garfiel stepped in for a follow-up—

Roswaal: "How about we calm down for a bit?"

Garfiel: "Gah!"

As he planned to rush in, his body was pulled backward at the waist, knocking the wind off his sails.

Looking at it, Garfiel came to notice that Roswaal had hooked the tip of his sai onto the clothes at his waist. The former wondered what in the world Roswaal was trying to pull, but he figured out the man's intent the moment he attempted to snap at him.

Because a rotating black blade grazed Garfiel's nose as it came flying by.

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

Roswaal: “The moment you two came apart, he threw a flying blade at your blind spot with his hand behind his back. Putting the spin on it is just a petty trick, but shinobi have a whole treasure trove of that. Not to mention, our opponent’s at the top of their class.”

Olbart: “If ya think somethin’ so pompous as being on top of a small hill, people’ll point ‘n laugh at’cha. Being at the top of the shinobi ain’t somethin’ ta brag ’bout.”

Unconcerned with his attack having missed, Olbart closed one eye and looked at them vigilantly.

Garfiel once again bit his teeth in humiliation at this exchange between the two, of which he had been left out of. Roswaal had saved his life not once, nor twice, but thrice already.

In the fight against Kafma, he had felt on his body that he had overcome one singular wall.

And in spite of that, he was incapable of doing a single thing against these people who were making a mockery of his fight with Kafma. This was a disgrace to Garfiel himself, and to Kafma who had lost to him, but—.

Roswaal: “—Garfiel, do not misjudge his type of strength.”

Garfiel: “Ahn…?”

Roswaal: “You’re strong. So, your opponent tries to avoid meeting you in your domain. Once you see through his wiles, most of the weakness you harbor should disappear.”

Roswaal pulled out another sai as he said this to Garfiel, who was clenching his fists.

With short-strike weapons in both hands, Roswaal was no longer the Head Magician of the Court that Garfiel knew, but rather he was attempting to maintain the appearance of a mere warrior.

There was a moment of confusion, but after a pause Garfiel understood his intention.

Roswaal had to abide by the restriction of not being able to use magic in this situation.

If Roswaal were to use magic, his true identity could be exposed. If that were to happen, this civil war within the Empire could unfold into a war between the Kingdom and the Empire.

Thus—

Roswaal: "All I can do, is provide cover… You're the key to this battle against this General First-Class of the Empire, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "…"

Roswaal: "It's true that we have bad chemistry. You're straightforward and honest, after all. That being the case, I'll find a workaround for the deficiency that creates. So, I have…"

Garfiel: "—A nasty personality."

Roswaal smiled wryly at Garfiel, who had taken from the former's words and continued them.

Roswaal: "Yes, I have a nasty personality. Quite reliable, isn't it?"

Garfiel: "Pah! Quit talkin'!"

With this response to the winking Roswaal, Garfiel wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

He wiped the blood off that was still flowing from the beatings he had been on the receiving end of previously, and exhaled deeply. From the rumbling sky came the feeling of scorching heat and extreme cold, each no less threatening than the other.

Just the thought of those tingling sensations being directed at his comrades was enough to numb his entire body.

However—

Garfiel: “That’s only for now.”

If he did not focus on the enemy in front of himself, there would not be a next time, nor would there be a time after next time.

Olbart: “Now that it’s two-on-one, it’s gettin’ annoyin’.”

Garfiel took a deep breath, and Olbart sighed at the situation. And at the old man’s words, Garfiel frowned with an “Oh?”.

What’s so strange ’bout it? It may be annoyin’ to him, but it’s been two-on-one since Roswaal showed up.

Garfiel: “Ya got just two opponents, so there’s no point in complainin’ ’bout it now bein’ two-on-one.”

In response to the doubt Garfiel harbored, Olbart bent his neck.

The monstruous old man grabbed his long white eyebrows with his index and thumb, and then declared,

Olbart: “It’s only two-on-one if the two are cooperatin’… What was just a couple of cheeky young’uns ’til now’s started bein’ a pain in the rump.”

Garfiel: “Then, how ’bout ya surrender, since you’re at a disadvantage?”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Both fleein’ from the enemy and abandonin’ the battle are the worst kinda disgrace, worse than dyin’ a dog’s death. In addition, well…”

Garfiel: “In addition?”

Flicking one of the eyebrows he was pinching, Olbart flashed his teeth.

Contrary to his smile, the small old man overflowed with a tremendous amount of fighting spirit, and then,

Olbart: “—Even this bein’ a two-on-one ain’t a reason ta give up, for me.”

Instantly, the old man's smile faded, his figure evaporating from view once more.

When it came to the Vicious Old Man, left and right were not the only options, the sky and the underground were as well. Garfiel's nerves were on edge, due to the prospect of those possibilities—

Roswaal: "—The inseam."

Prompted by the voice he heard, Garfiel pulled back half a step.

A moment later, his eyes met those of the old man, rising up from under the earth,

Garfiel: "ORAAAAAAA!!"

A blow with his all was swung downwards, as Olbart jumped up to his knees.

Garfiel's fists slammed into the old man's knees, which were like withered branches.

Shockwaves rippled through the ground, causing it to crack, terrific destruction spreading.

With that first direct hit, a battle to the death with the shinobi had begun, in the truest sense.

2

—The hero arriving late.

Although a cliché of that sort did exist, Subaru was not too fond of it.

Strictly speaking, it was correct to say that he had come to think "Don't screw with me" in the process of all the many events he had experienced in this other world he had been transported to.

Subaru: "If this were a game, a manga, or within a story, that would've perhaps been fine."

Events in a fictional world needed developments of the sort, to liven things up.

However, for Subaru, who actually did live within this turbulent world, the sooner a hero, a heroic figure, a person with abilities beyond human understanding appeared on the scene to resolve a conflict, the better.

It was best to have the hero show up as quickly as possible, so that he would swiftly solve the root of the problem.

If people were to say something along the lines of the story not being interesting, that was fine, as it was not a story. Discussing whether it was fun or not could only be done when having the presence of mind to do so.

Subaru: "And yet, it's pathetic that we're the last to arrive!"

Swaying on the back of a Galewind Horse of bright red coloration, Subaru looked to the front in regret.

This battle all around the Imperial Capital would decide the fate of the Empire. It was hard to say who he ought to complain to, but for now, Subaru seethed with rage at himself for being a slowpoke.

Even though he thought about how much he hated it, he ended up turning out the same as a hero who arrived late.

After all—

Subaru: "Isn't this exactly like those heroes with a tendency for being late, being the ones most eager to achieve the best possible outcome in a fight?!"

The reason why late-arriving heroes put in so much work was surely because the heroes themselves were extremely regretful for being late.

The hero was painfully aware that his friends, the people he had to protect, or someone he did not want to lose, had been through hard and painful times in the meanwhile. That was why.

For the first time, Subaru learned the justification for the heroes' struggles, which stemmed from not being able to make it to the battlefield in time from the beginning. —They too, had blamed themselves.

Subaru: "Let's do this, Beatrice!"

Beatrice: "El Shamak!"

With this understanding, the shadow magic of the little girl clinging onto Subaru's chest was unleashed—black clouds appeared out of thin air, one after another, shrouding the heads of the Imperial Soldiers just lined up in a row.

Depriving people of their vision to diminish their fighting strength —was not the case here. The soldiers with these shrouded heads were not being robbed of their sight, but rather, of their fighting strength itself.

Pleiades Battalion: "OOOHH, RAAAH—!!"

The line of Imperial Soldiers with shrouded heads being frozen in place had been crushed by the first attack of the Pleiades Battalion, which had come rushing in with their outlandish fighting style.

Rendering them powerless in order to take away their weapons and armor, as well as breaking any of their limbs so that they could be left behind, had been the fundamental tactic of the Battalion, reflecting the fighting style and intentions of their boss, Subaru.

It was not like he was hell-bent on not killing anyone.

Still, he had opted for a method that would result in as few human deaths as possible. Doing so was the best for Natsuki Subaru's peace of mind, and at the same time—

Subaru: "—I hate the Vollachian Empire."

It was his revenge; revenge against the Empire that forced people to fight and kill each other, just in order to be a warrior.

???: "Schwartz, we are approaching the city walls. We need to decide whether to continue into the Imperial Capital, or to head to the other bastions to provide support."

The ground quaking, was due to Gustav Morello going on a rampage, with his extraordinarily gigantic build.

Having been appointed as the Governor of the Gladiator Island, he was the indispensable brain of the Pleiades Battalion, displaying tremendous combat power as he brandished his four thick, strong arms, keeping the approaching Imperial Soldiers at bay.

While Gustav's powerful upper limbs struck soldiers, sending them flying over his head effortlessly, Subaru saw the walls looming before him—the walls of the fourth bastion of the star-shaped ramparts that surrounded the city.

Conquering each bastion was the condition for gaining the upper hand in this siege.

Subaru: "What do you think, Gustav-san?! How are we supposed to attack?!"

Gustav: "It is not for I, in my capacity, to decide. I shall just present the possible advantages and disadvantages. —If we enter the Imperial Capital and reach the Crystal Palace, we can accelerate the conclusion of the battle. If we go to the other bastions to provide support, we can reduce the casualties on both sides with the help of our main force. That is all."

Subaru: "How troubling! How troubling, but…"

While Gustav was dependable in keeping his cool even in the midst of a fight, Subaru did regard his personality as horrible, since Gustav never helped him make decisions in these situations.

Yet, though he would present Subaru the possibilities, he would never force him to choose.

It was precisely because Gustav abided by that tenet that the Pleiades Battalion had remained united until now, rather than collapsing.

If there was one more reason for Gustav's attitude, and for the Battalion to be this united—

Subaru: "Gustav-san! Take the flagbearer Hiain and half of everyone to support the other battles! Weitz! Take the other half and hold this position! I'll leave it to you!"

As Subaru had been entrusted with making the decisions on the spot, he had to exercise it properly.

Gustav: "—I, as the official, acknowledge those orders."

Hiain: "I'm on it, bro! We're all in this boat together!"

Weitz: "Of course we're in the same boat, lizard…! Since it's your request, I'm gonna listen…"

Hearing Subaru's decision, everyone who had been called upon replied, one after the other.

He had made the extravagant decision to take both of the options presented by Gustav. Even so, that would have to be done by dividing the forces to each battlefield, but—

Subaru: "—If it's us, then we can do it!"

One could easily see how the enthusiasm of the members of the squadron heightened further at Subaru's declaration.

And that was precisely why they were comrades with whom he had fought together ever since that hellish island, making their way over here.

Idra: "Schwartz, what should we do?!"

Subaru: "It's a no-brainer! We're going to make a grand entry through the wall!"

Idra questioned him, as he held the reins of the Galewind Horse, galloping along with Subaru.

Subaru answered the obvious question cheerfully, as he pointed to the ramparts in front of him. Then, with his eyes fixed on the imposing wall, he opened his mouth and declared,

Subaru: “Destroy it, Tanza! I’m counting on you!”

Tanza: “—Schwartz-sama, you sure are a smooth talker.”

Receiving Subaru’s shout of encouragement, a small shadow agilely jumped out from right beside him.

Lifting the hem of her kimono, and kicking off the ground in a dash as she headed to the ramparts, was Tanza. She had ended up working with Subaru through a strange quirk of fate, and was an indispensable member of the Pleiades Battalion.

To be precise, the reason for that was—because she was the strongest attacker in the Pleiades Battalion.

Tanza: “—Haa!!”

Flying like a bullet, Tanza spun in midair, and following that the geta she wore on her feet pierced the ramparts.

One moment later, the robust rampart had been shattered, Tanza’s figure running through it. The shockwave created a crack in the fourth bastion of the city walls, fissures spreading across its entirety.

Subaru: “GogogogoGOOOO—!!”

Everyone: “OHHHH—!!”

Then, with Subaru’s order, the Pleiades Battalion crashed right where Tanza had struck the first blow, with its full momentum.

It no longer was an attack by an individual member of the Battalion, but a blow from the individual living entity that was the Pleiades Battalion. An attack that even the walls of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, boasted for their robustness, were unable to resist even briefly.

Subaru: “…”

There was a thunderous roar, a terrific plume of dust enveloped them, and then, the ramparts were opened via brute force.

Seeing this overwhelming spectacle, Subaru performed a fist pump, while Beatrice in his arms opened her round eyes wide.

Beatrice: “For that wall to be so easily… That’s too absurd, I suppose…”

Tanza: “—That is the Pleiades Battalion.”

Descending from amidst the dust as to respond to Beatrice’s horrified mutter, came Tanza.

Dusting off her kimono, she was the sort of girl whose facial expression would barely ever stir; however, on this occasion, she seemed to be just a little proud of herself.

Even though she did not show much camaraderie, she had recognized herself as a member of the Pleiades Battalion. Otherwise, she would not have been affected by the “Power of Unity”.

However, Beatrice did not seem to like Tanza’s attitude.

Beatrice: “You have an impudent expression on your face, in fact…!”

Tanza: “Even if you call it impudent, this is the face I was born with.”

Beatrice: “Facial expressions are different, I suppose! They can be changed, in fact.”

Louis: “Uhh! Ahh, uhh!”

Looking down at the clearly aloof Tanza, Beatrice, who was on horseback, had her face flush. Then, as if taking Beatrice’s side, Louis, who had been clinging to Subaru’s back, also began to make a fuss.

To the frenzied girls, Subaru raised his voice with a “Waitwait, calm down!”, before continuing,

Subaru: “Don’t fight! We’re a team! Comrades! A Unit!”

Beatrice: “Younit…?”

Tanza: “Understood, Schwartz-sama.”

Beatrice: “Grrrrr, I suppose.”

Beatrice cocked her head in confusion at the unfamiliar echo, whereas Tanza bowed, as it was a familiar one.

Knowledge of Gladiator Island was the difference between those reactions, but Subaru’s lips curved as the atmosphere seemed to become more and more like a spark for Beatrice’s anger.

However, rather than Subaru moving to mediate there—

???: “Damn you, prepare yourselves—!”

Subaru: “Eh?”

A lone Imperial Soldier, creeping up amidst the dust created by the collapsed walls, raised his sword, training it on Subaru riding atop horseback.

Even if it was hard to believe, to this enemy soldier before them it was clear that Subaru was the leader of this group. It was the way of the Empire to not underestimate children, even if they did not know any better.

Therefore, the soldier’s sword veered not from its aim, and was driven into Subaru—

Louis: “Uau!”

In an instant, the force hugging Subaru from behind became stronger, and his vision changed in a flash.

What had occurred was plain and simple, in the blink of an eye, the Galewind Horse had moved—No, it had teleported away from the spot it had been standing just before.

Idra: “Wh-What…? Uurf…”

The sudden teleportation caused Idra, the holder of the reins, to swoon, involuntarily coming to vomit, his internal organs upset. Subaru also felt like his body remembered this sensation, that of the unusual power Louis at his back possessed.

Then—

Beatrice: “Shamak.”

Imperial Soldier: “Wha-?! Ku… Guah?!”

With a brief chant from Beatrice the Imperial Soldier was covered by a cloud, and a fluid kick from Tanza swept the legs of the stunned Imperial Soldier in splendid fashion, knocking them down onto the ground, lost of consciousness.

After this momentary display of teamwork, the two who achieved it exchanged glances from on and off the horse,

Tanza: “Excellent work.”

Beatrice: “You too, your moves weren’t bad, in fact.”

Thus, the tense atmosphere that had prevailed earlier completely changed, as they acknowledged each other.

Subaru: “Well, it’s good to see you little girls warming up to each other… By the way, Louis! Don’t do that so suddenly, you’ve turned Idra’s stomach inside out! Even though it helped a lot!”

Louis: “Ahhh, uh!”

Subaru: “Hmmm, good answer! Idra, take a deep breath! This is the first time that happens but maybe not the last.”

Idra: “I-I’ll try my best…”

With the power of Louis’s teleport, at least one unforeseen accident had been averted.

If push came to shove, Subaru would not hesitate to make use of it, no matter how much Idra would be about to throw up.

Subaru: “Not like I could handle two or three in a row to begin with… Gustav-san! Hiain! Weitz!”

At the call of the reinvigorated Subaru, the faces in front of the collapsed wall looked back at him. One-by-one, they looked into the eyes of that familiar face with a firm gaze.

Subaru: “I’m counting on all of you!”

Gustav: “I will, in my capacity, fulfill my duties. You ought to do likewise.”

Hiain: “Let’s get it! Time for the triumphant return of the Pleiades Battalion in its full and imposing force!”

Weitz: “Schwartz, we’ll defend this place to the last… Go take that throne…!”

Gustav’s group headed off to another battlefield, Weitz’s group stopped to defend the collapsed walls; and as Subaru left his dependable men to their respective posts, he poked Idra in the chest with the back of his head.

As he got headbutted, Idra looked like he was holding Subaru in his arms as he rode the Galewind Horse,

Idra: “Well, we got in. Looks like we’re the first ones.”

Laughing bravely, Idra rode the Galewind Horse over the wreckage of the city walls and into the inner city. While swaying to and fro’ on the same horse, Subaru also entered the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

The cityscape of the Imperial Capital hidden within the high walls could not be seen in its entirety from the outside, but it was a methodical, orderly, and disciplined arrangement of buildings.

Subaru: “The city’s representative must be a nervous wreck to build it like this.”

If the person in question had been listening, they might have argued how impossible it was for them to be responsible for adding on to a city that was built hundreds of years ago.

So, having stated this one-sided impression, the Pleiades Battalion surged into the Imperial Capital.

Their goal was—

Beatrice: “Subaru! What should we do, I suppose?!”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, what shall we do?”

Louis: “Uau! Au, aa, uhh?!”

Subaru: “Of course, it’s obvious! Head straight to the Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital! Let’s rub this warm welcome straight into the pompous face of His Excellency the Emperor!”

Subaru, having been asked this question by all the girls at once, responded to them collectively.

Beatrice, Tanza, and even Louis all nodded in reply to Subaru’s answer, but only Idra, who was forced to be close to all of them, muttered quietly,

Idra: “On the battlefield with four children in tow… I guess I didn’t have the talent of a warrior after all.”

Indeed, that was a fitting thought for a miller.

3

—And, concurrent with the Pleiades Battalion led by Natsuki Subaru breaching the city walls, being the first to finally enter the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

???: “Surely, I had not expected you to be so dogged.”

Groups of rebels were besieging the Imperial Capital in their plans to overthrow the very foundations of the Empire—And the fixed destination for all of them, expending their lives for the sake of reaching it, was the Crystal Palace.

The throne room was located in the most elevated, most prestigious room in the castle. With the national banner of a wolf pierced by swords hoisted on the wall behind it, and a blood-red carpet laid out before it, present there was the throne upon which all the authority of this Empire was concentrated; and upon it, the Emperor sat.

Young, intelligent, and as ruthlessly beautiful as a finely sharpened blade, the Emperor did not change his complexion even as the masses came flocking in, their swords pointed at his throat.

Despite what he himself had stated, the situation nevertheless surpassed his expectations.

Even though—

???: "Out of the countless threads you have laid out, up to which layer were you referring by that?"

???: "…"

As this was the throne room, those words were too irreverent to be uttered to the Emperor who was seated on his throne.

However, there was neither a loyal retainer to condemn that insolent man, nor were there any soldiers to behead him, and the room echoed with the sound of the intruder's presumptuous footsteps on the carpet.

There was also another inscrutable thing, within the vacant throne room.

Supposing others were present in the room, they would have frowned upon this fact. —Or perhaps, they could not even have frowned.

Because in order to recognize that fact, one would need to have sufficient reason to break through the cognitive block.

A gift had once been presented to an ancient Emperor, by a tribe he had shared a friendship with.

A mask that took after the Oni Clan, a clan created for the sake of killing the most terrifying existences in the world, making those gazing upon it to avert their eyes in fear of what laid on the other side of the mask.

Therefore, it was not easy to recognize that the tone of voice of the person wearing the oni mask was exactly the same as that of the Emperor.

And so, a presence had made its appearance before the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, bearing the same tone of voice as the Emperor, striding proudly and fearlessly through the throne room as if it were his own.

That presence was—

Vincent: “Unsurprisingly, you are emotionless to the very core. — Even when you look up from below at the throne you were ousted from like this.”

Alas, it was the triumphant return of the rightful Emperor, who’d had no recourse but to abandon his throne before.

Chapter 106:
Bastions in Chaos (III)

1

When Berstetz Fondalfon made his return to the throne room, noticing something strange, he came to find that the door to the most venerable room in the Crystal Palace was firmly closed.

The word “closed” did not simply refer to the mere opening or closing of the door.

In this case, “closed” literally meant that the door was completely sealed off from the outside world. It was a manifestation of the intention of the master of the Palace, the intention to never let anyone else enter.

However—

???: “—In this case, I wonder whiiich~ of the two Emperors’ intentions is more appropriate to keep in mind for this, Prime Minister-sama?”

Berstetz came to a stop, narrowing his already thread-like eyes even further to the utmost, due to the clownish manner of the delicate man that was stretching out his arms and standing in front of the closed door.

The man standing there with a faint smile on his face was an exception of some sort, being allowed to enter and leave the Crystal Palace as he pleased because of his Stargazer peculiarity, making him an unpredictable entity who had obtained the position of being neither friend nor foe.

Berstetz: “Ubilk-dono, regarding the throne room…”

Ubilk: “I’m not gonna leave you high and dry, so I’ll tell you the truth. His Excellency the Emperor is present. Both the real and the fake, so they shooould~ get their face-to-face meeting.”

Berstetz: “…Incomprehensible.”

Even though he had an inkling, Berstetz chose to respond like this as he placed his hand on his chin.

Exactly as he had mouthed, it was incomprehensible to him, and there was no doubt that the situation was difficult for him to just accept. At Berstetz’s reaction, Ubilk tilted his head, saying “Incomprehensible?”,

Ubilk: “What’s so hard to accept? Are you wondering how the real Emperor was brought here? If that’s the case, I was guided by the whispers of the stars…”

Berstetz: “Even on the battlefield, you can manage to walk down a path that is free from falling arrows. Even if soldiers are slashing at each other in close quarters, you are able to step through without a splatter of blood reaching you, let alone their sword blows, correct?”

Ubilk: “Yeah, that’s hooow~ it is. But that’s not all.”

With a smirk Ubilk nodded, making no pretense of hiding anything.

As ridiculous as it sounded, Berstetz had been witness to Ubilk’s abnormal abilities with his own eyes.

Ubilk had once leisurely walked through a literal rainstorm of projectiles and a forest of swords without suffering a single scratch. Ubilk claimed to follow the whisperings of the stars, but Berstetz could not determine whether him possessing superhuman fighting skills was true or false.

If one thing could be said for certain, then it was that he was enveloped by a power beyond human understanding, be it the whispering of the stars or Ubilk’s own abilities.

And because he was so useful, neither the real Vincent Vollachia nor the fake Vincent Vollachia had been willing to let go of Ubilk.

Everything was—

Berstetz: “So that you serve as a guiding light, for the purpose of preventing the Great Disaster.”

Ubilk: “Whaaat’s~ this, wasn’t it due to my own humanity being acknowledged?”

Berstetz: “If anyone was to be called forth to the Crystal Palace because of their humanity, it would be General First-Class Goz. Aside from him, everyone else would be called due to their abilities. I myself am no exception.”

From the perspective of running a nation, personal attachment was nothing more than the sound of insects flying, it ought be ignored.

That was Berstetz’s view, and it was almost certainly the same view held by both Vincent Vollachias.

It was not a question of good and bad, or likes and dislikes, but rather a topic that should be discussed from the perspective of necessity.

In that regard, Berstetz was only a necessary cogwheel at this point. If his position were to become unnecessary or worthless, he would have no qualms about being removed.

Ubilk should not deviate from his required role as well, regardless of his resolve.

Berstetz: “If you were aware of this, you would not have overlooked this plot of mine and His Excellency who sits on the throne now, would you?”

Ubilk: “Could it be that you consider my actions as betrayal? Thaaat’s~ complicated. After all, in order to betray, you gotta be trusted first. Or, do you trust me?”

Berstetz: “No, not at all.”

Ubilk: “That so? It hurts me to have that be said, but…”

Putting his hand on his forehead, Ubilk looked amused as he spoke of how much it had hurt him. Whether this was out of placidity or something else, Berstetz had never witnessed him failing to keep a straight expression.

He had never thought of this as unpleasant before, but at this moment, for the very first time, he considered him an eyesore.

The real Vincent Vollachia, who had been banished from the Crystal Palace, thus relinquishing of his title as Emperor—he had now been brought through the door, pushed into this decisive scene.

Ubilk: "Allow me to answer one question, Prime Minister-sama… I haven't changed my standpoint."

Berstetz: "—What standpoint, exactly?"

Berstetz inquired whether he purported to be a friend or foe. Upon hearing that, Ubilk put his hands together in front of his chest, making a sound that echoed through the air.

Ubilk: "Of course, my standpoint of wishing to avert the Great Disaster and maintain the peace and quiet of the Vollachian Empire."

Berstetz: "—. For that reason, the confrontation on the other side of this door is necessary?"

Ubilk: "Yes, that's right, that's right. Everything I do is for the sake of that. —The beating of my heart, the breathing that inflates and deflates my lungs, the flow of blood through my body, everything."

Berstetz: "…"

Berstetz remained silent in response to Ubilk continuing on, tapping on his own chest.

Ubilk's unchanging smile, unwavering demeanor, and somewhat devilish gaze seemed to be sane and serious to Berstetz's eyes.

He could not say for certain whether that sanity and seriousness was a peek into the other side of madness.

Berstetz: "—Your Excellency, what will you do?"

As Ubilk stood guarding the great door and the two Emperors faced each other on the other side of it—Berstetz muttered to himself, thinking of the person he had banished.

Berstetz did not care if he were to be beheaded, if his soul were to be lit ablaze, if he were subjected to any other kind of brutal execution.

If Vincent Vollachia, one of the wisest Emperors in the history of the Empire, truly wished to be Emperor, so be it.

Therefore—

2

???: “A man always quick to act, always light in words. I would not count on something of the ilk of the Stargazer, who placed his faith in the skies above.”

???: “Firstly, I expect no sort of loyalty from that thing. If hierarchy were to be established based on loyalty, Vollachia would not have been preserved as it is till the present day. But then again…”

???: “…”

???: “Had my ruin come as a result of being unable to question the upsides and downsides of the ambitions you have hidden, then one could easily say it is but natural that the prospect of me stepping through the Palace floor like this would be one so far off in the distance, now would it.”

Treading upon the blood-red carpet, Abel posed a question to the one before his eyes, the former’s gaze fixed on the latter, arms crossed.

There was no room for debate as to whose hand had aided Abel in this instance of arriving here. That man, who read through the peculiarities of that which was outside the norm, pouring heart and soul into realizing the wishes of the Observers, was without peer in regard to the act of treading the outside of the game board.

Much akin to a loose cannon. However, a cannon that could not be divested of its station, unless the conditions were to be met.

Identifying the conditions for forcefully divesting that loose cannon of its post had been a particularly difficult task to the extreme, being that making it stir was a double-edged sword. Yet, he had done it.

The fact that he was now once more setting foot on the throne room from which he had been ousted, was proof of that.

The scheming, the concealment up until this moment, it was no exaggeration to state that it had all been done in order to wrestle back this opportunity.

Abel: "…"

The face of the man sitting on the throne he had his eyes set on, the one to whom he was about to pose a question, was one Abel had seen many times.

His own face, it was. It went far beyond logic like mere intimate familiarity or whatnot.

It was a visage that to others would appear like that of Vincent Vollachia himself; however, to Abel, who had known the man who had mastered the art of disguising himself with that face for years, it appeared to be a poorly crafted mask.

A mask would remain a mask however, even if poorly crafted.

A mask over one's face concealed their true visage, accomplishing the role of covering up their real thoughts, making them invisible. Henceforth, Abel posed his questions not with his eyes, but with his words.

And in addition, he posed a straightforward, piercing question, one devoid of any smoke and mirrors.

Abel: "—Have your wishes in ousting me, thus joining Berstetz, come true?"

The query spoken by Abel, had anyone heard it, was one that would surely have caused outrage.

The aftermath of the banishment drama that had begun in a room in the Crystal Palace had already spread throughout the entirety of the Empire. Even now, Imperial Soldiers and rebels were clashing by the walls surrounding the Imperial Capital, their lives continuously being scattered to the wind.

The people living in the Imperial Capital, too, were entrusting their lives to the outcome.

Against this backdrop, Abel's question was the sort that could not escape being criticized as leisurely.

Still, Abel had voiced so. The rebel, who preferred not wasting a single thing, who had worked out so many wily schemes to get to this point, had voiced so. Because, it was necessary.

To determine what Abel—Nay, what the real Vincent Vollachia, ought to seek in the forthcoming dialogue with the fake Vincent Vollachia.

Finally, after pausing for a time too long to even be hesitation, yet too short to be dubbed contemplation—

Vincent: "—No, not yet. I have not yet obtained the result I seek."

In a voice imitative of the one that had cast the inquiry, thus was the answer from the false Emperor to the true Emperor.

Abel: "…"

For that reply, Abel likewise needed a moment of time.

He paused for a breath, putting neither hesitation nor contemplation betwixt.

And then—

Abel: "Have yet to obtain what you seek, is it?"

As that spilled from him, he closed both his eyes. —Going against the natural habit he had.

Never did Abel close both eyes simultaneously. He was forced to keep one eye open at all times, lest his preparations be too deficient as an Emperor who ruled his Empire lifeless after the blink of an eye.

The point here was not that for Abel, who by product of training and self-awareness was capable of keeping one eye open even when sleeping, his consciousness remaining half-awake, this marked the first time in several years in which darkness came as a result of closing both his eyes.

It was that by doing so, by possessing the very capability of doing so, Abel had made an assertion of his own intents.

In other words,

Abel: “That is deceit.”

From the moment he had set foot into the throne room, no anger, no disappointment had been present within Abel’s voice and gaze both. The same applied even when it came to being before the man who had performed an act of treachery, stabbing him in the back. His steely self-control had allowed him to do so.

Here, Abel’s voice, which had assiduously rejected all emotion, was for the first time laced with a tone.

A tone of disdain which he had stopped concealing, directed towards the person who had disguised himself in his own visage.

Vincent: “…”

With those words spoken, the false Emperor, warming his throne, kept his silence.

Silent, he kept. Though, it would have been somewhat helpful had his silence been out of trifling pride.

Abel: “Ousting myself from the throne, you removed that damned Goz from the equation as he had gained knowledge of the situation, schemed to anticipate and crush my plans after my escape, and took part in the destruction of the Demon City. The smoldering embers have spread to the entire nation, permitting that the bounds of the Imperial Capital, a place where rebels armed with their designs of insurrection have never been allowed to reach, would at last have their tainted, boorish feet enter it.”

Vincent: “Do you believe it would have not come to pass, had it been yourself on the throne?”

Abel: “To begin with, had I been on the throne, all this now would not have come to fruition. As a result, the conflagration you have brought upon has scorched the Empire. However.”

Thereupon cutting off his sentence, Abel extended his hand towards the oni mask that covered his face.

And then—

Abel: “—A way to immediately snuff out these flames exists.”

Having spoken so, he ripped off the mask affixed to his face, thus exposing his real face to the outside, within eyesight of the other person.

With his countenance looking down upon him and both of them alike in every way, like two peas in a pod, the two Emperors faced one another. Real and fake, a perfect mirror such that none would be able to detect discrepancies.

Abel: “…”

He was a wise man. Abel’s actions and words would have conveyed his intentions clearly.

With matters having come this far, he had sufficient understanding of his disadvantageous position, of the difficulty in fulfilling his plan. It was time for the irresistible waves of reason to sweep away the schemes that had been hatched.

If the obstacles they had set their eyes on, if the Great Disaster to be fought against were both the same, that would be only logical.

Henceforth—

Abel: “I shall—”

He was about to announce his intent to return to the place he was supposed to be.

He would issue a decree difficult to oppose, thus settling the battle initiated by foolish reasons.

And, it happened just prior to that.

Vincent: “—Your Excellency.”

That one expression, cut off the rest of Abel’s words.

It was an expression that ought not be stated, with that appearance, with that voice. Deprecating oneself and putting the one it was directed to at a higher standing, it was a stupid statement from someone who had lost awareness of his own position, which ought not happen.

The moment it was heard, Abel’s words were interrupted for a beat.

Perhaps, that was the second time Abel—No, Vincent Vollachia, had had his expectations betrayed in the Crystal Palace, a possibly fatal moment.

On the first occasion, he had been ousted from the throne. And now, on this second instance—

Vincent: “…”

Slipping into that momentary gap, the false Emperor rose from the throne.

Raising himself from his sitting position, the difference in their heights, which had been only that of one looking down on the other, once more increased for a smidgen. However, that notion vanished in a blink’s worth of time. No more did it matter.

The reason for that being—

Vincent: “—Your one lapse was in having a bird’s-eye view of the board.”

The figure informing him of this had closed the distance in the time of a sole breath, looming before Abel.

3

—Inside the Crystal Palace in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, two Emperors, one true and one false, were within breathing range of each other.

At that very moment, various changes occurred simultaneously all over at the places the Imperial Capital was being laid under siege.

Each of them had been caused by different feelings and beliefs, but they all had just one thing in common.

That one thing, was that none of the changes occurring at these places had been desirable.

???: “—El Fula.”

Wielding a wand in their hand, they created a gust of wind in the parched air of the battlefield.

Normally, this magic would focus on slitting the opponent’s throat with precision and minimal effort. However, Ram had realized that this would not be effective against the enemy present upon this battlefield.

Forming a horde, stone golems were standing in her way as if they did not have a life of their own.

They had nothing akin to a self-consciousness, they attacked approaching objects mechanically, and although they were humanoid in shape, they lacked what one would call the vital points of the human body.

Whether their heads were removed, whether their limbs were severed, they attacked their enemies using the remaining parts of their body as weapons.

Therefore, Ram's signature tactics were ineffective.

But she could not just throw the towel like a genteel damsel who was completely incapable of doing anything on her own.

???: "Let loose—!"

In response to the glaring Ram who stepped towards the horde, a line of brown-skinned war maidens likewise pressed forward on the front line. The People of Shudraq fearlessly pushed onto the battlefield with their bows poised, their arrows drawn, their shots fired at the encroaching obstacles of stone.

Applying wind to each of their arrows, Ram attempted to rout the problem away by force.

The windborne arrows were vested with speed and rotation, and the moment one struck a stone golem, the arrowhead would emit a burst of wind with penetrating force such that it would pulverize the golem.

The arrow would continue with unrelenting force and pierce right into the stone golems behind it in a chain reaction, causing the same destruction and increasing the damage.

With just a single arrow fired, two to three stone golems would collapse as a result.

In addition to that—

Ram: "Fula."

The whispered, delicate chanting would create a wind of a different wavelength compared to the destructive wind, and blow the earth apart almost as if caressing it to scatter the stones it was composed of.

At once, the arrows that had dropped to ground after destroying the stone golems would whirl up, and thus make their return to the hands of the running Shudraqs, just to be nocked and released to then defeat the stone golems again. Again, and again.

Ram: “Fula, El Fula, Fula, El Fula.”

The alternate chanting, the rapid use of the magic in succession was like a delicate motion combining the selfsame system of the magic.

The People of Shudraq, who had nothing but respect and admiration for the Vollachian Empire that had mastered the art of warfare at the expense of developing magic, could not comprehend this extraordinary skill.

It was like she was threading a needle with her eyes closed and her hands tied. Or perhaps, it was a superhuman feat, akin to putting the selfsame thread through countless lumen simultaneously.

Because of the arrival of Ram and her highly effective wind magic on the battlefield, the Shudraq’s breakthrough power had swelled severalfold.

The female warriors, having been left behind due to Zikr Osman’s faith and sentimentality, were using their consequently preserved strength to crush the forces of the nigh-impenetrable third bastion.

???: “Ahh, how pleasant! To be able to shock both friend and foe!”

With glossy black daggers gripped in her hands, Mizelda said this as she raced across the battlefield.

Although she boasted a prosthetic leg in place of the one she had lost, her unfaltering gait gave no sense of deficiency. Mizelda overtook the frontline of the battlefield, the place where the arrows of her allies flew towards mercilessly and, swinging her daggers in both hands, she tore apart the stone golems like a storm, opening a hole in their group.

???: “Sister will dodge them on her own! Don’t stop! Let Ram’s wind carry our spirit!”

Taritta, herself armed with a bow on hand, fired three shots in the same time the other Shudraqians took to fire one, and with her eyes fixed on the back of her older sister rampaging on the front lines, she made an appeal to her brethren.

In accordance with that, as the arrows of the Shudraqians dealt a crushing blow to the group of stone golems, Zikr and the others who had picked their lives back up after they should have been thrown away, charged in to destroy their battle formation.

???: “Move, move, move! You small fry stone golems, you ain’t gonna take over this battlefield!”

Letting loose a vulgar voice at the head of the group, was a man with an elegant, flowing swordsmanship contrary to his apparent character. Bringing demise to several stone golems with one sweep of his swords, the man with an eyepatch leveled the battlefield in a single move.

If one went by what had been described so far, it was a war situation that could probably be labeled as overwhelming superiority.

However—

Zikr: “Pull back—!!”

Mounted on the back of a Galewind Horse with a beautiful coat, Zikr shouted, and the group running on the front lines immediately split up. Right after, a “wall” fell from overhead towards the center of that group.

A thunderous roar and violent tremor engulfed the land; without exaggeration, this phenomenon was like fighting a fort itself—such was the threat posed by Moguro Hagane, who had become one with the city wall, and which would not diminish no matter how many stone golems were chipped away.

Literally, with one swing of Moguro’s arm, their gains in the battle would be nullified in the blink of an eye.

Rather than seesawing evenly, the battle had been unfolding with one step forward, followed by two steps back.

But—

Ram: “—What?”

Ram, who had been concentrating on advancing forward onto the battlefield, as well as delivering arrows to the Shudraq and having their arrows pierce through the enemy, narrowed her light-crimson eyes and pondered the changes that had taken place.

It was only Ram at first who noticed the signs, but gradually, the change in the battlefield over the third bastion became one noticed by all.

A change, namely—

Jamal: "—Fuck you! Don't turn your back on your enemy! Are you even a General First-Class!"

Moguro Hagane, who had become a huge figure of unbelievable proportions, was struck by vulgar swearing hurled towards their back.

Yes, towards their back. —Moguro Hagane, had taken a giant step towards the Imperial Capital, turning their back on Ram, the Shudraqians, and the throngs of warriors they had encountered on the battlefield.

4

???: "It's no good! She won't wake up at all!"

Shaking her shoulders, shouting at her, and lightly tapping her cheeks did not awaken the limp dragonkin girl in her arms—Madelyn Eschart.

Emilia, after retrieving her from the snow, where she lay motionless, was trying her best to make the hectic battlefield a little better, but she was unable to get any results.

Emilia: "Mezoreia is…"

Emilia, her silver hair fluttering in the cold wind, held Madelyn, still locked in a stubborn sleep with her eyes closed; and once she turned around, she came to witness a battle between two extraordinary beings taking place.

On one corner was a Dragon clad in clouds, separated from ordinary creatures by the sheer nature of their very existence.

And, while the blue-haired boy on the other corner would perhaps look and talk like a small child, he was flying around the battlefield with a fighting style that would put any adult or Emilia to shame.

The battle between the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia and Cecilus Segmunt was now a legendary one.

Cecilus: “Shuwa!”

With the soles of his zori on the icy wall without any apparent aid, Cecilus’s body ran through the air at an angle parallel to the ground.

Without anything to hold on to, the human body would normally fall to the ground. Yet, Cecilus ignored such natural principles and made use of the towering ice wall as a foothold from which to approach the Dragon above Emilia’s head.

Taking one last powerful step, Cecilus’s body caught up to Mezoreia with lightning speed.

Mezoreia flapped its wings and tried to keep its distance, but it was at the mercy of his maneuvers, being hit by the slash of an ice sword to its exposed neck without being able to defend itself, once Cecilus had avoided its swinging claws.

Mezoreia: “—GYAHHHHHHH!”

From the Dragon came a cry of anguish that was quite unlike a Dragon, and then came a shrill noise of the ice sword shattering against the Dragon’s neck, conveying its demise through sound to those around in the environs. Was it the robustness of the Cloud Dragon’s scales that had shattered the ice blade, which had been hardened like iron, or was it the speed with which Cecilus had swung the sword that had made it shatter?

In any case, the disintegrated sword of frost had served its purpose, and Cecilus was defenseless in midair—

Cecilus: “I’m spoiled for choice with this many options to pick and choose from! There are no limits, no petty tricks!”

The voice, its high pitch comparable to the sound of the sword of frost shattering, was an indication of Cecilus’s natural voice and excitement.

Cecilus’s words, spun in a pleasant tone, were followed by a second sound of ice shattering—no, not a second, but a third and a fourth in succession.

Cecilus: “Ch-ch-ch-ch-ch!”

Not unprotected in midair as one might have thought, Cecilus sprung upwards, without fail.

He pulled out a myriad of weapons of frost created by Emilia—weapons created via Icicle Line, one after another, which he had shoved into his clothes.

From his back, his waist, and between his thighs, the items Cecilus had picked up while catching up with Mezoreia, who was escaping into the sky, were swung one after another by Cecilus’s hands while in the air, peeling off Mezoreia’s scales.

Swords, axes, spears, and hammers of ice wreaked havoc, and the Cloud Dragon was put on the defensive due to the violent assault. Or perhaps, even that expression was a misnomer seeing as Mezoreia was unable to defend itself.

Emilia: “Wow…”

Her eyes were able to follow him because she was far away in a spot where she would not get caught in the crossfire, but if Cecilus were to move right in front of her, Emilia would probably not be able to follow his afterimage.

Considering that level of surprise, then perhaps Cecilus would be able to defeat Mezoreia even if Madelyn did not wake up.

Though her heart was not in a state that she would not feel frustration at that.

Emilia: “You’re fighting for someone you care about too, aren’t you?”

Emilia lowered the corners of her amethyst eyes at the sight of Madelyn’s unconscious sleeping face.

Madelyn had always been hostile, angry, and unwilling to listen, but Emilia did not know her well enough to dislike her for it.

What she did know, was that the reason she was angry laid in her feelings for someone she cared about, and Mezoreia had come down to help Madelyn in this way.

If Mezoreia were to die while she was asleep, just what would happen to Madelyn’s mind?

Emilia: “Madelyn, wake up! Wake up already!”

They were in the middle of a battle. Moreover, Cecilus had saved Emilia’s life from peril.

It was impossible for her to be so selfish as to ask him to back off or not to kill Mezoreia.

Therefore, that only left Madelyn. Only she could end the battle without Madelyn herself or Mezoreia, who had come to her aid, losing their lives.

Cecilus: “Oh, I see! So the wing’s joint is weak!”

Despite Emilia’s hopes and considerations, the analysis from Cecilus, who had been cheering for battle, proceeded.

Looking back at her memories of fighting Volcanica, at the time Emilia had had no idea of what the weaknesses of the creature known as a Dragon would be, but Cecilus seemed to be different.

The blow of Cecilus’s sword had met the joint of one of the Dragon’s wings as he had stated, while he continued to fight in the air using the Dragon’s body as a foothold, not falling out of the air, and in the meantime, he dodged the attacks from its wings and tail, performed in an attempt to fling him away.

In an instant, the nature of the scream changed, and blue blood dripped onto the snow-white decoration.

It was proof that a slash had skewered the sturdy scales, reaching beyond them.

Cecilus: “If a Dragon were to lose its wings, what would make it different from a ground dragon? Have you had a chance to learn how to fight while on the ground in your long lifetime?”

He was not mocking it, nor was he belittling it.

Cecilus’s tone of voice had remained the same; if anything, he was saying it to hype himself up. But even Emilia was convinced that what he had been saying was about to become a reality.

If Emilia had been convinced, Mezoreia, who was being directly swung at by the sword, ought to have been convinced of it even further.

A Dragon having its wings cut off, thus falling to the ground.

Emilia, who had no wings and was not a Dragon, could not imagine how unbearable that would be. But she could see how it would take away Mezoreia’s chances of winning.

It was hard to believe that Cecilus, who could not be kept up with even in the sky, could be kept up with on the ground.

Mezoreia: “—This dragon is…!!”

A moment later, Mezoreia’s low voice boomed, trying to sweep aside the impending humiliation.

Kicking Mezoreia in the flank, Cecilus leapt up and his slash drew near the root of its wing. Just before it hit, it did a spinning drill and flipped from down facing to upward facing while airborne.

Looking up towards Cecilus aiming for the wing, Mezoreia’s draconic arm reared up in front of the former.

A human body could easily be torn apart if it were hooked in either the claws or the scales.

Even Cecilus, who could move fast, was no exception to this, making Emilia come near to shrieking. But Emilia's scream was directed not at Cecilus's death, but at something else.

Cecilus: “Hoowee, that was a close one!”

The swinging arm of the Dragon had certainly caught Cecilus in midair.

However, Cecilus aligned his sole against the Dragon arm striking at him, allowing him to run alongside the arm while it unleashed its ferocious blow.

Launching himself using the tip of the Dragon's claw as footing, he started running near the Dragon's elbow.

He had been able to convert a strike that would have blown his body apart upon impact into an opportunity to run and jump out of the way; it was his ridiculous foot speed that had allowed him to escape an otherwise certain death.

Cecilus: “Beauty-san!”

Emilia: “Ah, yes!”

Being called a beauty, Emilia was at loss for any words of modesty in response.

Instinctively sensing why she was being called upon, Emilia leapt away from the tip of the Dragon's arm, and then cast a new weapon of frost in Cecilus's vicinity, who had landed on the ice wall.

Cecilus quickly picked it up, turning to Mezoreia, who was about to give chase, and bent his knees in preparation for another leap.

The distance that had opened between them could be closed in the blink of an eye, but in there laid Mezoreia's chance for victory, as right now no attacks from Cecilus could reach it.

Naturally, Mezoreia would put all its energy into this. —At least, that was what ought to have happened.

Cecilus: “Hm?”

Getting ready for an immediate attack, Cecilus tilted his head while he crouched down.

Despite his tacit understanding and despite the fact that he was giving up the first move, the expected attack did not arrive.

Emilia seemingly harbored the same doubts as Cecilus. Before she even knew it, Emilia understood that this was the final frontier between over victory or defeat as she was pushed to her limits.

And yet, Mezoreia did not move. On the contrary—

Mezoreia: “…”

Immediately before this moment, Mezoreia had tried to swing its Dragon arm to obliterate Cecilus. Having stopped moving in midair, its white eyeballs with pupils and irises black stared at a single point.

At Cecilus, who had tried to put it on the ropes, making it taste humiliation—that was not so.

Aside from Cecilus, who was posturing on the ice wall, and Emilia, who was cradling Madelyn, there was another presence that Mezoreia could not ignore on this white-dyed battlefield.

Mezoreia, still as if it had been struck dead, raised its gaze even higher into the sky.

It stopped and gazed towards a point in the sky much, much higher than its own.

Emilia: “…Is there, something flying?”

Emilia followed Mezoreia’s gaze and focused on the ashen, snow-laden clouds.

Even higher in the sky than where Mezoreia’s huge body floated, there was a shadow of something flying just barely visible to Emilia's eyesight.

The only options Emilia could consider flying in the sky were the Dragon in front of her, the flying dragons that flew in numbers across the battlefield, or Roswaal getting sidetracked during his travel time.

And—

Mezoreia: "—It can't be."

Mezoreia flapped its wings as it muttered this.

The body of the idling Dragon resumed its movement. However, it was not a move to unleash a decisive attack like it was supposed to do just prior,

Cecilus: "Whaaa?! Heyheyhey, wait, wait, this can't be happening?!"

As soon as Cecilus observed its movement, his expression trembled with the greatest of shock.

Until then, his expression had seemed to be happy regardless of what was done to him, but now his eyes darted about quickly in bewilderment. That was only natural. At a time he had expected his opponent to rush in, Mezoreia turning its back like that was quite unbelievable.

Mezoreia: "…"

Not heeding Cecilus's voice, Mezoreia flapped its wings and tore through the sky.

Once the Dragon had decided to fly and started moving, its speed was extraordinary, turning back and rising into the sky so swiftly, that it was like an arrow being shot with full force.

Cecilus: "You think I'll let you do that!!"

In order to prevent the airborne Dragon from escaping, Cecilus bent his knees not for a counterattack, but to explosively unleash the strength required from his legs to chase after the flying Dragon.

The small body made an incredible thrust, causing the thick, huge ice wall to fissure and crumble starting from his sole, as Cecilus's body leapt away.

Flying in a straight line, Cecilus's figure surpassed the Dragon's speed, homing in on its wings. He drew closer. Closer, closer, and closer, until—

Cecilus: "—Ah, damn, looks like I can't reach."

No matter how fast Cecilus was on his feet and how far he could leap, he was incapable of erasing the distance to the Dragon which was already in the sky.

Alas, Cecilus's body could not keep up with Mezoreia, the latter pulling away, and once he hit the apex of his leap, he lost his momentum, dropping back down. Had the Cloud Dragon shifted its aim and gone for Cecilus, even he would perhaps have been in danger.

But Mezoreia did not retaliate. Instead, it rose steadily and ripped through the sky.

And—

Cecilus: "—It's heading into the Imperial Capital?"

5

—Changes had taken place in multiple places in the siege of the Imperial Capital, amongst them, the developments that had occurred in two places were of particular importance.

At the same time these had transpired outside of the Crystal Palace, within the throne room, two Emperors met face-to-face, their gazes so close together that their eyelashes could have touched those of the other.

Abel: "…"

The rebel ringleader, Abel, had been a move behind; however, he switched gears on the spot.

He leaned forwards as to play his best move—or rather, to play the next best move he had, against the person donning a visage identical to his own, who had approached his immediate front before his eyes.

Abel: "—Hk."

A sharp strike was delivered to his left clavicle, his thoughts soldering red from the severe blow.

Taking a look, he saw that what had struck the base of his neck was being held by the hand of the one right before him, an iron fan—the preferred weapon of the person wearing the same visage as his own, an object he knew from sight.

Handling that weapon took something special, and he had harbored doubts of just how powerful a thing it was, many times in the past.

Abel: "…"

The fact that he had attained the answer to his past questions, the pain penetrating his brain, he consciously excised them both from his thoughts.

Picture in your mind the priorities of the present moment and immediately formulate measures to address them. Taking into consideration a combination of feasibility and effectiveness, alongside your injuries, arrange the priorities.

But—

Vincent: "This is not a board game. This is why you are not worthy of being a warrior, it feeeels."

Faster than Abel was able to choose from the myriad of options that had emerged within his head, the warrior displayed the techniques that had permeated his body, his veins, rather than his head.

Mercilessly twisting Abel's arm, he snatched away the thing which was held by the now-weakened limb, and in the moment following that, Abel's vision was covered in dark for an instant.

Abel: "…"

Has he crushed my eyes, or have my eyes been blinded in some way?

A moment's pondering, negated by the fact that his blocked vision returned immediately afterwards. If so, what had been the true meaning behind the other party's actions? And coincident with those thoughts, he realized.

—That again, his own face was covered with something that felt familiar.

Abel: "You—"

And thus his lips, moving faster than his hands or feet, let out a sound as he glared into the black eyes before him.

With those words from Abel, on whom he had put the oni mask that had previously been snatched away, the false Emperor before him—No, Chisha Gold, twisted his lips, the lips on a face that was not his own.

Recognizing that upon his own face was an awfully decadent smile, Abel's eyes widened.

A moment later—

Abel: "…"

—A white light came rushing in, piercing a wall of the throne room, and perforated the chest of the one at the apex of the Empire, Vincent Vollachia, from behind.

Chapter 107:
Chisha Gold

1

The oni mask did not obscure just how the man's face stiffened as he was pushed away.

An expression of that sort would easily lend itself to misinterpretations. Despite his cleverness, or perhaps because of it, the Emperor would often abridge his statements, even when unfavorable; and his countenance was no less taciturn than his mouth.

If there was somebody able to seize the truth behind that expression, it was probably himself, who had spent several years at the Emperor's side.

Chisha: "Or, perhaps—"

Were it the Emperor's little sister, whom he held sacred in every sense of the word, at this place, would she figure it out as well?

In any case, it was pointless to make comparisons now.

After all, in this minuscule, isolated place in time and space, nobody was present other than himself.

2

???: "Chesha Trim, would you be willing to die for my sake?"

Upon their first meeting, having disclosed his name, he received a question treating matters of life and death in exchange.

Chesha, fourteen years old at the time, had believed himself to be mature for his age, but meeting that boy, two years younger than himself, forced him to reconsider.

What the youngster before his eyes exhibited was true maturity, whereas his own case was mere conceit.

???: “…”

Once the question came out, the boy awaited with his black eyes fixed on him.

His hair and irises, both black as if imbued with shadows, were considered uncommon traits, even in a land so rich in racial diversity like the Vollachian Empire. Although Chesha’s eye color differed, he likewise had been born with black hair. For that, he would often become the subject of mockery, so he could sympathize with the boy.

Or maybe not. It felt nothing short of insolent to think that they shared something to sympathize over.

Physical characteristics, however rare they may be, amounted to trifles when compared with what actually made the boy especial. Superficial coincidences aside, the child’s very origins elevated him far from ordinary folks, and that refined, precocious attitude was also a product of his upbringing.

He stood in a unique position, where he must grow this way, lest he would not survive.

To be precise—

Chesha: "—Prince Vincent Abellux."

His name was accompanied by a title, his role acquired at birth.

This black-haired youngster, Vincent, was the son of Drizen Vollachia, sovereign of the Vollachian Empire, and therefore one of several children bestowed with the possibility to one day stand at the pinnacle of the Empire.

He had more than twenty siblings possessed of similar qualifications, but that did not devalue his noble blood in the slightest.

Regardless—

Chesha: "…"

Chesha reminisced on his course of action heretofore, seeking to solve one doubt: how had he ended up encountering such an outstanding lad, not to mention riding the same carriage as him?

All had begun with a simple act of assistance.

He had come across a stranded carriage, its wheel stuck in a ditch on the highway. Pushing and pulling, many attempts were being made in vain to release it. He approached the scene and freed the lurched carriage from the deep ditch by inserting a board and utilizing it as a lever.

Much to his surprise, that vehicle belonged to the lord of the Abellux Domain, and aboard sat that individual famous for his rise to headship through the Miracle of Abellux, Vincent Abellux himself.

"Miracle of Abellux" was the name given to a rebellion that had begun with a vassal of the House of Abellux betraying their long-lasting patronage by conspiring with another family. But albeit their tactics had been brilliant, they had suffered defeat at the hands of an eleven-year-old commander. In the end, all conspirators had been massacred.

His household's members and soldiers having given in to distress and disarray, Vincent, whose name remained unsung back then despite his princely status, had devised a plan for them without delay. By exercising his prodigious finesse, he had thus achieved victory.

The vassal behind the rebellion had underestimated Vincent as an enemy, judging him to be an easy prey whom they could behead for a trophy. Those presumptuous delusions had become the cause of their demise.

Facts came to light, as did apocryphal rumors, giving him quite the outrageous reputation.

As a civilian of the Empire, Chesha heard the stories as well, but he had never pondered the odds of getting involved with him—yet here he was, by a twist of fate, in front of the person dreaded by the public.

And then, that had been cast towards him. —If he was willing to die for him or not.

Chesha: "…"

Whatever had he aimed to earn with that inquiry, Chesha could not discern.

In the first place, he had been invited aboard for two reasons: to thank him for releasing the wheel, and to bring him into the mansion.

Of course, Chesha held not the right to decline. No matter how much he resented this, his opinion carried nonexistent weight.

Hence, he had resigned a fraction of his time and stepped into the carriage. Once he had set foot onto the vehicle, Vincent had begun the interrogation.

It was inappropriate to start that interaction with an acquaintance who only helped him resume his journey. But this boy was a prince by birth, thereby accustomed to having people heed his wishes.

Notwithstanding, he bore a relatively recent record of annihilating an entire family and its retainers, out of fury towards the vassal who had committed treachery against him. Nobody would blame a twelve-year-old for developing an extreme distrust of people after an experience of that ilk.

Perhaps his mind would not be at ease unless he managed to confirm everybody’s allegiance, even that of a casual passerby.

The silence had already extended for ten-odd seconds, more than enough for it to turn disrespectful.

The issue at hand concerned a figure not simply superior, but supreme. Still, he understood what answer he ought to give, and what answer the other wanted.

Obviously, the other wished to hear a single phrase, “I would”.

This was a test for Chesha, as a citizen of the Empire. Either he pledged unwavering loyalty and eternal servitude to the prince, or he would incur the forenamed’s wrath, knowing that within him, potentially, lay the seed of a tyrant.

Enduring the improper distance between them, Chesha bowed his head deeply before the possible sovereign—

Chesha: “—My apologies, but I am afraid I would nooot.”

And so, he spoke the one reply that he should have avoided.

Chesha: “…”

His head still lowered, Chesha cursed himself for committing such a gaffe on impulse. Moreover, he felt the urge to grab his own head in embarrassment at his lack of self-control.

With his impatient nature as the reason, he had gotten in trouble with a powerful individual and ended up banished from his hometown. Time after time he would tell himself that his behavior could ruin his prospects, yet he had never been able to mend it.

And at last, he had addressed the worst possible answer to the worst possible addressee.

He would soon perish in one of the most stupid ways: falling victim to his own idiocy.

However, he could not act brazen enough as to give the desired answer in the desired manner to a question about death, much less with the overbearing tone in which it was delivered.

If his heart were to shatter, were his pride to be extinguished, then, as far as he was concerned, even if he still breathed, he was dead too.

He did not cherish Vollachia's praxis, but he was nonetheless a man of the Empire.

Therefore, he held no regrets towards his response.

If anything, he felt sorry for taking his pitiful frustrations out on a boy who had merely sought something that would assuage his own trust issues.

At least, that guilt would disappear once the rageful blade unattached his head from his shoulders—

Vincent: "Perfect. Maintain that outlook, for you shall be serving me hereafter."

Chesha: "—. I will?"

Vincent: "Do not end your affirmations in a rising tone. Otherwise, they shall come across as interrogative."

Chesha: "I did not err, the pronunciation was intentional… So, does this mean you will not execute me?"

Vincent: "Seconds after securing you? That would be senseless."

Closing one eye, Vincent scowled with a hint of annoyance.

Receiving a meaningless question irritated him, yet he did not protest when denied a vow of loyalty. Chesha found that strange, but he kept his composure and reexamined the situation.

For some reason, Vincent seemed to overlook Chesha's irreverence.

Far from that, he seemed to consider recruiting Chesha as his retainer.

Chesha: "I apologize, but I cannot wrap my head around this. Is it a hobby of yours to jest with those you intend to kill before taking their lives?"

Vincent: "Do tell, why do you insist that I kill you with such obstinacy? That is far more incomprehensible, I dare say."

Chesha: "I do not mean to offend, but it is well-known that you do not take kindly to those who oppose you."

By the time he realized that his comment was again of the undue sort, it had already escaped his mouth.

However, since he had succeeded in committing one transgression, Chesha shifted into a bolder stance, ready to find out how many more he could commit before reaching the threshold, putting his life on the line.

Like whenever he enjoyed a book, cultivated new knowledge, or proved his theories through execution, he was determined to decipher the prince's unrevealed thoughts.

If he died in consequence, so be it.

While Chesha surrendered almost his whole future to embark on this reckless undertaking, Vincent, now aware of the context, nodded with an "Ah" before continuing,

Vincent: "If you are referring to the latest rebellion, I made an example of that family because it was necessary. You ought to collar any wight who might be aspiring to attempt the same deed. Fear produces the best effects for that."

Chesha: “And is that also why you had the instigating servant’s advance troops dismembered and put on display on the road?”

Vincent: “If a life must be ended, then you had better exploit it to the utmost first. People should die in an efficient manner.”

So replied Vincent, his chin resting on his hand, as he sat inside the carriage. His austere, realistic perspective left Chesha at a loss for words.

What Chesha had mentioned was the first and main counterattack that Vincent had launched in order to suppress the rebellion—slaughtering the enemy vanguard, plus the barbarous profanation of their cadavers.

After enduring the anguish of being mangled while alive, their corpses had been lined up within the battlefield. Hearsay had spread that getting caught would result in similar punishment, and thus, the other traitors had chosen to disregard their agreement with the primary conspirator and relegate themselves to the role of spectators.

Alone, bereft of any escape route, said conspirator had gone to confront Vincent, only to end up ensnared in the latter’s sanguinary stratagem. They, alongside their relatives and retainers, had perished savoring the same hell that the other soldiers had.

Naturally, with the emergence of this information, the public had reshaped its notion of Vincent Abellux into that of a brutal, bloodthirsty prince. But—

Chesha: “—Are those rumors of your own creation, perhaps?”

Vincent: “If my sole presence elicits dread in you, I can at least say that their purpose has not gone unfulfilled.”

Chesha: “Hahaaa, good to hear, I guess…”

More and more did Vincent’s thoughts sound too impressive for ones that had sprung from a twelve-year-old.

On the other hand, although Vincent had pardoned his irreverence, Chesha did not expect to be capable of performing whatever mission Vincent had in store for him.

Vincent: “What exact purpose do I expect from you, you wonder?”

As if he had read Chesha’s mind, Vincent delivered the next question.

It was vaguer than the previous one, and moreover, it required Chesha to unravel the mystery with his own brain. Surely, there was an arduous mission meant for him, but he needed to pinpoint what it entailed.

A very challenging problem, indeed.

Born into the Imperial Family, Vincent was destined to take part in the Empire’s imminent rite sooner or later. What purpose could he find in a mere plebeian like Chesha?

Chesha: “I doubt I can do much more than help you pull a jammed wheel ouuut.”

Vincent: “And that shall benefit me.”

Chesha: “Hoho, I assume you are planning to go get stuck in a ditch quite often from here on out, if you require my strength that much?”

He felt almost inclined to congratulate himself for reaching a new milestone in disrespect with that aggravating quip.

Yet, upon hearing it, no part of Vincent’s countenance twitched.

Vincent: “Correct. The road I am traversing is fraught with ditches, and I cannot avoid all of them. However, I cannot stay in a ditch waiting for the issue to solve itself; otherwise, death shall come for me. And that means, I shall need a method to pull myself out whenever I get stuck.”

Chesha: “…Before we continue, are you sure this discussion is still about wheels?”

Vincent: “I have not belied the subject once ever since we began talking.”

The bizarre reply made a chill run down Chesha’s body, not because he felt threatened, but because he finally assimilated that his conversational partner was a phenomenon.

In addition, the aforementioned phenomenon held him in oddly high regard.

Chesha concluded so from the fact that, despite the irreverent attitude adopted, the rude replies given, the impolite retorts uttered, Vincent appeared uninterested in killing him.

Was that proof of Chesha’s merits, or proof of Vincent’s principles?

Regardless, he would never have imagined that a day this eventful awaited him upon waking up this morning in his shabby lodging.

Vincent: “…”

While Chesha remained silent, Vincent looked at him, head poised on his hand, one eye shut.

That gesture gave off the odious impression that he was basking in the satisfaction of shutting his opponent’s mouth. Losing all strength to resist, Chesha turned his disgruntled gaze towards Vincent, and arrived at a sudden realization.

Chesha: “I see, you never close both eyes at the same timeee.”

Vincent: “There you have it.”

Chesha: “Huh?”

Putting a hand to his pointed chin, Vincent replied to Chesha’s offhand observation with a nod.

Unable to grasp the meaning of that sentence, Chesha tilted his head.

Vincent: “If you wish to know the reason as to why I did not execute you, therein it lies."

Vincent's explanation was short, but his mien indicated that he deemed it complete. The moment Chesha noticed that, everything fell into place.

The precocious boy put many adults to shame with the schemes that he concocted, and with the unbridled way he wielded his talent as a Prince of Vollachia, yet nonetheless he was twelve years of age.

—If he were not, he would have already learned how naive it was to expect those around him to possess wisdom matching his own.

3

—Chisha Gold.

That was the new name conferred on Chesha Trim upon entering the Abellux estate as Vincent's recruit.

Chisha: "Since my family is back at my hometown, I would rather keep my name from becoming well-known to avoid causing them unwarranted trouble. Though, I suppose you would find it easy to murder all my worries away…"

Vincent: "You seem very obstinate in portraying me as a bloodthirsty brute. Are you also responsible for the sobriquet of Sanguinary Prince that people call me in the streets, perchance?"

Chisha: "Why, I believed that was another one of your fear-based strategies. I have heard accounts about parents mentioning you in cautionary tales for children, as in, "Behave, or else the Sanguinary Prince will come"."

Vincent: "Come, but for what purpose, according to them? As if I would bother."

Chisha: "Oh, but what if you show up and hire them against their will, like you did to me? Pretty frightening, if you ask me."

Vincent: "I advise you to watch your tongue, or I might end up justifying those fabrications with your blood."

Conversations with Vincent blurred the line between seriousness and jest.

Should the need arise, Vincent would pay with somebody else's life, no hesitation. He would never do that if unnecessary, though. He handled human lives the same way he handled money or goods.

When consorting with him, one could not ignore that he regarded whichever as limited resources with equal value.

The reason for the name change to Chisha Gold matched his statement; he was worried that somebody in his hometown would turn indignant at the news of Chesha Trim's promotion and involve his family in retaliation.

Notwithstanding, even if his family were harmed, he would not go out of his way to help.

Albeit callous in the eyes of some, a certain distance existed between him and his kin, and just with that he was being compassionate enough towards the relatives who had neglected him in the most critical of moments.

Funnily or not, the surname Gold pertained to a family exterminated by Vincent as a punishment for treachery.

Perhaps it had been a little jape of revenge from Vincent towards Chesha's rudeness; but that aside, it misled the public into rumoring that he had spared one descendant of Gold, while condemning them to endure the humiliation of failing to escape his control, which reinforced his standing as the Sanguinary Prince.

As for the first name, Vincent had suggested a single letter modification, so it sounded similar to his original one, just like Chesha had hoped. Since he had had no motive to complain, and no malice seemed to be implicated this time, albeit adjudging it frugal, he had approved the idea.

Despite everything, after a lifetime of being ostracized for his proclivity to theory over practice and for his social clumsiness, Chesha's rebirth as Chisha brought a welcome change.

Never could his remote village have provided him with so many books and activities to indulge in.

He had gotten the opportunity to resettle, far from those who had unjustly scorned him for being inept at tilling or harvesting the fields, and he would never trade that for anything in the world.

However—

Vincent: “We are in the next ditch, Chisha. Prove your utility.”

Every time, those words warned him that Vincent was about to harass him over a problem leagues above stuck carriage wheels, initiating a discussion that would persist until a solution sprang.

Vincent’s drive made him a force to be reckoned with.

In what way did Vincent view and perceive the world, tackling various issues at the same time, with consistent focus as well, despite bearing two eyes and one head like ordinary men?

Sure enough, a lord held the duty to involve himself in his domain’s matters, but it was an unscrupulous thing to anticipate from a twelve-year-old, even more so when he lacked adult figures to rely on.

But any commiserations that an outsider might direct at Vincent would disperse upon being faced with his performance.

Being associated with Vincent demanded a vast array of specialized knowledge from Chisha, which granted him no time to loiter.

As soon as they solved an issue, a new one appeared; sometimes, another issue would surge while the current one was still at hand. And while he racked his brains over those different problems at once, the Abellux Domain continued evolving.

The quality of life improved, while the residents’ initial apprehension transformed into commendation.

Vincent had the ability to turn terror into admiration and servitude into adoration, both well-deserved.

He did not bother with others’ opinions of himself, and therein lay the reason for which he held that aforementioned ability.

Vincent: “Chisha, you have educated yourself well on the flood control system. Now, I must discharge that incompetent administrator from his post. I shall adduce his charges of embezzlement heretofore and have him decapitated.”

Chisha: “In my humble opinion, such charges do not warrant a decapitation.”

Vincent: “So, he earned his profits due to effort? Is that what you are telling me?”

Chisha: “…This topic is a little too far from my specialtyyy.”

Vincent: “If what he has pocketed were offset by his work, I would ignore him. Otherwise, retribution is due. By refusing to correct his misconduct, even after repeated warnings, he himself depleted the allowances that I conceded.”

Beneath Vincent’s drastic initiative and resoluteness hid his fastidious side, contrasting with his expectations towards others and, as an underlying factor, inclining him to criticize those unable to meet them as slothful.

Vincent was no meritocrat, though; he did not disrelish people solely for being incompetent.

Were he to put his own doctrine into words—

Vincent: “—One ought to perform the vocation that corresponds with their caliber.”

He wished for everybody to live with all their might, no respite.

Knowing this, the boy named Vincent Abellux and the circumstances behind his fastidious perfectionism seemed to start shining in a different light.

Unbelievable as it might sound, Vincent did not possess unwavering confidence, nor did he take pride in himself.

For more, he constantly hungered.

For more, he constantly lamented.

For more, he constantly struggled.

At the core of Vincent's being lay a driving force. It was not gratitude towards the princely status bestowed upon him, but a furious determination to fulfill the role that said status demanded.

And the motive that made Vincent harbor these fierce sentiments was—

Vincent: "—There is one despicable man, Stride Vollachia his name."

Some time after joining Vincent, Chisha found himself frowning at the words that his master had spoken.

Luckily, or rather, proving Vincent's discretion accurate, Chisha indeed had somewhat of a talent to pull wheels out of ditches, thanks to which he had managed to not lose his job.

That said, he had been steered down this path little-by-little.

His position's pros and cons had revealed themselves one after the other, tipping the scales in a way that made it difficult to tell which side weighed more.

And Chisha was still in the process of pondering that, when, for the first time, Vincent exposed something unrelated to work, something stemming from somewhere in his heart.

Chisha: "Stride Vollachia, is it? Pardon my ignorance, my studies must still be insufficient, considering I have never heard that name."

Vincent: "No, your studies are not to blame. In fact, your life would be at risk if you knew that information. That man's existence has been long erased from the records of the Imperial Family of Vollachia, after all."

Chisha: “…”

Chisha thought about how Vincent might have just endangered him by disclosing that so incautiously, but, given his position, it was difficult to interrupt the latter once he had started talking.

Besides, he was interested in that man who had been ousted from the Imperial Family.

Chisha: “Well, ousting someone of the Imperial Family does not sound possible. Even if it were done, their blood still flows through their veins. Plus, that is what the Imperial Selection Ceremony exists for.”

The Imperial Selection Ceremony, held in order to determine the Empire’s next sovereign.

This ceremony, a competition where the Emperor’s offspring would kill each other to reach the pinnacle of the Empire, was a prime representation of the nation’s essence, with origins dating back to its very founding.

The last one standing would be crowned Emperor.

And as the Emperor of Vollachia, they could seize the Yang Sword, emblem of their reign.

Chisha: “Though, in theory, one can live without fighting if they renounce their right to inherit the throne, or so I have heard.”

Vincent: “A mere prevarication. That is fantasy, naught but a tool to cull beforehand those who, despite possessing the right to power, lack the courage to triumph in the ceremony. And that is to say, your concerns are correct.”

Chisha: “So ousting a member of the Imperial Family is unthinkable.”

Vincent: “Yet, Stride Vollachia suffered that unthinkable penalty, and was therefore disengaged from the Ceremony’s ensemble. Even so, given that the Imperial Selection Ceremony progressed without delay afterwards, that wight most likely did not elude death.”

Vincent's gaze, colder than usual, was tinged with deep disdain towards the man in question.

Stride Vollachia, the man who had been removed from his position as part of Vollachia's Imperial Family, erased from the historical records—He was of the exact sort that evoked Vincent's fury.

To those who did not perform their assigned role nor exert their natural abilities to the fullest, he offered zero clemency.

Chisha: "…Even so, how come you know of his existence, when no one is supposed to, Vincent-sama? Did a chatty gentleman of high status tell you, perhaps?"

Vincent: "Never afraid to step over the hierarchical ditch with your insolence, are you? —The journal."

Chisha: "Journal?"

Vincent: "Yes, Stride Vollachia's journal. It was concealed in the Crystal Palace's library, where I found it. Shame that such an intriguing tome turned out to be full of unreadable, nonsensical inscriptions."

The way Vincent curled his lips in displeasure was a gesture of unmitigated loathing.

Vincent generally took a tolerant approach when digesting and evaluating things. He went through said thought process with impressive speed, which, for better or for worse, almost made it seem like he judged without prior deliberation. It would strike anybody as unusual to witness that same Vincent displaying such negative emotions.

Chisha: "And what was inscribed in it? Would you ever show it to me?"

The topic piqued his interest.

Nevertheless, deep down, he knew well that his attention was digressing from the journal's contents, towards discovering what put his troublesome master in so much anguish.

Aware of Chisha's inner thoughts or not, Vincent closed one of his black eyes and, piercing him with his gaze, spoke.

Vincent: "I shall not show it to you. —Not that anthology of worthless delusions about the Observers and things akin."

4

???: "Well, no offense but you seem like quite the overthinker, always looking for reasons and whatnot. Chesha, I don't think normal people make schemes while frowning as intensely as His Excellency or you do."

Chisha: "—First, please mind your words; second, my name is Chisha."

???: "Oh my, I'm so sorry! What could be more discourteous than mistaking a fellow actor's name?! I'll reflect very deeply about what I've done. Chisha, Chisha, Chisha, Chisha, Chisha, Chisha, Chisha!"

Chisha: "…"

With energy and nothing else worth describing, the blue-haired boy kept talking.

The boy, named Cecilus Segmunt, was of the same class as Chisha years ago: somebody whom Vincent had sensed potential in and thus picked up.

If one possessed great skill and the readiness to exercise it, Vincent would engage them.

Vincent questioned neither one's origins nor status. While these ideals had earned him some detractors, none of them could deny that the Abellux Domain was blooming further every year, under his rule.

Notwithstanding, albeit prestigious origins were not a requisite, the gap in educational level made it too difficult to find another civil officer of excellence among commoners. Hence, Chisha's workload never abated.

However—

Cecilus: “A good military officer needs nothing but pure brawn. Though, in my case, as an actor, I need to have splendor as well, but I’m already one of a kind in both of those aspects anyway!”

Chisha: “You sound rather confident… But you probably do have enough strength to vaunt. Which, ironically, makes it more bothersome, but that is no concern of mineee.”

The energetic little child—perhaps he was too old to be called that, being six or seven years younger than Chisha; although doing so felt natural for the latter, now eighteen years of age. Unfortunately, Cecilus lacked the characteristic cuteness of boys his age.

And not due to his appearance or conduct, but due to that skill of which he boasted with pride.

Chisha: “…”

After joining the House of Abellux, Chisha himself had trained in martial arts, for bodyguarding and self-defense purposes, but he was aware that his proficiency was that of an average man. And rather than moving his own body, he was suited to moving crowds.

Of course, he ought to forget said pretext and avoid neglecting his training henceforth if he wished to improve. But even in the eyes of someone as inexperienced as himself, Chisha could tell that Cecilus’s power surpassed the norm by far.

Chisha had already met a phenomenon of ingenuity.

Yet, he had never imagined that he would come across a phenomenon of armed might like this one.

Chisha: “The more I know, the less I understand what Vincent-sama… What His Excellency wishes.”

Cecilus: “Oh, there you go again with the deep thoughts, Chisha. But don’t fret, I’m here to give you the answer. That’s what people call… foreshadowing, yes!”

So declared Cecilus, thrusting a nimble finger towards Chisha, whose eyes widened.

Looking at the other's reaction, Cecilus retracted his finger and continued.

Cecilus: "Wait, you've never heard the term? Let me explain then. Foreshadowing means showing important information in a story, but disguising it in a…"

Chisha: "Yes, I know the definition of "foreshadowing". The expression you see now on my face means that I cannot fathom why you brought that up."

Cecilus: "Ah, I see! It's pretty simple, just so you know. I'm telling you, what you and His Excellency have in common is that constant urge to find the meaning of every little thing."

Amused, Cecilus brought his hands together in front of his chest as he laughed. Then, he broke the clap and revolved on the spot, pointing with open hands at all that surrounded him.

Cecilus: "Alright, let's suppose that there's indeed meaning to everything! Which is to say, all that stuff you can't explain at this moment serves as foreshadowing for what's to unfold sooner or later in this plot! Heart-pounding, isn't it?!"

Chisha: "The expenditure of unaccounted funds and the amassing of goods of dubious provenance do not quite strike me as foreshadowing for the future, but as evidence of prevalent corruption and bribery."

Cecilus: "Do you hear yourself?! What you just mentioned is stuff you can solve in the present! Meanwhile, I'm talking about that which you cannot. Come on, Chisha, I know you're so much smarter than this!"

Chisha: "…"

Bringing his spinning feet to an abrupt halt, Cecilus objected, brows furrowed in annoyance.

While it displeased him to see Cecilus annoyed at him without a clear motive, somehow, Chisha found a tiny scrap of salvation in those words.

As he toiled to satisfy the demands that Vincent had imposed on him along with his post, one doubt had lingered at the back of his mind: why had he been the one seized?

Years had elapsed, in which he had even gotten to know Vincent as a person, yet he still was unable to explain that.

Because that problem did not pertain to Vincent, but to Chisha himself.

Without an answer to cure his woes, remaining at Vincent's side had taken a heavy toll on his psyche, but now—

Chisha: "…If that is the case, could my presence itself be foreshadowing something, too?"

Cecilus: "Oh? You've already absorbed the knowledge, impressive. Well, with how intelligent you are, no wonder you learn so quickly! Now that deserves my absolute respect, I could never do the same!"

Chisha: "If you wish to show me respect, how about you start addressing me with an honorific? I am your senior, superior to you in both age and rank, am I not?"

Cecilus: "Awww, but addressing a friend with an honorific feels a tad too distant, don't you think? We're going to be on the same boat, now and for many days to come. So let's go ahead and throw all those pesky formalities out the window, shall we?!"

Chisha: "Friend…"

With those unreserved words, plus a pat to his shoulder, the boy left Chisha speechless.

While he was surprised at the familiarity with which the former could close the distance between them, too, the true shock had come when he realized that, in his path thus far, not once had somebody called him a friend.

In the few years since forsaking his hometown, being taken by Vincent, studying assiduously under the aforementioned, drudging away at work, he had not become close to anybody.

Of course, although there had been people who had appreciated him for business reasons, those did not count here.

Chisha: “…”

Cecilus: “What’s the matter? Hm, maybe you’re right, should I start with the honorific, then? Like in those stories where the distance keeps shrinking one step at a time, until the end, when the two realize their paths have crossed! That kinda development is charming in its own way, so I wouldn’t mind turning the rudder towards…”

Chisha: “No, you do not need to. —His Excellency is one who favors a job done with dispatch.”

It was not like he had grasped Cecilus’s drivel in its entirety, but if, in the end, they were going to arrive at that destination anyway, then he preferred to take the briefest route.

While deriding himself for harboring thoughts so deeply tainted by Vincent’s doctrine, Chisha chose not to negate Cecilus’s ideals and, instead, accept them.

Were he to mimic that man’s speech style—

Chisha: “I shall expect you to wield your power when necessary, for the sake of seeing His Excellency’s desires fulfilled. That, no doubt, is the reason why you were plucked…”

Cecilus: “That’s foreshadowing the role he’ll need me to carry out, right?! You can trust me, Chisha! I might be useless at anything that’s not fighting, but in battle, I won’t let anyone catch up with me!”

Chisha: “I look forward to that.”

The slender child puffed out his thin chest as he bragged about his hypothetical feats, but Chisha did not laugh at him.

In accordance with Vincent’s discretion, as well as his own, he would give Cecilus Segmunt a place corresponding with his caliber.

Moreover—

Chisha: “—I suppose, for now, I must await the day I will perform the function I foreshadow.”

Assimilating the role that his much younger friend had mentioned, Chisha whispered.

And as if fate had listened to him, the Imperial Selection Ceremony, involving Vincent Abellux, commenced around six months after this event.

5

With the death of the former Emperor, Drizen Vollachia, ensued the commencement of the Imperial Selection Ceremony.

Because of his indisputable talents, Vincent Abellux had been regarded as an enemy by his other siblings, being caught in a besiegement made up of concentrated attacks from the latter, in one opportunity.

However, as it turned out, Vincent lived up to his initial reputation and expectations, winning the Imperial Selection Ceremony with overwhelming strength.

Having vanquished all his siblings, having been adorned with the crown of blood of the Vollachian Empire, Vincent Abellux—No, the Seventy-Seventh Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, was born.

Part of the bloody path that Vincent had trod, part of the great river of blood that Vincent had pooled had perhaps been due, in part, to the contributions of Chisha and Cecilus, who had served as his subordinates.

However, in regards to this Imperial Selection Ceremony, the role that had been expected of Chisha, in the plan carried out for the sake of Vincent’s victory—had been something quite different from “freeing a wheel from a ditch”.

During the battle, Chisha's entrusted role had been to make the very last move on the board—

Chisha: "—I see your younger sister has escaped unharmed. She may have quite the fierce and uninhibited personality, but I am certain she understands her predicament. I believe things have been settled, for the time being."

It was in an office, namely a room within the Crystal Palace in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

In that room used by the Emperor, who stood at the top of the nation's politics, Chisha experienced having that familiar face regarding him back, a situation which would likely take him a while to deal with in this calm of a manner.

Even though the Emperor himself sat atop a chair of considerable authority, he showed no sign of breaking his usual demeanor. Even when assured that his victory in the Imperial Selection Ceremony was unshakeable, he did not even show a glimpse of a smile from a sense of accomplishment.

Never did Vincent smile. At least, not while passing as a prince or the Emperor.

When not playing as the prince, his lips would actually come apart and form a mischievous grin. However, the opportunities for that seemed like they would decrease significantly in comparison to then, as well.

He had become the Emperor. And thus, he would not permit a moment during which the Emperor was not the Emperor.

—No, he could spare a singular moment when that was not the case.

Chisha: "I could not believe my ears when you inquired about a way to save Prisca-sama."

Assuming that no one else was listening, Chisha spoke of the greatest secret of this iteration of the Vollachian Empire, one in which he was directly complicit.

Coinciding with the conclusion of the Imperial Selection Ceremony, the birth of a new Emperor was announced.

But the fact of the matter was that the Imperial Selection Ceremony, in which only the last of the Imperial Family would succeed to the throne, had not been carried out fully. —Two candidates had remained at the end.

These two, were Vincent Abellux and Prisca Benedict.

Prisca Benedict was described as a tragic princess who had gulped down a poisonous cup herself, losing her life.

In actuality, she had indeed drunk the poison, yet she had not lost her life.

She had not consumed the poison from a cup, instead having done so to save her squire, who had been so concerned for her master as to cling to the possibility of saving her life.

The venom had arrested Prisca's heart just long enough for everything to be concluded before it resumed beating anew.

The Imperial Selection Ceremony was over, Prisca Benedict had been interred in a tomb.

Vincent Abellux became Emperor, and Prisca Benedict assumed a different identity, a life not by that name—.

Chisha: "Supposing I were from a family that had served the Empire since ancient times, I might have had to admonish His Excellency for his outrageous wiiish. However, I hail from a family of commoners."

There was no basis for which prestige or tradition were to be appreciated in particular.

A certain amount of respect was to be given, their value was even to be acknowledged, but they ought not be misunderstood as something above all. In the Vollachian Empire, prestige and tradition were merely tolerated.

And that was why—

Chisha: “I had not the slightest bit of hesitation in partaking in this plan.”

Vincent: “…”

As the Emperor, Vincent, kept his silence, his innermost thoughts were perhaps unfathomable, but his actions were clear.

From the very start, amongst his many siblings, Prisca had always been special to Vincent. Although Prisca shone brightly in Chisha’s eyes because of her sagacity, it was not only because of her ability that Vincent had an eye on his younger sister, even though he was much older than her.

Despite being akin to the very picture of arrogance, Prisca respected Vincent and treated him truly as a blood-related elder brother.

Since the Imperial Selection Ceremony was the fate of the Imperial Family of Vollachia, they mutually acknowledged that they were not allowed to coexist, even with compromises—Until Vincent tore that fate apart by his own hand.

This came much to the delight of Chisha, and, above everything else, as a relief.

Vincent’s approach was to demonstrate his full capabilities within the position and role he had been bestowed with.

Vincent had not changed his ways from the day of their meeting until the present day. So, what kind of rationale could have possibly manifested from the fact that he, of all people, had chosen to permit Prisca’s survival?

If she were found alive, he himself would be endangered, and violence would break out whereupon the foundation of trust that the Emperor had built up in the Vollachian Empire could be lost.

As Emperor of Vollachia, what argument could he have that could justify it?

None. Of course he would have none. It had not been a decision made rationally.

It had been a desire born of emotion, a wish, a prayer.

Vincent Abellux had not wanted to kill his beloved sister.

Henceforth, Prisca Benedict had been kept alive, and Vincent wore a crown of falsehoods.

That had made Chisha happy.

Vincent had made the judgment that he wanted to bring Prisca back to life, rather than having her be kept alive, and so, he had asked Chisha for a way to get rid of the obstacle—the wheel stuck in the ditch.

Chisha: "Foreshadowing, was it?"

The nonsense Cecilus had uttered before the Imperial Selection Ceremony began crossed his mind.

Even something that in the moment did not make any sense, something which seemed meaningless, could be found out to possess meaning in the distant future. It could even be understood as having been present for that very purpose.

Like his own position and actions, as well as Chisha's, were perhaps the foundation for that future.

Chisha: "Well, it truly is annoying to admit that what Cecilus was talking about was pertinent, and I can see him getting overly enthused, so I will never tell him."

Vincent: "You have been this way for some time now, however I have been giving it some thought recently. Have you completely lost your color, and along with it, everything you have cultivated whilst in service of mineself?"

Chisha: "Surprisingly, I have been doing quite well, ever since I skirted the oblivion of death."

Knowing it was disrespectful, Chisha shrugged in front of Vincent. The Emperor changed his posture, but he would not rebuke the former for that unless it were done in public.

Having changed his manner of referring to himself, in Vincent's sable eyes, Chisha's reflection was as he had stated: completely white and bereft of color.

During the Imperial Selection Ceremony, after being nearly killed in a stand-off with an enemy and then returning from the brink of death, Chisha's black hair had been drained of all its color, turning completely white.

Since then, he had been wearing white, exactly the opposite of the black attire he had been donning, for some reason or another. Having even repainted the iron fan he used out of preference, he was thus completely white, his clothing uniform.

Of course, that had not been just for his amusement.

After being on the verge of death, and after losing his color, Chisha had awakened to a strange "ability". In order to handle this "ability" of painting himself in the color of others, he had to keep constant awareness.

A measure necessary, as to imply to himself that he was able to dye himself in any color.

In any case, the particulars of this "ability" had been kept from Vincent as well. He would not disclose it to anyone, naturally. Let alone to the loose-lipped Cecilus, or to others with whom he had little connection.

It was always a good idea to have an ace up one's sleeve, a trump card, or a secret move or two ready to go.

However—

Chisha: "If Your Excellency would finally release me for the great work I have done, then I believe no longer would there be any need for such machinations."

Vincent: “Suppose you were me, do you believe I would have you dismissed and alive, being aware of a fact of utmost importance, one that must be kept under wraps, in the Empire, and let you sleep peacefully at night?”

Chisha: “Developing a hypothetical within another hypothetical is somewhat bad manners, but I guess losing my head before I leave the castle is all I have in store right nooow.”

Vincent: “If you comprehend that, and if you value your life, then continue to serve me obediently. So long as you can prove that you are of use to me, I shall keep your head attached to your torso.”

As he declared so in an arrogant tone, Vincent rested his chin atop his hands, his elbows on the desk.

It was difficult to tell if either of them was serious in this frivolous exchange, but it was necessary for the Emperor, who did not spare any words for others, to let him speak out like this and make sure.

As per that exchange, Chisha Gold’s status and the role expected of him would go unaltered, though Vincent had become the Emperor, but—

Chisha: “—The state of the Sacred Vollachian Empire may or may not change.”

Already, the radiance of the Yang Sword, the absolute symbol of the Vollachian Empire, had been betrayed.

The Imperial Selection Ceremony, which had taken place ever since the Empire’s establishment, had been finalized in a way different to how it had been until now. Thus, what would normally follow the Ceremony would also change dramatically, in the future in quintessence.

Going down that path, prioritizing his own desires and opting to save his younger sister. Vincent did all that.

A new path would be opened, a path different from the one that had existed thus far. Chisha found himself slightly excited by that fact and the anticipation that came with it.

However, he would never display it in his expression, in his words, or in his attitude.

That was, because he was conscious of his friend’s, of Cecilus’s bad influence.

6

—The days passed by at a dizzying pace.

The former system of the Nine Divine Generals was restored, and the rankings of the Imperial Nobility were reset.

By purging those who had become a mere shell of their former selves and enjoyed high status because of history alone, the way of the Vollachian Empire, which flew the national flag of a “wolf pierced by swords”, was enforced inside and outside its borders without exception.

The way of doing things that had lasted till the previous Emperor, who had unthinkingly believed the unwritten rule that the strong were absolutely right and had let the Empire fall to ruin internally, was completely disavowed and the initial principle that the strong were to be respected was scrubbed out.

Those who sat on their bloodlines and family’s social standing were robbed of what had represented them, while those who had been waiting vigilantly for the opportunity to come around were given a chance to take on the challenge.

From the outside, Vincent Vollachia’s reign would have perhaps seemed no different from the history of the Empire thus far.

However, its reality was quite different. Those who knew what was going on behind the scenes experienced it firsthand.

Before long, it became something that many in the Empire, and even those outside in other countries, would likely come to know.

About the grandeur of Vincent Vollachia’s remaking and reforming of the Empire.

Useless conflicts would cease, and absurd fights to the death would no longer be applauded.

Proof of strength was no longer based on an individual's military prowess, and those who held ambitions not suitable for their stature would prove with their lives the difficulty of truly fulfilling those ambitions.

It was as if they were watching the process of completely painting over the criteria for what was "strong".

However—

???: "I'll be the First, Anya'll be the Second, and after Olbart joins, Chisha'll be the Fourth. His Excellency's choices aren't so bad, but Chisha, your complexion doesn't look so great, does it?"

Chisha: "I am the Fourth because otherwise it does not quite sit right for me. As Cecilus knows as well, I…"

Cecilus: "On physical strength, absolutely. Well, well, I'm not claiming to understand your feelings at all, but I guess this is the way the pecking order's determined in the world ruled by HisExcellency. It's hard to know which is which when there are mixed standards, but I'm feeling rather positive about it."

Vincent: "What is the reason for that? Aside from the fact that you are immovable as First."

Cecilus: "You took the words right out of my mouth! That you did is the biggest reason. But that's not the only one. I think having Chisha there will change your point of view."

Chisha: "Point of view… In other words, can I take that to mean that of one's way of fighting?"

Cecilus: "That's the gist. If me and you go at it, Chisha, you'll die in the blink of an eye for sure; however, what if you start with a thousand men? It might take a thousand seconds!"

Chisha: "I doubt it would. But I understand where you are coming from. While I gain a thousand seconds…"

Cecilus: “His Excellency, or someone else, can fulfill their purpose. My one greatest flaw, as the leading actor of this world, is that there’s only one of me in this world.”

There were those whose natures would not change at all, even if they gained a higher standing or if the way of the Empire changed.

However, Cecilus embodied that first principle. The reason for why was that, in the most ancient eras of the Vollachian Empire, “the strong” had garnered respect from everyone.

Everyone throughout the Empire knew that the one in question was unpopular, did not have a personality that would be liked by everyone, and did not have the character to be an example for anyone.

Still, should anyone be asked who the strongest in the Empire was, their chests would swell with pride as if they were tied to him personally.

And they would say that it was Cecilus Segmunt who was the most powerful being in the Empire.

The fact that Chisha was considered to be able to gain a thousand seconds if he were to gather people against Cecilus, had also been the reason why he had felt at ease with the position of Fourth of the Nine Divine Generals, going without firmly refusing it.

Hence, albeit he was of the opinion that he was being overvalued, Chisha had resigned himself to that position and role. For the most part, it worked well.

If there was any problem, it was—

???: “—My my, isn’t this luuucky~, General First-Class Chisha. Today’s fortunes are good, aren’t they?”

That person, who had started a conversation like that in a friendly manner, gave him a small smile.

When it seemed that everything was going favorably in the Empire, the ominous feeling he held towards the being that had introduced themself as a Stargazer, and whose comings and goings to the Crystal Palace were permitted, had felt like a black spot on his white body.

—The fact that the ominous feeling had been no mistake was proven years later.

Stargazer: "—The coming of the Great Disaster has been passed down in a commandment. It is regrettable, Your Excellency."

In the center of the Emperor's office, a man who by all rights should not have been there had announced that with an expression that felt like they were trying to say, "I am solemn from the bottom of my heart".

Chisha, who was present at the meeting, frowned at the words of Ubilk the Stargazer.

Chisha: "…The Great Disaster?"

It was something he did not recall having heard of, yet at the same time it sounded like something that could not possibly be a good sign.

It could also be called a mass-scale disaster. A prediction that it would be no ordinary calamity could be conjectured. However, what disturbed Chisha was the one addition that Ubilk had appended.

Just why was this man still saying things like it being a pity, and so forth, in regards to Vincent?

Chisha: "Ubilk-dono, I have no doubts about your authenticity as a Stargazer. On numerous occasions, you have been able to anticipate insurrections, cataclysms, and matters that were liable to occur within our country. In many cases, your prophecies have helped to limit the damage, Ubilk-dono."

Ubilk: "Pardon me, General First-Class Chisha. Hooowever~, I have one correction. I didn't make any prophecies. I'm only conveying the whispers of stars. I can't take credit for that."

Chisha: “…I respect your opinion, Ubilk-dono. Of course, we need to be prepared to deal with the Great Disaster, but may I ask what you expect to happen?”

Ubilk’s expression in response to Chisha, which had been cryptic until then, took the shape of a smile.

Chisha posed a question that needed to be asked while being suspicious of Ubilk, whose face was rich in expression, yet none of it heartfelt.

Ubilk’s role, who called himself a Stargazer, was similar to that of a faith healer or fortune teller.

However, the accuracy of Ubilk’s predictions was extraordinary, setting him apart from charlatans which felt like they used an element of theatrics to boost morale.

However, the drawback was that there were many details that were vague and somewhat circular in terms of how much they related to Ubilk’s personality.

But, as Chisha had also mentioned, there were actually a smattering of situations that had been triggered by Ubilk’s advocacy and resolved without major incident, regardless of whether they had been natural disasters or man-made.

It was because of Vincent’s appreciation of his abilities that he had been allowed free access to the Crystal Palace.

Chisha was not very keen on making heavy utilization of the unfathomable Ubilk, but Vincent’s stance was that those that could be used ought to be used.

For instance, that applied all the same in regards to giving positions to those who had served his brothers and sisters who had died in the Imperial Selection Ceremony. To have Berstetz Fondalfon at his side as the Prime Minister, even though he was the cream of the crop, was madness.

However, the Prime Minister was a man who held surprisingly strong faith in the Empire, and so long as Vincent continued to act like Vincent, there was no fear that Berstetz would bare his fangs against him.

In any case—

Chisha: “If you are going as far as to call it a Great Disaster, it must be incredibly difficult to avoid. Fortunately, both General First-Class Cecilus and Arakiya are available… Well, I can say that those two are typically available at all times because it’s dangerous to leave them apart…”

Ubilk: “—It’s ruin, General First-Class Chisha.”

Chisha: “Hmm?”

Recalling the faces of Cecilus and Arakiya, the First and the Second, who had a special reason to be there, Chisha was half-steeped in despondence when an unexpected sound brought him back to reality.

Further furrowing his brow, Chisha gave Ubilk another opportunity to speak.

In response, Ubilk prefaced his remarks with the words, “As I said”,

Ubilk: “What’s coming, General First-Class Chisha, is ruin. The Great Disaster is a means of ruin that’s gonna destroy the Vollachian Empire. It’s something that brings destruction beyond even the reach of the sun’s light. Alllthough~…”

Chisha: “…”

Ubilk: “From the outset, the Yang Sword cannot be used to its fullest potential. Riiight~?”

The moment Chisha, who had been standing behind Vincent, heard this, he jumped into the middle of the room, placing the iron fan he had pulled out to Ubilk’s neck, knocking him off balance.

And just like that, he would drive his iron fan into Ubilk’s head, who had fallen to the ground, sparing no quarter—

Vincent: “—Halt, Chisha. There is no point in killing him.”

Chisha: “But, Your Excellency. This thing knows of matters it has no right knowing. Surely, Your Excellency did not tell him?”

Vincent: “Nonsense. I would never let my mouth slip to a clown. Most likely, as you would put it, he learned it from the stars.”

Ubilk: “Ahaha, that’s correct. Say, I guess I was about to die just now?”

With a finger of his poking the iron fan that had been stopped just before striking him, Ubilk produced a half-smile.

Looking down at that, Chisha fretted for a moment as to whether he really should dispose of Ubilk, then let out a heavy sigh and took a big step back.

Chisha: “I apologize for my discourtesy. However, I would ask that you refrain from such careless remarks, as I cannot guarantee that my hand will be stayed again next time.”

Ubilk: “Ahem, how careless of me. As expected of one of the Nine Divine Generals, even though you’re referred to as the civil servant type, your skill is that of a warrior.”

Chisha: “No need for flattery. Rather—”

Cutting off there, Chisha averted his gaze from Ubilk and turned to look behind himself.

There, Vincent, in the same posture as when he had received the Stargazer, sat at the large desk where he did his work, and looked their way.

Faced with those black eyes, Chisha suddenly recalled how they had met.

When he had come face-to-face with Vincent for the first time, the two of them had been at a roughly similar distance from one another, inside the carriage.

Why was he suddenly recollecting that moment? Most likely, the feeling now was similar to the one he'd had at the time.

His state of mind equal to the one he'd had then, Chisha could not help but probe Vincent.

Chisha: "Your Excellency, you seem unsurprised by Ubilk-dono's prophecy from just now. May I inquire as to the true reason for that?"

Ubilk: "Ummm~, I don't do prophecies… Uh."

Chisha: "My apologies. However, I would advise you that there will not be a next time."

As Ubilk attempted to cut into the conversation uninvited, the iron fan grazed his cheek and pierced the wall. From his cheeks, which had suffered a slight cut, a drop of blood welled; Ubilk thus raised both his hands in a vow to remain silent.

Without even looking in his direction, Chisha stared at Vincent—Nay, Chisha glared at him.

To Chisha's discernment, Vincent closed a single eye, and stated,

Vincent: "The signs of the disaster have already been reported. The Observers have whispered that the forthcoming Great Disaster shall bring about the downfall of the Empire."

Chisha: "—Why did you not share it with me at the time… No."

Astonished by the contents of Vincent's speech, Chisha's tongue stopped just as he was about to argue. Shortly before, in the words that Vincent had uttered, he had sensed an indescribable dread.

Ruminating on what had caused that, Chisha widened his eyes slightly.

Chisha: "Your Excellency, if I have not misheard, who has given you that guidance? —The Observers, was it?"

A long time ago, many long years prior, he had heard of them from

Vincent on one occasion.

Stride Vollachia was a banished member of the Imperial Family, a man whom Vincent had designated as an abomination and a despicable existence, on whose journal that expression, “Observers”, had been noted down.

And now, Vincent had mouthed that expression. That too, was an expression connected to the Stargazer, Ubilk, an expression whose nature he had grasped since that time long ago.

Chisha: “Your Excellency, by Observers, do you mean the “stars” Ubilk-dono speaks of?”

Vincent: “…I share the same perception. What Ubilk has recited is a type of announcement, of what the Observers had peered at.”

Chisha: “—. So, do you believe that Stride Vollachia was a Stargazer as well?”

Vincent: “The likelihood of that is high, in my view. But, he differed from the others who proclaimed themselves to be Stargazers. Were you to analyze the contents of his journal, you would notice the hostility of Stride Vollachia towards the Observers.”

Chisha’s dissatisfaction with Vincent grew as the revelations unfolded.

Both before and after he had become Emperor, he had willingly burdened himself with an immense workload, yet he still had saddled himself with such troubles, which he had not shared with Chisha.

For the sake of keeping it hidden from Chisha, he had certainly gone to great lengths.

If he had that much effort to spare, he ought to have shared it from the beginning.

Ubilk: “Please calm down, General First-Class Chisha. His Excellency had his reasons for not discussing this with you. I respect that decision.”

Chisha: “I believe I advised you there would not be a next time.”

Ubilk: “I know, I know. Buuut~, if His Excellency has trouble speaking about the matter, I thought it’d be better if I did. That’s why I’m present together with General First-Class Chisha, isn’t that so?”

Still holding his hands up, Ubilk looked toward Vincent over Chisha’s shoulder.

It was irritating that he acted as if he understood Vincent’s thoughts, but Vincent did not refute Ubilk’s suggestion.

In that case, Chisha had no right to dismiss it either. Besides, there was a limit to how many concealments he could be saddled with.

Chisha: “I would recommend that you drop the pompous act and choose your next words carefully.”

Ubilk: “I appreciate your concern. Well then, I’ll inform you in a concise way. —About the Great Disaster that will bring ruin to the Empire.”

Despite having been warned about the pompous act, Ubilk interrupted himself for an instant.

However, the anger towards Ubilk was outweighed by the interest in the words that were to follow. Consequently, Ubilk remained unpunished for ignoring the warning, and continued spinning his tale.

That continuation was—

Ubilk: “—The death of His Excellency Vincent Vollachia, that will be the signal for the beginning of the commandment.”

7

The tactless Stargazer left the room, leaving only the apex of the Empire and his trusted confidant in the office. —No, Chisha was no longer sure if assessing himself as such was correct.

For he would be unable to claim being one's confidant, if the latter were unable to unravel their heart of hearts to him.

Unexpectedly, perhaps the malign declarations that the Stargazer was being bombarded with, the declarations that he was a clown, were also appropriate for himself.

Chisha: "When I disguised myself and replaced Your Excellency, the Stargazer never approached meee. Were those instructions given by Your Excellency as well, perhaps?"

Vincent: "If that which is being kept secret were to be recklessly talked about, then all plans would be rendered null. Thus, it is only natural to tie up loose ends before something goes wrong."

Chisha: "I suppooose. I would do the same thing."

It was not so much a collusion, but Ubilk, who appeared as if he had free rein, was also kept on a tight leash by Vincent.

There was a secret agreement exchanged between the two parties concerning the Great Disaster.

However—

Chisha: "I do not understand. Why conceal it even from me?"

Vincent: "—. To get rid of unnecessary and cumbersome thoughts."

Chisha: "Unnecessary and cumbersome…"

Vincent: "Were you aware of this matter, you would perhaps think of saving me. However, that is a futile thought."

Shaking his head horizontally, Vincent stated this devoid of any hesitation.

Albeit it was his life at stake, Vincent would not falter from the truth before him. However, his own acceptance of that truth and Chisha's were matters entirely different from one another.

Chisha: "It is only natural that I should put Your Excellency's life first. Why do you call it futile?”

Vincent: “Recall all the stories which the Stargazer brought about thus far, claiming them to be his commandment.”

Chisha: “The stories brought by Ubilk-dono…”

At being told this, Chisha pondered.

If the Great Disaster was the only thing Vincent had kept from Chisha, then Chisha was well-aware of all the other prophecies Ubilk had brought.

They were all useful portents for natural disasters and rebellions, both posing as omens of situations that could lead to a conflagration. Thanks to this, it had been possible to keep the damage to a minimum—

Chisha: “—Though with varying degrees of damage, all of those situations did happen.”

Vincent: “Indeed. Never has there been a case in which it was possible to prevent one from happening, having been informed as to its signs. Whether man-made or natural disaster, the first move always happens. Even if we are able to deal with the damage that follows.”

Thus, Ubilk had said.

Vincent: “The Great Disaster that thing spoke of, shall commence with my death.”

Chisha: “—Hk, then what I ought to do is safeguard Your Excellency’s life and defy the Stargazer’s commandment!”

Vincent: “Do you think I have not attempted to ascertain whether that is feasible?”

Chisha’s knee-jerk objection was negated by Vincent’s unhurried words.

Naturally, the ideas that had come to Chisha in the heat of emotion had all been tested by Vincent.

In the past, other prophecies brought about by Ubilk, unrelated to the Great Disaster, had been challenged time and again as to check if they could be prevented.

While fulfilling the role of an Emperor to the fullest extent, behind the scenes—

Chisha: "—Your Excellency."

Vincent: "What?"

Chisha: "I have a question, which has come up to me just now."

Suddenly, as a cold, somber voice permeated his brain, his own, Chisha spoke thus.

He had stated that he had a question, but his brain was numb. Completely numb. Be it a mental block as a reaction due to his brain being overworked, or a consequence of it refusing to work, it was completely numb.

However, regardless of the reason for its numbness, the question had already been raised, the Emperor had received it.

And then—

Vincent: "I shall allow it. Speak."

Chisha could not deny that which the Emperor had chosen.

Hence, Chisha could not refuse what the Emperor had granted permission for.

And so, as Chisha experienced his own brain being numbed, he posed his query.

Chisha: "Since when have you been aware of the signs of the Great Disaster?"

Vincent: "—The journal."

Quietly, Vincent opened a drawer in the desk he utilized to perform his duties, took out an old bound book, and placed it upon the desk.

A journal that had become a topic of conversation once in the past, but which he had never seen. The journal left by Stride Vollachia, if it conveyed the signs—

Chisha: “Your Excellency, what you have done so far—”

Meeting Chisha, originally Chesha Trim, walking alongside him, cultivating him over time, picking up Cecilus, taking part in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, saving Prisca Benedict’s life by going against his own principles in a first, and paving a new path as the Emperor of the Vollachian Empire.

The whole of Vincent Vollachia’s journey had been—.

Vincent: “—After my death, the ruin caused by the Great Disaster must be minimized. This is the purpose of the reform, that of the Nine Divine Generals.”

Chisha: “…”

Vincent: “—Your purpose, Chisha Gold.”

8

Chisha: “I demand to know who these Observers are, and I demand you to disclose whatever information you may have on them.”

Pushing the open iron fan against another’s neck, Chisha issued a threat, his tone low.

However, as Chisha directed that ghastly hostility at him, the facial expression of Ubilk, who had had his back pinned against the wall, was a carefree one, as if bemused, unable to read the situation.

His expression unchanging, Ubilk called out to him with “General First-Class Chisha”, then continued,

Ubilk: “I’d thought that you and His Excellency the Emperor had discussed that a few days ago, and that you had come to terms with it down inside, General First-Class Chisha…”

Chisha: “It took me a few days to review the preconditions to make sure there was no mistake. Unfortunately, there is currently no way to directly reject His Excellency’s thoughts.”

Ubilk: “I’m sure it’d be the same even if you’d discussed it with me. But, as expected from the General First-Class who also serves as His Excellency’s body double, you do take after him plenty.”

While being held in place Ubilk spoke, to which Chisha produced a faint look of puzzlement. Taking in that reaction from Chisha, Ubilk shook his head, then stated,

Ubilk: “His Excellency also asked if there was a way to bend the commandment. Buuut~, I can return you the same answer as I did then. There is not.”

Chisha: “—. What is your purpose? Ubilk-dono, you have introduced yourself as a Stargazer, thus gaining the position to stay at the Crystal Palace and deliver prophecies from the Observers. Myself at the helm, people aside from His Excellency do not think highly of your existence, Ubilk-dono. If His Excellency does pass away as per the prophecy, you shall not escape destruction.”

Ubilk: “You put that so clearly it hurts me… Buuut~, General First-Class Chisha, that assumption of yours is off.”

Chisha: “…”

Ubilk: “More important than my own destruction, is the fulfillment and realization of the commandment. My purpose, is to ward off the destruction due to follow the Great Disaster.”

As he spoke, the grin disappeared from Ubilk's face.

Ubilk's face, vanished of the artificial emotion it had possessed, had lost its warmth. Capturing it from up-close, made Chisha get an impression as if he were facing Ubilk's real face for the first time.

For an instant, he suspected that that was due to some technique of Ubilk's—

Ubilk: "I don't have any power of that sort. Didn't I destroy my own Evil Eye in front of your very eyes, General First-Class Chisha, as to display I held no malice towards His Excellency at the very start? Do you wish to confirm that?"

Chisha: "—. No, that is fine. Unless I have misheard, you, Ubilk-dono, have stated this? That your purpose is to ward off the destruction due to follow the Great Disaster."

Ubilk: "Yes, that's correct. In that respect, that purpose is in accord with His Excellency's."

The replying Ubilk was devoid of faltering, and Chisha could perceive no falsehoods in his opinion.

If he were to lie here in the first place, it made no sense that he would not lie to make himself, rather than Vincent, look good to Chisha. Even Ubilk would not be too thrilled were he to be killed after carelessly provoking Chisha's ire, most likely, despite that expression of his suggesting he did not mind being killed at any time.

In addition, even though he had some thoughts on Ubilk's behavior and perceived him as a nuisance, Vincent's reasons for not sending Ubilk away were understandable.

Vincent and Ubilk were both working toward the same goal.

Chisha: "It does not seem to me that Ubilk-dono is thinking of preventing the Great Disaster itself. Why is that?"

Ubilk: “Oh, it’s simple. The Great Disaster cannot be postponed. It’ll happen without fail, sort of like a foregone conclusion. My purpose, once the Great Disaster has happened, is to ward off the destruction it brings. In other words…”

Chisha: “In other words?”

Ubilk: “If the Great Disaster doesn’t actually happen, my commandment won’t be fulfilled. For that reason, even if all the factors that’d cause the Great Disaster are destroyed, I’d become said factor.”

That was a fanatical way of thinking, the means and the ends were both mixed up.

Gulping due to that incomprehensible absurdity, the iron fan that was already on Ubilk’s neck was made to dig into it with further force by Chisha. Pointed against a vital point, putting enough force into it would have Ubilk’s throat severed there.

Allowing Ubilk himself to understand this, Chisha’s voice became sharper.

Chisha: “Then it would be best if we remove that factor with our own hands hereeee.”

Ubilk: “I wish you wouldn’t, but I’m not gonna stop you. Thoooough~ let me tell you one thing, supposing you kill me, the next Stargazer will appear. That’s how it works.”

Chisha: “…”

Ubilk: “Four major disasters will destroy the world. The opportunity to stop one of them has come. We are terminals of self-purification and self-defense brought about by the stars, and there are infinite substitutes.”

Staring into those eyes from which nothing could be sensed, Chisha ground his teeth.

That there were no threats, no falsehoods, and that Ubilk himself was at least speaking seriously, was something that Chisha could sense.

—In order to ward off the destruction wrought by the Great Disaster, he would make it so the Great Disaster would happen without fail.

A declaration far too absurd, far too illogical, yet it was an invitation to a war of attrition, employing countless lives as shields, that even Vincent was unable to do anything about.

A possibility popped up, however; that perhaps, of some of the Stargazers who had brought commandments thus far themselves had served as sparks, playing a role in the materialization of their prophecies.

But if they were to ascertain this and massacre the Stargazers, eradicating them, being that the conditions for their emergence were not known, it was likely that they would need to murder all those capable of becoming one.

That, would be tantamount to destroying the country.

Ubilk: "His Excellency is admirable. Having attachment to individuals is something that makes up very little part of my nature, but I gotta take my hat off to His Excellency for the way he is. Someone who's not a Stargazer isn't capable of being like that."

Chisha: "…Ubilk-dono admiring someone that greatly, what an unfunny jokeee."

Ubilk: "I truly mean it. There's no one able to accept their death forewarned by the commandment with peace of mind. And yet His Excellency's making all preparations for after his own death. Even if he has no hopes left for living, he hasn't given up fighting. Truly, the King of Sword Wolves."

Ubilk's words, muttered solemnly, were a solid expression of his admiration for Vincent.

The Sword Wolf he had spoken of, the "wolf pierced by swords" that was the national emblem of Vollachia, was a celebration of the way of life of a warrior that did not falter even when saddled with life-threatening wounds.

In that sense, as Ubilk had declared, Vincent's way of life was that of the Sword Wolf itself.

Ubilk: "General First-Class Chisha, I've spent all my life with the intent to fulfill my commandment with my entire heart. Buuut~, it's not like I believe that my commandment is more wonderful than all. In case you're saying it's difficult to accept, General First-Class Chisha, it's okay if you were to try it out."

Chisha: "Try it out… Exterminating you, Ubilk-dono, and those with the same station you have, you mean?"

Ubilk: "I did state that there are infinite substitutes, but there's a limit. There are only so many lives. Trying it out with the support of General First-Class Cecilus would be worth the shot."

Once more, Ubilk's mind was hard to grasp in regards to just how much of that proposal came from what he truly felt.

For a moment, Chisha did consider it to be a decent idea, proof of just how shaken up he was.

Supposing he did as Ubilk had stated, disclosed that fact to Cecilus and guided him as the latter probably did nothing but babble about it, they may be able to wipe out the citizens of the Empire.

—No, that too was impossible.

Were Vincent to discover that plot, he would halt any nonsense of the sort immediately. Cecilus was a friend, but his priorities were very much fixed within his mind.

For Cecilus, Vincent took precedence over Chisha. And that was the reasoning as to why Cecilus Segmunt was the First, even though his head was not to be trusted one bit when it came to thinking.

Chisha: "Nevertheless, the likes of disclosing this to Cecilus was an option that had not occurred to me, and that is quite laughable, even if I say so myself."

An out-of-place, deep emotion carved a faint smile onto Chisha's lips.

Emerging in his head vividly, was Cecilus pouting his lips, protesting vehemently—

Chisha: "…"

He suddenly recalled an exchange they'd had one day quite clearly.

Cecilus: "If me and you go at it, Chisha, you'll die in the blink of an eye for sure; however, what if you start with a thousand men? It might take a thousand seconds!"

Chisha: "I doubt it would. But I understand where you are coming from. While I gain a thousand seconds…"

Cecilus: "His Excellency, or someone else, can fulfill their purpose. My one greatest flaw, as the leading actor of this world, is that there's only one of me in this world."

The smiling face of his friend as he spoke of random things came to mind.

Suddenly, he had a thought.

Chisha: "Ubilk-dono, I would like to inquire something of you. — These commandments you receive, in what way are they brought to you?"

Having been questioned, Ubilk widened his eyes in amazement slightly.

He then cocked his head, regaining his usual atmosphere of meekness that had vanished, and,

Ubilk: "It varies. More often than not, I receive them in something like a dream."

Chisha: "Then, would that also apply to the commandment regarding the Great Disaster that you have conveyed to His Excellency?"

With the questions piling up, Ubilk nodded with a face of perplexity. Exhaling at that answer, slowly, Chisha gave form to the thoughts that he'd had.

Chisha: "If, in the commandment you have received, the moment His Excellency loses his life is present—"

Pure white vanished, and thus, he painted over his uncertain self that could be dyed in any colour, not just with anyone.

Appearing there was—

Chisha: "—The Vincent Vollachia that dies there, which one is it, I wondeeer?"

9

—Chisha Gold, formerly Chesha Trim, did not consider himself to be someone with a very high sense of loyalty, nor had he pledged unwavering obedience to His Excellency the Emperor.

As none other than Vincent Vollachia himself had stated.

At a time Chisha had been asked if he would be willing to die for Vincent, returning the direct reply that he would not do so.

To keep that in mind as he served him, so had Chisha been told.

In accordance with that declaration, and with those sentiments, Chisha had come to serve Vincent.

Therefore, he would not do anything akin to dying for Vincent's sake.

Even if he did not pledge unwavering loyalty to Vincent, he pledged a loyalty born of common sense. As one of the people of the Empire, as one of the Generals of the First-Class of the Empire, he also happened to possess some sense of respect towards His Excellency the Emperor.

Conduct that felt as if it ran counter to Vincent's command, was preposterous.

Hence, Chisha's choice was something made not for Vincent's sake, but for all intents and purposes, it had been made for the sake of those very same feelings at the very origin of it all, when he had happened to run into the prince on that road.

Back then, the many people around him had avoided getting involved upon laying eyes on that carriage, which they could tell at a glance had high-class folk riding in it.

They would have been fine with helping out, but if they turned out not to be able to, instead incurring displeasure, their lives would be in jeopardy.

While able to perfectly grasp the thoughts of those people, Chisha had stepped up to the carriage.

It was not as though he had wanted to help people.

However, he had thought it a shame were he to miss out on the opportunity to test his arithmetic and studies, which were said to be useless in the village that was his hometown.

Indeed, the same went this time around.

A chance to get behind the thoughts of Vincent Vollachia, a man whose ingenuity could make anything go according to his hypotheses, would probably never come around again.

Moreover, ever since Vincent Vollachia had been a young child, he had steeled himself to accept that moment with solemnity.

In other words, this was a challenge to partake in a crucial bout on which the life of Vincent Vollachia was staked.

A man whose blood would boil once the gauntlet was thrown down, a man whose spirits would rise more and more upon the realization that his enemy was a mighty one indeed, a man whose soul would ignite as a means to fell his opponent. That was a man of the Empire.

And Chisha Gold, was a man of the Empire.

What sort of feelings, what sort of thoughts had been in Vincent Vollachia's mind, at the time he had decided to place Chisha under his care, as to learn under him, to become capable of using the same intelligence as himself after his own demise, were unclear.

He did not understand, nor did he want to understand.

Once he understood that he did not understand, he had had many of those hot-headed thoughts.

Vincent had once given a few words on it, that he had experienced those very same thoughts.

And thus—

Chisha: "The ruin brought about by the Great Disaster… Just what is the Great Disaster, don't make me laaaugh."

Labeled as the likes of a mass-scale disaster, it seemed the Great Disaster would somehow try to trample, to plunge the Vollachian Empire into ruination. From Chisha's point of view however, it was humorous.

The Great Disaster would commence with the death of Vincent Vollachia.

The Great Disaster would not start without Vincent's death, in other words, the Empire could not be destroyed if he were allowed to live, so had he not already lost before the destruction had started?

Setting Vincent Vollachia aside, what was the destruction to come, what was the Great Disaster?

—Vincent Vollachia, the Seventy-Seventh Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

Chisha: "His Excellency himself is the Vollachian Empire. The utter devastation and ruin of the land after the death of His Excellency is an incredibly absurd, side-splitting, comedy of comedies."

He ridiculed the yet-unseen Great Disaster with a manner of speech akin to Cecilus.

Ridiculing the Great Disaster that he most likely would never lay eyes upon, he stuck out his tongue.

Chisha: “A dog that seeks to snatch a lowly victory, how can that be the one to kill our Sword Wolf? —Don’t you dare underestimate Vincent Vollachia, who I supported, who I built up.”

If you are someone who can kill him, then what are you waiting for? If you say you will snatch him away, go for it.

Forewarned ruin and all the like, don’t you dare think that you can destroy our Emperor, our Empire.

That day, when I got the wheel out of the ditch, it was for the sake of this moment.

For the sake of ridiculing this destruction, all of it was—

Chisha: “—Foreshadowing. Though, I shall absolutely not say such a thing, for if I did, Cecilus would get overly enthused.”

10

—A white light shone dazzlingly within the throne room, and immediately afterward, scarlet blood splattered grandly.

Upon the red carpet, a slender man stood, drenched by the fresh blood that had just been scattered.

The man, donning a ridiculous oni mask on his face, widened his black eyes hidden behind the mask, frozen in shock at the events that had developed in front of him.

And before that man who was standing stock still, the body that had gushed copious amounts of its blood crumbled, toppling to its front.

His chest, lacking any defenses, had been run through from behind, destroying his heart without a shred of mercy, eradicating, ripping away anything and everything necessary for the maintenance of life.

???: “…”

Unable to support the falling body with his arms, it helplessly collapsed onto the carpet.

With that, the fallen body did not stir, with nary a twitch, nor with even a gulp of air much less any final words.

None may live, having had their hearts pierced.

Consequently, that was an event inevitable, the terminus of fate as was bound to arrive.

???: “…”

The man had died.

He was Chesha Trim, became Chisha Gold, and finally as Vincent Vollachia, the man had died.

—And that was the entirety of what had transpired, in that moment.

Chapter 108:
The Forthcoming Great Disaster

1

—The final act of Chisha Gold, posing as the Emperor, was beyond comprehension.

???: “…”

Having been ousted from the throne, Vincent Vollachia began giving his name as Abel, gained support from the People of Shudraq in the large forest to the east, and personally took the lead of a rebellion that had upheaved the Empire.

This was not what he had hoped for when planning for the future, but this was rather Chisha’s plan, who had deliberately gone the full length, committing treason, thus driving Vincent away from the Imperial Capital. He would not do an about-face so easily.

Therefore, he had taken measures to clearly inform him that his actions, that his motives were futile.

Destined death, brought about by the Stargazers, was something that Abel had resolved himself for long ago, from the time he gained self-awareness as an Imperial Prince of Vollachia.

When commandment and forewarning were received, it was foretold that upon the death of the Emperor who had ascended to the throne, the Great Disaster, which was to bring about ruin, would commence.

It was not as though he himself had been mentioned by name.

However, once he laid eyes upon that forewarning, he had been convinced that he would be the one to ascend to the seat of Emperor.

He had been convinced that, were it not him, the Vollachian Empire could not be saved.

To his other brothers and sisters, he could not entrust that great duty.

Putting the entirety of his capabilities and his potential into it, Vincent Abellux would take the seat of Emperor, and as Vincent Vollachia, he would take measures for the Empire to not be undone.

That was the plan that Vincent Vollachia, that Abel had staked his life on.

He had restored the system of the Nine Divine Generals, whom everyone worshipped in the Vollachian Empire where the strong were revered, and upon their apex, he had placed the unmistakable strongest.

Distorting the way of being of the Empire, rife with senseless barbarism as it was, he had guided them so that they would lose their reluctance regarding orderly violence.

Thus leaving as much potential as he possibly could so that the Vollachian Empire would survive, even after his death.

Everything, had been part of the plan on which he had staked his life.

Abel: “…”

The body, unable to do anything but lie face down, continued to spill vast volumes of blood from its chest, its heart having been pierced.

Black hair and black eyes; each time he looked in the mirror, his face made him feel anger and frustration at his lack of power, his lack of knowledge. That face had been deprived of blood, its expression soaked in blood as it gazed at nowhere in particular.

His current body, manifested through the “ability” which he had professed to have attained while on the verge of death, a time at which his color had vanished, did not return to his original form, even once his life had come to an end.

Nevermore would he lay eyes upon that form, nevermore would that impudent speech strike his eardrums again.

Nevermore.

Abel: “Why.”

A question that ought not be asked, spilled from his lips.

The one who was to answer that question, would never open their mouth once more. Even so, the lips that were supposed to avoid all that their owner knew to be meaningless, spilled that question.

The prophecy of the Great Disaster, it was conceivable that it could be overturned were one to be aware of its conditions.

He had sought out that method in the past. He had conveyed so to him, that ought to have made him understand that it could not be done. And yet, as Chisha had still not been convinced, he had committed treason in vain.

In this way, the confrontation they’d had within the throne room ought to have been proof that no means with which to avoid the Great Disaster existed.

He had trained Chisha, so that he could entrust him with the Empire after his own demise. To think as he did, to arrive at the same conclusions as he did, in order for him to be able to fulfill being a proxy of Vincent Vollachia.

Therefore, were he truly Vincent Vollachia, he was supposed to have accepted defeat with grace.

Accepting defeat and lowering weapons, putting an end to this futile battle, restoring the throne to the returned Abel so the latter could welcome death, and then, with that, he would supposedly oppose the Great Disaster of ruin.

That had not come to pass. A foolish gamble it had been.

Even if he were to die in Abel’s place, as Vincent Vollachia, were the Great Disaster to not deem it acceptable, it would amount to a foolish gamble that had ended in naught but a useless death.

That especially was what Abel abhorred, a death inefficient to the utmost extremes.

Even though Chisha Gold had presumably been aware of that.

Abel: “Why.”

Endless doubt and bewilderment, stained a deep scarlet by the flowing blood.

Even if he asked once more, there would only be another layer of silence piled on, gone without replies. That too, was what Abel loathed, inefficiency to the utmost extremes, and then—

???: “—Well, ain’t that just ‘cause it was a bad plan?”

Immediately after, a second shot of white light was fired, zipping straight towards Abel, who stood bolt upright.

2

Calling it light was no falsehood, the blow that brought death aimed for Abel faster than an arrow.

To begin with, Abel was not a fighter.

Even supposing the shock from the immediately preceding event had already passed, it would have been entirely impossible for him to react to the white radiance that had grazed the edge of his vision for nary a moment.

Ergo, what had saved Abel’s life in that moment, was not a judgment of his own.

???: “…”

It came to pass right as Abel was on the verge of being run through by the light approaching him from the front, about to have his heart extirpated.

A roaring sound and violent tremors furiously shook the throne room—Nay, the entire Crystal Palace, and a tremendous impact destroyed its firm walls. The origin of the impact did not stop at just destroying the wall, and wedged its way between Abel, who was standing bolt upright, and the corona zipping towards him.

With a sound akin to a splash of water, the white light obliterated that interference. And thus, that which had saved Abel's life by a hairbreadth was—

Abel: "—An enormous arm, is that Moguro Hagane?!"

Moguro: "Man at throne, protect. His Excellency, ordered me."

The wall-esque object that had made a sudden appearance before Abel's eyes, was the right arm of Moguro Hagane, which had been thrust into the throne room.

Moguro, a Meteor also known as the very Crystal Palace itself, was supposed to be participating in a fierce clash unfolding upon the battlefield, having taken in the ramparts of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana as their own body.

And yet—

Abel: "Was it Chisha…?!"

Moguro's earlier statement was proof of the fact that they had received orders to protect Abel.

Then, the one to direct Moguro to return from far away had been the one who sat upon the throne possessing the function of exerting influence on the Meteor; none other than Chisha Gold could have done so.

That Abel's life would once more be targeted right after he himself had been shot, had been his prediction.

Abel: "—Hk, Moguro Hagane! Bring me outside!"

Moguro: "Who, you. My, priority, His Excellency—"

Abel: “The Emperor has died! If I die, his death shall be in vain!”

Moguro: “…”

Taking in those domineering words from Abel, Moguro noticed the collapsed silhouette as they peered into the throne room.

Moguro’s state was such that it was difficult to tell where their eyes were present. Once the green orbs emerging from the city walls flickered, however, they too recognized the death of the Emperor, who had collapsed face-down.

Moguro: “The body—”

Abel: “It is superfluous! Worry not for the dead!”

Shouting at Moguro as they attempted to retrieve the Emperor’s corpse, Abel jumped towards the titanic right-arm before him. As he clung onto one of the fingers of the hand-like shape, Moguro pulled their arm out of the throne room, causing Abel to be bathed in raging winds as he was extracted out into the sky.

Moguro: “…”

Moguro had become one with the ramparts, having altered the latter’s structure to allow themself easier movement.

Moguro’s body was now that of an enormous golem greater than fifty meters tall, and riding on the arm as it was lifted, Abel’s elevation was about the same.

With the cityscape of the Imperial Capital in sight from that height, the path Moguro had taken from the third bastion that they had been protecting alongside the buildings trampled in said path was visible. It was apparent that they had bolted straight towards this place, devoid of any other concerns.

Apart from that, though the battles at each bastion were still ongoing, the reasons for their conflicts had vanished already, and so those who needed to prepare for the upcoming battle were squandering their lives in vain.

In vain, their lives were—.

Abel: "—Hk."

A disturbance arose in his thoughts, and Abel put strength into his arms clinging onto the gargantuan rock.

This was not the time to cling to bygone events and have his thoughts dispersed into many fragments. Already, events were unfolding. It was just as he had told Moguro. —If he were to die now, that death would be in vain.

At the very least, he must ascertain whether that death had held meaning or not.

Abel: "I shall not die."

Voice leaked as if being wrung out, and Abel bit down on his molars and stared downwards, intently.

Even if he raised his voice here, it would not reach those whose lives were clashing on the battleground. However, he must inform them that the meaning in this battle had been lost, by any means necessary.

Moguro: "Danger."

As Abel was thinking, Moguro's gale-like voice struck his eardrums.

Their difference in their physique was so significant that each and every single one of Moguro's actions was akin to a human's actions towards an ant. However, it was not as though Moguro had rocked his eardrums without purpose.

Gyrating their colossal frame, Moguro turned their back on the Crystal Palace with Abel protected in their right hand. As sounds of successive impacts resounded from the exterior of the right hand he was held in, Abel's cheeks contorted.

The sequence of strikes came not from one direction, rather, they were raining down from all angles.

The enemy was simply great in numbers. —No, a collection of magic users that could aim for their enemies with such precision, would be infeasible on this soil of Vollachia.

That was to say, this was not a group large in number, but the mastery of a single person.

A truly powerful individual who lent the illusion that a great number of people were performing a simultaneous attack from all directions—resuscitating the memories of the time when his thoughts had ground to a halt due to shock just before, Abel raised his face.

That fighting style, the voice of that undesired reply, were present in his memories.

That was—

Abel: "…"

Moguro twisted their body, defending Abel from the downpour of bullets, and descended.

Looking up at the sky from within that fist, he saw the traces of a shadow moving too fast for eyes to fix upon. Albeit exceedingly rare, it was a form that could be seen within the Vollachian Empire.

Soaring by means of flying dragons, 'twas the acrobatic flight of the flying dragon riders able to control them—Nay, there were currently no riders in the Empire capable of gliding through the sky at this speed.

To be precise, that was the level of ability known as the "utmost limits of flight", the domain where the Empire's strongest flying dragon rider was without peer.

In an instant, white light dispersed, the sound of Moguro's enormous body being broken by the impact reverberated, and a part of the broken wall grazed Abel's cheek. Without distorting his countenance due to the pain, he saw it.

The flying dragon rider passed by the vision of his black eyes covered by the oni mask—Ashen-brown hair, cracks running through his features bereft of color, and dark eyeballs, akin to a moonless night, with a golden radiance looming therein.

His form appeared far too unrecognizable, but even so, there was no mistaking him.

Abel: "—Balleroy Temeglyph! For what reason are you alive?!"

Balleroy: "I ain't gonna talk to ya, Mister Oni-Mask."

Producing a beautiful voice that gave off an elegant impression, he refused to reply while still affirming his existence.

Fading from sight once again, the enemy that steered his flying dragon to slice through the air—Balleroy Temeglyph, was unmistakably the perpetrator who had aimed for the throne room of the Crystal Palace from the outside, the one who had shot the fake Emperor through the heart.

Known as the Magical Sharpshooter, he was the man who reigned supreme at the apex of all flying dragon riders.

The former Ninth of the Nine Divine Generals, who in the past, during a rebellion that had occurred within the Empire—

Moguro: "Balleroy, died. You, fake."

Their perception the same as Abel's, the giant Moguro fired a counterattack.

With Abel enveloped by their right-hand, Moguro swung the left arm of their huge body, and quite literally mowing down the air, they launched an attack towards Balleroy's flying dragon.

People would tend to believe that big things moved sluggishly, but that was but an illusion originating from their viewpoints being far away from the events.

In addition to protecting Abel from the magic sniping, they had blocked the entirety of the enemy's attacks until this point. Moguro's movements were keen, nimble, and precise.

Moguro: “Fast. Meticulous.”

However, even with Moguro’s reflexes and agility, subduing Balleroy, who made the entirety of the sky into his domain as he flew around it, was unfeasible.

The special trait of a flying dragon rider was not restricted to just speed, but extended to having the potential to move up, down, left, right, front, and back. To move in every conceivable direction, was their greatest advantage that could not be taken away lest they were felled to the surface.

On top of that, Balleroy was no ordinary flying dragon rider, he was their apex.

Abel: “He’s clad himself in wind…!”

Balleroy’s tactics excelled in sniping while moving via the use of magic, but his strengths as one of the rare wielders of magic within the Empire were not limited to only offensive implementations.

By shrouding wind around the flying dragon he steered, he actualized a maneuver that other flying dragon riders could not, increasing its speed and softening the impacts it took, making himself unable to ever be caught.

However, in order to put it into practice, a strong coordination with his flying dragon was indispensable.

Abel: “Has that flying dragon also soared back from the beyond?!”

Flying dragon riders boasted tremendous strength in battle, but their greatest drawbacks were that it took time to cultivate them, plus that they could not ride upon the back of any flying dragon apart from the one they chose as a partner.

To kill a flying dragon rider, their flying dragon must first be killed. The cause of Balleroy’s death was no exception.

However, Balleroy had soared back. Quite literally, he was soaring through the sky together with his beloved dragon.

Abel: “The Great Disaster—”

It was not as though any clear or observable damage had arisen.

However, since Chisha had lost his life as Vincent Vollachia, there was no choice but to suspect that the events transcending human comprehension that had ensued thereafter were related to the Great Disaster.

Even so, it was nonsensical for Balleroy Temeglyph to be the bearer of the Great Disaster.

Of course, Balleroy was the apex of flying dragon riders, a truly powerful individual amongst the Empire’s strongest.

Were he inclined to do so, he would have no trouble in doing away with Abel’s life.

And yet—

Moguro: “Shaking. Endure.”

Abel: “It matters not, do it!”

The inorganic voice sent forth an intense wind, and Abel raised his own voice in response.

The following moment, Moguro, lunging with the enemy as their aim, thrust their arm down to their own feet. Even if those were called “feet”, looking at Moguro’s currently enormous body, it appeared as if they had become one with the street.

Posterior to being plunged into a street of the Empire, the left arm produced a creaking sound, and after a moment of resistance, the street that had been uprooted was magnificently heaved into the sky.

Abel: “…”

The sight of parts of a district being sent flying was something that Abel had laid eyes upon a short while at Chaosflame, priorly. It had been an absurd sight back then as well, but it had been nothing more than the city's residents coming together to hurl demolished buildings.

However, in Moguro's case, that was a feat of strength devoid of intricacy, an unmistakable act of violence.

It was a sight that proved that Moguro Hagane was extraordinary, that proved that he was one of the Nine Divine Generals.

Without doubt, Balleroy too was an extraordinary individual, but Moguro, in addition to the other Divine Generals, also possessed those same qualifications. Therefore, Balleroy could not be capable of being the bearer of the Great Disaster.

Of course, were the street that had been ripped from the ground to be hurled and nothing more, the astute Balleroy would just evade and be done with it.

Hence, with the block of the city that could be called a cannonball having been thrown, Moguro—

Moguro: "Pulverization."

A slam of their left arm, and it was turned into innumerable projectiles obstructing Balleroy's aerial escape path.

Shrapnel scattered in all directions, each piece a mass of rock or clump of soil even larger than a human. Thus dispersing with that singular blow from Moguro, it was such that an ordinary human would be quite likely to suffer fatal injury with even a mere graze.

Naturally, if Balleroy were to be struck by it, even he, who had mastered the Flow Method, would end up showing a fatal opening in midair. In order to avoid that,

Balleroy: "Carillon!"

In accordance with the sharp voice amidst the windstorm, his flying dragon soared in order to slip past the bullet rain of boulders.

Flapping its wings as it diced the air, his flying dragon aimed for the one area in the world where the incessant downpour of boulders was slightly weaker—

Abel: “Obviously, that is a trap.”

Moguro had deliberately left a region in which the downpour was slightly weaker, however, even if Balleroy and Carillon were aware that it was a ruse, they could not afford to be hit by the shrapnel, so they had no choice but to fly into it.

What remained was whether Balleroy, riding his beloved dragon at a high speed, would be victorious in evading the blow expected from Moguro.

With his flying dragon wrapped in wind, Balleroy accelerated, soaring through the sky as he obliterated the obstructive shrapnel with lights.

Moguro gyrated the left arm they had drawn back, and a blow that could drill a hole through the world burrowed through the sky of the Imperial Capital.

As mutual Divine Generals, a duel that could have never been realized in Balleroy’s lifetime unfolded, and as both of them crossed with all of their might up high in the air, they began their showdown—

—That instant, faster than they could crash into one another, the clouds of the Imperial Capital were blown away with the sound of an explosion and its shockwave.

Abel: “—Hk.”

Though direct damage from the explosive power had been averted, the aftershock was so intense that it seemed like it would tear Abel’s body away from clinging to Moguro.

But, no matter how harsh a situation his slender body faced, Abel would never close both his eyes. Henceforth, his eyes firmly grasped the events of that moment.

Abel: “Moguro’s, arm—”

Just before Moguro's gyrating left arm was able to display its might by pulverizing Balleroy, an interference occurred, and the part equivalent to a human's brachium was torn asunder.

Spinning with vigor, the arm of Moguro, humongous enough to rival the castle's own size, danced through the air. Leisurely slipping out by flying under the damage, Balleroy had survived the rain of shrapnel—Not just that, he had escaped completely unharmed.

Then, the one that had destroyed Moguro's arm, thus saving Balleroy from his predicament was—

???: "Oh, OHHHHHHHHHHHH—!!!"

As a deep voice that rumbled the atmosphere was raised, there was a fierce collision, an impact from the side. Arm demolished and posture broken, Moguro's green orbs scintillated at what had barged in.

For Abel too, this interference had been unforeseen. Though, it was something to be expected.

After all, if the opponent was Balleroy Temeglyph, who had soared back from death.

???: "BASTARD! GET THE FRIG' AWAY FROM THIS DRAGON'S DARLIIIIIIING—!!!"

Brandishing claws of a dragon, it easily tore through Moguro's body, fashioned from the city walls, and alongside a roar, a blow from its tail slammed against Moguro, destroying one part, the latter's mass being reduced in the blink of an eye.

It was extremely abrupt, but that was a matter of course. —The opponent was of the strongest lifeforms in existence.

Abel: "The Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia… is that which resides within, Madelyn Eschart?!"

Mezoreia: "RAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH—!"

The howling Dragon raged with its whole body, and with a collision caused Moguro's enormous build to sway greatly. With each blow the ramparts fissured, its broken pieces plummeting onto the Imperial Capital.

The Crystal Palace, extolled as the world's most beautiful castle, had its gardens trampled upon, subjected to devastation, while the cityscape of the Imperial Capital, constructed in a well-arranged, orderly fashion, met its demise with each passing second.

In addition, the catastrophes assailing the Imperial Capital did not end there.

Abel: "…"

Indistinguishable amongst the thunderous sounds of the Dragon's wrath as it laid waste to Moguro's body, what had reached Abel's ears was the sound of destruction, akin to the world crumbling, originating from a distant location.

Thus directing his gaze there, to behind the Crystal Palace—where a reservoir was present, a cistern which made use of springs amidst the mountains and was utilized as a water source for the entire Imperial Capital, had its bulwark pierced through by Moguro's left arm, that had been cleaved just moments before.

A beat later, fissures expanded from the point the arm had penetrated, and the water from the reservoir began seeping out from the cracks. Gradually amassing vigor, before long the entire dam would crumble and become a stream of mud flowing through the Imperial Capital.

Guiding the residents of the Imperial Capital, as well as the Imperial Soldiers and rebels participating in the battle, to refuge as soon as possible was—.

Moguro: "—Blunder."

Right after hearing Moguro's whisper, a mutter not all that quiet, a feeling of floating assailed Abel's body.

Looking over his shoulder as he felt his insides rising up, Abel saw that it was not that he had been thrown, but rather, that Moguro's arm, the hand of which Abel had been held in, had been crunched through by the Dragon above the wrist.

It was not that he had been targeted. Rather, it had been nothing more than a result of a foolhardy attack.

However—

Abel: "—Oh."

Engulfed by the momentum of his freefall, Abel's body spun around over in midair.

His arms, which had been clinging onto Moguro's arm, had been detached from it, but even if he were still hanging onto it, given the arm had originally been the city's walls, it would have ended up being his cause of death, most likely.

However, even if Moguro's arm had not become his cause of death, at this rate, Abel would slam into something that was very much similar to it, and similar his fate would be.

Abel: "I need to—"

Find something; looking around, Abel's eyes were drawn to one point.

However, that point was not a source of aid.

What had entered Abel's vision was the large hole in the Crystal Palace through which Moguro had pulled him out.

The hole led to the throne room. He was unable to peer inside, yet his attention was drawn to it.

He had been the one to say "worry not for the dead", yet he too had pretty much drunk from the same poison.

Abel: "…"

He did not know whether he had found a way to break through the deadlock or not, even with that sole second.

But that he had not squandered that one second was proof of Abel's unrelenting spirit, the indelible scar engraved upon his soul for all perpetuity.

Then again, if he were to plunge to his death like this, discussing the scar engraved upon his soul would have no merit.

???: "Pull—!!"

Abel: "—Hk?!"

Lost in what he ought to do, Abel arranged his limbs as to diminish the impact, but before that could happen, he was forcefully met with a soft sensation.

Unconsciously holding his breath, Abel's body rebounded, and he fell on top of that sensation once again. Repeating that countless times for a brief moment, Abel came to notice he was bouncing on a spread-out cloth.

Someone had spread out piles of cloth beneath the descending Abel, thus catching his fall.

Digesting the reality of his narrow escape from death, Abel rolled off the cloth right away, and off its edge he placed a foot on firm ground. While on one knee, he raised his face in order to ascertain the doer of said deed—

???: "—Weeeell~, the time for the commandment has arrived!"

Abel: "…"

???: "Are you His Excellency, or perhaps His Excellency? Either way, the Great Disaster has come around! Won't you fight against the Great Disaster together with me?!"

Are you really so delighted with the fulfillment of the prophecy?

Spreading his arms, both his demeanor and voice were joyful and far too out-of-place, with the battle between the titanic Moguro and the Cloud Dragon causing the demolition of the city to his back, the man—Ubilk, smiled.

Celebrating the moment in which the commandment he had been granted as a Stargazer, had, without a doubt, been materialized.

3

The thunderous boom of the walls breaking reverberated, violently shaking the Crystal Palace. Upon being convinced that something decisive had occurred, Berstetz Fondalfon entered the throne room.

And then—

Berstetz: "—Is that, Chisha-dono?"

The wall of the throne room had crumbled, and amidst the freshly scattered dust, Berstetz found the form of the black-haired Emperor toppled atop the scarlet carpet, thus lowering the corners of his slit eyes in gloom.

Walking closer towards it, he saw that the body, collapsed face-down, had been punctured on its chest. The heart that ought to have been beating within had exploded, the thread of life had been cut.

Though he was not a military officer, he understood with a glance. It had been an instant death. There had been no time to even feel pain.

Berstetz: "Considering what we have done, this could be said to be quite the merciful end."

Ever since he had committed treason, raising a rebellion against the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, Berstetz had resigned himself to the fact that his death would not be a peaceful one whatsoever.

As an accomplice, Chisha should have steeled a similar resolve as well.

But then again—

Berstetz: “Though, from my discussion with the Stargazer, it seems you had set your eyes on something different than me.”

Though a clear act of treachery, Berstetz had no intent of condemning it.

Rather, his true feelings were those of admiration.

In order to gain that which one desired, they must exhaust all of their strength in attempted pursuit; such was the Empire’s essence.

Neither Berstetz nor Chisha possessed the fighting strength needed to abide by the Empire’s mantra, but they were alike in the sense that they both compensated for what they lacked with their ingenuity.

The new form of the Empire constructed by the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, had also recognized and certified that as a form of strength.

Berstetz had also approved of that way of doing things in the Empire, and adhering to it, Chisha had made a magnificent example.

With his own strength. —As a man of the Vollachian Empire, that was a deed of honor.

Berstetz: “Although, it seems it will be difficult to find the time to speak words of praise.”

Looking down at the corpse, Berstetz gazed at the hole in the wall where a gale was blowing in. On the other side, he could ascertain the presence of an enormous body, colored like rocks, in motion—the presence of Moguro Hagane.

Given these circumstances, it would be strange if Moguro had killed Chisha.

In his position, Moguro was supposedly an ally of Chisha, the latter playing the part of Emperor. Chisha’s cause of death had been a blow through the chest, but it would have been impossible for Moguro’s giant body to execute a strike with such precision.

If there was concern to be had, it was of the strange words that the Stargazer—that Ubilk, had left behind as he passed by Berstetz, the outside of the Crystal Palace the place he was heading to.

Berstetz: "The Great Disaster, and the ruin it brings… Just, what is it that I am unaware of in the Empire?"

???: "—My my, has nobody informed you? In that case, shall I fill you in?"

Berstetz: "…"

His cheeks stiffening upon suddenly hearing a voice, Berstetz slowly turned his gaze back.

His eyes, directed towards the large hole, turned back to the collapsed remains of the Emperor. Then, he cast his gaze further upwards, to the deepest part of the throne room—to the throne.

Even as the entire castle yet shook from the impacts, the throne went without moving, firm in its position. As the national flag depicting the Sword Wolf swayed in the wind, before it was a silhouette, resting chin in hand.

Augustly sitting on the throne where His Excellency the Emperor ought to be sat, the figure looked down upon Berstetz.

Berstetz: "—Wha…"

Properly speaking, Berstetz should have raised a stern voice, should have reproached the disrespect of the person sat upon the throne.

However, he was incapable of doing so. It was true that he had been rendered speechless due to the shock, but above that, Berstetz did not possess the qualifications to reproach them.

In this Vollachian Empire, the position of Prime Minister ranked second after the Emperor and the Imperial Family in terms of authority.

It was possible to say that the Generals of the First-Class extolled as the Nine Divine Generals held a similar rank, but more important was the fact that there was almost nobody in the country that Berstetz, with the position of Prime Minister, could not reproach.

Nevertheless, Berstetz had been unable to rebuke the other party.

The reason was—

???: “To think you would yet live, you are quite tenacious, Berstetz. —Say, who won the Imperial Selection Ceremony? Vincent-niisama? Or was it Prisca?”

Cracks formed on her pale and beautiful face, the member of the Imperial Family of Vollachia spoke.

The master whom Berstetz Fondalfon had served priorly, the Imperial Princess who was supposed to have perished, having suffered defeat in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, Lamia Godwin, leisurely crossed her legs atop the throne.

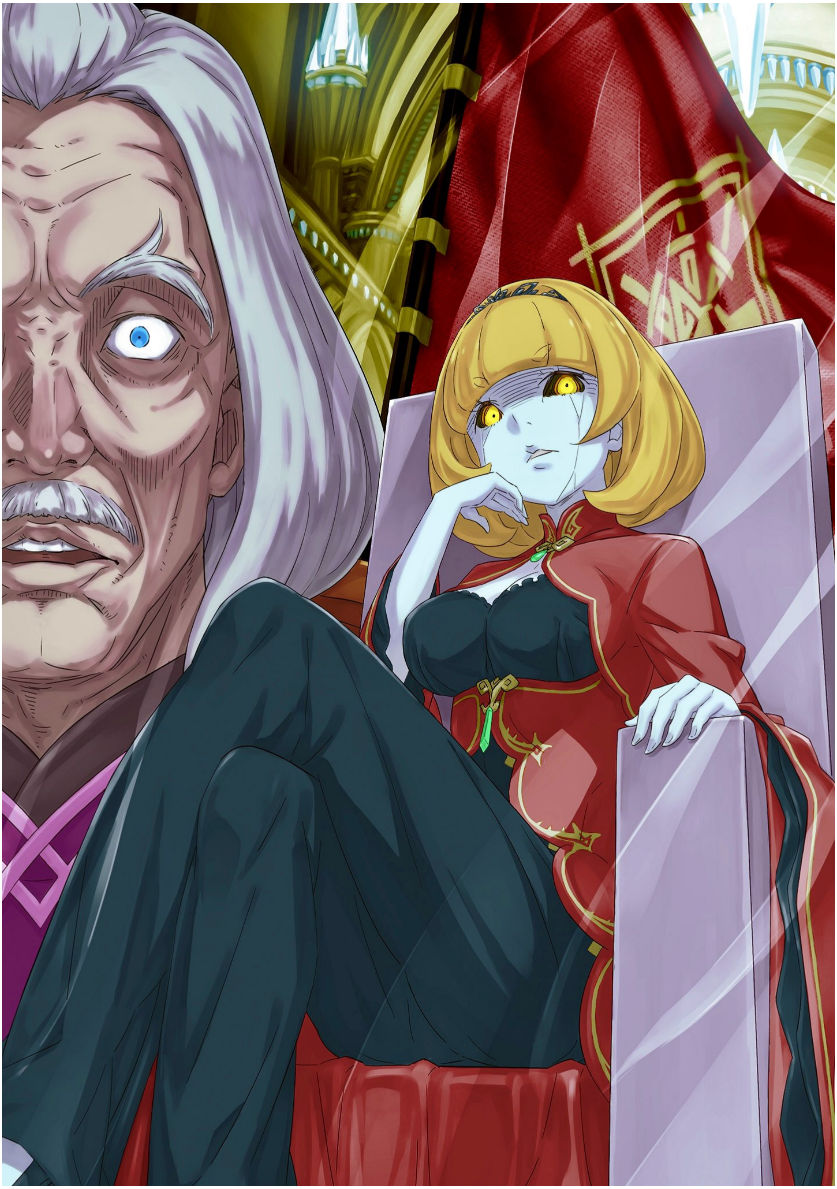

Chapter 109: Sword Wolf of the Empire

1

He was reminded of an aggravating affair.

As per his recollections, Petra had been the one talking.

Petra: “The Master has a very bad personality. His speech is shabby, he pesters people, and he seems to enjoy being scolded, which is weird at times, but he is really good at teaching.”

Being unable to unfairly demean a person because she did not like them was Petra’s nature, even though she was not willing to admit it.

Garfiel and Petra were close in age, so was it perhaps safe to say they were even friends? He liked Petra’s noble nature, no wonder Frederica was so taken with her.

In terms of loss-prone personalities, Garfiel’s love for Subaru and Otto was probably of the same vein. After all, blood proved the siblings.

If so, Garfiel had to admit that too.

Roswaal L. Mathers was a love rival, a malcontent in the Camp who had plotted unforgivable misdeeds, and a natural enemy that he had never liked since long ago.

Still, Roswaal’s teachings were spot on, and that had kept him alive.

Roswaal: “Garfiel, that’s a shuriken. It’s coated with poison. Even if you avoid it, it’ll explode. What is the right move?”

Garfiel: “You’re a tad slow, ain’t’cha!”

Howling, Garfiel stomped on the ground, and immediately afterward, the earth rose up to protect the two of them as a shield.

The light sound of a shuriken piercing into the wall of earth, followed by the sound of an explosion, scorched the atmosphere.

As Roswaal had predicted, correctly so, damage could not have been avoided had it been parried with his gauntlets.

His sharp fangs creaked due to that fact—

Garfiel: “Who’s next?”

Roswaal: “I am.”

With an immediate answer to his question, Garfiel turned to Roswaal behind him.

A moment later, Roswaal used the sai in both his hands to knock away a kunai thrown at him. Seeing a shadow flashing above his head, Garfiel launched his fist in its direction, bereft of hesitation.

There was a ringing sound, and the strike of Garfiel’s fist was met with a kick with the outer part of a foot, delivered mid-flip.

That attack had been unleashed by Olbart, who had ceased his skull-shattering attack on Roswaal’s head. The monstrous old man countered Garfiel’s fists with his legs, all while saying,

Olbart: “Damn, this really is turnin’ out ta be a problem. Ain’t two against one unfair?”

Garfiel: “Don’t try ‘n change the rules now, old fart!”

Olbart: “Kakakakka! I’m free ta say anythin’ I wanna.”

Drawing back his foot from where it had impacted the fist, and using it as a springboard, Olbart leapt towards the back. For a moment, Garfiel was about to step forward to follow up,

Garfiel: “…”

A shuriken, swooping in from his side, passed right under his nose as he stopped, slashing through the air.

Letting it sail by, Garfiel exhaled deeply. Roswaal, right next to Garfiel, changed his expression as he re-gripped his sai.

Garfiel's lips curved at the sight.

Garfiel: "What'cha smilin' at?"

Roswaal: "Nothing, nothing. Well, I was just admiring the remarkable speed of your growth. Even without me saying anything, you've managed to anticipate the surprise attack just now. You're learning things as you fight."

Garfiel: "You're sayin' I'm just bein' sly, ain't'cha? And my amazin' self ain't gonna be as shitty as you or that old man."

Roswaal: "It takes talent to be nefarious, you know. The way I see it, you don't have the predisposition to be nefarious. You're about on par with Emily."

Garfiel: "Of course not! Don't put me in the same basket as her!"

He snapped at Roswaal's remark, but after he himself voiced that out loud, he reflected, concluding that that reaction would have possibly hurt Emilia had she heard it.

Either way, his mind was on Emilia and the other members of the Camp who were probably on the battlefield like Garfiel, and on those who were fighting alongside them. He took a deep breath as he thought of Heinkel and the Shudraqian women, as he thought of Ram's safety as well, the latter having joined them.

Olbart: "Ya got a lotta time on yer hands, don't'cha? Yer people are in a tough spot, ain't they? I'm sure we got a stronger lineup than ya do."

Garfiel: "—Hk."

Olbart's words frustrated Garfiel's attempts to regain his composure and face the situation.

The feeling of having one's mind read would make one suspicious that their intentions could be predicted on the battlefield, a situation most undesirable.

But next to the impatient Garfiel, Roswaal shrugged,

Roswaal: “Your opponent wants you to get heated. In your case, that could eliminate any hesitation, but it’s not good to mix impurities into your fervor. In addition…”

Garfiel: “In addition?”

Roswaal: “He’s been quite chatty to begin with, but haven’t the number of attempts to deceive us through words increased? Seems like the old man is also getting quite irritated.”

Olbart: “—. You’re a disgustin’ young’un, ain’t’cha?”

As he spoke, the glint in Olbart’s long, brow-covered eyes took on a shine of vexation.

And, after hearing Roswaal’s statement, Garfiel realized an obvious truth—His opponent was as annoyed by this battle dragging on as he himself was.

Olbart laughed, provoked, teased, not because he could afford to, but because he wanted his opponents to believe that he had room to, so that he would gain the mental upper hand.

Whereas with Garfiel, his feelings could immediately be seen in his face, voice, and fur.

Thus, in this sort of psychological warfare, one could win in the blink of an eye by leading their opponent by the nose.

Roswaal: “Even so, you can win provided you surpass your opponent’s strength and they play on the same field you do. However…”

Garfiel: “I know. If a bastard stronger than my amazin’ self only fights in the field I’m good at, then no matter how hard I try, I won’t be able to see a way to win. But…”

The fact that Garfiel was now fighting in the Vollachian Empire was the result of a rather unfortunate combination of various coincidental events.

However, what the dice had rolled mattered not; there was no denying the reality before him.

And in the years to come, battles comparable to this one in the Empire could befall him without end, as long as he was with Emilia and Subaru.

That was to say—

Garfiel: "—Done with whinin'."

Roswaal: "Mhm, that's right. That's good. This is the end of your boyhood."

Garfiel wrinkled his nose at Roswaal's histrionics.

For Garfiel, being congratulated or praised for his growth by Roswaal was nothing to be happy about. However, he liked that expression, "end of boyhood".

From this point onward, Garfiel would continue forward as someone who had matured.

Olbart: "—Dear, oh dear. This is why I hate young'uns. Unlike this old man who's got no room ta grow, y'all can reach enlightenment on a dime."

As he twisted his neck and shook the ankle of the foot that he had off the ground, Olbart sighed.

However, the Vicious Old Man's light-hearted derogation contained genuine hostility. —Yes, hostility. Up till this moment, Olbart had considered Garfiel to be of a lower rank, aiming to eliminate him.

It was proof that Garfiel had finally been recognized as an enemy.

Garfiel: "Finally…"

Garfiel's blood was red-hot with enthusiasm for earning the right to go toe-to-toe with Olbart.

He breathed in through his nose again, loudly and deeply, and exhaled through his mouth. Then, he became conscious of the blood circulating in his body and his power that could not be seen—.

Olbart: “Ahhn?”

Suddenly, a dumb-sounding voice was uttered, disturbing Garfiel’s concentration.

It had been uttered by Olbart standing in front of him; for a moment he believed it to be a shinobi technique to disturb his composure. However, it was not.

Because, that opening had been born in Olbart, rather.

Garfiel: “…”

He was the head honcho of the shinobi. The opening that had arisen was as small as the eye of a needle, but Garfiel could not help but gasp, as he had never shown such laxness before.

What in the world had brought it about—

???: “—Waitwaitwait! It’s unfair to withdraw in the middle like this, it’s a waste, you’re not reading the mood! Pretty sure I’m right on the mark on you being even more unable to read the mood than I, aren’t I?!”

There was a figure running across the battlefield, raising a noisy voice and leaving behind a cloud of dust.

A small boy who gave the impression that he was out-of-place on the battlefield was calling out in a shrill, high-pitched voice from a considerable distance—However, the speed at which he ran was unusual.

The screaming boy was looking up at the sky, chasing a huge being as it flapped its wings.

Garfiel understood at first glance that it was the Dragon that had landed on another battlefield a distance away from here. He understood that, but this situation where boy and Dragon were playing tag was one beyond his comprehension.

A battlefield where anything could happen, although he had a strong hunch on that—

Olbart: "…Why's that bastard Ceci so small?"

Garfiel's eyes narrowed at the incomprehensible sight, but a subdued voice reached his ears.

Olbart, standing on one leg and still yielding an opening akin to the eye of a needle, was distracted by the Dragon and the boy—or rather, the screaming boy.

And then—

Olbart: "Well, Chesshy, you've taken my style, haven't'cha?"

The old man's clouded eyes filled with surprise and suspicion, after which they eventually turned clear and were instead filled with anger.

It was an emotional change that had lasted less than ten seconds, yet he had no idea what thought process had brought forth this change in Olbart.

But, if it was one of only a handful of openings that the Vicious Old Man had made in his life, the devious Roswaal was not going to overlook it.

Roswaal: "—You must really be unaware of the situation if you can afford to look away from him with how he is right now."

Thrusting the tip of the sai he was tightly grasping, Roswaal stepped into the needle-thin opening which had arisen.

His immediate reaction disturbed, the strike grazed Olbart's left shoulder as he twisted around. The speeding mass of iron had connected with Olbart's shoulder, causing the old man to gnash his teeth as his diminutive figure melted into the ground.

It was the technique of swimming through the earth, which he had displayed several times during this battle.

But—

Roswaal: “Garfiel!”

Garfiel: “I know!”

As irritating as Roswaal’s advice was, he could already see the strategy in the making.

After all, Garfiel’s Divine Protection of Earth Spirits was a Divine Protection that drew Mana from the ground via the soles of his feet. In other words, it connected him to the earth.

Even if an opponent was under the ground, if he concentrated, tracking their position would be—.

Garfiel: “—Ah?”

Suddenly, all the hairs on Garfiel’s body stood on end as he was seized by a strange sensation.

He felt a repulsive sensation, as if his neck was being licked by a tongue which felt strangely coarse. That sensation was not coming from Olbart in front of him, but from a much larger, wider area.

Roswaal: “Garfiel?”

In response to the motionless Garfiel, Roswaal raised a questioning voice.

Not entirely in response to Olbart’s earlier comment, Garfiel also yielded an opening. An opening that the monstrous old man would surely have exploited.

However, there was no attack. On the contrary—

Roswaal: “The traces of the old man, they vanished?”

Roswaal muttered, frowning his shapely brow and going without relaxing the grip on his sai.

He was correct; signs of Olbart's presence were supposed to be there, but none were present. Of course, the opponent was a shinobi. He likely knew how to hide his presence to the greatest possible extent.

Yet, that was not the case. Olbart's presence below ground seemed to be getting distant.

He was moving away from Garfiel and Roswaal at breakneck speed, and then—

Garfiel: "What the fuck‘s this feelin'…"

Roswaal: "Garfiel, the old man is—"

Garfiel: "It's strange, disgustin' even, it's like "the winds of Aihiya corrupt the water"…"

Roswaal, still wary of Olbart, did not share the sense of danger with Garfiel.

If he could not feel it, then it was probably not Mana that was causing the disturbance. It was a huge, tremendous sensation which Garfiel could feel underfoot drawing near.

—It was a feeling that Garfiel, who possessed the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, noticed most quickly.

Garfiel: "The soil of the battlefield… No, the earth of Vollachia, is running wild?"

Garfiel could feel the horrifying screams of the vast earth.

Any resentment that the battle had been left unfinished, or that the opportunity to break one of the walls had been lost, dissipated before the weight of what stood in their way.

Garfiel: "Roswaal! Fly right now ‘n let everyone know!"

Roswaal: "…"

Garfiel, forgetting the pseudonym he was meant to use in the Empire, called out to him; Roswaal did not interject, perhaps out of respect for the urgency of the situation.

Garfiel shouted with a sense of urgency, in spite of his hatred of the other party.

It was—

Garfiel: "—All of Vollachia's gonna turn into enemies!"

2

—Lamia Godwin was one of the daughters of Drizen Vollachia, the Seventy-Sixth Emperor of the Vollachian Empire, an Imperial Princess defeated and killed in a conflict against Vincent Abellux and Prisca Benedict, in the Imperial Selection Ceremony.

In the Imperial Selection Ceremony, brothers and sisters were forced to kill each other until a single one remained; yet she had formed an alliance with her other siblings to defeat Vincent, who had been viewed as the one most likely to take the Emperor's throne, as she excelled in cornering her opposition through the excellent usage of schemes and traps.

However, her plan had failed to disprove what had been speculated at the start. The alliance collapsed, and in the end, she had lost her life in a duel with her sister, Prisca, being that there was no love lost between the two.

Among those involved in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, it would often be stated that she would have won the throne given her age and capacity at the time. Had it not been, for Vincent.

However, defeat was still defeat. Upon facing a cold, hard, and irrefutable reality, Lamia's body was reduced to cinders by the flames of the Yang Sword. That, too, was supposedly a cold, hard, and irrefutable reality.

And yet—

Berstetz: "Your Excellency Lamia, but how…"

Berstetz would normally keep his eyes closed and narrow, but now they had opened just enough to allow one to ascertain the gray coloration of his pupils, betraying his astonishment towards the person before him.

What Berstetz's trembling vision beheld was none other than the countenance of his master Lamia Godwin, a countenance still vivid in his memory, but now sitting on the throne with the flag fluttering in the wind to the back.

Excepting, however, the cracked, bloodless white face she now donned, and the beautiful red irises that had transformed into an eerie golden glow standing out amidst pitch-black darkness.

Lamia: "Berstetz, did you not hear my question? Has Vincent-niisama won the Imperial Selection Ceremony? Was it Prisca? It cannot be, was it Palladio-niisama, of all people? It would be nightmarish, were anyone else besides those two to vie for the throne after my defeat."

Berstetz: "—. His Excellency Vincent Abellux ascended to the throne after the defeat of Your Excellency. To the present time, he has continued to reign for nine years."

Lamia: "However, he has died. Is that the answer to what is lying beneath my feet?"

Cutting off Berstetz's words, Lamia looked over the prone corpse as she rested her chin upon her hand. While unable to discern the face from her position, she was able to tell the body apart from those of her other blood siblings.

Technically, Berstetz had surmised that the fallen Vincent was in fact not the real Vincent, but rather Chisha Gold in disguise, though that was beside the point.

Berstetz: "With all due respect, Your Excellency Lamia, but would you lend me an ear?"

Lamia: "What is it, Berstetz? You have been a faithful henchman of mine. If you have any questions, then I shall answer them."

Berstetz: “For what reason have you returned? If I may add, the throne is reserved for none other than the Emperor of Vollachia to sit upon. —You do not possess that qualification, Your Excellency.”

Berstetz uttered this fully aware that it would have been disrespectful and that it would give rise to displeasure within his conversational partner.

At one time, he had served and had done everything in his power to raise her as the worthy successor to take the throne of the Vollachian Empire. Back then, he would have been delighted had he witnessed Lamia sitting on the Imperial Throne in such a manner.

—Welling up in the depths of his chest were boiling, unbearable hatred and anger.

Berstetz: “Make a wise decision, Your Excellency. We were defeated.”

With a reverent hand against his chest, Berstetz advised Lamia as he had once done.

When she was still young, but beautiful and intelligent, Lamia had the flexibility to listen to Berstetz’s recommendations, take them seriously, reflect and digest them, and let them guide her to the right answer.

This cunning, poisonous virtue of Lamia—

Lamia: “You have fallen sick, Berstetz. No matter how much you love and devote yourself to it, this country will never repay you.”

Tilting her neck, Lamia responded, her expression unchanging as if frozen solid; and Berstetz acted immediately in return.

The ring on his finger had glinted mysteriously once he turned his hand on his chest toward Lamia.

A Meteor it was, given to Berstetz as a mark of being the Prime Minister.

Berstetz: "Prepare yourself—!"

Berstetz's will had elicited a response, and from the glowing ring's jewel, a fireball shot out.

It was something Vincent too possessed for the sake of self-defense, and it released the Mana accumulated within it as magic, an attack towards the one whom Berstetz had once sworn fidelity to—No, towards one who bore her likeness.

Just like that, Lamia defenseless on the throne was engulfed by the fireball—

Lamia: "Fool. Of all things, you employ fire against a member of the Imperial Family of Vollachia."

The subsequent moment, dazzling red light illuminated the throne room, and the flame was bisected diagonally, going in two different directions. Lamia and the throne avoided the blast, given its momentum, which in turn crashed into the wall upon which the flag had been draped, giving rise to flames.

If left unattended, that conflagration could spread to the flag, then engulf the entire Crystal Palace in flames. However, Berstetz's attention was focused on what was in front of him, rather than on the Crystal Palace's future.

Rising from the throne, Lamia held in her hand a glowing treasured sword of crimson.

That unmistakable form was the pride and joy of the Vollachian Empire—

Berstetz: "—The Yang Sword Vollachia."

Lamia: "It is only natural for someone of Vollachia's Imperial Family to possess it, yes?"

Once more Berstetz opened his eyes to a width on par to the width of a normal person's squinting eyes, and reflected within them was Lamia leaping toward him, holding the brilliant Yang Sword in her hand.

With a swing, Lamia's slash loomed. Were that dazzling crimson no forgery, Berstetz's existence would be torched, not even ashes would remain.

He had to move, but he was not able to.

He had not been trained in that way, and, more importantly, he was blinded by the radiance of it all.

The radiance of the Yang Sword, symbol of the Vollachian Empire —.

Lamia: "Goodbye, Berste—"

A flash of light fell upon Berstetz, and even he himself understood at that moment that his life, that the life of this wicked man, who had pretended to be a loyal subject and had shaken the Empire to its very foundations, was arriving at its terminus.

???: "Nuuuuun!!"

The great door of the throne room was suddenly smashed open from the outside, and something flew in from the other side with tremendous force. Its speed unchecked, it flew directly into Lamia, who had been swinging her blade at Berstetz, blowing away the Imperial Princess's thin body with a "Guh".

Lamia: "Wha…"

Feeling that his imminent death was growing distant, Berstetz came to see that what had collided with Lamia was a battle-axe which had been thrown. It was one of the weapons held by a set of armor arranged in the hall of the Crystal Palace in front of the throne room, a gleaming piece with ceremonial decorations.

Even so, the battle-axe had always been well-cared for, kept ready to be used on the battlefield, since not displaying weapons that were actually useless was not the imperial way.

And thus, it had stopped Lamia on her tracks from her front, blowing her away towards the back of the throne room with terrific momentum.

Berstetz: “Who did…”

Has thrown that axe, was the doubt Berstetz harbored. He turned around, but before he could confirm who it was, loud footsteps approached him at once,

???: “Traitorous retainer, Berstetz Fondalfon! I was against keeping someone like you as Prime Minister the whole time!!”

Berstetz was grabbed by the collar and lifted to his feet by a huge hand, which forced him to face a bearded giant of a man. The titan was endowed with a loud voice that befitted his large body, and a stern face that looked as if it had been tailor-made especially for him.

His naked upper body was covered by an armor of well-trained muscle, and his vigor had not diminished in the slightest, even though he had been in captivity for more than a month—

Berstetz: “General First-Class Goz Ralfon…”

Goz: “You will be tried in public! Of course, General First-Class Chisha, who planned and carried out this treason, is just as guilty! Regardless of your true intentions, you are guilty of plotting against His Excellency and your own allies!”

Berstetz: “…”

Goz: “In the first place! Do not underestimate us officers and our soldiers! No matter how many hardships we may face, the Great Disaster will be crushed by our combined efforts!”

The giant who had spoken loudly, Goz Ralfon.

He was one of the Nine Divine Generals of the Empire, ranked Fifth. A man who, due to his loyalty and unfortunate timing, had become the second victim of Berstetz and Chisha’s schemes, Vincent being the first.

However, as his interference had aided Vincent in his escape from the Imperial Capital, Berstetz could not be lenient on him for the sake of his own objective.

It was the way of the world, and the imperial way itself, that one side would win and the other would lose when both sides gave their all for their own cause. Therefore, he did not feel even a bit like apologizing for that.

Berstetz: “Why are you here… You were supposed to be chained up in the basement of my mansion.”

Goz: “A brave girl rescued me! She possesses a strong heart… You were out of luck to have trapped her alongside me! She is a lady the Vollachian Empire should be proud of!”

Berstetz: “…I see, it was her, huh.”

Berstetz’s mind flashed to the blue-haired girl he had been holding captive in his mansion.

She was a valuable user of healing magic and, according to Madelyn, she was a young girl from the Oni Clan. He had intended to make her a candidate for the Emperor’s consort, both in terms of her abilities and her race.

He had evaluated her as a strong-willed and vibrant woman, but apparently that had still been an underestimation.

He intended to not get too hung up on that, though, now that the failure of the plan had become apparent.

However, what was worrisome concerning the truth of Goz’s appearance—

Berstetz: “General First-Class Goz, have you already heard about the Great Disaster?”

Goz: “I have not heard the details! However, I have heard that it would happen at the cost of His Excellency’s life! I must inquire Chisha about that as well… But my priority is His Excellency’s life! Where are you keeping His Excellency, you…”

Responding in an unnecessarily loud voice, Goz announced his intentions to Berstetz.

Internally, Berstetz had admired, and even resented, the fact that Chisha had kept the Great Disaster completely to himself, even though it had reached even Goz, but that was all he felt.

Halfway through his words, Goz had noticed something, his eyes widening.

And then—

Goz: “Wha, ah…, Hi-His Excellency… HIS EXCELLENCYYYY!”

With a scream, Goz crumpled to his knees. Berstetz, thrown by the momentum, fell to the floor on his buttocks, but Goz did not care as he clung to the corpse before him—to the corpse that had collapsed on the red carpet, the corpse that would move nevermore.

From Goz’s widened eyes tears streamed, absorbed by his thick beard. The tears pressing down his beard, he pounded his large fist against the carpet with force,

Goz: “Your Excellency…! This Goz Ralfon, was too late…! What folly! What an act of folly! No longer can this folly be atoned for except by death…!”

Berstetz: “G-General First-Class Goz! Please remain calm! That man is…”

Goz: “This is no situation to remain calm in! Damn you, Prime Minister Berstetz! Are you satisfied with this?! You have taken the life of His Excellency, and now this very Empire itself—”

Berstetz: “The deceased is General First-Class Chisha!”

Berstetz loudly silenced Goz, who had been furious at the Emperor’s corpse, which had been pierced through the chest.

Opening his eyes wide towards Berstetz, who had let out a yell seldom heard from him, Goz then carefully examined the lying corpse,

Goz: “This is General First-Class Chisha…? Ridiculous! If so, then what happened!”

Berstetz: “Even I do not know the details of the situation. However, I think that the death of General First-Class Chisha in the guise of His Excellency and this unprecedented situation… may have something to do with the Great Disaster.”

Having calmed Goz and his flurry of emotions, Berstetz had also organized his own thoughts.

Perhaps his death as Emperor and the rebellion he had committed with Berstetz were all part of a plot hatched by Chisha Gold.

And this had not been unrelated to the events of the Great Disaster that had popped up time and again.

If anyone did know anything about the Great Disaster, it would be —

???: “—That is just awful, all of a sudden. I have not been treated like this in all my life and in my death.”

Goz: “…”

A quiet voice could be heard from the back of the room.

Lamia’s voice, who was supposed to have been blown away, felled by a blow from violent throw of a battle-axe performed by Goz barging in.

Before proceeding, let it be clear that her presence had not been forgotten.

Despite his subsequent boisterous exchange with Goz, Berstetz had not bothered to mention her because the power in that battle-axe had been, without a doubt, deadly.

Goz Ralfon was a General admired by many others in the troops, second only to Chisha Gold in terms of commanding large armies; but he was also possessed of outstanding individual combat skills in comparison with the latter.

Were Goz to unleash an attack with the intention of defeating an opponent, the body of an average man would be maimed in a single hit, if said average man were on the receiving end.

However, for Lamia, that had not been so. —At least, not strictly speaking.

Lamia: “Well, this body… It does not seem to feel any pain, so I guess that is a relief.”

Saying this, Lamia stood up and tilted her head as she slowly connected the right half of her body together—which had been shattered like pottery.

No jest nor metaphor in that expression, it had been spoken in its truest sense. There had been no blood flowing from the wounds, the crushed parts wriggled and combined together like ice filling out a lake.

But, things did not end with the fact that someone who was supposed to be dead had come back to life, suddenly reanimated.

Goz: “Prime Minister Berstetz, if I am not mistaken, that person is…”

Berstetz: “—. This is Her Excellency Lamia Godwin. She passed away nine years ago during the Imperial Selection Ceremony.”

Goz: “Why is Her Excellency the Imperial Princess, who is supposed to have died in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, doing this?! And I even attacked Her Excellency Lamia?! Do not tell me that His Excellency the Emperor kept his sister alive?!”

Berstetz: “That cannot possibly be the case. His Excellency Vincent Vollachia has no attachment to such sentiments. Considering her strange appearance, it is Her Excellency Lamia who is the problem.”

Having corrected Goz’s reflexive shortsightedness, Berstetz took a close look at Lamia, who was still restoring her body, and arrived at this conclusion.

If possible, he would prefer prolonging the conversation with Lamia to obtain more information.

Berstetz: “It was no one else but me who closed the window for negotiations.”

Lamia: “Yes, so it seems. Even though I was intending to talk this out in proper fashion. So, what happened?”

Berstetz: “That is a good question. Perhaps I was getting desperate, thinking that my allies would betray me as I take on this last great challenge in my life. I am quite surprised by this side of mine.”

Goz: “This is not the time to say that!! Your Excellency Lamia! I am Goz Ralfon, a General First-Class serving His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia! If you would oblige and let yourself get tied up!”

After Goz had launched a preemptive strike, Lamia would likely turn a deaf ear even after stating her willingness to talk.

As Lamia affirmed this, Goz took a large step towards her. Even with his battle-axe no longer in his hands, his arms were still as thick as logs.

Even with the power of the Yang Sword and the physical enhancements that accompanied its wielding, Lamia’s ability should not have been sufficient to stop Goz.

Even though Lamia was not supposed to be the type that was unable to understand the difference in strength between both of them—

Lamia: “I refuse doing such a thing. I am not going to have my freedom taken away right after awakening again.”

Goz: “Then, by force…”

Lamia: “—Besides, you know?”

Thinking that she was not willing to listen, Goz was already about to take an even larger step forth, and it happened.

Lamia’s bewitching golden eyes flickered, and the situation changed. —As shadows dwelling in the selfsame pitch-dark goldeness arose around her one after the other.

Goz: “What the hell?!”

Goz cried out in horror, Berstetz also lost his voice as he choked up.

As if shadows had risen from the ground, more eerie-looking figures with the same eyes and cracked skin, which had lost their color like Lamia’s, appeared.

That alone was astonishing, but Berstetz’s and Goz’s shock did not end there.

There was also the fact that they recognized everyone who had risen—

Lamia: “—I pity you for clinging to an Empire that will end regardless.”

As she stated this, Lamia raised the Yang Sword to the heavens. In the same manner, more than two dozen figures around her all reached for the heavens as well, unsheathing their treasured swords of crimson; all members of the Imperial Family in possession of the qualification that allowed them to not be burnt away.

3

—The battle between the Eighth, Moguro Hagane, and the previous and current Ninths, Madelyn Eschart and Balleroy Temeglyph, continued raging in the Crystal Palace’s proximity.

The extraordinary battle that unfolded within its immediate vicinity was a clash between gigantic ramparts in the shape of a human and a cloud-clad Dragon; and with the addition of the Empire’s most powerful flying dragon rider, it turned into a fierce battle that would go down in the history of the Empire.

The thunderous roar, the rumbling of the earth were the very screams of the Vollachian Empire, the water streaming out of the destroyed reservoir turning into a wave of mud flowing into the Imperial Capital.

The Imperial Capital of Lupugana—or rather, the Sacred Vollachian Empire itself was in the midst of an unprecedented upheaval that foreshadowed its destruction.

And yet, despite these circumstances—

???: “Are you His Excellency, or perhaps His Excellency? Either way, the Great Disaster has come around! Won’t you fight against the Great Disaster together with me?!”

The Stargazer, with his arms outstretched and a broad smile on his face, not looking at the crumbling streets of the Imperial Capital, was more than out-of-place; he was nightmarish, carelessly trampling on the understanding of ordinary people.

But alas. The one confronted with the Stargazer’s eccentric smile was the one person who had the least permission to be ordinary in this Empire.

Abel: “…”

For a moment, Abel glanced behind the curtain at the miracle that had saved his life.

What had saved Abel from falling from a great height was a cloth stretched to the max placed exactly where he had fallen, an improvised cushioning material gathered from the rooms of the Crystal Palace and the surrounding buildings.

He could understand the mechanism that had saved him. The question was, why could it have been prepared?

This sort of preparation would be unfeasible unless one knew that someone—no, that Abel would fall there.

Abel: “How much did you know?!”

The moment he reached that conclusion, Abel’s outstretched hand grabbed the smiling Ubilk by the chest. He pulled him to his feet forcefully, and Ubilk bellowed an “Owowow”, his eyes widening.

Face-to-face, directly in front of him, sparing no quarter Abel stared at Ubilk, and,

Abel: “Chisha’s plan… No, that is not it. How far in advance did you know whose death would bring about the Great Disaster? You said that it would be my death that—”

Ubilk: “Yeah, I did say that. —That Vincent Vollachia’s death would be the beginning of the Great Disaster that will bring ruin to the Empire.”

Abel glared at him from a distance their breaths could be felt, but Ubilk’s relaxed demeanor did not falter. Perhaps it was not so much composure, but rather it was a different kind of disgusting anticipation or exuberance.

In fact, Ubilk was in high spirits, as if at last the opportunity he had been waiting for had arrived.

But—

Abel: “Vincent Vollachia is I.”

Ubilk: “No, no! Your Excellency! That’s wrong. That’s nooot~ true. I’ll say it out loud; that’s incorrect, Your Excellency.”

Abel: “…”

Ubilk: “General First-Class Chisha Gold has unquestionably fulfilled the role of Vincent Vollachia. His Excellency himself, of all people, had molded General Chisha Gold to do so.”

Abel: “I…”

It was not for that purpose that he had kept Chisha Gold by his side.

Upon the Great Disaster’s arrival, he would need someone with the ability to take charge of everything within the Empire to replace the helpless Emperor who would be unable to be present; that was his belief.

Someone who, after Vincent’s death, would cooperate with a worthy successor and save the Empire.

Abel: “Why did you take part in this plan?”

Ubilk: “What’s that?”

Abel: “As a Stargazer, you are only interested in the fulfillment and implementation of your commandment. Then, if you wished to ensure that the Great Disaster would happen, you should have made use of my life. Why did you decide to go along with Chisha’s uncertain plans? It is nonsensical.”

A Stargazer was a commandment’s puppet in human form.

No matter how much they could possibly have pretended to be likable or accommodating, what lay inside was naught but an obsession with their commandment and a fanatical desire to fulfill it.

His priorities should have been clear. So, why had he sided with Chisha’s plan?

Abel: “What was your reason? Answer me.”

Ubilk: “Ummm~, I think you’d be offended if I were to say it, Your Excellency.”

Abel: “Speak.”

Ubilk: “Well, it doesn’t really matter to me whether it was His Excellency himself or General First-Class Chisha. It’d be good if the Great Disaster happened, and it’d be bad if it didn’t. If it didn’t happen even after General First-Class Chisha died in the guise of His Excellency, then I’d have to do sooomething~ about His Excellency himself… Do you get what I’m saying?”

Abel: “—. In that case, is this situation what you had hoped for?”

With that, Abel quietly gained an understanding, as Ubilk stuck out his tongue in a mischievous manner. At the same time, he comprehended that talking to Ubilk any further would be of no use.

Releasing his grip on Ubilk’s collar, Abel slowly turned around. Reflected in his eyes through the oni mask, were several figures holding the edge of the cloth that had saved Abel.

None of their faces had ever been seen at the Crystal Palace before, but—

Abel: “These people, are they also a part of your faction?”

Ubilk: “There aren’t enough of us to call it a faction, though, areee~ there?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Ubilk spun around and spread his arms in front of his accomplices. The crowd of roughly ten-odd people, assembled without regard for their age or gender, were presumably Stargazers just like him.

Even if one were to try and cull them, their numbers would increase. Since it was unknown how the pawns of the Observers were selected, he had left them alone despite knowing of their existence.

Ubilk: “As I said, we’re moving in accordance with the commandment. What are you gonna do, Your Excellency?”

Abel: “What am I—”

Going to do? Abel tried to put his thoughts across his tongue as he pondered such.

However, in the middle of responding to Ubilk, the ground was shaken by a particularly loud impact. Some distance away from Abel and everyone else, a part of Moguro’s body fell to the ground, making a large sound.

The battle yet raged on. However, since it was two against one, Moguro’s disadvantage was undeniable.

Balleroy Temeglyph, a man who was supposed to be dead, had been resurrected alongside his beloved dragon.

The worst possibility one could deduce from this, was that it was just not limited to the two of them.

Ubilk: “The turmoil in the Imperial Capital and the crisis in the Empire, events that defy reason are truly a manifestation of the Great Disaster.”

As Abel shielded his face from the dust sprinkling down, Ubilk cocked his chin to point to the sky.

The resurrected dead and the Dragon ran amok, foretelling mounting damage that would probably not end there,

Ubilk: “The Witch of the Kingdom, the Night Weeping of the City-States, the Collapse of the Holy Kingdom, and the Great Disaster of the Empire… The four disasters that will destroy the world. Their time draws near. Even at this very moment.”

Abel: “…”

Ubilk: “Oh, and Your Excellency, this is just my personal opinion, but…”

Ubilk deliberately clapped his hands as if speaking of something that he had failed to mention. Then, the Stargazer pointed overhead to Moguro’s battle—No, he was pointing to something else.

He pointed not to the battle, but to the throne room bearing a sizable hole, which laid in the Crystal Palace, the latter being rocked by the shockwaves of the fierce fight.

Ubilk: “Why did I cooperate with General First-Class Chisha’s scheme, waaas~ it? I’m sincere in saying that I would’ve been fine with both, but… I thought that with Your Excellency, our odds would be better.”

Brazenly laughing, Ubilk lowered the hand that pointed to the Crystal Palace and, in the same motion, pointed it at Abel.

Ubilk: “I prioritize the fulfillment of the commandment. My goal was to start the Great Disaster, and theeen~ to hold back the destruction it’d bring. —I haven’t wavered in my priority.”

A Stargazer was obsessed with the realization and fulfillment of their commandment, a living puppet enslaved to their goal.

That perception remained the same. And without that perception being altered, Ubilk presented the reasons for his actions, the rationale for his choices, and the future that he pursued.

He said that, in order to save the Vollachian Empire from the Great Disaster, he would prioritize Abel.

Abel: “—Chisha Gold, you…”

What kind of future, what kind of expectations had these disguised black eyes, imbued with the color of Vincent Vollachia, imbued with his color, painted?

Why had he not understood that words like “hope” and “dreams” were naught more but silly escapism from reality?

Ubilk: “—Oh?”

An unexpected explosion roared in Abel’s ears as he put his hand to his face and grabbed the cheek of his oni mask. Ubilk let out a silly voice in response, followed by a heavy sound of something falling beside them.

Upon looking at it, Abel came to see that something had fallen onto the cloth that had caught him earlier. However, unlike him, the cloth had not been stretched to help, and it did not fulfill its purpose as cushioning material.

However—

???: “You were correct that this cloth would be laid out! Prime Minister Berstetz! Are you alive?!”

???: “That took quite the toll on this old body, but somehow… Hm.”

Shaking off the cloth that covered them, a large man with his upper body bare and a white-haired old man carried in the former’s arms emerged from under the cloth.

Both of them looked familiar; Abel had never thought that he would run into them here.

Ubilk: “Ohhh~, if that isn’t General First-Class Goz? And Prime Minister Berstetz’s safe, too.”

Berstetz: “One would think you would have long since absconded, yet you are still here…”

Goz: “You! You are the Stargazer who instructed General First-Class Chisha and Prime Minister Berstetz with all these superfluous things! Because of you, His Excellency… His Excellency is…!!”

As the large man—Goz Ralfon, who had apparently jumped down from the large hole in the Crystal Palace, so stated, he approached Ubilk while carrying Prime Minister Berstetz in his arms.

Now that he knew what Chisha had been attempting to do, he thought that Goz would not have been killed, but how was it that he had appeared here in this state following the events that had taken place?

Just how much had been shared between Berstetz and Chisha?

Goz: “The turmoil in the Imperial Capital and everything else! It is all caused by your schemes! You should die in order to atone!”

Ubilk: “Wait, waaait~ a minute please! I wasn’t even all that involved in it, nor did I have anything to do with what happened to General First-Class Goz! Because, you see, as far as the commandment’s concerned, Goz isn’t someone to pay much thought about…”

Goz: “How dare you, you bastard!”

By once again running his mouth, Ubilk incurred Goz’s wrath more and more. Berstetz writhed in pain, as if Goz had forgotten that he was carrying the former.

Moreover, the changes in the situation did not end at just that—

???: “Uwah?! The closer I get and see, the more puzzling everything becomes! I ran after the Dragon that ignored me, only to find out that the one replacing it as my opponent was a big golem! Sure, it might serve as a decent show, but I don’t think it’s capable of acting as a substitute!”

Abel: “…”

And right after he heard a yapping, high-pitched voice, the owner of said voice made their entrance wrapped in a tremendous wind while a cloud of dust spread behind him.

Gliding on the soles of the zori he wore, he looked up at the sky with his hands forming a brim. A boy who had been uncalled for, sporting blue hair and a kimono, had arrived—everyone’s eyes widened at the sight of his raucous demeanor, speech, and conduct, but above all else, because he looked like a mere shrunk-down version of a familiar figure.

Goz: “C-Cecilus Segmunt—?!”

Cecilus: “Hmm? Did you call me just now? Well, I’m quite embarrassed for having managed to do something so grand that my name has spread with lightning speed. To be honest, I thought the best moment would be me cutting down that Dragon, but I hate just how much of a star I am!”

Goz: “…No doubt, it is General First-Class Cecilus!”

The boy, who was watching the battle between Moguro and the Cloud Dragon, turned around and uttered those words with an unmistakably unique sense of distance.

This was, without a shadow of a doubt, Cecilus Segmunt, the strongest of the Nine Divine Generals, the First, who stood at the peak of the Vollachian Empire’s military might; but his state that of a child.

It had been at about this age when Abel had first picked up Cecilus as a subordinate, taking him under his wing. Since then, his mind aside, his body was supposed to have grown up.

Abel: “But you, why are you small… I can only believe that this is the work of Olbart Dunkelkenn; but, if that is the case…”

Then, contradictions with Olbart’s behavior during their meeting at the Demon City of Chaosflame would arise.

Olbart was, some way or another, unaware of the fact that Chisha had been masquerading as the Emperor. But supposing that Olbart had been employing the same technique he had utilized on Natsuki Subaru, Medium, and Al, with Cecilus as the target, he could not help but cast doubts on the actions taken.

Why would the Emperor himself have Cecilus infantilized, he wondered.

A logical explanation for it seemed improbable. Cecilus had gone without being corrected for over a decade until now. At this point, nothing could shackle him down.

In other words—

???: “You’re way too light-footed for a pipsqueak, ain’t’cha? Can’t believe someone’s gettin’ such a large lead on me, I’m really startin’ ta feel my age.”

Immediately after the thought crossed his mind, a petite shinobi—Olbart Dunkelkenn, made his appearance right there and then. He had supposedly been entrusted with a bastion to defend the Imperial Capital, yet he had abandoned that role, returning to the Crystal Palace.

When it came to the reason as to why had Olbart, the shinobi head honcho, done such a thing,

Cecilus: “Huh, I thought I’d shaken you off, but I actually didn’t? That’s great, old man! Still wanting a stage role even at that age, how admirable! Bravo!”

Olbart: “So loud. At this point, ya forgot stuff altogether, haven’t’cha?”

Cecilus: “Forgot stuff? Well, I got no idea what you’re talking about though.”

Olbart: “Ceci’s small, so if I didn’t do it, it’s gotta have been that arse’s fault, Chesshy’s. Tho’ I like ta steal others’ skills, I don’t like it when they steal mine.”

Cecilus: “Ahahahaha, that’s an amazingly selfish complaint! I don’t dislike it, rather, I quite like it.”

The old man, his lips curved in dissatisfaction, was laughed at by the much younger Cecilus, who was barely taller than him.

The Stargazer, Ubilk, was still being pressed for answers by Goz, while Berstetz had been stolen of his freedom, being carried by Goz’s brawny arms, his mind more focused on whether the consequences of the still-raging battle between Moguro, the Cloud Dragon, and the resuscitated Balleroy were about to befall him.

Abel: “…Just, what is this?”

One after the other, people gathered at this place.

The majority of the Nine Divine Generals of the Vollachian Empire had come to this location, he came to realize.

Had this, too, been brought about by Chisha?

Having been trained to perform all that Vincent Vollachia could as well, just how much had Chisha Gold surpassed the latter’s expectations?

He had given his own life to keep Abel alive, and what was to come after—.

Chesha: “—My apologies, but I am afraid I would not.”

Abel: “…”

Once upon a time, faced with a query from Vincent Abellux, Chisha Gold had replied thus.

Upon being asked if he was willing to die for Vincent, he had returned the frank answer that he would not.

Then, the one for whom Chisha had laid down his life, was not Vincent Abellux.

Certainly, it had not been for Abel's sake, nor for Vincent Vollachia's, either. It had not been for a play on words of the sort, for that which Chisha had laid down his life for was—

Abel: "—Heed my words! The Great Disaster is nigh! From here on, you shall abide by my command!"

Grinding his molars together, Abel lifted his face, leaped atop the rubble, turned around. Then viewing the entirety of the ensemble present, he thus asserted for all to listen.

Upon Abel's proclamation, each and all of those in their self-centered doings observed him.

At that moment, with the exception of Ubilk and Berstetz, who were in the know, the eyes of everyone, Divine Generals included, had the utmost doubt flash across their eyes—Just who in the world is this man?

Taking that in, Abel reached for the oni mask upon himself, seizing its cheek. His visage had been covered with an object by Chisha, in the latter's final moments; now removing it, Abel bared his real face.

And finally—

Abel: "I am your Emperor, Vincent Vollachia. —The apex, of the Sword Wolves of the Empire."

Chapter 110:
Congratulatory Words

1

Digging into the ground powerfully with their bestial claws, they launched their body forward with such force that they seemed to be pulling the ground out.

Their companions, using their wits and martial prowess, were scrambling to take control of the battlefield. As to aid them, Frederica Baumann raced across the battlefield.

The beautiful, golden-haired leopard sailed through the wind, fulfilling her role as messenger through and through, being that she was the second fastest among all those roaming around the battlefield.

Against the overwhelmingly superior quality of the regular soldiers of the Imperial Army, the rebels, who were, to put it bluntly, a patchwork of people, had been able to bring the situation to a stalemate thanks to the information gathered by Otto Suwen, Abel's management of that information, and Frederica's ability to transmit said information in a quick manner.

Regardless of whether Frederica had been aware of her contribution or not, now armed with information most important she kicked the ground away; the impact that that intel would bring about was of particular significance.

It was—

Frederica: "—A message from the Master and my brother; there are signs of a change within the land."

With ragged breaths, pushing her exhausted beastified body, Frederica, undoing her beastification, announced her arrival at the main camp in a hurry, not hesitating in exposing her bare skin to all.

While she had been traveling across the battlefield, Garfiel, having survived a fierce fight, had communicated those words to Frederica bearing a passionate expression; one not proud of the outcome of the battle.

Ragged and bloody, Garfiel had lived through a fight to the death, a battle that Frederica could not even begin to imagine. Her sisterly feeling of wanting to sing her brother's praises for his struggle had to be postponed in the face of his desperate plea.

Fortunately, Roswaal, arriving with the Flying Dragon Squadron as reinforcements, had been by Garfiel's side, and had been able to lend him proper assistance, regardless of Garfiel's feelings about said assistance being given to him by his love rival.

???: "—. That wasn't very specific. Any more details?"

Frederica: "I do not know, I can only say that it was a gut feeling from my brother's Divine Protection. It is just…"

???: "Just?"

Frederica: "My brother's hunches are usually right, regardless of whether they are favorable or not."

Garfiel's instincts were as good as a wild animal's; even though he had never been wild, one could call them his wild instincts. Garfiel's instincts did not work well in everyday life, and his unrefined behavior would often come to the fore in front of Ram, but when it came to fighting, the reliability of his instincts was unparalleled.

That was why Frederica had, without any hesitation, rushed to the main camp.

???: "…"

Hearing Frederica's plea, the beautiful Serena Dracroy—a High Countess of the Empire who had come to their side with her Flying Dragon Squadron as reinforcements, looked to be deep in thought.

Rumor had it that she was an acquaintance of Roswaal's, who the latter had gone to request help from. Since she was Roswaal's acquaintance, she was probably a woman of strong character. However, it was also a common characteristic of Roswaal's acquaintances that, personality aside, no doubts would exist in regards to the excellence of their abilities.

This was evident in the fact that she was currently serving as a substitute for the absent commander-in-chief at the main camp, where the movement of the rebels, now a large army, was being controlled.

???: "Frederica-sama! Here is a cloak for you to wear!"

A red cloak was draped over Frederica's shoulders from behind as she looked thoughtfully at Serena's profile. It was a cloak that only Generals of the Vollachian Empire were allowed to wear; but the person who had done so with grace was not familiar with the meaning of that adornment.

Because of this, Frederica smiled, happy for the gesture of pure goodwill.

Frederica: "Thank you, Schult-sama. I apologize for my unseemly appearance."

Schult: "No, not at all! Frederica-sama has worked hard, running around amongst so many people! I think it is very admirable!"

Pulling the cloak tighter around her, Frederica thanked Schult for his hospitality. But, it was Schult who was the one who was bowing before Frederica, his small body filled with charm.

Schult's feelings of being left behind in the main camp and having to watch the progress of the battle with a sense of dread must have been even more painful than Frederica's, who was at least able to fulfill the role of a messenger.

Still, it was admirable of him to give Frederica words of appreciation upon her return.

???: "Yeah, Freh is great too. Uu wanted to go fight like crazy with Mii and the others like crazy."

Next to Schult was Utakata, whose black hair was dyed pink at the ends, nodding with her arms crossed.

Flinching at the little girl's warlike comment while saying, "I-I wonder about that", Frederica turned her attention back to Serena.

Serena stroked the large scar on the left side of her face, which had been engraved by a sword, and spoke,

Serena: "Signs of a change within the land of Vollachia, yes? How foolish it would be to disregard the words of one whom Roswaal values so highly."

Frederica: "So…"

Serena: "While maddening, it also fits with what the man who disappeared with the Stargazer said. It was a selfish thing to say, to entrust me with a great task that only I could fulfill. It was as if…"

Frederica: "As if?"

Serena: "It was pride as if he were the Emperor himself. Even though we're in a position where we've come to bring him down."

Serena, her arms crossed, sighed with a complicated expression that was neither angry nor bemused.

She spoke of the man in the oni mask—Abel. He had originally been in charge of commanding the rebels at large, however, he had left the main camp, entrusting Serena with that role.

In regards to that, Serena had not disclosed any details regarding the kind of conversation that had taken place at that time.

Frederica: "Before he left here, what did Abel-sama say to you, Serena-sama?"

Serena: "—. That the conclusion draws near. However…"

Serena paused, her almond-shaped eyes now filled with indignation. Her well-shaped chin indicating the battlefield, her eyes glowing with resentment, the Scorching Lady, known for her fiery presence, continued,

Serena: “The conclusion won’t be favorable to either side, the Imperial Capital’s and the rebels’; it’ll end up being undecided.”

Frederica: “It will end up being… undecided?”

Serena’s expression suggested that she would not even be able to say it, which perplexed Frederica.

What kind of situation could possibly be expected when the outcome of a battle of this magnitude taking place would end up being inconclusive? In the first place, it would be inappropriate to use words that could be taken to mean that all efforts would be in vain when addressing the person whom he had entrusted with the command of the battlefield.

Abel, who had left that unsaid, did not understand the human heart to a fatal degree; that much must be said.

In any case—

Schult: “Does this mean that the battle has concluded? If so, does that mean that Priscilla-sama, Al-sama, and Heinkel-sama will return?”

Frederica: “Schult-sama…”

With melancholy in his round eyes, Schult stood up on his tiptoes and looked out over the battlefield.

The boy’s eyes were drawn to a corner of the increasingly harsh battlefield—where the red sky and the white sky, two battlefields that even Frederica was unable to traverse, laid.

Merely approaching them instilled a feeling of dread in her beastly instincts, instilled a certainty that her body would not be able to withstand them.

Frederica: “…”

For that reason, Frederica did not feel herself capable of speaking words of comfort so readily.

What had been happening under those skies was surely a phenomenon that transcended Frederica's imagination. She felt ashamed, lowering the corners of her eyes.

Utakata: "Shuu, don't worry. Puu and Yor are both strong. They're as strong as Mii and Taa."

Schult: "Utakata-sama…"

Utakata: "Uu-chan is fine."

Schult: "Utakata-chan-sama…"

Puffing out her chest, Utakata stroked Schult's pink curly-haired head with violence, utilizing her hand.

It was a childish and baseless assertion, but it had resonated with Schult because Utakata had not hesitated in speaking it. Once Schult nodded his head, Frederica's lips parted slightly.

Once again, turning to face Serena,

Frederica: "What are you going to do, Serena-sama? If you choose to not abandon my brother's intuition, then you need to deal with what Abel-sama said…"

Serena: "I'm in a quandary. Needless to say, there's no time for hesitation. —Behold."

Serena once again cocked her chin, directing Frederica to look toward the battlefield, to which the latter responded with a "Huh?". With her emerald-green eyes, Frederica witnessed, even from afar, a change in the battlefield—a rampaging giant castle wall shaped like a human, one of the Nine Divine Generals, had turned their back, rushing toward the Imperial Capital.

Frederica: "Is that… headed towards the Crystal Palace?"

Serena: "The more things go on, the more they go as he says, hm? —Though, I don't know the truth of your brother's statement that

Vollachia will become the enemy.”

At the reckless action of the Steelman, Moguro Hagane, Serena frowned with a face that seemed to have an idea of what was going on.

And then—

Serena: “Tell everyone. —As soon as there is anything abnormal at the Crystal Palace, cease all the fighting. To prepare for things to become inconclusive, where this battle, the blood spilled, and lives lost were all in vain.”

2

—With a shrill sound, the Blue Dragon Sword, an axe, and a barbarian sword struck each other in midair, sending off sparks.

All of those were steel, steel wielded without mercy for the purpose of reaping the life of their opponent.

One person’s senses had been growing duller, but once something was directed at them once more, feelings of dread welled up from within their skin, from within their bones, due to their life being threatened.

They had never thought of themselves as mentally fragile. Rather, they had always believed that, compared to other children of their age, they had been blessed with superior courage, combined with the experience of having survived scenes of carnage.

However, upon experiencing the sizzling pain of being scorching by a blast on their skin, upon feeling as if their lungs had contracted due to the tension of the moment, causing them to suffocate, it seemed like the foundation of that trust directed at oneself was wavering.

The most important reason for that feeling was—

???: “—!”

Even amidst that fierce battle, a contemptuous gaze would be directed toward them.

The man’s gaze was the biggest factor that increased Petra’s feeling of suffocation; it was as if it was saying he had not forgotten about her and holding a knife against her.

The man was an Imperial Soldier with a bandana wrapped around his head, wielding an axe.

This person, whose name she and her companions did not know, was the true identity of the formidable foe that was currently tormenting Petra and her comrades.

As long as one lived, death would always be adjacent.

Regardless of the situation, circumstances could change in the blink of an eye. Petra ground her teeth together with force, as the man in front of her seemed to be an example of that absurdity.

Kneeling on the ground, Otto struggled to breathe. Having taken the brunt of the blast from the magic stone used for the emergency evacuation, his fatigue was quite high.

That was why Petra could never afford to be weak on the battlefield, where both the strong and the weak alike put their lives on the line.

Medium: “Haaah! Al-chin!”

Al: “Yeah, Lil’ Miss Medium.”

The one person with the high-pitched voice, a voice unsuitable for this blood-scented battlefield, and the one person with the dispirited voice worked together, exchanging sword blows with the one person possessor of a pitch-black murderous intent.

Cooperating with Medium, who used her small body to the fullest, Al waged battle with the Imperial Soldier. Their fighting ability was not enough to overwhelm their enemy however; and so, their fierce bout continued.

No offence to Al being who he was, but Petra was disappointed with him as a reinforcement.

Petra: “If only it were someone like Garf-san or Emily…”

Not only were they reliable allies, to put it plainly, but they would surely have overwhelmed their opponent as far as fighting ability went.

Al’s ability, being unlike theirs, was not very high in Petra’s estimation. Even though he was better than non-combatants like Petra and Otto, she felt that he was weaker than any of the People of Shudraq.

However, in the sense of possessing not-so-outstanding strength, the same was true of their opponent, the Imperial Soldier.

Without a doubt, that Imperial Soldier was weak compared to Emilia, Garfiel, and the Nine Divine Generals of the Empire. Even still, Petra was terrified of him.

Overwhelming magic would not be needed to shoo away a bug that had perched itself on a flower. It could be brushed off with a finger or even with a bit of water. Thoughts of the sort were apparent in the attitude of this Imperial Soldier.

On this battlefield, Petra and the rest of her group were nothing more than hard-working little bugs—.

Soldier: “—You’re a pain in the ass, man.”

Suddenly, the man’s voice slipped into the cowering Petra’s ears.

For a moment, her shoulders jumped. But, the one who the other person was calling out to was not Petra nor was it Otto, the man was calling out towards the pair he was crossing weapons with, which was also the direction Al was in.

Al: “Hah! Ngha! Take this!”

The man swung the axe in his hand, aiming it at Al’s thick neck. However, the moment the Blue Dragon Sword in the one-armed Al’s possession met it, the man immediately turned himself around, delivering two, then three heavy attacks in quick succession.

By means of some bizarrely risky slights of hand, Al managed to parry the barrage of blows.

Petra was not at all at ease, even letting out a couple of little screams of “Kyah!” and “Yikes!” as she watched.

Otto: “I would like to support Al-san somehow, but…”

Otto seemed be similarly anxious, there had been more impatience than fatigue in his voice.

There was clearly a sense of urgency in the battle waged by Al, who had made his entrance with much fanfare; although he was fortunate to have been able to survive up until now, there had been five times where one wrong step could have resulted in his death.

The possible existence of a sixth time, to Petra, seemed to have some terrible odds.

Soldier: “You’re still a pain in the ass.”

However, it seemed that the opinion of the Imperial Soldier was slightly different from that of Petra and her comrades.

The man, who continued to shrug off the attacks, even though it was by the skin of his teeth, took a large step backward, whereupon he raised his axe-less hand, casually waving it in the direction of Al and Medium.

Immediately after, a fireball burst to life in the air, rushing furiously toward them, incinerating the sky.

Al: “Oioioioi!”

Medium: “HIYAAAH~!”

She did not understand why, but a Spirit was being forced to obey in an unjust way.

Al and Medium ran to try and escape the fireball approaching them, in great troubles. The fireball missed the two of them, going onto the trees in the surroundings, then spreading to the grass on the ground, causing a swell of flames.

Otto: “This is bad… Hk.”

Petra understood what Otto had just muttered.

From what she saw, the flames brought about by the fireball did not burn Al and the others, instead consuming their surroundings. The blaze surrounded Petra and everyone facing the Imperial Soldier, blocking any escape.

The rising fire created a circle, trapping them.

The Imperial Soldier could have possibly been aiming to block their escape route, even in case he had missed. But, that situation had Petra’s group grinding their teeth in frustration. Their opponent tilted his head.

Soldier: “I don’t like this.”

To that quiet, totally inappropriate remark, Al raised a “Huh?”.

His Blue Dragon Sword in hand, he pointed to their surroundings, now in flames,

Al: “After all this, what are you saying? Cherish what you got, your resources. How hard do you think plants gotta work to make oxygen, so that humans can take a deep breath and be aight…”

Soldier: “I should’ve killed you about six times so far, but I haven’t been able to kill you even once. Even when I’ve pushed you into spots you shouldn’t be able to dodge out of. It’s disgusting.”

Al: “I can’t believe you just said that. Man, today’s a real pain.”

Al’s response was met by the man shrugging and growing even more distrustful of him.

Not knowing the limit of Al’s strength, the Imperial Soldier seemed to be quite confused. To be honest, it was very disgusting to agree with that person, but Petra had the same doubts about Al.

Al looked like he was going to die, but he still did not.

He was meeting the attacks of the Imperial Soldier, but managed to avoid fatal wounds with his high-risk movements. —He had surely avoided fatal wounds, and fatal wounds only.

But it did not give off the feeling that he was hiding his capabilities. It was all inconsistent.

That was why the Imperial Soldier could not get a decisive blow to cut his losses, as well.

Soldier: “Even if you’re on the same level as I am, I get the feeling you’ve got no training at all and that you’re just winging this. In that sense, that guy over there is probably more in my class.”

Otto: “…Do you mean me? If so, I would like to raise an objection on my honor.”

Medium: “That’s right! Your evil character is different! You’re more dangerous, and sneakier!”

Otto: “Even though you are on my side, you still stab me in the back.”

Otto, having unexpectedly been pulled into the discussion, gave a wry smile.

His demeanor made Petra somewhat frustrated, but that quickly faded.

Petra: “…”

Otto glanced and winked at Petra. She thought about it, sensing something other than bitterness in his expression; he was plotting something.

Without saying a word, he wanted Petra to try to guess.

Soldier: “This is taking too long.”

Just after Petra had surmised this, the Imperial Soldier, with a cold voice, snapped his fingers.

Right after that, about ten fireballs, each smaller than before, were created all at once. They scattered in all directions at unreadable speed, which ignited not Petra and the others, but the trees and ground surrounding them.

He did that to expand the formation of flames encircling them, magnifying it with more flames and black smoke—

Medium: “Hothothothot! It’s burning, it’s burning!”

Al: “Calm down, lil’ missy! Come here before your braids burn!”

Surrounded by flames, a fiery Medium jumped up and down, holding her long braids. She crossed the line of flames, jumped to Al’s side, and looked back at him with tears in her eyes.

Gripping her barbarian sword tightly again, she glared at the person who had done this to her—

Medium: “Huh?!”

Al: “Is this for real…?”

Medium’s surprise was matched by Al’s exasperation.

The cause of their reaction was the disappearance of the Imperial Soldier who had created this spectacle of flames.

Medium: “…”

The figure of the Imperial Soldier had vanished amidst the flames and black smoke. Had he retreated to hide from the flames, or was he simply waiting for them to slowly burn to death?

Al: “Tsk…”

Medium: “He’s totally gone! We gotta get out of here before we burn, too!”

Al’s helmet-covered vision swept around, searching for the figure of the man who had disappeared into the flames. All the while, he held his Blue Dragon Sword against his own neck in a strange stance, his eyes looking for the Imperial Soldier.

Beside him, Medium also looked around a bit, impatient with the enemy she could not find, pleading for them to escape the growing fire.

It was certainly natural for a person to give priority to getting away from a dangerous place, rather than obsessing over the man’s whereabouts; thus avoiding putting carriage before ground dragon.

However—

Petra: “…”

His body supported by Petra, Otto placed a tad more strength into the hand of his that was placed on the former’s, squeezing it. And that tight grip was taken as a silent instruction by Petra.

Petra vehemently agreed with his wariness; they should not let their guard down.

Furthermore, Petra put her other hand on top of Otto’s hand—

Otto: “—Thank you, Petra-chan.”

Immediately after uttering these words of gratitude, Otto shifted in place and fell onto his back. —A moment later, an axe, cleaving the air sideways, narrowly missed him.

Petra: “…”

The killing intent of the Imperial Soldier, approaching covertly amidst the smoke emanating from the spreading fire of the camp, struck, and missed.

The man, having missed in that moment of truth, widened his eyes in amazement ever-so-slightly. But, as if quickly regaining his composure, the man attempted to pull back the axe he had just swung—

Petra: “Jiwald!”

Soldier: “Guh.”

Petra, holding up five fingers, released from all of them a low-power Jiwald that caught the Imperial Soldier in the face, drawing an arc; one of the five rays had seared their opponent’s right eye.

Petra’s attack had aimed to suppress the enemy, sacrificing pure power. It had achieved its goal in splendid fashion, the man who’d had his eye burnt crying out in agony and recoiling.

Then, a spinning figure leapt at him from above.

Medium: “Let’s gooo!”

Beyond the flames, Al hunched over, and from his back, using it as a springboard, Medium leapt.

Spinning vertically, Medium flashed the barbarian sword tightly gripped by both her hands, driving it into the Imperial Soldier, his posture shot, without relent.

Medium: “Uryahhhh~!”

A hard sound echoed, and a shade of vermilion different from that of the burning flames mixed with the latter.

The sound that had echoed was not the sound of a skull being split by the barbarian sword. Raising her head, Petra took a glance, and came to see that the man had, by his own volition, met the swing of the barbarian sword with his forehead.

That hard sound had probably been from armor that he had placed under his bandana. That was how he had taken Medium’s blow. Of course, he was not completely unscathed.

Swinging his axe with vigor, his shaking free hand on his forehead, awkwardly he dodged the follow-ups, stepping back, and further back, and further back—

Soldier: “Shit…”

A bandana stained with blood fell from the man’s head. Even with the armored bandana there, the man’s forehead had been cut open, the bleeding from his split forehead did not seem like it could be stopped.

The man, bleeding profusely, glared towards Otto and Petra.

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The look in his eyes seemed to be asking how his surprise attack had been detected—

Otto: "—I will not tell you. I am not your parent, nor am I your brother."

Even though Otto was lying on the ground, he still spoke up as if he were proud of his victory.

In response, the Imperial Soldier clicked his tongue. He clicked his tongue, wiped the blood from his forehead with his palm, and,

Medium: "Ah! Wait! It'd be so unfair if you just run away!"

He did not choose to be reckless, and rush at Otto.

With his right eye closed, occluded by heat and blood, the Imperial Soldier disappeared amid the flames. Having become unable to be seen once more, Petra was wary of yet another surprise attack.

Al: "He ain't coming back… He doesn't seem desperate enough to continue fighting with such a disadvantage."

Petra: "Ummm, I disagree. Wasn't it like we were the only ones who were desperate?"

Al: "I know how you feel, Lil' Miss. But it's the other side that ran away without leaving any final words. We win, we win. —It's our wiiiiiiiin!"

Medium: "We wiiin!"

Facing the direction the Imperial Soldier had just disappeared into, Al and Medium shouted a victory cry.

Petra's heart was lightened a little by the two of them. Although, she was not sure if their cheering would actually pester that Imperial Soldier.

In any case—

Petra: “In the end, how did you know how to read that man’s moves? It was a gamble, wasn’t it?”

Otto: “It was not my doing, it was thanks to you, Petra-chan.”

With Al, who had sheathed his Blue Dragon Sword, lending him a helping hand, Otto was helped up, and spoke of Petra. However, she was unable to take credit for everything.

Otto: “In the first place, I was his target, so I knew that the last move would be aimed at me. It was the sound of footsteps that told me the time and direction of the attack.”

Medium: “Footsteps?”

Petra: “Otto-san’s channel let him hear from the little ones under the ground… Correct?”

Otto: “Correct answer.”

With her guess proved right by Otto, Petra put her hands together in front of her chest.

From the start, the reason Otto had been targeted by the enemy was due to his use of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language to maintain control of the entire battlefield. However, they had no idea how that Imperial Soldier had appeared while avoiding Otto’s Divine Protection, as he could grasp the entire situation by hearing the voices of animals and insects.

To perceive such an opponent, the same method as before was not enough.

Petra: “So, that’s why the little ones under the ground… They were useless as Otto-san said, since they don’t have eyes to see what’s going on outside.”

Otto: “I just wish I had chosen my words a little more carefully…! Anyway, I took a listen to the animals and insects in the ground and determined where he was by the sound of his footsteps. It was a bit hit-or-miss, but Petra-chan was able to help me pick up the voices with her Yang Magic.”

Petra: “Otto-san, you had a bad look on your face when giving me the signal.”

What Otto had requested from Petra, back when he had gripped her hand tightly, had been the support of Yang Magic.

With her help, Otto had employed his Divine Protection, and thus, he had guessed his opponent’s position from the sound of his footsteps, avoiding the latter’s final ambush and conversely, they had inflicted a painful blow on their opponent, forcing him to retreat.

Otto: “—. To tell you the truth, I wanted to make him unable to continue fighting.”

Petra: “I agree. He wasn’t strong, he was just good at killing. More importantly…”

Medium: “Hothothot! We’ve gotta get out of here fast, or we’re gonna get cooked!”

Having a dangerous enemy retreat did not necessarily erase the situation of having their environs on fire.

Hearing Medium’s appeal, Al lent his shoulder to Otto and said, “Yeah, you’re right”. Petra, along with Medium, led them along, looking for spots where the effects of the flames were less severe.

And so, the group attempted to leave before the flames engulfed them—

Otto: “Let us get out of here as soon as possible. There is now a reason to return to the main camp.”

Al: “…The way you just put it doesn’t sound like the prelude to a heroic tale in which you brag about surviving a dangerous opponent.”

Otto: “Yes, it is bad news. Things are getting very time-sensitive… Earlier, I was trying to listen for footsteps, and this is just a secondary piece of information that I happened to hear.”

It was an unpleasant preface, one spoken just as one hardship was about to be over.

Chased by the heat of the flames, but still unable to overlook his statement, Petra turned to see a grim-faced Otto behind her—or rather, he was looking out over the entire battlefield.

Otto: “I got indications that the whole battlefield is going to become even more dangerous due to something completely different from the Dragon and the burning sky and whatnot. In fact, it is right in front of our eyes.”

By complete coincidence, at the exact same time that his bro detected it through the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, Otto Suwen had obtained the same information through the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language; he now voiced it.

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???: “—I have heard that there is a so-called Great Disaster drawing near which will endanger the Vollachian Empire. As I am a General First-Class of the Empire! As I am a General that still survives though living in disgrace! No matter what it takes! I shall not die without being of service to His Excellency the Emperor!”

Being thus informed by the large man that had been chained to a wall underground—the person that had introduced himself as Goz Ralfon, Rem understood that problems aside from the rebellion would soon shake the Imperial Capital.

Although Goz had been quite weak after having been given only one meal every two days, after Rem had healed him as a mere stop-gap measure through her magic, he had become surprisingly energetic, his vitality regained.

She had believed the majority of that effect to have been brought by, most likely, due to his own pre-established notions.

Goz: “Girl, your treatment has saved my life! Normally, I would have liked to invite you to my home as to introduce my savior to my wife and children, but I must now head to His Excellency’s side!

I shall repay you for this!!”

Rem: “Ah, umm, yes.”

Goz: “If possible, leave this place and join up with the regular army! General First-Class Moguro Hagane or General Second-Class Kafma Irulux shall do you no harm! Avoid the other Generals of the First-Class! Your words will not get through to them!”

Having been released from his chains, Goz thus declared in an extremely loud voice. He leapt out of the basement with tremendous speed and, after rebuking the soldiers guarding the mansion, ordered them to accompany him to the Crystal Palace, which was visible from a distance.

The opinions of the guards were divided in two in regards to that.

It seemed that even the mansion’s soldiers were split between those who knew of Goz’s existence and those who did not. Those who had been kept in the dark were not amused, while those to whom the information had been disclosed felt the deep trust placed in them by Berstetz.

Therefore—

Goz: “I see. You lot will stand in my way, then?”

With nothing to wear and his bare upper body covered with an armor of muscle, Goz fixed his eyes on the guards who had drawn their weapons, blocking his path.

Goz was unarmed, and the time he had spent in confinement was not limited to merely one or two days. He was far from being in perfect condition. However, the guards had opposed him not because they stood a chance of winning or whatever.

Goz: “Very well. Just as I am loyal to His Excellency the Emperor, you lot are loyal to the Prime Minister. I shall certainly see that honor through to the very end!!”

The overwhelming aura emanating from him was clear, even as he looked at the soldiers who opposed him.

Goz's bare-knuckle fighting style in the one-sided battle that followed, too, was clear.

There was a swing of one of his huge fists, and in one blow, several guards were sent flying.

The slight advantage in numbers had not even made a difference. They had been instantly, and overwhelmingly, suppressed.

Rem: "I'd heard his name from Abel-san as one of the Nine Divine Generals, but…"

Actually, the only ones of the Nine Divine Generals that Rem had seen in person were Arakiya and Madelyn, back at the Fortress City of Guaral.

Even when compared to both of them, Goz's presence would not be outdone.

He might have been at a disadvantage at this moment, but only in what could be accounted for in weapons, equipment, and exhaustion.

Goz: "You have fought well! That is why you are Sword Wolves of the Empire!!"

Thrusting his arms up in the air, standing right in the middle of the battered soldiers, Goz passionately uttered his praise.

If she was not mistaken, she had heard that he was the person who had risked his life, sacrificing himself so that the true Emperor, Abel, could escape. However, he was so lively that it seemed like a lie that he had been exhausted from having been tied up.

In the first place, it was unclear why he had been tied up in the basement of the mansion.

Goz: "Once again, Prime Minister Berstetz Fondalfon! I shall not let things go according to your plans! You too, General First-Class Chisha! Uoooooh—!!"

Before they could discuss things in detail, Goz boldly dashed out of the main gate of Berstetz's mansion, with the guards on his side in tow.

Overwhelmed by the valor of the Lion Knight, Rem could do nothing but watch his back as he left.

However—

Rem: "There's no need for me at that palace."

In an unexpected turn of events, the mansion's soldiers were now gone; no longer were there any obstacles before Rem.

Rem checked to see if the soldiers who had been struck down by Goz were alive or dead. After applying only minimal treatment to those who had been seriously wounded, utilizing one of the long swords as a cane, she moved around the mansion, heading to a room which she had entered many times.

And then—

Rem: "Katya-san, it's me, it's Rem. Please come out."

Katya: "…I absolutely don't want to come out. Wh-What was that loud voice just now?"

Rem: "I understand how you feel. But the person with the loud voice has already left. I think we should talk about what we're going to do from here on out."

Katya: "What we're going to do…"

Rem's voice urged Katya, who did not allow Rem to see her, to make a decision through the door to her room.

At present, Goz's bravery, for better or worse, had wiped out the mansion's soldiers, so the urgency to leave the mansion had diminished.

However—

Rem: "The Great Disaster…"

That was the reason as to why Goz hastened to meet the Emperor, who was said to be present at the Crystal Palace.

To be precise, the main justification for Goz heading to the Crystal Palace was to confront the impostor posing as the Emperor. Nevertheless, it was true that his purpose was to prevent that mysterious disaster.

In any case, Goz had advised her against sticking around.

If that was the case—

Katya: "—Th-There's no reason for me to leave here, after all. I-I'm a hostage."

Rem: "There are no more guards left to detain us. There isn't a reason for us to continue being held hostage any longer."

Katya: "B-but still…"

Rem: "—I understand. Please, at least open the door. I'd like to check if you are safe."

Though Rem was at a loss, Katya, who had been undaunted by her insistence, finally folded.

After a few moments of silence after that final request from Rem, the wheels of her wheelchair were heard moving, and the door was unlocked. And so, the door to the room opened,

Rem: "Excuse me. Let's go."

Katya: "Huh?! Ah, hey, wait!"

Rem: "I'm sorry. Me just wanting to check if you were safe was a lie."

After entering the room, Rem found Katya by the door, and then, quickly walking behind her, she pushed her wheelchair out of the room.

A panicked Katya attempted to resist, but she was powerless to stop the wheels, unable to resist Rem's forceful action; and like that, she was pushed along.

Katya: "Wait! I have someone I have to wait for here…"

Rem: "I understand that perfectly well. But waiting here isn't safe. Even if we're to wait for your fiancé, let's at least go somewhere safe."

Katya: "Safe? A place safer in the Imperial Capital than this place —"

Doesn't exist, or so was Katya probably going to say next.

But Katya, who was in the middle of speaking while twisting her head left and right to glare at Rem behind her, abruptly widened her eyes round, staring towards the sky.

Prompted by Katya's reaction, Rem gazed upwards, only to lay eyes upon a large, a titanic shadow overhead, as they walked down the hallway of the mansion.

—A colossal castle wall in the shape of a human straddled the mansion, stepping toward the center of the Imperial Capital.

Rem: "…"

In comparison to Goz's rampage, or even in comparison to any of the attacks perpetrated by the rebels trying to breach the Imperial Capital, seeing a giant foot stomping and bounding through the city, passing close by them, had been heaps more shocking.

Feeling the wheels of Katya's wheelchair lifting off the ground due to the tremors of the earth and the impact of the feet, Rem and Katya looked at each other in alarm, and,

Katya: "I-it doesn't seem like this is a safe place, for sure…"

Rem: "Yes. Let's hurry."

As expected, the giant step just now was one of the few things that were an exception to the norm amidst this whole uproar, but it would be foolish for Rem to go out of her way to say that and incur Katya's displeasure.

With Katya now meek and obedient, Rem who was pushing her wheelchair, headed for,

Katya: "Your companion is still recovering, isn't he? What are you going to do?"

Rem: "He really shouldn't be moving around too much. However, I can't say that…"

Responding to Katya's words with that, the two reached the room Rem had intended to reach.

Inside this room was Flop O'Connell, who had been brought to the mansion alongside Rem. He had not fully recovered from his serious wounds, and he was still under house arrest.

As per her answer to Katya, he should preferably be left to rest if at all possible, but—

Rem: "Flop-san, it's me. May I come in?"

???: "Mhm, is that Wife-san?! I'll open the door now."

She received a response immediately after she had knocked on the door, and subsequently, the door opened. The seemingly near-instantaneous reaction from the door made Rem and Katya's eyes go round; it was no wonder, however, as Flop had apparently been lurking by the door, tightly holding a small hand mirror.

Rem: "Um, Flop-san, what's with the mirror?"

Flop: "Weeell, to tell you the truth, it was kinda meant to be a weapon. You heard a very loud voice earlier, didn't you? The city's getting noisy, so I thought someone hostile might come barging in."

Flop answered as he twirled the hand mirror, reminding Rem and Katya that they were there as prisoners of war and hostages, so there had been no tools in their rooms that could be employed as weapons.

However, a mirror as a countermeasure was not ideal.

Rem: "…You mean, you can fight using that mirror?"

Flop: "Unfortunately, this is about all there was in this room. But I've never fought with a mirror before, so maybe I have a dormant talent for it! What do you think, Wife-san?"

Rem: "Sure, why not. I'd like to stop talking about unnecessary things and do what's necessary, however."

Flop responded to Katya's scornful eyes in his usual tone of voice; it was reassuring that he was behaving as he normally did, but at the same time, Rem wanted to put this aside for a while, as they were in such a dire situation.

Regardless—

Rem: "This is Katya-san. I met her at this mansion."

Flop: "I'm Flop O'Connell. You must be the friend of Wife-san's that I heard so much about."

Katya: "…I-I don't remember becoming friends with this girl, but…"

Flop: "If that's the case, then you should prepare yourself to become friends with her. Making good friends is the key to a better life. Even if it isn't, there's nothing wrong with having a lot of friends."

Katya: "I'm… probably not as good at that as you are…"

As per Rem's expectations, Flop's personality was one that Katya was not very comfortable with. Nevertheless, Flop's disposition was such that he did not mind if Katya was frank with him, so it would be the best situation if Katya was just bitter about it.

Rem: "Flop-san, the situation in the Imperial Capital right now is…"

Flop: "I've more-or-less understood it. Madelyn-kun came to meet me right before she left for the battle."

Rem: "…Madelyn-san, came to meet you?"

It was an unexpected personal connection; she knew that Madelyn had been visiting Flop, but she had never expected that they would become friends, even going so far as for her to come to greet him before going off to battle.

However, if one of the Nine Divine Generals had spoken to him directly, it was even possible that Flop would know more about the situation going on outside than Rem.

Rem: “Well then, that makes the conversation faster. The guards of the mansion are already gone, so we should be able to stay or escape at our leisure, but… I say we should escape.”

Flop: “I wonder if that has anything to do with the loud noises and the terrible tremors from just now?”

Rem: “Yes. But it’s not just that. Something even worse could happen.”

Katya: “W-worse than that! A-are you kidding me…?”

Rem answered Flop with concern, and upon hearing that, Katya turned pale, shaking.

All of that had not been about scaring Katya into obedience, but rather about a real, though unconfirmed, possibility of danger. On the other hand, it was no more than “something could happen”, so it did not provide any assurance off of which they could act.

Flop: “Still, I think we should leave this place, Wife-san.”

Rem: “—Indeed.”

With that question from Flop, Rem nodded without hesitation.

Despite the fact that they were under house arrest, life in the mansion was not so uncomfortable. Although they were not allowed to leave the premises, they were allowed to go to each other’s rooms, Flop’s wounded body was being taken care of, Rem had been able to meet Katya, and there was no reason for any great anger or hatred toward Berstetz, who was supposedly their enemy.

As for the reason for Berstetz's rebellion, Rem had a suspicion that Abel, or rather, Vincent, was the one at fault all the more.

Nevertheless, leaving such circumstances aside, Rem's emotions were probably the most decisive reason as to why she wanted to leave the mansion.

Staying in captivity like this would worry a number of people who had shown kindness towards Rem.

That was the reason as to why she needed to get out of such an unjust and dishonest situation as soon as she possibly could.

Flop: "Okay, got you. I have no objection either. Wife-san and Miss Katya, let's get going."

Rem: "Are you sure?"

Flop: "Even if I stay, there's not much that I can do other than lie in bed. I'm still a peddler, so I have to be somewhat physically active or I won't feel at ease."

As to keep Rem from getting upset, Flop made a clenched fist as he smiled. Then, he interjected with a "Besides",

Flop: "Actually, I've been entrusted with a message. If I accidentally overslept and missed the opportunity to tell it, I wouldn't be able to face the world, or my sister, for that matter."

Rem: "A message… who is it from?"

Flop: "From a Sword Wolf of the Empire who has taken on the stigma of a traitor himself, and who, in my personal opinion, has taken a great gamble."

Flop winked, and Rem looked daunted at his reply.

Apparently, it was not the person that Rem had in mind, but it was nice to know that Flop would be coming along.

Rem: "As you can see, it'll be no small feat to push Katya-san's wheelchair while carrying Flop-san on my back, so…"

Katya: “You’re asking me what to do, but you have no intention of letting me do it, do you!”

Rem: “As long as all of you aren’t in danger, I’d be happy to leave you alone…”

As long as it remained unsafe to take them out by force, they were left with no other choice but to do so. As expected, Rem did not intend to save them beyond the extent of her ability, but if she could do so, then she had no choice.

She would do so, even if she had to manipulate their feelings. — Even while knowing that it would not shine well upon her.

Rem: “…”

For a moment, Rem felt like she was doing the same thing as she had done to the hand that had been extended toward her, and her heart fluttered due to her complex feelings on the matter.

Quickly shaking off that feeling, Rem nodded to Katya and Flop with a “Well then”,

Rem: “Let’s be careful when leaving the mansion. If we encounter someone, be cautious. We don’t know the people who are coming into the Imperial Capital, either.”

Katya: “Don’t say such scary things… Aren’t you injured? Can you even go?”

Flop: “Ha-ha-ha, thanks for your concern. Fortunately, Wife-san has been casting her healing magic on me devotedly. The gouged flesh is filling in nicely, and I think my blood’s starting to replenished. As for my physical condition, I guess I’ll just have to ask you to give me a shout when running is needed.”

Rem: “I’ll take that into consideration. My legs aren’t in perfect shape, and Katya-san’s in a wheelchair.”

Once again, she realized that each of the three gathered here were physically impaired. Still, it was crucial for them to join forces, as losing any of them would be unacceptable.

And so, with much enthusiasm,

Flop: “By the way, Wife-san, what about all the other people who are being held prisoner besides us?”

Rem: “…That eluded my mind.”

Flop pointed that out, taking the wind out of her sails, prompting Rem to put a hand to her forehead.

There was a separate building in the mansion, and in that building were held captives other than Rem’s group—among them, there were several people who claimed to be the black-haired Crown Prince, the illegitimate son of the Emperor of Vollachia.

Most of them had apparently been used as a justification to raise an insurrection against the Emperor. However, this was not a problem unrelated to Berstetz, who had rebelled over the issue of the Emperor’s heir. So, they were being taken as prisoners of war whenever possible and kept to ascertain whether they were truly the Emperor’s child or not.

Rem: “They can’t be said to be either our enemies or our allies, so I want to ignore them, frankly.”

Currently, setting Katya aside, Rem and Flop’s situation was a very complicated and difficult one.

Even though she had no strong cause or claim, she had reluctantly joined the rebels led by Abel. However, she had been separated from that group, and she was not acquainted with the group of “Crown Princes” being kept captive.

Rem and her group had no idea if they were friend or foe, and their attitude towards them was also unknown.

Rem: “…”

That was why, her real opinion was as she had just stated.

However, leaving them in the locked detached building while Rem’s group left the mansion to escape from the looming, incomprehensible Great Disaster also brought Rem distress.

Even if saving all of them was a difficult deed, she wished to diminish casualties as much as possible.

That was why the guards who had been beaten down by Goz had been given the minimal amount of treatment.

Katya: "…Why don't we just find the key and place it where they can retrieve it themselves?"

Rem: "Ah…"

Katya: "I-I don't know. I don't know, but if it's dangerous, I don't want to get involved. But I can't help but hesitate. Is that strange?!"

Rem: "No, no, it's not strange. Right?"

Seeing that Rem was worried, Katya offered a compromise.

Rem only had one of two options in mind; to help, or not to help. She felt saved by Katya's words.

As the latter had stated, it would be fine to locate the key to the detached building, making sure that the captives had only a little trouble obtaining it. That would ensure the captives' safety along with her own peace of mind.

Flop: "Seems like you've got everything covered."

With Rem's and Katya's conversation coming to a close, Flop nodded in satisfaction.

Meanwhile, he had been braiding some of his own long blond hair, before then gently placing his hand on the door. As he pushed it open,

Flop: "Well, for now, we need to find where the key to the detached building is… Let's wait a sec."

Flop, who was about to go through the door, closed it while withdrawing his earlier statement. That sudden action of his caused

Rem and Katya's eyes to widen, astonished.

However, Flop put his finger to his lips and said, "Be quiet". Then, he opened the door slightly, as to peer outside. Standing beside Flop, Rem also looked out.

Rem: "—Ah."

Katya: "H-hey, what is it? I don't have a good feeling about your reaction at all…!"

Once Rem found out why Flop had closed the door, her breath hitched; frightening due to the signs the two gave off, Katya's voice quivered.

But Rem was unable to find words to relieve Katya's anxiety right there and then.

That was because, for Rem and Flop both, it was a scene that was outside the realm of their imaginations.

In the courtyard of Berstetz's mansion, figures other than the soldiers were standing there.

They were—

Flop: "…Somehow, they look sickly pale, don't they? Maybe they aren't getting enough sleep, I wonder."

The looks of the figures, enveloped in a bloodthirsty aura, were so, so strange, that Flop's joke had come out as dry.

Donning pale complexions with no signs of life, cracks running across their visible skin—a group of people, bearing features that could be recognized at a glance as bizarre, were occupying the mansion of the Imperial Prime Minister.

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Flop: "…At a glance, they all appeared to be Imperial Soldiers, didn't they?"

Shutting the door without a noise, Flop muttered, holding his breath together with Rem and Katya.

In frankness, the scene they had put their eyes on had been so alien that Rem, bereft of the composure to do as much as to pay attention to the details, was unable to affirm Flop's irresponsible claim.

It was just that—

Katya: "Th-There are creepy people entering the mansion…? Doesn't that mean someone from the rebel army is trying to kill His Excellency the Emperor?"

Rem: "They seem like they'd be impossible to communicate with, and they also gave off a different air. It wasn't like they were angry or overexcited or anything like that, rather…"

Flop: "It's like they're creatures that aren't human, but take human form. I also got the feeling that it'd be difficult to gain an understanding by talking to them. It feels like my wounds are spiking with pain, that's a bad omen."

Whether she wanted to or not, Rem agreed with Flop's opinion.

As she had not checked what lay outside, Katya had not seen or understood the people the other two were referring to, but she surely would have been shaken had she looked.

Looking at her friend, who she felt had quite a different sense of logic, Rem had a sudden brainwave.

Rem: "Don't tell me, that's the Great Disaster…?"

She had only heard of the expression "Great Disaster" from Goz, but she supposed it was something nefarious regardless of its exact nature. Having heard about it being imminent, and having laid eyes on the beings outside, she could not help but believe there was a connection between the two.

Moreover, this was just Rem's intuition as a practitioner of healing magic, but, Rem: “It didn’t feel like there was life in them. It was as if…”

Katya: “Y-you’re not going to say they’re dead people, right? Calling them something like Hollows, is ridiculous…”

Flop: “Though, it may be too soon to laugh that off still. The ones outside took the appearance of Imperial Soldiers, and come to think of it, their armor, as well as their faces and napes, seemed to be somewhat tattered. Perhaps there’s a chance they still bear the wounds they received in life… What do you think?”

Katya: “What do I think? I have no idea!”

Flop’s expression, true to his nature, caused Katya to lose her head and dart her eyes about in bewilderment.

But the fact that she was rejecting it vehemently served as undeniable proof that she, too, had perceived that something abnormal was happening from Rem and Flop’s behavior.

Even worse than that was—

???: “—Gyah!”

???: “Guh!”

???: “—Ah.”

Small wails of pain were heard in succession, wails from the guards outside who had been put to sleep—due to having been beaten down by Goz. Rem had deferred their treatment for later, yet they now spilled their death cries.

In frankness though, it was not as if she had ascertained it with her own eyes.

Flop: “…Seems it’s going to be hard to talk and reach a mutual understanding with them.”

Flop’s words, his cheeks tightening greatly, told of the undeniable ultimate fate of the soldiers.

Those enigmatic forces, their faces pallid, had bestowed the collapsed soldiers with the coup de grace. There had been zero margin for discussion. —That Rem, and everyone else, would be an exception to this rule, was difficult to envision.

Rem: "I…"

Had she at least put the soldiers in some room, would it have been different?

Had they, in their unconscious and defenseless state, been moved to a safe place, their arbitrary demise could have been avoided. That being the case, the onus for their deaths would lie with Rem. She had not done everything possible.

Katya: "—Hk, is this the time to be thinking about that!"

Rem: "K-Katya-san…"

Katya: "If you get depressed now, it won't just be those three who die. I-I don't want… anything like that…!"

As Rem cast her face downwards in chagrin, it was seized by both of Katya's hands, one hand on each cheek, and the former's head was raised by force. A teary-eyed Katya snapped at Rem as to reproach her, attempting to obliterate Rem's fainthearted disposition.

Katya's momentum, and wholly honest words made Rem catch her breath.

Nodding quietly after that,

Rem: "Flop-san, the situation has changed. We have no choice but to go unlock that one separate building."

Flop: "Mhm, indeed, Wife-san. I was thinking the same thing. I dunno if we'll be able to get on friendly terms with the Crown Princes who've been detained in that building, but there's always the train of thought that the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Rem: "Yes. With a common enemy, there's the possibility that we can work side-by-side.”

With that declaration, Flop immediately approved the change in course. Seeing the consensus between Rem and Flop, Katya shook her head up and down in agreement, and spoke,

Katya: “If that’s decided, then get on with it, get on with it already! Please do your best at breaking the lock to the detached building already. Y-you can do it, right?”

Rem: “…Fortunately, I picked up a sword to substitute for my walking stick, so I can use that.”

The sword would likely break, but in exchange, she would be able to destroy the lock on the door, at least.

No longer would it be possible for them to traipse around the mansion searching for the key. It would be too difficult.

Flop: “We need to get there before they turn their attention to the detached building, but the problem is…”

Rem: “Katya-san’s wheelchair…”

All eyes were on the wheelchair.

The wheelchair, which had been a gift from her fiancé, was a very well-made, high-end one, but that notwithstanding, it would not be possible to conceal its sounds; those of the wheels turning, and those of its many parts operating.

It was not ideal for situations in which one had to move without being detected.

Katya: “I… I…”

Faced with the same tough challenge, Katya’s gaze faltered as it flickered left and right, upwards and down.

However, seeing as she possessed a physical disability, Katya and her wheelchair were inseparable. She herself was aware of this, and after a few moments of anxiety, Katya spoke.

Katya: “Leave me, and go open that building. I-I’ll wait for you alone…”

Rem: “Alone… But, I can’t let you do something like…”

Katya: “I’ll lock myself in my room! They won’t know I’m there if I shut myself in there and stay quiet, right? If those people are undead or anything of the sort, it’s probably safer to stay hidden and not do anything stupid. B-but I’m not telling you two to go and do something dangerous.”

The fact that she was speaking so quickly, and that her voice had gone up in pitch, was no more than evidence that her innermost thoughts were frantic.

But that Katya’s proposal came from her mustering the entirety of what paltry courage she possessed, was something Rem and Flop comprehended to a painful extent.

They understood that her feelings, her faith, ought not to be rejected.

Rem: “Flop-san, stay with Katya-san and…”

Flop: “No, you’ve got to take Miss Katya’s determination in mind, Wife-san. The chances of success are higher if the two of us were to deal with it. Worst-case scenario, one of us could serve as a decoy.”

Rem: “…”

That truly was the worst-case scenario, but if she were to avert her gaze from that which she wished to not think about, she would have no escape from being overwhelmed by the horrible situation once she actually found herself in it.

Therefore, despite taking into account the possibility that that worst-case would overwhelm her, Rem assented with a nod.

Rem: “Without fail, I’ll unlock the detached building and return.”

Katya: “D-do it properly. It’s no good if you don’t come back too. Promise!”

Rem: “—I will.”

Grasping Katya’s hand, Rem exchanged words of firm promise with her.

Bearing Katya’s concern, so clumsy as she was, Rem kept its weight within her heart so that she would not forget it. And with that, Rem and Flop nodded to each other, and they exited the room.

Flop & Rem: “…”

While stifling their breaths and concealing their bodies, the two of them made their way out into the corridor, and as they surveyed their surroundings—in search of those eerie “enemies”, they managed to advance towards the back of the mansion, where the separate building laid.

As they made their way, wafting in the wind was the scent of blood belonging to the soldiers that had been slain. A deed performed by the enemies, numbering over ten, wandering through the mansion paying no concern to any danger.

Flop: “…Seems like they’re looking for something.”

Rem: “People who are alive, perhaps?”

Flop: “No, I get a feeling like, taking out the ones on guard duty was something they just did while they were at it. There aren’t enough people for them to comb the mansion that thoroughly, it’s likely they have a much more definite target.”

Keeping their bodies low while enroute, Rem and Flop exchanged opinions on the enemies’ behavior.

Hearing Flop’s keen insight brought Rem some vexation, feeling as if she were always off-mark every step of the way.

Flop: “I’m not too sure of this idea either, it’s something I just thought of.”

And, to have Flop smooth over things frustrated her.

At the very least, she would contribute to freeing those imprisoned in the separated building, thus making up for it.

Rem: "—That wouldn't be enough, would it."

Something that ought to be called fortunate, however, was that the sensory functions of the strange-looking "enemies" did not seem to differ much from those of humans, nor had they been boosted with incredible abilities beyond Rem and Flop's grasp.

Thanks to that, somehow, they had managed to approach the separate unit while avoiding detection. Though, a problem arose then.

Flop: "As expected, they didn't fail to notice it completely, huh?"

Having witnessed the same sight Flop had, Rem nodded in silence, agreeing with the former's words.

As they hid behind the building and examined the unit's surroundings, the problem, three figures belonging to "enemies", could be seen. As they were searching for something, it would be unnatural for them not to stop by such a conspicuous structure.

The problem was the building's interior; if the Crown Princes were truly confined within, the "enemies" would massacre the former without a word edgewise the moment they broke through the door.

There was no time to lose. If they did not act this very instant, their lives would be forfeit.

Flop: "Wife-san, I'll attract their attention. Can you do them in while I keep all three occupied?"

Rem: "…"

Flop: "I don't mind if we reverse our roles, Wife-san, but I think it's more likely that you succeed than me with my lack of nerve. I'd like you to decide now."

A forceful declaration, but a decision was necessary.

Taking that in, Rem closed her eyes for a second, then quickly opened them.

And then—

Rem: "Let's do it. I'll go around the back. Flop-san, it'll take only a second."

Flop: "Yeah, I'll leave it to you. I don't want to boast, but serving as a decoy's one of my strong points."

Rem nodded to Flop's answer, speaking of himself as reliable, and they then split up.

With the three "enemies" right in front of the building's entrance, while they planned to breach the large door, Rem and Flop separated in different directions, as if to sandwich their foes.

Rem: "…"

Squeezing onto it, Rem ascertained the feel of the steel sword she had carried for the purpose of breaking the lock.

Never had she had experience wielding the sword, nor was wounding another her forte. If anything, breaking Subaru's finger was all Rem's battle experience amounted to. It was possible to say that it was far from a solid foundation for her self-confidence.

But whether she had confidence in herself or not was irrelevant. She had to do it.

Do-or-die.

Flop: "Heyhey, gentlemen, are you all doing well? I'm a peddler with nothing to sell. At present, I just want to make myself known!"

Abruptly, Flop slipped out from behind the building, and started a conversation with the "enemies".

Although he had to draw their attention on the spur of the moment, and although there had not been any major preparation done in advance, and speaking of Flop's demeanor, it was far too assertive as to slip by them.

Enemy: “…Who the hell are ya?”

Riveted by Flop’s entrance, the “enemies” turned around, one of them apparently uttering so.

Their voice was cold and devoid of warmth, yet in it dwelled definite intelligence, which had come to Rem as a fairly large surprise, having presumed that communicating with them, let alone negotiating, would be impossible.

However—.

Flop: “Oh my, perhaps you can speak? Assuming you can, then maybe I should change my attitude, don’t you think?”

Enemy: “Ahh, ya’ve got it wrong, then. Everyone in the Empire’s gonna die.”

Flop: “I see. —Turns out there’s no margin for negotiation after all!”

So did Flop loudly assert, as to veil over the savage reply given by the “enemy”. An unequivocal cue for Rem’s heart to melt, in whom hesitation had emerged for a moment, so that she would stir.

Having heard things thus far, Rem did not hesitate in her subsequent action.

Rem: “Ah, AHHHHHH—!”

The moment she resolved herself to make her move and initiate her assault, albeit she knew she ought to be silent, she emitted sound. Were she to forgo raising her own morale in that manner, from within, she would not be able to continue with said subsequent action.

Pulling the sword from its scabbard, she held it aloft, and with might and main, she thrusted it at an “enemy’s” back turned to her. They raised a shriek of “Wha?!”, but twice, thrice she swung the sword in a daze.

Not granting the “enemies” who had turned their attention to Flop a chance to turn around, a chaotic series of strikes ensued. She knew not what it would take to incapacitate her opponents from doing battle, nor how long it would take her, hence she swung the sword with reckless abandon.

She had conscious awareness of the solid sensation of her hand rebounding, though everything besides that was rather blurry.

Nevertheless—

Flop: “Wife-san! It’s okay now! You’ve done them in already!”

Rem: “Ah…”

Having been called out by an earnest voice, Rem came to her senses and saw Flop’s figure in front of her.

Then looking for the “enemies” that were supposedly between the two of them, Rem came to find them at her feet, defeated—or rather, she found the pieces of what used to be those “enemies”.

Upon gazing at that, at the completely unexpected way they had been felled, Rem’s eyes widened with a “Huh”.

Flop: “To me, it looked like they were shattered. In fact, looking at the remains like this, it looks like they shattered like pottery or glass.”

Rem: “…Do you think they’re… dead?”

Flop: “At the very least, I think it’s doubtful that they were even alive before they were smashed into smithereens like this.”

Crouching down, Flop answered, holding scattered pieces of the “enemies” between his fingers.

Hearing his answer, Rem got quite the unpleasant feeling upon realizing that, exactly as if it were the answer she had been expecting.

For Rem, taking the life of a living creature was something abhorrent that ought to be avoided as much as possible.

Consequently, she realized that she had held a shameful expectation; she had wished to protect her mind through the doubt of whether the "enemies" she had vanquished were defined as a living being or not.

Flop: "Wife-san, their companions will notice it before long as well. Let's hurry to the detached building and open it up."

Flop made the decision to put off Rem's sentiments for the moment. She did not object to Flop's course of action as well, believing it to be the correct choice.

At the minimum, she attempted to give legitimacy to her actions; and as she was on the verge of unlocking the separate unit, she noticed something.

Rem: "Huh?"

Beneath her feet, the fragments of the "enemies" she had ground to a fine powder wriggled unnaturally, the wriggling different from how it would occur when caused by the wind or an earthquake.

???: "—We won't die that easily. 'Cause we're dead."

Rem shuddered, and the moment she experienced a sensation of unease, the voice of an "enemy" slipped into her awareness.

Turning around, Rem and Flop witnessed the supposedly-beaten "enemies" regenerating. The broken pieces of pottery fused together as if time had been reversed; though fissures with the appearance very much as if they were seams were visible, they had been restored to their original state.

Rem & Flop: "…"

Petrified by that impossible spectacle, Rem and Flop both froze in place.

Rem promptly decided to do the reverse of what Flop had done back in Guaral, where he had protected her, and put strength into her legs, hoping that she could at least shield Flop.

However, the unrest in her mind caused her knees to stay rigid, and her crippled legs would not let her actualize it.

If anything, it produced a fatal collapse of her posture in front of the “enemies”.

She had to raise it, she had to raise the sword. She had to do it, faster than her opponent, and yet.

She would not make it in time.

Rem: “—Hk.”

There was a flash of a grey light of dull hue with a swish. An “enemy” was about to strike Rem and Flop down, devoid of any mercy, with the sword in his hand—And it happened at that exact moment.

???: “—El!”

???: “Minya!!”

Two high-pitched voices overlapped, ushering in the extraordinary phenomenon that occurred immediately afterward right in front of Rem’s eyes.

Before her eyes, purple crystals scored a direct hit on the three sword-wielding “enemies” from behind, running through their chests. Furthermore, the astonishment did not end at that.

Enemy: “Gah.”

And then, in the moment immediately subsequent to a howl of pain from one of the pierced “enemies”, they had their entire body morph into the same dark-purple crystal that had penetrated their chest. And once more, they shattered.

If a difference did exist, it was that the “enemies”, now in purple fragments, displayed no signs of reviving.

And the one who had successfully saved Rem and Flop just barely, was—

???: “—Kept you waiting, Rem! The real star has stepped on the stage!”

Bravely announcing so, a small silhouette jumped off a large horse that had leapt over the outer wall, infiltrating the grounds of the mansion.

And thus, a boy of black hair with nasty-looking eyes, holding up a little girl in a dress in his arms, turned to Rem, closed one eye, and flashed a toothy smile at her.

Rem was left speechless due to his flamboyant appearance and announcement, and finally, she spoke.

Rem: “—Who are you?”

The young boy who had so gallantly made his appearance was someone who, to Rem’s eyes at least, was unknown.

5

—There was a loud, violent knock on the door, which caused Katya to feel a chill run down her spine.

Katya: “No, no, no, don’t come in, don’t come closer…”

Pushing her wheelchair to the back of her room, she clutched her curly hair and prayed, frantically.

She had sent Rem and Flop away, having declared that she would wait alone for the time being. Katya was going to stay hidden as long as possible, even breathing as little as she possibly could.

And yet, an”enemy” had noticed her existence, and now she was frightened to death.

Katya: “I’m unlucky. I’ve always been so, so, unlucky…”

The fact that an“enemy” had stumbled upon this room was purely the result of random chance, in their attempt to find survivors. Seeing as they had found her so easily, her luck was awful.

Maybe Rem and Flop would not make it back in time. Such a convenient thing would never happen to her.

Katya: “…Brother.”

Obviously, she was unable to see the other party outside the door.

However, according to Rem and Flop, the third party wandering around outside, who were neither Imperial Soldiers nor rebels, had the appearance of the dead.

When it came to the dead, the first person that came to Katya’s mind was her own big brother, Jamal Aurélie. The brother whom she had thought unkillable, and who had met an untimely demise.

She could not help but think that she would like to see him at least one more time. Even as a Hollow.

However, when it came to the inexplicable situation of the dead actually being out and about, what came to mind was not an obsession with her brother, but rather self-pity; it was wholly unsightly.

She could not even have such lofty compassion as to pray for Rem and Flop's safety and hope that they would survive in her stead. All she had was a sense of self-preservation, a sense of self-preservation which she could not help.

I'm just an imperfect and helpless person, one who doesn't deserve to be loved by anyone.

Katya: "I'm kind of like…"

Anticipating, hoping, and wishing to be saved was a mistake in and of itself. Due to her thinking such impudent thoughts, Rem and Flop would possibly end up as collateral damage.

Was this not the result of Katya's bad luck and ineptitude, which had ended up getting Rem and Flop caught up in this?

Katya's throat froze as those endlessly desperate thoughts were interrupted by a creaking sound of the door, finally beginning to show signs of being broken into.

Faced with such a hopeless situation, she cursed her body, seemingly incapable of even screaming satisfactorily.

However—

Katya: "Huh?"

Just when she thought that the door was about to be breached, it happened.

On the other side of the door, the "enemy" that had been trying to break in ceased moving. —Or, more precisely, they had been forced to stop their destruction.

Because, the entire body of the "enemy" had burst into flames, enveloped in vermillion.

And then—

???: “The Micro Spirit I scared into doing that was my last one.”

A new voice, one different from that of the burning “enemy”, reached Katya from the other side of the door.

Katya looked up as if she had been startled by the sound of the cursing voice. Then turning the wheel of her wheelchair, Katya took hold of the door herself by her own volition.

With a trembling hand, she unlocked the door that she had been so afraid to open, and opened it.

Behind the door stood a man, kicking the burnt and charred corpse of the “enemy”.

???: “Kept you waiting, Katya. —Let’s get out of here.”

He had lost his familiar bandana, and his normally upswept hair was hanging down. Katya’s eyes widened at the man, his forehead and cheeks covered in dried blood, who was reaching toward her.

Then, as she wheeled toward the man,

Katya: “Late… you’re so late, you idiot! I-I would’ve killed you if I’d died!”

And then, she tearfully dove into her fiancé, who had ruthlessly made his appearance.

6

—At the Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital, at the star-shaped ramparts, and at the rebel stronghold, various situations were unfolding.

There were some who were aware of the circumstances, and others who knew absolutely nothing at all.

Those people were all jumbled together on a battlefield transformed into a crucible of chaos—no, the Vollachian Empire was what had been transformed.

Where bloodshed was rife, where the loss of life, akin to leaves falling from a tree, was revered, where taking action for the sake of blossoming ambition was considered the right thing. Its vast lands pulsated, and those engraved into the history of the Empire rose, one after the other.

What could it be called, if not a nightmare?

???: “—The Great Disaster.”

Indeed, if not to be designated as a nightmare, then it could only be designated as a Great Disaster.

The Stargazers, who infested the Vollachian Empire, had loudly proclaimed this to be one of the mass-scale disasters that would drive the world to ruination, as declared by the commandment they had been bestowed with.

That in itself was a matter inconsequential to the crux that had brought about the circumstances known as the Great Disaster.

The important thing was that this disaster induced the ruin of the Empire’s soil, and at its terminus, the wish would be fulfilled.

For that purpose, the moves to be made, the measures to be exhausted, absolutely everything would be expended.

Dying and bringing death, killing and being killed, through those means, amassed on the vast lands of Vollachia, were mountains of corpses.

If the entirety of Vollachia’s spilled blood was the foundation of the plan, all that remained was.

???: “All that remains is to carry the plan out to the end. —Deliberation: Required.”

With that, the bearer of the Great Disaster, the symbol of ruin, congratulated herself very, very quietly.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy VIII

“Enter.”

“Excuse me.”

When he knocked on the door in front of him, he was granted admittance.

Once authorized, he announced his presence and pushed the office’s door open. In an instant, the room welcomed him with an oppressive atmosphere, as if it were imbibed with the unadulterated essence of the mansion’s master.

“There is no way I can get used to this.”

Letting out a frank cavil, Chesha Trim put a hand to his own mouth.

A candid opinion, truthful perhaps, but reckless nonetheless. Even he would often admonish himself about this unfavorable habit of speaking his mind without a second thought.

And here were the consequences…

“You dare expose your master to your dissatisfaction upon arriving at his office? Your disrespect knows no bounds.”

“Prince Vincent…”

“Call me not ‘Prince,’ but ‘Your Excellency.’ Were you one among the rest of my subjects, I would not bother correcting you, but you shall continue addressing me on future occasions. Bear this in mind henceforth.”

While handling a quill over the large desk allotted for his official duties, the boy delivered a warning.

His stern words rebuked Chesha for that gaffe. However, his criticism was appropriate, and despite what the word choice might suggest, he did not intend to administer another punishment besides this reprimand.

Therefore, Chesha bowed deeply on the spot.

“Understood, Your Excellency Vincent Abellux.”

Thus he readdressed his master: Vincent Abellux, prince of the empire.

A few days ago, Vincent, bearer of lustrous, black hair and dark, wise eyes, had encountered Chesha by chance and, much to the forenamed’s surprise, brought him in as a subordinate without consent.

Once an ordinary citizen of the nation, Chesha now spent his days in the mansion of a noble, offspring of the emperor too, discovering a new, hectic world.

Nevertheless…

“Your Excellency, I came to inform you that I finished the books you ordered me to read. And I must say, the library is quite different from my hometown’s. There is a wider variety of books here, and preserved in impressive condition as well.”

“A deteriorated book transmits deteriorated knowledge. It is said that, in the Kingdom of Lugunica, they employ magic to prevent that, but such conveniency is not available to us in the Empire of Vollachia. Workers are required for that task.”

“Hahaaa, yes, I can see that. Thanks to those efforts, I did not struggle with guessing faded characters, nor with the frustration of getting engaged in a story, only to find that its ending has been cut off.”

“Those are common occurrences. As for you…”

“Yes?”

“I believe that I provided you with a considerable quantity of books. Given the brevity with which you read through them all, I presume that you are enjoying your stay.”

Vincent poised his chin on his hand, supported by the desk, and raised his gaze towards Chesha. Seeing the slight, cynical grin on his lips, Chesha closed one eye and shrugged.

That silent gesture was all that he could muster in response to Vincent’s undeniable inference.

His original plan did not include serving a Vollachian prince… yet, as much as he adjudged it hectic, Chesha had found gratification amidst that routine.

By nature, he disliked adapting to his environs; he preferred to walk at his own pace, regarding whatever river flowed beside him with little more than a sidelong glance.

‘Egocentric’ was the perfect term to describe his attitude.

“In my hometown, my troublesome character became the cause of my exile, whereas in Your Excellency’s mansion, it does not seem to hinder me in any significant way.”

“That is not your assessment to make, but your peers’. Thus far, no complaints about your behavior have reached my ears, though.”

“Unfortunately, I find it difficult to even come close to Your Excellency in terms of ill repute. You may defy them, but those old, yet heated rumors about your familial exterminations are not going to cool off with ease.”

“Hmph, your mouth opens so often, yet desirable things come out seldom.”

With a light snort, Vincent fended off Chesha’s disrespectful remark.

While it was not the latter’s intention to anger him, the prince harbored remarkable magnanimity… No, rather, he reserved his emotions, such as anger and fear, for worthier purposes.

Despite being still a boy, the younger one by two years as well, he managed himself with astounding rigor.

He never closed both eyes at the same time in front of Chesha, nor anybody else for that matter.

Not one second of laxity would the absolute regime of his psyche ever condone.

“Tell me about the distribution map for the aquatic mabeasts inhabiting the Godlet Waterfall.”

Faint perplexity tinged Chesha’s mien when the conversation digressed into an unexpected subject.

Soon he recognized its connection to the previous reads that he had mentioned in his latest report.

“I remember now. Their breeding season is near… And during this period, culling measures should be carried out to prevent their influence on fishermen’s hauls.”

“Regarding the vicissitude of the Kraukraun Grassland nomads’ ruling class.”

“Since the power balance among said land’s nomads made them quite prone to repeat the same history, they needed to create new arms, techniques, or prodigies, lest conflicts would never be settled.”

“If the ‘Stone’ in the Gairahal Wetlands moves, when shall its next activity be predicted to occur?”

“Considering its cycle, within the next two years. And given that the records of major activity were twelve years apart, we can anticipate a large-scale earthquake in six years.”

From economy, then anthropology, to geology, Vincent tested Chesha without pause. Each query demanded him to cite those texts… Not via memorization, but via comprehension and application skills.

From Vincent’s mouth sprang more questions, which diverged into linguistics, astronomy, arithmetic, international magic techniques; and Chesha exerted his brainpower for all of them.

Once they finished…

“Very well. You have proved that you did not lie about having read the books.”

“…This went beyond a mere reading or writing test. You have set such high standards for me.”

“High standards? What is that supposed to mean?”

For an instant, Vincent seemed caught unaware.

An atypically childlike expression disrupted Vincent’s adult composure. In this state, his countenance rendered him a normal boy of handsome features.

“I shall not tell a swordsman to fire his sword. I shall order that he slash with it.”

However, that unusual semblance faded seconds later into a display of philosophical insight.

While he understood Vincent’s purport, Chesha could not help but deem it an overestimation. He had managed to reply in the desired way this time, but who could guarantee that he would never lose track of the boy’s wisdom and bring shame upon himself?

“I fear the day when I will no longer be able to fulfill Your Excellency’s expectations.”

“Heed your steps, and you shall elude it. My ideals allow no indolent wight to walk abreast with me.”

“Oh, how you limit my choices.”

To detest not the unskilled, but the indolent: a sentiment most emblematic of the person called Vincent. It was at that moment that Chesha recalled the main reason why he had stopped by this room.

He was awaiting the next instruction, having completed the assigned reading, but not only that…

“Your Excellency Vincent, while it may be impertinent, I want to request something.”

“Do tell. Unless it is a holiday, in which case, do not even bother begging.”

“I would indeed like to discuss the terms of my work at a later date… But my actual request relates to my hometown, where my family lives.”

“Your hometown, you say?”

Someway, Vincent’s interest flared up when Chesha broached that topic. In the middle of opening the seal of a letter on the desk, the boy’s hands became still, while his black eyes stared at Chesha.

Upon first arriving in the mansion, Chesha had undergone an interrogation regarding his antecedents, through which he had briefed Vincent about his expulsion from the village. Chesha had displeased the village’s aged landowner, and not even his family had stood up in his defense. Ergo, no home awaited his return.

“I assumed that any matter pertaining to that village would be long dissociated from you. Or perchance you still resent those who banished you… So, you wish to borrow my soldiers to enact your revenge?”

“Hahaha, you jest. And if you would be so kind as to brush off what I will say next as a joke too…”

“Say it.”

“Judging by that radical proposition, is it safe to assume that you amuse yourself exterminating rebels along with their families?”

Unsure of what he was expecting, Vincent pardoned Chesha’s jest with an irked face. Albeit Chesha phrased it as a joke, part of his doubt stemmed from genuine concern.

Should he construe these indecorous persiflage and jokes as a peculiarity of Vincent, or as the Vollachian imperial family’s typical sense of humor?

Putting that irrelevant query in the back of his mind, he spoke:

“My apologies, but I am not so obsessed with my family as to wish ruination upon them, so I do not need to borrow your soldiers. In truth, I want you to assist me in delivering a memento.”

“A memento… And who is it that you need slain?”

“It is not a head, nor an ear, nor a finger.”

“…”

“It will be the first pay I receive while working in this mansion.”

When Chesha explained his petition, Vincent’s face scrunched up in confusion.

He could brook the rebuff of his imperial quip, but not hearing Chesha’s words without grasping the meaning behind them. However, Vincent’s skepticism was justified.

“My apologies, but I need you to understand the reason behind this is a mere whim of mine.”

“How unfathomable. I understand that your indifference overrules your resentment, but what would gifting your salary be, if not a token of gratitude? Towards the wights who spurned you, no less.”

“…”

“What compels you to remit money to them? You are no stranger to the saying, ‘the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb,’ are you?”

Disbelief made Vincent’s obduracy grow to unforeseen extremes.

Hearing his master almost argue in favor of the familial extermination as a more rational idea, Chesha breathed out a feeble sigh.

He was not lying. He did not feel aggrieved enough to seek his hometown’s destruction, but neither was he so indulgent as to forgive his family’s acts on grounds of their kinship.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

“Answer, Chesha Trim. What compels you to ask for…?”

“To put it succinctly, revenge.”

“…What?”

Upon hearing Chesha’s answer, Vincent ceased all movement, betokening discontent with his expression.

Knitting his eyebrows did not suffice, Vincent etched flagrant wrinkles between them, while his eyes strove to read Chesha’s intent to no avail.

“Your philosophy is beyond my comprehension. How shall you achieve revenge by remitting money?”

“Good question. As I have explained to Your Excellency before, I was banished from my hometown. My family did not bother supporting a stubborn troublemaker like me… They must be convinced that I will not make it far into the outside world before dropping dead due to a silly misstep.”

“Perhaps. How does that solve my doubt?”

“What if that very same troublemaker were to send them some decent money? Imagine their faces when they get proven wrong, would that not be hilarious?”

“…”

How dreadful would it be if the boy from whom they anticipated a beggar’s death sent them a copious amount of money, as if thanking them for ousting him? And that wealth would bring not joy, but anguish, for despite being its possessors, their right to squander it did not come guaranteed.

So had Chesha Trim plotted in retaliation against his hometown and family, inferior in severity to destruction, yet an effective way to gloat nonetheless.

“This is purely based on my imagination, though.”

He affixed that affirmation at the end, aware that his logic was difficult to follow. Unlike Vincent, Chesha did whatever he could to avoid abridged explanations.

Regardless, Chesha trusted that his choice contained nothing nonsensical nor insane, yet…

“…Pfft.”

“Your Excellency?”

Suddenly, Chesha raised an eyebrow and called out to Vincent.

Chesha found himself feeling slight surprise. Ignoring Chesha’s bemused gaze, Vincent put a hand to his own forehead…

“Hahahahaha!”

And so, his voice rose into a guffaw.

Eyes wide open and paralyzed, Chesha watched Vincent laugh.

Some times, Vincent would joke or banter. Others, he would don a sardonic smirk or snort. But never could he have pictured Vincent thus, laughing with his mouth open.

“I was convinced that Your Excellency never laughed.”

“What foolish thoughts you voice. You dare present such a malicious scheme to me and tell me not to laugh? What unbridled disrespect, insolence!”

“Had I done it on purpose, you would have adduced it to reprehend me…”

He had not aimed to amuse or bewilder him; this exploit did not involve deliberation. At least, it did not cause his master to assess him as a creature of unfathomable psyche, though.

“Hmph,” chuckled Vincent, struggling to repress the impulse that lingered after that hearty laughter, with a nod. “I see your vision now. However…”

“Ah, of course, this would apply exclusively to my first pay. I am quite greedy, you see… so, no matter how much this mansion’s library provides, it will never satiate me.”

“Good to know. Like swordsmen need their swords and civilians need their books, every living being needs nourishment.”

That response was a tacit authorization of Chesha’s revenge, and also a promise of complicity.

Grateful for Vincent’s approval, Chesha spoke again:

“While we are here, Your Excellency, if you do not mind granting me something extra…”

“Speak. The more secretive your exposition is, the less attention I pay.”

“If you say so… Could you confer a new name onto me?”

“…”

Upon the reveal of the additional favor, Vincent tensed his lips and narrowed his eyes.

That request signified Chesha Trim’s renounce of his birth name. Although he planned to remit his salary to his hometown as a token of revenge, he did not wish ill upon his estranged family.

If news spread that Chesha served a Vollachian prince, it would place an unnecessary burden on his family. The possibility of Chesha’s family trying to take advantage of his status existed too.

So, instead of discommoding Vincent with such matters…

“Does the surname ‘Gold’ appeal to you?”

Contemplating Chesha’s circumstances, about which he did not need to inquire, Vincent submitted a name. Chesha felt impressed by his master's perspicacity. Notwithstanding…

"If I remember correctly, that surname belongs to a household of traitorous subjects, who were exterminated by Your Excellency."

"You do remember correctly. You have earned my praise for your memory."

"I must say I admire Your Excellency's dedication to intimidating others."

Albeit he was not determined on refusing, the fact that somebody could conceive an idea so vicious amazed him. Regardless, he had no actual qualms about bearing the surname Gold.

"Very well, the last name will be Gold. What should we do about the first name? If you ask me, I would prefer one similar to the original."

"Similar to the original, huh. Then, let us call you Chisha."

"…"

"Chisha Gold. Hm, not bad."

Complacent, Vincent went ahead and validated the modification, with which he seemed to find no fault.

Not because he lacked seriousness in naming a person. There were simply no aspects that he found fault with. The combination of a resemblant first name and a reusable last name.

In fact, he appeared proud, almost congratulating himself for fabricating the optimum option.

"…? Is something wrong, Chisha Gold?"

"Oh, no, no, nothing. I am once again awash with admiration, is all."

Thus, Chesha Trim became Chisha Gold.

In other news, Chisha carried out his revenge without hassle: when his salary reached his family in their hometown, they froze in shock at the great sum, which wreaked distress.

Furthermore, Chisha informed his hometown about the House of Abellux's involvement in this donation, and thereby executed another vengeful scheme against his troublesome master: proclaiming the name of the 'Sanguinary Prince.'

END

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy Zero:
The Nine Divine Generals

1

Before his eyes were bundles of documents piled up into mountains. After finishing the first mountain, Chisha Gold massaged the skin around his eyes and slowly stood up.

Chisha: “Oh dear, it appears that I am showing signs of being a tad strained.”

In the Vollachian Empire, it was normal for the strong to be revered, and for the weak to be disdained.

Since such a stern ironclad rule of blood was imposed widely, it was indeed easy to form misunderstandings, but it was not as though everything was driven by the clash of swords sparking against each other.

Though it might have been obvious, there was also the existence of negotiations unaccompanied by a sword, purely by means of words, money, and goods. Since there existed people who engaged in such negotiations, and though this also may be obvious, there was also a considerable amount of paperwork.

Chisha: “His Excellency often preaches the importance of civil officers, but, after all, it would be a thorny path to spread such an awareness among the people of the Empire.”

In Vollachia, ever since the time that one was a young child, there were many things decided based on physical strength. If the standard of value were purely brute strength, then it would not be difficult to imagine the treatment of those unsuited for fighting.

The public gaze of the Empire’s Sword Wolves was harsh on those who pretended to be wise. It would have been better had it been only the public gaze that was harsh, but because their harshness went as far as their claws and fangs, it was a great deal of trouble for the weak.

In reality, Chisha had been one who had faced extreme hardship during his childhood.

Although, in Chisha's case, when in a direct confrontation with an opponent he was no match for, he would make full use of tools and arithmetic to launch a counterattack, or would manipulate language and information to turn his opponents against each other; so, he was left undefeated.

However—

Chisha: "If you are defeated, you lose your life, and if you fight back, you lose your place. It seems a pity that I am not suited to the soil and water of the Empire."

Ultimately, since that disposition of Chisha's was the cause of him leaving his hometown, it became tempting for him to lament just how absurd life could be.

Be that as it may, it could be said that he was rather lucky, for his life had not been exhausted as he drifted through the stream.

Chisha: "Only…"

Muttering to himself, Chisha stood as he gazed out of the window of the room that was granted to him so that he could perform his official duties.

Positioned at the innermost place of Vollachia's Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the Crystal Palace—This castle, known for having the foremost beauty within this world, was a rare article that the people of the Empire could find value outside of strength in.

Extolled to have such beauty, the gardens of the castle had also been extremely intricately designed, but—

???: "Ahahahahahaha! Hold on, hold on, Anya, there's no way you'll be able to seize me like that! Are you perhaps messing around, dozing off, or getting distracted?"

Arakiya: “Cecilus, I’ll kill you.”

Cecilus: “Doesn’t that favorite phrase of yours become kinda empty after saying it for years?”

Arakiya: “I’LL KILL YOU!”

The gardens of the beautiful Crystal Palace, its vegetation was ripped out one step after the other as legs kicked off the ground, and it was devastated by a vortex of flame that chased after the fleeing back; it was being painted over into a wretched spectacle, never to be seen again.

The rampage and voices that lacked any concern for their surroundings whatsoever was a playful bout between two fellow natural disasters, one that nobody would heedlessly approach.

That was the reality unfolding in the Crystal Palace of His Excellency the Emperor, who sat at the pinnacle of the Empire. Upon beholding it, Chisha narrowed his long-slitted eyes, expressing his feelings of lament.

???: “—General First-Class Cecilus! General First-Class Arakiya! Cease this folly! Just where do you think you are right now?! This is the revered castle of His Excellency the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia! Compose yourselves!”

As if speaking by proxy for those inner thoughts of Chisha, a deep, angered voice broke into the garden where lightning and flame entwined.

However, it seemed like the owner of the angered voice did not realize that he was helping to raise the level of the increasingly noisy atmosphere, so the voice accomplished nothing but adding fuel to the lightning and fire.

Cecilus: “Oh? Goz-san! If you have any complaints, please direct them towards Anya, and not me! After all, I’m just bustling about like I usually do!”

Arakiya: “Goz, hindrance.”

Goz: “Alright! Are neither of you listening?! You are lacking in self-awareness as Generals!!”

At the situation which only continued to become more obstreperous and noisy, Chisha silently left the window. Then, while massaging his brow with his fingers once again,

Chisha: “It should not have turned out this way. Oh, how I pity myself…”

With that, he expressed lament of his own circumstances once more.

2

—One of the Nine Divine Generals of the Vollachian Empire, Chisha Gold was granted the position of Fourth.

Whenever he looked directly at that title of his, Chisha would make a sour face at how unbalanced it was.

Unbalanced in the sense that he was not worthy, and in the sense that it was a position he had not desired.

Chisha: “The Nine Divine Generals are the honor of military strength, a title that ought to be granted only to military men who are worthy of the seat of General First-Class. It would have been better for me to be made Prime Minister, instead of granting it to that turbulent individual.”

???: “Stop being half-assed, how about you just accept your fucking position, Chisha.”

When Chisha spilled his miscellaneous thoughts, a visitor interjected vulgarly.

Stepping into the office, using the entirety of his small body to occupy the sofa, the hyena person of small stature—

Chisha: “—General First-Class Groovy Gumlet, are you not unsatisfied? With the fact that I am one of the Nine Divine Generals, not to mention one who is above you in rank.”

Groovy: “Kah!! Don’t make me fucking laugh, goddammit. The topmost one is Cecilus. As long as that doesn’t change, then the order of the ones under him doesn’t have any significant meaning! You should know that too, bastard.”

Chisha: “As usual, in contrast to your appearance, speech, and conduct, you are quite the capable intellectual. I am impressed.”

Groovy: “That means you think that I’m a fucking idiot, doesn’t it? Goddammit Chisha.”

Flashing his sharp fangs, Groovy tried to intimidate Chisha with his cute and round eyes.

Though his outward appearance was not very menacing, as Sixth of the Nine Divine Generals, he was one of the Empire’s strongest warriors; and, unlike Chisha, that title was not merely a decoration.

Be that as it may, that he had paid a visit to Chisha’s office like this was not for the sake of an important discussion between two fellow First-Class Generals of the Empire about asserting influence over the future of Vollachia. Rather—

Groovy: “Cecilus and Arakiya, that fucking goddamn duo, they had the nerve to mess up the gardens that I tend to! Chisha, you bastard, you better properly discipline them!”

Indeed, it was for the sake of pleading his complaints on the matter of the garden’s wretched state.

Groovy was a distinguished warrior of the Empire, but he also possessed notoriety as a craftsman and artist, separate to that of being a warrior. The gardens, which played a part in the beautiful scenery of the Crystal Palace, were also one of his works.

Known as the Master of Cursed Tools, Groovy was enthusiastic about developing arms and weapons for the purpose of killing and harming people, and he was also well-versed in the restoration of old buildings and ruins that held historic value.

On that point, he could see eye to eye with Chisha, who could feel the grace in the functional aspects of antiques.

Chisha: “First, Groovy—let me preface this by saying that I fully understand the sentiments of the Generals, but let me just tell you this…”

Groovy: “Oh, what is it, what is it? If it’s just a fucking standard apology, then there’s no point.”

Chisha: “I will first answer that I have no reason to apologize. At any rate, it is not my duty to discipline Cecilus, for there is no position which even does so.”

Groovy: “Hah?! You’re refusing to discipline him?! Are you fucking abandoning your duty as his owner?”

Groovy’s eyes looked utterly perplexed, but Chisha was the one who found it unbelievable.

He had certainly known Cecilus for a long time, but Chisha was not his parent, sibling, or anything of the sort. Chisha had no obligation to educate or discipline Cecilus, and besides—

???: “Groovy, unreasonable. Cecilus, anybody, discipline, impossible.”

Sitting on the floor, Moguro Hagane spoke by proxy for the conclusion of Chisha’s inner thoughts.

Moguro, who called themself a Steelfolk, a peculiar race whose bodies were made out of metal and minerals, could have been mistaken for an avant-garde decoration if they simply sat there and remained silent.

According to what Chisha had heard, the first meeting between Groovy and Moguro, who now had a surprising friendship, seemed to be when Groovy thought Moguro was a furnishing of the Crystal Palace and had tried to put them away into storage.

Regardless of their start, the two had become close, and now the both of them were paying a visit to his office together.

However, the fact that they were close friends, and cooperating to do whatever they were told, were separate matters.

Groovy: “Ah? What the hell are you saying? Goddamn you Moguro! Even though I came to complain about those two fucking idiots making a fucking mess, how do you have the nerve to oppose me!”

Moguro: “Invited, me, gardening. Your, complaint, support, incorrect.”

Groovy: “Goddammit! I’ve been double crossed by my friend! How could this possibly be, FUCK!”

Groovy clutched his head in perplexity, and his fur scattered as he raged atop the sofa. Observing that state, Chisha let out a “That is it” as he fiddled with his bangs.

Groovy: “That? What is that? Goddammit.”

Chisha: “It’s the same as how General First-Class Moguro did not do what you told them to just now, General First-Class Groovy. Cecilus will not do what I tell him to. Therefore, your pleas to me are meaningless.”

Groovy: “FUCK! So then, I’m supposed to be prepared for those fucking idiots to lay waste to the gardens each time I tend to them? GODDAMMIT! Then just let it pile up with sand, fucking hell!”

Chisha: “—. I understand your sentiments, so I will pass them on to His Excellency. For the time being, I would be grateful if that satisfied you.”

It was not enough of a counter-proposal to be referred to as such, but that was the extent of the compromise offered by Chisha.

Groovy made a fairly bitter face regarding the matter, and hesitated to nod, but,

Moguro: “Groovy, compromise.”

With that, at the straightforward words of his friend, he made a profusely loud click of his tongue.

???: “The Stargazer who hangs ‘round the Palace, wouldn’t it be better ta kill it?”

Was there at least one person who could visit without giving him a headache? Even though Chisha did not hold his head at these opening words, he did begin wanting to hold it.

The Stargazer, brought up as the topic of conversation, was a person who was neither a military officer nor a civil officer, but had special privileges to visit the Crystal Palace as he pleased, and they were someone whom even Chisha did not think of kindly.

Be that as it may—

Chisha: “The information that it brings is adequately useful. Sir Olbart, you should also be aware of that.”

Olbart: “Of course, I’m plenty aware. But, there are Stargazers who got a similar position outside of it, ain’t there? If that’s tha case, there shouldn’t be a problem with replacin’ it.”

Chisha: “In other words, Sir, you think we ought to eliminate Ubilk-dono?”

Olbart: “It’d be pointless if the other Stargazers were all tha same as it, but I’ve tortured enough of ‘em ta understand that ain’t the case.”

Saying that, Olbart Dunkelkenn sat cross-legged on the reception table as he scratched his back.

While he had the aura of a good-natured old man, he was the chief of the Shinobi, a group of extraordinary superhumans, and had deeply immersed himself in the dark side of the Empire for a long time, coming to be quite proficient at dirty work.

Stargazers—Those who devoted themselves to the fulfillment of the commandment that they received from the stars; Ubilk, who frequently visited the Crystal Palace, was one of them. Aside from him, there were some other Stargazers here and there, and in order to question them about the authenticity of Ubilk’s words, many were imprisoned and put through the hardship of torture by the hands of Shinobi.

Chisha: “Despite going to that extent, the words of Ubilk-dono could not be concluded as falsehoods.”

Olbart: “That’s why, I ain’t sayin’ we should get rid of all the Stargazers. It’s just that I want ta get rid of it.”

Chisha: “Sir Olbart, are you saying that that is for the sake of His Excellency the Emperor?”

Olbart: “Hmm? That’s just me feelin’ good ‘bout serving my duty as a General. Not only is this me seriously doin’ my job, but it’s also for tha sake of His Excellency, right?”

Shamelessly, Olbart tried to force his demands to be met. While Chisha was astounded by that stance, there was some truth to what he was saying.

Especially since this old man known as Olbart, did not mainly serve due to loyalty or his conscience.

At the extremities of probing into his own desires and way of being, he had been perfected as the apex of the Shinobi, so it was important for Vincent’s reign that he treated Olbart well to keep his mind open.

However—

Chisha: “It is going a bit too far for you to try and bend His Excellency’s will by flashing your military might.”

Olbart: “Good grief… as expected, yer tha most frightenin’ outta tha Nine Divine Generals.”

Chisha: “Oh? To receive such an evaluation from the Vicious Old Man himself, I am surprised.”

Olbart: “If it was only ‘bout being strong, then it would be Ceshi or Araki, but yer strength ain’t somethin’ that can be compared ta those kinds of aspects. Surprisingly, that’s the same as it, right?”

Chisha: "…"

Olbart: "In this country, I think tha ones who get up ta tha worst stuff are guys like ya."

Being spoken of with quite an unexpected appraisal, Chisha made an astonished expression. Seeing him in that state, Olbart laughed with an amused "Kakaka-kka!" and jumped up.

Dropping from the table to stand on the floor, he turned his back and waved his hand.

He probably came in with the expectation that luck may be on his side, but yielding upon understanding that it would not come to fruition was quite manly. Olbart had survived for so long to that age not just because he was strong, but because he was tough.

Chisha: "Only, it was probably an exaggerated opinion that I am the most frightening."

Olbart: "Yer free ta think that way. Just as I'm free ta think this way."

The fact that he had no intention of bending his opinion was a trait of Olbart, who seemed like he was reasonable, yet refused to understand others.

Flashing his teeth as he smiled, the old man departed, and as Chisha saw him off, he massaged the skin around his eyes with his fingers.

His shoulders were also stiff from all the paperwork, but taking consultations again and again in his office like this was also troublesome. In the first place, why was everyone going to Chisha in succession?

Chisha: "I wish they would stop bringing things to me, just because it would be difficult to directly communicate such things to His Excellency."

Of course, everyone probably had the consideration not to bother Vincent in his busy position, but Chisha being chosen as a substitute was probably not the entire reason for this.

Was it because it was easy to speak to him? Or perhaps—

???: “Well, ain’t that just ‘cause if His Excellency was willing to lend an ear, it’s unthinkable that it would be for anyone ‘cept General First-Class Chisha.”

Chisha: “—General First-Class Balleroy.”

Leaning against the opened door, what Chisha saw from within the room was a tall figure who gave off an elegant atmosphere—It was the man known as Balleroy Temeglyph.

He called out Chisha’s name, and upon seeing the latter’s reaction of a slight frown, Balleroy shut a single one of his eyes, and,

Balleroy: “What’s wrong? Is there something on my face?”

Chisha: “No. It is just that I feel strangely linked by fate with the Divine Generals today. General First-Class Balleroy, since I have now happened to see you, today I have seen the figures or heard the voices of all except General First-Class Yorna.”

Balleroy: “Well, I’ve also had some strange days. While we’re on the topic of strange and peculiar things, General First-Class Chisha, would ya like to relax for a bit and go on a long ride with me?”

Balleroy walked up to Chisha as he made a proposition, and hearing that, the wrinkles on Chisha’s brow became increasingly deep.

As an oddball to the many obstinate folk within the Nine Divine Generals, Balleroy possessed an exceptionally honest human nature. Nonetheless, he was not such a close friend that he would make this kind of proposal.

Chisha: “If that were to happen, it would be in accordance with Cecilus’s suggestion and expectations, though.”

Balleroy: “Ta-hah, now that’s the level of discernment I would expect from ya.”

At Chisha’s identification, Balleroy placed his hand on his forehead and laughed, Balleroy: “Just as ya guessed, Cecilus had requested that I do this. Somehow, it seemed that he felt responsible for ruining the gardens together with Arakiya…”

Chisha: “General First-Class Balleroy, if you are a General, you ought to handle information properly.”

Balleroy: “General First-Class Chisha, it seemed he was worried that what happened in the gardens was causing wrinkles to gather on your brow, so he asked if I could take you flying through the sky to help take your mind off of things.”

Chisha: “As usual, I am surprised he is a man who is capable of leaning in the direction of thoughtfulness.”

Although, on top of being a moment of rare thoughtfulness, relying on Balleroy instead of his own strength seemed to be a sign of growth.

If there was not really a glimpse of growth, then with his own philosophy, which was incomprehensible to others, he would have tried to carry out his gratitude towards Chisha using his own strength.

Balleroy: “So then, what shall we do? Would you like to relax for a short while on my Carillon?”

Chisha: “I appreciate the proposal. But, I also have piles of work to get through…”

Balleroy: “Oh my, that’s too bad… I wish I could help out, but unfortunately I’ve never been remotely good at this kind of work.”

Staring at the heaps of documents atop the desk, Balleroy scratched his cheek. Even so, the fact that he was apologetic about being unable to help out made Balleroy much more personable than the other Divine Generals.

It was something that neither Groovy, nor Moguro, nor Olbart, nor anyone else had brought up. If it were Cecilus or Arakiya, they would have probably exemplified their refusal at merely the sight of the mountain of documents.

Henceforth—

Chisha: “—For the time being, it seems that there is a need for me to carry this burden on my back.”

With that, the man, who alongside Cecilus was indispensable to the Nine Divine Generals, massaged the skin around his eyes once again.

END

The Dragon Kingdom:
Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record II

1

Meili Portroute's ordeal had reached a new stage. Accompanied by her two companions, Annerose and Clind, they had used a rather unconventional method to visit Lugunica Castle in the Kingdom of Lugunica's royal capital. Using Clind's mysterious power, the three of them had traveled by teleportation. The boulder-faced knight charged with guarding the castle dropped his head into his hands, saying, "If such a person truly exists, no amount of security will ever be enough to protect people of importance…"

Meili was apologetic, feeling rather sorry for him. If there had, in fact, been someone with Clind's abilities during her and Elsa's time in the assassination business, then they would have completed their assignments with much less hassle. So, in that respect, it was a good thing that Clind was just a child-loving pervert who served Annerose.

"Unfortunately, it's not the kind of power I can use freely. I hope you're aware that proper compensation must be paid. Gratitude," he said as he glanced over his shoulder at Meili.

Meili's shoulders shook. She felt uncomfortable since it felt as if he had read her thoughts, but she quickly realized this wasn't the time to be worrying about Clind or the boulder-faced knight. The reason being…

"Are you the girl who can lead the way to the Pleiades Watchtower?"

The question came from the monster standing before her. As a tamer of witchbeasts, it wasn't that she had the power to fight directly herself, but she had certainly encountered a variety of opponents weak and strong during her time with Elsa—who loved fighting. However, she had never encountered anything like the one standing before her now; he was a true monster.

"There's no need to be so nervous… But I suppose it doesn't sound very convincing when it's coming from me."

"…"

Meili stood frozen as this monster before them addressed her directly. "I don't mean to frighten you. I only wish to ask you a question, first of all." Then, looking over her slender shoulder with his blue eyes, he asked, "How did you tame that witchbeast?"

"…"

Meili flinched, and a small creature suddenly leapt onto her head. As it extended its pincers towards the sky, the young man raised his eyebrows slightly in surprise.

"Whoa."

Everyone else was not so calm as pandemonium quickly spread amongst the group. Meili reflexively covered her face as small pincers snapped above her head, her mind overcome with confusion since she didn't know what to do.

"Meili! Calm down!" screeched Annerose from right beside her in an attempt to pacify her. It was no use, however, for Meili had fallen into a state of disarray in this terribly unexpected occurrence.

Following her deep rooted defensive instinct she had developed from a young age, she let the witchbeast rage as it attempted to cut down everything in her vicinity—

A sudden voice and sharp slap cut through the chaos in the great hall.

"Dumbass. You're the one causin' her to panic, so get your ass back here."

"Huh?" Meili raised her head to see the monster in front of her stepping back.

The source of this voice and the loud slap was a young girl with gold hair coming forward to meet them. Her crimson eyes peered at

Meili, and then at the creature on her head—a small, crimson scorpion. "I understand how you feel—bein' leered at by a crowd of people as though you're some weirdo. They're a bunch of creeps."

As she spoke, the girl held out a finger towards the crimson scorpion, which aimed a pincer at it. "Whoa now." She quickly pulled her finger out of harm's way and gave a cheerful laugh, one protruding tooth standing out from the rest. "Heh, what a lively insect! Your pincers seem pretty sharp, eh?"

"…It could probably slice a thin finger riight off."

"Heey now, are ya serious? Then that coulda been pretty dangerous."

The girl's demeanor, which was more unorthodox than reckless, made Meili respond in her natural way of speech.

"Lady Felt, please be careful," said the man standing behind the smiling girl. "Though it may be tiny, it's still a witchbeast."

"So you're the pipsqueak professing to be able to control witchbeasts, right? Putting it on your head like that ain't nothing, I guess. Looks like you could be telling the truth. More or less…"

At the caution of the monster, the girl sharpened her almond-shaped eyes and, with that expression, surveyed the distinguished old men lined up inside the great hall.

"You old geezers haven't learned anything, have ya? Don't you remember how you pulled the same sorta shit when you came to see me and pissed me off? Or are you all a bunch of idiots or somethin'?"

"Lady Felt, just because you are a candidate doesn't mean you can behave like that…" criticized Bordeaux.

"I was like this before I was given an insignia," she retorted, crossing her arms. "Just 'cause you're old doesn't mean you can pretend to be hard of hearin'. If you want to be treated with respect, then show me some sincerity first."

The bald old man—Bordeaux—furrowed his thick eyebrows and fell silent.

Watching this exchange from the side, an elderly man they called Miklotov laughed with a “Ho ho ho ho.” He caressed his long beard in good humor as he spoke. “You’ve become better at forming your arguments, Lady Felt. Could this be a sign that you’re becoming more aware of your position as a candidate for the royal selection?”

“Who knows? Although, I gotta say, I’m not sure if I’ve developed that kind of annoying awareness yet, but…” After answering Miklotov’s question, Felt pointed to the tall, red-haired figure behind her with her thumb, causing the monster to widen his eyes. “But I have become self-aware enough to know I’m this guy’s mistress and that I gotta reel him in whenever he accidentally scares people.”

“Well, then we’re grateful that you’re with him,” Miklotov replied.

“Don’t mention it.”

Brazenly responding to her senior, Felt spun around to face the visitors. Meili slightly stiffened at the strong-willed crimson eyes pressing upon her.

Felt laughed good-humoredly. “I’m Felt. One of the royal selection candidates, and that Sword Saint’s mistress. Nice to meetcha.”

Giving Meili an abrupt slap on the shoulder, Felt nonchalantly declared herself the tamer of a monster.

2

The monster known as Reinhard van Astrea was able to accomplish his job with ease after Felt calmed Meili down.

“She certainly is the owner of a divine protection…the Divine Protection of Witchbeast Manipulation. It’s an incredibly rare ability that allows her to manipulate witchbeasts at will.”

With a single glance at Meili, Reinhard identified her power. Since getting others to believe in Meili’s abilities was their objective, his assurance was welcome, but…

“Just so you know, we were prepared to test the validity of our claim regarding her powers. Please do not think you did us any favors,” said the girl standing next to Meili.

“You’re pretty anal about bein’ in someone’s debt, huh. You’re pretty mature for someone so small. Don’t worry, Reinhard only glanced at her, so I don’t think you owe us anything either.”

“Splendid, then.”

Taking no notice of Meili—the person concerned—Annerose and Felt argued on equal terms.

In any case, with proof of Meili’s witchbeast-taming divine protection, discussions with the Council of Wise Men could probably move forward. That is to say—

“The way to the Pleiades Watchtower is therefore possible with Emilia’s vassal—this Meili Portroute,” Annerose boldly proclaimed to the Council of Wise Men gathered there.

The wise old men began their discussion at her words, but Felt and Reinhard, having arrived late, were a step behind in the conversation. Folding her arms, Felt tilted her head. “The Pleiades Watchtower…”

“It’s the tower that Lady Emilia, Subaru, as well as Lady Anastasia went to,” Reinhard explained. “In the far east, at the edge of the Augria Sand Dunes, sits a tower where the Sage, Shaula, resides.”

“…Naked Lady didn’t really feel much like a Saage,” Meili mumbled reflexively at the mention of the Sage, before immediately slapping a palm over her mouth—but it was too late. She’d drawn the attention of Felt and Reinhard, who both stared at her.

The two stood beside Meili, the small crimson scorpion still perched atop her head.

“I see… I got the jist of it. Because of your divine protection, the witchbeasts coverin’ the path to the tower don’t see you as a disturbance and allow you to pass unchallenged."

"Judging from the conversation just now, it seems as though you've already been to the Pleiades Watchtower and come back," commented Reinhard. "Did Lady Emilia and the others get back safely?"

"H-Hold on, hoold on! I'm…not alloowed to talk without permission!"

Meili, being pressed, refused to speak. As she shook her head with a hand still over her mouth, her three-strand braid shook from left to right. The small crimson scorpion raised its stinger in support of her and snapped its pincers as though it was trying to intimidate the two.

Clind cleared his throat as help to the flustered Meili and cut into the space between her, Felt, and Reinhard. "We're very grateful for your cooperation, Lady Felt and Sir Reinhard. However, Meili is also in an extremely difficult position, and no matter how young Lady Felt seems, and how dazzling her soul is, we cannot hand her over. Gratitude."

Turning towards Clind's mysteriously sparkling eyes, Felt's cheeks stiffened. "What the—you sure are sayin' some creepy things there…"

Gently inserting an arm in front of Felt to protect his mistress, Reinhard compared Meili and Clind. "When you say 'difficult position', is that what you are here to talk about?"

Giving a deep bow, Clind affirmed Reinhard's question. "Indeed. Discerning."

At that conversation, Felt made a face that showed her lack of understanding. But before they could explain, the conversation had moved on—not between Meili and the others, but rather, Annerose and the Council of Wise Men.

"I understand that Miss Meili's rare ability would help us clear a path to the Pleiades Watchtower in the eastern part of the kingdom.

Considering this, what could we offer you in return?"

"Uncle… Margrave Mathers spoke with Emilia after she got back, and I've been told that he will need help to make use of the tower. Please arrange workers and guards for that purpose."

"Hmm. As representatives of the Kingdom, we certainly have no reason to reject that request if there's a chance for us to use the Sage's tower. However, that is not all, I assume." Miklotov ceased stroking his beard and narrowed his eyes.

Meili was caught off guard by his unexpectedly sharp gaze. She had always seen Miklotov as a kind and gentle man, but now she knew there was more to him than just that. After all, he represented the kingdom's decision-making body.

Holding Miklotov's gaze, Annerose did not sway. "…Yes, we have another request."

Meili admired the courage and composure of this girl younger than her. These qualities ingrained in the young noblewoman since birth, and the strong sense of self-consciousness she displayed were truly impressive.

Annerose gestured her hand at Meili, who stood dead still in silent admiration. "The girl who holds the ability that you require in order to reach the Pleiades Watchtower."

"Yes, what about her?" asked Miklotov.

"She has taken part in numerous crimes within the Kingdom of Lugunica as well as other nations. We want her absolved of those crimes and a guarantee of her personal safety."

"What?!" Bordeaux's eyes widened and he rose to his feet at Annerose's demand. In a thick voice full of disbelief, he thrust a quivering finger at Meili. "And what exactly are these crimes she's taken part in?"

"Subversive activities, assassinations, and an attack on Margrave Mather's mansion and attempted manslaughter of its residents," explained Annerose.

"It may be impertinent, but it should be mentioned she committed other crimes such as putting the village in the Margrave's domain in danger and threatening the lives of the villagers," Clind added. "Addition."

"She's unquestionably a serious criminal!" Bordeaux banged his fist on the desk at this outrage, the sound reverberating through the great hall.

Feeling the dry atmosphere and the severe gazes focused on her, Meili came to grips with their reactions, considering them to be only natural. No matter how young she may be, this was a justifiable response to what she'd done. It was the response of the Emilia Camp—Emilia, Subaru, and Petra—that had been strange. However…

"Why did ya feel the need to bring that shit up?" Felt suddenly asked.

"Lady Felt, that has nothing to do with us…"

"If we don't ask," she began, cutting off Reinhard, "they're gonna start talking about punishments and whatnot. I'm more interested in this because there's no point in discussing all of that. So, why'd you go and bring it all up?"

In an instant, Bordeaux's fury simmered down as though it had been drenched with cold water, and the other wise men—including Miklotov—looked to Meili for an answer.

Meili dropped her gaze, trying to carefully choose her next words. As though attempting to encourage her, the small crimson scorpion dropped to her shoulders and reassuringly clicked its pincers.

Receiving courage from this, she opened her mouth. "I did a lot of bad things, but…even so, there are people who toold me it was okay to live regardless of my past."

"…"

"Don't you think they're biiig dummies? I think so too. But I don't want to be the cause of their trouble, sooo…"

"You wanted to come clean with your past crimes and clear your name before they came to light."

Miklotov narrowed his eyes at Meili, who pressed a finger to her lips as she struggled to explain. She was fully aware that she was making things easy for her as she nodded. "Yes. Selfish, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, but the nature of your divine protection may be substantial enough to warrant this. Hmm…"

"Lord Miklotov? What are you thinking about?" asked Annerose.

"…Suppose we want you to stay and serve the Kingdom in exchange for absolving you of your crimes and giving you your freedom, what would you think?" Miklotov asked Meili as if to test her resolve.

Meili tensed up at this query, but slowly shook her head side to side. "No, I don't want thaat… It might be selfish, but I've already decided where I want to live my life."

At her reply, Felt roared with laughter. "Kuhahaha! Get rejected, old man!"

"My lady…" chided Reinhard.

Waving her hand dismissively at the knight's words, she continued. "Quit it with the jokes, old man. You shouldn't ask for something ya don't really want. Sayin' no can be tiring too, you know?"

"Dear me, you've really become sharp with your words, Lady Felt… Incidentally, it must be some kind of fate that we met here today. There is something I'd like to ask you."

"I figured as much when ya didn't drive me away. It's Reinhard, right?"

At Felt's perceptive reply, a smile formed on Miklotov's wrinkly face. Beside them, Bordeaux sighed with a grim face, and Annerose and Clind both relaxed.

Unfortunately, the one who was central to the whole discussion—

Meili—had no idea what was going on. “Um, so what’s going to happen to meee?” she asked.

“Do we need to spell it out for ya? Just show us how useful you are. Don’t worry, it won’t be dangerous. After all—”

“—I’ll be with you,” Reinhard declared as he stepped forward, holding out his hand with a broad smile. Looking down at that hand, Meili thought to herself, The road to freedom won’t be easy.

END

Arc 8:
Vincent Vollachia

Volume 34

Chapters 1-15

Chapter 1: Change of Victory Conditions

1

—The battle between the Imperial Forces and the rebels that had begun with the Imperial Capital of the Vollachian Empire, Lupugana, as the battlefield, had entered its final phase, scattering the seeds of chaos throughout the country.

The death of “Vincent Vollachia”, who had been killed by a bullet of light in front of the throne within the Crystal Palace, at the innermost part of the Imperial Capital, seemed to be similar. The Nine Divine Generals, ordered to guard the city walls protecting the Imperial Capital, had abandoned their duties, and the sudden arrival of unknown fighters in the battlefield, in addition to the mysterious group from the west that had opened a massive hole in the front line, most certainly had contributed to the chaos scattered throughout the city. There was no doubt that these too were seeds of chaos.

However, currently, the location of the seed that had grown the most in this situation of war was—

Vincent: “—Abide by me! The situation is no longer remotely close to that of conflict between the Imperial Army and the insurgents! The intervention of a third party has changed the conditions of victory!”

Standing upon a pile of debris, a man raised his voice on an impromptu stage.

He was a handsome man, with sharp black eyes, tinged with a heated intellect, dried blood clinging to his black hair, and a voice that carried well even on a roaring battlefield.

In a battlefield dominated by violence—no, in the Vollachian Empire dominated by violence, one might only wonder what could possibly attract people to the impotent figure of this man.

No one ridiculed the man, even if they wished to. They just turned their attention and listened.

The blood flowing through their veins as people of the Empire, their way of being that had been defined by none other than this man himself, would not allow them to turn their ears away from the voice that was raised on an unshapely pedestal.

—Would not allow them to turn their ears away from the one exclaiming from his throne atop the rubble, Vincent Vollachia himself.

Everyone: "…"

Vincent's loud declaration had been heard by a distinguished lineup of people.

Lined up were Goz Ralfon and Olbart Dunkelkenn, both members of the Nine Divine Generals, as well as Berstetz Fondalfon, the Imperial Prime Minister, and even Ubilk the Stargazer, who had been allowed entry into the Imperial Palace with the special role he held.

Considering the faction each one of the attendees had been on during the conflict just before, it was more than possible to say that being face-to-face with them, at a distance such as to make him defenseless, was rather deadly.

However—

Vincent: "Moguro Hagane is suppressing him, but the one they are facing in the sky above is Balleroy Temeglyph, who is supposed to be dead. Somehow, he has risen with his own beloved dragon."

Berstetz: "I have a message for you on this matter. —I encountered Her Excellency Lamia Godwin in the audience chamber. I believe it is the same person as she was back then."

Goz: "Why you! That report should be raised by me! Your Excellency! It was not only Lamia who was present, but also other members of the Imperial Family who perished in the Imperial Selection Ceremony!"

To Vincent’s words, Berstetz and Goz responded.

Goz, who had remained unchangeably loyal to Vincent, despite his disappearance, was still vexed by Berstetz’s switch.

Nevertheless, since Berstetz’s original concern was the prosperity of the Vollachian Empire, the old man’s attitude could be described as natural when it came to a situation where the very existence of the Empire was at stake.

Once these ramblings had been dismissed as trivial, Vincent’s concerns were narrowed down.

Vincent: “Ubilk, you had some advance knowledge of the cause of the Great Disaster. That being the case, do Balleroy Temeglyph, Lamia, and the other Imperial family members reviving constitute the Great Disaster?”

Ubilk: “Regarding that matter, I can say “yes” and “no” to that, Your Excellency. The whispers told me that Vincent Vollachia’s death would be the trigger for the Great Disaster, and I plotted aaall~ kinds of schemes to prevent the downfall of the Empire…”

Vincent: “You were not aware of the details?”

Ubilk nodded with a carefree look on his face and answered, “Yeees~, that’s right”.

The answer had been somewhat expected, but the certainty gained was beneficial to Vincent. Ubilk and his fellow Stargazers were in opposition to the Great Disaster, which was evident in the fact that they had saved Vincent from a fall.

Vincent: “If that is the case, in the current situation, your presence is currently outside of our consideration. Maneuver only not to die.”

Goz: “Your Excellency! Please leave this situation to me, and put your own safety first! I, Goz Ralfon, will do everything in my power to redeem myself for my absence—”

Vincent: “—Silence.”

Goz: “—Hk!”

Glancing at a heated Goz, Vincent, with a single word, crushed his momentum.

Goz wanted a chance to prove his loyalty to the Emperor and redeem himself for being late at a crucial time, but having allowed Vincent to escape from Chisha’s rebellion in the first place meant his performance had been sufficient.

Had Goz not put up a tough fight, Vincent would have been captured by Chisha, and it was highly possible that even preparing the current situation in the Imperial Capital would not have been possible—Indeed, the current situation had been prepared.

Vincent: “…”

Vincent placed a hand on his chin and drew a mental map of the Imperial Capital, piecing together the situation.

Although the loss of blood and the exhaustion of his body were affecting his ability to think, fortunately, the pain in his collarbone from being struck by Chisha in the throne room was jolting his consciousness. His determination, too, remained at its peak.

He did not think that even this pain was part of Chisha’s plan, but—

Cecilus: “Um, sorry to interrupt while everyone’s chattering, but I have a role to enchant the world in my own way. Is it okay if I excuse myself?”

Goz: “Wha?! General First-Class Cecilus?! What are you talking about?!”

Cecilus: “Well, I do hear about this General First-Class person from time-to-time, but I’m not really interested, so it doesn’t really stick in my mind. Maybe you’ve mistaken me for someone else? It would be quite a pity for this General First-Class person to get compared to me in that case!”

In this situation, it was not just Vincent’s mind that was whirring and spinning around.

Moreover, within a radius of several tens of meters—which was a mere single step for Moguro's huge body, the battle against the duo of the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia and Balleroy continued.

Water flowed out from the shattered reservoir, which could be seen to have been broken from a distance; it was only a matter of time before waves surged into the entire Imperial Capital. In addition, Cecilus, who had been making a fuss, had become tiny.

Although Goz, Berstetz, and even Olbart's attitudes on display were that of waiting attitude for Vincent's decision, only this young thunderbolt did not fit into his plan.

Not only his appearance, but also the contents of his mind seemed to be biased towards immaturity, so Cecilus did not have a trusting look in his eyes towards Vincent's declaration.

Cecilus: "That was quite a splendid speech earlier! I'm sure it's a fact that you're the Vollachian Emperor, but unfortunately, I don't bow down to others just because they're an Emperor. If you want to change the path I take, you'll have to prepare a hanamichi for me!"

Vincent: "—. Just like Natsuki Subaru did, is that so?"

Cecilus: "—? Unfortunately, I don't know who that is. The name sounds similar to the name of someone I know, but I can't quite recall. I feel like I talked about this earlier with a beautiful woman."

While twisting his neck and fidgeting his short legs, Cecilus answered .

He was not sure who the "beautiful woman" Cecilus was worried about was, but once the young Cecilus entered the battle for the Imperial Capital, Vincent had been convinced.

Convinced that Natsuki Subaru was the one who led the unexpected group that ravaged the battlefield from the west, and that he was also the one who had brought Cecilus with him.

And then—

Vincent: "It is not restricted to the current situation. It is nothing new that you do not follow mine orders. Feel free to run around as you like."

Cecilus: "Oh, you are very understanding. However, I have no intention of obediently following someone's orders regardless of what I'm told anyways. So, I'll take my leave here if you don't mind."

Vincent: "Cecilus."

Cecilus waved his hand at Vincent, who had decided to let him do as he pleased, and was about to dart away. When his name was called from behind, the young lightning turned around with a "Yes?".

Vincent's gaze met Cecilus's eyes, which still carried the same difficulty in handling as when they had first met.

Vincent: "As per our former agreement, I shall prepare the stage for your grand moment."

Cecilus: "—Aha."

Cecilus left with a small laugh after Vincent's short declaration.

The speed of his lightning-fast movements, not even leaving a trace, with him still in his unfinished state, was why the title of Vollachia's strongest belonged to that man, and why that title was unshakeable.

In any case—

Berstetz: "Your Excellency, is everything all right? As for General First-Class Cecilus…"

Vincent: "I do not have time to waste on trivial matters. Very much like you and Ubilk were treated. More importantly…"

The handling of the disappeared Cecilus was less urgent than addressing the current problem at hand.

Vincent faced Berstetz's narrow eyes and spoke in a voice that could be heard by Goz, Olbart, and the others behind him.

What he said was—

Vincent: "—We shall abandon the Imperial Capital. We shall retreat while maintaining as much of our military strength as possible."

2

Riding atop a red Galewind Horse, the group rode through the Imperial Capital in a whirlwind of confusion and chaos.

The flag bearers were the familiar faces of Natsuki Subaru, flanked by the cavalryman Idra Missanga and the powerful young girl Tanza, with whom the Pleiades Battalion's breakthrough ability remained strong.

Subaru: "Plus, now we add the two leading stars there, Beatrice and Louis, and we're the ones with the momentum!"

In front, Idra was holding the reins and at his back, held in Subaru's short arms as if being sandwiched, was Beatrice, then Louis who was nestled on Subaru's back.

Unexpectedly, the four children were led by the adult Idra but—

Beatrice: "—Minya!"

Louis: "Uau!"

Tanza: "I beg your pardon."

Beatrice's hand held up as she fired purple arrows, Louis's unrestricted attacks as she teleported through space, and Tanza's fists as she effortlessly reaped through the ones blocking their path.

After jumping over the destroyed city walls into the Imperial Capital, Subaru and company were aiming for the Crystal Palace, which could be seen in the distance—a gleaming castle where the fake Emperor presided.

The fake Emperor that was in that castle, the one who impersonated

Vincent Vollachia.

If they could be defeated, it would put an end to this great civil war in the Vollachian Empire, in which Subaru was inevitably embroiled.

So believing this, he plunged in, ready to go wild and wreak havoc.

Idra: “Schwartz! These guys are springing up no matter where we go through! What is this?”

Idra’s voice, though not quite a scream, was throaty with a deep-seated fear.

Perhaps his consternation was felt through the reins in his hands as the gait of the Galewind Horse began to falter, but it would be unreasonable to expect him to just endure it or forget about it.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “What’s really going on with these pasty-faced guys?!”

They knew that once they rode into the Imperial Capital, they would naturally be met with determined resistance from the Imperial Soldiers.

However, it was only during the initial stages that Subaru and company actually encountered Imperial Soldiers in the Imperial Capital. From then on, Subaru and the others were confronted by strange-looking beings, all of them with pale faces.

Those with pale faces and golden eyes, with glass-like cracks all over their bodies, obstructed Subaru and the others with a cold, heartless demeanor.

—No, they were not standing in the way of only Subaru and company.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, those ones, they are also attacking the Imperial Soldiers.”

Tanza kicked a group of pale faces and slammed them against a wall, throwing out a report as such.

As she said, what was unfolding at the edge of her vision was the presence of the "enemy" who was not attacking Subaru and company, but rather the Imperial Soldiers who were guarding the city.

Of course, these "enemies" did not care about Subaru's feelings, unlike the Pleiades Battalion. They were relentless in their attempts to take the lives of Imperial Soldiers using the weapons they wielded.

That was why—

Subaru: "—Tanza! If you please!"

Tanza: "I understand."

Hearing Subaru's unreasonable request, Tanza accelerated as she kicked the ground.

She charged like a speeding ball into the ranks of the enemy—the Imperial Soldiers, and caught up with those who were about to take their lives, cleaving them in the back with her thick-soled shoes.

???: "—Hk!"

A short cry of pain could be heard, and the kicked "enemy" crashed into the buildings on both sides.

Tanza glanced at the destroyed buildings, the Imperial Guardsmen whose lives had been spared beyond the thick plume of smoke, and then said, "Go ahead," as she let them off.

Fortunately, the soldiers who were saved chose to leave the area instead of attempting to target Tanza's back.

Subaru: "That is helpful… but what about these guys?"

Tanza's efforts were averting unwanted deaths; however, Subaru suffered the brunt of her blow and was left gasping at the devastation caused by the "enemy" that crashed into the buildings and shattered them.

The reason why the “enemy” did not get up was partly that Tanza’s kicks were so powerful, but more importantly, because they were in no condition to get back up.

The body of the “enemy” was shattered and in pieces. However, their body was not a grotesque corpse, but rather had been shattered as if they had dropped a china cup on the floor.

There was no blood, either. As if there was no blood in their bodies.

Subaru: “How do they work? Is it like a puppet or maybe a robot…?”

Beatrice: “—It can’t be, the Sacrament of the Immortal King, in fact?”

Subaru: “—! Do you have an idea, Beatrice?!”

Subaru did not miss the words spun by Beatrice’s cute cherry-like lips, who was resting her body on Subaru’s chest, completely trusting him.

Beatrice lowered her head in response to Subaru’s reaction,

Beatrice: “A kind of magic that, upon death, returns the soul to the body from which it has left… a forbidden technique, I suppose. It was originally researched by Mother, but it was supposedly left incomplete.”

Subaru: “A forbidden technique for raising the dead, so like the type of magic of a necromancer, then? There’s a part of my head that’s still a little fuzzy, but man, your Mother is a good-for-nothing!”

Beatrice: “This is not the first time that Subaru has spoken ill of Mother, in fact. But, Betty will get upset if you keep saying it, so be careful, I suppose.”

At Beatrice’s suggestion, with her eyebrows raised, Subaru stuck out his tongue and closed one eye in reflection.

However, the opinion of the cute Beatrice was not to be dismissed. What if necromancy, with a name like the Sacrament of the Immortal King, was what was creating these enemies?

Subaru: “You mean there’s someone like a necromancer in the Nine Divine Generals of the Empire?”

Beatrice: “…If that’s the case, then Abel is out of line for not having talked about such things beforehand, in fact. Plus, it would mean that we wouldn’t be able to distinguish between friend and foe, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I guess that’s also possible in an Empire with buggy ethics, but… wait! You know who Abel is?!”

Beatrice: “…Betty knows, in fact.”

Hearing this unexpected name from Beatrice’s mouth caused Subaru’s eyes to widen. At Subaru’s surprise, Beatrice affirmed it with a bitter look on her face.

Beatrice’s contact with Abel, and that it was not just another person with the same name, was clearly conveyed in her bitter face.

Because Abel was essentially incompatible with everyone, the obvious explanation would be that he was incompatible with Beatrice as well.

Subaru’s stomach churned just thinking about what kind of irreverent attitude Abel had subjected Beatrice to but—

Subaru: “—Of course that guy is here.”

It was inconceivable that Abel would not be in the middle of the siege in this great battle. But, since he did not know the specifics of the composition of the rebel forces, he felt a different emotion when told clearly that this was the case.

If Abel was here, then Subaru’s antics would need to be given some extra thought.

Subaru: “Then, should I leave the zombie fighting to them over there rather than me? Or would it be better if it was me with the cute and zombie-savvy Beatrice running in to deal with the… OUCHOUCHOUCH! What?!”

Beatrice: “Hmm, I suppose. Subaru’s face was a bit annoying, in fact.”

Subaru: “Why! This look in my eyes between charming and cheeky is from birth you know?!”

Beatrice: “It was annoying how strangely relieved you looked when you heard Abel’s name, I suppose.”

Subaru’s mouth curved into a pout as Beatrice pinched his thigh along with an irrational accusation.

Although it was hard to say by exactly how much, Beatrice’s judgment of Subaru might have become stricter in the period of time that they had been separated.

Certainly, he recognized Abel’s excellence in terms of ability. But, under the circumstances of this large-scale conflict, he was not taking any comfort in hearing Abel’s name.

By any measure, meeting Beatrice was a more joyous occasion than meeting Abel.

Subaru: “You’re my number one, Beatrice, don’t misunderstand.”

Beatrice: “Then prove it going forward, in fact.”

Subaru: “Oh, absolutely!”

In response to Beatrice’s benevolent judgment, Subaru tapped Idra on the shoulder and made the Galewind Horse stop at once.

There were no signs of enemies or civilians in the surrounding area, but he wanted to decide on a course of action for the future.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, if you are done flirting, what would you propose we do?”

Subaru: “You’re acting so thorny! I wasn’t flirting… but Beatrice! Does that zombie magic stop when the user is defeated?”

Stung in the side by Tanza’s blank expression, Subaru sought Beatrice’s informed opinion; Beatrice, when asked, fiddled with her vertically rolled hair with her fingers, and the two of them, with the same expression on their faces,

Beatrice: “The types of magic that interfere with the bodies of others are predominantly Yin Magic and Yang Magic, I suppose. With either of these attributes, generally speaking, when the caster dies, the effects of the magic are cut off, in fact. So likewise, it would be nice to think that this is the case, I suppose.”

Tanza: “That phrasing has some wishful thinking mingled within. Is it not certain?”

Beatrice: “Even Betty has never seen the Sacrament of the Immortal King realized, in fact! One cannot be so childishly irresponsible as to make a haphazard judgment on the basis of speculation, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Calm down, calm down! So, you don’t have any idea of the area of effect or where the magic is being used from?”

Beatrice: “…It’s regrettable, but it’s dependent on the user, in fact.”

Beatrice looked at Tanza in frustration as she replied, as if thinking that Tanza might be dismissive of her again. However, Tanza did not criticize Beatrice for admitting her inadequacy.

In that regard, Tanza did not demean even those with whom she did not have the best chemistry.

Subaru: “There’s no time for squabbling; besides, Beatrice, what you said helps. Thanks.”

Beatrice: “It was not a very praise-worthy response, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s cheeks puffed out as he patted her head while thanking her. It was tempting to poke her swollen cheeks with his fingers, but he also felt he was put in a difficult position.

Given the circumstances, this zombie attack was clearly an unusual situation.

Since the Imperial Soldiers were being attacked, it was certainly possible that there was a necromancer in the rebel army and that the unscrupulous and coldhearted Abel might have resorted to inhumane tactics; however, something was off about the implementation and how the zombies had appeared out of nowhere.

These zombies clearly gave off the impression that they did not invade the city from the outside, but rather that they had been created from within the city and were rampaging around.

If this was Abel's strategy, the best course of action would have been to start a war of attrition from the beginning. It might have even been plausible that there were some military techniques being used that Subaru was unaware of.

Subaru: "As expected, if they start using zombies, I'll have to think about how to deal with them."

Moreover, although it was ultimately a vague impression, he felt that while Abel would not use the actual "Dead" for military purposes despite resorting to "Death" for political purposes.

He suspected that Abel's view of life and death, or the general Vollachian one for that matter, would not allow for that.

Therefore—

Subaru: "The existence of this zombie Meister should be considered irregular. If the war doesn't end when we beat up the fake Emperor in the castle, then…"

Idra: "What now, Schwartz? We'll follow your lead."

Subaru: "Idra…"

Subaru put his hand to his chin as Idra turned only his head to him to utter these words of trust.

That was not a sign of him tossing the responsibility to Subaru, but rather a reaffirmation of his willingness to risk his life together with Subaru in a situation that might lead them to death once again.

Subaru achieved this position by his own will.

He absolutely had to fulfill that responsibility. And thanks to Idra and the members of the Pleiades Battalion, Subaru could reach out his hand even further than before.

Subaru: "I'm not entirely sure what to do in this situation, but after all… OWOWOWOW! OW, OW!"

Beatrice: "Subaru!"

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama!"

Subaru nodded at the realization of his responsibility, but screamed in pain from Beatrice pinching his thigh and from another pain, to which Beatrice and Tanza widened their eyes at him.

This time Subaru felt pain because his hair was being pulled.

And the one responsible was not Beatrice or Tanza, much less Idra, but—

Subaru: "What the hell, Louis! Don't pull my hair! It's a vital defense strategy to take care of it from a young age so that I won't suffer from baldness when I get older…"

Louis: "Uuau! Uu! Au! Auuu~!"

Subaru: "What?"

Louis desperately pleaded something to Subaru, who was protecting his pulled scalp.

She patted Subaru on the back, then pointed to the north side of the Imperial Capital—the direction where the Crystal Palace was located, but slightly off the beaten path, and continuously urged him.

Head there, he knew that was what she was saying.

Subaru: “Is there something over there?”

Louis: “Au!”

Subaru’s question was answered by Louis in a high-pitched voice.

It also needs to be stated that Louis seemed to be quite emotionally stable now that she managed to meet up with Subaru. Subaru himself was also genuinely relieved at her safety, despite their complicated relationship.

On top of that, if there was something that Louis was calling for so desperately, then that would be—

Subaru: “—Beatrice, let me ask you one thing. Is everyone still together?”

Beatrice: “…Everyone, is not, in fact.”

In response to Subaru’s quiet question, Beatrice avoided making a clear statement.

However, it was clear that Beatrice was not being evasive for the sake of putting on airs, but rather to spare Subaru from the shock. Understanding this, Subaru also realized why she had been ambiguous.

So—

Subaru: “Tanza, Idra! Also, Beatrice and Louis, change of plans!”

Concluding on what needed to be done, Subaru called to the members around him from the Galewind Horse.

Most likely, the battle centered around the Imperial Capital would not calm down, but rather intensify further. With the zombies and their Meister being unknown entities, preparations were in order.

Of course, he could put together such a theory, but—

Subaru: “First, we’re going to where Louis is pointing at! Let me pick up something important there!”

Beatrice: “If it’s Louis then… She will be there, I suppose.”

Subaru’s decision gave Beatrice a sense of the destination that Louis was indicating.

Nodding at Beatrice’s words, Subaru turned to Tanza and Idra, who were also looking at him, and continued.

That was—

Subaru: “—Pick up Rem and flee the Imperial Capital with as many people as you can! We’re racing against the clock!”

Thus, he mysteriously made a decision in the same direction as the man who was not present at this moment.

Chapter 2: Grudges

1

—Beatrice was at a loss as to how to handle the little girl known as Louis.

When the Magic Crystal Cannon fired from the Crystal Palace, their relationship allowed them to cooperate in sending it to another space.

Without Louis's mysterious teleportation ability, it would not have been possible to reach that place. Had they not arrived, many deaths would have occurred on the battlefield, starting with Zikr's.

This single act alone could not have dispelled the responsibility of Louis being the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.

And yet—

Louis: "Aau!"

Beatrice: "Betty can trust that you have no animosity towards Subaru and the others, I suppose."

Sitting awkwardly on the shaking saddle, although only the size of children, three people aside from the primary rider rode the running red Galewind Horse.

On the back of the Galewind Horse, Beatrice and Louis sat with Subaru between them; unlike Beatrice, who was held in Subaru's arms, Louis dexterously stood up on the horse behind him, tapping Subaru's shoulder and pointing in one direction.

—From Beatrice's point of view, the situation in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana was a crucible of chaos.

Beginning with the clash between the regular army and the rebels, flying dragons that were being commanded and flying dragons that were not fought each other for the sky, a world of white and red trespassed on the normal one, a giant and a Dragon rampaged, and finally, the dead rose one after another, to ravage the city from the inside out.

Being inclined to isolate herself, not giving support to anyone, there were few occasions in which Beatrice had directly intervened, but this world's insane and inconsistent way of being reminded her of the chaotic times of four hundred years ago—.

Beatrice: "—Witches."

Thinking back to those bygone days, Beatrice naturally uttered that word.

If there could have been one thing that symbolized that era of four hundred years ago, it was unmistakably the Witches.

Echidna, Beatrice's creator, and the one whom she adored as her mother, was also one of those who were labeled as Witches.

Other than that, that era in which there were several Witches bearing the deadly sins; that era when everyone was struggling to survive, was a dark period that was like a child's nightmare come true.

The current situation in the Imperial Capital was a return of the same thing. —She wondered what could have triggered it, and her heart skipped a beat.

While Beatrice held those frustrations in her heart—

Subaru: "—Hang in there, Rem!"

Immediately behind her, she heard Subaru's panting, yet determined, voice.

Louis, voice sounding like a growl, and Subaru, hurrying the galloping horse in the direction she pointed, had no doubt that there was the waiting girl he was searching for.

As Beatrice thought of the results of the time that Subaru had spent with Louis, separated from her, her chest became a hazy mess, but she understood that there was trust between them.

Beatrice, too, had no doubt that Rem was there, in the direction to which Louis was pointing.

Looking back, Louis had spent a large amount of mana to extinguish the Magic Crystal Cannon and went straight to Subaru to try to save the disappearing Beatrice. She had the power to locate those she was looking for.

Whether that could be anyone, or only someone she knew, was unclear.

Subaru: “A huge mansion!”

Idra: “What do we do, Schwartz?! The walls are high! Do we go around to the front…?”

Subaru: “No, that would be a waste of time! Tanza!”

The exchange took place as they crossed a number of streets ahead of them and approached their intended building.

It was a mansion that took up an imposingly large plot of land in the northern part of the Imperial Capital, and its surroundings indicated that it was the residence of a person of high rank.

Naturally, the walls surrounding the mansion were high to ensure adequate security.

But—

Tanza: “I do not want to give you the wrong impression.”

Saying that, the deergirl, her voice as emotionless as her face, kicked the ground with the slightest hint of disapproval in her features and mutterings.

Tanza, the young girl plunging straight into the wall in front of her, continued.

Tanza: “I am not Schwartz-sama’s tool for breaking down walls.”

Right after her declaration, Tanza’s thick-soled shoes struck the mansion’s wall, which was likely imbued with the Divine Protection of Earth attributes. This impact caused the wall, which should have enhanced the mansion’s defenses, to cave in, be penetrated, and ultimately collapse.

Accompanied by a booming sound and a gust of wind, the small silhouette of a girl emerged from beyond the wall. As if diving headfirst into the billowing smoke, the Galewind Horse carrying Beatrice and the others leaped onto the property.

And then—

Louis: “Uau!”

Beatrice: “—Subaru, over there, in fact!”

Within the spacious mansion grounds, multiple buildings separated from the main house were lined up, causing them to, momentarily, almost lose their sense of direction. However, looking around just like Subaru, Beatrice opened her round eyes and searched for their target, before noticing a gathering of people.

At that same instant, Louis also looked in the same direction as Beatrice and shouted out, reinforcing her conviction.

Ahead of them, at the entrance of a separate building, there were several figures.

In front of the firmly shut door, all that could be seen was a back sporting the ragged equipment of an Imperial Soldier, and facing it were two figures, one of which Beatrice did not recognize.

—The other was a girl whom Beatrice recognized as well.

Subaru: “—El!”

Beatrice: “Minya!!”

A dull sword was raised, targeting the girl and her companion.

As soon as they noticed it, Beatrice and Subaru, holding hands, raised their opposite hands and chanted magic. The ensuing deep purple arrow captured the back of the pale-faced men, transforming them into crystals.

Enemies: “Gah.”

A bitter cry leaked out, but no further action by the men was allowed.

Accompanied by a high-pitched sound, similar to ice cracking, the men’s figures shattered and crumbled away.

The Galewind Horse reached the girl, who, narrowly escaping death, widened her eyes in surprise as Beatrice and Subaru landed on the ground together, her hand pulled by his.

And there—

Subaru: “—Kept you waiting, Rem! The real star has stepped on the stage!”

With one eye closed and teeth gleaming, Subaru made a pompous declaration.

Despite his childish appearance, Beatrice looked at her partner from within his arms, proud of his unchanging bravery in scrambling to help someone else.

The eyes of the girl whose life was saved widened as she met the gazes of Beatrice and Subaru.

As it were, the excitement and emotion quivered within her throat —

Rem: “—Who are you?”

She asked, in a dubious voice, with an atmosphere that was not very friendly.

Subaru: “No, it’s me, it’s me! I’m a bit smaller, I’m telling you, it’s me! You can tell, right?”

Rem: “…I’m grateful for the help, but you ring no bells at all.”

Subaru: “No way!”

Subaru waved his arms and sorrowed at that unexpected cold response from Rem.

He felt dejected by this reaction, especially since he thought that, after going through a hopeless experience, then having been saved from a life-threatening predicament, a deeply emotional meeting was surely awaiting him.

Of course, since Subaru, being Subaru, had gone and gotten himself shrunk while Rem remained unaware, he thought that asking her to be openly happy would also be unreasonable.

Subaru: “In that sense, setting aside Louis, who already knew me in this state, it’s quite something that Beatrice would just accept it right away…”

Beatrice: “It’s not really that Betty thought nothing of it, I suppose. It’s merely that whether you have shrunk or not, it will not change that you’re Betty’s partner, in fact. More importantly…”

Subaru: “More importantly?”

Lowered to the ground from the arms in which she had been held, Beatrice looked at Subaru and Rem, comparing them. Then, narrowing her peculiarly patterned eyes,

Beatrice: “That attitude is completely different from what Betty had heard from Subaru, I suppose. That girl… Rem was supposed to have been gentle toward Subaru, in fact. Was that a lie, I suppose?”

Subaru: “No, that wasn’t a lie! It’s just that she’s forgotten a lot right now!”

Beatrice: “Forgotten…”

Derived from Rem's cold treatment, Beatrice was made unnecessarily suspicious.

Likely, it was the doubt about whether Subaru had led everyone who did not remember Rem in her "Sleeping Beauty" state to believe a story that differed from reality.

It was an unthinkable misunderstanding. In the first place, something like lying about Rem's personality as she slept was beyond blasphemous, and it too also made Subaru miserable.

In response to Subaru's explanation, Beatrice silently turned back to Rem,

Beatrice: "You don't remember Betty, in fact?"

Rem: "…No, I believe this is our first meeting."

Beatrice: "—. I see, I suppose. I understand now, in fact."

Rem: "It seems that's persuaded you, but in the end, who are you guys? I appreciate the help, but…"

Beatrice's face showed that from Rem's reply, she accepted that Subaru had not just said whatever he wanted. On the other hand, Rem's doubts remained undispelled.

Even if Subaru and Beatrice were unilaterally convinced, Rem's questions would only continue to pile up.

Although his own internal sense of discomfort had relatively decreased, sure enough, Rem's attitude clearly conveyed that the large Subaru and the small Subaru were completely different.

Subaru: "Be that as it may, I'm me! Rem, in any case, let's ta…"

???: "Oh my?! I was wondering who helped us, but it's Husband-kun! It's Husband-kun, right! Thanks for rushing in!"

Subaru: "Ah, look, Flop-san understands… Eh?! Flop-san?!"

Saying that as Subaru was trying to somehow unravel Rem's incomprehension, he was taken aback at the sight of Flop, the blond-haired young man that suddenly appeared from behind her.

Having come to help Rem, he had not even considered that Flop would be with her.

Subaru: “Why are you here? Were you kidnapped along with Rem?”

Flop: “My oh my, it’s quite daring to come to Wife-san’s aid without knowing anything, isn’t it! But, on the whole, that understanding isn’t mistaken. More specifically, it would be correct to say that since I suffered a fatal wound, Wife-san accompanied me to give me treatment!”

Subaru: “A fatal wound… Uwah, you’re right! That’s a terrible injury!”

Flop was as cheerful as ever; but, ignoring that ridiculously bright personality, the skin visible through the gaps in his clothes was wrapped in bandages, and his complexion seemed somewhat pale.

Judging from his experience from the Gladiator Island, Flop was seriously wounded to the level where standing would have been greatly difficult.

It seemed like saying that he had received a fatal wound had not been an exaggeration.

Subaru: “But, then Rem also… Geez, you’re too gutsy.”

Rem: “Please wait. You’re trying to move the conversation along smoothly, but… Flop-san, by calling this boy that…”

Flop: “Ah, perhaps this kind of thing is all the more easier for a third party to notice? Like Wife-san is thinking, it’s Husband-kun. With just a bit more of a baby face!”

Rem: “…”

At Flop’s words, Rem stared down towards Subaru once again.

Faced with the doubt emerging within her pale blue eyes, Subaru adjusted the angle of his face to give her a better view, and flashed his teeth. The hue of doubt turned to dismay, which then quickly turned to surprise.

Rem: “I thought, I thought you were a very strange person, but… not only can you dress up as a woman, but you can even turn into a child?”

Subaru: “That’s wrong! This situation is out of my control! Isn’t that right, Beatrice?”

Beatrice: “Subaru, were you cross-dressing again in a place unknown to Betty and the others, I suppose…?”

Subaru: “Don’t get caught up on that right now!”

Both Rem and Beatrice looked at Subaru with doubt, overwhelming him. Flop, standing by the exchange, while holding up a finger to his own well-groomed face,

Flop: “Well, it wasn’t only Husband-kun who dressed up as a woman, myself and Village Chief-kun also did it after all. We really looked like girls all together, and our figures were lovely too.”

Subaru: “That’s because I put all my points into my charisma stat at that time. Anyways! I’m glad we were able to meet up.”

Patting his chest in relief, Subaru smiled at both Rem and Flop. Flop nodded frankly at the smile, and Rem, after contemplating every last possibility,

Rem: “…You went through all this trouble, to search for me?”

Subaru: “Well, of course. No, I didn’t know you had been kidnapped until I was enroute, but the moment I found out, my selfish feelings surged up. The only thing that made me certain you were here was…”

Louis: “Uu!”

And just then, while he answered Rem’s question, the reason for his certainty burst in.

Wedging herself in between Subaru and Rem, it was Louis who had jumped toward the latter. Louis's golden hair fluttered as she embraced Rem, and even though she was surprised and gave a "Uau", Rem accepted the young girl's hug.

With that face so close to her, relief emerged in Rem's eyes.

Rem: "Louis-chan, I see you're safe. I was worried that you might have been mistreated by him, since you went off on your own following that man."

Louis: "Aauu!"

Subaru: "No matter how you look at it, would I really treat her so poorly that you would be worried… Did I do that? I did, didn't I? I probably did do that. I regret that now, though."

Stroking Louis's head as she hugged her, Rem made such a comment to which Subaru pouted his lips.

In fact, if Rem and Louis separated at the time when Subaru and the others had set out to Chaosflame, then that was the point in time at which Subaru and Louis's relationship had been the worst.

It was not limited to the worry that along the way, Subaru may have taken the opportunity to abandon Louis in the fields. It could be said that Rem's worries were never-ending.

But then again—

Subaru: "Right now, I'm not thinking about doing anything to Louis. We've made peace."

Rem: "…Is that true? Louis-chan?"

Louis: "Uu!"

With a broad smile on her face, Louis nodded her head, and the question mark above Rem's head was finally dispelled by her response.

Since his body had shrunk, the circumstances which had probably been his biggest predicament were proceeding peacefully, so Subaru breathed a sigh of relief. Then, while gripping on to Subaru's hand,

Beatrice: "…Even though Betty intended on accepting it, it's still a scene that gives a very bad feeling, in fact. Such a thing like that girl and Rem being so friendly towards each other, it's a strange feeling, I suppose."

Even though Beatrice muttered this, Subaru made a wry smile within his heart.

However, considering that when he was first sent off into the Vollachian Empire, he was viewed with hostility by the newly awakened Rem, and was together in a situation with Louis, whose aims were completely unknown to him, Subaru was also in complete agreement with Beatrice.

After all, through some causality, a Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, the cause of Rem turning into the "Sleeping Beauty", was now spending time with her in the same place in such a friendly manner.

Subaru: "—. I still haven't found the proper answer for that yet, but…"

Rem's memory had still yet to return. Louis's origin, too, still remained unknown.

However, they were able to stay alive and reunite with Rem in this way, and Louis had also demonstrated as much of a friendly attitude towards them as she could. Thus, they should be able to find a solution.

Therefore—

Tanza: "—Schwartz-sama, I do not think we have much time to be so relaxed."

Witnessing the atmosphere of that reunion, the young girl interrupted with good timing and a good reason.

Upon hearing the intervention of Tanza, the little girl in a kimono, who had read the atmosphere, Subaru turned to her and said, “Yep”. Then, keeping up a vigilant watch out on the surroundings from horseback, Idra also entered his field of view, and,

Idra: “We found the person you’re looking for. By the way, there isn’t anyone else who has been taken, right?”

Beatrice: “As far as Betty has heard, there shouldn’t be anyone else, in fact.”

Rem: “I also haven’t noticed anyone else. Has Flop-san…”

Flop: “I don’t know of any other acquaintances who were brought in, either. Unless, carelessly, Medium has been kidnapped or something! How’s she, Husband-kun!”

Subaru: “She hadn’t been kidnapped at the time we were separated. …She’d been shrunk, though.”

Flop: “Huh? What’s that? What did you say?”

To Flop, who was concerned about his sister’s safety, Subaru withheld the fact that Medium had also shrunk.

Other than a shrunken appearance, she was in perfect health; surely Medium would have left Chaosflame safely and joined the group at Guaral.

There was not time to reconcile the details of the situation and to wrangle over this and that there.

In order to guarantee such a lively and cheerful time, they needed to move.

Subaru: “So, including Rem and Flop-san, I want to escape with as many people as possible, but is there anyone else in this estate?”

Rem: “There is a woman named Katya-san whom I met here. Then, there’s this detached building…”

Subaru: “Here?”

With a nod, Rem’s gaze turned to the tightly closed door beside her.

He had to defeat the enemy quickly, so he did not check it properly, but it seemed that Rem and Flop were trying to open this building,

Flop: “It’s said that inside are black-haired Crown Princes from various places.”

Idra: “Black-haired Crown Princes… Schwartz’s fakes.”

Flop answered Subaru’s inner questions, and Idra frowned upon its content.

The perception Idra expressed, that they were fake Schwartz’s, was generally shared by everyone in the Pleiades Battalion, and it was one of the big lies Subaru was telling them.

The black-haired Crown Prince, who was talked about across the Empire, was the illegitimate son of Emperor Vincent Vollachia, and all of those who had taken the name for themselves in various regions were nothing but fakes.

The real black-haired Crown Prince was none other than Natsuki Schwartz—.

Idra: “The ones who were used as justification here and there to start a rebellion? To be blunt, I don’t like this careless approach to things.”

Beatrice: “Betty agrees with Beardy, I suppose. The originator doesn’t like it either, in fact.”

Idra: “B-Beardy…”

Idra clearly expressed his displeasure at the imposter Crown Princes who seemed to be held captive inside the detached building, to which Beatrice nodded in agreement.

To be blunt, Idra’s words were painful for Subaru to hear as well. Beatrice’s added comment seemed to support Subaru’s guess as to whose scheme this was.

Frankly, it was difficult to distinguish whether some of the fake Crown Princes were good guys or if some of them were bad guys—.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, what would you like to do?”

Subaru: “Nah, isn’t there really nothing to discuss? If they’re left here, sooner or later the zombies are definitely going to kill them, so we don’t have a choice but to help.”

Tanza: “…”

With a hushed voice, Subaru replied to Tanza, who was asking for his decision.

Tanza’s eyes widened at the answer in regards to the black-haired Crown Princes—she was the only one who had been told ever since Gladiator Island that Subaru’s claim to be the successor to the Emperor was a lie spread for the purpose of creating a disturbance.

A huge reason why the comrades of the Pleiades Battalion trusted Subaru and were willing to participate in this battle for the Imperial Capital was because they believed that Subaru was the black-haired Crown Prince.

If the captive false Crown Princes were released, the chances of that lie being exposed would increase.

Subaru: “But, that is that and this is this.”

Even though he was aware of Tanza’s concerns, Subaru would not sacrifice human lives to protect a lie.

Of course, one would hope that this act of compassion would be returned, and that the fake Crown Princes would be quietly appreciative of the efforts of Subaru and his friends.

Beatrice: “As expected of Betty’s Subaru, I suppose.”

Beatrice looked at Tanza proudly while tightly holding Subaru’s hand. For a moment, there was a tingle flowing between them again, but Subaru put it aside.

Taking that into account, they faced the detached building’s door.

Subaru: “Does Rem or Flop-san have the keys to the entrance?”

Rem: “N-no, I didn’t know where the key was, so I thought I would pry it open by force.”

Flop: “You can trust in Wife-san’s strength. As you already know, my arms are as meager as they look.”

With Louis attached to Rem at the hip, Flop showed off his feeble biceps. Subaru scratched his cheek at the two’s replies, and pathetically turning to face Tanza,

Subaru: “Would you be the master key once again?”

Tanza: “…I am not sure what a mastur kee is, but I understand what you are trying to say. Schwartz-sama, I would like to reiterate this to you…”

Subaru: “You aren’t a tool for breaking open walls, right, Tanza? Forgive me.”

Towards Subaru, who meekly bowed his head, Tanza released a deep, deep sigh.

However, it was not just a sigh; with deep compassion Tanza softly spoke, “Please step aside”, to request that Subaru and Rem move away from the front of the door, and she gripped the large padlock hanging from it with both of her hands.

Then, with a sudden and strong jerk of Tanza’s slender hands, the lock twisted off.

It was quite the shocking sight, but Subaru and Idra had grown used to seeing it.

At Tanza’s unbelievable display of superhuman strength, Rem and Flop stared in wonder, and as Subaru saw those reactions to his side, he took a light breath and slowly opened the door to the solitary building.

And then—

Subaru: “I think that everyone has their own respective circumstances, but, for the time being, why don’t we put away our various grudges, and work together to get out of this place?”

Like that, being careful not to alarm the cautious inhabitants, Subaru entered the solitary building—Inside of which were lines of narrow jail cells, containing the fake Crown Princes which Subaru had greeted.

Fake Crown Princes: “…”

At Subaru’s call, the faces of fourteen or fifteen young boys turned towards him.

As they had been called the black-haired Crown Princes, and counting backwards from Emperor Vincent’s, or rather, Abel’s, current age, it was to be expected that they would be around the same age as Subaru was presently.

That said, the sight of the figures of these children that had been hidden from the gaze of the public inside of these jail cells was sickening.

Tanza: “However, each of their cells are spacious, and it looks thoroughly cleaned, so it does not feel like such a poor environment.”

Peeking inside of the solitary building from the side, Tanza added her own opinion on top of Subaru’s impressions.

As she had said, the space was cleaner than just the bare minimum. It seemed that the fake Crown Princes were being properly fed, and any who were suffering extreme weakness could not be found.

Tanza: “More or less, it seems like they were prepared in case one of them was the true Crown Prince.”

Beatrice: “Perhaps they also do not have a taste for taking the trouble to torment children, in fact.”

Rem: “…Given the temperament of the homeowner, it seems like it could be either.”

From Tanza to Beatrice, and then to Rem, each took over to share their impressions of the inside of the solitary building. At that description, Subaru thought that the owner of this large mansion— Most likely, they were an important figure in the Imperial Capital.

Considering these circumstances, the fact that they had captured so many candidates for the black-haired Crown Prince like this also indicated a rebellious spirit towards the fake Emperor, who understood there was no such thing as a fake Crown Prince.

Subaru: “That fact that his son is a fake, the man in question would know best… Wait a second? Is it possible that the fake Emperor doesn’t know? If Abel was the type of guy to be careless with his relationships with women, then…”

Rem: “I can’t say this for certain, but I can’t imagine that being a side of Abel-san.”

Subaru: “I agree. That guy, doesn’t he consider his own cross-dressed self to be the most beautiful woman in the world?”

Looking back on the time that he had called himself Natsumi Schwartz, Abel as Bianca, and Flop as Flora, Subaru spoke of such reminiscences.

At any rate—

Subaru: “I’m going to open the jail cells now. It’s going to be pretty busy outside, with all of the rumbling and shaking, you know. Let’s throw away our grudges, and all escape together!”

Fake Crown Prince: “…Escape? But all of the cells are locked.”

From inside, among the fake Crown Princes who came from different tribes and had different skin colors, someone said this in response, to which Subaru replied with an “Oh.”

All of them had black hair and black eyes, which was not very common in this world, and so with their physical traits being similar to Subaru, while feeling a certain sense of kinship with them,

Subaru: “Don’t worry about the lock. We have a solution right here.”

Tanza: “Right here indeed.”

Subaru pointed his thumb towards Tanza, and the little girl bowed as she showed the broken lock in her hands to the fake Crown Princes.

All of their faces looked surprised at this, their skeptical expressions disappearing. Instead, a sense of awe was directed towards Tanza, but,

Subaru: “It looks like getting you out won’t be a problem. Tanza over here will break you out… Rem!”

Rem: “Y-yes.”

Subaru: “Where’s that friend you met here that you were talking about just now?”

Rem: “—If you mean Katya-san,”

With her hand placed on Louis’s head, Rem’s expression stiffened as she turned around towards the outside of the detached annex. Judging from Rem’s reaction, this Katya was probably in the main building.

They succeeded in crushing the three zombies in the vicinity of the selfsame annex, but others had likely gotten into the mansion. They had to find a way to somehow get the girl in question out before she was discovered.

Subaru: “Does this Katya person have any distinguishing features?”

Rem: “She has brown, curly hair and deep eyes. And then…”

Subaru: “And then?”

Flop: “Miss Katya has bad legs. Because of that, while Wife-san and I headed here, we had her hide in the other building.”

Subaru: “Her legs are…”

Subaru put his hand on his chin in response to what Flop had answered in Rem's stead.

Fortunately, since they had the Galewind Horse Subaru and the others had rode in on, it could be said that this was the perfect situation for carrying someone with bad legs. Since their overall mobility would drop considerably anyway by taking the fake Crown Princes along, that would probably not be a problem.

Subaru: "I'm concerned that Tanza is our only decent fighter."

Beatrice: "The way Betty and Subaru are now, we would not be outdone by that deergirl, I suppose."

Idra: "Although I'm not on the same level as Weitz or Gustav-dono, I can put up a fight, too."

Subaru, concerned about their fighting strength, received reassuring answers from Beatrice and Idra.

Of course, they could not be overly reliant on Idra since they needed him to hold the Galewind Horse's reins, but Subaru's skill was to make full use of the cards in his hand to optimally adapt to the situation at hand.

Subaru: "If I assume the role of a fake Crown Prince, and at least one person could ride on the horse…"

Rem: "Uhm, I'm worried about Katya-san, so if it's possible…"

Subaru: "—My bad, that's right."

Looking impatient, Rem appealed to Subaru, who was trying to wrack his brain.

Subaru nodded back as he felt the need to quickly clear away the cause of her worries. For the time being, as long as Subaru and Beatrice were there, they could deal with the zombies.

Subaru: "Just in case, Tanza should come along too. In order to reassure this Katya person, if Rem or Flop-san could also come, then —"

Subaru was just about to say that they could get by without causing any unnecessary commotion.

???: "—You don't need to worry about that. I already got Katya out safely."

Subaru: "…"

Like that, Subaru's words were cut off by a voice from outside the detached annex. —No, merely being interrupted was not why his words were cut off.

It was because Subaru's heart was pierced by something cold in that voice he had heard.

Beatrice: "—Subaru?"

Since he held Beatrice's hand, she noticed something was wrong as his whole body instinctively grew tense.

But without responding to Beatrice's words, Subaru quickly headed to the entrance of the detached annex before Rem and Flop, who were already standing there, even had a chance to turn around.

To confirm who it was. —And then, to keep them away from Rem.

The one who was standing there and had called out was—

???: "I really have to say, this is some peculiar coincidence. How else could we end up in this situation?"

Subaru: "…"

???: "We probably all have our own respective circumstances, but… for the time being, why don't we put aside our troublesome grudges, and work together to get out of here?"

Thus, the man repeated Subaru's statement from just before, as if to ridicule it, and shrugged his shoulders.

—And so, the adversary with whom Subaru grew the most troublesome and fateful bond during his stay in the Empire, Todd

Fang.

Chapter 3:
Three Reasons

1

Jumping out from the entrance of the detached building, Subaru stood in front of a man who was giving a faint smile.

That petrification was perhaps the most foolish choice he could have made in the face of that man. However, even for Natsuki Subaru, who had experienced all kinds of hardships, even Death, over and over again, the indescribable eeriness of this man made his mind go blank.

A sense of fear that not even a Sin Archbishop could bestow, and a sensation of being ensnared.

In the face of Todd Fang, Subaru was made to feel that way.

Subaru: "…"

Bewilderment had arisen around Subaru, who stopped reflexively in response to the voice he had heard.

It was Beatrice, as she held hands with him, facing the same opponent as Subaru. Other than her, Tanza and Idra were also casting a dubious gaze upon Subaru, who was standing still.

Although his mind raced to the thought that he should immediately warn them to be cautious, but—

Rem: "—Katya-san!"

And, before Subaru could move his trembling lips, Rem shouted in a high-pitched voice.

When he looked, Rem's pale blue eyes, which had turned back towards Todd by the door—No, they were directed not towards him, but directly behind him.

It troubled Subaru to take his gaze off of Todd and shift his attention to that direction, but once he did, he understood the target of Rem's shout.

There was a wheelchair-bound woman hiding behind Todd's back.

The woman peeked at them as she grabbed the hem of Todd's clothes, with suspicious eyes that overlooked the world beneath curly brown hair; she was a perfect match for the features Rem had described.

That in itself was joyful—No, the fact that she was beside Todd would mean,

Rem: "Please stay away from her…!"

Louis: "Uu!"

Rem, who seemed to have come to the same conclusion as Subaru, raised her voice and glared at Todd. Louis, who was always close to her, also growled while looking at Todd, roused by Rem's fighting spirit.

Despite losing his trademark bandana and letting down his orange hair, Todd's cruelty and dangerous creativity had probably not been diminished.

Even in this situation, it was not difficult to imagine that he would try to use the woman—Katya, as a shield to manipulate Subaru and the others into doing his bidding.

Of course, it was obvious from Subaru's previous hostile encounters with Todd that the outcome of giving in and doing as what was told would ultimately result in Death.

Subaru: "…From this point onwards."

If I were to die, I can't be sure of how far back I'll return to.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how one looked at it, during the entire series of events of intervening in the siege of the Imperial Capital, breaking through the city walls, and riding into the city, Subaru had never once lost his life.

Regardless of whether that was to thank, or to blame, Subaru did not know the starting point of Return by Death.

He was able to meet up with Louis and Beatrice, and was also able to reunite with Rem and Flop.

Honestly, the situation had been going well, almost too well. It was impossible to calculate how many retries it would take to reach this point.

However—

Subaru: "—I'll do what I must."

If he had decided whom to save, whom to let survive, and whom to move forward with, Subaru had decided with a steadfast heart to firmly grasp that outcome.

For that reason, he was able to rescue all the Gladiators concerned with the Gladiator Island, and fight alongside them as members of the Pleiades Battalion until today. —He would never give up, no matter what.

Not even if the obstacle he needed to overcome for that purpose was the very embodiment of a fear that caused his heart to freeze over.

Thus, Subaru moistened his dry lips with his tongue, and with a determined action—

Katya: "P-please wait! You've got it wrong! I haven't been captured, Rem!"

Rem: "Katya-san?"

Katya: "Misunderstanding… Yes, it's a misunderstanding! Todd is, he isn't your enemy!"

Katya tried to move forward, turning the wheels of her wheelchair while loudly insisting that it was a misunderstanding and that Todd was not their enemy. However, Todd put a hand on her thin shoulder, preventing her from moving forward.

Katya, pitching forward with vigor, glared at Todd with teary eyes, and,

Katya: “Wait, what are you doing! You are putting yourself in danger!”

Todd: “You’re the one in danger. Don’t move forward on your own.”

Katya: “Wh-Who do you think I’m saying this for…!”

Todd: “Of course, it’s for my sake. But that doesn’t mean I can overlook the woman I love putting herself into danger.”

Katya: “Ugh…”

Red-faced and having snapped at him forcefully, Katya was silenced by those words.

That was not because of embarrassment or shame, but mainly because his objection had conveyed that he was concerned about her.

Subaru found it difficult to believe that it was a perfectly honest statement without the intent of deception.

Rem: “Katya-san, could it be, that person is…”

With a small gasp, Rem asked Katya this with a fearful look. Although she did not clearly state the question, the intended point of the question was clear.

Whether it was a sign of her hesitation and anxiety, but Rem had put her slender hand on Louis’s shoulder. In response to this question of Rem, Katya nodded her head while biting her lip.

Katya: “I told you this several times already. …He is, you know, my.”

Rem: “Your fiancé.”

Katya: “That’s it…”

After her initially hesitant declaration, Katya responded clearly to Rem’s question as such.

Rem’s eyes wavered when she was told this, and she clearly was agitated. Subaru was just as shocked as Rem, and was also shaken to his core.

Subaru: “Fiancée…”

While not having the fondest memories of Todd following the events since their first encounter, the story of his fiancée left a different impression apart from his insanely cautious and unforgiving nature.

Todd, who had been deployed as an Imperial Soldier and was encamped near the forest where the Shudraqian village was located, frequently spoke of his desire to return to his fiancée.

But after a series of bloody encounters with Todd, his expectations for his humanity had faded, and it became a distant memory that merely lingered in a corner of his mind—.

Subaru: “They really did exist…”

And the words were so incongruous with Todd and his lovely fiancée that he had to let it slip.

Despite probably not even hearing Subaru’s monologue, Rem looked at Todd with suspicion in her stern eyes,

Rem: “Are you really Katya-san’s fiancé?”

Todd: “Yeah, it’s true. Like I said before, it’s an unconventional arrangement. I never thought that Katya and you would be getting along so well during your confinement in the Prime Minister’s mansion.”

Rem: “…”

Todd: “Don’t look at me like that. Of course, I’m not saying we had a good first encounter or a good relationship either, but this is the situation we’re in. We both have to let go of our grudges, don’t we?”

Shrugging his shoulders at Rem’s silent gaze, Todd spoke up brazenly. Then his gaze turned not to Rem, but to Subaru.

Holding his breath, Subaru met Todd’s gaze. Cold sweat ran down his back.

However—

Todd: “What the kid said is true, right?”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

There was no hint of hostility in Todd’s demeanor as he closed one eye and winked at him.

Staying true to his words, Todd had let go of his hostility and caution and was extending a hand, as if it was the obligation of the person proposing to cooperate with each other to get out of this situation.

Flop: “Husband-kun, Wife-san, who is Soldier-kun?”

At the sight of both Subaru and Rem going silent, Flop’s soft face took on a serious look.

In response to his question, Subaru could not speak carelessly, partly due to his current appearance. Instead, Rem continued with “That man”,

Rem: “I’ve had several encounters with him before. And, each time, my life had been put in danger.”

Katya: “Huh…”

While she looked at Katya, Rem tried hard to choose the right words while also telling the truth. Upon hearing this, Katya’s eyes widened and she looked at Todd who stood beside her.

Her lips trembled as she questioned her fiancé from his side.

Katya: “I-is that true? Todd, you, what Rem said…”

Todd: “If it’s about that young lady, it’s true. You said it earlier, that there are some grudges. I’m an army man. Sometimes I have to turn my weapon on someone. That kinda thing, I guess it’s just one of those unwanted situations.”

Rem: “To think it was “unwanted”, you went out of your way to…!”

Todd: “If it was in the Fortress City, it was because I saw your companion as a threat. If it was before that, I was just following orders like any other soldier. I have nothing personal against you.”

As he said this, Todd took the axe worn on his waist. For a moment, a tension ran through Subaru and the others, but Todd, keeping one hand outstretched, heaved it away without getting worked up.

A parabolic arc was drawn as the axe slid across the ground and came under the feet of Subaru and his team.

Louis: “Aau.”

Louis picked up the axe and alternated between looking at Subaru’s face and Rem’s.

It did not seem to be an axe-shaped bomb, but it appeared to be a pure act of disarmament.

Todd raised his hands and waved at Subaru and the others who had recognized that fact.

Todd: “As you can see, I’m not your enemy. Only, it would be regrettable for all of us if we wasted time glaring at each other like this, right?”

Flop: “…Wife-san, I too think we should talk constructively. What do you think?”

Rem: “…”

Squeezing her own arm, Rem glanced sideways at Subaru.

Only Subaru and Rem were able to share their wariness of Todd and the level of threat that he posed. As for their acquaintances themselves, Louis was also there when Subaru, Flop, and the others were attacked by Todd in the Fortress City, but none of that danger was shown on either of their faces.

Therefore—

Beatrice: "Betty will follow Subaru's decision, in fact."

As she held hands with Subaru, Beatrice gave him only the courage to make a choice, without influencing him either way.

She was not alone; both Tanza and Idra left the future to Subaru's choice. —Just the fact that these two and Todd were in the same place was enough to make his heart freeze.

If possible, he would have liked to get Todd's presence far away from them as soon as possible, but—

Subaru: "…Katya-san is a friend of Rem. I want as many of us as possible to get out of here unscathed. We don't have the time to squabble here, that's what I think."

Rem: "—. I, understand, but…"

Subaru hung his head and bit his lip, and Rem also stiffened her cheeks in frustration.

But, he also did not know what kind of action Todd would take if he refused him poorly. That was a concern that Rem also shared. Now that he was here, he could not let him go.

It was the same reason one could not leave a bomb unattended, not knowing when it may detonate.

Katya: "D-don't worry! Th-this guy is outrageously tenacious! I'm sure he'll be useful to help me and all of you escape!"

Todd: "Hey, come on, you shouldn't compare your fiancé to something like a Zodda bug.”

Seeing Subaru and Rem’s state of unease, Katya clumsily backed-up Todd. With a wry smile at Katya’s defense, Todd then ran his hand through his own hair, and,

Todd: “Well, since you’ve accepted me, I’ll have to return the favor. Thanks, I’ll also have to prove myself to Katya, who has treated me so lightly.”

With that, Todd spoke like a reliable, young man, and ignoring the feelings of Subaru, who had an inescapable sense of tension that made his throat growl, he joined the others.

2

—There were three reasons why Subaru could not reject Todd Fang’s presence in this situation.

The first was the presence of Katya, Todd’s fiancée.

Having apparently developed a friendly relationship with Rem during her time in the mansion, she appeared to be a good person, despite her sharp-tongued nature, having properly shown Subaru and company that she was not a nefarious sort of person. From all appearances, she did not have the slightest idea of who Todd was at the root of his character; but, whatever accusations Subaru and company made here, it would be a bad bet whether she would believe her fiancé or them.

If so, should one, due to disliking Todd, choose to separate from Katya?

Comparing it to the wheelchair Subaru had made for Rem, it was not inferior. Her leaning her weight on it looked so pitiful that he could not leave her behind.

As long as Katya and Todd were intimate to the point of seeming to be one, it was only logical that they could not refuse Todd.

The second was that Todd’s actions were all undone in previous attempts due to Return by Death.

With his ruthless nature and cool-headed judgment, Todd had on numerous occasions cornered Subaru, taking Subaru's life—Not just that, sometimes taking the lives of Subaru's cherished friends.

Now, Flop, who was accompanying Subaru, Tanza, Idra, and even others had once been killed by Todd.

Subaru's strong feelings of hatred and fear toward Todd were probably due to the fact that Todd had taken the lives of his friends right before his eyes more than any other person Subaru had ever encountered in this world.

However, since, as a result of Return by Death, these events had not actually occurred, even if Todd were to turn his blade against them, he would not have done any harm beyond that.

Neither the great fire in the Shudraqian forest, nor the unrelenting attacks in the Fortress City, nor the massacre of Gladiators on Gladiator Island, none of these had happened. —Only that it was possible for him to perpetrate them.

And the third and final reason—

Todd: "—Aim from the chest up! Anything below the waist will only buy you some time!"

Subaru: "Tsk, Beatrice!"

Beatrice: "Understood, in fact! Minya!"

At the sharp voice's instruction, Subaru and Beatrice simultaneously held their hands out in front of them.

Ahead of their palms, several pale-faced enemies—zombies were knocked down to the ground as the purple arrows were shot at them, causing them to crystallize and sending up a cloud of dust.

Some of them escaped being critically hit, however—

Subaru: "Sorry, but, even if their torso is in that state…"

Tanza: "Even if the head is intact, it will just be shattered."

The zombies that were not immediately incapacitated were hit by the heel of Tanza's falling leg. Their crystallized torsos were shattered, leaving them unable to do anything after their four limbs were blown away.

The head of the zombie rolled away, and without its regeneration process beginning, eventually, the still intact head lost its color and crumbled away like sand.

Though, it was not as though he did not feel heartache at the sight of it.

Todd: "Now, we should have eliminated the obstacles in the back streets. Your guys' magic, it's working extraordinarily well on these guys, thank you. How much power can you spare?"

Beatrice: "…There is plenty more, in fact. Ten-thousand or a hundred-thousand to spare, I suppose."

Todd: "That's reassuring. But don't try anything too rash. You guys are my lifeline."

Being praised for their successful elimination of the group of zombies that was blocking their way left Subaru and Beatrice with mixed feelings.

Unilaterally defeating the zombies was a sound choice, mentally. On the other hand, it was somewhat unpleasant that Todd was the one praising it.

Putting aside the sentiments of Subaru and the others,

Todd: "I had many encounters with those pale-faced guys before I reunited with Katya at the mansion. They didn't seem to be on either side, the regular army or the rebels, and you can't communicate with them."

Flop: "Oh, really? But we seemed to be able to talk to the ones that Husband-kun and the others took down in the mansion, though."

Todd: "Being able to talk and being able to communicate are similar, but they're not the same thing at all, are they? They won't listen to you, and they won't die if you crush their heads or cut them off. They're troublesome enemies to deal with."

Tanza: "Soldiers who do not die… just as Schwartz-sama's companion told us."

After being told of the zombies' formidable characteristics, Flop and Tanza contemplated.

However, they were considering Todd's opinion, and this was also a highly accurate analysis that Subaru could not ignore.

Todd: "To summarize, they can't be defeated by honest means. Swords, lances, and other weapons are only a temporary measure. The best way…"

Flop: "Is Husband-kun's and Dress-chan's."

Tanza: "Magic."

Todd: "I've also roasted some of them to charcoal with a Spirit I had in my care, and they didn't get back up. I haven't verified if it's effective with ordinary fire as well as magic fire, though."

Subaru: "…"

Todd: "Well, in case you're wondering, it takes longer for them to revive if you hit them above the neck than if you hit them in any other part of the body. The legs regenerate surprisingly quickly, so don't expect to take away their mobility."

Even Subaru, who knew his true nature, was impressed by Todd's willingness to give out such advice.

As soon as the matter of accepting them into the group was settled, Todd generously shared information about the zombies, giving out information as they went along.

Naturally, he, like Subaru and his group, had moved through the Imperial Capital, where numerous zombies roamed, to join up with Katya. Having done so, Todd likely had effective strategies against the zombies and knowledge that would help them escape.

This prospect was the third reason why Subaru had welcomed Todd.

Subaru: “That said, I had no clue how far it went…”

The zombie outbreak occurred shortly after Subaru and his group had climbed over the city walls.

For a moment, Subaru thought that they might have been the ones to trigger the zombie outbreak, but they decided to trample that down and move forward, as it was an unanswerable fear to consider.

Regardless, from the zombie outbreak to the present, even though the time for investigation should have been around the same for both Subaru’s group and Todd, the depth of the information Todd had gathered for survival was incredibly ahead.

It was that attitude of his, not just toward zombies, but toward anything, anyone, anywhere, that propelled Todd’s extraordinary decisiveness and ability to get things done.

Rem: “Katya-san, are you alright?”

Katya: “Y-Yeah, aside from being a little shaken up by all the unfamiliar people… What about you, are you fine?”

Rem: “I’m much more afraid of the likes of Priscilla-sama and Madelyn-san, I don’t have any chance against them.”

Katya: “Those kinds of people have nasty tempers…”

Rem and Katya slowly lagged behind Subaru and his battle group, trying to make their way ahead. Rem was pushing Katya’s wheelchair, and Louis was escorting the defenseless girls as they looked around restlessly.

Because of the poor footing and choice of route to bypass the group of zombies, combined with the speed of the fake Crown Princes led by Idra and the Galewind Horse, the speed of travel was not fast.

Still, steadily, they approached the ramparts of the Imperial Capital.

Flop: “Husband-kun, why the long face? Are you still concerned about Soldier-kun?”

Subaru: “Flop-san…”

The complicated expression on Subaru’s face, which was both happy and bitter at the same time, was seen through by Flop, who was still watching his surroundings closely.

Being the astute man that he was, Flop could see that Subaru was more wary of Todd than necessary—at least, more than was necessary with the amount of information he had at this point.

Of course, he could not reveal the fact that Flop had been killed before, because it would run afoul of the rules of Return by Death.

Subaru: “Flop-san, as I said before…”

Flop: “Pay attention to what Soldier-kun is up to, right? I know that, and that’s why Miss Tanza stays with him as much as possible, as you had requested of her.”

Subaru: “…”

Flop: “Although you have become smaller and your face younger, your way of thinking has grown more mature and cautious, Husband-kun. You always do your best to worry, and that’s a virtue. But you know, suggesting cross-dressing in order to conquer the Fortress City, I also like that side of you.”

Seeing Flop’s soft and gentle smile, Subaru looked embarrassed and then gave a wry smile.

Even without his current appearance, when compared to his original body, Subaru felt like he realized the older Flop’s proficiency as an older brother. It was no wonder that Medium had so much respect for Flop.

Beatrice: “—Hk, Subaru, look down at our feet, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Our feet… huh, Uwaah.”

When the conversation came to a close, Beatrice led Subaru by the hand, and at their feet—Soaking the soles of their shoes, they saw water flowing on the inclined ground.

Beyond the Crystal Palace, the reservoirs that held large amounts of water had been breached, and the volume of water flowing into the city was beginning to rise in earnest. The enemy was not only Imperial Soldiers and zombies, but the water as well.

If they took too long to withdraw, they would eventually be swallowed by the rising waters—.

Todd: “If we don’t get out of here before that happens, it’s over for all of us.”

Todd, who walked over to them, clearly verbalized Subaru’s sense of crisis.

Subaru stiffened slightly, and whether or not Todd realized his alarm, he pointed the tip of his returned axe toward the Crystal Palace.

Todd: “It looks like General First-Class Moguro doesn’t stand a chance against the Cloud Dragon. It’s only a matter of time before Moguro loses. It would be better if it were one-on-one, but two-on-one is fatal… After the General First-Class is defeated, how will the enemy proceed?”

Subaru: “How they will proceed, do you have an idea?”

Todd: “Regardless of the Cloud Dragon, the flying dragon rider cooperating with it looks to be a corpse. So far, all the corpses have been attacking as soon as they see us. In other words…”

Subaru: “The zombies are trying to kill the living.”

Todd: “It’s irritating, but that’s how it is.”

Todd tilted his head in contemplation, and Subaru understood what he was trying to say.

The objective of the zombies was to exterminate every last living person they came across. For that reason, if there was a way to kill a lot of people, it would not be surprising that they would choose it.

The stone giant clashing against the white Dragon right in front of the castle, if it lost, the zombies would completely destroy the walls of the reservoir, causing the water to ceaselessly flood.

If that happened, Subaru's group and the people of the Imperial Capital, along with the soldiers of the regular army and the rebel army who were fighting outside, would all be swept away.

Todd: "That's irritating. But, I do like the way you call them zombies. We need some kind of name for them. Let's just call them zombies from now on."

Beatrice: "What do you think about those zombies, in fact?"

Suddenly, Beatrice, who had been silent, asked Todd that question.

Todd, who muttered the word "zombie" several times to familiarize himself with the word, made a puzzled face at Beatrice's question,

Todd: "What do I think?"

Beatrice: "So far, the majority of the zombies we've encountered were Imperial Soldiers just like you, I suppose. I can tell by their appearance, in fact. How do you feel about killing your own allies…"

Todd: "First, they aren't my allies. They just wear the same clothes. If they're dead, they're not soldiers or anything. They don't need to be recognized as anything other than troublesome obstacles."

Beatrice: "…"

Todd: "Talking about whose pawns they are and what their goals are, I don't think that's important for survival right now. That's something for the big shots to think about and solve."

He gave a composed response, and Beatrice silently agreed to end the conversation.

Todd shrugged his shoulders at her attitude and looked at Subaru again,

Todd: “You’ve got a reliable partner, but it would be better for you to talk it out with her if you’re feeling worn out. Contrary to expectations, even just spitting out what’s on your mind can do some good.”

Subaru: “…I’ll keep that in mind.”

In response to Subaru’s gloomy answer, Todd left him with the words “Do it”, and proceeded forth.

Acting as a scout for the road ahead, Todd would find the positions of the zombies and make a plan for how to drive them back, to which Subaru and his team would then review and implement in order to secure their escape route. Currently, it was going quite well.

However—

Beatrice: “Subaru, if you are worn out, you can talk to Betty about anything, I suppose.”

As Beatrice looked into Subaru’s face, he looked to be mentally worn down.

That was partly because he continued to devote strong vigilance towards Todd, and partly because Beatrice’s magic was using his mana.

But the greatest psychological burden of all was taking down the zombies.

It was painful to destroy zombies that could speak and had something close to the will they had during their lifetime.

How much better it would be if, like Todd, he could simply dismiss them as scarecrows blocking the way.

Flop: “I think that’s also one of the virtues of Husband-kun, though.”

Subaru: “…I don’t know. Rem’s going to kick my butt for hesitating again.”

Flop: “Wife-san wouldn’t do such a thing.”

Subaru: “…”

Flop: “I don’t think she would.”

Strangely, Flop’s repeated words were persuasive.

Flop had survived in this merciless Empire with neither physical strength nor magic, but with words alone. Perhaps the single greatest weapon he possessed was his humanity.

Subaru: “Thanks to Flop-san, I’m feeling a bit better!”

Flop: “Thank goodness! I’m useless, so if Husband-kun were to get depressed, I wouldn’t be able to find a way to save us! Oops, but…”

Subaru: “But?”

Flop: “Thanks to me, I think I may have hurt Dress-chan’s feelings a bit.”

When Flop pointed that out, Subaru turned around and said, “Huh?”. There was Beatrice, holding hands with Subaru and glaring at him with her cute, round eyes.

Subaru’s cheeks stiffened at her reaction, and Beatrice’s cheeks flushed,

Beatrice: “Neglecting Betty when she worried about you, lucky you, in fact. There Subaru goes again, immediately befriending a handsome guy and ignoring Betty, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What incredible misinformation! No, I’m not ignoring you at all, okay? In the first place, though guys like Flop-san and Ceci are exceptions, Idra and Weitz are nuanced while not necessarily handsome… Hiain is quite charming, though.”

Beatrice: “There’s no need to make excuses, in fact!”

She suddenly turned her face away from him, and Subaru moaned in pain as if his chest had been brutally gouged out.

Beatrice was also worried about him. Although Flop had phrased his words more skillfully, he felt regret towards Beatrice from the bottom of his heart.

No matter what, after escaping from this place, he had to entirely devote himself to making it up to Beatrice.

Subaru: "For now, all I can do is caress you earnestly with my hand…"

Rem: "…What do you think you are doing in a situation like this?"

Subaru: "Wow!"

Subaru was surprised when someone called out to him from behind. Rem, who cast Subaru a dubious look, still had Louis clinging to her waist as she looked around the vicinity warily and said,

Rem: "Even if you take such a form, your personality surely doesn't change."

Subaru: "Oh? Does that mean that you know my nature well enough to understand who I am?"

Rem: "Correction. Now that your body has shrunk, your restraint has become nonexistent compared to before."

Subaru: "That's the part I'd really like you to laugh at and let slide, blaming it on the wild nature of a child."

Even Rem's harsh opinion was a pleasant stimulus for Subaru, after having been separated from her for some time.

Subconsciously, Subaru tightened his face and appeared to be happy, being careful to not make Rem uneasy.

In addition to that, speaking of someone that he did not want to make anxious, Katya: “Hey, is Todd bothering you? Is he properly being of use?”

Subaru: “…”

Katya, pushed in a wheelchair by Rem, hesitantly asked.

Compared to the fake Crown Princes who had been released from confinement and followed Subaru and his group on their own as they retreated, Katya was experiencing a considerable sense of helplessness in not being able to move on her own.

She seemed to be terribly worried about Todd as well as herself, and it was clear that she had a shy affection for Todd, her fiancé.

Seeing Katya’s genuine concern, Subaru turned towards the end of the alley where Todd was headed,

Subaru: “Yeah, he’s being useful. He has a good nose and good eyesight. His precise directions have really helped us avoid trouble.”

Katya: “I-I see. That’s good then…”

Katya, her eyes downcast, patted herself on the chest in relief.

As aggravating as it was, those were not thoughtless words said just to reassure Katya, but a fair assessment of Todd’s work up to that point.

In fact, as a soldier, Todd’s work had been impeccable. His scouting and route selection had contributed greatly to their survival in this current situation of having to flee, even with the hindrance of having to move a large number of people.

Todd did not have an effective way to strike the zombies, but he was outstanding at exposing them to the attacks of Subaru and Beatrice, who did have effective skills. —Except for Subaru suffering more mental wear due to the higher amount of loss than necessary, there were no disadvantages to Todd’s presence.

Subaru: “…”

—No, Rem, whose interactions with Katya seemed to be complicated, was also under the same mental strain due to Todd's presence as Subaru.

Subaru: "At this rate…"

Would they really all be able to escape out of the Imperial Capital together without incident?

While Subaru struggled with unanswerable questions about how he wished for things to proceed—

Todd: "—Katya, I told you to stay farther back, didn't I? Don't catch up to us."

Todd, who had been away scouting, returned and found Katya with Subaru and the others, and gave caution to his fiancée.

At Todd's words, an expression of relief for Todd's safety rose on Katya's face, then it quickly turned into a look of opposition towards the words, and then her expression changed once again.

She seemed to be a bit worried about Todd's appearance.

Katya: "Todd, did something happen?"

Todd: "…Good grief, she's so intuitive only at times like these."

As he said this, Todd ran a hand through his bandana-less hair and revealed what he had seen as he looked toward Subaru and the others.

That was—

Todd: "—There's a rather tough-looking zombie just ahead from here. A member of the Cyclops Tribe, he was probably the one who stood out the most in today's battle."

So he spoke.

Chapter 4:
Warrior's Instinct

1

—The "Giant Eye" Izmail, was a valiant warrior of the Cyclops Tribe and the hope of his clan.

In the center of his valiant face, a large blue eye fixed its gaze clearly on the future without hesitation. —No, it had once fixed its gaze.

Now, Izmail's single eye was as if a golden moon had emerged in an otherwise moonless night; the very manifestation of an evil omen.

Izmail: "…"

In order to bring fame and prestige to his tribe, Izmail resolutely threw down the gauntlet in the battle for the Imperial Capital, and entered the battlefield as a rebel aiming to take the head of the Emperor Vincent Vollachia. True to his reputation, he quickly broke through the defenses of the regular army and reached the city walls.

However, that was as far as Izmail's advance went.

The unleashed hellfire thoroughly burned down the "Giant Eye" Izmail, and all the warriors of the Cyclops Tribe who followed him. Despite surviving on the border between life and death, he ultimately lost his life by the pursuit of an emotionless assassin dagger.

Indeed, he had lost his life. —That was what should have been.

Izmail: "…"

His body, blown to shreds by artillery fire, certainly ought to have died.

Nevertheless, Izmail's body, hideously burned and blown asunder, grew new limbs and rose, and while carrying his weapon, his battleaxe, on his shoulder, he walked through the Imperial Capital, ravaged by war as it was.

Moving his cold, lifeless body with nothing more than fervently surging emotions of abhorrence and hatred—.

Izmail: "—Where are you, you damned repulsive beast?"

2

Todd: "Up until now, we've only faced small fries, and haven't come across anyone on the level of a former "General", but the opponent ahead of us will be more than a match for that. As such, he is quite troublesome."

Subaru: "When you say "General"…"

Todd: "There may be exceptions who are evaluated for their military tactics and strategic acumen, but in most cases, it's their own skill that counts. This guy is one of those… not comparable to a General First-Class, but he definitely has the potential to become a General Second-Class."

Subaru: "…"

Todd: "If we were to compare by simple ability, he could probably kill all of us by himself."

With a nonchalant attitude, Todd wrapped up his hopeless report with their annihilation.

Thus pointing out how deadly the formidable zombie that awaited them was to the group, and that the dumb luck that had protected them until now had run out.

Katya: "B-but, you're a cunning guy, you can figure something out, right? You've done so well so far, with the help of these kids."

Katya said, her voice had risen while her eyes clung to Todd.

The kids she referred to were Subaru and Beatrice, who were magically crystallizing zombies, and Tanza, who was destroying enemies who might have slipped through.

Fortunately, Louis had not had to step in to protect Rem and the rest of the followers so far, and the two main attackers, together with Todd's good judgment, had paved the way for the team's success so far.

However—

Todd: "When there is a certain level of parity in strength, brute force can be effective. However, when facing an opponent with a significant power gap, it becomes meaningless. No matter how hard the wind blows, it cannot bring down a castle."

Katya: "Ugh…"

Flop: "So, you think it's going to be tough going down this road, Soldier-kun?"

Todd: "Yes. —I'd say that, but we can't change our path so easily."

He nodded halfway through Flop's words, and then he shook his head. He then turned his head to the path they came from, the Crystal Palace.

Todd: "What's more, that side has finished their battle. The water will be arriving soon."

As Todd emotionlessly pointed out, a roar dominated the sky in the far distance.

As they looked in the same direction as him, they saw a huge humanoid figure that clashed with the Dragon near the Crystal Palace; both of its knees were destroyed and its crumpled body fell to the ground, breaking the castle's perimeter.

Behind the dense plume of smoke, the white Dragon that defeated the colossal god unleashed a battle cry.

No creature, zombies included, would not be able to comprehend that the sound that echoed loudly was that of a battle cry, given that scene.

Todd: “If our earlier guess is correct…”

Subaru: “I don’t know if we can make it in time to go back the way we came and find another route.”

Beatrice: “I suppose.”

It was a conclusion that could drive them further and further into a corner, but as they put into words the course of events that they had no choice but to consider, Beatrice, who had joined hands with Subaru, also affirmed Subaru’s thought.

Todd pulled back his chin in response, and Tanza raised her hand modestly, “Well,” she said.

Tanza: “Then the situation is deadlocked, correct? We have a powerful enemy in front of us, but even if we went back, time would not allow it.”

Flop: “Ha ha, Miss Tanza, that is a very scary conclusion. It’s true that if we only consider the information we’ve been told then it does feel like a deadlock which is really uneasing, but I’m sure there are moves left that we can take!”

Tanza: “For example, what?”

Flop: “That’s not for me to know, though! I’m sure someone is here who might, right?”

In response to Flop’s statement, Tanza, who had had difficulty changing her emotions, furrowed her round eyebrows and turned her gaze.

In situations like this, it made Subaru happy and grateful that people thought of him when the topic of someone they could rely on came up. There was pressure too, but it also made him feel like he had to meet their expectations.

Furthermore—

Rem: “Can you manage it somehow?”

Indeed, Tanza was not the only one who had high hopes for Subaru.

Subaru: "…"

Rem, who was pushing the wheelchair holding Katya and clutching the handle to the point that her fingers had turned white, asked him this question with shaking pale blue eyes.

Compared to the total trust that Katya, who was just in front of her, had for Todd, it was something as fragile as a sandcastle or thin ice.

Even so, Subaru's heart was excited.

Having been vigilant towards Todd, who was accompanying them, Subaru was able to pull his attention back to the task at hand and utilize his mind to its fullest.

Todd: "If we don't decide quickly on whether to go or return, we won't make it in time."

While Subaru was brainstorming, Todd had added requirements as if to remind him.

If they went, all they needed was strength. If they were going back, all they needed was luck and time. —If he assumed he would Return by Death, the latter might have a better chance of success.

Subaru: "No, I can't say that for certain."

If he kept repeating Return by Death and eliminated the wrong routes, they might eventually reach another way out by the shortest route, assuming that there was a goal.

If they could not make it in time by whatever route they took, they could not choose the latter option.

On the other hand, if the option to fight was chosen—

Subaru: "Whether we can fight a strong enemy or not is…"

Among the group fleeing with Subaru, only Beatrice with Subaru, Louis, Tanza, and Todd could have been counted as having decent fighting strength, with Idra as a backup.

Of these, Subaru was like a bonus for Beatrice, and wanted to entrust Idra with escorting non-combatants such as Rem and Katya, Flop and the fake Crown Princes.

In effect, there were four people who could serve as combatants—Beatrice, Louis, Tanza, and Todd—Magnificently, the only people he could trust were young girls, and he did not have the time to laugh it off.

That was what Subaru was just thinking.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru looked up with his hand on his chin in contemplation and his gaze met with Todd’s, who happened to look in Subaru’s direction at the same moment.

At that instant, lightning flashed in Subaru’s head, and the electrifying feeling of it felt very reliable and bitter.

The reason was—

Subaru & Todd: “—Let’s beat that zombie.”

—Because Subaru was acutely aware in his soul that they had both intuited their mutual conclusion at the same time and that what it would take to accomplish it would be a combination of strength and wisdom.

3

—Izmail turned himself around the moment he heard a loud noise, one unlike the others in his environment.

Izmail: "…"

His old, burned body was replaced by a brand-new, cracked one. Izmail, hero of the Cyclops Tribe, took a wide stance and lowered his posture to capture the approach of a large shadow in his single eye.

As Izmail stood in the street, flying parabolically above his head was, as if by some joke, one of the houses that made up the Imperial Capital that had been pulled out of the street in its entirety.

It was forcibly torn from the ground and thrown, spilling pieces all over the ground and walls, scattering like crumbs from a loaf of bread. In reality it was not that cute, and most people would certainly be crushed to death.

Even still—

Izmail: "—How slow!"

The "Giant Eye" Izmail, was outside the bounds of most people.

The flying house was on a trajectory to land in the center of the street, leaving only in front of and behind him as escape routes since the left and right sides were tightly blocked.

But, that they purposefully provided an escape route, meant he would have to play right into their hands.

Therefore, Izmail did not flee forward or backward, but raised his battleaxe instead.

It was a huge axe that would even be difficult for two strong warriors to lift, but Izmail easily maneuvered it and could cut through any obstacle with ease.

On this occasion, the same fate befell the thrown house.

At the moment of contact, the blade of the axe slashed directly up from below, entered the front edge of the house, and sliced the large house into two vertical sections with a slash like cutting a large man all the way across from the groin.

The severed house could no longer fulfill its role as a home as the furniture, dishes, and clothing left by the homeowners smashed into the streets, all without dealing any damage to Izmail's physical body.

However—

Izmail: "—Hk."

immediately after unleashing his spectacular move, a rock came right for Izmail's face.

Of course, this would not work against the Cyclops Tribe, whose eyesight was unparalleled compared to that of other races. As he tilted his head, dodged the flying projectile, and ducked into the swirling dust left by the house, Izmail squinted his eye.

The "enemy" was in the same direction from which both the house and the stone had been thrown.

—The pupil technique of the Cyclops Tribe allowed Izmail's view of the world to be switched.

Izmail's eye, which was capable of using color to capture the emotions of a target, saw multiple flickers of red coming from the direction of the thrown attack. —The color of the will to fight.

That in itself was desirable, and Izmail's whole body became filled with strength.

During this siege of the Imperial Capital, or in a battle against bandits or any other race, there was nothing more degrading than fighting those who did not bear the color of a warrior.

Warrior against warrior, fighter against fighter, it is only in such battles that there is value in a contest of skill.

The source of the animosity that drove Izmail's supposedly dead body was great towards those that had defiled the honor of such universal martial arts.

Izmail: "It's a fight—"

Stepping onto the dirt-strewn streets, Izmail's body advanced toward the enemy.

The same stone projectiles that were thrown from before tried to intercept him, and the next massive projectile—a house followed in a parabolic trajectory; although, he did not think it was cowardly or a weak man's tactic.

Only that it was a fine tactic. That he held respect for, and needed to destroy.

Izmail: "A warrior's death must come at the hands of a warrior."

The speed and accuracy of the incoming stones were quite high. Although he responded with a minimal amount of ducking and parrying with his raised battleaxe, it would be inevitable that his bones would be shattered if he were to receive a proper hit.

Needless to say, the massive house that was thrown into the air was a projectile with such force that it would immediately render its target incapacitated.

However—

Izmail: "Don't think it's your exclusive right to send something flying!"

The howling Izmail swung his battleaxe, blowing away the second house-cannonball, and drove the edge of his weapon into the street with such force that it ripped away the ground of the Imperial Capital.

Continuing to rip up the ground, Izmail swung his long leg around and launched a kick that blew it forward like a buckshot. Naturally, he did not expect this to be an effective strike against the enemy across the street.

Izmail: “It’s just a distraction, but…”

Unlike the Cyclops Tribe, other races that did not possess special eyes would be unable to see through a curtain of dust that danced around them.

Izmail hid within the dust and shattered street debris, which clearly lowered his chance of being hit by the stones being thrown at him, and had a reprieve to advance further.

Izmail: “A big man and a little girl—”

As Izmail peeked through the curtain of smoke, he could clearly see the other side and could make out that there was a man and a girl.

The man took the role of keeping Izmail in check with stones, and the small girl beside him pulled entire houses from the ground and threw them into the air as massive projectiles.

It was a well-coordinated effort, but at the same time, what was disconcerting was the inexperienced way in which they acted.

Izmail, who had honed his skills on the battlefield, understood.

Neither of the two, who had gone on the offensive, were genuine warriors. Nevertheless, they had somehow developed a warrior’s spirit, which Izmail, who was the target of the attack, indeed respected.

Sometimes, the battlefield could transform a non-warrior into a warrior in an instant.

The same thing was happening with that man and the girl.

Izmail: “Magnificent.”

Voicing his praise, paying them respect, he must kill them, no matter what.

With absolute perfection, with no hesitation whatsoever, without even the slightest of errors, he must thoroughly slaughter them. Eradicating every last part of their lives, he must choke the very life out of them.

He must tear them limb from limb, rip off their heads, and drink in the blood of their eviscerated hearts—.

Izmail: “…”

He could feel the fierce craving for death, blood, and lives flaring up within his own mind.

At the same time, as Izmail tore through the third house-cannonball, a shrill noise resounded as the window glass shattered, and he saw himself reflected therein.

Izmail was smiling.

The corners of his mouth contorted as if to applaud the malevolent heat that was flowing through his cold body, in which no real blood circulated. It was a heinous smile reeking of naught but blood, one that had never once been worn on his face when he was still alive.

Izmail: “Haha, hahaha, HAHAHAHAHA!”

Instead of feeling repugnance at that smile, a vehement exhilaration boiled inside of him, and erupted with the sound of laughter.

As he laughed, and kept laughing, he struck down a lucky shot from the stones that were flying in his direction. Plunging towards the next house-cannonball, he tore through it with his battleaxe as he made his suicide attack.

They continued to hurl things at him while they retreated back, and he leapt towards the two warriors—No, he leapt towards his prey.

Slamming his battleaxe towards the fifth building, which seemed to be their final resistance, Izmail would try to bless the applause of his boiling “blood” with real blood, and—

???: “—As expected, only having one eyeball really confines your vision, doesn't it?"

Izmail: "…"

The house flew in a parabolic arc, and, tearing down its front door with his axe, he would propagate that destructive power, and cause the entirety of the bending building materials to burst like a bubble.

Just before that could happen, somebody's ridicule struck Izmail's eardrums.

—No, no no no no no, absolutely not.

That was not the ridicule of just "somebody".

For Izmail, that voice was the utmost abhorrent, a symbol of malevolence, a target of detestation.

Izmail: "YOU—!!"

His raised morale from just before had vanished, and a chilly bloodlust dominated Izmail's entire body.

The one seen by Izmail's widened, black-stained, golden eye was a single orange-haired Imperial Soldier, lying flat on the floor of the destroyed house—.

—Undoubtedly, he was the sworn enemy who had brought about Izmail's Death.

Izmail: "—RAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

That instant, twisting his body in a burst of rage, Izmail's battleaxe changed its trajectory.

It changed from a vertical axe strike which would have split the house right in half, to a slanted trajectory in an instant, and was about to strike down upon the prone Imperial Soldier—

Izmail: "—Oh."

Just before he could drive all of his might into his sworn enemy, the

Imperial Soldier suddenly vanished from Izmail’s field of view, as the latter rode the motivation of his own war cry.

It was not something of this dimension, like moving at an intense speed.

Quite literally, he had vanished.

Izmail: “…”

The next moment, Izmail’s thoughts were completely painted over by black and white.

The hatred that had burst out towards his sworn enemy had lost its destination, and his mind was dominated by the blankness caused by such a strange phenomenon. But, just before that moment, Izmail’s “Giant Eye” had perceived a discrepancy.

It had perceived a young girl of long, golden hair, clung to the leather belt of his prone sworn enemy’s detestable form.

Izmail: “…”

The reason and intention was unclear; however, he did not think that information was irrelevant.

Even though the time of contact was short, there was no way that the Imperial Soldier would thoughtlessly carry unnecessary things; such was the negative trust that stole Izmail’s thoughts away.

Thereupon—

Izmail: “—Gah?!!”

A piercing impact bore through Izmail’s left shoulder, and he released a cry of pain.

Within the house where the destruction had been interrupted, what pierced through the walls and struck Izmail, whether it was precisely aimed or just a lucky shot, was a stone fired at a high speed.

He thought his bones would break if struck by that, and in accordance with that belief, that force caused Izmail's left shoulder to violently explode, and as a result, Izmail's body would begin to scream—But that did not come to pass.

Izmail's body had lost the color of blood, and cracks had formed in several places on his skin. When the stone struck him, a terribly short sound rang out, and it shattered.

It was just as if Izmail himself was the same as the window glass of the destroyed houses.

Izmail: "…"

For a moment, as his left arm shattered, Izmail's thoughts came to a standstill.

However, while he was surprised, the absence of the expected pain prevented his thoughts from being shredded to pieces. Consequently, he was able to be at ease without overlooking the next change.

Izmail: "My arm…"

His arm, shattered at the shoulder and fallen to the floor of the inclined house, regenerated through inexplicable movements as if time was turning back; cracks were filled, shattered fragments returned, and it was restored.

In less than two seconds, it was as if the shattering had never even happened.

Izmail: "Hah—!!"

He promptly switched the battleaxe from his right hand to his freshly repaired left hand, and with the intention of ascertaining the feel of it, Izmail fired off an axe strike, this time blasting the half-destroyed house-cannonball.

Destroying the building constructed with a mix of stone and wood, Izmail bathed in the debris as he broke through to the outside—Then, he reached out his right hand towards the approaching sense of hostility.

He caught a flying fist-sized stone head-on with his widely opened right hand.

If he did not avoid the impact, the bones in his right hand would obviously be painfully demolished. But Izmail's body deviated from how a human body would be broken, and would break down like inorganic matter instead.

Then, it had been restored to its original state with higher regenerative ability than a human body's ability to heal.

Izmail: "This is, this is the true nature of this body…!"

Unconsciously averting his attention from the unnatural situation in which he was placed, Izmail moved with a burning hatred.

Granted to him via an incomprehensible resurrection, this repulsive body distanced Izmail from the concepts of blood, pain, and even that which was indispensable to life, the very concept of Death.

In that case—

Izmail: "—Hah."

Exhaling, Izmail saw below him the sight he desired.

The man and young girl who had been resolutely attacking Izmail for some time now, the one standing right behind them was his cowardly sworn enemy who had vanished just before his attacks could reach him.

With an unknown technique, the moment he vanished from Izmail's eye, he appeared behind those two, and the warriors joined forces with the coward.

At that moment, his admiration for the warriors from just before reversed, and transformed into a thick hatred.

Izmail: "All of you, pay for this mockery of war with your lives—!"

Kicking the fragments of the house that had been blown away, Izmail's body flew like an arrow.

As his body headed straight towards the villains, the young girl decided that there was not enough time to get to the next house, and so she began throwing stones like the bearded man standing next to her.

However—

Izmail: "—It's no use, no use, IT'S NO USE!"

Without wielding his battleaxe to hit them away, the stones caught Izmail at high speed; however, neither could they stop Izmail's actions, nor could they discourage his heart.

Even if a part was struck by a stone and shattered, it was instantly restored, and he suffered no damage.

With a new body that had relinquished the true feeling of life, Izmail tried to attain the true feeling of life from others by bathing in their blood, and so, towards the stiffened faces of his enemies—

Izmail: "…"

Trying to reach his hand out, he became aware of something.

The bearded man, the young girl in a kimono, the Imperial Soldier whom he had decided was his hated archenemy, none of their expressions had died.

The bearded man and girl appeared red, while his sworn enemy appeared blue once again; it happened at the moment he ascertained those colors.

—Izmail sensed the arrival of a presence behind him as he leapt toward his enemies.

Izmail: "—Hk."

Izmail's warrior instincts sounded an alarm, and he spun around in mid-air to look up at the presence.

With his “Giant Eye” opened wide, reflected in his golden eye was a person who had somehow managed to get behind him in an instant —No, it was not just one person. There were three figures.

A young boy with black hair, and held in his arms was a young girl in a dress.

And, the young blonde girl, who should have just been by his sworn enemy, was clinging to the boy’s back.

All three were small; however, burning with bright red fighting spirits, they raised their hands.

???: “El—”

At the murmured incantation, Izmail’s warrior instincts immediately tried to react by kicking off the debris.

However, restraining those instincts, Izmail stretched his arm in order to swing his battleaxe. Without dodging the attack of his enemies, without stopping it, he would bask in it as he performed his counterattack.

An attack that would have been impossible with his former body, was now a possible slashing attack that could slaughter his enemies, and—

???: “Minya—!!”

An amethyst glow was fired, and Izmail dared to catch it as it flew straight towards him.

He, who had planned to counterattack from there, had not even realized it.

—He had not realized that the hero of the Cyclops Tribe, the “Giant Eye” Izmail, would have never made such a foolish choice.

Chapter 5: Forgiveness

1

Todd: “—They’ve only recently turned into zombies. Some of them were alive just a few hours ago. Those who died in this battle are coming back to life one after another… But we can’t say for sure yet.”

Subaru: “But I understand what you mean about them having just turned into zombies. It’s like they don’t know what their own weaknesses are. We aren’t the only ones who don’t know much about zombies…”

Todd: “They themselves are the same. However, if they have a head to speak, they probably have a head to think as well. The more time we give them, the more they can fill in those unknown parts, and the more their possible weaknesses disappear.”

Subaru: “That’s why we need to strike before the enemy becomes fully prepared—oh.”

Todd: “What? What did you notice?”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “Don’t be coy, just say it.”

Subaru: “I’m not being coy. It’s just that zombies don’t really understand their own bodies. So if we inform them instead—.”

2

He let Louis cling to his back and squeezed Beatrice tightly against his chest.

The same basic position as when they were riding on the back of the Galewind Horse; however, the situation they were placed in was quite extreme, and he did not have time to worry about the girls.

The surrounding scenery changed in an instant, and soon after, beside a house that was shattered by a furious blow, Subaru and his allies appeared in the air, taking the back of the hostile zombie.

Tanza, who threw houses, and Idra, who threw rubble, attacked in waves—it was a pretty funny warfare strategy when put into words, but it was not only the words that were funny, but the picture as well.

This was not about why the child was throwing the larger ones and not the adult. In the first place, the tactic of throwing a house itself was ridiculous.

Nevertheless—

Tanza: "Since I am receiving Yorna-sama's love, then I have to do at least this much."

Since she reliably accepted it like this, the impact of the scene could be shelved for now.

In fact, the mysterious enhancement of the entire Pleiades Battalion applied to Idra as well, but it was not as good as Tanza, who had stacked Yorna's as well. It was all about being the right person at the right place.

From that perspective, their opponent's attention was drawn by the wave attacks using big and small tools—once their focus was on Todd, Subaru and his allies made a surprise teleport attack.

Subaru: "…"

The zombie twisted in mid-air; the enemy, with his distinctive one-eyed face, blackened the white part of the large eye in the center of his face, while his golden pupil glowed brightly.

A terribly cruel, blood-scented evil sneer was etched upon his mouth, sending shivers down Subaru's spine.

Was he always the type of person who would laugh hysterically in the midst of battle? Or perhaps he had changed since he became a zombie; they did not know which one it was.

However—

Beatrice & Subaru: “El—”

Quickly, Subaru and Beatrice simultaneously held up their hands and pointed them at the enemy in front of them.

If their opponent showed a move to avoid Subaru and Beatrice’s attack with the utmost effort and no hesitation, then their strategy would fail.

In that case then perhaps, even with their best efforts, they would not be able to surpass this enemy.

But that would not happen. Because Subaru—no, because Subaru and his team forced them into this situation.

Izmail: “—Hk.”

Sure enough, the zombie turned around with a startling gait and, catching Subaru and the others in its large single eye, took a posture of swinging his battleaxe in his grip instead of taking evasive action.

It was a strategy that involved taking Subaru and crew’s attack, then defeating them with a counter attack—the traditional tactic of incurring damage so as to inflict greater damage on your foe, but the desperation put into the attack here was different.

The zombie’s body regenerated inflicted wounds in little to no time.

That was why the enemy thought that they could take Subaru and his team’s attack with no risk, and then use it to launch their own counterattack.

Unfortunately—

Beatrice & Subaru: “Minya—!!”

—Unbeknownst to them, that was the path to defeat that Subaru and his allies had carved out.

With his battleaxe swung to counter attack, the enemy took a serious hit from the purple arrows released from the hands held up by Subaru and Beatrice.

Three brightly shimmering, amethyst crystal arrows pierced the left half of the Cyclops' body.

Izmail: "Brilliant tactic, but—"

Without paying attention to the purple arrows that had pierced him, the enemy bared his teeth and howled at his prey, Subaru and his friends.

A zombie's body, oddly enough, broke in a brittle manner when it was shattered, much like pottery cracking, even though it retained some strength.

His broken body would then be repaired like a video played backwards, and the zombie would attack as if nothing had happened—

Izmail: "Wh, at…?"

—But he could not do it.

The amethyst arrows that had pierced the zombie's body did not shatter its body from there, but rather remade the body into the same amethyst crystals as the arrow. The crystallized part of the zombie's body then cracked, and this time the zombie's body shattered, but the parts did not regenerate.

The particular effectiveness of Yin Magic against zombies—that was the enemy's weakness that had been identified during their retreat up to this point.

—Although there was not an abundance of opportunities to check over a long period of time, several common characteristics were observed in the zombies.

For example, a zombie's fatal wound was closer to the heart than the head.

However, since piercing their chest would not kill them, fatal may not be the right word. Nevertheless, it was a fact that zombies, which regenerated wounds on their bodies with abnormal resilience, healed more slowly when the wounds were close to their heart.

Since blood did not flow when an arm or leg was lost, it seemed that the heart probably no longer served to pump blood to the body, but it had not lost its function as a vital part of the human body.

As those characteristics of zombies that could not be beaten were revealed, it was Beatrice's Yin Magic that was recognized to be effective at defeating zombies.

Beatrice explained that the Yin Magic "Minya" had the effect of freezing the time of the target, which was a kind of instant death magic, and it seemed to be especially effective against zombies, who relied on their regeneration.

According to Todd, if one burned a zombie's body down to ashes, they could stop the enemy from regenerating just as if they had hit them with Minya, but there was no use in asking for something one did not have.

Subaru: "This is the strongest use of the hand we have!"

Regardless of the strength of the enemy zombies, they could be defeated if they were hit with Beatrice's Minya.

In that case, the result of thinking about a strategy to hit it was to make the enemy, who continued to demonstrate its ability in life, understand the merit of becoming a zombie.

Beatrice: "They are not damaged by attacks. If one gets attacked and finds that they can heal quickly, anyone would contemplate relying on that power, I suppose."

Subaru: "Before he turned into a zombie, I'm sure he would have easily avoided that."

Louis: "Au!"

It was a declaration of victory for Subaru, Beatrice, and Louis—or rather, both admiration and pity for their enemy.

This warrior who came back to life as a zombie was undoubtedly quite the skilled warrior in life. Even as a zombie, there was no discernible change in his fighting ability, but there was a distortion in the ideology with which he approached battle.

If only he had not been so arrogant as to think that receiving an attack would not be a problem.

Subaru: “There was no way he could have seriously taken that shot.”

Izmail: “…”

The zombie’s eye widened as it spun with the shock of the magic he was exposed to.

The look in his eye was a whirlpool of mixed emotions, a mixture of astonishment and understanding as he realized his defeat; Subaru bit his lower lip and cursed the unreasonable fate that had befallen this warrior.

Even if Subaru was cursed at for crystalizing the left half of his body and making him taste death for the second time—

Tanza: “—Schwartz-sama!”

Immediately after a moment of sentimentality washed over his heart.

Subaru was called by Tanza in an urgent voice, and he suddenly realized the truth of the situation. Spinning in the air, turning away, and then turning back to face him, the look in the enemy zombie’s eye had changed color.

It was not as if the color of the dead’s distinctive golden eye had changed.

But the astonishment and understanding that had been floating in it had faded, and it had been replaced by an intense hostility.

At one point, the enemy almost accepted his defeat along with the impact.

That had changed the complexion of his eye. —Perhaps Subaru's last word was the catalyst.

Izmail: "Not yet."

Subaru: "—He's not dead!"

In front of Subaru, who gasped at the sight in front of him, the enemy, whose crystallization was advancing across the left side of his body, kicked something into the air.

It was a fragment of a shattered house-cannonball. Even though it was just a fragment, it was as big as a person's head. Kicking it into the air, the impact shattered the zombie's left arm from the shoulder and blew it away.

In return, the flying debris instead flew straight at Subaru's face—

Louis: "Uau!"

Just before he was hit, Subaru had a vision of his skull being shattered by the fragment.

It would have been a fatal blow, but it did not reach Subaru. Because a figure, Louis, intervened before it hit Subaru, and took his place.

Subaru: "Louis—!"

Clinging to his back, Louis forcefully pushed Subaru's body down, moving him out of the path of the debris and into the line of fire herself instead.

As a result, Louis caught the debris without protection, was torn from Subaru's body, and was blown away.

Beatrice: "Subaru, don't look away, in fact!"

Beatrice called out to the distracted Subaru as Louis was blown away. She kept her body in Subaru's arms and reached out her hand to attack the enemy.

However, the opponent was not so simple-minded as to be fatally struck twice.

Izmail: "—Hk."

With fragments of his arm flying through the air, the enemy skillfully read Beatrice's pursuit with Minya and used what little remained of his left shoulder area to receive it.

He took on the damage in areas that were already crystallized, minimizing the progress of damage caused by the progression of the cracks.

It was truly the skill of an exceptional warrior—.

Louis: "Ua-"

As soon as he was awed by his skill, Subaru's collar was grabbed by an outstretched arm.

He had abandoned his battleaxe—No, after losing the ability to wield the battleaxe, he displayed his obsession to not let Subaru escape.

Izmail: "Ooooh!!"

Subaru: "Gah!"

Subaru's body, which held Beatrice, was forcefully sent to the ground by the pull of the enemy's arm. Choking from the pain of his back hitting the hard surface, Subaru saw the form of the enemy up close and tried to quickly raise his hand.

But, however, the opponent's determined form met his gaze, and his movement stopped.

—The way he looked, full of ambition and the will to fight, it was hard to believe that it was from an already dead body.

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Beatrice: “Subaru!”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama!”

Subaru’s neck was constricted and desperate voices struck his eardrums as he gasped.

Hearing those impatient voices and the sound of the bones in his neck fatally creaking, Subaru’s arms still did not rise. It was not that he was deprived of strength, but rather that his heart was no longer inspired.

Even though he knew that if he did not do it, he would die.

Even though he knew that if he did not kill, he would be killed.

Beatrice: “Minya!”

Subaru, unable to move, was supplanted by Beatrice, who had leaned in and fired her magic at the enemy.

Covering Subaru, resulted in also covering Beatrice, who was in his arms. Naturally, the magic reached the target from a distance that ought to have been called point-blank range.

However, the enemy endured. —The right arm that had tightened around Subaru’s neck was defended to the death, and even if its torso was crystallized, the enemy at least tried to take him along with them.

Todd: “It’s because you are being strangely merciful.”

Immediately after such nonchalant words were spoken, the head of the enemy, which was trying to kill Subaru with its burning eye, was severed at the neck.

Instead, emerging on the other side of the vanished enemy’s head was a stone-cold-looking Todd.

Subaru: “…”

Todd swung the axe in his hand and decapitated the zombie.

The head that was lopped off by Todd tried to turn its hatred toward him,

Tanza: “How dare you!”

And then Tanza’s diving kick ruthlessly blew its head away. As it was, the Cyclops’ head continued to bounce down the street like a soccer ball.

Then the torso, which was left behind by its head, slowly crumbled, turning entirely into deep purple crystals.

Tanza: “Are you all right, Schwartz-sama!”

Subaru: “…Cough, cough, I, I’m fine. Sorry, thanks for the help.”

Shaking off shards of the enemy’s collapsed torso, Subaru lifted his hand to Tanza, who was running toward him, assuring her that he was unharmed.

Tanza was relieved to hear Subaru’s response, and then Subaru’s face turned into an expression of sudden realization,

Subaru: “Louis! Where’s Louis? She covered me and…”

Idra: “It’s nothing serious, it seems. Although it looks like she got hit by a piece of debris and has a concussion.”

The hasty Subaru received an answer from Idra, who was crouched a short distance away.

At his feet lay Louis, her upper body propped up, blood streaming from her forehead, her head swaying unsteadily.

Subaru: “Her head isn’t looking good…! Beatrice, please!”

Beatrice: “—. Of course, I know, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Please…!”

Subaru took in Louis’s condition and rushed to his feet, pulling

Beatrice's arm. For a moment, there was hesitation in her demeanor, but Subaru did not notice it.

Beatrice was the only one currently present who could use healing magic.

The other user, Rem, was asked to go with the non-combatants to bypass the area of battle toward the inner city in order to avoid an all-out battle against a strong enemy.

The more they were able to pull the strong enemies away from beside the ramparts, the more likely it was that they would be able to get out of the city safely, but this is where the impact of the lack of possible healers came into play.

Subaru: "Louis, you're going to be okay…!"

Subaru crouched down beside Louis with Beatrice as she held her hand over the wound on her forehead; while Beatrice activated the healing magic, Subaru held Louis's hand.

Subaru's tight grip was returned weakly, and Subaru uttered a repeated "I'm sorry…"

All he could do was apologize. For it was completely Subaru's fault.

Todd: "So that girl can use healing magic, too? You've sure got a lot of people with rare powers around."

Todd then called out to Subaru, who was watching over Louis's treatment.

He carried the axe that had decapitated the enemy's head on his shoulder, fixing his gaze on Subaru's slightly tense figure,

Todd: "And yet, if you keep going the way you are, their talent is going to go to waste. You're aware of that, aren't you?"

Subaru: "Todd…"

Todd: "Those who place confidence that they will not die in anything other than their own strengths are weak."

Subaru: "…"

Todd: "This applies not only to the Cyclops we just killed, but to you as well."

The reason why he could not respond to those indifferent words was because they had unmistakably hit the mark.

That moment of weakness that passed through Subaru's mind as he saw his enemy shake off his looming defeat and grasped at victory. It was, as Todd said, the result of being overwhelmed by a thirst for life.

Subaru was not so naive as to dismiss it as a matter of course, but —.

Tanza: "Is it not rude to speak like that?"

Todd: "…"

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama is someone who was of great contribution to the current battle. The way you talk about him, pointing that out, is…"

Todd: "Don't snap at me. I acknowledge his contributions. It's just that I think they're insufficient. That, and the person who was of greatest contribution was either you or the girl that's collapsed over there."

Tanza's cheeks stiffened when Todd stated that, pointing his chin towards the girl.

The girl who had taken a major role against such a strong opponent upon herself, did not seem to care about the praise directed at her, but was rather worried about Subaru, who was hit with those heartless words.

She was a girl who scarcely altered her facial expression, but the feelings she kept hidden inside were rather strong.

Since the Gladiator Island, she had considerably deepened her relationship with Subaru, and so when he was insulted, she understandably displayed an attitude of anger on Subaru's behalf.

The absence of Todd's fiancée, Katya, from this situation also added to the intensity of her tone.

Tanza: "Do you consider yourself to be correct no matter what? In that case…"

Todd: "I said, don't snap at me. What I said is just a fact. That there are monsters out there who are so incredibly strong that they can be sure they won't die, and that there are others who think they won't die for an external reason to that. —Neither you nor I are either of those things."

Tanza: "That is…"

Todd: "If the former is an ally, things go easily, but I wouldn't want the latter to be an ally. If they're an enemy, you'll be able to take advantage of them, like we did just now. Your friend's plan was spot on."

Tanza: "—Hk, you do not…"

Speak for Schwartz-sama; Had she tried to snap at him with such words?

With her face slightly flushed with anger, Tanza tried to snap at Todd. But, quicker than Subaru could stop her, Idra intervened.

While he was supporting Louis's body, he called out her name, "Tanza,"

Idra: "That's enough. This isn't like you. Your inherent flavor is that you always keep your cool, right?"

Tanza: "…It is just that I am unskilled at managing the fluctuations of my emotions. Moreover, Idra-sama, you should also understand."

Idra: "By understand, you mean…"

Tanza: "After all, Idra-sama, you and I are both connected to Schwartz-sama. Whatever Schwartz-sama is feeling, it should be transmitted to us in no small amount.”

Idra: “…”

Idra frowned and kept his mouth shut at Tanza’s complaint as she kept her back turned. Seeing Idra’s expression directly in front of him, Subaru unconsciously gulped.

Although the Pleiades Battalion was graced by the exceptional strength they received from the effects of Subaru’s Cor Leonis, the members with whom Subaru had a close relationship—Idra and the others who had originated from the same Unit, and Tanza, who had a closer relationship with Subaru than the others, received his deficiencies.

Subaru felt a sense of relief that Tanza and others did not see that as Subaru’s failure or lack of virtue.

On the other hand, he felt sorry and that he was still lacking.

Indeed, it was at the time Subaru had thought that.

Louis: “Aa, uh.”

Suddenly, Louis squeezed Subaru’s hand back and let out a weak voice.

As usual, the details of what she meant, not having formed words, were not known. However, it was clear that she was concerned about Subaru. Even though she was in a situation where she was more injured than he was.

Beatrice: “If she can talk, there’s no need to worry, in fact. If the treatment is over, it would be best to take her outside and have Rem give her a checkup, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I, see. Yeah, that’s right. With great trouble, we’ve cleared the way. If we linger here…”

It’s not unlikely that other zombies will gather, making sure not to get those priorities backwards; it happened at that moment.

—Whoosh, he heard a strange sound, cutting through the wind.

Subaru: “…”

It sounded like the swinging of a rope with something light strapped to it, but the events that occurred immediately after he heard the sound of cutting wind, were not light whatsoever.

Tanza: “Kah”

A short groan spilled out, and Tanza’s body trembled.

Then, as she looked down at her shivering body, her round eyes widened. —Having pierced through her back and abdomen, something akin to a tentacle with a sharp tip protruded.

The tentacle, having pierced Tanza’s small body, extended from the direction of the street that had been destroyed in the aftermath of the battle, a long way from where Subaru and the others were.

Extended like a writhing serpent, the origin of that tentacle had been—

Subaru: “…Huh?”

A grotesque torso growing from the head that had been kicked away, extending tentacles outwards, was the figure of the zombie from just before.

3

Subaru: “…”

A momentary standstill, Subaru’s thoughts were dyed white by the figure that trampled upon his imagination and understanding.

But in order to avoid that moment from becoming fatal, a voice spoke up.

Beatrice: “Subaru!”

Beside him, Beatrice’s face had turned pale as she screamed, bringing Subaru’s attention back to reality.

A sound like blood rushing through his head echoed in Subaru’s mind, and he once again took in the scene before him—a one-eyed zombie standing on the destroyed street, its grotesque appearance caught in his gaze.

Their head had the same black eye with a golden pupil as before.

However, below the neck was not the sturdy body of a warrior, but a monster that could only be described as grotesque, with different thicknesses and lengths of paired left and right arms and legs.

From one of its arms, the monster extended a tentacle—No, that was not quite right. It was not a tentacle, but a finger, and it pierced through Tanza’s body.

Tanza: “—Ugh.”

The moment he saw it, the monster withdrew its long finger that had pierced through Tanza’s body, and her body trembled again.

Her body, which had been pierced through the torso, spurted blood and she collapsed onto her knees with a powerless thud.

Subaru: “Tanza—!!”

Idra: “—Hk! This is bad! Schwartz!”

Immediately after Subaru shouted, Subaru, who had reached out and began to run, was forcefully pushed by Idra’s palm, which had been thrust out from the side.

Subaru’s body easily flew through the air from Idra’s enhanced push. However, through his inverted vision, he quickly realized that Idra’s push was the correct decision.

The position where Subaru had been until just before, the monster’s shriveled fingers struck.

The pavement and buildings along the way were sliced vertically with terrifying sharpness, destroying the city; if it was not for Idra’s push, Subaru's body might have been sliced as well.

As it was, Subaru's body continued to fly through the air with great momentum—

Todd: "Tch! Don't tell me it regenerated from its decapitated head."

Todd grabbed hold of Subaru with his arm, reaching up from below.

Stiffening at the sound of Todd's voice coming from overhead, Subaru was shocked by the meaning of his words—to regenerate from a severed head, "You gotta be kidding," he muttered.

Todd: "Even though we crushed and crystallized its torso, it's still moving! How is this possible?!"

Subaru: "I don't want to admit it, but we have to face the reality that it exists. That eerie appearance of theirs…"

Beatrice: "That's because the formula for regenerating its body is bugged, in fact!"

Beatrice was the one who provided an answer to Todd's question, holding Subaru.

She was wearing a look of frustration on her cute face, staring at the grotesque monster,

Beatrice: "Perhaps it's the result of rejecting death from damage that should have killed it, I suppose!"

Todd: "—. In other words, it clings to its life even more than other zombies… No, since they already died, it might be more appropriate to say that they more stubbornly clinging to death?"

Subaru: "Ugh…! Beatrice! Idra! Hurry and save Tanza…!"

Idra: "I know! I know, but…"

In response to Subaru's desperate plea, Idra gritted his teeth and raised his voice.

He shared the same concern for the injured Tanza. However, if they acted recklessly, they would draw the attention of the monster. It was already evident that the monster's attacks could reach the Pleiades Battalion.

If even Idra fell, their chances of winning would vanish.

That was—

Subaru: "I mean, in the first place…"

Louis had been injured by the fragments, and Tanza also suffered serious injuries that were clearly life-threatening.

The zombie that they thought they had beaten not only was not completely defeated, but they had also transformed into a grotesque creature and stood in their way. This situation seemed as if they had entered a dead-end loop.

Subaru: "—Don't be ridiculous."

Subaru cut off the foolish thought that had briefly crossed his mind.

A dead end of fate, there were loops that could not be resolved no matter what one did. Todd, who carried Subaru, had even brought about such a situation before.

However, Subaru was there. —Moreover, Subaru had been saved.

Even if he had given up on himself, he could not give up on everyone else.

Todd: "—You have a disgusting look in your eyes."

Subaru: "Eh?"

Todd: "That's the look of someone who treats their own life and the lives of others differently."

Subaru switched gears with a loud sound in his mind. Todd muttered those words while looking closely at Subaru's expression, but Subaru could not understand what was going through his mind.

There was no doubt, however, that disgust must have been seeping through.

Todd: “Let’s go.”

After saying that briefly, Todd kicked the ground strongly while holding Subaru.

And then, unbelievably, he turned his back on Tanza, Beatrice, and everyone else and made a beeline for escape.

Subaru: “Wha?! What are you doing! If we separate from everyone…”

Todd: “You’re the one who needs to look closely. That thing’s aim is the two of us, both you and I.”

As he said that, Todd leaned his body and jumped into a side road.

In that moment, Todd’s afterimage was grazed by a finger that seemed to pierce through the pavement, and the smell of burning air tickled Subaru’s nostrils.

For a moment, something flashed before his eyes.

It was that monstrous creature, its single eye glowing ominously, chasing after Subaru and the others.

Todd: “That thing’s target seems to be me, who killed it first, and you, who killed it the second time.”

Subaru: “…hk! So you lured it away from everyone else?”

Todd: “When others are involved, you don’t think straight.”

Todd looked down at Subaru with his green eyes and said that.

Held by him, Subaru was shaken, and as he was stared at by those icy eyes, he felt a fear equal to or greater than the approaching grotesque figure.

Even in this situation, Todd’s gaze towards Subaru was nothing more than appraisal.

Todd: “Can you think of a way to take it down without your partner?”

Subaru: “If there isn’t one?”

Todd: “In that case then, although I hate it, we can do nothing but leave things to chance.”

Subaru understood that Todd did not really mean what he said.

Since they shared the same conditions of being targeted, Todd would use Subaru as a decoy and make a run for it if the situation turned unfavorable for him.

He was not doing it right now because the plan of using Subaru as bait to escape had a low chance of success.

Conversely—

Subaru: “—If there’s a way, you’ll lend me a hand, right?”

Todd: “…”

In response to Subaru’s question, Todd’s expression tightened again.

Todd skillfully used the obstacles to hide from the monster’s line of sight and evade his attacks. Meanwhile Subaru, while being carried by him, kept scanning his surroundings looking for a particular building inside the Imperial Capital.

It was the building that Idra had mentioned as they escaped.

He had come up with a plan besides the one to hit with Minya, but since he had no way to lure the enemy to the building, he had eliminated it as an option—.

Todd: “Can you do it?”

Subaru: “—I’ll do it.”

Todd: “…”

As soon as Subaru answered the question, Todd raised his eyebrows slightly in surprise, and then sneered with a cruel twist at the corners of his mouth.

And then—

Todd: “All right. —I’ll follow your plan.”

4

—As he chased after his fleeing targets, the “Giant Eye” Izmail’s thoughts had shattered to thousands of pieces.

Izmail: “…”

With flickering vision and scattered thoughts, his boorish movements were far from refined.

With limbs of varying lengths scraping against the ground, with instability akin to a newborn beast, as he was crashing into walls and against the ground, he stretched his hands, his fingers, out towards those backs that were growing distant.

The reason for his obsession over those two fleeing enemies, was something Izmail could no longer recall.

Already, with the fact that it had once been Izmail fading into oblivion, the grotesque monster grew new limbs from the cracks that it sustained every time it fell, continuously furthering its repulsiveness.

—That was undoubtedly the obstreperous behavior of the regeneration ability that Beatrice had pointed out.

However, after being resurrected by the will of another, those mutations occurring in Izmail’s body, which had been exceptionally estranged from the concept of death, were something that not even the caster would be able to control.

Achieving its goal, slaughtering the two targets of its obsession, what would become of the monster thereafter?

Izmail: “O̤̓͢O̸̖̗ͦ̿o̶̬͓̽ȍ̷̳̝͂o̸̪̳̟͛͑͡o̷͍̞͊...”

Eerily letting out hollow roars, that was something of no interest whatsoever to this monster.

Izmail: “…”

The larger of his two targets was carrying the smaller one as they fled, and as soon as it seemed like he could seize their backs, they would pull away, and so the situation that forced him to repeat his unsuccessful strikes continued.

However, his opponents could not keep fleeing forever. Through continuing his unshapely sprint, limbs had grown all over his fallen body, to the point that Izmail could no longer fall.

And since he would not fall, it stood to reason that the one with more limbs would run faster.

Therefore, to his targets trying to escape, little by little, little by little by little by little, Izmail shortened the distance, shortening it and shortening it and shortening it—.

Izmail: “B̸̗l̷̦͒u̳͆͝ĕ̸̹!”

With a short roar, Izmail’s finger gouged his fleeing target’s back and shoulders.

Blood spurted, and a heinous smile appeared on Izmail’s face as he heard the screams of his enemy. It felt good. With incredible enjoyment, more and more blood, more and more screams, he wanted to hear.

Recklessly taking a turn onto another path, his opponents, unlike how they had been up to this point, gave off a sense of desperation.

Chased by Izmail, being caught up to by the monster, hating the idea of being torn to shreds, his targets desperately fled. Aiming for their limbs, especially those on their upper bodies, he would wound them.

If he aimed for their legs, his targets would no longer be able to escape. If that happened, then this would come to an end.

If it ended, he would be lonely. If it ended, he would be disappointed.

That was why, forever and ever, in order for it not to end—.

Izmail: “OOOOooooon”

Raising a low war cry that caused the air to tremble, Izmail smashed into buildings and trampled the streets, kicking off the flooded ground in pursuit of his targets.

He closed the distance in an instant; perhaps the stamina of his fleeing enemy had finally been exhausted, and shedding blood, they clicked their tongue as they leapt into a nearby building.

With nowhere to run, they made the foolish choice to dive into a dead end.

Sensing the end of this hunting period, Izmail—No, the monster that had ceased to be Izmail, tore down the closed door and slipped inside.

His limbs had multiplied, his body had swelled, and with a frame incomparably larger than his original body, he became unable to easily open the door and enter the building.

Then, entering the dim building into which his targets had fled, the monster looked around inside.

The sources of light were meager, but even if he had transformed into such a grotesque state, his special eye alone remained unchanged. With a blink, he switched the way he saw the world, and searched for the figures of his hidden prey.

As he searched, the monster realized.

Izmail: “…”

—In the building it had entered, there was so much flour fluttering around that it was enough to stain the monster’s entire body white.

The darkness was not the only reason for his hazy vision, but also because the air inside of the building was filled with scattered flour. Looking around, he saw that the building was lined with shelves, and that each shelf had been lined with sacks filled to the extent of bursting.

Those sacks had been torn open and a large quantity of flour had been scattered throughout the building.

???: “The thing that beats you isn’t gonna be magic or a killer technique.”

At the same time the flour-covered monster had noticed the situation inside of the building, he heard that voice from behind. The monster turned around, and in his field of view, there was a small, bright-red silhouette.

It was one of the fleeing targets—No, at some point, the fleeing target had become just one person. Separated from the larger one, the smaller one that he had lost sight of now stood there.

And then—

???: “Eat this, the soul of science—Dust explosion!!”

Right after that shout, the small figure’s surroundings were also all dyed red in one fell swoop—

—A tremendous explosion blew away the flour mill, and the monster was engulfed by a bright crimson lotus.

5

Idra: “—Schwartz, look, let’s use that flour mill as a landmark. It’s the building with the waterwheel beside it.”

Idra, taking the non-combatants with him and staying vigilant of his surroundings while spurring on the Galewind Horse, was the son of a miller before he had been sent to the Gladiator Island.

Subaru had not known exactly what role a miller played, but he had been told that they used the power of a waterwheel to grind wheat into flour.

In other words—

Subaru: “If we use the ingredients in that mill, we can make a dust explosion.”

A dust explosion was a phenomenon in which flammable powdery materials were scattered in the air, and when kindled, fire would spread in a chain reaction, igniting and exploding all at once.

In addition to the enclosed space of the flour mill, with a large amount of wheat flour fluttering about, if an incendiary material was dropped in with definite vigor—

Subaru: “…I had no idea it would end up being this powerful.”

Leaning his back against the battered wall, Subaru muttered while coughing.

In front of Subaru’s eyes was the flour mill that had been blown to grains by the dust explosion that was triggered, and the charred remains of the monster that had been engulfed in it.

When he and Todd needed to bait and defeat the monster together, the plan that came to Subaru’s mind was to make a dust explosion using the flour mill.

Of course, a dust explosion was not something that was easy to pull off, and he had no confidence that he would be able to successfully lead his opponent there in the first place.

Therefore, it was not just Subaru’s strength that made the plan so successful.

Subaru: “…Are you alive, Todd?”

Blown away by the impact of the explosion, Subaru stood up, blinking his eyes while shaking his head.

After the division of roles, Todd took on the duty of drawing the monster’s attention and running away until the flour mill was ready while Subaru snuck into the mill and spread the dust aptly through the building.

Then, when Todd saw that the time was right, he burst into the mill, and threw an incendiary at the place where he guided the monster. It was also Todd who prepared that incendiary.

Subaru: “Todd, Todd…!”

Todd: “…You don’t have to call out to me so pathetically. I’m still alive.”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Subaru, who had been calling out to the area around the epicenter of the explosion, evidenced by the many embers that remained, heard a slightly hoarse voice and turned to face in that direction.

Looking over, he spotted where the wall of the mill had blown down onto the destroyed street, and he saw Todd on one knee. When he saw Subaru walking towards him, he spat out the saliva in his mouth and said,

Todd: “You nearly got me killed there, man.”

Subaru: “…You’re making me look like the bad guy. After all, I told you it would be very powerful, yeah?”

Todd: “Occasionally, an accident like this happens, but when I heard the principle behind it, it made sense.”

As expected, Todd was breathing with difficulty as he fell back onto the street. Then, as he looked toward the blown-up mill,

Todd: “What happened to our opponent?”

Subaru: “He was blown away. Completely… Look.”

With that, Subaru pointed to a part of the blown-up monster that was just visible from their position. Then, a part that was seared by the embers crumbled like sand and lost its shape.

Like the dispersal of the other zombies, it was the result of completely crushing its regenerative abilities.

Subaru: “How’re your injuries?”

This time, confirming that they had defeated the formidable zombie, Subaru asked Todd a question.

When they were dividing their jobs, since they could not afford to be caught by the enemy, Todd, who could keep running away for a while, had no choice but to play the role of decoy. However, he had volunteered for the role himself.

It had defied Subaru’s expectations that Todd would absolutely avoid any plan that would endanger his own life.

Todd: “It wouldn’t be a good story if I easily lost my life while being unwilling to suffer fresh wounds. We both just did our required roles. Although…”

Subaru: “Uh…”

Todd: “I was gouged out pretty much everywhere. I feel like I’m missing a lot of blood.”

As he said this, Todd raised a hand, and it was clear that his injury was quite severe.

Although he had no wounds that could be called deep, his shoulders and thighs were soaked with blood, and his face was pale from the amount of blood that he had lost.

If left unchecked, it would undoubtedly endanger his life.

Subaru: “I’ll immediately—”

Go and call Beatrice, Subaru tried to move with such intentions.

With Subaru and Todd’s separation, Beatrice would have surely been left in a panic. But, he was sure that she would prioritize Tanza’s treatment.

Louis and Tanza's safety was also a concern, so they needed to hurry to meet up with Beatrice and the others.

And then—

Todd: "—After all, if we've done this much, Katya won't be able to complain."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Todd: "We talked about this at the mansion, didn't we? Because she seems to think I'm lazy. I helped us escape, defeated a really strong enemy, and even suffered honorable injuries. Don't tell me you're also going to take all the credit for yourself, huh?"

Todd said that with a shrug of his shoulders and a pale face that was drained of blood. For a moment, Subaru was taken aback before letting out a "Hah" and exhaling a weak breath.

Despite being in such a battered state, the one that still weighed on his mind was Katya. Perhaps he had also planned to untie Subaru's mental tension, but either way.

Subaru: "Katya-san truly is important to you, huh."

Todd: "That's a given. She's my fiancée. Katya is my very life."

Todd declared this without any shame.

Upon hearing that response, Subaru took a deep breath, held it momentarily, and then by saying "Alright," he fired himself up.

Even now, he was afraid of Todd. The things that man had done had left deep scars on his heart.

Still, the fact remained that they had cooperated to defeat that monster here. Even to the extent of getting completely battered, Todd had devoted himself to ensuring everyone, including Subaru and his friends, could get out of this alive.

If that was the case, then now it was Subaru's turn.

Subaru: "Wait here… No, someone who heard the explosion might come here. For now, just return with me along the way. Once we find a suitable place, wait for me there."

Todd: "Ahh, I understand. I'm counting on you, so please don't leave me behind."

Subaru: "I wouldn't do that!"

Todd made Subaru think that it may have been possible to finish things without doing that.

However, even if Subaru had been in an hostile position towards Todd, he was unsure of whether he could have left him there on the verge of death.

Subaru: "No, if I overthink it, I'll get stuck in a rut. Anyway—"

Even if he were to lend a shoulder to Todd, their height difference would make it difficult. Subaru looked around the blown-off mill, hoping to find something he could use as a makeshift cane.

Then, he found a support pole for a shelf that had been blown into the midst of the embers—

Subaru: "…"

—At that moment, a hard sound rang out.

Subaru: "…Why."

The moment the hard sound resounded, Subaru cast his eyes down and tightly clenched his fist. As his lips trembled, shoulders trembled in fear, and black eyes trembled, he muttered.

Subaru: "Why."

Todd: "…"

His question receiving no response, Subaru turned around as he exhaled.

Having turned around, before Subaru's eyes was the blade of an axe that had been swung down, stopped just a hair's breadth away from crushing his skull.

—For it was restrained by that which was visible to none but Subaru, the Unseen Hand.

Todd: "Tch, my bad, my bad."

With a small click of his tongue, Todd released the axe from his hand and jumped backwards. His swift movements showing no signs of blood loss or injury, Subaru grit his teeth.

Even that had been an act. The pain from his injuries, the plea for help from Subaru, speaking of his feelings for Katya, which had softened Subaru's heart, all of it was just an act.

Subaru: "WHY…?!"

Three times, Subaru had fired off the same question, glaring at Todd with a face that looked like it was about to cry.

While glaring at him, he felt tears welling up from the overwhelming frustration.

Subaru: "Up until now, you haven't done anything. You haven't killed anyone. I could have even forgiven you!!"

Todd: "Quietly, you've slowly damaged my trust in you."

Listening to Subaru's screams, drawing a knife in place of the axe he had released, Todd readied himself.

That had been the declaration of the irreparable separation between Natsuki Subaru and Todd Fang.

Chapter 6:
Won't Beg for Forgiveness

1

As blood was gushing from their gouged shoulder and thigh, rough breaths filled with a feverish heat and their blood-drained complexion made it evident that the countdown to their death was ticking.

Unless they received treatment immediately, their life would be in danger, as the countdown could not be stopped.

However, if healing magic were to be cast, they would definitely be saved. It was an absolutely treatable injury.

Subaru: "Even so, why…"

Next to the pulverized mill, amidst the lingering smell of burnt wood from the remaining embers, Subaru faced off against an "enemy" in the slowly swelling waterlogged Imperial Capital.

And yet, it was someone who no longer could be called an "enemy", Todd Fang.

—Calling Todd an "enemy" was not something Subaru wanted to do anymore.

Since their very first meeting, Todd continuously subjected him to all sorts of grief. He had been targeted and killed numerous times, with death and fear etched into his memories that fostered a deep-seated grudge.

Each time Subaru had Returned by Death and dealt with Todd's attacks, he ultimately undid each and every tragedy that occurred.

The forest that the People of Shudraq lived in was burned down, leading to their annihilation. In the surprise attack on the Fortress City of Guaral, Flop had been killed numerous times. During the operation to capture the City Hall of Guaral, Subaru had experienced the feeling of walking on a tightrope that was set ablaze.

The pinnacle of it all was the massacre on the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, where Tanza, Idra, Hiain, Weitz, Gustav, Old Man Null, and many other companions on the island were all killed. However, Subaru had even managed to overturn that outcome.

Subaru had no intention of pretending like Todd's actions had never happened.

It was just that through Subaru's struggles of protecting what was dear to him by Returning by Death, these actions by Todd had gradually been erased.

The reason why Subaru regarded Todd as an enemy was something that existed only within Subaru's mind.

And finally, now that an unprecedented disaster had struck the Capital and they were forced to retreat, Todd showed a willingness to cooperate with Subaru and the others to protect his fiancée.

Indeed, without Todd's cooperation, it would have been difficult to find effective countermeasures against the overflow of zombies, and it would have taken numerous retries to achieve an outcome where everyone escaped.

The same was true for the battle with that zombie, the one-eyed warrior.

In order to defeat that twisted enemy who had transformed into a monster, Subaru also required Todd's cooperation. They both knew that without each other, their lives would be at risk.

That was why they needed just one more step.

If only he had taken one more step, Subaru could have walked alongside Todd while bottling up his conflicting emotions.

And yet—

Subaru: “Why…!”

Todd: “Don’t speak so hypocritically. You averted this just now because you also had a slight hunch. It’s not like you reacted to my intent to kill, you were just wary the whole time, right?”

Todd closed his bloodshot right eye as Subaru spoke with a trembling voice.

With a face that seemed like he was dealing with an unreasonable child, Todd’s gaze fell on the axe floating in the air—or that was how it would have appeared to him as the weapon was grabbed by a black hand.

In Subaru’s mind, the axe was synonymous with Todd.

Subaru had experienced being struck in the head with Todd’s axe more than once or twice. Even though he had taken it away from Todd’s hand, just seeing it at the corner of his vision was enough to make Subaru’s teeth grind in unease.

Todd hit the nail on the head. Subaru had been wary of him all along.

So, when Subaru turned his back on the injured Todd, he activated Invisible Providence to protect his head since that would have been the surest way to kill him in case he was targeted.

However, he certainly did not wish for it to happen.

Nothing that occurred should have ever happened.

In that case—

Todd: “My bad, my bad. I fell right for your trap.”

Subaru: “That’s not true…”

Todd: “We’re separated from the others, so right after we took care of the enemy I thought that was my chance but… You’re quite the actor.”

Subaru: “You’re wrong…”

Todd: “Did you plan to blow me up with that explosion earlier? If that was the case, it’s too bad that your aim was off.”

Subaru: “No! I really wanted to cooperate with you…!”

Todd: “—Spare me with your lies.”

Subaru’s throat gulped as Todd’s cold voice hit.

With one eye closed, Todd looked into Subaru’s eyes with a gaze devoid of heat and humidity. His gaze did not contain any hint of evaluating Subaru, which it had just moments ago.

Todd had already finished appraising Subaru, and that was why he was like this now.

Todd: “You should get it deep down as well. We just can’t understand each other.”

Subaru: “…”

Todd: “I outwardly am suspicious of others, and you believe others to a fault. No matter how many words we exchange, our values are different.”

Slowly changing position, Todd cautiously watched Subaru, especially his axe that floated in the air. Subaru also bit his lip and glared at Todd with sorrow over the hovering axe.

They could not understand each other, Todd had said. Subaru continued to wonder if that was really the case.

He wondered if there really was no way to make it work.

Subaru: “If you kill me here, how will you handle the zombies and…”

Todd: “You don’t know when to quit. As long as I get out of the Imperial Capital, it’s all good. Thanks to your help, we were able to get Katya to the city walls. After that, I’m better off without you.”

Subaru: “Why! I have no intention to hurt Katya-san! I didn’t even intend to fight you! And yet!”

Todd: “—But you were willing to choose whether to save Katya or not, right?”

Subaru: “Huh…?”

Todd, standing in front of Subaru, who was raising his voice, said one cold comment.

Subaru’s cheeks hardened as he felt like he had been doused with cold water by Todd’s words.

He had no idea what he had meant.

To begin with, that was at odds with what Subaru was claiming. There was no need to choose as Subaru had no intention of harming Katya in the first place, so such an accusation was misplaced.

And yet, Subaru’s thoughts were frozen.

—Todd did not miss that moment.

Todd: “—I won’t beg for your forgiveness.”

Slipping through the opening of Subaru stumbling over his words, Todd lowered his stance and lunged at him.

The feeling of the shrinking distance between the two sides was so great that every cell in Subaru’s body screamed. Subaru immediately commanded his Unseen Hand, which was extended in the air, to throw the axe he had seized back at Todd.

However—

Subaru: “Kk, gaaahk?!”

Instantly, Subaru’s vision was dyed bright red by a burning sensation that pierced his right thigh.

In Subaru’s right leg, a knife was sticking out of his thigh.

It was in Todd's hand just a moment ago. Right before he leapt, he threw it into Subaru's thigh while Subaru was unable to think, and he unfortunately took the brunt of it.

Then, while he was distracted by the pain, the Unseen Hand that was supposed to have thrown the axe was disrupted—the floating axe was snatched back, and Todd's forward kick smashed into Subaru's chest.

Subaru: "Oof."

Subaru's body fell backward with a cry of pain, unable to put weight on his stabbed leg. He hit the back of his head and his back, and his scattered thoughts became even more fragmented.

His legs, chest, head, back, and then, the blade of the axe falling in front of him—.

Subaru: "Aaaaaa!"

He frantically shouted and forced the black hand to interrupt the axe in the midst of swinging down.

The overused Unseen Hand protruded from Subaru's chest to stop the axe that approached the tip of his nose, and he mobilized his own two hands to keep the trembling blade from falling, resisting the murderous intent with his three arms.

Then Todd, holding the axe, also pushed in with all his might to force down the jostling blade.

His leg that was stabbed hurt. His chest where he was kicked hurt. His back where he was hit hurt. His head hurt as well. If this axe were to go through his face, it would hurt more than all of that and would furthermore hurt to the point of death.

Todd: "You're, too tenacious… hk. Give up and die already…!"

Subaru: "No, way… Absolutely, no way…!"

With his hand on the ridge of the axe, Todd used his full weight to try to kill Subaru.

Subaru resisted with his three arms, including the Unseen Hand, but the child's two hands and Authority, which had little advantage other than being invisible, could not push Todd away.

From the outside, it would appear to be a very absurd and miserable deathmatch.

The battle between Subaru and Todd was crude and unceremonious at such a critical juncture in the battle for the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, where a multitude of soldiers and warriors competed with their well-honed skills and weapons.

They had no trained skills, no special weapons, nor trump cards that could overpower others.

By the standards of the Vollachian Empire, this was a low level battle of life and death—The decisive battle between Natsuki Subaru and Todd Fang, two people who could not understand each other.

Todd: "You're too damn inconsistent! Your eyes say that you're willing to die at any moment, you're willing to put other people's lives on a scale selfishly, but when it comes to this, you're desperate to resist. It's creepy!"

Subaru: "Don't say, something so unreasonable…! Like hell I think I'm ready to die whenever. I've also never put anyone's life, on a scale…! I don't want to die!"

Todd: "Die!"

Subaru: "No!"

Todd's eyes, chilled with a black, murderous intent, were about to freeze Subaru's racing heart. While the grinding struggle of the blade of the axe that was locked between the two continued, their fierce battle could not go on forever.

Because—

Subaru: "Guh, gee…"

Subaru stifled a grunt in the back of his throat as blood trickled from his earlobes.

It was the backlash due to the heavy use of the Authority of the Unseen Hand. This was a screaming warning signal from Subaru's eroding body. However, he had no choice but to rely on it. Otherwise, the falling blade would cleave Subaru's face in two.

Todd: "That strange trick seems to be nearing its limits."

The ghastly look on Subaru's face and the outpouring of blood helped Todd understand the repercussions of using the Unseen Hand. He knew that if he kept on going at this pace, Subaru would reach his limit first.

Whatever it took, before it happened—that was what he thought at that moment.

Both: "—Hk?!"

Subaru and Todd, vying for the deadly axe, were momentarily distracted by a tremendous roar.

It was something far away from the center of the Imperial Capital, far away from Subaru and his companions—the reservoir at the edge of the city, beyond the Crystal Palace, which held back a large amount of water, had reached its limit and was starting to crumble.

With a roar, cracks burst open through the entire retaining wall, and a tremendous amount of water surged into the Imperial Capital. It was like a giant wave was advancing into a world without any oceans and as the surging waves swept through the Imperial Capital, the aftermath reached all the way to Subaru and Todd's deadly exchange.

And then—

Subaru: "Uh, ahhhh—!!"

Todd: "—Hk."

For a brief moment, Todd's attention was diverted to the roaring sound, and Subaru gathered all the strength he could muster.

As his body laid on the ground, forgetting the pain of the knife buried in his leg for the moment, he turned over onto his side and pulled the axe blade with all the might of his Unseen Hand so it struck the ground next to his head.

Even Todd, who had been putting all of his strength into the axe, could not defy such momentum. The axe dropped right next to Subaru's head and Todd fell to the ground with it.

Subaru: "Haa, Haa… phew."

Subaru continued to roll sideways with his momentum to create distance between him and Todd and the axe.

The knife in his leg repeatedly struck the ground and caused him severe pain. He cried as he rolled over, enduring the agony since getting away was more important to him.

Eventually, after what felt like ten or twenty rolls, Subaru's body hit the remnants of a building, forcing him to stop. There, he somehow managed to get up onto his arms, bleeding from his cut forehead—and then he spotted it.

Todd: "…This guy is just utterly infuriating."

Todd rose to his knees, mumbling in anger. As he turned to face the distanced Subaru, he noticed the axe deeply embedded in his left shoulder.

Subaru: "…"

When Subaru had managed to avoid the axe in his desperate attempt, Todd had fallen on top of it.

The blade of the axe was buried deep, splitting his collarbone so far that it looked like it had reached his heart, but Todd, wiping his mouth and spitting out blood, showed none of the weakness of a dying man.

It was like he was almost too tough.

His body had been cut in various places due to his role as a decoy for the zombies, he had received collateral damage from the dust explosion, and to top it all off, he had an axe sticking out of his body, but he did not seem to be concerned about it.

The reason for Todd's nonchalance finally became clear to Subaru.

That was—

Todd: "—You noticed it? My bad, my bad."

There was a clear irritation in Todd's tone that lacked frivolity or leeway.

It was a voice full of excessive anger at himself rather than at his opponent for his own failure of letting something be seen that no one ever was meant to see and that he never wanted to reveal either.

While fully displaying his anger, Todd violently ripped the axe out of his own shoulder. The badly mangled wound spurted blood just once strongly—then stopped bleeding right away.

That recoverability was something that would have evolved in a species in order to prevent negative effects of injuries from being too great while in combat or while hunting. It was the kind of recoverability that Subaru had witnessed several times in this other world.

Although there was no discernible difference from Subaru in terms of appearance, there was definitely different blood flowing in his veins.

He was demi-human. And—

Subaru: "—Are you, half-beastman?"

Todd: "Correct. But by itself not entirely."

In front of the puzzled Subaru, Todd narrowed his eyes and affirmed only half of his suspicions. Todd answered Subaru's question with half an answer.

His cheeks contorted inhumanely, his eyes lit up with blood-colored fury—

Todd: “—I’m a werewolf.”

2

—In this world, there were certain things that were considered abhorrent just by their mere existence.

Half-elves stood out pre-eminently among such abhorred beings, possessing the disadvantage of being tied to the Witch who had once nearly destroyed the world. That reputation was shared across all countries.

Elsewhere, hairless demi-humans were considered to be an unlucky thing in the Kararagi City-States; and, in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, the closer the hair and eyes approached to black, the more alienated one would be, as they would be considered to be disliked by the Spirits.

Similarly, within the Vollachian Empire, where various demi-human races coexisted, there were two races whose existence was frowned upon—the molepeople and the wolfpeople.

In ancient times, these two races, the molepeople and the wolfpeople, were said to have been condemned for betraying the most beloved woman in the Vollachian Empire and putting her to death, a crime for which they would never be forgiven.

As a result, the molepeople abandoned their homeland and escaped out of the country by digging into the earth. And, the wolfpeople who did not know how to escape, were hunted down until they were eradicated.

The wrath of this Empire extended to neighboring lands, and if any molepeople or wolfpeople were found in another country, they would be deported across the border to the Empire to be executed. This was the history of the molepeople and wolfpeople—Hunts, as they were commonly called.

In modern times, it was said that the molepeople used their abilities to burrow under the earth to hide from the outside world. As for the surviving wolfpeople, they disguised their origins as dogpeople in order to hide their true identities, and only one person in the world—Halibel, the Admirer, the strongest in the Kararagi City-States, did publicly advocate himself as a wolfperson.

An Empire that relentlessly hunted wolfpeople, whose national crest was ironically a wolf pierced by swords.

The Sword Wolf was the most revered symbol in the Empire, whereas the wolf that ran away for fear of being pierced by a sword was the most despised.

Therefore, in this world, both the existence of wolfpeople and half-beastmen of wolfpeople blood—"werewolves" continued to bear a curse that could never be forgiven.

3

Subaru: "Wear… wulf…"

Subaru was absolutely stunned when Todd declared this, twirling the axe he had pulled from his own shoulder in his hand.

Knowing about the little-known secret of Todd, who was someone who had often clashed with him, and not knowing which emotion to feel, positive or negative, was one thing, but what he felt more than anything else was fear.

The sound of "werewolf" in his ears was a surprise to him. It was an instinctive aversion.

—Subaru had no knowledge of the history of the ostracization of "werewolves" in this world.

He knew nothing of the fact that both wolfpeople and molepeople were abhorred in the Empire, that the reason for this was the betrayal of a woman named Iris, that her true identity was Yorna Mishigure, or that her beloved Emperor was not Vincent Vollachia.

He knew nothing of any of the underlying circumstances.

Even without knowing anything about them, Subaru's soul understood. —How alien the existence of "werewolves" was in this world.

Todd: "That look of surprise is a little different than I expected. You looked surprised that I was half-beastman, but not surprised that I am a werewolf."

Todd looked at the silent Subaru and furrowed his eyebrows with a face that looked as if he was throwing away his expectations.

Todd: "But now we can do this without any strange reservations, right? Werewolves are meant to be hung. It's a curse that runs in their blood. You too—"

Subaru: "Why?"

Todd: "Hmm?"

Subaru: "Why, does it come to this? I have never…"

He could not say that he had never thought about killing Todd.

But this was not because of Todd's blood or his origins, but because his own actions were incompatible with Subaru's, and he had no choice but to clash with him.

And yet, the way Todd spoke now—

Subaru: "Don't act like blood is the reason you became my "enemy"."

Todd: "…"

Subaru: "You ran into me, many times, because it was a problem between you and me! Not because of who you are or because of your blood provoking me!"

Gritting his molars, Subaru pressed his fist into the ground and raised himself up.

The intense pain from the knife in his leg; it raced through his body at great speed, but it also clarified his consciousness and the anger that was seething in his chest.

Subaru: “You’re becoming a werewolf, all on your own…!”

Todd: “Oh, on my own? I won’t listen to this, coming from you…”

Subaru: “Shut the heck up! Why, why are you like this!”

Not a single thing went Subaru’s way, and when Subaru had positive feelings, it would cause negative actions, and when Subaru had positive thoughts, it would cause negative problems.

After helping Katya, saving Rem and Flop, and joining forces to defeat the formidable zombies, he had now tried to kill Subaru, choking on the idea, and to top it all off, he was a werewolf.

Subaru: “Why!”

Todd: “Don’t talk to me about the circumstances of someone’s birth. That’s the way it is. My mother might have slept with a dog. Come to think of it, there was always a big dog living in the back of the house, maybe that was my dad?”

Subaru: “No, I’m not! You’re the one who’s talking about someone’s birth!”

Todd: “…”

Subaru: “I’m not the one who’s looking at you like that… Hk.”

Subaru had no idea what kind of life Todd had as a werewolf.

Nor did he even want to know. If he knew, he would probably search for a reason to forgive Todd. Therefore, he did not want to know. Subaru did not want to forgive Todd for some unavoidable reason.

That was why—

Subaru: “—I’ve made up my mind.”

Subaru muttered, his voice strained, his head jumbled with anger and pain.

Hearing Subaru's muttering, Todd's eyes narrowed. Even without words, the silence prompted him to wonder what he had decided to do.

So prompted, Subaru announced his decision.

Subaru: "I'm not going to kill you. It's not going to go the way you want."

Todd: "…"

At Subaru's quiet declaration, Todd had nothing to say in return.

However, he did not remain silent. —He laughed.

Todd: "Ha, hahaha, ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Ruffling his hair with his hand that was not holding the axe, Todd opened his mouth and laughed. Not caring that his hair and forehead were stained with blood, Todd opened his mouth wide and burst out in laughter.

Then, after laughing for a while, he gently shook his head,

Todd: "You're a monster. Much more so than that zombie."

More clearly than ever, he glared at Subaru with emotion visible in his eyes.

Subaru understood what it was, the emotion that was hidden behind that black murderous intent; this was the first time it was revealed. Many times before, he had seen it in the mirror.

It was fear. —It was the fear of incomprehensible things that brought Death.

Todd: "Lack of self-awareness is a bad trait. You're choosing between lives. Who to save, who to let die, you're deciding as you please. You show favor towards those who butter you up, but don't care about those who don't. Me, I wouldn't hesitate to butter anyone up, but…"

Subaru: "…"

Todd: "How could I go along with someone who decides who lives or dies based on his own fickle whims?"

—That was Todd Fang's ultimatum.

Subaru: "…"

Having spat that out, Todd's bones creaked as his form changed.

The wounds peeking through the tears of his Imperial Soldier's uniform were closed, and his skin was covered with animal hair that matched the color of the hair atop his head. His nose protruded and his mouth grew wide as if it were ripping open, and newly grown white teeth began to sharpen, transforming his appearance into that of a ferocious beast.

A werewolf, he looked just as he had declared.

He stood on two legs, handled his weapon with two arms, and would bite the life out of his opponent with his ferocious fangs. He had transformed into that type of existence—no, his true nature was revealed.

Todd: "Die."

Briefly, Todd stepped toward Subaru once again with that intention in his words.

His step was large, and the speed with which he kicked the ground with his hind legs exploded. His aim was to kill Subaru, the object of his unknown fear, not allowing his opponent who knew his true identity to live.

Subaru's fighting spirit exploded as he realized this.

Subaru: "—Invisible Providence."

Todd, now a werewolf, leapt at Subaru with an axe in his hand.

Before the axe could reach him, Subaru picked up debris with the black arm that extended from his chest, and knocked the axe away to the other side, past Todd's head.

Todd: "—Hk!"

But even if his axe was gone, Todd now had another weapon, his fangs.

Subaru had also used the Unseen Hand to block the axe and could not rely on his Authority to block Todd's fangs.

Instead, Subaru pulled out the knife that was stuck in his leg with his own hand.

Subaru: "Ghi, gaaa!!"

Screaming from the intense pain that he had never gotten used to, Subaru held the knife he had pulled out in both hands, and he clamped it in the gap between Todd's fangs as he bit down on it.

The closing, sharp fangs were stopped by the knife, and Subaru's face was pushed down again as drool spilled from the knife-biting werewolf's mouth, dripping onto his cheeks.

Todd: "—Oh!!"

Subaru: "Aaaaaah!!"

Like that, his fangs pushed forward, closing in on Subaru's neck.

While desperately trying to hold him back, Subaru screamed in pain.

Subaru: "I'm… not going to kill you…!"

He screamed as he was about to be killed, just before the tips of their fangs gouged into his neck.

The one who was about to take a life was being chastised by the one whose life was about to be taken.

Even if he was pushed to the edge and his head was bitten off, even if he lost his life, even if he was sent back to where he was in the middle of the battle.

For reasons unknown to Subaru, Todd felt a sense of grief and resentment for the world.

It was at that moment.

???: “—That’s enough.”

The sound of that voice caught Subaru by surprise, plucking resoundingly at his soul.

Every one of the beast’s breaths, every little rumble of the earth, every bit of ongoing chaos in various parts of the Imperial Capital, it was all a noisy hell where every sound was rampaging around as it pleased.

Even in such a world, nothing could impede that voice.

It was as if the very existence of Natsuki Subaru was made to resonate with that voice.

Todd: “Goh—”

Immediately after, as Todd’s body pressed down on Subaru’s, trying to bring his fangs down to end his life, Todd was blown away by a tremendous impact, slamming him from the side.

Subaru: “…”

In front of him, Todd, who became a werewolf, was propelled into open view, and reflected in Subaru’s eyes were shining and gleaming shards of raining ice. What scattered them was a hammer made out of ice.

With a full-power blow using a sizable ice hammer, Todd was sent flying.

And the one who had swung that ice hammer with both hands, making her long, silver hair dance, was a girl in a white outfit with a stunningly beautiful figure—

Subaru: "—Emilia."

Subaru's mouth unconsciously moved to trace the name that had suddenly passed through his mind.

The girl looked back, her amethyst eyes blinked, and they met Subaru's black ones. Subaru, captivated by the beauty of her eyes, involuntarily gasped.

Emilia: "You there, come here!"

Subaru: "Huh?"

He forgot to breathe, or perhaps he was holding his breath, but it was forcibly interrupted.

White fingers, reaching out with great strength, pulled Subaru's body up into her arms with a strength that one could not have imagined from her appearance. Without hesitation, the girl, Emilia, picked up Subaru who was muddied with blood as she bent her knees with an "Alright,"

Emilia: "Haa!"

With a shout, Emilia jumped and kicked the wall of a nearby building, and leaped up even higher onto the roof of a building. Subaru, wrapped in her embrace, was dumbfounded, but he soon understood.

Below them, the street below the building where Emilia had landed with Subaru in her arms was swept away at a tremendous pace by a muddy stream, engulfing everything in sight.

Emilia: "That was dangerous… You almost got swallowed by the water."

At that overwhelming sight, Emilia patted her chest in relief.

Emilia’s reaction did not convey much urgency or sense of tragedy, although the despairing scene was overwhelming as both the ruins of the grain mill that was blown up by the dust explosion and the street where Todd had dragged the zombie around until the grain mill was prepared were collectively engulfed in the flash flood.

If she had been a little slower, Subaru would have been swallowed by the current, just as Emilia had said. If that had happened, there was no way he could have survived—

Emilia: “—Hk, who was that guy?!”

Todd, who was on the verge of biting Subaru to death, was sent flying by Emilia.

If he had failed to escape, would he have been swallowed by the flash flood as well? If he had been swallowed by the force of the water, there would have been no way for Todd to have survived that strong of water.

Forgetting the pain in his leg, Subaru quickly looked around and searched for Todd in the muddy streets of the Imperial Capital that were swallowed up by the murky water. Subaru did not even know the answer to the question of whether he wanted Todd to be found or not.

Emilia: “Hey, relax! Who are you looking for… Oh! Looking closer, I see that you’re badly hurt! I need to get you treated right away…”

As Subaru looked around frantically, Emilia noticed the wound on Subaru’s leg, and moved to sit him down on the edge of the rooftop,

Emilia: “Hold on! A user of healing magic will be here soon…”

Subaru: “There’s no time for that! Leave me alone, and…”

Emilia: “You’re the one who needs to get on your feet…”

Emilia raised an eyebrow at Subaru as he tried to stand up, brushing off her words of advice. However, her scolding was interrupted before it reached its conclusion.

Her large, amethyst eyes opened wide, and he could see the scene behind him reflected in her beautiful eyes.

As Subaru sat on the edge of the rooftop, the werewolf came out from behind him as it broke the water and opened its gaping mouth to bite Subaru on the nape of the neck.

Subaru: "…"

Either the bite would pull him into the water, or it would mercilessly bite down on his jugular. It was a moment that even Emilia, right in front of him, would not be able to stop in time.

Todd's dogged determination defied even the flash flood and attempted to gnaw away at Subaru's life.

At that moment—

???: "—Don't touch."

The sound of a strong wind rattled as he heard footsteps treading on the rooftop.

Neither the exhausted Subaru, nor the too-distant Emilia, could stop Todd's attack.

Instead, it was a girl with angry, light blue eyes who leapt in.

???: "—Him!!"

At the same time as that yell, an axe was unleashed, swung with all its might.

@ddukae

Subaru had knocked away the axe as the werewolf pounced towards him. Somehow, it landed in the hands of the girl and was sent back to its owner, who was trying to bite Subaru.

Todd: "—Gah."

A second attack pushed through, overlapping with the wound on his left shoulder where the axe had once deeply pierced. The impact threw off the wolfman's momentum, and his huge body was knocked away, thrown into the muddy waters.

With a loud splash and a column of water, this time, the werewolf —Todd Fang sank below the surface.

???: "Haa, haa, haa…"

The girl who had swung the axe, breathing heavily with her shoulders heaving, held Subaru's head to her chest. As she did so, she dropped the axe from her trembling hands into the water and knelt down on the spot.

Then, the girl—Rem's light blue eyes and Subaru's black eyes met.

Rem: "It, seems like you're fine."

Subaru: "I'm not really fine, but…"

Subaru replied in a wavering tone to Rem as he lowered the corners of his eyes with a faint sense of relief.

Then, he looked behind him for Todd, who had been thrown into the water by Rem's blow. —He was nowhere to be found. There was no way he could be found. And even if he was found…

Subaru: "—Hk."

With frustration and bitterness welling up inside him, Subaru put his hand on his chest.

Subaru and Todd could not understand each other in any way.

What Subaru wanted him to understand, and that Todd did not wish to be understood, none of it.

That was what frustrated him. It was so frustrating and disappointing.

With that feeling of helpless frustration—

Emilia: “Rem! Thank goodness. Heal this boy’s wounds! Then, quickly, to Subaru…”

Rem: “Wait a minute! This is the child! This boy is him! This is the one that calls himself Natsuki Subaru…”

Emilia: “Huh! That kid is Subaru?! But he’s so cute…?”

Slowly, little by little, Subaru’s strength slipped away on the edge of the rooftop, and right in front of him, the two women who had helped him—Emilia and Rem were shouting this and that about Subaru.

Then, with those two in front of him, the thought of how long it had been since he last had seen them talking to each other passed through his mind, and faded—.

Subaru: “Todd, you goddamn idiot…”

With this sense of frustration and defeat as the final straw, Subaru’s consciousness abruptly faded.

Chapter 7:
Todd Fang

—Todd Fang was a soldier of the Vollachian Empire, Private First-Class his rank.

He was the fiancé of Katya Aurélie, the younger sister of his colleague, Jamal Aurélie. Starting with when he was dispatched to the Buddheim Jungle in the east of the Empire, by way of the battle with the rebel army in the Fortress City of Guaral, he had currently taken up the official position of subordinate to the Spirit Eater, General First-Class Arakiya.

The siege of the Imperial Capital Lupugana, commenced by rebels who all simultaneously rose in revolt.

In this battle too, he participated as a foot soldier, fighting hard, wielding his weapon as he valiantly fought the rebels in order to protect the citizens of the Imperial Capital—And above all, to protect his fiancée, Katya.

His true identity was that of an existence treated as abhorrent in the Vollachian Empire, that of a werewolf; subject to historic discrimination and persecution, he came to establish his own way of life as a being incompatible with others.

That was unmistakably the werewolf of the Empire known as Todd Fang.

—I have no intention of telling you anything more than that, man.

Chapter 8:
Future Prospects

—When the Cloud Dragon flew into the Imperial Capital, leaving Madelyn behind, Emilia decided to follow Cecilus, who was chasing after it, but she fell behind and chose to hide within the city herself.

Emilia: “Hey, you there! Take this girl and step back! I’ve frozen her limbs so that she won’t struggle, so please handle her gently!”

She did not forget to entrust the frozen Madelyn to the soldier that carefully examined the situation.

Madelyn, who was frozen in ice, showed no signs of waking up, and since her limbs were strongly frozen, there should have been minimal concern about her causing a disturbance in the headquarters.

Emilia: “…It feels like a reaaally unpleasant atmosphere.”

After leaving Madelyn in someone else’s care, Emilia created an ice staircase and climbed over the city walls. She felt a sense of unease from the atmosphere that pervaded the Imperial Capital.

The air itself should not have changed between inside and outside the city walls, but there was certainly a prickling sensation on the skin which threatened to unsettle Emilia’s heart.

However, she could not afford to be defeated by the prickling sensation in her heart and back down.

Emilia: “Mezoreia and Cecilus have both gone towards the castle.”

The battle with the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia would have ended in Emilia’s complete defeat if Cecilus had not intervened. Thanks to Cecilus, Emilia managed to hold on, but she was constantly reflecting on the fact that she had almost been defeated.

Emilia: “Even though I asked everyone to come all the way to

Vollachia.”

Of course, everyone was worried about Subaru and Rem, who were sent flying. If she were to say something like that now, no one would blame Emilia alone.

Nevertheless, Emilia had a responsibility as the most important person in the camp.

Emilia had to be aware of Roswaal’s importance as her supporter, as well as another, different kind of importance. She needed to acknowledge the importance of everyone’s efforts in order to fulfill her own wishes.

Therefore—

Emilia: “Therefore—I have to work really hard to fulfill what I said I could do.”

After climbing over the tall city walls, Emilia finally entered the streets of the Imperial Capital and saw the cityscape.

Though quite different from the atmosphere of the Royal Capital of Lugunica, being the capital city of a major nation, the orderly and tidy layout of buildings as well as functional areas could be perceived as the result of well thought out urban planning, even from Emilia’s viewpoint.

The Emperor of the Empire must have had a clear vision for the future and worked hard to make this city and country a better place.

Emilia: “Even if you try so hard, this is how it turns out, huh…”

The impression someone would get from the cityscape of the Imperial Capital and its current condition, however, were strikingly distinct.

Regardless of what intentions the Emperor held when it came to governing the Empire, the answer that a part of the Imperial citizens came up with was this rebellion, and Emilia was on the side supporting it.

While one could say that it happened gradually or as a result of circumstances, Emilia did not side with them thoughtlessly; she listened to them, discussed it with her comrades, and made the decision.

Of course, she did not think it would be best to take the Emperor's life as many traitors wanted, but rather to capture him and negotiate with Abel and others.

However, Emilia's hopes and wishes were betrayed in a way she could never have imagined by the events that occurred in the Imperial Capital.

Emilia: "…What?"

In the far distance, near the magnificent building called the Crystal Palace located at the very back of the Imperial Capital, one could see a gigantic figure colliding with the Cloud Dragon that took off from the battlefield.

The collision between two giant entities further increased the danger of the siege of the Imperial Capital by one or two levels, but there was something else that surprised her even more.

—At the Crystal Palace, where a fierce battle was raging, and all over the Imperial Capital, pale figures attacking the fleeing people were appearing in large numbers.

Emilia: "I don't want to…"

The moment Emilia saw their presence, a chill ran up her spine.

The sensation that Emilia felt was not just a physical disgust, but it was probably her nature as a Spiritual Arts User that caused her to be repulsed by them.

Spirits were natural entities that, desired by the world, emerged into existence.

On the other hand, what caused her to shiver were unnatural entities, impure beings that the world did not recognize, and Emilia intuited that as a Spiritual Arts User.

At the same time, Emilia realized that the internal conflict of the Empire, which had been painful and sad, had transformed into a fierce competition for survival between not just humans, but also non-human entities.

Emilia: "…"

The moment she intuited such, the significance of that battlefield changed within Emilia.

To make the most of what was available, Emilia lifted both arms and created ice stairs haphazardly within range of the star-shaped city walls surrounding the Imperial Capital.

By creating ice stairs wherever she could, Emilia turned the situation of being unable to enter or leave without passing through the city gates into a situation where it was possible to enter or leave from places other than the gates, thereby increasing the escape routes.

Emilia: "Everyone! Run to the wall! You don't have to go to the gate, you can escape from there!"

Calling out in a loud voice, Emilia descended from the city walls into the city.

As soon as she did, a pale being appeared as if growing up from the ground and reached out to Emilia. Emilia mercilessly struck it down with a blow from an ice sword.

Emilia: "I think you guys also have your own goals, but…"

Emilia could not meekly be persuaded to sit down for a dialogue when she was being attacked by others without explanation.

The ones who stood in her way were all dressed in the military uniforms of the Imperial Soldiers, and when they were hit by Emilia's attacks as she broke through them, their bodies shattered and collapsed like pottery. However, their broken bodies immediately began to stick back together, and they returned to their original state, unable to be fully defeated.

Emilia: “If that’s the case, then—.”

Even at a disadvantage, Emilia showed her boldness by not retreating there.

Against an opponent who would get up even if they were crushed, Emilia steered towards icing the opponent with sword blows, rather than smashing them with sword blows.

Emilia: “Teya! Taa! Urya urya urya!”

Against the one, then two, then three, then four “enemies” that rose up, Emilia kicked the walls, the ground, and the streets of the Imperial Capital in all directions as she jumped around and laid waste with her assault.

The “enemies” who were attacked by Emilia and had their crushed parts iced over were, as one would expect, unable to have their wounds repaired to their original state. However, there were also some “enemies” who destroyed the iced parts themselves and overwrote it with regeneration.

Emilia: “Well then, I’ll take that approach away from them!”

If the opponent responded, then Emilia would further surpass their response.

If freezing a part of the body did not work, she assailed the “enemies” by freezing the entire body. Of course, the strength used against one “enemy” would be greater, but there was nothing she could do about that.

Her missing endurance was made up by determination, and Emilia cleared the streets of the whole area.

Emilia: “Go, quickly! If you go now, they won’t get in your way, run, run!”

Emilia guided the people of the Imperial Capital, who were slow to escape, by making the streets she had cleared easy to navigate. In the meantime, she herself ran in the opposite direction of those running toward the city walls and ran full speed on the road deeper into the city.

Emilia: “Someone is committing all this badness…!!”

The “enemies” appearing one after another were caused by an unnatural phenomenon.

Meaning, like magic or curse arts, someone’s will was involved in raising them. If the caster was there, there would basically be no resolution unless they were stopped.

There was a limit to the extent of what Emilia could freeze.

Fortunately, Emilia, who had a freakishly large store of mana, was still able to move, but with fighting Madelyn, Mezoreia’s participation, creating the stairway to the inside and outside of the city walls just a moment ago, and then battling “enemies” that appeared one after another, she was still feeling tired.

Emilia: “Even though being a little bit more energetic than others is supposed to be my strong point… hk.”

As she felt pity for her lack of strength, Emilia ran up the streets of the Imperial Capital.

She could move faster if she aimed straight for the Crystal Palace, but she had to protect the people who were being attacked by “enemies” along the way. This was the limit to her speed as she was helping them.

While she was thinking about this, she saw another group of people struggling to stay out of sight of the “enemy” on the street—

Emilia: “I’ll make a path, right away!”

There were four “enemies” who seemed like they would get in the way of the group going out into the street; the moment they turned their back, Emilia leapt down from the roof of the building, and before they could turn around to see her, her ice-blade flashed—.

Emilia: “…”

The bluish-white, glistening ice sword cleaved the atmosphere, transforming the four “enemies” who were hit by the slash into ice statues.

After making sure her “enemies”, frozen with a look of surprise on their faces, were properly iced, Emilia converted the ice sword in her hand to mana and turned toward the other side of the street.

Emilia: “You’re safe now! If you use the ice as a landmark, then you can make it out of here!”

???: “Th-Thank you very much. You saved us.”

Emilia called out to them, and a voice answered from the other side.

Emilia raised her hand in response to their thanks and thought about resuming going to the center of the city once the people had crossed the road safely.

That was what she had thought, but—

Emilia: “Wow, that’s a lot of children…”

Opening her eyes wide, in Emilia’s field of view a group of nearly twenty people had slipped out from the other side of the street. Moreover, most of them were children about ten years old, all with dark hair.

Emilia blinked her eyes at the very unusual group, as black hair itself was rare.

There were too many kids whose faces did not resemble one another for them all to be of the same family, which made her think that maybe that was not the case.

Then, one of the few adults in the group waved at Emilia,

???: “Hey, hey, you really saved us! At any rate, we’ve got our hands full just trying to run and hide. I was having trouble deciding whether to play the decoy myself or not.”

Emilia: “Is that so? In that case, I’m glad you didn’t. It should be fine from here, so everyone should work together and not be impatient.”

???: “Understood. Miss, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! Well then, Wife-san! Miss Katya!”

Katya: “D-don’t call out so loud… It’ll be bad if those guys show up again…!”

It was a woman at the end of the line who thus answered the call of the blond, young man with a cheerful smile. Emilia was slightly surprised when she saw a small woman riding in a wheelchair.

Emilia: “Besides the one Subaru made, this is the first I’ve seen.”

Wheelchairs were useful for transporting people with impaired legs, but that kind of tool was rarely seen. Emilia also knew about them because she had seen the actual wheelchair that Subaru had gone to the trouble of designing and assembling for the sleeping girl.

Now that Subaru and Rem had been sent flying, that wheelchair too had been left at the Roswaal mansion, but—

Rem: “Katya-san, please don’t be so angry… I understand your unease after being separated from your fiancé.”

Katya: “D-don’t go saying unnecessary stuff! You’ve been worried about those kids this whole time too…! Don’t only talk about me.”

Rem: “That wasn’t my intention.”

Emilia, whose eyes had been fixed on the girl in the wheelchair, was slow to recognize the sight of the girl standing behind her that was pushing the wheelchair.

Holding the handles on the back of the wheelchair and pushing it was a girl with blue hair—

Emilia: “—Rem?”

Rem: “…”

Involuntarily, Emilia's lips uttered that name, and her eyes met with the girl who looked up in surprise.

Emilia stared fixedly at the face of the wide-eyed girl who was looking back at her. It was the first time Emilia had seen her with her eyes open, but she looked exactly like a girl Emilia knew very well.

That, too, was expected, as Emilia had heard that this girl and the girl that she knew were twins. —From none other than Emilia's trustworthy Knight.

Rem: "Do you know me?"

Raising her brow, the girl—Rem looked at Emilia suspiciously.

Emilia gasped at that question from the girl with one hand on her chest. Stuck in the middle of the pair's conversation, the girl in the wheelchair looked back and forth between Emilia and Rem's faces.

And then,

Katya: "A-another one of your acquaintances? Just how many people are looking for you… Wah!"

Emilia: "Rem!"

Leaping over the woman muttering something with a sour look, Emilia closed the distance between them and took Rem's hand.

Rem's eyes widened at her movement, but Emilia was not composed enough to show consideration for her surprise. Still clutching her hand, Emilia teared up at the sight of Rem in front of her.

Emilia: "Awake… Rem's awake! Amazing! This is huge! Quick, I have to let Ram and Subaru know!"

Rem: "W-wait please, just who are you?"

Emilia: "Umm, there was a message from Ram saying to meet up outside, so maybe she's already outside? Geez! Why is Subaru missing at a time like this… Umm, umm…"

Rem: “Please listen to what I’m saying!”

With so many surprising incidents, Emilia’s head was a complete mess, and it was Rem who put the brakes on her thoughts.

She stared angrily at Emilia, who was still clutching her hand,

Rem: “You also called me Rem… Are you someone who knew me from before?”

Emilia: “Ah, no, that’s a bit tough to answer. I don’t remember you from when you were awake, either. So, it’s weird, but it feels like we’re meeting for the first time.”

Rem: “I-I don’t know what you mean…”

Emilia: “Umm, I’m not very good at explaining things, so I’m not sure I’ll be able to get this across properly…”

Emilia felt sorry and thought about what to say to the puzzled Rem.

It was a great feeling to be able to talk to Rem while she was awake, but to Emilia, she was Ram’s younger sister, and a girl who had been asleep for more than a year. She was also someone who had had her Memories from her time awake stolen by the power of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.

If not for what Subaru had said and Rem’s resemblance with Ram convincing her that her memories with Rem were truly stolen, Emilia herself would have held no particular feelings.

However, there were some things that could be discerned from Rem’s account and from what Emilia herself knew.

That was—

Emilia: “Rem, is it possible that you don’t remember what happened before you woke up?”

Rem: “…Well, I don’t really know how to feel about there being a before and after I woke up, but yes.”

Emilia: “…So. That’s how it is.”

She had a hope that perhaps when Rem had woken up, she would have the Memories of her time with Emilia and the others, and that she might be able to tell her about their previous relationship.

Unfortunately, that hope was not realized, but still,

Emilia: “But you don’t have to worry about anything. You may be reaaally worried because you don’t understand a lot of things, but I will help you, and Ram and Subaru will both be there for you!”

Rem: “—. What are you, to me?”

Emilia: “If I were to just state our relationship, I would say that we are guest and maid. But I don’t think that’s the only type of relationship I have with Ram, so I guess I want to have more than just that with you as well, Rem.”

Rem: “…”

Emilia: “Lending each other help when we need it, thinking together when we have problems, and facing difficult things side by side… Maybe I can’t explain this kind of relationship very well.”

When asked who she was to Rem, Emilia was unsure.

The reason for that was that her relationship with her had been brought down to zero and had to be reassembled from that point once again. So, she would only be able to convey how she wanted to reassemble it, and her prospects of it.

Emilia: “I want to get along with you, Rem. Let’s do our very best together.”

That was Emilia’s honest belief, and her future prospects.

Rem: “…”

Upon hearing Emilia’s answer, Rem’s eyes widened and her lips opened and closed several times.

However, her thoughts were not so readily put into words, and her lips opened and closed over and over again. Just like that the moment slowly seemed to slip away, but—

Flop: “Wife-san, I have a feeling she’s on your side.”

Rem: “Flop-san…”

Flop: “I’ve met many people as a merchant, but it’s rare to meet someone who is so straightforward. I’m sure she can be trusted.”

It was the blond-haired young man named Flop who said this to the stammering Rem.

At his bright and cheerful affirmation, Rem raised her eyebrows and then turned to look at Emilia again. Emilia met that gaze with pride in her chest.

At Emilia’s attitude, Rem let out a small sigh,

Rem: “…I believe that you are someone who knows me, and that you have no ill will.”

Rem’s hesitation to say so made Emilia’s heart ache for a moment. Emilia’s eyes widened, and Rem’s pale blue eyes narrowed slightly,

Rem: “Um, you mentioned the name “Subaru” earlier…”

Emilia: “Huh? Yeah, I did. Subaru is someone who reaaally worries about you and has always treasured you…”

Rem: “—. If that is true…”

Rem’s eyes lowered at Emilia’s answer, and her gaze glanced toward the end of the alley—the direction from which Rem’s group had just come from. It was not quite a glance into the alley, but more like a glance back along the path they had just taken.

Emilia thought about what it might mean, and leaned forward with a “By any chance,”

Emilia: “Were you with Subaru? Is Subaru okay? He’s not doing anything reckless, right?”

Rem: “So that’s your perception, too. That, that man is often reckless.”

Emilia: “Hmm, yeah. He’s a difficult boy and… Oh! Come to think of it.”

Rem: “What is it?”

Emilia: “My name is Emilia, just Emilia. Since you’ve forgotten, I should probably start by introducing myself.”

Even though Emilia remembered Rem’s name, Rem did not know Emilia’s, and no matter how much time passed, if she did not tell her, Rem would never be able to call her by name.

After hearing Emilia’s name, Rem’s eyes slightly opened in surprise.

Rem: “Emilia-san…”

Emilia: “Uh, yeah. So Rem, about Subaru, is he over there?”

Rem: “They’re over there, I’m pretty sure of it…”

Then, upon hearing Rem speak ambiguously and seeing her expression darken, Emilia raised her eyebrows with a bad feeling.

Looking at the state of the Imperial Capital and the fact that Rem, Flop, the girl in the wheelchair, and the children were the only ones on the move, it was not very Subaru-like for him to be separate from them.

Still, if Subaru was moving separately from Rem and the others—

Emilia: “Well then, he’s being reckless again… I’ve got to get to him quickly!”

Rem: “Since you immediately know what to expect, then he is that kind of person after all…”

Emilia: “Yes, Subaru has a habit of showing off, so I’m always worried about him.”

Rem: “So he is that kind of person after all…”

Rem nodded her head in agreement with Emilia’s assessment of Subaru.

Emilia was happy to exchange words with Rem like this, but the urgency of this situation did not allow for a lengthy chat.

What made that sentiment even more urgent was that—

Katya: “—Hk! Wh-what?! What is that?!”

Suddenly, a rather loud explosion echoed in the distance. The woman in the wheelchair, her shoulders jumping at the sound, looked around restlessly.

While it was hard to make out from her location, Emilia could see a red pillar of fire rising from the far side of the Imperial Capital, followed by a plume of black smoke.

It was a very big explosion.

The atmosphere did not seem troubled, so it did not seem to be an explosion caused by magic. Perhaps it was ignited by Fire Magic Stones or something.

Rem: “Over there…”

Emilia: “By any chance, is that the direction where Subaru is?”

Rem: “—. Yes.”

Looking toward the direction of the explosion, the choked-up Rem nodded to Emilia’s question.

The moment Emilia saw the explosion, she could not help but think that Subaru had something to do with it. She wanted to rush over there right now and join Subaru.

But, it was also a very difficult choice to leave Rem here alone, considering how Ram and Subaru would feel, and Emilia was almost overwhelmed with wanting to do both this and that.

Katya: "…A-are you going toward the explosion? Then, then, take that girl with you. She's useful."

Emilia: "Huh?"

Rem: "Katya-san?"

The confusion in Emilia's mind was brought to a stop by—Katya, the woman in the wheelchair who had been extremely startled by the sound of the explosion.

She timidly looked at Emilia, repeatedly making eye contact and then averting her gaze,

Katya: "Look, she can use magic to heal wounds. If you had that, you'd be okay, even if they were a bit reckless. Besides… It's been on your mind this whole time."

Rem: "…I think it's Katya-san who is concerned about these things."

Katya: "I'm fine! And Todd, you see, that guy, he stubbornly clings to his life. He's bound to come back with a calm and collected look on his face no matter what. But, those kids you know, aren't as tough as Todd."

Rem: "Yes, but…"

Katya's faltering speech, while blunt, was sympathetic toward Rem's feelings. Perhaps it was because that thoughtfulness was conveyed well.

Rem was unable to nod at Katya's words. When Katya saw Rem's reluctance, she raised her voice and said, "Forget it!",

Katya: "From here on, this person… you know, she took care of it already, right? This… What's with you, silver hair and long ears, that's a bad omen, isn't it?"

Emilia: "Oh, I didn't want to bring it up; it might trouble you, so don’t look at me right now.”

If people found out that Emilia was a half-elf, it might scare them away, even in the Empire. So, she hid both of her ears with her hands so that they might forget about it.

Katya looked at Rem again, wondering about Emilia’s reaction,

Katya: “If it’s about me, you worry too much. I’ll let the nice, scraggly guy over there take me. You do what you want to do, and do it properly…”

Rem: “…”

Katya: “A-and while you’re at it, make sure Todd hasn’t screwed things up. That’s all I’m going to say! Come on now, don’t dawdle…”

With that, Katya spun the wheels of her wheelchair and moved away from Rem. Rem let out a small “Ah” at Katya’s decision to go without her, and then cast her eyes down.

However, while she closed her eyes tightly,

Rem: “Flop-san, can I leave Katya-san in your care?”

Flop: “Yeah, she’s in good hands! Let’s just get through this last push with the fake Crown Prince-kuns we have worked so hard together with.”

Rem: “Yes. —Katya-san, thank you very much.”

Rem bowed deeply to Flop, who thumped his chest and was ready to take over. Katya’s cheeks reddened as she turned away with a “Hmph”.

While smiles were exchanged between Rem and Katya, Emilia looked at them fondly.

Emilia: “When we get out of here, please tell me what you have been doing up until today, Rem. I, Ram, Subaru, and everyone else would reaaally like to hear it.”

Rem: “I don’t even think it’s going to be an interesting story… But, I understand.”

When Emilia held out her hand, Rem hesitated slightly before grasping it back.

Emilia smiled at the touch and then gently pulled toward herself. Unexpectedly, Rem’s eyes widened, and she stumbled and fell onto Emilia’s chest.

Then, Emilia picked up Rem’s body and said, “Alright!”,

Emilia: “Sorry. We can’t afford to take our time, so let me carry you so we can go a little faster!”

Rem: “Y-you’re quite strong, aren’t you?”

Emilia: “Yes, I am. —Take care, everyone! We will meet again!”

With Rem in a princess carry, Emilia called out to Katya and Flop and the others around her. Then, with a “Yaa!”, she leapt from that spot and ascended up to the roof of the building.

Flop: “Wife-san! Miss Emilia! Please be careful out there as well!”

Katya: “Y-you better come back to us…”

With those cheers, Emilia looked down at Rem, who was in her arms,

Emilia: “Hold on tight. I’m going to run a little fast!”

Rem: “—. What kind of relationship did you and I have before?”

While tightly clinging, Rem muttered words as if she was wringing them out. At those words, Emilia did not have a clear answer to give, but,

Emilia: “I’d like to know about that as well!”

With that strong declaration, she started running again deep into the Imperial Capital, with Rem in her arms.

Continuing on, Emilia ran, and ran, and ran, with the feeling of Rem’s arms clinging tightly to her, and then—

Emilia: “That’s enough.”

—At that moment, the reunion had been made complete.

Chapter 9:
Deciding to Love

1

—Withdrawal from the Imperial Capital Lupugana.

Although it was judged to be a necessary decision, it was still a major incident in the history of the Empire.

The Imperial Capital, which was under the Emperor's direct supervision, not only allowed the "enemy" to advance to the Crystal Palace, but the Emperor was even forced to abandon both the castle and the city and flee. The decline of his authority was unavoidable.

However—

Goz: "Given that we do not know the intentions of those ominous guys, Your Excellency's judgment would be the best course of action."

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Ain't an Emperor abandonin' the Palace ta flee unheard of? At the very least, I've never heard anythin' like that 'til this age."

Goz: "Do not laugh, General First-Class Olbart! If you think about His Excellency's feelings… If you think about it, I! Damn! Without fail, under His Excellency's command, we will recapture the castle and the Imperial Capital!!"

Ubilk: "Waawaaaa~, are we running away? Your judgment is quiiite~ fast! As for me, I'm not into the mindset of fighting to the last breath, so I think that's the right decision to take."

At that moment, there was no one who opposed Vincent's decision.

This was because Vincent had assigned positions based on practical abilities rather than loyalty, which proved to be worthwhile. Although rebellion was also incited due to differences in opinions, ultimately, his closest and most trusted ally had betrayed him. Therefore, any differences in loyalty were merely a margin of error.

In any case, it was time to begin the retreat.

Vincent: “Olbart Dunkelkenn, buy us some time. If left alone, Moguro Hagane will be defeated quickly. We cannot let the reservoir be destroyed yet.”

Olbart: “Geez, it’s not good ta overwork the elderly. How ‘bout usin’ Goz instead?”

Vincent: “Agility and swiftness are the specialties of a shinobi. Fulfill your duty without indecision.”

Olbart: “…Just warnin’ ya, even I can’t catch him if he focuses on flyin’, y’know?”

Above, Balleroy Temeglyph, who had died, cut through the sky of the Imperial Capital as he flew. After listening to Olbart, who implicitly said that he still had his skills from when he was still alive as the greatest dragon rider from the Vollachian Empire, thus conveying the toughness of their opponent, Vincent, even so, entrusted the task to the monstrous old man.

As Olbart said, while there may have been some differences in aptitude, Goz could still fulfill the same role.

However, when speaking of differences in aptitude, there was a role that Goz must fulfill. This loud and overbearing General was exceptionally trusted by his troops.

Therefore,

Vincent: “Goz Ralfon, make use of your absurd volume. From now on, what we need to retreat from the Imperial Capital is manpower. Gather any scattered troops in the vicinity.”

Goz: “Yes! Leave it to me, Your Excellency! Right away!!”

Without hesitation, Goz nodded and jumped onto a nearby pile of rubble with his bare upper body. There, he took a deep breath and shouted to the world where the thunderous noise of the titanic Moguro's battle echoed.

His incredibly loud voice raised objections to the shaking air of the Imperial Capital.

Goz: "Listen up, Sword Wolves of Vollachia!! These are orders from the top of the Sword Wolves, His Excellency Vincent Vollachia! Follow my voice! Follow it!!"

When Goz's directive was issued, with loudness that sounded like the roar of a magic stone cannon firing, Vincent covered his ears and looked towards Olbart as if testing him. Olbart, who was also covering his ears, shook his head slowly and said,

Olbart: "I can't do somethin' like that. So yer just choosin' the right person for the task, right?"

Leaving only those words behind, Olbart's figure disappeared into the sky, leaving a trail behind him.

The monstrous old man climbed the cracked walls of the Crystal Palace left by the aftermath of the battle, using them as footholds. Halfway, he jumped onto the massive body of Moguro and intervened in the battlefield where the Cloud Dragon and the Magical Sharpshooter were cooperating. The Vicious Old Man demonstrated his power and began to manipulate the situation.

Olbart might have said something about being unable to keep up with his flying opponent, but, with his shinobi's gear and his hidden techniques, he most likely had countless ways to deal with the situation.

If the monstrous old man joined the battle, Moguro's disadvantage would likely be somewhat overturned.

Ubilk: "Your Excellency, is there anything you want uuus~ to do?"

Vincent: "—. How many of you Stargazers are there in the surroundings?"

As Goz was gathering the people, Vincent asked Ubilk, who had nothing else to do. Ubilk responded to Vincent's question with a "Weeell~" and placed the fingers of both of his hands on his cheeks.

Ubilk: "Let's see, within the range where our voices can be heard, there are twenty-seven of uuus~."

Vincent: "More than I expected. Then, go around opening doors in the residences one by one. Tell them that the Emperor and the troops will abandon the Capital, so even if they remain in the city, they will only be throwing away their lives."

Ubilk: "Understood! This is it, this is it! An all-out war… The united effort of the entire Vollachian Empire to resist the Great Disaster, this is what I've wanted to do."

Vincent: "Quickly, get it done."

Vincent let out a sigh as he drove away the excited Ubilk, who could not contain his excitement over being able to achieve his goal as a member of the Stargazers.

Vincent then looked at Berstetz, who remained silent so as not to disturb his thoughts and deliberations.

He was the individual who had joined Chisha Gold, the ringleader of the civil war, and caused chaos in the Empire by driving Vincent from the throne.

Vincent: "You are rather quiet."

Berstetz: "In the present situation, two heads giving commands can only sow seeds of confusion. If, hypothetically, a Sword Wolf were to be born with two heads, it would mean…"

Vincent: "That severing one of the two heads is your duty?"

Berstetz: "If so needed, this old man shall offer you his head with pleasure."

With his hands clasped behind his back, Berstetz calmly stated his resolve.

Although he was far from a man of military prowess, within him burned the pride of an Imperial man. Vincent did not believe that Berstetz had rebelled out of a lust for power, nor did he believe that the words he just uttered were a perfunctory excuse.

Plain and simple, a devout devotion to the Empire was Berstetz's driving force.

For that reason, when he saw a threat to the Empire, he would immediately drop his previous policies and plans, and stand on the same side as Vincent as he was doing now, without hesitation.

Vincent: "When Goz Ralfon, the Stargazer, and the others finish their preparations, we will begin our withdrawal immediately. Berstetz, your opinion. Be brief."

Berstetz: "—With all due respect, Your Excellency, if you are going to withdraw, please follow your own thoughts."

Vincent: "…"

To Vincent, who had asked for a concise opinion, Berstetz responded.

Although his words were enigmatic, Berstetz did not mean to mislead Vincent. After a moment of contemplation, Vincent understood the meaning of those words.

To follow his own thoughts, that was to say, the thoughts of Vincent Vollachia.

—That was the same mindset that Chisha Gold had been following up until now.

Berstetz: "If General Chisha had replaced you knowing the prediction, and cooperated with me to usurp the throne…"

Vincent: "—He must have guessed what the Great Disaster would consist of, and had prepared for it."

Berstetz: "It is as you say. And it is something that only Your Excellency the Emperor could notice, and anyone other than Your

Excellency the Emperor would not notice.”

As Berstetz spoke, with one eye closed, Vincent contemplated.

The opinion expressed by the Prime Minister was understandable. —No, it was reasonable. Even without Berstetz’s advice, Vincent would have come to the same conclusion, but this had shortened time.

Chisha staked his life to remain in the form of Vincent on the throne. And what if he had left Vincent with more than just a “future” where he was supposed to have been cut off?

That was—

Goz: “—Your Excellency! The men have all returned, each one of them with the face of a soldier! What do you wish to do?”

The instant Vincent’s thoughts arrived at that conclusion, from a pile of rubble, Goz violently jumped down.

Looking around, one after another, gathering around them were the Imperial Soldiers who came with their equipped swords and armor clanging, a pack of Sword Wolves. In face of this unprecedented situation, they must have been confused and uneasy. However, following the call of the Lion Knight Goz Ralfon, they gathered together, and when they realized that the Vollachian Emperor was waiting for them ahead, they tightened their expressions and standings.

???: “…”

It was the terrible and loathsome way of being of the people of the Empire.

But in order to fight the coming calamity, a Sword Wolf must not forget its hunger. Spending years for that reason, recalling the times past, Vincent looked up at the sky.

To accumulate national strength, and to maintain the discipline and morale of the soldiers, for the sake of leaving behind an Empire that would be able to withstand the calamity. —That plan had gone awry, but there was no intention of leaving as a failure.

Vincent: “Moguro Hagane! Do not let these scoundrels use the Magic Crystal Cannon! As long as you uphold that, I will grant your wish!”

Moguro: “…”

There was no telling whether or not his voice, that he had pushed to his limits, had reached Moguro, who was in the midst of fighting what was the currently strongest creature in the world, a Dragon.

However, that noble Meteor listened to human words attentively. They looked as if they did not have ears, but they were reliable.

Then, having sent out instructions to the assembled Generals, Vincent lowered his gaze and surveyed the faces of the soldiers who had gathered around him.

Then, looking at those Sword Wolves, whose will to fight was undiminished, he continued.

—Chisha Gold, if he had truly embodied Vincent Vollachia,

Vincent: “We are withdrawing from the Imperial Capital! We are heading northwest to the Fortified City of Garkla!”

Then a plan to oppose the Great Disaster, should be in that land, such was what he loudly declared.

2

—Both the Imperial Soldiers and the rebels that were a part of the battlefield had begun to realize that the struggle to set the course of the Vollachian Empire had changed shape.

With the degree of confusion that spread everywhere, and the change in ambience, striking that it was, fully enthralled in battle, the Sword Wolves were therefore aware of such an atmosphere and sensed the interference of unsavory intentions.

Thus, with orders flying around from the commanding officers whose expressions had changed, the mindset of the two sides who were frankly crossing arms was changed by their slightly regained composure and battle intuition.

Due to that, the two sides that were fiercely fighting each other until only a few moments before ceased their hostilities, replaced the title of Imperial Soldier or of rebel with the title “citizen of the Empire”, and joined as a pack of wolves.

At that moment, Vincent Vollachia, at the center of the Imperial Capital, and Serena Dracroy, at the siege surrounding the city, had both just raised their voices as chief commanders.

Simply put, the changes that everyone from the Empire had sensed were circumstances that necessitated immediate action. Completely unrelated to these events, there was still a battlefield burning bright red that could reduce everyone else to ashes.

—The Spirit Eater Arakiya, protecting the first bastion, was being confronted by Priscilla Barielle and Yorna Mishigure, magnificent and bewitching women of strong character.

Yorna: “—Love me.”

As the world was dominated by red, radiant flames, Yorna gallantly kicked the ground with a fire lit in one of her eyes.

The hem of her kimono fluttered glamorously, and when Yorna’s long legs, which made her tall for a woman, touched the ground, the earth rose up the next moment and aided her sprint in both speed and momentum.

This was not the Demon City of Chaosflame, but only the land surrounding the Imperial Capital, the territory of the Emperor of Vollachia.

Long ago, beyond the memories of a past that had become distant for both Yorna Mishigure and Sandra Benedict, she had once desired for the Imperial Capital that seemed so out of her reach.

Though a place she could never reach through her own strength, as she held hands with a man who was so noble and of such different status that she was afraid to whisper that she loved him, there she stood.

Yorna’s Soul Marriage Technique could only be granted to those she loved.

—Then, with love for that man that could never fade, why did Yorna not love the very land that he loved?

Yorna: “—It was also stolen from me.”

The Emperor of Vollachia, who was known as the King of Thorns at the time, and Iris, the girl who had fallen in love.

She sheltered, supported and walked the same path as the Emperor who had been ousted from the throne. Seeing the courage and nobleness of the young girl, many sang the praises of the King of Thorns, wishing blessings upon their future together.

However, due to the molemen who had tricked them by manipulating them with adulation, and the wolfmen who had betrayed them through ambition and arrogance, that future had lost its perfect ending.

The paradise that the King of Thorns was supposed to build, the construction of that promised world was abandoned. The Emperor, who was controlled by delusion, bonded the soul of the girl, who was supposed to disappear, with the blood of the traitors to the soil of the Empire.

Since then, Iris had been reborn again and again, changing her name and appearance.

Loving someone, being loved by someone, she continued to live.

But at the same time, this Vollachian Empire, the Empire’s very land, was the only thing that she could not love. Perhaps she hated it because it was so distant from the dream she had once envisioned.

But, however, such things were trivial compared to what was truly important.

Yorna: "—Love me."

Whether or not she could love; she just decided to love.

It was not an Empire with only happy memories. Happiness and unhappiness had been two sides of the same coin, both when she was Iris and throughout her many lifetimes after she was no longer Iris.

The same was true for Yorna's beloved children in the Demon City—Sometimes she would be choked up with love, and sometimes she would be angry at their pettiness.

Yorna: "—All of it, I am happy with."

Yes, as the resounding "love" resonated within Yorna, the burning earth rejoiced.

The solid ground, which was only supposed to catch her footsteps, gleefully lashed out, and the bouncing earth served as a foothold for Yorna, sending her high into the sky.

Spinning around, Yorna's thick-soled heels fell on Arakiya in mid-air.

Arakiya attempted to let it pass through her by assimilating with the air surrounding her. However, Yorna's kick burst through the brown skin that it should have slipped through.

Arakiya: "—Ah?"

Her kicked shoulder exploded with pain, and Arakiya gave a small gasp at the impossible impact.

Arakiya's body, which had been assimilated with either fire, wind, or shadow exploded from the impact, and her expression, which had rarely displayed such fiery emotion, was colored with pain and surprise.

For Arakiya, who continuously took full advantage of the traits of a Spirit Eater to gain the upper hand in every fight against her enemies, this was truly a bolt out of the blue.

But Yorna was neither surprised nor satisfied with the fact that her kick hit. Using the heel she struck with as a fulcrum, she raised her upper body and swung the kiseru held by her slender fingers, unleashing a follow-up attack.

Arakiya: “Eh, ah, wah.”

There was a sound of something hard hitting her flesh consecutively, and Arakiya’s expression was continuously distorted.

Arakiya’s voice escaped from her throat as if she could not comprehend the sensations she was suffering. It was a manner of rejecting the fact behind it rather than the anguish itself.

“Why”, she asked Yorna. Arakiya’s eyes were widened, even the one that she could no longer see from.

Yorna: “If there is love there, then there’s no meaning in tactless hesitation.”

Arakiya: “Love…?”

Yorna: “You’re the foster sister of my ill-disciplined daughter, are you not?”

Yorna’s answer, with a beaming smile, filled Arakiya’s face with a look of incomprehension.

Even though she had received an answer, her cheeks hardened at the fact she did not understand it. Then, Arakiya freely flew in the sky at high speed to escape, causing cataclysmic waves of natural phenomena.

Yorna, who was in midair, had no way to avoid her onslaught of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water.

Yorna: “As it was the case even before I made peace with the Empire.”

Spinning those words from her loosened lips, Yorna ran through the air on the footholds of earth that rose up one after another.

While resentful in spirit, but also full of joyful emotional attachments, if she decided to love such a Vollachian Empire in its entirety, then the ground itself would respond and continue its ardent support.

Avoiding the rain of fire, the spears of water, the great waves of wind, and the slashes of light at every turn, Yorna once again closed in on Arakiya.

No longer did Arakiya have the advantage of being in the air since the ground reached wherever Yorna stepped, allowing her to reach the same height.

Arakiya: "—Ugh."

She assimilated with the Spirits in the atmosphere and became transparent to enemy attacks.

Since she had become overly accustomed to avoiding this way, Arakiya was slow to react to the approaching danger of Yorna and took a kick directly to her smooth-skinned torso.

The destructive force penetrated the back side of Arakiya's body, causing the gale she had enclosed herself with to shimmer through the world of red-tinted flames.

Arakiya: "—Hk."

Finally, pain was etched on Arakiya's face, overtaking her look of surprise.

This was definitely a sign that Yorna's attack was pushing Arakiya over the edge. Up until now, while the flow of events going in Yorna's favor had been something to be proud of, Yorna was still not optimistic.

That was because—

Arakiya: "You would never… hk!"

With her cheeks contorted in pain and anger, Arakiya grabbed her tree branch and slammed it into Yorna.

It was simply picked up and used as an ordinary item, and yet it had never been broken, even in the midst of these natural disasters. Like a great treasured sword, it showed its true value in the hands of the Spirit Eater.

Yorna caught the swinging branch with her kiseru that she held in her upraised arm. The edge of her mouth quivered slightly as the two glared at each other up close.

Yorna: “Ku…”

The power of the blocked tree branch made Yorna’s throat moan through her kiseru.

Yorna’s Soul Marriage Technique could transfer pain and wounds to her own treasured belongings. Naturally, this was a secret technique that required an appropriate level of attachment and dedication.

However, Yorna’s hairpins, earrings, and obidome, all of which had been donated to her by her beloved residents of the Demon City, were not consumed. In spite of this, Yorna herself was suffering pain.

The answer was simple and clear—love was never a one-way affair.

Yorna: “—Love me.”

Once she had decided to love the Empire in an intermingling of love and hate, as well as discipline Arakiya, with whom she had fallen into a hostile relationship, she needed to aim for compatibility instead of forcing one-sided love on her.

This was the exact opposite of how Yorna Mishigure’s Soul Marriage Technique was originally intended to be used.

3

Priscilla: “…”

In midair, Yorna and Arakiya faced off in a fierce battle.

Priscilla, holding the dazzling Yang Sword in her hand, with flames in one eye proving that she was loved, frowned at the sight of her mother and foster sister clashing without restraint.

As a user of the same Soul Marriage Technique, she understood the reasoning behind Yorna's actions.

However, because they were both users of the Soul Marriage Technique, Priscilla could understand the forbidden nature of what Yorna was doing.

Priscilla: "Focusing only on the strength of the technique, you have no regard for its weaknesses. You too, Dear Mother, are reckless."

Yorna figured out with only a glance how to ignore Arakiya's nature as a Spirit Eater and let her attacks flow through, but it required a precise handling of magic and the resolve to suffer wounds herself.

Both Priscilla and Yorna were no strangers to the Soul Marriage Technique, a secret art that required a talent so rare that it had no historical inheritors, and required a miraculous sense of balance to put it into practice.

In short, Yorna's efforts were a risky gamble that would not only prevent Arakiya's attacks from reaching her, but could even sever her connection with the loved ones who had given her gifts.

Priscilla: "…"

Priscilla was neither foolish nor heartless enough so as to not contemplate why Yorna would take such a risky gamble to face Arakiya and turn her head.

For the sake of Priscilla, Yorna embraced that taboo.

—Priscilla, in order to avoid a situation in which she would have to kill Arakiya.

Priscilla: "With mine Yang Sword, I shan't have to brave the same crisis as Dear Mother."

To cut what one wanted to cut, and to burn what one wanted to burn, was the true essence of the Yang Sword's properties.

When its true value was demonstrated, its white flame could deliver Priscilla's slashes without regard to Arakiya's characteristics, even if Arakiya had all natural phenomena as her ally.

While maintaining the effect of the Soul Marriage Technique, the attacker was able to reach their opponent.

This was exactly what happened when Priscilla and Arakiya met again for the first time in nearly a decade, and under these circumstances, Priscilla could obviously not entertain the notion of doing the same thing.

So, Yorna smacked Priscilla on the head, and fought on the forefront as such.

Priscilla: "To strike mine head like that…"

It was tempting to argue that she was a mother, but that was precisely the case.

Reflecting upon her feelings, she realized that before Yorna had struck her on the head with her kiseru, Priscilla had been uncharacteristically enthusiastic.

Upon arriving at this point, she felt that she had to deal with Arakiya herself.

However—

Priscilla: "—A Spirit Eater's karma, is it?"

It was inevitable that a manufactured species such as Arakiya would be endowed with particularly distorted characteristics.

To wield great power, one must pay the appropriate price. Not to mention Priscilla's Yang Sword or Soul Marriage Technique, the same was true of Arakiya's Spirit Eating powers.

Of course, Priscilla had heard of what kind of being Arakiya was born to be when she accompanied her. She even did her own research. However, she was not careful enough.

The result gave Arakiya, who could not stand without support, a pillar called Priscilla.

Priscilla: “If mine radiant sun were hidden, the world shall be cloaked in darkness.”

For ten years, Arakiya lived in a world cloaked in darkness.

Perhaps it was impossible for someone to fill Priscilla’s role, but would someone not have cast a ray of light upon the shadow?

When she decided that she could not bring Arakiya, she had thought Vincent would, but.

Priscilla: “That would be impossible.”

Furrowing her brow at her own thoughts, Priscilla dismissed the idea.

At the time, when she was still young and bright, Priscilla—Prisca, she was mistaken. She thought she could trust her older brother with such a task, but that was a miscalculation.

As the battle for the Imperial Capital took such a radical turn, and as she learned of the strength of the other Nine Divine Generals, besides Arakiya, gathered by her older brother, Vincent Vollachia, she noticed. She understood.

Vincent had intended to fight a very different and greater thing than a rebellion.

Moreover, he had no intention of surviving at the end of the battle. When the battle was over, to whom would he intend to entrust the throne he had lost?

Arakiya’s loyalty could not change for someone else.

Priscilla: “Nonsense.”

Just about everything was first fabricated as a board atop a desk, and the world was then constructed according to that as reality.

That was Vincent’s strength, but no matter how good his wits were, if his envisioned form of perfection was mistaken, the world as he envisioned it would be undeniably distorted.

He shall one day be rewarded for his lack of awareness. Or maybe he would receive it in this battle, however—.

Priscilla: “We have been apart for ten years. Enough, Elder Brother, you shall distance yourself from your little sister.”

Priscilla strode forward, casting dishonor on her counterpart, who was absent from the scene.

The sky was dyed red with flames, and the earth was raging at the behest of The Flamboyant. It was as if heaven and earth were all refusing the intervention of the sun, Priscilla.

However, to such a presumptuous world, Priscilla Barielle—or rather, the daughter formerly known as Prisca Benedict, had only one thing to say.

Priscilla: “—Everything in this world is made for my convenience.”

4

At that moment, it was wrong to express what Arakiya was feeling as humiliation or shame.

Humiliation means that there must be no name for the feeling of being lowered by regret.

Shame meant that there could be no sense of pride in being disgraced by falling behind.

Arakiya had no attachment to her name or pride of any kind.

The highest-rank of Second, excluding Cecilus, who was considered a completely erroneous presence among the esteemed Imperial Nine Divine Generals. This individual possessed unparalleled qualities known as The Spirit Eater, not only within the Empire, but also throughout the entire world, making her an absolute powerhouse.

Despite being blessed with the status and abilities that many people desperately desired, those things could not become the “pillar” that supported Arakiya as an individual.

Arakiya defined herself as a beast in the wild.

Beasts that lived by hunting other creatures had no pride in their fangs and claws. —No, Arakiya only thought so, but beasts did have their own pride and ways of doing things.

That being the case, Arakiya’s self-perception was far from even that of a beast.

Fire, wind, water, earth, light, shadow, untouchable phenomena.

There was no will that intervened, only the realization of what was desired.

Arakiya wanted to be a phenomenon, neither man nor beast.

She wanted to be a phenomenon that did not feel humiliated or disgraced.

If so—

Arakiya: “I am—”

Arakiya tried to turn into the wind to deal with the barrage of fierce attacks. However, she was unable to handle it completely. The wind was seized, and the blows left a pain and heaviness inside Arakiya.

A cry of anguish escaped, and Arakiya’s face contorted in distress. As a Spirit Eater, she did not often experience pain in battle, but she was by no means immune to it.

Arakiya had already experienced all kinds of pain as a child.

In order to obtain the qualities of a Spirit Eater, the adults around Arakiya tried every conceivable ritual and technique, repeating them over and over again.

Not afraid of pain. She would not cower in remembering the past.

However, the mere fact of being realized was greater than the pain for Arakiya.

Fire would not suffer pain, nor would it die if it was extinguished by water.

Was Arakiya nothing more than fire that would suffer pain and die when extinguished by water?

Arakiya was afraid of denying to herself that she could not be a phenomenon.

Arakiya: “I—”

Yorna: “—Silence, you.”

Driven by frustration, she tried to speak out, but her opponent’s slap landed across her face.

The power of the attack blew Arakiya away from the head up. Though she quickly recovered their original form, the pain remained, as did the damage to Arakiya’s psyche.

It was neither humiliation nor disgrace, but a seeming denial of her existence. As if clinging on for dear life, Arakiya raised the ground, with her palm toward Yorna, who leapt on her.

She did not know what was happening, but both Prisca and Yorna had somehow managed to escape Arakiya’s attacks at some point. As soon as Yorna had sealed her technique, their attacks began to reach Arakiya. At the same time, Arakiya’s attacks also began to reach Yorna.

Arakiya: “—Hk.”

Just one time, one shot, one hit.

Yorna herself had raised the level of her physical abilities, either through an unknown technique or magic. However, if she did not use that technique to escape damage, that meant Arakiya’s attacks would get through.

As long as she was able to hit—

Arakiya: “The Princess and…!”

If she could get rid of that annoying Yorna, she would be left alone with just Prisca and herself.

So long as that happened, surely everything would turn out well.

???: “If there’s something you want, it’s more constructive to go out and get it than to wait, right?”

Yes, Todd had said that, too.

Todd’s words strangely resonated strongly in Arakiya’s mind.

It was not because they conveyed convenient things or based on personal likes or dislikes.

Todd’s words were devoid of any emotion toward Arakiya. That was comforting. Just as one did not love fire or water, Todd had no feelings toward Arakiya.

Being treated so vacuously was Arakiya’s salvation.

That was why—

Arakiya: “…”

The tree branch in her hand burst into flames from tip to tail, turning into black dust.

The branch was just something she had picked up; it had no special power. It was merely a clear indicator that defined where Arakiya intended to direct her power.

The fact that she had burned that wooden stick was a sign that she was unleashing a firepower that did not need to be aimed.

The Spirit Eater, Arakiya, was regarded as one of the Empire’s strongest, and her greatest power was only ever unleashed once during a skirmish with Cecilus Segmunt.

Because the opponent was Cecilus, no damage was done, but Arakiya's outburst left the northern part of the Imperial Capital a burnt wasteland. The Emperor, Vincent, told Arakiya that it would not be tolerated a second time. Later, at Chisha's suggestion, the burnt land was reused as a reservoir, but the blow was powerful enough to redraw the map.

Priscilla: "—Everything in the world is made for my convenience."

—The slash issued by a dignified and confident voice drowned everything out.

A flash of the Yang Sword swallowed the flames that would have scorched the world black.

Prisca leapt to Yorna's side, her long, beautiful hair fluttering in the hot wind as Arakiya was reflected in her eyes, one lit by flames and the other not.

And then—

Priscilla: "Dear Mother."

The moment her lips moved, Yorna, moving from behind Prisca, unleashed a ferocious kick.

Prisca, who aligned her feet with the sole of the unleashed kick, converted the momentum of the kick into her own forward motion, launching herself and approaching Arakiya with a speed that could be mistaken for light.

Prisca then raised the Yang Sword in her hand,

Priscilla: "Arakiya."

With a flash, and a single word, Arakiya's movements were all sealed off.

The reflexive defensive action of Arakiya, an evasion that blended her with the atmosphere, was twisted and crushed by Prisca's flash, mercilessly piercing her entire body.

Arakiya: "…"

Arakiya's consciousness, was cut off.

Ironically, just like when she had turned the northern part of the Imperial Capital into a scorched field, Arakiya's most powerful firepower was unleashed, but right after that, she was struck by Cecilus's flash, and had her consciousness cut off in a similar way.

But, finally, in the end, she heard it.

Priscilla: "My Yang Sword cuts what I want to cut, burns what I want to burn. —And strikes what I want to strike."

As she said this, Prisca had swung the Yang Sword—While Arakiya fell, she had not realized it had not been the sword's blade, but rather the hilt, that had been pointed towards her.

5

—The boy smiled. No matter the time, he was always smiling.

Even if the color of the sky changed, even if these vast lands violently fissured, even if a natural disaster yet unseen by those blue eyes assailed upon the world, and unprecedented events tried to get in his way, he would smile.

Had he gone crazy? Yeah, he was crazy.

Had he been drunk? Yeah, he was drunk.

Not on battle. Not on alcohol. Not on love. Not on blood.

Absolutely, thoroughly, unquestionably, a maniac. Definitely, undoubtedly, unequivocally, a drunkard. That boy continued to smile.

If he did not do so—

Boy: "—Folk who are busy wouldn't perch their eyes on the stage of a boring actor, now would they?"

Even when nothing happens, tears could be spilled. But, was it possible that, even when nothing happens, one could smile?

If so, then smiling would be the beginning of something. Smiling, would signify that a tale was beginning to unfold.

Whether that tale had already begun, or was just beginning from here, he did not know.

That was to say, smiling was proof of one settling their resolve to rise to the stage; such was how the boy defined it.

Therefore—

Boy: “By all means, feel free to smile, how about it? You’ve gone through great trouble to get everything fully prepared up ‘till here. If possible, giving you a big laugh would feel just as good as defeating you!”

???: “…”

Boy: “Oh, is it possible that it’s strange for me to be here? If you perhaps think that one of your allies disobeyed you and spoke about it or something, that would be a needless worry! I don’t really know why, but I just came all the way here on a hunch after all!”

Cheerfully smiling as he clapped his hands, he firmly planted his zori on the ground and stopped putting on airs.

Behind him, the bulwark of the reservoir was fissured, water continuing to gush out, and standing in front of it, blocking the way, the boy—Cecilus Segmunt, saw the figure of an antagonist before his eyes.

That was—

???: “Whatever shall I do with you, how arduous. —Deliberation: Required.”

—With a great number of dead people following behind her, was a Witch of short stature.

Chapter 10:
No One Can Be Alone

1

—Fainting and sleeping, while both were the same disruption of consciousness, how were they different?

Surely, Subaru, who was probably one of the world's leading experts on fainting and loss of consciousness, did not understand how the two were different.

What he could say for sure, was that if both fainting and sleeping had the effect of resting the body, then it seemed to him that fainting had only about half that effect.

It may have been just a matter of feeling, but that was how he felt.

That was definitely because, unlike sleeping, in fainting, the feelings of the people around oneself were too different.

If one had no connection with anyone else, and no one was worried about them, maybe there was no difference between fainting and sleeping.

However—

Subaru: "—Ah."

His eyelids trembled, and a weak sigh leaked from his throat.

With such a frail and helpless gesture, while bringing himself back to reality, Natsuki Subaru slowly awoke from the darkness.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru raised his face from the shore of reality he had pulled himself to, and for a moment, he forgot to catch his breath.

What came into his view was an unfamiliar ceiling—how many times had he woken up in an unknown place like this and used his head to try to find out where he was?

However, what would normally be a solitary task was not so this time.

Beatrice: “…Oh, you finally woke up, I suppose. Subaru is such a hopeless oversleeper, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

A familiar, lovely face filled in Subaru’s view of the unfamiliar ceiling.

Beatrice, with her drooping eyebrows and pale-colored eyes, was looking at Subaru; she was the girl who had probably shared the most waking moments with him.

And, when Beatrice entered Subaru’s field of vision, he realized that his hand, which seemed to be lying in bed, was being held, and his lips loosened.

Subaru: “By some chance, did you hold my hand this whole time?”

Beatrice: “Of course, I suppose. Betty is Subaru’s partner, in fact. Besides, Subaru tends to go everywhere too much on his own, I suppose. If you don’t like being chained up, then holding hands is the most effective way to keep you in check, in fact.”

Subaru: “As expected, you really understand my personality well…”

Subaru could only chuckle at Beatrice’s pouting face, as he could not come up with a retort.

Subaru always found a way to do what needed to be done, even if he was chained up, but it was always heartbreaking to release a hand that had been held.

Subaru was sensitive to pain, so that was the most effective way to keep him from leaving.

Subaru: “Uh, so where are we? Right now, what are we doing…”

Beatrice: "Calm down, Subaru, I suppose. It is understandable that you want to be concerned about a lot of things but… more importantly, first, look around you, in fact."

Subaru: "Around me?"

Beatrice put her finger to her lips and feigned seriousness at Subaru, who wanted to know what was going on.

Subaru, who had been feeling restless and impatient, was stopped in his tracks and made to blink as he followed Beatrice's advice to look around at things other than her and the ceiling.

And then, he sucked in his breath.

—Around himself resting on his bed, he saw many people snoring.

Subaru: "…"

The cabin was not spacious at all. With only the one bed that Subaru was sleeping on, it took up half of the cabin's space. Within that cabin, there were more than ten people packed tightly into it.

In addition, it was an unthinkable assembly.

Subaru: "Tanza and, Garfiel? And, Hiain and the guys and Louis and, even Utakata…"

Beatrice: "That's not all, I suppose. Betty may have won one hand, but the other…"

Being told this, with Subaru not only having his right hand clasped by Betty, he turned towards his left hand and realized it was also being grasped. There they were tightly clutching his hand, sleeping with their upper body stretched out on the bed—

Subaru: "—Petra."

With a large ribbon fastened on her head, even the little girl's sleeping face was adorable.

Generally, how many hardships and rough patches had she overcome in order to hold his hand? He was not familiar with Petra's traveling clothes, which were covered in dirt, filled with the concerns that the little girl had about being stylish.

To be in that condition, it was proof that she had finally managed to arrive here.

Beatrice: "But the hardest thing that Petra had to do, it would have been seizing the chance to hold Subaru's hand, in fact. It was a struggle for everyone, I suppose."

Subaru: "Hey, hey, you're saying everyone wanted to hold my hand while I was sleeping? No matter how you say it, something that stupid is…"

Beatrice: "It is not stupid, in fact."

Subaru almost laughed at this joke, but Beatrice's quiet voice stopped him.

Subaru's eyes opened wide as Beatrice raised her tightly clenched hand and pointed it out to him,

Beatrice: "Everyone, we were all really worried about Subaru, I suppose. If holding Subaru's hand would help you, then even if it's just that, we're ready to do anything, in fact."

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "Just a little, Subaru should be more aware of how big his presence is, I suppose. For a long time, that's what Betty has been telling you over and over again, in fact."

Quiet, the tone of her voice sounded somewhat dismayed, but Beatrice's words were filled with far too much compassion.

To say something like that with those eyes and voice, it was impossible for him to disregard it.

Even Subaru did not presume to think he did not have an impact on everyone around him, nor that he should not be held dear, however —

Subaru: "…Just because I shrank, everyone's become too overprotective."

???: "I do not know about that. For me, rather than the overprotectiveness of those around him, should Natsuki-san not first reflect on his shrinkage?"

Subaru: "—!"

Suddenly, Subaru's shoulders jumped at the voice he heard.

The voice unexpectedly jumped in, coming from the entrance of the narrow cabin, and examining the expression of the one who slid the door open, his soft features were ever so great to see, goddamnit.

Subaru: "Otto?!"

Otto: "Yes, it is me, but… please be quiet. Please consider Petra-chan's and Garfiel's feelings."

Subaru: "Their feelings…"

Otto: "It was like this, they are waiting for Natsuki-san to wake up, you know? Of course, it was because they wanted to be the first to speak with the awakened Natsuki-san. But, if they found out that I showed up like this and took that privilege, how much would they resent me?"

Subaru: "Ho, you're such a bad guy."

Otto: "Even with Natsuki-san shrunken like this, you do not seem to talk any less."

Putting his finger to his lips and lowering his voice, the young man that had appeared—Otto looked around the cabin.

He made a troubled expression, the inside of the chamber was so crowded that there was almost nowhere to step. Otto looked annoyed, but somehow managed to find a foothold and walked over to the bed,

Otto: "Beatrice-chan, you too, thank you for taking care of Natsuki-san."

Beatrice: "There's nothing to be tired of, I suppose… More importantly, are you going to inform them, in fact?"

Otto: "Of course, I will make sure to let everyone know that Natsuki-san is awake, but…"

As Beatrice looked at him with a reproachful gaze, Otto spaced out his words while smiling bitterly. As he made those spaced out words sound more important, he looked at Subaru lying on the bed,

Otto: "Although it pains me, since I was witness to Natsuki-san's inopportune waking, before things become too noisy, I would like to raise a personal complaint with you."

Subaru: "Th-the nerve of you to act so nice…"

Otto: "Yes, I am a merchant after all."

Touching his hatless head, Otto laughed with a face free of offense.

That smile, it gave Subaru the same chills that the gaze of his enemies did, or the same chill he felt when he incurred Tanza's displeasure; while experiencing this sensation, Subaru took a deep breath.

Admittedly, partially because he was sent to the Vollachian Empire, Subaru believed that he was not as much at fault as he was for the ensuing troubles; however, it was true that he had made people worry.

No matter what kind of complaints he was hit with, he would take them in stride.

Subaru: "Okay, give me everything you've got. But, my mentality has also been suitably trained here. Don't think that you can destroy me with half-baked words."

Otto: "What kind of boast is that? Well, I do not intend on giving you a long lecture. Since I am not the only one who wants to say something to you, I will keep it short. —Natsuki-san."

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Otto: “—I am glad that you were able to safely reunite with us. Please, do not worry too much.”

Subaru: “…”

A hand reached out, plopping itself onto Subaru’s small shoulder.

Feeling Otto’s fingers, which were stronger than what the impression his features gave, they trembled slightly on top of his shoulder, and then Subaru’s throat choked up.

Firmly, Otto knitted his brows, his nose wrinkling as he let those words out; as he had always been one to look at himself from an unbiased view, Otto’s uncontainable emotions became loosened.

Subaru: “Gu…”

His trained mental resolve, and his readiness to accept any blow, all of it was for naught.

Those words that Otto had let out were a killing blow, mercilessly destroying Natsuki Subaru’s barriers, driving a fatal blow into the bare soul underneath.

In short, it was foul play.

Otto: “In any case, this works best on Natsuki-san, right?”

Subaru: “You, you, bastard… hk.”

In front of Subaru, whose whole body was trembling, tightening his expression which had just been on the verge of crumbling, a daring, calm, and implicative smile emerged on Otto’s face.

Having been completely led by the nose, Subaru could not help his face turning red from the sense of defeat. —No, there were other methods. As payback to Otto for being outwitted, though it was far from being a win, it was at least a way to not let him escape with victory.

That was—

Subaru: “Aaah! I’ve lost, I’ve lost, it’s a complete loss, Otto you bastard!!”

Otto: “Eh?!”

While his face was red, Subaru had a wicked smile as he declared his defeat in a loud voice. The second he heard this, Otto’s face turned pale and he shouted.

At that, with Subaru and Otto’s back-and-forth argument echoing within the confines of the cabin, naturally, one-by-one his sleeping companions heard them—No, rather the sleeping lion pack began to wake up.

And like that, with joy and reproach, there was an eruption of feelings of joy and sorrow.

Inside of that noisy cabin, beside the troubled Subaru and Otto, Beatrice watched it from beginning to end with her chin resting on her hands,

Beatrice: “Good grief… they all act far too much like children, I suppose.”

Saying this, with the attitude of a lone bystander, she looked over this scene with affection.

SETOWI

2

—The simultaneous evacuation of the citizens from the Imperial Capital Lupugana.

That was a matter of great importance that had begun while Subaru was unconscious, and among the large group engaged in that, Subaru had woken up in the cabin of a dragon carriage allocated to the transportation of important individuals.

Pulled by a great number of ground dragons, it was a mobile sleeping quarter, an extraordinary product that could be used for both evacuation and recuperation. With such august treatment, it seemed Subaru had been taken out from the Imperial Capital.

Hiain: “Bro! I’m real glad y’er safe! When the power left my body along the way, I got real damn worried! Not knowin’ what might’ve happen’d to ya!”

Weitz: “I wouldn’t care if the bearded bastard died, but if we lose you, the Battalion’d be finished… If you’re on the verge of death, use me or anyone else as a shield…”

Idra: “Weitz’s phrasing bothers me, but I agree. Schwartz, I am truly glad that you’ve returned. Both as a member of the Battalion, and as my own individual.”

Those were the reactions of the ones firmly within the group that had been waiting for Subaru to wake up, of the three in his Unit who had accompanied him since the Gladiator Island, comprised of Hiain, Weitz, and Idra.

Regardless of Idra, who had gone with him during the battle, Hiain and Weitz must have been especially worried, having gone off separately.

That was not the only reason that he had to apologize to those three.

Subaru: “My bad. Because I fainted, everyone’s strengthening must have come undone…”

Weitz: “Don’t worry ‘bout that… Luckily, that only happened when we were already startin’ to evacuate.”

Hiain: “That’s right! The only one who nearly died from that bein’ cut off was this skull-lookin’ bastard, he was in the middle of supportin’ a crumblin’ pillar. If the Governor hadn’t been there, he woulda been crushed to death…”

Weitz: “Didn’t I tell ya not to speak of that…!”

As usual, Weitz’s thoughtful concern for Subaru was ruined by Hiain’s uncalled for comment. Seeing the scenery of the quarreling duo, Idra shrugged his shoulders.

In the midst of the Imperial Capital, with Cor Leonis having come undone, he, who should have been exposed to danger as a result,

Idra: “As Weitz said, don’t sweat it, Schwartz. From the moment that we decided to follow you, whatever would happen beyond that point would be our own responsibility.”

Subaru: “But…”

Idra: “And even if I say that, I know that you’re the one who’s gonna be worried. —I’ll leave the rest of the discussion to those girls who seem to have known you longer than we have.”

As always, Idra was good at wrapping up the conversation rationally.

Thanks to this, Subaru, who could only make emotional objections, was silenced. Idra left the cabin with Hiain and Weitz, who were still grappling with each other.

Like that, as the three of them were leaving, a small figure was about to follow them,

Subaru: “Tanza.”

Tanza: “…I sincerely apologize for not being of use at such a crucial time. I am truly glad that you have been able to return, Schwartz-sama."

Despondently hanging her head, Tanza responded in a formal tone.

Thinking back to the time when they were separated in the Imperial Capital, he could understand Tanza's regrets about her own lack of strength. However, that did not seem to be the only reason for her dispirited expression.

Subaru: "What's wrong? If something happened…"

Tanza: "—. No, it is not something that I should talk to Schwartz-sama about right now. Please leisurely rest your body, and spend time with everyone."

After a moment's hesitation, Tanza also exited the cabin without saying anything more.

He tried to reach out towards her frail back, but both of Subaru's hands were occupied. Still, Subaru's heart appealed to him, not wanting to leave Tanza alone, having made such a face.

Within his heart, he firmly decided that he would definitely hear the reason for that face later.

Then—

???: "—Subaru."

After seeing off those who had left the cabin earlier, what formulated in this moment, as if it had been eagerly waiting to call out to him, was a lively voice in the tone of silver bells, tenderly striking upon his eardrums.

Subaru: "…"

A beat, was the time he needed to both react to that voice, and turn towards it.

The uneasiness of having caused her to worry, or the embarrassment of not being able to face her, or some petty pride;

such things had not been the reason.

It was simply that Subaru genuinely needed to mentally prepare himself.

After all—

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Because, just by calling the other person’s name out, Subaru’s heart experienced a sweet, tingling sensation.

At Subaru’s call, filled with nervousness, the woman herself—Emilia smiled softly,

Emilia: “Mhm, I’m glad to finally see you again… Even so, even when you’re this far away, you’ve made lots of friends, Subaru. I’m reaaally relieved.”

Subaru: “Friends…”

Emilia: “Yes. After all, Subaru, everyone was reaaally worried about you, and never left your side.”

At Emilia’s words, Subaru lowered his head, remembering the state of the cabin up until a moment ago.

No matter how strong Subaru’s feelings about causing them worry had been, whenever he was told it was a bad habit of his, he felt bad about it, but.

Subaru: “I’m, such a lucky guy.”

Emilia: “That’s definitely true. But I want Subaru to be more and more happy, so this tiny amount is not enough at all.”

Subaru: “Even after all the good you’ve done for me?”

Emilia: “So, when Subaru does something for me, does he ever feel satisfied that it’s enough?”

Emilia tilted her head, and while she felt her beautiful, silver hair cascade down her slender shoulders, Subaru was at a loss for words, completely cornered.

She was right. When he wanted to do something for the people he loved, he never thought if what he was doing was enough, but rather he thought if there was more that he could do.

Seeing Subaru's reaction, Emilia smiled and said "Hehe",

Emilia: "What do you think? I'm not wrong, am I? My Knight."

Subaru: "…Yup. You've grown so much while I've been away, and I'm so proud of you, but I've missed you, Emilia!"

Emilia: "Emilia?"

Subaru: "…No, it's, Emilia-tan."

When asked again, Subaru recalled that long-forgotten name he called her.

Yes, that was what Subaru called the girl who was so important, so precious, so dear, and that he got his heart all messed up when he thought about her.

As soon as he called Emilia that name, a feeling of harmony quickly overcame him.

While Subaru was reflecting on that feeling,

Petra: "Emilia-neesama! It's about time we had a chat with Subaru!"

The long-awaited, tender mood between Subaru and Emila was interrupted by Petra, a young girl who asserted her presence by raising her small hand.

Woken up after the earlier commotion, and afterwards not able to calmly celebrate the reunion due to the chaos that had followed, Petra hungered for the chance to reunite while anger burned in her round eyes.

Petra: "We haven't been able to talk to Subaru properly yet. —

Except for Otto-san, who sneaked in."

Otto: "Ugh. That is not, I was not trying to sneak in…"

Garfiel: "Oh? Oh? Excuses, Ottobro. What kind of excuses is he gonna tell, ain't we all a lil' excited to hear? Ya sneaking in here hurt even my amazin' self, y'know…"

Otto: "Even Garfiel is snapping at me?!"

Garfiel dropped his shoulders in disappointment and made a sad gesture. When he stacked his attack on top of Petra's, Otto opened his eyes wide and shouted.

Then Beatrice followed up with, "That's right, in fact," as if to add insult to injury.

Beatrice: "Betty heard, I suppose. Otto said it himself, that he secretly came to talk to Subaru so that Petra and the others wouldn't find out about it, in fact."

Emilia: "Huh, really? Otto-kun, I understand how you feel, but we were all worried about Subaru, so you shouldn't cheat."

Otto: "I have no allies! Rather than incurring a terrible loss, this hurts far worse!"

Being called out by the backstabbing Beatrice and by Emilia, who were reacting to it honestly, Otto clutched his chest and was vigorously punished for his deeds.

While laughing at such a lively group of people,

Frederica: "Despite Otto-sama's bad habits, I am beyond glad that we were able to meet, since Emilia-sama, Beatrice-sama, and, of course, Petra were not in the least bit happy."

Frederica said this softly.

She, like Petra, was also dressed in a traveling outfit instead of a maid's uniform, which was a rare sight. However, Subaru was immediately surprised to see a sight even more rare than that.

The smiling Frederica had a tear well up in the corner of her eye, and it almost started to run down her cheek.

Petra: “F-Frederica-neesama, you’re crying!”

Frederica: “Huh? Ah, m-my apologies. I was just, you know, completely relieved… How indecent of me.”

Subaru: “…No, it’s not indecent or anything at all. That’s how worried you were about me.”

Frederica’s tears surprised him, but more than that, he was grateful.

As Frederica said, they had rushed to find the missing Subaru and the others, and the amount of trouble they had to overcome to get here was immeasurable.

They were in an Empire in a state of civil war, with borders that should not have been easy to cross.

They must have overcome a number of obstacles that could not have been overcome by proper means in order to reach Subaru.

Subaru: “Really, thank you, everyone.”

Garfiel: “Heh heh, it’s only natural that our amazin’ selves would come here. Without the Captain, we can’t get our amazin’ selves together in any way, shape, or form.”

Petra: “Yeah, Garf-san is right… I am surprised that you became so tiny, though.”

Garfiel rubbed the bridge of his nose, and Petra, smiling and nodding, chimed in at the end.

Certainly, this could not be said to be over just with all of them coming together—at least not with Subaru’s current condition. As expected, they did not intend to return to the Kingdom of Lugunica with Subaru in a shrunken state.

Natsuki Subaru would not be able to stand alongside Emilia unless he returned to his original age of eighteen.

Subaru: “Well, Beatrice… ahem! Beako, you don’t mind me lining up next to you?”

Beatrice: “Nothing wrong with being at the same eye level, I suppose. But Betty misses being up in Subaru’s arms already, in fact. That is why a big Subaru is preferable, I suppose.”

Petra: “Me too! I also think the big Subaru is better. I do think the current Subaru is nice and cute, but…”

Emilia: “Oh, you think he’s cute, too. I’m glad I’m not the only one who thought so.”

Emilia’s slightly off-topic response to the conversation caused a relaxed atmosphere to spread throughout the cabin.

Subaru could feel the nostalgia of the long-separated Emilia camp in this gentle, indescribable atmosphere, and his soul found a sense of satisfaction.

Having been thrown into the Vollachian Empire, he had spent time with the Shudraqian People, Flop, Medium, and later with members from Gladiator Island, all of whom had formed the Pleiades Battalion. However, the atmosphere of this reunion was different from any of them.

While everyone he had met was precious, the preciousness of this space, which had been kept away from him for so long, was something he took the time to appreciate.

Subaru: “But, as expected, guess Roswaal or Ram couldn’t come. No, it’s already pretty bad just to have Emilia-tan here.”

Subaru gave a wry smile when he mentioned the faces that he did not see in the cabin.

Meili was also not there, but it would be difficult for her to cross the border in order to accompany Emilia and the others due to her situation. In all likelyhood, she stayed back at the mansion with Ram and—.

Emilia: “Huh? No, you’re wrong there. Ram and Roswaal are here with us. They were reaaally worried about you, Subaru."

Subaru: "—What?"

Subaru's thoughts were shattered by Emilia's answer, who had a strange look on her face.

Subaru's eyes widened in shock as Emilia's beautiful voice resonated in his head. Saying Ram and Roswaal had come with them.

The presence of Roswaal was a tremendous surprise, but that was put aside for now.

Because, the problem was not Roswaal,

Subaru: "Ram, she's here, too?"

Petra: "She's here. Ram-neesama was also worried about you, Subaru… Ah! Just don't mention that to her, okay?"

Subaru: "I won't. I won't. I won't mention it, but that's not what I'm talking about…"

Shaking his head, Petra's words made Subaru's brain fire off.

What he was talking about, was that Ram being here meant—

Subaru: "Did, she already meet with Rem?"

Emilia: "Ah…"

As soon as Subaru asked the question, everyone's expression except for Subaru's suddenly became tense.

That reaction was what Subaru had feared the most.

Emilia and the others' reactions, which were of the "I forgot to tell Subaru" variety, told him that it had happened while Subaru was sleeping.

—The reunion of the separated sisters, Ram and Rem.

Subaru: “Waaah–!! I so wanted to be theeeere!!”

Emilia: “S-Sorry, Subaru, but we wanted them to see each other as soon as possible…!”

Subaru: “I know, I know, I’m such a damn idiot—Hk!”

Covering his face with his hands, Subaru exclaimed about his own stupidity for having missed the historic moment.

Emilia and others tried hard to comfort Subaru, but this was no one’s fault, and Subaru’s wounds would remain unhealed.

If pressed to say, it was Subaru who was the most at fault for having slept during such a critical moment.

Even so—

Subaru: “H-How was it? Both of their reactions…”

Emilia: “Um, well, they were a little hesitant at first… But it felt reaaally special! I even cried a little, too!”

Subaru: “Graaah!”

Beatrice: “Emilia! You need to elaborate more, in fact! Subaru is pitiable, I suppose!”

Emilia: “Huh, right! I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Even so, the frustration did not abate in the slightest, so Subaru’s frustration stayed in full.

As Subaru shed tears of frustration, he realized once again how much he hated the fact that when he was about to really cry, this childish body could not hold back the tears.

3

Rem: “…”

Right in front of her, from behind the door she was about to reach for, she heard a powerful, loud shout.

The bellowing voice and its contents stopped Rem from moving, and her mind was racked with hesitation, her shapely eyebrows furrowing together, wondering what to do.

Louis: “Uu, au?”

Rem: “…Um, I’m sorry, Louis-chan, I know you want to see him.”

Right beside Rem, Louis, hugging her around the waist, looked up at her curiously.

When the unconscious Subaru woke up, Louis wanted to talk to Subaru herself, but she held back and rushed to Rem’s side.

Then, she took her by the hand and led her to Subaru’s sleeping quarters—

Rem: “…”

The voices coming from inside the cabin belonged to Subaru and his companions.

Putting it like that, it may have sounded like an outsider’s matter, but it seemed that these friends were also closely related to Rem. —Like with Subaru, Rem did not really feel a connection with them.

Rem: “They’re not bad people at all, I know that.”

The group, led by Emilia, who was the first person she had met among them, had come in search of both Rem and Subaru, and they were clearly considerate of their companions, full of action, and above all, good people.

According to what she had heard, they came from the Kingdom neighboring the Empire, even though they were forbidden to cross over, and even participated in a civil war with which they had no connection.

All of this was done to save Subaru—or rather, Subaru and Rem, who had been caught up in the Empire’s rebellion.

In the same way that Rem could also not escape from this struggle in the Empire—.

???: "—You can hear Barusu's rapacious voice."

Rem gasped slightly as suddenly a voice called to her back while she was thinking.

Instead of Rem, it was Louis, who was hugging her around the waist, who turned around to look at the other party. They looked back at Louis, who was looking at her, and let out a small sigh,

???: "Stop glaring at Ram with such an accusatory look. This was a tough love lesson for Barusu… No, there's no love, so it's just tough. Yes, a purely tough lesson."

Rem: "…Does that mean you don't like him?"

???: "There's no hate, just many opportunities for disdain."

With that said, Rem also turned to the other party, who was slowly walking toward her, their shoes making a sound.

She took a beat to turn around to look in that direction, as she needed to muster up the courage to look at the other person's face directly.

After all, that face was familiar to Rem's, even though she had no memory of it.

It was—

Rem: "…Ram-san."

Ram: "What a cold way to address Ram, considering she's ready to be called older sister."

Rem: "For me, everything was so sudden that…"

The woman who stood in front of her, clutching her elbows and puffing out her chest—Ram, that was how she referred to herself, and that was how she was referred to by those around her, bore a lot of resemblance to Rem herself.

The differences were the color of her hair and eyes, and the overwhelming pressure of confidence overflowing within them.

It seemed that she was Rem's older sister, who had no memory of her.

To be honest, there was nothing to deny when one compared their facial features. The name of her older sister, which Subaru had told her many times before, must have been "Ram".

Above all else, what undeniably predominated Rem's mind was—

Ram: "Whatever you think, Rem's heart will feel it, because Ram and Rem are sisters… Synesthesia doesn't lie."

Rem: "Synesthesia…"

Ram: "A sort of connection of the soul between twins. All along, Ram has felt Rem's presence… Is Rem different?"

Rem: "…"

Rem closed her lips at Ram, who narrowed her light-crimson eyes as she asked directly.

If asked whether Rem was different or not, then no, not at all. While she did not understand well that thing called Synesthesia, inside Rem there was a very, very strong sensation that felt different.

That was an overwhelming feeling of safety towards Ram, whom she was supposedly meeting for the first time.

Rem: "…But I'm afraid."

Ram: "Afraid?"

Rem: "To have such feelings about you, with whom I have only exchanged a few words in a short time."

For Rem, who had lost her memory, Subaru and Louis were the only two people who were present at the moment her present self began. Due to the circumstances, she pushed Subaru away and kept Louis by her side at first.

After that, Rem got to know the Shudraqian people, Flop and Medium, Priscilla and Katya, and in Rem's own way, she established various relationships with them.

Even then, Ram's very existence overtook them all at once, and tried to stand at the top.

Rem: "That is what I'm afraid of…"

This inexpressible sense of security, it was the footsteps of the past approaching.

It was not that she did not wish to regain her lost memories. But, it also seemed as though many of Rem's problems would surely come back to her with the return of them.

But at the same time, she feared that when those footsteps caught up with her, everything would change.

If the way one saw, the way one felt, the way one thought, if everything changed.

Yes, firmly, intensely, Rem shut her eyes and clutched her chest.

And there—

Ram: "Yes. —What a relief."

Rem: "Huh?"

An unexpected voice was heard, and Rem opened her tightly shut eyelids to look up.

Ram, who was clutching her elbows in front of Rem, stared at her, lowering the corners of her eyes slightly, wondering what she had just said,

Ram: "Ram is thinking the same as Rem. Afraid."

Rem: “Afraid, you mean…”

Ram: “What if Rem naturally accepted Synesthesia and jumped into Ram’s chest as a given? —Yes, Ram was afraid.”

Rem: “…”

As she had a tender expression, but spoke about fear, Rem began to understand less how Ram in front of her felt. —No, that was not it.

Understanding what she did not understand, that was what confused her.

Louis: “U!”

Suddenly, instead of Rem, whose eyes were swimming with confusion, it was Louis who groaned as she hugged her around the waist.

Louis, glaring at Ram from below, was sensitive to the trembling in Rem’s heart and sharpened her gaze as if to scold Ram for causing it.

Meeting Louis’s gaze, Ram’s eyes narrowed slightly,

Ram: “Trying to stand between Ram and Rem? Of all people, you?”

Louis: “Aa-u!”

Ram: “So, you’re not going to back down. This is complicated, but not unpleasant.”

Just what history was there between them, that Ram had said such while showing signs that she also knew Louis, then looked into Rem’s eyes once again. When their eyes met, she could not separate them from hers.

Even though her heart felt like being burned by the intensity of that gaze, her soul was attracted to it.

Her anxiety grew stronger and stronger.

Just as equally strong as her captivation towards Ram.

Feeling it intensely, Rem bit her lip hard,

Rem: “You certainly must be my older sister. I can believe that without a doubt. It’s just…”

Ram: “Even if your heart is convinced, your mind is not?”

Rem: “…Yes.”

Ram: “Right. Then, that is fine for now.”

Rem nodded weakly, and Ram closed the distance with another step.

Rem’s shoulders tensed at the sight of her approaching, and Louis stepped forward to protect her. But Rem gently held Louis’s shoulder and said, “It’s okay,” stopping the gentle little girl.

Then, of their own volition, they directed their gazes directly at Ram.

With Rem’s gaze on her, Ram uncrossed her arms and held out her hand. The hand that was offered by the person whose heart had already recognized her as her sister.

Ram: “I am Ram. Your older sister, doubtlessly born to love you.”

Rem: “…”

Ram: “Though, there are other people just as important to this independent older sister of yours too.”

Rem’s eyes widened at the words spoken with such calm and confidence.

Then, as the meaning of the words began to sink in, a gasp escaped her lips. Rem just gave a little smile and laughed,

Rem: “It turns out, you are a frightening person. When I talk to you, I feel like my body just surrenders itself into this sense of security I feel.”

Ram: “It cannot be helped, Ram is the kind of older sister you just want to put all your trust and love in.”

Rem: “Yes, Ram-neesan.”

Ram proudly puffed out her chest, her hand being timidly grasped by Rem, who at last had addressed her in that manner. Upon hearing that, Ram raised her eyebrows slightly.

It had taken courage for Rem to address her as such, so that reaction was unexpected.

Rem: “Umm?”

Ram: “…As much as doing it like Barusu said annoys me, this sure doesn’t feel comfortable.”

Rem: “Errr?”

Ram: “—Nee-sama.”

Rem: “Huh?”

With Ram looking sour for an instant then continuing her few words, Rem widened her eyes. In response to Rem’s reaction, Ram repeated herself once more, saying the same thing again.

Ram: “Address Ram as nee-sama. That feels the most comfortable.”

Rem: “…Ram, nee-sama?”

Ram: “The name is unnecessary.”

Rem: “—Nee-sama.”

Doing exactly as she was told to, drawing ever closer to what Ram wished to be called, the latter shut her eyes tightly. Then, she pulled Rem’s hand, the one she was gripping, towards herself; Rem stumbled around a bit on reflex, but came to have Ram gently catch her body from the front, embracing her.

@ddukae

And continuing like that, Ram put her lips to Rem's ear, and,

Ram: "Now Ram can clearly feel it. —Ram is Rem's nee-sama."

Rem: "I feel, it too."

Thus, as soon as she was embraced by her arms, what she had been afraid of overflowed from her.

What she had dubbed a sense of security, was an attraction to her soul, a love for Ram. Firmly, gently, it engulfed even Rem, who was supposedly without memories.

Ram: "…As much as it pains Ram to say it, but are you ready for this, Rem?"

Rem: "Ready… for what?"

Ram: "Ready to go inside; we need to show it off to Barusu, not to mention show it off to Emilia-sama and the others. We need to boast our sisterly love, that will alleviate any lingering worries."

Due to Ram's words, Rem closed her eyes.

Even now, be it Emilia and everyone else or Subaru as well, how she ought to face them and what expression she should have were questions for which she had not found an answer.

But, at the very least, there were no doubts whatsoever about the feeling of Ram being her sister, about her feelings for Ram.

Rem: "Yes, nee-sama."

Ram: "Like I thought, perhaps we should put that off until you call Ram that a hundred times."

Rem: "Nee-sama…"

Ram: "It's a joke."

To the nodding Rem, Ram told a joke that had not sounded like a joke.

Seeing such a mischievous attitude from her sister filled Rem's heart with relief, even if for but a single moment, despite her own self's sense of urgency, despite the fact that they were in a situation that was otherwise a matter of the utmost urgency.

Louis: "Uau, auaaau~?"

Rem: "Yes, I'm fine. And thank you, Louis-chan, for your concern."

Louis: "Uh!"

Louis had been standing by Rem's side the whole time, caught in the middle of Rem and Ram's dialogue. Relieving her of her fears with a smile, Rem gently stroked the head of the kind little girl.

Then, with Louis in tow, Rem mustered up the courage to line up next to her sister, who had turned around halfway.

Without stopping, Ram and her shared glances and nodded, and the two of them reached for the door before them and—

Rem: "—Pardon us. I could hear you making a lot of noise, even from outside."

Ram: "It was a very Barusu-like yell, like many little animals put together, wasn't it?"

And so, the sisters both stepped into the cabin their companions were in.

4

Subaru: "Haa… Feels like a huge weight's been lifted off my shoulders…"

Keenly sensing that a huge load had disappeared off of his chest, Subaru muttered so.

That huge load on his chest, it had been the responsibility Subaru had needed to take upon himself—with nobody else around to protect Rem, he would see that duty through, and make it so Ram, Emilia, and everyone else could meet her.

In all honesty, however, upon learning that he had not been present for the reunion of the sisters, Ram and Rem, he had been struck with grief akin to that of the world ending.

Subaru: “If only I could’ve presented the two of them lined up side-by-side, like that…”

The demeanor of those two, visiting Subaru’s cabin together, made him believe that it had at least not gone badly, even if he did not know exactly what sort of exchanges the two sisters had had.

Once Subaru grasped this, the frustration he had felt just before vanished, and a sense of relief washed over him.

Finally, he had finally made it so that Rem and Ram could meet.

He had made it so that Rem could meet with Emilia, with Beatrice, with everyone else.

Just how much of that could be said to be due to Subaru’s contributions, he did not know, but it had been done regardless.

That Subaru himself had also been able to meet up with Emilia and the gang, was a matter of great celebration.

Subaru: “Although, I’m still small, and Rem’s Memories aren’t back yet…”

However, he could sense that the seeds of hope were budding.

As far as the matter of Subaru’s size went, it could be said that a way for it to be resolved could be seen in the near future; and assuredly, he would be able to find a way to restore Rem’s Memories.

So, what came next was—

Beatrice: “…Is it really alright if you don’t have Betty with you, in fact?”

Subaru: “No, I’m not that composed at all, but that guy won’t show his face with you around, Beako, so indulge my selfishness for just a while.”

Beatrice: “If anything happens, call for Betty right away, I suppose. Betty will come rushing with a zyoom, in fact.”

Subaru: “I’ll be counting on you.”

Until the very end, Beatrice wanted to avoid letting go of Subaru’s hand.

The deeply considerate girl tenderly detached her hand; once Emilia and everyone else reluctantly parted with him and exited the cabin, Subaru was left with nobody else in the cabin filled with silence.

Once the factors for it having been so lively up until this point had all left the cabin, Subaru was instantly overwhelmed by a myriad of misgivings.

The retreat from the Imperial Capital, on how large of a scale had it been undertaken? Had the origin of that horde of zombies been grasped? Was the relationship between the Imperial Army and the rebels improving? For what reason had Emilia and the others purposely only touched upon nothing but upbeat topics? What was the answer for Tanza’s somber expression?

And, the events that had occurred just before, when Subaru had gone unconscious, how had they concluded?

Subaru: “Even if you don’t answer everything, can you at least answer around half of them?”

???: “—That would depend on how much you are willing to compromise.”

In the sleeping quarters bereft of people, Subaru’s words, spoken as he raised his upper body from the bed, were answered by a figure that had likely been waiting for everyone to finish leaving.

There was the sound of shoes stepping firmly, leisurely, on the floor in a dignified manner, punctuated by a posture which lacked any hesitation to make their presence known to those in the environs.

Their deportment, the keen glint of their eyes, none of it deviated from his memory. And yet, they were markedly different in some way, that person—that black-haired man, Subaru fixedly stared at his handsome looks.

And then—

???: “How eloquently shall you speak, Natsuki Subaru? —O Stargazer of the Dragon Kingdom.”

And thus, his black eyes pregnant with hostility, Vincent Vollachia inquired so of Natsuki Subaru.

Chapter 11:
Shut the Hell Up

1

???: "—Are you going to see him, Abel-san?"

Stopping at the call from his side, Vincent turned around.

Multiple carriages were coupled to one another, treated as a single long dragon carriage, which allowed the Divine Protection of the multiple ground dragons to be applied to its entirety—Vincent batted one eye shut, upon witnessing a familiar blue-haired girl standing at the juncture he had crossed over.

Thinking back, it had been a long time since he had last exchanged words with her in this way.

Vincent: "Have the uninvited guests from the Kingdom achieved their purpose?"

Blue-Haired Girl: "Their purpose is not me, but…"

Vincent: "Cease. Do not take up my time with nonsense that even you do not fully believe. Time is precious. Especially under the current circumstances. As you understand."

Blue-Haired Girl: "…"

At the sound of Vincent's sharp voice, the girl lowered her head with eyes downcast.

However, she quickly raised it again, adopting Vincent's notion of time being limited,

Blue-Haired Girl: "Are you going to see him, Abel-san?"

And, she piled that very same inquiry onto him once more.

Vincent: "I am not Abel. I, am Vincent Vollachia."

To that question, Vincent replied without changing his expression.

Abel was a temporary name, which he had utilized for his own convenience during his escape and nothing more. He had taken it from Abellux, his family name from the time before his ascension to Emperor, a name he held no particular attachment to.

But, his displeasure towards being called that was stronger, right now.

Vincent: "—. It has been reported that that thing is awake. I must confront him."

Pushing aside his displeasure, Vincent answered the girl's inquiry.

Whatever she thought, it would not alter Vincent's decision. He did not think she had such thoughts or intentions to begin with.

Protected, displaced, distressed, and after a long period of time, she would come to a natural conclusion.

Like many others, she was merely a single ordinary person.

Ergo, Vincent attempted to cut that dialogue short.

However—

Blue-Haired Girl: "He is not your enemy, Abel-san."

Vincent: "—What?"

Upon receiving a reply from the girl he had expected to remain silent and downcast, a reply with contents contrary to his expectations, Vincent furrowed his brow.

The girl thus glared at Vincent, her pale-blue eyes containing a definite purpose.

There was a light that, as of their parting, had not dwelled in them; timidly yet boldly it penetrated Vincent, as if trying to intimidate him.

Vincent: “—. I am Vincent Vollachia. There shall not be a third time.”

Blue-Haired Girl: “I am sorry. But I do not have my memories, so I do not know much about His Excellency, Emperor Vincent. So there is nothing I can say to Him.”

Vincent: “…”

Blue-Haired Girl: “He is not your enemy, Abel-san.”

Without once averting her gaze, the girl yet again emphasized so.

Vincent had a good understanding of her based on the abilities she possessed: she was the reins with which to control Natsuki Subaru, and a valuable user of healing magic.

Supposing that she had taken that self-assured stance against Vincent while being aware of her own position, he would be compelled to do nothing but dub her as possessing considerable mettle. Yet, that did not seem to be the case.

And thus—

Vincent: “You, what did you say your name was?”

Blue-Haired Girl: “—It’s Rem. At least now I can definitively answer that.”

Vincent: “The girl who has no memories, making such a declaration?”

Rem: “It’s strange. Even though my heart and my mind don’t remember, there are things that your surroundings can teach you. I know that I’m Rem, thanks to someone who kept telling me that all this time.”

Whether it was gratitude or exasperation, the girl—Rem herself did not comprehend which of the two her way of speaking was conveying.

However, understanding that it was not connected to disgust or other loathsome negative thoughts, Vincent concluded that there was no need for further conversation.

Turning his back, he proceeded to walk away. And as he did so,

Vincent: “Rem, never again let mine time be so needlessly squandered. At your next act of disrespect, I shall lop off your head.”

Leaving her with those words, he ended his conversation with Rem.

And then—

Vincent: “How eloquently shall you speak, Natsuki Subaru? —O Stargazer of the Dragon Kingdom.”

2

While acutely sensing the hostility being directed towards him, Subaru stood face to face with the man.

In retrospect, his relationship with this man could be summed up with the word “enigmatic”.

At their first meeting, he had been a suspicious masked man camping out in a forest. On that occasion, he had been frantically searching for Rem and Louis, whom he had lost sight of; hence why he had not been desperate to probe deeper into that matter, but the man was far from just being a suspicious person.

The next time they met, it had occurred inside a cage in the Shudraqian village; Subaru could hardly explain why the man had acted so self-important despite his status as a prisoner. He would rather that there had been some means of escape, because after that he was made to take part in the Lifeblood Ritual, in which he had acted without a plan.

Thereafter, his help in retrieving Rem notwithstanding, he had come to part with Subaru on one occasion; however, he had known that Subaru’s group would have no option but to return. Not informing them of those circumstances had been a show of his underhandedness.

Immediately after, he had fully cooperated with Subaru's plan to capture the Fortress City of Guaral; as the dancers that went by Natsumi Schwartz, Bianca, and Fiora, they entered the enemy's stronghold together.

There were doubts regarding his unusual relationship with Priscilla; and after, in the Demon City, he was courted by Yorna; and without hesitation, he declared that Louis should not be allowed to live; thus was their relationship upon parting ways.

And even then, once Subaru had escaped from the Gladiator Island, and once he heard of the situation enveloping the Empire at large, he had held full conviction that said situation had been instigated by that man, the Emperor who had been ousted from his throne.

Abandoning the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, he took command of the great number of people making their retreat, of the great number of people evacuating the Imperial Capital. And once more, leading the people of the Empire as the one at their apex, the one regarded as the wisest Emperor—.

Subaru: "It's an honor to have Vincent Vollachia-san come and visit me. You arrived at just the right time; can you peel me an appa?"

Vincent: "Do not play games with me. In the first place, I am not one to do the likes of peeling fruit. Where are the appas, even?"

Subaru: "Where are…?"

At the question of the man who had set foot into the sleeping quarters, approaching him, Subaru's gaze turned to the side.

Even in another world, it was standard practice for fruit to be brought when visiting someone injured or ill; it was perhaps a bit of a cliché in situations of the sort. For that reason, there was a basket of appas next to his bed.

Naturally, his conversational partner should have been able to see it as well.

Subaru: "In that basket of fruits there. The red ones, don't they look delicious or what?"

Vincent: “Fool, are you duping me? Appas are fruits of white color.”

Subaru: “Well, they’re white inside once you’ve peeled them, but… Wait, this conversation, I think I recall having this very exchange, stored way way back in the recesses of my memories.”

Memories of it were rather faint, but he had the feeling he’d once had the same conversation quite some time prior.

The details of whom he had been talking to at the time could not be recalled, but he did have the memory of getting the same impression he was getting now, that those of nobility had reached an extreme to this point.

Either way—

Subaru: “I guess there are things you don’t know either. How unexpected.”

With that not-at-all-tense preface to their first mutual exchange of words in a while, feeling like they had not started off badly, Subaru stated so.

At Subaru’s words, the man—Abel, extended a hand to the basket, and split an appa in half with the knife left there. Naturally, a cross-section of its white insides was exposed.

Subaru: “…”

Laying eyes upon that undeniable result, did he have the mind to admit what was actually factual in their previous exchange? Abel put down the knife, and, leaving the fruit split in half in the basket, turned to Subaru.

Moistening those sable eyes of his still, was unmistakable hostility.

Subaru: “No way, you’re mad at me for embarrassing you about the color of an appa…? You’re the one who’s called me something weird just now.”

Vincent: “Stargazer of the Dragon Kingdom, it was.”

Subaru: “That was it.”

One more time being made aware of how he had been referred to, Subaru frowned, as he had no idea what he was on about.

That term was not one he had no recollection of. If he was not mistaken, from what he had heard, it was something like a term that referred to the fortune tellers that accompanied the Emperor closely, in the Empire.

Very much like the Dragon History Stone, the Kingdom of Lugunica’s tablet of prophecies, they were an existence that spoke of the future.

Subaru: “No, feels like you spoke of it in a way even worse than that… You put it like it’s like peeping into the near future.”

Vincent: “I recognize it as such, without a doubt. That is how I perceive those things.”

Subaru: “If that’s the case, you spoke of me as if I’m a peeping tom just now, are you aware of that?”

If times had not changed, would it not be that by normal standards, he would have the right to cut Abel down for the affront? Or, to put it into modern terms Subaru was aware of, he was prepared to fight for defamation of character in a civil court.

However, faced with Subaru’s reply, Abel’s countenance did not waver in the slightest. Those black eyes of his, the same color as Subaru’s own, but distinct in their depth, told Subaru that he had no intent to play along.

Of course, Subaru did not intend to mess about either—

Vincent: “You, just how much have you grasped?”

Subaru: “How much have I grasped, about the current situation? If that’s what you mean, I wasn’t told many of the details. Emilia and everyone were all worried about me right after I woke up… But I know we’re in the middle of evacuating.”

Vincent: "…"

Subaru: "The civil war has stopped for the time being, everyone's fleeing from the Imperial Capital right now… Though you'd think it would be hella chaotic, it doesn't seem like it's turned into a huge uproar."

The dragon carriages moved unceasingly, the night view outside the window shifted at a slow pace, but with the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion shielding them from the vibration and the howling of the wind, all was quiet.

One would think that the very quietude in the passenger cars of the dragon carriages as quite loud, but that the dragon carriages had not halted their march even once was evidence that no major troubles had popped up.

And that was in spite of the fact that a considerable number of people, most likely in the hundreds of thousands, were being transported.

Subaru: "The Nine Divine Generals and whatnot probably served as a unifying force, but that alone wouldn't be enough. As I thought, you're quite the big deal, man."

Vincent: "…"

Subaru: "Honestly, when I heard the story of you being betrayed by your right-hand man and retainer, being ousted from the throne, I really wondered if it'd be fine to have you back as Emperor, but, it turned out to be the right option."

Leadership and charisma, those were the so-called qualities of those standing above others.

These qualities were not simply the result of outstanding ability, and they could probably be acquired through blood, sweat, and tears, but the people who had these traits from birth were not few in number.

The royals of each country, the heads of many an organization, were such cases.

In that sense, Abel, who had had something to fall back on in times of emergency, still held the potential to be followed, to be looked up to by those around him.

Subaru: “It annoys me that rather than being on the fence about it, I was leaning more towards believing it. But I was right, you are the Emperor…”

Vincent: “—Is that as per your expectations as well?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

A quiet voice, however, it had certainly been laced with emotion. As it seemed way out of left field, Subaru’s brain refused to comprehend it.

As a result, Subaru did not dodge the hand that thus was extended, his forehead being pushed down onto the bed, his body following suit. And, before he could raise an objection as to what the hell was going on, he perceived the sensation of something sharp against his throat.

Which he immediately realized to be the tip of the paring knife with which the appa had just been split.

He had made that realization, yet he knew not the intent behind it. He knew not the meaning of Abel clasping that knife, and turning it towards Subaru in that manner, directing his hostility at him—Nay, directing his hatred, the same hatred his voice was rife with.

Subaru: “…”

From near proximity, within breathing distance of one another, Subaru and Abel shared mutual glares.

If Subaru were to carelessly raise his voice in a call for help at this juncture, Abel would not hesitate in slitting Subaru’s throat with the knife.

But conversely, that Abel was not doing so at once was because he had no reason to.

Subaru: “What, do you want… Hk.”

Vincent: “That ought to be mine question; what are your plans? To what extent exactly have you seen the current course of events unfold? Is everything up to this point in accordance with the picture you have painted?”

Subaru: “I told you already…! I told you, I don’t know what you’re talking about. What am I scheming…?”

Vincent: “—Why, did you leave me behind, and not Chisha?”

In comparison to the blade at his throat, the tone of his voice cut by far and away more deeply. It silenced Subaru, and Abel’s hand shook, trembling while gripping the knife.

As Abel gritted his teeth, as he glowered at Subaru from point-blank range, having asserted so.

That was not something Subaru was able to comprehend immediately.

Subaru: “Abel…”

Vincent: “Vincent Vollachia.”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “I, am no Abel. I am none other than the Seventy-Seventh Emperor of the Vollachian Empire, Vincent Vollachia. —That, is the course you have desired, is it not?”

Declaring such as if he were wringing the words out of himself, Abel—Nay, Vincent, gave his name with a hint of annoyance.

Not quite understanding the meaning of that attitude of his, an attitude as if he were cursing himself for giving his name as such, Subaru knitted his brows. Because, of course he would.

Subaru: “You… went to war so you could reclaim that name, and that crown, didn’t you…?!”

Vincent: “Incorrect. I was striving to fulfill my duty as Emperor. The Covenant with the People of Shudraq, the fall of the Fortress City, the negotiations with Yorna Mishigure, and the provocation of civil war were all for that purpose.”

Subaru: “Your duty, as Emperor…?”

Vincent: “While on the throne, Vincent Vollachia will be killed. With that as the starting point, the Great Disaster will attempt to destroy the Empire, the means to oppose it being left behind by Vincent Vollachia. That, is my duty.”

Subaru: “Hah…”

As Vincent enumerated the particulars of his undertaking to him for the first time, Subaru exhaled a hoarse breath.

That expression, “Great Disaster”, was one unfamiliar to Subaru’s ears, but what astonished Subaru even more than that was the very way Vincent had recited it all.

Per his words, upon the demise of Vincent Vollachia, the Great Disaster would commence.

Then, he had also stated that he would leave behind the means with which to oppose that Great Disaster.

Rather than searching for those means, he would leave them behind.

From how he had spoken, it was just as if—.

Subaru: “The way you spoke… It’s kinda like you knew you were going to die…”

While firmly sensing the cold tip of death trained on the neck, Subaru muttered.

With Death perhaps creeping closer to Subaru, before him, Vincent's sable eyes wavered with uncertainty. The vast expanse that laid beyond their jet-black coloration, he had a hunch on its true identity.

'Twas resignation, adorned with the will to resist.

Vincent: "Indeed. I have made mine demise a part of my plans. I left behind plans to ensure that the Vollachian Empire would not fall to ruin, even with mine passing."

And thus, none other than Vincent himself confirmed his intuition as correct; the very next instant, Subaru's mind was stained red, and his emotions burst out.

Subaru: "YOU BASTARD, STOP GODDAMN SCREWING AROUND!"

Teeth bared and eyes flaring up in anger, Subaru gave Vincent—No, the cowardly bastard before him the death stare, bellowing out. There was a flash of acute pain at his neck, but that could be postponed until much, much later.

Right here and now, it was much more important to just beat the living shit out of this wimp wearing a self-righteous face.

Subaru: "After manipulating so many people, after making them cross so many dangerous bridges, after making them take so many unnecessary detours with you, you planned to die at the end of it all? Don't joke around!"

Vincent: "As if I would do anything such as jest. Everything you have spoken of was done because it was the road that needed to be taken. At its terminus was to be mine death, a matter the importance of which cannot possibly be compared to the survival of the Empire which hangs in the balance."

Subaru: "That's not it! What I'm saying is, why is it that the first thing you do is give up on your own life? Some huge disaster? Don't know anything about it! Wouldn't it be better to just stay alive and face it yourself?!"

Vincent: "Do you lot not know any better but to chatter nonsense? While I live, the Great Disaster shan't come. That is the premise of this plan. It cannot be overturned—”

Subaru: “Who the hell decided it can’t be overturned? You’ve got a good head on you, so whether it be the Great Disaster or anything else, you could just deceive it and lure it out, and then…”

Vincent: “—Yet it was you Stargazers, who declared that it could never be overturned!”

Vincent, stifling his emotions, had been replying to a Subaru prattling on and on with sentimentality. But the former’s emotions had come to this point, and now exploded before Subaru’s eyes.

Just how unexpected had that violent outburst been from the standpoint of Vincent? Had he himself not seized the blade of the knife thrust towards Subaru with his opposite hand, who knew where the tip of the knife would have stabbed; such had been the torrent of emotions.

In drips, blood trickled from Vincent’s left hand, having seized the tip of the blade, staining the white sheets here and there.

However, neither Subaru nor Vincent paid any mind to the falling droplets of blood, instead focusing their attention towards each other’s eyes, towards the very essence of the other’s being beyond said eyes.

Yet again, Vincent had dubbed Subaru a Stargazer.

Therein laid the unmistakable reason as to why Vincent Vollachia hated, harbored hostility towards Natsuki Subaru, even going as far as to train a knife at him.

It was precisely because he happened to understand it, that those doubts could not be resolved.

Subaru: “The Stargazers… declared…”

Vincent: “—. The Stargazers hear the voices of the Observers from the heavens above, that exist beyond the framework. They speak of events that may occur in the far future, conferring us with the possibility of minimizing the damage. Still, that is but a matter of the scale of damages. Not of how to prevent it from happening beforehand."

In a disgusted voice, yet one attempting to stifle any emotion as much as possible, Vincent began to speak.

Subaru was reminded of one thing amidst the contents of his speech. If the Stargazers were truly able to foretell the future, from his experience, actually being able to change it would be no easy feat.

Whether it ought to be called the power of fate or the natural flow of time, it would stick to a predetermined path as much as possible; those who attempted to avoid impending tragedies would be brought to their knees.

The Stargazers' precognitions, they were akin to what Subaru knew from experience.

For example, were Subaru to Return by Death due to a natural catastrophe, even if he could urge everyone to take refuge in preparation, he would be unable to stop the natural catastrophe itself.

Whether that would prevent the destruction of houses and buildings, or even prevent the loss of human lives entirely, he would not know until he had a go at it, but he held no doubts that it would be difficult.

Vincent: "Many times in the past, the Stargazers have precluded correctly that perils would befall the Empire. Those crises were dealt with to the fullest extent possible, but some things could not be saved. Therefore, plans are necessary."

Subaru: "Plans…"

Vincent: "Plans with which to keep the damage at a minimum, and lessen those lost to as close to zero as possible."

—Calamities awaited in the future, doings could be done so that a greater number of people would be able to overcome them. Doings could be done so that a greater number of people would not be left behind.

If Vincent Vollachia had toiled, sparing no effort, for the sake of making that come to pass.

Vincent: “It was you, Stargazers, who whispered of mine death. How dare you, with that mouth, utter that my death must be defied? Are you toying with me… with me?!”

Subaru: “W-wait, wait a sec! For quite some time now, I’m not a Stargazer or anything like…”

Vincent: “—You see things that have yet to happen. Cease your deception, Natsuki Subaru.”

With those scant words, Subaru tasted the feeling of having his heart, within his chest, being stopped.

In the process of spewing out the recesses of his very own heart, the mask of Emperor had fallen away, and visible on the other side was not the face of Vincent Vollachia, but rather the face of a man rife with defects who went by the name of Abel.

And finally, once the man looked at him directly, once the man declared those words, Subaru finally comprehended.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Vincent—Nay, Abel, had dubbed him a Stargazer, and Subaru had understood the reason for that.

Abel, had perceived Subaru’s Return by Death.

In precise terms, he had not perceived Subaru’s Return by Death, rather, the fact that via the loss of his life, Subaru had gone back in time, thus bringing back information from the future—he had perceived that Subaru held the means to know what laid ahead.

So then, he had comprehended that it was akin to the foresight abilities that Abel knew to be held by the Stargazers.

Subaru: “…”

If he gave it some thought, it was quite natural that a mistake like this would possibly occur.

Because of course it would. Subaru himself, in his pursuit for understanding and comprehension, had found in Abel's exposition about the Stargazers something in common with his own Return by Death.

Armed with the knowledge of the precedent represented by the Stargazers, if Subaru were to attain results beyond the capabilities he was possessed of, it was no surprise that he would draw a connection—No, that he would identify him as one in the same.

Abel's insight was a reliable one. His acumen would certainly scrutinize all things.

With that insight of his, he had immediately grasped that Subaru had not survived all the situations he had come across in the Empire through his unripe abilities and sheer fortune.

That was why, that was certainly why.

Subaru: "So, that's why you always tried to listen to my advice?"

If Abel interpreted Subaru's advice as a proposal that came as the result of selecting the most optimal move via seeing the future, then no matter how idiotic the proposal may have sounded to the ears, he would be unable to flat out discard it.

The refusal of allowing the Shudraqian village to go up in flames, the crossdressing performed with the purpose of capturing the Fortress City, the voyage to the Demon City of Chaosflame, the negotiations with Yorna, all of those had been so.

Abel had always explored the possibility of actualizing Subaru's proposals, earnestly scrutinizing them.

In this manner, Abel had attempted to drag Subaru, who he thought to be a Stargazer, into the struggle for the Empire's survival, employing him as a pawn on the board. —After he himself was lost, Subaru would be another one of the means of opposition.

Despite this—

Vincent: "…You, left me behind, not Chisha."

Subaru: "…"

Vincent: "Natsuki Subaru, you are a banal human being."

In a form different from the one just prior, the timbre of that voice was devoid of sentiment.

There was no attempt to repress emotions. If there indeed was such an attempt, those very real emotions would still eek out, able to be heard in their venture to appeal outwards.

Yet nothing was heard. They were not being repressed, those emotions had died.

And with that tone of voice killed of emotions, Abel let loose words bereft of hue towards Subaru.

Vincent: "A naïve, green, immature human being, holding on to plenty of bitterness. Neither do you possess virtue worthy of mention, nor do you possess viciousness worthy of mention. With neither of these, you would have accomplished nothing, and died an ordinary man."

Subaru's characterization, spoken so matter-of-factly, left absolutely no room for retort.

As per Abel's pertinent judgment, Subaru could not become anyone special. Even immersed in the lack of maturity of his body and mind, with his spirit returned to the days when he had believed himself to be a child prodigy, he also knew what he would eventually be in the future to come, a half-baked human being.

But—

Vincent: "You have been bestowed with an opportunity to surpass banal, ordinary men. By making perfect use of it, you have survived till this day. You have not been banal, you have not been an ordinary person, you have no strong disposition toward either virtue or viciousness.”

Subaru: “Abel…”

Vincent: “You… are a banal human being… If so, why.”

Firmly, potently, Abel tightly gritted his teeth, looking at Subaru.

He cast away his expression, his nobleness and his graciousness, his composure and his self-confidence and everything entirely, baring the true face visible behind the mask of Emperor that had been stripped away, his voice quivering.

And with that quivering voice as it had been, with that trembling voice as it was, he exclaimed.

Vincent: “Why, why did you leave me behind, Natsuki Subaru!”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “You have no bond to this Empire, nor any obligations. You could have been content with protecting the many you have come to know till this day, and nothing more. For what reason did you save me? For what reason did you think to try and save me, a man who does not get along with you…!”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “Why… hk.”

Due to his extreme emotions, his hoarse voice conveyed just how monumental was Abel’s desire to pose that inquiry of “Why”.

With more and more strength he grasped the blade of the knife, digging even deeper into his hand; more and more intense grew the flow of blood, so painful to gaze at that Subaru instantaneously attempted to release Abel’s grip on the knife and staunch the hemorrhage.

However—

Vincent: “Do not touch me!”

Subaru: “Agh!”

His hand was violently swatted away, and instantaneously becoming aware of pain in the hand he had outstretched, Subaru produced a grimace.

Upon taking a look, Subaru saw that the knife within the hand of that strikingly-different Abel had slashed his own hand, and drop-by-drop blood was trickling from it as well.

In the space between the two confronting one another, the sheets became increasingly sullied by their blood, blood that went on dripping away without efforts to stop it.

And thus, in that manner, paying no heed to the blood flowing out of them, to the soiled sheets and floor,

Vincent: “…Just now, when you reached out your hand to lend help, you did it again. That is what is most baffling, and what is most incompatible with me, in your way of being.”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “Every so often you leave it all to the emotions you feel at the moment, punting to the wayside all beliefs and ideas you have felt until then. You do not follow what you have decided upon, easily reversing whatever course you have concluded that you ought to be taking. You are unable to categorize what ought be saved or not, reaching out your hand indiscriminately.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

His blood oozing out, faced with the glaring Abel’s insight and words, Subaru gulped down a breath.

Even the pain of the bleeding wound grew distant, with Subaru’s thoughts freezing over. Because what Abel had stated just now, held the exact same meaning as what had tormented Subaru in a recent occasion.

Todd: “—But you were willing to choose whether to save Katya or not, right?”

Subaru: “…”

Before he had regained consciousness, before he had even lost it, those had been the words hurled towards him.

That he and Natsuki Subaru were incompatible in every sense possible, that Natsuki Subaru was a monster that he could never understand, such was the blade of words that Todd Fang had trained upon him, decisively forcing their separation against Subaru’s will.

He too, though not drawing that conclusion about Subaru owing to Return by Death or owing to a status as a Stargazer, had seen through Subaru’s peculiarities, and defined him as such; perhaps it was through his power of observation, honed through his life as a werewolf.

Todd: “You’re too damn inconsistent! Your eyes say that you’re willing to die at any moment, you’re willing to put other people’s lives on a scale selfishly, but when it comes to this, you’re desperate to resist. It’s creepy!”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Todd’s chilly gaze, his voice devoid of heat, overlapped with those of Abel before him.

Abel’s gaze, Abel’s voice possessed the fervor of rage; nonetheless, the two still overlapped. The reason for that, undoubtedly, was that both were attempting to part with Subaru.

A preface for ousting Natsuki Subaru, rejecting he whose way of being was incompatible with theirs, from their world.

Todd: “Lack of self-awareness is a bad trait. You’re choosing between lives. Who to save, who to let die, you’re deciding as you please. You show favor towards those who butter you up, but don’t care about those who don’t. Me, I wouldn’t hesitate to butter anyone up, but…”

Todd: “How could I go along with someone who decides who lives or dies based on his own fickle whims?”

Thus, what had driven Todd to commit the heinous acts he had committed, as per his words, had been Subaru's way of thinking and behavior.

Of course, Subaru had not just accepted it without questioning, and did not consider himself to be at fault. It was what he had always done and thought to be correct, in his own Subaru way. But were he to so easily change his ways, Subaru would be unable to show his face to the companions who had followed him, who had placed their faith in him till this day.

At the same time, however, there was a truth he could not repudiate completely.

—Subaru was choosing who to let live and who to let die, as he had indeed stated.

Through the Authority of Return by Death, Subaru had transfigured the fates of those precious to him.

Those who had no choice but to lose their lives, those who had no choice but to hurt him, those who had no choice but to struggle for what was dear to them, those who had no choice but to deprive themselves of the opportunity to reach a mutual understanding. He had distorted their fates, and kept them alive.

Through the decisions and actions Subaru had taken, assuredly, the number of people around Subaru who had been robbed of their lives or become sorrowful had diminished.

However, Natsuki Subaru had not been capable of saving every single person, either.

Whether he went without saving them, or without being able to save them, though those differed on whether he did it proactively or reactively, his decision had been thus. And so, without him turning back the clock, the onward march of reality imposed itself as immovable.

It was not as though he had destroyed all of his "enemies".

But, it was not that he had saved all of his "enemies", either. Just how had Subaru come to decide which to save, and which not to save?

That was possibly due to Subaru's personal likes and dislikes, such was Todd's fear.

Vincent: "No, that is not so, Natsuki Subaru. It is not even up to your like or dislike towards others."

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Shaking his head, Abel's words restrained Subaru, the latter having been made aware of the unbridgeable gap between himself and Todd once more.

With Subaru holding his breath and raising his face, Abel so relayed.

Vincent: "Were you to determine who to save and who not to save based on your subjective preferences of people's characters, that I would be able to understand. But, you save even those you loathe. Such as me."

Subaru: "It's not…"

Like that, so he wished to assert, yet Subaru's words did not continue.

Whether Subaru hated Abel enough to abandon him at the eleventh hour was something he would only understand were he to do some deep introspection, but it was true that he had reached out his hand to someone he loathed.

He had been unable to reach. In spite of that, Subaru had attempted to reach out to Todd as well.

Finishing things without letting go. Their conflict notwithstanding, Louis had remained alongside Subaru till this day.

Having been told that he reached out to those who he loathed, that was exactly what he had been doing.

Vincent: "—Take your people from the Kingdom, and leave Vollachia."

As Subaru reflected upon his prior deeds, aghast, those unforeseen words struck him.

Slowly raising his eyes, he came to lay them upon Abel, who had returned the knife his hand had been holding to the basket of fruits, that wrathful hue erased from his countenance, weaving words in tandem with what had been his facial expression until then.

He, towards a Subaru astonished at the change in demeanor and at the content of the words thrown at him, resumed.

Vincent: "From this point onwards, the Empire shall be plunged into battle against the Great Disaster. The board is different from the one I was attempting to arrange, but alas, a way through remains. Therein you are not required."

Subaru: "Wha…"

Vincent: "I have heard enough nonsense. Whatever your intentions may be, what you have already done must be considered definite. Questioning the merits of your reasoning for that, would be an act akin to futility of the utmost extremes."

Those were not so much words directed towards Subaru, as they were words directed towards his own self.

The exchange in which he had gotten emotional with Subaru, and the exchange in which he had bared all his emotions; Abel was about to unilaterally terminate the exchange that encompassed the entirety of both that had taken place here.

It had not been a behavior too uncharacteristic for him.

A topic mentioned both when things had gotten emotional, and when the emotions had died, the name "Chisha" was one Subaru had gotten an idea about.

Judging from how he had voiced it all, Chisha had apparently lost his life amidst the siege of the Imperial Capital; why Subaru had not saved him, to ask such a thing must have been Abel's true intentions.

Attempting to cover up those intentions, Abel would try to pretend that such things had never, ever truly happened.

Vincent: "Make preparations to return to your country. All necessary arrangements will be made for you to cross the border. Everything after that will be the Empire's problem—mine problem."

Thus, changing his way of referring to himself, and restraining all of his conduct as Abel, were signs of the resolution he had arrived at, to move forth as Emperor Vincent Vollachia.

And just how meaningful, just how heavy were the things he had been entrusted with, and if those had been the reasons for his decision, were all things Subaru could not possibly understand.

Natsuki Subaru could not understand Vincent Vollachia.

Likewise, Vincent Vollachia could not understand Natsuki Subaru.

And with that, this fruitless period was coming to an end, with naught more than both shedding the others' blood—.

Todd: "You're a monster. Much more so than that zombie."

That understanding one another was impossible, that the gap could not be bridged, that a separation was unavoidable; both had reached such a conclusion on their own, both had arbitrarily decided such things on their own, and both had ended things like that all on their own.

Don't you regret that it had to end the way it did, you goddamn idiots.

Subaru: "Hey, Abel."

Turning his back, his conduct indicating that the conversation had drawn to a close, the Emperor advanced towards the door. The slender back making its departure was called out to, and the Emperor, taking a calm, short breath, halted his steps.

And as he was, the Emperor, with eyes devoid of heat, turned his countenance over his shoulder, and spoke,

Vincent: “Do understand. I am Vincent Vollachia, any man that goes by Abel is—”

Subaru: “—Shut the hell up. Let’s see you grit those teeth!”

Making use of the bouncy springs of the bed and blasting off, Subaru at last charged towards that face.

At that profile, the profile of one deciding to end things all on his own, the pompous profile of one who had the nerve to selfishly tell him to hurry up and leave, that odious profile of one intending to take absolutely everything and anything upon himself; either way, already unable to stop himself from getting incredibly angry, irritated, and pissed off, Subaru drove his small, blood-soaked fist into that profile. Something he had been wanting to do for a long, long time.

Chapter 12:
Natsuki Subaru and Vincent Abellux

1

The moment he threw that punch, it was the moment he had been the most frustrated about having become smaller.

Even more so than the tragedy of the Gladiator Island, which he had been able to unite everyone in order to prevent; even more so than the Sparka used to win Gustav over to his side; even more so than his dialogue with Cecilus under the moon; at this very moment, that he could have punched him a just a little bit harder were he to have a larger body, made him frustrated.

Vincent: “You…!”

Taking the blow from the young Subaru’s fist on his left cheek, the Emperor, his face soiled with blood, widened his eyes.

His gaze was directed at his own feet, observing Subaru after the latter had failed to land, tumbling down onto the floor. However, though his face held shock, it was bereft of indignation. More so than the humiliation he felt, his astonishment had been stronger.

The Emperor, having been given more shock than pain from Subaru’s fist, while pressing his hand against where it had struck,

Vincent: “Do you not hold your life dear?! If I were to raise mine hand, the Flame of the Yang Sword would scorch your very being…”

Subaru: “Yup, it’s not dear to me! Compared to letting you go without giving you a wallop right here and now, something like burning to death isn’t scary or anything at all!”

Vincent: “Wha…”

Receiving a scowl from the Emperor, Subaru jumped up before his eyes, and riposted, firmly.

Just then, fatigue yet remaining in his body, he lost his balance and fell backwards, slamming against the door, but that was just right. Leaning against the door like that, Subaru spread his arms, thus obstructing the Emperor from proceeding.

That he did not hold his life dear to him, such a thing was a downright lie.

But, in this tit-for-tat, he did not want to show even a hint of weakness.

This Emperor was spouting everything he had to say without holding back, so whether it be with fists or words, Subaru would not be satisfied unless he fired back.

Subaru: “It’s just as you guys say. I think, I can’t be understood. After all, even I myself don’t really understand what my criteria is for taking action.”

Vincent: “…“You guys”, you say?”

Biting his lip, the Emperor frowned as Subaru glared at him.

Lowering his hand from his cheek, his face defiled with blood trickling from Subaru’s hand, the Emperor was at a loss from the fact that Subaru’s statement had been aimed at multiple targets, possibly being directed at someone aside from himself.

Though, no matter how much he pondered it over, there was no way he could understand. The man before Subaru’s eyes was the Emperor, the other man nothing more than a foot soldier without an officer rank.

And yet, the wounds that both had given Subaru, the scars they had both pointed out, were one and the same.

Subaru: “I want to prioritize the people I like, the people I hold dear, and protect them. Those are my honest feelings. But, even if it’s someone I hate or someone I don’t know, and they’re put into danger right in front of me, then I…”

Todd had said, that Subaru would choose who to save based on his subjective likes and dislikes.

Abel had said, that Subaru would recklessly choose who to save regardless of likes or dislikes.

Both of those were correct, and since both were correct, they were mistaken.

After all—

Subaru: “But… is that really such a bad thing…?”

Vincent: “What?”

Subaru: “Is that so bad? Without the resolve to try and carry the whole world on my back, and without any grand significance, is it really so bad if I save those who are right in front of me on impulse?!”

As Subaru rose his voice, violently stomping his feet, and the Emperor widened his sable eyes.

Though still amidst a rapid sequence of expression and demeanours uncharacteristic of him, Subaru yet pressed him for an answer.

Subaru: “It’s just as you said! I consider the things within my own range of vision, I reach as far out as I can, that’s what I’ve been doing until today. What’s so bad about that?!”

Vincent: “You dare now object?! What is so bad, you say? Is it not obvious?! For what reason do you focus not on the greater picture, and instead act upon your selfish emotions? The Authority bestowed upon you, for what reason do you not put it to good use?!”

Subaru: “I use absolutely everything! I’m standing here because I put it to good use! Don’t get emotional, huh?! Stop talking like an idiot! The way I choose to use my own emotions, is up to me!”

Vincent: “Then at least act in accordance with those emotions! If you are to decide between somebody’s life or death based on your likes and dislikes, do not deviate from that method in any sort of way. Your way of being, is riddled with distortions."

Subaru: "If that's your conclusion from me leading a righteous life, I'm all for having a warped personality!"

As the Emperor still continued to rebuke Subaru's attitude, the latter delivered a powerful kick as he replied. Kicking the Emperor's shin over and over again, his anger, too much to be contained, erupted in full.

As Subaru unleashed kicks charged with his foul temper, the Emperor contorted his cheeks, and,

Vincent: "We shall speak no further."

With that, he attempted to terminate the conversation one-sidedly. Once more, he did it one-sidedly.

Trying to leave behind the divide between their sense of values in that manner, the Emperor seized Subaru's shoulders. The Emperor tried to move him out of the way, and with the physical strength of a child, he could not go against an adult.

That was why, Subaru bit down on that hand with all of his might.

Vincent: "—Hk, You!"

Subaru: "Schtop beain sho selfesh!"

Biting down without restraint, he engraved the Emperor's right hand with a bite wound. His right hand, bleeding as he forcibly shook it free, together with the one bearing a wound from the knife, both of the Emperor's hands were shedding blood.

Causing the great and noble apex of the Empire to shed blood, Subaru would be unable to avoid the death penalty.

Subaru: "That'll only happen if the country still exists, you stupid idiot!"

Vincent: "What are you… guh!!"

The moment he had been shaken off, Subaru's small body grabbed the Emperor from the front, pressed his head against the latter's abdomen, and clipped his knees. A fighting style he had learned from Weitz, who had devised it himself.

Proceeding to apply Weitz's teachings even further, he took a mounted position, and attained dominance through street rules.

With the Emperor having fallen onto his back, sitting upon his chest as to weigh him down, Subaru grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into the floor. Were the back of one's head to be struck over and over again, no matter who it was, they would be knocked-out instantly.

However—

Vincent: "Do not get carried away!"

The first time, shock; the second time, confusion; the third time, although he had been successful in bringing the back of his head to the ground, he was stopped by a simple difference in strength. Furthermore, he was thrown off of the Emperor's body, having been grabbed by his hair.

Screaming out with a "Gyaaaargh!" as he tumbled to the floor, Subaru saw the Emperor stand back up in his peripheral vision, and once again, the latter attempted to head for the door.

Subaru: "Like I'd let you!"

Jumping onto the Emperor's knees from behind, by means of sheer force he halted the body moving towards the door. Due to Subaru's excessive momentum however, the Emperor was knocked over forwards.

The result—

Vincent: "Buh."

Then, with a dull thud, the Emperor crashed face-first into the cabin's door.

Vincent: "…"

A firm sound echoed, the sound of him placing his hands against the door his face had been pressed against, and thus the Emperor rose to his feet once more, after having fallen face-first onto it. Then, turning around, the Emperor seized Subaru by the collar with both his hands, hoisting him up.

The two's bodies spinning around to switch places, Subaru's back was slammed against the door, pressed against it with force, as he leaked out "Uah"s of pain.

Before his eyes, the nose and forehead of the Emperor were reddened; from point-blank range he glared at Subaru, the latter's legs suspended.

Vincent: "You, what do you want? What is your objective? What is it that you desire?!"

Subaru: "I want to hit you! My objective is to hit you! My desire is to hit you!"

Vincent: "You…!"

Subaru: "What about you, what do you want? What is your objective? Just what the hell is it that you desire?!"

Vincent: "…"

Caught by his collar, clawing at the Emperor's hands, Subaru's spittle flew as he shouted in reply.

Then twisting his head, he opened his mouth in an attempt to bite the Emperor's hand one more time, but no matter how hard he tried, he was unable to reach it. At the very least, drool amassed in the Emperor's hand as he spat.

In that way, while having his hand sullied by Subaru's saliva, the Emperor's cheek stiffened for a reason separate to that disgrace; he muttered.

Vincent: "My, desire…?"

Subaru: “That’s right. There’s gotta be something you wanted to do apart from spouting grandiose and meaningless words at me. If not, you wouldn’t go out of your way to come to me at such a busy time.”

Vincent: “…”

Subaru: “Aren’t you the one that doesn’t understand yourself the most? While you were talking just now, there was something you put the most energy into, something you put the most emotion into. That’s what’s most important for you.”

The topic of evacuating from the Imperial Capital, or the topic of suspecting Subaru being a Stargazer. The topic of dealing with Emilia and the others, who had hailed from the Kingdom, to the topic of the divide stemming from being unable to understand Subaru’s way of being.

Now that he thought of it, there had been no words expressing sympathy for Subaru after his recovery from having fallen unconscious; in the first place, this bastard had not said anything in regards to this being their first meeting after the Demon City either.

But putting all those numerous affairs aside, the one topic he was most passionate about was obvious.

Subaru: “—Chisha.”

Vincent: “…Why, Natsuki Subaru.”

The heat that had boiled over just before during their grappling match, disappeared, however, in its place was a cold heat, a heat set alight by that question, now uttered once more.

If that which accompanied violence was a scarlet flame, then that question had come accompanied by a flame of azure hue.

That azure glow blazing in his eyes, it scorched Subaru as he stood before the Emperor, while the latter posed his question.

Vincent: “I was the one who trained him. If it were him, he would have been able to do the same work as me without even the slightest deviation. It could even be said that he was superior in regards to military power, depending on the circumstances.”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “There was no difference between mine and that damned Chisha’s ability. Whichever of us remained would take over the fight to oppose the Great Disaster, seeing it through to completion. —Why.”

Staring directly into Subaru’s black eyes, the Emperor’s—No, Abel’s black eyes wavered.

The mask of Emperor, which he had likely worn alongside a resolve to never again remove it, was ripped off of him not long after he had steeled himself like so. And thus, Subaru gazed upon Abel’s face.

And finally, not as the Emperor of this country, but as a single person who had been bereaved of someone dear, Abel could not help but question Subaru.

Vincent: “Why, did you let me live despite loathing me, and let Chisha die, Natsuki Subaru.”

After gaining self-awareness of what he had wanted to ask Subaru himself, Abel hurled the same question towards Subaru as he had done before their scuffle had broken out.

The sorrow, the fragility contained within that voice, were incomparable to what they had been just before.

The Emperor known as Vincent Vollachia, utilized absolutely everything in his possession for the sake of the Empire.

Ruling over the great country that possessed the vastest lands among those known in this world as the Four Great Countries, Vincent Vollachia reigned as Emperor, an omnipresent and all-seeing existence.

For that Emperor known as Vincent Vollachia to issue that question not for the sake of the Empire, but rather as a mere single person, was evidence that this singular question carried a weight rivaling that of the Empire itself.

Perceiving that in his skin, his blood, his brain, his very soul, Subaru's heart trembled.

At the same time, in contrast to Abel's swell of emotion, Subaru's emotions were tranquil.

Subaru: "…"

Just why was it that the person known as Chisha had to die?

Unbeknownst to Subaru, Abel and Chisha had each been placed on different plates of a scale, and one of those two sides had fallen into a situation beyond saving.

Thus, Abel had intended to share in the fate of the scale as his own side tipped into perdition.

That envisioning had been painted over. —Most likely, by the deceased Chisha himself.

—Abel had likely prepared for his own death since long ago.

If one was born, someday, their life would assuredly reach its end. All were aware of such a fact. But it was just as if Abel's situation was completely different to the reality everybody unconsciously ignored.

Resolve towards destined death, that was no different from Subaru confronting the trigger of his Return by Death.

Always, Abel had been squaring off against his own forthcoming death.

With the same resolve as Subaru, who fought to the bitter end while believing that the arrival of Death was something that could be changed, that it was something that must be changed no matter what, Abel had continued to fight.

If Subaru were to go without dying, Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice would end up dying.

Otto and everyone else, Tanza and everyone else, all of the Shudraq, Flop and Medium, a great number of people would end up dying. In exchange for his own life, he attempted to allow everyone to survive.

If he had come to expend the entirety of his resolve for that purpose, then it must have been the same for Abel.

Vincent: “I completed all preparations with that end in sight. But even so—”

Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice, they had all taken Subaru’s place, permitting his survival.

In order to let Subaru live, Otto and everyone else, Tanza and everyone else, all of the Shudraq, Flop and Medium, a great number of other people, had become sacrifices so he could survive.

Even if nobody else was capable of understanding that despair, Natsuki Subaru was the single person who had to keep it in mind.

Nullifying that possibility, painting over that reality by means of his Authority, Natsuki Subaru was the single person who would not deny the despair that Abel was going through without paying any heed.

Understanding, gulping down, there was something he must say in addition.

Subaru: “—I’m not a Stargazer, Abel.”

Vincent: “…”

The words he spoke, they probably seemed like a betrayal to Abel, this late in the game.

This late in the game, Subaru had not returned the reply of Abel’s desire, instead keeping it to himself. But, however much Abel suspected Subaru, reality would not budge.

Perhaps Subaru was able to do the same things a Stargazer could.

Perhaps Subaru possessed means with which to intervene with fate to an extent greater than a Stargazer's own means.

Even so, he was not omnipotent. He could never be omnipotent.

It would be nice if he were omnipotent, he could never be sufficient as to aspire to be omnipotent.

Subaru: "That's why, I couldn't save this Chisha person you talked about. I wouldn't know how to save him, either. But, I'll just say this one thing…"

Vincent: "…What is it."

Subaru: "…Supposing I really did have a power like the one you speak of, even then, I'd choose to save you, who I hate, rather than someone I don't know. Without reasons like seeing ahead to what lies in the future, that's what I would do. That's what I will do."

Truly, even he himself thought his nature was a helpless one.

But, that was the result that Natsuki Subaru, by consulting with the abilities he possessed, within what he understood to be the realms of what were his own capabilities, had reached.

Vincent: "…"

Slowly, strength left Abel's hold on his collar, and Subaru's body was released.

While his back rubbed against the door, Subaru's body slid down. Even now, Abel's hands were holding on to Subaru's collar, but those fingers, white from the strength that had been put into them, now lost their pale coloration alongside said strength.

If he truly wished to remove those hands, he could have done it easily; however, Subaru did not do so.

With them still seizing his collar, Subaru merely called his name out with "Abel"—.

Vincent: “If you claim to not be a Stargazer…”

Such was the frail sound produced by Abel’s lips.

But, Abel himself had not been satisfied with the sound he had uttered, and continued no further. Abel’s black eyes began to wander, in search of the words he truly desired.

He would put his emotions into words.

Perhaps the Emperor of the Empire, who had not once done such a thing till this day, who had not once done something that even a toddler was capable of, would now do so.

Vincent: “You… would try and save me no matter what…”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “In a situation where the survival of the Empire is at stake, you occupy me with trifles of such insignificance…”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “I… I! Even since I laid eyes upon your way of being…”

Subaru: “…”

Each time, his words would get stuck halfway through.

No matter the words, no matter the emotions, they were not enough to express what Abel felt in his heart of hearts. Repeatedly, Abel ceased speaking, revised his words, and corrected himself; yet Subaru did not rush him.

Vincent: “You… detest me, view me as an enemy…”

His intelligent self realizing that the response of his desires laid not beyond his faltering words, Abel started the words he ought to say anew, over and over again.

He, known as the wisest Emperor since the inception of the Vollachian Empire, a man whose wisdom was respected by everyone, did so.

And thus, after repetitions upon repetitions, he finally managed to do it.

Vincent: “I…”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “I… had resolved myself for my own death… I had not resolved myself… to lose someone dear.”

Having only forged his resolve to be the one leaving the rest behind, his resolve for being left behind had not been cultivated.

Perhaps he had even gone as far as to think about what words he would leave behind in his final moments. There was even the possibility one would find notes here and there left for after his death, if they were to search.

All had been done for the sake of entrusting the matter to those who would continue forth, done with a resolve that had not even considered the possibility he would be on the side being entrusted.

Vincent: “Why.”

A quavering voice, questioned so.

While speaking in a quavering voice, Abel detached his hands from Subaru’s collar. Those hands, his own very blood-stained hands, he brought them to his face, and concealed his expression.

The Emperor, who would by no means even close both his eyes in front of others, covered his face with both his hands.

Vincent: “Why, did you leave me behind and die, Chisha…?!”

His face in his hands, his voice trembling, his black eyes potentially even tearing up, Vincent Vollachia fell to his knees.

Having lost a very, very important person, the man who had likely not had even the time to grieve, not needing to wear the mask of

Emperor in front of a rude and disrespectful individual whom he hated, fell to his knees.

Witnessing just that, Subaru, taking a very long, and immensely deep breath—

Subaru: “—I’m sorry.”

With that, as a fellow struggler fighting against an unreasonable fate, he faced the fellow struggler who had been wounded while earnestly continuing to fight, and imparted words that would never be able to serve as comfort.

2

When swinging at Abel as he tried to leave, what came to Subaru's mind was the memory of the time Otto had once punched him in a similar manner.

Subaru: "You're incredible, man. I could never be as smart as you… I'll never say that to his face, though."

Since he would feel embarrassed and annoyed, he really did not wish to state so directly to that very person.

The most he was willing to consider was that one day, once Otto was dying of old age, he would sit at the side of the bed and say "To be honest, I thought you were incredible". If he were to really go through with it, he had faith that Otto, even in his dying moments, would retort with "Then why have you been keeping silent about it until now?!".

Anyhow—

Subaru: "…"

With a thud, Abel leaned his back against the wall of the cabin as he sat on the ground, observing the dim interior of the cabin as he hugged one of his knees.

Subaru, too, absentmindedly savored the silence while sitting next to him with legs crossed.

From the outset, Subaru's true feelings were undoubtedly feelings of gratitude towards Otto, alongside a wish to mess with him a bit.

Some time ago, at a time Subaru had been on the verge of buckling under the weight of attempting to carry anything and everything by his lonesome, Otto had given a wallop to Subaru's cheek, had lambasted him with words he needed to hear.

That he was keeping up useless airs in front of his friends, so he was told. —That experience had given Subaru the courage to spring off of the bed.

But then again—

Subaru: “Not like you and I are friends or anything.”

Vincent: “—. Of course. Speak not of such repulsive things. Being a friend of yours… No, I simply have no need for the likes of friends. Nor shall I ever want them.”

Subaru: “So your reasoning isn’t that you can’t make friends, but that you won’t make them? I also did that when I pretended to be a proud lone wolf, but it’s completely obvious to the people around you.”

Vincent: “Your disrespect knows no bounds, now does it?”

Seated close to each other yet without looking towards the other, Subaru and Abel exchanged words.

No longer were the heated emotions from their grappling scuffle present, but on the other hand, they were not vanished to the point that they would abort their conversation midway, nor were they able to feign civility.

Subaru’s face, clothes, and hands were stained with blood all over.

Of course, Abel’s face, hair, and clothes were also stained with blood all over.

Inside the cabin, the sheets were stained with blood, and the knife had fallen to the ground. Blots of scattered blood were present here and there, and evidence of damage and of blood having been shed was everywhere.

The amount of blood was not enough for this place to be dubbed a murder scene, but it sure was enough for it to look like a crime scene.

Subaru: “But, even if we thrash around, we could never destroy the whole cabin. That’s what our individual limit is, you and I.”

Even with Subaru and Abel having gone into a no-holds-barred rampage, the most they had been able to do was break the furnishings.

Were the ones to go on a rampage the truly dangerous people present in this world, the cabin would probably be destroyed in the blink of an eye, no traces of it being left behind. How much time would it take for Emilia, with that adorable face and those adorable hands of hers, to adorably dismantle this cabin.

Subaru: “Even if you and I throw down, it’s nothing so adorable, even.”

Vincent: “…Just what in the world is your problem?”

Subaru: “What about you, what the hell’s your problem? I’ll tell you what, your story’s all over the goddamn place, I can’t even tell what you wanna talk about.”

Vincent: “…”

Abel remained silent, and pondered.

The reason he had held his tongue was likely because he was made aware of how scattered the topics were. It was the result of plugging his ears to the appeals of his true intentions, and only choosing the topics that felt good to his ears, and flowed nicely; since he had been on edge, there had not been a single topic that was sincere.

That was the essence of Abel’s speech till just before, and he had also now become aware of that lapse of his.

Thence, how he would recover from that, Subaru waited to see—

Vincent: “Natsuki Subaru, is it the truth that you are not a Stargazer?”

Subaru: “…It’s true. I’m not a Stargazer or anything like that. Stuff like premonitions of the future, that fits the Witch Cult more than it fits me. I don’t really get along with those guys.”

Vincent: “I did happen to hear that you had felled two Sin Archbishops, in Lugunica.”

Subaru: “It’s not public, but it’s actually been three. Gluttony’s been as well… Nah, it’s kinda difficult to say whether Gluttony’s been defeated or not, so forget about that. Louis’s situation is also… AH!”

Vincent: “What is it?”

Subaru: “You didn’t do anything to Louis, right? After all, I still haven’t forgiven you for that time you said Louis was to be killed.”

In the Demon City of Chaosflame, Abel’s firm stance towards Louis had been what had triggered Subaru’s separation from Abel and the rest, going on to act independently.

When her identity as a Sin Archbishop came to light, Abel had declared that she would not be tolerated.

With that as the reason, Subaru had moved separately from Abel and the rest of their group; the pair of him and Louis isolated and without assistance then headed towards Yorna’s Castle—

Subaru: “Though stuff’s happened until now, I still won’t forgive you.”

Vincent: “Speak not of foolish things. Though, was it not you who thoroughly hated that girl?”

Subaru: “Before is before, now is now. To begin with, if you’ve kept your impression of me from our first meeting, you’d doubt my sanity considering the members I get along with.”

Vincent: “Your sanity is something I have doubted since the Shudraqian village. —Your concern is unnecessary.”

Subaru: “Hah?”

Vincent: “No harm has been inflicted upon that girl. After all, what I had been trying to say back then was not that we ought to execute someone whose apparent identity was that of a Sin Archbishop on the spot.”

Subaru: “Wha…?!”

Vincent: “You jumped to a hasty conclusion. Diligently reflect upon this.”

Having been told that his worries were needless, Subaru was at a loss for words. But, even supposing that were true, Abel’s coldhearted and indifferent attitude had been part of the reason for Subaru making a conclusion so hastily.

Adding up Abel’s attitude up until then had led to his distrust back then.

Subaru: “That… was an issue of your attitude…”

Vincent: “It was necessary. It was just in case, so you would not wish for my survival.”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “All grounded on the conjecture that you were a Stargazer, that included. You, who continues to produce results unprecedented within the Kingdom, have performed deeds no ordinary person would be able to.”

Subaru: “That’s…”

Vincent: “Although, there was no need for me to go out of my way to worsen your impression of me. Even if I did not act as such, you are the type of person who would detest me the most. Abhorrence and disdain, they both overflow from your heart.”

Subaru: “YOU! DAMN! BASTARD…!”

Whether it was a lie, the truth, good, or bad, Abel’s words caused veins to bulge in Subaru’s forehead.

But, as Subaru explored his relationship with Abel while treading on thin ice, Abel had come into contact with Subaru with a mental state akin to treading a tightrope.

With Subaru on ice, and Abel walking a tightrope, no interaction of the sort could ever proceed smoothly.

After all, each of them went without looking at anything but their own feet; they did not even regard the other's face.

Subaru: "…I, don't know anything about that Chisha guy. He kicked you out from the throne, and turned himself into you pretending to be Emperor. I only happened upon him in Chaosflame, when he was posing as Emperor."

Vincent: "…"

Subaru: "I don't get what that person was thinking, or what he had been scheming in driving you away from the Palace. But, you got frustrated in such a way because that person died, and if he really did die when you were supposed to, I do get that. Therefore…"

Falteringly, Subaru spoke of what he thought as he thought it.

Since they had an unspoken agreement to not face each other, Subaru could not see Abel's expression as he spoke those words. A tad frightening, that was.

That person was someone who Abel lamented losing to an extent such that he could not preserve the equilibrium of his heart.

For Subaru, speaking about that person while knowing nothing about them, his remarks could perhaps trample upon Abel's heart far too much.

But, he thought.

Though it had not been for a very long time, having been embroiled in a situation that concerned the survival of the nation, having been completely manipulated by this man who gave his name as Abel, Subaru, thought.

Subaru: "That Chisha person, he sure was incredible."

Though perhaps inappropriate, as he lifted his face, he produced a spirited voice.

It had been no forceful attempt to brighten things, it had been praise, praise overflowing from Subaru's heart.

In reality, just how many of them were there? People who could betray the predictions of the man renowned as the wisest Emperor since the inception of this Vollachian Empire, who molded just about every last thing merely within his own mind, who valued things proceeding as per his expectations; just how many people could go against that, and fulfill their own goals in such spectacular fashion?

Just that was more than enough to earn Subaru's praise.

Moreover, he had performed to the extent that Abel, having been left behind, was left hesitant and disheartened. He did not know if that was in accordance to the expectations held.

Subaru: "You said there wouldn't be a big difference whether you or that person was left behind. If that's true, then there's only one reason why that person made this situation."

Vincent: "…You."

Subaru spoke as he thought, and without facing him, Abel let out a muted voice.

He was not so sure if anger had been present in that timbre or not, especially because he went without verbally assaulting Subaru in the way the latter had grown familiar with,

Vincent: "You, are you saying that you understand? The reason why Chisha plotted against me?"

Indeed, it was rather something to urge Subaru to voice the conclusion he had reached.

Vincent: "…"

Abel desired an answer.

An answer that even his own, that even Abel's own clever brain could not come up with. For something like that to come out of the mouth of Subaru, who did not even know the person known as Chisha, even if Abel had no expectations, he had begun to have expectations.

He could not help but think of those expectations as added pressure, but,

Subaru: “Well, no matter what you’ll think of me, we’re already this far in…”

Once he had stood up in defiance, there remained no reason to hesitate in speaking exactly what he thought.

The reason as to why Chisha had left not himself, but Abel, behind, that Subaru had thought of.

That was—

Subaru: “With fate trying to kill you, you resigned yourself to the opponent that was fate. That’s gotta have irritated him.”

Vincent: “—Hah?”

Subaru: “There’s also a pattern of like, wanting someone to live even at the expense of your own life. But, I don’t think that’s the case here. After all, the way you live wouldn’t have anyone do anything of the sort for you.”

He could understand the feeling that one might want another person to live even if it meant they themselves would die.

But, in order to harbor a feeling of the sort, they must greatly think of the other person as dear, and they need a reason to be made to think that way.

Prepared for his own destined death, desperate to pave the path for the sake of those who would continue after him, it was implausible that Abel would have anyone think of him in such a way.

Therefore, Subaru’s answer was that.

Subaru: “Chisha got irritated because of you. After all, he even proved it.”

Vincent: “Proved it, you say? Proved what? …Proved that I was plotted against, and that I was a fool?”

Subaru: “Flop-san and Mizelda-san have probably also realized that you’re a moron with a good head on him. What I mean is… the reach of the thing known as fate.”

Vincent: “Fate…”

As though vocalizing that word for the first time, Abel’s tongue became acquainted with that unfamiliar concept, muttering so.

In reality, for Abel, who confronted everything head-on, who resisted endlessly armed with his own predictions, all impediments could be put into words. Likely, he had not realized his opponent was something so absurd, so formless as “fate”.

But, beyond all doubts, the enemy to which Abel had unconsciously accepted defeat was fate.

At the same time, Chisha had proved that very thing by using his own life, and letting Abel live.

Subaru: “Fate can be fought. —There’s no reason to give up, not even a single one.”

Vincent: “…”

Faintly catching his breath, Abel kept silent as if the words he had been told had struck his very heart.

Had he not believed his enemy to be “fate”, likely, he would not have thought to fight it, or to even resist it. It would not have been something he had even considered.

However, supposing he were to know just what exactly that “enemy” was, what could possibly ensue?

If he, the wisest Emperor since the inception of the Vollachian Empire, were to know the true identity of his “enemy”, just what would he do?

Subaru: “—Abel, I’m not a Stargazer.”

Vincent: “…”

Subaru: “But—”

Adjacent to Abel, who remained silent, Subaru spoke as he placed his hands on the knees of his crossed legs.

Upon being accused, he denied it, only to be accused again. Upon denying it, he was accused, only to deny it again.

Although explaining or affirming the matter of his own Authority, the matter of Return by Death, was something he was not able to do, Subaru had also resolved his heart on something, during this dialogue.

That something was that which would have been his likely answer to Todd Fang, who had cornered him with words completely, leaving him unable to riposte in clear terms before their parting.

Subaru: “I’ll save as many people as I possibly can, as long as they’re within range of my hand. Even so, if there truly are still lives I’m not able to save, that’s…”

Vincent: “…A defeat served to you by fate, would it not be so?”

Subaru: “—. I can’t get a complete victory. After all, it’s not just me who’s fighting fate.”

He had not been able to save everything.

Thus, Subaru was unable to declare that he was going to save everything, even from here onwards.

While roaring for that inevitable fate to bring it on, while vowing to continue fighting against fate, yet still being faced with the loss of lives, Natsuki Subaru would mourn and lament, only to then continue to declare such things.

And in that manner, for the sake of diminishing the chances for him to lament, for the sake of diminishing the chances for him to shed tears—.

Subaru: “Lend me your strength, Abel. If you do that, I’ll also lend you mine.”

Vincent: “…”

Subaru: “From this point onwards, I’ll cooperate in full…! That said, I won’t say selfish things without consulting with Emilia and the others, but that’s just how passionate I am. That’s why…”

Saying that, Subaru firmly clapped his knees, and stood up.

Then, without looking at Abel’s face, he slowly advanced to the middle of the cabin, to the side of the bed. With a sidelong glance to the disheveled and bloodstained sheets, Subaru reached his hand into the basket of fruits.

Inside, was the appa which Abel had abandoned after splitting it in half. The cross-section of its white insides were turning to a light-brown coloration due to being exposed to the air, but not concerning himself with that, Subaru picked the halves up.

Then—

Subaru: “Help me finish eating the appa you cut in half.”

Tossing a half of the appa over to Abel, he sunk his teeth into the half he held onto.

With a pleasant sound, the sweet juice of the fruit slowly filled his mouth, and Subaru looked into the face of Abel, still plopped down on the floor.

Having caught the appa thrown at him, Abel brought his eyes down towards it, and after a moment of hesitation, he bit into it.

With a similarly pleasant sound, the sweet and sour flavor ought to have filled his mouth as well.

Whether he liked it or disliked it, hated it or loved it, was completely unrelated to that flavor.

As fellow living beings, there would be no difference in the flavor of the appa that they shared.

Vincent: “Natsuki Subaru.”

Subaru: “What’s up?”

Vincent: “I am not fond of you.”

Subaru: “Ngh.”

Vincent: “—But, I require your strength.”

Declaring so, Abel slowly stood up. With the half-eaten appa in his hand, Abel trained his sable eyes upon Subaru.

Once again he hid all the hues of uncharacteristic emotions that he had displayed within the cabin behind his consciousness as the Emperor; however, while those yet revealed themselves ever-so-slightly via his eyes and voice,

Vincent: “Apologies for mine many acts of rudeness. O Knight of the Kingdom.”

With that, upon seeing the Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire bow his head, Subaru smiled.

Smiling, while biting into what remained of the appa,

Subaru: “I won’t apologize for my many acts of disrespect, Emperor of the Empire.”

And with that, the first step to rectify the discrepancies in their relationship, which had been mistaken ever since its very start, was taken.

Chapter 13:
To Each Their Wounds

1

???: “—You also came, Rem.”

Rem looked up quietly, as a voice called out to her from her side.

At the coupling of the coupled dragon carriage, a silver-haired girl opened the door of the next car and called out to Rem, who was leaning her back against the wall of the car—it was Emilia.

She had a beautiful face with a soft look in her eyes, and a girl holding her hand by her side. It was Beatrice, who had rushed to Subaru during the chaos at the Imperial Capital.

It was a touching sight, but Rem’s feelings toward them were extremely complicated.

Of course, this was partly because these women were related to Rem’s lost Memories that she herself had no knowledge of, but that was not the only reason.

Unlike Ram, who she had instinctively known was her sister, and the other people who had called themselves her companions, these two people were special. —They were special in that they were deeply connected to Subaru.

Both of them felt a particularly strong connection to him during the situation surrounding the Imperial Capital, during the retreat, and afterwards when they were visiting Subaru while he was unconscious.

Rem did not know why it bothered her so much—.

Rem: “Emilia-san, and Beatrice-chan…”

Beatrice: “Rem is also concerned about where the discussion is going, I suppose.”

Rem: “Concerned… Yes, right, concerned I might be.”

When asked by Beatrice, who had addressed her by name, Rem looked down slightly.

The reason Rem stood in the empty passageway was to watch over the cabin a short distance away—the cabin assigned to Natsuki Subaru as his sleeping quarters.

Subaru and Abel were now confronting each other in a quiet cabin after the large crowd of visitors had left.

Abel had a grim face, and when he was seen, he was often wearing an oni mask, so it was refreshing for Rem to see his true face.

However, as far as Rem knew, Abel always had a scowl on his face when he was unmasked. But today, his already grim face looked even more stiffened than before.

Emilia: “Rem, you’ve been around Subaru and Abel… er, Emperor Vincent for a while, haven’t you? Are they good friends?”

Rem: “Emperor Vincent, I’m not used to calling him that. And I don’t get the impression that the two are very friendly with each other. I would say that even though they had agreed on some ideas, they didn’t get along…”

Emilia: “Ugh, that’s what I thought…”

Beatrice: “Well, that was predictable, in fact. Abel’s way of thinking is like oil and water with Subaru, I suppose. Betty prefers the sentimental way Subaru thinks, in fact.”

Emilia: “Jeez, Beatrice is so quick to spoil Subaru. You have to properly listen to Abel’s side of the story… um, Emperor Vincent’s side of the story!”

Emilia’s shoulders slumped at Rem’s answer, but her lips pouted at Beatrice’s subsequent assertion.

In front of Rem, who thought her expression seemed to change from one moment to the next, Emilia added a surprised “Ah” and looked at her.

Emilia: “Oh, and, Rem, since we’re in Vollachia, you have to call me Emily…”

Rem: “…Um, is there a point to that?”

Emilia: “Eh, of course there is. No one thinks I’m Emilia. Right, Beatrice?”

Beatrice: “Since Betty also spoils Emilia, to give no answer is a kindness, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Huh?! What does that mean?!”

Emilia’s eyes widened at Beatrice’s kind misdirection as she held her hand.

Rem felt that her feelings were at the mercy of the two as she saw their hard to dislike interactions, but she soon grew fond of Emilia and Beatrice.

In the first place, if what she had heard was true, they had risked a lot to come to this country to look for both Rem and Subaru. There was no way she could dislike them.

Rem: “Unlike with him, there’s nothing suspicious about them.”

Subaru carried a stench that inspired fierce, instinctive alarm. While a large part of Rem’s hostility was due to that, there was no sign of it in Emilia and the others.

So, like with Louis, the People of Shudraq, Flop, and the others, there was no reason to bother snapping at them.

Although—

Rem: “…That person’s smell suddenly becoming fainter is also scary.”

She was concerned about Subaru, who had lost his strong stench while they had been separated.

Since she did not know what exactly it was, and between it existing and not existing it was definitely better if it did not, she wanted to say that things had improved.

And, as she had been thinking that.

???: “Huuh? It’s Rem-chan, Emily-chan, and Beatrice-chan!”

The door of the carriage on the opposite side from where Rem and the others were standing was opened, and the other party who had appeared called out the names of the three in a loud voice.

Waving her hands vigorously, a tall woman strolled towards them—her long golden hair was freely arranged, her skin was exposed like a dancer’s, and above all, she had fully grown arms and legs appropriate for her age.

She was—

???: “—Medium-san.”

Medium: “Ya-hoo! Perhaps, are you all worried about Abel-chin and Subaru-chin too?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. Medium-chan was as well?”

Medium: “Yeah, yes! See, I finally have a big body again, don’t I? Now, unlike when I was little, I can stop adults from fighting, so I thought I could be useful.”

With her chest puffed out, Medium answered as such—they had not seen her for long, but like Subaru, she was one of those whose appearance had changed from that of an adult to a child.

The childish Medium was also very endearing, retaining her lively personality, but her charm remained the same regardless of the length of her arms and legs, so the familiar figure calmed Rem down.

It seemed that Medium had also been very frustrated when she was little, and she seemed to be enjoying being back to her large body as much as she could.

In any case—

Rem: “To stop a fight… that is, between that person and Abel-san?”

Medium: “That’s right~? It’s been a while since the two of them talked properly, aren’t they going to go wild?”

Rem: “I don’t know… Setting aside that person, I can’t imagine Abel-san going berserk.”

With a stern face and a harsh voice, she had the impression that Abel was one who said painful things.

However, unlike Rem, who had frowned at Medium’s concerns, Emilia and Beatrice’s opinions seemed to be closer to Medium’s side,

Beatrice: “Betty agrees with Medium, in fact. At the very least, Subaru has a lot to say to that Emperor, so he will probably snap at him, I suppose.”

Emilia: “That’s true. I, Emily, am a teensy bit worried too. A fight, it’s not only about hitting each other, but also about hurting each other with words.”

Rem: “…Is that how it is?”

Certainly, it would not be a scuffle, since there was no indication that Abel would raise his hand, but it was quite possible that Subaru could become emotional and the argument could intensify.

Because Abel was rational, Rem felt that he talked circles around Subaru comparatively more often, but Abel may not have much leeway now. She had not exchanged many words with Abel, who had regained his position as Emperor, but she could understand the concern of Medium and Beatrice.

And that speculation was immediately verified to be correct.

Subaru: “—Okay? Anyways, let’s sneak over to Garfiel. If it’s him, he should be able to understand our unavoidable circumstances.”

Vincent: “What, the scandal of how a Knight of the Kingdom raised his hand against the Emperor of the Empire?”

Subaru: “Don’t forget, if that goes to trial, I’ll talk about everything you’ve been up to as a last resort…!”

And so on, the door of the cabin opened as they continued the hushed exchange.

The eyes of those in Rem’s group, who were waiting for the discussion to be concluded, met the black eyes of the two men as they peeked out to see whether there was anyone in the aisle.

Subaru opened his mouth with an “Ah”, while Abel frowned with a “Ugh”.

However, that was not the extent of the reactions of Rem’s group when they saw the state of the two of them. After all, both Subaru and Abel, who showed their faces, were covered in blood.

Rem: “Unbelievable…”

Medium: “You two were having a much bigger fight than I thought you would?!”

Emilia: “Oh, oh no! Beatrice! Quickly, heal him…!”

Beatrice: “It’s as you see, in fact! Betty should have been there, I suppose!!”

Subaru and Abel met their gazes at the group of women who had welcomed them with a flurried commotion. Then Abel sighed, and Subaru raised his hands in resignation.

After that,

Subaru: “Um, you’re definitely going to get mad, so before that happens I gotta tell you… We’ve made up.”

With a wry smile on his pitiable face, he said that as if he had at least some good news to tell.

—In the end, their injuries were just a small cut on their hands, nothing impressive.

Medium: “But, the cabin’s a mess now and… We don’t have another cabin that we can prepare.”

Subaru: “No, I’m not going to tell you something as self-important as to prepare another cabin. I’ve seriously reflected on what I… Ah! Medium-san! You’re back to normal!”

Medium: “Hehe~, that’s right, Subaru-chin! Ah, no, that’s no good! I’m happy that you said that, but I’m also angry at you. The two of you are hopeless~.”

Saying that, Medium put her hands on her waist and scolded Subaru for his poor attempt to change the topic of the conversation.

Subaru’s shoulders slumped in remorse; however, instead of the depressed Subaru, it was Abel, whom Subaru had fought with, that received the brunt of Medium’s scolding.

Medium: “Abel-chin as well, while Subaru-chin is small, you can’t act immature, okay?”

Vincent: “…You, do you understand what you just did? You raised a hand against the Emperor.”

Medium: “Because you’re so great and all that, and no one has ever scolded you, Abel-chin, you’ve grown up to be like this, haven’t you?”

Vincent: “…”

Abel frowned and crossed his arms, meanwhile Medium was giving him a reproachful glare. As one could understand from the exchange that had just happened, surprisingly, Medium had slapped Abel over the head.

Looking at the disastrous state of the cabin, it was reasonable to want to scold Abel for fighting with the young-looking Subaru, but

Rem was impressed by the absurd act.

Rem: “If it’s okay with Medium-san, may I also hit him?”

Vincent: “Do not join her. We do not have the leisure to look over each instance of disrespect one-by-one at this time. Do not do something that would make me have to take my time after the war to decide whether I should punish you by comparing it to your achievements.”

Rem: “That’s a shame.”

Of course, she had not expected to receive permission, but for Rem, it was fruitful to hear the words “after the war” come from Abel’s mouth.

At least, Abel was looking towards the future. Although she did not know what had been said during their conversation inside, compared to before he had visited this cabin, it felt like the light and color within his eyes had improved.

Emilia: “—Okay, this is good. But, you need to change your clothes or else everyone will worry about you, you can go see everyone after you’re dressed properly, okay?”

Beatrice: “Truly, you’re so troublesome, in fact. You can’t allow Betty to have any peace of mind, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Sorry, sorry. But it’s been a while, it feels so fresh. For a while the only people who worried about me were, except for Tanza, all men.”

Having wiped off the blood on Subaru’s face and hands with the hand towel she carried, Emilia patted him on the head.

Beatrice, with her hands held out and seemingly trying to heal his wounds, shrugged her shoulders, appearing to feel not only a sense of relief, but also a sense of joy.

Both of them seemed to feel happy to be looking after Subaru.

Looking at this, for some reason Rem felt her chest tingle.

Medium: “Hey, hey, Abel-chin, do you think you can manage?”

Not having noticed that which occurred in Rem’s heart, Medium tilted her head as she asked Abel this question.

Abel narrowed his black eyes at her question, and then nodded his head after a moment.

Vincent: “There is no problem. In fact, it is foolish to point at me and question whether I can work hard. Ever since I decided that I would assume the seat of Emperor, I lost the right to act haphazardly.”

Medium: “—? Does that mean that you’re going to continue working hard as the Emperor?”

Vincent: “—. That is a foolish way of saying it, but roughly, yes.”

Medium: “I see! Then I also agree! Let’s work together~!”

Medium’s face suddenly brightened up and she held her hand out towards Abel. Abel glared at Medium’s hand, and proceeded to turn his face away.

At Abel’s cold attitude, Medium withdrew her hand and clapped her hands together, producing a snapping sound.

Medium: “Well, should we go to meet the others? Big bro also wanted to talk with Abel-chin.”

Vincent: “I do not have the time to talk with that thing, but Serena Dracroy’s flying dragon ship should also be back soon. Either way, I need to talk with the main players now.”

Rem: “—Ah, please wait.”

Towards Medium’s urging, Abel drew back his chin.

For Abel, who liked to take care of things quickly, she knew that from now on, important discussions would have to be held to discuss how to deal with the problems occurring in the Imperial Capital.

Naturally, as people who were important to that discussion, it was already decided that Subaru and Emilia would be present, but before that, Rem had something important to say.

Half of the reason Rem stood there was because of her concern about the twisted relationship between Subaru and Abel, but the other half was because of that.

Subaru: “Abel, I also have something that I want to do before I meet everyone… something that I absolutely must do. So, let me go do that first.”

Rem: “Ah…”

Stopping the exchange, Rem tried to tell them her reason for coming. However, Subaru interrupted Rem as he began to speak, turning his gaze towards her.

That gaze made her understand that what he absolutely had to do was the same thing as what Rem had tried to say. So, Rem pursed her lips, and nodded.

And then—

Subaru: “—Rem, take me to Katya-san.”

3

???: “What the fuck, brat? This ain’t no place for you.”

When he visited his intended cabin, Subaru’s eyes widened as he was greeted by a vulgar voice.

Standing behind the open door was a man with a rough greeting voice that matched his eye-patched face—for a moment, he had a difficult time opening his memory drawer, but then it hit him.

Subaru: “Jamal… right?”

Jamal: “Oh? How do you know my name? I don’t know you.”

Subaru: “You’re, alive…”

Jamal: “Aren’t you a damned rude little brat, huh?!”

The name of the man who had opened his mouth that had an unexpectedly clean set of teeth and made his throat growl, was Jamal.

When Subaru was blown away to the Vollachian Empire, he was one of the first Imperials he had encountered—and this was the man who had been Todd Fang’s companion.

As far as Subaru knew, it was certainly in the Fortress City of Guaral, when Todd helped a General First-Class, who had been previously captured, escape, where he should have been captured as a prisoner of war by the rear guards who remained.

Following that, due to Subaru going through a lot, his safety had honestly slipped his mind.

Subaru: “Why are you in this cabin?”

Jamal: “What’s so weird about me being in my little sister’s cabin?”

Subaru: “Little sister… ah.”

Hearing the sound of his suspicion melting away due to the answer, Subaru remembered.

That reminded him, Todd mentioned that his fiancée was Jamal’s younger sister. Meaning that, the people in front of him, Jamal and Katya, were actually siblings.

The delicate Katya and the thuggish and wild Jamal were siblings.

Subaru: “Well, both your hair color and frizziness are similar…?”

Jamal: “I don’t understand what you’re saying, but I do understand that you’re pissing me off. Brat, if you don’t want to get hurt you should…”

???: “—Nii-san! Stop it!”

Perhaps annoyed by Subaru’s attitude, Jamal rolled up his sleeves and showed him a gesture of trying to kick him out by force. But before he could do so, a shrill voice from behind called him to stop.

Looking into the cabin past Jamal's side, the layout of the cabin was similar to the one in which Subaru was sleeping, and a woman was lying on a bed at the far end of the cabin.

That woman was—

Subaru: "Katya-san."

Katya: "You, you're finally awake… You, you've been sleeping too much. Seriously, really…"

Katya looked at Subaru across from the body of her brother, who was standing in the way, and he saw her sit up on her bed. Then Jamal quickly walked over to her and said, "Oi oi,"

Jamal: "Take it easy! You don't know when you're going to die, so move slowly."

Katya: "I'm not that fragile! Don't compare me to a brother who doesn't even die when he's supposed to be dead…"

Jamal: "I didn't die in the first place, but you people would've selfishly killed me anyway…!"

Jamal, his concern flat out rejected, and now stigmatized as a dead man after so long, slightly shuddered.

It seemed like a lot had happened in the reunion of these siblings, but it was not Subaru's real intention to delve into that. There had been another reason for his visit.

Rem: "—. Are you all right?"

Subaru looked down slightly and saw that his feet did not move very far from the entrance into the cabin, and it was Rem, who was with him, who had asked that.

After apologizing to Emilia, Abel, and the others, Subaru visited this cabin with Rem.

As Katya's friend, Rem had every reason to be present here. —That was because she too had wanted to hear what Subaru was trying to do from here on out.

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm all right."

Nodding, Subaru stepped into the cabin.

On the bed, Katya and Jamal were still arguing about something, but when Subaru arrived with Rem, Katya was the one who had closed her mouth.

As she was, she kept her blue eyes, framed by long lashes, downcast,

Katya: "…Is your body doing better now?"

Even if it was just a prelude to the main topic, her concern for Subaru's body was kind.

Her tone was blunt and brusque, but there was no doubt that she was a lovely woman at heart, and that was why she had become close to the unreliable Rem.

To this woman, Subaru had to tell her.

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm all right. Thanks, for worrying about me."

Katya: "…I wasn't worried or anything. It's just that this girl seemed anxious."

Subaru: "…"

With a glance, Subaru looked toward Rem as she stood next to him, her expression stiff.

Knowing roughly what was going to be discussed, he did not overreact to Katya's words as he normally would.

Although it was something he anticipated, Subaru admonished his own weakness, which made him want to put off the main topic. Taking a deep breath, he exhaled.

And then—

Subaru: “I’m sorry. I, couldn’t bring Todd back.”

Yes, he informed her of the final parting between him and Todd in the Imperial Capital.

Katya: “…”

Squeezing his small fist tightly, overcome with grief, Subaru let the cruel truth be known.

At the end of the battle in the Imperial Capital, even though Todd had helped them break through the siege of zombies, their clash was all but inevitable.

Subaru decided not to kill Todd, a man who hated and abhorred Subaru’s way of thinking and who was determined to get rid of him, and they faced off against each other.

But in the end—

Subaru: “Um, he was washed away by the floodwater that swept into the city, but any more than that…”

Katya: “—Oh.”

Subaru: “It’s just that, in the fight against the zombies, he acted as a decoy and suffered a lot of injuries. That’s why…”

At Subaru’s report, Katya’s hoarse exhale escaped. As if to overlap with that breath, Subaru described what he saw to Katya in a way that was not exactly as he had seen it.

If he wanted to, Subaru could have given Katya hope.

The reality was that the last time Subaru saw Todd, he was swallowed up by that muddy current and disappeared. If his body had not been found, it should have been possible to show some hope for his survival.

But, Subaru did not do that.

Subaru: "…"

The last time Subaru saw Todd was when his figure was encompassed by the flood.

However, the exact description had been left out. To be precise, the last time Subaru had seen Todd, he was in the form of a Werewolf, taking a deep axe blow to his chest and tumbling into the rushing waters.

—He was severely wounded, unconscious, and swallowed up by the muddy current. He could not have escaped harm.

Jamal: "—Hk."

Upon hearing Subaru's story, the sound of Jamal gritting his teeth hard could be heard echoing throughout the cabin.

For Jamal, Todd was his companion, and, more than that, his future brother-in-law whom he had decided to entrust his sister Katya to.

It was a terribly odd feeling, but if possible, Subaru also wanted to hope that Todd had survived.

Having his expectations seriously betrayed, their relation was that of his life being targeted, and in the world where Subaru actually Returned by Death, Todd was an opponent that had taken his life multiple times.

However, since he had a history of dealing with Todd on many occasions, he understood.

Todd was just an ordinary person with no special powers. The fact that he was a Werewolf was not an advantage which could overturn that life-threatening situation.

In a helpless situation where Subaru would die, Todd would also lose his life.

Todd Fang, he was swallowed up by that flood and had perished.

As the person who, in the end, had been the closest witness to the final moment of his life, that was Subaru's conclusion.

Subaru: "…"

Silence fell upon the cabin.

Gradually, the silence seemed to burn his forehead and the nape of his neck. There was a heartache that he had to live with; it was something he had decided to take on by himself.

So, after a while, as he continued to experience the sensation of his skin being burned—

Katya: "…You, you didn't see the crucial part of it, did you? Then, maybe he's not dead."

Her voice, faltering and cracking, caused Subaru to look up.

Not only Subaru, but also Rem and Jamal, all looked at Katya in bed. She fiddled with her hair, her blue eyes quivering.

Katya: "What, what if, you know? If you'd seen Todd's head get smashed in, or his body cut in half, or burned to a crisp, or something like that, you know? If you'd seen it, you might think so, yes, but…"

Rem: "Katya-san…"

Katya: "But see, he really, really clings to his life. And besides, when we parted ways, he told me he would come back soon… Definitely, back to me… He would never lie. Even when he told me that my brother had died! He just misspoke, that's all!"

Rem: "Katya-san!"

Raising her voice, Katya started clawing at her hair. The sight of it made Rem call out to her, and she cuddled up on the bunk to hold Katya's head.

Cradling Katya's head in her chest, Rem caressed her back.

Rem: "Slowly, breathe slowly. I am right here beside you…"

Katya: “You’re, you’re wrong… he wouldn’t… that easily… right? Right, Rem…?”

Rem: “Katya-san…”

Large tears streamed from Katya’s eyes, soaking Rem’s clothes as she hugged her. Without minding that, Rem continued to stroke her sobbing friend’s back.

Subaru’s heart was intensely torn by Katya’s honest reaction.

He understood.

That Katya would be hurt this way by telling her about Todd. It was a really, really complicated relationship, but Todd’s feelings for Katya were likely genuine. Katya as well, was really cherished by Todd. That was why there were these tears.

That was why Subaru did not mention the crueler truth.

It was something that Rem was not even aware of. —It was Rem who had finished off Todd, who had turned into a Werewolf, with an axe.

In order to protect Subaru, Rem had put an end to Todd.

Since Todd was in his Werewolf form at the time, and since he did not undo his beastification until the instant he was submerged, Rem was unaware of this fact. Moreover, Subaru had no intention of enlightening her on the matter.

Subaru did not believe that the truth had any value here.

Todd loved Katya, and Katya loved him back. That was what mattered. There was no reason to destroy those memories and dwell on what really happened.

Subaru: “Todd truly cared about Katya-san. All the way until the very end.”

That was the only motive without any lies that Natsuki Subaru, the target of Todd Fang’s raw murderous intent, could convey to Katya

Aurélie.

Katya: “—Hk.”

Katya, sobbing, wrapped her arms around Rem’s back as she hugged her, and one could see her nails digging hard into Rem’s back. It was painful, but Rem took it in silence.

In this cabin echoing with sobs, Rem glanced at Subaru, and shook her head.

Within that gesture, Rem conveyed to leave Katya to her, and her gratitude to Subaru who had come prepared for this outcome.

Jamal: “—. Sorry to make you have to play a nasty role, brat.”

Jamal said this to Subaru as they left the cabin, leaving Rem and Katya behind.

When Subaru raised an eyebrow at Jamal’s surprisingly straightforward words, he grimly wrinkled his nose with a, “Ya know.”

Jamal: “It’s a tough role to inform the family of the deceased. No matter how heroically and bravely the person died, there are still those who will want to cry.”

Subaru: “…How about you?”

Jamal: “Huh?”

Subaru: “Because to you as well, Todd is your companion, your sister’s fiancé, and he’s someone special, right?”

With cheeks contorted, Jamal pondered Subaru’s question.

After a moment of silence, he touched the eye patch that was covering his right eye with his finger,

Jamal: “I don’t know. If the bastard had survived, I would have laughed it off that we both failed to die, but that step completely disappeared. Well, if he died fighting, then he did his job as an

Imperial Soldier. Even though he severely mocked that."

Subaru: "…"

As he said that, Jamal gave a small snort and laughed at the last part.

Subaru could not tell whether it was a laugh at the thought of Todd's uncharacteristic end, or whether it was a laugh based on some kind of Imperial way that Subaru did not understand.

Whichever the case may be, Subaru did not feel that he could laugh at someone's death.

Jamal: "It's just."

In front of Subaru, who was thinking that, Jamal suddenly followed up.

Subaru opened his eyes wide at the tone of his voice. For what was in Jamal's continued voice was not anger or loneliness, but something more akin to anticipation.

And that impression was correct. Jamal went on to say.

Jamal: "I don't think that son of a bitch would die so easily. What Katya said is true… I haven't seen him actually die."

Subaru: "That is… Yeow."

Jamal: "Shut it, brat. Regardless of what I think, that's hope for Katya."

Jamal's finger flicked Subaru's forehead as he was about to involuntarily object. Having silenced Subaru, Jamal jerked his chin toward the door behind him as he said that.

Subaru could not discern whether the hope Jamal spoke of was a bright one or a cruel one. However, he understood that he was not qualified to interfere.

Only those who were invited and allowed to participate in Katya and Todd's lives had the right to interfere with their feelings. — Subaru was not qualified to do so.

Jamal: "Damn, for a guy who hated to fight, he had quite the hot-blooded attitude. And because of that, he crossed a far more dangerous bridge than I did."

Looking up at the ceiling of the hallway, Jamal made that critique of Todd.

Even though Jamal did not show his face and his voice was shaky, Subaru was still not qualified to point this out.

4

???: "Heeello~, Subaru-kun, you're looking well, areeen't~ you? You've been looking more youthful, I wooonder~ if it's thanks to the food of the Empire?"

Subaru: "Amazing. The only person that could make such a gaudy joke after seeing me like this is Roswaal."

Roswaal: "Oh my, no one else was calm enough to do that, riiight~? By the way, for the time being, in this place I go by the name Dudley—From now on, let's get along, okay?"

With his blue eye closed, leaving his yellow eye winking towards him, an expression that Subaru had not seen in a while—Subaru broke into a smile as he came face-to-face with Roswaal.

As expected, Roswaal was unphased as he looked at the shrunken-down Subaru, but Subaru decided not to mention that his style differed from his usual clown costume. It was a little vexing, it reminded him of when he changed his tone of voice, and intentionally omitted explaining anything.

After Subaru had informed Katya of Todd's final moments, Subaru went to the middle of the coupled dragon carriages to a larger passenger car that had been prepared for him.

The coupled dragon carriages—According to Subaru's prior knowledge, they were similar in structure to electric and railway trains, the likes of which could only be found in the Vollachian Empire, which was flatter than most other countries.

Of course, when it came to who had the most earth dragons, that went to the Kingdom of Lugunica; thus, he decided he would keep in a corner of his mind that it would probably be possible to lay out something similar, provided he chose the right terrain.

Roswaal: "This coupled dragon carriage, I dare say that it appears to be one of the secrets of the Empire. From what I've heard, it was invented by a member of the Nine Divine Generals known for their wisdom…"

Subaru: "I knew it. I've never seen something like this in the Kingdom… Thinking about it, we've seriously seen a lot of the inner workings of the Empire."

Roswaal: "Hahaha, it would be disastrous if we're prevented from returning just because we peeked at the dark side of the Empire too much. From now on, I think it may be wise if we spend some time with our eyes closed."

Subaru: "That's, no laughing matter either…"

Roswaal gave a hearty laugh in agreement as Subaru grumbled this. Otto wore a dismayed expression as he overheard their conversation.

The passenger carriage in question was a dining car with a lot of tables, designed with enough space to accommodate roughly twenty people. However, the purpose for all of these tables was not for having a meal, but rather for discussions such as assemblies and war councils.

In fact, Subaru and Roswaal were not the only ones there; there were many other faces as well.

Of course, there was Emilia and Beatrice, who had come here earlier, sitting at the same table as Ram.

Ram gave a scornful gaze to Subaru, who had come alone.

Ram: “Little Barusu, what’s up with Rem? Shouldn’t you be together with her?”

Subaru: “You really didn’t need to use that prefix… Right now, Rem is with Katya-san. For this discussion, I don’t think we’ll be seeing her face.”

Ram: “—. Ah, yes.”

Spilling out a sigh, Ram did not dig any further into Subaru’s answer.

At last, Ram had managed to meet her younger sister, Rem, but apparently they were not as clingy with each other as Subaru had thought they would be. From the get-go, he had the impression that the two of them were quite close with one another, so Subaru had hoped that the two sisters would be constantly holding each other’s hands.

Ram: “Ram and Rem are both their own person. Don’t be forcing your own selfish feelings onto us, young Barusu. It’s disgusting.”

Subaru: “Don’t read other people’s minds! I’m not being disgusting!”

Ram: “While Ram couldn’t be around, it was the people around Rem that supported her. Don’t think of belittling those relationships. Shameless, undeveloped Barusu.”

Subaru: “Let’s see how long it takes for you to use up all of your variations of my nickname, Nee-sama…!”

As his cheeks twitched at the various things Ram said and did, Subaru took a deep breath.

Ram had a point; it would be no good to rush. First of all, the sisters had been successfully reunited, so they should not rush and should advance forward slowly.

There was no need to worry, as there was a bond between Ram and Rem that no one could get between.

He was able to believe this from the atmosphere that he had felt when they had come to visit Subaru together.

Subaru: “But, is this all of our members? What about Petra, Frederica, and Garfiel?”

Emilia: “Petra-chan and Frederica are taking care of the soldiers that are fighting. Garfiel as well, he’s also busy with the wounded.”

Subaru: “The fighting, that’s still ongoing?”

Emilia: “Yes, it is. Subaru, I think you saw a lot of them in the Imperial Capital…”

In regards to the whereabouts of the missing members, Emilia slightly hesitated with her answer.

What she was about to say, Subaru could guess what it would be.

Subaru: “The zombies…”

Otto: “Wh-What is that, that strange name?”

Subaru: “A dead person that can move around. In my hometown, we call them zombies. I thought it would be better if they had a name, so I called them that for the sake of convenience.”

Otto: “Do you not have way too many weird things in your hometown, Natsuki-san?”

Otto turned a reproachful look towards Subaru, whose mouth curved into a smile.

In this case, he thought about whether he should argue that this world in which zombies had actually appeared was the stranger one, or whether it was his world, in which zombies were the subject of so many works of fiction, but did not actually exist. Truly an incomprehensible matter of dimensions.

Roswaal: “I see, that’s good, zombies. At least, we can avoid calling them “corpse soldiers”.”

Then, Roswaal cut in between Subaru and Otto's conversation.

Subaru ruminated on the words "corpse soldiers" that came from his mouth.

Subaru: "Something like that, it seems like it's connected to some bad memories, huh?"

Roswaal: "That is indeed the case. It's one of the memories that I don't wish to remember."

Beatrice: "As discussed in the Imperial Capital, it's safe to say that this is the result of the Sacrament of the Immortal King, I suppose. According to the records, it was used most recently during the Kingdom's civil war, in fact."

Subaru: "So that's why it's a bad memory."

At Subaru's gaze, Roswaal gave a vague smile as he declined to say anything further.

Roswaal had a deep knowledge of the past. Even if he himself had not participated in the civil war, he still might have had a bad experience with the Sacrament of the Immortal King.

Beatrice: "But, as far as Betty knows, that secret art is meant to be an unstable product, I suppose. To create such a great number of zombies and reproduce it so well, it should be impossible, in fact."

Subaru: "But, they were actually moving and talking, so there must be some reason for it, right?"

Beatrice: "…Betty is also scratching her head, I suppose. Dudley, you shouldn't be slacking off, in fact."

Roswaal: "Oya oya, I'm upset that you think that I'm slacking off. Since this also involves me, there's no reason for me to cut any corners. Besides, all of your lives are also at stake."

Beatrice: "Betty doesn't know how much to trust you, I suppose."

Roswaal: "I understand. Because your life is also at stake."

Beatrice: “What do you understand, in fact! You are just joking even more, I suppose!”

Roswaal gave this answer with his chin resting on his folded hands, causing Beatrice’s face to become red as she shouted at him.

Beatrice exploded with frustration at the teasing Roswaal, but even Subaru was not sure what Roswaal was truly thinking. However, since Beatrice was Subaru’s partner, he pulled down his eyelid and stuck his tongue out at him.

Emilia: “Well, I’m not really sure of the details, but is it alright if I call them “zombies” like Subaru?”

Otto: “I see no problem with it? It is shorter than saying “corpse soldiers”.”

Subaru: “That way of agreement is just like Otto…”

And so, just like that, as Subaru’s conversation with the others came to a close,

Berstetz: “—Your Excellency, according to a report I received from General Second-Class Kafma, they will remain in the Gairahal Tropics to keep an eye on the stragglers as much as possible.”

Goz: “Also, from General First-Class Olbart, he is using delaying tactics with the shinobis under his command! However, he said that, since their opponent has no need to resupply water or food rations, it seems that what he can do decreases by about half!”

Vincent: “As for Kafma Irulux and Olbart Dunkelkenn, tell them to continue their operations as they have been doing. Serena Dracroy, what of your flying dragon ship?”

Serena: “They have not yet returned. Hopefully the fact that it’s taking longer than anticipated doesn’t mean that the Fortified City has fallen.”

Vincent: “…If it performs the purpose that it was built to do, the Fortified City should not be unprepared.”

And so, with the flurry of several footsteps and important talk flying around, Abel and three of his Imperial followers—an old man, a large man, and a beautiful woman arrived within the carriage.

Subaru did not know any of their names.

Otto: "The old man is the Prime Minister Berstetz Fondalfon, the tall man is General First-Class Goz Ralfon, and that woman is High Countess Serena Dracroy."

Subaru: "You saved me there… Goz, I think he's the guy that was arrested for letting Abel escape."

Otto guessed the reason for Subaru's frowning profile and made his comment… Among the names that Subaru had heard from him was that of one of the Nine Divine Generals whose survival was supposed to be in jeopardy.

He was someone who was said that he could be considered an ally to Abel if he had survived, so he was honestly happy to see him actually at Abel's side.

Vincent: "All of you are here? Good, then we can begin the war council."

Subaru: "Hey, what about Flop-san and the others?"

Vincent: "If there was a shortage of manpower like at the Fortress City, it would be a different story, but, what value would the addition of a peddler provide to this war council?"

Otto: "That is true. I wonder, why am I even here…?"

Beside Subaru, who had tilted his head, Otto also tilted his head at what Abel said.

But, the reason that Otto had tilted his head was not known by the Emilia Camp, Subaru included. It was only natural for Otto to be present here.

He was even laughed at scornfully by Ram with a "Ha."

Subaru: “And Taritta-san, Mizelda-san, and the others are positioned in the passenger car at the rear; so they won’t be here for this discussion, right?”

Berstetz: “Yes. That is what we have heard from the People of Shudraq. They have given me a really reassuring reply that when the time comes for them to utilize their power, they will do so with full force.”

Goz: “Certainly, I never thought that I would get the opportunity to stand side-by-side with the People of Shudraq, renowned for their bravery and courage! If this were not a struggle for the survival of the Empire, I would be all the more excited! Damn!”

Vincent: “You make too much noise. Keep your mouth closed.”

Abel silenced Goz, causing him to clinch his fists, which were the size of a child’s head, as he restrained himself. It was an inconsiderate remark, but since nobody paid it any attention, it was probably just a typical exchange between them.

At any rate, he now understood why Flop and the People of Shudraq were not present.

Emilia: “Subaru, your friends from the Empire are…”

Subaru: “I’ve already told everyone in the Battalion that I would speak as their representative. Um, there’s something I want to discuss with everyone. Especially with Beako.”

Beatrice: “With Betty…? This doesn’t feel like it’s going to be good, in fact.”

Subaru: “There, there, there.”

For the time being, he had asked his comrades from the Pleiades Battalion to refrain from attending this meeting.

After all, Subaru and Abel were both in the same cabin. With one wrong move, Weitz could have attacked Abel in an attempt to hand over the throne to Subaru.

The lie that Subaru was the illegitimate son of Abel—of Vincent Vollachia, that he was the black-haired Crown Prince, was still ongoing. He eventually needed to resolve that issue as well.

Subaru: “Though, it would have been nice at least if Tanza were here…”

Subaru was the only one who was attending the meeting as a member of the Battalion. He did not feel comfortable taking her out of her cabin, as she was not looking well.

As was the case when she visited him, he would definitely have to talk to Tanza later.

Subaru: “Also, I haven’t seen Louis around…”

Ram: “That girl is with Medium and Flop. You seem to have a lot of feelings for her, but what do you intend to do with her, Barusu?”

Subaru: “—. We can talk about that later, too.”

Ram’s light-crimson eyes narrowed, and Subaru felt compelled to reply.

Ram knew that Louis was present at the Pleiades Watchtower right before Subaru and Rem were sent to the Empire. Naturally, from Ram’s mouth and from Abel’s, Louis’s true identity would have been shared with everyone.

Still, she would like to know who, along with what kind of work and effort, had made it possible for her to be on board this coupled dragon carriage.

In addition, they needed to find the best compromise for Louis.

Vincent: “Now that you have finally caught up, we shall start this war council, Natsuki Subaru.”

Subaru: “You, don’t forget that I’m holding onto an enormous scandal, okay? I mean, I guess it’s like that, but not quite.”

Abel’s attitude had not changed on the surface, even though he vividly remembered him meekly bowing his head. Using disparaging words at his attitude, Subaru put a stop to him.

Still, there was a companion whose movements had not yet been confirmed.

That was—

Subaru: "—What about Priscilla? She must have been in Guaral, and wasn't she also at the Imperial Capital? Besides, Tanza mentioned Yorna."

Subaru asked this, as if he were saying "she should have been there" while looking at Abel's face.

Somehow, Priscilla and her merry band of companions had come to the Vollachian Empire. Al had even accompanied him to the Demon City of Chaosflame, so he was sure that they were involved in the battle for the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

As for Yorna, Subaru and his group had also received information that she had joined the rebels. Tanza also felt Yorna's presence in the Imperial Capital.

Naturally, such faces must also be on board the coupled dragon carriage.

Speaking of a face he had not seen, he also had not seen Cecilus either, but Cecilus's moodiness was the same as it was before he left Gladiator Island, so he was not concerned about him—

Subaru: "—Hey?"

However, when Subaru asked him about them, Abel fell silent and closed one eye.

Suspicious of his reaction, Subaru furrowed his brows as he looked around to see that Abel was not the only one who had such a reaction.

For some reason, nobody was saying anything about Priscilla's group's movements.

If Priscilla and the rest of her group had heartlessly returned to the Kingdom before the siege of the Imperial Capital, then Emilia and the others would have been surprised to hear Priscilla's name.

That was not the case. And, the answer to this uncomfortable silence was—

Beatrice: "—Subaru, that was kept secret to avoid agitating you, I suppose."

Subaru: "Beako?"

Beatrice took action before he could react and squeezed Subaru's hand. Subaru's cheeks tightened at Beatrice's preamble.

Then, Emilia turned her attention towards Subaru, who unconsciously held Beatrice's hand tightly,

Emilia: "Stay calm and listen to me, Subaru. About Priscilla and Yorna-san…"

She paused for a beat.

Emilia continued with what felt like a drawn-out answer to the anxious Subaru.

That was—

Emilia: "When we were all fleeing together from the Imperial Capital, we didn't find those two. —But, I want to believe that they're safe."

—It was a definite proof of the wounds inflicted to their side during the siege of the Imperial Capital.

Chapter 14:
The Kingdom and the Empire

1

—Priscilla and Yorna had not returned.

The lack of disagreement from the other people in the cabin made it clear that he had not misheard the startling information that came from Emilia's mouth.

The siege of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, in the midst of the battle between the regular army of the Empire and the rebels who had risen against them, one could only imagine the magnitude of the role that Priscilla and Yorna had played.

At the same time, Subaru's fists clenched tightly in the realization of one thing.

Subaru: "So Tanza's disheartened expression, that was the reason…"

Subaru had woken up in the bed in the coupled dragon carriage, and some members of the Battalion came to visit him. He was concerned that among them, Tanza had been looking depressed the whole time.

Subaru had planned to discuss the future course of action with Emilia, Abel, and the others, and then try to ask Tanza again once things had settled down. However, before Subaru could actually do so, the reason for Tanza's anxiety became clear to him.

Subaru: "So even though those two didn't come back, we still left the Imperial Capital?!"

Vincent: "—. There is no end to the list of those who participated in the battle and have not yet returned. Of course, the presence of her and Yorna Mishigure would be substantial, but they shall not be given special treatment."

Subaru: “But Yorna-san is…! Even then! You also should have had some sort of bond with Priscilla.”

Subaru appealed to Abel as he glanced out the window of the dragon carriage, seeing the scenery outside pass by as it rode forth, and thinking of the Imperial Capital that was moving away in the distance.

He had not known the full details of the situation. But Priscilla, who had rushed to his predicament in the Fortress City, had literally flown there, likely to protect Abel.

The exchanges that followed, while sharp as if they were pointing blades at each other, seemed to have a certain sense of familiarity between two people who knew each other well.

Abel must not have been at peace with the desertion of Priscilla.

Perhaps his earlier distraught reaction in Subaru’s cabin was not solely due to the person known as Chisha, who had died.

Goz: “You, how dare you speak so rudely to His Excellency!”

However, the one to raise an objection to Subaru’s attitude had not been Abel himself, but the large man beside him.

A scarred-faced man clad in golden armor, Goz Ralfon; while the volume of his voice erupted like a volcano, he looked down upon the boy who was hounding the Emperor that Goz had pledged his loyalty to.

Goz: “Looking at the particulars of the situation in the Imperial Capital, it would only be natural for His Excellency to abandon the Capital! The remaining generals, soldiers, and people will understand the validity of His Excellency’s judgment!”

Subaru: “I’m not talking about whether it was right or wrong. What I’m trying to say is…”

Goz: “YOU—!”

Vincent: “Cease this, Goz Ralfon. It is not in his nature to stay silent.”

Goz’s face turned red at Subaru’s insistence, but Abel stopped him with his hand.

At the sound of Abel’s calm voice, Goz closed his half-opened mouth, and he hung his head in respect. Subaru, on the other hand, looked at Abel with an embarrassed look on his face,

Subaru: “Sorry for all the fuss. But I’m going to repeat the same thing to you.”

Vincent: “It is as Goz said. Remaining in the Imperial Capital under the current circumstances is tantamount to throwing away one’s life. I could not make such a decision. Of course, there is fear regarding the safety of Priscilla and Yorna Mishigure…”

Emilia: “You know, Subaru, it’s not all bad news… Well, umm, it’s said that even amidst bad news, there’s also hope.”

In front of Subaru, Emilia placed her hand on Subaru’s shoulder with lowered eyebrows.

She, like Subaru, was very concerned about the safety of Priscilla and Yorna. If she said there was hope, it was for Subaru’s sake, as well.

Subaru: “By hope, what kind do you mean?”

Emilia: “Priscilla and Yorna-san are both reaaally strong, but not only that, they have the power to influence the others around them.”

Subaru: “Around them… that’s, yeah. Though I don’t know if that’s the case with Priscilla.”

Yorna, the ruler of the Demon City of Chaosflame, had enhanced the entire city’s power with her Soul Marriage Technique, an ability to connect the path of her soul with all the city’s inhabitants.

That also applied to Tanza, whose unparalleled power, despite her appearance as nothing more than a lovely deergirl, was something different from the Pleiades Battalion's overall enhancement.

It seemed to be a rather powerful supportive effect, and the effect persisted even on the Gladiator Island, far from Chaosflame, and even during the siege of the Imperial Capital—.

Subaru: "…Could it be that Tanza's enhancements are still in place?"

Beatrice: "In addition, the effect on those who have joined us from the Demon City remains in place, I suppose."

Ram: "Naturally, that means General First-Class Yorna, the wielder of that mystic art, is alive and well. That's why Emily, who is of a nervous disposition, is not panicking."

Emilia: "Yeah, I'm not panicking. And, Priscilla is the same way."

Subaru: "Priscilla, is the same?"

Beatrice and Ram corroborated Subaru's guess. Then, Emilia's follow-up statement that Yorna and Priscilla were the same caused Subaru to frown.

If he were to interpret that at face value, it would mean Priscilla was a user of the same technique as Yorna.

Subaru: "But, that doesn't sound like a Priscilla-like ability, and I thought Abel said the Soul Marriage Technique was really difficult to use. Was that a lie?"

Vincent: "Fool. What is in it for me to deceive you? I do not care what you think of me now, but there is no reason to recklessly provoke animosity here. Use your head."

Subaru: "If that wasn't supposed to provoke my animosity, you're not cut out to be Emperor."

Even if it was not this time, in the near future, this was behavior that would surely lead to a revolt.

When Subaru raised this point, Goz again became angry, but

Berstetz, standing next to him, intervened and prevented a major incident.

Otto: “In any case, though I do understand Natsuki-san’s impression of Priscilla-sama, she is a user of this so-called Soul Marriage Technique. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

Emilia: “Otto-kun is right, I saw it too. However, unlike Yorna’s extraordinary use of it, in her case, it is limited to her favorite servant-kun.”

Subaru: “Her favorite, Schult…? Speaking of which, what about Al?”

In conjunction with Priscilla having not returned, when the conversation turned to her camp, Subaru asked about the man in the iron helmet, who had not been seen here or in the coupled dragon carriages.

Al’s position was that of Priscilla’s Knight, although both master and servant did not approve of it at all.

He, too, was easygoing and frivolous, but he was certainly loyal to Priscilla. Naturally, Al must have felt most responsible for Priscilla not returning.

Beatrice: “…That man, he didn’t get on the dragon carriage, and instead remained in the Imperial Capital, in fact. Just as Subaru thought, he is taking action to search for Priscilla, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That guy…! No way, all by himself?”

Ram: “He was of the opinion that by his lonesome, he would be quicker to adapt to changing circumstances. Ram is in agreement with that idea. It would not be a good idea to leave so many people in the Imperial Capital under those circumstances.”

Subaru: “Damn, so that’s why… hk.”

He received an answer about the absent Al, but it was a fact that made Subaru’s brow wrinkle.

Despite his appearance, Al was quite astute, and he was someone who specialized in surviving things beyond his capability. Still, there was no doubt that his strength was a step below from those who were truly strong.

Despite being aware of this, Al supported Subaru like a relative. Even in the Demon City, there were many times when Subaru would have lost his life if it had not been for him.

Otto: "As for Priscilla-sama's camp, Priscilla-sama is at the top. Al-dono, her follower, and Heinkel-dono, who accompanied her, are missing. Schult-kun is resting in a cabin."

Subaru: "Heinkel… somehow, that's a name that I have an incredibly unpleasant memory of…"

Otto: "He is a drunkard."

Beatrice: "That description fails to get the point across, in fact… He is Reinhardt's father, I suppose."

Subaru: "—! That shitty father! Why is that guy in the Empire?!"

Eyes opened wide, Subaru retrieved an unpleasant recollection from the depths of his memory.

In the Watergate City of Pristella, Heinkel was the man who ruined the atmosphere when they had all been sitting in harmony. On that subject, he had been with Priscilla and the others, but it was surprising that he was also present in the Empire.

Egotistical and self-centered, it seemed like he would never have wanted to come to the Vollachian Empire.

Emilia: "But, Heinkel-san is also missing."

Subaru: "Just like Priscilla and Yorna, he hasn't returned… Dammit, I don't know how to feel about this."

Of course, he did not want him to die, nor did he think he should die.

On the other hand, he was not a person whom he thought of fondly, so he had no reason to wish for him to stay alive beyond not wanting to make Reinhardt or Wilhelm sad.

But, he had a thought about the results of him participating in that battle.

Subaru: "…"

Heinkel, a man of the Kingdom of Lugunica and father of Reinhardt, the Sword Saint.

A situation in which that man, caught up in a battle of the Vollachian Empire, ended up losing his life; the thought of that caused even Subaru, who was not on friendly terms with him, to feel a bitter emotion.

Subaru needed to return to the Kingdom with all of his precious companions, no matter what.

And so, it happened at the moment when Subaru had just strengthened his resolve.

Otto: "The circumstances of Priscilla-sama and Yorna-san are as I have told you. On top of that, I would like to make a firm statement before we start the meeting going over the future course of action."

The one who began to speak after a heavy silence had fallen over the cabin, was Otto.

He stood up on the spot and held up one index finger to attract the attention of those around him, and,

Otto: "As I am sure you know, we are people of the Kingdom. Having acknowledged that we are responsible for crossing the border at a time when we were not allowed to cross, I will state this."

Vincent: "—State it."

Otto: "Yes. —We have accomplished our objective. Once we enter the Fortified City of Garkla, we will proceed to go northward through the Kararagi City-States, and then return to the Kingdom of Lugunica."

In the midst of this unprecedented crisis in the Vollachian Empire, in front of the Vollachian Emperor who was undergoing the emergency of his country being brought to ruin, Otto made a clear declaration.

2

Otto: "—Natsuki-san and Emily, please remain silent."

That was what Subaru and Emilia were told before they could even say anything, taking the wind out of their sails.

Without turning his gaze to them, Otto's statement had surprised Subaru and Emilia before they would begin to vehemently protest, and had successfully allowed him to make the first moves.

Though, Subaru's and Emilia's reactions were natural.

With the Imperial Capital in such a state of destruction, and with no knowledge of the safety of Priscilla and Yorna, it would be too extreme to make plans to return to their home country.

Ram: "You may call it heartless, but Ram is in agreement with Otto's plan. We retrieved Rem and, incidentally, the short-limbed Barusu. Those results are satisfactory."

Emilia: "Ram… hk."

Ram: "There's no use in giving those wistful eyes, Emily. You should also understand. It is merely that Ram's group unexpectedly accomplished this without losing anything. It's far too dangerous to go any further."

In place of Subaru and Emilia, who had been ordered to be quiet, Ram gave her opinion of approval of Otto's plan.

Ram, having given a cold answer to Emilia's imploring gaze, partially closed her eyes in her usual pose, sitting on a chair and hugging her elbows.

Unexpectedly, they just accomplished it without losing anything. — Ram was right to express it that way.

As a matter of fact, they failed to bring Priscilla and Yorna back to this place. There was no guarantee that that would not happen to someone in their camp.

Serena: "Dudley, do you agree with your wife?"

Roswaal: "She's not my wife, but I'm generally in agreement with both of them."

The one who brought Roswaal to this topic with that exchange was Serena, a beautiful woman with a conspicuous white scar on her face.

Was the one Serena referred to as "wife" meant to be Ram? While denying that allegation, Roswaal concurred with Otto and Ram.

Roswaal: "In fact, if you look only at our objectives, I'd say it was a perfect accomplishment. His limbs have become a little shorter, and the girl who was supposed to be asleep has become a tomboy, but the results are excellent. I guess withdrawing to the Kingdom here would be the decision with the least fear of losses."

Ram: "Even if Barusu's teeth haven't finished coming out, Ram says the loss is minimal."

Subaru: "All of my teeth have come out, damn it…!"

Hoping for no argument, Ram ragged on her impression of Subaru's size. Regardless, given the bad course the conversation was taking, Subaru's eyes wandered around.

Otto, Ram, and Roswaal were the three people in the Emilia camp who had a strong voice in policy-making meetings because of their practical wisdom.

Despite being the crown of Emilia's camp, it was not unusual for Emilia's and Subaru's opinion to not be accepted. Rather, it was quite common.

Subaru: “So the only one on our side is Beako…?”

Beatrice: “…Sorry Subaru, but Betty is more on their side, in fact. Isn’t it far too dangerous to associate any more with the Empire, given that Subaru has shrunk, I suppose?”

Subaru: “No way, even you!”

Subaru’s eyes widened in shock at his partner’s unexpected betrayal.

However, although she looked apologetic, there was no sign of Beatrice saying “It’s a joke, in fact.” She was saying that because she really cared about Subaru.

In short—

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “…It’s just Emilia-tan and I.”

Squeezing her white hand tightly, Emilia’s amethyst eyes wavered. Subaru cleared his throat at her call and broke out in a cold sweat because he was so outmatched.

At the very least, if the others who were not there were present, it would be a different story—.

Otto: “Just for the record, Petra-chan agrees with us. Frederica-san is passive, but would prefer to return to our home country… Garfiel is the only one on your side.”

Subaru: “Only Emilia-tan, Garfiel and I?! Stop joking around!”

Emilia: “Uhh… somehow I’m feeling reaaally helpless…”

With their wishful thinking smashed by pragmatism, the helplessness of Subaru’s and Emilia’s opinion was strengthened.

If this were a meeting where decisions were made by fistfighting, the presence of Emilia and Garfiel would be an overwhelming advantage, but they were simply not suited to other kinds of meetings.

Goz: “God! What a farce! I cannot stand to watch this!”

It was Goz who said as much while snorting at the arguments within Subaru’s group.

For him, who had previously complained about Subaru’s attitude towards Abel, he must have felt that all the words and deeds of his faction were disrespectful to the Emperor.

Taking a large step forward, Goz picked Subaru up by the nape of the neck. He truly did, and when he plucked him up with his two thick fingers, Subaru cried “Wah!” in astonishment.

Goz: “This is a matter for the Empire! If you are citizens of the Kingdom and not of the Empire, then you should cross the border as soon as possible, as per the policy you have established! Your strength is not required!”

Subaru: “W-wait a sec! We’re not quite done with our side of the conversation yet…”

Goz: “Silence—!!”

With his legs dangling in the air, a tremendous voice had struck Subaru dizzy.

Even with his hands covering his ears, Goz’s voice penetrated his defense as if it were a weapon. However, his argument came from his pride in being an Imperial Soldier, and Subaru had no reason to follow suit.

Additionally, the same was true for outsiders other than Subaru.

Emilia: “That’s enough, Goz-san. First, put Subaru down, then we can talk about this properly.”

Immediately, stepping forward with her hands on her hips, was Emilia.

She looked up at Goz, who was holding Subaru in his hand, and communicated her firm will to him. Her attitude made Goz scowl deeply, and with his scarred face, he looked down at Emilia.

Goz: “And you, I see you share this boy’s opinion! But! The Sword Wolves of the Empire will accept no charity! Your help is unnecessary! Join your comrades and promptly…”

Emilia: “That! I have a reaaally strong objection to that!”

Goz: “What?!”

Emilia: “You say that our power isn’t necessary! But! I don’t think that’s the case at all!”

Beatrice: “Her voice has gotten loud in the heat of the moment, in fact.”

Not wanting to lose to Goz’s vigor, Emilia’s voice, akin to the ring of a silver bell, grew louder and louder.

The beauty remained intact, but Emilia’s voice sounded more like the toll of a large bell than regular ones, and when she challenged him directly, Goz’s expression twisted.

Thrusting her finger towards Goz, who wore a contorted expression, Emilia continued.

Emilia: “After all! Even in the battle for the Imperial Capital, if it weren’t for me, Priscilla, and the others, everyone would have reaaally struggled a lot more!”

Goz: “—Hk!”

Emilia: “All of us! We were very strong, isn’t that right, Berstetz-san?!”

Speaking with a loud voice, Emilia turned the conversation to Berstetz.

Eyes as narrow as threads, the old man was unfazed by the sudden nomination. “Yes, I suppose so,” he replied, wringing the mustache around his mouth with his fingers, Berstetz: “For my part, it was unexpected that the Generals of the First-Class would be unable to succeed in their battles. If that was the contribution of these women…”

Serena: “It feels strange to talk about things from our perspective, but the white light that was fired from the Palace… it was dispelled by that girl in the dress.”

Berstetz: “—My my.”

Cocking her chin, Serena mentioned Beatrice’s achievement. Upon hearing this, Berstetz’s expression tightened slightly as he wondered what she had done to the light.

Just before Subaru and his team arrived at the battlefield, a single shot very nearly decided the battle—Beatrice’s achievement in erasing that shot was mentioned, so, as her partner, he was proud.

Subaru: “Well, Goz-san, the prerequisites are different now, right? You say you don’t need our help, but without us, the situation would have been much worse.”

Emilia: “Yes! I don’t know specifically how, but I imagine it would have been a lot worse!”

Beatrice: “Emily, it’s time to turn down the volume, I suppose.”

Subaru and Emilia had attacked in waves, with Serena and then Berstetz also providing support, causing Goz’s lips to twitch.

It would be difficult if only Subaru and his team had insisted, but in this situation, to be acknowledged by Serena and her colleagues, who also participated in the top-level meeting, seemed to be highly effective against Goz, who gave off a strong sense of having worked his way up as a military man.

However—

Goz: “…I certainly acknowledge your contributions. But! In the first place, you have not concluded the most important discussions among yourselves!”

Subaru: “That’s…!”

Emilia: “That’s not wrong…”

He gave them a reasonable counterargument, and Subaru and Emilia were disheartened.

Here, even if they were able to overcome Goz, it only meant that they had defeated an easy opponent, but it did not mean that Subaru and his allies’ ideas would go unchallenged.

Rather, in comparison to Goz, there were more difficult people to convince.

Otto: “I know it sounds callous, but let me say this.”

As soon as Subaru recognized his adversary again, that opponent spoke up as if he had seen it coming.

Beginning to speak in way that gave off naught but a bad premonition, Otto looked between Subaru, who was being grabbed, and at Goz, who was grabbing him, and,

Otto: “As General First-Class Goz says, this is an issue for the Empire. Unlike the necessity of the situation that befell us, to get actively involved from this point on could become an… international incident, interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.”

Subaru: “Guh… hk.”

Otto: “First of all, why would you want to interfere so badly, Natsuki-san? Whatever the case may be, it is probably due to your obligation to the people you have come to know in the Empire up to this point, or some other such thing, correct?”

Subaru: “Don’t talk like you know what is going on! But anyway, is what I want really so wrong?!”

Otto: “Not wrong, but I also have this to persuade you. —Well, what I mean is, what if Natsuki-san takes all the people whom he cannot abandon out of the Empire.”

Otto was someone who aimed to solve problems through reason, so displaying that philosophy to the greatest extent, he caused Subaru's eyes to widen at the outrageous proposal he had just made. As if Goz was just as surprised, his fingers slipped as he dropped Subaru onto the floor.

Naturally, this also took Emilia by surprise. As she helped Subaru, who had fallen onto his butt on the floor, she looked over, saying, "Otto-kun?", and,

Emilia: "What do you mean by that? No way, are you really…"

Otto: "There is no twist, that is just what I am proposing. That even in these circumstances, we should perform the reckless action of taking the people who want to come with us. Fortunately, we have the right to make the decision."

Glancing over, Otto's gaze turned to Roswaal.

Roswaal was supposedly hiding his identity within the Empire, but it was true that he was the most powerful man in the Emilia camp. If Otto's opinion was accepted, Roswaal would be the one to guarantee the acceptance of those seeking refuge.

Then, at Otto's challenging manner, Roswaal shut his yellow eye,

Roswaal: "At the very least, I'm sure my employer wouldn't refuse. If it keeps them from taking a risk they don't have to take, then it's a necessary expense."

Ram: "Since you're referring to Barusu, with his immature way of thinking, the majority of the people he's latched on to are likely those who don't have the strength to fight. They would not be people that the Empire would regret letting go of."

While negotiations were happening at a daunting level, Subaru and company were left to the side as they were being talked about.

Neither Roswaal's overly broad sense of self-preservation, nor Ram's speculation based on her insight into Subaru's character, found room to interject, and the conversation proceeded in a muddled manner.

Otto: “What do you think, Your Excellency the Emperor? If we can reduce the number of casualties in your country as much as possible, our proposal is not a bad one, correct?”

Vincent: “—. A very well-thought-out proposal. The kind that is difficult to so easily dismiss.”

Otto: “Thank you for the consideration.”

Abel’s words affirmed that it was a shrewd proposal, and Otto bowed socially. However, for Otto’s part, it would not be surprising if he was imagining himself sticking out his tongue.

Imperialism and Otto were incompatible. Not necessarily in terms of ability, but in terms of character.

Like Subaru, it seemed Otto did not like the Empire.

They were of the same opinion on that. The only thing Otto was doing on top of that, was organizing things based on importance.

Subaru: “Guh…”

It felt as if he had gone and fixed a hole on the ship they were meant to ride on his own, but ended up remaking the ship into a different one entirely.

This ship sailed in a different direction from what Subaru had wished, but it flowed and drifted to protect the lives of Subaru’s precious ones, heading for a different shore.

Subaru knew that this was something that had been thought-out in consideration of him and his companions.

He knew that, and yet.

Otto: “How about it, Natsuki-san, this is the best I can do in terms of compromise and consideration.”

Rather than unsparingly dismissing Subaru’s opinions, Otto tried to accommodate Subaru’s opinions as much as possible and, at the same time, ensure their safety.

He thought he was a reliable guy, but he was far too troublesome an opponent when they had a serious disagreement. He was a man who should have been given a drink and left in a drunken stupor before this discussion had occurred.

To Otto's overpowered theoretical armament, how could Subaru, who only had a cypress stick—.

Emilia: "—Hey, Abel, I have something I want to ask you."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan?"

Suddenly, Emilia, who must have shared the same opinion as Subaru, while also feeling the same frustration at being pushed around, approached Abel with a remark.

Looking at her profile, Subaru's eyes widened.

Unlike Subaru, who was forced into silence as he looked frustrated and tried to find a way out of the situation, neither Emilia's eyes nor her profile showed signs of being outmatched.

At Emilia's dignified and brave call, Abel's sable eyes trained their gaze on her.

Prompted by his silence, Emilia's thin lips moved,

Emilia: "How many people are there in the Vollachian Empire altogether?"

Vincent: "—. The civil war this month has probably reduced the number considerably; but it was roughly fifty million or so before that."

Emilia: "I see."

With a furrowed brow, Abel answered Emilia's question. Hearing his answer, Emilia let out a short breath, then raised a finger to her lips and looked at Subaru.

And then—

Emilia: “You heard him, Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

So said Emilia to Subaru.

For a moment, Subaru failed to catch the meaning of the words that she gave him, and then his eyes immediately widened and his cheeks stiffened.

Then, as he hesitated for a moment wondering what he should do with that which prompted such a reaction,

Beatrice: “Subaru, Betty has already voiced her opinion, in fact. But…”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “Betty will always be on Subaru’s side, I suppose.”

Holding onto Subaru’s hesitant hand, Beatrice snuggled her body up next to him.

Beatrice was almost the same height as Subaru, and her eyes were even closer than usual; as they stared at him, Subaru took a deep breath in, and exhaled.

Then, still under Emilia’s expecting gaze, Subaru looked at Otto.

Looking up at him, he spoke.

Subaru: “Fifty million.”

Otto: “…What?”

At that blunt statement, Otto asked this back as he raised his shapely eyebrows.

At that reply, Subaru’s chest heaved, his cheeks contorted into a smile, and then he repeated what he had said.

Subaru: “You, you told me earlier. You told me to take all the people that I can’t abandon with me to the Kingdom. In that case!

The ones I can't abandon are those fifty million people!"

Otto: "—Hk, Natsuki-san!"

Subaru: "I know! You're the one who's right! I'm the one who's spouting nonsense! I understand that everyone came to save me and Rem, and I get what you're saying! But!"

Subaru thrust his hand out at Otto, who had raised an eyebrow, and while Subaru mocked himself, he could not pull his own weight.

There was no way that he could have beaten Otto, Ram, and Roswaal if he had been forced to reason with them. So then, Subaru would do what he could with Emilia and Garfiel on his side.

In other words, when faced with logic, he had become unreasonable with an emotional argument.

Subaru: "It's a hell of a bad situation! If we leave and the Empire is ruined, then what? Just thinking about it is enough to make me not want to eat!"

Otto: "What about the risk that we will bear? If we save fifty million strangers but in exchange one of us dies or sustains a wound that cannot be healed, it will be much more painful."

Subaru: "I'm not gonna let any of us die or get into that kind of trouble. That's an absolute! That's an absolute, so what the hell even matters past that?"

Subaru retorted to Otto as he quietly cornered him. Then, he looked not at Otto, but at Roswaal, who was standing off to the side with one eye closed.

Subaru: "Roswaal! You should know. My absolutes, are absolutes."

Roswaal: "…I am Dudley, Subaru-kun, though it would be somewhat too dishonest for me to not nod my head to that question, given my high expectations of your absolutes."

Though a bit of a roundabout way of putting it, Roswaal put his hands up in response to Subaru's opinion.

Even if he did not know about Return by Death, Roswaal knew about Subaru's Authority. So, the part of him that had expectations of that Authority, would not allow for Subaru's mood to be harmed.

In the first place, if he were to fall for Roswaal's cajolery here, what would become of his Oath from back at the Sanctuary.

Emilia: "Ram, please…"

Ram: "…Emily, do you at least have something to convince Ram?"

Emilia: "I'm just trying to do my best and I just want to help everyone… So, please."

On the contrary, Emilia took a ridiculously brute-force approach and asked a favor of Ram.

If Subaru would have done the same thing, Ram would have mercilessly smacked him with a verbal slap, but she was unable to respond effectively to Emilia's forcefulness.

Then, Ram let out a small sigh.

Ram: "Ram would have been fine as long as Rem could be brought home. But the way that Rem is now, she's become so close to the people of the Empire… If that was to be ignored, it would be harmful to Ram's dignity as an older sister, which she has only now finally realized."

Emilia: "Ram…!"

Ram: "Stop, it's irritating."

Emilia hugged Ram, who had closed her eyes and found her own reason for compromise. Ram responded to Emilia's embrace with an unpleasant look on her face.

And so, Roswaal and Ram caved in a way that could only have been achieved by some hard work.

However—

Subaru: “Otto, please…!”

Otto: “Are you going to use the same persuasion by tears as Emily did? Sorry, but I am not like Ram-san. I am not foolish enough to sign a contract when I do not know what the price that I will have to pay is.”

Subaru: “Beako is also begging you…!”

Beatrice: “B-Betty is also begging you, in fact.”

Otto: “Even if you have two or three people, I will not budge.”

Subaru urged Beatrice to join him, but Otto preemptively stopped Emilia, who was hugging Ram, from joining in again.

Otto’s face showed that he was completely determined to not let his decision be swayed by emotion, his stubbornness akin to the difficulty of when Subaru faced off against the maniacally-obsessed Roswaal. However, even if he conveyed that slanderous remark to Otto right now, he would not listen.

Otto: “We would only be taking a risk; there would be no advantages in going along with the thinking of Natsuki-san and the rest of you. You do not even satisfy the conditions to persuade me with tears. Ram-san, and Dudley-san as well, please do not go so easy on them.”

Roswaal: “Oya, I’ve been scolded.”

Ram: “For someone of Otto’s social standing, you’re quite impudent.”

Otto spoke sternly, Roswaal shrugged his shoulders, and Ram frowned. But, they did not hold an opinion different from Otto’s, so the two did not argue any further.

In reality, if the fortress known as Otto could not be conquered, they would not be able to push past this situation.

After all, merely imposing circumstances that everyone did not agree on from above, was something that neither Emilia, nor the

Emilia Camp, could deem as acceptable.

Then—

Vincent: "—You said that there would be no advantages. In that case, the conversation would change if there were to be advantages."

Otto: "…"

It was neither Subaru nor Emilia, but Abel who had interjected.

At the Emperor's intrusion into the conversation, Otto's gaze sharpened. Unlike Subaru's flippant way of talking, Otto turned his disrespectful gaze towards the Emperor.

Otto: "If there is any advantage, that is. What in the world do you intend on? I will say this in advance, there is no possible compensation that could make it worthwhile for us…"

Vincent: "—Towards a Royal Candidate of the Kingdom of Lugunica, I formally request assistance."

Otto: "—Hk."

At Abel's proposition, Otto's expression tightened, and he made a sound with his throat.

At the same time, several expressions began to violently tremble, and more so than those of Subaru and his companions, it was those of the ones on the side of the Empire. Serena laughed at those words while Berstetz's slitted eyes widened.

Then, with astonishment plastered on his face, Goz spread out his hands, and as if it were the very end of the world,

Goz: "Please wait, Your Excellency!! A request for the Kingdom's assistance… Such a thing! It is completely unprecedented in this Sacred Vollachian Empire!!"

Vincent: "What matter is it if there is a precedent or not? If you say that, what precedent is there for an unsightly Emperor to lose the

Imperial Capital to such an impudent bunch? Such a foolish fixation."

Goz: "BUT! The soldiers and generals and citizens will lament that you have made a decision not worthy of the Sword Wolf if you choose to rely on the aid of another nation! I say this respectfully, but a shadow will be cast over the authority of Your Excellency the Emperor!"

Vincent: "A shadow cast over my authority… Such a foolish concern."

Towards Goz's loud complaint, Abel shook his head as he supplied that reply.

At this declaration, Goz froze as his eyes widened. Looking back at Goz, Abel called out "Goz Ralfon", the name of his retainer.

Vincent: "Currently, is hollow authority without any substance what we need? —That is not so. Right now, the Empire desires to be victorious. To bite off the throats of our enemies, to bathe in their blood, to gorge on their lives; before any of that, the victory we obtain will be what shapes the Empire's tomorrow."

Goz: "Y-Your Excellency…"

Vincent: "Those who sink their fangs in and become a hindrance, they are all enemies of the law of iron and blood imposed by Vincent Vollachia. Answer carefully, Goz Ralfon."

Goz: "…"

Vincent: "—You, are you my enemy?"

As he was asked this question quietly, Goz's entire body began to shake.

Showing no signs of his struggle with Subaru back in the cabin, standing upright, there was power in Abel as he displayed his might as Emperor.

There was a dominant power in his gaze, in his voice, and in his very being itself, and Goz had to face that power up close and head-on, all by himself.

Then, after a period of careful contemplation that must have lasted less than five seconds, Goz—

Goz: “I beg Your Excellency’s pardon for taking up so much of your time. —I am Goz Ralfon! The warhammer that will shatter the many obstacles that stand in your way! Never! Never will I be your enemy!”

Vincent: “If that is the case, then so be it. I am relying on your work. Strive to do better.”

Goz: “Yessir!! …Yessir?!”

Nodding to Goz’s boisterous answer, Abel responded with his expectation that his subjects should work at their best. After accepting it emphatically, Goz let out a thunderous sound.

Perhaps it was the words that Abel had added that caused his surprise.

Goz: “—Hk, I shall give my utmost efforts!”

Goz wiped his face with his thick arm and pledged to Abel again in a trembling voice, while tears streamed down his face.

Looking away from him, Abel glanced at Serena and Berstetz,

Vincent: “You two also have no objections?”

Serena: “No. You have a look that I like, and I now feel more loyalty to His Excellency than ever.”

Berstetz: “No, not even from me. Except that I am more than a little surprised.”

Vincent: “Hmm.”

Serena smiled, and Berstetz once again narrowed his eyes. After letting out a snort at their demeanor, Abel then proceeded to go forward and stand in front of Emilia.

Then, he looked at Emilia, who was blinking her eyes,

Vincent: “You have heard me correctly, candidate for the Royal Selection. The Vollachian Empire formally requests the assistance of the Kingdom of Lugunica to put an end to this situation. —Lend us your strength.”

Emilia: “…You know, Abel. I would certainly like to help you, too. But, I reaaally don’t know what you’re talking about with this Royal Selection candidate stuff.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, no! This is one of those times where you don’t need to keep it secret!”

Emilia: “What?! Are you sure?!”

Emilia, who looked really distressed by Abel’s offer, widened her eyes.

Both Subaru and Beatrice nodded back at her repeatedly, and Emilia looked at Ram, who was still in her embrace, seeking further confirmation.

Then, Ram shook off Emilia’s arms and pushed her away from her.

Ram: “Yes, of course. —Do what you wish, Emilia-sama.”

Emilia: “—Ah.”

When Ram called her “Emilia”, Emilia was surprised as her eyes lit up. She blinked to hide her joy behind her eyelids and then turned to face Abel once again.

As Abel waited for her to resume, a slight frown on his brow, Emilia cleared her throat with an “Ahem”,

Emilia: “I am Emilia, just Emilia, a Royal Selection Candidate for the Kingdom of Lugunica to decide who will become the next king. And one who wants to help the Empire that is currently in danger.”

Vincent: "—. This is a formal request; the Vollachian Empire would never ask for the cooperation of a person from another country, even one in such a position of great responsibility. Therefore, if this fact became public, it would serve as a tailwind for you, who is fighting for the throne in the Kingdom…"

Emilia: "Jeez! That kind of stuff can wait! What I want to do now is this!"

When Abel tried to lay out some solid logic, Emilia puffed out her cheeks. With that cute puffed-up face, Emilia presented her hand to Abel.

Slowly lowering her lifted hand, Emilia offered it to Abel,

Emilia: "Allow us to help your Empire."

In the end, it conversely seemed as if Emilia was the one who broached the subject. Looking down at Emilia's outstretched hand, Abel glanced toward Subaru for a moment.

Subaru smiled and nodded with a wicked look on his face at the faint bewilderment arising in Abel's black eyes.

Subaru: "By all means, Your Excellency the Emperor. I allow you to hold my Emilia-tan's hand."

Emilia: "And that's why I say Subaru is mine."

Emilia wryly responded to Subaru's light-hearted comment, to which Abel closed one eye and sighed.

Then, his hand slowly grasped Emilia's proffered hand,

Vincent: "—Very well. I shall accept your aid."

Again, in the end, this was a very Abel-like thing to say, in establishing cooperation between the two countries.

3

—And thus, Emilia and Abel shook hands, and an historical moment between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Vollachian Empire was engraved.

Subaru: “Umm, Otto-san, any opinions on something of that sort…?”

That event with the Subaru and Emilia party and the Abel plus Empire party had come to a climax, their exchange ultimately reaching a handshake, yet Otto, the one who had first suggested something of the sort to begin with, had been left by the wayside.

A compromise with Roswaal and Ram had been found, but since Otto, for whom that had not been that case, had been left behind as the matter progressed, Subaru had been filled with trepidation.

Since he was aware that he had been way out of line, he subconsciously asked Otto for his opinion, buttering him up with formal language and a polite demeanor.

Otto: “…”

And to that inquiry posed timidly by Subaru, Otto went without replying.

Too scared to look at Otto’s face, Subaru found being answered with silence greatly troubling. Thoughtlessly, he hugged Beatrice to his side, their cheeks coming into contact,

Subaru: “Wh-What should I do, Beako… Otto won’t talk to me…”

Beatrice: “Betty understands that feeling, I suppose. From Otto’s perspective, he must feel like you’ve played him for a complete fool, in fact. You ruined his idea, and made him look like a complete clown, I suppose.”

Subaru: “A clown, even if he doesn’t resemble Roswaal that much…”

Beatrice: “Stop it, in fact! An insult that massive will only make him angrier and angrier, I suppose!”

Flustered and panicked, Subaru and Beatrice fumbled for a way to break the impasse, together.

He wished to make amends for making Otto lose face, but just what should he do?

Subaru: “Shall I give you a foot or a shoulder massage…?”

Beatrice: “It’s like, you’re apologizing for angering your parents, in fact…”

Subaru: “Because I can’t think of anything else! Otto, I’m begging you… hk!”

With Subaru unable to come up with a decent enough proposal, Otto, having stood in silence until then before the former, abruptly pulled a chair, then sat down on it with a plop.

Surprised by that sudden action, Subaru and Beatrice jumped back while still embracing one another. Certainly it was not that he had sat on the chair to have Subaru give him a shoulder massage.

And, before the panicky duo of Subaru and Beatrice, Otto brought a hand to his forehead—

Otto: “…Well, have you calmed down and settled for my desired compromise?”

Subaru: “Heh…?”

Letting out a long and deep breath, Otto massaged the skin around his eyes. Taking in the words he had declared, Subaru was left stumped, and blinking his eyes alongside a “No way”, he spoke.

Subaru: “No way you thought this would happen from the beginning…”

Otto: “I did not think it would turn out this way, but I was eager to do something this big. Because, I did not know just how many concessions Emperor Vincent would present. But, since you and Emilia-sama would not change your opinions anyway, Natsuki-san, I needed to devise some compromises.”

Subaru: “Ah, oh, uh, eh, ah, oh, uh…”

Faced with that nonchalant response of Otto’s, Subaru’s mouth was left agape. In disbelief, Subaru turned around; however, his eyes met those of Roswaal and Ram.

Then, those two also wore looks on their faces that said that for the most part, they had generally understood everything.

Subaru: “You guys, you guys, are SCARYYYYYY—!!”

Otto: “How upsetting! First and foremost, it only happened because you guys were so stubborn, Natsuki-san!”

Subaru: “Uwaaah, I can’t trust anyone besides Beako and Emilia-tan anymore… And Rem! And Louis! And Tanza and everyone from the Battalion, and Flop-san and Medium-san, and Mizelda-san and the People of Shudraq!”

Beatrice: “There were still a lot more, I suppose!”

While squeezing Beatrice tight in a hug, Subaru could not help but feel fear towards the meticulous mental preparation of Otto and the others of the brainiac squad. Perhaps Abel had paid some extent of heed to their plans, but even so.

Subaru: “No, scary scary, I really can’t handle this. From now on, I’ll be taking the emotional approach.”

Beatrice: “Betty does not understand that conclusion, but she thinks it would be better if Subaru took a route in which he was honest with himself, in fact. If that route is the emotional one, then Betty likes it, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I love you too. Geez, really—”

Finally, the shock of the Otto from earlier began to wear off, and Subaru was relieved.

And, it happened just as his feelings were simmering down with that exchange.

—Unexpectedly, the clapping of hands rang out within the cabin.

???: "—Deary me, feels like I've just stumbled upon somethin' incredibly delightful. So darn amazin', it's quite a big deal."

Loud applause had been produced, and reflexively turning around as to see who had clapped their hands, Subaru held his breath upon spotting an unknown figure present.

In a corner of the cabin, where no one had been, a tall figure now stood before anyone had been able to notice. Clapping their hands together, that person had been watching the exchange taking place until then.

—Without anyone in the cabin having noticed their presence.

Goz: "Who are you?! How in the world did you get here…??!!"

???: "Ah, darn. Well, I accidentally clapped even tho' no one called for me. This won't do, this won't do, it's a bad habit of mine to unconsciously be praisin' any praiseworthy children that I find."

That instant, protecting Emilia and Abel behind him, Goz adopted a fighting stance.

And before Goz, his expression having become bloodcurdling, that person kept their indifferent attitude, as if everything were unrelated to them, biting the golden kiseru they had retrieved from a pocket, donning a shrewd smile.

That figure already was terribly out-of-place, and even more conspicuous was their outward appearance.

Nearly two meters tall and sporting black body hair, their blank, smiling countenance had some charm to it, and alongside their unkempt fur, they gave off the impression of a gentle black dogperson.

Dressed in a kimono and biting on a kiseru, having had appeared unnoticed in the coupled dragon carriages where many key figures of the Empire had assembled, that existence naturally attracted the attention of all those present.

???: “My my, y’all do seem to be quite curious ‘bout me, don’t’cha?”

Emilia: “Who are you? Why did you come here?”

While turning their gaze, the dogperson scratched their head with their finger. And Emilia, protected by Goz’s back, inquired so of the dogperson.

In response to that query, the dogperson tilted their head. The shape of their mouth, lined with fangs, broke into a smile, and thus spoke.

???: “Well, the name’s Halibel, but mind if I pop in to give a quick howdy?”

Thus he declared.

Chapter 15:
Admiration

1

Speaking in a carefree tone, the beastman scratched his head, giving a large grin as he gnawed on his golden kiseru.

He had moderately long black fur and a countenance that gave off quite the affable air. Neither did his gentle way of speaking feel like it contained any malevolence, nor did his relaxed posture seem to harbor any sense of wariness as he stood.

Nevermind the fact that among these coupled dragon carriages, in the cabin where a conference between important figures from both the Kingdom and Empire was taking place, nobody among those powerful individuals included had noticed his presence.

Goz: “Halibel, you say…?”

Indeed, with shivers of fear mixed into his stern voice as he muttered thus, Goz had been the one to issue the strongest level of vigilance towards that presence as he protected both his lord and his new ally behind him.

He himself was one of the Nine Divine Generals, a military man whose name was among those of the strongest rank within this Empire riddled with warriors, that of General First-Class. That very Goz had not perceived the invisibility of the beastman who now stood before his eyes.

But, that fact alone was not the entire reason for the stiffness of his voice.

Vincent: “—The Admirer, hm? What business does the cornerstone of the City-States have here?”

Shielded by Goz’s back, staring beyond that large body and fixing his eyes on the beastman—on Halibel, Abel inquired so.

Perhaps it was the well-known alias of this dogperson that he had uttered before he asked his question. For some reason, Subaru felt like he had heard it somewhere before, and in his surprise, he fumbled around for it within his box of stirred-up memories.

Thereupon, as Subaru knit his brows, Halibel, displaying his smile, shifted his thin eyes towards him.

Halibel: “If ya hafta think about it that hard, then the name ain’t too much of a big deal. Well, that’s just what they be callin’ me since I like ta give lotsa praise, and somethin’ like the “cornerstone” can be chalked up to ‘em overestimatin’ me.”

Subaru: “Overestimating…”

Halibel: “Yep yep. It’s just ‘cause ‘n Kararagi, there ain’t nobody stronger than I am.”

Halibel gave his response in a calm manner, as if he were simply discussing the weather.

Subaru gazed in wonder at those words of his; the instant his mind processed the word “Kararagi”, that which he had been stuck on just a moment ago was suddenly ignited with understanding.

The Admirer of the Kararagi City-States, the meaning of that nickname was—

Goz: “The strongest shinobi of the Kararagi City-States! For what reason have you boarded this dragon carriage??!!”

The next moment, stepping down on the floor of the dragon carriage with enough force to cause an explosion, Goz thrust his weapon, his mace, towards Halibel as the latter stood still.

Goz’s weapon was a mace of peculiar shape, something like a long spear with a spiked orb attached to its tip in order to strike. It was similar to the Morningstar that Rem had once loved to use, but its size and weight were overwhelmingly disposed towards an item that belonged to Goz.

Anyhow, upon the sudden appearance of the City-States’s strongest, the Empire's military man took the stance of thrusting his weapon forth.

Perhaps it may have seemed that at this rate, things would be plunged into an explosive situation.

However—

Halibel: "I was the one who caused all this stir, so maybe it ain't my place to be sayin' this, but come on now, can't we all just sit 'round and chat without gettin' all fired up?"

Goz: "Ngh, guh…!"

Nimbly tilting his head as the mace was thrust towards him, Halibel began to speak. Goz's face stiffened upon hearing Halibel's words, and the arm that he had funneled power into trembled.

Against the edge of the golden mace wielded by Goz, Halibel held his kiseru of similar golden hue. With just that, Goz's weapon became unable to make even the slightest of movements.

Goz: "…"

Likely, Halibel had exquisitely controlled the balance of power that he put into the kiseru and suppressed Goz's mace from moving up, down, left, right, and of course, from thrusting forward.

No matter how Goz tried to move his weapon, the kiseru would apply pressure from the opposite side to prevent it from moving. It was not simply brute strength; rather, it was the utmost pinnacle of technique to perfectly control the flow of his strength.

Goz: "You… hk!"

Goz's face reddened, and the sound of his grinding teeth could be heard reverberating throughout the cabin. But, even when compared to Goz's teeth grinding, the series of deeds Halibel was carrying out was far too quiet.

At that point in time, the existence known as Halibel was wrapping up his evaluation of this place.

Vincent: “Cease this, Goz. Besides, if he had the intention to harm us, he would have lopped the heads off of everyone here long before making his presence known through the likes of applause.”

Emilia: “Since you didn’t do that, that means you’re not our enemy… right?”

Witnessing Goz and Halibel’s quiet offense and defense, both Abel and Emilia interjected.

Just as both had said, in reality, if Halibel had felt like it, it would not have been strange for everyone inside the carriage to have been killed before they had even become aware of his presence.

With that pointed out, Halibel’s large mouth relaxed into the shape of a smile, and,

Halibel: “Yep yep, I’m delighted that yer able to understand. Regardless of Emperor-san, a half-devil child bein’ so upfront, ya must be quite the good lassie. Even tho’ yer hated by others just like I am, you’ve been raised to be honest… yer folks must’ve been quite the admirable people.”

Emilia: “Thank you. I also think that I am quite fortunate to have been raised by Puck, Mother, and Juice.”

As Emilia placed her hand upon her chest and spoke her thanks, Halibel nodded and retracted his kiseru. That instant, Goz’s specialized weapon was released, but he did not then do anything reckless such as swinging back at Halibel.

Although he was frustrated, Goz kept firm vigilance on Halibel, and,

Goz: “If you go against those previous words, I will defeat you, even if it costs me my own life. Remember that.”

Halibel: “I ain’t gonna do such a thing, really, I ain’t. Lookie here, I’m sittin’ all nice and well-behaved after all.”

Waving his hands about, Halibel pulled up a chair next to him with his tail, and then hugged one of his knees as he sat down for a bit.

He was someone around as tall as Goz, but when he curled up his slim figure like that, his impression of being a large breed of dog became stronger. It did not seem like his statement about good behavior was sarcastic.

Roswaal: “Be that as it may, I did not expect Kararagi to intervene heeere~. Even if not to the same extent as the Kingdom and Empire, I haven’t heard that the City-States ever got along well with the Empire. Much less, when considering the matter of your officially disclosed position, in particular.”

Halibel: “Oh, do all y’all know ‘bout me? Gosh, it’s embarrassin’ since it kinda feels like I’m a celebrity somehow.”

Subaru: “Roswaal, when you say that person’s “officially disclosed position”…”

Ram: “Barusu is as ignorant as he appears, so Ram will inform him. The Admirer, Halibel, is a wolfperson.”

A wolfperson; upon receiving that information from Ram, for an instant, Subaru’s heart and body trembled.

However, that was not in response to Halibel, who was in front of him; rather, the reason he trembled was a separate matter. That which Ram had informed him of in itself did not really help Subaru to suddenly understand anything, either.

But, without paying heed to Subaru’s lack of understanding, the conversation continued as common sense would have it.

Vincent: “You ought to be aware of the Empire’s attitude regarding wolfpeople. To then cross the border and set foot in here, you truly appear to be considerably reckless.”

Halibel: “‘Course I knew that, tho’ I ain’t got all too good a feelin’ ‘bout it. But, y’all should also know the reason that I ain’t hidin’ the fact that I’m a wolfperson, ‘cause ain’t nobody’s able to kill me. From the looks of it, seems like Cecilus ain’t here either.”

Subaru: “—! Hey, do you know about Ceci?”

Halibel: “Hm? Oh, I do know him, yeah? After all, he came to try ‘n kill me once. Tho’ for some reason, after throwin’ down for a bit, he said somethin’ like “Seems like the conclusion shall not be now!” ‘n he went back home.”

Though the topic of the conversation had deviated from the matter of wolfpeople, Halibel answered Subaru’s question without modesty.

It was an unexpected response, and an unexpected point of contact. Cecilus and Halibel had once fought in a deathmatch, and judging from the current conversation, it seemed like Cecilus had been the one to pick the fight, but that was also easy to believe.

Moreover—

Berstetz: “In the Vollachian Empire, which exemplifies its resolute stance towards wolfpeople, appears the most well-known, most powerful individual from the Kararagi City-States. In addition, he has discourteously done so inside the very cabin where His Excellency Vincent is present.”

Serena: “If I may add, he has grasped the contents of an important conference between our country and the Kingdom. Oh my, is this not a situation that warrants a decapitation, even if it means kindling the Blue Lightning?”

Roswaal: “…Serena, could you not put everyone currently present in danger with your poor tastes?”

Taking advantage of Berstetz’s summary of the situation, Serena added on her dangerous opinion with good humor. The extremity of her words was to the extent that Roswaal reflexively cast a warning true to his feelings.

With that, the initial surprise and fervor from Halibel’s sudden appearance had more or less faded, and the original question was then returned to.

Vincent: “There shan’t be a third time. On what business have you come, Admirer?”

Regardless of whether or not Halibel was intimidated by the armed might of those present, the word “flattery” would not exist in Abel’s lexicon. Witnessing the owner of a dictionary who had intentionally blotted out all words of humility and modesty, Subaru gulped as he wondered how Halibel would respond.

But, contrary to the rising tension, Halibel remained seated as he rested his chin upon his hands on the table, and,

Halibel: “There ain’t no need to be so tense, I said what I came to do right back at the start, didn’t I? That I was just wonderin’ if it woulda been okay for me to pop in to give a quick howdy.”

Subaru: “By that “howdy”, do you actually mean something like ripping out all of our hearts instead of actually greeting us…?”

Halibel: “Zoinks! Ya sure think up some frightenin’ stuff kid, now don’t’cha? I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

Beatrice: “In that case, you’re saying that your objective really was to just say your greetings and make your appearance, I suppose?”

Halibel: “That’s right?”

Protesting Subaru as he fearfully tried to probe into the shinobi-style of greetings, Halibel also gave an indifferent reply to Beatrice’s question after she had continued for Subaru.

Having come this far, it truly seemed like Halibel had no intentions of engaging in violence.

Otto: “In the first place, he is someone who can kill us without needing to take roundabout means. Would it not be in bad taste to do something like taking our lives after toying with us up until here?”

Subaru: “I was also scared, but you shouldn’t pull that kind of opinion out of people… But, if that’s so…”

Emilia: “If that’s so? Did you think of something, Subaru?”

Gulping down his saliva, Subaru had imagined something frightening upon understanding Halibel's attitude.

Having been questioned about that by Emilia, assuming his mental image of Halibel's character was as the person himself had answered—

Subaru: "If both Reinhardt and this person are truly upright, then that predicament with Ceci was…"

Vincent: "Cease this, Natsuki Subaru. Your cooperation may have been requested, but I have no memory of permitting you to investigate our country's scandals."

Berstertz: "Scandals… Personally, I would be unable to list all of the cases with General First-Class Cecilus, either."

Regarding the matter of Cecilus's humanity, not only Subaru and Abel, but even Berstetz, all saw eye to eye. Although he was not present here, Cecilus was being spoken of disparagingly; but most likely, if he was here, Subaru had confidence the same things would still be said about him.

In reality, it was very Subaru-like to have the fantasy that the strong would show appropriate behavior, so in that respect, the conduct of Reinhardt and Halibel was ideal for him.

On the other hand, he also believed that if Cecilus had not been present on the Gladiator Island, things would not have gone so well, so it was a tale of how everything has its pros and cons.

Emilia: "So? In the end, what was the objective of your greeting? This dragon carriage is going north, but the Kararagi border is still further ahead… That shouldn't be enough to incur your caution, right?"

Halibel: "Mm-hmm~, it'd probably be a whole lot faster if ya ask my employer 'bout that instead of me. Things've gotten a lil' complicated since I messed up by carelessly clappin' my hands… Ah, seems like it should be any time now, tho'."

Emilia: "Any time now…"

Halibel's eyes had looked pleased with a hint of embarrassment; however, he lifted his face upon realizing something, and drawn in by that, Subaru followed his gaze.

His wolf face had turned towards the door connecting to the adjoined carriage. Exactly one beat later, someone knocked on the door from the other side.

???: "—Excuse me for interrupting the meeting. There is something I need to report."

With that, a voice that he had heard before declared thus, and Abel silently commanded him to "Enter". The door opened, and in came the figure of a small man with fluffy hair.

The instant that Subaru saw him, his eyes widened.

Subaru: "Zikr-san! Thank goodness, you're alright!"

Zikr: "Indeed, there is no need to worry. It is most wonderful that you are also safe and sound, Miss Natsumi."

Subaru: "To still refer to me like that even when I'm in this form…"

Both when they had met and when they had parted, the man had given a smile to the cross-dressing Subaru, and upon seeing the Imperial General Second-Class Zikr Osman alive and well, Subaru patted his chest in relief.

Then, Zikr's smiling expression tightened up, and,

Zikr: "Your Excellency, there is something I must report… But, that individual over there…"

Vincent: "Ignore him for the time being. Likely, he is not unrelated to your report."

Abel was unkind to Zikr's concern about the presence of Halibel, who was in the corner of the cabin. But, Zikr was accustomed to the Emperor's suppression of words, and nodding with a "Yessir",

Zikr: "High Countess Dracroy's flying dragon ship has returned.

With them were brought leading figures from the Fortified City of Garkla, as well as visitors from the City-States."

Vincent: "—Visitors from the City-States."

Abel muttered thus as he directed his sable eyes towards Halibel.

Since the destination of these coupled dragon carriages was the Fortified City of Garkla, it was natural that the relevant people there had come here via flying dragons. If they were accompanied by people from Kararagi at the same time, it would likely be impossible for that to be unrelated to Halibel.

In other words—

Emilia: "Halibel-san, did you come ahead of those people?"

Halibel: "Well, I ain't too good with heights."

Regardless of whether his cute words were meant to be a direct answer or not, Halibel had affirmed that the information Zikr had brought was connected to himself.

Even if Subaru could understand that Halibel was bad with heights and hence had not boarded the flying dragon ship, he felt like he could not understand how Halibel was then able to arrive faster than the flying dragon ship; but there was no point in saying something like that to the superhumans of this world. Even Cecilus could run faster than something flying in the air, so it was kind of the same thing.

In any case—

Serena: "They even took the trouble of getting on my flying dragon ship. Then, shall we be expecting some very influential people to come bringing some very important things to say?"

Zikr: "At the very least, the pretty visitor said so herself."

Vincent: "Judging from how you speak, it is a woman?"

Zikr's report was easy to understand, that a woman had come from the Kararagi City-States.

Subaru tilted his head in puzzlement at the matter, but for some reason, his friends reacted differently. Beatrice tightened her grip on his hand, looked over towards Emilia, and,

Beatrice: “Emilia, it’s the subject of visitors from Kararagi, in fact.”

Emilia: “Yes, indeed. Perhaps, that could be—”

Subaru: “Eh? Eh? Do you two happen to…”

Know something? It happened right as Subaru had tried to finish his question.

???: “—Somehow, even tho’ people have gone thru’ the hardships of hurryin’ all the way ta tha Empire, aren’t’cha sayin’ some rather heartless things, Natsuki-kun?”

Subaru: “…”

Unexpectedly, a voice interrupted, its elegant timbre coming from behind Zikr.

It seemed like that visitor was waiting on the coupler of the adjoined carriage, but they must have had quite the sharp ears in order to participate in this conversation. But, he was satisfied with those sharp ears.

After all, merchants were people who always had to be straining their ears for chances to make profits.

Berstetz: “Your Excellency, what shall be done?”

Upon the reality that that voice had heard the matters being discussed, Berstertz asked for Abel’s opinion. At that question, Abel glanced towards Subaru, and ascertained his expression.

Then, Abel looked towards the door from which the voice had been heard,

Vincent: “Somehow, it seems that you are not merely a boorish and presumptuous fellow. Present yourself.”

Visitor: “Then I ain’t gon’ refrain.”

Gaining the permission of the Emperor, the owner of the voice gently responded. And, before anyone could notice, Halibel, standing upright next to the door, opened the door of the carriage with his hand, showing the visitor inside.

Seeing Halibel’s consideration, the person, now visible, smiled with a “Thank ya”, and then—

Visitor: “Been quite a while since we last came face ta face, but I’m real glad ta see yer doin’ well.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Visitor: “Even so, Emilia-san and the rest of y’all are quite the experts at happenin’ ‘cross troublesome situations. Looks like yer gon’ need our strength yet again.”

With an informal tone and wearing a smile, and having given a merciless evaluation, with her light purple hair all tied up, and her arms through the sleeves of her kimono, it was a woman clad in a fox-scarf—Anastasia Hoshin.

By her side followed her attendant, a young man dressed in Japanese-style clothing.

Subaru: “Anastasia-san and… Julius?!”

Two people who he had never thought he would meet here, Subaru was taken aback upon seeing them.

Upon Subaru’s capsized voice, Anastasia placed her hand over her mouth and smiled, and the young man whose name was called out —Julius, traced the fierce scar underneath his left eye with his finger, and looked at Subaru.

And then—

Julius: “—I had wanted to say that I am glad for your safety, but why is there always something up with you?”

Subaru: “Don’t say stuff like I’m always causing trouble on the level of turning small!!”

Upon their reunion, instead of joy, it was an angry voice that had erupted.

2

As all strength vanished from his knees, he fell forward and collapsed onto the ravaged plain.

Lacking even the willpower to support his body, the ground mercilessly crashed into his face. He felt the pain of his nose being crushed as blood flowed out from his busted lips.

Taking that blood upon his tongue, the bone-dry interior of his mouth was ever so slightly moistened.

???: “…”

Not even the slightest bit of strength remained in any part of his body.

If he had lost all willpower, then his physical strength would not take long to vanish entirely, either. And now that both had completely run out, he would probably rot away and die upon the very spot on which he had collapsed.

Absolutely everything, absolutely anything and everything, had been in vain.

The things that he had tried to do, the things that he had been enraged that he needed to do, the things that he had continued to do purely out of habit, absolutely all of it had been in vain.

In the end, he could not possibly be anything other than himself. The thing called hell, was something that existed within him.

In that case, there was no way that he could ever escape it. There was nobody who could escape it. Nobody could escape from the hell bearing the name of oneself.

???: “God… damnit…”

Vexation leaked out in a parched voice from his lips.

At this point, not even tears would well up anymore. Neither did he have the passion, nor the qualifications for such a thing.

Everything was so damn bizarre. It was not a place that he could reach. Reaching out toward a place he could not reach, that had been the biggest mistake of his life; and yet, he did the exact same thing again.

There was no introspection. That was why he could do nothing but regret.

There was no chance that he would ever be able to like somebody like himself, so he could do nothing but hate who he was, until finally, he grew to utterly loathe his very being.

He was not even able to continue to love those whom he loved. Enough already; failures who were as fucking worthless as himself should just hurry up and—.

???: “—Oh? Thought I’d just strip all the possessions off a dead body, but to think ya still got some breath in ya. That deserves a bravo, bravo.”

Suddenly, above the head of the collapsed body, somebody’s voice could be heard.

His body lacked the energy to make even the slightest of movements, but the owner of that voice reached out their hand and rolled him over. Instantly, his vision was plunged into the glare of the clear blue sky, and he groaned with a “urhhh”.

The tears that had not emerged from his disgrace and repentance, now gradually began to well up.

That was overwhelmingly frustrating.

Absolutely everything, every last inch of this body, would they really only function for the sake of himself, and nothing else?

Stranger: “Are ya frustrated about something, Mr. Collapsed? Buddy, with yer whole body still alive and well, it’ll be nothing more than a blink of an eye.”

???: “To think… I’m still alive…”

Stranger: “Woah there, so it’s the type where you’ve gotten fed up with living? My my… as far as I’m aware, there’s only one way to fight off those kinds of gloomy thoughts.”

???: “…”

He felt the owner of the voice give a smile, and their upside-down face cut into the clear blue sky reflected in his own vision. He had a hard time seeing the face due to the glare from behind, but he understood that the person was smiling with a broad grin on their face.

Although, that grin was not something that was ridiculing him, and therefore it was a smile which he was unable to comprehend the reason behind.

However—

???: “What… are we going to do?”

If he could not find the answer within himself, he would inquire about the thoughts of the person who was incomprehensible to him.

At the very least, while cursing himself for still wanting to be saved, he inquired to see if he could hear an answer that was much more respectable than he was.

Hearing that question, the person deepened their smile as if to say he had hit the nail right on the head, and then,

Stranger: “Isn’t it obvious? —We’re off to drink tons of booze, enough that we could bathe in it.”

Right after answering, the person grabbed him by the collar, and began dragging him along through sheer force. A man, stretching out both of his legs, quickly moved across the wasteland.

Using the fact that he was unable to resist as an excuse, the man hummed and sang while he pulled him along, and,

Stranger: “I’m Rowan, the stingy ronin. What about you, buddy?”

???: “…”

Rowan: “Buddy, you’ve gotta at least have a name, right? It ain’t gonna get any worse even if ya tell me.”

Easygoing and over-familiar, witnessing the attitude of the man who gave his name as Rowan, he took a long breath.

He had no obligation to answer, but neither did he have any special reason not to answer. A man, while thinking that he no longer cared about what became of himself—

???: “…It’s Heinkel.”

Thus, with neither of them realizing the position of the other, Heinkel Astrea gave his name.

He could not have known. —That coincidence and predestination were some old tricks that fate always liked to make use of.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy IX
(LQ AI Translation)

1

???: “If that is the case, how about something that compiles Vollachia’s ethnographic history?”

???: “Close! Not bad! However, since it is “not bad” merely on the point of comparing it to others, please regard it as the kind of praise that by no means deserves to be lauded!”

As he was about to knock on the door to the office, such voices could be heard through it.

He recognized both voices, but, drawn by the latter one that was always noisy, he stopped in his tracks, thinking it rare that the former voice had also become loud.

If some troublesome discussion was unfolding, it might be wiser to make time, and, after it ended, to choose the right moment to—

???: “Ah— Your Excellency, Chisha’s just arrived in front of the room! Since we’re at it, let’s have Chisha listen as well. I’m sure Chisha will, just like me, cover his face and lament Your Excellency’s idea!”

???: “That one’s irreverence is little different from yours, but he shan’t go so far as to be that blatant. In the first place, the very assumption that he and you will share the same opinion is premature. —Chisha, enter.”

Chisha: “…Pardon me.”

Irritatingly, having had his presence through the door noticed and deprived of any escape, the man—Chisha Gold—suppressed a sigh, and, obeying the summons, opened the office door.

Within the Abellux residence, the second finest room was the young head's office. The most finely appointed room was unoccupied, regularly made to look as though someone spent time there, and those ignorant of the circumstances mistook that room for the head's own.

It was a way of thinking befitting the Vollachian Imperial Family, constantly exposed to the danger of assassination and intrigue and obliged to be vigilant.

At any rate—

Chisha: "Cecilus, it does not do to trouble His Excellency overmuch. His Excellency is a busy man, unlike you, who idle the livelong day."

Cecilus: "Wait, wait! You're jumping to conclusions! True, it is a fact that I usually stay His Excellency's hand from work, but this time is different! Yaay, Chisha's jumping the gun!"

Chisha: "…Your Excellency?"

???: "On this occasion alone, this fellow's wording is not mistaken."

Glancing over, the black-haired boy facing the office desk answered solemnly, and at that, "See, I told you so!" the blue-haired boy in kimono waved both hands, dancing and chanting.

For the time being, Chisha smacked the dancing boy on the head with the documents he had been holding, made him say "Ow," and then,

Chisha: "Then what is it? I believe I heaped a mountain of documents upon His Excellency—cases I wished processed."

???: "Fool. I do not push back my official duties to amuse myself with trifles."

Cecilus: ""Trifles," you say! Chisha's whacking me, His Excellency's being offhand with me—my treatment's what's trifling here! Besides, those "trifles," this time the topic was one Your Excellency brought up!"

Chisha: “Hm. That is rare.”

While the boy stomped his feet ba-da ba-da and aired his grievance, raising a brow at Cecilus’s remark, Chisha began checking the large sheaf of documents thrust out upon the desk.

Setting aside the outlandishness of his conduct, Cecilus did not lie. If he was not suited to lying, it was because he felt no need to; such was his nature. On the other hand, the other party—Vincent Abellux—if one looked at the documents, one could tell there was no lie in his saying that he had finished his work.

In short, putting the two opinions together, it seemed he had happened upon a scene worthy of remark—Vincent, who seldom did so, had broached casual conversation with Cecilus.

Chisha: “So long as it does not impede your official duties, that is well enough, but what sort of discussion were you having?”

Cecilus: “Well now, this is quite the masterpiece, you see.”

As usual, but more than usual with his cheeks grinning, Cecilus’s shoulders shook.

That said, should he hear it from Cecilus’s mouth, there was a high chance the answer would come back twisted and imprecise, so Chisha awaited Vincent’s reply.

Perhaps because of Cecilus’s preamble, Vincent, though a little slower to part his lips, spoke—

Vincent: “—We were selecting the book that ought to be presented to the Benedict Family’s younger sister.”

Chisha: “…I see.”

At those words of his master, which furrowed his brow in a way hard to notice to the onlooker, Chisha nodded quietly.

Then, glancing at Cecilus, who was flaring his little nostrils beside Vincent, he inwardly concurred with the boy taking that ridiculous attitude.

—Surely, this was a situation that ought to be called quite a masterpiece.

2

At the age of sixteen, Vincent Abellux is a member of the Vollachian imperial family.

The Emperor of Vollachia takes many wives from various lands and sires many children. As a result, Vincent had many brothers and sisters both above and below him. However, even among blood siblings there is the problem of whether personalities match, and Vincent, in general, is the type who chooses people.

Consequently, there is no one among his other brothers and sisters with whom he is friendlier than necessary.

Chisha: “At most, would that not be Lord Barthroy, who has a pleasant manner with people?”

Vincent: “Elder Brother is without malice and not the sort to turn his thoughts to scheming. At the very least, at present I feel no need to make him an enemy. …We are straying from the topic.”

Chisha: “Yes, it was a present for the younger princess… for Her Highness Prisca Benedict, was it not?”

Rolling the words on his tongue, Chisha deeply felt anew that this was an unexpected worry.

By his position, it is not rare for Vincent to present something to someone out of social obligation, but in those cases the meaning lies strongly in the negotiations with the other party, and the fact of having given the gift is more important than the gift itself. For that reason, he does not end up fretting over the contents of the gift—but,

Chisha: “That you are troubled over the contents is proof that you are thinking to present something that will truly be to the recipient’s benefit… Your Excellency is growing day by day.”

Vincent: “There remains no sign of respect sprouting within you. If all you can offer are counsels akin to Cecilus's, then, lacking his skill, know that you will be the one unable to escape the reproach of incompetence."

Chisha: "How cutting."

Chisha shrugged at Vincent's harsh phrasing. However, if one thinks this is also a kind of bashfulness, then charm outweighs fear.

It was only natural that Cecilus was enjoying himself.

Chisha: "Even so, it is rare for you to be so undecided. Lady Prisca is at an age still young… would not glittering jewelry, or a beautiful dress, do?"

Vincent: "For other sisters I would make do with such things. But for that one, it would be a waste."

Chisha: "A waste, you say. Your true intent?"

At Vincent's voice, which had lowered ever so slightly, Chisha asked what lay in his breast.

The expression "a waste to give" can be taken to have two meanings. One is that one finds no value in presenting jewelry to the other party.

But, given the way Vincent was speaking now—

Vincent: "That girl is a rare talent. Rather than delighting in jewels and dresses and the like, there must be something more fitting."

Chisha: "For Your Excellency to say so much?"

To the surprised words that slipped out, Vincent quietly nodded.

It was an evaluation worthy of surprise. Vincent has an eye for people—in the sense of seeing through to ability; self-praise mixes in, but it is the truth. Chisha and Cecilus, and the many talented personnel the Abellux domain has taken on, can be called people who passed Vincent's scrutiny. For Vincent to say this much—

Chisha: “However, even if she is excellent, if she is your younger sister then…”

The fate of the Vollachian imperial family that awaits is far too dark, and one cannot blame the stance of not fraternizing with other members of the imperial family.

Thus—Chisha was about to say something in the vein of admonition, but,

Cecilus: “If what is to be lost in the end has no value, then it had no value in being born. All living things, without exception, die eventually. By that logic, Chisha, Your Excellency, and I would have no value, would we?”

Chisha: “Cecilus…”

At Cecilus’s phrasing, which precisely cut open the words he had left unspoken, Chisha knit his brows. Ignoring that, the childlike man-slasher stamped the floor hard in his zōri and said,

Cecilus: “Isn’t it fine! Let His Excellency do as he pleases. He wishes to give a gift. Splendid! If possible, to give something beneficial. Also splendid— As retainers taken into His Excellency’s service, let us devote ourselves to realizing His Excellency’s wishes as much as we can.”

Chisha: “…From anyone else I might accept it, but when it’s you saying it, it becomes hard to nod along.”

Cecilus: “It’s uncool to swap in and out what’s right and wrong depending on who the speaker is, you know?”

Tilting his head, Cecilus, with each and every remark, grasped the essence of the matter.

Thanks to that, the correctness of Vincent’s eye in having discovered him was once more proven.

Chisha: “And so… I see, Your Excellency chose a book.”

Recalling the conversation between Vincent and Cecilus he had heard through the door at the outset, Chisha at last caught up to the core part of the pair's topic.

Rather than gifting jewels or dresses, if one has struggled to find something to match Princess—Prisca's—talent and to cultivate it further, it is understandable to arrive at a book.

When Chisha too was first taken into Vincent's service, what most stirred his heart was the number of volumes in the Abellux family's collection. It is certain that many books satisfy curiosity and polish the intellect.

To Chisha's understanding, Vincent nodded with a "Indeed," and said,

Vincent: "No talent, of whatever sort, can show its true worth if it is not honed. To sharpen a sword one needs a whetstone; to polish intellect, books are essential."

Chisha: "Hence, books. I am in agreement on that point as well, but —what is the problem?"

Vincent: "—That one there loudly declares without compunction that what I chose does not suit."

Cecilus: "Yes! It is wholly insufficient!"

Hands on his hips and leaning back, Cecilus looked around at Chisha's and Vincent's faces.

Watching those eyes of his, which were shining terribly brightly, Chisha could only tilt his head at Cecilus's argument. He thought Vincent's aim was not mistaken, but—

Chisha: "Why do you say that will not do?"

Cecilus: "In the first place, the thinking of narrowing it down to a single item is far too small. It's fine to present a book on the grounds that it will surely be beneficial— But what is the reason to hesitate over presenting jewels or a dress? Yes! Aren't you saying it based on the mood when there's no particular reason!"

Vincent: "—But in what way would those be of use to her?"

Cecilus: "To be surrounded by fine things cultivates an eye for fine things. Please look, Your Excellency—at this sword I pestered you to obtain for me."

Saying so, Cecilus thrust out the sword he wore at his hip. Just as he himself said, it was a famed blade, a masterpiece Vincent had bestowed upon him.

Cecilus drew the sword, showing the bared blade, and said,

Cecilus: "You may think that a master does not choose his weapon, but that is wrong! It is precisely the master who cuts people with skill who should be given a weapon that can cut without skill. The ones we should be dealing with are not a single person but many—For that, we must cultivate an eye for the weapons we handle."

Vincent: "…It galls me, but it is infuriating to find myself nodding along to talk like this."

Chisha: "Indeed. Ah, Cecilus, please do not carelessly draw a blade in His Excellency's office. Next time it will not be settled with only a warning."

Finding no points at which to rebut Cecilus's argument, Chisha for the time being cautioned him about his behavior, and, while Cecilus hastily put the sword away, Chisha turned to Vincent and nodded.

Chisha: "I imagine it sticks in your craw to follow Cecilus's advice, but I have concluded there is reason in it. Let us prepare those as well… As for the book, what will you present?"

Vincent: "That too is a matter for deliberation. This impudent one kicked aside my opinion as trifling… you will, no doubt, betray that expectation?"

Chisha: "—I cannot help but tilt my head at how this course lays a great burden upon me."

In short, because Cecilus had said whatever he pleased and denied his thinking, the sulking Vincent was poised to dump it all on

Chisha.

If this were personnel appointments or flood control and the like—affairs of state—that would still be one thing, but trying to curry favor with a younger princess whom he had never actually met made Chisha's extremes of predicament extreme indeed.

Even so, when his master sought his opinion, Chisha would not be fit for his post if he could say nothing. Turning over the matter in his mind, drawing together his black brows, Chisha suddenly voiced a thought.

It was—

Chisha: "—Then, rather than a book that sets down knowledge, I am of the opinion that you might present a book of stories."

Vincent: "What?"

Cecilus: "Oh! Stories!"

To Chisha's proposal the listeners' reactions were polar opposites. Vincent was dubious, and Cecilus, eyes shining, leaned in.

Chisha was not among those who read in great quantity, but he had also enjoyed stories. On the other hand, Vincent should have had no familiarity with such made-up things, with fiction.

Chisha: "Precisely because of that, it may also strike her as fresh. As I surmise it, if what Your Excellency favors is the case, then is not Lady Priscilla also a person who, like Your Excellency, polishes her intellect? If so, I think Lady Priscilla will in time reach, on her own, the books Your Excellency has read."

Vincent: "If it is a path that will come in due time, I think there is meaning in a forerunner showing a more efficient road, and yet, over and above that, you recommend something lowbrow like stories. Why?"

Cecilus: "Wait, wait—deciding that stories are lowbrow, even for Your Excellency, is mmmph!"

Chisha: “You have already spoken enough. Let us make this the scene where I set forth my thinking.”

Covering Cecilus’s mouth as he sprang out, Chisha faced Vincent’s gaze head-on.

At the stare that peered in to probe his intent, Chisha began, “Now then,” to don his theoretical armament in his head. That said, even if it was a sudden idea, it was not a random proposal. Just because its origin was such, there is always a foundation to the thought.

There was, for Chisha Gold to arrive at that idea, such a foundation.

Chisha: “Indeed, Your Excellency called it lowbrow, but how much experience have you had in savoring stories? To speak categorically without that, I fear, would rightly be judged as having ‘told’ about a thing with no basis.”

Vincent: “A slick tongue. Then, even if I withdraw the judgment that it is lowbrow, what meaning is there in making me and Prisca read stories? What sort of knowledge would be gained?”

Chisha: “—In all likelihood, reading stories would serve to polish the spirit.”

Vincent: “What?”

Lowering his voice, Vincent spoke, and Chisha, considering the raison d’être of “stories,” expounded.

Vincent had said: to sharpen a sword one needs a whetstone, and to hone intellect one needs books. If so, then are stories not there to polish the heart?

Chisha: “Just as one learns from history, people can learn from stories. There is a faculty by which, knowing another’s feelings to be another’s, one can think of them as one’s own. When a flood occurs in the neighboring town, is the lesson to be gained only the damage caused by the flood? Is there not also something to learn in the fact that someone was lost?”

Vincent: “…If one reads stories deeply, such knowledge can be gained?”

Chisha: “As it is, Your Excellency is one who can live only as a member of the Vollachian imperial family. All the more so then, I humbly think that as a guide to knowing the thoughts of others, stories may at times prove useful.”

As he spoke, he was surprised to find that it had become a far more reasonable argument than he had expected, and was impressed with himself for, at this late hour, arriving at his own intent.

In fact, perhaps because Vincent too had something to think about, he fell silent and seemed to be considering the matter seriously. It was not that he had any particular fixation on making her read stories, but—

Cecilus: “Nice, Chisha. Surely, this foreshadowing will pay off.”

Slipping cleverly free from the hand that had covered his mouth, Cecilus said so with an easy smile. At the word “foreshadowing,” which seemed to be the trend in him of late, Chisha also smiled wryly.

And then, as Chisha was shrugging at Cecilus’s rare praise,

Vincent: “It is a way of thinking I did not have. But it sits ill to present one without reading it myself.”

Cecilus: “Great! In that case, I like “The Rose Knight of Tireos”!”

Chisha: “I am of the opinion that beginning with something well-known, like “Iris and the King of Thorns”, would be good.”

To Vincent’s forward-looking statement about reading, Cecilus and Chisha each raised a book title. Both were famous works, but Vincent’s reaction was meager; it seemed truly to be a weak field for him.

It felt bad, as though they were using the younger princess as a stepping-stone, but Chisha thought it not a bad thing for Vincent, at times, to show age-appropriate reactions and take an interest in other things like this.

Incidentally, this inspiration of Chisha’s at that time pierced the brother and sister, Vincent and Prisca, beyond expectations, and thereafter the pair would enjoy all manner of stories and, at times, eagerly await new releases from favored authors, becoming a pair of literary siblings—but that is foreshadowing for another, far-off “story.”

END

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Even Oni Shed Tears

1

"—Katya-san, what was your relationship with your fiancé like?"

"What?"

Katya couldn't hide her perplexed look towards Rem's words as she asked a question wrapped in innocence.

Rem, who had chosen to push the wheelchair through a less bumpy road, was cursing her own lack of touch as she thought about how she had failed to make a segway that felt even a bit natural.

But, no matter how much she cursed herself, what was done was done.

"No, like I said, I wondered what your relationship with your fiancé was like, so…"

"I heard you the first time! Wh-Why now, all of a sudden, is what I mean…!"

"Was it weird?"

"Of course it was! T-Take a look at the situation…hk."

Katya became angry, with a voice that was quiet yet angry to the point that it could be thought of as a special skill. she was looking around with her blue eyes filled with suspicion, and it was as she said. This was not the time for gossip.

Since currently, Rem and Katya were in the middle of evacuating together with a group of dozens of people—In a turn of events after the fight between the rebel army and the Imperial Army, they were now right in the middle of aiming for the outside of the Imperial Capital now that the situation had changed.

—At the mansion of chancellor Berstetz Fondalfon, where they had been taken prisoner.

Some time had now passed since someone came to their aid just in the nick of time when that place was attacked by a mysterious group of people. This aid was troublesome; the one who helped Rem and the one who helped Katya as well, both of them disturbed Rem's inner mind for extremely complicated reasons.

One of them, was the person who had been by Rem's side ever since she woke up without her memories, Natsuki Subaru. He appeared with a different look to him to get Rem, who was captive, and rescued her from peril.

That fact, and also that he had shrunken down while he was out of sight, were things she had reservations about, but still, that would seem insignificant when compared to the complicated situation she had with the other one.

"Todd…"

Moving her lips so, with an anxious expression on her face, Katya's pale skin turned a shade paler.

Holding tightly onto the railing of the wheelchair, she tried to hide her shaking. As if she were relying on it during this unstable situation, she mouthed that name, seemingly unaware of the fact.

But, to Rem, that name was, the person with that name was quite important.

"…Todd Fang"

As with Katya, Rem mouthed that same name, as if trying to make sure nobody heard it.

It wasn't a name she would say she relied upon, or even one she held much goodwill for. That would be the case, since, to Rem, Todd was someone who was tied to some very dangerous memories.

From the point of view of Rem without Memories, Todd was the first one to have threatened her life—if she closed her eyes to various conditions, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call him that.

Of course, the person in question said that it was on the army's orders, and he was not doing it of his own will, but…

"…You worry too much."

"Eh?"

"You're getting some unnecessary ideas, like, if you bring up Todd in this situation and make me talk about him, that would help me relax, right? Y-You're so obvious…"

Without turning to meet eyes with Rem who was pushing her wheelchair, Katya told her her understanding of the intentions behind the question she had given earlier. At that understanding, which was very like Katya, Rem closed her eyes.

However, the way Katya took it and the way Rem thought about it were practically completely opposite.

The reason Rem asked Katya about Todd was because she expected to find a way she could get an excuse to separate them directly from Katya's mouth.

If she could get Katya to become suspicious of Todd's words and actions, and get her to feel more like Rem and the others do about him, then she could get Katya to separate from that dangerous person.

No matter how much, that's right, no matter how much she tried to paint him as a good guy, Rem did not feel like giving the human known as Todd even an inch of trust. And as Subaru found him convenient, he must be quite exceptionally skilled. She understands that, and even then trusting him is difficult.

Since Todd, never once tried to learn the names of the people around him.

And, when Rem had begun to consolidate her complicated state of mind.

"—Katya, stop"

Like a sucker punch, she heard the voice of the man himself, and Rem's shoulders jolted reflexively. In Rem's stead, Katya's voice unconsciously called on the owner of that voice, "Todd-…"

That man, from which not a smile rose up at Katya's relief—Todd, shrugged his shoulders.

"Everything's been going fine until now, but a bit ahead there was a bit of a nuisance. There's enough zombies to make me reconsider changing our route, but, unfortunately…"

"There's no time to search for a different route."

Todd pointed at the road with an ax in hand, and the one to draw the conclusion of his explanation, was a young figure holding hands with a girl in a dress, Subaru.

Rem and Katya, as well as the about twenty boys with black hair and eyes that were imprisoned in the mansion. Due to the fact they're taking those burdens with them on their escape, Subaru's group went ahead to secure an escape route, with the whole group aiming to get to the castle walls and get to the outside of the Imperial Capital.

However, this meant a shadow has finally fallen upon their so far successful.

"So… There's a strong enemy, and we have no time to find a different path?"

"W-We're completely cornered! Wh-What do we do…!"

"Let's see. How about giving up and joining the dead? Doing that with you might not be so bad."

"Stupid! I-If you're gonna die, go die by yourself! …Ah."

Having unintentionally spat that out, the color swiftly drained from Katya's face.

She heard the urgency of the situation, and she bit back at those biting words with her statement, but immediately fiercely regretting the words she said in the moment was Katya's bad habit.

Of course, understanding that, Rem tried to rebuke that statement and…

"—Don't make that face. You didn't really mean that, I at least know that much."

But, before anything could come out of Rem's mouth, Todd said that gently while stroking Katya's frizzy hair.

Todd's speech and mannerisms, and what's more, Katya's relieved face, struck Rem in the chest.

The confidence Rem had as someone who had become Katya's friend, her feelings as she pretended to be someone who understood her, were overturned. Having lost on that point, Rem's heart became greatly upset.

"I talked with these kids as well. We don't have the leeway to change our path right now. Which is why, with everyone that can be counted as a fighter, we'll wipe out the enemy. In the meantime, you try to get to the castle wall from the neighboring street."

"We've made a plan for victory, so the detached team is a just in case kinda thing."

Leaving Rem's inner thoughts aside, Todd and Subaru explained the course of action for now.

Apparently, they seem to be saying that while Subaru and the others face off against the enemy awaiting them, Rem's group should circumvent the battlefield.

"Please wait. If you mean anyone that could be counted as a fighter, then I as well."

"A fighter? You, girl?"

"…Any complaints?"

Naturally, Todd made a perplexed face towards Rem who had protested her exclusion from the people who could fight. With what had occurred before, Rem's voice went lower, and she glared at Todd, but he shrugged his shoulders with a "Nah" and…

"Your gait, it has an odd quirk to it because you have a limp leg, right, girl? If I recall, last time I saw you, you were using a cane. You're not aware how well you can move, are you?"

"That's-…"

"We can't call someone who doesn't have a complete grasp of their own mobility a fighter. Besides—"

Without replying to any of Todd's harsh remarks, Rem grinded her molars from the frustration. Todd acted pompously on his last words he gave towards Rem, and turned his gaze towards Katya.

Seeing Katya muttering "Wh-What…"at the gaze of her fiancé, Todd laughed.

"—It looks like Katya trusts you. Pretty rare for someone as shy as her."

"Wha-…?!"

"That's why, I want to leave Katya in your hands. How about it?"

Side eyeing Katya, whose face went bright red with teary eyes, Todd threw a question at Rem.

Rem noticed her own complete defeat with that cowardly question. At being counted out of the fighters, and Katya's new human behavior, she had been completely trapped.

At the very least, if Rem's own counterattack would not come to pass, then trying to turn her gaze to Subaru,

"I agree with Todd. Rem, take care of Katya-san. Let's all meet safely, outside the walls."

"—Understood."

Hearing those words from Subaru, the one who had the probability of backing her up, Rem powerlessly nodded.

This was something she had already understood. To Subaru, it was hard to agree to having Rem jump into danger. Just as Todd kept Katya away from danger, he as well-kept Rem from danger.

And as one would expect, he had properly prepared an excuse that would be hard for Rem to decline.

Then…

“Katya, mind your manners. I’ll definitely come get you later.”

“…D-Don’t make a mistake. Your strong point is being witty and tenacious, so make sure to properly make use of th-that strong point of yours…”

“I know. —I also treasure you above anything else.”

With that exchange of words between Todd and Katya, Rem saw them off with an indescribable feeling.

While also hesitating on whether she should also give similar words to Subaru…

2

—However, the irony of fate would bare its fangs not towards Rem but towards Katya.

“Huh…?”

At Katya being frozen stiff, with her blue eyes stuck open, Rem bit her lip and hung her head. Rem’s hands tightly held onto the hem of her own clothes, and her chest was filled with a feeling of uselessness.

This was a role she took on herself. In which case, could I have done better? she wondered. The delivery of this information from Rem’s mouth to Katya—of this terrible news.

Because of that, Katya's eyes swam, and after that, she once more asked Rem.

"Wha-, t… did- you- just- say, Rem?"

"Todd-san…He, could not be found."

"Liar!"

With her head still hung and without looking at Katya's face, Rem repeated the same information, and was torn apart by a sorrowful voice.

The wheels made a rattling sound as they turned, and Katya, who moved forward, grasped Rem's hand. Katya's nails dug in unconsciously, but pain like that was trivial.

When compared to the pain Rem, and also Katya, were feeling in their hearts.

—In order to face off against the strong enemy that stood in their way, Subaru's group separated from Rem's.

Thanks to that plan, Katya and the captive children safely escaped to the outside of the Imperial Capital.

After they separated from them midway,

However, Subaru's group had pushed itself to death in the exhausting fight against the strong enemy, especially Subaru, who, when Rem reached him, was on the brink of death.

She had just barely made it in time and managed to save Subaru, but…

"…"

She gripped Rem's hands painfully, and Katya's already pale and sickly skin drained even more blood.

The figure of him, Katya's fiancé, who was fighting together with Subaru against a strong enemy, was nowhere to be seen. Beatrice and the others as well had separated from Subaru and him in the middle of the battle and could not reunite their battle concluded with that strong enemy.

Therefore, they didn't know how Subaru and Todd's battle reached its conclusion.

"There's still, still, that, that kid that came to get you, right…?"

"…That person, yes"

"If he was, with Todd, then… We still, can't know for sure. Maybe, just maybe he knows what happened to Todd, what happened to him…"

"Katya-san…"

"—Why-"

The trembling Katya's eyes gazed at Rem, and the pained emotions behind those blue eyes, wavered for a moment.

Most likely, the words she had cut off were meant to be blame thrown at Rem.

Whether that be blaming her for not bringing back Todd, or perhaps, for only bringing back Subaru. It was Katya's own conscience that made her not say it.

While feeling that she would rather let her shout at her, Rem was also at a loss for words.

No matter how earnestly he showed his cooperativeness, Rem's suspicion towards Todd never cleared. The relief Rem felt now that Todd was gone, was not insignificant. While that was not something she was able to say to Katya, it was undoubtedly the truth.

"It's not true, he, he couldn't, Todd, not like that…"

Katya, who remained unable to accept the reality told to her, said so weakly. She would have liked to have a heart-to-heart with her, and give her time to calm down, but they didn't have that privilege here.

The walls of the reservoir had been broken, and the Imperial Capital was sinking under a great quantity of water. The evacuated imperial citizens, soldiers, and rebels had begun to move towards a northern city, and Rem and her could not delay further.

At the very least, Rem's healing magic should be put to good use. But, it was hard to leave Katya's side.

And, when Rem was wavering like that…

"—Katya? Hey, Katya! If it ain't Katya!"

Around them were many refugees, pieces of cloth spread on the ground, and a tent erected to make a rudimentary break room.

A voice with seemingly no consideration or care to it, Rem was surprised when it called Katya's name, but the person in question's reaction was much more dramatic.

As if pulled back to life, Katya raised her face, turned towards the voice, opened her eyes, and then said,

"…B-Brother?"

"Ooh, there you are, Katya! Thank goodness, you managed to get outta there, huh! I was about to go dive back in myself, but there were so many people getting in my way that I was having a hard time"

Pushing the crowd aside, this imperial soldier with an eye patch walked up to Rem and Katya.

For a moment, she felt like she remembered him from somewhere, but Katya's reaction overshadowed Rem's thoughts.

"Is that, your brother? But, I heard Katya-san's brother was supposed to be dead…"

"I, wha-? Who th'fuck's dead! Wait, are you her caretaker? Good job bringing Katya here. And I am definitely getting some payback from you for—”

“—Todd is-”

His face with a roughness like that of a bandit turned to a scowl, and the man Katya called brother began meaninglessly threatening Rem. However, he was stopped by a few words from Katya.

Her brother turning wordlessly towards her, Katya released her grip on Rem’s hand and instead took the hand of her approaching brother.

“Brother…Todd, he, he-…He’s-…hk.”

“—. Tch, that motherfucker.”

Suddenly she exploded in emotion, and Katya clung onto her brother’s hand with her voice trembling. Big blobs of tears dropped from her eyes, and her brother clicked his tongue, pulling the head of his sister close to his chest.

His body was that of a man covered in blood, dripping in sweat and mud, but Katya didn’t pull away. She couldn’t pull away.

Rem could not do that; Katya’s emotions burst out, and her weeping began spilling out.

Even with her brother, who was thought dead, back, she still couldn’t think that it was fine that Todd’s well-being remained unclear. Katya simply broke into tears without restraint in front of Rem, who was at a loss for words.

Hearing her suffering, anxious, crying voice, Rem felt a prick in her chest, and for some reason, felt heat from the back of her eyelids.

“—Why me.”

Tears welled up, yet Rem questioned whether she herself had any reason to cry.

She made Katya cry. It was her fault. That feeling of powerlessness continued to torture Rem very, very strongly.

The powerlessness of not being able to at least let her cry within her arms, also continued to torture her.

“Todd…Tooodd…hk.”

Having lost a precious someone, sincerely grieving, the loving girl suffered greatly.

She prayed in her chest that, at the very least, her fateful reunion with her brother gave some salvation to Katya’s heart.

—Soon after this will it arrive for Rem, a verily unavoidable fated reunion of her own.

The time for the great desire of those who came to get her from a country far, far away was before our eyes—And the readiness to come to terms with it was something Rem still had not prepared within herself.

END

The Dragon Kingdom:
Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record III

1

The sky gleamed white. And it was in that moment of realization that a portion of the desert vanished into oblivion.

"…"

A tempest of wind-swept sand soared skyward, only to descend back down from the clear, blue sky like rain. Their vision blurred in a yellowish haze as the fine grains of sand permeated the air, threatening to contaminate each and every breath.

"Cover your mouths tightly!" Reinhard yelled. "The sand is infested with Miasma! Be careful not to accidentally breathe it in!"

"I can't bear the taste of this sand anymore," Flam moaned.

"The taste of humiliation," Grassis concurred. Pulling their anti-sand cloths over their mouths, the petite figures sitting side by side on the driver's seat hollered with all their might as Meili clutched her own mouth shut, stifling her own cries. She felt the crimson scorpion that had made her hair its nest pop out and start snapping its pincers in alarm. Meili could totally understand how the excited small crimson scorpion was feeling, but no matter how it protested this small witchbeast…no, everyone there including Meili, could do nothing. Except for one person.

"Reinhard!" she cried out to the Sword Saint, whose name resounded, who was the reason they hadn't turned to dust.

"…"

The red-headed knight, descending from the dragon carriage that traversed the sandy terrain, stood at the brunt of the swirling light. Raising his sheathed sword, housed in a white scabbard engraved with the claws of a dragon, he gazed intently over the expanse of the desert. A moment later, another burst of light surged forward as the swinging sword met it head-on, cleaving through its attack.

The severed light emitted a splashing sound as it dispersed, demonstrating its destructive force in the distance, missing its original target and creating yet another massive crater in the great sandy plains of the Augria Sand Dunes.

The second blow, following closely behind the first, held the power to vaporize not only Meili's petite form but the dragon carriage that carried her, leaving no trace behind should they be struck directly by the light's tremendous force. Yet it was nothing more than a mere act of exhaling for their opponent.

"It was the same with Naked Ladyy. But why is the reception soo extreme?!" Meili said through a stifled scream, voice brimming with indignation.

Despite having painstakingly overcome the challenges of Sand Time, as Meili and her party ventured toward the tower beyond the desert, what had awaited them was a rough greeting from Shaula, the self-proclaimed Star Keeper of the tower. They had barely survived the previous encounter thanks to the strenuous efforts of Emilia, Julius, Subaru, and Beatrice. And with the loss of Shaula, they never expected such a situation to arise again. However…

"What did you say to that dragooon?!" Meili cried. Far, far away, a breath of light radiated from the tower of sand in the distance. The source of the light was a massive, blue-scaled Dragon, perched atop the tower as a proxy for the absent caretaker.

"The Divine Dragon, Volcanica," a voice muttered from inside the dragon carriage as the menacing sound of a little red scorpion snapping its pincers rattled in their ears. Such was the rough welcome to Meili as she made her return to the Pleiades Watchtower.

2

The time was two days before facing the tumultuous welcome of the Divine Dragon, Volcanica.

“Got it? You must never open your heart so easily,” warned the younger Annerose, as Meili’s lips twitched in response to the seriousness in her face and voice. Annerose carried a strong sense of responsibility and was keenly aware that she had been entrusted with Meili’s safety by someone important. So, I get why she’s so anxious, but…

“I’m still a former assassiin…” Meili started.

“Regardless of your past, it’s evident that you’re currently captivated by Emily, are you not? So nothing you say grants you the power of persuasion. Persuasion is something achieved through action.”

“Hmph…” Annerose stood there with her hands on her hips lecturing Meili, who was unable to come up with a rebuttal. In truth, Emilia and Subaru played crucial roles in her backstory. After becoming acquainted with those two naive characters, it’d be absurd to continue playing the role of a ruthless assassin. Annerose should understand more than anyone.

“I’m somewhat thankful to them, you knoow,” Meili acknowledged.

“Yes, I know,” Annerose replied. They were both moved by similar people, so Annerose understood her feelings and nodded. “So I won’t say any more. Not to you, at least.” However, as expected from her, Annerose added a cautionary note.

As if to back up the slight worry Annerose had…

Felt came towards them flashing her fang with a smile and waving her hand. “Yo, you ready to go? We’re all here.”

Felt, another royal selection candidate and one of Emilia’s rivals, was accompanied by her knight, Reinhard, and three other attendants: a small boy and two girls, equally petite. Those girls look so much alike, they’ve got to be twins…

“This little guy over here is Ezzo. He’s my strategist. And these twins are Flam and Grassis. They handle the food and cleaning and stuff,” Felt explained, introducing her companions.

“Miss Felt, that’s a bit of a sloppy explanation. First of all, your strategist is Sir Rom,” Ezzo pointed out.

“Old Man Rom says he doesn’t need a fancy title,” Felt clarified. “So he’s my advisor, and you’re my strategist. Flam and Grassis are my caretakers. Reinhard’s the violent one.”

“Lady Felt, you’re rather harsh on the young master,” said Flam.

“But it’s true,” said Grassis.

“If you had at the very least said ‘powerful’ instead of ‘violent’, it would have been easier to process…” Reinhard lamented.

The exchange of words left Meili feeling dizzy.

Annerose appeared to share the sentiment as she let out a small sigh, then clapped her hands to get their attention. “Alright, alright,” she started. “Lady Felt, thank you for introducing your companions. As Meili is an important member of our camp, we couldn’t entrust her to someone whose identity is uncertain,” Annerose expressed with concern in her voice.

“If we’re talkin’ identity, I’ve gotta be the most suspicious of all of you,” Felt said, laughing heartily, while Reinhard and the rest of the people around her sighed.

“Lady Felt…” Surprised at Felt’s nonchalance in describing her own upbringing, Meili surveyed her camp once more. She wanted to take a better look at the members who would be heading to the Pleiades Watchtower with her.

Accompanied by Annerose, Meili had an audience with the Council of Wise Men at Lugunica Castle. There, she used her ability to manipulate witchbeasts as a bargaining chip, requesting indemnity for her past crimes. The Council of Wise Men agreed, but with a condition: Meili had to prove her usefulness.

In other words, Meili must prove that she could traverse the Augria Sand Dunes with her power, and in order to prove that, the ones who had volunteered to accompany her were…

“But are you certain about joining us, Lady Felt?” Annerose questioned.

“It was I who provoked them,” Felt insisted, confidently pointing her thumb at herself. “And it was probably fate that I was there. On top of that my testimony holds more weight since I’m from a different camp, wouldn’t ya say?”

“You do have a point,” Annerose said, nodding reluctantly at Felt’s suggestion. As Roswaal’s appointed representative, Annerose herself couldn’t accompany them on their return visit to the Pleiades Watchtower. Thus, she had no choice but to entrust Meili’s care to Felt and her companions, which must have been embarrassing for her to be clearly indebted like that. However…

“I won’t get into the details of who owes who what for something as small as this. I’m also thinkin’ of doing something about Priestella,” Felt declared.

“Understood.” Annerose bowed to her as if in resignation, as Felt offered a wide smile. “I appreciate your kind offer.”

With that, Meili’s well-being had been securely entrusted to Felt and her companions.

“By the way, about the Divine Protection of Witchbeast Manipulation. Sir Reinhard, do you not have the same Divine Protection?” Ezzo asked curiously.

“Unfortunately,” he replied, “only one of her Divine Protection can exist at a time.”

“I see. That makes the responsibility heavier and heavier for us, doesn’t it?” Ezzo pondered.

“It’s quite the tough role, isn’t it?” Flam commented.

“A pain,” agreed Grassis.

“You two, please don’t talk about it as if it were someone else’s problem; I expect you to give your best, too,” Reinhard chided with a wry smile. The twins nodded at his words with emotionless expressions.

Beside them, a boy called Ezzo approached Meili. “I am Ezzo Cadner,” the diligent-looking guy introduced himself, adjusting his cloak and bowing respectfully. “I have had the honor of serving Miss Felt ever since a particular incident, and am delighted to accompany you on this intriguing journey. Let’s fulfill our roles together.”

“Yes, let’s do that…” Meili said. “So what can you doo?”

“I’m a magic user. I’m the second best in the kingdom, much to my annoyance,” Ezzo replied, irritation mixed into his otherwise intelligent countenance; it seemed that he was in a complicated situation. Despite the small stature of the boy, he had a certain air about him that could not be underestimated…and he wasn’t the only one.

“It seems those twins have more to offer than caretaking, hmmm?” Meili commented.

“You have a good eye,” complemented Flam.

“You know too much,” muttered Grassis.

Flam and Grassis, along with the members of Felt’s camp, each had their own unique quirks and idiosyncrasies. Particularly noteworthy were the sly royal candidate and her first-ranking knight, the Sword Saint, both of whom found themselves entangled in unexpected circumstances. Subaru and Emilia sure have their fair share of challenges awaiting them, Meili thought.

“So weiiird,” Meili muttered, wondering why she felt anxious at their problem as if it were her own.

“Lady Annerose, everything is in order. Ready,” Clind, Annerose’s butler, interjected in his typically subdued manner. Clind played an important role in Meili’s trial, which encompassed this journey to the Pleiades Watchtower and overcoming the Augria Sand Dunes. He would transport them all the way from the royal capital, Lugunica, to the dunes in a single bound.

“Miss Meili, good luck to you. Expectation.” Clind bowed deeply, surprising Meili and Annerose.

“I wouldn’t be so afraid of you if you’d just say one word to cheer me up like that,” Meili jested.

“Clind always has much to say, doesn’t he?” Annerose chimed in. She took Meili’s hand again and continued, “Meili. I wish you the best in winning back your future.”

“Yes, thank youu. I’ll do my beest,” Meili replied with her usual light-hearted tone at the younger girl’s—Annerose’s—sincere words. No matter what grand schemes lay ahead, the girl closest to Meili remained unfazed. She’s the strongest person I’ve ever known, always standing her ground. That’s why I believe that the most powerful thing one can do is always be true to oneself.

3

Through Clind’s enigmatic power, Meili and the members of Felt’s camp were instantly teleported from the royal capital to the entrance of the Augria Sand Dunes. Boarding the dragon carriage prepared for their journey, they moved the witchbeasts out of their way using Meili’s ability, then slowly but surely made their way towards the Pleiades Watchtower, visible in the distance, without any hiccups. It was when they had somehow managed to survive the difficult Sand Time that they got a violent greeting from the Divine Dragon mentioned at the beginning.

“Geez, why are we in such a mess?!” Meili lamented her bad luck in frustration with a high-pitched voice inside the violently shaking dragon carriage. As far as she knew, the Dragon, which had resided in the Pleiades Watchtower for a considerable amount of time, was at Emilia’s beck and call. If she remembered correctly, then it had been asked to protect the tower on behalf of Shaula. This can’t be happening. Was it Emilia’s typical vague remarks that drove the Dragon to commit this heinous act?

“He’s most likely just been startled by my presence,” Reinhard explained as he fended off the overwhelming onslaught that greeted them.

“Huh?” Meili exclaimed, her eyes widening in disbelief, when she realized that he was replying to her scream. She couldn’t believe her ears that Reinhard had the leisure of having a conversation in a situation like this as he leaned forward.

“Ezzo, I’ll leave you in charge here. I’ll handle the Divine Dragon!” With these words, the red-headed knight swiftly departed a great distance, the sound of his footsteps like the firing of magic stone cannons. Beneath his feet, a massive crater formed in the sand, an impossible feat for anyone with mere human leg power. Reinhard’s prediction appeared to have proven true as he was propelled into the air.

The emerging light from the distance changed course, moving away from the dragon carriage carrying Meili and the others, and began to chip away at the desert in pursuit of the airborne Reinhard.

“The light appears to be targeting the young master,” Flam observed.

“Caught in the middle,” Grassis added.

“Don’t be so blunt!” Ezzo scolded. “Oh, this is a disaster! Miss Felt! I don’t want anything to happen to you! Stay close to me…”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Felt retorted, brushing off a hand reaching out from the driver’s seat. “How am I your top priority now? Now that that damn Reinhard flew off somewhere, your duty’s to protect Meili!”

As it was, Felt embraced Meili protectively, who was curled up in a seat on the dragon carriage. She glared at the little crimson scorpion clacking its pincers atop the startled Meili’s head. “I’m not tryna hurt your master!” she scolded. “Hey, Meili!”

“Wh-What?”

“Don’t lose focus. If you mess up, we’re all in trouble!” Meili paused momentarily, and Felt continued. “Show us just what you can do. You’re the only one with the map to this maze. We can only follow you.”

Felt tightened her grip on Meili's shoulder, her eyes radiating determination. Meili gulped, feeling her powerful gaze. The situation was just as urgent to Felt as it was to Meili, yet despite this, Felt remained unflinching, reminding Meili that she, too, possessed her own exceptional qualities. She, too, possesses unwavering values. A special quality, similar to Subaru and Emilia…and Elsa.

"Well? Ya gonna answer?" Felt snapped.

"I don't need you to remind mee," Meili retorted. "It's my job to do thiis."

"Heh, well said. Ezzo! Flam! Grassis!" Felt called out the names of the three in the driver's seat with a wide grin showing her fang. They turned toward her, silently awaiting her command. "Reinhard will secure the victory! We need to make sure we don't lose! So buckle up!" Felt's voice rang out with fiery determination, igniting sparks of fervor in the eyes of her three followers. Everyone in the camp, including Reinhard, who was unable to hear what she just said, sought the best outcome.

Witnessing their dedication, Meili couldn't afford to lag behind. "Pleease, just stay stiiill…!" she pleaded. Despite the tower guardian's absence, the intensity of the Miasma in the dunes showed no signs of diminishing. The violent nature of the witchbeasts that abound in the Augria Sand Dunes and their unnatural, undeterred willingness to fight, even to the death, remained strong due to that. Had Meili not ordered them to stand by, the bloodthirsty witchbeasts would have swarmed in on them.

However, unlike the climactic battle at the tower, the current scenario had the witchbeasts entangled in a fierce struggle against the forces of nature. Meanwhile, the battle between Reinhard, the Sword Saint, and Volcanica, the Divine Dragon, intensified.

In the midst of the chaos, the two tasks at hand were protecting the dragon carriage from the shockwaves from the battle and protecting Felt and the others from senseless danger. Not only must we reach the tower, but I also have to prove that I'm capable of saving someone.

That alone held the key to a new life for Meili Portroute.

“You know your role, don’t you?” Felt asked, a mischievous smile playing on her lips as she glanced at Meili, fully focused and oblivious to her surroundings, sweat glistening on her forehead. Her gaze extended toward the decisive battle exploding over the expansive desert. “I’ll bet the girls who went to the Empire haven’t the slightest clue that we’re here fighting the Dragon,” Felt said, wetting her lips with a flick of her tongue.

Meanwhile, to the complete ignorance of Felt and her camp, Emilia and Priscilla had simultaneously clashed with a Dragon in the fortress city. Thus, each royal candidate was in the midst of their own intense battle.

END

Volume 35

Chapters 16-28

Chapter 16:
The Undead Cataclysm

1

—Pale skin drained of complexion, and golden irises housed in the center of dark eyeballs.

With the sudden appearance of undead forces, both the Imperial Army and the Rebel Army had been doused with literal cold water as they fought a battle for the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

Before anyone could notice, the battle between the living vying for control of the Empire had transformed into a struggle for existence between the living and the dead, and it was becoming increasingly severe.

???: “URAAAAAAH—!!”

Raising a loud voice, he brandished his two-handed sword and slammed it into the enemy in front of him.

In an attempt to block the strike, the enemy raised a battered sword that they had picked up from somewhere, but that blow smashed the brittle sword nevertheless, cleaving straight into the enemy’s skull.

Their cranium shattered, and yet what followed was not a spectacular scene of blood and brain matter spewing out, but a scene of fragments scattering about, as if a ceramic pot were smashed; an utterly unthinkable way for a human to die.

The things were not only inhuman in appearance, but even the way they died ran contrary to the path of humanity.

As somebody who lived in the Empire, there were opportunities to lay eyes upon races that possessed extravagant features in their appearance, but even if it was an opponent with a different number of arms or eyes, the way they died would remain constant.

It was only logical that those with life should experience their lives come to an end in a manner befitting that quality.

But, these undead did not have that. Perhaps that was why he still felt such a strong repugnance towards them.

Even in the Empire, where life was even said to be cheap compared to other countries, they did not trample upon life itself in the way these undead did.

General: “Keep the front lines at bay! Let His Excellency the Emperor and the civilians escape!”

Soldiers: “OHHHHHH—!!”

When one of the Generals shouted a command, the soldiers around him roared as if they were in a fever.

As a result of the undead forces, the rampage of the Cloud Dragon, and the bulwark of the reservoir in the northern part of the Imperial Capital approaching destruction, His Excellency the Emperor made the decision to abandon the Imperial Capital, and withdraw all troops.

The Imperial Army united all of its efforts to assist in the evacuation of the Emperor and the citizens of the Imperial Capital. Ironically, with the advent of this third faction, the battle against the Rebel Army had gone undecided. No distinction remained between the regular army and rebels, and with the living and the dead divided into friend and foe, the fierce battle raged on.

Just now, the Imperial Soldier who had just destroyed a single undead was one who held their ground. He and the soldiers around him were fighting with all their might to stop as many of the undead as possible, even if only one, and see if they could take them down to meet death together.

Soldier: “No idea what those things are. But…”

Soldier: “If it is His Excellency the Emperor!”

Soldier: “He will absolutely find a way to eradicate you lot!”

No matter who the enemy may be, their faith in the apex of the Empire, Vincent Vollachia, would never waver. That was the greatest reason why the soldiers were able to hold their ground without a hint of fear.

Vincent had continued to deliver results. The amount of spilled blood and piled up corpses of Vincent's enemies was the foundation of the Imperial Soldiers' faith in him.

Considering the absoluteness of his reign, his fighting spirit was of a different purity from that of those who so casually plotted insurrection.

And thus, his fighting spirit directed towards the undead shaking the Empire was precisely the same.

General: "—Hk! All troops, bring that one down!"

The General cried out once more in response to the onslaught of an undead with a massive body.

A bald undead of large build swung their arms about, and the Imperial Soldiers who stood in their path were blown away like scraps of paper. If they were to permit the large undead to do as it pleased, a hole would open in the front lines, and the defensive position they had gone through so much trouble to form would likely crumble.

In order to stop it, the soldiers obeyed the General's order and leaped towards the huge body at once.

Soldier: "Uu, OOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!"

The soldier who leaped first was struck, crushing his head; evading that carcass as it flew towards him, one Imperial Soldier kept close to the ground as he slashed at the legs of the huge undead.

The attack connected, and his opponent's stance collapsed. But, having perpetrated such an impudent act, the Imperial Soldier's eyes met golden irises looking down on him, and witnessed the dim gleam of a sword that had been plucked off somebody else.

Just before he was impaled by its tip, the figure of a person wedged their way in front of the Imperial Soldier.

General: “Finishhhh… iiiit… hk”

Pierced through the chest, the General cried out as blood frothed at his mouth.

Shielded by the General, the Imperial Soldier gulped down, and immediately jumped out from behind the General’s back; swinging his sword with all his might, he smashed the gigantic undead’s head in.

The sword broke in half upon impact, but without any counterattack, the large undead’s whole body shattered.

And so, just as the General collapsed to the ground on his back, the large undead was struck down.

His chest pierced, the General had met his end, and as the Imperial Soldier admired that bravery, he borrowed a replacement for his broken sword from the General’s hand.

Then, twisting his head around, he tried to search for the next enemy—

Imperial Soldier: “Fucking hell…”

The Imperial Soldier muttered, his cheeks contorting as he lowered the helmet he was wearing with his fingers.

Having just evaded death, the Imperial Soldier looked as the next undead entered his field of vision—The General who had just died protecting him, his same equipment and face were worn by it.

The corpse of the General was lying beside him, and he himself was gripping the General’s sword.

And yet, standing in front of him with a pale face and golden eyes, was that very same General.

Imperial Soldier: “Fucking hell.”

A battlefield where even one’s comrades-in-arms could become undead, turning into enemies as soon as they died.

Upon these flooded lands which he wanted to curse, where death was near certain, the Imperial Soldier raised his sword, and continued to fight until his life no longer allowed.

2

—The coupled dragon carriage retreated from the Imperial Capital of Lupugana and headed towards the Fortified City of Garkla.

The historical alliance formed between the Emilia camp and the Vollachian Empire’s leadership within that carriage had unexpectedly encountered interference in an unforeseen manner.

Although, as for the cause of that interference—

Anastasia: “What’s wrong? Even tho’ we were so worried about Natsuki-kun… it’s distressin’ to see ya lookin’ at us like we’re uninvited guests.”

Subaru: “I’m not making such a face! I’m happy that we were able to meet properly. It goes without saying for Anastasia-san, but even if it’s Julius with his stern expression, I’m glad about both.”

Anastasia: “Well, it ain’t exactly a stern expression, but it’s all ‘cause of yer appearance.”

And so, the two people, Julius and Anastasia, who had suddenly boarded the interconnected dragon carriage, looked down at the shrunken Subaru from head to toe with keen interest.

Naturally, for Subaru, encountering the two of them there was like a bolt from the blue.

The level of surprise was comparable to when Priscilla had suddenly descended from the sky in the Fortress City.

However, why those two had ended up in the Vollachian Empire, Subaru did not consider himself so naive as to be unable to guess the reason.

Subaru: “Even so, I understand that Emilia-tan and the others were looking for us, but for Anastasia-san and Julius… to go out of your way through Kararagi just for me?”

Anastasia: “Yep, exactly. Was a grand adventure, traversin’ through three countries. Crossin’ the border to Vollachia ain’t somethin’ that can be done easily, and the journey was quite costly, to say the least.”

Subaru: “Urk.”

Anastasia: “I hate to come across as countin’ every penny, but I’d be happy if ya won’t forget about the costs we broke our backs for.”

Being sent to the Empire was beyond Subaru’s control, but when he heard about the concerns that were expressed for him, his heart felt heavy. Under Anastasia’s gaze and words, it seemed like Subaru was about to be burdened with a tremendous debt of gratitude.

However, at that moment, a voice calling her “Ana” could be heard near Anastasia’s neck,

Echidna: “You shouldn’t bully Natsuki-kun recklessly. Considering his current appearance, no matter how you look at it, Ana, you seem like the villain bullying a child.”

Subaru: “Ah…”

When Subaru raised his eyebrows at that voice, the other party responded by wagging a white tail.

It was the fox scarf that Anastasia, who was dressed in a kimono, had draped over her shoulders. In other words, it was Echidna, the Artificial Spirit, whom Anastasia was carrying with her.

Unlike the Witch with the same name, Subaru had a recognition of Echidna as a companion whom he had gone through the ordeal of the Pleiades Watchtower together with. Hearing her voice, Subaru also felt relieved and at ease.

With this, among the companions who had gotten separated in the Pleiades Watchtower, once Subaru showed his face to Patrasche, who was outside, only Meili would have yet to see that he was safe.

Anyway—

Emilia: “Anastasia-san! Julius, too, you made it to Vollachia safely!”

Anastasia: “I’m relieved that Emilia-san ‘n the others are safe too. As for the hardships durin’ the journey… I couldn’t find Natsuki-kun before Emilia-san ‘n the others did, so it’s a bit embarrassin’.”

Emilia: “No, that thought makes me feel reaaally happy. Thank you.”

Emilia also welcomed Anastasia’s appearance with a relaxed smile on her face.

Indeed, the situation in the Vollachian Empire already tense, and on top of that, there was the undead disaster following the civil war. Inadvertently, she could say that she was very grateful that she did not cross paths with Anastasia and the others in the Imperial Capital.

And with the joy of such an unexpected reunion coming to a pause —

Vincent: “Are you quite finished rekindling your old friendship? Whether you know it or not, the time for the military conference is limited.”

The one who dampened the mood with those words, with a cheeky attitude and arms crossed, was Abel.

With an unusually tolerant demeanor, he had been trying to gauge the atmosphere, but it seemed like he could not remain silent any longer. Making a sarcastic remark, Abel glanced sideways at Subaru and then said,

Vincent: “Another of your acquaintances. How unexpected, to think your influence has spread as far as Kararagi.”

Subaru: “As for that, it’s a bit complicated. Anastasia-san and the others are on the Kararagi side, but not exactly on the Kararagi side… So, what's the deal with him?"

Subaru's puzzled question stemmed from the presence of Halibel, who stood beside Anastasia and the others. Halibel, the wolfperson who was known as the strongest in the Kararagi City-States, demonstrated his existence while shaking the kiseru he held. Subaru wondered what position Anastasia and her group held, given Halibel's title and affiliation.

Julius: "I will handle that explanation. I will give a firsthand account of the particulars that allowed us to get on that flying dragon ship."

In response to Subaru's question, Julius brushed the scar beneath his left eye with his finger and began to answer.

The new white scar on Julius's profile, combined with his unfamiliar appearance in a traditional Japanese outfit, emphasized his dignified and handsome aura, giving Subaru a strange sensation.

It was not to say that the influence of "regression" had not affected Subaru's perception, but it was probably more due to the changes on Julius's side that caused this sensation.

Somehow, it felt like the current Julius had more composure than before.

While there was elegance in his previous demeanor as the "Finest of Knights", it seemed to be different from his current composure. It might have even been considered something that stood in stark contrast to it.

His attitude, which seemed like he had discarded long-worn armor, was it a result of the experience in the Pleiades Watchtower, or was there some other reason behind it? That remained uncertain.

Julius: "—Your Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, I am relieved to see you safe and well. It is an unexpected honor to have the privilege of an audience with you once again."

Ignoring Subaru's impression, Julius, having taken a step forward, bowed as he elegantly spoke.

Abel, protected by Goz's large build as he stood, raised his shapely eyebrows at Julius's greeting. Subaru, too, harbored a sense of unease with Julius's "once again" part.

Vincent: ""Once again" you say, hm. But, neither do I remember granting audience to a swordsman of the City-States, nor do I recognize your face. What prompted you to say "once again"?"

Julius: "With all due respect, I once received the opportunity to have a glimpse. However, at the time, I was not a swordsman of the City-States, but a knight of the Kingdom."

Vincent: "The Kingdom—"

Upon hearing the response of Julius, who did not show fear even when addressing Abel, the Vollachian Emperor, Abel's black eyes narrowed in deep thought, but he could not seem to find any memory of the occasion.

With such a dignified demeanor, there was no way that Julius could possibly be telling a lie. As such, even though the two were actually acquainted with each other, Abel had forgotten it.

In other words, it was evidence that the effects of Gluttony, which caused those around Julius to forget him, had yet to be undone—.

Vincent: "You are deceiving me, and thus I do not understand your behavior. —Berstetz."

Berstetz: "Yes. I, too, have no recollection of ever seeing this person."

Vincent: "It would be rare for Berstetz to not be present at an audience. That is to say, it is not an issue between you and I, but one of a larger scale."

By merely questioning the presence of Julius within Berstetz's memories with a single word, Abel detected that extraordinary circumstances were entangled in the discrepancy of perceptions between himself and Julius.

Witnessing Abel's speech and conduct, Subaru could not help but mutter “Is this guy for real?”

Subaru: “Is it really normal to accept that so easily? Something that’s so absurd…”

Vincent: “We are in the midst of an emergency, in which the dead have risen, and the Emperor is being driven away from the Imperial Capital. Speaking of the grand scheme of things, the fact that your body has shrunk does not make much of a difference either. What matters is whether or not it can be conceived as possible.”

Subaru: “I wouldn’t say that me shrinking is something that happens every day either though.”

No matter what kind of profound mysteries this world held, even if those were deemed as plausible theories just because they could be conceived, it did not make them things that could be so easily accepted with an “Ah yes, I see.”

As Subaru’s brow wrinkled, Beatrice, holding his hand, rubbed the wrinkle between Subaru’s brow with her other hand.

Beatrice: “Don’t overthink it too much, I suppose. It’s much more convenient if they have the tolerance to accept it, than if they were to be obstinate about it, in fact.”

Subaru: “…That’s true. Also, that feels good, please keep doing it a little longer.”

Beatrice: “Roger that, I suppose.”

While Subaru continued to receive an eyebrow massage from Beatrice, Julius, with the questions that arose from the first act of his greeting canceled, he returned to the main topic.

That was—

Julius: “First of all, the lady present here is Anastasia Hoshin-sama… I presume you have already been made aware of Emilia-sama’s identity and status, but Anastasia-sama is also of the same status.”

Serena: “Hoho, the same as Miss Emilia. In other words, candidates for the next king of the Kingdom are together in a foreign country. My goodness, that’s quite the amusing and rare situation.”

Serena contorted her facial scar in amusement, and Julius nodded silently at her words. At his affirmation, the gazes of the Imperial camp members turned towards Emilia, and meeting those gazes, her lips formed a smile.

Emilia: “Yes, Julius is telling the truth. Anastasia-san and I are both candidates for the Royal Selection, and we’re friends.”

Anastasia: “Tho’ for the time bein’, the thing ‘bout bein’ friends is an agreement for after the Royal Selection is over. —Followin’ that introduction, I’m a representative of Kararagi’s Hoshin Trading Company ‘n one of the candidates for the Royal Selection in the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

Vincent: “In addition to that impressive title, you are yet another person of the Kingdom?”

Anastasia: “I feel a lil’ sorry if my title happened to surprise ya, but to tell ya the truth it ain’t the only title I got right now. That’s the reason we went out of our way to ride that flying dragon ship, ain’t it?”

Just a short while ago, Abel had formed a friendly alliance with Emilia as the head of the Empire. As Abel expressed his disapproval at the fact that another person from the Kingdom had now become involved here, Anastasia put a stop to that.

As Anastasia noted that she had a title that had yet to be disclosed, Emilia put her finger to her lips with a puzzled look on her face.

Emilia: “But, Anastasia-san is a representative of the Trading Company, a candidate for Royal Selection… and there’s still more? Oh, maybe the employer of the mercenary group that Mimi and the others are a part of?”

Anastasia: “The Iron Fang’s under the jurisdiction of the Hoshin Trading Company, so I don’t bother to add it to the title of Trading

Company representative. Still, it’s a separate matter from that.”

Emilia: “Separate…”

Told that she was incorrect by Anastasia, Emilia muttered in an adorable, troubled voice.

And beside Anastasia as she smiled at Emilia’s behavior, Julius gestured to her with his hand,

Julius: “On this occasion, Anastasia-sama is acting on behalf of Kararagi’s League of Cities—Appointed as an emissary, she has made her way to the Empire.”

Otto: “—The Kararagi League of Cities?!”

Hearing Julius’s reply, it was Otto whose voice had capsized.

Otto broke his silence with an uncomfortable expression, to which Subaru thought was the right opportunity to ask “What’s the League of Cities?”.

Subaru: “I’ve heard that Kararagi is known as the City-States, a country with many cities joined together.”

Otto: “—. That understanding is correct. The Kararagi City-States are, roughly speaking, a country composed of ten large cities. Each city has its own mayor, who is the representative of the city, and there is a council formed by these people, which is the League of Cities.”

Subaru: “Huh… It’s like the Council of Ten in Pristella.”

Otto: “Rather, Pristella’s Council of Ten is probably inspired by the League of Cities. As is the case with the Water Plumage Pavilion, there is a large influx of Kararagi culture in Pristella along the border.”

Subaru: “Oh, come to think of it…”

The Water Plumage Pavilion, where they had stayed at the invitation of Anastasia and her companions, was said to have wafustyle both inside and out, which had been introduced from Kararagi.

Going further back, Subaru believed that Kararagi's Japanese-style itself might be knowledge that was brought from his world, but he put that aside for the time being.

In any case—

Subaru: "It's not a peaceful situation when you're not only a candidate for the Kingdom's Royal Selection, but you've also entered the Empire at the behest of the League of Cities as an emissary."

Anastasia: "You're right. Tho' not as bad as with Lugunica, Vollachia ain't on the best of terms with Kararagi. I mean, the Empire is basically hostile to everyone."

Subaru: "It's probably because the Emperor is so sharp. It's possible his corners will be a little rounder from now on."

Vincent: "Silence."

When Subaru joined Anastasia's brazen and blunt comments, Abel, without changing his expression, hurled an admonishment at Subaru.

Subaru stuck his tongue out at that, and Julius was taken aback by this exchange with Abel.

Right after, he looked at Subaru in surprise, but since it would have been a long story if he were to explain, Subaru covered it up by simply sticking his tongue out at Julius as well.

Anastasia: "We heard about the mess in Vollachia while we were in Kararagi, but we didn't come here to take advantage of it."

Vincent: "That is very auspicious. However, it is not as if you have no intention of doing so."

Anastasia: "Well, you've gotta be tough to get by. Wouldn't it be more uncomfortable for ya to be helped for free?"

Vincent: "—. But of course."

At that mischievous look in Anastasia's eyes, Abel's gaze briefly turned toward Emilia.

As for Emilia, she looked at them curiously, but from Abel and Anastasia's points of view, Emilia's good intentions were probably way more unexpected.

Even Subaru would not go so far as to say that they should help Abel and the others without compensation, and if he did, Otto would give him a thousand hellish sermons.

Then, a hoarse voice asked for a chance to speak.

When Berstetz received Abel's silent affirmation, he turned his narrow, nearly thread-like eyes toward Anastasia and Julius, while saying,

Berstetz: "I am wondering, may I ask why the City-States have sent an emissary to the Empire in its current state? Perhaps, you suspect that the problems of the Empire have come to your country, and you are pursuing them?"

Anastasia: "Even Kararagi, which believes that "time and money are of equal value", certainly wouldn't come to talk about money in the middle of such a busy day. Besides, interference in internal affairs will only cause loss if you're not prepared for it."

Vincent: "You are being evasive. Did I not say that time is limited."

Anastasia: "You're impatient, aren'tcha? All right, all right, all right. —Halibel."

Halibel: "Hm? Yer fine with me talkin'?"

Anastasia called Halibel to her side as the Imperial leaders were eager to proceed.

Leaning against the wall of the dragon carriage, Halibel, who was making a ring with the smoke from his kiseru, stroked the fur on his chin as the gazes gathered from around him.

In Subaru's eyes, his fur was really nice, lush, and a full coat.

Halibel: "Then I'll go for it… Actually, somethin' strange has been goin' on in Kararagi for a while now. Well, the League of Cities've been urgin' me ta figure it out."

Subaru: "Something strange?"

Halibel: "Y'all can imagine what I'm talkin' 'bout, right? —The Hotoke-san have been movin'."

Emilia: "Ho-toe-keh?"

Subaru gasped at Halibel's easy-going, slightly pretentious words. But, Emilia, Goz and others tilted their heads at the unfamiliar word.

Seeing that reaction, Halibel gave a wry smile as he said "Sorry, sorry", and,

Halibel: "Righty right, that phrase is Kararagi dialect so none of y'all woulda understood. In Kararagi, when ya say Hotoke-san it's got the meanin' of a corpse. I'm tryna say…"

Subaru: "—Are you saying that the City-States also suffered harm from the undead?"

Halibel: "Somethin' like that."

Halibel calmly nodded, and the same shock that Subaru had just received spread to Emilia and the others anew.

Given the undead forces that had come out of left field to interfere with the battle for the Imperial Capital, if the same thing had happened in Kararagi, it would mean that the large incident was not a matter confined only to the Empire.

Subaru: "Th-Then, this could be happening on a global scale if we're unlucky, right? What happened to that zombie disturbance in Kararagi?"

Halibel: "Zombie?"

Subaru: “The moving dead people! It’ll be easier to understand if we have a name for them.”

Halibel: “Hahaa, I see, I see. For some reason, even tho’ I dunno the word, it sure rolls off the tongue.”

Gathering Subaru’s response, Halibel gnawed on his kiseru and replied in somewhat of a good mood. But, frustrated by Halibel’s reply, Subaru hastily shouted out “Halibel-san!”.

With every passing moment, if the undead cataclysm was continuously expanding—.

Subaru: “That would mean we don’t have a moment to waste. For you to have come to the Empire is…”

Halibel: “Don’t’cha worry, I done tidied up the zombie disturbance that happened back in Kararagi. So ya don’t need ta get all worked up ‘bout Kararagi.”

Subaru: “Ah…”

Halibel: “Yer such a sweet kid, how ‘bout some candy…? Ah, I ain’t got no candy on me.”

Without doing anything like feeling around in his sleeves, Halibel soothed Subaru with a lighthearted tone. Involuntarily, Subaru pouted his lips, feeling rebuked for his hasty attitude.

Julius: “According to Mr. Halibel’s investigation, the undead in question… No, the zombies, following the flow of where their damages have been incurred, it seems that they have gradually been proceeding towards the Empire. Therefore, in order to investigate the emergency that occurred within their country, and to issue an alert for caution to your country, the League of Cities has—”

Anastasia: “We done employed Halibel since he was fully informed on the situation, ‘n I’ve taken on the role as an emissary for the League of Cities. It was also quite the help for crossin’ the border.”

That was how Anastasia promptly summed up the details of how she took on the role of emissary for the League of Cities.

She may have taken care as to not sound too serious, but unfortunately, no matter how much care she took, the contents of this matter were such that there was no way it would not become heavy.

In particular, the fact that the undead cataclysm had occurred earlier in Kararagi was—

Vincent: “The incident that occurred in the City-States preceded the Empire. If that is the case, it could be said that the current undead catastrophe was brought to the Empire from your country, is that not so?”

Anastasia: “I guess that’s possible, but we got a different view.”

Vincent: “Ho. If this is not an attempt to avoid responsibility, let me hear it.”

Anastasia: “It seems like Kararagi was the first place where the Hotoke-san… where the zombies, caused damage. —But, I think the main target was Vollachia, ‘n Kararagi was used as a practice ground before that.”

Anastasia replied to Abel’s snide remarks with an unchanged attitude.

Contrary to her elegant demeanor, the hypothesis she posited was a rather extreme one. The view that Kararagi was the practice ground, and Vollachia was the main event, was far too harsh.

Emilia: “Why does Anastasia-san think so? That the thing with Kararagi was not serious, and that Vollachia is the real objective.”

Anastasia: “Well, the scale of damage.”

When the question Subaru had in mind was spoken by Emilia, such was Anastasia’s response. While the gaze of her pale turquoise eyes clashed against Emilia’s amethyst eyes,

Anastasia: “The account was convoluted, but Garkla received the first reports of damage to the Imperial Capital. Even if it ain’t fully accurate, it’s true that zombies done captured the Imperial Capital, ain’t that right?”

Julius: “It is unusual for the Imperial Capital at the center of the Vollachian Empire to be captured, and for its citizens all to be evacuated en masse. Henceforth, I have no doubt that the intentions of the “enemy” who brought about this situation lie in the Empire.”

Vincent: “Your reasoning is sound.”

Hearing the deductions posed by Anastasia and Julius, Abel gave a brief response.

However, deep in thought behind his tranquil sable eyes, the Emperor, prefacing his speech with “Incidentally”, turned his gaze toward Halibel.

Vincent: “The damages you said you suppressed in the City-States, what truly happened there? Despite the state of the Empire, I have not heard anything of the City-States being destroyed by undead.”

Halibel: “Righty. I done stopped it before that happened… tho’ even if I’m sayin’ that, seems like their goal wasn’t ta make a mess of Kararagi, but just ta warm up like what lil’ Ana said.”

Vincent: “What does that mean?”

Halibel: “Puttin’ it simply, the zombies I happened across had entirely replaced all the people in the city, ‘n were livin’ the same lifestyle as if they were still alive. Seemed like they didn’t want us ta know that they had swapped places.”

Subaru: “Wha…”

As Halibel revealed the truth, Subaru became lost for words.

And it was not only Subaru who was surprised. This group of wise people all had thoughtful expressions on their faces, and everyone who was surprised like Subaru was speechless.

That was probably to be expected. Just now, Halibel’s story was far too different from what had been assumed.

Goz: “You, you are saying that those undead are going as far as to disguise themselves as the living?! It is true that Her Excellency Lamia spoke in the same manner as she did then when she was alive…! But even so!”

Serena: “If you see them as the living, then that destroys the perception of them being an opponent who attacks indiscriminately. It’s already troublesome that some of them are intelligent, but if that happens, the way we deal with them as enemies will need to change quite a lot. This has become excessively amusing.”

Goz: “Just what is so amusing, High Countess Dracroy! Even your impudence ought to have its limits!!”

Goz and Serena’s views were pitted against each other as a shocking embodiment of that misconception.

However, that reaction from the two was natural. In fact, Subaru had the same opinion. These were not opponents which could just be fought, it had become a matter of exploiting their weakness.

Even still—

Emilia: “Hey, Halibel-san, you said that everyone in the town was turned into “zombees”… But in that town, how many people were living there?”

It was a question that someone needed to ask.

Subaru regretted that instead of himself, he had let Emilia do it. That regret grew deeper and larger after hearing Halibel’s answer.

That was because—

Halibel: “—Roughly, somewhere ‘round two thousand people.”

Emilia: “That many…”

Halibel’s answer clearly quantified the scale of the damage.

One could only imagine that drastic scale of damage; that made Emilia’s expression severely darken, and drove a cold, sharp thorn into Subaru's chest.

However, there were not just people who were hurt by Halibel's answer, there were also those who looked ahead.

Vincent: "If that many disguised themselves to be the living, I have no choice but to say that it is troublesome. What caused them to be exposed?"

Anastasia: "The reason they were discovered was the amount of supplies that were goin' in n' out of the city. They disguised themselves to some extent, but the numbers between the livin' and dead people didn't match up. The Hotoke-san don't need food or drinkin' water, so that's where the discrepancy came from."

Vincent: "The boundary between the living and the dead. —It appears it can not be crossed."

Unlike Subaru, whose emotions halted him, Abel and Anastasia did not stop.

While he felt frustrated by that difference, he also did not want to forget what he had told Abel, that it was necessary to not throw away this frustration.

Vincent: "Berstetz, you had an army stationed in the western part of the Empire, correct?"

Indifferent to Subaru gritting his teeth, Abel posed a question to Berstetz.

Berstetz nodded briefly with a "Yes" to the Emperor's question, and,

Berstetz: "We have received reports of unrest along the national border with Kararagi in the west. It was before the signs of civil war had expanded, but we feared counter-moves and polarization of the rebel army, so we kept it maintained to keep them in check. —You do not mean."

Vincent: "The one entrusted with that army, it ought to have been Groovy Gumlet, was it not?"

His narrow thread-like eyes opening slightly, Berstetz laid bare his astonishment. As if agreeing with the Prime Minister's realization, Abel let out a small sigh.

That which the sigh spoke of, was certainly one of the Nine Divine Generals—he was supposed to be the First-Class General whom Subaru had never had a chance to meet face to face.

The reason why Abel narrowed his eyes languidly when he said that person's name was—

Goz: "Your Excellency! Surely not… Surely not! General First-Class Groovy is!"

Vincent: "Keeping the unrest on the national border with the City-States in check… If that is why they did not participate in the great battle of the Imperial Capital, and if it has reached a state that we are not even able to meet with them, then there is no other recourse but to assume the worst."

Serena: "Assume the worst, hm? Even I would have a hard time calling that amusing."

Goz's face flushed red, and Serena erased the thin smile on her lips.

Giving a nod at these leading figure's reactions, Abel spoke.

Vincent: "—Groovy Gumlet and his army have already fallen into the hands of the undead. If they fail to unite with us in the future, we ought to operate under that assumption."

Goz: "—Hk!"

In response to Abel's words, Goz's entire body trembled and he gnashed his molars.

It was not a metaphor, he really ground his molars. As an immense amount of indignation ran through the body of the warrior named Goz Ralfon, the possibility of having lost his comrade was hitting him hard.

Even for Subaru and the others, who did not know him personally, it was a silent blow.

Berstetz: “Your Excellency, as per your speculation, if an undead can pretend to be alive, then…”

Vincent: “Indeed, the reports from various regions, on their own, have lost credibility. Without increasing the accuracy of the information, to engage in the battle for the recapture of the Imperial Capital will be next to impossible.”

Which of the delivered reports were from their living allies, and which ones were from the undead enemy, was not known.

Presented with such a frightening possibility, Subaru gasped.

Subaru: “In other words, that’s the reason why the League of Cities entrusted Anastasia-san with being their emissary…”

Anastasia: “The sense of crisis, y’all feel it too, don’t’cha? It absolutely mustn’t be allowed to spread. Therefore, we were allowed to go as jus’ a small group of reliable people.”

Anastasia spoke while nodding, to which both Julius and Halibel also expressed agreement.

Due to the commencement of the opposition against the undead, they were two trusted people chosen for their individual war potential.

Subaru: “What about Ricardo, Mimi, and the others?”

Anastasia: “They’re buildin’ a united front with the League of Cities at the border. Basically, they won’t be enterin’ the Empire. If it doesn’t stop with the Empire, Kararagi will have to be prepared.”

Halibel: “That ain’t a good omen, but gimme a break. Well, at this point it’s too late ta do anythin’ ‘bout lil’ Ana’s sharp tongue.”

Anastasia: “Halibel.”

Anastasia, who had answered the whereabouts of the absent Iron Fang, looked at Halibel with a smile. She put her hand on her cheek in a soft gesture, and kept her gaze fixed on Halibel,

Anastasia: “I overlooked it the first time, but can ya stop callin’ me lil’ Ana? I ain’t a kid anymore, and I’m also a representative of Kararagi.”

Halibel: “Tho’ ya say yer not a child, ya don’t look any different from when ya were a wee lassie. Yer character hasn’t changed from the ol’ days when ya were such a rascal together with Ricardo…”

Anastasia: “Halibel.”

Halibel: “Alrighty alrighty, my bad.”

Waving his hand, Halibel raised the white flag to Anastasia.

The seemingly familiar relationship between the two was intriguing, but compared to the pressing issue at hand, it could only be considered a trivial matter.

Indeed, from the point of view of having to defend against the unprecedented undead cataclysm—.

Julius: “Once again, I would like to convey the intentions of Kararagi’s League of Cities. In order to contain the damage caused by the undead… the damage caused by the zombies, the City-States will extend as much support as possible to the Empire.”

Vincent: “—. Regarding the support, we can work out the details later. Do you people have any ideas of means to stop this situation?”

Halibel: “‘Bout that, it ain’t a natural phenomenon that the Hotoke-san wake up, right? No doubt, it’s the result of some fella’s gaudy intentions. In other words—”

Anastasia: “—The mastermind, the caster, the ringleader, or whatever you wanna call it, they gotta be subdued.”

A huge problem that could plunge the entire world into crisis, and the plan to overcome it.

Stopping the entity responsible for this problem, the unseen “enemy”, was the highest priority of the Kingdom of Lugunica, the Vollachian Empire, and Kararagi’s League of Cities—.

Subaru: “—The unidentified “enemy”.”

Thinking of the “enemy” whose true nature was unknown, Subaru murmured softly.

What did this “enemy” look like, and just what were they thinking when they made preparations to commit such terrible barbaric acts?

The mere thought of the hardships and obstacles that awaited them in their quest to defeat this yet-to-be-seen “enemy” sent cold sweat down his spine.

However—

Subaru: “—With this many members gathered here.”

Subaru’s heart, seized by fear as it was, was nevertheless encouraged by the presence of those around him.

The Emilia camp, who had even come to the Empire in search of Subaru and the others, the leaders of the Empire, who hardened their resolve to unite for the sake of protecting it, and the reliable reinforcements from Kararagi.

Subaru: “No matter what the “enemy” is planning, there’s absolutely no way that we’re gonna lose—!”

That was Natsuki Subaru’s sincere declaration of war against the “enemy.”

3

—Indeed, it was around the same time as Subaru’s surge of enthusiasm from within the coupled dragon carriages.

Ferociously, the reservoir’s water gushed forth from the destroyed bulwark, engulfing the Imperial Capital.

As the muddy torrent swept away buildings and tore people and trees asunder indiscriminately, the blue-haired boy, having escaped to a high vantage point, used his hand as a visor as he gazed over the view.

Boy: “Oh dear I tried to buy as much time as I could but I wonder if everyone was able to successfully escape. Hopefully Boss and the others didn’t let the blood rush to their heads and mess up the decision to retreat.”

Lightheartedly muttering so, clad in a kimono and wearing zori was Cecilus.

In this grand battle for the Imperial Capital, as the most difficult problem in all aspects concerning the complete change in the situation was identified by his natural intuition and drama-geek mindset, the leading actor of the world rushed to the scene.

In fact, if Cecilus had not taken such a selfish and arbitrary action, the Imperial Capital would have been engulfed by water much sooner, and many more people would have failed to escape, resulting in an enormous amount of casualties.

In that sense, Cecilus’s actions, beyond anyone’s expectations, coincidentally brought about a fortunate outcome for many.

However, that was not the case for Cecilus, as the person concerned.

With the sudden appearance of the undead forces, the state of the battle for the Imperial Capital had changed, and trying to surprise the third “enemy” who was attempting to snatch victory through a boorish intervention, Cecilus had leapt forth.

Undoubtedly, he was in a state where he could sing his own praises of it having been a performance meant to enchant the world.

And yet—

Cecilus: “Even so, this was completely unexpected.”

Within the Imperial Capital engulfed by the muddy torrent, Cecilus murmured so, scratching his cheeks at the sight of undead who had all fled to higher ground like he had, still maintaining their fixation over those who yet lived.

There was no doubt that they existed outside the natural order, resurrected by a technique unknown even to Cecilus.

In fact, he had also encountered the being that had made them into such things.

Even though everything up to that point had proceeded in accordance with Cecilus's intuition—

Cecilus: "—Unbelievable, who could've imagined that the situation wouldn't be settled even when the caster is defeated!"

Collapsed at the feet of Cecilus as he raised his voice, was the caster who had resurrected and commanded the undead.

With beautiful pink hair and long ears, the young girl appeared to be around the same age as Cecilus—Having confronted the Blue Lightning, Cecilus, she was a Witch whose life had already met its end.

Chapter 17:
A Magical Approach

As much as it was necessary, the certainty that this was an unprecedented situation only grew deeper.

Among the events that had taken place in Lugunica recorded in the history books, was a case resembling this unusual situation, but in that sequence of events, the case was not treated as anything major.

—The Demi-Human War.

It was a mass-scale civil war that occurred in Lugunica's past, and much like the current situation, it was the only recorded instance in history where the dead rose as enemies.

However, the main focus of the history books were more on the friction between the human and demi-human tribes, and the extraordinary attacks carried out as part of the civil war had not been recorded in detail.

That was regrettable. Had the details of that time been recorded in more depth—

???: "I'm not gonna fall behind these guys!!"

With a roar and a swing of his fist, a group of Imperial Soldiers, each pallid in complexion, were blown away all at once.

Riding off the energy that had been vigorously drawn up from the ground he firmly stepped on, he unleashed a blow with all of his might, one that was perhaps closer to a cleave than a punch.

In quick succession he repeated the attack a second, and third time, with each blow knocking down the enemy's formation. —No, it was not anything impressive like a formation.

At first glance, the silhouettes of the enemy approached side by side, but they had no such thing as tactical leadership, coordination, or strategy. If that were the case, they were simply a cluster of individuals.

If they were merely a cluster of individuals, Garfiel would not be caught lagging behind.

However—

???: “Zeh-ah! Zuah!”

With a sharp lunge, a double slash grazed Garfiel’s neck.

Feeling his hair standing on end, he glared at his opponent; having suddenly appeared kicking away the fragments of a shattered undead, was another undead clad in an air different from the others.

Garfiel: “Tch.”

With a click of his tongue, he raised his shoulder and checked his neck, where the tip of the sword had slightly grazed him.

The extent of the slash was about a finger’s length difference between the first and second blows. It was the technique of a master who deliberately demonstrated a dodgeable blow, then tried to cut off the opponent’s head with a second.

They were nothing more than a cluster of individuals without any formation, but occasionally among them, there were those who had this level of skill.

As a result, it had become a bit more troublesome than expected, and he assumed that there was one skilled undead out of every twenty. Because of this, he could not carelessly support his allies by saying that they would be fine as long as they worked together.

Based on one assessment of the situation, it was quite possible that a formation of a hundred men could be destroyed by a single skilled undead.

Skilled Undead: “Zeh-ah! Zuah—!”

Garfiel wrinkled his nose, whereupon the undead again unleashed the same double slash.

Contrary to what had just been shown, the range of the technique had changed to be more daring. Earlier, the difference was a fingertip's worth, and now it was a fist's worth. A deep cut the size of a fist would be fatal, no matter how shallow the cut was.

However, the undead who had unleashed the technique widened his eyes, a face in stark contrast to that of one confident in victory.

The reason was simple—their right arm, which had been holding the sword, had been shattered at the wrist.

Garfiel: "No matter how many obvious tricks ya play, yer grip on the sword is always in the same position when ya slash. "The Three-Headed Valgren has but one body"… Hah!"

He switched over to shatter the left hand, and then drove his fist into his opponent's astonished face.

As soon as the impact of the blow passed through to the back of its head, the undead's head was blown away as if it were a fruit bursting open. As its head crumbled, fissures went through its torso and legs, and its whole body shattered.

Garfiel: "This ain't to my liking."

Looking down upon the wreckage of his vanquished foe, Garfiel voiced those words.

What irritated Garfiel was the way the undead were defeated and destroyed. Since these things were dead, it would not be appropriate to describe it as a way of dying, and more than anything else, the very way they shattered deprived Garfiel of the feeling that he was fighting against something that had life.

All that remained was a faint cold sensation, questioning just what in the world he was fighting against.

Garfiel: "…"

Garfiel wiped the sweat from his chin with his arm, and when he looked around, he saw an incessant stream of undead soldiers on the night plains that had become the battlefield.

In order to combat them, a tactical delay force, which included Garfiel, was in the midst of fighting hard.

Initially, Garfiel had been assigned to a medical unit in order to make good use of his healing magic, but the policy of preventing people from getting injured suited Garfiel's nature better than treating the injured.

Petra: "Garf-san, your fidgeting is worrisome! If you're so restless, go help the people fighting yourself."

So said Petra, who was working hard in the same medical unit as Garfiel.

Though it was not because she had insisted, Garfiel rushed outside. In reality, as a volunteer, he thought he was producing some good results.

However, he was not so conceited as to say that he was doing the best work here.

The reason was—

???: "Do it—!!"

A sharp yell echoed in the black of the night, immediately after which the sound of drawn bow strings firing rang out in succession.

In accordance with the yell from Taritta, the chieftain of the People of Shudraq, a tremendously dense hail of arrows was fired.

Rather than as individual arrows, they fell as a single cluster that left no means to dodge; the only way to evade them was to either catch or repel all of them. In fact, the undead, having no choice but to suffer the attack, each tried to utilize their weapons and shields.

However—

Kuna: “I see it!”

Holly: “Go for it!”

The undead, focused on the sky overhead, were struck by a heavy duty arrow fired from a strong bow by an assertive voice.

Literally, to say that they were shot through would be an understatement; that absurd impact was like being rammed by a full speed dragon carriage. The undead that assumed a defensive stance were blown away along with the group behind them at the same time.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self ain’t s’pposed to lose to ya, but that’s fuckin’ insane.”

The undead who were weak were eradicated by the rain of arrows which dominated the area, and the undead who were strong and survived that attack were sniped by the strong bow. The rhythm of the coordinated hunters greatly impressed Garfiel.

Even for Garfiel, his movements would halt if he was turned into a hedgehog from getting pierced by arrows, and then in addition to that was the huge damage from the strong bow which he could not dodge. He considered it a relief to have those tactics on his side.

Garfiel: “Well, I got no idea what’s happenin’ ov’r there…”

In contrast to the great strength of the Shudraq, another group won Garfiel’s admiration in a different way—they accompanied Subaru who should have fought alone in the Empire, they were a group who all looked rough; the self-proclaimed Pleiades Battalion.

Pleiades: “LET’S GO LET’S GO LET’S GO LET’S GO—!”

Pleiades: “STRONGEST! INVINCIBLE! BRING IT ON! BRING IT ON!!”

Pleiades: “UOOOOOOH—!!”

They were abnormally loud in the midst of a nighttime battle, and Garfiel’s eye could not spot anyone as being exceptionally skilled in martial prowess. Of course, many of them seemed to have refined their techniques to the level of an Imperial Soldier, at any rate.

It was hard to say if the majority of them were trained, but they were good at giving into their instincts and the way they raged about.

But even so, they were strong. Already, the difference in physical strength was like an adult compared to a child.

???: “It’s beautiful. Their strength is refreshing.”

A voice reached Garfiel, who was staring at the way the Pleiades Battalion fought. When he turned his head, lined up next to him was a woman with dark brown skin and dyed red hair—Mizelda.

Mizelda, who had a single wooden leg, wore a smile the color of blood towards the Battalion’s violent fighting style.

Garfiel: “I don’t get it, but they have somethin’ to do with Captain. I do wonder what they’re doin’, but I ain’t worried that it’s bad.”

Mizelda: “Captain… Subaru, is it? Emilia and the others, they put great faith in him.”

Garfiel: “Ha! Faith? A word like that is an understatement. Captain’s a man, a man who gives back my amazin’ self’s expectations and faith a hundred times ov’r!”

It was neither an exaggeration nor a bluff; from the bottom of his heart, Garfiel held zero doubt in praising him in such a way. At Garfiel’s answer, the quality of Mizelda’s smile changed.

From a mask of war, to something that was somehow calmer and harbored a sense of understanding.

Mizelda: “I also understand that feeling. In the Lifeblood Ritual and in all the subsequent battles, Subaru continued proving himself to us. He has the soul of a warrior. Though he may not have a good face for a man, he’d make a good husband for Taritta.”

Garfiel: “Stop talkin’ ‘bout his face! The Captain also worries about tha look in his eyes! Besides…”

Mizelda: “Besides?”

Garfiel: “No matter how charmed someone gets by Captain, there’s someone that he’s already decided to fall for.”

Mizelda: “—I see. That’s right.”

Garfiel rubbed his nose with his finger, and Mizelda nodded profoundly.

He was unsure to what extent were her words a joke and to what extent were they genuine praise, but the fact that Subaru was also valued within this Empire made Garfiel proud.

Wherever he was, Subaru involved the people around him and brought about great results.

However, though Subaru could get on exceedingly well wherever he found himself, it was the wish of Garfiel and the collective will of the entire Camp to have him stay with them.

It was for this reason that everyone went through great lengths to rush to the heart of the Empire.

Garfiel: “And yet, they had the nerve to get in the way of our amazin’ selves reunitin’ with the Captain… Hk.”

Garfiel was a military officer, one who loved to compete against the strong. But, he was not a battle junkie who chose to fight anyone and everyone, no matter the time or place.

To reunite with an important companion, to be in a situation in which that delightful reunion time was interrupted by constantly appearing enemies filled his heart not with happiness, but solely with hatred.

Garfiel: “But, they sure are a weird ass lot, ain’t they?”

Mizelda: “The dead coming back to life is unnatural. I understand what you’re saying…”

Garfiel: “Ah, that ain’t what I meant.”

Mizelda: “—?”

His fangs creaked as he bit them together; Mizelda raised an eyebrow at Garfiel’s mutter.

In a purposeful response to her doubt, Garfiel jerked his chin, directing his gaze towards a group of undead that were still being targeted by the Shudraq’s arrows.

Garfiel: “Look closely ‘n ya can tell… There ain’t a surefire way to kill these guys. Some break with one arrow, while others don’t, even with five arrows in ‘em.”

Mizelda: “There are also some tough beasts. Just like people. Isn’t it the same thing?”

Garfiel: “I know the difference between strong ‘n weak. This ain’t like that…”

He could not explain it well, but from Garfiel’s view, even among the undead appearing roughly equal in strength, he sensed a difference in their level of toughness.

Whether an arrow hit a vital spot or not seemed to have little relevance. Some seemed to be unaffected even when an arrow pierced an eye, while others shattered from a single arrow lodged in their shoulder.

It felt as if simply gauging them by the strength or weakness of their life force—.

Garfiel: “Damn it! Jus’ thinkin’ ‘bout it hurts my head! It’s “a Guiltilaw that fell one step short.” If we jus’ crush ‘em all, it ain’t matter anyway…”

???: “—That is exactly how “a Guiltilaw that fell one step short” would think, iiisn’t~ it?”

At that moment, Garfiel’s shoulders jolted in response to the voice descending from above his head.

When he hastily looked up, there was a silhouette leisurely approaching from the thickly clouded night sky. It steadily grew into the shape of a man that Garfiel could not stand.

And then—

???: “Since you are struggling, let me give you a haaand~.”

Garfiel: “Dudley, you bastard…”

???: “Oops. I feel bad saying this after you had finally gotten used to my alias, but after the meeting we had earlier, there’s no longer a need to hide my naaame~. So, as usual, you can…”

Garfiel: “Fuckin’ Roswaal…!!”

Roswaal: “While there is an unnecessary prefix, but you can call me that, I don’t miiind~.”

Indeed, Roswaal, who had landed on the ground, was laughing, provoking Garfiel’s irritation.

Since infiltrating Vollachia, he may have concealed his facial makeup and outlandish costumes, but his unique manner of speaking, which likewise should have been sealed away, had returned.

Hearing that the pseudonym was also lifted, it could be inferred that the discussion in the dragon carriage had probably been settled.

The negotiations that Otto, Frederica, and the others had mentioned before, to reach a consensus regarding their involvement with the Empire—without twisting Subaru and Emilia’s feelings.

That in itself was a joyous thing for Garfiel.

Garfiel: “If ya finished talkin’, I’d like to hear how it turned out… Beatrice! Have ya changed sides? It’s rare to see ya to be with that bastard.”

Beatrice: “It’s out of necessity, in fact. If possible, Betty would rather not leave Subaru's side for even a second, I suppose. But, it can't be helped but to be relied upon, in fact."

With that said, Beatrice flung herself out of Roswaal's arms.

Since it was for just one month, Beatrice being active even in Subaru's absence was still fresh in her memory, so now that she somehow managed to reunite with Subaru, Garfiel thought that she would have been resolved to never leave his side again.

In fact, just before everyone was about to smother the awoken Subaru in the coupled dragon carriage, the girl had been mumbling along those lines with a completely determined look in her eyes.

For her to leave Subaru's side, and come to the battlefield with Roswaal—

Beatrice: "Garfiel, Betty is here to ascertain the origin of that unease you felt, I suppose."

Garfiel: "The origin, of the unease?"

Roswaal: "If you go into a battle without knowing your enemy, the results will amount to less than half of what you expected. You compensate for this by knowing your enemy. Especially this enemy, who is shrouded in faaar~ too many mysteries."

After letting go of Beatrice, Roswaal swung his arms as if feeling somewhat lonely. At the words of those two, Garfiel felt optimistic about the outcome of the conversation, and his fighting spirit surged.

Even though the bearer of this message was the despised Roswaal.

Mizelda: "Not Dudley, but Roswaal… That's your real name then?"

Roswaal: "Yes, Miss Mizelda. Due to certain reasons, I had to falsify my name. I do apologize. Not only I, but also Emilia-sama, who you knew as Emiiily~, had to do the saaame~."

Mizelda: "It was done by a man with a nice face. So you are forgiven."

Beatrice: “What an outrageous basis for a decision, in fact…”

Mizelda digested the issue of the pseudonyms with her own peculiar sense of values.

Beside her, Garfiel gazed towards the pair of Roswaal and Beatrice, and,

Garfiel: “So, the fight’s gonna continue in the Empire, and the reason you two came is…”

Beatrice: “Events outside the realm of reason are best identified by magicians who have the ability to interfere with reason, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “This is a historic collaboration between Lugunica and Vollachia. The most valuable thing the Kingdom can offer in return to them is a magical approach to determining the caaause~.”

If the knowledge of a mage could help to identify the cause of the endless stream of undead, then surely there was no one in Emilia’s camp better qualified to help than Roswaal and Beatrice.

Emilia was a Spiritual Arts User, Ram was the type to rely on her senses, and Petra was still in the process of learning.

Roswaal: “How has it been actually fighting them for a prolonged period? Have you grasped anything?”

Garfiel: “—. I don’t really get the difference between the ones that’re easy to beat ‘n the ones that’re hard to beat. I think there’s a reason apart from whether they’re strong or weak, but…”

Roswaal: “Hmm. So the survivability and vitality of each individual is different?”

Garfiel inwardly clicked his tongue at Roswaal, who was in thought with a long, slender finger on his chin.

It was true that he did not like Roswaal’s every move, but the tongue click just now was not due to irritation with him, but rather for the fact that he was counting on his thoughts and knowledge.

Because, he honestly thought that Roswaal was reliable in this situation.

Beatrice: “Roswaal, looking at it in a daze won’t lead to the answer, in fact.”

Roswaal: “Agreed. Well then, if it comes to this… Beatrice, how much mana do you have left?”

Beatrice: “After having met with Subaru, perfectly full, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “Very well. Theeen~—”

Suddenly smiling, Roswaal’s heterochromatic eyes narrowed, and soon after, four different colored lights, mana, floated in the air around him.

Roswaal snapped his fingers, and the four colored lights raced through the darkness of the night at arrow-like speeds, piercing into the distant group of undead, each light displaying their own powers.

One of the undead burst into flames, and another was encased in ice. One had its limbs severed by a blade of wind, and one was pierced through the groin by a block of rock that rose up from the ground.

All of them were fatal wounds, a destructive force that shattered them into infinitesimal pieces with a cracking sound a second later. Garfiel, and even Mizelda, raised their eyebrows slightly in surprise at the result.

Roswaal: “As it was reported, it’s the fire attribute that works the most effeeectively~. Wind did poorly, and earth is treated no differently than a physical strike. Freezing seems to be inefficient with its mana consumption.”

However, to Roswaal, the executor of the attack, it was not the fact that the undead were defeated, but rather how the strength of the attacks affected the defeated undead.

And then, Beatrice had also begun the same examination, but in a different way than Roswaal.

Beatrice: "—Vita."

Beatrice held her hand up to the night sky, and her chanted magic meddled with the rain of arrows, which was released by the People of Shudraq, as the arrows tore through the sky.

Innumerable arrows poured down upon the undead, their weight multiplied several times by the effects of Beatrice's Yin Magic—magic that altered the weight of its target.

The increase in their power could be gauged from the spectacular sound that came from each undead as they were pierced into the ground.

Beatrice: "As Garfiel said, there is no explanation for why some zombies crumble, and others don't, even though the arrows are of different weights and have different power, in fact."

Garfiel: "If ya make all the arrows heavier, won't it be hard to tell the difference?"

Beatrice: "Don't think so lowly of Betty, I suppose. Instead of making all of the arrows the same weight, each arrow was tested differently, in fact."

Beatrice appeared angry, puffing out her cheeks like a little girl, but her reply in an effort to not be treated like a fool was even more foolish.

Garfiel, as a person who could use magic, albeit specializing in healing magic, understood the precision of the magical manipulation that Beatrice was doing.

One could see that what she had just done with magic was of equal difficulty to threading many needles at once without using one's hands.

Moreover, Beatrice and Roswaal were—

Roswaal: "The cause of their crumbling is not the loss of their liiimbs~. Some of them are still alive even after having their vitals gouged out. Although they are humanoid in appearance, it is better not to think of them as living creeeatures~."

Beatrice: "It's not easy for anyone other than you to treat them like they're not living creatures when they're laughing, angry, and even talking, I suppose. —Maybe it's contingent on the accumulation of a certain amount of damage, in fact."

Roswaal: "That's quite an insulting assessment. I've spent a lot of time with all of you, and I think I've regained a lot of my humaaanity~. Some of them can be taken down with just one leg blown off. If it's a condition of damage accumulation, it doesn't add uuup~."

Beatrice: "It's a ridiculous argument to settle it as a simple difference in individual endurance, I suppose."

Roswaal: "What other reason could there be? The flow of mana is uniform."

Beatrice: "Indeed, it is uniform… Wait, in fact. It's way too uniform, I suppose."

While exchanging banter with each other, Roswaal and Beatrice's investigation of the enemy progressed.

Surprisingly, as they discussed, the two of them checked the disposition of the undead who attacked them, using their respective areas of magical expertise.

Fire, wind, and purple arrows raged, and the undead were unable to get close to the two as they fought back to back.

Of course, Garfiel and Mizelda also attacked the undead to keep them away, but even without them, Roswaal and Beatrice would not be deterred.

Although he would not say it since Beatrice would absolutely hate it —

Mizelda: "Those two couldn't be more in sync."

Garfiel: “We absolutely can’t let them hear that.”

As with Garfiel’s thoughts, Mizelda gave the exact same assessment.

While showing off coordination that could only be described like that, Beatrice, unaware of what they were thinking, lowered her eyebrows and called out “Roswaal!”

Beatrice: “Going to touch them just once, in fact.”

Roswaal: “—How reckless.”

After saying this, Beatrice lightly kicked the ground with her foot and jumped forward.

With a flutter of the hem of her dress, Beatrice’s small body soared like a feather. This was also an unnatural jump, her own weight eliminated by using Yin Magic.

As it was, Beatrice was headed for a single undead who had its back to her—sensing Beatrice’s approach, it turned around to face her.

Roswaal: “Jiwald.”

A moment later, the undead’s right hand that held a sword was vaporized as it was about to strike Beatrice with it.

Roswaal was pointing at the undead. A white light that had emitted from his fingertip had burned the opponent’s arm. The undead was stiffened in astonishment, and Beatrice placed her hand on its forehead.

Then Beatrice’s distinctive patterned eyes widened,

Beatrice: “As expected, I suppose.”

Beatrice grumbled as her body was pulled away by an arm around her slender waist.

Holding Beatrice’s body close, Roswaal exchanged places with her and delivered a sharp fist with the arm opposite the one holding her, shattering the undead’s head before it could regain its

composure.

Roswaal: “Good grief, I’m the one who is going to get scolded by Subaru-kun.”

Beatrice: “And it’s Betty who will get all the praise from Subaru, in fact. —It’s Restoration Magic, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “—So that’s the reason.”

Roswaal, who had complained about Beatrice’s recklessness, closed his yellow eye at what he was told instead of an apology.

The current interaction with the undead gave Beatrice some kind of certainty. It seemed that Roswaal understood this in a few words, but unfortunately, Garfiel had no clue what it meant.

Garfiel: “Oi, I don’t understand at all! Explain it in a way that even Emilia-sama could understand!”

Beatrice: “Essentially, Emilia and Garfiel are about the same in terms of their comprehension, in fact. —Now we know the structure of the zombies’ bodies and the mechanism behind it, I suppose.”

Garfiel: “Like I asked, what the hell does that mean?”

Garfiel asked the question with gnashed teeth.

Garfiel was already aware of the existence of Restoration Magic. It was a magic that could restore damaged objects, and he heard that the best users could even restore burned books from ashes.

However, it was said that there were few users, and that there were also noticeable shortcomings, such as the need for exquisite magical precision and the tendency for restored items to deteriorate in quality.

And above all, life could never be restored. —This was not restoration nor repair, but the forbidden realm of something like the Sacrament of the Immortal King that had been brought up a few times already.

Roswaal: “Teacher chose mana for her vessels, and I chose blood for mine. —But, this enemy chose earth for their vessels, are they not bothered if the contents overflow?”

Roswaal, covering his mouth, spoke of the revelation that Beatrice had given him.

Even then, Garfiel’s understanding fell short of theirs, but he could intuit that it was a path that would lead to answers that were terribly disturbing and unpleasant even for Garfiel.

Disregarding Garfiel, Roswaal looked at Beatrice with a grim expression on his face.

Roswaal: “Beatrice, this isn’t the Sacrament of the Immortal King, right?”

Beatrice: “…The basis is the same, but the approach is different, in fact. For the Sacrament of the Immortal King, the vessel comes first, and the soul second, I suppose. However, as for these zombies…”

Roswaal: “The soul comes first, and the vessel after. —The body changes form to suit the soul.”

At Roswaal’s comment, Beatrice nodded deeply.

As usual, Garfiel could not understand the crucial part of the exchange between the two. Garfiel, holding back his bitterness, suddenly could not believe his eyes.

Garfiel: “…”

Roswaal was there with an expression that reflected even more anguish on his face than Garfiel did.

He had never imagined he could have this contorted expression on his face. —Nay, Garfiel had hoped to punch him in the stomach someday, wanting to bring about an anguished face, but for a reason unrelated to Garfiel’s desire, Roswaal was in agony.

With that agony reflected in his eyes, Roswaal opened his mouth.

Roswaal: "—I think I might know who this "enemy" is."

Garfiel: "—Eh, for real?! Then…"

Roswaal: "But, wait. That can't be. After all, by my hand, she was…"

Gone was the composure he had just prior, and Roswaal's voice was filled with hesitation and doubt.

At his demeanor of not stating things clearly, Garfiel blinked and then immediately bared his teeth. If it had been Garfiel himself, it was possible that some absurd idea would have popped up.

However, it was Roswaal, not Garfiel, who had come up with the thought.

Garfiel: "Bastard, this ain't the time to be utterin' such weakness."

Roswaal: "…"

Beatrice: "Roswaal, clarify one thing, in fact."

Garfiel leaned forward as if wanting to grab Roswaal by the collar. However, before his hand could stretch out in aggression, Beatrice's voice struck the silent Roswaal.

Beatrice fixed her eyes on Roswaal, and after waiting for him to meet her gaze,

Beatrice: "The cause of your hesitation, is it related to Mother, I suppose?"

Roswaal: "…Am I that easy to read?"

Beatrice: "Only matters related to Mother can upset you so much, in fact. Also, more recently, about Ram, I suppose."

Roswaal: "I'm confident I'd be overcome by emotions if something happened to you as well."

With that, Roswaal, who had responded with a wry smile, closed his eyes firmly and tightened his cheeks. Then, having pushed aside the hesitation and weakness from before, he opened his eyes and nodded.

Roswaal: “Beatrice’s observation is correct. The mechanism by which the zombies are revived without the original corpse is an application of Restoration Magic. The prerequisite for this is the invocation of the soul, which is an application of the Sacrament of the Immortal King.”

Beatrice: “Both Restoration Magic and the Sacrament of the Immortal King aren’t the kind of techniques that can be used immediately upon understanding the theory, in fact. To begin with, given the feat of combining such fundamentally different types of magic, it can’t be said that there are even a handful of geniuses who can do it, I suppose. Those who could do it would be…”

Roswaal: “—Of Teacher’s lineage. However, it cannot be Teacher. Therefore…”

The “teacher” that Roswaal spoke of and the “mother” that Beatrice spoke of were the same person, and by no means could it be said that that person was completely unrelated to Garfiel.

Although it could be confusing because there were multiple people with the same name, when he heard that the name of that Witch was involved, Garfiel immediately understood.

A single word from Beatrice had cut through Roswaal’s agony, and his attitude of trying to admit what he did not want to admit might have also played a role in Garfiel’s understanding.

However—

Mizelda: “—What a boorish gaze.”

Suddenly, Mizelda murmured in a low voice.

Because it was about the intricacies of magic, Mizelda, who probably could not keep up with the conversation between Roswaal and Beatrice any more than Garfiel, had given up on understanding the cause of Roswaal’s agony and was focusing solely on attacking the undead.

The woman had stopped in her tracks, and she was looking upwards with her fierce eyes narrowed in aggression.

Garfiel also looked towards the target of the hunter's piercing gaze and choked up. Not only Garfiel, but Beatrice and Roswaal as well.

However, the reason behind the reactions from those three were slightly different.

For Garfiel, it was because he saw a familiar figure that should not have been there.

For Beatrice and Roswaal, it appeared that a more negative feeling was the reason.

—In the night sky, with long, fluttering pink hair, was a girl clad in black.

Her face was the same as the being Garfiel had admired ever since he could remember; however, with cold eyes that had never been directed at Garfiel, she was looking down at him.

Girl: "This was not desired, but implementation was successful… Seemingly, this world has recognized my existence as its own life."

The familiar face murmured in a familiar voice, gently tracing the crack that ran through her face with her hand and glaring at Garfiel and the others through her golden irises.

In response, Roswaal swallowed his saliva with an audible gulp and opened his mouth.

Roswaal: "So, you were alive… Sphinx."

Sphinx: "No, I am dead. —Observation: Required."

With an indifferent voice as if teasing, the girl with an appearance that looked exactly like Ryuzu, Garfiel's grandmother—The Witch, Sphinx, with the face of an undead, declared so.

Chapter 18:
Reunions Are but a Moment

1

Her long pink hair fluttering, a young girl clad in black floated in the air.

The young girl of slightly elongated ears narrowed her slim eyes, that outward appearance serving as proof of her elven descent, a race that was loathed in this world.

However, those external features were, strictly speaking, a misperception.

The reason being that, upon pursuing the history of the young girl, the most peculiar fact about her would not be the elven part, but rather the way in which she was born.

Using the elf, Ryuzu Meyer, as a model, a certain technique established in the Sanctuary was used to produce replicants—Constructed using mechanisms similar to the Artificial Spirits, each one was a brand new life.

Among the many such replicants produced, there was one evaluated as being the greatest failure.

That had betrayed the intentions of the Witch who had devised the technique and utilized the mechanisms, resulting in a large number of victims, and it was engraved into the history of the Kingdom as a major catastrophe.

—The artificial monster created as a result of Echidna, the Witch of Greed, failing to replicate her own existence; that was Sphinx.

Roswaal: "…"

At the sight of the "enemy" floating in the night sky above him, Roswaal gasped.

The unexpected encounter with an enemy that should not exist brought no small shock to his psyche. —No, let it be recognized without any pretenses.

It had been an utterly crushing blow, quite capable of causing Roswaal's heart to fissure.

This was a reunion that should not have been possible.

Regarding the monster overhead, the one who was most cognizant of its existence was Roswaal. Indeed, he had actually faced Sphinx when she was wreaking havoc in the Demi-Human War.

Back then, the monster's life should have been crushed by the fist of that generation's Roswaal.

And yet—

Sphinx: "Absence of four limbs, negative. Regarding memory, intact up to just prior. My form is… anchored in an unintended state. Self-awareness is troublesome, is it not? Countermeasures: Required."

While stretching out her arms in mid-air, Sphinx muttered in a quiet voice.

Her golden irises and pale skin drained of color were unmistakably those of the undead, but she also possessed a stronger sense of self than any of the undead that Roswaal and the others had encountered thus far.

The presence of memories and sense of self from their lifetime; deciphering the degree to which that element varied between undead individuals was the reason why Roswaal and the others had come here—But it was a mistake.

A mistake that spanned around forty years, at that.

Sphinx's survival was a major blow to Roswaal, but what he lamented even more, was that Beatrice and Garfiel were also present here.

He should have never allowed them to meet.

Regardless of Sphinx's true identity, for the "enemy" to have that appearance, an appearance which both Beatrice and Garfiel had emotional attachments to; he should have absolutely never allowed them to meet.

Hiding that regret behind a blink of his eyes, Roswaal clad his heart in armor, and without taking his gaze off Sphinx—

Roswaal: "—Garfiel, you must not rush ahead."

Garfiel: "—Beatrice, get behind me."

Beatrice: "—Roswaal, calm down, in fact."

All three simultaneously raised their voices towards another, and a moment of silence ensued.

If each of them had called out to the one they thought would be the most emotional, then all of them must have dealt with the initial shock and were now thinking ahead.

The exploration of the perceptions from Beatrice and Garfiel were postponed.

Mizelda: "Not only can it speak, it has a different air about it. That undead is special, right?"

Unlike Roswaal and the others, Mizelda, who had no reason to stiffen, narrowed her eyes.

Drawing back his chin at her words, before Beatrice or Garfiel could hurl some words at Sphinx, Roswaal opened his mouth.

Roswaal: "I find it hard to believe, but have you been surviving as an undead ever since the Demi-Human War?"

Sphinx: "I sense a slight discrepancy in that phrasing. If the term "undead" is adequate, would the term "surviving" not be unsuitable?"

Roswaal: "I see. You have no intention of answering the question. —As always, you tend to get on people's nerves."

Sphinx: “The form of your question was improper; I merely pointed it out.”

It was a reply that was nothing short of vexing, and yet, Sphinx’s expression showed no change.

From the very beginning, the girl was a monster without any semblance of emotion, so by becoming an undead, she had also lost what could be called the warmth of a heart. To be precise, it could be described as the coldness of a lifeless body.

But, the moment she took on that undead body, the sense of unease that Roswaal felt was unbearable.

This was employing the same mechanisms as the technique of producing replicants devised by the Witch of Greed, Echidna, as well as the Artificial Spirits, whose bodies were constructed using mana.

There were also the improvements that had been made to the Sacrament of the Immortal King, which he and Beatrice had hastily deciphered earlier.

Clearly, this monster had become an existence more dangerous than ever before.

Garfiel: “Bastard, what the hell even are ya, oi?”

Perhaps frustrated upon seeing the lack of progress in Roswaal’s exchange, Garfiel interjected.

The boy, his sharp canines clattering, and emerald-green eyes brimming with indignation,

Garfiel: “I know there’s others who look ‘n speak like Nanna. But ya see, I know everyone who has Nanna’s face by name, ‘n exactly where they’re at.”

Sphinx: “…”

Garfiel: “So what the fuck are ya?”

Garfiel was talking about Ryuzu, the grandmother he loved dearly, and the replicants, who had the same manner of birth as her but lacked a sense of self due to not being assigned a role.

Even those replicants were given names, and the Ryuzus who lived independently were now in charge of their education, hoping that one day they could be entrusted with carrying out the camp's duties.

Anyhow, it seemed that through Garfiel's intuition, he discerned that Sphinx was not one of those, but rather, another that had been born in the same manner.

To Garfiel, she was no different from a blasphemous existence that tarnished his family. In response to the question from the fervent boy, Sphinx silently lowered her eyes, and,

Sphinx: "Since a short time ago, it seems the atmospheric mana has been disturbed by you two."

Garfiel: "—Tch!"

She had completely ignored Garfiel's presence.

As if the question had never even been asked, Sphinx's gaze turned to Roswaal and Beatrice. At that fact, Garfiel's throat clenched, and the intensity of the anger in his eyes grew.

Understanding Garfiel's anger, Roswaal closed one eye. With only his yellow eye, he glared at Sphinx, torn between cursing at her and provoking her.

Beatrice: "There is a vague idea as to who you might be, I suppose."

Roswaal: "Beatrice."

Beatrice: "Be quiet, in fact, Roswaal. That thing came out while Betty was secluding herself in the Forbidden Library, so your silence about the matter will be overlooked for now, I suppose. But—"

Having been beaten to the punch by Beatrice as he was still choosing his words, Roswaal sighed.

She seemed to have discovered the reason why Roswaal had not disclosed the existence of Sphinx. Given that, Roswaal's ineptitude would surely catch up with him later.

However, right now—

Beatrice: "This time, you will not be able to get away, in fact."

Raising her hand, Beatrice fixed her gaze on Sphinx with her round eyes. Meeting the strong determination in Beatrice's eyes head-on, Sphinx nodded.

The monster, directing her hand towards Beatrice,

Sphinx: "I, too, have recognized the threat. Elimination: Required."

With that, in the moment where words that should never have been spoken were voiced, the emotion in both Beatrice's and Sphinx's eyes slightly intensified—

Roswaal: "—Please die."

Faster than anyone, the inferno of the magic unleashed by Roswaal signaled the commencement of the battle.

2

Stopping in the corridor of the coupled dragon carriage, Subaru glanced out the window with a sudden uneasiness.

The dim night sky stretched across the Empire's plains, and praying for the safety of the little girl who had been sent there yonder, he placed his hand over his chest, and felt the faint beating of his heart.

Emilia: "Subaru, are you alright?"

And, noticing that state of Subaru's, Emilia called out to him from beside.

Emilia narrowed her beautiful amethyst eyes as she gazed at him, and Subaru raised his hands saying, "Yeah, I'm okay".

The discussions between the Emilia camp, the leaders of the Vollachian Empire, and the Kararagi emissaries had come to a close, and experts were now exchanging ideas within numerical areas, such as calculating military potential and securing logistics.

He could be useful if a strategic breakthrough was required, but when it came to the pragmatic management of such a large number of people, Subaru could not help but feel that he lacked in ability.

Subaru: “Even in the Pleiades Battalion, that was left to Gustav-san and Idra…”

Emilia: “Yeah, I also know how Subaru feels. Honestly, I would like to be useful in these kinds of discussions… But I’d only be holding Otto-kun back.”

Subaru: “Rather, there’s gotta be something wrong with Ram and Otto who’ll stay back there and participate in such an intense discussion. Regardless of Nee-sama, I think that guy has lost the ability to feel fear.”

Emilia: “Geez, no matter how you put it, you’re exaggerating. Otto-kun is working reaaally hard for us.”

Emilia puffed up her cheeks at Subaru’s evaluation of the camp’s all too-reliable internal affairs officer.

In this calm setting, as he faced Emilia, the joy of having been able to reunite with her, and the fact that she was still just as perfect for him as always, made his heart restless.

Seeing her every morning made his heart flutter, but after such a long time, the impact was tremendous.

Subaru: “How I wish I could fill my heart with praise for Emilia-tan’s adorableness today, but…”

Emilia: “Beatrice and Roswaal, you’re worried about them, right?”

Subaru: “For my sake, Beako might be working herself too hard.”

When she correctly guessed why he had looked out the window into the sky beyond, Subaru gave a wry smile.

Though he had said it jokingly, it was no surprise that he had been greatly concerned. In reality, Beatrice had indeed departed with heavy breathing for Subaru's sake.

Cooperation with Roswaal, with whom she had complicated feelings, was another of his worries.

Beatrice and Roswaal, who had been brought up in the conversation, had left the coupled dragon carriage and converged with a group performing a tactical delay on the enemy forces, and were conducting inspection of them.

That inspection was, precisely speaking, to ascertain the characteristics of the undead.

Subaru: "As a matter of fact, they'll see if the zombies are being resurrected using the Sacrament of the Immortal King that we've heard so much about, or if it's actually using magic…?"

Emilia: "Vollachia seems to have fewer magic users than Lugunica, so I'm sure there are things that only the well-versed Beatrice and Roswaal would notice. If they can explain what they find to Abel and his group, I think it'll help."

Upon having said that, Emilia tilted her head slightly,

Emilia: "Honestly, I wish I could have been helpful too… But, I'm not really knowledgeable in magic. I always just use it while saying "Hiyaah!" after all…"

Subaru: "That's because Emilia-tan is more of an intuitive person, you know. Your needs are different from the bookworm Beako or the otaku-type Roswaal. There are scenes where you really shine, so it'll be alright. In fact, in my eyes, you're always shining like the evening star!"

Emilia: "Sorry, I've got no idea what you're talking about."

He had tried to encourage Emilia, who was frustrated at not being able to help Beatrice and Roswaal, but his words came up short.

Nevertheless, it was fortuitous that Emilia and he were able to share their concerns in this way and not burden themselves with them.

To begin with, Beatrice and Roswaal were not the only ones Subaru was concerned about. He was worried about Garfiel, as well as everyone else from the Pleiades Battalion, who were all fighting in the same place.

Among the members of the battalion, only Tanza had remained on the coupled dragon carriages, while the rest of the members had temporarily disembarked and arranged to join the tactical delay force.

The members of the battalion were his comrades, who up until now, had all become one to overcome fierce battles.

Including Cecilus, who for some reason had still not converged with them no matter how much time had passed; Subaru trusted all of them.

Subaru: "But even so, worrying is worrying~! Please, everyone, don't be too reckless or get too carried away…"

And so Subaru put his hands together in prayer.

???: "—Subaru, Emilia-sama, so this is where you were."

Emilia: "Ah, Julius."

The door that separated the aisle was opened, and Emilia raised her eyebrows at the handsome man who appeared from the other side of the door. Just as she had called, there appeared Julius, wearing a Knight's sword over his traditional Japanese outfit.

After doing a small bow, he went right up to Subaru and Emilia, who were standing along the corridor, and then relaxed his lips, which had been somewhat stiff just a few moments prior,

Julius: "Back there, I was unable to exchange many words with you."

Subaru: "Uh… yeah. I caused you, Anastasia-san, and Echidna all to worry. Really, thank you for coming all the way out here to find me."

Julius: "—. How surprising."

As soon as Subaru sincerely expressed gratitude to Julius and Anastasia for their efforts, Julius raised his eyebrows slightly in earnest, and,

Julius: "To think that you would so honestly express your gratitude. Perhaps it is because you are younger in age, and your stubbornness has been lessened in a way that is appropriate to your appearance?"

Subaru: "Shut it! There might be harm in that, but I'd at least say thank you even if I hadn't shrunk! Just where do you think we even are? It's hell!"

Emilia: "It's Vollachia, not hell, right? Putting it like that is inconsiderate towards Abel and the others from the Empire."

Subaru: "Oh, really? The majority of why I feel like this country is hell is because of the way that guy does things, so don't I have the right to offend him?"

Of course, he thought that Abel had his own perspective, and it was not difficult to imagine that he went through trial and error trying to manage the Empire effectively in his own way. But, since the result of that was the agony that Subaru had experienced, he should have the right to say at least this much.

Emilia seemed at a loss as to what to say to Subaru's complaints, and she must have felt, in no small part, that she could not deny what Subaru had to say.

Julius, on the other hand, while stroking the scar around his eye with his finger in response to Subaru's scathing remarks,

Julius: "…I thought this during the meeting earlier, but Subaru, what is your relationship with His Excellency the Emperor Vincent? Your language just now, it was far too excessive."

Subaru: "If you say that was disrespectful, you'd faint if you found out what I did to that guy. I'll say this now, but I'm not acting out because I have special privileges as a kid. In fact, the reason I'm like this is because that guy wasn't able to keep the reins on that old man."

Julius: "I am fearful to even imagine. Emilia-sama, have you any details about what happened?"

Emilia: "Yeah. You're talking about how Subaru and Abel are reaaally a lot closer than expected, right? At first I was worried if the two of them would get along… but honestly, Subaru makes friends very quickly."

Subaru: "Friends, hmmm…"

With regret for Emilia, who boasted as if it were her own accomplishment, Subaru was subtly pondering where to place Abel's presence among his relationships.

At the very least, despite the fact that they had beat each other up while spilling their hearts, it was not as if they were a couple of delinquents who fought each other in a riverbed and immediately warmed up to each other.

Julius: "—. Subaru, have you decided on whether you think of me as your friend?"

Subaru: "Huh? Well, that's, um, I guess so? I used to think it was questionable, but for the time being, we crossed the Sand Sea together, so we're good, I think? I think we're good."

Julius: "I see, that is a relief. This is the second best thing to hear after the report that you, Emilia-sama, and the others were all safe."

With an exaggerated joke, Julius's doubts were resolved for the time being.

However, that was only the start of things considering Subaru's current situation, which at a glance was obvious to anyone. Subaru's biggest problem had not yet been solved.

Julius: "Subaru, about your body…"

Subaru: “The old shinobi did it to me. You should also give it a try. I’d like to see it.”

Julius: “I will refrain. I do not really want to face my younger self. Rather, someone like Anastasia-sama or Emilia-sama would have been quite adorable when they were children.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan’s younger self! Oh yeah! Why didn’t I think of that!”

Emila: “Me? Hmmm, I don’t know. I had seen my younger self in the Sanctuary, and I think the current Subaru and Beatrice are cuter.”

Emilia, who did not rate herself highly, would say as much, but there was no way that could be true.

Since the grown-up Emilia was this beautiful, she must have been a beautiful little girl even when she was young. That was, she might have been evenly matched with Beatrice—.

Julius: “Nevertheless, hearing you speak like that, I am relieved. It seems the path to returning you to normal has already been set.”

With Julius’s words, Emilia also nodded, saying “That’s right”.

Being taller than Subaru, she placed her hand on his shoulder from behind and,

Emilia: “The old man who made Subaru tiny also seems to be one of Abel’s allies. Right now he’s out there fighting the “zombees”, so when he comes back, we’ll have to ask him to return Subaru back to normal. And then…”

Subaru: “Ah~, actually, there’s something I need to tell you about that.”

Emilia: “—?”

Feeling slightly uncomfortable, Subaru glanced back at Emilia, who was standing directly behind him. Emilia, who was resting her hand on Subaru’s shoulder, widened her eyes at his words.

Julius, who was facing him, also furrowed his brows. Subaru, while scratching his own cheek with a finger, said,

Subaru: “I plan on not returning to my original size even after Olbart-san returns. I think it’ll be more convenient to stay in this small form for the time being.”

Emilia: “Eh?! Why? Ah, could it be because a child’s body needs less food to eat? If that’s the case, I can share my side dishes with you…”

Subaru: “Your concern is incredibly cute, but it’s not that.”

Shaking his head, Subaru gently dismissed Emilia’s assumption. In response to Subaru’s reply, Julius wore a serious expression, narrowing his yellow eyes,

Julius: “It is you after all. So it must be something you think is necessary…”

Subaru: “Ah. I haven’t introduced them to you or Anastasia-san, but I became comrades with some people from Vollachia, the members of the Pleiades Battalion.”

Julius: “Pleiades…”

Because of the existence of the Pleiades Watchtower, Julius was alert to the sound of its name. However, not wanting to interrupt, he disregarded the doubt and urged Subaru to continue.

Nodding to that concern, Subaru continued.

Subaru: “When the members of the Battalion, I don’t know all the details, but when all of us, including me, unite our feelings as one, we become incredibly strong. It’s not just emotional strength or anything.”

Julius: “—. Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “Hm, that seems to be true. That girl called Tanza-chan and Subaru’s other friends are all reaaally strong and fight very hard.”

Subaru: “And, I’ve been lying to all those friends. —The lie that I am the Emperor’s son.”

Even with Emilia’s affirmation, the words that followed had Julius staring in astonishment. Emilia, also taken aback, placed a hand over her mouth which had gasped out an “Ah”.

Emilia: “That reminds me, you did say that you introduced yourself like that… Um, but, Vollachia is not where you were born, right Subaru?”

Subaru: “Ahh, of course not. My hometown isn’t like this hell. It’s more harmonious, filled with love and peace.”

Julius: “…Even in the Fortified City, I heard talk of a black-haired Crown Prince. When I heard “black hair”, I did somewhat think of you.”

Subaru: “Just so you know, Abel’s the one who came up with it, so please direct your complaints over there. Anyway, it’s important that everyone in the Battalion believes in it. That’s why…”

When departing from the Gladiator Island, Subaru made his companions, who he had persuaded to go with him, believe that he was the son of the Vollachian Emperor.

Today, the foundation of the Pleiades Battalion’s unity rested heavily upon that lie. He was not going to leave things like this forever, Subaru had not wanted to continue lying to them.

For, when the unprecedented Great Disaster that was shaking the Vollachian Empire was resolved, Subaru would return to his normal size and, together with Emilia and Rem and the rest of the camp, they would make a triumphant return to the Kingdom of Lugunica.

And if Subaru and the others were to finish this battle with an overwhelming victory, the Pleiades Battalion’s assistance was surely needed.

Subaru: “That’s why I can’t go back yet. I have to be the Natsuki Schwartz who everyone in the battalion believes in. At least until this battle to take back the Empire is over.”

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Tightly clenching the small fists that he had become accustomed to seeing, Subaru clearly stated his decision.

Until declaring as such to Emilia and Julius like this, Subaru had also been unsure of what to do.

It was a matter of course, but his larger form was more his body than his smaller form. He had a strong desire to get back to his original body, to hold Beatrice in his arms lightly, and to talk with Emilia on the same eye level.

But, that yearning of Subaru’s could not be compared to what was truly necessary.

Julius: “—. Truly, regardless of where you are or what form you take, you remain the same.”

Hearing Subaru’s resolve, Julius spoke as he let out a small exhale. He brushed his bangs back with his hand, and looking at Subaru with a look of equal parts wonder and understanding,

Julius: “You force the most difficult and unexpected decisions to be made. Be that for yourself or someone else.”

Subaru: “…It isn’t such an admirable resolve. “I want to be a child for a while longer”; that’s the kind of determination you’d hear in a Showa-era song.”

Told such by Julius as he faced him, Subaru replied feeling somewhat embarrassed. Then, a hand was gently placed on Subaru’s head, he turned his head and found his gaze meeting a pair of amethyst eyes.

Emilia lowered the ends of her eyebrows and looked affectionately at Subaru.

Emilia: “Doing that, Subaru is going to get me worried again.”

Subaru: “Uh, I don’t really have an excuse for that. No, I really want to return to my normal body and flirt with Emilia, you know?

But…”

Emilia: “I know. Subaru has thought about it a lot, and chose what he thought was the best option, right? I also feel the same as Julius, that’s just who Subaru is.”

A flustered Subaru moved his hands up and down, and Emilia smiled at him as he panicked. She placed her hand on Subaru’s head and this time, poked Subaru’s nose with her finger, continuing, “But you know,”

Emilia: “No matter how small Subaru is, I know that Subaru will still be Subaru. Even if you don’t revert from being tiny, I’ll keeeep waiting for you until you grow big again.”

Subaru: “All the same, I’d also like to avoid being unable to go back to normal, but… Huh, what did you just…?”

Emilia: “—?”

With a gentle manner and tone of voice, it made Subaru’s eyes blink as he felt like he had been told something incredible. But, the person who had said that to him, perhaps not understanding the meaning of Subaru’s reaction, tilted her head curiously with a face that was completely innocent.

No, even just tilting her head to the side made him embarrassed. She had an incredible temptress inside of her.

Emilia: “…”

Feeling the red color involuntarily rising in his cheeks, Subaru looked to Julius for help. However, he shrugged his shoulders at Subaru’s gaze and heartlessly brushed aside the latter’s dependence.

He cursed at the unreliable Julius in his mind, thinking that maybe they were not friends after all, and looked around regretting his earlier judgment—

???: “Huh?”

And, just as a girl entered the corridor from one of the cabins, his gaze collided head on with hers, as she stared directly at him.

3

???: “Huh?”

Yes, it was a girl with blue hair and light blue eyes who had called out to Subaru and the others—and as soon as Subaru saw her, his face lit up.

Subaru: “Rem, great. I wanted to talk to you too.”

When Rem showed up, Subaru’s mind was whisked away from the events that had just taken place.

Subaru, who had lost consciousness after the trouble in the Capital with Emilia, Beatrice, and others, had not had the time to talk with Rem.

After the confrontation with Abel and telling Katya what needed to be said, Subaru left her in Rem’s hands and went straight to discussions.

That discussion came to a close, and then they finally met again.

Subaru: “Well, what about Katya-san? Has she calmed down?”

Rem: “—. Because the circumstances are what they are, that won’t happen so easily. However, she has now tired out herself crying and has fallen asleep, so her brother is looking after her by her side.”

Subaru: “I see. Oh, yeah. I’m sorry to entrust you with such a difficult role.”

Rem: “…I did it because I wanted to do it. Um, by the way…”

Responding to Subaru in front of her, Rem’s tone of voice lowered slightly. Subaru tilted his head and wondered what was going on.

But before Rem could speak a word—

Julius: “—Miss Rem, you are awake!”

Yes, Julius, surprised by Rem's presence, was quicker to speak up.

His eyes widened, and his voice burst with honest surprise and joy, and Subaru nodded with a "That's right!".

Subaru: "My bad. I should have told you, Anastasia-san, and Echidna. Rem woke up after we got separated from everyone else. But…"

Julius: "I have no recollection of Miss Rem. So her circumstances are the same as mine?"

Subaru: "Not only that, but she's in a hybrid situation similar to Crusch-san."

Julius: "…Then, she has no memories?"

Julius's shapely brow furrowed at Subaru's explanation.

He quickly realized that it was not a situation to rejoice openly, and seemed to be at a loss as to what to say. But once he closed his eyelids, upon opening them, he regained his fearless expression,

Julius: "Miss Rem, I apologize for the unexpected manner in which I addressed you. I am Julius Juukulius… and I am a Knight in the service of a certain person and a friend of Subaru."

Rem: "You are his, friend…"

Subaru: "The emphasis on that makes me want to protest, but yes. He's one of them. One of the people who helped me a lot when you wouldn't wake up, Rem."

Rem: "That is—"

Rem raised her eyebrows in surprise when she was told of his relationship with Julius, who bowed graciously. Taking a moment to pause in surprise, Rem also bowed her head in response.

Rem: "Thank you for your concern. I can't say I'm at full strength yet, but for the time being, I am able to stand and walk on my own feet just fine."

Julius: “That makes it all the better. For yourself and for everyone around you who was thinking of you.”

Rem: “—Yes.”

It was tempting for Subaru to swear at him, as usual, for his carefree and thoughtful way of speaking, but in front of Rem, who had put her hand on her chest and nodded softly, it was impossible to say such a reproachful thing.

Anyway, he was glad to be able to tell Julius that Rem was now awake. Later, he would have to tell Anastasia and the others.

Subaru: “But I’m really glad that Anastasia-san and the others came to the Empire so that I could see Rem like this. You guys were also worried about us.”

Julius: “Yes. Anastasia-sama was also deeply concerned. Although Miss Rem will not remember it, as someone who traveled with her, I am truly pleased.”

Emilia: “Yeah, I think so, too. It’s all thanks to Subaru’s hard work.”

So said a smiling Emilia, patting Subaru’s head once more.

Because of the height difference, it was easy for her to pet him, but being petted like this over and over again made him feel like a child, and it was very frustrating.

It felt very good, but his manly heart did not want to allow Emilia to treat him like a child.

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan, don’t dote on me so much.”

Emilia: “I think you’re cute, but I’m not trying to be overly affectionate, you know? I think Subaru is splendid. As expected of my Knight.”

Rem: “Hah?”

Emilia: “What?”

And, just as Emilia was petting Subaru's head like that, there was a sharp voice unexpectedly released, and Emilia's hand stopped.

Emilia's eyes widened, and she saw Rem facing her across from Subaru.

It was Rem, with her pale blue eyes, who stared at Emilia's hand placed on Subaru's head.

Emilia: "Rem? Is everything okay?"

Rem: "No, there's something I'm a little confused about. Emilia-san, can I check something?"

Emilia: "Check something? Yeah, go ahead and shoot…"

Subaru: "Who even says, "go ahead and shoot" these days…"

With one side placing her hand on his head, and the other having her hand placed on his head, Subaru and Emilia tilted their heads in unison at Rem's words.

Rem looked at Subaru and Emilia alternately with a suspicious look,

Rem: "…What kind of relationship do you two have?"

Emilia: "Subaru and I?"

Subaru: "Me and Emilia-tan?"

Subaru and Emilia exchanged looks at each other in response to Rem's question.

Indeed, as it stood, Rem had just reunited with everyone in the Emilia Camp, and although he was told that an understanding of her relationship with Ram had been reached, beyond that, there were no further details yet.

If that were true, maybe they should do this where everyone was present—

Subaru: "Right. To put it simply, Emilia-tan is the top of our camp, the future Monarch of a country called the Kingdom of Lugunica."

Emilia: "I'm still working on becoming one, so I'm a candidate. And so, Subaru is my number one ally, my Knight."

Rem: "Your number one ally…"

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm doing everything I can to make my Emilia-tan's dream come true."

Emilia: "Yes, he's doing his best. Although I'm not his, Subaru is mine."

Subaru's proud words were answered by Emilia's bashful response. Thereupon Rem, having heard their answer, put her hand on her forehead.

Then, after she pondered it for a while,

Rem: "Excuse me. This is confusing; am I the cause of this?"

Julius: "—. No, I do not think you are responsible, Miss Rem. Though that is coming from a third party's perspective."

Rem: "Thank you for that…"

For some reason, Julius answered Rem in such a manner, the latter seeming like she was troubled by something.

It was not clear why Julius, who was from outside the camp, seemed to have such an understanding attitude when not only Subaru, but also Emilia, did not understand Rem's confusion.

Emilia: "Maybe I just said way too much about Lugunica to the current Rem…"

Subaru: "I've told her bits and pieces of it here and there beforehand… Perhaps, Priscilla may have told her some unnecessary things in Guaral…"

Julius: "Wait. Why is Priscilla-sama's name being mentioned here? I find it hard to believe, but is Priscilla-sama also here in the

Vollachian Empire?”

Rem: “Um, would it be alright if we dealt with my confusion first?”

In seeking to resolve the questions that had been raised before, new questions had emerged, so they were on the brink of going around in circles.

For the moment, there was a struggle to decide on the priority of questions, with the feeling that there were too many topics that needed to be properly discussed with Julius and Anastasia and the others.

The first and foremost priority, though, should have been to clear up Rem’s confusion, but—

Subaru: “…”

As he and Emilia were trying to find a solution to Rem’s confusion, Subaru’s attention was suddenly drawn to something that passed slightly out of the corner of his eye.

It was something outside the window, descending from the night sky to the field in a flash.

Emilia: “Subaru?”

As Subaru’s eyes widened involuntarily, Emilia’s questioning voice called out to him. Putting off responding to her, Subaru rushed to the window and peeked outside.

Normally, Subaru would never ignore Emilia’s call. However, right now, rather than responding to it, he gave priority to confirming the glimpse of what he just saw.

His eyes strained at the landscape as it passed by, and he re-focused his vision on the thing that had descended from the night sky.

That was—

Subaru: “—What are they doing here?”

A person who should not be here; pulling it out from the fringes of his memory, Subaru blinked his eyes repeatedly, and would vocalize that name.

The person present there who was supposed to be living a peaceful life in the Kingdom of Lugunica—

Subaru: “—Ryuzu-san?”

???: “…”

There was probably no way she could have heard Subaru’s whisper.

Despite the distance and volume of his voice, which should have been impossible to hear, Subaru’s eyes met those of the small figure heading towards him, and he instinctively sensed that they had both perceived each other.

With her eyes still locked with Subaru’s, the small figure moved its lips and said something.

Subaru leaned forward to try and hear what it was—

Subaru: “—Ah.”

—Immediately following, a white light rained down upon the coupled dragon carriages, engulfing Natsuki Subaru and most of the occupants onboard, utterly blowing them away.

SETOWI

Chapter 19:
Valga Cromwell's Stratagem

1

The battle began forcibly with a salvo from the impatient Roswaal.

Roswaal: "—Please die."

And then, in contrast to those cold words, a scorching inferno erupted as if burning the sky to nothing.

The flames furiously blazed, spreading across the night sky all at once. The inflamed sky caught the eyes of everyone, including the warriors who were still fighting against the undead with their lives on the line.

Even though the goal was just to reduce a single enemy to ashes, this was overkill.

Beatrice: "An act of barbarity akin to burning down a whole mansion in order to kill a small insect in a room, I suppose."

Burning down a mansion to accomplish an objective was a reckless act that only Petra and Otto would dare to do.

If not for that resolve of theirs, she may have never mustered up the courage to leave the Forbidden Library; Beatrice was secretly grateful for that, but she still thought it was overdoing things.

With his first strike, Roswaal demonstrated that his overkill would not fall short of that of those two.

However—

???: "Threat level recognized, Adjustment: Required."

After evading through the air to escape from the burning night sky, the enemy—Sphinx, was still going strong.

Even though they had gone through the trouble of burning down the mansion, it would be meaningless if the small insect that had been targeted were to escape. In this case, it seemed like Roswaal had only scorched the sky and startled everyone around without achieving anything.

If only Roswaal was the only person present here.

Beatrice: “El Minya.”

With her pink hair fluttering as she soared freely through the sky, Sphinx had been floating in the path of shimmering deep purple flashes that had suddenly appeared. It was the pinnacle of magic that had the power to freeze the time of the target and shatter it.

It was a deadly attack that had already been verified to be the most effective against the undead.

Beatrice: “It is not good that no one except Subaru and Betty can cultivate Yin Magic, in fact.”

Against an army of undead, there would have been nothing to fear with a full line-up of Yin Magic users.

Even Beatrice, who had lived such a long time, had never witnessed a scene where more than ten Yin Magic users were all assembled in one place, so she knew it would be an impossible proposition.

With such useless thoughts, Beatrice preemptively killed all hesitation within herself.

—In order to strike down the loathsome “enemy” who wore the same face as Ryuzu Meyer.

Beatrice: “Ryuzu…”

Ryuzu Meyer’s fleeting smile passed through Beatrice’s mind.

Unlike the Ryuzus, who Garfiel and Frederica dearly loved as their grandmothers, Ryuzu Meyer, their progenitor, was Beatrice’s first lifelong friend.

At the time, she was unable to recognize that. She had been far too late in recognizing that.

But, it was different now. Now, Beatrice could fully accept the magnitude of her presence. That was precisely why an "enemy" that took this form, as far as Beatrice was concerned—

Beatrice: "Betty has gotten angry, I suppose!"

As Beatrice howled, she saw Sphinx charging head-on into the unleashed purple arrows.

The eyes of the "enemy" narrowed briefly as she raised both of her hands in front of her face, and white light shot out from all ten of her fingers, clearing away all the Minyas that stood in her way.

With nary a sound of shattering, the deep purple crystals had been blown apart into pieces—But, that would not be enough to destroy Beatrice's frustration.

Sphinx: "—Hk."

Although Sphinx had supposedly dismissed the threat, her expression slightly contorted.

The reason being, the deep purple crystals she had cleared away had turned into flying shrapnel in their shattered state, spreading out and chasing down the fast-flying Sphinx.

Beatrice: "Magic is an idea, as soon as you think you've stopped it, it all goes wrong, in fact."

However, the crystalline arrow shape that represented Minya was not what was important. It was about the effect of freezing and shattering the time of the person it struck.

Indeed, even if it did not have the shape of an arrow, as long as it pierced the opponent, the form and size did not matter.

Hence, the flying shrapnel of Beatrice, with her competitive spirit alight, would not allow Sphinx to escape.

And then—

Sphinx: “Threat level recognized, once again, Adjustment: Requi—”

???: “—Yer a hundred years too late to rethink this.”

Evading the flying Minya that would turn her to stone as she strenuously tried to escape, directly next to Sphinx was the malicious countenance of Garfiel, who had leapt off the ground with a kick.

His eyes sharp, his fangs bared, Garfiel roared like a ferocious beast, and swung his refined arms with a mighty swing in an attempt to hit Sphinx with all his might.

For a moment, Garfiel’s and Sphinx’s gazes met.

Garfiel’s hesitation to strike his fist into an opponent with the same face as that of his grandmother made his heart—

Garfiel: “Compared to Nanna, the smell of yer heart is completely fuckin’ different—!!”

Such outfield concerns were unnecessary for the dependable military officer of the Emilia camp.

A fist was unleashed, striking Sphinx’s cheek; the girl’s body was shot from the air straight into the ground, and the fist continued to press her against the ground with tremendous force.

There was a thunderous crash and a cloud of dust that rose as if a large rock had fallen; Beatrice could see Sphinx’s body flutter like a leaf on the other side of Garfiel’s arm.

Garfiel’s blow was one of pure fury, void of any semblance of mercy or hesitation.

If she suffered a direct hit, even one shot would likely reduce Beatrice to mana; Sphinx was blown away as she rolled behind the plume.

Roswaal: “It’s a three-person encirclement. That was some nice teamwork, waaasn't~ it?"

Beatrice: "Says the guy who lost his temper first, I suppose."

Garfiel: "Teamwork with ya is fuckin' disgustin'."

As Roswaal shrugged his shoulders, as if to say that he was completely unperturbed, Beatrice and Garfiel each responded with abusive language.

Receiving such cold treatment, Roswaal shrugged his shoulders once more.

And then—

Sphinx: "…Once again, threat level… recognized. Adjustment: … Required."

Sphinx muttered as she slowly moved her body on the ground as the plume began to settle.

Felled to the ground and coated in dirt, Sphinx did not show any expression of pain, but it was clear that she had accumulated damage from the sound of her voice.

Sphinx: "…"

Still, her golden irises shone as she trained her gaze on the three of them.

They were not filled with feelings of hostility or anger, but rather a monstrous gaze of intelligence that saw them as nothing but targets of her curiosity.

Garfiel: "Tch, don't like this."

Like Beatrice, Garfiel felt a chill go down his spine at the gaze of his enemy and clicked his tongue. Roswaal narrowed his eyes in silence as well, and began to knead mana within himself in obvious discomfort.

Once again, Roswaal gave a sidelong glance wondering if he should rush ahead, and Beatrice glared at Sphinx as she stood up, then immediately moved forward.

Acting as the representative for the unreliable pair, she would try and find out her true intentions—

Beatrice: “Sphinx, Betty dares to call you out, in fact. Just what are you—”

Thinking?; It happened when Beatrice tried to finish her question.

Sphinx: “…”

Now standing up, Sphinx’s body trembled, and her gaze fell on her own chest.

From Sphinx’s small chest protruded the tip of a blade. It was a deadly blade that had stabbed her in the back and jutted out of her chest.

And, the one who was holding the blade was—

???: “I have a bad feeling about this girl. There are no reasons to keep her alive.”

Mizelda, who had stated so in a brutal manner, pulled out the dagger that had stabbed her, and then stabbed her again.

After three concentrated stabs had bored through the back and chest, she grabbed Sphinx by the hair and forced her head upward, then mercilessly slit her neck with a dagger held in a backhand grip.

It was the body of an undead. No blood was spilled, but there was no doubt that all of it was lethal.

Sphinx’s body also fell forward onto her knees, then collapsed face down.

Beatrice: “Y-Y-You… Hk.”

Beside the collapsed Sphinx, Mizelda made sure that no blood had gotten on her knife; upon witnessing this, Beatrice was frozen still as she stared with widened eyes, at a complete loss for words.

Roswaal and Garfiel were also left speechless at Mizelda's actions.

Mizelda tilted her head, beautiful and with eyes that conveyed a strong impression as it was, at the state of the three of them,

Mizelda: "I know that she had a history with you guys. But, speak at her grave. That's the battlefield custom."

Garfiel: "Well, I guess that's true…"

It was a blunt outlook, but Garfiel resigned himself to the fact that it was irrefutable.

Beatrice had been frequently surprised by the sense of values in Vollachia, but she had altered her perception of their severity, believing her perception to have still been naive.

Roswaal: "Sphinx."

Roswaal, ignoring Beatrice's and Garfiel's turmoil, stepped forward. He looked down at the collapsed Sphinx and called out her name in a sidelong glance that showed little emotion.

Mizelda's blow, a fatal one, was evident not only in the location of the wounds, but also in the way Sphinx's body crumbled.

Most of her lower body had already been reduced to dust, and the girl's face, on which cracks had been present from the start, was beginning to crumble away, and it would only be a matter of time before her whole body was shattered to pieces.

However, Sphinx's life force as an undead had yet to be exhausted.

She had no power to counterattack or struggle in vain, but she had enough energy remaining to move her golden irises and look back toward Roswaal, who was looking down at her.

Roswaal: "…"

Even though he knew she was a different person inside, it still pained his heart to see Ryuzu's appearance crumble.

What Roswaal was feeling was probably different from Beatrice's sentimentality, but Mizelda's thorough realism had gotten in the way, and perhaps deprived her of the means to alleviate that sentimentality.

In any case, the main culprit behind the anguish of Beatrice, Garfiel, and Roswaal was—

Sphinx: "…Deliberation, should have been: Required."

In the midst of her body crumbling, one could hear Sphinx mumbling, never showing any signs of pain on her face.

At first, Beatrice thought those were words lamenting her own lack of ability.

Sphinx: "—For you three."

However, the words that followed indicated otherwise.

Beatrice caught her breath at the added words, and Garfiel groaned, "Huh?"

Beatrice, as well, was not quite sure of their true meaning. But, she could sense that it was not a throwaway line that could be ignored.

From there—

Roswaal: "—Damn it!"

Roswaal looked up as if he had been played.

He had a look of impatience and remorse on his face, and turned around toward the rear. —Back behind, to the sky he had flown through with Beatrice, towards the coupled dragon carriages that were still advancing forward.

Likewise, drawn in by Roswaal's unease, Beatrice also turned to face there.

Then, while she was struck by the turmoil in her own small chest,

Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

So she had called out his name.

2

An instant, yes, everything happened in an instant.

Having taken notice of something out of place, immediately after he vocalized his doubts, everything was engulfed by a white light.

Emilia, who was by his side, Rem, and even Julius, none of them were given a chance to react. Naturally, Subaru was also unable to do anything as the white light swallowed everything up, and vanished.

Natsuki Subaru immediately intuited what that meant.

—That his life had been expended, and Return by Death had been invoked.

As proof of that—

???: “—I love you.”

As if to say that she, having found him once, would never let him go again, he heard the whisper of her voice.

Rem: “Um, would it be alright if we dealt with my confusion first?”

The moment that he heard that voice, filled with equal parts astonishment and exhaustion along with a tinge of irritation, Subaru flipped on the “Ready, GO!” switch inside of him.

Subaru: “…”

Verifying his footing and the situation around him, he discerned the specific moment from the faces that were present.

The scene was in a corridor of the coupled dragon carriages, when Rem had joined in on the conversation he was having with Emilia and Julius. From the flow of the conversation, Subaru's last remark was "Perhaps, Priscilla may have told her some unnecessary things in Guaral…", which was made in deliberation over Rem's state. Towards the front of the coupled dragon carriages, Abel, Otto, and some others were working through the details regarding military potential. Beatrice had been sent off quite far away together with Roswaal, and they were taking an approach from a magical perspective in order to find means to counter the undead. The two were headed to the place where Garfiel and the People of Shudraq were fighting hard, alongside all the members of the Pleiades Battalion who should have also been there. The feeling akin to a prayer for nobody to get seriously injured, along with the faith that if it was them, they would be alright, caused his heart to feel obstreperous.

—With that, having flipped the switch, Subaru ran through everything up to that point in an instant.

Emilia: "Subaru?"

In a surprised voice, Emilia called out Subaru's name. For a moment, her eyes must have caught the rapid movement of Subaru's eyes darting round and round.

Once before, after having seen Subaru in the same state, Tanza had pointed it out.

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama's eyes were darting around all over the place. It was, um, eerie."

That was Tanza's comment, choosing her words carefully and yet still unable to find the right ones, concerning Subaru's unusual behavior as he endeavored to grasp the situation immediately after Returning by Death.

Having laid eyes upon the same thing, Emilia's reaction being much more reserved was understandable.

Anyway—

Subaru: "Emilia, just wait a little."

As he raised his hand to avoid being questioned, Subaru's awareness was sharpened to a knife's edge.

In an environment where retrying upon death was a given, the very intuition that had been essential in ensuring the survival of everyone on the Gladiator Island enveloped Subaru, and in order to investigate the cause that brought about his Death, his concentration was exerted to its utmost limit.

This was no time to be fussing over overly sluggish thoughts such as "Did I just die?".

Without the intuition that could catch up to reality by saying "If I just died…", he would never be able to arrive at a solution.

It was absolutely essential for him to understand that if he could not make that switch quickly, it would cause Subaru and those around him to lose their lives twice as many times.

Rem: "—? Um…"

Emilia: "Rem, please."

Next to Subaru, who was concentrating, Rem with her eyebrows slightly knitted looked at him with questioning eyes. But, Emilia stopped her from questioning with a gesture of her hand, as if holding her back.

Meanwhile, Subaru had finished correlating his Death with the events just prior to Returning by Death—

Subaru: "…"

Outside the window of the coupled dragon carriage as it ran, he once again caught sight of the foreign object blending into the landscape.

Instantly, Subaru jumped toward the window of the dragon carriage and,

Subaru: "—Julius! Outside!"

Julius: “Understood!”

Emilia and Rem had felt the sudden change in Subaru, and naturally, so did Julius.

The fact that he sprung into action with nary a moment’s hesitation upon Subaru’s call was proof of that. Behind Subaru as he jumped towards the window, Julius drew his Knight’s sword, slashing the wall of the corridor with a diagonal swipe, and extended his long leg, kicking it down.

Then, carrying Subaru under his arm, he leaped outside of the effective range of the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion from the numerous ground dragons.

Julius: “Leave the landing to me!”

Subaru: “I’m counting on you.”

The moment they exited the Divine Protection’s range, fierce winds and inertia battered Subaru and Julius. But, Subaru passed all the preparations for survival over to Julius, who took it upon himself.

Two Quasi Spirits of hues yellow and green gently emerged around Julius, with one turning into a blanket of wind and the other turning the ground into a cushion to support their landing.

Julius’s technique, woven together by his renewed bond with his Quasi Spirits, was masterful, however, Subaru’s attention was not drawn to it in the slightest.

Even when the window he had jumped through was cut off together with the wall, even when he elegantly landed in through the wind storm that followed, his gaze remained fixed on a single point—the girl who was descending from the sky.

Subaru: “I knew it, the same as Ryuzu-san…”

With her pink hair and black robes, she was identical to the lovely and old lady Ryuzu. But, no matter how much Emilia and the others were worried about Subaru and Rem, they would not have dragged Ryuzu to the Vollachian Empire.

In other words, that could not have been the real Ryuzu, nor was there any possibility that it was any of the replicants, like Pico or the others, all of whom took the same form as Ryuzu.

In order to tell them apart, they had all been given different hairstyles, individual ribbons, and hair ornaments. The fact that none of those were present meant that it could not be any of them.

Subaru: “Julius! It’s that girl! Seize her!”

Subaru shouted, pointing to the fake Ryuzu in the air, before they had even landed on the ground.

Hearing Subaru’s request, Julius also spotted the girl blending into the night sky. Leaving all questions about who or what she was doing behind, the Finest jumped into action.

Dropping Subaru on the soft soil beneath his feet, Julius’s body was enveloped in the remnants of the blanket of wind, using it as a foothold to leap through the air and advance towards the fake Ryuzu in a straight line.

Because of his extraordinary momentum, the fake Ryuzu also recognized him as a threat.

That instant, he realized that the eyes of the fake Ryuzu shone a brilliant golden radiance even at night, and understood that she was a pale-skinned undead, something he had not been able to recognize from a distance.

Without any delay, the fake Ryuzu directed her hand towards Julius, and as she was about to unleash an abominable white light at Julius—

Julius: “—In, Ness, lend me your strength.”

A white light, different to the one alight on the fake Ryuzu’s fingertips, made Julius’s whole body faintly luminescent, and in turn, a black light faintly enveloped the fake Ryuzu’s whole body.

The moment it became clear that Yang Magic and Yin Magic were being simultaneously employed by the two Quasi Spirits respectively, Julius's Knight's sword flashed, and the strength drained from the fake Ryuzu's arm, which had been housing light.

Fake Ryuzu: "Explanation: Required."

Julius: "I cut the tendon in your shoulder. Of course, it will likely reconnect soon…"

Julius sincerely replied to the fake Ryuzu, who asked the reason for the lack of strength in her arm. At the end of his answer, Julius twisted in mid-air, and his long, howling leg struck the floating girl, knocking her body to the ground.

At the spot where the fake Ryuzu fell, the ground transformed together with a yellow light. The ground, which had become viscous, softly and deeply received the girl's body, and then hardened all at once.

As a result, the fake Ryuzu was stuck, as if wrapped in a quilt made of stone.

Julius: "I recommend you do not resist. If you fail to heed this warning, I will treat you as an enemy, be you alive or dead."

Fake Ryuzu: "…"

His sword thrust before the fake Ryuzu, who lay on her back atop the ground, Julius declared.

Having thus rendered his opponent powerless, Julius nodded to Subaru, who had ascertained that for himself. Having had no choice but to watch the sequence of events go down, Subaru scratched his cheek with his finger,

Subaru: "No, that's what I had wanted you to do… but seriously, this guy. Clearly, you've gotten a lot stronger than you were before."

His style of fighting with the support of the Quasi Spirits was more sophisticated and refined than before.

Contracted with Quasi Spirits of six different attributes, the Spirit

Knight displayed his hybrid fighting style, combining both magic and swordsmanship.

Emilia: “Wow, amazing, you took her down in the blink of an eye.”

And from behind Subaru, running across the grass, was Emilia.

It seemed like she had jumped off the dragon carriage in pursuit of Subaru and Julius, her eyes widened when she saw that she would have no opportunity to do anything because of Julius’s brilliant skill.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, what about Rem?”

Emilia: “I asked her to tell Otto-kun and the others that you and Julius jumped out. I needed to hurry, too, so I followed you right away, but still…”

Subaru: “No, it’s not that you were slow, Emilia-tan. It’s that this guy was too fast. Also, it was the right choice to not bring Rem here.”

It seemed possible that if it was the current Rem, she might have come down with Emilia, but thanks to the latter’s good judgment, she would not get wrapped up in any danger.

When he thought about it, he reconsidered that the Rem who did have her memories would have definitely jumped down, so Emilia was very correct in instructing her to stay behind anyway.

In any case—

Emilia: “This isn’t Ryuzu-san, right?”

Subaru: “She looks exactly like her, but there’s no doubt she’s a zombie. Come to think of it, could someone like Beako or Ryuzu-san become zombies…?”

He did not even want to think about Beatrice or Ryuzu dying, but there was room to question whether zombification was possible for these women, whose bodies were composed differently to those of normal creatures.

In reality, since there was an undead that took the form of Ryuzu, her origins should have been the same as Ryuzu's unless she was a miraculous look-alike.

In that case, they would conduct an investigation without needing to give it a second thought, so Subaru and Emilia headed over to the fake Ryuzu, who had been captured by Julius.

Julius: "This is a zombie that is able to think and speak. Subaru, please be careful."

Subaru: "Yeah. Actually, there's a high chance she's way more dangerous than her appearance suggests. Emilia-tan, could you also be careful and keep an eye out?"

Emilia: "Yeah, leave it to me. If you behave, umm…"

Entrusted to be vigilant, Emilia roused herself, but found herself lost at what to say to the fake Ryuzu.

It was doubtful whether the warning, "If you don't resist, we won't hurt you," would be meaningful against an undead. Nevertheless, they must never let their guard down.

This small existence had just utterly blown away the coupled dragon carriages holding Subaru and the others in the span of a breath.

Even if her four limbs were bound, it was uncertain if she was perfectly immobilized.

Subaru: "Sure is a shame that your preemptive strike failed."

Fake Ryuzu: "—. You are…"

Subaru: "My name is… is what I would say from my conditioned reflex to give my name, but I'm not trying to be friends with you. It's fine if our relationship remains with you being a dangerous person, and me being the one who hindered your plans."

Fake Ryuzu: "I see, you are a strangely capable person. At first glance, you seem to have no outstanding ability though."

The fake Ryuzu, lying sprawled on the ground and looking up at Subaru, expressed her views.

He had grown accustomed to being underestimated, so he was not upset with that assessment. Beside him, it seemed Emilia wanted to say something, but Julius shook his head to stop her.

In any event—

Subaru: “No other zombies are coming. Did you just go ahead on your own because you could fly? If you rushed ahead thinking you could beat us, that’s too bad.”

In reality, he had already been killed once by her preemptive attack, but he would not let that be known.

If his provocation would make the opponent speak up, it would be profitable. However, it seemed that her skin turning pale was not just for show, and no emotional response was given.

But, it was a cliché for this type of person to be tempted to show off their intelligence by making repetitive statements that ran contrary to their objectives.

If necessary, Subaru was ready to put on the performance of a lifetime as the stupidest child he could manage.

However—

Fake Ryuzu: “—Valga Cromwell.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Suddenly, the lips of the girl lying there uttered an unfamiliar term.

—No, it sounded like something he had heard somewhere before, but Subaru could not immediately recall when that was or what it was about.

While Subaru furrowed his brow at that doubt, Emilia and Julius had a different reaction.

Both of them reacted as if they knew the name.

But, before Emilia or the others could question the fake Ryuzu's words—

Fake Ryuzu: "This was a stratagem of his that had not been carried out at the time."

Indeed, the fake Ryuzu had been the one to continue first.

Thus, the development thereafter also connected seamlessly, giving no room for the question that had already been delayed from being asked once.

Emilia: "Subaru!!"

A moment later, Subaru saw Emilia's facial expression change, and he was forcefully pulled into her arms. As it was, Emilia gnashed her molars, and created a wall of ice around Subaru, Julius, and herself.

Inside the wall of ice, Julius also readied his Knight's sword, which had been aimed at the fake Ryuzu near his feet, and clad himself with the rainbow light of the concentrated power of his six Quasi Spirits.

In response to the forthcoming danger, Emilia and Julius had completed their preparations in an instant.

Then they would—

Subaru: "—Wha…"

—A white light rained down from beyond the sky, wiping them all out at once as if in a cruel mockery.

3

Rem: "Um, would it be alright if we dealt with my confusion first?"

Subaru: "—Hk."

The voice of Rem, filled with equal parts bewilderment, exhaustion, and irritation, was heard, and Subaru took a short breath.

The feeling of remorse at being unable to avert the arrival of the Death, which unlike last time, he knew was coming, along with the trembling of his soul caused by the shock he had anticipated, pummeled Subaru's heart from within.

—He had completely misjudged the cause of his Death.

This was the result of latching on to the most obvious visible change, and the conceited thought that he had prevented it.

The first time, the interval between noticing the existence of the fake Ryuzu and then Death was too short, causing him to miss what had actually happened.

The absurdly powerful white light that had obliterated Subaru and the others had not been released by the fake Ryuzu, but had rather originated from somewhere else.

Emilia: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "—. Emilia, just wait a little."

Noticing Subaru's introspection, Emilia tilted her head, to which he raised a hand in response.

Pausing his introspection, he cast aside all regrets. While there was still room for growth in reflection, regret was nothing but self-pity of something one wished they could have done.

With that, neither the self that he had pitied, nor all the others whom he had ignored, would be saved.

That, he would not allow. That, he would absolutely, never allow.

At that moment, the fake Ryuzu had mentioned the name "Valga Cromwell". Subaru had still yet to understand what it meant, but Emilia and Julius seemed to have recognized it. Perhaps he should ask for more details. —No, that could wait. Even if he found out who this Valga was, the wrath of the white light that followed would not simply disappear. That attack was very much real, and more so, it was an outrageously powerful danger that stood in the way of Subaru and the others. It needed to be dealt with, but was it possible to prevent it from being fired in the first place? It was impossible for the situation with the fake Ryuzu and that attack to be unrelated, but would she, an undead being, be willing to negotiate? If she was an undead that could communicate, would it not be dangerous to close the door on negotiations? No, if she could be reasoned with, then she would not have tried to kill them outright with no dialogue. Whether she could be reasoned with or not, in order to sit around the negotiations table, a table first needed to be set—.

Rem: "—? Um…"

Emilia: "Rem, please."

Beside Subaru, whose thoughts were sparking in full throttle, Emilia stopped Rem's question.

The flow of events was the same as before, however, from this point on, it had to be steered toward a different progression. Within his mind, he processed everything that had happened in order, and in order to get off this railtrack that ended in Death, a change had to be made at this critical juncture.

For that reason—

Subaru: "—Julius! Outside! Emilia, you come too!"

Julius: "Understood!"

Emilia: "Yes! Got it!"

The moment that he glimpsed the form of the young girl outside the window, the harbinger of the Death that would soon arrive, he jumped towards the window and called out to Emilia and Julius behind him.

Without hesitation, Julius's sword strike sliced through the wall of the coupled dragon carriage, and once the wall was kicked down, Subaru and the other two headed outside. Just before they escaped the range of the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, he yelled.

Subaru: "—Rem! I need a favor!"

So he declared.

4

A long leg flashed, a kick knocked the fake Ryuzu to the ground, the changed nature of the earth caught the body of the undead, and once again, an earthen quilt restrained her entire body.

Julius: "I recommend you do not resist. If you fail to heed this warning, I will treat you as an enemy, be you alive or dead."

Fake Ryuzu: "…"

Right beside her as she lay on the ground, the fake Ryuzu stared at Julius, who thrust his sword before her. She may have been marveling at Julius's elegant skill, but his fighting style had not capitalized on any advantages from Subaru's Return by Death.

Seeing Julius, who had dominated his opponent with his pure ability, Subaru clenched his fist.

Emilia: "This isn't Ryuzu-san, right?"

In a split second, Julius neutralized his opponent and Emilia, who had jumped down from the coupled dragon carriages at the same time, furrowed her shapely eyebrows at the fake Ryuzu by his feet.

Subaru, too, did not know the true identity of the fake Ryuzu. But, he knew that she was an undead, both willing and capable of doing harm to Subaru and the others; outside of that, he knew nothing.

Subaru: "The way they look is identical, but she is neither Ryuzu-san nor Pico or the others. More importantly, put me down and be on guard! Get ready, Emilia!"

Emilia: "Be on guard? Even though that girl has already been taken care of by Julius?"

Subaru: “Something bigger is coming. Something that can kill us if we’re not prepared.”

Saying that, Subaru jumped down from Emilia’s arms.

This time, Emilia was left to cover the landing, and Julius was asked to immediately restrain the fake Ryuzu. With that, Subaru nodded to the surprised Emilia and rushed toward Julius, who was restraining the fake Ryuzu,

Subaru: “Good work! But there’s more to come! There is going to be a huge shot coming from beyond the sky! If we don’t stop it, we’re all in big danger!”

Julius: “From the sky?”

Subaru: “I also have Emilia taking deep breaths!”

Skipping over the minor details, Subaru pointed to Emilia behind him.

There, with her arms spread wide, Emilia was taking slow, long, deep breaths. Her concentration was improving in preparation for what was to come.

Julius nodded his head at that, and the Quasi Spirits of six colors gathered around him.

Fake Ryuzu: “—. You are…”

Quickly, both Emilia and Julius hurried their preparations, and the fake Ryuzu, who was restrained to the ground, gazed at Subaru with skepticism.

With the current exchange, she understood quickly that the cause of her head being pinned down was Subaru’s quick comprehension. But, the fake Ryuzu’s surprise did not end there.

Subaru: “Valga Cromwell.”

Fake Ryuzu: “…”

Subaru: “That’s the name of your military strategist, isn’t it?”

Closing one eye, Subaru conveyed to the fake Ryuzu that he saw through her plans.

In truth, neither the intentions of the fake Ryuzu nor even the identity of Valga Cromwell were known to him, but it was a bluffing technique that did not reveal that fact.

The information that had come from the fake Ryuzu herself, was now causing the fake Ryuzu to be astonished.

In fact, up until now she had remained expressionless, but now her cheeks stiffened, and she was looking at Subaru with more intensity in her eyes than ever before.

Fake Ryuzu: “I had thought prudence necessary for the magic user and Spirit Knight; but it seems for you, too, Caution: Required.”

Subaru: “…Your stratagem has been seen through. Be graceful and accept your defeat.”

Subaru tried to continue bluffing. But, since a bluff could not affect the spirit of the fake Ryuzu, it meant her planning had been different altogether.

The fake Ryuzu’s stratagem, it was not the kind that would fail if it was seen through.

Fake Ryuzu: “Valga’s stratagem, is something that cannot be prevented even if it is perceived.”

At that moment, that white light from beyond the sky aimed at Subaru and his friends—no, it was not.

The white light was not aimed at Subaru and his friends, it was aimed at the fake Ryuzu lying on the ground, unleashed to obliterate everything atop the surface.

Emilia: “—Subaru!!”

Before the imminent light of Death annihilated Subaru’s existence, Emilia reached out her hands and deployed an ice barrier, which violently collided head-on with it.

At the same time, Subaru was pulled up by his collar and his body fell to the ground at Emilia's feet. In front of Subaru's eyes, the fake Ryuzu, who was closer to the light than Subaru, was engulfed by the white light, and disappeared.

Perhaps this had always been the case.

That white light was something unleashed aiming for the fake Ryuzu. Her presence became the marker for the white light to aim at, and the aftermath of the impact swallowed Subaru and the others, as well as the coupled dragon carriage.

She became a living target of overwhelmingly powerful bombardment as she traveled into the midst of the enemy. —No, since she had died, she was a dead target. Either way, the one who had originally proposed that was completely crazy.

Subaru: "That damn idiot Valga Cromwell—!!"

Julius: "Al Clauseria!!"

Subaru's heartfelt cry was met by Julius's incantation as he thrust the tip of his sword toward the light.

A rainbow aurora was born, its brilliance collided with the white light like a wall; it just barely restrained the light enough to prevent it from shattering the several ice barriers created by Emilia.

A white light of destruction, and the protective ice wall clad in an aurora.

Unlike the last time, when they had no choice but to face it without sufficient preparation, there was time to formulate strategies against the white light. This was the reason why Emilia and Julius were able to resist the attack compared to the last time.

But, even still—

Emilia: "Ugh, yaaaah—Hk!"

Julius: “Guh, kuu… Hk.”

With desperation in their voices, Emilia and Julius fought against the white light.

But, for this to be something that even the combined efforts of these two could not overcome, just how powerful was it? Unable to do anything in this situation, Subaru could only support Emilia’s back as she stood her ground.

Subaru: “Hang in there! You two, keep it up!”

Clenching down on his molars, and unable to provide physical support, Subaru shouted out psychological support.

It would have been nice if that roused the two of them and gave them the strength to extinguish the white light completely, but things did not tend to go so smoothly.

No matter what the situation, salvation would not be suddenly offered out of the void.

No matter how much one wished or prayed, one could not play cards that they had not been dealt in the game.

That was why—

???: “—Ya did well callin’ for me, so darn praiseworthy.”

Indeed, hearing a carefree voice that contrasted the urgency of the situation, Subaru held his breath.

Somebody had walked out next to them. Then, the person gave Subaru’s head a pat with their large hand and walked out in front of Emilia and Julius, as though they were merely taking a relaxed stroll.

Those two were also surprised by the sudden behavior of the person, but—

???: “Here’s the deadspot.”

As soon as they said it, the figure advanced in front of the three, and swung the arm they had taken out of its sleeves, tossing something into the white light.

The light possessed the power to swallow everything and turn it into dust. Beyond the barrier that Emilia and Julius had used to hold it back, that too would be swallowed up and then disappear.

Or, so it had seemed.

Emilia: “No way…”

Letting out a voice akin to a gasp, Emilia’s amethyst eyes widened.

Reflected in her beautiful eyes was not the white Death that had been so close at hand, in fact, that had disappeared entirely; and instead reflected was the night sky, covered with thick clouds that had now been hollowed out in the shape of the light.

Witnessing the same thing, both Subaru and Julius were left speechless.

The aurora-clad ice wall that had collided with the light had also disappeared, and the fake Ryuzu, who had used herself as a target, disappeared into the light, leaving nothing behind—

???: “Was thanks ta that Blue Oni girl who went ‘n came callin’ for me. But, the three of ya did a real darn good job hangin’ in there. How ‘bout I give ya some candy?”

While saying that, having just wiped away the overwhelming Death with his own hand, the wolfperson—the strongest of the City-States, turned around and gave a huge grin at Subaru and his friends, utterly dumbfounded as they were.

Then, his hand rummaged around in his clothing, and while tilting his head with a kiseru still in his mouth,

???: “Ah, oops, I ain’t got no candy on me.”

With that, he waved his empty hand about in the air, causing the exhausted Subaru to fall on his buttocks.

Vic.ll20

Chapter 20:
The Two Lights

1

Roswaal: “—The identity of the enemy has become clear. The Witch’s failure that once wreaked havoc in the Kingdom… a being by the name of Sphinx, the worst kind of monster.”

An emergency meeting had been convened once again in the coupled dragon carriages, and Roswaal, who had rushed back from the battlefield, looked over everyone assembled and gave such an explanation.

Sphinx—that was the name of the fake Ryuzu that Subaru’s group had faced.

Also—

Subaru: “You said she rampaged in the Kingdom, when did that happen?”

Roswaal: “—Approximately forty years ago, in the midst of the Demi-Human War.”

Subaru: “—Hk!”

Hearing Roswaal’s response, Subaru’s eyes widened in surprise.

The Demi-Human War was an incident that frequently came up in conversation, but it was an event that had taken place exclusively within the Kingdom of Lugunica, the stage for the civil war. To think that he would hear about it even when in the Vollachian Empire.

Julius: “As per the records, during the Demi-Human War, Sphinx was among the three people on the demi-human side who required the most caution. I have heard that her deep knowledge of magic significantly escalated the horrors of the Demi-Human War.”

Emilia: “I think I also came across that name while studying the history of the Kingdom. That and, the name Subaru mentioned as well… Valga Cromwell, right?”

Julius: “—. Indeed. That name also corresponds to one of the individuals who warranted caution.”

Having actually confronted the fake Ryuzu—Sphinx, and experienced the threat she posed, Emilia and Julius also referenced the other name that had been mentioned at that time.

To them, it must have seemed like Subaru had suddenly thrown out that name, but by judging from Sphinx’s reaction to it, they understood that she and the named individual were not unrelated.

Then again, Subaru himself had not been aware that it was the name of a person involved with the Demi-Human War.

Subaru: “In other words, our enemies are Sphinx and this Valga Cromwell guy, and the people who rampaged during the Demi-Human War are now on a rampage in the Empire? I don’t really get why…”

Anastasia: “The Demi-Human War was already over forty years ago. I’ve also studied the history of the Kingdom, ‘n I know ‘bout what the demi-human side was advocatin’ for durin’ the civil war… I feel this situation ain’t alignin’ with that.”

Subaru: “Right. Anyway, I’m just glad that Beako and the others are safe, but…”

In the past, Sphinx and Valga had wreaked havoc in the Kingdom, but it was illogical that these two would now be rampaging in the Empire, so both Subaru and Anastasia tilted their heads in doubt.

At this rate, it seemed likely that the last of the three people to be wary of from the civil war, would also turn out to be an enemy.

Beatrice: “That’s impossible, in fact. The last person… the one named Libre Fermi, was confirmed to be in the library of the Pleiades Watchtower, I suppose. There is no doubt that he is counted among the dead, in fact.”

Snuggling up to Subaru's side, Beatrice negated his worry.

Ever since hearing about the predicament in which Subaru's group had found themselves in, Beatrice, who had literally flown back with Roswaal, had firmly resolved to not leave Subaru's side.

For Subaru as well, letting her go to the battlefield had been heartrending, so he was more than willing to accept Beatrice's cute resolve.

Anyhow—

Subaru: "So we can rest easy if they had a Book of the Dead… but is it really okay to say that? We're dealing with zombies, so I'm starting to feel like it's natural that it was there."

Julius: "If that is the case, it is a frightening prospect. The possibility that we may not just be dealing with ordinary zombies, but with the likes of heroes or villains whose names have been engraved into history."

Subaru: "The heroes engraved into history, huh…? Hey, you aren't gonna get too excited, right?"

Julius: "Regrettably, I have already confronted Reid Astrea. Thus, I am disciplining myself as to not harbor excessive expectations."

Julius shrugged his shoulders, and Subaru gave him a doubtful look.

In fact, when the topic of Reid had come up at the tower, it became more evident that Julius was a history geek. He had also properly settled matters with Reid. He was not the kind of man who would fall behind, but Subaru doubted his remark that he could keep his composure when facing an eminent figure.

Otto: "Now is not the time to be talking about that… For the time being, Natsuki-san's group has been able to stop one of the opponent's trump cards, but it was not perfect. The good news is that Sphinx, who seemed to have been a formidable opponent, has dropped out early, but…"

Garfiel: “Sorry ‘bout this, Ottobro. Truth is, can’t be sayin’ that for sure.”

Otto: “Huh?”

As Garfiel, with his arms crossed as he grit his fangs, told that to him with poor enunciation, Otto widened his eyes. Staring fixedly at Otto, Garfiel had returned from the battlefield with his whole body covered with dirt, and he gestured to Beatrice and Roswaal with each of his hands,

Garfiel: “That Sphinx fucker was in front of my amazin’ self, Beatrice, ‘n that bastard. That face she wore, it pissed me the hell off, like, ya gotta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me…”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right. She had the same face as Ryuzu-san. That must have been reaaally tough for Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Well, if she ain’t my Nanna, she ain’t my Nanna, no matter how much she looks like her. That’s why I didn’t have any hesitation to fight her. Problem is what happened after.”

Emilia: “After?”

As Emilia tilted her head, Garfiel nodded deeply.

His brave countenance was unusually clouded over, and with a sigh he said,

Garfiel: “—There’s no doubt that our amazin’ selves took down that Sphinx. Saw her shatter to pieces with my own eyes, to the point that it was like “Rigirigi’s Wasted Trump Card”. That was…”

Beatrice: “That was Sphinx’s goal, I suppose.”

Taking over Garfiel’s conclusion, Beatrice squeezed Subaru’s hand tightly.

She gripped Subaru’s fingers so tightly that they turned white, indicating the extent of the shock that Sphinx’s goal brought to Beatrice.

Looking fondly at Beatrice, Roswaal continued, “Allow me to conclude,”

Roswaal: “Sphinx certainly died in front of us, she then died once more in front of Subaru-kun and his group. What can be inferred from this is plain and simple… Sphinx is able to die several times, and each time, she can be resurrected as a zombie.”

Subaru: “Wha…?!”

Roswaal: “Perhaps making it even worse, the next resurrected zombie could be aware of her previous death and the circumstances that caused it. In other words, she could know that Subaru-kun and Halibel-dono were the main factors that stopped her plan to blow away the coupled dragon carriage.”

Everyone: “…”

Though it was just conjecture, Roswaal explained a dreadful thought at the very end.

But, there were many parts they could certainly agree with. In the midst of the destructive light that rained down, while being exposed to a blow that would reduce her to dust, Sphinx did not seem the least bit distraught.

When facing their own death, there existed people who remained unfazed.

However, if Sphinx’s lack of reaction to Death was because she had not considered it to be Death, it strangely made sense to Subaru.

Subaru: “It’s just like…”

—Return by Death, Subaru thought, though he did not say it out loud.

Thinking that losing one’s own life was not a detriment, but rather, that it could even be a weapon used to accomplish a devastating attack. The functional difference was the fact that the reality of Death itself would not disappear.

Come to think of it, rather than Subaru's Return by Death, it may have been more comparable to the troublesome "possession" ability of Petelgeuse, who he had once fought against.

Julius: "No matter how many times they are defeated, hm?"

For a moment, as Julius muttered that, his gaze met with Subaru's.

Perhaps Julius, like Subaru, had compared the troublesome nature of Sphinx to Petelgeuse. Though unlike Petelgeuse, Sphinx did not "possess" others, so perhaps this could be called Escape by Death—

Subaru: "If you can't defeat them, no matter how many times you try, then there is one sure way to defeat such a person: just keep defeating them until they run out of spare lives, that's it!"

Emilia: "Spaer laives? Eeh, that's…"

Subaru: "It means the remaining number of times they can come back to life. No matter how dangerous the opponent is, there's no way they can revive as many times as they want without limit. There is definitely a limit. Right?"

He felt like he was not one to talk, but the remaining lives seemed to have to be exhausted eventually.

If they killed Sphinx repeatedly until she ran out of lives, her otherwise composed face, despite the fact that she might have thought she could not die, would no longer be able to retain its composure.

Subaru: "So that's why we don't have to stay in the dumps. Let's just be happy we knocked them down a peg! Thanks, Rem!"

Rem: "—! I-I didn't do anything that important."

When suddenly prompted, Rem shook her head. However, she was too modest to say that she had done anything important.

Immediately upon using Return by Death, Subaru had exited the coupled dragon carriage accompanied by Emilia and Julius, then asked her who remained inside to convey a message to the others.

—To seek out the most powerful of Kararagi.

Subaru: “If Rem hadn’t gone and retrieved Halibel-san, then Emilia, Julius, myself, and the coupled dragon carriages would all be dust by now. If that had happened, Beako would be a widow who lost me, and a nun who would be mourning me forever.”

Beatrice: “Don’t just casually state the worst possible outcome like that, in fact! It’s something unthinkable! If you die and leave Betty behind, then Betty will really become that nun, I suppose!”

Emilia: “Hm, I guess it’s thanks to Rem that Beatrice didn’t become this nun and that we can talk like this. Thank you.”

Rem: “…I, understand. At least, I think I do.”

Rem was somewhat reserved in accepting the thanks from both Beatrice, who was almost in tears, and Emilia, who was smiling.

The sight of Emilia, Beatrice, and Rem all together again made Subaru’s heart swell with emotion. Then, he turned his gaze to the tall figure standing there,

Subaru: “Of course, thanks, Halibel-san. To be honest, I was just banking on the reputation of Halibel-san’s name to see if you could do something about it…”

Halibel: “Hahaha, ain’t it a good thing ta be honest? In fact, I was also surprised when I was suddenly called by the young Blue Oni girl. If I’d been hit by it without knowin’ I’d also be dead y’know? If anything, I feel like I narrowly escaped death ‘cause she told me ‘bout it.”

Halibel laughed with an attitude that was not befitting of his accomplishments.

His laid-back tone lacked a sense of urgency, but without him, Subaru and the others would have been annihilated. It was a good decision by Subaru to have called him on the second time, but it was horrifying to imagine him not having been there in this coupled dragon carriage in the first place.

In that short time, he had to assemble all of the combatants on board of the dragon carriage and find the best solution. Even so, there was no guarantee that there could have been a solution, and that was truly because of the strongest of the City-States.

Anastasia: “Ya say it like that, but how did ya actually do that?”

Emilia: “Yeah, Julius and I did our best, but I think we came up a little short, so I’m reaaally glad that Anastasia-san had Halibel-san on our side.”

Anastasia: “I see, I see. Well then, it was worth spendin’ allat money to get him to come with us.”

Quietly, Emilia and Anastasia also re-assessed Halibel, who lacked a sense of urgency, and in any case, were able to reflect on the situation because everybody had taken the best possible action.

That was Subaru’s takeaway from the incredible assault just before —

Subaru: “So, that’s how the whole mess went down earlier. Well, that was fast, and all of us did our best to save everybody’s lives, you know. And of course, there’s something to be said for that, right?”

Vincent: “It was a great service.”

Subaru: “You bastard…!”

When the Emperor, Abel, who had been quietly listening to the report up to this point, expressed his gratitude, Natsuki Subaru shook his fist intensely.

2

Though it was a matter of course, the Escape by Death strategy that Sphinx had used when attacking the coupled dragon carriages needed to be shared with the Imperial leaders who had become relevant parties before they could even become aware.

The coupled dragon carriage was supposed to be a considerably important and highly classified secret typical of the Vollachian Empire; since it had been necessary to destroy a part of the valuable vehicle, a concrete explanation was needed.

Be that as it may—

Subaru: "Even though we put an end to such a situation, you're just settling it with the words "great service"…"

Goz: "What are you saying, Natsuki-dono! How could you ask for any greater reward than words of gratitude from His Excellency! You should feel ashamed as a subject of the Empire governed by His Excellency!!"

Emilia: "Goz-san! Don't be mistaken! Subaru is not a child of the Empire, but of the Kingdom like us!"

Subaru: "Emilia, your voice is getting wound up all loud again."

Unlike the Imperial Soldiers, who had maxed out their loyalty, Abel's words of gratitude were not enough of a reward for Subaru.

Though, if it was thanks from Emilia, whose voice had grown loud to match Goz's, it might have made up for Subaru's dissatisfaction.

Vincent: "Currently, we have been driven out of the Imperial Capital, and are en route to reestablishing a condition from which we can deal with the situation. Even if you demand a reward corresponding to your achievement, I shall not make empty promises. Therefore, I have naught but words to grant you."

Subaru: "Don't tell me so proudly that your wallet is empty…! Waaaah, Anastasia-saan!"

Anastasia: "Yes, yes, ya ain't got no need to get so frustrated. I'll be makin' sure that you, Julius, 'n Emilia-san get yer fair shares paid exorbitantly by the Empire."

Subaru: "Whoopee! Rip 'em off!"

Subaru raised his hands with tears in his eyes at Anastasia's dependability, and Abel frowned before sighing. Then, restoring the discussion to the original topic, he said “So”,

Vincent: “This undead in question… the one called Sphinx, you mean to say she is at the center of the current Great Disaster?”

Roswaal: “At the very least, she must have been the one who constructed the technique that revived such a laaarge~ number of zombies. Alteration and improvement of existing techniques, that’s what that failure would do.”

Emilia: “Roswaal, I know you hate her, but don’t use so much nasty language.”

Roswaal responded to Abel, and Emilia raised her eyebrows slightly at his statement. Her gentle amethyst eyes grew severe, and as she fixed her gaze on Roswaal,

Emilia: “We don’t want to speak with foul mouths, right? Even if you happen to do a good thing, if you’re always saying nasty things, no one will be willing to listen to how you really feel.”

Roswaal: “—. Yes, I’ll bear that in mind.”

Emilia: “Yes, please do.”

Roswaal gave a wry smile as he obediently bowed his head to the smiling Emilia’s complaint.

Though her gentle nature remained unchanged, Subaru felt that Emilia’s way of thinking had grown more sophisticated. It would be nice if Roswaal also felt the same thing.

Then, leaving Subaru’s thoughts aside—

Vincent: “I hear that Sphinx had gone on a rampage during the Kingdom’s civil war. What became of these circumstances?”

Julius: “Kingdom records state that Sphinx, Valga Cromwell, and Libre Fermi were all killed before the civil war concluded. The loss of these three resulted in the demi-human side’s disadvantage in the civil war… That is what I remember.”

Vincent: “I see. —But, there is no possibility that the undead are simply sprouting from the earth without cause. Is it not the fault of your Kingdom that they have become undead and presently ravage the vast lands of the Empire?”

Roswaal: “Oh my, someone as eminent as His Excellency the Emperor Vincent is saying the most nonseeensical~ things.”

As Abel posed that question with a single eye closed, Roswaal smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Indicating to the view outside the window with his hand,

Roswaal: “The deepest depths of their thoughts are still unknown, but since they are bringing disaster to the Empire, and not to the Kingdom where they have memories of defeat, it’s clear that their agenda is different to what it was back then. Considering their silence for the past forty years, it is unrealistic to think that the Kingdom’s record is wrong.”

Having said all that, Roswaal moved his hand back from gesturing outside and held up one finger, saying “But then again”,

Roswaal: “If there was anyone who participated directly in the Demi-Human War and had the opportunity to kill Sphinx, but failed to do so, then just as you say, Your Excellency, I believe they should be blaaamed~.”

Vincent: “Foolish. They would have participated in the Kingdom’s civil war over forty years ago; asking an old soldier who decided the outcome of the battle, it is not even worthy of discussion.”

Subaru: “Well, that’s right. For a start, I’m relieved you’re not a guy who would make such unreasonable demands… Huh? What’s the matter, Beako, you’re making an ugly face.”

Beatrice: “…Betty’s face is always adorable, I suppose.”

Abel quickly conceded that Roswaal had made a sound argument, and retracted his point.

Such restraint might have been a habit, but it was a bad habit, so it would be better to change it. To Subaru's side as he thought that to himself, Beatrice wore a glum expression for some reason.

It was true that it was adorable, but apparently there was something in the current exchange that weighed on Beatrice's mind. Perhaps this face of Beatrice's was Roswaal-related.

Vincent: "So, what else did you uncover? Making such a dramatic show of jumping out is no accomplishment if it yields the same result as having stayed on the dragon carriage."

Beatrice: "It was Subaru, not Betty and the others, who made a dramatic show of it, in fact. But, it is also Betty's duty to take responsibility for Subaru's dramatic show, I suppose."

Roswaal: "Of course, there were some fruuuits~ of our labor. Not so much about the peculiarities of zombies, but we did learn several thiiings~."

Asked by Abel, Beatrice and Roswaal responded confidently.

To the two of them, Subaru snapped his fingers and said, "As expected of you,"

Subaru: "So, so? Did you figure out the zombies' weak spot? If we figured that out, we don't have to be afraid of Sphinx when she appears again."

Otto: "Natsuki-san, please do not get your hopes too high. No matter how you look at it, such impressive results are…"

Beatrice: "You underestimate Betty and Roswaal too much, in fact. Of course we figured it out, I suppose."

Otto: "Waah?!"

Subaru: "For real?!"

Subaru and Otto were astonished at Beatrice's words, with her chest puffed out and her face smug. Beatrice, pleased by their reaction, smiled and said, "Naturally, in fact.", Beatrice: “The hint was Garfiel’s intuition, I suppose. Garfiel, who was already rampaging across the battlefield before Betty and Roswaal, noticed something strange, in fact.”

Garfiel: “That said, if Beatrice ‘n that bastard hadn’t come along, might’ve forgotten ‘bout it.”

Roswaal: “I think it’s a real waste that you’re someone with excellent intuition, but you don’t trust in it… Oya? I had intended to compliment you, but…”

Garfiel: “I ain’t gonna be happy whether ya praise or criticize me.”

As Garfiel rebuked and stuck out his tongue, Roswaal closed one eye and shrugged.

Aside from their usual bickering, Beatrice continued.

Beatrice: “The discrepancy Garfiel noticed was the difference in the durability of the zombies, I suppose. Some zombies would die from a single arrow, while others would still be alive and well even after being pierced by ten arrows. That’s the discrepancy, in fact.”

Emilia: “But, isn’t it because each ”zombee’s” strength is different? I’m stronger than Subaru, so it could be that kind of discrepancy.”

Beatrice: “That was not it, I suppose. Even with the same difference in strength between Subaru and Anastasia, there was still a discrepancy between one arrow and ten, in fact.”

Anastasia: “Bein’ compared with me, seems like Natsuki-kun’s still as pitiful as ever.”

With an elegantly wry smile, Anastasia glanced at Subaru. But, since Subaru had been shrunk, there was no room for him to refute the claim, and he responded to her concern with a wave of his hand.

However, Beatrice’s mention of a discrepancy was certainly something that caught his interest. Also, the fact that Beatrice and Roswaal had uncovered the truth behind that discrepancy.

The answer was—

Vincent: “State your conclusion. What caused the discrepancies between the undead?”

Beatrice: “—Bugs, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Bugs…?”

When Abel’s question was answered, Subaru furrowed his brow at the contents of the answer.

Then, Beatrice looked towards Roswaal, and nodded. With that signal, Roswaal took something out of his own pocket, and,

Roswaal: “Everyone, please be extremely careful. It has been frozen to stop its activity, but if the ice breaks, it is presumed that a zombie will be booorn~ here.”

Subaru: “What are you talking about… Hey, hey, hey, what the hell is that?!”

Roswaal: “Beatrice said it, didn’t she? It’s a bug. I’d even venture to call it a Corebug.”

As he stated this, in Roswaal’s hand was a small block of ice being pinched between his fingers, about the size of a coin; inside, there was a red, round object.

Upon closer inspection, he understood that it was a small round bug that looked like a caterpillar—.

Roswaal: “This Corebug is lurking within the body of every zombie. And, this worm is the zombie’s lifeline… in other words, it is undoubtedly their core.”

Subaru: “These bugs are their cores, that means…”

Julius: “—I see. So, the true nature of Garfiel’s perceived discrepancy was the difference in the points at which an arrow killed the Corebug within the zombie’s body.”

While Subaru's shock from the impact of the bugs had still yet to disappear, Julius comprehended the details in such a manner.

Hearing Julius's words, the others also reached an understanding. Of course, Subaru also finally understood the purpose of the bugs' existence—

Subaru: "So you're saying that the Corebug is basically the heart of a zombie?"

Roswaal: "We will be working to unravel more about the technique, but this Corebug acquires the data of the target that is to turn into a zombie, and then reproduces the original form by making a vessel out of earth… That is our conclusion."

Beatrice: "Indeed, in fact."

Without objection, Beatrice nodded her head in agreement with Roswaal's conclusion.

But, Subaru was utterly shocked at the conclusion that the two had reached.

If the zombies were being created by magic, he could accept it in a fantasy sense. However, when it came down to magic bugs creating the zombies, the feelings of disgust prevailed.

Subaru: "Even though I loved catching bugs when I was a kid, how pathetic…"

Otto: "Though, I do not think that is the kind of situation where you should be reflecting on that. —In any case, our people have produced good results. How do you like that, Your Excellency the Emperor?"

Vincent: "At the very least, you have proved that you are not merely an incompetent bunch who make big talk and produce no results. I recognize that. It was a great service."

Otto: "…Perhaps it would have been better had I not asked."

Regardless of the people of the Empire, those words of praise were disreputable to the people of the Kingdom, including Subaru.

Anyway, as Otto went out of his way to corner him with words, even the obstinate Abel had no choice but to acknowledge the results that Beatrice and Roswaal had produced.

Deep down, he was probably grumbling “Grrr”.

Subaru: “You did a great job; that’s my Beako.”

Beatrice: “Naturally, I suppose. That is the competency of Subaru’s partner, in fact. Unlike that deergirl, who has only gone through a little bit of hardship with Subaru, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Instead of getting huffy, shouldn’t you get along with Tanza?! Emilia-tan also said not to say anything nasty!”

Soothing Beatrice, who was showing her competitiveness in a strange way, Subaru promised to pet her a hundred times to restore her mood, and then looked at Abel and the others again.

When Abel returned the look, Subaru said, “Well?” with a puffed-out chest, and,

Subaru: “These are my reliable allies. All my big talk paid off, didn’t it?”

Vincent: “I recognize your achievement in protecting against the earlier attack on the dragon carriage. For what reason must you insist on boasting your success to me in order to feel satisfied? Your achievements are visible enough to the eye.”

Subaru: “Heh, whatever you say makes you sound like you’re a sore loser. I’m feeling great right now after all.”

Subaru snorted in a good mood in response to Abel’s displeased reply. Emilia said “No!”, angry at him for this attitude, but Subaru could not disguise his true feelings.

Then, perhaps impatient with Subaru and his party’s achievements, the Imperial Leaders—Berstetz and Serena exchanged a few words, and then Abel looked over to them, Berstetz: “Your Excellency, the people of the Kingdom… Since our acquaintance Margrave Mathers and his companions have shown so much success, would it not be dishonorable if our side was unable to produce beneficial answers?”

Vincent: “High Countess Dracroy, for what reason are you so amused?”

Serena: “Amused, you say? Apologies, Your Excellency. I wasn’t conscious of it myself, but perhaps it is the result of the feeling that my own dignity as Imperial nobility is being put to the test, supposing we are in a situation where the Empire’s prestige must be demonstrated to maintain our honor.”

Vincent: “…”

Putting her hand over her ample chest, Serena replied as the white scar on her face contorted. She was not smiling, but the tone of her voice and the intensity of her eyes were rather good-humored. In a situation where she was absolutely not the superior, she exhibited an outstanding mental fortitude to be dealing with the Emperor with such a tone.

Subaru: “Could it be that Serena-san is quite the dangerous person?”

Garfiel: “I dunno if she’s bad or not, but she’s pals with Roswaal.”

Subaru: “Ah~.”

Seeking information about Serena, with whom he had little contact, the first bombshell thrown in was enough to break down the wall of doubt.

However, it was hard to say whether it had been Roswaal or Serena who had decided to be friends. After all, it was clear as day that their cross-border friendship was a factor behind why Emilia and the others were able to come all the way to the Empire, to look for Subaru and the others.

Come to think of it, Roswaal was also very impudent during the ceremony for the Royal Selection.

It made sense to hear that he was friends with Serena, who held that attitude towards Abel.

Anastasia: “Enough time’s passed that I can talk ‘bout it, but Natsuki-kun was also like that back then, right?”

Subaru: “I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you…”

As Subaru covered his ears and ran away from his unpleasant past; “The things you’ve done in the past won’t disappear”, the lukewarm eyes of the very person who had once preached that to him, now felt like they were stabbing into him.

And, with a similarly lukewarm gaze, Serena graciously faced the Emperor, and continued to persuade him about something.

Serena: “Anyway, Your Excellency must think those things are useful. That’s exactly why you’ve kept them by your side, but those are just the suspicions of a woman like me.”

Vincent: “Cease. Even if you had not gotten so unscrupulous with your words, I would still understand.”

With a snort, Abel obstructed Serena’s gaze with his hand. Then he erased all hue of deliberation, and revealed what Serena had encouraged him to.

That was—

Vincent: “—There is someone who possesses information that may or may not prove useful as we confront this Great Disaster. It is necessary to hear what that person has to say before we arrive at the Fortified City.”

3

???: “My ohhh~ my, are you finally going to listen to me? In that case, I’m overjoyed, Your Excellency.”

The person, who had been said to be confined beyond the door of a firmly locked cabin within the dragon carriages, gave an amiable smile upon seeing Abel’s figure.

However, for him, in such a state of confinement, it really was not something that he should have been smiling at.

After all, his entire body was bound by chains, tied to a chair so as to never let him escape.

Subaru: “Oioi, Abel, no matter how you look at it, this is…”

Vincent: “A necessary measure. For better or worse, losing this man would be a major blow to our side. Allow me to warn you, if his restraints are removed, he will easily go off to his death.”

???: “It’s preeeposterous~ that I’d go off to die! It’s just that I’ve been doing everything I can to stop this Great Disaster until now… If it’s for that purpose, it doesn’t matter if I lose my life.”

Subaru: “Ohh…”

Thoughtlessly smiling, the delicate man rocked back and forth in the chair he was bound to.

Feeling a sense of insanity from that manner of speaking, even Subaru could not help but believe that Abel’s argument was no exaggeration.

However, even though they seemed to be nothing but suspicious—

Subaru: “This, Stargazer is… Ubilk-san, was it? You said we could rely on this person?”

Ubilk: “Whaaat’s~ this, it’s upsetting that I’m being doubted… Wait, taking a closer look, aren’t you the Stargazer-san of the Kingdom that I paaassed~ by in Chaosflame?!”

Subaru: “You’re completely wrong. Ah! By any chance, were you the one who instilled the idea that I’m a Stargazer into this guy’s head?! I ended up in a fist-fight with him because of that!”

The delicate man with a sparkling face—Ubilk, had uttered a rash remark that caused Subaru to snap back.

For Subaru, being treated like he had the dubious occupation of a

Stargazer was a huge inconvenience. Of course, since Stargazers took on some sort of prophet-like role, Subaru understood there was a risk that he, who could Return by Death, could appear to be like them; even so, it was a huge inconvenience.

In any case—

Subaru: "I'm not the same as you. Keep that in mind."

Ubilk: "Huhhh~? That sure is strange. I heard that you were the same, though…"

Subaru: "Was that from the stars? In that case, Abel, we aren't gonna be able to rely on this person."

If it turned out that the stars gave incorrect answers, they were something he would unfortunately want to avoid right now.

At the present moment, the important thing was to acquire accurate information from the stars, no matter how trivial. Vague prophecies that could be taken either way, along the lines of the Barnum effect, were unnecessary.

Hence, he promptly turned his back in disappointment, but—

Ubilk: "Wait wait, please waaait~! I understaaand~! You areeen't~ a Stargazer! That doesn't matter to me!"

Subaru: "I'm bothered by your manner of speaking, but even if you amend your statement, it's not like your credibility is suddenly restored…"

Ubilk: "I don't care if you keeeep~ me locked up like this. But, please at least listen to what I've gazed from the stars. That's all you need to do!"

Subaru: "…"

Twisting around in his seat with a burst of strength, Ubilk appealed so, his eyes ablaze. With such vigor, the chains wrapped around him forcefully tore into his skin, to the extent that his blood mercilessly started to spill out.

Completely ignoring the pain, he was trying to convey some information that he had heard from the stars as a Stargazer. If he could do that, injuries would not matter to him.

It seemed as if even his own life did not matter to him.

Subaru: “Abel, these Stargazer people are…”

Vincent: “Do away with that sentiment. Hear what he must say, and then decide if it is worth consideration.”

That intense fixation towards the stars gave Subaru an unpleasant sense of déjà vu. But, Abel did not agree with that judgment of Subaru’s, and he proactively fixed his gaze on Ubilk.

Seeing Abel’s willingness to listen, Ubilk ceased his writhing, his gentle face forming a smile.

Ubilk: “Rest assured, Your Excellency. No matter how mighty the Great Disaster may be, the staaars~ are on the side of Your Excellency.”

Vincent: “The same cruel stars that make no distinction as to which Vincent Vollachia is left behind, hm? Do not make me laugh. —Speak. What must you convey?”

Ubilk: “Two, there are.”

Abel posed this question with arms crossed, and Ubilk gave that short reply.

Hearing it, Subaru muttered “two” inside his mouth, and Abel urged him to continue through his silence.

Subaru was extremely apprehensive as to whether they could put their trust in him, but at the very least, this Stargazer was said to have predicted the arrival of the Great Disaster itself; and right now, they would provide information for the sake of the shaking Empire.

That was—

Ubilk: “Two lights, to overturn the peril of the Great Disaster. The first, brought by a Stargazer of the Kingdom… or rather, by the boy who is not that, a girl unable to communicate with words.”

Subaru: “…What?”

Ubilk glanced towards Subaru, and the latter widened his eyes, motionless at the words that had been spoken.

He had been questioning whether to fully believe Ubilk’s words or not, but the words that had then been spoken made it unthinkable that there was any cause to believe him.

After all, there was only one person who met the conditions of which Ubilk had just spoken.

Then, without sparing a moment for him to recover from that impact, Ubilk continued.

With the same lips that had just revealed one of the so-called two lights, he continued to the light which yet remained.

That light, it was—

Ubilk: “—The most well-versed in curses across all the Empire, a beastman who stands upon one of the nine summits.”

4

Kicking off the ground, out of breath, he ran up the rocky mountain path with sheer force.

???: “Fuck fuck fucking fuck, these fucking shithead bastards…!”

Even the vigor in his words had grown weak; he was aware that he was wearing himself out.

Running across plains, and continuing to fight without sleep or rest, were things he had always been doing in order to survive in the vast lands of the Empire since he was a child.

Nevertheless, the stress from going over ten days without eating or drinking was a different dimension entirely.

???: “—Hk.”

Sniff; when the stench of earth mixed with something strange entered his nasal cavity, he furiously began to exert his limbs.

He neither tried to catch a glimpse with his eyes, nor tried listening with his ears. He was able to fully grasp the world through what his nose could smell alone. Even the positions, numbers, and general armaments of his enemies.

Because of that, he understood that he was surrounded by a hundred enemy troops, that it would be hopeless no matter how much he whittled down their numbers; it made him want to think that his nose had gone stupid.

???: “These, FUCKING ASSHOLES!”

But, he immediately dispelled those thoughts, and slammed his weapon into the scent of earth.

A first, a second, and third; the bodies of the enemies that received a direct hit were blown to pieces, and the impact perforated through to the opponents on the other side, allowing him to forcefully break through the encirclement and get away.

No matter how many he took down, the pale earth puppets ceaselessly sprang forth.

Those nightmarish things of poor craftsmanship were undoubtedly prowling after his life.

The army unit he commanded was annihilated, and it was already all too late when he realized; while doubting his talents as a General, he continued to run east, further east, clinging to his dear life.

Even if he tried to converge somewhere, the paths continued to be obstructed; not only was he starving and thirsty, but his last contact with a living person had been when he parted with his second-in-command.

At the very least, it would be nice if a few of his subordinates had been able to survive.

???: “Tch—!!”

The moment his thoughts veered off topic, his reaction to the enemy slashing at him had been slow.

His shoulder plate protected against the attack as it grazed his shoulder, and taking the opportunity to escape the impact, he kicked off the surface of the mountain trail. Compared to proceeding up the narrow path filled with those hindrances, slipping off the side of the cliff was much better.

Deciding that, he ran down the cliff, steep as a right angle as it was, and began to shake off the pursuing enemies quicker.

Even if he was going to be cornered by the number of enemies being thrown at him, a small breather would be somewhat helpful.

Having faith in that, he ran, ran, and ran—

???: “—Hk, this smell is…”

Mixed among the earth, vegetation, and slight fragrance of flowers, the smell of life tickled his nasal cavity.

Sensing something that was different to the scent of iron from the weapons his pursuers held, his thoughts were scattered into a thousand pieces for a moment, but he immediately consulted the situation and followed the smell of life.

He hesitated about dragging other people into his fight with this enemy.

However, if he were to avoid that, he would suffer from hunger and thirst and lose all his strength. That would be the stupidest, most idiotic fucking conclusion he could reach.

???: “…Fuck, a hidden village?”

Following the smell of life, he entered an isolated settlement among the mountains.

In the Empire, there were a considerable number of people who abandoned their land in order to evade taxation, and either became bandits or went to live in the mountains or forest. This settlement was probably one of those hidden villages.

As a General of the Empire, he typically would not let the existence of this hidden village slide, but—

???: “It’s a fucking emergency! It’s fine for now! More importantly…”

Wondering if anyone was present, he gazed over the whole settlement, and sniffed his nose when nobody entered his vision.

The origin of the smell of life was this settlement, but what potently ticked his nasal cavity was not a lingering scent, but the stench of somebody who was currently present here.

He headed in that direction, and if they were someone who could fight, he would request their assistance.

Even if they could buy him a little time, he would probably be able to use it to regain his physical strength through a meal and water.

Rousing his heart right before he was about to wither and die, he relied on the scent and went towards a large building in the settlement.

He approached the entrance, and burst inside.

???: “Oi! I dunno who you are, but would you lend me a hand against these fucking bastards—”

—That instant, two columns of wind violently flashed to meet his entry.

???: “FUCKING CLOSE ONE!!”

Right away, he leaned his head and hips back in order to evade; he was late in sensing that what had been unleashed were sharp slashing attacks.

He had barged in requesting help, but instead an attempt had been made to kill him; he snarled his fangs and intently glared at the opponent who had performed such a foolish fucking action.

And then—

???: “Oh? Now this is quite the strange happening! To think we’d try and see whether the next dead person’d be a man or a woman, only for a living person to plunge in… Redhead! Looks like I’m the winner of our bet!”

???: “Shut the fuck up, be quiet, die. Winning, losing, it’s all fucking worthless…”

As he glared, what had entered his vision was the inside of a spacious building, where two middle-aged men sat by a circular table—Furthermore, they were men who absolutely reeked of liquor.

One held a katana, and the other a Knight’s sword; while looking at the drunken state of the two, anger surged up within him, and for a moment, it caused him to forget about his empty stomach and parched throat—

???: “Hey motherfuckers, these perilous days of the Empire aren’t the time for you to be getting fucking shitfaced drunk, FUCKING HELL!!”

With that, the Master of Curse Tools, Groovy Gumlet, exclaimed in a terribly straightforward manner.

Chapter 21:
A Destiny Unavoidable

1

A thick air of liquor and an earthy scent hung over the tavern.

Heaped up near the entrance were emptied alcohol bottles and barrels, as well as a wreckage of earth puppets, which likely once were in the form of people.

All of that had been heaped up by these two middle-aged men, grumbling over booze inside the bar—

???: “Oh? This gentleman, got a slight feeling that I’ve seen him somewhere before… Whatd’ya think, redhead?! Recognize this Furball Gentleman over here?!”

Groovy: “Who’re you calling a fucking furball?! Don’t fucking fuck around! I’ve been doing nothing but running without drinking or eating anything, SO I’M FUCKING EXHAUSTED…!”

As the man with a ruddy face grinned in good humor, giving his knees a good slap, Groovy flared up at him.

For some reason, the middle-aged man, blue-hair tied behind his head, began to laugh with increasing amusement and an “That’s inevitable, inevitable!” after hearing Groovy’s complaint.

It seemed like he was in a completely drunken state.

Since the blue one was out of the question, Groovy looked towards the other, towards the red-haired middle-aged man. He was sat quietly in his chair, glaring at the bottle in his hand.

Groovy: “Oi! You over there, fucking redhead! Are you the same type as this fucking blue-haired motherfucker?!”

Redhead: “…”

Groovy: “Don’t ignore me! Stop fucking keeping silent, and look over…”

Redhead: “—Shut the fuck up.”

Here; Before Groovy could finish his sentence, a flash of silver surged toward him in retaliation.

While still seated in his chair, he unleashed a horizontal slash aiming for Groovy’s neck. Something similar had happened when he had first barged into the tavern, but this was precise swordsmanship that sought to strike the opponent’s vitals.

If the opponent had not been Groovy, it might have been a fatal attack, but.

Groovy: “Who do you think you’re picking a fucking fight with, ASSHOLE!!”

Evading in a way such that the sword attack only skimmed the tip of his nose, Groovy took a step, and closed the distance in an single instant as his fist howled; equipped with a gauntlet, it slammed into the side of the red-haired middle-aged man’s torso, the resultant shock wave launching him into the wall.

Coughing out a “Kahh” with cries of pain, the red one’s body spun around as it flew. The man crashed into the wall without taking any measures to defend himself, and as Groovy gave that a sidelong glance, he caught the bottle of booze out of the air as it flipped around vertically.

The alcohol that the red one had been drinking, Groovy poured it down his throat with tremendous vigor.

Groovy: “Kuah!! That fucking burns…! I’d prefer water and some fucking food, but…”

Blue-Haired Man: “—Bravo, bravo! My my, yer skills sure are nothing to scoff at, Mister Furball. The redhead shoulda also been considerably strong, I’m amazed that ya dealt with him so easily!”

Groovy: “Hahh?”

Glancing back towards the red-haired man who was upside down against the wall, the blue one went down onto his knees, and offered up his katana as if to say he had already been beaten.

Sitting on his knees and with his face flushed red, the blue-haired man praised Groovy's strength, and while displaying that he had no intention of fighting back, he deeply bowed his head.

Blue-Haired Man: "We've caused ya a terrible inconvenience, Mister Furball! We fellas are just wanderers, and we ended up aimlessly stopping by this settlement. However, by the time we stumbled here to this village, it was already like this; all the villagers were gone, and it was occupied by a group of those there earth lumps."

Groovy: "…So, you're tryna say that you fucking dumbasses had no choice but to drink up all the booze that the dead left behind?"

Blue-Haired Man: "Deary me, it's a bit embarrassing but you're exactly right! We were bored, so we ended up betting on whether the next earth lump that came through the door would be a man or a woman."

Smiling like a fool, the blue-haired man divulged the particulars of a bet that would make one forget that this was a time of emergency.

Those particulars were nonsensical, but Groovy could not tell if they were gambling with the alcohol that did not really belong to them, or if it was with their own lives on the line. Wherever these men lived or died was all up to their own whimsy.

However—

Groovy: "—I really don't fucking like this."

Blue-Haired Man: "Heh, whatd'ya mean?"

Groovy: "Bastard, you got the nerve to get on your knees and offer up your katana, acting like you got no fucking intention of fighting, but my nose can't be fucking fooled… Don't fucking stare at me with that murderous intent, fucking hell."

Blue-Haired Man: "…"

Sniff; Groovy snorted his nose and glared at the blue-haired man, to which he responded with a troubled expression, scratching his cheek with an “Ehh”. But, the fact that he did not voice words of denial, rather than him being unable to find the right words immediately, it was likely because he understood that a sloppy excuse would incur Groovy’s wrath.

This blue middle-aged man, ever since the red one was beaten, had been constantly hiding an intent to kill Groovy behind his words and attitude.

Having barged into this place after being chased by the earth puppets, instead of getting to rest, he had gotten entwined with a troublesome opponent—And, just when he thought that, Groovy realized.

Groovy: “…Bastard, I remember your fucking scent.”

The stench he had smelled somewhere before, Groovy recalled it as all the hairs on his body stood on end.

He would not say that he could remember every scent he had ever smelled, but distinctive smells were difficult to forget. Faced with that scent diluted by a murderous intent, when he tried to recall his opponent’s identity—

Groovy: “—Hey asshole, are you that fucking Cecilus’s fucking shitty dad?”

Voicing the memory that came to mind, Groovy glared at his opponent.

Under that sharp gaze of Groovy’s, the blue-haired man made an loathsome expression, and,

Blue-Haired Man: “Yikes, looks like ya remembered me.”

Groovy: “FUCKING HELL! You have the fucking nerve to try and kill me because you didn’t want that leaked?! STOP FUCKING JOKING AROUND! To begin with, why the fuck are you even alive?! Didn’t Cecilus kill you?!”

Blue-Haired Man: “Even if ya ask me why, I can only answer that I’m alive ‘cause I’m alive. That said, if it came to light that I survived, it’d be awfully inconvenient for me.”

Loosely shaking his head from side to side, the blue middle-aged man answered shamelessly—He was the father of Cecilus Segmunt, First of the Nine Divine Generals.

In the past, he frequently visited the Crystal Palace together with Cecilus, so he was someone who Groovy had passed by many times. However, a few years ago he committed an act of blasphemy in the Imperial Palace, and was cut down by none other than his own son, Cecilus; he should have been considered dead.

Blue-Haired Man: “They got wanted posters for me everywhere, musta been a slip o’ yer memory if ya thought I’d died.”

Groovy: “I just thought that that Cecilus fucker wouldn’t fuck it up. That asshole’s sword skills are the only fucking reliable thing about him; if he still fucked it up, then he’s nothing but a fucking piece of shit. There’s no fucking way he took discretion just because it was his fucking parent.”

Blue-Haired Man: “—That ain’t it. That guy’s swordsmanship’d never be dulled by the likes of familial bonds.”

Groovy: “…”

Witnessing that firm declaration, Groovy withdrew the words that he was going to bite back with.

He did not know much about the parent-child relationship between this blue-haired man and Cecilus. But, this was the father who raised Cecilus to become that Cecilus. It was not difficult to imagine that he was also a good-for-nothing monster.

If Cecilus’s skills had not dulled when cutting down his father, then that also probably stood to reason.

However—

Groovy: “Fuck…”

After being chased and chased, constantly running away, even though he had finally just managed to come across living people, they were a pair of drunkards—Furthermore, one of them was a wanted criminal, and the other was prone to drunken violence.

He cursed his poor luck, and began wanting to wallow in his despair.

Redhead: “Ugh, guhh…”

Blue-Haired Man: “Oh, ya also let the redhead live. You’re a kind one, Mister Furball.”

Groovy: “…I didn’t really take it easy on him or anything. That fucking redhead is just fucking sturdy.”

The violent red-haired man, now upside down against the wall, had endured a strike from Groovy that had been intended to make the insides of his body all mushy, and was nearly drowning in the vomit overflowing from his mouth.

Even in his battered state, Groovy would be able beat down this blue and red duo of middle-aged men, but—

Blue-Haired Man: “…Quite the racket outside, ain’t it?”

Just as the blue-haired man said, an aroma of loathsome earth had entered the settlement.

Having chased down Groovy, it seemed like quite a large number of them had surrounded the hidden village. Sensing with his nose that the encirclement was gradually closing in on them, Groovy anguished.

He would beat these two middle-aged men to death, and fight as hard as possible to break through the besiegement; then, he would find someone better than these two drunkards, and make the time to fill his belly with food and water.

That ideal, could it realistically be achieved? If not that—

Groovy: “…You fucking bastard, let’s make a deal.”

Blue-Haired Man: “Respectfully listening.”

Still seated on his knees, the blue-haired man humbly placed his katana by his side.

Until just before, this guy had been trying to kill Groovy with the exact same posture and attitude, to the extent that he wanted to call him a barefaced liar, and yet, the scent of murderous intent had now subsided.

While feeling irritation at that, Groovy spoke.

Groovy: “No matter what it takes, I gotta get back to where His Excellency and the others are. Even if that means I gotta use you fucking dumbasses to get there. That’s why…”

Blue-Haired Man: “…”

Groovy: “I’ll use my power as General First-Class to get you off the wanted list. In return, you’ll cooperate and help me get back to the Imperial Capital.”

For Groovy, this was a desperate last resort.

If he were in perfect condition, he would have never thought to rely on such men. But, if he remained stubborn and collapsed, just who would that benefit?

Groovy: “That would be the fucking piece of shit who constructed this whole fucking incomprehensible situation.”

Honestly, he felt like there was lots going on in the shadows behind the civil war shaking the Vollachian Empire.

Keeping vigilance over the west side was indeed a believable reason for why he had been sent far away from the Imperial Capital, but in that case too, he slightly suspected that Vincent had had other motives.

The reason he obediently followed that was because he had thought it was fine to believe in Vincent’s judgment.

Thus, in order to hear the answer of what he had believed in, Groovy had no choice but to go back.

Therefore—

Groovy: “DO YOU ACCEPT THE DEAL OR NOT, HURRY UP AND DECIDE, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!”

Groovy bared his fangs and howled, opposite him, the blue middle-aged man closed a single eye in deliberation.

Before the man, whose mind was difficult to read, could voice his answer, there was a loud crash behind Groovy; the tavern’s door had been destroyed from the outside.

Maintaining the vigor from breaking down the door, the pale earth puppets burst inside. Right before their hands could reach Groovy’s small back—A sword flashed.

With a slash from the unsheathed katana, the heads of the earth puppets were parted from their torsos, and turned into clods of earth.

The one to perform those actions, the blue-haired man, returned his katana to its sheath in a natural motion, and stood up. Then, the man, his face ruddy, stroking the stubble on his chin with his empty hand,

Blue-Haired Man: “In addition to erasing me from the wanted list, how much am I getting paid?”

Groovy: “You sure are a fucking piece of shit through and through, fucking bastard…”

Taking that shameless question as an answer, Groovy took a long, deep breath. Then, it seemed like his vision spun around, and,

Groovy: “Fuck.”

Indeed, his physical strength had reached its unavoidable limit, and overwhelmed, Groovy’s consciousness sank to a dark riverbed.

Blue-Haired Man: “Goodness gracious, to think he’d doze off and delay sorting out the finer details for later, this Furball Gentleman is quite the pleasant character.”

Having languidly tumbled down on the spot, the small beastman began heartily snoring.

One of the apexes of the Vollachian Empire’s military strength, Groovy Gumlet of the Nine Divine Generals; looking down on him, Rowan Segmunt, his face red from drinking, tilted his head in contemplation.

The terms that had just been presented, Groovy did not seem like the kind of person to go against his word.

Upon consideration, these terms were sufficient. Of course, he also considered continuing to run away; he could stab the sleeping Groovy in the heart here, but then he would merely proceed with his life on the run.

Rowan: “If I did such a thing, just who in the world would it benefit? Plus, it’d be more proactive of me if I took this as luck being on my side. —At long last, the curtain rises on the third act of my life!”

As he took firm steps upon the ground, Rowan worried about the slight cramp in his left leg; however, he then chuckled to himself, realizing that there was no longer any need to act reactively.

Nevertheless, the top priority right now was to get out of this place alive, so as he sensed the presence of the earth lumps gathering outside the bar, he heaved Groovy up.

Then, he stepped towards his companion who was upside down against the wall—Heinkel, and gave him a good kick.

Rowan: “Hey, redhead, wakey wakey! The situation’s changed!”

Heinkel: “Uh, hah…?”

Rowan: “I’d have trouble sleeping if I just left ya here! Redhead, if yer life has come to a dead end, then yer best bet is to turn the tables by taking up the sword and fighting alongside me here!”

Rowan spoke in an intensely loud voice, and Heinkel reluctantly opened his eyes up wide.

Through his upside down vision, he looked at Rowan, and at Groovy upon the former’s shoulder; he slightly swung his legs and flipped himself back upright, then immediately began to stagger due to the dizziness,

Heinkel: “What the…? I feel like shit…”

Rowan: “Rather, to give such an answer after taking a hit from a General First-Class is nothing short of a big shot. Come on now, we just about drank up all the booze here, so it’s a good time to start drifting over to the next place.”

Heinkel: “…What about that beastman? We eating him?”

Rowan: “Maybe if we’re ever really pressed for food, but for now we ain’t intending on doing that. Well then…”

Using his sleeve to wipe the vomited booze off Heinkel’s mouth, Rowan gave him a hearty clap to the back. Then, adjusting Groovy’s body on his shoulder once more, he turned around.

All at once, the lumps of earth surged into the tavern. Facing them, Rowan used a single hand to tear his katana out of its sheath, and as he wore a large grin on his face,

Rowan: “Stay alive and wait, prodigal son of mine. —You’ve still some way to go, before ya reach the Heavenly Sword.”

2

—To overturn the peril of the Great Disaster, two lights there were.

That was the prophecy brought forth by the Stargazer Ubilk, shackled in chains—No, as he would put it, it was the commandment.

This statement from the Stargazer, a being treasured in the

Vollachian Empire and reputed to have accurately predicted numerous events, struck Subaru with a profound impact.

Frankly, Subaru did not have much faith in prophecies or premonitions.

He considered such things as a sort of fraud through the employment of various psychological techniques. Of course, he recognized that in this different world, phenomena unconstrained by common sense could very well occur.

After all, depending on how one saw it, the results that Subaru's Return by Death brought about could be regarded as a way to avoid the worst possible future through foresight.

If possible, he would have been more grateful to know the future without having to die.

Regardless—

Subaru: "…A girl, unable to communicate with words."

To rephrase and say that Subaru was not the Stargazer, going to such lengths just to transmit accurate information.

The implication brought to mind an individual, and Subaru caught his breath.

However, before Subaru could inquire about the true intent, Abel, standing beside him, turned a cold gaze towards Ubilk,

Vincent: "One of the lights you spoke of, if it is Groovy Gumlet, he is dead."

Ubilk: "Eh?"

Ubilk's eyes widened and his mouth gaped open at the outright declaration.

That was to be expected. If someone were told the subject of their grand announcement was dead, anyone would have such a reaction. In fact, Subaru was also taken aback by Abel's claim.

Ignoring Subaru and the others' surprise, Abel, his arms folded, shrugged his shoulders lightly,

Vincent: "Out of a mouth that pompously declared that the stars are on my side, came that? It is rather a letdown, to say the least."

Subaru: "Hold on, hold on, hold on! Don't just speak as if it's true! It's still unconfirmed!"

Vincent: "Fool. With no signs of him converging, he is as good as dead."

Subaru: "Don't lump "as good as dead" with "he is dead"! You overthink the worst-case scenarios so much that you kill people off in your mind!"

Subaru snapped back vigorously at Abel's words, which seemed to be needlessly stirring up Ubilk. There was no particular reason to deceive Ubilk right here and now, so this was a well-deserved retort.

In response to Subaru and Abel's exchange, Ubilk released a conspicuously relieved sigh,

Ubilk: "I-I received no indicaaation~ if he was alive or not. So, wouldn't it be fine to assume General First-Class Groovy haaasn't~ died?"

Vincent: "We have long lost contact and there is no movement from the army he was supposed to be leading in the west. If his whereabouts are unknown, it would be more constructive to speak as if he is dead."

Subaru: "Constructive in building what? A graveyard?"

Possibly taking Subaru's words as teasing, a hint of severity entered Abel's gaze. However, since there was no reason to back down from his stance, Subaru stuck out his tongue in response and turned to Ubilk.

His trust in the Stargazer, it remained shaky at best.

Subaru: “At the point when the stars spoke to you, Ubilk-san, was this Groovy person definitely alive? It would make convincing this guy easier if he was.”

Ubilk: “I’m sooorry~ to say, all I received from the stars were the essentials of those who could resist the Great Disaster. I’m not privy to whether these individuals are aliiive~ or not.”

Vincent: “So Groovy Gumlet, having died, holds a countermeasure against the Great Disaster?”

The issue of life or death was getting tiresome, and Subaru gave up on correcting it further. However, Abel’s offhand remark held significant implications for the future.

If one assumed Ubilk’s prophecy was believable, then whatever unique thing Groovy alone possessed would be a necessary component to stop this disaster.

In addition to that—

Subaru: “—Louis.”

If one of the two lights Ubilk spoke of referred to Groovy Gumlet, a General First-Class of the Empire, then the other pointed to her.

The girl who was transported to the Vollachian Empire alongside Subaru and Rem. She who had overcome countless hardships with them, joined them in these coupled dragon carriages, and was one of the most troublesome characters, even in this world; Ubilk stated that she was necessary to repel the disaster.

Louis and Groovy, there should have been something common between these two that was effective in defeating the enemy.

Vincent: “Groovy Gumlet is known as the Master of Curse Tools, he is familiar with magic and Curse Arts, possessing the skill to create equipment incorporating these techniques.”

Perhaps he had followed the same line of thought as Subaru.

What Abel revealed was a unique skill that Groovy possessed. One that could not be replicated by others, which likely contributed to his selection as one of the lights.

Subaru: “So, as one of the Generals of the First Class, he must be pretty strong himself, right?”

Vincent: “There is no doubt that he is sufficiently competent. Even amongst beastpeople, his senses were exceedingly sharp, especially in his sense of smell; none across all the Empire could rival him. But, based on the conditions stated by this damn Stargazer, his skills as a warrior are not what requires attention.”

Subaru: “I know… Magic and Curse Arts, huh?”

In regards to magic, Beatrice and Roswaal had already shown promising results.

They had discovered that the Corebugs, lurking within the undead, were undoubtedly at the center of the mechanism that birthed the undead.

However, neither Beatrice nor Roswaal were included in the two lights Ubilk had mentioned.

In essence, the emphasis should not have been on exceptional magic users, but rather—

Subaru & Vincent: “—Curse Arts.”

Subaru and Abel spoke simultaneously, their black eyes exchanging glances.

The fact that not only he, but also Abel, had come to the same conclusion strengthened Subaru’s conviction. Almost certainly, Groovy had been chosen as a countermeasure against the undead due to his knowledge of Curse Arts.

On top of the magical approach, the addition of a Curse Arts-based approach could lead to some sort of effective measures to use against those undead.

Vincent: “Excluding Groovy Gumlet, the only one with knowledge of Curse Arts is Olbart Dunkelkenn. It is urgent that we gather all those with such insight. What about your side?"

Subaru: "As for us, Beako has a bit of knowledge, and I myself am still cursed. I wonder whether Roswaal or Nee-sama is more knowledgeable…"

Vincent: "—. Disregarding that one part, it is necessary that we have them speak from their knowledge."

In the past, when he had been bitten and cursed by a pack of Ulgarm Witchbeasts, Subaru had been told that the aftereffects were still nested within his body.

Fortunately, since it did not interfere with his daily life, he had left it alone; though, since the curse was like having an unidentifiable wart on his body, it would be a lie if he said it did not worry him.

In any case, as Abel suggested, it was necessary for them to gather all those who had knowledge about curses, to arrive at the insights that the leading expert, Groovy, would have provided them with.

As Subaru considered this, Abel quietly added, "On top of that,"

Vincent: "—Do you possess an answer as to what kind of advantage that girl's existence will bring to the Empire?"

Naturally, the conversation spread to Louis, and Abel's inquiry was thrust unto Subaru.

Subaru: "…"

Closing his mouth, Subaru kept Abel waiting for a beat before giving an answer to that question.

However, a beat soon turned into two, then three, and still he could not arrive at a clear answer.

What he was being asked was clear, and it was equally clear without any doubt that Subaru himself did not have an answer.

Vincent: "Back when we shared that appa, I had told you. —That what I had intended to say was not that we ought to execute someone whose apparent identity was that of a Sin Archbishop on the spot.”

As if in lieu of the silent Subaru, Abel pushed further on the topic of Louis.

At the end of their disgraceful brawl, Subaru and Abel had divided the appa and ate it together, and during that exchange, they had also mentioned Louis.

Back then, Abel had indeed then said that he would not punish Louis due to her identity, but—

Vincent: “Even now, those thoughts remain unchanged. —For it is not I who ought to decide what that girl shall be defined as, but you.”

Subaru: “…I, ought to define Louis?”

Vincent: “The one deeply involved with that girl’s conduct is not me, but you. Even should that girl entrust her fate to another, it would not be me, but you who is desired.”

Beside Subaru as he felt a thirst in his throat, Abel stated thus matter-of-factly, and returning his gaze from Subaru back to Ubilk,

Vincent: “There is no mistake in what you have heard from the stars? That in order to oppose the Great Disaster, the existence of the girl whom this one brought along is considered a key?”

Ubilk: “—. Yes, my story hasn’t chaaanged~. Just like for General First-Class Groovy, I don’t knooow~ what the stars have acknowledged in that child.”

The chains jingling as he shrugged, Ubilk replanted the seed of the unchanged dilemma.

He was yet unaware of how it would sprout, what buds it would form, and what flowers it would bloom. Even if he was unaware, Subaru had fully understood that he could not merely continue to carry the seeds with him, neither allowing the flowers to bloom nor wither.

Then, as Subaru worried himself over that reality, the Emperor, who would never conduct himself to try and understand the pain of others, proceeded to tell Subaru without a shred of mercy.

Vincent: “Arrive at a conclusion swiftly. Though, that is only if the taste of that appa, and all of your big talk, were not falsehoods.”

3

Emilia: “—Subaru, did you get to hear what you wanted?”

Upon exiting the cabin where Ubilk was being held captive, he was greeted by an anxiously awaiting Emilia.

The existence of the Stargazers was pretty much considered confidential information in the Vollachian Empire, so people from the Kingdom, with the exception of Subaru, were not allowed to be present in the room.

Subaru was already acquainted with Ubilk, and it seemed that Abel had made the judgment that he ought to be allowed to hear what the Stargazer had to say.

Subaru: “If you’re asking if I heard it, then I did, and if you’re asking if I didn’t hear it, then I didn’t…”

Beatrice: “…That answer completely avoids the point, in fact. Are you saying it was just a waste of time, I suppose?”

Subaru: “No, I don’t think so.”

Beatrice had trotted across to Subaru, whose enunciation had unconsciously gotten worse, and had taken hold of his hand, furrowing her brows.

However, neither Beatrice nor Emilia, nor Otto nor Garfiel, who also happened to be present, wanted to rush Subaru’s answer.

With a vague feeling that their consideration was different from that of the Imperial people, he ended up wanting to indulge in the warmth of their kindness that he had so dearly missed.

But—

Subaru: "—That's a no go."

It was not something that he could keep turning his face away from forever.

Outweighing his dishonesty, the situation had reached a point of urgency. Above all, at the time when he was separated from those who would forgive his avoidance, it would not be Subaru who would suffer the most.

Therefore—

Subaru: "Everyone, though it's also for the sake of the Empire, there's something I want to have a serious discussion about."

Emilia: "Something you want to discuss with, everyone?"

Subaru: "Yeah."

As Emilia asked in return, Subaru nodded and took a deep breath.

For everyone here, and even for those who were valuable to Subaru but not present here, it was a subject that they absolutely could not avoid, that they must not avoid.

And that was—

Subaru: "—About the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb; let's have a proper discussion."

Chapter 22:
Want To Believe. Will Not Forgive.

1

???: “—Village Chief-kun, may I have a moment?”

As a voice called out to him from behind, Vincent Vollachia halted his step.

Before he even turned around, he knew who the owner of that voice was. Once he heard a voice, or laid eyes upon a person, he would never forget them. This was no exception; he immediately grasped that this was the blond, blue-eyed peddler—Flop O’Connell.

Vincent: “Unfortunately, the survival of the Empire is currently in crisis. I have not the time for frivolous chatter with you.”

Though he had grasped it, Vincent would not engage any further than grasping it.

The oracle he had received a moment ago from the Stargazer, Ubilk, left him no choice but to discuss with Berstetz, Serena, and the rest of that lot regarding how they should handle it.

Groovy had been designated as a countermeasure against the enemy, but since there was a high chance he had lost his life, to formulate a plan that depended on him would be an act akin to the height of stupidity. On that point, putting his expectations in Natsuki Subaru, who was headed to persuade the other person who had been designated, was a foolish idea that was less objectionable.

In the first place, there was no chance that Vincent would be able to persuade that girl.

He would not even be able to come to a mutual understanding with her. Since the cards in Vincent’s hand could not be used on the young girl, it was logical to let Subaru deal with that side of the two lights.

Ergo, the only thing Vincent could do was continue scrutinizing the details for a realistic plan—

Flop: “Woah there, you can’t know whether it’s frivolous chatter or not unless you talk and find out! No matter how clever Village Chief-kun is, I doubt you’d be able to tell what seeds of conversation I have before you water them!”

Vincent: “You…”

Speaking those words, Flop grabbed Vincent’s shoulder as the latter tried to resume his walk, preventing him from moving forward. Naught could that be called but a reckless action, the very pinnacle of imprudence.

Under different circumstances, it would have been a barbaric act that caused Flop to be beheaded on the spot.

Vincent: “Release me at once. If not, wish your life goodbye.”

Flop: “Of course, I’d also like to start talking with you right away. But, I want a suitable amount of time to have a proper discussion about this matter. We can’t be rushing things.”

Vincent: “I did not tell you to speak, but to release your grip…”

???: “Now, now, don’t say that, Abel-chin. Instead, you should talk about what big bro wants to tell you.”

Vincent: “—Hk?!”

As he looked back with his head and scowled at Flop, who still had his hand placed on Vincent’s shoulder, a voice had called out from in front of him; simultaneously, another reckless act had been performed, that of two hands grabbing him by his sides and lifting him up.

Having held her breath, and now giving a cheerful broad smile, the one who had done that was Medium O’Connell—The sibling duo of Flop and Medium, had pincered Vincent with smiles from both front and rear.

Medium: “Abel-chin, you’ve been disregarding big bro this whole time, right? Big bro is so injured and worn-out that he always needs to lie down for even just a second longer, so don’t be mean and just listen to what he has to say~.”

Vincent: “Speak not of foolish things. To begin with, how long shall you continue to contact me with such a familiar attitude? Should the situation change, so shall individual positions. Things are no longer the same as they were in the Shudraqian Village and the Fortress City.”

Medium: “Well, Abel-chin may be acting like the Emperor, but I think it’s mistaken of you to make light of us! Big bro!”

Flop: “Got it, dear sister!”

The unreasonable sibling pair, did not lend their ears to Vincent’s words.

At the high-spirited call of his younger sister, Flop, responding in a similarly energetic manner, promptly opened the door to the adjacent passenger cabin; Medium then carried Vincent inside, and the door was closed.

After quickly confining the Emperor in a locked room, Medium finally released Vincent.

Vincent: “You two, are you aware that this is an act so barbaric that not only you, but all members of your household will be punished for?”

Flop: “Hahahaha, unfortunately for you, Village Chief-kun, our family purely consists of us two siblings. So, your objection isn’t really much of a threat.”

Medium: “Ah, but, big bro, what about everyone from the orphanage? Even if we aren’t related by blood, everyone who escaped is our family!”

Flop: “Hahahaha, now that you mention it! Village Chief-kun, please find it within yourself to forgive us!”

Vincent: "—Set me free immediately, and behave."

No matter the situation, the conduct of the O'Connell siblings seemed invariant.

Medium had been shrunken and stretched, and Flop seemed to have been injured, but seeing the both of them like this was causing him to grow suspicious.

If one had their body shrunken and stretched, it would typically be a heavy burden on their mind, but Medium was far too lacking in awareness that her body had shrunk and then stretched back again.

He had heard that Flop had also suffered a grievous wound that brought him to the verge of death, but he too was full of life. —No, his neck had a visible complexion, but it seemed he was concealing the color in his face using make-up.

Flop: "After all, it's quite important for merchants to put on an act."

Vincent: "…"

Flop: "But, although it's always been an ironclad rule of trade to barter for what you want, I'm unable to meet Village Chief-kun's current demands. I don't wanna put this off any longer."

Vincent: "What are you saying…"

Flop: "I've been entrusted with a message. —A message from the person who, in your place, had acted as Emperor."

Having expected him to start speaking more nonsense, Vincent's eyes slightly widened.

Going out of their way to confine the Emperor in an empty cabin, the O'Connell siblings were attempting to report something to Vincent. —In this world, there was only one person who had held that position.

That was why—

Flop: "You ought to hear his words, Village Chief-kun. —No, Your

Excellency the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.”

Thus, when Flop displayed a serious expression for the first time, Vincent had chosen not to interrupt him with words.

2

—The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb.

When he spoke those words aloud, Subaru had heard a grating sound reverberate within his heart. While it was always within arms reach, he had always hesitated to take the lid off of that box of taboos. It was a Pandora’s box that could be opened at any time, so long as he was willing to do so.

Subaru: “…”

Deciding this was not a conversation suitable for a corridor, they had relocated, moving to a spacious passenger cabin.

Abel’s thoughtful allowance for them to use this cabin if necessary was a rare display of consideration for the feelings of others. —Though, since the resolution of this matter was of critical importance to the Empire, it might have been natural for him to give that thoughtful allowance.

Gathered in the cabin were Emilia, Beatrice, Otto, Garfiel, and Roswaal of the Emilia Camp, and in addition—

Anastasia: “The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony… Really, it’s a connection that seems to pop up indiscriminately.”

Elegantly touching her cheek, Anastasia quietly murmured so, and Julius was maintaining a solemn silence by her side. The participation of these two was also essential.

That was not merely because they had traveled a great distance to cross the border to assist Subaru and his friends, but because they too had suffered from the damage caused by Gluttony.

Subaru: “The person at the crux of the matter, Louis, she’s currently with Rem and some others. I think everyone except Anastasia-san and Julius should already know about Louis, but…”

Beatrice: “Of course, in fact… Frankly, it was an outrageous surprise at first, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That… was the case for me too.”

Beatrice’s wording of “surprise” was likely a generous understatement.

In fact, when Subaru had first realized that he had been transported with Louis, his sole intention had been to protect Rem, which caused him to adopt a rather aggressive stance. At first, this led to Rem being quite wary of him, perceiving him as someone who could not be trusted.

Subaru did not know under what circumstances Emilia and the others had met Louis, but it was not difficult to imagine that their initial contact would have been fraught with tension.

With that in mind, he wanted to express his gratitude that no one had resorted to extreme measures.

Subaru: “You all did well to hold yourselves back. I’m sure Otto and Garfiel were ready to erupt at any moment.”

Otto: “Indeed, Garfiel and I were of the opinion that we should either eliminate or restrain her. The fact that she was not subjected to either was due to Emilia-sama persuading everyone else.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan did that…”

As one might expect, it seemed that Otto was at the forefront of the radical faction, but his views had apparently been tempered by Emilia, who was of the moderate faction.

As Subaru and the others turned their gazes to her, she gave a short nod, saying “Yes,”

Emilia: “Medium-chan was defending that child… Louis, with all her might. Considering how much those around her cherished her, I was scared of trying to decide anything and everything on the spot."

Subaru: "I see, Medium-san did that…"

Hearing that Medium had defended Louis, Subaru felt a faint sense of relief.

Originally, Louis had grown quite attached to the cheerful and caring Medium. Still, the last time Subaru had witnessed that between the two was back in the Demon City of Chaosflame, when Medium had been afraid of Louis after her identity as a Sin Archbishop had been revealed.

If Medium had still defended Louis after that, there must have been some shift in her feelings that had taken place somewhere unbeknownst to Subaru. That made him happy.

Emilia: "That's something I've also experienced. Having people say that I'm reaaally scary, that I seem like a Witch to everyone, and nobody around me would want to talk to me. So…"

Otto: "For Emilia-sama's case, it is due to irrational prejudice against half-elves. However, with this girl, there is a difference. A clear distinction, resulting from none other than her own actions."

Emilia: "Otto-kun…"

As Emilia explained why she stood by Louis in addition to Medium's protection, Otto bluntly offered his stern comment. He did not hesitate to clarify his position as an ally of Emilia and, simultaneously, an adversary of Louis.

Indeed, their journey together so far had been nothing more than a deferment until the final conclusion.

Roswaal: "May I have a word?"

Into the tense atmosphere created by Otto's declaration, Roswaal raised his hand casually.

As Subaru's glance urged him to speak, Roswaal closed his blue eye, and, Roswaal: “Ram, Anastasia-sama, and I joined later, after aaall~. We really don’t know how that girl, Louis, behaves… but, is there anything suspicious about her? Of course, Garfiel has been keeping his eyes, ears, and nose peeled on her, hasn’t he?”

Garfiel: “I wasn’t exactly peeled from head to toe like that. But, I gotta agree with Ottobro. That’s why, from the moment we met her till the big battle, I kept a close eye on her, but…”

Roswaal: “So, it turned out to be in vain. Theeen~, how can you definitively say that the girl is a dangerous Sin Archbishop?”

Otto: “Because of Beatrice-chan and I. We encountered a girl claiming to be Louis Arneb, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, in Pristella. I had my leg gouged in then, and it is not something I will forget.”

Roswaal, representing those who had less interaction with Louis, made a statement to which Garfiel and Otto expressed their respective views.

As Otto stroked his leg, it was a reminder of the injury that had caused him to be taken out of action for quite some time.

It made sense as to why Otto, in particular, was very cautious of Louis.

Julius: “My apologies for following the Margrave, but may I also speak?”

Once Roswaal’s question had been addressed, Julius quickly joined the conversation.

In this discussion about Gluttony, Julius, who had been making a difficult face from the beginning, glanced at an even more grim-looking Subaru out of the corner of his eye and said,

Julius: “First, I would like to confirm. Is it correct that the girl named Louis, who is currently riding in this dragon carriage, is indeed the same individual as Louis Arneb, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony?”

Emilia: "—? What do you mean by that?"

Julius: "Emilia-sama and Lady Ram must be aware. In order to replicate the powers of those it devours, there were instances where Gluttony had changed its appearance to match that of its victim. In other words…"

Anastasia "So, yer suggestin' the possibility that the Louis we're talkin' 'bout 'n the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony might not be the same person, but one who was consumed by the other?"

At Julius's conjecture, Emilia and the others wore faces of surprise.

Indeed, considering the nature of Gluttony, it was not an improbable theory. If Gluttony could mimic the form of the person it consumed, it would make sense that the original, who was consumed, would still exist somewhere.

If this was true, then the existence of this Louis could be separated from that of Gluttony.

However—

Subaru: "…No, that's not likely. Louis, I believe, is reproducing the abilities of those she has devoured. It must be due to the Authority of Gluttony."

Julius: "I see. My apologies for such misleading speculation."

Julius closed his eyes and apologized as Subaru shook his head.

It was no fault of Julius. If his hypothesis were correct, Subaru would not be as troubled as he was right now. But, they could not resort to makeshift solutions created by tiptoeing around the issue.

What they needed was not just an answer, but an answer derived from a shared understanding of the truth.

Louis had been transported alongside Subaru to the Vollachian Empire; and yet, despite being treated so harshly by Subaru, she pushed herself time and again to help him, suffered injuries, and even put her life at risk.

It was her, Louis Arneb, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, who was the same person as the Louis that they all knew. To get everyone to acknowledge that she was an essential presence for the upcoming battle…

Subaru: "—. First, let me explain what happened with me and Louis in the Empire after I was sent here with Rem, before any of you came across Louis."

???: "…"

Silently, everyone directed their gazes towards him.

Under the scrutiny of his trusted comrades, Subaru unmistakably felt a sense of suffocation. It was as if a grading of exams or a verification of answers was about to begin.

It was a verification of whether Louis could truly be accepted by his comrades for who she was.

Emilia: "Subaru, there's no need to rush."

Emilia gently reassured Subaru, who was bracing himself for what was to come. Beatrice, by his side, gave his hand a gentle squeeze with a nod of affirmation.

Comforted by their consideration, Subaru took a deep breath and began to speak.

Subaru: "The very first thing we noticed was that we were next to a large forest far to the east—"

3

He had intended to speak plainly, choosing his words to convey the facts as succinctly as possible.

Still, the things he had to talk about sprang forth like a gushing spring, making him acutely aware that the days he had to recount were filled with significant moments, despite the brevity of the time in question.

To begin with, a tremendous amount of trouble had occurred in just a short period.

All of it comprised accidents that endangered the lives of Subaru, Rem, and their companions, and, naturally, Louis was inevitably involved in these.

Naturally. —Yes, it was indeed natural.

After all, Louis had been with Subaru and the others the entire time, enduring Subaru's hostility while receiving kindness from Rem, and she persevered without being discouraged by the harsh treatment from Subaru.

So—

Subaru: "—Louis and I, collaborating with Yorna-san, managed to win our bet against Olbart-san. It was with a bit of cheating, though, as we changed the rules from hide-and-seek, to a game of tag."

???: "…"

Subaru: "After that, something unimaginable happened at Chaosflame, as you may have heard. The people living there miraculously survived and we were able to join up with Abel and his rebels. I lost consciousness there and got separated… You guys probably know more about what happened with Louis after that, right?"

Emilia: "—. Yes. We met Abel and the others when they came back to the destroyed Guaral, which happened right after."

As Emilia nodded in confirmation of Subaru's statement, he finished his explanation and took a long breath.

Even though Subaru had intended not to take up too much time, in the end, the story lasted nearly an hour. He was grateful that during that time, his companions mostly refrained from interrupting and listened intently.

Inevitably, Subaru had to tell the story from his own perspective, but he tried to be as detached as possible in narrating the events.

With that in mind—

Subaru: “As I’ve told you, there wasn’t any suspicious behavior from Louis while she was with me. I believe you can hear the same story from Rem.”

Otto: “We are not really doubting that. If we truly thought her suspicious, there is no way Ram-san would have allowed her to stay near Rem-san.”

When it came to her family, and especially Rem, there was no need to mention the intensity of Ram’s scrutiny.

In fact, the primary reason she overwhelmed Gluttony’s Ley Batenkaitos at the Pleiades Watchtower was her profound objection to any interference with her relationship between Rem and herself.

Ram, who could go to such lengths for a sister she did not remember.

If she felt even the slightest hint of danger from Louis, it would have been unthinkable for her to leave Louis near Rem, who had just awakened.

Anastasia: “…We’ve roughly grasped how tough it was for ya, Natsuki-kun.”

Anastasia, who had been silently listening until now, was massaging her brow with a finger, acknowledging the harshness of Subaru’s journey.

Even for a woman as wise as she, the sequence of events presented a volume of information that took time and effort to fully digest. Having somehow swallowed it all down, Anastasia removed her finger from her forehead and,

Anastasia: “I’m curious ‘bout what happened to ya, Natsuki-kun, after ya lost consciousness in the Demon City, but since that ain’t the main subject, let’s put it aside.”

Subaru: “Yeah, right now, what’s important is Louis. As I’ve said, Louis hasn’t shown her dangerous side to us so far. And there’s the prophecy of Ubilk, the Stargazer… that’s a factor too. So, in the upcoming battle, having Louis cooperate with us—”

Anastasia: “—The question’s ‘bout yer story, where’s the point of compromise that you’re gonna take?”

Just like that, her quiet interjection stopped Subaru’s train of thought.

Anastasia, having voiced her thoughts, gently traced her lips with the finger that had been massaging her brow. Her intellectually vibrant aqua eyes seized Subaru’s heart as she continued.

Anastasia: “I ain’t against yer idea of usin’ everythin’ at our disposal, Natsuki-kun. Even Meili-san, who helped us cross the Augria Sand Dunes, was originally an enemy. If we’re makin’ such distinctions, then the same applies to that girl.”

Subaru: “That’s, well, the same, right? Meili and Louis should be in the same position.”

Anastasia: “No, it ain’t the case. —I’m sure everyone but ya, Natsuki-kun, would think so.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Confronted with that calm assertion, Subaru looked around at the others in surprise.

Anastasia’s words echoed in Subaru’s mind as he scanned everyone’s faces, hoping that someone would disagree.

However, not one of them met his expectations.

Subaru: “Everyone… Hk.”

Otto: “Since no one seems to be willing to say it, I will.”

Among the group, all wearing grave expressions, Otto raised his hand without changing his demeanor.

However, his unchanging demeanor did not denote a lack of emotional response, but was the mere reflection of his calmness, sustained since the start of the meeting.

Neither his gaze nor his voice were unconditionally supportive of Subaru.

Otto: “I agree with Anastasia-sama. The situation with her and Meili-chan is different. They are not in the same position.”

Subaru: “Otto!”

Otto: “I will take it upon myself to say what no one else seems to want to. —It is because she is a Sin Archbishop.”

Otto answered Subaru, whose voice had inadvertently risen, with a calm tone.

Anticipating Subaru’s question, Otto’s response was as fitting as it could possibly be for the reason why none present could side with Subaru.

Beatrice: “Subaru, Betty wants to stand by Subaru, in fact. If Subaru says that girl… Louis, is a girl without evil intentions now, Betty can believe that too, I suppose. But…”

Roswaal: “The fact is, Gluttony’s victims include us. Not to mention, considering that the damage is not easily apparent, I wonder what the extent of the potential victims is, riiight~.”

Julius: “Though there is no way to confirm it… The bitter regret of those who lost themselves, forgotten by others, and could not return while having anybody to turn to, I cannot imagine how they must feel.”

Following up on the concerned Beatrice, Roswaal and Julius expressed their genuine opinions, as a person heavily concerned with a victim, and as an actual victim of Gluttony’s authority respectively.

???: “…”

Roswaal and Julius were correct, those who knew they had been affected were comparatively better off.

There must have been many victims who could do nothing but be truly wrought in despair, having lost their Names and Memories, left without a place to return, unable to be saved.

And thus, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, who had created numerous victims—

Emilia: “It’s not that everyone doesn’t believe it.”

Subaru: “Emilia…”

Emilia: “It’s not that… Rather, I think they won’t forgive her.”

Subaru’s explanation was not lacking, nor did his feelings not get through to them.

Emilia’s words, with her eyebrows furrowed, shattered his heart as she explained that the real problem was not there.

Knowing about Louis’s time with Subaru, and knowing what happened after his absence, Emilia and the others knew the “current” Louis was not a threat to them.

Having understood that, the issue at hand was the actions of the “past” Louis.

Anastasia: “—The things you’ve done ain’t ever gonna disappear.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Quietly, Anastasia murmured those words.

Once before, it was a despairing warning that had frozen Natsuki Subaru, crushing him to pieces.

The fact that those words were thrown at him only existed within himself. And once again, in a different turn of events, they were delivered from her mouth to Subaru’s ears.

Anastasia: "No matter how much Natsuki-kun tries to convince us that that child is harmless, it doesn't even up the harm she did. In reality, the victims remain victims… It ain't a superficial problem that can be brushed aside with pretenses for yer own benefit."

Subaru: "—Hk."

Anastasia: "First off, don't ya think that should come after gettin' back all the Names n' Memories that have been eaten so far? Even if ya try to proceed without them, wouldn't Natsuki-kun also be dissatisfied with that?"

Anastasia's sharp words sliced through the stiffened Subaru one after another.

All of their arguments were valid, but the one that caused the greatest pain was the final point—that they could not even stand on the very foundation for deciding Louis's fate, if they did not return the Memories and Names that had been taken.

That was the crucial premise leading to what Emilia had said, "They can't forgive her."

Roswaal: "Well, His Excellency the Emperor is aware of this prophecy Subaru-kun heard. Saying that we won't let this girl, Louis, cooperate in the battle is just not realistic, is iiit~?"

Garfiel: "Huh? Whaddya wanna say? Speak clearly."

Roswaal: "It's troubling to have your irritation taken out on me, but… no matter how our discussion ends, the plan to involve the girl won't change. The only thing left is how she will be treated afterwards."

Subaru: "Treated…?"

His heart grew impatient with Roswaal, who still continued with his roundabout way of talking after being told to speak clearly. In response to Subaru's earnest gaze, Roswaal shrugged his shoulders and spoke.

That was—

Roswaal: “It’s a matter of what we can tell her to make her cooperaaate~. For instance—we could promise her amnesty once we overcome this crisis threatening the Empire. And then, once everything’s done, the appropriate punishment for her crimes will be executed solemnly. This is the best way to handle it without any future problems.”

Garfiel: “—Hk, stop messin’ around!”

In response to Roswaal’s explanation of his wicked plan, Garfiel clicked his fangs and snapped at him. He glared fiercely at Roswaal, and,

Garfiel: “Even if the other guy’s a villain, we don’t have to stoop to the same level! Danglin’ some bait that doesn’t even exist just to get her to help, no way I’ll approve of that!”

Roswaal: “Oh, really? You know, I think Otto-kun was thinking the same thing…”

Garfiel: “Don’t lump yerself in with Ottobro!”

Otto: “—. The Margrave is speaking for the majority. Sin Archbishops should not be granted any amnesty. Or rather.”

There, Otto paused for a moment and gazed fixedly at Subaru.

As Subaru gulped under his gaze, he continued mercilessly.

Otto: “Is Natsuki-san trying to create a precedent where Sin Archbishops are forgiven?”

Subaru: “—Hk, I don’t intend on doing anything like that. In this world, there are villains who mustn’t be forgiven. The Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult are definitely among them.”

Petelgeuse, Regulus, the brothers Roy and Ley, Sirius, Capella; every Sin Archbishop Subaru had encountered up until now were all invariably far beyond redemption.

They were beings who would not hesitate to sacrifice others to satisfy their own desires.

However—

Otto: "—Are you saying only Louis Arneb is different?"

Subaru: "That's, well…"

Otto's query attempted to lay bare the depths of Subaru's heart.

Sin Archbishops should not be forgiven. Not just Otto, but everyone drew this line in the sand, something Subaru could clearly understand.

Yet the insistence on putting Louis in a separate category, as Otto put it, was indeed strange.

Subaru: "…"

Under the scrutiny of everyone's gazes, Subaru once again questioned himself.

What did Subaru want to do with Louis? They harbored great hatred for each other in the Hall of Memories, and Subaru chose not to save her as she suffered from the aftermath of Return by Death. He did not think that choice was a mistake. Even if he were to be placed in that situation once more, he would most likely make the same decision.

However, at the same time, he knew the Louis who had shared hardships with him in the Vollachian Empire.

The fact that he had witnessed her risk her life to save him and die for it multiple times was certainly engraved in his soul.

Somewhere along the way, Subaru's vigilance had been melted away by Louis's earnestness—

Emilia: "How?"

Subaru: "…"

Suddenly, a hushed question was posed to Subaru just as he was deep in thought.

As he opened his closed eyelids, he found himself looking directly into Emilia's amethyst eyes. She narrowed her long-lashed eyes and repeated the same question once more.

That was—

Emilia: "How did Subaru come to think that way?"

Subaru: "How, you ask…"

Emilia: "You reaaally couldn't stand the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, could you, Subaru? You thought you couldn't forgive her. So, why now?"

Subaru: "That's because… didn't I already tell you? She… Louis, in this Empire with us…"

They had shared many hardships, and Louis had bravely tried to protect Subaru and Rem.

The events in the Empire had left their mark on Subaru, as much as or with even more intensity than the unforgivable enemy she had been thought to be in the Hall of Memories. That was why.

That was why Natsuki Subaru's feelings towards Louis had changed.

Julius: "Subaru, let me once again convey a harsh truth to you."

Julius said this in a low voice to Subaru, who had answered Emilia's question falteringly.

The fact he prefaced his words as harsh made Subaru brace himself. As Subaru prepared himself for it, Julius traced the scar under his left eye with his finger and addressed him.

Julius: "Humanity in this world will not forgive the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, the girl known as Louis Arneb. Whether it be the Kingdom or the Empire, you can say it is the consensus of the world."

Subaru: "…"

Julius: “Even if she were to flee to any corner of the world, there is no place where she would be pardoned. Acts of crime will be met with punishment. And, a Sin Archbishop is a criminal whose sins can only be atoned for with their life.”

There was no falsehood in that preamble of the harsh truth.

Julius decisively pronounced it in a clear, strong tone, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

There was no place in this world where Louis Arneb could live and be forgiven.

At those heavy words, Subaru was left unable to respond.

However—

Julius: “I too, desire nothing but death for Sin Archbishops. Nothing but Death for the beings we consider enemies of the world. That is what I can say, with all my soul.”

Subaru: “…What?”

Otto: “Julius Juukulius!!”

The person who had raised their voice sharply, glaring at Julius, was Otto.

Subaru, unable to comprehend the meaning behind those added words, was left aside with widened eyes as Otto and Julius stared at each other piercingly.

Julius’s gaze was filled with pain, while Otto’s was bitter, their eyes wounding each other.

Otto: “For you, an outsider, to say that is outrageously selfish…!”

Julius: “I am sorry, but I would like to correct your perception on this matter. I am also one of the parties involved. I am in a position to voice my opinion, so allow me to exercise that right.”

Otto: “—Hk!”

Gritting his teeth, Otto's glare towards Julius grew sharper.

Despite knowing he was no match in terms of fighting strength, the intensity of his gaze did not even budge. Julius, too, closed one eye at that strength of Otto's will and let out a small sigh.

Subaru: "Nothing but Death, for the Sin Archbishops…"

Beside the back-and-forth between the two, Subaru muttered while feeling as if a part of his brain had gone numb.

What Julius had tried to say, and why the perceptive Otto had snapped at him. Subaru had not noticed what had been hidden beyond the surface level of words.

Nothing but Death for the Sin Archbishops was desired. The world would not forgive Louis Arneb.

The Sin Archbishops, Louis Arneb, the world would not—.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Beatrice: "Subaru, Betty will speak now, in fact."

The moment he felt the sensation of a slight breeze blowing across the labyrinth of thoughts, Beatrice spoke up.

Looking up at Subaru with her round eyes of a distinctive pattern,

Beatrice: "Betty ran into the Sin Archbishop Louis back in Pristella, I suppose. After that, this time when we happened to meet in the Empire, this is what Betty thought about that girl's state, in fact. — It's as if she's a different person, I suppose."

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice: "That girl, she's different from the Sin Archbishop Betty knows, in fact. How was it from Subaru's perspective, I suppose? From the perspective of Subaru, who had directly spoken with the Sin Archbishop up close."

Beatrice's kind, yet inescapable words questioned him.

He understood what she meant. For Subaru, it was something he had refused to acknowledge because he did not want to acknowledge it.

That the current “Louis” and the Louis Arneb he had met in the Hall of Memories, seemed to be different people.

However, just as he had refuted Julius’s suspicion, “Louis” had been using her Authority. Just as Gluttony had used it, she was able to freely utilize the special abilities of her eaten victims.

“Louis” still possessed the Authority of Gluttony, but her mind alone had been born anew.

That was just like—

Subaru: “Just like me, when I had lost my memories.”

If that was indeed so, had “Louis” been suffering this whole time?

Just like how back then, Subaru had chased after the phantom of “Natsuki Subaru”, troubled and distressed at being unable to trust anyone around him, had “Louis” also been seeking help?

Even if that was the case, “Louis” had still helped Subaru and Rem, and had made it through to this day.

Then—

Emilia: “—You know, I’ve been thinking about this the whole time. Once you do something bad, is it already too late to undo it?”

Subaru: “Emilia…”

Emilia: “You apologize, you atone, but even then if you’re told that it’s not enough, then sometimes you’d get fed up with apologizing and atonement, right? So, I’ve been thinking about a way to prevent that… but it’s not easy to find such a terrific solution. But…”

Subaru: “But?”

Emilia: “There’s just one, one method that might work. It’s a method that Subaru taught me.”

Emilia placed her hand against her chest, and she carefully chose words that could fully convey her emotions.

Hearing the words that she had spoken, Subaru searched his own heart. But, among the things Subaru had taught Emilia, as for something that could be applied to this moment, nothing came to mind.

To Subaru, who had no idea what to expect, Emilia, with her gentle gaze upon him,

Emilia: “It’s to think “I want that person to be happy” more than you think “I will not forgive that person”.”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “For lots and lots of the people around them to think “I want that person to be happy.” I think that in order for us to forgive that child, it’s necessary for her to make us think that way.”

Emilia’s words slowly and gently seeped into Subaru’s heart.

A method, to forgive bad people. A method, to forgive evil deeds. A means of salvation that might lay beyond apologizing and atonement, that was the earnestly thought-out answer that Emilia had given.

Whether she had learned that from something Subaru had done, or it was something he had once taught her, he had no idea.

But, it felt like those words had fallen firmly into Subaru’s heart with a thump.

Why was it that Subaru was so concerned for the sake of a Sin Archbishop, for the sake of “Louis”?

That was because “Louis” had done more for Subaru than what Louis had done to him.

Therefore—

Anastasia: “Once more, lemme ask ya the same thing.”

Hearing Emilia’s words and Subaru’s faint sigh, Anastasia had thus spoken.

While stroking Eridna, who was wrapped around her neck, she looked at Subaru and Emilia in turn, and spoke.

Anastasia: “—In yer story, jus’ what point of compromise d’ya intend on takin’?”

So she declared.

4

Louis: “Aau?”

As she cupped Louis’s face between her hands, who was looking at her curiously, Rem let out a long, deep sigh.

That reaction of Rem’s caused Louis’s face to look more and more puzzled as her cheeks remained cupped.

From the girl’s demeanor, Rem reflected that she must have caused her to worry.

Even though she reflected—

Rem: “Haah…”

???: “That’s quite the sigh, Rem. Is something the matter?”

Rem: “Nee-sama…”

Just when she gave a big sigh, a gentle voice called out from beside her.

It was Ram, who had returned to their assigned passenger cabin, having prepared some tea. Behind her, she was accompanied by a girl with antlers—Tanza, Rem recalled her name to be.

Noticing Rem’s gaze, Ram nodded and said, “Ah,” Ram: “It seemed like she had nothing to do with the time on her hands, so Ram brought her along.”

Tanza: “It is not as if I have nothing to do…”

Ram: “Really? There was a look of dissatisfaction on your face when you were kept away from the rest of those loudmouths. Even the Empire has ideas like wanting to fight to protect women and children. Ram thought they would have been more foolish.”

Rem: “N-Nee-sama, that is a bit of an exaggeration…”

Rem’s cheeks stiffened slightly at her sister’s rather blunt statement.

It was still taking quite a bit of time to come to a thorough mutual understanding between herself and her sister, but even so, since the appeal from the root of her soul was honest, Rem could feel her heart stirring with every single move Ram made.

Regardless, Tanza looked discontent with the way Ram had put it.

Tanza: “It may be true that many of the people in the battalion, especially Cecilus-sama, think about things in a simple manner, but among them are those who are as sharp-witted as the Governor.”

Rem: “I see. So, it was that sharp-witted Governor who told you to stay behind?”

Tanza: “—. No, it was Schwartz-sama who had told me to rest.”

Louis: “U.”

At Ram’s switch-up, the corners of Tanza’s mouth slightly stiffened as she replied. Immediately, Louis, whose cheeks were being cupped by Rem, moaned as the pressure of the hands grew stronger.

Oh no! Thought Rem as she apologized to Louis with an “I’m sorry”.

Rem: “I carelessly did such a thing. Are you alright, Louis-chan?”

Louis: “Auu… Uau?”

Rem: “…No, that has nothing to do with this.”

Louis: “Uu.”

Her cheeks still being sandwiched, Louis cast a doubtful gaze on Rem after hearing the latter’s answer.

Turning away from Louis’s gaze, her eyes met Ram’s, who had just been serving the tea. She placed a cup of warm, fragrant tea in front of Rem,

Ram: “Despite being a confidential dragon carriage of the Empire, it’s not as well-stocked with tea leaves as you’d expect. The flavor isn’t anything too notable, but it will keep your body warm.”

Rem: “Th-Thank you. I’ll take a sip now.”

Ram: “So? Did Barusu do something rude to you?”

Rem: “Ptooey.”

Finally releasing Louis’s cheeks, as soon as she put her mouth on the tea, she sputtered it out. As Rem quickly put down the cup, Louis tried to wipe her face with her own sleeve.

Rem: “I’m fine, I’m fine, Louis-chan… Um, what is it, Nee-sama?”

Ram: “Nothing at all. Barusu’s behavior is usually rude and inconsiderate. Even if it is guesswork, chances are high that it is the reason why Rem’s face looks so gloomy.”

Rem: “That’s also a bit of an exaggeration, no matter how you say it…”

In other words, it was just some guesswork off of a hunch, so Rem breathed a sigh of relief as Louis wiped her face. But, that reaction was enough for the perceptive Ram to guess the reason for her sigh.

Sitting cross-legged just in front of her, Ram stared at Rem as she tilted her cup.

Under the pressure of that silence, Rem soon relented and confessed.

Rem: “Um, about Emilia-san…”

Ram: “Emilia-sama? Yes, Emilia-sama is also clueless and inconsiderate in some aspects, isn’t she? So is that why Rem’s face was so gloomy?”

Rem: “N-no, that’s not it! It’s just… I wanted to ask what the relationship between that person, the person called Natsuki Subaru, and Emilia-san is…”

As the tone of her voice fell, Rem succeeded in asking her question while keeping as calm as she could.

However, at this time, Rem did not realize that the very choice of topic was enough to make Ram’s light-crimson eyes narrow.

But, her astute-looking older sister quietly muttered, “I see,”

Ram: “Well, Ram ought to tear Barusu limb from limb. Let’s do that together later.”

Rem: “Nee-sama?!”

Ram: “Hehe, it will be a sisterly collaboration. I suppose Barusu can be useful sometimes.”

Her faintly smiling sister possessed enchanting beauty, but her remarks were extremely disturbing. And after hearing Ram’s remarks, it was Tanza who quite literally had a horn to pick.

She took a sip of the tea that had been brewed for her too, and though she was surprised at the taste with a “Wow”,

Tanza: “Is that not a bit of an imprudent statement? Barusu… I suppose that is referring to Schwartz-sama. But, if you lay your hands on Schwartz-sama, I and the rest of the battalion will not show mercy.”

Ram: “That’s quite the courageous response… Tanza, how old are you?”

Tanza: “—? I will turn twelve this year.”

Ram: “That’s it. That explains it.”

Tanza: “Even though you have reached some comprehension, I am unable to understand.”

Rem approved of the dissatisfied Tanza’s view.

Why had Ram reached an understanding when she had heard Tanza’s age? To begin with, was it not so that Ram had not even answered Rem’s question yet?

Um, what kind of relationship does that girl Emilia have with Subaru?

Rem: “…They were, awfully close.”

If she were then to be asked “So what?”, even Rem would be unable to reply with anything but “Ha?”, but Rem did have many thoughts about how close those two were.

Thus, Rem preferred to resolve this as soon as possible so she could focus on her own problems.

Rem’s problems, that was to say—Anyway, it was Rem’s problem.

Rem: “That’s right. It’s just a trivial matter that needs to be taken care of quickly so that I can face the bigger issues. Nothing more, nothing less.”

???: “—Rem, you got a minute?”

Rem: “Ha?!”

With a loud jolt, Rem reflexively stood up on the spot. This caused Rem to unconsciously pick up Louis, who had been on her lap.

Rem lifted Louis up, who in her surprise let out an “Auu!”, and Rem yet again apologized to her, looking toward the door of the cabin, in the direction where she was called from,

Rem: “Wh-Who is it?”

Ram: “Not just who, it’s Barusu, the one to be torn to pieces. —It seems that their discussion is over.”

Rem: “Ah…”

At Ram’s words, as she gracefully tasted her tea, Rem let out a small sigh and hugged Louis. With an “Au?”, Louis twisted her head, and Rem closed her eyes as she buried the tip of her nose into her golden hair.

Just before, Rem was present when an attack was launched on the coupled dragon carriages, but afterward, she did not join the subsequent discussion where Abel had taken Subaru with a serious look on his face.

Of course, there was also the fact that she would not be useful even if she got mixed up in an important conversation, and there was also the small issue that she had ascertained earlier that was still bothering her.

However, the biggest reason was—

Louis: “U?”

The reason was that she had an unpleasant apprehension about the one in her arms, Louis.

She did not fully know why, but Rem’s heart instinctively knew that she needed to be by Louis’s side. Thus, when she had shut herself in this cabin like this—

Tanza: “—Schwartz-sama, come in.”

Subaru: “Ah, thanks… Wait, Tanza was here too?”

Tanza: “Yes, since Schwartz-sama conspired with everyone, and forced me to stay behind.”

Subaru: “Something about the way you put it makes me feel guilty…”

While Rem was flustered, Tanza instead welcomed the visitor into the room.

When Tanza hit him with some resentful complaints, the person who entered scratched his head in a troubled manner. Even though his stature had shrunk, the atmosphere of his troubled profile had not changed much.

That was probably because even if he grew somewhat taller, the childish look of his face would not disappear.

Rem: “Despite the mean looking eyes, he’s a strange person…”

Subaru: “Hey?! Just now, did someone say something bad about my eyes? I heard you, you know?”

Ram: “This is quite the considerable feat. To think that the complaints of the people of the Kingdom of Lugunica could be heard across the border.”

Subaru: “There’s no way the whole Kingdom is talking about my eyes! They’re making delightful conversation about dinner and plans for tomorrow and whatnot, I bet!”

Giving an exaggerated response to Ram’s teasing, Subaru strode into the room with a great deal of swagger.

For some reason Rem felt unable to look at Subaru, so she hid her face behind Louis, whom she was holding up with her arms, and did not face him directly.

Instead, Louis took her place and spoke an “Uau” to Subaru.

Subaru: “Yo, Louis, I also have some business with you. Would you happen to know where Rem is?”

Louis: “Aauu.”

Subaru: “I see, so you don’t know. Welp, I’m beat. Even though I had something important to tell her…”

Rem: “—. If it’s an important matter, please don’t joke around and get to the point.”

Subaru: “Whoa, Rem! So you were behind Louis?! I didn’t notice!”

Subaru forced an unnatural and exaggerated reaction when Rem interjected. But then again, his forced behavior seemed to have fooled Louis, as she shrugged her shoulders in disappointment that she could not hide Rem from him.

As she lowered Louis to the floor and stroked her head to comfort her, Rem narrowed her eyes.

Rem: “…Perhaps, you’re overdoing things?”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “I think I’ve said it before. Please stop overdoing things and shouldering reckless burdens like that. After all, you’re not a hero who can do everything.”

Subaru’s attitude just before seemed to be some sort of brave front, so Rem quoted the same words that she had told him in the past.

Subaru’s eyes widened at those words, however, he immediately smirked and said,

Subaru: “Nah, surprisingly, I’m objectively viewed as Superman, so while I’m grateful for Rem’s opinion, I’ll just accept it as a cute voice.”

Rem: “Please don’t joke around.”

Subaru: “I’m not joking. —Rem, I have something important to tell you about Louis.”

Straightening his posture, Subaru erased his smirk and said so straightforwardly.

Hearing that, Rem gulped, and in her place, Ram sighed at the exchange of the two, and,

Ram: “Barusu, shall Ram and Tanza excuse ourselves?”

Subaru: “Nah, it’s fine if Nee-sama and Tanza stay. Nee-sama can be the representative of the Big Sister Division, and Tanza can be the representative of the Loli Division.”

Ram: “You are saying Ram is superior to Frederica as an older sister. Naturally.”

Tanza: “Um, what do you mean by “lolly” division…?”

Requested to be present, Ram puffed out her chest and Tanza cocked her head.

Then, Rem gently pulled Louis closer as Subaru turned his gaze towards them again. Holding the back of Louis’s head to her chest, Rem fixed her eyes on Subaru.

And then—

Subaru: “—Let’s resolve it. This lovely relationship between us, that we don’t really understand.”

Chapter 23:
Louis

1

Truly, their relationship had been a peculiar one, Natsuki Subaru thought.

Perhaps rather than peculiar, it ought to be called a malignant providence that had guided Subaru and his companions thus far.

Their ideologies, their ways, he despised absolutely all of it with every fiber of his being; the Vollachian Empire.

The one who had given him the unbearable yearning to cry his heart out for reasons he did not understand; bereft of her Memories, Rem.

The one he had cast the entirety of the blame upon, who he had utterly loathed; the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb.

Served with a situation he could not help but curse, lamenting and raging in accordance with the path that had been laid out for him, while he repeatedly continued to crash, Subaru had been able to survive through these days by dying over and over again.

Here, there were also people who he had made contact with, who had helped him, and he had helped; the Vollachian Empire.

He was together with the one whose kindness and deep thoughtfulness made him yearn to weep; bereft of her Memories, Rem.

The one who had risked her life time and time again, bravely devoting herself to him; the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb.

Processing the curse that had been served to him, refusing to follow the path that had been laid out for him, while they continued to gently hurt each other, Subaru had been able to survive through these days by dying over and over again.

Was it malediction, grief, or hatred? Or perhaps, without cursing, without grieving, it could be forgiveness?

The time had come to resolve this relationship, which up till now had continued to remain ambiguous.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru's declaration upon entering the passenger cabin cloaked the space with an air of tension.

Present in the room were Rem and Louis, joined by Ram and Tanza, totaling four. The former two were directly concerned in the matter, the latter two, witnesses; Subaru desired to converse with them.

Emilia, Beatrice, and the rest were waiting for the resolution.

Regardless of the form Natsuki Subaru's answer would take, they were waiting.

Rem: "…Has the important discussion with Abel-san concluded?"

Before Subaru, who had been considering how to broach the subject, Rem was the first to speak.

Seated beside Louis, with her hand in hers, Rem's words, whether she was conscious of it or not, seemed like an attempt to keep things in check.

In response to her question, Subaru shook his head,

Subaru: "It's paused for now. That discussion can't proceed until we've resolved our own matters… The discussion with Abel also involves Louis."

Louis: "Aau?"

Rem: "Why, is Louis-chan involved?"

Subaru: “It’s because according to the prophecy of the Stargazer guy, Louis’s presence is crucial for us to win this battle.”

Rem: “—Hk.”

As Subaru presented the prerequisite without concealing anything, a bitter expression crossed Rem’s face. Holding Louis’s hand, Rem looked at Subaru with her pale blue eyes and said “So that means”,

Rem: “You’re saying that you’re going to make Louis-chan fight? Despite her being so small, just a child who doesn’t understand anything, you’re suggesting such a cruel thing…”

Subaru: “Whether she needs to fight or not is a question for later. But, let me clarify something first. —The notion that Louis is just a kid who doesn’t understand anything, is a mistaken one.”

Rem: “What do you…”

Subaru: “Even though communicating with words is difficult, Louis clearly understands the situation she’s in. She chooses who she wants to side with, and who she doesn’t. Knowing that, she is here with us.”

Rem: “That’s… Hk.”

At Subaru’s calm words, Rem lowered her head, speechless.

Rem, too, understood that Subaru’s objection was the truth. If it were not so, Louis would not be here in the first place.

From the moment she had been cast into the Vollachian Empire, she was in an incomprehensible situation; she acted like a clingy child, imprinting herself onto the first people she encountered, Subaru and Rem. —However, such an explanation could not account for the myriad of brutal trials that they had surmounted together.

If the imprinting was not a sign of love, but rather a manifestation of a defensive instinct seeking a protector in order to survive, it would go without saying that being together with Subaru and Rem was detrimental to Louis’s survival.

If she merely wanted to survive, it would have been easier for Louis had she not been with Subaru and his companions.

Ram: “On that point, Ram agrees with Barusu. Although only bits and pieces of the situation have been heard from Rem, that child being here, despite having been separated from both Rem and Barusu, is a result of her own choosing.”

Rem: “Nee-sama…”

Ram: “Don’t misunderstand, Rem. Ram is entirely on Rem’s side and has resolved in her heart to tear Barusu apart together with you later, but she won’t twist the truth.”

Subaru: “There was one part of that declaration that I can’t ignore, but thank you.”

With a feeling somewhere between gratitude and bitterness, Subaru thanked Ram, who had interjected.

To Subaru, that too felt like an attempt to keep things in check from Ram’s side. At the same time, it was an indication that Ram would be impartial in this conversation and had no intention of emotionally siding with Rem.

That was exactly in line with the way that Rem used to often describe her assessment of Ram’s behavior.

Subaru: “Nee-sama, is far too kind… huh?”

Whether those words murmured within his mouth could be heard or not, Ram snorted without giving any words, then crossed her slender legs and brought her cup of tea to her lips.

Beside her, Tanza, who seemed to have been somewhat bored, looked at Subaru with her dark eyes, and,

Tanza: “Similar to Ram-sama, I also shall not support Schwartz-sama. I am unable to gauge the situation, so please do not be mistaken if you were intending to make me an ally here.”

Subaru: “I know. Tanza is being reliably strict with me. I didn’t think you'd take my side anyway."

Tanza: "…"

Subaru: "Huh? That seemed to have upset you a little? Why?"

Having followed Ram's lead and declared her status as an impartial witness, Tanza's expression became a bit sulky.

Tanza's expression rarely changed, but this sullen face was relatively common. Most of the time, it popped up in response to Cecilus's unreasonable words and actions, or when Hiain said too much.

Also, it was quite frequently directed toward Subaru.

Nevertheless, thanks to Ram and Tanza stating their positions, he had finished mentally preparing himself.

With that, Subaru once again turned to face his main focus, Rem and Louis.

And then—

Subaru: "Louis, we're about to discuss something important. It's about you, and I won't conceal any of what I feel within my heart of hearts. Will you listen, without running away?"

Louis: "…Aau!"

Subaru: "I see. You're a good girl. Thank you."

After a moment's hesitation, Louis nodded with a lively voice.

That reaction was yet another piece of evidence that she had a good understanding of what Subaru and the others around her were talking about. Rem, avoiding any eye contact, glanced at Louis's profile.

Therein, Rem was hoping to see the emotions she desired; if Louis would show even the slightest sign of discomfort, she could use that as a reason to stop the conversation.

But, in Louis's profile, she had been unable to find a reason to do so.

Subaru: "Rem, Louis, I think both of you have realized. That from the start, I was always really wary of Louis, and that I always shunned her… and, that I had always hated her."

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "The reason for Rem being so excessively suspicious of me at first; that was the main source. When I tried to somehow separate the two of you, I even got my fingers broken."

Rem: "About that time… I also went too far."

Subaru: "It's fine. Looking back, it's just another good memory between me and Rem."

Rem: "Huh?"

Subaru flexed the fingers of his left hand as he answered, and Rem made a face as if doubting his sanity. Not only Rem, but Ram and Tanza too made similar faces, so despite the topic being broken fingers, Subaru changed the subject by saying, "Anyway" before his heart could be broken.

Subaru: "I was actively wary of Louis. And so, Rem was actively suspicious of me. I don't know how Louis was feeling, but you must have felt that tense atmosphere, right?"

Louis: "Uu?"

Subaru: "Even after we got separated at one point and later were reunited with all the Shudraqians, even after we retreated from Guaral, and after that around the time of the siege of Guaral, it had always been like that."

Because of that, the gap between Subaru and Rem kept getting wider and wider, making it difficult to fill.

As for the reasons Subaru had felt hatred for Louis, the fact that her existence caused his relationship with Rem to worsen was something that undoubtedly had a great influence.

His animosity towards Louis only began to change after they arrived at the Demon City of Chaosflame, having separated from Rem.

While spending time with Louis without Rem as a mediator, she had worked her hardest to protect Subaru, and little by little, Subaru had no choice but to acknowledge that.

That was why, after they had split in the Demon City, and he was reunited with Beatrice at the Imperial Capital, he had been honestly happy that Louis was also there. At that point, none of the animosity that he had from the beginning remained.

Subaru: "If we just stayed like that, continuing to go on without thinking too much about it, I think it definitely would have been easier. But, that's just not possible. It's the same as a wound. Some wounds will heal if left alone, while others will only get worse. This is a wound that we can't just leave alone."

In order for the wound to heal, it needed to be treated.

And, for treatment, one could not just rely on magic or medicine, in some cases, more daring methods had to be used.

Thus, this was a wound of the sort where they had no choice but to resort to such means.

Therefore—

Subaru: "Up to now, I've never once said it. The reason, Louis, why I hated you."

Louis: "Uau…"

Staring into those blue eyes, Subaru poured out his feelings.

As if responding to Subaru's serious gaze and tone of voice, Louis did not avert her gaze either. This girl had resolved herself to accept whatever he might say.

Instead—

Rem: “…Please stop.”

Biting her lip, it was Rem who spoke in such a trembling voice.

In a voice that trembled as if she was pleading, she remained holding Louis’s hand as she spoke. —No, that was wrong. It was not that. The one with their hand being held, was not Louis.

It was Rem. It was Rem whose hand was being held by Louis, that much was clear.

Rem: “I don’t… want to hear it. The reason that you hated Louis-chan, I don’t care about such a thing. Isn’t it fine to just think that you were cold-hearted?”

Weakly shaking her head in refusal, Rem rejected Subaru’s words.

Stopping herself from putting pressure on Louis’s hand by instead clenching her other hand so tightly that her bones creaked, Rem tried to refuse what came next.

He wanted to respect those feelings of Rem’s. He wanted to grant all of Rem’s wishes.

Subaru: “I’m sorry. I won’t let you plug your ears on this matter.”

But, he must not do so.

Neither could he fulfill Rem’s wishes, nor could he show them respect.

If she did not want to listen, her only option was to flee this room. Subaru had no right to stop Rem if that was what she truly wanted to do.

However, Rem also understood.

That plugging her ears to Subaru’s words here would be tantamount to turning her back on her own missing Memories, and—

Rem: “…”

And it also would mean betraying the feelings of Ram, who was silently watching over her.

Rem: “Even so, I don’t want it… I don’t want… to hear it… hk.”

Clenching her eyes shut and gritting her teeth, Rem chose to not run away from here.

However, she felt a very, very strong urge to refuse Subaru’s next words.

While struck by her words, Subaru, again, kept his eyes fixed on Louis.

Louis: “Uau.”

Louis’s lips moved, indeed, she voiced a sound that did not form a coherent word.

That sound, he understood perfectly well that it was calling out his name, “Subaru”.

And because he understood that.

Subaru: “Louis, the reason why I hated you… why I detested you, is…”

Rem: “STOP… hk!!”

Subaru: “—Because you are the one responsible for stealing Rem’s Memories, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.”

—Because he understood that, Subaru had no choice but to respond.

2

He had said it. At last, he had finally said it, the words that had always been left unspoken.

The moment he told her, there were no deep emotions of a secret being laid bare, no heartbreaking sensation of a detestable individual being condemned.

Even now, as he revealed that which had been bottled up in his heart, there was naught but anguish of intensified weight and anguish.

And, it only got worse with the developments that followed thereafter.

Rem: “Waaaaahhh—!!”

Her voice raised, her face grimacing, Rem’s hands reached towards him.

Her hands seized Subaru’s collar, and with tremendous force, pushed him down onto the ground; he was unable to offer any resistance, as she was positioned on top of his body.

He probably would not have been able to do so even if his body had not become smaller, but now that he was smaller, it was especially true.

If Rem were to have put all her strength into her arms, she would have easily been able to cover Subaru’s mouth.

Yet, until those definitive words were spoken, Rem had done no such thing.

Even now, in this moment as she was mounted atop Subaru.

Rem: “Why… Just why… Hk.”

Her voice strained, her face contorting with fury, she scowled at Subaru’s face at a distance so close that he could feel her breath, but still she did not utilize all the strength in her arms.

Her emotions were bursting out, but even so, Rem remained rational before crossing the final line.

Subaru: “…”

Feeling Rem’s hot breath on his face, Subaru stretched out his hand to restrain the bystanders.

At the moment that Subaru was pushed down, Tanza immediately attempted to move to protect Subaru. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Ram was holding Tanza back by the arm.

From Subaru's side, too, he appealed to the two indicating that they had done enough, and looked back at Rem who was in front of him.

Drop by drop, tears streaked from Rem's pale blue eyes and fell upon Subaru's cheeks.

Her eyes housed neither anger nor sadness, but rather were intensely brimming with frustration, and the reason why she had maintained her rationality and opted not to cross that last line. That was what was embodied in her tears.

That was—

Rem: "Even without you telling me, I could tell… that Louis-Chan, that she had something to do with the Memories that I couldn't remember, I knew that…!"

Subaru: "Rem…"

Rem: "After all, what else could it have been? The only reason why you were so cruel to Louis-chan, trying to keep her away from me over and over again was because you thought I would be in danger if I stayed with her, there couldn't be any other reason, could there…? Hk."

Her breath, her voice, her eyes, all of them trembling feebly, Rem poured her heart out.

Upon being told this, Subaru shut his eyes. It was only natural.

Indeed, it was none other than Rem who was the victim of these lost Memories.

The thought that Rem herself could be less concerned about her own Memories than Subaru and everyone else, such an absurd notion could absolutely never be the case.

It was natural that more than anyone else, she would have been in anguish, longing for the whereabouts of her own Memories.

Rem: “I’m well aware… Do you think I’m stupid? Maybe I am stupid. I’m just a stupid woman who doesn’t know anything. After all, I don’t know anything about you! And I don’t even want to! And yet you just barge right in… I hate you!”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “You are nothing compared to Louis-chan. Louis-chan has always stayed beside me, she’s always cared about me… She is, Louis-chan, is my…”

Those endless streams of tears not only hit Subaru’s cheeks, but they also ran down Rem’s cheeks and chin, embellishing her body and heart with teardrops, disguising them.

She knew, but she still wished that she did not.

Rem: “Everything, all of it has to be some kind of mistake… All of it, all of it is your lies…”

Subaru: “—Rem.”

Rem: “—Ah.”

Feebly, Rem’s eyes welled up with tears, and when a large teardrop fell, her blurred vision must have been temporarily cleared, for she could see Subaru’s face right before her.

Subaru, pinned down as he was, gently cupped Rem’s face between his hands, and fixed her gaze on himself.

Black and blue eyes met, and Subaru spoke to her lovely face, soaked with tears as it was.

Subaru: “It’s not a lie. Everything you thought, Rem, was true. Louis, was our enemy.”

Rem: “—Hk, what do you mean, enemy? Is it because of what she did to me, to my Memories? If so… then!”

With a strong shake of her head, Rem raised herself up as she left Subaru’s hands. As it was, she turned toward Louis, who remained standing in her initial position,

Rem: “Then, I will… I’ll forgive Louis-Chan. I’ll forgive her, so isn’t that enough? See, with that, everything will be solved, won’t it…?”

Subaru: “No, that’s not enough. That, doesn’t solve anything.”

Rem: “WHY?!!”

Subaru: “—Because I will never forgive Louis for the pain she caused you.”

Her voice cracking, Rem said she would forgive Louis, to which Subaru thus declared.

Hearing Subaru's words, Rem's eyes widened, letting out a hoarse breath. Suddenly, Rem's body lost its strength, and Subaru slowly raised himself up.

Rem, still on top of Subaru's body, stood up and exchanged glances at close range.

Subaru: "It's not just me. It's Ram, it's everyone else, it's everybody who cares about you, Rem. They won't forgive Louis. No matter how much you say you forgive her."

Rem: "That's, just…"

Subaru: "Besides, Rem… the things Louis did, they weren't all to just you. Many, many more people are suffering from Gluttony's wrongdoings because of the things Louis did."

Even if Rem really forgave Louis, even if she forgave her out of compassion and not out of impulse, there were many more "Rems" in this world who could not forgive Louis.

So long as those people were not saved, Rem's desperate plea would never come to fruition.

Rem: "…Many, others?"

Subaru: "Yeah. To an outrageous extent. So many people are suffering."

Rem: "Well… Well, there's nothing that can be done about it, right?"

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "From the very beginning, there was nothing that could be done, that's the sort of issue this is, right? You're saying that there's nothing that can be done… Is that the resolution you were speaking of?"

Her lips trembling, more large tears began to well up in Rem's eyes.

In a manner likely more intense than how she anguished over her own Memories, Rem wept for Louis.

That she wanted to save Louis regardless of her own Memories, that she truly desired to save her; in accordance with how emotional she had gotten, Rem's lips trembled. She, wept.

Those tears, that trembling voice, both caused Subaru to feel the pain of being torn apart.

Subaru: "I'm sorry, it must feel like I'm messing with you."

Rem: "…Please, don't apologize."

Subaru: "But, I'm sorry. This whole time, I've only been saying things that are hard and painful for you, Rem."

Rem: "Like I said, please don't apologize… Hk. I, I don't want to hear it…!"

Subaru: "I'm sorry, but you have to listen to me."

Rem: "Like I said… Hk!"

Subaru: "I don't want to give up. —I don't want, to continue being unable to forgive Louis."

Rem: "—Huh?"

A gasp escaped from Rem's throat, and her eyes opened wide.

Facing Rem, Subaru took in a deep breath and licked his lips. Word by word, he ensured that his thoughts, exactly as he had intended them, were fully conveyed to the girls who he wanted to hear them.

Subaru: "I'm the same as you, Rem. I want to forgive Louis. I don't want to continue being unable to forgive her. But, I can't. After all, Rem is really important to me."

Rem: "—Hk."

Subaru: "That's why, I won't forgive Louis for the terrible things that she did to you, for taking away your Memories, and for causing you to still suffer like this, Rem.”

Gently reaching out, Subaru wiped a tear from Rem’s cheek with his finger.

By the time he wiped off that single droplet, many more teardrops had already moistened Rem’s cheeks. Even so, Rem did not break Subaru’s finger.

It was as if to say he had not been denied, thus Subaru continued to speak.

Subaru: “Everybody really let me have it. They scolded me a whole lot, telling me not to say or think such stupid things. I think Otto probably still thinks things would work out better if Louis were dead.”

But, that was surely the natural mindset.

This was not to say that it was a self-purification process, but everyone knew in their hearts that it had to happen. Even Subaru knew it in his mind, and that was why he strongly faced strong opposition.

However—

Subaru: “Julius told me. He’s an incredible guy. On the other hand, he might be an idiot. He’s as much a victim as you are, Rem, but he shouldn’t say those things like they’re normal. He’s an idiot.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “I’ve been told lots of things by smart people, by stupid people… tons of things by cool people, by kind people, by amazing people, and I’ve thought. I’ve thought about it a whole lot, and I’ve decided. My point of compromise.”

Rem: “Point of, compromise…”

Subaru: “I want to believe in Louis. I want to forgive her… But, I won’t forgive her right now.”

So, as he voiced his thoughts, watching Rem's eyes waver in front of him, the words of a certain man passed through Subaru's mind.

???: "How could I go along with someone who decides who lives or dies based on his own fickle whims?"

The words of a man, with whom Natsuki Subaru had been incompatible, clawed painfully at his soul.

He was told that his attitude of deciding to forgive or not based on his own fickle whims, was not something worthy of trust.

There was no doubt that those words were correct. That which was the least reliable, was Subaru's own heart.

Even so, it was a matter of reaching a compromise with this heart, something that he could not yield to anybody else, and proceeding onward.

So easily moved, so quick to come around, with this fragile and pathetic soul of his, he would reach a compromise.

Rem: "—Ah."

Subaru hugged Rem tightly, who was surprised by his words and unable to move.

Despite the difference in height, Subaru pulled himself out from under her body and embraced the slumped over Rem's head to his stomach.

Subaru wished to convey that he truly cared about Rem from the bottom of his heart.

And then—

Louis: "—Uau."

At the sound of that voice calling his name, Subaru looked at Louis.

Parted from Rem's hand, Louis had been standing still, and knowing that it was now her turn, she called out to Subaru.

Louis: “Uu…”

Witnessing how forlorn Louis appeared as she stood, Rem, still in Subaru’s embrace, let out an “Ah” and hurriedly stood up.

Then, as Rem hugged Louis from the front,

Rem: “I-I’m sorry, Louis-chan… We, on our own…”

Louis: “Au, Uau, aaau.”

Rem: “I’m, sorry… Hk.”

With a feeble apology, Rem wiped her face with her sleeve, then stood up beside Louis.

Once again, she tightly squeezed Louis’s hand, however, this time it was with a face that did not rely upon her. He felt just a little bit envious of Louis, who was able to move Rem’s heart like that.

In addition to that—

Subaru: “—Louis, do you still want to become me?”

Louis: “…U?”

Rem: “…What, are you saying?”

Seemingly not understanding the meaning behind Subaru’s question, the two of them tilted their heads together.

Indeed, they had both tilted their heads. Not only Rem, Louis had too. —”Louis” had, too.

Subaru: “As I told you earlier, Rem. Even if you forgive Louis, I won’t forgive her. The many other people who have suffered harm due to Gluttony won’t forgive Louis either. But…”

Rem: “…But?”

Subaru: “But, Louis, I want to forgive you. If I was able to forgive you, that’s what I would want to do. So, let me ask you this.”

Firmly, conscious to not let his voice waver, Subaru looked straight at Louis.

He saw Rem squeeze Louis's hand, and Louis squeezed it back. While he hoped that this would be the answer to the relationship between the two.

Subaru: "Are you a Sin Archbishop? Or, is it possible?"

Louis: "…"

Subaru: "It's been said to me a lot. And, I agree. The world will not forgive the Sin Archbishops, and it must not forgive them. The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb, is a being who must not be forgiven."

Louis: "…"

Subaru: "But, you helped me. You protected me over and over again. You didn't even know that you once wanted to become me. You're completely different to the Louis Arneb that I knew. Still, you can use the Authority of Gluttony. You possess a Witch Factor."

That was Subaru's full impression of "Louis" from the time he had spent with her thus far.

She was of the same appearance as the Sin Archbishop, Louis Arneb, whom he had encountered in the Hall of Memories, and even though she possessed the same Authority, she did not seem to be the same person.

That was just like "Natsuki Subaru" from some time ago, and "Rem", who was like this now.

Someone who, while being the same, was different.

Someone who could make that choice of their own will, to be the same, or to be different.

To that "Louis", he wished to ask.

Subaru: "Are you a Sin Archbishop that no one in this world can ever forgive? Or, is it possible that you might be able to take back what the Sin Archbishop has done?"

Louis: "A, uu…"

Subaru: "Can… can you, start your life anew?"

What if, just what if.

What if the situation that "Louis" had been placed in was the same as that of "Natsuki Subaru" and "Rem"? Then, Subaru was asking a terribly cruel and unfair question.

Having no memories, having no clue as to what was happening, the hardship of being burdened by the self that one is not; Subaru was keenly aware of those feelings. Rem, too, knew them well.

And now, he was trying to force those same things upon Louis like this.

However—

Subaru: "If you can do that, if that is what you desire, then take my hand."

As he said this, Subaru slowly held out his hand to Louis.

Louis's eyes traced back and forth between Subaru's face and the proffered hand; similarly, as Rem held her breath next to her, her gaze shifted between Subaru's eyes and hand.

Subaru: "Louis, a lot of people curse you the same way that I do. I can't speak for all of their feelings. But, I can just say one thing."

Louis: "…"

Subaru: "I don't know what you would need to do to get everyone to forgive you. It's just… just, what you need to do for me to forgive you, I can tell you that."

Before he had come here, before he had been permitted this time, Emilia had told him.

Emilia had said it was something Subaru had taught her, but that was unthinkable. After all, Subaru was always learning from everyone else.

He did not even know how to resolve his own feelings without being taught how to do so.

Questions like, why did Subaru want to forgive Louis?

And, how could Subaru be able to forgive Louis? All of it.

Thus, the way to reach that, to reach the point of compromise, was —

Subaru: "—Louis, save lots of people."

Louis: "…"

Subaru: "Right now, you're going through unreasonable circumstances. I know that without any memory, you're being forced to bear an outrageously unreasonable cross. Even so…"

Taking a deep breath, with unwavering eyes his gaze fell upon Louis, he told her.

Subaru: "You can help lots of people."

Louis: "…"

Subaru: "If you help and help, and keep helping, continuing to help more than you've stolen… at least I, and I alone, will be on your side."

—The things you've done won't ever disappear.

That was what Anastasia had said to him once in the past, and then again just before, a statement that froze Subaru in his tracks.

Now, Subaru found those words no different to traumatic advice that there were some things that even his Return by Death was unable to overturn.

However, when Anastasia had made that statement, she had also said,

Subaru: “If you want people to believe you’re doing the right thing, you have no choice but to show them something that backs that up. The only way to change their appraisal is to overturn it with a different one.”

That was the most important part of the traumatic advice that Subaru had received.

The fact that Subaru was offering his hand to Louis like this now, was also because through her actions, she had overturned the animosity Subaru harbored towards her.

That change of heart that had happened to Subaru, would happen to all the people who suffered from the damage of Gluttony.

That was—

Subaru: “—That’s the “From Zero” I’m offering you.”

Not just from zero, but on a world-wide scale, she had no choice but to start from the negatives.

Facing such an absurd, outrageous, and tremendously nonsensical challenge, it was grandly delusional reasoning, for who in their right mind would believe that such a thing could be accomplished?

But, that was the best that Subaru could offer.

So then, if facing this absurd, outrageous, and tremendously nonsensical challenge, was a grandly delusional reasoning that nobody in their right mind would believe could be accomplished, Subaru would lend his aid.

In the same way that it had once been done for none other than Natsuki Subaru in the past.

Louis: “…”

Hand outstretched, Subaru remained still, awaiting an answer to come.

He did not rush her. Nor could he wait forever. He was giving her the time she needed, and quietly awaited the needed answer.

Rem: “I… I don’t know…”

During that stillness, beside the silent Subaru and Louis, Rem muttered.

For but a moment, it seemed as if that statement meant that she did not comply with Subaru’s proposal. However, Rem’s eyes said otherwise.

She, continued.

Rem: “About the ones called Sin Archbishops, about the name Louis Arneb, all of it.”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “But, if those so-called Sin Archbishops, and also this Louis Arneb person, if their existence is not forgiven in this world… then what, what will this child become?”

Her voice, trembled. But, her pale blue eyes were not filled with tears.

As if to say that with a blurred and moist vision, neither would she be able to see the answer she coveted, nor the answer the other person presented, Rem’s eyes were direct.

To be neither a Sin Archbishop, nor Louis Arneb, if such was her choosing, what would she become?

As “Louis”, she would bear many unreasonable burdens, and walk a path seeking forgiveness, unaware of whether it truly existed on the other side of it all. —Such a girl, just who would she become?

When proffered this question, all Subaru could say was—

Subaru: “—Spica.”

Rem: “Huh…?”

Subaru: “To this girl, starting over as a new self, with a new way of life, I bestow this name.”

Rem’s eyes widened, and Louis’s eyes followed suit.

If she chose to live in a different way to how she had lived thus far, and set her sights on a completely different future from now on, Subaru intended to do everything he could to support her.

Because, in a world where nobody would forgive a Sin Archbishop, in a world where nobody would forgive Louis Arneb, he still wanted to forgive the girl who stood before him from the bottom of his heart.

So that Subaru could forgive the girl, he wished for her to become such a person, thus—.

Rem: “Spica…”

Stunned, dumbfounded, Rem uttered the name, then looked to her side.

The young girl fixed her eyes on Subaru. He, too, looked at her without averting his eyes.

He wanted things to be like this, such was his wish.

But, if he spoke it out loud, the girl would surely do so. Not of her own wishes, but because she respected Subaru’s; thus, he would not say it.

Because he wanted her to choose for herself, and not for anyone else.

He wanted her to walk and walk and keep walking, so that when she looked back at the path she had walked, she would be able to think that it was a path that she had chosen to walk.

Louis: “—Uau.”

Subaru: "…"

The girl's thin lips moved. Subaru's name, was called out gently.

Silent and still, Subaru waited. He did not want to rush her. Nor could he wait forever. He had given her the time she needed, and she had chosen what was needed; he wanted to hear her answer.

Then, as Subaru desperately tried to contain himself, the girl's expression changed.

Louis: "Auuau."

Gentle and tender, words were spun, and a smile emerged.

Then, as tears trickled down from the corners of her blue eyes, the girl's hand softly grasped the hand Subaru had held out.

Welcoming that light, soft touch, Subaru clenched his eyes shut.

To be neither a Sin Archbishop, nor Louis Arneb, a new way of life.

Having been a Sin Archbishop, having been Louis Arneb, a past that could not be erased.

Taking that upon herself, she would need to walk a thorny path, the girl—"Spica", he held her hand so tightly and firmly, as if to never let go.

Subaru: "One day, I want to forgive you. —So, let's do our best together."

Spica: "…Au!"

Flashing her white teeth, Spica gave a wide grin with her tearful face.

Having witnessed that smile of Spica's from the side, Rem's emotions swelled up inside of her, and burst forth.

Rem: "—Hk."

With more passion and more tears than ever before, Rem embraced

Spica.

Embracing her, cradling her, wailing her heart out, Rem cried. Startled by the embrace, Spica was drawn in by Rem's emotions, and as her expression clouded over and scrunched up,

Spica: "—Aaaau!"

Spica, too, with a loud voice, her face scrunching up, in a manner befitting her age, while shouldering a destiny that someone of her age should never have to, she burst into tears.

Just like how any other being who was newly born into this world would.

Wailing like newborn babies, the girls kept crying. They just kept crying.

—Subaru, also, cried a little.

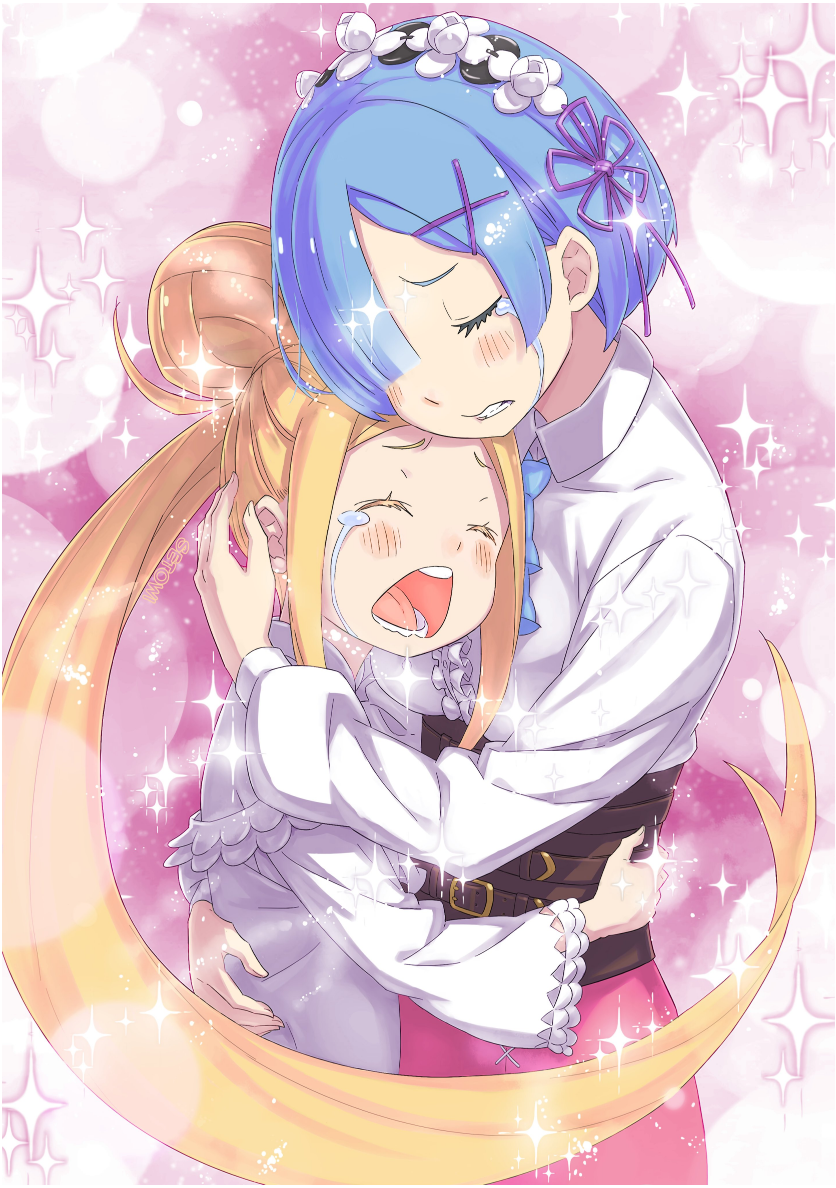
SETOMI

Chapter 24:
To Walk in the Light

1

???: “—Spica, is it?”

Looking at the two crying, Rem and the girl who had been Louis up until that point, a voice muttered.

Subaru wiped his tearful eyes with the back of his hand and turned around to see Ram, the person who had spoken. With her usual calm expression, she sat with her long legs crossed and her chin propped on her arm that rested on the table.

She tilted her head slightly and looked at Subaru with narrowed light crimson eyes,

Ram: “Where did that name come from?”

Subaru: “…It’s the name of a star. From my hometown, though.”

Ram: “So, you’re a poet, out of character for Barusu. But do you understand?”

With narrowed eyes, Ram’s gaze turned toward the two in an embrace.

That was enough to let Subaru know what Ram was actually saying.

Naturally, this was something he had discussed extensively before coming to this cabin.

Ram: “Do you know exactly what it means to use a Sin Archbishop, even if it is for a greater purpose?”

Subaru: “—. Of course, I thought about it. I can’t say I understand for sure, but…”

Ram: “If that’s the case, then stop.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Subaru’s throat let out a small sound as the cold, hard words struck him.

However, Ram, with eyes unmoved by his pain, continued to add.

Ram: “If you don’t properly understand, then don’t do it. —That is, to understand the meaning of facing these eyes.”

Saying this, Ram extended her hand, which had been supporting her chin, and touched the slender shoulder beside her.

It was Tanza, who stood next to Ram and watched the exchange between Subaru and the others along with Ram. Tanza was asked to be a witness and was present.

Her black eyes flickered at Subaru’s gaze,

Tanza: “I am very aware of Schwartz-sama’s feelings, as we have weathered many hardships at Ginunhive and along the way since then. However…”

Subaru: “Tanza.”

Tanza: “However, I would be inclined to think that even Schwartz-sama, who brought even Cecilus-sama with him, should not bring a Sin Archbishop with him.”

Resolutely correcting the wavering light in her eyes, Tanza looked at Subaru and said this.

Tanza did not flatter anyone by choosing words that were pleasing to the ear, but rather asserted her honest opinion. Tanza’s honest, yet childlike, opinions were thus deeply felt by Subaru.

Subaru: “…Yeah, I know, I’ve been an idiot.”

After Tanza’s words, he was once again acutely aware of the truth behind Ram’s words.

And that was the mistaken weight of what Natsuki Subaru had chosen.

Subaru: “I understand it all right. I’ve been told a lot, and I’m going to take it all on.”

Ram: “Yes. Ram is telling you, whatever Barusu or Rem may say, Ram will not allow it.”

???: “…Hk, Nee-sama.”

Ram: “No, Rem, as your older sister, your kindness makes Ram proud, but this is different.”

Holding Spica in a tight embrace, Rem looked at Ram with tearful eyes. But, shaking her head in response to her sister’s gaze, Ram clearly stated her viewpoint.

It was natural. Ram was yet another victim of Gluttony, robbed of her other half, Rem.

He would never think of trying to say something so presumptuous such as that her position was comparable to Subaru’s.

That was why—

Ram: “For her to want to be forgiven, the entrance for such a wish has yet to be opened. The only reason why this girl… Spica, has not been torn apart by Ram even now, is the issue of Memories, that is all.”

Rem: “…I don’t know how to get my Memories back right now, if anything happens to Spica…”

Ram: “Though it is unlikely, Rem’s Memories not coming back is an outcome that cannot be allowed to happen. Rem said it would be fine if they do not return, but Ram doesn’t want that. For Rem and Ram to recall just how much we loved each other, Ram will ensure we remember.”

Flatly declaring that she would regain her love, Ram’s conclusion was the same as before.

When the battle of the Pleiades Watchtower concluded, with Ley Batenkaitos dying, and Roy Alphard successfully being taken into custody, Roy's life was not taken, as he was a possible means of helping the victims of the Authority of Gluttony.

However—

Ram: "The only difference is that when compared to that Sin Archbishop, she is more cooperative."

Subaru: "Ram…"

Ram: "Stop making that face. Alright? If she wants to be forgiven, she has to make amends first. That is the logical thing to do. Anyway, she had already been told this."

Subaru: "—. Right."

With a nod in response to Ram's words, Subaru pressed his small fist against his chest.

Exactly as she said, Spica has been allowed a generous deferral for now. The people involved with her extended the period of deferral of her punishment because of her deeds and usefulness.

All Subaru could give her was a name to kick-start her determination to begin living anew, and assist her by getting a lot of other people to agree to extend the deferment.

Subaru: "For the time being, Spica… Are you unable to use the power of your Authority to restore Rem's Memory and Name in one go?"

Spica: "Uu, au…"

Subaru: "As expected, that's asking too much…"

Peeking over the shoulder of Rem's embrace, Spica shook her head apologetically.

She was opening and closing both her hands, but it did not seem easy to freely control her Authority and return that which the

Gluttonies had collected.

Rem: "…Are you sure that Louis-chan… No, Spica-chan, can do this? Can Spica-chan bring back mine and other people's missing memories?"

Subaru: "At least, Spica is the one with the highest chance, being able to do that is the minimum requirement. That in itself is already a different matter from what the Stargazer talked about."

Rem was worried, but that was something that Spica would need to be able to do.

This was the essential condition needed for Spica to walk while bearing the cross of "Louis" on her shoulders.

To that end, Spica needed to master the use of the Authority of Gluttony—

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "—? Um?"

A momentary, fleeting anxiety shut down her words and made Rem's eyes waver.

The generosity exhibited by Ram, the conditions necessary to undertake that, knowing the means that must be achieved in order to do so, the Authority's very existence was dreadful.

It was dreadful that in order to become something that was not the unforgivable Sin Archbishop, the Authority utilized by the Sin Archbishop would continue to be used, and Spica's way of life would once again draw closer to that of "Louis Arneb".

To keep Spica alive, meant to continue fighting against that fear.

With that resolve settled—

Subaru: "—I'll have you do it. I'm counting on you, Spica."

Spica: "U! Auau!"

With definite determination housed within her blue eyes, Spica nodded vigorously at Subaru's words.

Though Spica and the villainous "Louis Arneb" shared an appearance, their innermost feelings did not overlap. That was a hope that could certainly be believed in.

Subaru: "Tanza, I'm sorry I didn't take your advice."

Tanza: "—. Do you expect me to just smile and forgive you, saying it is something that always happens?"

Taking his eyes off Rem and Spica, Subaru turned back towards Tanza. The tone of Subaru's voice worsened, and Tanza responded in a voice stiff in emotions.

At that response, Subaru shrugged his shoulders with a "No,"

Subaru: "I don't expect that. After all, you rarely smile at me."

Tanza: "That is not what I…"

Subaru: "I do know what you mean. But, give me a break."

Tanza: "…If that is what you want, there must be countless methods to choose from. Why not just say that her power is for the sake of the Vollachian Empire and, by extension, for Yorna-sama's salvation?"

Tightly pursing her lips, Tanza vehemently argued so to Subaru.

Regardless of the authenticity of the Stargazer's prophecy, if attention was drawn to the fact that Spica's presence was essential to this battle, then Tanza would not be able to say no with Yorna's life on the line.

But, Subaru did not like that approach.

Subaru: "I could probably get Tanza to do as I say using that unfair tactic, but I don't like that idea. I don't want to use any unfair methods on anyone. You're one person who I feel that especially strongly about."

Tanza: "—. In that case, it is impossible for Schwartz-sama."

Tanza finally turned away from Subaru, hugging her own thin arms.

Confronted face-to-face with gestures and words regarding his cowardice, Subaru let out a long sigh.

The things Subaru wanted to do were always a path that would do nothing but hurt the people around him, the people who cared about Subaru.

Ram: "Well? How well did the unfair and cowardly Barusu play his cards out there?"

Subaru gave a wry smile at the way Ram phrased it.

Ram was kind for not letting Subaru's self-mockery be replaced with self-satisfaction in this way. Although he really wished that he could have played his cards as well as Ram put it.

Subaru: "I didn't do anything so perfectly. I had the means to do it over until I did it perfectly, but…"

For example, at the Gladiator Island, Subaru had been able to do that without hesitation.

Whenever he went down a mistaken path, or progressed into an undesired relationship, he gave it another go using a method to recover from those mistakes, with an assertiveness to just keep repeating in a cycle of trial and error.

Subaru: "But, now that I'm reunited with everyone, I don't want to do that."

As he said this, Subaru slid his tongue around inside his mouth; that which had been stored there for an awfully long time, the drug cartridge hidden behind his molar—Ascertaining that he did not feel that package of poison, he closed his eyes.

Even if he did resort to that method again, he would never use it in order to avert his eyes from mistakes in his relationships.

And precisely because he had firmly decided that in his heart—

Subaru: “—After all, Otto also punched me really hard.”

That even if the path he trod would force him to make sacrifices, he must not repeat it.

2

Garfiel: “Ottobro, show me yer hand, ‘n I’ll fix it up.”

Upon hearing this, Otto turned to face Garfiel, who stood in front of him.

This rough-looking boy, despite his rugged exterior, had a very delicate nature. He was considerate and kind-hearted, truly embodying the essence of a member of the Emilia camp.

In response to Garfiel’s offer, Otto shook his head and replied,

Otto: “There is no need to be so concerned. It is not that serious…”

Garfiel: “Ottobro, that ain’t like ya.”

Otto: “…”

Garfiel: “Y’know, it ain’t like my amazin’ self don’t have my own thoughts ‘n feelings. So, I kinda understand how ya must feel.”

Garfiel scratched his head and closed one of his eyes. Then, he gestured toward Otto’s hand with a jerk of his chin.

It was a painful sight, Otto’s right hand, which was swollen and bruised.

For a moment, Otto tried to turn away, to hide his hand from view, but it was foolish to think that he could do so in front of his sworn younger brother who was a skilled warrior. Above all—

Garfiel: “You ain’t plannin’ on goin’ into an important battle with that untreated hand, are ya Bro?”

Otto: “…With you saying that, I really cannot argue, can I?”

With a wry smile, conceding to the reasonable persuasion, Otto extended his bruised right hand.

The dark, swollen fist throbbed with pain. From the sensations that he had accumulated over the more than two decades of his life, Otto was pretty sure that the bones in his fist were broken.

If anything, thinking so only intensified the pain. Whether it was broken or not, it sure felt like it was broken.

Garfiel: “This feels like the “Timid Domus is the first to die on the battlefield”.”

Otto: “Did that not mean that someone who is usually timid going all out on the battlefield and dying a pointless death?”

Garfiel: “Well, I wouldn’t exactly associate “timid” with ya, Ottobro.”

As he spoke, Garfiel gently grasped the offered hand and cast a healing spell.

A sensation like being gently warmed by hot water enveloped his hand along with a faint light. In just a few seconds, the pain in Otto’s fist had subsided.

Garfiel: “It’s freshly healed, so if you’re gonna punch again, use yer left.”

Otto: “I do not want to break both hands. I will leave the next punch to you, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “If my amazin’ self did it, there’d be a massive hole, wouldn’t there? It’s only ‘cuz of yer strength that it stopped at that, y’know?”

With a gritting of teeth, Garfiel turned his head, sending his gaze towards the wall of the carriage.

Indeed, just as Garfiel had said, there was a slight indentation and a crack in the wall. That mark was made by Otto’s fist, and the height of that mark—

Garfiel: "—Is right around our shrunken Captain's head, huh?"

Otto: "It is fortunate of Natsuki-san that he was small at that time. If I had punched him in that state, no matter the explanation, I would have come across as the villain."

Garfiel: "No doubt about that. Well, if the Captain were his usual size, after ya were done, I might've taken a swing myself."

Garfiel chuckled at Otto's light-hearted remark.

Seeing Garfiel's reaction, the corner of Otto's mouth twitched into a smile. "Oh, honestly," he muttered, scratching his head with his right hand that had just healed.

His freshly healed right hand still hurt when he handled it roughly. But, the pain was reassuring.

Otto: "Simple as it may be, pain can be therapeutic… Oh, maybe I should have just gone ahead and punched Natsuki-san regardless of his size after all."

Garfiel: "If that's what you're thinkin', wanna go give him a smack together now?"

Otto: "No thank you. If we go now, we will see something we would rather not."

Garfiel, trying his best to be comforting, groaned with a low "Gao…", struggling for words upon hearing Otto's response.

Even though he had not intended to, Otto reflected on his words, feeling as though he had unfairly lashed out. —But, did he really have no such intention?

Could he confidently say that he had not aimed those sharp words at Garfiel who was always looking out for his best interests, fully knowing that he would never turn against him?

Otto: "…This is frustrating."

Muttering to himself, Otto, once again, smacked his forehead with his right hand, a bit harder this time.

The forehead that was smacked and the right hand that smacked it both cried out in pain.

—Presently, Subaru had headed towards the cabin where Ram and Rem were waiting. There, he was expected to confront “Louis” and engage in a conversation.

The topic likely to be discussed there was something that Otto, from the bottom of his heart, did not want happening. He could loudly declare that he absolutely did not want to be present for it.

Emilia and Beatrice, more worried about Subaru himself than the nature of the conversation, had followed him. Whether they would enter the cabin or not remained uncertain, but he could easily imagine them anxiously awaiting the outcome.

However, considering the circumstances—

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel, with his awkward expression and silence, probably had stayed here out of concern for Otto.

Emilia, Beatrice, and Garfiel all had a way of making Otto’s heart sour.

—Otto’s stance on the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb, had consistently been that she must be eliminated at all costs.

Because he believed this and had strongly resolved himself to it, there was a fact that Otto had deliberately not shared with Emilia and the others.

Since their reunion in the Fortress City of Guaral, and through several encounters with “Louis”, the girl who was unable to speak—his ears had never once picked up on any malice from her.

Otto: “…”

Otto’s Divine Protection of the Soul of Language had a simple function, one that enabled him to communicate with any living being, and only that. While he had most frequently used it to exchange words with ground dragons or insects in order to gather information, if Otto so wished, he could even communicate with an infant.

There was a time during his difficult days as a traveling merchant, when he had taken on the task of looking after the infants of influential figures in various lands, simply to earn some money for his traveling expenses.

Even though an infant's voice might not be able to form words, Otto could understand the underlying intention.

In the same vein, while the utterances of "Louis" might not have formed coherent speech, Otto was able to discern her intentions. And within them, he found no malice toward others; instead, her affection towards Subaru and Rem had made up the most of it.

That was why Otto had placed a lid over this certain truth and never told Emilia or the others about it.

As long as doubts were harbored, he could prevent them from getting too close to "Louis."

Once those doubts were dispelled, it was needless to say what kind of attitude the kind-hearted Emilia and others would display towards "Louis" or how they would approach her in terms of emotional distance.

That would—

???: "—Otto-kun, Garf-kun, mind if I have a word?"

Otto: "…"

With a light knock-knock on the cabin door, peeping in was Anastasia, clad in a kimono.

Upon seeing her, who had brought Julius beside her in a similar fashion, Otto tightened his cheeks and gave a nod, signaling "Yes."

Anastasia: “It seemed like things over there were gonna take a while, ‘n I thought it might be a bit much for all of us to wait together. I was also worried ‘bout Otto-kun’s hand…”

Garfiel: “Even without yer worries, I already healed Bro’s hand. Besides…”

Anastasia: “Hmm?”

Garfiel: “I ain’t comfortable with ya callin’ me “Garf-kun”.”

Garfiel voiced his grievance while crinkling up his nose, to which Anastasia widened her eyes in surprise. She then chuckled, “Sorry ‘bout that,” and said,

Anastasia: “Y’see, Mimi’s always callin’ ya “Garf” ‘n talkin’ ‘bout ya like that, so I just got used to thinkin’ of ya as “Garf-kun”. Is “Garf-kun” not okay?”

Garfiel: “Not that it ain’t okay, but…”

Otto: “Garfiel, there is no need to fuss.”

While Garfiel reluctantly stood his ground against Anastasia, Otto patted his shoulder and shook his head.

When Anastasia and company had entered, Garfiel shifted his position, placing himself between Otto and them. —To be precise, it was not due to Anastasia.

Garfiel: “…”

The presence of Julius, standing right beside Anastasia, was the reason.

When he had appeared in the cabin, Otto’s demeanor had shifted, and Garfiel noticed it. Grateful for Garfiel’s thoughtfulness, Otto nodded.

And then, standing beside Garfiel, who was basically his younger brother at this point, Otto presented his right hand to Anastasia and company.

Otto: “As Garfiel has said, my hand has already been treated.”

Anastasia: “I see, I see. That’s good to hear. I was thinkin’ ‘bout havin’ Julius heal it if need be, but I guess I was bein’ kinda nosy.”

Anastasia playfully stuck out her tongue while looking smug as she spoke, grating on Otto’s nerves. If she thought they could not refuse her suggestion, she was unfortunately mistaken.

While Otto and Garfiel were absent from the Augria Sand Dunes, it was possible that the duo of Anastasia and Julius had deepened their friendship with Subaru, Emilia, and the others, but—

Otto: “Unlike them, I properly remember that you two are our enemies.”

Anastasia: “—. Ya really are good, Otto-kun. Of course, I don’t dislike Emilia-san ‘n’ the others, but… without that kinda response, I’d lose my competitive edge, too.”

Otto’s gaze sharpened, to which Anastasia responded with a gentle smile. Although her expression and voice were soft, the light in her pale blue eyes was firm, and Otto too understood.

Even though they had gone to the trouble of crossing the border into the Vollachian Empire, Anastasia clearly established camp delineations. That was precisely why they had boarded the Dragon Carriage in a position of such importance to the Kararagi City-States.

In that regard, the problem was not Anastasia,

Otto: “Knight Julius.”

Julius: “Earlier, I made an excessive statement. Allow me to apologize for that.”

Otto: “Apologize, huh.”

After addressing the other party with a harsh voice, hearing Julius’s reply caused a sigh to escape Otto’s lips.

The “excessive statement” seemed to be the comment that was expressed over the treatment of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony from the earlier exchange.

In the sense that he was voicing his opinion, Julius was merely exercising his right to do so.

Those were supposed to be Julius’s own words to the then agitated Otto.

Otto: “So, you say that you have reconsidered? That you are an outsider, after all.”

Julius: “No, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony’s Authority… I am involved in the sense that I have been harmed by it. I also have a younger brother, whose existence I cannot recall. From that point of view too, I do not consider myself to be an outsider.”

Otto: “…In that case, in what way did you exceed yourself?”

Lowering his voice, Otto furrowed his brow as he listened.

Despite having offered an apology, Julius stated that he had no intention of changing his opinion regarding the part that Otto was concerned about.

It did not come to mind, however, another reason for Julius to apologize.

To the puzzled Otto, Julius then said.

Sincere gratitude and even a certain kind of respect towards the other permeating his yellow eyes,

Julius: “Otto-dono, for taking away your role, I apologize.”

Otto: “…”

Julius: “I could tell by your reaction. Had I not brought it up, you would have spoken the same yourself. Nevertheless, using the fact that I myself am a victim of Gluttony as a pretext, I took away your role as a person partaken in the camp. Therefore,” Cutting his words off there, Julius bowed deeply.

Then, with the crown of his light purple hair facing them,

Julius: “From the bottom of my heart, I apologize. I am truly sorry.”

Yes, when shown such a genuine display of apology, Otto bit hard on the inside of his cheek.

Had his reaction been any slower, he would have almost bit his lip in front of the other party. Bowing his head, Julius could not see it, but Anastasia could.

That absolutely had to be avoided.

Anastasia: “Julius really wanted to apologize for that, didn’t he? So, I was thinkin’ that if Otto-kun’s hand hadn’t healed yet, it’d be easier to start the conversation that way.”

Garfiel: “…’s that right? Well, sorry ‘bout that.”

Anastasia: “That’s fine. Even if without a cue, my Knight is good at apologizin’ properly.”

Setting aside Otto and Julius, the two parties involved, exchanging such words were Anastasia and Garfiel. Meanwhile, Julius kept his head bowed, and Otto belatedly realized that his response was being awaited.

Otto needed to give a response, or this apology would not be complete.

Otto: “…Your head, raise it, please.”

Taking his time, Otto slowly addressed the other party.

In response, Julius also began to slowly raise his lowered head. Seeing the Knight in his waso, with the scar under his left eye accentuating his dashing features, Otto sighed.

And—

Otto: “That your statement was not malicious, and that you were trying to cooperate with Natsuki-san, I do not doubt. But, you are our enemy. That remains the same.”

Julius: “Otto-dono.”

Otto: “I am not a Knight, so we have no opportunity to cross swords. You are neither a merchant nor a civil official, so we have no opportunity to cross words. —Nevertheless, though we are in a position to cross neither swords nor words, you are my enemy and I am yours.”

Tightly clenching his fist hard enough that it hurt, Otto declared to Julius.

Taking Otto's words head on, Julius's eyes widened. Be it astonishment or amazement, the fact that it was not the kind of surprise you would direct at someone you don't think of as an enemy protected Otto's pride.

Otto: "Anastasia-sama, I would like to say this beforehand… No matter what Natsuki-san's and Emilia-sama's opinions are, the reason for making use of the Sin Archbishop is in the Empire. If we are slandered because of the Sin Archbishop's existence, it is the Empire that should bear the blame."

Anastasia: "—Hmm, I have no objection to that either. Even if I did, I don't think I would take such a thing in my hands. 'Cause ya know, that's how it is right?"

Anastasia closed one eye at Otto, who turned in her direction and made a pertinent argument.

As she stroked her white fox scarf, she turned her gaze in another direction—towards the cabin where Subaru and the others probably were.

Anastasia: "No matter what kind of plan it may be, as soon as a Sin Archbishop is allowed to be involved, people around us will be disgusted, regardless of how deep or shallow the relationship is. This isn't true just for the Empire, nor just Emilia's camp, it's true for us too."

Otto: "—If you understand, then that is fine."

Nodding to Anastasia's answer, Otto relaxed his shoulders slightly.

If a Sin Archbishop was involved in a matter, it could not be received positively in any situation. That was the framework of this world and an unshakable truth.

No matter what the victim Julius said, no matter how the kind-hearted Emilia showed the path to forgiveness, and no matter what the foolishly hopeful Subaru wanted, this remained true.

For that reason, they must thrust at one another.

Knives pointed at each other's necks, while mutually pressing their fatal wounds.

Otto: "—Sorry, there is something I need to do. Excuse me."

After confirming their common understanding, Otto suddenly said so.

Hearing that, Anastasia tilted her head with a, "Is that so?". Beside her, Julius digested Otto's earlier declaration, his surprised expression tightened, but Otto could not bear to look at him for too long, so he quickly turned away.

Garfiel: "Bro! My amazin' self too…"

Otto: "Garfiel."

Garfiel: "Huh?"

Otto: "I'll be fine by myself."

Swiftly, Otto attempted to leave the cabin. As Garfiel tried to follow him, Otto blocked him with his hand, saying so in an easy to understand manner.

It was not that he was okay alone, it was a plea that he wanted to be left alone. And then, the considerate younger brother obediently listened to him, nodded, and saw him off.

Otto: "…"

Closing the quiet cabin door, Otto departed with long strides.

He left Garfiel in the same room as Anastasia and Julius. He was worried about what they would talk about, but he did not have the emotional leeway to support him.

He did not run, but his mind was in such disarray that he wanted to run.

Otto: “My role, taken…?”

Wanting to apologize, his head bowed, Julius’s words echoed within Otto’s head, causing him to clench his molars.

To be able to apologize, Julius was indeed the Knight of Anastasia, a sincere and earnest person. Such a pleasant thought, did not at all come to his mind.

He just felt very bitter about Julius’s misunderstanding.

Julius was making a big mistake.

Had Julius not said anything, Otto would never have said something that would poke a hole in Subaru’s impasse.

It was true that as Julius said, he would be lying if he said he did not have the same thoughts as him, but one could be assured that Otto would never say that, even in his death.

It was not because he was deprived of his role that he was so furious.

Otto was furious with Julius there because he said something he should not have said—No, he did not want him to say. Julius did not understand that.

And yet, the one making that misunderstanding—

Otto: “Indeed, those two are alike.”

At his core, this was proof that Julius was an idealist just like Subaru.

He believed that human beings were fundamentally good. But that was not because he was carefree. It was not because he was ignorant of reality. Even knowing the reality, he was still able to boast like that.

That was the same as Natuski Subaru and Emilia, their way of walking in the light.

Otto: "—Hk."

??? "—Otto-kun, that's no good."

Suddenly, Otto felt his arm being gripped, snapping him back to reality.

Looking to see what had happened, he realized that he had unconsciously raised his arm, which was now being restrained by someone from behind.

Most likely, in a surge of emotion, he had just been about to punch the wall. It was the very right hand which had just been healed by Garfiel.

Roswaal: "This is Garfiel's healing magic, isn't it? It seems that it has just been healed, so it'd be awkward for you if you break it again right away."

Otto: "…I acknowledge that I did something stupid, so would you let me go?"

He involuntarily muttered with a low voice, surprising himself a little. But, the other party, seemingly used to it, made no mention of it and released Otto's arm.

Standing there was Roswaal, who he never really wanted to run into. Although Otto never really wanted to encounter him, he now felt especially averse.

Roswaal: "That expression suggests you don't even want to speak with me, doeeesn't~ it?"

Otto: "If you can see that and still approach me, then you, Margrave, are truly relentless."

Roswaal: "That's an uncharacteristically dull retort from you. Seems like you're taking it harder than I thooought~."

Otto: "…"

Naturally, Roswaal had also been a part of the earlier discussion in the passenger cabin.

He was well aware that Otto's heart was furious during that meeting, as well as that he held an unyielding stance on how to treat the Sin Archbishops.

Knowing this and still acting this way, it was clear as day that Roswaal intended to provoke Otto.

If that was not the case, then he was far too inept at interacting with others.

Otto: "I am sure you can tell, Margrave, but I don't have the patience for this right now. If you do not wish for your whole body to be munched on by the rats that I have purchased, I would advise against ruffling my feathers."

Roswaal: "If I ever find myself being nibbled by rats, I'll know that you were behind it. That may have been useful to hear, but… I'm genuinely concerned about you."

Otto: "…About me?"

As Otto responded with skepticism, Roswaal nodded.

With that response, Otto understood that Roswaal was pestering him from a different angle. That being done to him in a situation where he lacked patience made him truly feel nauseated, making it all the more abhorrent.

Otto: "Margrave, what are your thoughts?"

Roswaal: "Me? I'm of course in the same boat as you, Otto-kun. I couldn't care less if the Empire is destroooyed~."

Otto: "…"

Roswaal: "Oh, perhaps I was mistaken? The Sin Archbishops are nothing but poison incapable of doing any good. Instead of pondering on how to make use of them, it would be better if the Empire just disappeared. Just as you suggested to Subaru-kun, it'd be fine if we just returned home bringing back only the members who he would feel guilty about abandoning."

Roswaal's attitude, shrugging as if to say "It was a great idea", plainly displayed Otto's own views back at him, giving him an unpleasant mood.

Shamelessly speaking in order to draw close to him, Roswaal went out of his way to fire Otto's approach back at him, showing that the sheer nastiness of his character was reaching its peak.

At the same time, even though Otto recognized the pragmatic side of his own suggestion, he was repelled by his own inclination to think of it as the best solution.

Observing this self-loathing Otto, Roswaal peered closely and remarked,

Roswaal: "I will tell you this much, I think you're doing more than enough, Otto-kun."

Otto: "…It seems that without makeup, even your sharp tongue is dulled, Margrave. It almost sounds as if you are trying to close the distance with me."

Roswaal: "I have no talent for getting close with people, so don't assume I am doing so. Either way, I believe you're doing more than enough. But, there's also the matter of "no matter how much you struggle"."

Otto: "—. No matter how much, I struggle?"

Caught off guard by Roswaal's choice of words, Otto's eyebrows twitched.

As Otto repeated it, Roswaal gave a deep nod. He rested a hand on the slender chin of his makeup-free face, and as he closed a single eye, leaving his blue eye open,

Roswaal: "This recent incident serves as a perfect example. In most cases, things go according to how Subaru-kun and Emilia-sama desire them to. Everyone rallies around, organizing their efforts, arranging the path for their wishes to be met."

Otto: "…What are you saying?"

Taken aback by Roswaal's sudden assertion, Otto furrowed his brow.

The idea that Subaru and Emilia's wishes always came true was incredibly absurd. If that were the case, Emilia would have been crowned king and taken on the name Natsuki Emilia long ago.

The fact that this had not happened, meant that it was not the case.

Otto: "Are you mocking me? Or perhaps, are you ridiculing Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama?"

Roswaal: "Neither. I merely pity you. Your family's contributions played a part in our journey from Lugunica to Vollachia. For that, I am grateful to you, and it is out of this gratitude that I offer this earnest advice."

Otto: "…"

Roswaal: "Becoming overly engrossed and finding yourself at odds with Subaru-kun and Emilia-sama is toxic for you. This toxin will erode you, and I fear that it may eventually kill you. After all, someone as capable as you is hard to come by."

Gently, as he calmed the tone of his voice, Roswal spoke in a straightforward manner.

At some point, he had dropped the clownish intonations in his speech, and he appealed to Otto Suwen with sincerity in his heterochromatic eyes.

At those words and attitude, Otto stayed silent for a while, and after a bit, he noticed it.

The aim of the person named Roswaal L. Mathers.

Otto: “Margrave, I have understood your words. Therefore, I shall not follow your advice.”

Roswaal: “Hmm…”

Narrowing his eyes, Roswaal let out a long sigh with a hint of concern.

After that, to him as he tried to hear the truth for why his advice was rejected, Otto declared.

Otto: “I understand. —I must be a hindrance for you. After all, I have not forgiven what you had orchestrated, Margrave, and I suspect that you are still plotting something.”

Roswaal: “…Oh?”

Otto: “That was why you decided to approach me after seeing that I had a great deal of discontent built up. Perhaps you thought it a perfect chance to get rid of me under a plausible pretext, but that was a grave mistake.”

Indeed, Roswaal’s assessment was accurate.

The earlier exchange had been, in the time since Otto had joined the Emilia camp, perhaps the moment he had felt the most anger. Before joining the camp, there had been an incident that had angered him to the point of punching Subaru, and this anger rivaled that.

Otto: “Although, if you were thinking that I would just give up on everything because of that, you are gravely mistaken.”

Roswaal: “Otto-kun…”

Otto: “First of all, what was all that nonsense just now? Whatever Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama wish for will come to pass? Please do not utter such absurdities. That is not true in the slightest, which is why I, Garfiel, Beatrice-chan, Ram-san, Petra-chan, Frederica-chan, Patrasche-chan, and everyone else have struggled so desperately to get to this point.”

Saying that he was extremely misguided, Otto was viscerally furious at Roswaal.

Roswaal's earlier assertion was this.

Whatever Subaru and Emilia desired, the people around them would somehow make it happen, so it was not necessary for him to be overly concerned and wear himself out. That no matter how much he objected, his opinion would be suppressed, making his presence meaningless.

However—

Otto: "Such a thing, I could never."

Roswaal: "…"

Otto: "Margrave, about what you said, I do not know to what extent you were indicating that everyone rallies around them… At the very least, supposing I were to side with all of Natsuki-san's opinions, affirming them all, and arranging the path such that everything would come to pass. —I do not consider myself capable of doing such a thing."

He was not like Beatrice or Garfiel, who could lend their powerful abilities.

Nor was he like Ram, Frederica, or Petra, who could provide their indispensable support.

He did not have the power to grant all their wishes either, so what was the meaning of Otto being there?

Otto: "I cannot do that. I will not acknowledge that. I will not allow that. Whenever Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama desire something, the moment that I stop speaking out, will be when my very reason for being ceases."

Roswaal: "…"

Otto: "Unfortunately for you, Margrave, it will not be as you desire."

While intensely staring at Roswaal, Otto plainly declared so.

It was probably the first time that Roswaal had been so one-sidedly pressured in the span of a single breath.

Of course, while it had never been expressed aloud, there had always been this kind of intense tension between Otto and Roswaal.

For that reason, when Roswaal saw the opportunity, he approached Otto in an attempt to remove a hindrance, and attempt to set the board to his advantage.

But, Otto would not yield. At least, not because of today's ludicrous reasoning.

Otto: "I have decided where I stand. I cannot walk in the light, and that is fine."

Roswaal: "…"

Otto: "That was a bad move, Margrave. It would have been better had you not approached me."

Nevertheless, the outcome would have remained unchanged, or so he would have liked to say.

However, if he had at least taken more time before reaching an outcome, it may have swayed. But, Roswaal's haste to get the result that he desired had led to the opposite, to an undesired result.

And, it was at the moment when Otto caught his breath in front of Roswaal, who wore a pleasantly different sullen face.

???: "Ah, Otto-san! Found you!"

Upon being called by a high-pitched voice, accompanied by the patter of tiny footsteps, Otto turned around.

Thereupon, his eyes met with Petra's, who was running towards him while waving her hand.

Otto: "Lady Petra… I mean, Petra-chan."

Reflexively addressing her out of the habit that had formed when they were undercover, Otto placed a hand over his mouth and corrected himself. Petra, who had run up to Otto and was slightly out of breath, asked,

Petra: “Otto-san, is your hand okay? I heard you punched the wall with all your strength…”

Otto: “Everybody seems to be asking me that. Fortunately, Garfiel healed it for me, so it is fine. Sorry for making you worry.”

Petra: “No not at all, as long as you are okay, then it’s fine… What is the Master doing?”

Giving a wry smile, Otto showed Petra his unharmed hand since she had been worried. Relieved, Petra immediately changed her expression and glared at Roswaal.

In response to that gaze, Roswaal weakly shook his head and said, “No”,

Roswaal: “I was just reflecting on my habitual behavior.”

Petra: “The Master is…? Since you never reflect on anything, would it not taste like nothing?”

Roswaal: “Uwah.”

Otto had also intended to put a lot of pressure on Roswaal, but the impact of Petra’s single comment was incomparable.

In fact, Roswaal’s shoulders had drooped, but Petra, who had been watching Roswaal intently, suddenly exclaimed “Ah” as if she had just remembered something.

Then, she turned towards Otto, the ribbon on her head swaying,

Petra: “Speaking of which, I didn’t just hear about your hand. A little while ago, you guys were talking about Louis-chan, so…”

Otto: “Ah, yes, that is right. For that as well, sorry for making you —”

Petra: “So I, in place of Otto-san, went ahead and hit Subaru.”

Otto: “…”

Thrusting out her small hand that was tightly clenched into a fist, Petra declared so.

Looking alternately at the outstretched fist and at Petra’s enthusiastic face, Otto blinked his eyes in surprise.

At Otto’s reaction, Petra’s breathing became a little rough, and,

Petra: “Otto-san, I heard that you held back. Because Otto-san would have felt sorry for hitting the now-small Subaru. So, I did it myself!”

Opening her closed fist, Petra showed off her palm. As she peeked at him from behind her palm, Otto stayed silent for a while.

But, he could not hold back.

Otto: “Ha, hahaha, ahhaha!”

When Julius had apologized to him, he had endured the discomfort.

When Roswaal had gone on the offensive, he had even endured the helplessness of being showered with blows.

But now, when faced with Petra’s words of good sentiment, he could not endure it.

Laughter did not mean that everything was settled.

With the issue still remaining, as always, Otto was opposed to Subaru’s thoughts.

Even so, while remaining opposed, since his reason for being was to keep saying that the point of compromise Subaru had found was unacceptable, he would continue to say it.

He would never give in.

Otto: “Petra-chan.”

Petra: “Yes?”

Otto: “Thank you.”

Saying that, Otto placed his palm against the palm that the young girl had extended.

A light clap resounded, and Petra laughed, saying, “My pleasure.”

Chapter 25:
The Wishes of Those Who Near Death

1

—Your Excellency the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.

Looking at him with a serious expression, Flop had addressed him in such a manner, and Vincent closed a single eye.

Flop and Medium had abruptly confined Vincent in a cabin of the coupled dragon carriages; this blond-haired sibling duo did not comprehend exactly how terrible of an act they had perpetrated.

A reckless act, that would likely warrant them the death penalty if witnessed by anyone; their reason for doing such a thing was to transmit a message from somebody else, so there must have been something wrong with them.

And to top it all off—

Flop: "Before I deliver the message, may I take a little while to tell you an old story?"

Still donning his serious expression, he had suggested such a thing.

Vincent: "…"

Unable to read Flop's motives, Vincent stayed silent with one eye still closed. Perhaps thinking that the silence put him in an advantageous position, Flop continued with "That and,"

Flop: "I'm aware it's impudent, but… after you hear the message, would you allow me to ask a favor of you?"

Vincent: "Hey."

Flop: "My my, that's quite the scary face, Your Excellency the Emperor! However, please don't forget. I'm the only one who knows the message you ought to hear, so you shouldn't carelessly try to silence me.”

Vincent: “I also have the option to order Olbart Dunkelkenn, who would force it out of your mouth via Shinobi torture methods.”

Flop: “Isn’t it fine if we just have a peaceful chat together, Your Excellency the Emperor?!”

Once Vincent included a threat, Flop immediately raised both of his hands.

This was not merely a matter of having the courage to engage in negotiations against the Emperor. That said, the matter of the old story he had prefaced with, and the matter of the favor that had followed must have both been quite important to him, such that he went out of his way to bring them up.

But then again—

Medium: “But big bro, there isn’t a lot of time, right? At this rate, if Abel-chin doesn’t return~, won’t Goz-chin and the rest kick up a fuss? Regardless of your request, what’s the old story?”

As Medium tilted her head, it almost seemed as if her brother had not shared any information with her.

Vincent: “You, do not support your brother’s reckless actions without questioning anything.”

Medium: “Huh~? But, it’s what big bro was doing, right? If it’s him, then I’ll help out, no matter what he’s doing~. That’s my family oath. Isn’t that the case for Abel-chin too?”

Vincent: “Fool. Are you unaware of how Vollachian Emperors are born?”

Medium calmly spoke in a foolish manner, and when she heard his reply, her eyes blinked in surprise. Witnessing her sincere reaction, Vincent cast a reproachful gaze upon Flop, as if to say “even a lack of common knowledge ought to have its limits”.

Though it was by no means a nice story to hear, it was common knowledge that the brothers and sisters of the Vollachian Imperial Family would kill each other to decide the next Emperor.

For Medium to not even know that, Vincent suspected some bias in Flop's methods of teaching.

But, for whatever reason, Flop smiled upon receiving that gaze of Vincent's,

Flop: "I know what that gaze means, Your Excellency the Emperor. You're surprised at my sister's lack of common knowledge, aren't you?"

Vincent: "What else is there to be said? Additionally, cease referring to me as "Your Excellency the Emperor" every single time. If naught else is applicable, just "Your Excellency" shall do fine."

Flop: "I see, I see. Understood, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun."

Vincent: "…"

Nodding his head and maintaining his smile, Flop continued, and Vincent narrowed his eyes.

It could also be felt in his serious expression from just before, but today, Flop was not just a friendly merchant, rather, it seemed as if he intended to show the face that laid beyond his title.

To be precise, a person who had some sort of reservations while facing Vincent, was the face he intended to show.

Flop: "Dear sister, you just asked me, right? About why I want to tell an old story. Well, that's because in our past, there's a connection between us and His Excellency the Emperor-kun."

Medium: "Huhh?! Really?! Between us and Abel-chin?! What is it?!"

Flop: "Hahaha, come on now, no matter how you look at it, you're far too forgetful, dear sister. His Excellency the Emperor-kun is the Emperor of the Empire. In other words, because he has connections with the Nine Divine Generals—"

Medium: "—You mean Ballebro?"

Her eyes widened in surprise, and the liveliness of Medium's expression suddenly vanished.

She had voiced somebody's nickname, and there was also the term Nine Divine Generals from just before. Drawing a connection between the two, a single name naturally emerged in Vincent's mind.

Vincent: "Are the two of you related to Balleroy Temeglyph?"

Flop: "Yeah, that's right, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun. He's what you'd call our sworn-brother. We spent some of the most sentimental years of our lives with him, he's our extremely, extremely precious and beloved family!"

Firmly clenching his fist, Flop raised his voice as he answered, to which Vincent let out a sigh.

The ends of Medium's eyebrows drooped, and her gaze alternated between her brother and Vincent. It was clear that bewilderment and signs of sorrow had emerged on her countenance.

Flop: "It also seems like High Countess Serena Dracroy happens to be riding this dragon carriage too. As a matter of fact, my sister and I were also in the care of Countess Dracroy for a period of time."

Medium: "Sisrena…"

Flop: "By the way, this is a nickname that Countess Dracroy forced Medium to use so that they wouldn't feel like strangers, and so that the Countess would never be treated like a woman who's older than she really was. Amusing, right?"

Vincent: "Get to the point."

To bring up meaningless topics and cause people to lose concentration was the style of a peddler.

He had formed an estimation the moment it had been revealed that this sibling pair had connections to both Serena and Balleroy.

Originally, Balleroy Temeglyph was a subordinate of Serena Dracroy, and thanks to his definite capability, he was called upon to become a Divine General; there were great expectations for his future as a General.

However, knowing Balleroy's whole story, the gazes of many generals and soldiers would turn to disappointment.

He had rebelled against the Emperor, and had died a violent death upon his failure—That was the end of Balleroy that the world knew; the conclusion of the man whom these two called family, that would be recorded in the history books.

Vincent: "—No."

Resurrected and having become an undead, it was likely that the descriptions of Balleroy Temeglyph left in the history books, would not end with just insurrection, but with him becoming a being that brought ruin to the Empire.

Despite having thought about that fact, Vincent did not speak of it to Flop and Medium.

Because he anticipated that if he were to bring up the matter of the undead Balleroy right here and now, the topic Vincent desired would only get further and further away.

Either way—

Flop: "Right, let's get down to business. My old story isn't really that long either. After all, Medium happened to already touch on the main point."

As the ends of his eyebrows slightly lowered, Flop slowly shook his head.

At his words, Medium gave a clueless face, but Vincent made no made no comment of it. This conversation with the siblings constantly veered off course, and thus he would only interject when it did get off topic.

Flop: "Medium and I were orphans, we were raised in a shoddy institution. We got rescued from there, and were brought to Countess Dracroy's domain… that's where we met Balleroy, and became sworn-siblings with him. Got everything so far?"

Vincent: "—Continue."

Flop: "Those really were some busy days. Both Medium and I were pretty ignorant about the outside world, so anything and everything we saw was fresh and new. Countess Dracroy was someone who had a very broad outlook on things, so she gave us, who had no place to go, an education."

Vincent: "Considering all that, it has not produced any results for your sister."

Medium: "That's 'cause, I preferred doing physical activities with Ballebro and the others…"

Pouting her lips, Medium seemed to have regained at least a small amount of her good mood.

Vincent had also heard of the circumstances in the Dracroy domain that Flop spoke of, and surprisingly, the administration of the territory was something that could be evaluated favorably as well.

Known as the Scorching Lady, she was often evaluated as having a rough temperament, but the special quality of Serena Dracroy was the flexibility of her ideas, which were unbound by any preconceived notions.

In most cases, the people of the Vollachian Empire did not have the vision to look at things from a long term perspective.

Since the majority of children did not show promise of serving effectively as manual labor or as military strength, many people were born, and among them, those who were blessed with ability and circumstance would survive, with very few attaining great success as strong individuals.

Though it was a different case for the people of one's own family, this was a country where the endeavor to raise a broad range of capable people by cultivating them during their childhood was mostly considered to be an impracticable theory.

Flop and Medium were two siblings who had been blessed with that rare opportunity. —No, Balleroy, whose talent had been discovered, had also been one of those people.

Flop: “Of course, it wasn’t all just fun things, and Countess Dracroy couldn’t always be kind to us. Back then, Countess Dracroy had just usurped the territory from her father by herself, so it was pretty busy for her.”

Medium: “We also faced plenty of dangerous situations.”

Flop: “Like when those assassins attacked, aiming for Countess Dracroy’s life. Those were tough times.”

While the two reminisced on their fond memories, Vincent searched for the main point of the matter.

But then again, the main point had already been touched on near the start. Putting it this way, there were words he had grown accustomed to being told, and gazes that he had grown accustomed to being turned to him.

The words and gazes of these two likely conformed to those.

That was to say—

Flop: “We got through those days together, there was a strong bond between us siblings and Balleroy. It’s precisely because of that relationship, that I want to ask you this, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun.”

Vincent: “…”

Flop: “Our sworn-brother, Balleroy Temeglyph, as is widely known to everyone, he was a foolish traitor who couldn’t see ahead, and lost his life after failing to achieve a desire beyond his station… but is that really true?”

Having asked that question, a stillness returned to Flop’s expression once more.

For himself and his sister, he was a sworn-brother, but to the Empire, he was a traitor; such was the position of Balleroy Temeglyph, and of his death, Flop now enquired the truth from Vincent.

As expected, these were words that had been said to Vincent plenty, and a gaze that had been turned to him many times.

To die on the battlefield was the honor of a warrior, to refuse to yield even when pierced by swords was the way of the Sword Wolf.

Even the Vollachian Empire, a place where such things were valued, was not entirely filled with those who would celebrate the deaths of those close to them. It was logical that human emotions would seek out the meaning and reason behind death.

Henceforth, Flop and Medium asking him this here, was lamentation that he had grown accustomed to.

Vincent: “For what reason, do you doubt? Do you suspect that impurities have mixed into the rumors that have circulated through the streets, and feel you cannot place trust in them?”

Flop: “Nah, that’s not it. It’s just, I finally got my long-awaited chance to speak with someone involved. Then, it’s not that strange to think that I’d want to hear a story that’s much more trustworthy than the gossip, right?”

Vincent: “Though, this opportunity for dialogue was forcibly created by the two of you.”

When Flop tried to twist it into a matter of being an unlikely convenience, Vincent added that brief comment.

And then, for a short while, he went into an unusual state of deep thought.

The death of Balleroy Temeglyph, as was spoken of on the streets.

The descriptions of his death left in the history books, would have been that he died violently in the failure of his attempted insurrection.

What Flop and Medium heard, too, should have been nothing more, and nothing less than that. Thus, Vincent would not consider restoring Balleroy's honor past his death.

The story was nothing more and nothing less than that, thus the world in which it was propagated was correct.

Flop: "I want you to answer, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun. Once I know that, I'll deliver the message to—"

Vincent: "—. I do not know what it is you desire, but…"

The rumors you have heard are not mistaken, thus Vincent had tried to answer.

However—

Medium: "—Abel-chin."

Vincent's words were interrupted by a feeble, short call.

Vincent: "…"

Standing before the cabin door, Medium was obstructing him from going outside—No, it seemed like she no longer had such intentions.

Standing stock still, Medium's shoulders, of rather high stature for a woman, had been made smaller as she tightly hugged her own arms and looked at Vincent. In her blue eyes, tears had welled up.

He had long become used to seeing people get teary-eyed while they made entreaties or pleaded for their life.

Hence, that did not cause Vincent's heart to waver in the slightest. But, although his heart did not waver, it gave his presence of mind a short while longer to ponder.

—Flop and Medium, though he did not know what it was they desired.

Indeed, Vincent had tried to give that answer.

However, was that truly the case? What these two desired, he was sure to know. What these two desired was obvious, and Vincent had the answer.

He had it, but even so, he did not speak. That was Vincent's way of doing things.

But, that way of doing things, it could be crowned with the title of "same as ever was".

Vincent: "…"

The "same as ever was" method, was something that decided everything based on Vincent's own thoughts.

But, with the "same as ever was" method, Vincent had the rug pulled out from under him by his loyal retainers. He had received a hard punch from a man with a naive mind, saying that the act of regarding conjecture as a certainty was off the mark.

The "same as ever was" method, had its limits.

What was required of Vincent, had to be the "beyond what ever was" method.

Thus, in order to obtain that method—

Vincent: "—The true circumstances behind the death of Balleroy Temeglyph, they differ from the rumors that have been disseminated throughout the streets."

Indeed, Vincent had chosen to give an answer that differed to the "same as ever was" method.

2

Flop & Medium: "…"

The moment they heard Vincent's answer, an alteration was yielded in the expressions of Flop and Medium.

Flop's eyes slightly widened, and Medium's eyes blinked in amazement. Though astonishment could be seen in both, the nature of each varied.

Seeing the difference between their reactions, Vincent understood.

Vincent: “Flop O’Connell, you already knew that reality was not in accordance with the rumors, did you not?”

Medium: “Huh… big bro?”

Flop: “To say that I knew, would be a tad incorrect. The rumors just didn’t sound much like Balleroy at all, really, even Medium thought that much.”

Medium: “Y-yeah…”

Invoking her attention, Medium nodded with a countenance of unfading perplexity.

But, Flop, who prompted his sister to nod, had not denied Vincent’s query.

Receiving Vincent’s gaze, Flop slightly tilted his head,

Flop: “Don’t tell me, did Your Excellency the Emperor-kun think that just because I’m close with Balleroy, I would have already heard about it from him beforehand, and so I just tricked you into confirming the truth?”

Vincent: “—. There is a possibility, but it is close to nonexistent. The man I knew would not have raised the margin of error even slightly, and he would not have disclosed his actions to anybody until the very moment in which he carried them out.”

Flop: “…Right. I think it’s as you say, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun. I’m glad. It seems like with you, I can talk about the Balleroy that I knew well. After all…”

Vincent: “…”

Flop: “Ever since that incident, whenever we heard Balleroy’s name somewhere in the Empire, Medium and I could only think of it as being someone we didn't know."

Knitting his well-shaped eyebrows, a sense of loneliness wavered in Flop's blue eyes.

That must have been true. Vincent was not surprised by that.

In order for it to be so, Chisha had tailored the rumors to become so, Berstetz had directed them like so, and it was Vincent, who had given the orders for them to do so.

Everything, was in order to conceal the truth of the situation, to conceal the reason as to why Balleroy Temeglyph had become a rebel.

That was—

Flop: "—That rebellion, it wasn't Balleroy's true motive."

Medium: "Big bro?!"

At the words Flop had spun, Medium shrieked out loud.

Her round eyes were wide open, and as she vigorously shook her head side-to-side,

Medium: "That's weird, you're talking crazy. Ballebro was, because… Abel-chin! Say something! Tell big bro that he's being crazy…"

Vincent: "If there is a need to correct him, I shall. If not, I shan't. That is all."

Medium: "You have, no reason to say anything…"

At a complete loss for words, Medium's face looked as if it was saying she could not comprehend what was happening.

Meanwhile, Flop took a long, deep breath, coming to grips with the fact that Vincent had not denied the misgivings he had voiced— About the true circumstances behind Balleroy's death.

According to the rumors on the streets, Balleroy Temeglyph had been unsatisfied with his position of Divine General, so he launched a rebellion aiming to reach a higher standing, and died a dog's death as a foolish failure.

That had served the role of proving the sturdiness of Vincent Vollachia's throne, and weakened the flames in the hearts of many who would have plotted treachery.

Vincent: "As irony would have it, now it is my own strategy that has supported the rebellion, causing those weakened flames to intensify once again."

Flop: "—. Yeah, it was only peaceful for a little while. But, that's probably just how the outcome got used, his original objective wouldn't have been that."

Vincent: "…"

Flop: "Balleroy had a different goal. Your Excellency the Emperor-kun just made use of the outcome, but the prerequisite should have been something different. Your Excellency the Emperor-kun, do you know that objective?"

There had been plenty of time for him to think about it. That was likely the reason Flop could speak without hesitation.

Upon Balleroy's death, a rumor that differed from the truth had been circulated, and Flop always continued to think about just where the truth was. Ergo, he had not let this golden opportunity slip.

The Magical Sharpshooter, Balleroy Temeglyph.

His objective in taking part in that rebellion, that was—

Vincent: "—To exact revenge upon the killer of Private First-Class Miles, who had lost his life on a special mission to the Kingdom of Lugunica."

Flop: "—Hk."

Vincent: “What is so surprising, Flop O’Connell? This ought to have been a fact of which you were aware. At every turn, you are attempting to test the Emperor. It is disrespectful.”

As Flop held his breath, Vincent spoke those words and snorted.

Similar to how he had previously asked if the rumor about Balleroy was true or not, this had likely been another trap that Flop had set for Vincent.

It was in order for Flop to ascertain if there was value in continuing this conversation.

However, in response to Vincent’s voice, Flop shook his head with a “no”.

On his expression of surprise, as a second type of surprise emerged,

Flop: “I have no intention of making shameless excuses. I certainly have tried to test you. But…”

Vincent: “What is it?”

Flop: “…Your answer, it surprised me that you said the name of Big Bro Miles.”

Vincent: “…”

As surprise flowed through Flop’s voice, Vincent narrowed his eyes.

Setting aside the first answer about testing Vincent, the second answer was of a matter not worthy of surprise. Vincent knew about Private First-Class Miles, who had a close relationship with Balleroy. —No, it was not just Miles.

Vincent: “It is natural that I grasp the positions, names, and appearances of those who serve me. Whose orders do these soldiers and generals believe they are receiving, to whom do they think they are devoting the entirety of their souls?”

If not for that, the position of Emperor would be tantamount to always having blades pointed at one’s back.

He was ordering them to put their lives on the line, so he ought to know about those people. They might come to try and take his life, so he ought to ensure that he knew their faces.

And, the names of those who had lost their lives while following his orders, were something that he would never forget.

Vincent: “I am different to those of the Kingdom. My heart shall not break for the death of each soldier and general. I merely ought to remember. Therefore, regarding both Private First-Class Miles and Balleroy Temeglyph, I shall—”

Medium: “Abel-chin, won’t forget…?”

Vincent: “—That is all. I shan’t offer consolation.”

Vincent replied so to Medium’s feeble, tottering words.

On top of that, Vincent added one more comment to Flop and Medium.

Vincent: “Supposing you two desire to restore Balleroy’s honor, that is impossible.”

Medium: “—! Wh-Why?”

Vincent: “If it were to be known that the rumors differed from the truth, people would begin to sow distrust in every rumor. The rise of that would lead to needless cracks in the foundation of the Empire. Such a thing would not have…”

Flop: “Balleroy wouldn’t have wanted it. Right?”

Flop confirmed that with Vincent, who wondered just how much Flop understood.

Since it would be futile to keep it concealed, Vincent nodded. Then, an intense turmoil spread further and further across Medium’s face.

To that sister of his, Flop spoke gently, like a big brother, but also with a level of strictness, Flop: “Dear sister, you said it yourself, didn’t you? That you’d help me out, no matter what I do. That’s our family oath. I can also puff my chest out and say that.”

Medium: “Th-That’s right? But, what do you mean? That’s…”

Flop: “If Balleroy had truly intended on starting a rebellion and killing His Excellency the Emperor-kun, he would have come to us and asked for help. Even if it would have only raised the chances by a small amount, if he was truly serious about it, that’s what he would have done.”

Medium: “—Ah.”

At Flop’s words, Medium’s eyes opened wide.

The “family oath” that had also been spoken of earlier—Vincent did not know how much of a binding force that was, but if it carried a meaning so strong that one would not refuse the invitation to rebel against the Emperor, Flop’s theory would be valid.

Flop: “Balleroy had no real intention of succeeding in that rebellion. At the same time, he had the objective of wanting to get revenge for Big Bro Miles. The inconsistency there is that Balleroy wouldn’t have thought that Big Bro Miles’s killer was His Excellency the Emperor-kun.”

Vincent: “…”

Flop: “Finally, may I ask just one more thing?”

Though he should have already shamelessly spent all of his time, there were no words to describe Flop’s courage as he still held up a single finger.

Vincent responded with nothing, but as if Flop had taken that as the situation being in his favor,

Flop: “Did Balleroy fulfill his dearest wish? Did he get revenge for Big Bro Miles?”

Vincent: “—. No.”

Flop: “I, see.”

With just that brief response, Vincent would not hand over any more information.

Even if Flop requested such, he had no intention of handing it over. Even if Flop aspired to get revenge for the two siblings, for Balleroy and Miles, it would be impossible for him to accomplish that.

And above all else, that was because—

Vincent: “Balleroy Temeglyph would not have desired it.”

3

Flop: “Sorry for taking so long, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun.”

His dialogue with Vincent concerning Balleroy Temeglyph having concluded, Flop bowed his head.

His head had been bowed. In truth, the dialogue had taken a long time.

Vincent: “Are you unable to imagine just how valuable my time is during this crisis?”

Flop: “I have confidence in my appraisal of things. That’s why I could tell that the message entrusted to me was of the highest value right now, and used it to get the answers that my sister and I wanted.”

Vincent: “Your disrespect knows no bounds. Additionally, do not speak falsehoods to me.”

Flop: “Hm?”

Vincent: “Those were not the answers that you and Medium had wanted, those were the answers that you had wanted. This was nothing more than her simply going along with your request. That was the “family oath” you spoke of, was it not?”

Jerking his chin, Vincent corrected the mistake in Flop’s speech.

Hearing that, Medium widened her eyes, and after a moment of surprise, Flop nodded with a “Right”.

Flop: “I was the one who wanted to know the answer. If you’re planning on an execution, my head is the only one I want you to lop off.”

Vincent: “Fool. You think I will engage with your careless remarks any longer? Medium, do not look at me with those eyes.”

Conveying that he did not have the time to go along with frivolous chatter, Vincent snorted at the gaze of Medium, which was seeming to plead for her brother’s life, and then,

Vincent: “So, have you been satisfied?”

Flop: “Yeah, that’s right. I fully understand that amidst Your Excellency the Emperor-kun’s precious time, you’ve earnestly engaged with me. And you did so without even getting caught in my repeated tricks.”

Vincent was silent as Flop unashamedly declared that he had tested the Emperor.

Supposing Vincent’s answers had not fulfilled Flop’s desires, what would he have done?

Inferring that question from the silence, Flop smiled.

Flop: “If that happened, I would’ve brought the message to Husband-kun instead of Your Excellency the Emperor-kun, saved the Empire, and then have him become Emperor.”

Vincent: “You…”

Flop: “Nah, it’s really, really good that we settled things without that happening! …You weren’t one of the makers of the world that I must get revenge on.”

Vincent: “Revenge, on the world?”

At the words mixed into Flop’s sigh of relief, Vincent raised an eyebrow.

Then, beside the conversation between her brother and the Emperor, Medium sniffled as she responded “Um, well”,

Medium: “Big bro is always saying it. The reason that something unpleasant happens isn’t because of a single bad person, but because of the world that made that person bad~.”

Flop: “That’s quite a loose paraphrasing, but yes, exactly! Well, since this is an unpleasant world where those kinds of unpleasant things happen unreasonably, I’m striving to steadily improve it, even if through small things. That’s my revenge against the world.”

Vincent: “—. What nonsense.”

The world on which revenge must be taken, and the makers of that world.

While thinking that the way it had been put was similar to Cecilus Segmunt, Vincent muttered. Hearing that mutter, Flop gave a wry smile, and Medium got angry with flaming eyes, saying “What’s with you~?”.

At the reactions of the siblings, Vincent thought of it as increasingly foolish.

There was no doubt that Vincent was one of the people who had shaped the world which Flop felt to be absurd. Even if someone thought about making change for certain reasons, as long as they did not enact it, they would remain as a target of that revenge.

So, why had Vincent been excluded from that? He could not understand.

Considering that the origin had been him abandoning the “same as ever was” method, and then using somebody else’s thinking as a reference while aiming for the “beyond what ever was” method, it was something that he did not even want to think about.

More importantly—

Vincent: “You had said earlier. If I did not meet your expectations, you would deliver the contents of the message to another person, and thereby eliminate the peril to the Empire.”

Flop: “Yeah? That’s right. I had intended to entrust it to Husband-kun.”

Vincent: “It matters not who you were to entrust it with. Rather, if entrusting it implies that the Great Disaster will thus be eliminated, it must be a very important measure.”

A measure left behind by Chisha, who deceived Vincent, and had schemed all sorts of things.

Just what sort of thing was it?

Vincent: “Every single word and phrase, deliver it without leaving out anything. Assume that even a single omitted phrase can alter the future of the Empire.”

Flop: “That was my intention from the start, but man, that’s really scary! In total, I’ve been put in charge of three messages… ahem ahem. Cheer me on so I can do it well, dear sister.”

Medium: “Yep! Leave it to me, big bro! Do your best~!”

Receiving Vincent’s threat, Flop hyped himself up as Medium raised her voice.

As Vincent watched their charade, Flop cleared his throat a little once more,

Flop: “First is number one. —About Cecilus Segmunt, I had replicated a technique of Olbart Dunkelkenn’s to shrink him, then he was sent to the Gladiator Island. Likely, he has already crawled out using his own strength, but supposing he is late in his escape, assume that he is there.”

Vincent: “…”

Flop: “Well, because when he was talking to me, he looked just like you, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun. His tone and manner of speech were like yours as well. But, that was exactly how he put it."

As Vincent narrowed his sable eyes, Flop added that on in a panic.

But, there was no need for him to explain. In reality, ever since Chisha had ousted Vincent from the throne, it was an undeniable truth that he had begun playing the role of Emperor.

Since Chisha had been cautious, he probably would have never returned to his original form, and there was no doubt that he approached his final moments while imitating even Vincent's tone of voice.

When he had witnessed the shrunken Cecilus in the Imperial Capital, he had roughly fathomed a guess that it was something done by Chisha. The objective of that was also clear, since with Vincent ousted from the throne, Cecilus's presence would still be an impediment.

Vincent: "Even Chisha could have never deceived him. If Cecilus had been living his days normally in the Imperial Capital, it would have been impossible for me to have been removed from the throne, no matter what Chisha had prepared."

To put it plainly, it was the right decision to shrink and banish a hindrance to his plan. If it was Chisha, Cecilus would have had enough negligence to get shrunk.

Vincent: "No objections. Continue."

Flop: "Then, number two. —The Sanctum has been detained in the Fortified City. Depending on its presence, you may discover the way of being of the Great Disaster, which invites ruin to the Empire."

Vincent: "…"

Flop: "To be honest, this seems quite important, but I don't really get what it means. But it doesn't seem like you need me to repeat it, so…"

Then, Flop let out his words with an attitude that lacked confidence, and held his breath.

The reason for that was because, upon hearing that message, a change was yielded on Vincent's expression.

Vincent tightly clenched down on his teeth, then placed his hand to his mouth and kept silent. He would not close both eyes at the same time. Thus, he forcefully shut only his right eye.

The reason he had aimed for the Fortified City of Garkla, was because he had thought that if it were Chisha, he would have left some sort of countermeasure there. —But, that was incorrect.

What Chisha Gold had left behind in the Fortified City was not a countermeasure. It was an "answer".

Vincent: "We need to enter the Fortified City as soon as possible."

Medium: "Wait wait, Abel-chin! There were three messages, right? There's still one left!"

Vincent headed for the door, as his time was too valuable to remain at a standstill, but Medium stopped him. Halting his step at her words, Vincent took a deep breath.

The first was concerning Cecilus, the second was an "answer", so then what had been left as the third?

Vincent: "Let me hear it. If there is a card that still remains unturned—"

He would make full use of it, and protect the Vollachian Empire from the Great Disaster.

As Vincent requested that, Flop looked back into his sable eyes, and, clearing his throat again to try and deliver the message exactly as it had been entrusted to him—

Flop: "—Your Excellency."

Vincent: "…"

Flop: "My assistance in getting the wheel out of the ditch, concludes hereee."

—.

——.

———.

Vincent: “—What an enormous fool.”

Declaring that and nothing more, Vincent headed for the door of the cabin.

Flop, having ceased his imitation, raised his own voice in a “Please wait!” towards Vincent’s back.

Flop: “Even if you hurry and rush out of the cabin, the speed at which we reach Garkla won’t change! It would only be different if Your Excellency the Emperor-kun could run faster than an earth dragon!”

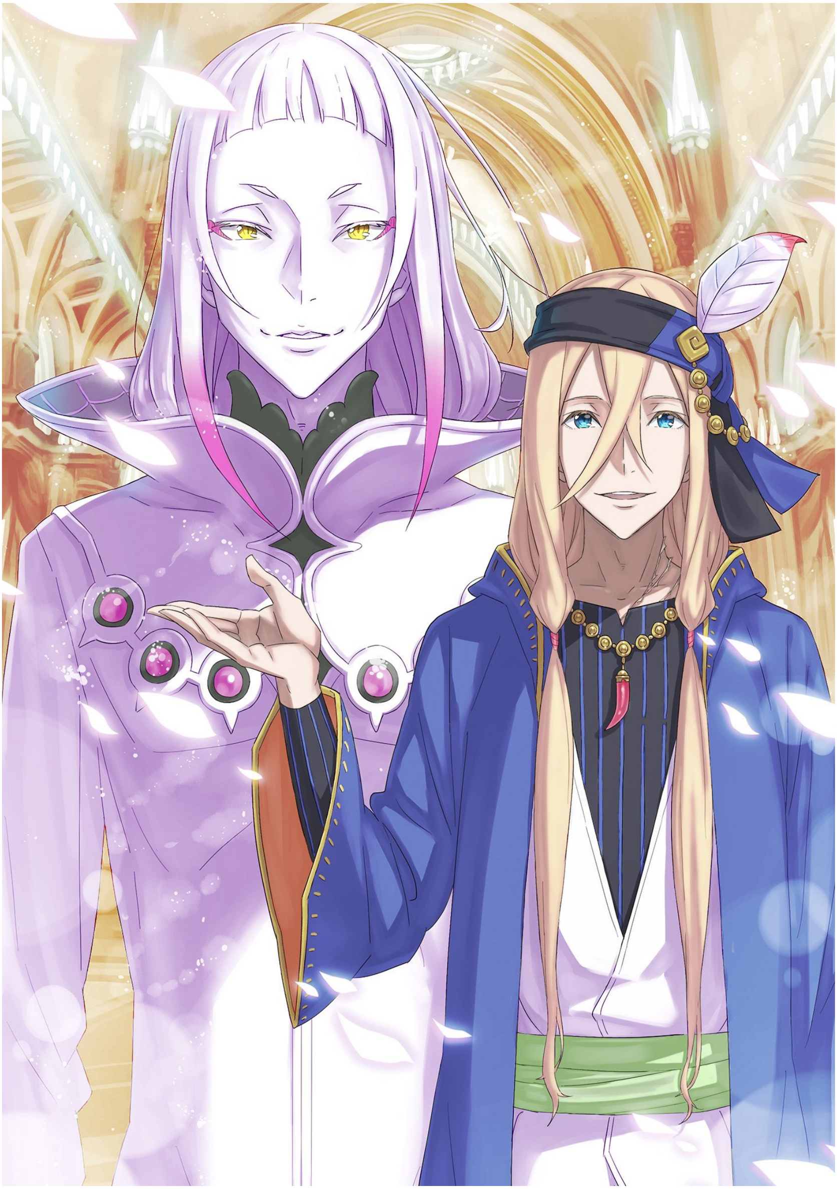

Vincent: “I have no choice but to make haste for the Fortified City. If necessary, I shall fly there using the dragon ship or by other means.”

Flop: “The sky isn’t safe either! There might be dead flying dragons soaring around! Besides, there’s still one part of this conversation remaining… Medium!”

Medium: “Y-yeah! Got it, big bro!”

He felt impatient to head to the Fortified City.

Flop had pointed out the danger of the dragon ship from a reasonable angle, and as he ordered Medium, his younger sister once again blocked Vincent’s path.

Vincent: “Even if it is to hasten the dragon carriage, or to share the information with Berstetz and the rest, there is no better option than for me to hurry. Get in the way, and you shall be executed.”

Medium: “Big bro, Abel’s eyes are serious?!”

Flop: “But, if it’s about the degree to which we seriously live our lives, then there’s no way we’d lose! Your Excellency the Emperor-kun! I said this at the start. After you hear the message, I’d like to ask a favor.”

Vincent: “…”

While harboring impatient emotions, Vincent turned around to face Flop, who was pincering him together with Medium.

If he recalled correctly, Flop had impudently thrust the two conditions of the old story and a favor before him.

He had no memory of accepting, but in order to hear the message, he had not outright rejected them either.

Vincent: “Say it.”

He had already informed him that restoring Balleroy's honor was an impossible goal.

Something that Flop and Medium would have desired beyond that, Vincent could not think of a single candidate that would be impossible to achieve.

If it was too far-fetched and unacceptable, then he would not be able to do anything, but—.

Flop: "Your Excellency the Emperor-kun, after the current crisis passes, you'll return to the seat of Vollachian Emperor, and the Empire will go back to normal… No, you'll do your best to make it even better, right?"

Vincent: "I have reservations about the way you phrased it, but generally that is so."

Vincent once had a plan of his own, but now that it has lost its footing due to Chisha's scheming, he felt that he needed to discuss whether it was feasible.

For that reason, Vincent nodded, as there was no room for denial.

Flop gave an "mm-hmm" to his response, and smiling as if to say that it had benefited his intentions, he nodded,

Flop: "Then, I wonder. After everything is over, I think Your Excellency the Emperor-kun is going to welcome many wives… but, would you let Medium be one of them?"

Medium: "Eh?"

Vincent: "What, so it was something like that? I do not mind."

Medium: "Eh?"

Originally, the reason why Vincent had not welcomed any wives until now was in order to reduce the annoyances that would serve no purpose to his aforementioned plan.

Now that his plan had broken down, he had no reason to overly adhere to it.

Regarding the Imperial Selection Ceremony, too, he felt the need to get his hands in the game.

Henceforth, Vincent was merely facing the obligation he had to fulfill as a Vollachian Emperor.

As Vincent gave that response, Flop patted his chest in relief.

And then—

Medium: “Eh?”

With that, only the person who was placed as the subject, Medium, continued to tilt her head in confusion.

***

Note from the author:

The topic of “Balleroy Temeglyph” comes up quite often, but the book “Re: Starting Life in Another World From Zero Ex4—Travelogue of the Finest” deals with his character in a major way.

And similarly, the topic of “Miles”, which comes up rather sparsely, is a character who makes an appearance in the book “Re: Starting Life in Another World From Zero Ex1—The Dream that the Lion King Saw”.

Since nothing more than the contents that emerge in the main story will be written about in the main story, readers who wish to know more details, by all means, check those books out!

Chapter 26:
The Poison Princess

1

—At the same time as when the open palm of Petra Leyte caused Natsuki Subaru's cheek to swell, and when Flop O'Connell's bombshell statement caused Medium O'Connell to be confused.

???: "—As expected, seems like y'all couldn't wait for us ta arrive."

Gazing up as he gnawed on his kiseru, the strongest shinobi of the City-States languidly muttered.

Slouching his already sloped shoulders, having sat down cross-legged, the wolfman—Halibel, amidst the flowing nightscape, maintained vigilance of the quiet evening hours on the roof of the dragon carriage.

Just before, the coupled dragon carriages had been targeted.

Thanks to the children who had noticed the surprise attack before Halibel, they had been able to avoid that danger, but accidents like those did not happen very often. To ensure that they did not happen, was Halibel's duty.

Halibel: "After that, lil' Ana's gaze was real darn unsparin'. I hafta make up for it."

The young girl who he had known since long ago due to ties with his kin, had paid an extraordinary price in order to go to the Empire on this occasion.

Accompanied by Halibel, she had taken on the role of an envoy for the City-States. —Contrary to the expectation that this was an untapped business opportunity that ignited her merchant soul, her objective was actually to search for a friend who had disappeared.

She was a girl who did not want to show weakness. Of course, that was not something she would ever admit.

Halibel: "'Cause of that, she told the middle-aged geezer who she knew from long ago ta not lend her a hand."

As he said that, Halibel slowly stood up.

Consisting of multiple dragon carriages coupled together, the coupled dragon carriages were being pulled without rest by a great number of ground dragons—An outstanding piece of engineering truly characteristic of the greedy Empire, fully displaying the haphazardness of the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion.

Even so, Halibel could not get used to that unnatural sensation.

Even though the wheels were stumbling along an uneven path as the scenery flowed, neither wind nor shaking could be felt. Kararagi had a low overall number of ground dragons, and beast carriages were commonly used, so he was well acquainted with shaking and sluggishness.

And, speaking of unnatural sensations that he was not used to—

Halibel: "Dang, even tho' the movin' corpses were already quite considerable… seems like flyin' dragons're also becomin' "zombies"."

Reaching his finger into a gap in his Japanese-style clothing, Halibel sloppily scratched his belly as he grumbled.

Reflected in his slit-eyes as he gazed into the night sky, with cracks throughout their grand large bodies and spread wings, were flying dragons that had been reduced to corpses—a flock of "undead flying dragons".

A dense flock that concealed the stars like dark clouds, were slowly approaching the coupled dragon carriages.

Halibel: "—There's a troublesome one in there."

As Halibel gave such an evaluation to a presence mixed in among the flock of undead flying dragons.

As if noticing the presence of that repulsive enemy, unrest began to sprout among the ground dragons pulling the dragon carriages.

Even though the ground dragons were known as loyal friends of people, it was not as if they had lost their wildness upon being domesticated. Feeling a sense of danger at the looming threat, even they would have a frightened heart.

The coupled dragon carriages were a big deal as an invention, but such danger was always present. Ground dragons were already highly empathetic creatures. If one of them got frightened, that fear would spread like a chain reaction—

???: “—DODOGYUUUN!!”

Right after Halibel had worried about that, a neigh that seemingly tore through the dusk reverberated.

A lethal cry of the approaching threat, that paralyzed the ground dragons with fear—was not what it was.

The neigh had originated from near the foremost wagon, where several dozens of ground dragons were lined up to pull the coupled dragon carriages; the thing that had played the most important role, was the loud cry of a single jet-black ground dragon.

Halibel: “Heh, seems like there’s a young’un who’s got a considerably manly spirit.”

With the quick wittedness of the black ground dragon’s neigh, the contagion of fear was intercepted from spreading throughout the ground dragons.

Thanks to that, they had avoided the worst possible situation of the fearful ground dragons abandoning their duty, which would have caused the mid-air breakage of the coupled dragon carriages. And, just when Halibel was impressed, he had suddenly realized.

Halibel: “Golly, the black ground dragon young’un was actually a female. Rather than manly, guess she’s got a maidenly spirit.”

Unusually widening his narrowed slit-eyes as he muttered, Halibel laughed a small “Kaka”.

Smiling, the shinobi wolfman walked lightheartedly outside the dragon carriages that continued to run—Stepping forth into empty space, he leaped into the sky.

He would engage. The formidable enemy that even the Admirer deemed to be troublesome, in order to prevent it from drawing any closer.

That formidable enemy was—

2

Subaru: “Whoa whoa whoa, what the heck is that?!”

Clinging to the window frame of the corridor, Subaru’s voice croaked as he gazed at the scene outside.

Having finished his discussion with Rem and Louis—no, with Spica, in the passenger cabin, he had joined Emilia and the others who had been worriedly waiting for him; in the midst of giving them a report, he had been slapped by Petra.

Petra: “This is for me, and a little bit for Otto-san too!”

Then, after receiving that physical reprimand, he grappled with the concern he had caused the girls and the worry he would continue to burden them with in the future, and that was the moment he braced himself.

A sudden roar, as if to shatter the night sky itself, was heard, prompting Subaru and the others to rush to the window.

Subaru: “That thing’s, a black flying dragon… No, it’s way too massive to even be compared to a flying dragon!”

Beatrice: “That size, it’s not a flying dragon, in fact. Unmistakable, it’s Dragon-class, I suppose. And furthermore…”

Emilia: “—That Dragon, it has three heads!”

Above Subaru and Beatrice, who were clung to the window side by side, Emilia also pressed herself against the window and exclaimed just that; not only Subaru, but also the people of this other world had recognized it as an atypical being of imposing appearance.

Amidst the nightscape, soaring through the sky as if to race alongside the coupled dragon carriages, a fearsome colossal black Dragon swung its massive body and three heads around.

Cracks running through its majestic figure and expansive wings, the three pairs of golden eyes asserted its presence even in the night sky, vividly revealing its true nature.

Subaru: “Dragon Zombie…!!”

Ram: “A black Dragon with three heads… No way, the Three-Headed Valgren?”

Subaru: “Do you know it, Nee-sama?!”

With their cheeks still pressed against the window glass, the trio of Subaru, Beatrice, and Emilia turned their gazes to Ram behind them. Ram, cradling her own elbow, and as she stared out at the Dragon with her light-crimson eyes,

Ram: “It’s the infamous Blight Dragon that once wreaked havoc in a city by the border between the Empire and the Kingdom.”

Subaru: “I thought as much! It’s a given that a unique monster with such a nickname would be formidable…”

Ram: “A few years after the Demi-Human War, that Dragon almost scorched the Commercial City to the ground. Furthermore…”

Subaru: “Furthermore, what? Is there something else?”

Ram: “—. It was that battle in which the head of the family from two generations prior, Roswaal-sama’s grandmother, lost her life.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the words Ram delivered made Subaru and the others catch their breaths.

The threat of an enemy became far more visceral when one learned that a relative of somebody close to them had been a victim. All the more when it was Roswaal's grandmother. There was no way she could have been weak.

That stupendous Blight Dragon had been forestalled and was presently being held at bay by Halibel, but—

Tanza: "Um, who exactly are those wolfpeople over there?"

Pulling closer, with Subaru in the middle, Tanza peered out of the same window, unable to hide her astonishment at the confrontation unfolding outside.

Surprised as she was, her phrasing was not incorrect, no matter how much it may have seemed so.

Regarding the appearance of the fighting Halibel, her phrasing of "those wolfpeople" was indeed accurate.

The reason was—

Subaru: "Halibel-san, it looks like there's about three of him…"

Emilia: "No, there are four of him, Subaru. It seems one has been on the Dragon's back the whole time, trying to whittle down its wings."

Beatrice: "In this case, Betty doesn't think the exact number is the issue, in fact…"

Touted as the strongest shinobi of the City-States, Halibel had erased Sphinx's deadly attack in an instant. Those actions alone already lived up to his reputation, but the battle now within the view of Subaru and company was equally, if not more, befitting of that reputation.

It was no big deal for him. Halibel, like a ninja, had split himself into clones and was engaged in aerial combat with the Blight Dragon.

Given this high-speed combat, it was understandable that Tanza, unacquainted with Halibel, might have been fooled by the illusion into thinking that the true form of the strongest entity of the City-States was actually a shinobi group composed of multiple people, called the Admirers.

In any case—

Spica: “Uau!”

Rem: “I believe the Blight Dragon isn’t our only enemy. Wouldn’t it be best for us to regroup with everyone else?”

Spica raised her voice in alarm, while Rem, who held her hand, suggested regrouping.

Ideally, Subaru would have wanted to share the details regarding the handling of Spica with everyone in a more calm situation. However, given how the situation was moving, they did not have that luxury.

Subaru: “Yeah, you’re right… We should head to where everyone is! Abel and the others should also be on the move. Right now we—Urgh?!”

Emilia: “Subaru?!”

Following the proposal of Rem and Spica, Subaru was just about to suggest moving to another location.

Midway through, suddenly, a burning pain on Subaru’s chest interrupted his words, and Emilia supported his body as he tried to crouch down.

But, it was not just Subaru who had experienced this strange phenomenon.

Tanza: “…Are you alright?”

Beatrice: “To be supported by you is humiliating, I suppose, deergirl…”

Ram: “Even Beatrice-sama… Barusu, what happened?”

Just like Subaru, the sudden pain had staggered Beatrice, and she expressed her displeasure as Tanza promptly supported her.

Ram asked a question upon witnessing that exchange, to which Subaru replied, “I-I don’t know”.

Subaru: “I just felt pain on my chest all of a sudden…Huhh?!”

As he spoke, Subaru pulled down the neckline of his clothes, widening his eyes in shock.

Seeing the same thing Subaru had, both Emilia and Ram furrowed their brows in confusion.

Present there was a scar that seemed like a swollen red welt—And, it was not just an ordinary scar.

Beatrice: “What is this…? It’s shaped like, somebody’s eye?”

Subaru: “Ah, so you see it too? It’s a mark shaped like an eyeball… Wait, don’t tell me, Beako! Do you…”

Beatrice: “…Betty has the same mark on her soft skin, in fact.”

What had appeared on Subaru’s chest was a mark roughly the size of a child’s palm—a deformed design that appeared to depict an eye.

It seemed like the same emblem had been carved into Beatrice, and Tanza confirmed by nodding deeply as she peered into the neckline of Beatrice’s dress.

Subaru: “But, it’s just me and Beako? Why is everyone else unaffected?”

Ram: “Disgusting.”

Subaru: “I’m genuinely worried?! Do you really think I’d say something obscene given the situation and my current size?!”

Ascertaining that the others did not have that same mark, which was still pulsating with pain, Subaru rubbed the mark on his chest and scowled.

This was an abnormal sign that had emerged in this situation. Of course, it was clear that this was an action taken by someone opposing Subaru and company, but the intentions behind the targets were unclear.

Perhaps, due to the contract binding Subaru and Beatrice, something cast upon one of their bodies could possibly manifest on the other as well.

Subaru: “No good, the limits are unclear no matter how much I think about it. The best thing would be to talk to someone knowledgeable about this. For now, we need to get out of here…”

Spica: “Aau!!”

Rem: “—Hk! You can’t!”

Once more, just as he tried to suggest they leave, he was interrupted yet again.

In a flurried state, Spica and Rem forcefully pushed Subaru and the rest aside from where they were lined up. It was a sudden move, however it turned out to be the right one.

—Because from directly above them, the roof was penetrated, and the silhouette of an enemy wielding great shears dove in, violently tearing through the spot where Subaru and company had stood just moments before.

3

Otto: “Margrave!”

Petra: “Master!”

In unison, two voices called out to him in concern, eliciting a wry smile from Roswaal.

These two might not have easily heeded his advice, and they certainly had not given their trust to Roswaal, but their genuine worry was evident. Their inherent kindness not only spoke for itself but also served as a testament that they, too, were part of Emilia's faction.

—This was a distinction that set them apart from Roswaal, who could never truly connect with them at the core.

Roswaal: "…Hk, they've marked me."

Swallowing his fleeting smile, Roswaal pulled open his shirt to reveal his chest.

There, a red swollen mark stood out, depicting the pattern of an eye. Petra, her face covered, had her eyes widened in shock upon seeing it.

Otto's expression clouded over upon seeing the mark, murmuring, "That is…"

Otto: "Margrave, did you say "mark"? I hope it is not what I'm thinking…"

Roswaal: "It's exactly what you're thiiinking~. —This is most likely a sign that we've been recognized as enemies, or perhaps designated as targets. Either way, it's not a welcooome~ sign."

Petra: "Enemies, or targets?"

Otto's glance fleetingly shifted to Petra beside him. She quickly grasped the implication behind his look, fervently shaking her head in response.

From their reactions, neither Otto nor Petra had this emblem manifesting on them.

While that in itself was a relief—

Petra: "What kind of effect does this emblem have?"

Otto: "—. Effects that I can think of could be a slow sapping of one's life, the ability to read the target's thoughts, or simply a means to continuously locate the marked individual."

Petra: “You deliberately listed the worst effects first, didn’t you? So, the most likely possibility is that this mark serves to pinpoint our location?”

Roswaal: “Indeed, both of you are truuuly~ astute.”

Roswaal closed his eyes, seeing Otto and Petra’s broad, calm judgement on the range of possibilities.

The most dangerous kind of curse, one that drained life, was not something that could be remotely inscribed and probably did not need to be considered.

However, being constantly located due to the mark would be problematic in itself.

Roswaal: “We might need to consider splitting up to ensure our movements aren’t entirely transparent. With the assistance of Halibel-dono outside, you two should distance yourselves from me…”

Otto: “—No, it seems it is already too late.”

Right after responding in a low voice, Otto pulled Petra’s shoulder beside him.

Petra, her eyes widening in shock, watched as an immense figure suddenly crashed through the window right beside her, entering the corridor of the coupled dragon carriages.

The intruder, covered head-to-toe in black armor and wielding Great Shears, emanated a malevolent aura—it was an undead.

Petra: “—Hk.”

Suppressing a scream, Petra pointed at the enemy from within Otto’s arms.

While praising the bravery of the girl who had tried to take the initiative in the sudden situation, Roswaal stepped forward and thrusted his palm forward before the enemy could swing the Great Shears upward.

He swiftly drove his hand into the gap between the helmet that covered the face as if it was a sword, inserting his fingers into the opponent’s eye sockets as he chanted.

Roswaal: “Goa.”

In an instant, flames engulfed and exploded from the creature’s head, causing the armor to rupture from within.

Despite their flashy entrance, the intruder had not landed a single blow. Believing he had chosen the best course of action, Roswaal turned around, only to realize he had been overly optimistic.

One by one, soldiers in similar gear began pouring into the carriage from the roof and corridor.

In no time, the entire coupled dragon carriage had transformed into a mobile battlefield.

4

Medium: “Abel-chin, over here! Hurry! Big bro you run too!”

Flop: “To tell you the truth, this is me running with my full strength, dear sister!”

Raising her voice with all her might, Medium protected the rear by repelling the enemy’s attacks with her twin swords.

The barbarian swords and the great shears clashed violently, and as they slipped through the openings she created, the two men she was protecting—Vincent and Flop, kept away from the enemy’s onslaught.

At first glance, that was a pitiful aspect, but there were reasons other than the fact that these two were respectively an injured man and a non-combatant.

Flop: “Your Excellency the Emperor-kun! Are you alright? Please don’t tell me you’ve been poisoned! I’d be troubled if you were unable to keep your promise!”

Vincent: "…Hmph. If you are worried, then hide your ambition a little. It is disrespectful."

Flop: "It may come as a surprise to you since you surround yourself with ambitious people, but there are people in the world who approach you for reasons other than ambition, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun!"

Vincent snorted at Flop who spouted such a thoughtless remark while supporting his shoulder.

Vincent's expression stiffened as he experienced a faint pain akin to his chest being pierced. It seemed as if the sudden pain along with the red scar was a thorn that ate into Vincent's flesh.

Directly after that came the invasion of enemies which Medium was now keeping in check, Vincent was convinced that he was being assailed by the same thing that had once attacked him in the past, and in a way that was more troublesome than that time.

That was—

Flop: "That painful chest wound is…"

Vincent: "Though it is an annoyance, it is likely the Evil Eye of one of my siblings, Palladio Manesque. During the Imperial Selection Ceremony, that man died in defeat, it seems he was unable to rest in peace."

Flop: "Evil Eye…! So that effect is…?"

Vincent: "Back then, it was something that allowed him to transmit his voice to somebody whose location he knew, but its precision seems to have improved after his death."

While answering Flop's question, Vincent recalled the sibling who he had once allowed to die.

Among his siblings competing for the Imperial throne, Palladio had been in a particularly formidable class, but his cause of defeat ended up being that he had grown complacent about the power of his Evil Eye, and had been unable to make full use of that ability.

It had never occurred to him that Palladio would rectify that after his death, but—.

Vincent: "…No, even if he died, his way of being was not something that could be so easily changed. There is someone who has ordered Palladio to do this to me."

Flop: "But, if he was your sibling, that Palladio person must also be a member of the Imperial Family, right? No matter how undead he's become, for such a person to just do what he is told…"

Vincent: "—You have generally guessed it. If Palladio were to obey, it would only be to either the former Emperor, Drizen Vollachia, or someone to whom he had yielded to as being above himself."

One person who fit that criteria was Vincent himself, but considering that Palladio was on the side of the undead, he was excluded from the candidates from the start.

As a definite undead, Drizen, the former Emperor and his biological father, emerged as a candidate, and as an important matter worthy of no consideration, the face of his missing younger sister also came up.

But, taking the equipment of the enemy Medium was facing into account, there was only one possible option for the real enemy—.

Vincent: "—Lamia, hm?"

A being who satisfied the conditions for Palladio to obey, and was accompanied by brutal soldiers who carried great shears—the Pruning Corps; there was nobody else but Lamia Godwin.

Vincent presumed that the enemy was one of the three siblings whom he had evaluated highly while competing for the Imperial throne in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, and he forcefully clutched his aching chest.

And, there—

???: "You're fuckin' annoying, damn dead people!!"

A rough, bellowing voice could be heard, and a drawn blade rampaged ahead of the path of Vincent and the two siblings.

At a glance, coming from the opposite direction of Vincent and company, the soldier—a man with unruly hair and an eyepatch, was mincing up the undead that had broken through the window and entered the carriage, and was reducing them to dust.

Then, breathing heavily, the soldier noticed Vincent and company, and,

???: “Oi! You lot, gimme a hand! My sister’s exhausted inside of there…”

Vincent: “Nay, it is you who ought to lend a hand.”

???: “Huh? The hell are you saying… Y-Y-Yo-You-Your Excellency the Emperor?!”

The man who had approached them with such a rough manner of speech, shouted upon realizing Vincent’s identity.

Thinking that was the natural response, Vincent found satisfaction in the reactions of those who were insolent and disrespectful, and, as he gestured to behind himself with his chin,

Vincent: “Cooperate with the ones behind me and stop the enemy forces. With this, your sister shall be brought out.”

???: “Y-yes sir! Private First-Class Jamal Aurélie reporting, yes sir!”

Vincent: “Exert your utmost efforts, Jamal Aurélie. The survival of the Empire hinges upon your performance.”

Jamal: “—Hk!”

At Vincent’s words, the one-eyed Jamal trembled all over. Immediately after, he let out a fierce, beast-like roar and ferociously leapt over Vincent and Flop’s heads, rushing to aid Medium, who was fighting strenuously behind them, and he began to hold back the undead.

Flop: “You with the eyepatch! The one fighting alongside you, Medium, is a candidate for the Most Honorable Empress Consort, so please treat her courteously!”

Medium: “I still haven’t said yes to that~!”

In response to Flop’s voice, Medium’s reply lacked tension.

Behind her, Flop burst into the room where Jamal’s sister was, and he brought out a woman in a wheelchair, whose eyes were darting about.

The woman clung to the wheelchair, and as her eyes pitifully brimmed with tears,

Katya: “Wh-what? What is it? Why, why can’t you just leave me alone…!”

Vincent: “—. That is likely something that everyone in the Empire is currently thinking.”

While he sincerely agreed with the voice of the woman who lamented the situation, Vincent shook his head.

No matter how dire the situation became, they could not afford for the wheels of the coupled dragon carriages to come to a halt right here and now.

If it were to stop, how much time would it take for the dragon carriage to start moving again?

If that were to happen—

Vincent: “—There is not a moment to waste. We must arrive at the Fortified City.”

5

Serena: “If you stop the dragon carriage right now, we’ll be surrounded by even more enemy forces. The mechanism behind the coupled dragon carriages rely on the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion. So if we start going without the Divine Protection, we’ll probably roll over.”

Anastasia: “I knew that’d be too convenient, but that’s a pretty big drawback, ain’t it?”

Serena exposed the shortcomings of coupled dragon carriages when it was suggested that the dragon carriages be stopped, given the situation of the coupled dragon carriages being attacked and the enemies and allies being mixed up in the moving carriages.

Once Anastasia was told this, it was clear that it would be impractical for them to stop.

Anastasia: “Even if that ain’t the case, the ground dragons have been runnin’ for almost half a day… ‘n once they stop, they won’t be able to start runnin’ again tonight.”

Serena: “There’s also a difference in manpower between us and our opponents. This is undoubtedly made up for by the mobility of the dragon carriages. If that gap were to disappear, our fate would be the same as that of the aging Prime Minister, Berstetz.”

Garfiel: “This ain’t the time to be talkin’ like that! Gramps, quit lettin’ everyone tell ya what to do!”

Berstetz: “This is the nature of High Countess Dracroy’s character, not to mention the fact that it is only natural that I will be executed after the Great Disaster has been resolved…”

Garfiel: “Don’t be so fuckin’ determined to just give up!”

Serena made a light remark that was hard to judge as such, and Berstetz responded with words that had no air of frivolity, to which Garfiel raised his voice.

This new attack occurred at a point in time where Anastasia and Garfiel were in the same room. Normally Garfiel would have wanted to join up with Emilia and the others, but—

Anastasia: “I’m sorry that ya were forced to be with us, Garf-kun, but thanks to ya, both me ‘n Serena-san ‘n the others were saved, right?”

Garfiel: “Tsk… I ain’t worried ‘bout the Captain, as long as Ram ‘n Emilia-sama are with him. But, I’m worried ‘bout Ottobro…”

Anastasia: “Reason doesn’t disappear when we get emotional. Otto-kun’s a merchant, so don’t worry, he can take care of himself. Whoops…”

Garfiel, his arms not looking particularly strong, snarled in frustration as he intercepted the Great-Sheared Jäger, who was boarding the carriage.

With a blistering onslaught of punches, blows, and crushing strikes, he quickly hunted down the Jäger in the blink of an eye.

Then, Berstetz, who was grouped on the same side as Anastasia as a non-combatant, narrowed his eyes even more at the sight of the undead, beaten and crushed to dust,

Berstetz: “The Pruning Corps… It seems that Her Excellency Lamia is here, after all.”

Serena: “Her Excellency Lamia Godwin? That’s someone I would have liked to have met once.”

Anastasia: “Really? What kinda person are they?”

Serena: “The Prime Minister knows more about her than I do. After all, it was the Prime Minister who wanted her to become Emperor.”

Serena shrugged as she held up her own sword, the blade of which waved through the air, and Anastasia turned her gaze to Berstetz.

The old man, who did not deny Serena’s story, nodded, his eyes so narrowed, to the point of being like threads, that one could not readily see as to where he was looking,

Berstetz: “She was a woman worthy of being the Emperor of the Vollachian Empire. If not for Vincent Abellux and Prisca Benedict being in the same generation, she would have been Emperor.”

Serena: “Could it be that she has risen as an undead to come and fulfill that ambition? Perhaps, Prime Minister, you might be forgiven if you were to pledge your allegiance once again?”

Berstetz: “—. Unfortunately, Her Excellency Lamia and I are losers. It is not in keeping with the Imperial way.”

Serena closed one eye and sighed as Berstetz slowly shook his head.

It seems Berstetz’s serious answer was not to Serena’s liking. Anastasia, too, could detect the mixed feelings between the former master and servant, but not much more.

???: “—Ana.”

Suddenly, as she was contemplating, Anastasia heard a call in her ear, and raised her head.

The call came from around Anastasia’s neck, from Echidna, disguised as a fox scarf. Glancing over, Echidna’s dark eyes turned toward the entrance of the guest room.

???: “—Anastasia-sama, I am back.”

Shortly after following her gaze, Julius appeared from the other side of the door.

The handsome Julius held his Knight’s sword in one hand and a slender man in the other. Julius had been ordered to separate from the others and pick him up.

The figure shook his long gray hair, and as he raised his head with a pitiful expression,

???: “Now now, I’m trooooubled by this all happening so suddenly. My chest is burning and aching, and with this swordsman here shaking me all about, it’s all so terrible.”

Anastasia: “Instead of complainin’ so much like a chitterin’ bird, shouldn’t ya be thankin’ me n’ my Knight? Ya might be their target, after all.”

???: “Whaaat?!”

Wearing a look of surprise, it was the one who had been restrained earlier in the back of the carriage, the Stargazer, Ubilk.

Apparently, he was in a position where he was a beneficial asset to the Empire, and was also a valuable source of information for it in its fight against the Great Disaster. In order to prevent him from being killed, Julius was sent to him.

Anastasia: "With Garf-kun, I thought there woulda been a lotta detours due to him wanderin' off 'n foolin' 'bout."

Garfiel: "I'm fightin' properly, ya know! Stop complainin'!"

Anastasia: "Really? If I didn't ask ya to do this job, wouldn't ya have gone to help Halibel outside instead?"

Garfiel: "Graarrr…!"

Snarling with an expression that proved she had hit the bull's-eye, Garfiel's fangs quivered.

The coupled dragon carriage was being continuously attacked by their enemies, but ensuring the biggest threat could not approach them, keeping the Evil Dragon at bay on his own, was Halibel.

The fierce Dragon's roar could occasionally be heard along with the accompanying sky-cracking boom—if he were not the strongest of the City-States, it would be impossible to stall the world's most powerful species.

Julius: "Garfiel, thank you very much for protecting Anastasia-sama and the others. I extend my respect for your bravery."

Garfiel: "Shut up! Just like the Captain, my amazin' self ain't too good at dealin' with ya!"

Julius: "That is regrettable. As with Subaru, I was hoping to become friends with you as well."

Garfiel: "GRRRRRRR!!"

Garfiel vigorously growled at the words Julius spoke in his face, thrusting out his fist. As if intersecting with Julius, the coordination demolished the undead that appeared behind one another.

Even if Garfiel would not admit it, the two top-notch warriors were perfectly in sync.

Anastasia: “However, this is all just a stopgap… I don’t wanna stop the dragon carriage, but if it stops then that’ll be the end of the line. We hafta get the situation movin’ somewhere, right?”

6

???: “NUUUGGGGH—!!”

With a deep and burly roar, a golden mace was swung.

The horizontal impact scythed down the undead clad in bulky armor all at once, and the enemies that had been flung off of the top of the dragon carriage, crumbled into dust even before they even crashed into the ground.

However, even after dealing with several enemies at once, the number of foes did not abate.

???: “Damn it damn it damn it! Such shrewd tricks!!”

Angered was his stern face, covered in beard and scars, and Goz Ralfon roared like a lion.

In Goz’s field of vision, he could see a swarm of undead flying dragons blanketing the sky, deploying the undead clutched in their talons down onto the coupled dragon carriages one after the other.

This bold method of transport was the worst possible mechanism by which the enemy soldiers could board the coupled dragon carriages.

—Throwing the enemy soldiers down did not ensure that every one of them could catch hold of the coupled dragon carriages.

Rather, nearly half of the soldiers failed to catch the coupled dragon carriages, and after being thrown by the undead flying dragons, simply fell to the ground below, and the outrageous occurrence of the impact reducing their resurrected bodies back into dust was repeated over and over.

However, even a military deployment that could only be called a suicidal act for a living soldier, turned into an efficient means of transportation that can be used without the fear of losses using dead soldiers.

And thus, implementing it was—

Goz: “—It is the Pruning Corps of Her Excellency Lamia!”

Goz had rushed to protect the ground dragons, who were of the most important position at the foremost wagon of the coupled dragon carriages, and he glared at the sky where the worst assortment of undead were being brought by the flock of deceased flying dragons.

The Pruning Corps were the malevolent group that had carried out what came to be known in the Vollachian Empire as the Great Purge.

Every member was clad in an armor that disguised their facial features, and wielding massive great shears, they pruned any person deemed unnecessary for their master’s supremacy. —That was the purpose of the Pruning Corps.

The reason the name of that group went down in the history of the Empire, was because a girl from the Imperial Family—Lamia Godwin, nine years old at the time, had massacred all the armies of the Mid Counts who had incited a rebellion.

The victims of the purge had been made to suffer gruesome torment, thoroughly tasting the hell of this world.

Naturally, the young princess had all her subordinates carry out all kinds of malevolent violence that would be a large burden for even those who got their hands dirty, thereby perfecting her malevolent squadron with ironclad loyalty.

Just how much control she had over the hearts of her soldiers, was on full display in this strategy. —The fact that even in death, that which gnawed at their very souls, Lamia's poison, had not faded in the slightest.

And then—

???: "—My my. Even though so many years have passed, to think you would remember me and my adorable beasts, I am glad."

Suddenly, a fear-inducing, sickly-sweet voice descended from above.

At that moment, Goz, paying no heed to appearances, raised his mace overhead, and deflecting the bright red swing head-on, lept backwards. Immediately after, the mace that Goz held caught fire.

It was a matter of course. —After all, the brilliance of the Yang Sword dazzlingly illuminated all things.

Goz: "By no means, to think that you would descend onto the battlefield yourself…! Your Excellency Lamia Godwin!!"

Lamia: "Is it really so surprising? With this body, that is the best choice, is it not?"

Clenching down on his molars, Goz glared straight ahead, and in his vision was a noble undead who smiled bewitchingly.

The blood-red opulent dress, the dazzling array of jewelry, and the natural beauty characteristic of the Vollachian Imperial Family, which caused the value of the items which adorned their beauty to plummet. —However that too, when coupled with the pale cracked skin and eerie golden irises, she was but a shadow of her former self.

In the past, during the Imperial Selection Ceremony, the Poison Princess Lamia Godwin had vied for the throne against Vincent Vollachia, and could have become the Empress—as if testifying that she had completely changed, she looked down at the half of her body that Goz had shattered with his counterattack.

However, where other undead would have crumbled to dust from such a blow, Lamia's body did not shatter. Instead, the cracks mended themselves, restoring her original form.

Goz: “That body…”

Lamia: “An immortal body that shall not be lost, no matter how much it is crushed or destroyed… alas, it does not seem to be something so convenient that I can boast about it in such a manner.”

Lamia, gently stroking the part that had been repaired, wielded the Yang Sword with that very hand, as if to prove that she had indeed recovered. In her arms, the dazzling beauty of the unfaltering treasured sword, instead seemed all the more blasphemous.

Goz frowned at that fact, to which Lamia muttered, “How unpleasant,”

Lamia: “Although you could not calm down and have a chat at the Crystal Palace either, I wonder if you could stop making such a scary face, General Second-Class Ralfon?”

Goz: “Guh…”

Lamia: “Ah, you have become a General First-Class now, have you not? I heard about that. So Vincent-niisama has reinstated the system of the Nine Divine Generals? That is very much like him to do.”

Placing the hand not holding the Yang Sword against her chin, Lamia parted her lips to the side.

Those gestures and speech were unmistakably those of Lamia, whom Goz had also come to interact with while she was still alive, and he was both horrified and angered by the technique that allowed for the undead to replicate her former behavior.

Indifferent to his inner thoughts, Lamia looked at Goz’s armor from top to bottom and said,

Lamia: “The Nine Divine Generals, it is structured so that rising to the top is measured solely by strength. It is the perfect way to gather mindless, easily controllable pawns.”

Goz: “…Certainly, part of the context behind His Excellency’s reinstatement of the Nine Divine Generals, was an intention to prepare a countermeasure against the current Great Disaster. That is something I acknowledge.”

Lamia: “Though from the way you say it, it seems you have an objection?”

Goz: “With all due respect!”

Lamia’s statement, it sounded like it was praising Vincent’s thoughts.

Before they opposed each other in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, it was said that Lamia had been quite fond of Vincent. Though life and death had separated their paths, her confidence in him remained intact even after death.

However—

Goz: “Your Excellency Lamia, how much do you know of the time when you were not alive?”

Lamia: “What a strange question. —Unfortunately, I know nothing from the time I was dead. Right now, I am in the middle of brushing up on all the various things that have happened. I would not mind if you were to teach me a little.”

Goz: “Then just one thing! Pardon my rudeness, I wish to correct you!”

Lamia: “…”

Goz: “As Your Excellency Lamia has rightly observed, the Nine Divine Generals of the present age are all highly capable. They are all strong individuals who make light of even myself… but, there is not a single one among them who is an easy pawn to control!”

Puffing out his chest adorned in golden armor, Goz emphatically boasted out loud.

Supposing that in preparation for the battle against the Great

Disaster, Vincent had reinstated the Nine Divine Generals in hopes of having pawns that would do exactly as they were told, it could be said that his plan had failed.

Every General First-Class was a hardened troublemaker, there was no way such a thing could be done so easily.

Goz: “It is not to the extent Your Excellency Lamia believes, the magnificence of the Empire is not summed up within His Excellency alone!”

Lamia: “—. I wonder, could that be an insult to Vincent-niisama?”

Goz: “No! Never! Not at all, Your Excellency Lamia!”

At Lamia’s narrowed eyes and the slightly sharp tone she had put into her words, Goz shook his head.

Lamia was angered by the feelings he had expressed about Vincent, but Goz was also sensitive to any disrespect or rude remarks made about His Excellency the Emperor. However, ever since the decision to abandon the Imperial Capital, his stance had changed slightly.

All of it, had not been influenced by Goz himself, but rather by a change in Vincent.

Goz: ““I am relying on your work”, he told me.”

Lamia: “…What did you just say?”

Goz: “Your Excellency Lamia, His Excellency Vincent Vollachia who your esteemed self knew was indeed outstanding! And yet! Now! Even more! His Excellency the Emperor is changing, striving for even greater excellence!!”

Lamia: “…”

Goz: “The Vollachian Empire, hereafter, will continue to flourish more and more! For that reason, we cannot let the hindrance from those who have once died go uncontrolled any longer!”

In the sense of seeking perfection from the Emperor, Goz and Lamia were very much alike. But, what decisively differentiated the two was their respective knowledge from the passage of the last nine years.

Those who continued to walk forward in time, they would leave behind those who had halted their step; that was a fact.

Goz: “A wise man who does not cease his onward march! Surpassing even the expectations and predictions of those who have halted, and pushing even further beyond! That, is the apex of the Vollachian Empire, His Excellency the Emperor!”

Raising the blazing head of his mace aloft, Goz shook off his hesitation, and he charged forward.

Up until that point, his love and reverence for Lamia, a member of the Vollachian Imperial Family despite her altered appearance, had fettered Goz. —But, those shackles were torn apart by a stronger and more fervent loyalty.

Goz: “OOORAAAAH—!!”

Raising a mighty roar, Goz’s singular swing drew a semicircle, and slammed down onto Lamia.

Possessing unparalleled herculean strength, a strike from Goz using all of his might was not easy to block, even if the opponent was one of the Nine Divine Generals. Even more so for the slender arm of a woman, even if that arm held the Yang Sword.

In fact, Lamia did not even try to block Goz’s strike with the Yang Sword that she wielded.

Lamia: “With that unwise head of yours, you sure talk a lot, General First-Class Ralfon. —I am actually rather impressed, so I shall inform you.”

Her thin lips moved, and Lamia fixed her gaze on Goz with a beautiful smile.

The figure of the woman received the head of the descending mace in its entirety, and without offering even the slightest resistance, it shattered like ceramic, and was blown away into smithereens.

Right after stating her intention to tell him something, she had been reduced to dust beyond any hope of repair.

Of course, there was also the matter raised in the war council earlier. Even if the undead were defeated, there was a possibility that they would rise again through the medium of the so-called Corebug that the magicians from the Kingdom had discovered.

Goz: “Even so…”

The defeat of Lamia here, it should be a turning point in the situation.

If the Pruning Corps no longer had someone to give them explicit orders, depending on the presence or absence of a commander—No, the difference in their ability would already be an advantage to his side.

That confidence of Goz was—

???: “—Are you listening, General First-Class Ralfon?”

Goz: “—Hk?!”

Once again, the moment when the sickly sweet voice grazed his ears, Goz’s mace was swung directly behind him; in its path, it slammed into the figure of the enemy and, piercing through the torso, had split their body in two with a sound like shattering pottery.

As that was smashed and blown away in the corner of his vision, Goz gulped.

Because the enemy he had reflexively struck down, that which had been turned into dust and vanished, had a face that should have been impossible.

The reason being that it was the very same as the one Goz had defeated with his own hands just a moment ago.

???: “Even though you rarely say clever things, it is just as you say.”

Goz: “Impossible…”

Faced with the strange sight that should have never been, the hand gripping the mace began to quake and tremble.

Whether that was out of anger or some other emotion, even Goz himself could not discern. What was certain, however, was that it was blasphemy.

A blasphemy against the Vollachian Empire, to which the Lion Knight, Goz Ralfon, had sworn his loyalty.

???: “—This is a war of annihilation, between us who were left behind in the past, and you lot.”

???: “—This is a war of annihilation, between us who were left behind in the past, and you lot.”

???: “—This is a war of annihilation, between us who were left behind in the past, and you lot.”

Having declared thus, Lamia Godwin, who should have been shattered, smiled at Goz.

—Wielding countless Yang Swords in their hands, innumerable Poison Princesses, innumerable Lamia Godwins, smiled at him.

SoupVEVO

Chapter 27:
Berstetz Fondalfon

1

Lamia: “Berstetz, I am entrusting this situation to you. Stand firm, even if it means your death.”

Berstetz: “Yes, Your Excellency. Please ensure your own safety.”

—That was the last conversation they had ever exchanged.

If one were to ask whether their bond was based on a so-called “strong connection” beyond a mere professional master-servant relationship, the answer would be “no”.

Still, sensing great potential in her intellect and demeanor, using the wisdom he had accumulated over the years, he sought to pave her path, guiding her towards the throne where the Emperor ought to sit.

Even without having loyalty or passion towards her, their master-servant relationship was genuine.

She had not been instructed how to count from one to ten. Yet this individual, once she understood “one”, she would comprehend “one hundred”, and think up “one hundred and one”.

She was someone able to judge for herself and others the roles befitting their abilities, and the duties befitting their position.

He had not been blessed with martial prowess, he always yearned to be the Sword Wolf of the Empire, yet he never quite reached it.

Not garnering respect from others, he could only live a life of scorn, but the fact that she had deemed him useful was perhaps something worthy of gratitude.

Thus, there was not a shred of deception in the last words that they had exchanged.

During the Imperial Selection Ceremony, he was sternly commanded to stand his ground, even if it meant risking his life, and he had resolved himself to do so.

Unable to proclaim himself a Sword Wolf, it was the final service of a man who had simply grown too old.

Even though he was a passionless servant, he was determined to become a martyr to fulfill his duty.

And yet, Berstetz had survived.

And the master, who had hoped for his safety, had lost her life.

To this day, Berstetz Fondalfon continued to live in shame.

Without fulfilling his duties, pursuing the position of the Emperor that leads the Empire towards decline, he remained unaware of the schemes behind the Great Disaster that had unfolded. To call himself a Sword Wolf now would be nothing short of hubris and disgrace.

Despite not fulfilling any of the commands given to him, he continued to live in shame.

2

???: “General First-Class Ralfon, what has come over you?”

???: “Is this not quite uncharacteristic for someone with a fondness for the Vollachian Imperial Family?”

???: “Or perhaps, you no longer favor me since I was defeated in the Imperial Selection Ceremony?”

The same voice emanated from different mouths, and Goz Ralfon found himself under the unrelenting gaze of countless golden eyes.

Goz Ralfon, clad in golden armor of the same color as those eyes, distorted the scars on his face and gritted his molars at the horrifying reality reflected in his eyes.

With all his might, he struck a hammering blow with his mace.

The blood of the Empire's Sword Wolf coursed through Goz's veins, screaming in defiance as he struck down Lamia, a respected member of the Imperial Family, now deemed an enemy.

Torn apart by the soul-crushing pain of his actions, Goz finally grasped the grim truth.

—The Great Disaster unquestionably threatened to destroy the Vollachian Empire.

Goz: "For what purpose…!"

As Goz's teeth ground together in rage, before him stood Lamia—Or rather, multiple Lamias tilting their heads in unison.

The sight of her cascading orange hair slipping over her slender shoulders fanned the flames of anger within Goz.

Goz: "Why do you allow this imitation?! Such… Such blasphemy cannot be! You are making a mockery of Her Excellency Lamia's life!!"

Riding on his surging anger, his voice trembled as the impending tears were seared away by his boiling blood; Goz addressed the countless clones of Lamia before him.

However, in response to Goz's heartfelt plea, the Lamias collectively placed the back of their hands to their lips, then playfully said,

Lamia: "Do not misunderstand, General First-Class Ralfon. This is something I did of my own volition, not something someone else forced upon me."

Goz: "…What, are you-"

Lamia: "That Witch is rather rigid in her thinking. If I can be resurrected after being shattered, then I can certainly resurrect myself back before being shattered. Receptacles can be made endlessly, so all I need to do is dilute the source and fill them all. Once that is intuitively grasped—Well, something as dreamlike as this can be achieved, right?”

Graciously smiling, Lamia Godwin, her pale face painted with a flush of mischief, proudly displayed the many versions of herself, mirroring her wit from when she was alive.

Goz: “…”

Seeing the dreamlike state Lamia described, Goz could not help but inwardly agree.

Lamia, endlessly multiplying, blasphemously replicating her own existence. And each one of these Lamias bore the Yang Sword, the symbol of the Empire.

If this was not a dream—or rather a nightmare, then what was it?

Lamia: “You know, General First-Class Ralfon, you cannot shatter dreams in reality. Why not accept that… and perhaps join us on our side?”

Goz: “—. What, what do you mean?”

Lamia: “It is not complicated. If you were to die, you would be in the same position as me and the others. Why not choose the winning side sooner rather than later?”

Lamia, her hands clasping her sword in front of her and tilting her head, beckoned Goz.

If one were to fall in battle, they would join the ranks of Lamia’s undead army. It was a reality unfolding on the battlefield, but imagining it brought an unbearable weight on one’s psyche.

The staunchly loyal Imperial Soldier, Goz, and the soldiers who shared his sentiments would, upon falling, align with those aiming to destroy the Empire without a second thought.

Just as Lamia Godwin, who once vied for the throne of the Empire’s Empress, had done.

There, upon its completion, would be an Empire of the undead. —In the country of the Sword Wolf, without even a shadow to be seen.

Goz: “I am undeserving of your words, Your Excellency Lamia!”

After tightly shutting his eyes, Goz lifted his face, and he confronted Lamia.

In the face of Goz’s intense spirit, Lamia’s beautifully arched eyebrows furrowed as she frowned.

Lamia: “You seem poised to refuse.”

Goz: “Generous as your mercy is, Your Excellency Lamia! I, Goz Ralfon, must respectfully decline!”

Lamia: “As expected, you have turned me down.”

Against Lamia’s narrowed golden eyes, Goz thought of the vision he had seen in his moment of closed introspection.

The vision where he, life extinguished, became an undead like Lamia and the others, his pale face bearing those golden eyes, wielding his mace to destroy the Empire—he shattered that vision into pieces.

Complete destruction, faced with that illusion that shrouded him, he roared.

Goz: “I must correct my earlier statement! I said that none of the Nine Divine Generals are entirely under the Emperor’s control! I am a loyal pawn of His Excellency the Emperor! Regardless of what others may do! I alone! Wish to remain so!!”

Rejecting the fate of becoming a harbinger of destruction in Death, he yearned to remain a living servant of His Excellency the Emperor.

That was Goz Ralfon’s way of being as the Empire’s Sword Wolf, his desired path.

Deep thoughts, lofty ideals, he left everything to his ruler, Vincent, intending only to fulfill his designated role.

That was to say—

Goz: “I am the ‘Fifth’ of the Nine Divine Generals chosen by His Excellency the Emperor Vincent Vollachia! I am Goz Ralfon!!”

He raised his golden mace, declaring his stand against the countless Lamias without taking a single step back.

The next moment, the multitude of Lamias, brandishing their Yang Swords, lunged at Goz, who had so boldly proclaimed this. With a single touch of the sword, the scintillating flame of Vollachia would incinerate a person down to their soul.

But before it could touch him, Goz’s muscles pulsated, and his mace swept through the air.

Goz: “—Hk.”

With unwavering intent, Goz’s swing struck the side of the attacking Lamia, smashing together about five of them in one fell swoop, turning their delicate, porcelain-like bodies to dust.

Witnessing this display, the remaining Lamias widened their eyes, their expressions changing.

They gazed at the obstinately straightforward Sword Wolf and smiled cruelly.

Lamia: “No matter how bravely you roar and rampage, upon your Death, you will become my slave you know?”

Goz: “If it is truly so difficult to resist! Then I shall turn to stone before my life expires! I shall remain undying, to offer my final act of loyalty to His Excellency the Emperor!!”

He swung his mace overhead, poised to ensure none of the gathered Lamias would escape.

If the Lamias wielding the Yang Swords scattered throughout the coupled dragon carriages, their radiant light might sear the eyes of Vincent. He was determined to prevent that.

And for that purpose, the colossal form of the Lion Knight was ever present. In his fury, Goz Ralfon raged on.

3

Lamia: “—It seems like you’ve steeled quite the valiant resolve, but alas, how unfortunate.”

At the foremost wagon of the coupled dragon carriages, as it barreled towards its destination, Goz Ralfon fiercely howled his reason for being, preventing the wheels of the carriages from being stopped.

While his ardor was quite considerable, his main desires would not come to fruition.

Unfortunately for Goz’s desperate attempts to keep the now undead Lamias at bay, they had already reached other parts of the coupled dragon carriages.

A matter of course. Even if she multiplied, there was no need for her to multiply in only one place. She was not bound by such limitations. While she would not say that Goz’s valiant efforts were in vain, they had little impact.

Thus, in a dragon carriage full of those among the Empire’s living who played crucial roles, the significance of keeping a formidable force such as Goz Ralfon occupied went without saying.

Lamia: “Unfortunately for you, you are not the one suppressing me, General First-Class Ralfon. I am the one subduing you.”

As Goz fended off against Yang Sword by his lonesome, while hindering his ardor, Lamia glanced into the distance as she headed for one of the center wagons.

In the distant sky, there could be seen the figure of a wolfman clashing with a mighty Blight Dragon, dark as blackened clouds.

Lamia: “It’s outside my calculations that Valgren is unable to be used, but to successfully keep that one occupied is quite the achievement.”

Through her narrowed golden eyes, Lamia was able to see just how exceptional the wolfman seen with Valgren really was.

Goz, one of the Empire's Nine Generals of the First-Class, was undoubtedly among the world's mightiest warriors. And that entity, surpassing even Goz, was contending with a being belonging to the world's most powerful lifeform.

—No, on the contrary, the Blight Dragon was the one who was being overpowered.

The only reason why the Blight Dragon had not been completely overcome was because its ability to recover exceeded the damage from the attacks it was suffering. Even when shattered time and time again, the shinobi was not able to finish off the regenerating Blight Dragon.

The fact that it could not be killed alone, already made it more than enough of an unusual sight.

Lamia: "But, it's unfortunate that the wolfman will be of no use to us even if he dies."

???: "—That's a comment I can't overlook."

At the sound of light footsteps, followed by a rough voice, Lamia slowly turned around.

Looking in the same direction that Lamia was, watching the battle between the Blight Dragon and the wolfman with a sidelong glance, stood a blond man—no, it was a boy.

Lamia gave a small snort, and cast a smile upon the boy.

Lamia: "Considering you have the stench of a foul beast, perhaps, you are half-beast?"

???: "…I don't wanna hear that from a woman who reeks of dirt. Nah, it ain't just that."

Lamia: "—?"

???: “Lotsa women who all got the same face lined up, for somethin’ like that, Nanna’s more than enough for me!”

With a firm thud as he clapped his fists together in front of his chest, the caustic words of the half-beast boy caused Lamia, and the other Lamias, to narrow their eyes.

The meaning behind the boy’s complaint was unclear. But, it was apparent that the boy had previously encountered another group of beings that all shared the same form, much like with the Lamias now.

Furthermore—

???: “I ain’t sayin’ that my amazin’ self is all buddy-buddy with that shiny golden oldie there, but he’s got a fuckin’ loud voice… So I know that outta all the ones who’re attackin’ here, you’re the toughest bastard!”

Lamia: “…”

Indeed, just after the boy bared his fangs and snarled, Lamia could sense a shift in the atmosphere.

Those were changes in various wagons of the coupled dragon carriages—assuming the whole motorcade was divided into five parts, Lamia was currently facing off with the boy in the third segment. Separate from Goz’s show of resistance in the first segment, these changes had occurred in the second and fourth segments.

The roof of the second segment had been engulfed in flames, while the fourth had been glaciated over by a freezing wind.

Both instances had taken place in wagons that had been boarded by Lamias separate to this Lamia, as well as the Pruning Corps.

Keenly understanding that reality from her experience, Lamia touched the back of her hand to her lips and smiled.

Lamia: “I seeee~. It seems that people from the Kingdom really don’t know when to give up.”

???: “…Why do ya know that our amazin’ selves’re from Lugunica?”

Lamia: “I only just figured it out. After all, you didn’t seem very characteristic of Imperial Citizens, so I just tried to ask. I find it rather adorable.”

???: “Nah, that ain’t it. Teasin’ my amazin’ self ain’t the only purpose.”

Observing Lamia’s smile as she mocked him, the boy shook his head.

It was not a matter of being unable to admit defeat. Nor, for that matter, was it insight. If it had to be put to words, it would be the boy’s instincts. It was a primal, innate ability to sniff out the truth.

In his mind, the boy had connected the dots between what he had sniffed out, and Lamia’s earlier words.

???: “Considerin’ the talk about how ya can’t use the Admirer, ‘n yer disappointment about where my amazin’ self’s from…”

Lamia: “—That’s enough chatter.”

Evidently, the boy was using his head despite it not being his forte.

Seeing someone give their utmost effort to that which they were unsuited for, was very, very irksome to Lamia.

As Lamia shrugged her slender shoulders, another Lamia slashed at the boy in response.

Ducking down, the boy evaded the sharp tip of the red blade, slamming the back of his fist into that Lamia’s abdomen. But, another Lamia slashed through the body of the Lamia who had been blown away. The bisected body of that Lamia caught fire, and from behind the curtain of the blazing inferno, a lethal thrust aimed for the boy’s life.

With a brief roar, the boy kicked off the roof, and leaped up into the air.

An undead flying dragon sliced through the air in its approach, and the boy who tried to escape into the air was snatched into the deceased dragon's maw. With the boy in its mouth, the undead flying dragon ascended, and shortly thereafter other undead flying dragons swarmed.

Lamia: "It was the same with General First-Class Ralfon, but those who need to close the distance will find that they have poor affinity with the Yang Sword."

Adjusting her grip on her unswung Yang Sword, Lamia spoke to the boy, who was being swarmed by the undead flying dragons.

With just one slash of the Yang Sword, its flames would scorch a soul until naught remained. The magical blade's effect, which boosted the physical abilities of the wielder, could transform even the pampered members of the Vollachian Imperial Family into top-notch fighters.

And, for someone who had dedicated time to the art of the sword, its benefits went without saying.

Lamia: "Now then, the boy with that beastly stench is dealt with. All that's left is Nii-sama's whereabouts…"

Taking her time, as Lamia was about to embark on a leisurely stroll, a thunderous roar suddenly rang out above her head.

The flock of undead flying dragons, so many had swarmed that it seemed like a round sphere, and over ten of them had been blown away mid-air, bursting into smithereens. Emerging from the center of that outburst, bearing not the slightest resemblance to the slender and agile boy from just before, was a mighty, gigantic tiger.

The large tiger, swinging its mighty arms, larger than bundles of many logs, blew away the swarm of undead flying dragons, and immediately swooped down. Its weight made the roof of the coupled dragon carriages creak, and in the next instant, it lunged toward Lamia.

Lamia: "…"

Whirling around, Lamia slashed the Yang Sword upwards from a low position.

She was momentarily taken aback. However, the beastification had made him a larger target. Against a wielder of the Yang Sword, where a mere graze could ensure victory, this was a bad move.

As the large tiger leaped toward her, its chest would instantly be sliced open by the Yang Sword—

???: "—RRRRRRAH!!"

Lamia: "—My my~."

A sound was made as the tip of the Yang Sword scraped against steel, and Lamia's golden eyes widened.

The giant tiger plunged forth, and rather than slamming its brawny arm into Lamia, it instead dug its claws into the roof a half of a step in front of her, forcibly upheaving it to use as a shield.

Lamia's sword stroke glided off its surface, and as the large tiger pivoted, it drove its other arm directly into her.

The impact tore away Lamia's upper body, and her shattered form was knocked down to the side of the carriage.

The giant tiger had exceeded Lamia's expectations. Yet, much like Goz, it was a futile effort.

Lamia: "Even if this "me" dies…"

As she crumbled to dust before hitting the ground, Lamia's lips spun words.

Even if this body were to perish, she would simply regenerate, just like her other selves. Moreover, the advantage of this regeneration was not just the fact that death did not mean the end.

The next Lamia to rise would inherit all of this Lamia's experiences.

Which meant—

Lamia: "…"

As Lamia fell, sensing the other Lamias and the Pruning Corps springing towards the giant tiger, her crumbling field of vision caught a glimpse inside one of the wagons of the coupled dragon carriages that she was leaving behind.

Inside that wagon, her eyes met with someone gazing out of the window. She had ascertained which carriage the person she sought was in, so that she could pass this information on to the next Lamia.

Lamia: "—Found you, Vincent-niisama."

4

Berstetz: "—Your Excellency."

It was undoubtedly Lamia Godwin, revived as an undead, who had just now been shaken off the roof and had smashed to the ground.

With his own eyes, Berstetz had already confirmed this fact.

As soon as he saw that the Pruning Corps, with whom he was well acquainted, was participating in this fierce assault on the dragon carriage, he knew full well that it was Lamia who was behind it.

Still, the sight of Lamia's body shattering and being reduced to dust shocked Berstetz.

Serena: "I had hoped to see you at least once, but I didn't expect it to be like this."

Berstetz: "High Countess Dracroy…"

Serena: "Don't look at me like that, Prime Minister. You saw the same thing I just did. If Her Excellency Lamia was crushed like that, might it stop her private army, the Pruning Corps? Am I understanding that right?"

Berstetz: "…"

Serena: "This doesn't look very promising, though."

The undead Lamia had just met her end outside of the carriage window, and Serena, smiling, shrugged her shoulders.

She spoke with dim expectations, and even though Lamia, to whom she had sworn her loyalty, was killed, there was not a shred of hope regarding the onslaught of the Pruning Corps.

Based on the previous discussion at the military conference, death did not seem to be the end for the undead.

Sphinx, the main perpetrator behind the Great Disaster, aimed to use even death itself to destroy the Empire. After all, if this Witch could do it, what could the Poison Princess not do?

Even without witnessing the undiminished fighting spirit of the Pruning Corps, the end of Lamia was surely ahead of them.

???: “Anastasia-sama, please stand back!”

Raising a dignified voice, a young man in a waso wielded a flowing sword.

A rainbow-colored slash easily sliced through the solid black armor of the Pruning Corps as if it were hot steel slicing through ice.

Even Berstetz, who was not blessed with martial prowess, could see that this young man—Julius, was no less capable than the Empire’s finest warriors.

Anastasia: “But, even my Julius can’t stay fightin’ forever. We gotta move the situation forward.”

Anastasia muttered as she stroked the scarf around her neck, protected by Julius’s struggle.

Julius and Garfiel, respectively, were fighting the enemy inside the carriage and on the roof, but along with Lamia, who had fallen earlier, both inside and outside were fierce battles.

It was a situation in which all the personnel who could fight were fighting, including the guards.

Ubilk: “Eeeven~ so, don’t you feel like we’re being targeted a bit too much?”

Anastasia: “Maybe, but ain’t it ‘cuz you’re here? I can see that sore on yer chest, looks like it’s been marked up pretty good.”

Ubilk: “Mark…? Whaaat~, it’s true!”

Ubilk, who had been taken out of his confinement room, looked down at his loose blouse and raised his voice.

As Anastasia had said, there were traces of a welt on his white skin that she had happened to glimpse, and if that had occurred at the same time as the attack—

Berstetz: “An Evil Eye to grasp the whereabouts of a target… It cannot be, His Excellency Palladio Manesque?”

Serena: “Well, well, well, are all of the participants of the Imperial Selection Ceremony here? Then, I’d like to reminisce with His Excellency Barthroy, who sent me flowers when I took the governorship from my father.”

The Evil Eye of Palladio Manesque, Prince of Vollachia, heir to the blood of the Evil Eye Tribe, had captured its target, which must have been why the Pruning Corps continued to attack this place.

Berstetz guessed thus, and Serena, who herself was using her sword to keep the enemy in check, licking her lips,

Serena: “Whether we move from this place or not, I don’t want to die because we made a choice between being in the front or the back. If we are defeated, the Empire is as good as dead; not just the head, but from the waist up. It will be interesting to see if there is any other way for creatures such as these to die…”

Berstetz: “I would be troubled if you were to say something unscrupulous. I am not sure about this old body of mine, but I cannot be replaced by the likes of His Excellency or you.”

Serena: “No one is irreplaceable, Prime Minister. Indeed, I am in awe of you, just as I am in awe that you were appointed to represent His Excellency, the Emperor. Be that as it may—"

Serena, who never lost her bitterness under any circumstance, was moved when she took a jab at Berstetz's conduct in the Imperial Capital.

The choice of whether to move forward or backward emerged from the choice itself.

???: "There you are! You've been standing your ground here, huh!"

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun!"

Crossing the threshold of the door to the rear carriage, which had already been breached by the Pruning Corps' attack, a small silhouette rushed into the carriage where Berstetz and his group were.

At the sight of the black-haired boy at the head of his group, Anastasia raised her voice in welcome.

Those who had just hurriedly arrived were the boy named Natsuki Subaru, and a girl in a dress holding his hand. Following them were a deer girl, a girl with blonde hair, and two young ladies who shared identical features, apart from one having pink hair and the other having blue hair—.

Julius: "Subaru! What happened to Emilia-sama?"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan is fighting hard in the rear section! She's freezing the vehicle to reinforce it so that the enemies can't get in, and if we had stayed, we'd have ended up frozen too!"

Anastasia: "That's quite da high-handed move… But still, it's a winnin' one."

Subaru answered Julius's question, which was asked as he forced an undead back out the window as it was trying to break in. Anastasia batted an eye shut at the frowning boy's response, and then directed her light-blue gaze behind him—towards the blonde girl.

Girl: "Aau…"

Anastasia: “With all this goin’ on, I guess yer talk’s been put on hold?”

Subaru: “—No, I already concluded my discussion. It’s just that the opportunity to convey it to everyone’s been interrupted. What about that bastard Abel? Does he have the same mark as me?”

Standing alongside the blonde girl, Subaru spoke thus and pulled his shirt down to show them a spot on his chest. There, a raised welt identical to the one on the Stargazer, Ubilk, could be seen.

As soon as he noticed it, Ubilk loudly exclaimed “Aaah~!”,

Ubilk: “Seeee~, I knew it! You’ve got the same mark on you! That must mean we’re fellow Stargazers!”

Subaru: “I keep telling you, that’s not it! It’s not just on me, it’s the same on my cute Beako, and I feel sorry for her! What’s there in common here?!”

???: “—Most likey, it is marking the obstacles to the Great Disaster that need to be eradicated.”

This time, a voice had come from the door opposite from where Subaru and the others had entered, and the one it belonged to rushed in from the corridor that led to the car at the front.

Appearing side by side were Otto, a tactician of the Kingdom who had exerted a strong influence in the war council, and a girl who had devoted herself to healing the wounded soldiers.

Upon their entry, Subaru turned around, his eyes wide in surprise,

Subaru: “Otto! Petra! Are you both okay? I’m sorry about earlier!”

Otto: “Let us leave that discussion for later. Right now, we need to exchange crucial information.”

Petra: “The mark you were saying appeared on Subaru and Beatrice-chan, it’s appeared on Master too! Right now, Master is in the dragon carriage up ahead, drawing the zombies to him…”

Pink-haired woman: “Roswaal-sama also has the mark…”

Upon hearing the report from the girl called Petra, the woman with pink hair, likely a relative of Rem, cast her eyes downward.

However, if not only Ubilk, Subaru, and the girl named Beatrice, but also the Chief Court Magician of the Kingdom had the mark, then the qualifications needed for being marked had become somewhat apparent.

That being—

Anastasia: “—Margrave Mathers ‘n Beatrice-chan, who went up against Sphinx on the plain. Also, Natsuki-kun, who stopped the ambush on the dragon carriage, ‘n Stargazer-san as well, if I recall.”

Berstetz: “It cannot be confirmed from here, but there is a possibility that the same marking has also been carved on Halibel-san, who is fighting with that black dragon outside.”

Serena: “And also our Excellency the Emperor I guess. I’d say that’s quite likely. Every one of those named are all irreplaceable in their abilities.”

Serena made a quick jab at Berstetz’s prior comment, while also agreeing with the opinions of the experts.

Concerning the discussion that was started by Anastasia and the others, Berstetz also concurred. So long as the effect of Palladio’s Evil Eye persisted, endless assassins would be sent after the ones who were targeted.

However—

Rem: “Wait, please. If your guess is correct, then I don’t understand why the same mark hasn’t emerged on this child… On Spica-chan.”

The one who voiced this was Rem, who was holding on to the little girl’s shoulders from behind her.

This girl that she called Spica, although her importance had not yet been detailed, was said to be one of those named in Ubilk’s prophecy.

In that regard, there was no doubt that she was an important person for the Vollachian Empire—

Otto: “Spica, is it?”

At Rem’s appeal, Otto muttered with an emotion that differed from Berstetz and the rest.

Upon hearing his muttering, Subaru looked at Otto and, with a serious expression,

Subaru: “I’ve decided where I stand. The proof will be in her way of life from here on.”

Otto: “—. What an odd coincidence. I have just made a decision as to where I stand as well.”

It would have been impossible for an outsider to guess how many complex emotions were involved in this quiet exchange. Moreover, in the midst of this assault, it was a situation that would need to be put on the back burner.

Right now, the top priority should be—

Pink-haired girl: “We need to get a move on before Garf, who’s howling above our heads, turns into a grilled tiger.”

Subaru: “Don’t make it sound like he’s a grilled chicken… But, Rem had a point earlier.”

Subaru nodded at the pink-haired girl’s words, and when he turned around, everyone’s eyes were focused on the girl named Spica. The girl made a choked sound at the concentration of their gazes and looked around with a puzzled face.

Beatrice: “If this Stargazer is to be believed, this girl… Spica is the natural enemy of the Great Disaster, in fact. So then, why is she being overlooked, I suppose?”

Petra: “—? Is that really so weird? I mean, we would’ve never known if that guy hadn’t told us about it, right? If that’s the case, doesn’t that mean that they don’t know either?”

Subaru: “…So, does that mean there’s not a Stargazer on the undead’s side?”

Subaru muttered this realization as the girls continued to exchange questions.

Ubilk turned around at that remark, but he shook his head lazily with a forlorn look on his face,

Ubilk: “Yeaaah~, I’m sorry. I don’t even know that, since it’s not related to my commandment.”

Rem: “Even so, can you at least tell me what it is about Spica-chan that makes you say she is a shining light? It would be irresponsible for you to just fling her name out.”

Ubilk: “Sooorry~ for being so irresponsible.”

Ubilk’s seemingly defiant expression turned Rem’s face a tense color. However, Ubilk’s answer was less than desirable, but Rem’s skewed topic might have been worth considering.

???: “With what materials we have at our disposal at the present, we have no choice but to use the coupled dragon carriage, which could break up at any moment, to charge toward the Fortified City, all the while protecting those who have been marked. That city is supposedly still being repaired, too.”

Subaru: “I don’t think we have that much time left.”

Even as they spoke, the dragon carriage was slowly losing its original shape under the attack of the Pruning Corps. As had been previously discussed, if it were to stop moving, it would inevitably be destroyed.

To stop this battle, they must deal with the commander—Lamia, who was leading the enemy forces.

Berstetz: “…”

As they sought for means which were more than just coping remedies currently, Berstetz noticed in his narrow, thread-narrow vision that Subaru had a terribly conflicted expression on his face. The anguish that occupied his countenance was the result of having realized something and hesitating to say what it was.

A statement that the boy hesitated to utter in this situation. His conflict was different from Serena's, who did not examine her statements carefully enough, and the content of this conflict was—

Pink-haired girl: "—Barusu."

Otto: "Natsuki-san."

At the same time, two people called out to Subaru.

Much like Berstetz, they must have also noticed the change in the boy's facial expression. And the two, who knew the boy much better than Berstetz, were able to understand what was troubling him.

Closing his eyes at the intent of their gazes, Subaru took a deep breath and, tightening his expression,

Subaru: "—Spica's Authority, it could be the breakthrough in this situation."

5

???: "Oryaaaah~!"

Wielding a barbarian sword in each hand, Medium forcefully cut down the undead approaching in front of her.

As a result of that large swing, her back side was left completely exposed, and another pair of great shears from an undead were about to strike her. However, a slender longsword intervened in its path.

Jamal: "Don't mess with her so lightly, you big fucks!"

The one who howled and slashed wildly was the one-eyed Imperial

Soldier who called himself Jamal.

Working together with Jamal, Medium was struggling to protect her brother Flop, Jamal's sister Katya, and the self-indulgent Abel from the constant attacks of the undead.

Even now, Medium stopped her foe in its tracks with a front kick, cut off its head with a barbarian sword, and turned the undead back to dust. Jamal also severed his foe's knees with his twin swords, skewered its chest, and destroyed it.

Jamal: "Most Honorable Empress Consort! I'll take care of this, you just stay back!"

Medium: "Like~ I~ said~! I haven't said yes yet!"

Jamal: "Candidate for the Most Honorable Empress Consort! Stay back!"

Medium: "Geez~!"

Medium, not accustomed to being treated so respectfully, could not hide her bewilderment.

It had been that way ever since the earlier discussion between Flop and Abel. Abel pointed it out already but Medium had cooperated with her brother without asking anything of Flop's thoughts.

In hindsight, she should have asked him a bit like Abel said.

Medium: "Then, I wouldn't have been so surprised…!"

Flop: "Dear sister! Worrying and fretting doesn't suit you!"

Medium: "And just whose fault do you think that is, big bro!"

Placing her frustration into her sword, Medium put all of her strength into her legs as she grappled with the great shears that were being thrust at her. She stood firm and pushed back so as to not be overpowered. A blade was thrust from under her armpit, and Jamal, who had moved to the rear, pierced the enemy through the chest and killed it.

After Jamal did so, while scraping his twin swords together in mid-air,

Jamal: "Katya! Don't get impatient! I'm not letting anything get near you!"

Katya: "J-just stop it… I don't care anymore… Th-There's nothing good even if I keep on living anyways…"

Jamal: "Don't be so stupid! If you die, Todd won't be able to rest in peace!"

Katya: "—Hk, m-my brother's stupid…! Are you going to say it? Y-you wouldn't say that, would you? Die! D-die, brother…!"

Katya, sitting in her wheelchair, began to weep when a name that Medium did not recognize was mentioned. Medium began to feel very sorry for Katya. If it was not for this current situation, she would have liked to confide in her as a fellow younger sister who was being pushed around by her brother.

But, there was no luxury for that anymore.

Because—

???: "…"Empress Consort", now that is something I cannot just ignore, don't you think?"

Medium: "—Hk."

???: "I wonder, are you qualified to accompany the Sword Wolf among Sword Wolves?"

Tilting their head, standing out from the black-armored undead who were rushing toward them, was a very beautiful undead, even from Medium's point of view.

If not for her pale skin and eerie, golden eyes, she would have been a sight to behold.

Whether the power of her words came from her being dead or from when she was alive, her words were remarkably intimidating, rendering Medium unable to answer back.

Vincent: “Whatever answer that girl would give you, it would be of no use, since you are already dead.”

And so, it was Abel, not Medium, who answered back.

Abel and this beautiful undead glared at each other with Medium, Jamal, and the undead soldiers in between, from the front of the carriage all the way to the very back. —Wrong, Abel and this beautiful undead stared at each other.

???: “Hello, Vincent-niisama. You look as dignified as ever… Maybe you have even lost some weight?”

Vincent: “Just when I begin to think that my brothers and sisters are no longer able to pester me, you and Palladio seem to have wandered back. It is inevitable that my cheeks would appear a bit gaunt.”

???: “Fufu, of course I would want to wander back. —You saved Prisca, right? Onii-sama.”

Vincent: “…”

???: “I wonder if you are qualified to punish me and Palladio-niisama when it was you, Onii-sama, who violated the premise of the Imperial Selection Ceremony? If the truth were to become known, no one would recognize you as the Emperor, would they?”

With a sneer, the undead princess laughed with her hand covering her mouth.

Abel’s black eyes shook slightly at her words. With those eyes, Abel tried to say something back to her, but—

Medium: “There’s someone! I think Abel-chin is the Emperor!”

Jamal: “Me too, Your Excellency the Emperor! There’s no need to listen to the dead!”

Unable to hold back, the voices of Medium and Jamal, who had taken advantage of the situation, shook the carriage.

Hearing both of their statements, Abel's eyes widened even more than before, and the Princess's eyes narrowed. With irises glowing of aurelian lustre, characteristic to the undead, she looked at Medium and Jamal, and,

???: “Do pray tell. These soldiers over there, do they have any idea of who I am?”

Jamal: “Huh? By the looks of it, you're a part of the Vollachian Imperial Family, but what does it matter when you're dead? Those who die a dog's death are losers, and those who live are Sword Wolves! That's it! That's the way of the Empire!”

Shouting out the world's most simple logic, Jamal resumed his melee with the enemy soldiers.

At the pleasantry of that momentum, Medium blinked her eyes and smiled. Smiling, Medium, like Jamal, resumed fighting.

Medium: “You're way cooler than Abel-chin, Jamal-chin!”

Jamal: “That's disrespectful, Most Honorable Empress Consort!”

Giving a wild grin at Medium's praise, Jamal rampaged with his twin swords.

The confrontation between Abel and the Princess continued, with those fights occuring in between. Abel narrowed his sable eyes at the Princess as the latter seemed to have become slightly displeased.

Vincent: “—I sense the presence of many Yang Swords. You are not alone, Lamia.”

Lamia: “So what? I suppose you may be happy that your cute little sister has multiplied? Or perhaps, since it's not Prisca, Vincent-niisama isn't interested?”

Vincent: “Supposing that you are making use of the undead's mechanisms to induce phenomena outside the realm of reason, for what reason do you appear before me without those numbers?”

At the mocking attitude of the Princess—of Lamia, Abel was not at all concerned. Yet, within Lamia’s silence, Abel went ahead and found a clue.

With his narrowed sable eyes, Abel gazed at his little sister, who seemed to have been completely changed,

Vincent: “There is a limit to your numbers. Moreover, the majority of them are being subdued. —Goz, hm?”

Lamia: “You say that so calmly, Onii-sama. If that’s true, then General First-Class Ralfon’s efforts would be worthy of a medal, no? That poor soul, saying that he’s fine with being a pawn—”

Vincent: “—And hence, I chose him.”

In a quiet voice, Abel interrupted Lamia.

Abel naturally crossed his arms on the spot and took Lamia’s gaze and words head-on,

Vincent: “He is one of the Generals that I have selected. It is only natural that he should work to that capacity.”

After stating so imposingly, Abel continued by calling her name, “Lamia”.

Then, to Lamia, as she looked at him with slightly widened eyes, he spoke.

Vincent: “I have never once thought of you as an insignificant being.”

Lamia: “…”

At the words that were spoken to her, Lamia’s expression greatly shifted.

Up until then, she had looked nothing but fascinated, very sadistic, and otherwise discontent, but upon hearing Abel’s words, the look on her face changed.

Her aurelian eyes widened, and she bit her lip.

Lamia: “—VINCENT VOLLACHIAAAAA!!”

The next moment, the expression that Medium had seen vanished in an unbelievable manner, and a different expression appeared.

Her face, in which no real blood flowed, housed a definite indignation, and as her aurelian irises violently spasmed, she reached into the air and unsheathed her treasured sword, shining a brilliant red.

The treasured blade of dazzling radiance in hand, Lamia stepped forth, kicking off the floor, kicking off the wall, slipping through the gap between the undead, she leaped toward Abel.

That radiance, as if flames or even light itself were being swung down, brightly illuminated the interior of the carriage filled with undead, and attempted to extinguish Abel in his entirety.

Staring at that head-on, the treasured sword swung down toward Abel’s nose.

Medium: “Abel-chin!!”

Kicking off an undead, Medium jumped back, catching the treasured sword with her barbarian sword. After time stood still for a moment, Medium’s barbarian sword melted, and the treasured sword continued in its trajectory.

Jamal: “Your Excellency the Emperor!”

A moment later, Jamal’s twin swords went to repel the treasured sword, just as Medium had tried. These, too, were engulfed by the treasured sword’s radiance, and their blades vanished in an instant.

Surmounting the obstacles presented by Medium and Jamal, Lamia’s sword strike was about to reach Abel.

At that rate, Abel’s entire body was going to be engulfed by the red light, and Medium screamed.

It was at that moment.

Vincent: “…”

Just what had happened, no one knew.

Neither was it that behind Abel’s imposing stance, Flop and Katya had both pulled on Abel’s jacket and made him fall on his rear on the spot, nor was it Medium, who felt a tremendous pain in her chest at the thought of Abel’s death, nor was it Jamal, whose face wore a look of despair at the thought that it was already too late.

—It was just that right there, as if struck by the wind, Lamia’s body collapsed.

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Lamia: “To think you would yet live, you are quite tenacious, Berstetz. —Say, who won the Imperial Selection Ceremony? Vincent-niisama? Or was it Prisca?”

—Those were the first words she had presented to him upon their reunion.

The reunion with his master, whose physical appearance had undergone a radical change.

Even after nine years, when he would close his eyes, he could recall her appearance from back when she had been alive, almost as if it were yesterday. As humans age, events of the distant past tend to become clearer than what has happened the day before.

That was why he only needed a single look to understand the abnormality pertaining to his master.

Her fractured, pallid skin, and her golden eyes that no longer desired the light, were those of the dead who had consigned their life to oblivion.

He had also understood from the initial question she had given him.

The clock inside her had stopped ticking. That was right. That was how it should have been. The living and the dead must be kept far apart from each other.

Therefore—

Berstetz: “—Pruning, CEASEEEE!!”

He barked out the order, raising his voice to the point that he thought it might tear apart his parched throat.

Graced by the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, neither the strong winds that were supposed to batter him nor the violent tremors of the dragon carriage were present, allowing his voice to soar and resound throughout the area.

The moment they heard the command, the undead, equipped with great shears in their hands, stopped moving.

The Pruning Corps suddenly halted their movements, and he did not know what to think about that fact. Should he lament it, or should he feel proud?

Entrusting their hearts to the Poison Princess, they were a symbol of fear with cold blood running through their veins. It was Berstetz who had reshaped them into such. They had met his expectations in accordance with his goals.

And, even after death, their bodies had reacted to the command of Berstetz Fondalfon.

Berstetz: “Time has stopped for the undead. If so, for them, that battle during the Imperial Selection Ceremony would have just occurred the day before… What is ingrained in their bodies can never lose its color.”

They had demonstrated the ideal way to follow their master even in death.

Lamia: “—And then? You are only able to subdue my animals for a moment, are you not?”

Berstetz: “…Yes. However, with this, now you are here.”

Turning around towards the voice behind him, Berstetz greeted her in person, alone.

With its roof and walls in ruin, the dragon carriage was a mere shadow of its former sublimity. Despite that, on one of the platforms of the carriage that was laden with the Empire’s hope, Berstetz and Lamia faced off against one another.

Confirming that he was visible in the reflection of Lamia’s golden eyes, Berstetz blew out a breath.

Berstetz: “I have been expecting you, Your Excellency Lamia.”

Lamia: “Yes, it seems that way. But, I wonder, why are you here alone?”

Lamia gave a slight tilt of her head, spreading her arms as her eyes scanned over the empty dragon carriage.

Aside from Berstetz, neither Serena nor those of the Kingdom were present. He had remained here alone because he had a secret plan to immobilize Lamia as well as the Pruning Corps.

As a matter of fact, he had been successful in doing so for the Pruning Corps, even if it would last for only but a moment.

Berstetz was certain his commands would never take effect ever again, but he knew that his fellow passengers in the dragon carriage were able to utilize the opening he had created with the few seconds of time he bought.

With that, Berstetz had kept his promise to those who had gone ahead of him.

Berstetz: “I am no longer at an age where I would make declarations I cannot keep.”

Lamia: “There is no need to put yourself down like that. Nine years have passed since then, but you really have not changed a bit. You are the same as when I had died.”

Berstetz: "—Perhaps it is as you say, Your Excellency."

Berstetz responded to Lamia's teasing words in a low, gravelly voice.

Lamia knitted her brows as she heard that. In front of her, Berstetz balled his bony hand into a fist, clenching his teeth that had miraculously not suffered a single loss.

He had not changed, even after nine years. What Lamia had said was correct.

Berstetz: "Since that moment, my time has also come to a standstill, Your Excellency Lamia."

Berstetz murmured, then took a step forward.

Full of determination, he took a large step. Once his outstretched foot met the floor, he took another. Forcing his elderly body to move, Berstetz continued stepping forward, one step at a time.

Lamia: "…"

Exasperatedly, Lamia narrowed her golden eyes.

The flow of time moved along slowly, feeling sluggish and stagnant. Not only did it feel as such, but it was slow in reality as well. Compared to Julius and Garfiel, who had been fighting to protect Berstetz and the others until a little while ago, it was terribly feeble to the point that making a comparison would be presumptuous.

He was a sheep painted black in a pack of wolves. He had become a sly old goat. Making his horns seem larger than they were, he desperately flaunted that he had his own role amongst the wolf pack.

Lamia: "—Yang Sword."

As Lamia reached out towards the sky, the hilt of the esteemed, crimson sword materialized in her hand.

Her slender fingers squeezed themselves tightly around it, drawing out the treasured sword, the symbol of Vollachia. The fiery red, scintillating flame trapped within the blade seared into his eyes.

He was glad he always kept his eyes narrowed. Thanks to it, his eyeballs would still have been protected, even if his eyelids had been scorched.

Carrying those trivial, useless thoughts with him, Berstetz lifted up his fist. Curled around one of his fingers was a ring. It was proof that he was the Prime Minister of the Vollachian Empire.

It was a Meteor, imbued with Mana of the element of fire.

Lamia: “I have already seen that.”

The coldness in Lamia’s gaze retained its ice, having already seen the Meteor in action at the Imperial Capital, within the Crystal Palace, inside the throne room.

Berstetz’s advance was terribly slow, and his last resort had already been subjugated once. On the other hand, his opponent possessed one of the ten Enchanted Swords, which wielded power relative to the top echelon of the world—

Berstetz: “—Your Excellency.”

He knew it would take less than a single second for her to cut him down and reduce him to cinders.

Despite that, out of his entire life, which spanned close to seventy years so far, Berstetz made full use of the longest second he had lived.

And then, he told his master what he had told her in the past, once again.

Berstetz: “—We have lost…!”

Berstetz threw down his raised fist as he spoke, pointing the ring at the floor.

There, he activated the Meteor. Flames swelled up and burst out beneath his feet, augmenting the elder's sluggish advance with blazing momentum.

With great intensity, Berstetz's entire body barreled towards Lamia.

Lamia's golden eyes widened upon seeing the old man's body throw itself at her from up close. In those wide, gold-colored optics, there was the reflection belonging to Berstetz Foldalfon.

Gazing into the face that Berstetz saw in her eyes, Lamia continued to hold up the Yang Sword, and,

Lamia: "—So, you were capable of making such a frustrated face."

They were lady and vassal, with a long-lasting affiliation while maintaining a respectable distance, who never had a heart-to-heart conversation with one another.

For the first time, Lamia's enigmatic vassal displayed an expression that she had never seen before. On that face, full of wrinkles and thin eyes narrowed to the point that his pupils were not visible, the elderly man appeared as if he were about to cry. Her hand stilled.

—Berstetz and Lamia's bodies met each other head-on.

Unable to mitigate the force of the explosion, the two hurtled into the wall of the carriage in a tangle of limbs. They were slated towards the wall that had been torn down by the Pruning Corps' break-in, and they were thrown out, just like that.

Squeezing tightly, with fingers as bare as a withered tree, the elderly man grabbed onto the dress of the beautiful girl and refused to let go.

Without separating from one another, their bodies were forcefully ejected out of the coupled dragon carriage—

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—In that instant, a shockwave struck all of the countless Lamia Godwins that had appeared within the coupled dragon carriages.

Lamia: “…”

The Lamias fighting Goz Ralfon, the Lamias fighting Garfiel Tinzel, the Lamias fighting Roswaal L. Mathers, the Lamias fighting Emilia, and the Lamias in the other parts of the dragon carriage were all affected by the shock simultaneously.

A Divine Protection is a blessing that can be bestowed upon lives born into this world; their true natures have not been elucidated to this day, and much is still shrouded in mystery.

However, regarding Divine Protections, many hold a single conviction that they intuitively understand.

That is, that Divine Protections affect the soul, of the ones to whom they are granted and the ones on which they are targeted.

Whether this is true or not has never been proven. However, this much can be said.

—Berstetz Fondalfon was thrown out of the dragon carriage with one of the Lamia Godwins, and they were both excluded from the effects of the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion at the same time.

And then, as one of the Lamia Godwins brought her sword down on Vincent Vollachia, and both Medium O’Connel and Jamal Aurélie failed to block the attack, it was also the very moment when tragedy was about to strike in front of Flop O’Connel and Katya Aurélie.

Lamia: “—Hk”

As if having been struck by a gust of wind, the body of Lamia, who had raised up her Yang Sword, was pushed back.

At that moment, neither Lamia nor Medium and the others understood what had happened. However, the truth was that Vincent, who had been pulled down, extended his leg and kicked Lamia backward.

Then, behind Lamia, who had been punted away, the door connecting to the adjacent car was breached—

Lamia: “…”

A rainbow brilliance danced, and the Pruning Corps standing before the door were cut down.

Slipping past the light of that rainbow, three small silhouettes scrambled into the car.

One of them held up their hand, and a faint glow surrounded the three silhouettes, speeding them up as they rushed in. The one in the middle, who was holding hands with the previous silhouette, shouted out.

Boy: “—Lamia Godwin!”

With a raised voice, such was the shout of the black-haired boy who was holding hands with two girls on either side.

The girl in the dress had produced the glow, the young black-haired boy had called out that name, and the last one who had leapt in, with the hand opposite to the one that was linked with the boy, she reached out—

Girl: “—E ea.”

—Retracting her hand after touching the back that she had leapt towards, she stripped off the name of the Poison Princess.

Chapter 28:
Siblings of the Empire

1

A premonition had emerged within him.

When the Stargazer Ubilk had named her the light that would save the Empire, he had racked his brains in earnestness and plunged into thinking.

Just how could she possibly become the nemesis to the resurrected dead.

Just what about her, was unalike other humans.

Being a kind girl. Being earnest. Being able to endure for someone. All of that was wonderful, but those conditions applied to others as well.

It was not that, but a specialty she alone was endowed with, and no others were—.

Subaru: “—The Authority of Gluttony.”

Even if she wished to part with her past of having been a Sin Archbishop, that cross shan’t ever let her loose.

Subaru had pledged to her, that he shan’t let her loose from bearing that cross.

She had pledged to Subaru, that she would not escape bearing that cross.

—Thus, therein lied hope.

Subaru: “I have, the Authority of Sloth and Greed.”

The abominable Witch Cult, the abhorrent Sin Archbishops.

Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti and Regulus Corneas, the Authorities they wielded were now, through many series of events, within the deepest depths of Subaru's.

Why, had this happened. Repulsed as though they had passed the baton onto him, Subaru did not confront it with gravitas as befit. But, that was no longer possible for him.

For her, for Subaru who chose her, he must confront it.

And so—

Subaru: "—If you are going to choose a life as Spica, not Louis Arneb, then you should be able to change even the way the Authority is used, just as I have."

There were two sides to every coin, all tools depended on the way they were used. —No, not just tools.

Whether a person became good, or was lacquered with evil. It was oneself who drew the final line. There existed circumstances where something of such sort eluded capability. But, she had been bestowed the opportunity to do such.

—Ley Batenkaitos of Gourmet.

—Roy Alphard of Bizarre Eating.

—Louis Arneb of Satiation.

Wielding the power they were endowed with, ones who became sinners, never to be forgiven by the world.

Possessing the same power as them, an atoner who walked the path of indemnifying the world.

Subaru: "—Star Eating."

The inextricably intertwined siblings, who etched an antecedent of evil.

The atoner would eat anew their antecedent, the deeds of the sinners who inherited the names of stars.

The newborn girl who eclipsed stars, Spica of Star Eating.

Spica: “—E ea.”

Calling the Names of those resurrected in vessels concocted of earth, whose Memories were sealed within bugs, the Star Eating of the girl bestowed with the name of the Alpha Virginis, was activated with her protruding hand, with the touch of her fingers.

He knew of an empty place, white, where naught held meaning.

The place where the elements of all souls, be they beautiful or sullied, were scoured and born anew.

Eating their role, that of those who had been hauled down from that place.

Eating their fate, such that those souls could never again be food for another.

—Eating the deeds of the Sin Archbishops affixed with the names of stars, Star Eating came to materialise.

Spica: “—A ou o e ea.”

2

That instant, the Lamias were all engulfed by the wind, halting their movements.

Goz Ralfon, as he bore searing wounds all over his body, did not miss this fleeting opportunity.

Goz: “—Got you.”

In the midst of battle, he was exposed to the threat of the encroaching Yang Sword from every direction; however, Goz shed his flame-engulfed armor, enduring the onslaught.

As he skillfully handled each attack, Goz closed his eyes, his will to fight undiminished, devoting himself to the sounds around him.

Thanks to the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, he could concentrate on the sounds of the Lamias he opposed. With more than twenty Lamias, and the sound between all of them remaining identical, Goz understood that he was facing a truly formidable foe.

But, for all the identical Lamias, their compatibility against Goz was the worst possible.

For some unknown reason, all the Lamias had collapsed simultaneously.

It must have been Vincent’s doing. The Vollachian Emperor, to whom Goz swore loyalty, had prepared a means to break the deadlock, even in such a situation. It was enough to bring Goz to the brink of tears.

Holding back his emotions, Goz raised his mace, and twisting the middle of its long handle, he disassembled it into the two parts of the striking head and the shaft. Using the shaft, he struck the striking head with great force.

In an instant, the shockwave of sound that erupted crashed against only the collapsed Lamias.

Lamia: “…”

The golden mace wielded by Goz, combining a long spear-like handle with a spherical striking head, was a masterpiece forged exclusively for his use.

Weighing as much as ten men with a single swing, when combined with Goz’s herculean strength and exceptional ears, it realized a technique unattainable for others—Each and every living organism possessed vibrations unique to themselves, and the “howl”, which could strike one’s opponents with those same vibrations in the form of sound, had been attained by Goz.

Contrary to his bold and dauntless appearance, Goz Ralfon possessed ears that could distinguish even the nuances in the sounds of the wind, and he had the skill of a genius who could delicately perform with any and all musical instruments.

That deadly “howl” was precisely why Goz was known as the Lion Knight.

Once he had seized her unique vibrations in the heat of battle, Goz’s “howl” assailed Lamia—No, it assailed all the Lamias, causing the cracks within each of them to grow, shattering the undead Princesses.

—The same events transpired in various carriages separate to Goz’s battlefield.

Deeming flames to be ineffective against the Yang Sword, and instead confronted Lamia and the Pruning Corps with blades of wind and landslides of earth, was Roswaal.

Using the immense strength from his beastification, his beastly claws ferociously tearing through Lamia, the Pruning Corps, and even the dragon carriage itself, was Garfiel.

Reinforcing the dragon carriages with ice as they were destroyed one after the other, slipping past the group of ice sculptures she had created to take on the Pruning Corps, and battling with the Lamias, was Emilia.

Everyone aboard the coupled dragon carriages did not overlook the moments of opportunity that had been created in an unexpected way.

They did not overlook the fleeting instance, believing that someone, even if they did not know who, would create such a moment.

With the radiant Yang Sword in hand, the Lamia Godwins, were shattered one after the other—

3

Lamia: “—Hk.”

Spica: “Auu!!”

Clenching down on her molars, Lamia spun her body around, and slammed her long legs against the girl who had touched her back—Spica. Receiving Lamia's kick, Spica's body was violently blown away. Subaru, who had been holding Spica's hand, and Beatrice flew an excessive amount together.

There was a reason for that other than simply the strength of Lamia's legs. Due to the effects of Beatrice's Murak, the gravity applied to Subaru and the other two had decreased as much as possible, and they had become as light as ping-pong balls.

Subaru: "Gooo!"

Julius: "On it!"

Slipping under Subaru and the others who had been sent flying, Julius stepped towards Lamia.

Tearing through the dust of the Pruning Corps, which he had cut down, the thrust of the Knight sword, clad in rainbow as it was, was unleashed upon Lamia. Housing an aurora, Julius's sword thrust even cut through the great shears of the powerful soldiers, as if they were pudding.

However, the Yang Sword held by Lamia released a light and heat more intense than the brilliant rainbow of Julius's sword, and halted the blow from the thrusting attack head-on.

As light erupted upon the clash of sword on sword, Julius and Lamia both repelled each other. Both parties counterattacked immediately, and the next sword fight—did not begin.

Lamia: "…Even in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, you never once did things by your own hand, now did you?"

Vincent: "—Yes, that is correct."

Loosening her lips, Lamia muttered those words like a sigh. Responding to that was Abel, who stood directly behind her.

In Abel's hand was gripped a half-melted barbarian sword, and although the blade had become short and dull, it still was able to pierce through Lamia's back.

Lamia: "At long last, you finally feel inclined to use your own hands to kill your blood-related sibling."

An undead's weak point was neither their heart, nor their cranium.

Operating within the vessels of earth, were the Corebugs discovered by Beatrice and Roswaal. As long as that remained intact, the activity of an undead would not come to a halt.

However, the Yang Sword, its red blade pointed to the floor, was dropped with a swaying motion. Before the tip of the falling Yang Sword could pierce the floor, it vanished as if it was swallowed by the air.

And the reason why Lamia had let it fall, was because the tips of her fingers had crumbled, and thus she was no longer able to hold a sword.

Lamia: "…"

Twisting her body, with the barbarian sword still skewered through her body, Lamia shook free from Abel's hand.

Taking tottering steps, her dying body was such that it seemed like anybody could take a weapon and cause her to fully crumble to pieces with just a single strike. In fact, Jamal swung his melted twin swords around, displaying his intent to slash at her, but Abel held him back by reaching his arm out.

Then, gasping very feeble breaths, Lamia looked back at Abel, and,

Lamia: "It seems that neither father, nor Barthroy-niisama, have come back. After all, those two were satisfied."

Vincent: "—Lamia."

Those brief words left behind by Lamia had caused Abel's sable eyes to waver.

Seeing that single reaction, Lamia narrowed her lifeless aurelian eyes, and her cracked face of pallid hue contorted into a smile. —It was an awfully devilish smile.

Lamia: "—General First-Class Temeglyph!"

Immediately after, Lamia's expression changed, and she called out a name with a shrill voice.

It was not a name that was known to Subaru, but for several of the people currently present, that name held immense significance.

Of course, that also went for the very person whose name was called out.

Julius: "Al Clauseria!"

With an instantaneous reaction, it was Julius who briskly painted an aurora of rainbow.

Springing the tip of his readied sword up, Julius borrowed the power of his Spirits and created a barrier of intense light. Thanks to Julius's quick judgment, the lives of everyone in the carriage had been saved.

But at the same time, since the aurora, laid out in order to protect them, had hindered their mobilization, they were slow on the next move.

Responding to Lamia's call, a bullet of light had come from the side of the coupled dragon carriages and perforated the wagon.

The bullet-like object had blown away the wall of the dragon carriage, and the aurora had prevented it from shooting out the people inside. However, a light orb that had not been stopped was able to tear off the roof, and it fully exposed the inside of the carriage.

Slicing through the air and approaching the exposed wagon, was one from the flock of undead flying dragons that had been deploying the Pruning Corps one after the other—No, it was one that had mastered acrobatic flight to an extent utterly incomparable to that of the rest of them.

Clad in a fierce wind, that dark, undead flying dragon swooped down upon the dragon carriage, and snatched up Lamia.

Having dropped the Yang Sword, Lamia's arm had already been reduced back to its shoulder, and she was swept up into the air; sat astride the undead flying dragon, the undead who had performed that act was—

Julius: "—Balleroy-dono?!"

Vincent: "Balleroy…"

Flop: "Balleroy?!"

At that unexpected figure, several voices of astonishment were raised.

But, one among them was most potent with shock, and at the same time, it was the most heartbroken.

Medium: "Ballebro?"

Her blue eyes opened wide, Medium's mutter was met with no response from the undead she had called out to.

Only, pulling the reins of the undead flying dragon he was mounted on, he immediately ascended with Lamia snatched in his arms. As the undead rode the undead flying dragon, it faced its head toward the rear of the dragon carriage, and flew in that opposite direction.

As much as the coupled dragon carriages ran, as much as the undead flying dragon flew, the distance between the two of them increased.

Medium: "BALLEBRO! BALLEBROOO—!!"

Losing control of herself and stretching out her arms, Medium tried to chase the silhouette that had immediately faded out of sight.

From behind, Flop jumped at his little sister and put a stop to her rash actions. The Pruning Corps still remained in the coupled dragon carriages.

Pruning Corps: “Ohh, RAAAAHHHHHHH—!!”

Those who covered their faces with black helmets raised a deep roar, and fiercely raised their great shears overhead.

It was just as if their collective will was to try and fulfill their master’s escape.

In the past, when their master was killed in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, that was something they had been unable to accomplish due to being defeated by the Blue Lightning; so now that they had been turned into undead, that was the dying wish they would attempt to fulfill.

Anastasia: “Everybody, don’t lose focus till it’s all over!”

Anastasia shouted a command, and Julius, being the first to receive that ardor, burst into action.

Those who could fight took up their weapons and clashed head-on with the Pruning Corps who had just raised their own spirits. Thus, the current clash annihilated them down to their very last soldier.

—But, having bought time until their master could make her escape, there was no doubt that the final moments of this raid by the Pruning Corps had certainly blossomed into a flower of success.

4

—Around the same time when Balleroy Temeglyph had snatched up Lamia Godwin and flew away.

Far, far away, collapsed on the tracks left behind by the speeding coupled dragon carriages, the old man covered his face with his hands.

His entire body creaked in pain, and his hideously burnt legs impudently cried out. Yet, neither the pain nor his inflamed wounds were things the old man had desired.

Pain and wounds and the like, he gave not the slightest care. —Why, why had he failed to die yet again?

???: “I was given an opportunity.”

To the old man who was lying on his back, cursing his own disgraceful self, she said so.

She was not in human form. But, her supple yet strong beastly appearance epitomized what the humans of the Vollachian Empire deemed to be superior and beautiful.

Acting with the forces that were left behind at the rear of the dragon carriage, chasing after the coupled dragon carriages in order to deliver a message, she had certainly witnessed the figure of the old man leaping out with the flames of the Meteor.

And, just before the old man was about to slam against the ground, she had snatched him away from death.

Man: “By opportunity, you mean…?”

Woman: “When you were thrown out of the dragon carriage, I could not have made it to you in time with these legs of mine. But, the undead that flew out with you sent you flying.”

Man: “…”

Woman: “In that brief bit of time, my legs were able to make it. That is all I am able to say.”

Shaking her head slowly, the beautiful, golden-furred leopard informed the old man.

He understood what she had said, along with the intentions behind it. However, he did not know the absolute truth.

Perhaps that person had merely pushed the old man who had jumped at her aside, finding him bothersome. She was a person whose true intentions he was not able to understand in the slightest.

Thus, him having no idea about what someone else was thinking, was something that applied to every member of the Vollachian Imperial Family.

???: “—So, you were capable of making such a frustrated face.”

Berstetz: “—Hk”

Recalling her surprised expression when she had said that, the old man’s throat clogged up on something.

Just what that was, even the old man did not know. He just had this, only this one thought.

Berstetz: “If you even went as far as to kill your younger sister… to kill Her Excellency Lamia, in order to obtain this Empire, then take responsibility…! Fulfill your duty as Emperor… hk!”

Was he perhaps a sheep or a goat that had disguised even his own fur, merely feigning as a Sword Wolf? The old man, who was simultaneously none of these things, and still somewhat all of them, wrung his voice out.

Those were his own true feelings that lay deep within his eyes, narrowed to the thinness of threads.

The old man—The Imperial Prime Minister, Berstetz Fondalfon, reflected upon the shame of his life, and wrung it out as words.

5

—The Crystal Palace, often appraised as the world’s most beautiful castle, had undergone a major change to its state of affairs.

The undead roamed freely within its walls, and the wounds from the recent conflict that was centered in the Imperial Capital had not healed in the slightest; remaining there was only death and destruction, without the counterparts of life and restoration.

For this reason, the Crystal Palace had lost its original beauty and had become a dreadful realm of rampant repulsiveness.

However—

???: “…”

Quietly opening the eyelids that contained those crimson eyes, was a being who, even in this realm of suffering, had not lost their beauty.

Her long orange hair was unraveled and frayed, her luxurious blood-red dress was torn all over, her snow-white skin was marred by dust and grime, but none of it tarnished her allure in the slightest.

For those who were truly beautiful possessed traits that had no need for any superficial adornment.

But then again—

Woman: “Compared to your current appearance, even frayed hair and torn clothing appear as excellent as gold.”

???: “…That is something that you would say, Prisca.”

At the sickly-sweet tone of voice that called her by her old name, Priscilla Barielle narrowed her eyes.

Her arms were raised overhead, restrained by special chains, and her appearance was that of a prisoner of war being forced to stand. Despite this, there was not the slightest hint of vulnerability in Priscilla’s eyes or demeanor.

After all, no matter where she was restrained and made to stand, there was not a single reason for her to yield.

Priscilla, who had been locked in the dungeon of the Crystal Palace in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, was skeptical of the one who had expressly come to visit her—the now undead Lamia Godwin.

She appeared to be of the same age as when she had died nine years ago, and while she possessed the skin and eyes that were characteristic of the undead, her alluring presence that had earned her the name of the Poison Princess was very much intact.

With her dress in tatters and half her body destroyed, she was now but a mere shadow of her former self.

Since she was an undead, she should have been able to restore the parts that had crumbled. Even if that was not the case, she could easily just transfer herself to a new earthen vessel. Having observed the undead and made those inferences, Priscilla then understood.

She grasped why Lamia, who despised unsightliness and disgracefulness to the extreme, had appeared before her in such a sorry state.

Priscilla: “What, are you going to die yet again, Lamia?”

Lamia: “My, that is quite the way to speak to your elder sister. But, indeed. After all, my connection to the empty box has been severed… no, it is more like the connection has been eaten.”

Pricilla: “…”

Lamia: “Ah yes, listen to this, Prisca. Vincent-niisama did this to me with his own hands. This is something he has never done for you, whom he holds so dear, right?”

Lamia placed her hand, still intact though about to crumble, over her mouth and laughed.

Whether or not that was something that merited boasting was a matter of one’s own sense of values, but Priscilla just sniffed quietly. At her reaction, Lamia narrowed her aurelian eyes and said,

Lamia: “Truly, it has been quite dull. Apart from you and Vincent-niisama, there exists nobody else capable of holding a proper conversation with me.”

Priscilla: “Albeit between you and mineself, the number of proper conversations had could be counted on one’s fingers.”

Lamia: “It is not a matter of quantity. Foolish little sister.”

With that murmur from Lamia, the hand she had placed over her mouth had crumbled and vanished.

Slowly, Lamia was losing what was left of her form. Since she stood directly before her, the sight filled Priscilla’s vision whether she wanted to see it or not.

However, Priscilla did not shut her eyelids. Those crimson eyes, trained their gaze on Lamia.

And, with that gaze trained upon her,

Priscilla: “If your role has concluded, swiftly make your exit, Lamia. —Once more, mineself shall attend your deathbed.”

At Priscilla’s words, Lamia raised her eyebrows slightly.

Then, with a smile akin to sweet, sweet poison,

Lamia: “Such an unlovable little sister.”

As far as Priscilla could remember, those were the exact same words and smile as her final moments from the time she was alive.

6

???: “For a final convo between fellow sisters, was that ‘nough to satisfy ya?”

To Priscilla, who had just witnessed the end of Lamia, the lighthearted voice of a man called out from somewhere.

Turning her face in the direction of the faint footsteps, she met eyes with the undead who had descended the dungeon staircase, wearing a dauntless expression. Golden brilliance looming within black, he possessed eyes shared by all undead.

However, just like Lamia, the atmosphere he exuded set him apart from the other undead of poor craftsmanship.

Priscilla: “So it was you? That is, the one who brought Lamia back to the palace.”

???: “She sure was a tough cookie, now wasn’t she? With her body in such a state, she came down to the basement all on her own. As expected of a noble Vollachian Princess… as an Imperial Citizen myself, it makes me rather proud.”

Priscilla: “For a rebel who turned his fangs on the Emperor, those words are plenty shameless.”

???: “I ain’t got any ground to stand on if ya say that to me, but… if it’s in the sense of being a rogue to the Empire, there ain’t much of a difference between myself and M’lady.”

With such a manner of speaking, the standing figure stepped forth out of the darkness.

The person’s form clearly entering her vision, Priscilla confirmed the guess she had made based on voice alone. The name of this undead was Balleroy Temeglyph, a former member of the Empire’s Nine Divine Generals.

And in the past, he was an acquaintance of Priscilla’s during the times when she had still been in the Empire. That was when Priscilla had been the wife of an Imperial Mid Class Count, her first husband.

Nonetheless, this was not a case of the living and the dead renewing an old friendship from bygone days.

Priscilla: “What business have you? ‘Tis impossible to think your foolish question earlier was the whole purpose.”

Balleroy: “Of course, ascertaining the last moments of Her Excellency Lamia was part of my job… but, I’ve also brought a meal for M’lady.”

While saying that, Balleroy raised a silver platter that he had been hiding behind his back.

With a similar silver lid resting on top, it adhered to the formalities one would see in a restaurant, but as Priscilla narrowed her crimson eyes,

Priscilla: “Needless.”

Balleroy: “Well now, that goes without saying. After all, we’re all dead, right? Since we ain’t got the need for food, it’s unthinkable that we’d have food for living people like M’lady. If I didn’t bring anything, a rare beauty woulda been ruined.”

The color of his skin bereft of life, Balleroy smiled as he lifted the lid off the meal.

Then, a warm steam and aroma diffused, and Priscilla closed one eye at the dish before her.

For something made by an undead, it appeared to be rather respectable cooking.

Balleroy: “Unfortunately, I couldn’t sample it since my sense of taste is gone, but I’ve got experience with cooking, so I don’t think it’ll taste bad. Uh-oh, please forgive me for giving ya the cuisine of commoners.”

Priscilla: "…"

As Priscilla remained silent, Balleroy took the fork that was on the platter and used it to stab the food; then, he brought it towards her mouth.

Priscilla's arms were bound to the ceiling. She knew she had no choice but to do that, but.

Priscilla: "I shall lop off your head with my own hands."

Calmly announcing that, Priscilla ingested the food presented to her.

It was not bad. But, it was cheap. Even when using ingredients from inside the palace, if the skills and conceptions of the chef were cheap, the finished product could not be designated as high quality.

At Priscilla's silent pressure, Balleroy gave a wry smile with the face of an undead. Within that smile, Priscilla caught a glimpse of something other than what was being directed towards herself,

Balleroy: "Nah, this just reminded me 'bout how there was a time in the past when I fed a young lass like this, since she was locked up as punishment for causing mischief."

Sensing a change in atmosphere, Balleroy divulged the true meaning behind his wry smile.

While sensing displeasure in his answer, Priscilla voiced a "Wipe" to have him wipe her mouth, and then,

Priscilla: "For what reason are you lot destroying the Empire? In resurrection, what is it you desire?"

Balleroy: "—It ain't my place to give an answer for the former. But, the latter is quite simple."

Upon receiving that question, his wry smile from just before and his light-hearted tone both disappearing, Balleroy responded.

In response to the change in atmosphere surrounding Balleroy, Priscilla became alert once again. Inside of him—No, it had been in Lamia too, was that definite indignation.

Without betraying Priscilla's impression—

Balleroy: "The desires of the dead have been fixed since the dawn of time, it's to clear up any remaining grudges or pent-up resentment."

Indeed, revealing the heartfelt desires of the undead, Balleroy Temeglyph spilled those words in a voice of lifeless laughter.

7

Man: "Did I… get killed? Fucking hell!"

Kicking off the wet road with a splash, he turned the corner ahead of him with vigor. That instant, his hips slammed against the wooden crate directly in front of him, and he forcefully tumbled over as he screamed an "Uggh".

Inside the helmet as it crashed against the wet stone pavement, pain flashed through his forehead, and he saw a spark in his vision. But, as a halo of birds spun above his head, this was not a situation in which he could afford to collapse.

Placing his right hand on the ground, he had no choice but to hurry and get back up.

If he did not do so, the man would come. —Garbed in black, the one who wished to observe him, the one known as Viva the Dissector, would come.

Man: "If I don't, he'll make my organs spill out again…"

Viva: "I have already come, got it?"

Man: "—Hk."

Feeling a chill in his lungs, he drew the Blue Dragon Sword from the back of his waist in the blink of an eye. Lacking any technique or form, he swung it around in order to hit his opponent through brute-force sweeps, no matter where he may be.

However, though it ought to have landed a hit no matter where the opponent was, the Blue Dragon Sword missed; instead, a scorching pain passed through his armpit, and the Blue Dragon Sword slipped right out of his hand.

Man: “Gah… hk.”

Viva: “Resistance is futile, got it? Even in the best of circumstances, the conditions you meet differ from those of the others, got it? If you shed blood in futility, unable to conform to the Emperor’s desires, you will be of no value, got it?”

Constricting the arm where the blood was spurting out of his armpit, he struggled in vain trying to reduce the amount of blood he was losing. He would have wanted to support the open wound with his opposite hand if possible, but it had already been too long since he said goodbye to that arm for such a wish to be granted.

Behind him as he let out cries of pain, dual-wielding curved-edge knives and concealing his mouth with a black cloth, a blue-haired undead turned to face him.

The pair of golden eyes glared at him, intently observing him as he shed blood.

That his opponent enjoyed gradually torturing people to death, was not the case. As long as he believed what Viva had said several dozens of times up till now, his opponent’s aim was experimentation.

Using the body of a living person, it seemed there were things he wished to ascertain. Likely, that was something he had been doing over and over since the time he had been alive, which was why his alias was the “Dissector”.

Man: “So neither can I fight, nor can I escape… I wanna move on to the next one, so could you just make it painless?”

Viva: “To make it “painless” would be illogical, got it? It is not as though I wish to torment you, there are merely things I wish to ascertain, got it?”

Man: “As I thought~… So be it.”

Giving up all hope that he could reason with his opponent, he shifted his gaze towards his fallen Blue Dragon Sword. Fortunately, it was not lying very far from him, and it seemed like he would be able to jump to it.

The problem would be whether he would be successful in cutting off his own head or not. If he failed, the suffering would be hopelessly prolonged. —This was no time to hesitate.

Man: “—Hk!”

A judgment was made in one second, a resolve was settled in one second; not even one second was needed for him to burst into action. Before the Dissector could commence his malevolent deeds, the man immediately dived towards the Blue Dragon Sword without warning.

Viva’s response to that act was a move too slow, and in that opening he would use the blade of the Blue Dragon Sword to slice through his own neck—

???: “No no, isn’t it a little too soon to abandon this life and move onto the hereafter?”

Man: “Ah?!”

As he tried to slice with the Blue Dragon Sword, something was pinning the blade down against the ground. From what he could see, what had done that was a small leg, and continuing upward, was a slender waist, and a crazy smile.

Standing on the Blue Dragon Sword with one leg, was the reckless act of a child wearing a Japanese-style outfit.

Viva: “A child, this is yet another undesired condition, got it?”

Upon the entry of that child, Viva spun the two knives in his hands and, without a shred of hesitation, attempted to drive the same attack that had gouged the man’s armpit into the vitals of the child.

It was the most horrible routine of rendering the arms and legs useless, then proceeding to perform an inspection on the internal organs.

Seeing those blades close in on him, the child raised an eyebrow and,

Child: “Hoho! To completely ignore the sudden pretensions of an intruder, I must say bravo! Although…”

Viva: “—Hk?!”

In the subsequent instant, Viva’s head, his eyes wide open, came flying off from his torso.

The child had kicked the hand gripping the knife Viva had tried to swing, and as that arm shattered, it was instead Viva’s own head that had been severed off by his own knife.

And then, the child nimbly switched the foot he had standing on the Blue Dragon Sword, and his next kick perforated what remained of Viva’s torso, and the body of the undead, on which Dissection would not be required, was pulverized to smithereens.

Child: “Unfortunately, co-starring with a villain of poor-tastes such as yourself is NG!”

In contrast to the death battle he was taking part in, the child declared so in a frivolous tone.

On the opposite side of that remark, the head of Viva, whose body had been destroyed, gave an astonished expression as it crumbled to dust, engulfed by the winds of the Imperial Capital.

The man could do nothing but watch with a dumbfounded look on his face in his collapsed state, and still with one leg raised, the child turned to face him,

Child: “Pardon me for standing on top of your sword. You see, the floor is wet right? It would be really uncomfortable for me if my zori got wet. So that’s why I’m acting like this!”

Man: “Ah, I don’t really mind that though…”

Looking up at the dimwitted pose of the child with one leg raised, he got himself up from his collapsed position and plopped himself down into sitting cross-legged. Just as the child said, it was unpleasant for his butt to get wet, but he was already in a state where it was too late for that, no matter what he did.

Man: “More importantly, I wanna ask someone to lend me a hand for things that aren’t too late yet. Could I count on you to help me out? “

Child: “Ah, having only one arm would certainly be an inconvenience. That considerably striking form is exceedingly favorable for me so it would be a waste if we parted here! That shall do fine!”

Giving an indifferent smile, the child vigorously added, “However!”, and pointed at the roof of the building directly next to them,

Child: “As I have informed you, I don’t want to get my zori wet! So let’s move to higher ground first. Until then, please take care not to lose blood, Mister Helmet!”

Man: “…My name is Al, you yancha boy.”

Child: “Hahahaha! Yancha boy! The way you speak is kinda similar to Boss!”

As the child roared with laughter, the man, still constricting his armpit—Al, gave a long sigh.

The child was clearly not an ordinary person, but Al could keenly feel the influence of a certain someone who knew many of the words that the boy was spewing out.

Whether this encounter would turn out to be a good thing or a bad thing, either way—

Al: “Wait for me, Priscilla… I, no matter what, will definitely save you.”

Strength no longer remaining in its three heads, the colossal body finally lay limp on the ground.

With wings torn asunder, and many ninja tools piercing its body, even when most of what could be said to be vital points were pierced and destroyed, it was difficult to tell just which had been the fatal strike.

If there was just one thing he could say—

Halibel: “This won’t do, I ain’t good against “zombies” that ain’t human, that’s for darn sure.”

Waving his sleeves about, Halibel muttered as he watched the Three-Headed Dragon entirely turn to dust.

The three additional bodies that had split off from himself also disappeared, and he took a lengthy breath from the exhaustion. As expected, fighting against an opponent on the level of a Dragon took a whole lot of effort.

If possible, he never wanted to be put on monster extermination duty again.

Halibel: “Tho’ that may be so, lil’ Ana and the rest of ‘em said somethin’ like the same girl could keep becomin’ a zombie.”

If that was true, it was also quite possible that the Three-Headed he had just defeated would reappear.

Next time, Halibel would probably win again, but he was unsure if they would be in an environment where people nearby would not get dragged into the fight. Moreover, he would feel uneasy as a hired guard if his hands were busy during that occasion.

Julius was also quite competent by Anastasia’s side, but—

Halibel: “Seems like he ain’t up ta my level.”

Cracking the joints in his neck, he set fire to the kiseru which he had not smoked during the battle, and inhaled its fumes.

From there, after ascertaining that the Three-Headed’s body had fully disappeared, he turned around in search of the coupled dragon carriages, which had left him behind as they ran far, far away into the distance.

And then—

Halibel: “Golly, after workin’ so dang hard, I kinda want some candy… Ah, oops, I’d die if I were ta eat candy.”

While grumbling those words, he began to chase after the tracks left behind by the dragon carriages as they continued into the distance.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy X
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Man: “It is precisely for that reason that now is the time we must rise.”

A man’s low voice faintly stirred the air of the dark cellar.

The hushed tone that kept a wary eye on the surroundings was proof of the guilty secrecy that must not be overheard. The tavern’s cramped basement felt musty and rank, enough to make one’s stomach churn.

Not that the queasiness came only from the stagnant air of the cellar.

Voices: “That reprobate of the Abellux Family, who counts neither parent as parent nor vassals as so much as the nails upon his hands—the villainous Dragon Child, the Fresh Blood Prince, Vincent Abellux…!”

Voices: “That werewolf at heart who does not spare even a single drop of our blood a thought…!”

Voices: “We shall—indeed we shall—make him a dead man!”

Even hushed, the heat crammed into those voices could not be concealed.

In any case, with the cellar’s gloom and the hoods pulled down over their heads, not one of those assembled could make out another’s face; only the color of the flames kindled in their chests was the same. Namely, hatred for Vincent Abellux, one of the Vollachian Imperial Family—styled the Fresh Blood Prince, a boy who continued to carve bloody footprints along the path he walked.

Chisha: “…”

Feeling that pitch-black heat, Chisha Gold pulled his hood down deeper. He had little fear of his face being seen, yet his discomfort won out. There was no doubting the earnestness of those gathered here. He was the one out of place.

He, too, was among those who harbored resentment toward Vincent Abellux, and yet—

???: “What is the matter, will you not raise your voice with them?”

Chisha: “…If I were thought the sort to attempt something so foolhardy, I must say I would take offenseee.”

Answering the voice that had come from right beside him, Chisha let out an audible sigh. In response, the other gave a small snort. “Hmph.”

He had recently learned that when this person snorted thus, it tended, if anything, to indicate a moderately good mood. Care was required; the way he expressed his feelings differed from ordinary people.

Should one misremember where his likes and dislikes lay, the consequences would be irreparable. Even so—

Chisha: “…I cannot help but call this a curious and vicious endeavor, such is the case.”

The gathering in which Chisha thus murmured was an underground meeting place where the dissident elements of the Abellux Domain had assembled, and Chisha’s station was, nominally, that of a confidant to Vincent Abellux, the lord of that very Abellux Domain.

In addition—

Vincent: “They, too, must have things they would wish me to hear. Is that not their heart’s desire?”

And the companion who leaned back with such mean-spirited pride as he said so was none other than the very Vincent Abellux in question.

Vincent Abellux had many enemies.

Born as one of the Imperial Family of Vollachia, where the strong are revered and the weak are scorned, he distinguished himself not so much at a young age as already in childhood, and inherited the headship as a prodigy. To display that capability, the quickest way was to exercise his skill and drive others out.

Vincent: “Improving food supply and enforcing thorough flood control are of course to be carried out as a matter of course, but they take too long to sink in as tangible results. To win hearts quickly requires results that can be seen.”

Chisha: “I see, I see. Then the clan purges of House Gold were most convenient, were they not.”

Vincent: “Fool. Convenient things do not simply occur if one sits and waits in a daze.”

Chisha: “…I seeee.”

This was an exchange when he asked about the process of taking the headship and establishing his position as lord, and Chisha was greatly impressed by his thirteen-year-old lord. House Gold’s claim had been that a child lord was no vessel to be counted upon and thus they rose in revolt, but apparently all of that had been guided by Vincent, who desired achievements. He had his vassals betray him of their own accord, and by punishing them proved his own ability.

Vincent: “Would you denounce it as a base and despicable deed?”

Chisha: “…No. It is reasonableee. Compared to the facts of the outrages of House Gold—of our house.”

To his lord’s testing question, Chisha slowly shook his head from side to side.

Originally Chesha Trim, he now went by the name Chisha Gold. The setting was that he was one of the members of House Gold that had been abolished; his answer followed that.

In truth, the conduct of House Gold—vassals of House Abellux—had many points that were hard to overlook. Clashes with the commoners and unreasonable taxation; even if the Empire’s way was for the weak to toady to the strong, there were rather more problems than a little. When Vincent sought a sacrifice to solidify his base, it was only natural that the first name to come up would be theirs.

A family of bad behavior, for whom even granting an opportunity to mend their ways gave one pause. Therefore—

Chisha: “They would be so careless as to do something like having an envoy approach meee.”

Lowering his face under his hood, Chisha murmured so, half in exasperation and half in comprehension. The underground gathering to which he had slipped in, embracing hostility toward Vincent Abellux, was not because he had infiltrated it, nor because he had betrayed Vincent. He had been invited as a supposed survivor of House Gold, sacrificed to the “Fresh Blood Prince.” Needless to say, that was not true. Chisha was born to an exceedingly ordinary commoner family. The name “Gold” was nothing more than a name Vincent had affixed either in play or out of laziness.

Chisha: “Or was it that Your Excellency had foreseen matters to this extent when you bestowed it?”

Vincent: “Fool. Even I cannot see so far through the conduct of the rabble. That they contacted you may, for once, be termed “convenient.”“

Chisha: “It is good to see you in high spirits. Even so…”

Vincent: “What is it.”

Chisha: “For the very person being singled out to attend a clandestine meeting is, I must say, a matter of poor taste, such is the caseee.”

To Chisha, who frankly stated his feelings, Vincent gave a snort, “hmph.” When the envoy of the malcontents, who had stored up resentment toward Vincent, made contact, Chisha promptly reported it to the man himself, and proposed that the underground gathering in question be dismantled and crushed. However, Vincent’s reaction and actions in response betrayed Chisha’s expectations. The result of that betrayal was manifest in the present situation.

Clad in shabby clothes and a hood to hide his identity, Vincent narrowed those black eyes. His sharp profile, unbefitting an age that could still be called a child, fixed upon those making ready to turn their blades upon him, and showed not a trace of agitation or bitterness.

He was a far cry from Chisha, who, tired of being shunned and treated harshly by others, had abandoned his village.

Rebel: “We have many comrades. First we shall seize the villages of the domain and tighten the noose around the Abellux lands…”

The rebels never dreamt that they were being seen and heard by the lord of the domain himself. As Chisha pitied them beside him, Vincent seared every word into his mind—

Vincent: “Too soft!!”

—such that he had no endearing inclination to content himself with so timid a plan.

Vincent’s shout, which painted over the prior hushed exchanges, spread surprise and dismay among the rebels around them, and next drew their attention this way. Taking it head-on, Vincent, still with his face concealed, declared once more, “too soft,” and—

Vincent: “So many have gathered, and how utterly ruled by cowardice they are. With such methods, you will sooner or later hit a dead end, and you will suffer the counterattack of the “Fresh Blood Prince.”“

Rebel: "…Then what would you do."

Vincent: "Naturally, in one stroke, thrust the "Fresh Blood Prince" down into a pool of blood."

Rebel: "Nonsense!"

As he raised one finger and so replied, those around mocked Vincent's bombast. They harbored hatred for Vincent Abellux, and at the same time they believed that their opponent had not attained his present position by luck alone.

Even if they aimed at the keep from the outset, it was not a head to be easily taken.

Rebel: "With such barbarity, it is plain to see you would be suppressed at once!"

Vincent: "But what if it were possible to slip through that net?"

Answered in a calm tone, the rebels were at a loss for words.

He hid his face, and though that slender figure's voice was that of a boy not yet grown into an adult, before the confidence and vigor contained in his tone, such doubts could not even bud. While everyone, before they knew it, was lending an ear, Vincent looked over the faces of the rebels one by one—and suddenly, he clapped the shoulder of Chisha, who was watching the situation right at his side, and—

Vincent: "This one here is a survivor of House Gold, sacrificed to Abellux's tyranny! And now, he stands at the side of Vincent Abellux, entrusted with office!"

At the instant his shoulder was struck, Chisha, who had had a bad premonition, managed not to raise his voice. Otherwise, he would not have been able to hold back a scream or an angry shout at this unannounced declaration. Had it come to that, he would have failed to respond to the even harsher gazes around them.

Chisha: "As my lord's man says, I am at present in attendance at the side of Vincent Abellux."

However, thanks to that instant of steeled resolve, Chisha did not disgrace himself. Feeling the sensation of the color and heat of their gazes changing, Chisha, in turn, slowly looked over the faces of the rebels.

Chisha: “That prince conscripts the survivors of those whose houses he has purged, and seems desperate to flaunt his authority. It is for that reason that I am granted my present station, such is the caseee.”

Rebel: “…But how are we to trust you, who, though your entire clan was rooted out, now serve Abellux? Has not your heart bowed, and are you not with us in name only?”

To the suspicions thrown at him, Chisha answered “correct” in his heart, yet took his time in giving his reply. Vincent’s earlier outrage, and his posture of dumping the situation onto Chisha; and to begin with, it was none other than Vincent who had given him the name “Chisha Gold” and fabricated, then spread, the information that Chisha was a survivor of House Gold. Because that fabrication was perfect, the rebels could not doubt Chisha and made contact—

Rebel: “What is the matter. Why do you fall silent. So after all you harbor a double heart—”

Chisha: “…Indeed, if you cannot perceive my intent to this degreeee, I cannot help but feel some measure of unease at the thought of counting you all among our allies, such is the caseee.”

Suddenly switching the flow of the rhetoric, Chisha made the rebels stir, “what,” but their reaction was not of such importance. Chisha’s attention was on Vincent at his side. On those black eyes fixed upon Chisha, narrowing as if to check the answer.

Stifling a sigh at that gaze, Chisha continued.

Chisha: “To begin with, with whom do you think it was that arranged to call out to you all and gather you here?”

Rebel: “Impossible…”

Chisha: “Who is it that, having had his entire clan rooted out, hates Abellux the most—that is the question at hand, is it not.”

At Chisha, who declared it so boldly, the rebels faltered, and no voices of objection were raised. Chisha’s statement was nothing but a bluff; had there been an initiator who had in fact moved the rebels, it was content that could be denied at once. But it did not turn out so.

The initiator would not raise a hand. He was busy stifling his smile at Chisha’s side.

—It was Vincent Abellux who had gathered the rebels and orchestrated the holding of the underground assembly. Naturally, it was also he who had arranged for an envoy to be sent to the “survivor” of House Gold. The aim was the same as in the clan purge of House Gold, one strand in a scheme to sweep away the malcontents within the domain. If that was the case, Chisha would have liked to have been told beforehand, but—

Chisha: “Vincent Abellux is cautious, a schemer to the point of being insidious. Even so, if he believes he has already broken someone’s spirit, signs of carelessness appear. I shall incite the “Fresh Blood Prince,” and lead him to a battlefield you all have prepared to perfection. There, we shall—”

Rebel: “—slay the “Fresh Blood Prince”…”

Chisha: “Impale that werewolf who, boasting of the amount of blood he has spilled, puts on airs as a sword-wolf.”

Rebels: “O-Ooh, oooooh!!”

Consciously twisting his lips into an evil smile, Chisha’s words lit a fire in the rebels.

At once, they rose to their feet, and with a force like blowing away the stagnant air of the cellar, raised their voices, and the heat of the underground assembly leapt to its peak.

Feeling that change in the air upon his skin, Chisha sent a sidelong glance at Vincent. Wondering whether this ill-natured lord was satisfied with Chisha's bluff. To Chisha's suspicious gaze, Vincent, with only the mouth not hidden by his hood, smiled.

Vincent: "To call me a werewolf—one sees you had quite the pent-up resentment."

Chisha: "Now then, whatever could you be talking about, I wonderrr."

3

Chisha: "Your Excellency, regarding those malcontents, there is a report that they, together with the troops they had gathered, were taken in one fell swoop."

Vincent: "I see. Those who shared your aspirations were cut down; your heart must ache terribly, must it not?"

Chisha: "I merely matched the talk at the time, such is the caseee. I cannot quite tell what you are saying."

Shrugging his own shoulders thus, Chisha brushed aside Vincent's ill-natured jab. About ten days had passed since attending the underground meeting, and, just as he had promised the rebels there, Chisha made use of his position as Vincent's subordinate to move Abellux's private soldiers at will. Using them, he handily lured the rebels out and annihilated them, sweeping away the unrest within the domain.

Chisha: "Even if the main faces do gather at an underground meeting, the branches and leaves will not be fully assembled. In that case—"

Vincent: "It is all the better to egg them on and make them send out their entire force. Well done."

In the office, Vincent, seated at a desk still large for a boy whose limbs had yet to fully grow, thus offered his thanks, then knit his brows and questioned Chisha with, "What is it."

At that question, Chisha ran a hand through his black hair, Chisha: “I am grateful to be thanked with “well done.” However, I would like to ask one thing… just how long do you intend to keep testing meee?”

Vincent: “Are you dissatisfied?”

Chisha: “Hardly. Do you expect me to answer that I am not watching Your Excellency’s mood at all?”

At Chisha’s words, which were something like a riposte, Vincent stilled the hand holding his quill pen. Possessed of deep black eyes, Vincent fixed Chisha head-on and said,

Vincent: “Do you think that, in this matter, I toyed with you out of mere whim or idle fancy?”

Chisha: “No. Your Excellency cannot be that unoccupied.”

Vincent: “That you are being tested means that I too am being tested.”

Having only that to say to Chisha, who had shaken his head, Vincent set his quill moving again. He seemed to judge that he had said what should be said, but it was a most unkind attitude. With few words, he indicated: from one thing, lift out as much as I would.

—While testing Chisha, Vincent was himself being tested. Interpreted in Chisha’s own way, that meant that acts like Vincent’s this time would not cease. For to test is to prove change. And an imperial of Vollachia cannot survive unless he continues to move forward, to press on. To live. And to realize the ideal that lies beyond that, he will continue to test.

Chisha: “Good grief, to have been received by a lord troublesome from the heart, such is the caseee—I am at a loss.”

How many more times would he be tested? Feeling heavy-hearted at the thought, and at the same time exasperated to the core at his own disposition that, in some corner, enjoyed it, Chisha Gold, who claimed to be a survivor of House Gold, was thoroughly disgusted with himself.

END

Anastasia's Search for Her Companions: First Chronicle

1

—Around the same time that Emilia's group was planning to smuggle themselves into the Vollachian Empire following Natsuki Subaru's disappearance from the Pleiades Watchtower.

Anastasia: "Yep, looks quite nice. As expected, a handsome man's a handsome man no matter what he wears, that's for darn sure."

Julius: "It is an honor to receive your praise."

Seeing Julius's sharp kimono-clad figure in front of her, Anastasia joined her hands before her chest, and she became convinced that her own selection had not been mistaken.

His Knight's uniform also suited Julius, but with his looks, the shades of a kimono gave him a little more freedom to play around. The coloring and patterns of kimonos were much more flashy than the general clothing of the Kingdom of Lugunica, and if the wearer's radiance did not lose out, then the overall sense of glamor would be multiplied.

She praised herself for drawing out the maximum quality from the talented individual known as Julius Juukulius.

Anastasia: "If I'm bein' honest, it woulda been better if we coulda prepared a special order kimono to precisely fit Julius instead of a ready-made one, but we ain't got the time, so that's too bad."

Julius: "There is no need to be so concerned, as this kimono fits my body well enough. At least, it poses no hindrance to my movement… I am surprised."

Anastasia: "Hm?"

Julius: "This is my first time wearing this kind of waso-style clothing, but it has far more functionality than one would presume based on its exterior appearance. Just like with anything, there is so much one cannot know until it is experienced first-hand.”

Anastasia: “Fufu, the most important thing’s that you’re pleased with it. I ain’t really able to tell the difference, but it seems to have a surprisingly good reputation among people who move a lot while fightin’. One of the famous people in the Empire also supposedly likes waso.”

Anastasia nodded at Julius as he moved his arms to get a feel for the kimono he was wearing.

Waso was one part of the wafuu culture that was unique to the Kararagi City-States, and it was very familiar to Anastasia, who was born in Kararagi.

Recently, seldom had she wore a kimono, but that was just because she had been trying to assert the impression that as a Royal Selection Candidate, she wanted to familiarize herself with the customs of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

As a person from another country, not to mention a representative for a Trading Company of that other country, the handling of her impression was very important.

And, that was the same as how Julius was now wearing a kimono like this.

???: “Oh! Almost didn’t recognize ya, Julius! I guess a handsome man’s a handsome man no matter what he wears!”

Then, after he had finished changing, Ricardo examined his face inside the shop and gave a big hearty laugh with his mouth.

Julius widened his eyes at Ricardo’s compliment, and Anastasia placed her hand on her forehead.

At the reaction of the pair, Ricardo tilted his head with a “What?”.

???: “It is nothing, Ricardo. Those were just the exact same words of praise that Ana gave to Julius. It seems like Ana got embarrassed by that.”

Ricardo: “C’mon now, don’t’cha worry ‘bout such minor things! Me ‘n the young Miss’ve known each other since she was a tiny lass.”

???: “I also think that way. This is what makes a maiden’s heart so complicated.”

Anastasia: “Heyy, don’t say things like that on yer own. Jeez, since when did ya go ‘n become a spokesperson for my heart?”

Rebuking Ricardo and the one who took advantage of Anastasia’s silence to talk about this and that on their own, Anastasia hit the base of her neck.

The fox scarf that her hand touched was Echidna, who had been Anastasia’s partner for many years.

For a long time, Echidna’s existence had been hidden, even from Ricardo, but ever since the incident at the Watergate City, the circumstances were revealed and Echidna had been getting on well with Ricardo and the others.

Echidna: “Well, from my perspective it was just that I had no opportunities to converse, so it has been a one-sided fellowship for ten years now. On the other hand, I think the adaptability of Ricardo and the others ought to be commended.”

Ricardo: “I was real darn surprised ‘bout that, but as Echidna says, I wouldn’t find it too strange if the young Miss is still hidin’ a thing or two from us! Is that huge handbag gonna start speakin’ as well?!”

Anastasia: “It won’t. Well, I wouldn’t really mind if it did tho’…”

Responding so to that good relationship between Echidna and Ricardo, deep down it was something that relieved Anastasia.

Even though Ricardo spoke in that manner, secrets were things that could easily become causes for misfortune. Even after going on for so many years, she ought to think of herself as blessed.

The fact that Ricardo was a person of such character had saved Anastasia, both back then and now.

Anastasia: “I really hit the darn bullseye when I looked at Ricardo ‘n chose him as the first member of my camp.”

If life was a series of looking at things and choosing, then Anastasia’s first choice had been that.

And now after bouncing from place to place, Anastasia had brought him with her all the way to this position in such an important bout.

Then—

Anastasia: “Well then, have ya steeled yerself, Julius?”

Julius: “Indeed. Wearing this kimono, I believe both my body and mind are firm. Let us proceed.”

Returning a reliable answer, Julius straightened his posture, and together with him, Echidna, and Ricardo, Anastasia proceeded outside of the store.

—And for the first time in a while, she set foot onto the soil of her birthplace, that of the Kararagi City-States.

2

In the midst of the ongoing Royal Selection of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Anastasia Hoshin broke the prohibition that she had intended to avoid doing for as long as possible, and made her return to the Kararagi City-States.

The reason that was a prohibited move, of course, was because there was concern that it would negatively influence her in the Royal Selection.

As the head of a large company in Kararagi, the Hoshin Trading Company, Anastasia had made use of that supporting base, but the scale of that influence served as a double-edged sword.

Of course, the people of the Kingdom were not favorable to influence from other countries getting stronger. That was a sensible fact harbored by all those belonging to the Kingdom, regardless if they were an expert or just an ordinary citizen.

Anastasia: “It’s a bit troublesome if ya just say “For some reason”. People’s choices ‘n decisions are somethin’ that can be swayed by their mood a whole lot more than they think. “For some reason I hate it”, “For some reason I don’t like it”… there ain’t a single good thing ‘bout thinkin’ like that.”

If it was concerning likes and dislikes that had reasons behind them, then it would be easy to take measures to compensate. However, it was hard to search for measures regarding fickle likes and dislikes that had no reasons; therefore, there was also the fear that they would be easily overlooked.

Hence, Anastasia had taken various measures to ensure that these “For some reason”s did not damage her.

Wearing clothes that were not waso, and returning to Kararagi as little as possible, all of it was in order to not grant any careless “For some reasons”s to the people who paid attention to Anastasia’s every move.

However—

Julius: “Anastasia-sama, you have settled your resolve to return to the Kararagi City-States. In addition, that is not for your own sake, for the sake of Subaru and Emilia-sama, who are of a different camp.”

Anastasia: “—. I just wanna settle this debt as soon as possible. It woulda been fine if it’d been me doin’ the lendin’, but this time no matter how ya look at it I was on the borrowin’ end. It ain’t to my likin’.”

Julius: “…”

Anastasia: “Jeez! What’s with those eyes!”

As Julius maintained silence at Anastasia’s reply, she reflexively slapped her knees and raised her eyebrows. But, seeing that reaction, Julius just said “Pardon me” and shook his head sideways.

Feeling somewhat avoided, Anastasia rested her chin in her hands in discontent.

—Currently, Anastasia's group was using beast carriages to cross the border between the Kingdom of Luguncia and the Kararagi City-States, and they were heading for the Kararagian City of Ivada.

Anastasia: "In the Kararagi City-States, the mayors of the ten big cities got some real influential voices, but Ivada is one of them ten cities, and it's the place where the Hoshin Trading Company is located."

Julius: "In Anastasia-sama's absence, who has been managing the company in Kararagi?"

Ricardo: "The young Miss communicates with letters, but most matters are handled by the vice-president, Chuden."

???: "Uncle Chuden! He always gives Mimi snacks so I like him. He's reeeally fat!"

???: "O-Onee-chan, you shouldn't speak like that…!"

Hetaro chided Mimi, who had made such a comment while flapping her short legs with a pitter-patter.

Accompanying them on their journey was the sibling duo of Mimi and Hetaro, and they were quite energetic after having recuperated from the Watergate City incident. Their other younger brother, Tivey, had stayed behind at Priestella and was entrusted with the management of the Iron Fang and the Hoshin Trading Company's activities within the Kingdom.

That also included looking after Julius's sleeping younger brother, Joshua.

Julius: "Mimi, Hetaro, I am delighted that I am able to travel together with you once again."

Mimi: "Oh? Then that's reeeally good! But, Mimi's real sorry that we don't remember!"

Hetaro: "O-Onee-chan…!"

Julius: "No, I do not mind. Mimi, that attitude of yours is very comforting to me."

Julius, who had entrusted the younger brother of the two with taking care of his own younger brother, now laughed at Mimi's candid words.

Suffering harm due to the Authority of Gluttony, Julius's Name had been forgotten by everyone around him. The memories she had made together with him that spanned longer than one year were no longer present, and for Anastasia, that was an extreme failure.

However, on the other hand, the relationship between them did not completely collapse with that, and she could believe so since Julius still stayed by her side through the Watergate City and the Pleiades Watchtower.

For that reason, even though it would not be able to fully compensate,

Anastasia: "In order to find Natsuki-kun and Rem, I hafta use all the cards available in my hand."

Echidna: "Right. I will say this now, but that plan of Emilia-kun and the others to smuggle themselves in from Lugunica, it's, you know?"

Anastasia: "Even if ya didn't say, I'd understand. Emilia-san ain't good at lyin', so you're sayin' it ain't suited to her?"

Echidna: "After all, she is far too honest."

As Echidna was choosing her words, Anastasia understood what she was trying to say and nodded.

Emilia's group was searching for the disappeared Subaru and Rem's whereabouts from a different angle to Anastasia's group.

She had heard that they were planning on crossing over to the Empire from the Commercial City, but it was a plan that went hand in hand with hardship.

Worst-case scenario, the identity of Emilia's group would be revealed and they would be deported, and it was quite likely that they would need to give up on entering the Empire. By some chance, she may try to break through with sheer force and things would escalate to becoming an international problem, but the people around her would probably stop her before that could happen.

Anastasia: “But, in that case, it’d become real difficult for Emilia-san ‘n the others to search for Natsuki-kun. That’s why…”

Echidna: “Ana is acting as an alternative… You are quite engrossed in this.”

Anastasia: “…What? Are ya tryna say that I’m mistaken on somethin’?”

Echidna: “No? It is simply, this is a first, so it also feels rather fresh for me.”

As Echidna tickled her nape while stirring about, Anastasia pouted her lips.

The “first” she had pointed out was probably referring to the motivations for Anastasia’s actions. Anastasia also had self-awareness that she was acting for a reason uncharacteristic of herself.

It was the exact same reason why Julius had laughed at her earlier.

Anastasia: “It ain’t a lie that there’s a debt involved.”

But, supposing that there had not been one, Anastasia would have needed to be more careful when deciding on this matter.

Because she was aware of that, Anastasia was unable to respond to Echidna and Julius’s somewhat lukewarm gazes with her usually sharp tongue.

3

The line of beast carriages arrived at the Third City of Kararagi, Ivada, as planned.

Here, the plan for Anastasia’s group had been to converge with the Hoshin Trading Company, having sent a letter in advance, and make arrangements to head towards the Vollachian Empire, and then cross the border.

However—

Chuden: “—The timin’ was just awful, president. Traffic to ‘n from the Empire has just been completely restricted in terms of both people ‘n goods, even I’ve got my hands up with no clue as to what to do.”

Then, greeting Anastasia and the others as they converged in Ivada, Chuden raised both of his hands.

The giant, middle-aged man with a big belly, flabby chin, and dressed in a costume that made lavish use of cloth, got right into the heart of the main topic in his greeting for their first reunion in quite a long while.

The speed of that conversation was certainly that of a merchant—It was probably a relic from before the Chuden Trading Company had had its name changed to the Hoshin Trading Company, and he had been the president.

Anastasia: “Prepare exactly what is wanted for the person who wants it. Even tho’ ya used to be that kinda person, have ya forgotten how to do business in the time ya were bloatin’ yerself ‘n gettin’ fat?”

Chuden: “Ya sure say some harsh things. Just who d’ya think drilled the fundamentals of business into ya? Even if I’ve handed over the seat of president, my thinkin’s still a long ways away from gettin’ rusty.”

Anastasia: “If that’s so, then what’s the meanin’ of this?”

Shaking his head, the saggy flesh of his cheeks and chin shook all together. Gazing over him, Anastasia stared at Chuden with an impatient feeling.

If that were true, he would have quickly made the preparations for crossing the border, and it would have been the point where she would have wanted Julius to reevaluate them with an “As expected of the Hoshin Trading Company”. The fact that there was a setback was not amusing to Anastasia in the slightest.

However, Chuden’s following words were even less desirable.

Chuden: “It seems that the current restriction wasn’t just from the Imperial side, but the City-States also agreed to it.”

Anastasia: “—The Kararagi side did as well? Something so rare pretty much never happens.”

Frowning at Chuden’s words, Anastasia pondered. Then, standing by Anastasia’s side, Julius called out to her saying “Anastasia-sama”,

Julius: “This is a difficult situation, but is this something rare? I often hear that the Empire bans traffic with the Kingdom and the City-States…”

Anastasia: “Demands from there are frequent. But, fundamentally it’s fixed that the Empire just asserts somethin’ on its own, and the City-States grumble about the heavy losses… But, this time, they agreed.”

Julius: “…In other words?”

Anastasia: “Kararagi’s League of Cities is at work.”

Hearing Anastasia’s answer, the gravity of the matter was conveyed to Julius.

The Kararagi City-States were made up of multiple cities, and their League of Cities was a congress made up of the mayors of ten cities, an organization that possessed the right to decide on the management of the City-States.

The fact that they had placed a ban on traffic between Kararagi and Vollachia meant—

Chuden: “If we ignore the official notice, even the Hoshin Trading

Company will likely mercilessly have its business permit revoked. Even if not on a large scale, the Company has already shown its readiness to move, so ya ain't gonna be able to talk your way outta it by sayin' somethin' like "I don't know nothin' 'bout Vollachia"."

Anastasia: "Ugh, to think that showin' the true strength of the Hoshin Trading Company would backfire like this…"

As her fingers trembled, Anastasia was irritated by the abhorrent judgment of the League of Cities.

Julius: "So, there is nothing we can do?"

Anastasia: "—Don't be sayin' such stupid things. I ain't gonna back down here."

However, while making an unpleasant face, Anastasia roused her spirits upon hearing Julius's question. That instant, she saw Julius's lips loosen, and felt like she was either being tested or guided.

But, Anastasia switched over to the belief that this was proof of his trust.

Anastasia: "Vice-president, ya weren't just waitin' here to give us bad news, now were ya?"

Chuden: "Now, I wonder… It's just, the dignitaries of the League of Cities are present in the next city over, Fusumi, so I've already gone 'n completed preparations for ya to head over there."

Anastasia: "Jeez! Stop sayin' each 'n every thing like you're sellin' me an expensive favor!"

Puffing her cheeks up at her business teacher Chuden's way of speaking, Anastasia turned her back to him. At a glance, she could see that the next beast carriages and provisions for the journey had already been shrewdly prepared outside of the company.

Anastasia: "Hey, let's get a move on! "Time is Money"! Why did the League of Cities release such a rare announcement? We ain't gonna be able to enter the Empire if we don't sort that out!"

Julius bowed to Anastasia, who forcefully clapped her hands, while Ricardo, Mimi, and Hetaro ran around boarding the beast carriages and getting ready.

Looking over their state, Anastasia wiped the sweat off her brow and muttered.

Anastasia: “Good grief, you’re makin’ me sweat… This’ll cost ya lots later, Emilia-san.”

So she declared.

END

The Dragon Kingdom:
Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record IV

1

Meili Portroute was traveling through the Augria Sand Dunes along with Felt and her camp, heading for the Pleiades Watchtower. The journey was going well after overcoming the difficult Sand Time obstacle, but right before they reached the tower, they were faced with an unexpected problem.

A mighty impact violently shook the dragon carriage. The ferocious voice of a young girl echoed amidst the sandstorm. "Didn't expect to be greeted by the Divine Dragon!"

Listening to her voice next to her, Meili concentrated on her divine protection. For Meili's case, this meant she had to focus and imagine heat was building up in the middle of her forehead. Every user of a divine protection had their own unique method of concentrating on their power, requiring each to learn on their own in order to discover the most suitable method for themselves. Meili's method was influenced by the way witchbeasts licked each other's horns as a sign of friendliness. As a young girl who had been raised by them, she had experienced having her forehead licked as well. In either case…

"I'll keep my concentration," Meili said. "Buuut…"

"But what?!"

"There isn't a single witchbeasty that'll come near us when we're being so rowdyyy!" As Meili exclaimed in a high-pitch voice, another one of the impacts struck the side of the carriage. She held onto her seat as the carriage shook violently, holding back the urge to scream. This had been happening repeatedly, but the dragon wasn't going after anyone in the carriage. The impacts were merely the shockwaves from its attacks, intending to hit its primary target.

Felt clicked her tongue. "Give us a break already. What the hell is

Reinhard doing? He better not be goin' easy on it!"

"Don't be too hard on him, Miss Felt," Ezzo admonished. "Sir Reinhard is certainly extraordinary, but the opponent he's facing is none other than one of the three heroes, the Divine Dragon, Volcanica!"

"Oi Reinhard! If you lose, you're nothin' but a dead weight!" Felt yelled at Reinhard as he continued to parry the white beams coming towards him, holding Meili by her shoulders.

What a daring thing to saayy, Meili thought, considering the person Felt was yelling at was someone she saw as a monster.

"My apologies, but my opponent is quite formidable."

"Don't give me excuses!" Felt yelled. "Show em' what you're made of for once!"

Confusion overtook Meili, causing her to panic at the voice she suddenly heard echoing in her mind. "Wha, wha, whaaat? What was that voice just noooww?"

"Calm down, Miss Meili," Ezzo soothed, before beginning to explain the nature of the voice he had also heard. "That was Sir Reinhard's Divine Protection of Telepathy."

Contrary to Felt, who was bickering with Reinhard's voiceless voice as if it were the most natural thing to do, Ezzo bit his lips—a rather normal reaction for someone in his situation, one might add.

"There'll be no end to this situation if it continues on like this…" Ezzo muttered. "Miss Flam! Miss Grassis! Are you two well?"

"We're managing, somehow," answered Flam.

"But not for long," responded Grassis.

Receiving their responses, Ezzo made a sour face like that of a young boy, agonizing over their predicament. "If only we could distract the Divine Dragon for even a second."

However, he knew all too well that they would just get in Reinhard’s way if they tried to interfere. We sorely lack the strength to jump into the battle between the Sword Saint and the Divine Dragon. Such was his analysis on the matter.

Glancing at Ezzo’s profile as he desperately searched for an effective method, Felt clicked her tongue. “Meili! How about you make a witchbeast throw itself at the Divine Dragon?”

“I told youuu,” Meili responded. “There isn’t a single soul bold enough to get in the middle of their battle, not even a witchbeastyy! If you think there’s some convenient way to help Mister Red-Hair from here, then…” You’re mistaken, were the words she wanted to say. However, before she could utter them, Meili came to a halt.

Felt tilted her head. “What’s wrong?”

Meili began searching her breast pocket and took out a small pouch, something Natsuki Subaru had made.

“Miss Meili, what’s inside that pouch?” Ezzo asked.

Meili dropped its contents onto her palm, and Felt and Ezzo looked down at it.

“It’s black but it doesn’t look like jewelry,” Felt assessed as she laid her eyes on the black object on Meili’s palm. “What the hell is it?”

“Uhh, I don’t know how to say this, buuut…” Meili said hesitantly as she looked away from them. “Emilia said that if we have thiiis, then the Divine Dragy won’t get maaad.”

The object was a Dragon Talon given to her by Emilia, who had formed a friendship with Volcanica. In other words, it was a passport, which would allow them to get past the Divine Dragon safely.

“Why the hell didn’t you take out such an important thing sooner!” Felt yelled, erupting in anger.

By preventing his feet from sinking into the sand through his Divine Protection of Sandplay, kicking and flying through the air with his Divine Protection of Air Dashing, and protecting himself from the dragon's blasts with his Divine Protection of Second Sight, Reinhard continued his battle with the Divine Dragon. The last divine protection, which allowed him to intuitively respond to attacks he'd seen before, proved especially effective when he faced formidable opponents, and such was the case with the Divine Dragon, as he had yet to take a single hit.

"But I can't close the distance," Reinhard muttered to himself.

Even though he was sure he was the dragon's target, there was no saying if it would change its mind or not. The distance he created between himself and the carriage carrying everyone was close enough that if the dragon decided to switch targets, he could manage to prevent it from getting to them. However, if he went any further than where he was, he wouldn't be able to stop the dragon from getting to the carriage in time. Bearing this in mind, he was unable to close the distance and go on the offensive.

If it's only a matter of evading and blocking its blasts, then I can withstand it however long it wants, but what if it never grows tired? What then?

"…"

As he began searching for a breakthrough, he felt a sudden disturbance that tore his azure eyes away from the Divine Dragon. Keeping the remainder of his five senses on the dragon, his eyes caught hold of the change in the desert.

Felt, who had been told to stay put, was leaning out of the carriage, holding something up.

"Lady Felt…" he muttered as he sensed another change. The Divine Dragon, Volcanica, had also turned his attention to the carriage—nay, to Felt.

Reinhard immediately prepared to draw his sheathed Dragon Sword, which he had only been using to parry the dragon's attack until now. However, no matter how hard he tried to draw the sword with his steel-ripping strength, the handle wouldn't budge. Without wasting a second, he gave up on unsheathing the sword and swung it in a semi-circular motion, gouging out the desert and kicking up a sandstorm. Each grain of sand had turned into a lethal bullet, creating a wall of sand as formidable as Sand Time. However, a certain entity broke through this wall with ease.

"…"

With his magnificent blue wings outstretched, the Divine Dragon Volcanica soared away from the watchtower toward Felt at an astonishing speed, despite being ten times larger than an earth dragon. Reinhard kicked into the air as well and readied himself to make a slicing motion with his hand, aiming to sever the dragon's elongated neck.

"Reinhard."

Right as he was about to attack the dragon from its flank, Reinhard halted in response to his mistress's calm voice. When he turned to face her, he detected a strong conviction in her expression and intuited that his action would only inconvenience her. To ignore this would have been a betrayal of her trust. Trusting his instincts, he stopped. However…

"Farsale, thy recklessness tires not only me but all the rest of us."

Reinhard's anxiety persisted until the moment Volcanica's dignified voice spoke these words after landing a few steps away from Felt.

3

"So with this talon Meili was hidin' from us, the dragon greets us with grace, huh?" Felt said with every intention of poking fun at Meili for causing a once-in-a-century battle due to clumsiness.

"Like I saaaid, it's not like I was hiding it on puuurpose," Meili retorted as best as she could, but lacked any strength in her voice.

In her defense, she neither hid it on purpose nor forgot about its existence. She simply expected the talon to be requested in a more peaceful manner, so when they were attacked so vehemently, her mind went blank.

“Besides, Emilia was the only one who told me the dragon went on a rampaaage.”

“However, considering the fight Sir Reinhard had to put up, Miss Emilia definitely deserves praise for even coming back alive after fighting it,” commented Ezzo, on Emilia’s overwhelming power after hearing Meili’s story. “That, of course, has nothing to do with her receiving support from Roswaal…”

“There goes Ezzo’s weird stubbornness,” commented Flam.

“A man’s stubborn pride,” added Grassis.

It feels kind of good when Emilia gets praised, though, Meili thought. However, they still couldn’t completely relax.

“Sooo?” Meili asked, “Are you alright, Feltyyy?”

“Huh, can’t you see? Nothins’ all that different,” Felt responded, gesturing at the window behind her seat. “Although, it’s not tryin’ to bite us or anything, so that’s good I guess.”

Outside the window, a colossal outline ran alongside the dragon carriage. It was Volcanica, his wings neatly folded, matching the carriage’s pace with his lengthy strides.

“I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned.”

“This is all it says, no matter what we ask,” Felt said. “Is this thing really the legendary Divine Dragon?”

“As someone who faced it, I can vouch for that,” Reinhard commented. “I can guarantee there isn’t another dragon with the same tremendous power that fits his description.”

“There’s no mistake, huh?” Felt muttered while resting her face on her hand. She then grinned, flashing her fang at Reinhard. “By the way, the face you had when you came flyin’ back was priceless.”

Reinhard furrowed his brows. “Lady Felt, I say this time and time again, but, please be more careful. I still can’t believe you exposed yourself to the dragon like that… And Ezzo, Flam, Grassis, what are you here for if not for protecting Her Ladyship from danger?”

“Sir Reinhard, I understand what you want to say, but I merely agreed with Miss Felt’s judgment,” Ezzo responded from the driver’s seat. “As soon as I noticed that the talon emitted the same type of Mana as the Divine Dragon, I was certain the plan would succeed.”

Reinhard listened quietly.

“That being said, it could have been myself, Flam, or Grassis to go out of the carriage. Since we didn’t volunteer to do so, I suppose your point is somewhat valid…” he concluded, shrugging his shoulders.

Reinhard lowered his brows, perplexed by Ezzo’s explanation.

“Young Master, a Sword Saint shouldn’t make a face like that,” said Flam.

“You look like a sad, wet puppy,” commented Grassis.

“You too, Flam, Grassis?” Reinhard lamented.

Stretching her neck, Felt pulled her legs up onto the seat and crossed them.

“You’re always so overprotective… But I guess I can’t blame you too much this time, since we were dealin’ with the Divine Dragon. It’s only natural for you to panic.” She put her hands on her knees and bowed. “My bad.”

As someone who had observed their odd dynamic, this scene came as a surprise for Meili. However, she noticed she wasn’t the only one thrown off by it.

“Lady Felt apologized to the Young Master,” said Flam in awe.

“This must be a bad omen,” commented Grassis, astonished.

“Miss Felt, have you accidentally consumed poisonous sand?” Ezzo asked worriedly. “We must treat you immediately.”

“Shut up, all of you!” Felt exclaimed. “I’m more than capable of apologizin’ to Reinhard when I think I did somethin’ wrong!”

“Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

“Shut it! No one’s talkin’ to you!” After having been teased by the people around her, and even Volcanica, Felt sulkily rested her face on her hand. “Well, I’ll admit I was able to do something so bold because I knew you were there. Though, I guess it must’ve caused you quite a bit of anxiety.”

“No.” Reinhard shook his head awkwardly. “If that was your intention, I have nothing to say…”

Different from his usual calm, confident demeanor, Reinhard couldn’t hide his shock. Sensing this from his profile, Meili couldn’t help but feel bad for him. Just like Subaru and Emilia, and Julius and Anastasia were, I suppose being a royal selection candidate’s knight is no walk in the park.

“Felty has Mister Red-Hair wrapped around her fingeeer, huh?” Meili sighed.

Hearing Meili’s comment, Reinhard smiled bitterly. “To be honest, I’m not very fond of that interpretation.”

Reinhard and Meili both made a mistake that caused them to look like fools during the incident. They glanced at each other and agreed to drop the subject. However, there were still certain things they needed to discuss.

“Why does the Divine Dragy call Felty by some weird naaame?”

“It called Miss Felt ‘Farsale’,” Ezzo said. “That’s the name of the king of Lugunica who made a covenant with the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, and was last to be called a Lion King.”

“So, is the Divine Dragon mistaking Lady Felt for Lord Farsale?”

Reinhard inquired.

“Hey, this guy’s a man, right?” Felt exhaled sharply through her nose. She then looked out the window at Volcanica. “Dontcha think it’s rude to mistake me for some guy?”

However, there was no response from Volcanica, leaving Felt scratching her head.

“But if even the Divine Dragon mistook Your Ladyship as royalty…”

“Enough, Reinhard. I told you before. No matter my lineage, I am who I am,” Felt declared in a cold voice.

Reinhard paused and composed himself as he bowed. “Yes, you’re right. Do excuse me.”

Meili narrowed her eyes at their unique interaction and pulled her knees in. Even with Volcanica walking by their side, there were daring witchbeasts that tried to approach them. As she kept them away with her Divine Protection, she watched as the carriage slowly approached a tower on the desert horizon—the tower where she had been just a few days prior, and where she had rekindled her will to live.

“That giant door better open once we get there,” Felt huffed.

“You won’t need to worry about thaaat,” Meili reassured. “But you do need to think of what to do with the Divine Dragyy.”

“Why am I always in charge of the monsters…”

As Felt lamented her predicament, a crimson scorpion crawled out of Meili’s hair and began clicking its pincers triumphantly upon making it back home. As Meili petted it, a thought popped into her head.

“If a whole lot of people are coming, won’t we need more of the Divine Dragy’s taaalons?” she muttered to herself, glancing outside the window at Volcanica.

I bet Felt would get irritated if I asked her to cut the dragon’s nails…

END

Comic Alive Collection 9

Lugunican Hustle
(CA)

1

With a clang, the table tilted, and the glass slid off. A beat later, I realized that I couldn't reach it, and the glass crashed to the floor, shattering with an ear-piercing thud, the cold contents soaking under my feet. But I could neither crouch down to wipe my shoes nor apologize for the fact that I had broken the glass. Because, just before the sound of shattering glass pierced the air, we were surrounded on all sides by a hostile group.

"Yo! What the hell are youse guys doin' in here?!"

"Don't think we're lettin' youse off the hook!"

"Yo! Git over here! Take that!"

Furious verbal threats were directed my way. I felt the blood drain from my entire body all at once, making it difficult to breathe. All I felt was dread that I would never experience the light of day again… Not unless I could come up with some kind of death-defying explanation to give them. My breathing became more and more labored.

In that instant, I forgot how to breathe. Should I inhale or exhale? What action must my body perform to stay alive? The strange and thunderous sound of blood coursing through my veins was deafening, as if my heart was located right behind my ears. They were so loud, a vivid image of my heart exploding near my ears and turning me into a chunk of meat covered in blood crossed my mind.

"Relax," came a voice, accompanied by a gentle tap on my tense shoulder, sending the earlier explosion's echoes fading into the distance. "Dontcha worry. Jus' leave it to me."

Before me, a petite woman stepped forward, unwavering despite the intimidating men surrounding us. Without a trace of fear in her small frame, she confronted the aggressive group. She then clapped her hands loudly in front of her chest, grabbing the men’s attention. “Come on, quit makin’ such a fuss. That’s all I’m askin’.”

The men exchanged puzzled glances as the woman’s smile remained unwavering, unaffected by their threats. Standing behind her, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease, wondering if the men would escalate the situation. I couldn’t help but reflect on how I had ended up here like this. How could we have found ourselves in such dire straits, in a place frequented by those who didn’t dare tread out in the daylight?

Thus, Joshua Juukulius cursed his fate. This journey into despair had begun just several days prior.

2

Rich, vivid colors and sophisticated, skillful brushwork—these were the hallmarks of extraordinary artistry that could, at times, create an experience that was powerful enough to reshape the viewer’s life. People defined this as art, and those who channeled their inner worlds into such creations were bestowed with the title of artists.

The works crafted by these artists invariably stirred envy within those lacking the ability to conceive such beauty. And envy was a driving force behind the amassing of vast wealth, transcending any age and era.

On occasion, those of affluence extended their patronage to these artists, commissioning masterpieces for their own personal pleasure. Many even acquired these creations in an endeavor to sate their desires for possession and a heightened degree of self-importance.

Throughout the ages, exceptional art has consistently aroused fervent desires in the hearts of many individuals. Yet, behind these desires lurked those scheming to exploit them for ill-gotten gains. Hence…

“Hmmm…” The girl with purple hair let out a soft hum as she stared intently at the object before her. Her locks cascaded in soft waves of purple, with a charming, well-defined profile and crystal clear, pale blue eyes exuding intelligence. She was adorned in an outfit of white, with a white fox collar wrapped around her neck despite the day's warm weather.

At first glance, she appeared to be a gorgeous young girl with a certain ethereal air about her. However, her remarkable background was not defined by such external factors alone. For she happened to hold one of the most significant positions in the Kingdom of Lugunica, standing amongst the top five individuals of importance.

What had captured her attention and made her hum in interest was a single piece of artwork, at which she gazed as if to appraise it. It was a masterpiece of meticulous brushwork, depicting a delicate, slumbering woman resting her cheekbone on her hand. This piece, known as "Sleeping Miderine," was a distinguished work of art, dating over 100 years back.

The painting was grand, encased in a frame that was as tall as the girl. The bold strokes of the brush and the faint scent of oil hung in the air—it was a moment of profound assessment. Yet, her evaluation was not driven by a desire for ownership.

"Wh-What do you think, Lady Anastasia?" Beside the girl conducting the evaluation stood a gray-haired elderly gentleman, looking somewhat unsettled. The slender gentleman pressed a handkerchief to his cheek as he awaited her verdict.

Straightening up her previously hunched posture, the girl gently touched a hand to her cheek, and smiled gracefully.

"I hate bein' the one to tell ya this, Mr. Olsen, but it's a phony. I'm so sorry." With that, the girl, Anastasia Hoshin, extended her sympathy to the unfortunate customer who had fallen victim to a counterfeit piece of art.

3

Currently, the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica had found itself in the midst of a prolonged period of crisis due to its absence of a king. In order to prevent chaos, the Council of Wise Men, an assembly of senior nobles, together with the Royal Knights, worked diligently to manage the situation. However, the lingering unrest stemming from the vacant throne was undeniable.

Therefore, a competition was being conducted to determine the next person to fill this void, known as the Royal Selection. And Anastasia Hoshin was one of the candidates taking part in it. Half a year had passed since the royal selection commenced at the royal castle. During that time, the candidates had engaged in various activities to prove their worthiness, and Anastasia was no exception. And today, she had been invited by a renowned art collector in the capital as part of her efforts.

“I was bracing myself for this,” Olsen lamented, “but actually hearing that it’s a fake… Well, it’s more disheartening than I imagined. What a shame for a collector!”

Nico Olsen sighed with a weary look on his face as he spoke. He only barely managed to keep his composure, as he was standing before a guest. But once that guest took her leave, he would surely collapse into a heap. After all, one of his favorite masterpieces was evaluated as a forgery. For a collector of his caliber, it was tantamount to the sudden loss of a darling lover.

“I deeply sympathize with you, Lord Olsen.” A handsome man sitting on the visitor’s couch consoled the despondent Olsen. This was Julius Juukulius, a tall man donning a knight’s uniform and carrying a knight’s sword at his waist. He was a member of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica, and a knight in the service of Anastasia. “Your collection of masterpieces is so well-respected. It’s a shame to think they’d be subjected to such a terrible fate.”

Julius’s consideration brought a smile to Olsen’s glum face. “I appreciate your concern,” he replied. “I apologize for displaying such embarrassment, especially considering my connection with the Juukulius family through your brother, Joshua.”

“Please, no need to apologize. I have only heard good things about you from my brother. So I was hoping to deliver good news today, but…”

As they exchanged words, Julius couldn't help but steal a glance at Anastasia, delicately sipping from a cup of tea she had been served.

"What is it?" she asked, tilting her head. "You ain't thinkin' there's somethin' wrong with my appraisal, are you? Sure, I coulda lied jus' to make him happy. But why would I do somethin' so unacceptable to my pride?"

"Such was not my intention," replied Julius sincerely. "I only regret the misfortune of the event that occurred. If possible, I would have hoped that you could have dispelled Lord Olsen's sorrow."

"Hmph, see? You are making me look like the bad guy," Anastasia huffed. "Well, as a connoisseur, I'm used to that kinda reaction, so it don't really bother me."

Julius found himself somewhat vexed by the sulky tone in her voice. Feeling somewhat satisfied at the sight of his confused, furrowed brows, Anastasia set down her cup and thanked the man for the tea.

"Gettin' back to the story. I'm sure Mr. Olsen's feelin' disappointed he was given a phony. However, he's a master art collector, so bein' able to fool someone like him is quite the feat. Honestly speakin', if I hadn't been asked to appraise it, I wouldn't have suspected anythin' myself."

"Lady Anastasia… please be a little more considerate of Lord Olsen's feelings," Julius started. But Olsen halted him before he ended up offending his master.

"No, it's fine. She… Lady Anastasia is right," replied Olsen in agreement with Anastasia, who raised her shapely eyebrows at his words.

"Oh, dear. Mr. Olsen, no need to use titles here. This is business, after all. At least lemme loosen up a bit when I'm doin' merchant work, or I'll get burnt out."

"Ah, my apologies," Olsen responded. "But I just can't get used to it. As a royal selection candidate, you hold one of the most prestigious positions in this country. How can I treat you as a mere business partner?”

“In that case, you shouldn’t have called us to appraise the painting, yea?” Anastasia criticized. “It didn’t even hafta be us. There’s gotta be at least a few other connoisseurs out there, no?”

“Indeed, you are correct,” he agreed. “It’s tough. But you understand, don’t you?”

Anastasia placed her hand over her mouth, chuckling. “That’s why we didn’t cut corners either. I hope you appreciate it, though, right?” To this, Olsen relaxed his expression. Julius, however, continued to watch their exchange with a slight sense of tension.

Baron Nico Olsen, while not holding a particularly high rank among Lugnica’s nobility, was a renowned art collector, and a notable figure in his own right. Widely respected in the realm of the arts, Olsen could certainly be called a major figure in a less conspicuous sect of the kingdom.

As a royal selection candidate seeking to garner the support of as many influential individuals as possible, Anastasia had everything to gain and nothing to lose by establishing a connection with him. In fact, he was someone she should have reached out to. Therefore, it seemed like a stroke of good fortune that Olsen had approached her first with his proposal.

“So the famous Sleeping Miderine is a fake,” Julius thought aloud. “Lady Anastasia, please forgive my lack of knowledge, but how exactly does one determine the authenticity of a painting?”

“Hm? Well, let’s see. In most cases, I can usually tell by the artist’s signature or the paint they used. Of course, fakes are painted after the originals, so the materials used tend to be newer.”

“I see…” Julius responded, glancing at the fake Sleeping Miderine, placed in a corner of the parlor and covered with a white cloth.

Unfortunately, Julius did not have the expertise to distinguish the authenticity of a painting. But upon Anastasia’s explanation, he nodded in apparent understanding. Yet, recognizing such nuances naturally required not only proper knowledge, but a discerning eye, honed through extensive exposure to various artworks. Lady Anastasia's insight is truly astounding.

"I am continually amazed by your keen eye, my lady," he praised. "I never realized that you possessed such an extensive knowledge of art."

"I may not look it, but I happen to dabble in art collectin' myself, y'know," Anastasia responded. "Although I'm afraid I can't hold a candle to the true collectors, especially you, Mr. Olsen."

"I assure you, it's not a mere matter of having a large collection," Olsen spoke softly, shaking his head languidly. "As you see, even I've fallen victim to counterfeits such as this. It's nothing to be proud of." No words could relieve him of his humiliation. What Olsen truly needed was not mere consolation, but some progress in the situation.

"Lord Olsen, may I ask where you acquired this painting?" Julius inquired.

"Although I understand your suspicions of the dealer, he's someone I've known and trusted for a long time as an art dealer," Olsen explained. "He was probably unaware of its inauthenticity himself. I'm practically certain."

"How can ya judge the authenticity of someone's favor if ya can't even recognize the authenticity of a paintin' yourself?"

Anastasia's relentless inquiry challenged Olsen's initial denial, leaving Julius momentarily breathless. However, Olsen softened his demeanor, replying, "That's pretty harsh. You waste no time with flattery or consolation. You operate in a world where such things are unnecessary. Which is precisely why I called you here."

"I reckon ya might be givin' me way too much credit. It's a bit scary bein' raised up so high, but…sure. Anyway…" With stern gazes fixed on each other, she adjusted her posture and returned her attention to the painting, gesturing at it with her hand. "Mr. Olsen, what made ya think it was a phony?"

"Well…" Olsen hesitated.

"Like I said, that phony's a masterpiece," Anastasia interrupted. "If ya didn't have any doubts, ya wouldn't even bother appraisin' it in the first place. So where'd those suspicions come from? Ain't that far more important than where the paintin' is from? Or is it just me?"

"Can't pull the wool over your eyes, I see," Olsen conceded. Anastasia, with one eye closed, watched him cast his gaze down in contemplation. He then reached into his pocket, retrieved a letter, and placed it on the desk—a plain, unremarkable letter.

"You see, this letter arrived at my home the other day. The sender didn't even leave a name. All they wrote was a single sentence: The Sleeping Miderine you own is a fake."

"May I have a look?" Julius took the letter from the desk and scanned its contents. He adjusted his posture to make it easier for Anastasia to see, who had been peering over his shoulder. As they examined the letter side by side, they confirmed that indeed, it contained a single sentence, just as Olsen had said.

"It's concise an' to the point…not that I mean to be praisin' it," remarked Anastasia. "But that's all ya got? Nothin' else at all from that sender?"

"No, not a single thing after that. Of course, it could just as well have been a mere prank. It's well known that I possess the Sleeping Miderine. It could simply have been some prankster who knows about it playing tricks. It's just that…" Olsen hesitated before continuing.

"Your pride as a collector would not permit you to let it slide, is that it?" Julius offered.

"That's exactly right," Olsen concurred. He turned his cloudy, yellow eyes toward Anastasia, peering through his deeply wrinkled face. "That's why I turned to you, Miss Anastasia, to appraise the authenticity of the artwork. I've heard that you were a collector of art yourself, and one of Kararagi's finest connoisseurs. So I thought, in that case…"

"As a member of the Lugunican nobility, an' for the purpose of assessin' one of the royal selection candidates, ya brought this matter to my attention… I reckon yer quite straightforward yerself, Mr. Olsen," Anastasia concluded.

"Your words are rather direct," Olsen replied, raising a brow, "but I also know that your Hoshin Company has many opportunities to deal in works of art. Given our mutual involvement in the art world, shouldn't we be more concerned about such forgeries circulating in the market?"

Anastasia met his gaze, and a quiet struggle ensued between the two for a moment. Both were influential figures—one a royal selection candidate, the other a member of the nobility, both negotiating with silence.

Eventually, the silent standoff came to an end, with Anastasia raising her hands. "No need to provoke me. I ain't thrilled about it, either. So long as we're in business, we can't afford to be damagin' our reputation wit' subpar work. So, give me some time."

"Splendid," Olsen replied. "As for how to use that time, may I ask you more about that later?"

"Sure. I reckon we'll be gettin' pretty busy ourselves, too," Anastasia said as she rose and stretched her back. Julius rose with her and handed her her jacket. She accepted it with a small nod of gratitude to Olsen, a soft 'ah' escaping her lips. Then, she smiled softly and held up a finger.

"Oh yeah—an' this is important—if we happen to stumble upon the real Sleeping Miderine, Mr. Olsen… How much are ya willin' to pay for it?" she inquired in a blend of cunning charm and business acumen.

“Still, that was pretty surprising,” Julius said as they departed Baron Olsen’s estate and climbed into the awaiting dragon carriage.

“Hm?” Anastasia, settling into the plush comfort of the seat inside the elegant Juukulius family dragon carriage, tilted her head in response to Julius’s unexpected comment. “Surprisin’? What was?”

“Our discussion with Lord Olsen. I honestly had no idea about your hobby of collecting artwork, Lady Anastasia. So…”

“What? Hard to believe a quick-witted gal like me could have an appreciation for art?”

“No, no. I meant nothing of the sort,” he replied hastily in an attempt to correct himself.

“Oh, I’m jus’ kiddin’ around,” Anastasia chuckled reassuringly, finally settling into her seat. “I know you’d never think somethin’ like that, Julius. Although yer not entirely off the mark. I ain’t necessarily a fan of paintin’ or the arts.”

“But you had an engaging conversation with Lord Olsen,” Julius continued. “And most importantly, you have enough expertise in the subject of paintings to be considered a connoisseur. So…”

“That don’t mean I’ve fallen in love with art, though, y’know?” Anastasia replied, her thoughts a bit more pragmatic and straightforward than Julius’s. “Though I reckon it’d be nice if that were the case.

“It’s true that I got some art on hand, but they’re for givin’ as gifts to those who want ‘em. Bein’ a connoisseur’s essential for a merchant, that’s why I studied it,” Anastasia explained. Of course, I understand people’s passion for the arts, an’ their natural appreciation for ‘em. How can I do business with ‘em if I don’t? It just ain’t aligned with my own desires for ownership.

“I do appreciate Mr. Olsen’s honesty as a collector, like how he contacted us to check the authenticity of his own paintin’,” she continued.

“That’s because you have an admirable trait of affirming the desires of others," Julius acknowledged.

"You're a tad mistaken," Anastasia clarified with a smile. "I prefer affirmin' my own desires more than others'. I jus' think that bein' honest about what ya want makes life easier an' happier."

Anastasia was known for her ability to understand and respect the desires of others. She had made her philosophy evident in the hall on the day that marked the beginning of the royal selection. Such was Anastasia Hoshin's approach to life.

"I reckon Mr. Olsen gathered from our conversation that I ain't much of a collector at all. But my philosophy an' his appreciation for art can coexist. That's why I get along well with collectors. Ain't his proposal in line wit' such expectations?"

"Baron Olsen has yet to disclose who he will support during the royal selection. Are you considering this a litmus test for determining his position?" Julius inquired.

"Well, it's only natural that people wanna support those that get 'em. Also, frustratin' as it is, it ain't fun seein' fakes goin' around. So it works out for both of us." It's scary, Anastasia thought, lips forming a wry grin at Olsen's old-fashioned behavior.

He refused to let his mistake in acquiring a counterfeit go beyond a mere blow to his pride. Such avarice ain't bad. I reckon he's someone I'd rather have as a business partner than oppose as an enemy. However, what truly piqued her interest even beyond Olsen was something else.

"It ain't every day we see a phony of that caliber. We definitely gotta find out who's behind it an' put a stop to 'em."

"Lady Anastasia, are you perhaps taking this on as your true mission?" Julius asked, narrowing his eyes as he questioned her true intention.

"No way," she said dismissively as she pointed out the window to distract him. "Oh, look, we're almost back at yer mansion, ain't we? We gotta prepare to unload the goods we got. Come on, come on."

Across from her, Julius only let out a small sigh as the roof of the mansion came into view.

Back at the mansion…

“Wh-What the—?! Th-This is the Sleeping Miderine! Why on earth is this here!” Joshua exclaimed in utter shock at the sight of the painting being lowered from the dragon carriage.

This was Julius’s brother. Yet despite his striking resemblance to his older brother, the expression he wore was one rarely, if ever, seen on Julius’s face. His monocle slid down, perfectly capturing the magnitude of his astonishment.

Anastasia watched Joshua’s reaction with a satisfied nod. “Yeah, yeah, that’s exactly the reaction I expected. Thanks, Joshua. I’m totally satisfied.”

“What do you mean you ‘expected’, Lady Anastasia?” Joshua asked.

“I’m of course talkin’ ‘bout yer over-the-top reaction. Oh, how funny,” Anastasia responded amusingly with a hand over her mouth as Joshua looked at her in disbelief.

Watching their interaction from the sidelines, Julius shook his head exhaustingly. “Lady Anastasia, please don’t toy with my brother so much. And Joshua, you need to calm down too.”

“How am I supposed to calm down?” Joshua retorted. “Why is this painting here? Isn’t this one of Baron Olsen’s collections?”

“You’re right about that. As a matter of fact, it was Baron Olsen himself who entrusted it into our hands. Though technically, this painting isn’t really the Sleeping Miderine. It’s a fake.”

“A fake?!” Joshua exclaimed aghast as he gazed at the magnificent framed painting sitting on the floor of the entrance hall. His expression gradually evolved from one of sheer surprise to one of contemplative appreciation of the artistry.

From an early age, Joshua had been plagued by physical fragility, confining him indoors more often than not. Rather than outdoor adventures, he spent much of his time buried in a book, dabbling in poetry, and cultivating his painting skills. Consequently, he ended up acquiring a deep knowledge of the arts, and a profound affection for them. In this regard, Julius was far behind his brother in the area of familiarity with artistic pursuits.

“So it’s really a fake?” Joshua remarked, his voice laced with disbelief. “Ever since I’ve seen it at Baron Olsen’s residence, I could only imagine that it would be genuine.”

“Regrettably, I lack the confidence in my own abilities to accurately evaluate a piece of artwork. However, Lady Anastasia’s discerning eye is beyond compare. Even the baron himself trusted her judgment,” Julius explained.

“Which means, this is a counterfeit with the capability of deceiving even the meticulous eyes of Baron Olsen himself…”

For someone with his deep understanding of art, an esteemed art collector such as Olsen was in a class of his own. Joshua grappled with the shock of the notion that even Baron Olsen could be hoodwinked.

“Mr. Olsen mentioned that y’all are good friends, ain’t ya, Joshua?” Anastasia questioned.

“Good friends might be an exaggeration,” Joshua admitted. “We simply had the chance to show each other our paintings through a common acquaintance. And ever since, he’s been nothing but kind to me. He even showed me this Sleeping Miderine. It was utterly overwhelming.”

“Joshua is an artist in his own right,” Julius added. “Some of his creations even grace the walls of my room. As his older brother, I take great pride in his talent.”

“J-Julius…” Joshua stammered, bashful under Julius’s praise. Yet Julius’s words were not mere flattery. He had intended to show Anastasia Joshua’s works later. Despite his amateur perspective, they were remarkable masterpieces in his eyes. Julius couldn’t help but nurture the hope that his younger brother might one day ascend the ranks of the master painters.

“It’s simply a painting masquerading as a masterpiece,” Joshua said dismissively. “You are giving me too much credit, my dear brother.”

“There is nothing wrong with making a living doing what you love. In fact, I find it admirable.”

“Haha. It would indeed be nice if I could do that,” Joshua responded modestly, seeming to take Julius’s words with a grain of salt. Julius hoped to break that bad habit of self-depreciation, but before he could continue speaking, Anastasia clapped her hands before her chest, interrupting the brothers’ conversation to get their attention.

With a brief glance at the fake painting, she spoke. “As lovely as it is seein’ y’all bondin’ over there, let’s move on to the main issue. For the sake of our esteemed Mr. Olsen, we gotta find the copycat responsible for this. I reckon we’re gonna hafta start lookin’ for clues one by one,” she declared.

“Clues from the copycat? How would one even go about…” Joshua trailed off in uncertainty.

“Oh, are you talking about that letter Baron Olsen received?”“ Julius asked.

“Yeah, exactly,” Anastasia affirmed, retrieving a letter from her pocket that had been left in her possession with the painting. She unfolded it, revealing a single, unambiguous sentence. The writer’s handwriting was devoid of any trace of the author’s identity. Searching for the informant, as they called him for the sake of convenience, through this letter seemed impractical.

“Or maybe not…” Anastasia mumbled.

“Lady Anastasia?”

“If our copycat were really so talented, this ain’t likely to be his only piece, right? Which must mean that Mr. Olsen ain’t the only person that this informant has tipped off, no?”

"I get it. So are you suggesting that this person may have sent a similar letter to other collectors who might have other counterfeit pieces by the same copycat?" Julius asked for clarification.

"Well, I'm sure relieved that no one sent somethin' like this to me," Anastasia commented with a relieved sigh, modestly rejoicing at her good fortune. "Had it turned out that the ones I'd gone through all the trouble of collectin' were fakes, too, I reckon my credibility woulda also been shattered, not to mention my self-respect."

Julius, on the other hand, couldn't help but marvel at Anastasia's logical reasoning. Upon hearing that they would be searching for the copycat, he assumed it would be as elusive as grasping at a cloud.

"I never thought of all that, Lady Anastasia. Have you ever done something like this before?" Julius asked.

"Searchin' for a copycat? Nah, I' ain't never done nothin' like that. I jus' try to find the possibility that makes the most sense."

"Even so, I was very surprised," Julius admitted, charmed by Anastasia's bashful, blushing response. He continued speaking while looking at the painting. "However, if you had already deducted so much, why did you borrow the painting from Baron Olsen? It does not seem that there is much we can learn from it." Anastasia's speculations made so much sense, he found the reason for this puzzling.

"Oh, that?" she responded. "Well, the paintin' itself ain't what's important to me right now. I jus' wanna confirm somethin' using that well-done phony. Joshua?"

"Eh, um, me? Yes! What is it?" Joshua asked, caught off guard. Julius furrowed his brow, for he also couldn't understand why she called his name. Anastasia held up a finger in front of the two brothers.

"I want ya to help us wit' somethin' for a sec, Joshua."

"M-Me? Sure, I don't mind…"

“Really? Great, that’ll be a big help, alright. I’d expect nothin’ less from a man from the Juukulius house.” Lady Anastasia smiled as she spoke warmly, gesturing toward the Sleeping Miderine with her hand. “Ya mentioned earlier that ya got mutual friends wit’ Mr. Olsen, right? I’d be thrilled if ya could show this paintin’ to all those art-lovin’ friends of yours.”

5

“Wowee! Julius was right, this is awfully impressive,” Anastasia exclaimed, eyes sparkling as she admired the various paintings adorning the room.

Within her gaze were landscape paintings depicting a variety of vistas. Some were of the royal capital, while others appeared to be distant, fantasy landscapes that appeared to have sprung right off the pages of a storybook.

While some pieces made one want to avert their eyes due to their amateurish nature, there were others that exuded a certain level of confidence. They were all displayed side by side, not as a mere art collection, but as a collection of works by a dear family member. It was Joshua Juukulius’s own personal art gallery within Juukulius Manor.

Although to call it a “gallery” might be a bit of an overstatement. The artworks were of varying quality, and their value as art pieces was subjective. At least, that’s what the artist himself believed.

“Ya know,” Anastasia began, “Julius mightn’t look it, but he’s somethin’ of a family guy. So I reckoned he was jus’ bein’ nice wit’ his words. But it seems he wasn’t kiddin’. I’m impressed.”

Anastasia’s unreserved and straightforward manner of speaking did offer some relief. However, it hinted at a particular evaluation of Julius, which couldn’t be easily overlooked. Julius Juukulius, the Finest of Knights, was a man of honor, and an exemplary knight through and through.

“Do not doubt my brother’s eye for art,” Joshua said defensively. “I simply cannot produce results that meet my brother’s evaluation.

He is always looking ahead toward the future.”

“Ah, so both of y’all are family guys. I hadn’t realized,” Anastasia remarked, sticking out her tongue playfully. She gazed at the paintings with a hint of apology.

Since painting was simply a hobby for him, Joshua rarely revealed his works to anyone other than family. So taking this as an opportunity, he began to explain his paintings to Anastasia, even though she hadn’t asked.

“All I have are landscapes, but very few of them are actual places I’ve seen. I mostly paint the scenes that I imagine from books or scenes that I have heard about from my father or my brother. Like scenes from their travels, for example.”

“Ya mean ya drew somethin’ like this from yer imagination? That’s pretty darn impressive, ain’t it? I ain’t very crafty wit’ my hands, so I admire ya for bein’ able to paint like this. I’m envious.” Anastasia looked at the paintings sullenly as she spoke, and Joshua scratched his own cheek with a troubled look on his face.

Today was the day they had invited his acquaintances to the mansion, in accordance with Anastasia’s request. As they awaited their arrival, Joshua fulfilled Anastasia’s wish by showing her the paintings he had created.

However, for Joshua, this situation came with a complex mix of emotions. If only Julius were here to keep Lady Anastasia company.

Unfortunately, Julius had adamantly declined attending this day’s gathering.

Julius offered considerate words of reasoning before leaving: “I do not wish to make your friends uncomfortable, Joshua. So please just enjoy yourselves as you normally would. And please take good care of Lady Anastasia.”

Because of this, Mimi from the Hoshin Company had come in his place. However, her carefree nature meant that she spent most of her time in the dining room, snacking away, pretty much leaving

Anastasia unattended.

“I don’t mind having my brother around at all, but…” Joshua said to himself.

However, he was well aware of the artists’ tendency of eccentricity, and therefore could not predict how they would interact with Julius, a royal knight. In that sense, Julius’s considerate remark was undeniably accurate, making Joshua’s feelings as a younger brother quite complex.

“Hmm…” A voice interrupted his inner musings.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was lost in thought. Is something the matter?”

“Nah. I just thought you might be goin’ through some stuff at your age. Must be tough,” Anastasia offered comfortingly.

“It’s nowhere near as tough as what you and my brother face, Lady Anastasia,” Joshua replied, slightly embarrassed as she peered into his contemplative expression. However, in response to his words, Anastasia straightened her back and placed a finger on her lips.

“Oh? Well, ain’t no point in comparin’ our struggles, y’know. That don’t change nothin’ for the person experiencing’ it, so there’s no need to be underminin’ yer own achievements.”

“Well…”

“Y’know, Joshua? I reckon yer serious, worryin’ personality shines through in yer paintin’s. I ain’t so skilled in that field, but ain’t such sensibilities what make art enjoyable?”

Standing inside before a conspicuously large piece, Anastasia looked up at it. It was a depiction of the very Juukulius Manor in which they stood. For Joshua, this was the mansion he had called home since birth, and thus the very origin of his world.

He had dedicated a significant portion of his life to complete this single piece. That time was the equivalent to the time he invested in confronting his own world head-on.

“Yer paintin’ skills are pretty darn impressive. Ain’t ya ever consider a future as an artist?”

Joshua remained silent, gasping slightly as her question caught him off guard. Nonetheless, it was an anticipated and familiar inquiry. After all, it was only natural to assume that one who could handle a paintbrush so well would consider pursuing that path.

Joshua responded with his usual faint smile. “Unfortunately, I do not possess that level of talent. Both you and my brother greatly overestimate me, Lady Anastasia.”

“Well, perhaps. Bein’ an artist requires dedicatin’ your whole life to it, an’ only those who can truly commit can make it. Besides—” She paused for a beat before continuing without turning around. “It ain’t always guaranteed that yer abilities an’ desires will align.”

Her words felt several times sharper than what had silenced Joshua just before. So sharp, the heart they pierced felt as if it had been torn apart by their sting. “Um, Lady Anastasia?”

Unsure if he grasped the true intent behind her words, he furrowed his brow. But Anastasia only raised her hand in response to Joshua’s questioning tone.

“Sorry, sorry. Didn’t mean to cause ya any confusion. I reckon yer paintin’s are way better than ya give yerself credit for. If ya improved just a tad more, I’d even like to sell ‘em.”

“I am honored by that. However, I do not paint for the sake of money,” Joshua replied humbly.

“Ain’t that even better, then? Imagine havin’ something ya only do for fun end up bein’ worth something.”

Well, I don’t know about that. Joshua didn’t want to criticize Anastasia’s values, but he couldn’t help but have reservations. I do, of course, believe everyone’s values are unique. And I also agree with Anastasia’s philosophy on respecting those diverse perspectives. But—

Honestly, Joshua had never been particularly fond of Anastasia. The fact that the Juukulius family supported her was mostly because of Julius, who was the next heir of the family. For Joshua, he had merely been following his brother’s request to assist her. But he was uncertain whether Anastasia was suitable for the kingdom’s throne. He had yet to determine whether or not he truly wished to support her wholeheartedly.

“Missy! Missy! The guests are here! And they look suuuper important! So cool!” The excited voice of Mimi rang out from downstairs. It seemed their visitors had arrived, and she wasted no time being the first of their servants to report it.

The pitter-patter of Mimi’s footsteps clattered beneath the staircase, prompting Joshua and Anastasia to exchange glances.

“Sounds like our guests are here. Shall we go give ‘em a warm welcome?”

“Yes, let’s…” Joshua said. “Um, I know I’ve said this before, but please allow me to say it again. My friends may come off as somewhat eccentric, but please remember, they are not bad people.”

“I know, I know,” Anastasia reassured. “Julius already warned me to keep yer buddies outta trouble, so don’t worry. Anyway, they’re art lovers, right? In that case, I reckon they could become customers of our company. I’ll deal with ‘em properly.”

“Deal with them…?” What exactly does she mean, ‘deal with them’? Unable to muster the courage to ask her directly, Joshua accompanied Anastasia to the room where Mimi was waiting, heading downstairs to greet their guests.

6

“So, thanks to Joshua’s friends, I gathered quite a few interestin’ things,” Anastasia reported to Julius upon their reunion at the mansion after the guests had left.

“Interesting things, you say?” Julius asked.

Seated at the same table, Joshua nodded in agreement. “Today, I showed my art enthusiast friends the fake Sleeping Miderine," he explained. "Seeing the actual painting in person, some of them said intriguing things."

"Is that to say that everything went as Lady Anastasia had anticipated?"

"Bullseye!" Anastasia affirmed. "Seems some of 'em also got a mysterious letter from someone. Polite anonymous reports sayin' one of their paintin's a phony, with the name of the paintin'!'"

"So what did they do after they received those letters?" Julius asked with a stern expression, having confirmed the existence of multiple counterfeits in circulation.

"Absolutely nothin' at all," she replied. It seemed that although the art enthusiasts had indeed read the contents of the letters, they had simply put them aside. "Ya see, they were all well-authenticated masterpieces, havin' already passed all their appraisals 'til now. So nobody really felt any need to doubt 'em jus' 'cause one anonymous person sent 'em a letter."

"However, they seem to have changed their mind after seeing the Sleeping Miderine," Joshua continued. "Baron Olsen wouldn't have let go of this painting unless he was certain it was fake. That seems to have been a deciding factor for them."

"Which means that if there's really a copycat out there who can produce such elaborate imitations, then as the letter suggested, their own masterpieces also run the risk of being possible fakes," Julius summed up.

Upon learning that not only the magnificent Sleeping Miderine before them, but their own collection of masterpieces could be fake, the connoisseurs had flown into a panic and ran home, having forgotten even the most basic of etiquette. Undoubtedly, they had also been in a rush to validate the authenticity of their own pieces in their possession. In that regard, Joshua, aside from his interest in art, was relieved that he wasn't a collector.

"So, now that we've confirmed that, as Lady Anastasia suspected, letters were indeed delivered to other collectors… What now? It seems like a dead end in terms of leads,” Julius pondered aloud.

“A dead end? No, it ain’t nothin’ of the sort. For starters, we ruled out the possibility of the sender jus’ bein’ a prankster wit’ grudge against Mr. Olsen, right? And it’s gotta be someone who can discern the authenticity of paintin’s, too. Now, if only we knew their motive…”

“Motive?” Julius speculated. “To eradicate the circulation of counterfeit paintings throughout the world, perhaps?”

“Ahaha! Julius, you’re a riot! Puttin’ on such a serious face, then comin’ up with such jokes!” Anastasia laughed and applauded, but Julius looked unamused. Without a doubt, these were Julius’s true thoughts, but they had been received as a far-fetched dream. It is said that twenty percent of masterpieces currently circulating in the world are fakes. Criminals scheming to exploit people’s desires never stop existing. It’s futile to even dream of eradicating every existing fake in the world. However, the informant’s action of sending these letters in the first place did seem to suggest some hostility toward the copycat.

“Well, what if the informant was actually the copycat himself?” Joshua suggested. “It could simply be a mischievous act to mock the collectors who are unable to detect the phonies on their own.”

“Haha, that’d be pretty amusin’ too. If that were the case, findin’ the sender would mean findin’ the copycat at the same time. Like hittin’ two birds wit’ one stone! Super convenient.” Anastasia clapped her hand in enthusiasm.

“In this case, I don’t think the other party is necessarily thinking about gain or loss…” Julius said with a wry smile.

However, with the limited information Joshua had on the culprit, that was about the best they could come up with. After all, what benefit would the sender even gain from engaging in such actions?

“Or maybe their actions are completely unrelated to gains and losses?” Joshua speculated.

“Nah, that definitely ain’t the case,” Anastasia dismissed, wagging a finger at Joshua, who was getting desperate. “Whether material or psychological, humans never engage in actions completely detached from some sorta benefit. So there’s gotta be someone gainin’ something, for better or worse. An’ whoever that is, is none other than our sender.”

“Lady Anastasia, what kind of possibilities are you considering?” Julius asked.

“Me? Well, let’s see. I don’t think whoever’s sendin’ these letters is doin’ it for money. As Joshua would say, this won’t yield any gains. Of course, if they exposed the phonies an’ came back sellin’ the originals, that’d be a different story.”

“At the moment, there don’t seem to have been any such offers,” Joshua confirmed.

“Then the sender’s target’s gotta be the copycat’s, no? Maybe it’s an attack on the copycat, or some other motive. Either way, it’s still up in the air.”

“I see. So they’re fixated on the copycat?” Julius inquired. Anastasia’s speculations certainly carried conviction, especially considering her ability to discern the authenticity of paintings. Suddenly, Joshua felt oddly embarrassed by the ineptitude of his own deductions.

Sensing Joshua’s embarrassment, Julius nodded and said, “There’s no need to worry about it. What you said earlier also showed a keen observation. I would not have come up with that myself. I’m sure even Lady Anastasia was impressed. Isn’t that right?”

“Thank you for that, Julius,” Joshua acknowledged. “But had it really been an idea I came up with, I’m sure you and Lady Anastasia would have both said something right away. No need to be so modest with me.”

“Says the one being so modest himself…” Anastasia murmured while adjusting her scarf, watching Joshua and Julius talk. Then, with a slight shift in her own demeanor, she continued, “While it’s good to get an idea of the culprit's identity, gettin' too hung up on it now might lead to biases and preconceptions. Anyways, I got a feelin' there'll be some movement soon. Don'tcha agree?"

"I understand what you're saying about preconceptions," Joshua noted. "But movement, you say? From which side? The informant or the copycat?"

"Hmm, well, neither of 'em. Rather, from your friends from earlier." Julius and Joshua exchanged glances at Anastasia's matter-of-fact reply. Smiling at their reactions, she pointed at the window and started counting down: "Three, two, one…"

Taken aback, they both glanced over silently, half-doubtful, half-expecting. "Anand… zero. Ah well, I reckon that woulda been way too convenient," Anastasia said with a shrug, flashing an embarrassed smile.

Just then, before the Juukulius Manor gate, a dragon carriage approached. It was a rather eccentric carriage, belonging to one of the enthusiasts who had just stopped by several hours back. And thus, Anastasia's prediction that one of his friends would make a movement, turned out to be remarkably accurate.

"I reckon I shoulda waited another five seconds or so," she mused, turning around, one eye closed. "That really woulda been somethin'." Julius respectfully bowed as if in admiration, and Joshua hastily followed suit. However, in Joshua's mind, he was more impressed by Anastasia's uncanny foresight, rather than mere admiration. What she had done could be called predicting and directing the thoughts and actions of others. And if she could do that—

"It's as if she's able to read minds." Such an idea was terribly frightening to Joshua, causing his shoulders to tremble against his will. Although he couldn't quite pinpoint the reason for that trembling.

7

Only three days had passed since they accepted Nico Olsen's request, and they now found themselves approaching the residence of Azla Eastern.

“It appears that nobody is home,” Julius said, turning back toward the others. They were on an unremarkable corner of the commoner’s district, with the lively bustle of the royal capital echoing in the distance.

There’s no nameplate on the door, but this is undeniably the correct address. The lack of response must mean that either the person in question is absent, or that he lives a more nocturnal lifestyle that seems to be common among artists. In any case, there is no other way to obtain the detailed information we need than to ask the person directly.

“But it is indeed rather surprising. To think that we would identify a suspect of the informant so quickly,” Julius remarked.

“Is it?” Anastasia asked. “Thanks to Joshua, we came across a few other copycat victims amongst his friends. I reckon they wouldn’t make such a fuss had it been anyone else. But bein’ a matter of their own, everyone got desperate. Even if we did nothin’, I reckon they’d go off lookin’ for the culprit on their own, an’ let us know whatever they find.”

Joshua looked at her in surprise. Raising a finger, she continued her proud explanation. “But seein’ as we provided the information first, think of it as a favor in return.”

Certainly, things had turned out just as Anastasia had described. After discovering the possibility of a phony amongst their own art collection, the art enthusiasts spared no effort in searching for the identity of who sent the anonymous letters to their homes. As a result, Joshua and his friends had become a hub for such information, piecing clues together in an attempt to narrow down a culprit.

Their currently available information suggested it was a tall young man with rust-colored hair, clean-cut but lacking extravagance, who also enjoyed painting by himself. And while several names came up, at the top of the list was the one called Azla Eastern.

Azla was a young man residing in the royal capital, often seen coming and going from a trading company, engaged in tasks such as handling materials. It was said that on rare days off, he would take up a brush and paint portraits in the square.

“While the description matches, we can’t do much if he doesn’t respond. Should we set him aside for now and move on to our other suspects?” Julius suggested.

“Ya seem to be enjoyin’ this, Julius,” Anastasia teased.

“I am…sorry about that,” Julius said, clearing his throat. “Although I routinely have the opportunity to patrol as a knight, it is not very often that I get the chance to conduct a serious investigation such as this.”

Julius, while admonishing himself for his words and actions, was not dressed in the white uniform of the knights, but in his everyday attire. At Anastasia’s request, this was a deliberate measure to avoid intimidating the other party.

Nevertheless, the effect was questionable, as Julius’s appearance did not detract from his dignity and grace, as his style of dress was still sophisticated despite being his own personal wear.

“Your refinement simply cannot be hidden… Truly impressive, dear brother,” Joshua praised.

“Joshua’s brotherly favoritism toward you notwithstandin’, it’s actually the fact that we’re all so eye-catchin’ that’s bothersome. We’re so good-lookin’ standin’ side by side, our disguises are practically pointless.”

“I am at a loss for how to apologize for that,” Julius replied. “But first of all, it would certainly help if you could also take the initiative and disguise your own beauty, Lady Anastasia…”

“Well, I don’t need you tellin’ me that… But all jokes aside, I don’t reckon we should be lingerin’ around for too long.”

Anastasia turned her head, letting out a thoughtful “Hmm…” However, she abruptly interrupted her train of thought. With a decisive expression, she clapped her hands in front of her chest. “Alright, I got it. Hey, don’t y’all hear a baby cryin’ inside the house?”

“Huh? A baby? I don’t hear anything…” Joshua said, confused at Anastasia’s sudden suggestion.

“I see,” Julius nodded in an understanding manner. “If there is a baby crying inside, then this is indeed an urgent matter. We must hurry.”

Disregarding the confused Joshua, Julius moved swiftly, placing his hand on the door of the Azla residence.

From the cuff of his sleeve, a quasi-spirit named Ia emerged, emitting a faint red glow. Ia flew straight into the keyhole of the front door, and within seconds, the lock clicked open.

“J-Julius?! Isn’t this a crime…?!” Joshua exclaimed.

“No, this is an emergency,” Julius clarified. “We must make sure that the baby is safe. Lady Anastasia has entrusted me with discretion in situations like this.”

“Wh-What a bad influence…!”

“Come on now,” Anastasia interrupted. “If we start fussin’ outside the house, people will start suspectin’ us.”

As Julius slipped in through the open door, Anastasia forcefully pushed the hesitant Joshua inside, right into the Azla residence.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Joshua apologized. “I didn’t mean to offend. I just couldn’t imagine my brother doing something wrong. So the problem must be with your suggestion, Lady Anastasia…”

“Well, yer quick to say sorry, ain’t ya? But there ain’t nobody here to apologize to. So relax.”

“Even so, it feels a bit heartless to find comfort in that…” Joshua, who had his eyes closed, slightly opened them and slowly surveyed the interior of the house.

Indeed, as Anastasia said, it seemed to be unoccupied. In that regard, Joshua was relieved that they weren't reprimanded for entering without permission. However, for Joshua, that reassurance would not last very long. Because what lay before them was…

"Lady Anastasia," Julius started.

"Yeah, I noticed it, too…" she replied, bringing her tone down a notch. "The place's been ransacked."

From their change in demeanor, Joshua could also sense that this was a dire situation. The Azla residence was in a state of disarray, and appeared to have been that way since long before they had broken inside.

This chaos had nothing to do with the presence or absence of tidiness. Furniture had been overturned, dishes were shattered, and signs of resistance had left their mark. The most concerning issue was the bloodstains on the floor.

Although the amount was scant, the floor was dotted with traces of blood. It was unclear whether this blood belonged to the homeowner, Azla, or to someone else.

"Whatever happened here was certainly out of the ordinary," Julius observed. "There were physical altercations, followed by…"

"The kidnappin' of the homeowner. That's how it seems." Squatting near the bloodstains on the floor, Anastasia looked at the window in the back of the room. Upon closer inspection, the bloodstains were leading in that direction, accompanied by a sizable shoe print left behind on the windowsill.

"After enterin' through the back, they waited for Azla's return before attackin' an' abductin' him… that scenario makes the most sense, don't it?"

"But who?! Who attacked him, who?" Joshua asked, dumbfounded.

"Well, if my assumption's correct, then Azla's definitely the whistleblower sendin' out all them letters. But that'd be a pain for the copycat, meanin' it's gotta be the copycat himself who's our prime suspect.”

Joshua, despite finding himself burning with anxiety, couldn’t help but agree with Anastasia’s deduction. Her composure contributed greatly, as for a person in the midst of such discomfort, composure served as a beacon. Anastasia’s soft way of speaking was more than enough to create such an impression in Joshua.

“Lady Anastasia, this seems like a situation in need of the guards,” Julius announced. “I will return shortly. May I entrust this place into your care?”

“Yeah, I reckon that’s best,” she agreed.

“Understood. Joshua, I entrust Lady Anastasia to you. I’ll call upon the guards and return promptly.”

“Y-Yes!” Joshua responded. “Julius, please be careful.” With that, Julius and Anastasia proceeded to take their next actions.

Leaving them in charge of the mansion’s security, Julius had entrusted Anastasia to Joshua, and quickly made his way to a guards’ station. As long as they had a case, it would be the guards’ duty to search for Azla from this point forward.

“Wait, Lady Anastasia!” Joshua called out. “Shouldn’t you wait here for my brother to return?!” However, disregarding Joshua, Anastasia immediately headed out of the room. He hurried after her.

Without looking back at him, she responded, “Listen. Once the guards come swarmin’ in, things are gonna get crazy. So before that happens, we gotta do what only we can. Somethin’ that can’t be done wit’ Julius around.”

“Something we can’t do with my brother around…?” Joshua asked, dumbstruck. “Does such a thing even exist in this world?”

“It might sound astonishin’, but I assure you, it exists,” Anastasia replied with a wry smile. “Take this, for example…”

With that, she headed to the house neighboring the Azla residence, and pounded on the door, calling out: “Hellooo? Yer neighbor, Mr. Azla, was jus’ attacked. Didn’t y’all happen to see anythin’?”

“W-Wait!” Taken aback by Anastasia’s boldness, Joshua’s face turned pale as he glanced between Anastasia’s profile and the door of the neighboring house. “I-Is it really okay to say something like that so directly? If they do know something, won’t they have already reported it to the guards?”

“Shh.” Placing a finger on her lips, Anastasia motioned for Joshua to be quiet. He couldn’t make heads or tails of her intentions. However, until now, Anastasia had demonstrated a consistent track record that defied expectations, leading them to Azla. Trusting that, Joshua shut his mouth.

“Hmm, nothin’ at all…” Anastasia muttered. “In that case, on to the folks ‘cross the street.” Unphased, she moved on to the next house.

Joshua, although puzzled, had no choice but to follow her lead. He had been entrusted by Julius to look after her. Swirling in a vortex of uncertainty about what he could do, he knew he couldn’t abandon his duty.

Keeping the momentum, Anastasia went around the vicinity of the Azla residence, asking questions to people left and right. And as a matter of course, she was ignored by everyone she asked. In the end, they came up with no clues, leaving Joshua to slump his shoulders in defeat.

After their numerous unsuccessful attempts, Joshua was waiting for Julius to return with the guards, when a rough voice shot out in their direction.

“Yo! Youse two over there! Ya got some questions or somethin’, don’tcha?” The owner of the voice was a man with a rather aggressive aura. He was surrounded by men with equally intimidating vibes. Joshua felt an uncomfortable cold sweat run down his back.

“Uh, well you see… Oh, we’re not suspicious individuals…” Shielding Anastasia behind him, Joshua tried to hold off the men.

Anastasia, however, spoke out from behind Joshua. “Yeah, yeah, we’re in a bit of a pickle. Mind spillin’ the beans, fellas?”

“L-Lady Anast…mmmph!” As Joshua tried to call out her name, a hand reached from behind and covered his mouth, rendering him speechless. At that moment, he heard Anastasia’s voice whisper softly into his ear.

“Don’t say my name.”

“Ah—” Releasing her hand from Joshua’s mouth, Anastasia stepped forward gracefully. He realized she had removed her familiar hat and scarf, transforming her appearance from her usual self.

Joshua realized that this was an effort to keep her identity as Anastasia Hoshin a secret. He also realized that the situation had gone just as she had anticipated. Taking a deep breath, Joshua steeled himself. “Well then, what should I call you for now?”

“For now, let’s go wit’ Ana. Gotta keep everythin’ under wraps, y’know? Alright, time for a social studies field trip.”

Surrounded by the men, Joshua felt a cold shiver run up his spine. Anastasia, on the contrary, winked playfully in complete composure. Astounded by her poise, Joshua realized that Anastasia had left her hat and scarf at the Azla residence as a message to Julius. He continued to follow along, all while pondering: “Are you sure we can trust this person, dear brother?”

And thus, they were led away by the men quietly, Joshua all the while addressing the absent Julius with his concerns.

8

One day, Anastasia Hoshin, one of the candidates for the throne of the Kingdom of Lugunica, received an unusual request from Baron Nico Olsen, an art collector.

The content of the request was rather peculiar: to locate the master forger responsible for replicating the baron’s treasured masterpiece, Sleeping Miderine. Anastasia, who occasionally dealt with artworks in her trade, shared a mutual interest with the baron in preventing the circulation of such exquisite forgeries and securing his support.

Upon accepting the task, Anastasia and her team began their investigation. Three days into their inquiry, they stumbled upon information regarding an individual who appeared to have reported the forger—a man known as Azla. Upon visiting his residence, signs of a possible assault and abduction had become evident.

In their pursuit of more information, Anastasia and her team began questioning the people in the vicinity. Suddenly, a group of rugged-looking individuals who seemed to know something emerged. They then guided them to a dimly lit tavern, which appeared to be their hideout.

“Are ya the ones who killed Azla Eastern?” Anastasia asked abruptly, catching Joshua off guard, making him let out a squeal. Inside the dimly lit tavern were a number of shadowy figures, all exuding violent air.

With Joshua, who was painfully aware of his slender build, it was a fair match in terms of arm and leg thickness against these formidable opponents. Amidst this group, Anastasia, who was even more delicate than Joshua, exuded a sense of brazen confidence. However, she knew that poise alone wouldn’t shield them from the others’ simmering anger.

Suddenly, a rough-looking man, startled by the inquiry, slammed his hand onto the table. “Uh-oh.” A sense of impending doom washed over Joshua, but it was too late. The table tilted, causing the glass to gracefully slide and shatter upon the floor.

“Wh-What the hell are youse guys doin’ here?” one of them demanded.

“Yeah! Don’t think youse can waltz in here and leave unscathed!” another chimed in.

“You heard ‘em! Come at me, punk!” shouted a third.

Anastasia and Joshua found themselves encircled by the angry men, who hurled insults in a deafening chorus, their fervor so overwhelming that the latter half of their words were indistinguishable.

Joshua's vision blurred, overwhelmed by the men's intensity. His heart raced as if it might leap from his chest, and nausea surged within him. But even in this dire situation, Anastasia remained unfazed.

"Well, now, let's not make such a ruckus," she calmly interjected with a graceful smile, unaffected by the men's chaotic uproar. She boldly continued to inquire about Azla's whereabouts amidst her rowdy acquaintances. "Would you be willing to hear us out? We have a request."

"A-A-Ana?! Do you have a plan?" Joshua asked, his voice trembling. In awe of her bravery asking these ruffians about Azla's whereabouts, he knew there had to be a plan behind her actions.

On initial assessment, the group before them seemed to number no fewer than ten. Even in a one-on-one confrontation, Joshua knew he couldn't adequately protect Anastasia. It seemed hopeless. "If only Julius were…"

Restraining the words that nearly escaped his lips, Joshua shut his eyes tightly. Julius, who had been accompanying them during the investigation, had separated from them to report the vandalism at Azla's home to the guards. Naturally, had Julius been present, there would have been no reason for Joshua to feel apprehensive, regardless of the number of opponents they faced. However…

"If Julius were around, I reckon they wouldn't dare come near us in the first place," Anastasia said, finishing his unspoken thought.

"So that was your intention, after all." Joshua exasperated.

"Oh, absolutely," she replied, a playful wink accentuating her demeanor. "If ya wanna win big, ya gotta bet big! Remember that, Joshua." Joshua couldn't fathom how she could remain so composed.

The men's posture didn't appear to be a mere bluff to Joshua. They genuinely seemed intent on getting rid of both himself and Anastasia completely, who they deemed little more than unwelcome guests. Anastasia, who held one of the most esteemed positions in the country, unaccompanied by none of her comrades—neither Ricardo, nor Mimi, nor above all, Julius Juukulius.

“Joshua, I entrust Lady Anastasia to you.” In that fleeting moment, as Joshua remembered his absent brother, the last words Julius had entrusted to him echoed in his mind.

I can’t even begin to imagine how taken aback he will be once he returns with the guards only to find us gone. And how worried he will be. Despite such thoughts, he reminded himself he had been entrusted with a specific duty. Now, he bore the responsibility for the well-being of Lady Anastasia Hoshin, the person who mattered most to Julius.

Holding his breath, Joshua forced his golden eyes open and surveyed the interior of the tavern. The men continued to eye them with simmering hostility. However, his attention wasn’t fixed on them; he had something else in mind, a strategy to navigate this challenging situation. For example, the ornamental swords mounted on the tavern’s walls. “Ana, over here!” he called out.

In a split second, Joshua’s hesitation faded. He quickly grabbed Anastasia’s arm and forcefully pushed through the encircling group. It seemed neither Anastasia nor the men had anticipated Joshua’s decisive move. Capitalizing on their momentary surprise, Joshua managed to slip through. Then, he reached for one of the decorative swords hanging on the wall.

Drawing the sword from its scabbard, Joshua positioned himself protectively behind Anastasia. Witnessing Joshua’s desperate resistance, one of the men taunted him with a sneer. “Hey now, you’re kidding, right?”

But it wasn’t just that man who found it amusing. The others seemed to regard Joshua’s actions as mere bluster. Instead of anger, their recent fury had morphed into amusement, akin to a cat toying with a mouse.

However, Joshua was dead serious, with no intention of jesting or playing games. Holding a sword he had no desire to wield for a joke was the last thing he'd ever do.

"Do not expect me to hold back," Joshua warned. "I haven't swung a sword in nearly ten years."

"Getta load of that!" one of the men taunted. "Punk says he ain't holdin' back! Ooh, I'm so scared I'm pissin' my pants! Yo, Mr. Swordsman! Ya gonna cut us all down or what?"

"I'm not a swordsman," Joshua corrected him. "I'm a knight."

"Eh?" The man's boorish grin disappeared. Of course, Joshua knew that this would only further agitate him. He knew this, but it was all he could do to provoke him. Because…

"I'm the son of a knight. Even if these feeble arms may disqualify me from such a position, my spirit will not break. Above all," Joshua lifted his head, his trembling arms gripping the sword firmly as he stared down the man, "I'm the brother of the most knightly man in the country. How can I back down here?!" With an uncharacteristic rage in his voice, Joshua stepped forward and swung the sword.

"What the—?!" the man exclaimed, his voice cracking. It was a feeble move. A decade without wielding a sword was no exaggeration. A boy ten years younger could have managed a more decent swing. Yet, even so, it served to strike down those with malicious intent. A sword wielded to protect the righteous against malice—it was truly a knight's sword.

"Urk!" In the spur of the moment, the man raised his arm to shield himself, but blood dripped from his hand as Joshua's blow struck.

The ornate sword that had been on display was indeed nothing more than decoration. The blade, neglected and lacking proper maintenance, was dull. Combined with the knight's lack of skill, it only managed to nick the thin skin of the man's hand. Yet, it was a strike sufficient to display Joshua's resolve. And it was enough to infuriate the men who had been basking in their superiority of tormenting the weak.

“You sonuva—!” The man, whose palm had been shallowly cut, lunged at Joshua in a fury. His palm appeared to be a far more dangerous weapon than the sword of the hapless knight. But before it could reach its target…

“Really, boys always gotta be showin’ off, don’t they?” Anastasia, shielded behind him, uttered with a sigh. Her voice resonated deeper in his consciousness than the furious clamor of the enraged man. Distracted by her voice, Joshua was yanked by the collar and stumbled backward.

In that instant, the man’s arm, still dripping with blood, passed right before his eyes as he narrowly avoided it. As Joshua staggered backward, his falling body was supported by a slender, delicate arm. “L-Lady Anastasia…”

“It’s Ana. But given that ya did look pretty cool out there, I reckon I’ll let this one slide,” Anastasia said, directing a soft smile at Joshua, who accidentally called her by her real name in the heat of the moment.

But we’re not entirely safe yet, Joshua told himself after seeing Anastasia’s smile. If that guy takes one more step, his dangerous palm could easily reach us.

“What the hell are ya punks cozyin’ up there fer?! Ya punks are—”

“Why am I cozyin’ up, you ask?” Anastasia said, poking her head out from behind Joshua. “I mean, I got two knights here to protect me. What’s there to be scared of?” She stuck her tongue out playfully.

“Two…?” Before Joshua could fully comprehend the meaning of her words, the answer made a dramatic appearance before them. In an instant, with a deafening crash, the closed doors of the tavern burst open.

From the other side of the busted doors, behind where the men stood dumbfounded, emerged a handsome man with light purple hair. “Sorry about that. I guess I knocked a bit too hard.”

“J-Julius! Why are you here?!” Joshua gaped in amazement as Julius entered the shop in what seemed like a miracle. Witnessing his brother’s reaction, Julius briefly let a sense of relief, a sentiment shared only among family, appear at the corners of his mouth.

“Oh, nothing,” he said with a shake of his head as he quickly composed himself. “When I returned with the guards, I couldn’t find a trace of the two of you. I thought something might have happened, so I conducted a search in the area…and found this.”

“That’s Lady Anastasia’s…” He noticed the white fox fur collar that Julius held up. It was something Anastasia always wore, but she had undoubtedly discarded it when the men brought her to the tavern to conceal her identity. It must have tipped him off to the men’s base of operations.

“Lady Anastasia, are you—mmph!”

“Ya been way too careless since earlier,” Anastasia said, cutting off Joshua’s words by pushing her finger to his lips. “It’s Ana. I only let it slide that one time.”

“I see, that’s what you’re going for,” Julius said, grasping Anastasia’s intent in using her alias. “In that case, I am Juli.”

“You’re really fond of that name, aren’t ya?” Anastasia said, giggling at his choice of pseudonym for reasons Joshua didn’t understand.

“Y-You bastards! How dare you ignore us!” The men regained their composure in the midst of the invaders’ calm exchange. “So there’s one more pretty boy. So what?! You’re just a—”

“Sorry, but we are tired of your insults,” Julius coolly responded, cutting the man off. “Never mind me, but the two behind me, especially.”

The man who had confronted Joshua barked at Julius in the same manner. Or at least, he tried to, but to no avail. In the middle of his words, Julius appeared to have vanished from the man’s sight. In reality, he had crouched down low and slipped through them like the wind. But the fact that their eyes couldn't even keep up made the gap in their strength abundantly clear.

As Julius made his entrance, Joshua and Anastasia whispered in relief. "That's my brother," Joshua commended.

"And that's my knight," Anastasia added. Immediately following, the man who had been barking at them tumbled headfirst to the floor.

Julius's long legs swung out, sweeping the man off his feet. The man, who was still looking for the vanished Julius, collapsed before he could realize what had happened. In an instant, Julius rose before the other stupefied men who had just watched him take one of their comrades down. He stood protectively with Joshua and Anastasia behind him.

"Twelve in sight, two more behind the bar. Hiding is futile. Insults will be repaid with revenge. However…" Julius unfastened his knight's sword from his hip, and handed it to Joshua behind him. Joshua took the sword and was immediately surprised by its weight, to which Julius smiled. "You did well, Joshua."

Joshua, having been praised, however, couldn't find the right words to say.

"Today, I am not a knight," Julius said, turning his attention toward the men. "Therefore, I shall not use the sword. Instead, I will engage you as Juli, a wandering mercenary, with these fists. How does that sound?"

Hearing this, Joshua's vision blurred with tears as the men rekindled their rage. As they surged forward with incomprehensible insults, Julius casually rotated his arms and stepped forward.

"Juli, don't hurt yerself," Anastasia cautioned.

"Understood," he replied. Encouraged by Anastasia's unwavering support, Julius struck with fists like an arrow. A blow to their leader's chest sent him flying, causing those behind him to lose their momentum.

Although superior in number, it was not enough to secure victory, hence the fate of the men had been sealed. In a matter of seconds, all fifteen men, including the first one who fell, were wiped out.

And thus, looking down at the fallen men, Julius sighed, unscathed. He reflected on his victory, attained from his position unreachable by anyone else. “This can hardly be called an elegant outcome.”

9

“Look, it ain’t us who raided Azla’s house! We been lookin’ for ‘im too!” Perhaps due to the overwhelming defeat of the fifteen men, they had become more cooperative in answering Anastasia’s questions. However, the answers they obtained were far from what they had hoped for.

“So y’all been lookin’ for Azla, too, huh? Is that why y’all were askin’ us ‘bout him, too?” Anastasia asked.

“Yup. Cost us a good deal of dough too, ya know?” one of the men answered.

“In short, you were lured in by the reward. Meaning that someone hired you and instructed you to find Azla Eastern. Is that correct?” Under Julius’s gentle prodding, the man sitting on the floor nodded several times. Julius maintained a soft attitude, keeping his courtesy toward the other party. However, that didn’t diminish their fear of being beaten down. The men’s faces were pale.

“I’d expect nothing less of you, my dear brother. Even hundreds of them would be no match for you.”

“No matter how skilled I am, hundreds of them would probably make me hesitate. Of course, if those hundreds were targeting you or Lady Anastasia, I wouldn’t think twice.”

“Julius…” Joshua was impressed by Julius’s attitude. But Anastasia cut into their display of brotherly love with a clap of her hands.

“Alright, alright, enough sappy siblin’ comedy.” Then she turned to the slightly embarrassed Julius. “Thanks again for helpin’ us, Juli. Ya did a great job trackin’ our leads.”

“Well, seeing it so boldly placed right in the middle of the road, it was pretty hard to miss. Honestly, I am relieved that somebody else did not pick it up before me. It sends a chill down my spine simply thinking about it.”

“Right in the middle o’ the road?” Anastasia remarked. “Honestly, that girl really has a knack for carelessness…”

“Ana?”

“No, no, it’s nothin’. Speakin’ of which, it’s pretty refreshin’ bein’ called Ana by you, Juli,” Anastasia said cheerfully to Julius, still in disguise.

Cracking a smile, he responded softly, “Anytime you wish… But putting that aside, it seems there are others besides us looking for Lord Azla.”

“Seems like it. Hey, y’all ever ask your employer why they been lookin’ for Azla in the first place?” Anastasia inquired of the men.

“N-No, we ain’t ask nothin’…” the man responded. “But…”

“But?”

“But they were actin’ all jittery. Sayin’ some crap about how we’ll all be in cahoots if we don’t hurry it up.” It was unclear how reliable the man’s impression of their employer was, but he didn’t seem to be lying. After a few more questions that didn’t yield much more useful information, Anastasia and her companions quietly left the tavern.

“Seems y’all ain’t lookin’ to draw any attention. I reckon y’all get outta here before the guards show up.” With those parting words of advice from Anastasia, they left.

“Even still, this situation has become quite complicated, hasn’t it?” Julius said.

“Sure has,” Anastasia replied with a sigh. “Seems both us and them guys from earlier jus’ missed Azla. Meanin’ if Azla’s kidnappin’ was someone else’s doing…”

“That means there are at least three factions after him,” Julius added, finishing her thought.

As they left the tavern and gathered in a shop facing the main street to organize their information, the conclusion they reached left the trio with solemn expressions.

The ruffians in the tavern failed to secure Azla. And after confirming that they weren’t the ones who ransacked his house, the only other explanation was that another faction was responsible. And without a doubt, it was the faction that abducted him who currently held the most advantageous position.

“They say the one who hired those ruffians is a woman named Amilét…”

“Amilét Megis… A pretty notorious antiques dealer, handlin’ stolen goods and stuff,” Anastasia explained. “There’s a buncha unsavory rumors about her goin’ ‘round.”

“Why would someone like her be after Lord Azla?” Joshua questioned, tilting his head in confusion. Julius wore an expression of contemplation. However, Anastasia muttered in agreement.

“Lady Anastasia? Did you figure something out?” Julius asked.

“Wait, Juli,” Anastasia cautioned. “Those guys from earlier might still be followin’ us. Let’s not let our guards down, ‘kay?”

“I see. Well then, Ana, what did you notice?”

“Hehehe… The enemy’s motive,” Anastasia replied with a knowing smile. “Listen up.” She motioned for the wide-eyed brothers to listen carefully and huddle up. “The antique dealer Amilét’s motive’s pretty straightforward. She’s after Lord Azla, who’s been exposin’ art phonies ‘cause it disrupts her business.”

“Disrupts her business, you say? Does that mean…”

“That she was knowingly selling counterfeit paintings,” Joshua blurted out, excited as he came to understand Anastasia’s speculations. Whoops, how embarrassing. That was unprofessional of me, wasn’t it? But to his surprise, Anastasia nodded in agreement with his answer.

“Joshua, ya hit the nail on the head,” Anastasia affirmed. “The antique dealer Amilét’s been knowingly sellin’ phonies to her customers.”

“Meaning Lord Azla’s accusations are an inconvenience to her… If she has been selling fakes as the real deal all this time, the price difference must be enormous.”

“And it ain’t always easygoin’ folks like Mr. Olsen who wanna buy art. I reckon there’s a buncha art lovers millin’ around in the rough-an’-tumble businesses, too.”

Anastasia’s speculations made sense. Indeed, if this were the case, the antique dealer who had been dealing with counterfeits would not only suffer great financial losses, but could also be in grave danger. It only made sense that they would panic and try to take Azla into custody to silence him.

“But they slipped up, lettin’ someone else get first dibs on Azla before ‘em.”

“In that case, it is reasonable to assume that Ms. Amilét and the copycat are connected, is it not?” Julius asked. “To buy and sell counterfeits, one must presumably have a hand in the business.”

“Yep, ya got it,” she agreed. “They’d need a direct link to the copycat. Though I reckon findin’ Ms. Amilét’s whereabouts will be jus’ as challengin’ as findin’ Azla himself.”

“If she’s aware that she’s being pursued, wouldn’t she be on the run?” Joshua wondered. Despite coming to understand her situation, we still haven’t gotten to the heart of the matter. Frankly speaking, although our initial goal was to find the copycat, on an emotional level, we can’t just forget about Azla. We still don’t know his reason for exposing the fakes. However, without his whistleblowing…

“At the very least, we wouldn’t have known that the Sleeping Miderine is a fake, and the tarnished pride of the collectors would have gone unnoticed,” Joshua continued.

“Well, Joshua, ain’t ya enthusiastic?” Leaning on her cheek and smiling, Anastasia’s words made him embarrassed.

“Uh, no, sorry. I got a bit carried away…”

“It’s fine, relax. Anybody’d get all worked up upon findin’ out somethin’ they loved was a phony.”

It’s sometimes difficult to deal with how this girl can take such reckless actions, and even influence the otherwise upright Julius. I do believe it is simply her way of dealing with things, but either way, I don’t mind.

“So, Ana, what do we do from here?” Julius asked. “We still don’t have any leads.”

“Hmm, that’s true. We already struck out in this direction. Guess we’d better start lookin’ for leads from another side.”

“Another side? Um, do you have more shenanigans planned?” Joshua couldn’t help but let his true feelings slip.

“Joshua, that’s a rude way of asking,” Julius commented, rubbing his brow in frustration. Joshua quickly covered his mouth, realizing his gaffe, but Anastasia was not offended.

“No need to apologize. If anythin’, it looks like Joshua’s startin’ to understand me better. Though I ain’t sure I can meet those expectations…”

“You mean because Ricardo and the others aren’t here right now?” Julius asked.

“Unlike Joshua,” Anastasia continued, “my knight ain’t all that charmin’.”

“Right now, I’m more a mercenary than a knight, though,” concluded Julius. Anastasia made a somewhat unamused expression at his seamless response. It was as if she had been outwitted, and Joshua was impressed by his witty remark.

Although they originally got along well, their chemistry had improved even more since becoming master and servant. Considering the battle for the royal selection, this was as good as it could get. However, at the same time…

“It also means that my brother is changing,” Joshua thought. Just as that sense of desolation escaped his mouth, another voice called out to them, cutting him off.

“Oh, Miss! I found you. I’m glad you’re here!” Upon closer inspection, an orange-haired kitten boy approached them near the window from outside the store. It was Mimi’s younger brother, Hetaro. He wore a relieved look on his gentle face as he patted his chest with a sigh. “I was so worried, Miss! When I got to the address, there were guards all over the place!”

“Oh, that was Azla’s place,” Anastasia said. “Sorry, I didn’t have time to let y’all know about it. Anywho, how’d y’all manage to find us?”

“Julius and Joshua have a really unique scent,” Hetaro explained.

Joshua was taken aback by Hetaro’s sniffing. “Huh? Not only my brother, but me as well?”

“Joshua, why are you so surprised?” Julius asked with a stare. Joshua had assumed that it was only natural for Julius to have a flowery scent, but was genuinely surprised to find himself treated the same way.

“Julius and Joshua have a similar scent,” Hetaro continued. “Both have a mix of hard and soft scents, but Joshua’s might be a bit more oily.”

“O-Oily?” Joshua asked, dumbfounded.

“It must be the smell of art supplies,” Julius thought. “I also get that from Joshua at times."

Joshua sniffed his sleeve, but couldn't detect anything unusual. Although it would be odd to compare his sense of smell to Hetaro's, who was a demi-human. I guess it's best not to worry about that.

"By the way, Hetaro, why were you looking for us?" Joshua asked.

"That would be for my other shenanigan." Anastasia laughed with a mischievous smile, poking fun at Joshua's earlier comment. "So, Hetaro, how'd y'all manage?"

Hetaro, who didn't understand this exchange, tilted his head at Joshua, who shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you said, Miss, there was someone who had been collecting old paintings that weren't very famous, and we were able to track down their workplace somehow."

"Oh my, y'all kids are awfully capable, ain't y'all?" Anastasia nodded in response to Hetaro's report, petting the young cat-boy's head. He blushed and smiled bashfully. "If y'all figured out that much, I reckon that's all we need."

However, the Juukulius brothers tilted their heads in response to his report. As far as they were concerned, it was another piece of the puzzle leading them to the copycat. "Ana, I don't quite follow. I'm sorry, but could you explain?" Julius asked.

"Yep, I'll explain as we go," Anastasia said, stretching slightly and wrapping the white fox fur collar that she had been holding around her neck once more. "Although I hate leavin', it's about time I return to bein' Anastasia."

Although the weather on this day was warm enough to deem a scarf unnecessary, the fair-skinned girl wore it naturally and with grace, without so much as a hint of discomfort. "There's the Anastasia we all know and love," Julius remarked at the sight of his mistress. "Beautiful."

"Well, you ain't wrong. Come on, Julius and Joshua, let's skedaddle."

“Right, understood. So, um, where are we going?” asked Joshua.

“It’s obvious, ain’t it?” Anastasia shrugged at Joshua’s flustered question. Then, she wore her typical mischievous grin and replied boldly, “We’re headin’ to the copycat’s place.”

10

Following Anastasia, they headed toward their destination—the residence of the copycat. According to the information provided by Hetaro, it was the gallery of an obscure painter named Hogey Marshepo.

“I’ve never heard of him. It’s an unfamiliar name,” Joshua remarked.

“Ain’t it more convenient that way for a copycat?” Anastasia pointed out. “If he’d been famous, people would recognize his painting style. Bein’ an unknown artist is essential for a copycat.”

“But for someone to create such impressive paintings…” Thinking of the forgery that was the Sleeping Miderine, Joshua couldn’t help but wonder.

The Sleeping Miderine, the masterpiece that Anastasia had identified as a fake, was indeed one that had deceived many as an authentic painting for years. With that level of skill, it’s plausible that the copycat has considerable talent of their own—talent that makes them far more gifted than someone like me, who only wields his brush as a hobby.

“There is always a reason behind people’s actions,” Julius speculated. “There must be a significant reason for this person, Hogey, to become a forger.”

“Is there really a convincing reason to paint forgeries?” Joshua questioned.

“I would not know. I suppose I am as much of an art lover as anyone else. In that respect, you are probably much more capable than I am, Joshua. Lady Anastasia—”

“Yeah?”

“What made you think that Hogey Marshepo was the copycat?” Julius asked as they walked and talked. In response to his question, Anastasia raised a finger mid-gait.

“Lemme refresh your memory,” she began. “Remember how to tell between a fake paintin’ and the real deal?”

“If I recall correctly, the style and technique are important, but so are the materials used,” he replied. “Sometimes, counterfeit artists use materials that were not available at the time of the original work, which can be a clue.”

“Bingo,” Anastasia confirmed. “An’ those materials include paints, brushes, and… paper. Paper’s a material, too, ain’t it?”

Joshua’s eyes widened in realization at Anastasia’s confident statement. “I get it! To create forgeries of art from a specific time, you would need paper from the same period. So, they must have gathered up unsold paintings from that time…”

“And used it as a canvas to make a new paintin’,” she finished. “Well, I reckon that’s one way to do it.”

“I had no idea…” Paper-making techniques have changed significantly from the past to today. Paper, which used to be made from animal skins, has evolved into something entirely different. The same goes for art supplies.

“They went out of their way to collect old, unsold paintings, then painted their own fresh works right on top… The world of forgery is built upon some extraordinary ideas, isn’t it?” Julius mused.

“Well, yeah, that’s another part of it. Anyways, we’re here,” Anastasia said, pointing to their location: the gallery of Hogey Marshepo.

And if our previous speculations were correct…

“Azla Eastern might be here, too.”

“For both the art dealer sellin’ the phonies and the painter creatin’ ‘em, the presence of an accuser would be nothin’ short of problematic… So this gotta be the place.”

Upon hearing Anastasia’s words, Julius questioned his mistress with a serious look in his eyes: “Well then, shall we go inside?”

If it is indeed true that Azla is inside, the more time we take, the more risk that his life is in danger. In such a case, a frontal assault would be the most appropriate choice.

“To think that I could ever have such a thought… Could this be her influence?” Joshua lamented.

“Well,” Anastasia interrupted, “I don’t think rushin’ in is the best idea. Not ‘cause of your worryin’, Joshua, but ‘cause it’s an art gallery, after all. Why don’t we try knockin’ politely?” With a wry smile directed at the doubtful Joshua, Anastasia knocked on the gallery door. After a moment, a flurry of footsteps approached from inside.

The door opened, and a thin, bearded, middle-aged man revealed himself. “Sorry to keep you waitin’. Folks don’t come ‘round much these days. If you don’t mind me askin’, who might you fine folks be?”

“Pleasure to meet ya, I’m Anastasia Hoshin. If y’all ever heard of the Hoshin Company, we’re a kinda big deal.”

Seeing Anastasia confidently take charge and introduce herself, the man’s expression quickly changed. It was evident from the man’s reaction that he was well-informed. “Well I’ll be, the Hoshin Company? Well, even before that, the moniker you just mentioned…”

It was endearing that someone would get so nervous when met with a candidate, recognizable in name and face, for the royal selection that had been rocking the entire kingdom. Joshua sympathized with him.

“So, you’re Mr. Hogey Marshepo, ain’t ya?” Anastasia asked.

“Well, yep, that’s about right. Name’s Hogey Marshepo…” Even though he was flustered, Hogey managed to confirm his identity. In response, Anastasia nodded multiple times with a friendly smile. And then, keeping the momentum of her nods, Anastasia looked at Hogey with her light blue eyes.

“Ya see, I reckon that it was you, Mr. Hogey Marshepo, who mighta been the one responsible for forgin’ that fake Sleeping Miderine painting,” Anastasia said bluntly. “Whaddya say? My assessment way off?”

Hogey froze, speechless at her straightforward interrogation. Observing from the sidelines, Joshua couldn’t help but think aloud, “Going straight for the heart of your opponent to gain control… Isn’t it a tactic that only manipulative adults use?”

“Joshua, that isn’t a very nice thing to ask,” rebuked Julius, wearing a stern expression.

11

Hogey led the three into his gallery, where he surprisingly confirmed their suspicions with unexpected candor. He readily admitted to being the copycat responsible for the counterfeit painting, the Sleeping Miderine. “As you’ve figured out, I am indeed the forger you’re talking about.”

The sincerity of his words and actions was enough to make one inclined to question him. But as they looked around the gallery, such suspicions were quickly cast aside. Because at the very moment, Hogey had been in the process of creating one of his works. Forgeries, to be precise. Forgeries of numerous famous paintings that anyone with even a passing interest in art would recognize.

“Quite the extravagant undertakin’, ain’t it? I mean, if famous paintin’s like these started poppin’ up left an’ right, ain’t that jus’ asking for loads of unwanted attention?” Anastasia asked.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so careless,” Hogey explained, scratching his head. “I have no plans to sell these, mind you. I’m just trying to see if I am capable of recreating them myself."

Joshua responded bluntly to Hogey as he studied the forgeries. "And have you confirmed that ability?" It was a simple query, one that had arisen naturally within Joshua.

The forgeries of famed artworks on display were of remarkable quality. While many were still works in progress, to Joshua's eyes, they held hardly a difference to the originals. Without a doubt, these fakes were painted in a near-identical process to the genuine versions.

"If you're capable of painting such works…" Joshua started.

"Sadly, I still fall short," Hogey said, averting his gaze. "I can't hold a candle to the real deal. All I can manage is a feeble imitation, nothing more."

For some reason, despite his words, it was Joshua who felt a sense of disappointment. But it wasn't the disappointment born from the lofty standards of being an artist. He was well aware of that. However, he couldn't precisely grasp what exactly it could be.

As Joshua and Hogey conversed, Anastasia contemplated their discussion while admiring the paintings. "Lady Anastasia, what are your thoughts?" Julius inquired, to which she let out a thoughtful hum.

Julius's question served as a confirmation of Anastasia's earlier speculation. Namely, the idea that Hogey, the forger himself, was the mastermind behind the attempt to silence Azla, the accuser.

However, that theory started to waver within Anastasia's mind once Hogey himself readily affirmed their suspicions. She couldn't understand why he would answer her question so easily if he were indeed the copycat and had reason to conceal his own works as forgeries.

"Well, when ya hit upon somethin' ya don't understand, it jus' makes sense to ask," Anastasia said. "Hogey, ya ever hear the name 'Azla Eastern'?"

“Huh?!” As soon as she brought up Azla’s name, Hogey’s expression noticeably tensed.

“Oh dear, that’s a greater reaction than I was expectin’,” Anastasia remarked. That only makes things more confusin’, she thought. So is he a cold-hearted copycat, or an art connoisseur wit’ a guilty conscience?

However, Hogey, seemingly resigned to the accusation, nodded and said, “So, you heard my pieces were forgeries from my son, huh?”

“Huh?” Hearing Hogey’s unexpected confession, Anastasia and Julius were taken aback.

“My son… Azla… he spilled the beans about my craft, didn’t he? He always despised me working as a forger.”

“Please wait a moment,” Julius said. “Your response deviates slightly from our expectations.” We had assumed that Hogey and Azla had a perpetrator-victim relationship, but now, a new connection has been unveiled: Hogey is Azla’s father.

“Allow me to confirm once more, Lord Hogey. Azla Eastern…is your son? Your biological child?”

“Yes, indeed, that’s the truth,” Hogey confirmed. “I met his mother many years ago, when I was just a young man. But with my financial hardships, I couldn’t marry her like I wanted. Being an unsuccessful painter isn’t exactly an ideal occupation for supporting a family.”

“I see, it’s all startin’ to make sense,” Anastasia surmised. “An’ that’s when Amilét Megis approached ya askin’ ya to paint more phonies to assist her own business.”

“That’s the gist of it,” Hogey said, reluctantly nodding in agreement.

It must have been a bitter decision, Julius thought. Hogey, unable to marry his wife due to financial issues, chose the path of a counterfeit artist. He then used the proceeds from his forged works to support his wife and child.

"But my dear wife passed away two years ago, and that's when my son learned the truth—that he was raised by his father's dirty money earned by a shady living. And that made him angry."

"So the reason he exposed your forgeries by reporting them to the owners was…?" Julius asked.

"I suppose it was his way of seeking revenge," Hogey said, slumping his shoulders heavily. He stood before his unfinished painting and traced the edges with his finger. "I haven't the foggiest idea what exactly he studied, but he must have done some pretty extensive research, seeing as how my forgeries led him straight my way. He begged me to stop making them right away. His hatred for my work—his own father's work—was entirely justified. But I've been doing this for well over twenty years now. It's too late for me to change now."

Hence, Hogey rejected his son's pleas and decided to continue his life as a copycat artist. Azla's subsequent accusations were the result of his building resentment and desire for revenge against his father.

"In that case, it seems rather… Lady Anastasia?" Julius asked.

"Hmm, well, I get the story an' all, but still… Ain't it a bit unsettlin'?"

"Unsettling? Isn't it more heartbreaking to have such a misunderstanding occur between a parent and child?" Julius asked, trying to decipher his master's cryptic words.

However, Anastasia herself couldn't quite articulate her feelings. Hogey's explanation made sense. His son's anger toward him and the subsequent accusations had incurred the wrath of the criminal underworld involved in the counterfeit business.

As they hadn't met Azla in person, it was difficult to make further deductions. That's when Joshua, who had been silent until now, spoke up: "Could Azla's anger really be simply about the forgeries?"

Even Joshua himself seemed surprised by the words he had involuntarily blurted out. Everyone turned their attention to him.

"Joshua, what do you mean by that? Are you suggesting that Lord Hogey is lying?"

At Julius's question, Joshua looked away and touched his own chest. "No, no, I don't think he's lying. I only meant that words can fall short at times. Even between families, not everything can always be fully understood."

This answer made Julius hold his breath. Joshua turned his gaze toward Anastasia. Anastasia's light blue eyes stared back, filled with curiosity and expectation. "Well, Joshua? Whaddya think? Speak up."

"I can't say there was no anger at all," Joshua began. "I imagine Azla must have felt some dissatisfaction upon learning he was brought up thanks to forgeries. But given how deeply Azla was involved in art, to the extent of being able to discern authentic pieces from counterfeits, I don't think that was the only reason."

As he spoke, Joshua stood in front of the unfinished forgery—or rather, the painting. He narrowed his eyes at the vibrantly colored world it depicted. "That Sleeping Miderine was magnificent. All the works here are. The value of a painting isn't determined solely by its authenticity. Authenticity is transcendental."

"My artwork couldn't possibly have so much value…" Hogey started.

"That's an insult to the collectors who desired your paintings," Joshua said with deliberate force, staring down Hogey. Although he hadn't had much experience in holding others accountable, this time, he felt it was necessary. As one who lacked such a gift, he felt the need to speak up for those who were unaware of their own. "Azla told you to stop making forgeries, didn't he?"

"Yes, that's right. He told me to stop making forgeries. It's just that…"

"That's because he wanted you to paint your own art."

"Eh?" Hogey, whose face could neither confirm nor deny his own actions, was dumbfounded at that statement.

Seeing the oblivious look on his face, bitter emotions filled Joshua's heart. Perhaps it was frustration, or something close to it. To think that someone who could create such magnificent paintings would give up on their own talent. "You are an incredible person. Why don't you realize that?"

"It's just that…"

Joshua approached Hogey, who shook his head with uncertainty. "You have talent. You can create such magnificent art. You have an expressive power that rivals renowned masterpieces, so why?!"

At this emotional outburst, Julius gently gripped Joshua's shoulder. "Joshua, calm down."

Feeling the touch of his brother's hand, Joshua realized he had become too heated and apologized. But my apology is not for my words. I stand by what I said. I'm sure Azla would feel the same.

"I second Joshua's opinion," Anastasia chimed in.

"But it's a risky gamble," Julius said. "To accuse your own father, who works as a counterfeit artist, of his work being counterfeit…"

"That's why he ain't mentioning his father by name," Anastasia concluded. "Simply bringin' to light that the paintin's were phonies woulda made it easier to back out… But draggin' Amilét into it, well, she probably had it comin'." Given that they were wittingly sellin' phonies, a day of reckonin' was bound to come. But that don't mean there won't be anger directed at Azla.

"To think my own flesh and blood would do such a thing…" Hogey lamented.

"I would like to second Joshua's opinion that words aren't always enough." Julius's gaze briefly shifted towards Anastasia, and she nodded in agreement. "Of course, this is merely speculation, and we would need to hear the details from Azla himself."

At this point, it was safe to dismiss the theory that Hogey had tried to eliminate Azla for accusing him of his forgeries. Although their father-son relationship in no way exonerated them from suspicion, the unfolding of events made it evident that it would have been an unlikely scenario. However, one question remained: “So who abducted Azla?” Joshua thought aloud.

“What?! My boy was abducted?” Hogey was taken aback by Joshua’s contemplative words, clearly unaware of the situation.

Seeing Hogey more surprised at this than when he was accused of being a forger, Joshua made up his mind to explain the situation from the beginning. “Well, it all started when the collector, Baron Nico Olsen, requested Lady Anastasia to authenticate his Sleeping Miderine…”

“Oh, no…” Upon hearing the beginning of Joshua’s explanation of the investigation, Anastasia muttered to herself. She covered her face with her hands and began to groan.

“Huh?”

“Lady Anastasia?” Joshua said. “What happened?”

“To think that I been actin’ all high an’ mighty only to just realize somethin’ so obvious… So embarrasin’.”

“Well, um…” Joshua was puzzled by Anastasia’s attitude. However, Julius understood the intention behind her distress.

“So, do you have any leads on Azla Eastern’s whereabouts?” Julius asked. In response to his question, Anastasia slowly removed her hand from her face and spoke.

“Yeah, got it,” she said. “Let’s go question the mastermind right now. Oh, Hogey, I reckon ya should come wit’ us.” With a vexed expression, Anastasia led the three of them out of the gallery. Given her attitude, she seemed fairly confident about Azla’s whereabouts.

Half-convinced, Joshua and the others followed her lead. Along the way, Hogey was given an explanation about the situation, and his face paled as he contemplated the danger his child might be in.

“You ain’t need to worry so much. Azla is safe. Since he’s…”

“Wait, this is…” Joshua said in surprise, his eyes widening as he realized where Anastasia was headed. It was a place familiar not only to Joshua, but to Julius as well. Because the owner of this mansion was none other than someone they were already acquainted with.

“Seems everythin’ went jus’ as you planned, Mr. Olsen,” Anastasia remarked.

“My, my, you managed to find your way here in just three days. Truly, your insights are remarkable.” And thus, Baron Nico Olsen, the very man who had triggered this investigation, welcomed Anastasia’s visit as if he had been eagerly anticipating it.

12

The mastermind behind it all was none other than Baron Nico Olsen. And indeed, all unfolded precisely according to his plan. Azla, the son of a master forger, wanted little more than to make his father quit. However, recognizing that his direct appeals were in vain, he resorted to more drastic measures.

It was he who dispatched those letters to the owners of the forged paintings, exposing them as fakes. Yet, even this audacious move failed to elicit his desired response. So in his frustration, he decided to take a more extreme action—exposing the information to Nico Olsen, the art collector in possession of the counterfeit Sleeping Miderine.

This was his last ditch effort to cut off any means of escape for Hogey, his father, and end his career as a forger. Nico Olsen, however, respected Azla’s plea and longing.

“Of course,” Olsen explained, “initially, I was filled with anger toward the counterfeit artist. But then I had a change of heart. I became intrigued by the world of this artist who was capable of crafting such exquisite forgeries.”

“So, you chose to assist in ending Mr. Hogey’s career as a counterfeit artist. But what prompted you to involve Lady Anastasia?" Julius asked.

"As I understood it at first," Anastasia recalled, "it was also part of my assessment. Mr. Olsen was committed to fulfillin' his duties as a baron an' preservin' his honor as a collector."

Anastasia crossed her arms, shooting a disapproving glare in Olsen's direction. As Olsen welcomed Anastasia and her group into his residence and began to serve tea, he offered a faint smile and nodded.

"I could have visited Lord Hogey directly after hearing Azla's complaint," Olsen admitted. "But where's the thrill in that? It was also our way of getting back at the counterfeit artist, you see."

"Baron Olsen, ya truly are an intriguin' character," Anastasia remarked. Olsen, unperturbed by her comment, openly confessed that he had orchestrated the entire affair. In fact, he appeared to find it rather amusing. Anastasia, on the verge of reprimanding him, was momentarily taken aback.

"Wait, then what about Lord Azla's home being ransacked?"

"I anticipated that once the counterfeit allegations surfaced, it would naturally draw the attention of some unamused dealers who might target him. So I took the initiative to stage an abduction. The bloodstains left at the scene were Azla's idea, actually. Pretty effective bluff, wouldn't you agree?"

"Baron Olsen…" Julius was at a loss for words at the man's audacity. Of course, considering his position, Olsen's actions should have warranted severe consequences, but one could also argue that it was Olsen's protection of Azla that had prevented any harm from coming to him.

"So even that was all part of Baron Olsen's schemin', huh?" Anastasia said with a sigh. "Then I reckon Hogey an' Azla are havin' a touching' family reunion in another room now?"

"Yes," Olsen confirmed. "Artists often believe that it is enough to put their thoughts into their works. However, that's not entirely correct. People still need to communicate with each other."

"So, does our discussion pass accordin' to your own personal beliefs, Mr. Nico Olsen?" Anastasia asked.

"Well, I sure would have liked to see Lord Hogey squirm a little more, but yes," Olsen replied with a mischievous grin. Anastasia let out a sigh, deflating her pouty cheeks and relaxing her expression. It was indeed a quintessentially Anastasia-like, business-like smile.

"Well, I did reckon that everythin' was in yer hands, Mr. Olsen, which wasn't interestin' at all," Anastasia started. "But I'm glad to say we might finally be outdoin' ya."

"Oh, outdo me, you say?" Olsen asked with surprise.

"We gotcha some souvenirs. My youngsters should be deliverin' 'em soon. Jus' watch—three, two, one…" Anastasia counted the seconds on her fingers, uttering "Zero" the moment she put down the last one.

"Hey! Sorry for the wait, Miss! Take a look! We got the lady you were looking for!" With a clamor, a figure burst into the parlor of the Olsen residence. The owner of the resounding footsteps was Ricardo, a hulking, dog-faced demi-human with a towering physique.

Having anticipated Ricardo's arrival, Anastasia smiled and said, "Thanks for your help. So, whatcha do with 'em?"

"Bringing her along would've just caused a big ruckus, y'know? So I tied her up and left her rolling around in the dog cart! When I went to check out that tavern those good-for-nothings you mentioned were in, jackpot! Hahahahaha!" Ricardo laughed, his mouth open wide as he made his report. Joshua and Julius had a pretty good idea of who he had captured.

"Do you mean… Miss Amilét?" Julius confirmed.

"I figured if they had hired someone to catch Azla, they'd want to know how it went, y'know?" Anastasia explained. "And I was right on the mark. Here's your souvenir, Mr. Olsen."

Until that point, Olsen had always been one step ahead in everything. But now, he sighed in admiration. "I see, I've been outsmarted."

It was Amilét Megis, the antique dealer who had been selling the counterfeit works. And the most likely person responsible for selling the Sleeping Miderine to Olsen.

"Any talk 'bout damages oughta be between you an' Amilét, Mr. Olsen. But seein' as we're the intermediaries, kindly steer clear of any rough antics," Anastasia warned.

"I never intended to in the first place, but sure, you have my word. Also, my hat goes off to you." Olsen rose from his chair and knelt before Anastasia. Then, the baron took a deep breath, and bowed deeply. "I apologize for testing you, Lady Anastasia. You exceeded my expectations. As a nobleman and a collector, I salute you."

Such was Olsen's declaration of defeat. At the same time, it could also be taken as his clear declaration of his position in the royal selection.

"An' wit' that, the case is closed" Anastasia said with a triumphant smile. But Joshua, having been dragged around in all this, felt a mix of complex emotions.

13

"In the end, everything went according to Lady Anastasia's plan. Indeed, what she sees is different from what we do. Don't you agree, Joshua?"

"Your words are always correct, Julius. However, I must admit that today's events were a bit of a shock."

The Juukulius brothers spoke amongst themselves in the mansion that night after the incident had been brought to a close. It had only lasted three days, but they were three intense days. Although the majority of the situation had culminated on the final day, Joshua was overcome with sudden fatigue from the non-stop action.

Fortunately, with the intervention of Baron Nico Olsen, although the father-son duo of Azla and Hogey were not completely absolved of guilt, they wouldn't face severe punishment. From that point onward, as his son desired, Hogey would abandon his life as a forger and receive Olsen's endorsement in creating his own artwork.

The specifics of the interactions between the dealer Amilét and the buyer Olsen remained shrouded in mystery. But it was evident that she had deceived more than just Olsen. In order to avoid retaliation from even more dangerous adversaries, she had no choice but to surrender unconditionally to Olsen. The incident of the counterfeit painting, as well as the matter of who he would support for the royal selection, was concurrently settled, and the situation drew to a close.

"You seem a bit displeased. Is something bothering you?" Julius asked.

"Well… I do think it's great that things came full circle. But I still can't be certain if Hogey can actually paint his own art."

"Hmm." Seeing Joshua lost in thought, Julius narrowed his eyes while brushing his own bangs. Unexpectedly, these recent events had led to Joshua spending a substantial amount of time with Anastasia, inadvertently exposing him to different perspectives. This experience, centered around art and paintings, had proven to be a significant opportunity for Joshua to expand his horizons.

Perhaps owing to the circumstances of Joshua's congenital health conditions, Julius harbored a deep desire for his brother to be able to see a more diverse world. This was his genuine wish. Certainly, during his early childhood, Joshua grappled with frail health, rarely venturing beyond the confines of their home. However, as he grew older, his constitution improved, albeit not dramatically, and he was no longer haunted by the fear of illness.

Still, the reality remains. Pursuing the path of knighthood that he once yearned for will prove challenging. Nonetheless, Joshua shouldn't let this stop him from opening all the other doors available to him. And I believe Lady Anastasia is the person who can help broaden his horizons. Her philosophy of validating other people’s desires will surely manifest greatly once she becomes Queen.

“Julius?”

“Ah, my apologies. I was lost in thought for a moment. Hogey’s predicament is still shrouded in uncertainty. After all these years, he’s never painted a single artwork for himself. Can he truly create his own original works with those brushes? Only time will tell. However…”

Julius’s words trailed off as he quietly gazed at Joshua. Under that gaze, Joshua shifted his posture nervously and averted his yellow eyes. Julius nodded at his younger brother, who lacked assertiveness, but was filled with potential beyond himself.

“Today, I witnessed a person who, despite not wielding a sword for over ten years, was capable of picking one up for the sake of another. That alone gives me hope,” Julius said proudly.

“Ah…”

“It could get worse,” Julius continued. “There’s certainly apprehension about that. But at the same time, I want to have hope. I want to wish for a tomorrow brighter than today, a simple and common wish.”

Azla’s wish for his father was simple: that he could become a celebrated painter that everyone could take pride in. Julius preferred a tomorrow in which Hogey could fulfill that over one in which he could not. “He hadn’t completely abandoned this path, so then it’s all about changing his mindset.”

Even if it was as a forger, Hogey continued to wield his paintbrush. So there was a chance. Moreover, in the grand scheme of things, it did not concern anyone else. Even if one were to face death tomorrow, there was no inherent reason not to change.

Julius had already decided that the path he walked was the only path for him. There was no haste, and no turning back. Knighthood was the way of life that Julius himself aspired for, and what he wished to be.

“Joshua, I hope you find something like that for yourself too. Time is not an issue. I will take care of the matters concerning the Juukulius family and Lady Anastasia.”

“Julius…”

“Simply share with me your heartfelt wishes, and I will support you to the best of my abilities. That is the pledge that I, Julius Juukulius, take as the brother of Joshua Juukulius.”

Joshua had many friends, many of whom would gladly offer their support. However, among them, none could fight more bravely than Julius. Such was Julius’s pride, not only as a knight, but as an elder brother.

Upon hearing Julius’s pledge, Joshua spoke up unexpectedly. “Please don’t laugh when you hear this.” Seeing Julius look up at him, he hesitated before continuing timidly. “After everything that just happened, I’ve developed a strong desire to paint. If possible, I’d love to capture the landscapes I’ve witnessed with my own eyes.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Julius said supportively. “You have the freedom to paint any breathtaking scenery you envision.” Hearing Joshua’s unusual desire made Julius aware of a warmth in his heart. Expressing one’s wishes and desires was truly a delightful thing to do.

“What would you like to see?” Julius asked. “There are many beautiful things both in and around the royal capital. Oh, that’s right, Joshua, you once mentioned you wanted to see the Watergate City, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Priestella,” Joshua replied. “A place known for its scenic beauty. I would be thrilled to visit someday.”

“Then let’s propose it to Lady Anastasia. She will surely find a way to bring us there in her own unexpected way.”

Strangely, even though they had yet to utter a word, Julius could already imagine Anastasia and Ricardo eagerly conspiring to fulfill Joshua's wish. Julius softened his expression. Seeing this, Joshua lowered his gaze and started to speak. “Someday, please allow me to paint a portrait of you, Brother.”

“Of me?” Julius asked in surprise. “But Joshua, you've never painted portraits…”

“Yes, that's true. I've never attempted it before. But I want to give it a try.” Joshua peeked up from his lowered gaze with a bashful expression. He appeared somewhat anxious, as if he were being too hasty with his requests. However, Julius was genuinely delighted by his brother's enthusiastic plea.

So, in accordance with his brother's wish, Julius offered a knightly bow in acceptance. “It would be an honor.”

END

Golden Siblings
(CA)
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

???: “Garf, let us go out.”

???: “Huh?”

Garfiel tilted his head at such an invitation at fire hour, with the clear sunlight shining beautifully.

Curled up in the garden of the mansion, he had just been grooming himself. There was no need to groom himself in that particular spot, but he couldn’t help but feel most at ease within that part of the mansion grounds.

Although there was a room reserved for Garfiel in the mansion, he was hesitant to sleep anywhere that his own scent had not already seeped into.

Therefore, instead of staying in one spot, Garfiel spent his days in various locations throughout the mansion.

His behavior having no rhyme or reason; whenever Otto or the others had business with Garfiel, they had to wander around the mansion aimlessly,

Meaning, the only person who could find Garfiel in one try was Frederica, who currently stood right in front of him—except for Ram, whose side Garfiel would come to if she called him.

Frederica, who shared many points with his appearance, with her long blonde hair and emerald green eyes, was Garfiel’s biological sister. To be precise, they were siblings from different fathers, but neither of them seemed to care much about that.

If they were to worry about something, there were more important things than that to be concerned about. For example, the long, long years they had spent apart.

—Garfiel and Frederica had spent over a decade apart.

Garfiel was 14 years old and had lived apart from his older sister for more years than he had lived with her now. Still, a beast-man's blood was a strange thing, and it would be impossible to mistake a person with the same blood in their veins for another.

No matter how much her appearance had changed since they separated, he could tell that she was his blood relative, for whom he had had complicated feelings for for a long, long time.

Garfiel: "…"

Frederica: "Garf, is something wrong?"

Frederica asked the suddenly silent Garfiel.

Uncharacteristically lost in his own musings, Garfiel shook his head and said, "Nah"

Garfiel: "Jus' kinda not used ta Sis being so huge and so…Guh?!"

Frederica: "Please stop saying huge this and huge that about a woman's height and physique, geez."

Garfiel: "S-Say that before ya hit me…"

Garfiel's head was in his hands, thanks to the greater-than-expected retaliation to the comment he had inadvertently blurted out. Sighing at her brother's state, Frederica gazed at her own shoulders.

Frederica: "I would love to be cute and dainty too. Not to say like Grandmother or Petra, but at least a physique like Ram's…"

Garfiel: "Ahh, like Granny ya got no hope, but that little kid is still growing up. Besides, ya, lookin' like Ram… Ha! Don't make me laugh."

Frederica: "I would love to know more about that laugh, and what it means.”

Frederica exuded a sense of dread as she put her hand over her mouth and hid her fangs while smiling. Pressured by this, Garfiel swallowed hard and lightly clicked his fangs.

Garfiel: “So? What’cha talkin’ about? What do ya mean, go out?”

Frederica: “Again with the happy-go-lucky misdirection… Sigh, very well. If we were to go off on a tangent and waste time on it, we would be putting the cart before the ground dragon.”

Garfiel attempted to change the subject, and Frederica was taken aback, but took him up on it.

Then Frederica held up one finger and said,

Frederica: “Actually, I have the day off after lunch. So I thought we should go out to the city together. That is why I came to ask you out.”

And that was what she said.

2

—The “Sanctuary” had been liberated, and Garfiel had stepped onto land outside of his home village for the first time in his life.

In reality, he had stepped foot outside the Sanctuary half a day before its liberation, but he had realized the magnitude of his action at the same moment as the Sanctuary’s residents had.

Garfiel: “…”

To be honest, Garfiel had his doubts when it came to that matter.

In the Sanctuary, he had clashed with Subaru and his friends, and although he had been up against many at once, he had still been forced to submit and had surrendered to them. He knew that if he had not cooperated with them to break the barrier, the village would have been swallowed up by the swarm of the “Great Rabbit,” and its residents would all have been killed.

Even so, Garfiel still felt some doubt as he gazed at the snow-covered landscape of the Sanctuary. —He thought to himself, how unreasonably stubborn it had been for him.

No doubts, no hesitation, straightforward.

Many originally viewed Garfiel as such a decisive person, but in Garfiel's opinion, that was ridiculous. He had always thought that there had never been anyone before or since who had sweated the small things as much as him.

So that was why he was drawn to truly decisive people, he thought.

One of the best examples of that was Garfiel's dearest love.

???: "I see, with Frederica. That seems quite alright. Why don't you go have some fun?"

Garfiel: "Well duh, my amazin' self wouldn't be turnin' it down either, but…"

Garfiel couldn't hide his confusion, as if saying he didn't know what to do. Ram, who was folding the laundry in front of Garfiel, mumbled, "Such a fool," without looking directly at him.

Frederica had invited Garfiel to go out with her, and he had reluctantly agreed.

However, he could not quite grasp the significance of his sister's offer, so he used the short time he had before meeting up with her to come to Ram for advice.

However, there was not much to discuss with her. He just tilted his head in concern, not understanding the meaning of Frederica's offer.

Or maybe it was just a dig at Garfiel, given the events that happened in the Sanctuary.

Ram: "That would be a misguided presumption. Frederica simply wants to make up with you, Garf. She is happy to be reunited with her estranged brother. Even if it is a brother like you."

Garfiel: “I don’t like how ya phrasin’ it there. It’s like, “Tomorrow’s a cloudy day for Amelie.””

Ram: “What? You cannot believe Ram’s words?”

Ram stared at Garfiel, scratching his short blond hair and scrunching his cheeks. Garfiel’s eyes were pierced by the sharp gaze of the woman of his dreams, and he involuntarily straightened his posture.

Ram: “You’ve come a long way, haven’t you? What in the world have you become?”

Garfiel: “Don’tcha get me wrong, there’s nothin’ I believe more than Ram’s words, other than… Granny’s, the Captain’s, and also—uuuh, anyway, there ain’t too much else.”

Ram: “—. Foolish. But that is the kind of thing Ram likes about you, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Oh, yeah? What part?”

Garfiel blushed when Ram smiled at him.

Reflecting back on his remarks, he was unable to see the answer as to what in the world he had been praised for. The answer, it seemed to him, was that he had not been able to narrow down which thing was the most important; it seemed to him to be an unmanly answer.

Anyway—

Ram: “If you can trust that much, then trust Frederica too. At the very least, Ram can assure you that Frederica is thinking of Garf.”

Ram stopped folding laundry and said, “Because,”

Ram: “Ram is also an older sister, just like Frederica. As an older sister, Ram knows exactly what that feels like.”

Garfiel: “That person is…”

Garfiel expressed his sullenness at Ram’s remark.

Reflexively moving his gaze, he saw the sleeping face of the girl who was the cause of his sullen face.

It was a girl sleeping in her bed, faintly breathing. Her face was the spitting image of Ram's, the only differences seeming to be the color of her hair and eyes.

—Rem, that was her name, and she was the twin sister of Ram, so it seemed.

It was a strange thing to say that 'it seemed', since Garfiel and Ram had known each other for nearly a decade and, of course, her twin sister should have been no stranger to them.

No one remembered the existence of Rem except for Natsuki Subaru now.

Garfiel: "…"

Beside her quiet sister's sleeping face, Ram was folding laundry that smelled of the sun. Everyone in the mansion knew that she had been visiting her sister's bedroom for some time now.

Even within Ram, who said that, there were no memories of Rem left. Still, Ram went to visit her sister frequently, trying to fill the void of what was missing.

Ram: "That is what an older sister does."

Garfiel: "…Didn't say anythin'."

Ram: "Yeah? Maybe not. Then it is Ram monologuing. Precious, right?"

At Ram's remarks, Garfiel tried to click his fangs out of habit. However, he hesitated to do so because he felt it would disturb the sleeping Rem.

But Garfiel was not sure about which was the right choice in this case.

Ram: "Ha! It is not like Garf to be considerate."

Garfiel: “Mragh, well, sorry, that ‘m not actin’ like myself.”

Sullenly, Garfiel averted his gaze. Turning his head to the side.

Ram: “It’s not quite. —like there was anything wrong with that.”

Garfiel’s heart was thrown for a loop as he heard those gentle words from Ram.

3

???: “Frederica nee-sama, it’s wonderful!”

Petra’s round eyes lit up when she saw Frederica, who had changed outfits from her maid uniform.

With her light brown hair cut to neck length, she looked like a girl who embodied the word “lovely.” Looking at Petra’s cheerful face, one could not help but smile.

Frederica: “I should not, I am…”

Putting her hand over her mouth, she restrained the laxness caused by Petra’s cuteness.

She admonished herself in order to maintain her dignity, both as a senior maid and as a surrogate older sister. Though Petra’s cuteness was a blow to her dignity, Frederica barely held her own at the water’s edge.

Petra’s pure eyes constantly tested Frederica’s inner strength.

For Frederica, who always strived for perfection, Petra was simultaneously her greatest enemy and greatest ally.

Petra: “Frederica nee-sama, did you hear me?”

Frederica: “Oh, uh, what was that? I am sorry; I was just a little distracted.”

Upon looking, it seemed that Petra was slightly puffed up, as Frederica had not heard some of what had been said. Such a situation was adorable, but telling her about it only would make her pout more.

Frederica said, “I am sorry,” apologizing,

Frederica: “So, what were you talking about?”

Petra: “So, I was telling you that the Master is terrible; if he was going to give Frederica nee-sama the day off, he should have told us earlier, not on the day of. Since then…”

Frederica: “Since then?”

Petra: “I would have prepared more for Frederica nee-sama.”

Everyone looked helpless in front of Petra, whose appa-red cheeks were puffed up in anger.

Petra’s anger was directed at Roswaal, the owner of the mansion who had granted Frederica a half-day off.

Roswaal was the object of animosity of most of the people in the mansion for a number of reasons, but Petra was the one that had the greatest amount of resentment.

As for Frederica, Roswaal was a man for whom she owed a debt of gratitude that words could not describe. Because of that relationship, Frederica would have liked to defend Roswaal—

Frederica: “The Master has blundered such that there is no excusing him…”

Even if a person was a great benefactor, some deeds were not worthy of being defended.

Roswaal’s actions had been just like that, and Frederica had given up on defusing Petra’s anger.

Although Frederica at least tried not to look too harshly upon the same incident.

Besides, because of those circumstances, Petra was now eager to complain about everything Roswaal did, from one thing to another, hence her anger.

Frederica: “But it was the Master who told me to go out with Garf. Petra, are you sure you are not appreciative of that?”

Petra: “Uh… but, but in the case of the Master, the deducted points from before are so much more than that.”

Frederica: “You are being stubborn. But I cannot change that, either.”

Unfortunately, she failed to correct the image of Roswaal within Petra. In that situation, it was debatable whether Petra was being stubborn or whether Roswaal’s deeds were that much of a stubborn stain.

—As previously mentioned, Roswaal’s granting of a half-day off to Frederica was abrupt. He also specified using that time off as time to be spent with Garfiel.

Frederica: “…The Master knows everything, doesn’t he?”

She muttered to herself only quietly, because Petra’s good look would disappear otherwise.

No doubt Petra, at least, would not be pleased with Frederica’s characterization of Roswaal as such.

With consideration for her newly formed sisterhood, Frederica placed her hand on her chest and closed her eyes.

There lay her true feelings. —To Frederica, Roswaal was a magician.

Not a magician as a mere profession or skill, but a “magician” in the sense that he was a special being that could do anything.

It seemed as if he knew everything and could anticipate everything. This was still the case even now that Emilia and the others had subverted his schemes involving the Sanctuary.

Because that was how Roswaal was, the reunion of the older sister and younger brother, which had happened at the time of the liberation of the Sanctuary, and the subsequent awkwardness of their relationship must have been well known to him.

In order to remain in the same camp going forward, it would be best to resolve that rift as soon as possible. She thought that must have been the true meaning for the half-day off.

Leaving Frederica's inner turmoil aside, Petra, despite her anger, was helping her get ready for the day.

Frederica did not have a lot of plain clothes, as she usually spent most of her time in her maid uniform. However, Petra transformed these few options by combining them and altering them in different ways, and as if by magic, Frederica became more and more colorful.

Petra: "Frederica nee-sama is tall and has long legs, so she looks wonderful no matter what she wears…"

Frederica: "It seems to me like Petra is a bit of a magician, too."

Petra: "I really don't want to share a job with the Master."

From Frederica's point of view, it was the highest form of praise, but Petra dismissed it with a smile.

Even though she felt sad, Petra's finished decorating Frederica with her "magic"—

Petra: "—It's finished. What great results."

Petra gazed at her finished work on Frederica, her eyes filled with a sense of accomplishment and admiration.

Frederica's eyes widened as she examined herself in the dressing mirror, basking in Petra's rapturous praise.

Unlike her usual maid outfit, her jacket and skirt were made of loose-fitting fabric, and her jewelry, while not gaudy, was somewhat ornate, and from top to bottom, she was finished in shades that complimented her blond hair and emerald green eyes.

With Frederica’s usual attire, this kind of outfit would not be the first thing that came to mind.

Petra: “Whew, that was satisfying. Let’s dress up Emilia-sama and the others together next time!”

Frederica: “Petra, Petra, you are changing the purpose of this.”

Petra: “Ah.”

Noticing her own excitement, Petra cupped her head as if to reflect. Frederica gazed with a smile at such a gesture, and once again turned her attention back to her appearance.

Despite only going out with her younger brother, she seemed to have put a good bit of enthusiasm into it.

Frederica: “It’s a great battle emotionally speaking, is it not?”

And then, taking a deep breath, Frederica brushed a hand through her long blonde hair.

4

—The mansion was named the New Roswaal Mansion, according to Natsuki Subaru.

The former mansion was burned down for various reasons, and due to that, the Emilia camp now resided in a different mansion.

Most importantly, this one had a much older history as a mansion. The burned one was a subsidiary residence of the Mathers family, while this one was the main residence of the Mathers family.

The size of the mansion was the same as the one that burned down, although this one was more convenient, due to the famous Industrial City of Costuul—One of the Five Great Cities of the Kingdom of Lugunica at its doorstep.

Since there was only one small village near the former mansion, she was told that it was inconvenient in many areas, such as buying necessities.

If so, it still remained a mystery as to why anyone would choose to settle in such a remote location…

Frederica: “You see, the Master is quite the eccentric, is he not?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t that sorta a wild conclusion, though?”

At Frederica’s answer, founded in Roswaal’s personality, Garfiel frowned. Even if the answer was correct, it was hardly what Garfiel wanted.

And then there’s the fact that, to begin with—

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self doesn’t want to listen to anythin’ else about that bastard Roswaal!”

Frederica: “…That is right. I am sorry; I will be more careful.”

Garfiel clicked his fangs in displeasure, and Frederica apologized with downcast eyes. The self-reflective look on his older sister’s face made Garfiel regret his ill-chosen words.

He didn’t know how to put it, but he was like this with his sister in all of his exchanges with her.

This awkwardness did not exist when he challenged the “Bowel Hunter” at the mansion in order to save their lives. However, as soon as he left that deadly battlefield, he didn’t know what to say.

When Frederica showed up at the meeting place in an outfit that was not her maid uniform, he was so surprised and bewildered that he was left speechless.

Garfiel: “Grrrr…”

Garfiel’s throat trembled as he realized this is what it meant to be thrown off.

Originally, Garfiel avoided having thoughts about Frederica as much as possible during their time apart. This was not out of dislike for his sister, but because he thought it would be pointless.

Garfiel was ready to stay in the sealed "Sanctuary," believing he would never see his sister again.

As a result of the collapse of his assumptions and the reunion with his sister, Garfiel was unsure of what to say to her. So consciously trying not to think about it had, in the end, backfired.

If this were Ram he was dealing with, there would be no shortage of topics to talk about because he is always thinking about her.

Presently, after getting stuck on the subject, topics of conversation such as Roswaal, whom they share in common as a subject, got brought up, and so on and on in a vicious circle like never before.

Garfiel: "…"

While Garfiel continued to agonize over this, Frederica was facing the same problem.

However, in her case, unlike Garfiel, she did not have a history of intentionally pushing her estranged brother out of her thoughts; on the contrary, she never forgot her family, even for a single moment.

Despite their distance, Garfiel and Ryuzu were irreplaceable family members to Frederica. Nothing had changed since their reunion.

Swiftly said, Frederica's problem seemed simple.

—There were so many things she wanted to talk about, but she didn't know what to talk about.

Sending Frederica's rather astute mind sinking, the various questions and answers she had prepared in advance of her reunion with her brother came up one after another in a flurry of questions and answers.

Frederica was bright, yet compassionate. Frankly, she wanted to know everything about Garfiel during their time apart, but was too afraid to go for it and ask questions that might put him off.

A family that finally reunited. What if a rift were to emerge with said family that would be unrelated to distance or time?

The thought of it made the hairs on Frederica's entire body stand on end. Her mind was so agitated that she was about to transform into a beast for no reason.

Frederica: "…"

The fact that she went out in a different outfit with Petra's help now seemed like a mistake. Not because of Petra, but because of Frederica's ever-present attitude.

Naturally, Garfiel was dressed in his usual attire, and Frederica was the only one dressed up. Perhaps it was this preparation that made Garfiel feel defensive.

Frederica: "Well, you see…"

Garfiel: "Well, uhhh…"

Their voices overlapped just as they were about to make up their minds and change the subject.

Frederica: "…"

They crushed each other's start and created a tenuous atmosphere where it became awkward to move.

Frederica: "Ga-, Garf, you should speak first."

Garfiel: "Well, Sis, I think it'd be better if ya said somethin' first."

And, when both parties began to yield the reins of the conversation to the other, the issue turned into a quagmire. Ultimately, both sides were unable to say anything, and silence once again fell between the two.

The two of them walked side by side for a while, awkwardly passing the time like that.

—The trip was uneventful, and the two were now in sight of the Industrial City of Costuul.

Frederica: "This town is always bustling, as usual."

The road from the mansion merged into a large highway along the way, and after giving way to a hastily moving dragon carriage, the Industrial City gently came into view in the distance.

Prided as the largest among Lugunica's Five Great Cities, not for nothing, Costuul had a population of nearly 100,000 residents and was a large city.

Naturally, with its vast area that corresponded to its population, and the various establishments and people that came and went to support it, it would be quite a spectacular sight to see the cityscape for the first time.

In short—

Garfiel: "Oh, ooh…"

Frederica: "Garf?"

Garfiel's emerald-green eyes, open wide, eagerly gazing at the city, was the ideal image of a countryside man who had come to the big city.

Garfiel: "W-, well, it's a lot different in person, ain't it? They say, "Gasock is bigger than it sounds.", don't they?"

Frederica: "An idiom with a very succinct thought. Well, before that, was this Garf's first visit to Costuul?"

Garfiel's unexpected response caught Frederica by surprise.

It had already been more than ten days since moving out of the Sanctuary and into the current mansion. During that time, Frederica had frequented Costuul numerous times. Of course, Frederica and Garfiel's roles at the mansion were different, hence the discrepancy between the two.

Garfiel gave Frederica an awkward look, and said, "What's wrong with that?",

Garfiel: "It couldn't be helped, ya know. I was busy scentin' up the mansion first, ya know. So I left lookin' around outside for later."

Frederica: “Placing a scent, that is…”

Frederica was taken aback by her brother’s sulky remark, and put her hands to her forehead.

Even though he did not know anything about the world outside of the Sanctuary, such behavior is indeed unacceptable, and could only be described as eccentric. For one, a lesson in outside common sense was in order.

Frederica: “It is alright, Garf. You are newly relocated from your old home now, and you have a lot to learn …A lot to… Oh, ooh, ooooh…!”

Garfiel: “Oh, Sis?! Are ya okay?! Ya sick?!”

Garfiel stared up in astonishment when Frederica stopped mid-speech and covered her face with both hands. Frederica groaned for a moment, then shook her head, saying, “N- no.”,

Frederica: “As I recall, ten years ago, when I first left the Sanctuary, I did exactly the same thing as you, Garf…”

Looking back on her actions, Frederica was struck by the shock coming a decade too late.

For Frederica, it was exactly ten years ago, but at that time, she, like Garfiel, exhibited a variety of eccentric behaviors due to the anxiety of being away from her hometown and her lack of common sense—Behaviors that now can only be described as eccentric.

In addition to putting their own scent all over the mansion, she often prowled around late in the night to check on her territory and to instill a hierarchical relationship with the animals living in the surrounding area; the list went on and on.

Frederica: “Well, at that time, Clind, who was the head servant, disciplined me to correct it, and…what a surprise. I had no idea that Garf and I were so much like sister and brother…”

Garfiel: “What’cha surprised about, course it’s normal for my amazin’ self and Sis to be like sister and brother…”

Garfiel scratched his head and sighed as Frederica quivered and trembled. However, Frederica looked up with a start when Garfiel said that to her.

Garfiel: “Sis?”

Frederica: “No… No, you are right. It is a matter of course. It is a normal thing for us to be like.”

Gently patting herself on the chest, Frederica smiled at Garfiel. Garfiel’s now seemingly obvious comment lightened the load on her chest.

Absolutely, her younger brother is right. —No matter how long they have been apart, no matter what they have talked about since their reunion, Frederica and Garfiel were still siblings.

There was nothing to be excessively fearful of.

Frederica: “Hehehe, thanks to you, I am unburdened. Well done, Garf.”

Garfiel: “…Just when I thought ya were going all “Oooh” and “Aaah” and stuff, ya suddenly look all relaxed, th’ hell’s going on with ya? Sis, did ya start goin’ all senile like granny t-…Gkh!”

Frederica: “That was a few too many words, you said. No, it is more than a few extra abusive words when you take into account that outburst against your grandmother. You should reflect on that.”

Garfiel: “Y-Ya don’t have to hit me over it, ya know…”

Garfiel looked at Frederica with a grim look in his eyes after taking a fist to the top of his head. Frederica smiled, covering her mouth, laughing, and then turned her attention to the cityscape of Costuul.

Frederica: “Come on, let us go. We do not have that much time. We have come all the way here as siblings, so we have to enjoy ourselves in our own way.”

And so, accompanied by his elated sister, Garfiel's tour of Costuul began.

However, in terms of tourism, none of the Five Great Cities had as few attractions as Costuul.

Frederica: "Costuul is a key industrial center for the kingdom, which is why there are fewer recreational things to do in the city, which is preferable for me, but…"

Frederica, who had comparatively more experience with Costuul than Garfiel, described the city. The tepidness of her explanation indicated that she was concerned that she might bore Garfiel with a lack of novelty.

But—

Garfiel: "Hey, hey, Sis. What's that big box over there?"

With wide emerald eyes, Garfiel pulled on Frederica's sleeve, enjoying the city to the fullest.

Frederica sighed with relief at the sight of her brother, inquisitive and simply fond of big, squarish things.

Frederica: "Calm down, Garf, not only that one over there, but all the factories throughout the area use Magicreation Tools."

Garfiel: "Magicreation Tools, huh?"

Garfiel tilted his head and clicked his fangs at the unfamiliar words. Frederica, pleased by Garfiel's reaction, asked, "Now listen, okay?". Frederica, pleased with the reaction, held up a finger and began to elaborate.

—"Magicreation Tools" were the most important secret that supported the Industrial City of Costuul.

Garfiel called it a "big box," but Costuul had a wide variety of Magicreation Tools, each of which has its own function in relation to the products it manufactures.

Frederica does not know the details of how the device works, but its power source was a magic stone; it was a complex and bizarre assembly of iron and wood that does the job faster and more accurately than manual labor.

Frederica: “The city of Costuul was one of the first to incorporate the Magicreation Tools system into its work, and it has expanded and become one of the Five Great Cities. Unlike the other four cities, it is a rare place that is recognized for its new ways of being rather than its old ways.”

Garfiel: “Wow, that’s amazin’.”

Frederica: “Of course it is, of course, it is.”

Garfiel: “…Why is Sis so proud about this?”

Upon explaining the origins of the city, Frederica seemed pleased with herself, to which Garfiel looked annoyed. Frederica continued, “Actually,” in response to Garfiel,

Frederica: “Now, Garf has acknowledged Magicreation Tools as an amazing achievement… but what if I told you that the master’s own Mathers family were involved in the creation of Magicreation Tools?”

Garfiel: “…”

Frederica: “Oh, my dear, what a grim face… it is not the Master himself, but rather his father, you know?”

Garfiel: “Don’t talk about anythin’ that has to do with that bastard Roswaal.”

Having been explained plainly, Frederica fell silent with a sour look on her face. It was a failure.

Garfiel sighed grimly, but the fact remained. The Industrial City of Costuul was supported by Magicreation Tools, the achievement of Roswaal’s predecessor.

Roswaal K. Mathers, the previous head of the family, was a great benefactor to Costuul. That was why the Mathers family's main mansion is located so close to the city.

Frederica: "Technically, I guess you could say that he made the city that was near his main mansion flourish…"

One would like to think that even Roswaal's predecessors would not have foreseen this far into the future, but the Mathers family is so unfathomable that one can hardly be so sure.

Anyways—

Frederica: "If you are interested, Garf, why don't we take a tour of the area?"

Frederica suggested this to Garfiel, who was repeatedly glancing at the factory and itching to see it. Garfiel responded, "Oh!" as his eyes lit up.

Garfiel: "Oh, but 's y'know."

Frederica: "What now? You sound pathetic and unmanly. Are you so offended when the products are connected to the Master?"

Garfiel: "That's one of the reasons, but it ain't the only one. But if my amazin' self does whatever I want, Sis is gonna be bored."

Frederica: "…"

Frederica choked up at Garfiel, scratching his cheek with one finger.

It was an entirely out-of-place concern. If he could extend that consideration naturally to everyone, even Ram would show a bit more interest.

Frederica: "…No, that is not possible. That girl is an iron wall. A pity."

Garfiel: "Wait, wait, wait, why are ya suddenly starting to pity my amazin' self, Sis? I won't be satisfied with something like "The distance between Picqitt, and the moon is unbridgeable."."

Frederica: “It is nothing. Besides, your concern is unnecessary, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

Frederica: “I was the one who invited you today, Garf. That would be better if this were our last opportunity, though it probably is not, right? …then it is best that you enjoy it.”

It was not like it was back then when they wanted to, but didn’t have the opportunity. There was a decade-long rift in the relationship between Frederica and Garfiel, but now there were no obstacles in the way of bridging the gap.

Thinking about it that way, it was no trouble for her to spend the whole day today for her younger brother’s sake.

Garfiel: “…Thanks.”

Frederica: “You are very welcome.”

Frederica’s hesitation was fleeting, and upon Garfiel’s honest thanks, Frederica responded with few words.

As it was, the pair’s legs walked to one of the factories they could see.

Frederica: “It looks like this is where they are processing magic ore.”

As they approached the factory, they could see the full extent of the large-scale Magicreation Tools, visible from a distance.

Piles of magic ore surrounded the Magicreation Tools, and a faint scent of mana tickled their nostrils.

The effect of the crystallized mana-bearing ore became more acute when the ore was processed. It can then be used for various purposes, such as ornamental items or as a crystal lamp.

This factory appeared to be another factory specializing in the processing of such magic ores.

Frederica: “If there is a staff member present, we can speak to them…”

Garfiel: “— Sis.”

Frederica: “Garf?”

While Frederica’s eyes wandered around, looking for someone, Garfiel suddenly stopped her with a low voice. When she turned around to see what was the matter, Garfiel’s gaze was directed toward the rear of the factory.

Frederica turned her gaze in the same direction and saw a strange and mysterious figure.

Frederica: “—Huh?”

An unexpected sight caused a feeble voice to escape Frederica’s throat. This was completely unexpected, a surprise from something that came from beyond her thoughts.

It was an existence that could only be described as a strange “object.”

It was about the size of a dog at most, appearing to be in a low, hunched posture like an animal. However, its entire body was covered with shiny, hard skin, the color of which shimmered in an unnatural manner. It was a strange “object” that seemed to be covered with coils of flames and water.

Frederica: “That is…”

At first glance, it appeared to be an ornamental object made with a sensibility that was hard to comprehend. That is, if it were not wriggling.

That is, if it did not turn toward them, what seemed to be its light.

And then—

Garfiel: “You…”

The moment Garfiel tried to take a step forward, a wind occurred.

A sharp, life-threatening wind struck Garfiel and Frederica.

6

Without even waiting to see how it would react, Garfiel snapped his fangs at the attacker.

Before his eyes, the identity and intentions of the other party were unclear. However, it was nice to know that its intention could be easily understood. Hostility for hostility, just like "Yakkgaran's reversed day and night."

Garfiel: "So, if you're goin' for it, I ain't going to give ya any quarter."

Garfiel said this as he deflected the blade of wind that came from directly in front of him.

The magic also had intensity; the magic of a skilled mage was denser. If that was expressed in terms of the quality of magic, the quality of this blade of wind was very close to the worst.

Since the most recent Wind magic he saw was Ram's, the difference between them was even greater with consideration of his favoritism.

And, finishing his evaluation of the situation instantly, Garfiel lightly tapped the ground with his toes. The impact that was released from his toes was used to deliver a blow through the "Divine Protection of Earth Spirits," hitting his opponent.

Garfiel: "…"

The entity, which was more like a mass of glowing objects as opposed to a cluster of glowing lights, was shattered by the impact.

There was a high-pitched sound of stones breaking, but it was not the death cry of it itself. While some animals do not have vocal organs to make sounds, this felt different.

First, it was too fragile. Though it was of poor quality, for an entity capable of wielding magic to have this sort of durability…

Garfiel: “You’re an inconsistent one, ya bastard!”

Thinking it was aiming for something, Garfiel took one more step forward.

The “Divine Protection of Earth Spirits” blow could not be aimed very precisely. By its nature, the blessing’s basic principle was that it drew mana from the earth and transformed it into vitality for the user.

Garfiel reversed this basic principle by sending force into the earth rather than drawing it up, thereby reversing the flow, and causing the ground to cave in or rise up.

Divine Protections are not magic, and the sensation could not be explained to those who do not possess the same Divine Protection. The results that occur resemble magic, but unlike magic, there was no way to convey them. It is like the process of breathing.

He never thought that his unknown opponent would be so fragile that he could be crushed by the effort of a mere breath. And, Garfiel’s theory was correct.

Frederica: “Garf!”

Frederica, now standing two steps behind him, shouted, and the hairs on the back of Garfiel’s neck stood on end.

He did not take his eyes away from it. The “object” that was shattered by the blow was still there in front of them. And yet, Frederica’s cry suggests a different story.

—A strange “object” rained down from above the roof onto Garfiel’s head.

Garfiel: “Hah!”

With a sharp exhale, Garfiel clasps his palms together powerfully above his head. The “object” that had just fallen between the palms was hit and shattered, its physical durability immediately overwhelmed.

As the shimmering debris dispersed, his palm felt a rough sensation. Feeling as if he had crushed a lump of sand, Garfiel wrinkled his nose and kicked away the ensuing flames and wind.

Garfiel: "…"

As with the first wind blade, there was a resurgence of wind and a confluence of flames.

However, both were still of low-quality magic and were easily overcome by Garfiel's physical counterattacks. Of course, while this level of threat was nothing to be concerned about—.

Garfiel: "Damn, there's so many of them, it's "Heeromedoi's Brute force.""

Grumbling, Garfiel sniffed; there was an alien smell that slowly crept into his olfactory senses. It was not a bad smell, but it was at the same time a fishy and iron-rust sensation.

Although it was only a rough estimation, he could sense that there are more than a dozen of these "objects" similar to the two that he had just seen.

Frederica: "Garf, what do we do?"

Raising her voice, Frederica quickly countered one of them with her bare hands. With a single blow, with only using her transformed wrists, her ability to switch instantly was quicker than Garfiel's.

However, once he saw Frederica's cuffs were torn as she did so,

Garfiel: "Tsk."

With a click of the tongue, Garfiel glared at the dangerous "objects" that surrounded them.

Although he and Frederica could probably wipe them out without so much struggle, Garfiel: “I’ve got no more reason to go at’cha bastards for too long. No…”

Rather, the opposite was true.

Garfiel: “I’m gonna blow ya to bits right now, ya bastards!”

Frederica: “—Hk! Garf, please wait! Doing that here would be…”

Blood boiling in his head, Garfiel swung his leg over his head with a mighty swing. Just before his foot fell, Frederica shouted to stop him, but it was too late.

As the force of the attack hit the ground, an overflow of power permeated the earth through Garfiel’s heels, and “objects” in various parts of the factory were struck from directly below—

“…”

—The next moment, the factory building itself crumbled as if it had experienced a massive explosion.

7

???: “I have a clear understanding of the events that took place. I also know that it was a difficult situation that required extremely difficult decisions.”

Their hands were laced on an ebony desk, and their stern voices and expressions looked at them directly. Their gaze gave her the illusion of physical weight, and so Frederica was hurriedly bowing her head.

Frederica: “Yes, I am very sorry… and see, Garf too!”

Garfiel: “Oh! Ow, ow! Sorry, I know it’s my fault…”

Tugging on Garfiel’s ear next to her, she made him express the same apologetic gesture as she did. Although the gesture was not polite, Garfiel was sorry in his own way, and it was probably true.

The question was whether or not he will be able to convey his remorse to the other party, however—

???: “I accept your apology.”

Frederica: “…Re-, really, you accept it?”

???: “Why such a need for validation?”

Frederica: “It is…”

Frederica muddled her words as she looked at the other person’s face. This was not polite, but with this man on the other end of the line, it was not surprising.

After all, this person’s expression never varied from when Frederica and Garfiel entered the room until now. It was a quality of a politician not to let his expression be read, but he was too thorough.

The owner of these steely-looking features was Leno Rex. —He was the mayor of the Industrial City of Costuul, one of the Five Great Cities in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Long story short, he was the most powerful person in Costuul and was also responsible for the magical ore processing plant and other facilities that Frederica and Garfiel had unceremoniously blown up.

—Frederica and Garfiel’s outing took a dramatic turn when they were attacked by strange “objects” at a factory they were visiting for a tour of the Magicreation Tools, resulting in a massive explosion.

Naturally, Frederica and Garfiel were unable to leave without being taken into custody by the responding guards, leading up to the present situation.

Leno: “About those strange “objects” you have come across…”

Frederica: “Well, you may not believe us, but, they did exist, okay? But we could not just let them attack us without a fight, so we struck back…”

As a result, the “objects” were destroyed, and the evidence was lost and scattered. However, Frederica was still uncertain as to what the objects were, unable to find the right words to describe them.

At this point, she didn't want to sound like she made up an excuse on the spot to get out of the situation, but—

Leno: "No need to worry; we have confirmed their presence here as well. We are currently having a difficult time with the "Lightbugs.""

Frederica: "Lightbug, is it?"

Leno: "They are called that for convenience."

In answer to Frederica's question, Leno wrinkled his brow. This was the first time he has changed his facial expression since their arrival, but the change, causing his already stern face to appear even sterner, was unwelcome.

Leno tapped his fingers on the desk, and looking into Frederica and Garfiel's faces,

Leno: "Those of you who are involved with Margrave Mathers know how this city has developed. It is now called one of the Five Great Cities in the nation, and I have been appointed as city mayor, among other things, although I am not as qualified as I should be…"

Garfiel: "Yeah, it's only gotten bigger in the last few decades, hasn't it? Sis told me that. So?"

Leno: "Behind that rapid development, the existence of those Lightbugs has been confirmed time and again. This is a largely unknown fact to the outside world."

Garfiel: "…"

Leno: "Curiously, I have never heard of any sightings of Lightbugs in other cities. The Lightbug has thus been considered an anomaly, existing only in the soil of Costuul."

Frederica frowned with her shapely eyebrows as she listened to Leno's explanation.

There were always problems that come with every place.

The existence of the Sanctuary, with its barrier and tomb, was a prime example of this.

As Leno told them, this was the first time Frederica had heard about Costuul's Lightbug. It was a topic that has been handled with such scrutiny and so much thought, she realized.

Why did he confide such an important issue to Frederica and Garfiel?

Frederica: "Leno-sama?"

Leno: "I regret my inability on this matter, but I would like to ask Margrave Mathers to help with this. Right now, the city is experiencing an unprecedented outbreak of Lightbugs, which is disrupting the operation of the factories."

Frederica: "Disrupting the operation… Ah."

Frederica placed her hand over her mouth at Leno's plea, without changing her complexion or tone of voice.

The factory where Frederica and the others were attacked by the "object"—A Lightbug, was unoccupied. However, Frederica and Garfiel were curious about the tools that had been left abandoned, obviously in the process of being worked on, and the magical ore scattered about.

That was probably the result of the Lightbugs occurring during the operations and forcing them to evacuate.

Garfiel: "What's the point of talkin' to that bastard Roswaal?"

Frederica's contemplation aside, Garfiel's voice unapologetically cut in when Roswaal's name was mentioned.

For a beat, Leno pondered the relationship between Garfiel and Roswaal, but quickly snapped out of its stagnation, taking a breath with a "Hmm", Leno: “I thought Margrave Mathers would have wisdom on how to solve the problem. You all must have thought that Lightbug’s ecology was strange as well.”

Frederica: “Although they were weak, they did have the ability to use magic.”

Leno: “Up until now, we have only had minor injuries, however, if we have serious injuries… much less, if deaths begin happening, it will be too late. The Margrave is also no stranger to Costuul’s problems.”

Frederica took in the strong language of the city’s safety, swallowing her words.

In fact, Roswaal’s title was “Margrave of the West,” and the Industrial City of Costuul was also located in a location that in a broad sense would be managed by Roswaal.

Damage to Costuul could call into question the Margrave’s ability to do more than merely collect taxes, of course.

That could be a fatal blunder as the sponsor of Emilia’s participation in the Royal Selection.

Frederica: “It is one problem after another, so busy with it all indeed…”

Leno: “Wherever you are, peace does not last. It only makes a difference if things happen in the city or in the kitchen. That is what my wife tells me.”

Frederica: “Ara, that is an excellent point.”

Frederica’s lips relaxed slightly at the jest, which felt quite unlike him.

Regardless, the appeal certainly needed to be shared with Roswaal. Although the outing with Garfiel would have been a letdown, the priority was work.

So, Frederica, hiding a slight disappointment, called out “Garf” next to her,

Frederica: “Garf, you heard him. As for today, let us report to the Master at…”

Garfiel: “Nah, don’t think so.”

Garfiel simply shook his head at the request. Frederica sighed at his attitude.

Garfiel’s dislike of Roswaal was very serious, but this was a situation where issues of like and dislike must be put aside.

Frederica: “Garf, please do not make this personal. This is an important matter for Costuul.”

Garfiel: “It’s not that I don’t wanna do it because the bastard pisses me off. I’m talkin’ about the fact that he can’t just come over and fix it right now.”

Having said that, Garfiel got up from the couch. Turning his gaze to the far end of the city mayor’s office, Garfiel then,

Garfiel: “It’s here.”

He snorted.

Garfiel: “…”

Immediately afterward, Garfiel’s gaze turned to where something unusual was happening. Near the wall, a bookshelf filled with books shook violently, and something slid out from behind it.

Without hesitation, it tried to jump toward the window of the room. However—

Garfiel: “I’m not gonna let ya get away!”

Garfiel stepped in with a roar, his fist slamming into the foreign object that traveled up the wall. The impact excessively exceeded its durability, and the sound produced by the light and the shattering of the wall rippled through the room.

Leno: “That just now was…”

Frederica: “A Lightbug.”

The shattered entity sparkled and dispersed under Garfiel’s blow. Seeing this, the voices of Leno and Frederica overlapped in turn.

Frederica saw that it was the exact same as the Lightbugs that they encountered at the magic ore processing plant.

Frederica: “The wall aside, …Leno-sama, are Lightbugs all over the city?!”

Leno: “Negative. At the very least, the instances of finding them were limited to the area around the factories. Even on the rare occasions when they went out into the city, they were never found in City Hall.”

Garfiel: “No way. Did they follow us?”

Garfiel’s eyes narrowed as he picked up a piece of the smashed Lightbug.

There is no doubt that Garfiel’s mutterings were the most plausible theory at the moment; it was more realistic to say they were following them from the processing plant than that the Lightbugs were lurking everywhere.

Frederica: “But what is the purpose of this? The Lightbug’s proclivities, perhaps?”

Garfiel: “They suddenly attacked my amazin’ self and Sis, ya know? That kinda thinkin’ isn’t something my amazin’ self would expect at all.”

Frederica: “Ga-, Garf, you are smart enough to…”

Aside from his usual apprehensions, Garfiel’s intuition when it came to fighting was sharp. And, Frederica had no hesitation in following Garfiel’s instincts.

In this situation, the Lightbugs tracked Frederica and Garfiel to the

City Hall—.

Leno: “Definitely, to overhear what was said…”

Garfiel: “This is proof that someone is controllin’ these insect things.”

Leno: “Impossible. As I said, The Lightbugs have been around since this city began to be developed.”

At the conclusion, Leno stood up and waited. Indeed, if his testimony was true, this Lightbug-controlling entity has been involved since their outbreak.

The aim of their efforts, the nature of Lightbugs, and everything else remained unclear.

Frederica: “…Hk.”

Within the line of sight of Frederica, who swallowed spit, a crack appeared in the city mayor’s office wall. It was not the effect of Garfiel’s blow, but a deliberately inflicted destructive force.

Besides, the destruction was not only on one of the walls, but extended to all four walls—No, even to the floor and ceiling. In other words, fine fissures were appearing all over the City Hall.

Garfiel: “They’re crystal fuckin’ clear!”

Garfiel, with a twinkle in his eye, howled when he realized it was an enemy attack.

With that, while coming to the same conclusion as her younger brother, Frederica looked back to Leno.

But, in the midst of a rapidly changing situation, priorities should be carefully examined, and,

Frederica: “Leno-sama! How many people are in City Hall now?”

Leno: “—. Twelve.”

Understanding the meaning of Frederica’s question, Leno instantly arrived at the answer.

In response, Frederica shouted, “Garf!”.

Frederica: “Please break a hole in the floor! I am going out!”

Garfiel: “Tsk!”

As soon as he was told, Garfiel immediately stomped the floor. At the same time, Frederica leapt to Leno, carrying the large man easily and launching him backward into the window.

With a high-pitched crash, Frederica shattered the window, falling with Leno to the ground below.

Leno: “…”

Even in this predicament, Leno’s tenacity to not let out a single scream was remarkable.

The city mayor’s office is on the third floor of City Hall, a height that Frederica could easily land from. But that would not be the case for ordinary people.

So—

Garfiel: “Sis, let’s go!”

Frederica: “I understand!”

With an aggressive voice, Garfiel signaled to Frederica.

In response, the windows of the second floor of the City Hall broke one after another in front of Frederica.

It was the City Hall employees being thrown out of the building with a mighty crash that was the cause of it.

Frederica: “…Hk!”

Frederica caught them falling, blue in the face and screaming, just outside. She rescued one and immediately lowered them to the ground to rescue the next.

Eight times in a row, and after more than half the number of people Leno had mentioned had been successfully rescued,

Frederica: “The building is…”

The first signs of its collapse completely spread throughout the building, causing the City Hall to collapse in front of Frederica. A plume of smoke and shock surged through the air, while Frederica’s blonde hair fluttered wildly, her eyes straining to see.

The four missing staff members and Garfiel, all of them now lying on the ground, are speechless.

Such a long, uncomfortable silence, and—

Garfiel: “Bha!”

And then, one figure broke through the plume of smoke and leapt out with great force.

—No, there was only one figure, but the figure had one person in their right hand, one in their left, one on their back, and one in their mouth.

Frederica: “Garf! Are you all right?!”

Garfiel: “Kaa-pfft! Who the hell do ya think my amazin’ self is? Well, for a moment, it looked like we weren’t gonna make it out in time, but…”

Garfiel answered by lowering the four people he helped onto the ground and turning them around by their shoulders, feeling relieved that there was no sign of injury other than black smudges on their faces from the fumes.

However—

Frederica: “Surely a collapse this large is not a coincidence, is it?”

Garfiel: “Right? This means we found out somethin’ inconvenient to ‘em, and they want to keep us quiet.”

Frederica shuddered as Garfiel looked behind him at the wreckage of City Hall, muttering to himself.

It was unexpected that a half-day vacation together with siblings would turn out to be entangled in such a situation.

Leno: “Thank you all for your help. On behalf of the staff, I thank you as well.”

Then Leno, who was also involved in the same devastation, approached. Leno thanked them, but having already fixed his clothes, his composure did not match that of the victims in this disaster.

Leno: “I was particularly amazed at the way you carried yourself. I admire it greatly.”

Garfiel: “Oh, oh, so ya are. Ya know, I’m kinda losin’ my groove, but we don’t have time to talk about this.”

Leno: “Indeed. —This is a clear attack on the city.”

The tone of his voice dropped a degree, and Leno clearly recognized the current situation with his words.

An attack on the city. —The attack was aimed at City Hall, the hub of the city, and the city’s mayor. It was definitely a situation that needed to be recognized as such.

Frederica: “The perpetrator is manipulating the Lightbugs and plunging the city into chaos. Though their aims are unknown…”

Garfiel: “Our amazin’ selves have noticed.”

Frederica: “And, the other party must have realized that we have noticed. The situation is not in our favor.”

Unexpected and unanticipated interactions may be mutual, but there was a difference in the level of preparation that has been built up to that point. By nature, a battle depended on preparation before it even began.

The mindset of the one who was not prepared to be hit was different from that of the one who was prepared to be hit.

The situation proceeded as if to support the conclusions of Frederica and the others.

Frederica: "…"

People from all over the city rushed to the collapsed City Hall to see what had happened. Amidst all this, a roar was heard in the opposite direction of City Hall— The area where the factories were located.

For the second time today, there was a roar in the area where Garfiel caused the explosion. Frederica's emerald-green eyes widened as she turned to see what had caused it.

Frederica: "—Hk, that is-!"

Surprise escaped her lips as a tower of light shot up in Frederica's gaze.

A spire of light, decorated with complex and bizarre patterns, shimmering with non-uniform colors over its entirety— The sight of its surface writhing in the distance was a frightening realization that it was not a tower at all.

That was a collection of Lightbugs.

They gathered together at a tremendous rate and formed a tower of light.

Frederica: "This is a terrible day off…!"

Garfiel: "Damn… I knew it; goin' out of the forest would be no good!"

Frederica and Garfiel's respective lamenting voices overlap, echoing up into the sky.

—The Industrial City of Costuul, and the day off of the demi-human siblings, was swept away by a shimmering malice.

8

The appearance of the shimmering Lightbugs shattered the peace and quiet of the Industrial City of Costuul.

Starting with an explosion in the factory district, followed by the collapse of City Hall, and then finally an outbreak of light in the factory district again—all of these were the work of a mysterious creature called the Lightbug.

Garfiel: “Tsk! Ya lookin’ down on me…!”

The Lightbugs, clustered together, became spires of geometric hues of light, and Garfiel clicked his fangs and howled as many of the city’s residents were shaken by their presence.

He had just rescued about ten people from a collapsed building. However, the determination throughout his body had not waned; he remained determined.

With a beastly expression, he was about to run toward the swarm of Lightbugs, his fangs bared.

Frederica: “Please wait, Garf!”

However, it was Frederica who stopped Garfiel from rushing in with a raised voice.

She looked to her younger brother, whose nose was scrunched up, and pleaded with him as she tended to an injured City Hall employee who was caught up in the collapsed building.

Frederica: “The priority is providing aid to people. Garf, your healing magic should be up to the task.”

Garfiel: “What’cha ya sayin’? There’s that damn huge thing goin’ crazy right in front of us. If we just beat it up…”

Frederica: “For the moment, there is more harm being done. Do you not sense it, Garf?”

Frederica gave a scathing look and sniffed at Garfiel, who pointed at his enemy and insisted. At his sister’s rebuke, Garfiel snorted and clicked his tongue likewise.

Garfiel and Frederica, siblings with mixed beastman blood, had five keen senses. Among them, their sense of smell was unparalleled to that of humans, and even in this situation, they were able to distinguish various odors.

The sudden appearance of the Lightbugs and the ensuing chaos, with no small amount of it, the smell of blood—

Frederica: “It is proof that the number of wounded is increasing, even if we could eliminate the Lightbugs…”

Garfiel: “There’s no point, is what’cha mean? …Shit, so what should I do then?!”

Frederica: “—. Very well done, Garf.”

Frederica smiled at Garfiel, who was receptive to her opinion on the matter, and was ready to give priority to providing aid. Then, she once again turned her emerald eyes to the Lightbugs in the distance—the huge Lightbug.

Frederica: “…”

A colossal Lightbug, like a tower of light, appeared in the center of the factory district. However, at least at the moment, there was no indication that the large Lightbug had begun to destroy anything. Although the combat power of the smaller Lightbugs encountered earlier at the factory were not significant, one cannot be optimistic about the behavior of an enemy of this size.

Based on what was overheard in the conversation at City Hall, it was certain that there was a master who was controlling the Lightbugs. Their aim was unknown, but it would be convenient if they had no intention of mobilizing the Lightbugs right now.

With this in mind, Frederica called out “Leno-sama,” to the tall City

Mayor who stood by her side.

Frederica: “Please send an evacuation order for the factory district and send relief to those who are injured. Fortunately, there is no sign of movement from the Lightbugs. Collect the injured without provoking them and gather them in one place for treatment. Garf… my brother should be able to help you there.”

Leno: “Agreed. Our first priority is to avoid casualties.”

Frederica’s prompt and efficient instructions were followed without hesitation by Leno Rex, who was always ready to listen to the opinions of others, instead of sitting on the laurels of his position as the city’s mayor. These were the qualities of a politician. As one would expect from a man who was in charge of one of the Five Great Cities, he was an outstanding person.

As Frederica was impressed, Leno looked up and said, “But,” staring at the Lightbugs from a distance.

Leno: “Your younger brother is correct; we cannot leave that thing alone. We need to send a strike team immediately to…”

Frederica: “—I would not worry about that.”

Leno: “Wha-”

The next moment, Leno’s expression, which had seemed to have never been upset, slightly tightened. Frederica saw this out of the corner of her eye and felt a slight euphoria, though it was not quite enough to compensate for the grief she was causing Petra.

Leno: “…”

Leno’s cheeks hardened, and standing on the grass in front of his gaze was a four-legged beast with a beautiful golden coat of fur.

Her appearance was similar to that of a leopard, with emerald eyes, sharp fangs, and a commanding face that somehow hinted at intelligence and grace. With its elegant physique, it was a golden female leopard that even brought an out-of-place feeling of excitement.

In terms of sudden appearances, it was as abrupt as the Lightbugs. But unlike the Lightbugs, the source of the leopard was clear. —If one looked at the scattered clothes under her feet.

Leno: “Frederica-sama’s Beastification?”

Frederica: “This is an emergency situation, so please do not be offended by the vulgarity of my behavior. —I will return to the mansion and inform the master.”

Leno: “It would be reassuring if Margrave Mathers could come.”

Once the initial shock had passed, Leno acclimatized very quickly. He immediately affirmed Frederica’s decision and turned to the surrounding personnel.

Leno: “I know you are all in a state of confusion and turmoil. However, every second counts. Every second here is worth a human life, so please follow my instructions.”

Everyone: “…”

At Leno’s calm command, the personnel looked up. Then, a moment after, they nodded from wherever they were, stood up, and began to move to deal with the disturbance.

They were highly trained. —No, it was a difference in consciousness, or so it felt when they were only Leno’s subordinates.

Frederica: “Garf, please comply with Leno-sama in case of an emergency…”

Garfiel: “Make yer own decisions, right? I ain’t a little kid, I know what I’m doin’.”

Frederica: “No matter how much time has passed, you will always be a kid to me.”

At the words of his older sister, in her leopard form, Garfiel clicked his tongue in a sulky manner. Frederica’s four paws kicked the ground as she gazed on with a ferocious grin. A moment later, her figure shifted into a golden wind.

The beastified Frederica ran so fast that it seemed as if it were an illusion.

Garfiel: “With Sis like that, it won’t take long for that bastard Roswaal to get the message. Our amazin’ selves are…”

Leno: “Let us move forward with the same dedication as that of Frederica-sama. Evacuate the people from the factory district, treat the wounded, and prevent the damage from spreading. Can we count on your healing magic?”

Garfiel: “Ha! “Getten’s net-work”, Who’da ya think you’re talkin’ to?”

Garfiel responded to Leno’s confirmation with gnashed teeth and looked behind him.

What was the purpose of the huge Lightbug, unmoving at the end of his gaze?

Garfiel: “…I don’t like the idea of bein’ left behind, Sis.”

9

Kicking the ground with her four beastly legs, bathed in a fierce wind, Frederica felt euphoric.

Even though she knew that it was not the time for this, she could not stop herself from being excited. Perhaps it was the delight of the beastman blood that flowed within her.

She had never spoken with another beastman or half-beastman before, wondering if they had ever questioned their own existence. —In her own heart, there was endless self-questioning.

So, which of these two forms was truly who she was?

Frederica: “…”

She could not say.

Beastification itself was a special kind of transformation that only those who were half-beastman possessed. It invoked the blood that flowed within oneself, and one abandoned one's human body and underwent a complete metamorphosis into the body of a beast.

Just as Frederica became a leopard, Garfiel had the power to transform into a tiger. There were more than a few half-beasts in the world with similar powers.

What did they think? Did they not wonder? If the real her was the one that stood on two legs, then what was the true nature of this feeling of liberation and euphoria when she became a beast?

Was it not because she was so constrained by her normal self that she felt liberated at the moment she became a beast? If so, was her true self a person or a beast?

Frederica: "If it were Garf, he would not even have these worries…"

Frederica's beastly mouth drew a wry smile at the thought of her younger brother.

That was not to say that Garfiel was reckless and simple-minded. He was surprisingly sensitive, timid, and a real handful.

The fact that he sacrificed himself for more than a decade to preserve the Sanctuary spoke for itself.

So the reason Garfiel did not have the same doubts as Frederica was that for him, the root of Frederica's problems was trivial. They were undeniably siblings by blood, yet Frederica and Garfiel's personal circumstances are different.

However, she had no intention of going out of her way to talk to her brother about this particular issue.

Frederica: "—Far too many distracting thoughts. Right now, my top priority is to inform the Master as soon as possible."

Shaking her head lightly, Frederica concentrated on the speed at which she ran.

Frederica's speed, like a golden wind, reduced a ten-minute walk to less than a minute, which, considering the distance from Costuul to the Roswaal mansion, was more than enough for a round-trip.

Despite these jumbled thoughts, her speed was unhindered, and her judgment was not wrong.

—But only if things were limited to the chaos in Costuul caused by the proliferation of the Lightbugs.

Frederica: "…"

The moment her forelegs stepped onto the ground, Frederica's nose caught the scent of hostility.

It was not instinctive, but more like a genuine, well-crafted intent to harm. With a single swoop, it came at Frederica's legs, which kicked the ground. A split-second decision had been made.

She slammed her paws into the dirt, sending up a cloud of dust, and changed directions. Flying sideways while maintaining her speed, the female leopard evaded the threat that was closing in on her. However—

???: "—That's nice, tomboy. I'm also fond of teaching some manners to people like ya."

Frederica: "—hk."

The speed with which the enemy was moving was effortlessly catching up to Frederica, who was now leaping to the side at high speed. Frederica stiffened at the sound of a man's voice whispering in her ear and swung her claws.

Without mercy, she would gouge her opponent's face with a blow that would leave claw marks on even the thickest steel plate. The front leg was swung with tremendous force, but was stopped before it could strike her enemy directly.

Then, a powerful kick to Frederica's exposed torso sent her into a silent fit of agony.

Frederica: “—hk!”

Spittle flew out of her mouth, as Friederica let out a pained cry at the tremendous force knocking her sideways.

Although the durability of beastmen was extraordinarily high, even among demi-humans, it was not so much the case for Frederica. Even taking this into account, the power of that blow was still unbelievable.

???: “Normally, I’d just tear off a limb or two here, but my client insisted, ya see? They ordered me to do no more damage than necessary. So, about that…”

Frederica: “Kugh…”

???: “Would ya mind putting up a little more of a fight? If ya resist, I can make the case that I hurt ya to make ya behave. —Well, by the looks of it, that’s not gonna happen.”

The man with a ferocious demeanor looked down upon Frederica, who was panting in agony, and laughed brazenly. He had dull golden hair tied into a knot at the back and wild-looking facial hair.

No further information could be gleaned by Frederica in the spur of the moment—

???: “You should sleep for now. Chances are, you’ll be happier if ya don’t wake up.”

Such were the man’s last words before Frederica’s consciousness faded.

10

—The change in the huge Lightbug’s movement conveniently came when the treatment of the severely injured was over.

Garfiel: “—hk, What the?”

Wiping his bloody fingers with his waistband, Garfiel looked up and wrinkled his nose.

This was right after he followed Leno's directions and applied healing magic to every single one of the gathered wounded.

The workload would have made a conventional mage dizzy, but Garfiel still felt strong. This was thanks to Garfiel's Divine Protection of Earth Spirits.

As long as Garfiel's feet were in contact with the earth, the power of his Divine Protection allowed him to draw upon the earth's vitality — or in other words, mana. Of course, that amount also had its limit, but it was far more than the ordinary person; it had reached a point in which it was possible for him to make frequent use of his mana. In Subaru's words, "It's like a spare tank of gas".

At any rate, Garfiel, who was hardly affected by the use of healing magic due to this blessing, saw movement in the huge Lightbug at the edge of his vision.

Garfiel: "…"

Since its piercing emergence from the factory district's ground, where it had caused damage to the surrounding area with that powerful impact, the unmoving, glittering giant, its head glared at the surrounding area.

That gesture, it was as if it were searching for prey.

Garfiel: "Yo, City Mayor-san. Sis hasn't come back yet… but if this thing goes on a rampage, it'll be a crazy mess. Before that…"

Leno: "You are going to subdue it? I respect your decision."

Garfiel: "…"

Leno, who had understood Garfiel's intentions and was taking command of the battle, immediately nodded his head.

It helped that he was quick on the uptake, but he was a man who never said no to a proposal, even one from Frederica. It made one wonder if he was not decisive, but just unthinking.

Leno: "Without a doubt, you are currently the strongest force in the city. I wish to entrust it to you."

Garfiel: "Ha! Ya get it, don'tcha? My amazin' self will take care of everything!"

Nodding, Leno's statement gave Garfiel a push forward, throwing away his doubts. Then, extending his arms to those around him, he stepped forcefully on the ground and…

Garfiel: "Anyone who is far away, listen to the sound! If you're close, then gather yer eyes here! My amazin' self is going to beat all yer enemies with my fists!!"

Chanting a speech he had learned from Subaru, Garfiel's body launched like an arrow.

The city's residents were astonished by Garfiel's instantaneous disappearance. Leaving their astonishment behind, Garfiel vigorously shattered the cobblestones, flew across the rooftops, kicked the walls, and made a suicidal attack on the huge Lightbug.

Garfiel: "Oh—"

With the residents having already evacuated, Garfiel sprinted through the now deserted city block. He leapt, flew, and advanced to the heart of the huge Lightbug, as a flood of Lightbugs rushed his way from the street corners.

The huge Lightbug was formed by the gathering of many Lightbugs —but, there were still plenty of Lightbugs that were not swallowed up by it. It was a clever trap for a bug.

Garfiel: "That ain't enough to stop my amazin' self!"

A few puny Lightbugs were not enough to slow down Garfiel's advance.

The fire and wind attacks that they unleashed were extinguished with a swing of his arm and a stomp of his foot, and the Lightbugs, having lost their strength, were unable to maintain themselves and collapsed. It was a desperate attack.

Their behavior was less than that of insects, unnatural, as their desperate behavior meant nothing.

Garfiel: "…What sorta shitty bastard is controllin' 'em?"

Inwardly irritated by what was happening, Garfiel clicked his fangs.

There was no doubt that the Lightbugs had intent behind them, as evidenced by the fact that they targeted City Hall. And it was clear that this was the result of human malice, not animal instinct. Therefore, there was a mastermind directing the actions of both the huge Lightbug and the Lightbugs.

There was a mastermind, but, their plan was too poorly executed; the Lightbugs' futile deaths were a good sign of that—

Garfiel: "Aaah?"

With this thought, Garfiel, who was growing angry at his invisible enemy, noticed an unexplainable presence and raised his eyebrows. His gaze turned not to the huge Lightbug, but to the ground a short distance in front of it.

Garfiel: "…"

That presence, there was the fast-moving back of a person that ran straight down the street in a straight line to the huge Lightbug.

As Leno said, no one was more capable than Garfiel in the city right now. The city's security forces were also prioritizing the evacuation of the residents and should not have the capability to take on the huge Lightbug.

So, even seeing their back, the impression at first was of a reckless, out-of-control resident running loose. But their steps were fast, and it was hard to believe that they were just a confused resident.

Then, the identity of the person became immediately apparent.

???: "—Garfiel-sama."

A figure running at tremendous speed looked back without slowing down. As they continued to run backward, a young man with dark blue hair and a monocle was looking toward him.

—It was Clind, a butler who served Annerose, a relative of Roswaal.

Garfiel: “Wha—”

The question that Garfiel was trying to ask was to the effect of “What are you doing here?”.

No sooner than that, the huge Lightbug launched an attack on Garfiel and Clind.

Garfiel and Clind: “…”

Multiple lights blended together, and the light that was emitted was dyed white as rays of heat burned through the streets. Buildings and trees along the way could be seen vanishing as they were burned by the intense heat.

Although weak individually, thousands of Lightbugs could accumulate extraordinary power when united into a single body. Even Garfiel would not be able to survive their heat rays.

The only reason he did no’t get hit was because of Clind’s hand signals as he ran backward—not words, but hand gestures to warn him of the incoming danger. Thanks to that considerable service—

Garfiel: “—Rraa!”

Garfiel dove under the huge Lightbug’s legs and slammed his fist into its massive body. The moment his fist hit, it felt like stone had cracked and shattered on impact, gouging out a chunk of it.

However, there was nothing endearing about a huge Lightbug made from several combined that could be subdued by a single fist strike. Instead, it was a colony that only appeared to be a huge body. Only one of the Lightbugs could be killed with a single fist strike; in short, the enemy had several thousand lives left.

One shot was far from enough, and even with a hundred, it would still appear lively.

Garfiel: “If that’s the case, I’m gonna put 10,000 punches into ya!”

Barking and declaring ten times the number of blows required, Garfiel’s entire body resonated with energy in order to destroy. With the sensation of boiling blood, his muscles swelled, and his Divine Protection sucked up the power of the earth.

Fists, claws, and fangs were swung, and the body of the huge Lightbug was vigorously devoured.

Garfiel: “…”

While shimmering in complex and mysterious ways, flakes of light peeled off from the writhing, huge Lightbug. All of them consisted of the Lightbugs that made up the huge Lightbug, releasing mana like an explosive burst.

Chain explosions of light erupted under the feet of the huge Lightbug, and Garfiel, unable to defend against the resulting range, was also thrown in it and blown away. He put his hands into the ground, forcibly breaking his movement, and looked up.

Although he was not injured, there was bitterness at being forced to start over. Furthermore—

Garfiel: “They just keep comin’ ‘n comin’, there’s no end to ‘em.”

However many he removed or scraped, more Lightbugs were incorporated into the huge Lightbug to be replenished afterward.

Garfiel had no intention of getting pushed around whatsoever, but the damage to the city would be enormous at this rate.

Clind: “You seem to be having difficulties. Assistance.”

Garfiel: “Ya?”

Against the advancing Lightbugs, Garfiel made a motion of his hands as if literally swatting an insect, and then glared at Clind, who had come up next to him.

He was a calm-faced young man whom he had only met a few times in the month before.

The reason was that it was Annerose, his master, who provided housing for the residents who had been displaced from the Sanctuary, as well as for the people in the Roswaal mansion, which had burned to the ground.

From that time on, he had always thought that he had a very unusual demeanor, but—

Garfiel: “Help me; what the fuck can ya do?”

Clind: “Indeed. I am but a butler, so I am proud to say that I have a wide variety of small skills in that regard. Proficiency.”

Having said that, Clind stepped forward and gently lifted his hand behind Garfiel’s back. Then he clenched his five fingers. —Immediately after, the torso of the huge Lightbug exploded.

Clind: “…”

The huge Lightbug was split in half down the middle of its body and could no longer support itself. Clind looked at its upper body, which was falling down toward the city.

Clind: “That is not good. If I make a mess, Annerose-sama will reprimand me. —Delight.”

Narrowing his eyes at the future reprimand, Clind continued to move the fingertips of his outstretched hand. With that simple movement, the upper body of the huge Lightbug, which was about to smash into the street, was completely disassembled.

If the once formidable mass dispersed and broke into countless Lightbugs, the damage to the streets would be trivialized in one fell swoop.

There was a sound of something granular and hard steadily dropping, and the scattered Lightbugs fell like stones. They quickly rose up and gathered again, trying to get back together to reform the huge Lightbug.

Clind: “If the structure is disturbed, then they cannot reform. A little creativity. Instantaneous.”

Garfiel: “Ha! I don’t get what’cha doing, but…!”

Clind’s attack and ingenuity were neither seen nor understood whatsoever. But as long as Clind was on his side, he did not care. Garfiel was able to come to that conclusion.

He stomped down, cracked the streets, and the rising earth drilled the Lightbugs from directly below.

This was the same technique that was used at the factory, much to Frederica’s outrage, but it was the best solution for killing a large area of targets. Afterward, he would have to convince Leno that the damage was unavoidable.

Garfiel: “So, why’re ya here again?”

Clind: “I was on my way to the Master’s residence, accompanied by Annerose-sama. Seeing that, Annerose-sama ordered me to deal with the situation. Commanding.”

Garfiel: “Oh, that little miss, is it?”

The huge Lightbug, which had been broken apart and reduced to half its original size, released a ray of heat that was also reduced to half power. The upraised shield of earth caught it, and the two exchanged a few words behind the mud wall.

Clind’s answer made Garfiel recall an image of Annerose, and it made sense.

She was nine years old, but she was so mature that it was hard to believe that. In fact, Garfiel, who did not know much about the world, had a lot of level headed youths around him.

Certainly Annerose, but also Petra. Sticking close to Frederica and so on, Petra often glared at Garfiel with her round eyes, as if he were an enemy.

This time, she was very hostile to the idea of him going out alone with his sister.

Garfiel: "—. Oh, that's remindin' me, Sis sure is takin' her time."

Clind: "Frederica? I do not see her, but she accompanied you? Inquiry."

Garfiel: "Oh, she went to the mansion to fetch that bastard Roswaal…"

If it was his sister's beastly legs, then she should have arrived at the mansion around the time the huge Lightbug started to move. From there to here, there should have been some kind of follow-up to the attack and defense.

It was then that Garfiel had such a question—

???: "—Hii, yahh!"

The shout coincided with a long spear of ice being thrust into the torso of the huge Lightbug.

Garfiel: "…"

With Garfiel and Clind firmly rooted in place, the huge Lightbug was trying to reconstruct its shattered body in the meantime, and its intentions were successfully thwarted by a single, powerful shot.

The huge Lightbug was thrown back by the impact and fell to the ground, scattering fragments. The air hissed as the large hole in its body froze over. It was a "regeneration-killing" blow that interfered with the regrowth of its huge body.

And the one who unleashed that merciless icy blow was—

???: "Garfiel! And Clind-san! Are you two okay?"

A young girl with flowing silver hair, Emilia, rushed down the street with nimble footsteps. She was probably the one who delivered the coup de grace that was too powerful to be called just a reinforcement.

Seeing that figure, Garfiel closed one eye, and Clind politely bowed.

Clind: “Emilia-sama, I apologize for the inconvenience. Regretful.”

Emilia: “Huh? Don’t worry about it. I should be sorry; I just came out of nowhere and didn’t even talk to you two. From a distance, I just saw someone being attacked…”

Garfiel: “That’s a very Emilia-sama-like answer…”

She rushed in and made her opening move with such power. It was the ultimate display of her character, but her nonchalant attitude was all the more frightening when you saw the results of her attack.

Emilia: “Roswaal told me just to freeze the wounds of those little ones who were sticking together.”

Garfiel: “Ha! So that’s the bastard’s meddlin’, huh? No wonder I thought ya were so merciless… So, I don’t see Sis; did you leave her behind?”

Emilia: “Frederica?”

Emilia’s eyes widened in surprise. Her reaction made Garfiel feel uncomfortable, and he tilted his head in puzzlement with an, “Ah?”.

Garfiel: “Sis went to the mansion to ask for help. That’s why ya showed up, right, Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “I came because I happened to see a big light in the distance. I talked to Roswaal and rushed over. Subaru and the others will be here later…”

Garfiel: “Sis didn’t come back?”

Garfiel’s cheeks stiffened at Emilia’s unexpected statement. Frederica, who had gone to tell them about the huge Lightbug, would not have taken any detours along the way. First of all, if she had not passed Emilia, who had come straight here from the mansion, then—

Garfiel: “Sis got stopped by some enemy…?”

Clind: “…”

Emilia: “Huh? What?”

Clind silently narrowed his eyes at Garfiel’s intuition. Only Emilia couldn’t keep up with the situation, so her being confused could no’t be helped.

Garfiel tried to choose the right words, wondering how to explain it.

Clind: “Emilia-sama, while this is impolite, can we leave this to you? Delegation.”

With that said, Clind skipped most of the explanation and told Emilia just the conclusion. Then, in front of the two astonished people, he indicated with his hand toward the huge Lightbug.

Clind: “We believe that the adversary who controls that thing has kidnapped Frederica, putting the custody of Frederica between him and me. I would like to ask Emilia-sama, who is a good match to dispatch that thing. Petition.”

Emilia: “—. Is everything okay with the two of you?”

Clind: “Assuredly so. Promise.”

The exchange between Emilia and Clind was established, leaving Garfiel behind.

With a promise exchanged, Emilia faced the huge Lightbug with a serious look on her face, holding up both hands and outpouring powerful mana. Seeing that power, the huge Lightbug’s attention was drawn to Emilia.

Behind her, Clind looked back at Garfiel, and,

Clind: “As you have heard. Leave this place to Emilia-sama, and we will go to Frederica. Search.”

Garfiel: “Oi, oi, oi, are ya sure ‘bout that? But Emilia-sama is an important person not only to the Captain, but to that bastard

Roswaal as well. That’s…”

Clind: “Putting something in a frame and displaying it is not the only way to treat it with care. Differentiation.”

Immediately after Clind’s words, the huge Lightbug emitted a screeching cry—or rather, a ray of heat that made the atmosphere scream, but Emilia’s shield of ice defended against it, and it was reflected back into the sky.

Emilia’s ranged attack power and adaptability were better suited for a fight that did not cause damage to the city.

Clind: “And thus, we have our roles to play. Right people in the right place.”

Garfiel: “Role…”

To Garfiel’s question, Clind closed one eye and then answered.

Clind: “—Frederica, to rescue her. Immediacy.”

11

???: “—It’s about time you woke up, Lassy.”

At such a call, slowly, Frederica’s consciousness was roused.

Frederica: “…”

The first thing she felt was two different kinds of cold against her body. One was a cold wind that caressed her skin directly, and the other was a hard, cold feeling that rested against the entire backside of her body.

Futhermore, what she noticed after feeling the cold was—

Frederica: “Both of my arms…”

???: “You are being restrained. Apologies, but I’d like you to refrain from using your beastification. If you don’t, the blade on the inner part of the shackles is designed to slice through that beautiful skin. I would like to avoid that. At any rate…”

Frederica: “…”

???: “—Lassy’s blood would be wasted, wouldn’t it?”

Both of Frederica’s hands were shackled, and she was restrained by chains; within her field of vision, a figure entered. It was a strange-looking man peering at her as she lay on a bed of iron.

He had slicked-back gray hair and a sickly-white face. His bony cheeks and neck gave the impression of emaciation, but it was his eyes that were most striking.

His gaze, devoid of temperature, was colder than the wind and the bed.

And when the man said the word “blood”, Frederica’s fangs trembled.

Frederica: “So you are after my…blood, right?”

???: “Surely you are aware of this, Lassy of rare blood. Your blood is a treasured resource.”

Frederica was more than convinced by this simple statement. The enemy’s goal was clear.

—The term “Rare Blood” mentioned by the man meant, as one might expect, blood that was extremely rare.

The blood was different from that of normal people; Frederica did not know the specific differences, but the taste, smell, and various other things contained within the blood were different from those of normal people.

In many cases, the difference seemed to be ritually useful, and Roswaal once told her that more than a handful were seeking Frederica’s rare blood.

This rare blood led Roswaal to agree to take Frederica out of the Sanctuary in the first place.

???: “To be honest, I was surprised. I never thought that someone with such rare blood as you, Lassy, would come to the city so openly. Not once, not twice, but many times.”

Somewhere, Frederica heard the man’s voice, trembling with glee as she observed her surroundings.

The chill in the air and the wind indicated that this was most likely a cave where the sun did not reach, or underground. It was annoying to the unbeastified and completely naked Frederica that she was not allowed to wear even a piece of cloth. The other truly uncaring party probably thought Frederica was a blood bag or something.

Truly, the fact that his interest was only in her blood stirred the recesses of Frederica’s mind.

Frederica: “What are you going to do with my blood?”

???: “Oh, interested? That’s good. Lassy has a right to hear. —That’s because Lassy’s name should belong to the great achievement that will begin here.”

The man nodded his head brilliantly like a doll and took a step to the side, looking amused. Frederica was taken aback upon seeing something that had been hidden behind the man’s back.

For there were cabinets and innumerable glass vessels, also filled with blood, lined up in rows.

Frederica: “These, are…”

???: “These are the blood samples of my soul. I am a researcher. I am searching for a way to save people that does not rely on magic. Particularly with blood. Like mana, there are many mysteries surrounding blood in the human body that haven’t been uncovered.”

Frederica: “The mysteries of blood…”

???: “To unravel them is akin to unraveling the secrets of life. That’s why I turned to your blood, Lassy. —Rare blood will advance my research into the future!”

Frederica was flabbergasted to see the man’s eyes glowing with ecstasy. There was no hint of a lie or hesitation. The man was serious about saving people.

His words of salvation were his genuine intentions, not the construction of a desire for knowledge or curiosity.

???: “Consider that a drop of your blood, Lassy, saves one life. Isn’t that a great honor? Rare blood is a chosen honor.”

Frederica: “An honor… you caused chaos in the city to capture me?”

???: “Using the rare forms of life that occur in Costuul. The shallow ones disparage it as a “Lightbug”, but it is nothing of the sort. Despite appearances, it is a being that was naturally born.…”

The man responded to Frederica’s question without hiding his frankness. But the answers to those questions only left one’s mouth open in surprise.

Within a month, the man spotted Frederica’s rare blood, and in a much shorter period of time, he developed a plan to get his hands on Frederica. So he managed to create a diversion and capture her simultaneously.

Truly, he was a maddeningly obsessive opponent that was hard to deal with.

???: “—Yo, Doc. Can I talk to ya for a sec?”

Then, a thick, wild voice, the opposite of the high-pitched man’s voice, overtook him.

The voice sounded familiar. The figure of the other man also quickly came into her view. It was the muscular blond man, the one who had beaten and restrained Frederica.

The man looked at Frederica on the bed and whistled.

???: “Wowie, That’s a nice view. This is so good, I could stay here forever.”

???: “What’s going on, Hayden-kun? I am speaking right now of my noble mission to the rare-blooded woman…”

Hayden: “Ahhhhh, those things can wait. It seems like we’ve got a visitor coming our way. Whaddya wanna do, Doc?”

The researcher, who was called “Doc” by the man who radiated a ferocious presence, had a clouded face. As it was, the researcher bit his nails and muttered in a nervous voice, “You”…

Researcher: “Once again, what meaning is there in stopping my noble mission… You, you, you, you! You ruffian who doesn’t understand the gravity of the situation!”

The researcher became enraged and grabbed one of the blood samples from the cabinet. He thrust it at the man in front of him.

Researcher: “Hayden-kun! Hunt down the intruders! Fulfill your duty!”

Hayden: “Good grief, I hate it when people treat violence as my duty. Well, ya ain’t wrong.”

Having said that, the man took the blood sample with two fingers and went to follow the researcher’s instructions. Just before he did so, he turned back to Frederica, gave her a wink, and,

Hayden: “I hope you look forward to my return. The Doc wants ya and I to partner up, my dearie, in order to increase the supply of rare blood.”

Frederica: “—I certainly will not.”

Hayden: “A strong-willed woman, I like ya.”

Waving a hand that held a blood sample from over his back, the man disappeared from sight.

Seeing this, Frederica tensed her arms. The chains clinked, and pain shot through her wrists.

Researcher: “I said it’s useless. You can’t remove them, Lassy. Oh, what a waste.”

The blade inserted inside the handcuffs sliced a shallow cut across the skin of Frederica’s wrist. Then the researcher looked at the dripping blood and shook his head, sadness in his eyes.

Then the researcher cleared his throat, and,

Researcher: “I was going to wait until Hayden-kun was back, but then again, I can’t. I want to enjoy the taste of rare blood and its mysteries… Well, at least one part of it.”

Frederica: “Uu…”

The wide-eyed researcher knelt beside her and gently brought his face close to the wound on Frederica’s wrist. Feeling the man’s rough breathing, Frederica gnashed her teeth and endured her shame.

If Hayden was sent to intercept, then someone had come to Frederica’s aid. —Whether it was Garfiel or Roswaal, she didn’t know.

Frederica: “…”

Frederica was terrified of the sensation of having her wrist licked, but she simply held her breath and closed her mind to the humiliation that she endured at this moment.

12

Garfiel: “Usually, when ya kidnap someone, you cover yer tracks, don’t ya? But this one left such an obvious stench behind. What’re they doin’…?”

Clind: “Common sense would suggest that either the criminals were careless or it is a trap aimed at us; given that Frederica was taken, the latter is more likely. Conjecture.”

Not long after leaving Costuul, Garfiel, and Clind were standing in front of a cave.

It was a cave dug out from under a cliff, with the entrance to the hideout being magically disguised. The clifftop offered a great view of the Industrial City in the distance, making it a perfect location for nefarious schemes.

However, other than the disguised entrance, it was a lousy trick.

Garfiel: “I can smell Sis from the inside. She smells like blood, too…”

Clind: “Yes, but why? Questioning.”

Garfiel: “It doesn’t smell like Sis’s blood. But there’s a shitload of it.”

Wrinkling his nose, Garfiel was sickened by the smell of blood wafting from inside the cave.

There were individual differences in the smell of blood, and the smell of Frederica’s blood was particularly distinctive. When compared to his memory, the smell of blood in the air was not from Frederica. The smell of blood was too strong.

Garfiel: “Ten or twenty people ain’t enough for this amount…”

Clind: “The smell of blood other than Frederica’s rare blood… is it the kind of vampire that seeks rare blood? Rumination.”

Garfiel: “Rare blood?”

Garfiel cocked his head at the unfamiliar term. Clind responded with a short “affirmative” while repositioning his monocle.

Clind: “Frederica is the owner of a unique type of blood known as rare blood. This blood has ritualistic influence and a strong sensitivity to mana. —Even Dragons are captivated by it. Divine qualities.”

Garfiel: “Huh? I ain’t ever heard of it! If Sis is like that, then my amazin' self is…"

Clind: "No, rare blood is…it's unrelated to genetic siblings or parent-child relationships. Rare blood is more like a single-generation mutation; Frederica's blood is special, for better or worse. Absolute."

Garfiel: "…'n some bastard is tryin' to get it? Fuck that."

Sharply gnashing his fangs and laying his anger bare, Garfiel stepped into the cave. Just the same, Clind also followed behind his back; their footsteps echoed in the dark passageway.

Naturally, if the entrance was disguised, there would be no traps in the cave. Since the hiding place was their hideout, there was no way that anyone would be foolish enough to lay traps.

To start with—

???: "—If we gave ya that kinda welcome, it wouldn't have been worth the trouble of inviting ya, would it?"

Garfiel: "…"

A voice greeted them as they entered a passageway and arrived at a slightly open space.

In front of them, a tall man with tied-up golden hair and a ferocious smile awaited them. Garfiel's muscles rejoiced at the ferocious dread that overflowed from this man's entire body.

—He was undeniably a formidable opponent.

Clind: "This is most unusual. A half-breed of the lionman tribe. Scarce."

Garfiel: "Really? To see through him at a glance, it seems you're not just some smug bastard."

Having his lineage discovered at a glance, the man who had been paying attention to Garfiel then took interest in Clind.

The man crossed his strong arms and smirked as if to flaunt his white fangs.

???: “Correctly guessed, I am the lionman, Hayden Garo. This will probably be very short-lived, but I’m looking forward to getting to know you, both of you. Especially that blonde boy.”

Garfiel: “Ya picked my amazin’ self; ya gotta be full of yerself, ain’tcha? …Well, who was the one who had made a show of leaving Sis’s smell behind?”

Hayden: “It’s a love letter to ya. I’m thrilled ya followed it for me, boy. Ya see, I love to beat the shit outta younger guys. —I’m really fond of breaking guys like ya, my friend.”

Garfiel: “You’re gonna break my amazin’ self? What the fuck are ya talking about…”

Clind: “—Truly, you do not understand. Disappointment.”

Garfiel: “Oh?”

Hayden: “Yeah?”

The man who identified himself as Hayden as well as Garfiel turned to Clind at the same time. At the end of their gaze, Clind simply shook his head, as if depressed.

Then, he gently placed his hand on Garfiel’s shoulder beside him.

Clind: “Admittedly, Garfiel-sama’s heart is immature and green, and, therefore, precious. However, if you are yearning for the brightness of its potential, the pleasure you take in casting shadows upon it is shallow and thoughtless. It is too careless a judgment and desire, I must say. Disappointment.”

Hayden: “—I see. You’ve come all the way here in your fancy clothes. I thought ya must be a weirdo, but I guess that don’t make ya any less a scholar”

Clind: “Comparisons are meaningless. I am what I am, and he is what he is. There is just a difference in principle. Separation.”

Garfiel: “I really don’t get it, but…”

Garfiel scratched his head and narrowed his eyes at the exchange between Hayden and Clind. As he did, he looked over at Clind, who was standing beside him.

Garfiel: “So what’re you tryin’ to say ‘bout my amazin’ self?”

Clind: “You have an unbreakable brilliance. Our adversary who speaks of breaking it, for example, is laughable. Absurd.”

Garfiel: “—Ha! That’s pretty easy to understand, ain’t it!”

Hearing Clind’s answer, Garfiel’s previously hazy face cleared. Garfiel glared at Hayden in front of him, slamming his fists together in front of his chest.

In short, Garfiel found himself in a fight. And on top of that, his older sister was also kidnapped.

Garfiel: “Then I guess I don’t need to go easy on ya. …Go, Clind.”

Clind: “—You do not mind? Affirmation.”

Garfiel: “The bastard wanted me, right? It’s also sickening for Sis’s blood to be drained outta her. I’m countin’ on ya.”

Clind: “I understand. Certainly.”

Hearing Garfiel’s request, Clind took a step back. Hayden, who had been watching the exchange, held out his hand and said, “Hold up,”

Hayden: “Stop talking away as you please. If you pass me by, that researcher will be furious. Then I won’t get any of my owed blood, either.”

Garfiel: “Blood?”

Hayden: “That’s right. That researcher’s completely nuts…but he’s getting results. People who are really crazy come up with ideas that others normally wouldn’t!”

As he said this, Hayden raised the glass container he had been hiding behind his back—a vessel filled with blood, above his head and poured its contents into his own mouth. There was a sense of disgust at the act itself, but that too was fleeting.

—Overshadowing the disgust, a powerful sense of caution rushed through his entire body, and Garfiel assumed a battle stance.

—Immediately after, Hayden's kick, closing the distance in the blink of an eye, hit Garfiel, who had been holding his ground, right in the middle of his crossed arms, sending him flying backward.

Hayden: "Ha ha! Your lovely big sister took one of those shots to the belly and collapsed!"

Garfiel: "—hk, what the fuck are ya doing to Sis's belly? Ya perverted bastard!"

Garfiel howled, swinging his kicked arm. For an instant, he turned his gaze to where Clind was. This should be an opportunity to go and rescue Garfiel's sister. —But his figure was already gone.

Seeing this, Garfiel put strength into both his legs. And then—

Garfiel: "Raah!"

To get back at him, Garfiel launched a spinning back kick, aiming for the advancing Hayden's chest. The rock-crushing blow caught Hayden in the torso, and the big man backed off with a cry of pain.

Hayden: "Oh! That's good, that's good, that's good! But now it's my turn—"

Garfiel: "What crap are ya talkin' 'bout?"

Hayden: "—hk."

His knee thrust into the face of the once-delighted Hayden, leaving his body shaking from the blow. Bending over, he grabbed him by the back of the neck, blood dripping from his nose, then slammed him down hard onto the ground head first.

Garfiel laughed, snorting at the rising discontent and the smell of Hayden’s own bleeding.

He furiously crushed his resented enemy for doing something so outrageous to his older sister—

Garfiel: “Ya know, my amazin’ self came outta the Sanctuary to smash misguided bastards like ya.”

Right above his head, Hayden’s face took a direct hit from the sole of Garfiel’s shoe. The impact, which shook the entire cave violently, mercilessly shattered his bitter enemy’s nose.

13

The wind blew; that was the moment he was eluded.

Clind: “—You should put on this coat. Your appearance is unsightly. Indignation.”

Upon speaking, he placed the coat on her naked upper body. That assured concern was infuriating.

The humiliation of a moment ago was overlaid by another humiliation.

Wondering why, of all people, he had come to this place.

???: “—hk. How did you get in? Hayden-kun is…”

Clind: “If that was him, he is in the middle of entertaining my companion. I do not expect him to survive for very long, but it would be insensitive for her to remain in this place for any longer. Separation.”

???: “Likewise…”

Clind: “—Blood sample collector, Leonardo Baroness, your savagery ends here. Demise.”

Frederica, her movement restrained on top of the bed, was unable to see the entire exchange. However, she could see the back of the young man putting his jacket on—Leonardo, the researcher, faced him.

Leonardo's cheeks stiffened as he shook his head at the young man's pronouncement. Then, as if he could not accept his own demise, he reached for the blood samples behind him.

Leonardo: "There is, there is no way I will stop! You will not keep me from my progress! Myyy breakthrough!"

His voice trailing off, Leonardo swept away the blood samples with his arm and dropped them to the ground in one fluid motion. The sound of shattering glass echoed throughout the darkened room, and the smell of blood permeated the air. —Leonardo, thus bathed in a large amount of blood, began to let out a low growl.

—His body, which had been only skin and bones, bulged out, and the color of his pale skin turned bright red.

While maintaining his human appearance with merely a single layer of skin, Leonardo was transformed by the power of the abnormal blood. Upon smelling the fragrant blood samples, Frederica was overcome with nausea.

It was impossible to imagine how many people were sacrificed and what was produced by this mixture of blood.

Leonardo: "With this all-powerful blood, all wrongs will be eradicated! Lassy here will be the foundation for this—"

Clind: "Unfortunately, I cannot spare the time to listen to your unbearable delusions. Apology. —Moreover, she is the Master's property. It is my contract to protect her. Adherence."

The young man dared not step back in the face of the bloated Leonardo's caustic words.

Hearing this quiet declaration of war, Leonardo's bright red eyeballs trembled, and he thrust out his arms.

It was a simple movement, but his arm was being swung with an extraordinary amount of muscle mass, making it an impressive weapon of destruction. A single blow would shatter even the thickest stone wall, and it approached the young man's slender body without mercy.

However—

Clind: "—The attitude of aiming high is commendable. It is an idea I would not have had. Impressive."

Leonardo: "Is that so!"

Clind: "However, there are too many problems with that methodology. Reckless."

The sole of Clind's shoe met the blow of his arm, and the young man's body lightly flew through the air. Then the young man, twisting in midair, reached out and clenched his five outstretched fingers. With that, Leonardo's left arm was flattened without a sound.

Leonardo: "Ga, aaaaah?!"

Leonardo's enlarged arm was crushed entirely at the wrist, elbow, and shoulder joints. The same damage was also done to his right arm.

It was all linked to the opening and closing of the young man's hand, a guaranteed kill.

Clind: "This, is not the most desirable method. Tristitia."

Leonardo: "Not…not yet!"

Clind: "Oh my. Admiration."

The young man who had landed and brushed off his knees widened his eyes. The reason for this was the presence of Lightbugs crawling across the lab floor, where the smell of blood lingered, attaching themselves to the young man's limbs.

If the disturbances in Costuul were Leonardo's doing, then of course he would be the one who was manipulating the Lightbugs. Whether that was through blood or some other means remained unclear—

Leonardo: “If I seal that hand, you won’t be able to attack me again!”

Leonardo let out a deafening howl at the certainty of victory, as if his pain were being erased by some sanguine magic power. Leonardo rushed forward with a shout to crush the young man, whose movements were being sealed by the Lightbugs.

Then, just before the massive body’s tackle caused the young man’s body to burst—

Leonardo: “—ah.”

Clind: “I am truly sorry. My hand, is inconsequential. Fascination.”

Leonardo’s knees were crushed, and he fell headfirst to the ground, helplessly. The huge figure was left completely at his mercy, and the man, with all four limbs crushed, lost his fighting strength.

It was an overpowering offensive and defensive battle that lasted less than a few seconds.

Clind: “Frederica, are you unharmed? Confirmation.”

Frederica: “Y, yes, I am fine. As long as you take off these shackles…”

Immediately after she said this, the iron shackles that restrained her wrists were abruptly torn off and removed. What Frederica struggled so hard to remove was removed so quickly by him that she could not tell if it had been touched.

However, Frederica did not refer to it and got up, covering herself with a jacket.

Frederica: “—So, what has happened to Garf and Costuul?”

Clind: “To say that as soon as you get up is unacceptable. Confirming your well-being should be the first priority. Imperative. Of course, it is ridiculous for a servant to cause concern for their master. Pitiable.”

Frederica: “Ugg…answer the question! Actually, why are you even here? This is not funny, Clind!”

On the iron bed, Frederica was fuming, forgetting to cover her mouth, and the young man—Clind, ostentatiously covered his ears. Frederica’s anger only grew at that gesture.

Ignoring Frederica’s concerns, Clind told her, “You need not worry,”

Clind: “Garfiel-sama is fighting that man’s companion, but they are no match for him. Costuul is being attended to by Emilia-sama. Perfection.”

Frederica: “Garf aside, Emilia-sama…? Why not the Master?”

Clind: “The Master has his own plans. Forward-thinking. Now then…”

Frederica: “Now then, what is it?”

Frederica cocked her head in astonishment, and Clind looked back at her and sighed. Then, furrowing his shapely eyebrows,

Clind: “—As I expected, seeing you grow up is a disappointment. Regret.”

Frederica: “Which part of a person do you look at when you say that?! You pervert!!”

It was an outburst that made her lose all interest in thanking him for saving her life.

14

Garfiel: “That perverted scientist and the lionman bastard were workin’ together. So, did that lionman bastard have the same rare blood as Sis? Realizin’ that, the perverted scientist got greedy.”

Having welcomed the unharmed Clind and the half-naked Frederica, Garfiel lowered the big man to his feet and explained to them what had happened.

The large space was heavily marked by intense signs of the fight between the two men. The blows were also etched into Garfiel as scars, but not as many as the instantly felled Hayden.

The white-eyed Hayden had all of his fangs in his mouth broken off and fainted, with blood bubbling out of his mouth.

Frederica: “He is knocked out, right?”

Garfiel: “He’s a tough bastard, ain’t he, so he ain’t dead. He kept cockily prattlin’ on ‘bout being a lion, so I wasn’t ‘boutta lose to him as a tiger.”

Garfiel was smiling nonchalantly in his triumphant glory, with no trace of sadness on his face. Although that was a relief, did he remember that his older sister had been kidnapped?

Frederica: “Well, I was responsible for getting captured…and it is not reasonable to blame Garf for that…”

Garfiel: “Oh? What’re ya talkin’ ‘bout, Sis? I’m really relieved. I was really worried for ya.”

Frederica: “Really? You have not forgotten about it until just now?”

Frederica glared at him with scornful eyes, and Garfiel scratched his head and looked away. Then he puckered his lips in an apologetic manner.

Garfiel: “But I thought if Clind were there, you’d be okay. Actually, it did work out.”

Frederica: “…It annoys me that your statement is not wrong.”

When told of Garfiel’s reassurances, Frederica was unable to say anything about their validity. The nonchalant man right beside her was an absolute equal to Roswaal for Frederica.

Unlike Roswaal, he was just not someone in whom one could place their trust in without any qualms.

Frederica: “Nevertheless, those Lightbugs, this place, and these people…”

Clind: “An ostracized researcher, who was expelled as a heretic. Amongst which was only one other man, for certain. Frederica, you have nothing to worry about. Evil.”

Frederica: “…”

An ostracized researcher, expelled as a heretic.

Frederica’s eyes were downcast at Clind’s words, and she went deep in thought. She pulled Clind’s jacket tighter around herself and looked at the already-closing wounds on her wrists.

She felt ashamed that the blood that flowed within her had brought about this situation. A long time ago, Clind had told Frederica about the dangers of rare blood, and now she felt pathetic that she had erred in front of him.

He would be disappointed that she couldn’t do what he told her to do. —It was an unpleasant feeling.

On top of that, she also caused trouble for her brother, the master she served, and the many other people who were kind to her.

Clind: “—. You think too much. Misapprehension.”

Frederica: “Huh?”

Clind: “How can the people you care about not care about you? That is just the way it is. Fact.”

Frederica: “…”

Having expected to be reprimanded for her lack of ability, Clind’s words took her by surprise. Her fangs trembled, and heat surged into her ears.

Garfiel: “Oh, yeah, Sis. It really ain’t good to be completely naked. I picked up some of yer clothes just in case.”

Frederica: “Um, ah, thank you for helping me, Garf! I, I will get dressed right away!”

In the corner of the room, Frederica was shown the clothes that Garfiel had brought with him, and she accepted them, then returned to the hallway and happily got dressed. Turning their faces away from her, the men stood side by side.

Garfiel: “I don’t know what rare blood is, but there was a lotta trouble caused in the city just for the sake of Sis, wasn’t there?”

Clind: “It has value for its own sake. —Be wary, Garfiel-sama. Warning.”

Garfiel: “…What is it?”

Clind: “The Master is rarely moved by mere good intentions; if taking Ram is a milestone for the future, Frederica is certainly another one. Keep that in mind. Heed.”

At Clind’s emotionless advice, Garfiel lightly touched his fangs. Then, nodding his head with a “yeah”,

Garfiel: “I never trusted that bastard Roswaal from the get-go. He fits someone you should be suspicious of.”

Clind: “It would seem. It is impossible for Frederica to do that. Devotion.”

Garfiel was dismayed to learn that those words implied Frederica’s trust in Roswaal. Speaking of dismay, there was a presence right behind him—

???: “—hk! Ya let your guard down, ya two!”

The previously fainted Hayden jumped up. He laughed with a bloody, evil look on his face and swung his strong arms at Garfiel and Clind, who had their backs turned to him.

At that moment, Hayden’s vicious blow was about to strike both of them in the back.

Frederica: “—How dare you ruin my time with Garf.”

Hayden: “…”

Leaping out of the darkened passageway, a powerful elbow struck Hayden directly in the face. Hayden flipped around with great force, spinning once before slamming to the floor, and this time being completely silenced.

At Frederica’s strike, Garfiel and Clind, who had been about to intercept Hayden, looked at each other.

Then Frederica, breathing furiously and still with her fist up, turned to them and said,

Frederica: “Thank you for what you did today. —But I am not the kind of person who is so pretty that I have to be protected all the time. I beg your pardon.”

Saying so forcefully, Frederica brushed away her long blonde hair with her hand. Garfiel sighed after seeing her attitude and the words and actions that struck the villain.

Garfiel: “Gu-ha! Ha-Ha-ha-ha! Don’t make me laugh, Sis, ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Frederica: “Wh, what is so funny?”

Clind: “Frederica, childish bravado is the prerogative of the young. With you, it is painful. Disparity.”

Frederica: “Disproportionate, is that not an exaggeration?!”

Garfiel laughed loudly, and Clind lamented. Hurt by the pair’s attitudes, Frederica relaxed her shoulders.

Frederica: “Good grief…”

—Her skirt, which had been ripped just now by the elbow strike, was now ripped even more than it already was.

—And though that would have been a good way to end it.

???: “Ah! Thank goodness all three of you are okay! So, did you figure out how to stop these little things?”

So shouted Emilia, sliding down the streets on a slab of ice and escaping the attacks of the huge Lightbug. Frederica was made speechless by her question and the city streets that had been ravaged by the fierce attacks.

Next to her, Garfiel and Clind also had an “Oh no” look on their faces.

???: “Emilia-tan is doing a great job, but if we don’t do something, they’re going to run out of town! It’ll be like a big Kaiju battle if it does!”

???: “Subaru! You need to look where you’re going, I suppose! If you make such careless moves, you’re going to end up flattened, in fact!”

Subaru: “Uooowaa!”

Unlike Emilia, who danced about brilliantly, it was Subaru who was running around on the ground holding Beatrice, desperately trying to get the situation under control.

Although it was understandable that he rushed from the mansion and struggled to help Emilia, his abilities would be of no use here. —The city had fallen into that much chaos.

Emilia: “Clind! Did this person tell you how they manipulated the Lightbugs…?”

Clind: “They are in a deep coma, and waking them up would be exceedingly difficult. Infeasible.”

Garfiel: “Well, we’ll just have to destroy ‘em steadily. —Emilia-sama, I’ll lend ya a hand!”

The two main offenders taken out of the cave were unconscious and incapable of being questioned about the Lightbugs’ operation.

In response to this desperate answer, Garfiel immediately opted for an aggressive solution and immediately joined the battle with Emilia, who was pleased.

Clind looked over at this and exhaled; leaving his jacket in Frederica's care, he then said,

Clind: "I have my orders from Annerose-sama. I, too, will assist Emilia-sama. Your—."

Frederica: "—I am also coming."

As Clind was about to proceed, Frederica lined up and said that to him. Hearing this, Clind took a moment to say something, then stopped.

Clind: "You have always been stubborn. Exasperated."

Frederica: "That is my line!"

They argued, and then Frederica and Clind also entered the battle for the defense of Costuul.

In the end, the battle raged on until just before the day's end, when the leading figure, Roswaal, was finally deployed, and the situation was completely quelled.

In response, ironically, Emilia's reputation in Costuul skyrocketed.

Behind the scenes, both Garfiel and Clind secretly received severe reprimands from Petra for ruining Frederica's day-trip outfit.

—But, that was another story.

END

Brotherhood of Pleiades
(CA)

1

—In the west of the Vollachian Empire, there was a lone island surrounded by a lake of isolating waters, Ginunhive. The island, also known as the Gladiator Island, had some unique rules imposed over it.

On the whole, the people who lived on the island were divided into two different groups—the guards who controlled, and the gladiators who were being controlled. Many of the gladiators were criminals or people in debt, or perhaps just people who were simply unlucky enough to be captured by slavers and sent to the island; every single one of them had their own individual circumstances.

But, no matter what their reason for being sent to the island was, the way they were all treated there was impartial.

All that was required of the gladiators was that every few days, when their turn would come around, they just needed to participate in Sparka, a show that turned the techniques and lives of people into a spectacle, and survive through it.

If they had enough luck and true strength, then they would not only be able to survive through many Sparkas and live a long life, but they could also buy their own freedom as a reward, or even gain a position of superiority on the island.

Where personal history and humanity were irrelevant, it was a utopia for savages where only physical strength was esteemed—that was the place known as the Gladiator Island Ginunhive.

???: “—There are lotsa guys who got that misconception, but if ya ask this guy right here, I’d say it’s a fucking dumbass way of thinking.”

Saying that, the man gulped down some cheap alcohol from a coarse wooden cup.

He was a person with ashen-brown hair, dark skin, and thick lips. He had a white scar that seemed to cover his right eye, and present behind the closed eyelid was an artificial replacement eye.

It was not something that could substitute for the eyeball he had lost, but it seemed like something he would be lonely without.

The man's name was Jawsrough. One of the gladiators who lived on this Gladiator Island, and he was quite the celebrity here. — According to the rest, he was known as the lone-wolf Jawsrough.

The reason he was called that was not simply because he did not hang out with anybody else.

Jawsrough: "This place's got the system of Units, where ya gotta trust that strangers've got your back, and they also gotta trust that ya got theirs. Together with one another, ya put your lives on the line. That'd also prolly happen when things get desperate. But…"

???: "But?"

Jawsrough: "If the guy whose back ya gotta look out for is a despicable fucking asshole, then what?"

Confronted with a question right after tilting his head, Natsuki Subaru frowned as he began to ponder.

Occupying a small table in a corner of the dining hall on the island, Jawsrough intently glared at the silent Subaru with his yet functioning left eye.

Subaru's form, reflected in Jawsrough's single eye, appeared to be only eleven or twelve years young.

If one were to think using normal standards, it was not an age where one could possess an answer to Jawsrough's question. However, Jawsrough's gaze had not the light of someone making fun of an ignorant child, nor was it trying to rush Subaru as he pondered; it was merely awaiting a response.

It was likely that hidden under the surface of Jawsrough's attitude, there were expectations for Subaru.

In that case, he had no choice but to meet those expectations.

Therefore, as Subaru took a breath through his nose,

Subaru: "On this island, there are also criminals who messed up outside of here. Maybe they stole, or killed someone, or violated some rule. And among them…"

Jawsrough: "…"

Subaru: "There are also guys who did stuff like stealing from women and children, or even killing them. Are they "fucking assholes"?"

Jawsrough: "—. Hey, you forgot to add the "despicable" part."

At Subaru's words after he had finished thinking, Jawsrough muttered this as he shifted his gaze to the alcohol in his cup. Subaru had not been so twisted as to take that to mean refusal or rejection.

At Jawsrough's attitude, Subaru readjusted his posture in his chair and continued.

Subaru: "The kinds of people that you can't trust with your back. If anything, you wouldn't even want to see their faces to begin with. Was it because those sorts of guys were abandoned by your Unit, that you ended up all alone?"

Jawsrough: "That's also incorrect. They weren't abandoned. They were cut down and discarded."

Subaru: "From the back…"

Jawsrough: "If it's a back that ain't worth looking out for, I'd feel much better just cutting 'em down right away. Ya wouldn't be able to say that the same thing won't end up happening with your comrades either, right?"

Snorting his nose as he gave a cynical smile, Jawsrough tried to continue by saying “That’s why”. Likely, the words that would have followed after were exactly what Subaru was imagining.

If it was exactly what he was imagining, it was a statement that had no need to be said.

Subaru: “I’d be fine with that, then.”

Jawsrough: “…What?”

Subaru: “Whenever you like, if you think my back is unworthy to be looked out for, then you can just pretend that I’m big enough so that it’d be okay for you to cut me down. I’ll make sure you won’t regret it through the way that I stand and present my back to you.”

Jawsrough: “…”

At Subaru’s declaration, Jawsrough opened his eyes wide, and his artificial eye fell out of his right eye socket. Bouncing off the tabletop, it rolled right in front of Subaru. Having realized that, Subaru caught it with his right hand, and pinched it with his fingers as he hoisted it before his face.

Then, locking eyes with the wooden eye at point-blank range, he looked past the prosthetic eye towards Jawsrough. As he looked, Subaru’s mouth was engraved with the smile of a mischievous boy, and,

Subaru: “Give up already and become my comrade, Jawsrough. You’re the last gladiator.”

At Subaru’s encouragement as he flashed his teeth, Jawsrough pressed his hand down on his empty right eye socket, while his remaining left eye slightly wavered, and cast its gaze downward.

That was the final show of resistance before the former lone-wolf, Jawsrough, finally returned to the pack.

2

Subaru: “S-Somehow I even got Jawsrough to become my comrade… It was a long road…”

With a plop, flopping down onto the hard bed in his room, Subaru put his hand over his face.

Occupying his young body was an enormous sense of exhaustion, along with a sense of pride and accomplishment that could rival or even surpass that.

After all, at the current moment, the total number of gladiators held prisoner on this Gladiator Island was upwards of six hundred—He had succeeded in making all of those gladiators his allies, and having them enlist in the Natsuki Schwartz Camp.

Subaru: “That really, took a long time…”

With his view obstructed by his hand on his face, Subaru took a long and deep sigh.

Without thinking about the specific amount of gladiators, Subaru had resolved himself to do it as he got back up on his feet upon his restart. From there, he began to fight anew while considering the circumstances of the island and the situations of the gladiators one thing at a time; that struggle of his were such that both the reader, and the narrator, would shed tears upon its recital.

But, while it began to seem like he would drown in those tears, the fact that he never ceased his fluttering kicks as he swam forward had been rewarded.

Thanks to that, he had gotten one step—

Subaru: “—Closer to painting over that worst possible development.”

Clenching the hand that had been on his face, while a dirty ceiling was reflected in his now open vision, Subaru felt a certain response and reflected upon the progression of the situation.

—This life was Natsuki Subaru’s second lap around the Gladiator Island.

It was not that this was his second time using Return by Death. As far as Return by Death was concerned, it was not on the level of two or three times; the amount of times he had restarted was completely incomparable.

What was meant by the second lap in this situation, was something separate from all his piled up instances of Return by Death, and was a case of turning back time on a much larger scale.

Subaru: "—After all, the way the last lap ended was horrible…"

Flashing through Subaru's mind as he muttered was an ending of despair, one that merely the word "worst" could never fully express.

It had been an ending where his acquaintances on the island, those who he had mutually recognized as comrades, were slain by a murderous blade one after the other; all the other people on the island experienced a massacre; without preventing that, the starting point of Return by Death continued to fall forwards, and it finally solidified itself as a situation where nobody could be saved anymore.

Originally, it was supposed to have been too late. It was supposed to have been that he could no longer save even a single person.

However, Subaru had refused for it to end in such a way, and so, relying on the being that had bestowed upon him the power to fight against the Deaths that he had faced many times—relying upon the Witch, he had been granted a final chance.

Once more, returning to the very first day that he was sent to this Gladiator Island, he had been granted the chance to start over on his fight, so that he would never arrive at that hopeless conclusion again.

Subaru was already in the midst of a plan to avert the total annihilation of the Gladiator Island.

For that purpose—

Subaru: "I will make every single person on this island my comrade."

Once again, it was an absolutely preposterous plan. But, he had no choice but to see it through.

In the future where the Gladiator Island was completely annihilated, everyone on the island would be in the same boat.

In order to drive away the messengers who bring about that calamity, the unity of everyone was absolutely indispensable.

Then, when he had succeeded in making an ally out of the lone-wolf Jawsrough, who among the gladiators he had been unable to find any clues for how to persuade, Subaru had cleared one of the hurdles in the plan.

Subaru: “Honestly, it feels like a speedrun to earn favorability… in the time loop genre, the protagonist often starts to move efficiently and various things happen, but in reality, things don’t go so smoothly.”

In the various manga and games that Subaru had encountered, there were characters with similar circumstances to Subaru; thinking back on his hardships until now, and about the sheer difference that there would have been in the struggle if he would have swapped places with them, he dropped his shoulders.

Unlike video games, the people Subaru was encountering in reality also had consciousness and emotions, so if he were to undertake the doctrine of efficiency and ignore those emotions, those people would not honestly join hands with him.

For that reason, he had tasted the failure of being unable to construct personal relationships many times, and hence—

???: “—Basu! Basu! I heard all about it!”

As he thought back on those hardships, a boisterous voice sounded from the front of the room. Then, without hesitation, the voice’s owner forced the door open and burst in wearing a cheerful face.

His blue hair tied behind his head, clad in vibrant pink and blue clothes, was the pretty boy—Cecilus Segmunt, the problem child of the Gladiator Island who proclaimed himself as the owner of that name.

Cecilus Segmunt was the name of this country's strongest warrior, and though Subaru generally thought that the boy in front of him was probably the real deal, it was still an unsettled matter, and hence it would continue to be treated as a self-proclamation.

In any case, with quite the delighted face, Cecilus looked upon Subaru on the bed, and—

Cecilus: "It seems that you've finally persuaded Jawsrough-san, now haven't you?! My my, when Basu first said something like "I'm going to make everyone on the island my comrade", I was really quite happy with all that big talk, but dear me, I really must say bravo, I'm quite amazed that you've come this far!"

Subaru: "…Ahh, ummm, is that a congratulations? Ceci…"

Cecilus: "Congratulations? Indeed, it certainly is congratulations! Although there are many gladiators who have come to the Gladiator Island Ginunhive thus far, there's been nobody who has harbored ambition and aspirations quite like Basu and come so close to realizing them! It's something that should be extolled as an incredibly great undertaking!"

Subaru: "Then, now at the end, are you going to boast about how powerful your own fate was that you picked me up along the coast?"

Cecilus: "That's absolutely right! As I was aimlessly and innocently going on one of my occasional walks outside, I ended up picking up Basu. That is the precise evidence of what I possess! Perhaps it's the basis as to why I am the leading actor of this world!"

Openly singing his own praises, Cecilus gave a smile while feeling good, and Subaru gave a wry smile in return.

Cecilus was firing out a series of words as if he was a machine gun, but surprisingly, he felt no discomfort in being made to listen to those overwhelming words. The person concerned had no hesitation or restraint while speaking, and yet perhaps it was because his choice of words was fair and delicate.

Just as he called himself the leading actor, it seemed that he had the dignity to not speak of things he did not want others to hear.

Cecilus: “Nonetheless, you really shouldn’t be careless, Basu.”

Subaru: “Careless?”

Being told so, Subaru sat up straight on the bed. Then, as Cecilus nodded with a “Yes, indeed”, he thrust his finger at the speed of lightning to the tip of Subaru’s nose.

It was really too fast for even his eyes to perceive, and bad for his heart.

Subaru: ““Careless”, just what am I being careless about?”

Cecilus: “I think that you must certainly feel pretty good about winning nearly all of the gladiators on the island over to your side, but Ginunhive isn’t so easy that your conquest would be completed with only that. It’s an island that has only ever had a single escapee since it first became known as the Gladiator Island.”

Subaru: “Escapee…”

Cecilus: “It’s not something unrelated to you, right? After all, Basu’s objective is to get off of the island.”

Thinking about how he had been rambling on and on, he now cut into the crux of the matter with a brief comment.

Witnessing that good use of conversational arts akin to a combat style, Subaru scratched his cheek. He had hit the bullseye, but until now, Subaru had not spoken even once to Cecilus about something like getting off the island.

Cecilus: “Oya oya it seems like you are quite surprised but it’s a matter of course. After all, if it’s become this much of a rumor across the island, my ears have also happened to hear the leak about Basu’s identity.”

Subaru: “Don’t tell me that the guards also know about this?!”

Cecilus: “Ah, you don’t need to worry about that. I may have gone a little over with the things I just said. What I mean by rumors on the island is merely just within the network of gladiators. Okay?”

Subaru: “OK OK geez, you’re confusing me…”

Because Cecilus had limited the words that he had used to express himself, it almost seemed like Subaru’s plan was about to collapse.

Of course, regarding the topic of Subaru’s “identity” that Cecilus had just brought up, he would make effective use of it against those who controlled this island, but it would be inconvenient if the management had already heard about it.

If they were to hear about it, he would ensure that it would be during the scene where the display would be the utmost effective.

Subaru: “However, I just narrowly escaped it there, but it wouldn’t be strange if it were to slip out sometime…”

Cecilus: “stare~~”

Subaru: “On that point, I guess I should remind everyone to not spread the rumor, and…”

Cecilus: “stare~~, stare~~”

Subaru: “…What is it, Ceci? Your stare and emphasis are really noisy.”

Subaru had placed his hand to his chin as he pondered, and Cecilus had given an intense stare to his side-profile. He had even gone out of his way to add emphasis to the intensity of his stare by using vocalizing onomatopoeia, but upon seeing Subaru’s frowning reaction, Cecilus let out a “No no no!” as he began to exaggeratedly wave his hands around, and,

Cecilus: “You are quite seemingly looking straight ahead to the future but you are still neglecting that which is under your very feet, Basu! Don’t you understand? I only said nearly all of the island's gladiators. Isn't there a difference between nearly all and all? That should be doubtless!"

Subaru: "Yep, I do know that though."

Cecilus: "So then so then so then! That stubborn lone-wolf Jawsrough-san may have certainly been quite the formidable obstacle, but even he was nothing more than an opening act that served as a prelude to the main event! You shouldn't be forgetting such an obvious fact!"

Subaru: "Yep, I also know that."

While listening to Cecilus, who used up the entirety of his lung capacity each time he spoke, Subaru turned his head back when Cecilus unusually made one or two valid points.

Indeed, securing Jawsrough had been a large step for the sake of Subaru's objective, but he was only one of the hurdles which Subaru had to overcome, not the entirety of the obstacles.

At Subaru's answer and expression of determination, Cecilus slightly widened his eyes.

From there, his cheeks eased into a very delighted look.

Cecilus: "Is that so now, is that so? In that case, what do you intend to do next?"

Subaru: "Well, I'll just say that a secret is a secret for now, and that it's something I want to discuss with everyone. In regards to the main event of this island, we'll also go into more detail about that during that conversation."

Cecilus: "Fufufu, I see, I see, you're building to the climax. But alas! No matter how much advanced preparations and war arrangements you make, the height of the wall that is the main event is not something you can be so sure of!"

Putting his hands in the sleeves of his kimono, Cecilus flapped the fabric around as he felt elated with triumph.

Cecilus had devoted himself to preaching about the greatest enemy, the thing known as carelessness, and giving a nod to his manner of speaking, Subaru got up off of the bed and headed towards the hallway.

Then—

???: "—Schwartz-sama, everyone is currently gathered in the dining hall."

With that, greeting Subaru as he exited the room was a young girl, clad in a kimono different to the one worn by Cecilus. Out of her head grew two splendid horns, and she was a deergirl of the same generation as the current Subaru, Tanza.

Tanza had a reason to survive through this Gladiator Island, where she had been sent off to together with Subaru. Giving that cooperative young girl a large grin, Subaru gave her a pat on the shoulder and let out a "Got it",

Subaru: "Well then, shall we begin?—Conquest of the Gladiator Island, Final Stage."

Such had been the manner of his declaration to both Tanza and Cecilus.

3

Hiain: "Yo, bro, we're all good to go whenever you are. So when are we gonna begin?—The simultaneous uprising, where we'll seize full control of the island!"

As Subaru arrived at the dining hall, waiting for him at their usual table was the lizardman—Hiain, who gave a big wave of his hands, and dropped such a bombshell announcement in a loud voice.

He was scared of this information getting out; such a thought unconsciously discouraged the resolve which Subaru had just settled in front of his room, but Hiain, carefree as he was, received a hard bash to the back of his head from somebody.

Screaming out a "Gyaaaargh!" Hiain cowered as he embraced his own head. The one clenching their own fist behind him was a man who had skeleton-like tattoos over his body, Weitz.

While wearing an angered expression that amplified the fierce look he had from his tattoos,

Weitz: “Stop incessantly blathering on with that loud voice, ya lizard bastard… Think about Schwartz’s position…!”

Hiain: “S-Still, that ain’t something ya should hit me over! It really ain’t!”

Weitz: “If that were true, then I would’ve had to slit yer throat there…”

Hiain: “The fuck’s wrong with ya, asshole?!”

Receiving a glare from Weitz as he spoke in a hushed voice, Hiain glared right back at him, speaking in a loud voice.

There were many times when these two, who could not get along no matter what, would quarrel and glare at each other in this way.

Idra: “Good grief, the more you two cause a ruckus like that, the more attention you’re going to attract. That would probably be much more bothersome for Schwartz.”

Ignoring the quarreling duo and giving a wry smile was the other person seated at their table, Idra. Stroking his beard, he pat his hand on the chair next to his own, and,

Idra: “Schwartz, come and sit. I’m no Hiain, but I was hoping to speak with you.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I also intended to do just that. Tanza, next to me. Ceci, if you’re gonna be noisy, go over there. If you can be quiet, then feel free to sit with us.”

Cecilus: “To tell me to be quiet is a rather futile effort but I suppose it’ll have to do. I’d much rather stay silent than not be able to be present for the conversation beyond this point.”

Giving a very long and drawn out explanation, Cecilus seated himself at the edge of the table. Ascertaining that, Subaru seated himself next to Idra, and next to him sat Tanza.

Even Hiain and Weitz, who were wrangling, upon seeing Subaru and the rest take their seats, had no choice but to cease their dispute, and sit at the table.

And then—

Hiain: "—So, when are we gonna do it? I said it earlier, but everyone is good to go."

Weitz: "Lizard bastard…"

Hiain: "What the hell! I'm talkin' in a really quiet voice, the hell did I do wrong?!"

Despite lowering his voice, Hiain received a death stare from Weitz upon digging up the topic from just earlier. Just when it seemed like those two were about to go at it for a second round, Subaru extended his arms out and exclaimed "Wait!".

To begin with, it would be futile for the two of them to begin fighting here.

In any case—

Subaru: "Sorry for getting you all fired up, but we won't be doing a simultaneous uprising. For all the gladiators to seize control of the island, and for us to be its rulers… that's not what I desire, after all."

Hiain: "Ngha?!"

Weitz: "What…?"

When clearly told that they had misunderstood their course of action, naturally Hiain, and even Weitz, who ought to have been opposed to the former, both widened their eyes in surprise.

Somehow, even though he had rebuked Hiain's hasty conduct, it seemed that Weitz had also believed without a doubt that their course of action was to seize control of the island by brute force.

Subaru: “Well, I guess it really would be a strategy befitting of violent gladiators, but…”

Tanza: “There would be no chance of victory. Have the two of you forgotten? The Governor of this island, Gustav Morello-sama, has imposed a Curse Rule over us.”

Hiain: “Ghk…!”

Subaru deepened his wry smile, and to his side, Tanza voiced her astonishment while remaining expressionless.

Upon hearing what the little girl had pointed out, Hiain’s throat clogged up, and Weitz also made a bitter face.

—The Curse Rule was something that bound the prisoners of the Gladiator Island, chains of a curse invisible to the eye.

If the Curse Rule were to be violated, the lives of the gladiators would be taken without mercy. And, the one who imposed that Curse Rule over everyone was the Island Chief, Governor Gustav Morello.

If he ever felt the need to do so, he could completely annihilate the gladiators of the Gladiator Island in the blink of an eye. If he was able to specify the target of the Curse Rule, it would be easy for him to destroy only the ones participating in the insurrection.

Tanza: “As long as that Curse Rule is not dispelled, seizing control of the island is a dream within a dream. Do the two of you now understand just how thoughtless the things you have been saying are?”

Weitz: “Tch…”

Hiain languidly slumped his upper body on the table, and Weitz folded his arms as he clicked his tongue in displeasure. Though, the most important thing was that both of them understood the gravity of the matter at hand.

Idra: “However, even if you were to go through the trouble of making all the island’s gladiators your allies, the moment the Governor suspects you, we’re all done for. I doubt that your desire is just to be the king of the hill, Schwartz.”

Subaru: “As expected, Idra is quite astute.”

At that comment, Subaru snapped his fingers, and Idra snorted slightly and relaxed his lips.

Just as Idra had pointed out, if they did not do anything about the Curse Rule, then Subaru’s position would come to an end at becoming king of the hill. But, Subaru’s objective lay outside the island. To be more precise, it was to make every single person on the Gladiator Island into his ally, and then escape with them off of the island.

That was the exact conclusion of the Gladiator Island Volume that Subaru was planning.

Cecilus: “But but it’s certainly that y’know. There’s a promising chance that Basu could possibly even pluck off that Curse Rule and run straight through, right?”

Subaru: “Ceci, you promised to keep your mouth shut.”

Cecilus: “Excuse me excuse me. It’s just that, y’know, I don’t think that Basu’s true intention is to go out of his way to make all of his esteemed allies all anxious about this thing and that, isn’t that right?”

While tapping the table with two of his fingers, Cecilus mocked their meeting in such a way.

At Cecilus’s remark and attitude, Hiain and the rest of them all looked at Subaru with unpleasant faces. Even Subaru could guess what the intention of those gazes was, but the one to clearly put it into words was Tanza.

Just like the other three, the unease she felt in what Cecilus had said emerged within her eyes, and, Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, um, are you sane to be doing this with Cecilus-sama?”

Subaru: “If you ask about my sanity rather than just if I’m serious, then at that point, I’d want to deny it no matter what you’re asking.”

Tanza: “I sincerely apologize. It was an unintentional slip of the tongue. Are you seriously doing this with Cecilus-sama?”

Tanza had wanted to ask if his strategy depended on Cecilus, and as if supporting her question, the rest of the Unit put intensity into their gazes.

While under the gazes of those four, as well as Cecilus’s self-confident gaze, Subaru breathed a sigh, and,

Subaru: “No? In my strategy to somehow deal with the Curse Rule, I’m not thinking about getting help from Ceci.”

Cecilus: “Yes yes indeed for my time on stage to finally come around here, it will be showtime for the main performer and WAIT WHAT DID YOU SAY?!”

Subaru: “I mean, what would be the point if only Ceci escaped from the Curse Rule? That wouldn’t be a solution to the problem at all, now would it?”

In the time of a single breath, Cecilus had stood up on the table, tried to put on a show, and was then taken aback. From his position, he examined Subaru’s expression, but Subaru poked his nose and caused him to back down.

Cecilus had been roaring down a mistaken highway since before they came to the dining hall, but unfortunately for him, it was impossible that Subaru, having gone as far as making Jawsrough into his ally, would set his next objective to be Cecilus.

For Cecilus in particular, he had intended on preparing the right situation, but—

Weitz: “In that case, what in the world do ya plan on doing,

Schwartz?”

Subaru: “About the Curse Rule?”

Weitz: “Yeah… As much as it annoys me, the fake warrior has a point… If you’re unable to overcome the Governor’s Curse Rule, then ya won’t…”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Weitz: “Then ya won’t be able to meet with yer father, His Excellency the Emperor…”

He had a grave expression and heavy tone, however what Weitz spoke of was quite admirable.

Subaru: “…”

In an instant, Subaru smiled at Weitz’s words, and then took a deep breath.

It was not just Weitz; both Hiain and Idra, perhaps also Cecilus, who was not particularly interested, as well as the considerable number of gladiators, all would have had this misunderstanding. — That Subaru was the illegitimate child of the Emperor that had become a popular topic of conversation all around the Empire.

The rumored existence of a black-haired Crown Prince was certainly in the process of spreading throughout the Vollachian Empire, and it had become the core of the budding rebellion; it was said that he was plotting to usurp the Imperial Throne from the current Emperor.

Moreover, the existence of Subaru, who displayed actions on this Gladiator Island unsuited to his age, was suspected by everyone to be the very person rumored as the black-haired Crown Prince.

Thus—

Subaru: “That’s right. I also wanna give my shitty old man a strong punch to the gut.”

Intentionally not clearing up that misunderstanding, Subaru utilized it as a proactive means to grasp the hearts of the people on the island.

He felt ashamed about deceiving the people of his Unit, whom he was quite close with; but initially, it was they who had started to suspect Subaru of being the black-haired Crown Prince, and so it was something quite convenient in convincing them.

For the other gladiators, too, the establishment of being the Emperor's illegitimate child was favorable for quite a few people. So, at least until they left Ginunhive, he had no intention of revealing the truth.

However—

Tanza: "…"

Silent and motionless, Tanza examined Subaru's side-profile. She was the only person who knew that Subaru was not really the illegitimate child of the Emperor, and understood Subaru's lie.

Even if most of their time in contact with each other was as members of the Unit, they had known each other from Chaosflame before coming to the island. He thought that to her, it would be difficult to pretend that he was the Emperor's illegitimate child, and above all else, leaving aside logic and efficiency, he just did not want to lie to Tanza.

After all, the chance for a second lap being granted to Subaru was thanks to the fact that in that world approaching a hopeless conclusion, Tanza had snuggled close to him until the very end of the end.

At any rate—

Hiain: "W-Well, in the end, what are we gonna do? Nobody's gonna go rioting. But we ain't givin' up in frustration either. So then, what do we do?"

Cecilus: "That's absolutely right just what do you plan on doing I wonder?! Isn't it just a little too underhanded to boast while showing everyone your dreams and having no actual plan? Basu doesn't seem to understand just how much of an injury it will be to bear on the hearts of those who will have their hopes completely betrayed!"

Subaru: "It seems like you're trying to condemn me on the same vector as Hiain, but what you're saying is an entirely different thing. First and foremost, I haven't said a single thing about including you in my plan, Ceci."

Cecilus: "Stupid Basu!"

With a hop, he jumped off the table, and while leaving behind a childish remark, Cecilus, just like the wind—with a speed that was truly just like the wind, he rushed out of the dining hall.

Seeing his back leave like a storm, Subaru sighed. Then, he turned back around to the faces of the people who were waiting to resume the conversation.

Tanza: "So then, Schwartz-sama, concerning the Curse Rule…"

Subaru: "Yep, if we don't do something about the Curse Rule, nobody will be able to leave the island. Therefore, let's make him an ally."

Weitz: "An ally…? Just who in the world…?"

Upon first listening, thinking that it meant somebody who possessed extraordinary power, Weitz's gaze searched for Cecilus's back at the entrance of the dining hall after the latter had just rushed out.

But, Subaru forced a smile, and prefacing his next words with "Ah, that's not it", he spoke.

Subaru: "I'm talking about Gustav-san."

Weitz: "…What?"

At Subaru's words, the companions of his Unit frowned, thinking that they had misheard him.

It was unavoidable that they would think that way. After all, that was the big boss of Gladiator Island's management; someone who was known by everyone for his rigid style of work, and as an embodiment of unbending loyalty towards the Empire.

Even so, if he was going to surmount the Curse Rule, this could not be avoided.

Hence, for the second time now, Subaru bluntly declared.

Subaru: "I'll do something about the Curse Rule. For that purpose, I'm gonna win Gustav-san over as our comrade."

Thus he declared.

4

—Governor of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, Gustav Morello.

A member of the Multi-Arm Tribe who possessed four burly arms, wearing a uniform that tightly wrapped around his large body of two and a half meters, he was a tough-looking gentleman who had his hair carefully combed back.

His expression and speech were strict, but he was not someone who could not be communicated with or understood, and Subaru's impression was that he was one of the exceedingly rare adults who was sensible in the Vollachian Empire.

But then again, he was very strict with rules, and Subaru had an even stronger impression that he would not allow their distance to be closed, so there was no doubt that he was going to be a formidable enemy in the sense of this conquest.

Subaru: "Even so, it's necessary that we secure Gustav-san."

Of course, the existence of the Curse Rule was a large reason for Subaru's stubborn thinking.

If they did not surmount the Curse Rule that punished those who violated the rules and robbed them of their very lives, then the gladiators cooperating with Subaru would be unable to escape annihilation, and in the end, they would arrive at the conclusion of the massacre.

Even supposing they had some sort of method to nullify the Curse Rule, Subaru did not wish for the lives of Gustav and his guards to be taken in an armed uprising by the gladiators.

Subaru did not like the Vollachian Empire, nor did he like this Gladiator Island, but he had no intention of turning an irrational abhorrence to the people carrying out their professional duties as soldiers and guards.

Subaru: “Prisoners are bullied and ridiculed by guards, that sort of development is a cliché in fiction, but so far I haven’t heard about anything like that here.”

He thought that it was likely not limited to just fiction, but such a structure of violent control born out of difference in positions was not something that had materialized on this island. These circumstances were also tightened by Gustav’s thorough enforcement of control and discipline, and the embodiment of his leadership as Governor.

Long story short, if he could secure Gustav, then he would not have to win over each guard one by one; rather, it was quite likely that they would all become his allies at once.

Subaru: “In that case, there’s no reason not to do it, right?”

Tanza: “I understand what you are saying, but…”

As Subaru presented the extent of the merits that would come with the acquisition of Gustav, Tanza made a troubled face as she covered her mouth with her hand.

Now, they had moved out of the dining hall, and were on one of the lookout platforms overlooking the island.

They were relatively free to move around the Gladiator Island when not participating in a show, but this lookout platform was quite the popular spot among the gladiators. It was difficult to see the prisoner tower from here, and by feeling even the slightest bit closer to the sky, they could get the hallucination of freedom. It was a rather popular trick.

Subaru: “The reason for the trick is way too sincere…”

Tanza: “That alone is enough to show that everybody here is starved for freedom. That is precisely why they all have such high expectations of Schwartz-sama. The black-haired Crown Prince… Although that is merely a fabrication.”

Subaru: “Don’t say that so clearly… You don’t know if anyone is listening in from behind, after all.”

Tanza: “Unlike Hiain-sama, I am quite careful.”

While nonchalantly dissing Hiain, Tanza, with a composed face, looked far out into the distance—to the opposite side of the lake, she thought nostalgically of the world beyond that shore.

From Ginunhive, completely surrounded by the lake, the outside world could not be seen. For both Subaru and Tanza, their respective concerns and interests lay beyond the far shore of the lake. Subaru understood her impatient feelings to a painful extent.

The ripples of the young girl’s emotions were hard to see, but Subaru understood just how much her heart was burning.

Tanza: “…So, what do you intend on doing?”

Subaru: “—! Will you help me confront him?”

Tanza: “Just like everybody else, I possess strong feelings to give up on this. However, after spending just a few days with you, I have come to understand that Schwartz-sama is not very good at giving up.”

At Tanza’s words, dropping her shoulders as if to say “It cannot be helped”, Subaru gave a wry smile and scratched his head.

Though what had emerged on his face had the nuance of a wry smile, he was truly happy from the bottom of his heart to have this kind of reinforcement.

After all, he had told Hiain, Weitz, and Idra about his plan to turn Gustav into an ally, but the three of them had simultaneously drooped to the conclusion that it was "impossible" and dispersed.

To be precise, they had the flavors of "Ya gotta cool yer head", "There are things you can do, and things you can't do" and "Leave it to me, I'll peel Gustav's skin off and use it to impersonate him…", but no result was yielded from having them as comrades.

Subaru: "On that point, Tanza is earnestly worried for my sake! I love it!"

Tanza: "…As expected, are you perhaps urging me to reconsider abandoning you?"

Subaru: "Wait wait wait wait wait, my bad. But, since you really are worrying, idea please."

Tanza: "aideea…"

Regurgitating that broken English, Tanza cast her large irises slightly downward, and,

Tanza: "First of all, we should plainly inform him that all of the gladiators now follow us, and use the difference in war potential as a shield in negotiations. How does that sound?"

Subaru: "I'm gonna have to say, nope. In Gustav-san's case, the moment he understands that we're conspiring and planning something, it seems like he'll use the Curse Rule to punish us."

Giving an answer to Tanza's suggestion, Subaru recalled his last lap, where faces he had not wanted to remember had visited the Gladiator Island as messengers, and from there began arguing back and forth with Gustav.

The messengers were concerned about the threat of the people of the island causing domestic trouble, and suggested that the gladiators should all be disposed of at once, but Gustav had stubbornly refused to do so. That was not because he was backing the gladiators, but because of the sense of professional duty Gustav himself possessed.

At that time, it was just that Gustav did not follow the proposal to serve punishment based on mere doubts. The moment that suspicion would turn to confidence, Subaru did not think that Gustav would hesitate in utilizing the Curse Rule.

Subaru: “If we bluntly negotiate with armed might, there’s a low chance that Gustav-san won’t use the Curse Rule. That’s why, it’s a no.”

Tanza: “I sincerely apologize. It appears that I have been unable to be of use to Schwartz-sama.”

Subaru: “You’re done already?! Why does it feel like so many of the girls in this world tend to go for the brute force approach?!”

At Tanza’s apology, as she bowed her head from which her deer horns sprouted, Subaru deplored the heavens for the abundance of such carnivorous women.

To begin with, even though deer were supposed to be herbivores, this was the way Tanza had approached things. Just why was it that each woman he met, such as Medium and the Shudraq, were all predisposed to brute force?

Subaru: “Maybe Rem and Yorna-san are the exceptions… Nah, aren’t those two also relatively inclined to using brute force?”

Even though she lacked the ability to move due to her legs, Rem was also relatively the brute force type. Yorna too, who had performed explosive axe kicks to the Castle, could ultimately be said to be inclined towards brute force.

Tanza: “If you are speaking ill of Yorna-sama, I shall not forgive you.”

Subaru: “I’m not speaking ill of her, these are just my idle grumbles… Anyway, the fact that you’re helping me out does make me really happy, Tanza.”

Tanza: "—. Yes."

With a small nod, even if Tanza could not provide advice, she had agreed to help.

To be honest, Tanza's presence was both physically and mentally dependable for the current Subaru. In addition, it was Subaru's duty to meet her expectations and her faith in him as she stayed by his side.

Tanza: "So then, in the end, what do you intend on doing? "

With that, coming full circle back around to the same question, Subaru suddenly looked up to the sky.

What would he do, the answer to Tanza's question was—

Subaru: "First and foremost, I'd like to get to know him a bit better."

Tanza: "Eh?"

Indifferent to the feelings of Subaru and everyone else present below it was the detestable blue sky, now revealed as the clouds slightly cleared up. Glaring at it as he spoke, Subaru's words caused Tanza to gaze in wonder.

And then—

???: "—Kept you waiting, Schwartz."

Hearing that stern voice fall upon his ears from a place much closer to the sky than he was, Subaru lowered his gaze down. Next to him, Tanza's small body tensed up, and unrest also began to spread throughout the other gladiators present on the lookout platform.

That was a matter of course. After all, it was a rather rare occurrence for that man to visit the lookout platform.

Governor of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, Gustav Morello; that very person.

Subaru: “Glad you could make it here, Gustav-san.”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama!! Did you call the Governor here?!”

Subaru: “That’s right. I made an appointment, since it wouldn’t do any harm.”

Tanza raised her voice nervously, and Subaru calmly nodded as he responded to her question.

Taking dignified steps towards those two, the large figure, so tall that even if the pair of these little children got on each other’s shoulders they would not meet its eye level, approached them.

Crossing his four burly arms, Gustav unintentionally cast a shadow over Subaru and Tanza, and then,

Gustav: “As the official, I am not here on free time. To summon me here so casually is quite the inconvenience.”

Subaru: “This is far from the likes of a whim. I summoned you fully prepared for you to get angry with me. If I really was summoning you casually, I would have told you to bring a lunchbox and invited you on a picnic.”

Gustav: “Whether it be you, Tanza, or Segmunt, it is quite the strange disposition for young individuals to have such nerves of steel.”

Tanza: “…Though, I find it unpleasant to be evaluated on the same level as those two.”

While still maintaining her feelings of tension in front of Gustav, she interjected upon hearing a comment that she could not ignore.

Although, he thought that her attitude completely supported what Gustav had just said about their nerves, and Subaru also thought that unlike himself on this second lap, her nerves were a natural thing, and hence she was quite dependable.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “Even though you’re busy with work, I’m happy that you found a moment to spare.”

Gustav: “In a sense, you are currently in the position that attracts the most attention on the Gladiator Island. Even more so than Segmunt, who boasts an oppressive strength that allows none to approach him.”

Subaru: “Is that so? If I may say so myself, I think his fighting style shouldn’t be displayed in front of an uncouth audience.”

Gustav: “Naturally, he has not had as many chances as you to display that fighting style before others.”

Although his voice held neither anger nor astonishment, Gustav flatly declared thus.

As Subaru scratched his cheek, Gustav began to move his large mouth, which was made more fierce by the two fangs that protruded from it, and then,

Gustav: “Do not tell me that you intend on keeping this up? Participating in every Sparka that opens, and putting your life on the line to help fight for the survival of other gladiators.”

Indeed, the reason why Gustav had responded to Subaru’s summons; to ask a question regarding a situation which he held doubts about.

Participating in Sparka—That was, on this second lap around the Gladiator Island, the greatest contribution to Subaru making many gladiators into his allies. All of the gladiators were made to fight against a Witchbeast known as a Gladiator Beast in the name of Sparka, and they needed to risk their lives in order to be victorious.

That which was most feared on this island, but at the same time, that which was the best way to demonstrate the way of being of an Imperial Citizen; making use of those as opportunities, Subaru had gained the respect and trust of the gladiators.

However—

Gustav: “As the official, I have also learned the ways of the warrior in the past. I did not become a fully-fledged combatant, but I believe I have developed an eye for talent. Speaking from that point of view, Schwartz, the fact that you have survived all of the Sparkas that you have participated in until today was nothing more than merely treading on thin ice.”

Subaru: “…”

Gustav: “If you mess up one small thing. Or rather, if you fail to account for one small thing, your life shall be lost. In my capacity, I’ve encountered gladiators with various opinions on life and death, but your methods are devoid of all reason.”

Analyzing Subaru’s completely reckless fighting style, Gustav firmly concluded.

That judgment of Gustav’s was accurate. In reality, Subaru had participated in Sparka many times, but it was not as if Subaru’s presence had considerably lowered the danger of Sparka.

Were it Cecilus who was participating, he would instantly kill the Gladiator Beast and distort the way of Sparka, and Gustav and the rest of the management would not be able to let it go without imposing some type of penalty.

Subaru: “But, that would be unreasonable for my way of fighting. Each time, I’m fighting for my dear life, after all.”

Gustav: “It is very apparent that you are not acting. The fact that many of the gladiators are in a frenzy about your fights, is for no other reason than because they understand that you stand upon the same level ground that they do, and face battle.”

Tanza: “After all, Schwartz-sama does not allow for my participation…”

As Tanza cast her eyes down and muttered so, Subaru felt a stinging sensation pierce him. But, if he were to accept Tanza’s help, then Subaru, weak as he was, would begin to desire her help.

There would be no meaning in that. —The trust of the gladiators was something that Subaru had to win on his own.

Gustav: “Your streak of good fortune shall not last long. Shortly, perhaps even the very next time, your fortune shall be severed.”

Subaru: “Is that a declaration that Gustav-san will directly send in a super powerful Gladiator Beast?”

Gustav: “It is merely a rule of thumb. Misfortune is something that approaches under the guise of good fortune. Certainly, it is something that you should take to heart. —In my capacity, I also believe that it would be regrettable for you to die.”

Subaru was surprised at Gustav’s unexpected words, and Tanza also widened her eyes. As usual, Gustav’s scary face did not allow for his emotions to leak through, but it did not seem like what he said had been a lie. Strangely enough, in their peculiar relationship which could not be labeled as friends or foes, he had faith that Gustav would not lie.

Subaru: “Gustav-san, why are you the Governor of the island?”

Gustav: “How abrupt.”

Subaru: “Is that so? Originally, I just called Gustav here today because I wanted to talk about this and that. Or, perhaps you already have to go back?”

Gustav: “…”

Subaru: “By the way, since you’re always soldiering on and persevering, doing work at your desk, getting a suitable amount of breaks by changing pace can produce more efficient results while working. It was proven in a research study done in California.”

Gustav: “In my capacity, that is not a word that I know. Incidentally, have you been teaching those words to Segmunt recently?”

Subaru: “In Ceci’s case, it’s not that I’ve been teaching him, it’s just that he’s been absorbing them on his own.”

Clearing up those false accusations, Subaru asked “So then, how about it?” to ascertain if Gustav had any intention of continuing this conversation.

Upon hearing Subaru’s question, after a brief silence, Gustav spoke,

Gustav: “In my capacity, that reason that I accepted the occupation of Governor was none other than because I had received a direct command from His Excellency the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.”

With that, he began to recite his story up until today, the tale of Gustav Morello.

5

Gustav: “Originally, in my capacity, I was treated as the odd one out, even in my own tribe. This was because there are many in the Multi-Arm Tribe who are predisposed towards violence, and that trait was uncharacteristic of myself, in my capacity.”

Among the wide variety of demi-human races, the special trait of the Multi-Arm Tribe was quite easy to understand at a glance.

They were born with an average of four to six arms, and since those arms were able to wield weapons and tools, there was no need to speak of just how useful they were in war. Be that as it may, it was because the activities of the Eight-Arms, born of the Multi-Arm Tribe, had been propagated that the warriors of the tribe came to be known as powerful.

The existence of the Eight-Arms, having gained fame as a warrior of the Vollachian Empire, brought hope to his fellow members of the Multi-Arm Tribe, and many of his brethren rushed toward the battlefield, and with more arms than the other races, they brandished their weapons.

Gustav: “In my capacity, I was not drunk on that same fervor. While my brethren were charmed by the valor and glory that awaited them on the battlefield, I was far more suited to enjoying books, raising livestock, and protecting our homes. In my capacity, my brethren lambasted me as a coward, but not once have I felt ashamed.”

The fervor of the Eight-Arms ran rampant within the tribe before Gustav had been born. His father and grandfather, his siblings and friends, all of them dreamt of the battlefield, but for Gustav, it had not been so.

Blood was spilled, arms were severed; instead of granting their dreams, fate had decided that their dreams would fleetingly scatter upon the battlefield—It seemed to him that becoming a warrior was nothing more than approaching a death of futility.

Gustav: “It is not that I fear death. What I fear, in my capacity, is that my death shall bring about nothing. I wanted to avoid the situation where my life would be expended, lost as a futile and meaningless death.”

His father and grandfather and siblings and friends had all expended their lives as futile and meaningless deaths, losing their lives without reaching the status of a legend like the Eight-Arms.

He did not think that his own thoughts were correct, nor did he think that those who had died were mistaken, but since Gustav had survived, those of his tribe began to treat him all the more harshly. Since everyone’s loved ones had died, but the person who was supposed to be lambasted as a coward had remained alive, they could not go without harboring hateful feelings towards him.

Gustav had accepted that as something unavoidable.

However—

Gustav: “My village, having lost many of my brethren, was attacked by bandits. They were thinking that all of the men had died on the battlefield, and only the women and children remained.”

The bandits had thought correctly; Gustav’s tribe did not have many ways to resist.

Houses were burned, belongings were plundered, women and children were killed for sport, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. The only man who had not gone to the battlefield, only

Gustav fought against the enemy; the man of the Multi-Arm Tribe who hated the battlefield, and had kept away from swinging weapons, stood no chance, and his resistance was immediately suppressed.

Then, unable to do a single thing, Gustav was about to be decapitated, but—

Gustav: "—Just before my life, in my capacity, came to an end, a gust of wind wedged its way through."

The man who had raised his axe to cut off Gustav's head, his own neck was sliced by the wind in the blink of an eye; the bodies of all the surrounding bandits were also cut down in quick succession.

Then, when the wind stopped, those who survived were only Gustav, and just a few of his fellow tribes-people. The bandits were all slain with not a single one left standing, and only a pool of their blood remained on the grassland.

Before Gustav, astonished as he was, appeared a lone man who had accompanied that wind.

Gustav: "The man, who from my perspective in my capacity, was of small build, spoke thus: "For what reason is a member of the Multi-Arm Tribe, of whom many have died upon the battlefield, currently on these lands where women and children have been killed?" And so, I answered to the best of my capacity: "I did not go to the battlefield. Because fighting and war are both things I detest.""

Judging from the bloody situation they were placed in, that had been an impudent dialogue unbefitting the scene. But, his brain numb from the overwhelming circumstances, it was not a situation in which Gustav could ascertain the proper judgment.

Therefore, that was the dialogue that had formed, and the man, receiving an answer to his question, surveyed their surroundings, and,

Gustav: "The man said this: "I am of the same opinion." Then, he said that he would grant me, in my capacity, the right to decide what would happen to the survivors and the ringleader of the bandits.”

According to the man accompanied by wind, it was a feudal lord of the surrounding area who was behind the bandit attack.

In order to ensure that the influential tribes living in his domain did not possess too much power, the feudal lord habitually dressed up his private army as bandits and carried out the act of culling; this time, the target of the culling was the Multi-Arm Tribe.

Gustav: “They had already taken the mastermind feudal lord captive. The man ordered me, in my capacity, to pass a verdict. Though he had been arrested, the feudal lord had not lost his dignity, and had preserved his vigor, but behind all that, I perceived that he harbored fear towards death. Therefore, in my capacity, I—”

Told to pass a verdict, Gustav did not kill the feudal lord.

Holding a weapon where he stood, he had been granted the opportunity for retribution by means of violence; retribution for the insult his brethren’s deaths being used, and retribution for the contemptible attack on his village. But, Gustav refused that opportunity.

Instead of death, Gustav decided to levy hard labor upon the feudal lord, and witnessing his decision, the surviving tribes-people shouted their objections. However, the man respected that Gustav did not distort his will.

Thus, he spoke.

Man: “Work under mine command, Gustav Morello. Your way of being may be seen as spineless, but I do not think that way. On these vast lands of the Empire, where strength is esteemed, your dignity shall be kept.”

Gustav: “Henceforth, in my capacity, I was given patronage. As I carried out my duties, I received opportunities to increase my court rank, and was granted the position of High Count. Then, on the day I was granted the position of High Count, the man—His Excellency the Emperor, directly ordered me to work as the Governor of the Gladiator Island."

The peaceful reign of the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, was close at hand; but then again, he was neither in a position similar to that of the Nine Divine Generals nor the Imperial Prime Minister, so it was not as though he had been able to continue watching the Emperor's capability while near him.

However, Vincent had shown Gustav a face, and told Gustav words, all of which were unknown to anybody else; so, though it was a matter of course, he had the self-confidence to accept it more deeply than anybody else possibly could.

The wisest Emperor had entrusted Gustav with a great duty, and sent him to the Gladiator Island. Thus, with recognition for his great obligation and his way of being in his heart, Gustav had no choice but to fulfill his professional duties to perfection.

Unmistakably, that very thing was—

Gustav: "—The reason why I, in my capacity as the official, carry out my professional duties on this Gladiator Island."

6

Under the blue sky on the lookout platform, the contents of the story Gustav had told them definitely did not suit the mood of the sunlight passing through the trees. Rather than a refreshing breeze passing over a lake, the wind of a bloody battlefield would be far more suited to that tale.

Gustav's attitude, his complexion, and his detached expression all remained unchanged, and Subaru breathed a long sigh, then,

Subaru: "You spoke a lot more candidly than I thought you would…"

Gustav: "Was it not you who inquired about the reason as to why I, in my capacity, assumed my professional duties, Schwartz? As the official, I intend to answer all questions as sincerely as possible."

Subaru: “I don’t doubt your sincerity. Well, I never doubted your sincerity to begin with.”

Deeds such as lying or deceit were far beyond the person known as Gustav.

After all, if there was something he could not speak about, he clearly stated that he could not speak about it. He was completely divorced from the sort of dishonesty where one would try to smooth things over with lies and falsehoods, all the while fabricating suitable details.

Nonetheless, as he had said, he did not expect Gustav to speak this candidly.

Subaru: “…Since you were rescued by His Excellency the Emperor, you pledged allegiance to him?”

Gustav: “That is not so. Strictly speaking, the one who rescued me, in my capacity, was the Blue Lightning, who was present by the Emperor’s side. If you want the reason for my debt of gratitude, perhaps it is because, as the official, my position would have been very different to what it is now.”

Tanza: “Blue Lightning…”

Making a troubled face, Tanza muttered after hearing those very words. It was an alias which Subaru had also heard of, but it had become complicated, and since the course of the conversation was changing, he decided to ignore it for the time being.

Subaru: “So then, is the reason for your loyalty because he respected your way of life?”

Gustav: “I have reluctance to declarations of emotions. Therefore, I shall refuse to give a response.”

Subaru: “…That’s exactly what I’d expect from Gustav-san.”

Gustav had expressed both the nature he had expected, and the reply he had expected.

For Subaru, there would not be anything that could surprise him from here on, but the appearance of a retainer who truly idolized the Emperor—truly idolized Abel, would make this the second person after Zikr. He really could not understand their feelings, but there was a good amount of people who had pledged their allegiance to Abel, not because they were following those around them, but because they had arrived at that conclusion on their own.

Gustav was one of those people, and that which he was ordered to do was—

Subaru: "—In preparation for an emergency, to train the gladiators in both body and mind, wasn't it?"

Gustav: "…It is not something I keep hidden, but how are you aware of that? It has not been long since you came to the island, so although there may be room for you to have a few suspicions of me, as the official…"

Subaru: "It's something like "walls have ears, and doors have eyes" and "doors can't get in the way of spreading rumors"."

He could not tell whether or not Gustav understood those expressions, so chalking it up to Gustav's inability to be dishonest, Subaru said "Leaving that aside" to change the topic through sheer force.

That which the Emperor had ordered Gustav to do, a duty that he would not yield even if he received a signed decree from the Prime Minister, that was—

Subaru: "The event of an emergency, don't you think that the current situation, where the Empire is on the verge of being plunged into tumult, would be one such event?"

Gustav: "…"

Subaru: "I've heard that Gustav-san has been doing all these preparations, and that the quality of the gladiators has risen incredibly. Old Man Null also said that ever since Gustav-san became Governor, it's a world of difference from before."

Old Man Null had a long history as a gladiator, and was a living witness to both the good and bad times on the island. Since he had provided testimony that there had never been a Governor better than Gustav, it was quite a big deal.

Gustav was admirably fulfilling the duty that the Emperor had ordered him to do.

Subaru: “But, even a shiny, valuable, excellent sword will be completely useless if kept contained in its scabbard.”

Gustav: “Schwartz, what are you trying to get me to do? If you continue to run your mouth with excessively imprudent comments, I shall have no choice but make use of my power as the official, and issue punishment.”

Subaru: “So you’ll force me to do a Sparka? But, Gustav-san, you should know that such a thing won’t really serve as a punishment for me, right?”

Gustav: “—. Merely ordering participation in Sparka, would not necessarily be the entirety of your penalty.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Gustav narrowed his eyes as he trained his gaze on Subaru. It was plain as day that the true meaning behind those words was that of the Curse Rule.

The fact that he did not want to use it if possible was communicated via the peacefulness within his eyes, which even his imposing appearance could not hide.

Gustav: “What sort of times we are currently living in, what sort of actions I shall take as the official, those are things that I, in my capacity, shall decide for myself. Schwartz, the only thing you ought to do is act in accordance with your awareness as a gladiator, and silently pass the time.”

Saying that, Gustav turned his back towards Subaru and Tanza.

If that was the final thing he wished to convey to Subaru, then he sure had spoken about far too many needless things. Whether or not Gustav himself was aware of that, he made quick strides walking along the stone paving of the lookout platform, and wanted to hastily leave from here.

So, although he felt sorry towards Gustav—

Subaru: “You gave me advice, so sorry about this, but there’s no way that I’m gonna pass the time in silence, Gustav-san.”

When the voice called out to the big bulky back, Gustav’s legs suddenly came to a halt. Gustav looked back around with only his head, and fixed his gaze upon Subaru, standing upright, and Tanza, waiting beside him.

Under that imposing gaze, Subaru slowly shook his head side to side.

Subaru: “Though I do like you Gustav-san, there are things that I gotta do. Since I have no intention of giving up on those things, I think I’m gonna be causing a racket for a little while longer.”

Gustav: “…Are you attempting to provoke me in my capacity?”

Subaru: “Nope. Just that I’ve settled my resolve, that sort of declaration of war.”

Flashing his teeth as he smiled, Subaru declared so, and witnessing that, Gustav stroked his own fangs using his two right arms. After briefly contemplating, he gave a deep sigh towards Subaru, whose smile could not be destroyed, and,

Gustav: “In that case, as the official, my side shall simply do nothing but perform our professional duties.”

Leaving only those words behind, this time Gustav actually left the lookout platform with large strides.

As his back vanished from sight, but still waiting until those audible footsteps could no longer be heard, Subaru finally released the tension he had put into his shoulders.

Subaru: “Good grief, as expected, it really is quite the strain to confront Gustav-san.”

Tanza: “This is not a matter for you to be saying “good grief”. I think it was I whose lifespan has been greatly diminished.”

As Subaru languidly took breaths, Tanza, released from her tension, hounded him with those words. Seeing her angered state, Subaru forced a smile saying “My bad, my bad”, and,

Subaru: “But, it was thanks to Tanza staying by my side that I was able to get through that without crying. Thank you.”

Tanza: “Perhaps it would have been better if you were exposed to the shame of crying, and then be made to reconsider, Schwartz-sama.”

Subaru: “Oi, oi, even if crying was on the same level as peeing my pants, I still wouldn’t back down, you know?”

Tanza: “I think in response to my foolish question, Schwartz-sama has given a foolish answer.”

That opinion was way too harsh. But, from Tanza’s perspective, it may have been natural to say that letting it get this far already was way too gracious.

After all, their opponent was the top position of the island, who could kill them in the time of a breath if he so desired, and even if they tried to run, it would be futile, since that opponent had placed a curse on them.

Tanza: “So then, without paying heed to your life, did you accomplish your objective, Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “Quite the thorny way of putting it… Please don’t treat me like you treat Ceci. After all, I do truly hold my own life dear.”

Tanza: “Did you accomplish your objective?”

Subaru: “That pressure is brutal! I accomplished it, I accomplished it! Rather than accomplished, it might be more natural to say that I ascertained it. —Seems like only using words won’t be enough to persuade him.”

Tanza's dark irises closing in on Subaru without hesitation was a knockout. Hearing him give that reply like he was complaining, Tanza frowned her round eyebrows.

Subaru's objective had been to ascertain just how much Gustav poured his heart into his professional duties as Governor. Then, he had wanted to figure out the foundation of the reason why he did so.

Fortunately, thanks to Gustav's doctrine of transparency, he was able to find out about those things. In exchange, he also found out about the underlying conviction for his unwavering loyalty.

Subaru: "Dammit, that masked bastard is really irritating."

Remembering the nasty and underhanded man bearing the mask of an Oni, who still got in his way despite being separated from him, Subaru pouted his lips, and then faced the sky as he reached out to it in a grand motion.

And then—

Subaru: "Tanza, can you call for Hiain and the others? I've decided on the next course of action."

At Subaru's declaration, Tanza's expression tensed up, and prompted the words that would follow through her silence.

She wore a dependable expression, which seemed like it wanted to say that no matter what his strategy was, they would certainly accomplish it; while Subaru faintly anticipated what her expression would shift to next, he continued.

Subaru: "—I'm gonna challenge Gustav-san to a Sparka."

Thus he declared.

7

—Challenging the Governor of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, Gustav Morello, to Sparka.

Having turned all of the gladiators on the island into his allies, solidifying his will to participate in the rebellion shaking the Vollachian Empire, that was Natsuki Subaru's strategy in order to complete his conquest of the Gladiator Island.

Tanza: "But, was it not you who had dismissed my proposal of armed negotiations as being the height of stupidity, Schwartz-sama?"

Subaru: "I didn't say anything like "the height of stupidity" though?! I cushioned the blow by saying it was gonna have to be a nope, didn't I? Tanza, I don't want you to hate me after all."

Tanza: "It seems that you speak in such a manner to everyone. So much so that you have even won over six hundred people."

Subaru: "Considering that your motive is worry, your words are still way too sharp…"

Her eyes and expression unchanged, Tanza closed in on Subaru with an indifferent voice as the latter became overwhelmed. The sudden change from his previous attitude of asking her to tell him anything was rather difficult to believe.

Having called Gustav down to the island's lookout platform, Subaru directly carried out a conversation with him.

There, in addition to Gustav's nature of which Subaru already knew, events unknown to him were revealed, ones that touched upon the main essence of Gustav's loyalty to the Emperor. Subaru thought that all of it was valuable information for his conquest, but now Tanza was in this sort of bad mood.

Be that as it may, it was only natural that she would be upset.

After all, Subaru's strategy to challenge him to Sparka probably did not seem all too different from her initial proposal of overpowering in negotiations by using their difference in war potential as a shield.

Tanza: "On the contrary, this would essentially be the same thing as a simultaneous uprising that both Hiain-sama and Weitz-sama spoke of, would it not?"

Subaru: “Tanza, the way you say “on the contrary” really shows your opinion of those two… But, it’s different from their idea. Of course, it’s also not the same as Tanza’s idea.”

Tanza: “…Please explain.”

Given some leeway from Tanza as she stared him down, Subaru lowered his hands, which had been raised in submission.

Tanza, with whom Subaru truly shared the same feelings of wanting to escape from the island, had been far too easy on him. The reason she was even helping Subaru was simply because she desired to reunite with Yorna as soon as possible. He reflected upon the fact that he had forgotten about that, and that he had heedlessly been relying on her.

In any case…

Subaru: “What I mean by challenging Gustav-san to a Sparka is different from the idea of seizing the island via brute force.”

Tanza: “In that case, what is your objective?”

Subaru: “I’m gonna make Gustav-san understand. —That the time for him to make a decision is coming.”

Ultimately, as if he had spoken a riddle, discontent emerged in Tanza’s eyes.

But, it was not at all as if Subaru had simply put it in a confusing way to be mean.

Subaru: “I have more trust in Tanza than she may think, but…”

Even if it were Tanza, he needed to be very careful about the information he gave her.

In the first place, with all of the island’s gladiators recruited as Subaru’s allies, the Gladiator Island was currently atop a more perilous equilibrium than it had ever been before. What had been detering the gladiators from uniting and erupting with their pent-up anger until now was the Curse Rule imposed by Gustav.

Due to the presence of the Curse Rule, the gladiators were unable to take strong measures due to fear of a one-sided slaughter. —However, Subaru was already aware of the whereabouts of the Curse Rule's cornerstone.

Subaru: "The Curse Tool is inside of Gustav-san's body…"

—In the world of the first lap, Todd and Arakiya had visited the Gladiator Island as messengers.

As a result of stubbornly disobeying the two special envoys sent from the Imperial Capital, Gustav had lost his life. Having opened up his back, Todd tore out the cornerstone of the Curse Rule from inside Gustav's body, the Curse Tool.

A black orb the size of a palm—the Curse Tool which had become a hindrance; if his goal was merely to take that away, it would be best for him to reenact that repulsive scene.

With that, the objective of Tanza and the gladiators would be complete, and everyone would probably be able to break free from the island.

However, the lives of Gustav and the guards would not be saved. —That was something which he hated.

Tanza: "—. Schwartz-sama, what kind of future are you picturing?"

Fixing her eyes on Subaru as he tried to choose his words carefully, Tanza enquired so of him.

Though she was still young, Tanza was by no means a fool. She fully understood that Subaru was not revealing all of the information he had, and that he was intentionally being secretive.

And for her, there was always the option to hear what Subaru knew via brute force at any time.

But even so…

Subaru: "…"

Intently waiting for an answer, Tanza did not resort to such measures as Subaru tried to remain sincere.

Precisely because she had confidence in that, it seemed to her that Subaru was acting not in selfishness, but rather in sincerity.

Subaru: “My ideal is that me, Tanza, everyone from our Unit, and the gladiators of the island all get along with Gustav-san and the others, joining hands as we leave the island together.”

That was why, without pranks or anything of the sort, Subaru honestly confided his true feelings to Tanza.

For a moment, irritation towards his enigmaticness flashed in Tanza’s eyes, but since she could tell that Subaru was not lying just by looking at him, it gently shifted to understanding and perplexity.

Tanza: “…No matter how you look at it, that idea is nothing but an idealistic dream.”

Subaru: “—Ngh, it’s not like that.”

Tanza admonished the unveiling of Subaru’s ideal as a rash aspiration. However, as Subaru immediately refused to fold with his quick rebuttal, an even greater amount of perplexity spread throughout Tanza’s large eyes.

It was probably a perplexity which could not comprehend just where Subaru’s confidence was coming from, but it was awfully ironic.

After all, this baseless confidence of Subaru’s was given to him by none other than Tanza herself.

Tanza: “Yes, that is correct, Schwartz-sama. Next time, without a doubt, we will not lose.”

Those were words that she had spoken to Subaru, who did not want to give up in a world that had once ended.

The magnitude of power that had bestowed upon Subaru was something which the current Tanza had no way of knowing.

Tanza: "…For the sake of that ideal, is your answer Sparka?"

Finally, as if she had succumbed to Subaru's unwavering gaze, Tanza breathed a sigh.

Perceiving that sigh, Subaru also relaxed his shoulders as he felt the slight stinging in the atmosphere calm down.

Granted, it was never as if he thought he would directly get into a jostle with Tanza.

Subaru: "Well, at worst, I was prepared to break an arm or two…"

Tanza: "If you thought I would commit such outrageous behavior, that is exceedingly unthinkable."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's right. Sorry, sorry, it's not that I doubted you Tanza, it's just that I've developed an overabundance of tension from some of my experiences."

If it was Rem, it was possible that she would fight over a difference of opinion to the extent of breaking his fingers, but that comment angered Tanza, since she would never do those sorts of things.

Even Tanza, a genuine citizen of the Empire, would be inclined to say that Rem's tendency to make snap judgements was overkill. Though, Rem's surprising honesty when it came to her emotions was one of her good aspects.

And, as Subaru's train of thought veered off-course, Tanza took a long sight as if she was astonished, and,

Tanza: "If we are truly speaking our honest feelings, I think that Schwartz-sama's plans are reckless, foolish, and too idealistic."

Subaru: "Gulp… W-Well, even if you say that, I can't help it…"

Tanza: "But…"

As Subaru's cheeks stiffened, Tanza interrupted his words with a rather strong tone. Gazing over the daunted Subaru, with a slight air of spite, Tanza: “In the beginning, when Chaosflame was first created, Yorna-sama would have likely faced similar ridicule of it being reckless, absurd, and impossible. Yet, she succeeded.”

Uttering the name of Yorna, whom she held in high regard, Tanza spoke of how she had accomplished the great feat of materializing her ideal.

Having laid eyes upon Chaosflame himself, Subaru could also imagine the reckless endeavor Yorna had attempted, along with how steep the road to materialize it would have been.

With Tanza as the first, it must have been a great help to many demi-human tribes.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, I am not trying to tell you that you are able to accomplish the same things as Yorna-sama. After all, Yorna-sama is an extraordinary person.”

Subaru: “I know. I’m not that conceited.”

Tanza: “But, were I to point and criticize someone’s ideal as being reckless, it would be tantamount to me ridiculing Yorna-sama’s ideal.”

For Tanza, who held a deep gratitude, love, and respect for Yorna, there was no way she could do such a thing.

It was not as if Subaru had been aiming for that when he spoke of his reckless ideals to her, but this little girl sorted through the feelings that were important to her, and the things that could be compromised, and chose to do so on her own.

Tanza: “However, Yorna-sama had both the power and the planning ability to materialize her grand ideal. Do you have such things, Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “…When compared to Yorna-san’s raw strength and intelligence, I’m at quite a disadvantage. But, in regards to planning ability, it’ll be handled through Sparka, and in regards to power—”

Tanza: “Regarding it…?”

Subaru: “I’m counting on all the gladiators, as well as Tanza, to be my power.”

Tanza: “How slick…”

Tanza finally removed her gaze from Subaru as he gave his response.

It was astonishing that he would rely on others in the end, but Subaru had stopped worrying about that. Just what could he actually accomplish by rashly exerting himself with nothing but his short limbs and small stature?

From the start, Subaru’s pride would blow away in the same way as a dandelion’s fluff.

Subaru: “And so, could you go call for Hiain and the others again? First we’ll get those three… and then, we’ll get all of the gladiators to lend their help.”

Tanza: “Understood… But, will it really be possible? To challenge the Governor of this island, Gustav-sama, to Sparka?”

Subaru: “If I were to invite him to come down to the arena, and have a man-to-man fist fight with him there, the chances that Gustav-san would accept would be pretty low.”

Tanza: “Then, what are you going to do?”

Raising her round eyebrows, Tanza asked so of Subaru.

The key to his plan was to commence a Sparka with Gustav; without that, he would not reach his objective. Her question regarding that was natural, but there was also a difference in their interpretations.

But then again, he could easily imagine Tanza’s reaction if he were to try and explain it in further detail.

The reason was…

Subaru: “This is something I heard from Ceci, but…”

Indeed, the instant Cecilus's name was uttered, just as Subaru had imagined, Tanza's expression was covered in a rare hue of suspicion.

8

Cecilus: "—Do you know the origin of the word "Sparka", Basu?"

Cecilus: "Right now it's used as a word that means gladiators fighting but originally it was used as a word that had the implication of a duel in which unyielding convictions were staked."

Cecilus: "Somewhere along the line it stopped meaning a contest of convictions and started to be recognized as a word that meant a struggle between lives… Well, situations where people were fighting to the death often involved scenes where convictions were put to the test so perhaps the essence of it hasn't shifted all too far from the truth!"

Cecilus: "Thus, to so easily accept that change in interpretation would be the thinking of a background-character. Unfortunately one's life and their convictions are obviously completely different things! In most cases it's often recommended that you bend your convictions for the sake of your life but that is a choice which can only be tolerated for background-characters, supporting-roles, and antagonists."

Cecilus: "But were it to be worthy of the leading actor as he performs in the limelight and pulls the story on the grand stage! Then there is absolutely no way he would do anything like bend his convictions whilst being reluctant to die! Convictions are one's dignity itself. If one bends their convictions to extend their life then whose life is it that then remains?"

Cecilus: "That person will lose the evidence that they are themselves the moment they bend their dignity and discard their convictions, if that is so…"

Cecilus: "An empty husk which has lost the core of the person they had been up until that point with only their life remaining, just who could they then be called?"

Cecilus: “Precisely because that is so, I shall dare to declare it! Even if everyone evaluates it as a crude and extreme logic and refuses to give their endorsement, I shall declare it in a loud voice without any concern for those things!”

Cecilus: “—Life itself is Sparka!”

Cecilus: “Battles where we must herald our convictions and dignity can befall us at any time. Likely we are endlessly continuing to fight upon battlefields of Sparka in forms unknown.”

Cecilus: “If you understand that then blades and even limbs aren’t necessary for Sparka. After all, this fighting isn’t just conducted by means of brute strength, it is a flower which supports the whole color palette by taking various forms.”

Cecilus: “Well now, Basu. —What form will your Sparka take?”

9

Subaru: “—Gustav-san, do Sparka with me.”

Gustav: “…”

Turning around in a dignified manner, Gustav glared at Subaru, who had reached his hand out, with an imposing expression.

With his tendency to regularly wear a terrifying face, there were cases where Gustav gave off the impression of glaring when he was merely looking at another person, but this did not seem to be one of those misjudgments.

Gustav Morello was glaring. —Glaring at Natsuki Subaru, who had deployed the gladiators to occupy the entirety of the area of the island’s upper stratum that belonged to the Governor, and had completely paralyzed all operations of the island.

Gustav: “What is…”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Gustav: “What is the intention of this reckless behavior, I demand your explanation, Schwartz."

Subaru: "Explanation…"

Moving his lips from which large fangs protruded, Gustav's rational demeanor would not crumble. Ruminating over the word Gustav spoke, Subaru looked back towards the entrance of the office to which his back had faced.

Previously in the first lap, Subaru had witnessed all the brutal tragedies that had taken place in this room by camouflaging with the help of Hiain. Though, thinking back upon those tragedies that had a huge impact on him, if he drove them out of his mind, then this was just a very modest and inorganic room.

Whether that modest room would reach a conclusion where it merely remained as it was, would all depend on Subaru—.

Gustav: "Schwartz, your explanation."

Of the silent Subaru, Gustav repeated himself and inquired once more.

With or without an explanation, since they had so clearly risen in revolt, from Gustav's position as Governor, the correct course of action would be to suppress them without question. Not to mention, Subaru and Gustav were the only two people in this office. To subdue him would be exceedingly easy.

Even going as far as to stop Tanza from accompanying him, Subaru had come here by himself.

Of course, that was something Subaru did because he believed that Gustav was not the kind of person to suppress them without question, but from this point he would have to proceed in a logical manner.

For the sake of the important topic that Natsuki Subaru would propose to Gustav Morello, from here on out,

Subaru: "There's nothing for me to explain, Gustav-san."

Gustav: "…"

Subaru: "As you can see, I've made all the gladiators on this island my comrades. Seems like my extremely dangerous Sparka style sparked everyone's paternal instincts."

Gustav: "As far as I know in my capacity, the vast majority of gladiators can be evaluated as being far removed from paternalism."

Subaru: "That's one way of saying my way of evoking paternal instincts was top notch."

As Subaru shrugged his shoulders and gave a response, Gustav narrowed his eyes and pondered.

With an expression akin to an oni and folding his four burly arms, Gustav once again grasped the situation outside the window—the situation of the Gladiator Island being occupied, and accepted Subaru's words as valid.

—Currently, the Gladiator Island was under the complete control of Subaru and his comrades of around six hundred gladiators.

There were also one hundred guards assigned to the island, but it was impossible for them to stop all of the gladiators from operating in such an organized and systematic manner. The thing he had been most scared of was the Gladiator Beasts being let loose, but since they had stolen the keys to the cages beforehand, they were able succeed in seizing control.

Subaru: "Thanks to that, we were able to avoid the Gladiator Beasts from going on a rampage. After all, that was the only thing I was afraid of."

Gustav: "That was the only thing, you say?"

Upon Subaru giving his impressions regarding the difficulties in seizing control of the island, Gustav reacted.

From his perspective, it was a comment which he could not just let slide. After all, the largest factor stopping a rebellion on this

Gladiator Island was not the Gladiator Beasts, but rather…

Gustav: "—As the official, the jurisdiction to utilize the Curse Rule is granted to me, there is no possibility that you are not aware of it."

Subaru: "I'm aware. Since Gustav-san is binding everyone with a curse, the gladiators won't do anything rash even if they had discontent. If they disobeyed, their lives would be in danger."

Gustav: "In that case, why have you launched this kind of reckless rebellion?—Preposterous, are you thinking that the Curse Rule does not exist, and that I, in my capacity, have fabricated it as a falsehood in order to restrain the gladiators?"

Subaru: "I don't think that. Nah, I did think that at first. But now I don't think that."

As Gustav had said, there was a time when Subaru had suspected that something such as the Curse Rule did not exist, and instead was an imperfect alternative being made to appear bigger through fear and control.

However, Subaru was already well aware of the fact that the Curse Rule did exist.

Even so, the reason Subaru was not afraid of the Curse Rule was plain and simple.

Subaru: "I'm scared of the Curse Rule, but I'm not scared if the wielder is Gustav-san. After all, Gustav-san isn't gonna totally annihilate us with a curse."

Gustav: "…Are you saying it is a role which exceeds my capacity?"

As expected, there was some discontent mixed into Gustav's voice as he was told that.

In other words, it was denouncing him as a coward who abandoned his professional duties. Even he, who had told Subaru that bravery alone was not important at the lookout platform, would not want to be spoken of poorly.

If he was being slandered, he would likely want to give his retort.

Gustav unfolded one of his upper crossed arms, and gesturing to the island with that large arm,

Gustav: “Bestowed upon me, as the official, is the role of a warden that steadily administrates this Gladiator Island. Any factors which obstruct this must be eliminated, no matter what form they may take. Not to mention, the one who ordered me, in my capacity, to work as Governor was His Excellency the Emperor himself.”

Subaru: “What was it again? Something like “In preparation for the emergency, train the gladiators in both body and mind”?”

Gustav: “You are generally correct. Therefore, deeds such as rebelling against the guards and I, as the official, are undesirable. Consequently, you shall be disposed of in accordance with the jurisdiction granted to me, in an effort to prevent such things from occurring again.”

In a severe voice, Gustav sternly declared his own course of action.

If the conversation were to end there, and Subaru’s reckless deeds invoked the activation of the Curse Rule, that would be the worst possible result. However, as Subaru stared up at Gustav, he continued.

Gustav: “However, if you disperse the crowd right here and now, and never attempt the same overpowering negotiations again, the activation of the Curse Rule… the execution of the jurisdiction granted to me as the official, shall be shelved.”

Subaru: “…”

Gustav: “Schwartz?”

A concession of the greatest degree; while suggesting such a thing, the wrinkles on Gustav’s brow slightly deepened.

The reason for that was present in Subaru’s expression as they faced each other. It was because Subaru, who had been slightly tense as he awaited Gustav’s words, relaxed his expression upon hearing the proposal.

Right now, Subaru's chest was filled with the relief of that previous tension being alleviated, as well as a sense of satisfaction.

There were several reasons for that relief, but the thing which had relieved Subaru the most was…

Subaru: "As I thought, Gustav-san, you sure are lost."

Gustav: "What?"

Subaru: "Even if you do that scary face and voice, you wouldn't be able to dispose of us so easily."

Gustav: "—. In my capacity, my facial features and voice are not things I can change to my liking."

In response to Subaru pointing that out, the tone of Gustav's response was weak.

It was not that he was perplexed due to not having any idea what to do in response to that being pointed out.

Rather, it was something that ought to be referred to as the clumsily sincere wavering of a person who had far too clear of an idea of what to do.

The one who held responsibility for absolutely all of that was not Gustav, but rather the Emperor who had given him those orders.

Subaru: "It's all because of that damn Abel's vague orders."

And, remembering that abhorrent expression clad in an oni mask, Subaru cursed so.

Of course, he did not think that it was a problem caused by incompetence on Abel's part when he issued the order. Though he had been ousted from the throne, even if the fugitive Emperor, continuing to take measures to reclaim his throne, was self-righteous, he was a man far from receiving an evaluation of "incompetent".

Everybody who knew Abel was well aware of that, and Gustav was no exception.

That was why Gustav had always continued to think about it. —About the true intent of the Emperor's orders.

Subaru: "If Gustav-san's thinking has gotten stagnant because of that, it really makes me wanna tell that guy to stop messing around."

Gustav: "Insults towards His Excellency the Emperor are…"

Subaru: "Not allowed, right? But, don't you think so? In preparation for the emergency, train the gladiators in both body and mind… When is the emergency? What's the standard for the level of the gladiators trained in both body and mind? Let's say you were able to actualize that, what are you supposed to do from there?"

Gustav: "…"

Counting all the dissatisfactions regarding the cruel orders bestowed upon Gustav on his fingers, Subaru's breathing became rough.

At first, he was reproached by Gustav, abundantly loaded with anger for the unparalleled disrespect towards the Vollachian Emperor. But, Gustav did not rebuke him for the second time.

Gustav, too, felt anger towards the Emperor deep in his heart—That did not seem to be the case. But, on Gustav's silent face, Subaru felt like he could see a small, truly difficult to understand, conflict.

That conflict was anguish over whether he should continue conversing with Subaru like this, or if he should make use of the Curse Rule to forcibly put an end to their discussion.

Subaru: "I probably have an answer to what Gustav-san wants to know."

Gustav: "…An answer to what I, in my capacity, want to know?"

Subaru: "I understand that Gustav-san has quite a strong loyalty towards the Emperor. I don't really get why, but I get it… That may also be something that serves as my lifeline."

Gustav: "…"

Those last few words, which he appended in a quiet voice, was a suspicion which Subaru did not really wish to make sure of. If that suspicion turned out to be correct, it would not be very agreeable for Subaru, so he did not ascertain it.

Hiding his brief personal conflict, Subaru looked to Gustav, and spoke.

Subaru: "Frankly, Gustav-san, you're lost and worried about whether your actions are properly following the Emperor's orders. Am I wrong?"

It seemed that Gustav was probably exerting as much effort as possible to prevent his expression from shifting. However, though it was just a moment of discomposure, his stiffened cheeks were not able to bear it.

Ordered by the Emperor, the highly loyal retainer honestly tried his best to live up to those expectations.

But, far too much interpretation for this important order was entrusted to the listener, and with the wishes of the Empire's apex so distant that he even hesitated to inquire about the true intent, Gustav must have been lost, he must have wavered, and he must have been troubled.

On his own, he comprehended the true intent of the Emperor was a certain way, anguished over it, and arrived at an implementation.

And then…

Subaru: "The thing that the Emperor wanted to let Gustav-san do, I think it's probably been achieved at this point. Though, it really makes me angry."

Gustav: "…For what reason does it anger you, Schwartz? Do not repeat more impudent disrespect towards His Excellency the

Emperor. First and foremost, how do you know that the current state of the Gladiator Island is in accordance with the esteemed intentions of His Excellency the Emperor?”

Subaru: “No, I don’t know that. Whether this island is in the ideal state that the Emperor had hoped for is honestly an enigma.”

Gustav: “—. It seems your viewpoint in itself is constantly changing…”

Subaru: “I’m not doing that.”

As Subaru shook his head, Gustav’s light air of perplexity deepened.

A serious and honest blue-skinned Multi-Arm Tribesman with a frightening monster-like face. Faced with such a commendable vassal who devoted such loyalty towards him, the Emperor of Vollachia—Abel, had done something cruel.

Subaru: “Probably, the Emperor’s desire wasn’t how the island would turn out, but rather, the trial and error that Gustav-san would go through in order to clear his order.”

Gustav: “…”

Subaru: “In other words, the Emperor was doing a test… he was testing you. How Gustav-san would interpret the order he was bestowed with, how he would implement it. The objective was… well, at the very least, it probably wasn’t just out of curiosity.”

As Subaru expressed his conjecture and scratched his cheek, Gustav remained silent.

But, that silence was not in order to bear anger or the violent emotions welling up inside of him; surely, it was an intellectual and composed serenity for the sake of taking in Subaru’s view, and processing it for himself.

Though it was probably in Gustav’s nature to unsparingly brush Subaru’s opinion aside, this silence was likely because he himself could understand that Subaru may have had a point.

Subaru: “If that’s true, then he’s truly a bastard with an awful personality…”

Just how would he meet the instructions granted to him? Subaru could understand the idea of trying to ascertain a subordinate’s ability and aptness via such creativity and ability to respond to instructions, but this method was absolutely that of a prideful, dictatorial leader. When doing such a thing on a national scale, the number of people involved would be extraordinary.

But, at the same time, it also felt like the aptitudes ascertained from these tests would be something unfavorable for the reign of Abel. If he wanted to continue being a dictatorial Emperor, then finding people like Gustav who had the ability to think for themselves would be rather inconvenient.

The true meaning of this test was a plain expectation for other people.

Subaru: “But, “expectation” doesn’t really sound right, so, maybe trust…? That doesn’t suit him either.”

He wanted to call it “arrogance in the form of trust in others”, as if going to such an extent was natural.

Setting aside that resistance in his heart, Subaru spoke of what he thought the true intention of the order given to Gustav was. Perhaps it could be called a litmus test of the Emperor’s expectations and trust.

Exposed to that, as a result of the struggle to meet those expectations, the Gladiator Island…

Subaru: “At first, I thought this was an outrageous place…”

In the barren room, touching the back of the sofa used for receiving visitors, Subaru turned around to the interior—No, he turned his head as to look out over the Gladiator Island Ginunhive.

Since he had unexpectedly washed ashore on the island of isolating waters, sharing in the same fate as an unfamiliar partner, Subaru had repeated Death to such an extent that would make anybody want to avert their eyes, and managed to overcome Sparka.

The circumstances were such that if one did not accomplish that, they could not become a member of the island; however, what lay beyond surmounting that first barrier was a life on an island where an air of tension constantly hung, with rigid rules bending them down.

Under Gustav's designs, it was a restrictive island that did not lean towards severity or coarseness—When Subaru became confident that that was what Ginunhive was, he had a thought.

Subaru: "This place, it's like a really strict boarding school."

Of course, he was not talking about the entry test being difficult; even if monstrous parents did not object to a system where failure to pass would result in death, the vehement protest of a legal guardian would be unavoidable.

But, if one at least ignored the imperial ways there, then it was a sound environment where a bed and meals were guaranteed, and one even had to do work that involved mental strain (Sparka).

It was just like school—though, taking the history of the gladiators into account, it might have been more appropriate to compare it to prison. Either way, both were institutions that intended to cultivate those who entered, and to rectify them.

Just why had Gustav been entrusted with such a role?

Subaru: "You told me about this back at the lookout platform. When Gustav-san first met the Emperor, all the men had gone off to war, and the only ones left in the assailed village were Gustav-san, the women, and the children."

Gustav: "…Strictly speaking, there were men present other than myself, in my capacity. However, the reason for them not going to war was because they were all either injured, sickly, or elderly."

Subaru: "What happened to them?"

Gustav: "When the village was attacked, they all strived to grab their weapons first, and they lost their lives. Including myself, in my capacity, the survivors were composed of only very few women and children. Even we who remained, if His Excellency the Emperor and his subordinate had not arrived in time, everyone—"

Subaru: "It's that."

Interrupting Gustav's answer halfway through, Subaru reeled in the reason for his unease.

The unease Subaru felt, it was something that the person it concerned, Gustav, did not understand. Even if it was clear to an onlooker, it was not an uncommon case that the person concerned would feel anything out of the ordinary.

But, supposing the Emperor had felt the same discomfort that Subaru was feeling,

Subaru: "If I remember correctly, the mastermind who targeted Gustav-san's village was a feudal lord whose objective was to reduce the number of mouths to feed. It would be dangerous for him if such dark activities were exposed, so he should have been fully prepared and should have dealt with any issues."

However, the result was that time had been bought for Gustav and the women and children, so the Emperor's subordinate was able to come rushing in and kill all the assassins; because of that, the mastermind went through the hardship of punishment since his own involvement was finally exposed.

Then, there ought to have been somebody whose great efforts caused the mastermind's plan to fail.

For instance…

Subaru: "In preparation for the village getting attacked, Gustav-san could have armed the women and children."

Gustav: "…"

Subaru: "That expression, so you really did do that?"

Gustav: “…If the men left the village, it was obvious we would be deemed as ideal prey by others. Sitting around waiting to be destroyed is a matter for fools of the past. In my capacity, I loathe strife, but I am not one so obstinate to refuse to take the sword when it means death. —Even so, most were killed.”

Subaru: “…But, Gustav-san was saved. And even if just a few people, there were other survivors.”

The amount of people, Subaru did not know if that would relieve the burden on Gustav’s heart.

Supposing the feelings of guilt Gustav had were large, Subaru could understand the feeling of worrying over the problem of zero or one hundred.

But, he could also somewhat understand the reason why the oddball Emperor, who had hastened there, had given a high evaluation of the eccentric Multi-Arm Tribesman who had resisted.

Subaru: “If Gustav-san were the type to mindlessly follow the Emperor’s orders, this island would have probably been a much more hellish environment, and if we took a rebellious stance like this, it would be weird to not immediately activate the curse… But, I guess that’s probably the reason why this island was entrusted to you.”

Gustav: “But, just earlier you guessed that it was His Excellency the Emperor’s true intention to test me in my capacity?”

Subaru: “A test is a test, but qualifications are needed to take the test. Letting a guy with no chances of passing take the test is like, only something that happens when someone takes an entrance exam for a school without caring if they pass. Besides—”

Subaru folded his arms and tilted his head, and he answered as Abel’s face came to his mind.

It was the test of a prideful man who spoke as if he knew everything and could foresee anything in this world.

Subaru: “The moment he decided to try and test you, he would have already completely deemed you acceptable. If a disappointing outcome resulted from that, he's the type to curse his own decision to let you take the exam instead of cursing the examinee."

Gustav: "…"

Subaru: "That's just what I think, personally."

Marking that as the end, Subaru restated that everything he had said until now was all his conjecture.

The contents were such that they had probably given Gustav hopes of understanding what the Emperor's true intentions were, but as they spoke, the less sure Subaru became of whether it was correct.

It would not be strange if in the blink of an eye, Abel could think up the same contents that had taken Subaru so much thinking to devise, and it was also completely possible that he had been completely off the mark.

But, this way of thinking was a perfect match for the image of Abel within Subaru.

Gustav: "Schwartz, supposing your thinking is correct…"

After taking a moment to digest everything, Gustav wrung those words out.

His voice sounding akin to one heard in a cold and gloomy cave, Gustav formed his words as he folded his four thick arms.

Gustav: "What do you think the "emergency" that His Excellency the Emperor ordered me to prepare for, as the official, is supposed to be?"

Subaru: "…Gustav-san, if you suspect that the emergency is the civil war happening right now, then you're the one who has to decide on that. That's what you had just told me back at the lookout platform."

Gustav: "Affirmative. But, bearing the shame, I request your opinion."

For him to admit his own fault, and openly request advice, was incredible.

In a savage place where admitting a mistake could cost one their life, full of people trying to take advantage of those mistakes, the very fact that he could admit his mistake like that shone like a golden radiance.

But, it was an uncharacteristic blunder on his part to ask that question of Subaru.

Subaru: "…"

After all, was it not so? "Prepare for the emergency"; Gustav had been ordered to do so.

If Subaru told him that the emergency was meant to mean what was happening right now, it would be enough justification for him to go with Subaru and the others.

The fact he had entrusted the matter to Subaru, may have been indicative of Gustav's intent, but—.

Subaru: "—I think, the "emergency" the Emperor spoke of is just about being prepared. There's no specific date or event that it's referring to, but more like it's about getting ready in case anything ever happens."

Because the word "emergency" had thoughtlessly been chosen, margin for interpretation had been created, and confusion had sprouted. He also feared that perhaps even that was a part of the test intended by the Emperor.

Gustav: "…"

Hearing Subaru's reply, a complex hue flashed in Gustav's eyes.

Subaru's reply just now was an answer that had deviated from the aforementioned justification. At a question which he could have exploited and taken advantage of, Subaru chose not to exploit, he chose not to take advantage.

And then…

Subaru: “The “emergency” that the Emperor ordered Gustav-san to prepare for isn’t right now. —But, won’t you pretend that it is right now, and come together with us to ruin the civil war?”

In such a merry tone, Subaru invited him to join a policy that betrayed the Emperor’s decree, which he only now revealed.

10

Gustav: “—This is difficult to understand.”

As Subaru held out his hand and grinned, Gustav used his two upper arms to rub his brow.

With the reality of having just caused distress for him, it was not as though Subaru did not feel responsibility, however,

Subaru: “I’m asking if Gustav-san can bend his logic just a little bit, but…”

Gustav: “In my capacity, I am aware of this. Since I am aware, I am finding it difficult to understand. In the first place, all of your speech and conduct until now has been nothing short of incomprehensible.”

With fingers still on his brow, Gustav’s eyes looked down on Subaru, as the latter feigned ignorance.

Gustav: “Throwing yourself into perilous Sparkas, winning over the island’s gladiators as your allies, and rising up in revolt against me, the official; these I can comprehend. However, I have no choice but to question an uprising performed while fully understanding the risk of the Curse Rule; moreover, our dialogue a moment ago was quite capable of pushing me, in my capacity, to take the step and utilize the Curse Rule.”

Subaru: “Just like an act of suicide?”

Gustav: “There are no other words capable of describing it. But, I do not sense that you have suicidal thoughts. I find it unthinkable for you to want to take those in your surroundings down with you. That is to say, it goes beyond my capacity for comprehension.”

Just like how Subaru had analyzed Gustav, Gustav was now analyzing Subaru’s character.

Be that as it may, Subaru did not consider himself to be a complex person, so Gustav’s diagnosis was generally correct. He had never thought that he wanted to die, or that he wished to bring those in his surroundings down with him.

For that reason, Gustav was troubled that he could not understand Subaru’s feelings, but…

Subaru: “Come to think of it, there’s a Curse Tool needed for the Curse Rule inside of Gustav’s body, right?”

Gustav: “—. Do not tell me, has it already been taken out of my body, as the official?”

Subaru: “Ah, to tell you the truth… YOU SERIOUSLY THINK THAT! No I have not! Even though it’s designed to prevent such a thing from happening, it would be worrying if we were able to steal it without being caught, wouldn’t it?!”

Gustav: “If Cecilus Segmunt is present, things that are usually impossible seem to become possible.”

Subaru: “Ahh, Ceci, right. Yes yes, Ceci, Ceci…”

Though it was an outrageous opinion, Subaru could not help but agree with the line of thought that most things could become possible when Cecilus was placed in the center.

In reality, just how did Gustav perceive Cecilus, who was given non-standard treatment?

The strength he possessed was certain, but still, Gustav did not think he was the real First, or perhaps he did?

Either way, it would not be fair if he did not clear up Gustav's misunderstanding first.

Subaru: "I'm sorry, Gustav-san, I lied to you about one thing."

Gustav: "…A lie? As expected, so you took it from my body?"

Subaru: "Not that, it's about making all the gladiators on the island my allies. Um, there's just one exception. Ceci."

Gustav: "What?"

Subaru: "Ceci's the only one I've yet to ask. Or rather, I don't intend on asking him until the very end."

Raising a single finger, Subaru displayed his attitude towards the lone expectation on this island, Cecilus.

Gustav slightly widened his eyes upon hearing that, and resumed rubbing his brow with the fingers still placed there. It was a reaction that seemed to say "This is increasingly difficult to understand."

Gustav: "This is increasingly difficult to understand…"

Subaru: "Ah, you said it."

Gustav: "A matter of course, is it not?—You had been getting along with Segmunt. Taking Segmunt's capabilities into account, he ought to have been the most suitable person to ask right after the members of your Unit."

Subaru: "Well, even if I asked him because I coveted him, I knew that he wouldn't say no."

At first he had put on airs, around mid-game he began acting nonchalant, and after reaching the latter-half, Cecilus had started to insist that he wanted to be persuaded; but, Subaru neglected him.

What Gustav had said was certain, Cecilus's capability was outstanding, and if they had him then most things would turn out all right through a brute force approach.

Gustav: “If you knew that, then why?”

Subaru: “Because I knew that, I decided not to.”

Gustav: “…Difficult to understand.”

Hearing Subaru’s immediate reply, Gustav’s misgivings only continued to deepen.

If Subaru did not demolish that mountain of doubts soon, then no matter how rational Gustav was, it was possible that he would negligently activate the Curse Rule.

Subaru: “The reason I didn’t ask Ceci, part of it was of course to annoy him, but the most important thing was the message I would be sending to Gustav-san.”

Gustav: “Mehssej…?”

Subaru: “Basically a declaration of my intentions. We don’t intend on using a brute force approach.”

As Subaru amended his words, Gustav’s doubts were not cleared up at all; in fact, they only deepened.

With his two lower arms still folded, Gustav turned his strict face, and,

Gustav: “…With the island’s guards suppressed, it seems to me that the requisites for a brute force approach have been fully met.”

Subaru: “But, Gustav-san has the trump card of the Curse Rule. Since we don’t have the trump card of Ceci, we can’t get Gustav-san to do what we say with brute force, right?”

Gustav: “—. That reasoning is sound, but everything outside of that reasoning does not hold up.”

Gustav, having been able to understand one thread of logic in the confusion, brought the two upper arms that had been massaging his brow back to his waist. Slightly puffing his chest up, with the Curse Tool stored in inside of him, Gustav’s fangs shook, and, Gustav: “Following your reasoning, I, as the official, am at an advantage due to having the last resort of the Curse Rule. Completely one-sidedly at that. In my capacity, I am unable to comprehend why you have constructed such a situation. Your objective, what is it?”

Subaru: “If that’s what you wanna know, then it’s the very thing I said right at the start. —It’s Sparka.”

Though they had taken quite the detour, Subaru’s cheeks contorted as the conversation finally returned to the main topic.

At first, when Subaru spoke the word “Sparka”, Gustav ignored it, and demanded a discussion to grasp the circumstances and comprehend Subaru’s motives.

But, the thing Subaru demanded had not deviated whatsoever from that which he said to Gustav at the very beginning.

A contest of convictions, where both Cecilus and the Curse Rule were to be considered against the rules.

Gustav: “Sparka… but Schwartz, that does not mean that you desire a duel with me in my capacity, correct?”

Subaru: “Of course, I don’t think you’d ever agree to such a thing, but I would be extremely troubled if you readily consented to it. My only chance would be if Gustav-san’s muscles were just for show, or if you were actually a little girl wearing a full-body costume.”

Gustav: “It would be impossible for a costume to control the island.”

Subaru: “Right.”

So of course, he rejected the likes of fist fights or death matches, and desired a different method.

The method for that, that which Subaru had brought with him was…

Subaru: “Gustav-san, do you know the origin of the word

"Sparka"?"

Gustav: "—. Since I took up office as Governor of the Gladiator Island, it was a necessary preliminary inquiry. Originally, it was not something that referred to the exhibition of gladiator battles, but a word indicative of duels wagered by those who refused to yield."

Subaru: "Something like that. The thing I'm challenging Gustav-san to, is that type of Sparka."

Speaking those words, Subaru tidied up the reception table, and spread out the contents of a cloth wrap that had been held in one of his hands the whole time.

The contents of the bag had been a coarsely made game board, and a pile of small pebbles painted with black and white on each of their sides.

Subaru: "It's called Reversi. We take turns placing our stones on the board, and whoever has the most pieces by the end wins. When you sandwich your opponent's pieces between your own, you get to flip them all over and make them your pieces."

Gustav: "Why are you explaining this game?"

Subaru: "Because this is the Sparka I'm proposing."

Responding so to Gustav's question, Subaru placed his hands on the table and looked up at Gustav.

There was no flashy audience, and it was not a competition of disciplined skill either. However, if Sparka was a bout where convictions were staked, then this would be enough to serve as Sparka.

Subaru: "If Gustav-san wins, I'll obediently withdraw everyone. I won't cause any more disturbances like this either. I promise."

Gustav: "If I win in my capacity, hm? Well then Schwartz, what about if you win?"

Subaru: "Renounce the Curse Rule, and let us go free. And then, you'll come with us."

Saying thus, Subaru vigorously seated himself in the reception sofa, and gesturing to the chair opposite himself with his hand, he invited Gustav.

The idealistic thought he had spoken of to Tanza, which she had said she would not ridicule; in order to materialize that reckless dream which would make anyone want to burst out laughing,

Subaru: "—To the Imperial Capital, to launch an attack on the place where His Excellency the Emperor is. Together with everyone from the island."

11

It was a proposal that he should have brushed off as nothing short of absurd.

He had been given a direct order from the Vollachian Emperor, Vincent Vollachia. Consequently, Gustav had assumed the seat of Governor of the Gladiator Island; there was no margin for him to agree to such a thing.

He ought to teach this Natsuki Schwartz, the boy who had made a proposal that was more incomprehensible than it was reckless, that his decision was wrong. Perhaps it would have been better if he firmly insisted on activating the Curse Rule.

However…

Schwartz: "Is it alright if I take black, and Gustav-san takes white? I feel like there was a rule that the colors decide who goes first and who goes second, but I've forgotten it, so you can decide whichever you please."

Gustav: "…In that case, I, as the official, shall go second."

Schwartz: "OK, then I'll make the first move. I like going first too."

Moistening his lips with his tongue, Schwartz clapped his hands together and grabbed a black pebble, casually placing it adjacent to one of the white pebbles, which was one of the four pieces initially setup on the game board. With that white pebble now sandwiched between two black ones, Schwartz flipped it over with his finger, showing the side of the pebble that had been painted black.

Gustav: "…"

Gustav pinched a pebble that was far too small for his hand, and pondered as he decided on where to put it.

Why did he not refuse Schwartz's proposal or simply take actions to put an end to this absurd uprising on the island, but instead directly engage in this game—No, in Sparka?

Schwartz: "If you happen to be worried about the safety of the guards and can't concentrate, you don't need to worry."

Gustav: "—. What is your basis for that claim?"

Schwartz: "We didn't subdue the guards with brute force, but by serving them a drug. Old Man Null made it for us, and then we laced it into the food prepared by Kashew and Codroe."

Gustav: "…It has come to light that there is a need to reevaluate the way I deal with the guards and gladiators. You have my gratitude."

While each of them placed their pieces, Gustav heaved a sigh at the information presented in a manner similar to idle chatter.

Due to having permission to give medical treatment to his fellow gladiators, the gladiator known as Old Man Null was granted appropriate freedom; but, Gustav was surprised that he could create a drug with such an effect, and that he could compound drugs in general.

He could not turn a blind eye to the fact that the guards were rendered powerless due to eating the meals prepared by gladiators. It seemed it was necessary for him to explain the importance of their professional duties on the island to the guards once more.

Beside Gustav as he contemplated tightening discipline, Schwartz continued.

Schwartz: “Old Man Null has deemed Gustav-san’s way of doing things as acceptable. Even so, he helped me out because I promised to bring him back to his hometown. He said that there’s scenery he wants to see one more time before he dies.”

Gustav: “…”

Schwartz: “Oh yeah, the duo of Kashew and Codroe originally worked as cooks. But, their shop was devastated by some hooligans hired by a rival shop, and they were arrested trying to get revenge.”

Gustav: “…”

Schwartz: “By the way, the ones who stole the keys for the Gladiator Beast cages were Hiain and his friends, Orson’s group. The way lizard-people can move by crawling on walls is really incredible. But, because of that, they get treated like thieves, even if they didn’t do anything.”

Gustav: “…”

Schwartz: “The board and pieces for Reversi were both made by Jawsrough. Did you know? The guy known as the lone-wolf, Jawsrough. Though he’s not a lone-wolf anymore, apparently he originally worked as a mason.”

Gustav: “…”

Schwartz: “Weitz did the colors for the pieces. He said I could count on him to help with anything, and he was a lot more proficient than I had thought. Idra let me use his good-luck bandana for the cloth wrap.”

Gustav: “…”

Schwartz: “You know, those kinds of guys wouldn’t have been saved if it weren’t for Gustav-san’s way of doing things. Nah, even under Gustav-san’s way of doing things, not everybody is saved.”

When the board was filled about half-way, a certain heat filled Schwartz’s voice.

Currently, it seemed like Gustav's white pieces were dominating the boardtop. But, in this "Reversi" game, a lot of pieces could be turned over all at once, so he could not afford to be careless.

The moment Gustav entered into this match of gradual demolition, it was fully possible that he had already fallen into a trap designed by the boy before him.

Schwartz: "…"

Schwartz's gaze was fixed not on the game board, but on Gustav.

In those black eyes, he did not feel cold calculations; rather, he was captured by the earnest light housed within. It was no wonder that so many gladiators had changed their minds. All the more if their reason for that was due to the topic of the Emperor's illegitimate child.

—The rumor that Schwartz was the black-haired Crown Prince that the masses were all currently discussing had naturally also reached Gustav's ears, as the Governor of the island.

The fact that Schwartz was not merely the young child that his appearance suggested could be understood by witnessing his manner of activity on this island. Thus, people sought to find a reason for that.

That was so for Gustav, too. Even if the authenticity of that matter was unknown, in the case that the rumors were true, it would mean that Gustav might be taking the life of the esteemed child of the Emperor, to whom Gustav owed a great obligation.

—He had wanted to avoid that.

Gustav: "But, that is the reasoning for my side, as the official. It would not be the reasoning for Schwartz's side. You have gone out of your way to be at a disadvantage; I don't understand the intentions behind trying to be equal to myself, in my capacity."

If Schwartz's highest priority was to leave the Gladiator Island, then the best thing he could do would be to abandon his trivial hangup and make Cecilus his ally, cut through Gustav's Curse Rule, and leave the island without any anguish.

However, Schwartz had not done those things, and instead deliberately went down a thorny path with no chance of winning in sight.

Gustav: “As expected, it is difficult to understand.”

Schwartz: “Gustav-san?”

Gustav: “Schwartz, if it is like you have calmly stated, and you have discovered talents that the gladiators have outside of fighting, then the choice to drag them into the middle of the civil war is a contradiction. Since you are aware that I, as the official, would never think of defying His Excellency the Emperor’s decree, it was also unwise to refuse to falsify the meaning of the “emergency”.”

If he did not want to let anybody die, then he should not drag the gladiators into the civil war.

If he wanted Gustav to accompany him, he should not have let the biggest opportunities pass by.

Thus, the same could be said of this game where both black and white take from the other’s position.

Gustav: “Even if you are victorious in this Sparka using this game board, you have no guarantee that I, as the official, will keep my promise. As you know, in my capacity, I am not a warrior of the Empire, nor do I take pride in battle.”

Schwartz: “I know. But, you’re mistaken about one thing, Gustav-san. —I don’t plan on having Gustav-san lose this Sparka.”

Gustav: “—What?”

With a light thud, Schwartz placed down a black piece, and flipped over some of the whites on the board.

Though he was paving the path to his own victory, Schwartz had spoken those words.

That he did not intend on having Gustav lose this match. His words and his actions, were overflowing with contradictions.

Gustav could not help but doubt such disarray, and seeing that, Schwartz made a sound as he fiddled with the pebble in his hand, making a huge grin.

Schwartz: “It may seem like I’m speaking in riddles, but I’m not. — Saying that we’re clashing with each other may seem like it means that there’s gonna be a winner and loser no matter what, but there’s another conclusion entirely detached from that.”

Gustav: “…”

Schwartz: “My ideal would be to win Sparka, then accompanied by all the gladiators and Gustav-san, launch an attack on the Emperor’s place in the Imperial Capital.”

Gustav: “In order for that, there is a need for me to lose in my capacity, no? If that is the case, your comment just earlier about not having me lose as the official is a contradiction.”

Schwartz: “That may be the case for winning or losing Reversi. But, Sparka is a bout where convictions clash. In that case, both are important and can be ways to settle the conclusion.”

Gustav placed down a white piece, and flipped over a black one. As the Multi-Arm tribesman engaged in a bout that did not make good use of his four arms, Schwartz closed one of his eyes at Gustav, who had just ended his turn.

And then, a question was posed.

Schwartz: “What’s Gustav-san’s ideal conclusion?”

Gustav: “—. In accordance with His Excellency the Emperor’s decree, to carry out my professional duties as Governor of the Gladiator Island.”

Schwartz: ““For that purpose, prepare for the emergency, training the gladiators in both body and mind”… Right?”

Gustav: “Affirmative. It is just as you have verified many times during this conversation…”

Schwartz: “—Well then, the emergency that Gustav-san has decided on, when is it gonna happen?”

Schwartz nonchalantly stacked that question on top and made a loud sound as he placed a stone on the board.

The noise struck his eardrums, and the question had struck his very heart; at that moment, Gustav understood. The comprehension he had long anguished for, he had finally reached it.

—Schwartz had firmly instilled the Emperor’s intentions into Gustav.

Entrusting Gustav with the role of Governor, was not just for him to simply follow orders, it was to test if he had the talents to find the best solutions using his mind. If that was the true intention of Vincent Vollachia’s order, then it meant that Gustav had been granted something.

The order passed down to him from the Emperor, it granted Gustav the right to make judgments and decisions at his own discretion and interpretation.

Gustav: “…”

Even if the contents of the question were the same, the respondent had been different, and thus it had been born.

In their previous discussion, Schwartz had overlooked the favorable opportunity to make Gustav his ally after gradually whittling him down. However, with offense and defense now reversed, the one who had to choose was Gustav.

Whether the emergency was now or not, the one who could decide on the Emperor’s order became Gustav.

As if to give Gustav a gentle push forward, Schwartz appended a brief comment.

That was…

Schwartz: “Gustav-san, do you have the patience to stay confined to this island at a time when your benefactor is in danger?”

Gustav: “SCHWARTZ…!!”

Schwartz: “Your face and voice sure are scary, but if you aren’t going to kill us with the curse, then it’s nothing but a threat.”

Slamming both his upper arms on the table, Gustav loomed over the game board and Schwartz as he glared at the latter.

But, the boy looking up at him from directly below was undaunted by Gustav’s threat.

An extraordinary courage, and black eyes which seemed like they peered directly into his soul—They bore a strong resemblance to the man who looked down from horseback at Gustav Morello when he was on the verge of death in those days long past.

Back then, Gustav’s existence was affirmed by the man of those black eyes, and he was deemed worthy.

To that man, he felt a sense of obligation, both for saving his village, and elevating his social status. But, that which Gustav truly harbored loyalty for, it was the salvation of that moment.

If the Emperor told Gustav to stand by until the time of the “emergency” on the Gladiator Island, where the damage from the civil war in the Imperial Capital would not reach, that was what he ought to do.

Gustav: “If the time of “emergency” is now, I must hasten to His Excellency the Emperor’s side.”

Schwartz: “Accompanied by the gladiators, trained in both body and mind, right?”

Gustav: “But, Schwartz, you are… your position is, His Excellency the Emperor’s…”

If Schwartz was the rumored illegitimate child of the Emperor, if he was the black-haired Crown Prince, then his goal would be to usurp the Imperial Throne, and it would be tantamount to Gustav sinking his fangs into the Emperor, to whom he had such a great obligation.

In that case, would it not be a mistake for Gustav to proceed in accordance with Schwartz's will?

And would it not also be the kind of mistake that could not be undone?

Schwartz: "The fact that I came here, is the answer to that."

Gustav: "…"

While Gustav silently remained in deep thought, Schwartz suddenly spoke in a quiet voice.

Schwartz was still in the shadow of Gustav's large figure, and with a sharp look in his eyes, he firmly pushed his fist against Gustav's chest, and,

Schwartz: "I can't show anything for it. I have no evidence. All I can give you are my true, unfiltered intentions."

Gustav: "What are you…"

Schwartz: "In order to protect the Vollachian Empire, accompany me to the Imperial Capital."

Gustav: "…"

Schwartz: "If you cooperate with me, I shall never let you be known as a man who betrayed the Emperor."

Truly, without presenting anything, these words merely made a straightforward appeal.

If this was the Emperor, Vincent, the margin for Gustav's choice would be shaved away, and numerous artifices would have been arranged to lead to the result of the Emperor's desire, controlling the hearts of others through a sense of defeat.

For a moment, it seemed as though he could see a glimpse of that in Schwartz, but…

Gustav: "—In my capacity, I have placed my final pebble; is it concluded?"

Schwartz: "…Yeah, with that, Reversi has concluded."

Looking down on the game board, the white pieces had reigned supreme ever since the mid-game. Without that supremacy being overturned, the final move had colored most of the board white.

Despite it being a game that he himself had planned, brimming with confidence as he brought it in, it was a complete defeat.

Gustav: "So, you brought a game that you did not expect to win?"

Schwartz: "My skill at Reversi is decent… but, to be honest, the critical moment this time was whether or not I could persuade Gustav-san, so I couldn't really concentrate on the game at all."

Gustav: "…But, Schwartz, your true match lay not on this board, hm?"

Following the rules of the game, the victor here was undoubtedly Gustav.

If the promise of the Sparka were to be fulfilled, Schwartz and his men would abandon their operation, and the Gladiator Island would return to the usual administration it had had until this morning; it would return to the state that Gustav had imposed upon it.

However…

Gustav: "—. You have made both me, as the official, and yourself, the victors of the Sparka, hm?"

If it was not a fight to the death, but rather a clash of convictions, then there was a possibility of a conclusion whether neither party would yield.

Certainly, what Schwartz had spoken of was logic that he could agree with.

Schwartz: “Gustav-san, since I lost Reversi, I’ll have everyone disperse. But, what will you do?”

Since victory or defeat upon the board was secondary to him, Schwartz’s words were that of understanding that the true outcome lay here.

Having presented victory conditions that Gustav had not realized, making him understand, and after a great amount of confusion, Schwartz had made use of all the trump cards he possessed at this final showdown.

Gustav: “…”

For a beat, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and the conflict that had persisted within Gustav for a long, long time, finally came to an end.

That conflict was something that had been present ever since the time he had taken up office as the Governor of the Gladiator Island; thus…

Gustav: “One thing I shall tell you, Schwartz.”

Schwartz: “Yeah?”

Gustav: “Many times now, I have let many opportunities to activate the Curse Rule pass due to conjecture about your position. But, this decision is by no means a result of any speculation regarding you. —Especially, in this time of “emergency”.”

Stating thus, Gustav retracted his two upper arms which he had placed on the table, and unfolded his two lower arms which had been crossed—With all of his four arms, he shook hands with the boy who held his arm out.

When he saw the boy’s face sulk upon hearing the sound of the word “speculation”, Gustav Morello’s conviction as a Governor was protected, and he let out an audible laugh, so very uncharacteristic of himself.

???: “—Please don’t think ill of me, Boss.”

Sitting cross-legged on the desk, chin rested in hand, the blue-haired boy gave an indifferent smile.

That smile was abhorrently the same as ever, and for that reason, Subaru clearly understood that it was not a joke or anything of the sort.

In both the boy’s smile and voice, there was no sarcasm or hostility to be found.

A matter of course. When people dressed up their words, it was more or less because they had some intentions. Thus, when they did so, it was to increase the chances of fulfilling their objective, even if only by a little.

However, if one had no such need for those kinds of petty tricks, and they could achieve one hundred percent of their object through nothing but their own power, then the thought of playing with their words was something that would not even pass through the corners of their mind.

To be precise, that was undoubtedly the laughing boy’s—Cecilus Segmunt’s, way of being.

Subaru: “Ceci…”

Cecilus: “Such a feeble voice will make your stocks plummet, y’know? I know I said, “Please don’t think ill of me,” but if thinking ill of me leads to a considerable improvement in the display of Boss’s proficiency, then please feel free to think ill of me. For me, I think it’s best to prioritize whichever one makes you shine brighter.”

“Boss”, and “Ceci”; even when calling each other by their nicknames, the atmosphere between the two did not subside.

Normally, if it was a close relationship where nicknames were used, lots more discretion would be utilized. But, he could not hope for such a thing with Cecilus. After all, rather than a gap between their hearts, what divided Subaru and Cecilus was more like a gap between their ways of living.

This gap was not something that could be filled by merely having nicknames or living alongside each other.

A tiger and a Dragon could not understand one another—no, considering the difference in strength, a tortoise and a hare might be more suitable. Anyhow, as living beings who differed by a great deal, understanding each other would be difficult.

???: “Segmunt-sama, are you sane?”

Outstretching her arms to protect Subaru, it seemed that Tanza shared the same opinion.

Harboring vigilance in her large irises, the young girl clad was in a kimono; receiving the glint in the eyes from that girl of characteristic deer antlers, Cecilus gave an “Oya” and facetiously raised his eyebrows.

Cecilus: “That’s a meaningless question, Tanza-san. You’re not able to tell on which side of the path of sanity I’ve been whimsically walking down, now are you? How do you intend to compare the world I see against what you deem to be the opposite side of sanity?”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, somehow it seems like he is sane.”

Subaru: “Seems like it.”

As Cecilus’s spoke incessantly in a way that would make anyone want to suspect the existence of a script, bitterness was mixed into Tanza’s tone. Subaru shrugged his shoulders at that information, and he desperately made a face that did not reveal his inner feelings.

Otherwise, it would be discovered that a cold sweat was running down his back at the very unexpectedness of the situation. If that were to be exposed, he had no idea what Cecilus would do next.

Subaru: “Shit…”

Even at the best of times, Cecilus was a problem child who could not be patient and brought about situations like this.

He had intended on understanding that Cecilus was difficult to deal with, but realized that it had truly been nothing but an intention. Just what in the world should he do?

Cecilus: “Well now let’s see, I wonder if Boss’s “True Sight” will be able to overcome my whimsy?”

Just how much did he know? Flashing his white teeth, Cecilus spouted a loathsome remark.

In the truest sense, he had pierced the crux of Subaru’s Return by Death—The fact that it seemed like he was even doing that by instinct, was Cecilus’s most troublesome quality.

Gnawing his molars at that troublesomeness, Subaru shouted while knowing it was mostly pointless.

Subaru: “Why… Why did you betray me, Ceci?!!”

So he shouted.

13

—Let us rewind the clock to a few days before that troublesome confrontation.

???: “It’s no good! No matter where ya look, there ain’t nothin’ left!”

???: “The armory and food cellar are also empty! There are also ashes mixed into the water! It ain’t drinkable!”

???: “They also thoroughly killed the Brave Oxen for the beast carriages… What an impudent bunch…!”

With bittersweet emotions of confusion, lament, and indignation, they had brought back such a report.

As they had triumphantly marched into the stronghold to examine the interior, this was the result of him excitedly waiting for the report they had to give. In short, hearing that there was no gain, Subaru, at his wit's end, held his head.

Subaru: "Goddammit! That bastard, the damn nerve to do this!"

Directly on the receiving end of that targeted harassment, the face of the offender immediately came to Subaru's mind.

Without a doubt, the one who had done this was Subaru's worst enemy—Todd Fang.

Visiting the Gladiator Island as an emissary, Todd was the perpetrator behind the tragedy that massacred every person on the island. In order to prevent that horrible future, Subaru threw down the gauntlet for a second lap around the Gladiator Island.

And thus, in a display of excellence, he had gained all of the island's gladiators as his allies, and had even won over those on the side of the guards, who, by all rights should have been his enemies; hence, he had succeeded in preventing Todd from disembarking.

Having certainly achieved a perfect victory, Subaru and his gladiator comrades of around six-hundred people had become ecstatic.

Believing they were unbeatable, they finally rushed out from the island, and began their journey with their sights set on the Imperial Capital—And then, their first hurdle ended up being the lookout stronghold that was located on the shore opposite to the island.

It was a small stronghold used to operate the drawbridge connecting the island with the far shore, and it also had the objective of inspecting the beast carriages going in and out of the island; at most, there would be a limit of twenty people stationed there.

As previously mentioned, the number of gladiators that Subaru had enlisted as allies was six-hundred. It had been something that was very difficult to deal with.

Subaru: “Though, during the time when we were all a bit flustered as we left the island, I was incredibly surprised when Ceci immediately ran off to capture the stronghold and burn the flag…”

Cecilus: “Nah, I heedlessly did that because of all the pent-up frustration I had from being treated like my participation wasn’t needed. Be that as it may, capturing the stronghold isn’t really all that incredible. I guess in story-terms, it’s an activity on the level of being finished between the lines.”

Subaru: “…In reality, this isn’t an episode that can be compared with Ceci’s monstrous chronicles.”

In the corner of Subaru’s vision as he muttered that, the flag burned, and Cecilus laughed “Right?” as he shouldered the pole which no longer had anything to hoist.

That indifferent attitude seemed entirely as if it did not share in the same sense of impending crisis as Subaru and the others.

Indeed, that sense of impending crisis was—

Tanza: “Just as Hiain-sama and the rest have reported, it seems that the stronghold has been completely abandoned. Because of this, we are unable to collect any rations or water whatsoever.”

Subaru: “I guess it makes sense to burn and throw these things away if they’re going to be captured and used by the enemy. But even though they tucked tail and ran, they still had the damn nerve to do such underhanded things…!”

In front of Tanza as she summed up the report, Subaru kicked a nearby wooden box with all his strength. It hurt his toes very much. Absolutely all of this was the fault of that bandana man.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama, is this the doing of the Private First-Class of whom you spoke?”

Subaru: “No doubt about it. He’s the kinda guy who precisely does the most undesirable things. But man, no way he went as far as to throw ashes into the water.”

As Subaru placed his hand to his forehead in lamentation, Tanza was having difficulty thinking about what they should do in response.

Given their position, even Tanza, with whom Subaru was the most open about his thoughts out of all his comrades, could not share in his feelings without personally experiencing the peril and troublesomeness of Todd.

Thus, Subaru did not expect Tanza to understand to that extent either.

It would be fine if Subaru was the only one to experience the menace of such a frightening, outrageous opponent. At the very least, even she ought to have understood his troublesomeness from the skill of his withdrawal.

Subaru: “At times like these, I become keenly aware of just how useful it would be to have magic. If you can produce water and ice with magic, then something can be done about thirst and hunger…”

Tanza: “Regardless of quenching thirst using water, is ice not incapable of averting hunger?”

Subaru: “There’s the strategy of having the bloated tummy distract from an empty stomach, and there’s also the method of eating shaved ice. Magic has infinite possibilities.”

Tanza: “Though, I do not get the impression that there are infinite ways to use it…”

Whether it was because she was not very familiar with magic, or because Subaru gave a poor example, Tanza tilted her head with a face unable to comprehend the usefulness of magic.

He was just about to exhaust his words endeavoring to restore the honor of magic, but the current priority was not to elevate the status of magic, of which there were no users present, and instead was a more immediate problem.

???: “As a result of Segmunt’s efforts, our allies have suffered no damages. But, it seems we cannot merely stay with our hands raised in joy. Without the replenishment of resources, all of us shall eventually ebb away."

Subaru: "Ugu…"

???: "Even if you incite others with spirited words, appreciation shall not follow if results are not produced. Though it may be strict, the fact that you are a juvenile shall not become an excuse for errors in your judgment."

As his thoughtlessness was pointed out by a stern voice, Subaru was at a loss for words.

With a terrifying expression akin to a demon, Gustav folded his four burly arms.

Considering the situation he had been placed in, that merciless remark was a natural development.

Subaru: "I know. We can't afford to stumble and fall like this right at the start. After all the trouble we went through to have Gustav-san betray the Emperor and come with us…!"

Gustav: "—. I cannot help but say that such a perception and manner of speaking are somewhat vexing for me, in my capacity."

WIth a heavy sigh, Gustav cautioned so; however, that seemed to be a rather humane attitude.

While bearing the obligation of the Governor of the Gladiator Island, Gustav took the island's guards and aided in the prison escape of Subaru and the six-hundred gladiators. That was unmistakably a large decision capable of ruining his life's career, and if it resulted in failure, he would naturally be subjected to execution.

Since he had made Gustav believe that such a decision was worth it, and piled up steady steps to make him go all in, Subaru was responsible for Gustav's life.

—No, not just Gustav, that went for everyone who had decided to follow Subaru.

Subaru: “I gathered them all, and I will lead them all. That’s the Schwarnia Family.”

Gustav: “Generally, I have no reservations about the name, but I earnestly implore you to fulfill your duty. If you are unable to do so…”

Subaru: “If I am unable to do so?”

Gustav: “As the official, I will have no choice but to swiftly resume my original obligations as Governor.”

Since his tone of voice did not seem like he was joking, Subaru became startled that the statement was likely not a joke.

Though it was a matter of course, the original obligations of Governor referred to the duty of the Chief of the Gladiator Island.

In other words—

Subaru: “That means, forcing everyone to go back to the island?”

Gustav: “If there is no choice, thus shall it be so. However—”

???: “—Oi oi oi, ya bastard, ya sure are talkin’ a whole lot ain’t’cha?!”

Subaru: “Huh, oi!!”

As Subaru timidly asked a question, Gustav mercilessly gave the Governor’s answer. And, upon hearing that, someone poked their head out from the side, and voiced their thoughts, the vigor of which took Subaru aback.

Lashing out at Gustav with a shrill voice was one of Subaru’s comrades from his Unit, Hiain. While glaring at Gustav with his characteristically cute Lizardman eyes,

Hiain: “Even tho if it weren’t for bro, those emissaries that we repelled would’ve prolly rampaged ‘round the island, how the hell could’ya have complaints?! You ungrateful little…”

Gustav: “In my capacity, I am not declaring any dissatisfaction, Yatz. Additionally, using only Schwartz’s report in regards to the intentions of the emissaries is entirely one-sided. Whether that was the truth or not cannot be said objectively without first hearing the opinion of the other side.”

Hiain: “The fuck d’ya mean “objectively”?! Bro is our ally! His enemy is our enemy! That’s all there is to it!”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait, you’re getting way too worked up!”

As if he had been irritated by Subaru and Gustav’s previous exchange, the vigor and harshness of Hiain’s tone was not anything ordinary. Be that as it may, since the reasoning had been irrational, and he was grateful that Gustav had become his comrade, Subaru was about to stab Hiain in the back.

Subaru: “Don’t let your temper get the better of you so suddenly! Gustav-san was just giving me a little push forward telling me to get myself together.”

Gustav: “That is not a thought I can affirm, Schwartz. There are no lies in my words, as the official.”

Subaru: “Since this is getting a bit complicated, just make a scary face and glare!”

As he was about to stab Hiain in the back, Subaru himself was stabbed in the back by Gustav. His desperate appeal was silenced with a “Hmph” by Gustav; however, Hiain’s vigor did not abate.

And as he intensified his vigor with a “Look at that!”,

Hiain: “As expected, we ain’t gonna get along with the administration! Ya gotta be careful, bro!”

Subaru: “Ah, dammit, it’s all gotten too distorted.”

Hiain: “There ain’t no need to act modestly. The Curse Rule’s already been dispelled. No matter how self-important the Governor acts, our side’s got strength in numbers!”

Subaru: “What a refreshingly minor-character-level declaration!”

Despite being a scaredy-cat who was weak in scuffles, it was very much like Hiain to ride a favorable wind at full speed. Subaru greatly admired the worldly wisdom of betting on the winning horse, but Hiain had misjudged one major thing.

Subaru: “Just to let you know, Gustav is still in possession of the Curse Tool. Hence, it’s wrong to assume he will never put a curse on us again.”

Hiain: “Is that so? Fine, that’s as far as I’ll go for today!”

Subaru: “What a refreshingly minor-character-level move!”

Hiain, who possessed the ability to camouflage himself to blend into his surroundings, quite literally made a pale face and left a parting threat as he hopped to hide behind Subaru.

Gustav: “Schwartz, I do not wish to say strict things to the members of your Unit, but…”

Subaru: “I know. I’ll give Hiain some proper admonishment later.”

Gustav: “That would be preferable. In my capacity, I do not wish to stir any meaningless trouble.”

Those were certainly his true feelings, but his warning from beforehand was also probably his true feelings.

Gustav was someone who was able to separate his pragmatic duties and desires, and come to a proper judgment. His Sparka with Subaru on the Gladiator Island resulted in nothing more than a slight deviation in that judgment.

If he saw a need to come to his senses, Gustav could easily wake up from this dream at any time. To continue showing him that dream, that was Subaru’s current responsibility.

Anyhow—

Tanza: “That is enough joking around. Schwartz-sama, I am sure you have realized, but…"

Subaru: "…About the food and water supplies?"

Tanza: "—Yes."

Having spoken in a hushed voice, Tanza frowned her round eyebrows and nodded at Subaru's words.

As previously mentioned, the members of Subaru's group were a large family surpassing six-hundred people. In addition to being a number greater than the total student-base of an ordinary elementary school, practically all of them were adults. To make matters worse, since the guards had brought along the Gladiator Beasts as fighting assets, the level of lunch provisions at an elementary school would not be enough to cater to their stomachs.

Of course, when they left captivity, they brought all the contents of the island's storehouses with them, but even if they divided meals into once in the morning and once in the evening, the hard truth was that it would only last for two days.

When they had captured this stronghold, he had hoped that they could stock up even a little bit, but that had been thoroughly crushed by Todd. Abhorrent.

Tanza: "This is the western edge of the Empire, and our objective of the Imperial Capital is far to the east. We are very much lacking in food and water supplies."

Subaru: "I don't want to make everyone feel hungry."

Tanza: "That is part of it, but more simply it will become a factor for anxiety… An empty stomach famishes not only the body, but also the mind."

What was rather difficult to ignore, was the very somber tone of Tanza's voice.

That was something that just having lots of knowledge could not produce, for there was a weight housed therein that was only possible in the voices of those who have personally experienced such a thing. That was the case for Tanza.

Was that an experience of actually being so starved that her mind had withered away, or an experience of witnessing a person that famished?

Subaru: “…”

Subaru did not laugh off Tanza’s anxious feelings as an exaggeration.

Even while living on the Gladiator Island that threatened one’s life, meals and a bed were guaranteed. Paradoxically, in order to maintain order in that harsh environment, those things were absolutely indispensable.

If he could not maintain those, what awaited him was the collapse of this group.

Cecilus: “If it’s a large family, the lack of money in your pockets will swoop down on you… it’s plain and there’s no way to make it flashy, but with this it seems like you’ve crashed into a rather difficult problem.”

Subaru: “You’re saying it like it’s someone else’s problem, but Ceci also has an insanely large appetite.”

Cecilus: “Hahaha, no matter what you tell me, I won’t give in or endure the state of my stomach. I have no interest or concern in your financial or money situation. After all, it is the duty of the main actor to receive an appropriate return for the role he plays.”

While poking the flagpole into the ground, the cheerfully smiling Cecilus was quite the glutton despite having such a small build.

Even though indulging oneself was absurd for life on the Gladiator Island, Cecilus still indulged himself to the extent that he might put on weight. With his small physique, he was able to make quick work of three adult meal portions. Furthermore, while other gladiators had to bear with only two meals a day, he would eat a third and even a fourth meal.

His current declaration seemed to indicate that he felt no sense of weight on himself beyond this point.

Subaru: “Should I have Gustav-san curse Ceci as to not be able to eat three meals?”

Cecilus: “Oyaoya, Boss. Aren’t you underestimating me a little too much? Even if you curse me to die if I eat three meals, I’ll get my hands on some bread when my stomach starts to rumble. It’s important that I maintain a healthy good-looking appearance.”

Tanza: “In the first place, would the curse really work on Segmunt-sama? What if he is able to outrun the curse?”

Subaru: “He’d die. I can guarantee that.”

Cecilus: “I don’t understand how he could guarantee that but if Boss says so then I guess I’d die!”

The threat that he had no intention of following through on was meaningless, as Cecilus was utterly indifferent to the topic of his own life.

In reality, Subaru had witnessed him lose his life at the activation of the Curse Rule, but at that time too, his attitude was that of not fearing death to an unthinkable extent, so this was not an attempted bluff or anything of the sort.

Subaru: “Anyway, it would be annoying to lose to the hungry Ceci’s point. This isn’t the time for us to go along with the saying “You can’t fight on an empty stomach”. Gustav-san, where’s the closest stronghold from here?”

Gustav: “It is around half a day east. It is also a considerably larger stronghold than this one.”

Subaru: “Alright, let’s head for there!”

Relying on Gustav’s knowledge, Subaru decided on their next destination. Nobody opposed that decision of Subaru’s. That was because everyone had made up their minds that Subaru was the leader of this group.

Subaru: “I’m grateful. But, that’s a lot of pressure.”

Until now, even though Subaru had filled the top position of groups for short periods of time in this other world, he had never experienced being in charge of a group on this scale for such a long-term.

Only now that he had reached this position, could he truly feel it for the first time. —The heavy burden, of being at the apex.

Subaru: “Something like wanting to return to the position of Emperor, what a pervert.”

On the verge of being crushed with having just unified the gladiators of the island, Subaru was reminded of the annoying face of someone attempting to reign over something much, much larger than that, and he made a sulky face as he muttered so.

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—Afterwards, Subaru’s group spent half a day heading east, and succeeded in finding the stronghold from Gustav’s knowledge without trouble.

Differing from the small stronghold that aimed to monitor the Gladiator Island, this stronghold was surrounded by stone walls, and was a splendid thing fulfilling the role of a checkpoint, so they had hopes of what was contained inside.

However—

???: “Uooooh! There ain’t nothin’ in the storehouse! Ain’t nothin’ but dust scattered ‘round!”

???: “This time, there’s even shit and piss in the water well…?”

???: “How much of a fool are they gonna make of us… stop fucking messing around…!”

As revealed by the sorrowful complaints of Hiain and the others, their hopes were betrayed yet again.

The storehouse was empty, and the well water had been made useless. The stronghold, which had taken Brave Oxen, Galewind Horses, and even ground dragons for use in beast carriages, had been abandoned before Subaru's group had invaded.

And yet, it had not merely been abandoned.

Subaru: "They even went as far as to set up a trap so that when we opened the food cellar, a magic stone would explode…"

Cecilus: "Well, if it hadn't been me who rushed ahead first we might have very well lost a considerable number of people. Fortunately I have legs that can outrun an explosion."

Subaru: "Yeah. I'm glad that Ceci is a monster who can outrun explosions."

Cecilus: "Couldn't you at least call me a monster? If you add a little bit to make it a "good-looking monster" then I think we can come to an agreement, don't you think?"

Tanza: "Still, would Segmunt-sama be able to run free from a curse?"

While fed up by Cecilus's useless declaration, Tanza gazed at the corner of the stronghold that had been blown away.

The explosion that caused the stone-built fortress to lurch had a level of power such that its explosive inferno could even be seen rising from a good distance away. In reality, if Cecilus had not been so gluttonous, everyone caught in the trap would have been erased, leaving no trace.

But, even though there were no visible injuries, the report of there being no results was something akin to an attack.

In both the abandonment of the stronghold, and the trap with the magic stone, he could feel the participation of Todd.

Subaru: "No matter how you look at it, there's no way he'd have them abandon every single stronghold…"

Since he had no idea the extent to which Todd's hands had reached, any careless course of action would be unwise.

Without even having come face-to-face, even though there was no way for him to be cognizant of his existence, Todd's manner of doing things irked Subaru in all the worst ways.

Subaru: "That there would be no results here, goes completely against my expectations."

Anticipating there to be something to be gained from the stronghold, they had taken quite the forced march for half a day to get here.

Since he had tried to mask their anxiety as they gradually approached by singing and dancing as they advanced, they had been consuming water and food more intensely than they would have normally.

At this rate, they were in danger of realizing Tanza's fears that they would collapse due to their minds withering away.

???: "Schwartz, don't be so worried…"

Then, patting the worrying Subaru's shoulder, Weitz called out to him.

Having eagerly looked around the stronghold both this time and last time, he was much more vexed than the others at the fact that they came back empty-handed. Even so, he could not just do nothing after seeing Subaru's somber expression.

As Weitz traced the skull-like tattoo on his own face,

Weitz: "Ya shouldn't feel down 'cuz of this kinda dirty trick…"

Subaru: "Weitz…"

Weitz: "It'll be fine even if ya feed that rowdy bunch with dirt… if that still ain't enough, we do have this many people… if we attack and pillage some of the towns and villages along the way…"

Subaru: “Weitz?!”

As Weitz tried to encourage him, a part that immensely bothered him came forth. Subaru’s voice unconsciously overturned, but Weitz frowned and made a confused face.

It was just as if to say that he had not said anything strange.

Weitz: “What…?”

Subaru: “No matter what, that’s a no go!”

Weitz: “—?”

Subaru: “Pillaging, stealing, and robbery, we won’t be doing any of those kinds of things! Those are absolutely prohibited!”

Weitz: “What the fuck…?”

Subaru made an “X” with his arms and raised such an appeal, and Weitz’s face showed surprise from the bottom of his heart.

Subaru understood that Weitz’s natural idea to include pillaging among their options was due to a difference in the environments they had grown up in. But, that was something not limited to just Weitz.

Hearing the current dispute between Subaru and Weitz, the other gladiators exchanged baffled looks.

Gladiator: “No pillaging… are you sane, Schwartz?”

Gladiator: “How are we gonna get food without pillaging? It ain’t something that just grows from the ground.”

Gladiator: “It probably does grow from there, but we ain’t got any idea of how to grow it!”

Subaru: “Oi oi oi oi.”

Subaru was dumbfounded by the dangerous notions being clamorously voiced by the gladiators. However, the fact that that was not some kind of gladiator dark humor, was evident from their true-to-life faces.

As expected, having become criminals in the Vollachian Empire, a land on the verge of becoming a lawless area, they were an elite group of people who lacked common sense and had been sent to the Gladiator Island. Still, since the majority of the people of the Vollachian Empire lacked common sense, the elite were the most prominent among them.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “Wait! Please wait! Everyone, listen up!”

While calling out to the obstreperous surroundings, Subaru attempted to convey his will.

But, the discussion of the heated gladiators could not really be stopped.

If the food situation truly deteriorated, they would likely heavily push for the option to pillage.

That had kept the disorder in check until now, but it collapsed with pillaging having become prohibited.

Weitz: “Ya win what ya desire with strength… that’s the way of the Empire… Both ya and the rest of us, we won our freedom through strength, didn’t we…”

Representing the disorder of the gladiators, Weitz tried to correct Subaru’s mistake. In response, Subaru shook his head saying “No, that’s wrong”.

Subaru: “It’s true that we fought. But that was all in order to gain through victory. Not in order to steal.”

Weitz: “It’s the same…!”

Subaru: “It’s entirely different!”

As Weitz strengthened his tone saying they ought to pick the rational choice, Subaru objected. Weitz's eyes widened at the volume of that voice, and Subaru stared at him as he continued.

Subaru: "Though getting something through victory and getting something through stealing may seem similar, they are different things. I am willing to fight to win things, but I don't want to fight to steal things."

Weitz: "Schwartz…"

Subaru tightly clenched his fist as he answered, and in response, the wrinkles in Weitz's brow deepened. Thereupon, in response to Subaru's intense declaration, Idra raised his hand and interjected with a "But". Compared to the other gladiators, he stared at Subaru with a somewhat calm gaze, and,

Idra: "How do you specifically differentiate between those two? Everyone in the surroundings here, myself included, do not know that method."

Subaru: "Well, it's not really that difficult. After all, all of you should know how to make that distinction."

Answering such to Idra's question, Subaru suddenly jumped on top of a nearby wooden crate.

Elevating his point of view, Subaru gazed over his surroundings, and took a deep breath. In order to ensure that his words could reach all the people who had accompanied him off the island, who had not yet heard the current conversation, he raised his voice.

Subaru: "Listen up! As we continue heading for the Imperial Capital, we will not pillage any towns or villages! That's the rule of our team… of this group!"

Everyone: "…"

Subaru: "From here on out, all our battles will be for the sake of gaining through victory! They will absolutely not be for the sake of stealing! We won't fight to steal! I want you all to keep it that way!"

As Subaru asserted so in a raised voice, a moment of silence was born, and exploded immediately after.

That it was even louder than before, was likely more so due to discomposure instead of opposition. From them, who were very accustomed to the ways of the Empire, the choice to not steal had not even been pre-installed to begin with.

Gustav: “I understand your assertion. But, as to whether it can be called a realistic view…”

Subaru: “Gustav-san…”

Even within the commotion of the gladiators, he could clearly hear the coherent voice of Gustav.

Having participated in searching the stronghold, Gustav was also aware of the uneasiness regarding the resources they had brought from the island. Narrowing his eyes, which were still at a higher elevation than Subaru’s, even with the latter standing on top of a wooden crate,

Gustav: “In my capacity, I do not endorse the act of pillaging. But, things remain exactly as I have expressed before. Supposing this campaign reaches an undesirable conclusion, in my capacity and as the official, I will carry out my professional duties.”

Hiain: “Th-That bastard, he still has the nerve to intend on betraying us…!”

Subaru: “Hiain, shut up for a sec.”

Gustav’s statement was not yet a pronouncement that he would reinvoke the Curse Rule. Silencing Hiain, who had overreacted and came to that conclusion prematurely, Subaru urged Gustav to continue.

Gustav: “You are likely aware, but in my capacity, I am accompanying you following a rather major decision. Since I have gone that far, I have no choice but to exhaust all possible measures to procure favorable results.”

Subaru: “Of course, I know. Lip service won’t fill our bellies, and our throats are still thirsty.”

Gustav: “Well then, do you happen to possess any sort of alternative plan?”

Subaru: “That’s…”

In response to Gustav’s stern question, Subaru took a moment to contemplate, given how important this answer would be.

If he failed to be careful with selecting his words here, this gladiator alliance would collapse before they even participated in battle, and everyone would be dragged back to the island once again. If that came to pass, he had something prepared within his mouth in order to “re-select” as soon as possible.

But, he did not want to relinquish the present which had been proceeding so favorably until now—

Cecilus: “—You’ve misunderstood Boss’s thinking a little, Gustav-san.”

Subaru: “…”

That instant, cutting into Subaru’s moment of silence, Cecilus carelessly shrugged his shoulders.

The boy attracted the gazes of Subaru, Gustav, and all the other people present onto himself, and loosening his lips as if he was enjoying all that attention,

Cecilus: “It’s not that Boss is grumbling that he doesn’t want to gain food and water without the exchange of any money or goods. To say that “gaining through victory” and “gaining through stealing” are different things lies within the realm of wordplay but that is what is hindering everyone from understanding. They have pretty much the same meaning so you could say it was a rather clever choice of words, but…”

Gustav: “Segmunt, I am having trouble understanding what you intend to say. Explain it in a way that even I, in my capacity, can understand.”

Cecilus: "The very fact that we are in a slump after finding the contents of the stronghold empty means that collecting the resources from the stronghold was a safe condition for Boss. In other words it's a problem regarding the level of the opponent. We can steal from wolves, we won't steal from dogs or rabbits."

Subaru: "…"

Cecilus: "That's what you mean right, Boss?"

Tilting his head, Cecilus inquired of Subaru, who was on top of the wooden crate.

Thus, this time everyone's attention gathered on Subaru, and he reluctantly nodded.

For the most part, Cecilus's point was correct.

However—

Subaru: "Even if the opponent is a wolf, it's ideal to use the phrase "Gaining through victory"."

Cecilus: "Hahaha, it's good that you have a hangup about that. Without something like that then it would just be following an absurd plot that doesn't know what point to focus on. Be that as it may…"

Subaru: "—?"

Cecilus: "There are many cases where a plot that just aims to be unconventional for that sake of it becomes a trash piece of work that's hard to watch. Just like Gustav-san, that isn't something that I desire."

Cecilus closed a single eye as he spoke those words, and they gave the impression that they were as sharp as glass. Thin and brittle, but sharp. Such an act of damage-control from Cecilus was painful to Subaru's ears.

Then, even after hearing that exchange, many of the gladiators still could not come to an understanding.

???: “Strongholds that have enemies are fine, but we can’t attack villages and towns…?”

???: “What the hell, what does Schwartz want to do?”

???: “If ya really wanna give it to His Excellency the Emperor… to yer old man, then this ain’t the time for us to be starvin’!”

Loudly raising their voices, they were trying to get closer to Subaru due to the vexing matter. Despite this, that thoughtfulness was a fatal deviation from Subaru’s desires.

With the disconnect in their sense of values as it was, he did not want to proceed with forcibly silencing their discontent.

However, would he be able to figure out what to do?

Tanza: “—Sparka.”

Subaru: “Eh…?”

Tanza: “Well, I thought if you explained Sparka, perhaps everybody would be able to understand.”

Indeed, the one who offered a ray of light to the worried Subaru was Tanza, who had been deliberating by his side this whole time.

Concerning Subaru’s claim, which had been unable to clear up the question marks from many of the gladiators, including the three from his Unit, Tanza had sympathized despite her general sensitivity, unlike Cecilus, who displayed comprehension born out of a lack of common sense.

Since he could not think of her suggestion as anything but that, Subaru became fraught with emotion.

His chest became ardent at the fact that Tanza had earnestly wracked her head to try and convey Subaru’s views.

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama?”

Subaru: “Ah, no, sorry, I just got a few tears in my eyes. —

Everyone! Tanza said it in a way that's easy to understand! Tanza did! This adorable girl did! In a way that's easy to understand!"

Tanza: "P-Please stop! We are getting off topic!"

Subaru: "Ow ow ow! Don't pinch my thigh!"

Though Subaru just wanted everyone to share in the deep emotion he was experiencing, it was Tanza herself, her face flushed red, who pinched his thigh and set him back.

Then, as Subaru's eyes became teary, this time due to the pain,

Subaru: "We're gladiators! That which we ought to do is Sparka, not stuff like one-sided pillaging! To begin with, that's what it means to do battle."

Everyone: "…"

Subaru: "I get that you have complaints. But from here on out, when I end up clashing with my father… with the Vollachian Emperor in the Imperial Capital, I won't be able to win if I'm cowardly, selfish and lame."

That was not a matter of logic, but it was rather of an emotional nature, and perhaps even regarding the intensity of his soul.

A clash with the Vollachian Emperor—At the very least, he seriously intended to throw down the gauntlet with the fake Emperor. He did not know what kind of objective the fake Emperor was aiming for when he had ousted Abel from the throne.

But, he did not think that the deeds of a mere coward who lacked conviction could have done such a thing.

In that case, what awaited him in the Imperial Capital was a battle with a powerful enemy who harbored strong convictions—In other words, it was Sparka, and there was no way that Subaru's distorted self would stand a chance.

In order to gain victory, it was necessary. —The unwavering conviction of Natsuki Subaru, was.

Subaru: “Though, conviction might not actually be such an impressive thing, but rather just being stubborn.”

If that stubbornness was what had gotten Subaru through the Gladiator Island, and all of his life in this other world up until now, then his bad temper and improficiency at giving up were things he could never let go of.

Everyone: “…”

At Subaru’s proclamation, silence was born among the gladiators once again.

There was no commotion, but there was a clear confusion left in the silence. Even when the contents were simplified and conveyed, their reactions were to say that they had yet to reach an understanding.

However, tearing through that silence, a vigorous voice was raised.

That was—

Hiain: “Hey hey hey! What is it, ya bastards are damn depressing! Bro said he’d do all that! So then he’s gonna do it! If ya can’t believe it then hurry up and go the fuck home, ya tattooed skelly!”

Weitz: “Shut up, lizard-bastard… don’t say such fucking bullshit like that I’d ever doubt Schwartz… You’re the one who oughta be cowering behind a rock…!”

Glaring at each other, swearing at each other, Hiain and Weitz stirred up an unpleasant atmosphere. Lagging one step behind those two, Idra spoke while giving a wry smile,

Idra: “Schwartz, you have no intention of changing your mind, right?”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah, for just this at least. No matter how terribly hungry I get, I absolutely won’t rethink this.”

Idra: “I know just how obstinate you are. After all, we’ve been watching over you from close by.”

The obstinacy Idra spoke of, was that perhaps about when he was running all about, making all the gladiators of the island his allies, or perhaps when he succeeded in persuading Gustav, when even Idra and the rest had thrown in the towel, thinking of it as an absolute impossibility?

Likely, he was referring to all of that, and as Idra smiled,

Idra: “You are our leader, Schwartz. We want to abide by your thoughts as much as we can. Therefore, we have a suggestion. — Let’s go somewhere, not to dogs or rabbits, but to a place of wolves.”

Subaru: “A dwelling of wolves…”

Weitz: “If we continue a full day northeast from here, there’s a town… It’s Glarasia…”

Hiain: “It’s called the City of Iron and Blood, a famous town where they make stuff like weapons and armor! It’s on the bigger side of towns within the Empire, so if we go there…”

Though it was Weitz and Hiain, who often quarreled with each other, they took turns pushing the conversation forward. While he was listening to them with widened eyes, Subaru shook his head sideways with a “Wait”.

Subaru: “If it’s a big town, there’ll probably be a lot of food and water. But, as for protecting the rule of no pillaging…”

Weitz: “The town isn’t our aim… It’s the fortress of Imperial Soldiers that protects the town…”

Subaru: “—Hk”

Idra: “Across the whole Empire, the revolt against the Imperial Capital is picking up steam. Of course, the fortresses that protect the cities in each will be at the height of rigorous vigilance in preparation for the uprisings in each region. If it’s there, the opponent will not be insufficient.”

Hiain: “The enemy is Glarasia’s Fortress of Iron and Blood! How’s that bro, ain't it a great idea?!"

Weitz: "Don't speak like this is yer achievement…!"

Idra nodded, Hiain got carried away, and Weitz clicked his tongue.

Hearing the proposal from those three, Subaru's mouth was agape in full surprise. Softly placing a small hand over Subaru's open jaw,

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama, I think their proposal deserves some consideration."

While speaking, Tanza closed Subaru's jaw with her hand. She was also impressed by the idea of the trio, but Subaru greatly surpassed merely being impressed, for he was deeply moved.

Subaru: "Even though going along with my thoughts is way out of line with the common sense of the Empire."

And yet, the trio respected Subaru's thinking, and suggested a means to bring it to fruition.

Even though persuading Subaru to do things in accordance with the ways of the Empire would have seemed to be the much easier path.

Subaru: "…"

In order to proceed with a hangup that was nothing more than Subaru's self-complacency, the three of them had come up with a target.

Fiercely sniffling and covering the tears and snot that were welling up, Subaru clapped both of his hands onto his cheeks. Then, opening his eyes, he could see the faces of his comrades from atop the wooden crate.

Hopes and understanding, confusion and tension, a single trend had yet to be fixed among them, but—

Subaru: "Let me hear all the details regarding Glarasia. —In order to keep us from falling apart."

Glarasia, the City of Iron and Blood, was a major city for the arms industry within the Vollachian Empire.

In Vollachia, where conflict never ceased, the demand for weapons was always high, and all day long from morning to night, the sound of forging steel went without pause in Glarasia.

The city made up over half of all the arms that were distributed throughout the Empire, so naturally the importance of Glarasia within the Empire was exceedingly high, and they were allocated a suitable amount of fighting strength for their defenses.

The highest extreme of their defensive capabilities was the stronghold where over a thousand soldiers were always stationed—The Fortress of Iron and Blood.

In Glarasia, where nearly all the residents of the city were involved in the arms industry in some way or another, though there were many hot-headed individuals, there were few who made a livelihood from fighting itself. Protecting those craftsmen, there was the Fortress of Iron and Blood, an important position in order to ensure the steady supply of weapons, and the commanding officer entrusted with the defense of that important city was an Imperial General Second-Class, the Steel Appraiser.

???: “—Weapons, are beautiful.”

That man, Toledo Spiegel, was dearly in love with weapons.

On the topic of just how much he admired weapons, he had gone so far as to groom the beard around his mouth into the shape of a sword, a demonstration of the love he felt for weapons.

His nimble and slim body standing upright, the man, around the age of forty, was clad in a uniform furnished with a cloak that served as proof of his position of General within the Imperial Army; he stood with his hands joined behind his back as he faced the wall.

The highest floor of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, the office of the building where a great number of Imperial Soldiers were permanently stationed; its wall was adorned with an immense amount of weapons, each and every one of them being part of Toledo's personal collection.

Toledo: “The skilled craftsmen compete to refine their technique, and forge weapons with the clear objective of taking lives. As that purpose is a simple one, these are excellent articles to express the abilities of their makers.”

Speaking in an enraptured voice filled with heat, Toledo appreciated the weapons on display.

Even in the blade of a single sword, pursuing the ideal sharpness and durability was a herculean task. A thin blade would have an increased sharpness, but the strength of the thin portion would fall. Durability would increase with thickness, but naturally the sharpness would fall proportionally, and would likely approach a blunt state.

That ultimate trial and error of ideals and reality was vividly stuffed into weapons.

That was the reason why Toledo Spiegel was enchanted by weapons, why he had accumulated so many of them, and why he was made out to be a distinguished collector within the Empire. Thus, he became known by the alias of the “Steel Appraiser”, and his discerning eye for weapons served as the reason for him being established in the position of General.

Toledo: “Though I am still imperfect, I have come to handle weapons with more ardor than the average person. Even if the highest peak is still far off, I have confidence in my eye for weapons. The strength and quality of all weapons, whether they suit their owners or not, and even that…”

In this world, there was no shortage of boorish folk who spared no expense in procuring the likes of famed and treasured swords. But, the sight of those very folk wearing unbefitting weapons on their waist was ridiculous.

The amount of times when such people would take a weapon that did not suit their stature, and were pointed out as targets for scornful laughter, were also not few in number.

However, while on one hand those gazes seemed like a disgrace, there were also times when the weapon would match the holder's stature. That was the charm of weapons, and the spiritual way of being that was demanded of Vollachia's Sword Wolves.

Toledo: "I do not allow for my subordinates to carry mediocre weapons. By taking a good weapon in hand, I believe that people shall correspond to, and perfectly suit the brilliance of that steel, and it shall enhance their very selves."

Toledo did not pridefully label himself as having an eye for people.

Instead, he had an eye for weapons. Seeing whether a person was suitable to wield a given weapon, he had acquired such a technique of seeing people through the weapon.

The Imperial Soldiers of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, each of them carried an excellent weapon based on Toledo's judgment. He could confidently assert that they were all worthy soldiers that he himself had thoroughly trained.

Henceforth—

Toledo: "Just what happened to those outstanding subordinates of mine?"

???: "—Ah, pardon me. If I remember correctly then everyone did have quite good expressions on their faces but even so it seems that they were too lacking as actors to be able to stop me."

Behind Toledo, as he posed this question while gazing at a dazzling treasured sword among the collection on the wall, a presence gave a response.

Inside of this fortress where over a thousand powerful Imperial Soldiers were stationed, he had single-handedly reached Toledo's office, which was the most tenaciously defended, a presence of such immense capability.

Toledo: “Currently, there is unprecedented peril shaking the entirety of the Vollachian Empire. Insolent people going against the glorious authority of His Excellency the Emperor are emerging everywhere, but have you decided if you are one such person?”

???: “I guess you could say so. Though it’s a little upsetting that you think of the group I’m a part of as the same as those other folk. After all, we’re special!”

Toledo: “Hm…”

Mixing in a word that he had no recollection of ever hearing, the lighthearted voice declared so.

While carefully examining that which was within his mind, Toledo reached his hand out to the treasured sword in front of him, and removed it from the wall.

The collection on the wall was varied with swords, spears, axes, hammers, and sickles, but as expected, the sword was most familiar to him. —Of course, Toledo could sufficiently master any weapon.

He did not want to become someone who just lavishly made use of his money and social status to hoard weapons that he did not even use. For that reason, by the end of his bloodied training, Toledo had been able to rise to the rank of General Second-Class.

As that very Toledo turned around, his eyes met with those of the blue-haired child standing in the entrance to the door.

As a small teenage child, he was likely younger than even Toledo’s four children. However, the moment they faced each other here, it became an impossibility that he was merely a child as suggested by his appearance.

However, Toledo was unable to accurately grasp just how strong this child was beyond the fact that he had reached the top floor.

The reason was—

Toledo: “Without taking up a weapon, you were able to arrive here empty-handed?”

Child: “Yep, I’m barehanded. I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but I don’t have any kind of concealed weapon either.”

Toledo: “I believe you. I do not sense the presence of concealed weapons coming from you.”

For himself, who had confidence in his love for weapons, it was necessary for him to also have deep knowledge of concealed weapons that were meant for assassinations and surprise attacks.

The act of carrying concealed weapons had the inherent objective of concealment, but Toledo was able to feel their unique presence on a microscopic level. To put it frankly, he could hear them.

Toledo: “The voices of concealed weapons, I hear none coming from you.”

Child: “Ho hoh ho hoh! My goodness that is quite the wonderful reply! Are you the possessor of a Divine Protection that allows you to converse with weapons, or is this perhaps simply what Boss would call a character quirk!”

Toledo: “My love is pure. There are no impurities such as Divine Protections mixed in.”

Child: “I see, so you’re someone with a character quirk!”

While Divine Protections were useful traits to have, they had no role whatsoever in Toledo’s abilities. His sense of smell developed by polishing his own love, that in itself was a source of pride for Toledo.

Hearing Toledo’s response, as the boy tapped his zori on the floor with a pitter-patter,

Child: “As far as I can see the weapons lined up are all superb articles of great renown. But I don’t know, I can’t seem to find any katanas.”

Toledo: “Katanas?”

Child: “Yeah. My preferred weapon is the katana. I was searching for an ideal katana that would suit my hand if possible but I'm not having much luck happening across an article that fits!"

Toledo: "I see. Indeed, even in my collection, there are no satisfactory katanas included."

At the words of the boy yearning for a katana, Toledo thought about his entire collection.

Even apart from the ones adorning the wall behind him, Toledo kept many weapons stored in the mansion on his territory. However, even among those, there were no famed katanas being kept.

Originating from the Kararagi City-States, the katana was a single-edged sword. —And for those, there was a collector in the Empire that exceeded even Toledo. Taking absolutely every single famed katana into his possession, was an Imperial General First-Class.

Henceforth, if the boy intended on happening across a magnificent katana within the Empire, there was likely a thorny path that awaited him.

But then again—

Toledo: "That is only if you are able to surpass the eye for beauty of this very Steel Appraiser!"

Child: "Steel Appraiser! That's nice, what a lovely alias! By the way, has your eye for beauty deemed me to be a worthy opponent to fight?"

Toledo: "Unfortunately, these eyes are only able to ascertain the quality of weapons and the diligent efforts of craftsmen."

He could tell that the strength of the boy, who had one eye closed, was preeminent from the fact that he had rushed to the highest floor of the fortress. He could not ascertain anything more than that fact.

The fact that not a single soldier of the fortress had come up yet, also substantiated the boy's strength.

But, Toledo Spiegel did not possess the means to measure those who took up no weapons.

Toledo: “Hence, I shall show you. The history of a plethora of weapons, and their power.”

Child: “—. I was about to do something very rude. I deeply apologize.”

Toledo: “…”

Child: “As expected of a talented man who has ascended to the rank of Imperial General. I was about to look down on you, who has arrived at becoming your current self by following your dignity and convictions, as being a minor character. This was an exceedingly arrogant oversight by the leading actor who drives the stage.”

While speaking, the boy lightly jumped as he stood with a hippity-hop, then bent his knees. There were no openings whatsoever in that casual action, and Toledo quietly continued to watch over the boy.

Then, in front of Toledo, the boy silently straightened his posture, and,

Child: “The soldiers of this fortress were also sufficient actors. I pay my respects to you and the subordinates you have trained. Let’s not finish this in the spaces between lines.”

Toledo: “—En Garde!”

The moment the boy narrowed his eyes, Toledo swung his treasured sword, releasing a sword flash that went beyond the office desk.

The slash was unleashed upon the boy like a wave, and Toledo leaned forward, taking a step to close the distance on his opponent. Invigorating the muscles on his slender arms, he danced in ecstasy as the silver flashes of the treasured sword piled up.

That act scorched the atmosphere of the room, proving the sharpness of a weapon that could cut even the world.

However—

Child: “Seeing that definite strength, I suppose there’s nobody who would ever treat you like a minor character.”

After those words of praise grazed his eardrums, Toledo was struck in his medulla oblongata.

Just before his consciousness was severed, Toledo thought about the meaning of the words of the boy who had not suffered even a scratch from the tempest of his slashing attacks, and he gave up.

Toledo: “I do not understand anything other than weapons.”

Having even gained a wife through the connection of both of them being weapon collectors, that was Toledo’s response.

16

The fall of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, would likely become just as much of an upcoming topic within the Empire as the abandonment of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive.

Be that as it may, the recent times in Vollachia had also seen events such as the Fortress City of Guaral being occupied by rebels and the collapse of the Demon City of Chaosflame, so this event would just be another part of that sequence.

However, Subaru thought the fact that a single boy had taken down a fortress on the scale of one-thousand people made it a bit more crazy and unthinkable than the other topics.

Subaru: “As expected, Ceci sure is absurd. I’m glad I could get him as my ally.”

Tanza: “Looking at it objectively, I believe it is appropriate to evaluate Schwartz-sama as being equally absurd for seizing control of the Gladiator Island.”

Subaru: “Me? Nah, I certainly tried my best, but Ceci’s is a natural phenomenon, and mine is more like cultivation, right?”

Tanza: “Even if you say “right”, I do not really understand…”

As Subaru tilted his head and spoke those words, Tanza slightly frowned in confusion.

Putting the Authority of Return by Death to good use, Subaru had reached his ideal after a staggering amount of trial and error. He was somewhat different to Cecilus, who could get what he desired in a single try.

And, that self-awareness was something that even Tanza could not sympathize with.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “He even fulfilled the no-killing condition that I requested; he did a magnificent job.”

As Subaru spoke and looked over the fortress, the soldiers who had been waiting in each part of the building were now totally defeated; all of them had lost consciousness and fainted, but their lives had not been taken.

It was something that Subaru had requested of Cecilus. That was not just limited to this Fortress of Iron and Blood, but it was a policy that had also been maintained for the other two strongholds they had visited after leaving the Gladiator Island.

Even if he was told that it was naive, he could not do something like taking the lives of others so easily.

Those were Subaru’s thoughts, but contrary to his expectations, Cecilus did not laugh at them.

Cecilus: “Isn’t it good to do it in the way that Boss wants it? Fortunately, the strength to accomplish that… in this case, the excellent pawn known as myself has it. If a strong person can easily kill a weak person, then choosing to not take their lives easily is the way of the Empire, right?”

Then, with such a tone he readily accepted the undertaking, and really did succeed in the conquering of the fortress.

Of course, Subaru himself had self-awareness that he had made an unreasonable request. Ignoring the value of life, it was natural that subduing the enemy without killing them was more difficult than simply taking their lives.

He had forced that difficulty, and it had been accomplished.

Subaru: “For now, everyone is helping to tie up the sleeping enemies. I understand their feelings of wanting to leap towards bread since they’re so hungry, but they need to endure for just a bit more.”

Tanza: “Yes, the Governor is giving directions. Shall we head up?”

Subaru: “Right… Ceci has been waving at us this whole time.”

Along with Tanza, he looked up at the upper stratum of the fortress, and there a small speck-like figure could be seen waving its hand. To that which was endlessly drawing attention to its presence in the upper part of his vision, Subaru waved back, and heaved a sigh.

From there, he proceeded to the office inside of the large fortress together with Tanza.

Then, as Cecilus welcomed Subaru as the latter arrived at the office —

Cecilus: “—I thought this fortress would be just right for this, so I want to test Boss on one thing.”

Subaru: “…”

Inside the room where the wall was adorned with many weapons, Cecilus was sitting his bum on top of the work desk, and as he trained his gaze on the arriving Subaru and Tanza, he smiled.

Next to Cecilus, a man with a characteristic beard stood bolt upright. Judging by his uniform furnished with a cloak, he understood that the man was a General from just a single glance.

Having understood that, a question surged within his mind. —Why was that General free?

Cecilus: “This is Toledo Spiegel-san. The Steel Appraiser of the Imperial Second-Class Generals, he’s the person who commands the Imperial Soldiers of this fortress but he himself is also quite the swordsman.”

Toledo: “No need for such flattery. My fangs… no, my blade was no match for you.”

Cecilus: “Well that can’t be helped now can it? After all, I’m special!”

At the words of the man introduced as Toledo, Cecilus gave a broad smile and answered in his usual tone. Unable to bear that usual tone of his, Tanza tightly grit her teeth and,

Tanza: “Segmunt-sama, what kind of joke is this?”

Cecilus: “Nooo, it’s not like I’m messing around. I won’t deny that since I don’t really give off a serious vibe it may seem like I’m playing but I’m basically always serious.”

Tanza: “So then! Just what are you…”

Since that was not the answer she desired, Tanza unusually raised her voice.

As Tanza’s small body shook with her complaint, Subaru cut her off with his own words.

Subaru: “You said you want to test me? Can that not wait until everyone has eaten?”

Cecilus: “I also feel sorry. That’s coming from someone who never missed a meal even while everyone was cutting back on food and enduring. It’s just that I really wanted to clarify something while we’re here.”

Subaru: “Clarify something, what’s that?”

While feeling like that gaze staring at him was roasting his forehead, Subaru concealed how overwhelmed he felt and locked eyes with Cecilus.

What he was thinking, what he was starting, he confronted the monster without knowing either of those things.

At Subaru's do-or-die gaze, Cecilus crossed his legs atop the desk, and rested his chin in his hand.

And then—

Cecilus: "Boss's specialness is whether he lets people live or kills them. —I wanted to clarify whether or not you have the resolve for that."

17

—Thus, the story returns to the beginning of Cecilus's betrayal.

Subaru: "Why… Why did you betray me, Ceci?!!"

Cecilus: "Like I said it's in order to test Boss… Ah, I guess I haven't spoken of how I intend on testing you. That was an oversight on my part. There aren't many times when I'm the one painting the picture after all!"

Slapping his knees in his cross-legged position, Cecilus declared while having a hearty laugh.

On the highest floor of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, sitting atop of the office desk, keeping the one whom he ought to have sent down by his side, the Steel Appraiser, Toledo Spiegel, Cecilus faced Subaru and Tanza directly.

Cecilus: "—You'll steal from wolves, but not from dogs or rabbits. I don't dislike that individual attitude of Boss's, rather, I quite like it. That's why I absolutely hope that you can continue to maintain that until the time you die, but…"

Subaru: "…But?"

Cecilus: "Isn't it a bit questionable to excessively avoid the deaths of wolves in order to actualize that?"

Closing a single eye, Cecilus made grand movements with his slender arms, and posed a question to Subaru while gesturing to the entire room— No, to the entire fortress.

Cecilus: "Well now didn't I capture the fortress on Boss's orders? As discussed earlier Toledo-san over here is quite skilled and while the other soldiers were minor characters but upon evaluation I think they were worthy of being in roles that get killed off."

Subaru: "But if you didn't kill them then they're not in roles that get killed off, right?"

Cecilus: "Yeah that's right, I didn't kill them. Since Boss had requested that I do it without killing."

Subaru: "…"

Next to Cecilus as he nodded, Toledo slightly narrowed his eyes, and stared in Subaru's direction.

Even though his characteristic sharp beard suited him, it was clear that his eyes harbored anger towards himself for losing as well as a wholly different hue. —Was that perhaps anger towards Subaru, who had given the order not to kill?

Much like other Imperial Soldiers, was this person the type that deeply desired to die in battle?

In that case, the resolve that Cecilus had asked of Subaru was—

Subaru: "So then, is Ceci acting like this because I requested you to not kill anyone? To say that I excessively avoid casualties…"

Cecilus: "It'd be bad if you think I'm wrong. The way we see things and our sense of values are greatly unaligned. You agree with me don't you, Tanza-san?"

Tanza: "—. I do not wish to answer."

Cecilus: "Even while trying to avoid making a statement you have still formed an answer. Truly a tasteful remark."

Cecilus was satisfied with Tanza's answer, but Subaru's lips contorted.

That he excessively avoided peoples' deaths, was a vexing evaluation. In the first place, lives were a matter of being a one or zero, so there was no being excessive or anything of the sort. It was merely whether it was avoided, or not.

Cecilus: "So then my answer to the previous question is no. It's not really like I'm doing this because you told me not to kill anyone."

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Cecilus: "I think there is merit to not killing. It's dramatically more difficult than simply taking lives so it becomes more of a climax. People who have tasted disgrace and fallen once can use that frustration to polish their skills and stand in the way once more— Such a development really gets me excited."

Toledo: "Even if such is your hope, I do not have confidence that we can satisfy the standard you desire."

Giving a sidelong glance, Toledo denied the outlook that Cecilus hoped for.

Cecilus pouted his lips at that, but it only enhanced the confusion within Subaru.

Subaru had thought that Cecilus had betrayed him because of the Imperial way, disliking the restriction of being unable to feel the sensation of killing others due to the restriction on taking lives, but he had said that was not the case.

Subaru: "So then, so then what the hell? Disliking the deaths of wolves, that's…"

Cecilus: "Hahaha, don't joke around saying you don't know. —In the world that Boss sees, are the wolves just the antagonists who block the way?"

Subaru: "…"

Cecilus: "The way I see it, even Tanza-san who is earnestly glaring at me from next to Boss looks to be a lovely wolf.”

Being told so, Subaru looked at Tanza with a surprised expression on his face.

Without facing Subaru, all the while protecting Subaru with her outstretched arm, Tanza’s lovely side-profile stiffened. But, seeing her lightly bite her lip, Subaru realized.

Faster than Subaru, Tanza had grasped the meaning of the “Wolves” Cecilus had spoken of.

Subaru: “…The wolves that Ceci is speaking of, does that mean everyone who accompanied us from the island?”

Cecilus: “Yes.”

Subaru: “But! What’s wrong with that? They’re our allies. What’s weird about avoiding doing things that would cause my allies to die? That’s not what I—”

Cecilus: “—In that case, why did you take everyone away from the island?”

A chilly blade was suddenly fastened to Subaru’s throat. —No, no such thing was fastened there. But, to the extent that he felt like there was one fastened, it was a blade of words that had made his heart skip a beat.

Catching his breath, Subaru widened his eyes. Peering directly into those black eyes of Subaru’s with his single open blue eye, Cecilus asked.

Cecilus: “Boss’s objective is in the Imperial Capital. For that purpose we stopped at this fortress searching for food and water but it was me alone who captured the fortress. Though I appreciate that you had confidence in my strength and entrusted me with this role!”

Emphasizing the end of the sentence, he posed a question.

Cecilus: “The same plan won’t work in the Imperial Capital. If you don’t want to let any of your allies die then you shouldn’t have made them your allies in the first place. A pack of wolves can't be tamed like dogs."

Subaru: "That's… hk."

Tanza: "Segmunt-sama!"

As Subaru struggled to find words, Tanza sharply called out Cecilus's name in his place.

Witnessing the glint in the young girl's dark eyes, Cecilus opened his closed eye and stuck out his tongue, then,

Cecilus: "Any more than this will anger Tanza-san so allow me to promptly convey my demands. As Boss has said, none of the fortress's soldiers have been killed. In other words, at the current point in time the fighting strength of the fortress has not fallen in the slightest. Ah, I guess it's been reduced in terms of some weapons being destroyed though."

Raising up the index fingers on both of his hands, Cecilus swayed from left to right as he spoke.

Given the flow of the conversation with how he had prefaced with "demands", that which Cecilus had just pointed out caused an unpleasant sweat to run down Subaru's back. While thinking "No way", Subaru looked down at his feet— No, at the Fortress of Iron and Blood.

At that reaction of Subaru's, Cecilus smiled as if to say "You've hit the nail on the head".

Then—

Cecilus: "Please capture this fortress once without using my strength. If you can't even accomplish that then you aren't qualified to rise to the stage anymore. —As the leading actor, I will forcefully advise you."

18

After the boy and girl left the room in an irritated manner, Toledo looked at the boy who remained.

At the boy who was aimlessly swinging his legs while atop the desk — no, at the very incarnation of the Imperial way that took the form of a boy.

Since there was a law of iron and blood that existed in the Empire that the strong would take all things into their hands, he looked at the being who, in accordance with that way, possessed the right to take all things into his hands.

In addition—

Toledo: “Cecilus Segmunt.”

Cecilus: “Yes?”

As Toledo spoke the name of a person, the friendly boy gave a response.

The boy had a face as if to say that was a matter of course since his own name had been called out, and Toledo narrowed his eyes at him.

Toledo: “Are you saying that such is your name? However, the owner of that name is…”

Cecilus: “Ah, I’ve heard I’ve heard. Somehow it seems like there’s an extremely troublesome person who not only uses the same name as me but even uses the same nickname. But even if they have the same name and same nickname, the real deal doesn’t change. Please know that I am the definite Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt.”

The boy gave a bright smile and boasted with an imposing air, and for the time being Toledo acknowledged him as Cecilus.

Toledo had never been acquainted with the owner of the same name, First of the Imperial Nine Divine Generals, Cecilus Segmunt. Though they had never met, his strength and audacity were things known to everyone in the Empire.

He had single handedly defeated over a thousand Imperial Soldiers and captured the Fortress of Iron and Blood.

Such a deed was an extraordinary act that Toledo thought was impossible for anyone except the real First.

However, the Blue Lightning was not supposed to be a little boy, but—

Cecilus: “Even so, I do beg your pardon, Toledo-san. I went and decided this and that and everything all on my own.”

Toledo: “Following the way of the Empire, you have won the right to have things your way through your own strength. Above all, even if I were to try and deny you, I do not have the means to drive you away. Additionally…”

Cecilus: “—?”

Toledo: “I do not think ill of you, so I have no desire for you to voice words of apology.”

Cecilus: “Haha!”

That was a rather daring declaration, but Cecilus gave a lighthearted laugh and ignored it.

It was not as though he had fallen into desperation. Considering his exchange with Cecilus from just before, it was unlikely that he would raise his hand against Toledo here. But then again, nothing could be certain.

Toledo: “I shall say this now, but we have no intention of cutting corners. If given the chance now, this time we shall assuredly fulfill our desires alongside our weapons.”

Cecilus: “I don’t mind that. If you cut corners then it’ll spoil all the fun, and I won’t interfere even if it seems like Boss and the others are gonna be defeated.”

Toledo: “…If weapons could speak, perhaps they would give off this kind of impression.”

As Cecilus continued to indifferently speak about his own methods, Toledo harbored such a thought.

Cecilus's way of being, which had been forged with the straightforward goal of strength, was quite close to that of a weapon. The only difference would be that this weapon had rebelled against its owner by its own will.

On that point, he sympathized with the black-haired boy and the deergirl, but,

Toledo: "I have no intention of letting the black-haired Crown Prince get any further east than this fortress without doing anything."

If his objective was the head of His Excellency the Emperor that resided in the Imperial Capital, Toledo could not let that pass by any means.

Even if that happened to be a second-chance brought about by the whim of the young Blue Lightning.

Indeed, beside Toledo as he steeled his resolve, Cecilus grinned with his chin resting in his hand, and,

Cecilus: "—Come now, sear it into my eyelids once more, Boss. You, who has accomplished things that nobody could possibly accomplish, just what kind of answer will you give to my whim?"

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Hiain: "Like I said, I never thought we could rely on such a bastard!"

Hiain clutched his head with tears in his eyes, and shrieked out in a sorrowful voice.

The location was a plain that commanded a distant view of Glarasia, the City of Iron and Blood; the group commanded by Subaru had withdrawn from the Fortress of Iron and Blood, and were now awaiting the discussion of what they should do next.

The current agenda was a matter of course; the worst possible obstacle that had abruptly appeared before them.

Hiain: “Regardless of the other guys, the reason that bro didn’t persuade that damn brat ‘til the very end was ‘cuz ya also thought that same thing, ain’t that right?! Goddammit, my bad feeling was right on the mark!”

Weitz: “Shut yer fucking mouth, lizard bastard…! Don’t always wait to see yer opponent’s move before lodging a complaint…! If ya really thought that then it woulda been way better if ya said something to Schwartz from the start…!”

Hiain: “If I had gone and done somethin’ like that, what would we’ve done if that dangerous brat went and acted violently?!”

Subaru: “Be that as it may, you could call what’s happening right now the result of him actually acting violently.”

With bitter and sullen faces, learning the details of what had gone down in the fortress, everyone had some amount of negative emotions mixed into their expressions, and were confronting the issue.

Subaru: “Everyone, I really am sorry. If I’d been able to persuade Ceci, this sort of thing wouldn’t have…”

On the whim of Cecilus who had captured the fortress by himself, Subaru could not prevent the idea that the former had spoken of; lamenting that, Subaru bowed his head.

However, at Subaru’s apology, Weitz spoke out with a “Wait…”.

Weitz: “Ya don’t need to apologize… It’s much more of a serious crime that this lizard bastard thought something like this might happen, and still kept his trap shut…”

Hiain: “That’s right, I’m much more at… Don’t fuck around! All of this is that crazy brat’s fault!”

Tanza: “There is no doubt that it is exactly as Hiain-sama says, but the problem is the fact that nobody can bend the view of Segmunt-sama.”

Tanza nodded and affirmed the point Hiain made as he raised his voice, but even if she clarified the whereabouts of the problem which were clear even before she clarified it, nothing about their situation had changed.

Gustav: “From my point of view, as the official, I believe we currently have two options.”

Then, Gustav uttered words in a deep voice that sounded as if a large rock was speaking.

Gustav had his two lower arms folded, and with the index fingers of his two upper arms raised,

Gustav: “First, we disregard Segmunt’s demand, abandon the fortress and leave Glarasia, and aim for another fortress or settlement in the vicinity. That is to say, a change in our policy. This change would include a change to Schwartz’s policy of not seizing resources from towns and villages.”

Subaru: “That’s—”

Weitz: “Not happening… I ain’t got no intention of twisting Schwartz’s desires…!”

The first of the choices presented by Gustav; opposing that even more intensely than Subaru, was Weitz.

He, who at first had no reluctance to pillaging, truly held Subaru’s thoughts in high regard. Aside from him, both Idra and Hiain, though the latter was a little hesitant, appeared to share the same view.

As if he had anticipated that reaction, Gustav continued with “Well then, it shall be the other option”,

Gustav: “This one is simple. —Accept Segmunt’s proposal, and capture the Fortress of Iron and Blood without relying on his strength.”

Idra: "I am not satisfied that we are doing exactly what Cecilus wants, but it seems there is no other choice."

Since they rejected the first suggestion, they would naturally need to go with the second— That was to say, they had no choice but to accept the absurd game that Cecilus had proposed.

No one held any objections to Idra as he summed it up. That was why, Subaru held some.

Subaru: "Wait! There can still be another option… I could go and try to persuade Ceci one more time or something…"

Gustav: "Schwartz, this may be harsh for you to hear, but… do you truly believe that Segmunt would be willing to lend an ear to your persuasion?"

Subaru: "Ugu… hk"

Being pierced where it hurt, Subaru's cheeks stiffened up.

Indeed, that was a problem. —Even if Subaru were to make use of the poison prepared in his mouth, and pile up attempts like he had done on the Gladiator Island, he could not picture being able to persuade Cecilus.

Or perhaps, if the restart point for Return by Death had not shifted from way earlier— that was, from the precise moment that he had washed ashore on the Gladiator Island, then he could probably eliminate the cause for this explosion in advance.

Subaru: "Even so…"

No matter what route he made him an ally in, he did not feel like he could avoid the explosion of the bomb known as Cecilus.

That was unmistakably the biggest reason why Subaru had feared Cecilus on the highest floor of the fortress.

It was the dreadfulness of the "whims" that Cecilus had even spoken of himself.

Against an opponent that acted on whims, Subaru's Return by Death could no longer be called invincible.

Subaru: "…"

He did not know what activated the switch in the bomb known as Cecilus. So then, would it be better if he gave up on acquiring the bomb? Choosing such an option was impossible.

Heading to the Imperial Capital without Cecilus was an act akin to putting the ground dragon before the carriage.

There was no option other than to dismantle this bomb, and make it harmless.

Subaru: "But, like I said, right here and now…"

Weitz: "Schwartz, I get that you're worried… But…"

Even if it was not the real Cecilus, Subaru could not take the plunge and attempt to tackle Cecilus's challenge. Patting him on the shoulder, Weitz furrowed his brow with a grim face.

Subaru was dubious of his grim expression, but he immediately understood the reply.

—A sound rang out. His stomach, loudly growled.

Subaru: "…"

Moreover, drawn in by that growl of Weitz's stomach, the stomachs of the surrounding gladiators began to growl in quick succession. That large chorus of growling stomachs, was something that could not be helped.

Idra: "Until now, we've been straining ourselves on one meal per day. Even so, we're out of rations. We've accumulated some water from the light drizzle that fell along the way, but we're just barely enduring…"

Hiain: "Even so, that brat had the nerve to eat three whole meals a day… bro! I'm… I'm pissed off! The whole time, that bastard was just abusin' his power!"

Subaru: "Weitz, Idra, Hiain…"

Hit with the growling stomachs and words of the trio, their frustrations pierced Subaru's very soul.

It was not just them. Everyone whose stomachs were growling— no, even all the gladiators whose stomachs were not growling, were they not all wearing expressions of those who were daring to take up the gauntlet?

Seeing all of them, Subaru's own stomach hurt as if it was tightening—

Tanza: "Please wait, everyone! Please do not lead Schwartz-sama astray."

Undaunted by the heat of the strong and rowdy bunch, Tanza raised her high-pitched voice.

WIth both hands outstretched, she wedged herself between Subaru and Weitz and the others, and gazing over the men whose enthusiasm was gradually increasing, the side-profile of her lovely face contained a hue of tragic heroism.

Tanza: "If you intend on abiding by Schwartz-sama's policy, then it is our duty to endeavor as to not rush Schwartz-sama's—"

Indeed, it happened in the midst of her spinning kind words that were carefully considerate of Subaru.

Tanza: "…"

Suddenly, Tanza's words were interrupted, and even the gladiators simultaneously widened their eyes.

The reason was that a faint noise was mixed into Tanza's do-or-die appeal— Tanza's stomach, wrapped in the obi of her kimono, made a small growl.

Promptly clutching her stomach, Tanza was flushed red from the neck up right away.

Tanza: “D-Do not be mistaken, Schwartz-sama. Just now, that was…”

Tanza’s expression was clouded as she turned around, and with her face flushed red she desperately tried to deceive him.

But, no matter how admirably Tanza tried to hide it, she could not hide the cute sound of her stomach growling.

Listening to that, Subaru bit his lip—

Subaru: “Sorry, everyone. —I want you to let me contemplate my answer for just one more hour.”

With that, he requested more time for his futile do-or-die struggle.

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Gustav: “Based on Segmunt’s personality, it is unlikely that he shall come to obstruct us as part of the forces of the fortress. He is an obstinate person who does not waver on the things he has decided.”

Subaru: “Mm, yeah. I agree.”

Gustav: “…But, your expression is that of unwavering apprehension.”

As Gustav slightly frowned as he looked down upon him, Subaru pinched his own cheek.

An hour of weeping; while wasting that which he had requested in order to settle on a conclusion one second at a time, Subaru continued with painful reluctance as he meandered with hesitation and indecision.

Was there truly no other option? Searching for a means other than challenging the fortress, he endlessly meandered.

Gustav: “Do you regret recruiting Segmunt as an ally?”

Perceiving the innermost thoughts of Subaru's turmoil, Gustav quietly posed a question.

Subaru: "There's no way I could ever say that I don't regret it… But, we didn't have the choice not to make Ceci our companion. Those are my true thoughts."

Gustav: "It is logical. Even if you are lost on how to pull his reins, Segmunt is absolutely indispensable."

In order to demolish a large wall, one must borrow the power of a bomb. Even if there is the risk that it might explode while one is carrying it, it is necessary to accomplish the objective.

That was why there would be safety valves to reduce the risk of explosion as much as possible. Had Subaru been too negligent in that regard?

Gustav: "Schwartz, I must apologize to you for just one thing."

Subaru: "…Eh? Gustav-san needs to apologize to me?"

Suddenly spoken to in a quiet voice, Subaru's reaction was a moment late.

Though partly due to Gustav suddenly severning the flow of the conversation, Subaru was more so surprised at the word "apologize". In truth, Subaru had no idea what Gustav wanted to apologize to him for.

As Subaru widened his eyes, and Gustav inversely narrowed his own,

Gustav: "At the outset when we left the Gladiator Island, I told you something, as the official. That the fact that you are a juvenile shall not become an excuse for errors in your judgment."

Subaru: "—. Yeah, you told me. In reality, I think that's exactly how it is."

That was still before they were scraping by for resources, but those words came from a situation where such an omen could be felt.

Being told that, Subaru was cautioned that it was necessary to pull himself together. Subaru had dragged the island's gladiators and Gustav into this, and had taken them outside.

Their safety, food, and water, Subaru was responsible for guaranteeing all of that—.

Subaru: "That's why, I feel sorry about these disappointing circumstances…"

Gustav: "—That was a lack of words on my part, in my capacity. If that was the reason for you carelessly pushing yourself, then that was an error of mine, as the official."

As Subaru reflected like that, Gustav stopped him with his four hands, and deeply bowed his head.

As Gustav, who was close to being two and half meters tall, bowed his head, before the shrunken Subaru it appeared as if a mountain was collapsing. But, that was the amount of impact that could be felt.

After all, Gustav was expressing his apology to Subaru to the extent of bowing his head.

Subaru: "A lack of words…"

Gustav: "It seems that you have taken my words as me, in my capacity, pressing you for liability, but that was not my intention, as the official. What I wished to express back there, in my capacity, was an objection to the notion that you must undertake the responsibility for that group on your own."

Subaru: "—. Sorry, I don't really get it…"

Even though he rephrased it in a way that was easier to understand, Gustav's view was still abstruse.

As Subaru frowned in response, Gustav folded his four arms, and continued a little more.

Gustav: "Regarding Segmunt's reckless actions on this occasion, albeit there are some negative points, there is also one point that you ought to re-evaluate. That is, including myself in my capacity, this is a problem that everyone from the island is prepared to face."

Subaru: "…"

Gustav: "Schwartz, I understand that you are of a personality that despises the deaths of people to the utmost. From the fact that you placed a ban on pillaging, and that you even ordered the Fortress of Iron and Blood to be taken without killing… No."

Thereupon, Gustav shook his head.

Gustav: "It was clear from the very beginning, when you threw yourself into Sparka countless times in order to win the hearts of all the island's gladiators. Thereafter, you engaged me, the official, in Sparka over a game board, and compelled the guards to surrender without harming them. You have been thorough with your own desires, and have succeeded in them."

Subaru: "Isn't it natural that I'd get serious for my own selfishness?"

Gustav: "Affirmative. After all, as the official and in my capacity, I have continued to revise the Gladiator Island's rules in my own way. Since I have given such an affirmation, there is something I must now say."

Subaru: "…"

Gustav: "Schwartz, all of the gladiators who left the island with you, they want to fight for your sake. If you say that your thoughts are your own selfishness, then that is their— that is our selfishness, in our capacities."

Subaru: "—Ah."

Being directly told by Gustav that they wanted to become his power, Subaru was at a loss for words.

Gustav disclosed what he had felt in his heart this whole time until he had bowed before the much younger Subaru. And that was not just his own thoughts, but those of everybody else as well.

Gustav: “You stand in the position of the one commanding this group. However, that does not mean you must bear the burden for everything. In my capacity, myself and the others have the resolve to carry the burden alongside you. Besides…”

Saying that, Gustav, fangs protruding from his frightening face, contorted the corners of his mouth.

Subaru was a bit slow in realizing that it was Gustav’s smile.

Gustav: “If that was not so, then why do you think everybody would abide by your rules without deserting the group, to the extent that they would continue to endure their empty stomachs and parched throats?”

Subaru: “…Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot.”

Gustav, with a gaze akin to an adult looking at a child, gave a wry smile.

Though his real age was older, Subaru was currently in a state that made it easier for him to be treated like a child, but even if he was in his original form at this time, there was no doubt he would nonetheless be treated like a child.

To that extent, what Gustav was saying was natural, obvious, and exceedingly logical.

Cecilus: “—In that case, why did you take everyone away from the island?”

Subaru: “I was even told so by Ceci…”

The question that Cecilus had thrown at him at the Fortress of Iron and Blood, its true meaning was finally conveyed to Subaru.

Ultimately, pushing that realization via hearsay demonstrated just how unkind Cecilus’s conduct was, but in this case, it was Subaru’s intuition that was far too poor.

It was vexing, but Cecilus had been the one who had actually evaluated Subaru’s allies.

Subaru trying to bear the burden of taking them with him meant that he was ignoring their thoughts to an extreme extent.

He thought that by keeping them away from danger, as to not let them be hurt, as to absolutely not let them die, he was protecting them.

—A pack of wolves cannot be tamed like dogs.

However, Cecilus had perceived that to not be the case, and Gustav also plainly stated it.

Subaru: "I thought that running and hiding from battle, and taking detours instead was the best option, but I guess that was wrong."

In the first place, that strategy could only ever continue until they reached the Imperial Capital.

He did not know what kind of battle would unfold at the Imperial Capital, but there was no doubt it would be on a scale larger than anything up to this point. Strong beings such as the Nine Divine Generals would also be present.

It was not realistic for him to continue to protect them, and to keep everyone away from that danger.

He did not want to let them get hurt. He did not want to let them fight. In that case, why did he take them with him?

Subaru: "…"

Gustav: "Schwartz, it is almost time."

As Subaru closed his eyes, Gustav's voice fell upon him from above.

Gustav had raised his bowed head. Then, he probably noticed the change in Subaru's expression. Gustav's voice had returned to its usual tone, a relief to Subaru.

Subaru: "Gustav-san."

Gustav: "…"

Subaru: “Gustav-san, from now on, you’ll be this team’s military advisor. The position of my right-hand man.”

Gustav: “…Though, as far as I know in my capacity, Segmunt and Tanza are already cast for the roles of both of your arms.”

Subaru: “If that were true, then I guess I’m about to be giving my left arm a punch with my right arm.”

Smiling at the rare joke from Gustav, Subaru opened his eyes.

Looking up at Gustav, his gaze was met with a nod, and he headed back to everyone while accompanied by his military advisor.

Everyone: “…”

—Subaru and Gustav returned, and everyone’s attention was turned to them.

Until then, everyone had been noisily exchanging some words, but their mouths all closed simultaneously. Even with the etiquette of a school morning assembly, it should have taken something more than that to get everyone to quiet down before the principal would speak.

He was sorry to all the school principals around the country, but here, everyone’s attention to Subaru’s actions were due to a topic of much greater interest than any discussion at a morning assembly.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “First of all, there’s something I’d like to say to everyone.”

Everyone was listening to Subaru’s words: at the very front was Tanza, and around her was the trio of Hiain, Weitz, and Idra. There was also Old Man Null, Orson’s group, Rex, Milzac and the others, and Jawsrough was also mixed in, united with everyone.

Everyone’s faces and names were united. Feeling the heat of all those gazes, which were as if to say everyone’s hopes were being entrusted to him, Subaru opened his mouth.

And then, he spoke.

Subaru: “I’m a bit annoyed with the idea of always being called something like the group of gladiators, or the escapees from the Gladiator Island, so from here on out, this is what we’ll be calling ourselves. —The Pleiades Battalion!”

21

—The Pleiades Battalion.

That was the name of this group of ruffians, of which Subaru was the leader.

Since they were a battalion, every member was required to be a warrior. Speaking with the reasoning of the Vollachian Empire, all members were wolves, and it was impossible for them to be dogs or rabbits, let alone pigs.

They were Subaru’s reliable comrades who would devote all of their power to actualizing and abiding by the code he had touted.

Idra: “Schwartz, everyone is in position.”

As Idra’s voice called out to him, Subaru nodded.

Looking up, spread out was the night sky filled with sporadically placed stars. Originally, it was standard practice to commence battle in the early morning, but that was in the case that the opponent was not already aware of their enemy’s presence.

This time, since Cecilus had devised the battle, the intentions of Subaru’s group to attack was obvious to the soldiers of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, so the time they chose would not matter. More importantly, their stomachs would be in a far worse state come the crack of dawn.

Subaru: “At this rate, we’d end up needing to kill the Gladiator Beasts and eat them…”

Idra: “I’ve heard they are awful. Apparently the taste is something akin to eating stinky sand. Old Man Null said that in the past, he ate one when he was pressed for food, and it caused him excessive suffering."

He had heard stories of eating an entire warhorse to compensate for food shortages, but that would be terminal if it extended to eating Gladiator Beasts = Witchbeasts.

It was necessary for them to start fighting before that happened, and for them to finish fighting before that happened.

However—

Subaru: "…It's said that the attacking side needs three times the strength of the defending side."

In the past, he had a memory of discussing the same thing when planning an attack somewhere.

The difference in strength might be a little better than it was back then, but the Fortress of Iron and Blood was just under a thousand men strong. On the other hand, the Pleiades Battalion was six hundred men strong plus alpha. The plus alpha was the Gladiator Beasts, but it was unknown just how much they could be relied on due to their malnutrition.

At the very least, there was little hope that they would be able to make up for the two thousand and four hundred people they were lacking.

Tanza: "Schwartz-sama."

Indeed, Tanza, who had been waiting by his side, called out Subaru's name.

Of course, there were also strong individuals, like Tanza and Gustav, whose strength could not be simply counted as a single person's, so it was not necessarily true that this side's strength was completely unfavorable to that of the opponent.

However, since Cecilus, who was literally worth one thousand men, was not present, casualties would definitely emerge. Both on this side, and the opponent's side.

In order to decrease those as much as possible—.

Subaru: "—With an offensive approach, I'll struggle through it."

In his mouth, ascertaining the package of poison hidden behind his molar with his tongue, Subaru took a breath.

On the Gladiator Island, Subaru had made use of Return by Death to avoid battle as much as possible. Even in this situation, it might have been able to prevent Cecilus's betrayal somehow. It might have been able to change this entire outrageous situation somehow. He had racked his brain for such a course of action, but he revised it.

Victory, he decided that he would win together with everyone. —Return by Death, would be used for that purpose.

Subaru: "We'll win. Moreover, it'll be by a landslide."

When the battle began, the formations of the opponent, the tactics they would use, who would be defeated at what times, where the losses of life would occur, he would grasp it all.

In the same way as when he enlisted these six hundred people as his allies, he would save the lives of all of those six hundred people.

—No, not just six hundred people, if possible, the opposing thousand people as well.

—One thousand and six hundred people, save them all, Natsuki Subaru.

22

—When that shook the plain, the City of Iron and Blood, Glarasia, and the Fortress of Iron and Blood, Cecilus was above even the highest floor of the fortress, on the rooftop as he bathed in the night wind.

Cecilus: "Hm~ hm~ hmmm~, hm~ hm~ hm~ hmmm~"

Sitting on the edge of the night-time rooftop, he swung his zori-clad feet as he hummed a tune.

Would Schwartz's group, who had withdrawn from the fortress, run away, or fight?

Personally, Cecilus would naturally want them to choose to fight, but since it was Schawrtz, the choice to run away was also quite possible. That was not because he was a coward, but because he was wise.

However, wisdom was not always something that deserved reverence.

Cecilus: "That's especially the case in this Vollachian Empire. It can't be helped that it's quite a difficult place to live for people who maintain thinking and conduct that's similar to Boss. But…"

It was precisely because they had survived through difficulty, that the paths of such beings became "dramatic".

What would be the point in paying attention to those who were ordinary, of boundless mediocrity.

There existed nobody who was deeply invigorated by trying to find value in the fact that nothing happened.

That was why, Cecilus wanted Schwartz to fight.

He certainly possessed it. Schwartz possessed a distortion so intense that it could invigorate anyone.

For that to end without blooming, even if Schwartz might have been fine with it, Cecilus would not be. Such a thing would be an extreme tedium that would be very pitiful for the world.

Ergo—

Cecilus: "Ohh! Did you finally feel inclined to turn up!"

Seeing the gladiators deploy along the field, Cecilus's heart honestly jumped.

The initial choice had gone just as Cecilus had desired. Whether the following battle would go, whether it would go as Cecilus hoped, even Cecilus himself did not know.

It was not as though he thought it would be good for many people to die. If they did not die, that would be fine.

The issue would be if that became a plot with far too little highs and lows. An unstimulating plot would be seized by sluggishness, and would not be able to keep attracting the eyes and interest of the audience.

Cecilus: “All of you observing from the heavens, please feast your eyes. Upon the souls of the actors who brighten the stage!”

Even if they were just minor roles, if they appeared on the stage, they would catch someone’s attention. Regardless if that moment was full of soul or of inertia, the moment they were seen, that was the entirety of the relationship between actor and audience.

For that reason, one must always make up a face and mind. In order to not have regrets when they were seen at any given moment, and affixed with a “label”.

Cecilus: “Hmm? Oh-Oh, what’s that?”

Trying to evaluate the gladiators with his own pet theory, Cecilus suddenly frowned.

Far in the distance below him, there was an incomprehensible change in the movements of the gladiators on the plain. Of course, seeing that development occur next to the fortress, everyone of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, having been forewarned of the attack, responded.

That should have been reflected in the eyes of the soldiers of the fortress, and also in the eyes of their commander, the Steel Appraiser.

—The gladiators were standing in a circle. A small circle was surrounded by a larger circle, and that circle was surrounded by an even larger circle; such was the circular formation of the six hundred people, reflected in their eyes.

And then—

Schwartz: "—WE, ARE THE STRONGEST!!"

Gladiators: "STRONGEST! STRONGEST!! STRONGEST—!!!"

The loud voices forming that unbelievable war cry shook the plain, the city, and the night sky of the fortress.

7

In a circular formation, raising his voice from its center, Subaru felt everyone's spirit with his entire body.

Having completely lost their spirits after withdrawing, the roaring voices of the Pleiades Battalion were filled with a newfound competitive spirit, and they used their whole bodies to enhance what was being thrown at them.

Subaru: "—WE, ARE INVINCIBLE!!"

Pleiades: "INVINCIBLE! INVINCIBLE!! INVINCIBLE—!!!"

A big circle surrounding a circle, and an even bigger circle surrounding that one, the enormous circular formation of six hundred people gave off a fervor akin to a sports day or a rally.

They were the same in the sense that everyone was becoming one. —Except that what awaited them here was a battle on which their lives were staked.

Subaru: "—OHHHHHHHHHHH INEVITABLE FAAAAAAAATE!!"

Pleiades: "BRING IT ON! BRING IT ON!! BRING IT ONNNNNNN—!!!"

To what he thought was the biggest, most absurd enemy, Subaru thrust forth his declaration of war.

That they should use a circular formation, that they should raise their voices, nobody objected when he had made those suggestions. The enemy was already aware of their presence, and of their intention to attack.

In that case, they would absolutely not lose in terms of morale. To powerfully draw out an unyielding spirit was the policy of a battalion.

Subaru: "…"

Releasing their linked arms and shoulders, Subaru and the rest faced forward.

To the fore, the grand Fortress of Iron and Blood could be seen ahead of the plain; it appeared further away and mightier than it had been when they entrusted it to Cecilus alone, like an outrageously impregnable location.

But, their spirit to take up the gauntlet had not withered in the slightest. And, Subaru had already settled his heart.

Subaru: "I'll redo this no matter how many times it takes."

He had decided that he would make every effort with an offensive approach. Moreover, the resolve he was devoting was likely the same as when he began his second lap of the island, and he harbored an ever stronger sense of duty.

Natsuki Subaru would conquer this battle together with his comrades.

Subaru: "HERE WE GO—!!"

For that purpose, Subaru and the rest ferociously broke out into a sprint.

Kicking up clouds of dust, they swooped down upon the fortress. With rumbling and tremors, the stampede of the men seemed to shake the vast lands, and as they gradually approached the fortress, the enemy came into sight.

The elite soldiers who had been lying in wait, charged with the duty of defending the Fortress of Iron and Blood. One step, another step, they approached, before the collision with those who stood on guard with expressions resolved for death.

Once they collided, the expenditure of life would begin from then onwards. He would pay attention to that as closely as possible— as Subaru thought that, he suddenly saw a figure on the highest floor of the fortress.

—A figure that was waving its hands, as if cheering on Subaru and the others as they challenged the fortress.

Subaru: “CECILUS SEGMUNT, IS A GODDAMN IDIOT—!!”

Pleiades: “GODDAMN IDIOOOOOOOT—!!”

23

—That was a result born due to a coincidental alignment of various factors.

In order to materialize this, there truly was a miraculous overlap of requirements.

Firstly, all those present were unwavering and united in their feelings. Those united feelings were great and powerful, and so firm that they could not be swayed.

And then, there was the existence of Natsuki Subaru at their core, subconsciously invoking Cor Leonis. —The final condition could never have been fulfilled if it were anybody else.

When the condition that was impossible for anybody else to actualize was fulfilled, a miracle was invoked.

Cecilus: “No way…”

And, laying eyes upon that miracle, Cecilus subconsciously muttered to himself.

Cecilus, who was generally unmoved by most things and had a habit of choosing events for their stylishness and stage presence, could surprisingly comprehend all things with just that, but this impression ran contrary to that.

This sight was so unexpected for Cecilus that he could not help but say that.

Cecilus: “Uwaa, the soldiers of the fortress are melting, they’re melting.”

Of course, Cecilus’s muttering was just a figure of speech, but it was a fact that they had met a development so overwhelming that the result of the collision appeared to be like that.

The fight between the group of gladiators commanded by Schwartz, and the elite soldiers of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, was completely one-sided.

The fight should have been an equal struggle, with the fortress side being a little more advantageous. Such was Cecilus’s estimation, and he thought that it would have been a sight to see how the presences of Subaru and Gustav would overturn the disadvantage he had speculated.

However, Cecilus’s estimation was betrayed in an even more nonsensical way.

—Schwartz’s group was clashing with the Imperial Soldiers head on, blowing them away one after the other.

An adult and a child, a Galewind Horse and a puppy, Cecilus and Schwartz; a difference in strength akin to those— perhaps that last example was a bit inadequate, but a difference in strength to those extents was yielded between the two parties.

The mechanism behind that was clear to Cecilus’s eyes. —The Flow Method.

The technique of utilizing the mana flowing within oneself for battle, it was a secret used by so-called martial arts masters to manipulate their bodies. For some reason, everyone had suddenly become able to utilize it.

Cecilus: “No no no as expected there’s absolutely no way that everyone has been using it, right? I mean if there were this many people who could use it then the Sparkas would have been much more impressive and spectacular!”

Cecilus was no fool about the influence that feelings had on the body, but this was just stupid. Such a stupidly absurd thing should have never even happened in the first place.

Cecilus: “Man, Boss is incredible. Or instead of incredible, perhaps I should say incredible.”

The chance to praise someone with feelings of dumbfoundment like this did not come to Cecilus very often.

Schwartz, who had allowed it to come to him, had magnificently lived up to Cecilus’s expectations. —No, this had surpassed his expectations, surpassed his imagination; it was unexpected, extraordinary, and unbounded.

Cecilus: “I had thought it far too cowardly to fear the deaths of wolves and had intended to crush that notion beyond this point, but, man… To think that he would instead persist with the height of cowardice and overprotection to produce such a result, I must say bravo!!”

While the details of what had happened were unclear, Cecilus displayed that his insight was reliable enough to perceive who the origin was, and he roared in laughter with exceeding delight.

—He laughed about the fact that the Fortress of Iron and Blood was unlucky enough to fall twice in a single day.

24

When all was said and done, the result was an anticlimax. —Subaru would never have thought such a thing.

He had not the slightest idea of what they had caused to happen.

Subaru: “Don’t tell me, Ceci didn’t do something for us, did he?”

Cecilus: “Ahahahaha! No way no way there’s absolutely no way. Didn’t I say? That “I won’t interfere”. That’s an expression of my stubborn intention to neither get in your way nor help you out.”

Subaru: “I figured. I understood and didn’t have any expectations.”

At Cecilus’s unashamed answer, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and responded.

From his perspective, there was probably no reason to be ashamed. Rather, having gotten his desired outcome, his confidence that he was the world’s leading actor had probably only deepened.

Cecilus: “That’s a little incorrect, Boss. This wasn’t my desired outcome, it exceeded all my expectations.”

Subaru: “Oh…”

Cecilus: “To think that even I couldn’t see this coming. I can’t believe that in the eleventh hour, Boss and everyone else achieved an awakening and rapidly rounded up all the soldiers of the fortress!”

Spreading his arms wide in excitement, Cecilus hopped up on his feet.

The rooftop of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, on top of the fortress that was already under the occupation of Subaru and the Pleiades Battalion, they faced each other. Behind the turned-around Cecilus, the large white moon was visible.

Cecilus: “Well then what about Boss? Perhaps this was also something you were able to foresee in the scope of your “true sight”?”

Subaru: “If I had such an outrageous power, I’d be able to live much more comfortably…”

Cecilus: “Oya that’s a strange thing to say Boss. It seems like Boss is enjoying comfort in plenty, no?”

Subaru: “…Are you saying that since my movements are slow when compared to Ceci, it looks like I'm comfortable when I operate in eco-mode?"

Cecilus: "No no, you've got it all wrong. It's nothing so complicated."

When Subaru grimaced as if an outrageously false accusation had been made against him, Cecilus shook his head with a smile on his face.

Cecilus: "Boss, what do you think consumes the most energy in life?"

Subaru: "Mastering how to write Roman letters… Oh yeah, like the moment you fulfill a big objective?"

Cecilus: "This is my pet theory. —It's when things don't go the way you hope them to."

At Cecilus's quiet answer, Subaru slightly stiffened his cheeks. Seeing that reaction of Subaru's, Cecilus gave a smile, and,

Cecilus: "How is this outcome for Boss? Extremely disappointing?"

Subaru: "Don't say such ill-natured things… It's beyond ideal."

Kicking the rooftop under his feet, Subaru responded so to that question.

—The first battle of the Pleiades Battalion had concluded with a perfect victory against the Fortress of Iron and Blood. There were zero casualties; it was a literal perfect victory.

And all of that was thanks to extraordinary power that had suddenly manifested itself on the plain.

Cecilus: "Both on the Gladiator Island, and here in the Fortress of Iron and Blood, Boss magnificently fulfilled the wishes that he wanted granted and the things that he wanted to do. If we follow my pet theory from earlier…"

Subaru: "My energy consumption is lackluster."

Cecilus: “I won’t say it’s lackluster but your wishes are being granted and you are being rewarded with more than just obtaining your desired outcome. At the very least you can’t say that you’ve tasted futile efforts.”

While still feeling that they had yet to exit the realm of false accusations, Subaru thought that Cecilus’s claim was not something that had been made foolishly.

Not just on the Gladiator Island, but the majority of Subaru’s days in this other world had come to be rewarded in the end. But, it was just that therein laid the unseen expanse of countless “futile efforts” that Cecilus was unaware of.

Cecilus: “I’m not saying that you’ve simply dealt with things in eco-mode and are rejoicing all easy-peasy. I know that the path Boss walks is a thorny one and that the soles of your feet are all shredded up. On top of understanding that, I’m saying that since you’re being rewarded, you’re fully enjoying comfort.”

Subaru: “—. What exactly do you want to say, Ceci?”

Spending time with his long-winded speech, Cecilus explained his thoughts. Receiving those details, Subaru approached the true conclusion of the battle of the fortress in the moonlight.

The audience was merely the white moon. However, that was enough for Cecilus to dance.

What remained was— whether or not Subaru was deemed worthy for the stage Cecilus rose to.

Subaru: “Were your desires granted? From here on out, what are you going to do with us?”

At Subaru’s question, Cecilus fell silent.

Supposing that Cecilus was planning on going into overtime, even if the Pleiades Battalion had obtained a profoundly mysterious power, it could not be said that they had much of a chance of winning.

But, he had faith that Cecilus would not do that, and not just because Gustav had evaluated him so.

Cecilus acted on his own whims, but was also contradictory in the sense that he was not the incarnation of egotistical selfishness.

Cecilus: "—To tell you the truth there is one thing I have misgivings about."

After being silent for a while, Cecilus raised a single finger and spoke.

Cecilus: "Boss can see things that ordinary people are unable to. I've gone ahead and started calling it "true sight", but…"

Subaru: "—Hk."

Cecilus: "Ah you don't need to affirm or deny it. Either way I already have an answer regarding that within myself. It may be selfish but I don't require the words from Boss himself."

As Cecilus plainly divulged his opinion, Subaru's heart skipped a beat.

He had said it all so forthrightly, but for Subaru it was quite literally a matter of life and death.

This was nothing more than the situation ending without incident because Cecilus had not requested an answer from Subaru's mouth.

Understanding that Subaru possessed a power that laid beyond the bounds of logic, Cecilus continued.

Cecilus: "Boss has the eye to see far into the distance. I won't say that that in itself is troublesome, but… if you see too much then there's a chance that things will get somewhat less interesting."

Subaru: "See too much…?"

Cecilus: "There are certainly fine works where you can see the conclusion of the story coming, right? But I don't want that for the stage I rise to. So I want you to make me a promise, Boss."

Egotistically, Cecilus continued the conversation in a manner that centered on himself. The reason Subaru had not interjected was not because Cecilus was monstrously strong, but because his heart was drawn into what lay beyond those words.

Because the sound of him spinning words was beautiful, he would spit out words until one would become sick of hearing them.

Subaru: “A promise, of what exactly?”

Enduring the sensation of his eardrums desiring that voice even more, Subaru returned a question.

Perhaps because he did not expect an answer from Subaru, Cecilus slightly raised his eyebrows, and then just like always, closing a single eye,

Cecilus: “I’m very impressed by Boss’s resolve. I’d even say that coming this far while persisting with extreme cowardice regarding casualties is attractive. I think there’s no problem with getting so many people involved with your prideful way of being. —But, please make me an exception.”

Subaru: “…”

Cecilus: “Please, for just my life or death, don’t let it enter the vision of your “true sight”, Boss. My life, death, dancing, and brilliance, please let me handle absolutely all of that on my own.”

Cecilus placed a hand on his chest as he spoke so, and Subaru closed his eyes.

Subaru: “…Is this because you think you won’t die?”

Cecilus: “That’s wrong. While I certainly do play the part of this world’s leading actor, if struck with a sword my head would fall off. If I drink poison my heart would truly stop beating.”

Cecilus boasted so in a manner so unchanged from his demeanor that a chill ran down Subaru’s spine.

To the extent that it made Subaru’s resolve seem cute, those were the values inside Cecilus that were formed by his way of life, honed to be ready for battle at all times. In truth, Subaru had witnessed him stick to those values, a scene where he accepted his own death.

He did not fear death. Yet, he loathed the idea of others sullying his life or death.

Subaru: “Alright, Ceci. Let’s make it a promise.”

Eventually, Subaru nodded in agreement to the promise proposed by Cecilus.

It was not an atmosphere in which he could decline, and the contents were not something he would decline to begin with. If Cecilus felt like it, he could run so fast that nobody would be able to catch him, so if his wishes were not granted he would probably run far into the distance, regardless of whether the Curse Rule was still active.

Subaru: “Ceci, get your pinky out.”

Cecilus: “My pinky? What are we doing?”

Subaru: “It’s a promise ritual from my hometown. If you break it you’ll be forced to swallow a thousand needles.”

Cecilus: “Heh, your hometown is sort of like Vollachia.”

Hearing Cecilus’s nonchalant impression, Subaru thought about how he hated the Vollachian Empire, and he held out his pinky, entwining it with Cecilus’s, who had done the same.

And then—

Subaru: “About that promise just now, there’s just one more thing I have to tell you.”

Cecilus: “What is it?”

Waving their pinkies up and down, Subaru appended something on as they performed the promise ritual, to which Cecilus tilted his head.

Staring at Cecilus's face from closeby, Subaru would clearly tell him, who held no malice.

Cecilus had also said some things that were quite unreasonable, so Subaru would also—

Subaru: "—I'm a serial promise-breaker."

Their joined fingers parted, and Cecilus greatly widened his eyes at the unthinkable statement Subaru had made right after making a promise, then he immediately burst out laughing.

Once more, an alliance was formed between Subaru and Cecilus—and as a witness to that formation, the round white moon had kept watch over the dialogue under the moonlight.

25

Hiain: "Like I said! Strength surged up from the deep depths of my body like bwamm! Maybe this is the result of my trainin' on the Gladiator Island?"

Idra: "Even if you say you were training, the only thing you ever did was run away…"

Hiain: "There's also the possibility that my sense for victory and defeat was also trained!"

Weitz: "Why the fuck would yer sense of victory and defeat being trained make ya able to send yer opponents flying… Think before ya speak, lizard bastard…!"

Raising their voices in good spirits, the usual trio spoke of the fruits of the battle— no, it was not just them who were roused by that subject.

Roused were the members of the Pleiades Battalion; the manifestation of the inexplicable power that had occurred during the previous day's capture of the Fortress of Iron and Blood brought about excitement to everyone that had not subsided even after dawn had broken the night.

Gustav: “It is not as though I do not understand everyone’s excitement. In my capacity, I also felt the morale rise during that event.”

Subaru: “Gustav-san did?! You felt your spirits rising?!”

Gustav: “I suppose that I was also astonished that I, in my capacity, could feel my emotions become excited like that.”

Gripped by the excited state of his surroundings, Gustav spoke so, startling Subaru.

While that reaction of Subaru’s was upsetting, as Gustav clenched all four of his fists tightly,

Gustav: “In many cases, I had never attached importance on the presence or absence of armed might. But, to witness it actually produce such results, as the official, I have some reservations on my mind.”

Subaru: “Something like, with too much power, Gustav-san will also drown…?”

Gustav: “The fact that if you have such mighty power, the things desired by Schwartz shall be possible.”

In response to Subaru’s anxious question, Gustav shook his head.

Subaru could understand Gustav’s point. He had resolved himself to restart as many times as was necessary to eliminate the casualties he thought would emerge, but those all disappeared in the face of overwhelming power.

The strength of the Pleiades Battalion maintained absurdity, and with the complete capitulation of the Fortress of Iron and Blood, they were able to accomplish the great military achievement of replenishing their supplies without producing any victims.

However, to affirm that in the way that it was, would be tantamount to affirming the Imperial way.

Subaru: “Rather, I’m the one who has to make sure I don’t drown in the power.”

Gustav: “…Schwartz?”

Subaru: “Nothing, I have hopes for Gustav-san’s performance as a military advisor from here on out. If Gustav-san hadn’t come with us, we would’ve fallen apart in the blink of an eye.”

Gustav: “—. I shall work diligently.”

As Subaru winked with hopes for him, Gustav folded his four arms and gave a quiet reply.

Ahead of his line of sight, he could see the beast carriages carrying the supplies they had collected from the fortress, and Cecilus straddling the back of a Galewind Horse that was pulling it.

Roughly, the only ones who would lend an ear to Cecilus’s opinions were Subaru, Gustav, and occasionally Tanza, so without Gustav, the battalion seriously would have crumbled.

And, just when he thought that,

Subaru: “Huh? Speaking of which, where is Tanza…”

Tanza: “—I am here.”

As Subaru looked all around, the voice of the person he was searching for struck his back. Causing his shoulders to jump was Tanza, who had been waiting patiently behind Subaru before he spun around.

With her regular blank expression, she gazed at Subaru.

Subaru: “Oh, ohh, I’m glad you’re here.”

Tanza: “Is that so? Though Schwartz-sama would not be especially troubled even if I was not present. After all, it seemed like I would have been a hindrance to your conversation with Segmunt-sama.”

Subaru: “…No, that was because I thought that the talk with Ceci was definitely gonna get complicated.”

For the dialogue under the moon on the previous night, Subaru had ordered Tanza to not accompany him, and instead be on standby; thus she spoke sarcastically towards him.

From Tanza's point of view, Subaru's safety was just a necessary factor in order to reunite with Yorna.

Therefore, he understood that she felt apprehensive about being distanced from him.

Tanza: "That goes for dealing with the people of the fortress as well. Regardless of sparing them, is releasing them unconditionally not going too far?"

Subaru: "We confiscated their weapons, and prohibited them from chasing after us. When I told them to give us their weapons, Toledo-san went completely pale for some reason."

Tanza: "…That is enough."

Suddenly averting her gaze, Tanza displayed discontent regarding Subaru's answer.

At her reaction, Subaru wracked his brain trying to figure out how he could put her back in a good mood.

He had finally captured everyone from the Gladiator Island, Gustav, and even Cecilus, so even though the Pleiades Battalion was completed, there was no point if Tanza was not one of them.

Tanza: "In order to win over the members of the Unit, all of the gladiators, Governor Gustav, and Segmunt-sama, Schwartz-sama has gone through immense hardship, correct?"

Subaru: "Yeah, it's been a lot tougher than it looks… Don't tell me, is Tanza also going to act unreasonably towards me?"

Tanza: "Yes."

Subaru: "Tanza's revolt?!"

First was the Sparka with Gustav, which was followed by Cecilus's betrayal, and now, Subaru widened his eyes at the forewarned revolt of Tanza.

As Subaru repeatedly opened and closed his mouth, Tanza spoke, her gaze still averted.

Tanza: "…Please, say that you require my strength."

Subaru: "…"

Tanza: "If you want to put me in a good mood, please say that you require my strength."

As Tanza put on airs and made that request, Subaru's eyes widened to a greater extent than before.

Then, as he started to laugh,

Subaru: "—I need your strength, Tanza."

Tanza: "In that case, I will accompany you."

Answering so, Tanza faced Subaru, and as her lips slightly loosened, she began to smile.

Ascertaining that, "Tanza's Revolt" came to a lovely ending, and Subaru inhaled a large breath.

And once again, in a manner that the comrades who were pushing forward in the same direction as he was could hear, he made an announcement.

Subaru: "—LET'S GO, PLEIADES BATTALION!"

Pleiades: "YEAHHHHHHHHHHH—!!!"

Their sights were set on the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, and what awaited them was likely the greatest battle of the Vollachian Empire.

And, there was an extraordinary and unprecedented group that would plunge into that battle as an unforeseen joker, the Pleiades

Battalion— This has been the secret tale, of how that group came to be.

END

Short Story Collection 9

Lugunican Hustle (Translation Pending)

Lugunican Hustle Extra

1

“IIII’m bored! Mimi is leaving now! Farewell!” a small figure exclaimed as she rambunctiously ran out of the room.

“Ah! Big sis! Big siiiiis!” another small figure screamed, chasing after her. The chair the first figure had been sitting on toppled over. However, before it hit the ground, yet another small figure, who hadn’t run out of the room, prevented it from doing so.

“I’m very sorry for my big sister and big brother’s behavior, Joshua,” the cat-boy Tivey said, apologizing on behalf of his sister Mimi and his brother Hetaro for abruptly running out of the room as he supported the chair with one hand and fixed his monocle with the other.

Smiling bitterly at his apology, Joshua shook his head. “No, I had a feeling it might turn out like this. Do not worry too much about it. I did not expect Mimi to be able to sit still for a long period of time.”

“I’m sorely embarrassed as her younger brother,” Tivey said, slumping his shoulders. “However, I too had a feeling it would turn out like this. So I am in the same boat as you.”

Joshua couldn’t think of anything to say to Tivey, who was obviously feeling down.

In front of Joshua was a canvas with a painting of what would surely be a portrait of someone once completed. Mimi was supposed to be the subject, and Hetaro was the one who had requested Joshua for it. He wanted to put up the finished painting in his room. Joshua understood Hetaro’s sentiment and accepted the request. However…

“With Mimi like that, I reckon it will take forever to complete,” Tivey surmised.

“W-Well, let us continue this again when we have a chance,” Joshua replied. “I do not suppose Hetaro will be able to bring her back, will he?”

Tivey hesitated to answer for a moment. “I’m embarrassed to admit it, but no.”

Even if Hetaro managed to catch up to Mimi, being able to persuade her to come back was another story. Even I can tell the possibility of that happening is slim, Joshua thought. And if Tivey, who grew up with them, agrees with me, I can be pretty certain I am right. He decided to call it a day and pack up his painting equipment, when there was a knock on the half-open door.

“Joshua,” the person who knocked called out, peeking into the room. “I saw Mimi and Hetaro run out of the room. Is everything alright?”

“Ah, Brother,” Joshua said, noticing his brother, who had come to check what the commotion was about.

Julius looked into the room—Joshua’s art studio—then softened his expression upon noticing the paintbrush in his brother’s hand. “Seeing as how you have a brush in your hand, were you in the middle of painting? And were you accompanying him, Tivey?”

“I suppose. Although, I don’t know if ‘accompanying’ is the right word,” Tivey answered. “I was here to have a painting of my sister done by Joshua.”

“Of Mimi? I see, so that was what the whole ruckus was about.” With Tivey’s response, he quickly understood the situation.

Julius slipped his long legs through the door, entering the room, and approached his younger brother. He gestured at the canvas that had a cloth over it, as Joshua had begun cleaning up. “May I?”

“S-Sure,” Joshua replied, nodding hesitantly, “but I have only just begun working on it, and it is far from complete…”

“Let me guess, Mimi could not sit still and ran out before long, right? I can imagine,” Julius said as he flipped over the cloth, uncovering the canvas, then narrowed his eyes. Joshua stiffened, noticing the emotions that ran through his brother's bright yellow eyes. After a thorough examination, Julius nodded in deep satisfaction.

"It is indeed far from complete, and I can tell you have only just begun, but I can already feel Mimi's explosive energy through it," Julius commented. "By the way, this appa she is holding…"

"She ended up eating it all the way to the core," Joshua explained.

"I see. I wanted to say the color is striking and provides a great contrast to the overall portrait."

"Th-Thank you! I will be sure to prepare a fresh appa for next time!"

Julius smiled bitterly. "I was not trying to compliment the appa…"

Joshua fidgeted with his hands at Julius's words. He took a moment to collect himself and accept his brother's warm compliment. However, the next words from Julius would make him completely freeze up.

"Oh, by the way," Julius started, as if he had remembered something important while looking at the canvas. "You said you wanted to paint me the other day. If you are done working on this painting of Mimi for today, would you like to—"

"YYY-You, Brother?! No, I'm not ready for you yet!"

"Is…that right?" Julius asked with a dumbfounded look on his face, to which Joshua nodded vigorously.

I know my brother did not have any ill will, but that proposal is way too sudden. It is bad for the heart.

"That being said," Joshua began, "It is something that I said I will do. I have no intention of going back on my words." It is just that painting him is a huge deal for me.

Through the fake "Sleeping Miderine" incident, Joshua had the chance to be more honest with himself about art. He even decided to explore portraits, something he'd always avoided, and declared he would like to paint Julius one day. But I did not mean right away. I want to paint him when I have more confidence.

“So, I was thinking maybe in ten or twenty years,” Joshua said.

“That is way too long of a wait,” Julius lamented. “Besides, I am not sure if I will even be around in ten or twenty years.”

“No! If it is you, Brother, you will be doing fine as ever in ten, twenty, or even a hundred years,” Joshua asserted, refusing to believe anything bad would ever happen to his older brother.

“To think Julius would be doing well in a hundred years is kind of scary,” Tivey said from the sidelines.

“Joshua,” Julius said, furrowing his brows, disconcerted by his younger brother's assertion. “I am happy to know you took our promise so earnestly. But it is not like you have only one chance. You do not need to be so serious about it.”

“I have more than one chance?!”

“What are you so surprised about?” Julius said, closing one eye amusingly. “Did you think that I would be unable to sit still for a long period of time like Mimi and wouldn't be able to finish painting me?”

Joshua vigorously shook his head. He would have never insulted Julius by saying he was as impatient as Mimi. The idea of getting to paint his brother over and over again just never crossed his mind. It was a rather obvious solution to his conundrum, but that still didn't ease his mind.

“I cannot stand the idea of continuously creating an imperfect portrait of you. I would rather paint Lady Anastasia again and again instead!” Joshua fervently declared.

“Oh, Miss, what are you doing here?” Tivey said suddenly, causing Joshua to shriek. He turned around hastily, making eye contact with the girl peeking in through the half-open door.

Smiling gracefully, she answered Tivey's question with a simple hum and shook her head. “Oh, nothin'. I jus' thought I heard a party goin' on and wanted to take a peek. But it seems like ya'll are havin' an interestin' conversation.”

“Yes, great timing,” Julius responded. “Lady Anastasia, if you are not too busy, would you mind making some time for Joshua? He said he would like to paint your portrait.”

“Wha?!” Joshua exclaimed.

“Apparently, he can't get started on me without painting you first…” Julius explained to Anastasia, misconstruing Joshua's earlier excuse.

As Joshua stood stock-still as if his soul had left his body, completely lost for words, Anastasia put a finger to her lips, letting out a small hum, and faintly smiled, squinting her pale blue eyes. “Make sure to capture me beautifully, yeah?” she said, knowing full well she just led the situation down a path that was exactly the opposite of what Joshua wanted.

2

“My, it's kinda ticklin' to be stared at like that,” Anastasia said from the subject's seat.

“Have you never had your portrait painted before, Lady Anastasia?” Julius asked, standing beside her.

“No, no, never. Apparently, there were sketches of me on billboards around the royal capital after news of the royal selection went public, but that's pretty much… Oh, there was also the time with the Dragon Times.”

“Oh yeah, I remember the media artist passionately drawing you,” Julius said with a smile, to which Anastasia also smiled and agreed as she reminisced about the event.

As they continued their light-hearted chit-chat, Joshua agonized over the position he'd been put in. He'd kept his entire afternoon free to paint Mimi, so he couldn't tell them that he didn't have the time. He could’ve passed on their request by saying that, as an artist, he gets demotivated when the subject changes, but that would mean he would need to ask himself if he was fit to call himself a true artist. And he was not quite ready for that yet. As a result, he got cornered into this agonizing situation.

“D-Do your best, Joshua,” encouraged Tivey, who more or less empathized with him.

As a fellow monocle wearer and the youngest child of their respective families, Joshua considered Tivey a friend and was honestly thankful for the encouragement. However, he didn’t feel like the power of their friendship would be enough to take on the overwhelming expectations Julius and Anastasia had for him.

“No, I just need to concentrate on finishing it,” Joshua told himself. “Just keep moving my brush. Do not think about anything else. No matter how gruesome a path may seem, there is always an end…”

“Oh, I have an idea,” Julius suddenly said. “Lady Anastasia, how about we make copies of the painting once it’s done and display it in the Hoshin Company’s branches? Would it not be good for business if people were able to see you even if you weren’t around?”

“Brother?!” Joshua exclaimed.

“Hmm,” Anastasia hummed at his suggestion. “That’s a brilliant idea. In that case, I really need to be painted beautifully. But I’m sure Joshua will be able to meet our expectations.”

“Lady Anastasia?!” Joshua cried.

Julius and Anastasia’s high expectations further exhausted Joshua’s heart. What made it worse was that Julius had no ill will at all, while Anastasia knew exactly what she was doing. Even though they were saying the same things, they had different motivations. However…

“Lady Anastasia,” Joshua began. “If you are to actually take my brother’s suggestion, I recommend you hire an actual artist with the right set of skills and experience. Not me."

"But Joshua, your skills are more than…"

"No, Brother," Joshua interrupted. "I am afraid I am not skilled enough for such a task. I understand my own limitations better than anyone."

This was his honest opinion as Anastasia's supporter in her grand pursuit of queenhood. It was different from the childish tantrum he'd thrown when Julius asked for his portrait. If she truly wishes for victory, she must avoid nepotism. It would only burden her as a disadvantage.

"You're right," Anastasia responded solemnly to Joshua's earnest words. "I got a bit carried away there. My bad, my bad."

Joshua was relieved to know his words were properly heard. At the same time, however, he became anxious about whether he was out of line. The fact that he interrupted his brother also started to make him worry if he was being rather pompous.

"B-Brother, I just wanted to say…"

"No, you are absolutely right, Joshua," Julius asserted before Joshua could finish. "I have no expertise in art. And yet, I tried making a suggestion to my mistress based solely on my biased opinion. Thank you for putting an end to it." Julius bowed, apologizing for interfering in this matter despite his ignorance.

Joshua, flustered at the sight of this, searched for the right words.

"They're so serious," Anastasia remarked, watching the brothers' interaction. "They're almost identical… Don't ya think, Tivey?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Tivey. "They're so different from my brother and sister."

As siblings who weren't real brothers, being told they were identical evoked rather complicated emotions in both of them. However, it was also true that they were more similar to each other than Tivey, Mimi, and Hetaro were. So…

“Joshua and I are determined to support Lady Anastasia with all our might,” Julius affirmed, raising his head from his bowing position.

“The same goes for my sister, brother, and me.”

Julius smiled gently at Tivey’s response. “As long as you share that part, all your other differences are insignificant.”

This is my brother’s greatest weapon, Joshua thought. Despite being hailed as the ‘finest’ knight in the kingdom and possessing distinguished skills, he maintains humility and never stops working on himself.

As he reaffirmed his brother’s greatness, he felt Anastasia’s gaze resting on him.

Upon noticing that, Anastasia pointed at Julius. “You were once wonderin’ why I was so confident in myself… Would ya get it if I said I got it from him?”

“That is…” Joshua uttered.

“Not jus’ him, though,” Anastasia continued, gracefully putting her hand on her cheek. “Tivey, Mimi, and Hetaro, too. What the hell, I’ll even add Ricardo to the list… And, of course, you’re in it too, Joshua.”

Joshua was taken aback, clenching his teeth. Her confidence comes from the people she surrounds herself with—no, from her confidantes—no, that’s not it, either. She probably sees everyone around her as her own possession.

As a person who doesn’t hold back on her desires, Joshua and Julius were no exception.

“We don’t hafta distribute it elsewhere, but how about we display it around the mansion?” Anastasia suggested.

“That is a great idea,” Julius agreed. “In either case, I still want to see your portrait painted by Joshua.”

So, there is no getting out of painting Lady Anastasia, I see. Well, I suppose I brought this on myself. I just need to suck it up and do it. It will be done before I know it. I just need to keep moving my brush—but, if I am going to do it, I might as well try to make it as great as possible. Looking back now, it feels like Lady Anastasia's been constantly swinging me around like some kind of toy. It will be nice to paint something great, and see her taken aback for once.

"Do yer best, Joshua," Anastasia said. "Ya don't mind paintin' me again and again, right?" Right when he was about to get started, Anastasia reminded him of his rude remark from earlier. As his expression grew bitter, she smiled elegantly without a hint of remorse. Unable to find the right words to reply to her with, Joshua firmly grasped the brush. At least now I have an excuse to postpone painting my brother for a while.

END

Golden Siblings
(Edited Machine Translatio)

1

—It all began one day with an unexpected exchange between an older sister and a younger brother.

???: "—Garf, let us go out."

???: "Huh?"

???: "Yes, let us go out. Just me and you, Garf."

???: "…Huh?"

The younger brother Garfiel could not help his eyes from opening wide at his sister's emphatic and repeated invitation.

—Garfiel Tinzel and Frederica Baumann, two siblings who were recently reunited after many years apart.

Their reunion was a dramatic one, with the younger brother dashing in just as the older sister was about to fall into the hands of an assassin. After that, the two did not get along well enough to make up for their time apart. Rather, the superb coordination that they had achieved during that life-threatening situation did not translate to everyday life, and the awkwardness of the past ten years continued on.

It had been one month since the resolution of the issues surrounding the Sanctuary and the Roswaal mansion, bringing the residents of that closed-off place into the outside world. Garfiel, one of them, was finally getting used to waking up in the morning in a room of a large mansion instead of a familiar shabby shack.

However, there was a sense of tension in such a new environment, and the relationship between the siblings had not improved much.

???: "You're siblings, so it's okay to flirt with each other like we do.

Right, Beako?”

???: “D-Don’t be so cavalier about flirting, I suppose. However, since Betty is Subaru’s partner, it is essential to stick with you as much as possible, in fact.”

Subaru: “Ha ha ha, you little cutie. But I think I’d rather take a bath alone without being watched!”

This was part of a conversation between Subaru and Beatrice, who entered into a contractual relationship with him at the same time as the reunion of the siblings.

It was tempting to say that the two were interfering with them out of the fact that their relationship was going well, but this was surprisingly a common issue in the newly reformed Emilia Camp.

The entire group moved into a new mansion to replace the one that had burned down for various reasons. In an effort to restore the sibling relationship between Garfiel and Frederica, they had tried various meddling schemes that had ended in failure, without ever getting beyond the realm of pranks.

The relationship between the two siblings, with no signs of improvement in sight, was unexpectedly brought to a head by—

Frederica: “—Garf, let us go out.”

It was the sudden invitation from his sister at the very beginning.

???: “No need to be so cautious. Frederica is probably trying to work out how to get closer to her reunited little brother. You should go. Ram understands Frederica’s desire to be an older sister.”

When he discussed Frederica’s invitation, Ram said this curtly, in her usual tone, as she folded the laundry she had brought in.

Although it was curt, Ram brought the laundry basket into an appropriate room—where a girl who looked exactly like her was lying on the bed.

In the room of a girl with whom Garfiel and Ram had “been told” they had a close relationship, when Ram said she could understand Frederica's sisterly feelings, Garfiel had neither the wit necessary to retort back nor the ability to throw an ignorant tantrum.

Ram: "You seem dissatisfied. Don't you believe what Ram is saying?"

Garfiel: "Nah, I do. There's no one my amazin' self trusts more than ya, Ram. The only other people I trust more than Ram are… Nanna, the Captain, 'n well, there's not many others."

Ram: "—. Such a fool. But that is the kind of thing Ram likes about you, Garf."

Garfiel: "Gah…"

Taken aback, Garfiel was unsure why he was suddenly being praised.

Ram never looked at him until then, she only looked at him at times like this, and her profile was so beautiful that Garfiel was again captivated by his crush.

Anyway—

Ram: "Do your best, Garf. Frederica has always been concerned for you, Garf. She is Ram's senior. Ram won't feel good if you make the wrong choices."

It was very Ram-like to add that.

???: "You two get along so well …ah! If you're too conscious of it, it'll make things awkward. Then, don't overthink it and just reaaally have some fun!"

???: "Frederica-neesama is so beautiful! You are too good for Garf-san!"

???: "Oh, just in time before you go out, could you please buy some more ink for my quill pen? I am almost through my supply."

There was no particularly strong reason to refuse, but when he added a reason why the outing with Frederica could not be refused, it became a no-brainer on a day when she had been given a half day off.

Exaggeratedly, everyone came to see them off at the gate—Emilia, the leader of the camp, whom he was still getting acquainted with; Petra, a brusque maid whom he had only known for a short time; and Otto, whose attitude was so irritating because he did not consider this event to be of any importance and others.

Then at the end of these farewells—

Subaru: “Go enjoy the date alone, sister and brother! Just like me and Beako!”

Beatrice: “D, d, d-don’t you take this date thing so seriously, I suppose. It’s best to listen to what Subaru says half the time, not just half, but a quarter of the time, in fact.”

Subaru: “Ha ha ha, you little rascal. But you don’t have to follow me to the toilet in the middle of the night!”

After being seen off by Subaru and Beatrice, both of whom seemed eager to show how well their relationship was going, Garfiel and Frederica departed from the Roswaal mansion.

That was how Garfiel ended up going out with his sister.

2

Frederica: “—So Garf, when was the last time you went to Costuul?”

Garfiel: “Huh?”

What was intended to be casual chitchat was met with a brusque response, which Frederica thought she messed up.

Although Frederica had thought she had done a lot of mental preparation for today’s outing, her plan to open up a simple topic stumbled at the outset, and Frederica’s plan fell apart.

Immediately, words from Frederica’s grandmother come to her mind.

Ryuzu: “Fuu, this is the first time Gar-bo has lived away from us. I’m sure he’ll have a hard time because of all the new things that he’s never done before, so Fuu, make sure that you help him out.”

This was what Frederica was requested by Ryuzu, who had been assigned to live elsewhere, to unite the Sanctuary’s inhabitants and her replicants.

Of course, Frederica cared about Garfiel not because she was asked to but because he was her dear younger brother. But while she wanted to act like a big sister, Frederica was unsure how to do so.

In any case, Frederica’s blood would run cold with despair if she were to fail her grandmother’s request.

And, just when Frederica’s fangs were trembling with apprehension,

Garfiel: “I’ve never been… Today’s my first time.”

Frederica: “Huh…?”

Garfiel: “That’s why I said it was my first time. Didn’t ya just ask me yerself, Sis?”

Frederica: “Oh, yes, it is, is it not? Yes, this is the first time you have ever been here… eh?! Even though it has been twenty days since we moved in here?! This is your first time?!”

Garfiel: “You’re bein’ annoyin’! I already told ya, don’t keep repeatin’ yerself!”

Frederica’s behavior seemed too serious for Garfiel, who was willing to talk with her. Immediately after Garfiel responded warmly to Frederica’s question, the mood was broken by an unexpected remark.

However, it was really that surprising.

Frederica: “Surely you had the opportunity to accompany Ram on some shopping trips…"

Garfiel: "Ha! Ram left most of the troublesome shoppin' to that lil' kid Petra. And, my amazin' self was busy scentin' up da mansion."

Frederica: "When it comes to her, she is becoming easy going again and… Garf is also Garf. Scenting the house is such a crude thing to do."

Frederica was dismayed with Ram's apparent misconduct, and subsequently dismayed by Garfiel's conduct.

Certainly, it was understandable to feel uneasy about leaving one's hometown, with its familiar scents all over the place. But scenting territory was an eccentricity in the outside world.

Frederica: "You need to be taught some common sense in that area, too… ah, ahh, ahhhh…?!"

Garfiel: "Wh-What's wrong?! Sis, yer face suddenly turned pale?!"

Frederica: "Nothing, I just remembered that when I left the Sanctuary ten years ago, I did the same thing at first in the mansion…"

Looking back on her actions, Frederica was struck by the shock that came a decade too late.

At that time, Frederica, in order to cope with the loneliness of being away from her hometown, also went around scenting various places, things, and even people, patrolled her territory late into the night, and even established a hierarchical order with the surrounding animals, all of which would be considered eccentric behavior.

Frederica: "Well, at that time, Clind, who was the head servant, disciplined me to correct it, and… what a surprise. I had no idea that Garf and I were so much like sister and brother…"

Garfiel: "What'cha surprised about, course it's normal for my amazin' self 'n Sis to be like sister 'n brother…"

Frederica trembled, and Garfiel sighed as he patted her back. Garfiel's words startled Frederica and said "Sis?" as he tilted his head.

The person in question spoke casually, without any qualms.

Frederica: "…Yes, of course. It is only a natural thing to do."

Garfiel: "Huh?"

Gently patting her chest, Frederica smiled at Garfiel.

As Garfiel said, it was only natural that they were like siblings. Even if they had been apart for more than a decade, there was no need to be afraid to face the fact that they were sister and brother. It was okay to be natural.

To begin with, what kind of siblings required mental preparation to be a sister and brother?

Frederica: "Grandmother, I think I can manage to fulfill my role…"

Garfiel: "What? You've had that "Field Bunting is still blue" look on yer face til' now. Sis, maybe you're startin' to turn senile like Granny… gah!"

Frederica: "I went to the trouble of complimenting you, but that was a few words too many. No, it is more than a few words if you consider your abusive words to Grandmother. You should reflect on that."

Garfiel: "Y-Ya don't hafta hit me over it, ya know…"

When Garfiel received a blow to the head, Frederica hid her mouth and laughed, then took a few quick steps in front of Garfiel,

Frederica: "Come to think of it, you still have not said anything about me getting all dressed up."

Garfiel: "Huh?"

Frederica: "Do not sound so grumpy. Petra chose my outfit for today. Walking next to me is so much more refreshing than if I were in my maid uniform, right?”

Wearing a light cloak over her shoulders, Frederica was dressed for going out, not in her usual maid uniform.

Petra, who was very knowledgeable about clothing and at the same time had a very keen eye, chose the outfit, and Frederica was enjoying the refreshing feeling of wearing something other than her uniform for the first time in a long time.

—No, it should be said that she finally had the time to enjoy the experience.

Garfiel: “…I really don’t care ‘bout the clothes you’re wearin’.”

Frederica: “Would you say the same thing if Ram were here?”

Garfiel: “Guh…”

Frederica: “Subaru-sama told me that when a man or woman goes on a date, he or she does everything in their power to be considerate and have an enjoyable time with the other person.”

Although the word was unfamiliar to her, it seemed to be a common word among Subaru, Emilia, and Beatrice, while Petra was happy to say that she had a date with Subaru the other day.

It was Petra’s look that gave Frederica the courage to ask out Garfiel.

That was why—

Garfiel: “…Well, I guess it ain’t so bad, is it?”

Frederica: “For someone like you, Garf, you did your best.”

Garfiel: “Huh?!”

Garfiel, who seemed to have tried his best to figure out the unfamiliar words, raised his voice at the assessment.

Frederica enjoyed these exchanges with Garfiel, thinking that this was probably the most enjoyable part of the date that Petra and the others happily told her about.

3

The Industrial City of Costuul, one of the Five Great Cities of the Kingdom of Lugunica, was also the nearest city to the new mansion to which the Emilia Camp had just moved.

The previous mansion had only a small village nearby, which had made it inconvenient for various reasons, such as shopping. Therefore, although the sizes of the old and new mansions were not different, the present mansion was much more convenient.

Frederica: “Moreover, this mansion is the Mathers’ main mansion, meaning that we were spending all our time in an inconvenient mansion, right?”

Garfiel: “…Why did they do that?”

Frederica: “I am sure the Master had profound thoughts on the matter… but the former mansion is closer to both the Royal Capital and the Sanctuary.”

Garfiel: “That bastard flies in the air, so it really doesn’t matter…”

When Garfiel gnashed his teeth in disgust, Frederica was unable to respond.

For some time now, Frederica had always been unsure of Roswaal’s thinking, but the events just prior to their reunion had reinforced this. Frederica could not imagine what Roswaal had hoped to gain from that scheme that had backed the entire camp into a corner.

However—

Frederica: “…It is because the Master is a “magician”.”

Letting the matter drop, Frederica withdrew her negative feelings toward Roswaal to the back of her mind. What lay there were her honest and true feelings. —For Frederica, Roswaal was a magician.

Not a magician as a mere profession or skill, but a “magician” in the sense that he was a special being that could do anything.

His knowledge and skills were the solution to every problem. The main reason why Frederica left the Sanctuary when she was still young was because she saw hope in what Roswaal could do.

That had not changed even now, after all that Roswaal had done.

Garfiel: “Tsk, I don’t wanna talk ‘bout that bastard Roswaal. If I’m gonna go out with Sis with a frown, my amazin’ self’ll just… oh, oh, oh, oh, oooooh!”

Frederica: “Wh-Wh-Wh-What is it, Garf? You are yelling so loud all of a sudden!”

Garfiel: “Wh-Why, look at that, that! What is it, Sis, that huge buildin’! That wall! The city!”

Saying this, an excited Garfiel pointed to a distant view of the city in front of him.

Garfiel’s previously sour expression changed, and he was astonished to see the city—Costuul, which became visible just as the forest that had blocked the view of the road was cut off.

Would that not be natural? Most of the world Garfiel knew was a small village called the Sanctuary. Although Garfiel knew about the world, the reality of a big city was far beyond his imagination.

Garfiel: “D-Damn! I shouldn’t have been wastin’ time scentin’ up the mansion! Sis! Come on! Hurry up! A big ass thing, a big ass thing, and a big ass thing are waitin’ for my amazin’ self!”

Frederica: “Ah! Hold on, Garf! I am wearing a skirt! Do not be in such a hurry… you already are! Garf!”

With a childlike twinkle in his eye, Garfiel hurried Frederica along.

Although Frederica smiled at such a quick change of attention from the previous topic, she could not hide her anxiety toward her excited younger brother.

Garfiel was curious about his first visit to a big city, but the problem lay with Costuul. The Industrial City of Costuul was the most modest of the Five Great Cities.

Frederica: "Compared to the other Five Great Cities… the Watergate City, the Ground Dragon Capital, and the Mining City, there would be much more to see…"

There were no so-called tourist attractions in Costuul.

Although Garfiel was willing to go out on a date, Frederica was worried that she might disappoint him once again.

Frederica: "Please, Grandmother… watch over Garf and I…!"

—It had been a while since she offered a heartfelt prayer to her faraway grandmother.

Garfiel: "A-Amazin'! It's even bigger when ya look at it up close! It's as they say, "Gasock is bigger than it sounds"!"

Garfiel's emerald-green eyes widened with glee as he gazed at the building under construction.

The trip to Costuul started with a sense of anxiety, but despite Frederica's misgivings over the lack of delicious sweets and beautiful scenery, the city's inorganic nature seemed to be a good thing for Garfiel, who simply loved big, angular things. The nature of the city was a blessing in disguise.

Frederica: "Thank you, Grandmother… thanks to you, my date with Garf did not get ruined…"

If Ryuzu had heard this, she would have tilted her head in confusion for something she did not understand, but at this moment, Frederica was unconcerned.

Then, Garfiel, pulling Frederica's sleeve as he looked around, Garfiel: “Hey, Sis! What’s that? That thing looks like a big ass box!”

Frederica: “Calm down, Garf. That box is a Magicreation Tool… a unique product of the Industrial City used all over the city.”

Garfiel: “A Magicreation Tool?”

Garf’s eyes widened at the unfamiliar word, and Frederica perked up.

Magicreation Tools were the primary factor that contributed to the prosperity of the Industrial City of Costuul and made it one of the Five Great Cities. Magic stones powered Magicreation Tools and were capable of tasks that would be impossible to accomplish by human hands. These tools were used in Roswaal’s mansion to produce heat for the kitchen and boil water for the baths, and in the Royal Capital to create fountains, making them a major industry of Costuul.

Frederica: “The Magicreation Tools work faster and more accurately than manual labor, and were introduced into factories to produce and export goods to other cities… this raised Costuul’s value, leading to it being called one of the Five Great Cities. Unlike the other four cities, it is a rare example of a city that has only recently joined the Five Great Cities.”

Garfiel: “Really, that’s amazin’!”

Frederica: “Of course it is, of course, it is.”

Garfiel: “…Why is Sis so proud ‘bout this?”

After Frederica explained the origins of the city, Garfiel grew suspicious of the glee with which Frederica explained it. Frederica opened her arms and continued, “Actually,” in response to Garfiel.

Frederica: “Now, Garf has acknowledged Magicreation Tools as an amazing achievement… but what if I told you that the Master’s own Mathers family was involved in the creation of Magicreation Tools?”

Garfiel: “…”

Frederica: “Oh, my dear, what a grim face… it is not the Master’s achievement but his father’s, you know?”

Garfiel: “Don’t talk to me ‘bout anythin’ dealin’ with that bastard Roswaal.”

Having been explained plainly, Frederica’s shoulders slumped. It was a failure.

However, no matter how much Garfiel disliked Roswaal, the fact remained that the key to the city’s success lay with his predecessor, Roswaal K. Mathers. The Mathers family was instrumental in developing the Industrial City of Costuul, which had been why their main mansion was near Costuul.

Regardless—

Frederica: “Garf, the factory I talked about, how about a tour?”

Garfiel: “—! Are ya sure? No, but Magicreation Tools are that bastard’s creation… no, but it doesn’t matter!”

When confronted with a factory producing Magicreation Tools of various sizes, Garfiel overrode his hesitation. Without further ado, he tried to run into the factory at a brisk pace, but Garfiel stopped himself just before he started.

Frederica tilted her head when her brother suddenly stopped,

Garfiel: “…Sis, are ya okay with this? My amazin’ self is the only one who’s gonna be havin’ fun, ya know?”

Frederica: “—. It is okay. We will have many opportunities to come to Costuul, and a date is something that is mutually considerate… and just now, you were considerate of me.”

Garfiel: “Tsk, I dunno ‘bout that, but… well, let’s go!”

With only a moment’s hesitation, Garfiel rushed into the factory, full of energy.

Surely, he would indulge in his first visit to Costuul by asking questions of the staff with that same passion.

Seeing off her energetic brother, Frederica walked over to the fence outside the factory and pulled off her right boot while resting her weight on the fence.

She had a new pair of boots for the date, causing her foot to chafe slightly.

Frederica: “It is not as bad as I thought it would be. This is…”

???: “—Oi, oi, that’s amazing. I can’t believe such a beautiful lady is so freely exposing her bare feet.”

While feeling relieved that the wound was not as bad as she had feared, Frederica stiffened her expression. She adjusted the hem of her skirt, which she had rolled up slightly to check her foot, and looked in the direction where the voice had come from.

Thereupon was a tall, strong, wild-looking man with dark blond, slicked-back hair. He stroked his well-groomed beard around his mouth with his fingers and smiled, baring his sharp teeth.

???: “Sometimes instead of leaving it up to others, ya gotta stretch yer legs yerself. Right?”

Frederica: “You are a very ill-mannered gentleman. If you ask me to agree with you, I have nothing to say to you.”

???: “What a very elegant way to speak. Ah, I know, I know. The first thing ya do is embellish where ya can be seen and heard, a rudimentary means of disguising yerself.”

Frederica could not ignore the man’s friendly attitude as he approached her. The reason was because some of the man’s words were on point.

The first thing she learned when she left the forest was how she spoke and appeared—.

Frederica: “Just who are you?”

???: “Me? I’m Hayden Garo.”

Frederica: “…”

Hayden: “I know, I know! It’s not my name you wanna hear. Right? But then again, even if I didn’t, I’m sure yer blood does, kinsman.”

The man added so with a laugh and grin—Frederica fell silent at the last part of Hayden Garo’s words.

When Frederica was informed of the man’s identity, she knew what he was.

Frederica: “So you are Halfbeast, just like me.”

Hayden: “Quite rare, ain’t it? To run into someone else like ya outside of yer own hometown. We’re the kind of creatures who cannot even recognize each other if it weren't for something else."

Frederica: "…I dislike being lumped in with you with how you say creatures."

Unable to regain her elegant expression, Frederica only refuted Hayden's way of speaking.

Halfbeasts were beastmen with more human-like characteristics than other demi-human species. Despite their physical abilities and beastman-like characteristics, they were almost indistinguishable from the human race in their normal appearance.

Frederica and Garfiel were also indistinguishable from others, apart from their fangs. And it was the same for Hayden in front of her.

Frederica: "You have fewer distinctive features than we do."

Hayden: "Yeah, I've got sharp fangs, that's all. And the rest is the sex appeal overflowing from my entire body that attracts females."

Frederica: "In the roughly twenty years since I was born, I never knew I was not a woman."

Hayden: "You're saying that! But hey, I think I like you."

When Frederica turned her head away from Hayden's poor character, he was in a good mood for some reason. He stood in front of Frederica and pulled her shoulders up to him.

Frederica, still with one boot off, was unexpectedly held close to his chest.

Frederica: "—Hic, how rude! Let go of me!"

Hayden: "You're really tall when ya stand up. Ya got nice breasts and a shapely waist. You're a woman I'm liking more and more."

Frederica: "You…!"

Her anger peaked at the scrutinizing gaze, and Frederica's hand mercilessly slapped Hayden's cheek.

Hayden turned his head away as if his neck had been snapped, and as he slowly turned his head back,

Hayden: “I like yer strong spirit. I’ll take ya as my future queen.”

Frederica: “What are…”

Hayden: “The future queen of the country I’m building must be a strong and beautiful female.”

With that, the color of Hayden’s eyes turned bright red. Frederica felt the hairs on her body stand on end, and she almost instinctively turned into a beast.

It was not the sex appeal that Hayden spoke of, but a sense of danger in response to a threat that appealed to the instincts of all living things—

???: “—Get away from Sis, ya fuckin’ bastard!!”

Immediately afterwards, instead of the frozen Frederica, a powerful arm was unleashed on the detestable man.

It was a youthful indiscretion, a blow not tempered with the slightest restraint. Garfiel, who had no experience in the outside world, did not hesitate to deliver a blow that would have turned an ordinary man into minced meat.

Even if it was to protect Frederica, it would be a serious matter if the other person died. The date would be ruined, and Garfiel’s reluctance to go out in the outside world would accelerate.

However, that did not happen.

Hayden: “Oh, you’re a feisty brat. If it weren’t me, that would’ve been dangerous.”

Saying that, Hayden grinned through his teeth as he waved his arm. He was forced backwards from his original position, and Frederica escaped from his arms and was now in Garfiel’s arms.

At Frederica’s sudden gasp, Garfiel wrinkled his nose at his sister, Garfiel: “Sis, what’s with that grinnin’ bastard; you’ve got terrible taste in men.”

Frederica: “G-Garf, I do not want to hear that from you! …No, it is thoughtless to try to compare Ram with this person. I apologize. And, thank you.”

Garfiel: “I ain’t sure what’cha mean, but for now, let’s put that aside…”

Garfiel glared at Hayden, his eyes growing even sharper. In his wariness, Hayden clapped his hands in front of his chest, making a dry sound, and said,

Hayden: “You’re also a Halfbeast? But from what I can tell, ya have ordinary blood. Are ya really that woman’s brother?”

Garfiel: “Talkin’ ‘bout ordinary when my amazin’ self is here. Ya can’t be thinkin’ the reason why my amazin’ self and Sis are blood relatives is because of our height, can ya? If that’s the case, it’s Sis’s fault.”

Hayden: “Ha ha ha ha, no, no. It’s like I said. —Ya got ordinary blood.”

As Hayden said this, he glared at Garfiel, and suddenly his wrist gushed blood.

The ensuing hemorrhaging caused Frederica to shout “Garf!”. However, Garfiel, with a calm expression on his face, held the wound and cast his healing magic,

Garfiel: “Nothin’ to worry about, Sis. It ain’t a big deal. I just got caught on the bastard when I punched him.”

Calmly, Garfiel licked the healed wound with his tongue. However, his whole body was overflowing with a fiery fighting spirit, and his anger at Hayden for offending his sister and attacking him was enough.

Hayden seemed to sense this and shook his head, saying, “Oi, oi.”, Hayden: “Oh man, I was just saying hello. I didn’t mean to start a fight.”

Garfiel: “Don’t say somethin’ so pathetic after all that. Stay ‘n have fun with my amazin’ self til ya get yer nose smashed in. “Sundown is Dildane’s start”, isn’t it?”

Hayden: “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather be asked out by your sister. So—”

Hayden spoke flippantly and snapped the fingers of both hands.

For a moment, Frederica and Garfiel grimaced at the fact that nothing happened, but then, just after Hayden “chuckled” at their combined reaction.

—Suddenly, there had been a roar from the factory behind them, and the screams of the staff were heard.

Garfiel: “—Hic, what the!”

Hayden: “Well, what is it? You’ll never know if ya keep staring at me.”

Hayden scoffed at Garfiel’s reaction to the unusual situation at the factory. Angered by Hayden’s behavior, Frederica yelled, “You…!”.

However, Hayden took a big leap backward, and—

Hayden: “See ya. We’ll meet again, my future Queen.”

The figure disappeared from Frederica’s sight after uttering a self-serving, hair-raising statement. The scent of self-confidence he wore also faded away. It seemed he was not lying when he retreated.

As soon as Frederica’s nose detected this, she called out “Garf!” to her brother.

Garfiel: “Oh, I got it!”

Before she could say anything, quickly, Garfiel’s howling body rushed into the factory, and Frederica hurried after her brother to see what was causing the commotion at the Magicreation Tool factory.

And then, she saw it. —One of the Magicreation Tools was running amok, covered in a sparkling light.

Frederica: “That is…”

Doubting her eyes, Frederica was surrounded by a green and yellow glow from the Magicreation Tool for pressing metal.

It was a Magicreation Tool, which was used to mold metal between two steel plates, one above and one below the material; this was a relatively common sight in Costuul, but she had never seen one that shined so brilliantly.

And even more so, the sight of it moving autonomously and trying to destroy humans and other Magicreation Tools.

Frederica: “—! This is not good!”

For a moment, Frederica was shocked, then, kicking off the ground, she saved a worker who was on the verge of being pinned under a piece of material knocked down by the rampaging Magicreation Tool, barely preventing the damage from spreading.

And then, before anyone else could get caught up in it—

Garfiel: “Quit yer actin’ up ‘n bein’ all sparkly—!”

The two arms of the howling Garfiel were driven forcefully into the structure of the Magicreation Tool, breaking and splitting it apart as they twist between the steel plates that moved up and down. The decisive sound of steel being torn to shreds echoed through the air, and as the built-in magic stone cracked and mana erupted from the impact, light surged forth from it.

It moved like a winged insect drawn to a fire, all concentrated in one place.

Garfiel: “Turn the fuck off!”

A moment later, a fist slammed into the magic stone that was attracting the light, and it shattered with a high-pitched sound.

When the magic stone, a crystal of dense mana, shattered, its fragments scattered into the air as mana dust, and the light that caused the Magicreation Tool to go haywire also disappeared with it.

There was nothing left behind, not even a trace of the light that had wrapped the Magicreation Tool.

Frederica: “Garf, you did a great job. Thanks to you, no one was injured…”

Garfiel: “Yeah, looks like it… but.”

Frederica: “—?”

After giving Garfiel a pat on the shoulder for stopping the damage, Frederica raised an eyebrow at her brother’s somewhat despondent voice.

Frederica wondered why he sounded so subdued, and he said,

Garfiel: “…It was a huge, cool Magicreation Tool, but then it got brutally destroyed.”

The big, angular thing-lover said, looking down with sadness at the broken Magicreation Tool.

4

???: “—I looked into the situation. It is consistent with the testimony of the staff. Their well-being is irreplaceable. You are not responsible for the damage to the factory’s equipment.”

Frederica: “Thank you for saying that… Um, are you sure you are not upset?”

???: “Puzzling, why have such a need for validation?”

When Frederica received a questioning look, she declined to answer, reluctantly saying, “No.”.

Although Frederica knew it was impolite to stare at someone’s face, this man’s expression did not change even once from the moment Frederica and Garfiel entered the room until the end of them telling the story of what had happened. It was a quality of a politician not to let one’s expression be read, but the Mayor of Costuul, Leno Rex, was too thorough.

—Currently, Frederica and Garfiel had interrupted their date to visit the Industrial City’s City Hall to report on the unusual events that had occurred at the Magicreation Tool factory.

She had just finished reporting the incident that took place there and explained the circumstances surrounding the destruction of the Magicreation Tool.

It was a very strange event. After all, the light that surrounded the Magicreation Tool was—

Leno: “They are called “Lightbugs” in this city.”

Garfiel: “Oh? Ya knew it had a name, Pops… ouch!”

Frederica: “Do not be disrespectful! My apologies, Mayor. My brother has only recently moved from the countryside and has difficulty speaking…”

Leno: “No matter. I value the ability to save the people of the city more than etiquette.”

Garfiel: “Oh, Pops, you’re bein’ sensible, aren’t’cha? Sis worries too much… ouch!”

Frederica sighed as she pinched the unrepentant Garfiel in the side. Then, to resume the interrupted topic, she prefaced it with a “So”,

Frederica: “You mentioned Lightbugs? What are they?”

Leno: “They are a phenomenon unique to this city, so to speak. They have had many sightings near factories that use Magicreation Tools, and it has been confirmed that they are attuned to magic stones. It is speculated that magic stones, which are used to power the Magicreation Tool and the mana residue from the magic stones, may have bonded with some kind of Micro Spirits."

Frederica: "…Indeed, that light certainly gave the impression that it might have been closer to a Micro Spirit."

Frederica nodded quietly, finding Leno's speculation convincing.

Since Emilia, a Spiritual Arts User, lived in the mansion, she routinely interacted with the Micro Spirits around her every morning and evening. Frederica had many opportunities to see this. The appearance of the Micro Spirits flying around Emilia seemed to be similar to that of the Lightbugs in the city.

But—

Garfiel: "It's a lil' dangerous for Lightbug to be doin' such mischief, isn't it?"

Leno: "—. In fact, this is a new problem that Costuul has had in recent months."

Frederica: "A new problem, is it?"

No matter the city-specific nature of the phenomenon, its dangers were just as Frederica and Garfiel had witnessed earlier. However, Leno said it was not an old problem, but one that had arisen in the last few months.

At Frederica's and Garfiel's glances, Leno tucked in his chin in a small way, and,

Leno: "As mentioned previously, the Lightbugs' presence has been confirmed in the city for some time. However, there was a consensus that they were harmless, as they were only seen alongside the Magicreation Tools. In recent months, the Magicreation Tools have been observed to be malfunctioning and behaving abnormally, and there have been reports of the Lightbugs's unusual behavior as well."

Frederica: "Then, the Lightbug was causing the Magicreation Tool to behave abnormally?”

Leno: “It was being verified. But, what you witnessed confirms it.”

When Leno replied, he shook his chiselled face with thin eyebrows gently to the side.

Leno: “While it would have been preferable if we could have dealt with the problem within the city, however, the priority of dealing with the damage is more important than determining the cause of the problem. I will be requesting assistance from Margrave Mathers as soon as possible.”

Garfiel: “Huh? Why d’ya need that bastard Roswaal’s help?”

Frederica: “Garf, this city is part of the Master’s territory as the Margrave of the West. It is only natural for a lord to address any problems that arise in his domain.”

As she explained the situation to Garfiel, Frederica was impressed by Leno’s sound judgement.

It had been the right decision for the Mayor to try to resolve the situation internally and turn to the lord immediately if he found it difficult to do so. And if the person he relied on were Roswaal, the decision would be sound.

There was no one better than Roswaal when it came to managing the affairs of a lord, as long as he was not being devious.

Frederica: “So I understand that you dislike the Master, but…”

Garfiel: “That ain’t it. My amazin’ self not likin’ the bastard ‘n what I’m sayin’ now are two different things. Surely ya know that, Sis? I’m talkin’ ‘bout the bastard who made Lightbug or whatever it was go nuts.”

Frederica: “That Lightbug was made to misbehave… oh.”

Frederica’s emerald-green eyes blinked in surprise when Garfiel frowned at her.

She was so preoccupied with reporting about the Magicreation Tool going haywire at the factory, and the Lightbug that caused it, that she missed Garfiel's point about the rude man—Hayden Garo, just prior to the incident.

Naturally, Leno, who had never heard of this before, responded with, "What do you mean.".

Leno: "Do you have an idea what caused the Lightbug to cause the Magicreation Tool to go out of control?"

Frederica: "Y-Yes. However, we are not sure of the exact method…"

Garfiel: "I know the bastard that did it. He's a big, ugly Halfbeast. As soon as the bastard snapped his fingers, it caused the commotion at the factory. He's got the Lightbugs under his control somehow. It's like "The giant rat dancing to Dokost's flute."."

Leno: "I find that difficult to believe at this point."

From Leno's point of view, he had been handed information that was beyond common sense. Frederica called out to him, "Mayor" despite the fact that he did not change his facial expression but only changed his tone of voice.

Frederica: "Earlier, you speculated that the Lightbugs are similar to Micro Spirits. If so, a Spiritual Arts User should be able to communicate with a Micro Spirit and make a contract with them to use them…"

Leno: "It would not be surprising if there were someone who could communicate with Lightbugs and manipulate their workings, yes?"

Leno was receptive to Frederica's speculation, and he arrived at the same concern.

Even though the specific nature and identity of Lightbugs were unknown, if the possibility surfaced, it could be considered by following the precedent. There was a good chance that the man Hayden had been controlling the Lightbug.

Frederica: "In addition to consulting with the Master about how to deal with the Lightbugs, I think we should also follow that man… Hayden Garo. I do not mean to be presumptuous, but my brother and I can track him down using our noses to some extent.”

Leno: “Well, the Margrave is the “Demi-Human Lover”.”

Frederica: “I would like to deny that moniker for the sake of the Master’s honor, but…”

Frederica was somewhat uncomfortable being convinced by the misguided assessment of Roswaal because she had better senses than the average person.

Regardless, it seemed that Leno had given due consideration to the abilities of Frederica and Garfiel and the possibility of Hayden Garo’s involvement in the incident.

Frederica “Let us move quickly, Garf. Unfortunately, our date today ends here…”

Garfiel: “…”

Frederica: “Garf?”

When there was no response to her call, Frederica turned to Garfiel and addressed him. However, her brother did not respond and remained still, his gaze fixed on the window of the room.

And then, when the silent Garfiel snorted weakly—

Garfiel: “—Get down!”

Immediately after, Garfiel’s outstretched arm grabbed Frederica and Leno’s clothes and pulled them down. Frederica almost screamed as she was pulled down forcefully to the ground. —No, she may have actually screamed, but no one, not even herself, heard it.

The next moment, something crashed with great force into the wall of the top floor of City Hall.

Frederica: “…”

Tossed by an impact that seemed to turn the world upside down, the room's desks, shelves, and sofa on which Frederica and the others were sitting were blown away, and collected at the far end of the room.

Among all of it, Frederica and the others had also been tossed to the far end of the room. There, they sat up, looked at the wall to see what had happened, and were stunned.

There was a large hole in the wall, through which one could see a panoramic view of the Industrial City. Moreover, in that panoramic view, a huge construction Magicreation Tool was clad in a pale light.

The Magicreation Tool, a type of beast carriage with a ladder for transporting construction materials to high places, crashed into the City Hall at a tremendous speed while carrying a large amount of building materials.

Of course, this could not be a natural phenomenon—

Garfiel: "That bastard set this up…"

When Garfiel had sensed the attack at the last minute, he howled, his fangs twitching in anger. The target of his anger would be the unseen Hayden, but the venting of his rage would have to wait.

The slowly descending Magicreation Tool for working at heights approached, accelerating once more.

There was no telling if City Hall would collapse if that thing hit it again.

Frederica: "Leno-sama! How many people are in City Hall?!"

Leno: "—. Twelve people, including family members of staff."

Leno understood the meaning of Frederica's question and answered it instantly.

In response, Frederica sharply shouted, calling "Garf!" to her brother.

Frederica: “Please break a hole in the floor! I am going out!”

Garfiel: “Don’t screw up, Sis—!”

Garfiel barked and instantly stomped the floor, and at the same time, Frederica jumped to Leno, dropped to one knee, picked him up by his large frame, and pushed him back against the window opposite the side where the Magicreation Tool was closing in.

With a high-pitched crash, Frederica smashed through the window and escaped out of the building with Leno.

Leno: “…”

Even in this predicament, Leno’s tenacity to not let out a single scream was remarkable.

City Hall was a six-story building with the Mayor’s office on the top floor. Frederica could have easily landed at this height if she were alone. However, with a person in her arms, even she could not land easily, and an ordinary person would fall to their death.

Kicking the exterior wall to kill their momentum, Frederica, while holding Leno, managed to land on the ground—just as the Magicreation Tool struck for a second time, shaking City Hall, causing the building to tilt with a roar.

Frederica: “Garf! The back of the building!!”

Frederica shouted aloud, forgetting her modesty in the moment. Her voice had to be heard by Garfiel over the thunderous roar. The results were immediate.

Windows from the fifth floor down of City Hall were shattered in a single motion, and the staff inside were thrown out one by one.

The staff, their faces turning pale, panic-stricken in mid-air, landed over the heads of Frederica and Leno into the reservoir behind the city hall behind them.

Leno: “Someone lend some assistance! I am going to rescue those who fell into the water!”

After hearing the continuous sounds of water, Leno, having left Frederica's arms, immediately gave instructions.

Immediately, people who heard the noise gathered together, rushing in, panting for breath, and began rescuing the employees who had been thrown into the reservoir. Meanwhile, the collapse of City Hall continued—

Frederica: "—The Magicreation Tool."

It had to be stopped. Frederica ran and grabbed onto the Magicreation Tool, which had lowered for the third time to get into position. Jumping onto the beast carriage with a long vertical passenger compartment, she saw the Lightbug up close, as it forced the Magicreation Tool to move, which it was not supposed to be able to.

It looked more and more like a Micro Spirit, and Frederica's fangs clicked as she destroyed the magic stone that was embedded as the power source, cracking the magic stone inside and causing the Lightbug to dissipate.

Instantly, as if it had died, the Magicreation Tool's suspicious behavior stopped.

Upon seeing this, Frederica leaned out of the Magicreation Tool and looked at City Hall—

Garfiel: "—Bha!"

City Hall collapsed even without further damage, and Garfiel burst through the plume of the rising smoke. With one person in his right hand, one in his left, one on his back, and one in his mouth.

Together with the eight staff members who were thrown into the water, this was all twelve people Leno indicated.

Frederica: "Garf, grew up strong…"

A feeling of relief spread slowly through Frederica's mind as she patted her chest in relief.

Of course, Garfiel's abilities were duly seen the night they were reunited, when he rescued Frederica from the clutches of an assassin. But that was not exactly the case.

Not only did her brother have the power to fight someone, but he also had the power to save someone.

Frederica: "Grandmother, you really did a great job raising Garf."

A sense of pride filled her heart with gratitude for how her little brother had grown up and for Ryuzu for raising him so well.

With that firmly in mind, she decided to join up with Garfiel and the others—

???: "—Oh, that's quite the accomplishment. It's amazing that ya didn't let a single inferior get killed."

Suddenly, at that whisper in her ear, Frederica's entire body swelled all at once.

The clothes Petra had chosen swelled as Frederica's arms, legs, and torso threatened to tear them from the inside out, while golden fur threatened to cover her white skin.

However, the man who appeared, Hayden Garo, was faster with his strike.

Hayden: "My future Queen, if you're going to undress, I should do it with my own hands in the bedroom."

Hayden's fist, delivered with a vicious remark, pierced Frederica's midsection. Frederica cried out in pain, and her knees went weak as the impact went through her spine and shook her insides.

Her body crumpled, then was humiliatingly supported by Hayden, as her consciousness faded away.

With that done to Frederica—

Hayden: "My plans have gone a little awry, but it can't be helped if I'm to welcome my future Queen. —Now, with yer blood and mine, we shall exterminate the inferiors and build a new nation.”

The euphoric proclamation of Hayden, was left unheard by Frederica.

However, at the edge of her fading consciousness, Frederica could only think of one thing—the strong sense of remorse she felt at being separated from Garfiel once again.

5

Leno: “Garfiel-dono, are you all right? Are you injured?”

Garfiel: “Ach, puh! Who d’ya think my amazin’ self is? Don’t worry. Well, I was afraid for a moment that I wouldn’t be able to get everyone out in time.”

Garfiel spat out the gravel in his mouth and replied to Leno, who ran up to him.

Having finally set the four who escaped with him down on the ground and thanked him for getting them out, they were taken away for medical attention, and Garfiel finally took a breath.

Leno: “My thanks to you as well. You did a fantastic job of getting everyone out.”

Garfiel: “Ha, I guess it’s only natural that my amazin’ self can handle it. It looks like Sis… also did well.”

Garfiel snorted at a grateful Leno and looked at the Magicreation Tool, which had ceased to run amok.

Beyond the debris of the collapsed building, there was a halted Magicreation Tool that had lost its light, and as Garfiel moved to save lives, Frederica must have turned off the Lightbug that was causing the problem.

—No, the real cause was not the Lightbug,

Garfiel: “It was Hayden Garo, that fuckin’ bastard…”

Leno: “That person is connected to the Lightbug’s outburst? This collapse is no coincidence, then.”

Garfiel: “After the trouble at the factory, he must’ve followed us. And when he found out we were talkin’ to ya, he wanted to keep us quiet…”

And, when Garfiel thought that much, his eyes widened slightly.

Leno asked Garfiel, “What is wrong?”, but he did not respond. With narrowed emerald eyes, Garfiel turned around and stared at the stopped Magicreation Tool.

There was no sign of Frederica anywhere around the Magicreation Tool.

Garfiel: “That… Fuckin’ bastard…!”

Instantly, he knew that Hayden Garo had kidnapped Frederica. The attack on City Hall was a diversion, and his true objective was Frederica.

As a result, he was caught up in the enemy’s schemes and was unable to protect Frederica.

Leno: “Garfiel-dono, Miss Frederica couldn’t have been…”

From Garfiel’s gaze and expression, Leno also understood what had happened to Frederica. With a “Yeah.”, Garfiel answered his question with a nod of frustration.

He painfully realized his own inadequacies, but would let himself be beaten down by them later.

Garfiel: “My first priority is to get Sis back. Everythin’ else is—”

He was about to leave the cleanup of City Hall to others, but things took a turn for the worse.

Before Garfiel could finish, a roar echoed in the distance. In a chain reaction, not once, but two and three times, each from a different direction, one after the other.

Garfiel: “…”

Garfiel’s eyes widened in shock, and he looked in the direction from which the sound had come. A plume of smoke rising upwards, perhaps fire, whatever sign of disaster it was made all the hairs on his body stand on end.

What conclusively revealed its nature was the pale light visible at the source of every sound—shimmering, dangerous lights that accompanied the Lightbug-attached Magicreation Tools.

New disasters caused by Lightbugs occurred simultaneously in various parts of the city. It seemed to be Hayden’s plan to ridicule Garfiel, now that his sister had been taken away from him.

Garfiel: “You’re kiddin’ me… Ya gotta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me, Hayden Garo—!!”

Garfiel’s vision turned red with rage, and he gathered strength in his legs. The ground cracked as he stepped on it, and the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits drew forth its energy in response to his anger.

How great would it be if all that energy could be directed toward Hayden? How great would it be if he could get his sister back right after she was taken?

With such a longing that made his heart crack, Garfiel stepped forward.

—Instead of the road that led to his sister, his fangs creaked as he turned to the now-raging Lightbugs.

6

???: “—The loss of the Demi-Human War is the primary reason why the inferiors have been allowed to prosper.”

???: “…”

???: “I find it also aggravating that people are calling it Lugunica’s civil war, as if everything outside of the Kingdom’s a sideshow. But there were countless sparks everywhere. There was room for the flames to spread so much further."

As the man continued speaking in an endless stream of words, the sound of steel rubbing against steel could be heard in his hand.

It was a harsh sound, the sound of a small file sharpening a sharp nail. —Hayden Garo, a man who meticulously filed his nails, finished filing the nails on his left five toes with a practiced hand.

Hayden raised his well-groomed hand and peered through the gaps between his fingers. His theatrical manner caused Frederica to let out a long breath, and,

Frederica: "Um, do you mind?"

Hayden: "Yeah? What is it?"

Frederica: "If this is going to take long, may I go to bed? I had a hard time sleeping last night. I was looking forward to today before this happened."

Hayden: "—. Kuku, ha ha ha ha ha!"

There was a momentary lull in Frederica's words, which was quickly filled with laughter.

Hayden laughed with his mouth wide open. Frederica winced in disgust as she heard his laughter reverberate—her chained arms raising a lifeless sound.

Hayden: "Oi oi, don't hurt yerself needlessly. Blemishes are unbefitting of a Queen."

Frederica: "You knocked me out and then brought me here, now you dare do as you please…"

Hayden: "I treated ya gently. I took care not to put a scratch on ya… although I don't deny that I had to use a strong hit if I didn't wanna make any mistakes."

Having said that, Hayden walked up, grabbed Frederica by the chin, and made her look up.

Glaring directly into Hayden's close-up face, Frederica's expression contorted in disgust. The sight of Frederica, having brought a smile to Hayden's well-groomed, bearded face,

Hayden: "You don't have to be submissive. A female who keeps her high spirits is worthy of my country."

Frederica: "Country, country, country… what exactly are you intending to do? Do not tell me you are seriously planning to establish your own country?"

Hayden: "If I said yes, would ya sneer at my dream?"

Frederica: "…"

Frederica kept quiet as Hayden asked in a slightly hushed tone of voice.

Of course, he was delusional, but if she thoughtlessly said it out loud, the hand on her chin would crush her careless mouth. She was convinced of this.

At Frederica's silence, Hayden narrowed his eyes and said, "Good girl.",

Hayden: "Beautiful, headstrong, and discerning. These are the reasons other than blood why I can't take my eyes off you."

Then, he took his hand off Frederica's chin and proceeded to run his fingers through her long blonde hair instead, kissing it as if he were truly in love with it.

Though her disgust rose at the act, Frederica only turned her face away in order to express her mind, instead turning her attention beyond Hayden and to her surroundings.

The place where Frederica was taken after being knocked out by Hayden—it was a rocky space where the air was cold, and the only light source was a weak, blue-white light. The heaviness and dampness of the air and the reverberation of sound made it clear that this was a place like the inside of a proper cave.

Frederica was chained to a cold wall of rock and restrained in a standing position, but judging from the time she had been unconscious, she was not far from Costuul—.

???: “Hayden-kun, how is the Lass doing?”

Frederica: “—Hic.”

When Frederica looked around, her shoulders jumped at the sound of a sudden voice from a third party.

Hayden’s smile deepened as he let go of Frederica’s hair, after she unconsciously reacted and made the chains clank. Then he turned around and greeted the figure slowly approaching behind him.

Hayden: “Oh, our future Queen is in good condition, Doc. No matter how good the quality of her blood is, if she is weak and ugly, no one will be willing to worship her.”

???: “I was not asking about appearance. Do you think it’s my nature to obsess over that?”

Hayden: “Oi, oi, don’t be so demeaning. Sure, you’re ugly, but the presence of ugly things highlights the presence of beautiful things. Besides, it’s much better than being an inferior.”

Hayden shrugged his shoulders, and the person with whom he exchanged words slowly came into the light.

It was a gray-haired man with a morbidly pale, scrawny, skin and bones body. His dry skin and lifeless hair gave an eerie impression of a moving corpse, but this impression was belied by his eyes that held a glistening, sinister gleam.

Both by intuition and by Frederica’s rule of thumb, people with that look in their eyes were not sane.

And sure enough, as the man stood in front of the strung-up Frederica, his eyes shone brighter and brighter,

???: “But I understand your feelings, Hayden-kun. At last, another bearer of the lovely “rare blood” has appeared before my eyes!”

Frederica: “—Rare blood.”

Frederica reflected on the man’s words, his voice betraying his excitement.

She was not reflecting on what was said, because she had absolutely no idea what was being said. —It was just the opposite.

Frederica knew of rare blood, and she had been aware that she possessed it. She also knew that the special blood that flowed within her was partly the reason she was allowed to serve outside the Sanctuary and taken in by Roswaal.

???: “Of course, you are aware of your own blood, aren’t you? That your own blood is special and different from the blood of others. Its mana content, taste, and effects are different when consumed by a blood-sucking kind. Did you know that? If you take other people’s blood, it becomes poison, but rare blood is not like that; it’s mysterious blood!”

Frederica: “…I was not aware of that. Some of that information I did not want to know.”

With no offense meant to the insistent man, she did not want to imagine the possibility of someone consuming her blood. Even if they said it tasted good and was full of power, she would not necessarily be happy about it.

Of course, Frederica was grateful for her mother, who gave birth to her as she was, and although she had mixed feelings about her father, who had made her mother suffer, she was grateful for the chance to be born.

It was also noted that Frederica’s status as a Halfbeast was an important part of her destiny that she lived with.

Ryuzu: “Fuu, don’t curse your birth. Nothing would make us happier than for young Fuu and Gar-bo not to have to live with the regrets we have lived with for so, so long.”

Frederica recalled Ryuzu's words to her when the Sanctuary was liberated and they were to live apart. To her words, Frederica replied, "Absolutely.".

Frederica: "However, I was never told that I would be courted by these gentlemen, Grandmother…"

Although she did not want to burden herself with her own birth or Ryuzu's words, she was indeed tempted to say that this situation may be too unfortunate.

???: "Good, excellent, I've longed for this. It's my long-awaited moment. You too are my, my, my, my…"

While Frederica's thoughts wandered, the man's eyes became all the more erratic. With fingers as thin as dead twigs, he pulled open the front of his cloak, exposing what was underneath.

At first, Frederica almost screamed at the unpleasant sight she imagined, but upon seeing what was actually under his cloak, her screams were subdued.

There were countless vials filled with a reddish-black liquid hanging inside.

???: "The blood samples of my soul. I am a researcher. My goal is to discover the hidden power of blood, unravel its mysteries, and thereby bring the world salvation."

Frederica: "The mysteries of blood and the salvation of the world…?"

???: "That's right! To unravel the mysteries of blood is tantamount to unravelling the secrets of life! Therefore, your blood, Lassy, will be a great help to move the world towards the future—"

The man approached Frederica, who was left speechless after having been told of his bizarre theory. At the man's approach, who was dominated by fiendish thoughts, Frederica felt an instinctive terror.

However—

Hayden: “Doc, that’s enough. I don’t want ya to intimidate my future Queen any further.”

Of all things, it was Hayden who grabbed the man’s face and saved the squirming Frederica.

Hayden grabbed the man by the mouth, and the man let out a pained yelp. However, Hayden’s expression hardened slightly as he tried to get the man to back down.

Hayden: “Tsk, Doc’s got some sticky fingers… no, they’re some sticky fangs.”

???: “Hyah, hyah, it’s wasteful! Et’s wastefel, Hayden-kun…!”

Hayden clicked his tongue and let go; blood dripped from the base of his thumb.

Apparently, the man’s teeth had hit him as he grabbed his face, which caused him to bleed. However, the man’s behavior was unusual. When Hayden’s blood dropped to the ground, the man fell onto his stomach and began to lick it up.

Again, it was an unusual behavior that made Frederica want to scream, but she could see the man’s mouth as he did so, and then it made sense to her.

Frederica: “Those fangs and that behavior of blood licking… a blood-sucking kind, you are a batperson, right?”

Frederica determined from the man’s obsession with blood that this was the man’s true identity. Then, looking at Hayden, she continued, “And.”,

Frederica: “I see that you, too, have rare blood.”

Hayden: “Ya really are a smart woman. It was worth taking the time to evaluate ya, Frederica.”

Frederica: “—Hic, my name.”

Hayden: “Of course, I know. Ya didn’t really think I was just gonna say that a woman I saw on a whim was gonna be my future Queen? That's the stuff of fairy tales and make-believe."

Frederica felt humiliated and, at the same time, understood that everything had been set up, as she was mocked by Hayden, who shrugged his shoulders, having said that today was no coincidence.

Everything from her encounter with Hayden at the factory, to the subsequent commotion and the collapse of City Hall.

Frederica: "So, all this commotion in Costuul is because of my rare blood?"

Hayden: "Oi, oi, don't talk as if yer only value is in yer blood. I'm interested in yer body, too. Well, you're right. The real reason for all the commotion was ya."

Frederica: "…How did you manage to manipulate the Lightbugs?"

Hayden: "That's the result of the research of the Blood Sample Collector, Doc Leonardo Baroness."

He licked the wound on his hand and admired the accomplishments of the man he looked down at, the man he called—Leonardo, who crawled at his feet.

Hayden: "I don't have a clue about it, but I've heard that some people in the world got a disposition that allows them to bring out the performance of magic stones better than others, and unlike a Divine Protection, the difference appears to reside in their blood… The Doc extracted that element and was able to manipulate the Lightbugs, which are born out of the used magic stones."

Leonardo: "If I am to say it, calling it a bug is a rather ignorant statement. It is an entity that serves as a deterrent for the world, so as to punish those who distort its laws…"

Hayden: "In short, they came to be because of the inferiors who created the Magicreation Tools. The people who created them in all of their hubris, getting attacked by the proof of their very sin. Delightful story, isn't it?"

Frederica: “With such a short story, there were two or three things that struck a nerve with me…”

Frederica grew angry at both Leonardo, who was licking the ground, and Hayden, who was sneering at her.

Hayden, who kept repeating “inferiors, inferiors” like a broken record, had already differed from Frederica in his ideology, calling himself a Halfbeast like Frederica and Garfiel and while apparently having some thoughts on the Demi-Human War and the Kingdom of Lugunica—

Frederica: “Us and humans are not in a competition for superiority. We are not the same, but I do not think of them as differences.”

Hayden: “…”

Frederica: “In fact, the human race made different discoveries from the demi-human races. Magic and tool-making skills, for example, even Costuul’s Magicreation Tools, are the results of their hard work…”

Hayden: “—Be quiet.”

Frederica tried to clearly state that she had a different opinion.

Hayden brought his face close to the tip of Frederica’s nose and spoke a short, clear command. The ominous energy that overflowed from his whole body immediately made Frederica’s instincts shudder.

It produced a more certain effect here than being grabbed by the chin and silenced by force.

Frederica: “…”

Holding her breath, Frederica swallowed her words. At the sight of Frederica, Hayden’s face turned serious, and after a pause, he broke his expression with, “Oi, oi”,

Hayden: “My bad. I’m just annoyed that you’re always talking outta turn. I like strong-willed women, but don’t like ill-tempered ones.”

Frederica: “What do you plan on doing to me, after all?”

Having seen that Hayden seemed to regain his composure, Frederica gave up the idea of talking to him.

Talking to someone unwilling to engage in discussion would only force a one-sided negative response. The only thing to do here was to look for an opportunity to escape while playing the role the other party wanted in this situation.

But Leonardo could not be allowed to drain all the blood out of her body before that—.

Hayden: “No need to worry. I won’t let ya get hurt. Once we’re ready to leave, we’ll go to my castle for a while.”

Frederica: “Castle…”

Hayden: “Oh, you’ll love it. —Oi, Doc! How long are ya going to keep licking the blood off the ground? I’m waiting for ya. Get this over with.”

After announcing his disheartening plan, Hayden grabbed Leonardo by the collar and made him stand up. Leonardo seemed to want to go back to the ground, but when Hayden kicked him on the butt and urged him to hurry up, he said, “All right, all right!”, and began to dismantle everything.

Once that was done, it seemed that Frederica would be welcomed into Hayden’s castle

Frederica: “…”

The strength of the chains was such that it was uncertain whether Frederica could break them even after transforming into a beast. Leaving that as a last resort, Frederica gathered her breath and waited for the opportune moment.

Frederica: “I will be certain to keep my promise to Grandmother…”

Frederica remembered the promise she had made to Ryuzu, strengthening her resolve.

Surely, Garfiel must have been struggling to find Frederica by now.

7

—And in the Industrial City, Garfiel struggled beyond Frederica's imagination.

Garfiel: "OOORAAAA—!!"

Garfiel kicked the street hard enough to leave footprints, and his body flew like an arrow into the Lightbug-clad Magicreation Tool—or rather, the Lightbug that was wielding the Magicreation Tool.

The Magicreation Tool in the factory and the one for elevated work that caused City Hall to collapse could be said to have been rendered haywire by a Lightbug, but this, however, was at a whole different level.

The Magicreation Tool, at its core, was designed to polish metal, but its function and structure were ignored by the Lightbug that clung to it, covering the entire thing and turning it into one gigantic monstrous Lightbug that rampaged about.

Garfiel's flying kick had pierced into the center of the monstrous Lightbug. There was resistance from the light for a moment, but the twist of his heel shattered it, smashing the Magicreation Tool itself.

The magic stone at the core of the Lightbug formation shattered, and the entirety of the monstrous Lightbug also dissipated.

Garfiel: "With this…"

Having just destroyed his tenth monstrous Lightbug, Garfiel was ready for a breather.

However, Garfiel was not allowed to rest on his laurels, as Magicreation Tools began to go haywire in other parts of the city in rapid succession, which spawned new monstrous Lightbugs and caused more and more damage.

Garfiel: "—Hic."

Magicreation Tools were the backbone of the manufacturing power of the Industrial City of Costuul. As such, they could be found throughout the city. Since the Magicreation Tools were triggered one after another by the Lightbugs, it was as if the sparks had been scattered throughout the city in advance.

Garfiel: “Shit, no matter how many times I smash ‘em, they keep on comin’…!”

Garfiel grit his teeth as the city guards also rushed around under Leno’s command, but they were not entirely up to the task.

Ultimately, it was a situation where Garfiel’s defenses were indispensable.

Garfiel: “Sis…”

There was a slow-burning sensation in his heart, and Garfiel’s spirit was driven to the edge.

He would like to rescue his distressed sister as soon as possible, but if Garfiel were to leave an opening , what flowed through would wash away the fates of many people.

If he devoted all his energy to prevent that, Frederica would grow further and further away.

The inescapable conflict between the two was mercilessly chipping away at Garfiel’s inexperienced soul—

Garfiel: “Bring it on, this ain’t nothing—!”

Despite the uneasiness in his heart, Garfiel’s body moved wildly.

The moment the newly emerged monstrous Lightbug poked its head out, he accurately hit only the magic stone part of the Magicreation Tool with his fist, without any unnecessary moves. Right after, as if to get back at another monstrous Lightbug which made a Magicreation Tool howl somewhere else he jumped, hitting it with a spinning kick and silencing the next enemy as well.

If he wanted to rush to his sister’s side just one second sooner, he would have to silence as many monstrous Lightbugs as possible. To do so, he went for the location of the next Lightbug—

Garfiel: "—Ah?"

Just as he was about to leap out, Garfiel felt a growing presence behind him on the nape of his neck.

However, that was impossible. It was from where the first of the two Lightbugs that had just been destroyed in succession had appeared. Garfiel's emerald-green eyes widened as he turned around to see if there were any more of them.

The monstrous Lightbug was supposed to have been defeated. However, its light surrounded two Magicreation Tools—by absorbing multiple Magicreation Tools, it had increased its critical points to two, and he had failed to defeat one of them.

One of them jerked wildly, and a part of the monstrous Lightbug's body began to glow intensely. He could see the mana concentrated at that one point, a sign that an attack was about to be unleashed beyond his reach.

Garfiel: "Wait—"

He extended his hand, and tried to jump to get in the way, but would not make it in time.

Then, before Garfiel's eyes, the monstrous Lightbug's attack was be unleashed to set the city ablaze as if to ridicule Garfiel's arrogance —

???: "—Pardon the assistance. Just a moment."

The moment he heard that voice, the body of the monstrous Lightbug that was about to release the light disappeared suddenly.

The space where the monstrous Lightbug's body used to be literally disappeared, and the mana it had accumulated and its bizarre body also disappeared. Naturally, the monstrous Lightbug's core, the Magicreation Tool, was gouged out, it could not maintain itself, and became particles of light that dissipated into thin air.

Garfiel: “Wha…”

An extreme amount of confusion struck Garfiel as he wondered what had happened.

The confusion stopped Garfiel in his tracks, and unhindered by his interference, malice was about to blossom elsewhere. But that, too, was stopped just in time.

When the Lightbug, which was about to become massive using a Magicreation Tool as a catalyst, was frozen whole.

???: “Thank goodness! It looks like we made it in time!”

A flying figure landed nimbly right on top of the now-frozen pillar that used to be the monstrous Lightbug. With long silver hair that danced in the air, it was a half-elf who patted her chest in relief—Emilia.

Garfiel’s eyes widened at her appearance as a member of her camp and its leader.

Garfiel: “E-Emilia, sama… Why’re ya here?”

Emilia: “Why? I was in the mansion when I heard a reaaally loud noise coming from the city. There seemed to be a lot of smoke, so I rushed over.”

Garfiel: “Rushed over…”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. I’m sure everyone else is on their way too, but the first ones to get here were me and…”

???: “—It appears there is only me. Accompaniment.”

A calm voice overtook Emilia’s words, and Garfiel turned in a panic. Then, his eyes met those of a composed-looking young man standing behind him.

A thin, wire-like impression clad in a black butler’s uniform with a monocle over his left eye—this person had taken care of them a month ago, before and after they moved into the current mansion.

Garfiel: “I think ya were at Roswaal’s relative’s, the lil’ pipsqueak’s place…”

???: “It is an honor to be remembered. As you said, I serve the young Annerose-sama. I am Clind. Re-introduction.”

Garfiel: “Why’re ya, a third party, even with Emilia-sama?”

Clind: “I was just visiting the mansion on business and happened to come across this situation. Coincidence. So, I joined Emilia-sama for support. Limited help.”

The young man politely bent at the waist and bowed—Garfiel let out a ragged breath at Clind’s words.

If it was Clind who caused the strange phenomenon that erased the monstrous Lightbug just before, his help would be more than a little help, and it would not be a coincidence, but good luck.

Then, Emilia jumped off the pillar of ice and landed beside Garfiel, looking around the city,

Emilia: “Are those strange little ones Micro Spirits…? Hmm, no, not quite. Those little ones are the ones who are doing bad things to the city, aren’t they?”

Garfiel: “Oh, yeah, apparently they’re called Lightbugs. They’re messin’ ‘round together with the Magicreation Tools in the city… but that’s not all!”

As Garfiel unconsciously answered Emilia’s question, he raised his voice. Emilia’s eyes widened in surprise at the force of the response.

However, Garfiel did not have time to apologize for surprising Emilia,

Garfiel: “It’s Sis! The city’s in trouble, but Sis is in trouble, too!”

Emilia: “C-Calm down, Garfiel. What happened? You and Frederica were supposed to be on a “dayte”, weren’t you? You’re not together?”

Garfiel: “No, she isn’t. She was taken away by the bastard who started all this trouble!”

Emilia: “—. Frederica?”

Garfiel, who had been struggling to smash every one of the monstrous Lightbugs that sprung up left and right, grew increasingly impatient, and was finally able to vent his frustration to a companion.

Instantly, Clind’s eyes narrowed sharply, and Emilia’s eyes widened even more.

Clind: “Garfiel-sama, details, please. Urgency.”

Garfiel: “…While tourin’ the city with Sis, some asshole got into a dispute with her. I don’t understand how he did it, but he made the Lightbugs go berserk…”

Clind: “Frederica was taken by him. Diversion.”

Garfiel: “Yeah, that’s right. And ‘cause I got stuck here, sis…”

Garfiel clenched his fists tightly and regretted his mistake.

Just because City Hall had been destroyed was no excuse. Since he had seen Hayden’s obsession with Frederica just prior, he should have suspected that his sister would be targeted.

Emilia: “Garfiel.”

As Garfiel expressed his regrets, Emilia stepped forward. And before Garfiel could say anything—she clamped her hands tightly around his face,

Emilia: “Keep your head up! You saw what they looked like, didn’t you? If so, you’re the only one who can find the person who took Frederica, Garfiel!”

Garfiel: “…”

Emilia: “Roswaal is not at the mansion right now, so I’ll make the decision. Go search for Frederica… no, it’s Garfiel’s duty to get her back! Do your best!”

Emilia said this to Garfiel directly, putting pressure on her slender fingers.

Garfiel was taken aback for a moment, but then his voice shook as he said, “W-Wait a minute.”,

Garfiel: “If my amazin’ self leaves here, the city ‘n all the people who live here will be…”

Emilia: “We’ll take care of that! You don’t have to do everything alone! We’re all in this together!”

Garfiel: “—Ah.”

Garfiel was stunned by Emilia’s words.

It was okay not to do everything alone. —That was why Garfiel was defeated by Subaru just a month ago and why Subaru, with the help of Ram and Otto, defeated Garfiel and recruited him to their side.

However, it was an idea that Garfiel, who raged alone in the Sanctuary for so long, had never even conceived of, and so he found himself unable to breathe.

Clind: “Emilia-sama, may I also accompany Garfiel-sama? Proposition.”

Emilia: “Clind-san also?”

Garfiel aside, Emilia was surprised at Clind’s proposition.

Clind: “Yes. —Considering the cause of Frederica’s kidnapping, it is likely urgent. More to the point, if what caused this situation is who took Frederica…”

Emilia: “If that bad guy is defeated, all the dangers in the city will be solved…!”

Clind: “So, I foolishly believe. Appeal.”

Emilia’s eyes grew intense, and she pointed at Clind’s bowed head with a finger.

Emilia: “Yes! Let’s do that! I’ll deal with the city while Garfiel and Clind-san go and get Frederica back!”

Garfiel: “But if it’s just ya alone, Emilia-sama, ya don’t have much of a chance…”

Emilia: “That’s not true!”

Emilia, about to undertake the vigorous defense of the city, intensified her words at Garfiel’s concern and matched the edge of her words with her hand turned to towards the distance.

Beyond the palm of her hand, Emilia watched as the newly born monstrous Lightbug froze and became unable to move, and she turned to Garfiel and Clind with a “Right?”.

Clind: “As long as there is a long range, the environment is more favorable to magic users, and I think Garfiel-sama has his own strengths. Encouragement.”

Garfiel: “Being strong is my amazin’ self’s strong suit. My strength will help find my sister… wait a minute.”

The alternative of leaving her in charge of the city broadened Garfiel’s horizons.

Specifically, there was something that Garfiel had not noticed in the chaos of Costuul with the emergence of the monstrous Lightbugs. However, now that he had calmed down, there was something that certainly stimulated Garfiel’s sense of smell.

Garfiel: “—. This way.”

With certainty, Garfiel turned in the direction where Frederica would be.

Emilia and Clind looked at each other and nodded.

And then—

Emilia: "—Go on! Subaru once told me. It's a dayte until you get back to the mansion!"

Garfiel: "Yes! Leave it to me, Emilia-sama!"

Emilia saw him off, and Garfiel dashed off with a few words to Emilia, who remained behind.

For a moment, he almost thought he was going to leave Clind behind due to his powerful acceleration,

Clind: "No need for concern. Accompaniment."

Slightly lent forward, Clind followed at a speed comparable to his.

With that being the case, Garfiel forgot his concern for him, put the chaos of the city out of his mind, and concentrated on getting to Frederica's location.

Subaru: "A belated appearance of the real star of the show! Kept you waiting, huh, Garfiel! Now that Beako and I have rushed over, you can rest assured that everything will be safe and sound!"

Beatrice: "Let's show off Betty and Subaru's partnership to the fullest, in fact! Don't blink and miss it, I suppose!"

And at the entrance to the city, Garfiel passed a pair of voices like that, but those, too, were outside of his consciousness.

Garfiel left behind the two people exclaiming "That's not right?!" and "Is there no limit to your rudeness, in fact?!" at being ignored by him.

For the first time in a month, he ran again to save his sister, just as he had done that night, savoring the joy of running with someone's affirmation that he was not doing it all alone.

8

???: "If ya don't try to escape, I won't do anything. I want to believe ya, but what happens now?”

When asked by Hayden, his strong arms outstretched, Frederica gave a grimace and fell silent as best she could.

The question came at the point when he was finally ready to take Frederica out once he had completed his preparations for leaving.

It seems that if she did not resist, he would remove her chains in a gentlemanly manner.

Frederica: “There is nothing gentlemanly about keeping me tied up. Do what you want. But, just be prepared.”

Hayden: “Really? Prepared?”

Frederica: “If you remove these chains, be prepared to have your face ripped off by my claws.”

Hayden: “Oi, oi, when ya say it like that, I’m tempted to take them off, but I’d rather not hang out in this cave any longer.”

With that, Hayden cracked his knuckles.

Would he beat Frederica, knock her out, and carry her out, as he did when he brought her here?

At Hayden’s threat, Leonardo’s thin voice echoed, “Hayden-kun.”.

Leonardo: “Her rare blood is very precious. Do not be too rough with it.”

Hayden: “I don’t need to be told, Doc. She’s my future Queen. I wouldn’t hurt her.”

Leonardo: “Even if you have no intention of doing so, your strength of arms is beyond the reach of ordinary humans. In fact, in bringing her here, you probably wounded her. I can smell the rich scent of her blood.”

Hayden: “What?”

At Leonardo’s nervous words, the smile faded from Hayden’s face.

Seeing this reaction, Leonardo’s cheeks hardened, and he asked, “What’s wrong?”,

Leonardo: “I commended you on your strength. Your physical prowess is unparalleled…”

Hayden: “No, that’s not it. You said it smells like blood. Rare blood, that’s not mine.”

Leonardo: “Y-Yes, you’re right. I would recognize your blood immediately. It’s different, rich…”

Leonardo was momentarily overwhelmed, but soon ecstasy filled his voice. When Hayden heard his reply, he turned around and looked at Frederica with his blue eyes.

Seeing the flicker in his eyes, Frederica understood. —She had been noticed.

Hayden: “…”

Wordlessly, Hayden closed the distance between him and Frederica. Just as quickly, Frederica leaped to her feet as Hayden approached defenselessly.

Frederica: “Take this!”

Up to this point, she had never attempted to fight back, and kicked with all her saved-up strength.

It stuck into Hayden’s side of the head so as to reap the arrogant man’s consciousness—but it failed to do so. The kick was stopped by an upraised arm, and he brought her held leg in front of him.

And then—

Frederica: “Aah?!”

While holding onto her leg, Hayden forcefully tore off Frederica’s clothing with his other hand.

Frederica screamed as her shoulders and underwear were exposed, and Hayden looked at her white skin from top to bottom. Then, with a cruel expression on his face, he grabbed Frederica's face this time.

Frederica's mouth was forced open by what Leonardo had described as an "unparalleled" physical strength. Looking into Frederica's mouth, Hayden snorted.

Hayden: "That's my future Queen. You're clever, aren't ya?"

Smiling wickedly, Hayden's eyes caught the bite mark at the base of Frederica's tongue.

At the moment of her kidnapping in Costuul, Frederica gave herself a wound on her tongue, leaving a trail of her blood, dotting it until she was brought here.

Hayden: "Leonardo! Let's get outta here! Some troublesome guys will be here soon—"

???: "—Those troublesome visitors are here. Pardon."

Turning around as if he had been played, Hayden shouted to Leonardo.

However, this was interrupted by a rather patronizing voice, which made Hayden's brutish face tense up. —That was the kind of reaction one would expect, if a person suddenly appeared out of nowhere in empty space. Especially if the cave walls had been gouged out by an unknown force, creating an entrance that he did not know about.

And then, a figure jumped in through the entrance—

???: "For the second time! Get away from Sis, ya small fry—!!"

With a powerful punch to Hayden's face, he was able to do what Frederica was unable to and take revenge for the humiliation she had been put through.

The phenomenon that Clind had caused could only be described as a profound mystery.

It was already a profound mystery when he crushed the monstrous Lightbug as well as the very space it occupied, but it was also a profound mystery the way they arrived at their destination.

But the moment he confirmed that his sister was at their destination, he forgot all about that profound mystery.

The important thing was to get Frederica back. —That, was Garfiel Tinzel's role.

Garfiel: "OOORAAAA—!!"

He drove his fist into the face of the one he detested and slammed it straight into the wall behind him, sending him flying out the other side, crashing through the rock wall. The impact and plumes of smoke shook the entire cave, but it was not the strength of the cave that he was concerned about, but rather separating his sister from the enemy in front of him.

To accomplish this, Garfiel did not stop, even when he smashed through the wall. Instead, he broke through, and through, and through—into the vast room beyond.

Garfiel: "—Hic."

After a brief moment of being thrown through the air, his entire body was immersed in a vast expanse of water. After he kicked the bottom of the water and rose to the surface, he found himself in a dark lake—a place like an underground lake.

Upon reaching the disguised entrance, he knew it was not a man-made cave, but was surprised to find such a large underground lake hidden inside.

Hayden: "You don't got the luxury of looking around, unselected blood!"

Garfiel: "Tsk!"

As Garfiel emerged from the surface of that water, he took a claw strike to the shoulder, causing a spray of water to rise.

He instantly turned his body, but inside the water his movements were dulled. Unable to dodge, the man’s fingertips gouged out his shoulder, and blood spurted vigorously from the claw-shaped wound in his flesh.

It was like the first exchange of blows in Costuul, and that was despite Garfiel’s body being tough so as to not be easily ripped open, even by the claws of a beast.

Garfiel: “You’re proud of yer claws huh, ya fuckin’ bearded bastard…”

Hayden: “Yes, I am. My prized claws can even cut through steel, you see. Sinners, traitors and inferiors, these are the King’s swords to behead them.”

Garfiel: “Don’t go sayin’ shit that makes no fuckin’ sense!”

Garfiel’s fist roared as he yelled, and the surface of the lake was blown away as if an explosion had occurred.

Even if the water killed its momentum, Garfiel’s well-trained arm was like a mortar. It had the power to smash the opposition, regardless of any half-baked obstacles.

However, this was only the case when the opponent wasn’t capable of making “half-baked obstacles” non-trivial.

Hayden: “Does it feel different in the water? There’s a big difference in how you move compared to when you’re on the ground!”

Garfiel’s right arm broke through the surface of the water; Hayden dexterously handled it, laughed, and his arms flew mercilessly toward Garfiel, who gnashed his teeth.

He claimed to be able to cut through steel, and indeed, the sharpness cut through Garfiel’s skin, gouged out his flesh, and cracked his bones, causing the blood that flowed out to stain the underground lake reddish-black.

Garfiel's Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, as pointed out by Hayden, did not work underwater, and the wounds he sustained were faster than his healing magic, causing him to bleed profusely, dissolving his life force into the water.

Garfiel let out a bubbling cry of pain, and Hayden sneered at Garfiel as he sank into the blood and water.

Hayden: "I'll give ya credit for having the guts and familial love to come here! But ya still have unselected blood. Ya can't beat me no matter how hard ya try. Yer sister will serve as my country's future Queen, where the inferiors will be exterminated, so thankfully sink!"

Garfiel: "Inferiors…?"

Hayden: "They're vermin that infest the whole world, pretending to be the rulers of the land. There was once an opportunity. The Demi-Human War was just that, but its leaders were incompetent. I'll take over their roles!"

Even amid his bravado, his claws scraped away at the flesh of his body.

With blood flowing and flesh taken, Garfiel's weight may have been much lighter than before he left the mansion. Even so, it was an uncomfortable outing—or rather, date.

Ram: "Do your best, Garf. Frederica has always been concerned for you, Garf. She is Ram's senior. Ram won't feel good if you make the wrong choices."

Ram's words, spoken to him before his departure, filled his blood-starved body with vitality.

Whatever Hayden's point was, it mattered not to Garfiel.

Garfiel: "You're pissin' me the fuck off. My amazin' self is gonna beat the shit outta ya. —That's it!"

Garfiel's enthusiasm bubbled noiselessly as his face was immersed in the water.

However, his determination lay within his fist. Garfiel's lunging fist left behind a strip of blood, while Hayden calmly took his time to stop it.

Hayden should have been able to avoid the blow as before, but he was caught off guard by the slow movement of his fist. —Hayden's right arm caught the fist, and the bones from the palm to his elbow, where the fist struck him, were instantly shattered.

Hayden let out a stunned "Wha-" and his eyes widened as the other fist was thrust, this time into his lower jaw, launching the large man with slicked blond hair and sending him flying into the cave's ceiling.

Unable to stand firmly due to being underwater, and having used the impetus of his entire body to throw that strike, Garfiel exhaled a long breath. There was no way he could do it again, even if he were asked to.

Garfiel: "All the Demi-Human War this 'n selected blood or not, that, 'n other such headache-inducin' things… say 'em to Emilia-sama, not my amazin' self!!"

The relationship between humans and demi-humans, the absurdity of the world that Hayden considered wrong, and the ideals he sought to correct, were all outside Garfiel's expertise.

Those kinds of ideas were for Emilia and Subaru to worry about.

Garfiel's role was to break down the obstacles that stood in the way of pursuing those ideals.

Garfiel: "'N that, means ya!"

Hayden: "—. Are ya saying a dumbass like ya, who doesn't understand a single thing I'm saying, is gonna break my fangs?"

Floating on the surface of the water, Garfiel pointed a finger above his head at Hayden, who was impaled on the ceiling by the earlier blow. Hearing Garfiel's caustic words, Hayden's expression turned angry, and he bared his teeth. —His form, which had lost one of its sharp canine teeth, transformed and changed its shape with a tremendous sound.

It was beastification. Hayden Garo transformed into a great lion that rampaged on instinct.

Seeing this, Garfiel also strongly gnashed his fangs—

Garfiel: "—I don't care what the fuck ya hafta to say. I've gotta continue my date with Sis!"

And then, as Garfiel howled, his whole body began to enlarge with a creaking sound.

10

She was so ashamed that she wanted to chew up one of her files if she could.

In order to sharpen her endlessly growing fangs, she could not do without a file as a necessity in her life. Sometimes, when she felt really down, she chewed a file very hard as a way of venting her feelings.

And now, this was exactly the kind of moment she wanted to have a file.

Because—

???: "—You should put on this jacket. Your appearance is unsightly. Affront."

With his voice, a jacket was softly draped over Frederica, her clothing having been torn off.

His nonchalant consideration displeased her, but even more so she was displeased with herself for the relief she couldn't help but feel. Of course, that relief was largely due to Garfiel, who rushed in and punched Hayden away.

However, Frederica was not so childish as to say that his presence had nothing to do with it.

Frederica: “…This is humiliating.”

???: “First of all, one would have expected a word of thanks. Perplexing.”

He turned his head and muttered reluctantly as he repositioned the monocle over his left eye.

Clind, the versatile butler in the service of Annerose Miload, from a branch of the Mathers family and a relative of Roswaal, was always detestably cool.

Leonardo: “Ha-Hayden-kun! Hayden-kun! Guh, kuh… how did you find this place?!”

Clind: “Should I say that it was siblingly love? To be exact, Garfiel-sama picked up the clues in the blood that Frederica left behind with his sense of smell. Acuteness. Nevertheless—”

Leonardo: “Uh…?”

Clind: “From a glance, I see that you are also clad in a considerable scent of blood. Despite this, it was a failure to have not noticed her plan. Great negligence.”

Clind shook his head slowly, unable to hide his disappointment.

That gesture made Frederica shudder as she recalled his thorough education when she was an inexperienced maid. That mental anguish had also hurt Leonardo now, hurting his pride.

In his emaciated, pale face, Leonardo’s sunken eyes went bloodshot with rage, as that anger set ablaze his researcher self, in all of its bizarrerie.

Leonardo: “I won’t let go… I won’t let go! The woman of rare blood, every drop of her blood is mine!!”

Leonardo fell forward on the spot, frothing at the corners of his mouth, the insanity engulfing his eyes. Then suddenly, with a chain of high-pitched sounds, the vials of blood specimens he had hanging from his body broke all at once.

The slowly spreading blood made it seem as if Leonardo himself had been the victim of a horrific incident, if only for a brief moment.

The spilled gore seeped into Leonardo's entire body, and thus soon after he groaned, "Ohh, ohhh, ohhhh!", the Blood Sample Collector's flesh now enveloped in bubbles of blood and beginning to transform.

And then—

Clind: "It always amazes me how impure the souls of those who harbor such infatuation for you are. Dumbfounded."

Frederica: "That is something I deplore more than anyone else…!"

Frederica's voice trembled at the sound of Clind's dismay, and so she cursed her dole yet again.

It was tempting to curse him. —For in front of her eyes that man, obsessed with her blood, dissolved into a mess of it, transmorphing himself into a reddish-black liquid monster.

Leonardo: "— Glorp."

Leonardo's emaciated, slender body was transformed into an enormous mass, incomparably larger than himself, even compared to the volume of blood in the vials he had hanging from his body.

Moreover, even in such a state, Leonardo's obsession did not seem lost, as himself now turned into liquid blood began to inch toward Frederica.

With every tremor of the liquid Leonardo's massive body, bubbles of blood floated up into the cave's cold air. When it hit the pale, luminous rock wall, it absorbed that area into the blood and assimilated it. Once it hit the ground, it returned to Leonardo's body, assimilating the ground as well.

Frederica was horrified from the bottom of her heart at the sight of his gradually growing figure.

Frederica: “Ahh! Clind! Clind! Would you please do something!”

Clind: “That ever growing ambition is admirable in itself. It is a way of thinking that I do not possess. Envious.”

Frederica: “Clind!!”

Clind: “—Nevertheless.”

Clind’s eyes, which had been expressing a mysterious admiration for the approaching liquid Leonardo, sharpened. The eye behind his monocle glared at the blood clot, and Clind extended his hands in front of him.

Then he clenched his hands tightly. —Immediately after that.

Leonardo: “— Glorp?!”

The position of the head of the liquid Leonardo was unknown, yet his groans changed.

The reason became obvious: the massive body made of blood had been gouged out alongside the very space it occupied, and the impact pierced his entire body. Furthermore, it had not happened only once, as that burst ocurred every time Clind opened and closed his hands.

Clind’s attacks, which were invisible and unexplainable, struck Leonardo each time his hand was clenched.

Leonardo: “— Glorpp!”

Clind: “Oh my. Admiration.”

The liquid Leonardo’s size vanished faster than it could absorb its surroundings as he fought a defense only battle. The researcher’s delusions would not allow such helplessness, however.

The liquid Leonardo’s huge body trembled, and the next instant, a burst of sparkling light—a Lightbug rushed toward Clind and attempted to contain his outstretched arms.

As long as his hands stopped opening and closing, Clind would have no way to unleash another attack—

Clind: “I am truly sorry. —My hands, are inconsequential. Mistake.”

Leonardo’s massive body was gouged out in front of Clind, who bowed with his hands enveloped in the Lightbug.

Leonardo: “— Glor.”

As it was, Leonardo’s transformed blood-clot body had become riddled with holes like a moth-eaten piece of cloth, and one after another, the space his body had occupied was devoured and disappeared. He faded away and then, finally, vanished.

Literally, not even a drop of blood was left behind, and the Blood Sample Collector ceased to exist.

Clind: “Had it grown endlessly, it would have been a danger to the existence of the Kingdom. Addressed.”

Frederica again gasped at the unfathomability of the situation, and then spun around to look at Clind, who maintained a composed expression as he put things into perspective in a few seconds, and,

Clind: “Frederica, are you unharmed? Confirmation.”

Frederica: “Y, yes, I am fine. As long as you remove these… chains.”

As she spoke, she suddenly felt the chains binding her wrists disappear, and she was able to lower her arms. Unsure how, the chains seemed to have been erased in the same way as Leonardo was.

No longer noting the method, Frederica hid her body with his jacket,

Frederica: “Well, thank you for this… I should not say that! Garf is!”

Clind: “Please wait. While important as well, that cannot be carried out immediately. The priority is to confirm your well-being. Ill-prepared.”

Frederica: “Guh… I know, and you do not need to tell me! Roughly speaking, why are you here?”

Clind: “When I stopped by the mansion on business, I spotted the damage done to Costuul and ran to the scene with Emilia-sama. We heard that you had been kidnapped there, so we came here. Rushed.”

Frederica: “…You were worried about me?”

Clind: “Of course. Your rare blood being misused. Dilemma.”

Frederica’s fangs trembled as Clind shook his head slowly and answered.

Even though she had already been released from her restraints and Leonardo had been defeated, Frederica still felt even more humiliation and disgrace than before. She did not want to think about the reason for it.

And there was—

???: “—Yo, Monocle, are ya and Sis safe?”

Frederica: “Garf!”

Frederica heard a voice coming from the other side of the huge hole in the wall and rushed toward it. She watched as Garfiel stepped over the hole and emerged, his whole body bloodied and battered.

Frederica: “Are, are you okay? There is so much blood…”

Garfiel: “Ah? Don’t worry. It’s all my amazin’ self’s blood.”

Frederica: “That is why I am so worried! All these injuries… these, injuries?”

Frederica’s eyes widened as she wiped her brother’s bloodied body with her sleeve and checked his wounds.

The wounds that had caused the massive blood loss were already almost gone from Garfiel's body. He may have used healing magic, but that was a truly tremendous recovery power.

Garfiel: "If my feet are on the ground, there's no way my amazin' self can lose in a fistfight."

Frederica: "…You really are a child."

Frederica's shoulders relaxed when Garfiel showed his white teeth and proudly boasted of his victory.

In Frederica's eyes, Hayden Garo was an incredibly powerful man, but Garfiel was even more so. —Her little brother was much more dependable than this rare blood of hers.

Frederica: "You are more precious to me than any special blood."

Garfiel: "Oh? Oi, Monocle, somethin's wrong! Sis said somethin' weird! She's on some kinda crazy drug… ouch!"

Frederica: "I swallowed my pride to say this! Do not tease me like that!"

Garfiel: "I'm not kiddin'! I'm worried 'bout ya!"

Frederica was indignant that she had been made fun of despite building up the courage to say something so embarrassing, but Garfiel responded by saying something equally upsetting, and the siblings began to bicker with each other.

Clind: "I am pleased that you two siblings are so close, but a side note. Attention."

Frederica: "What is it? I was just telling Garf about his sister's dignity… ah."

Frederica looked back at Clind, who interrupted her, and Frederica's mouth dropped open. Garfiel also grimaced when he saw Clind's arms—both of which were enveloped by Lightbugs.

Clind: "Despite the defeat of the one pulling the strings, they still will not release. Handle.”

Garfiel: “I managed to deal with the Magicreation Tools …by smashin’ the magic stone. D’ya want me to smash yer Od or cut off yer arms?”

Clind: “Please avoid that method. Plea. —This being used to be manipulated by that researcher’s blood. In that case, Frederica.”

Frederica: “M, me?”

Her name was called and Frederica pointed to herself. Nodding his head at the gesture, Clind held out his Lightbug-covered arm,

Clind: “Free my arms with your rare blood. Salvation.”

Frederica: “…”

With a gulp, Frederica looked alternately at Clind’s arms and face.

Truthfully, Roswaal had told her from an early age about the nature of her Rare blood, but she did not remember it ever being of any use or benefit to her. If the reason Roswaal had taken an interest in her was her blood, that would be the only good thing she could count.

There were many things that she detested, big and small, including today’s events—

Frederica: “—I hope this will be the second one.”

With that, Frederica placed her finger on her fang and slid it over the tip with a flick.

Slowly, a drop of blood formed on the cut fingertip, and then it gently fell onto Clind’s Lightbug-covered arms. The drop of blood hit the pale light produced by the Lightbug.

Frederica: “I release you from the bonds of the blood that binds you. —Please, be free.”

The moment that Frederica muttered, so as to carry out her will.

The light intensified momentarily, and the Lightbugs that covered both of Clind's arms dispersed, scattered into the air, then disappearing.

Garfiel watched the scene and let out a gasp of astonishment,

Garfiel: "No way, it's gonna take a lot of Sis's blood to stop everythin' in the city, isn't it?"

Clind: "Rest assured. Frederica's rare blood has overridden the bonds the practitioner placed on them. Coercion. By now, the disturbances in Costuul should have stopped. Speculation."

Frederica: "Speculation shall not suffice! Garf, that man who was the mastermind…"

Garfiel: "He's lodged in the fuckin' wall. We've gotta drag him back to the city as soon as possible."

As he said this, Garfiel took Frederica's hand and cast healing magic on her cut fingertip, instantly healing the wound.

Her cheeks relaxed at her brother's concern, and Frederica gently stroked her finger,

Frederica: "Occasionally, this blood of mine brings me good as well."

Garfiel: "Huh? Did ya say something?"

Frederica: "No, it is nothing. Come on, we should hurry. Any more of this sweltering blood smell around me will make my nose weird… Clind?"

Frederica turned around to thank Clind, and in her gaze she saw that he checked the feeling of his arms while staring at Frederica.

Frederica, breath caught in her throat at the sharpness of his gaze, asked, "Wh-What is it?". He shook his head gently to the side and said, "Nothing".

Clind: "—Again, as I thought, seeing you grown up is a disappointment. Regret.”

Frederica: “Which part of a person do you look at when you say that?! You pervert!!”

It was an outburst that made her lose all interest in thanking him for saving her life.

11

Frederica had been successfully retrieved, Clind had destroyed the enemy collaborator, and the only thing left was to apprehend the mastermind and complete the victory—but, it was not to be.

Garfiel: “Tsk, ya stubborn bastard…!”

In Garfiel’s view, there was a large depression in the ground at the edge of the underground lake. The aftermath of the fierce battle had left marks all over the place, and the ground depression was where the battle had ended, but Hayden Garo, who was supposed to be defeated, sprawled-out on the ground was nowhere to be seen.

When they clashed against each other, Garfiel and Hayden had transformed into beasts—a great tiger and a great lion—and although bloodstains remained at the bottom of the crater, Hayden’s figure was nowhere to be seen.

Clind: “He holds a dangerous thought process. We should put out an alert in the vicinity and search for his whereabouts. Expeditious.”

Clind reassures Garfiel concerning the whereabouts of Hayden, whom he failed to subdue.

He advised that Garfiel must not feel discouraged. Of course, Garfiel also regretted his lack of strength and attention. But more than that—

Garfiel: “Next time, if he comes after Sis again, I’m gonna smash him again.”

Clind: “…”

Garfiel: “What? Yer makin’ an “overwhelmed by Wilov’s eccentricities” face.”

Clind: “No, not as much as Wilov, but I was surprised. Impressed.”

Clind smiled at Garfiel’s reply as if he knew the late Wilov himself. —That smile, so very slight.

Clind: “A fresh soul, with a promising future, like a growing young tree, is truly magnificent. Coveted.”

Garfiel: “…That, is a compliment I’m not that happy ‘bout.”

Whether it was Clind’s way of encouragement or pure praise, feeling uncomfortable about such an evaluation was all but inevitable.

While Garfiel and Clind were talking, Frederica was also waiting for them at the cave entrance, and clasping the front of the jacket Clind gave her she sighed.

Frederica was told that after her disappearance, there had been an increase in the damage caused by the Lightbugs in Costuul. Emilia, Subaru, and Beatrice had been sent out to prevent the damage.

Everything was a reflection of her own immaturity, which made things worse.

Frederica: “If only I did not say what I said today…”

???: “—And then, I just tried to do the same thing on a different day. I was after ya, ya know.”

Frederica: “—Hic.”

Shuddering, Frederica turned at the sound of the voice, flourishing her prowess.

With an air crack, the other person grabbed Frederica’s arm. The one to do it being a lionman, a barbarous smile worn by his face as he looked down on her—

Frederica: "—Hayden Garo."

Hayden: "I'm glad. Finally, I'm hearing my name come from yer lips."

Hayden spoke much, though his whole body was in tatters, and his high spirits were noticeably diminished. If one were to fight Garfiel and lose, it would only be the natural outcome.

Rather, it would be more crazy to have the guts to get back up and then try to take on Frederica again.

Hayden: "That's the big difference between us and the inferiors, the unbridgeable difference of superiority."

Frederica: "…It is a difference, not superiority. Are you still intending to try?"

Hayden: "Of course, is what I'd like to say, but this is harsh. Your brother's of poor blood, but he's quite skilled."

Still holding onto Frederica's left hand, Hayden shook his head slowly.

If he were to take Frederica away or do anything to harm her, Garfiel and the others would rush to her aid, and he would face certain defeat.

So, this was just Hayden Garo's unwillingness to admit defeat.

Hayden: "Frederica, I'm backing off for today. But ya and I will run into each other again. As long as ya continue to play with the inferiors in that joke of a Royal Selection."

Frederica: "Your right hand man was beaten. Do you intend to do this until one of us perishes?"

Hayden: "Ya don't understand. —Ya don't know how many people out there share my vision."

Bringing his face close to hers, Hayden told Frederica in a throaty, muddled voice. Instantly, Frederica reflexively swept the nails of her ungrasped right hand across Hayden’s face.

She thought he would avoid it. However, Hayden did not evade, and a claw mark was etched above his left eye.

The fragrant rare blood of the lionman stained Frederica’s fingernails.

And—

Hayden: “I’ll keep this scar as a token of my appreciation for yer remembering my name.”

Frederica: “Unfortunately, as soon as I wash the blood off my hands, you will be forgotten as a bad memory. My apologies.”

Hayden: “Haha.”

At Frederica’s best bluster, Hayden laughed a throaty laugh and removed his hand.

With that, the lionman lept dramatically backward and slipped into the forest outside the cave, disappearing both from sight and from her senses.

Frederica: “…”

A man despicable even as she let him free.

For just as he mocked, the unpleasant certainty that she would meet him again struck Frederica harshly in her heart, the source of life that pumped rare blood throughout her body.

12

Clind: “—I will go to Costuul first to report the news. I will also be in charge of the arrangements for the escaped lionman, Hayden Garo. Duty.”

Frederica: “Y-Yes, please. It is that…”

Clind: “Frederica, you are overly concerned. Unfounded fear.”

Frederica: “Huh?”

Clind: “There is no way that the people you care about would not care about you. Often, those people do not even consider their efforts for others to trouble them. Fact.”

Frederica: “…”

Clind: “It is regrettable to have been interrupted. However, it is still possible to find enjoyment. Ingenuity.”

Leaving those irritating words behind, Clind proceeded to the Industrial City.

If he was correct, the Lightbug cataclysm that Costuul had suffered should have ended when Frederica’s rare blood broke what was binding it.

It was annoying to her that he was so confident that this would actually be the case.

Garfiel: “But when that guy talks like that, it feels like he’s really in the right.”

Frederica: “—! I understand. I do. That man has always been like that. He acts like he knows everything; always effortless, and no matter how hard I try, he always has that self-effacing look on his face. It is so aggravating!”

Garfiel: “I, I didn’t say anythin’ like that…”

Garfiel held Frederica’s shoulders as she leaned forward.

Unconsciously, Frederica thought her brother to be a Clind hater as well, but seeing his reaction, she blushed and apologized, saying “I-I am sorry.”.

Anyway, Clind had left, and Frederica and Garfiel were once again alone together. —Although Frederica’s clothes had been torn off, and she was hiding her exposed skin under Clind’s jacket, with Garfiel’s upper body was also naked due to his beastification, him being in a horrific state due to the blood that had not been fully wiped away.

It was hard to believe that it had only been a few hours since they left the mansion for their date.

Frederica: “You know what?”

Garfiel: “What is it?”

She did not want the silence to continue, but as soon as she tried to string a conversation, her speech was overtaken.

Frederica and Garfiel’s eyes widened; they looked at each other for a while, then smiled softly.

It was a ridiculously difficult situation, and the whole thing was not fully resolved.

Frederica: “I am sure you and I are safe for now, Garf.”

Garfiel: “‘N the people in the city are safe, I think. I ignored ‘em, but the Captain ‘n the others were there too.”

Frederica: “That is right… Garf, perhaps you were a little bit dressed up when we left the mansion?”

Garfiel: “Gah!”

Garfiel’s cheeks hardened and he grunted at Frederica’s question as she tilted her head.

Garfiel turned his head in a motion that seemed like it would make a sound, and his reaction said it hit the mark.

Frederica: “I am glad you were well-prepared to go out with me.”

Garfiel: “S-So annoyin’. I had no choice but to do it ‘cause Ram told me to! Even though you’re the one who went to the trouble of gettin’ all dressed up, isn’t that pipsqueak maid gonna complain ‘bout it?”

Frederica: “Do not worry; Petra would not scold me. I am sure it will be you, Garf, who she will be angry with instead of me."

Garfiel: "Why's that?!"

Without overthinking, the siblings continued their conversation just like they always did.

The date to close the gap of more than ten years did not go as planned, and many people got involved, and things got very serious.

However—

Garfiel: "Well, it's that y'know, Sis."

Frederica: "I do not understand what you mean by "that". Tell me what "that" is."

Garfiel: "I got beaten up by the Captain 'n came out to help Emilia-sama with the Royal Selection. But now I see that there're also bastards like that bearded freak out there."

Frederica: "…Garf."

Venturing outside of the Sanctuary and, for the first time, having encountered someone with values completely different from his own, despite their common circumstances, Garfiel's words weighed heavily on Frederica.

However, Frederica's momentary apprehension was dispelled by Garfiel's continuing smile.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self can feel the meanin' of comin' out of the Sanctuary. I'm doin' this so that these misguided bastards don't get in the way of Emilia-sama 'n the Captain's plans!"

Frederica: "—. Hehe."

Garfiel: "Huh?"

To Garfiel who clenched his fists and gave such a simplistic answer, Frederica laughed, half in bemusement and the other half in endearment.

Garfiel raised his brow at his sister’s smile and snorted with a curious look on his face.

—As if that awkwardness was never even there, Frederica and Garfiel enjoyed their date side by side.

In the distance, they could see the Industrial City, where people were calling out to each other and cleaning up the situation that had been brought under control. In the midst of it all, Emilia, who had noticed the two of them, waved her hand in a wide gesture.

Looking at Subaru with Beatrice on his shoulders and Clind, having arrived earlier, Frederica and Garfiel also looked at each other and waved back, big and wide, the siblings getting along well with each other.

END

Golden Siblings Extra (Edited Machine Translation)

1

Subaru: “I know the other day was a disaster, but today is the day to reaffirm the bond between you two! Just like me and Beako!”

Beatrice: “Th-Th-Th, there’s no need to make a big deal about reaffirming your bonds, I suppose. You can make an ordinary outing feel rainbow-colored, in fact.”

Subaru: “Ha ha ha, you cutie. Are you always in a rainbow mood with me? It was just raining, wasn’t it!”

With encouragement from Subaru and Beatrice, who were aware of the whole story, it was decided that Garfiel and Frederica would have a second “date”—the first one had been spectacularly interrupted, so it had to be redone.

Nevertheless, the destination was the same as before, the Industrial City of Costuul, and the purpose was—

Garfiel: “You’re talkin’ like this is somethin’ special… it’s just a shoppin’ trip.”

Frederica: “Oh my. Even if it is just a shopping trip, it can be enjoyed if one has the right mindset. That is exactly what Beatrice-sama said.”

Frederica walked next to him in an elegant manner while she spoke.

Unlike the other day, Frederica was dressed in her maid uniform, which Garfiel was accustomed to seeing at the mansion. Apparently, compared to the first “date”, she was less enthusiastic.

Garfiel: “Sis, ‘bout yer outfit…”

Frederica: “—Hk! Should I have gotten dressed up after all? But I thought it would be a bother for you if I put all of my effort into it every time…”

Garfiel: “No! Just ‘cause Sis ain’t all dolled up don’t mean I have to say anythin’ ‘bout it… First of all, just ‘cause you’re wearin’ yer usual clothes doesn’t matter; ya still did up yer hair and put on perfume.”

Garfiel’s eyes and nose could clearly discern the difference between how his older sister usually was and now. Frederica raised her eyebrows at his comment and then lowered the corners of her eyes, vaguely pleased.

Somewhat embarrassed by the reaction, Garfiel turned his head away,

Garfiel: “Even if she says it’s all ‘bout mindset, I don’t think you can count on what Beatrice, sama, Bea-ko… is sayin’ when she’s havin’ such a good time with the Captain like that.”

Frederica: “What are you so confused about? Please address her as Beatrice-sama out of respect.”

Garfiel: “I getcha, but…”

Garfiel frowned as the taller Frederica scolded him from above.

As his sister said, Beatrice was apparently older than Garfiel and was also a Great Spirit; Garfiel’s position was that of a military officer in the Emilia Camp. With Subaru being Emilia’s first knight and Beatrice being his contracted Spirit, it made her Garfiel’s superior, a position that felt like it demanded his respect.

Garfiel: “But ain’t she a pipsqueak?”

Frederica: “…Garf, you should not judge someone’s talents by their physical size. Even if she looks little and so adorable that you want to hug her, Beatrice-sama is still a powerful Great Spirit.”

Garfiel: “I don’t think of her as bein’ weak. Just that…”

Frederica: “Just that, what?”

Garfiel: “When she’s with the Captain, it ain’t just how she looks that makes her small.”

Frederica: “Uh…”

Frederica was rendered speechless upon being told that by Garfiel. The fact that Frederica could not say anything back meant she had the same opinion.

The librarian of the “Forbidden Library” of the Mathers’ mansion, the Great Spirit Beatrice, wielded immense power. —Still, Garfiel’s impression of her after living with her for a month was that she wanted to be pampered, either in accordance or beyond the scope of her appearance, but she was also a little girl who was not very good at being pampered at the same time.

Garfiel: “Sis, ya know, you’re pretty much the only one who’s properly respectin’ Beatrice-sama, right?”

Frederica: “No, that is not true! Petra is a very well-mannered girl. She…”

Garfiel: “Next to the Captain, she’s the closest with Beatrice-sama.”

Unfortunately, Frederica’s rebuttal was not convincing enough if she was going to bring up Petra.

Petra was well-behaved for her age, but she was also seen playing with Beatrice in a way that was more appropriate for her age. They looked close in age, so seeing them get along with each other was equal to seeing two young children playing together.

Apart from Subaru and Petra, there was Ram and Roswaal, who both went without saying.

Frederica: “Ah! Otto-sama! There is Otto-sama as well! If it were him, surely he would look at the other person properly and adjust his attitude.”

Garfiel: “Don’t talk ‘bout him in such a sorry way… Ah, no, he probably won’t care ‘bout it.”

Garfiel clicked his fangs at Frederica, whose voice perked up at the thin string of salvation she had found.

The slim, mild-mannered man that came to mind belonged in the same camp, and Garfiel considered him as a complex person.

In the sense that he lacked physical strength but was strong-willed, the impression he gave was not so different as that of Subaru. However, while Garfiel sensed a red heat from Subaru, the heat Otto gave off was blue.

To Garfiel, who had never known the existence of this blue heat until their clash in the Sanctuary, he could not deny the impression that Otto was an unknown entity and someone challenging to deal with.

Because of this, he felt Frederica's statement was a bit crude, but he did not dispute it.

In any case—

Frederica: "…No, I have strayed from the main point. No matter what others do, we treat them with reverence and respect. That is our role."

Garfiel: "Ya just went around in a circle and came back…Aight, I'll be careful."

Frederica: "Yes, that is fine."

Frederica nodded in satisfaction, but then she added, "and also" to the end of the exchange,

Frederica: "Garf, you stopped partway through your earlier conversation. You were saying something about my clothes, were you not?"

Garfiel: "…Ya remembered?"

Frederica: "They are the words of my precious little brother. Please do not underestimate my hearing or my memory."

The older sister, proudly puffing out her chest and looking at him expectantly, urged him to continue the conversation. Garfiel scratched his head roughly, wondering if it was really a big deal.

Garfiel: “It ain’t a big deal. You’re dressed like ya were when I ran into ya, Sis, for the first time in a long time. So, in my mind, ya look like that when I think of you now.”

Frederica: “…”

Garfiel: “It’s just like “Gregorone’s identical mornin’”. It ain’t like ya have to get an answer outta me.”

With such high expectations, his response might have been a disappointment or made her feel as if he had dodged the question. As a rush of embarrassment took hold of Garfiel, his sister placed her hand over her mouth.

Then, Frederica narrowed her emerald-green eyes, the same color as those of her sibling—

Frederica: “If you could do that to Ram as well, it would be a little less heartbreaking…”

Garfiel: “Huh?! Why did Ram’s name come up there!”

And then, feeling unreasonably pitied, Garfiel’s voice cracked in a high pitch.

2

Due to the recent incident, Costuul suffered extensive damage to various parts of the city.

Although Frederica did not have the opportunity to witness it firsthand, Garfiel and Emilia reported that oversized versions of the city’s unique creatures, the “Lightbugs,” had gone on a rampage.

Even after they had been subdued, as someone who had observed the devastation of the city, she was prepared for the suffering and hardship of the people who were forced to rebuild their homes, but —

Garfiel: "—Huh, it hasn't even been a few days, but it's goin' pretty well."

Garfiel said, impressed as he held a hand to his forehead to shield his eyes. Frederica could not put her admiration on display as frankly as her brother, but she shared the same sentiment.

When Frederica and Garfiel arrived at the city, they were met with the city's main gate—which had been half-destroyed the other day but had been repaired since then and was no longer in its previously saddening state.

Naturally, during the reconstruction process, the restoration of everyday functions was prioritized, and everything else tended to take a backseat. The appearance of the city's main gate was no exception to this.

The fact that its main gate had already been repaired—.

???: "You appear surprised, Miss Frederica, Garfiel-dono."

And then, a voice called out to them as they stopped at the entrance to the city.

Slowly lowering her gaze from the distant view of the city in front of her, she saw a man with a steely expression on his face standing there.

Frederica: "Leno-sama, I did not expect the City Mayor of Costuul to go out of his way to greet us."

Leno: "The other day, your day off was ruined because of a unique feature of this city. It is my duty as the city's representative to apologize and welcome you."

Garfiel: "And that's yer idea of a welcome after all that…?"

Leno's hard-eyed face remained as still as a stone. Upon hearing Garfiel mumble out a comment regarding Leno's attitude, Frederica gave him a quiet "Garf," scolding him.

Before Leno had a chance to become suspicious of the exchange between the siblings,

Frederica: “Thank you so much for your thoughtfulness. Besides, the city is looking splendid…”

Leno: “Thanks to the hard work and encouragement of the populace. In addition, we received support from the Margrave in the form of manpower and supplies. As a city that has been granted the name of “Industrial City”, we can’t afford to fall behind.”

Frederica: “The Master?”

Garfiel: “Roswaal?”

When told of Roswaal’s contributions to the city’s rapid recovery, Frederica and Garfiel had opposite reactions.

Some aspects could not be helped, which could not prevent Garfiel from disliking Roswaal. However, presenting the discord in the camp’s relationships with outsiders was not a good idea, so Frederica would have to warn her brother about it later.

At any rate—

Leno: “Spend some time relaxing. Since that happened, the chances of seeing Lightbugs near the Magicreation Tool factories have decreased drastically. No more irregularities like the other day—”

Frederica: “—? Leno-sama?”

As Leno attempted to fulfill his duty as City Mayor, faltering in his speech while informing them of the city’s safety, Frederica frowned.

Then, beside her, Garfiel appeared startled,

Garfiel: “S-Sis! Your fat leg…That hurts!”

Frederica: “It, it is not fat! It is average, I say, just average! …Oh?”

Slapping Garfiel on the forehead for suddenly mentioning the size of her legs, Frederica then looked down at her own body, and her eyes widened.

A shimmering pale light clung to the skirt of Frederica's maid's uniform. —It was apparent that it was one of the same Lightbugs that had plunged the city into chaos the other day.

Garfiel: "Ya lil'… get away from Sis!"

Frederica: "Hold on, Garf! If you hit me with that amount of force, you will create a new problem with my legs! Also…"

Garfiel: "What?"

Frederica: "These little ones do not have any ill intentions. They are just being playful."

Frederica calmed the panicked Garfiel and shook her head. Garfiel blinked his eyes, seemingly not understanding the situation, and she couldn't help but smile awkwardly.

This was probably due to the simple fact that the Lightbugs were freed from the clutches of the "blood sample collector" the other day. Having been set free by the effects of Frederica's "rare blood", they appeared to remember the blood's owner.

Frederica: "Maybe it is… Ah, that is it."

Without thinking, Frederica reached out her hand, and Lightbugs gathered at her fingertips. Combined with the Lightbugs' characteristics, it reminded her of Emilia when she interacted with her Micro Spirits.

Frederica: "This makes me feel a little bit like a Spiritual Arts User."

Garfiel: "O-Oi, those guys ain't gonna do anythin' bad, are they?"

Frederica: "Yes, do not worry. I have assurances from Clind and the Master."

Garfiel looked rather nervous, but he wrinkled his nose at the mention of the two names.

The hostility toward Roswaal was noted earlier, and the added hostility toward Clind was something that Frederica could understand, so it was not surprising that he would make that face.

Then, Frederica looked at Leno, who had been silent with a complex look on his face,

Frederica: “I apologize for startling you. But as you can see, the Lightbugs have no ill intentions. I am sure they will not cling to anyone other than me.”

Leno: “Surprisingly, that seems to be the case.”

Frederica: “Yes. …Um, are you really surprised?”

Leno: “Yes, I’m feeling quite ashamed, and quite sweaty. Why are you asking?”

Frederica offered a stiff smile at Leno, who said he was sweating, but did not move a single muscle of his face, nor did drop a single sweat. Her reaction was not noted, and Leno put his hand on his chin, his expression unchanged, exhaling as if he were pondering something,

Leno: “The Lightbugs have been successfully rendered harmless and subordinated… According to the craftsmen of the factories, the output of Magicreation Tools that caused the Lightbugs to go out of control was more than four times greater than during normal operation…”

Frederica: “Oh, um, Leno-sama? Is something wrong? Your eyes seem a little…”

Leno: “Miss Frederica.”

Frederica straightened her back with a “Yes” as Leno unexpectedly called out her name after a bout of muttering to himself. He bowed with his hand on his chest in front of Frederica,

Leno: “I informed you that I wanted to make amends for the recent incident as the city’s representative, but would like to rectify my statement. In addition to my apology, I would like to request your cooperation.”

Garfiel: “Oi oi, cooperation, huh? What do ya think my Sis can do? All she does is nothin’ more than a bit of housework at the mansion, nothing speci …Ow!”

Frederica: “Well, if it is okay, I want to hear what you say.”

Frederica nodded to Leno while tugging on the impudent Garfiel’s ear. Leno seemed satisfied with the answer—no, nothing had changed in his expression. He just nodded back.

As it was, he indicated with his hand to the Lightbugs that clung to Frederica’s body,

Leno: “If you are capable of having the Lightbugs heed you, we would like to ask you to lend a hand to the craftsmen in the factories. There is a possibility we could discover additional methods of operation for the Magicreation Tools.”

Frederica: “You mean you want me to command these little ones?”

Leno: “Affirmative.”

Frederica inquired, puzzled, as Leno nodded.

Although the Lightbugs’ intentions could not be ascertained, Frederica would prefer to cooperate if it would lead to the development of Magicreation Tools. Having said that, today Frederica was in the middle of rearranging her “date” with Garfiel, and their contributions to Roswaal would also be significant.

Naturally, there would be pushback from Garfiel—

Garfiel: “Well, why not?”

However, Frederica’s concerns were denied by Garfiel himself.

Frederica’s eyes widened in surprise, and Garfiel scratched his ear with a finger,

Garfiel: “It’s like “Ebion would rather pick ears of wheat than gamble”. Sis, I ain’t so stupid that my amazin’ self doesn’t know what’s important.”

Frederica: “But, Garf…”

Garfiel: “Besides. —It ain’t like this is the last time.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Garfiel clicked his fangs and grinned.

Garfiel: “Ya never know when that runaway bastard’s gonna come after ya again, Sis. So lettin’ ya go to the city alone ain’t a good idea. I’m sure there’ll be lotsa chances for me to tag along.”

Frederica: “—. That is true. There are plenty of opportunities for dates.”

Frederica smiled softly in agreement with Garfiel’s answer. She then turned to Leno, who had been waiting for an answer, and readily accepted his request.

The blood that coursed through her veins, and the existence of beings such as the Lightbugs and Hayden Garo who were drawn to it. She had a hard time deciding whether these events were good or not, but—

Frederica: “But the blood that flows within me is bound to Garf.”

With a strong awareness of her certain bond with her brother, Frederica, and Garfiel set out together this time with a sense of pride, determined to see the end of their current date, which had undergone yet another interruption.

END

Brotherhood of Pleiades (I) (Translation Pending)

Brotherhood of Pleiades (II) (Translation Pending)

Volume 36

Chapters 29-Interlude

Chapter 29:
Did Not Want to Love

1

—Standing atop a hill, the man gazed out toward the distant horizon.

The sun had already long since set, and the poor village, lacking in light sources, was no match for the dead of night.

All the more so, with many of the male laborers injured and with fewer bonfires than usual, the sight of a man standing in the darkness seemed very strange to the girl's eyes.

Bandits had been raiding villages in the vicinity, and her hometown bore the brunt of the raids, having just suffered major losses such as livestock, food, and the men becoming injured.

But even so, it was a silver lining of a dark cloud that the village had not perished, and the person atop the hill could also be said to be one part of that good fortune.

When the bandits had attacked the village, the men who resisted were killed or wounded, and the women and children were captured one after another.

As the girl was facing the possibility of being sold, or of going through something even worse, appearing there were soldiers who had been dispatched from the Capital, including the man atop the hill.

They surrounded the bandits in the blink of an eye, and annihilated them with little resistance.

Afterward, they were stationed near the village to help protect and rebuild it, responding rapidly, and the village obtained a more sturdy fence than it had before it had fallen victim to the bandits.

If the injuries of the men healed, the village would be secure for the time being.

Like the grown-up women, the young girl was busy bustling about, tending to the wounded, serving food to the soldiers, and taking care of the village's children.

On her way home, after she had finished working, she spotted the man atop the hill.

Man: “□□□”

The sight of the man, silent, staring into the darkness of night, could be described as comical.

Deeds akin to staring into the darkness, where there was likely nothing to be seen, were the height of futility. The value of acts that did not lead to results was not recognized; such was the harsh way of the Empire.

However, the man did not look comical to the eyes of the young girl.

The man looked into the distance with undivided attention, as if he were trying to ascertain something that the others could not see.

And, what happened next was because she was irresistibly curious about what exactly he was trying to see.

Girl: “Would it not be more comforting to count the stars in the sky than to look out into the darkness?”

The next thing she knew, she called out to the man's back.

The man turned around with a slight surprise in his eyes, which made her somewhat proud.

—This encounter between a girl and a king would become a fairy tale that would go on to be recounted for a very, very long time.

—That reunion was something that could not have been foreseen.

Perhaps it ought to be called a cruel twist of fate, or a strange stroke of chance.

In the midst of the unprecedented peril that had befallen the Vollachian Empire, the full face of the Great Disaster had become known by almost everyone simultaneously.

The march of the undead, risen from the grave, had plunged all the living into the midst of mayhem.

However, there were those who experienced that inevitable plunge into mayhem and managed to crawl out of it.

Regardless of the physical degree of strength, they could rise as beings of immense mental and spiritual strength—In the eyes of mediocre and ordinary people, they were perceived as heroes and exceptional beings. Often, such formidable individuals were also physically strong, but their actions significantly influenced the fate of the Imperial Capital either way.

The horrid surprise attack on the living, the strike of the Great Disaster, had resulted in casualties below what was initially expected.

But, that did not mean it was the best outcome, even if it signified the valiant efforts of the living.

That was because, at the outset of the initial mayhem, individuals who should have rightfully been counted among the exceptionals were engulfed by the initial ambush much quicker than they could rise above it.

???: "—Ngh."

A faint breath escaped from the lips, and consciousness gently drifted towards awakening.

The eyelids, framed by long lashes, quivered, like the sun that fears the dawn, the eyes slowly began to reflect the world; once, twice, the blue eyes blinked—in an instant, the ephemeral dream burst, and consciousness firmly settled into reality.

???: “—Hk”

Hastily sitting up on the spot, the sight that was reflected in those eyes was an unfamiliar place.

The room had a high ceiling, and both the materials of the walls and floors, along with the craftsmanship, were top-notch. Fine furnishings adorned the luxurious room, giving it an air of nobility at a glance.

The fact that they were lying on a soft bed in this spacious room only added to their realization, and the realization itself was peculiar.

It was a fact that, when compared with the memories that immediately preceded it, this was extremely unnatural.

???: “I, should have been participating in the…”

Battle for the Imperial Capital; they reflected upon themselves that way.

Instantly, they recalled a world where both heaven and earth were painted with crimson, along with the memory of working hard together with their miraculously reunited daughter to try and comfort a weeping child.

Quite literally, it was a situation in which their hands were burning, but the attempt itself should have been successful.

However, they had found themself in such a place. It was far too incomprehensible—

???: “—My kimono…”

After thinking that far, they belatedly noticed the unfamiliar sensation of the touch of their own hand resting on their chest.

Looking down at their own body in the bed, the attire adorning their limbs was not their familiar kimono, but a blue dress made with fabric of the highest quality, which also exuded an air of luxury.

Their tied up hair was now undone, and it seemed that both their hair ornaments and earrings had been removed.

All of those items were irreplaceable to themself, and were things that they would have never parted ways with, even while unconscious—

???: “—Hast thou awoken, O Star of Mine?”

Just as they were about to leave the bed in search of their lost ornaments, they heard that voice.

???: “—Ah.”

The voice, which unexpectedly struck their eardrums, stole every bit of their brain’s activity without exaggeration.

The voice was uttered from the entrance of the room, which was adorned with elegant and dazzling furnishings that were captivating enough to seize one’s gaze. However, none of that entered their vision whatsoever.

As if their ears had been ensnared, as if their heart had been ensnared, their consciousness was drawn in that direction.

For them—For Yorna Mishigure, that was unavoidable.

Yorna: “□□□”

With eyes wide-open, Yorna, still on the bed, was fixated on the figure standing at the entrance.

There stood a petite figure. They were significantly shorter than Yorna, who was already tall for a woman, and their slender frame gave the impression of a child. However, he was a handsome man with sharp facial features.

His hair, a shade of green that neared black, reached down to his shoulders, and the unhealthy deep shades around his eyes that suggested displeasure seemed to vividly reflect his unfriendly personality.

However, Yorna knew that in reality, it was just that people feared him, and he did not try to keep people at a distance. —In fact, he had not tried to distance himself from her.

Even when facing his final moments, he had sincerely refused to distance himself.

So, right now, Yorna knew that was why she was here.

Because she knew—

Yorna: "…Your Excellency, is it?"

Man: "A strange manner of speaking. But I shall allow it. All that is concerned with thy soul, I shall allow."

Harboring a thought utterly unbelievable, Yorna posed a question, and that man of small build answered so.

Terribly blunt, cold, and pregnant with melancholic weight, for such a short declaration, that voice was packed with so much emotion that it seemed like it would burst apart.

That was the excess of obsession present within himself, and the source of that obsession was love.

The man before her eyes, was in love with Yorna Mishigure.

That was not understood because he possessed a special power as a result of being "loved" by Yorna, but rather, it was a powerful emotion so abundantly clear that it would be immediately obvious to anyone else if they were present in the room.

But then again, it was absolutely impossible for any other person to be present here.

After all, this was—

Man: "A tryst after a period of near three hundred years. None shall pose a hindrance to mineself and thee.”

Yorna: “□□□”

Man: “Show me thy face. Even if thy form is altered, I wish to behold a glimpse of thee from close by.”

As the man slowly approached her as he spoke those words, Yorna’s heart trembled.

Just what sort of emotion that was the result of, she herself could not clearly tell. Of course, there was joy in this impossible reunion, and it made her feel the urge to jump into his chest.

However, at the same time, there were three hundred years worth of reasons why she should not do such a thing. The most recent decades, for the moment, were the biggest reason why Yorna did not act so impulsively.

Hence, Yorna harbored conflicting emotions concerning the man approaching her, and her lips quivered—

Yorna: “—Your Excellency Eugard Vollachia.”

At her call, the man halted his step, and Yorna tightly shut her lips.

Since he halted his step upon being called so, then she had not mistaken him. There was no way that she could mistake him in the first place. Even if anyone else were to mistake him for another person, only for Yorna was it impossible to ever mistake him.

Only for Yorna—No, only for this soul that started out as a girl named Iris, was it utterly impossible to mistake the one known as the King of Thorns, Eugard.

—Iris and the King of Thorns.

It was a fairy tale recited in this world since long ago, and simultaneously it was an old story of historical fact.

A story known for the meeting and separation of the girl known as Iris and the Vollachian Emperor known as the King of Thorns, as well as the tragic conclusion depicted therein.

Iris's soul did not ascend to heaven, and instead it was fettered to the vast lands of the Empire, resulting in the existence of Yorna Mishigure after reincarnating many times. And, the one who fettered Iris's soul to the vast lands of the Empire, was none other than the King of Thorns, Eugard Vollachia.

In other words, this was an unwritten epilogue to the story of "Iris and the King of Thorns"—

Yorna: "That, could never be such a beautiful tale."

Slowly shaking her head, Yorna suppressed the urges she felt in her heart.

A reunion with Eugard after an undesired parting, one could say that such a thing had been Yorna's dearest wish. In that sense, one could also probably say that this was the very moment that her dearest wish was granted.

However, that would be incorrect. The reunion Yorna had envisioned did not take this form.

Yorna: "I did not wish to see you with such a face and eyes, Your Excellency."

As it seemed the malicious nature of fate was ridiculing her, Yorna looked to Eugard while bearing a sorrowful ire.

Having halted his step, Yorna's beloved Emperor received her gaze—He, with pallid skin and golden irises, had been completely altered from the form which Yorna knew.

She did not know what had exactly happened to him.

But, she was confident that Eugard's form was unusual, and that it would definitely not bestow any positive influence upon her or her beloved children.

With a completely altered form, Eugard had achieved an impossible resurrection—If by some chance this unfamiliar place she had awoken in was a room of the Crystal Palace, the worst possibility passed through her mind.

The possibility that some sort of absurd situation had occurred, and the state of the Empire had changed.

Yorna: “Your Excellency, my lord, just what in the world has happened for you to…?”

There were as many stories to be exchanged as there were tears to be shed.

Yet, Yorna tried to shake those feelings off, attempting to ask what needed to be asked.

However—

Eugard: “—O Star of Mine.”

Yorna’s intended question was silenced by Eugard’s simple gesture of raising a finger.

It was not the gesture itself that sealed Yorna’s lips. Along with it came a sharp pain that constricted her heart, compelling her silence.

Yorna: “Kah, ugh…”

The sharp pain pierced her heart, and instead of a question, a moan spilled from Yorna’s throat.

Yorna reflexively clutched at her chest, and a glance revealed a design on her dress that had not been there before—Thorns of ashen hue had been added.

These thorns spiraled around the center of her chest, slipping through her pale skin and reaching inward.

They thrust their spikes into Yorna’s heart, causing a tremendous pain that overwhelmed her entire body. Trying to touch them was futile; they would slip through Yorna’s fingers, remaining intangible.

As her thoughts were clouded with pain, what flashed through Yorna's mind was Eugard's alias—Successive Vollachian Emperors were called by various names based on their governing style and the conquests they achieved, but the title signifying Eugard was the "Emperor of the Briar".

Quite literally, Eugard had the power to bind and subjugate others with the pain of thorns.

After all, Eugard subjugated his Imperial subjects with untouchable thorns he had planted, and he was the Great Emperor who used pain and fear to expand the Empire's territories into what they currently were.

Tormented by unbearable pain, Yorna's throat quivered as she gasped for breath.

And then she remembered. —In the midst of that battle concerning the Imperial Capital, after she and Priscilla had subdued the crying and raging Arakiya, just what kind of defeat had she suffered?

It was nothing at all.

Enthralled by the sudden appearance of Eugard, Yorna was unable to avoid the binding of the thorns. And then, holding both the bound Yorna and the unconscious Arakiya, Priscilla found herself facing off against Eugard, and behind him, many beings with golden eyes—

Yorna: "—Prisca, is she safe?"

This question was posed amidst sharp, intense pain.

The fact that her lips, which previously only let out moans enduring the pain, could form a coherent question was purely because her feelings surpassed her suffering.

In truth, the pain she felt had not wavered in the slightest.

Eugard did not loosen the binding of thorns. Whether the victim was Yorna or anyone else, it mattered not. To begin with, Eugard's actions were not aimed at venting anger or chastisement.

For Eugard, planting thorns and binding others were acts as natural as breathing.

Just as people walk on two feet, Eugard bound others with thorns.

The cries and the blood that flowed from those pierced deeply by these spikes were nothing more than means for him to interact with others.

Therefore, being with him meant being together with this pain.

Recalling this through personal experience, a faint smile played on Yorna's lips as she posed her question.

Yorna: "The two who were with me at that place, are they safe?"

Eugard: "If thou were with them, they did not catch mine eye. What falls within mine sight, O Star of Mine, is naught but thee."

Yorna: "Is that so…"

Eugard's response to her repeated inquiry was not what she had desired.

But, hearing the tone of Yorna's voice worsen by this, Eugard narrowed his eyes, as if contemplating something,

Eugard: "…However, the Witch hath brought some living beings into the castle. Perhaps those of whom thou spoke are amongst them."

At Eugard's addition, Yorna drew a sharp breath.

Distinct from the indigo eyes in her memories, Eugard had a golden radiance housed within his black eyeballs, but the gentle gaze he gave Yorna and his tactless consideration seemed unchanged from his original self.

Feeling a pain, one separate from the thorns, squeezing her heart,

Yorna: "If that is the case, Your Excellency, I have a request."

Eugard: “A request?”

Yorna: “—. That, a Witch was it? The ones whom the Witch brought in, I wish to ascertain if they are my companions.”

Prisca and Arakiya, she wanted to ascertain if those two were safe.

For Yorna, who did not fully understand the current situation, the highest priority at the moment was the well-being of those two.

If that were to be granted—

Eugard: “—Wilt thou give up on death, O Star of Mine?”

The words uttered by Eugard, pierced Yorna’s chest once more with a different sort of pain.

Yorna: “□□□”

As Yorna raised her face without releasing any vocalization, Eugard looked down on her.

Hearing Eugard’s words, Yorna was unable to say anything at once. There was no way she could say something like “What nonsense”. That had unmistakably pierced Yorna’s true motives.

Her soul fettered to the vast lands of the Empire, she was resurrected with a new name in a different body each time she died. —Repeating that over and over, Yorna, Iris, harbored a desire.

Eugard Vollachia had seen right through that.

Yorna: “…Blood is something that cannot be disputed.”

And that very same thing, had also been seen through by Vincent Vollachia.

For that reason Yorna had chosen to join forces with Vincent, and to throw herself into the battle to recover the Imperial Capital from traitors. Of course, the collapse of the Demon City played an important role, but Yorna thought it dishonest of herself when she was lost on where her intent truly lay.

That was why Yorna nodded at Eugard's question.

Yorna: "If it saves the lives of those children, then my death is but a trifling matter."

Eugard: "That shall do fine. I shall grant thy request, O Star of Mine."

As Yorna smiled through the pain, Eugard nodded with no change in his expression.

Then, he resumed his halted step, came right before Yorna's eyes, and gently touched Yorna's cheek with his outstretched hand.

Contrary to that affectionate hand motion, his fingers were cold, and in proportion to the distance he had closed, the spikes of the thorns pierced her more deeply.

Eugard: "Wait for a brief moment."

In both heart and body, Yorna felt a piercing pain; letting go of her, Eugard left those words behind as he turned his back to her.

As always, he was quick to decide on his actions.

While bearing such deep emotions, Yorna issued a question to the back heading for the door of the room.

Yorna: "What happened to the kimono I was originally wearing, as well as my hair and ear ornaments?"

Eugard: "They were not to mine liking. But, they were articles which hadst adorned thee. I have set them aside."

Speaking thus, Eugard gestured to a shelf beside the bed, and concluded his reply to Yorna without wasting any more words.

Proceeding to exit the room, that candidness of Eugard was undoubtedly that of the man which Yorna knew. During his lifetime, he always lived fast and recklessly, as if he was always pressed for time.

Wanting to tell him that there was no need to rush, Iris once lined up next to him—.

Yorna: “…Just like a helpless little girl.”

Loosely shaking her head, Yorna slipped out from the bed, and reached for the shelf.

Opening the drawer, Yorna’s kimono and obi were carefully folded, and there was also a pouch that contained her hair ornaments and earrings, making her let out a sigh of relief.

Perhaps because that sense of relief was too great—

Yorna: “—ah.”

An unusually feeble sound leaked from her throat, and at the same time a heat ran through her cheeks.

Yorna: “Kuh.”

Her body bending forward, Yorna tightly clenched her teeth and choked back a sob.

She could not allow the likes of tears to flow. That was a curse that would revert the firmly constructed Flamboyant, the Mistress of the Demon City known as Yorna Mishigure, into the mere village girl, Iris.

To return to being Iris would mean to narrow her focus down to only just one person whom she loved.

In these three hundred years up until now, she had been someone’s child, someone’s parent, someone’s wife; to return to being Iris would mean to pretend that all of those days gone by had never even happened.

Yorna: “Why, Your Excellency… Why now?”

Prisca, the residents of the Demon City, many of the people living in this Empire; she wanted to remain as herself, who loved them.

The pain of the thorns asserting themselves through spikes within her heart was trying to make her forget all of that.

That nostalgic sweet pain was enough to drive her mad, and frighteningly, Yorna could not resist it.

She could not resist it.

Chapter 30:
Bad News

1

—The Fortified City of Garkla was a great city listed among the top five of the Vollachian Empire.

The neighboring countries that were the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Kararagi City-States, Garkla essentially resided alongside the national border of these two countries; with a large mountain at its back, and numerous robust forts lining the insides of its defensive walls, the city had become an important location of mighty defenses.

However, the legend of the city extolled for such sturdiness came crumbling down by hand of the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Greed, who had assailed Garkla by his lonesome over a decade prior.

The damage to the Fortified City included the death of several thousands in the standing army, the death of the one who was considered to be the strongest warrior in the Vollachian Empire, Kurgan, the Eight-Arms, and finally, the annihilation of several forts, leaving it as one of the worst losses in the history of the Empire.

Since then, a deep scar had been carved into the Fortified City; coming to the present day, the restoration of the city and recovery of its functions had not been complete, and the international tension between countries remained high—.

???: "And, that was the Kingdom's understanding of the Fortified City's state of affaaairs~."

In the deepest part of the city, a large fortress had been carved out in the mountainside of the adjacent Mount Gildray. Roswaal stood by the window of the conference room, smiling as he looked over the cityscape.

The city had plenty of shelters that were amply stocked and sufficiently spacious, which now accommodated the soldiers and refugees who had barely escaped the Imperial Capital with their lives, finally allowing them to welcome the sensation of relief.

Below, several forts erected during this lifetime were used to realize that scene, but not even a single one of those buildings were under construction.

Roswaal: “This is quite different from what I had heard… Even within the Empire, the only rumor about the Fortified City was that it was in the miiiddle~ of reconstruction.”

Let alone citizens of other countries, the true state of affairs in the Fortified City was not even well known to Imperial citizens.

If any country had taken action on the information that the Fortified City was incomplete, it would have been greeted by the perfect structure imposed by the Empire.

As expected, the Empire utilized its own scandal for the sake of war; he was more impressed than he was initially surprised.

And, thereupon—

???: “If even the famous first-ranked Magician of the Kingdom was not aware, then it seems that our information control has functioned quite well.”

Roswaal: “You wouldn’t leave such visible and audible weaknesses lying around, would you? Goooodness~, I taaake~ my hat off to the Empire’s meticulousness.”

With this tone of admiration, Roswaal turned around as he shrugged his shoulders. In front of him, standing there was a gray-haired old man—The Imperial Prime Minister, Berstetz Fondalfon.

During the attack on the coupled dragon carriages, he was a person who had assisted in breaking the deadlock of that strenuous fight.

At one point, he was ejected from the coupled dragon carriages and his survival had been in danger, but just by a hair’s breadth, he was rescued by Frederica who had been chasing the dragon carriage, allowing them to rejoin forces in the Fortified City.

Nevertheless, under those circumstances, it was not an unscathed return.

Roswaal: “How are you feeling? The degree of your buuurns~ were quite extensive.”

Berstetz: “Much gratitude for your concern. Fortunately, thanks to the power of that healer girl, I have escaped death. My arms and legs are just a little impaired, but… I suppose this is already too much good fortune for myself.”

Roswaal: “—. I see.”

As Berstetz said this, he struck his cane using one of his hands, limping along with his right leg.

No matter how great the effectiveness of healing magic, it would take a miracle to create results far beyond the upper limits of an individual’s resilience.

Unfortunately, Berstetz’s miracle seemed to have ended when he narrowly escaped death. But then again, the old man appeared to consider even this event to be far too miraculous.

In any case—

???: “It is fortuitous that we were able to enter the Fortified City with minimal human casualties and without losing any significant war potential. It is regrettable that the Prime Minister’s leg is impaired, but we couldn’t have hoped for a better outcome.”

Stating this, having entered the conference room together with Roswaal, was Serena.

She sat at one of the seats of the round table in the middle of the room, and while tracing the scar on her face with her finger, she pulled out the chair beside her for Berstetz.

Towards this unbefitting consideration of hers, Berstetz bowed, and then took his seat.

Berstetz: “The words of High Countess Dracroy are lacking manners, but her gestures are considerate… I am at a loss for how to perceive you.”

Serena: “Don’t think too hard about it. Both are parts of me. If this fortress were to crumble, I’d be running around propping up the withered Prime Minister and expressing my honest opinions regarding the effort without hesitation.”

Berstetz: “I see. This is quite challenging to comprehend.”

That frankness added a layer of complexity to Serena’s charm, but Berstetz’s attitude also gave the impression of having peeled away a veneer.

The attack of the flock of undead flying dragons led by the Poison Princess. In addition, the appearance of the Three-Headed Valgren, whom Halibel, the Admirer, had personally put a halt on, was honestly the worst turn of events.

However, one could say that, including Berstetz’s survival, it all was a miraculous settlement for the battle array.

Nevertheless, there were still some controversial aspects regarding how that miracle had unfolded.

Berstetz: “By the way, are you certain about this? That Her Excellency Lamia can no longer be resurrected?”

Roswaal noticed a strange trace of warmth in Berstetz’s question as he took his place at the round table. However, unlike Serena, he refrained from making tactless inquiries.

Instead, Roswaal just simply stroked his chin,

Roswaal: “It seems that the other party has found a way to breaaak~ the technique that combines the Sacrament of the Immortal King with Restoration Magic. Princess Lamia Godwin has been cut off from her means of resurrection through that method… No, in this case…”

Serena: “Has been saved, perhaps, is a tad bit too arrogant of a way to say it.”

Serena pointed out the part that was hesitated upon without any mercy.

Regarding that point, neither did Roswaal himself have a clear answer. He could not gauge whether or not a life resurrected as an undead would welcome its own existence.

If he was to give his own personal opinion, he would not necessarily condemn the resurrection of life itself as evil. However, the state of being resurrected as an undead—

Berstetz: “—Saved. Or perhaps, “liberated” may be a more appropriate way to put it.”

Serena: “Oh? It’s quite surprising to hear you say that, Prime Minister.”

Raising an eyebrow at Berstetz’s words, Serena murmured inquisitively. With her gaze fixed upon him, Berstetz, with both of his hands on the handle of his staff, let out a deep breath.

Berstetz: “I do not believe that Her Excellency Lamia would have approved of such a state of affairs. Her Excellency must have been aware of her own defeat… That was an unwelcome opportunity.”

Serena: “In that case, you mean to say that she would have preferred to have been vanquished? Considering that, the fact that she attacked us in such numbers still doesn’t quite add up.”

Berstetz: “…Even so, I believe Her Excellency had different intentions.”

Berstetz, with his thread-like eyes cast down, held an unhidden desire in his heavy murmurs.

Roswaal had a sense that he understood Berstetz’s emotions. Unfortunately, Serena, her palms propping up her chin, did not seem to have grasped the same sentiment at all.

In any case, this was a significant part of the discussion.

Roswaal: “The enemy is formidable, and the situation is in turmoil. It’s a precarious situation that requires us all to unite. This isn’t the time for us to have internal coooonflict~. Isn’t that so, Subaru-kun.”

???: “…I know that without you having to point it out.”

With a wry smile, Roswaal called out to the entrance of the conference room.

A black-haired boy, who had just opened the door and peeked his face in, answered with a bitter look on his face.

2

Subaru: “I wasn’t able to talk more because it was an emergency, but I’d like to share the information again. This girl Spica, formerly known as Louis, was originally a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.”

Spica: “Aauu!”

At the very beginning of the discussion in the conference room of the large fortress, Subaru openly revealed the true identity of Spica, who was standing next to him.

The side that was already aware of the situation from the start on the coupled dragon carriages accepted the confession quietly, of course. On the other hand, the reaction from those of the Empire, who did not know about it, was as one would expect.

Dumbfoundedness and astonishment came first, followed by a reaction whose nature would remain the same whether the confession was the truth or a joke—That was to say, it was rage.

Goz: “What, what are you saying! A Sin Archbishop?! Impossible! You say this thoughtless remark knowing that this is the Fortified City?! The city that was once felled by a Sin Archbishop!!”

Indeed, it was Goz Ralfon who yelled even louder than usual.

Goz, who had made great contributions to the defense of the coupled dragon carriages, and had hurriedly joined the meeting after receiving treatment for his wounds, his cry was probably the consensus of those who were hearing the situation for the first time.

However, this was neither a joke nor a game.

Subaru: “I’ve also heard about how that piece of shit Regulus went on a rampage in this town. I don’t know if it’s any consolation, but we took care of that bastard, so forget about him for now.”

Goz: “I care not about that abhorrent villain! What matters are the sins carried by that cursed title of Sin Archbishop! Do you understand?!”

Subaru: “—I know.”

Goz’s voice was so loud that it created an illusion of a wind that made one feel as if they were about to be blown away. But, Subaru did not take a single step back from Goz’s angry bellow and instead answered him head-on.

Even Goz widened his eyes with a “Mph” as he heard the direct response from the child Subaru.

Berstetz: “May I?”

Just when Goz’s momentum had stalled, it was Berstetz who raised his hand instead. As the Imperial Prime Minister looked upon Subaru and Spica beside him with his thread-like eyes,

Berstetz: “The fact that you went through the trouble of confiding this to us is a sign that you consider her presence and skills to be necessary for further discussions. In other words, you believe that she has something to do with liberating Her Excellency Lamia from the yoke of the undead?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. It’s helpful that you spoke up so quickly. As expected, I’d be in trouble if Berstetz-san died on his own.”

Berstetz had inferred the general situation from the flow of the discussion, and while nodding his head in affirmation, Subaru unintentionally said such a thing.

During the battle of the coupled dragon carriages, Berstetz had faced Lamia alone, and he even risked his life removing her and her additional bodies from the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion. Nonetheless, his actions were completely of his own judgment, and almost cost him his life.

Subaru: “Please, don’t let even the smart people be infected by the Empire’s customs. There’s nothing great about accomplishing something at the cost of your life.”

Berstetz: “It seems there are differing opinions on that, but… at the very least, I do not think there is much to be gained in exchange for my life. I will admit that.”

Berstetz spoke while compromising where he had to, and remaining stubborn where he could not.

Subaru thought in a similar way, so it seemed likely that they would remain on parallel paths when it came to the value of life. But then again, Subaru had no intention of letting them die in the line of duty nobly.

Serena: “So? Since you affirmed the Prime Minister’s question, there’s no doubt that the Sin Archbishop girl is immediately effective against the undead. But, what in the world did she do?”

Subaru: “It’s hard to give a specific explanation about that, but…”

Serena rested her chin in her hands atop the round table and prioritized her curiosity over her hostility toward Spica. She asked the obvious question, and Subaru glanced over at Spica.

Receiving his gaze, the girl blinked her blue eyes, and as her hand was lifted by the one holding it,

Subaru: “With the Authority of Gluttony, Spica can eat the special powers of anyone whose name she knows… is what I think. With that, she can nullify the technique of the unlimitedly reviving zombies.”

Anastasia: “What sorta weightless explanation is that? If ya don’t tell me more clearly, I’ll be left feelin’ uneasy ‘n not the least bit relieved y'know?"

Subaru: "Look, even I'd like to give a more convincing and concrete explanation!"

Anastasia, who was supposed to be his ally, mercilessly shot Subaru in the back after he made such a vague statement.

But naturally, it was logical to shoot, and the contents of the shot were fatally unavoidable. On the other hand, it was also true that Subaru could not explain it in any other way.

Beatrice: "In any case, Subaru's aim was right on target, in fact. With that girl's Authority, that troublesome zombie princess fled, I suppose. Her retreat wasn't a lie or a bluff, in fact."

Julius: "I am in agreement with Beatrice-sama. And, the Pruning Corps who held their ground in order to help buy time for their master's retreat… it is hard to believe that all of their valiant efforts were the product of some compromise."

Anastasia: "The two of ya are givin' emotional answers. But that's just circumstantial evidence… 'n if ya ain't sure of its effectiveness, ya'd know it's too dangerous of a drug to use, right?"

Subaru: "That's… of course, I think I get it."

Even with Beatrice and Julius's support, the validity of Anastasia's points remained unassailable.

The correctness of her argument was made clear by the reaction of the Imperial side, which needed to be persuaded anew. The Empire ought to be protected, but it also must be said that whether burdening themselves with a Sin Archbishop for that purpose was worth the risk involved or not, was a difficult decision to make.

That which the Stargazer Ubilk had spoken of, the two lights to oppose the Great Disaster—the survival of one of them was hopeless, and Spica was the only one who could be relied upon.

Subaru's realization of Spica's potential came after Beatrice and Roswaal's exhaustive investigation concerning the onslaught of zombies, which turned out to be utilizing the Sacrament of the Immortal King and Restoration Magic.

Using the Authority of Gluttony to interfere with the souls of the zombies—As mentioned before, the exact result that would be yielded upon Spica's Authority being exercised, was not known.

But, as for Lamia Godwin, the target of Spica's Authority, her Name was not forgotten by Subaru and his group, nor her half-brother, Abel.

And upon her departure, Lamia showed no signs of having amnesia. Therefore, her Memories had not been eaten either. —So, just what had Spica eaten?

In this current situation, there was no other choice but to put forward all kinds of wild theories such as their fates, causalities, roles, or the abnormal conditions that were cast upon them at the time.

Of course, Anastasia's point that this all was lacking in persuasion was understandable.

Emilia: "But, this girl might be able to stop the other zombees too, right? I think that's reaaally important."

Then, while Subaru struggled with that, Emilia, seated at the round table, raised her eyebrows and spoke up. Anastasia narrowed her pale turquoise eyes at Emilia's remark.

Anastasia: "I ain't sayin' that I don't understand Emilia-san's feelings. I'm also fed up with all this clamorous Great Disaster stuff, 'n I likewise wanna jump on the winnin' strategy. Even so, usin' the power of a Sin Archbishop's just…"

Emilia: "Mm-mm, that's not what I meant. Of course, it's true, but… I want to do something about the fact that people who have died are being turned into zombees."

Subaru: "You want to do something about the zombies?"

Emilia: "I don't know how to put it, but… I reaaally hate that people who are no longer here are being turned into zombees and manipulated like that. Abel for instance, I'm sure he didn't want to meet his sister like that. And, the same goes for Medium-chan."

Emilia's eyes, framed by long lashes, were downcast, and she touched on the absent Medium.

Her absence was in larger part due to her current condition rather than her being excluded from the conference. —The final undead she had encountered aboard the coupled dragon carriages was the cause.

Receiving Spica's Star Eating, Lamia had lost her ability to multiply and was about to be destroyed. Obeying her call, the undead flying dragon along with the undead flying dragon rider who commanded it had recovered her.

It seemed as though that person had had a relationship with the siblings Flop and Medium during their lifetime.

Shocked by the fact that someone close to her had turned into an undead, Medium, now that the crisis was over, was holed up in a room in the fort, and refused to show her face.

It was an event that forced the always bright and positive Medium to become like that.

Subaru, too, felt pain in his heart, but he had not been concerned about her in the same way that Emilia was. That was why, even after all this time, Subaru was surprised by Emilia's comment.

He was so focused on the threat of the zombies that he could not even stop to think about the grief that they were causing.

Otto: "…Emilia-sama may have a slightly different view, but there is no doubt that those zombies are troublesome things. To begin with, the form they have been resurrected in is unnatural. Though to say that they are completely flawless would be far too convenient."

While Subaru was feeling ashamed after hearing Emilia's opinion, it was Otto who interrupted her.

After observing the situation for a while, he looked up at the ceiling, leaning his back against the wall of the fort,

Otto: “The zombies are likely not merely resurrected beings. Until now, a great number of… though one part of that was many of that one woman showing up, ignoring that, we have seen many zombies. I do not believe that all of them had a grudge against His Excellency the Emperor during their lifetimes. Naturally.”

Subaru: “Yeah, naturally indeed.”

Beatrice: “No matter how you look at it, such a thing would naturally be impossible, I suppose.”

At Otto’s interjected doubts and advocacy, a forceful sense of trust compelled Subaru and Beatrice to nod.

No matter how much Abel might have seemed to others to be a callous and cold-blooded Emperor, there was no doubt that he was not only hated, but respected as well.

Subaru had witnessed and heard about this unbelievable fact during his travels throughout the Empire.

In other words—

Otto: “We should assume that the aggressive sentiment toward His Excellency Vincent and the Vollachian Empire was implanted or amplified in the process of being resurrected as zombies.”

Julius: “Brainwashing, is it… I think that is a valid point.”

Beatrice: “…I heard something from the soldiers fighting at the rear, in fact. It seems that there have been cases where when a soldier who was fighting with them died, that same soldier would immediately turn into a zombie and attack them, I suppose.”

Julius: “Those who were fighting as allies until just previously, attack as soon as they turn into zombies, hm? It appears that Otto-dono’s assessment is certain.”

Otto: “—. Indeed.”

Having expressed his opinion regarding the zombies, Otto gave a curt response to Julius's affirmation. Subaru furrowed his brows at that distant response, but Julius and Anastasia did not seem to bother and accepted it as a given.

Anyhow—

Roswaal: "About Otto-kun's opinion, it is something I have discussed with the Prime Minister and Countess Dracroy just before you all arrived. According to that… don't make such an unpleasant face."

Serena: "Postponing the delving into the details of Roswaal's relationship with the Internal Affairs Minister, the Prime Minister also held a similar opinion. Isn't that right?"

With the subject from Roswaal and Serena taking a stab at his interest, Berstetz nodded. He kept his hands resting on his staff, and as he surveyed the participants of the meeting with thread-like eyes that were difficult to read,

Berstetz: "Considering Her Excellency Lamia's character, she would not wish for a second life. Much less, would she ever do something akin to planning to overturn the death of her first life."

Subaru: "So as expected, they were brainwashed into attacking us in such extremely high spirits, right?"

Berstetz: "I suppose we ought to consider it as such… Of course, it is also possible that they were revived without any resistance, and deliberately cut no corners to test whether the current Empire is worth preserving."

Goz: "In that case, the Vollachian Imperial Family…!"

Beatrice: "I'd like you to drop that fervor right now, in fact…"

While prefacing that he would not have made that judgment under normal circumstances, Berstetz was strangely proud that he could not deny the possibility of making strange judgments even if some aspects of normalcy remained.

In any case, it appeared that the consensus was that the zombies' thoughts were not normal.

Subaru: "The zombies who've come back to life will be hostile to us no matter what. In that sense, just like Emilia-tan said, we need to stop the enemy zombie attack as soon as possible. For that purpose, Spica's power is necessary. In practical terms, I don't think this can be conceded."

Otto: "But with that many zombies? You want to take the time to eat them all up one-by-one? If we are speaking in practical terms, I do not think that can be ignored either."

Subaru: "If it's necessary, then I'll do it. Just munching on the yummy bits and discarding the rest, that's not the kind of resolve I grabbed this girl's hand with."

In more than just a figurative sense, Subaru tightly clutched Spica's hand, and declared to Otto.

Receiving Subaru's gaze, Otto turned to look at Spica as if peering into her heart. It was a gaze filled with unrelenting suspicion, and Spica, facing him while clutching Subaru's hand back,

Spica: "Auaaau!"

With such vigor, she growled as if to assert that she had made up her mind to tread this thorny path.

Hearing Spica's response, Otto exhaled through his nose, and,

Otto: "I will say this now, but there is no use in persuading me. After all, I do not have the authoritative power to decide whether to incorporate her into the plan or not."

Subaru: "Even if you don't have an authoritative voice in the meetings, your presence is significant among us. At least, how am I supposed to persuade anyone else if I can't even persuade the people in my own party?"

Otto: "Is that so? If that is the case then I suppose I ought to have been a bit tougher in my assessment."

Although Otto shrugged his shoulders and let out a “good grief,” it seemed that he had no intention of retracting his previous statement.

Perhaps, from his perspective during the battle of the coupled dragon carriages, when Spica used her Star Eating against Lamia, he was probably prepared to draw the same line.

It was just that Subaru did not like leaving this unfinished without ever confirming that.

Anastasia: “Seeeems~ like y’all’ve settled down, but I still ain’t adequately convinced, y’know?”

Subaru: “Ugh… On the contrary, Anastasia-san, what would it take to convince you?”

With the consensus of his companions in place, Anastasia, who had the judgment of a semi-companion, stood in the way.

Within this Empire, she at least was in the same boat as the bitter-faced Subaru, and putting her finger on her lips at his question,

Anastasia: “If I’m bein’ honest, I’d like ya to think ‘bout that on yer own as well, but it’s lots better than just poutin’ ‘n groanin’ without givin’ a response. —First of all, ascertainin’ what that girl is capable of, ‘n if possible verifyin’ the subsequent impact it has.”

Subaru: “What she’s capable of, and the subsequent impact…”

Emilia: “By what she’s capable of, you mean that she can stop the zombees from getting up again, right? But as for what happens afterwards…”

Anastasia: “Both Natsuki-kun ‘n Emilia-san should know just how horrible the Authority of Gluttony is.”

At Anastasia’s soft remark, Subaru held his breath, and Emilia widened her eyes.

That was, though an obvious matter, something that could not be left unmentioned.

The Authority of Gluttony; victims that it had brought about were present throughout the world.

In the conference room alone there was Emilia and Julius, and Rem was also present inside the fort. —Well, in the sense that everybody else also suffered the impacts, everyone could be said to be a victim of Gluttony.

Since they were intentionally making use of that Authority, it was natural to assess the risks.

Beatrice: "…So far, nobody has forgotten about the girl who multiplied herself, I suppose."

Anastasia: "That's right. But, ain't nobody thinks that she didn't eat nothin'. It may not be the Name or Memories, but once whatever she ate accumulates, what'll happen to the girl?"

Subaru: "That's…"

Anastasia: "Like Natuski-kun admirably suspected, what if she ends up goin' back to bein' the girl she once was?"

Anastasia's probing was merciless, and Subaru had no choice but to hold his tongue.

All he could do was pray with a baseless, purely emotional belief. Belief in the girl who had been granted the new name of Spica, and chose a different way of life from Louis Arneb.

Belief, in a way, that this Authority, which could be said to have been with the child since birth, would be guided in a way in which many people would deem it as just.

Julius: "Anastasia-sama, it can be said that there is no way to ascertain that. Of course, I believe we ought not to be lacking in vigilance, but…"

Anastasia: "I can't give ya proof that I ain't schemin' a business plan that I ain't got either. So that, I at least want the certainty of a reward for goin' down a dangerous path."

Julius: “So, I take it as you want the definition of the results from employing Miss Spica’s Authority?”

Julius touched the scar under his left eye, and Anastasia nodded with a quick “Yep.”

Then, as she gazed over both Subaru and Spica,

Anastasia: “There ain’t no merchants who’d go to a negotiation with treasure of unknown value. At least, without knowin’ how it’ll be useful, yer sales pitch’ll be irrelevant.”

Julius: “Without a doubt.”

Since Lamia’s attack had ceased, it was probably safe to assume that she had been crushed.

However, the only other evidence was the oracle of the Stargazer Ubilk, whose existence, words, and conduct were all dubious. Since those concerns had no way of being resolved, Anastasia was in fact more than willing to compromise.

At the very least, if they could not satisfy everyone with just the fact that Spica’s Star Eating was certainly effective on the zombies —.

???: “—Unfortunately, we do not have time to spare for such an inspection.”

The low voice that barged in there rudely stirred the inferior air around Subaru.

Everyone’s gazes were instantly directed to the black-haired lean figure that had appeared in the entrance of the conference room— Though he should have been the leading figure of the conference, Abel had arrived late.

Accompanied by Flop and, for some reason, Jamal, he calmly proceeded without halting his step and imposingly sat on an empty seat at the round table.

And then—

Vincent: “What? Your face is befuddled.”

Subaru: “I was just surprised at how overly imposing you’re acting for being late. We already started talking earlier; what were you doing?”

Vincent: “There was something I urgently needed to verify. That was the largest part of the reason why we hastened towards the Fortified City. —To ascertain the meaning of the words left behind by that enormous fool.”

As Abel responded with no shame, Subaru hesitated to question him further.

That was because Subaru could imagine that the “enormous fool” he spoke of was likely the retainer who had deceived Abel, and then allowed him to live.

But on the other hand, the reason for hastening to this Fortified City caught his attention.

Emilia: “Um, that thing Abel heard, that’s the reason why we rushed over to this town?”

Vincent: “Of course, though it is also a fact that this was the most suitable location to receive refugees.”

Anastasia: “Can ya tell us without usin’ any sluggish bloat? Whatd’ya mean when ya said we ain’t got time earlier?”

Both Emilia and Anastasia directed their questions towards Abel.

Those same questions were harbored by everybody present in the conference room. Receiving those gazes questioning the meaning of his statement, Abel shut a single eye, and tapped the round table with his finger.

A firm sound rang out, and the attention of Subaru and everybody else concentrated on his hand, whether they wanted to or not.

Vincent: “I shall put it plainly. That which I wished to ascertain in this Fortified City, was the unchanging Sanctum… confirmation of the location and status of the Empire's Great Spirit enrolled among the extraordinary Four Greats, the Stone."

Subaru: "Great Spirit among the Four Greats… you mean the Four Great Spirits?"

Vincent: "Indeed."

With the sudden appearance of unexpected information, Subaru blinked his eyes many times.

In regards to the Four Great Spirits, he had heard about them when he first came to this other world, and learned more about their existence when he contracted with Beatrice and became a Spiritual Arts User.

Spirits amongst the most powerful Spirits in this world—Though, the moment he associated with that blundering gray-colored cat who was one of them, he became dubious of their credibility.

Julius: "Then, have you discovered the whereabouts of one of the Four Greats, the one that is in the Empire, the Stone, Muspel!"

Subaru: "I-is that really something so surprising?"

Julius: "Of course. The Slasher of the City-States, the Sacred Beast of the Holy Kingdom, in each nation they are the respective targets of unwavering faith and reverence. The Stone, too, is a being that hides similar power."

Anastasia: "If ya can secure cooperative ties with a Great Spirit of the Four Greats, that'd be a matter of great importance for the state… It'd be a much bigger deal than that darn lie 'bout the Fortified City bein' in the midst of reconstruction."

As Julius and Anastasia informed him of the importance in succession, Subaru could not do anything but dart his eyes around in honest astonishment.

But, since nobody stepped in to correct them, and since Emilia and Beatrice were making proud expressions for some reason, there was no doubt that their perception was correct.

The problem was—

Julius: “If you rushed to the Fortified City to confirm the location and state of that Stone, does that mean the Great Spirit is in this land? Certainly, borrowing that power will be a major backing, but…”

Confronting enemies that arose inexhaustibly, Spica’s Star Eating alone was not enough.

Of course, until Star Eating could be detonated, it was best for them to have as much fighting strength as possible to fend off the zombie onslaught. Or, in the same way that Puck could specialize in area attacks better than the current Emilia, the promising power of the Stone could as well.

Flop: “Regrettably, that’s not how things work. Does everybody remember just before when His Excellency the Emperor-kun said we don’t have time?”

Subaru: “Flop-san?”

With a slow shake of his head, Flop restrained those positive thoughts of Subaru’s.

He, who always maintained a bright positive attitude like Medium, now had a strained expression, and uttered those words in a serious manner.

For some reason, having accompanied Abel, he appeared to be the same as the Emperor. If that was Flop’s expression after learning of the conclusion a little earlier than Subaru and the rest—

Vincent: “You cannot expect the assistance of the Stone. If anything, the existence of the Stone is being put to use by the opponent… by the Great Disaster.”

Subaru: “What, do you mean? The Great Spirit—”

Vincent: “Is in the palm of the enemy’s hand. Likely, in order for the Great Disaster to inexhaustibly give rise to the undead from the grave, it is utilizing that extraordinary amount of mana. Henceforth, they continue to appear in perpetuity.”

Everyone: “□□□”

Vincent: “And—”

Eyes widened at the horrible report, Subaru looked in disbelief at Abel as the latter still proceeded to continue. But, Subaru did not possess the ability to deter his words.

In the midst of the strained air of the conference room, Abel continued without halt.

That was—

Vincent: “I expressed it as “in perpetuity”, but that is not accurate. No matter how much mana is in the Stone’s possession, it will eventually run out. When that happens, the vast lands of the Empire will meet their demise. —After all, the Sanctum protected by the Stone, the power sustaining the vast lands of Vollachia will be forfeit, and there will be no escaping collapse.”

—Announcing the true nature of the Great Disaster destroying the Empire, it truly was bad news.

Chapter 31:
The Stone

1

—The Stone, Muspel.

Enrolled as one of the Four Great Spirits, it was an ancient Great Spirit rooted within the vast lands of the Vollachian Empire.

Unlike the Sacred Beast, Slasher, and Arbitrator of the other countries, it was a being that had not left any voluntary actions or claims in the annals of history. Though it was known to exist in Vollachia, no further information or observations of it had surfaced; one could even say it was the most Spirit-like Spirit.

That was the nature of the Stone, Muspel, considered to be an unchanging Sanctum.

Subaru: "Which is how Beako cutely explained it to me, but isn't this different?"

Since Subaru lacked knowledge of the Four Great Spirits, Beatrice had recounted an anecdote about Muspel to him. As such, Subaru listened to Beatrice's anecdote with great interest, but the contents of the anecdote clashed greatly with the actual situation.

The Great Spirit whose whereabouts and true form were unknown, such was the story of Muspel, but—

Subaru: "You being so confident that the opponent has stolen it is contradictory to you having grasped its location. But actually conversely, Muspel was here in the Fortified City. —Is that wrong?"

Subaru thrust his index finger with a question before Abel's surly face.

Abel's black eyes narrowed at Subaru's questioning, but before he could open his mouth—

???: “Oi, ya got some damn nerve to talk to His Excellency the Emperor like that.”

An unexpectedly harsh tone wedged itself between Subaru and Abel, and a wind blew out of the scene. Immediately after, the tip of Subaru’s pointed finger, the white part of the nail, was suddenly shaved off.

With a whoosh, a drawn blade sliced through the wind and his fingernail, the result of which caused Subaru to scream, “Dowhoa!”.

And then—

???: “You brat! Know your place, your place goddammit!”

Subaru: “That’s what I should be saying! You don’t suddenly cut a kid’s fingernails with a sword!”

Holding his hands over the sudden outburst, Subaru spat at the perpetrator of the heinous act—Jamal.

For some reason, Jamal, who had been allowed to accompany Abel since arriving at Garkla, suddenly cut Subaru’s fingernail using the blade he had pulled out.

Subaru looked at him in disbelief at that overly rash behavior,

Subaru: “I thought you’d gotten a little better, but as expected, I hate you!”

Jamal: “Ahh? I don’t want a brat to like me either. …And.”

When he told Katya the news of Todd’s demise, he was naive to think that he could have a rational conversation.

When Subaru protested against Jamal’s unchanged crude attitude, the latter tried to ignore the age difference and get confrontational, but that immature attitude was stopped with the raise of a hand.

It was none other than Abel, seated at the round table, who had ordered him to “Cease”.

Vincent: “Do not start unnecessary squabbles. Be aware that your value, as I recognize it, is that you are a relatively easy pawn to use. Now is not the time to fight with the Kingdom.”

Subaru: “Fight with the Kingdom… ah.”

Subaru furrowed his brow at Abel’s way of saying it, then turned around when he realized what the intent was.

When he did, those on the Kingdom’s side, witnessing the current exchange between Subaru and the others—Understandably, Emilia, Beatrice, and Spica looked at Jamal with reproachful eyes.

If this standoff continued, the girls joining the fight soon would be unavoidable.

However, not understanding the gravity of the situation, Jamal frowned and reluctantly sheathed the brunt of his outburst.

Jamal: “If His Excellency the Emperor says so… Tsk, ya escaped death, brat.”

Subaru: “It’s amazing you still have the guts to say that in this situation… I feel like we were just on the verge of our alliance breaking up and the Empire being destroyed.”

With the Emperor’s stoppage, sighing at the sight of Jamal, who was still unashamed under the gaze of Subaru’s friends, Subaru looked at Abel.

He evaluated Jamal as being easy to use, but it really did not seem like that.

Subaru: “You’re not going to do something like a careless assassination this late in the game, are you?”

Vincent: “In fact, if someone were to surrender with my head in their arms, I suppose it would not be a detriment to them. This attitude is extremely normal for an Imperial Soldier… a little too short-tempered, but not to the extent of Cecilus.”

Subaru: “It’s not fair to use Ceci in your comparison…!”

Subaru was infuriated by Abel, who said such an unfunny joke and gave such an example that could not be confirmed nor denied. Ignoring his reaction, Abel gestured for Jamal to stand down and then looked back at Subaru.

His posture, answering Subaru's pointed finger and question, showed that he was ready to disclose information about the Stone that had almost veered off into a tangent.

Vincent: "The question which you snorted out a moment ago, I shall affirm it. The Stone was indeed within this Fortified City. Measures have been taken to detain it here, turning this city into a Sanctum."

Beatrice: "…Unbelievable, I suppose."

Abel once again tapped his finger on the round table, producing a firm sound as he divulged the truth. And, it was Beatrice who involuntarily voiced a sound at Abel's response.

With her adorable profile, as she tightly pressed her lips together,

Beatrice: "What an outrageous story, in fact. Among the Four Greats, the Stone is the most challenging one to come to a mutual understanding with; that's how it was described by Mother, I suppose."

Subaru: "Among the Four Great Spirits, the most challenging…"

Beatrice: "By the way, among the Four Greats, the one which doesn't properly listen the most is the Sacred Beast, and the one which should not be talked to the most is the Slasher. The one that is most futile to talk to is the Arbitrator, in fact."

Subaru: "Aren't those all pretty much the same?! Puck, please come back!"

He could not hide his astonishment at the line up that made him increasingly yearn for Puck.

Compared with the disturbing titles of Slasher and Arbitrator, the titles of Stone and Sacred Beast oddly gave off a softer impression.

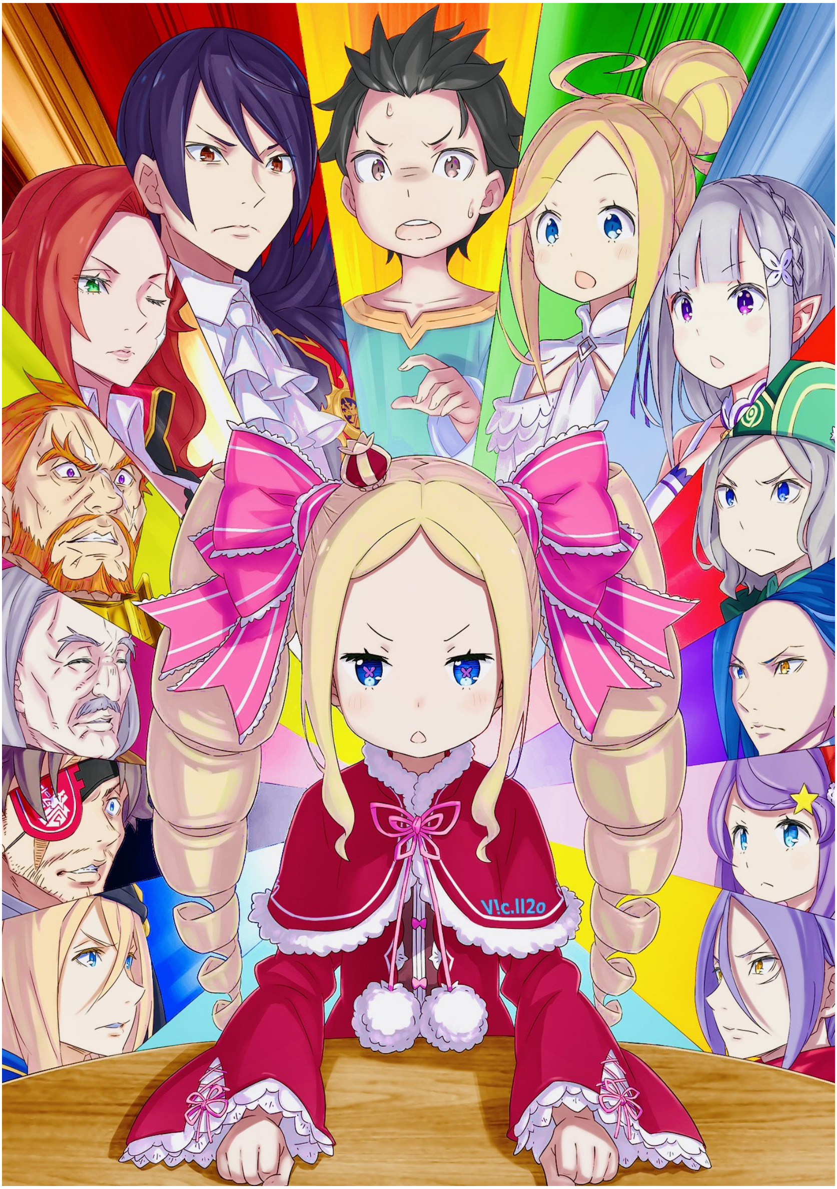
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Subaru: “If you can’t speak with the Stone, I thought the Sacred Beast at least sounded to be a little better, but…”

Beatrice: “Mother used to call the Sacred Beast a benevolent monster, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Oioi, I’m inclined to see all of the landmarks in this world, but there isn’t a single celebrity who I’d like to meet… Isn’t that actually kinda incredible?”

Having spent over a year in this world, Subaru occasionally heard the names of famous individuals, but most of them held rather disturbing titles, so he was a bit sick and tired of them.

Though, the fact that he was already acquainted with positive celebrities such as the Royal Candidates and the Sword Saint may have played a big part in that.

Nevertheless—

Otto: “This is the first time that I have heard expressions like the Sanctum and the detaining of the Stone. I think those are perhaps phrases unique to Vollachia, but what exactly do they mean?”

Vincent: “To put it plainly, the Stone is a Great Spirit that governs the Earth attribute. Therefore, the land it uses as a resting place naturally receives the protection of its special qualities. In addition to cultivating fertile soil, it also yields a positive impact on the recuperation of those who live on that land.”

Otto: “…I see. It is a much more significant role than I thought.”

Otto, who had interjected with a question, placed his hand over his mouth in wonder regarding Abel’s response.

In essence, within the scope of Muspel’s influence, agriculture flourished, and the recovery of the sick and injured was accelerated. It seemed to have benefits akin to a hot-spring consisting of nothing but good things.

If one could control the position of Muspel as they pleased, that would be—

Anastasia: “I gotta say, that’s a story that’s gotta be hidden much more than the lie that the Fortified City’s in the midst of reconstruction. That one of the pillars supportin’ the strong national power of the Empire is the Stone.”

Julius: “And he has disclosed all of this to us, the people of another country. —I shall take this as a sign of the degree of His Excellency the Emperor Vincent’s resolve.”

Anastasia: “I dunno if they’d feel too threatened if they were overly open about their secrets, but… I kinda understand the sentiment about wantin’ to avoid internal conflicts.”

Anastasia and Julius’s attitudes were natural for representatives of foreign powers.

Of course, as Anastasia had added at the end, it was not as though there was no prospect for the Empire to reveal too much unfavorable information.

Emilia: “If this was something he really wanted to keep hidden, couldn’t Abel have used various different ways of speaking to cover it up? Since he didn’t do that, it makes me think that wasn’t exactly that case.”

Subaru: “It’s as Emilia-tan says. This guy has a nasty personality and functions with twisted wisdom. He could have even deceived people like Roswaal or Anastasia-san if he wanted to. Even if it doesn’t seem like it, this is Abel’s utmost sincerity.”

Vincent: “It is still surprising that the half-elf girl does not exude any sense of insolence. You, such praise is not given lightly in this day and age.”

Even though Subaru had gone out of his way to follow up, Abel gave a reply to which following up would be of no avail, so Subaru pursed his lips.

Bringing a halt to this act of Subaru and the others, Flop clapped his hands to gather everyone's attention. He then nodded with a "It's as Husband-kun and the others say,"

Flop: "His Excellency the Emperor-kun has disclosed the truth. That alone signifies the urgency of the matter, along with the topic that cannot be avoided in order to explain the worst-case scenario."

Roswaal: "Worst-case scenario… You mean, the demise of the vast lands of the Empire that His Excellency the Emperor meeentioned~?"

Flop: "That's right!"

Nodding vigorously, Flop affirmed Roswaal's ascertainment.

The demise of the vast lands of the Empire—Utilizing the Stone, Muspel, that was the worst possible scenario of the Great Disaster assailing this Vollachian Empire.

And, before that scenario was revealed to Subaru and the others, the reason why Abel was accompanied by Flop, who was supposed to be nothing more than just a civilian—

Flop: "It was the fake Emperor-kun who entrusted me with the information about the Sanctum to deliver to His Excellency the Emperor-kun… but his intentions were not to cooperate with the Great Spirit that is the Stone, but to warn of the possibility that the Stone was being utilized in the opponent's plans."

Subaru: "I see. Flop-san, you were able to directly meet Abel's imposter, huh."

Flop: "Yeah. I don't have the qualifications to give an answer or an opinion as to why he behaved that way, but… It's in my nature to accomplish what's entrusted to me."

Flop still looked pale due to all the blood that he had lost. His answer, showing his unchanging strong sense of duty, was a relief to Subaru, who now thought of the fake Emperor.

The fake Emperor who had ousted Abel from the throne, and lost his own life in the latter's place—His true intentions could only be guessed, the same as when he had quarreled with Abel, and an answer would not be heard for the rest of eternity.

Still, the fact that the person he had entrusted with the message was Flop, was one of the best possible moves the fake Emperor had made.

Emilia: “Umm, based on what you’re saying, does the Empire perhaps have a contract with Muspel?”

Vincent: “If the contract you are thinking of is that which binds a Spirit and a Spiritual Arts User together, you would be incorrect. The Stone has no such consciousness for that. There is no way for us to offer it a contract that has our side as superior or equal.”

Subaru: “Vollachia is the one who brings up the advantageous and disadvantageous in contracts with Spirits. Take a look at me and Beako’s clean, righteous, and charming relationship.”

Beatrice: “That’s right, in fact.”

Vincent: “It looks like naught but children playing.”

Holding hands with Beatrice, the two of them made a display as they lightly took steps together, and Abel gave a comment. Ignoring Subaru who puffed his cheeks out together with Beatrice in response, Abel went on with the discussion.

Vincent: “No vows have been made with the Stone. Yet, it continued to reside within the territory of the Empire. That is why we made use of our relationship with it, but… at the same time, it continued to move into the Empire’s bowels, spreading its roots.”

Subaru: “Its roots?”

Vincent: “Think of it as the roots of a tree. A tree with thick, long branches may strengthen the ground it is affixed to, but conversely, if that tree were to be uprooted, what shall become of the land?”

Anastasia: “…It’ll get so porous ‘n fragile that it’ll crumble with just a teensy poke.”

Anastasia summarized Abel's question in a nutshell.

In exchange for continuing to enrich the vast lands of Vollachia, Muspel had tied its fate to the Empire itself.

And then—

Subaru: "Wait, so you when you say that it would be the end of the line for Vollachia if Muspel were to die, you mean it would literally be the end of Vollachia?! Isn't that insanely bad?!"

In other words, it was something akin to revealing the existence of a bomb that could blow the Empire itself to pieces.

It was a state secret that needed to be concealed, something that Vollachia would have to deal with not just for now, but forever on after this. At that fact, Subaru's surprise finally caught up with the intelligent people.

However—

Vincent: "Fool, do not be so panicked."

Subaru: "How can you not be in a panic! Hah! Don't tell me, once this is all over, you intend to silence all of us who know the secret …"

Vincent: "Do not underestimate us in that regard. If such was my intention, do you believe I would have allowed you to harbor such suspicions? Intrigue and conspiracy are not the prerogatives of the Holy Kingdom alone."

Subaru: "Wouldn't it be better if the Empire that boasts about it and the Holy Kingdom that's famous for it were destroyed?"

Due to the magnitude of the matter, topics of national scale were raised with wild abandon, and though the Empire went without saying, the Holy Kingdom did not seem to be anything decent either. Subaru also thought that he had suffered through some pretty bad things, but one should remember that the Kingdom of Lugunica was a much more pleasant place to live.

Subaru: “Well, even though it was a hell on earth, as soon as I met Emilia-tan and the others, there was no more doubt that the Kingdom of Lugunica was the most heavenly place.”

Emilia: “Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

Subaru: “That’s fine, that’s fine, I’m just talking to myself. —So, the meaning of the previous topic is for him to discuss.”

Subaru smiled at Emilia as she tilted her head, then returned to trying to catch Abel’s interest regarding the topic at hand. In response to it, Abel quietly closed an eye and crossed his arms,

Vincent: “A ruler who turns a blind eye to a ridiculous act, a blatant one to this extent, such as entrusting their heart to another, must not be in their right mind. Of course, the process of decoupling the roots of the Stone from this country had been moving forward. Your concerns are oblivious to the difficulty of discovering that and claiming lives in accordance with it, which is, simply put, nonsensical. Such is the equivalent of challenging the Dragon with a pen.”

Subaru: “If I went, “Gotcha! Glad to hear that!” then it wouldn’t match up with how we were talking about running out of time earlier. The decoupling process might’ve been moving forward, but it couldn’t be done in time, which caused this situation… Isn’t that right?”

Vincent: “□□□”

Subaru: “Don’t stay silent just because the odds are against you!”

Abel’s silence in reaction to the accurate guess was confirmation that Subaru’s suspicion had hit its mark.

Someday, Vollachia might be able to sever their shared destiny with Muspel. However, the time was not now, and it could not be cited as a clue to break through their plight.

Vincent: “In other words, the fates of the Stone and us citizens of the Empire remain intertwined. As long as those hordes of undead are in pursuit of us and we desperately continue to drive them away, the Stone's mana shall eventually be depleted, and the lands of Vollachia shall be unable to escape from its ruin. I also hear the soldiers who lost their lives in battle would undergo immediate resurrection. In short—"

Roswaal: "We're in a situation where defeating too many of our opponents and casualties on our side are both undesirable, it seeeems~."

Serena: "Seems like it. Their intentions are thrillingly illogical, and there's no end to their cruelty."

On top of being forced to respond to the opponent's initiative, even the terms of their defensive battle had been set as something terribly evil.

Subaru did not understand why Serena seemed to enjoy this, but looking closer into the enemy's relentless tactics, which did not stop at using the undead to force their way through, he could catch glimpses of their proactiveness in bringing the Empire to its definite downfall—

Emilia: "—But, I wonder why Sphinx is doing such a thing."

Subaru: "Eh?"

As Emilia voiced the doubt that surfaced in her mind, Subaru blinked at her words.

The fearsome enemy, who had resurrected many of the dead resting below the Empire's soil, and was currently taking measures to act on its demise, an event regarded as the Great Disaster. The identity and schemes of such a foe—Sphinx, the Witch, had been made quite clear in detail.

However, the Witch's motive that Emilia had expressed her doubt about was—

Subaru: "Of course, isn't that because she wants to destroy the Empire…? It's not like I don't understand how she feels, though."

Otto: "Leaving aside Natsuki-san's true feelings, that is not an adequate answer to Emilia-sama's question. Assuming the identity of the opposition's leader is the Witch that had rampaged through the Kingdom of Lugunica in the past, any grudges they hold should be pointing towards the Kingdom."

Julius: "Nonetheless, the Witch has created an uprising with the dead in the Empire. It is certainly implausible. However, there is a possibility that the Empire was where the conditions could be fulfilled."

Otto: "Conditions?"

Designating Emilia's inquiry as the beginning of their theorization, Otto and Julius made eye contact with each other.

As Otto seeked out the rest of Julius's deduction, the Knight placed his fingers on his narrow chin,

Julius: "An army of zombies with a combination of the Sacrament of the Immortal King and Restoration Magic… For it to come to fruition, the existence of the Four Greats, who all possess an extraordinary amount of mana, was essential. Therefore, the Witch had managed to actualize the spell in the Empire, and—"

There, Julius paused for a brief moment, and then took a sweeping glance at the faces of everyone in the meeting room,

Julius: "Perhaps it may be a plan to invade the Kingdom after tearing down the Empire."

Subaru: "Wha…"

Goz: "—That is ridiculous!!"

Just as Subaru fell speechless upon hearing about the likelihood of such an occurrence that Julius dreaded, Goz exploded with a roar of indignation. Balling his hand into an excessively tight fist the size of a child's head, Goz gnashed his teeth together while retaining the bare minimum of his rationality to not break the round table.

Goz: "If you are correct in your thinking! Are you suggesting that the fact that our dear homeland is on the brink of annihilation is merely a byproduct of this predicament?!”

Anastasia: “To be exact, it’s probably the first stage of the plan to strike the real target. Well, with the whereabouts of the Stone ‘n stockin’ up on the zombies ’n all, that stage has probably been movin’ on from step to step since a really long time ago.”

Goz: “Gh, grrrrruh…!!”

Anastasia probably did not intend it in the first place, but her supplementary explanation was unsuccessful in placating Goz’s anger. Rather, he was growling with frustration, and Jamal seemed to be similarly furious. No one could possibly accept it if they were told the crisis occurring in their homeland was purely incidental.

Subaru thought over their feelings with a dose of sympathy, then noticed the expression of Beatrice, who was beside him.

Subaru: “Beako?”

Beatrice: “—. Julius’s idea is understandable, I suppose. But… Roswaal.”

Roswaal: “Certainly, I recognize your concerns. —Could it be, that Sphinx truly carries human emotions with her, enough for her actions to be considered as vengeance upon the Kingdom? It’s precisely why I can’t help but think that the idea suggested by Knight Julius is only half-correct.”

Subaru: “By half of Julius’s idea, you mean…”

Roswaal: “The conditions were satisfied in the Empire. So, she did what she did. That’s all.”

Roswaal closed one eye, leaving his yellow eye open while Subaru took a sharp intake of breath at his words.

If Julius’s line of thinking was accurate, then the current occurrences in the Empire were not unrelated to the Kingdom, and therefore, the Kingdom could be facing the same crisis very soon.

However, if Beatrice and Roswaal’s theories were correct, then the situation between them and the opposition was beyond salvaging.

And then—

Berstetz: “Either way, the Witch has already taken up arms and drawn the bow against the Empire. Now that even the lives of the Imperial nobility have been disgraced, we are left with no other option but to eradicate our enemy. Is that not the case?”

Serena: “I’m receiving quite the hot-blooded impression from your statement, Prime Minister. As I thought, has the incident regarding Her Excellency Lamia birthed an anger your stomach can’t suppress?”

Berstetz: “—Yes, is there a problem?”

If Serena had meant to poke fun at him, his reaction was not quite what she had been expecting.

Although Berstetz maintained an attitude of superficial calmness, his fury towards the opposition could be clearly felt from his unexpressive, narrow-eyed face.

At his words, Serena traced the scar left behind by a sword wound on her own face,

Serena: “No? The way you are now aligns much more with my taste in men.”

Berstetz: “That is quite a frightening thing to say.”

Serena: “Hahaha! Though, I consider myself good-looking if you pretend my scar doesn’t exist.”

Appraising Berstetz, who had undergone a change of heart as such, Serena let out a guffaw.

Setting aside the exchange between the two, the truth of the matter was exactly as Berstetz had told them. They had no choice but to face the commander of the undead army, Sphinx, in a final showdown.

No matter her objective, they had to.

Subaru: “So, are you alright, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “—Mhm. It’s something that we don’t know, even if we try our best to think about it. It would be great if we had an opportunity to hear it directly from Sphinx, but…”

Subaru: “We only ran into her for a moment, but she didn’t seem like someone we could talk to.”

Beatrice: “Betty agrees with Subaru, in fact. Betty also thinks it’s difficult to hold a conversation with that one, I suppose.”

Utilizing her own life in the form of Escape by Death, Sphinx had targeted the coupled dragon carriages.

Within the scarce number of conversations that had been held between him and Sphinx, Subaru had felt as if she was completely devoid of any zeal, just like her tactics, which considered life as a disposable resource. She did not respond to any provocation coming from those whom her emotions remained unmoved against. She was the type of competition that was rough to deal with for Subaru.

Hence, even with Return by Death, she was a tremendously powerful opponent—.

Subaru: “In the meantime, our opponent is steadily increasing the number of her zombies, and she’s also shaving down the power that’s left in the Great Spirit Muspel. We’re just going to be at a disadvantage in a battle of endurance.”

Anastasia: “Though, gatherin’ battle-ready forces from all over the Empire ‘n launchin’ another attack on the Imperial Capital… is no good, either. Large armies clashin’ against each other is a simple war of attrition. The damage is gonna be worse.”

Otto: “A condition that we are bound by, where we cannot afford any casualties from our side and the opposition… Which means, there is practically only one option left for the plan to save the Empire from the impending Great Disaster.”

Subaru, Anastasia, and Otto spoke one after another, and spontaneously, all eyes were on Abel, who was seated at the round table. Every citizen of the Empire was involved in this incident, and as the man among them who stood on the crest, he regarded everyone's gazes as something that was to be expected, and,

Vincent: "—We shall invade the Imperial Capital with a small elite unit, and capture the Witch, who is the mastermind. Thus, the path to the Great Disaster that they had laid out so scrupulously shall be dismantled."

—Marking the start of the final phase of the battle that had begun in the Vollachian Empire, he assuredly announced their strategy to halt the Great Disaster, just like that.

2

With the conclusion of the round table meeting, they reached a stopping point.

In accordance with the policy established, from this point forward, the selection of personnel to dispatch for the blitzkrieg and the plan for the attack on the Imperial Capital would be developed.

However, before that discussion began in earnest—

Berstetz: "—I had not realized that the Stone had been stationed in Garkla."

In the conference room where only the Emperor and the Prime Minister remained, Berstetz was the one to break the ice.

It was a short time where not only the members of the allied Kingdom, but also those on the imperial side, such as Serena and Goz, were not present. Even Jamal, an escort, was kept waiting outside the room, so that it was just the leaders of the Empire in discussion—although if that were true, then there would have been one more person present.

Vincent: "In the end, you also fell completely for Chisha's scheme?"

Berstetz: "It appears so. If all went according to schedule, the

Sanctum would have been near the southwestern Cloud Sea City of… Mezoreia around this time. Just what point in time had I been blindsided?”

Vincent: “Your eyes appear closed. Blindsiding you must have been easy.”

Berstetz: “They appear to be closed, but they are not. That is precisely why they are so effective in prevention… is just what a sore loser would say after they have actually been deceived.”

Shaking his head slowly, Berstetz muttered as if lamenting his blunder. However, Vincent did not consider it Berstetz’s fault.

As was often the case, Chisha simply exceeded Vincent and Berstetz’s expectations.

In addition to deceiving both the Emperor and the Prime Minister, Chisha had also made preparations to find out just what traps the forthcoming Great Disaster would set.

Berstetz: “If the Stone has not been used, we could use the Fortified City as a base and strengthen our defenses. If the Stone has been compromised, then—”

Vincent: “In other words, it is being used for the Great Disaster’s plan. It seems that enormous fool had thought of many ways to destroy the Empire and had executed them in his mind. Hence, he was right on target.”

Berstetz: “I did not know what measures to take against someone plotting an usurpation, and I did not expect someone whose goal was to wreak havoc. From now on, I shall strive to be stricter.”

Vincent: “—. Then do that.”

Vincent was slightly taken aback by Berstetz voicing his vision for the future with that “from now on.”

After this case was settled, Berstetz would resign from the Prime Minister’s position, as he thought it was not impossible that he might try to martyr himself for Lamia.

Berstetz: “Since Her Excellency Lamia has refused to do so.”

Finding the question in that momentary void, Berstetz answered it himself.

Hearing this, Vincent said nothing. Only a little snort. In response to Vincent’s reaction, Berstetz continued, “Nevertheless,”

Berstetz: “I was surprised to hear what Your Excellency said about the Stone and the Sanctum. It is hard to say that we have any hope of even separating the Stone from the land.”

Vincent: “As soon as this present matter is settled, we shall get to working on the national policy that we had put on hold. If we cannot produce results by the time the non-aggression pact with the Kingdom expires in two years’ time, there shall be no tomorrow to succeed today.”

Berstetz: “Is that so? Incidentally,”

At that, Berstetz paused a beat and opened his thread-like eyes slightly.

Berstetz: “Though I am sure you are aware, the method employed to detain the Stone is not to be revealed. Not only is it an Imperial secret, but it is also a matter of strong belief among our allies.”

Vincent: “After all, Natsuki Subaru and the half-elf Spiritual Arts User are both utterly opposed to even the appearance of injustice. —It would be troublesome if they knew that we have been using convicts sentenced to death as the Stone’s contractors, disposing of them upon their deaths.”

Berstetz: “Your Excellency.”

Do not speak carelessly; as Berstetz gave him such a warning, Vincent shrugged his shoulders.

During the conference, Emilia had asked him whether the Stone and the Empire had a contractual relationship, and Vincent answered that there was no contractual relationship of the sort she understood.

That was not a lie; it was a simple statement of fact.

The simplest way to detain the Stone was through a contract between the Spirit and a person.

However, the Stone did not have self-consciousness, and had no room or window for negotiation regarding the contract. Therefore, the cost of contracting with the Stone was consistently the burden of the enormous amount of nothingness that flowed into the contractor.

The sensation of sharing one's body around the clock with a preposterously large entity with which mutual understanding was impossible would very easily break the human mind, driving it into a state where it could no longer retain its original form.

In exchange for inescapable dehumanization, the Stone's nature was to abide by the contractor's current location.

Therefore, the Empire kept the Stone and the forcibly contracted death-row convicts in lands where the Sanctum was required, and distributed the benefits of the Sanctum to various regions. As it was a next-to-impossible task to track down the Stone once its location had been lost, the replenishment of the death-row convicts was a matter of utmost importance.

And, before the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital began, Chisha, disguised as the Emperor, moved the Stone to the Fortified City of Garkla in preparation for the Great Disaster.

But, there was no sign of the death-row convict who had contracted with the Stone in the city.

Berstetz: "If it has been moved, it would be impossible to track it down without any leads. If so, the only thing that would be gained by divulging the particulars is the distrust of our allies."

Vincent: "Though, even if I did not deliberately say it out loud, there were some who have likely guessed it."

Recalling the faces at the conference, Vincent closed one eye as a few pertinent individuals came to mind.

Berstetz was correct; they did not want to create internal discord in this situation. Surely the people who had guessed this and did not speak up had the same intention.

In any case, once it had been stolen from the Fortified City, the Stone was no longer a usable pawn, but a pending catastrophe whose whereabouts were no longer known.

If there was no better solution than to subdue the Witch, Sphinx, then even if they deliberately concerned themselves with that existence, there would be no meaning—.

Vincent: “□□□”

Berstetz: “Your Excellency?”

Suspicious of Vincent’s reaction, who had suddenly fallen silent, Berstetz called out to the Emperor.

At that call, Vincent shook his head with a “No”.

For a moment, a certain thought crossed his mind, but it was too slim of a possibility to include in his future plans.

Much less, with the one whose difficulty to handle was second only to the most difficult being in the Empire to rein in—.

Vincent: “—If there was any possibility of grasping the Stone’s whereabouts, it would be with someone akin to a hound with a keen nose for extraordinary prey, but that is too high of a hope.”

3

—At the same time, somewhere in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

In the darkness, lying on the damp and hard ground, it remained unmoving.

It bore the weight of wounds. The exhaustion of its mind and body also played a large part. However, the greatest reason as to why it could not move was that a wound had been suffered to a part of itself far more important than the heart—A wound to the soul, was the reason.

That which it had always continued to pray for and believe in since long ago had been denied, and felled to the ground.

From the time it was born until today, even though there was absolutely nothing that it had treasured more, it had been rejected by none other than that very treasured something.

It had lost sight of its reason, its meaning for living.

It had relinquished its own value, reason for being, and the things it could do.

But, just but, while sprawled out on the dampened ground, its chest rose and fell in respiration, and it muttered.

???: “Princess…”

To the person who had denied its meaning, as if clinging, as if praying, in a feeble voice, it muttered.

And, it merely continued to weakly mutter.

Chapter 32:
Selection of Members

—A blitzkrieg operation to prevent the destruction of the Vollachian Empire caused by the Great Disaster.

Now that it was clear that a head-on confrontation with the ever-reviving army of the undead was a risk that would only hasten their demise, a swift-strike settlement was required.

Since they could not afford to pit large armies against each other in a decisive battle between the living and the dead, it was natural that they would choose to send a small number of elite troops for a mission to assault the enemy lines.

If there was a problem, it was going to be about—

Subaru: "—Who will be raiding the enemy's base of operations?"

Arms crossed, Subaru surveyed the scene while sitting on the floor in the middle of the room.

Inside a room in the Fortified City of Garkla's great fortress, a spacious one perfect for a large group of people to assemble, Subaru's allies, excluding those affiliated with the Empire, were gathered together.

Those who had missed the earlier meeting because they had been treating the wounded were present as well—Ram and Garfiel, Petra and Frederica, and not to mention, Rem.

Of course, Anastasia and Julius were also there, as they were not affiliated with the Empire—

Subaru: "I'm glad Halibel-san is also back safe and sound."

Halibel: "Aw, it's kind of ya to worry 'bout me. Well, lil' Ana's real tough on me, so I'm honestly glad you're appreciatin' my efforts like that."

Halibel, with his back against the wall and a kiseru in his mouth, smiled as he replied to Subaru's words of encouragement.

The City-States' strongest wolf person had confronted the black dragon that appeared before the undead attacked during the battle on the coupled dragon carriages—he was credited with the victory of keeping the dragon zombie at bay.

Thanks to him keeping the dragon zombie from getting near the dragon carriages, the damage was kept to a minimum. He was an extraordinary shinobi, as evidenced by the fact that he had single-handedly slain a Dragon.

And at Halibel's comment, however, Anastasia looked dissatisfied by his teasing.

Anastasia: "What're ya on 'bout? If ya put it like that, it makes it sound like I'm a heartless employer. Didn't I tell ya that you'd be paid properly for yer work?"

Halibel: "See, that's what I'm talkin' 'bout. She's become an un-cute child, tryin' to settle everythin' by lookin' at gains 'n losses… Ricardo's permissive parentin' policy made her a wily one, don't'cha think?"

Anastasia: "Haaaliiibellll."

Halibel: "Yeah, yeah, I'll take my loss."

The exchange of Kararagi dialect between the two was settled with a lighthearted call from Anastasia.

Although they had known each other for a long time, the ease with which they communicated was reminiscent of an older man and a little girl who were relatives. Anastasia was petite and had a baby face, but her personality was the opposite of childlike, so it was unusual to get this impression from her.

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Regardless of Subaru's impression, Halibel, who had lost in the argument with Anastasia, said, "Well, that's how it is" to get the conversation back on track.

Halibel: "I've found out through fightin' with 'em that the zombies in Vollachia are a lil' different in how they work from the zombies in Kararagi. They're probably a terrible match for me."

Subaru: "The zombies are different between Vollachia and Kararagi? What do you mean? Don't tell me there's another cause for a zombie panic arising at this stage?"

Halibel: "Nah, there's no way. The impression I'm gettin' is… the zombies in the Empire are tougher. I heard that the kid who set this up is causin' mischief to the Empire's Great Spirit, so maybe it's a distance thing."

Subaru: "Distance…"

Halibel revealed his opinions as he bobbed the kiseru up and down between his teeth.

The subtle difference in nuance was not clear to Subaru, who was not familiar with the undead in Kararagi. However, since someone as competent as Halibel had felt it, there must have been a difference.

He did not want to think that zombies were truly being used for separate reasons at the same time, though.

Julius: "I get the impression that this is more a matter of being complete than of distance."

Anastasia: "What'cha mean by that, Julius?"

Julius: "Since Halibel has described them as tough, it must be true that the zombies that have appeared in the Empire are superior in terms of ability. However, the zombies in the City-States have emerged at an earlier period. So, what we can infer from this is…"

Ram: “That Kararagi’s zombies were for practice, and Vollachia’s zombies are for the actual operation. Is that what Knight Julius is trying to say?”

Ram asked this of Julius, who, when questioned by Anastasia, had expanded upon his reasoning while touching the scar under his left eye. He straightened his back at Ram’s words, then tucked his chin in with a, “Yes,”

Julius: “If my current thoughts are correct, that would explain Halibel’s impression. In addition, Halibel, may I ask why you believe that you are not a good match for the zombies of the Empire?”

Halibel: “I didn’t see it myself, but I heard that the number of zombies in the dragon carriage were multiplyin’? That black Dragon did the same thing. Ya see, the sellin’ point of my attacks is the fact that it’s a curse of death that makes it over for ya when it hits, so I ain’t compatible at all with an opponent who don’t end even after they kick the bucket.”

Subaru: “□□□”

Halibel: “Huh? What’s with the silence?”

Subaru: “No, I was just surprised when you casually said your selling point is a killing curse.”

Subaru could not believe his ears when Halibel revealed his hand so easily. However, Halibel seemed to nod his head in agreement with Subaru’s point with a, “Yeah,”

Halibel: “It ain’t like anything will happen even if ya know. ‘N even if ya knew, not many people would get by without takin’ a single hit from me, right?”

Subaru: “Yeaaah, you might seem humble, but you’re not. Same with Reinhard and Ceci, I feel like the strongest people of each country have that in common…”

Subaru was deeply impressed by Halibel’s confident, imposing statement.

Needless to say, Cecilus, the manifestation of approval addiction, and Reinhard, who embodied humility and sincerity as if they were the very clothes he wore, had absolute confidence in their own abilities.

In fact, if someone who was as strong as they were said “I’m nothing special”, it would not be very persuasive. It would be much more impressive if they said they were proud of that fact.

In any case—

Emilia: “I know that Halibel-san isn’t that good at fighting those zombees… but, what should we do about that? Who should be it to storm the Imperial Capital?”

Anastasia: “Tho’ Halibel ain’t talkin’ like the strongest in Kararagi, I can still guarantee his abilities. I’m thinkin’ he should be in the assault team so he won’t get spoiled.”

Halibel: “Well, I ain’t gonna cry ‘n make a fuss sayin’ that I don’t like it tho’, right?”

Halibel gave a wry smile to Anastasia, who was harsh even without any arguing.

In reality, even if his special assassin curse did not work on the zombies, Halibel’s ability to single-handedly confront the black dragon was undeniable. While considering that it was a certainty that he should be a part of the assault team, Subaru wanted to cut to the chase and, with a “May I say something?”, raised his hand.

Then—

Subaru: “First things first, I’m joining the assault team.”

Indeed, before anyone else came forward, Subaru asserted his position.

???: “□□□”

All eyes gathered on Subaru, who had nominated himself, and a momentary pause was created.

Taking advantage of this void, Subaru seized the opportunity to explain why he should be a part of the mission.

Subaru: “First, it should be clear to everyone that Spica’s Authority has the power to nullify their specialty… the resurrection of the zombies. However, currently, it’s necessary for me to accompany her as her guardian so she can use it. If Halibel-san has such a hard time dealing with the resurrecting enemies, then Spica is absolutely essential for the assault.”

During the attack on the coupled dragon carriages, Spica had made a significant contribution to the defeat of the formidable foe, the Poison Princess, Lamia Godwin.

If she could fully wield the Authority of Gluttony, she could cut off the endless Escape by Death of the resurrecting undead. In terms of defeating Sphinx, there seemed to be no better strategy than utilizing Spica.

Subaru: “Both Spica and I have irreplaceable roles… So inevitably, Beako will also have to come with me to the Imperial Capital.”

Beatrice: “That’s what was wished for, in fact. Betty doesn’t want to be separated from Subaru anymore, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I’m sorry, thanks for your help.”

Seating herself comfortably beside Subaru after he had raised his hand, Beatrice firmly grasped his raised hand in hers, signifying her agreement to accompany the assault team.

Feeling reassured by his partner’s response, Subaru glanced at Spica, the crucial part of the operation—and Rem, whom she was holding onto.

Spica, clinging onto Rem’s waist as she hugged her, and Rem, supporting her shoulder, received Subaru’s gaze.

Rem: “…Why are you looking at me with such anxious eyes?”

Subaru: “Well, I’ll be bringing Spica into danger again, and if that makes Rem dislike me, it’ll make my heart shatter…”

Rem: “—. Besides, it’s not like you can’t seek comfort from Emilia-san, right?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Upon hearing Subaru’s timid response, Rem averted her gaze discontentedly, muttering under her breath.

While Subaru struggled to fully grasp the meaning behind her words, Ram, standing beside her, narrowed her light-crimson eyes and said, “Rem”,

Ram: “What are you going to do? Rip Barusu into pieces?”

Subaru: “Don’t suddenly say something so disturbing, nee–sama!”

Ram: “Just kidding. If you were to tear him to pieces now, he’d just come back to life, wouldn’t he? A Barusu increasing atop corpses… A real nightmare. Disgusting.”

Subaru: “Don’t kill me without permission and then find it disgusting when I’m multiplied!”

At Ram’s Ram-like remarks, Rem smirked as she shook her head. Then, she thanked her sister with a “Thank you very much”,

Rem: “I really appreciate your concern, nee-sama. However, as nee-sama rightly said, no matter what we do now, he will just come back to life, so let’s set that aside for the moment. More importantly…”

Spica: “U?”

Rem: “Spica-chan, do you think you can work hard with that person?”

Rem, with her smirk fading away, looked down at Spica who was clinging to her and asked. Spica widened her blue eyes at the inquiry, quickly adopting a resolute expression.

Being questioned about her role and what she should do, the girl, recognizing her duty, repeatedly nodding her head,

Spica: “Aau!”

And so, she nodded with such vigor.

Taking that as a voiceless affirmation, Rem made a mixed expression of bitterness and desolation. In order to express her true feelings, her voice trembled as she continued.

Rem: “If that’s true, then I also want to come with you… But, if the current me were to follow you, I understand that I’ll only be a burden. But…”

Emilia: “—Then, you don’t need to worry, Rem.”

Rem’s earnest plea was interrupted by a reassuring voice.

Unconsciously, Rem let out an “Eh?”, and her pale blue eyes widened as she was told this by Emilia, who thumped her own chest.

Her beautiful amethyst eyes were filled with determination as she nodded to Rem.

Emilia: “About that child, and the others who are going together with Subaru, I also reaaally understand your worries. So, I’ll protect them so that they’ll be safe no matter what!”

Rem: “Emilia, san…”

Emilia: “Leave it to me. I’m a reaaally strong person.”

Flexing her biceps, Emilia smiled at Rem.

At the words of the overly reliable Emilia, the bewildered Rem became speechless, and her eyes began to wander around.

However—

Otto: “No, no, no! What are you saying, Emilia-sama! Emilia-sama, you cannot go, and there is no way that I could approve of something like that!”

Emilia: “Eh?! Why not?!”

Otto: “What do you mean “why not”, do you need someone to explain it to you?!”

Emilia opened her eyes full of surprise, but it was Otto who was even more surprised at her.

Otto, who had seemed to be constantly frowning since joining forces with the Empire, finally revealed his typical flustered face—that, would be a laughable way of putting it.

In actuality, Otto’s opinion this time was far more appropriate than that of Emilia’s.

Otto: “No matter how much you may want to go, this is a mission to march into the most dangerous part of the Empire, right? I absolutely cannot send Emilia-sama out there.”

Garfiel: “Hol’ up there, Ottobro. If ya wanna talk about dangerous places, why didn’t’cha just say that when we first entered Vollachia?”

Otto: “That may be hard to deny, but this is a matter concerning the magnitude of the danger. Natuski-san is right, the Imperial Capital is the enemy’s core… their stronghold, the protection of a village with no strategic value cannot have a similar sturdiness. Without a doubt, the Imperial Capital is the most dangerous place.”

Garfiel: “Well, I guess ya got a good point.”

After having his legitimate question rebuked by a sound argument, Garfiel retracted his opinion.

Driven by this momentum, Otto turned his gaze towards Subaru and Beatrice,

Otto: “Truthfully speaking, I am also opposed to Natsuki-san and the others going. This is an Imperial problem, so it is absurd to risk our lives for the sake of a foreign country.”

Subaru: “What an honest guy. But, I’ve said it several times…”

Otto: “I understand. You want to say that whether it be the Kingdom or Empire, it matters not where it happens. Since the Witch’s aim reaches Lugunica, that is also my opinion. If she were to appear near my home town, however, then I would much rather that the Empire become a wasteland.”

Subaru: “You’re not hiding your blatantly strong kinship anymore, are you?”

Otto usually had a serious face, but weighing the advantages and disadvantages of getting involved in the Vollachian Empire’s affairs seemed to not balance out in his mind. That was why he was constantly in disagreement.

But, just as Otto had understood, for Subaru, this was not a matter of which land was being affected.

Even Subaru disliked the Vollachian Empire, but there were people that he had grown to love in this Empire which he despised. For their sake, he wanted to do everything he could for them.

And it was for that reason that—

Subaru: “—Not just Spica, but I also need to go to the Imperial Capital.”

Subaru’s rush to volunteer for this was, of course, to ensure that Spica’s Authority was fully realized by traveling with her as her guardian.

However, his biggest reason for going to this largest battlefield, the Imperial Capital, was—as would be expected from that place, to overturn the inevitable Death which someone might face, to paint over the tapestry of fate.

To garner the support of all of the gladiators from the Gladiator Island, Subaru had gone through a lot of trouble.

But, it was well worth it. Were there to be a promised reward, Subaru would not hesitate to take it.

Betty: “Betty also doesn’t want Subaru doing anything dangerous, in fact.”

And there, Beatrice, who had spoken on Subaru’s behalf, towards Otto, who looked at both Subaru and herself, began to express her thoughts.

With that characteristic pattern in Beatrice’s blue eyes, while making contact with Otto’s eyes that looked towards her,

Beatrice: “But, the strength of that girl will be useful in dismantling the Sacrament of the Immortal King, I suppose. And, in the unlikely event that we need to seal Sphinx, Betty’s strength will be needed, in fact.”

Subaru: “Seal, huh?”

Beatrice: “If Spica’s Authority does not work, there will be no choice but to use a method that will seal her moves and stop her rampage, I suppose. If she commits suicide in order to escape, it will be the start of a never-ending chase, in fact. In order to prevent that, it will be time for Betty’s magic to come into play, I suppose.”

With one hand holding onto Subaru’s, Beatrice stuck out her other free hand.

As he looked at the round hands of the young girl, Subaru’s mind was filled with a scene as Beatrice spoke about the “Seal”—the successful capture of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, at the Pleiades Watchtower.

Roy’s entire body was hardened like wax by Yin Magic, and he was restrained in a state where he could not move or even think.

Subaru: “That’s right, the Witch of Envy was captured under the same seal…”

Betty: “That’s right, in fact. It’s the reliable and proven Witch seal, I suppose. If sealing Sphinx is essential to controlling this situation, sorry about you and Petra, but Betty and Subaru are indispensable, in fact.”

With Beatrice covering for him from a magical standpoint, Subaru sneaked a glance at Otto, as well as at Petra, who was standing with Frederica, opposite to him.

Petra, who had grown more reliable and promising in the time since he last saw her, was understandably unwilling to let Subaru return to the Imperial Capital in his shrunken state.

However, she was smart enough to understand the validity of Beatrice's opinion, that if the undead army was not stopped here, the damage would increase exponentially.

For the sake of that, she sighed reluctantly, and then,

Petra: "Of course, it would turn out like this."

Subaru: "Petra…"

Petra: "Just like Rem-san, I'm not in a position to come along… At least it'll be a huge help that Beatrice-chan will go as a chaperone."

Subaru's heart ached for the overly understanding girl, whose anxiety was caused by none other than himself. Beatrice nodded her head in assurance of Petra's trust.

Beatrice: "How Petra feels is certainly understandable, I suppose. As long as Betty is around, she won't allow harm near Subaru, in fact."

Petra: "Yup, thank you, Beatrice-chan."

Emilia: "That's right. Beatrice being with Subaru makes me happy and relieved. But, I would feel more at ease if the two of them and I were together…"

Otto: "Emilia-sama…"

Emilia: "Errr…"

Following the beautiful friendship between Beatrice and Petra, Emilia tried to stubbornly impose her opinion in a not-at-all-successful way, and was shot down by Otto's steely gaze.

However, as mentioned before, Subaru also believed that Otto's opinion was correct on this matter.

Subaru wanted to grant Emilia whatever she wished if he could, but granting this wish would take Emilia straight into the most dangerous place in the Empire.

On the other hand, Garfiel had a point.

In the first place, there was no doubt that the Empire was dangerous when they had arrived, and even if she were to remain in Garkla, her personal safety would not be guaranteed.

In that sense, the ideal situation would be to keep everyone Subaru knew close to himself—.

Roswaal: "—I am in favor of adding Emilia-sama to the group that is going into the Imperial Caaapital~."

Frederica: "Master?!"

But then, unexpectedly, an opinion arose that was one hundred eighty degrees different from the one that had come before.

Frederica was so startled by that opinion that she could not believe her ears as she raised her voice with a look of disbelief on her face. But, while it was only Frederica who had voiced it first, most of the people present could not hide their surprise at that opinion—Roswaal's statement.

Amidst the surprise that reigned, it was Anastasia who recovered relatively quickly. Frowning as she stroked her fox scarf,

Anastasia: "That's a surprisin' opinion. Surely, I woulda thought that y'all were unanimously against it, except for Emilia-san."

Roswaal: "Being that Emilia-sama is the representative of the camp, it's a pity that her opinion isn't being listened to… Well, juuust~ kidding. I didn't mean to be a prankster and gooo~ against the grain, either."

Otto: "…Allow us to hear it."

Roswaal shrugged his shoulders, and Otto urged him onward with his emotionless voice and expression.

Both Subaru and the person being supported, Emilia, waited with bated breath for Roswaal's thoughts. Roswaal, under the scrutiny of those around him, closed an eye, leaving only the yellow one open,

Roswaal: "It's not difficult. In this alliance with the Empire, Emilia-sama's ability is a powerful asset for us to propose. If it were Anastasia-sama who were to tell her to go ahead, we would all stop her, but Emilia-sama is nooot~ like that. In fact, we all approved of Emilia-sama's involvement in the war before the zombies even showed up."

Emilia: "Yeah, true! You know, I fought Madelyn and Mezoreia that time, too, and I made it back without a hitch!"

Otto: "This situation is different from that. What is required is a surprise attack by a small number of elites, and Emilia-sama's over-the-top… bold fighting style is not suited for that."

Roswaal: "She has more than enough to make up for that. And if Emilia-sama is there, even if the operation fails, then rebuilding can be incorporated into the operation. She could freeze half of the city, wouldn't you agree?"

This was an outrageous statement by Roswaal, who held up one finger, but it was not surprisingly over the top.

Emilia's abilities as a unit was hard to replace, she had a ridiculous amount of mana that she could provide on her own, and super long-range skills that she could make full use of.

In short, Emilia could turn the battlefield into a snowy landscape all by herself and run around in the extreme cold, all while being cute and energetic. In order to make ideal use of her overwhelming fighting ability, Subaru had devised Ice Brand Arts, which was also recognized by Roswaal.

In fact, there was no doubt that Emilia was one of the camp's strongest fighting assets.

After having thoroughly participated in the events surrounding the Pleiades Watchtower and the decisive battle at the Imperial Capital, it was not a convincing argument to keep Emilia out of harm's way.

In addition, Roswaal had a conviction only he could possess.

That was—

Roswaal: "Subaru-kun would be more motivated if Emilia-sama were with him, riiight~?"

Subaru: "You…"

Subaru could not help but bite his lip when Roswaal gave such a clearly malevolent smile.

It was obvious that the tacked-on remark was making fun of Subaru's Authority—Return by Death, which only Roswaal knew about.

Roswaal had no idea that Death was the trigger for Subaru to go back in time, but he knew that Subaru had such a secret trick up his sleeve.

For Emilia's sake, there was also the certainty that he would not let this trick go to waste.

Roswaal's calculations were correct.

Subaru would use Return by Death if something happened to anyone, but if Emilia were to come along, Subaru's eagerness and desperation would be everything that Roswaal wanted and more.

However, only people like Roswaal could be persuaded by such circumstances.

Frederica: "Master, I, like Otto-sama, am against Emilia-sama going."

Despite this, the opposition was not swayed by hearing Roswaal's viewpoint.

Even Frederica, who was among the members of the camp who tended to side with Roswaal, was opposed to Emilia joining the team, emphasizing the dangers of the situation.

However—

Frederica: “Of course, I am aware that Emilia-sama is stronger than Otto-sama and I will ever be, but still, she is way too important—”

Roswaal: “—So I will accompany them. Is that right to saaay~?”

Frederica: “Huh?”

Unable to find an agreement after all, Frederica’s eyes widened upon hearing this refutation.

Roswaal made a brief but unmistakable declaration as he waved both of his lifted hands for all to see,

Roswaal: “I will accompany Emilia-sama and the rest of the team to the Imperial Caaapital~. Fortunately, now that I no longer have to hide my true identity, I’ll be able to show off my skills, both great and small.”

Emilia: “Huh, Roswaal is coming? Umm, are you coming with us?”

Roswaal: “Are you surprised?”

Emilia: “Well, I always had the impression that you were always just relaxing in your mansion, Roswaal.”

Roswaal gave a wry smile at Emilia’s genuinely astonished reaction.

Although “relaxed” was a rather Emilia-like expression, Roswaal was usually not there to solve problems since he was often the cause of them, and because he was an unreliable ally to begin with.

However, it would make no sense for Roswaal to betray their trust under these circumstances.

Considering that there was no possibility of Roswaal plotting some dark scheme within the Empire, in a sense, they could trust Roswaal here much more than they could in the Kingdom.

Subaru: “It makes you wonder what kind of ally is more trustworthy in another country…”

Upon hearing that Roswaal would be accompanying them, it seemed to Subaru that the proposal had nothing but merits, except for the rather disgusted look on Beatrice’s face.

If one was talking about the strongest members of the camp, Roswaal was undeniably one of them.

Otto: “I, also—”

For a moment, Otto suddenly started to say something.

Yet, the words he was about to say were interrupted by grinding teeth, so Otto took a deep breath, and exhaled,

Otto: “Garfiel! Please accompany Natsuki-san and the rest!”

Garfiel: “—. Ya sure ‘bout that? On top of the Three Knights goin’, all the strong ones are gonna be there.”

Otto: “Since we made it this far, it would be folly to put in half the effort. In that respect, I do not like the fact that it is in the hands of the Margrave.”

Roswaal: “Otto-kun is always thinking too much of me, iiisn’t~ he?”

Roswaal put on a relaxed smile and Otto put his hand on his forehead. Garfiel, seeing his brother’s distress, gnashed his fangs and put his fists together in front of his chest.

With a dry thud, Garfiel stomped the floor with gusto,

Garfiel: “Aight, then. I’ll be takin’ Otto-bro’s worries, Petra’s worries, and also Sis’s worries all together with my amazin’ self.”

Ram: “Garf, Ram’s worries are missing.”

Garfiel: “I don’t wanna bring your concern for Roswaal with me!”

Ram: “Idiot. There’s no need to worry about Roswaal-sama. Ram is worried for you.”

Although Garfiel had made his choice readily and determinedly, the singular jab he received from Ram had caused his momentum to shrivel up with a “Rawr…”

After displaying her sinful tendency to lead Garfiel on, Ram then glanced at Roswaal, who had volunteered to be a part of the invading force,

Ram: “Please, to your heart’s content. Kindly put on a show for the Empire with your powers.”

Roswaal: “Sure thing. The Empire has too little respect for magic, after aaall~.”

In response to his smile, Ram lifted the skirt of her traveling outfit to perform a curtsy.

Staring at the interaction in which a certain amount of trust, neither excessive nor insufficient, had been exchanged, Emilia blinked her eyes, having been left behind by the flow of the conversation.

Emilia: “Erm, so, Roswaal and Garfiel are coming with us, and I’m also going to invade the Imperial Capital with Subaru’s group… Is that right?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that should be alright. We put together the strongest team, just as Otto said.”

They would be bringing along Emilia, Garfiel, and Roswaal, the three most powerful people within the Emilia Camp, so it could be said that they would be performing at their highest potential as an allied faction.

Subaru was worried about the prospect that the trio of him, Beatrice, and Spica would become a burden to them.

Subaru: “And then Halibel-san also joins the team, huh. All that’s left is—”

Julius: “—Subaru.”

Just as Subaru was about to declare the team as one undoubtedly made up of their strongest members, he turned around upon hearing someone calling for him.

The one who had called for him was a man who had not been included among the names that were mentioned. Moreover, if only the strongest were to be gathered, then he was unmistakably someone that Subaru wanted in such a team.

However, the man in his traditional Japanese clothing, with his handsome face, had made an affirmation with a look of dignity in his eyes.

Julius: “I will stay by Anastasia-sama’s side. Drawing the enemy’s eyes towards the Fortified City will assist your break-in, will it not?”

Subaru: “□□□”

Julius: “Of course, those whom His Excellency the Emperor places his trust in will bear the responsibility of defending the city, but I plan to be of assistance as well. Most of all…”

There, he—Julius cut off his words for a moment, and cast a glance at Anastasia, who was beside him.

In order to search for the missing Subaru and company, Anastasia had pushed herself to come running all the way to Vollachia. Along with Subaru’s feelings of gratitude towards her, it was necessary for her to return safely without question.

Therefore, Julius made an unequivocal statement.

Julius: “I am Anastasia-sama’s one and only Knight, after all.”

Subaru silently took in a breath at those self-assured words, cloudless and invigorated to the point that it was spectacular.

It was because Subaru understood. That was a statement Julius had made to indicate where he stood, and at the same time, it was to light a fire under Subaru, who was also in the same position as him.

—A shove in the back to protect Emilia, just as Julius would protect Anastasia.

Subaru: “I’m telling you, just because you stay here doesn’t mean you can take it easy. If you let your guard down, you’re gonna get humbled like you did with Reid.”

Julius: “How daunting. Even now, I tremble in fear whenever I gaze at the wound on my face in the mirror.”

Subaru: “The hell are you saying!”

Laughing off Julius’s banter in that manner, Subaru practically jumped to his feet on the spot.

Like that, he surveyed the entire group with his eyes, and went on to reconfirm.

Subaru: “Me, Beako, and Spica are going. Emilia-tan, Garfiel, and Roswaal will be there, and Halibel-san’s also gonna be a member of the team, too.”

Emilia: “Mhm, let’s do our best. Since Ram’s group and Anastasia-san’s group are staying behind, please be very careful of the zombees.”

Anastasia: “Y’all are the ones breakin’ into the core of the castle, so I’m gonna lose face if ya told me that. But, dependin’ on how much we can be flashy with attractin’ our customers, the difficulty of yer mission will change. It’s our time to shine, ain’t it?”

As if her merchant’s spirit had been stirred, Anastasia responded with an evil grin.

Feeling reassured by that, Subaru clenched his fists at the imminent battle that would be decisive for the Empire.

No matter what, they would dedicate their best effort to prevent the

Great Disaster.

For that reason, they had to hurry towards the Imperial Capital.

If he were to be asked why, it was because—

Subaru: "—If Ceci, any time now, carelessly decided to slay a thousand, or even ten thousand people at where he was left behind, and the Great Spirit's mana runs out and the Empire gets destroyed because of it… That's gonna be absolutely terrible."

In that case, it would be impossible to tell whether it was Subaru's fault for taking Cecilus along with him, or a price the Empire had to pay for leaving that guy unattended up until now.

Chapter 33:
Verdict on Love

1

—Governor of the Gladiator Island Ginunhive, Gustav Morello.

There was an immense significance in receiving that position from the almighty Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

In Vollachia, where the teaching that “The people of the Empire must be strong” was lived and breathed, the role of the shows held on the island, utilizing the gladiators, was exceedingly important in these times of peace.

Those were not simply for the purpose of amusement, but so that in the reign of the current Emperor, who extinguished even the smallest fires of the live coals known as internal strife, the human nature of the Imperial peoples would not be overly distanced from “combat”, so that their fangs would not be dulled.

It was not as though the Emperor had so plainly declared that, but when Gustav was appointed as Governor by the Emperor Vincent Vollachia, he grasped that such were the professional duties he must fulfill.

In reality, following that through, Gustav had come to fulfill that better than any of his predecessors in the long line of Governors of the island. —Until today.

Gustav: “—I, Gustav Morello, accompanied by the gladiators of Ginunhive, have successfully converged.”

Before the Emperor who cast his gaze down upon him, before Vincent Vollachia, Gustav placed all four of his arms as a Multi-Arm Tribesman on the ground, and spoke as he kneeled.

—The great civil war that shook the entire Empire; its premise had completely collapsed with the interference of the dead.

In order to escape the hosts of savage undead, the citizens of the Imperial Capital and the surrounding areas were simultaneously evacuated, and without distinction, the warriors of the regular army and rebel army were forced to cooperate in order to oppose the ruin.

The evacuation of the excess refugees was still proceeding, but even so, the Fortified City of Garkla was accommodating more than half of the total refugees. As a part of that large number of evacuees, right after they had entered Garkla, Gustav was granted an audience with Vincent.

Gustav: “□□□”

In a room of the large fortress, next to the kneeling Gustav, Idra Missanga wore a puzzled expression.

The group of outlaws that was the gladiator gang had changed their name to the Pleiades Battalion, and with Natsuki Schwartz as their boss, Gustav had served the role of military advisor. And in that role of military advisor, Gustav had chosen Idra to assist him in jobs other than rampaging.

Among the gladiators whom Schwartz had an especially close relationship with, Idra happened to have a suitable amount of prudence and composure, and was an exceedingly useful treasure in the group of ruffians.

Be that as it may, when abruptly brought before His Excellency the Emperor, that composure could not be demonstrated.

Vincent: “In regards to your activities, I have received a report from Zikr Osman. That person… Natsuki Schwartz, was also chirpily boasting about your achievements.”

Idra: “Chirpily… ah”

Perhaps because he was overly tense, Idra subconsciously voiced that, and his face went pale.

Narrowing his sable eyes, Vincent was famous for the fierce nature on the other side of his handsome, delicate appearance. For the

Imperial Citizens who only knew of the Emperor through rumors, it was understandable that they would be prepared to die with just his gaze being turned to them.

However, as Gustav looked up to Vincent while still kneeling,

Gustav: “Your Excellency the Emperor, this is Idra Missanga. He is a gladiator, but he assists myself, as the official, with work that others are incapable of. Please, depending on if the current conflict is resolved, your pardon would be—”

Vincent: “You are unusually talkative, Gustav Morello. But…”

Idra: “—uh.”

Vincent: “If he says you are valuable, then it must be so. Endeavor to the utmost. If you are going to speak about what comes after the war, leave behind achievements and a life that can be discussed after the war.”

Idra: “U-Understood! I am grateful and delighted!”

With so much excess momentum that his forehead slammed against the floor, Idra resolutely prostrated himself on the spot.

Idra was so deeply moved by the feeling of narrowly escaping death that he could not see his surroundings, but as a mere son of a miller, he did not realize just how extraordinary the words Vincent had spoken to him were.

Of course, Gustav thought that he had contributed enough to be deserving of that, but at the same time, he noticed a change in Vincent—That was, the tolerance he showed towards others.

From the very start, Vincent was the Wise Emperor, perhaps even too wise an Emperor.

Therefore, when faced with someone who could not share in the exceptionally perceptive sight of the Emperor, Vincent was rather cold-hearted. For that reason, the people around him were urged to stake their lives on the line in the endeavor to try and understand what the Emperor saw.

The Emperor had deemed that acceptable; however it seemed as if he had lost just that.

Vincent: “However, you have made quite the bold move, have you not?”

Suddenly, as if to sever Gustav’s contemplation, Vincent spoke.

At the Emperor’s sentence, Gustav, still kneeling, closed his mouth with his fangs still sticking out, and awaited Vincent’s next words.

V!c.ll2o

As Vincent narrowed his sable eyes at Gustav's silence,

Vincent: "My order to you ought to have been the duty of the Gladiator Island's Governor. To think that you have abandoned that duty during this emergency, spearheading the island's gladiators to advance far east to the Imperial Capital… How dare such a person bring their one and only head before the Emperor, where it is natural to tremble?"

Sitting in a large chair, Vincent spoke these words with his chin resting in his hand atop the armrest; to the side, Idra could be heard making a noise with his throat.

It was a situation in which the height of disrespect had been directed toward the Emperor, in which any Imperial Citizen would be pessimistic that their life had been lost.

Gustav: "—. May I have the privilege of clarifying a few things?"

Vincent: "I shall allow it. However, choose your words carefully. Even if you lose two arms, you would still be able to continue working as an ordinary person, correct?"

But, Gustav did not succumb to such pessimism, and instead discourteously responded to the Emperor. With a gaze that could be described as sadistic or inflammatory, Vincent allowed it.

Before him, Gustav was astonished with how calm he was. Being inclined to act this way was likely the influence of the courageous boy who was more fearless than anybody else.

Gustav: "Your Excellency the Emperor, you have stated that, in my capacity, I have abandoned the duty of Governor, but in reality that is not the case. And in addition, the one spearheading the gladiators is not me, as the official, but—"

Vincent: "It is not you?"

Gustav: "—It is the honorable son of Your Excellency the Emperor."

Vincent’s reaction at that moment was likely something that Gustav would never forget for the rest of his life.

Vincent: “□□□”

In an instant, Vincent’s sable eyes widened, and he made a wretchedly uncouth expression.

That reaction could not be accurately described with any other words than “being attacked in an unguarded moment”. It was evidence that for Vincent, both the speaker and the content spoken went far beyond his expectations.

Vincent placed his hand over his mouth and erased that rare expression, then,

Vincent: “I had evaluated your devotion to your professional duties as having no leeway.”

Gustav: “In my capacity, I am in agreement. But, if things had proceeded in line with the thoughts of Your Excellency the Emperor and myself, as the official, I would be doing nothing but watching over this major crisis of the Empire from the far reaches of the west.”

Perhaps, if Schwartz had not outrageously seized control of the Gladiator Island, Gustav would still be remaining on the island during this major crisis of the Empire, fully immersed in his duty of managing the gladiators.

Even if something had happened to Vincent in the Imperial Capital, he would have obediently performed the professional duties appointed to him; perhaps, he would have even thought of producing results that nobody would appraise as some sort of farewell gift.

That such a thing had not come to pass, that such a version of himself had not been left behind, relieved him from the bottom of his heart.

Instigated by Schwartz, he had interpreted the Emperor’s order in a rather self-centered way—That he could decide for himself whether this was the “emergency”, even if it was the result of perverting it to the fullest extent in order to hasten to the Imperial Capital, that was the case.

Vincent: “—The Emperor would have perished along with the Imperial Capital, and he would have likely put you lot to good use.”

Gustav: “Your Excellency the Emperor?”

Contrary to Gustav, who thought he could affirm his own judgment regardless of whether it was correct or not, Vincent’s spoken words sounded pregnant with some other speculation.

But, Vincent did not try to touch upon the speculation that had shown itself.

Instead, Vincent shook his head, and,

Vincent: “That shall do fine, I shall go along with what you say. In the midst of this situation contending for the survival of the Empire, magnificently exert yourself to win pardon for the gladiators, and to keep your own position. —Stand down.”

Gustav: “Yessir. As much as my arms allow, in my capacity, I shall work myself until my body is ruined.”

Between Gustav and Vincent, there was a mutual understanding that they were treating this as the “emergency”.

Whether Gustav had deviated from the professional duties of Governor of the Gladiator Island or not would be proved by the work done by Gustav himself and the Pleiades Battalion from here on out.

He did not have the confidence that they could definitely accomplish that. But, at this moment, Gustav thought that he would at least finish things without regretting what Schwartz had instigated.

Indeed, it was at the moment that Gustav slightly contorted the ends of his mouth, and was about to excuse himself from before the Emperor.

Idra: “W-with all due respect, Your Excellency the Emperor, there’s a question I’d like to… hk”

With his forehead rubbing against the floor, Idra suddenly began to speak, causing Gustav to reflexively gasp.

With a quivering voice, Idra discourtesy spoke so to Vincent, skillfully tilting his head upwards in his prostrated position, and directed his eyes, still on the verge of tears, to the Emperor.

Idra, who had displayed his willpower in the Sparka of the island, possessed admirable courage, but refusing to yield after being ordered to stand down by the Emperor was, as expected, an exceedingly outrageous action that did not value his own life.

However—

Vincent: “—What is it?”

At Vincent’s unthinkable response, Gustav was utterly flabbergasted once more.

At that great opportunity, Idra extended his arms without hesitation, and he did not miss his chance. Like a gladiator, making full use of their instincts during a critical moment on which their life was staked, Idra moved his parched lips, and released the prompted question.

That was—

Idra: “Your Excellency, after this battle, what do you intend to do to your honorable son… to Prince Schwartz?”

Gustav: “Missanga?!”

It was an inappropriate and ill-timed question that nobody except the bravest person in the whole Empire would be able to ask.

The rumor of the black-haired Crown Prince that had arisen all across the lands was inseparable from the great civil war that would be left in the history of the Empire, at least before the circumstances were painted over with the battle between the living and the dead.

Originally, the details behind the start of the Pleiades Battalion were that Schwartz had expressed his determination to clash with Vincent, so that was the overall objective of the battalion.

Therefore, it was natural for Idra to desire that answer from Vincent.

The problem was, that was an ultimate disrespect that posed a very real threat to his life, but Idra was so overwhelmed by tension that he was unable to recognize that.

Gustav: “□□□”

During the moment of silence that was yielded, Gustav became aware of the rare discomposure within himself.

Thinking back on it, all of his discomposure in recent memory had been due to either Schwartz or Cecilus; for Idra to be added to that list was an event that made the world seem bleak.

Unconsciously, even Gustav tried to escape from the reality unfolding before his eyes—

Vincent: “—Idra Missanga.”

Vincent’s lips called out Idra’s name.

Receiving that, not just Idra, but Gustav also gazed in wonder, and they both gulped down their saliva. Before the two of them, the Emperor rearranged his crossed legs, and continued.

Vincent: “It is not my place to be concerned with the validity of his actions.”

Vincent’s answer could not be said to have a comprehensible meaning.

The notion that Vincent, who stood at the apex of this Empire, did not have the right to make a decision regarding Schwartz’s position; there was nobody who could be satisfied upon being told that.

But, more than that, Idra could not be permitted to continue persisting.

Vincent: “Stand down while your head is still attached to your torso. —Any more than this shall be disrespect.”

Having overlooked everything until now, the Emperor now explicitly drew a clear line; with that as a start, Gustav hurriedly hoisted up Idra with two of his arms, and used his other two arms to close his mouth.

With Idra, who was likely the luckiest man in this Fortified City, or perhaps even in this Empire tonight, being carried in his arms, Gustav gave a very deep bow to Vincent.

And then—

Gustav: “I sincerely beg for your honorable mercy on Prince Schwartz’s honorable position.”

Sharing in Idra’s good luck, Gustav used it to his advantage and left behind that final comment, and the curtain was closed on the act of explaining their departure from the Gladiator Island.

2

Vincent: “So, he was even able to cause Gustav Morello to speak in such a manner. That man is someone I am incapable of fully reading.”

Gustav had carried Idra like a criminal, and departed while adding a comment that would have been fine if left unsaid. Seeing off that back, Vincent quietly sighed.

Not only had he been unexpectedly sent to the Gladiator Island, but he had twisted the thoughts of all the gladiators there, and of Gustav, who was honestly devoted to his professional duties; that fact deserved praise.

To be honest, no matter how much the person in question may deny it, his actions were to the extent that him not being a Stargazer seemed not to make any logical sense.

Anyhow—

Vincent: “Even if they are included in the city’s defenses, it shall be far from stable. We must not cut corners in selecting the offense against the Imperial Capital, but…”

Vincent had many thoughts on how they ought to be handled.

The personnel from the Kingdom’s side were being selected by their own intelligent individuals, and in an alliance with them, this side also needed to turn over a suitable hand. Berstetz and Serena would remain in the Fortress City, and regarding tactics, Goz’s presence would function more than well enough.

In the sense of plain fighting strength, the shortage of the personnel joining the strike force would hurt, but—

Vincent: “The personnel who triumph in large-scale tactics are irreplaceable. That point likely has more value than if ten Ceciluses were left behind… There being ten of him would be nothing short of a nightmare, but I suppose the reason why he has still yet to converge is that something in the Imperial Capital has piqued his curiosity. Him causing the destruction of our country is something I would like to avoid.”

Everyone who was aware of the level of danger posed by the Stone and Cecilus’s nature harbored the same fear; that Cecilus would massacre the undead, sucking the mana of the Great Spirit dry.

Similar to how Halibel had suppressed the black dragon at the coupled dragon carriages, he did not think Cecilus would lag behind the undead even if his limbs were shorter, but the very fact that he would not lag behind was the very problem.

Vincent: “Supposing that causes the ruination of the country, I suppose it would be that damn Chisha’s responsibility for picking him up that day. The very notion of his predictions being off the mark is a nice feeling, but…”

He was not enough of a madman to laugh in delight because of that, and it was unclear if there was even enough time to be laughing in delight.

Indeed, right as Vincent reaffirmed within himself the reason for hastening—

???: "—Oi, hold on! I told ya that I can't let ya in, Most Honorable Empress Consort!"

???: "Like! I! Said! I still haven't said that I'm okay with that!"

Hearing a sudden loud voice from beyond the door, an odd flavor was mixed into Vincent's contemplation.

A hoarse, clamorous voice and an angry, shrill voice sounded, and as Vincent lifted his face, before him was the door being vigorously thrown open from the other side.

???: "Abel-chin! Gimme a minute!"

Vincent: "I shall not."

Having kicked open the door and marched in, it was a tall woman with fluttering, long blonde hair. Stepping forth before the Emperor with two barbarian swords fastened to her waist, it was Medium O'Connell who brazenly performed that outrageous action which seemed to be devoid of sanity.

Behind Medium, Jamal Aurélie, who had been positioned in front of the door, wore a deplorable expression, and Vincent pierced him with a chilly gaze.

Vincent: "I ordered you to only let through the ones which I said to let through, did I not?"

Jamal: "Y-yes, that's true, but… When the person is the Most Honorable Empress Consort, a low ranking soldier like me ain't got a clue on what to do… hk"

Vincent: "In that case, if a General of higher rank were to appear with a rebellious spirit, you would be powerless?"

Jamal: "Yes! No! Since between Your Excellency and a General, I think Your Excellency is definitely higher. But, I don't really understand the position of Most Honorable Empress Consort… that's all!"

While his vulgarity was always on display, Jamal showed that he was carefully selecting his words. At his response, Vincent decided to give up on it for now, and looked at Medium, who stood in an imposing way.

Medium, who had marched in with heavy breathing, gave a very different impression to what he had heard.

Vincent: "I had heard that you had confined yourself in a room, and were whimpering to yourself."

Medium: "Who said that I was whimpering! That's not like me at all! Though, just a little… I may have cried just a little…!"

Vincent: "It was your brother, Flop O'Connell."

Medium: "Big bro! Big bro! Why did you say such a thing~?!"

Flop: "That is quite simple, dear sister. Of course, facing the forthcoming conflict between honorable consorts, it is so that His Excellency the Emperor-kun will have a strong concern and desire to protect Medium!"

Medium vigorously turned around, and prompted by her, Flop ungrudgingly confessed his plan with a foolish look on his face.

Vincent no longer said anything to Jamal, who had just let Flop pass freely, but he did not have the time to go along with the sibling quarrel that was beginning here.

Medium: "I said it to Jamal-chin as well but, I haven't agreed to that! It's not that I hate Abel-chin, but I don't know what I would do as the Most Honorable Empress Consort!"

Flop: "I see, I see. But, dear sister. You're my little sister, but did you become my sister while knowing what a sister ought to do? Or did you become my sister without knowing anything in particular… Am I wrong?"

Medium: “Huh? Eh, now that you mention it…”

Flop: “In that case, it isn’t important whether you know how to become something or not. What matters is the feelings of trying to become that thing, and the surrounding environment. You could even say that the foundations of a little sister and the Most Honorable Empress Consort are the same thing!”

Medium: “Ohh~! I get it, you’re incredible, big bro… You aren’t deceiving me, right, big bro?!”

After being tricked for just a moment, Medium furiously lashed out, and Flop said “I guess there’s no helping it~” as he placed his hand on the forehead of his sodden face.

Though, it did not seem like a sudden occurrence of a quarrel between siblings.

Vincent: “Come not before me with matters that you have not even settled amongst yourselves. I am busy. Jamal, take them away.”

Medium: “Ah, wait, wait! Right now it doesn’t matter whether I’m the Most Honorable Empress Consort or not! Wanting Abel-chin to give me a minute wasn’t about that…”

Vincent: “What is it?”

Medium: “I also want to go to the Imperial Capital!”

With a firm sound, Medium struck her hand against her chest, and clearly stated her request.

Hearing that request, Vincent furrowed his brow. Then, next to Medium, who wore a brave expression, Flop raised a finger and said “May I?”,

Flop: “You might be surprised by such a sudden thing, but this isn’t just an idea that my sister came up with. Right before we arrived at this town, the final one we saw in that dragon carriage.”

Vincent: “—Balleroy Temeglyph, was it?”

Flop: “Yeah, that’s right.”

As Flop nodded without surprise, Vincent recalled the final conflict on the coupled dragon carriages.

Subaru had made the girl whom he had started to call Spica do something, and as a result, the resurrection of the undead Lamia became defective, and Vincent stabbed her with his own hands.

Then, controlling a deceased flying dragon, the one who had taken away Vincent’s sister who was dying once again was the Magical Sharpshooter, Balleroy Temeglyph.

Having laid eyes upon Balleroy there, Medium had certainly said something.

Medium: “Ballebro…”

In a weak, feeble voice, Medium muttered so.

Her voice quavering, she called that out to the fleeing Balleroy many times over.

Flop: “Medium and I have an old fellowship with Balleroy. In the past, he helped us out a lot at High Countess Dracroy’s place. For Balleroy to be there… there’s no way we could have ever expected to reunite with him in such a way.”

Vincent: “To call that a reunion, would be perhaps a bit too ironic.”

In response to Vincent’s words, Flop spoke “Yeah” in a voice that was unusually somber for him.

Medium and Flop, the two of them harbored complex feelings regarding the undead Balleroy; if someone they were very close with had appeared in a form completely different to when they were alive, the heartache incurred was something Vincent could understand.

But—

Vincent: “□□□”

Vincent would never disclose that he could sympathize with those emotions, no matter what.

At the very least, he had given his resurrected sister her last rites by his own hand.

Vincent: “So, how does the relationship between you siblings and Balleroy connect to your previous request?”

Medium: “Abel-chin is smart, so you should know what I’m trying to say, right? But the way you just said that had a really unpleasant feeling, so it’d be better if you stopped with that.”

Vincent: “□□□”

Medium: “I want to meet Ballebro and talk to him. Even if I have no clue what he’s thinking, having become like that, I want to talk to him. After all…”

At first she was vigorous, however, gradually faltering, she chose words to try and accurately convey the feelings in her heart; as Medium did so, her words came to a pause.

The most important words, in order to choose them in the most accurate way possible, she earnestly contemplated, and,

Medium: “After all, I wanted to become Ballebro’s bride.”

Vincent: “—. So it is naught but an emotional argument.”

Responding so to the teary-eyed Medium’s appeal, Vincent looked towards Flop.

Flop was the one who had endorsed Medium, who was still on the verge of bursting out crying, to become one of his consorts. Rather than ambition, the true motivation was likely more strongly concerned for Medium’s well-being.

Vincent: “Is it agreeable with you to not stop your sister from heading towards such a deadly place?”

Flop: “Oyaoya, Your Excellency the Emperor-kun, it seems you don’t understand just how much my sister and I treasure our everyday conversations. Of course, before coming here I did all I could to try and stop her, but she shook me off through sheer force, and I just finished reapplying all of my bandages!”

Vincent: “In other words, she overcame you through brute force, hm? It is unexpected that she is able to disregard her brother’s recommendations.”

Medium: “I love big bro, and what big bro says is generally always correct. But, me and big bro are different people, so there are times when we want to do different things. Now is one of those times.”

As if she could not be stopped by force or by words, Medium regained the springiness in her voice.

Witnessing her forceful appeal, Vincent pondered for a while.

In the sense of plain strength, Medium’s capabilities were just a little better than a rank and file Imperial Soldier.

Jamal, who could not even follow simple commands, likely had a higher level of sword ability. It was difficult to imagine she would make dramatic contributions to the progress of the battle, were she to be brought along.

However, on the contrary, that would mean her presence would not influence the war situation.

Vincent: “—Do as you please.”

Medium: “—! Really? Abel-chin…”

Vincent: “Do not be doubtful that your request has been accepted. Whether you are present or not shall not impact the war situation. But, that is exactly why you shall need to take that responsibility upon yourself.”

Medium: “That means…”

Medium was astonished by his initial response, but Vincent’s following words made her blink her eyes. Seeing Medium in such a state, Flop interjected with “In other words”,

Flop: “You will need to defend yourself. They don’t have the strength to spare in order to protect Medium, that’s what he means.”

Vincent: “Indeed. Without that resolve, throwing yourself into the maelstrom of battle would be…”

Medium: “What, in that case it’ll be okay! Needing to defend myself is something that I’ve been doing all along when I was traveling with big bro.”

Vincent: “□□□”

As he tried to convey that she was mistaken if she intended to receive protection because she was an Empress Consort Candidate, Vincent’s expectations were swiftly betrayed by Medium herself.

Medium had been anxious about what she was being told, but she patted her chest in relief as if she had just been given a trivial condition.

Medium: “Jeez~, I was so nervous about what exactly you were telling me~. But, I’m glad that Abel-chin isn’t as ill-natured as I had feared.”

Being told something roughly in line with his expectations, Vincent contorted his lips into a slightly dejected expression.

At any rate, that was Medium’s declaration after having spoken her request, and comprehending the danger that would come in that situation.

If that was the case, Vincent had nothing else to add.

Vincent: “Tomorrow morning.”

Medium: “Eh?”

Vincent: “Tomorrow morning, the selected personnel shall head for the Imperial Capital. Make your preparations.”

Informing her curtly, Vincent then looked towards Flop.

Vincent: “You are not going to say that even you shall come along, are you? I shall say this now, but I have no intention of discussing whether it is right or wrong for someone who is unable to protect themself to volunteer for suicide in such a manner.”

Flop: “Thanks for your concern. As one would expect, I don’t intend to willingly go to my death. I don’t want to be an impediment to my sister either… The matter of Balleroy, I’m entrusting it to Medium.”

Medium: “Big bro…”

Vincent: “—. Though, there is no way to be confident that they shall meet.”

Without commenting on Flop’s determination, Vincent touched on the possibility that their desire might not be fulfilled.

However, at Vincent’s words, Flop gave a smile.

Flop: “Don’t worry, they’ll definitely meet.”

Vincent: “For what reason do you think so?”

Flop: “I have faith in fate. It may be ill-natured, but it shouldn’t be so tactless.”

That baseless appeal had the same persuasiveness as Medium’s earlier emotional argument.

But, Vincent avoided referring to this and that for now. If he said something, these siblings would each reply to Vincent with twice the amount he had spoken.

Besides, they would probably understand without him needing to tell them.

Medium: “Well then, Abel-chin, see you tomorrow! I’ll get bags under my eyes if I don’t get a good night’s sleep!”

With a big wave of her hand, Medium gallantly turned around.

In her bolt-upright back, there was not a single trace of the fact that she had tears in her eyes just moments before. If those were not fake tears, he could only feel that she was a girl of hectic emotions.

Then Flop, who ought to have been following Medium out, suddenly halted his step, and,

Flop: “Your Excellency the Emperor-kun, thank you.”

Vincent: “This gratitude is in regards to what, exactly?”

Flop: “For taking Medium’s… no, for taking both of our feelings into consideration. Also, for not rebuking Medium, even though she liked Balleroy. You know, since she’s a candidate to be your honorable consort.”

With a pleased look on his face, Flop touched his forehead.

For that reason, Vincent responded by snorting his nose, as if to question what Flop was saying.

Medium’s feelings of wanting to meet Balleroy; the very notion of gratitude for having not rebuked such a thing.

Vincent: “To punish love? Anyone who performs such a boorish deed must be miserable.

Giving an awfully delighted smile at that reply, Flop was an eyesore to Vincent.

Chapter 34:
Won’t Forgive You Until You Explain

1

—The morning of departure for the Imperial Capital of Lupugana had arrived.

At the entrance to the Fortified City of Garkla, refugees from the Imperial Capital and surrounding areas continued to arrive in droves throughout the morning, swelling to a number that even the cities which could accommodate the greatest numbers of people could not hold.

Everyone was busy dealing with and responding to the situation, but unfortunately, it was not a matter that anyone unaffiliated with the Empire could do or say anything about.

That was why the tasks entrusted to them needed to be accomplished properly.

If they were not done properly—

???: “Though it really, really pains me… I cannot really be of any help to you.”

The pink-haired boy’s small shoulders scrunched up in frustration, and as if feeling the same pain he was, Emilia clenched her fists.

Emilia understood all too well the pain of not being able to do what one desired to do because one was not strong enough.

Moreover, this boy—Schult, was a young child. Emilia, too, had been unable to be there for her loved ones when she was a child.

So, she was painfully aware of Schult’s feelings.

Schult: “Emily-sama, I entreat you. Please, I’d like you to save Priscilla-sama, Al-sama, and Heinkel-sama.”

With round eyes filled with tears, Schult begged Emilia for help.

It took a lot of courage for such a small child to hold back his tears and beg someone to help the people he loved.

It was something Emilia could not have done. So, she respected Schult's bravery.

That was why Emilia would bring home to Schult a different ending than her's back then.

Emilia: "Yeah, leave it to me. I appreciate you asking me to do this."

Schult: "Emily-sama…"

Emilia: "Because with this, no matter what Priscilla says to try to keep me away, I can say back to her that you asked with a please properly!"

With a thump on her own chest, Emilia reassured Schult with those words.

As Schult heard this, his round eyes widened even more, and his expression quickly brightened,

Schult: "Yes ma'am! Priscilla-sama is not being honest with herself, so I hope you will talk back to her!"

Schult's voice regained some of its energy, even if it was a bit hollow, and Emilia, trying to match Schult's words, nodded back firmly with a "Yes!"

???: "Em is reliable. But it's dangerous. It's better if Bae watches over you."

???: "…You don't need to say anything, since that was already the intention, I suppose."

As Emilia and Schult spoke, two little girls exchanged words with each other.

Beatrice, Emilia’s escort, and Utakata, Schult’s escort, watched Emilia and Schult’s exchange with satisfaction, then exchanged glances with each other,

Beatrice: “It’s probably not completely safe here, either, in fact. It would be a good idea to stay hidden here with your head in your hands, along with that Schult boy, so you won’t be seen, I suppose.”

Utakata: “When push comes to shove, Uu will protect Shuu and fight, and Bae will also do her best with Suu and the others.”

Beatrice: “…Good grief, what an encouraging thing to say, in fact.”

Despite their outward physical appearances, as the two girls had a difference in age on the inside, they pledged to fight well and exchanged their resolve for the battle that would foretell the fate of the Vollachian Empire.

2

And then, somewhere a little further away—

Medium: “—Well, I’m off now, big bro! Big Sis Serena!”

Declaring in a lively and loud voice, Medium veered a courageous smile to the two people seeing her off.

Medium was included in the group storming the Imperial Capital, and seeing her off was her brother Flop, of course, along with the nostalgic person to whom she was greatly indebted, Serena Dracroy, whom she had reunited with on this battlefront.

Flop and Medium had been under Serena’s care for a long time since they were children, and with the white scar on her face included among her beautiful features, she was bidding Medium farewell as the latter headed for the warfront.

That was just like when the siblings of Flop and Medium had left her hands, and had departed on a journey all by themselves over five years ago.

Serena: “To think that not only did Medium surpass me in height, but even in position. If you settle into the position of His Excellency's consort with no issues, remember that you are indebted to me in plenty."

Medium: "Jeez~, I'm trying not to think about that right now! From here on out, I'm going to meet Ballebro, so I don't need to be doing things like thinking about Abel-chin."

Serena: "Yeah. You aren't that clever of a girl. That's exactly why…"

Stepping up to Medium, Serena gently caressed the former's cheek.

Serena was quite tall for a woman, but Medium was even taller than that. However, when Medium was before Serena being touched like this, she felt like she had returned to when she was still a little girl.

In the past, on their day of departure, Serena had also brushed Medium's face like this. Touching the same place as where her own white scar was located, she gently traced it with her finger.

Serena: "I envy you, being able to so unwaveringly desire a dialogue with him."

Medium: "Big Sis Serena…"

Serena: "With both Balleroy and Miles, I was unable to exchange any final words. On this occasion, too, it seems like I won't be granted the opportunity to speak with Balleroy… Whether that's painful, or if that's a relief, I myself don't know. Though, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Fearless, was the impression Medium had of Serena.

When she had usurped the household from her father, even when he was screaming out complaints and carved a lifelong wound into her face, Serena did not even change her expression; or so Medium had heard.

Serena: "That is a lie. It was painful, as were my father's words. I simply shed blood instead of tears."

Flop: “Umm? I wonder about that. In times that are really painful, aren’t tears something that are shed even when blood is also being shed? With that in mind, there’s no way that Countess Dracroy didn’t…”

Serena: “Be quiet, shut up.”

Silencing Flop with a chilly voice as he wracked his brain, Serena, still touching Medium’s face, narrowed her eyes and looked at the latter in a loving way.

Serena: “The scar on my face was something I needed to gain in order to be born anew. I don’t wish for you to similarly bear a wound, but I do wish for you to gain something.”

Medium: “…Yes. Big Sis Serena, is there something you want to tell Ballebro? I’ll definitely deliver the message.”

Serena: “—. Yeah.”

At Medium’s determination, Serena had the resolve to give a message, and pausing for a moment, she deliberated. But, being quite a wise woman, she immediately returned an answer to Medium’s question.

That which she wished to tell Balleroy, that would be—

Serena: “—Hurry up and sleep. Miles is complaining that it’s getting boring without you.”

In a manner truly characteristic of Serena, stern but with certain love, it was a message filled with heartfelt emotion towards someone who could neither be called her subordinate nor her sworn younger brother.

3

Idra: “—Schwartz, in the worst case scenario, I won’t blame you if you don’t come back.”

Subaru: “Oi, oi.”

Idra said that with a serious face, and Subaru reflexively opened his eyes wide.

He quickly tried to retort with, “I can’t believe you’re making jokes at a time like this,” but Idra’s serious expression did not collapse, so he ended up missing the chance.

In place of Subaru, it was Hiain who said with his voice raised, “Don’t be saying stupid shit!”

The lizardman glared at Idra, and blinking his round eyes in surprise,

Hiain: “Tell me, bastard, the fuck d’ya think you’re saying! What d’ya mean it’s okay if he doesn’t come back! Don’t tell me you’re telling bro to go die, are you!”

Idra: “Don’t get me wrong, but yeah.”

Hiain: “Huh?! I didn’t get nothing wrong! You’re a traitor! There’s a traitor among us! Bro, what the hell, this is real bad!”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait, calm down, Hiain. Isn’t it strange for Idra to say such a thing suddenly? There’s no way.”

Idra’s face fell as Hiain lunged at him. Although he was in a very serious mood, Subaru was not so dim-witted as to take his words at face value.

Rather, his relationship with Idra was not something of that sort.

Subaru: “So, why did you say something like that? Come on, tell me why.”

Idra: “…Together with Governor Gustav, I had an audience with His Excellency the Emperor. During it, I asked something. I asked His Excellency the Emperor what he was planning to do to you, Schwartz.”

Idra clenched his fist tightly and said this bitterly, to which Subaru responded with an “Ohh.”

He had heard that Gustav was going to talk to Abel the night before, but not that Idra was also present there, and that he had dropped quite the bombshell.

However, if Idra was indeed there, then that was a natural question to ask.

Originally, the members of the Pleaides Battalion were a group centered around Subaru, created with the objective of him delivering a wallop to the face of the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.

It was because of the zombie panic that the situation had remained unsettled; but, once that issue was resolved, there would once again be a need to give a conclusion to the civil war.

That said, it took a lot of courage to directly question Abel about the matter.

Hiain: "R-really… then, did the Emperor say what he's gonna do with bro?"

Idra: "His Excellency the Emperor said, whether Schwartz lives or dies depends on his own performance…"

Hiain: "H-he's got the damn nerve to fucking mess around…! Ain't that just mean it depends on how the Emperor feels?"

Upon hearing the information Idra had brought back, Hiain's voice trembled with anger.

In Subaru's mind, he could see Abel saying that and roughly guess his intention, but to them, who did not know Abel's personality, it would sound like an excuse to provide a reason to get rid of Subaru after the war.

Subaru: "So, is that why you told me to die?"

Hiain: "Ahh? So, you're betraying bro and joining the Emperor…"

Subaru: "That's not it, he did that to tell me to run away, right?"

Subaru interrupted Hiain, who was over extrapolating, and Idra nodded at his words.

And as Idra cast down his eyes in frustration,

Idra: “It was His Excellency the Emperor who brought the Imperial citizens together amidst the chaos that was spreading as the dead were being revived in droves. The seeds of discontent that led to the civil war will be uprooted once this situation is under control… If he survives, Emperor Vincent’s throne will be secured.”

Hiain: “Wh-What if bro achieves something huge?! Like, taking down the enemy’s boss with one punch…”

Idra: “Even then, it’s tricky. He will be recognized by His Excellency the Emperor for his deeds, kept for a while, and then once the dust settles, he might be assassinated somewhere.”

Subaru: “Once again, the Vollachian Empire is too cruel…”

The fact that this was not overthinking for Idra and Hiain showed that this was a national custom in the Empire.

At the very least, he hoped that Abel would mellow out once his position was restored, but at this present moment it would be hard to completely change Idra and the others’ opinion.

But, he felt sorry for Idra and Hiain, who were worrying and trying to find a way to overcome this.

Subaru: “I won’t pretend to be dead. Of course, I won’t actually die either. I’ll be sure to return. When I do, there’s something I need to tell everyone.”

Idra: “Schwartz…”

Subaru: “Don’t make such a grave expression. The result of all of this… I don’t know if it’ll be resolved peacefully, but I think that the worst case scenario can be avoided.”

In any case, the “Struggle for the Imperial Throne” that both of them were most concerned about would crumble at the initial premise.

He was worried about what would become of his relationship with his comrades in the battalion, but Subaru would have no other option but to convey his sincere and heartfelt apology to them.

Subaru: “I’ll definitely come back. —That’s why, you can stop stowing away on the dragon carriage, Weitz.”

???: “Guh…”

Subaru called that out, and a muffled voice could be heard.

As Idra and Hiain looked all around, wondering where it had come from, Subaru sighed and crouched down.

Behind where Subaru and the others were conversing, there was a dragon carriage scheduled to depart with the assault team on board.

Beneath the carriage, clinging to the shaft of the running wheels, was the figure of a tattooed man. The image of a skull etched onto his body, Weitz reluctantly emerged from there.

Subaru: “No matter how much the shaking is stopped by the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, if you cling there for a whole day, you’d naturally just fall to your death.”

Weitz: “I’ve entrusted my life to ya… If I died for yer sake, I’d be satisfied…”

Subaru: “If you fell to your death quietly without anyone knowing, that wouldn’t be dying for my sake!”

Weitz, whose sense of camaraderie was directed in the wrong way, fell silent with a “Ngh…” upon Subaru’s remark.

Then, as both Hiain and Idra stepped forward,

Hiain: “Listen here, didn’t ya fucking promise to obediently protect this place until bro returned! This ain’t the time for ya to try and rush ahead, traitorous bastard!”

Weitz: “Shut up, don’t lump me together with that disgusting bearded fucker over there…!”

Idra: “Stop treating me as a traitor! You should know by now that it’s not like that!”

Subaru: “Heyyy, calm down! Stop making a fuss! Get along!”

Seeing the three start their usual banter, Subaru intervened and placed a hand on his hip.

Indeed, these were members whom he had become so familiar with that he could sense that this was their usual behavior. But, they had to remain in the Fortified City, preparing for the forthcoming battle against the horde of zombies.

With their strength and resilience, the group whose resistance to death was now the best in the Empire—In the battle against the zombies that would not die even if killed, there was not a force as reliable as the Pleiades Battalion.

Subaru: “I’m counting on everyone here. A lot of my precious allies are staying here. Unlike you guys, these allies can’t fight… er, relatively they can’t fight.”

Hiain: “Be precise with yer words!”

Rem, Ram, and the others remaining in the city flashed in his mind; it would be a lie to say that they were completely unable to fight, yet he could also not confidently say that he had no worries about those members joining the battle, leading Subaru’s answer to be quite ambiguous.

Hearing Hiain raise his voice significantly, Subaru made a wry smile.

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s not about whether they can fight or not, it’s that I don’t want to let all those people fight. That’s where you guys differ. Fight to your heart’s content!”

Idra: “…That’s genuine trust, and we can take it as such, correct?”

Subaru: “That’s right. Weitz, please understand that too.”

Weitz: “□□□”

He looked at Hiain and Idra, then finally at Weitz, and spoke to them. Weitz crossed his arms, closing his intense, intimidating eyes that were accented by the skull-like tattoo.

After a moment of contemplation, Weitz slowly uncrossed his arms, and,

Weitz: “Und… und-und… und…er…”

Subaru: “Please understand that too!”

Weitz: “Understood… hk”

With an overwhelming sense of a bitter decision, Weitz agreed to Subaru’s plan.

Weitz then slowly extended his hand towards Subaru and placed it on his shoulder. And in an unusual, gentle voice,

Weitz: “Now that I’ve said it, make sure ya come back, bro…”

Subaru: “Ah.”

He was slightly taken aback, however Subaru quickly returned a smile, and as he nodded,

Subaru: “Got it, bro.”

With this, he felt compelled not only to respond to the outstretched hand, but to live up to their trust as well.

Upon hearing that, Weitz smiled with satisfaction. However—

Hiain: “Oi oi oi oi, don’t fucking copy my way of calling people, ya thieving bastard!”

Weitz: “Ya just call him that on yer own… Schwartz actually called it back to me…”

Idra: “Don’t get into a pointless argument! I thought we were all on the same page?!”

Subaru: “Hey, stop it! Bros!!”

Once again, diffusing the bickering that began for different reasons, Subaru regretted the coming parting with these troublesome brothers.

4

???: “You ought to be aware of the role you must play. Do not neglect to remember that whether or not your life shall outlast the war depends on your work.”

???: “Auau.”

As the girl nodded with an obedient look on her face, presumably with the intention of doing so, Vincent closed a single eye.

The very power possessed by the girl carried around by Natsuki Subaru, outrageously professed as a Sin Archbishop, was a silver bullet against the undead arising one after the other.

Even if that were true, operating a plan which incorporated the cooperation of a Sin Archbishop would be an impossibility for the Vollachian Empire, which was said to be eccentric by other nations.

To begin with, it would be an impossible prerequisite to have a situation in which a Sin Archbishop’s cooperation could be obtained.

???: “Your Excellency! The preparations for the dragon carriage are complete! If everything proceeds without a hitch, it will not be long before you reach the Imperial Capital, even if it is not with the coupled dragon carriages!”

Goz’s voice reached Vincent, who was facing the girl—Spica, with a voice that could have been heard from over the mountain. Of course, since he was beside Vincent and not on the other side of the mountain, the volume of his voice was excessive.

At any rate—

Vincent: “If the Stone had already run out of energy by the time we arrive, there will be no discussion. You have strict orders, too. Do not kill the undead needlessly.”

Goz: “A war without death or killing is something so unfamiliar, but I will endeavor to ensure that all officers and men receive your venerable orders! But…”

Goz paused and clenched his fist, which was as big as a child’s head. Even without looking at his profile, one could see that he was contorting the sword scars on his face in frustration.

And sure enough, Goz’s stern, earth-shaking voice, trembling with frustration,

Goz: “Please, would I be able to accompany you!!”

Spica: “Au.”

Goz’s appeal was too vigorous and forceful to be contained, and Spica recoiled as if she felt the wind in her face; Vincent even felt the sound quaver on his skin.

Not only could he rampage with his favored mace, but even without it, Goz’s vocal volume made the world quake.

Vincent: “But, no matter how much you lament, the decision shall not be overturned.”

Goz: “Your Excellency!”

Vincent: “Aside from you, the only two who can serve as commanders are High Countess Dracroy and General Second-Class Zikr Osman. Even if both of them can be entrusted with a battlefield, a whole war is a separate matter.”

Goz: “That is…”

Vincent: “Now with that damned Chisha gone, I cannot entrust the entire army to anyone but you. You must understand the significance of that.”

Goz’s eyes widened, and his entire body stiffened at Vincent’s statement.

Berstetz was a civil officer, and Serena was competent as a High

Countess but not as military personnel. Zikr had no experience commanding such a large army, so there was no personel but Goz who could take overall command. That was Vincent's evaluation, devoid of conjecture.

Vincent: "I entrust you with all of my officers and men. Consider that the very survival of the Empire rests upon your strong shoulders."

Such was Vincent's comment, looking directly at Goz.

In response, Goz closed his eyes tightly and shook off his hesitation with that one act of meditation.

With a ferocity in his eyes worthy of being called the Lion Knight, Goz clasped his fists and palms together in front of his chest and vowed to Vincent.

Goz: "—. I, Goz Ralfon, will obey the venerable instruction of His Excellency!"

Vincent: "It is a great service."

Goz: "YES SIR!!"

With a brief statement, Goz bowed deeply to Vincent, who tucked his chin back.

He would have loved to accompany Vincent and serve as his guard, using his own strong arms to carry out the difficult task. However, Goz held his feelings in check, and instead—.

Goz: "I am counting on you, General Third-Class Aurélie! Honorably ensure the protection of His Excellency!"

Jamal: "Yeah, leave it to me, General First-Class Ralfon! Since I was specially selected, I'll fulfill my duty without fail!"

So Goz entrusted Jamal with this task, and the latter pounded his chest with vigor.

Designated by Vincent for the role of his guard, and even entrusted with that duty by Goz, he made a vulgar smile as his breathing grew heavy.

For one thing, the Aurélie household was a family of Low Counts, but they had none of the trappings of nobility.

But—

Goz: “Well stated! Precisely what one would expect from a soldier of the Vollachian Empire!!”

As Goz proudly threw out his strong chest and saw him off, this attitude was absolutely the way of Vollachia.

Considering that, Subaru and the people of the Kingdom, who were still difficult to handle, would have to be considered inappropriate personnel to use, even though they could understand and sympathize with each other.

Vincent: “Once again, do not become a useless tool in the eleventh hour.”

Spica: “Uu, au.”

With Goz and Jamal exchanging loudly, Vincent looked at Spica, who was covering her ears, and told her so.

At Vincent’s words, Spica’s lips pouted in a frown.

For some reason, Vincent felt like it coincided with the look on Medium’s face last night when she had been cautious about Vincent’s words and conduct, and he sighed.

And then—

5

—The three dragon carriages departed, a far cry from the number of people who arrived at Fortified City by beast carriage or on foot.

But it was undeniably a glimmer of hope sent out to prevent the Great Disaster that had struck the Vollachian Empire—or rather, the

Great Disaster that was about to destroy it.

Each of them, with their strong resolve and many hopes on their shoulders, would return to the Imperial Capital, now turned into a city of the undead, and there they would strike their leader, the Witch known as Sphinx.

That was why—

???: “…It’s unbelievable that Nii-san is joining them.”

Katya mumbled as she wheeled her wheelchair to the window and gazed at the scene below. Hearing this, Rem stood by her side, the corners of her eyes lowering.

Katya’s brother, Jamal, was one of the people heading to the Imperial Capital as Abel’s escort.

Rem did not have fond memories of her encounters with him, but as Katya’s older brother, she could not be overly antagonistic, as he was a difficult person to deal with.

However, it seemed that Abel trusted him enough to choose him as an escort in this last phase.

Katya: “Nii-san is simple, easy to handle and easy to discard; so that’s why.”

Rem: “No matter how Abel-san may be, I don’t think he’s that callous…”

Katya: “I don’t know. At least, Nii-san seems to want to come across that way… y-you heard what he said yesterday, didn’t you?”

Rem: “Uh, about that… yes.”

Katya looked at Rem with an upward glance, and as Rem could not excuse herself, she nodded her head.

When Jamal visited Katya last night, he reported that he had been chosen to accompany Abel to Imperial Capital, and then laughingly told Katya, Jamal: “Don’t worry, Katya. I’m going to die in style serving His Excellency, and then ya won’t need to suffer for the rest of your life because of the reward, even if that bastard Todd isn’t around!”

Rem: “It didn’t seem as if there was any malice in it.”

Katya: “S-some things can be bad even without any malice to them… Why is it that both Nii-san and Todd behave like that, even though it’s their lives? It’s really selfish…”

Perhaps, in his own way, Jamal was concerned about his sister Katya’s life as her brother, but Rem sincerely hoped that he would be more considerate of Katya’s feelings than her livelihood.

With the loss of Todd, her fiancé, if she were to lose her brother, Jamal, Katya would truly be all alone.

That was not a void able to be filled even if Rem were by her side as a friend.

Rem: “I felt so, too, when… When I was reunited with Nee-sama.”

Since she had no Memories, it was a new experience for Rem to meet Ram again.

However, even though Rem had no Memories of Ram, her “soul” remembered her, and her presence made her realize that she was not alone in this world.

For Katya, Jamal must also be like that.

And yet, that Jamal thought otherwise was a failure of Imperial culture.

Rem: “No matter what kind of Emperor Abel-san is, I don’t like the Empire very much…”

Katya: “…What a coincidence. I don’t have a favorite country or place, either.”

Rem: “At this point, I would agree.”

According to Subaru and Ram, Rem's home was a place called the Kingdom of Lugunica, a neighboring country.

Since Subaru so often criticized the Empire, the Kingdom must have been a more comfortable place to live compared to the Empire.

Nevertheless—

Rem: "—When this battle is over…"

Will I go to the Kingdom?

It would be hard to leave Ram, and she did not doubt that the Kingdom was her hometown. However, Rem now knew more things and people in the Empire than in the Kingdom.

She could not adequately imagine herself in an unfamiliar Kingdom.

Katya: "…Rem, it looks like they're leaving."

Suddenly, Katya called out to Rem, who was lost in thought.

When called, she looked out the window as well and saw three dragon carriages about to depart for the Imperial Capital.

Spica, Abel, and Subaru were all on board.

Katya: "Did you see him off properly?"

Rem: "We spoke at breakfast. You too Katya-san, did you talk to your brother…?"

Katya: "I said all I had to say. There was no point in getting angry, but I did get angry."

Katya turned her face away and made a bitter expression as she recalled the argument she had exchanged with Jamal.

But, in her own way, the words she had said to her brother, who was heading off to a dangerous place, were probably meant to convey her deepest feelings. That was why, Katya turned her gaze back toward Rem, Katya: “Did you say what you wanted to say?”

Rem: “…What I wanted to say, huh?”

Katya: “You seem to be kind of bummed out.”

Rem blinked with surprise at this very unexpected assessment.

“Bummed out” gave the impression of a child sulking. First of all, Rem was not sulking, as Katya was insinuating.

Rem: “There’s not even a reason to sulk…”

Katya: “If that’s true, then that’s fine I guess.”

Rem: “□□□”

When poked and prodded, Rem closed her lips at Katya’s words.

When she put it that way, it sounded like Rem was lying. Rem was not sulking, and there was no need for Rem to devote any more words to it.

Subaru was accompanied by both Emilia and Beatrice.

Spica and Abel were also accompanying him, as was Halibel, that very strong wolf man. Surrounded by such reliable people, he must have felt completely at ease.

That was why—

Katya: “I-I…”

Rem: “□□□”

Katya: “I regret it.”

With her face turned away, directing only her gaze to Rem, Katya hesitantly moved her lips.

There was no need to ask what it meant or what thoughts it would lead to.

Closing her eyes tightly, Rem, together with Katya, reached for the window where they had been watching the scene down below, and opened it as wide as they could.

Immediately after, a cool morning breeze flowed into the room of the fortress, caressing Rem's blue hair.

Mixed in with that breeze was a smell that could hardly be described as refreshing. The dragon carriages were on their way back to the place where this all began—

Rem: "—You better explain yourself when you get back!"

With a shout, Rem cast her wish toward the dragon carriages that were growing distant.

She could not say that she wished him a safe return. Nor that she wished them good luck. But, Katya had pushed her on, and she could not choose to not say anything.

As it was, this was the voice of the troubled Rem's heart.

Who the heck was Natsuki Subaru to Rem?

He was so desperate for Rem, and yet he already had Emilia and Beatrice. He risked his life for the Empire, and he watched over Spica for everyone's sake, but who was he?

Rem: "Until you tell me, I won't forgive you."

It was not because of his sinister, nose-curling stench.

A Rem without Memories; she wanted an answer as to how to think of him, who was around every corner in her newly created Memories.

Rem's loud voice was swallowed by the wind, and she was not sure if it had reached.

However, there was a small hand, a child's small hand, waving back at her through the open window at the tail end of the three departing dragon carriages.

Katya: “You look foolish. With that happy look on your face.”

—As Rem saw that, she thought she could hear Katya sigh those words.

Chapter 35:
Life-Threatening Work

1

???: “Huh? What did you say?”

???: “I shall not repeat myself three times. —As far as I can ascertain since I took the seat of the Emperor, I can match the faces and names of all of the Imperial citizens.”

???: “Are you an idiot?!”

With folded arms and a mysterious look, Abel’s absurd answer caused Subaru’s voice to flip.

The setting took place within a dragon carriage, en route from the Fortified City of Garkla towards the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, now turned into the stronghold of the undead.

There were three dragon carriages consisting of the Kingdom affiliates, Empire affiliates, necessary provisions, etc. This was the division of the assault team called the “Rescue the Vollachian Empire from destruction squad”. At present, Subaru had purposefully boarded the dragon carriage designated for the Empire affiliates.

His reason for doing so was not an act of betrayal towards the Kingdom but rather was driven by his desire to know—the reason the Emperor, Abel, had joined the assault team.

Naturally, considering the important fight for the survival of Vollachia, it was only natural for Abel to take a prominent position on the battlefield. However, having experienced numerous unfavorable situations alongside Abel, it could be said that while he had wisdom, he lacked combat prowess.

There was no compelling reason for him to accompany them when only pure military power would be called upon in the future.

Subaru never would have thought that even Abel would be under Vollachia's influence, so if he was going along with them, there must have been a reason to overturn that. However, there was a possibility that he did not want to disclose the reason in front of the Kingdom's people, so Subaru had taken the initiative to board this carriage.

Without beating around the bush, Subaru asked, "What will your role be?"—

Subaru: "Matching the faces and names of all of the citizens…"

Subaru's mouth was left wide open at such an absurd and aberrant statement. Seeing how outrageously surprised Subaru was, Abel furrowed his brows in displeasure.

Vincent: "Do not misunderstand me, I do not mean every single citizen of the Empire. Just like the People of Shudraq who continue to dwell in the forest, the identities of those who remain discreet and unexposed are impossible to grasp. As such, it is futile to try to fully grasp all of the citizens in the Empire."

Subaru: "What are you angry at, that's already dumb enough?! Because essentially, that means you remember all your subordinates, the Imperial Soldiers, right?"

Vincent: "It is necessary."

He put it concisely, but it was not the typical way an ordinary person would think.

Of course, one would not consider Abel to be an ordinary person, and the fact that he could match the faces and names of all the Imperial citizens was meaningful in the current situation.

Because—

Vincent: "For that girl to remove the yoke of the undead, their names are required."

With Abel's indifferent words, Subaru became concerned for Spica, who was seated at the edge of the dragon carriage.

Due to her situation, Spica could not be left unattended, hence why she, like Subaru, had boarded this dragon carriage. At the moment, she was sitting quietly, being comforted by both Medium as well as Beatrice, who steadfastly stayed by Subaru's side.

In order to fully utilize Spica's Authority, Abel's abnormality—his remarkable memory came in handy.

—Star Eating had too many unclear aspects regarding its manifestation.

When she had succeeded in using her Star Eating on Lamia Godwin, a royal family descendant, it seemed Spica did not eat her Name, as no one had forgotten her. Nevertheless, the alignment of face and Name appeared to be the key to that Authority.

Therefore, they had no choice but to rely on the method that had worked once.

Subaru: "Still, it pisses me off that your excessively foolish memory is useful for that purpose…"

???: "Schwartz-sama, that is a false accusation, is it not? Even if the person you are dealing with is the ruthless Emperor, who often treats Yorna-sama coldly."

Subaru: "Is that your advice for this guy? Or your dissatisfaction towards my facade?"

???: "Of course, my advice to Schwartz-sama, is it not?"

Tanza, the girl clad in a kimono, answered calmly and turned her face away from Abel's gaze.

She was part of the assault team, and it appeared that she had some thoughts regarding Abel that revolved around Yorna, the main reason for her involvement in this battle.

From what he had heard, Abel had been persistently rejecting Yorna's proposals of marriage. Hence, Tanza had no reason to have any favorable opinions regarding Abel, but rather negative ones, considering his cold treatment towards the Demon City.

Vincent: “I shall tell you this, what Yorna Mishigure desired was not me, but instead the former Emperor.”

Subaru: “Oh, is that so? Like your father or something?”

Vincent: “Farther back than that. If you wish to know more, you should question that person directly. The opportunity for that is still available, at least for now. Am I not correct, girl?”

Tanza: “—Yes. Even now, I can still feel the presence of Yorna-sama.”

Upon Abel’s words, Tanza gently placed her hand over her own eye and quietly replied.

Her words were not wishful thinking, but rather a clear conviction derived from the benefit of Yorna’s power, which she had been entrusted with. As long as that power was present, Yorna’s survival was assured.

However, the uncertainty of the situation in the Imperial Capital made it frustrating.

Not only about Yorna, but also regarding Priscilla, whose whereabouts were unknown, and Al, who had stayed behind to help her, along with the concerns about Cecilus, who had wandered off on his own.

Subaru: “Even so, thinking about it that way… doesn’t it show an excessive imbalance in strength?”

Struggling to contain his overflowing feelings, Subaru voiced what he had been concerned about, once again recalling the composition of the “rescue from destruction squad”.

Abel closed an eye at what he said, and Tanza tilted her head to the side instead.

Tanza: “An imbalance in fighting strength?”

Subaru: “Yeah, because we have myself, Beako, Emilia-tan, Spica and Roswaal, and also our up-and-coming Garfiel, don’t we?”

Beatrice: “Did you just brag about Betty, I suppose?”

Subaru: “Yep, I did. Love you, lovely Beako.”

Beatrice: “Betty loves you too, in fact.”

After confirming their love for one another with Beatrice, who had chipped in to the conversation, Subaru raised a finger.

Outside of this dragon carriage, the carriage running behind them had Emilia and the others boarded on it.

Subaru: “Halibel-san over there is also the secret weapon that Anastasia-san sent with us. This is supposed to be a battle for the Empire, but the room’s full of external collaborators.”

Obviously, it was not as if the assault team was formed without any of the Empire’s people.

However, on the head of the list was Abel, who had made it clear in detail that his smartassery transcended the limits of any human, and then Medium, who came along as a companion after negotiating with him. Adding on, there was also Jamal, triumphantly taking on the job of the driver, who had been promoted to a General for some reason, as well as selected to be a bodyguard. The citizens from the Empire on the team consisted of these three.

The two of Medium and Jamal were unmistakably categorized as those with a high power level even among the people of the Empire, but it could not be said that they were stronger than Garfiel.

Subaru: “Tanza’s also mine, so it’s like she’s basically on our side, right?”

Tanza: “□□□”

Subaru: “Huh? I thought you were gonna get mad and hit me right away, but this is a letdown… The time lag!”

Tanza: “Please do not say such self-centered things.”

Subaru shouted as he paid the price for the joke he uttered, having been slapped with a force that exceeded his preparedness in accepting the outcome. He instinctively squatted down with teary eyes, but Tanza simply looked down on him with a cold stare.

He knew he went too far, but she seemed way too angry, even for that.

???: “Kakakakka! They’re tellin’ ya, Your Excellency. That they can’t see how serious the Empire is ‘bout it. If they put it that way, it can’t really be helped, can it?”

Subaru: “Yeah, yeah, it can’t be helped even if we… Ubyaaaah?!”

Beatrice: “Subaru?! What’s wrong, I suppose?!”

Just as he was about to nod to the unexpected raspy voice, a scream ripped itself out of Subaru’s throat.

As Beatrice rushed to his side in a hurry, Subaru jumped back in a tumble and clung onto her. Within the sights of Beatrice and Subaru, wrapped up in each other’s embrace, stood a small shadow that was hunched over.

Appearing out of nowhere was the elusive Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkenn—

Beatrice: “Subaru, calm down, in fact. It’s just a tiny elderly man that suddenly appeared, I suppose.”

Subaru: “If a tiny elderly man suddenly appeared, that’s either Olbart-san or a Japanese horror movie! Things they have in common are that they’re both scary! Dangerous! And crazy!”

Olbart: “Whoa, you’re yappin’ quite the stuff there, boy. Seems like you’re lil’ as always, but how’ve ya been?”

Subaru: “Whose fault do you think it is that I’m little! I’m doing great! How about you?!”

Olbart: “I’m just peachy, too. Kinda lost my right hand, though.”

Olbart said, waving his right arm as the folded part of his sleeve flapped about. Having been shown his fluttering sleeve, Subaru fell silent, feeling as if he would not be able to say anything without making the situation awkward.

What a devious trick it was, coming from this insane old man, trying to garner sympathy by showing his injury.

Subaru: “But, I fell into his trap, just like that…!”

Vincent: “Stow away your inner conflict for another time. —So, you have heard the details, Olbart Dunkelkenn.”

Ignoring Subaru, who had Beatrice caressing his head that he gripped in his hands while he agonized over his thoughts, Abel called for Olbart. The fiendish elder gave a nod to the call with a “Well,”

Olbart: “The spellcaster that’s controllin’ ‘em dead folks is in the Imperial Capital, so we’re gonna go n’ kill ‘em, right? I can imagine that Goz cryin’ like a lil’ kid after being left behind by Your Excellency. Ain’t he a poor guy?”

Vincent: “There is a role that only one is able to fulfill. Of course, that is equally true for you.”

Olbart: “I’m an old geezer who’s over ninety, ya know? Workin’ me ta tha bone even with all that… Ya don’t have enough kindness.”

Vincent: “If you wish for a discussion regarding your retirement, you may request for one after this emergency has been expedited. Furthermore, I shall tell you this, but…”

Olbart’s easygoing attitude did not waver even in the face of Abel, the Emperor. Overlooking the eerie elder’s terrifically irreverent behavior, Abel added on one more thing to the end of his sentence.

As Olbart raised his brows with a, “Hm?” at the prefatory note,

Vincent: “I do not expect we shall see any more of your bad habits for the rest of your life.”

Olbart: “□□□”

Vincent: “Therefore, I command you. Do your duty without pretense, Olbart Dunkelkenn.”

Olbart’s lips pursed in response to Abel’s brief but clearly intended words.

Rather, it was a reference to Subaru’s considerable concerns about Olbart and a preemptive gamble to check them.

If Olbart were to become agitated here, there was no one in their dragon carriage who could stop him.

However, Olbart went silent for a moment, then tapping his lower back with his remaining left hand,

Olbart: “Good grief, I don’t like young’uns ‘cause they have a lot of growth potential. I can’t believe the world is not kind to old folks, including His Excellency.”

Vincent: “I am very magnanimous.”

Olbart: “Kakakakka!”

Olbart laughed as if he had just heard the biggest joke of the century.

Subaru’s shoulders finally relaxed as he sensed that this was the end of the quiet contest between Abel and Olbart.

Regardless of the humor of Abel’s joke, they avoided a confrontation between the two.

Tanza: “Then… will Olbart-sama be joining us at the Imperial Capital?”

Tanza was apparently experiencing the same nervousness as Subaru. Her voice hardened slightly, and as Olbart’s eyes narrowed under his bushy eyebrows in response to her question,

Olbart: “It’s a request from His Excellency, and I don’t like tha idea of bein’ told what ta do by a kid. A country that doesn’t play its cards right when it’s in danger is no laughin’ matter. Besides…”

Tanza: “Besides?”

Olbart: “Those other guys are still in the Empire, too. At least Moguro and that bastard Ceci are.”

Tanza: “…Yorna-sama, too.”

The temporary partnership in the Demon City—Although he did not know the finer details, it was between Olbart, who had infantilized him and some of the others, and Tanza, who were working together out of a mutual interest.

The two had a complicated relationship, but they put their differences aside for the time being.

Of those named, the being called Moguro and Subaru were not acquainted with each other, but at least Yorna was someone who could be trusted in terms of ability and personality, and Cecilus was competent enough to make up for his personality. If Olbart joined them, the Empire’s capabilities would certainly be enhanced.

Subaru: “But we also have Halibel-san here, so even with Ceci and the others, we have a slight advantage… or rather, Ceci is also one of my comrades.”

Vincent: “You think you can put a collar on that thing? If so, your understanding of him is limited.”

Olbart: “Oh, that Halibel guy’s here. He’s tha only shinobi in tha world stronger than me, and I seriously hate him.”

They each respectively had something they wanted to say about the two strongest people, who were held as cards in their arsenal.

In any case, Abel’s reasons for coming along and his stance, as well as the Imperial side’s military strength, were settled with Olbart joining the group; Subaru’s doubts were also resolved for the time being—Although there were still some topics to be explored, such as the matter of Medium’s nomination as a candidate for Empress

Consort.

Subaru: “I’ll leave the subject of Medium-san for when I get back. Also, what Rem said—”

As Subaru felt Beatrice’s soft hand in his, he remembered Rem’s parting words to him from inside the fortress as they were about to depart.

Her statement could be taken, in the most positive way possible, as a wish for Subaru’s safe return.

Subaru: “I’ll probably get really chastised when I get back, but until that happens, I’ll take it as a positive that Rem is worried about me.”

Beatrice: “B-Betty thinks she has shown worry for you without the need for such a debasing mentality, has she not, in fact?”

Tanza: “I, also, took it that way…”

Subaru: “Oi oi, it can’t be helped, but you two don’t know Rem. Well, there’s a little bit of that to it because Rem is kind, but the majority of it is anger at me… No, no, stay positive, positive…!”

Subaru almost inadvertently undid the suggestion he placed on himself and had to reassert the positive thought spell he had cast on himself.

Beatrice and Tanza looked at Subaru with apparent pity, but the expression of their gazes had no effect on Subaru, as he had reapplied his magic. Bam, he bounced back.

Jamal: “—Your Excellency, we are almost at the relay point, and the dragon carriage will stop for a while.”

Just as Subaru was mentally regrouping, the small window of the dragon carriage opened, and Jamal’s report came in as he peeked inside the car from the driver’s bench.

Jamal, who was on watch around the moving dragon carriage, was startled to see Olbart, who was not supposed to be there, beside

Abel, who was nodding in agreement with the report. Olbart waved his hand back pleasantly in response, in the worst way possible.

Anyway, once he arrived at the reported relay point, Subaru, having his doubts resolved, would return to the dragon carriage with Emilia and the others on the Kingdom side. But first, Subaru decided to call out “Oi” to Jamal through the small window.

Subaru: “I just happened to hear about it, but you said you’re gonna die for Katya-san?”

Jamal: “Huh? What about it, brat?”

Subaru: “No, I’m just saying it makes no sense. Katya-san’s been really sad after her fiancé had gone. Can’t you imagine how she’s gonna feel if her family also dies?”

Hearing that Jamal had confidently told Katya he would “go and die a courageous, splendid death”, it made Subaru question his sanity, and he also felt lightheaded from the severe problem that was the Vollachian way of thinking.

It was why he wanted to make Jamal retract his announcement, and he also planned to make him swear and reaffirm that he would return alive to Katya’s side.

However, Jamal blew out a disgruntled snort at Subaru’s words,

Jamal: “Look here, brat. Quit talking rubbish.”

Subaru: “Rubbish? What’s so “rubbish” about it?”

Jamal: “Katya crying because of my death? I don’t care about that. What’s important is how useful I am to His Excellency and the country when I die, and whether there’ll be a reward for it.”

Subaru: “See, you guys disregard your lives because of honor and all that stuff…”

Jamal: “What a thick-headed brat! She can’t even stand up or bear any children! If that guy, Todd, ain’t here, then there’s no man that would take her as a wife! Katya needs the money to live!”

As Subaru attempted to stand his ground, Jamal spat at him with a raised voice.

Just like that, Jamal’s gaze skipped over Subaru and was aimed towards Abel, who was behind him,

Jamal: “Right now, I’m a General Third-Class. If I can be of use to His Excellency in this, then I can look forward to being treated as a General Second-Class when I die. That way, Katya can live in peace. I’m able to do my job as her big brother if I’m dead, more than if I stay alive!”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Subaru’s breath involuntarily caught in his throat at the intensity of Jamal’s line of thought.

Medium: “Subaru-chin…”

Medium lowered the corners of her eyebrows out of worry, glancing at the silent Subaru. However, her actions ended there, and she did not object to Jamal’s logic. Such a thing did not only extend to Medium. It was the same for Abel and Olbart.

Jamal’s opinion made sense. From the viewpoint of the people of the Empire, it was a shared belief.

It was only Beatrice who had the consideration to stand shoulder to shoulder with him, moving half a step to cuddle up with him.

Spica: “Uau.”

—No, Spica had also gently placed her hand on his back, making an effort to support him.

Subaru: “□□□”

Subaru’s words were ignorant of the Empire’s realities, making up an emotionally charged argument against Jamal’s logic.

But, the things that Jamal had said, and the fact that Abel and the others would not say anything, was wrong. If a reward would be granted for his death and it would ensure Katya's livelihood, Jamal could instead live, live, survive, achieve a successful career, and then guarantee Katya's livelihood with his pay.

Subaru: "It's possible, if the salary Abel pays to his Generals isn't itty-bitty peanuts. —I've decided, Jamal."

Jamal: "What? Ya got anything else to…"

Subaru: "That future plan of yours… I'm definitely going to stop it from happening. —You won't die, ever."

Biting down hard on his molars, Subaru made a declaration in that manner, as if he was also stating a challenge.

The moment Subaru's surroundings heard his words, Abel let out a brief sniff, and Olbart bared a gleeful grin along with a snickering laugh. Tanza hugged her own arms around herself, and Medium widened her eyes before nodding.

And then, Beatrice and Spica lined up next to Subaru, gazing at Jamal.

As the line of three kids stared at him, Jamal narrowed his left eye that was not under his eyepatch,

Jamal: "Y'know, you're one freaky brat."

Subaru: "Your friend also told me that. —I won't quit, though."

One last interaction was exchanged between them before the small window was closed, and Jamal returned to his role of staying vigilant of his surroundings in order to stop the dragon carriage at the way-point.

Subaru shut his eyes after seeing him out, then came to an honest face-to-face with his own heart.

He understood that Jamal had his own ideas. And, that it was one way of thinking considered to be correct in the Empire.

Bearing that in mind, such a mindset can go and eat shit, was what

Subaru thought.

Subaru: “Trying to save something else by dying… That’s just—”

Nothing more than a heart-wrenching method, one that even Abel could not endure.

That was why Natsuki Subaru had to continue rejecting such a method, no matter what.

Contrary to the speed of the hurried dragon carriage, the Imperial Capital in question was far away, and it was terribly frustrating. The more he thought about what was transpiring over there, the more he felt a burning need to arrive there as soon as possible.

Hurry up hurry up, Subaru continued to yearn, his patience smoldering away.

2

—The scene abruptly shifted to an unsettling situation under the same sky.

Dark clouds loomed, almost like the weather was foreshadowing the Empire’s impending demise.

Because of the vast amount of water gushing from the destroyed retaining wall, the inside of its star-shaped defense barriers was flooded and forced the inhabitants to flee, turning the Imperial Capital of Lupugana truly into a city of the undead.

With the resurrected dead roaming around, the survivors continued to struggle trying to hide their breath in fear of being found—Among them were not only those who hid and cowered, but also fierce individuals who sought to secure their lives by fighting.

However, many who wielded weapons would soon regret their careless decisions.

Once the battle began, it meant an unending competition against the endless resurrecting undead, comparing their dwindling life force to those who had already exhausted theirs, so they should not have any prospect of winning.

Ironically, the bravest would end up losing their lives, joining the ranks of the undead in search of the next living being.

The Imperial Capital had now become a spiraling city of the dead, where the undead beckoned more of the undead, and turned into a manifestation of hell, where the despair of this world reached an impasse.

However—

???: "—As rare as this situation is to behold, it is not so much interesting but rather troublesome once you get used to the sight. If only there was a bit more competition to return to the stage once more! Then perhaps one could anticipate a few more highlights."

While saying that, the boy's tied-back blue hair swayed in the moist breeze steeped in a foul smell.

The boy with a distinctive appearance in his traditional Japanese outfit and zori looked around, and made such remarks while shading the tops of his eyes with his hands.

His lively complexion and blue eyes were those of the living, deviating notably from the most evident features of the undead.

However, his perspective, taking in the chaos of the drastically changed Imperial Capital, was, in some ways, an opinion that was more detached from the living than the typical undead.

Depending on the person, a true transcendent being might be defined as being allowed to have the selfishness to render the distinction between the living and the dead meaningless.

In any case, the boy's eyes gleamed with a certain brightness that seemed cheerful and yet insane—Not insanity born from a complete lack of fear regarding the current situation.

Rather, because he had never experienced fear once since his birth, he harbored a gleam that could be described as insane.

Boy: “Well, repainting the battlefield by single-handedly and systematically cutting down any visible enemies all by myself seems like a legendary display of supremacy only I could achieve, but…”

With a gaze that would instill fear in others, the young man lowered his hand, stopped gazing into the distance, and twisted his head.

Boy: “I wonder why? It doesn’t feel like it would lead to a very favorable outcome!”

Throwing his hands up, extending them to the sky, the boy openly admitted his feelings.

With his abilities, the boy could single-handedly cut down the majority of the undead infesting the Imperial Capital, without exaggeration. Yet, the boy refrained from doing so. And so he was agonizing over his inability to put the reason why this decision eluded him into words.

To the multitude of people suffering in the Imperial Capital, it was a concern that veered far off course, a luxury so off-course that might lead to exasperation. A concern that only the boy could comprehend, one that held no meaning to anyone else, yet carried significant weight for him.

Groaning in acknowledgment of this, the boy, then sighing in a troubled manner,

Boy: “I can’t seem to explain it well. What do you think about that?”

???: “Well, I don’t quite understand, but…”

Boy: “Eh?”

???: “Is this really a conversation we should be having before you drag me up…?”

The boy squatted down, peering below.

Within his sight was a man in an iron helmet holding onto the edge of a tall rooftop building he had chosen as his perch, trying desperately not to fall off.

He supported his entire body weight with one hand, but there was no other option. He was one-armed, rendering it impossible for him to support himself with both hands.

Nevertheless, looking down at the man in such a perilous situation, the boy—Cecilus smiled.

Cecilus: "That is no good, Al-san. Since I have no clue who or what you are, I can't decide whether or not I should let you be a part of my future history!"

Beneath the smiling Cecilus, the dangling man—Al let out a strained sound from his throat.

The Imperial Capital had now become a spiraling city of the dead, where the undead beckoned more of the undead, and turned into a manifestation of hell—

Al: "Oh, dammit, this is seriously the worst…"

At the very least, in this moment, this singular scene had devolved into a situation where the living without any need for conflict questioned the whereabouts of life.

Chapter 36:
Undead Capital Lupugana

1

—The Imperial Capital of Lupugana was occupied by the undead.

In Lupugana, a city that was now best described as the Undead Capital rather than the Imperial Capital, Al was searching and struggling alone for Priscilla, who had gone missing.

Nevertheless, it could not be said that the search for his master was going well.

The basic method of searching for people was to ask for eyewitness testimony. However, there was no one here to ask, not for conclusive testimony or even for useless gossip.

The only people who were around were either undead, who approached the living with a sinister purpose; or survivors who had survived by keeping their heads down, holding their breath, and not taking any action.

Either way, they were useless for Al's purposes.

Although—

???: "The absurdity of the world is that just because you meet a living person, it doesn't mean that your objective is going forward, right, Al-San?"

The very absurdity of the world itself, Cecilus, exclaimed such.

While he was in complete agreement with that assessment, there was no room for Al now to quibble with this and that, as it were. —Al was hanging over the edge of the roof of a five-story building.

Al: "—Shit."

Swearing inside his iron helmet, Al turned his gaze away from

Cecilus's smirking face.

It would be useless to say anything to Cecilus in this situation. In the first place, the reason why Al was hanging like this was because he had been kicked off the rooftop by none other than Cecilus. Moreover, he had kicked Al from behind after calling him over to the edge of the rooftop and making him think that there was something in the distance.

And if that was not a sign of malicious intent, then what was?

Cecilus: "Whether you call it a test or a check, the objective is ascertainment. Your reaction seems to be better than Boss's, as you didn't fall head first."

Al: "Um, yeah. I have no idea what you mean."

Cecilus: "It's fine if you don't understand! For I know what I think and what I want. Also, I'll go ahead and tell you that I will not be helping in pulling you up, Al-san."

Giving an undesired reply to Al's question, Cecilus nonchalantly clapped his hands.

Al did not know the reason for the murderous behavior until Cecilus spoke; actually, he still had no idea what the reason was, even after hearing the answer. Even if he would talk about hostility or murderous intent, Al had not had much of a conversation with Cecilus before this in the first place.

After being rescued from a powerful undead enemy, they briefly introduced themselves to each other. Al talked about his movements up to this point and his future goals, and then he was kicked off the rooftop.

Although it might have seemed like a stroke of bad luck running into him, his answer was not particularly discouraging to Al.

Because—

Al: "—I've heard that plenty of times, so I don't expect you to."

With that, Al released his grip from the edge and let himself enter into a free fall.

Cecilus: “Oyo.”

Cecilus’s voice sounded surprised and distant, and Al began to think amidst the floating sensation.

The distance to the ground was about fifteen meters, a height that superhumans could have landed easily, but Al was an ordinary person and could die normally. The crushed tomato would be complete.

The approaching ground was wet cobblestone, there was not enough water to soften the impact of the fall, and the muddy soil offered no cushioning, making this an overly harsh method.

Therefore, in order to save himself, an action other than falling was needed here.

Al: “Oaaah!”

With a guttural sound from the back of his throat, Al extended his bent knees and kicked the wall as hard as he could.

Al’s body, which should have fallen straight down, was propelled diagonally instead, shortening the distance to the opposite building, which was the same height as the one he’d been holding onto. The timing of the kick was between one and two seconds after the start of the fall, and if it was early or late he would hit the wall, and becoming a crushed tomato with a sore neck would be unavoidable.

But if the timing was right—a moment later, Al’s body smashed through the window of the building.

Al: “Guoh!”

Al rolled on his back into a deserted room, with a broken window as collateral damage. His shoulder and back were cut by the glass as he struck the floor and received some serious damage.

Al: “But, I survived…”

After rolling backward into the room he had flown into, Al jumped up and confirmed that he was alive. Next, he checked for fatal wounds and broken limbs, and only after passing this check was he allowed to declare himself a survivor.

Any injuries that were unrecoverable at this point needed to be recovered.

Al: “Woah, my left hand is gone?! I mean, that’s been like that for almost twenty years now…”

After a pause with some small senility, Al immediately hid beside the door facing the corridor and quickly drew the Blue Dragon Sword from behind his waist.

He had escaped falling to his death. However, his escape did cause him to jump into the building with a loud crash.

Naturally, the sound drew the attention of everyone in the surrounding area—

???: “Around here!”

???: “Yeah!!”

Together with a flurry of rushing footsteps, the undead broke down the door and stormed into the room.

The undead vigorously charged towards him, but as their pale visage passed in front of him, Al swung his Blue Dragon Sword and decapitated them.

The foremost attacker was killed instantly, and using the headless body as a shield, he ascertained the number of enemies that had rushed over here. There were two behind the broken door and the sound of one set of footsteps coming up the stairs, for a total of three—beyond the dead body of the first, the second, recovering from their state of astonishment, thrust the short spear they held in their hands forward.

They were quick to recover. It made him sick.

While thinking that, Al forced the headless corpse into the trajectory of his opponent's spear—

Al: "I messed up."

As the body of the undead received a fatal blow, it instantly shattered like pottery that had lost its will.

Therefore, the familiar tactic of using a dead body as a shield would not work; Al realized this as he tasted the enemy's short spear fatally digging into his chest.

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???: "Around here!"

???: "Yeah!!"

Together with a flurry of rushing footsteps, the undead who kicked down the door was decapitated.

Kicking the hindering headless corpse to the side, Al leapt out of the way to the back of the room. Chasing him down, the second enemy rushed in with a thrust of the short spear in its hand.

Al: "Dona!"

The tip of the short spear was engulfed by the earthen wall that rose up from the floor, forcibly capturing it.

As soon as Al saw that it had caught his opponent's attention, he placed the sole of his foot on the earthen wall and,

Al: "Dona! Dona! Dona!"

A pillar of earth flew out sideways from the earthen wall against which he had placed his foot, striking the undead on the other side squarely in the face and blowing them backward.

The pillar of earth pushed back both the second attacker, and the third attacker who was trying to follow behind; from the tip of the pillar, he launched another pillar of earth, and yet another one from that tip, stamping the two undead together with the vigor of a multistage rocket, and crushing them to death against the wall of the corridor.

Al: “One left…!”

Hearing the large sound of pottery shattering between the pillar and the wall, Al thought on how he had taken out three enemies in a single breath, and remained on guard for the enemy’s movement with his foot still on the earthen wall.

He had defeated the first attacker with a surprise attack, and the second and third attackers with a delicate technique. Only the fourth or final attacker remained, so Al would be safe if he could exchange his bad prospects for good ones, but—

Al: “Well, things aren’t gonna work out so smoothly!!”

The entire wall of earthen pillars blocking the entrance was pulverized, and the final undead invaded the room by forceful means.

Wielding a massive battle axe, it was an undead of the Cyclops Tribe with a giant eye of golden hue in the center of its face. Upon seeing that, and judging that they were far more dangerously powerful than the other three up until then, Al turned his back to them and intently focused all his energy to getting to the window of the room—

Al: “Can I make it!!”

Just when he was about to make it in time, his shouting back was struck by the destructive force of the battle axe, utterly mowing him down, and leaving the interior of the building to be grotesquely redecorated with Al’s scattered entrails.

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???: “Around here!”

???: “Yeah!!”

Together with a flurry of rushing footsteps, the first undead attacker who kicked down the door was decapitated.

Next, he knew that there were two in the corridor, and the most horrible enemy coming up the stairs. Then, Al took a big leap backwards—

Al: “Dona!”

Dealing with the second and third attackers in front of him, he had no choice but to open up a strategic avenue of escape from the final monster.

2

Cecilus: “Woah, amazing amazing! When that Cyclops Tribe guy came flying in at the end I thought there would be no way Al-san would win, but you really did it.”

Al: “What a turbo piece of shit…”

Cecilus: “Oyaoya, I’m sure he was an extremely formidable opponent, but I wouldn’t say that’s a likable attitude to have towards a foe with whom you have fought so hard. Of course, foul language and abusive insults tend to make an impression, but I’m not fond of the idea that notoriety is better than anonymity!”

Al: “I was talking about you…”

His entire body covered by innumerable wounds, Al was greeted upon exiting the building, and as he breathed deeply, he lethargically slumped his back against the wall and sat down.

Then, Cecilus opened his eyes wide as he was simultaneously greeted by and rebuked by Al.

Al: “Huh, I seriously don’t understand how you can be so surprised being spoken to like that. You almost killed me, and that’s in two senses. Even a psychopath bastard would at least have a memory of being resented…”

Cecilus: “Oh, as expected, I didn’t learn all of Boss’s words in a short period of time so there are still some words that I don't know. By the way, what does "psychopath" mean?"

Al: "It's kinda like being a deranged person. They go around killing people but still have the nerve to be calm about it."

Cecilus: "Is that so? But in that case I don't think I'm a psychopath. —I mean, Al-san doesn't die for some reason, right?"

Foolishly laughing, Cecilus then vocalized a twisted self-defense.

At Cecilus's answer, Al crouched in place and concentrated on regulating his breathing. While Al remained silent, Cecilus held up one finger and continued.

Cecilus: "The Cyclops Tribe guy from earlier was quite skilled. Unfortunately, he's far from reaching me, but if it were Al-san up against him, you'd lose a hundred times out of a hundred. That's the truth that I saw with my own eyes!"

Al: "…But, I'm alive, aren't I? Or, are you saying I'm dead?"

Cecilus: "No no, I'm sure you're alive. I had a suspicion that perhaps you were an undead posing as the living, but that doesn't seem to be the case. In that case there is only one thing that I can think of. —Al-san drew the hundred-and-first possibility."

With one finger raised on one hand, and another finger raised on the opposite one, Cecilus displayed two fingers.

Counting those two fingers would not result in anything more than two, and if one was being generous it could be seen as eleven, but instead of focusing on the gesture that did not really reflect his intentions, Al gulped down a breath at his words.

Cecilus: "I'm not particular over the number one-hundred-and-one. One-hundred-and-two, one-hundred-and-three, or even two-hundred would be fine! Al would lose a hundred times out of a hundred to that Cyclops Tribe guy. But what if you did it a thousand times, ten thousand times, or a hundred thousand times? Quite literally, you might draw a one in ten-thousand chance. You drew that right at the start. Am I wrong?"

Al: "—Hk."

The deception that he was remaining silent as he focused on catching his breath, had reached its limit.

Within Al's steel helmet, the expression that Cecilus could not see had warped; he feared Cecilus from the bottom of his heart. That insight, speech, and conduct, even Al could not comprehend what in the world they were.

By the way Cecilus was speaking, he had mostly correctly guessed the Authority that Al possessed. And that was not through logic, but rather an understanding through guesswork, so to speak.

The boy who called himself Cecilus Segmunt not only shared the same name as the Blue Lightning, the strongest in the Vollachian Empire, but was clearly an extraordinary being of the world.

Al: "His height, maybe it's because of the same reason as me and bro…"

Just like how Al and Subaru had been infantilized by Olbart's technique, it was quite possible that Cecilus had also been shrunken.

The person in question did not regard himself as the First of the Nine Divine Generals, but when Al's infantilization had gotten more severe, he had felt his consciousness being pulled back to match his outward appearance. The same was likely to be true for Cecilus.

In Al's case, he was forced to optimize his mind, but that drastic measure could only be done by himself and Subaru. Therefore, Cecilus could be considered to have shrunken in mind.

If that was what had turned Cecilus into such a juvenile monster, the repercussions of Olbart's actions were grave.

Cecilus: "Is your lack of an answer because you're unable to answer or because you don't want to answer… which one is it?"

At Cecilus's quiet question, Al sat up, relying upon the wall he was leaning against.

Within that silence, Cecilus harbored a tint of danger, and that was a sign that a pendulum was swinging within him. It was a pendulum that would determine whether Al was his enemy or his ally.

Utterly unconcerned with the unprecedented disaster assailing this Undead Capital, it was a fixation over a trifling matter.

Cecilus: "I wonder. I wonder, y'know. Let's suppose that Al-san has something that can draw a one in ten-thousand possibility on the first shot… I wonder if you'd be able to draw that possibility with me as an opponent."

In that case, rather than one in ten-thousand, there would be a one in a billion, no, quite possibly a one in a trillion chance of that happening.

However, if it was not zero.

Al: "I'll say this now, but… that's as far as you should go with digging into my allure. Otherwise, you'll have an unwanted party keeping an eye on you, and you're really gonna regret it."

Cecilus: "Unbelievable! To speak to me in such a manner. I don't dislike it, rather, I quite like it."

Al sighed at Cecilus's reaction, who seemed to be becoming increasingly amused.

He wanted to find the words to dampen Cecilus's fascination, but by the looks of things, he did not have the time. He had finally survived the rush of undead that had come after his plunge to the death.

The burden was heavy, but he needed to advance to the next stage.

Al: "—Release territory, subsequent re-expansion, re-initiate thought experiment."

Before Cecilus could make any unnecessary movements, Al redefined the matrix he had once established.

The recoil was far too great due to the frequency and scope, but at the very least, Al had decided to continue ignoring the consequences until he made it out of the Vollachian Empire. —Recovering Priscilla was his top priority.

Al: “If it’s for that purpose, then no matter how many times it takes, I’ll—Dwaa?!”

It was at the very moment that he was about to utter his resolute declaration.

Quicker than he could finish, the figure of Cecilus in front of him blurred, and immediately afterward, Al was flipped sideways, taking a hit from a zori to his flank.

In response to such outrageous conduct, Al screamed while sliding across the ground.

Al: “What, the hell! After all that talk about making a grand impression on a stage, you attack someone while they’re in the middle of talking!”

Cecilus: “No, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong! It’s utterly unthinkable for me to commit such rudeness! That would be an offense warranting kappuku. So it’s not that, but rather, take a look.”

Al: “Look at what…”

As Al finished sliding and began to rise to his feet, Cecilus gestured towards the wall to justify himself. There, at chest height of where Al had been standing just moments before, was a fist-sized hole.

It had not been there a moment ago. However, the hole had suddenly appeared.

That meant—

Al: “Sniper… Gyahh!!”

Cecilus: “Forgive my rudeness for a moment!”

In that instant his eyes widened, Cecilus’s form blurred once more, and immediately after, Al felt g-forces of acceleration throughout his body as he was thrust straight backwards.

Cecilus, running furiously, had hooked his hand around Al's waist and was dragging him along in a swift sprint. And, hot on their heels as they became one with the wind—

Al: "Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, what the hell, what the hell, what in the actual hell?!"

Amidst the illusion of being flung backward, Al's vision was filled with city streets and building walls being pierced one after the other, as something tremendous pursued them with reckless abandon.

If his initial impression was correct, it was sniper fire. A sniper was chasing after Al and Cecilus.

Al: "Though if we're being sniped, it's an ironclad rule that snipers are supposed to stay put!"

They were supposed to patiently lie in wait, take aim once their target was in their sights, and strike with a fatal shot.

Those were the fundamentals of sniping, and ought to have been the ironclad rule. Yet, this sniper was defying all that, accurately pursuing the fleeing pair, and was even anticipating their moves to find cover, and firing accordingly.

It was as if they were surrounded by a hundred snipers, or being targeted by a single sniper with the complete freedom to move around at rapid speeds.

Cecilus: "Whoa! Woah there! Whoopsie!"

Al: "Bwah! Oof! Bit my tongue!"

While being targeted by this terrifyingly precise and agile sniper, Cecilus, while carrying Al, moved his body right, left, up, and down, all the while continuously evading the assault.

However, he did not seem to be looking at his surroundings at all.

Then, Al realized. —It was guesswork. Cecilus was dodging this top-class sniping by sheer guesswork alone.

Cecilus: “It’s not quite to that extent. But don’t you just feel a certain thrill during moments the opponent deems critical? That’s it.”

Al: “You can ignore my suspicions! More importantly, focus on what you’re doing!”

Cecilus: “Very well. But our opponent is of remarkable ability. —I’ve encountered them a few times before, but they’ve never allowed me to close in on them.”

The ground erupted with an explosive sound that seemed impossible to be caused by a kick from his zori, and as he gained propulsive force, Cecilus began to accelerate. Feeling the proximity of the unseen sharpshooter pursuing them with sniper fire, Al received a two-fold shock from Cecilus’s statement.

The first shock was that Cecilus had already encountered this enemy several times before, and still continued to survive.

The second shock was that even Cecilus had been unable to defeat this enemy, which meant they were an abnormally formidable adversary.

Cecilus: “I believe they’re flying, but for some reason other than their speed, they can’t be seen.”

Al: “An enemy, who can’t be seen… hk.”

Upon the words of Cecilus, who seemed to lack a proper sense of danger, Al gained the keyword of “invisible enemy”.

If only they could unravel the mechanism behind this invisibility, or at least find some way to counteract it.

Cecilus: “Woah there, my my…”

Once more, Cecilus spoke without a sense of danger, and a tremendous crashing sound followed, prompting Al to look back—

that is, toward the direction they were heading.

Then, within Al's field of vision, three buildings along their path came crashing down.

From the front of the street and on each side, buildings began to descend upon them. Each had its foundation targeted and hollowed out by the sniper, causing them to tilt and collapse inwards.

If they collided with that, there would be no escaping from being crushed to death. Upon grasping that, Al clenched his molars, and,

Al: "Territory, redefinition—!!"

Cecilus: "I'm rushing straight ahead!"

Immediately after resetting the territory in time, Cecilus, kicking off the ground while holding Al, broke through the window of the frontmost collapsing building and plunged inside.

As they slanted, and he heard the gentle cascade of shattering window glass in conjunction with the flexing of the walls, Cecilus kicked the floor of the collapsing building, smashed through the ceiling, and sprinted upwards, forcibly creating a direct route from the lower floor to the upper floor.

Cecilus: "Go go go go go go go go!"

Given how the building was collapsing, it was a fact it would be crushed by contact with the street at the lower floors first.

On the other hand, the outrageous feat of escaping from being crushed in such a manner could not have been said to be a sane course of action. It should not be said.

However, thanks to that eccentric judgment, Al and Cecilus managed to kick through the ceiling of the top floor and escape to the outside, faster than the building could fully collapse—

Al: "—No, this won't work out."

Bursting through the ceiling, Al and Cecilus soared into the sky.

Below them, they witnessed the three collapsing buildings collide with one another, their colossal mass causing a tremendous earthquake as they crumbled. One of the fallen buildings seemed to have contained flammable liquor, or perhaps stored magic stones, as an inferno was extending across the street.

However—

Cecilus: “Now this is a formidable enemy!”

Both Cecilus’s cheerful exclamation and Al’s body shaking from the impact happened simultaneously.

But, Al was not the one who was directly affected by the impact. Having leaped into the sky alongside Al, it was Cecilus—Struck by the sniper fire, the impact had blown off one of his legs.

The young boy’s small left leg was blown off from the knee down, scattering blood into the air as he gnashed his teeth. Having experienced similar situations, Al understood what it was like. That the pain would come immediately, causing the throat to scream—

Cecilus: “—Over there!”

Instead of screaming, Cecilus shouted that out, likely having pinpointed the enemy beyond the sky.

He then placed his remaining leg against Al’s body, which he was still holding, using it as leverage to propel himself towards something that he had spotted.

Being propelled by just one leg, his momentum was fierce, seemingly sufficient to catch the enemy.

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All of that while in a state of having lost one leg—.

Al: "—This won't do."

Even with one leg missing, Cecilus was still probably a hundred times stronger than Al.

But, that was no good. It was necessary for him to be in perfect condition. Thus, Al drew his Blue Dragon Sword and pressed it against his own neck.

Then, without hesitation, he forcefully exerted the blade—.

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Cecilus: "I'm rushing stra—"

Al: "No, the building on the right!!"

As the buildings were collapsing from three different directions, the moment Cecilus was preparing to rush inside of the frontmost one, Al shouted in a voice that would not lose out to the volume of the collapsing structures, and issued a change in their path.

The instant he heard Al's appeal, Cecilus laughed, and the fact that he licked his lips was already known.

In that instant, Cecilus forcefully altered their direction, and while carrying Al, he lunged towards the collapsing building on the right.

Hearing the cascade of shattering window glass, Al pointed towards the interior of the room they jumped into,

Al: "The room over there! Secure the box inside!"

Cecilus: "Aye-aye sir!"

At Al's confident directions, Cecilus did not ask any questions whatsoever.

Forcefully smashing through the wall into the adjacent room, there was an iron chest—a part of the fortune kept by the owner of the building, intended for emergency situations.

Unfortunately, it seemed like the owner was unprepared and was unable to take it out with him, but thanks to that, Al and Cecilus were able to secure it.

Al: “Upwards!”

Immediately after securing the box, the escape from the slanted building reverted the route to one that employed Cecilus’s extraordinary leg strength and innovative thinking.

Carrying Al, who carried the box, Cecilus’s sprint pierced through the ceiling of the lower floor and the floor of the upper one, and repeating that in quick succession, they dashed all the way up to the top floor in one go.

Then, the moment Cecilus kicked open the ceiling of the top floor and they flew out, Al was faced with a scenery that he had already seen countless times, and dropped the box from his hands.

And, just before the sniper could blow off any of Cecilus’s limbs from afar—

Al: “—Dona.”

Inside the box that was dropped, Al’s shoddy magic sparked a fire that ignited a high-purity magic stone belonging to an individual within the Empire, and then at once, the blast swelled up and flames engulfed them from directly below.

Al: “□□□”

While savoring the sensation of the scorching heat roasting their skin, the created curtain of flames also concealed Al and Cecilus from their surroundings. However, even if the flames hid them only for this moment, if there truly was a sniper, he would shoot through them—No, he would shoot through Cecilus without losing sight of him.

Therefore, the aim was not to disrupt the sniper’s eyes.

Cecilus: “—Over there.”

Cecilus muttered this while smiling with bared teeth.

Blood was spouting from Cecilus’s cheek, and his long blue hair bursted and spread apart as his hair clip was snatched by the sniper. However, all of Cecilus’s limbs were unscathed.

The flame curtain was not to hide Cecilus from the enemy, but to allow him to spot the bullets approaching him before they reached him.

Before reaching Cecilus, the bullet had to pass through the flame curtain.

As foolish as it sounded, but he believed enough to bet on Cecilus of all people to not miss the momentaneous change in the flames before the bullet would reach him. He won that bet.

—Hence, across the flame curtain, Cecilus’s and the sniper’s gazes intersected.

Cecilus: “□□□”

In an instant, the pupils of Cecilus’s eyes narrowed and the soles of his zori sandals were placed against Al’s hip.

As before, Cecilus intended to leap down to the shooter’s location. The difference was that all of Cecilus’s limbs were stuck to his small torso.

All that was left from now was—

Al: “—Don’t you let your guard down.”

Muttering that, Al established preparations for the next re-expansion of his territory.

Each time it happened, he felt a sense of loss in his head, as if something was shredded into pieces, but Cecilus was right. One could say a once in a lifetime opportunity was a chance one could not afford to pass by once it happened.

If somebody wanted to obtain it twice, then they could not afford to compromise.

That was why, Al was going to reset the next matrix—.

???: "—Cloud-cutting."

Just before that, a remarkable change flashed into Al's vision.

It was behind the flame curtain, in the direction Cecilus surmised the sniper to be, in the sky where Al still could not see the enemy; there was an unusual change in his vision.

Simply put, the clouds had been severed.

The thick black clouds that covered the sky of the Undead Capital of Lupugana were unexpectedly cut open. The cumulus clouds received not one, but two to three cuts in succession.

It was as if they were chasing an invisible enemy in the sky—No, not as if.

The slashes were chasing the enemy and the aftermath was tearing through the black clouds.

Cecilus: "Aaah!! They're getting away, they're getting away! They're escaping!!"

The screeching voice belonged to Cecilus, who kept his foot on Al's back.

His eyes widened, and the reason for his scream was probably in response to the sniper running away from the slash that tore through the clouds—abandoning the battle and disengaging.

From Al's point of view, this could only be described as a favorable turn of events, but not for Cecilus. He stared at the view below with eyes brimming with frustration.

And there—

???: "Ha ha ha ha! Run, run in fear of my swordsmanship!"

Al and Cecilus jumped out, away from the three collapsing buildings; a lone figure could be seen on the roof of the building.

It was a figure with a sword in his hand, seeing off the enemy in the distance, and pointing his blade that had sliced the clouds towards the heavens as he smiled broadly.

Al frowned, wondering who or what this stranger was.

Behind Al, Cecilus said “Huh” as he looked at the sudden intruder,

Cecilus: “Looks like you’ve grown old in the while I haven’t seen you, Dad.”

Al: “Your old man?”

Al was stunned by Cecilus uttering this with completely feigned ignorance.

Meeting up with this person in the distance Cecilus called his father would probably be a good thing, but the problem was—

Al: “…You ain’t gonna die after this, are you?”

After the formidable sniper was gone, Al, while looking directly down at the three buildings that were still vehemently collapsing, muttered to Cecilus about what was ahead, feeling a floating kind of sensation.

Chapter 37:
Time for Foreshadowing

1

With a sword in one hand and carrying baggage under his other arm, he slowly opened the door in front of him.

He would never foolishly kick open a door, nor cut it down. Thoughtlessly making noise and provoking the undead that could be potentially lurking around was something he wanted to avoid. The same applied to attracting attention from his surroundings.

It would still be manageable if it were only a bunch of ordinary Imperial Soldiers that had been transformed into undead fighters, but he preferred to not find himself in a fight against skilled opponents. His reluctance was amplified by the fact that he was carrying something that he could not simply throw out.

???: “□□□”

He took a whiff of the air around him with a sniff, then grimaced at the stench of rusty iron wafting from the inside of the room.

It was the smell of blood. Once one becomes used to it, distinguishing its freshness becomes more or less easier. The aforementioned odor was induced by recently spilt blood, and it did not come from just one person at that.

As expected, upon investigating the furthermost room, there were two bodies piled up atop of each other.

Left behind in the single house facing the main street, there were the corpses of an old woman and a man.

The perpetrator must have been the undead that he had chopped down in front of the house right before this. It was none other than because these corpses were freshly made that the sword in its hand had been drenched in blood.

The victims were presumably parent and child. Unfortunately, their expressions during their last moments could not be described as serene, so he was not able to compare their facial features. The old woman was lying on the bed, and the man seemed to have fallen on top of her as if he were placing himself over her, a broken sword lying beside him.

???: “They couldn’t escape in time… No, it’s something else.”

The composition of the scene was not two people who failed to escape in time, but a son who had stayed behind to protect his mother because she was unable to run.

To intuitively perceive the display as such was far too ironic for it to have occurred in the Imperial Capital, which stood at the heart of the Vollachian Empire, a place where it was only natural for the weak to be trampled upon.

Nevertheless, he could not laugh at the irony. If only he had arrived a few minutes earlier…

???: “□□□”

Placing his drawn sword back into its sheath, he silently gazed upon the corpse of the man who had decided how he would use his own life in the midst of a visit from an inevitable tragedy.

If he had been placed in the same situation, would he have been able to fight until his life was depleted like this man, with his back to the bed where his dearest family laid upon?

???: “It’s pointless, the answer’s obvious.”

He spat irritatedly, ridding himself of the bitter glob of saliva with a lingering revulsion that did not disappear.

Yes, it was a question for himself with an obvious answer. It was self-evident that he would turn tail and run off, regardless. —The moment he ridiculed himself in that manner.

????: “Heeey, redhead! Where are ya?! I got my business done!”

Suddenly, he heard a tremendously loud voice coming from outside of the building, and his head shot up to look at the window.

The ruddy face that he had gone separate ways with surfaced in his memory, and he felt himself sober up as the blood drained from his face at the recklessness of raising one's voice in this undead-infested city.

His head clobbered by the weight of reality, which he was not able to brush off with the drunkenness he had inflicted upon himself by drinking and drinking, on and on, he clicked his tongue as he peered out of the window he had approached.

Just then, at the bottom of his line of sight, on the street there was a single blue-haired man in a wasou outfit searching for him while waving his hand—no, next to him was a small silhouette in similar clothing.

?????: “Where might you be, Dad's companion! This area isn't suitable for having a nice and long talk, so why don't we move somewhere else where it's easier to do so! That is, only if what Dad told me about having a companion isn't a drunken illusion or a joke of the sort, of course!”

????: “Whoa now, how could ya say that? Saying those sorts of things after grabbing yer parent with ya… My child has grown into an ungrateful son. I wonder, I wonder! What went wrong with my parenting…!”

?????: “Nonono, it's not your fault, Dad! You hardly ever raised me, after all!”

With those two noisy fellows bunched together, describing the ruckus as twice as loud would be a massive understatement.

Although there was a difference between being drunk on alcohol or drunk on oneself, upon hearing the voice that he knew belonged to an equally drunken man, the companion whom the two were on the search for—Heinkel, held his head in his free hand.

As the throbbing headache from his hangover kicked up a fuss about a pain caused by something other than the influence of alcohol, he adjusted his grip on the emergency food—the hyena human, who had stirred in his grasp, and then let loose a deep sigh that reeked of liquor.

2

The two idiots continued to make a racket on the main street, unmindful of the fact they were out in public.

If he left them behind and they were consumed by the surging crowd of undead as a result, it could be chalked up as them reaping the consequences of their actions. However, since Heinkel did not want to be dragged into that process, he called out for them right away.

As the two were invited into the house in that fashion, an unexpected plus-one had come along with them.

???: “I didn’t expect you to be staying in the Imperial Capital, Heinkel-san. I thought you’d have already ran away, or if not, then…”

Heinkel: “Died, were you about to say? I’m going to say the same exact thing back to you, Aldebaran.”

Al: “Al, please.”

Al, the man in the steel helmet, responded upon their unanticipated reunion, while using a finger to fiddle with the metallic parts of his helmet.

During the all-out battle that had encompassed the Imperial Capital between the regular army and the revolutionaries, Heinkel, as a part of the rebel faction, had been deployed to a separate battlefield from Priscilla and Al, so he was not aware of the outcome of the battle, nor their well-being.

An answer he had no means of knowing even if he wanted to. By chance, it had been brought to him.

In addition to it—

Heinkel: “So Miss Priscilla’s been captured, huh. It’s a bit hard to believe.”

Al: “Well, charging headfirst into unexpected developments is a part of Princess’s troublesome charm, but this time, even I feel like I shouldn’t leave her on her own. So, I ended up staying in the Imperial Capital, but…”

Heinkel: “Then, you came across that bunch.”

Al nodded at Heinkel’s words with a, “Yeah.”

He was covered with his steel helmet, rendering both his expression and facial complexion unknown, but Heinkel could infer the extent of the hardship that Al had been wrung through from the tiredness in his tone and his overall mood.

Al was someone who could get along with Priscilla, the living embodiment of outrageous and haphazard behavior. If he was reduced to such a state, then Heinkel could easily guess the dreadfulness of who he had been dealing with.

Regardless, meeting the person who had made Al utterly exhausted was also a strange turn of fate.

???: “Well, well, I didn’t expect to have a reunion with you in a place like this, Dad. I thought I hadn’t seen you around for a while, but could it possibly be you who threw me into the Gladiator Island and plotted for me to play a role in a story about the legend of the island or something like that?”

Chattering away and lining up one sentence after another at breakneck speed, the boy who munched down on the dried meat he had arbitrarily brought out from the house’s storage cabinet—or Cecilus, as he called himself—was the son of Rowan, who had been tagging along with Heinkel, much to his astonishment.

On top of that, it might as well be some sort of joke, but Cecilus’s full name, including his family name was—

Heinkel: “—Cecilus Segmunt. The Blue Lightning of Vollachia.”

The Vollachian Empire’s strongest swordsman, and the immovable First of the Imperial Nine Divine Generals.

No matter how far he had fallen, Heinkel was still the Deputy Commander of the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Royal Guards. He at least knew the names of famous figures from their insidious neighboring country.

Peerless even within the blood-soaked history of the Empire, he was the individual who had taken the most lives in this world, and was also said to be someone so powerful he was a rival to the Kingdom’s Sword Saint.

Heinkel: “□□□”

Heinkel narrowed his eyes at Cecilus, who looked roughly around eleven or twelve years old, and scorned himself for even thinking about making light of his capabilities just because of his youth.

For the truly powerful beings, topics such as their appearance and age were simply nonsensical and would leave one with nothing but misery.

When Heinkel had first lost to his son, Reinhard, with the sword, it was before he had turned six years old. —In this world, those kinds of entities existed.

If anything, Heinkel had to admit that someone like Rowan was a rarity for him.

Similarly to Heinkel, if he was also the father of someone proclaimed to be the strongest, then having his own reservations regarding the sword skills and fame of his son, Cecilus, would be—

Rowan: “Hahaha, yer making me laugh. The battles to the death on the Gladiator Island are just exhibitions in the end, so ya won’t learn anything for yer sword or technique no matter who or how many people ya cut down in that place. Dumping ya in that kinda place’d be nothing more than a detour in yer path to reaching the Heavenly Sword.”

Indifferent to the thoughts rearing their ugly head within Heinkel, the ruddy-faced Rowan shrugged his shoulders as he brought the booze-filled gourd to his mouth, seemingly in high spirits as he conversed with his son.

Cecilus replied with an, “Oh, I see then,” not appearing the slightest bit worked up by it, tilting his head as he bit off a piece of the dried meat.

Cecilus: “Well, I did suspect that wasn’t the case because the direction of that sort of method wasn’t clear at all for someone like you. But then, it becomes more of a strange, strange mystery because I don’t understand why I was on the island at all.”

Rowan: “Now, that’s gotta be another odd, bizarre, and unusual way to put it. Anyway, it wasn’t arranged by me… Hmm?”

Rowan took a pause in the middle of his sentence, then gave Cecilus a long stare from head to toe.

Noticing his father’s gaze, Cecilus caused the sleeves of his wasou outfit to sway back and forth, performing a twirl that made his long, untied blue hair spread out.

Cecilus: “What’s the matter? Even if it’s been a long time, I would think it’s difficult to forget the brilliance of the leading actor that I am.”

Rowan: “Apart from that, wait a minute, Son! Where’d ya put Murasame and Masayume? Such fine swords aren’t meant to be removed so carelessly from yer waist.”

Cecilus: ““Fine swords”? Do you mean katana by that? What are you saying? There’s an unspoken agreement between you and me where I won’t hold a katana, and also that you won’t let me hold one either until I obtain a blade worthy of me. Woefully, my waist remains light because I still haven’t come across an exceptional katana I’ve been looking for. Shaky, shake!”

Rowan: “Hmmmmm?”

Rowan’s eyes became increasingly cloudy with suspicion as Cecilus continued shaking his weaponless hips. Eventually, his eyes widened with an, “Ah,” as if he had made sense out of the situation.

And then—

Rowan: “Upon giving ya a careful look ‘cause of this feeling of strangeness, whaddya have here? Cecilus, ya shrunk down in height!”

Al: “You realize that now?!”

Al raised his voice at the surprised Rowan, having been hit with a feeling of bewilderment that went beyond his surprise.

Next to him, the Cecilus in question echoed, “Shrunk?” with a clueless expression. Needless to say, Heinkel also had no idea of what was going on.

In his place, Al, who looked like he had an idea, closed the distance between himself and Rowan with brisk steps,

Al: “I want to make this clear, so you’re Cecilus’s dad, and the Cecilus you know was really an adult. That’s correct, right?”

Cecilus: “Please wait, Al-san, I’m not sure about that. In the first place, I wonder when and at what kind of timing are humans able to say that they became an adult? For example, if someone cut down another person for the first time, and if you don’t consider them as full-fledged, then it would make it so that the person who had been cut down was killed by someone who is only half-baked, so I feel as if this is a meaningless discussion…”

Al: “You shut up for now! So, what about it, old man?”

Rowan: “Ya don’t hafta press me that hard, helmeted sir. Firstly, from the eyes of a parent, even if their kid’s grown somewhat taller, they’ll always stay in the kid category, ya know. Besides, when it comes to Cecilus, that one’s words and actions never matured a bit from when he was a kid, no matter how much time passed…”

Al: “I’ve heard enough of the fact that you two are parent and child…!”

Bombarded with responses comparable to an avalanche by Rowan, who he had drawn closer to, and Cecilus, who was next to him, Al stomped the ground as if he was venting out his pent-up anger.

Heinkel felt sorry for him, scratching his own red hair roughly,

Heinkel: “So, Aldebaran. Is this what you want to say? Cecilus Segmunt over there shrunk down and became a child for some reason.”

Al: “It’s Al… Well, I know everything about how it happened and how to undo it, but yeah.”

Heinkel: “You know how to undo it, too…?”

It sounded absurd to just nod with a, “I see,” upon being told that a person had shrunk in size, but thinking back to the scene akin to the veriest hell he had seen during the decisive battle at the Imperial Capital, he could accept that most things he saw were not entirely out of the question.

If they could expect Cecilus to turn back, then it probably was not too much of a setback.

Heinkel: “Well, why don’t we start talking after turning him back?”

Al: “As much as I wanna do that, we need a certain old Shinobi to return him to normal. So for now, we need to go on while he stays at that size… Hey, why didn’t you notice that your son’s become tiny the moment you saw him?”

Al slowly shook his head sideways, then pointed the subject of the matter towards Rowan.

However, Rowan traced his noticeably stubbly chin with a finger at Al’s query,

Rowan: “Of course, whether my son’s big or small ain’t important to me.”

Al: “Hey hey, is this a contest to decide who’s the shittiest dad? Are the dads of the strongest in each country all something like this?”

Heinkel: "—. How about you? Do you know you've shrunk?"

Al let out an exasperated grumble at Rowan's answer, given abashedly by someone who was far from an exemplary father. Reluctant to react to Al's grumbling, Heinkel brought up the subject with Cecilus.

At his words, Cecilus, who was starting on his third piece of dried meat, laughed out, "Well,"

Cecilus: "If you're asking me whether I'm aware or not, then I'm not! Shrinking or growing, I've already gone on stage as myself!"

Heinkel: "Alright…"

Cecilus: "However! Howeeever! The things said by Boss, Gustav-san, the others on the island, and the rest of the side characters are falling into place! I believe the foreshadowing has come together!"

Cecilus hit the surface of a desk that was close at hand, his voice bubbling with enthusiasm.

The look on his face said that something about it had made sense to him, but it all sounded like gibberish to Heinkel, having only followed after the words spoken during their conversation. A shrinking body should be a grave matter, but all Heinkel knew was that neither father nor child took it too seriously.

Rowan: "Though, it all adds up now. No wonder I thought he was so calm even when he faced me. Ya see, we had quite the parting."

Cecilus: "Oh? I don't recall anything about it, but I'm curious as to how we part—"

Cecilus tipped his head sideways at Rowan's revelation, keenly stroking his chin.

A parting with a father which the son had forgotten. For all that, taking their interactions thus far into account, Heinkel imagined that it could not be anything but awful.

At that moment—

???: "—The fucker over there is the motherfucker that planned a fucking assassination of His Excellency and got sliced up for it."

A sharp voice cut in, capturing Heinkel and the others' gazes in its direction.

And there was the petite hyena human that had been fast asleep until now, picking himself up from the floor he had been left aside on. Sitting up in a cross-legged position, he glared at Rowan with a sour look on his face,

???: "I'm also real fucking surprised to see this shithead alive when he should be dead. Especially because I can't imagine that even the fucking dumbass Cecilus would fuck it up."

Cecilus: "Oh, you're awake, Doggy. Woof, woof! I'm glad you're looking very well."

???: "You're being fucking stupid as always, you piece of shit!"

Cecilus pouted with a sulky expression at the shouting hyena human.

Judging from his reaction, the hyena human seemed to be acquainted with Cecilus. However, it must be said that it was Cecilus who did not remember such a fact. —No, from the current flow of the conversation, perhaps saying that he had forgotten about what happened before he shrunk would be the correct way to phrase it.

It was a ridiculous story, but it could be because he did not recall anything from his adulthood that he, Rowan, and the hyena human were all on different pages, talking past each other.

Al: "By the way, who's this guy that was knocked out earlier? He seems pretty energetic…"

Rowan: "Ah, Mister Furball over here is General First-Class Groovy. He's one of the Empire's Nine Divine Generals, and Cecilus's colleague."

Al: "By Groovy… Oh, you mean Groovy Gumlet!"

Al’s voice rose a pitch higher, perplexed by the unpredicted identity of the stranger, but Heinkel was just as surprised as him.

After all, Rowan had only told him that the person was someone important without giving him any further information, so he had been carrying him along as a lump of baggage.

Depending on the situation, he might have treated the luggage that was the hyena human as a shield against the undead’s attacks.

Al: “Which means, even though one of them’s shrunken down, there’s two General First-Classes here. I want to say it’s giving me some unexpected hope, but…”

Rowan: “—? What could it be?”

Al: “Didn’t Mister General First-Class just say something crazy? Planned the Emperor’s assassination?”

Once Al brought the topic back on track, Rowan was once again at the center of attention.

For a moment, the hyena human’s—Groovy’s—awakening and his exchange with Cecilus had stolen Heinkel’s focus, but he did certainly say that.

Faced with everyone’s distrustful looks, Rowan placed a hand on his forehead with an, “Oopsie,”

Rowan: “That’s a misunderstanding, ya see. I haven’t planned an assassination of His Excellency the Great Emperor. I only tried to have my son do it.”

Heinkel: “…That’s no excuse. So, as parent and child, you guys are both guilty of an attempted assassination of the Emperor?”

Heinkel stared at the blue-haired parent and child, stunned by the explanation that failed to serve its purpose as one.

He had never heard of the Emperor being killed, so it was probably just handled as an attempt, but that was quite an egregious rumor to have floating around.

However, Groovy shook his head with a, “You’re wrong,” to Heinkel’s question,

Groovy: “This fucker told His Excellency that his shitty dad was planning it. After that, the story goes that he went to put an end to the nasty fucking plot along with his shitty dad.”

Al: “But isn’t he alive because Cecilus didn’t put an end to it?”

Groovy: “I dunno about it either, fucking hell! OI, CECILUS, YOU FUCKER! The hell were you thinking, letting your shit-for-a-father live?!”

Cecilus: “Who knows? Even if you told me it was something I did, between the me of yesterday, the me of today, and the me of tomorrow, the quotes and exceptional directions of the sort that flash across my mind during the moment will also change. However, it’s hard to imagine that I failed to do it, so perhaps it could be that I purposefully didn’t do it?”

Groovy shot up to his feet, edging in on Cecilus, but the boy with a similar stature waved his hand with an unapologetic look, as if he were saying that the answer was lost with his missing height.

In reality, asking Cecilus about this when he presumably cannot recall his own reasons would be fruitless. Instead of clinging on to an unknown answer—

Heinkel: “Blue hair, why did you plot the Emperor’s assassination? Is your goal to overthrow the government?”

Rowan: “Hahaha, ya say such silly, silly things, redhead. My goal’s mighty simple. If my son were to do away with His Excellency the Emperor, the whole of the Empire’d become his enemy.”

Heinkel: “That’s pretty… Obvious, though?”

Rowan: “That’s my goal. A situation where those Imperial soldiers are gonna keep on attacking without sparing any time to eat or sleep… There’s no better environment than that to polish his sword skills between life and death!”

Heinkel: “□□□”

Acting as if he had come up with a wonderful idea, Rowan gave a good-humored, resounding slap to his knee.

Heinkel could only widen his eyes while frozen in place, unable to comprehend the logic he was voicing out. On the other hand, Cecilus spoke up, chiming in, “Ah, ah, ah!” after hearing those words,

Cecilus: “I see, I see, so that’s why! I have no recollection of it, but if it’s Dad, then he would make me do something like that. He would stop at nothing to reach the Heavenly Sword!”

Rowan: “Yer talent with the sword’s the real deal… But, when it comes to ya, ya hit the ceiling right in front of the Heavenly Sword. If that’s the case, I thought, why not use a somewhat heavy-handed method to let ya break outta yer shell… Out of parental love.”

Cecilus: “Hahhahha, parental love? That’s really unlike you! If you had human emotions like that left in you, Dad, then you wouldn’t have killed five or six of your own children until the talented me was born.”

Rowan: “Oh dear! There’s no room to argue ‘gainst that!”

Their biggest doubts having been dispelled, the eccentric laughter from the giggling father and son reverberated loudly.

While Groovy regarded their words with a scowl and Al listened to them with a hand to his neck, Heinkel’s vision began to sway in a bout of dizziness, and he bumped his shoulder against the wall.

Their parent-child relationship was unfathomable.

He struggled to understand what was driving him to go that far. Suddenly, the faint hope he had harbored towards Rowan until just a moment ago, a type of shared feeling he had for the person who stood on the same foot—the father of someone considered as the strongest, had faded away rapidly before vanishing completely.

He’d plotted the assassination of the Vollachian Emperor, been betrayed by his own child and fell short of his goal in addition, was considered long dead, and in a position where he would be well known for his appalling notoriety.

With all that in mind, Heinkel could not comprehend why he was able to laugh so nonchalantly.

Heinkel was in a similar position in his home country. Even so, it was terribly suffocating.

Even if he were only suspected of a crime he had no memory of committing, such as being involved with the kidnapping of the Lugunican royalty, it was still unbearably suffocating—

Al: "—Right, I got the idea that each of us have our own circumstances."

Al spoke out quietly, ignoring Heinkel, who was in the midst of a dizzy spell.

He, too, might have his own thoughts concerning the previous conversation between the father and son, as well as Groovy's status, in his mind. However, he gulped down the entirety of those emotions and placed a lid over them.

That was because Al had already decided what to prioritize in this place, over the doubts laying about in front of him.

Al: "We're all members that have something we're looking for, or have some objective at the Imperial Capital. The lineup might be full of talented people who don't really need anyone to lend a hand to them, but they have no reason to go out of their way to reject willing collaborators. Isn't that right?"

He asked, surveying the roster in the room with a glance.

Groovy crossed his short arms, puffing out his chest at Al's question,

Groovy: "I just woke up, so I only know the Imperial Capital's got this shitty ass earthy smell to it. Plus I don't wanna be left behind with this fucking dumbass and the fucking dumbass's dad. —I dunno whats His Fucking Clever Excellency's planning, either."

Al: “The primary goal is to fight off the undead, regardless of whether we’re enemies or allies… At least, I can believe that you’ve got the same idea as us, right?”

Groovy: “You don’t have to be worried for shit, it’s the same for me.”

Groovy asserted with a bullish tone, showing his agreement with Al’s opinion rather aggressively. Subsequently, after receiving his response, Al looked over to Cecilus,

Al: “I understand that you and your dad’ve got a unique parent-child relationship. I dunno why you’re able to get along and laugh together considering what happened, but the topic of parents is also a touchy subject for me. I won’t elaborate. But, instead of—”

Cecilus: “There’s no need to worry, Al-san. You don’t have to choose your words so anxiously. There were a few occasions where your decisions saved me during the previous battle with the archer. So! For now, I believe it’s unnecessary to have a clash in our objectives just for us to part ways.”

Al: “That’s great. That’s great, but also please don’t try to kill me on a whim. I can’t deal with it no matter how many lives I have.”

Cecilus: “Hahaha, no matter how many lives you have! Nice joke!”

Al: “It’s not a joke, though…”

Al breathed a sigh as Cecilus let out a cheerful cackle while making a thumbs-up.

Finally, he gathered both Heinkel and Rowan within his field of view,

Al: “How ‘bout you, old man? Whatcha gonna do?”

Rowan: “Whoaaa, helmeted sir! Compared to my son and Mister Furball, the way ya talk when ya invite us is as if yer being forced to speak… That wounds me, ya know.”

Al: “I mean, I kinda have the worst impression of you right now.”

Shrugging his one-armed shoulders, Al let Rowan know about his impression of him in a blunt manner, and then craned his neck in Heinkel's direction,

Al: "You might've had nothing to show for during the all-out battle, but you can make up for it if you go and rescue Princess. Without her, your wish won't come true. Right, Heinkel-san?"

Heinkel: "I…"

Upon being told that by Al, Heinkel clenched the back of his teeth together as he dropped his gaze.

Just as Al said, Heinkel was a part of the Priscilla Camp because there was something he wanted, a reward that he could obtain should she win her way through the Royal Selection.

Essentially, no expectations were placed on the contributions and capabilities of Heinkel himself. The only thing he was expected to do was to act as a constraint against Reinhard, who was allied with another candidate.

If he thought about it in this way, no matter how much he was able to contribute to Priscilla in this situation, he would only be achieving results that deviated from his original role.

Adding on to that—

Heinkel: "□□□"

Heinkel had already fallen to his knees once on the battlefield, giving up on fighting back.

When he had witnessed the sight that appeared otherworldly, as if the world had been flipped upside down on its head, he had lost heart. —Heinkel had tried to give up.

That was why he left the battlefield, drowned himself in liquor as Rowan dragged him away, and closed the lid on top of everything.

And yet, he thought,

Heinkel: "…Louanna."

Within his heart, where he had been told that he had an opportunity to redeem himself, a certain regret showed its shameful face.

If Priscilla had not seen him when he had run away, nor his state of mind when he had given up… If he could pretend everything was going well, he wanted to turn a blind eye to the fear that had once gripped his throat, and continue reaching out a hand.

Heinkel: "—. But, what can we do? Even if we band together, we're just five people. Are you saying we can save an Empire on the brink of destruction with this group of five?"

Cecilus: "That's certainly one upsetting, offensive opinion. Of course, we seem like a group of five people if you only look at the numbers, but the strength that lies within me alone is over and above the equivalent of a hundred others so you'd opt to reword it as a million and four peop—mrghmrghmrgh…"

Groovy: "Shut your fucking trap."

Locked in a battle with his inner worries, Heinkel sought for their chances of succeeding and outlooks on what awaited them.

As one would expect, General First-Class Groovy used his own hand to cover the mouth of Cecilus's meaningless banter aimed at Heinkel's words. Keeping Cecilus's mouth covered, he glanced at Al with a, "Though,"

Groovy: "It's just as the red old fart fucking said. Even though we have me and this fucking dumbass, it's not easy to kill the shit out of those motherfuckers outside."

Cecilus: "Byyy the way, I think we shouldn't do that. Why? Because of a hunch felt by the leading actor!"

Groovy: "Shut your fucking trap!"

Leaving aside the two, who began squabbling over whether they should cover Cecilus's mouth or not, Heinkel's doubts remained suspended in the air, unresolved.

Truthfully, Heinkel had already made up his mind to an extent. If he could settle it without giving in, then he could not afford to give in. All that was left was the reason he was seeking.

Al flicked the metal fittings on his helmet with a finger at Heinkel, who continued to look for the reason he sought,

Al: “Just as Heinkel-san said, we’re being way too ambitious if we think we can turn around the situation with just us five. That said, what we need to do isn’t something as grand as saving the Empire. —We gotta pave the road.”

Rowan: “The road, ya said?”

Rowan licked up the alcohol in his gourd, then wiped his mouth with a sleeve. Al nodded at his query with a, “Yeah.”

He turned his head, gazing ahead at the closed window; the Imperial Capital could be seen behind it, reduced to a city of corpses.

And then—

Al: “Saving the Empire is a job for the hero. We’re gonna create a starting point for it. As many points as we can, and anywhere we can get our hands on, because there’s no knowing what’s gonna come in handy.”

Heinkel blinked his eyes at Al’s words, which gave him the impression of sounding oddly confident.

It was as if he were implying that he had an idea of someone who could pull it off, but Heinkel had no idea of who that someone was, nor did Rowan or Groovy.

However, as the unbounded one regarded those words with gleaming eyes,

Cecilus: “—In other words, it’s foreshadowing!!”

In high spirits and highly enthusiastic, the young Blue Lightning declared as such, welcoming Al’s aim with open arms.

In terms of the power dynamic in this place, it did not take long for it to be expressed as the collective opinion of the five people taking part in this meeting.

Chapter 38:
Rowan Segmunt

1

—Rowan Segmunt was a Stargazer.

Stargazer, in a sense different to the official position of the Vollachian Empire, to which Ubilk, who was one among them, had been appointed by Vincent Vollachia for the first time; he was a Stargazer in the original sense of the expression.

Bestowed with a commandment that ought to be prioritized more than anything else in their lives, a being that would relinquish anything and everything in order to fulfill their grand purpose; that was a Stargazer.

One could surmise that Vincent's act of deliberately conferring the title of Stargazer upon the official position held by Ubilk held not only the purpose of bestowing meaning unto the aforementioned post, but even possessed the intention to reduce the very existence of Stargazers to a formality. The Wise Emperor's true motives may be ignored for the time being, however.

What was important, was the fact that Rowan Segmunt was one of those people bestowed with a commandment.

The compulsive force that acted on a person vested in a commandment, thus becoming a Stargazer, was quite strong.

It was endowed with power to interfere with human life such that it could provide a mere male prostitute the influential voice to frequent the palace as to provide the Emperor with his opinion, that it could cause a frail mother to forget the love she felt for the daughter to whom she had given birth while on the verge of death, that it could easily make someone abandon the objective they had devoted their entire life to.

Upon receiving their commandment, many Stargazers would have the lives they had been leading till that point distorted, coerced, forced to alter the principles of their way of life. And, they did not consider that as a tragedy.

Rather, having been granted a great ambition, one they needed to accomplish even if it took them their entire lifetime, doubtlessly believing that fulfilling it was the purpose of their very birth, they even felt great happiness.

No matter how abnormal, how pitiful it might seem to those around them, that was how it was.

But, in regards to that tragedy shared by the Stargazers, the position Rowan had been placed in was an exception when compared to his fellow Stargazers.

After all, the commandment bestowed upon Rowan Segmunt was to reach the Heavenly Sword.

—And that was none other than the great ambition Rowan himself had harbored even before the commandment had been bestowed upon him.

2

Rowan: “To master the way of the swordsman, many months and years spent with steel in hand—”

Rocking his head from left to right, his face flushed red with a scent of liquor, Rowan sang in good humor.

There was no particular melody to it, but since he was in such high spirits, he could not help but sing. Happily staggering back and forth, his footwork would appear to be that of a dance.

A while prior, slightly before the uproar of the black-haired Crown Prince had begun, the nostalgic fragrance of blood had hung in the air across the entire Empire.

An omen of war it had been; as the reign of Vincent had been so ridiculously docile, Rowan had had a hunch that its backlash would cause an extremely large disturbance in the world.

That hunch of his had been right on the mark. The Empire was now facing a moment of disaster, one in which even the boundary between the living and the dead was unclear.

Rowan: “Ahh, really, this is the kinda world I like.”

The world was estranged from peace, and the more chaotic the state of the world got, the more the way of steel would be refined.

He did not mean that more diligent efforts ought to be applied in that case, just that there should be more enemies who were worth slaying. But generally, it was quite difficult for astonishingly powerful beings to come into being during the midst of peace.

Even if souls did know where they would arrive, their frame of mind seemed to be harmonized with their vessels of flesh before inhabiting them.

Those born into turbulent times would come into being bestowed with the aptitude to live in those turbulent times.

Therefore, expecting those same souls to be dwelling within people born outside of turbulent times was a bet with really poor odds. Rowan had lost that gamble many a time, and was only blessed with Cecilus after killing eight of his own children with his own hands.

Upon seeing a drawn blade during their first bath after being born, Cecilus had been the only one to laugh at it as something he would come to love for his entire life.

Rowan: “To think that Cecilus has also hit his ceiling, and yet the Heavenly Sword is still far off. Ahh, ahh, really, really… I really was born in the wrong era.”

Using his palm against his forehead as a visor, Rowan grumbled out his lamentations many times.

The more chaotic the world got, the more into ruin that peace fell, the more the era would demand the overwhelming might of the strong. With the path to reach the Heavenly Sword having become so distant and steep, he wondered just how good it would have been to live in the era of four-hundred years ago, when all living things feared the Witch.

Had he been born in that epoch, there would be no fear of the path to reach the Heavenly Sword being cut short.

Much less, would Rowan have Cecilus—

???: "—Oi, do you intend on doing this seriously, you."

Rowan: "Hmm?"

A voice called out to his tottering back from behind him, and Rowan turned around inquisitively.

With both legs firmly planted on the stone pavement, the glinting eyes glaring at him from above belonged to a red-haired swordsman of tall stature—to a person bearing the name of Heinkel.

That man had ought to have been binge-drinking together with Rowan til a moment prior, yet he now wore a completely sober expression in stark contrast. Though expectations were that he would don a tidier appearance compared to the time Rowan had initially found him on a plain, he looked even more haggard than before, strangely so.

Rowan: "Yer spirits still kinda down? C'mon, redhead, let's just drink. The town's a lil' lackin, but fortunately those undead folk are leaving the food and booze untouched."

Heinkel: "Fortunately… Hk."

Rowan: "Ohhh, looks like that rubbed ya the wrong way."

As Rowan raised his alcohol-filled gourd up high, Heinkel grinded his teeth, his cheeks stiffening.

Since that response indicated refusal, Rowan reluctantly allowed that destinationless alcohol to pass through his own gullet.

As he had informed Heinkel, without paying much attention to the noticeable restaurants and residences, the undead were prowling around in search of the living, but their objective was neither food nor alcohol, it was blood.

That was to say, they were free to satisfy their hunger and drunkenness as much as they pleased.

Rowan: “What’s not to like about that? If stuff’s just gonna spoil if we leave it be, the rational thing for us to do’d be to have our fill.”

Heinkel: “Food and alcohol and whatnot, those things don’t matter in the slightest! I have no hopes for your sense of duty… for the sense of duty of both you and your kid. More importantly, answer me, do you intend on doing this seriously?”

Rowan: “□□□”

As Heinkel raised his voice, Rowan closed a single eye at those words, and kept silent.

The red-haired swordsman seemed to have grown irritated simply because he was unable to wait for those few seconds; unable to guess what his problem was, Rowan went without knowing what the answer to that question was in earnest.

Guessing the thoughts and feelings of others was something Rowan was not very good at.

That same defect seemed to have been inherited by Cecilus, but he would overcome that problem by force, making use of a different point of view. Rowan could not do the same thing.

In any case—

Rowan: “Redhead, are ya worried ‘bout whether or not I’m gonna take part in that helmeted gentleman’s plan?”

Heinkel: “That’s right. The flow of events brought me back here, but as Aldebaran said, this is a chance for redemption. I won’t screw this up.”

With a nod, Heinkel pointed over yonder—No, far beyond that, he indicated the sturdy ramparts that forbade one from seeing the outside of the Imperial Capital from within.

To the star-shaped ramparts used to protect the citizens from the rebel army in the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, and thus —

Heinkel: “It’s one of the five bastions we’ve got to capture.”

His voice leaden and tense, Heinkel spoke of the target of their tactics.

The man in the steel helmet, the person known as Al had spoken of the “path” they ought to pave—foreshadowing for the sake of the “hero” who would come after Rowan and the others who were currently in the Imperial Capital.

Presently, the only living people at this place were Rowan and Heinkel, and luckily, they had not come across a single dead person. Cecilus, Groovy, and Al had gone off in a separate group.

All of them were taking action to open holes in the strong bulwark that safeguarded the Imperial Capital.

The method that Rowan, Heinkel, and Groovy had employed to enter the Imperial Capital had been quite illogical, so it would likely be difficult for others to replicate. In that case, the notion that they had to create passages was a proposal that made sense.

Then, after parting ways with his son, who was boisterous even after being shrunken, the middle-aged duo began a carefree journey —preventing them from doing so was the heat Heinkel was filled with. Wondering what to do, Rowan scratched his cheek.

Ignoring Rowan’s sentiment, Heinkel clicked his tongue, and,

Heinkel: “To be honest, I don’t get what your son meant by “foreshadowing”, but…”

Rowan: “Well, ya really shouldn’t worry too much about the way he speaks. Anyhow, there ain’t no doubt about the fact that things won’t be able to proceed as long as those ramparts are in use.”

Heinkel: “If you understand that…!”

Rowan: “—Why would I choose not to take part?”

As Heinkel bared his teeth and shouted, Rowan interrupted the words of the former and shrugged his shoulders.

His daunted face was actually hilarious, and Rowan wished to say that it would be delicious to drink alcohol while gazing at it, but going too hard on the booze would be a mistake. It would be a hassle to procure alcohol at this place, and there was no guarantee that the man in front of him would not carelessly draw his sword.

Rowan: “Nah, redhead here ain’t drawing his sword against me.”

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

Rowan: “Ahh, ahh, ya really don’t need to feel any shame. At the very least, I’m the type who doesn’t think it’s very brave to draw yer blade on anyone and everyone without distinction… since I don’t get the difference between what’s scary or not in the slightest.”

Tapping the side of his head with his finger, he touched upon a shortcoming unrelated to his intoxication.

Seeing Heinkel widen his eyes upon hearing that, Rowan looked towards the ramparts,

Rowan: “The reason why I’m not going along with the helmeted gentleman’s offer’s exceedingly simple… His objective’s to retake the Imperial Capital from the dead people, right? That ain’t something I really desire.”

Therefore, he had no reason to cooperate with the plan to get rid of the Imperial Capital’s defenses.

Those were Rowan’s honest feelings, but Heinkel still darted his eyes about in bewilderment. Rowan believed himself to have given a relatively clear answer, so he titled his head in confusion.

Heinkel: “So, in other words, you’re taking the side of those undead guys?”

Rowan: “Why’d ya think that? That’s an entirely different thing, innit. For me, the country’s falling to ruin courtesy of the undead rampaging about. It’s just that a situation of this sort’s convenient, I ain’t taking the side of the undead.”

Heinkel: “…It’s no use, I don’t understand what you’re thinking in the slightest. To begin with…”

Rowan: “Hm?”

Heinkel: “Even if you don’t feel like doing it, your son… the Blue Lightning is eager to. Are you just going to overlook that, knowingly?”

Putting his hand over his mouth, Heinkel tried to chew through the information it had been forcibly stuffed with. However, the next thing he spoke was also irrelevant to Rowan.

While it was true that Cecilus was eager to go along with Al’s plan.

Rowan: “I’m me, and my son’s my son, that’s all there is to it. Besides…”

Heinkel: “Besides?”

Rowan: “For Cecilus in his current state, the summit of the Heavenly Sword’s become distant once again. By being shrunken, his skill with the sword’s been dulled. With how he is, he won’t be able to fulfill the promise we made when he slayed me.”

Heinkel: “□□□”

With a light stroke of his chest, Rowan reflected on the slash that had been engraved there.

Groovy had loathsomely spoken of the case of the attempted assassination on the Emperor. Rowan’s involvement in it was in trying to get Cecilus to do it, so he could be considered as having instigated an assassination. Either way, after that attempt of his ended in failure, he experienced the stroke of a sword as punishment, and even now he did not forget the scorching heat of that instant.

Then, upon thinking that much, Rowan suddenly cocked his head.

Rowan: “However, redhead, ya seem to be awfully hung up on the matter of me and my son. Thinking back on it, yer reaction was the most intense, redhead. —Anything wrong ‘bout it?”

At the fact that the shrunken Cecilus was Cecilus, and that Rowan was Cecilus’s father no matter if he was big or small, Heinkel’s reaction had been weighty and thickheaded.

Upon being inquired of the true meaning behind that by Rowan, Heinkel returned an unexpected answer.

That was—

Heinkel: “…I’m Heinkel Astrea.”

Rowan: “Astrea… Astrea, Astrea, Astrea… Oh, OHHHHHHHHH!”

Putting on more than enough airs, Heinkel gave his name, and Rowan gazed at him in wonder.

At first, placing the sound he had heard on his tongue, the conviction did not sink into his brain until he had ruminated on it a few times. However, the very moment it clearly sunk in, his blood boiled at its significance.

Rowan: “So that means, redhead! You, you belong to the Sword Saint’s lineage!”

The Astrea Family of the Kingdom of Lugunica; that was the title of the being said to be the strongest within the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, or perhaps, the strongest across the entirety of the lands of the Four Great Countries, not just the Kingdom.

A special mention went to the Sword Saint of the current generation, Reinhard van Astrea, whose existence he had heard to be exceptional across all the generations of the Astrea Family until now.

Rowan: “No way, no way, redhead! Ya didn’t pretend yer name was Heinkel while actually being this generation’s Sword Saint, did ya? So that means, yer a blood relative… No, is it yer son?! Yer son’s Reinhard! The father of the Sword Saint! Now this is quite the unexpected coincidence! What a bizarre turn of fate!”

He had heard that Reinhard was of the same age as Cecilus—the same age that Cecilus was originally.

If that was the case, Rowan could fathom a rough guess of the relationship between Reinhard and Heinkel, as the latter resembled himself in age. At the same time, Heinkel, having finished processing his bitter hangups, wore an expression of reaching comprehension.

Rowan and Heinkel were the fathers of the Blue Lightning and the Sword Saint—.

Rowan: “More importantly, this means that yer a descendant of an ancestor who reached the Heavenly Sword, right?”

Heinkel: “…ah?”

Rowan: “The reputation of the first generation Sword Saint, Reid Astrea, is true to the memory and the ears! In that case, as a fellow swordsman, I hold respect for those who’ve arrived at the summit that we all ought to aim for.”

The title of Sword Saint was proof of the extraordinary nature of the Astrea Family, and the first generation was considered to be the first to have reached the concept of the Heavenly Sword, a transcendent being who stood at the apex of all swordsmen.

The instant he thought that, it seemed as though his attitude towards Heinkel until now had been rude; hence, a wish to apologize began to rise. Just how rude had he been to a descendant of someone who had reached the Heavenly Sword?

Rowan: “Sorry, redhead. I apologize for all my impoliteness until now. I’d never even thought that a family member of Reid Astrea, who reached the Heavenly Sword, would’ve fallen so low.”

Heinkel: “□□□”

Rowan: “Redhead?”

There was no response from Heinkel as Rowan placed his hand on the katana on his waist, and deeply bowed.

Suspicious of that, Rowan looked with an upward glance, and saw Heinkel covering his face with his palm, shaking his head. Then, as he let out a long, frustrated breath,

Heinkel: “…Got it. I finally got it. Down to our very roots, I’m completely different to you.”

Rowan: “No matter what’s up, don’t let it get ya down too much. I’m me, and my son’s my son. And so, you’re you, redhead. Regardless, ya won’t be able to cut deep unless ya persist with steel.”

Heinkel: “—I have you to thank, for not letting me die back there. For that alone, I’m grateful.”

As if refusing to entertain the back and forth any further, Heinkel turned his back to Rowan.

For a moment, Rowan raised his head with the desire to cut deep into that upright back, but Heinkel was not the type to draw his weapon were his life to be in danger, so he decided to refrain himself from killing in futility.

Killing without any gain would merely dull the steel.

Then, Heinkel headed for the bastion he had pointed to, and would likely work hard to sabotage it.

If there happened to be a skillful individual there, it was unclear whether Heinkel had factored the possibility that he might become unable to do anything into his calculations, but if he intended on depending on Rowan in that possibility, Rowan was sorry.

But, Rowan had his own objective, and his relationship with Heinkel did not take priority over that in the slightest.

So, though he felt a bit lonely to be parting with his drinking buddy, they would just be briefly separating here—

Heinkel: “What do you want to do by neglecting your son, oi?”

Before running off, Heinkel called out with his back still turned, to which Rowan raised a wry smile.

This also went for his face and expression, but Heinkel really did not betray the impression that he was an unmanly personage. Anyhow, Rowan had no hesitation at that question, and while patting the sword wound on his chest,

Rowan: “Of course, it’s for the sake of my own dearest wish. —Redhead, I’m the same as ya.”

If he was referring to the matter of neglecting his son, then, they were the same in that regard.

Without any interest whatsoever in how Heinkel would respond to that, Rowan headed for his own objective, and broke into a light sprint through the Imperial Capital, where no living people remained.

3

—Well then, Rowan Segmunt was a Stargazer.

Vowing on his honor, Rowan also had a personality, desires, and a life before becoming a Stargazer, before becoming fully absorbed in fulfilling the commandment granted to him.

Of course, just like the majority of Stargazers, Rowan was bestowed with a commandment, and was compelled to change the way he lived upon becoming a Stargazer. But, to those around him, there was no noticeable change that could be perceived from Rowan.

That was because before he had even been bestowed with a commandment, Rowan Segmunt’s dearest wish was to reach the Heavenly Sword, and he was obsessed with doing everything that could possibly further that purpose.

Strong individuals who strived to master their techniques just like Rowan, fearsome Witchbeasts that attacked villages, people of the villages destroyed by those Witchbeasts, scoundrels who tyrannized others, saints who donated to others; he had systematically slain everything that could be useful for tempering his steel with reckless abandon, but he had not produced many results.

In various schools, he had studied, acquired techniques, then went on to cut down the heads of the schools; he had tried to unify the many techniques he had absorbed, but when he understood that it only led to the equilibrium of his own skills crumbling, he abandoned that as well.

Quite literally, he had continued to walk and walk and walk a path of blood, but the path to the Heavenly Sword was still unreachable; craving that from the bottom of his heart, he had even considered ending his own life—and it was at that moment.

That was when Rowan was bestowed with a commandment, and became a Stargazer.

The Heavenly Sword must be reached no matter what, such had become Rowan's destiny; that did not mean that he himself was to reach the Heavenly Sword, but that he was to pursue trial and error in order to produce a being qualified to reach the Heavenly Sword.

But, he did not know the correct interpretation. Fundamentally, Rowan's methods always remained the same.

At first, he could do nothing else but try and do everything systemically. He immediately gave up on the path of finding those who had talent, and fostering them to reach it.

He could always perform more skillfully when he did things himself. If they could not perform more skillfully than him, then the Heavenly Sword was just a dream within a dream, so it was better for him to cut down and discard that ephemeral hope.

While he was doing that, he realized it.

There ought to have been meaning in the fact that he had expected himself to be the one who should reach the Heavenly Sword.

Thinking that, he tried to aim for the Heavenly Sword on his own once again, but when it remained an unreachable path even after recklessly endeavoring, and recklessly slaying people, he relinquished it.

That was not it. For Rowan himself, it was not meant to be. — Rowan's lineage, ought to reach it instead.

Thus, through Rowan Segmunt's diligent efforts, a vessel to reach the Heavenly Sword, Cecilus Segmunt, was born, and Rowan's duty was fulfilled.

Seeing his child soaking in his first bath, giggling as he gazed upon the drawn blade pressed against his neck, Rowan was released from the binds that had tied him down for a long, long time.

When a Stargazer ascertained that their commandment was fulfilled, they were liberated from the role bestowed upon them.

Afterwards, what would overcome the mind was a loss of understanding for the sense of values that they had calmly obeyed until then for no reason at all, even distorting their beliefs and convictions.

Of course, the same thing happened to Rowan.

In order to fulfill his commandment, he had been desperate to create a child with the talent to reach the Heavenly Sword; upon seeing the child born at the end of all of it, the moment he realized he had accomplished it, it did not matter to him anymore.

As a result, what remained was his son who was recognized for his potential to reach the Heavenly Sword, and his very self, who had lost sight of his goal to reach the Heavenly Sword, and had squandered the prime years of his life for the sake of others.

Faced with that immensely unbearable truth, this time, Rowan headed towards the decision to end his own life, which he had been unable to carry out in the past.

But—

Cecilus: “Aaah.”

Laughing at the drawn blade which threatened his life, the son, having been promised to tread the path to reach the Heavenly Sword from birth, clutched the finger of the despairing Rowan, and those thoughts vanished without a trace.

For Rowan, who had cut down so many lives and basked in enough blood to form an entire lake, the shock that this feeble life brought him was unfathomable.

He had realized it.

At this moment, a being so weak that it could not hold even a single chopstick would acquire ability with the sword worthy of eventually reaching the Heavenly Sword. In that case, where was the reason to assume that his future prospects would only decline after passing his prime?

If a baby could reach the Heavenly Sword, then a path still remained for an old swordsman.

Ergo, Rowan forgot about his sorrow over the path being closed, and vowed once again to strive towards his own desire.

Bestowed with a commandment, fulfilling his commandment, having a child capable of reaching the Heavenly Sword born into this world, Rowan Segmunt was released from his duty as a Stargazer.

—Even now, he did not give up on the path to reach the Heavenly Sword, and continued to move forward.

4

Having separated from Heinkel, Rowan sprinted towards the north side of the Imperial Capital with vigilance.

Ahead of his route was the building that stood out the most within the Imperial Capital, the Crystal Palace, and there was no room to doubt that it had currently been transformed into the base of the undead.

Likely, the ringleader who was resurrecting the dead, with whom Groovy and Al were having issues with, was also present in the palace, but that was no reason for Rowan to halt his legs.

Storming the palace, and beheading the ringleader of the enemy faster than anyone else—Let it be known that he was not heading for the Crystal Palace in order to bring the situation under his control.
That which he had told Heinkel was no lie, it really did not matter to Rowan in the slightest whether the Empire was saved or not. His perception was that it was better for chaos and disaster to be widespread.

There was a reason why Rowan was possessed of a single-minded focus on hastening to the Crystal Palace.

That reason was of course, his biological son, Cecilus Segmunt. However, even if the reason were stated to be Cecilus, it was not due to any parental love or affection.

Rowan: “That damn dullard, it’s absolutely outrageous that he parted ways with the Dream Sword and Fiend Sword.”

In Rowan’s mind as he gnawed his teeth, two katanas that concealed tremendous power were pictured—Though there were many magic and holy swords in the world, only ten were swords of absolute power.

Two among them were Cecilus’s beloved katanas which he had parted with after being shrunken, the Dream Sword Masayume and the Fiend Sword Murasame.

Even if things were to take a turn for the worst, it would be troubling if those two katanas were to be lost.

It went without saying that, to reach the Heavenly Sword, the person in question was required to possess masterful swordsmanship and talent. But in order to prove to the world that they were the real deal, they must not yield in the aspect of using worthy steel.

And undoubtedly, Masayume and Murasame were two worthy blades.

Rowan: "I dunno when he'll return to normal, but without his katanas, he ain't gonna be able to fully take form."

When the shrunken Cecilus returned to his original size, him being without his swords was out of the question.

It was possible that, during a moment of this exceedingly massive disaster, Cecilus would reach the Heavenly Sword. If Cecilus were to not possess his katanas when that came to pass, it would be absolutely outrageous.

—Even if Cecilus were to reach the Heavenly Sword, were he to go without wielding his perfect katanas at the moment Rowan cut him down, then the latter would have no proof that he himself had reached the Heavenly Sword.

In order to secure that proof, he had no choice but to recover Cecilus's swords.

Rowan: "That bastard, what an imbecile to shrink and forget the promise he made with his father."

In the past, Rowan and Cecilus had made a promise as parent and child.

When Rowan attempted to quickly make the entirety of the Empire into an enemy, so that he could have Cecilus reach the Heavenly Sword, Cecilus refused it because "That's typical of a crude villain" of all things, taking Vincent's side as he tried to slay Rowan.

Then, in order to have Cecilus turn a blind eye, Rowan had made a promise.

That eventually, once Cecilus reached the Heavenly Sword, Rowan would definitely come to kill him.

Accepting that, Cecilus dropped a gravely-injured Rowan into a river, allowing him to escape. Having survived through the verge of death, Rowan continued to improve his skills as he awaited the promised time.

And now, that moment was imminent, constantly drawing closer.

Rowan: “If the location hasn’t changed—”

While vested with the seat of First, Cecilus had spent nearly all of his earnings on swords.

Therefore, he did not have a mansion befitting a General First-Class, instead living his life in a small hut constructed in the field north of the Crystal Palace. If that had not changed, there was a high chance that both the Dream Sword and the Fiend Sword were being stored in that small hut.

In order to retrieve those and deliver them to Cecilus, Rowan headed for the hinterland of the Crystal—

Rowan: “—Hk.”

He evaded the eyes of the undead, he passed by the Crystal Palace, and when he tried to proceed to the base of the destroyed reservoir wall, Rowan took a great leap sideways due to a sudden presence.

And, that had been the right thing to do.

—A tremendous impact crashed down from overhead, its vehement, destructive force generating a circular crater in the main street.

The walls surrounding the Crystal Palace that faced the street warped and crumbled, and as a plume of smoke akin to an explosion filled his vision, Rowan clicked his tongue and unsheathed his blade.

Utilizing the cloud-cutting technique he released a strike to sever the eruption of smoke, he was then able to lay eyes on the being present beyond it, on the culprit that had produced the impact.

Standing there was a lone woman, of tall, slender stature.

With long flowing white hair, the woman was adorned in a blue dress and stood with an elegant posture. Though Rowan was completely ignorant in concepts of beauty and ugliness, his values would evaluate her graceful physique as quite beautiful.

Her long-slitted blue eyes were pregnant with a hue of sorrow, which brought suspicion to Rowan.

Unlike the undead, she did not possess black eyeballs of golden irises. Blood coursed through her white skin, so the woman fixing her gaze on him was likely a living person.

However, this was the palace of the dead, the capital of the undead, that conduct should be that of an enemy to the living.

Rowan: “Over there, ya’d be—”

Woman: “—Iris.”

Rowan: “…Didn’t think ya’d introduce yerself so suddenly.”

His katana poised by his waist, Rowan moistened his lips, and narrowed his eyes.

She was a woman, but that was no reason to underestimate her. More than anything else, she was clad in the air of an unbelievably powerful individual. She did not seem to have a positive expression about wielding that power, but that was a matter trivial for Rowan.

With an expression that seemed to be extremely concerned over that trivial matter, as the fox ears hidden within her white hair trembled, the woman who called herself Iris,

Iris: “Return to where you came from. There is no need for anyone to die within the reach of my eyes.”

Rowan: “My goodness, awfully sorry about this.”

Closing a single eye before the woman who was earnestly appealing to him—before Iris, Rowan adjusted his grip on his katana.

No matter what his opponent’s intentions may be, if they were obstructing his way, there was no helping it. And above all else, to move aside when faced with this powerful of an individual was something impossible for a swordsman.

That was to say—

Rowan: “—The path to the Heavenly Sword is still steep. I’m gonna cut ya down, then further down the path I shall proceed.”

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Chapter 39:
Laughter of the One Unbounded

1

—Cecilus Segmunt was a Stargazer.

Stargazer, in a sense different to the official position of the Vollachian Empire, to which Ubilk, who was one among them, had been appointed by Vincent Vollachia for the first time; he was a Stargazer in the original sense of the expression—Bestowed with a commandment, they were beings that would relinquish anything and everything in order to fulfill their grand purpose.

The compulsive force that acted on a person vested in a commandment, thus becoming a Stargazer, was quite strong.

It was endowed with power to interfere with human life such that it could provide a mere male prostitute the influential voice to frequent the palace as to provide the Emperor with his opinion, that it could cause a frail mother to forget the love she felt for the daughter to whom she had given birth while on the verge of death, that it could easily make someone abandon the objective they had devoted their entire life to, to the point of even contemplating suicide for that purpose.

Upon receiving their commandment, many Stargazers would have the lives they had been leading til that point distorted, coerced, forced to alter the principles of their way of life. And, they did not consider that as a tragedy.

No matter how abnormal, how pitiful it might seem to those around them, that was how it was.

Amidst those Stargazers, Rowan Segmunt stood as the sole exception.

After all, the commandment bestowed upon him overlapped with the great ambition he had aimed for originally, henceforth, it did not seem to those around him that his way of life had been distorted; only the person in question held that impression.

How the wish he held dearest and the commandment he had been bestowed came to a compromise, and how his current faith had been established have already been delved into, thus, they shall be omitted.

What shall be discussed here is the being who had been born into this world as the end result of the commandment bestowed upon Rowan Segmunt, Cecilus Segmunt, the fact that he too was a Stargazer, and—

—The reality that, among the Stargazers, Cecilus Segmunt was the sole one unbounded.

2

Cecilus, with the hem of his hakama fluttering in the blowing wind, rested his hand on his forehead to make a visor as he gazed out into the scenery of the distance.

Al had proposed a strategy to bring down the five bastions of star-shaped ramparts that enclosed the Imperial Capital.

In order to draw in reinforcements from the outside, they would open holes in the solid defenses of the undead. Cecilus would warmly welcome more actors who shine onstage and audience members who would bear witness to his flourishing activities.

If this could be called foreshadowing for later exciting developments, then it would not be a bad idea to work diligently at a modest job.

Cecilus: “Nonetheless! Don’t forget that it’s only because I’ve promised a reward hereafter!”

In theater, in war, and in everything else, there was something known as the right person in the right place.

No matter where one was in the world, they were always on the stage—that philosophy of Cecilus’s would take a long time to explain, but different people were suited to different things, and if whether small work and steady accumulation were strong points of Cecilus or not had to be said, they would have to be major miscastings.

From the standpoint of the stage direction, it would really be putting the ground dragon before the carriage to have the leading actor, the center of the stage who captivates the audience's eyes, work under the cover of a stagehand's dark clothes.

Cecilus: "Wouldn't everyone in the audience agree with that point?"

Tilting his head to look up at the sky, Cecilus addressed his words to an unseen party.

Of course, under normal circumstances, if one were to perform such an action, the sky overcast with black clouds would never return an answer to those on the ground. —Indeed, under normal circumstances.

However, Cecilus was not normal, he was the leading actor of this world.

—Inaudible to others, voices from the audience were returned only to Cecilus.

In loud voices that seemed to whisper, in manners as dignified as they were imprudent, and in divine tones seemingly incognizant of the very concept of etiquette, the voices spoke to Cecilus.

Moreover—

???: "■■■■." / "■●■●■●■." / "—■■." / "●●●●●!!" / "■■■■●●■■." / "●●■■●■■●●." / "■■!!" / "●●●■■■." / "■■■●■●●■■●●." / "●●■●■●●●■■●—" / "●●…■." / "●■●■●■●■."

With excessive force and quantity, they poured down upon Cecilus.

Wildly enthusiastic that they had been addressed by the leading actor, Cecilus, the audience eagerly gave him their answers—no, that was incorrect. These were not answers that had been arranged in response to what Cecilus had asked just now.

These were the voices that poured down upon Cecilus's every move, every single action that he took.

They were something that Cecilus had been hearing ceaselessly ever since he became aware of his surroundings, things that was trying to force all of Cecilus's conduct to do this, or do that—

Cecilus: "Hahaha, it seems like you're enjoying yourselves in awfully good moods today as well! I know, I know. After all, I can't help but captivate people with my every action! You won't be able to take your eyes off of my activities for even a second in the future, so stay tuned for those unfolding developments!"

For Cecilus, who had never listened to a single word he was told, those were just enthusiastic cheers from his fans.

—As previously mentioned, Cecilus Segmunt was a Stargazer.

And, for the majority of Stargazers—no, even for Rowan Segmunt, who stood as an exception, their ways of life were distorted in order to fulfill the commandment bestowed upon them.

Such was the extent of a commandment's coercive power, and the lives of Stargazers were dominated by it.

That was, save for Cecilus Segmunt, the sole unbounded Stargazer.

Cecilus: "Thank you, thank you, thank you for all of your cheers. As usual, I have not the slightest understanding of what you're saying at all, nor do I have the ears to listen, but don't worry! I will betray your predictions! I will live up to expectations! For that is the way I live my life as the leading actor!"

???: "—Oh, you fucking shitforbrains. Stop making a racket; it'll be a fucking pain in the ass if they find us."

Cecilus: "Whoopsie."

Taking just the enthusiasm of the audience and ignoring the rest of it as usual, Cecilus turned around at the call of the hyena-man—of

Groovy, who was approaching him from behind.

With a hand placed on his hip, Groovy had a vigilant gaze, and Cecilus admired that.

This beastman warrior, Groovy, who was no taller than himself, was very good.

First of all, there was charm and beauty in his appearance. He was also likely strong enough to be entered amongst the top five most skilled fighters Cecilus had seen since he exited the island. Cecilus had hopes that he would have an interesting fighting style that could not simply be measured by sword ability.

Cecilus: “Regrettably, there is a bit of a problem with your use of words. If you use so many foul words in rapid succession, your dignity will deteriorate! Once it deteriorates, you won’t even be able to maintain your status as a skilled personage. If you go down the path of fighting to the death with me, I would at least expect my opponent to have an appropriate status!”

Groovy: “Don’t be a such a fucking goddamn idiot saying all these fucking illogical things! First of all, who in the fuck is going to fight you to the death asshole?! That Chisha prick had the nerve to do such a fucking unnecessary thing…”

Cecilus: “Oyaoya, that’s a name I’ve heard in passing. Your unfriendly reply is worrisome, but what does this person, whose name has been brought up here, have to do with me, exactly?”

Groovy: “He’s got plenty to do with you, with how you’ve shrunk and lost your memory. —The one who shrunk you is Chisha, the guy with a head that’s way too fucking big.”

Hearing Groovy’s response, Cecilus made a “Mmmm” sound with his throat.

He was often told that he had shrunk, but as usual, that did not really click with Cecilus. Whether Cecilus had shrunk or not, as far as he was concerned, his self currently present here like this was his entirety.

Of course, the fact that Rowan had grown old in the small time since their last encounter, and that the alias of Blue Lightning, a name that was sure to shake the world in the years to come, was already known far and wide, was not without its persuasive power.

Cecilus: “It’s quite the dubious tale that this Chisha person made me small, isn’t it?”

Groovy: “Ahh? Are you going to give me some fucking shit about how it’s impossible for people to shrink, asshole?”

Cecilus: “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong. There are no limits as to what people can imagine, and what they envision can certainly come true. This kind of fairness is one of the reasons why I like the stage that is this world so much, so there’s always gonna be mysteries of stuff like people shrinking. The part I’m having difficulty believing is quite simple. —Who could ever perform such a surprise attack on me?”

Groovy: “□□□”

In response to Cecilus’s question, with his hands clasped behind his head, Groovy made a solemn face.

Even his wrinkled expression had a charm to it, making one think that every stage needed a lively character like Groovy. Yet, even for him, Cecilus’s question seemed to have an impact.

Cecilus himself did not think he was invincible or immortal.

If his heart were gouged out, his slender neck severed, or nearly half of his blood drained, he would die, like any other person.

But who, for that matter, would be capable of such a deed?

In this regard, Groovy realized the contradiction in his own thoughts. No matter who the adversary was, no one could diminish Cecilus—.

Groovy: “—Did that bastard Chisha twist your brain, or were you just fucking careless, asshole?”

Cecilus: "Huh?! Are you saying that while looking at me?!"

Groovy: "I am. I'm saying it for fuck's sake."

Cecilus: "Is that really such a natural thing? Ahaha, that's a low blow, but you got me!"

Laughing and clapping his hands in response to Groovy's words, Cecilus shook his head, as if to say, "Wait a minute".

It was an evaluation that made one want to cover their face in embarrassment. Although, Cecilus understood his own abilities, and even someone as strong as Groovy could not completely dispel such doubts.

Cecilus: "In the end, someone as big as me isn't anything special! I will never become someone who receives such evaluations given my current sorry state! Please wait and see in ten years!"

Groovy: "Who's gonna stick around for your growth for a whole ten years! Quit talking fucking shit and get back to your original size already!"

Cecilus: "But even if you tell me to return to my original size right away, I don't particularly want to… And do you, Groovy-san, know how to revert back?"

Groovy: "I don't know, but that bastard Chisha who set this up probably does. These shinobi tricks have some fucking time or condition-based restrictions. Chisha would likely have some conditions."

Cecilus: "Hoho, so this Chisha person is a shinobi? Are they an acquaintance or friend or blood relative of that energetic old man?"

Groovy: "I don't know, and Chisha isn't a shinobi. It's just his method that's shinobi-like… Ah, this is fucking annoying."

Groovy scratched his head vigorously, complaining like a know-it-all.

Cecilus had a hunch that Groovy seemed knowledgeable about various things, but what was more important than the true identity of this Chisha person was probably clearing the conditions he had set.

If he were to ask that, Groovy would probably get angry and say, “There’s no way I would know!”.

Cecilus: “So what do you think the conditions are for me to revert?”

Groovy: “I have no damn clue!”

Cecilus: “See?”

Cecilus chuckled, just as he had anticipated, while Groovy grumbled unhappily with an “Ah?”.

Just then, as the two were conversing—

???: “Sorry to interrupt your fun conversation, friends, but can we put an end to this amusement time for now?”

Cecilus: “Oya, it’s Al-san.”

The owner of the weary, exasperated voice was Al, who had arrived on the rooftop where Cecilus and Groovy were standing.

He appeared from the stairs on the top floor and tapped his foot on the steps.

Al: “I’m serious, please. It’s tough when you casually hop up to the rooftop, leaving me to use the stairs. Groovy, you too.”

Groovy: “Fuck, sorry. I got carried away with this fucking idiot’s chatter.”

Groovy, with a frown, sincerely apologized to Al, who had been left waiting downstairs.

Cecilus had gone up to the building for a quick lookout, as Groovy had expressed concern about something across the street, but he had gotten a bit too distracted.

In any case—

Cecilus: “Well, well, Al-san, don’t be so angry. Groovy-san seems to be reflecting with his ears drooping like this, so you must be feeling forgiving by now, right?”

Al: “I’m not surprised by your relentless ‘do-it-my-way’ attitude anymore. But more importantly, did you notice anything while you were observing?”

Cecilus: “That’s right. —As expected, the defenses at numbers three, four and five look strong. It seems like a natural strategy considering the direction Boss’s group likely retreated.”

Al: “Those three spots…”

With his one-armed right hand, Al touched the fittings of the helmet, and Cecilus pondered Al’s response.

The numbers Cecilus mentioned were names for the bastions of the star-shaped city walls surrounding the Imperial Capital.

With a palace located in its northmost extreme, the entrances to this Capital□□ The southernmost bastion was number one, the southeast was number two, the southwest was number three, and following that, the northeast was number four and the northwest was number five; such was how the bastions were numbered.

The northern and western sides, the defenses of the three points corresponding to those were strong enough to be said to be impenetrable. On the other hand, the two other locations could be their opportunity, but—

Groovy: “Purposely leaving such easily identifiable holes smells fishy.”

Cecilus: “Can Groovy-san’s nose also detect the smell of such sinister designs?”

Groovy: “There’s no way it’s built that fucking weirdly! This is just my judgment as a General! Don’t try to use your shrinkage as an excuse, either… ah nevermind, there’s no point.”

Al: “What is it? Doesn’t it bother you when someone stops talking midway through their sentence?”

Groovy: “From the start, this fucking dickhead didn’t do his job of General even before he shrank.”

Upon the words of Groovy, who had made a bitter face, Cecilus and Al gave an “Ahh” in comprehension.

From Cecilus’s perspective, he did not get the impression that he was being made fun of, but that it was simply a fact. Supposing Cecilus really did shrink as a result of carelessness, it was unthinkable that he would have guided or gotten close to anyone before he shrunk.

So he had no particular objection to Groovy’s point.

Cecilus: “But to be rather candid about it I do agree with you. However if that’s the case then you know what that means, right? Surprisingly, or rather, beyond expectations, Al-san is quite the tactician.”

Al: “…What do you mean?”

Cecilus: “After all number one and two look easy to conquer but they’re actually a trap luring you in… That’s where you sent my dad and his friend, so you’re a tactician.”

Al: “□□□”

As they talked about the two people who were not present and were working separately, Rowan and Heinkel, Cecilus smiled in Al’s direction, the latter having suggested splitting up the group.

In front of the smiling Cecilus, Al held his breath and fell silent.

Currently, the group of five members were divided into teams of three and two respectively, and each were on a mission to capture the five bastions.

And, the one who had instructed Rowan and Heinkel to attack the south and southeast, the first and second bastions, was Al, and his intentions were clear.

Cecilus: “If there are relationships or war assets that aren’t painful to lose, they’ll be used as sacrificial pawns to attract the enemy’s attention. Al-san might be modest, but you’re still a tactician!”

Al: “…Do you have a problem with the way I used your old man?”

Cecilus: “No? As a performer, I welcome this as opposed to having the spotlight scattered all over the place with five people clumped together, and in terms of tactics, it’s a very practical way of thinking. It’s not really my place to say this, but it’s completely futile to expect my Dad to be cooperative!”

Al: “True, that’s an issue you mentioned.”

When it came to cooperation, one could only assume that the parent-child Segmunt duo were born with a fault.

In any case, Al had racked his brain over how to make the best use of his limited war potential. If one’s head for thinking or tactical intuition were working, one might be able to imagine what role would be required.

Groovy: “There’s no way we can leisurely take our fucking time to capture them one by one with a five man group. If those red and blue old farts can’t realize that, there’s no choice but to have ‘em do their fucking jobs as sacrificial pawns.”

Al: “Yeah. We can’t cause a big uproar in one place and gather all our resources there.”

Cecilus: “Hence the distributed attack… but it was a bit surprising. You see, Al-san was talking to Heinkel-san like you guys were comrades.”

Al: “I’m no hero. My priorities are in order.”

Spoken in a somewhat self-mocking way, that seemed to not be about the utility of Heinkel, but rather to be concerned with how he used himself; such was how it felt to Cecilus.

That response did not really change his impression of Al, but—

Cecilus: “—I see. You sure are different from Boss.”

Al: “□□□”

For some reason, Al turned to face Cecilus, who had said what he was thinking aloud.

Al’s expression was hidden by his iron helmet, however, sometimes the sharpness and heat of one’s gaze spoke more eloquently about what they felt on the inside than words or expressions could.

Cecilus: “Well, just because it’s true at times doesn’t mean it’s true right now.”

Al: “…I don’t know what you’re talking about, but fine. You’re right that I’m not like bro.”

Cecilus: “Hmm? It’s natural for things to be different, so it doesn’t really matter, right? Though, I think Al-san is tougher than Boss.”

Getting the nuance that Al thought of himself as inferior for some reason, Cecilus tilted his head in that manner.

Strong and weak, beautiful and dirty, like and dislike, those were all like the shifting phases of the same moon. Even if there was value in swinging from joy and sorrow, they do not have the weight to tip the scales of life.

Even right and wrong were not absolutes.

Cecilus: “Boss is the one who struggles against death in a crude manner yet still chooses the method that allows him to beautifully shine on the stage. Al-san, on the other hand, is different. On top of struggling against death in a crude manner, you pick the dirty method that makes everyone want to avert their eyes from you. I’m not saying one is superior to the other. That’s just the difference between you and Boss.”

Al: “□□□”

Cecilus: “Oh, putting aside the talk that wasn’t about superiority or inferiority, the matter of how you would like to be is a different story altogether. How you want to be reflected in the eyes of others is up to each individual to figure out… Defecation may be dirty, but I want to make even defecation beautiful and attractive!”

Al: “Dude, I was trying to do a little rethinking just now…!”

Cecilus: “Sorry, Groovy-san’s favorite word was still stuck in my ears.”

But then again, even though the direction that the conversation turned might have been due to Groovy’s influence, that statement itself was not a lie.

Cecilus’s pet theory was that the leading actor must provide a reason for people to keep their eyes on them, even when performing deeds that seemed dirty, unsightly, and would make people want to avert their eyes.

Groovy: “So? Are you done fucking wasting time with your nonsensical ramblings? Life counselling is fucking bullshit. After this is all over, I’m just gonna hold a fucking postmortem review at your graves.”

Al: “…When he says it this much, no wonder it sticks in your ears.”

Cecilus: “Right?”

As Al’s shoulders slumped at Groovy’s incessant swearing, Cecilus laughed.

Although Cecilus had made a lot of ill-suited arguments, he had no objection to Al’s plan and did not mind if Rowan and Heinkel encountered difficulties, just as planned.

There was just one thing that Cecilus thought might be a problem in Al’s plan.

Cecilus: “I wonder if my transcendently selfish Dad will follow what Al-san says?”

Unusually, Cecilus did not blurt out what he had thought because, also unusually, Cecilus had completely given up on the nature of his father, Rowan.

Rowan would not do what he did not want to do, and he would absolutely do whatever he wanted to do.

It was a disposition that Cecilus had inherited as well, but Rowan and Cecilus were not the same. This was the same thing he had told Al just a moment ago, and also previously to his boss, Schwartz.

It was not a question of right or wrong. It was a matter of the way one lived, and the way one died.

Groovy: “So, where do you intend to attack from, you helmet fuck?”

Al: “—. I want to avoid number three, since that’s the area where the sniper from earlier was. So it’ll be the number four or number five on the northern side… If even the slimmest possibility is a condition, it’ll be the north-eastern number four.”

Cecilus: “Eeh! But I want my revenge!”

Groovy: “Don’t say such fucking bullshit when there’s no leeway! Who do you think you’re dealing with—”

Cecilus: “Tsk, I understand.”

Groovy snapped at him, and Cecilus retracted his comment with a pout of his lips. Groovy, who had raised his fist into the air, widened his eyes at Cecilus’s reaction.

Seeing this, Cecilus responded, “What is it?”, and as Groovy lowered his raised arm,

Groovy: “You’re listening too easily. Bastard, you’re even more of a fucking bell end than you were before you got shrunk.”

Cecilus: “Hoho, doesn’t it feel like I’m being complimented?”

Groovy: “Shut the fuck up! We’re running out of fucking time. Let’s hurry up and go.”

Jerking his chin, Groovy turned his head toward the fourth bastion. Cecilus was about to follow with a “Yes, yes” when Al, the one who had proposed the idea, uttered, “Is that fine?”

Al: “I gave an answer because you asked me, but compared to me, you guys are… no, you’re more knowledgeable about the Imperial Capital.”

Groovy: “Not even I would agree to a plan that seems like fuckpiss. I don’t got a problem with your plan… I also don’t wanna throw down against that fucking dumbass Balleroy.”

Al: “…A former colleague of yours?”

Groovy: “That’s part of it, but it’s because he’s fucking strong. If you’re gonna have someone fight that bastard, it’d be Moguro. There’s absolutely no way that he’d lose.”

Groovy asserted that the sniper’s ability was strong.

Cecilus has also encountered this opponent many times in the Imperial Capital, but he had yet to even see him properly. There was no doubt that he was strong. Perhaps it really was a mistake to nod his head just now. Even if he began to complain about it now, would they approve of a change in the plan? Would they not?

Cecilus: “Let’s go in and get it done lickety-split. The goal isn’t to preserve the holes that we open, so there’s no point in putting it off.”

Groovy: “Be careful. This fucking dumbass is gonna wraps things up real quick and then go look for Balleroy.”

Al: “…Once the real star performer makes his entrance, by all means, do that.”

Cecilus: “How arrogant of you to call anyone other than me the star performer!”

As Al slowly shook his head and grumbled in resignation, Cecilus exclaimed in chagrin.

3

The journey to the fourth bastion was an anticlimactic and smooth one.

It was not as though they had not seen any undead searching for survivors along the way. But, they were nothing more than extras that passed by, or if they obstructed the way, then they would simply be eliminated.

Was there any actor who would go out of their way to give the spotlight to a minor role in order to liven up the stage?

Cecilus: “Unfortunately, an audience’s interest is finite after all. I’m not saying that there aren’t minor roles who give great performances that elevate the overall quality of the stage, but whether they’re actively sought out or not is a different matter… Nevertheless.”

Though he was enjoying the peaceful journey, Cecilus furrowed his brow.

Of course, Cecilus was all for eliminating unnecessary hassles, and he did not think it desirable that a performance would involve time and effort spent dealing with rank and file soldiers.

Still, the way Cecilus and his group looked now was unfashionable, was it not?

After all, Cecilus was on Al’s back, and Groovy was clinging to his abdomen—in other words, Cecilus and Groovy were making an Al sandwich.

If one were to question why they had come to be in such a situation, it was because otherwise, Cecilus and the Groovy would protrude from the coverage of the cloak that Al was wearing over his head.

Cecilus: “But this is unstylish! This isn’t how I market myself, Groovy-san!”

Groovy: “Put a fucking sock in it! Our presence may be hidden, but our sounds and smells aren't! If the nearby fucknuggets notice and surround us, we'll be in some deep fucking shit!"

Al: "Both of you are too loud…! And don't wiggle, or I'll fall…!"

Complaining and shaking Al's shoulders, the two of them wrapped in the same cloak were reprimanded.

The fur cloak that Groovy had prepared was quite the impressive piece of work. Apparently, it was an exceptional item that could be used to prevent the wearer from attracting the attention of others. Rowan, Heinkel, and Groovy had used this fur cloak to slip past the enemy's radar, and enter the Imperial Capital.

In fact, though they had chosen an inconspicuous road, the fur cloak likely played the largest role in the fact that they had not been found once by the undead.

Cecilus: "Even though it's so swelteringly hot with just our different physiques, I can't imagine how you and my father managed to get into the Imperial Capital with three people. But still, where did you purchase such a bizarre cloak?"

Groovy: "I didn't buy it. I made it. You're too fucking stupid to remember, but I also melted down your Fiend Sword and reforged it into a katana."

Cecilus: "Ho ho, Fiend Sword! What a cool name! I'd love to see it, learn about it, and worship it!"

Groovy: "Like I already fucking told you, it's your fucking katana, dickhead!"

Groovy performed the feat of yelling in a muted voice.

Putting aside the dispute of whether he had shrunk or not, it was quite interesting to hear Groovy describe the background of Cecilus, of which he did not know himself. In particular, he loved the topic of katanas.

Cecilus: "However it's interesting that you reforged it as a katana. Are you perhaps a swordsmith, Groovy-san? You must be very busy being a General and a blacksmith."

Groovy: "It's not like I specialize in swords. I make swords, weave garments, and also tinker with magical tools."

Cecilus: "So, this mysterious cloak is also some kind of magical tool."

Groovy: "No, this one is just werewolf skin."

Cecilus expressed an impressed "Ho" at Groovy's response, and Al's shoulders shook in astonishment. As Cecilus closely inspected the fur cloak,

Cecilus: "Werewolves are quite rare. I know they exist, but I've never met one before."

Groovy: "It's because they're fucking hard to find in the first place. The whole race is under a Divine Protection, just like ground dragons or the Uruha people of the Holy Kingdom. If you skin them alive, the Divine Protection remains on their pelt. It's an effective use of those sneaky fuckers."

Al: "The Divine Protection of the Concealing Cloud…?"

Groovy: "Ahh? So you know about that fucking old-fashioned name for it. "The Divine Protection of Ambush" is more common… although the topic of fucking werewolves isn't too common to begin with."

Hearing Al's mumbled comment, Groovy showcased his knowledge.

Regardless, werewolves were loathed in the Empire, and it stemmed from an old, old story. But then again, since the tale was based in historical fact, it was also deeply linked to reality.

Cecilus himself had no particular hostility toward werewolves or wolfpeople, but—

Cecilus: "Isn't it awfully ironic that the pelt of a werewolf is helping us, considering the way werewolves are treated in the Empire. Even if it's just their skin."

Groovy and Al: “□□□”

Cecilus: “Huh? Ignoring me? Are you ignoring me? I thought I said something rather clever—”

Just then, after Cecilus had thought that Al and Groovy both had given a dismissive response to his comment regarding the fur cloak—that such was not the case, Cecilus had also surmised.

???: “—■■■■■■.”

And it was not because the onlooker had been lively, as they usually were.

Al’s entire body grew tense as Cecilus clung onto him, and Cecilus felt the reason for that tension slipping into himself as well.

That was, putting aside the issue of whether or not he was shrunken, something that seized the inside of Cecilus’s thin chest.

—Gray thorns were swirling around in Cecilus’s chest.

Cecilus: “By any chance, is this appearing on the both of you as well?”

Al: “…Yeah. Oi, Groovy-san. With this cloak, I thought we shouldn’t be able to be detected…”

Groovy: “FUCK…hk! You gotta be fucking kidding me…!”

Al and Groovy seemed to be in the same situation as Cecilus, and Groovy’s discomposure, or rather, his anger was especially quite immense.

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Maybe it was because someone saw through the effects of the fur cloak that he was so confident in? —No, that was not quite right.

If the other party had located Cecilus and the others, they would not leave the three of them in the state of being a sandwich for so long. Of course, one could also say that these thorns were a warning.

Al: “Doesn’t seem like it. What do you think?”

Groovy: “—It’s an indiscriminate ranged attack. What kind of fucking wanker does that?! Who in the fuck is spilling out such braindead cursecraft…?!”

Groovy’s throat shook with rage, and he cursed the irrationality of the yet-to-be-seen master of the thorns.

A moment later, the thorns around each of the three’s chests slowly began to writhe, and the sharp spikes, slipping right through their hands, tried to exert the full effect of their curse.

And then—

Cecilus: “—As expected, it seems the world doesn’t approve of me sneaking around. Now, for this newly arrived hardship! Let’s flourishingly overcome it with a ta-dah!”

So spilled out the excited laughter of the one unbounded, just before a sharp pain seized his heart.

Chapter 40:
An Inconsequential Threat

1

—Heinkel Astrea was not even a Stargazer.

As was known, neither was he the Sword Saint, nor had he received the sword name of “van” that was granted to those who had made distinguished accomplishments through their own swordsmanship; his position as Deputy Commander of the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Royal Guard was also just a decoration.

Generally, he was a man who had not been chosen for a single thing that could only be obtained via being chosen; that was the person known as Heinkel, and that was not something that would change even when coming to the Vollachian Empire.

While being swept along, he participated in the battle, and he had his heart fractured by sights utterly unthinkable for this world; he had barely escaped death upon getting away, and being swept along again, he found himself returned to the same place, clinging to a feeble hope.

That hope, too, was just a signpost for escape presented by someone who expected Heinkel to play the role of a sacrificial pawn, and after abandoning all thought, he was too stupid to even realize that such was the intention.

—Therefore, unlike Rowan Segmunt, who had opposed the plan of attack due to his own insane reasons, he himself got the short end of the worst possible stick, trying to play his role in an honest manner.

Heinkel: “Fucking hell…”

Of the five bastions of the ramparts which served as the keystone of the Imperial Capital’s defenses, the southern and southeastern points that were supposed to have been divided between himself and Rowan were both now the responsibility of Heinkel alone; he thought that he ought to capture the first bastion, which had originally served as the city gates which allowed entry and exit to the Capital, so he headed south.

To put it simply, that was a reasonable decision, and an appropriate choice that had nothing to do with eccentricity.

Thus, Heinkel finally encountered the result of his reasonable and appropriate choice.

???: “—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies.”

That majestic figure of the white Dragon spread its wings as if safeguarding the first bastion, and then—.

2

The room was cluttered with heaps of jewelry.

Craftsmanship abundant in the use of gold and silver, hair ornaments and clothing adorned with gems, various fine articles were all lined up, scattered about, and left lying around in the room with splendor that was clamorous to the eyes.

Right in the middle of the dazzling room, Madelyn Eschart awakened.

Madelyn: “□□□”

Blinking her sweet, golden eyes several times as they hazily overlapped with reality, the two black horns that grew from her sky-blue hair swayed from side-to-side, and her petite body stood up. In an instant, she collided with and fell down into the surrounding jewelry, but Madelyn was unconcerned with it being violently scattered across the floor.

Jewelry and treasures of gold and silver, she rather liked such dazzling things.

She did not like that humans were so noisy in spite of how weak and fragile they were, but their craftsmanship utilizing gems and gold had an irreplaceable charm.

It was not a bad idea to fulfill the tasks assigned to her by humans, so she could receive such things as a reward.

Heaping those up in her den, cramming them in, and surrounding herself with them as she slept took an important role in Madelyn's quality of sleep. —However, neither gems nor gold could fill the hole in her heart.

Madelyn: "□□□"

Swinging her upraised head around, Madelyn pushed the door of the den open.

This was different to the den that Madelyn had been living in for a while after having become a Divine General, and instead was a new den that had been hastily made for this occasion.

Her own scent was lacking, and the treasures were things that had been gathered from inside the palace, so while she was far from feeling satisfied, it was better than nothing.

Above all, there was enough reason here to abandon the den she had grown accustomed to living in, and relocate.

That was—

Madelyn: "—Carillon."

Exiting the burrow and crossing through the passage, coming out to the balcony where a tepid wind blew, the figure of a flying dragon resting its wings was present.

Carillon: "□□□"

Its name having been called, the flying dragon turned its head towards her—the scales across its entire body had painful looking cracks running through them, and golden irises loomed within its dusky eyes; a clear indication of the state of this vessel, which had lost its life.

Similar to the humans being resurrected one after the other, there was no small number of flying dragons being brought back from the beyond.

Only, she could not communicate with the ones who were wild when they were alive, but instead, she could establish understanding with the ones like the flying dragon before her—the ones like Carillon, who had been tamed.

In fact, having responded to Madelyn's call, Carillon quietly lowered its head on the spot.

Even if the other deceased flying dragons—the undead flying dragons, came into contact with Madelyn, they would regard her as someone who had life, and would relentlessly begin attacking her.

Of course, she had no mercy to spare for those who did not know their place, and did not hesitate in shattering them to pieces.

Madelyn: "I, the dragon, am friggin' sorry for shattering you."

Caressing the neck of Carillon's lowered head, the corners of Madelyn's mouth stiffened upon feeling how cold it was.

By nature, flying dragons did not have superfluous body fat in order to soar into the air, so their body temperature was low. Be that as it may, the temperature transferred to her fingertips was about as cold as touching decorative jewels.

Unlike jewels, however, she did not feel any splendor or beauty.

Even so, for Carillon to be present before her and moving around like this was of irreplaceable value.

—For Madelyn, Carillon was the flying dragon who had been tamed by the first human she had ever laid eyes upon.

As the final dragonkin in existence, Madelyn had lived without coming into contact with anything outside of the Cloud Sea where she was born, partly due to the nature of Mezoreia, who was a dragonhusk.

Excluding Mezoreia, the only beings that Madelyn had opportunities to come into contact with were the wild flying dragons that lived in the surroundings of the Cloud Sea, but even so, they were nothing more than beings that obeyed the dragonkin.

There was a difference between lifeforms; a separation between herself, a dragonkin, and the flying dragons.

That was something rooted in instinct, something that left no room to think about the reason or the purpose. No room was left for pessimism or doubt to be yielded regarding the divide that was only natural in their existence.

Someone who had never bore witness to the beauty of gold would never desire a golden crown.

However, Madelyn's satisfied days of not knowing about what was beyond the Cloud Sea, abruptly came to an end.

Bringing about that end was none other than this Carillon, and, soothing his beloved dragon who was reluctant to ascend due to the presence of the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, the straggler who had plunged right into the middle of the Cloud Sea—.

Madelyn: "—Where the frig' is this dragon's darling, Balleroy?"

While tickling the back of its neck, Madelyn posed a question to Carillon.

The vocalized name was one exceedingly familiar for Carillon, and placing that sound upon her tongue, it seeped into Madelyn's chest like a delayed poison.

This pain, akin to a poison eating into her very soul, was the very reason why Madelyn had run away from the Cloud Sea, and descended to the surface where the humans lived.

But, right now, the pain of this poison was on the verge of becoming something different to what it had been until then.

Carillon: "□□□"

Madelyn felt the pain of the poison within her heart. Next to her, Carillon slowly raised its head as it was still being caressed, and made a soft sound with its throat.

Realizing that the gesture and cry were indicating behind her, Madelyn turned around.

Then, the figure of a person stepped out from the passage connected to the balcony. That figure gave a wave of its hand, and assumed an easygoing attitude when faced with a dragonkin.

Madelyn: "…Such insolence, if it wasn't you, this dragon woulda friggin' chewed you to pieces with her fangs."

???: "Well, if it wasn't me, there ain't nobody who'd take this kinda attitude when faced with an exalted dragonkin. That's what I'd like to say, but contrary to what one would expect, there are actually tons of rude individuals among the Generals."

Madelyn: "That's friggin' right. Humans really are so tedious."

???: "Tahaha, there's nothing I can say to that."

As the person shrugged their shoulders with a strained laugh, Madelyn exhaled through her nose in an exasperated manner.

But, feeling that she had let the emotions that were difficult to hide slip into that sigh, she admonished her restless heart, and brushed off her mouth as if to conceal her impassioned breath.

The emotions that were difficult to hide—that was her ceaselessly overflowing passion for the person before her eyes.

Even if their complexion and eyes appeared to be completely different, her emotions would not lie.

The amount that she treasured Carillon, who had become an undead flying dragon, was something that she felt even more strongly towards him.

Madelyn: "Balleroy, where the frig' were you just now?"

Taking half a step closer to him, who had already come right before her, Madelyn enquired so.

He was by Madelyn's side when she had fallen asleep in the treasure-filled den. If possible, she would have wanted him to stay by her side the whole time until she woke up.

Madelyn's question left those things unsaid, and as if he sensed her unspoken feelings, Balleroy touched his head and said "Sorry",

Balleroy: "Somehow, it seemed like there were some rats scampering about in the Imperial Capital. His Excellency Palladio was making a fuss when they caught his eye, so I just went to do a bit of recon and report back."

Madelyn: "Rats… did you friggin' kill 'em properly?"

Balleroy: "Nah, these were some tenacious rats. When I said that I had let 'em slip, His Excellency Palladio furiously scolded me, I'm talking real darn furiously."

Loosely shaking his head, Balleroy's words caused the pupils of Madelyn's eyes to narrow.

The Palladio he spoke of was, if she remembered correctly, a resurrected member of the Vollachian Imperial Family. He was a man of the Evil Eye Tribe who, during the Vollachian custom of siblings killing each other, had lost to Vincent, the one who came out on top and became the Emperor, and he was resurrected thereafter—.

Madelyn: "If he is causing trouble for this dragon's darling, this dragon will tear him apart with her own hands."

Balleroy: "Don't say such frightening things. Even if he died once, he's still a member of the Vollachian Imperial Family… among those who got revived, the ones unconditionally obeying him ain't few in number. You'd be making those guys your enemy as well."

Madelyn: "—Hk, are you friggin' saying that I, the dragon, and Balleroy would lose to those dead people?!"

If he was, he would be greatly mistaken.

There was no way that the undead could win against Madelyn and Balleroy, who had previously cooperated with them. If anyone were to get in their way, they would utterly crush those people and put an end to them.

Madelyn's breathing grew heavy; however, as Balleroy gently held her slender shoulders,

Balleroy: "That's wrong. It was never a question of whether we'd win or lose, now was it?"

Madelyn: "What are you…"

Balleroy: "You oughta understand. After all, the freedom of us corpses is clutched in the hands of that Witch."

Madelyn: "—Hk."

At Balleroy's seemingly chiding statement, Madelyn forcefully bit down on her molars and fell silent.

The Witch was the person responsible for filling this Imperial Capital with undead, the being who had created the reason why Balleroy and Carillon were standing in front of Madelyn like this right now.

The Witch, who had constructed an unnatural body which resembled the dragonhusk of Mezoreia, was involved with secrets of Od Lagna that even Madelyn, a dragonkin, was unaware of.

For that reason, she was able to call back this many souls, and reconstruct them in their living state.

But on the other hand, if the Witch were to interrupt that miracle on a whim—

Balleroy: "As you said, Madelyn, if we were to fight, we'd win against almost all those guys. But, we're just two people and a single flying dragon, while His Excellency Palladio can command several hundreds and thousands of people. I ain't got a clue which one the Witch would find more useful.”

Madelyn: “Instead of us dragons, she would pick the humans?”

Balleroy: “I dunno. After all, nobody knows what the Witch’s extravagant desire is.”

Though it was nothing but vexing, Balleroy’s answer had a point or two.

The Witch, whose thoughts were utterly incomprehensible, was occupying the Crystal Palace, and had positioned Madelyn there on the condition that the latter would cooperate with her. It was aggravating to be put to work in such an arrogant manner, but she had already swallowed that disgrace when she had initially accepted Berstetz’s proposal and descended to the surface.

What was hard to swallow, was the fact that she did not understand the other party’s motives.

Madelyn: “□□□”

As Balleroy had said, as long as they did not know the Witch’s objective, the situation was tantamount to Madelyn constantly having the tip of a blade piercing her reverse scale.

If not for that, Balleroy would not have resigned himself to this situation, and he surely would have escaped to beyond the Cloud Sea together with Madelyn, vowing upon their promised wedding ceremony.

Indeed, their unfulfilled promise would finally—.

Madelyn: “Finally, we meet again like this.”

Balleroy: “…Madelyn.”

As impulse overcame her, Madelyn hugged Balleroy’s body, which was right in front of her.

Balleroy was far taller than Madelyn’s small build, and as Madelyn leaned her body against him, her black horns seemed like they would pierce through his neck. Nimbly evading them, Balleroy patted Madelyn’s back.

Upon that gesture, Madelyn recalled how, one time, when she was overcome with emotion and had hugged him, her horns had pierced him with full strength, causing a catastrophic accident in which Balleroy lost a lot of blood, and tears began to well in her eyes.

The embrace of his body was cold, and the skin she made contact with was not soft whatsoever.

His eyes, which used to be the same color as Madelyn’s blue hair, had become black eyeballs with golden irises that gave no sense of warmth, so his emotions were easily obscured by his outward appearance.

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Nevertheless, they shared memories. Nevertheless, he knew of her wishes.

Losing his life, being parted by death, and now once again making contact with her, neither blood nor heat flowed in his body. So, what did that matter?

Madelyn: “Balleroy is here with me… This dragon, does not desire anything more than that.”

It had nothing to do with life or death.

The dead did not necessarily need to be under the soil. If, by some chance, the dead overflowed above the soil, and a treasured person happened to be present among them, who had the right to deny that repulsive miracle, and judge it as an error?

In front of this dragonkin, Madelyn Eschart, what kind of person would say that?

Madelyn: “—They’ve come.”

Burying her face in the chest of her beloved person, Madelyn, who had been enjoying the cold rendezvous, groaned in a low voice.

Guessing what the tone of her voice was indicating, Balleroy, who had been gently patting her on the back, stopped his hand, and turned his gaze to outside the balcony—far in the distance, to the south of the Imperial Capital.

Something had been caught. By Madelyn’s senses—no, by the senses of the dragonhusk, Mezoreia.

No matter what came, Madelyn had been ordered to safeguard that place.

This shall be repeated once more. There was indeed resentment. But, Madelyn would not hesitate. The thing she wished for, was right here.

Madelyn: “I’m friggin’ going now. Balleroy, this time—”

Balleroy: “I gotcha. As long as I’m not called upon, I’ll be by your side.”

Madelyn: “—Just as expected of this dragon’s darling.”

Things like “I’ll definitely never leave you”, or “I’ll always be by your side”; he would not say things that he could not do.

In an easygoing manner, Balleroy understood exactly what was within his reach, so without any needless expectations or disappointment, Madelyn could love him just the way he was.

She ascertained that once again—Suddenly, Madelyn’s body lost its strength.

Madelyn: “□□□”

Her limbs growing languid, Madelyn collapsed on the spot. Promptly drawing her body towards himself, Balleroy firmly supported the unimaginable weight of her small stature.

Then, in his arms, he picked up Madelyn, who had lost consciousness—No, she had regained consciousness.

Carillon: “□□□”

Balleroy: “I gotcha. I’ll be sure to carry her gently.”

Softly groaning, his beloved dragon was worried about the limp Madelyn.

Nodding at Carillon’s cry, as Balleroy turned his eyes to the state of the Imperial Capital once more,

Balleroy: “Even if she dies, we’ll meet again. I don’t desire anything more than that. I’m the same as you, Madelyn. —As long as we meet again.”

—The battle started one-sidedly, and it ended one-sidedly.

To begin with, a battle was a clash between those who had fighting spirit, and they would clash with all their soul until their will to fight was exhausted.

Following that definition, if one of the parties lost all their will to fight in a single moment, then that would not be a battle.

Mezoreia: “□□□”

That, was a person so weak that they could not even be called a threat.

With that said, there was no other suitable term to call those who turned up whilst still harboring hostility and malice. Thus, “an inconsequential threat”, would be the most fitting expression.

In reality, the inconsequential threat was blown away by the swing of a tail, akin to how leaves would be swept away by a broom, and was buried in the dust of the surrounding buildings that were also caught in the strike.

It was a rather unsatisfying result. But, it was not something that needed to be especially lamented or pitied.

As living beings, that was the unparalleled gap between a Dragon and a human.

Facing off against a Dragon, who differed from them in their very nature of existence, humans would easily turn to dust, quite literally.

There was no choice but to recognize that for some reason, in extremely rare cases, there were people to whom such would not be the case, but those were a mutation that emerged within the human species, and were, to put it frankly, some other entities that were not human.

Whatever those other things may be, as living beings, they were ultimately no match for a Dragon.

That fact would eventually need to be proven in a trustworthy manner, so once the inconsequential threat was moved out of the way, it would be acknowledged once again in a stronger manner, with the notion that this was how things ought to be.

In that sense, there was value in the existence of this inconsequential threat.

It yielded the result of the mightiness of the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, being made known to the Witch once more, and granted the Dragon itself the opportunity to reexamine the value of its own existence—.

???: “…Fucking, hell.”

Suddenly, upon hearing a voice that seemed to curse this very world, the movement of the Cloud Dragon ceased.

The Dragon had flapped its wings, had turned its back on the mowed down street, and had been moving to return to the ramparts. That was in order to demonstrate that no matter what kind of malice may approach, it would be unable to break through this location.

Those movements had ceased. Because a voice that should not have been, was heard.

Mezoreia: “□□□”

The Dragon slowly turned back around, and with a clattering sound, the mountain of rubble collapsed.

The street that had been destroyed by a strike of its tail, and the wreckage of buildings that were heaped up into spire; crawling out from within in a battered state, was a filthy human of red hair and blue eyes.

The human who had been judged as an inconsequential threat, and had turned out as such in reality.

Following the definition of a “battle”, if they had crawled out, and had drawn the sword from their waist once more and faced this direction, then the battle that was thought to have ended had still yet to reach its curtain's close.

However, there was no fighting spirit or drive whatsoever within the body of the human who had crawled out.

Human: "It's always, like this…"

Perhaps because dust had entered their lungs, the human muttered that out whilst violently coughing.

Once again, that was a voice that seemed to only curse. And it was not the Dragon, but the world that was being cursed. The foundation beneath them, the atmosphere enveloping them, anything and everything surrounding them, and above all else, their very self at the center of all of it; that entirety was being cursed by their voice.

Human: "At the most crucial moments, I'm completely abandoned by luck—"

Listening to those resentful complaints was deeply unpleasant, so this time it would drive its tail into them vertically.

Previously, the street had gotten caught up and was swept away, but this time, the Cloud Dragon drove its tail into the feeble figure that stood totteringly, scooping it up.

The tail did a single backwards revolution, and suffering that direct blow, the human's body was blown away like a pebble that had been kicked; boring holes through walls and buildings, they went through three or four blocks.

If one were to look down from the sky, the townscape of the Imperial Capital was laid out in a very satisfying manner.

The blown away body of the human was chaotically destroying that; since their way of being, their way of flying, and even their way of dying were all so unshapely and unsightly, the Dragon's nerves were thoroughly irritated.

The fact that beautiful things were being spoiled for such a person, was immensely infuriating.

And at the end of all that—

Human: “—ugh.”

Far away, after crashing through many blocks, a groan could be heard.

No matter how great the damage they had received, no matter if it was the strained breath of somebody who was on death’s door, such a thing should have never been heard in the first place.

Having suffered a strike from a Dragon’s tail, a being whose life did not burst apart, should not exist.

Human: “…I, am.”

It should not, exist.

Mezoreia: “ALL OF YOU, FRIGGIN’ DISAPPEEEEAR—!!!!”

Surging up, letting the uncontrollable impulse fill its breath, the white destruction was fired from the mouth of the Cloud Dragon, from the mouth of Madelyn Eschart, clad in the dragonhusk, and rained down upon the human who was supposed to be an inconsequential threat.

This was not a battle.

It was the beginning of a one-sided, or at least what was supposed to be a one-sided, slaughter.

Chapter 41:
Where Hell Resides

1

—Groovy Gumlet had no interest in Stargazers.

It was not a sense of aversion born out of disgust or hostility, but rather a genuine indifference in the truest sense.

In the first place, it was rare for an ordinary person to come into contact with those who spouted such kinds of nonsense as Stargazers did. In his position as a General, he would occasionally encounter Ubilk, who was allowed entry into the castle, but he rarely spoke with anyone other than those he had business with.

Groovy, also, could not recall ever speaking to him with the exception of shutting him up for constantly interrupting meetings.

Given such an impression, it was difficult to comprehend why Vincent, the Emperor, and Chisha, his trusted confidant, were unusually attentive to the movements of the Stargazer. The stance of the Prime Minister Berstetz concerning the Stargazer was unclear, but from what Groovy could smell, his loyalty to the Empire was genuine, and the complex resentment he harbored toward Vincent did not influence his judgment.

Therefore, with the leaders of the Empire having already determined their respective attitudes, Groovy, who had no opportunity to be involved, had no reason to take an interest in the Stargazer.

Precisely for that reason, if it were revealed that the clash with the Great Disaster, a threat to the survival of the Empire, had been known to the Stargazer in advance, his mouth would likely have overflowed with his habitual curses.

However, at least in this instance, the reason behind the familiar curses coming out from Groovy’s mouth was not anger directed at the Stargazers or anyone related to them.

Groovy: "—Fuck!"

Gray thorns emerged just above the left side of his chest, and the moment his fingers, trying to pluck them, passed straight through, the sharp thorns pierced his heart, causing an intense pain that made Groovy's fur stand on end.

The sensation of having a sharp object thrust into the innermost parts of one's body, especially a vital spot directly linked to life, was a pain so intense that even a seasoned warrior would not be able to help but writhe.

Infuriatingly, the thorns had no tangible form. It made it impossible to shake them off.

Gritting his teeth against the unilateral onslaught of pain, Groovy glanced to his side—at the iron-helmeted man whom he was clinging to around the waist.

Naturally, suffering the same curse as Groovy, he too was writhing in pain—

Groovy: "Fucking hell, get down! The fucking situation's about to get even shittier!"

Al: "Get down… Guh!"

Reacting to his unresponsive companion, Groovy punched Al's abdomen, forcing his body to move backwards.

As he groaned and fell backward onto the street, Groovy grabbed him and quickly pulled him into the shadow of a building just off to the side.

It was an indiscriminate ranged attack. Taking cover in the street like this was nothing but a temporary respite.

Cecilus: "Even so, we don't want to be seen making a ruckus and end up attracting the horde of undead from all over the place."

Groovy: “…Haven’t you gotten the fucking thorns?”

Cecilus: “No? I’ve received them. I think it would have been quite literally a floral gift if they had given us not just the vines, but flowers as well.”

Descending onto the same street as Groovy and the gang, Cecilus tapped the left side of his chest as he spoke.

Similar to Groovy, thorns were visible through his chest, and the pain should have been just as intense. And yet, he was grinning in the face of the pain that even furrowed Groovy’s brow—

Cecilus: “The conduct of a leading actor is always the center of the audience’s attention. If one twists their expression in agony after losing someone they love or a dear friend, it can be emotionally moving. But if one distorts their face just because they’re in pain, it will only diminish their acting caliber.”

Groovy: “So, no matter how fucking painful or fucking difficult it is, you don’t show it on your face. That’s your fucking dumbass mindset.”

Cecilus: “Huh? Have I already talked about this before?”

Groovy: “You did, but fuck it.”

Despite not wanting to hear any of it, he had been made to listen to the convictions of Cecilus, who tilted his neck, to the point they were revolting to him.

While many did not pay any attention to Cecilus’s whimsical remarks, Groovy, who could not let things slide when his feelings were captured, often became entangled with him. It was because of this that he had become familiar with said convictions.

However, now that he had even forgotten about sharing it, it became apparent that Cecilus had been living by this logic since before his limbs were fully grown, and this went from being impressive to being simply foolish.

And, as Groovy and Cecilus bantered with each other, Al: “Ghagh… Huh, the pain from the thorns is gone?”

Rising to his feet after having been dragged into an alley, Al muttered as he looked down at the thorns on his chest. Instead, he rubbed his stomach where he had been punched, and directing a resentful aura towards Groovy,

Al: “My stomach hurts even more from being punched… What the hell is going on?”

Groovy: “It’s your own damn fault for not backing the fuck off! … Those thorns, they’re probably affected by distance.”

Cecilus: “Oh, so you mean the distance between the thorn user and us? Certainly it would make sense if the pain disappeared as soon as we stepped back! It’s even easier to understand because we were clinging to each other. First there was Groovy-san at the belly, then the sandwiched Al-san, and then finally me at the back, and even though it was less than a second, there was still a difference.”

Al: “…But, the thorns aren’t gone.”

As he cleanly cut his finger on the untouchable thorns, Al muttered bitterly.

He was right, the pain had faded, but crucially the thorns had not disappeared. It was worrisome that, even though the obvious challenge of the pain had subsided, the thorns themselves did not. In most cases, this kind of residual spell had the effect of sensing the target’s whereabouts.

As long as those thorns remained, there was a high possibility that their whereabouts would be known to the other party.

Cecilus: “If that’s the case, even if we go to the trouble of hiding, they may suddenly send their forces against us. —I don’t think it’s such a good idea to kill too many enemies.”

Al: “You said that earlier. The reason being.”

Cecilus: “As I said earlier, it’s a hunch.”

Groovy: “…Your fucking hunches, huh.”

As Cecilus did not hesitate to state the insight behind his reasoning, Groovy was unable to laugh at such a stupid joke.

While this was not a laughable situation, he had a track record that could not be dismissed as nonsense. Cecilus and Arakiya were the completely intuitive types of the Generals First-Class, but they were intuitive in different ways.

Groovy, also, did not think that their opponent who had caused a disaster of this magnitude would make a dull move of attacking with just brute force.

Rather, if the opponent only used brute force, then they would be no match for Vincent nor Chisha—.

Groovy: “□□□”

For a moment, he glanced over at Cecilus’s profile, and then Groovy remained silent.

There were many thoughts going through his mind, but he knew that if their opponent had chosen to go with all-out force from the beginning, it would be a poor choice to clash with an Empire that contained the likes of Cecilus and Arakiya.

An opponent making such a presumptuous mistake could never be an enemy of the Vollachian Empire.

Of course, it would have been a different story if Cecilus’ shrunken state was actually part of the opponent’s plan, but regarding that, Groovy’s own sense of smell negated that theory.

It was Chisha that had shrunk Cecilus. That he was certain of due to the residual Mana.

And, there was no way that Chisha would be complicit in the destruction of the Empire. In the end, however, it was hard for Groovy to figure out what Chisha’s intentions truly were.

Al: “If our whereabouts are known, we don’t have time to think long and hard. What are we gonna do? Should we all go after them and confront the person who's putting this curse on us?"

Cecilus: "Yup. That's the fastest solution! But Groovy-san's theory was that the curse's potency is related to distance. That means that if we move away from the person, the pain will go away, if we close in however…"

Al: "This time we ain't getting off with a lil ache, huh."

Cecilus: "Looks like it."

While Cecilus put forth a guess, the mortified Al stared at the thorns in his chest.

Groovy agreed with Cecilus. Therein resided the horror of their enemy who was randomly scattering around a thorn curse on any target within range.

The closer one would get to the user, the stronger the curse of the thorns would act. Most people would probably be incapacitated by the pain before they could ever reach the user.

Groovy: "And if that happens, no matter how fucking stupid they are, they wouldn't be able to move."

Cecilus: "So, judging from that look in my direction, you must take me for a fool who rushes in without thinking, right? But as you can imagine, I won't rush in without thinking either. If I can settle the problem by cutting down the opponent while enduring the pain that would be amusing, but—"

And, Cecilus, after a clap, clasped his hands together strongly in front of his chest, making a sound. As he was, he interlaced the fingers of both hands together and, alternatingly looked at Groovy and Al through the gap between his fingers,

Cecilus: "That's not the case, is it? If it were a matter of cutting off the other person's head, Groovy-san would have sent me out and made me do it by now."

Groovy: "…That's what's so fucking nasty about this curse shit."

Cecilus smiled wickedly, and Groovy couldn't help but sigh.

If this were magic, killing the caster would usually cause it to cease functioning. Magic is invoked by the caster using mana to interfere with the world, so if the caster disappeared, that would be the end of it.

However, curses are specialized for causing damage that results in the death of the target.

For this reason, many of them activate in combination with the target's Od, and most of them do not lose their efficacy as long as the target continues to live, even if the caster is dead. For example, these thorns are clearly more dependent on the target's Od than the caster's and are a perfect example.

The only way to break this type of curse is to have the caster break it or use a secret trick.

Groovy: "There's a fucking sword, Murasame. Go get it."

Groovy jerked his chin as he gave his instructions, to which Cecilus and Al simply stared in puzzlement.

Groovy didn't mind Al since he'd never known about it, but he hated Cecilus, who had known but had forgotten. Groovy grabbed Cecilus by the collar and bared his teeth.

Groovy: "It's the Fiend Sword Murasame! That fucking sword is the fastest way to cut through curses, contracts, and other things that don't have any form! Go find it!"

Cecilus: "Huh?! Even if you say so, it's still a sword I don't know of! If you don't know where it is, do you want me to go look for it… or would Groovy-san know where it is by the smell?"

Groovy: "It's no use. That fucking sword cuts off the smell, so I can't track it with my nose. Even if it was in a pool of blood all year long, I can't follow the smell, fuck."

Even if it were not for that, Murasame hated Groovy, who had melted the sword and reforged it into a katana, and would not even allow him to hold it in his hand.

Groovy’s nose could not locate the Fiend Sword, which was as difficult to deal with as its owner, Cecilus.

Al: “—But with it, you can do something about these thorns, right?”

As Groovy and Cecilus exchanged a few words, Al stood up and confirmed the situation in a low voice.

At his serious tone, Groovy released Cecilus and nodded.

Groovy: “Yes. If it’s to be somewhere, it’s either at this fucking idiot’s house or in a secret vault, but I don’t think the fucking idiot can keep a secret secret, so he probably doesn’t have something like that.”

Al: “I agree. Where is the house?”

Groovy: “It’s in the Crystal Palace’s garden. He lives with Arakiya in a stupid fucking shack.”

Cecilus: “Wait, wait! Groovy-san’s always talking about a “fucking idiot”, and I think he’s talking about me, but there’s a name I don’t recognize, who is it!”

Al: “Arakiya, that girl, is she doing all right in the castle garden? What a small world…”

Groovy: “Nah, she’s probably not all right.”

Groovy wrinkled his nose as he replied to Al’s reasonable mutterings.

The relationship between Cecilus and Arakiya was unclear even to Groovy, who could only observe from the outside. They apparently had known each other for nearly a decade, but it remained a mystery how Cecilus felt about her. It was clear that Arakiya disliked Cecilus, but they still lived together and shared meals together.

If they were together, Groovy would be able to tell from the smell, but there was no sign of that. At times, they were a nuisance, as whilst seriously trying to kill each other they could change the topology of the empire.

Groovy: “But I don’t think that the Dream Sword or the Fiend Sword would be left alone even after the fucking idiot got shrunk. So it’s possible that…”

Al: “—. If they were to be put in the castle, they’d have done it from the start.”

Al was right in his concern regarding the uncertainty of whether they were put in the castle after the recovery.

If they were to be able to get into the Crystal Palace, they could not adopt the bastion storming strategy, as it relied on reinforcements. However, in order to receive the reinforcements, it is a prerequisite that this caster be stopped.

Cecilus: “Hmmm, what to do? Leaving such a great weapon in the castle would be a waste. Weapons that seem meaningful must be put to use.”

There, Cecilus, hands folded behind his head, interjected.

Cecilus, with his back to Groovy and Al, who were talking to each other, glanced at them and groaned, “Ugg”.

Groovy: “The fuck is it. If there’s something you want to say, just fucking say it.”

Cecilus: “No, no. Can’t the two of you speak by yourselves? It doesn’t seem like the two of you will hear anything I say anyway so I don’t really care.”

Groovy: “You’re sulking about Arakiya, fucking hell! You and that girl used to try and kill each other! This what you’ve been all pissy about ain’t it! So that’s all, you fucking idiot, now speak up!

Cecilus: “Huuhh, if you do want to hear it so badly. —To be blunt, I’m talking about the fact that from their point of view, it’s better to let someone else have it than to leave it in the castle.”

Changing from a smiling face to a sullen one, Groovy furrowed his brow at Cecilus's statement, and became frustrated that he was then offered an opinion that was more honest and plausible than he had expected.

In other words, if Cecilus was correct, the Dream Sword and the Fiend Sword, two powerful weapons, were likely to be possessed by one of the undead.

Moreover—

Cecilus: "If they are such powerful weapons then wouldn't you put them in the hands of someone to whom you entrust an important location?"

Groovy: "Fuck."

As stated by Cecilus, that was the most likely scenario, and thus Groovy agreed with a swear.

If this was the case, it was in their best interest to cut down on the possibilities they could and head for the correct locations.

Groovy: "If you don't like Balleroy over at number three, that bastard's different. He's got a spear. He won't make the shitty decision to switch weapons."

Cecilus: "Then it's somewhere else. It might be a waste of Al-san's efforts to use my father and his friend as decoys."

Al: "No, I agree with you that he's the one that needs to be put out of the way the most… It's no joke that he's the only one who can hold Bro and the others back when they arrive."

Al's clenched fist trembled, to which Cecilus, with one eye closed, looked at Groovy.

The plan was finalized. In order to obtain the Fiend Sword, they would go to the other bastions to find the person they thought might have it, a somewhat haphazard strategy—

Groovy: "Fucking idiot, at least be the first to go and pull it off.

Where's the best chance?"

Cecilus: "Hmm… I guess it's number two, isn't it?"

Al: "If it's the southeast, it's still pretty close to here. Then we'll use the leather cloak again, and the three of us can go to…"

Groovy: "No."

As they decided on the bastion to which they were headed, Groovy interrupted Al.

Shaking his head, Groovy threw the werewolf pelt in his hand to Al, turned his back on them, and went toward the entrance to the alley.

And then—

Groovy: "We're going to go our separate ways from here. I have to hold this fucking enemy's head down so he won't move. —It's a shitty role, but I'm the only one who can do it."

Al: "—Hk, I understand what you're saying, but there are thorns in our side! Aren't the conditions the same for you and me?!"

Groovy did not stop when he heard Al's voice trying to stop him.

Al was about to chase after him when Cecilus's small hand stopped him with a tap on his chest. While still holding back Al, Cecilus then asked Groovy.

Cecilus: "You can win, can't you?"

Groovy: "At least I'll make time for you, the fucking idiot, to do your work. Who do you think I am? I'm the amazing Groovy Gumlet, the Sixth of the Nine Divine Generals."

Groovy raised his arms and told Cecilus over his shoulder the basis of his confidence.

This seemed to have resonated particularly well with Cecilus. He let out a delighted snort that was obvious, and without even looking, Cecilus: “Well have fun. Next time we’ll meet with the Fiend Sword!”

With the leading actor’s familiar, florid speech, Groovy kicked off the cobblestone pavement and headed off to the battlefield.

2

—After parting ways with Cecilus and Al, Groovy, now all on his own, leapt his way across the Imperial Capital.

Regardless of being out in the open, he sailed past the streets, kicked the walls and roofs of the buildings, and bounced with great vigor.

From here onwards, unlike covert operations that might have been done by wearing the pelt of a werewolf, he had to garner the opposition’s attention by purposefully making his move in dramatic fashion.

Finally, at long last, the opportunity for Groovy to swing into action in his own element had arisen.

Groovy: “Making me do all this fucking annoying shit…!”

Placing the entirety of his accumulated frustration onto his tongue, Groovy spat out a spiteful sequence of profanity.

In the first place, behaving in a way that required him to scuttle around, such as running around in an effort to escape and lurking in secret out of the sight of others, was not Groovy’s thing at all. It was not about whether he was good at it or not, he simply hated doing it.

Despite that, ever since he had withdrawn from the western battlefield after the arrival of the undead, such a role had been unremittingly forced upon him until he had reached the Imperial Capital, and therefore, he was at the absolute limit of his patience.

Of course, his frustration was not the reason for his suggestion to act on his own, but now that he had obtained a perfect chance to run wild at his own discretion, he was going to savor it.

Groovy: "—Fucking dammit, it's here."

As Groovy spun in circles vertically while hugging his knees close to himself, the thorny vines surfaced and wriggled across his beastly fur-covered chest, its bindings undergoing reactivation due to the shortened distance between him and the caster.

The acute pain that pierced his heart directly was something that could not be withstood easily, even if the recipient was a warrior who was accustomed to pain. It was the complete truth without a sliver of falsehood, as stated previously.

Except—

Groovy: "If it's a shitty curse that torments the opponent, then there's gotta be a loophole…!"

Groovy barked, drawing out a single dagger from the waistband fastened securely around his own body.

Selected from the waistband, loaded with multiple daggers, was one with a purple line streaking across its blade, and Groovy pointed the sharp edge of the dagger at his own neck, pushing the tip into himself.

Immediately, the poison affixed to the edge of the dagger's blade coursed into his body, rapidly eating away at the petite build of the hyena human by flowing through his bloodstream. The deadly toxin ran amok, delighted by the joy brought on from fulfilling its duty of killing a living creature, and as it rushed to put a lethal end to the creature's vital activity—the blade was pulled back right before it could do so.

Groovy: "—Aah."

Enduring the sensation that caused the contents of his stomach to go through a reflux, blood rushed to Groovy's widened eyes.

With the capillaries of his eyeballs having been ruptured, both of his eyes were dyed red, but his physical body had stopped short of being felled by the virulent poison, and a change was delivered to it instead.

A part of his body's senses had been silenced by the poison. —His sense of pain had been suppressed.

The next moment, the pain from the thorns that would have been enough to immobilize him had disappeared, and the sensation that constricted his heart was subdued by the exhilaration that came from forcibly overcoming the threat to his life.

Originally, the poison was intended to be used as a tool for torture, the procedure consisting of administering it to captive enemies and letting them watch, fully conscious, as their own bodies were demolished, all the while being unable to feel any pain.

Although, as long as he adjusted the dosage, he thought it would be possible to maintain control over his body and carry on with his sense of pain eradicated, just like this. He had always wanted to test this but had lacked the opportunity to do so, yet it went swimmingly without any preparation beforehand.

Groovy: "If I ever tested this on that fucking dumbass Cecilus, then it's gonna be an irreversible mistake in case I fuck it up."

If it were a matter of his own body, then he had it completely memorized, starting from the number of his beastly hairs without a single fang's width of inaccuracy. He was able to make even the slightest adjustments thanks to it, but testing the poison on Cecilus or Al would have meant making rough estimates with their lives on the line.

More specifically, he did have an urge to test to see if even Cecilus would die from the poison—pushing down his slowly climbing curiosity, Groovy set out for the third bastion.

The current situation spoke for itself. Right now, his topmost priority was to save the Vollachian Empire from its imminent destruction.

Truthfully, he wanted to make the most out of this undead-reviving situation, going on a spree to collect materials from the limited numbers of rare races and those that had already gone extinct, but he had to choke back his regret and let the opportunity pass.

The reason to allow such a thing simmered and blazed within Groovy.

Groovy: “Fuck this shit.”

He threw out brief words of obscenity. Those had come from the constant feeling of frustration within him.

—Since the moment he had laid his eyes upon the Imperial Capital that was ruled by the undead, identical to how he was looking at it right now, Groovy had recalled the possibility that either Vincent or Chisha had died. On top of it, if one of them were truly dead, then he had thought it would have been Chisha.

There had been signs of a faint smell of death trailing after Vincent’s steps. For all that, when the smell had abruptly vanished at some point, or so he thought, the situation had gone to shit.

Groovy: “Fucking pale-faced motherfucking bastard.”

The guy was a detached man who kept his emotions closed off from the eyes of others, but he had ultimately hid away even the inner workings of his heart from the smell.

As the Imperial Capital’s decisive battle drew closer, it had been the orders from Vincent that had sent Groovy towards the west, keeping him away from the battlefield, but that Vincent must have been Chisha.

He had no way of knowing what had happened to Vincent in the meanwhile, but upon imagining the circumstances behind why Cecilus had been shrunk down, the sole winner of all of this was Chisha.

In spite of that, if the Empire were to be defeated, then even his victory would be brushed away as if it had never happened.

Groovy: “Fuck that shit.”

Such a stupid idea could not be allowed to become a fact.

Groovy was born in the Empire, raised in the Empire, and was a hyena human who lived in the Empire. The rise of his race's social status depended on the work he did, and he had always been told that his duty was to fight courageously until he drew his last breath.

He was aware that he was born as someone who would leave his mark on the history of the Empire. In fact, he had been scouted by the Emperor, climbing through the ranks in leaps and bounds and eventually rising to the position of the Imperial General First-Class.

The group that such a person, Groovy Gumlet, had acknowledged as his equals, or even greater than him, were the Nine Divine Generals.

Groovy was a warrior who belonged to the Empire, and was also one person who obeyed the philosophy stating that “the people of the Empire must be strong”.

That was why the matter of victory or defeat was sacred. —The victor must be honored, after all.

Groovy: “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fucking fuck…!”

In Vollachia, the land of ceaseless battles, the world would sink to hell if even the aforementioned unwritten law were to be distorted.

Furthermore, hell was to be brought upon Vollachia's enemies, so turning this world into that place was not an option.

He had to give the enemy an idea of where hell resided.

Groovy: “—I fucking found it.”

Spinning alongside his body was his vision, and Groovy let out a mutter when he saw a few silhouettes on the move.

The horde of undead at the bottom of his line of sight were screeching out something. However, their reactions were beyond subpar. They would have been harmless even if he would have left them alone, but he had no reason to do such a thing.

Above all else, Groovy could not afford to let his prey get away in the midst of the smell of blood.

Positioning his fangs together with an audible click, he drew out the chain and sickle that he carried on his back.

It was a weapon that was difficult to handle, consisting of a wide, single-handed sickle connected to a weight with a chain. Usually, the chain would only be several meters long, and the chain and sickle were supposed to be used in fights that were close-ranged or middle-ranged, but Groovy's weapon was made out of unique materials.

Because of that, the chained weight had easily reached the group of undead, even if they were nearly thirty meters away from him.

He swung his sickle-wielding hand in wide arcs, and the chained weight that followed after a moment sang its metallic tunes as it flew towards the ground with tremendous speed. The size of the weight was equal to a fist, but the power behind its acceleration was too enormous to be converted to a mere punch.

Of course, the undead jumped out of the pathway of the weight, not wanting to be on the receiving end of it—but, how naive.

Groovy: "FUCKING MORONS!!"

The launched weight made contact with the ground in the direction of Groovy's roar.

Suddenly, the weight manifested a red hue from within, and the surrounding buildings were caught in the massive explosion that followed. The resulting powerful shockwave engulfed the undead that had narrowly avoided the blast, and just like that, one of the Imperial Capital's streets had been annihilated.

—The Crimson Hills Girall were located northwest of the Kararagi City-States, near the Great Waterfall.

The place that appeared as a red desert area was the most dangerous land in the world, made from delicate Fire Magic Stone particles resembling grains of sand. Because even a puff of wind could trigger a chain of explosions in that region, it was said to have been created from the bloody tears of a Great Spirit who had failed to become a part of the Four Greats.

The weight connected to Groovy’s chain and sickle contained Fire Magic Stones that were collected from the Crimson Hills Girall in its interior, and upon absorbing mana from its surroundings, it would be able to unleash its exceptionally destructive power in this manner.

Exposing himself to the aftershock from the explosive heat that had demolished an entire street, Groovy landed on the charred ruins that continued to let up black smoke and burn ablaze, and while leaning up to straighten his back,

Groovy: “Rrroooooohhh!!”

Like that, he roared as he let the destructive impulse that had been swelling up inside of him run its own course.

His pounding heart was bitching about the squeezing sensation from the thorns, but there was no pain to it. Moreover, he felt the scorching heat sear through his inner body, blowing out a breath that smelled of blood.

And then, he gnashed his fangs loudly, adjusting his hold on his chain and sickle,

Groovy: “Can’t fucking ambush me with a shitty curse like that!!”

As a shadow dropped from the sky, the hem of their red overcoat fluttering in the air, he launched the chained weight at them.

Just as how the power behind the weight had been demonstrated earlier, the opponent intercepted it with the sword in their hand, and immediately after that, an eruptive blaze swallowed them whole.

However—

Groovy: “Tch!”

Groovy leapt backwards immediately, witnessing the flames that had enveloped the sky becoming split in half.

The unnatural change that had occurred to the flames was a testament to the fact that the flying silhouette had chopped it down. In addition, the thorns pulsing with ardor at the arrival of their master, as if they were howling with joy, told him that his opponent was the one responsible for scattering the curse of thorns against Groovy, as well as his surroundings.

If he had not silenced his sense of pain with his toxins, then he would have been writhing on the ground as he vomited blood by now.

In the case that his opponent was someone who only relied on their thorns, Groovy wanted to say that he had the complete upper hand, but unfortunately, his enemy was apparently not easy to beat.

???: “Ambush? ‘Tis a rather strange remark. For what reason wouldst I resort to such an underhanded subterfuge?”

The silhouette spoke as he descended upon the scorched field, languidly gazing in Groovy’s direction.

Fractured, pallid skin and golden pupils floating atop black irises. His appearance was just as Groovy had expected, meeting the requirements of an undead, but there was something that had vaulted over a wall or two regarding his expectations.

First and second, there was the aesthetic garb that was only allowed to be worn by the Vollachian Imperial Family, and facial features that were somehow reminiscent of Vincent Vollachia. More than anything, it was about the thing that his opponent had in his hand.

That was something only permitted to be held by the Emperor of Vollachia, the crimson, scintillating glow of the Yang Sword—.

Groovy: “Fucking hell.”

If the undead were resurrections, then of course there was the possibility of the Vollachian Imperial Family becoming a part of the horde.

Because of it, although Groovy was surprised by the fact that his opponent had the Yang Sword, he was able to accept it. What he was not able to accept was that it was not the only sword in his enemy’s possession.

With the Yang Sword grasped firmly in his right hand, the undead Emperor was holding a different weapon in his left.

And, it was a blade that Groovy had not been expecting this one undead to have gotten ahold of in this place—

Groovy: “—How far are you gonna go to fucking defy me, you shitty ass katana!!”

As Groovy roared in an outburst of rage, in his field of vision was the undead Emperor, with the Fiend Sword Murasame in his hand—the Yang Sword and the Fiend Sword, two blades belonging to the Enchanted Swords were standing as an adversary against the Master of Curse Tools, Groovy, much to his chagrin.

V!c.ll2o

Chapter 42:
The Grand Slave

1

—Priscilla Barielle did not despise Stargazers.

Appearing only in the Vollachian Empire, they were pitiable existences burdened with mental illness.

That was the general perception of those who had become familiar with Stargazers, though to begin with, happening across those who harbored the disease of conversing with the world was not something that happened so frequently.

Even so, there existed positions that easily became entangled with those of the Stargazer affliction.

Those were people closely tied to the Vollachian Imperial Family.

Whether it was the Imperial Family themselves, or perhaps those who served the Imperial Family's needs in their daily life. Those appointed to positions of steward, guard, and all the like, had a chance to encounter individuals ailed by the Stargazer malady.

After all, the Stargazers were a lot who could not help wanting to be involved with the history of the Empire, and whenever there was a large incident that would seem to be recorded in Imperial history, they all appeared to blather on about it.

Although, there had never been a case in which the utterances of Stargazers, despised as madmen, were given significant importance.

Of course, there were likely some curious people who had lent their ears to the words of the Stargazers, but there were no history books, at least publicly, in which it was recorded that their ramblings had proved useful.

Until the current Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, granted Ubilk an official position and the permission to enter and leave the Palace, that was the common understanding of the relationship between the Empire and Stargazers.

Was it not just as if Stargazers were like swains, continuing to emit an unreciprocated passion for the Empire?

Endowed with a commandment, they were swains who blindly relinquished everything for its fulfillment. Many of the Imperial citizens aware of their existence despised them, however, Priscilla did not. Neither did she pity them.

Stargazers and the like were nothing so special as to warrant being the targets of contempt or pity.

From the beginning, the vast majority of living beings were slaves to something greater than themselves.

Be that to a King, to one's family, or to one's spouse, or perhaps to love, hatred, or fate; that was the only difference.

Thus, that was—

Priscilla: "—Even mineself is no exception."

With a clang, the chains of the binds cuffed around her wrists resonated as she murmured amidst the darkness.

When weaving words, she did not particularly care about whether an audience was present or not, but at the very least this murmur was not a soliloquy; it was uttered to be heard by someone.

Nevertheless, it seemed as if the other party had not desired such a thing, as there was no response.

Yet, if one was trying to conceal their presence, such petty desires would not be granted.

Priscilla: "No matter your attempt to bate your breath, there is no way to conceal the presence of a being such as yourself. Or perhaps, you shall not show your face unless I directly make mine way over to you?"

???: “—. As long as your hands are bound, that is an impossible action.”

Priscilla: “So be it. In that case, there is no choice but for you to take a step in mine direction. I do not intend to exchange words with someone who does not even show their face.”

???: “□□□”

A beat later, though there was no confusion to the extent of hesitation, the thought was interrupted before the sound of footsteps. Gradually, accompanied by the slow, echoing sound of footsteps striking the cold floor, a small figure emerged in the darkness.

The light source in the dungeon was meager, allowing only a vague perception of their form.

There was a limit to how much one’s eyes could adjust to darkness. Much less, when one did not bother closing one of their eyelids to adjust their vision to the darkness of night.

Priscilla: “Do not perform acts so uncouth as concealing yourself in unlit darkness. When you make your entrance, do so magnificently into the light.”

???: “Truly a prideful statement characteristic of yourself. Caution: Required.”

And, right after hearing the emotionless voice, a hardness separate to that of the shoes sharply struck the stone floor. A high-pitched sound cut through the cold air, and then a bluish-white light forcefully pushed back the darkness in the cellar.

Priscilla: “□□□”

In an instant, within that light, a beautiful white face emerged— With orange hair and crimson eyes, the beauty clad in a dress as red as blood, was Priscilla Barielle.

Chained up in a basement, Priscilla was flashed with a staff that shone a bluish white, and holding that staff was a young girl with long pink hair—with cracks running through her skin and horrifying eyes, she was an undead.

If there was something different about this undead, it was that she, having taken the form of a little girl before Priscilla's eyes, was—

Priscilla: "—The instigator of this Great Disaster?"

Girl: "I will not deny it, but where did you learn that term? You should not have had any opportunity to hear it?"

Priscilla: "It was your subordinate who served a meal to mineself. Perhaps you had starved him of conversation? Even without mine inquiry, he kept talking about various matters to alleviate his boredom."

Girl: "For General First-Class Temeglyph, Warning: Required. However—"

At that point, the youthful undead interrupted her words, and taking a step forth, she closed the distance between herself and Priscilla.

Even so, it was still far. No matter how slender and artistic Priscilla's legs might be, it seemed unlikely that she could lift her leg to reach the other's bangs.

Girl: "Have you managed to endure it? The boredom."

Priscilla: "□□□"

With the distance to Priscilla still maintained, the youthful undead continued her paused words.

Priscilla's eyes narrowed slightly in response to the question. There was a strange closeness in the young girl's statement, as if she were looking into her face.

It was not about physical distance, but about a mental one.

Priscilla: "You speak as if you have known mineself for a long time."

Girl: “What do you think? Do you remember me? Do you have any idea who I am?”

Priscilla: “Unfortunately, I am not so fickle as to remember such a trivial thing. So either you are unworthy, or this is the first time you have ever shown your face to mineself.”

Girl: “Correct. This is the first time you have seen my face.”

The nodding young girl’s answer, however, was not a thorough answer to Priscilla’s doubts.

But then again, precisely because the other party’s statement left out all of the most important bits that their intention was clear. — She was testing Priscilla. It was as if she was watching to see if a tethered beast would take the bait.

Priscilla sensed her intention and snorted slightly.

Priscilla: “Such fearless disrespect for mineself.”

Girl: “Indeed, I do not know the emotion of fear. What I do not know is not limited to fear, but as a venerable substitute for Mother, who greedily desires knowledge—”

Priscilla: “So you know mineself from a one-sided point of view. — You are the one behind the mouryou of the village of Coffleton.”

Girl: “—. Elucidation: Required.”

Priscilla interrupted the young girl, who rambled about herself, and as she spoke of something that rang a bell in her mind, the girl held her breath.

The mutter was proof that Priscilla’s idea had a connection to the young girl, but it was not clear to the other party how exactly Priscilla linked it to her.

Priscilla: “Hmm, it is not that confusing, is it? Once upon a time, within mine domain in the Kingdom, what is now happening to the Imperial Capital… or rather, the entire Empire, a similar incident occurred. When such rare events happen twice around oneself, it is natural to connect the two.”

The incident occurred within the Barielle Domain of the Kingdom of Lugunica, in the village of Coffleton, which was the center of the incident and whose residents were turned into undead.

However, at that time, it was not so much a case of the dead being brought back to life as it was a case of corpses being manipulated according to the will of someone else. The queen, who was the apparent cause, was defeated, and since then, there had been no reports of similar incidents. It was thought that the situation had been settled.

Priscilla: “It seems that you have changed the location of your nest and continued to perform your “tehsts”. You have improved somewhat in your appalling game of dolls with insects inside their corpses.”

Girl: “The previous approach had too many obstacles to achieving my goals. Improvement: Required.”

Priscilla: “You do not deny your involvement with Coffleton?”

Girl: “I do not see the point. Are these not meaningless inquiries?”

The young girl’s response, devoid of emotion, was more an expression of disgust than one of distaste for the wasteful use of time.

The clear indifference aside, such lack of denial was useful in obtaining the information she wanted to get. On the other hand, however, the dialogue with such a person was—

Priscilla: “You are quite the bore.”

Girl: “And that is important, how?”

Priscilla: “Disregarding whether this conversation is beneficial or not, that is the only value that can be derived from it.”

Girl: “So then, why do we not just ignore whether it is beneficial or not?”

Priscilla: “That is why I said I find your conversations a bore. It is like talking to a dead person. Talking to a gravestone would still be preferable, given the lack of your petulant responses.”

Girl: “□□□”

The young girl’s black eyes narrowed as Priscilla spoke, and she took another step closer to her. She put her hand on her chest, the one not holding the staff,

Girl: “Is it not as if you are conversing with the dead? When you see me, you would not suspect me to be alive.”

Priscilla: “It would be nonsensical to ascribe life or death to something that could not even be said to have lived. However, it was somewhat unexpected that you were undead.”

Girl: “—. Why is that?”

Priscilla: “It would be an ill-advised gamble for you, the originator of the ritual, to become undead yourself. Moreover, at the moment of your death, the technique that you have woven could be cut off, and all your plans may come to naught.”

Naturally, that might be an unfounded worry depending on information and evidence of which Priscilla had no knowledge. However, given the nature of this young girl, even that was highly questionable.

This girl, in particular, disliked inefficiency and had a propensity for not reaching for things that she estimated to have less than definite proof.

Despite this, she treated even her own life as a card in her hand that would bring about the Great Disaster.

Priscilla: “Perhaps when confronted with your inevitable death, you had no choice but to entrust your hope to the afterlife. Or perhaps you were already undead before you caused this incident. If not—”

Girl: “If not?”

Priscilla: "—Perhaps you deemed it acceptable that it would all come to naught had your life not continued beyond that point?"

Guessing at the inexplicable true intentions of the young girl who had turned into an undead, Priscilla voiced three possibilities.

Listing them out in order, based on the nature of the young girl that she analyzed so far, she held off the possibilities that would be far from being true.

However—

Girl: "Admiration: Required."

This was the young girl's reaction in response to Priscilla's speculation when she voiced what should have been the least likely possibility.

In essence, it meant nothing more than that the young girl had given up on the plans she had set in motion around the time of the incident in Coffleton, about at the same time as the end of her own life.

This fact alone was enough to furrow Priscilla's beautiful brows, but what intensified it further was the reaction of the young girl to the truth of the statement.

With her lifeless, pale face missing any signs of life, the young girl smiled as if Priscilla's intentions had been understood.

In the midst of the light emitted by the staff, witnessing that smile, Priscilla furrowing her brows became even clearer.

Priscilla: "Finally, you have shown that there is at least value in talking to you, disregarding gains."

Girl: "—. Has something changed?"

Priscilla: "If you have yet to realize it yourself, allow me to append some congratulatory words. The exceeding irony that is the sprouting of a life after death…"

Then, Priscilla stopped speaking, closing one of her crimson eyes. After a brief moment of beautiful and precious contemplation, Priscilla reopened her closed eyelid.

And, with both of her crimson eyes fixed on the face of the young girl, who had lost her smile,

Priscilla: “No, not quite. It did not sprout after death. You, did you sacrifice your own life to prove it?”

Girl: “I did not take my own life. The opportunity naturally presented itself. However, the speculation that I faced an unavoidable Death is not incorrect. Correction: Required.”

In response, the lips of the young girl once again painted a smile, similar to before.

In this clear reaction, Priscilla could distinctly sense the rhythm of life—The presence of emotions within the young girl. They were something that had not existed in the young girl until now.

And without that, the dead could not resurrect as undead.

Therefore, the young girl had proven it with her own life.

She might have had the qualification to become undead, but there needed to be a reason to place her soul back into the earthen vessel and make it cling to this current life.

It was a strategy with low certainty and could hardly be called efficient.

Priscilla: “But emotions are what lead to such choices, are they not?”

Girl: “That is correct.”

The young girl, with her hand still on her chest, had a sense of audacity emanating from her.

The previous emptiness, as if conversing with a doll with no substance, was gone. Instead, what was present was the tension of confronting a decidedly different and inorganic presence.

Girl: “The plan in the Kingdom was thwarted because the me of the past had dismissed this. However, though I may have failed to become the Witch of the Kingdom… it seems I have been chosen to become the Great Disaster of the Empire.”

Priscilla: “Chosen, you say. Is that the reason you have invoked the disaster?”

Girl: “Correction: Required. That is not the motive. It is the basis.”

To Priscilla’s question, there was a resolute answer.

Listening to the young girl’s response, Priscilla’s vague suspicions began to take shape.

What had been sinking into the shadows darker than the darkness of the underground dungeon gradually became clearer through the young girl’s words and expressions, just like when she had brought the light of her staff into the cellar.

And then—

Girl: “My name is Sphinx, I was also once known as a Witch in the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

Priscilla: “□□□”

So, looking directly at Priscilla, declaring her name, the young girl’s—Sphinx’s words and demeanor, and what they meant, were finally conveyed to Priscilla.

The explicit mention of being called a Witch in the Kingdom of Lugunica was likely to clearly distinguish herself from those known as Witches in other countries.

The six Witches who once existed, other than the Witch of Envy, had all but disappeared from history, but they were still commonly known as Witches throughout the world.

However, if one were to limit a Witch to the Kingdom of Lugunica, only one person would fit the description.

It was easily discernible through history that this entity had been involved in the Demi-Human War.

Yet, what this self-proclaimed Witch, Sphinx, wanted to convey to Priscilla was not merely some trivial information regarding her true identity.

What the Witch wanted to convey to Priscilla was—

Priscilla: "—The reason you overcame a futile death, and gained the sprout of life as an undead, was because of mineself."

That was a declaration of war, stating that Priscilla was the reason Sphinx had become the Great Disaster.

2

In the first place, she did not even have to mull over it to know that the situation was too conspicuous.

At the site of the decisive battle at the Imperial Capital, where the Imperial Army and the rebel army had engaged in a direct clash with one another, Sphinx had brought the undead along with her, interfered in the battle as the Great Disaster, and caused the end of the insurrection to be left undecided.

During the battle, Priscilla and Yorna had both been focused on their fight with Arakiya, leaving them with a delayed grasp of the shift in the situation compared to the other battlefields, and they had been defeated as a result, too late to discern the intentions of the undead.

As of now, Priscilla was chained up in the dungeon, and the well-being of Arakiya and Yorna remained unknown in the current situation.

During the fight with Arakiya, the Soul Marriage Technique that Yorna had placed within her still retained its lingering effects, so there was no doubt that Yorna had survived. Even if that were not the case, Priscilla had resigned herself to being held as a prisoner in exchange for the safety of Arakiya, who had lost her consciousness, and also Yorna, who had been disconcerted by the undead that had appeared.

The deal would not have been able to be established if the other party did not have the intention to capture her.

Therefore, the fact that Priscilla was chained to this prison while alive, just like this, it was only natural that the other party wanted something to do with her.

Priscilla: "I have imagined that, surely, it was Lamia who was particular about my life."

Sphinx: "Princess Lamia Godwin had agreed to spare your life. She was strongly attached to you. During her last moments—"

Priscilla: "—I do not intend to share the time between mineself and Lamia with another."

She cut her off, bluntly regarding her words as a mere stint of curiosity that existed for momentary satisfaction.

Sphinx simply pulled back with an, "I see," at Priscilla's declaration. She had brought it up as the subject of their conversation, but her interest concerning the topic was probably non-existent.

This much was evident to Priscilla, who had been kept alive even after Lamia's second death.

Sphinx: "Attachment is a mysterious phenomenon. It is too heavily influenced by elements that are contradictory to rationality. Regardless, I have struggled to understand outcomes where irrationality had prevailed over rationality at times."

Priscilla: "Rationality or irrationality, which one have you given greater importance to for the outcome of speaking to me in this manner?"

Sphinx: "I wonder which one it is. Deliberation: Required… Doing so is a thought-provoking action in itself."

As Sphinx answered her, Priscilla wondered if she was aware of it.

Regardless of whether she was aware of it or not, as Sphinx continued to speak with Priscilla in this place, there was a rapid increase in the human-like qualities of her speech.

The water that was her conversation with Priscilla had been poured onto her budding humanity, bringing a significant growth into existence.

Priscilla: “□□□”

Priscilla took notice of what Sphinx had truly meant by that, and it had not been refuted when she had voiced it out loud.

Judging from how Sphinx was maintaining her attitude of deliberately not probing further into the subject, it could be said that the idea of it belonging to the core of her motives was unequivocally affirmed.

There was one thing that Priscilla was, as much as she was vexed to admit it, falling behind Sphinx in regards to it—the fact that she was entirely clueless about Sphinx’s extreme attachment.

Of course, considering Priscilla’s status, there had been times when complete strangers and those whom she only knew the names of harbored some sort of one-sided obsession over her.

However, Sphinx’s attachment was clearly beyond the scope of her egotistical single-mindedness.

There was a reason. A reason that had become the origin of the Great Disaster.

Sphinx: “Earlier, you spoke of an interesting subject.”

Priscilla: “□□□”

Sphinx: “All forms of life are slaves to some sort of greater entity. In the past, I have not been able to understand this, but currently, I am sensing the signs that will guide me to my understanding.”

Sphinx started, seemingly finding the topic interesting, and Priscilla responded to her words with her silence.

She was not scorning her, nor was she ignoring her. If she were to put it into words, it was a type of curiosity that must not be trifled with. Sphinx had begun speaking while mentioning that she found it interesting, and her speech itself was what Priscilla was deeply fascinated with.

The Witch had expressed her understanding of something she previously could not fathom, and even showed her agreement with Priscilla's words. What was she planning to talk about?

Sure enough, in front of Priscilla, who prompted her to go on with her silence, Sphinx resumed her speech.

Sphinx: "Because of this, I am able to discover a new rationality in the midst of all the irrationality. Attention: Required."

She said, then struck the end of her glowing staff against the floor once more. The staff, with a glorious jewel inlaid into it, grew glaringly brighter, and during the moment, a change had occurred to the surface of the jewel.

—The view of the Imperial Capital, outside of the dungeon, had been projected onto the pale, transparent jewel.

Perhaps its principles were similar to how a Conversation Mirror would emulate the reflection on the other side over the face of the mirror. Priscilla felt that such a formula seemed rather grandiose to only be used for gazing at something from a distance, narrowing her eyes through the light.

Although, Sphinx had told her to pay attention.

Priscilla: "What do you wish to present to mineself?"

Sphinx: "The validity of your words, and the results of my renewed equation."

On the assumption that the accuracy of Priscilla's words was correlated to what Sphinx had said a moment ago, she pondered about what would be shown on the jewel, and then made a realization.

And then, simultaneously, Priscilla's realization and the jewel's projection became clear.

The scene that had been displayed was—

Sphinx: "By gaining an understanding of emotion and attachment, for the first time, I have discerned the methodology regarding their uses. She is commendable, isn't she? If it is for your sake, she does not take herself into account. —Deliberation: Required."

3

—At the same time, at the real location of the scene projected within the jewel.

???: "Oh dear, seems like I've done quite the bad thing to Groovy–san. I'd established in my mind that my intuition wouldn't be wrong at the critical moment… but it was fairly off the mark."

Voiced in a witty manner, a manner contrary to the cheerful tone of the words was the topic of his own mistake.

However, no diffidence could be sensed in his expression or narrating tone whatsoever. That was because he did not care about his mistake at all, and because he was not really serious about the desire to apologize—because his intuition had been half-right, and half-wrong.

Leaving the flashy role of a diversion to his ally, he had dashed along the undead-infested Imperial Capital to one of the bastions belonging to the city's walls, to a place that was known number two in that sequence, where something he was looking for ought to have been present.

Of course, his intuition had been the one to lead him to believe so; he held no doubts that were he to call that his conviction, many would end up rebuking him.

But, at the very least, he himself did hold a conviction. —That this was his time to shine.

That if he, the leading actor of this world, Cecilus Segmunt, were to arrive at this venue, a boisterous, obstreperous display of his magnificent deeds would be made to all those in the audience watching over him.

That was—

???: “…So, do you have some sort of excuse?”

Cecilus: “Dear me, you’re right about that, but how about this? “My intuition wasn’t wrong. If you want to know why, it’s because the thing I truly want is right here!”“

Next to him, holding the smoldering pelt which had already lost the meaning of “invisibility cloak”, Al spoke words of bitterness, to which Cecilus exultantly responded so.

In reality, whether that had been veracious or not was in a dimension beyond Cecilus’s comprehension, but was believing oneself not much, much more positive when compared to doubting oneself?

Cecilus: “Don’t you think so too, half-naked onee-san? A depressed face’s sure to be followed by a dark turn of events. In that case, then it needn’t be said what face the leading actor, who basks in light, ought to be making.”

???: “□□□”

His head cast above, facing the figure of a person floating in the sky, their altitude beyond even than the height of the ramparts they had arrived at, Cecilus raised his voice; but a reply came not, from the other party.

However, there had been an initial greeting from them. Something that had transmogrified absolutely everything in the surrounding area into a sea of flame in an attempt to immolate Cecilus and Al, both hiding under the cloak of fur, to naught.

While performing a deed immense to such a degree, no hostility, no intent to kill targeting Cecilus and Al could have been felt in said action whatsoever.

The only thing there had been from the slender body exposing plenty of its brown skin, had been merely the sobbing pleas of a young girl, who had taken in something so great that it seemed like she was about to be rended apart.

He did not know what kind of circumstances had led to that thing entering her, but—

Cecilus: “I guess she probably ate something bad. —You really are a handful.”

Girl: “□□□”

Cecilus: “Huh? That strange feeling just now…”

Just what was it, Faster than he could reel that answer in, there was movement overhead.

A flicker of light, and a tremendous power rained from overhead to destroy Cecilus and Al. Before that could happen, Cecilus licked his lips, and to his side, as Al cast away the fur cloak,

Al: “Ah, fuck it all! —Territory re-expansion!!”

As that desperate shout was engulfed in the midst of the impact, the greatest clash of the Undead Capital began.

Chapter 43:
To Each Their Long-Cherished Desires

1

—Aldebaran knew of what Stargazers were.

The person who had informed Aldebaran of their existence, in the past, was a being knowledgeable about almost everything about this world, who nevertheless still coveted the unknown, greedily.

His relationship with that person was a complex one.

It was not one which he could describe with words such as “like” or “dislike”.

If asked whether he was grateful to them or not, he would probably say he was. But, the degree of his gratitude towards them notwithstanding, he harbored reservations about how incompatible they were with him. Such was the kind of person they were.

At any rate, regardless of who had taught him that knowledge, he knew of the Stargazers’ circumstances.

And thus, they contributed nothing to the outcome of Aldebaran’s dearest wish whatsoever. More important than his interest in the Stargazers or whether they were involved with him or not, was the fact that they had dragged them into this.

When Priscilla had first declared she would head for Vollachia, through trial and error he attempted to stop her; once she had decided on something however, her mind would not be swayed no matter what.

So, the best he could do was to accompany her, endeavoring to serve as her insurance as much as possible, but—for Aldebaran, the fact that he had happened across them in this Empire, was undoubtedly a cruel twist of fate.

Always, fate would intervene in Aldebaran's life in extremely odious ways.

Therefore, he did not have the slightest good impression in regards to fate, but just this time, he was grateful.

If they were here, it would be a different story. If they had been dragged into this, the situation would be dramatically changed.

If they were to enter a frame, unable to abandon it, if the frame they were unable to abandon were to increase in scope more and more, to the point that they would not be able to handle all of it, then Aldebaran's dearest wish would be fulfilled.

Once before, Aldebaran had thrown everything away, entirely.

Amidst darkness, continuing to walk while solely relying on what meager starlight was present, he had given up on trying.

For that reason, the sun was radiant. As if there was no such thing as darkness, it had scorched his resignation to naught.

If it was to protect that dazzling sun, he was fine with licking the boots of fate. Enduring the pain that seemed to tear into him, he would not even hesitate to look them right in the eye.

Be it Witch, be they Stargazers, be it the Great Disaster, no matter what stood in his way, he cared not.

—It's just, I'm begging you, so please, don't get in my way.

2

—In total, twenty-two times.

That was the number of attempts it had taken Al to figure out what had happened to him. In an instant, there was a whiteout so abrupt that he did not even realize that his body had evaporated—.

Al: "—Nah, it wasn't caused by clouds or snow, it was fire, so I guess it'd be a redout. Or it'd also be fine to call it a crimsonout, 'cuz it sounds cooler."

Taking a deep breath, he uttered a pointless, nonsensical remark.

Although he could not say for certain whether his mind was normal or not, at the very least, he could bring himself to a tenuous belief that his mind was normal.

For the time being, that was fine. If there was a problem—

Al: “When it comes to fighting at this level, there’s no room for me to intervene!”

In front of Al as he barked this, was one of the duties that had to be accomplished in the Imperial Capital—the conquest of the five bastions of the star-shaped ramparts had been completed in one location.

The solid walls that boasted immense defensive capability had been annihilated without a trace. What else could this be called but the accomplishment of that objective?

But then again, at the second bastion, where the high, high walls and surrounding buildings had been completely erased, a greater obstacle than the now-vanished walls obstructed the way as the next hurdle.

—The cloudy sky was dyed red, and a girl surrendered herself to the sky through the work of some unknown principle.

The girl had short silver hair, red eyes, and much of her brown skin exposed; however, as much as her beautiful features were captivating, she exhibited an appearance that jolted the instinctive sense of danger of the beholder.

Having left the master of the thorns to Groovy, and by using the werewolf’s pelt, Al and Cecilus had safely reached the second bastion—no, they had attempted to reach it.

Strictly speaking, the second bastion had been wiped from the face of the world, and caught up in that annihilation, Al had suffered damage many times without being able to recognize it, before finally grasping the situation and the method with which to move it forward.

That said, he did not even want to think about how many extra attempts it would take to reach the same result if he were asked to do it again.

That was why—

Al: “—Re-initiate thought experiment, territory redefinition.”

Updating the matrix by ten-odd seconds, or perhaps just by a few seconds, Al put all of his effort towards finding an opening to escape.

As Al had shouted earlier, there was no room for him to intervene. Regardless, whenever Al suffered fatal damage, he would restart from a predefined point, so the world would not progress.

It would be a different story if Cecilus could pick up Al and let him escape from the lethal zone together with him, like the time with that sniper, but—

Cecilus: “Sorry, Al-san, but my intuition is telling me that this is my time to shine and that looking after you would spoil my state of being.”

With that stated, Cecilus quickly resigned from protecting Al and challenged the girl in the sky—Arakiya.

How many times had Al seen her by now? Looking back on it, their relationship had been steadily deteriorating: back when he was a gladiator on the Gladiator Island, he had fought together with her when she was still a little girl; next, they faced off as enemies in the Fortress City of Guaral; and now, she was vaporizing him in the Imperial Capital.

But, other than the viewpoint of a middle-aged guy who had encountered her several times, as Cecilus had said, it could be understood that Arakiya was not in her usual state with a single glance.

Arakiya: “□□□”

Arakiya was writhing in midair, and her state was evidently abnormal.

A Spirit Eater, Al had heard about their characteristics in passing from Priscilla. In reality, he had been able to see her transform into fire and water with his own eyes, but this clearly ran counter to those precedents.

Unlike when she assimilated her body with water, or when she soared with part of her body turned into flames, Arakiya's current appearance looked like she was just about to be devoured by an enormous white light from the inside out.

As if protruding out from the inside of her slender brown body, translucent crystals tinged a pale yellow seemed to be directly growing from her skin one after the other.

The purest form of magic stones were known as magic crystals, and they were encircling Arakiya's entire body.

If she could still remain composed like that, it would have seemed that Arakiya's appearance was another display of her power as a Spirit Eater, but—

Arakiya: "—Hk."

Arakiya's red eyes did not clearly reflect anything in the world, and with tears flowing from her clouded left eye, her lips spilled out a pained gasp for help.

Nobody would consider this situation as normal or as something that Arakiya herself desired.

If a child cried out with a gaping mouth, tears streaming down from their eyes as they repeatedly pounded on someone, even supposing they closed their eyes, plugged their ears, and covered up their skin, they would still know that the child was crying nonetheless.

That was exactly what Arakiya was doing right now.

Al: "Don't tell me you're gonna say that you can't leave a crying child alone?!"

Al, at the end of his rope and trying his best to flee from the ruin, shouted in desperation to Cecilus, who was rushing towards it.

Upon hearing this, Cecilus did not look back, but shook his shoulders in a way that made it clear that he had laughed,

Cecilus: “The tears of women and children can be the instigator to get a story moving. So it’s natural that I can’t overlook them, but that isn’t the case here.”

Al: “So then…!”

Cecilus: “But—I have business with those tears.”

Immediately after he spoke, Cecilus leapt at lightning speed, using a piece of melted debris as a foothold.

In the surrounding area, the barricades that had been erected to protect the second bastion had melted away, manifesting the appearance of a magma-filled inferno. Should one carelessly plunge one’s foot into the magma, the damage incurred would be much more than merely slipping, but rather the portion that had been plunged in would be instantly incinerated, leaving a scar that would not be seen ever again. Al’s source for this was himself.

But, Cecilus jumped into the area that had become a garden of magma, making full use of the limited footholds to close in on Arakiya, who was floating in the sky.

His speed and transience were beyond description—no, truly beyond description was the deed that was realized directly afterward, mixed in with Cecilus humming a tune.

Al: “No way?!”

Arakiya’s entire body radiated white light in the air, and a moment later, a flash of light scorched the spot where Cecilus was running.

The unleashed spear of light pierced into the magma, and a beat later, everything within a radius of a few meters around it had compressed, and was immediately blown asunder. The imploded magma and the destructive force that had caused it then spread out to the surrounding area, scattering it over a radius nearly ten times the size of the initial compressed space.

Al was speechless, and even though he knew he was out of range, he reflexively covered his head with his arm to protect it, and in that covered vision, he could see that even though that single shot alone was horrifyingly powerful, the bombardment still continued without cease.

One, two, three, four shots were fired in rapid succession, each shot reshaping the form of the Imperial Capital.

Streets ceased to be streets, and land ceased to be land.

They were fired one after another, pursuing Cecilus as he ran on the ground, but even he—

Cecilus: “Ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta—!!!”

Splatters of the scorching heat known as magma were scattered about, the gaze of the blinks of destruction known as flashing light were evaded, and Cecilus broke through the white dust in a mad dash through the space where death rained down incessantly.

All the footholds had already disappeared, and through a space where magma would soak one’s feet in the place of solid ground, Cecilus swiftly ran with zori that did not seem to have any sort of fireproof quality.

Bearing witness to that sight, what flashed through Al’s mind was the absurd image of a shinobi running on water—the technique of stepping forth with their left foot before their right foot sank, then stepping forth with their right foot before their left foot sank.

Undoubtedly, Cecilus was performing that not on water, but on magma.

Al: “That shouldn’t be possible?!”

Cecilus: “As long as one thinks that way, they’ll never be able to do it!”

Cheerfully responding to Al's exclamation, Cecilus performed an outrageous act that scoffed at the very laws of physics; he ran straight forward and plunged into a house that had escaped harm's way, and in the subsequent instant, that house collapsed, and a pillar that had been kicked out of the crumbling building soared through the air like an arrow.

It was a rather girthy arrow with an incorrect size ratio, but it closed in on Arakiya with enough speed to bore through the torso of a large animal. But, before it could hit Arakiya, it spontaneously combusted, and smoldered to naught within the air.

Surrounding Arakiya as she radiated light, so much heat was being generated that it appeared as if both herself, and even the space around her were being distorted, so there was no way any half-hearted attack could have drawn near her.

Even Cecilus ought to have understood that. And yet—

Cecilus: "Go! Go go! Go go go!!"

Inducing a thunderous sound, Cecilus destroyed buildings one after the other, and, kicking the pillars, rooftops, and household belongings of the destroyed buildings flying at speeds unperceivable to the eye, he made an incessant onslaught on the airborne Arakiya.

Of course, it was not a matter of which would reach her, as all of them vanished in the air before they had the chance.

Moreover, in retaliation against those unsuccessful attacks, there were arrows of light that were sure to prove fatal with merely a graze.

Al: "Idiot, stop that, don't you get it?! If you recklessly attract her attention…"

Cecilus: "What are you saying, Al-san! It's totally totally totally totally the opposite! Rather, it's absolutely necessary that I attract her full attention to myself!"

Al: "This show-off… No."

Cecilus continued to contribute to the destruction of the Imperial Capital's scenery, voluntarily to the buildings, and incidentally to the rest of the surroundings. Trying to laugh off his usual leading actor-type statement with an unfunny one-liner, Al realized.

All of Cecilus's positioning involved placing Arakiya on the interior of the Imperial Capital, and going around so he would be outside of it to draw her attacks—That was to say, it was a battle with no attacks directed towards the inside of the Imperial Capital.

Having finally understood that, Al also understood what Cecilus was trying to say.

Cecilus: "Right now that woman has neither consciousness nor rationality. All she has are the defensive instincts in order to not be killed or burst apart. If left alone she would aimlessly head for the center of the city, but if we let her rampage in the center, what's gonna happen?"

Al: "It'd become a hole that nobody'd be able to live in for the next hundred years…"

Cecilus: "A whole lotta people would die. It may be fine if they were just enemies, but I don't really find it desirable for people who aren't enemies to die in great numbers. The world will get lonely, after all."

Saying so in a calm tone, Cecilus dodged the ray of death that attempted to graze him, and devoted himself to lightning speed in order to implement his statement.

Unable to hide his surprise at Cecilus's unexpectedly decent motivation, Al stuck his finger into his heated iron helmet, and adjusted its angle while holding his ground.

—As Cecilus had said, currently, Arakiya did not have the leeway to turn her attention anywhere else.

Arakiya had taken in something beyond Al's imagination, and desperately enduring as it overflowed, she was merely counterattacking by reflex against any threat that could impede her.

Thus, Cecilus continued to put himself at a critical distance and meddle with Arakiya in order to keep her contained here, as he claimed it was necessary to prevent the Imperial Capital from being destroyed.

Al: “□□□”

Cecilus’s aim, and the peculiar situation Arakiya had been placed in.

The choice to turn his back and flee, as there was nothing he could do, would always flicker in the corner of his mind, but even Cecilus had once had one of his legs blown off.

If Al’s presence had made it so that that had never happened, then there was value in him being here.

Al: “—Am I really doing this?”

Slowly shaking his head, Al drew in a long breath.

Right at the outset, he had already drawn the short end of the stick twenty-two times; from here on out, he did not know just how many times he would end up drawing it again. As a result, he wondered what might happen to his sanity.

However, regardless of whether he was sane or not, there would never be any mistaking that the sun was dazzling.

Al: “In that case, I’m fine with this.”

The metal fixtures on his helmet made a sound as he plucked them, and Al took one step forward.

Then—

Al: “□□□”

The unleashed white light aiming for Cecilus exploded ten-odd meters in front of him, and the magma droplets blown away by the aftershock directly caught Al, who had not dodged—

Al: “—Next.”

With his redefined territory, the ordinary man resolved himself to step onto the grand stage.

3

—Cecilus Segmunt had once told Arakiya something, in the past.

He had done so during a battle to the death between the First and the Second, an event regarded as commonplace in the Imperial Capital.

In the midst of a chat between Arakiya and Cecilus, who were the defeated and the victor respectively, a conversation taking place in a vast field reduced to a scorched plot, the latter had sliced open the clouds with his katana, a technique he had purported as being nothing but something for show.

In reality, Cecilus had thought it held no utility other than for surprising people; having witnessed it first-hand, Arakiya too evaluated that as a skill devoid of any useful purpose whatsoever.

That, was the divine miracle of empty sky that Rowan Segmunt had spent his lifetime devising—for those who were transcendent monsters, it was worthy of naught more than being dubbed a flashy performance.

That was to say—

—A long leg glided through the air, and with a delay, a strong wind blew the dust away.

Quickly stooping down to evade the powerful leg, he spotted an opening in the large sweeping kick of his opponent, and unsheathed his blade towards the slender waist in an attempt to cleave them in twain—an impact slammed into his chest.

The air was squeezed out of his lungs, and looking down with eyes widened, that which had caused his sternum to grate were the multiple tails growing from the rear of the woman who had unleashed the kick.

Rowan: “—Hk.”

Its fur soft, a tail like that of a fox had delivered a strike unbelievably vigorous, causing the body on the receiving end to fly backwards, bouncing off the ground.

Once, twice he witnessed heaven and earth revolving, and upon the third time, bidding farewell to the skies he thrust his sword into the ground, as to bring his momentum to a halt. Heels smashed into the ground, and clenching his molars he immediately sheathed his blade, his stance one for drawing his sword—

Woman: “Do you understand by now?”

Rowan: “—?!”

The very start of the movement, aiming to unleash his swordsmanship, ought to have had a glint of light reflect off the blade to accompany its drawing from the scabbard, but it was stopped by the hand of the woman, pressing against the handle of the katana still in its sheath. He fell silent at that instance, and as the woman faced him, the corners of her long-slitted eyes drooped as if pitying him, and,

Woman: “You are not worthy as my opponent.”

Rowan: “Ohhhhh—!!”

As if to sever that pity, instead of drawing the pinned-down katana, with the handle fixed in place as an anchor, he pulled off the scabbard, revolved by half a turn, and slammed the scabbard fashioned from the bone of a Witchbeast into the side of her face.

The force, the angle, the feedback from the swing, they all told him it had been more than sufficient to pulverize the human cranium.

However—

Woman: “□□□”

The one to be smashed to pieces was the scabbard, and the woman—the foxwoman who called herself Iris, displayed no sign of pain in her expression.

But, as she raised the hand that had been pinning down the handle, her lips, in which pity still remained, quivered,

Iris: “I shall not allow you to die, but the pain shall be to such an extent.”

Striking her palm against his forehead, he rolled backwards as his body was blown away.

This time, his defensive stance to endure a hit was torn asunder, his brain bobbing about. He traveled down the long, oh so long boulevard before the Crystal Palace, bouncing for tens of meters without stopping.

Bouncing, bouncing, bouncing and rolling, rolling and rolling, he rolled until he lay spread-eagled.

And then—

Rowan: “—Ah.”

Having been left half-dead after only a short battle, Rowan Segmunt gazed in wonder.

She was far too excessively, exceedingly, powerful.

An unbelievably strong individual. Of course, he had fully understood that she was a formidable opponent. And yet, he had believed that after one thing or another, he would be the one to come out on top ultimately.

As that was how things had always gone until then, this occurrence too would come to an end in the same fashion, most likely—.

—Here, the misfortune of the man known as Rowan Segmunt shall be narrated.

The man who had been traveling with him, Heinkel Astrea, was a man whose misfortune laid in the fact that he had not been chosen for a single thing that could only be obtained via being chosen.

On the other hand, Rowan Segmunt was a man who had continued to be chosen for things that could only be obtained via being chosen, which had resulted in his misfortune.

Rowan Segmunt held a long-cherished desire. Something he kept pursuing. A prayer he continued to long for.

In order to reach the Heavenly Sword, he had endured all kinds of hardship, mastered every conceivable necessity; no matter what sort of devil or monster he was branded as, he possessed the hunger to fulfill that goal.

In that wish, there was no lie or falsehood. It had nothing to do with compromise or resignation.

He had never once been dishonest about the sword or technique he tried to master, nor had he ever missed a training session.

But, Rowan Segmunt had never encountered them.

Had never encountered a worthy rival who had reached the same heights as him, a formidable enemy who could invigorate him with the notion that he had no other option but to overcome them, a love that would push him to places he could not reach alone; he had simply never done it.

He cut down every single person he encountered, and due to some causality, he had never collided with anyone whom his ability with the sword could not surmount; continuously he missed opportunities to clash with the many transcendent beings in this world, and, upon falling into despair at that which he could not reach, upon wishing for death, he had been bestowed a commandment, becoming a Stargazer.

Had he been granted the chance, Rowan Segmunt's swordsmanship would have likely made the world tremble throughout its entirety.

But, devoid of a worthy rival, devoid of a formidable enemy, devoid of a loved one, Rowan continued to be all by his lonesome.

It was not that he had come to the clear conclusion that feelings were unnecessary to master the way of the sword, nor was it that he had suffered a severe betrayal from someone he had formed a bond with.

It was simply that Rowan had never met someone who would inform him of his current position, nor had he met someone who could boost him up from his current position.

The reason he had been able to avoid Iris's initial attack from the Crystal Palace was because she, adverse to the deaths of others as she was, had had no intention of landing the attack.

The reason for which the undead Balleroy Temeglyph had fled from the "cloud-cutting" technique was because he feared an unexpected counterattack from Cecilus Segmunt; thus, he had wished to avoid pursuing them too far.

The reason he had remained safe until now, amidst the Great Disaster brought about by the hosts of undead, was because the only ones that had appeared before him were opponents his sword skills were perfectly capable of handling.

The reason for which Rowan had not been dispossessed of his life by Cecilus Segmunt, the latter refusing the former's attempt at instigating the assassination of the Empire, was because the latter had said "It may be impossible Dad, but get really strong then come back here and fight me, I've got a feeling that a development like that would be heated!" on a whim.

The reason why Rowan Segmunt had continuously escaped death till this day, was none other than the scales of fortune and misfortune always tipping in the direction of fortune for him.

And now, the opponent Rowan had encountered in the Imperial Capital, which had transformed into the Undead Capital, was also the sole enemy that had no intention of taking Rowan's life.

—The world would not grant Rowan's wish, but it continued to only illuminate the paths where he would survive.

Rowan: "□□□"

Iris: "—You intend to persist?"

As Rowan slowly raised his body from its spread-eagle position, Iris knitted her brows.

The distance between them had opened a few tens of meters, but perhaps because her unmistakable presence had made it so, Iris's words were fully understood by Rowan.

—Nay, this was likely a change yielded due to encountering a powerful enemy for the first time.

As if an unbreakable shell that had always been around his exterior had been shattered, that feeling was probably the reason. Because of that, he clearly understood.

As Iris fixed her gaze on him from the front, the powerful Mana in which her entire body was clad—its colossal magnitude was understood by him beyond a shadow of a doubt, as was the result of direct confrontation just a moment prior.

In the Undead Capital of Lupugana, guarding the Crystal Palace, where the ringleader of the enemy was likely present, Iris blocked the path—this woman was, unmistakably, the strongest being in the Vollachian Empire.

Someone that even Cecilus, extolled as First of the Nine Divine Generals, was no match for, the ultimate existence for the sake of this disaster—.

Rowan: "Kahaha, how fortunate, how so very fortunate! What a good day it's been…!"

Perceiving that through his experience, Rowan bared his teeth and smiled as his mind rang with a sound akin to his son singing in a loud voice.

He had thought that in order to reach the Heavenly Sword, there would be no means aside from cutting down his son once the latter did eventually reach it. However, if he were to encounter a being that surpassed even Cecilus, like he had now, it was a quicker story.

It was not eventually, the time was now.

Right now, at this moment, Rowan Segmunt would reach the apex of the sword, and seize the seat of Heavenly Sword.

For that purpose—

Rowan: "—Swordsman, Rowan Segmunt."

Once more, sheathing the katana which he had yet to let go of, he spread his legs, adopting a stance with the blade at his waist.

In the far distance of his vision stood Iris, the distance that had opened between the two of them a sign that he had run out of luck—no, the result of his days of blood and sweat in his endeavor to reach the apex remained, still.

And now, he would receive the reward commensurate with that from Iris's slender neck.

Rowan: "—Cloud-cutting."

With the blade being unsheathed, a flash of the sword was unleashed; Iris, standing motionlessly, faced it head-on.

The air present ahead was cut down by the flash, the foliage interrupting the path were cut down by the flash, all notions of sound and wind were consigned to oblivion; in all his life until now, it was the most honed Rowan's blade had ever been.

And the woman in the beautiful dress, Iris, would have her head lopped—

Iris: "—This is as far as it goes."

By merely tilting her head, she avoided the finest brandish of Rowan's life, and grumbling those words like a sigh, Iris firmly stepped on the ground, and moved forth.

The ultimate existence of the Great Disaster, did not grant Rowan the time to swing his sword a second time.

As a violent impact plowed into him right from above, Rowan could do naught but be buried deep into the street.

Iris: “□□□”

Looking down at the figure of the swordsman who had sunk into the ground, Iris waved the hem of the dress that had performed the deed, and turned her back to the man she had faced off against.

Likely, the strength to fight no longer remained within her opponent. She would be under no threat even with her back turned to him.

It was sad to say, but even supposing strength was indeed present, even if he did attempt to launch a surprise attack, it would not reach Iris.

Iris: “While you are still with your life, you must leave the Imperial Capital.”

Those words were to be spoken at the outset to the weak; spoken only at the end of a duel to the death were the opponent strong.

As an opponent to whom these statements ought be given, Rowan was a terribly troublesome person. —He was not weak. Yet, neither was he strong. If she was forced to put it to words, he would be the apex of the common man.

Thus, in regards to the reality spread throughout Imperial Capital as it was in the moment, his presence could even be called a sin.

Iris: “A sin, is it? How in the world could I say such a thing…”

Clutching her chest, Iris spilled those words out as if to curse herself.

Even so, her mind was made. She had made up her mind. Thus, she had carried that out in a form where she could not make excuses. No matter who or how many people closed in, she would force them all back.

As long as she did that, the story of Iris and Eugard would—

Iris: “—For what reason, do you stand?”

Halting her steps, Iris questioned the presence behind her without looking back.

To the swordsman who ought to have fainted from the strike a moment ago, to the presence of Rowan standing up. She had believed that she had dispossessed him of his consciousness, instead she now lamented for having been exceedingly naïve. However, had she applied any more force, his skull would have been shattered, most likely. That was because she had no intention of reaping his life.

Had she been too naïve, believing that she had properly conveyed the gap in strength between them, perhaps? There did exist some cases in which the other party would not back down despite a difference in strength, so perhaps this was one such case.

Iris: “There are times when your opponent has no intention of letting you go, so you must fight with your back against the wall. But, I have…”

Rowan: “…No intention of doing that. That’s the problem.”

Iris: “□□□”

The response, spoken in a frail, husky voice, was beyond Iris’s comprehension.

Be it the pride of a warrior, be it the obstinacy of a man, either way it was something Iris was unable to comprehend.

Iris began to think. She thought about that which she wished to cherish, even more so than those things.

That was why—

Iris: “If you still cannot bring yourself to give up—”

Until his spirit was crushed, she would keep going, even if she were to hear the sound of cracks forming in her own heart.

Indeed, it happened at the moment Iris was about to confront Rowan's resolve.

Iris: "…Eh?"

Turning around, Iris's eyes widened in astonishment.

Not because of any abnormal situation like Rowan closing their difference of ability in the blink of an eye, nor was it because someone else had come to this place, turning their weapon towards Iris in Rowan's stead.

Present there was merely Rowan, however, the one to have astonished Iris was unmistakably Rowan.

—With the katana in his hand, he slashed his own neck, fatally so.

Iris: "Wha…"

One beat elapsed, and in the subsequent moment, blood spurted out of the severed arteries in his neck with tremendous vigor.

The boulevard was stained with the gushing blood before her eyes, the essence of life flowed out of Rowan Segmunt's body, being absorbed into the ground.

Iris: "Why…?"

Witnessing a scene wildly beyond her comprehension, with that gasp a breath escaped from Iris's lips.

Seeing Iris's state, Rowan's eyes widened with a maniacal glint as blood gushed from his neck. And while that blood came up his digestive tract, flowing out of the corners of his mouth, he smiled.

And smiling, he spoke.

Rowan: "Even if I die, I'm go—"

Midway through his words, Rowan's blue eyes rolled around, and as his pupils dilated, he collapsed.

While perceiving that it was not a loss of consciousness, and instead was a loss of life, Iris quickly rushed over, trying to extend her hands to the man in an attempt to at least save his life.

However, her hands did not reach the man's corpse.

The reason for that being—

???: "—I'm gonna reach the Heavenly Sword."

???: "—I'm gonna reach the Heavenly Sword."

Having just died, several undead Rowan Segmunts swooped down from all directions in unison, set upon Iris as she sprinted.

V!c.ll2o

5

—When the unleashed breath of the Dragon ran through the townscape of the Imperial Capital in approach of him, there were not many things that Heinkel could do.

Only, wielding his sword in accordance with the appeals of his survival instincts, he dug enough of a hole in the ground to give himself scant consolation. Just in time, he slipped his body inside that hole.

But then again, consolation was merely consolation; with the trajectory of the Dragon’s breath boring deep into the ground as it closed in, the hole would probably amount to nothing more than consolation.

Thus, the life of the current head of the lineage of the Sword Saint, a family that had continuously protected the Dragon Kingdom for many a year, the life of the man known as Heinkel Astrea would, as irony would have it, be deleted by the breath of a Dragon, no trace of it remaining—

???: “—Oioi, ya can’t die so easily, Pops.”

Grabbed by the scruff of his neck, Heinkel was dragged out of the hole he had opened by force. With fierce vigor his body was hoisted; immediately after, a burning smell, that of the Dragon’s breath having scorched the world, could be perceived by him.

Heinkel: “Uoh, UWAHHHHHH?!”

His vision spun around, blood spilled from his broken forehead, gastric juices flowed out of the corners of his mouth; his body’s contents were scattered about without any impediment, and after experiencing the sensation of being afloat, he fell to the ground.

His state such that a defensive or even an adequate state could not be taken, he stretched out his legs, placed his arms on the ground as to raise his body, then looked at his surroundings.

Heinkel: “—Ugh.”

The reason he had reflexively let out a groan, was because he bore witness to the disastrous scene in the location he had been just a moment prior.

Caressed by the Dragon’s breath, white steam was being emitted from the area, which had been completely erased. Had his escape been belayed, most likely, he too would have become a portion of that white steam.

???: “To make it easier for Captain ‘n the others to enter, my amazin’ self was s’posed to rampage in the south ‘n draw their attention, but… Hah! Can’t believe my eyes!”

Heinkel: “Aah…?”

???: “Thought you’d flee for sure, but ya sure got guts, don’t’cha Pops?”

Amidst its roughness, praise was certainly present in that voice; once Heinkel did turn the side where its origin lay, standing there was the figure of the person who had dragged him out.

There was enough illumination behind him that Heinkel was unable to gaze at their face with clarity. His ears were still ringing due to the impact of the Dragon’s tail strike just before, so he was unsure if that voice was a familiar one or not.

But, as if to say that all of those things mattered not, the person gnashed their fangs, and proceeded forth.

Behind Heinkel kneeling on the ground, they moved to square off against the colossal Cloud Dragon, its glare on the two of them.

Then, powerfully striking their fists together before their chest,

???: “—My amazin’ self’ll lend ya a hand, Pops! “None can lift the Quain Stone alone”, ain’t that right!!”

—With a roar akin to that of a beast, as the vanguard of the “Rescue the Vollachian Empire from Destruction” squad, Garfiel

Tinzel raised a warcry at the start of the bout against the Cloud Dragon.

Interlude:
Ubilik

1

—As we all know, Ubilk was a Stargazer.

The commandment bestowed upon him, was that of saving the Vollachian Empire from the ruin of the Great Disaster that befell it.

For that purpose, he, a mere male prostitute, had acquired unexpected intelligence, and eventually came to be recognized for his certain value by Vincent Vollachia.

Of course, Ubilk was not so naive as to view that as an achievement of his own merit.

Even so, amidst the many who were granted the position of Stargazer and seemed to tread on tragic paths, Ubilk thought himself to be in a fortunate position.

For the vast majority of Stargazers, being granted a commandment meant distorting the human nature that they had possessed up to that point, and being forced to live in an entirely new way. One might evaluate that as unfortunate or pitiful, but from Ubilk's perspective, the prerequisites for that were extravagant, and it could not be thought of as anything but the viewpoint of someone who was blessed.

A twisted human nature, and surrounding individuals who could sense a change within them—if not for acquiring those things, they would never be able to harbor such a recognition in the first place.

Ubilk was certainly one of those people, and he was deeply grateful, from the bottom of his heart, for his commandment, which had altered his way of life; a life which ought to have been expended with him remaining a nobody.

Even now, after having fulfilled his commandment as a Stargazer, that did not change.

Ubilk: “Stiiill~, it’s not like Vollachia has been saved though…”

The reinforcement of armaments and appropriate stationing of capable personnel, in the Fortified City of Garkla where preparations for war were being made all throughout the night, Ubilk, with no position of his own, muttered so as he overlooked all the busy people.

Sensing that the fog which had always occupied a corner of his mind had cleared up, his thoughts were suddenly free from the influence of the fog, and Ubilk became aware that he was no longer a Stargazer.

As previously mentioned, the commandment bestowed upon Ubilk was that of saving Vollachia from the Great Disaster.

In spite of that, the fact that Ubilk was currently released from his commandment, was tantamount to implicitly notifying that there was no longer anything Ubilk could do regarding the Great Disaster.

As soon as he woke up from the frenzy that had been stimulating him, Ubilk felt like he had been made naked.

Ubilk: “I’m grateful you know? Eveeen~ thoooough~ I’m grateful…”

He had taken close to ten years for its manifestation, it was exactly like a grand bout one has only once in a lifetime.

Had he had the ladder pulled out from beneath him just before he got any results, he might have been tempted into grumbling his dissatisfaction with “that’s not how it’s supposed to be.” He had even put out his evil eye, a natural feature of his as one from the evil eye tribe, just to prove to Vincent that he held no treachery, thus declaring his position.

Even now, he still had the scar from his evil eye right in the middle of his chest, and such a lonesome thing it was.

Ubilk: “Well, either way, it’s a good thing that as a user of an evil eye I don’t have any talent for it.”

The problem was, the firewood he had been tirelessly burning until today had vanished, leaving behind his proxied beliefs, that just continued to raise smoke, along with the being known as himself after that had been quenched.

Until now, he had continued to progress in the direction indicated by his commandment, and had carried out his duty as a Stargazer.

That had been Ubilk's method of fighting, so he had not acquired knowledge of the fighting styles of warriors, such as swinging swords or drawing bows. The days he had spent on the Gladiator Island, too, involved making it his number one priority not to die in order to fulfill his commandment, thus he had absolutely no combat experience.

Therefore, in this fortress where everyone had the resolve to fight, Ubilk was all on his lonesome.

Ubilk: "I wonder if I shooouldn't~ have informed His Excellency in such a foolishly honest manner."

Leaving the Fortified City of Garkla, Vincent was headed to the Imperial Capital of Lupugana for the decisive battle.

Before his departure, Ubilk was directly questioned by him. — About if as a Stargazer, there was still some use he could provide in stopping the Great Disaster.

If he had lied and said that his commandment was still unfinished, perhaps he would not have been left behind in the fortress.

Ubilk: "Buuut~, it's not like I really want the Empire to be destroyed."

By telling a lie because he had no place, needless worry would be bestowed upon Vincent, and it would serve as an act that would benefit the enemy.

Weighing Vincent and Chisha as to who would serve the Empire better if left behind, Ubilk took part in Chisha's plan, and assisted in having Vincent survive.

He was bestowed with a commandment, but in contrast, Chisha, who had established his own way of life without having been granted one, was much more admirable.

Ubilk did not want to disgrace that decision. On the other hand—

Ubilk: “□□□”

Within the restless fortress, Ubilk aimlessly passed by many people.

Absolutely all of them understood the adverse situation they were placed in, yet still did what they needed to in order to challenge that which they must. Regardless of how well they performed, Ubilk respected that they were devoting themselves to their duty. At the same time, he was envious. Just a little while earlier, Ubilk had been on the same side as them.

Ergo, Ubilk thought to himself.

Ubilk: “Supposing the Empire were to be in danger… I wooonder~ if I could be bestowed with a commandment again?”

If he was deprived of his role, as it was no longer necessary, what if it were to become necessary once more?

At this point, there was nothing Ubilk could do concerning Vincent’s group, as they had already departed for the Imperial Capital. But, even if Vincent’s group were to eliminate the ringleader of the Great Disaster, what would happen if someone who held an important position in the Empire were to lose their life, or if someone from the Kingdom who was helping out were to die?

Would that not be a crisis threatening the ruin of the Empire, in a form entirely different to that of the Great Disaster?

Ubilk: “The possibility of something like a Stargazer being bestowed with a commandment, fulfilling it, and then being granted a new commandment, is close to zero. —But, it isn’t zero.”

If only a commandment to save the Vollachian Empire from ruin could be brought down to him.

If that new crisis were to come about, commandments would likely be passed down in order to prevent that.

—Yearning for such a possibility, Ubilk's legs began to head for the back of the fortress.

Ubilk: "□□□"

Ubilk, along with important people of both the Kingdom and Empire were packed inside the sturdiest great fortress within Garkla.

In order to reach this point, the undead would need to capture the protective walls enclosing the city, as well as the numerous forts along the way. By that point, the perspective of those defending would treat it as a lost battle.

However, there were no further means of retreat within the Fortified City, and the soldiers would have no choice but to fight until the very last soldier fell. Quite literally, this grand fortress would be the last bastion of the Empire.

—If there was an opening in that.

Ubilk: "Just anything small."

Just one opening would be fine.

Even if he did not go so far as to remove the latch from the gate, he could leave it raised a bit so it would be easier to unlatch. Setting up a simple magic stone time-based device to go off after a certain amount of time within the outer walls of the fortress would also be fine. If only to push the backs of the undead, one step forward.

If he did that, the flame that had gone out in Ubilk's heart would receive a new kindling—

???: "—You, what are you doing over there?"

As a voice suddenly came down on him from overhead, Ubilk halted his step, and tensed the expression on his face.

Turning around, a gaze was looking down upon him from the second-floor passage of the fortress—his eyes met with those of a brown-haired woman, who rode in a wheelchair and had a nasty look in her eyes.

A woman that had also been riding in the coupled dragon carriages, where she too had no idea what her role was. With a look of suspicion on her face, she glared at Ubilk, who was present in the unpopular rear of the fortress, and,

Woman: "Don't tell me… you're slacking off? If so, can't get any worse than that. Listen here, even though a woman with bad legs like me is working, do you want to die? Yes you."

Ubilk: "…Nooo~, it's not like I'm slacking…"

Woman: "So then, why are you in such a place? C-can you not make such poor excuses? You think a person like me is ignorant about the world, so it's easy to deceive me, don't you? Those sorts of things, I can tell."

While mixing in a strange self-punishing viewpoint, the woman denounced Ubilk.

Her attitude was extremely one-sided, but anything that he could say in response would pointlessly provoke her ire, so Ubilk was earnestly troubled as to what he should do. Wracking his brain, he suddenly had a thought.

Ubilk: "I want to ask sooomething~ really quick… Your legs are disabled, and you're probably unable to fight, so why exactly does a young lady like yourself continue to live?"

Woman: "You, are you trying to pick a fight?!"

Ubilk: "Ah, no, you're mistaken. I wasn't reeeally~ trying to speak ill of you…"

As the woman widened her eyes in anger and leaned out of the window, Ubilk raised both of his hands and apologized. As he did, he truly tried to formulate what he wanted to say within his mind.

In this predicament, within the grand fortress in which warriors were coming and going, was a disabled woman who could serve no purpose.

Ubilk: “Why does such a person go around searching for things to do like that?”

Woman: “That’s, well that’s obviously because it’d feel awful to just stay put without doing anything!”

Ubilk: “□□□”

Receiving a blunt, angry voice in response, Ubilk was startled. Seeing Ubilk’s surprised reaction, the woman gave an “Argh geez!” and bit her fingernails in irritation.

While biting them, she fixed her eyes upon Ubilk as if he had killed her parents, and,

Woman: “…You know, my fiancé died in this conflict. He went out of his way to come and save me, and he died.”

Ubilk: “…Thaaat∼ must have been tough.”

Woman: “Don’t speak as if you know. Though, it isn’t just you. Everyone is saying things like they know, but it’s none of their business. But…”

Ubilk: “But?”

Woman: “What would they think if a woman in a wheelchair remained whimpering and cowardly, unable to serve any purpose? They would make a fool of Todd, saying stuff like “Ahh, her fiancé died because she was such a burden”.”

Her voice and lips trembling, the woman spoke while tears welled up in her eyes as she gave an angry glare.

The name that had suddenly appeared without explanation was likely the name of her fiancé. What she was speaking of was undoubtedly just her paranoia. But, though it was excessively dramatic, there was also some truth to it.

Without knowing the circumstances, without knowing the relationship between this woman and her fiancé, if strangers were to cross paths with her for just a moment, the majority would likely harbor such pity for her.

Woman: “I don’t need anything like pity. I-if I can have even a little bit of dignity, if there is even a little bit of work I can do, then that idiot, then that idiot won’t need to be looked down on by people who didn’t even know him.”

Ubilk: “□□□”

Woman: “I’m, going to live my life with dignity.”

Clenching her teeth, with tears welling up in her eyes, while her pitiful voice trembled, the woman spoke thus. Saying that, the woman glared at Ubilk with her moistened eyes once again.

And with a snap, she thrust a finger out from her elevated position.

Woman: “I-if you understand, then find a job to do and get to work. Are you below a woman in a wheelchair?”

Was that intended to light a fire in him through rough words, or was it purely just her having a sharp tongue? For Ubilk, who did not even know the woman’s name, her true intentions could not be deduced.

Though he could not deduce them, the woman was sufficiently conveying what way of life she had established for herself.

And that was—

Ubilk: “You’re quite praaaiseworthy~, young lady. After all, you just crushed one of the reasons leading to the Empire’s ruin.”

She became the impetus for Ubilk, who had ceased to be a Stargazer, to be released from his commandment in a true sense.

2

Katya: “Saying such nonsense like that, that man was trying to redirect the conversation. Well, after that, it looks like he properly went to the soldiers in the fortress to find work to do…"

Walking next to Katya, who was breathing roughly unable to relieve her anger, Rem sighed deeply at the story of the man she had reprimanded.

Even in such a situation where everyone needed to work together as one, there would always be a certain number of troublemakers. They were the ones who would discourage the morale of those around them and disrupt the loop.

Rem: "But, please be careful. There's no guarantee that they won't lose their temper and turn violent on Katya-san."

Katya: "Um, that's…"

Rem: "I'm glad that this time someone listened to you obediently. Next time, please don't be so reckless when I'm not around."

Katya, her lips pouting with bitterness, had nothing to say in response to Rem's concern. She did not outright acknowledge it, but she also did not want to say something that would make her feel bad for no good reason. As she caught a glimpse of such Katya-like anguish, Rem's expression grew gentler.

Subaru and the rest had left for the Imperial Capital, and the people that remained in the city were busy preparing for the defensive battle.

Those who could fight were assigned to their respective positions, while those who could not were assigned to support them. Rem, who could use healing magic, was valued highly. It was literally an all-out war.

Katya, who had converted one of the unmotivated personnel, was one of those who were doing everything in their power to help — Rem knew, of course, that although she was fighting hard, that did not mean she had recovered from the feeling of loss.

Katya had lost her fiancé, Todd, and even her brother Jamal had proudly announced his intention of going to a place where death was certain. Only able to imagine how that must have felt, it was heartbreaking for Rem. Katya's brave front, which she had also put on in an attempt to not allow Rem to worry, contributed to this.

So—

Rem: "Katya-san, can I ask for help gathering clean cloths? I'm sure we'll need a lot of them when the fighting starts."

Katya: "That's fine. You know, you can pile a surprisingly large amount of things on my lap."

Without pointing out Katya's brave front, Rem asked her to help with her work. She believed that this was what Katya needed right now, and that it would help as many people as possible reach tomorrow.

And then—

Petra: "—Ah, Rem-neesama."

When Rem looked up upon hearing her name being called, she saw a girl barging in, waving her hand at the end of the passage. It was a pretty girl with a big ribbon on her head—Petra. Besides her was the tall figure of Frederica, and there was also another person—

Rem: "Nee-sama too; what are the three of you doing together?"

Rem tilted her head as she caught sight of Ram, who was leaning her back against the wall.

These three women, according to Subaru, were apparently Rem's colleagues from when she had her memories. She was satisfied with her relationship with Ram for the time being, but she had not gauged the distance with the other two yet.

Frederica, with the crinkles of her eyes lowered, smiled when seeing Rem's slight nervousness.

Frederica: "We have finished our work for the time being, and we have come to invite you to take a break with us. We can't overly let our guards down, so a minimal sense of urgency may be necessary, but…”

Ram: “You won’t last long if you stay tense all the time, plus, the more time I get to spend with Rem, the better.”

Petra: “I also agree with Ram-neesama. Besides…”

Smiling in response to Ram’s candid words, Petra turned a meaningful glance to Rem mid-sentence, glancing up at her.

Realising Petra’s gaze was on her, Rem was silent for a moment and perceived what she truly meant. They were people Rem was trying to feel out their relationship with, but the same could be said of them too.

That said, it was also true that things right now were in a state of emergency, so—.

Rem: “I feel grateful about how you feel. But, now is not the time…”

Ram: “No, Rem. You have it backwards.”

Rem: “Nee-sama…?”

Ram: “It’s an imminent situation, after all. You may think this is not the time for this. However you can also say it’s the only chance we’ll have. Ram can trust Rem, no questions asked. But—”

There, Ram squinted her light-crimson eyes, and pointed out the two by her side with a glance.

Rem thought that friendship should have been put on the back burner due to the urgent situation. However, Ram and her colleagues thought that trust was important in a situation like this.

Rem: “…Katya-san, what do you think?”

Katya: “Huh? D-don’t ask me something like that. First off, I wasn’t even invited…”

Ram: “What are you talking about? Aren’t you a friend of Rem’s?

You had better come too.”

Katya: “Wha…e-even though your face looks similar, you’re way more pushy than Rem… no, thinking again calmly, the one here is a very pushy woman as well… hk.”

Rem and Ram, the two sisters, spoke to her at the same time, and Katya looked awfully puzzled.

Anyway, when asked for her opinion, Katya’s gaze wandered for a moment before she said,

Katya: “…Why don’t you try to get along? You won’t be slacking off if you talk to them about work-related matters, and I’m sure on the flipside too that they wanted to see you anyway, no? Or so I think.”

Frederica: “Katya-san.”

Petra: “Katya-sama.”

Katya: “N-No need to be so forceful! I don’t even know your names.”

Petra and Frederica were pleased with Katya’s opinion, which was opined closely to Ram and the others after some puzzling. Rem also had her notions, sneaking a glance at Katya who was trembling at the vigor of those two.

It was not like Rem did not like it. It was just that she could not help but feel pressured—.

Ram: “—Are you really that worried about Barusu?”

Rem: “Yes. He’s always acting so over the top… ah.”

From Rem’s side, Ram quietly asked this of her, who was watching Katya and the others with her hand on her chest. It had been so natural that even Rem had unintentionally let her true feelings slip out.

Without realising she was doing so, Rem, whose hand had been on her chest, put it back over her mouth and gawked at Ram.

However, her big sister just batted one of her eyes shut and gave a proud smile, making her aware that she was no match for her.

And, that was when it happened. —In the sky above the grand fortress, a loud, loud explosion rang out..

Everyone: "—!"

A moment later, Rem turned her head in a hurry to look out the window and she saw a flash of light cutting through the morning sky. It was a report from a city watchman, who had used the signal that was agreed upon in advance—

Ram: "—Frederica!"

Frederica: "Understood!"

Immediately after, faster than Rem could stir, Frederica responded to the sharp call of Ram. She quickly stepped behind Katya, and grabbing the handles of the wheelchair,

Frederica: "Katya-sama, be careful not to bite your tongue!"

Katya: "W-wait, hold up… gyah."

Petra: "Frederica-neesama, this way!"

Katya, who was in her wheelchair, let out a scream as Frederica broke into a very brisk run. Meanwhile, Petra began running with her small body through the fortress corridor as if she were leading the way for the wheelchair.

One moment later, one after another, all of the people in the great fortress—or rather, everyone in the entirety of the fortified city of Garkla, began to move at once; in a flash, the city had transformed into a singular living thing.

They all shared a common fate, they were all in the same boat, such applied to the living, to the dead, all and one the same creatures.

Ram: "Rem, are you prepared?"

Rem let out a gulp, feeling this illusion that made her feel like the whole city was shaking; and standing next to her was Ram. Looking back at her intrepid big sister's face in profile, who had asked her that question, Rem took a small breath and said,

Rem: "What would happen if I were to say I am not?"

Ram: "If that was the case, rest assured that Ram has already prepared for Rem as well."

Rem: "—. As expected of Nee-sama."

Ram: "Of course. Ram is the kind of older sister you should be proud of."

Nodding to Ram, who shared her courage without even needing to ask her for it, Rem followed Katya and the others ahead as she ran with her sister through the noisy fortress.

The battle was about to begin. —The final battle that would determine the fate of the Empire.

Rem: "Please. —I'm relying on you."

Thinking of the boy who was not here, Rem bashfully prayed for him.

Whether it was because she was relying on that boy, or because she was not able to be by his side to help him, she did not know the source of her frustration.

Rem ran through the shaking fortress, following behind Ram, who had set off ahead of her.

The large-scale evacuation of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, accompanied by the retreat on a scale unprecedented within recorded history.

While casualties among the civilians and the soldiers were by no means negligible, the present outcome was nevertheless far less severe than had been originally anticipated; in large part because of the mindset by which the Imperial citizens lived their daily lives.

—The people of the Empire must be strong.

That teaching and philosophy had pervaded each and every citizen of the Empire, and it had succeeded in allowing many to take the best possible measures for surviving in this extreme situation.

In addition to the success achieved through such individual resolve and actions, the fact that the various plans that were made for times of emergency, like the coupled dragon carriages, had been fully functional was also significant. These were the achievements of the person who had grasped the forthcoming threat of the Great Disaster, the arrival of which originally being foretold by the Stargazer, and had made the proper preparations.

The fact that said person had been unable to arrive at the fight against that very Great Disaster could be called a bitter regret.

???: “Still, that selflessness has kept the Empire alive! I express nothing but the utmost respect, General First-Class Chisha…!”

As the voice bellowed, Kafma Irulux mowed down the hordes of the undead with thorns discharged from his arms, fighting hard in order to defend the road leading to the Fortified City behind him.

The Imperial Army that had been deployed incrementally along the highway going from the Imperial Capital to the Fortified City, had been gradually falling back towards the city while supporting the evacuation of the retreating Imperial citizens, with the aim of merging with the group within the fort.

Among the Generals who had participated in this decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, the role that had been assigned to Kafma was of the utmost importance, and although he himself would not admit to it, it could be said that the work he had done was influencing the survival of Vollachia.

The resolve of the Imperial Citizens had a large impact on the reduced casualties during the evacuation; the advance preparations had a large impact on the sturdy defenses of the Fortified City; and Kafma’s valiant efforts had a large impact on the high morale and minimal losses of Imperial Soldiers.

Serving as the rear guard to the formation that was gradually falling back towards the Fortified City, he used the power of the “insects” he had taken in to slow the march of the undead, an achievement worthy of being left behind in the annals of history.

However, all of that would be contingent on whether the Vollachian Empire escaped ruin.

Thus, Kafma’s eccentric achievements were also the results of fighting without taking his own survival into consideration.

Kafma: “—Hk.”

As far as the eye could see, the hosts of undead had blanketed the vast plain.

While striking them with thorns, bullets of light, and blades of wind, Kafma gritted his teeth against the appetite of the “insects” that were eating away at him from the inside, stifling his urge to scream.

The Insect Cage Tribe could use the power of the “insects” that coexisted within their bodies, and depending on the type of “insects” that were taken in, they could manifest a wide variety of abilities and combat techniques. But, the relationship between the Insect Cage Tribe and the “insects” was always a symbiotic one.

Neither was it one-sided usage, nor was it assimilation.

Naturally, the “insects” would seek compensation from their host for their work. That would usually be the host’s mana or life force, but if that was found to be insufficient, it would be their flesh and blood.

Already, more than fifty hours had passed since Kafma had decided to fight with the resolve to die, and during that time, he had quite literally been forced to go without eating or drinking.

Although his consciousness had been sharpened like never before by his awakened fighting spirit, to the “insects” inside his body, the host’s state of mind was irrelevant. They would simply lodge a complaint to the host about the fact that they were hungry, run out of patience if the host refused to lend an ear, and start to devour their flesh.

Kafma: “I’m the one breaking the promise. But still…!”

He could not desert the warfront, nor could he allow himself to fall.

The Empire had many other dependable warriors besides him, but Kafma prided himself on being the bravest when faced with death. He had to prove that his pride was real.

For that reason—

Kafma: “I, must not—”

Fall here; it happened at the moment he roused himself with those words, about to step forth with his organs still being devoured.

From behind, a large palm grabbed his shoulder.

And, the one to whom that palm belonged was—

???: “Fall back, General Second-Class Kafma! You have fulfilled your duty sufficiently!”

The loud voice seemed to be shouting, however, that was just the usual volume for this person.

Being told thus with a voice akin to being struck by a gust of wind, Kafma stared wide-eyed, looking at the giant in golden armor who stood next to him—Goz Ralfon.

Gripping a mace that only he could handle was Goz, whose arrival at this scene surprised Kafma.

Kafma: “For what reason have you come to the front, General First-Class Goz? A General First-Class should be commanding things from the fortress…”

Goz: “High Countess Dracoy is over there! Even without me shutting myself in the fortress, that woman can handle the troops skillfully! More importantly, I can be of more use to His Excellency on the battlefield!"

Kafma: "—. In that case, I will accompany you."

His heart, on the verge of cracking with determination and earnestness, sought to reinforce itself with Goz's appearance. However, Goz interrupted Kafma's plea with a firm "No".

Then, as Goz extended his thick fingers and pressed them against Kafma's chest,

Goz: "The sound of stirring and devouring echoes from within you. It seems you have lost control of the "insects". If you were to be consumed entirely, it would be a significant loss!"

Kafma: "That may be… But, everything I've built up is for this battle!"

Goz: "Kafma Irulux ! Death in itself is not atonement!!"

Kafma: "—Hk."

Getting directly slapped with an angry voice this time, Kafma's entire body began to tremble.

Just at this moment, even the "insects" that were eagerly devouring Kafma's body halted their movements, paralyzed by the fierce aura of Goz standing before them.

Looking down at Kafma, Goz, with his scarred, bearded face, expressed his anger.

Goz: "I understand that you still seek to atone for the rebellion orchestrated by your kin, along with that damned Balleroy! But! Atonement can not be achieved through death! You must live!"

Kafma: "General First-Class Goz…"

Goz: "Even after the Great Disaster subsides, the Empire will not instantly return to normal! Both you and I can become His Excellency's strength! That is why!"

With a roar filled with loyalty as if about to burst, Goz bashed Kafma's thoughts.

Realizing that this was not a place to sacrifice his life, Kafma, with his innermost feelings laid bare, tightly closed his eyes and deeply bowed his head before Goz.

Goz: "What, anyhow, it is not so easy a conflict that you can simply step back and be done with it. Your turn will come again soon! Until then, eat, rest, and regain your strength!"

Kafma: "Under, stood. General First-Class Goz, I entrust this place to you…"

Goz: "No need to say it. —I too, have pent-up frustrations!"

With a wide grin at Kafma's strained words, Goz aimed the mace he had shouldered towards the enemy lines.

Handling the excessively heavy weapon that no one but him could with ease, Goz's entire body overflowed with a tremendous fighting spirit, so immense that it had an illusion of visibility.

Once again, feeling the apprehension of the "insects" within his own body, Kafma fell into deep thought.

Chisha Gold, who demonstrated an unfathomable strategy to take precautions against the ruin of the Empire, and Goz Ralfon, who frightened the "insects" by merely standing there with his tremendous spirit, were both those who had reached the position of the Vollachian Empire's Generals of the First-Class, all of which were transcendent beings no less competent than another.

Envisioning how he had almost been ranked among them in the past, and how he must be ranked among them in the future—

Kafma: "—The Empire is strong. We won't be so easily taken by the undead or disaster."

3

Otto: "It is not a matter of being strong or weak, but it is rather a matter of quantity, and one that is difficult to deal with. Fortunately, the supplies and defenses of the Fortified City are abundant, but… we cannot withstand such a siege for long."

Serena: "You speak your mind clearly. Well, I certainly have a better impression of you than those who can't express their opinions for fear of offending others. If only your cunning could be matched by your military strength, then you would be more to my liking."

Berstetz: "High Countess Dracroy, let us not digress any further."

Berstetz, chiding her, glared at Serena with thin, thread-like eyes. Serena shrugged her shoulders under that gaze, and Otto, who was being flirted with, let out a small sigh.

The setting was the command room of the great fortress, and those facing each other were responsible for leading the full-scale defensive battle of the city.

From the reports of the lookouts, it was confirmed that the Fortified City of Garkla had entered a state of being ready for combat around the great fortress.

The delaying force that had been holding back the enemy's advance had also joined the city, and staged within a city that boasted the Vollachian Empire's strongest defenses, the largest siege in the history of the Empire was about to begin.

Anastasia: "That bein' said, ya typically win a siege by waitin' for reinforcements, but we can't be countin' on that this time, y'know. The only way we can be sayin' we've won is…"

???: "—When Natsuki-kun and His Excellency the Emperor splendidly defeat the enemy's mastermind. Until then, our role is to struggle to ensure that Vollachia does not fall."

Anastasia: "If Vollachia goes down, then Kararagi 'n Lugunica are gonna be in hot water too… What the heck, it's really a battle for the survival of the world, ain't it."

Placing her hand on her white cheek, Anastasia broke into a graceful smile as she spoke, and the fox scarf that chimed in with her let out a sigh of exasperation.

Having quite the peculiar form, the fox scarf brought by Anastasia was supposedly a Spirit. They needed as many capable heads as they could get, as this truly was an all-out war.

Serena: “The first question is how long the city’s defenses will hold.. General Second-Class Irulux has been replaced by General First-Class Ralfon. Despite his appearances, he’s a man capable of delicate and skillful work. He should follow the directive of sparing the lives of the zombies as much as possible, but…”

Berstetz: “It is unrealistic to consistently expect non-lethality. This goes not just for General First-Class Goz, but for everyone else. If there is any hope for us to hold onto…”

Anastasia: “I’m guessin’ it’d be Natsuki-kun’s group of friends.”

Otto: “I think so, too.”

Anastasia and Otto exchanged glances, aligning their opinions with each other.

The topic the duo raised concerned the strange defensive force for the Fortified City, in whom they held high expectations, the members of the Pleiades Battalion.

The black-haired boy, who had formed a miraculously friendly relationship with Vincent, led this group. They had significantly aided the refugees with their strong solidarity and mysterious combat abilities.

Currently, the boy in question was headed to the Imperial Capital with Vincent and the others, leaving the group under the leadership of Gustav Morello—led by the stern member of the Multi-Arm Tribe, the Gladiators were fighting exceptionally well.

Echidna: “Their morale is high, and their ability to prevent casualties is impressive. I often think to myself, Natsuki-kun is a genius at bringing what is needed to where it is needed.”

Otto: “Yes, that seems to be his one redeeming quality. Though, I wish he would just make deliveries or bridge political divisions, instead of recklessly running into the most dangerous of situations."

Anastasia: "But ya know, ain't that more of a problem on Emilia-san's part? If Emilia-san starts runnin' ahead, Natsuki-kun's gotta run too, ain't no way around it."

Anastasia shook her head with a "good grief" gesture, and Otto dropped his shoulders in agreement.

While watching this exchange and the development of relationships would be interesting, spending too much time on it would draw a stern look from the Prime Minister.

Serena cleared her throat, and after capturing everyone's attention,

Serena: "As per our prior agreement, our combat strategy is strictly to hold a siege, a defensive battle. If defeating one specific opponent could resolve all of this, I'd consider assassination as an option, but…"

Berstetz: "As it stands, let us consider His Excellency and those headed to the Imperial Capital as the arrows of assassination."

Serena: "That's how it is. —It's an all-out war."

At Serena's words, there was a palpable tension in the air, and everyone's expression became more intense.

The light-hearted banter from just before had ended, and from that point on, it would be a world where they needed to exert their utmost efforts.

The Imperial Generals, the rebel fighters, the Gladiators of the Pleiades Battalion, the People of Shudraq, and even the allies of the Kingdom and the emissaries from the City-States, all part of a battle that utilized everything at their disposal.

And, as the first hurdle—

Serena: "We'll be counting on you, envoys from the City-States."

Anastasia: “Sure thing, leave it to us. —As far as I can remember, he ain’t ever let me down, not even once.”

4

—Amidst the warfare waged in the Vollachian Empire, what exactly was the aspect that differed most greatly to that of other countries?

If one were to ignore the resolve harbored by the Imperial Soldiers, or their fiery spirit to contend in battle, the answer to that was plain and simple—the potential for aerial combat.

The technique of flying dragon taming, which was absent from other nations, and the fact that a large number of flying dragons inhabited the Empire exclusively, were aspects of their superiority that were thoroughly demonstrated in warfare.

It was a fact that went without even needing to be thought, but merely being able to fly through the air was something that proved advantageous in war.

In fact, the Fortress City of Guaral, which was said to boast high defensive capabilities among other cities of similar size, had fallen into a state of utter destruction due to a flock of flying dragons commanded by the Flying Dragon General, Madelyn Eschart.

By merely throwing things down from an unreachable position, a battle would become one-sided.

That remained a threat even for the Fortified City of Garkla, a city surrounded by a towering wall.

However—

???: “Fire—!!!”

Lined up atop the wall, Shudraqian warriors with bows at the ready fired arrows into the air in unison.

The barrage of arrows covered the sky, offering no escape, and directly pierced by those countless attacks was the flock of undead flying dragons that had been ordered to assail the stout city from the skies above, and was soaring through the air as they drew ever closer.

Pierced by the merciless blows, one after another the heads of undead flying dragons shattered before they turned to dust and fell to the ground.

Among them, there were some that continued to fly without paying any mind to the attacks, but—

Shudraqian: “Take them down!”

Shudraqian: “It’s best if they fall to the ground~.”

Struck by a blow from an arrow incomparable to a normal arrow in terms of length and thickness, one of them was blown to smithereens in mid-air, and met its end.

In response to aerial combat, the Shudraq boasted unrivaled strength—the experience of the aforementioned crushing defeat in the Fortress City had a great impact on the fighting style of these women.

Had they not suffered that defeat, the Shudraq would likely have not been fighting the undead flying dragons here.

Giving meaning to each and every one of their battles, the People of Shudraq had fought since the start of the Empire’s upheaval, which began with Vincent Vollachia’s ousting.

And,in response to the morale of those women—

Shudraqian: “Go get them! Guy with the handsome face!”

Man: “I shall do my best to meet your expectations. —Al Clauseria.”

Weaving an incantation with a fine tone of voice, the tip of the Knight’s sword traced the sky, and following that trajectory a rainbow light was born, thwarting the path of the undead flying dragons.

Despite the beauty of the rainbow aurora, it became a barrier that rejected anything and everything.

Man: “Wholly different from when they were still buds, these girls have blossomed, and this is their glimmer.”

In the blink of an eye, the skies of the Fortified City were engulfed in an aurora of rainbow—however, the size and extent of that rainbow were enough to defend around half of the extensive Fortified City.

The Imperial Soldiers fighting on the front lines, as well as those who were also responsible for protecting the city from atop the wall, were left speechless by that extraordinary combat capability, and they could not help but feel a surge of courage from that reliability.

Sensing that swell of morale, the Knight who birthed the rainbow—Julius Juukulius, waved the hem of his kimono, and looked up to the sky once again.

With a white scar underneath his left eye, the dauntless young man participated in the battle out of honor, and nevertheless trained his gaze upon what he ought to do without an iota of hesitation. His eyes were fixed upon the sky, upon the vast lands where the undead drew near, believing in the efforts of his friend, who was headed even further beyond—

Julius: “—I shall carry out my own duties. I hope you also do so to the fullest, Subaru.”

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves: Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XI

1

Chisha: “Groovy-dono, if it is alright with you, I would like to invite you to join me.”

Groovy: “Geh.”

Being told so as they passed each other in the corridor, Groovy Gumlet made a mighty frown.

Looking down at Groovy, who had a short build characteristic of hyenapeople, was a lanky man who was taller than the average person. His hair, complexion, clothes, and even the iron fans that he kept on himself were all white, and he was an overly dubious, lanky bastard.

Though, he was also aware that the name of this lanky bastard was Chisha Gold.

In the Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital, Groovy had run into Chisha in a corridor; the latter turned his back to the former, and calmly began to grow more distant as his long legs stepped on the carpet.

Stopped in his tracks, Groovy silently saw the back go off, but—

Chisha: “I find it difficult to comprehend why you are not following me.”

Halting his step, Chisha turned around to face Groovy and spoke those words, to which Groovy snorted out a “Hah”.

Groovy: “Though you fucking prefaced it with something along the lines of “if it’s alright with you”. In that case, even if I don’t go along with your summons, which you only fucking made because it was convenient for you, you don’t have any right to say anything.”

Chisha: “Hm, I shall admit that it was an error of mine. But, have you not heard the report from His Excellency, Groovy-dono?— Within this Crystal Palace, my words are tantamount to those of His Excellency the Emperor.”

His gaze and tone had not changed, but the sharpness of the demand in Chisha’s statement had increased; Groovy closed his mouth with a small groan, and made a face that appeared like he was chewing on a bitter-tasting insect.

Thinking back on it, it was how Chisha said, the ruler of this Crystal Palace— no, the ruler of this Vollachian Empire, Vincent Vollachia, had said something like that to Groovy.

—It was something that happened immediately after Groovy was discovered by the Emperor himself, and had been welcomed to the Imperial Capital as a General.

Those offered the position of General were called before the throne, and after Vincent had them pledge allegiance to the Empire, he introduced Chisha as his aide, and ordered Groovy and the rest to give him the same regard as they would to Vincent himself.

Groovy: “—It really doesn’t fucking sit right with me.”

That special treatment was the biggest reason why Groovy continued to snap at Chisha like this.

Special treatment, Groovy would give that a warm welcome if he were the target, and he would be proud that receiving it meant that he had value. Therefore, when he came around to the Imperial Capital with fanfare and heard that there were others receiving the same treatment that he was, he had some mixed feelings.

And, something that his feelings towards were more hateful than mixed, was Chisha Gold.

Groovy: “Such a weak fucking bastard is equal to His Excellency the Emperor? That’s not how the Imperial way works. You had the fucking nerve to make His Excellency take a liking to you because of your fucking way with words and your ability to get basic fucking work done, fucking lanky bastard.”

Chisha: “I shall proceed with the conversation, having surmised that that nickname is referring to myself, but… as you say, Groovy-dono, I shudder at the disrespectful notion that I and His Excellency are equals. Much less, is His Excellency a personage gullible enough to easily fall for any cajolery of mine.”

Groovy: “Stop being so fucking roundabout. What do you want to say.”

Chisha: “For one in the position of General to say something along the lines of myself and His Excellency the Emperor being of equal rank, is a rash remark in violation of the Empire’s law of iron and blood. I advise that you be more careful.”

Groovy: “—Hk.”

Groovy’s pupils contracted, and blood began to rush to his head at Chisha’s attitude. But, right before his boiling blood could burst out, Chisha stopped him by adding a short “Additionally”.

After that brief addition, Groovy’s anger, having surrendered himself to the impulses of his blood, was put on hold.

With Groovy silenced, Chisha continued.

Chisha: “I suggest you do not cover your ears simply because you dislike me. After all, that which I wish to discuss is Groovy-dono’s responsibility— a matter pertaining to “Curse Tools”.”

With blood still in his head, it was a topic that did not cause Groovy’s impulses to explode. As Chisha had raised that subject, Groovy had no choice but to endure the explosion and abide by him.

His anger only deepened as his dislike for this lanky bastard increased more and more.

2

—The Master of Curse Tools, Groovy Gumlet.

That was the renowned reputation of Groovy as a member of the Nine Divine Generals that was well known even in other countries, but in these days, when he had just been accepted as a General, he had yet to be referred to by that alias.

However, that was just because it had yet to be established as an alias, and Groovy's eagerness to create Curse Tools was something he had harbored long before Vincent had discovered him.

That was to say, when he was invited to the Imperial Capital as a General, he was already engaged in the production of Curse Tools—

Chisha: "—The Curse Tools produced by Groovy-dono are circulating throughout the black market, and are giving rise to mayhem."

Closing the office door, the first thing Chisha said got the ball rolling on the main topic.

Having a one-on-one in a room where there would be no interruptions, Groovy plunked himself down into the provided chair, and raising his eyebrows at Chisha's comment, he stroked the fur under his chin.

While stroking, there was only one thing he thought.

Groovy: "What's wrong with that?"

That he was objecting due to sulkiness, was not the case. That was what he actually thought.

Mayhem and chaos, it was natural providence for those to exist in Vollachia, where matters were all decided based on the superiority of strength. Being told there was something of which existence was only natural, it would be illogical to then say this and that about it.

Chisha: "I would like to think that those who become Generals surely would not believe that mayhem and chaos are natural providence, but… based on your reaction, it seems that is right on the maaark."

Groovy: "You got some fucking nerve to phrase that in a way that's not to my liking in the fucking slightest. But, you're not wrong. Or what? Are your abilities so fucking useless that letting that go overlooked would be troubling?"

Chisha: "No, I would not say that. It is true that I am unsuited to the Imperial way, where right and wrong are determined by superiority in strength. However, that in itself is a principle that His Excellency the Emperor has come to accept."

Groovy: "So then…"

Chisha: "—Nevertheless, if there are individuals who have erred in their perception of that principle, they ought to be corrected. All the more if they are a General whom His Excellency the Emperor has found promise in."

Interrupting Groovy's words, the following statement caused Groovy's patience to rupture.

That instant, he threw a dagger he had drawn from his clothing, and it grazed the unmoving Chisha's cheek as it passed by to his rear. The dagger made a sound as it thrust into the wall; however, it would be naive for Chisha to think he had escaped death.

Groovy: "That's been laced with some powerful fucking venom extracted from a snakeman. Even if your head's still full of energy, it'll make everything under your fucking neck unable to move."

The snake demi-humans that were snakepeople had various toxic substances mixed within their bodies, but it was a relatively unknown fact that in proportion to the level of danger that their lives were placed in, their poison would be refined to be of higher efficiency.

This was a mixture of poisons Groovy had concocted himself, a masterpiece that severed the nerves between the head and the body.

He was still in the process of looking into if there were any other amusing uses for it, but—

Groovy: "Currently, it's being used for a fucking frightening torture method where you watch as your own fucking body gets dismembered."

Chisha: "Then, allow me to preface one thing. —The contents I shall speak of here, are not something I am conveying due to Groovy-dono's threats, so do not be mistaken in that regard."

Groovy: "…"

Chisha: "In accordance with His Excellency the Emperor's wishes, I deliver this information."

Sat in his work chair, Chisha did not wipe the blood as it ran down his left cheek, and as it dropped and stained the shoulder of his white clothes, he faced Groovy without his voice trembling in the slightest.

While his life was in the clutches of the raging hyenaman before him, Chisha showed no fear on his face, and declared that he would not succumb to the poison— no, that he would not succumb to Groovy.

At Chisha's demeanor, Groovy became aware of a misunderstanding he had harbored.

Chisha did not have the adequate strength to be a General. But, it was not as though he did not know how to do battle with his life on the line, much less underestimate that he would not have to do so against Groovy.

At any given moment, he harbored within his chest the mettle of a warrior risking their life.

Chisha: "His Excellency the Emperor has also accepted the principle of things being decided by superiority in strength. However, for both that strength and the chaos born as a result, he desires it not to be disorderly, but rather to have order to it."

Groovy: "…Chaos, with order to it? That just seems like a beautiful fucking load of shit."

Chisha: "If you perceive it as something filthy, I would like you to keep the amount you speak of it to a minimum, for it is the contraction desired by His Excellency. The Generals are required to serve as the spear and the shield for the purposes of making it a reality."

Groovy: "—. Fucking lanky bastard, in the end, what is that you want me to do."

Feeling obliged due to having misjudged Chisha's demeanor, Groovy would listen to what Chisha had to say.

Be that as it may, Groovy would not concede when it came to producing Curse Tools. One of his original objectives when he accepted the invitation to become a General was to elevate the position of hyenapeople as a tribe, but it was his personal desire to obtain the raw materials from Witchbeasts and rare races, and craft new Curse Tools to his heart's content.

That was, through the creation of tools that were in times of yore called "Meteors", and recently in the Kingdom as "Magicreation Tools", to produce results in the world that differed from those of simple blades and armor.

That was what Groovy wanted to do. —He wanted to create devices of violence such that they remained in the world for generations to come.

To still be in active use no matter how many years, decades, or centuries passed, continuing to be treated as influential; those were the sort of devices of mayhem he wished to create. That was Groovy's personal dream.

Groovy: "I need a lot of fucking money for that. I'll say this now, but the wage for a General isn't enough. I didn't know that the Curse Tools were circulating in the black market, but my desires aren't so fucking trivial that I'd give 'em up just because of that…"

Chisha: "Do not misunderstand. His Excellency desires chaos with order… Groovy-dono, your current irresponsible handling of the Curse Tools is not conducive to that purpose."

Groovy: “So, did you fucking decide to strip me of my title as a General?!”

In that case, Groovy howled that he did not want to be in such a restricted position.

To begin with, if he could not do what he wanted to, then the position of General was nothing more than a burden. If he could not fully devote himself to studying how to produce violence that would last into the future, he would give up his title and do whatever it took to fulfill his goals.

Before the angry Groovy’s ambition, Chisha narrowed his eyes, and,

Chisha: “As I have said, I request that you do not misunderstand.”

Thus, he spoke as if admonishing Groovy.

Groovy widened his eyes at those words, and Chisha continued with “May I proceed?”,

Chisha: “I have said that Groovy-dono’s current handling of Curse Tools after their production is irresponsible. Hence, it shall be fine if you take responsibility. For that purpose, using your position as General would be most beneficiaaal.”

Groovy: “…Ahh?”

Chisha: “From my own perspective, I have great expectations for the potential concealed by Curse Tools. It would only make sense for my powerless self to arm myself with equipment of extraordinary power… rather than conducting research as an individual, what of expanding it to be a large operation? If you do so, shortage of funding will no longer be an obstacle.”

At Chisha’s lengthy suggestion, Groovy’s eyes were bewildered as he listened attentively.

The reason he did not interrupt midway through, was because he could not keep up with the contents, and after he did catch up, he was dumbfounded at how unthinkable the contents were.

Groovy: “Bastard, weren’t you just trying to fucking shit on me by saying that the Curse Tools were a problem?”

Chisha: “—Since the Empire is a soil that cannot be separated from violence, the violence and the chaos brought about as a result ought at least be controlled; that is what he thinks, and thus by that I shall abide.”

Groovy remained silent when hearing what Chisha had to say in his unchanged matter-of-fact tone.

There were many things he thought about it. Nevertheless, instead of saying all the things he thought, he first decided to follow his impulses.

Drawing out a dagger different to the one he had thrown, he traced it along Chisha’s bloodstained cheek.

Chisha: “…What was it this time? A lethal poison, perhaps?”

Groovy: “No, fucking hell! I haven’t prepared anything of so fucking high quality like an antidote. That’s a medicine made out of snakeman venom. It’ll counterbalance the poison that went in earlier… at least it should.”

Chisha: “It seems like you are speaking with an excessive amount of apprehension.”

Groovy: “That can’t be helped! I’ve never tested it! That’s generally how it is for everything, fucking hell!”

Raised in a remote tribe, Groovy was hopeless when logical knowledge was requested of him.

The insatiable inquisitiveness he harbored in his chest towards Curse Tools, came from when he had thought one of the bones of the first demi-human he had killed was in an interesting shape, and had found it fun to wield it like a weapon to go hunting.

His untiring inquisitive spirit and ability to take action, that was Groovy’s passion for Curse Tools.

Chisha: “…It appears like it has worked as intended.”

Suddenly, Chisha had become able to move again, and he opened and closed his hand. Taking a white cloth from the inside of his clothes and placing it against the wound on his cheek, he looked towards Groovy, who reseated himself with a thud.

At that gaze, Groovy grimaced with a “The fuck do you want”, and then,

Chisha: “I was just examining to see whether you were giving some thought to my earlier proposal or not.”

Groovy: “…It’s not really like that talk about Curse Tools was the reason I removed the poison. Your way of living is way too fucking risky.”

Chisha: “Though, I suspect you did not remove the poison, but rather added more.”

Groovy: “Don’t get down into the fucking details. Nobody else fucking understands what you say like I do.”

With the cloth placed against the wound, Chisha lacked awareness of the parties involved, and Groovy snarled at him for it.

As he had said, Groovy was still someone who was willing to listen. That was why he had lent an ear to Chisha’s opinion regarding Curse Tools, and had accepted his proposal as rational.

However, many Imperial people were not like that, and it was Chisha’s position to face those many.

Groovy: “Chaos transformed into order… though it sounds like some fucking righteous bullshit, are you serious about this?”

Chisha: “Frighteningly so. For that is the desire of the Lord we serve.”

But, Chisha was also guilty of not trying to stop it despite understanding it to be reckless.

Beholding that way of living, of proceeding down such a thorny path by one's own volition, Groovy scratched his head. —Groovy Gumlet's insatiable inquisitiveness towards Curse Tools was a major light in his life.

Chisha also had something similar. That was likely the reason he held his ground without fighting strength of his own.

Groovy: "That fucking proposal from before, tell me about it in more detail."

Swallowing that, Groovy urged Chisha to proceed with the matter from earlier. Upon hearing that, Chisha's expression and tone did not change; however, there was a scent of a slight uptrend in his emotions,

Chisha: "The stability and integrity of performance, in order to industrialize Curse Tools there are many challenges we need to go throoough."

Groovy: "You're talking too fucking fast! And also, you love fucking talking like this when you don't have any work to do, bastard!"

3

Groovy: "In the end, I completely went along with your intentions, fucking lanky bastard."

Chisha: "My goodness, you've brought up quite the nostalgic nicknaaame."

In front of Groovy as he snorted, Chisha, sitting at his work desk, responded with a wry smile.

It had taken Groovy a while to realize that his noh mask-like expression could unexpectedly crumble, but with that much time having passed, Groovy recalled their initial hostile relationship.

Chisha: "I think Groovy and Goz-dono have been relatively cooperative from the start, which was unexpected."

Groovy: "It's awful that all the targets for comparison are a fucking shitty bunch! Besides, didn't I fully succeed in pulling off what you had said? Thanks to that, money is no longer an issue when it comes to making Curse Tools."

Chisha: "But then again, there has been a problem caused by the Curse Tools you have created…"

Groovy: "I made sure that if anybody except the proper owner uses it, they'll die. I won't hear any complaints."

Arms folded, Groovy snorted his nose as he objected to Chisha.

Once a hole was closed up, another hole would open, and that applied to creating Curse Tools, enforcing the law, and everything else. Somehow, having spent a few years as a General, he was aware of that to a painful extent.

However—

Groovy: "Well, it does work better than I had thought. That fucking righteous bullshit way of doing things."

Chisha: "Your phraseology is something I shall never get used to, no matter how many years paaass. Additionally, there is the matter of your next expedition."

Groovy: "Ahh, to the west, the border with Kararagi smells fishy, you said? I don't think those fucking merchants aiming to make a quick buck would do some fucking shit like lay their hands on the Empire, but…"

Chisha: "Groovy?"

Groovy: "If it's what you and His Excellency think, I'll go along with it."

At first, he could neither understand Vincent's thoughts nor Chisha's thoughts in the slightest, and even now it was hard for him to say that he understood them. But, even if he could not understand, he could trust them.

Groovy: "After all, that's something you came up with, your fucking weak self, who can face people as fucking strong as us as equals. It’s not as good as my Curse Tools, but it’s not bad.”

Chisha: “—. Good grief. I shall remember those words, Groovy.”

With that, Chisha took a long, deep breath, and nodded with a slightly pleased look on his face.

—That was the final conversation exchanged between Groovy and Chisha.

Afterwards, Groovy had been deployed to the west, and when he approached the core of the peril assailing the Vollachian Empire, the man known as Chisha Gold no longer remained.

What did exist, however, was that which Chisha had left behind. And, the fact that protecting that until the very end was the sole tribute he could make to his comrade in arms, was something Groovy had understood.

END

Anastasia’s Search for Her Companions: Second Chronicle

1

In a place where the presences of many people crowded together could be felt, a precarious atmosphere began to tense over.

The heightened tingling sensation felt upon the skin reflected the feelings of the participants in the tense atmosphere.

Standing right in the center of that atmosphere, was a tall beastman wearing a black kimono.

The long arms of the beastman were bound by handcuffs, and he was surrounded by imposing men carrying swords. At a glance, the scene made it apparent that the beastman was not in the best situation.

However—

Beastman: “Golly, ain’t it quite over-the-top ta have the full force of the League of Cities’ representatives all gathered ‘gainst me.”

Pierced by the stinging atmosphere and gazes, the beastman in question did not pay any mind to their sharpness.

If the beastman felt like it, neither the handcuffs nor the tense swordsmen would be an obstacle.

That was a fact understood not just by the person himself, but by everyone else present here.

That was because this beastman was the most famous being in the Kararagi City-States,

???: “—Halibel.”

Beastman: “Yep yep, that’d be me.”

His name having been called out, the beastman—Halibel, relaxed his shoulders and smiled.

At Halibel's response, the person who had called out his name—one of the mayors, who filled the ten special parliamentary seats that had been prepared in the assembly hall, knitted his eyebrows. While making it apparent through the wrinkles on his brow that he thought Halibel's attitude lacked seriousness,

One of the Mayors: "Actin' so flippantly, would it be wrong to suppose that'cha got an excuse?"

Halibel: "An excuse… I wonder what'd be good ta say here?"

Another one of the Mayors: "Without hidin' nothin', speak of absolutely everythin' ya got up yer sleeve. If ya don't, ya ain't gonna be able to convince us. —After all, it was two thousand people."

Halibel: "…"

Yet another one of the Mayors: "The annihilation of a town inhabited by two thousand people, no matter how much of a pillar Halibel-han may be to the City-States, we ain't gonna be able to ignore this level of damage."

Taking turns, the mayors cast their voices towards Halibel, and the instant that the specific scale of damages was touched upon, the dry atmosphere of the assembly hall tensed up even more.

Two thousand people, that was the number of casualties from the most recent disaster. It was the kind of statistic that would only ever emerge in the case of a large famine, natural disaster, or civil war, but this event was none of those.

Those two thousand people were casualties that had been brought about by none other than the individual known as Halibel.

One of the Mayors: "D'ya remember what our request was, Halibel-han?"

Halibel: "Hmmm, what was it now, I wonder? Prolly 'cuz of my age, recently, I’ve been forgettin’ a bunch of important things. Stuff like where I’d placed my kiseru before I went ta bed.”

One of the Mayors: “It was to investigate the unusual occurrence at Nanou, the town sittin’ ‘long the border with the Empire.”

Ignoring Halibel as he tilted his head and feigned ignorance with his answer, the conversation continued matter-of-factly. One of the mayors, with fingers as thick as hornworms, as he narrowed his droopy eyes,

One of the Mayors: “Investigatin’ the strange occurrence, that essentially means searchin’ for the truth ‘n solution to the problem at hand. Get it? Ya completely ignored that, ‘n instead entirely wiped out all two thousand inhabitants of the town.”

While maintaining a composed voice, there was an intense indignation housed within. The man was performing a strict interrogation, but he did not receive any reprimanding response from his surroundings.

It was customary for such a conference to get the briefing out of the way first, and then to proceed accordingly from there.

In the Kararagi City-States, the parliamentary system of mayor representatives from each city was a tradition dating back to the era of their founding father, Hoshin, but somewhere along the line, the system had been reduced to a mere formality.

Hoshin loved discussions, and it is said that he desired a parliamentary system in which differing opinions would clash and produce a conclusion that would not have come about from a lone individual. However, the current parliamentary system of mayors would head towards a predetermined conclusion from before the discussion had even begun, merely proceeding by tracing the form of a conference.

Therefore, a conclusion had already been prepared regarding the treatment of Halibel, regardless of any excuse he might have given.

One of the Mayors: “It’d be impossible to cover up such an outrageous story. We're aware of Halibel-han's contributions to the City-States. Even so—"

???: "—Can I have a quick word?"

Right when the discussion was about to reach its premeditated conclusion, a voice suddenly called out.

At the interference that had not been present at the prior briefing, the gazes of the mayors turned to the person who had interrupted. In the corner of the assembly hall, was the girl who had been permitted to listen in on this conference.

However, she had only been permitted to observe. Not to voice any opinions.

One of the Mayors: "Ya can't be speakin' out, Anastasia-han. I'll say this now, but you're only permitted to observe this conference 'cause of Chuden-han's influence. To impudently…"

Anastasia: "It ain't impudent or nothin' like that, Orgo-san, ya can't be sayin' things like that. Besides…"

Orgo: "…"

Anastasia: "For us merchants, impudence is naturally the tool of our trade, much like how a sword would be for a swordsman."

With an elegant smile, the girl gently sidestepped the words of the mayors who were over double her age. Then, stealing initiative from them, the girl stepped forward to the center of the assembly hall.

Naturally, the girl's actions and appearance attracted attention. Stroking the white fox scarf wrapped around her neck, nobody stopped the kimono-clad girl as she walked in a relaxed manner. It was to the extent that even the presence of the longsword-wielding escort with his graceful facial features had disappeared from everybody's perceptions for a moment.

Halibel: "Lil' Ana, this ain't no playground for children, ya know?"

Halibel calmly called out to the girl who had stepped forth. More so than his responses to the mayors, he used a tone of voice that was, to put it frankly, tender, harboring a clear warmth.

At Halibel's words, the girl—Anastasia closed one of her pale turquoise eyes, and ignored him.

Ignoring him, as Anastasia looked around at all of the mayors present in the assembly hall,

Anastasia: "Excuse the hurried greetings. I'm Anastasia Hoshin, representative of the Hoshin Company. Thanks to the kindness of Orgo-san over there, I've been allowed to sit in on this conference, but… I've become a lil' unable to just shut up 'n watch."

Orgo: "What're ya…"

Anastasia: "Look, Halibel's a careless, impolite, 'n hopeless loose-liver. Even so, he's got strength 'n popularitry, so I get why y'all mayors dislike his company. But—"

Pausing her words there, Anastasia opened her previously closed eye, and gazed at the mayors with both of her eyes. Within the gaze of her round irises, the expressions and shoulders of the mayors stiffened.

It was as if they had remembered the fact that, as the head of a company who still had youthfulness in her face, she was the representative of a large company that vied for the position of first or second within Kararagi.

As those mayors stood at the ready, Anastasia made a declaration without changing her expression.

Anastasia: "Ya can't be misjudgin' the reality of the situation. It's the teachin' of Hoshin to seize all the opportunities for business 'n for victory. In order to solve this problem, don't'cha think that ya gotta put yer displeasure with Halibel aside for a bit?"

Quietly and gently, Anastasia's words dominated the assembly hall.

—No, to be precise, it was Anastasia's overwhelming presence that dominated the assembly hall.

Next to Anastasia, with the attention having been taken off of himself, Halibel gave a comment,

Halibel: “Lil’ Ana, it hurts my feelin’s when ya talk ‘bout me like that.”

Then, while gnawing on the kiseru he had taken out, after having removed his handcuffs without anybody noticing, he grumbled so.

2

—The closure of the national border between the Kararagi City-States and the Vollachian Empire.

In a position of wanting to hasten to enter the Empire, this was certainly not a situation she found to be acceptable. In order to remove that issue, or perhaps to deal with it, Anastasia and Julius had wedged their way into the conference of the mayors.

As a result, while they had made a mess of the conference, they were able to get them to listen to what they had to say.

Julius: “Even so, a strange occurrence concerning the residents of Nanou, two thousand people… was it?”

Anastasia: “Accordin’ to what Halibel said, it ain’t got nothin’ to do with an epidemic or curse-arts. Either of those woulda been a huge problem, but it’s also a huge problem that it wasn’t either of ‘em.”

Seeing his lovely master place a finger over her lips, frowning in rumination, Julius narrowed his eyes. In terms of her demeanor from earlier at the assembly hall, Anastasia’s mannerisms entranced people.

As expected, having displayed her true talent at such a location, she was the woman whom Julius backed for the royal throne.

Anastasia: “How are ya, Julius? Tell me now, did ya happen to think of somethin’?”

Julius: "—. My apologies. Nothing that is for certain. Only…"

Anastasia: "Only?"

Julius: "In the past, I recall reading about a case that bore quite a resemblance."

When asked for his opinion, Julius searched around his own memories for an answer.

Before Anastasia, deep with curiosity as she was, what Julius remembered was from within history books documenting the Demi-Human War, a small detail that was only slightly touched upon.

The greatest civil war in the Kingdom's history, it was spoken of by many in a historical or gruesome sense, and though that one account essentially only amounted to being touched on,

Julius: "It is said that amidst the events of the civil war, the most unsightly battle was brought about through magic that controlled the dead."

???: "The dead… I see. Certainly, that can be interpreted as coinciding with Halibel's testimony."

Responding to Julius's report as the tone of his voice lowered was not Anastasia, but rather the Spirit around her neck covered in soft fur, Echidna.

The assent of an individual like her was reassuring, and Anastasia also nodded "That's right" without objection.

Anastasia: "They had bad complexions 'n their blood wasn't flowin'… Halibel said somethin' like "livin' corpses" were walkin' around, so I guess that's exactly what it was. Although…"

Julius: "Two thousand people, that is a vast difference in scale."

At Anastasia's identification, Julius touched the white scar under his left eye in agreement.

Though the accounts in the history books were few, and the events of those days were not clear, Anastasia's view was correct. In the battle that utilized the dead in the Demi-Human War, based on the way they were being controlled, the number would not have been so high.

Here, it was two thousand people. Even if there was a technique to control the remains of the dead, to actually implement that, and to go so far as to have them enact the form of a regular town, was devoid of sanity.

The competency, talent, and above all, the concept of the magic made Julius think so.

???: "Oh, didn't know y'all were over here."

Turning around towards that aloof voice, Julius slightly raised his eyebrows.

The one who had spoken was a tall wolfman of black fur, Halibel. He was the one held at speartip at the assembly hall earlier, but Julius could not avoid feeling tense at his calm demeanor.

After all, he was none other than the strongest shinobi of the Kararagi City-States—said to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Reinhard, he was one of the strongest warriors of the Four Great Countries.

However, contrary to the tension of Julius, Anastasia spoke "What?" while she turned a suspicious look to Halibel as he approached them,

Anastasia: "Why aren't'cha in handcuffs 'n bein' accompanied by guards? It's terrifyin' for a large criminal to have been set free."

Halibel: "Wasn't it lil' Ana who asked that I be released? Shouldn't'cha be glad that I've been set free? C'mon now, why don't I raise ya up in my arms like I used ta do back in the good ol' days?"

Anastasia: "'Cause I'm already a grown woman. We ain't that close."

As Halibel reached his hands out towards her, Anastasia bluntly slapped them down. Even towards that cold attitude, Halibel reacted cheerfully; witnessing the exchange between the two, Julius blinked his eyes.

He had heard that they had known each other for a long time. So he had heard, but they were far closer with each other than he had expected.

Halibel: “Hey, onii-san over there, must be tough bein’ lil’ Ana’s guard, ain’t it? After all, she’s a lass who seems ta have a curious soul, always scamperin’ about here ‘n there.”

Julius: “I consider that to be one of Anastasia-sama’s many charms. —Halibel-dono, allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Julius Juukulius.”

Halibel: “Stuff like dono, it’s alright even if ya don’t use such a formal way of callin’ me. Ya can just call me Halibel.”

Julius: “That is…”

Halibel: “I don’t mind. Or rather, I’d actually be more comfortable that way. It’s quite tiresome ta always be treated like I’m super important or incredible, after all.”

As Halibel spoke to him with a carefree smile, Julius hesitantly nodded.

He had not expected to receive such a request from the most powerful warrior of the City-States, but therein, Julius felt something akin to the power of Anastasia’s fate.

The right person in the right place would naturally have their life intersect with such things.

Anyhow—

Julius: “So then, what of the mayors?”

Halibel: “After chasin’ me ‘n lil’ Ana out, they’re in the midst of conversin’ without any nuisances. That said, ya don’t gotta worry. They ain’t so thickheaded that they wouldn’t be able ta recognize that persuasive power of what lil’ Ana said.”

Echidna: “—With that, it all depends on the extent to which they follow through on Ana’s request.”

As Echidna made that remark, having received the words of Halibel who was shrugging his shoulders, the shinobi in question reacted with an “Oh”, and jerking his face towards the fox scarf,

Halibel: “What’s this what’s this? Have ya finally given up on keepin’ yer mouth shut?”

Echidna: “—. From your reaction, were you perhaps already aware of my presence?”

Halibel: “Look, it’s my job ta be perceivin’ these kinda things. Since it didn’t particularly look like ya were doin’ anythin’ bad ta lil’ Ana, I just thought that maybe ya were a lil’ bit shy.”

As the kiseru in his mouth bobbed up and down, Halibel answered so, to which Echidna heaved a sigh.

It had been spoken like it was nothing special, but Echidna’s camouflage was not something that could have been easily perceived. It was the type of invisibility that neither Julius, Ricardo, nor Mimi and the others had been able to realize over many years.

Julius: “I understand that you have known Anastasia-sama for ten years now… nah, that you’ve known her for ten years, but what sort of time was that?”

Halibel: “Oh, stories of the good ol’ days? Well, Ricardo’s kinda like a brother ta me, and he brought lil’ Ana… jeepers, lil’ Ana, please stop givin’ me that look.”

As Julius carefully selected his manner of verbal expression, Halibel tried to start speaking of some old reminiscences, but he was silenced by Anastasia’s gaze. Julius found this to be unfortunate at heart, and as Halibel whispered “Another time” to him,

Halibel: “Even so, it’s quite unusual for ya ta be this impatient. Is there someone ya care about that much in the Empire?”

Anastasia: “Mph… what’d’ya mean?”

Halibel: “Ain’t no use in playin’ dumb. Makin’ such a passionate speech at the assembly hall, suggestin’ that ya take me along ta go ta the Empire as emissaries, somethin’ like that ain’t for the sake of Kararagi, nor is it for yer own sake.”

Anastasia: “…”

Halibel: “In a way that’s typical of lil’ Ana, ya rationalized it with this ‘n that, but yer real intention’s somethin’ else. But, since the feelin’ that ya didn’t wanna miss the business opportunity seemed so desperate, I thought that it might’ve been for somebody else’s sake. Am I right?”

Bending his tall body at the waist, Halibel asked this as he gazed into Anastasia’s face. With a sidelong glance to Anastasia as she remained silent, Julius stepped forward in order to defend her.

There was no strong reason to keep it a secret, but if it was something that Anastasia did not wish to disclose, Julius would stand up for her.

At Julius’s movement, Halibel lowered the ends of his eyebrows, wondering if he had gone too far.

But—

Anastasia: “—Someone whom I’m indebted to might be in danger. That, ‘n I’m worried ‘bout my friend.”

Anastasia, hiding behind Julius’s back and not showing her face, spoke so to Halibel.

What sort of face Anastasia was making, that was something which Julius, who was protecting her with his back, did not know. Halibel, too, was likely unable to see her face, as she was pressing her forehead against Julius’s back.

The person whom Anastasia said she was indebted to, would have been Subaru. And, the person whom she called her friend would have been—

Halibel: "—As ever, you're quite skilled at gettin' me motivated, what a naughty girl."

Julius's quiet conviction, and Halibel's warmth-filled voice, occurred at the same time.

At that response, Julius understood that Halibel, much like himself, was also someone who had been charmed by Anastasia's humanity.

???: "The conference has reached a conclusion. Return inside."

Then, one of the guards from the assembly hall called out to Julius and the others.

The discussion between the mayors—it was about the plan Anastasia had suggested in order to enter the Empire. The duty of secret messengers to offer relief to the Vollachian Empire from the Kararagi City-States.

If the situation was as they had predicted, and the disaster of the dead was also befalling the Empire, they would need support.

Anastasia: "Shall we head in, Julius, Halibel? —I'll be sure to work both of ya hard, after all."

Saying that, and removing her forehead from Julius's back, Anastasia stepped forth.

She was already back to being her usual self, so her previous statement was indistinguishable from a strategic move to inspire motivation within Halibel, and to have him accompany her.

Echidna: "She is not that clever of a girl, you know."

Halibel: "After all, she's got some surprisingly cute aspects ta her."

At Julius's speculation, Echidna and Halibel answered so one after the other—

Anastasia: "Don't be sayin' any unnecessary things, hurry up 'n get movin'! "Time is money!" As Hoshin says!"

Hastened by an angry Anastasia, Julius exchanged wry smiles with Halibel and Echidna as one of the people who surrounded her, and stepped forward.

—Not towards the assembly hall, but in order to proceed towards the Empire, he took a step forward.

END

The Dragon Kingdom:
Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record V

1

"Stay here, okay?" ordered Felt. "Can't tend to you even if you follow us in."

The one who received the order, the Divine Dragon Volcanica, let out a deep voice. "I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned."

Felt scowled, unsatisfied with his response. Her distrust in the Dragon was apparent through her expression. As one of the esteemed participants of the royal selection to decide the next ruler of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, her attitude was rather insolent, considering it was the Dragon, a being that deserved her utmost respect. However, her rudeness paled in comparison with the behavior of her other companions.

"Master Divine Dragon sir, please have some of our dried meat," said Flam, offering dried meat to the dragon from her bag.

"Let's domesticate a Dragon," added Grassis.

"Stop it you two!" exclaimed Ezzo from the side. "This is the Divine Dragon we are facing! A living, breathing Dragon that's famous the world over! I have nothing but great admiration for him on both an intellectual and emotional level."

Despite his tremendous power, Volcanica seemed to have treated Felt with respect. Felt, on the other hand, was worried about angering the Dragon and becoming a target of the devastating power he had displayed earlier, which was why she was taken aback by the nonchalance shown by the other three.

"Or maybeee," said Meili, as she rested her elbow on her lap and placed her chin on her hand, "they're not worried because you're with us, Mister Red-Hairr."

"…I suppose that's not entirely inaccurate," responded Reinhard. "I've known Flam and Grassis ever since they were babies. I've looked after them as if they were my own sisters."

"Hmmm, so you're like a real brother to them, huh?" Meili asked, squinting her eyes, before gesturing at the twins. "What about you guyyys? Do you feel the saaame?"

"The Young Master is the Young Master," answered Flam.

"The Young Master who needs to be taken care of," said Grassis.

"You heard themmm?" Meili said to Reinhard suggestively.

He let out a bitter smile without saying a word.

Reinhard was quite inept at hiding his feelings. Even during their short journey, he had allowed a stranger like Meili to see through him time and time again. I was nervous at first knowing the Sword Saint was tagging along, but I'm not scared anymore. "Before I knew it, all my anxiety was gooone. Kinda like when I was with the white-haired lady. Maybe all strong, important people are alikeee."

In Meili's mind, Emilia and Reinhard were similar in terms of their strength and air-headedness.

"Elsa was also…" Like that. Emilia and Reinhard's demeanor reminded Meili of her late sister figure. My chest used to start aching whenever I thought about her, but that hasn't happened lately, she thought. Emilia once told me that that's not a bad thing, "But I don't knowww…"

It was difficult for Meili to contemplate her own feelings. She'd always done whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted, like an animal. That was the only sort of lifestyle she knew. Now, she was burdened with responsibilities even if she didn't want them. But weirdly enough, I don't hate this. Maybe I'm growing as a person too.

"Gosh, he's finally calmed down," said Felt as she returned to the group after convincing Volcanica to remain outside the entrance to the watchtower, where he could be seen with his wings folded. Despite sitting there quietly, he still exuded an overwhelmingly intimidating presence.

Ezzo let out a small “hmm” as he stood next to Meili and observed the Dragon. “But to think that the Divine Dragon would listen to your orders… If you add the Sword Saint Reinhard into the mix, you might just be able to acquire the Kingdom with might alone, Miss Felt.”

“What a savage suggestion,” Felt replied. “If power is all ya need to rule a kingdom, then Reinhard coulda done that yesterday and made himself the sole conqueror. There’d be no need for me. Right?”

“I would never do such a thing,” responded Reinhard. “The Astrea Family was given the title of the Sword Saint and kept away from the seat of power precisely because they feared we might act on such a barbaric idea.”

“Don’t bombshell us with your heavy family history!” Felt exclaimed as she smacked Reinhard on the back while he smiled bitterly. She shrugged her shoulders at his expression.

As Ezzo had stated, however, with the devastating power of the Sword Saint and the Divine Dragon, which had nearly obliterated the desert in their earlier bout, under her belt, Felt was practically invincible.

“Buuut,” interjected Meili. “That Dragon is also on good terms with the lady in my caaamp. There’s no guarantee that he’ll listen to Felt alone.”

“Did ya hear that?” Felt said. “Maybe he kisses every candidates’ ass. There goes your plan, Ezzo.”

“As your strategist, I wasn’t seriously suggesting the idea. Although it’s natural to aim for victory in a competition, it must be attained through fairplay. Relying on an outrageous power, and one that we just so happened to stumble upon by chance if I may add, is not an action deemed worthy of a true victor.”

“I wasn’t being serious either. Jeez, learn to loosen up a bit.”

“Master Ezzo is a very stern individual,” commented Flam.

“He should learn from people like Lady Felt and us,” added Grassis.

Their comments were rather disrespectful considering it was directed at their mistress, but Felt simply brushed it off with a laugh and said, “That’s for sure.”

With Felt standing in the center, the group turned around to get a view of the desert.

“Your wish finally came true, Reinhard,” Felt remarked. “Last time you were here, you couldn’t get past the wittle sandbox and went crying home, right?”

“Yes, I’m thrilled to have finally reached here. It’s all because of you and Meili,” he replied with a smile, completely unfazed by Felt’s crude comment.

Amused, Felt snickered and started walking. Everyone followed.

As Meili walked at the very back of the group, the little crimson scorpion came out of her hair and sat atop her head. Feeling its weight, she entered the tower and looked up at the long spiral staircase that seemed to go on forever.

“Seems like we’re back here again,” she muttered without anyone else hearing.

2

The Pleiades Watchtower was also known as the Great Library of Pleiades.

Meili had to prove she could help anyone traverse the Auguria Sand Dunes with her ability in order to obtain her right to stay in the Kingdom of Lugunica. Her ability was technically already proven the moment the group arrived at the tower. However, some may argue her mission was only complete after they got back safe and sound.

“Imagine if they said we were only able to cross the desert because Reinhard was with us,” mused Felt.

“Lady Felt…” said Flam, exasperated by the idea.

“That’s not funny,” commented Grassis.

There was a good possibility their accomplishment was going to be invalidated by having such an extraordinary companion, but if it weren’t for Reinhard, they could have very well perished from Volcanica’s greeting. However, it was also possible that Volcanica wouldn’t have gotten so worked up in the first place if Reinhard wasn’t there. So, it was difficult to give a final verdict on whether his accompanying them was good or bad.

“I don’t hate Mister Red-Hair, thoooough,” said Meili. “I mean, he is kinda coool.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” responded Reinhard. “It’s true that you kept all the other witchbeasts at bay, while all I did was rouse the Divine Dragon. I’m really ashamed.”

“It’s not uncommon for a backup plan to backfire,” commented Ezzo, sympathetically. “I’ve had such experiences before.”

It was rare for Meili to pay someone lip service. So she was confused by her own actions, but she quickly concluded that it must have been because she’d let her guard down when she realized she had succeeded in her role. In other words, she was in a good mood. She was glad that she was finally able to do something for Subaru and the others.

“So this is the Library of the Dead!” Ezzo exclaimed, throwing his arms wide open with widened eyes. “The place that caused the greatest conflict in the Pleiades Watchtower!”

As a dwarf, Ezzo was small in stature, but usually carried himself in a dignified manner, which made him appear more mature than one might expect from a person of his height. However, at this moment, his eyes were glimmering with curiosity like a child that'd just been given a new toy. He looked like a totally different person.

"Master Ezzo, you look as happy as a clam. It's very heartwarming," said Flam.

"Master Ezzo, you're smiling like a conniving person who came up with a great scheme," added Grassis.

"No one is scheming anything, Miss Grassis!" Ezzo retorted excitedly. "Although it's not like I'm trying to warm anyone's heart, either, Miss Flam… All I'm trying to say is that this is a historic moment!"

Ezzo started running into the library. He couldn't keep his attention on any one thing, instead trying to consume everything around him. Seeing him run around, Felt let out a sigh. She looked around the room filled with books. "Books, books, and more books. Makes me sick."

"Are you being humble?" Reinhard asked. "You've been reading a lot of books lately, my lady."

"That's only because I thought it's better to be well-read," said Felt. "I still don't like books, and still get sick being surrounded by books I don't care about."

"You don't care, huh?" Reinhard said, furrowing his brows.

Noticing his reaction, Felt asked, "What?" as she looked up at him. "What's with that solemn look? Is it weird that I'm not interested in dead people? Not to sound crass, but I don't remember actin' all whiny to have you believe I'm that sorta person."

"No, you're absolutely correct," responded Reinhard. "I can't imagine you obsessing over someone who has died, Lady Felt. I was just impressed how you could have such a strong conviction."

"Impressed, huh?" Felt closed one eye and made a skewed frown. After a pause, she said, "Ahh," realizing something. "Reinhard, there's a Book of the Dead you wanna read, right?"

Reinhard said nothing. It was extremely rare for him to not respond to Felt, whether in word or action. His silence alone was proof he had a lot on his mind about the matter.

"I could never fool you, my lady," he finally said.

"The only way you could get one over me is through a physical fight. There's no one in the world who can beat you at that."

"That's not what I meant." His eyes began to wander, as if he was trying to process his overwhelming emotions. He then looked around the library. "If this library really contains books recording the memories of all the people that died, then…"

"Then you'll be able to know the feelings of the person you want to know better," said Felt, crossing her arms. "Let me guess, you wanna read your grandma's book, right?"

Reinhard gasped. "How did you know?" he said, blinking rapidly.

"You know that I've been corresponding with Granny Carol, right?" Felt replied, letting out a laugh. "And it's not like I wasn't paying attention in Priestella. Everyone knows you and your granddad ain't on good terms. They just don't say anything."

Reinhard said nothing.

"Would finding your grandma's book make you happy?"

Felt sounded like her usual self, but there was a tinge of kindness in her voice when she asked her last question. It was a question meant to console Reinhard, and he also noticed it. However, he slowly shook his head.

"It wouldn't," he answered. "I'm interested in her book, of course, but it wouldn't have much of an impact on me. It's just…"

"It's just, what?"

"I want my father to read her book."

Felt paused as she processed the reason Reinhard wanted his grandmother's book. It was to help someone else. As simple as that.

She let out a big sigh, exasperated by his attitude. "And here I thought you were getting better. It looks like you might be getting worse."

"I apologize if I'm being unprofessional by bringing personal matters up during a mission."

"I'm not angry about that. Did you think my reason for participating in the royal selection is unrelated to my personal reasons?" she answered before gesturing at the library with her chin. "C'mon, let's start looking."

Reinhard said nothing, looking confused by her gesture.

"Didn't you hear me? We're gonna look for your grandma's book. Although, knowing you, you might not need any help."

"Lady Felt!" Reinhard called out her name ecstatically.

"Stop lookin' so happy. I just don't want you standing next to me lookin' all depressed. Speaking of which," she said, turning her face away from Reinhard.

Ezzo was running around the library, followed by Flam and Grassis. They looked as lively as ever. By contrast, Meili was standing quietly by herself. Although Felt wasn't expecting a thorough tour of the library from Meili, who said she didn't know the library too well, her quietness was rather conspicuous.

"Why are you being so quiet?" Felt asked. "Don't tell me you're just annoyed by Ezzo's enthusiasm."

"Felt," responded Meili, looking up at Felt and Reinhard as they approached.

Noticing her eyes shimmering with anxiety, Felt quickly asked her, "What's wrong?"

Meili hesitated for a moment before she spoke. "I got an eerie feeling from the libraryyy… Those books on the floor were already there when we came in, riiight? Buuut…"

"But, what?"

"Emilia tidied the place up before we departed the last time we were heeere. She saaaid, 'It's not good manners to leave a place a mess'."

"Reinhard, Ezzo," Felt quickly called their names as soon as Meili finished talking.

Reinhard, who was already by her side, responded, "Yes, ma'am," and stood next to them. Ezzo, Flam, and Grassis also came rushing back.

Ezzo looked confused, expecting an explanation. Felt pointed at the books on the floor. "According to Meili, there shouldn't be any books out."

"So are you suggesting someone came here before we did?" Ezzo asked.

"That's one possibility. Another possibility is…" Reinhard replied, as he picked up one of the books and opened it.

"Ah," exclaimed Meili, noticing something.

Felt also noticed what that was.

"Meili, you said there were Books of the Dead that you can and can't read, right? Are all the ones you can't read blank like this one?" asked Reinhard.

The book in his hand was filled with blank pages.

Meili shook her head as she looked at the book he was holding. "Nooo, nothing of that sorttt. The books that can't be read also had their own unique letters written in theeem."

"Miss Meili is right," said Ezzo. "All the books I pulled from the shelves had something written in them. Although many of them were too difficult to understand, the only books with blank pages are the ones on the floor.”

“You say ‘only’, but…” Felt said, scratching her head and looking at the pile of books on the floor. It looked as if someone had knocked down a whole bookshelf. There must have been a few hundred books scattered about.

“If someone went on a rampage here, it must have been someone who’s skilled enough to sneak past the Divine Dragon,” suggested Flam.

“A big weirdo like the Young Master,” added Grassis.

“But that’s more likely than an entire bookshelf falling over on its own,” concluded Ezzo. “Miss Felt, if there is an intruder, we must consider searching for them, or withdrawing.”

Taking her vassals’ advice into consideration, Felt turned her attention to the spine of the book Reinhard was holding, then to the pile on the floor. No matter who the intruder is, the hint lies in the books. However, there wasn’t much she could glean from them.

“From the names, all I can say is that they’re probably related to Vollachia. Not to mention that this is all happening at the same time Emilia is infiltrating there. I’m getting a bad feeling about this,” she muttered to herself, starting to suspect that the Empire had some sort of connection to the anomalous Books of the Dead.

END

Comic Alive Collection 10

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders
(CA)

1

The room was saturated with the smell of blood. To be precise, rather than the thick stench of fresh blood, it was more that of the stain it left behind; a lingering smell that could never be washed away.

Without exception, every single person gathered in this room had lived a life bathed in the blood of their victims. Consequently, the smell of it was ingrained into their very beings, and its persistent presence dominated the atmosphere. The way they stared at one another hinted towards the hostility beneath their gaze—the kind of tension that kept their blades sheathed but their hands on their hilts.

In this place, where imposing men and women had gathered, several gave off a particularly prominent smell of blood. They shared an impervious gleam in their eyes—evidence that they shouldered duties and self-awareness befitting their positions.

This should come as no surprise, for the group assembled here controlled Flanders, one of the kingdom's five great cities, from the shadows. In other words, the underground elite.

"This is the sixth occurrence this month… Give me a break… I've had enough of this."

What had cut through the blood-swelling atmosphere was the sweet scent of tobacco smoke and the languid voice of a woman. The woman, nubile and relaxed in her seat, was reclining to reveal the slit in her skin-tight dress, exposing most of her thigh, a golden tobacco pipe nestled between her lips. With skin the color of sun-warmed wheat, her voluptuous body was rich in feminine charms. Such devilish good looks could entice men and women alike to give in to their passions with a single glance. She was also known as the

Wicked Temptress—a truly fitting name.

This beautiful woman—in fact one of those who gave off a particularly thick stench of blood—was Toto, the proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden.

When Toto, who had started the conversation, saw that no one followed suit, she took in a long drag of her pipe, gave a sidelong glance to a man at the back of the room, and then sent smoke his way, followed by her words. “Not saying much today, are you, Manfred? Which way is The Balance leaning? Cowardly opportunism? Or perhaps you’re unable to speak because you decided to place that precious tattoo of yours directly on your tongue?”

“Shut your trap, you shameless woman. If you insist on running your mouth over trivialities, I’ll gather all the women in your place and turn them into lap dogs. Then I’ll train you thoroughly and present you to my boss.”

The one who had responded with vicious words to Toto’s provocation was a slim man leaning against the wall. He was tall, bald, and wore long robes, but the skin exposed on his head, neck, and even his face was densely packed with tattoos of balance scale motifs. It was likely that they extended even underneath his robes.

It was one of The Balance’s rules that every member had to be tattooed with balance scales where they were visible, and he had more such tattoos than any other. This was an obvious sign of loyalty in the eyes of the organization; therefore, he won their favor, and they gave him an executive position in the organization in Flanders. The name of this young wolf, here to represent The Balance, was Manfred ‘Tattoo Face’ Madison.

The proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden and the representative of The Balance; between them, they represented two of the three big factions operating the underworld syndicates in Flanders.

And then, the third and final leader of the underworld, the head of the Black Silver Coin, spoke. “Did you gather here just to have a childish dispute? Know your place, you pigs.”

"…"

A deep, solemn voice reverberated throughout the room, and the two who had been bickering shut their mouths instantly. What the owner of that voice inspired was not fear. Rather, it was a subtle kind of awe. Fully aware of that, discontented expressions were etched onto the faces of Toto and Manfred.

Despite having the power to silence the two powerful syndicate leaders, the speaker merely sat in a cramped chair in the rear of the room, impassive. "What, no witty retort?—Not even a 'You're the one who's a pig'?" the large man said as he shrugged his large shoulders, sounding bored.

"…Good luck to you, if you're willing to risk your life to joke around the Pig King," said Manfred.

"As for me," added Toto, "I simply have no intention of going along with such an unamusing joke, Mr. Doltero."

Having provided excuses for their silence at Doltero's interjection, Toto and Manfred appeared mollified. At their rebuttal, the giant man clasped his wide fingers together above the table. "Good luck to those who crack jokes, huh. Well said."

"—? It sounds like you're referencing something specific. Something you'd like to share?"

Despite his grumbling, the large man only frowned in silence at Manfred's provocation. He approached two meters in height, his thick and mighty width a good match for his height. His limbs were as large and tough as tree trunks, and his physique was like that of a great tree in comparison to Manfred's, which was like one that had withered away. In contrast to his powerful body, he had blond hair that was combed back and azure eyes that anyone would find attractive, giving off a certain distinctiveness within the pig race that was known for its ugly appearances.

He was the Pig King, Doltero Amule, leader of the Black Silver Coin—the largest faction of the underworld syndicates of Flanders—and the most feared man in the city.

Even the Wicked Temptress and Tattoo Face would not lightly go up against the Pig King. This was a reflection of just how long-lived and influential Doltero's power over the city truly was.

The representatives of the three major criminal syndicates of Flanders chose a basement tavern on neutral ground in order to meet face-to-face. One couldn't wish for a more suitable place for holding secret meetings, and they had made ample use of this venue to hold these regular meetings.

The purpose of these regular meetings, centered around the Big Three and attended by the entire underworld society, was to reaffirm precarious peace treaties as well as re-establish the balance of power. Though the three syndicates had originally been true enemies in battle, they were nonetheless business rivals now, so not once had they tried to move towards building an amicable atmosphere at these meetings. However, even following the general conventions of a regular meeting, the tension in the air today was abnormal. The reason for that was…

"—Stop dilly-dallying. Have you figured out the identity of the criminal…of that scum?" Doltero fired off that question, bringing up the source of this meeting's bloodthirsty atmosphere.

In the last couple of months, there had been a number of injuries and deaths in Flanders—none of which were unusual if looked at individually. Though unfortunate, incidents that resulted in casualties seemed to be a rather commonplace thing; however, for the people present—who understood the connection—this wasn't something they could ignore.

"If all the victims are related to us, the situation is quite serious. Who is attacking us?" Doltero asked.

"Who knows?" Toto replied. "I was certain, for my part, that we had been invited to gather here in order to make that clear. Perhaps to receive a formal declaration of hostilities. Right, Manfred?"

"In general, I never trust the word of a harlot, but in this case I think so too," concurred Manfred. "I was expecting something similar. That's why I can put up with the feminine stench in here, which stinks more than usual.”

After exchanging murderous glares, Manfred and Toto settled back into an uneasy, silent war. Among the Big Three, they were the only two who had actually crossed blades with intent to kill, so there was certainly no love lost between them. Unfortunately, when the leaders of two vicious, rival syndicates got heated, it made sense that their subordinates would take that as a sign to be ready for anything.

The fighters from The Balance began shifting restlessly, and the flowers from the Flower Prison Garden eyed them with penetrating glares. Before they thoughtlessly went at it, however, Doltero crushed the armrest of his chair.

The iron armrest was deformed, as if it were being molded like candy, before being twisted off the chair. Then, without the slightest sign of distress, Doltero flung the detached armrest to the floor. “If you want to end up like this armrest, then by all means, keep dithering. Time is short for the elderly. Don’t waste it.”

“Even though you are just as on-edge as the rest of us?” Toto retorted. “What an insufferable man, trying to pretend to be the only mature adult in the room… Don’t you think so as well, Miss Golden Beetle?” Having smiled sweetly in the face of Doltero’s warning, Toto tried to draw the third party out, the golden pipe still nestled between her lips.

“Oh? You want me to take sides? I wouldn’t be much of a peacekeeper if I did that. More of a fire-starter.”

The one who’d frowned at being called upon was a petite woman who hadn’t spoken once until now. She sat at the corner of the table, skillfully avoiding detection since the start of the meeting, wearing a well-made black suit. Along with her black suit, she had been thorough enough to wear a black tie, gloves, socks, and shoes. She also had green hair of a shade so dark that it looked black depending on the light. A woman of ambiguous age, her hair was tied into a knot on either side of her head, and her faint, pasted-on smile was clearly designed to conceal her intentions.

Upon noticing her, Manfred raised his finger and said, “That’s right. Why the hell’s Helaine the Golden Pest even participating in this meeting, huh? This woman shouldn’t even have the qualifications to participate in the regular meetings.”

At the matching hostility from both Manfred and Toto, neither of whom bothered to hide their feelings, the woman in the suit—Helaine—scratched her cheek absently. “This lowly one surely cannot fault your logic… Ah, and the name is Golden Beetle, not Golden Pest, Mr. Manfred.”

The one who had extended a helping hand to Helaine was none other than Toto, who was still mildly puffing out tobacco smoke. As if trying to emphasize her voluptuous breasts, she crossed her arms. Giving Helaine a sidelong glance, she addressed the room. “It was I who invited her. That should be a good enough qualification to join us, yes?”

“It’s nothing but unpleasant to see these women hanging around each other, one reeking of blood, and the other of metal. You must’ve been prepared to be shunned since you bothered to show yourself here.” Clicking his tongue, Manfred threatened Helaine as he touched the tattoo on his face. “You have something to share, don’t you?”

To this vicious but hypocritical threat, Helaine broke the ice with an, “Actually…” This garnered the attention of the room. “As I am sure everyone is aware, our company has received the patronage of this city for a long time. This gift was only possible because of the daily assistance of everyone involved…”

“Enough with the pleasantries. Get to the point,” commanded Doltero.

“—Our company’s office was attacked, and the precious lives of my employees have been lost. We took for granted the harmony that your organizations grant the city, and for our under-preparedness in the face of a crisis, I can only express my shame.”

“…”

None of the Big Three took Helaine's humble, self-deprecating words at face value.

Though Helaine was ashamed of not being able to protect it herself, she was by no means as sorry as her words seemed to suggest. She was what they called a "moneylender," belonging to a company called the Golden Beetle. Her being able to participate in the regular meeting was simply a result of her having a lot of clients from the underworld.

Of course, their clients included personnel involved with the Big Three, and the Golden Beetle was an inviolable domain thanks to their patronage. No fighting and no aggression against them were unwritten rules, so if the Golden Beetle was ever threatened, these syndicates, including the Black Silver Coin, would do everything in their power to crush whoever was responsible.

And now, the guarantee of security that had been implied in that unspoken agreement had been ruptured.

She continued, "Whether it be money or human lives, we would like to avoid any further losses. And, as one who can serve as a representative of private citizens, I'd like to humbly request the swift intervention of this esteemed gathering."

"What an obvious lie," Manfred spat. "Calling yourself a representative of private citizens."

"I implore you to make haste in restoring our sense of security and peace of mind," Helaine went on. "Otherwise, the trust that has been cultivated between us and all of you will be in jeopardy."

Even as Helaine was politely lowering her head during her explanation, even Doltero couldn't help but feel disgusted by her words. The existence of the Golden Beetle itself was like a type of magic in Flanders, after all.

The Golden Beetle lent money to the underworld organizations to guarantee the safety of their operations within the city. If they were unable to do that, it was only reasonable for them to resort to methods that allowed them to get the money they had lent back.

Not a single soul here was foolish enough to brush her outlandish remarks off as being those of a mere moneylender.

“To sum it all up, the scoundrel in question brought disgrace to us, and laid hands on something that should have never been touched,” Toto began. “Vengeance must be vicious and thorough. Any objections?”

As ash fell from Toto’s pipe into the silence of her suggestion, Manfred took up the lead of the conversation to propose a course of action. “Fine by me,” he said. “We’ll find them and carve balance scales on their eyeballs. More importantly, there really are laudable idiots in the world, to try something like this. On our turf; in the Pig King’s territory, no less.”

When he’d finished speaking, Tattoo Face sent a meaningful look Doltero’s way.

“…What?”

“Nothing. It’s just that now we’ve got a guy who’s not afraid of the Pig King himself, who makes villains tremble in their boots. Perhaps times have changed? Maybe you aren’t as feared as you once were?”

“You seem to be in a hurry to have your head crushed before that scumbag does.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Manfred did not back down at Doltero’s dangerously low voice, sneering at him. “If you were truly still the man in the legends, you’d have crushed my skull before bothering to threaten me, right?”

As the meeting derailed, Toto’s scowl continued to deepen. Finally, she barked, “That’s enough!”

The one who raised a black-gloved hand to politely insert herself into the conversation was Helaine. “Now, now, please calm down, you two. Fighting like this will not result in profit for any of us. Please consider it as allowing us to save face…”

Doltero roared, “Why should I allow you to save face and let this insolent piglet off the hook?”

“That’s…ah, that’s right. I have some good news! It may even have something to do with the incident that happened recently.”

In the face of Doltero’s increasingly intimidating air, Helaine placed her hand in her breast pocket and pulled out a piece of paper.

“And what would that be?” Toto asked.

“An investigative report,” Helaine replied. “In order to do something for the surviving family members of the employees that passed away, we determined that we couldn’t simply wallow in despair. We worked tirelessly to investigate what happened.”

“Did you find anything?” asked Manfred.

“This is not yet confirmed, but…there is a possibility that this crime was committed by someone who does not know how the city works. And this reminded me of Hakuchuri’s Sword Saint.”

“…Hang on, you’re serious, aren’t you?” Manfred muttered.

The second those words had left Helaine’s mouth, chaos began to roil among those present. Even Manfred, Toto, and Doltero were no exception. However, although it seemed that no one noticed this, Doltero’s surprise had a distinctly different air to the rest of those in the room.

Hakuchuri’s Sword Saint was a disaster that even the people from the underworld trembled to mention.

Seeing that there was a possibility that this criminal had a part in it, everyone went into an uproar, prompting Helaine to quickly wave her hands. “Oh, please do not misunderstand me. We need not concern ourselves with the Sword Saint himself, but rather the young lady he brought home with him.”

“Young lady… So, that royal selection candidate, then?” Toto inquired.

“The selection battle for the throne… You mean that young chit who's just there to make up the numbers?"

Realizing that the disaster wasn't at the center of what was going on, Toto and Manfred seemed happy enough to throw themselves back into the conversation.

The royal selection was currently the biggest matter of interest for the people of the Kingdom of Lugunica. Since every member of the royal family had died due to an illness, the kingdom had announced the start of the royal selection in order to select a new ruler. One of the candidates had a base of operations in Hakuchuri, a town near Flanders. Unfortunately for her, however, she didn't even have a proper sponsor. She was just a pitiful little urchin found to make up the numbers to start the selection—common knowledge for the people of the underworld, who were sharp-eared for that kind of information.

Helaine, however, threw another piece of information into the pot, one that was worthy of causing a stir. "If this report is accurate, then it seems the aforementioned young lady has met with the Black Silver Coin."

"…"

Bringing her hands in front of her slender chest, Helaine declared cheerfully, "It also revealed that she had been extremely discourteous towards you, Mr. Doltero. If that is really the truth, then I can only call her a fool eager for the grave, but… Perhaps this was all a ploy to earn herself some popularity?" In clear contrast to the content of her speech, those listening were unable to maintain a similar state of calm.

In particular, Doltero found himself suddenly expected to explain the situation.

"Is what she just said true, Mr. Doltero?" Toto asked.

"…We had some altercations, yes. However, I've already taken care of it."

It was no different than telling them plainly, "I have no responsibility to explain the details to you." However, upon hearing that, Toto and Manfred's eyes flickered with hidden emotion as they exchanged knowing glances.

"If it's true that she had a dispute with the Black Silver Coin, the Golden Pest's words aren't something we can simply laugh off. The presumptive loser may simply be looking for a last chance at glory, reviving her candidacy by cleaning up the underworld. It's possible."

"It may only be the cute, naive rashness of a child, but this one does have the capacity to actually pull it off."

"The Sword Saint…" uttered someone in a low voice, gulping as they did.

Toto and Manfred's attention remained shifted over to the young selection candidate, ignoring Doltero, who suddenly had little to say. Never mind whether they saw her as the one responsible for their present circumstances, or whether they were interested in her on a more personal level.

"Credibility aside, shouldn't we first talk with the girl, at least?" Toto posed. "Especially since the girl in question is only a town away, and…well…she was rather cute, as I recall. A diamond in the rough, I'd wager."

"Ugh, there we go again," Manfred replied. "Your appetites repulse me. That said, we'd be remiss if we didn't pay her a visit, huh—what was she called again?"

"Hmm, let me see… If I'm not mistaken—"

Manfred absently touched the tattoo on his face as Toto gave a captivating smile, then looked at Helaine, who tilted her head at that—stealthily looking Doltero's way.

With that gesture alone, it was as if the tendrils of Helaine's nefarious nature had worked their way into his skin.

Then, without bothering to bring him up by name, Helaine smiled softly and answered, "—Lady Felt. That was her name, I believe."

2

"—Lady Felt!"

The instant she realized she wouldn't be able to evade the inevitable collision, she heard the dulcet tones of a male voice echoing toward her. Before she could react to that cry in any way, however, something collided with her forehead. With a light "plop," it sprayed her forehead in a shower of red liquid.

With the spray of red, her slender figure toppled backward. Then, without anything to break her fall, she crashed straight into the wooden crates behind her, smashing them to pieces in a large cloud of dust. Having fallen into the scattered wooden crates, the girl miraculously landed in the only spot she'd remain unharmed.

On her back, gazing up blankly at the clear, blue sky, her crimson eyes revealed no emotion. Instead, her usual air of implacable tenacity, as well as her dainty, refined features, were overtaken by the mass of red splattered over her forehead. Her gold hair, which seemed to shine like the rays of the sun itself, was also stained by it, and one couldn't help but avert their gaze at the terrible sight.

In fact, many had already averted their eyes, their shoulders giving off a slight tremble. Among them, however, was one who could not look away.

A quick burst of wind vaulted the gate to swirl around the fallen girl. No, not quite the wind, but rather a young man who had bolted toward her so quickly that one could easily mistake him for the wind.

"Lady Felt…" said the youth, down on one knee, peering at the fallen girl's face. He had a striking physical appearance—deep red hair that seemed to burn as brightly as a flame, blue eyes that seemed so clear as to have swallowed the whole blue sky in a single breath, and a handsomeness so heavenly that not even a sculptor with a lifetime of experience could replicate it.

The handsome young man's shapely eyebrows distorted with remorse as he kneeled beside her and murmured, "My deepest apologies. I…was unable to reach you in time…”

His voice was tinged with sorrow, revealing his feelings of regret and responsibility for what had happened. It looked so excessively tragic that, if put into a painting, it would be a timeless masterpiece capable of making anyone who saw it weep.

Within that scene, which seemed so detached from reality…

“—Reinhard.” As if by some miracle, the girl managed to murmur the word from amid her state of distress. And the arm, which had fallen limply to the ground before, began to rise, and little by little, her fingertips approached the face of the young man. As the young man watched with bated breath, her fingers drew inexorably close until the moment…she pinched his nose.

“Lady Felt?” came his now slightly nasal voice.

“Hey, you! Haven’t I told you to stop doing stuff like that—it totally puts me off my groove!” replied the irritated girl as she continued to pinch his nose. From that position, she stretched out her legs, brought them up, and then swung them down with enough momentum to bring herself upright. After that, she wiped off the red stuff that had stained her face with her hand. “Whoa, it’s sweet. Now that’s pretty cool. Didn’t expect that at all.”

“I am not sure if it is sanitary to lick the stuff on your face, my lady…”

“The hell you say?” she replied. “Are you implying that my face is dirty? I’m gonna kick your ass for that!”

“No, my lady’s countenance is extremely lovely. Though loveliness and hygiene are not exactly the same…”

“Ugh, enough, enough!” said the girl rudely, covering her ears. The girl—Felt—then sprang to her feet, brushed the dirt off her clothes, and hummed in thought as she looked around. “So? I gather the reason you barged in like that wasn’t just because you’re a total airhead.”

“That is correct, my lady. Though it pains me to say it, your team has lost.”

Propping a hand on her hip, Felt smacked her lips, accepting her defeat. “Hmph. Can’t be helped.” The young man—Reinhard—gave a wry smile at the sportsmanlike behavior, then passed her a cloth to wipe her face with before stepping into the middle of the square.

He then announced in a sonorous voice, “The winner of the Harvest Festival game this year is the team from the West District!”

“—!”

After a heavy moment of silence to take in this announcement, the crowd burst into an explosion of cheers. The town of Hakuchuri wasn’t all that large, but it was still amazing to see nearly every resident gathered in the town square. While wiping her head, Felt’s expression relaxed at the sight of everyone embracing each other and cheering.

“Ah, I lost, I lost, damn it!” And then, after a pause, said, “And some of you guys still have the nerve to turn your faces away!” Felt scowled in the direction of the spectators, sharply thrusting her finger at them. Everyone she was pointing at had turned away, their shoulders trembling, when she’d taken her fall.

Felt suddenly narrowed her crimson eyes at them. “Don’t bother holding back your laughter. Look at me! I look ridiculous, right?” she admitted, proudly showcasing her tometo-covered self.

And with that, a roar of laughter seemed to envelop the town square, reverberating without reserve throughout the town.

3

To the southeast of the Kingdom of Lugunica lay Hakuchuri, a town governed by House Astrea. House Astrea was famous for having produced a great number of Sword Saints, but in contrast to the Sword Saint’s clear value to the kingdom, their house received very little in the way of rewards from the royal family. The situation was related to the governing style of each generation’s head, as well as whoever bore the mighty title of Sword Saint.

In brief, as a sign of their allegiance to the kingdom, House Astrea would not use its might for anything other than serving the kingdom in times of peril and would never gain more power than was necessary to do so. And so, although they were a vital martial force for the kingdom, as far as being nobility, the territory they governed was rather unremarkable.

Hakuchuri was an ordinary town without any particularly striking characteristics. Its primary industries were agriculture and animal husbandry, and it relied on earth dragon-related jobs, which were in great demand in the nearby city of Flanders.

On this day, in the unremarkable town of Hakuchuri—as a part of celebrating their successful harvest—the traditional annual Tometo Festival was held.

During the Tometo Festival, the town split into four teams: east, west, south, and north. They would then grab tometoes from the baskets placed in the center of the town and throw them at each other. Those who got hit were out, and the game continued until only one team was left standing. In other words, this was the source of Felt's unfortunate tometo-splattered face.

And so Felt, playing for the eastern team, had been defeated in a final decisive battle with the player on the western team, concluding the Tometo Festival with the western team being declared the victor.

Felt, as the last one left standing on her team, could not help but feel frustrated. Well, it's not just because I'm annoyed by my loss, but…

"What do you think secured your victory today?" asked the mayor.

"Daily training and strict adherence to a healthy life of service," came the small voice of one of the western team's winners.

"Meanwhile, you stayed up all night, Lady Felt…" Reinhard lamented softly.

"Oh shut up!" she retorted. "It was the night before the festival;

there was no way I could sleep! So what?”

Standing up on the winner’s podium, receiving the Tometo Medal from the town’s mayor, were the twin girls who’d led the western team to victory with Felt’s crushing defeat. They had pink hair, their bodies even more childlike than Felt’s own small frame. The two girls, still in their early teens, were called Flam and Grassis—chamberlains of House Astrea, who had taken the pissed off Felt in. To make a long story short, it was a case of “subordinates overthrowing their masters.”

Felt had been on track to win the Tometo Festival at the end by utilizing her talents, but had suffered defeat at the last moment thanks to the twins’ killer technique.

“What the heck was that last move?!” Felt demanded. “Are there three of you?”

“Certainly not, my lady. It was simply a matter of me moving back and forth with great speed, you see.”

“The Reverse Flip Sideways Jump-Back.”

“I can’t believe I lost to such a ridiculous move…” Felt lamented.

After them, Felt received a Consolation Medal from the second-place platform with drooped shoulders, feeling crestfallen. Though she was feeling a sense of defeat right now, it would be fair to say that the Tometo Festival itself had been a great success. She got a sense of accomplishment from looking down at the townspeople from her high vantage point on the podium.

The success of the town’s small festival was truly a cause for joy. At first, there had been a lot of controversy about whether members of House Astrea, including Felt, would participate. For over ten years, the town’s ruler, House Astrea, had seemingly distanced itself from it, forgoing any participation in any of its festivities. And yet, just as it seemed to be business as usual this time around…

“Hm? What’s wrong with that? It sounds fun. Why don’t we do it?” Felt succinctly said when it was explained to her. And so, after an absence of 10 years, House Astrea decided to join in the festivities once again.

The festival didn't really have any strict rules originally, but because Felt and company were participating this time, they had to make some changes. In particular was the division of teams; typically, participants broke up into four groups based roughly on where they lived on the town map. However, since House Astrea didn't really fall into any of them, organizers weren't sure where to place them. So, they eventually decided to divide the members of House Astrea among each of the four teams: Felt in the east, Flam and Grassis in the west, Old Man Rom and Rachins in the north, and Gaston and Camberley in the south, making it a fair enough division to start the festival.

"Well, the condition was that Reinhard couldn't participate. If he did, no one would have stood a chance… Which makes sense, considerin' what he did last year."

The Sword Saint, with his overwhelming power, would have annihilated anyone in his way at the Tometo Festival. With him in the mix, the city's inhabitants would have quickly been covered in tometoes, bringing the festival to a swift end. That would have been a major deviation from the festival's main purpose, for people to relax and have a good time.

"Anyway, after all the fuss about participatin' or not, it's a good thing we did, right?" asked Felt, glancing to the side with a wry smile, simultaneously wiping away her sense of defeat along with the tometo.

Reinhard nodded in agreement to the girl with the prominent fang at his side. "I was honestly worried it would make things awkward and cause needless problems for everyone…"

"You were worried over nothing," chided Felt. "Listen to me more carefully next time."

"Yes. But next time…no, nevermind." Reinhard stopped mid-sentence, as if reconsidering what he was about to say.

Perturbed, Felt glared at the tall man. “What were you trying to say?” she pressed. “If you have something to say, just say it. It feels gross when you keep it to yourself.”

“…I’d appreciate it if we held the next one in a format where I can also take part. Just watching makes me feel a little…”

“…lonely?” Felt supplied the answer casually, but Reinhard’s eyes remained downcast. Her eyes widened as she took in his words. It was surprising because it was him who had said it.

Even if he was kept out of the loop, he would have just watched with a smile, she thought, reproaching herself for having had such a selfish impression.

However, as if to directly contradict Felt’s reflections, Reinhard shook his head and said, “No, I’m just not the type of person who can be content just watching. I’d really like to move my body too.”

“You’re just a sore loser, aren’t you? You were the one who suggested that you shouldn’t take part. So next time, do you wanna participate with your hands and feet bound in chains and make it a rule that you can’t touch any tometoes with your hands?”

“That’s it?”

“What do you mean ‘That’s it’? That’s psychotic! And if you want to join, tell me beforehand. This year’s festival is almost over, ain’t it?”

In any event, Felt was at a loss due to how bad Reinhard was at articulating his desires. When it came to snide remarks about her daily attitude, he had no problem doling them out one after another.

“Oh…?” Amid her foul mood, Felt raised her eyebrows at something she saw in the corner of her eye. At the back of the crowd of city dwellers surrounding the podium, there was a familiar mother and daughter. The mother, beautiful and young, was holding a baby with golden curls. The two were Kalifa and Ilya, whom Felt’s party had met two months ago because of a certain incident. The mother and daughter had moved to Hakuchuri to escape a difficult situation, and Felt had arranged for them to live and work at a ranch there. From the looks of it, it seemed that they had not taken part in throwing tometoes, but their expressions suggested that they were enjoying the festival nonetheless.

However, what caught Felt's eye wasn't that heartwarming sight. It was…

"That Gaston… Looks like somebody's enjoying himself," Felt muttered.

Not far off from the pleasant picture of Kalifa cradling Ilya in her arms was a large man with a perpetually fierce expression—Gaston. He was a man under Felt's employment, but his face as he spoke to Kalifa displayed shameless devotion; his fondness for her was amusingly transparent. Nevertheless, it appeared to Felt that Kalifa was not averse to it.

"Come to think of it, Gaston worked pretty hard for the southern team today."

Reinhard had noticed the same scene and gave his opinion, having acted as a referee for the festival. "Unfortunately, he didn't make it to the end, but he did quite well. He's gradually learning the Flow Method, so I'm looking forward to seeing what he can do in the future."

"Is that what you've been teaching them recently?" questioned Felt. "So, how did Camberley do? They were on the same team, right?"

"Quite soon after the event began, Camberley was thrown headfirst into a box of tometoes. It is a rare thing to see someone covered so entirely in tometo juice. "

"Oh. Right."

Though on the same team, the results of Gaston and Camberley were like night and day. But the difference could probably be attributed to one having someone they wished to show off to.

"I guess you could say my defeat was due to Old Man Rom being on a different team," Felt said primly.

"I think you're giving Master Rom a bit too much credit…but I'm sure having him in our camp will prove to be beneficial for the royal selection."

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Old Man Rom is amazing. You're startin' to get it now, ain't ya?"

The essence of the story aside, Felt was in a good mood after hearing praise for her Old Man Rom. If the Tometo Festival could finish here, on such a good note, and move on to the closing ceremony, that would be great, but…

Reinhard's hushed voice cautioned, "Lady Felt."

"…I know. I can see him." Felt crossed her arms and drew her chin back in defiance. In an instant, the atmosphere between the mistress and knight changed as they caught sight of something.

An uninvited visitor, out of place in this lively festive atmosphere.

"Let's move somewhere else," ordered Felt. "Leave the closing of the festival to the mayor."

"As you wish, my lady. Please leave your personal safety to me."

Rolling her eyes, Felt stepped down from the podium, not letting her inner frustration show on her face. Then, with Reinhard in tow, she strode off to a place away from the hustle and bustle of people, eventually arriving at an empty meadow.

"Look, there's no one around, so hurry up and show yourself."

"I'm sorry to have interrupted your fun. But the quicker we talk, the better."

In the meadow on the outskirts of town, the figure appeared at Felt's call.

The man in the slender black suit had a sharp, serpentine look about him—Felt recognized those creepy, snake-like eyes.

"You're from the Black Silver Coin, right? Your name was…"

“My name is Safis, and I’m very sorry I didn’t have time to say hello to you the other day,” the snake-eyed man—proclaiming to be Safis—greeted them politely, causing Felt to snort. She was mocking him rather brazenly, but in truth, no love was lost between them. After all, this man was the mastermind behind the incident involving Kalifa and Ilya two months ago.

“Didn’t you die when Pig-Nose punched your lights out last time? Good job surviving.”

“I was saved by the generosity of the Boss. Now I’m working like a dog to regain the trust I’ve lost. Naturally, I also lost my position as an officer.”

“That’s great. It would’ve been even better if you had lost your head too,” Felt barked without remorse.

“That’s going too far, my lady. Although I too have my own opinions about him,” said Reinhard, always quick to rebuke his mistress’s speech and conduct, though he himself had little positive to say about their interloper.

“Mr. Safis, the relationship between you and Lady Felt is far from good. Even if Master Rom and Mr. Doltero are on friendly terms, I personally can’t condone having a lengthy conversation with you.”

“I’m already aware that you both dislike me. That’s obvious. But I did not come to harass you two. I have a message from the Boss.”

“From Pig-Nose…?” Felt pondered Safis’s words, whose veil of superficial politeness had yet to break.

The Pig King Doltero—Leader of the Black Silver Coin syndicate—was in fact, Ilya’s birth father. However, to distance himself from Kalifa and Ilya, the man declared that he had no wife or child. That was why Felt despised him enough to never forgive him. But that was just her personal opinion. If he had something to tell them, she had no right to stop him—

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but this message has nothing to do with a certain mother and child.”

Disappointed and irritated on their behalf, Felt snapped, “Tch! Then what is it? I have nothing left to say to you.”

Safis seemed unconcerned by her anger and merely continued, “Now, now, don’t say that. Lady Felt, are you aware of the events currently causing a ruckus in Flanders?”

“No idea. I haven’t been in Flanders since I was with you guys.”

“I am aware of your efforts in the past few weeks, Lady Felt. The way the inhabitants of Hakuchuri treat their lord has improved considerably. For better or worse.”

Folding her arms, Felt curled her lips in annoyance. “Quit speakin’ like everything has a profound meaning behind it.”

For the past two months, she had been actively making contact with the residents of Hakuchuri, not only at the Tometo Festival, and showed a willingness to get closer with them. It certainly sounded calculating when said that way, but she was ultimately just doing what she wanted, regardless of the impact on her reputation.

“Not that I’m soft-hearted enough to be creeped out by it, but you’re still a perverted bastard for spying like that, you know?”

“Spying, you say? Hardly. After all, if I had any kind of malicious intent—even a dirty look—it would not have escaped the attention of the Sword Saint. Am I wrong?”

“Exactly right,” Felt said haughtily. “So, if you’re done playin’ around, may I ask what exactly is going on in Flanders?”

“Hmmm… I can only say that several organizations have been targeted, including the Black Silver Coin. Anything more than that, you’ll have to find that out for yourself.”

Despite the arrogance in his speech being a clear attempt to rile her up, it conversely helped Felt regain her composure. Having grown up in the slums of the royal capital, she was sensitive to these petty tricks. The fact that Safis’s words had a slight hint of anger and a dab of truth behind them was also quite clear to her.

At any rate, it didn't seem he had come here for idle chatter. She decided to investigate his implications on her own later.

"Well, fine. I'll bite. So, what's the message?"

"Including the recent contact with the Black Silver Coin, Your Ladyship's reputation isn't great within our circles. In particular, besides the Black Silver Coin, the Flower Prison Garden and The Balance have been wanting to learn more about you. I've been told by the Boss to inform you of a possible courtesy visit from them soon."

"By 'courtesy visit,' you mean…"

Safis merely narrowed his serpentine eyes in response to Reinhard's question, giving no other answer. That alone was enough to tell them that the "courtesy visit" was not all it seemed to be.

"In the end, you're saying that that Pig-Nose's underlings are coming after me because they don't like me? I don't know why you'd warn me instead of stopping them."

"The Boss also has his position to think of. Just like last time, it won't be a light thing for him to give his support to the cause. Besides, the two organizations I just mentioned aren't subordinate groups of the Black Silver Coin. Sad though it is to say."

"…For now I'll just listen to what you have to say." Felt waved her hands vaguely in response to Safis's reasoning, perhaps because it was the way things were done in the underworld. Then, as she clenched her hand into a tight fist, she said, "I'll accept Pig-Nose's… Doltero's advice. You go back home to your menial job. If some douchebag comes to say hello, then bring it on."

"I'll protect Lady Felt, no matter what tricks they throw at us," Reinhard boldly announced by Felt's side.

In response to these words, Felt straightened, suddenly an imposing figure in her own right, even as she made no move to deny Reinhard's vow.

Despite having the strongest Sword Saint at her side, her stance did not indicate the slightest trace of dependance on the martial prowess he possessed.

“I see. The number of chinks in your armor has certainly decreased. It seems that the boss was right,” said the man, who stared at the two figures while licking his lips with his long, slender tongue.

4

“Oh, you wanna know what’s happen’n in Flanders? Everybody knows that. They’re all sayin’ that the Black Silver Coin or Big Three or whatever are gettin’ the crap beat out of ‘em.”

The man who answered Felt’s question with his tongue sticking out was the slender-faced Rachins. Like Gaston, Rachins was under Felt’s employment. Considering the competition, he could be considered quite clever, but only when compared to Gaston and Camberley.

This exchange between Rachins and Felt took place at Astrea Manor after they had retired from the Tometo Festival. Back in the mansion, where each resumed their daily routines, Felt called Rachins into the lounge and began her story over a game of Shatranj.

Rachins, the wisest of the Three Idiots and a frequent visitor to Flanders, lived up to Felt’s expectations beautifully. Satisfied with his response, she moved a piece on the board and urged him to continue his story. “What are the details?” she asked.

“Well, for the past month or so, big shots from those syndicates that run Flanders on the down low have been offed one after the other. Nobody knows who did it or why, but the word is that when the culprits are caught, there’ll be hell to pay. Hard to believe there’s someone crazy enough to stir up that viper’s nest.”

“So that’s what you mean when you say they’re gettin’ beat. But I don’t understand why the Black Silver Coin warned me regardin’ the incident.”

“The Black Silver Coin warned you?” Rachins repeated with a heavy dose of skepticism.

Move your pieces, and try to steal your opponent’s pieces. Win by invading the opponent’s camp and toppling their king. These were the basic rules of Shatranj.

As they talked, Felt fiddled with the pieces she had taken with her fingertips, while Rachins contemplated something at length. It most likely had nothing to do with his next move in Shatranj, but rather careful deliberation over the content of their conversation.

Sitting cross-legged on her chair, Felt patiently waited for an answer. Then, after a few minutes, Rachins dropped the hand he had been holding to his chin and said, “Hey, Boss Lady. You’ve got yourself a big ol’ problem.”

“A problem?”

“If you’re not careful, they’ll suspect you of havin’ tried to set ‘em up the last time. You’ve had tussles with the Black Coins before. They’ll be liable to think that you’re out to get ‘em.”

“Huh? What’s with that accusation… That was all about Ilya before, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, and Doltero prob’ly knows that, but it’s not somethin’ he can make public. That’s why he’s tryin’ to be smart about it by givin’ you a heads-up.”

“Draggin’ us into it isn’t being smart about it.” Scratching her gold hair nervously, Felt had a sudden awareness of the awful situation she had been put in.

Rachins raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“What?” asked Felt.

“Oh, nothin’. Just thinkin’ you actually believed me. You do understand that all of that was just guessin’ on my part, right?”

“I was the one who asked you. If I asked your opinion and then gave you shit about it, it would mean that I have a really bad personality… Anyway, it makes sense, doesn't it? I'd be more surprised if you were just makin' this up as you go."

If he can make up such a convincing story on the fly like that, he should just use his talent to write a book. But looking at him leaning back in his chair and resting his cheek on his hand, it seemed safe to believe that he wasn't making it all up.

"So what are you gonna do? How is our royal selection candidate going to explain it to these guys?"

"Why do I have to be the one to make excuses? In the first place, I don't have anything to make excuses about. I also can't talk about Ilya and her mother."

"That's why they warned you to find a way somehow."

"…"

Felt pursed her lips and made the most unpleasant face she could muster. Seeing this, Rachins puffed out his cheeks and moved a piece on the board. "There you go, checkmate."

"Ah! Oh, you're kiddin' me. Even though I was winning?!"

"I was just makin' it look that way. You think too straightforward, boss; you should try an' hide your plans a bit better."

A strike by Rachins had left Felt's King with no escape route. Standing up, she looked at the Shatranj board from different angles, but she was trapped. It was a complete defeat.

"As if I'd admit defeat to someone who's just started learnin'. Though I'll admit that y'er a quick learner."

"Heh heh heh… Just remember this. Next time, I'll have you beggin' for mercy."

While Felt lamented her defeat and idly envisioned her King being burned at the stake, the winner, Rachins, got up from his seat in a thoroughly good mood. "I'll never say no to whippin' you at Shatranj, but you need to think about how you're gonna get through this. You should also bear in mind that their ‘courtesies’ are seriously dangerous.”

With these words, Rachins waved his hand over his shoulder and left.

In the lounge, left with some advice and a defeat, Felt scratched her nose. “If they send a greeting my way, then I’ll have something to say to them: Don’t drag us into your fuckin’ fight.”

5

Having collected the evidence regarding the incident in Flanders and listened to Rachins’s opinions, Felt was practically chomping at the bit for this “courtesy call.”

If a fight was going to happen, Felt would always rather be the one picking it. This was something she had learned in the slums—when the helpless got bullied, there was a reason for it. In most cases, Felt had learned, it was because they never got a win. Therefore, she would win, no matter what.

With such strong resolution, she was raring to go to get this “courtesy call” over with, but…

“Nobody’s frickin’ here!”

On this peaceful afternoon several days following the Tometo Festival, Felt’s anger finally exploded. In the room she had been confined to—otherwise known as her office—there was a mountain of reference books. These were handpicked by Reinhard every single day. As a candidate for the royal selection, it was undeniable that she was inferior to the other candidates in terms of knowledge. And it was true that she would have to work hard to catch up. However, no matter how many books she finished reading, there was always another. It was entirely reasonable that even the ever-ambitious Felt would throw in the towel. But precisely because the selection was so important, a “courtesy call” from an underworld organization was her biggest concern at the moment. And yet, no matter how long she waited, there was no sign of it happening.

"Day in, day out, I sit in my house starin' at books… My head's going to start growing mold."

As Felt was pouting her lips in frustration, a soft, tutting voice sounded from behind her. "Such language. What's not to like about uneventful days? Now me, I'll take a boring day over an eventful one every time, with open arms."

In response, Felt leaned back against her office desk and let out a purr.

Normally Felt, who was harsh to everyone, only showed a softer response to either those younger than her or otherwise to old and trusted acquaintances. And with the exception of young children, those lucky enough to receive her favor were naturally limited.

Sitting on her desk, Felt tilted her head and said, "You know what they say, if you're bored for too long, you'll grow senile. Are you sure you're okay with that, Old Man Rom?"

Even while sitting on the floor, his head still sat level with hers. The bald giant waved his hand dismissively. "Are you pullin' my leg?" he asked with a chuckle. "Don't you worry, I've been swamped with work nonstop since I came to this house. It seems that the mayor has been in charge of the estate in the absence of the young Sword Saint."

"You do like to beat about the bush, Old Man Rom. You tryin' to say he's abusing his position, doing something evil on the sly?"

In Felt's mind, the image of the mayor on the festival platform came to mind. He had a heavy build with a kind face—certainly not the sort of person who would line his own pockets.

"The opposite, actually. Apparently, that family is too good-natured and are taken advantage of all over the place. And it's not the first time either…both the previous head of the family and the one before that seem to have been too kind-hearted for their own good."

"The previous one, you mean… Reinhard's grandfather?"

"No, the one before him…his great-grandfather. The head of the family is still supposed to be that young one's father. That's another thing that gives me a headache…"

"Great-grandfather… Now that you mention it, Reinhard said something about that before. Something about respecting him or what not."

Felt was relieved that, according to Old Man Rom's words, there seemed to be no need to doubt the mayor's goodwill. However, it would be pretty terrible if he heard that he was being referred to in private as a bit of a doormat.

The documents that Old Man Rom was going through one after another were filled with reports and figures and so on, and were nothing but gibberish to her. He was now working with Reinhard and the mayor, and doing his best to improve the situation somehow, but…

"The Black Silver Coin is a matter of concern too, of course, but our own house needs your attention. If we don't have at least one person who can manage our internal affairs properly, it's only going to get harder from here on out."

"Why not you?"

"Unfortunately, I'm too underqualified. Even if it's just a desk job we're talking about, it's still different from my field of expertise," replied Old Man Rom as he stroked Felt's lowered head with his large palm. Closing her eyes in contentment at the familiar touch, Felt quietly puzzled over what was going on. If Old Man Rom is complaining about it, then it's obvious that there's a problem with the so-called internal administration. It all came down to a need for more personnel, but Felt didn't know how to deal with that.

It would be wrong to pick them all off the streets, like what she did with Rachins and the rest—although for a moment, she thought she might have found the right answer with the 'streets' idea.

"Ah, I don't get it! Why can't my problems just come one at a time, damn it!"

"Watch that mouth, now. You'll have a lot to think about from now on, but at least your appetite never suffers. That hasn't changed since we were in the slums."

"That's true, but… I've got an idea!" She had been pouting at Old Man Rom's sermon before her eyes suddenly lit up. She kicked her chair enthusiastically and leapt lightly over the pile of books on her office desk. Her petite body landed on the lap of the surprised Old Man Rom, and she looked up into his face from below.

"Don't startle me like that. Well, what brilliant idea did you just think of?"

"I'm talking about how I'm an idiot! This isn't the time to be complaining about too many problems at once. Why are we just waiting so patiently? All I have to do is go there myself." Pressing the back of her head against Old Man Rom's chest, Felt laughed at her bright idea.

She assumed that she had to wait because she was told in advance that there would be a "courtesy call," but that was her first mistake. Why should I wait patiently at someone else's convenience? she thought. "If they want to 'visit' me, I can just go and approach them myself. Wouldn't wanna make those busy folks come all the way out here, now would we?"

Old Man Rom made a face at Felt's aggressive idea. "Hmm… If you were going alone, I'd tell you to reconsider." He may have been emotionally opposed to the idea, but he couldn't find any reason to hold back his bold granddaughter.

In between feeling sorry for causing worry and the feeling of satisfaction with being cared for, Felt said one last word to make the final push to Old Man Rom. "I know it ain't safe to go to their hideout. That's why I'm takin' Reinhard with me. I mean, I'll still go on my own if he refuses, but…"

"For goodness sake… I sometimes wonder exactly who you take after." Sighing with resignation, Old Man Rom plopped his hand affectionately on Felt's head once more.

They had known each other for a long time, after all. When she had this look on her face, he knew she wouldn’t budge no matter what. When that happened, the most Old Man Rom could do was to help pave the way for her. In this case, it was to persuade a certain someone to keep her out of harm’s way.

As if to express just exactly how much he opposed the idea, Old Man Rom’s sigh was long and deep.

6

“Try to avoid doing anything dangerous. Do not leave my side unless absolutely necessary.”

“I got it, jeez. I’m getting an earache, for cryin’ out loud.”

Reinhard, her escort, had repeated the warning so often that she could almost see it in her dreams. He told me the same thing when we visited the hideout of the Black Silver Coin before, but where does he think I grew up? The slums of the royal capital weren’t exactly the safest of places, either.

“Every city, every land has places where normal laws don’t apply. I’m not saying you should avoid those places specifically, but… please refrain from lowering your guard just because you’re used to them.”

Taking in how little Felt seemed to be interested in heeding his warnings, Reinhard let his lecture falter off. He had no intention of insulting her, of course, and she could see nothing but concern for herself in his blue eyes. Chastened, Felt reluctantly grunted her assent.

Felt and Reinhard were currently on their way to the Earth Dragon Capital, Flanders.

After following Safis’s advice to wait patiently at their residence for this elusive “courtesy call,” they had grown tired of that and decided to take matters into their own hands.

To be honest, she had her suspicions that the whole thing was a fabrication by Safis, and that this was his way of getting back at her for exposing his previous plots. But after some probing, Felt found it to be true that her reputation wasn't the best within the city's underworld.

In order to find out what was going on in the area, she tried probing around Flanders, but…

"Heeey, what are you doing? A regular to this place has come all this way to show you around. Quit gettin' yourselves lost and follow me!" exclaimed Camberley, giving a wave as he looked back at Felt and the others who had been left behind.

The last of the Three Idiots—the tiny Camberley—was indeed a regular visitor to the city of Flanders. He and Rachins frequently traveled to a certain district within the city, as it was only a half a day away.

And that district was precisely where Felt and her team were heading.

"But, man, never know where life's going to take ya. To think that I'd be bringing a knight and his mistress to the red-light district," Camberley said nonchalantly, his arms folded behind his head.

"…"

Hearing his declaration, Reinhard gave a strained smile, which amused Felt.

"…Lady Felt, what have I done to deserve that look?"

"Hm? Oh, nothin'. I just thought it was funny how the great knight among knights makes such an awkward expression whenever the red-light district is mentioned. Ironic, since I bet that face of yours would be very popular there, after all."

At Felt's impish grin showing her fang, Reinhard merely kept his silence with a world-weary sigh.

They were taken by Camberley to a section of Flanders that was classified as a nightlife district—commonly known as the red-light district. The streets were full of lasciviously dressed women, and men who ogled and scoffed at them.

In a nutshell, the red-light district was a district of brothels, interspersed with scenes of customers who desired such services and the prostitutes who catered to their needs, interacting in front of their shops.

Fire Time had already ended, and Water Time was about to begin. As the full-blown night approached, the streets of the red-light district were filled with the glimmering light of crystal lamps. Men intoxicated with the decadent, out-of-this-world magical ambience were lured to bed for a single night's dream.

However, it was not only the male clients who were dreaming in the red-light district tonight.

Idly, Reinhard murmured, "I often wondered why Camberley and the rest frequently vanished off to Flanders."

"Well, that's just not bein' very observant," Felt retorted. "Since Gaston never went with them, you can easily imagine what they would be coming here to do. But still…"

"—?"

The well-mannered Reinhard seemed oblivious to it, but Felt was already getting sick of all of the intense stares being directed at them.

Many of the gazes directed at Reinhard were by those same women who were the stars of the red-light district. Every day, these women captivated many men with their beauty, but at Reinhard's appearance, suddenly their positions had been reversed.

The sight of Reinhard's leisurely stride, taking in the atmosphere as he went, seemed to have an allure that made it difficult for the veteran night flowers to take their eyes off him. And because he was standing beside Felt with even greater vigilance than usual, the reproachful glances directed at her were also quite intense.

On rare occasions, Felt also seemed to catch the eye of men who had come to find a lover. For this, however, she had a simple response.

“Grrrrrrr,” she growled.

When she poured her disgust and enmity into her glares, that was enough to scare most of them away. But as there was no real harm beyond making Reinhard a little uncomfortable, he had no choice but to put up with it.

With Reinhard in such a complicated state, Felt left Camberley to lead the way and headed towards the interior of the red-light district. After all, they hadn’t come to this street for fun.

“But is the leader of an organization like the Black Silver Coin really in the red-light district?”

Camberley scoffed. “You don’t get it, do you, Miss? In any town, it’s a given that the big movers in the underworld take charge of the upkeep of the brothels. The Flower Prison Garden is just the one in charge of this red-light district, that’s all.”

And this Flower Prison Garden that Camberley talks about is one of the Big Three, just like the Black Silver Coin, huh.

Although she was still a bit incredulous at this explanation, Felt had no choice but to follow the guidance of Camberley for now. After all, he was a frequent visitor and knew his way around. In fact, his boasts about being a regular here were seemingly not lies, as he was often approached by prostitutes on the street.

“You’re a dwarf, aren’t you? No offense, but can you even satisfy a partner?”

“Of course. It all depends on your technique. They don’t call me the playboy of the red-light district for nothin’.”

“And…you want them to call you that?” Felt was taken aback when the boastful Camberley responded in such a way, his small nose raised with pride.

Reinhard, meanwhile, remained silent with a difficult expression on his face. “You sure know a lot, Lady Felt. In the slums, did you…”

“Even in the royal capital, brothels exist. When I was a kid, the prostitutes used to give me food and their kindness. Though…it got harder to stay close with them as I grew older.”

Even if the women in the brothel had no intention of doing so, the shop owners carried suspicious glints in their eyes for fresh meat. If the prostitutes who had treated her well there had not secretly told her of the unspoken danger she faced, she might have been forced to join their ranks. In that sense, the red-light district of Flanders was much more well-ordered. In the royal capital, perhaps precisely because the leadership was too concerned with appearances to ever get their hands dirty, they kept turning a blind eye to it, and lawlessness was allowed to reign there.

“I see. If so, I am glad to hear it,” Reinhard replied, appearing relieved at her response.

What the hell was he thinkin’ to make him feel relieved? thought Felt.

“We’re here,” Camberley said after coming to a stop, before any further conclusions could be drawn. “This is where the proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden sets up shop.”

The sight that greeted Felt and her friends was the most luxurious brothel at the far end of the red-light district. Even from the shop’s interior, you could tell that it was of a different class from the other brothels from the stately arrangement of its alluring exterior.

Although the woman in question could not be seen from the outside, it was possible to perceive the presence of the kind of wicked charm that could easily seduce and beguile. A strong man stood guard in front of the shop, on the lookout for tactless people who might be drawn to it.

“…Right. This is actually pretty impressive,” commented Felt. “Shall we just go straight on in?”

“We are uninvited guests,” replied Reinhard cautiously, apparently hoping to dull Felt’s enthusiasm. “Since we are unlikely to receive a warm welcome, we should be careful…”

But their conversation was interrupted in the next moment by a voice that came between them.

“Wh-…wh-wh-what? Y-Y-You are! How can you be here?!” The cracked voice was trembling with surprise, anger, and inexplicably a certain degree of joy as well. It was high-pitched, partly because it had cracked, but that slight heaviness of the voice was certainly that of a man.

While a man’s voice ringing out in the street wasn’t exactly welcomed in the red-light district, what was even more undesirable was the action that immediately followed it.

“…”

At his sudden shout, Felt turned to see the man—or rather, dwarf—who had appeared at the entrance to the brothel. The figure was roughly the same height as Camberley, with a sharp countenance and an outstretched finger thrust in their direction. Felt saw a faint light concentrate on his outstretched fingertips, distorting the air around them. It was at that moment that she realized he was using magic.

“Lady Felt!” cried Reinhard from her side, moving quickly to place himself between her and the threat. Then, just as the dwarf man was blocked from Felt’s view, a light exploded.

And with that, the air of the red-light district of Flanders rang out with a cacophony of panicked screams and shouts of rage.

7

The moment the light exploded, Felt’s eardrums were assaulted by screams and hollers from all around. Still crouched where she had ducked to avoid the blast, she clicked her tongue in irritation.

“What the hell just happened?”

Straining her eyes in the twinkling white light, all she could see was an array of confused, fleeing figures with their heads in their hands—all men who had come to the red-light district to buy a dream for a night.

In the confusion that erupted from the sudden burst of light, sending men scattering in the illuminated streets, the prostitutes who resided here remained unfazed. These were women for whom sensual pleasures were tools of the trade, and trouble was common—none of them even batted an eye.

Some dropped down on all fours, some ran into the shop, and some skillfully used nearby men as shields. In this respect, Felt saw obvious differences between the sexes in their ability to comprehend and react to sudden dangerous situations.

In fact, Felt would also like to praise herself for handling the situation much more admirably than her companion Camberley, who simply stood stock-still as if waiting to be bowled over. However, her achievements faded when compared to Reinhard, who had the source of light grasped in the palm of his hand, shielding her from possible danger. “Are you alright, my lady?”

Felt looked up at the red-haired knight standing before her. “Yeah, I’m fine. Seems like you’ve learned your lesson from the Tometo Festival,” she said with a smirk, referring to the way he’d overreacted at the harmless tometo in the past.

Reinhard let out a wry smile, but despite his apparent humility, that movement was by far the fastest Felt had ever seen him perform. That scene must have been that shocking to him.

“Excuse me, my lady, please wait here for a moment,” he said, and upon confirming Felt’s safety, his figure instantly blurred.

In the blink of an eye, the knight appeared ten meters away and leapt at the dwarf at the entrance to the brothel—the culprit behind the magical attack.

The small man gawked at his frightening speed. “Wai-, what? Ah! W-Wait! I haven’t done anyth—”

“I’m sorry, but you made the first move. So I’m going to have to take you down,” Reinhard informed him in a cold voice he had never used with Felt.

“Gunu! That’s true, but… Ei! Then at least!”

Seeing Reinhard’s indifference to his pleas, the small man’s face reddened and he thrust both hands out toward Reinhard. A moment later, powerful mana swirled around his hands, attempting to warp the natural order of the world…

“Huh? Wait, what the… My mana’s formation is unraveling… Aahhhh!”

With the desired effect not taking place, Reinhard knocked the bewildered man to the ground. As he was even shorter than Felt, it looked to all the world like an adult bullying a child.

Even so, Reinhard mercilessly twisted the small man’s arm further.

“Ouch! Ouch, ouch, ouch! Wait, wait, wait, it’ll break! It’s going to break!”

“In that case, I would rather you stopped your vain attempts at resistance. The fact that you attempted harm upon my esteemed lady will not change, but I still have no desire to hurt you.”

“You think I’m going to believe you when you’ve got me pinned by the elbow, neck and wrist?! In the first place, what just happened with my mana…I see! You have an Excess Mana Circulation Constitution …?!”

“…”

Reinhard was taken aback by the odd, complex terminology coming from the small man while his arms were locked. Taking note of his reaction, Felt butted in. “Hey, let’s hear him out,” she said. “Just keep him restrained for now, Reinhard. He didn’t actually hurt anyone, right?”

“True, and I’m sure things will settle down momentarily as his spell was just a cheap parlor trick.”

This earned a slightly bitter scowl from Felt. “Coming from you, I’m sure it was ‘just a parlor trick’, but let’s not say that right to his face, huh?”

From Reinhard's perspective, it was true that anyone with less mana or strength than him may look like vermin, but even vermin had their own pride.

But at Felt's rebuke, he shook his head. "Excuse me, my lady, but I did mean 'parlor trick' in the sense that it is a common tactic designed to confuse and deceive. There was no killing intent behind that spell just now."

"You mean that glowing light was just a scare tactic?"

"Yes, my lady. But that doesn't mean I can ignore the act of malice committed in your vicinity…"

Satisfied with Reinhard's explanation, Felt nodded in acceptance. With her assent, the Sword Saint looked down at the back of the small man's head, ready to hold him responsible for his reckless action.

"Yeah, that's right! Don't let him get away with it, Reinhard! Make that ungrateful bastard sorry he ever woke up this morning! Go get him!!"

The one yelling in their direction so assertively was Camberley, who had finally managed to come to his senses in the wake of the chaos.

Despite having been like a scarecrow during the initial attack, he seemed to have recovered completely. Even so, Felt couldn't approve of his jumping straight into the conflict only to act like a petty small-time villain. She then noticed something. "Hey, Camberley. You just called this guy an 'ungrateful bastard.' So I take it you know him?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, I know him. You're real sharp, Miss," Camberley replied with a sour expression as he crossed his arms. "I think it was, hmm…about ten days ago. I saw this guy wandering around town, penniless. And we're both dwarves, right? I thought, hey, this is probably some kind of fate, you know? So I got this good-for-nothing set up with a sweet job. And then, look at how he acts, after all I did! Can you believe that?"

Clearly harboring a grudge, the small man scowled relentlessly at the sour-faced Camberley. “I was only penniless in the first place because you got me drunk till I passed out and took money from my pocket to pay for the drinks! And after all that, you tricked me and abandoned me here in the red-light district!”

As to which side of the argument was more credible, there seemed to be no need for debate—this was a can of worms Felt thought she was better off simply not opening.

“In other words, it was Camberley you were after, not me?” Felt ventured.

“Naturally—I have no idea who you are. Although it is of course my fault for surprising you like that. It was unmannerly of me…”

“And there you have it,” said Felt, idly rubbing the back of her neck, as she saw no need for further punishment toward someone so meek and honest. “Let him go, Reinhard.”

Reinhard gave a quick utterance of “My lady,” in assent and released the small man’s arm.

The attitude of the lord and her retainer astonished both Camberley and the small man.

“Wha… You’re going to let me go?”

“Yeah, man! What’s with you two? Didn’t you hear what I said? I’m telling you—he’s a bad guy!”

“You’re the one who’s clearly bad here. I actually feel sorry for this guy,” Felt snapped at her errant retainer, indicating the small man as he got to his feet.

Felt sympathized with the small man. He was extorted by Camberley and offered a job he did not want in the red-light district. His resentment had been building ever since, so it’s no wonder that he lost his cool the minute Camberley appeared in front of him.

“But what’s done is done. You caused all this mess, so what do you plan to do about it?”

Although he had escaped a severe punishment from Reinhard, the fact that he had been a nuisance to the people of the red-light district had not changed. Naturally, it had probably had an impact on the business of the surrounding brothels, too.

“Ugh…! I-I understand. I, too, am an adult who can take responsibility for my actions. I’ll fix the mess I’ve caused here somehow and return the town to its usual atmosphere of deplorable hedonistic lust and depravity!”

“Would you mind your tongue? What a rude person, you are,” came a lilting voice from within the brothel.

“Wha-!”

The boisterous enthusiasm of the small man was snuffed out in an instant. It was the sight of the figure standing in the entrance to the brothel—the owner of such a sweet voice—that stopped him in his tracks.

“…Wow.” When Felt turned around and saw the person, she couldn’t help but let out an unconscious murmur of stunned appreciation.

The character that had appeared was a stunning young woman, suffused in a sinfully enticing aura and possessed of an unparalleled beauty. She wore with utter confidence in her lush, alluring body, a dress that boldly exposed her shoulders, chest, and back. The combination of smells that wafted from the smoking pipe in her mouth and the perfume she wore felt like poison to Felt, with her good sense of smell. She felt that smelling it for too long would make her brain melt.

Indifferent to Felt’s reaction, the beautiful woman gently placed her hand on the petrified small man’s shoulder and said, “Mimosa came to me with tears in her eyes, saying that her teacher had caused a commotion on the street.”

“I-I’m sorry… I have no excuse. I apologize.”

“My, how obedient,” she cooed.

Tilting her head flirtatiously, the beautiful woman raised a shapely eyebrow at the small, meek man. Then, inhaling deep from her pipe, she blew a puff of purple smoke into the near-evening sky and said, “Girls, I will buy you two candles. Go ahead and call all your guests to your bedchambers.”

Although she did not raise her voice at all and gave off an air of nonchalance, the reaction from the prostitutes standing nearby was dramatic.

One by one, they got hold of the men who had been so shamelessly fleeing a moment before. Each of the prostitutes used the means at her disposal, whether a skillful play of words or the equally skillful application of feminine wiles, to coax each man back into the brothel, encountering minimal resistance along the way.

In a matter of seconds, every male customer involved in the commotion had been sucked into the brothel.

“Being too eager to get a sale will get you hated…at least, from what I’ve heard,” commented Felt.

“Surely, that applies to flowers only capable of providing wilted dreams. Unfortunately, I’ve made it a rule in my garden to pluck off any such flowers of such low quality.”

“Is that so?” said Felt with a begrudging smirk at the deftness with which this impressive person had nipped the commotion in the bud. “Well, I shouldn’t be surprised that the woman managing a place like the Flower Prison Garden would be so well-spoken.”

At these words, her red lips relaxed, and she gave a respectful bow. “The feeling is mutual.” Then, with a magical smile that even the same sex would be charmed by… “It is an honor to meet you, Lady Felt. It is truly a privilege to meet one of the five who are now in the most exalted positions in the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

By exchanging their identities this way, they had each played their first card.

After being guided into a VIP room at the back of the brothel, Felt's eyes widened at the softness of the sofa. She had been steadily acclimating to the disparity in living standards since her time in the slums—first at the Astrea's mansion in the capital, and then at the one in Hakuchuri. But now all her hard work had been undone.

The sensation of her hips sinking, her back supported, and the back of her head enveloped—this is the devil's chair. If it were to become Felt's office chair, there would be no chance of her ever being able to read or study again. This is definitely the type of sofa that can corrupt people, she thought.

"As expected, there's no expenses spared when it comes to the VIP room of a high-class brothel."

"Lady Felt, please don't accidentally fall asleep. This is the building of the Flower Prison Garden, and we are here to give our greetings."

"I know. I came a bit close, but I'm not going to fall asleep."

With a sour expression on her face, Felt defended herself against Reinhard's nagging. Unfortunately, the man waiting beside her had no notion of the sofa's power of corrupting people.

Nevertheless, Felt pulled herself together, understanding how problematic it could be to be too relaxed in semi-hostile territory.

The VIP room not only had the sofa but was filled with a large number of high-end-looking furnishings. It might be beneficial for them to be lectured on the principles of frugality, but then again, it was nothing compared to the somewhat poverty-stricken House Astrea.

While looking around such a splendidly decorated room, Felt—who had sunk deep into the sofa—turned the conversation to the small man standing in the entrance to the room. "So, are you going to keep me company in my spare time until the proprietress comes back?"

Upon closer look, he was a rather neat-looking figure. As a dwarf, he was half a head shorter than Felt, but his short limbs made him well-proportioned. Many of the dwarves looked young, and so—with no way of knowing their actual age—he gave off an air of an intelligent, handsome youth. His hair was grayish-brown and neck length, and he stood out with his rather pretentious dress code and oversized cloak.

Having already introduced themselves to each other on entering the brothel, they already knew his name.

"Mr. Ezzo Cadner, was it? Please excuse me earlier."

"N-No, I was at fault for that. Considering the position of the woman accompanying you, I'd say your attitude was justified. You have nothing to apologize for."

Reinhard apologized to him for bending his back and locking his arm, but Ezzo felt nothing but shame.

Placing a hand to his chin, he said, "Nevertheless, I didn't think I would get acquainted with a candidate for the royal selection like this. It annoys me, but I guess what that man said wasn't entirely untrue."

"Umm, I'm kind of scared to ask this, but what exactly did he say?"

"In short, all he said was that he was working for a great person. He didn't give me any specifics, but when I heard that someone like that was offering me a job, I was…I waaas…!"

"Seriously, Camberley is always troubling me."

Felt and Reinhard sighed in unison at the violently trembling Ezzo's testimony.

Camberley was not present on this occasion. Taking advantage of the proprietress' kindness, he had cunningly slipped into another brothel after the mess at the brothel's entrance had been cleared up.

Although he had fulfilled his duty when he led Felt to the brothel, he clearly had more energy to spare. However, it was interesting to note that the prostitutes' delight at being chosen by him was different from that of those they had chosen themselves for business. Perhaps his nickname as the red-light district's playboy was not as ridiculous as one might think.

"So you got led around by Camberley's words and that's how you ended up working in the red-light district. But if you're going in and out of the brothel owner's room, then she must be relying on you a lot."

"It's the result of a shortage in manpower and education. To begin with, being a guard in a brothel is not something that should be done using the noble power of magic. But despite that being the case, since it was introduced to me as a job, I thought that I shouldn't be so arrogant as to let my abilities weaken over time, possibly causing trouble for others."

"I see… How diligent. You seem so different from a certain someone I know."

In short, Ezzo had a tendency to take on responsibilities. Otherwise, he would have most likely run away as soon as he realized he had been introduced to a job he didn't want to do.

As he muttered, Ezzo searched for a compromise between his dissatisfaction with his circumstances and his sense of responsibility. As Felt's cheeks relaxed at such a sight, Reinhard also looked at him with a similar expression.

And so, it was while they were killing time in that fashion that a devilish beauty appeared and opened the door to the VIP room. "Apologies for keeping you waiting," she said. "It took me a while to fix my makeup."

The woman, who had changed into a more lascivious dress and shrouded herself in a new fragrance, was the proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden—Toto.

She looked at Felt, who had sunk deep into the sofa, and Reinhard next to her, with a beaming smile. "You are our special guests. So I have to be prepared when entertaining you, don't I?"

“Well, I’m the one who came to see you out of the blue. We’re lucky we didn’t get turned away at the entrance—I hear it’s hard to meet popular prostitutes in brothels.”

“Hmmm, that’s true. But I haven’t worked in the shop since I reached my current position, you see, so I’ve been surprisingly free… Today was a pleasant surprise!”

With a strong charm to her smile, Toto sat down in the chair in front of Felt. The way she crossed her long legs, and the exact angle of her smiling lips and eyes—everything had been done with purpose.

To come this far, every movement of Toto’s body had been subconsciously ingrained with the seductions of being a prostitute. Although she said she had not been working in the shop, her top-class abilities working as such had not diminished in the slightest.

“Is something the matter?”

“…Oh, it’s nothing. I like people who’ve lived a tough life. So I was just thinking that you and I might get on better than I thought.”

“…Oh my, to think you’re seducing me.”

Perhaps surprised by Felt’s response, Toto put her hand over her mouth and chuckled. Her gaze then shifted towards Ezzo, who was standing at the entrance. “Ah yes, I’d like to apologize for the impudence of our people. Although, knowing his character, I believe he has most likely already apologized and expressed his remorse…”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Felt. “He got the message across—it was just an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

“No!!!” cried Ezzo. “There are definitely reasons to defend me, but for the most part, the situation was caused by my hasty decision and short temper. In light of that, I would like you to decide how you’ll treat me from now on.”

For better or for worse, Ezzo’s diligent attitude made Felt make an exasperated face as she poured out her words. “That’s such a troublesome thing to say…”

“Anyway, now that the initial rift between us has been filled…may I ask what I can do for you?” Toto inquired.

“…”

“It’s definitely no small matter for one of the candidates bearing the responsibility for the kingdom’s future to visit such a shady place. And even more so when they’re accompanied by the greatest knight of all time, the Sword Saint.”

Toto’s flirtatious glance turned to Reinhard. At her gaze, the red-haired knight looked towards Felt next to him—for confirmation as to whether he should speak up or not.

Felt let out a sigh and shifted in her seat, lifting her body back up from a sunken position. Then, she pulled an item from her pocket—an insignia—and showed it to Toto. The emblem with the dragon jewel inlaid in it was proof of eligibility to participate in the royal selection, and the emanating light from the dragon jewel, which only shone when held by a certain person, was proof of Felt’s position as a candidate.

“I don’t like the method of tryin’ to sound each other out, so I’m going to be straight with you. As you said, I’m one of the candidates for the royal selection. And as a result, I’m doing various things over here in Reinhard’s domain. Today was just a courtesy call to say hello.”

“…You don’t really like playing by the book, do you? But even then, ‘various things’, huh?” Toto tilted her head suggestively, rolling her pipe between her fingers.

It was clear from the way she said ‘various’ that she was suspicious of Felt, but that was exactly the kind of thing Felt came to dispel. “I told you, didn’t I? I still have my hands full with this domain. That’s why…”

“‘That’s why’?”

“Don’t get me involved in your mess. I ain’t interested.”

"…"

Felt made it clear she had no connection to the incident that had caused such a stir in Flanders, and Toto's eyelids fluttered ever so slightly at the declaration. She most likely had her own plans, but Felt wasn't someone who'd act according to another's plans.

When she had declared this, Felt pointed to Reinhard next to her and said, "To begin with, if I really wanted to destroy you, I could have just sent Reinhard after you. Don't you agree?"

"If you say it like that, then I have nothing to say in reply—I am just a simple brothel owner."

It may have sounded absurd, but Toto's words did not sound like a disagreement.

In fact, if one had heard the rumors about Reinhard, then they would know it would be ridiculous to have him as an enemy and back off. Even more so if they knew that the rumors didn't do him justice.

And that's exactly what Felt had done, having been the one to decide against his participation in the Tometo festival.

"Ummm, Lady Felt, what's the matter? You seem rather upset."

"It's nothing. I'm just angry at myself for something that has nothing to do with this. You don't have to worry about it. I mean, don't."

"Lady Felt, I don't mean to be presumptuous, but I think you should concentrate more on this situation…"

"Shut up! Whose fault is it that you think it is? You, you bastard!" Having been scolded by the man in question, Felt lost her temper and bared her teeth.

Reinhard was bewildered. "I don't understand…"

Toto narrowed her eyes at the exchange between the mistress and her servant. "…You two have an interesting relationship. It doesn't look like a normal mistress-servant relationship.”

“Sorry about this. I’m still in the process of learning what ‘normal’ is.”

“It is an honor to hear you say so… However, I beg you not to take what Lady Felt just said lightly.” After letting out a small smile, Reinhard turned towards Toto, his face now void of any such thing. Although he didn’t seem particularly conscious of it, the pressure of his gaze was so strong that any normal person may very well hyperventilate just by seeing it.

The proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden, however, paid no mind to that level of gaze. “Yes, of course. It is self-evident that Lady Felt’s opinion is reasonable… Besides, it’s not like she doesn’t recognize our value… Right?”

“Talking about whether or not I recognize someone’s value makes me sound like a snob. But everything that runs well has a reason behind it, and I’m not childish enough to bring my personal likes and dislikes into the mix.”

Waving her outstretched hands, Felt expressed her lack of hostility towards Toto.

As she mentioned earlier, Felt didn’t hate Toto. In fact, if their relationship persisted long enough, she was certain she’d come to like her—but only if it persisted long enough, that is.

Reading Felt’s inner thoughts, Toto smiled softly. “Well then, I will do my best when entertaining you in order to make that happen.”

“In that case, I’ll make sure to inform you in advance next time, so make sure you have some good snacks ready. That would be easier for you, wouldn’t it?”

“As you wish. In fact, if you wish, we can even entertain you with our expert services… Although I am a little afraid of the Sword Saint.”

Despite the assessment, Reinhard’s expression did not alter. He was probably used to being described as ‘scary’.

Toto exhaled a cloud of purple smoke. “Oh kind and beautiful lord. In your presence, the flowers that make their living by selling dreams may end up caught in a dream themselves. So cruel, is it not?”

“—Uhh.” Struck so unexpectedly, Reinhard choked on his words and turned his blue eyes, filled with bewilderment, towards Felt. They seemed to be asking for help.

Felt flashed Toto a broad smile. “As I thought, I think we’ll get along just fine.”

9

“My lady, this may not be something I should say as a knight, but…”

“Oh, what is it? Say it.”

“…I don’t think I’m very good at dealing with the lady we just met.”

“Hahahahah, I thought so! You were totally losin’ your nerve, especially at the end there! It was satisfying seeing something as rare as that, though,” Felt replied, slapping her knees in good humor.

Having safely finished talking with Toto, Felt was about to leave the Flower Prison Garden’s brothel. Reinhard seemed to have been so effectively brought down a peg by Toto that he remained silent even when Felt burst into laughter. “She was complimenting you by sayin’ that all the prostitutes would fall for you, ya know? You should be happy, my dear Reinhard.”

“The sentiment itself is nice, but I also have my position to think about. It’s just troubling for me.”

“What? Are you looking down on prostitutes?”

As a person who had been taken care of by several prostitutes during her days in the slums, Felt was not amused by Reinhard’s words. But after she had snapped at him, he shook his head.

"You've got it wrong. It's not because it's the relationship between a knight and a…woman from a brothel. It's because I come from a family of Sword Saints and am the current owner of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint."

"…"

Lowering his eyebrows, Reinhard solemnly explained his position. "The Divine Protection of the Sword Saint is a divine protection that has only existed in the bloodline of the Astrea family for generations. There's a possibility of it manifesting itself even in indirect descendants. Therefore, I can't do anything carelessly."

Felt narrowed her eyes at his story and responded only with a short "Is that so." I see, the more I ask, the more I realize that he is seated in a troublesome position. According to the story, Reinhard was also forbidden to travel outside the country—he was treated more like a disaster than a human.

"Tch…" Clicking her tongue in irritation, Felt decided not to delve into the subject further and walked out of the brothel. As they had separated from Toto in the VIP room, their guide up to this point was someone else.

The figure opened his hands, gave an exaggerated sigh, and looked back at the two of them. "Well then, we've reached the entrance. This is the best brothel in the red-light district. If a man and a woman were to quarrel here, it would damage the name of the establishment," Ezzo said, flipping his cloak in an exaggerated manner.

It was all very dramatic, but Felt shrugged her shoulders at his concern and said, "Hurting the name of the establishment? Are those words really comin' from a man who cast magic on the street?"

"Ugh! Well… Yes… As you said…"

"Casting magic with that many people around, I guess that half-elf lady was also rather guilty." Folding her arms in front of the mumbling Ezzo, Felt recalled an event from a few months ago.

That half-elf Emilia's sure done some pretty reckless things while pursuing me after I stole her royal insignia, Felt thought to herself. Shooting magic in the street was just one such example.

Looking back, it was that request that had brought her to where she was today. Fate is such a strange thing—to think that I am now competin' with the very same Emilia in the royal selection.

"Even so, it was quite an interesting discussion. I would say it was the second most significant event for me since I started working in the red-light district."

"Now that you mention it—what kind of work do you do? Are you really a guard?"

Felt compared Ezzo with the strong-built gatekeeper standing at the gate in her head. Of course, Ezzo's specialty was probably not in hand-to-hand combat, so his appearance may not be a correct gauge of his ability.

"There are definitely those who judge people by their appearance. Even I can recall meeting some."

"Of course, there is no end to such shallow people. But they soon realized that I was a man who should not be messed with. Hahahah, Ha-Ha-ha-ha!" Ezzo was smiling broadly, puffing up his small body to its fullest, as though he was very confident in his magic skills. It was great that he did not mull over his defeat against Reinhard. As proof of that, he pointed a finger at him and said, "You, too, mustn't get carried away by a single victory. Let me make this clear —I wasn't serious and I still have a lot of room to grow. Besides, the higher the wall, the more it is worth climbing."

"—. I see. I'll bear that in mind, Sir Ezzo."

Without the slightest hint of false bravado, Ezzo Cadner spoke of his future as though it was a given. Reinhard straightened his posture at Ezzo's admirable attitude, and finally let out a faint smile.

As she watched, Felt grinned and folded her hands behind her head. "Well I'm sure if you're an actual magic user, there're a bunch of employers who'd want you. Toto's probably feelin' like she won the lottery, too."

"Though I don't enjoy being treated like an object, I do agree with you. But perhaps the reason behind Miss Toto's positive attitude to my employment was due to the identity of the person who introduced me. She must have known of your relationship with my detestable kin."

"You mean she knew that Camberley and I were friends? Does that mean that it was indirectly thanks to us that you were hired there?"

"I'm merely saying that it's possible. However, there is no doubt that I would never have visited the red-light district without that person. Ugh, I get angry just thinking about it." Ezzo's fingers trembled as his anger rekindled.

"All the unscrupulous ones, whether the people of my race or affiliation, always block my way…! Seriously! Such insolent people…!"

"You seem to have got a lot bottled up inside. Do your best."

Ezzo was turning purple from anger as he talked about Camberley and various other things all mushed together. Felt sympathized with this attitude, but—

"—Ma'am, you forgot something."

The voice that interrupted her came from a woman who had appeared at the entrance to the brothel.

She was around 20 years old, wearing a dress that was not too revealing but clearly showed off the curves of her body. She looked rather innocent for a woman working in the red-light district, and her somewhat timid eyes had the kind of feel to them that tickled men's hearts.

"Hmm, it's you, Mimosa. Has Mistress Toto sent you here?"

"Yes, Teacher. She told me to give this to our guest."

The woman called Mimosa gave her greetings to Ezzo and then turned to Felt. She then gently presented something wrapped in a white cloth to Felt. What was hidden inside was—

“Oh, the insignia. My bad, I forgot.”

“Lady Felt? Do you understand just how important that item is…”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. It was sticking into my butt when I was sittin’ on the sofa.” Scratching her head, Felt accepted the insignia that Mimosa brought her. While putting it back in her pocket, she suddenly glanced between Mimosa and Ezzo. “Now that ya mention it, you called him Teacher, is that what you would usually call a guard?”

“No, Ma’am. Teacher teaches me how to read and write, and how to do calculations. That’s why I call him Teacher.”

“Reading, writing, and calculations… Is that also a guard’s job?”

As Felt seemed perplexed by their story, Ezzo put a hand to his chest and explained himself. “I’m hired as a guard, but this area is already well-regulated by the Flower Prison Garden. At the very least, I’ve not really come across any problems since I started working here. I was uncomfortable with accepting so much money despite that, so I started doing this to keep myself busy.”

“Thanks to Teacher, some of us girls can read now. Everyone is grateful to him.”

In contrast to the boastful Ezzo, Mimosa’s look of respect was genuine. Seeing this, Felt nodded to herself. Ezzo mentioned earlier that his meeting with Felt and the others was the second most meaningful thing that had come out of his arrival in the red-light district. The first and most meaningful thing was clear from his face and lively voice.

Ezzo’s logical nature was very obvious. The presence of his pupils must have been very encouraging.

“How admirable. Keep up the good work, Teacher. It definitely suits you.”

“It is the duty of a good person to teach and guide well. It’s also my vocation.”

“Heh, you’re right… Well then, we’ll be on our way.”

Raising her hand, Felt, together with Reinhard, said their goodbyes to Ezzo and the others. But Ezzo suddenly stretched out a hand. “Wait, wait, wait,” he said. “What about my kin who was with you? Are you leaving him behind?”

“Yeah, I’m not waiting for two candles worth of time. I’ve done my job and he’ll probably go back on his own even if I leave him be.”

Toto offered two candles for the disturbance caused by Ezzo. A candle in the red-light district was a sign that a customer had bought the time to be spent with a prostitute. The prostitute will show the customer a dream until the candles burn out. At most, only one candle’s worth of time had passed by.

“Speaking of which, Teacher. Mistress Toto said that she was going to pay for tonight’s candle out of your stipend.”

“What…! No, that was certainly my fault. But the payment for that ancient document is…”

Shocked by Mimosa’s words, Ezzo had paid the price for his temper. This time, Felt and Reinhard waved and finally took their leave of the Flower Prison Garden.

“They were interesting people, weren’t they?”

“You’ve recovered very well for someone who said he was bad with them. Well, my impression is still the same. The Flower Prison Garden’s people aren’t as hostile as I thought they were. They even returned my insignia to me.”

Felt and Reinhard walked side by side as night approached the dimly-lit, red-light district. Smiling, Felt lightly tapped her pocket.

At this gesture, Reinhard looked a little surprised. “Did you forget your insignia on purpose?”

“I was just wondering what they would do. I didn’t think that everything they said in that room showed their real intentions. So I figured I’d test them a little.”

To prove that it had not been switched, Felt moved her hand to the insignia in her pocket. A faint glow leaked through her clothing.

Now either they’ll think I’m some kinda moron or be more alert. Felt quietly assessed how her opponent would view her after her little stunt. Well, either is fine.

“After all, they are the ones who started the fight. Besides, we did our part to show respect by comin’ here today. They won’t be stirrin’ shit up anytime soon. Let’s move on. Next up is…”

“It’s an organization called The Balance that runs the gambling quarter. This place also requires special attention, for reasons different from the red-light district. The Balance, along with the Black Silver Coin and the Flower Prison Garden, also don’t have a very good reputation. Please take extra care not to leave my side.”

“Yeah, yeah. As Sir Reinhard commandsss.” Felt responded in a light tone, but Reinhard’s eyes were full of worry. He doesn’t seem any more nervous or anxious than usual, but I wonder if he’s even had a chance to rest at all since he came to Flanders, she thought. “You look as though you’re gonna collapse from worry any moment now.”

At Felt’s tone, which seemed almost like someone else’s entirely, Reinhard gave the biggest smile he could muster.

10

The gambling quarter was another name for the eastern part of the city of Flanders, a section of the city where gambling activities were permitted. In the first place, there were no strict laws on gambling in the Kingdom of Lugunica, but such activities were often associated with crime and violence. Before legalizing it became possible, the problem lay with improving the environment it was in. As a result, such problems were addressed by an organizational deterrent that outweighed violence committed by individuals—an organization to operate the gambling dens.

Licenses for gambling activities were not issued by the Kingdom, but by the organizations in charge of the gambling dens in each city. And in the five great cities of the Kingdom of Lugunica, it was always The Balance in charge of managing these gambling establishments—no matter the size or form these places manifested.

In this city, too, The Balance controlled the gambling quarter. Together with the Flower Prison Garden, which controlled the red-light district, and the Black Silver Coin, which controlled the rest, they made up the Big Three.

Felt had decided to go and give her greetings to the representative of The Balance.

“Unfortunately, the Boss says he won’t see anyone without an appointment.”

The large man had a face like a crushed frog and gave a bow to Felt as he spoke.

The place was a large one-story building known as the Grand Casino in the gambling quarter. Despite it being the time of day when night began to draw in and the temperature began to cool, the atmosphere in the area was getting rather heated. With its business hours reaching peak times, the traffic coming in and out of the gambling den had increased enormously. Similar to the red-light district, the places that came alive at night were packed with people, who could be seen cheering and screaming here and there as they played various games.

In the midst of all this, Felt and her companion walked proudly through this gambling frenzy to visit the leader of The Balance, without any prior appointment. So, it was no wonder that they stuck out like a sore thumb.

“…”

Slowly, a group of men with a solemn presence surrounded Felt and Reinhard. A man in front of them—who introduced himself as

Mozolite—was silent, waiting for them to speak first.

So Felt scratched her gold hair roughly. “I know, I know. You don’t have to be so tense. I’m not gonna do anything… Although…”

Felt was about to add ‘I’d welcome a fight if you’re gonna turn me away,’ but Reinhard cut her off as he took up position in front of her. He stared Mozolite down, with a somewhat puzzled Felt behind him. “I understand that this is an abrupt visit. But if you have a representative present, could they please make some time for us? This person here is…”

“A royal selection candidate. The Boss knows that, too. He still refuses to see you.”

“…”

Interrupting Reinhard’s words, Mozolite refused to yield. Being aware of Felt’s identity, he must also know that the one in front of him was the Sword Saint. He certainly had some nerve.

Looking at Mozolite’s expressionless face, a tattoo of scales could be seen on his eyeballs—rumor had it that all members of The Balance were required to have a tattoo of scales on a visible part of their bodies. In fact, they could see tattoos on every single one of the men surrounding them, whether it was on their arms, necks, or other parts of their bodies. It did seem to be a special exception to have them on their eyeballs, however, for better or for worse. That alone just goes to show Mozolite’s loyalty to the organization.

“Reinhard, stop it. You’re the one who said we won’t be welcomed here because we didn’t make any appointments beforehand.”

“That’s true, but is that fine with you, my lady?”

“We came to say hello. While we’ve been turned away, the fact that I’ve come by has already been noted. So, it’s not that bad of a deal. You’ll pass my words to him, won’t you?”

Felt shrugged her shoulders while Mozolite raised his eyebrows in slight surprise.

"Yeah… Your message has been delivered, together with the fact that you greeted the red-light district's proprietress before the Boss."

"Don't tell me that's the reason he's being difficult. If I'd done it the other way round, would it have been the proprietress who refused to see me?" Felt's shoulders slumped in disappointment. The first thing that comes to mind is the fact that the two organizations are in balance.

The power of each organization was kept in a perpetual balance, but the cooperation between the Big Three was on thin ice. She'd heard enough about this from Old Man Rom and Rachins beforehand. The disagreement between Toto and Manfred, the man in charge of The Balance, was also a well-known story.

"…"

Seeing as Mozolite was silent on the matter, Felt felt that her guess might not be far off the mark. However, her intuition kept her from wanting to continue the conversation. The Balance knew that I was here. Then we're done.

"I'll make sure to bring a gift and make an appointment first next time. Sorry to interrupt your business."

With that said, Felt decided to end the conversation early. Reinhard was surprised at how easily she withdrew and quickly followed her as she left. Following Mozolite's gaze, the men around them also made way for them.

Felt quickly made her way through the crowd and headed towards the exit. "That place was no good. It smelled a lot more sinister than the red-light district."

Reinhard, who walked beside her, made a strange face at Felt's mutterings.

"A more sinister smell?" he asked.

Surprisingly, Reinhard did not have a nose for danger. There was no one who could make him feel endangered in a literal sense, so it was not surprising that he lacked the ability for it. But more than just the threat to one's own life, a sense of danger could account for the harm to others, their property, or a multitude of other things.

This exact sense was what alerted Felt to the unique and dangerous scent of the gambling quarter.

"It's not like I'm too scared or anythin', I just got a bad feeling about this place. Either way, this guy's gotta be the most uncooperative one so far."

"I trust your intuition, my lady, and I agree with you in that they were not the most cooperative." Reinhard then looked around alongside Felt, who had stopped in her tracks. Around him in the Grand Casino were various spaces for gambling, and everywhere seemed to be packed. There was a certain madness in the eyes of customers who sat here drinking with women at their beck and call. This type of excitement in the air was not something Reinhard was accustomed to, and he became rather timid.

Looking at his face, a sense of mischief began to grow in Felt's heart.

From the standpoint of someone usually subjected to Reinhard's nagging, it was a nice surprise that his weaknesses had been exposed in both the red-light district and gambling quarter in rapid succession.

"I'd never thought the day would come when I'd enjoy seein' that face of yours…"

"I'm honored to hear that, but I don't think it was a very pleasant process."

"Isn't that just your imagination? Besides, it'd be a shame to leave so soon; let's take a look around."

Fortunately, they had already put quite a distance between themselves and The Balance, including Mozolite. Of course, there were members of the group dotted about the place, but the sinister scent seemed to have weakened somewhat.

At Felt's smile, Reinhard hesitated for a moment before nodding, and together they decided to take a quick tour of the Grand Casino.

Gambling here still mainly involved using cards that followed a basic set of rules. Some of the games were unfamiliar to Felt, but while watching others play, she was able to get a vague idea of what was going on. Once she knew how to play, she observed wins and losses, and the strategies involved. Having done all that, she discovered that gambling was surprisingly fun to watch.

One, in particular, caught Felt's eye. "Oh, there's a Shatranj board. Can you make a bet on that, too?"

Felt's gaze fell on a game being played on the edge of the Grand Casino, with a Shatranj board in between the two players. From the looks of it, there was no difference from the Shatranj board she knew, and compared to the other gambling games, it seemed far quieter and more modest. However, there was definitely a kind of quiet intensity there.

"…"

The two men locked in battle at this board wore serious expressions filled with a sense of urgency, each looking as though they were about to reach out and cut each other. The spectators surrounding the two also exuded a different sort of atmosphere compared to the rest of the crowds there.

"I guess that means there are one-on-one bets like that too."

"Your Ladyship also studied Shatranj, did you not? What do you think of those two?"

"Ah, it's impossible for me. I'm no match for them. The way they use their heads is very different from how I use mine. The me right now wouldn't be able to do anything. I'm certain I'd lose." Shrugging her shoulders, Felt honestly raised a white flag. Hearing such a blunt declaration of defeat, Reinhard let out a small chuckle.

"What are you chucklin' about over there? You aren't supposed to be happy if I lose, right?"

“That’s true,” Reinhard said. “I was surprised when you declared there will be times we will lose, after meeting with Mr. Doltero. But just as I am capable of gaining new perspectives, I am also capable of noticing things about others.”

“Like what?”

“Your Ladyship said ‘the me right now’. That’s good enough for me.”

At Reinhard’s cheerful words, Felt pursed her lips and fell silent. Even though she was amused by his unusual weakness, she was not amused by the unexpected counterattack. With such feelings, Felt looked away. “Aaa, damn, I’m done with the tour! Come on, let’s head back to…hm?”

As she turned around and was about to head for the exit, she felt a hard sensation on the sole of her shoe. When she lifted her foot, she realized what she stepped on was a coin. “A fake coin… A coin used in this gambling den?” Felt muttered with some disappointment at the fake coin, which, for a moment, could be mistaken for a gold coin.

“Well, would ya look at that. It’s your lucky day, lil’ missy. Why not try your luck at a game?”

“Huh?”

The person who approached Felt with the object she found was one of the owners in charge of the gambling business. He was a tall, thin man with an unhealthy, sickly complexion. The game he was in charge of was a famous betting game called “Oka” in which players guessed numbers. There is a disk with holes and numbers on it that spins, before the owner throws a small ball, about the size of a fingertip, into the disk. The game is as simple as guessing which hole number on the disk the ball will fall into.

On a separate table from the disks was a table with numbers on which participants placed their bets. There was no upper limit to the number of participants, and the most interesting part about Oka was that it pits the owner against a large number of other participants.

"…"

With so many customers already at the table, there was no reason for them to bother bringing in Felt, who only had one coin. Felt's cheeks curved upwards at the pretense.

"Ha! A weird game with a lost coin. How fun. I'm in."

Sniffing, she took her place proudly in front of the man who had invited her to play. Staring at the numbers on the table, with the written choices from one to fifty, Felt challenged him to a match.

"Let's go."

In response to her enthusiasm, the man spun the disk. He tossed a small ball sharply in the opposite direction of the disk's rotation, which was so fast that the numbers appeared to melt into one another. When both the disk and the ball have momentum and the ball falls into a hole, that's the end of the game. So long as the disk and the ball are still spinning, the customer can place their bets on the table.

"Lady Felt, with that momentum, the place it's likely to fall is…"

"Hold it; I wouldn't be surprised if you could see the balls and the rotation of the disk and know where they will fall, so shut up. This is my game!"

"Wasn't it just supposed to have been a coin you found… Nevermind. Sorry, I'll keep my mouth shut."

Reinhard kept his mouth shut, but he didn't deny that he could see the spinning.

Either way, she put the matter to the back of her mind and stared at the disk. Then she glanced up at the man who, having thrown the ball, crossed his arms and gave her a snide smile.

"One or fifty…"

"…"

"But which one…ah, I don't know, so fifty!"

And, after much deliberation, Felt forcefully placed the coin on the fifty on the table. Immediately after, the betting period ended, and all that remained was to watch the fate of the disk and the ball. Slowly, the disk decreased in speed, and eventually, with a clatter, the hole that the ball fell into was…

"—! Oh, damn! It was one!"

"That's too bad, my lady. But it was a close game—you did narrow it down to two numbers. How did you manage that?"

With her prediction being off the mark, Felt held her head in frustration. As Reinhard's question hit her from the side, she cleared her throat and let out a, "Huh? I was torn between choosing the most auspicious number or the biggest number. If there's a choice, I gotta be number one or the biggest number there is; either way, the middle ain't for me."

"I see. I'll keep that in mind."

"Why're you so serious? There's no need to remember such things."

Pursing her lips at Reinhard's response, Felt left the table with a simple, "Oh well." It was also the etiquette of a gambling den to leave promptly after losing a game.

Watching Felt's gracious defeat, the customers around waved her off pleasantly. Though she couldn't deny the feeling that she had contributed to the gambling den after seeing the rest of the customer's enthusiasm to try and win in Felt's place.

"But I gotta say, even though I've fulfilled my goal of sending my greetings, things ain't going as smoothly as I'd hoped. Even if I say it's fine as long as I win in the end, I still need to get my edge back."

"…By the way, Lady Felt. How would you like to pay your greetings to the Black Silver Coin?"

“We got them real good before. That should be enough. I know it’s my fault for taking a detour, but it’s gettin’ dark already, so let’s head back to the mansion.”

The town of Hakuchuri, where Astrea Manor was located, was a few hours away from Flanders by dragon carriage. If we leave now, I wonder if we can make it to the mansion before daybreak, Felt wondered. “Nah, let’s stay here tonight. We can just return to the mansion during the day tomorrow.”

Unexpectedly, Reinhard shook his head at Felt’s suggestion.

“Haaa? Why? I admit it’s a little rushed, but it’s not too late, and with you around, walkin’ around at night shouldn’t be an issue. What’s the problem?”

“Well… I’m worried about your health if you stay up too late…”

“I’m going home.”

Felt asserted her thoughts strongly with her eyes at Reinhard, who she knew was telling a blatant lie. She continued pressuring Reinhard with her crimson-eyed stare to tell the truth, and after a few moments of endurance, he let out a sigh and said, “I will tell you tomorrow, I promise. So, will you please listen to me just for tonight?”

“Hmph, you pompous prick. All right, tomorrow, then. Since that’s decided, it’s time to find an inn. Let’s look for a place with good food!”

“Please rest assured, I have already found a place to stay.”

“You were plannin’ to stay the night from the get-go, weren’t you!”

He had indeed been planning something before coming to Flanders. Felt looked at Reinhard’s profile, trying to get a read on him, but somehow only caught a hint of relief and anticipation in his face, and stopped there.

“Well, I guess it’s fine.”

Unlike life in the slums, whatever Reinhard was up to would not directly affect Felt's life or death, nor would it humiliate her dignity.

To that extent, Felt placed her trust in her knight.

11

—Mozolite saw Felt and her companion off and then turned back to the Oka gambling parlor. "You okay with letting them leave like that, Boss?"

"It's fine. I just wanted to take a look at her for today. I also got them back for meeting with that vixen before me by messing with their luck at gambling," said the slender-faced man as he stood up from the dealer's seat at the table Felt had just left. "Besides, we got what we needed, didn't we?"

When a different person came into the gambling parlor to fill this seat, the slender-faced man brushed a hand over his own face as he calmly walked through the Grand Casino. And with that, his face came off. What appeared from beneath was a bizarre face covered in tattoos. It was the master of the Grand Casino, Manfred 'Tattoo Face' Madison.

"So that bodyguard is the Sword Saint. He isn't as great as the rumors suggest. He is oblivious to things other than pure animosity… It shouldn't be difficult to fool him with a bit of trickery."

Mozolite, his right-hand man, followed him without saying a word. He wasn't looking for an answer or any sort of reaction—the young wolf's monologue was directed at himself. "But, the candidate girl has a better hunch. On top of that, she was able to correctly narrow the choices down to two."

"Are you saying that if she had two coins then she would have won by fluke?"

"—No. If that girl had two coins, she would have placed them on the same spot both times. Money isn't her concern, it's about the way she conducts herself.”

Manfred’s murmur had a hint of joy and expectation. It was like a child getting a new toy or like a predator finding easy prey. His voice was practically seeping with bloodlust.

“Seems like you’re in a good mood, Boss.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel bad for a change—don’t let them out of your sight, Mozolite,” ordered Manfred, a menacing grin on his face.

“Yes, sir,” replied Mozolite with a low voice, bowing his head.

Held within the hand of the large, bowing man was a coin. Looking at that out of the corner of his eye, Manfred licked his lips. “Alright, show me what you got, royal selection candidate. Whether you end up as a mere insect in a bog, or you become something more, it will be worth watching.”

12

As the sun rose, bringing forth a new day, Reinhard led Felt to a certain place.

Having stayed the night in Flanders because of her knight’s stubborn request, Felt enjoyed the food served at the inn and slept in a soft bed. Early the next morning, she was woken up by Reinhard and drifted between being in a really good mood and a really bad mood. Nonetheless, she went with him without resistance, but…

“Your ass is mine if this ends up being a waste of time.”

“Very well. If that comes to be, then you may berate me to your heart’s content. It would be a failure on my part, after all.”

Reinhard’s attitude while replying to Felt was somewhat strong, which Felt found suspicious, but they soon reached their destination.

And, what awaited Felt there was…

“It’s the earth dragon I told you about before. It belongs to the brilliant Diana species.”

“Woa, woah, woaaaaaaah—ah!” Felt’s eyes sparkled in excitement at the sight of the bright red earth dragon standing on the other side of the wooden fence.

The place Reinhard took her to was a ranch situated south of the city of Flanders—a place with a lot of earth dragons that roamed around freely in the grasslands within the vicinity.

Reinhard had arranged for the rancher to bring one particular crimson earth dragon, which was now subjected to Felt’s admiring gaze as its gallant form rose to stand before her.

“Earth dragons from the Diana species are rare; they are a toughened earth dragon species that can give their fullest, no matter the landscape or climate. As it is a gift for Your Ladyship, I took my time, but…”

“Amaazing! It’s big, coool! This, is it fine for me to have it?”

Though Reinhard politely explained, Felt was crowing like a rooster without hearing any of it. Reinhard smiled and nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I have arranged it for you, Lady Felt. Please, accept it.”

“I don’t like it when it’s your shitty plans that make me happy, but, well, that doesn’t really matter. Alright, then.”

Her emotions changed hastily and Felt jumped across the fence. And just like that, the girl went in front of the crimson dragon. The sharp glare of the dragon was pointed at its master candidate. Yes, she was still only a candidate for being its master.

Earth dragons are all friendly with humans, and there are times when even a child can easily ride on them, but the Diana species were an exception to that. Along with their superior ability, their pride and obstinance is great, rarely accepting others as their master.

The one Reinhard had arranged for Felt was especially hard to please.

"…"

The rancher panicked at the sight of Felt facing the earth dragon and tried saying something, but Reinhard gestured with his hand to stop, nodding to reassure him that he'd intervene if necessary.

As Felt got closer to the earth dragon, they watched with bated breath. "It's really sudden," she began, "so it would be difficult to accept me immediately, but you're my earth dragon from today. Let's get along."

"…"

As Felt spoke and reached her hand out towards it, the earth dragon lowered its long neck and started to sniff around as if to tickle her. "Oh, you…haha, it tickles! You're a friendly one, aren't ya!"

Reinhard gave a short sigh looking at Felt jerking her body around in laughter.

"I am baffled that that girl is being so tame…at her first encounter."

Even the rancher couldn't hide his awe at the sight of Felt and the earth dragon mingling.

After that, Felt took the earth dragon since it accepted her as its master and was about to return to Flanders triumphantly. However, her way back was far from smooth. Since…

"Uh, woah?" Letting out a small scream, Felt panicked, having lost her balance on top of the earth dragon. Reinhard rushed to her side and supported her with his hand, pushing her back.

Felt somehow managed to get into the right position and let out a sigh of relief. After that, she looked at Reinhard. "The hell did you mean when you said they are easy to ride! It's a handful even sittin' on it! Where is the divine protection of the earth dragon?!"

"Please endure it, my lady. While it's true that the earth dragon's Divine Protection of Wind Evasion is excellent, you'll lose control once the protection expires."

“Argh, you may have a point, but…”

“I think you will be able to ride immediately if you learn the ropes. But until then…”

Stopping Reinhard in his tracks before he could say something like practice makes perfect, Felt cried out in excitement as if to say it was a brilliant idea. “Oh yeah, Reinhard! Show me how it’s done.”

Reinhard frowned to figure out her intentions behind that.

“Come onnn.” Felt slapped the saddle on the earth dragon and continued. “Riding alone is dangerous, and there ain’t no way I can learn the ropes like that, right? But then again, I can’t learn by watchin’ other people ride either…so I think it would be quicker doing that here.”

“That’s…I see, you have a point.”

“Right? So hurry up and get your ass over here.”

Reinhard respectfully followed the instructions of Felt, who had jerked her chin up at him. He made brief eye contact with the earth dragon and leapt onto its back.

Reinhard sat behind Felt, inevitably embracing the small girl from behind. While in that position, he held the reins in her hands. “Now, with all due respect, allow me to demonstrate. Please watch carefully, memorize the sensation of moving the reins in your hands and how you focus your sight.”

“Alright, I’ll be depending on you. I want to be able to ride Romy here and there as soon as possible.”

“So, it’s Romy…I think you should discuss the name with Master Rom before naming it that.”

“Shut up! It’s fine! Hey, hurry up and show me how it’s done!”

Felt’s cheeks turned red and she shouted to hide her embarrassment since the origin of the name was found out in an instant. While listening to her voice, he waved the reins with vigor.

“Alright.”

Slowly, Romy the earth dragon began running towards the Astrea Domain. Turning off the divine protection intentionally, feeling the pleasant wind against her, Felt let out a shout of joy.

“…”

Hearing that up close, Reinhard also smiled happily.

And just like that, the Felt Camp had finished paying their respects to the city of Flanders’s underworld. By making their point clear, they had shown their standpoint that they were not related to the incidents happening in the Earth Dragon Capital in any manner, but a flame once lit from the past wasn’t going to let them go so easily.

Things took a drastic turn a few days after Felt’s visit to Flanders.

It all started with the bad news brought to Astrea Manor by the Black Silver Coin’s Safis, who had once again come to them as a messenger…

The news was that Ezzo “The Gray” Cadner was on the run after burning down a brothel and that Camberley had been taken into custody as his accomplice, making it an unprecedented emergency.

13

Peace, meaning her routine life going uninterrupted by odd occurrences, never lasted long for Felt. The leaders of the underworld suspected her of being behind things she didn’t even do, so in order to prove her innocence, she paid them all a visit—going here and there for several days—even though she didn’t want to. It wasn’t like she was all relaxed thinking that everything was fine, but at least she’d made her point clear. With this, she hoped she could enjoy a brief time of tranquility. However, things seem to have been worsening a lot faster than she had expected.

“—What did you just say?” asked Felt with her elbow on the table, cheek resting on her palm. Her fang poked out as she grimaced at what she'd just heard.

The one at whom her question was directed at was Safis, the snaked-eyed man who had been led to her office, the messenger from the Black Silver Coin.

Safis was also the one who had visited them during the Tometo Festival as the messenger of his leader, Doltero. This time, however, he visited them early in the morning without warning. Felt would usually send a rude visitor like that packing due to being in a bad mood and sleep-deprived, but there was a reason she couldn't do that this morning. And that was…

"—Sorry. This is our blunder." Rachins mustered up the words in frustration next to their visitor, Safis.

He was in terrible shape. He was bruised all over, and it was evident from the smeared blood on his face that he had tried to rub the blood from his nose. His clothes were covered in blood and dirt, looking as if he'd been beaten to a pulp—no, it wasn't as if he had, this was definitely the appearance of a guy who had been punched and kicked by a mob.

Leaving Rachins next to him, Safis bowed respectfully. "Lady Felt, allow me to give you my report once again. Last night, there was a fire in Flanders and a building owned by the Flower Prison Garden was partially burned to the ground; some of the guards and prostitutes were unable to escape and burned to death. We know who the arsonist is, but as for the one who assisted in his escape…"

"You're tryin' to say that it was Camberley, right?" interrupted Felt while ruffling her hair with a serious look on her face. She had a feeling Safis's explanation was just contempt masquerading as politeness. Her nerves had started to settle down from when she first heard the unbelievable news, but it wasn't something she could easily accept. She then directed her crimson eyes at Rachins, who was hanging his head. "And, you also assisted the culprit in his escape… Is that right?"

"I don't know if he's the culprit or not, but it's true that I assisted Camberley in helping someone escape. And when I was getting beat on by that mob chasing us…"

"We, the Black Silver Coin, took him in. He might have been killed by the ruffians if we hadn't stepped in time. The dwarf got taken away by the Flower Prison Garden, however."

As a result, Camberley remained captive in Flanders, and only Rachins was brought back to Astrea Manor to report the news to Felt.

She was still drowsy and not fully awake, but after hearing the report she had a rough idea of what was going on. However, there were still a few pieces missing from the puzzle.

"What are we going to do, my lady?" asked the knight by her side. Felt was deep in thought, her arms crossed. Sitting beside her, Reinhard showed no signs of being sleepy or worn out despite it being quite early in the morning. The stately Sword Saint turned his blue eyes towards Rachins, who was hanging his head. "The situation demands that we pay a visit to the Flower Prison Garden to explain ourselves."

"Why should we have to explain ourselves? And why the hell did you and Camberley try to help someone who was tryin' to escape out in the first place? What is the relationship between you and…"

"Ezzo Cadner." Safis cut off Felt's interrogation as he gave a cold smile. Both Felt and Reinhard's cheeks stiffened upon hearing the name he uttered.

The name instantly rang a bell in Felt's mind. On top of that, it was a name closely connected to Camberley. "Ain't that the name of the bouncer teacher that Camberley brought to the red-light district?" she asked.

"And if that's the person who committed arson in the Flower Prison Garden's domain, then…it is understandable that Camberley would be caught up in the incident," Reinhard added.

The dwarf magic user's earnest-looking face came to Felt's mind. He was robbed of all his belongings by Camberley and fell to the position of bouncer in the red-light district, but if he's bein' suspected as an arsonist, Felt thought, there must be some complicated issue at play here.

"Is Camberley safe?" she asked.

"Even we aren't sure how the Flower Prison Garden is treating him," Safis answered. "But that proprietress of the red-light district isn't a short-sighted person. It's hard to imagine she would do anything that would cause her to lose the only lead she has connecting to the culprit."

"You still believe there's a possibility of her doing that, it's just that you think she won't."

Safis smiled gently at Felt, who was complicating things. But she could infer how bad of a situation Camberley was in from that attitude of his. Being Camberley's patron, she couldn't just ignore the dangerous predicament he'd gotten into.

"Of course, we at the Black Silver Coin believe Your Ladyship has no connection to this. But it won't be so easy to calm the other two organizations down…especially the Flower Prison Garden, whose reputation took a hit."

Felt swung her legs up and down and leapt out of her chair, then glared at Safis at the other side of the desk. The snake-like man living in the underworld showed his long tongue in response to her glare. "Worry not… I'm sure their demand is simple," he said with a provoking smile, as if he was enjoying the sight of them being cornered.

14

"My demand is simple, Lady Felt… You just need to hand over the arsonist your subordinate helped to escape."

"…I thought so." Felt snorted at the aroma sweet enough to melt away any man's rationality and sank into the soft sofa with a bitter look on her face. She was unhappy, as Toto's demand was just as the snake-eyed man had expected.

They were now in the manager's room of the Flower Prison Garden's top brothel. It was located in the red-light district where they had gone to greet her the previous day, but the atmosphere had taken a dramatic turn; the flower paradise that was supposed to give men a dreamy night had a dark shadow cast over it.

But then, the night flowers weren't so mentally frail that they would give up just like that. If the red-light district became gloomy, the women would address it by changing their makeup and attire to match the tone. As a result, men who came to enjoy the night continued to do so and business in the red-light district was prosperous as ever. However, this was only a facade for those looking from the outside.

"The building that burned down was on the street we crossed on the way here, right?"

"Yes. The partially burned-down building is still there, yes? The culprit has yet to be apprehended, so we don't have time to repair it yet… Good grief, my ability to judge a person's character has grown weak. I hate myself for that," muttered the proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden listlessly before blowing purple smoke out from her pipe.

"Miss Toto, are you also of the thought that Mr. Ezzo was the arsonist?" inquired Reinhard, a painful expression on his face due to the tragic event.

"Obviously," replied Toto with one eye closed at the Sword Saint's anguished expression. "If Ezzo was innocent, then he should have stayed behind and helped put the fire out and made an effort to prove his innocence. I am not so dense that I would deny someone their right to give their side of the story. Ezzo likely knows that as well. Nonetheless, he fled the scene."

"Which is why you believe that Ezzo is the one responsible for burning the building down and causing many people to lose their lives?"

"Yes, that's right. Ezzo Cadner is a murderer…and a coward who fled after turning his student who admired him as a teacher into a charred corpse.”

“…”

Reinhard furrowed his eyebrows at Toto’s heavy words of denunciation against Ezzo. Felt also took her words with a sense of bitterness.

It’s been confirmed that there were a few prostitutes and guards, as well as male customers, inside the brothel when it burned down. One of the pitiful victims was the prostitute that Felt had talked with, Mimosa. Though lacking in seductiveness, she was a girl who showed signs of being a naive hard-worker… She had addressed Ezzo as “Teacher” and learned reading and writing from him, but her future was now forever lost, stolen away by the inferno.

Normally, prostitutes are hired with a term limit. Once they fulfill their terms, they are released from their duties. Most prostitutes enter this profession to pay off a debt, or to settle some sort of deal of various kinds, and when this is also fulfilled, most of them lead a normal life afterwards. So, after learning how to read and write, Mimosa definitely had a different life waiting for her as soon as her term ended, but not anymore.

“Regular customers from both the Black Silver Coin and The Balance were inside the building as it burned down. So, for the time being, I think that Ezzo is working as a pawn of someone unrelated to the big three.”

“Which brings us to the top of the suspect list, right? Can’t say I can blame you,” said Felt.

At the moment, the most logical conclusion would be that the Felt Camp had sent their pawn—Ezzo—to the Flower Prison Garden and successfully tarnished their reputation. And the fact that Camberley and Rachins had assisted in Ezzo’s escape made it nearly impossible to dispute this accusation.

“That has nothing to do with us though,” declared Reinhard. “Shouldn’t you, the citizens of Flanders, solve the city’s problems yourselves?”

“I can’t believe that those cold words were spoken by the knight among knights, the Sword Saint. However, I can’t deny that after causing such a blunder. Since it is a fact that we let someone scheme and have been unable to catch them to this day.”

Toto smiled charmingly and raised a white flag at Reinhard’s assertion as she had no objections against it.

“But then,” she continued, still remaining in a submissive posture. “ What are you going to do about Master Camberley? Surely you aren’t thinking about abandoning him, are you? Or am I mistaken? Are you saying that that dwarf thug who is all talk has nothing to do with you? That he is unrelated to you?”

“…”

Reinhard’s aura sharpened a bit at the cruel choice Toto had suggested. Felt glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes and heaved a short sigh. I see, the proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden is smart. In short, she’s saying that we don’t have to go through all the trouble of proving our innocence for shit we didn’t do if we sacrifice Camberley, who is nothing but a mere thug without any sign of productivity and hasn’t made any contributions so far.

If Felt did that, then she’d be cleared of all suspicion and everything would be water under the bridge.

“Ha, it seems like we’ve been underestimated.”

“My, in my opinion, I’ve thought of your position as a candidate for the royal selection and made a huge concession.”

“And what am I going to pay in return for being able to escape from the trouble? Becoming indebted to you, being looked down on by my knight, spat at by my stupid companion I abandoned, and worse, turning into a coward, the very thing hated by my family that I respect…Don’t mess around with me.”

Felt stood up from the sofa she was sinking into and looked down at Toto, who was elegantly crossing her legs. Toto’s eyes widened slightly under her long lashes after seeing those crimson eyes peer into her.

“Remember this.” She pointed her finger at Toto’s well-defined nose and declared, “Camberley belongs to me. I am his mistress. His liabilities are half mine too. And I am my own master. I don’t intend on bein’ bossed around by anyone.”

“…”

“In addition, I am his mistress too. He’s ready to bite anyone if something happens,” Felt said with vigor while pointing at Reinhard, who was standing right behind her.

Reinhard deeply bowed after hearing her words and said, “Yes,” before nodding. “If it’s by Lady Felt’s order then I am always ready to bite into the throat of her choosing.”

“I was thinkin’ of an ear or finger. You’re…really scary…saying throat…”

“My lady…” Reinhard dropped his shoulders as if he had just been betrayed.

Toto went silent for a moment at their exchange and then placed her hand over her mouth. It was a graceful gesture—moving in such a way so that she wouldn’t get any lipstick stains on her hand—but it was definitely a movement following the urge to smile. “…Fufufu. Oh my, how boorish of me, and to call myself the proprietress of the red-light district… My apologies, Lady Felt. It appears I’ve underestimated you.”

“Yeah, and don’t you forget it!” Felt said, proudly puffing out her chest.

Toto nodded while still smiling. “Understood.” Then, shaking the pipe between her fingers, she let the purple smoke flutter in the room. “If that is Your Ladyship’s resolve then I have nothing to say… Though we have the dwarf who assisted Ezzo Cadner in his escape in our custody.”

“You aren’t gonna let us meet him easily, will you?”

"At least not until we get him to start talking. We are quite desperate," replied Toto with an expression showing no signs of being desperate. Camberley was alive, at least if her words were to be believed, but it was clear that there wasn't much time left. The terms for his release had already been made clear and tensions were high.

"If we find out who burned down your brothel, will ya hear us out?"

"Yes, of course, as I believe that culprit would be the same one behind these many incidents occurring over the past few months. It would be a great help to me as one of the representatives of this metropolis to settle this situation."

"Don't say something you don't mean." Felt ruffled her hair after listening to Toto's words and smiled. "I can't wait to see how you're gonna thank me after we solve this whole situation," she declared with a fierce smile without the slightest hint of fear.

15

"We weren't able to meet Camberley, so what are you going to do now?"

"I guess we could roam around the city or something, but…what good would that do?"

After ending the talks with Toto in the Flower Prison Garden, Felt pondered while walking around the city with Reinhard. To convince Toto and make her release Camberley, we need to capture the arsonist. For now, Ezzo is the prime suspect and the Big Three are desperately searchin' for him. I can't imagine that we, as outsiders, will be able to get to him before they can, though.

"Do you have a divine protection that helps you find someone you're lookin' for? If you do, spit it out right now."

"I truly want to be of assistance to you, my lady, but I can't claim to have a divine protection that doesn't exist. Nonetheless, if Your Ladyship orders me to search around the city without anything to go on, I will have no other choice but to obey…”

“That would be a waste of your existence. Seems like we alone can’t come up with a solution.”

Disappointed and somewhat relieved to learn Reinhard was not almighty, Felt swiftly crossed the street and walked towards the rendezvous point. Only she and Reinhard were allowed into the Flower Prison Garden to meet with Toto. The rest of her companions who couldn’t join them at the brothel were waiting at the charred remains of a building—the scene of the crime in question.

“Lady Felt, Young Master, we’ve been waiting.”

The one who had rushed across the street to greet them was a timid-looking pink-haired young girl, Flam—one of the twin chamberlains at Astrea Manor. She usually moved around with her other half, Grassis, but the sisters were acting separately today for a certain reason. Which was…

“So, how’d it go? Were ya able to meet Camberley in the brothel?” said the person leaning forward and inquiring about the outcome—a suspicious-looking man covering his head with a scarf and his mouth with a piece of cloth.

“Calm down.” Felt waved her hand at the hasty query of the suspicious man. “Stop bein’ so loud. You’re gonna blow your cover. You promised you weren’t gonna cause me any trouble, remember?”

“Yeah yeah, but how d’ya expect me to stay calm…!” the man—Rachins—spat, stomping on the ground out of frustration, before looking up at the sky. He was in disguise, hiding his identity because he was also suspected of attacking the Big Three alongside Ezzo and Camberley.

He had helped Ezzo escape and was nearly beaten to death by ruffians. So, whether to take Rachins to Flanders or not was a subject of much debate in the mansion. In fact, Old Man Rom and Reinhard were against him accompanying Felt. Nonetheless, Rachins insisted that he be allowed to join them and would not back down in the slightest. Felt couldn't help but respect this tenacity and commitment to see his friend.

As a result, Rachins accompanied Felt to Flanders, but she made him follow a few conditions. The first condition was that he keep his identity hidden in disguise; additionally, he must always remain with a guard since he could not fight very well on his own. That guard was Flam, who remained by his side.

"All things considered, Mister Rachins, aren't you ashamed of being protected by a young girl like this?" Flam asked with a shrug.

"Shut up! I had no choice, ya know?! I wasn't allowed to be here without you!" Rachins cried angrily at her. Either way, she was stronger than him, so his angry shout didn't really pack much of a punch.

As expected from someone serving the Astrea family, Flam and Grassis's fighting abilities were extraordinary despite the way they looked. Even Felt would be no match against the twins in a serious bout.

Felt interrupted them. "Well, we can leave that aside. As for everything we've learned…ah, Reinhard, I'll leave that to you."

"As you wish. Flam, Rachins, I want you to calm down and listen."

Like that, Felt tossed aside the long explanation and Reinhard thoroughly informed them both of the things discussed in the Flower Prison Garden.

Hearing that, Rachins narrowed his sanpaku eyes annoyingly and said, "So I have ta catch the guy I helped escape…"

Reinhard nodded. "Camberley's safety won't be guaranteed if we don't do that. But it isn't a good idea to search around the city blindly. Does anything come to mind? You guys know the city better than we do."

"What's that supposed to mean…nah I guess you weren't tryna start nuthin. Shit, this is why I hate people with good upbringin's…"

Rachins clicked his tongue at Reinhard's question and started pondering something. "It ain't like there isn't somethin' that comes to mind," he continued after placing his hand on his thin jaw. "It's real weird that the people here still can't find him after searchin' around. There ain't no way they wouldn't be serious about searchin' after bein' so dang humiliated by all this."

"Yeah, right," Felt said. "The Flower Prison Garden is probably hunting him down as we speak. So there's really no point in searchin' for him ourselves."

"Yeah. Others are already doin' that and they can't find 'im, which means that…"

"Could it be that he has already left the city?" muttered the young girl after hearing Rachins's inference.

"No," Rachins replied, shaking his head at her words. "Remember how the woman Gaston is hittin' on and her kid were found in Hakuchuri? Escaping from them ain't an easy task with the kind of influence they got. It's impossible for him to escape on his own. And if it's possible he isn't alone, then…"

"…There is a possibility that someone is giving him asylum," blurted out Reinhard.

"Bingo," Rachins said with a snap of his fingers before pointing at Reinhard.

"I get it now," added Felt, also feeling satisfied with the conclusion.

"He's someone who has caused such a big mess." Rachins faced the charred remains of the building and continued. "So giving 'im asylum would require great resolve… But I think I might know someone who'd be stupid 'nough ta do it."

"Is it someone who's close enough with Ezzo to want to protect him?" asked Felt.

"Not quite. If we're talkin' about how close they are, they ain't that close. It's simply that it ain't that difficult to receive their protection," replied Rachins while putting on airs and looking around at everyone. He then nodded at the three of them, who were frowning, and continued. "…There is a moneylender in this city known as the Golden Beetle."

16

"Well, well…if it isn't the most talked about person in the Kingdom now. I am most humbled that you came to visit someone like us."

Felt received the green-haired woman's greetings and squinted her crimson eyes. Black suit, twin tails, and a polite demeanor. The woman, armed with qualities that made her seem like a true professional, made Felt tense up like she had when facing Toto. She had previously come to this city to greet the Flower Prison Garden and The Balance, but forgetting to visit this place was a matter of deep regret.

"My apologies that I couldn't go to greet you… To say that we were extremely busy would be nothing more than an excuse, but nonetheless, I am ashamed of my shortcomings."

She slyly mentioned the other day as if she had read Felt's mind. A bitter taste arose in Felt's mouth at the mention of this and she shook her head. "Aah, enough with the pleasantries. My name is…"

"…Lady Felt, correct? We are the Golden Beetle, I am Helaine, the one in charge of the office in Flanders. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

The woman who introduced herself as Helaine bowed repeatedly and escorted her visitors to the parlor. According to Rachins, the Golden Beetle is the biggest loan shark in Flanders, in addition to being active throughout the entire Kingdom. In this city, they've been able to run smoothly and maliciously under the protection of the Big Three.

Protection or not, the Golden Beetle had also been a target during the past months. One sales office, separate from the one Felt and her group were visiting, had been attacked just the other day. With all of these disturbances, they were certainly in a position to want this solved quickly as well. Felt took a lesson from Safis this time and paid a visit to Helaine without any prior appointment. However, her response was quick and flexible, almost as if she'd expected them to visit.

Flam spoke up suddenly. "Young Master, there seems to be a problem."

"I know," Reinhard said. "We're in the dark here with no idea what this woman may be planning. We must be ready for anything…"

"It's not that. The cost of this cup of tea is equal to the cost of an entire month's worth of our tea back at the mansion."

"…Flam, I'm glad you're enjoying these luxuries, but please be on your guard."

While listening to the leisurely conversation between the two standing behind her in the parlor, Felt glared at Helaine sitting in front of her.

Helaine shrugged her petite shoulders after being exposed to Felt's glare. "So, what brings you here? Considering we're a mere nobody around here, I don't know how we could ever meet a royal selection candidate's expectations, Lady Felt."

"Are you hiding a guy named Ezzo Cadner?" Felt asked.

"…"

"Sorry about that. I ain't that good at negotiating."

Helaine went quiet at this blunt question. The faint smile she'd worn since the beginning was now cast in a slight shadow. While normally concealing her intentions, Felt caught a glimpse of Helaine's true nature beneath that smile.

"My my, what a strange thing to ask. If I'm not mistaken, that's the name of the dangerous criminal who's been ravaging the streets in our fine metropolis. For us to hide someone like that would certainly jeopardize our position…"

"Let me make this clear," Felt interrupted. "We ain't here to snitch on you. And, the guy, Ezzo, may not even be the culprit behind any of this."

"So Your Ladyship believes the reality of the incident to be different?" Helaine asked.

"Nah, I'm not sayin' that I know what really happened, but the person who got caught after it all happened is from my camp. So that's something I can't just ignore."

"I see. So your driving force lies in your captured subordinate…" Helaine stopped there and rubbed her chin with her black-gloved hand. "Speaking of which." She looked behind Felt. "The person over there has been staring daggers at me for a while. Do you know why he is doing so?"

Her query was directed at Rachins, who was standing next to Reinhard and Flam. His gaze was sharper than usual, not able to conceal his animosity at all. Felt waved her hand between Rachins and Helaine as if to block his gaze. "It's nothing. He's just being grumpy so don't worry about him. But if you want, I can make him wait outside."

"No, it's fine. I was just worried if there had been any discourtesy on our end. As long as that's not the case, there's no problem."

"Seems like you're used to being glared at, huh?"

Helaine nodded. "Yes, since our reputation is immensely bad among people who are prudent and aren't in dire financial crisis."

More than mere moneylenders, they were loan sharks with deep ties to the underworld. Violence and excessive interest rates were standard in their line of work. Felt, however, had no intention of criticizing their business. More often than not, the ones borrowing money are the ones at fault, she thought.

Felt continued. "So, I haven't gotten your answer yet. Where's Ezzo Cadner?"

"Haven't I given you an answer?" Helaine retorted. "The person at the center of this is said to have opposed the Big Three. Our position would be in danger if we protect someone like him."

"I'm sure that's true, but if you find the risk to be worth the payout, then that's a different story. Right?

"…"

"I don't intend on meddlin' with how moneylenders work, and you can do whatever side business you have. But if it comes in my way, then I'm free to try to move it out of my way, right?" Felt moved away from the backrest of the chair and joined her fists in front of her thin chest.

For the first time, Helaine's smile completely disappeared. Felt's words could easily be taken as a declaration of war. The atmosphere in the parlor grew tense, as now all eyes were focused on Helaine. Without any chance of assistance from other members of the Golden Beetle, she was all alone. It was obvious enough that a physical altercation would be hopeless for her, but not every altercation had to be won through physical means.

"We are moneylenders…so the way that we settle things around here should be clear enough," she said, reaching a hand into her pocket.

"Stop. If you try anything…" Reinhard warned.

Felt stopped Reinhard, who was now on high alert. "Don't move, Reinhard. She ain't that stupid."

Helaine nodded at their exchange and took a missive out of her pocket. She spread it on the low table in front of Felt. The content of the missive was…

"…This, would be master Camberley's IOU."

"Wait, wait, wait! That rascal had debt in this city?!" Felt screamed at this surprising turn of events.

"Yes, and it is quite a sum…it would be quite a financial blow to us if we aren't able to retrieve it. And now that he's been captured amidst all this commotion, we find ourselves with numerous options on how to retrieve the money owed."

At a cursory glance, the IOU seemed genuine and without any errors. She hated to admit to herself that all of her studying for the royal selection came in handy right now; as a result, she knew that if Camberley's blood seal on the missive is real, then the missive is valid.

Flam frowned at Helaine's suggestion of gruesome retrieval methods.

"…Numerous options, you say?"

"Turning the human body into capital isn't just through the red-light district or slave traders, young lady."

Flam murmured to herself, "…I can't let Grassis hear this."

It looks like Flam decided to keep this unpleasant social studies lesson a secret from her sister. Looking at that from the corner of her eyes, Felt speculated the reason behind Helaine taking out the IOU at this particular moment.

If things remain the same, then Camberley will literally be dismembered in order to pay off his debt. Helaine's conscience won't be hurt by that since it is her job to retrieve the money they have lent. In that case, to make her back off from dismembering Camberley with means other than guilt would be…

Felt began to speak "…This IOU."

"It is a huge sum of money for unknown use. Master Camberley often mentioned that he was serving a person in a prominent position… What are you going to do?" Helaine inquired, looking at Felt, who had picked up the IOU.

The question gave little detail, but Helaine's intentions remained clear as day.

To be honest, this feels like repeating the negotiation with Toto in the Flower Prison Garden. Camberley is making me really exhausted. I've been told continuously to let him go, give up on him, that he is no good, that he is a lump of debt and a womanizer. And I can't deny it if someone were to tell me he's my camp's burden. But…

"Please," Rachins implored. "I beg of you, don't abandon him."

Despite Camberley's reputation, the man pleading for his salvation by putting his forehead on the table with the IOU did not bad-mouth him. Felt could tell that Reinhard and Flam had gasped slightly at that sight. The disguised Rachins had put his forehead on the table between Felt and Helaine, kneeling and pleading for Camberley. It was evident from his stance he was serious about what he wished for.

Come to think of it, Rachins has been desperate from the start. He's been giving all he has for Camberley.

"He's my friend. Only Gaston and Camberley helped me when I was on the verge o' death and couldn't do anything! So, please…" Rachins's words trailed off in despair.

"…So?" Felt replied. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Nothing! You don't have to tell me. I know it's got nothin' to do with you!" Rachins lifted his face up and shouted at Felt's cold query. "I know we jus' been a burden on you! It'd be no loss for ya to jus' abandon us here either! But it's the same as back in that alley. You could'a jus' left us there too, but ya took us in!"

Rachins was referring to the time when Felt first met the three friends in a random back alley. She was on her way back from the remains of the loot house after having just declared that she would take part in the royal selection when she found them. The three of them were down on their luck and on the run and when she welcomed them to her camp. Back then, it was even Rachins who sneered at her initially. Reinhard complained that she should reconsider, and Old Man Rom just heartily laughed it off.

But now Rachins was here pleading desperately for mercy for his friend, his face on the verge of oozing with snot. Reinhard hadn't changed his position of waiting for Felt's decision, and Old Man Rom had stayed in Hakuchuri, so he wasn't here.

—Seems like the tables have turned within just a few months, thought Felt, amazed. "A sum as big as that can't be arranged right away. My walking wallet doesn't have that much, right? Am I right?" Felt teased.

"If by walking wallet you mean me, then it is as you say," Reinhard replied, unamused.

Felt closed an eye and looked over Rachins's head to Helaine.

The lady from the Golden Beetle smiled faintly and pointed at the IOU on the table. "Of course, I am not asking you to return all the money immediately. It would be of great service to us if you could do that, but I understand the sum is quite large. So for starters, how about a down payment?"

"Down payment…"

"It will be a guarantee to show me that you intend on returning the debt, though it would not hold any weight unless it's worth something to you. Thus—"

"Thus?"

What's she going to say? Felt had a bad feeling about what Helaine was about to say, but she urged her to continue. The Golden Beetle's Helaine was an unrivaled negotiator despite her young age. She deepened her smile as if she was testing Felt's resolve and said, "The red earth dragon tied to the dragon carriage outside…it would seem to be worth quite a hefty sum, am I correct?"

17

"Taking advantage of my situation, that damned Golden Pest…I'll make her pay next time."

Without intending to do so, Felt correctly used the standard derogatory term for the Golden Beetle, and clicked her tongue at the content of their negotiation. As tough as it was to say, they had achieved their objective safe and sound. Thinking of her dragon, she couldn't help but object at how safe it had been, but they had received a near-perfect response nonetheless.

She had to make a great sacrifice, but this yielded much for their efforts; as such, there was no time for them to slow down or stop now. However…

"What are you so giddy about?" Felt spat over her shoulder. "You're as deep in this shit as I am. Get your act together."

Confused and startled, Rachins meekly replied, "Oh, yeah…I know that but…"

Rachins had been acting like this since the negotiations with the Golden Beetle.

It wasn't like they couldn't understand Rachins's confusion.

"Excuse me." Seeing as Rachins had trouble putting it into words, Flam interjected to speak on his behalf. She then stood up straight, and looked back at the Golden Beetle's office. "Are you really okay with that? Romy was a gift from the young master, not to mention you had a deep fondness for it."

"No, it isn't fine. It ain't fine at all!" Felt shouted back. "They took my precious earth dragon as collateral! There's nothing fine about that at all. I'm definitely not gonna let this slide."

Her face grew closer and closer to Flam's as she babbled to the point where the young lady was bending backward. Felt caught Flam by the shoulders to keep her from falling and let out a deep sigh. Her anger was understandable since the collateral Helaine demanded was her crimson earth dragon, Romy.

It had only been a few days since Reinhard gifted the earth dragon to Felt, but it was clear that Romy had become completely attached to her. The two of them were eager to spend more time together. That was real precise harassment, Felt thought. I could have rejected the offer, saying the conditions weren't something I could agree with, but…

“She wouldn’t be nice enough to let us off any easier. If I said no, she’d probably be a lot more unreasonable, too, so what we got is the best we’ll ever get.”

Reinhard nodded. “But, you will definitely get it back. That’s what I’ll believe, my lady.”

“Obviously. And I’m not saying that ‘cause it’s a gift from you. It’s because Romy is my precious earth dragon already. I don’t intend to rest my ass anywhere other than Romy’s back,” Felt declared.

Reinhard gave a deep, trusting smile and nodded. He probably didn’t object to her decision because he truly trusted her. After all, the only person who did not object to Felt immediately accepting Helaine’s condition wasn’t Flam or Rachins, but Reinhard.

He continued, “It really was quite unexpected that she’s been hiding Mr. Ezzo.”

Felt agreed. “I thought she just might know where he was hiding, but I got a bit spooked by just how involved she was. Rachins was right for saying that we should go to her first.”

Reinhard nodded in agreement. Being given Romy as collateral without any resistance appeared to deeply satisfy Helaine’s code of honor as a moneylender. She confessed everything—leaving aside whether it being true or not, but she gave so much information to Felt and the rest that they felt like she’d shared everything she knew. She explicitly detailed where to find Ezzo Cadner, who’d been hiding out since last night after burning down the brothel.

“We are acting together with the Big Three of Flanders, but we aren’t their complete ally. Our profits are of utmost priority.”

That was what Helaine had to say, and they did not intend on telling it to anyone.

“Why is Helaine going on such a dangerous path?” Felt wondered.

“…She just cares about reachin’ her end goal, no matter what.”

She looked at Rachins. “Her end goal?”

“The Golden Beetle’s public stance is that they’re nobody’s ally. So if ya look at it from a different perspective then it means they wanna put on a good face for everyone. You bein’ a candidate is included in that everyone.”

Rachins hadn’t fully snapped out of the mood he was in, but his explanation here showed he was getting back to normal. After hearing that, Felt came to a late realization that Helaine had considered her position as a candidate. In short, she wanted to have something on the candidate for the royal selection, so she collected information on Camberley and Ezzo just in case.

The reason behind that was—

Felt was confused. “Are they suspecting us of planning to eliminate the people of the underworld?”

“No idea. But their doubts are growing I s’pose. We didn’t even visit ‘em last time we came here, so they couldn’t know what we were up to unless someone talked.”

“Aah, shit, what a drag.”

Felt was fed up with all of the unwarranted suspicion directed at her and the barrage of consideration she didn’t ask for. It had been two months since she decided to take part in the royal selection. When facing the desk in her study, she felt like she’s learned a lot since then, but in reality, she lacked experience in the practical application of her newfound knowledge. She was irritated at her complicated position.

“What should I do with this irritation now…”

“With all due respect, it would be nice if you would find some comfort with me on the task.” Reinhard joked with Felt, whose grumpy face wouldn’t let up. The slender figure leading them had stopped, which meant that they had reached their destination.

Ahead of them was an old Western-style house on the outskirts of Flanders. According to Helaine, the building was confiscated as collateral for another man’s debt. She hadn’t heard what happened to him after his mansion got confiscated, but she wasn't that interested in that, either. There was only one thing she was interested in at the moment.

Reinhard stepped forward. "Flam, please protect Lady Felt and Rachins in my stead. I will break in."

"Understood, Young Master. Please be carefu…be careful not to kill him."

Reinhard smiled wryly at Flam, who had rephrased her words into something more considerate for his opponent. The Sword Saint then knelt in front of Felt and gazed up at his mistress. "My lady, I'll be leaving your side for a short while. Please forgive me."

"Alright, alright, just don't let him escape. And no killing either. I wanna hear what he has to say."

Reinhard turned around towards the mansion after hearing Felt's apathetic instructions. With his graceful side profile and heroic gaze, a mere search in this rundown mansion seemed like an act from a great epic poem. Reinhard, with an air about him like that of an epic scene that marks the beginning of a grand tale, walked toward the mansion. He carried with him the great Dragon Sword, which he could not unsheathe.

Reaching the front door, he took a short breath and without any hesitation blew the door open with a front kick.

Felt chuckled. "He's oblivious to words like 'sneaky' and 'infiltration.'"

"That is how the young master is."

Felt and Flam exchanged their remarks as Reinhard broke into the mansion and quickly entered. Just as they thought he would begin his search, he unexpectedly shouted out—

"Mr. Ezzo Cadner, I know you're here! Please show yourself!"

Even Felt and Flam were baffled by his ridiculous act.

No way someone who's suspected of arson, running around the city would appear just by being called. But Felt's assumption was shattered immediately by the dwarf who appeared from one of the mansion's backrooms.

"…Who would have thought that the Sword Saint himself would pursue me? It would seem that I am quite popular."

"Huh, is he for real?" Felt muttered with a husky voice, having witnessed something unexpected. The person who had appeared there was undoubtedly Ezzo Cadner himself, distinguished by the gray-brown hair, intelligent look, and clearly short stature. His appearance was a bit of a mess due to being on the run, but the fire in his eyes hadn't faded one bit.

Reinhard looked at Ezzo's appearance and then pointed an empty palm at him.

"Mr. Ezzo…I would suggest that you surrender for your own good. Considering you've shown yourself so quickly, can you confirm the charges against you are some sort of misunderstanding?"

"Are you saying that you'll give me a chance to explain myself if I surrender? I'm not such an optimist to believe something like that. Nor am I a fool oblivious to his own sins, either," Ezzo dejectedly muttered, slowly shaking his head.

Reinhard furrowed his brow. "Your own…sin?"

"That's right," answered Ezzo before lifting his arms. "An unforgivable sin which demands atonement. This meager tribute to Mimosa is all I can do—what I must do, to atone for the severed future of a bright young girl who looked up to me.."

"Mr. Ezzo!" shouted Reinhard, sensing a change in the air. Ezzo, however, kept his arms raised to shoulder height, showing no signs of budging. A complex magical formula mingling in red and blue projected from both his raised palms…

"Your consideration is most appreciated! However, there is something I must do! I refuse to turn myself over to you before that has been accomplished! Even if the one standing in my way is you, Sword Saint!”

Reinhard glanced briefly at Felt to his rear. The reason was clear—it was to ask whether he should restrain Ezzo by force or not. Of course, he had no hope of getting past Reinhard, but even so, it was true that he had some level of ability, so…

“…Reinhard! Just do it!”

“As you wish…” Reinhard gave a short response to Felt’s order. Then in the blink of an eye, the Sword Saint exploded forward, the ground at the mansion’s entrance erupting behind him. Immediately the empty-handed Reinhard was close enough to reach for Ezzo’s shoulder. It was all playing out the same as that night in the red-light district, with Ezzo helplessly pinned on the ground…

“…You underestimated me, Sword Saint.”

“Wha?” Reinhard exclaimed in surprise as a purple shock exploded into his chest, sending him flying backward. Reinhard widened his eyes at this unexpected impact. He looked down to see that two buttons had been blown off his white shirt.

“Behold! A countermeasure to your Excess Mana Circulation Constitution!” shouted Ezzo with a satisfied smile on his face, both hands stretched out, blood dripping from them. The backlash of casting on Reinhard appeared to be great; he’d lost a few nails and he now had cuts all along his arms where his sleeves had been rolled up.

However, he’d managed to land an attack. It was the first time Felt had seen Reinhard get hit by anything—let alone magic.

“Did you really believe no magic user could harm you?! That would be true arrogance indeed, Sword Saint!”

“…”

“I have created a distortion in the normal conduction of mana by rearranging the magical composition! Make no mistake, it is no easy feat! It would take a lifetime for an average magic user to even be able to change the composition of a spell while executing it! But I have done it!" shouted Ezzo as he ripped off a barely-attached nail, ignoring the pain. Though it didn't do much, it was a blow nonetheless. Reinhard had no equal in combat skill, but his strength was not only derived from his extraordinary physical abilities. The Sword Saint possessed an innate ability that was said to nullify incoming attacks—particularly magic attacks—almost entirely. This had just been proven wrong.

"Let me thank you, Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea! Thanks to you, I've proven that my hard work can overcome even an Excess Mana Circulation Constitution such as yours! Now all that is left is practice!"

Ezzo's bleeding hadn't stopped yet, and neither had his elemental assault. Bursting from his outstretched hands came a stormy gust and a torrent of gushing water, clashing into a muddy stream right before Reinhard's eyes. The area was then blanketed in a heavy fog. Providing this cover for himself, Ezzo chose to flee. Making a preemptive strike, preventing his opponent from making a move, then fleeing was the best possible move for anyone in his situation.

...Unfortunately for him, this opponent couldn't be stopped so easily.

"..."

Reinhard stepped forward. The shockwave from this simple motion instantly cleared the fog with such force that water droplets bore holes into the mansion walls. He lunged forward and immediately caught up to Ezzo, giving him no chance to flee. Reinhard had already underestimated this dwarf once. There wouldn't be a second time.

"Ga-ah!"

He grabbed Ezzo by the nape and smashed him on the wet floor using a combination of power and skill. The force knocked the wind out of him and broke his focus, stopping him from composing another formula immediately.

"It is over now. Continuing would be…"

"No! We aren't done yet!" Ezzo screamed.

He refused to admit defeat even in this position. He glanced at his pinned right shoulder and a quick, sharp gust cut straight into it, causing blood to splatter and gush out. Reinhard was speechless, taken aback by the gruesome scene. Taking advantage of this surprise, Ezzo was able to squirm away and put some distance between them, his arm barely hanging from his shoulder. The arm would have been detached entirely if Reinhard hadn't let go immediately.

"You're soft, Sword Saint. I highly doubt that you would be able to protect your noble lady like that."

Stunned, Reinhard uttered, "That wound…needs immediate treatment. Why do something so reckless…"

"I told you. It's for my atonement!"

Ezzo grit his teeth, clutching what remained of his shoulder with his remaining hand. Blood flowed from his wound, undeterred by his tiny palm. Due to their small stature, it's clear that dwarves don't have much blood to begin with. His blood loss was fatal.

Ezzo roared at them without care for the danger he was in, his face pale.

"You people have plans of your own! I know that! But, there is something I need to do!" His voice trembled in rage, pain, and sorrow. "…I must avenge my student and answer for her stolen future."

This wasn't adding up for Felt. This dwarf's tragic cries were inconsistent with the confession of a sin. What it meant was…

"Mimosa was not a smart girl… She was not literate, had poor manners, and wasn't a fast learner, either. But she was earnest! She may have been slow, but that did not detract from the noble will to learn. And she didn't have a choice, her parents sold her to the red-light district. After all that, she wrote her very first letter to me with words she'd just learned. She asked me if it was weird for a girl who sold flowers at night to dream of being a florist. That's the kind of girl she was…"

His words became staggered, and the passion in his voice grew listless. He suddenly dropped to one knee, the wound taking its toll as he shook his head back and forth.

"No one can laugh at Mimosa's dream. I will not let anyone laugh. A prostitute in the corner of the red-light district having a small dream for the future, what's so weird about that…"

His once booming voice had now become a faint whisper, hardly audible to his audience.

Ezzo's heavy eyes were cast down struggling to stay open as he lifted his head up. He saw the silhouette of a thin girl before him and looked deep into her eyes. "Mimosa…" he muttered with a husky voice. "Nobody has the right to laugh at your dream. Neither the blood flowing through one's veins nor the place one grows up is relevant. I, the Gray, will prove that. So…"

"…"

"Someday, the day I get the titles, I'll pin a flower from your shop on my chest…"

His feeble voice drifted off as the strength left his body, falling limp in waiting arms. But it wasn't his dear Mimosa who held him gently, embracing his tired body; it was Felt.

"He lost consciousness. He pushed himself too hard and lost too much blood," she said. Pursing her lips, she looked down at the unconscious Ezzo. Blood continued to gush out from his wound. She ripped the cape from his back and tied it tightly to his shoulder to stop the bleeding.

Flam walked up to the girl. "Lady Felt, there's blood on your clothes."

"I can always get new clothes, that's not important. Flam, can you fix him up?"

"Yes. As a chamberlain of House Astrea, I have learned well from my grandmother."

With that, Flam gently took Ezzo from Felt and quickly began tending his wounds. Her movement and technique were brilliant, as expected from training with her grandmother, Carol.

I guess there's no need to worry now that Flam is taking care of him. As for this guy…

"You look super gloomy. I feel like I'm seeing you like this a lot lately."

"I am ashamed of myself," Reinhard muttered. "Honestly, I did not think that he could ever counter me like that…"

Felt nodded, "Yeah, that was unexpected for all of us. He's more impressive than I thought."

Gaining the upper hand on Reinhard even for a moment isn't something even a hundred normal people could pull off together. Ezzo definitely proved he's more than just talk. And that's not the only thing strange here.

"Rachins, aren't you going to say, 'Let's turn him in'?" she said, teasing him.

"…You don't gotta be like that. Even I can see it's more complicated after that whole thing."

Annoyed, he clicked his tongue at her with a scarf still wrapped around his head. His gaze was fixed on the thick pool of blood Ezzo had spilled on the ground. Only with extreme determination could someone do this to himself.

Delirious and at the cusp of death, Ezzo still howled sharply as if he were still engaged in battle. Felt could not possibly fathom that any of this was merely an act.

"My lady."

Felt responded with a somber nod. "I know."

She could hear the concern in Reinhard's voice regarding the now unconscious dwarf. Ezzo's critical condition and the mystery surrounding his actions left them with only one answer.

"Someone else is behind this, and Ezzo's taking the heat for it."

Seems like this is more than just simple arson. Felt looked up at the sky, lamenting the dire situation they'd become involved in. Annoyingly bright little clouds littered the sky in stark contrast to the grim, sinking feeling in her heart.

18

Standing in the pasture, Gaston felt a mixture of emotions after hearing that something was amiss. Earlier that day, he learned that Rachins and Camberley had gotten into trouble with some underworld syndicates after a night out in Flanders.

Gaston cursed himself for not keeping in touch with them lately.

He knew that Rachins and Camberley had a tendency to go overboard and lose control, but he had always been there to steer them in the right direction. However, now that he had let his guard down, they had found themselves in a dangerous situation. It was clear that they needed to stick together if they wanted to avoid any more trouble.

"…"

"Oh, aah, sorry about that, Kalifa. I spaced out for a bit."

Gaston suddenly felt a disapproving gaze boring into him from the side, and he quickly apologized with an expression oozing with love to the person looking at him. After receiving his apology, the gray-haired lady—Kalifa—smiled gently. He had become acquainted with this mother and her daughter a bit more than two months ago by a curious turn of fate. Kalifa was an admirable woman who, despite being young, raised her daughter diligently. Gaston had been getting along well with her and taking care of her all this time. She lost her voice due to a wound she received in a certain incident. This made her day-to-day tasks much more difficult to carry out.

They'd gotten so close that she doesn't get angry at him even if he calls her 'Kalifa' without any honorifics.

Ironically, it was Gaston's relationship with her and her beloved daughter Ilya that kept him from joining Rachins and Camberley's night out. On top of that, their past relationship with the underworld stopped him from leaving their side, which furthered the irony.

"…They might get dragged into the Black Silver Coin's mess, huh," he pondered.

It was something Gaston didn't want to think about, but that was the reason why Gaston didn't accompany them to Flanders. Gaston and Camberley were childhood friends who grew up in the royal capital together. Obviously, he wanted to take part in saving his friend from a dire situation, but he was advised to stay out of it. According to Felt, there's no guarantee that Kalifa wouldn't get dragged into trouble as well if Camberley's situation was related to the incident that wounded her.

If that were to happen, it would be up to Gaston to protect the two, considering his position and abilities.

Status-wise, Gaston was a servant at Astrea Manor, but he was continuously being taught how to perform various tasks and new skills as if being idle there was unforgivable. Among those, Gaston had quite the talent when it came to learning a systemized technique known as the 'Flow Method' and was being trained rigorously under Reinhard.

He used to give up quickly at the beginning, but things changed after he got to know Kalifa and found a reason for motivation. He could now take pride in himself that he had become somewhat better as a person.

"It's not like I really believe Felt when she says that bottom-dwellers like us are going to turn the kingdom upside down, but…"

Felt had boldly made that claim with a big smile the day she picked up Gaston and the other two as they were pursued for a huge blunder. They had the option to flee, sneering at her that it was a stupid ambition. But in the end, they didn't run away and found themselves gradually getting dragged in. Before he knew it, he had more reasons to stay than to leave.

Kalifa suddenly pushed the baby in her arms into the pondering Gaston's thick chest.

"…? Woah, woah, is it alright for me to hold her? Are you going back to work?"

It had become his routine to have lunch with Kalifa, a live-in worker at the ranch in Hakuchuri. After this, Gaston would normally take Ilya to the rancher while Kalifa took care of the grazing livestock and then leave after some small talk, but Felt had given him an order to lay low today, no matter how worried he was about Camberley, so he wanted to stick around here for a while.

"We'll stay here and watch you work. Ilya, you can cheer on your mommy as she works. You can do that right?"

Gaston held Ilya's small hand and waved it at Kalifa, who burst into gentle laughter. He smiled sweetly at that and sighed. He was happy here with the two of them and wished these little moments wouldn't end.

And then, it all changed…

"…Kalifa, hold Ilya and step back."

He noticed they were suddenly surrounded by suspicious men. Gaston clenched his big fists and held his ground, shielding the mother and daughter behind him.

There were eleven men he could see, all with their identities concealed by cloth wrapped around their faces. But the air around them wasn't that of an amateur and they didn't bother to make useless threats. These men knew exactly what they came here to do and weren't going to play any games.

"…"

Gaston let out a deep sigh in concentration. He extended his consciousness to the corners of his body and envisioned complete control over himself. The basics of the Flow Method were first to completely control one’s body. Despite what many believed, humans were terribly ineffective at controlling their own bodies. Understanding that limitation and breaking through it was the first challenge in acquiring the Flow Method.

He had gone through hellish days of training full of indescribable pain and torture. But I’m glad that I was able to survive that hell. I’m glad that I’m able to stand firm here. If I was the same old wussy, half-assed coward, then I wouldn’t have been able to fight for Kalifa and Ilya like this. So, I’m glad… All I have to do now is prove myself.

“I’ve stayed here while my buddies are in trouble, so I gotta make the ones who kept me around here believe they made the right choice.” He thrust his tightly clenched fist forward and stepped toward the men. The sole of his shoe, infused with the Flow Method, carved the earth beneath him as the men tensed in anticipation. With tremendous force, Gaston struck his mighty fist before him.

“Hraaah!!”

With Gaston’s war cry, a man was punched into the sky.

19

“So, why don’t you tell me what happened? Maybe we can help,” Felt said as she took a seat on the dusty staircase steps, her clothes still covered in blood.

However, the small gray-brown-haired man to whom the question had been directed made a sour face. “Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment, but…”

“But?” Felt tilted her head at the hesitant response. “But, what? You got something you wanna say?”

“Of course I do! I appreciate that you haven’t reported me to anyone before giving me a chance to tell my side of the story, but what is it with this treatment? What did I do to deserve this?!" the small man exclaimed as he swung his legs around.

He could swing his legs like this because they weren't actually touching the floor. They had bound and suspended him from the second floor of the mansion.

"Well, we still gotta be cautious. There's no telling what a magic user might try to pull if given the chance. But if you try something up there, you'll at least hit the floor first before you can do anything. That'll make it easier for us to deal with you."

"What do you have to worry about when you have the Sword Saint with you?! You're just having fun hanging me!"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

The name of the man responding to Felt's words was Ezzo Cadner—a dwarf magic user and currently the most wanted man by three of the largest underground syndicates in the city of Flanders. His charges ranged from arson, murder, and various other offenses.

"I am aware that I'm a criminal awaiting judgment, but this treatment is too cruel! I demand immediate relea…ugh."

"Mr. Ezzo, please remain calm. We found the rope in this old mansion, which could snap at any moment, and you yourself are gravely injured."

Turning his pale face up, Ezzo glared at Reinhard, who held the rope. "That's… something you should be telling your mistress, Sir Sword Saint…"

"Good point." The Sword Saint nodded. "Lady Felt, I must agree, this treatment is a little uncalled for. I also don't feel comfortable treating a magic user as skilled as Mr. Ezzo like this. If you are only fooling around, maybe it's time we stop…"

"Don't say anythin' more, Reinhard. Felt ain't just foolin' around.

Jus' like you said, he's a skilled magic user, and since we can't cover his mouth, we gotta at least tie 'im up so he won't be able to move. Just 'cause you can take him on, don't mean you should underestimate yer enemy."

"Rachins…"

The one who opposed Reinhard's request on behalf of Felt was a delinquent-looking man—Rachins. He sucked his teeth at the sight of Ezzo hanging below his feet. "I went through hell 'cause of you. Camberley is goin' through it as we speak. You better start talkin' now, or I swear Imma make you go through the same thing."

"Camberley… I see, my dwarven brother is…"

Ezzo's vexation and exhaustion seemed to fade at hearing Rachins's spiteful words. His face regained some color and showed more composure as he let out a deep sigh. "I understand. Though many parts of it may sound unbelievable, I will tell you everything I know."

"Why so cooperative all of a sudden?" asked Felt.

"He's in danger as a consequence of helping me. If I don't do anything to return the favor, even a little, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

Felt narrowed her eyes at this dramatic statement, initially skeptical, but she could hear the earnestness in his tone. She then signaled Reinhard with her eyes, and with that, he lowered Ezzo to the floor and unbound him. Finally free from his bindings, Ezzo examined the wound on his right arm. Though there was gauze wrapped around it, he could see that his injury was dire nonetheless.

"This is a treatment done by a very skilled individual. Who did this?"

"One of our twins. She went out to get me some new clothes, so she ain't here right now. If you wanna thank her, do so later yourself."

"New clothes… Right, that blood on you is mine. My apologies."

"Don't worry about it," she said, brushing off his apology. "You said you'll tell us everything you know, right?"

Ezzo's face grew solemn as he continued. "First, you may not believe me when I say this, but there's something I need you to know. The arsonist who burnt down the brothel of the Flower Prison Garden and killed so many…that…that wasn't me!"

"Oh, yeah, I know. You can skip that part."

"You know?" Ezzo froze at Felt's blunt words.

Reinhard walked over to Felt and looked as though he was about to criticize her for her bluntness. "My lady…"

"What?" Felt bared her fang at the knight's presence. "We ain't got the time to be wastin' on something that's already happened. We already decided we're lookin' into this matter based on his innocence, right? Then we gotta move on from that."

"I agree with your splendid decision, Lady Felt, but…how do I put this… You've glossed over such a large portion of our side of the story, you've caused Mr. Ezzo a bit of confusion."

At Reinhard's comment, Felt looked at Ezzo with disappointment. "Confusion? What's there to be confused about? I thought all magic users were supposed to be intelligent."

Receiving attention from both of them, Ezzo placed his hand on his head. "Wait wait wait. So what you're saying is that you're asking for my side of the story and not my defense? And that you've already decided to trust me and are willing to help me catch the real culprit?"

Felt widened her eyes. "Ah, uhm…? Yeah, I guess?" she responded, perplexed by Ezzo's speedy rational assessment of his own situation. Reinhard was also astonished by his accurate ability to objectively see the whole picture.

Ezzo, however, grew suspicious of the story that sounded too good to be true for him. "Why? Why would you trust me so easily?"

"…"

"You and I have only met once in the past. I can't even say you were particularly on good terms with my kin who helped me. So why would you hear me out, even when it defies the will of the Big Three?"

None of this makes sense. Ezzo's skeptical eyes pierced at Felt.

From his perspective, there was no telling who was on his side or not—no, there should have been no one on his side. There were only enemies. It was obvious he'd be immediately skeptical if anyone appeared and claimed to trust him.

Felt also had no intention of nosing around to find the truth of that disaster in the red-light district initially, but when she came and saw Ezzo in person—

"There must be a part of you that still thinks…I'm a cold-blooded killer who burned many people alive."

"Nah, there ain't. At least not after I heard your desperate cry."

"Desperate…cry…?" Ezzo furrowed his brows, apparently unaware of what Felt was saying. The blood loss seemed to have made him forget about what he said before losing consciousness: his raging vow to avenge his student.

—It's stupid to even suspect him after hearin' something like that, Felt thought.

So if there was anything she needed to ask Ezzo, it was one thing—only one. "I don't care for complicated shit. We already made up our minds. So you're the only one left. Are you in or are you out?"

"I'm…"

"I can kinda guess the shit you're in right now. You ain't able to make a move while bein' hunted by the Flower Garden Prison or the Black Silver Coin and whatnot, right? And I also get that you're probably still rattled from gettin' caught by us with all that goin' on—but if you don't accept our help right here, right now, then this discussion is over."

"—!"

"Just so you know, I don't care either way."

Ezzo's expression changed as though he was struck by lightning when he heard Felt's firm position on the matter. She had already made up her mind.

With Camberley caught, Felt was driven to solve the case. All that was left was for Ezzo to decide whether he would be there to witness her solve this case or not.

Yet, if the anguished words he howled from a pool of his own blood were genuine, there could only be a single answer for Ezzo—

"—I kneel before you and ask for your strength, Miss Felt. I, the magic user Ezzo "The Gray" Cadner, swear on my life that I will repay my gratitude." Ezzo dropped to one knee before Felt at the base of the stairs. She tried to mask her relief when seeing his completely sincere face looking up at her. Reinhard, however, admiringly gazed at his mistress's face from the side. Whether he could understand their trust in him or not, he accepted their help. Kneeling before this mistress and servant, Ezzo continued in his booming voice. "—Please, help me avenge the death of my beloved student, Mimosa."

With that, Ezzo Cadner bowed his head and started talking. He told them everything he knew about what happened to him and his student on the night of the fire.

20

"As you already know, I had been working as a guard in the red-light district after being tricked by your comrade…my kin. Well, on that night, after I finished my normal patrol, I headed over to my students' rooms—the girls I'd been teaching to read and write—to collect their homework. Then brought all of it back to my sleeping area to grade them."

Felt and Reinhard had already heard about this side job of his the other day when they met at the Flower Prison Garden, completely aside from his contract there.

Dissatisfied with his workload as a guard, Ezzo had voluntarily started teaching some of the prostitutes. He became quite popular for doing this and once mentioned he gained great satisfaction from it. He also noted one particular student of his who dreamed of opening a flower shop one day, the young girl Mimosa.

“My sleeping area was in the building that burned down. Even though it was operating under the name of the Flower Prison Garden, that brothel was relatively cheap compared to other places… So it also attracted rude customers who caused trouble.”

Ezzo was placed in this brothel in case such problems arose. Evidently, his presence alone significantly worked as a deterrent and the usual trouble here became almost nonexistent. Ironically, less trouble meant less work to keep him occupied, but he wasn’t one to complain about peace. So, once he finished grading all the homework assignments, he was ready for a late bedtime as usual—and that’s when he noticed something.

“Once the flower and her customer enter their room, it becomes a place almost detached from the real world, if you will. Usually, it would be insolent for an outsider to intrude in such a place, but on that night I had an eerie feeling I couldn’t shake off, and before I knew it, I rushed into one of the rooms. Unfortunately, when I arrived, the customer was already dead, and Mimosa, who was supposed to be attending him, was…” Ezzo stopped his words and pinched between his brows. He became silent, but that was for no more than a few seconds. He quickly put back on a serious face, with regret and grief showing only in his eyes, and continued. “—Mimosa was lying on her side, gasping for air. I rushed to her and attempted to heal the wound on her chest. But my healing magic didn’t activate… All I could do was press on the wound to stop the bleeding—but it was too late for her.” He paused. “Her lung was ruptured and air was leaking out,” he added, weakly.

He added that he found a short sword thin as a needle lying next to her, which he believed was used to impale her.

"I couldn't do anything for Mimosa. She kept apologizing deliriously. That girl was in agony till the very end. All she could do was keep scratching her pathetic teacher's chest until…she stopped moving."

"It was a miserable death. Mimosa died, gasping for her last breath," Ezzo added. "It was an unforgivable sight. But what was more unforgivable was what came after. I was too distracted by Mimosa's death and failed to notice the assassin hidden in the room."

As a result, Ezzo failed to dodge the assassin's strike from behind and received a blow to the back of his head. He attempted to strike back, but his magic was once again inactive and he lost consciousness.

When he regained his senses—

"The building was on fire, and I was right in the middle of the burning brothel. I instinctively carried Mimosa's body and the thin short sword, and made my escape outside. That's when…"

"—The people from the Flower Prison Garden found you," Felt finished his sentence.

"You may think I could've surrendered and waited for my chance to explain myself… but I couldn't. If I did, the assassin might have gotten away while I wasted time trying to prove my innocence. I just couldn't let that happen."

Ezzo, face covered in black soot from the smoke, quickly analyzed the terrible predicament he was in. The customer who died in the room was a member of the Black Silver Coin. Many members from The Balance were also in the building that night. He deduced that whoever was behind this was going to frame him for both Mimosa's murder and setting fire to the brothel.

"If I stuck around, I feared there would be no way to avenge Mimosa," Ezzo said, remembering his feelings that night. "I just, couldn't, allow that."

—A sinner must be punished appropriately.

This was an unwritten code amongst demi-humans; a bloody oath etched deeply in the soul of anyone with tainted blood running through their veins. Ezzo had always despised such philosophy, arguing it to be barbaric, but that night he could not deny the irrepressible bloodlust he was feeling.

Retaliate! his blood screamed. Retaliate! his soul commanded. Retaliate! he howled.

“Before I knew it, I broke out of the people circling me, and made my escape out of the red-light district. That’s when I ran into my kin and him right there,” said Ezzo, referring to Rachins. “I’m here today because of them.”

“Then, you asked that shady-ass Golden Beetle bunch for help and ended up hidin’ here. Am I right?”

“Exactly. Miss Helaine from the Golden Beetle can be trusted so long as we share a common interest. Besides…”

“…Besides?” Felt prompted Ezzo as he suddenly stopped his words. Ezzo, however, hesitated to continue.

Irritated by such an indecisive attitude, Felt was ready to open her mouth, but before she could have the chance… “Mr. Ezzo, we have already made up our minds. We’re not going to back out now, no matter what you tell us,” Reinhard chimed in, using Felt’s words. He then glanced at his mistress, to which she huffed sharply through her nose and nodded.

“You’re right…” Ezzo sighed at the unwavering resolution of this mistress and servant, and continued. “I couldn’t rely on anyone other than the Golden Beetle. The assassin is someone from one of the Big Three… And they’re also connected to the recent incidents happening in the city.”

“—! You serious? This better not be a lie.” Rachins’s face twisted in shock as he processed what Ezzo had just said.

Rachins’s reaction was natural for anyone. It was generally believed in the city of Flanders that the Big Three was being attacked by a third party. Ezzo's testimony, if true, would overturn this premise and even shift the balance of power within the metropolis.

Rachins held his head in confusion. "But, everyone thinks it's a third party, right? Since all three groups were attacked?"

"It's so they can act like a victim too," Felt said. She began to feel sick at the culprits' underhanded tactic. "Who's your source?"

"Mimosa," answered Ezzo. His short, one-name answer only made her feel worse. He made a bitter face. "Mimosa kept apologizing even as death loomed before her. She said she lent a hand in a plan that could endanger me, her close colleagues…and even the city itself."

"Lending a hand in a plan… So you think they killed her to keep her from talkin'?" Felt asked.

"She wasn't the deceitful type. I'd like to believe she was just being used without even knowing."

"Whatever it was, people died because of her," she retorted. "It's way past the point of just being used…but—"

—How did a mere prostitute like Mimosa get such sensitive information like that? Her face soured at these newfound revelations. It's not like I'm gonna back out now after all this, but…

"I really don't like that things are turnin' out exactly like that snake-eyed asshole Safis predicted. We're gonna end up going against the underworld for helpin' Ezzo, right?"

"I suppose there's no way around that," Reinhard agreed. "However, if we are to take Mr. Doltero and Safis's warning into consideration…"

"We can scratch off the Black Silver Coin from the list of suspects," Felt replied, finishing Reinhard's thought. "I also want to scratch off the Flower Prison Garden's name too, since it was their building that burned down…"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be wise. The Flower Prison Garden would have had the most opportunity to use Mimosa and, as much as it hurts to say this… She was…expendable," Reinhard said painfully. He looked distraught at the thought of treating human life as a mere tool. Felt and Rachins, on the other hand, were not so fazed by the whole ordeal.

They understood better than Reinhard that Mimosa's death was perfect for the Flower Prison Garden to obtain victim status, and that a mere prostitute's life was only a toy to certain sinister people.

Rachins appeared to finally process the situation. "I get it now," he said as he turned to Ezzo. "But how can you avenge 'er bein' cramped up in a dump like this?" He then gestured at the mansion and narrowed his sanpaku eyes. "Hidin' is fine and all, but how're you gonna look for anyone 'ere?"

"I asked the Golden Beetle's cooperation for that, as well," answered Ezzo. "The enemy has killed their confidant to keep their secret and found me to blame everything on. Their next move would most likely be to escape the city, so I asked them to notify me if they saw anyone from the Big Three try to leave the metropolis."

"That bitch didn't say anything about that to us…" Felt seethed as Helaine's condescending, fake smile popped up in her head.

"Helaine from the Golden Beetle, huh…" Rachins muttered to himself, looking like he was deep in thought.

Glancing at him from the corner of her eye, Felt scratched her head in frustration. "That's one more thing we gotta go and ask her."

"She'll probably demand an information fee when we do…" Reinhard added.

"If she does, I'll just offer her a Sword Saint and get Romy back for the price difference."

Reinhard let out hesitant laughter, unsure of whether Felt was joking or not. It was at that exact moment—

"…" Reinhard's expression completely changed. His piercing blue eyes focused on the main entrance to the mansion as if to look beyond the door. He narrowed his eyes and spoke in a low voice. "Lady Felt, we're being surrounded. There's at least 100 of them."

The door was closed and the outside was out of their view, but Felt widened her eyes at her knight's report. "What?"

Rachins sucked his teeth and rushed to the window. "Shit! He ain't lyin'! I can't tell the number but…they're members o' the Big Three!"

"Members from the Big Three? You mean, it's a group of members mixed together? Why are there so many people here…"

"They must have found out that I was hidden here," Ezzo muttered at Felt's question.

Felt's mind wandered to Flam, who was out on an errand. Did something happen to her? Did she give this place up?

"Lady Felt, Flam is quite competent." As if to read her mind, Reinhard jumped to defend the young chamberlain. "She would have never allowed us to be ambushed like this if she had known. I believe this is unrelated to her."

"Then who the hell did…" As if struck by lightning, a thought jolted Felt before she could finish her question. The face of a sketchy woman in black clothes popped up in her head. "That disloyal bitch!!!"

She was the type of woman who would sell anything for the right price. If someone had asked for information on Ezzo, the first thing she would have considered was the cost-benefit analysis.

"Yo yo yo yo yo, the hell're we gonna do? The Big Three are all out there! No way we could talk ourselves out of this if they find us!" Rachins screamed in a panic.

Felt began to brainstorm ways to escape.

Irrelevant to Helaine's intentions, the situation was unfavorable.

Felt's party had no chance to persuade this entire squad from the underworld to back off, not once they were seen together with Ezzo. They would be apprehended on the spot, and worst of all, the real culprit would escape out of the city while they try to prove their innocence; the fate Ezzo had feared the most.

Should we just go out before they come bargin' in and try to negotiate with them? Felt considered a preemptive move. No, they wouldn't even consider a negotiation unless we threaten 'em with somethin' equally or more damagin' than lettin' us go…

"Lady Felt." Reinhard called out her name from the side as she racked her brain.

He said no more, but Felt understood right away what he wanted to say: use my name and reputation.

Reinhard's martial might was known to all. The only thing Felt needed to do was hide behind his status and the people outside would be more than willing to negotiate.

Simply put, Felt had always had the upper hand. A simple command from her and Reinhard would have dismantled the entire underworld in less than a day. His name was more than enough to force their way out of this situation.

—That is, if she was willing to take advantage of Reinhard's overwhelming power for her own agenda and walk the path of a tyrant.

"Heh, as if. There's no way in hell I'm gonna do somethin' that lame." Felt stood up on the steps and looked down at Reinhard. This was something unusual for both of them for their height difference.

Reinhard had a puzzled look on his face, awaiting what he thought would be an order from Felt. She secretly enjoyed this expression on him.

"We can't have them find us together with Ezzo, right now. We gotta do something to get out of this mess," Felt declared.

"You say do somethin' but that's exactly the problem! The hell're we gonna do? They're professionals when it comes to cornering their target. Not a single cat can get away under their watch!"

"Rachins is right. Lady Felt, please use my name this once…"

"And I'm sayin' that I don't wanna do that… Wait, that's it!" Felt snapped her fingers.

It was true that if she used Reinhard's reputation, the people outside would have no choice but to falter. What she feared was if she allowed herself to resort to this method once, she would do it again and again until she saw this red-haired young man as nothing but a masthead. So, when she came up with an idea that would avoid using this method, she couldn't hide her excitement.

"Yo, Gray! You're an advanced magic user, right?" Felt asked with a wide smile that showed her fang. The men looked at her skeptically. "Then can you make a mask strong enough that it won't break in a fight?"

Her eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm.

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—This was the exact moment when death suddenly became all too real to the men surrounding the old mansion.

Every one of the men there held a weapon and stood ready to attack and capture the wanted dwarf supposedly hiding in the building. More than 200 members had been gathered for this mission. That dwarf had tarnished the names and reputations of the Big Three that ran the city. Normally they would never stand side by side, but on this particular occasion, they stood together with one goal in mind.

None of the 200 members expected the capture of a single dwarf to be a difficult task. The only thing they had in mind was who would be the one to capture the fugitive, and which syndicate would take the credit.

—But now they stood frozen in place, even forgetting to breathe.

"I don't wish to hurt any… I don't wanna hurt no one, but I have a favor… You better do what I tell you to do," said the young man who stood tall and proud at the entrance of the mansion. His voice resonated across the area to every gathered man. He neither wielded a weapon nor was heavily armored, wearing only light, white clothing that exhibited a slim, toned body… Were it not for the funny-looking mask tightly covering his face, there was nothing out of the ordinary about the young man.

"…"

The young man's strange appearance and his awkward speech pattern would normally have been an invitation for the men to attack, but none of them dared to make a move. They lived in the world of violence long enough to know not to make an enemy out of the young man.

One mistake, and we're dead. They instinctively understood the monstrous danger the young man posed.

"This presence…and red hair…? Are you…" One of the men spoke up in a shaking voice.

The young man nodded to his question. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is… I'm.."

The men gulped, eager to hear his next words.

"I'm the Masked Knight Veltol," proclaimed the young man, holding a hand to his mask. An overwhelming presence emanated from him as he spoke.

"…What?" One of the men voiced exactly how everyone was feeling.

The men were all bewildered by the unexpected name they were given. With his presence and appearance, there was only one name they expected.

"W-Wait! Aren't you…aren't you the Sword Saint?"

"Nah, I'm the Masked Knight Veltol."

“The Masked…Knight?”

“I have no idea what you folks are referring to. However, if you want to confirm my identity, come and try to unmask me.”

The men were stunned into silence. This was partially due to confusion at the inconsistency of the young man’s speech pattern, and largely due to his glare; they felt completely paralyzed, as if trapped in a never-ending nightmare.

The Masked Knight shrugged his shoulders at the men incapacitated by his gaze. “One more thing: though I feel bad about doing this, I’m going to have to knock each and every one of you out… Hope you understand.”

“The hell are you sayi…” As one of the men voiced his objection to the Masked Knight’s absurd declaration, he suddenly felt as though he was losing consciousness. “What the…?”

Though the man managed to pull himself together before completely blacking out, the same could not be said about the person next to him who was on the ground with his eyes rolled back—in fact, he was not alone. One after another, men collapsed all around, with only a little more than half of the 200 men remaining standing by the end of it.

“—More than half of you remain. I’m impressed. You possess a much stronger core than I expected,” muttered the Masked Knight to himself in surprise after knocking out nearly 100 people just by glaring as he looked around at the men still standing.

“U-Uwahhhhhhh!” One of the men suddenly charged at the Masked Knight with his weapon raised. This last comment acted as the final nudge for him to lose his mind, along with several others who followed this insanity.

“Guys, at least go in with a plan…!” cried out one of the members who managed to remain composed, but it was already too late.

The man charging in front swung his broadsword down at the Masked Knight, only for it to be stopped with a bare hand. The men watching could not comprehend what they'd just witnessed. The rest of the men who charged followed suit and swung their weapons one after another. Echoes of clashing and shattering steel cut through the air as their weapons broke to pieces. Again, none of them were able to comprehend what had just happened.

"Hmph!" The Masked Knight exhaled sharply as he forcefully stepped on the ground. The shockwave from his step blasted his attackers away, knocking a dozen men out cold.

The men on the sidelines looked at the Masked Knight who hadn't moved a step from where he started. They tried to process the idea that all he did so far was step on the ground with some force.

"The truth is, I have been feeling guilty," the Masked Knight suddenly muttered suggestively.

Feeling guilty about what? the men wondered. About your absurdly broken, unfair strength? Or about using some ridiculous alias like 'Masked Knight'?

"There've been many moments recently where my existence has caused my friends a great deal of trouble. I'm deeply embarrassed by my powerlessness to do anything about this. I must reflect on it accordingly."

The men were dispirited to learn their speculation was far off the mark. His shame had nothing to do with them. More than anything, they were dispirited by the fact he called himself 'powerless' in the wake of this domination. He stood among more than a hundred men he'd knocked out while barely moving his body. Nothing made sense anymore.

"…Yo, all of you, attack him on my cue," one of the members called on the others. There was no telling who was in which syndicate at this point, but none of that mattered anymore. They were all in this together.

"You serious? Isn't it better to look for an escape…?" another member asked.

However, the man who suggested an all-out attack made a bitter face. “You really think we can run away from this monster?”

“Impossible,” another member answered. “But it’s not like we can do anything to that thing even if we all attacked together.”

Only the hardiest of members were left standing and they could accurately assess what was going on. They knew well enough it was time to leave their egos aside. This was a war between a group of rats and a monstrous tiger.

“Yeah.” The first man nodded, well aware of the situation. “But imagine…just imagine if we manage to land even a single cut on him and live to tell the tale… That’ll be a story to tell for the rest of our lives.”

“Nice… I like it… I’m in,” one of the members answered; all the men smiled vulgarly and nodded in agreement.

A moment later, they all charged.

“Uwaahhhhhhhhhh!”

Countless attacks flashed towards the Masked Knight as he was quickly surrounded. He let out a faint smile at this and prepared himself for a counterattack.

—A few days later, one of the survivors spoke about the event in a bar. “Walking on air is just too unfair, man.”

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“You don’t wanna use him as a bargainin’ chip, but you got no problem usin’ him to knock everyone out, huh? I really don’t get you sometimes, Boss Lady,” Rachins muttered as he ran with a horrified expression. He was taken aback by witnessing the aftermath of Reinhard’s actions. The entire group of 200 enemies lay defeated on the ground, out cold as the party fled. They had been running ever since they escaped from the mansion.

“It’s fine,” Felt responded as she stuck her tongue out. “Now, even if they accuse us of anything, we could just say the Masked Knight did it. They can’t prove we were there or that Reinhard did all that.”

“What if they say only Reinhard is capable of doin’ somethin’ like that?”

“They can say whatever they want. Like I said, they have no proof or witnesses. Why do you think I made him wear a mask? Right, Mr. Masked Knight?

“Yes, I believe I was able to deal with the problem without anyone seeing my face,” Reinhard answered, fiddling with the mask in his palm as he spoke. It was a mask created by Ezzo’s magic, which effectively hid his identity.

Felt had taken advantage of Reinhard’s overwhelming abilities, but without relying on his reputation.

“It’s lame to threaten people with Reinhard outright, but it sure feels good to deny using him.” Felt was amused by this whole situation and glanced at Reinhard, who ran beside her. “You looked like you were enjoyin’ yourself too. Maybe we oughta bring Masked Knighty back out every now and then.”

Reinhard shook his head at Felt’s proposal. “I’m glad to have assisted in your plan, my lady, but there will be no next time—my powers are far too dangerous to use anonymously. That’s a dangerous way of thinking.”

“…” Felt realized she was getting carried away and restrained herself.

“…So where are we going now? Is there a place you have in mind?” Ezzo chimed in from the back. His face grew more pale as he struggled to keep up with them.

Although they managed to escape from the surrounded mansion with Reinhard’s—The Masked Knight’s—hard work, their situation remained unfavorable nonetheless. Their first course of action was to find a new hideout for Ezzo as soon as possible and avoid being seen in public with him.

“I guess the safest place right now is the Black Silver Coin,” Felt responded to Ezzo's question. "Let's tell 'em what we know, ask 'em to hide you, then go talk to that Golden Pest again."

"Kinda awkward to go and ask for their help after all we did…" Rachins muttered.

"Shuuut up," Felt spat in frustration. "The Masked Knight did it. So you apologize, Reinhard."

Reinhard nodded. "Sure. I will apologize on behalf of that masked gentleman."

Despite a slight detour from the main topic, they continued to plan their next move. By the time their discussion came to an end and they decided to visit the Black Silver Coin, they came to a halt in a back alley, hidden from the public eye.

Then suddenly… "Lady Felt! Young Master!" someone called them from behind. They quickly turned around and saw the silhouette of a young girl approaching them. Flam had found them once again after they fled the chaotic scene at the mansion.

"Flam!" Reinhard called her name. "I'm glad you're okay. Are you unharmed?"

"Yes, I'm glad to see you're all doing well too, Young Master… But there's urgent news you need to hear." She was clearly panicked and cut the greetings short. Felt was surprised to see her so flustered. Flam had always been so composed in every situation, despite her age.

Reinhard placed his hand on her shoulders and lowered his eye level to hers. "Flam, calm down. Just tell us what happened, okay?"

Flam slowed her breathing and collected herself in the wake of his words. As expected from someone who's known her for a long time, Reinhard knew exactly how to calm down this young chamberlain.

As her breathing normalized, her expression grew solemn. "I received a telepathic message from Grassis back at the mansion—she said Mister Gaston and the rest were attacked by an unknown assailant, and Miss Kalifa was taken."

—The Divine Protection of Mindspeak is the unique power the twin chamberlains of Astrea Manor, Flam and Grassis, possess. This divine protection allows them to send a verbal message to each other once a day, unimpeded by the physical distance between them. Thus, the emergency at the mansion was relayed to Felt and the others.

Felt grit her teeth at Flam's report. We're always a step behind.

According to Grassis's message, though not life-threatening, Gaston was critically injured and unconscious. He resisted fiercely against the assailants and managed to protect Ilya, but Kalifa was kidnapped.

There's no way this raid and the recent attack on the Black Silver Coin aren't connected. Felt quickly interpreted this as an attack on the Black Silver Coin. It was evident to her that Ilya and Kalifa were the targets, and not necessarily Felt's party. But these two were family to her, and she had no intention of sitting idly by and doing nothing. Her patience had officially reached a boiling point, and her motivation peaked.

"…Your nerves of steel truly astound me," Safis said as soon as he walked into the drawing room to greet the visitors he'd been informed of. There was a hint of shock in his tone and demeanor, a stark contrast from his usual cold impression. "After you took in a fugitive, you single-handedly dismantled a large number of our forces. Now you come to see us as if nothing happened. Please, would you be so kind as to tell me your secret on how to be so audacious…guoh?!!"

As he finished the venomously sarcastic breakdown of events, Felt grabbed Safis by the collar and shoved him against the wall. She was in no mood to humor his sharp tongue.

"What are you…doing…?"

"I don't have time for your snarky bullshit right now. So listen carefully and just answer my question. Are you the one targeting

Ilya and Kalifa, again?”

Safis paused. “I see. No wonder you are so worked up.” As suffocating as it was to be interrogated like this, Felt’s question allowed him to connect the dots. “I’m afraid I’m unrelated to this matter. As attractive as the idea is to again be the target of the Boss’s anger…there’s no point if I am also endangering his status.”

Felt continued to glare at Safis, gauging the authenticity in his words.

“My wish is for the Boss to reign over the metropolis as long as possible. No more, no less.”

Felt sucked her teeth. “Fuckin’ pervert.” She spat out her words in disgust and let him loose.

“Now,” started the snake-eyed man as he rubbed his neck and fixed his suit. “Based on your little outburst there, I assume that the mother and daughter in question were attacked? And that something has happened to them?”

“You really are keen,” said Reinhard. “So much so that it makes your last testimony suspicious.”

“If only I had the courage to attempt deceiving the Sword Saint after all this.” Safis raised his hands at Reinhard’s accusatory suggestion. “But, I see…that mother and daughter has… This is why I told the Boss many times that they’d be a liability.”

Felt stayed silent as Safis continued to babble. Despite her knowing that Ilya and Kalifa would constantly be in danger, she’d chosen to take them in and vowed to protect them from all harm. But now, she’d broken her vow.

“So this would mean the enemy’s true target is the Black Silver Coin… Were the attacks on the other syndicates merely a distraction?” Safis speculated. “By the way, how are you two intending to explain the ruckus you caused at the mansion?”

“The mansion? I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about. We have nothin’ to do with the Masked Knight.”

“I can’t believe you’re actually using that as your defense… Does this also mean you have no intention of explaining your relationship with the fugitive? And, if that’s the case, am I to assume that you’re working against us?” Safis asked in a cold-emotionless voice as he glared at Felt and Reinhard.

His eyes lacked any sign of the playfulness seen there a moment ago. Only pure hostility remained in this assessment of their allegiance.

Felt pursed her lips at his gaze. “Don’t start. Remember that we can kick your ass any day if we were to fight head-on.”

“Her Ladyship wishes to maintain balance,” said Reinhard. “Think of the Masked Knight as a gesture of her intention. Just imagine if he wasn’t there and it was me who had fought…”

“An all-out war would have been unavoidable, right?” Safis finished Reinhard’s thought. “But surely there must have been other methods…”

“I’m pretty sure I chose the most effective yet peaceful method.” Felt crossed her arms and smirked unapologetically.

Safis sighed and shook his head, having lost his animosity at the sight of her cheeky smile. “If you’re going this much out of your way to cover up for that dwarf… You must really believe he’s innocent.”

“He was framed by the real culprit behind all this. He’s in our custody right now and pumped to punish the real culprit.”

“Interesting. For being framed?”

Felt paused. “Apparently his favorite prostitute was murdered before the building went up in flames.”

She answered in a way that might cause a misunderstanding, but explaining Ezzo and Mimosa’s relationship would be too complicated in one sitting. She figured this simple explanation would suffice.

"Revenge." Safis let out an eerie smile. "Nice, it's my favorite type of motivation."

"We get it, you're a pervert," said Felt. "Anyways, that's the whole picture."

"I understand. I will make sure to keep my subordinates off of the fugitive. Moving on to the mother and daughter, are they…"

"The daughter is safe. The mother was kidnapped."

Felt decided to share all the information she had at the moment with Safis. As much as she hated to admit it, he was the only person in the Black Silver Coin who had the most updated and accurate grasp on Doltero's life. He understood that Ilya and Kalifa were Doltero's pressure points, and they had to be rescued at once.

"That's strange," muttered Safis after hearing Felt's report.

"Strange? Is there something that bothers you?" Reinhard asked.

"There's no doubt the kidnapper is going after the Boss considering their target, but the information about them isn't known to the public. I haven't heard of any leaks, either, so why were they targeted?"

"That's…true," Felt said.

"Besides, if they managed to get ahold of the mother, they should have made some sort of threat to the Black Silver Coin right away. The fact that we haven't received such a thing is strange."

Despite his sick personality, Safis was an intelligent man. Felt agreed with his line of reasoning and scrunched her brows at the opponent's unclear intentions. They each pondered a moment about why the kidnappers hadn't taken advantage of their first move.

"It's almost as if they don't know the relationship between Doltero and the two of them," Reinhard muttered.

It was merely a thoughtless comment, but Felt widened her eyes. "Maybe that's it."

“What?” Reinhard raised his brows at the unexpected response.

Felt looked up at him. “If the kidnappers knew Kalifa and Ilya were Doltero’s wife and kid, they would use them to blackmail him. But they haven’t done so ‘cause they don’t know their relationship.”

“But then why target them in the first place?” Safis questioned.

“They might not know the exact details of their relationship, but it was fine as long as they knew Ilya and Kalifa had somethin’ to do with Doltero,” Felt answered. “Say, Safis, didn’t one of your members die in the fire?”

Safis paused for a moment. “Yes. One of the old members did. I heard he went to buy a woman and was caught in the fire.”

“You know the name of the woman he bought?”

Safis remained skeptical at Felt’s line of questioning, but sensing she was on to something, he jogged his memories to find the answer to her question.

“He said something about receiving a letter from her. Something she had just learned how to do. I believe her name was…”

“Mimosa.” Without waiting for Safis to answer, Reinhard arrived at the same conclusion and said her name.

“Ah.” Safis nodded. “Yes, that’s the name of the prostitute. I heard she also died, but… I see,” he said, as that rang a bell for him.

Felt and Reinhard stared intently at him. Safis let out a small sigh. “The man who died didn’t know about the Boss’s relationship with the mother and daughter. He was, however, standing guard at the mansion the night when you came and visited the Boss with them.”

“In other words, he may not have known the exact nature of their relationship but…”

“He knew they were related to the Boss in some way or another. It’s certainly possible he may have leaked it to some prostitute during their pillow talk. What a pity I can’t kill him twice,” Safis said in a cold rage, cursing his subordinate who unforgivably leaked classified information.

That guy woulda experienced something way worse than death had he not died that night. Seeing Safis's face up close as he talked about his subordinate, Felt couldn't help but praise the dead man's luck.

"In any case, now we know why Mimosa kept apologizin' to Ezzo," Felt said, remembering Ezzo's recount of her last moment. "She was probably collectin' information from her customers in that fashion and sharin' it with someone."

"We would need to talk to Mimosa's employer…the owner of the Flower Prison Garden to understand further details," said Reinhard.

"Kinda like goin' in circles, huh? Although I can't imagine they'll be easier to see than the people here." As she gained a better understanding of the whole picture, Felt considered the possibility of not being able to secure a meeting with them. Unlike the Black Silver Coin, who they shared a secret with, they remained neutral with the Flower Prison Garden—actually, their relationship worsened after the incident at the old mansion.

"By the way, there's only the two of you here today… Where's the fugitive in question? It must be nearly impossible to find a hiding place in the city right now."

"Ah right, there's that too. I wanna talk to you about that later, but he's fine for now."

Noticing Felt and Reinhard alone had come to see him at the headquarters of the Black Silver Coin, Safis grew suspicious at the whereabouts of the dwarf in the middle of all this. Felt agreed with his sentiment. Having lost the old mansion as a hideout, Ezzo was in need of a new refuge.

"We couldn't bring him here while we still suspected you of targeting Ilya and Kalifa, but now we can," Felt said.

"Well… I'm so very sorry for being so suspicious," Safis apologized half-heartedly.

“If you’re gonna apologize, just retire,” Felt retorted as she glared at him. “Anyways, we’re split into groups for now to stay discreet.”

Felt looked out the window. Ezzo was hidden away with Rachins somewhere for the time being, thanks to some of Rachins’s connections.

“There’s nothin’ to worry about at least for now. He lived in the slums before, too. I’m sure he’s doin’ fine,” Felt said about the absent dwarf. A small smile grew on her face, exposing her fang.

24

“My, my… How unexpected to see you here.” The woman in black with navy-green hair in pigtails smiled faintly in surprise; she turned to face the one who called her from behind.

“Yes, I’m sure even a woman of your caliber couldn’t anticipate my coming to see you, Miss Helaine.”

As her name was called, Helaine from the Golden Beetle narrowed her eyes. The person facing her was the most wanted man in the city—

“Mr. Ezzo Cadner, isn’t it dangerous for you to be walking in public like this?” Helaine said as she cautiously glanced around. “I’m afraid it is rather difficult, even for us, to provide you with real estate as discreet as the one we’ve already provided for you.”

The two were standing on a bustling street corner in the busy gambling quarter. Although it was not uncommon to see people standing and talking there, Helaine and Ezzo’s conspicuous appearances inevitably drew attention from passersby.

“Not to worry,” said Ezzo. “I’ve magically altered my facial features and controlled the wind to redirect attention from me. It’s nearly impossible to recognize me without conscious effort.”

“…Well well. As expected from Ezzo the Gray.”

"I'll take that as a compliment. Also, about the property that you provided… Unfortunately, a bunch of guests who I don't remember sharing my address decided to drop in, cutting my residence there short. I've been very curious as to where it could've leaked from…"

"Oh, if that's what you want to know, I have great news for you. I can give you that information right away—it was us," Helaine said unapologetically, making Ezzo's cheeks stiffen.

A moment of potent anger flashed through Ezzo, but he quickly released a deep sigh and regained his composure. "So, you decided I'm no longer of any worth to you?"

"Your worth hasn't changed. It's just that as a businesswoman, when presented with a choice, I have to make the decision that yields the least losses. Have you come to harbor a grudge against me?"

"I've always known you were that type of person. To be honest, I've asked for your help in the past, relying on that particular trait. I'd be a hypocrite to criticize you just because I'm on the receiving end of it now."

"That's certainly an admirable attitude. But then you should know, we can no longer provide any assistance to you, Mr. Ezzo—so why are you here?" Helaine tilted her head in confusion as she learned Ezzo was not there with ill intent.

"Right." Ezzo nodded slightly. "I'm here as a middleman and insurance. That'll be my sole role for today."

Following Ezzo's words, a young man appeared beside him.

"And I'm the one who's got business wit ya today," the young man said in a strong-willed voice.

Facing straight at this newcomer, Helaine's eyes widened slightly. He had light-pigmented hair, displeasing sanpaku eyes, and the overall stature of a ruffian that could be found anywhere.

"My, it's you. I remember you from the office from the other day," Helaine said. She faintly smiled, raised a finger on each hand, and waved them amusingly. “After you left, I got curious and did some research on you. You’re one of the servants Lady Felt brought from the Kingdom of Lugunica… There are at least two more servants similar to you, but unlike them, you have a hidden past.”

The ruffian stared silently at Helaine as she unveiled his life. Ezzo had no idea what was happening, so he simply stood back and continued to assess the situation.

“Rachins Hoffman. The eldest son of Rickert Hoffman, head of House Hoffman and Royal Tutor of the Kingdom of Lugunica,” Helaine declared. “What is a runaway noble such as yourself doing in a place like this?”

“The Royal Tutor…” Ezzo quietly uttered at the surprising revelation. He was thrown off by the significance of this casual narration from Helaine.

The Royal Tutor was a title given to those who had the authority to educate royalty. This position was usually passed down from the current generation to the next within a noble family. Being the eldest son of such a family effectively ensured his right to inherit the title.

“You’re one talkative woman alright. How’s it feel to be so fuckin’ condescendin’ talkin’ about someone else’s family he cut ties wit?” The eldest son sucked his teeth in irritation and made a sour face. “Besides, what good’s a tutor when all the royals’re dead? Fuckin’ ridiculous. It’s jus’ an empty title now.”

“…I see. You’re not very fond of your family. That was rather insensitive of me to bring up then. So, what business do you have with me today?”

“The fuck do ya think? If I’m talkin’ to a filthy moneylender like you, obviously I’m ‘ere to make a deal,” Rachins said, intending to intimidate his opponent.

However, Rachins’s aggressive demeanor caused no apparent change in Helaine’s expression. As a moneylender, she was used to dealing with hostile individuals.

“Very well,” Helaine said indifferently, then bowed her head. “However, it is currently outside of our business hours. We will be happy to schedule you for an appointment and have you at our office at another time…”

“Can’t say that’s a wise choice.” Rachins interrupted. “You sure the branch manager o’ the Golden Beetle’s ready to ignore a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?”

Helaine paused. “A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, you say?”

Her already squinting eyes narrowed even further at Rachins’s proposal. She furrowed her brow as she took note that his mistress and her knight were nowhere to be seen.

“Miss Candidate and her knight aren’t here… Can it be that your deal involves them?”

“Truth is, I’m fed up wit them. Nothin’s gon’ right ever since I’ve been wit ‘em. Now my two buddies been dragged into their mess, ‘n I’m gettin’ real tired of it. I want out.”

“So you’re telling me you want to sell them out? I am not so naive to easily believe a story like th—”

“That’s why I’m here as insurance,” Ezzo jumped to Rachins’s defense as Helaine was about to decline his offer. “I’m also fearful for my life. It’s true that I once wished to punish whoever framed me, but I can see that’s not going to happen. Fortunately, with your help, I can still find a way to escape.” He meant this to explain his reasoning for cooperating with Rachins.

“And why would you think that I would help you? It is wiser to simply hand you over to the Big Three. Not to mention, it’s also the most natural course of action.”

“In that event, Rachins will refuse to negotiate with you. Consequently, you’ll forfeit a prime opportunity by opting for the safer choice. A shameful decision for the Golden Beetle, I must say.”

Despite his small stature, Ezzo boldly pumped out his chest to which Helaine placed her hand over her mouth. “Oh, you’re good.”

With that, she fell completely silent and deep into thought. All signs of emotion disappeared from her slanted eyes. The sound of beads resonated in her head as she calculated the pros and cons. She explored a multitude of diverting paths in a complex web to evaluate whether to take the deal or not.

After considering all possibilities, she resurfaced to the real world and faced her opponents. "It's certainly an interesting proposition, but I'm still unsure whether it's worth the risk."

"…So, that's a no?" Ezzo asked.

"It's more that I'm swaying between the two options…" Helaine said mischievously. "So, Mr. Rachins, would you be willing to up the ante?" she suggested in a soft voice and clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

"Up the ante?" Rachins pursed his lips.

"Yes, yes!" Helaine raised her voice. "You want to make a deal with me and sell out your current mistress, as you don't see a future with her. Would you be willing to add the family you cut ties with as part of that deal?"

"…There ain't much I know about them."

"That's fine. I don't ask for much in this part of the deal. Let's see… How about one letter? You send your family just one letter of what I ask you to write."

Just one, but more than none, Rachins thought. Although he cut ties with them, he was still anxious as to how the letter would affect his family. He couldn't even begin to imagine how cruel a letter written by someone from the Golden Beetle would be.

"…"

Rachins's face started to cloud over as he considered her new condition. Seeing his hesitation, Ezzo tried to speak up, but before he could…

"Of course!" Helaine interjected. "It would be an embarrassment as a moneylender if I didn’t offer any interest after asking so much. So allow me to offer you another condition, which greatly works in your favor, Mr. Rachins.”

“Another condition?”

“Yes. By some luck, we are coincidentally in the gambling quarter, so…” Helaine spread her arms and gestured at their surroundings. The gambling quarter’s madness, enveloped by money, violence, and insanity, deepened her insidious smile. “Play a game with me. If you win, Mr. Rachins, I’ll make a deal including only the first condition. But if I win…” Helaine calmly closed the distance between them until they could feel each other’s breath. “You follow through with my second condition. How about it, Mr. Rachins Hoffman?”

Helaine stared at him with eyes of insanity. Rachins, trying his best not to be intimidated, forced a smile.

“Sounds interesting. I’m in,” he answered.

25

—The sudden resurgence of liveliness in the city of Flanders indicated the night was near.

“The night is coming. The time for us flowers to bloom and dance…”

The enchanting beauty Toto, head of the Flower Prison Garden, leaned on a windowsill overlooking the red-light district. She held her pipe in her mouth as she blew a puff of purple smoke, basking in the night air. Women in charming attire lined the street below, illuminated by the flickering magic lamps that aroused hope and excitement in the darkening city. Soon, men with bloodshot eyes of lustful desires would fill the red-light district, seeking to tear the aromatic flowers to pieces with their own hands. Toto found such a view to be incredibly pathetic.

The men must believe they are liberating the flowers, Toto thought. She knew better, though. Most men were manipulated by these flower petals, captivated by their honey, and exploited.

Toto had once been among the many flowers that bloomed in these streets. The only difference was that she possessed an immeasurable amount of talent as a woman, almost to the point that it was sad. Although her talents did not bring her happiness, they did allow a girl who came from nothing to rise up and rule one sector of the city.

She was ignorant to regular happiness and unhappiness. She was born with a congenital numbness that caused her body to almost nullify pain, agony, pleasure, fatigue, drugs, or even poison. They were all foreign to Toto. However, this allowed her to always have the upper hand in the bedroom, never having to stop.

“Miss Toto, you have a guest,” called a prostitute who had entered the manager’s room. “It’s Miss Candidate and Sir Sword Saint.”

“Ask them to leave. I already have an appointment tonight,” Toto ordered.

She had already heard about the incident at the mansion where a large force from the Big Three was obliterated.

They might have come to explain themselves, but I can’t let them have the initiative. The Flower Prison Garden must also make a move.

“If they don’t want to be cooperative, then I’ll just do what we do best.”

She tapped out the ash from her pipe, then put on a dress tailored for entertaining guests. This dress was not meant for facing guests as the owner, but rather explicitly to exploit someone, whether man or woman.

As she prepared herself, the woman once hailed as the Hundred Flowers of the red-light district began to make her way.

“…”

I need to plant poison. In order for the Flower Prison Garden and I to always come out on top no matter what happens. I will protect my flowers from ever getting bent again. I must be ready for anything. And if taking on the painful role of a woman is what it takes, then so be it.

“Are you ready, my dear customer? I, Toto of the Flower Prison Garden, will be your companion for the night.”

As she opened the door and let herself into the room in a fluid motion, the man bound to the bed vigorously shook his body in dismay.

The man had the signature small-statured body of a dwarf. He was a servant of a royal selection candidate and a perfect target to plant poison in.

The charming woman once called the Hundred Flowers smiled with cruel seduction, like that of an irresistible poisonous flower.

26

The gambling quarter, with its array of tempting games and high-stakes wagers, was overseen by The Balance, a formidable presence among the three major gambling organizations. An unspoken decree held sway even among organizations of similar standing, such as the Black Silver Coin and the Flower Prison Garden, who abided closely by its unwritten code. Not even the Golden Beetle was exempt, despite their position of privilege within the city of Flanders.

“That’s why I can assure you, without a shadow of a doubt, that you can wager with confidence, even against us.” So professed Helaine, the enigmatic woman of dark green locks, as she narrowed her eyes and offered a profound bow. Rachins clicked his tongue at her condescending demeanor.

Ever since his family was brought up in their conversation, Rachins’s mood had been visibly sour. What made it even worse was that they were brought up to exploit him and undermine the deal. However, if the deal were to crumble in light of such circumstances…

"If that were the case, there would be no reason for us not to hand over the wanted man, Ezzo, to The Balance right here and now," she remarked sharply.

"You bastard…" Rachins muttered under his breath.

"Then, Mr. Rachins, you would have nothing left, correct? You'd never learn whether your friend was safe or not. All you'd be left with is the wicked rumor that he betrayed his master. A painful position for you to be in, I must say," she said with a hint of satisfaction.

Helene touted the worst possible outcome with an audacious flair. Her unabashed attitude, devoid of any trace of remorse for the calamity her words could bring about, revealed a chilling lack of humanity. It all boiled down to position. Rachins had long anticipated that this would barely amount to a negotiation between equals.

"You're a greedy bitch, ain't ya?" Rachins spat with evident disdain. "Hope ya ain't expectin' a respectable death."

"People don't have the privilege of dictating their own demise," she replied coolly. "However, at this moment, there's an unmistakable disparity between you and me regarding which of us is closest to their demise. Now, once again, I ask: what would you like to do?"

Rachins raised his gaze, eyes narrowing as he observed the figures flanking him. Amongst them stood Ezzo Cadner, a man of the dwarf tribe, and a subject of fervent discussion in the city. His fate now rested solely in Rachins's hands. He must feel like his back's against the wall. With that in mind, Rachins tried to gauge the tension in the man's intellectual, slack-jawed countenance.

"Stop with your gratuitous threats, Miss Helaine," Ezzo cautioned, crossing his stout arms, displaying no inkling of vulnerability. "It only diminishes your self-worth. For someone entrusted with matters of finance, undermining one's own value is utterly unacceptable." A momentary silence hung in the air as Helaine absorbed his words.

"What painful words to heed. I shall bear them in mind as valuable words of wisdom."

Whether the reason for his fearlessness was confidence in his own decision, faith in Rachins's judgment, or conviction in something entirely different, it remained shrouded in uncertainty. Yet, Rachins couldn't help but release a measured sigh of anticipation.

"Backin' out wasn't an option from the start," Rachins asserted. "And even if we end up losin', I couldn't give two hoots 'bout which way the house leans, so long as that bastard of a father is there. My answer is the same—I'll take the damn bet."

"I think you should have more consideration for your family," Helaine responded. "Nevertheless, I gladly accept your wager. Now let us ensure that our terms are fair."

"Fair? How so?"

"This is the gambling quarter, Mr. Rachins," Helaine explained. "Bets of all kinds are waged as far as the eye can see, so it is your choice alone to decide what you will contend for. I shall readily oblige."

Helaine gestured to the bleak and bustling view of the gambling quarter, leaving the task of selecting a game in Rachins's hands. After a quick survey of the surrounding gambling scene, Rachins's sanpaku eyes, inherited from his parents, caught sight of one corner of the amusement center.

Amidst the games of chance that dominated the district, there was a handful that relied on one's skill. It was within this subset that a particular game captured Rachins's attention.

"How 'bout a round of Shatranj?" he suggested, pointing toward the game in which two players vied to capture the other's king.

27

A mediocre move. Such was Helaine's assessment upon observing Rachins's moves against her. Positioned at opposite ends of the Shatranj board, they deftly maneuvered the other's pieces, aiming for their opponent’s king. With the watchful presence of The Balance’s overseer, the two players adeptly navigated through the initial phases of the match.

Rachins’s offensive moves appeared rather simplistic from what he had shown thus far. Not that they were bad. On the contrary, relying on the fundamentals could easily overwhelm opponents less familiar with the intricacies of the game. After all, the best way to improve was by learning from the book.

However, when dealing with more advanced opponents, adherence to the basics was tantamount to announcing your strategy. And Helaine was an extraordinary player who had mastered a myriad of techniques.

“…”

From behind her narrowed gaze, Helaine felt a profound pity for Rachins, sitting before the board with a vacant expression.

Prioritizing self-preservation over selflessness by abandoning his mistress with no future in sight is a natural decision for a commoner such as himself, Helaine surmised.

But for a man with the hand to dominate the board of the city of Flanders, involved with the royal selection candidate and organized crime, his actions were subpar, to say the least.

This is the best a man who was born into a wealthy household but ended up in the slums can hope for, I suppose.

Here was a man who, despite being fortunate with the opportunity to acquire various talents through formal education, failed to take advantage of his small but privileged gifts.

In return for divulging information about the royal selection candidate, Rachins demanded Helaine to fulfill his wish.

Although initially caught off guard by his unexpected approach in the gambling quarter, Helaine quickly understood that the implications of his proposition spoke volumes of his mediocrity, and that he must have run out of options. So, without a moment’s hesitation, Helaine opted to exploit Rachins.

He pleaded to Helaine for a modest fortune, and that was the end of his luck. Helaine had enticed him into the gamble under the guise of fairness. However, the truth was that no one could surpass Helaine in the games of the gambling quarter. For she was an extraordinary gambler with an intimate understanding of every game that permeated the town.

This wasn't attributed to past experience. Helaine had never been an avid gambler. She simply invested her blood, sweat, and tears, combined with meticulous research, into the art of betting, all in anticipation of the day a big game would finally reveal itself before her.

It was this unyielding mentality, verging on insanity, unburdened by the constraints of conventional efforts, that led Helaine's superiors to recognize her outstanding abilities and entrust her with the management of the Golden Beetle in this bustling metropolis, dominated by the notorious Big Three of the underground world.

Rachins gradually found himself outmatched on the board, driven into a corner from which he saw no escape.

I'll stay true to my words, Helaine thought. I'll provide you with a refuge, I'll even prepare you an escape fund. In return, you'll give me valuable information on the royal selection candidate, as well as the means to contact the family of the Royal Tutor. I can almost see the delight on my superior's faces with this unexpected accomplishment…

"Intriguing turn of events," a voice interjected. "I'll take over the supervision of this game."

At that moment, a man adorned in an array of countless tattoos on his face and body leaned in, observing the game as it progressed.

"Sir Manfred…"

"Looks like you're in a good mood, Golden Pest. If you're going to be naughty, at least let me get a piece of the action, scoundrel to scoundrel," Manfred "Tattoo Face" Madison, the leader of The Balance, retorted with a sneer. Helaine's voice caught in her throat as Manfred's expression distorted the countless scales etched upon his face, creating the illusion of the scales tilting backward.

Sporting a sly smile, Manfred relieved his subordinate of his duties, where he had been presiding over the game. Taking his place, he positioned himself strategically for an unobstructed view of the Shatranj board. Right beside him was Ezzo, who had transformed his face with magic.

"…"

At this spectacle, Helaine's heart danced with a frantic rhythm. Should Manfred see through Ezzo's guise, the game would come to a swift and disastrous end. Ezzo would be captured without delay, and the agreement with Rachins would be off the table. While Helaine herself had little to lose, there was a tantalizing prize on the line, too precious to surrender without a fight.

"Your turn, bitch," Rachins jeered, gesturing at the playing board.

Helaine, who was engrossed in her calculations to protect her gains, shifted her attention back to her opponent. "My, you certainly have a way with words, don't you?" she remarked calmly, moving her piece one step closer to victory.

With a thump, she advanced the ceramic piece into her opponent's territory. Seeing this, Manfred spoke with a hint of intrigue. "By continuing, that means you acknowledge my position here. So, for what exactly are you two competing?"

" I have no objections to the change in supervision," Helaine acknowledged calmly. "No one is more trustworthy than Manfred for a fair game in the gambling quarter. As for our wager, we have struck a deal."

"A deal, huh?" Manfred asked curiously. "What kind of deal might that be?"

Slightly widening her eyes, Helaine watched Manfred as he continued to trace the tattoos on his face. The role of Game Supervisor was to ensure a fair and orderly match. He had no need to delve into the details of the participants' wages. His sole responsibility was to draw the line between winner and loser.

Helaine had the right to remain silent regarding that answer. Despite her silence, however…

"It's simple, sir. The winner gets the opportunity to meet the guardian of the loser," Rachins responded in her stead.

"So I see," Manfred remarked, interest piqued. "A meeting of guardians. That's a rather interesting proposition for me, too."

"…"

Helaine's smile froze at the casual tone of his voice and the content of the conversation. She normally made a conscious effort to disguise her emotions behind a mask of stoicism. However, beneath this facade, now on the verge of shattering, one could almost hear it beginning to crack. What in the world did they just—no, did Rachins Hoffman just say?

"Mr. Rachins," Helaine began, her voice steady, "were the terms of the deal with us not a request for money?"

"Now hold on a sec," Rachins responded. "When did I ever ask ya for money? I said I had a favor to ask, y'know? However ya interpreted these words ain't my concern… But, it's too late for you to back out now."

"…" Helaine went silent.

"Your smile's gone, ain't it, bitch?" Rachins sneered. "What's eatin' at ya? Somethin' wrong? Huh?" As he spoke, Rachins revealed his elongated tongue and playfully flicked the ornament adorning its tip with his finger. A faint click echoed through the air. One click, then another, a total of six clicks.

Six clicks of his tongue. At that moment, Helaine's realization struck like a lightning bolt—she had been set up, and she knew it.

"I hate to say this," Ezzo interjected, shaking his head sympathetically at Helaine's stern expression, "but it was you, Miss Helaine, who started the off-the-board battle first."

Although she had only been in contact with them for a short period, Helaine had a keen eye for people. In her assessment, Ezzo appeared to be a decent man. One might even say he was too good, with the capacity of acting like an upright man.

However, there was something more driving him. Revenge lingered in his heart, even if it meant compromising his personal convictions.

"…"

She had plotted the course, chosen her tactics, thwarted actions, and driven hope into the ground, confident of victory. In fact, the Shatranj board showed victory as irrefutable. At the very moment she allowed Rachins to choose his bet, Helaine's victory had been all but guaranteed. However, there was one final move remaining before that gap could be closed. That was when…

"The royal castle's full of power and deceit," Rachins explained. "There, ya gotta shape yer opponent. Even if ya got the basics down, it's the ones who can put 'em to use that'll come out on top. Now, your move, bitch."

"Ah," Helaine squealed as Rachins slid one of his pieces across the board, knocking one of her pieces down. With it now being her move, Helaine watched through widened eyes as her lips quivered involuntarily. Rachins, Ezzo, and Manfred fixed their gazes upon her.

Through their timing and their breathless demeanor, Rachins and Manfred communicated a silent understanding to each other. Almost as if the two had struck a deal of their own before encountering Helaine in the gambling quarter.

It was Helaine, not Rachins, who made the initial misstep. She should have seized the opportunity to escape, without hesitation, the moment she crossed paths with him. Instead, she had underestimated the lowly commonor’s desperate plea for a small fortune, which they now used as leverage to block her escape. The result of the game of Shatranj no longer held any meaning at all.

“You can win and have your secrets exposed, or lose and suffer a great loss,” Rachins sneered. “Take yer pick.”

“Wai…” Helaine hesitated, weighing her options.

Upon being presented with those terms, Helaine realized she had underestimated him—she underestimated the breadth of his knowledge and experience. Not just as a royal advisor, but also with the influence and authority that came with the position.

So, Helaine bowed her head, forehead toppling the pieces on the board as she pressed it against the table. Grinding her head against its surface, she made a desperate plea, begging him not to pursue the defeat of anyone but herself.

“I lost, I lost. We’ve… no, I lost,” she confessed. She offered to divulge everything she knew about the city’s implosion, taking full responsibility for her actions.

28

“I’m back and I won!” Rachins exclaimed with a wicked grin plastered on his face as he swaggered back to the Western-style mansion.

Felt applauded at the sight of him looking so happy. “You managed to keep your limbs intact,” she congratulated, “and not a single finger was lost! I’m impressed!”

“Don’t say scary shit like that, man! Ain’t no way I’m crossin’ a bridge that big!” Rachins protested, rejecting Felt’s words of admiration.

“I mean, the bridge you just crossed was pretty damn close,” Felt said, scratching her head, disappointed by his reaction. “I was just givin’ you a compliment.”

The location was a Western-style mansion on the outskirts of

Flanders, once a fierce battleground. Fortunately, the Big Three's forces were all sent to a treatment center, making it now one of the quietest and safest places around. In that haven of tranquility, Felt anxiously awaited, her exasperation swept away by Rachins's triumphant report. Learning the outcome of the game in the gambling quarter, Felt nodded deeply and asked, "So you're saying that narrow-eyed lady confessed her involvement in the incident?"

"I mean, she jus' confessed that she connected the main suspect and the hitman," Rachins replied. "Tryin' to play nice an' soak up the sweet juices of the city… so she says."

"So she made up an excuse while her own people died. What a nasty woman." Folding her arms, Felt scorned Helaine's attitude. At the same time, she couldn't help but admire Rachins's astuteness in sniffing out Helaine's involvement and informing her of it. Rachins, who had boldly confronted Helaine, had made good on his lofty promise. Although Felt was taken aback when he proposed using Ezzo as bait for his plan.

"So you actually pulled it off for real," Reinhard complimented. "I'm impressed, Rachins."

"I could say the same 'bout you," Rachins returned. "You just let me go ahead without botherin' to ask what the hell I had in mind! Didn't ya consider the possibility that I might've sold 'er out and switched sides?"

"I wouldn't say that possibility never crossed my mind, but," said Felt, glancing at Reinhard, who was standing beside her, "people in the slums got a keen sense of smell, y'know? Why would they go out of their way to take a dangerous road just to get hurt? That's absurd."

"I swear. With Reinhard here, ya have nothin' to worry about," Rachins expressed with frustration, covering his head in his hands, to which Reinhard let out a bitter smile. If it's just a matter of winnin' or losin', it's pointless to make an enemy outta Reinhard.

Felt, observing the exchange, turned her head and said, "Well… Even if Reinhard hadn't been in the picture, I still would've left it to you."

"Why?" Rachins asked, puzzled.

"You bowed to me and said your buddy's life was on the line," she replied. "Ain't that enough?"

Originally, Felt and her crew became deeply entangled in this case because Camberley had been captured by the Flower Prison Garden. It was in this urgency to catch the real culprit and save him that Rachins bowed to Felt. That was enough to make his real intentions clear.

Recognizing his sincerity, Felt saw no need to inquire about the trump card he held to squeeze the truth out of the Golden Beetle. He made a promise, and he delivered.

"Well then, I guess there's no point in diggin' further," Felt remarked. "I'm not so stubborn that I need every damn detail to trust someone. Just tell me what's necessary."

"In that case, Rachins, it was enough that you were a friend."

Hearing the exchange between mistress and servant, Rachins stood stunned, mouth agape. Felt closed a single crimson eye, paying no heed to his reaction. Just then, it occurred to her that Rachins had returned to the Western-style mansion alone. "So, I guess that means there ain't no Ezzo…" she said with a sigh.

"Nope," Rachins replied. "The bastard went to get what he came for. Even Manfred of The Balance, who did the most, promised us the best forerunner."

"I see. So, forget about Ezzo's revenge, what about us?" Felt asked.

"We ain't lettin' 'em get away, that's for damn sure," Rachins replied, flashing his long tongue and a roguish grin.

Seeing that smile, Felt also grinned, baring her fang. "Super. Flam, you're up!" she called out, summoning Flam from the reserves. The young attendant quietly emerged and bowed before Felt's crimson gaze.

“As you wish,” Flam replied, looking back at her master with eyes devoid of emotion. “We can only perform this once per day, but I will make sure we fulfill it.”

“What a cute thing to say. Well, we’re counting on you to do your job. Let Grassis know.”

Flam bowed her head reverently at Felt’s command. With the power of their Divine Protection, the twins Flam and Grassis could communicate their words to one another once a day, regardless of distance. Through its power, Grassis sent word that Gaston, Ilya, and the others had come under attack in the town of Hakuchuri. And now, it was time for the counterattack.

“So, what’s the message?” Flam asked.

“Tell Old Man Rom who’s with them,” Felt began, “and tell him there’s someone I want him to contact.” With those words spoken, Felt turned her attention back to the fiery-haired Reinhard standing by her side, who met her gaze. He dropped to one knee for this long awaited moment. Felt couldn’t help but chuckle at his dramatic gesture, finding it a tad excessive. With her hands on her hips, she puffed out her chest and declared, “And now it’s our turn. So let’s give it all we’ve got!”

29

The moment he returned to his base, the man’s instincts tingled, sensing an eerie shift in the air that made his throat constrict. To survive in this business, one required a keen nose for danger. Grudges abound, and to that effect, the base was fortified with various traps, ensuring that only he could access it.

But those traps had been disarmed. The presence of an intruder was glaringly obvious. Yet what unnerved him the most was the unmasked hostility that thrust itself at him as he stood at the entrance.

Another man’s voice pierced the darkness at the far end of the hall, carrying a hint of intelligence and arrogance. “I’ve selfishly taken the liberty of paying you this unwelcome visit. But you mustn’t mind, as it was you who played dirty in my establishment the other day. You might even call it a brazen act of thievery."

The sound of this voice was familiar, though last time it was tinged with a sense of urgency and anger. Slowly, the other man's figure came into view from the far end of the hallway. There was no mistaking it.

"The guard from the Flower Prison Garden?" he uttered in surprise. It was the dwarf man he encountered in the burnt down brothel. Rumors had it that he was a formidable guard skilled in the art of magic, which meant he posed no real threat to the man. After all, the man possessed a natural talent to manipulate the essence of the mana that surrounded him.

"I'm merely a foolish man who failed to safeguard what I should have," confessed the dwarf. "The other day, I couldn't even put up a fight against you."

"And you think you can beat me today, magic user?" the man retorted.

"Is that…an Excess Mana Circulation Constitution?"

"As a magic user, you don't stand a chance. On top of that, I'm a hired hand."

"That's true. An Excess Mana Circulation Constitution is the natural enemy of magic users," the dwarf continued. "And it wouldn't be right for me to retaliate against you for just doing your job, while I couldn't even fulfill my own duties. I get it."

"…"

In the darkness ahead, the magic user nodded. Yet despite claiming that retaliation was off the table, his eyes, his hostility, and his determination to fight only grew stronger. His mana itself practically screamed that he had no intention of backing down.

Without waiting for the dwarf's next words, the man took the initiative and made his move. Although the magic user had no moves to make in the first place, it was best to not give him a chance to react. In their previous encounter at the brothel, the man had only spared the dwarf's life to frame him as the culprit. But this time, there was no other choice but to take him down. Brandishing the small sword concealed in his pocket, the man attempted to cleave the magic user's throat with a single, slick blow.

"You failed to finish me off that night. You missed your chance, and that's why you're going to lose now."

"Gah… guuuhh…?!"

In the next moment, a searing heat came from nowhere and erupted against the man's torso, blasting him backwards with a painful cry. Burning agony coursed through his chest, rendering his limbs numb. Unable to move, he collapsed. His thoughts wavered and clarity faded away. With widened eyes and twitching limbs, he struggled to comprehend what had just happened.

"It's the Excess Mana Circulation Constitution, patterns, and countermeasures…plus lots of practice and improvement." The fallen man's vision reflected the face of the dwarf looking down at him. He displayed his blood-stained hands as evidence of his attack on the Excess Mana Circulation Constitution, carried out through some mysterious method. How and where he had acquired this particular method remained unclear.

"It's a misplaced vengeance. The dead won't feel a thing, even if you retaliate. But my soul cries out for justice. So I decided to compromise."

"…"

"It's not about revenge; it's about proving something. That one can achieve the impossible if they just keep walking. That even a dwarf man inferior in Od could win a 'color' title. And that a girl selling flowers in the red-light district could build a future with her own flower shop!"

It was proof that what was deemed impossible, was indeed possible. The defeated man exhaled at the realization that he had lost precisely because of that. Ridiculous. That's why he wanted to overcome this wall? A wall no one had dared to challenge before, all for that reason?

“My name is Ezzo Cadner, the Gray, and I have at last avenged Mimosa.”

“I’m not…dead yet…no…” the man gasped, desperately clinging for life.

“I will not take your life,” said the magic user, Ezzo, with a flip of his cloak. “I don’t think she would want that either, for she knew the joy of nurturing flowers.”

At his words, the man caught a glimmer of hope, clinging to the possibility of survival. However, in that moment of hope, another figure emerged.

“Unfortunately, we don’t fall into that category,” came the chilling response. “We are a bit more savage.” The man’s throat tightened with grief as his gaze met the inked visage of Tattoo Face of The Balance, obscuring his view of Ezzo’s reflection. In swift succession, multiple individuals appeared and seized the man’s limbs, forcibly dragging him outside. Despite his futile struggles, his body, having been weakened by a vicious blow, refused to obey.

Interrogations carried out by The Balance, and those by Tattoo Face, were notoriously ruthless. It was widely understood within the realms of the underground that no one ever emerged unscathed, much less kept their mouths shut.

Thus, the man cried out, desperately clinging to a sliver of hope. “W-Wait… I’ll t-tell you… anything you want to know… about my employer,” he desperately appealed.

“Well, well, you sure talk fast,” Tattoo Face replied, his features contorting in a twisted smirk.. “That’s very helpful. Very helpful indeed.” The man’s eyes widened in sheer horror as the subtle shift in expression tipped all of the scales in unison. “I’m sorry,” Tattoo Face continued, “but unfortunately, I don’t put faith in tales from people I haven’t had the pleasure of torturing.”

"…"

"Take him along. I will personally attend to him later."

Tattoo Face's subordinate quickly and quietly fell in line with his directive. Unable to resist, the helpless man was dragged outside, never to see the light of day again. He only left behind a cacophony of despair, echoing in hopelessness that shattered his very core.

"So you're satisfied, avenger?" Manfred called out to Ezzo, his gaze fixed on the departing hitman, before tending to his own injured hand. Ezzo examined his fingers and sighed, shaking his head in response. There was only one way to answer.

"I can claim no sense of accomplishment. How can I fill this void in my soul, knowing I allowed her to perish? It was my own foolishness that brought about her demise. A remorse that will forever haunt me."

"You're quite the poet," Manfred remarked. "Not that I disagree. But then why did you go through with that plan?"

"I already told you," Ezzo replied. "I did it to prove a point. Nothing more, nothing less."

Manfred shrugged, not pressing further on the matter. Instead, he continued in his own distinctive tone. "Even so, you're quite talented. It's a shame that you're employed by the poison lady of the Flower Prison Garden."

"As expected," Ezzo continued after a brief pause, "I can't face Miss Toto after what has transpired. No longer can I call myself the guard of Flower Prison Garden."

"In that case," Manfred offered, "are you willing to accept The Balance's invitation? Anyone with a chip on their shoulder is welcome."

Ezzo's eyes widened lightly at Manfred's provocative words. Then, the Gray magic user shook his head loosely and replied, "I'm sorry to say… the one to whom I have entrusted my allegiance already has prior commitments."

“I see,” Manfred responded with a hint of regret. “That’s unfortunate. If that’s the case, then I’m sorry to hear that.”

Upon the rejection of his invitation, Manfred touched the tattoo on his face as if to convey he had anticipated Ezzo’s response. Ezzo squinted at the gesture, when Manfred twisted his expression once more, tilting the scales on his face. “How disheartening to lose both a promising individual and the forerunner for revenge to that young lady,” he muttered, his words tinged with a sense of resignation.

30

Mozolite was keenly aware that the scales had shifted in an unfavorable direction. As the trusted confidant of the Tattoo Face, Manfred, The Balance’s second in command, he himself did not know what he had done wrong that had driven him into such a position. With my special eyes, I should’ve been able to discern the movements of all the important people involved.

Mozolite was blessed with an extraordinary ocular ability known as the Divine Protection of Distant Vision, granting him unique eyes. These eyes allowed him to see the precise location of a target, or to determine and closely observe targets that fulfilled specific conditions.

Mozolite was supposed to have used his power to observe the leaders of the Big Three and their entourages, the young royal selection candidate and her Sword Saint knight, the dwarf man who had taken his place, and even the conniving Golden Beetle woman, with whom he maintained a tenuous alliance. He never let his guard down, and yet, the tables had turned. An irrevocable collapse was all that greeted him.

“Now is not the time to dwell on the cause of this failure,” he thought. “More importantly, it’s time to get out of here.”

Although his involvement had not yet been exposed, he knew it was only a matter of time. And often, the success or failure of escape hinged on how quickly one took their first step.

With that in mind, Mozolite departed the city before those around him had the chance to raise any suspicions.

Aligning himself with the Golden Beetle, he orchestrated attacks by assassins on the Big Three. Leveraging his position as a manager within The Balance, it was easy for him to facilitate such maneuvers. The rest was a ploy to strategically advance the situation, undermining the influence of the Black Silver Coin and Flower Prison Garden. And ultimately, to hold Manfred, who had long been a thorn in his side, accountable, thus replacing him. To this end, Mozolite had spent a significant amount of time meticulously crafting and executing this well-devised strategy.

“Where did the cogs in my plan go astray…?” Mozolite pondered aloud, voice tinged in frustration. Using his getaway plan he had prepared for emergencies, he had already departed Flanders, and intended to flee the country entirely. He would remove the organization’s tattoos, alter his face, and seek refuge in the countryside until everything quieted down. From there, he would embark on a fresh start within the shadows of the underworld.

“Sniff, sniff, sniff…” At the dragon carriage stop, where Mozolite waited for the dragon carriage to arrive, he felt something against his shoulder.

“Huh?” Startled, he glanced over his shoulder, only to discover a kitten girl nuzzling against his arm, sniffing curiously. Mozolite’s blood boiled in irritation at the sudden intrusion, but he managed to restrain himself. This wasn’t the time to cause a scene.

“Hey, Little Miss! I don’t know what you’re up to, but I’m busy. Where are your parents?” he demanded.

“Hmm, no good, no good at all. Old man, you smell like a bad guy! A verryy bad guyy!” the girl derided as she stared at him with her cutesy eyes, to which Mozolite could only gulp in response. At the same time, he noticed that this young catgirl before him carried a finely crafted walking stick while exuding a strong sense of fighting spirit. This realization sent a shiver down his spine.

“Bad Mimi. I told ya to keep quiet and watch!” A girl with flowing light purple hair materialized at the station entrance. Adorned in white, furry attire with a collar, she was a beautiful girl with a presence that seemed rather out of place.

“Ahh, Missy!” Mimi greeted the familiar girl. “I forgot! You did say that! You did!” The familiar girl was none other than one of the royal selection candidates who had recently become the talk of the kingdom.

“I’m hopin’ yer smart enough to realize it ain’t some coincidence we jus’ happened to cross paths,” she said with a glint in her light-blue eyes, causing Mozolite to jolt back instinctively. The cat-girl attempted to grab his sleeve, but he wriggled out of the way to escape, causing the fabric to tear as he stumbled away. Rolling over, he swiftly dashed off with all his momentum.

“Ahhhh! He got away! Hetaro! Tivey! Run run run run run!” the cat-girl shouted behind him. Mozolite activated his eyes, scanning for the hostile gaze as he wove through the winding streets, evading it.

It was like looking down at a map. Mozolite could perceive the actual location of any person searching for him. With this power, pinpointing targets and fleeing pursuers was a breeze. It was this very skill that made him invaluable to Manfred, and at the same time, what fueled his own ambitious desires.

Sure, there had been some minor setbacks, but Mozolite remained resolute in making a fresh start once he could elude his pursuers. I will reflect on what I did this time and do better next time. I will definitely get back at the ones who got in my way. If I can only just escape from that royal selection candidate’s underlings in the city and go to another land…

“Huh?” A moment later, Mozolite was briskly knocked off his feet and sent sprawling with a great impact.

“…”

My back is bruised and I can’t catch my breath. What the hell just happened? He looked at his feet, only to find them drenched in a vibrant shade of red. His right leg also emitted a fiery glow right around the knee.

“Ugh… ah…” The wound looked fierce, yet he felt no pain. Perhaps his brain had simply resigned itself to the incomprehensible injury.

In that case, it was worth it. I’ll prioritize escape for now, for as long as my legs will carry me. With this in mind, he took a step forward, when a sudden jolt struck his waist, causing him to collapse. Again, the wound erupted in a burst of red. Struggling to regain his footing, it was a relentless onslaught—my shoulder, my side, my leg, my hip, my foot, my arm, my leg, my hip, my shoulder, my stomach, my waist, my chest, my leg, my arm, I’m hit, I’m hit, I’m hit—

“Hey, wh-what the… huh? What the hell…?!” Mozolite exclaimed, his entire body now inflamed in red. He couldn’t comprehend the assault he was enduring. Desperately opening his eyes, he searched for the person who was aware of him—or rather, the person who was mercilessly attacking him. And before long, his opponent came into view.

Far away, on the other side of town, a young man raised his arm toward Mozolite. There stood the red-haired Sword Saint, holding a bright red tometo in his hand.

“This is ridiculous,” Mozolite muttered with a sense of incredulity. No sooner had he spoken when another tometo exploded right in his face, with an impact that shattered his awareness into oblivion.

“Lady Felt, he appears to have fainted,” Reinhard reported.

“Hmm, I see. But look…” Felt motioned curiously.

“Hm? What’s the matter?” Reinhard asked, a basket of red tometoes sitting beside him, from which he continuously picked them out and tossed them into the distance.

Felt’s lips curved into a frown as she watched the scene unfold. Grabbing a tometo from the basket, she pressed it against her lips and took a bite, savoring its fresh flavor. With a twinkle in her eyes, she turned to Reinhard and suggested, “For next year’s Tometo

Festival, let's make it a competition between you and everyone else in town." After all, it would have to be that much to even be a match.

31

Mozolite awoke to darkness, his throat tightening as he realized his immobilized state. He was seated in a rigid chair, limbs rendered motionless. He cautiously attempted to make sense of what had happened with his hazy mind. And then, a presence emerged.

"I see you've come to," came the voice of the most terrifying man in existence, resonating through the pitch-black void. Mozolite's memories flooded back—the encroaching tometoes, his failed escape from pursuers, the revelation of his plan. He was in the midst of fleeing the organization's pursuers when his scheme was exposed. However, his escape had failed, and he found himself ensnared once again.

"Oh, Boss…" Mozolite uttered weakly.

"Oh, you still have the audacity to address me as 'Boss'? That's a surprise." Manfred's throaty laugh sent chills down Mozolite's spine.

Mozolite attempted to open his eyes, searching for a glimmer of escape in the darkness. Searching for a way to survive, even if his life was a meager one. However, he was met with disappointment. His eyes would not open. He remained shrouded in darkness, unable to see a thing.

"Your eyes were indeed precious," Manfred spoke with amusement, "but perhaps you relied on them a bit too much. Even I made a few misjudgments, but… This time, your focus was too misplaced."

Desperation filled Mozolite's voice as he pleaded, "Hey, I can't see a thing! Boss… I can't see anything! Please, let me explain…"

"The Pig King and the Hundred Flowers, myself and the royal selection candidate, even the Sword Saint," Manfred continued. "You had your eye on Gray and Golden Beetle, too. You were cautious. And yet, you were still defeated by a mere foot soldier."

Mozolite could hear Manfred's footsteps drawing near. And yet, he could not see him. Am I blindfolded? I can't see him. He should be right next to me.

For Mozolite, who had lived his entire life relying on his Eyes, this was an unbearable fear. Yet, despite Mozolite's fear, there was a trace of twisted satisfaction in Manfred's voice.

"To be honest," Manfred continued, "the recent incident has ruined The Balance's reputation. I was betrayed by my trusted advisor, and my name has been put to shame. However, amidst all this, there is a silver lining. That young golden-haired girl is truly a remarkable find."

Manfred's words resonated from such a distance that Mozolite could feel his breath run down his neck. Just then, Mozolite felt something being placed in his hand, still secured to the chair. It was a soft, round object, unfamiliar to him.

"Gah… Boss, is this…? Ugh…"

"Don't drop it, Mozolite," Manfred cautioned. "That object represents the risk you took. That you've gambled with your life and lost."

Mozolite, unable to speak due to the foreign object in his mouth, opened his eyes wide, only to be met with darkness. Empty, eye-less sockets. And what used to occupy those sockets, was now nestled in the palm of his hand.

"The retribution of The Balance is harsh," Manfred explained. "You have brought disgrace upon our organization and robbed six comrades of their lives in pursuit of your selfish ambitions. Your crimes must be accounted for, in the name of Typhon, the bearer of the balance."

"Nn-n-n-n!" Mozolite's attempts to protest were futile. Manfred grabbed the jaw of the terrified man as he writhed in his seat. A slender finger, with the force of a vise, crushed Mozolite's jaw on the spot. In pain, Mozolite let out cries of agony, wrenching up blood from his throat. His wailing continued, an agonizing struggle that persisted until Mozolite's life eventually came to an end.

And thus, the life of the mastermind behind the incident in the Earth Dragon Capital, came to an end.

32

“So, I guess we can say yer problem's finally all taken care of, eh, Felt?”

“Yeah, that's cool,” Felt said, replying with a smile. “Sorry for putting all that pressure on you, my loudmouthed sis.”

Anastasia Hoshin, the guest sitting across from her, returned the smile. They were in the parlor of Astrea Manor in Hakuchuri, where they had at last returned after the the Big Three's attack in Flanders, the Earth Dragon Capital of the world.

With the incident resolved and various issues taken care of, Felt finally felt at ease in the residence. And now, having invited the people who had helped them to the mansion, they were able to relax, enjoy the fruits of their labor, and appreciate everyone's hard work.

“But let's be real, we ain't really do much ‘til the end,” Anastasia remarked. “That ain't much of a contribution… But Felt, I'm sorry hearin' ‘bout all the troubles ya went through.”

“No kidding,” Felt replied. “I've been wondering, do all royal selection candidates have to go through crazy stuff like this?”

“I dunno. At least my place hasn't been all that busy,” Anastasia admitted with a laugh, tilting her head at Felt. Felt frowned in response as Anastasia continued, “But even if it's true the situation was dire, how'd y'all decide ya needed our help? Normally, ya ain't supposed to show weakness to yer competitors.”

“I ain't scared to take risks so long as it's not my people's lives at stake,” Felt said. “Besides, I chose you, didn't I? I figured you'd be the most level-headed of all the candidates.”

“So ya mean ya think highly of us?” Anastasia asked.

"Nah," Felt replied. "Just thought if we were gonna strike a deal, it wouldn't be too complicated and messy."

"Well, ain't ya an honest one?" Anastasia responded, now in a good mood thanks to Felt's answer.

Truthfully, when Felt considered the four royal selection candidates as potential allies, she thought Anastasia would be the best person to approach. She felt each of the other three would be a tough sell for various reasons. So, through Flam and Grassis, she reached out to Old Man Rom to establish contact with the Hoshin Trading Company. After that, Anastasia and her crew acted swiftly and efficiently, allowing them to successfully hunt down and capture Mozolite, the fugitive criminal, through their tactical maneuvers.

"But when I heard that half of the mercenary group we were counting on couldn't move, I got a bit nervous," Felt admitted.

"Sorry 'bout that," Anastasia apologized. "I reckon our guys got a bit carried away earlier. Now I got 'em lookin' after the trading company, so I'm a bit short-handed."

"No wonder," Felt said with a shrug. "You've been dealin' with all sorts of baddies like the White Whale and Witch Cult, haven't you?" Felt recalled the most recent topics that had shaken the kingdom only recently. This very girl, Anastasia, who sat before her, had also succeeded in defeating the White Whale, a troublesome witchbeast that plagued the world for years, as well as a leader of the nefarious Witch Cult, together with the camps of two other royal selection candidates.

The royal selection had just begun, but Felt, who had been preoccupied with internal matters, found herself trailing behind.

"But looks like yer jus' gettin' started," Anastasia said.

"Actually, isn't that how it is?" Felt responded. "If you snatch someone's wallet and make a run for it, you'll run outta steam real quick if you go all out right off the bat. It's about knowing how to make a clean getaway and when to catch your breath."

“Maybe that ain’t the best analogy, but I reckon I catch yer drift,” Anastasia nodded repeatedly. Felt, sitting cross-legged on the chair, watched her reaction perplexedly. But then, Anastasia timidly extended her hand, to which Felt grew more reluctant as she took in her white, slender fingers.

“Felt, let’s become pals! I mean, I know I been callin’ ya a competitor an’ all, but truth is, I kinda like ya.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but that sounds so fake,” Felt bluntly replied.

“Aw, don’t be so mean, I’m serious!” Anastasia insisted, hand still outstretched. “I’m still in the business of honesty, y’know.”

It’s hard to tell if she’s serious or joking. At the very least, I can’t imagine an honest person succeeding in business, so her words just now obviously ain’t sincere, but…

“Well, alright then. Let’s give it a shot,” Felt conceded. “Alright, loudmouthed… I mean… Anastasia.”

“Then, shall we shake on it?”

“Well, it’s not like I’m losing’ anything, and you did help me a lot… and it’s not like I hate you, so…” Felt gave in and took her hand. Upon releasing their grip, Anastasia glanced at her own hand and let out a soft sigh of relief.

“I’m awfully glad,” Anastasia said. “I don’t got many friends my age. Let’s be good pals, alright?”

“Same age, huh?” Felt snickered. “From what I’ve heard, you’re one of the oldest candidates…”

“Oh, oh, I can’t hear you! I can’t hear ya! I can’t hear ya. Nope, don’t hear ya at all!” Covering her ears like a child, Anastasia blocked out the conversation she least wanted to hear. Chuckling at her childish gesture, something you typically wouldn’t expect an adult to do, Felt grabbed a tea cake and chomped on it. Not bad. Flam and the others must have gone all out with the treats when they heard who the guest was. Though even if that hadn’t been the case, we still got a lot of gifts from the people we helped. That's about the only thing we gained from this incident.

"By the way, did that lady in yer party who got kidnapped make it back safe an' sound?" Anastasia inquired.

"Yeah, she's alright," Felt confirmed. "They seriously couldn't figure out a use for her, so they just kept her locked up in the bad guy's hideout, but…then the angry Pig King came knockin'." Indeed, anyone who offended the Pig King, the one man in Flanders one should avoid offending above all, found themselves with a one-way ticket to the afterlife, courtesy of his iron fist.

So Kalifa was rescued and made it safely back to Ilya. However, Felt had mixed feelings about the fact that yet another contact was made between Doltero, Kalifa, and their daughter.

"Well, Gaston stepped up to the plate to protect Ilya, so I'd like to think he's got a good shot," Felt commented. I mean, he went all in, risking his own life and everything. I'd even feel bad for him if nothing pans out after all this. Although, there's probably nothing to worry about seeing as Kalifa's been visiting him nearly every day ever since she came back. "Gaston has manned up, and Rachins pulled off some clever work, too."

"Hey, wait a sec," Anastasia interrupted, "ain't we missin' someone? Ain't you and yer weird servant s'posed to have a three-man team?"

"Oh, that's the best part," Felt said with a laugh, rising from the chair in a huff. She walked over to the window and beckoned Anastasia to join her. Curiosity piqued, Anastasia followed and peered out the window beside her, gaze falling upon the well-maintained garden below, shaded by the surrounding trees.

"Oh, there he goes!" Anastasia pointed out. "In the corner of the garden with an awfully fancy lookin' lady."

"Oh, that's the proprietress who runs the red-light district in Flanders," Felt explained, holding up her pinky finger with a sly smile. "She ended up with Camberley, of all people."

“The proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden? Ain’t that a kicker?!” Anastasia exclaimed, taken aback by the unexpected revelation. For there in the garden of the mansion, sitting side by side in the shade of a tree, sat a rather unconventional pair—a far cry from what one would call picture-perfect.

At one time, Camberley was confined in the brothel of Flower Prison Garden, clinging to life by a thread. Rachins went to great lengths to rescue him, even taking on a high-stakes gamble with Helaine. However, as Rachins waged that battle of his own, Camberley managed to escape from his confinement by himself. But one question remained. Just how the hell did he pull off such a daring escape, anyway?

“How’d one of the most seasoned gals on the streets get so bent outta shape like that?” Anastasia asked.

“The Divine Protection of Bedroom Wiles,” Felt replied matter-of-factly.

“What?” Felt’s short answer stunned Anastasia.

Responding to Anastasia’s reaction, Felt continued. “Like I said! It was his Divine Protection of Bedroom Wiles. His infamy as a playboy of the red-light district really wasn’t for nothing. I’ve never heard of a prostitute in a brothel giving a customer their money back!”

“Felt, yer one of ‘em gals who collects all sorts of peculiar subordinates, ain’t ya?” Anastasia asked, putting her hand to her head and shaking it in disbelief. But it was all too true.

Once Camberley had escaped the clutches of Toto’s poison and returned from the red-light district, he requested that she be forgiven. He even vowed to make up any losses with his own labor if necessary.

Upon hearing this story, Toto also shared more about Mimosa, the unfortunate prostitute who had met a fiery end. Mimosa, the young girl with dreams of becoming a florist, had apparently hailed from the same hometown as Mozolite, the mastermind behind the incident. The whole story was as follows:

The girl had left her hometown in pursuit of her dreams, and found solace in a man from her hometown whom she had befriended in the past, entering the red-light district of this great city. She then innocently complied with his requests, unknowingly becoming a source of information herself. And so, she fell victim to the man's ambitions, meeting a tragic end before achieving any dreams of her own. Such was the truth of the unfortunate woman's death, and the end of her unsalvageable dream.

Having had it all explained, Anastasia asked Felt, "Are ya feelin' regretful?"

"Me? Don't be an idiot," Felt retorted. "I grew up in the slums. I've seen lots of people die in the shittiest ways. And I've seen lots of people die after being taken advantage of by other people. So…"

"So?" Anastasia urged her to continue.

"I'm frustrated and pissed off," Felt continued, brows furrowing in anger. "I'm so damn frustrated and furious… I'm gonna go crazy!" Yes, yes. That's exactly it. I'm angry. I'm pissed. I'm absolutely furious! I'll be damned if I go around tryin' to save every naive and clueless soul out there. But I sure as hell won't stand by and watch good folks being preyed upon.

Felt never really liked do-gooders. She felt as if she were exploiting their kindness and mooching off of them. That's why I'm gonna change it. I'm gonna change everything. And that's why…

"Hehehe…" Anastasia let out a mischievous chuckle.

"What the hell's up with you?" Felt asked with surprise. "Quit actin' creepy. Why are you smiling at me?"

"Oh nothin'," Anastasia replied. "Jus' thinkin' that I really do fancy ya after all, Felt." Anastasia's expression relaxed, and she swayed her shoulders in amusement. Felt rested her cheek on her hand. Although they shook hands earlier and made a verbal pact to be friends, with this off-beat attitude, Felt had a feeling she might regret that promise sooner rather than later.

“Oh, but don’t think for a second that I’m givin’ up on the royal selection,” Anastasia asserted. “I ain’t concedin’ my victory in this contest.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Felt said with a nod.

Felt and Anastasia exchanged knowing smiles, a flicker of camaraderie forming between the two royal selection candidates.

33

While the two royal selection candidates engaged in friendly banter downstairs, an upstairs room in the mansion served as a makeshift office, where one individual held his head in great distress. This man, short in stature, found himself surrounded by scattered ledgers and letters. After a quick glance through them, his normally intelligent profile turned bright red, and his eyes practically bled in frustration.

“Wh-Wh-What in the world is happening? How is this domain even being managed?” Ezzo stuttered, agitation bubbling over. This must be some kind of mistake! And yet despite the messy contents, the details of these records are written in such neat, meticulous handwriting. In essence, its tidy appearance is only masking a ridiculously haphazard approach to managing the land!

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! This is the most absurd thing I’ve ever come across!” Ezzo exclaimed. “Before relocating the base here… no, wait! Wasn’t this the main Astrea residence from the beginning?”

“Yes,” Rom confirmed with a nod, “but it appears it was always in this state. From my perspective, it was evident the economy was in dire straits, but getting a grip on the situation wasn’t easy.” Old Man Rom hunched his massive body over, stroking his bald head as he stood before Ezzo, whose eyes were widened in disbelief.

“But, old timer, leaving it in such a condition seems utterly hopeless,” Ezzo remarked, his voice filled with frustration and concern.

In the unusual setting of a room in which a giant and a dwarf had gathered together, the atmosphere indeed was a bit peculiar. However, the matter at hand demanded their attention.

“B-But, I certainly didn’t anticipate such a worm-eaten state of affairs…” Ezzo said. “Could it be, these are all false documents fabricated to test my abilities?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t the time to waste so much effort for you,” Rom stated bluntly. “This is the harsh reality of this mansion…or rather, our camp.”

“…”

Ezzo’s mental state seemed to crumble as he sank to his knees, sitting there for a moment. He then lifted his face to meet the stern gaze of Old Man Rom, towering above him.

“Anyway, I’d like to hear from the person who’s been in charge of these tax revenue matters,” Ezzo continued, regaining his composure. “These records indicate a complete lack of understanding. However, so long as one possesses the will to learn, that can change. Who in the mansion was responsible for these affairs?”

“Well about that, it seems that the people of the city of Hakuchuri were in charge,” Rom explained.

“Tax revenues managed by the very citizens being taxed? Why on earth?” Ezzo questioned, perplexed.

“Who knows…” Rom shrugged, his thick arms folded as he tilted his head.

Ezzo dropped to his knees on the floor, his face belying frustration and disbelief.

Sloppy management at its finest here. What’s even more astonishing is the absence of any attempt by the citizens to cheat their taxes. In other words, it’s a miraculous shortage of internal affairs management by a group of ignorant good people all leaning on each other.

“Bu-Bu-bu-but, now that I have joined the camp, I refuse to accept this subpar state of affairs!” Ezzo protested. “First, we need to set proper standards and hire the right people… Yes, Mr. Rachins seemed to have his wits about him! Let’s get him on board! Alright, it’s settled!” Ezzo laughed hysterically, jumping up and down.

This sudden wave of energy dispelled the previous air of frustration, leaving Old Man Rom raising his eyebrows at the rapid change. With an exhale, he let out a contemplative “Hmmm.”

“Positive and capable is exactly what we need right now,” Rom acknowledged. “If you can do that, you’ll be in great demand. But why did you choose Felt?”

“It seems you have a lot on your mind, old timer,” Ezzo responded to Rom’s inquiry, his expression stiffening as he turned to face him. Their eyes met, one low and one high. Then, Ezzo spread his cloak wide and confidently puffed out his chest, looking up at the huge man above him. “I am very grateful to Miss Felt, to the Sword Saint, to Mr. Rachins, and to everyone else who helped in this matter,” he began. “They helped me seek justice for Mimosa. I want to repay them for their kindness. Such is my premise.”

“Well, if that’s your premise, what are your real intentions?”

“I see a great talent in Felt, one that is worthy of serving. Part of it has to do with her current title of Royal Selection Candidate, of course, but Miss Felt has the capacity to lead others and the flexibility to utilize their strengths. She also has shown genuine concern for people. I believe that this, too, was a chance encounter.”

Ezzo extended his small palms. “I am indebted to you for aiding me in breaking through this impasse,” he spoke sincerely. Yet, it was Felt’s eyes that held the greatest significance. Locking gazes with her, he lowered his head and found resolve. If he was going to fight, if he was going to challenge, if he was going to face off, this was the right place to do it.

“Just as Miss Felt is competing in the royal selection, I too have an opponent I must confront,” Ezzo revealed. “Coincidentally, that opponent is also in a position to be closely associated with the royal selection. An unavoidable circumstance for me, as well.”

“So you’re implying you want Felt out of convenience?” Rom asked.

“No, I consider it to have been fate,” Ezzo asserted without a moment’s hesitation.

Reassured by Ezzo’s resolute response, Old Man Rom seemed mildly surprised. He scratched his bald head with his finger, and commented, “I see, so you’re an eccentric person yourself.”

“A girl from the slums with the Sword Saint as her knight; how could you expect a normal crowd to gather when the core master-servant relationship is this odd? Isn’t it exciting?”

“There’s one thing I should mention,” Rom cautioned. “Felt hates the word ‘fate’, so be careful not to alienate her with such terms.”

“I appreciate the advice! I’d be delighted to learn anything else you can tell me, old timer.”

Old Man Rom shrugged his shoulders in response to Ezzo’s sincere explanation, his movements constrained by the cramped space. He began tidying up the scattered ledgers and miscellaneous items on the floor. That’s when another thought struck him.

“Speaking of which,” Rom began, “I heard you mentioned some peculiar conditions for joining the camp… What in the world did you request?”

“Oh, that,” Ezzo responded with a chuckle. “I simply requested permission to visit the red-light district in Flanders twice a month. I have a group of students currently learning to read and write.”

“…”

“The will to learn is precious,” he continued. “I don’t want that to cease. That’s my revenge.” Ezzo stepped to the window, and as he fixed his gaze on the outside scenery, his expression softened.

Towering above, Old Man Rom's cheeks also lifted into a smile, mirroring Ezzo's sentiment.

Outside the window, Reinhard ascended the hill to the mansion, accompanied by a crimson earth dragon. The return of the earth dragon, previously confiscated from them after being offered as the price of their agreement, was a notable sight. A golden-haired girl raced toward the knight and the earth dragon. Felt's unwavering figure, running straight ahead without hesitation, brought an unexpected sense of tranquility.

34

And so, the problems surrounding the Earth Dragon Capital came to a close. With the exception of one thing, that is. The final scene unfolded in a stone room, stark and cold. Helaine surmised that it was somewhere in the basement of a nondescript building in some obscure part of Lugunica. The loss of the Golden Beetle in Flanders, coupled with her own failure, was too much to compensate for. The Golden Beetle's standing within that city plummeted, and Helaine, stripped of her administrative role, was relegated back to the royal capital.

The reason why she hadn't been handed over to the Big Three in the city was not due to any mercy bestowed upon her by her superior. She received no such generous compensation. In a sense, she may have even preferred her fate to have been entrusted to the Black Silver Coin, The Balance, or the Flower Prison Garden.

Of course, if this had been done, she would have faced severe torture or been subjected to their insatiable desires for a woman. Yet for Helaine, even such outcomes may have been preferable to being stared at with such indifference by the person before her.

"Let's hear your explanation, Helaine Gatness."

"Yes, of course," she acquiesced. "The unforeseen circumstances have dealt a severe blow to our plans of infiltrating the city of Flanders. The Golden Beetle's…false identity has also severely undermined its voice within the city."

Hanging her head, Helaine's gaze grew dim as she confronted the consequences of her own actions. However, she could not afford to falter and disregard what the other party had to say.

The magnitude of her blunder could not be erased. That's why, at the very least, I must atone for it with every fiber of my being.

"…"

Listening to Helaine's explanation, a man sat before her in a chair, his cheek propped on his hand, which in turn rested on the armrest. Even his gestures exuded an air of sophistication, and the way he regarded her stirred something deep within her.

Helaine was so captivated by the man before her, the word "captivated" alone failed to describe what she felt in its entirety. She was so enamored by this man that she would willingly forfeit her life should he ask her to die. However, such a notion seemed of little concern to the man. Wasting valuable resources was not an option.

"You said you planned to infiltrate Flanders. However, did I ever order you to do so?" the man spoke. "There existed a delicate balance amongst the three organizations in that city. Had you remained silent, there would've been no issue at all."

"There was an ambitious man, easily swayed, who possessed an unwarranted talent…" Helaine spoke with a tinge of frustration. "I believed that if I placed him in a leadership position in that organization, he'd have been much more manageable."

"You had to contend with the interference of the royal selection candidate, and your plan failed," the man admonished. "On top of that, your own involvement was exposed, nearly reaching the higher echelons. A complete fiasco."

"The eldest son of House Hoffman is now under Lady Felt!" Helaine's words grew increasingly frantic as she raised her voice, stumbling over her words. "So our…"

The man rose from his chair, interrupting her as he slowly approached her. “Rickert Hoffman’s son, huh?”

In the darkness of the basement, a tall man emerged into view, illuminated by the flickering candlelight. He was a man around 30 years old, with long, golden hair and a carefully trimmed beard. His blue eyes were filled with intelligence and reason, and he was known for his outstanding competence, which belied his appearance.

Most people probably perceived his position as that of a representative of the royal capital’s Merchant Guild. However, the reality of his position was far more significant than something so trivial. His decisions, actions, and statements had the power to influence the entire kingdom, and the importance of his role was comparable to that of the Council of Wise Men.

If it were the Council of Wise Men that ran the kingdom’s government, it would be his role to protect and support the very backbone of the kingdom. Forty years ago, after the Demi-Human War, a secret defense mechanism was created out of necessity to defend the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica from within.

The Six Tongues. An organization of which the man standing before her, Russell Fellow, currently held the esteemed position of director. And so, Russell advanced and stood before the kneeling Helaine, who gasped as the tall man looked down on her, anticipating his words as every nerve stood on edge.

“With the addition of the Golden Lion, the balance in Flanders has been fortified,” he began. “While we have fewer means to intervene on our side, there is no doubt that we have resolved a number of pressing matters.”

“…”

Helaine remained silent. Russell continued, “However, with the kingdom reeling from the royal selection, the Golden Lion and the Valkyrie, the half-devil and the Bloody Bride, and the Merchant of the West, we must be thoughtful in our response. Regrettably, you have proven lacking in this regard. Therefore, you must be punished.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Helaine lowered her head to the ground with such force, her forehead collided violently with the floor. She unbuttoned her suit on the spot, exposing her undulating white skin. Russell’s palm slowly crawled down her bare back. As he did, the curse mark etched into her skin made her blood boil, the intense pain staining her vision white. “Kaa… ku… aah!”

“Having to withdraw competent pawns back is indeed troublesome,” Russell remarked, without so much as a glance at Helaine, writhing and weeping tears of blood. Lost in his own contemplation, he continued. “Nevertheless, should we consider it a gain to have assessed the potential of the Golden Lion, initially shrouded in uncertainty at the start of the royal selection? No, it is unacceptable to have the son of the Hoffmans aware of our involvement. Perhaps it is time to revise some of our plans?”

Russell’s mind teemed with an array of strategies and an army of pawns, all of which he’d utilized with utmost efficiency without a shred of selfish desires. His ultimate selflessness was the precise quality that allowed Helaine to pledge an unwavering allegiance to him.

Yes, indeed, that is why I must overcome all this suffering so that I may serve him again soon, she thought.

“Ah, ah!” Helaine’s anguished screams pierced the air, and as Russell listened to the agony in her voice, a tinge of concern washed over him for the future of the kingdom. The royal selection had already begun, and whatever the outcome, it would undoubtedly bring about a resolution. Russell hoped that the days to come would hold a glimmer of hope.

To realize this… That is the sole purpose of Russell Fellow of the Six Tongue’s existence, he thought with conviction.

END

The Witch's After Tea Party:
One Wild Night
(CA)

1

It was a terrible snowstorm. The fierce crosswind's sheer cold threatened to cut straight through her body. It sapped the strength from her feet, the sight from her eyes, her hearing, sense of smell, and touch. It made her feel as though it would steal all that she was.

"…ega!!"

From the haze which mired her thoughts, she realized someone nearby was shouting at her. When she glanced up, a face took shape inside the howling, snow-swept expanse.

The moment she could recognize the desperate cry from amid her stupor, two hands threaded themselves beneath her armpits, and she found herself yanked sharply upward from the snowdrift in which she lay waist-deep. The next instant, she found herself pulled free by sheer physical force.

And now she was free of the snow, into the open air. Although she had only gone from slowly freezing solid to an icy wind chill, this small change in body temperature allowed her snow-addled mind to realize something else.

"…hey, you! Are you listening?! Omega! I'm talking to you, Omega!!"

The discovery might have moved her if not for the banshee screeching inches from her ear. The owner of the indignant voice, currently peering sidelong at her, was a girl. Her refined appearance contrasted with the fury burning in the depths of her eyes.

"Oh good," the girl muttered in a small voice. When Omega met her gaze, she breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re not dead, right? Can you hear me? If you can hear me, say something!”

“…I can…hear you. You don’t…have to…yell…” Omega rasped out.

“It’s just like you to talk back even when you’re gasping for air… Do you remember what happened?”

“Of course, I do… Who are you again?”

“Oh, you’re useless!” the girl raged at her.

The girl reached the limits of her anger and promptly headbutted her. The loud thud and sudden pain from the impact on her forehead wrenched back her drifting consciousness. Flexing her numb fingers and prodding the part of her forehead that had received the headbutt, she murmured, “That hurt, Palmyra.”

“So you do know me! Listen up, Omega. You fell into a pile of snow and got buried. I said I didn’t think we should leave in this weather, and now look—thanks to you, we’re stuck in a blizzard!”

“…Okay, but don’t yell so close to my ear. Your voice is even louder than usual, Minerva.”

“Who the hell is that?!” Seeing her slow drift into delirium, the girl—Palmyra—widened her eyes. Repeatedly slapping Omega’s cheeks, she screamed, “Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!”

It hurt, but sleep was winning. Ignoring the pain, she continued drifting towards the peaceful feeling.

“Palmyra! Omega! Are you two okay?!”

“Colette! Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. But…but it’s been awful! I’ve been looking all over, but I can’t find anywhere where we can rest!”

Pushing her way through the snow, the girl who appeared before the two had gentle features and was called Colette. When she saw

Omega lying in Palmyra's arms so limply, she yelped in surprise. Taking off her gloves, she pressed a bare palm to the girl's frozen cheek. It wasn't much in the face of such a terrible blizzard, but Omega was grateful for the warmth. Relying on that warmth, her eyelids shuddered as she spoke. "Colette, Palmyra… I have one final thing I want to say to you both."

"Don't jinx it!" cried Palmyra.

"No!" exclaimed Colette. "Don't talk like that!"

Hearing her weak murmur, the two girls were in fierce denial at the possibility of her death. But that was merely the pointless struggle of those who couldn't accept the reality in front of them.

Each moment, death grew closer.

Pale white and ice cold—a hopeless end.

"…No, actually, there is one last thing I can try." Omega shook her head, picturing the results of not struggling like a fool. If not a fool's resistance, there is only a sage's concession. But how can this be better? she wondered. To just accept my fate graciously and not soil my last moments? Sounds like something that black-haired boy would never accept.

"…" Taking a shallow breath, she raised her arm slowly. Gathering at the tip of her fingers was the power to meddle with logic, a power only a select few could perceive. It was magic—an abnormality produced through the barbaric act of using mana to reshape the natural order to one's will.

That was what brought the bright red flame into the world—a scorching heat that contrasted with the surrounding snow; brought into the world with the sole purpose of driving away the cold. It vanished quickly, and then it was over.

"…What was that?"

"A ball of fire? It disappeared so suddenly…"

Palmyra and Colette stared at one another, muttering about the lingering heat from the swelling ball of fire. Listening to the two talking, Omega let out a breath. “That was… the best I could do…”

“Wait, what?” said Palmyra. “That was you?!”

“Omega?!” exclaimed Colette. “Omega!”

Having used up the last of her remaining power in a genuine attempt to preserve her life, Omega felt her conscience—or rather, her entire existence—begin to fade. When a body constructed of mana welcomes death, it is absorbed by the particles that make up this world, and can only disappear.

It’s a comfort, at least, that those two won’t have to break down in tears beside my corpse. “But… If possible… I think I’d like to see… your faces as you cry…”

“What a cruel thing to say…!” cried Palmyra as she pleaded. “You… Wake up! Wake up, I said!!”

“P-Palmyra, no!” warned Colette. “Omega’s neck… Careful of her neck—”

Palmyra continued slapping Omega’s cheeks, unable to let her drift off, while Colette clung to Palmyra, trying to stop her attacks. Within the blizzard, they continued acting in a way they probably shouldn’t have, considering their situation, and time ticked by.

The three inched towards death with each passing moment.

“There you are! It seems the fire I saw just now was real after all.”

At the sudden voice, Colette and Palmyra turned in surprise. Standing before them in the snow was a woman in a thick robe.

“I’m Lysa, an itinerant preacher. I’m here to help!”

2

The woman calling herself Lysa skillfully began her work to save the three of them. “First of all, getting warm amidst the blizzard will be difficult; let’s dig into the snow and make a simple hole to serve as a windbreak. Here, take my jacket.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Colette. “I’m sorry! So sorry! I’ll help too. Please, let me help!”

Lysa nimbly removed her thick outer garment, threw it over Palmyra, and—using her cane—began work on the hole in the snow with her slender arms. Seeing this, the confused Colette also offered to lend a hand. And so, just like that, they created a cave in the snow, which the four huddled down into.

“It may be a little cramped, but we should make a fire now that the windbreak is done. Let’s get everyone warmed up.”

“…air…the air.”

“…? Oh, right! If we don’t let air into our hole, we’ll all suffocate.”

“S-Suffocate?!”

Startled, Palmyra stiffened, but Lysa just laughed, saying, “There’s no need to worry.” Then, with her cane, she pierced the ceiling, opening a small air vent.

After that, the woman produced a single book from her bag and tore a page out to use as kindling. Slowly, she brought a fire to life inside the cave.

“…warm.”

“Yes, very warm. Fire purifies all. There’s nothing greater in this world than fire.”

“That’s a little extreme… But-But it does sound reasonable. After all… it’s just so warm.”

As they comfortably warmed up in the cave little by little, Colette and Palmyra’s severe expressions began to fade. And then…

“The fire…is warm…” Omega said, stretching her body from Palmyra’s arms and straining to get closer to the warmth.

Watching her do this, Palmyra raised an eyebrow. “Careful. Don’t burn yourself.”

“I wouldn’t do anything so foolish. Though numb hands sure are inconvenient…ow!” While suppressing a laugh, Omega slipped on the snow approaching the fire and, with a flutter of her peach-colored hair, fell headfirst into the open flame. This warmed her up incredibly quickly. “I see, so this is a fire…”

“Agh!” exclaimed Palmyra. “How could you do it just as I was saying not to? What were you thinking?!”

“Just now, the pain of being burned… So this is what Carmilla felt…”

“Is your face okay, Omega?” asked Colette. “Make sure you cool it down properly with some snow…”

Drawing away from the fire, she applied snow to her burned face. Even though she was burned, frozen, and uncomfortable, being together like this made it all rather enjoyable. Watching the three of them, Lysa was dumbfounded and had to cover her mouth to stifle a laugh. “…You three sure are a strange bunch.”

“Ugh… How…embarrassing…” Palmyra’s face reddened, and she lowered her head as Lysa laughed.

Huddling up next to Palmyra, Colette clasped her hands to her chest. “You’re right about that…I’m sorry, was your name Lysa?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m Lysa, an itinerant preacher.”

“Thanks to you, Lysa, we’re alive. We’re so grateful! If you hadn’t come when you did…” Colette’s long eyelashes fluttered as a slight hint of fear crossed her pale face. “We’d all have…”

“We’d all have become snow algae… Is that the right word?”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to ask, but in that case, you certainly would have been the first to become one,” said Palmyra as she poked Omega between her furrowed brows as she attempted to finish Colette’s sentence.

Omega accepted both the finger and the protest and said, “It doesn’t matter. I’m grateful, too, Lysa. You said you were an itinerant preacher… Does that mean you’re part of the Gustekan Church?”

“Yes, that’s right. I spread our teachings as an itinerant preacher. I saw the red flame in the snow completely by chance… It took me by surprise.”

“And then you found us… How about that, Palmyra?” asked Omega. “Did you hear that?”

“I hope you’re not thinking it was all thanks to you,” Palmyra replied. “You’re the one who marched out into the blizzard in the first place and slipped into the snow. Everything was your fault.”

“…I see you haven’t learned to say thank you.”

“If I were to say thank you, it would be to Lysa—not you!”

The more Omega complained about the unreasonable assessment, the more she received Palmyra’s objections. As she shrugged her shoulders, Palmyra’s face turned redder and redder.

“Umm, these two are very sorry, Lysa. We haven’t even introduced ourselves. I’m Colette, and this child is Palmyra… And this very small child is—”

“Omega.” Riding off of Colette’s introduction, she chimed in with her own. Omega—a name suitable for this body, but not for a witch living in these times.

“So you’re Colette, Palmyra, and Omega, correct? Thank you for letting me know.” Listening to their introductions, Lysa gave a deep bow.

Omega was somewhat irritated at being called a small child, but it was true that her outward appearance made her look like the youngest of the three, so she didn’t protest.

“…”

As she warmed herself by the fire, Omega inspected Lysa’s appearance. She had gold hair that flowed to her lower back and clear blue eyes. Her fair skin and curved body were wrapped in a thick robe. Being an itinerant preacher, she most likely spent a lot of time touring various places within the freezing kingdom of Gusteko.

“This may sound a little rude, but isn’t being an itinerant preacher a difficult job for a woman?”

“It is. However, it’s my duty to travel across the kingdom on my own two feet and speak to the people with my own words. I truly believe there’s no better way to spread our teachings.”

“I see. But haven’t the Holy King Church’s Teachings already been spread to the vast majority of people? It’s hard to believe there’s any room for new teachings at this stage.”

“Our teachings are in the midst of a transformation. It’s my task as a servant of the Holy King to guide and instruct people in the new ways.” Lysa pressed a hand to her chest as she spoke, making her devotion to her faith clear.

Apologizing for causing trouble, Omega shrugged. “I’m not trying to test your faith with these questions. But there are people who follow the teachings without really thinking about them, aren’t there? Asking about things like this can give an interesting new perspective on it all.”

“Isn’t that the definition of testing…?” Palmyra scrutinized.

“Palmyra, you really do nitpick,” Omega shot back. “Don’t you ever get tired?”

Eyes locked on each other, there was tension in the air between Omega and Palmyra. Suddenly, Colette cut in, trying to move the conversation’s focus onto Lysa. “Excuse me! Lysa! Can I ask something?!” she asked. “Thanks to you, we managed to make a little house in the snow, but will we be okay staying here until morning?!”

“No, staying so long should be avoided,” answered Lysa. “There’s no indication that the blizzard will let up overnight, so once you've recovered your strength we should move. There's a church nearby we can take shelter in."

"A church… Well, if there's a building nearby, that's great," Omega chimed in.

Hearing Lysa's proposal, Colette and Palmyra looked relieved. Even Omega agreed with the suggestion.

"Anyhow," continued Omega, "I've used up most of my strength… I didn't think that just trying to survive in the snow would consume so much mana."

"Have you learned your lesson?" asked Palmyra.

"Everything in life is a lesson, and I'm here to learn everything life has to offer."

Upon seeing no indication of regret, Palmyra grabbed Omega's collar and shook her tiny body back and forth. "You…!!"

Lysa furrowed her brow at Colette, who was watching the two of them with a smile. "Are you three always like this?" she asked.

"Generally, yes. But the three of us have only just started our journey together…" replied Colette with a smile. Placing a hand on her cheek, she looked fondly at her quarreling companions. "Every day is completely different, and it's always so much fun."

3

The church had been constructed high in the snowy mountains. Back in the day, those in a position of authority had a preference for high places, and so churches were often built in similar areas.

"Naturally, churches on mountains also serve as a landmark to follow when looking from below," explained Omega. "Exactly as we're using it right now, they can be considered a beacon of hope when on the verge of death."

"Could you explain while walking on your own legs?" Palmyra grumbled to herself as Omega lectured about the church's history. In front of her, Lysa trudged along the snowy road, carrying Omega on her back.

"Sorry, Lysa. Are you sure she's not too heavy?" asked Colette. "If it's too much, let me know; I'll do my best to take over."

"I'm okay, but thank you for your concern, Colette."

Currently acting as their guide along the snowy road—on top of dealing with Omega—Colette was right to be worrying about Lysa, but her response did give some reassurance. The girls were grateful. After having the misfortune of being caught in the middle of a blizzard, they had been incredibly lucky to be found by Lysa.

"As an itinerant preacher…do you always take on such burdens? By the way, that question included a double entendre where I substituted the word 'myself' with 'burden'."

"It's not as if I always have to carry you on my back. But it's true that there are a lot of difficult roads that I have to take. Gusteko is just that kind of place."

Dominated by an extreme permafrost, the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko is a land far too harsh for humans to exist in. It's for exactly that reason that the Church protects those who cling to their beliefs. Thinking to herself, Omega smiled. After all, the Holy King Church hasn't changed one bit in hundreds of years. I do, however, still hold an interest in its history.

"If I have the chance, I'd like to visit the Holy City."

"I'd be most pleased if you could visit the Holy City and the Sacred Mountain at least once… But that journey holds many perils."

"It'd be suicide in our current state, right? How amusing."

Palmyra shot a stern look in the direction of Omega and Lysa's conversation. "There's nothing amusing about it!" she cried.

Omega was about to scold her on how wrong it was to eavesdrop, when Colette's face lit up, and her arm shot forward. "Oh! Look,

look, everyone! Isn't that the church?"

Distracted by her words, the other two looked in the direction she'd indicated, but neither could see anything through the thick snow.

"The…church? I can't see anything like that…"

"Huh? Really? I wonder why…"

"Ah, Colette. That would be due to the bracelet. I told you, didn't I? It'll protect you. And if it's to protect you, it'll even help with seeing through this wind."

"Oh really… How odd. But thank you." As she spoke, Colette rubbed her hand over the ominous bracelet on her right arm.

Palmyra narrowed her eyes at the explanation, but Omega ignored her. "If Colette can see it, then we must be going in the right direction. Could you lead the way?"

"…Of course! Leave it to me. Leave it all to me."

Upon hearing Omega's words, Colette took up position at the front of the group, seemingly happy at being relied upon.

Luckily, of the three of them, Colette had the most stamina. While it was partly due to the bracelet, this was a situation in which they could finally rely on her physical strength.

Having taken over as head of the group, Colette shoveled the snow to make a route for the rest of them, surprising Lysa with her skill. They continued along, single file, without having to worry too much about their footing, and finally reached the church.

It was difficult to fully take in its exterior due to the thick covering of snow, but the building seemed to be made from stone. It was a rare choice for a church, but an architectural style unique to the area that prevented buildings from being swept away by snowstorms. It had a comforting feeling to it—one that didn't arise merely from the fact that it was unlikely to collapse while staying there, but more so the faint light that leaked from the windows, indicating the signs of life that lay within.

"We're in luck, it doesn't look like the head of the church is asleep yet either."

"…That seems to be the case. Hello… Hello…!" Lysa called out. "Is anyone there? Hello… Hello…?"

"Hold on a second," came a response from the other side of the door. Footsteps could be heard growing closer, and then slowly the door creaked open.

"Whoa, aren't these some unexpected guests? A group of four women," said a stern-looking, middle-aged man with wide eyes. At first, he had opened the door just a crack, clearly wary of the sudden appearance of strangers, but upon realizing it was a group of young girls, he swung it wide open.

"Come in, come in!" he said, inviting Omega and the others inside. "Hey! Someone bring something for them to wipe themselves with! We have guests!" the man called out, and a figure appeared from inside—an incredibly tall figure.

As that person's silhouette came into view, Palmyra let out a shriek. She had just entered the church and was busy brushing the snow from her clothes, when he had handed her a towel. The subject of her gaze had a strange appearance.

"Whoa, how incredible," praised Colette. "You certainly have a lot of hands, don't you?"

"M-Multi-Arm Clan… Here… Use."

"Thank you! That's a great help."

The group of girls counted two extra arms on the giant man with dark blue skin. The four arms growing from his shoulders made it clear he was a rare demi-human from the Multi-Arm Clan—a race you didn't often see in the snowy kingdom of Gusteko.

"H-Here…take…it's bad…if body is cold."

"Th-Thanks… Umm, I'm sorry about screaming just now," said Palmyra. "You surprised me is all."

"It's…okay…happens…lots."

Colette took the towel he handed her. The stranger from the Multi-Arm Clan didn't seem perturbed by the extremes of Colette and Palmyra's reactions. Omega and Lysa, also receiving towels, took him up on his kind offer and wiped the snow away.

"Even so, for a group of girls to be out at night in the middle of a blizzard… Isn't that a little reckless?" questioned the man.

"I'm a little offended at being called reckless," Omega replied. "When we set out, there wasn't any sign that the weather would turn like this. It's a little rash of you to call us as such without first knowing whether we decided to leave before or after the snow had already started."

"Oh… Wow, you're quite the talker…"

The man they had first met at the door was left in awe at Omega, who had protested at the slight to their honor. Seeing his reaction made Omega feel a little proud, but the other two did not seem so pleased.

"Well anyway, I'm glad you girls are safe. I'm Podoso; I'm a friendly guy who works as a guard in the town on the other side of the mountain."

"I-I'm Admonsah… Traveling entertainer."

The two men introduced themselves. The middle-aged man being Podoso, the Multi-Armed one being Admonsah.

Upon hearing Admonsah's introduction, Colette's eyes brightened. "A traveling entertainer! They're those people, right? The ones who travel between villages and towns, showing off their skills… What kind of skill do you have? I'm so curious!"

"Uh… My…skill…is…"

"Your skill is…?"

Hounded by the overly curious Colette, Admonsah suddenly sobered, and taking a short breath in, he raised his four arms behind his back. At a speed no one could follow, he swung his arms and threw something towards the back of the church. That something being four knives he had hidden at his waist. The spinning blades flew at a terrific speed, and stuck beautifully into the four doors on each wall of the church, and he had done all that without looking. It certainly was an exceptional talent.

The problem, however, was that a woman had just emerged from the door that one of the knives had pierced. With wavy bronze hair, she stared at the knife as though it had been thrown directly at her, and opened her mouth in shock.

"What if I'd died?!" she screamed, so loud that it alone could have robbed someone of their life.

4

The woman screaming introduced herself as Maqueena, a minstrel. The direction of her anger was at Admonsah, who had directly risked her life with the knife throwing, and lashed out at him accordingly. "I thought I was going to die; I thought it was all over…and then I found this church, and I could finally breathe easy. And even though I knew I'd avoided freezing to death, I never imagined I'd die by a knife. You just shortened my lifespan! Why did you do that?!"

"Uh…Ah…Uh…"

"If you 'uh' and 'ah' like that, no one can understand! Aren't you slacking on your public speaking skills just because people are interested in your appearance? Take this more seriously!" She bit at Admonsah for a completely different reason than the knife throw.

When her attitude became intolerable, it was Lysa who cut in. "Please calm down. Admonsah bore no ill will, and you don't seem to have sustained any injuries, Maqueena…"

"Huh?! What about the wounds on my heart? Who the hell are you to be getting involved, anyway? And what's with those massive breasts? I'm going to touch them!"

"What a rude thing to say… Hey, you can't say stuff like that. You can't…"

Having merely tried to intervene, Lysa was now both flustered and hurt at having been shouted at. As Colette and Palmyra tried to console her, Omega let out a sigh. "Well, well. Seems it doesn't matter what era it is, minstrels never change. Passionate and emotional, they don't think about the hurt they cause as they stomp all over other people's hearts with their dirty shoes."

"Hey! That tiny child seems oddly pessimistic about the world. Reflecting upon the best and worst parts of humanity with that appearance…that appearance…"

Catching wind of that murmur, Maqueena—despite having switched who she was angry with—suddenly found she had lost her momentum. She looked like a somewhat unperceptive girl, but it seemed her observance skills came directly from her skills as a minstrel.

Maqueena's round eyes noticed Omega's sharp ears. "Y-Y-Y-You… Those ears…"

"Oh? You have quite the eye… I didn't mean to say that as Omega just now, how foolish of me," replied Omega with a quick wink to the trembling Maqueena, but her playfulness wasn't really understood. Sighing, she gently pushed her peach-colored hair back, highlighting her ears. "It's just as it looks. Although only half the blood running through my veins is elf…that still makes me half elf."

"That's worse! Elves are slightly preferable! Half-devil! You're a half-devil!" Jumping around yelling, Maqueena ended up hiding behind Admonsah and Podoso. The conversation seemed to jump from topic to topic rather quickly, and it seemed rather strange for her to rely on the person she was abusing just a few moments ago.

It seemed Podoso also thought so. As his lip curled, he spoke. "Young miss… No matter what has transpired, that certainly wasn't very polite."

"Wh-Wh-What is with this? A snowy night, in a church, with a half-devil… Under these conditions, there’s no reason I shouldn’t start flirting with a man. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die!”

“You’re exaggerating…”

Podoso’s face indicated how worn out he was by the fuss Maqueena was making. “I’m sorry, Miss Half-Elf. I try to be unprejudiced, but…”

“Ah, it’s no problem, really. It’s not uncommon to be treated as such. And besides…”

“Besides?”

“People who are usually so prim and proper will give you looks filled with animosity or distrust, and all because you’re a half-elf. The feeling is surprisingly addictive.”

“I-I see… You have a lot of guts… But looking at you, Miss Half-Elf, how old are you exactly?” Upon hearing Omega’s response, Podoso began to have doubts about it.

But it was because he had so rudely inquired about her age that the group of girls concentrated their attack. He was scowled at by Palmyra, received a shake of the head by Lysa, stared at sadly by Colette, and had his foot stamped on by Maqueena. “Wh-What’s with this? It’s bad enough being stared at by the little ones, but why are you stepping on my foot too? You were scared of Omega until just a moment ago!”

“That was different. Men who show no consideration are bad! Huge giants are bad too! And big-breasted women! And half-devils! I have no one I can rely on,” lamented Maqueena like it was the end of the world, her head in her arms.

But it was Colette, with a kind expression, who extended a hand out to her. Kneeling in front of the crumpled Maqueena, she said, “It’s okay. Omega is a good girl, so there’s no need to be scared. Admonsah, too, has really kind eyes. Podoso…well, his lack of consideration isn’t very good…”

“J-Just me, huh…”

"But he was the first person who opened the door for us!" she added. "He added firewood, and made the fire bigger… The only thing he doesn't understand is a woman's heart."

It was difficult to ascertain whether Colette was praising him or delivering the final blow, but Maqueena accepted her defense with a few sniffs.

"Do you see?" Colette went on. "Now, let's apologize to everyone, okay? That way they can forgive us, and then they'll let us into their circle."

"U-Um… S-Sorryyy. I don't want to be alone…"

At Colette's skill at getting Maqueena to apologize, Lysa unconsciously applauded. "Wow. You managed to tame her."

Palmyra watched with pride, and Omega moved next to her. "Are you happy Colette's skill has finally been recognized?"

"I really hate you sometimes," Palmyra said with a sigh.

"What?" replied Omega, astonished. "That's the kind of comment only a sweet, empathetic girl could make…"

When an accord had been reached amongst each person who had gathered there, it was Podoso who clapped his hands together and said, "May I say something? I think we should talk as the young ladies warm themselves. Seeing as we are all stranded in this blizzard for the time being, and are temporarily borrowing this church's roof… What do you think?"

Lysa nodded in response to his question. "I agree."

The others voiced no complaints, and he scratched his head. "I see."

And as he scratched the short, green hair atop his head, his expression was somewhat somber.

"Do you have something that's concerning you?" Omega asked.

"N—Actually, the pastor who should be living in this church doesn't seem to be here. Pastor Coatl is a great man, but…"

"Pastor Coatl…" At Podoso's words of admiration, Omega looked around at the church's interior. The place of worship had a direct connection to those who had greeted them at the door—the seven people who were currently warming themselves inside. There existed a section inside the church dedicated to the pastor's living quarters, but it didn't seem particularly large. At least, it certainly didn't seem large enough to conceal a fully grown man.

"Did you come here to see Pastor Coatl, Podoso?" asked Omega.

"Huh? Oh, yes, I did," he replied. "That's because…there's been lots of heavy snow. The pastor lives alone, so it could be bad if anything happened."

"Hmm. You worried for his well being in case anything happened to him. I see." Thinking over Podoso's words, Omega's eyes narrowed.

At that gesture, Podoso furrowed his brows curiously but wasn't given any time to question it. Catching up with the conversation, Maqueena leapt to her feet. "That's right! I also came here to see Pastor Coatl. I plan on writing a song about him—the hero who saved the local town!"

"…Umm, I also came here to see Pastor Coatl," added Lysa.

"Really? How similar we are, Big Breasts! I'm not happy about it, though!"

"Could you come up with a different name, please?"

Learning that they were searching for the same person, the mutual dislike that had built up between Maqueena and Lysa was put to rest.

In any case, it seemed like everyone wished to see Pastor Coatl.

"Did you also come to see the pastor, Admonsah?" asked Colette.

"N-No, not…me," he replied. "I'm…an…outsider."

"Did you plan to meet him?"

"Y…es."

Becoming rather close in such a short period of time, Colette translated his words for the rest of them. Watching this scene unfold happily, Palmyra tilted her head and interjected. "But Pastor Coatl isn't in the church. It's rather concerning."

"Well, the pastor has lived here for a long time, so he should understand the dangers of heavy snow. He's probably just gone out." As he spoke, Podoso turned his attention to the sound of the blizzard billowing outside the church.

As time went on, the blizzard only got worse.

I don't wish to scare the others, but even a person experienced in this sort of weather would be swallowed up by the tremendous snowfall. I'm unsure what type of person this Pastor Coatl is, but long life doesn't necessarily mean a high survival rate. "Even supposing that was true, it doesn't explain jeopardizing his life to go out like this… But then, I died at the age of 19, so I could be wrong."

"H-Hold on a second, what are you muttering about? Half-devils are scary."

"It's exactly because I'm half devil that I'm muttering—I'm deciding on how to eat you."

"Eeeeek! A cannibal! A cannibaaaal!" Falling over onto her back with a crash, Maqueena was so surprised she almost wet herself.

Omega was pleased with the result of her teasing, but her prank was, of course, questioned.

"That's not okay, Omega," admonished Lysa. "It's not fun to scare people like that."

"Whoops, I seem to have forgotten my manners in front of a member of the church. This is a home for followers of the Holy King Church, after all. Should I receive a punishment for my insolence?"

Omega shrugged at Lysa, who had scolded her for her behavior towards Maqueena.

Lysa, however, shook her head. “No. I’m not the head of this church; that would be Pastor Coatl. It isn’t my place to lecture you…but anyone with good sense should correct the mistakes of children, regardless of the teachings. That’s what I think.”

Accepting Lysa’s sincere opinion, Omega lowered her head. “…I see. The one without tact was solely me. I apologize.” The others surrounding them—including Colette and Palmyra—were astonished by her apology. “…Why exactly do you all look so surprised?” she asked.

“I wasn’t aware that you could apologize.”

“It does make me begin to reflect on things when it’s said by Colette rather than Palmyra.”

“You should reflect no matter who says it!” Palmyra barked at Omega, who was teasing her. Colette soothed her.

Ignoring the two girls, Omega continued. “Even then, Podoso called him a hero, and Lysa and Maqueena both said they came to see him, but is Pastor Coatl really that great of a person?”

“I have heard this, but—”

“Oh, oh, oh? Is it myyy turn? Let me explain!”

Maqueena’s nostrils had flared up at Omega’s question, and she leaped upon her own luggage, from which she pulled the popular stringed instrument of a minstrel—a lyulyre.

“What I speak of from now will be of the great disaster that struck this region and the story of the single clergyman who stood up against it! How sad! How saaad!”

As she sang, so did the story of Pastor Coatl begin—how he was adored by the people of the town and how he came to be known as a hero. But, regardless of the content, it was better not to mention Maqueena’s abilities in singing or storytelling.

5

This region was once struck by a huge avalanche, and a town was destroyed in the chaos. At that time, Pastor Coatl came running to the site of the incident without delay, and after successfully saving several lives, he offered up his savings to help restore what had been damaged. Afterward, he moved to a nearby church and continued to watch over the town.

“Is how I’d roughly summarize Maqueena’s song.”

“Huh? Why do you need to summarize it? I sang my heart out; it was full of emotion. Are you displeased somehow? Are you saying it’s lacking somehow?!” Having had her song summarized in such an unimaginative way, Maqueena raised a complaint. However, there wasn’t a single person who came to her defense, so one could very much imagine the quality of the song.

Anyway, the circumstances surrounding Pastor Coatl, at least, were satisfactory.

“That avalanche happened ten years ago…” explained Podoso. “The pastor, at that time, never took himself into consideration when carrying out the rescue operations. That’s how he lost his leg… And since then, he’s lived here.”

“Wow, that’s incredible. He really was an impressive man, wasn’t he?”

“Yes… Impressive. I think… Incredible.”

Admonsah and Colette clapped their hands together, under their complete mutual understanding. While their thoughts were completely in sync, Palmyra and the others hummed with far less enthusiasm.

“It seems Palmyra takes no interest in this,” commented Omega.

“Not really,” began Palmyra, “I neither liked it nor disliked it… I don’t think it was particularly interesting enough to be made into a song, though… That was a song, right? It sounded sort of like a song.”

“Yes, yes, that’s right!” exclaimed Maqueena. “Huh? What’s that? Was it a song? What do you mean?”

“Getting an answer to that question will only hurt you. Anyway, what’s that?” Palmyra was rather fed up with Maqueena’s snapping. Her caring nature was exactly why she could never become a bad person, but this place was an exception.

Encouraged by Palmyra, Maqueena slapped the lyulyre with the palm of her hand and exclaimed, “Actually, ‘The Saint of the Avalanche’ that I just sang isn’t very popular at the moment. The general opinion is that something is lacking from the climax of the story. So that’s why I came here!”

“That’s why you came to meet the pastor? Why?” questioned Podoso.

“Because I thought that the main character of the story would have more information to expand the story with! I’ll incorporate it into the story, and my song will be one step ahead of the others! That’s my goal!” Suddenly tightening her hand into a fist, Maqueena disclosed her aspirations freely. Then, weakly unclenching the fist, she groaned pitifully. “But…If I don’t manage to do that, there’s nothing in Gusteko for me to do. Lately, so many interesting things have been happening in Lugunica; it seems like there’s no end of subjects for songs.”

“Ahh, I have heard about stories coming from there, like the Royal Selection, the White Whale of the Three Great Witchbeasts, and the Great Rabbit,” added Podoso. “They’d probably be pretty easy to write songs about.”

“That certainly is a problem. If you’re going to do something interesting, do it over here, Mr. Unknown Hero.” Notwithstanding her grumblings, Maqueena’s despicable intentions were clear.

Omega looked over at Lysa. “Lysa, what was your reason for wanting to see the pastor?”

“…Actually, for the same reasons Maqueena spoke of. It’s a shame, really.”

Casting her eyes downwards, Omega sympathized with Lysa, who looked sorrowful. “I see… That’s indeed a shame.”

However, in this case, it didn’t mean making a song, but rather hearing the truth about the Saint of the Avalanche.

“Pastor Coatl’s name is famous even within the Church,” Lysa continued. “He was originally an itinerant preacher, just like me… I’d like to learn from my predecessor.”

“I see. Being so hardworking is a good thing. You should keep it up.”

“I can never guess what you’re going to say, Miss, but… Well, I get what you mean,” Podoso replied, giving a big clap and settling the conversation. “It’s a shame the pastor isn’t here, but perhaps another day would be better… By the way, did you three girls come here together? What for, exactly?”

“We were all chased out of our homes,” Omega explained. “My reason is exactly as you see. As for these two, it was because they were my close friends… Well, would you look at that? It’s all my fault. Ha-Ha-ha, I’m sorry I was even born.”

“It doesn’t seem like something to laugh about…” It had been her plan to make a hilarious joke, but unexpectedly, the atmosphere had soured.

Ignoring Omega, Colette called out to Maqueena. Her eyes were full of curiosity as she asked, “Do you have any other stories bar the saint one? I’m curious.”

“There aren’t many stories connected with this area… Ah, then shall I perform a story with a bit more adventure? It’s about the Ice Thieves.”

Colette tilted her head. “The Ice Thieves?”

Despite her previous negative experiences, Maqueena laughed and readied her lyulyre. Omega once again prepared herself for a truly awful performance, but Admonsah suddenly grabbed hold of the instrument and held it high into the air.

“Ah, hey, what are you doing?!”

“Oo… Everyone hates. No. I…won’t forgive.”

“Hate is a bit of a strong word!” Maqueena jumped up and down, but their height difference prevented her from retrieving the lyulyre. Eventually, having used up all her energy, she crumbled to the ground.

Taking over for the minstrel, who could no longer perform, Podoso cleared his throat. “The Ice Thieves is quite an old legend. A long time ago, there was a group of thieves who wreaked havoc in this area. The things they stole were hidden away very, very carefully. But one day, their cave got buried in an avalanche, and they became unable to retrieve their treasures.”

“In other words,” started Omega, “the moral of this story is that you shouldn’t hoard treasures without using them.”

“What moral? No, there are only idiots in this story,” Podoso said nonchalantly, declaring the characters in the story foolish. It might be the truth, but it was a rather blunt way of putting it.

“But, but… There were probably lots of gems and money amongst the treasure, right? And they’re all buried under the ice? It’s sort of exciting.”

Colette lightly pressed a hand to her chest—a gesture that Admonsah copied.

“Mmyes… exciting…”

“That’s true,” Lysa joined in, drawing in her chin. “I’ve heard that many people have tried to get their hands on the thieves’ stash. If found, it’d be worth a fortune, after all.”

“No matter the era, people’s sense of value is always so ridiculous,” Omega chimed in. “Nobody seems to understand what is necessary in order to live a full life.”

“What a profound opinion,” said Lysa. “Then what do you think is necessary in life, Omega?”

“It’s obvious—entertainment.”

“…”

At Omega’s immediate reply, Lysa and the others made a face.

But compared to the story’s content so far, this reaction was far more unexpected to Omega. “I don’t want to be the odd one out here, but that just now was not a joke. The thing people need to live a full life is entertainment. You could consider it a way to make life worth living. It does dictate your life, after all.”

“Then, how do you satisfy your heart’s desire?” asked Maqueena.

“By fighting ignorance. By learning of that which I do not know. I am the embodiment of a thirst for knowledge. Whether it be something I don’t know, or someone I don’t know… I long for every unknown,” Omega answered with a smile.

Maqueena, having listened to the answer to her question, considered it stupid and shrugged her shoulders. Both Podoso and Admonsah gave a curious laugh, but Colette and Palmyra were not laughing. Or, more accurately, they could not. The two of them knew Omega’s true character, after all. If they were to laugh at that, that would make them nothing more than reckless fools.

“Not that I’m the type to get angry at something as small as that, but…” Omega said with a small sigh.

But her sigh was quickly drowned out by Maqueena’s voice as she made her way into the church. “Ahh, I’m tired of talking about this… I have things to do.”

“Hey,” Podoso called out to her back. “Wait, wait. Where are you going? With it being so cold, you’re better off staying here.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I just need to take care of something real quick.”

“Take care of what? Pastor Coatl isn’t here, so what could you possibly need to…”

“You idiot! Don’t make me say it! I’m going to the toilet!” Having exposed her destination, Maqueena flung her towel at Podoso.

The towel smacked him right in the face, which he caught as it slid off. “Sorry…”

“Hah! As long as you are, then that’s fine. I’m off…”

“I’ll go with you,” Podoso announced. “Admonsah, I can leave the young ladies in your care, yes?”

“Huh?! I’m fine! I can go to the toilet by myself!”

Podoso’s attempt to go with her had astonished Maqueena. But despite her protests, he had a rather serious face as he spoke. “It’s okay,” he said, patting the girl’s shoulder. “You don’t need to act so modest. If I’m there, you won’t need to feel uneasy.”

“It’d make me more uneasy if you did come!” exclaimed Maqueena. “Hey, someone—anyone! Is no one on my side here…?”

“The gentleman is insisting,” asserted Omega, “and I must say, it isn’t very ladylike for you to continue refusing.”

“Quit saying stuff you don’t mean, half-devil!” In response to Omega’s insincere observation, Maqueena’s attitude soured, but then she wasn’t in a situation that would allow her to be patient. Glancing at Podoso—who showed no indication of backing down—she stamped her foot in submission. “Oh, alright! Fine, you can come along, pervert! But don’t think I’ll let you do whatever you want!”

“Aren’t you already letting him do what he wants?” Palmyra pointed out.

“Shut it, brat! You’ll have to go through the same thing soon enough!”

Maqueena and Podoso headed for the back of the church after pointing to Palmyra and giving one last parting threat.

As soon as they left, the atmosphere instantly relaxed around them, but it was not merely the foulmouthed Maqueena that had caused the tension in the air…

“Did Podoso seem nervous to you?” Colette asked with a tilt of her head. She was spot on. Unrelated to Maqueena’s attitude, Podoso had been strangely on edge. Accompanying Maqueena to the bathroom was definitely part of it, but it seemed as though he was concerned about something.

“Do you know anything about it, Admonsah?”

Admonsah shook his head. “N…o…”

He may have been enormous, and part of the Multi-Arm Clan that specialized in fighting, but his disposition was actually rather gentle.

“Well, if anything happens, then I’ll deal with it.”

“…Would that be possible, Lysa?”

“I’m an itinerant preacher, and a woman who travels alone as I do must be able to protect herself,” replied Lysa, flashing Palmyra a smile and tensing her bicep.

There wasn’t much to see on her arm, but there was definitely some truth to her words. Traveling alone as a woman was dangerous. That was part of why Omega had taken Colette and Palmyra with her—it hadn’t been solely because of how lonely it was to travel without companions.

“Anyway, nothing will happen to us when we’re gathered together in one place like this. If it comes to it, I’ll also show my true strength.”

“Your true strength… I’ll rely on you then,” answered Lysa, seeming rather amused by Omega’s remark.

She had most likely taken it as the drivel of a young girl, but Colette and the others who knew of her true strength gave a wry smile.

And just as the conversation had calmed down a little, so did the situation change. Abruptly, a noise could be heard as someone struck the church entrance from outside. “Excuse meee, hellooo. Open uuuup!”

“Seems like a new guest has arrived,” Omega observed.

The voice on the other side of the door was that of a young man. It seemed like there was another like Omega’s group, who had headed for the church in the midst of the blizzard.

After a brief moment of surprise, Lysa stood up.

“W-We’re opening it?” someone voiced in worry.

“…Yes, this is a church. It’s a place open to all. We’ll explain it to Podoso and Maqueena later,” explained Lysa before half-jogging to the door.

Admonsah, who had also gotten to his feet, dug for a fresh towel in his bag and brought it over. He’d given Omega and the others a towel each, yet he still seemed to have more with him. From the size of his luggage, it was entirely possible he carried the bags for the entirety of his group. Either way, the door to the church was opened, and a new character was ushered in by Lysa.

The newcomer flashed a radiant smile as he spoke. “Pheew. Thank you, thank you. I’m saved. I thought it was just going to be some light snow… I had no idea it’d be this heavy. How unlucky. What a pain.”

He was a young man in his early twenties, with moderately-long ashen hair tied behind his head, and gentle features that exuded charm. As he wiped the snow from his clothes with the towel Admonsah had given him, he spotted Omega’s group and raised an eyebrow. “Sorry if I startled anyone. I’m a humble peddler who goes by Trellock. Well, you can call me a peddler, but I’m currently destitute.”

Out of curiosity, Colette asked, “Destitute… You mean you have nothing on you? How did that happen?”

“Well, you see, young lady. It’s a terribly sad story… To cut it short, my wagon got stuck in the snow, and I was reluctantly forced to abandon it. Of course, I plan to go find it once the snow stops, but let's hope it's not buried," Trellock answered with a laugh.

It was clearly a personal story that involved feelings of loss, but the young man who told it—Trellock—exhibited no signs of sadness, leaving Colette and Palmyra unsure of how to respond.

At the girls' clouded expressions, Trellock flashed a smile and laughed. "Anyway… if it's possible, I'd like to spend the night. Who's in charge here? As it's a church, I'm guessing this young lady right here, yes?"

"Ah, no, you're wrong. I'm an itinerant preacher; the head of this church is someone else…" Waving her hands, Lysa explained her position and attempted to do the same for Omega and the others once more. However…

A scream cut across the church, interrupting their introductions.

"Eeeeeeeeeek!"

It was Maqueena's scream.

Although it wouldn't have been totally out of character for her to behave in such an erratic manner every time she used the bathroom, her scream was steeped in chaos and fear. Even as a spur of the moment performance, it seemed somewhat out-of-place.

"…Everyone, wait here!" Turning stiffly, Lysa's usually calm face was intense as she headed for the back of the church. In the wake of her pale face, Omega sprinted after her.

"Hey!" Palmyra shouted. "We were told to wait…"

"Palmyra! We're going too!" Tugging Palmyra's arm, Colette followed after them.

The sounds of Trellock's bewilderment could be heard in their wake.

The back of the chapel led into Coatl's living quarters. It contained a cramped living room, bedroom, bathroom, and another corridor that joined with the storeroom next door; however, Podoso and Maqueena could not be seen anywhere within the small area. There was certainly not enough space to have missed them, but the answer to the question as to why was soon discovered.

A section of the wall in the hallway had been slightly dislodged, and a small amount of light leaked through.

“A hidden passage…? It seems like it heads underground.”

“Omega, why are you here… Well, anyway, I’ll go first.” Realizing that attempting to stop her would be futile, Lysa widened the gap in the wall and descended the stairs.

Following after her, Omega and the others headed underground too.

They hadn’t gone far when they came across two figures.

“…”

One was frozen in place—Podoso—while the other that had sunk to the floor was Maqueena. Both had their backs turned, with their undivided attention focused on what was in front of them. In the gloomy basement, the only light came from a lagmite crystal—an ore that glowed upon impact. Amongst the dim light, Omega and the others finally saw what the two were staring at.

It was the sturdy body of a middle aged man—or rather, his corpse.

With his head split open, he lay in a pool of blood and spinal fluid. Cruel as it was to think so—with his legs in the position they were and his body so limp, a single glance was enough to know that it was already too late.

Seeing the dead body, a strangled sound came from Colette and Palmyra. Beside Omega, Lysa stiffened, her breath caught in her throat, and the corners of her usually gentle eyes tightened.

Maqueena, who had fallen over, was on the verge of tears. “H—h—h—w—why…”

Podoso’s face was pale, and his lips quivered as he spoke, calling out the name of the victim. “Pastor…Coatl…” Then, with a face expressing greater shock than when he learned of the pastor’s death, he fought to get his words out. “You really were inside the church…”

Admonsah and Trellock appeared on the stairs following the thundering sound of their approaching footsteps. And as they laid eyes on what everyone else had, they were also at a loss for words.

“Th-Th-This…” stuttered Admonsah.

“Ah?! A person? Is he dead? W-Wait a second, what the hell is going on?!”

The two men were terrified. In particular the one who had just arrived, sincerely lacking in luck—Trellock.

No, it might not be as straightforward as it seems. Amongst those expressing their confusion at the sight of the corpse, Omega closed one eye. Then, at no one in particular, began speaking. “So it seems that a cold-blooded killer—whether male or female—may be planning to murder us all.”

Then, fanning the flames of worry and confusion in the group, she gave a vicious sneer, worthy of a witch.

6

In the cold basement of the church lay the body of an old man with his head split in two. At the center of the group who had fallen into chaos at the sight was a young girl with long, peach-colored hair. She smiled in slight amusement, letting loose an evil cackle as she said, “So it seems that a cold-blooded killer—whether male or female—may be planning to murder us all.”

“Hey, Omega! Even with your bad taste in humor, this isn’t funny.”

The witch’s companion, Palmyra, scolded her for her insensitive comment, and hugged their other companion, Colette, who passed an unsteady gaze over the dead body. “B-Besides, is he really dead…? Are you sure you’re not mistaken?”

"Unfortunately, humans tend to die when they get their heads cracked open, contents spilling out. Well, there may be a handful who don't, but I don't think this old man is one of them." Stopping Palmyra's fleeting hope in its tracks, Omega's eyes moved over to the figure beside the corpse.

Podoso was a middle-aged man who worked as a guard in a town on the other side of the snowy mountains. And from what they'd discussed up until now, he was the only person who may have had a relationship with the owner of this church.

"Given the current situation, I'm guessing that the dead man would be Pastor Coatl, yes?"

"…A-Ah, yes. That's right. This is… Pastor Coatl."

"I see. The owner we thought was absent was actually already dead, right beneath our feet."

"H-H-H-Half-devil! Wh-Wh-Why are you so calm?! S-S-Someone has died… Died!"

Listening to Podoso's answer, Omega nodded in understanding before her shoulder was seized violently. The young woman who grabbed her had a pallid expression and brown hair—it was the minstrel, Maqueena. With her pale face, she shook Omega's slender shoulders back and forth relentlessly. "What was with that remark earlier?! What did you mean?! Cold-blooded killer? Murder us all?!"

"Sorry, I got a little carried away. I shouldn't have said that. So stop freaking out and calm down—my head is about to fall off."

"How dare you! You're telling me to calm down?! In this situation?!"

"Calm down, Maqueena. She's just a child." A woman in black church vestments intervened, grabbing the crying Maqueena's hand.

Lysa was an itinerant preacher, but despite her gentle demeanor, she yanked Maqueena's arm with great force.

Both Lysa and the one she was restraining—Maqueena—had come to this church seeking shelter from the blizzard. There were also two others in the room who were in the same position.

“U—A… Person…dead… child… can’t…look.”

“Ah, Admonsah…”

Blocking Colette and the other’s view was the traveling entertainer from the Multi-Arm Clan. He had a large build, blue skin, and went by the name of Admonsah. And from behind him, a man with ashen hair and a gentle nature peered into the room—the peddler, Trellock.

Trellock gasped, scrunching up his face at the gruesome scene before him. “When I heard the scream, I didn’t expect to come across this… I only planned on staying here for a night. What a thing to stumble upon…”

“Don’t make light of the situation… Who the hell are you, anyways?! Why is there yet another face I don’t know?!” Podoso shouted, confronting Trellock.

Trellock raised his hands in surrender. “Whoa, whoa, whoa…that’s what you’re upset about?!”

He had arrived at the church just as Podoso and Maqueena had left to go to the bathroom. With such unfortunate timing, it was only natural for Podoso to be wary of him.

“Podoso, please wait,” Lysa intervened. “We can explain his situation. But before we do that…”

“Before we do that?!” Podoso exclaimed. “What could be more important than seizing a suspicious character in this situa—”

“We should do something about the deceased,” Lysa interrupted, dampening Podoso’s vigor.

The old man’s fallen body in her line of sight was too painful to look at.

“Ah, I’ll get a sheet,” offered Maqueena. “It’ll be easier emotionally if we can't see him. Hey, get out of the way—there's one in the wooden crate behind you!"

"U…Ah…Sorry."

Shoving Admonsah aside, Maqueena pulled a sheet from a crate in the corner of the basement. It didn't seem particularly clean, but this wasn't a situation in which they could afford to be picky. She quickly covered the body with the sheet, and surprisingly, even went out of her way to shut his eyes.

"Oh, how unexpected. You lot live to sing about the failures and achievements of the dead—I wasn't aware you were physically able to feel respect for them."

"Huh? Are you looking for a fight? For the record, anyone that manages to go through life thinking over every single consequence would never make it as a minstrel, you bastard!"

"Hey, wait! Please don't fight!" Colette's voice was thick with anguish as she attempted to stop Omega and Maqueena from further distressing the situation. She shook her head with teary eyes. "Stop quarreling in front of the deceased. That's not okay. You're a good girl, aren't you, Omega? You understand, right?"

"I have things I'd like to say about the way you're speaking to me, but… It's not something I want to say so bad that it's worth making you cry, Colette. I'll stop. Besides, there's something that I'm curious about."

"Can't you just apologize properly… What are you curious about?" Palmyra asked Omega, who had lost the will to fight, in a chastising tone.

Omega looked directly at Podoso. "It's pretty simple." He stiffened under the young girl's gaze as the witch opened her lips. "You said something rather interesting a little while ago. I have a feeling you know more about the situation than us. But to what extent?"

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"I told you that I was a guard in a town on the other side of the mountain, right? Well, actually, there was an incident near the town yesterday. I came to visit Pastor Coatl in order to inform him of what happened."

They left the basement where the body still lay and returned to the church, which was where Podoso now told his story. Pressed for an answer by Omega, he gave up all resistance and explained the true reason he had come to the church: to alert Pastor Coatl.

After considering his situation and his murmuring in the basement, Omega asked, "You said there was an incident near the town. Is it safe to assume it was a murder? Don't ask me how I know that."

"Well, it must be obvious after seeing the corpse. What else could it be?" Trellock pointed out, a hand on his chin.

At their conversation, Podoso nodded in agreement, covering his face with his hands. "The corpse was in a terrible state. The face was unrecognizable. I could barely tell it was a traveler, and all their belongings had been stolen…"

"A corpse without a face and without any identification on him… huh… It's still not enough."

"…"

Podoso hardened his expression at Omega's mutterings. But Palmyra objected with a tilt of her head and an exclamation of "Huh?!" Consoling the frightened Colette, she glared at Omega with a stern eye. "Omega, you're being too cryptic. If you know something, then tell us. It'll put both Colette and me at ease."

"I've said this before, but that look of anguish on your faces, it's…"

"Amusing, right? We know."

Faintly drawing her eyebrows together, Palmyra fixed her gaze on Omega. The pleas of this young girl, so brave at only fifteen—the same age as Colette—left Omega with no choice but to surrender. It would not be beneficial to spoil the high spirits of her two traveling companions. There would be no one to save her if she fell into a snowbank, slipped into a river, or burned herself in a fire.

“Frankly, Podoso’s reaction to seeing Pastor Coatl’s body and the circumstances revolving around seeing the body of the faceless traveler do not match up,” stated Omega. “It’s a bit excessive for a single corpse.”

“…S-S-So what are you saying?” Maqueena asked.

“This is just speculation, but…am I correct in assuming that the death of the traveler isn’t the first murder case?”

“…You have very good eyes, young lady.” Podoso dropped his shoulders in resignation and let out a long breath. Then, raising his head, his gaze wandered as he searched for the right words. “I didn’t want to scare anyone off if there had been nothing to worry about. But after Pastor Coatl was killed, I knew I couldn’t keep quiet… That’s why I’m telling you. Just as you thought, young lady. In the past few weeks, seven people have been killed in the area… and the pastor makes eight.”

“E-Eight?!” exclaimed Maqueena. “You kept quiet about eight whole deaths?!”

“As far as I knew, there were seven… I suppose that doesn’t make it any better, though.” The point of his story lost its focus, and Podoso shook his head languidly.

Maqueena, after lashing out at him, turned her cautious gaze on everyone in the church. The fear and strain in her bloodshot eyes made her intentions obvious.

“Ah, miss… Are you suspecting all of us, by any chance?” Trellock asked with an air of discretion, taking note of Maqueena’s evident alarm. However, his composed tone had the opposite effect on her.

“Of course I am!” she snapped. “Who did it?! Who killed that old man?!”

“C-Calm down, Maqueena,” Podoso said. “Pastor Coatl was murdered by a cold-blooded killer…”

“Which means the cold-blooded killer is among us! Are you insane?!”

"Wha…"

Maqueena shook off Podoso's attempts to calm her down, her voice only growing louder. He was lost for words, but she had more to say. "The blood on the old man's corpse wasn't even dry! That would mean the murder occurred pretty recently, right? Right? Then he was killed after the snow started falling!"

"The snow turned into a blizzard immediately. So if the culprit left the church, he'd have had to trudge through the middle of a blizzard," Lysa calmly assessed the situation.

"Ha-Hah…" Trellock exhaled. "That would be suicide. If it were me, I'd turn back and wait it out in the church… Maybe the culprit did that too."

Maqueena seemed to grasp the situation. Lysa and Trellock sided with her understanding of the events. Podoso, pressed into silence, was unable to present any counter-arguments. Admonsah was horrified at the realization.

"Hey, Omega." Tugging at Omega's sleeve, Colette's eyes grew with concern and doubt. "Is it true what the others are saying? Could the bad person who murdered that old man really be here?"

"It's highly likely," Omega replied. "Of course, there's a chance they're hiding somewhere we can't find them—just like where Pastor Coatl's body was—but it's hard to believe there's another basement like that. Speaking of which, how did you find that place?"

"Huh? Oh, that was Maqueena," Podoso explained. "I was waiting in the corridor while she finished her business, when she noticed the light leaking through the wall…ouch!" Maqueena kicked him for yet another insensitive remark.

He truly is a man who never learns. But that isn't important now.

"A lagmite crystal was used to light the basement, right?" Omega picked up where they left off. "If it was still on, that means the crime was committed in the last few hours."

“Umm… I was wondering, but what sort of group are you?”

“Ah, that’s right—you wouldn’t know anything about us, Trellock. Umm, well we all sort of gathered at the church by chance due to the blizzard…”

Palmyra took it upon herself to give a thorough explanation of everything Trellock had missed up until now, including unnecessary details such as Omega’s close-calls with death in the snow and the fire in her agitation.

“This may not mean anything, but in what order did you all arrive in?” Trellock asked, after receiving an explanation of the preceding events from Palmyra.

“Ah, I was first!” Maqueena answered. “Then that old guy Podoso appeared, and then that Multi-Arm Clan guy. Then it was…”

“Myself and Omega’s group,” Lysa continued. “The four of us arrived together.”

“I see,” replied Trellock. “But that doesn’t guarantee anything. You could have killed the pastor in the church, attempted to descend the mountain, then given up and come back… You’re not an exception.”

“Ouch.” Failing to clear her name, Lysa’s shoulders slumped.

Such an alibi was completely useless here. Not even Trellock, the last to arrive, was exempt.

“But those of us who have always been together in groups, like me, Colette, Palmyra, can’t be the suspects.” Omega suggested. “I mean, unless the serial killer terrorizing the public happens to be a gang of three innocent young girls.”

“Well, we’re not doubting that,” Podoso chimed in. “Apart from the half-elf girl, there’s no way those two could do such a thing. Especially Miss Colette.”

“…? Why especially me?”

"Besides, I saw the body with my own eyes… That blow was way too high to have been a woman or child," Podoso explained.

Omega tilted her head; Podoso paled and swallowed. The look of horror on his face was a testament to the gruesome corpse he had seen. "It feels cruel to ask you this, but… I'd like to hear more about the incidents," she asked. "In particular regarding the techniques of the killer."

"The techniques… You mean how they were killed? How would that help?"

"I'm just curious… I figured you'd give me that look, so I prepared a justification: Knowing might also help expose the killer."

Being met with such a blatantly disapproving frown, Omega pushed forward with a pretense. Nevertheless, although his skepticism persisted, he began to speak gradually. "The victims until now seem to have all been outsiders—either peddlers or travelers," he explained. "Their faces had all been smashed in, and they were stranded on the side of the road. There seemed to be no bias towards women or men."

"Outsiders, and smashed faces… Podoso, did you think Pastor Coatl was in danger because he lived alone?"

"Yeah, exactly. I thought being alone put him at risk."

"There were seven victims near your town, and the pastor made eight. Was the seventh victim's face the only thing damaged?"

"No, his body was… Hey, what sort of question is that?" Podoso vexed as he rubbed his chest as if growing ill from the awful recollection of events.

Omega shrugged. "The seventh victim was covered in injuries, while Pastor Coatl only had his head split open. Don't you think the killing techniques are different?"

"Why does that matter?" questioned Podoso. "Killers aren't right in the head—seems only natural that we wouldn't understand their methods."

“That viewpoint is way too simple,” Omega explained. “By most people’s standards, a killer’s behavior is abnormal. But to the murderer themselves, there’s a reason for their actions. In other words, murderers have their own standards. Same as witches.”

“Why mention witches now…? How creepy,” Maqueena added, distracted by the end of Omega’s explanation.

Ignoring her, Omega focused on the differences in the techniques of the latest two crimes she had heard from Podoso.

The possibility of the murderer forcing their way down the mountain in this blizzard was low. From that, she worked her way backwards from the events that had transpired, and began putting it all together.

“Admonsah, I have something to ask you.”

At Omega’s words, the youth from the Multi-Arm Clan pointed all four of his hands towards himself in question. “Oh…um…M-Me?”

“Yes, you. I believe you to be an honest young man. So you will answer my questions willingly, right?” Omega continued, smiling at him. “The seventh victim that was found near Podoso’s town… I believe you might have killed them. What do you think?”

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Astonished at the question, the blue-skinned giant fell silent, affirming Omega’s accusation as ninety percent certain.

“H-Hey, what do you mean, calling Admonsah the murderer?” Podoso asked in surprise.

“So when did he kill the old man?!” Maqueena asked, equally puzzled.

“That’s a bit of a leap. That seventh victim… Well, in this case, it’s not actually correct to refer to him as such, seeing as his death had nothing to do with the other serial killer victims. It’s actually quite convenient that Admonsah here had something to do with the seventh victim,” Omega said, closing one eye.

Her explanation was an attempt to keep the agitated Podoso and Maqueena in check. But they were bewildered by this answer. Omega heaved a sigh.

“In short,” Trellock surmised, “the serial murders the guard mentioned, and the old man in the basement…you’re saying those are completely unrelated to the victim found in the nearby town? There were three different incidents?”

Palmyra added, “The serial murders, the victim in the town, and the one in the church…those three?”

Trellock and Palmyra worked together to summarize the explanation they just heard. Colette’s eyes widened upon hearing this, and she looked Admonsah’s huge frame up and down. “Admonsah?”

“Uh…I-I am…” Admonsah averted his eyes, a painful expression that, combined with his lack of denial, proved Omega’s speculation to be true.

“I was curious about his large baggage,” Omega admitted. “At first, I thought he was holding the luggage for an entire entertainment troupe. But then, I didn’t see the one person who should have been there in sight.”

“The one person who should be there?” asked Colette. “You mean…?”

“It’s obvious. The slave owner.”

The moment she uttered the word ‘slave’, Admonsah’s whole body shook. But it wasn’t out of anger; it was a subconscious reaction to his pain, or having his secret exposed.

“Did you say…slave?” Lysa asked. “But slaves are—”

“—not allowed in Gusteko?” Omega cut her off. “Maybe not officially, but in reality, they exist. And Admonsah is one of them. He doesn’t cloak his entire body in a long robe because of the region’s extreme cold. The traditional garb of the Multi-Arm Clan is quite distinctive, after all.”

“Distinctive?” Lysa replied.

“Their number of arms vary, so they don’t have any one-size-fits-all garments. It would also be difficult to use the garb of another clan. So they dress lightly because they must. That fact wouldn’t even change if they left their family. However, the reason he doesn’t dress that way is rather simple.”

“S-Stop…”

As Omega explained with one finger up, Admonsah trembled in fear. But his tongue-tied attempt to stop her had no effect. Omega narrowed her eyes and continued without mercy.

The reason Admonsah is clad in such a long robe is rather simple.

“It’s to hide the scars from his abuse as a slave. Under those garments, he’s likely covered in wounds. There may be traces of burns around his neck, too, a side effect from the scalding caused by those Collars of Submission they wear. If punished too often, they may even lose the ability to speak.”

“U…A…” Raising his voice at that, Admonsah sank to his knees.

Head in his hands, he tore his cloak off his back, baring his skin for all to see. Everyone was at a loss for words.

Admonsah’s body was covered in scars. Even his neck revealed twisted, white burns. Just as Omega had predicted, evidence of long term abuse.

“How terrible…” Palmyra commented inadvertently, clasping her hands over her mouth.

Fresh scars also adorned Admonsah’s body before them, most likely the result of a whip.

“…It’s all true. This must be what the half-devil was talking about, right?” While everyone else focused on Admonsah’s wounds, Trellock went a different route, holding something up for them to see.

It was a collar taken directly from Admonsah's belongings—the so-called Collar of Submission, used to restrain slaves. Fastened around the neck, it was used by the owner to administer electric shocks when slaves were disobedient. It was clearly something that Admonsah had worn for many years.

"So you found a chance to remove it," Omega noted. "I imagine the victim near the village was Admonsah's owner. From the wounds all over his body, he must have found himself in an unfortunate situation and fought back. His entire body was crushed…"

"A reflection of the extent of his hatred, I guess," remarked Podoso. Omega remained indifferent to his dumbfounded mumblings.

Admonsah, who had curled up, lifted his face at those words. "Y-You're…"

"You're wrong!" Colette shouted, cutting him off. "Totally wrong! You're completely wrong, Omega!"

"…"

Colette stood before him, arms spread out protectively as she faced the other adults.

"How is she wrong, Colette?" Lysa inquired. "Admonsah's guilt seems to have been proven immediately by Omega…"

"That may very well be," Colette continued. "But even if Admonsah was involved in one of these deaths as Omega said, it wasn't out of hate! Right?!"

"Uh…uh…"

Colette turned to Admonsah, their eyes level. His throat tightened at her question. However, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "I understand how difficult, and painful, and lonely it must have been. I, too, have had terrible thoughts in the past…but feeling sad and feeling hate are two very different things."

"…"

“Explain as best as you can,” Colette said sincerely. “Don’t worry. I’ll listen to you. Nobody will interrupt. So please, tell us your story.”

Still in her embrace, Admonsah cleared his throat and swallowed several times over. Then, lips slightly quivering, he spoke. “…I… was scared…”

“—and killed him in an attempt to protect yourself. Yeah, we know.”

“Omega!” Colette snapped.

The minute he’d tried to confess, Omega interrupted. Colette glared at her witch companion. “Admonsah is trying his very hardest to speak right now. And you…”

“I appreciate the consideration, but sentiment only hinders the truth,” Omega said. “At the very least, it’s fairly obvious that his actions weren’t planned, seeing as how he didn’t even use his own knives, but his fists, to do the deed.”

“The knives… Ah, yes…he’s a knife-thrower,” Colette recalled.

Admonsah, the traveling entertainer, had demonstrated his knife-throwing skills earlier in the church. Most had completely forgotten the extraordinary experience thanks to Maqueena’s outbursts, but there was no way that Omega would forget. On top of that, the blades were clean and unstained, never having known the taste of blood.

“The reason he didn’t use the very weapons he regularly carried on his own body in such a dire situation was likely because, as a traveling entertainer, he’s never considered his knives to be anything more than tools,” explained Omega. “That brings only one situation to mind where he’d mindlessly kill with his fists.”

“Wh-Which is…?” Maqueena hesitated to ask.

“If they were about to be killed themselves, and had to fight back.”

“Hence your self-defense theory, huh,” Podoso mused.

Speculating on the truth behind the circumstances, such a possibility emerged. Without so much as touching his knives, Admonsah murdered the very man who had fitted him with a slave collar. His scars and fresh wounds provided sufficient insight into the harsh environment he had lived in.

Once given permission to abuse another, humans become capable of any degree of cruelty, thought Omega. And there's no limit as to how far they can take it. "With that in mind, I believe Admonsah has been sincere with us," she stated. "In any case, he's from the Multi-Arm Clan… If he really wanted to, he could certainly kill us all."

When it came to physical strength, nobody in that church was a match for Admonsah. But despite his crimes being exposed, he seemed to have no intent to silence them. As it were, Admonsah's disposition was not one for hurting others.

"If it's true that he was abused and acted in self-defense, that should be sufficient grounds for consideration, right?" Podoso asked, scratching his head.

"Huh? You can't mean…" Maqueena's eyes widened.

"We have no choice, right?" Podoso continued, curling his lips. "Think about it, the one in the wrong was the guy who dragged Admonsah around. If I could, I'd personally have liked to send him flying with a punch myself."

"But he's a murderer?!" Maqueena exclaimed. "You don't care…?!"

"Hate the crime, not the person," Lysa remarked.

As Maqueena persisted, Lysa gently put pressure on her shoulders from behind. The itinerant preacher shook her head, and then turned to Admonsah—still in Colette's embrace. He raised his head slowly, still miserable, as Lysa extended a hand towards him. "You may have murdered someone. Every action is judged by the Silver Blessing. If there is to be a punishment, then so be it. But I do not believe that you deserve to be hurt."

“U…Y-You will…?”

“In short,” she concluded, “I forgive you.”

“…”

Admonsah was struck by Lysa’s smile and declaration. Colette gently stroked his surprised face. “It’s okay, Admonsah. No one here will hurt you. And if anyone tries it, I’ll have your back.”

“U…A…Aaaahhh…”

Touched by Colette’s words, Admonsah broke into a sob. The sight of the young girl soothing the weeping giant was like a scene out of a storybook.

“You must be proud to see that, huh, Palmyra?”

“You truly are a person without remorse.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You should be praising me for learning to understand people’s hearts.”

Such was the punchline of Omega and Palmyra’s banter.

9

If only the issue could’ve been settled just like that, it would’ve been a great relief indeed. However—

“That settles Admonsah’s part in all this,” Trellock began, “but what about the old gentleman in the church? That certainly couldn’t have been Admonsah too…”

Admonsah shook his head. “N-No…not me…”

Trellock nodded. “I figured as much.”

In regards to Admonsah’s crime, he agreed to descend the mountain with Podoso and turn himself in afterwards. Due to the extenuating circumstances, he probably wouldn’t be treated too badly. However, that only resolved the seventh victim, who had been found on the outskirts of the town.

The incident in the church and the serial killer spreading fear amongst the public remained a mystery.

“Judging by what Omega said,” Palmyra recalled, “the serial murders and the pastor’s murder are completely unrelated, right? Then we only need to solve the pastor’s murder.”

“Well, technically we don’t need to solve the pastor’s murder either,” Omega sighed. “As long as we stay on guard, descend the mountain together, and submit ourselves for questioning, we’ll be fine.”

However, it would be inconvenient for the culprit if we all were to submit ourselves for questioning simultaneously. There’s a good chance he’ll attempt to silence us before we could do that. That’s what we should all be most concerned about right now.

But Omega left that part out, not wanting to worry Colette and Palmyra. “By the way, are there any valuables or the like in this church?” she asked.

“Again, such strange questions… Where did that come from?” wondered Palmyra.

Omega replied thoughtfully, “The most obvious motive for attacking an old man who lives alone like this would be to rob him, right? From what I’ve heard today, the pastor used his own personal funds to help rebuild the town that was struck by an avalanche. So clearly, he had savings.”

“As you can probably guess,” Podoso spoke, “I don’t know anything about Pastor Coatl’s savings.” Not even he, the most knowledgeable in the group, knew the contents of another man’s purse. As he relinquished his title as the walking encyclopedia of all things local, Omega looked around the inside of the church.

Surely not even the pastor, saintly as he was, would have donated enough money to endanger his own livelihood, she thought. Pastor Coatl would have had a rough idea of how much money he could use on the town. Which meant that his savings must be somewhere in this church. However, where it was, she wasn't sure.

"Well, it has to be hidden somewhere around here," insisted Omega. "Like a room in the basement. That would make the most sense."

"Like a safe or a secret treasury?" Trellock wondered aloud. "That would be a dream come true."

"…You joke, but you may just be onto something," Omega said.

"Huh?"

Trellock, even the quick-witted one, raised an eyebrow at Omega's remark. Although not intending to confuse him, she cast a glance toward the hall, or rather, toward the basement beyond. "There's something I want to check. Can I inspect the body in the basement?"

"Something you want to check? Just because the dead can't object doesn't give you the right to do as you please with them."

"Palmyra, you so regularly misunderstand me," Omega objected upon hearing such an unthinkable assumption as she headed for the basement. "I'm not just doing it out of curiosity, you know."

No one was willing to let Omega act alone, however, and so everyone soon followed.

"S-S-So? What do you need to check in this depressing place?" Maqueena asked in uncertainty.

"If you're going to be scared, perhaps you should wait up stairs?"

"Everyone else came—I didn't want to be the only one left behind! But I don't want to be around a corpse either!"

Out of consideration for Maqueena's complex feelings of grief, Omega promptly returned to the investigation. Hitting the lagmite crystal embedded in the wall, the room flooded with white light. But because the crystal's light would fade over time, she needed to strike it again every so often in order to examine the corpse, now covered with a sheet.

“Did you figure something out?” Lysa asked hopefully.

“The dead may not be able to speak, but they’re far more eloquent than when they were alive,” Omega suggested. “For instance, this body has been tortured.”

“Tortured?!” Podoso exclaimed, aghast. “Pastor Coatl?!”

“Although his split head may grab your attention, his fingers and the inside of his mouth are in terrible shape, too. It seems the culprit really wanted to know something. Also… Yep, just as I thought. They’re gone.”

Omega rummaged as she spoke—with absolutely no hesitation and much to the horror of those watching. Ignoring their stares, she furrowed her brow as she fumbled around inside Pastor Coatl’s breast pocket.

Hearing her murmur, Colette called her name. “Omega? Are you looking for something? Messing with someone’s corpse like that is bad.”

“Yes, it is bad. And the culprit did just that…”

“Huh?”

Wiping her bloody hands on the sheet, Omega stood up. Taking note of the others, looking expectantly for an explanation, she let out a long breath. “In all likelihood, the things Pastor Coatl had on his person…keys, or something like that, I suspect? They’ve all been stolen. That could very well have been the culprit’s goal.”

“K-Keys?” Maqueena asked, confused. “How do you even know?”

“He went out of his way to set up a secret basement. It’s obvious he was being cautious… Also, it’s hard to see, but there are chafe marks on his neck—most likely evidence that he usually wore something around his neck. What could be something that a cautious person like him would always keep on his person and has disappeared from his corpse that shows signs of torture…"

"I see. It must've been the key for the safe that held all the pastor's assets." Trellock snapped his fingers, arriving at the same conclusion as Omega. The others, although a bit late, eventually caught on.

"Then, Omega," Lysa inquired, "are you saying—the culprit who murdered Pastor Coatl is most likely carrying the key the pastor had on him?"

"It's just speculation," said Omega, shrugging her shoulders. "But it is certainly a more constructive conclusion than just recklessly casting suspicion on each other. If you're going to accuse someone, you need a reason. That's how witch-hunts go."

"Why do you use witches in every example?" Palmyra asked, rather fed-up.

However, she knew that Omega wasn't completely wrong, so made no attempt to object. It was, after all, an effective method. Even supposing that the culprit wanted to harm them, they still had the physical monster that was Admonsah.

"…?"

After her explanation, Omega felt a sudden heavy weight upon her head. At first, she attributed it to fatigue accumulated from their long journey in the snow. However, she quickly realized that wasn't the case. This was something caused intentionally.

"Uh…Ah…" With a small moan, Palmyra fell to her knees before Omega. But there was no one there to catch her. Everyone else had collapsed at exactly the same time.

The cause of their exhaustion came from a faint sweet scent that tickled their nose.

"This is your fault, half-devil…! You shouldn't have said anything…!"

The sorrowful words rained down on Omega, who had fallen to the floor herself. Hearing the trembling voice, Omega slowly—very slowly—closed her eyes. Her body was so heavy that doing anything at all seemed incredibly exhausting.

10

Once she was sure that everyone was out cold, Maqueena brushed away the remains of the pollen from the sleeping flower—more commonly known as Muskrim—that permeated the basement. Her precautionary measures had worked wonders. Muskrim’s pollen could induce any human into a deep sleep. Nobody should awaken for a while.

“In the meantime…ah, here it is.”

Stepping over Omega’s fallen body, Maqueena searched the floor. Tearing away a faintly discolored floorboard, she came face-to-face with the safe hidden beneath. With a slight inhale, she took out the key hidden in her breast pocket and opened the safe.

Inside lay a number of small bags, which upon inspection revealed a collection of high-quality magic stones. There were nearly a dozen individual bags in the safe, which could each be worth a fortune on their own.

“I’d better grab these and hit the road!”

Maqueena pulled another sheet from the wooden crate, bundled all the small bags together, and left.

Making her way out of the basement, she grabbed her belongings and peeked outside of the church. After judging the strength of the blizzard, she headed outside. The wind was cold, and the snow bit at her skin. But compared to when it was at its peak, the blizzard had weakened a considerable amount.

“I can do this… If I stay here, I’ll be killed for sure…!”

She knew descending the mountain in the dark would endanger her life, but staying in the chapel meant certain death. Opting for the path with the higher probability of survival—small as it was—Maqueena set off from the church.

Using the piercing white light of the magical lagmite stones from the chapel, she began her walk through the snow and darkness. Fortunately, she was used to walking in such conditions, which had nothing to do with her being a resident of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

It was a skill that had been necessary for her job.

“Haa…Haa…”

The Muskrim that knocked everyone out in the church was just another provision for the job. She had crossed a dangerous bridge for that job, and continued to risk her life to this day. How utterly fateful it was to be saved by the very skills acquired through such work.

“It’s all Coatl’s fault for being such a fool…”

“Oh, how awfully interesting. I’d love to hear the rest of that story.”

The snide remark accompanied by a white breath was overshadowed by an unexpected—but gentle—voice. Maqueena’s breath caught in her throat in surprise as she turned to face the voice, only to be struck in the gut with a jolt.

“Ah, ugh!”

Maqueena tumbled through the snow, hissing in pain from the gut kick. Both the pain and the surprise accelerated her breathing, the persistent ringing in her ears only adding to her confusion.

What’s—what’s—what’s—what’s going on?

“It’s quite simple. No mediocre poison or drug can affect a temple knight…or an itinerant preacher. We are blessed.”

“A-And you, B-Big breasts… You’re the one who… Old Man Coatl…!”

“I thought I told you to stop calling me that…”

The figure looked down on Maqueena as if she were a naughty child. She was a woman donning black church vestments—Lysa.

She had coverings on both hands made of a dark-gray steel—which could easily make light work of smashing someone's head in. Just like what happened to the corpse in the basement.

"Rest assured, Maqueena. I will not torment you for very long."

"W-Wait! Wait, wait! H-How about money? Is that what you want? Here! Take it all! These magic stones will set you up for life! So—"

"Unfortunately, money is not what I seek. What I seek are the lives of Pastor Coatl…and you, Maqueena."

"Why?!"

"…Leanotte."

Maqueena, voice breaking as she pleaded for her life, suddenly stopped. Before her stood Lysa, an ice-cold gaze fixated on her own.

Leanotte.

That was the name of a town that once existed within Gusteko, but was now no more.

"It's the village that was destroyed by the ice thieves, which Pastor Coatl once belonged to. In their attempts to dig out their buried treasure, they caused the avalanche."

"You're from Leanotte…"

"I am a survivor, yes. After my family and neighbors all died, I passed through the gates of the Gustekan Church. And I have waited a long time for this day."

Lysa clenched one hand into a fist before her, hitting her palm with a clang. Gasping, Maqueena searched for some sort of salvation as the sight of Pastor Coatl's corpse flashed in her mind—it was the sight of a corpse that had been tortured up until the moment of his death.

"I-I-I…"

"Please apologize to my family, Maqueena. To the Silver Blessing."

She attempted to scream, but found her throat had closed up with fear. Lysa wordlessly raised her fist and…a flash of light came flying out of nowhere.

"…"

The light struck Lysa's raised fist and bounced off. Lysa spun around in surprise as Maqueena faced the same direction, dumbfounded to find a small shadowy figure looming in the blizzard.

"…Sorry to disturb, but could you hold off on making a second corpse, Lysa?"

With that, the witch pointed a finger at the preacher, stalling Lysa's opportunity to take revenge.

11

Maqueena lay slumped over in the snow, as Lysa stood before her on the verge of committing an execution. Staring directly at the two of them, Omega shrugged her shoulders and sighed. "Sleeping flowers sure make me nostalgic. I thought I'd pretend to fall asleep to smoke out the real villain, but…"

"…But what?"

"But I carelessly forgot to cover my mouth and nose and passed out for a bit. Luckily, the sense of danger woke me up in the nick of time."

If she'd slept for just a minute longer, Maqueena would have been the next victim. She didn't particularly have any attachment to Maqueena, but she didn't want her dead, either.

That would be a tragedy not only for Maqueena, but for her murderer, as well.

"Lysa, I know why you killed Pastor Coatl, and why you want to kill

Maqueena, too. You were one of the victims, too, aren't you? Of Pastor Coatl, Saint of the Avalanche and affiliate of the Ice Thieves. You were a victim of his misdeeds, as well as of the good deeds that he did as repentance."

"How could you know that…"

"It's not that complicated—I heard you talking just now… But killing Maqueena won't fulfill your revenge. She's not the target."

"What?!"

Lysa's gentle eyes sharpened as she shouted at Omega, who interrupted her. But the witch in the snowstorm did not waver a bit. Omega looked past Lysa at Maqueena, who was buried in the snow.

"She must've been visiting that church for a while, right? Her discovery of that hidden basement was too much of a coincidence, and she even knew where to find the sheet to cover the body with. That's when she took the key from the pastor's neck, leading her into this situation."

"I-It was just an impulse… And now I'm in this mess because of you!"

"You're right. All because I haphazardly said that whoever was holding the key was probably the murderer. So you felt like you had to make a desperate escape. If you'd been found with the key, you'd have been treated as the murderer. For all you know you could have been beaten to death then and there."

Omega apologized to her, admitting her role in setting the stage. Originally, it was a pretext to smoke out the key thief. Besides—

"Lysa, you finished your revenge by killing Pastor Coatl, no? The pastor didn't crack when you tortured him, and people who don't talk won't talk no matter what is done to them."

"Well… How do you explain Maqueena coming and going in the church? Huh?! She was acquainted with the pastor, and she also knew about the Ice Thieves' money in the safe…"

"It's simple. She's a conman. The minute you hear her sing, it's pretty obvious that being a minstrel is just a front. She must've realized the connection between the Ice Thieves and the Saint of the Avalanche, then decided to extort money from Pastor Coatl. She's probably done it countless times."

"…"

Completely lost for words, Lysa stared at the fallen Maqueena. At Lysa's gaze and Omega's conjecture, Maqueena nodded her head frantically, appealing to the fact that she was unrelated to Lysa's revenge.

"The pastor regretted causing the avalanche and the disaster that followed. His attempts to restore Podoso's town to its former glory was a kind of atonement. After that, he lived a simple life in penance. Isn't that enough?"

"I…"

"Of course, there is also the possibility that Maqueena, being a sly creature, is taking advantage of my deductions and hoping I miss something. So, I'm not saying you absolutely can't smash her head in."

"Huh?!" Maqueena cried.

Maqueena froze in astonishment as she felt her bright future begin to slip away. But neither Omega nor Lysa paid her any mind. The only thing of any importance to them was each other.

Omega raised a finger, glowing with the same light that had reflected off the back of Lysa's hands. "Some friends of mine told me to be mindful of causing too many deaths for the sake of the young children I travel with, so I've made it my policy. Also, you saved my life, so I owe you a debt of gratitude. That's why I'm willing to overlook the fact that you murdered Pastor Coatl."

"…"

"But I won't ignore a second death. If you smash Maqueena's head in to exact your pointless revenge, the third death will be yours.

Choose carefully."

Itinerant preachers had power in line with temple knights—known as the executioners of the Gustekan Church. To have the responsibility of traveling to various places to spread the teachings, you had to be prepared to punish anything that contradicts those teachings.

Lysa clearly possessed abilities that belied her appearance. However, even she didn't dare act too brazenly in front of Omega—a witch.

"Well then. What's your decision? Whatever happens will be of great interest to me," the witch said, making light of the cruelty in the snow.

12

In the church basement where the presence of people had decreased, the man slowly began to move his body.

"…"

Three people had vanished from the room—the minstrel, the clergywoman, and the odd young girl. Setting aside the first two, it was the young girl he was most concerned about.

"She had a strange, dangerous air about her."

His feet and hands were still heavy, but the effects of the pollen from the sleeping flower were gradually wearing off. He had never fallen completely asleep—he only pretended to so that he could watch the events unfold. He had great interest in exactly who was using his name.

"Still, I never expected to be implicated in two murders I had nothing to do with. I was almost blamed for both of them… The masses must live with their own selfish preconceptions…"

It was superficial to apply one's own reasoning to that which one does not understand. In that respect, the young girl's outlook was rather commendable.

—That was living by one's own philosophy.

Not even he chose to harm people at random. He only destroyed the faces of those he yearned for. By stripping them of their face, by removing the mask of their persona, he could become anyone he wanted to be.

The owner of the personality that he currently employed had been an incredibly wary character, so he couldn't tear off their face. He had crossed paths with this sociable peddler on the road. If he had only managed to tear his face off, too, everything would've been absolutely perfect.

"This current face is imperfect. I should start searching for the next one…"

Unfortunately there were no respectable faces left inside the church basement.

With none to pique his interest, the incredibly pure lady was the next best choice. He would peel her face off, then chase after the young girl who went outside. Her face seemed to conceal infinite knowledge. He wondered exactly what kind of transformation such a face would bring him.

"So I'll be taking your face for now, young lady."

Pulling a glove over his hand, the razor blades attached to the fingertips glinted in the light. With this glove, peeling faces off was so easy, it was amusing.

Preparing to flay her face, the man leaned towards the fallen young lady. The stronger girl had her arms wrapped protectively around his target. He scoffed at their touching relationship.

He wondered what kind of face she'd make once she'd awaken and find the one she tried to protect dead in her arms.

However—

"What?!"

He pressed a palm onto the girl’s face, ready to remove it, when a strong impact struck his right arm, shattering his fingers, wrist, and shoulder—destroying the entire limb.

Surprise preceded the pain, and the man’s eyes shot open when he realized what happened. Slowly, the seemingly youthful girl rose up, releasing a terrible roar reminiscent of a ferocious beast.

13

“Sensing the danger of its bearer, it bestows tremendous physical power in exchange for their rationality… Yes, this is a demonstration of the true nature of the Beast Protection Bracelet. It certainly is a pleasure to behold.” Omega smiled as she offered her commentary.

“…Is that all you’re going to say?” asked Palmyra.

“Dear me, Palmyra, are you really pouting because everything was solved while you were sleeping?”

The morning sun shone into the chapel as Palmyra sulked. “Idiot,” she growled at Omega.

The night of the blizzard had passed, and morning had come again. Those who spent that night in the church could certainly be called fortunate to have survived the madness. However—

“When I woke, half the church had been destroyed, two people who should have been there were missing…and in the end, a conman turned themselves in. I have no idea what to do with all this.” Looking over the damage caused to the church, Podoso sighed, leaving a cloud of mist in the air.

Indeed as he had said, two people—Lysa and Trellock—had vanished from the church. But for the life of him, he could find no reason for that fact.

“So that skinny guy was the serial killer, and the preacher lady beat him up and seized him…am I getting that right?” Podoso asked quizzically.

“Yes,” Omega confirmed. “And to bring him to justice, she boldly took him down the mountain, leaving us with a delightful misdemeanor as a parting gift. What do you plan to do with Admonsah?”

“…There are a lot of things to take into consideration with him. Luckily, if there really is a serial killer and he’s beaten up, then his crime may well be mistaken as part of those serial murders.”

Laying the preparations for a happy conclusion, Podoso scratched his head as Omega raised an eyebrow. I thought for sure Podoso would make a more obstinate choice. I had prepared so many things in advance to persuade him otherwise.

“So then, you’re letting Admonsah go?” she asked.

“It would be irresponsible to throw him out like that, no? He has nowhere to go, so I’ll bring him to my town. I’ve always wanted an assistant at work.”

Hearing Podoso’s empathetic reply, it was clear that he was a man who was always genuine, both with people and work. He’s a fine fellow.

“I’m glad we’re leaving things in your care, Podoso,” Omega said. “Now if only you were considerate towards women, then you may even be able to get married.”

“Don’t be such a brat!” he spat. “Now get out of here! And have a safe trip!”

Saying their goodbyes, Omega and the others parted from the remaining group on their way to town. Although she knew he’d be pardoned, it was still difficult for Colette to leave Admonsah. They had grown close over their short period of time together.

“Goodbye, Admonsah. I’m sure…we’ll meet again. When we do, you’ll have to show me your knife throwing again,” Colette said, bidding farewell on the mountain.

Admonsah waved his enormous hand. “Y-Yes. Colette… Careful… I’ll…be okay.”

"Good!"

There they left Podoso and Admonsah, as well as Maqueena—who was bound with a rope.

"Just so you know, what happened last night—"

"I w-won't tell them!" Maqueena cut off Omega's warning in an attempt to secure her future, pale-faced and lifeless. "I won't say a word! I'll live a simple life, just singing and practicing my lyulyre every day!"

Maqueena had a predisposition for a rather loose tongue, but with her life at stake, she had no choice but to fight this urge. Even Omega prayed for a cure. Otherwise, it would be quite a pain indeed.

Parting from the other three, Omega and the others resumed their journey together. As they walked along the snowy path in the opposite direction to Podoso and the others, Palmyra narrowed her eyes and turned to Omega, asking, "So what happened in the end?"

As Colette also waited for an answer, Omega let out a sigh. "The events that took place were basically as you saw. A pitiful saint was murdered by a victim born from his past sins. Whether it's fate or not, a conman who connected the dots just so happened to be present to witness the revenge… I suppose Trellock's presence was the only thing completely out of place. He was unlucky, too."

Trellock had most likely been defeated by Colette, who transformed into a beast with her bracelet when he dared to reach out to her. They never found his body, but the bloodstains in the basement and church suggested that it was unlikely he'd survive fleeing down the mountain.

But if by some chance he did, there was no doubt he'd refrain from meddling with Omega's group a second time.

"It's a shame we never got to say goodbye to Lysa," lamented Colette. "It's thanks to her that we're all okay." Colette fully believed Omega's cover story, and regretted being unable to express gratitude to the one who had saved her.

The Beast Protection Bracelet—the Meteor used in the incident—was the reason Colette's parents were taken from her, so she didn't really like to use it. So if she were to believe such a half-hearted excuse, then it was best to just let it be. That was what Omega—no, Palmyra—had said, as the most sensible member of their party. Neither did Omega have any objections.

"To sum up: thanks to the serial killer, a man forced to commit a crime he never intended to commit was blessed with a second chance at life. A curious but reasonable coincidence," Omega concluded.

"But adding in the witch element as a secret ingredient still doesn't quite make it a stew, though…" Palmyra's face made it clear she was sick of it. It was a face she made often, but it was also a kind of symbol of her pessimistic nature, so it wasn't something that would ever change.

You can't control the nature you're born with. As a witch, that was just as true.

"Ah."

Next to the deeply-moved Omega, Colette's eyes grew in surprise as she noticed something. Following her gaze, they found the figure of a person standing along the snowy road.

Realizing who the figure was, Omega raised her eyebrows.

"Lysa! Oh, I'm so glad to see you again! I wanted to say thanks!" Calling out the figure's name, Colette broke off into a run towards her. For a moment, Palmyra—who only knew half of the story—froze. But Omega shook her head.

If Lysa had been plotting something, there'd be no reason to show herself like this.

She embraced Colette into her large chest, smiled, and stroked her head. "Are you saying that because I saved you all?"

“Yes, of course. You put yourself in danger for us. Thank you, Lysa.”

Lysa confirmed the situation with her question, receiving Colette’s thanks as she glanced over at the nodding Omega and Palmyra. Palmyra gawked at the awkwardness of the two embracing. “So what’s going on?” she asked. “I heard that you had a good reason for rushing off down the mountain.”

“Yes, I did… But that reason disappeared. And my path has suddenly darkened; I’m not sure what to do now.”

“Your reason disappeared? Did you lose your job?”

“…Yes, I lost my job…and my purpose in life,” Lysa mumbled solemnly.

Her motive behind becoming an itinerant preacher and gaining such unparalleled abilities was revenge. But Pastor Coatl would not divulge the names of his peers, causing her revenge to all but collapse.

All that was left was the empty shell of a woman named Lysa Conwell.

“I know!” Colette exclaimed, clapping her hands together in front of her chest. “Then why don’t you come with us? You seem well-traveled, and will probably be of great help to us.”

“…Me?”

“Hey, Colette! You can’t just—” Palmyra began to object.

“It’s fine, Palmyra. If Lysa is with us, then Omega won’t get hurt even if we’re careless.”

Lysa and Palmyra widened their eyes as they pondered Colette’s proposal. For some reason, Omega was used as a persuasive factor, although she couldn’t help but wonder why.

“Well, Omega? What do you think?” Colette asked.

“…You guys do whatever you want. You don’t have to decide right away. It’s a long, cold walk down the mountain. You have time.”

Omega shrugged off Colette’s innocent invitation. The gesture was awkward and puppet-like, affected by the frigid air and her own frost-bitten feet. Colette burst out laughing at the sight, and Palmyra giggled. And watching the girls brought a subtle smile to Lysa’s face, as well.

Omega gazed up at the remarkably blue sky and exhaled a misty breath. It would seem that more companions shall be joining us on our journey.

END

Short Story Collection 10

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Introduction) (Translation Pending)

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Incident) (Translation Pending)

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint: Riot in Flanders (Sequel) (Edited Machine Translation)

1

“—And that concludes the earliest recorded account of how the Kingdom of Lugunica changed its name from the Lion Kingdom and went on to weave its history as the Dragon Kingdom.”

With that, he closed the book of historical records with a snap. He glanced over at the girl he had been reading to and noticed she had narrowed her red eyes, her arms crossed, wearing a serious expression on her face.

Her reaction seemed unusual. Had there been something lacking in his explanation?

However, before he could ask—

“Wh-What did you just say…? F-Felt actually sat through an entire lesson?!”

“Lord Rom’s surprise is entirely justified.” “Tomorrow, there will be a blizzard.”

The ones who spoke in astonishment were Rom, the elderly giant, and the twin maids of the mansion, Flam and Grassis.

Seeing their astonished eyes, the girl who had been wearing a serious expression curled her lips and said, ‘What?’.

“You guys are overreacting way too much. Even I can sit through a lesson if the story’s interesting enough, you know?”

“Lady Felt, that is not exactly something to be proud of…”

“Hah, I’m just telling the truth. In other words, your talk was boring. You should learn from Sensei a little, got it?”

"…I understand. I'll try to be as diligent as possible."

Sticking out her tongue with a mischievous grin, Felt muttered such rude remarks that made the young man with flaming red hair drop his shoulders. However, there was no real need for him to feel disheartened or reflect on anything too deeply.

After all, imparting knowledge was not the primary duty of the Sword Saint—Reinhard van Astrea.

"That's quite outside your area of expertise. Your role is to serve as Lady Felt's knight."

"Sir Ezzo…"

"You don't have to take on everything yourself. There's no need to worry—going forward, Lady Felt's education should be entrusted to a proper educator like myself. Although… I'm not actually an educator?!"

"Whoa, that was a surprise."

While trying to reason with Reinhard, he suddenly realized that he had gone off course.

Raising his voice in frustration, he caused Felt's slightly sharp eyes to widen in surprise. And right in front of her, the so-called Sensei—Ezzo Cadner—clutched his head.

Then, he shouted.

"I was recruited as an assistant for government affairs, not as a teacher!"

2

Ezzo Cadner, known as the "Gray" magician, was recently recruited into the Felt camp.

This connection began when he helped resolve a disturbance centered around the black market in the City of Earth Dragons, Flanders. Ezzo himself considered his decision to enter Felt's service a wise one.

From the beginning, Ezzo had a goal he needed to achieve, one that required overcoming several obstacles along the way. Working under Felt was a significant step forward in accomplishing what he had set out to do.

Beyond that, the opportunity to work with someone he could trust and respect was a rare stroke of good fortune. If that person also recognized and valued his abilities and character, there was nothing more he could ask for.

After learning more about the inner workings of the faction, he was shocked that it had managed to maintain even a superficial sense of organization up until now. And he saw it as an opportunity for him to show his worth. Now that he was no longer just a guest but an official member, he welcomed having a role to play.

Before he arrived, Old Man Rom had somehow managed to hold the faction together. He now cooperated with Ezzo to figure out which of the faction's many windows needed to be shut, and which should remain open.

At that moment, Ezzo let out his frustration—his work had been completely disrupted by Felt and Reinhard's noisy game of chase.

"I understand Sir Reinhard's point, but if studying becomes nothing more than a tedious task of memorization, it's no surprise that Lady Felt would want to run away from it."

"Right?! You get it, don't you?! Please say more, Sensei!"

"However, Lady Felt—you do realize that you lack the knowledge and refinement expected of your position, don't you? Sir Reinhard has a responsibility to uphold for recommending you. His strictness comes from his concern for you. You shouldn't speak ill of him."

"Yes, that's correct. Of course, I can't deny my incompetence and my inability to fully express myself, but there are some things I'd like Lady Felt to understand."

With Felt on his right and Reinhard on his left, Ezzo listened to both of their arguments, nodding at the validity of each point, as he struggled to mediate their dispute.

It seemed that the daily study sessions—focused on acquiring the knowledge and etiquette necessary for the Royal Selection—frequently caused cracks in the master-servant relationship between Felt and Reinhardt. This chase was apparently a routine occurrence, and simply brushing it off as another playful moment would be irresponsible.

At first glance, it may seem like Felt is just being selfish, but that was not the essence of the matter. Dragging her back and forcing her to sit at a desk wasn't the answer, what was important was—

"—Everyone feels discomfort when told to learn or memorize things they have no interest in. However, the joy of overcoming what once seemed impossible—and the satisfaction of resolving a puzzling question—is universal. It affects everyone. What's needed is a way to spark the desire to learn."

With that in mind, Ezzo had flipped through a history book of the Kingdom of Lugunica—the very one Felt had been using in her studies—and put his theory into practice. The result was the scene that had unfolded earlier.

Both Felt, who had been resting her chin on her hand with a dissatisfied expression at first, and even Reinhard, who had been keeping watch to make sure she didn't run away, leaned in with full attention as Ezzo explained historical figures and events. He touched on turning points in history that could be called twists of fate, engaging them in his discourse as he spoke."

Even Old Man Rom and the twins, at some point came in for a break, and watched the whole thing without interrupting.

Ezzo himself didn't mind having an attentive audience. In fact, getting carried away in the moment, he spoke with such enthusiasm that he ended up lecturing Reinhard on principles and reason.

And for that, he deeply regretted it.

"Damn it… I've made the same mistake again…"

"Mistake? What are you talking about? You didn't mess up at all. Honestly, I'm kinda impressed. Never thought I'd find studying fun. Guess there's a reason you get called Sensei."

"Lady Felt's words are right. I'm impressed."
"You're not just a noisy little guy after all."

"I'd take issue with how you phrased that, Miss Glasis, but please stop! I am not a teacher. At least, not in this faction."

Back in the flower district of Flanders, where he had once taught prostitutes how to read, write, and do arithmetic, it was only natural to be called Sensei. But here, Ezzo was determined to be something else.

Even if he firmly told himself that this was not what he should do, it was difficult to ignore.

"No, I will never do it again. It was a mistake of my own stupidity…"

"Hmm, seems like you've got a lot on your mind, but I must admit, I was somewhat impressed by your teaching style. Don't overthink it so much…"

"No, no, Sir Rom. I appreciate your feelings, but I am an adult. I know my own shortcomings. I can fix them"

"—? Is it because I'm not a good adult? I don't quite get what you mean by your reflection…"

Old Man Rom scratched his cheek with a thick finger, tilting his head at Ezzo's self-reproach.

The older man's gaze, as if he were looking at something immature, made Ezzo feel quite uncomfortable. However, it also prompted him to reflect deeply on his bad habit of constantly wanting to teach and intervene.

That very trait had complicated many of his past relationships.

Of course, there were times when speaking up was the right course of action. But Ezzo was still a newcomer in this faction, and he had no right to barge in and undermine its existing leadership.

“Ahem… In any case, my personal opinion is that the key to studying is cultivating interest and motivation. If we create the right environment, Lady Felt’s ability to learn will naturally flourish.”

“No need to add ‘personal opinion’ to that. It actually sounds useful, so you might as well just say it straight… huh? What’s up with you?”

“—. No, it’s nothing important.”

Ezzo began to wrap up, while Felt gave a wry smile. She then called out to Reinhard, who had remained silent throughout the conversation. He simply shook his head slowly.

Still, when someone said “it’s nothing,” it was rarely ever truly nothing.

“Huh. Well, if you say so. Guess it really isn’t a big deal.”

And with that, Felt cut the conversation off, and the opportunity to pursue the matter was missed.

3

“—And so, the concept of zero in numbers ended up greatly transforming arithmetic. Previously, people believed that something nonexistent couldn’t be accounted for in equations, but that perception changed.”

“I see. Now that you mention it, it makes sense, nobody would think of something that doesn’t exist as actually being there.”

“Exactly. Even in a brothel, there’s a huge difference between receiving a tip and not getting one.”

“I’d say that’s a bit of a different topic, but the way of thinking isn’t entirely wrong. By considering things we usually don’t even think about and seeing what's normally unseen, our perception changes."

"In a way, that's kind of like magic."

"Exactly!"

With a loud bang, Ezzo slammed his hand on the desk, startling the three listeners. Gaston, Camberley, and Rachins shuddered and exclaimed, "Whoa!!"

However, Ezzo paid no mind to their reaction. He leaned forward and continued.

"To think of something that doesn't exist, and to prove that something unreachable can be reached—that, too, is just another way of perceiving and understanding the world. Magic is merely one aspect of such differences in perception. The ability to think flexibly about such things is truly remarkable! You three are excellent students… or rather, not students at all?!"

"…Don't correct yourself like that."

"Still, I learned a lot from this, y'know?"

Holding his green-haired head in his hands, Ezzo agonized once again over how he had let himself get carried away with teaching.

He hadn't intended to give a lecture at first. It had started when the three came to collect their wages at the mansion, which turned out to be uneven. The discussion began with an explanation of why their wages differed—Camberley's lower pay was due to an incident in Flanders and his debts, whereas Gaston and Camberley had both received rewards related to the same incident.

From there, the conversation naturally drifted into the intricacies of arithmetic.

"I really need to stop this bad habit of mine."

"But isn't it just that—a habit? I heard you were even explaining to those twins why flowers and vegetables grow with just soil and water."

“I was just passing by and overheard a cute, curiosity-filled conversation, so I couldn’t help myself…”

Rachins had pointed out how Ezzo had ended up in a similar situation while chatting with Flam and Grassis as they peeled vegetables in the kitchen. What started as a simple explanation spiraled into a full-blown lecture, once again.

“Next time… Next time, I won’t let this happen…!”

“I don’t get it, but hey, don’t stress over it too much, Sensei.”

“Yeah! If you’re ever too tired from all that thinking, why not come to the red-light district with us for fun instead of just teaching?”

“Going out to party with the people you usually lecture? That’s a terrible idea.”

As they left, noisily chatting about something questionable, Ezzo watched them with a mix of amusement and exasperation.

He appreciated their concern, even if the way they showed it was unique. But that, too, was something you could only understand with time and familiarity.

“Still… rushing relationships never works out. My mistakes always come from acting too fast… That’s probably why I got along so well with the women in the red-light district. They’re experts at reading social cues and adjusting their approach accordingly.”

As he recalled his students from the district, Ezzo reflected on how, despite being older and more knowledgeable, he fell far behind them in terms of social skills and emotional intelligence.

He didn’t want to make mistakes here.

After all, for the first time, he truly believed he had found where he belonged.

“Sir Ezzo, may I have a moment?”

“Hm? Sir Reinhard?”

After the lively trio had bustled out, Ezzo welcomed Reinhard into the office space he had been generously provided. The red-haired Sword Saint gestured toward the hallway with a gentle expression.

“Those three just left, didn’t they? They seemed to be having a great time. What were you talking about?”

“It started as a discussion about wages, but then it turned into a breakdown of arithmetic. They’re quite curious, and before I knew it, I was deep into explaining things.”

“I see. That explains why they looked so entertained.”

After hearing the explanation, Reinhard glanced down the hallway once more, with a subtle furrow of his brow. His reaction gave Ezzo a familiar sense of unease.

It was a feeling he had experienced before.

“…I’m not sure if I should ask this, but can I?”

Battling his own reluctance to pry, Ezzo ultimately gave in to his nature.

At Ezzo’s words, Reinhard nodded, then, after closing the door behind him with one hand, he stepped further into the room.

“I actually have something I’d like to discuss with you, Sir Ezzo.”

“With me? Is it about the management of the territory? Or perhaps an update regarding the royal selection?”

“You’ve been helping with both, but I’d say it’s more related to the latter.”

Having settled on the topic of the Royal Selection, Reinhard hesitated for a moment. Though their acquaintance was brief, his demeanor was uncharacteristic of the Sword Saint, making Ezzo take notice. Then, Reinhard finally spoke.

“I would like your assistance with Lady Felt’s education.”

“Lady Felt’s…? Wait, but—”

“I understand. You’ve been deliberately avoiding interfering in that area. But this was the first time Lady Felt sat through an entire discussion without getting up or looking bored.”

Reinhard recalled the recent instance where Ezzo had read a history to her.

It had a greater impact on her than expected, and Ezzo himself didn’t mind teaching. However, he still felt some resistance to the idea.

“I just joined the camp, so I think it’s a bit excessive for me to be Lady Felt’s tutor, and even if it’s a sign of trust, you’re being far too careless.”

“I understand. Although I fear it may be a burden for you, please allow me to be present as well.”

“Sir Reinhard, you as well?”

“You’re worried about political manipulation or hidden agendas, aren’t you? My presence should ease those concerns. And…”

“And?”

“I, too, was deeply impressed by your teaching style. I want to learn from you, Sir Ezzo. —I don’t want Lady Felt to see me as a boring knight.”

That last part seemed like his true motivation, and Ezzo was momentarily taken aback. But Reinhard, despite his embarrassment, was completely sincere.

This was the great Sword Saint revealing his weakness. For Ezzo, that undeniable display of vulnerability was a sign of deep trust.

“Sir Ezzo, you believe trust should be built over time, don’t you? But the Royal Selection has a deadline, and neither Lady Felt nor I can afford to hesitate. Besides, I do trust you. I’m certain of it.”

“…How can you say that with such confidence?”

“Because the Divine Protection of Doubt lets me detect when someone harbors ulterior motives.”

Ezzo widened his eyes at Reinhard’s matter-of-fact statement, and in response, the knight playfully winked.

Whether it was a serious statement or a joke, Ezzo couldn’t be sure.

However—

“Not only Lady Felt… You are quite the fascinating person yourself, Sir Reinhard.”

“If that’s the case, then Lady Felt’s influence must be strong.”

Was that humility? Or simply a knight who took great pride in his master?

Either way, Ezzo felt his previous doubts fade. Perhaps, in this place, he could afford to keep being his talkative, over-explaining self. Because these people wouldn’t silently distance themselves from him—they’d yell at him to shut up first. And that kind of trust was a rare and precious thing.

END

The Witch's After Tea Party: One Wild Night (Translation Pending)

The Witch's After Tea Party:
One Wild Night Extra

It was after the events at the church on the snow mountain, following the moment when a new member had joined Omega's party.

"We need to discuss whether Noelle should accompany us."

The one who said this was none other than Palmyra, the group's troublemaker. She often brought up an issue to argue about, but only to voice her opinion and not necessarily to resolve it. Omega shrugged her shoulders thinking, there she goes again.

"There she goes again," Omega said, voicing her thoughts.

"What did you just say?" Palmyra retorted as everyone expected. Her sharp eyes were lit with anger. "What do you mean, 'there she goes again'?! Have I said anything wrong?"

"You haven't said anything wrong, per se, but I do think it is pointless to talk to you since you always end up doing whatever Colette decides anyways, right?"

"N-Not right. Don't make me sound like I'm subservient to Colette! Besides, she might have something to say about this matter too."

"Hm, something to say, huh?" Omega said as she tried to imagine Colette giving a different opinion than she already had on the matter. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't imagine Colette changing her initial attitude as Palmyra suggested. "Nope, can't see that happening."

Palmyra grabbed her twin tail hair with both hands and groaned, conceding to Omega. Her behavior reminded Omega how young she still was.

After having successfully descended the mountain, Noelle and the rest were heading to the town Podoso had told them about at the church. Luckily, they didn't have to worry about the weather based on how the sky looked and with the dry air. They took this opportunity to set up camp and have a rest. It was Colette and Noelle's turn to prepare the camp, while Omega and Palmyra sat in a tent facing each other.

"And as Noelle was working hard for her traveling companions, Palmyra schemed to gather votes to kick her out of the group," Omega snarked.

"Don't say it like that!" Palmyra yelled. "It's not like I want to kick her out!"

"Then what did you mean by your earlier remark?" Omega asked, tilting her head.

"Well… You get it, don't you?" Palmyra started mumbling. "There's Colette's bracelet to worry about, and about you too."

Palmyra's voice was too quiet for Omega to catch what she was saying. Omega twitched her half-elf ears. "I'm sorry, I couldn't hear what you just said. Could you repeat it loudly enough so that a person with half-elf ears, a peculiarity that's hated by many, like me could hear?"

"That's exactly my point!" Palmyra yelled into her ear, as if to scold her for joking around. "We're all dealing with one thing or another. Besides, I'll feel bad for Noelle if she gets dragged into our mess!"

"My ear's ringing," Omega said.

However, Omega was impressed by Palmyra's kindness. She was reminded that even though her personality may be aggressive, Palmyra still had a heart of gold. I mean, if not, she wouldn't have left her hometown where she did nothing wrong. So I guess it's natural for a person like her to worry about Noelle, who doesn't have an urgent reason to accompany us.

"Even so," said Omega, "you don't have to worry about my peculiarity, if that's what you're concerned about."

"Don't have to worry about it?" Palmyra questioned, directing a suspicious look at Omega. “That’s the most unreliable thing I’ve heard you say.”

Omega was deeply shocked by Palmyra’s mistrust. She had the same sort of look she gave the murder suspects at the church the previous night.

“But I’m sure you’ll see what I’m talking about very soon,” Omega said. “Since…”

“I already know Miss Omega’s secret,” a sudden voice interrupted Omega.

Palmyra yelped at the voice that came from behind her. She quickly turned around to find Noelle standing at the entrance to the tent, holding a pot with hot steam coming out from it.

“I apologize for startling you,” Noelle said, showing a soft smile. She then walked into the tent while carrying the pot. “I did not mean to eavesdrop, but I heard your discussion from the middle.”

“O-Our discussion?” Palmyra replied. “Wh-What are you talking abou…”

“Give up, Palmyra,” Omega interjected. “The cat’s out of the bag. Noelle already knows you were scheming to kick her out of the group.”

“No! I was saying that it could be dangerous for Noelle if she stayed with us—oops.” Palmyra quickly stopped talking, but it was too late. Noelle had heard everything.

Letting out a small laugh at Palmyra’s clumsiness, Noelle slowly placed the pot in the middle of the tent. “Thank you for worrying about me,” she said. “However, as I said earlier, I already know Miss Omega’s secret. I chose to accompany all of you despite that.”

“Do you…have a thing for odd people?” Palmyra asked.

“What a way to put it,” Omega remarked.

“Yes, I do have a thing for odd people. Just like you, Miss Palmyra.”

"I-I'm not traveling with her because I like her or anything," Palmyra said, turning red and pointing her finger at Omega.

Omega, however, knew Palmyra didn't actually mean it. "Actually," she reconsidered, "in this case I'm not sure if you are truly serious or just wanted to say something mean."

"Nobody cares about that right now," Palmyra dismissed. "Noelle, are you really okay?"

"Positively so," Noelle answered. "Besides, I probably should not say this, but I might be as odd as the rest of you," she said as she placed one hand on her well-developed bosom cloaked in black clothes. "I was an itinerant preacher of the Gustekan Church. However, due to the incident that occurred last night, I no longer have a reason to be a part of the Church and have no place to return to."

"That… Yeah I remember you mentioning that," Palmyra said. "Is the Church going to be ok with that?"

"It will not," Noelle responded swiftly.

"It won't?!" Palmyra said, eyes widening in shock.

"I am one of the followers who have made a vow to the Church. For me to abandon my duties and not return is something that should not be allowed."

"B-But a vow is like a promise, right? I guess breaking a promise isn't a good thing, but I wouldn't go as far as to say it's as bad as Omega's secret…"

"No, you're underestimating the Church, Palmyra," Omega said. "Or shall I say you're underestimating what the Church bestowed Noelle." It's the fact that Noelle made a vow to the Church that makes the whole situation tricky. Noelle is an itinerant preacher for the Church. And as we saw in the snow mountain, her body has been enhanced with great power through the Church's blessing. This isn't something that's bestowed upon anyone. It also can't be relinquished so easily. Palmyra compared it to a 'promise', but it's more of a contract between a devout follower and the Gustekan Church. “And what Noelle is doing is breaking the contract without any premeditation. Obviously, the Gustekan Church won’t be amicable about this.”

“I am deeply grateful to the Church,” Noelle said after a pause. “The fact that I have been able to survive until today and gain the power to achieve my goal has all been because of the Church and the power they have blessed me with. In return, I vowed to offer my whole life to the Church.”

“Your whole life…” Palmyra repeated.

“But it was all a lie.”

“It was a lie?! Well, of course it was! You abandoned your role after all!”

“What I did was receive the blessing I needed to achieve my life long goal, and completely abandon them now that I have.”

Palmyra said nothing. She was a rather empathetic person, but even she couldn’t find the right words to comfort Noelle.

It may seem like she made a bold decision, Omega thought. But there must be a part of her that’s just giving up and lashing out. And I’m partially responsible for pushing her into this state. I can’t let her be by herself. “So the idea that her being with us will be bad for her isn’t exactly correct,” she said. “After all, some people might come after her and we might get dragged into her mess,” she added, laughing.

“Stop laughing!” Palmyra yelled. “You better be ready to take off your disguise and brawl it out if the situation calls for it.”

“That isn’t something I can do so easily, you know?” Omega said. “Souls have a propensity to revert back to their original shape. It takes quite an effort just to make some changes on the surface.”

“Just, be, prepared, okay?” Palmyra said, grabbing Omega by her collars, shaking her.

“Okay, okay, I’ll do my best,” Omega conceded.

Noelle widened her eyes at her traveling companions’ interaction, and then let out a small laugh. “Miss Palmyra,” she said, still keeping a faint smile. “I am really happy you are looking out for my well-being when I should be the one asking you if I will be a burden by staying with you. Please do not hesitate to say so if that is the case. I will leave at once.”

“You being a burden…?”

“If you were planning on visiting other Gustekan churches, it could pose some problems keeping me, who is being persecuted by the Church, by your side.”

“Don’t underestimate me,” Palmyra responded, glaring at her. “I left my hometown with Colette after my village was destroyed by a half-elf looking witch. So I’m used to trouble.”

“You’re certainly the type who likes to take on trouble,” Omega teased.

Palmyra glared at her and quickly retorted. “Shut your trap.”

Omega shrugged and said nothing. Noelle, on the other hand, looked surprised by Palmyra’s aggressive words.

Palmyra pointed her finger at her. “What I’m trying to say is that your situation isn’t enough for me to push you away. The only concern I have is whether you’re fine staying with us.”

“If I am fine…?”

“Just so you know, you can’t use Colette as an excuse to back out. She’ll be more than happy to have you accompany us, no matter the situation. She isn’t the type to worry about potential problems.”

With Palmyra’s strong words, Noelle could no longer use Colette as an excuse.

But this means that Noelle just lost her only reason to back out from accompanying us, thought Omega. I’m sure Palmyra didn’t plan to do so, but she pretty much cornered Noelle into staying with us, and she's asking her to convince her otherwise. The whole situation is so ridiculous. "Good grief," she said aloud. "And to think that you wanted to kick Noelle out of the group, but instead, you took away her reason to leave."

"Could you stop talking and acting as if you know anything, when you in fact don't?"

"What?" Omega said, confused as she expected Palmyra to get flustered by her accurate assessment. "I was sure I perfectly figured out your hidden agenda that you yourself haven't even realized."

Then a voice came from the entrance of the tent. "Oh? Were all of you waiting for me?"

It was Colette. She had been preparing food with Noelle, but seeing as she came later, Omega speculated that she'd been cleaning up. Her words suggested she assumed they had already started eating without her.

"Not exactly," Omega said. "Actually, we could use your thoughts on this matter…"

"No, we were waiting for you," Noelle interjected with a faint smile. "I was hoping we could all eat together, including you, Miss Colette."

"Oh?!" Colette exclaimed, putting her hands together in front of her chest happily. "So that's how it is. I'm so sorry for making all of you wait. But I'm really happy we can all enjoy Noelle's tasty soup. It's incredible."

"Hmm," Palmyra said skeptically. "Are you sure you wanna set the bar so high?"

"Oh, are you doubting me, Palmyra? Then you're in for a surprise," Colette said with a laugh, showing confidence in her words.

It was a rare sight to see Colette like this, but Omega was rather disappointed to be left out of the loop. Seems like Palmyra and Noelle have decided to collude together to hide our earlier discussion from her. Well, it's not like I'm eager to tell her everything either. "But I wish this soup could uplift me from my disappointment."

"Well, now I think you're raising the bar a little too high," Colette commented.

They gathered around the pot, as Noelle served the soup to everyone. The warm aroma of the soup tickled Omega's nostrils, raising her expectations of the taste. She wasn't disappointed.

"It doesn't look like you added any more ingredients than we previously had," she said.

"I used my herbs and spices," Noelle explained. "I always carry them around when traveling as meals are one of the few joys we have on the road."

"Right? Right? It's good, right? Palmyra, how is it?" Colette asked, looking into her friend's face.

"It's good," Palmyra mumbled, making Colette flash a bright smile.

I see, no wonder Colette was enthusiastic about Noelle's cooking, Omega thought. This is really good. And, on top of this great quality…

"By the way, Miss Palmyra," Noelle started while she served everyone seconds, "I found a small nick on your bag, so I took the liberty of stitching it up."

"Eh? Oh, is that so?" Palmyra responded, dumbfounded.

"Yes, and the poles for this tent you and Miss Omega set up seemed unsteady, so I adjusted that as well. I will teach you both how to properly set a tent up later."

"I see," Omega said. "That'll be great, since knowing how to do something is completely different from actually being able to do it properly."

"And Miss Colette," she said, turning her attention to her, "let's make time after we eat for me to explain the teachings and manners of the Church to you like we discussed earlier. Knowing them should help you out in the holy kingdom.”

“Wow! Thank you so much!” Colette said. “I was really curious about it!”

And so, as she continued to diligently serve the group, she gave lectures on how to mend traveling equipment, the dangers of traveling in the snow, and even about the Gustekan Church, thoroughly impressing Colette and Omega.

Not only should we be thankful she’s so knowledgeable about traveling, I’m really interested in learning about the modern Gustekan Church. “Yeah, I think we found an amazing addition to our group,” Omega praised, sipping on her warm soup. Then, she noticed Palmyra also sipping on her soup, staring at Colette and Noelle with a sour look. “What’s wrong, Palmyra?”

“Now that I think about it,” Palmyra said, “would we have been able to travel safely without Noelle?”

Omega said nothing.

“Hey, say something!”

It was one of the rare moments where Omega had no retort. She just silently sipped on her soup.

END

Volume 37

Chapters 44-60

Chapter 44:
How to Respond to Faith

1

As all the muscles in his body throbbed, his canines were sharpened by a surge of fighting spirit.

The aftershocks from the fighting fissured, upheaving the street, and with his feet firmly plunked down onto it, the vitality flowing in from his soles overflowed in his soul; looking straight ahead, to the skies above, he glared at the majestic figure spreading its wings head-on.

The sound of his blood flowing got faster, the beating of his heart grew louder and more intense, as if it were a large drum invigorating his very existence.

That was to say—

???: "—'S THE BEST I EVER FUCKIN' FELT!!"

Gnashing his fangs, Garfiel roared as he smashed through the road with his foot, and advanced forth.

As the sky intercepted him, he saw himself reflected by the glint in the eyes of the dignified figure—the white Cloud Dragon; Garfiel's blood, flesh, and even his very soul, could not bear the applause.

As an arrow of the rebel army, he traded fists with one strong individual after the other in the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital.

A man who approached the Nine Divine Generals, and an individual ranked among the Nine Divine Generals; through battle against those who were undoubtedly strong, Garfiel truly felt the duty levied on him as a member of his faction.

Being able to clash with the extolled Generals of the Vollachian

Empire was truly an honor as a warrior.

However, having recognized that as a valuable experience, this was something he had been waiting for.

Garfiel: “Finally got the chance to throw down against a Dragon!”

For a citizen of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, for any being who lived in this world, it was known just how mighty, and how far beyond the realm of human knowledge the beings known as Dragons were.

Of course, that went for Garfiel as well. He knew that Dragons were not beings that could be measured by the logic of the world of men.

However, at both the Pleiades Watchtower and at the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, Emilia had gained the opportunity to clash with a Dragon, and had magnificently survived both of those encounters.

Emilia: “Dragons? Yeah, Volcanica and Mezoreia were both reaaally strong. Their bodies are big, and their breath is also dangerous… They kept on surprising me!”

Such was Emilia’s remark when talking about the threat of Dragons.

Combined with hand gestures, Emilia spoke of how Dragons were monumental beings, but regardless of the issue of her ability to express things, the full extent of that had not been conveyed.

The difference between that and the words Emilia had left unspoken, was now something he experienced first-hand here—.

Mezoreia: “—!!”

Splitting the ground beneath his feet, Garfiel ferociously closed the distance; facing him, the Cloud Dragon gaped its maw.

Garfiel stood on the ready, anticipating that another equivalent to the breath that had scorched the Imperial Capital just prior would be fired again; with aim locked onto him, Mezoreia unleashed the breath in accordance with his premonition.

However—

Garfiel: “Go-ah?!”

Struck by an impact accompanied by peculiar heat, different to that of scorching heat or extreme cold, Garfiel let out a cry of pain.

It was right after he had leapt to the side in order to evade the firing trajectory of Mezoreia’s breath. Having escaped to the side of the trajectory, Garfiel was assailed by a second firing of the breath.

Without doing anything to obscure its actions, it was obvious what his opponent was doing.

It was not that it had emitted a single breath to mow down the entirety of this block of the Imperial Capital in one go, rather, it had split it up into short bursts. Instead of letting out one long breath, it had released two breaths in quick succession.

—No, not two. If it was dividing one breath, it could do the same thing for a third and fourth time.

Garfiel: “Tch!!”

While scorching his left arm as it basked in the breath, Garfiel used his momentum from jumping to the side to smash through the wall of a private residence on the side of the road, and was hidden from the Cloud Dragon’s vision.

But, in the face of the Cloud Dragon’s breath, even a stone-built structure would not endure. It was different to the pig’s house that would not be blown down by the wolf’s breath, which Subaru had told him about in the past.

Struck with impacts from the succession of breaths, the walls very quickly flayed off the house; as the furniture and belongings were being destroyed, the damage reached Garfiel, who had plunged inside the house—at least that was what should have happened.

Garfiel: “OOOOOOORAAAHHH!!!”

Then, before the house exposed to the breath could be demolished to rubble, the roaring Garfiel had used both his hands to tear out the house from the very ground, and heartily hurled it through the air.

A house-cannonball that furiously gyrated as it scattered through the street—oddly enough, Garfiel was making full use of the same tactic that Natsuki Subaru had employed when evacuating the Imperial Capital. With the ball of mass hurled from those hands approaching it, Mezoreia took an especially large breath.

Mezoreia: “You’re in my friggin’ way!”

Roaring with a childish expression that ran contrary to its colossal and dignified appearance, the Cloud Dragon blew the house to smithereens before it could reach its destination.

However, it would be naive of Mezoreia to think it could catch its breath as a result of that.

Garfiel: “ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAAHHH!!”

Since it had defended against the first house-cannonball, Garfiel grabbed them up from the systematically laid out townscape of the Imperial Capital one by one, and hurled them towards the Cloud Dragon in the sky with tremendous strength.
With the combination of Garfiel’s physical strength, and the fact that the ground of the Imperial Capital had softened through repeated impacts, the aberrant balls of mass were fired in quick succession; witnessing this, Mezoreia widened its golden eyes.

Mezoreia: “Youuuu’re aaaaaaaa friiiiiiigginnnnnnnn’ EYESOOOOOOOOORE!!”

As the house-cannonballs flew towards it, Mezoreia flapped its wings and intercepted them.

Its arms, furnished with sharp claws, rampaged in the air, blowing away two houses, and swinging its tail straight upwards from below, it destroyed three buildings altogether in one intense strike.

And then—

Mezoreia: “—Friggin’ die already.”

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

Using the wreckage of the destroyed houses as a foothold, Garfiel dashed up into the air; seeing through the surprise attack, Mezoreia seized him head-on, and slammed its dragon claws into him from both left and right.

Being pinched in a trajectory akin to striking one’s fists together before their chest, the mid-air Garfiel swung his shield-clad arms in order to parry; taking the Dragon’s left arm with his right, and the Dragon’s right arm with his left, he received the blows.

An intense impact ran through Garfiel’s entire body, his clenched teeth fissured, and his nose bled.

But, if this were anyone other than Garfiel, they would be smashed into a lump of meat without lasting even a second. Mezoreia’s whiskers also quivered at that outcome, its shock at the existence of a human that was not crushed laid bare.

At that shock of Mezoreia, Garfiel’s cheeks began to contort into a smile,

Garfiel: “How d’ya like—”

That; before he could display his vigor with those words, his body, still held by the two arms, received a direct blow from the tail that slammed into him from straight above—Garfiel was blown away with force such that his body left behind all notions of sound, and while altering the structure of the townscape with each impact, he tumbled over and over and over again, until he crashed into the bulwark of the Imperial Capital, and came to a stop.

???: “O-oi?! Oi, brat?!”

Amidst the dense plume of smoke hanging over the scene, the man who had witnessed the marks left on the street of Garfiel bouncing, scraping, and smashing against ground—Heinkel’s voice quavered.

The man who had been unable to do anything but dumbfoundedly watch as Garfiel and the Cloud Dragon clashed against each other, rushed over to Garfiel's side, the latter having received a direct blow that seemed to have enough might to turn one hundred ordinary people into ground meat.

Heinkel: "Dead… Are you dead? You gotta be dead! That sort of thing…"

Garfiel: "…I ain't gonna let it, kill me so easily."

Before the mountain of rubble, a voice reached Heinkel, who had imagined that the fickle life had been lost. In Heinkel's vision as he was taken aback, the mountain of rubble collapsed, and there was the figure of Garfiel, with both his legs stretched out.

Garfiel turned his back on the ramparts, and languidly hung his head without showing his face. Then, his mouth made a chewing motion, and he spat out his shattered fangs together with blood.

And then—

Garfiel: "Ahh, shit… They really are fuckin' outrageous, these Dragon things. Finally get why Emilia-sama spoke about 'em so softly."

Shaking his head, he slowly stood up.

Feeling around with his tongue, he found that a tooth which had been fractured in twain was failing to try and replace itself with new growth, so he thrust his finger inside and ripped it out from its roots. Right away, he knew that the tip of a new tooth had turned up below where the removed one was, and he loudly cracked the joints in his neck with a twist.

Heinkel: "Did that, really do nothing to you…?"

Garfiel: "Ain't no way that it did nothing to me. I got hit with a blow from a Dragon… Nah, even got hit with a second and third blow. Seems like it's a case of "the miraculous survival of Manfroy"."

Heinkel: "…"

Garfiel: “But ya know, my amazin’ self can keep going. —I’m glad that my amazin’ self’s still able to keep going.”

As his entire body grated with appeals of pain both blunt and sharp, Garfiel clenched both his fists, and with shaky breath, he voiced his pride as such.

Even having taken the onslaught of a Dragon that surpassed human knowledge head-on, he still stood back up.

He was truly glad that he was able to do so.

Heinkel: “…What the hell, what the hell is wrong with you?!”

Hearing Garfiel mutter, Heinkel involuntarily cried out.

With Garfiel reflected in his wide-open blue eyes, the man violently and messily scratched at his head with the hand that was empty, and,

Heinkel: “Why the hell did you come back? I don’t understand! It’s a Dragon… It’s a fucking Dragon?! There’s no way you can win. You’re an idiot to come here! And yet!”

Garfiel: “Well we’re in the same boat there, Pops.”

Heinkel: “Ah…?”

Garfiel: “I’m sayin’ that if the act of bein’ here, ‘n the act of facin’ off against a Dragon is what an idiot would do, then doesn’t that go for Pops as well?”

Left speechless by those words, Heinkel stopped the hand that was scratching his head, and gazed in wonder.

His demeanor was entirely as if to say not to lump them together, but if that were truly the case, he was hopeless. That was because, in Heinkel’s hand, opposite to the one that had been scratching his head,

Garfiel: “You’re still holdin’ onto yer sword, ain’tcha?”

Heinkel: "…"

Garfiel believed that was proof that Heinkel had a faint wish which he had not thrown away.

He might have just become unable to open his fingers out of fear. —No. Try to understand.

He might have just forgotten about himself, and was just carrying it. —No. Try to understand.

He might have just been about to sheath it and run away at this moment. —No. Try to understand.

The weak thoughts, the crushed spirit, the reasons for being seized with fear, he would try to understand all of it.

After having thought through absolutely all of it, he continued to try to understand, because he believed that the face of a man was only complete if he grit his teeth through the pain and stood up to fight for the wishes of others.

Garfiel: "Captain and Ottobro're also the same. That also goes for my amazin' self."

Heinkel: "I… I'm…"

Trembling, Heinkel looked down at his hand, still gripping the sword as it quivered. With Heinkel in the side of his vision, Garfiel vigorously slammed his back against the bulwark, and straightened his posture.

Then, to Heinkel, who had not straightened himself,

Garfiel: "Ya asked why my amazin' self came back, didn't ya?"

Heinkel: "—Ah?"

Garfiel's quiet voice caused Heinkel to widen his eyes.

As Heinkel waited for the words that followed, Garfiel delivered not a continuation of his words, but instead a fist to Heinkel's chest, sending the latter flying.

Heinkel was thrust away, and the street was upheaved on a massive scale.

The next instant, the breath of the Cloud Dragon was unleashed from the midst of the city's air, and it rapidly closed in on Garfiel, his back to the ramparts—leaping up, Garfiel managed to evade it.

Garfiel: "Oh, OHHHHHH…!"

With the wall to his back Garfiel flew directly up, and pursuing him, the heated ray of white breath inclined its firing trajectory upwards. Scorching the townscape, while reducing the bulwark to dust, the breath went higher, higher, and higher as it pursued Garfiel as he escaped into the skies above.

Hot on Garfiel's toes, before it could burn his body entirely—

Garfiel: "'S because Captain told me this."

As the breath of the Dragon trying to scorch the world grazed the soles of his feet, there was not a hint of irritation that could be heard in his voice. What was present however, was pride in the act of responding to faith.

Curling himself up mid-air, Garfiel planted his feet on part of the wall that still retained its original form. —Immediately after, he kicked off the wall with strength that caused a crater to fissure within it, and flew forwards.

Forward, forward, forward, towards the Cloud Dragon that soared in the skies of the Imperial Capital, and with his mouth wide open, closing in as the sharp newly grown fang basked in the wind—

Garfiel: "—He told my amazin' self this! To go 'n bring down the loud ass Dragon that's flyin' in the sky!!"

Mezoreia: "—Rah?!"

Having flown above the breath and approached the Cloud Dragon, Garfiel let blows loose from both his wounded back arms, and the destructive power of a cannonball seized Mezoreia’s nose.

A sound as loud as a warehouse that was stuffed with magic stones exploding reverberated through the sky; the Cloud Dragon was knocked back having received a direct hit, and the next moment, blood spurted forth.

The Dragon spilled a nosebleed through its broken snout, and having been slammed back into the ground from the recoil of his own fist, Garfiel basked in the greatness of his action. As he basked in it, Garfiel laughed.

Garfiel: “Da-ha-ha-ha! I went ‘n gave a Dragon a nosebleed!”

Mezoreia: “You, little!!”

Mezoreia raged at the impossible humiliation, and Garfiel laughed even more upon seeing that state.

Seeing that from afar, having been thrust away and saved from the breath, Heinkel sat with his buttocks on the ground, gazing in dumbfoundment,

Heinkel: “…That’s not sane.”

As Heinkel weakly muttered, a battlefield was created by the faceoff between Garfiel and the Dragon—and that happened at roughly the same time as when changes in atmosphere of a similar scale were yielded in various other places within the Imperial Capital.

As if not paying any mind to that, the fight between tiger and Dragon unfolded, and with that scene before him, Heinkel did not move an inch.

Unable to flee, unable to even stand, he did not move an inch.

—But, upon his sword, his right hand still remained, continuing to hold on.

2

—Turning back the clock, to a slight bit before the conclusion of the battle between the Dragon and the tiger.

???: "…"

The feeling of cold water hitting his cheeks and forehead caused Subaru's consciousness to become fully alert.

It was neither drowsiness, nor bodily fatigue that he was experiencing. And yet, as if with a click, he felt something within him switch and exhaled deeply.

Before him, on the surface of the water that rippled within the trough, his own shaken and distorted visage could be seen. It was a face with sharp eyes that had retained its youthfulness, or rather that could only be described as childish.

He was already accustomed to seeing it, and he did not want to think that he could let his face remain this way. While thinking so, as he delicately squished his face with his fingers—

???: "Subaru, are you okay? By any chance, is there something wrong with you?"

Abruptly, as a voice called out to him from beside him, Subaru looked up from the water trough. In front of his raised face, he saw Emilia looking at him with her beautiful amethyst eyes.

As Subaru's heart fluttered upon unexpectedly seeing Emilia's face so close to his own,

Subaru: "I-I'm alrighty, Emilia-tan. Just needed to loosen up my cheeks a little. You see, I always want to show Emilia-tan my best smile."

Emilia: "I'm not picky though, as long as it's not a forced smile, I'm happy with any kind of smile Subaru shows me…"

Subaru: "Oooh, my heart is pounding… bum bum."

Said with a finger held to her lips, Emilia's words that held no hint of pretense left Subaru flustered. As he tried to wipe his face with his sleeve in an attempt to hide his reddened cheeks, a hand towel was offered to him from the side. —Two hand towels were offered from his left and right, by Beatrice and Tanza.

The two were shocked at the fact that their own action was performed by the other, and their usually round eyes became even more round, then instantly narrowed upon becoming aware of each other,

Beatrice: “Deergirl, Subaru wants Betty’s towel, in fact. You can take that back, I suppose.”

Tanza: “Schwartz-sama did not say anything of the sort. To speak of your own thoughts as if they were Schwartz-sama’s, are you not going too far?”

Beatrice: “Agrrh, such an infuriating girl, in fact!”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait wait, why are you fighting! See, I’m using both! I’m wiping the left and the right sides of my face with the towels from both of you.”

Intervening in the quarrel that had suddenly broken out for some reason, Subaru attempted to diffuse the situation by using both of the hand towels he had received from the pair. However, the two in question simply sighed at his response. He failed to settle the dispute.

At the sight of Subaru who slumped his shoulders, placing her hands on her hips, Emilia said “Seriously”,

Emilia: “Beatrice and Tanza-chan, stop causing trouble for Subaru. As it is, with the hardships he’s continuously facing, Subaru is about to collapse…”

Subaru: “Ooh, Emilia-tan’s thoughtfulness is so touching… that said, I’m not implying that the two of you don’t care about me, okay? In fact, the two of you are always helping me… the more I say it out loud, the more it feels like I’m making excuses, doesn’t it?!”

Beatrice: “Good grief, I suppose.”

Tanza: “As expected of Schwartz-sama.”

Seeing that Subaru was at his wit’s end, Beatrice and Tanza had no choice but to soften their attitudes in response.

Unexpectedly being cast as the villain, Subaru tilted his head in protest, but upon receiving Emilia’s gentle pats on Subaru’s head, he decided to accept his predicament.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “But, I’m not putting on a brave front, I really am alright, Emilia-tan. I was able to take a proper rest at the fortress before we set off… besides, if I were to carelessly collapse from a lack of sleep, the entire Pleiades Battalion would also fall apart.”

Held together by strong bonds, the strengths and weaknesses of the Pleiades Battalion were clear.

The united battalion was a group with unstoppable enthusiasm, but what held them together was Subaru’s presence—it was nothing that could be boasted about, Subaru’s Cor Leonis.

And this effect, it would be cut off if Subaru were to fall asleep or faint, and so from this point onward, he could not allow himself to carelessly doze off.

Subaru: “I know that, so it’s alright. Trust me, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Is that so? In that case, it’s fine, but can you truly promise not to overdo yourself?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan really doesn’t trust me at all…”

Emilia: “If you’re wondering why that is, try properly asking your own conscience.”

Trust, it is the accumulation of past actions. That was the implication of Emilia’s remark, and it left Subaru at a loss for words.

However, it was a fact that Subaru’s body and mind were in such good shape that he himself was surprised. In all likelihood, as the excessive tension seemed to be the reason for his mind being so alert, once the present conflict was solved in its entirety, that debt would gush forth all at once and topple everything.

However, if he could make it through on borrowed energy, he was more than willing to take on the debt that followed.

—Presently, having departed from the Fortified City of Garkla and heading towards the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the "Rescue the Vollachian Empire from Destruction Squad" was in the process of exchanging dragon carriages in order to ensure their arrival at their destination.

On the route from Garkla to Lupugana, having stopped at one of the many camps scattered along the route, while Abel and the other strategists were reviewing the war situation, the exhausted ground dragons were being exchanged with those in perfect condition, as a part of the preparations for the decisive battle.

Subaru: "Of course, Patrasche will always be with us, though."

Reaching out his hand, Subaru touched his beloved jet-black dragon who was harnessed to the dragon carriage—Patrasche, whose neck he caressed.

Patrasche, upon safely reuniting with him in the Empire, without any consideration of holding back despite Subaru's shrinking, delivered a powerful blow to him with her tail in retaliation for causing her to worry.

That one blow that had sent him crashing into the wall with a loud thud, it was reminiscent of the injuries he had sustained while fighting the Guiltilaw during Sparka at the Gladiator Island, and he was glad that it ended with just one.

Since then, after having accepted Subaru's sincere apology, she had been giving her all to accompany them.

???: "—Heh, this ground dragon young'un, she's one of y'all's, ain't she?"

And then, arriving where Patrasche and Subaru were frolicking was Halibel.

The tall wolfman shinobi, holding his kiseru between his large teeth, while bobbing it up and down with his lips,

Halibel: “When I was fightin’ with that Dragon zombie, she was doin’ a splendid job ‘n I thought she was real admirable.”

Subaru: “Ohh! Halibel-san also gets it, our Patrasche is amazing!”

Halibel: “Ain’t that the truth. You’re a lucky fella. —Lil’ Ana ‘n the others, everyone’s worried ’bout’cha.”

Subaru was overjoyed to receive open approval from the strongest and most renowned person from the City-States, Halibel. His eyes opened wide at the words that followed, then he earnestly nodded.

He did not need to be told, but having it mentioned made him think about it again. —He, was truly blessed.

Those in the Emilia Camp, along with Julius and Anastasia, not only did they break through various unfavorable obstacles to enter the Empire, but they also went along with Subaru’s selfish request to see this through to the end.

Just how reliable and reassuring that was, he could not thank them enough.

Subaru: “That’s why, I need to do everything I can to help.”

Emilia: “Subaru? The promise you made to me earlier, do you remember it?”

Subaru: “I remember, I remember, no being reckless! But, if push comes to shove…?”

Emilia: “See, doing that again would be too much to bear.”

With her lips curled into a frown, Emilia pouted at Subaru while he scratched his own cheek.

Chuckling at the sight of that, Halibel seemed to be really enjoying himself. Even though what awaited him might be a battle for the Empire's—or perhaps, the world's very existence, he steeled his resolve.

???: "Halibel-dono, I'm suuure~ you don't want Subaru-kun to heeear~ that."

Beatrice: "There he is, in fact."

???: "Of course, since we're together, why would I not be heeere~. Though I do wish that the Empire would recognize me as an ally, alreeeady~."

Shrugging his shoulders in disbelief, Roswaal chuckled at Beatrice's attitude.

As he appeared at the edge of the camp where the dragon carriage was parked, Emilia tilted her head at him while asking "Are you sure?".

Since Roswaal was currently more or less in charge of intelligence in the Emilia Camp, he was supposed to be accompanying Abel as he was speaking with the representatives of the camps.

Emilia: "Even though I do consider Roswaal a proper ally, I wonder if other people like Abel share that sentiment…"

Roswaal: "If that's the case, then I'm in quite the bind since I don't seem to belong in the Kingdom nooor~ the Empire. —Don't fret, His Excellency Vincent is currently addressing the soldiers in the vicinity, and they've entered the phase of boosting their morale.. If anything, I would only be in the waaaay~."

Emilia: "Yes. That's good to hear. And don't worry, Roswaal's rightful place is at our side. Just so long as Roswaal doesn't try any tricks."

With parted lips, Emilia gave an angelic answer to Roswaal's self-deprecation.

However, Roswaal could only put on a wry smile at those words, not answering whether or not he would be up to any trouble, which was extremely telling.

Subaru: “But, I’m pissed that things are working out so perfectly for Abel’s triumphant return.”

As he said so, Subaru glanced toward the center of the camp, where he could hear the cheers of a multitude of Imperial Soldiers coming from that direction.

Instead of a morale-boosting shout to prepare for battle, the cheers were those of joy, coming from men who were so moved to be addressed directly by the Emperor whom they served.

It was not surprising that Abel’s sour look, which Subaru was not only familiar with but even tired of seeing, was something that most of the citizens of the Empire were not allowed to see up close.

Subaru: “If I was in the same position as those people, and I knew nothing but Emilia-tan’s face and name, how would I feel… oh, no, I’m going to cry just thinking about that.”

Emilia: “What’s wrong, Subaru, aren’t you supposed to be my Knight? Get a hold of yourself!”

Subaru: “I know, you’re right! This isn’t a dream after all! Man, that was a close call, all because of Abel.”

With a quiet remark that would have made Abel frown if he could hear it, Subaru welcomed the fact that the Emperor-like idea was having the desired effect in itself.

Then again, in an effort to raise the morale of the Imperial Soldiers, after the war ended, Medium was also being shown off as a potential Empress without any consideration for her feelings, so one could not help but hold off with the praise.

Subaru: “With Spica constantly staying by her side, Medium-san can hopefully get her mind off it all a bit… that bastard, what the hell does he think marriage is?”

Emilia: “That’s right. I think Abel is reaaally smart, but that part of his views is not that good, I think.”

Subaru: “He should get kicked off the throne for doing this.”

Subaru and Emilia nodded in unison, agreeing that Abel was hopeless in that regard. At the sight of the two of them, as Halibel chuckled again,

Halibel: “Facin’ off against the Vollachian Emperor, them kids sure don’t know fear.”

Beatrice: “No matter who the opponent is, as long as Betty is with Subaru, there’s no reason for him to be afraid, I suppose.”

Tanza: “Having rejected Yorna-sama, it is a well-known fact that His Excellency the Emperor is heartless.”

Roswaal: “Truly, we wouldn’t want the people of the Empire to hear this conversaaation~.”

Within the camp roused with excitement regarding the Emperor’s triumphant return, where speaking ill of the Emperor would inevitably lead to bloodshed, Roswaal chuckled amidst the sharp comments being made towards Abel. With a wry smile, Roswaal closed one eye and said, “So”,

Roswaal: “Since he hasn’t shown up despite all this talk, Garfiel seems to be quite focused. —After having been selected by Subaru-kun for a grand task, it seems like he’s sufficiently moootivated~.”

Subaru: “—Right.”

With the yellow eye that remained open, Roswaal turned his gaze toward Subaru, who nodded in response to his words.

Garfiel, who was not participating in the conversation with Subaru and the others at the moment, was currently inside the dragon carriage that was tethered to Patrasche, quietly meditating and sharpening his concentration.

It was evidence that he was doing his utmost to meet Subaru’s expectations with all of his might. —To meet the expectations of

Subaru, who had requested him to match up against the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia.

Subaru: “It’s got agility, and its destructive power is overwhelming, so I want to do something to contain Mezoreia’s movements. Currently, Garfiel is the one most suited to being entrusted with that duty.”

Halibel: “Can I ask why that is? Lil’ Ana told me to follow y’all’s instructions for the time bein’, but… I’m stronger than that tiger cub, y’know?”

In response to Subaru’s judgment, Halibel tilted his head as he puffed out smoke.

If he felt angered by the notion that his abilities were being underestimated, there might have been a need for Subaru to come up with an excuse, but Halibel’s manner of speech remained flat.

He had purely voiced a question regarding their fighting potential, and as Subaru automatically pulled back his chin,

Subaru: “There’s no doubt that Halibel-san is the strongest among our current members. But, it’s a matter of putting the right person in the right place… rather, there’s someone else I’d like Halibel-san to subdue.”

Halibel: “Golly, what a frightenin’ story. Puttin’ off a Dragon ta focus somewhere else… are ya sayin’ there’s somethin’ even more troublesome than the Dragon?”

Subaru: “In a sense, yeah.”

Knowing that there was no use in beating around the bush, Subaru clearly affirmed this.

Upon hearing Subaru’s assertion, Halibel momentarily closed his mouth. But, his large mouth, characteristic of wolfpeople, immediately twisted into a smile,

Halibel: “I see, I see. Well then, I gotta get myself pumped up too.”

With that, he accepted Subaru's instructions, showing a willingness to comply.

Emilia: "Garfiel and Halibel-san… in addition, there's also places you want the rest of us to go, and things you want us to do."

Once Subaru and Halibel's exchange came to a close, Emilia, with a serious expression, looked at Subaru. As she touched the magic crystal at her chest with her fingers, her amethyst eyes pierced through him.

Emilia was not the only one. Beatrice, Tanza, and Roswaal were also looking in his direction.

Subaru: "That's right. For everyone here… including Abel's group on the other side, it'll be an all-out war."

Beatrice: "—. Fortunately, Subaru has a general idea of the enemy's whereabouts, in fact."

Emilia: "Indeed. Um, he also used it at the Pleiades Watchtower, that special power called an Authority."

Subaru: "Yeah. It's thanks to that."

In response to Emilia and Beatrice's words, Subaru pounded his chest with his fist.

The achievements of Cor Leonis that were displayed at the Pleiades Watchtower—grasping the whereabouts of separated companions, which helped them deal with problems inside the tower, was what Subaru had made Emilia and the others believe in.

The enemies waiting in the Imperial Capital of Lupugana—in order to oppose those formidable foes, Subaru had made them believe in the "lie" of how he had acquired the knowledge of the best choices regarding where to send each person.

Subaru: "—I will do what I can."

Emilia, Beatrice, Spica, Tanza, Garfiel, Roswaal, Halibel, Abel, Medium, Jamal, Olbart, he would direct them all.

Making use of every card available in his hand, in order to emerge victorious in this battle for the Imperial Capital—.

Subaru: “Of course, I’m counting on you too, Patrasche.”

Reaching out, Subaru once again stroked Patrasche’s neck, who neighed in response.

As everyone’s spirits were being heightened at that sound of Patrasche’s voice—

Roswaal: “—Subaru-kun, this is the best course of action, correct?”

Firmly, Roswaal trained his gaze on Subaru’s face.

To Roswaal’s inquiry, Subaru gave a deep nod, and answered.

Subaru: “Yeah, this should be the best. —I’ve gone and made sure of it.”

This, was merely Natsuki Subaru doing what he was capable of.

Thus, this should not be a breach of his promise with Emilia to “not overdo himself”; so he thought.

Chapter 45: How to Fell the Stars

1

—Thus once again, time returned to the same time as when a battlefield was formed by the fray between tiger and Dragon.

Having stormed the southern gate of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the first bastion of the star-shaped fortress, Garfiel clashed against the one who ruled the heavenly skies, the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia.

In the distance, the oddly thick collection of clouds in the sky was either proof that the Cloud Dragon was rampaging, or perhaps that it was preparing to exhibit its maximum performance.

Either way, the die had been cast, and the battle for it to roll onto the desired side had begun.

Entrusting Garfiel to spearhead the raid, having him suppress Mezoreia at the onset, was because the mobility and aggression of the Cloud Dragon served as the greatest obstacle in the battle to capture the Imperial Capital.

A single blow from the Dragon, capable of fleeing to high altitudes and attacking over extremely long distances by way of its breath, would be impossible to endure for those who did not possess extraordinary fighting strength.

For that to be fired at them recklessly, being unable to do a single thing about it would be the worst possible outcome for the “Rescue the Vollachian Empire from Destruction Squad”. —Garfiel had been able to crush that possibility.

However, even if Mezoreia was subdued, by no means would the rest be smooth sailing.

If there was a mistake in their response, there were other “formidable enemies” that could unleash catastrophic damage in a single move.

Therefore—

???: “ORAHHHHHHH!!”

Contrary to that vulgar warcry, twin swords carved out an elegant trajectory.

With swordsmanship that covered his front and rear with nimble movement and a dexterous stance, he forcefully parried the tip of the halberd the opponent had thrust forth, and caused their posture to break.

That instant, a fluttering drawn blade cut through the wind to fatally sever the opponent’s neck—

???: “You idiot, don’t kill them!”

???: “Uuoooh?!”

As the interjecting voice tried to restrain him, the trajectory of his sword immediately shifted.

The blade that ought to have beheaded the opponent bisected their left arm from their shoulder instead; having suffered the attack, the enemy swiftly jumped back, and handling their halberd with just their right hand, they tried to start their next attack.

But, that halberd would not reach any of his allies.

???: “—The White Cloud Lord, Gaoran Peyshit.”

Gaoran: “…”

The quiet, yet clearly audible, voice of a man spoke both the name and alias of the undead.

At that moment, the movement of this large white-bearded undead that ought to have thrust the halberd forward was stopped. Without overlooking that opportunity, a row of three small figures got right up close to the undead.

Then, they locked eyes with the undead as he looked down at them. —They stared into the eyes detached from those of the living, with the white parts stained black, and golden irises looming within.

And then—

???: “Gaoran Peyshit!!”

???: “E ea.”

Stripping that off, that of a being who was once alive, as if to ascertain it as proof of the time they had been alive, the star known as Spica ate the role that exploited them as an undead.

Passing by him with speed that seemed to whittle the street down, behind Spica who had just touched him with her small hand, having had his role eaten, the undead—no, Gaoran Peyshit’s body was reduced to dust.

Gaoran: “…”

In the end, thrusting his halberd into the ground as he crumbled, he bowed to the man who had called his name.

Though, it was unclear just what sort of emotions had caused the fading undead to do so.

???: “Atlem Nevi, Diphone Trevola, Gaion Talfou, Lescar Bhrain, Niolf Tradd, Yaren Swoker, Vellum Joytoh—”

The same voice that had called out Gaoran’s name, called out other names one after another.

The speed made it feel like they were just listing every single name that came to mind, but that was not the case. Those were the names of people who had each certainly had their own individual life.

Those were the names of the undead appearing one after the other in order to intercept the “Rescue from Destruction Squad” moving through the Imperial Capital—.

They, whose state and appearance had completely changed from the time they were alive, the black-haired Emperor—Vincent Vollachia would say their names without mistaking even a single person, and light the path for Star Eating to devour.

And what was especially aggravating about that was—

???: “Isn’t that a little too cool, dammit!”

???: “In that case, Betty can’t let her Subaru lose, I suppose!”

As Subaru’s cheeks contorted upon seeing Abel imposingly fulfill his duty, Beatrice pulled his hand.

In the midst of the Imperial Capital where the undead roamed—no, in the midst of Lupugana, now transformed into the Undead Capital, she guided Subaru with her unchanged appearance and unchanged love; waving the hem of her splendid dress, Beatrice truly was reliable.

Pointing the hand opposite to the one firmly fastened to Subaru’s towards the street, she weaved magic with her cute lips and lovely voice towards the deceased individuals blocking the way.

Beatrice: “El Minya!!”

At the same time as the incantation, amethyst crystals were yielded from Beatrice’s palm and glided through the air; dispossessing the undead of their arms, legs, and weapons, it reduced their fighting strength.

Beatrice’s Yin Magic could attack the undead in a unique way, but fully shattering their opponents went against the goal of their strategy.

That was why they intentionally tuned it down; borrowing the power of his lovely partner, Subaru leaped forward. Then, on the opposite side of the right hand linked to Beatrice—as he pulled up the left hand linked to Spica with all his might,

Subaru: “Here we go! Atlem Nevi, Diphone Trevola, Gaion Talfou, Lescar Bhrain, Niolf Tradd, Yaren Swoker—”

Spica: “Au! Uu! U~u! Aau! Uau! Uu~uu~!”

The names Abel had called out, accurately listing them in the correct order, while matching them to the faces of each undead who were turning hostility towards them, he made sure Spica reached them without fail.

Spica also understood her own role, and with her outstretched hands as the undead approached, sometimes she touched, sometimes she pierced, sometimes she firmly struck, and sometimes she pushed, but in all cases, she activated the Authority of Star Eating—.

Subaru: “Last one! Vellum Joytohhh!!”

Spica: “E ea!”

From the fore came a sword slash that aimed to split Subaru’s forehead open, and exchanging glances with the pale, wrinkly face of the undead who had unleashed it—Vellum Joytoh, Subaru clenched his molars.

Just before it could reach his forehead, the opponent’s blade was stopped by crystallization which extended from their shoulders to their hips, making them unable to move at will.

Grateful to Beatrice for providing covering fire, Subaru urged Spica, and her hand touched Vellum’s chest.

Then slowly, the undead turned to dust with a look of satisfaction on its face.

Subaru: “Buh, hah…”

Ascertaining that they had neutralized all the undead in the surroundings, including Vellum, Subaru deeply sighed.

This close combat similar to crossing a bridge gave Subaru a vivid reminder of the violent days he had spent on the Gladiator Island. With a deep inhale, Subaru was patted on the back by Spica, who looked at him with an “Aau~?”, and then he exhaled.

Contrary to Spica, Beatrice placed her hands on her hips and glared at Subaru,

Beatrice: “You’re blindly charging in too much, in fact! Betty told you she wants to see you look cool while making great efforts, I suppose. Even if you die in a cool manner, Betty doesn’t want to see it, in fact.”

Subaru: “I know. Just now was a move that presumed Beako would follow up. I’m sorry I did such a thing.”

Beatrice: “…If you understand, that’s fine, I suppose.”

As Subaru apologized upfront, Beatrice, who was in scolding mode, pouted her lips.

Though they could not hold a long evaluation meeting on the battlefield, her expression was nevertheless that of disappointment. However, it was not as though he had half-mindedly let it in one ear and out the other. Beatrice’s scolding was advice he ought to firmly take.

Even now, he was just about to have his forehead split open and die. If he had taken just one step further; the thought made him shudder. —Such a death would have been useless.

Vincent: “You nearly died by rushing out as soon as the battle had commenced. Do not act rashly.”

Subaru: “You…”

Scolded by Beatrice, and appreciated by Spica, Subaru grimaced as he turned around at that statement which lacked any consideration. Standing there with arms folded, Abel did not even pretend to help Subaru and the other two with their hard fighting.

Subaru was rather impressed to see the refreshing sight of the Emperor relying on others.

Subaru: “All sorts of things have happened up until now, but I’ve never thought of you as Emperor-like as I do now.”

Vincent: “We have just settled a bit of work. For the sake of the two by your side, I shall overlook that comment.”

Subaru: “You know, it’s best if you properly understand that from an outsider’s point of view, you look like the horrible nobility role that merely folds his arms and watches as children go to battle.”

An Emperor spectating a battle between children and undead was a sight akin to the unsightly amusement of a post-apocalyptic world after a zombie pandemic. There were limits to how bad one’s reputation could get.

But, considering Abel’s position, role, and fighting strength, as someone traveling alongside him, Subaru had to be grateful that he did not imprudently go to the front lines, so this was quite the dilemma.

And, thereupon—

???: “Tch, we dealt with the lookout right after entering the Imperial Capital, but… with this method, there’s no helping that it’s gonna take a while.”

Speaking thus, it was Jamal who provokingly spat onto the ground.

Having taken on many undead, he had contributed greatly to the triumphs at the outbreak of the battle; holding onto his twin swords, he adjusted his eyepatch while surveying the surroundings.

Jamal: “Even though this’d be much faster if we just cut down every undead that appeared. Why ain’t we doing that?”

Beatrice: “…A man who persistently doesn’t listen, in fact. If we did that, we wouldn’t be able to use Spica’s Authority to give the undead “Joubutsu”.”

Jamal: “Ahh? The hell is joubutsu?”

Beatrice: “It’s the way of making sure the undead don’t keep getting back up after being defeated repeatedly, in fact! This should have been explained to you so many times by now, I suppose!”

Beatrice stomped her short legs on the ground in frustration, and Jamal made a confused face at her appeal. That reaction only made Beatrice's face get more red, but unfortunately, it was not worth the effort as Jamal's head rejected any slightly complicated reasoning, no matter how many times it was explained to him.

For that reason—

Vincent: "Jamal Aurélie, obey these individuals. That is the best course of action, for I have judged it myself."

Jamal: "If Your Excellency says so, I'll do whatever you want!"

Beatrice: "Grrrr, in fact…!"

In the end, Abel had butted in presenting a tasty treat, and Jamal responded with money at the ready; seeing that, Beatrice ground her teeth in frustration. How cute.

As that exchange had put Subaru at ease a little, Spica stopped patting his back, and gazed at him.

Spica: "Uau?"

Subaru: "Ah, I'm fine. How about you, Spica, is there anywhere that feels weird or anything?"

Spica: "Uu! Aauu!"

When asked, Spica made a face that conveyed her crisp feelings, and in order to give Subaru peace of mind, she puffed out her chest with an appeal of how well she was doing. Since it seemed like there was no lie in her appearance, Subaru tightened his fist at the fact that Star Eating was not causing any harm to Spica, and at the fact that their operation was progressing.

Seeing Subaru's side profile, Abel narrowed his sable eyes, and,

Vincent: "Though it is resentful, it seems your judgment was right on the mark."

Subaru: "I don't get why that would make you resentful, but about what exactly?"

Vincent: "Need I even say? —The main force of the enemy's army is headed for the Fortified City, where the majority of our military assets remain. What lingers in the Imperial Capital is a portion of the undead, and soldiers unfit for war."

Subaru: "…Right. They left behind the guys who can't act cooperatively. I hate how each and every one of them is strong, but that poor Imperial Way thing is advantageous for us."

Surveying the state of the Imperial Capital, Abel made such a judgment, and Subaru nodded in agreement.

As Abel had said, the main forces of the undead were laying siege to the Fortified City of Garkla as a large army. Those who stayed behind were confined to the strong city fort, and were drawing the attention of the opponent—if they put in as much effort as they could, there was hope that the numerical disadvantage at the Imperial Capital would be mitigated.

The nature of this strategy was a blitzkrieg to defeat the ringleader in the Imperial Capital while the enemy was distracted by the Fortified City.

However, if the enemies at the Fortified City had an emphasis on "quantity", then the emphasis in the Imperial Capital was that of "quality".

Starting with the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, which covered the skies of the Imperial Capital, the rest of the fighters left behind for the city's defense were each a match for a thousand, all of them transcendent beings possessing stupendous power.

That was precisely why—

Subaru: "—By attacking each bastion at the same time, we have a second-stage diversion."

As Subaru spoke those words, Abel, Beatrice, and Spica tightened their expressions.

Currently, Subaru and his group were in the northwest of the Imperial Capital—in the vicinity of the fifth bastion. He had heard that it was through Garfiel's achievements in the battle for the Imperial Capital that the star-shaped wall had been greatly destroyed here.

He could not fathom just how reliable Garfiel had become in such a short period of time, but entering through the gigantic landmark he had made was the combination of Subaru & Beatrice with Spica, along with the rugged lord and retainer duo of Abel and Jamal—generally, it appeared as if their division was unreliable in terms of fighting strength, but this was actually the best possible configuration.

With anything other than this combination, the operation of the "Rescue from Destruction Squad" would certainly fail.

However, even if they went with this formation, it amounted to nothing more than them simply standing at the starting line.

Subaru: "We're the arrow of the main objective, and there's no doubt that our target is that massive Crystal Palace. Even if someone other than us were to quarrel with Sphinx, she could just run away, so there'd be no point."

Spending many long months and years, this was a being who had rampaged both the Kingdom and the Empire. If they failed to catch the one behind the Great Disaster, Sphinx, what kind of disaster she would plan next was not something they knew.

In order to defeat Sphinx, who had turned into an undead, Spica's Star Eating was the only method.

But—

Jamal: "Then, before more needless nuisances get in our way, let's make a mad dash for the Crystal Palace and fucking kill the boss of the enemy. Then with His Excellency's declaration, we'll have retaken the Imperial Capital!"

Spica: "Uu~ uu~!!"

Subaru: “While that would be ideal, it’s not that simple.”

Jamal: “Ahhn?”

Spica: “Aauu?”

Pointing his sword to the Crystal Palace, considered to be the base of the enemy, Jamal’s enthusiasm earned Spica’s agreement. Having their vigor discouraged, they turned to the one who had discouraged them, Subaru.

However, Subaru slowly shook his head sideways,

Subaru: “There’s not a chance we can head straight for the Crystal Palace. We actually shouldn’t even heedlessly get close to it.”

Jamal: “Bastard, don’t tell me you’re chickening out…”

Beatrice: “There is also no chance that weak-heartedness is his reason, I suppose. What awaits there, in fact?”

Subaru: “—A curse. Because of that, merely approaching the palace will make us unable to move.”

Interrupting Jamal as he ground his teeth in anger, Beatrice looked at Subaru and received that response. He firmly placed his hand on his chest, as if he was remembering an unavoidable, unbearable pain.

As long as that obstruction remained, they could not approach the palace. —If anything, nobody in this Imperial Capital would be able to operate in a proper manner.

Jamal: “Why do you say so much about something you haven’t even done yourself? Ahh?”

Of course, there were also some who could not swallow Subaru’s explanations so easily.

Jamal was at the top of that list. Different from Emilia and Beatrice, there was no such trust between them so that he could believe Subaru without asking anything like where Subaru’s ideas came from.

And, the same thing could be said about Abel.

Between Subaru and Abel, too, there was no trust similar to that which he had with Emilia and the others.

Therefore, Abel would—

Vincent: “Within this conduct, which seems reckless and roundabout at first glance, your intentions are present.”

Jamal: “Your Excellency?!”

Vincent: “Restrain yourself, Jamal Aurélie. There shall not be a third time. Obey these individuals—this individual.”

Emperor Vincent Vollachia did not have trust in Subaru, but he had judged Subaru’s actions and intentions by his own ingenuity.

At the repeated order from the Emperor, Jamal widened his single eye and fell silent, then he struck the hilts of his twin swords into his forehead. Striking, striking, striking so much that blood spilled from his forehead,

Jamal: “—Understood. I will absolutely not cause you to say it a third time.”

With all hesitation having vanished from his face, he gave a deep bow.

At Jamal’s answer, Vincent nodded, and as Beatrice’s eyes became angered,

Beatrice: “Why would you injure yourself, I suppose?! It needs to be healed right away, in fact!”

Jamal: “Ahh?! Shit, don’t do anything unnecessary pipsqueak! This is part of my oath…”

Beatrice: “Even though you only have a single eye, what would you do if blood got into that eye, I suppose?! There’s nothing but people who don’t think about the consequences of their actions, so it’s tough on Betty, in fact!”

As they loudly argued, Beatrice quickly healed the wound on Jamal’s forehead.

To the side of that exchange, Abel glanced at Subaru once again with a “Well then”,

Vincent: “If we cannot enter the palace like this, are we to silently wait for the others to deal with their matters, and create a path for us? That is not what you have in mind, is it?”

Subaru: “You’re speaking like you’re asking me to show you what I’ve got… There’s an important purpose in our fighting as well.”

Responding to the inquisitive gaze, Subaru placed his hand on the head of Spica at his side. As Spica, the keystone of the strategy, stared at him with an “Uu?”, and Subaru gave her a nod.

To thoughtlessly charge into the Crystal Palace was suicide, but having said that, there was no way for Subaru to work against the “curse”. Currently, nobody could get inside the palace.

Even so, if they wanted to square off against Sphinx, who was inside the palace, there was only one thing they could do.

Subaru: “And therefore—”

Indeed, as Subaru was about to speak, a sound of destruction suddenly jolted everyone’s eardrums.

Several buildings collapsed, and as smoke and rubble were scattered about, the structure of the street was being altered. As Subaru’s group all quickly turned to where the sound had come from, Beatrice and Jamal, who had been quarreling, stood to protect Subaru and Abel as they could not fight, and scowled at the eruption of smoke.

Then, at the tip of all their vigilant gazes, appearing from behind the smoke was—

Jamal: “…As expected, being His Excellency’s guard ain’t gonna be easy.”

Seeing the being that had emerged from within the smoke, Jamal’s cheeks contorted as he spilled out that comment.

Subaru and the rest held no objection to Jamal’s words. After all, his feelings were more or less the same as what everyone else was also feeling.

???: “—Oooo.”

As a sound akin to wind escaping from a deep, eerie cavern was produced, a grotesque figure dragged its body along as it proceeded through the Imperial Capital. It might have originally had the form of a person, but both the number and form of its limbs were far removed from its original state; it was a figure akin to how a young child would paint by freely moving the brush as they pleased to depict their parent for the very first time, an embodiment of innocence and chaos.

It swung its oddly long right arm, branching at its joints, like a beast’s tail, and it used its large but short left arm to grip the ground and drag its torso forward. On the contrary, it seemed to have four meager legs, but they did not function well, so it languidly continued by dragging itself with its arms.

The thickness of the grotesque being’s body completely varied at the chest, abdomen, and shoulders, but only the part which seemed to be the head had a single, large golden eye in its center—.

Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know.”

His name having been called out by Beatrice, Subaru nodded to signal she need not speak any further.

The strange, grotesque being, this was not the first time Subaru and his friends had encountered it. A reunion with that which he had thought had surely been finished off with the dust explosion—

???: “—Ó̸̡̞Ǒ̖Ô̡̭Ȍ̶̟!!”

Without even the time to wipe his cold sweat as that fact was fully conveyed to him, the defective undead opened its mouth which seemed to have been torn open, and gave a loud, loud bellow.

2

—Then, at the same time Subaru and Abel’s team squared off against a grotesque being.

Shortly after the battle for the Imperial Capital, the Imperial Capital of Lupugana was transformed into a battlefield once again.

For the battle concerning the Empire, while the ones casting their moves upon the board may have changed, the essence of the conflict remained ever the same. To take the head of the one who ruled over the beautiful palace towering in the innermost core of the Imperial Capital, the Crystal Palace, was the aim of this decisive battle.

That was not just in the case of the victory condition; even the way the battle must progress remained the same—that was to say, the star-shaped fortress that enclosed the Imperial Capital, fighting for control of its five bastions, would determine victory and defeat.

Ergo—

???: “I ain’t done yet! “No winning chance in hell Ifluse” is only just gettin’ started, ya nosebleedin’ Dragon!”

Neglecting the pain with his fighting spirit and morale, trying to respond to an unyielding faith, the boy set his very body and soul alight and challenged a legend.

???: “Bear witness, Observers of the heavens above. —Witness the choices the world shall make.”

Reciting the verse with pretensions, guising himself with a smile, as he danced on the boundary of what was both characteristic and uncharacteristic of himself, the lightning of childish form cut towards the overflowing second sun together with the personification of refusing to give up.

???: “—At last. At long last, I was able to meet you again.”

With a voice unable to conceal her delight, the kimono-clad girl with antlers on her head, accompanied by snow, arrived at the predicament of the treasured person whom she had eagerly awaited a reunion with.

???: “Jeez, I won’t let you go off wherever you please anymore. Come and talk to me properly, Ballebro.”

Straining the expression that was typically as bright as the sun, the girl who had settled her resolve for this cruel reunion, receiving help from a magician, locked eyes with the dragon rider soaring across the heavenly skies.

And then—

???: “Golly, guess there really are some casters who got nasty personalities. —There ain’t an ounce of love in this.”

Clad in a black kimono and black fur, the repulsive beast, presented with a curse far more repulsive than his own existence, laid bare irises of golden hue that had previously been concealed by the thread-like thinness at which he usually kept the opening of his eyes.

And thus, on the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, on the siege of the five bastions, on the battle to fell the very stars, the curtain now truly rose.

Chapter 46:
The Taste of the Wind

1

—Projected within a shimmering blue jewel, was a scene of glimmering flames that seemed like the end of the world.

Locked and confined in a dungeon, before the eyes of the hanging Priscilla, being projected by the deathly pale-skinned Sphinx, was the fierce battle that was happening in one of the vertices of the Imperial Capital.

On the one hand, taking in the very core of the Empire for oneself, while on the other, fighting against a formidable foe and standing one’s ground, the reality of these two extraordinary circumstances coming together was already for the verses of legends.

As such, the many songs and stories that have been passed down from long ago were themselves thought to have been born in this way.

???: “—However, that is only if there remains someone to pass along what they saw and heard.”

???: “Do not force your desires on others, much less upon mineself. When boorishness reaches its zenith, even getting angry is irksome.”

While witnessing the same scene within the jewel, such was Priscilla’s response to her addressee’s weak in enthusiasm words.

Weak. Yes, it was a voice that was weak in passion. Not completely lacking passion, just weak. Feeling so, with her shapely eyebrows drawn into a frown, Priscilla observed the person beyond the jewel.

The undead confronting her—Sphinx, who had introduced herself as the ringleader of the Great Disaster, had expressly come down to meet Priscilla, as if to flaunt the tragic situation in which Arakiya, with whom Priscilla held deep ties, was presently in.

Priscilla did not know what exactly Sphinx imparted to Arakiya while she was captured and isolated. But, the result was reflected in the jewel, and the purpose of doing so was before her eyes.

Arakiya was on the verge of exploding while trying to hold on to an existence that was too great for her, and Sphinx was observing Priscilla as she witnessed Arakiya's suffering.

By those golden pupils the black was vanquished, as they hinted at a curiosity that failed to be fully concealed, as well as a tinge of expectation.

Sphinx had an expectation. —That Arakiya's suffering would cause Priscilla's heart to waver.

Without a doubt—

Priscilla: "—You are obsessed with mineself."

Locking eyes with Priscilla who had spun it that way, Sphinx parted her lips without saying a word.

It was a confirmation, an expression of delight. Thus, being that the very impetus behind the Great Disaster, Sphinx's obsession with Priscilla was unquestionable.

Although how that originated was still unclear, any deed motivated by obsession was something to be despised.

Sphinx: "To have something that was bestowed, forcibly taken away. It is an extremely heart-rending feeling, such is my learning from observation. How will it affect you? Confirmation: Required."

Priscilla: "Your wishes are being fulfilled. Are you in high spirits?"

Sphinx: "It is true. I affirm it. As you said, I feel a sense of elation. I used to take for granted that everything would proceed according to the plans made in advance, but… my past self should have understood this sense of accomplishment. In that case, the outcome of the Demi-Human War would have been different."

Priscilla: "…"

Sphinx: "—But, that would mean that I could neither give, nor could I earn anything."

Taking a glance at Priscilla, Sphinx, who had been speaking with great eloquence, placed a hand over her own chest, and cast her gaze downward as if reflecting upon something.

There, noticing an emotion that was different from both joy and wrath directed towards her, Priscilla understood.

It was a figure that invoked a sense of mournful sorrow. —And, it was also what drove Sphinx to instigate the Great Disaster.

Priscilla: "…"

Setting aside her thoughts about Sphinx's motivations, Priscilla once again directed her attention to the scene projected in the jewel.

Regardless, the battle that unfolded on the battlefield was one that could completely change the very state of the world, a clash between what could be said was the embodiment of the Empire itself, against ineluctable lightning.

However, in the midst of it all, Priscilla had not failed to notice the weakness, which seemed to vanish into thin air.

Priscilla: "Weak, fragile, timid, born with nothing and resisting the notion of becoming anything; can such a one leave traces in the verses of myths?"

Sphinx: "What do—"

Priscilla, who averted her gaze, prompted Sphinx's consciousness to wonder what she saw in the jewel. However, she did not try to ascertain the true nature of what caught Priscilla's attention.

The reason was that earlier, tremors that could reach even the underground dungeons had erupted in various parts of the Imperial Capital.

Priscilla: “I presume that must be my elder brother.”

Sphinx: “Emperor Vincent Vollachia?”

Puzzled by the situation, Sphinx furrowed her slender eyebrows at Priscilla’s murmur.

For her, that possibility was not particularly high. Priscilla in the underground dungeon had no way of knowing what was the total number of forces Sphinx had at her disposal.

The Emperor, who once abandoned the Imperial Capital, found a way to break through the hordes of the undead.

Sphinx: “The swordsman who ended my life is in the midst of a one-on-one battle with General First-Class Arakiya… Even if the Emperor of Vollachia is a wise man, there are situations where one cannot overturn a hopeless board. —No.”

With a finger running along her lips, Sphinx tried to dispel worrisome possibilities. However, in the midst of that contemplation, she narrowed her black eyes.

And—

Sphinx: “—The foreign entity that prevented Valga’s stratagem, was involved?”

Priscilla: “Ho, did something come to your mind?”

Sphinx blurted out as if suddenly realizing.

Putting her thoughts into words, she then immediately denied them by shaking her head. At that time, Priscilla deliberately interjected.

The moment Sphinx glanced over, Priscilla, smiling enchantingly,

Priscilla: “Hastening when it does not stand to reason? If that is the case, then mineself shall give you “advyce”. —Call it intuition, what you have taken a hold of.”

Sphinx: “Intuition…”

Priscilla: “Think of it as the taste of the wind sensed by your heart. It may be ironic for the dead.”

Snorting in response, Sphinx fell silent, pondering Priscilla’s words.

Neither dismissing with laughter nor dismissively rejecting was in line with her innate habit—calling it innate was also ironic, but Sphinx continued to contemplate regardless of the concept of life and death.

Eventually, she slowly looked up—

Sphinx: “Let us acknowledge it. There is a foreign entity that could disrupt my plan. —Adjustment: Required.”

With Sphinx, standing in front of her, admitting her own change, Priscilla also gazed upward.

What was visible was the dimly lit, dark ceiling of the underground dungeon, faintly illuminated by the light of the jewel, yet unable to conceal the weight of history.

However, it only served as evidence of the narrowness of the view.

Priscilla did not look up at the sky to inspect the dirty ceiling.

For her heart would not miss the opportunity to sense the taste of the wind.

2

—Having begun unexpectedly, and concluded pragmatically, the battle started anew sacrilegiously.

As innumerable swordsmen of the same face assailed her from all directions, Iris, after a moment of shock, shattered them head-on.

Iris: “Strange, yet it is nothing more than a paper tiger.”

As the dress-clad Iris swung her arms, the approaching blue-haired swordsmen—the group of Rowan Segmunts had their heads, torsos, hips, and legs mowed down, being blown away like leaves off a tree.

But, there was also a Rowan who had slipped past her initial attack, and made it to a distance at which his blade could reach her. As he threw himself at her with all his might, Iris easily intercepted the attack with two fingers, inclined her body to evade the sword, and swung down her upraised legs to shatter what remained of him.

It was quite literally a total beatdown, for even if he had amassed more numbers, he was not worthy as an opponent.

That was the difference in strength between Iris, and the undead-turned Rowan.

Only—

Rowan: “Next.” / “Kahaha.”

Iris: “…”

As the opponent who had been kicked senselessly sprang up one after the other, her thoughts froze.

Raising smiles of satisfaction as if to say they had placed their hands upon their desire, the men closing in—no, the group made up entirely of the same Rowan, turned their blades toward Iris.

Reflexively fighting back against the berserking sword slashes, while she was countering all of them—what flashed through Iris’s mind, was the guilt that she had erred.

By causing surrender through brute force, and chasing people away without taking lives, she had tried to decrease the number of casualties, even if only by a few.

Iris had ignored the fact that her arrogant ideals crushed the hearts of those who were dyed in the Imperial Way, likely causing them to suffer.

As a result, as a victim, Rowan’s state had become like this before her eyes.

Iris: “I am…”

Evading the swung blades, she struck her kiseru into several of the approaching faces. Kicking one of them up with the inside of her long leg, she grabbed the leg of the airborne body, and heartily slammed it towards the Rowans in the surroundings, blowing away another ten of them that were approaching.

However, no matter how much she struck and whittled them down, she did not know if the vigor of the reviving Rowans could be stopped.

Iris: “I am…!”

Having suffered Iris’s attack, the body of the undead Rowan shattered, unable to endure.

Rowan was shattered to pieces like a ceramic bowl, however the next Rowan trampled over him with his zori without paying him any mind, and was also shattered upon jumping in.

Repeating that so many times, it was the same as being placed in the position of an executioner with no end in sight.

By nature, there were some people who thought nothing of destroying things that took the form of people.

However, in most cases, the act of destroying the human form, the receptacle of life, was something that took great resolve and determination, or perhaps accustomation or resignation, in order to be possible.

Iris could be said to be the extreme of the latter case.

Now still, even if it was an opponent that showed hostility against her, she could not kill them without feeling any anguish in her heart.

For that reason, Iris had manifested the Soul Marriage Technique, a power that could not be mastered without compassion for others.

That was what had propelled Iris to the apex of strength known as the Nine Divine Generals, though its origins lay in the malicious miracle that fettered her soul to the vast lands of the Empire.

Either way, even if it was an aberrant existence like that of Rowan Segmunt, even if that was a being that would continue to appear no matter how many times it was shattered, it grated Iris's heart each time she shattered them.

Tormented by unbearable pain, as it intensely gnawed at her heart, Iris was laid bare.

Each time she plucked a life, each time she destroyed something with form, each time she made the world lose the way it currently was, lose something from how it was, Iris's soul would fissure, and she was laid bare.

Iris: "I am—hk."

And thus, the final destination of her fissured soul.

For Iris, who had unwillingly continued to live on for a long, long time; for Sandra Benedict, who had tragically lost her life giving birth to Prisca; for Yorna Mishigure, who was shaken by a beloved reunion after hundreds of years, this was an unknown state of mind —

Iris: "—ah."

A hoarse breath spilled from her red lips, and the next moment, blood sprayed.

As some of the splatter landed upon the cheek of the blade's wielder, he stretched out his tongue and licked up the blood.

A smile escaped. —The wicked smile of the swordsman, escaped.

Rowan: "—The steps of the Heavenly Sword, the tips of my toes are thus placed upon them."

3

The stretched-out arm slipped through, and the naked blade brushed the bare shoulder of the woman.

A beat later, the spray of blood dyed the gray street a vibrant hue, and the finest swordsmanship of Rowan's life —no, now that he was an undead, he was no longer alive, so the finest swordsmanship of Rowan's existence was renewed.

Rowan: “Not there yet, I'm still just getting started.”

However, as his heart had ceased to pulsate, that insatiable desire spurred his whole body forth in place of flowing blood, and the being known as Rowan evolved at an accelerated pace.

The beautiful fox lady he faced off against was dreadfully powerful. An unbelievably formidable enemy. The difference in strength that made it impossible for him to fight against her, easily smashed through the piling-up Rowans.

By all rights, Rowan's attempt to challenge her should have ended back when he was defeated. However, these strange circumstances threatening the Imperial Capital, the Empire, and the very world, had not put an end to Rowan.

Fastening a blade to his own neck, he gave up on his futile, worthless life.

Believing that there was a territory only reachable by casting away his life, he exerted his blade, knowing that he would rot away and fade to obscurity if he could not reach it, and when he did, Rowan's vision opened up in the truest sense.

Rowan: “Ahh, ahhh, AHHHH! What a plain world I've been seeing until now.”

Within his opened vision, the domain that he had reached during his lifetime with bloodshot eyes was easily surpassed by Rowan.

Life truly was useless. Life was not a good thing. Due to it being the first thing one is granted upon being born, even recluses like Rowan harbored an unwise attachment to it.

Only when he cast all of that away, did Rowan obtain the freedom to head for the Heavenly Sword.

Without a doubt, this lack of attachment was the precise qualification to ascend the steps to reach the Heavenly Sword.

Rowan: “Well now, take a gander, foolish son of mine. This’d be impossible for ya.”

This was a state that those who had lost their lives could finally reach.

That was to say, it was scenery that even Cecilus Segmunt, unable to conquer death, would never lay his eyes upon.

To think it could only be reached through dying, what a sadistic place for the Sword God to have placed the Heavenly Sword.

He had won his gamble. —Hence, he would receive his inflated winnings.

Rowan: “HahahahaHAhaHAHAhaHAHAHAHA!”

As Rowan roared with laughter, his swordsmanship began to reach heights that had once been so distant.

No matter how much the approaching Rowan swung his sword, he was felled time after time by the opposing Iris. Unable to reach her as she kicked the ground, he had become unable to stand up just from a blow by her slender arm.

Such an overwhelming disparity, began to be closed at an unbelievable pace.

—Here, the misfortune of the man known as Rowan Segmunt shall be narrated once more.

Rowan Segmunt held a long-cherished desire. Something he kept pursuing. A prayer he continued to long for.

However, he had never come across an opportunity to fulfill it; he had never come across a worthy opponent.

That had been the tragedy of Rowan Segmunt, a man who had been plagued by misfortune until his life came to an end.

—Here, the miracle of the man known as Rowan Segmunt shall be narrated.

Rowan Segmunt held a long-cherished desire. Something he kept pursuing. A prayer he continued to long for.

And, he had finally come across an opportunity necessary to fulfill it; he had finally come across a worthy opponent.

Without having lost his deluded obsession towards the Heavenly Sword even after death, Rowan Segmunt was reborn as an undead; no matter how many times he was shattered or not, he produced beings that shared the same soul one after the other, transforming him into a monster incomparable to the man he was during his lifetime.

There were cases when those who faced off against a formidable opponent, bearing witness to abilities far and above those of their own, and using the battle on which their life was staked as a source of nourishment, would experience rapid growth.

Rowan was trying to invoke that same phenomenon as a miracle within himself.

Facing off against the formidable enemy Iris, bearing witness to abilities far and above those of his own multiple times, and using the battle as a source of nourishment as he quite literally was shattered over and over; that was his current environment.

If Natsuki Subaru were here, he might have even dubbed that act of learning through death as “Learn by Death”.

The undead’s unusual obsession, combined with his desire to learn, resulted in Rowan’s sword being sharpened.

Having left behind the sword of his lifetime, the undead sword technique designed for killing—the work of the Undead Swordmaster, Rowan Segmunt, was hot on the heels of Iris's life.

Iris: "Uh, ah…"

Besieged from every conceivable direction, Iris could not deal with all the incoming sword attacks; her arms and sides were sliced by the blades, and she gave a slight groan as her blood spilled.

Hearing that frail breath, Rowan shook his head in disgust.

He did not want to hear it. He did not want to hear it. He did not want to hear the weakness of the strong.

Rowan was grateful to Iris. It was thanks to her that he had become strong. Dying itself was nothing more than an impetus. It was something that had been necessary for him, who was to eventually reach the Heavenly Sword. There was absolutely no need for Iris to worry over that.

After all, he did not want to hear it; after all, it was grating on his ears; after all, even though the one who was inferior was surpassing the one who was superior, what he wanted to hear was not weeping, but cheers.

Therefore—

Rowan: "Don't be crying now, young lady. You're making a mess of yer lovely visage."

Iris promptly hoisted her kiseru to block the sword being swung down from overhead, and with her opposite hand, she bore a hole right through the center of Rowan's torso.

That was the end of this Rowan. But, it mattered not. Another Rowan subsequently leaped out, and approached Iris as her hand was still stuck in the pierced Rowan until he fully crumbled.

Her leg sprang up and smashed that Rowan. She thus had one arm and one leg occupied. Then, as a Rowan thrust his sword from behind her, she quickly slammed her tail into him, but blood spurted from the base of her tail. The slashing attack had connected. Iris's expression contorted in pain. Not good. This was truly not good.

Rowan: "Won't ya also die and resurrect, to keep me company forever?"

That would truly be an exhilarating future, however it was likely a future that would not come to pass.

Iris: "…"

Rowan's gaze collided into Iris as he stepped forward, but her eyes were turned to another place, irrelevant to the life or death before her.

Her perspective was not that of the victory or defeat, the life or death in front of her, but something different, as if she were looking at the past, so to speak.

To those who look not at the future, but at the past, glory would not come.

That alone, from the very bottom of his empty, hollowed heart, Rowan regretted—

Rowan: "—Your life, is mine."

A silver flash was sprung at full speed, and as the finest swordsmanship of his existence was renewed, it bolted towards the woman's slender neck.

Then, an artistically brilliant beheading was enacted—or, it should have been.

Rowan: "Wha…"

Hindered by a firm, solid, stiff, and hard sensation, the sword technique reaping the life was stopped.

The woman who was a formidable enemy, who was the finest worthy opponent, who could even be called his teacher of sorts, as his brandishing of gratitude towards her was stopped, Rowan widened his black-stained golden eyes, and was struck with wonder.

It was regrettable that his attack had been stopped, but the person who had stopped his attack was another matter.

It was not Iris, whom he had recognized as a tough, formidable, and worthy opponent. It was not a latent strength that she had shown while in the grips of death, but rather an undoubtable interference.

???: "—Yorna-sama."

Indeed, calling out the name of a nobody, the young voice had obstructed Rowan's sword.

Through sheer force, a whole body wedged itself between them to stop the strong sword, but even so, from Rowan's perspective, that was something that should have been impossible.

Even if the entirety of that slender body was used to try and get in the way, the slashing attack ought to have had enough power put into it to completely bisect the body. And yet—

???: "You all have the same face, but everyone get out of the way!"

Subsequently, a voice akin to the sound of bells courageously resounded, and the sound of the atmosphere tensing rended the world.

That instant, flowers of ice blooming on the surface engulfed the surrounding scene in one fell swoop; Getting caught up within that, Rowan, Rowan, and the rest of the Rowans were turned into nourishment for the flowers.

Seeing his selves being frozen still in his peripheral vision, as Rowan jumped back and readied his katana, he gazed over what had occurred.

And there—

???: "—At last. At long last, I was able to meet you again."

In a quiet, yet deeply emotional voice, the antlered girl muttered as she held Iris in a tight embrace.

Shedding blood and having fallen to her knees, Iris was embraced in the thin chest of the short girl, and while her blue eyes widened in surprise, she accepted the embrace.

Then, the young girl who had hugged Iris turned her dark eyes to Rowan, and,

???: “Scoundrel who turns a blade to Yorna-sama, though I may be unworthy, I shall serve as your opponent.”

With that, the antlered girl had made a clear declaration.

Chapter 47:
Tanza

1

—This was a complex feeling, but just like Natsuki Schwartz, Tanza hated the Vollachian Empire.

The people of the Empire must be strong, such a way of thinking was given wondrous praise, and in accordance with it, those who lacked strength were oppressed, and even were they to lose their lives, it would be declared that their weakness was at fault.

The weak were unqualified to be people of the Empire. —If that were the case, she would like to be excused.

None could choose where they were born.

Therefore, neither Tanza nor anybody else had been born into the Vollachian Empire of their own volition.

Tanza hated the Vollachian Empire.

She hated the Empire that had taken her mother and father; the Empire that, for some incomprehensible reason such as the Imperial Way, had tortured her sister to death: the sister who had assiduously raised Tanza; the sister who had been relieved upon finally finding a place where they could live in peace; the sister whom Tanza should have been able to finally repay for everything she had done for her.

She was sure that had been why.

???: “Do you happen to hate this country?”

When posed that question, her expression which seldom showed emotion became stiff, and she held her breath.

Something which must not be noticed, a thought which must not be known, an ideology which one would naturally have from being ostracized; she thought it had been found out.

However, upon seeing Tanza cast down her eyes as she trembled, the beautiful woman who had seen through her heart smiled, and tenderly stroked Tanza’s stiffened cheek.

The warmth of those fingers felt similar to that of her sister, whom she had already lost.

It felt similar to that of her sister, who had devoted herself to Tanza without consideration for herself, who had died without knowing any happiness that seemed to be her own.

Woman: “I do, too.”

For a moment, not understanding what exactly that meant, Tanza was perplexed.

After that confusion, she comprehended what the woman’s words were expressing feelings about, and she gulped.

If a child like Tanza, unknowing of how things worked, were to say that, it would merely end with them being scolded and punished. However, this person was unlike them.

She was not merely an adult, for she was a person with status.

Within this Empire, that believed in strength, she was one of the nine people who were a symbol of strength—.

Woman: “—I, too, despise the ways of this country.”

Indeed, while giving a tender, affectionate smile, that person confided her true feelings in Tanza.

2

Tanza: “Please, send me to Yorna-sama. I wish to be by her side.”

In the battle on which the survival of the Empire was staked, she was aware that what she was asking was selfish.

That was why she had been prepared to endure all sorts of verbal abuse. Thinking that being spoken to in such a manner was unavoidable, that even if she were to be showered with cursing and scolding, she still needed to be honest with her feelings.

And even though she had thought that.

???: “—Yeah, that’s what I intend to do. Let her see your face well, and properly go talk to her.”

Despite always selfishly putting Tanza’s feelings on the backburner, only at a time like this did he speak to Tanza’s feelings directly, almost like he was giving her an order.

That was an aspect she disliked about this black-haired boy.

Tanza: “—Yorna-sama.”

And right after she had called that out, Tanza stretched out her small body as much as she could, and receiving the flash of silver head-on, she saved the precious woman who was about to be decapitated.

The shock ran through the entirety of her being, sending a tingling and numbing sensation to the tips of her limbs.

But, in order to hide the fact that she felt pain, she bit down on her molars. Not for the opponent who had unleashed the sword attack, but in order to hide it from the precious woman she had protected.

Tanza: “—Hk.”

Firmly stifling her cries of pain and her expression, she endured.

She usually found it frustrating, but at this time she was grateful for her cold face. It must have appeared like she had withstood it with a face as if to say that it was not a big deal.

Even though in truth, without the shield of ice concealed inside her kimono, she would have undoubtedly been split right in two.

???: “You all have the same face, but everyone get out of the way!”

Following Tanza's bluff, a courageous voice with a tone akin to silver bells could be heard.

The reason why Tanza had not been cleaved in twain, the one who had hidden an ice shield for her, the silver-haired half-elf—Emilia gallantly swooped down on the Imperial Capital, and pointed her hands at the rows of undead who bore the same face.

Right after, a high-pitched sound like that of cracking glass enveloped the area; clear ice had shot out of the ground, entrapping the undead one after another in glacial prisons.

The undead immediately either tried to jump away and escape, or tried to evade by ducking low, or tried to cut off the freezing with their swords. —But, those who had selected the correct answer were few.

Those who jumped, those who ducked, and those who drew their blades, were made part of the blooming ice flowers in the sky, on the ground, and with their drawn swords respectively, and were quite literally frozen in ice wherever they were.

Engulfing nearly twenty of the undead in their entirety, there were merely a few who had escaped.

She wished to exhaust her vocabulary in praise of that, but right now—

Tanza: "—At last. At long last, I was able to meet you again."

The severed shield of ice fell from her kimono, and diffused into mana before it could hit the ground.

Then, with the chest from which the hard sensation had been removed, Tanza embraced the head of the woman who had fallen to her knees. Even though Tanza had been held like this by her before, since she was a tall woman, it was the first time Tanza was embracing her in such a manner.

To be frank, she had thought it was embarrassing to have this kind of thing done to her.

She had thought it would not set a good example, and it was frustrating being treated like a child. But, she had never disliked it, and her thoughts on being treated like a child had also changed.

Was it not the case that Schwartz and Cecilus could do as they pleased, regardless of being small or being children.

Even if being a child became an obstacle when trying to do something, it was by no means a reason to give up. Tanza tried to return that to this person with her whole body.

Shedding blood, the woman whose blue eyes were widened in surprise—while embracing Yorna, Tanza turned her dark eyes to the enemy, to the nuisance who was getting in the way.

And then—

Tanza: “Scoundrel who turns a blade to Yorna-sama, though I may be unworthy, I shall serve as your opponent.”

With that clear declaration, she asserted her own standpoint.

Undead: “…”

Accepting Tanza’s proclamation, neither the undead men, nor Yorna, embraced in her chest, made a sound.

Were they perhaps shocked by the foolish action, or was it Tanza’s sudden arrival that was the reason for their shock? It mattered not either way, and Tanza readied herself while still holding Yorna.

Thereupon—

Emilia: “Teiryaa!”

Undead: “Uuooou?!”

Emilia’s sprinting attack was even faster than Tanza’s movements.

Stepping forth with her long legs, Emilia swung the ice mallets that she had created in both of her hands down on the motionless undead. The undead man who had been focused on Tanza was taken aback as he swept those aside, and he squared off against Emilia.

Emilia: “I’m the opponent of all of you!”

Undead: “Though, that lass over there just said she’d be my opponent?”

Emilia: “Right now, Tanza-chan has finally encountered Yorna-san, who she’s been longing to meet. You… you guys? You all have the same face, but… I won’t let you guys get in the way!”

Undead: “It might be difficult to understand, but even if there’s more, I’m me… Rowan Segmunt, the individual. Ain’t no need for ya to get confused over that.”

Emilia: “I won’t let you get in the way!”

Emilia produced twin swords of ice in her hands as she corrected herself, and the callously smiling undead—all of the multiple Rowans, took the same stance as they faced off against Emilia.

From behind, as Tanza tried to back her up with an “Emilia-sama!”,

Emilia: “It’s okay, you can talk to Yorna-san first. —Subaru requested this of me.”

Tanza: “…”

As Schwartz’s name came up, Tanza hesitated to speak.

During that time, Emilia left behind a smile as her expression shifted to a stiff one, and taking a step towards the Rowans who were readied with their katanas in their sheaths,

Emilia: “—Icicle Line.”

After Emilia’s lips spun those words, the surrounding scene was dyed with even more white.

Every color was mixed with a silvery white, and trying to counter the twin swords of the snow-clad Emilia, Rowan smiled in satisfaction—thereupon, an icicle storm assailed.

Rowan: “OHHHHH—?!”

Rowan: “OHHHHH—?!”

Emilia: “Here I come!”

Rowan, who seemed to have thought that a contest of swordsmanship was starting, while stupefied at the bombardment of ice, fought against Emilia’s incoming attacks.

The light ice weapons clashed with the undead’s katana, and the sword dance commenced.

In the background of that sword dance, Tanza depended upon Emilia’s consideration, and looked to Yorna once again. Still, her expression appeared as if she had not caught up with the situation.

Tanza: “This is the first time I have witnessed Yorna-sama make such a face.”

Yorna: “—Tanza, is that you?”

Tanza slightly lowered the corners of her eyes in happiness, and while staring at that face, Yorna spoke words with meaning for the first time since their reunion. At that question, Tanza nodded. Since their parting at Chaosflame, she had been separated from Yorna for nearly two months.

Since there had been no correspondence, it would have been natural for Yorna to have assumed that Tanza was dead.

Tanza: “However, I have remained safe and sound. For the sake of returning to Yorna-sama.”

Gazing back into Yorna’s eyes, she reassuringly spoke those words.

The words that had hit Yorna as her eyes quivered at this reality, for being something she had spoken herself, there was an unthinkable reassurance to it.

Maybe this had been due to the influence of the people who could say things without any pretensions.

It was proof that Tanza had been through all sorts of things in the two months she had been separated from Yorna—but, Tanza was not the only one who had changed, as so had Yorna.

Yorna was wearing a beautiful, blue dress. Without the kimono that Tanza was used to seeing, she was wearing her hair down; more so than giving excitement over the novelty, that appearance gave Tanza some misgivings.

It was not that she was skeptical of a change in tastes. Yorna's ornaments—the articles presented to her by the inhabitants of Chaosflame, the fact that she was not wearing them was suspicious.

The inhabitants who dwelled in the Demon City of Chaosflame, they all loved and respected Yorna very much.

In order to convey their heart of hearts, they would take parts of their unique features as demi-humans, something that served as the primary reason for them being ostracized, put them to good use, and design them as ornaments to present to Yorna.

Everything from hairpins to earrings, to obidome to pins or threads for her kimono, Yorna clad herself in the affection of Chaosflame's inhabitants, and had come to present herself in a majestic manner.

Among those were combs carved out from a part of Tanza's, and of Tanza's sister's horns.

Yorna: "Tanza…"

Her name called out by trembling lips, Tanza waited for Yorna's discomposure to subside.

She also wanted to assist Emilia as she fought Rowan, but right now before her eyes, she wanted to put all her energy towards sorting out Yorna's emotions. Nervously, Yorna's fingers reached out towards Tanza's cheek; after ascertaining that feeling, Tanza would exchange words with her.

However, Yorna's fingers did not come into contact with Tanza's cheek.

Tanza: "Yorna-sama?"

Just as they were about to touch, Yorna held back her fingers and tightly shut her eyes; instead, she pushed Tanza's chest, which had been embracing her, and sent her a step backwards.

Tanza and Yorna, after having finally embraced, the two of them were separated once again, and Tanza blinked her eyes. As Tanza could not decipher the intention behind that action, Yorna opened her mouth,

Yorna: "For what reason, have you come to a place such as this?"

Tanza: "…"

Yorna: "At present, this Imperial Capital is the Capital of the undead… this place that was abandoned not just by the soldiers of the Empire, but even by the Nine Divine Generals and the Emperor, what business does a girl like you have doing here?"

Getting up from her knees, Yorna glared at Tanza in a stern manner. Being stared down by those almond-shaped eyes, Tanza's slender shoulders slightly shrunk.

For a moment, she did not know what she had been told. But, she immediately understood that those were words of rejection.

Yorna, the compassionate woman who accepted all things, had rejected Tanza.

Yorna: "This place is far too harsh and savage for the living to be. It would be wise to leave at once. If you cannot, shall I send you off by my own hand?"

Tanza: "…If you are distinguishing between the living and the dead, then for Yorna-sama too, that condition is…"

Yorna: "The same? —You believe that you and I are the same?"

Though she had been struck with shock, Tanza had tried to protest, and Yorna reached her hand towards her. However, that was not for the sake of stroking Tanza's cheek, but to seize her by the collar.

Five of Yorna's slender fingers grabbed the overlap of the kimono, and the legs of Tanza's small body were suspended.

She had been held up before. But, it had never been done to her in this kind of violent manner.

Yorna: "You and I do not stand on the same side. I have… someone whose side I wish to remain by. At long last, I can be with that person again. That is why…"

Tanza: "Yor…na–sama… hk."

Yorna: "I no longer have any need for you or the other children."

At a distance close enough that their breaths could reach each other, Yorna looked into Tanza's face. That which Yorna had spoken, was the reason she had remained in the Imperial Capital, filled with undead as it was.

The reality was not that she had been held captive, but that she had remained here of her own volition.

Tanza: "…"

Just as Yorna was looking at her, Tanza had also been looking into Yorna's blue eyes.

Deep within those irises, while Yorna was passing the days in the Demon City, while she was gently attending to Tanza and the inhabitants of the city, fragments of a longing that never disappeared could be seen.

Yorna Mishigure had always been searching for something.

That was certainly something that was unfathomably large and distant to Tanza, and even Yorna was unable to reach it; it seemed to her like searching for something akin to a star.

Something that was known to be bright, shimmering, and to have a dazzling gleam, but could not be reached.

Yorna had always been searching for that.

That she was someone who sought such a thing was known to Tanza, and to everybody else. She prayed that Yorna's wish would come true, and if it would not, then she desired to offer something in its place.

It was not just Tanza, everybody had thought that way.

And now, she had finally found it, Yorna's wish had reached the stars.

If that was the reason why she was grabbing Tanza's collar like this —

Tanza: "—Please be happier as you reject me, Yorna-sama."

Indeed, Tanza gripped the other's wrists, and told that to the poor liar whom she treasured dearly.

3

—Ah, I have become a bad child.

Gripping the slender white wrist, Tanza deplored her utterly changed self in such a way.

It was not supposed to be this way. For Tanza, Tanza's ideal self—that was, the idealized image of wanting to be like her dead older sister, Zoey.

—Zoey was a very strong-willed, and kind-hearted woman.

The reason Tanza's birthplace had been destroyed was because of the prevalence of a superstition that boiling the antlers of the deerpeople tribe would create a panacea, causing them to be attacked by bandits who aimed to sell the antlers at a high price.

With both her mother and father killed, the still-young Tanza was pulled by the hand of her sister, and they were able to barely escape with their lives.

But, the sufferings of the two sisters did not end there. The evil clutches of those hunting their antlers caught up to them many times, and even without that, it was customary in the Vollachian Empire to prey on the weak.

Many a time, their lives were in danger, and the extent to which her sister went through harsh experiences in order to obtain one plateful of soup, was something Tanza could only conceive of after a few years had passed. At the same time, she detested that she was entirely dependent on her sister, unable to do anything, so much so that she wanted to kill herself.

Zoey: “Tanza, you must not curse anyone. People who can easily curse others, will also be easily cursed in a similar manner.”

While emaciated and clad in tattered clothes, Tanza’s sister would tell this to her on nights when they shared a single plate of soup.

Without anybody treating them kindly, everybody was cold towards Tanza and Zoey. Whenever she spoke ill of that world, Tanza’s kind sister would, without fail, scold her by saying that.

Not out of frustration, but out of parental love, Tanza’s sister would scold her. —Despite being her older sister, and at an age where one would still depend on their parents, it was far too early for her to become a parent.

The superstition regarding the antlers of deerpeople did not peter out, so the sisters never settled in one place.

They were always fleeing, fleeing, continuing to flee, and when they had become fatigued from all the fleeing, what caught the ears of the two sisters, was a rumor of the Demon City, Chaosflame.

It was told that in that place, many demi-human tribes lived together and that it was a paradise for the ostracized.

The mistress who ruled there was said to be strong, filled with compassion, and a wonderful person who did not tolerate the weak being oppressed. —Such a prospect was ridiculous, Tanza thought with her childish heart.

There was no way such a person existed. It was impossible for such a convenient person to exist.

Even if such a person did exist, then why had her mother and father died? Why was her sister, so emaciated and ragged as she was, leading Tanza by the hand like this?

Therefore—

???: "—You have done well, Zoey, Tanza."

Finally, having reached the paradise that should not have existed, when the woman in the beautiful kimono brought the two ragged, dirty sisters up to the castle and embraced them as they clumsily introduced themselves, Tanza heard her sister raise her voice and cry for the first time.

Even on the day their mother and father died, even on the days that a spectacle was made of her for a plate of soup, and even on the days when an unreasonable Tanza would curse at her with inconsiderate words, Zoey never cried.

Seeing Zoey shed tears and sob as she clung to the woman's chest, Tanza also raised her voice and cried, and as she did so, she had a thought from the bottom of her heart.

She thought that she would never lose the paradise created by this woman—no, that she would absolutely never lose this woman, Yorna Mishigure; her childish heart firmly believed so.

—They were provided with meals and a bedroom, and the kimono-clad Zoey was beautiful. She was Tanza's pride.

There were many who adored Yorna and earnestly wished to serve her. Among them, Zoey was the most serious and hardworking, and Yorna came to appoint her to a responsible post.

Tanza was proud that Zoey was serving the amazing Yorna and doing important work.

She had thought that she would be like her sister one day, wholeheartedly serving Yorna, and wanting the existence of the paradise known as Chaosflame to be known to many more of the weak who suffered.

Her sister had died two years after that life had begun.

Outside of the Demon City, there was a group of demi-human tribes that sought the protection of Chaosflame.

When they were passing by a fortress of Imperial Soldiers conducting a military campaign, her sister was in contact with the group as Yorna's representative, and was in the middle of guiding them to the Demon City.

The Imperial Soldiers attacked the group of demi-humans under the guise that they were potential enemies, and her sister was abruptly killed. Tortured to death for a reason unrelated to the antlers of deerpeople, her corpse was subjected to disgrace.

Zoey: "Tanza, you must not curse anyone. People who can easily curse others, will also be easily cursed in a similar manner."

The words of her older sister flashed through her mind, and in the midst of sorrow, Tanza's heart was ripped to shreds.

Even after this, was it something she must not do? Even after this, was she not to curse anyone? After her older sister, who was finally supposed to be happy, was killed, was she still not to curse anyone?

Yorna: "Do you happen to hate this country?"

Tormented by despair, as Tanza suffered as if her own antlers had been broken, a voice called out to her.

She had put on a kimono to imitate her sister, but with her scant knowledge of being an attendant, it was impossible for her to imitate her sister, and her weak, brittle heart could not hide what she truly felt.

As Tanza lamented that those feelings of hers had been found out, the woman's hand stroked her cheek.

Yorna: “I do, too.”

While stroking it, the woman affirmed Tanza’s rage, affirmed her cursing.

And, in place of Tanza, who did not have the power or means to give that curse form, she took action. Even if that meant she would need to face off against the mighty, mighty Empire, she cared not.

Yorna: “—I, too, despise the ways of this country.”

Whenever the Flamboyant, Yorna Mishigure, rose in rebellion against the Empire, it was always for the sake of another.

Since Tanza knew she was a woman who would do so, she did not want to be the cause.

She wanted to remain a child who did not cause Yorna to face danger.

She wanted to remain a child who did not cause Yorna to face sorrow.

Like her sister Zoey, she wanted to be a good attendant, one who did not trouble Yorna.

—And yet, Tanza had become a bad child.

Tanza: “Yorna-sama saved my older sister.”

Tightly squeezing the wrist grabbing her by the collar, Tanza’s lips spoke.

Perhaps because Tanza’s reaction, conduct, and words had all been unexpected, Yorna’s blue eyes widened, and her lips faintly quivered.

The fact that those trembling lips mouthed the name of her older sister, “Zoey”, would not go overlooked by Tanza.

Tanza: “Yorna-sama acceded to my selfish request.”

After the rebellion that clashed directly against the Imperial Capital when Zoey lost her life, Yorna had gotten revenge for Tanza's older sister, and Tanza had requested to serve in her sister's place.

It was a request akin to the height of impudence, and she was extremely insufficient for the role, but Yorna accepted it with pleasure.

And, Tanza had served her wholeheartedly. She had been permitted to do so.

Tanza: "Yorna-sama has brought about happiness, for a great deal of people."

Outside of herself and her sister, just how many people had Yorna supported?

Just how many people had been saved and protected by their connection to Yorna? Tanza's words and actions were nothing more than a small fragment of that cluster of gratitude.

If Yorna was leaving all of that behind and proceeding without reserve, that would be fine.

If Yorna thought of them as a heavy burden, and wanted to become light in order to fly up and reach the stars, that would be fine too.

If Yorna was unhappy, they would not want her to stay with them. If they were to say they wanted Yorna to stay with them even if she was unhappy, that would be as selfish as a curse.

That was why, if she was going to shake free from the hands holding onto her, Tanza wanted her to at least smile, wishing for happiness.

If she could not do so—

Tanza: "—Yorna-sama, you still love us."

Without letting go of those emotions, which were not in the past tense, but were still present even now, Tanza clearly declared so.

In front of her, Yorna's eyes were widened past their limit, and she fell into a state of astonishment. Her face was as if it were completely inconceivable that Tanza would ever talk back to her.

In reality, that must have been so. Tanza had wanted to serve Yorna well. Like Zoey, she had quietly obeyed Yorna's words, and put in the utmost effort to make them come true.

But, a glimpse of her ineptitude for that should have become apparent when she was separated from Yorna.

The Emperor and the fake Emperor who visited Chaosflame; in order to prevent them from dragging Yorna into their war, Tanza had acted independently from Yorna, and ended up unnecessarily amplifying the disorder.

As a result, Tanza was separated from Yorna during the events that followed, and she experienced many things.

And now, having finally reunited, Tanza was directly objecting to Yorna.

She was a bad child. She had become a bad child.

The person she wanted to be happy, she did not want that person to compromise in the act of becoming happy. For that purpose, Tanza would even overcome that person's words and prayers.

What a bad child she had become.

Yorna: "—ah."

Eyes wide open in astonishment, a feeble breath spilled from Yorna's lips.

That was Yorna's reaction to the pain from her wrist being firmly gripped. As Tanza's collar was being held up by Yorna's wrist, she firmly gripped the wrist in return.

Supposing it was as Yorna had said, that she did not care about Tanza or the others, and that she was freely doing what she desired, then this ought to have never happened.

Yorna's Soul Marriage Technique distributed power to those she loved.

The effects would also apply to Yorna herself, due to the logic of self-love—the feelings of affirmation towards oneself, which could even be called a manifestation of the belief that one's actions were right.

As long as she sincerely believed that she was correct, extraordinary power would surge within Yorna Mishigure.

But, if she did not believe that was the case, what would happen then?

Though she was one of the Nine Divine Generals, an apex of the Vollachian Empire's military, if Yorna could not affirm her own deeds, she would rapidly lose strength.

And unmistakably, that very phenomenon had occurred, to the extent that the sword of the Undead Swordmaster, who had parted ways with life, had surpassed her in strength.

Yorna could not support those whom she could not love, those whom she could not affirm.

That was why, she could not support her current self.

That was why—

Tanza: "—Yorna-sama, those feelings of love are the only thing you cannot feign."

A blue flame alight in her left eye, Tanza believed in Yorna's love without a single shred of doubt.

Yorna: "…"

As the suspended legs returned to the ground, and Tanza looked at her while her eye flamed, Yorna was at a loss for words.

Pressing down on the wrist that had been gripped so tightly, Yorna looked at Tanza's face in front of her; there was no proof of "love" as great as the flame housed therein, and she stared at it as if it were unbelievable.

It was as if she was under the impression that she could completely deceive her own heart.

Tanza: "Yorna-sama, you are not a very skilled person. —To tie up your hair and get dressed up in your kimono, were you not always relying on the strength of me, my sister, or of everyone else who loves you?"

Saying that, Tanza stood up on her tiptoes and stretched out her back, and with her stretched-out hand, she stroked Yorna's cheek.

Just as it had once been done to her, and just as she would one day do to somebody she wanted to lovingly cherish. At the sensation of those fingers, Yorna's blue eyes greatly wavered. They wavered.

Just like when her older sister raised her voice and cried for the first time, it was as if a stout heart was fissuring.

Thereupon—

Emilia: "—Hk! You can't! Tanza-chan!"

Behind Tanza as she faced Yorna, the voice of a cornered Emilia, and the sound of zori firmly stepping on the ground, seized her eardrums.

At the same time, the sound of a blade was unsheathed—she could conceive that a single Rowan had slipped past Emilia's interference, and was trying to approach in this direction.

Rowan: "Outta the way, missy. This over here's the stage I've yearned for in my dreams!"

Along with a selfish remark, the enemy ran like a strong wind.

Yorna had likely seen him from over her shoulder. Right away, she reached her hand out to Tanza's shoulder, and tried to push her body out of the way to protect her.

As if to return the favor from earlier, this time she would try and serve as Tanza's shield.

Tanza: "However, I cannot allow that."

Yorna: "Tanza…hk?"

Standing firm and enduring the hand that tried to push her out of the way, Tanza rejected that action. Instead, she turned around to protect Yorna behind her, and faced off against the hideous golden irises heading in her direction.

The unleashed sword aimed to slash through Tanza's neck, and to cut Yorna in half behind her. The stroke of the blade was enough to scorch the chilled atmosphere, and as it approached Tanza's neck—

Rowan: "—Hk."

Tanza: "The stage of your dreams, was it?"

Stifling the shock in the back of his throat, Rowan widened his golden eyes.

That must have been so. There was no doubt that he had not expected for the attack he had unleashed with all of his strength to be caught by such a small child.

With her raised hand, Tanza caught and intercepted the flash of silver that scorched the atmosphere.

—Yorna's Soul Marriage Technique distributed power to those she loved.

If one believed that they were correct, and there was no doubt that they were loved, if they selfishly believed that from the bottom of their heart, its effects would be tremendous.

???: "Tanza's also mine, so it's like she's basically on our side, right?"

Ahh, how irritating. She was confident that she was loved; she had been infected as a bad child.

That was far too irritating and unbearable. She was truly glad that it was in her nature not to show it on her face.

Tanza: “Apologies. I am quite busy, so I do not have the time to be watching happy dreams unfold.”

Putting strength into her hand and crushing the katana grasped within, with an astonished reaction to her front and rear, Tanza aimed at the face of the nuisance before her, and drove the fist that had shattered the katana right into it.

Giving a strike that went through his nose, and caved it into the inside of his head, Tanza made a declaration.

Her days of merely dreaming of paradise, and continuing to pray for the sake of her precious person, were over.

Without taking action herself, she would never be able to grasp paradise or her precious wishes.

Having been saved by her older sister, having been aided by Yorna, having met Natsuki Schwartz and other comrades in the Pleiades Battalion, and having finally arrived here, Tanza’s answer was—.

Tanza: “—Because there is a harsh, cruel, but lovely reality that awaits.”

After all, in order to reach the stars, she did not have time to stop in her tracks.

Vic.ll2o

Chapter 48:
The Curse of Thorns

—The name Eugard Vollachia, Emperor of the Briar, was known not just within the Vollachian Empire, but also far and wide across the rest of the world.

The reason for that lay in the tale of tragic love engraved into the history of the Empire, “Iris and the King of Thorns”.

The tale that depicted the meeting and parting of the kind-hearted girl named Iris, and the Vollachian Emperor feared as the King of Thorns, along with the tragic nature of its ending, struck a chord within the hearts of many readers.

The fated meeting between the two and their first parting. Thereafter, betrayed by his vassals, the King of Thorns was ousted from the throne and reunited with Iris, and hand-in-hand the two of them began their rebellion—since then, a long, long time had passed, and though the way of reciting the tale may have deviated from historical fact, the most important, core aspect, that of two people who were deeply in love with each other, remained completely unaltered as the story continued to be told.

Such was the extent to which the story of immutable love known as “Iris and the King of Thorns” continued to be beloved.

However, as a result, the story, being told as a tragic love tale which lit a fire within the hearts of people, ignored and concealed a part of the original historical truth.

Iris and the King of Thorns, the two of them peacefully spending their time cultivating their love, had not been the case.

During those tumultuous times, in an Empire where treachery and lamentation intertwined, they spent their days together risking their lives, fighting day and night for the sake of their desired future as they engaged in a burning love.

And indeed, Iris and the King of Thorns turned the entirety of the Vollachian Empire upside down, and finally succeeded in taking back the Empire. —Of course, the tragedy which followed need not be said.

But, before that tragedy occurred, the two had certainly achieved their goal.

With her compassionate heart and her devoted way of being, Iris had won many allies over to their cause. With that Iris by his side, the King of Thorns achieved results in warfare befitting an Emperor of Vollachia.

Results in warfare befitting an Emperor of Vollachia—remaining unchanged from times of yore, that was the embodiment of the Vollachian Empire's law of iron and blood. In other words, that was proof of power.

—The Emperor of the Briar, Eugard Vollachia, was the strongest Emperor in the history of the Empire.

???: "Go FUCK yourseeelf!!"

As a bursting roar thunderously boomed out of his throat, Groovy Gumlet leapt high into the air, and discarded the kusarigama which had had its handle cut in half.

A moment later, the kusarigama which had left his hand burst into deep red flames midair.

Had he hesitated for even a moment, those flames would have likely consumed him; his fur instinctually stood on end as he realized he had nearly been burned to death. But, he did not have time to feel relief.

Eugard: "Thou doth dance well, pup. However, when it cometh to dancing, Mine Star is far more of an impressive sight to behold."

While speaking fondly of his lover in a detached, emotionless tone, his onslaught of red streaks was relentless, as if blooming in profusion.

The weapon he wielded, which had received a blow from the kusarigama and had made it instantly burst into flame without even permitting an exchange of blows, was truly the worst—as one would expect from the treasured sword which bore the name of the Empire, it was not just its sharpness, but even its special characteristic that was exceedingly troublesome. If it were possible, he would have very much liked to produce an article rivaling its excellent quality with his own hands.

Groovy: "If only His Fucking Excellency had let me a get a nice close look at it!"

Given that no one apart from the rightful owner could possess the treasured sword, opportunities to see the genuine article were extremely few and far between.

While expressing dissatisfaction at how he had been treated as a General First-Class, Groovy made full use of his small stature, which had been made fun of by his opponent, and evading the crimson strikes with his nimble body, he dodged, dodged, and dodged once more.

He evaded because getting hit was not an option; though it was primitive, it was the optimal solution to use against such an enemy. If it had been Goz or Moguro here, they would have received the blow without evading, meeting their ends in a fiery blaze.

As the aftermath of the slashes incinerated the cityscape, Groovy's nose took in the burning smell as he successfully managed to dodge the gale of the crimson sword. However, he was still unable to catch his breath.

Even if he dodged the Yang Sword, which scorched the world as it cut through, the subsequent flash of blackness would bisect the world.

Groovy: "—Hk."

Not even his habitual cursing was able to escape his mouth.

As the barrage of powerful swings came from the Yang Sword, Eugard twisted his body and unleashed a brandish of the Fiend Sword, causing Groovy's fur to stand on end as he ducked while the blade scythed just a centimeter above his head.

The result of this slash did not end with just his relief at his head not flying off.

Along the trajectory which the blade had traced, a few dozen meters in front of where the stroke had cut, the cityscape of the Imperial Capital slanted diagonally, a series of severed buildings crumbling in its wake.

Its cutting edge was so plainly absurd that even making a dedicated sheath for the blade had been rife with difficulties, such was the might of the blade known as the Fiend Sword Murasame.

This Fiend Sword, which manifested such impossible power, naturally required a suitable compensation in order to be wielded. If the wielder were an ordinary person, it would be an untread area which could cost them their very life—.

Groovy: "Going whoosh whoosh whoosh with it, you have some nerve swinging it around so fucking casually…!"

Eugard: "Dost thou hold concern for I whilst we face off against each other? If such is the case, thy fears art unwarranted. Diminutive beings such as thee need only worry over thyselves. In regards to worrying over mineself, Mine Star alone is sufficient."

Groovy: "You don't make any fucking sense!"

In his right hand, the Yang Sword Vollachia, and in his left hand, the Fiend Sword Murasame.

Though the foe who dual-wielded the worst possible combination of two swords that Groovy could possibly imagine had not given his name, so long as he held the Yang Sword without bursting into flames, it showed that he possessed the due qualifications to wield it.

Additionally, green hair with a crown of thorns, this situation in which the dead were revived as the undead—the identity of the person dual-wielding the two worst blades, a terrible possibility rose to the surface in Groovy's mind as he spat out an endless string of curses.

Hence—

Groovy: "Eugard Vollachia…"

Eugard: "Even if thou dost not call out to mineself, I am aware of mine own personage. However, for recognizing mineself even though we art separated by time, I bestow mine praise unto thy discernment."

Bearing blades of instant death in both hands, he stated this in a crushing voice to his foe who had opened up some distance between them.

And then from the front, the undead, standing atop the burning wreckage of the buildings, drew back his chin solemnly at Groovy's call.

Hearing the undead's—Eugard's reply, Groovy snorted his nose with a bad attitude, and,

Groovy: "Even so, I'm still somebody who actually reads books among the fucking Generals of the First-Class. And I may as well just fucking say this while I'm at it, I'm one of the Nine Divine Generals."

Eugard: "Nine Divine Generals… Ah, so it yet remaineth in existence, that position."

Groovy: "Though it seems like it completely fucking vanished in your era."

In front of Eugard, whose inflectionless speech did not indicate whether he was interested or not, Groovy put his arms behind his waist, drawing two hatchets from it and holding them at the ready.

He still had plenty of Curse Tools. The problem was not Groovy's remaining number of Curse Tools, but rather his remaining amount of lifeforce.

Groovy: “…”

While interlocking gazes with Eugard, he glanced down at his own chest at the edge of his vision. Like before, his chest, in which his heart was stored, was being stabbed by sharp, transparent thorns as they writhed.

It was good that he had hastily prepared to deal with the Curse of Thorns that gnawed at his heart by running poison through himself, but this daredevil strategy was not designed for the long haul.

The Curse of Thorns was, by how it had looked, a powerful curse that indiscriminately engulfed a wide area centered on the caster. Therefore, he had anticipated that the user would be the type to hide while focusing on operating and maintaining the curse.

That had been naive. Very naive. His guess was completely off the mark, and far from being in hiding, the enemy was imposingly wielding powerful weapons—no, the weapons were indeed powerful, but the weapons alone were not the reason for this tough fight.

It was because the wielder of the weapons was a person of extraordinary power.

In the current Vollachian Empire, the status of General First-Class indicated the position of the Nine Divine Generals.

That system had been restored by the current Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, and though it had been repeatedly revived and erased several times throughout history, it was during the reign of none other than Eugard Vollachia that the system of the Nine Divine Generals was first lost.

For what reason had the system of the Nine Divine Generals been eradicated during Eugard’s reign?

That was—

Eugard: “—Naught else could hath been done. For those weaker than mineself hadst made an attempt on the life of Mine Star.”

—That was the reason why the Emperor of the Briar himself had executed all the Nine Divine Generals of his time with his own hands, not sparing even a single one.

Of course, Groovy had not been a part of the Nine Divine Generals at that time, nor were there transcendent figures such as Cecilus or Arakiya. But even so, he did not think that the powerful individuals who bore the title Nine Divine Generals were so weak that they could not hold a candle to Groovy and the rest of the current Divine Generals.

In short—

Groovy: "—Gonna be a fucking short-term decisive battle!"

Eugard: "Cease from piling on more impure utterances. 'Tis irreverent."

Kicking off the streets where slash marks had been etched, Groovy's body flew toward Eugard.

Groovy was readied with two hatchets, and while pointing out his manner of speech rather than those weapons, Eugard was calmly poised to intercept with the Yang Sword. To his opponent who stood ready to intercept him, Groovy furiously bared his fangs, and he struck with his hatchets in a vertical attack.

Naturally, the strike was blocked by the Yang Sword, which had been raised overhead, but that was just what he wanted.

Eugard: "Hm."

At the moment the Yang Sword collided with the hatchets, cracks formed in Eugard's face. Literally.

The crack on the cheek of his pale, prim face was proof that Groovy's blow had permeated through his opponent.

Groovy: "It worked, but fuck off!"

At the puzzled Eugard, Groovy laughed with a sidelong glance as the hatchets were blown away in a blaze of flame.

To avoid the spread of fire, he had let go of the hatchets the moment they hit the Yang Sword, but the effect of those Curse Tools—not cutting them, but forcing an impact through them, was activated.

Originally, it was a Curse Tool that had been made to kill opponents who wore thick armor and steel helmets even when they were still clad in that equipment. The blade of the hatchet vibrated immensely at such a minute scale that it could not be seen; even the slightest contact would cause the vibrations to be sent throughout the opponent's body, pulverizing their bones and viscera.

Though would be lethal damage for a living person, he was not sure how effective it would be against an undead—

Eugard: "Enthralling. But if thou art incapable of continuing onward—"

Groovy: "Who ever said anything like that? I've got a fuckton of Curse Tools left!"

As if one or two axes were not enough, Groovy pulled out two more hatchets and readied them in both hands. Upon hearing Groovy's answer, Eugard slightly raised the eyebrows of his cracked face.

A hatchet was thrown, Eugard gyrated his body to avoid being hit, and then fired off a slash. Groovy also avoided the slash by jumping, and continued to throw hatchets one after the other.

Groovy: "Ora ora ora ora ora ora oraahhh!"

Eugard: "…"

Between the barking Groovy and the silent Eugard, a momentary combat between the two turned into a fierce struggle.

As Groovy threw his Curse Tools as he pleased, Eugard continued to fire blows from his combination of the Yang Sword and the Fiend Sword in return.

At a glance, the battle appeared to be evenly matched with only one move from either side needed to tilt the odds in their favor, but in reality, Groovy was at a major disadvantage.

His remaining strength, his number of remaining Curse Tools, and the lethality of each of their weapons, were all unfavorable to him.

The deadly poison that coursed through his veins was draining his life, and the Curse Tools that he kept using would eventually run out. While these Curse Tools might have caused great damage when they connected, the opponent's swords would spell certain death if they were to hit.

Even to an untrained eye, it was obvious which side had the advantage, and even more so for the two parties involved in the fight.

That was why Groovy capitalized on being at a disadvantage.

Groovy: "I'll fucking show you something."

Groovy did not consider himself to be particularly strong among the Nine Divine Generals.

He once prided himself on being the strongest in Vollachia. However, after being recruited by Vincent and seeing others who had been given the same rank of General, those illusions vanished.

He desired to be strong, but he did not want to step out of line, and he was not qualified to do so.

He was no match for Cecilus with his strength, Arakiya with her explosive power, Olbart with his versatility, Chisha with his intellect, Goz with his caliber as a General, Moguro with their survivability, Yorna with her unorthodoxy, Madelyn with her anti-army capabilities, and Balleroy with his anti-unit efficiency.

That was Groovy's self-assessment and the point he'd arrived at as a general.

However, aside from that, Groovy had strengths that the other Generals did not possess.

—Groovy excelled in his relentless dedication and method of killing his opponents.

Groovy: “chomp”

During his throw, a large amount of blood poured out of Groovy’s mouth with a bloodshot look in his eyes.

This was the result of the poison circulating throughout his body, causing blood vessels to break, which then overflowed as they broke all over his body. At the sight of Groovy vomiting blood, Eugard’s expression did not waver.

He, too, was a master martial artist, and he must have known that Groovy was approaching him with some means of resisting the Curse of Thorns. But also, that this was placing a burden on Groovy’s body that he would not be able to endure for long.

The blood he vomited only confirmed this belief.

Even if Eugard’s blades did not reach him, Groovy would die of exhaustion on his own. Indeed, Eugard must have discerned this with his insight.

Because of this, he would not be able to fully avoid Groovy’s mist of blood, as he spewed all of the accumulated blood from his mouth.

Eugard: “…”

Eugard frowned slightly, evaporating the mist of blood with the flames of the Yang Sword.

The blood contained the poison that Groovy had taken in, but even if one were exposed to it, the damage would be negligible. The goal, however, was not to poison his opponent.

It was to apply Groovy’s blood. —It was successfully applied to his sleeve, which he could not shake off.

Groovy: “Like fish in a fucking barrel.”

Immediately after, Groovy smiled, his bloody fangs showing. Around Eugard—the countless hatchets he had dodged so far drew close to him, as if pulled by a string.

Using Groovy’s blood as a medium to acquire its target, it was a guided tomahawk application of Curse Tool known as “blood hatchets”.

Eugard: “This is…”

Eugard dodged the incoming blood hatchet, but then his eyes widened as he saw it circle around and come back again.

Eugard, with his incredible physical prowess, dodged, dodged, dodged, and continued to dodge the storm of blood hatchets coming at him from all directions, but unless he knocked them down, they would eventually catch up to him as they came flying at him endlessly.

However, Groovy was not so well-behaved as to wait for that eventuality.

Groovy: “You’re probably wondering when it’s gonna fucking end, aren’t you? I’ll give you the answer!”

As he said this, Groovy was not holding an additional blood hatchet, but rather the severed weighted chain from the kusarigama that had been burned by the Yang Sword in the initial attack.

A specially engineered chain weight, it was briefly spun, and then was thrown with arrow-like speed at Eugard’s feet as he struggled to evade the blood hatchets.

Eugard: “—!”

Eugard turned his wrist to catch the chain weight with the middle of the Yang Sword.

Immediately seeing the difference between it and the blood hatchets, it was a brilliant move on his part deciding that it would be safe to defend against it. However, in the arsenal of the Master of Curse Tools, Groovy Gumlet, there was nothing one could safely touch.

At the moment of impact, the chain weight glowed red, and a tremendous explosion enveloped Eugard.

Eugard: “Ohhh—”

Tossed by the blast and flames, Eugard finally let out a distressed cry and was blown away. Nevertheless, Eugard straightened up his limp body, and he immediately tried to prepare for a follow-up attack.

Aiming toward Eugard, the blood hatchets swarmed the motionless target.

One blood hatchet could shatter bones, two could crush internal organs, and three or more could end a life.

With ten or twenty of them pouring down, not even Eugard could withstand it.

Therefore, Groovy felt sure that he had killed him—

Eugard: “—Stand tall. Thou art stronger than all the Nine Divine Generals of mine era.”

A moment later, Eugard’s fearless face appeared before Groovy’s eyes.

A slash from the Fiend Sword sliced off Groovy’s right ear as he leaned forward, and a kick from his leaping opponent hit him in the midsection, sending his small body flying backward.

But, as he was being sent flying, Groovy undid his waistband, swung his snakewhip sword, which was made from a series of snakepeople fangs, and began to cleave at the head of the pursuing Eugard.

Eugard: “If thou hadst been among the insurrectionists, the life of Mine Star may hath even been in danger.”

As it unwinded, the snakewhip sword unleashed a long, undulating blow akin to the body of a serpent.

Unsparingly dismantling it with the Fiend Sword as it approached him, Eugard appraised Groovy's fighting strength by comparing it to his own experiences.

And as proof of his honor at that evaluation from the strongest Emperor in all history, Groovy aligned his feet, and fired two grappling hooks from the cuffs of his trousers in an attempt to shatter both shoulders of his opponent.

Eugard: "Even under such circumstances, thou art as sumptuous as ever."

As the heels of his feet were whittled down by those grappling hooks, Eugard delivered a kick to Groovy; coughing up blood as a result of that kick, Groovy ripped off the cloth wrapped around his neck, and unfurled it into the air.

For a moment, the line of sight between Groovy and Eugard was obstructed.

Groovy: "Go, fuck, yourSELLLLL—!!"

From the one side of that unfurled cloth, Groovy flicked the magic crystal embedded in his throat, and hit Eugard with a surging roar that rumbled the very atmosphere.

From an unseeable position, with an onslaught equivalent to sound itself, it was a surprise attack that was impossible to dodge.

But, against that sound, Eugard displayed the true ability of the Fiend Sword.

—"To get to the point", there existed such a saying.

It meant to get down to the heart of a matter, but in all things there was an appropriate "point". No matter the object or phenomenon, or even concept, there existed a "point" that signified its essence.

The Fiend Sword Murasame, was an Enchanted Sword that bisected that perceived "point".

Murasame hated Groovy, who had melted it down, and reforged it in the past, so in order to prevent his outstanding sense of smell from sniffing it out, it cut the point of its “scent”.

Since then, it has become impossible for anybody to pursue the Fiend Sword Murasame by scent.

And here, Murasame had cut the surging roar that Groovy had unleashed.

Groovy’s eardrums heard the sound of the magic crystal embedded in his throat shattering, and the moment he realized that, the slash of the sword was about to cleave Groovy in twain—

Groovy: “…”

A sudden gust of wind had saved the life that should have been severed.

???: “Deary me, that was a real close call. I was just takin’ a stroll and happened ta save yer life, fella.”

With the Curse Tools he had sent forth for an emergency evacuation having all been made powerless, Groovy’s life had been on the verge of eradication; carrying him, the tall figure who had unexpectedly appeared spoke in a laid-back tone.

Groovy was surprised by that sudden interloper, but Eugard could not conceal his shock either.

Not only had he interrupted this fierce battle, but his presence drawing closer had not even been felt until this moment.

Groovy: “Bashturd…”

???: “Ah, pushin’ yerself ain’t no good. It was the technique that got cut, but the effect is goin’ all the way ta yer voice. If ya try force yerself ta speak, you’ll never speak again.”

Responding to Groovy’s voice, which sounded like it was clotted with blood, the person who had perfectly ascertained what had happened—the wolfman with black fur, let Groovy down.

Then, with his eyes that were as thin as threads, he looked over towards Eugard, who was glaring at him,

Wolfman: “I see. A Curse Tool that can chase ya down ta the ends of the world sure is useful, and yet it was made powerless with a single arm. However…”

Pausing his words there, the wolfman watched as Eugard’s missing right arm grew back.

As the wolfman had said, the moment the storm of blood hatchets exploded, Eugard had pruned off the entirety of the right arm which had blood on its sleeve, and had managed to avoid it.

It was not as though that method of evasion had been outside of Groovy’s consideration, but if one lost an arm, their actions would dull accordingly. Even when keeping the fact that they were an undead in mind, that should not have changed.

Despite all that, Eugard displayed immutable movements before and after losing his arm.

That had been beyond Groovy’s expectations, and if not for the wolfman’s interference, he would have connected with a fatal opening that caused him to lose his life. —But, the significance of that was.

Groovy: “Oi, fuhgger.”

Wolfman: “…Just now, did ya call me a fucker?”

Groovy: “Moar impohrtuntlee…Hk.”

Wolfman: “I know, I know. I’d be fully aware even if ya didn’t tell me.”

Nodding at the appeal, the wolfman put his golden kiseru in his mouth, and set the tip alight.

Then, while puffing out smoke, he slightly lowered the pitch of his voice and continued.

Wolfman: “Golly, guess there really are some casters who got nasty personalities. —There ain’t an ounce of love in this.”

Seeing the same thing as the wolfman as he spoke those words, Groovy harbored a similar impression.

Eugard ascertained the feeling of his regrown right arm; holding the Fiend Sword in his left hand, the powerful Emperor of yore threw off the garment that had been singed by the explosion.

—Just like Groovy, the Curse of Thorns had also been planted upon Eugard’s chest.

Chapter 49:
The King of Thorns

1

—As the one known as the Admirer, Halibel made full use of his title as the Kararagi City-States’ strongest individual.

Even if one surveyed the entirety of the Four Great Countries, they would have no choice but to say that there were no shinobi who surpassed him. Even the Empire’s strongest shinobi, Olbart, would have to make a bitter expression and admit he was the most powerful. Evaluated as an equal to the Sword Saint, the Mad Prince, and the Blue Lightning, alongside the strongest of each nation he had a track record which one could not be ashamed of.

There was only one difference between Halibel and the other three: he did not belong to any nation, proclaiming himself a masterless ronin.

The Sword Saint who was bound by treaty to the Kingdom, the Mad Prince who had been branded a national traitor and confined in the northernmost tower, even the Blue Lightning whose selfishness was renowned around the world held a position.

Only the Admirer Halibel was a free man who held no official position.

Of course, Halibel himself held a sense of gratitude and belonging to his homeland and would sometimes be asked to investigate and resolve serious problems in Kararagi. But, as far as the idea of his existence being owned by someone else was concerned, being used as a bargaining chip in negotiations and transactions was something he was extremely averse to.

—He would side with those he wanted to help, and he would turn his nose up at those things which did not interest him.

That was Halibel’s motto as one of the strongest, the owner of such a whimsical nature naturally caused the assessments of those who knew him to be divided into two extremes.

On one hand, there were those who were rejected with a “Without me y’all would be just fine, just fine, you’re remarkable.”

On the other hand, there were others who were accepted with an “It’s amazin’ that you’re able ta move someone like me, you’re remarkable.”

Either way he always relaxedly spoke of his praise for others, and so he was always called the Admirer.

Naturally, this was not the only reason for his nickname; no matter what opponent or action he was faced with, it was Halibel’s way of being to give an objective evaluation.

And so—

Halibel: “Golly, guess there really are some casters who got nasty personalities. —There ain’t an ounce of love in this.”

Puffing smoke from his kiseru, there was no admiration in the words that escaped Halibel’s mouth.

The tone of his voice was slightly lower, making him sound irritated, something that those who knew him would be surprised by as he was rarely ever displeased.

Halibel did not have a favorable impression of the undead, but there had been a moment when the scope and result of the technique made him feel some admiration for the opponent caster.

But, for the state of the opponent right in front of him, not a single shred of admiration could be found.

Halibel: “…”

Slightly opening his eyes which were as thin as threads, Halibel looked at the opponent in question with his golden irises—throwing away his tattered garments and wielding an incredibly famed sword was Eugard.

Just moments ago, one of the Nine Divine Generals, Groovy, had been facing off against this formidable enemy, but now he was unable to stand due to the burden of a technique that had become intertwined with his soul.

Seeing that same thing, Groovy, who was beside him, wiped up the blood coming from his mouth.

Groovy: “Oi, dat’s…”

Halibel: “I said don’t force yerself ta talk. I can see it too. —That kid, he said that he wanted ta leave this ta an expert on curses.”

Stroking his beard with one hand, Halibel recalled the boy that had assigned him to the fourth bastion.

Vincent had acknowledged the boy, who had gathered immense trust for his judgment of his surroundings, enough that even Anastasia held high hopes for him and told Halibel to respect his opinion as much as possible.

Due to his deep knowledge of curse techniques, that boy had assigned him to deal with this opponent who was said to be a decisive factor in the battle for the Imperial Capital. With all of Anastasia’s boasting, he was eager to fully display the true strength of Kararagi’s strongest.

Halibel: “Really didn’t see this comin’…”

The unenthusiastic Halibel, and Groovy who was at his side, both looked at the same thing.

They were both aware of the left side of Eugard’s chest, where the human heart would be and where a semi-transparent venomous looking thorn now appeared—the very same Curse of Thorns that had been indiscriminately disseminated across a large portion of the Imperial Capital was also eating into Eugard.

From this mysterious fact, two possibilities emerged.

The first was that the Curse of Thorns had even engulfed the caster, Eugard, and was an indiscriminate curse in the truest sense of the word.

However, Halibel evaluated that the second possibility had a higher likelihood of being true.

That was to say—

Eugard: "—Demi-human, answer mine query."

After he had finished ascertaining that his right hand had regenerated, Eugard cast his voice towards them.

Naturally, the one who was told this and was pierced through by his gaze was the sudden intruder, Halibel. To that statement Halibel asked "Me?" and pointed to himself with his finger, to which Eugard nodded.

Eugard: "If mine judgment does not err, thou art a wolfman, yes?"

Halibel: "Ahh, that'd be right. I'm a wolfman… since Vollachia went ta the extremes, we're in a position where we gotta feel ashamed of ourselves throughout the world. Seems like we're gonna die out soon."

Eugard: "I see. —I see."

The second part of his phrase was filled with an intent to eradicate him, but Eugard nodded quietly, as if to confirm it. Halibel was suspicious of this situation, meanwhile Groovy raised his hoarse voice to say "Oi!"

Halibel: "I told ya, don't force yerself…"

Groovy: "Dat's naut impoartunt, FUHG! Dah Emprouhr of duh Braiyer ish..!"

Eugard: "—I bear no grudge against thee personally."

Before Groovy could finish speaking with blood running through his voice, that declaration was made along with a physical form.

The casually wielded Fiend Sword flashed with black, and disregarding Groovy’s presence, it cleaved through Halibel, splitting him in two from his groin to the top of his head.

In just a blink of an eye, Halibel had been split vertically in twain.

Groovy: “—Hk!”

At the terrible scene, Groovy, who hadn’t been able to speak in time, was at a loss for words while Eugard, the one who had cut through Halibel, remained in a posture with the Fiend Sword raised overhead,

Eugard: “However, thy race was once complicit in causing the death of Mine Star. Therefore, akin to the molepeople who bear the same sin, I shall eradicate all of thy kind as an example.”

Halibel: “…Ahh, I finally managed ta remember. Ancient Emperor-san, ya were the original cause of us goin’ extinct.”

Eugard: “Hm?”

After speaking words to the opponent he had slain, Eugard scowled when a response was given.

In front of Eugard, the person who answered was Halibel, whose body had been severed into left and right parts right down the middle. Eugard blinked slowly at Halibel’s body, as each half gradually parted from the other.

Eugard: “That is a surprise. That thou hath yet to perish even in that state, is it perhaps beyond the final destination for those who train themselves to the extreme?”

Halibel: “That’s quite the amusing evaluation. But that ain’t it. —It just ain’t my real body.”

Just as Halibel laughed playfully, the left and right parts of his body instantly collapsed, and a large amount of black fur fell on the spot.

Drawing attention to such an unrealistic scene, behind Eugard—

Eugard: “Do not heedlessly sneak upon mine back. It shall not be pardoned for any other than Mine Star."

Halibel: "Heh, now ain't that quite the big deal."

On the opposite side of his collapsed clone, Halibel's body was cut in half by a slash from Eugard's right arm—by the Yang Sword that was held there once again.

However, the bisected upper and lower body that immediately burst into flames was not the main body either.

Having just dealt with the sudden attack to his back, Eugard exclaimed "Ngh" in surprise as his body abruptly sank down.

The cause was a third Halibel, who had grabbed him by both of his legs and dragged him down into the street. Halibel slipped out of the ground, and swapped positions with Eugard who was thus buried up to his waist. It would have been ideal to bury him up to his neck to restrict his movements, but,

Halibel: "It ain't gonna go so swimmingly, as expected."

The third Halibel grumbled and was torn to shreds above the burning remains of the second Halibel.

With vertical, horizontal, and diagonal slashes, he made cuts in a grid pattern and blew the pieces of the body apart; having also cut the ground into pieces with those slashes, Eugard jumped out.

With the Yang Sword in his right hand and the Fiend Sword in his left, he had recovered his fighting stance.

While dual wielding two Enchanted Swords that surpassed human knowledge, Eugard readied himself and was assailed by two new Halibels from left and right. It was a sort of revenge against the inexhaustible attack of the undead, but the increase in Halibels was something different to that of the common undead.

Eugard: "Thou art a devoted menace."

Accepting the fact of Halibel's clones with equanimity, Eugard swung the two Enchanted Swords simultaneously.

Against the Halibels as they came from the left and right, each Enchanted Sword was readied to unleash a deadly attack—but, a third Halibel who had appeared behind Eugard, grabbed his arms, and stopped him.

Halibel: "Sorry 'bout this, but I can actually go up ta three."

Having detained both his arms, the two Halibels belatedly used their hands to pierce the immobilized Eugard's head and torso.

As a master of the Flow Method, the sharpness of Halibel's spear hand was more akin to that of a famed sword rather than a mediocre cutting tool.

Without missing their aim, they pierced Eugard's right eye and solar plexus, demonstrating their might which was enough to cause an instant death.

However—

Eugard: "Do not attempt to scheme against mineself. For any other than Mine Star it is irreverent."

Stating this, his unpierced left eye met Halibel's and immediately afterwards, the radiance of the Yang Sword shone more brilliantly. The next moment, the red glow burst into flames, and including Eugard, the entire area was instantly engulfed in an inferno.

The explosive spread of the fire engulfed three Halibels who were in contact with Eugard, and burned them to a crisp.

Then, a beat later, the flames disappeared like an illusion, and the three Halibels were all reduced to cinders. Eugard, who had also been scorched, regenerated the burnt surface, and stepped forth unperturbed.

Then, looking around with his golden eyes—he noticed that Groovy, who had been there just a moment ago, had disappeared.

Eugard: "I had not thought him so courteous as to back down. —What is thine aim?"

Halibel: "—I ain't likin' this. I hate it when someone figures out my tricks."

Having left Eugard far behind on the battlefield, Halibel shook his head and sighed at how troublesome he was, not just because of his swordsmanship.

Eugard masterfully handled the powerful magic swords without being overpowered by them.

In addition to his considerable strength, he was virtually immortal due to being an undead and possessed a high level of insight. He had also seen through the deception that there was a limit of three clones, and had skillfully responded to deadly situations.

Halibel: "That's what I'd expect of a man who almost turned the tide of a losin' war single-handedly. Do ya think he's prideful?"

Groovy: "If you're asking me that, fuhg…"

Halibel asked this while holding him, and Groovy thrashed about in his arms as he was being carried away from the battlefield.

If they had remained there, they would have been caught in Eugard's final burst of flames, making their situation even more unbearable, but there was no cause for him to be so grateful.

After all, as a warrior himself, he could understand why he would not want to be kept back from the battle.

Halibel: "But, ain't there a chance you'll die from this? To begin with, ya forced yerself to move yer body with poison… that's quite the reckless thing to do."

Groovy: "…"

Groovy was slightly surprised that he had pointed that out, and Halibel flicked his own nose with his finger.

As a Shinobi who was familiar with all kinds of poisons, he could surmise what the faint strange odor mixed with Groovy's blood was. As for its use, Halibel would never have imagined or attempted it, and the thought of it caused him to shudder.

Halibel: "Honestly, the people of Vollachia sure are determined 'n scary. Not to mention Olbart-san, who's still grinnin' even tho he's missin' his right hand. Despite bein' an old man, I ain't no match for him."

Groovy: "And, what abouht youh…"

Halibel: "Hmm?"

Groovy: "It's gonna fuhgging get worse, that's how it usually is, clumsy curse…!"

Halibel: "—That's a problem, ain't it?"

Responding with a hint of confusion in his voice, Halibel replied to Groovy, who slurred as he dealt with his bloody throat that was rapidly getting worse.

This was why he was taking Groovy away from the battlefield, not to abandon his duties and flee the Imperial Capital, but as part of the strategy for victory.

Recklessly challenging an opponent without knowing anything about them is a fool's errand. Halibel's strength was such that it could defeat most opponents by sheer force alone, but this was not the case with this opponent.

That was not to say that his opponent was not superbly talented.

Halibel: "Well, if I were to keep fightin' with him like we were, I'm sure I'd be stronger than him. That's the truth, but—"

Merely defeating Eugard was not enough to fulfill the task that had been given to Halibel.

Halibel was tasked with dealing with the "curse" that would determine the outcome of the decisive battle for Imperial Capital, and simply defeating Eugard would not solve that problem.

That fact was the biggest problem.

Groovy: “Yhour, thornshh are…”

Halibel: “They’re all gone. That’s the second clue.”

Groovy: “…The first one, is that Emperor’s fucking thorns.”

Groovy, who was being held by Halibel as he ran and kicked the ground agilely, peeked at Halibel’s chest. Beneath his wasou, the Curse of Thorns that should have been on Halibel’s chest was gone.

It emitted an oozing pain, so it was no wonder that it was expected to be the biggest obstacle to be eliminated in the fight against the undead. However, Halibel had yet to take any proactive action to remove it.

The thorns had disappeared despite nothing having been done. On the other hand, it was not Halibel that had made the thorns disappear.

What that meant was—

Groovy: “That fucking bastard…”

Halibel: “From the sound of it, it looks like you ‘n I are havin’ the same thoughts. It’s reassurin’ to hear that the Master of Curse Tools is sharin’ the same opinion as me.”

Groovy: “It’s a fucking mishmash of shit all mixshhhed togetterh. That fucking bastard, the solution is fucking annoying…!”

Groovy cursed out his undirected anger as if spitting.

In the same frame of mind as Groovy, Halibel once again regained his initial misgivings and was convinced that the second possibility, which came to mind when he saw the thorns on Eugard’s chest, was the correct one.

The Curse of Thorns, the logical reason why they were entangled in Eugard’s chest was simple.

Halibel: “Them thorns weren’t the Emperor cursin’ the people ’round him, but…”

Groovy: “His Excellency Eugard was cursed by some bastard, and now the curse is being amplified like a motherfucker.”

3

—Eugard Vollachia, Emperor of the Briar, had received a curse as part of the sabotage concerning the Imperial Selection Ceremony, a rite of succession for the Imperial throne that had persisted for a long time within the Vollachian Empire.

After all this time, which of his opposing Imperial siblings had been responsible, and how distinguished of a curse arts user they had been involved with, were not certain things.

Only, intended for the forthcoming Imperial Selection Ceremony, the brutal strategy which had intended to diminish the competing opponents, greatly distorted the fate of the young Imperial who went on to become Eugard Vollachia.

—The Curse of Thorns placed upon Eugard, was a terribly cruel yet simple thing.

That was to say, through the binding of thorns, an unbearable agony that gnawed at his heart was bestowed upon him.

And, that was also something that applied to those in Eugard’s surroundings.

If the young Eugard cried and screamed at the pain of the curse, his family members and servants would try to save him from it. But, when they would try to get close to him, they would all be caught up in the curse, and thus would refuse to approach.

Within such solitude, the curse aimed to kill Eugard amidst the pain—that was the true form of the Curse of Thorns placed upon Eugard.

Due to the dreadfully ruthless Curse of Thorns, Eugard should have been unable to even reach the Imperial Selection Ceremony, and should have been a tragic Imperial whose life came to a quick close.

That would have been the synopsis that the person who had ordered for the curse to be placed upon Eugard had in mind; but here, a huge, huge, so huge that it would go on to change the destiny of the Empire, coincidence had arisen.

By birth, Eugard had “congenital analgesia”, the inability to feel pain.

Therefore, the constantly active Curse of Thorns did not bestow pain upon Eugard himself, but instead only continued to grant pain to those around him; as a result, he was left completely alone.

Even his family and servants did not approach him, and living by himself in the mansion which had been bestowed to him, Eugard spent his childhood without any opportunities to make contact with others; he thought that this was the reason why his expression was always so stiff, but it was fifty-fifty between that and his natural disposition being the reason.

In any case, Eugard and the Curse of Thorns had miraculously continued to coexist.

His contact with others had been limited to an absolute minimum, but even so, there were times where he had no choice but to make contact. During each of those times, the people who got caught up in the Curse of Thorns naturally reported that “Eugard was the one who placed the curse”, and Eugard had never denied it.

In reality, regarding the true form of the Curse of Thorns, Eugard did not know whether it was something placed on him by somebody else, or if he was the one invoking it for some unknown reason.

Furthermore, the curse arts user who had placed the curse, and would thus have the answer, never appeared in Eugard’s life afterwards, and the one who had ordered it remained unknown.

Therefore, with the true form of the thorns that haunted his every step unbeknownst to him, the King of Thorns continued his walk for a long, long time.

If the curse had never been placed upon him, then those steps would have been interrupted somewhere during the Imperial Selection Ceremony, bringing them to a permanent halt.

The thorns isolated Eugard, and the goal of the one who had placed the curse upon him was fulfilled, albeit not in its original form.

???: “Would it not be more comforting to count the stars in the sky than to look out into the darkness?”

—That was, save for his encounter with the girl, who had stepped into Eugard’s thorns, and had approached him.

4

Eugard: “I assumed thou hadst fled, wolfman.”

Halibel: “Well, it ain’t like I didn’t think ‘bout it… Sorry, that’s a lie. I didn’t think ‘bout it in the slightest.”

Eugard: “For what reason hast thou made an attempt to deceive mineself?”

Halibel: “It’s a habit of mine ta be ramblin’ on with loose lips. I’d be delighted if ya could forgive me without takin’ it too seriously.”

Eugard: “The act of deceit against the Emperor is irreverent. Yet, judging how thou hast confessed thy mistake, I shall disregard thy lie from a moment prior.”

Greeting Halibel as he returned to the stage, Eugard drew back his chin in a composed manner.

Without being disagreeable regarding Halibel, who had at one point left the battlefield and then returned, Eugard’s imposing stance had the dignity of an Emperor to it as he spoke.

Even without his strength, his caliber was undoubtedly worthy of being called Emperor.

Halibel: “Ta go ‘n make such a person as angry as lava, just what kinda things did ya guys do, my ancestors?”

At his undetachable connection with Eugard, Emperor of the Briar, Halibel scratched his cheek.

From Halibel’s perspective as a wolfman, Eugard could be called the archenemy of his entire race.

Needing to feel ashamed of their race throughout the entire world, the Vollachian Empire was still to this day an environment in which wolfpeople, and half-wolfpeople of mixed blood—werewolves, would be unable to escape the death penalty if they were to be discovered. The one who had cemented that as law to last forevermore within the Empire, was none other than this very Eugard.

The two races of wolfpeople and molepeople were established as the sworn enemies who had betrayed the Vollachian Empire, and amidst a long history, many of their brethren had lost their lives, and they were massacred to the verge of extinction.

In the future, that trend was unlikely to be completely lost.

Therefore, from Halibel’s perspective, it was natural for him to harbor an equal amount of hatred towards this opponent, but—

Eugard: “—Turning such a gaze upon mineself shan’t be pardoned.”

Halibel: “What kinda eyes does it look like I’m makin’?”

Eugard: “Eyes Mine Star would make on occasion. Anyone but Mine Star who turns such eyes upon mineself, I shall not pardon… Nay, ‘tis not to mine fondness.”

Hearing Eugard’s answer, in which there was likely no lie or falsehood, Halibel took a deep breath, and placed his hand over his left breast.

Thereupon, the Curse of Thorns was not present. Upon him, who ought to have been an abominable, detestable wolfman to Eugard, the curse was not being invoked. —That was something that more so ruffled Halibel's feelings.

Halibel: "Supposin' that kid went 'n sent me here predictin' that I'd get these feelin's, then, lil' Ana, ya really gotta watch out."

On the back of his closed eyelids, envisioning the girl whom he had known since she was a young child, and who had not ended up growing to be very tall, Halibel held the kiseru in his mouth as he said those words.

Then, setting the tip alight, he got a good whiff of the smoke before puffing it out.

Breathing out, he made up his mind.

Halibel: "It's fine if ya don't forgive me, Emperor-san. That's the kinda relationship between us, ain't it?"

Eugard: "That sort of relation would be?"

Halibel: "Between wolfpeople, 'n the Emperor of the Briar."

They each had a reason to hate the other, and a reason to destroy the other.

Pointing at himself and his opponent, Halibel spoke thus, to which Eugard's expression did not change. He did not know just how many things were locked on the other side of that invariant expression.

And though he did not know, Halibel had made up his mind.

By merely defeating Eugard, the duty he had been entrusted with, and his own determination, would not be fulfilled.

Therefore—

Halibel: "I'll set ya free from that darn disgustin' curse, 'n make ya nothin' more than just a king, O King of Thorns."

Chapter 50:
Eugard Vollachia

1

—Eugard Vollachia was a King who had been forced into solitude.

Having been afflicted with the Curse of Thorns for as long as he could remember, he was forced to grow up in a terribly unbalanced environment, with even his family and servants unable to approach him.

With his painless condition, Eugard did not have to experience the suffering of the Curse of Thorns, of which he was the source, but understood from the expressions of pain and screams from those around him that his existence was a source of torment to people, and so he accepted his life of isolation.

As for the Imperial Selection Ceremony, his chances of winning it were doubtful as well.

Common sense dictated that since he was afflicted with the Curse of Thorns, it would be very much inadvisable for him to assume the Imperial Throne and be in charge of the national government of the Vollachian Empire.

Even if he could become Emperor, he thought that an Emperor who could never appear in person to meet with important state officials or to negotiate with the leaders of other countries must not exist.

Therefore, once he decided that he should not win the Imperial Selection Ceremony, Eugard had settled that his life would end at the age when the ceremony begins.

Until that age, Eugard would gather all the knowledge he could and serve the Imperial Family—namely, for the improvement and peace of life of Imperial Citizens.

With the Curse of Thorns gnawing at him, Eugard had been forced into solitude.

However, despite his circumstances, Eugard did not consider himself unhappy. He did not feel that he was cursed, and as long as there was a rational answer to the “why”, he did not resent the person who had done it.

Some people were born blind, some were crippled. He thought that his inability to live side by side with others was just one of those things.

And, in a world where people constantly lost their lives due to blindness or crippled limbs, he considered himself lucky to have survived thanks to his position as a member of the Imperial Family.

Thanks to his origins from the Imperial Family, Eugard had been able to continue living without family or anyone close to him, as well as never knowing of starvation. Because of that, he would fulfill his duties as a member of the Imperial Family.

While he was sorry for his mother and the people of his house, he would never be able to seize the throne of the Emperor. —Then, at the very least, he would use the not-so-long years of his remaining life for the sake of the world that encompassed him.

—Hence, meeting her had been the biggest mistake of Eugard’s life.

It was not because he came to wish for the Imperial Throne, which he had ought to have given up on. Nor had he abandoned the mission of the Imperial Family.

Only, he had ended up with the desire to live. —To live with Iris, he had ended up desiring so.

2

The Curse of Thorns was something that had been cast upon Eugard Vollachia, and its effects had been designed to force Eugard into solitude.

To achieve that objective, what might be the conditions under which it would manifest its maximum effectiveness?

The opposite of isolation could be said to be love. That was to say, the Curse of Thorns was a curse that kept the people one loved at a distance.

In other words—

???: “The thorns went ahead ‘n disappeared from my chest, ‘n the fact that they haven’t disappeared for anyone else has gotta be the answer.”

Biting lightly on the mouthpiece of his kiseru, Halibel murmured while patting his own chest.

Having betrayed the King of Thorns, wolfpeople and molepeople had ended up being labeled as traitors in even the fairy tales that had been passed down for a long time; being one of the former himself, the reason that the thorns had disappeared from his chest, was that Eugard had recognized Halibel as a wolfman, and thus he had fallen outside of the conditions for the Curse of Thorns.

The Curse of Thorns would not be activated unless directed at something one loved.

Halibel: “Bein’ someone with immense affection, I can’t help but wonder who that was bad for.”

Mixing his frustration with the purple smoke, Halibel took a deep drag from his kiseru.

The special tobacco dropped onto the bowl burned out in a single puff, filling Halibel’s unusually large lungs with smoke. In the subsequent instant, biting down on his teeth and tossing the kiseru upwards, Halibel in his black kimono tilted his upper body, and the black hair on his back was slashed by the Fiend Sword that was swung diagonally.

Behind him, as the cityscape of the Imperial Capital tilted diagonally in the aftermath of that slash, Halibel’s towering stature stepped forward, along with another three tall figures doing so simultaneously.

Those tall figures were Halibel, each one an exact duplicate of the others.

However—

Eugard: “That acrobatics feat of thine, I have witnessed erstwhile.”

The Yang Sword wielded in his raised right hand descended, and flames covered the path of the four Halibels.

The hue of the scorching flames was too intense, creating a curtain of flames on the street that even appeared white, forcing Halibel and his duplicates to make a choice. Namely, the options were to leap over the flames or to take a detour—however, Halibel took neither of these two choices, and instead went for a third.

Halibel: “It’s a lil bit different from the trick I showed ya earlier.”

Two of the four Halibels took the lead, thrusting their palms into the rising curtain of flames.

Halibel’s palms, released in conjunction with a step that caused the cobblestones to explode, moved like battering rams that could blow away a poorly constructed castle gate in a single strike. However, these two strikes were stopped just short of the flames simultaneously, and the generated wind turned into a storm, blowing away the fire.

Eugard’s expressionless brows moved slightly at the strike, but it was still too early to be surprised.

The two who had lagged behind surpassed the two who had advanced earlier, forcefully slamming the same battering ram palms into Eugard’s torso.

Eugard: “—Hk.”

Suppressing the groan in the depths of his throat, Eugard was blown directly backwards by the impact. However, it was shallow. In an instant, Halibel’s palms were caught by the flat side of the Yang Sword, and he himself was propelled backwards.

Even so, though Halibel’s attack could not be completely nullified, Eugard was forced to recognize his extraordinary martial skills despite his position as Emperor.

Without assuming the position of an Emperor, he would have felt as if he had lost face, as his opponent was solely a shinobi.

But, it could not be helped.

Given Eugard's constitution, he could not rely on subordinates to protect himself. The Emperor had no choice but to protect himself.

Halibel: "I ain't gonna hold back."

Disregarding the circumstances, the pursuit did not ease for Eugard, who had been blown away.

To kill the inertia of flying backward, Eugard slid his toes on the ground and turned towards the voice of Halibel that had sounded nearby, and he attempted to deliver a slash with a twist of his body.

However, the Halibel who was there received the diagonal slash, and promptly disappeared in a scattering of fur. From directly below, another Halibel kicked up, catching Eugard with widened eyes.

Eugard: "Muggh…"

Kicked in the back, Eugard floated in the air and as he was pounded by Halibel from all directions. From all sides, there were mirror images of wolfmen who swung their hands in karate chops. Eugard, however, was not about to let himself be defeated, and used the Yang Sword's pulverizing ability against them.

In essence, in the explosion of the atmosphere caused by super-rapid heating, their movement would be disrupted.

The bright, red-hot Yang Sword spun in the explosion, and Eugard's slash circled in the air as it cleaved all four Halibels in half.

Instantly, the four Halibels erupted in flames—all of them turning into fur.

Instead, from directly above, an elbow strike as powerful as a battle-axe smashed Eugard in the head, and the Emperor crashed into the streets of Imperial Capital as he spun vertically, creating a circular crater accompanied by the sound of an explosion.

Landing beside the crater, Halibel quickly reached out, catching the kiseru that he had tossed with his mouth just before the collision.

And then—

Halibel: “That’s somethin’ that’d usually kill ya, but I’m guessin’ things won’t go that easy?”

Eugard: “—Indeed.”

Amidst the dispersing smoke, Halibel’s voice as he looked down into the center of the cavity was met with a calm response.

Though it was quite harsh to not have inflicted any damage despite everything he had done, the outcome was as expected, so the emotional toll was kept to a minimum. With this current confrontation, Halibel revised his evaluation of the Yang Sword and the Fiend Sword. He had initially considered the Fiend Sword to be more dangerous, but the Yang Sword was proving to be more than formidable.

And more than that—

Eugard: “Art thou employing both clones with substance and clones that are hollow?”

While raising his body within the crater, Eugard analyzed their combat from just moments prior.

Neither confirming nor denying the observation as correct or incorrect, Halibel licked the blood dripping from the cut that had emerged on his left cheek with his tongue, offering silence as his response.

Eugard: “Such technique would require a blood-curdling ordeal to master. ‘Tis worthy of commendation.”

Halibel: “Well, thanks for that.”

His responses were kept minimal to avoid giving up information unnecessarily, but Eugard’s observation was correct.

Halibel’s “clones” could be divided into two types, those that were merely illusions made of fur, and genuine clones with substance on par with Halibel’s real body.

With this combination, the essence of Halibel’s fighting style evolved around toying with his opponents, and even just the illusory clones were equipped with the ability to completely subdue any average opponent.

The problem was that Eugard was not any average opponent, and furthermore, Halibel’s signature tactic of cursecraft would not work against him.

Techniques designed to kill would not be effective against an opponent who was already dead.

Not to mention that Eugard’s soul had already been inflicted with a curse so strong that no others could surpass it in that regard.

However—

Halibel: “If I don’t follow through on the things I’ve decided to do, I’ll be in for a scoldin’ by lil’ Ana.”

Spinning the kiseru around in his hand, he placed the next piece of tobacco into the bowl and lit it.

Same as before, he filled his lungs with smoke in one go, and deceived his brain with the illusion that his limbs were coursing with strength. Then, towards Eugard, who was in the center of the cavity, his next attack would—

Eugard: “This shan’t do, as thou art too formidable. I have no choice but to display mine true strength.”

In the next instant, Eugard leapt out of the crater and raised the Yang Sword before him.

As the Yang Sword descended, Halibel promptly intervened, not with a sword, but by catching Eugard's right arm which held the weapon to block the attack.

Immediately after, the released shockwave passed behind Halibel, reducing the mangled and incinerated remains of the Imperial Capital's buildings to scattered embers.

At this moment, Eugard only held the lone Yang Sword in his hand. The Fiend Sword he had wielded in his left hand until then had been thrust into the cavity, abandoned.

That was not a decision to relinquish a powerful weapon.

Eugard: "Rather than dual wielding a combination of twain swords I have yet to grow accustomed to, I shall face you with the single blade in which mine mastery doth reside."

Halibel: "Really now, you're a darn unpleasant person, Yer Excellency the Emperor."

In all cases, choosing the opponent's least favored option was originally the style of a shinobi.

Against Eugard, who implemented that with insight and determination, Halibel kept Eugard's arm restrained, and had his clones step forward from three other directions.

A palm blow and a kick, together with one of them delivering a scatter shot of flying debris by striking a stone they had scooped out from the ground—Eugard, with his arm held, deflected them away with his overwhelming swordsmanship.

The Yang Sword in his right hand had instantly vanished, then had reappeared in his left hand, and through that he was able to blow the three approaching Halibels away whilst scorching them.

Two among them were clones made of fur, but the one who had performed the scatter shot was a genuine body.

Sensing the burnt smell of his own fur being scorched, Halibel delivered a karate chop, boring into the cheek of the Eugard as it grazed past, and a few seconds of ultra-high grade combat had begun.

3

—Herein, there lay an irony that ought to be called a twist of fate.

The Curse of Thorns had forced Eugard into solitude, but the curse itself brought no pain whatsoever to Eugard, who had congenital analgesia. However, even if Eugard was divorced from pain, it was a fact that the curse still ate into his body, and that he continued to receive its effects.

In truth, though the young Eugard had not felt pain either, he did experience a suffocating sensation due to the oppressive nature of the curse, and his actions had thus been limited. But, that influence had determined the amount of time he had left, and was rather inconvenient for Eugard, who had already made up his mind concerning the things he wanted to do.

The level of concord between his body and mind was uncertain.

But, at some point, the effects of the Curse of Thorns had stopped having any disturbance whatsoever on Eugard's body, and Eugard became fully capable of taking action for the sake of fulfilling his own objectives.

That was to say, Eugard's body had grown to be able to deal with the danger that constantly threatened his life. —The details of how the strongest Emperor in the history of the Empire had been born lay within that irony.

Having optimized itself in order to simply live, Eugard's body worked incredibly as a foundation for nurturing his mechanical diligence.

In a position where no guards could be assigned to him, Eugard had trained himself in order to protect himself; having been granted talent, as well as a body that could fully utilize that talent, he continued to grow stronger beyond comparison.

Since the Curse of Thorns had made Eugard stronger, this was a meaningless supposition, but his strength and ability with the sword were such that even if the Curse of Thorns had been absent, he still would have been able to wipe out the Nine Divine Generals of that era.

Of course, Eugard's battles, in reality, almost always consisted of him beheading an opponent who was suffering from the effects of the Curse of Thorns, and his battles against the Nine Divine Generals went mostly the same.

For Eugard, battles were not a contest of strength, but rather a situation in which he must perform the duty of executioner.

Eugard: "I bestow mine praise."

This was not a widely known fact, but among the Vollachian Emperors throughout history, Eugard Vollachia was the Emperor who spoke those words the most.

Precisely because they stood not on the same base, precisely because he understood he had been granted a position that differed to that of others, Eugard was generous in his praise towards others.

Therefore, this was quite the ironic encounter.

The ironic fact that the Emperor of the Briar, who had given the most praise to others in the history of the Empire, and the wolfman who took that way of being upon himself in the modern day, naming himself the Admirer, were clashing here like this, separated by life and death.

But within this chance encounter, there yet remained another irony that ought to be called a twist of fate.

As mentioned previously, battles were always a one-sided affair for Eugard.

As the Curse of Thorns ate into his target, Eugard would face off against enemies that could by no means be said to be in perfect or usual condition, and he would behead them; he never attained victory by any other means.

That general conception Eugard Vollachia held of “battles”, began to change.

Through his fierce clash against the Admirer, Halibel, a wolfman who did not receive the curse, that change was yielded.

Eugard: “Hah—”

As a breath leaked out from his slightly opened mouth, a flash of Eugard’s blade dyed the world in crimson.

The fiery flash of the sword diagonally cut through the air, yet within the path it carved, the figure of the tall wolfman was nowhere to be found. His opponent had ceased producing clones at random, and had altered his movements towards a thorough evasive maneuver.

His objective was not to buy time, but rather to ascertain Eugard’s swordsmanship.

Eugard: “A fine decision.”

Honest praise, complimenting that the correct choice had been made, filled Eugard’s heart.

This resurrected body was in great shape despite the poor quality of its skin, and Eugard even harbored the misapprehension that he could move inexhaustibly.

Of course, that was not the case in reality. This body was not something that could surpass his strength in life, and he ought not to desire anything more excessive than the restoration capabilities whenever the body was broken.

Even the bodies of the undead still felt pain all the same.

Ergo, Eugard stood here alone as the guardian of this location. Even if the others were undead, so long as they entered the range of the curse, they would still be tormented by the binding.

For even if they were undead, Eugard had no intention of indiscriminately inflicting pain upon the peoples of his country.

And above all—

Eugard: “I do not wish to allow any personage to disturb mine battle against thee.”

A battle, this was indeed a battle.

Contesting his skills against Halibel’s, while altering the very form of the Imperial Capital, Eugard funneled all his might into the arm wielding the Yang Sword, and absorbed himself in his rendezvous with an enemy who refused to die.

Since his birth, since his death, this was the very first time he felt his spirits surge within himself while swinging his sword at another.

The first time Eugard had fatally wounded a person was when an assassin, having broken into the mansion where he lived in isolation from his family, writhed in agony in the courtyard as they held their chest, begging for Eugard to kill them.

Ever since taking his first life at the age of seven, as far as Eugard was concerned, drawing a sword was tantamount to performing an execution.

Though, how was that?

The sensation of wielding his trained swordsmanship to the fullest, yet still only pursuing a life it could not reach, oh what a luscious and esteemed sensation it was.

Eugard: “…”

His thrust-out arm was caught from above and below by his opponent’s karate chop and knee, pulverizing his elbow. The Yang Sword which had parted from his hand vanished into the air, and transferring it to his intact right hand, it flashed with a horizontal strike.

His opponent evaded it by slipping into the ground, and brushing Eugard’s left hip with his fingertips as he slipped through, a hole around the size of a fist was gouged into his hips.

As he turned around, he made an attempt to reach the distant back with the Yang Sword, but he was thwarted by the outstretched arm of a clone from another direction; simultaneously unleashing kicks at the chest of the other, he was furiously blown away. Blown away. Away.

Eugard: “Half a step.”

Next time, he would take half a step further.

Even though Eugard’s swordsmanship had failed to do so just ten-odd seconds prior, he was confident that he would be able to do so the next time around. It was a feat he had never performed during his lifetime or after his death, however, he could envision innumerable derivative techniques.

That was the growth of an undead, greedy to the point of desperation.

—Forced into solitude by the Curse of Thorns, and with his notion of battles having been altered to that of executions, Eugard Vollachia had never had the opportunity to improve his strength as a warrior.

For the purpose of self-defense, his sword could be trained as much as was necessary due to his unique circumstance, but naught more than that had been required.

That swordsmanship of Eugard’s was now rapidly gaining a vast amount of experience, becoming greatly polished.

Eugard was completely unaware that the being he was facing off against was the strongest being of the Kararagi City-States—namely, a being among the top five most powerful individuals within the current world.

But, absorbing such enormous amounts of combat experience through this confrontation of which he was ignorant, as an undead, Eugard was allowed to grow into a being that greedily became stronger, to an extent much greater than he had been during his lifetime.

Eugard: “I bestow praise… Nay, I thank thee.”

Therefore, what spilled from Eugard’s mouth was not commendation, but rather gratitude.

A descendent of the abhorrent wolfpeople, had brought about a powerful emotion which Eugard had never felt during his lifetime. Since that was not a displeasing sensation, there ought to have been an appropriate evaluation of the one who had presented it.

That was something that had come from the bottom of Eugard’s heart.

Halibel: “Ya don’t gotta thank me. ‘Cuz after all, I’m gonna win.”

As ever, Halibel’s quick comebacks were irreverent, but even that irreverence was refreshing.

When he thought back on it, Eugard had scarcely experienced being talked back to, perhaps because people did not want to oppose the Curse of Thorns. Excluding those who had chosen to betray him, it was essentially only Iris who had ever expressed her opinions to Eugard—.

Eugard: “—O Star of Mine.”

In front of Eugard as he muttered so, the figure of the wolfman faded like mist.

Combining a peculiar walking technique with an unbelievable movement speed, an optical illusion occurred in a form differing from that of the clones. At the sensation of afterimages being left in his consciousness, Eugard could not help but admire that versatility.

However, there was no need for him to be deluded by such a cheap trick. The approaching presences were from directly above, and from his left and right; at the signs that lethal strikes were furiously closing in, Eugard turned the other way, utterly undaunted.

Then, going half a step further than last time, he stepped towards the rear.

Eugard: “Thou plainly scatterest thy presence. —Ergo, the direction bereft of any presence is where thou truly residest.”

Halibel: “Guh.”

His angle of turning around had been insufficient, but still the bottom of the Yang Sword’s hilt sunk into Halibel’s side. The moment he received the sensation of his opponent’s bone shattering, Eugard immediately channeled heat into the Yang Sword’s blade—the yielded explosion allowed the bottom of the hilt to bury itself even deeper, crushing Halibel’s insides.

Eugard: “OHHHHHH—!!!”

With an impact so powerful that it broke his own wrist, Eugard blew Halibel away.

Realizing that he had involuntarily roared as he blew his opponent away, Eugard gained a slight shock. Within Eugard’s vision, the blown away Halibel crashed into the rampart, and the wall violently fissured; the tall wolfman threw out his legs, and lowered his head.

That had been all of Eugard’s might. He had unleashed a tremendous blow, the most polished blow he had ever fired off in all his time both alive and post mortem.

That sensation was being updated again and again during his fight against Halibel. Half a step, he had taken half a step further. Next time, he might even go half a step further, and then half a step further again.

Or even further, further beyond, to where scenery, the likes of which Eugard had never before seen, was stretched out.

If Halibel stood back up and continued to fight, he might be able to grasp that. Henceforth, rise, rise, rise and do battle; as Eugard recognized that he was thinking this from the bottom of his heart—.

Eugard: “—I must hasten to the side of Mine Star. I am finished with thee.”

Taking the upsurge of spirits approaching their peak and his strong emotions as a warrior, he twisted them into love towards Iris.

Halibel: “…”

He shall admit to it. His battle against Halibel had indeed raised his spirits.

In every conceivable meaning, this had been a stimulus which he had never experienced in either his lifetime or his time after death. He had gained the perspective that upon that path of enhancing himself, which he had not gone down before in his life, such scenery existed.

He did not know whether he would ever be able to have an experience as significant as this in the future.

However, even so, no matter what.

Eugard: “It doth not compare to having Mine Star within mine sight, even if that is for but a blink of an eye.”

That was Eugard’s sense of values, something that had never changed in both his lifetime, or after his death.

No matter the unknown stimuli or elevation of spirits, they would not be able to reach Eugard, who knew Iris.

Despite having understood that he ought to relinquish it, that he ought to give up on it, the reason Eugard had desired the Imperial Throne was because he understood that without it, he would not be able to keep the time he had with Iris for even a second longer.

Since he had obtained the Imperial Throne in exchange for that selfishness, even though the time after he had lost Iris was far longer than the time he had spent with her, he continued to fulfill his duties as Emperor.

Eugard Vollachia was the Emperor who had spent the least amount of time in the Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital during his reign.

After losing Iris, Eugard spent most of his life as Emperor by his lonesome. He even concluded the objective of producing successors with a minimal amount of contact, and had dedicated his life to the Empire.

Everything else in his life, he used for the sake of Iris.

Therefore—

Eugard: "—I slay thee, O sable wolfman."

Declaring that any further time was unnecessary, Eugard took the Yang Sword in his hand, and turned his feet towards the rampart.

Then, he aimed to burn the collapsed Halibel to a crisp with a flash of the sword—he had been unable to do so. Having just attempted to swing the Yang Sword, Eugard's right arm burst open at the shoulder.

Eugard: "What?"

At the impact that gave him no sensation of being pierced, Eugard raised his eyebrows. But, the pinnacle of his shock lay at what occurred right after. —The arm of the undead did not begin to regenerate.

Having been shattered like ceramic, fragments of his right arm scattered, and the Yang Sword was thrust into the ground.

And then—

Halibel: "—Finally found the deadspot."

Akin to an exhale, Halibel spoke in a low voice as he stood up from the rampart. The wolfman, leaning his back against the fissured wall as he stood up, placed his kiseru in his mouth once again.

Slowly, he placed tobacco into the bowl, snapped his fingers to set it alight, and breathed the smoke into his lungs. While beholding that action, Eugard placed his hand over the injury of his right arm which was not recovering.

The arm that had disappeared from his right shoulder onwards showed no signs of starting to regenerate.

He clearly understood. Eugard's right arm had been the first part of his resurrected body to die anew.

The one who had done that was Halibel who stood before his eyes, and it seemed to be the result of the "deadspot" of which he had spoken.

Eugard: "There yet remaineth an abundance of things of which I am unaware."

Halibel: "Ain't that right. It's fantastic that I was able ta teach ya that. The wolfpeople were 'bout to be wiped out just before I could do so."

Clearing his throat with a smile, Halibel nodded as smoke escaped his nostrils.

The versatility of this wolfman had impressed him repeatedly, but this was the highest grade. To think he was even equipped with a technique to kill the undead, his skills and expertise were terrifying.

Eugard: "In the same manner as thou hadst rended mine arm, shalt thou take even mine life?"

Halibel: "That was my intention for observin' ya after all. Seems like it'll be a lil' tough, but… well, I think I'mma be able ta do it, don't ya agree?"

Eugard: "Thy boasting is irreverent. However, as it is refreshing, I shall forgive it."

Drawing the Yang Sword out of the ground with his remaining left hand, he faced Halibel. Though he could not read the expression of Halibel, who stood with a loose posture, that statement and demeanor were audacious, and they were no bluff.

Eugard's opponent had also made preparations to slay him. As the bugging passion within his chest, something he had become aware of for the first time, surged once again, he immediately trampled it.

Feeling an unknown avarice within himself, he could clearly state this.

There existed no radiance in this world that could satisfy Eugard more than Iris.

That was why—

Eugard: "—Sixty-first Emperor, Eugard Vollachia."

Halibel: "—Admirer, Halibel."

They gave their introductions, and in the next moment, the figures of both Eugard and Halibel disappeared, as time itself vanished.

Eugard: "…"

Behind each of them as they plunged forth, the kicked ground exploded, and clouds of smoke immediately erupted. Using those explosions as a propelling force, the dozens of meters between Eugard and Halibel had disappeared.

With such extreme speed that it appeared as if the world had shrunk, Eugard's blade sliced through the air in anticipation. The unleashed slash of red dyed its diagonal path a deep crimson, and releasing heat a moment belayed, a scorching temperature capable of melting even stone and turning it to liquid was produced.

However, Halibel slightly inclined his body to evade that slash, and only suffering the flesh of his back being slightly singed red at his right shoulder, he pressed forth.

Then, towards Eugard, who lacked an arm, Halibel sprang his front leg up and kicked; Eugard raised up his knee and caught the blow, and a shockwave exploded between the two of them.

The shockwave blew the flames and rubble around them away, and at a distance where they could feel each other's breaths, they furiously traded blows. Between karate chops and the treasured sword of crimson, between kicks and elbows, ramming and grappling techniques interlaced, and the blink of close combat chipped away at Eugard's body, piece by piece.

But, his opponent had also sustained damage.

Strangely enough, despite having an arm missing, the degree of wear and tear on both sides was around the same.

Therefore, in order to secure victory, Eugard took half a step further mentally.

Eugard: “—The Yang Sword Vollachia.”

In the midst of their rally, the treasured sword, its name having been called out, vanished from Eugard’s hand.

Sheathed into the sky, it was a supreme treasured sword that could be freely drawn again. Having relinquished it, the left hand that had become empty caught Halibel’s knee, and he crossed gazes with his opponent’s thread-like eyes.

As irony would have it, the eyes of the wolfman and the undead were both of golden hue; just what did those eyes see? Putting strength into his jaw, enough to bite through the mouthpiece of his kiseru, Halibel’s body greatly bent backwards.

Above his head, the Yang Sword, which was unsheathed from the sky, nearly grazed him.

The Yang Sword that had been sheathed in the sky, was drawn again from the sheath that was the sky. By utilizing that mechanism of sheathing and unsheathing the sword, Eugard performed a deadly strike—though it was the first time he had used it, it had been magnificently dodged.

However, with his stance broken, Halibel used his momentum from bending backwards to place his hands on the ground, and furiously performed backwards somersaults to avoid, avoid, and avoid the successive slashes.

As Halibel escaped from him, Eugard took a moment to charge up his next sword slash—he noticed something.

Eugard: “…”

Beyond the backwards somersaulting Halibel, there was the crater in the ground which Eugard had made.

And towards that cavity, a small figure from outside the battlefield leapt—it was Groovy. Groovy Gumlet, who ought to have withdrawn from the warfront, leapt whilst coughing up blood.

In the direction he was headed, the Fiend Sword was lodged within the crater, and reaching his hand towards it—

Eugard: “Magnificent coordination. —However…”

He did not call the sudden intrusion an act of cowardice.

He had been aware of Groovy’s existence from the outset. For Groovy to assist Halibel in the eleventh hour was only natural, since they were allies, or rather, anything else would not have made sense.

But, he would not allow that action. Overcoming even that, Eugard would be victorious.

Eugard: “—I shan’t allow thee to take the Fiend Sword.”

Holding the Yang Sword aloft, Eugard threw it at Groovy as the latter leapt towards the cavity.

That instant, the speed of the treasured sword accelerated as it spewed fire, and becoming a ray of crimson light, it went past Halibel’s flank, and made a mad dash towards Groovy.

Even if he had let go of it, the forte of the Yang Sword was such that he could return it to his hand at any given moment.

After the treasured sword skewered Groovy, he would recall the Yang Sword to his hand and challenge Halibel. Rather, at this moment, it was a delightful miscalculation that his body was now lighter without the Yang Sword as he pursued Halibel.

Of course, he had also considered the possibility that Halibel had aimed for this, and would counterattack, so he readied himself, and —

Groovy: "—Hk."

The thrown Yang Sword flew in a straight path and skewered Groovy's small body.

Even though Groovy twisted his body, the treasured sword of crimson still pierced his right side. As the blade bore deep into his body, Groovy widened his eyes and coughed up a blood clot at that impact, and then, an ear-splitting screech—

Groovy: "—We got you, fuckface."

Had not been let out.

Instead, Groovy's bloodstained mouth smiled, and he stretched out his finger to point at Eugard. There was disrespect, but surpassing even that, there was a shock that occurred within Eugard's vision.

With just one more step to go ahead of him, Groovy's hand did not reach the Fiend Sword, but even though he had not touched it, it snapped out of the crater as if to escape from his hand, and flew away.

Groovy: "Just so you know, this bitch-ass katana fucking loathes me…"

It was reasoning beyond his comprehension, however, such strange idiosyncrasies were an unavoidable part of Enchanted and Treasured Swords.

Snapping out, the Fiend Sword fled from the cavity while revolving, and caught by a hand covered in black fur, the bewitching luster of the blade flickered.

—With the Fiend Sword in hand, Halibel readied himself before Eugard.

Eugard: "…"

For a brief moment of combat, Eugard immediately recalled the Yang Sword; with the treasured sword no longer inside of him, Groovy's abdomen spilled a vast amount of blood.

But, Eugard had certainly taken up a weapon, and brandished it towards Halibel, who shouldered the Fiend Sword.

Then, as the flash of crimson swung down from overhead, it was unleashed as a blow that updated the most supreme swordsmanship in all Eugard’s time both alive and after death—

Halibel: “Really now, that’s just so darn praiseworthy. —If it weren’t me, that woulda completely destroyed anyone on the receivin’ end.”

Eugard: “What an arrogant manner of speech. However, taking that preeminent feat into consideration, I shall forgive it.”

As Halibel made that statement at such a close distance, Eugard drew his chin back without altering his expression.

Suffering a conclusive blow from the Fiend Sword that surpassed even the finest brandish of Eugard Vollachia, Eugard’s body was severed obliquely.

Halibel had been the one to perform that feat, and around the left side of his chest, the Curse of Thorns was coiled.

The fact that Eugard Vollachia truly felt admiration from the bottom of his heart in regards to the Admirer, Halibel, was something that, without a single word needing to be said, was exceedingly obvious between the two who had crossed swords.

Vic.II2O

Chapter 51:
Tennozan

1

—Through the strategy devised by Natsuki Subaru, the “Rescue the Vollachian Empire from Destruction Squad” had dispersed to various places in the Imperial Capital.

It was a strategy that aimed to have them all coordinated and to not interfere with each other as they each accomplished their respective roles, but the most important part of it was not actually any of the faces fighting in the Imperial Capital.

The key to this strategy was, decisively, all the strength of the Empire that had been left behind in the Fortified City of Garkla.

With the military forces deployed throughout it on a mass-scale, it was a large city carrying personnel equivalent to the brains and heart of Vollachia.

For how long would they have to hold back the hosts of undead marching on the city in order to seize it? That was undoubtedly the time limit imposed on the ultimate decisive battle on which the survival of the Vollachian Empire was staked; not only that, but in addition to the Empire, the destiny of the entire world would be divined by this important point.

By gathering as many of the undead to the Fortified City as they could, it would become easier for the “Rescue from Destruction Squad” to take action in the Imperial Capital. But at the same time, if the Fortified City were to fall, even supposing the Imperial Capital side were to succeed, it would likely be impossible for the Empire to rebuild in the aftermath.

That was to say—

???: “—Undoubtedly, this shall be as decisive as “Tennozan”.”

Wielding a Knight's sword, while speaking words that were not very familiar to his ears, Julius Juukulius ran across a rampart of the Fortified City with his tall stature, and gallantly fluttered through the air.

The elegant Knight directed the tip of his sword towards a horde of undead clinging to the rampart, trying to invade the city. Thrusting their weapons into the wall, the enemies climbed up while making improvised footholds; spinning as he swooped down upon them, Julius's sword flashed unrelentingly.

Julius: "I will not allow it!"

The arms and backs of the undead clinging to the wall were showered in slashes as they were felled to the ground.

And, as Julius jumped upon one of the blades they had been using as a foothold, he turned his eyes to the countless weapons that had been thrust into the wall, and,

Julius: "Aro! I wish to borrow your wind!"

After calling that out, a green wind burst forth, and as if coiling around them, it pulled all the weapons out from the wall they had been lodged into, and the toils of the undead that had been building up those footholds, were reduced to naught in a single stroke.

Finally, breaking the sword he stood upon with a jump, Julius returned to the top of the rampart.

While tickling the green light of his contracted spirit, Julius took a slight breather.

He had succeeded in hindering the enemies that had been clinging to this wall, but he could not afford to be careless.

Even if they broke past the city's utmost outer wall, there was still a second-most, and third-most outer bulwark, and even more sturdy fortresses, but nevertheless—

???: "It is faster than we had expected for them to have already gotten this close."

Julius: “—Miss Taritta.”

Standing atop the rampart, calling out to Julius as he caught his breath, was a dark-skinned woman with part of her black hair dyed blue—the female warrior who commanded the People of Shudraq, Taritta.

Since every member of the tribe wielded bows, the Shudraqian warriors could attack the undead from afar, and they were one of the primary forces in holding the Fortified City against the siege. Taritta, whose skill with the bow especially stood out even among the excellent archery of the Shudraq, was one of the cornerstones of the current defensive battle.

In fact, just like Julius, who had just removed the weapons that had been thrust into the rampart, she was obstructing the undead from surmounting the wall by firing arrows from atop the rampart.

He admired how truly reliable her skills were, but her words were a cruel reality that could not be ignored.

Julius: “—In such a short period of time, the front line has been pushed back to this extent.”

As he said that, Julius turned his gaze to the outside of the ramparts and stroked the scar underneath his left eye.

Ahead of Julius’s intrepid gaze, the heads of the advancing hosts of undead could be seen swaying all the way to the horizon, so it was visually apparent that an extraordinarily large army was approaching.

The line of defense that had originally been deployed outside the ramparts was broken through, and the Imperial Soldiers fighting on the outside were forced to draw the warfront back and downsize. Though of course, when considering the enormous number of enemies, there was no doubt that they had foreseen that this would happen eventually.

Taritta: “The occasional formidable undead among them are quite difficult to deal with, aren’t they?”

Julius: “I concur. As soon as they are found, there is no choice but to have a capable individual in close vicinity deal with them, but…”

Indeed, it happened right as Julius uttered those words.

???: “—Hk!!”

On the battlefield below them, the group that had been fighting together as one single mass were blown away all in one go.

Looking down, what flew through the air whilst raising thick screams, were members of the Pleiades Battalion, whom Subaru had hastened to the Imperial Capital with as reinforcements.

Through some perplexing strategy, it was a battalion composed of individuals who each boasted bizarre strength; having blown away its members, scattering them, was someone holding large swords in both of their arms—no, with both of her arms entirely transformed into large swords, was a female undead of a dreadful, heinous appearance.

???: “Fuck… now you’ve really gone and done it…!”

???: “Wait wait wait wait! Don’t go rushin’ in without a plan! Bro’ll need to shoulder the burden!”

???: “Fall back! We’ll have everyone surround her and then take her down!”

Before the heinous undead, the group that should have been done for stoutly stood back up.

Without incurring any casualties, their undeterred fighting spirit was worthy of praise, but even from Julius’s perspective, the strength of that female warrior was unmistakably first-class.

Thinking that he must rush there at once, Julius was about to leave the rampart to Taritta, and jump down below—

???: “—Nah, Lion Knight-kun is already there.”

Striking upon Julius’s eardrums, was a voice disproportionately cheerful for the battlefield. The information brought about by that voice, did in fact give rise to change on the battlefield beneath them.

Having rushed over to the warrior who dual-wielded large swords, golden mace in hand, was Goz.

Goz: “I have never had the opportunity to face you, but neither is there a chance that I could mistake you! So you have been resurrected, Gladiator Empress!!”

As Goz roared, his mace and the female warrior’s large swords collided, and a shockwave blew violently across the battlefield.

Between the two of them, extremely heavyweight weaponry which an ordinary person would never be able to lift traded blows, and the ensuing violence scattered the surrounding Imperial Soldiers and undead, tossing them around like a storm.

It was a skirmish where one must stand their ground, but he had ceased advancing towards it. It was best to entrust that place to Goz.

Julius: “I thank you for stopping me, Flop-dono.”

Flop: “Ha-ha-ha, no problem! It’s just because I had to let Finest-kun and Taritta-san focus on the battle right in front of them! This is about all that my powerless self can do to be useful!”

Smiling without getting worked up was Flop, whose bright attitude remained unchanged even on the battlefield.

As a non-combatant, and brother to a candidate for Empress Consort, he should have been ordered to be on stand-by within the fortress. He had shown up on a rampart which could have even been called the front line, so Tarrita was shocked.

Taritta: “Flop?! Why are you here…?”

Flop: “Huh, it’s because the situation appears to be an all-out war. Providing aid to the wounded, repairing equipment, there’s tons of stuff like that for people who can’t fight to do. Naturally, I’m also one of those people.”

Patting his slim chest, Flop held out a quiver to Taritta.

Taritta accepted it without a second thought; she already carried a quiver on her back, but the remaining number of arrows was not an amount she could depend on, so Flop’s resupply was just what she needed.

So then, he had probably also walked along the rampart distributing quivers to the other Shudraqians.

Including the non-combatants, everybody was taking part in this battle. His attitude embodied those words.

Flop: “How’s the war situation?”

Taritta: “—. Everybody is fighting hard. If we keep up the defensive battle, we will be able to defend the wall for some time. But also…”

Julius: “It would be a different story if a flying dragon rider were to appear among our opponents.”

Taritta responded to Flop’s question, and as she hesitated to continue, Julius provided the conclusion in her stead. At that reply, Flop’s expression earnestly stiffened.

Given that he was a young man who was always cheerfully smiling, that slight action was strangely impactful. But, it was only natural for his expression to become severe.

The people of the Vollachian Empire were more than aware of how incredible flying dragon riders were.

Flop: “…”

Right after the battle had begun, through a simultaneous attack by Julius and the People of Shudraq, the deceased flying dragons that had closed in as the first wave—the undead flying dragons had been deterred. Thereafter, all the threats from the sky that sporadically came flying in were reliably dealt with by the Shudraqians, who had been granted the duty of undead flying dragon hunting.

However, that was only possible because there were no undead serving as flying dragon riders among their opponents.

The ability of untamed flying dragons was incomparable to that of flying dragons that were united with a flying dragon rider.

Just a single pair of flying dragon and rider would likely be able to overpower even a flock of one hundred flying dragons in a clash. That was how exceptional flying dragon riders, who tactically utilized the sky, were.

—In the past, Julius had once crossed blades with a flying dragon rider.

Back then, he had miraculously seized victory thanks to the assistance of Ferris, who was traveling with him, but if Julius had been by himself, the positions of winner and loser would have surely been flipped.

There would likely never be another flying dragon rider to that caliber within the Empire, but, if rather than just undead flying dragons appearing on this warfront against the undead, there were to appear an undead flying dragon rider mounted upon one, the situation would completely change.

Flop: "Of course, a deceased flying dragon rider and their beloved dragon being revived together… because the precedent of that is extremely rare, it's conceivable that the city's skies have still yet to be taken."

That opinion of Flop's was likely correct when inspecting the current siege situation.

Flying dragon riders were a threat, but it took a long time for riders and their flying dragons to build trust, and without man and dragon undoubtedly becoming one, their true value could not be displayed.

That rule was something that could not be ignored, even supposing they were dead people being resurrected via principles beyond the realm of reason.

Without an undead rider and undead flying dragon that had been together since they were alive, the phenomenon of “undead flying dragon riding” could not be actualized.

At present, that was likely the reason why there were no undead flying dragon riders seen in the skies of the Fortified City.

Julius: “…But, it is ironic that the one rare instance of it occurring happened to be the most formidable flying dragon rider.”

Denying that faint relief, was the existence of the undead flying dragon rider which Julius had ascertained with his own eyes.

The undead who had appeared in the midst of the battle on the coupled dragon carriages—Balleroy Temeglyph, sitting astride the deceased beloved dragon with whom he had been together since his lifetime, had plunged into the midst of the enemy with his overwhelming mobility.

If he were to participate in this battlefield, it was quite likely that he would destroy the Fortified City’s warfront as a single rider.

Even if he had not yet shown up at this moment, that possibility could not be excluded.

Flop: “—I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

Julius: “Flop-dono?”

Flop: “It’d be different if there were other flying dragon riders who were being resurrected, but I don’t think you need to worry about Balleroy showing up.”

With a tone and expression of extreme conviction, Flop denied Julius’s vigilance.

Julius knit his brows at that statement, and while firing arrows at the undead clinging to the wall, ascertaining that she had hit the opponent’s knee, Taritta spoke,

Taritta: “How can you say that definitively?”

Flop: “Because Balleroy knows that Medium and I were on the coupled dragon carriages. Naturally, he'd also be thinking that we're in this Fortified City. It'd be hard for him to come and lay waste to this place, right?"

Taritta: "That's…"

Flop replied with a single eye closed, to which Taritta was at a loss for words.

Julius was in agreement with Taritta's reaction. It was impossible to say that Flop's point had any persuasive power to it. If he had hopes for the undead Balleroy's emotions and compassion, then—

Julius: "Unfortunately, there is likely no hope for the humanity that they possessed during their lifetimes. The thoughts of the zombies… of the undead are being twisted. If not for that, it would be impossible for so many of the dead to participate in the ruin of their own country."

In fact, there was such an enormous number of undead mobilizing that they had blanketed the plains all the way to the horizon.

It was difficult to imagine that all of these undead had truly resented the Vollachian Empire since their lifetimes, and were all trying to carry out their long-cherished desire as soon as they were revived.

It was natural to think that the caster who had resurrected them, was manipulating the undead for their own benefit.

As Julius pointed that out, Flop scratched his cheek with a "Yeah" as he nodded.

Flop: "I have the same opinion as Finest-kun. In the first place, the thoughts of all the dead people are being changed. But still, I've seen that there are parts that haven't changed."

Julius: "So, are you saying that only Balleroy-dono still retains his emotions and compassion?"

Flop: "That would be a great shock to my feelings! But, that's not it, Finest-kun. Though, I think that you and Taritta-san would have an easier time noticing it than I did.”

Taritta: “We would?”

Without having any idea, Julius and Taritta exchanged glances.

Something that not Flop, who had shared a relationship with Balleroy during his lifetime, but rather Julius, whose blade had clashed with his spear, and Taritta, who had never even seen his face, could notice, that was—

Flop: “—It’s their fighting style.”

Julius: “…”

Flop: “Even if their thoughts have changed from when they were alive, to dispossess them of their fighting style would make it meaningless to resurrect the person in question. That’s why, all of the dead people have the same fighting style as they did during their lives. Am I mistaken?”

Julius: “…I cannot say anything for certain, but that possibility seems high.”

It was not as if he was deeply aware of the forms that the undead he fought took during their lifetimes, but Flop’s conjecture should have been right on the mark.

At Julius and Taritta’s affirmative reaction, Flop smiled.

With some traces of nostalgia and sorrow, it was a terribly melancholic smile.

Flop: “Supposing Balleroy were to come here, he would have come here at the outset before anybody else, shooting out the vital points of this city. The Magical Sharpshooter, Balleroy Temeglyph, didn’t serve as the vanguard. That’s my basis for thinking that Balleroy isn’t coming to this battlefield.”

2

—Balleroy Temeglyph was a man of principle who hated letting his subordinates recklessly die in vain.

However, that did not mean he hated the “law of iron and blood” employed by Vollachia, nor did that mean he was a philanthropist who stood in opposition to imperialism.

The Imperial way of thinking, which esteemed the strong and oppressed the weak, was something rather convenient for Balleroy, who had been born into a humble commoner household. It would not make sense for one to use that construction of society to rise in the world, and then flip-flop when they gain status.

But then again, Balleroy himself had not thought so deeply about it, and he was not particularly committed to imperialism. He had just been lucky that what was already there was compatible with his nature and talents.

Ergo, Balleroy’s hatred for his soldiers dying in vain was ultimately unrelated to imperialism.

This was a way of thinking that Balleroy had acquired from teachings given to him by others.

—In the formation of Balleroy’s character, there were two primary individuals who had imparted a great influence.

The first had found promise in his talents and picked him out, granting him opportunities such as receiving education and meeting his beloved dragon; his benefactor, Serena Dracroy.

The other had used an undiscerning Balleroy, still a young boy, to successfully deal with the pursuers who were after him for stealing; having met the embodiment of mischief itself, he was someone like a big brother to him, Miles.

Through his encounters and days spent with those two people, who possessed a mix of qualities that were both befitting and unbefitting of the Empire, the character of the individual known as Balleroy Temeglyph was constructed.

And, having been constructed, Balleroy’s humanity very much hated for his subordinates to die in vain.

Subordinates were individuals who were within his reach, they were his people. —He hated for his people to be sacrificed.

That was why, with the odds of victory having been decided beforehand, when he took part in the rebellion devised for the Emperor's convenience, Balleroy had not taken any of his subordinates with him, and instead joined by his lonesome.

In the end, he had lost his life because of that, so Balleroy's decision had been mistakenly correct.

—If one were to fight, the deaths of enemies and allies alike would be unavoidable.

He would also take the lives of others. He could not say that he wanted for that rule to only not apply for his people. But if he was to try to have things go that way, he could not rely on outside help, for it could only be fulfilled by his own strength.

Therefore, the conclusion Balleroy Temeglyph had arrived at, was that of the fastest sniper.

As the wings of his beloved dragon raced through the sky, he would create an ideal opening, and would shoot out the beings that were the vitals and heart of the opposing side—that was the best method for his desires to be granted.

Balleroy was a man of the Empire. No matter how many of his enemies died, his chest would not ache in the slightest.

But, he did not want his own people to die. That was why, Balleroy's sniping desired the fastest conclusion. Without regard to enemies or allies, he was confident that this was the best method of preventing casualties among his people.

Hence—

Balleroy: "—I gotcha, Carillon."

Responding to the call of his deceased beloved dragon, Balleroy stood up from the side of the bed.

In the bed before them, an unconscious Madelyn was silently asleep. —Currently, her consciousness was back inside the dragonhusk, Mezoreia.

Needless to say, the violent force of a “Dragon” was far too dangerous an excessive force to wield in the Imperial Capital.

But, it was frightening that when considering the enemies that could potentially face off against it, “excessive” was not a term that could be employed with certainty.

Balleroy: “I know I’m someone who once served, but you guys are absolutely nuts, you Empire folk.”

A “Dragon” was supposed to have been the toughest life form in this world, so it was a strange notion to have an idea of monsters that could not only compete with, but surpass one.

With his title, he had also been ranked among those individuals, but Balleroy himself did not think that his skills were on par with those who towered above all else like that.

Only, it was just that there was absolutely no correlation between being strong and seizing victory.

Stroking the sky-blue hair on Madelyn’s forehead, Balleroy began to head towards the balcony where his beloved dragon awaited. Midway through, he grabbed the spear that was leaning against the wall, and Carillon directed its back toward him, wings folded as it stood on the white balcony.

As he stroked the base of one of its wings, his beloved dragon nuzzled against Balleroy’s shoulder with its long neck.

That was exactly the relationship they had shared since Carillon had hatched from its egg. Carillon’s habits had not changed from the time when it was still small and weak, a baby flying dragon.

Balleroy: “Habits and preferences won’t change even if you die… Though, I guess I can’t speak for others.”

Saying that in a self-deriding tone, he flicked up the hand that had been stroking and gave a firm pat to the back. As Carillon lowered its posture at that signal, Balleroy gallantly jumped upon its back, and faced to the fore.

Taking in a sweeping view of the vast Imperial Capital just outside of the Crystal Palace's balcony, the beautifully organized cityscape was devastated, destroyed, and engulfed in the air of a battlefield all throughout.

This atmosphere was not just present in the Imperial Capital, but throughout the entire Empire—it was especially potent around the Fortified City of Garkla, where great hosts of undead were being sent.

The Fortified City had received the refugees and Imperial Soldiers who had evacuated from the Imperial Capital, and a vehement battle was now unfolding there. Originally, Balleroy also should have been an attacker in the siege of that city.

However—

???: "—The sensation of losing your nerve, I am also in the process of understanding it. Since there is fear that you may be unable to perform to your usual ability, it cannot be said to be appropriate. Command: Required."

The caster who had revived Balleroy—the Witch who called herself Sphinx, spoke thus as she decided to keep Balleroy in the Imperial Capital. Rather than concern for Balleroy, it felt more like she wanted to ascertain the unknown flavor of the sensation that was budding within herself for the first time.

Of course, there was also no doubt that there were expectations for Balleroy to control Madelyn, who had defected to this side, in order to secure the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, as an ally.

He had several reservations about the duty that was expected from him, but even without that, it was convenient for Balleroy to remain in the Imperial Capital.

Because, then things would end without him needing to encounter his siblings who had likely entered the Fortified City—was not the reason.

This was something Sphinx had judged, and it was also something Balleroy himself had intuited, but,

Balleroy: "If it were His Excellency, he'd come for sure, wouldn't he?"

The Vincent Vollachia that Balleroy knew was a cool-headed, stern Emperor.

Even if the castle lord would never move during times of peace, they would always try to stand with their own legs in the location of the ultimate conclusion. That was not just limited to Vincent, as it was customary for all Vollachian Emperors.

This could also be said to be the influence of the "law of iron and blood" which was considered to be the Imperial way.

Thus, while he hated the Vollachian Empire more than anybody else, Vincent would try to faithfully fulfill the duty of Vollachian Emperor, so he would be coming to the Imperial Capital no matter what.

In order to destroy the ringleader of the Great Disaster, Sphinx, he would come with Yang Sword in hand.

Balleroy: "—I sure got completely fooled by Chisha."

At the genesis of the Great Disaster, in a situation where he had not yet grasped the existence of the undead or of himself, despite there being no opportunity more ideal than that, Balleroy's surprise attack had not reached Vincent.

Chisha's meddling had saved Vincent, and the Great Disaster's fastest victory had been deterred.

However—

Balleroy: "Next time, nobody's gonna serve as His Excellency's shield."

He would absolutely not miss his next opportunity.

If Vincent himself was coming to the Imperial Capital, Balleroy would shoot him through the heart with certainty. Once he accomplished that, the hope of the Vollachian Empire would be severed.

And then, the threat of the Great Disaster would head north, and then even the Kingdom of Lugunica would—.

Carillon: "—Kiryararahhh."

That instant, the neighing of his beloved dragon drew Balleroy's attention towards "that".

Balleroy: "…"

Looking up as he felt a tingle on his neck, Balleroy doubted his own eyes.

Riding on Carillon's back, Balleroy had been seeking his target, the figure of Vincent, with a bird's-eye view over the battlefield-turned Imperial Capital, so he had been straining his eyes to see every detail and to not miss any changes on the battlefield.

From somewhere outside of Balleroy's vigilance, something had boldly taken aim for the Crystal Palace.

—Directly above the most beautiful palace in the world, blazing balls of flame rained down one after the other.

Balleroy: "Carillon!"

At his sharp call, his beloved dragon instantly spread its wings, and with the lift generated from their flapping, its large body soared up into the skies of the Imperial Capital. With each powerful flap of its wings, its speed and altitude swiftly climbed, and taking Balleroy up along with it, the undead flying dragon ascended to the sky.

As if to obstruct the ascending Balleroy's flight path, the flaming spheres, around the size of a human, relentlessly fell towards them. —And towards them, he aimed his spear.

Balleroy: “Ain’t gonna letcha!”

The tip of the spear within Balleroy’s hand contained a faint light as he pointed it towards the sky, and in that instant, the fired bullet of light collided with the descending blaze, and as an explosion occurred midair, the sky was dyed red.

It was not a single shot. Two shots, three shots, firing successively until thirteenth total light orbs shot down the flaming spheres; with a thunderous sound enveloping the skies of the Imperial Capital, Balleroy and Carillon pushed through the swelling flames of the explosion.

Balleroy: “What kinda stuff d’ya think you’re doing, passing above the clouds like that?”

He had swept away the fiery rain, yet Balleroy was amazed by the skill of his opponent.

If the balls of flame had come straight for the palace, or if they had flown in a parabola like an arrow or a stone, they would have easily been detected from the Crystal Palace. The reason why Balleroy’s eyes had been unable to do so was obvious: the flaming spheres had come from far away, flying above the thick clouds in the sky of the Imperial Capital, and then went straight downwards when they were directly above the Crystal Palace.

When putting it into words, what had been done was plain and simple. But, when compared to actually performing it, there was a difference between heaven and earth—the divine feat of throwing a stone above the clouds and hitting a target from a place several kilometers away, this was a deed more dreadfully difficult than accomplishing that without even using one’s hands.

But, Balleroy was in a position that, while seldom seen within the Empire, was capable of using magic, even if it was only specialized to one trick.

Balleroy: “I’mma hafta return the favor!”

Having finished dealing with the flaming spheres that had pierced the clouds and fell from the sky, Carillon soared to the heavens. Firmly holding onto its back, Balleroy's attention shifted to the far south of the Imperial Capital.

Due south of the Crystal Palace, the area around the gate of the Imperial Capital was being safeguarded by Mezoreia. From the distance and angle of the unleashed balls of flame, he judged that the enemy in question was a little to the west from there—Balleroy's undead left eye, dyed black with a golden iris looming within, the vicinity around it subtly wavered.

That was not due to any change yielded in Balleroy's face, but due to a change yielded in the atmosphere surrounding his left eye.

Using magic to bend light, Balleroy created a scope in order to see far into the distance. Looking through it with his left eye, he imposingly aimed his spearhead in that direction.

Securing the sniping angle and distance from his flying dragon's speed, he specialized in the one trick of firing bullets of light to achieve ultra-long-range sniping, and in combination with a scope of light that prevented him from losing sight of his target, Balleroy would fight.

Supposing it was an open plain with no obstacles, Balleroy's light orbs could hit a moving target from several kilometers away.

Balleroy: "…"

This time, too, Balleroy closed his right eye with the intention of doing so, and focused his attention to his left eye.

The non-existent scope created from the bending of light leapt across the cityscape of the Imperial Capital, and going even further beyond, grasped the figure of the enemy who had thrown those flaming spheres towards the Crystal Palace—

Balleroy: "—Medi."

Muttering out in a husky breath, Balleroy Temeglyph's scope clearly projected that figure.

Golden hair glistening in a manner akin to the rays of the sun fluttered, and having risen to the sky while being held in the arms of a man in a long cloak, the girl's blue eyes were trained on Balleroy, whom she should not have been able to see.

And then, clearly perceiving the inaudible words spoken by those lips, a chord was struck within Balleroy's heart.

Medium: "Jeez, I won't let you go off wherever you please anymore. Come and talk to me properly, Ballebro."

Chapter 52:
Medium O’Connell

1

Serena: “—Such unskillful command.”

Standing by the window of the command center within the Fortified City of Garkla, Serena Dracroy muttered so whilst gazing through the sole gap in the towering walls that defended the city.

Among the soldiers of the Vollachian Empire, there were none who did not grasp the importance of controlling the skies.

It was to the extent that, even in this besiegement, the greatest concern was the allocation of air defenses. The People of Shudraq, powerful masters of archery, had exceptionally numerous opportunities to play an active role.

The reason why so many of those women were being instructed to keep watch on the sky was because the opposition’s potential aerial assets required that level of vigilance.

And yet, with sporadic attacks from the deployed undead flying dragons which could hardly be called successful, the Scorching Lady herself, owner of the foremost flying dragon squadron in all of Vollachia, even felt a sense of irritation towards the enemy.

Serena: “Though if I was the enemy’s commanding officer, I’d be able to bring down this city far more efficiently.”

???: “…At the height of this decisive battle, could you please not say such frightening things?”

Serena had clicked her tongue with dissatisfaction towards the opponent’s tactics, and interjecting upon having heard that was a delicate man occupying the same command center, Otto.

He was a man who had guts despite his gentle appearance, and

Serena also had a high evaluation of his character, but regrettably he had a tendency to not let others take risks.

Serena: “You only let yourself take risks… that’d be fine for a subordinate, but you’d be a boring man to have as a lover.”

Otto: “If you were to say that you have taken a fancy to me, Countess Dracroy, I would feel as if I was being told there was a flaw in my personality, so I do not object to your assessment, but…”

Serena: “Hmph, I see. So you don’t like a woman with a scar on her face?”

Otto: “I can say with confidence that my attitude does not change based on one’s appearance. It is far more important to be able to converse and come to a mutual understanding with each other. And even with your scar, I do find you to be quite beautiful, High Countess.”

???: “Whatcha two talkin’ ‘bout? Get yer acts together.”

Serena folded her arms as she stood near the window, and Otto had responded to her with a look of dumbfoundment. And having been dumbfounded by his response, was the emissary from Kararagi, Anastasia.

Opposite to the dumbfounded Anastasia, Berstetz, paying no concern to what the rest of them were going on about, looked over a laid out map as he restlessly exchanged words with a soldier who served the role of dispatching orders.

For some time now, the war situation was being reported without interruption, and orders were being shouted back and forth loudly. The hectically changing situation and the bursting of blood and lives—it was the fragrant scent of the battlefield.

Serena: “This is precisely what it means to be in the Empire. My sense of smell for battle has grown dull under the reign of His Excellency. I of all people had forgotten that war is a part of everyday life.”

Anastasia: “If ya try ‘n say that’s what the Empire is, ya ain’t properly repayin' the Emperor-san who tried to rule in peace."

Serena: "What, I'm a poor loser. If I was discontent with His Excellency's rule I ought to have done something about it through my own strength. Since I have not done so, the likes of my words are nothing more than jest. He attempted to impose a reign that was contrary to imperialism, and the method he used to implement it was imperialism… sadly, His Excellency is symbolic of the Empire."

While the person in question would likely not desire sympathy, she could not help but pity how he walked a path of solitude.

Though it was true that Vincent shunned battle, if he twisted the tenets of others for that purpose, then that would fall into the realm of the "law of iron and blood".

—Only in the midst of conflict and struggle, could precious things be born.

Regardless of whether the Vollachian "law of iron and blood" declared so or not, that was Serena's own interpretation of the Imperial way, and she had accepted those values. She understood that it was ephemeral to love things that could only be born amidst that, but it was in her nature.

Therefore—

Serena: "—So you haven't come, Balleroy?"

Staring at the vast, desolate sky, Serena muttered as if she still had one final regret.

The battle had been ongoing for quite some time, and the armies of both sides had suffered no small amount of casualties. The first wave and vanguard of this battlefield had been completely finished off—that was to say, the Magical Sharpshooter, who followed the principle of concluding battles with minimal casualties, was not flying in the skies of this battlefield.

If he had come, Serena's heart would have been shot out a long time ago.

Serena: "…"

Tracing the vertical scar that ran across the left side of her face, Serena closed her eyes for a few seconds.

Emerging on the back of her eyelids, was the slightly dirty boy she had found during her younger days. The figure of him growing up, losing his life, and in the end, revived as an undead, pointing his spear towards her—

Serena: "That last one is merely my own delusion."

With pallid skin and lifeless golden eyes, the undead form of Balleroy was something that Serena had never seen.

In the battle for the Imperial Capital he had aimed for Vincent in the Crystal Palace, and at the coupled dragon carriages he had carried Lamia away with her shattered soul. However, during both of those opportunities, Serena had been unable to meet Balleroy.

And, Balleroy was not here at the Fortified City either. That was reality.

Serena: "…It would probably be fine for you to hate me."

Muttering so, Serena stood by the window while picturing the undead Balleroy who had not appeared. While standing there, she had no choice but to admit to her unforeseen state of mind.

She would not have minded being killed if it was by Balleroy. That was why she had gone out of her way to expose herself via the window, and had been awaiting the sniping of the Magical Sharpshooter.

Anastasia: "I thought you'd already settled yer feelin's?"

Serena: "…"

Closing one eye, Anastasia was examining Serena's expression from the side.

As Anastasia looked at Serena with her round turquoise eye, it seemed as if that gaze was seeing through her inner thoughts; along with Otto, merchants proved to be quite shrewd.

It must have been under unthinkable fortune that Flop and Medium had been able to survive in the cunning world of commerce.

Thus, to the extent that she was mentally dodging it with useless thoughts, the bullseye that had been struck was not shallow by any means.

Anastasia: “If the enemy’s aimin’ for the commandin’ officer first, that’d be the same as targettin’ the people in this command center. So, you’ve gone ‘n put yerself right in the firin’ line… couldn’t’cha at least consult with us first before doin’ that?”

Serena: “Sorry. I had thought it would have been easier to deal with a situation in which it was obvious who was going to be targeted, instead of a situation where it was unknown who would be shot. With all the wise people present here, you guys would be able to calmly deal with things if my head was suddenly blown apart, wouldn’t you?”

???: “Even supposing that were the case, I think it would be best to search for a route where it is not blown apart, and I am not confident that Ana or I could remain so composed. We are not like Otto-kun.”

Otto: “Though even I would jump bolt upright if you were to suddenly die?!”

Otto raised his voice upon receiving an unexpected evaluation, but Anastasia exchanged glances with the Spirit accompanying her—Echidna, and shrugged her shoulders.

Serena would generally be in agreement with them, but in any case, Serena’s expectations had been off the mark.

Serena: “With Balleroy’s absence, considering that no flying dragon squadron composed of undead has emerged, the value in retaining my living flying dragon squadron has fallen. If there are any fronts of the battle with unfavorable prospects, have them be deployed there. They'll overturn any disadvantage in the blink of an eye."

Anastasia: "That's right. It's a foolish plan to deploy assets one by one, but it's just sloppy gamblin' to be pushed back while keepin' the units with high offensive capability in reserve. I agree that it's fine to use 'em. Only…"

Otto: "—It is concerning that it seems as if the opponent does not have a flying dragon squadron."

Anastasia furrowed her thin eyebrows in concern, and Otto muttered the following words in her stead. In response to their concern, Serena slightly exhaled a "hmm", and,

Serena: "There's not a high probability that any undead flying dragon riders have successfully paired up with their deceased flying dragon… be that as it may, it's certainly unnatural that there have been absolutely none. In that case—"

Otto: "—Rather than the usual application of a flying dragon squadron, there is a high possibility that one is being used in an unorthodox manner, correct?"

Serena: "Unorthodox… that's…"

And, it happened right as she was about to reach the heart of the matter. —With such force as if to break the door of the command center, somebody had come rushing in with a report.

Out of breath, the messenger made an urgent expression as they shouted "Excuse me!" in a quavering voice. Receiving that, Berstetz, who had been looking down at the map, raised his head,

Berstetz: "To the point."

Messenger: "Yessir! A target requiring caution has appeared! Enemy flying dragon squadron, confirmed!"

Serena: "—Have they come?"

Hearing the messenger's report, Serena's expression grew severe, as if to say that someone who ought to have come had finally arrived.

Then, Serena looked closely out the window, searching for signs of the enemy in the sky.

But, she could not find the enemy flying dragon squadron. Behind the suspectful Serena, the messenger proceeded with the continuation of the report.

That was—

Messenger: “—The enemy flying dragon squadron has passed over the large mountain behind the great fortress, and has invaded the airspace above the fortifications! They are deploying enemy soldiers, the undead have breached the city!”

2

—Medium O’Connell possessed the Divine Protection of Morale.

To speak plainly, the Divine Protection of Morale was something that would boost the physical capabilities of one’s body in concert with how roused their spirits and determination were.

Medium was unaware of her own Divine Protection, and even her older brother Flop did not know that his younger sister was the possessor of a Divine Protection. Only, at times when she had to persevere, power would surge within her as she thought “I gotta do my best!”, and as her brother would tell her “Do your best!”, she felt the sensation of power surging within her.

Hence, with the specifics unknown to them, the siblings’ relationship of supporting each other had always remained the optimal solution, and that rare precedent was also the secret behind the strength of the O’Connell siblings.

But, the troublesome aspect of the Divine Protection of Morale was undoubtedly that fluctuations in one’s mood influenced their ability; while the elevation of one’s feelings would enhance their abilities, it was a double-edged sword: to the extent that their feelings were down, they would become unable to display their capabilities.

Ergo, it could be called the most suitable Divine Protection for the bright, positive Medium, but it had backfired when events sorrowful to the greatest degree had occurred within her life.

There were three times in the past when Medium, who was like the personification of a positive attitude, had been depressed.

The first was when a member of her family, Miles, had died.

The second was when another member of her family, Balleroy, had died.

And the third, was when she found out that Balleroy, who should have been dead, had been turned into an undead.

During the first and second times, she thoroughly wept and cried, and it took her several days to recover.

The impact from the third time was not something inferior to those past two times, but there was no time for her to spend a few days crying due to the grievous event.

If so, did Medium participate in the battle with a face stained with tears, disheartened as it was?

—Certainly, that had not been the case.

Medium O'Connell had stopped crying in a true sense.

It was not as if the sorrowful event of the third time had not resonated as much as the first and second times. As an impact of the greatest degree in her life until now, it ripped her chest, her mind, and surely her heart to shreds.

However, as Medium hugged her knees and cowered, Flop did not leave her alone.

Flop: "Dear sister, I'm sorry I hadn't said anything. It was a situation in which people who had died were being resurrected one after another. It was not as if I hadn't considered the possibility that Balleroy was revived."

The coupled dragon carriages had arrived at the Fortified City, and

Medium continued to shut herself away in the room allocated to her; having come to her side, Flop spoke so regarding their encounter with the undead Balleroy.

When she heard her brother’s words, Medium felt the sentiment, “As expected of big bro!”, but she had been unable to say it aloud like usual.

Contrary to having feelings of wanting to condemn her brother for having not told her, she questioned why she had been unable to notice, and hated her own stupidity for never thinking about anything.

By nature, she was not very good at thinking. That was why she always left that duty up to Flop.

That was why, in exchange, it was her job to rampage, she was happy with it being divided up that way. And yet, it was weird for her to now lament her own slow brain.

No, that was not it.

Medium: “I really love you, big bro.”

Flop: “Ahh, thank you, that makes me happy. I love you too of course.”

Medium: “I also really love Sisrena, and I really love Big Bro Miles too.”

Flop: “I know. I’ve never doubted that. Of course, I also love those two.”

Medium: “…I really love Ballebro as well.”

Flop: “Yeah.”

While burying her head into her knees, Medium sniffled as she falteringly spoke. Kneeling down on one knee, Flop listened to her with a calm look on his face. She was grateful that for the last one, when she had spoken about Balleroy, he had just responded with a short nod of his head.

She was grateful, but she was also frustrated.

Medium: “Even though I really love them, I haven’t been thinking about the people I love.”

The possibility that the deceased Balleroy would be resurrected as an undead.

Flop had said that he had been unable to say it, but he had still thought about it. On the other hand, Medium had not even considered it.

That was not because Medium was slow in the head, but because she had been averting her eyes.

Even though she loved her family, even though it was the family she loved, she had not realized it because she had been averting her eyes. —Even though Medium had once regretted that very act to the point of death once before.

Medium: “When Big Bro Miles died, and then after that, Ballebro went and did that thing and also died, I was so frustrated with myself.”

She thought it would have been better if she had been by his side back then, even if he would have hated her or kept her away.

It would have been better for his sibling to make a noisy, loud, annoying racket by his side, and make it so Balleroy could not polish his plan to swoop down on Abel.

Because she had not done that, she had ended up letting Balleroy die.

Even though Medium should have been aware.

She should have been aware that after Miles died, Balleroy would start to worry himself with those sorts of thoughts.

After all, Balleroy was—

Flop: “—Medium, I won’t be going to the Imperial Capital. My wounds haven't finished healing, and I don't have any fighting ability. I'd certainly be a burden. But, you're different."

Medium: "Big bro…"

Flop: "I think Balleroy will be in the Imperial Capital. Being this backed into a corner, the only chance our side has to turn the tables is to defeat the oppositions' leader, who's likely in the Imperial Capital. If the opposition can predict that His Excellency the Emperor-kun will be going there, then…"

Medium: "Mm, yeah."

She knew what Flop was trying to say, even if he did not say everything.

When fighting, Balleroy would always choose the method with the fastest conclusion. That did not change when he became a soldier, and it did not change when he became a Divine General; it was a fundamental part of Balleroy's personality.

Balleroy would undoubtedly target Abel. Therefore he was in the Imperial Capital.

Therefore, if she went to the Imperial Capital, she would meet him.

Flop: "It seems like you've cheered up a little, haven't you?"

Medium: "…As expected of big bro, you really know me well."

Flop: "Ha-ha-ha, that's because I've been Medium's big brother for a long time now! Well then, as a brother who can't go to the Imperial Capital, I'll exhaust all means necessary for the sake of my sister!"

Medium: "Means?"

Wiping her teary face, Medium tilted her head with bloodshot eyes. Seeing his sister's state, Flop placed his hands on his hip, and while smiling,

Flop: "You know, even if you say you want to go, we don't know if His Excellency the Emperor-kun will accept. So in order to make him accept, we should think hard about the flow of persuasion, right? You don't need to worry. I know His Excellency the Emperor-kun's weak point."

Medium: "Incredible! As expected of big bro! What's Abel-chin's weak point?"

Flop: "—Decidedly, it's love."

Raising a single finger, Flop spoke with full confidence.

If the one hearing that was anyone other than Medium, they would have all tilted their heads, not understanding what those words meant, and may have made a peculiar face.

But, no matter what Medium was told by Flop, she would give a broad smile and answer.

Medium: "As expected of big bro! I'm counting on you!"

3

—Thus, Medium O'Connell had obtained the qualification to participate in the ultimate decisive battle for the Imperial Capital.

Thinking back on it, it seemed like a miracle that so many coincidences had piled up for her to finally reach this point.

The first was at the Fortress City of Guaral. Ever since she and Flop had noticed Subaru, Rem, and Spica trying to enter that city, this strange course of events had begun.

Medium: "Thank you for meeting me and big bro back then, Subaru-chin."

Along the way, as the dragon carriage headed for the Imperial Capital, Medium had expressed her gratitude, to which Subaru was surprised.

With his body still in a smaller state, Subaru's profile looked like he was thinking about something with the utmost effort and a frightfully sharp look in his eyes, but only when he was told this did his eyes widen.

At once, Subaru became gentle, and with the tender face he would always face Rem and Spica with,

Subaru: "What are you talking about, Medium-san? If we're giving thanks, then I'm the one who should be grateful to you. Thinking about what things would be like if I hadn't met Medium-san and Flop-san back there, it makes me shudder."

And amid his bashfulness, he had provided the opportunity for Medium's selfishness to be granted.

A settlement with the undead-turned Magical Sharpshooter, Balleroy Temeglyph. —For that purpose, he had sent a tremendously reliable backer with her.

Medium: "Thank you for supporting me, Ros-chin."

Feeling her hair sway in the wind, Medium spoke these words of gratitude in the midst of the air.

The person she spoke them to, was a being who was carrying her horizontally while floating in the sky—a companion of Subaru and Emilia, the person lending Medium strength in her battle, Roswaal.

At Medium's thanks, he smiled with a "Nooo~ no",

Roswaal: "I am the one who ought to show gratitude to you for letting me accompany youuu~. As a matter of fact, the person you desire to face off against is an exceedingly formidable enemy. I wish to have as many cards in my hand as possible, even if only by a single card more."

Medium: "—? I'm not a card, I'm a woman you know?"

Roswaal: "I've blundered. You're the same type as Emilia-saaama~."

As Roswaal spoke that with a soft, wry smile, a question mark floated over Medium's head.

Perhaps he had meant it in the sense that she was not as heavy as she looked. In reality, Medium was quite tall for a woman, and she stood at around the same height as the tall Roswaal. Even so, he was easily carrying her.

But, Roswaal's speciality did not seem to be in his physical strength, but rather in his aptitude for magic. That was also the truth of how he was carrying Medium and flying in the sky like this.

When Medium had been at Serena's place, she had experienced flight many times, but all of those occasions were riding on flying dragons. This was her first time flying while being carried by a person.

However—

Medium: "The trick to flying in the sky is to believe in the person lending you flight, and to entrust everything to them!"

The experience she had once learned from a flying dragon rider she trusted, would now support Medium in this moment.

Whether that partner was a flying dragon or Roswaal, the method to gain wings was to believe.

Roswaal: "I'd like to tell Otto-kun and Petra-kun about your courage and trick, as they aren't quite accustomed to fliiight~."

Medium: "Is that so? Well then Ros-chin, wouldn't it be better for you to get along with the two of them more?"

Roswaal: "Ahhh~ hahaha, that's painful to my eaaars~."

Deepening his smile at her straightforward opinion, Roswaal slowly shook his head.

Seeing that reaction, Medium sensed that Roswaal was not really smiling deep down, and that it was a smile that attempted to deceive. He was probably not very good at getting along with people.

Medium had recently come to the realization that such people existed. Abel was also like that.

She did not understand why they would go out of their way to distance themselves from others—no, she was beginning to understand it a little now. By doing so, one could try to ensure that they would not be hurt.

Medium: “But, if you always do that, you’ll end up regretting it.”

Roswaal: “…”

Medium: “That’s why, I’ll make myself a role model for Ros-chin and Abel-chin.”

Right after Medium spoke, a fierce, thundering roar echoed beyond the flying duo.

It was to the east of Medium and Roswaal—in that place where thick clouds were accumulating one by one, there was present the form of a Dragon so fearsome that it caused the very world to tremble.

In accordance with what had been decided beforehand, Garfiel was the one who would fight the Dragon.

And while Garfiel was subduing the Dragon, everyone else would begin to move.

One grouping among them, was the combination of Medium and Roswaal.

Medium: “…”

She deeply inhaled, and deeply exhaled.

Once it began, there would be no going back. But, she was fine with that.

Medium: “Ros-chin.”

Roswaal: “Shall we get started? There’s no need to get worked up. —After all, I’m the strongest magician in the wooorld~.”

Right after Roswaal declared so, for a moment, Medium felt goosebumps over her entire body.

That was at the moment Roswaal had suddenly unleashed magic that was supernatural beyond anything Medium was capable of imagining, causing flames to be sent above the thick clouds that blanketed the Imperial Capital, targeting the Crystal Palace from directly above.

While using such a ultra-high-class magic technique, Roswaal progressed his flying magic with Medium still in his arms.

It was an intricate feat akin to one using their right arm to draw and their left arm to compose a song, while also using their mouth to recite verses of poetry and using their eyes and brain to decipher an unknown language.

But, for Medium, who did not understand its value, she had no valid reason to praise it as being amazing.

Therefore, Medium did not voice praise with her mouth, but instead demonstrated it through her actions.

Medium: “…”

Staring into the distant sky, a chain of bright-red flames exploding could be seen above the Crystal Palace within the deepest part of the Imperial Capital; cutting past the blossoming crimson balls of flame one after the other, a flying dragon soared at a high altitude.

Far, far away, many kilometers in the distance, as a small speck in the sky, it had been clearly seen by the current Medium as somebody whom she wished to see, with whom she wished to converse, and whom she wished to touch.

—Medium O’Connell possessed the Divine Protection of Morale.

The Divine Protection of Morale boosted one’s physical abilities in concert with how roused their spirits were, and it was the most suitable Divine Protection for the bright, positive Medium.

And now that Medium was before a person whom she had wanted to meet to an absolutely unbearable extent, the performance of her Divine Protection was manifesting its greatest, most powerful effects in all the time since she had been born.

The thing she wanted to do and the thing she must do coincided, and smashing through her regrets of the past, she clutched what her older brother had entrusted to her within her chest; together with a reliable ally, she would challenge a beloved visage.

Ergo, Medium spoke to Balleroy, who had likely seen her from far off in the distance.

Medium: “Jeez, I won’t let you go off wherever you please anymore. Come and talk to me properly, Ballebro.”

—The next moment, a bullet of light had been fired after a beat had passed, and Medium cut it down with her unsheathed barbarian sword.

Medium: “…”

Though the impact tore through her entire body, both Medium, and Roswaal who was carrying her, were uninjured.

And thus, separated by an ultra-long distance, the curtain rose on the fiercest bout of aerial combat in the history of the Empire.

Chapter 53: The Magical Sharpshooter

1

—Roswaal L. Mathers was the premier magician in the Kingdom, and in the world.

If one were to inquire about this to said person, he would mix in a fearless smile and a certain confidence, and affirm the notion with the condition that “For the present day, I guess that’s the caaase~”.

As Roswaal would note that it was the case in the current era, there would be no chagrin harbored in his expression. Instead, what would dwell within his heterochromatic eyes, would be a deep love and a feeling of loneliness which would appear to be yearning for something.

When he spoke of matters regarding magic, that was the ephemeral longing that would never disappear from inside of Roswaal, of which none were aware, save for Ram and Beatrice; even he himself was not aware of it.

Based on that, Roswaal’s position as the current greatest magician would not waver.

Declaring that to Medium O’Connell as she challenged the decisive battle, he soared through the sky with her in his arms, and confronted the Magical Sharpshooter who had ascended to high altitudes far in the distance—considering that Roswaal had confidence and pride in his own magic, he estimated the chances of victory here to be low.

Roswaal: “…”

Having infiltrated the skies of the Imperial Capital from the southwest of the city, Roswaal’s vision beheld the sight of the sky above the northernmost Crystal Palace being dyed a bright red, and many explosions of flame bloomed. Roswaal was the one who had sent in that fiery rain, but it was a pair of flying dragon and rider, flying up from the palace, that had transformed it into flaming explosions—or so it seemed.

The reason for the phrasing of “seemed” was because Roswaal’s eyes were incapable of locking on to a target moving at rapid speeds from a position several kilometers away.

That was not an issue of Roswaal’s eyesight. It was simply a matter of the human eye being unable to do so.

However, Medium and the opposing Magical Sharpshooter were both overcoming that limitation through the power of a Divine Protection and through some sort of other technique respectively, and had visually identified each other.

As proof of that—

Medium: “—Uu, kyaan!”

Together with an adorable war cry, Medium swung her barbarian sword while being carried in his arms.

She was flying in a state where she was completely depending on another. By no means could her balance have been good, but Medium’s barbarian sword still caught the approaching bullet of light, and with a sound akin to a splash of water, she cut it down.

Stuck by the impact, and feeling the severed light bullet pass behind them and dissipate to mana, Roswaal could not help but shudder at the speed and precision of that attack.

—That was a magical technique designed to kill, perfected to an unbelievable extent at the very height of expertise.

He could surmise that the fired light bullet was a kind of Yang Magic, but it was of a different lineage to that of Jiwald, which fired a heated ray of light; the technique of shooting such a bullet of light could not be classified into any category, and was an original creation.

He could not say anything for certain after only a brief moment of combat, but it likely involved preparing light in a similar form and nature to the icicles that Emilia would shoot out, and then piercing the opponent's vitals. One thing that ought to have been noted was how instead of a bullet of ice or earth, which retained a physical form, it was being done with light.

By ensuring that physical bullets would not remain in the wound, it would be difficult for an opponent to discern the true nature of the attack, and furthermore, the area around the wound would be scorched by the light, easily causing a serious wound to be sustained.

Roswaal: "Superb magic."

Roswaal praised it as an attack undoubtedly worthy of being called Magical Bullets.

If his opponent had devised this by himself, then he should have the talents to become a first-class magician. But then again, at this point, the person in question likely would not desire such prestige. From the viewpoint of an Imperial, he had already received the highest possible evaluation by being a Divine General.

Not to mention that it was difficult to imagine someone who was not living, but rather dead, to be wishing for such glory.

Roswaal: "To begin with, even during his lifetime, he was not a person who clung to fame or prestiiige~. I've heard about that from those who were close to him, and from the one who had witnessed his final moments."

For information about the Magical Sharpshooter—Balleroy Temeglyph, there was an unexpectedly large number of people who had known him during his lifetime, so Roswaal's ears had gained more chances than he had initially been hoping for to learn about him.

However, what he had heard from the O'Connell siblings was largely testimonials regarding his personality, and Serena had choked up with feelings of guilt that were uncharacteristic of her. So, Roswaal had been unable to obtain the tactical information he had desired from them, but—there had been an unforeseen competitor.

That was—

Roswaal: "—I would have never thought that Julius-kun was the talented individual who had defeated this Divine General."

Taking care so that Medium, who was boosting her concentration within his arms, would not hear, Roswaal organized his thoughts as he recalled Julius, who had looked as if he was worrying himself with thought.

As Anastasia's one and only Knight, he possessed a strong sense of duty, so he had supported his Lord all the way to the Vollachian Empire. The Finest of Knights had brought quite the valuable information regarding the formidable enemy whom Roswaal and Medium were challenging together.

—From the start, regardless of whether the battlefield was to be the Imperial Capital or the Fortified City, it was established that Roswaal would be the matchup for Balleroy Temeglyph.

That it was because Roswaal was an old acquaintance of Serena Dracroy, and that he had been entrusted with the duty of performing the last rites over Balleroy, whom she had looked after since he was a child, was not the case.

Roswaal also had emotions, but he always eliminated decisions that were based on emotion.

Naturally, the decision to have Roswaal be Balleroy's opponent was a strategic one.

It might be a little late to bring this up, but the Vollachian Empire and the Kingdom of Lugunica had been enemies for a long time.

There were treacherous relations between all of the Four Great Countries, but the fact that they all mutually recognized which among those relations required the most vigilance could not be altered.

Therefore, for the interval that the Kingdom was holding its Royal Selection, it was a remarkable historical achievement that it had signed a non-aggression treaty with the Empire, but that did not mean that the chilly relationship between the two countries had warmed up.

To make a long story short, the Kingdom of Lugunica had persisted with its vigilance of the potential enemy that was the Vollachian Empire, and it was always refining its countermeasures against the primary force that was the Nine Divine Generals, and the lookout force that was the flying dragon squadron.

Within those strategy meetings, it had been decided. —The Kingdom's magic regiment would oppose the Empire's flying dragon squadron, and its apex, Roswaal, would clash with the most powerful flying dragon rider.

Roswaal: "Be that as it may, I had never thought that I would be facing off against targets requiring such caution like the Vicious Old Man and the Magical Sharpshooter within the Empiiire~."

When the counter-Empire discussions were being held, those two individuals were recognized as the greatest threats.

Of course, when it came to individual military assets, the Blue Lightning and the Spirit Eater were the big two, but concerning them, the Kingdom also had a Sword Saint who would not lose out.

But, when it came to war, the presence of leadership was vital.

The best way to end a war would be to end the lives of the enemy's leaders. —And for that, what was feared more than the First and the Second, was the Vicious Old Man and the Magical Sharpshooter.

Ergo, Roswaal had also surmised the techniques and capabilities of the Magical Sharpshooter from rumors.

Roswaal had heard that in the end, he had risen up in rebellion and had lost his life without them ever having the chance to face off against each other, so his simulations had ended up becoming meaningless, but by some hapless twist of fate, this situation had been brought to fruition.

And then, upon ascertaining the skills of the real, not imagined, Balleroy Temeglyph, the strongest magician in the world, Roswaal, was convinced.

Roswaal: “—As expected, I caaan’t~ win this on my own.”

That was not in jest or sarcasm, nor was it that he had lost his nerve; Roswaal merely recognized that as the plain truth.

This was not a matter of his magic being inferior to military techniques, but that there was a difference in the playing field.

First of all, there was a difference in their mobility.

Able to use flying magic, Roswaal was one of the world’s leading individuals who was capable of solo flight, but his speed and maneuverability could not match that of flying dragons, experts in the field. If one were to challenge Balleroy head-on in an air battle, the best they would be able to do would be to get thrown off by his speed, and get shot down while being tossed about by his three-dimensional movements.

Secondly, there was a difference in the precision and objective of their respective methods of attack.

The Magical Bullets, mastered by Balleroy, were undoubtedly something that had been trained for the purpose of killing others, and it would be acceptable to say that their power and accuracy had been perfected.

In order to become a magician that his Teacher would not be ashamed of, Roswaal aimed to master every possible magic, but he was still far-off from the deep mysteries of magic, and even if his diversity overwhelmingly surpassed that of Balleroy, he could declare that he had nothing on the same level as this enemy who specialized in the field of killing a target.

And thirdly, there was a difference in their combat conditions.

It was a vexing matter, but that was the greatest obstacle in this matchup.

If one were to think about it, they would likely come to this conclusion, but if it was possible to do battle from a distant location and one-sidedly attack the opponent, it would be impossible to lose. That was naturally Roswaal's fighting style, and fighting from the greatest range that was possible for himself could be said to be the fundamental tactic for certain victory as a magician.

The problem was that even with his greatest attack range, it would still be a situation in which his opponent would have the upper hand.

Naturally, his opponent would thus not permit the one-sided attacks he had come to use until now. In order to avoid that situation, he would need to close to distance so as to not lose out in range, and then in the situation where the range advantage had been eliminated, he would need to turn it into a contest of their individual abilities.

But, the combat conditions imposed upon Roswaal would not allow for that prerequisite.

Subaru: "To be honest, having our allies taken out one by one from far away would be the most troubling thing. In order to not let the opponent perform that kind of rapid fire on us, do something to suppress him!"

For their assault on the Imperial Capital, when dividing up the members of the "Rescue from Destruction Squad", that was the duty Subaru had entrusted to Roswaal.

In truth, that had been a logical decision. Disregarding Halibel and Olbart, Roswaal did not intend to claim that he was the most powerful asset, but there was no doubt that he was the one who possessed the greatest range.

Emilia was also on the right track, but she lacked precision in her attacks, and she had no method of ascending to the sky where their opponent made their battlefield. It was a matter of course that this would be up to Roswaal.

As a result, in order to prevent the other allies from being targeted, Roswaal was forced to attack from a distance that was overwhelmingly favorable for his opponent, declaring war while attracting his opponent's attention to himself.

Roswaal: "As I had feared, even at this distance the opponent's attacks are delivered with precision. I've attracted his attention, but… I'll have to close the distance from here. This act really could result in my deaaath~."

The three aforementioned disadvantages should suffice to show just how troublesome that would be.

Against such a formidable enemy, he would have no choice but to fight with tactics and at a distance where the opponent would triumph. Furthermore, recognizing the difference in strength between them, Roswaal was convinced that his opponent was above him.

But, there was neither lamentation nor despair dwelling within his heterochromatic eyes.

That was because—

Medium: "Diyahh!"

Immediately after he thought he had seen a flash, the sound of water splashing and an impact jolted both Roswaal and Medium.

That was proof that Medium had succeeded in defending against the impact of the second bullet. While admiring Medium's skill in managing such a feat, Roswaal deepened his smile.

The reason for that smile was—

Roswaal: "Medium-kun, does it seem feasible?"

Medium: "Yeah! We can do it! It's like Ros-chin said… it seems like Ballebro is only aiming for my arms and shoulders!"

Balleroy: “Tsk—”

Witnessing the second bullet he had fired being cut down by the barbarian sword in the magnified vision of his left eye, Balleroy bit down on his molars at the improvement in skill of the girl he recognized, and at the viciousness of his opponent’s objective.

Within the scope he had created by bending light, he could grasp for certain that Medium, with her face brimming with motivation, and the man flying in the sky while carrying her, were gradually getting closer.

Their aim was obvious, it was a standard tactic in warfare to close the distance on an opponent who specialized in long-distance attacks.

The surprise attack of the flaming spheres from above the clouds, once that had failed, they had immediately shifted gears—that was not the case.

If there was anybody who thought that such a bland attack would hit before being noticed, there was truly something wrong with them. The intention of that attack was for it to be taken down. Though he understood that, it was an attack that he had no choice but to shoot down.

Since his opponent had fired the opening attack of this battle like that, he would commence an ultra-long-range battle in his own overwhelming favor—upon seeing Medium, Balleroy’s fighting spirit was paralyzed.

The reason why they had let the surprise attack be defended against, and had commenced with a battle in which he was the one with the advantageous range, was because their strategy built on the fact that Balleroy would have to choose whom to shoot with his Magical Bullets.

Balleroy: “Medi…!!”

The first and second shots, Medium had defended against both of the Magical Bullets that Balleroy had fired.

She had always been that way. When Medium was feeling down, she could be overpowered by even the unathletic Flop, and yet when she was filled with motivation, she would become an obstreperously rambunctious kid.

Neither Flop nor Miles could do anything about it, and despite being her favorite, Balleroy also had difficulty in dealing with her. Serena was not one to rebuke, so Medium's liveliness knew no bounds.

Be that as it may, he had never expected for her to be able to deflect his Magical Bullets.

Carillon: "—Kiryararahhh!"

Balleroy: "—. I gotcha, Carillon."

As Balleroy clenched his teeth, his beloved dragon flapped its wings and neighed in appeal to him.

Through the art of flying dragon taming, Balleroy and Carillon were tied to each other's existences through their souls—through the merging of Od with Od. Subjugating the innately ferocious flying dragons through that process, was the secretive technique of flying dragon taming.

Given that relationship, any wavering in Balleroy's thoughts and feelings was directly transmitted to Carillon. The inverse also held true, so Balleroy had also sensed Carillon's thoughts.

He understood. Medium's skill was not the only reason why the Magical Bullets had been defended against.

Balleroy had laid eyes upon the figure of someone who was essentially a younger sister to him making such an earnest expression, and that had been the reason why he had not shot through her with the ruthlessness of a warrior.

Balleroy: "Her limbs…"

If he could just shoot one of them off, Medium would certainly withdraw from the warfront.

The magician whom she was accompanying would also judge that there would be no benefit in flying with her if she were to suffer a serious injury. If possible, it would be better for it to be an arm instead of a leg. If it was an arm, there would be less difficulty in her life hereafter than there would be if it was a leg.

It would be best if he caused Medium to withdraw with a wound, shot down the magician, and then requested Sphinx to spare her life. If he did so, his anguish would disappear.

Anguish. Would. Disappear.

Balleroy: "—Let's go get 'em."

With the face of an undead that had lost all complexion, there was a definite fighting spirit dwelling within Balleroy's golden eyes.

It was not the expression of hesitating to attack Medium, which he had worn until a moment earlier, but rather that of finding the consensus between his disposition and his objective, and bringing it to fruition; it was the expression of the Magical Sharpshooter.

Balleroy: "…"

While harboring a fighting spirit within his golden irises, the heat from Balleroy's body completely subsided.

Closing his right eye, concentrating all of his attention into the scope with his left eye, he got up on his knees upon the back of his beloved dragon, fixed his spear in place, and created a sharply pointed bullet of light at its tip.

Balleroy was an unorthodox magician, and he had not refined anything except this one technique.

A single one of these shots consumed very little mana, and since it maximized the effect with a minimal number of required processes, it had a good affinity with his nature. —To settle things reliably, it was the embodiment of that approach.

Balleroy: "…"

While Balleroy was concentrating in that manner, Carillon similarly boosted its own concentration.

The moment he peered through his scope, and carefully observed the conduct of his target, he would have to neglect maintaining vigilance over the rest of his surroundings, so in Balleroy's stead when he did so, Carillon would maintain a field of vision over their environs.

His beloved dragon, who kept a lookout over their surroundings with the eyesight and instinctive alertness of a flying dragon, was absolutely indispensable to Balleroy as he established this tactic.

Balleroy: "If you're looking to throw down against me, then you're gonna hafta close the distance. But, did ya really think I'd letcha do that so easily while knowing that?"

He was surprised that something like flying magic existed, but the speed of their approach could not possibly be compared to that of a flying dragon rider. If he fell back by the same amount that his opponent was approaching, the distance between them would not close.

Of course, since there was a limit to how much he could fall back, the method of maintaining distance was not just falling back, but also making full use of maneuvering and elevation. But, that was not a problem.

There existed no boundaries in the vast sky. Hence, the battle technique of the Magical Sharpshooter had been established.

Balleroy: "—Hit."

Weaving a word with lips devoid of moisture, the tip of his spear suddenly shone with an intense brightness.

The moment the Magical Bullet was fired, there was no recoil or emotion whatsoever on Balleroy's part. There was only a quick flash of light, and the result brought about the sniping in less than a second.

Within his vision magnified by the scope, Medium had defended against the third Magical Bullet with her barbarian sword.

Her movements suggested that she had realized that Balleroy was aiming for her limbs. Whether that was her natural intuition, or advice whispered into her ear by the magician behind her, was unclear.

While admiring that as quite the impressive feat, Balleroy spilled out a long breath,

Balleroy: “—Hit, hit, hit, hit, hit.”

With that, he consecutively fired from the fourth shot to the eighth shot in a single breath.

Balleroy: “…”

Balleroy’s Magical Bullets had no recoil. Therefore, there was no impediment to shooting in rapid succession.

If there was a limitation, it would be the speed at which the bullets of light were created to be fired, but Balleroy had poured all of his talents for magic into mastering this Magical Bullet attack.

Five shots per second, light bullets that were fired at the same accuracy without the slightest bit of deviation—that was the basis for Balleroy Temeglyph being called the Magical Sharpshooter, and the reason he had attained the position of General First-Class.

Balleroy: “Hit, hit, hit, hit, hit.”

Fiercely swinging the barbarian swords in both of her hands, Medium frantically continued to repel the Magical Bullets.

That in itself was worthy of praise, but Balleroy’s remaining strength had not decreased in the slightest. The time that had passed was ten seconds at most, and if they continued for another ten or twenty seconds, Medium would definitely use up all of her strength.

If Balleroy indifferently approached that moment while firing his Magical Bullets—

Balleroy: "…"

For a moment, suspicion was yielded in the composed Balleroy's thoughts.

All the while, he still continued creating bullets of light and engaging in a ceaseless chain of sniper fire via his Magical Bullets, but it was this very situation that Balleroy harbored suspicion about.

Bringing Medium along with him for the surprise attack, this was the opponent who had imposed a considerable limitation on Balleroy's Magical Bullets.

Naturally, it was an enemy who had thrown down the gauntlet with the intention of facing Balleroy, so would they really implement such a half-hearted strategy like letting him break through simply by persisting with his signature move?

He could not help but find it strange and peculiar. That was, this very situation in which he could fully display his true nature.

Indeed, it happened right after Balleroy had finished contemplating.

Carillon: "—Kiryararahhh!"

In Balleroy's stead as he looked through his scope, Carillon gave a loud neigh as it kept vigilance over their surroundings.

While flying at high speeds through the sky above the Crystal Palace, his beloved dragon who had been maintaining a constant distance with the opponent made an appeal, and Balleroy turned his attention to the cause of Carillon's neigh.

From even higher than Balleroy and Carillon, who were high in the skies above, something was falling towards them.

Balleroy: "—Hk, you're really giving it to us, ain't'cha!"

As Balleroy grit his teeth and howled, what pierced the thick clouds and fell towards them, was a threat even more direct than the balls of flame that had targeted the Crystal Palace earlier.

—An enormous mass of ice, akin to the size of a small mountain, ferociously hurtled down from the sky towards the Imperial Capital.

3

Julius: “Fighting against Balleroy-dono in a location with no cover will prove to be fatal. After all, he is the greatest flying dragon rider of the Empire… an astounding master of his craft, with range in every conceivable direction.”

Following the advice that Julius had provided whilst he bore a grave look on his face, the aerial battle that Roswaal had been challenged to was the poorest choice of battlefield against the Empire’s finest flying dragon rider.

After all, there was nothing in the sky that could serve as cover. Forwards, backwards, left, and right went without saying, but his opponent was even able to guarantee range on the vertical plane, allowing for every direction in three dimensions; altogether, it was the worst possible environment.

It was normal for a warrior to prepare the most disadvantageous situation for their opponent, so if one were to go out of their way to meet their opponent’s conditions, and choose to fight with a disadvantageous situation for themself, then they would merely be an insane person.

So then, although there was nothing that could have been done regarding the conditions, would that make Roswaal an insane deviant who chose to allow his opponent to fight on a battlefield on which they excelled, at a range at which they triumphed, and with tactics which were their forte?

—Certainly, that was not the case.

Roswaal would not say that he was normal, but he understood that he was not one to burn with a longing for victory, nor was he one to eccentrically enjoy the disadvantages of a war situation.

He recognized his own abnormalities, but those abnormalities were not things he displayed in combat.

Therefore, Roswaal had not done anything so foolish as facing a battlefield on which he had no chance of winning.

Medium: “Ha! Ha! Haaaah!!”

Within Roswaal’s arms, Medium panted as steam rose from her body.

The high level of heat being transmitted into his palms was proof that the performance of her body was rising in response to her fighting spirit. At the same time, it was also proof that she had surpassed her limits several times in just ten seconds.

The dreadful rapid-fire ability of the Magical Bullets, even if it was clear that they were flying towards her in a manner that would avert a fatal wound, he was deeply impressed that Medium had successfully repelled fifty of the approaching bullets.

But, they did not have another ten seconds. Hence, Roswaal progressed the battle to the next stage.

—Breaking through the clouds that hung over the Imperial Capital, an enormous mass of ice was plummeting from the heavens towards the city’s surface.

A mass of ice so mighty that one could have easily mistaken it for a mountain, Roswaal was naturally the one who had made it fall. However, if he produced a block of ice of that size, no matter how much pride Roswaal had as being the world’s greatest magician, he would barely have any mana remaining after the fact.

Therefore, he had gotten Emilia, who possessed excessive amounts of mana, to create the block of ice.

Roswaal: “She still had so much energy after creating something to that extent. Truly, it is an absurd notion.”

Having performed a marvel equivalent to creating an iceberg, Emilia calmly followed Subaru’s orders and confronted a different battlefield. As reliable as that was, when he considered the possibility that he might have to confront her adversarially one day, it gave him quite the headache.

However, in this moment, he would depend on that reliability, and would proceed with the stratagem of bringing down the iceberg.

It had been uncertain if all of Roswaal's mana could be used to produce such an enormous iceberg, but it would not have been too much if he were to simply maintain that which Emilia had created, and keep it afloat.

He had been keeping it on standby since the balls of flame had been brought down, and now, in this moment, he released it from its yoke.

Roswaal: "…"

The attack had the same mass as if a mountain was falling from the sky, but its aim was not to flatten Balleroy from overhead as he flew around in the air. It would be a briefer story if such a thing could be done, but it would likely not be very difficult for Balleroy to escape from the area of damage that the iceberg would inflict.

Hence, the reason for bringing the iceberg down was not to attack Balleroy. —It was to serve as an obstacle.

Roswaal: "If there's no cover, then I had better create some."

Right after he muttered this, Roswaal narrowed his eyes, and then cracks immediately began to form throughout the entirety of the iceberg.

That moment, a high-pitched noise pierced the sky, just as if glass that filled the air had all shattered at once, and the subsequent phenomenon that occurred might have even appeared as if the sky was crumbling.

The iceberg shattered, and as fragments scattered about, chunks of ice chaotically fell towards the ground.

Though the phrasing of shattered had been used, they were fragments of a mountain. Each individual fragment was around the size of a building or a dragon carriage, so it was identical to an avalanche of icebergs tumbling down from the sky.

It was a sight akin to taking a box filled with small pebbles and sand, and turning it upside down over a flowerbed—

Roswaal: “This, is the true ability of a magician.”

If one could engage in a one-sided attack from a distance at which they excelled, it would be impossible to lose.

That such was the fundamental tactic for certain victory for a magician, had been mentioned earlier. Therefore, Roswaal preferred a fighting style that conformed to that fundamental, and thus he put it into practice.

In order to perform one-sided attacks, it was crucial to reduce the opponent’s “options”.

A proficiency at a certain range, was nothing more than an easily decipherable indicator to help in doing so. By reducing his opponent’s “options”, he could pull the situation towards one that was advantageous for himself.

That, was the fighting style of the world’s strongest magician, Roswaal.

Medium: “Teryaaah!!”

A light passed through the incessant rain of shards and chunks of ice, and Medium cut down the Magical Bullet that had approached.

Medium had been ordered to not be phased no matter what happened, but he was as grateful as he could have been that she was moving in accordance with that order. The Magical Sharpshooter should have also been adequately astounded, but it was commendable that he had magnificently shifted back to attacking right away.

However, his rapid-fire capability and mobility had been reduced beyond compare.

And, above all else—

Roswaal: “If you’re the kind of person I’ve heard you were, you won't target me directly with your Magical Bullets. —After all, if I were to fall from this altitude, there would be no way of saving Medium-kun."

4

Making an extraordinary war situation into a reality, was an enemy akin to the devil.

Faced with a magician who used Medium as a shield in order to prevent his tactics, Balleroy recognized his opponent as such by means of a clear enmity.

In the Vollachian Empire, so-called magicians were exceedingly valuable.

That was because fundamentally and ethnically, a propensity to be unskilled in handling magic had been passed down, so ultimately the principles of the Imperial people did not align with magic.

At the roots of the Imperial people, there was a reverence towards the strong, and that could also be expressed as an adoration for the talents and skills of outstanding warriors. An ideal warrior of the Vollachian Empire would wield their own weapon and overcome their opponent in an exchange of blows, and battles that did not take such a form were shunned.

There were deep-rooted preconceptions and biases regarding other types of fighting styles, and though it had improved under Vincent's reign, it would still take some time for such things to completely disappear.

The fighting style of Balleroy, known as the Magical Sharpshooter, and the killing methods of the Vicious Old Man, Olbart, the shinobi head honcho, did not have much fame within other countries, contrary to the vigilance other nations had of them.

Though, since Balleroy and Olbart did not fight for the sake of fame, neither of them really cared.

Because he had possessed such rationale, Balleroy, unlike other Imperial people, did not particularly detest magicians. —He wished to overturn that evaluation from when he had been alive.

Balleroy: “I don’t like your way of doing things one bit, Mister Magician—!”

He admired their skill of using absolutely everything at their disposal to produce their own battlefield, but with their poisonous fangs pointed towards him, going as far as facing him with a member of his own family of all things, fury surged within him.

He truly wished to shoot through that person’s head and heart, but —

Balleroy: “Carillon—!”

Carillon: “—Kiryararahhh!”

Spurring on his beloved dragon with a pat on the back, the flying dragon picked up speed with a flap of its wings as it neighed.

As Balleroy and Carillon danced through the dark sky, soaring through the hailstorm of unbelievable scale, they focused on conquering the labyrinth of ice that had suddenly been created, attempting to break through.

In the past, there had been instances where people had tried to avoid Balleroy’s Magical Bullets by escaping to a forest, dense with trees, or by hiding away in a sturdy fortress.

When those had happened, Balleroy had cleared the trees with a rapid fire of Magical Bullets to secure a line of sight, and in the second case, he had identified where the opponent was hiding, and then shot a Magical Bullet through the wall to kill the enemy.

But, he had never once attempted to conquer a method as absurd as this until now.

And thus, naturally, he had never once overturned a strategy as absurd as this, either.

Balleroy: “So that means if I get past this, it’ll be my win, ain’t that right?”

While evading the fragments of the shattered iceberg, which would quite likely be able to end one's life with just a mere graze, Balleroy imagined the figures of Medium and the magician who had set this up.

Aside from those two, there were no others who had ascended to the Imperial Capital's sky. That was to say, the cards that would be played in the aerial battle against Balleroy, consisted entirely of those two.

It seemed like Serena had not sent out her Flying Dragon Squadron, her pride and joy, to face Balleroy.

Balleroy: "As I'd expect, the High Countess is fully aware."

Even in aerial combat that utilized flying dragons, there existed a clear hierarchy.

For example, wild flying dragons without a partner would never be able to contend with flying dragons that had a flying dragon rider. A single outstanding pair of flying dragon and rider could exterminate a flock of one hundred flying dragons.

And thus, if a flying dragon rider were to clash with another flying dragon rider, the superior party would always be victorious. With no relation to the advantage or disadvantage of numbers, the side with the superior flying dragon rider would win.

If there existed no flying dragon riders more capable than Balleroy, then no matter how many flying dragon squadrons were sent in, the only possible outcome would be for mountains of the corpses of valuable flying dragons and their riders alike to pile up.

That was how valuable a superior flying dragon rider was; they were outstanding personnel.

That was why Balleroy did not detest Serena. Her act of authorizing Miles to go on a secret mission to the Kingdom of Lugunica, had been necessary. —Nothing could have been done about it.

Balleroy: "Even so, I'm gonna—"

As he grit his teeth, the latter half of his mutter was something that even Balleroy himself had been unable to hear.

That was because underneath Balleroy and Carillon, shards of the shattered iceberg crashed into the Imperial Capital one after the other, and a thunderous sound reverberated as a tremendous amount of dust began to rise; the shards destroyed the cityscape, altering its very form.

The miserable amount of damage to the Imperial Capital that had been brought about by magic, the havoc which ought to have been called the Magic Disaster, continued.

It was a city that he had protected during his lifetime, and had grown accustomed to seeing. It was not as if he did not have reservations about it being destroyed, but Balleroy's attention was more so focused on his enemy rather than the city that was falling into ruin.

Balleroy: "…"

Amidst the shattered ice that was fluttering down like dust, there was an illusory sight caused by the light being diffused, and he became able to more clearly see the figure of Medium, who ought to have been further beyond.

However, there was still distance between them. Having brought down an iceberg from above the clouds, and producing damage that heavily demolished the cityscape of the Imperial Capital, the distance they had gained was a negligible amount.

Balleroy: "Hit, hit, hit."

In order to force back the distance they had gained, Balleroy shortened the amount of time it took for his fired Magical Bullets to reach their target.

And thus, Medium would need an accordingly instantaneous reaction speed. Just how many more shots would the exhausted Medium be able to obstruct?

Even if Balleroy were to reduce his mobility, restricting his line and angle of fire, he would still have the advantage.

That was to say, the next move was coming.

Balleroy: "—? The same bundles of flame from earlier… no."

There were signs of a change above the clouds, and knocking away an ice shard with his spear, clearing the line of fire with a bullet of light, Balleroy looked up, furrowing his brow.

Hurtling through the large hole in the thick clouds that had been created by the mountain of ice, were numerous flaming spheres and icebergs; though they were not as huge as the mountain of ice from earlier, they were still quite enormous. At the sight of those plummeting down, Balleroy thought that their purpose might have been to add to the obstacles in the sky—he then perceived his opponent's true intention.

They were falling down somewhere largely off the mark from the position in which Balleroy and Carillon were—they were drawing a trajectory headed for a direct hit to the Crystal Palace.

Balleroy: "What the hell d'ya think you're doing, deviant—!!!"

He was witnessing ice and flame in descent without him as their aim; however, Balleroy shouted as if it was an attack directed towards none other than himself.

They would not bring any direct damage to Balleroy. Instead, they would relentlessly crush Madelyn's body, which remained in the palace, and the rest of the people residing within its walls.

He could not afford to let that happen. —He could not afford to let Sphinx die.

Balleroy: "OHHHHHHH—!!!"

Spreading its wings and making a sharp turn, Carillon made a sudden brake in a position where no chunks of ice would hit. Raising his body as if being flicked off of that very back, Balleroy pointed his spearhead towards the sky above the Crystal Palace, and fired his Magical Bullets.

Since the rate of production of five shots per second would not be able to stop the attack, in this moment, he surpassed a limit that he had never surpassed in his lifetime, and a barrage of Balleroy's Magical Bullets covered the sky.

The rampaging bullets of light completely shot down the descending flaming spheres and chunks of ice, and he had successfully protected the Crystal Palace from the large-scale damage which would have caused it to come crumbling down.

But at this moment, it was a self-evident truth that Balleroy's opponent would aim at him while his back was turned—.

Balleroy: "—Hit."

Hence, while Balleroy was aiming his spearhead at the objects falling towards the Crystal Palace, he aimed the back of his spear at the enemy drawing near, and responded by firing Magical Bullets both forwards and backwards at the same time.

Balleroy: "…"

He had fired only one Magical Bullet to his rear, but that had been enough.

With his back turned, Balleroy had made it seem like he was presenting an opening, and a flame of magic had been directly approaching him—pierced head-on by the Magical Bullet, it too exploded mid-air.

The light bullet that had pierced the opponent's magic continued in its trajectory, heading right for Medium and the magician who had thought that they had taken advantage of an opening, only to be met by a barbarian sword.

Balleroy: "Medi, I'm a man who was once a Divine General."

When it came to the art of warfare, he would not fall behind his younger sister, regardless of her overflowing motivation.

In order to take her by surprise, the Magical Bullet which Balleroy had fired backwards was a little bit larger than the bullets of light he had fired up until now, and thus its power excelled.

Medium: “—Uwah!”

With a sound of water splashing, both barbarian swords were ripped from Medium’s hands.

Having immediately noticed something different instinctually, it was magnificent that she had intercepted it with two swords instead of one. Though he had intended to blow off everything beneath her left elbow with that shot, it was thanks to that reaction that she had kept both her arms.

However, the outcome would still be the same, now that she had lost her means of defense. With the next shot, he would blow off that arm of hers and put an end to this.

Balleroy: “Hit.”

His spearhead flickered in tandem with his determination, and he finished dealing with the ice and flame that were about to flatten the Crystal Palace.

Then, he immediately ascended with Carillon, and while reopening the distance that had previously been closed, he would create a Magical Bullet that would force Medium to withdraw—

Balleroy: “Wha…”

—That instant, as if to fully obstruct Balleroy’s field of view, the brilliance of a rainbow blanketed the sky.

5

—In order to defeat Balleroy Temeglyph, Julius’s advice had truly been useful.

It was advice from a person who had already defeated him once.

Not even Subaru could have provided information quite this useful. After all, Subaru was not a warrior, and he tended to give rather vague suggestions when it came to fighting styles.

In any case—

Julius: “In my fight against Balleroy-dono, I managed to defeat him. Of course, it was not a victory I could have attained without Ferris’s assistance… Why a personage of Balleroy-dono’s caliber had participated in such a rebellion, and had aimed for the venerable life of His Excellency Vincent, even in the future the reason for that will remain…”

Roswaal: “You saw his Book of the Dead, diiidn’t~ you? Truly a hapless coincidence. Julius-kun, if possible, I’d like you to go over what you saw in great detail…”

Julius: “—Margrave Mathers, the only information I shall be reporting is that of Balleroy-dono’s fighting style, and the manner in which I fought against him. I want you to understand that the things I had witnessed without his permission, the feelings that Balleroy-dono had harbored, are things I shall never disclose for the rest of my life.”

Identifying Julius’s attitude, whilst he spoke with a serious expression, as an action that served the interests of the enemy, Roswaal had some methods at his disposal of prying into the information that had been gained from the Book of the Dead. But, Roswaal did not choose to do so, and opted to listen to the only information Julius had decided to report.

Even he himself found that choice surprising.

By nature, if Roswaal had the means of obtaining information from someone, he would deem it acceptable to gain all of the knowledge he could and formulate a plan, and then use it to confront a battle.

And yet, why had he sympathized with Julius’s emotions, and respected his intentions?

He had no definite answer concerning the reason for his change of heart, but—that mattered not.

Even if he did not know everything about Balleroy Temeglyph, Julius had given a valuable answer. From Roswaal’s perspective, that alone had been sufficient.

Roswaal: “The fact that it was Julius-kun who killed you, is a fact indeed. —I wonder, do you not even remember the reason behind your own death, Balleroy Temeglyph-kun?”

Through the Authority of Gluttony, Julius’s Name had been eaten.

As a result, the people around Julius, save for the exemption of Subaru, had all forgotten about him. Roswaal was no exception, and it was likely that the deceased were no exception either.

Even Balleroy, who had been felled by the hand of none other than Julius, did not remember what it was that had caused his death.

In other words—

Roswaal: “—With the same method that caused you to die the first time, I will kill you.”

It was truly a hapless coincidence, and a miraculous happenstance.

This was what Julius had employed to kill Balleroy, and it was a chance of seizing victory that could only be grasped because Julius’s Name had been eaten.

It would be presumptuous of him to even try to imagine the anguish of Julius and Balleroy, who were directly involved, but as an outsider, Roswaal was truly grateful for that happenstance from the bottom of his heart.

—The expansion of the rainbow barrier blocked the path of Balleroy and his flying dragon as they tried to ascend.

A barrier brought about by an aurora, he had heard that such magic had been the decisive blow in Julius’s defeat of Balleroy.

It was an original magic that had been devised by Julius and his Spirits, and reproducing it required an abnormally large amount of mana consumption, even for Roswaal.

Roswaal was capable of using several types of magic at the same time, but utilizing all six types simultaneously was an act devoid of sanity.

While hearing the sound of his own gate screaming from within him, Roswaal still recreated Julius's victory condition in order to raise his own chances of winning.

The objective of this was not to be some sort of ridicule or harassment, rather it was a strategic choice.

Of course, if his goal had simply been to block Balleroy's escape path, Roswaal could have accomplished the same thing by making use of the flames and wind in which he was proficient. But, the magic he was accustomed to using would have been detected as dangerous with a single glance.

It was necessary to employ magic that Balleroy would be seeing for the very first time, robbing him of his discernment, even if for only a moment.

Therefore, surmising that this aurora of rainbow was also a part of what he had forgotten due to the Authority of Gluttony, Roswaal purposely brought this situation to its final phase with the resolve to shoulder the burden.

Medium: "—Hk."

As Medium grit her teeth, though both of her barbarian swords had been ripped out of her hands, she still maintained her fighting spirit and clenched her fists.

One or two shots of the Magical Bullets perhaps could have been blocked by sacrificing both of her hands, but he had no intention of engaging in a fight that demanded such a high price.

In the sense that the opponent had been robbed of his options, Medium had already done more than enough work.

On the way to the Imperial Capital, Medium had voiced gratitude towards Subaru, and then Subaru had also conveyed his own gratitude to Medium, but Roswaal felt the exact same way.

Subaru: “What are you talking about, Medium-san? If we’re giving thanks, then I’m the one who should be grateful to you. Thinking about what things would be like if I hadn’t met Medium-san and Flop-san back there, it makes me shudder.”

The way Subaru had put on a bashful performance had made Roswaal want to applaud him.

Certainly, without the assistance of the O’Connell siblings, this assault would not have been successful.

Roswaal: “But—”

Thwarted by the rainbow, they would begin to fall.

Since that was the conclusion that approached the pinnacle of flying dragon riders within the Empire, Roswaal narrowed his eyes—

Roswaal: “…”

—That instant, an impact pierced him diagonally from behind, and his consciousness was greatly rocked.

6

The moment the rainbow light stretched out before him, chills ran down Balleroy’s entire body.

Despite being an undead body, it was ironic that the fighting intuition known as survival instincts continued to work away.

Following the appeals of those dead survival instincts, Balleroy faced the barrier that had been created by the aurora, and fired the “hidden bullet” which had been quite literally kept hidden, which became the foundation for overcoming this obstacle.

—As Roswaal had guessed, Balleroy could not remember the cause of his own death.

Why had he ended up losing his life? Even though he could remember the commotion that had served as its impetus, as well as his incentive and reason for participating, the cause of his death was the only thing that remained a blur.

If possible, he thought that it would have been better if he had forgotten things other than the reason behind his death.

But, if he were to forget those things, he would definitely no longer remain himself.

In any case, Balleroy could not recall the moment of his death.

However, upon hearing accounts from the other undead, excluding the people who had died without understanding what was going on, he could not find anybody else who had forgotten the details that had led up to their death.

Because of that, Balleroy thought. He thought about why he had died, about why he could not think of an answer.

And, he had thought about how he must have died, considering as many options as possible.

The possibility that his affiliation with the rebellion had been exposed, and someone like Cecilus had lopped off his head, or his fellow Generals of the First-Class like Groovy and Moguro had purged him.

But, he had his reasons for carrying out that rebellion. —Thinking that it might have been related to the people who had come from the Kingdom of Lugunica, he had pondered what sort of battle it might have been.

—The method of being defeated by having his path obstructed mid-flight, was the final candidate that he had considered.

Balleroy had arrived at that idea after the battle of the coupled dragon carriages, where he had retrieved the body of Lamia Godwin, and had identified the presence of Flop and Medium.

Back then, when Balleroy had fired a Magical Bullet to restrain the enemy, he had witnessed somebody inside the coupled dragon carriage defend against it by putting up a barrier of rainbow. —It was after he had seen that rainbow.

He could not be sure. But, he had felt that it was a troublesome technique.

That was why, no matter what sort of corner he was forced into, he had kept it in mind to prepare one spare Magical Bullet, such that he could instantaneously fire it at any moment.

That had been useful in tearing through this rainbow barrier.

Carillon: “—Kiryararahhh!”

Carillon roared as it pierced through the rainbow, and while sustaining wounds over its entire body, they escaped the enclosure.

Maximizing the advantages of having become an undead flying dragon, his beloved dragon flew in a path towards survival as its painful wounds began to regenerate; grateful for that, Balleroy charged his spear with a Magical Bullet, and as he readied it diagonally,

Balleroy: “Hit.”

The bullet that had been fired flew straight in a direction that was off the mark from the enemy. However, in the line of fire of the bullet of light was some falling debris from the chunks of ice, and the light bullet slid diagonally across the surface of the ice.

With that momentum, the light bullet bounced around the surrounding debris, bouncing around, bouncing around—then, it pierced the back of the enemy who had unleashed the rainbow upon him.

Having been born, having died, he had succeeded in the ricocheting of light for the first time.

Having quite literally flown over the boundary of death, Balleroy had evolved his magical technique even further.

—Unfortunately for Roswaal, by attempting to select magic that was supposed to have been seen for the first time by Balleroy in order to delay his response, he had actually allowed for an instinctive reaction to the rainbow he was seeing for the second

time.

???: “Ros-chin—!!”

Struck by a ricochet from an unexpected angle, the magician’s flight had been hindered, and a scream called out for him.

From within the arms of the magician, Medium had been unable to do anything about an attack from a position she could not defend, and that scream sounded from her grievous voice.

If he had aimed directly for the magician and shot them down, they would have fallen from quite a high elevation, and there was the danger that he would not have been able to save Medium.

That had resulted in Balleroy being restricted to only targeting Medium, but the descent of the iceberg and the attack on the Crystal Palace had actually backfired on his opponent.

Balleroy: “At this distance, I can catch ya before ya fall.”

The long-distance battle of several kilometers between the southwest and northernmost point of the Imperial Capital had lost that distance in the midst of battle; it was now a distance such that he would be able to catch Medium before his opponent crashed into the ground.

Balleroy patted Carillon’s neck, and slipping past the chunks of ice, it faced its wings in that direction in order to retrieve Medium.

While preparing himself to endure all the verbal abuse that Medium would throw at him—

Medium: “Ros-chin?”

Suddenly, the audible voice was one of innocence, completely dissimilar to the shriek from just before.

If something were to be said, then it had been a tone bereft of what was characteristic for Medium, but the strangeness of hearing that in the midst of this battle, and the subsequent development, stole Balleroy’s attention.

Balleroy: “Wha…”

An undead with black eyeballs and golden irises looming within; with those eyes opened wide, Balleroy was left speechless.

Within Balleroy’s vision, Medium parted from the arms of the magician who had been flying in the sky, and began to fall towards the ground below—no, she was not falling. She had been thrown.

Vigor having been applied to Medium’s body, she had been thrown towards the surface with utmost strength.

With a speed much faster than a free fall, she plummeted towards the ground. If he did not move to catch her right away, he would not make it in time.

Right after he had thought that, Balleroy understood what that devil was thinking.

Balleroy: “…”

The moment before he chose to fly to Medium, Balleroy’s gaze crossed with the magician’s.

At a distance where he could finally see his opponent’s face clearly, even without the scope, it was a man with an exceedingly aggravating face.

His back having been struck, while blood spilled from his mouth, the opponent was still smiling.

Shooting a Magical Bullet at that smile, he immediately soared towards Medium. He would not let things go in accordance with his opponent’s intentions—

Carillon: “—Kiryararahhh!”

At that moment, Carillon’s neigh pulled Balleroy’s attention towards Medium.

Having been thrown away, Medium was plummeting towards the ground. The speed at which she fell was high, but it was likely that

Balleroy and Carillon would be able to reach her in time. —No, it would have been likely.

What awaited Medium at the end of her fall, were spikes of ice from the wreckage of the shattered ice chunks.

Balleroy: "…"

He hallucinated the vision of Medium's body being torn to shreds by the blades of ice.

From his opponent's perspective, Medium should have been an ally. His reasoning cried out that such an obvious fact would not serve as insurance before an opponent like this.

This opponent was a magician. A magician who would make full use of absolutely everything at his disposal as his own property—.

Balleroy: "…"

He had only a moment to think, and the result would appear immediately afterwards.

There was a single Magical Bullet stored in Balleroy's spearhead, and he only had one chance to make his decision. That was, whether he would shoot this Magical Bullet at the magician, or at the ice spikes.

—Balleroy hated the deaths of his own people more than anything else.

Balleroy: "—Ain't that right, Big Bro Miles?"

Carillon: "—Kiryararahhh!"

As he whispered in appeal, his beloved dragon neighed as if to express its approval.

That instant, the fired Magical Bullet flew straight, thoroughly destroying the ice spikes that were threatening to pierce the falling Medium.

And then—

Roswaal: “—The cause of your defeat, was that you wavered when it came to what was most important.”

Together with the unfeeling voice of the man, a Magical Bullet fired by his opponent pierced Balleroy’s chest, along with the wing of his beloved dragon, bringing this battle of sky to its conclusion.

Chapter 54:
Soumatou

1

—Before he could even notice it, Garfiel Tinzel found himself sitting in a dark place.

Garfiel: “Ah?”

With his sharp eyes widened, Garfiel glanced around.

There was no familiarity to the place. In the dimly lit area, Garfiel was sunk deep into a chair, resting his chin on his elbows with his knees.

What in the world could have brought him to be in such a place?

Garfiel: “Where the fuck am I…”

Wrinkling his nose in suspicion, Garfiel sniffed.

Garfiel’s excellent sense of smell, though not as acute as that of a Hyenaperson, was useful for assessing situations. Picking up information about his surroundings was more of an instinctive action—yet, his sense of smell was not working well.

It was not as if he could not sense any smell, but rather that it seemed elusive.

Speaking of elusiveness, it was not just the smell. The surrounding situation was also the same.

As previously mentioned, he found himself in a dimly lit area. The ceiling was high, and the chair Garfiel was seated upon was not the only one, as there were rows of chairs arranged on both sides. Moreover, there seemed to be multiple rows of chairs both before and behind Garfiel, with him occupying a seat in the middle of the space.

Just as he was contemplating this, Garfiel recalled something similar to this scene.

Garfiel: "This must be some kinda theater where they do plays or somethin'."

Once the idea of a theater was spoken, the image solidified in his mind, and it seemed clear-cut.

Indeed. Garfiel was in a theater, sitting in the middle of the auditorium. The dim lighting and high ceiling were all essential elements for theater performances.

Just as Garfiel came to this understanding of his situation, as if on cue, a loud, resonant bell chimed throughout the theater. —A signal for the beginning of the performance.

Garfiel: "…"

With widened eyes, Garfiel froze in place, leaving his inner thoughts behind, as a change occurred in front of the audience's seating—the curtain rose, unveiling the previously hidden stage.

And, on that stage, bathed in the audience's gaze, was—

Garfiel: "…A cat?"

Garfiel's muttered words, accompanied by a frown, succinctly captured the scene on the stage.

In truth, awaiting the start of the performance, now that the curtain had been raised, was a small cat. A tiny gray cat standing on two legs, with its arms outstretched.

Its small size, which was even tinier than the kitten-people like Mimi that Garfiel knew, was truly palm-sized.

One such small cat, then two, then three, began the start of their performance on the stage.

Each cat looked identical. And before Garfiel, swept along by the situation, the three cats began to move. —Each was adorned with different props.

One wore a golden wig, another a red wig, and the last one a white cotton tuft on its head.

Then, before Garfiel's blinking eyes, the three cats moved to their respective positions on the stage, where they began to perform spectacular movements.

The golden-haired cat and the cotton-tufted cat collided, while the red-haired cat stood still, watching.

Quite the literal scuffle had broken out.

Garfiel: "What the fuck's this…"

Stunned, Garfiel watched as the cats became entangled on the stage.

The props on the stage were quite elaborate, with a backdrop depicting a stone-hewn cityscape. The houses and kabuki paintings on the walls started to become broken, destroyed, and thrown around as the cats fought with each other.

It was quite the flashy, intricate horseplay, such that one would think it to be almost charming.

Garfiel: "—? That cat, now that I think 'bout it, ain't I seen it somewhere before?"

Suddenly, as he focused on the performing kittens, Garfiel felt a tug in his memory. Scratching at the lid of his nearly-closed recollection, he gradually opened it, and understanding began to emerge.

Those kittens, they looked just like the pictures that Subaru would draw at Emilia and Beatrice's insistence, depicting the Great Spirit who was contracted to Emilia.

Garfiel: "Nah, I said what the hell's up with that!"

Despite having an idea come to mind, Garfiel was indignant because he could not grasp what it meant. He inadvertently raised his voice, causing the kittens on stage to stop their movements in surprise.

Catching a glimpse of the three kittens peeking at him, Garfiel felt mortified.

He did not feel like there was a reason to apologize, nor did he want to insist that there was not one, but—

???: "—Truly a fool. Sit down, Garf."

Garfiel: "Oh…"

???: "Watching quietly is the etiquette of theater. Are you trying to disrupt the performance?"

Having been abruptly reprimanded, Garfiel turned to the side with his eyes peeled.

To his left, where there had been no one just moments before, sat a girl with pink hair—Ram. She pulled Garfiel back by his waistband and sat him down, and then to the kittens who were looking at her with glazed-over eyes, she arrogantly said "Continue".

Following Ram's instructions, the kittens resumed their onstage banter. However, Garfiel found Ram's presence more significant than the stage performance.

Garfiel: "Ram, what the hell are ya doin' here? 'N who the hell are those guys?"

Ram: "Garf."

Garfiel: "No, this ain't the time to be talkin'. Anyway, we gotta get outta here! I don't care where we are, I'll make sure to keep ya safe."

Ram: "Garf."

Garfiel: "Right, lemme know yer thoughts, Ram. Honestly, it's probably better to think 'bout things together with ya than for my amazin' self to think alone—"

Ram: "—Garf, haven't you realized?"

Driven by impatience, Garfiel's tone of voice became more and more agitated, choking up at Ram's words.

In front of the blinking Garfiel, Ram kept her usual cool demeanor, fixing her eyes on the stage.

Feeling frustrated by the one he loved not reciprocating the attention he was giving her, Garfiel also glanced up at the stage to see what had caught her attention, and he saw the unchanged playful antics of the kittens.

However, he soon realized that there was a hidden meaning beneath their continued playful interactions.

The golden-haired kitten, the red-haired kitten, and the cotton-tufted kitten faced each other and flailed about, wreaking havoc on the cityscape backdrop—until finally, the cotton-tufted kitten shoved the golden-haired kitten, causing it to tumble.

The fallen golden-haired kitten ended up trapped beneath a fallen prop.

What could this performance be about—

Ram: "Garf."

Once again, called by Ram's quiet voice, Garfiel turned around. And then, the light-crimson eyes that had been watching the stage up until now met his own, and their gazes collided head-on.

He looked at Ram's face, which normally made his heart pound when he saw it up close; however, at this moment, what was throbbing inside Garfiel was not love, but an instinctive warning bell.

Sensing Garfiel's realization, Ram let out a small sigh,

Ram: "You, are dying."

And so, she declared that the theater he was witnessing was just a fleeting dream.

2

—A kitten wearing a golden wig rolling onto the stage, which was his own appearance.

When he watched it with that understanding, this entire program appeared to be like nothing but a bad joke.

While confronting the enemy, the cotton-tufted kitten, he was the one protecting the red-haired kitten behind him. As he pondered upon it, little by little, his memory became clearer.

Garfiel: “That’s right, my amazin’ self’s right now in the middle of fightin’ with the Dragon that Captain asked me to… so that cotton-tufted one’s the Dragon?! ‘N the red-haired one’s the old man?!”

Ram: “That one has become rather cute.”

Garfiel: “As much as I wanna hear which one, this ain’t the time for that. I gotta get back soon…!”

Ram: “Wait.”

Garfiel: “Gooaah!”

Having understood the situation, Garfiel promptly attempted to jump into action, but he could only cry out in pain as the string of his necklace was pulled tight. Ram had forcibly stopped Garfiel and hastily turned him around to face her, and as Garfiel bore his fangs and was about to yell at her,

???: “Wait, wait, Garfiel. Stay right here like Nee-sama said. Let’s take a brief timeout.”

Saying so, Natsuki Subaru, who occupied the other seat next to Ram, stopped Garfiel.

The appearance of this Subaru, it was one that had not been seen in a while, with long arms and legs—long in comparison to the present state, but not actually all that long, that is what his appearance was.

Subaru: “Hey, right now, didn’t you just think of something really hurtful?”

Garfiel: “Don’t ya fret ‘bout it, Captain. Ain’t ya always sayin’ that ya got short legs ‘n a long torso?”

Subaru: “Saying it yourself versus having it said to you are entirely different kinds of damage! This must be the way of it! Am I right, Beako? Emilia-tan?”

Beatrice: “Subaru, right now, it’s Bubby’s moment to shine in the play, so stop interrupting, in fact.”

Emilia: “Sorry, Subaru. I’ll make sure to listen to what you have to say later…”

Subaru, who was finally back to his previous size, was altogether brushed aside by both Beatrice, who was sitting on his lap, and Emilia, who was seated next to him. The girls were way too absorbed in each and every move of the kittens on stage to give Subaru even the slightest attention.

Listening to the conversation between the disappointedly slump-shouldered Subaru and the others, Garfiel meanwhile recalled that the actual name of the kitten, whom he did not know personally, was Puck.

Furthermore, this kind of interaction of Subaru with the rest of the group felt similar to ones he had witnessed in the past.

???: “You are correct, this is a memory of the original theater that this space is based upon. You see, it looks just like the theater we were invited to when we all went to see the play about the Subjugation of the White Whale.”

???: “Garf-san was totally in love with that play. I had a lot of fun too, so I know how you feel.”

Garfiel: “Ottobro, Petra…”

This time, the voices came from behind him, and he turned around, where his gaze was met with Petra, who was waving her hands in the air, and Otto, who was seated next to her and was shrugging his shoulders.

Furthermore, besides Otto, he saw a woman with long, golden hair —

Garfiel: “Gaoh…”

Frederica: “That is quite the pathetic face you are making, Garf. Besides, Ram raises an unusually valid point this time. So sit, and calm down.”

Garfiel: “Oh, even if ya tell me to calm down…”

???: “Now now. Won’t you lend an ear to what all these people around you are saying? Good grief, one would expect some growth after not seeing you for so long, but you are still wet behind the ears, aren’t you, Gar-bo.”

Garfiel: “Geh! Nann… Granny?!”

Ryuzu: “…Why did you have to correct yourself to make it worse?”

Within the eyes of the astonished Garfiel, the figures of his grandmother, Ryuzu, together with his elder sister were reflected.

At that unexpected lineup, Garfiel was left flabbergasted, and Ram, who was right next to him, once again pulled him by the waistband, forcing him to sit down.

Ram: “So? Have you calmed down a little?”

Garfiel: “Just like “Dagraham‘s encirclement”, this ain’t a situation to calm down…! I just sat down cuz my knees felt a bit weak… What the hell’s goin’ on?”

Ram: “For the time being, it seems like you’re inclined to listen to what Ram has to say. Good.”

???: “As expected of you, Nee-sama.”

Garfiel: “Whoa?!”

Ram nodded with her usually cold expression, when suddenly an audience member seated in front of them turned around and interjected. Realizing that it was Rem, Ram's light blue-haired younger sister, Garfiel blinked.

However, Rem essentially ignored Garfiel and had turned back around to face forward again.

Garfiel: "Huh, what the…?"

Subaru: "That's how it is. Garfiel, you don't have much of a mental image of Rem yet, so she's only going to react nebulously. It's completely within the scope of how I impersonated her."

Garfiel: "At the rate people are poppin' up, ain't it gonna get hella crowded in here, dammit."

At Rem's vapidity, with Beatrice seated on his lap, Subaru responded while playing with her hair.

While this reasoning was somewhat convincing, if the person in question could not be recreated properly, then what was the point in keeping them in this theater in the first place; such was his impression.

Frederica: "You have it all wrong, Garf. It is true that you do not know much about Rem yet, but that does not mean you do not care about her. That is the reason why she is here."

???: "I agree. A person you are concerned about will continue to remain strongly in your heart. Familiarity with the person in question is not all that important, I think that's the crucial matter in this case."

Garfiel: "This ain't good for my heart."

Somehow, as he was beginning to understand the rules of the theater, the explanation that came from Frederica and Reinhard, who somehow came to be sitting in the rows behind, lacked a sense of reality.

Since none of this was real, it seemed like lacking that sense of reality was apt. In all likelihood, Frederica and Reinhard being in the same place, and having a conversation like this, had never happened before.

However—

Garfiel: “My impatience from earlier is startin’ to calm down. That bein’ said, should I just stay quiet like Ram said? I’m somehow startin’ to feel sleepy…”

Ram: “Ha! What is this idiocy I am hearing? If you fall asleep, you’ll die.”

Garfiel: “So this place really is dangerous after all!”

Beatrice, Emilia, & Petra: “Shhh-”

As soon as he raised his voice, Beatrice and Emilia put their fingers to their lips, and Petra admonished him. Being singled out made his lips quiver, and Garfiel clicked his fangs and fell silent.

He was told not to rush back, but then he was told not to be too calm, or else he would die; just what did they want Garfiel to do?

???: “It’s about not returning empty-haaanded~. Just do not try to overthink too much.”

Garfiel: “Urggh, even inside my amazin’ self’s head, you piss me off…”

Roswaal: “Oya oya, I am so haaated~. Although, blaming me would be absurd, so expressing my regret and apologizing would be an oddity.”

Seated one row behind with his long legs crossed, Roswaal fanned the flames. Looking towards him in frustration, as Garfiel was about to complain, he was suddenly at a loss for words.

He was aware that Reinhard, who had spoken out earlier, was seated next to Roswaal. However, the problem was the other person sitting next to him.

When the woman clad in black noticed Garfiel's gaze, she smiled sweetly with an "Ara",

???: "You're looking at me with quite the burning gaze. Although it's in a place like this, will you join me in slicing each other to our heart's content?"

Garfiel: "…Doin' that wouldn't be any fun. I'd also feel bad for Meili. So I ain't gonna do it."

???: "Oh, how disappointing. But, I don't feel that bad, knowing that you have a place for me inside of you."

???: "Since it is you Elsa, it is because of your nasty personality."

As a blood-colored smile appeared on Elsa's face, Meili took over the conversation from her, who was pincering Garfiel by sitting in the row in front of him, right next to Rem.

Somehow, he was beginning to understand the significance of the seating arrangements. If he was right, then naturally next to Elsa, a giant blue-skinned man with eight arms should have been present.

???: "…"

The giant man kept a rock-like expression on his face, and glancing at Garfiel, he remained silent.

Exposed to that silent pressure, Garfiel took a short breath, clenching his fist tighter and tighter. And then, that was when Garfiel's clenched fist was enveloped by the hand of a small shadow that had leaned over from the seat in front.

Mimi: "Garf, are you okaaay~? Can you do it? Mimi is super worried."

Garfiel: "Mimi…"

Ram: "That's right. Garf is a coward at heart."

The round-eyed Mimi took hold of his right hand, and his left hand was taken by Ram who was next to him.

Garfiel looked up, glanced around at their faces, and then let out a long, long sigh.

This was not a scene out of reality, Garfiel himself was about to die.

Despite that, the companions within his mind stopped him from going back immediately, and them taking turns talking to him like this, was like the “Soumatou” that he had once heard about from Subaru.

Subaru: “But you know, Garfiel. Ordinarily for a Soumatou, all of your memories from birth till the current moment flash before your eyes in a jiff, it’s not something where you get summoned to a theater.”

Garfiel: “…So then, what the hell’s this s’posed to be, Captain?”

Subaru: “For that, you’re gonna have to find the answer yourself.”

Rem: “As expected of Subaru-kun. I’m impressed.”

Garfiel: “—By myself.”

For a moment, despite the extra interjection in between, Garfiel went deep into rumination.

If this was not a Soumatou, and the answer was instead to be found by himself, then was it not just a momentary respite until the dying Garfiel could stand back up?

If he did not stand up right away, he would fail to fulfill the role he had been entrusted with—.

Beatrice: “Uu, I hope each of the Bubbys do their best, I suppose…!”

Emilia: “That’s right. No matter the outcome, let’s properly see it through to the end…!”

Indifferent to the anxious Garfiel, Beatrice and Emilia, who were watching the play, seemed to be getting more excited as the climax of the performance approached.

In suspense, and experiencing a whirlwind of emotions from what was occurring on the stage, the two held hands as the peculiar portrayal of Puck and Puck clashing with each other swayed their emotions tempestuously.

On stage, the golden-haired Puck had fallen over, and the red-haired Puck was restraining the cotton-tufted Puck as he tried to move in the direction of the golden-haired Puck, an undoubtedly perilous predicament—

Garfiel: "—The red-haired one…"

The red-haired Puck, while protecting the golden-haired Puck, was facing the cotton-tufted Puck.

The situation on the stage had changed while Garfiel had not been looking, and fearing that it was a reflection of reality, Garfiel's expression changed as he gnashed his fangs.

As expected, he needed to get back right away—

Ram: "—Truly a fool."

It was a familiar affront, but unlike the usual tone imbued with a bit of gentleness, the voice carried within it a more definite rebuke.

Garfiel's eyes widened at Ram's words, and she pointed to the stage with the hand opposite the one she had placed over Garfiel's. Looking at the stage that had been directed to, he found that the situation had continued to progress.

The collapsed, golden-haired Puck had arisen, and had pushed aside the red-haired Puck. It immediately began to head for the cotton-tufted Puck—with a single blow from the cotton-tufted Puck, the golden-haired Puck turned into light.

Subaru: "One out. However, in life, you don't get three outs. One out is how it ends."

Having turned the golden-haired Puck into light, the cotton-tufted Puck chased after the red-haired Puck, as he turned around in an attempt to run away, and also turned him into light. Thus, the cotton-tufted Puck alone remained on stage, and the play reached its curtain's close.

Amid sparse applause, the stage curtain descended, with the cotton-tufted Puck bowing deeply, and as the stage signaled the end of the performance—

Mimi: "Ehh~! That wasn't enjoyable at all! Mimi ain't satisfieeed~!"

And so, Mimi, who like Ram was also holding Garfiel's hand, stretched out her tail and started to throw a tantrum like a misbehaving child.

However, for a play that had already reached its conclusion, speaking out like that was pointless—but that had not been so.

In the next moment, the opening bell resounded within the theater, and the curtain that had been lowered began to rise once more.

And on the other side of the curtain, the golden-haired Puck and the red-haired Puck, who ought to have disappeared, along with the cotton-tufted Puck, who ought to have made them disappear, were facing off; protecting the collapsed golden-haired, the climactic scene where red-haired confronted cotton-tufted was being reenacted.

Garfiel: "The hell…"

Unsure of what in the world was unfolding, Garfiel's throat quivered.

And then, to Garfiel, whose thoughts had gone blank,

Ram: "Just recklessly standing back up didn't work, now did it? If so, then what will you do?"

So asked Ram, calmly with one eye closed.

To that question from Ram, Garfiel gulped, and he looked upon the stage once again.

Rem: “Nee-sama is wonderful.”

Truly, that was so; with the younger sister whom he was not yet too familiar with, Garfiel wholeheartedly agreed.

3

Onstage, the golden-haired Puck evaporated into light again and again.

It seemed that a great deal of improvisation was allowed in this play, and the content was influenced to a great extent by the audience’s opinions.

However—

Reinhard: “How about a serious kick to turn the entire Imperial Capital upside down?”

Elsa: “How about pretending just once to be gravely injured, and aiming at your opponent when they think you’re dead?”

Roswaal: “Even Dragons seem to have some sort of attachment. For example, hooow~ about using a friend of the Dragon who may be in the Imperial Capital as a shield?”

Garfiel: “If all ya can think of is impossible crap or cowardly plans, then shut up!”

Opinions that were not even adopted to the stage were shared one after another, and as Garfiel barked back furiously at the people behind him they all shut their mouths in unison.

Simply, since it was their words and actions as perceived by Garfiel, he could not help but feel unproductive because he felt as if he was angry with himself.

Otto: “At the very least, he needs to take advantage of the terrain. The difference between a large and small body can be fatal, but on the other hand, there must be a gap that can be used by being small.”

Petra: “Yeah, that’s right. Garf-san’s body is smaller than the Dragon’s, and he might lose in a contest of strength but… that’s why we should talk about what contest he can win in.”

Subaru: “In theory, yes, but in practice, how can we do it? Garfiel aside, if it were me, I wouldn’t be able to win a fight against a Dragon even if it was doing a handstand.”

Otto: “The thought of Natsuki-san exterminating a Dragon, I would not expect that from anyone but Garfiel.”

On the other hand, he felt that his comrades beside him who were speaking constructively were speaking more wisely than Garfiel, even though they were Garfiel’s perception of them.

Of course, the real people would have conversations like this, but—.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, do you have any advice for Garfiel?”

Emilia: “Me? Well… I think that the part where he couldn’t catch Mezoreia’s tail before she hit him like that, that part wasn’t good. He may have been in a difficult position, but instead of trying to catch it couldn’t he have dodged it?”

Subaru: “You really responded better than I thought!”

Rem: “As expected of Emilia-san.”

While she watched the Pucks prance on stage, Emilia made an accurate point and Subaru and Rem both responded to her. He didn’t know if Rem’s response was correct, but perhaps her statement was a direct reflection of Garfiel’s feelings.

At any rate, he felt that things were gradually coming into view.

However, when one piled something up and piled it up and piled it up, and then brought it back to reality, how likely was it that it would actually be useful?

Ryuzu: “You’re worried aren’tcha, Gar-bo?”

Garfiel: “Honestly, my amazin’ self feels more shameful than worried. My amazin' self was the one who was entrusted with the duty of dealing with that Dragon."

Ryuzu looked at his face and Garfiel expressed his loathsome feelings.

He jumped in with gusto, nearly died in the heat of battle, and when that wasn't enough, Garfiel built a theater in his head that had a large group of his friends—well, some weren't his friends, but he was comforted by them all.

Ryuzu: "And, what is shameful about that?"

Garfiel: "…"

Upon being asked that, Garfiel furrowed his brow and raised his head. Lined up next to Ryuzu was Frederica, who was staring at Garfiel.

She squinted with the same emerald eyes as Garfiel.

Frederica: "What is shameful about this, Garf?"

She piled on the same question.

Garfiel: "It's, shameful ain't it. Everyone else is fightin' by themselves and yet only my amazin' self… hk."

Ryuzu: "If you can't fight by yourself then that's shameful. Is that what you're saying?"

Garfiel: "Yeah! Wait, no, that ain't right. I'm not sayin' it's shameful to work together to fight. This is, havin' my friends bustlin' together in my head."

Frederica: "—Seriously, that is impossible, Garf."

Having been driven ragged, all he could do was rely on the companions in his own mind.

Towards Garfiel who was vigorously trying to break away from that attitude, Frederica spoke clearly.

With her emerald-green eyes narrowed, Frederica sighed at the stiffening Garfiel and,

Frederica: “You really are quite dumb, Garf. Please take a look at your surroundings.”

Garfiel: “My surroundings…”

Being told this, Garifel looked around the inside of the theater.

His companions were lined up in the seats next to him, his enemies were in the seats behind, those who he was hesitant to call his allies were in front of him, and—before he knew it, there were no empty seats left in the theater, all of them were filled with faces that Garfiel was familiar with.

Garfiel: “…”

Ram, Subaru and some others were naturally there, and so were Roswaal, Reinhard, Mimi, Rem and the others, and there were even more people beyond that.

There were also the people of the Mathers domain, and there were also those that he had come to know over the course of his journey in the Empire.

There were the companions he was fond of and other people who he could not get close with, but every single one of them had come into contact with Garfiel’s life in some way, and each had secured themselves a seat.

Ryuzu: “My oh my, the theater’s jam-packed. Soon we won’t all be able to fit in here anymore.”

Seeing the same thing as Garfiel, Ryuzu let out a good humored chuckle.

As his grandmother had said, the theater was so full that some people had to stand. Everyone looked at the scene of the Pucks atop the stage, watching how the Puck that played the role of Garfiel was losing.

At that reality, his face began to heat up. What a pathetic, disgraceful manner of losing.

Everyone was surely fed up with him—

Ram: "—Truly a fool."

Mimi: "You know, Garf. All of this is inside Garf's head, right? But, Garf's head isn't very smart. Just like Mimi! So, that also goes for what everyone is saying, right?"

Being spoken to from both his left and right in quick succession, Garfiel blinked his eyes.

Then when he looked around again, everyone who had previously been looking at the stage had turned to face Garfiel himself. Looking at each of their faces one-by-one, he thought back on the type of people that they were.

Everyone had spoken as much as they pleased losing their complaints towards the Puck playing the role of Garfiel that kept losing, but—

Garfiel: "Nobody's tellin' my amazin' self anythin' that's convenient for me, or anythin' that I don't think they'd say."

Ram's words were direct, and Mimi's were vague, but they were both saying the same thing.

If this theater was in Garfiel's head, and for the sake of comforting his beaten and dying self, he had gathered his family, friends, acquaintances, and even enemies, then that would be beyond pathetic.

But, Garfiel was not smart.

Getting people to think and say things that they would not normally say, or having them line up convenient words to comfort his heart like he was playing with puppets, were the sort of complicated things he was unable to do.

Subaru: "As you've thought, you can't put what we've discussed here to good use in the outside world. This is just consolation, a temporary peace of mind. But, there's nothing wrong with resting, even if it's just your mind."

Beatrice: "Even though it was Subaru who requested him to stop the Dragon, that is quite the manner of speaking, in fact."

Subaru: "That's because I'm the me inside Garfiel's head…!"

Emilia: "Wait so that means, when it feels like you're about to say reaaally difficult things, it's just because that's how it seems to Garfiel? Is that so?"

Emilia, with a puzzled look on her face, asked this, making Garfiel let out an "Ah."

He looked overhead, taking a moment to think before lowering his gaze.

Garfiel: "Maybe since I'm fine with however much the Captain asks of me, the Captain in my amazin' self's head can say things like that."

Otto: "Even supposing that were the case, you should know that the people around you are giving you their honest advice. Really, I have no clue where you learnt to think like this…"

Frederica: "…Otto-sama would say that, now wouldn't he?"

Frederica gave a wry smile as Otto pointed at himself with a disappointed expression. Seeing this, Petra placed a hand over her mouth, letting out an "Aha," a laughter which began to spread throughout her surroundings.

Before Garfiel realized it, he had joined in the laughter, in spite of himself.

Garfiel: "Well, like, maybe I was bein' a bit stubborn."

Ryuzu: "Oh, Gar-bo?"

Garfiel: "Cuz Captain asked me to do it, 'n also cuz the Empire was at risk. Sure, my opponent's a Dragon, 'n like always we can't afford to lose, but what the hell."

Garfiel slowly moved his hands apart from how they had been interlocked from left and right and raised them up. Then he clasped them strongly together before his chest, letting out a thunk.

With that pose, the reverberating sound of his gnashing fangs, and his rising fighting spirit,

Garfiel: "This here, is a job that was entrusted to my amazin' self, but my amazin' self ain't gonna be fightin' alone."

???: "—Magnificent."

Inspired by Garfiel's rising spirits, a low, solemn commendation hung over the room.

It had come from a seat behind him, and Garfiel did not need to confirm that this single word had been spoken by a giant with four pairs of crossed arms. Now, there was just one thing that he wanted to ascertain.

Garfiel: "I told ya, Captain! I'll make that flyin', bellyachin' Dragon drop to the ground!"

Subaru: "—Yeah! Like you said! Go and get 'em!"

Garfiel: "Hyooo!"

With an energetic reply, Garfiel stood up with verve.

And, unlike the other times when he stood up where she had pulled him back, Ram did not move. Garfiel glanced at her, and as she looked at the stage while embracing her elbows,

Ram: "What?"

Garfiel: "Ha! It's nothin'. Seems like in my amazin' self's head, you ain't that unswayable of a woman."

Ram: "There's no need to go out of the way to say what's already obvious. That's what Garf is for."

Garfiel flashed a wry smile at Ram as she shrugged her dainty shoulders, not even turning her gaze over his way. In her place, Mimi nimbly jumped on top of her seat,

Mimi: "Then, Mimi speaks! Garf, it would be so cool if you won this!"

Laughing at his declaration, Mimi slapped Garfiel's back with all the strength she could muster.

Then, a beat later, just like Mimi had, Subaru, Beatrice, Emilia, Petra, Frederica, and Ryuzu all clapped Garfiel on the back.

As he was being pushed out, Garfiel was clapped on the back, and he faced towards the exit of the theater.

Garfiel: "Ottobro! Give me some advice."

Otto: "Let me see… When it comes to dangerous behavior like risking your life, I would not allow that for anyone other than for myself."

Garfiel: "I don't wanna just be told that by you, Ottobro!"

His joking older brother gave him a slap on the back, forcing Garfiel towards the exit of the theater.

As he was forced towards the doorway, he saw his younger siblings, who he had thought could not be found in any of the seats, and towards them and his mother who held them by their shoulders, he directed a thumbs up.

An encounter that had filled the entirety of the theater, it was a good Soumatou.

And so, in those final moments, he pointed his finger towards the Pucks onstage, and,

Garfiel: "—My amazin' self ain't a cat! I'm the Gorgeous Tiger!"

4

???: “…”

Dragons were beings that were often likened to natural disasters and cataclysms, but the way the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, was rampaging about left that judgment no room for objection whatsoever.

It was the incarnation of destruction that had completely changed the scenery of the Imperial Capital from what it had been just a few minutes prior, and its fierce rampage was a sight utterly inconceivable for this world; witnessing that, Heinkel’s legs could not stop shaking as his heart shattered.

There had also been someone who had altered Heinkel’s destiny in a mere instant.

However, they had suffered a crushing defeat in an exchange of blows against the Dragon, and had been blown away by a roar which split the very ground asunder. Debris had rained down upon them, and had buried them underneath.

That was why there was no point, even though he had told them.

Senselessly, mercilessly, the golden-haired boy had lost his life.

And Heinkel had been unable to do anything but silently watch—

???: “—I’M THE GORGEOUS TIGER!!”

The next moment, an explosion occurred from within the mountain of rubble, and an angry roar reverberated.

At the event that had been far too abrupt, Heinkel’s throat clogged up in shock, astonished by the person who had thrust their first upwards and had blown away the mountain of rubble—Garfiel.

Garfiel: “Ahh, shit… How long’s my amazin’ self been sleepin’ for…?”

Staggeringly shaking his head, Garfiel ripped off his tattered vest, and enquired so. At that question, Heinkel blinked his eyes in surprise,

Heinkel: "…Since you were buried under the rubble, it's been about five seconds."

Garfiel: "—Five seconds, huh? Almost got killed ten times over, that was a fuckin' close one."

Taking a long, deep breath, Garfiel cracked the joints in his neck.

Seeing that unthinkable figure right after he had thought that the attack had invariably killed Garfiel, Heinkel was at a loss for words. But, there was also someone even more shocked than Heinkel, and could not conceal their surprise.

Mezoreia: "Wha, t… hk."

Garfiel, who had been bustling about with no cease to his motion, delivering unthinkable blows as if there were no difference in size between them, should have finally been defeated.

He had certainly been killed. For that belief to have been shattered in merely five seconds, Heinkel sympathized. —What did it matter if he sympathized? Against that ultimate lifeform, against the Cloud Dragon?

Mezoreia: "You, why… why won't you friggin' die…?"

Garfiel: "Ahh? Don't be an idiot, I really would've died. That is, if Pops didn't go 'n make those five seconds for me."

Heinkel: "I, I didn't do any…"

Garfiel bared his teeth at the words of the astonished Dragon, but Heinkel could only shake his head.

It was true that right after Garfiel was blown away and buried in the rubble, Heinkel had kept on holding his sword and had exchanged glances with Mezoreia. But, that was nothing more than him gazing at it while understanding that if Garfiel had been defeated, he would become the next prey.

Mezoreia: “—Hk! DIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!”

Ignoring Heinkel’s self-awareness, Mezoreia’s patience had reached its limit.

The Cloud Dragon furiously closed in on the bolt upright Garfiel, and raising up its thick, long tail, it brought it down like a flash of lightning.

The wind generated from the flap of its wings, which it had used to approach, was enough to make it feel as if the likes of Heinkel were about to be blown away. The extraordinary blow from the Dragon aimed directly for Garfiel—

Heinkel: “—ah?”

That instant, the Cloud Dragon’s body blurred mid-air, and its entirety was slammed into the protective wall of the Imperial Capital.

Mezoreia: “—Urahwahdah?!”

Turned upside down, Mezoreia’s back crashed into the wall, and it let out a disheveled exhale without understanding what had just happened; sharing that lack of understanding, Heinkel’s jaw was left agape.

It was not clear how it had been done. But, it was clear who had done what.

—Garfiel had parried the blow from Mezoreia’s tail, and had thrown the Dragon.

Garfiel: “Ahh, shit… now I’ve done it.”

Looking down at his hands, for some reason, Garfiel muttered so in discontent.

Making an expression as if he was digging up an unpleasant memory, he repeatedly opened and closed the hands that had thrown the Dragon, and then turned around.

Those emerald-green eyes directly clashed with the eyes of the upside down Cloud Dragon.

And then—

Garfiel: “Well, nevermind. Let’s fuckin’ do this, round two. —Sorry ‘bout this, but my amazin’ self’s the only one who’s got a mountain load of support!”

Indeed, using incomprehensible reasoning as fuel for his fighting spirit, Garfiel’s clash with the Cloud Dragon, after a momentary stoppage, began anew—the verse of a legend, headed for its coda.

Chapter 55:
Madelyn Eschart

1

—Madelyn Eschart was the youngest dragonkin in existence.

By nature, due to the mechanisms behind the dragonkin's genesis, they possessed origins distinct from every other race. In order to precisely explain their ecology, the relationship between dragonkin and Dragons must first be known.

Nowadays, the number of individual Dragons that could be identified on the surface had considerably decreased, but that was influenced to no small extent by the fact that in times of yore, the favorite food of the Stick Swinger, Reid Astrea, had been Dragon meat.

Reid killed Dragons as he pleased, and killed the Dragons that had challenged him for retribution because of that; by doing that for several years, the already small number of Dragons had decreased even more in the blink of an eye, and they had been brought to the verge of extinction.

And, in the background behind the downfall of the Dragons, the ecology of Dragons played a big part.

First of all, Dragons did not require copulation or mating in order to multiply. Even without a male and female pairing up, they were creatures capable of asexual reproduction. Their bodies were constructed with a large quantity of Mana, and thus were fundamentally different from other races, and if a comparison had to be made, the closest thing would probably be Spirits.

Only, unlike Spirits, which had levels such as Micro, Quasi, and Great, Dragons were Dragons by birth, and there was no doubt that their unparalleled might existed at the apex of all living things.

Therefore, Dragons possessed almost no sense of protecting other individuals of their race, or of preserving the species.

Since they were capable of parthenogenesis, they inevitably harbored little interest in other Dragons. The ones that challenged Reid in the name of retribution for their species did not do so for the sake of the killed Dragons, but because their pride deemed it unacceptable for the Dragon race to be disdained.

As a result, by the time the Dragons realized how bad their situation was, they were already standing on the verge of extinction—even the mighty Dragon that was the leader of the flock filled Reid's stomach, and in another land, their confrontation with the Witch of Sloth had proved to be fatal, so the time had come for them to make a decision.

That decision was, namely, whether to follow the pride of a Dragon or not.

The Dragons that followed their pride abandoned the land, and while not approving of the attacks led by individual specimens hostile against Reid or the Witch of Sloth, they had chosen to fly away over yonder.

The Dragons that did not follow their pride remained in the land, and without severing relations with those who arrogantly opposed Dragons that were superior to themselves, they had made the unusual choice to continue feuding.

From a human's intuition, it might seem like the explanations of the ones that had and had not followed their pride were reversed, but this was correct when considering the perception of the Dragons.

In the first place, Dragons were the ultimate existence that could not possibly be compared with other races. There was no reason for them to go through the trouble of clashing with other species to prove that point. For Dragons, doing battle was defined as vying for survival, so if one wished to compete for victory, they would do so through the act of surviving. Therefore, those who were capable of doing so would be known as superior specimens.

The line of thinking went that the Dragons who could not reach that thought, instead doing battle with humans to prove an unnecessary point, clinging to the land and risking their lives, were causing Dragons as a whole to be disdained, and thus were in the wrong.

Therefore, the majority of the Dragons departed from the land, and the Dragons that yet remained were eccentrics—to put it more directly, they were treated as deviants among the Dragons.

At the top of that list would be the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, who was the most proactively friendly towards humans of the ones that had stayed behind, but the topic of that well known Dragon deviates from the matter at hand, and thus will be omitted.

Thus, at last, we return to the subject of dragonkin.

Going against the intentions of the Dragon race, the Dragons that remained in the land all acted independently.

Some Dragons died challenging Reid or the Witch of Sloth, other Dragons lived as hermits in regions that they had grown familiar with, and another portion of Dragons had become humans. —The decision of this final portion of Dragons had served as the basis for the dragonkin.

It was ironic, but the existence of Reid Astrea had played a large part in the creation of dragonkin.

Whether the Dragons followed their pride or not, there was a level of audacity in the man who had driven them to that decision, but it was his strength that had left a stronger impression on the pride of the Dragons.

As mentioned previously, Dragons boasted that they were the apex of all living things, and they were well aware that they were the ultimate existence. Just as they knew how to move their limbs, how to look at things, and how to hear sounds without the need to learn, that was an intuitive understanding.

Therefore, being the ultimate existence was important to Dragons, and if they indeed were, then there would be no need to fuss over the original form of a Dragon. —If they were superior, then even the form of a human would be fine.

It was mentioned that the construction of the Dragons' bodies was close to that of Spirits, and that ecology would come into use here.

Originally, the reason Dragons took on the majestic form of large bodies that sprouted wings, with sharp fangs and claws, and tough scales, was none other than because it easily displayed their abilities as the ultimate existence. Dragons had retained the same form for so long because there had never appeared a form that could display the power of a Dragon more aptly.

But, with the trend of times and changes in the world, if there was a need to alter themselves into a more suitable form, the Dragons would not shun the notion of discarding their majestic appearances, and instead taking the same forms as humans.

That was the origin of the dragonkin, their relationship with Dragons. —That was to say, the dragonkin were the evolved form of Dragons, the next generation spawned through parthenogenesis.

While they were equipped with the same physical traits as humans, that was the reason why every dragonkin was capable of movements incomparable to those of humans, and why they possessed extraordinary power as living things.

However, in the long history of Dragons, this was the first time there had been such a sudden and drastic evolution in form, and the birth of dragonkin caused many problems.

Among those, the most serious flaw was that critical damage would be yielded in the soul of the Dragon that served as a parent to a dragonkin, followed by them becoming an empty shell stripped of their mind, the phenomenon of the dragonhusk.

A Dragon that had become a dragonhusk was practically in the state of a living corpse, and save for the instinctual act of self-defense, they were transformed into a puppet that obeyed the will of their descended dragonkin with whom they bore a deep connection.

Even so, the extraordinary power possessed by a Dragon remained, and to an average human, they would be more than enough of a threat, but it was definitely not a desired state.

The Dragons that remained in the land with their own bodies were few, and the Dragons that had evolved into dragonkin were even fewer. From various perspectives, it was considered a disgusting example of failure for the Dragons that had evolved into dragonkin.

But, while being aware of the failures of other Dragons, the dragonkin continued to exist with a small overall population.

And while understanding that their species would scorn it as the foolish struggles of deviants who had abandoned their pride as Dragons and remained in the land, unable to recognize the error in their decision.

—Dragonkin still continued to be born, and as one of them, Madelyn Eschart had come into this world.

2

An impact beyond comprehension beat Madelyn down, who was occupying the dragonhusk of the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia.

In her original body, that of a young girl in human form, Madelyn knew what it felt like to be hurled.

That was certainly infuriating, but at least she could comprehend it. But, for this huge build of the Cloud Dragon to be tossed about by a being as small as the tip of its tail, was an event completely detached from reason.

How utterly nonsensical. It should have never come to pass. This sort of thing was entirely beyond the realm of imagination.

Madelyn: “—HUMAN!!”

With its back slammed against the wall, what was reflected in her upside-down vision, was a bloodied boy beckoning to her from atop the smashed stone pavement.

Golden hair and sharp fangs, she could tell he was a beast demi-human from his ferocious, ghastly aura, but there was no doubt that he was human. There was no reason for Madelyn's flame of indignation to disappear.

In the first place, it was no joke to suffer a direct hit from a Dragon's breath and live to tell the tale.

—Storing her own mind within the dragonhusk of Mezoreia, she controlled its movements as if it was her property.

This was Madelyn's privilege as a dragonkin, and with the number of years since she had come into this world as a dragonkin still few, it was a powerful technique she was able to employ because there remained a strong connection between her and Mezoreia, the specimen that was her parent.

The destructive impulses and power that were usually too much for that small body, she could now wield to her heart's content with this large body. She would proclaim in a loud voice that it was this mighty power that was the true Madelyn.

She had not wished to be born into such a small, frail, easily crushable, helpless body.

If that had not been so, if it had not been that kind of body, Balleroy would not have left Madelyn behind when he went to challenge his final battle.

If Madelyn had been a Dragon with a scary face and a big, powerful body—even though she was.

Boy: "—Shield of Sanctuary, Garfiel Tinzel."

Gnashing his sharp fangs, and firmly planting his feet on the smashed up street, the boy—Garfiel, gave his name.

That held the significance of a warrior giving their introduction as they threw down the gauntlet, but unbeknownst to that, the dragonkin sharpened the glint in the Cloud Dragon's eyes, and greatly swung its tail.

Using that vigor to tear its upside-down body from the wall, she placed all four of its limbs on the ground and glared at the boy.

She would not lose. Even if her opponent was a being who had endured a breath she thought had certainly killed him, who had jumped out from under the rubble after a mere few seconds, Madelyn would not lose.

It was this very dragonhusk of the Cloud Dragon that Madelyn had desired as a bridal gown for Balleroy's sake.

Madelyn: "Someone like you, isn't friggin' special…!"

Its long white whiskers shaking, a shout arose from the Cloud Dragon's throat. Despite being right before the Dragon's roar as it struck fear in the world, the half-dead, half-alive Garfiel did not waver.

His appearance almost looked as if he was being accompanied by a mountainous number of reliable allies.

Garfiel: "—Ahh, I know."

Madelyn: "…"

Garfiel: "'Cause in order to make sure my amazin' self didn't get any mistaken ideas, the woman I've fallen for went 'n stopped me from rushin' ahead by sayin' I was truly a fool!!"

Joining his fists before his chest, his silver gauntlets powerfully clanged out, and Garfiel roared.

In front of a creature that was supposed to be fragile, yet did not show a hint of weakness, Madelyn felt anger, in addition to something else. That something she had felt, she denied that which a Dragon must never harbor towards a human.

Madelyn: "—FRIGGIN' DISAPPEEEEAR!!"

That next moment, responding to Madelyn's outburst, the Cloud Dragon's roar shook the Imperial Capital once more.

Until just before, Garfiel had kept Madelyn positioned inside the city, and he put in hard work to ensure that the direction in which she unleashed the breaths would be towards the outside of the city. With that, he had fought while maintaining vigilance over the length and width of the attack range of the Dragon's breath, but here, those hard efforts would be reduced to naught.

Unleashed from the uttermost south of the city, the Crystal Palace that was directly at the city's northernmost point was captured within its range. The rays of destruction that had been charged up within the Dragon's body scorched the street, reducing buildings to dust, destroying everything in its line of fire, and it was about to penetrate the North—if Garfiel had not been there.

Garfiel: "Oh, OHHHHHHHHHHHHH—!!!"

He firmly planted both his feet on the ground as if to pierce it, and raising both arms that were clad in silver gauntlets in front of himself, Garfiel caught the Cloud Dragon's breath head on.

Even though putting up even a little bit of a fight against that would be considered a miracle, the boy was not blown away, he was not blasted away, and he managed to endure as he protected the Imperial Capital from destruction.

The mechanism that allowed for this extraordinary strife to be realized, lay in his two feet that were thrusted into the ground.

The eyes of the Cloud Dragon, retaining the form of a dragonhusk constructed with a large volume of Mana, perceived that Mana was flowing from the ground into Garfiel with abnormal vigor.

Garfiel's abnormal recovery ability and stamina until now had likely been from absorbing power from the ground like that, but its scale and vigor had immediately skyrocketed.

As proof of that, Garfiel was not simply holding his ground, but while basking in the Cloud Dragon's breath, he advanced one step forward, of all things.

One step, and then another, he steadily advanced, closing the distance on Madelyn.

Garfiel: “To make sure my amazin’ self doesn’t chicken out, I got a fuck ton of guys pattin’ me on my back tellin’ me to keep on goin’!!”

As Madelyn doubted her vision, a voice could be heard amidst the destruction where even sound had been scorched to naught.

Impossible. But, Garfiel had declared so. Declaring so, he continued to advance. Against this Cloud Dragon’s breath, amidst destruction that would likely cause the maps to be redrawn, he advanced.

One step, and then another, taking steps which should have never been possible—.

Madelyn: “—Rahhfwahh!!”

Witnessing his advance, Madelyn’s exhale was greatly disheveled.

The roar and the breath, to phrase it another way, were none other than the destructive war cry of the Dragon. Having her mind thrown into disarray, if the breath ran out, the destruction would cease.

Garfiel’s advance and resistance had been enough to conquer the Cloud Dragon’s breath.

Garfiel: “GaaaRAHHHHHH!!”

With the sound of a crash as he broke through, Garfiel swung both his arms up.

By doing that, the final stretch of the Cloud Dragon’s breath shot up into the sky. The Dragon was motionless with eyes wide-open, and as white steam emitted from all over its body, it saw as Garfiel’s body, burned a deep red to the extent that it would make one want to avert their eyes, rapidly healing.

Behind him, was the cityscape of the Imperial Capital that he had protected with his two slender arms, and the figure of the red-haired man who had fallen down on his backside within that cityscape.

Madelyn: "…"

Having been fully defended against, Madelyn was struck by an impact.

However, more so than the fact that the Dragon's breath had not worked, the true shock that hit Madelyn was in a more horrifying form.

Making a loud gulping sound, the red-haired human looked at the cityscape that had not been blown away by the breath, and said this.

Red-Haired Man: "You're not, sane… that breath was about to blast away the entire palace, and you just stopped it…!"

Madelyn: "—ah."

In regards to the reality before his eyes, those had been the words of the red-haired man as he trembled with fear. There had even been some fear towards Garfiel, who had resisted the Dragon's breath, and endured, but that was different for Madelyn.

For Madelyn, malevolent blades stabbed into her as she reflected on her own actions.

It was as the red-haired man had said. If Garfiel had not stopped her, her roar would have erased the Imperial Capital.

Even though the Crystal Palace within the line of fire would have contained Madelyn's body, as well as Balleroy and Carillon.

Madelyn: "Th-That's friggin' wrong… hk."

Slowly, weakly shaking her head, she denied her own actions with gestures unbecoming of a Dragon.

With blood rushing to her head, her thoughts stained white, she became frantic to do something about the enemy in front of her, and as a result, Madelyn had almost blown away anything and everything.

To think that she had been saved by a small, weak, fragile, helpless human.

Madelyn: “That’s wrong, that’s wrong, wrong wrong wrong wrong WRONG WRONG WRONG WRONG WRONG WROOOOOOONG…!!”

Garfiel: “Ahh? Oi, what’s with you…”

Madelyn: “This dragon! For the sake of Balleroy! Everything, everything everything, was for the friggin’ sake of Balleroy!!”

At her wit’s end, Madelyn piled on words of denial, to which Garfiel made a dubious face. As if painting over Garfiel’s, over the voice she did not want to hear the most, Madelyn shouted.

Raising a scream that even she herself did not fully comprehend, the Cloud Dragon thrashed its wings.

Garfiel: “—Hk!”

As a violent gale was spurred forth, Garfiel immediately crouched down as his hair intensely flapped; the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, ascended in one go, and flew up into the heavenly skies.

Thereupon existed thick, dark clouds that were covering the entirety of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

Madelyn: “Someone like you, isn’t friggin’ special…!”

Following the beck and call of the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, clouds had gathered from across the entire Empire—with the Mana that Mezoreia could not keep stored within itself sealed within them, they were a destructive impulse of white.

She had brought them together in a single swoop. —By no means, were they something Madelyn would be able to handle. Even so, she would be able to bring them down to the surface as a bundle of absurd power.

Madelyn: “This dragon, isn’t friggin’ special…!”

Once Madelyn brought the clouds down to the surface, she would blast away Garfiel and the red-haired human, and then she would kill anyone who knew about what she had done.

By doing that, Madelyn would—

Madelyn: “The only one who’s friggin’ special, is Balleroy…!!”

As the weeping voice of the Dragon rained down from the heavens above, the puny humans below her looked up at the sky.

While looking up, the boy, small, yet not weak or fragile, gnashed his fangs,

Garfiel: “—This massive, goddamn idiot.”

3

—Madelyn Eschart was born at the summit of Mount Palzoa, the mountain where the Cloud Sea City of Mezoreia was located.

That city, crowned with the name of the Cloud Dragon that had inhabited the Empire for a long time, was a land where many who aspired to utilize the Empire’s original technique of flying dragon riding would make their way.

Through the power of the Dragon that had settled there, large clouds wound around the tall mountain’s surface all year round without ever disappearing, and the city had been built at a high elevation upon it.

The mountain was the residence for wild, violent flying dragons, and the elevation of the Cloud Sea City was a place where humans could just barely survive—those aiming to go even higher, would either end up with a flying dragon’s fangs gnawing into them, or return with a flying dragon egg, and embark on the path of being a flying dragon rider.

The likes of the mountain’s summit, concealed by the thickest clouds, had never once been seen by anybody.

The untrodden summit of Mount Palzoa, that was Madelyn’s birthplace.

Wrapped in clouds of white, in a place where, despite the presence of the sky, one could not hope to behold its azure hue, Madelyn had been born as one of the rarest beings in this world, a dragonkin. The new generation of Dragons, the ultimate existence, and while she was acquiring an instinctual understanding, there was a tragedy that had awaited her.

That was—

???: "—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies."

Her biological parent, the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, had become a dragonhusk upon birthing a dragonkin, and had welcomed Madelyn's birth in a state where communication had become difficult.

Hardly exchanging any words, yet only understanding that it was a Dragon who was close to her, the newborn Madelyn was not taught even a single thing, and she had earnestly spent her time in futility.

Why the Cloud Dragon, who ought to have lived for a long time, being fully aware of the severe and absurd nature of the world, had chosen to engage in this cruel generational shift, was something that even now Madelyn failed to understand.

The one thing that could be said was that, despite not being alone, Madelyn had spent her days amidst the clouds in eternal solitude.

And the one who had put an end to that solitude, was somebody who had accomplished something that nobody in the history of the Empire had ever done before, and had reached the summit of the mountain engulfed by the Cloud Sea; it was Balleroy Temeglyph.

Balleroy: "Really now, it's all fine and dandy that I went in wanting to challenge my own abilities, but… I never woulda expected that there'd be a lovely young lass and a frightening Dragon waiting for me at the top."

???: "—Kiryararahhh!"

Within what was a world of dense clouds rather than dense fog, finding Madelyn—the very young dragonkin who had yet to bear that name, Balleroy scratched his cheek in a troubled manner.

The flying dragon next to him, Carillon, was overwhelmed by the presence of the Cloud Dragon and the very young dragonkin, but still stood in a way to protect its companion, Balleroy.

Mezoreia: "—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies."

The Cloud Dragon, unable to say anything but those words, and only providing clouds bundled with Mana as meals, had likely not rejected the sudden visitor only due to the fact that he harbored no enmity.

Before Balleroy and Carillon, the Cloud Dragon had instinctively rejected flying dragons that had carelessly strayed from the pack and got lost in the clouds, making them disappear before they could enter the vision of its young child.

Therefore, this was the first time the young child was encountering life other than herself or the Cloud Dragon.

Young Child: "…"

The young child kept silent. Or rather, she did not know any words to speak.

At the pairing of human and flying dragon that had appeared without warning, all she could do was shrink her body. The Cloud Dragon did not say anything at times like this, and kept its consciousness submerged in the depths of ambiguity.

Of course, depending on the person's next action, the Cloud Dragon could forcibly remove Balleroy and Carillon in the same way it had done so for all the flying dragons that had peered at the summit until now.

However, before the overwhelming presence of a Dragon and a dragonkin, Balleroy, without getting especially worked up, took off the coat he was wearing, and, Balleroy: “For now, put this on, lil’ miss. It ain’t good for a maiden to recklessly expose her skin like that.”

With that said, the young child—the girl whom Balleroy would later go on to name Madelyn, was given the first semblance of kindness and warmth she had ever experienced in her life.

Two alternate portrayals of this scene can be found herehere

4

—Madelyn’s peculiar meetings with Balleroy always took place within the Cloud Sea.

Balleroy: “Madelyn, I’ve come again. Have ya been a good girl?”

Madelyn: “Balleroy!”

Balleroy: “Uwatahh?!”

Tearing through the thick, white clouds, Balleroy had showed up, and towards him, the young child—Madelyn came running.

Catching the body of the girl jumping towards him, that impact and vigor caused him to tumble down backwards together with Carillon after having just landed, and despite his dizziness, Balleroy stroked Madelyn’s head.

Since their first meeting, Balleroy had made frequent appearances at the summit of Mount Palzoa.

It was a summit that many flying dragon riders had risked their lives to challenge, yet nobody had ever reached before. Back then, she had no idea how much hardship Balleroy had gone through to reach her, and how valuable an action it was.

Only, by frequently visiting the mountain, and bringing Madelyn a connection to the unknown outside world, Balleroy became an irreplaceable existence to her.

The name Madelyn, was also something Balleroy had given to her.

At a loss for what to call her, he asked for her name, and when the young child replied that she had no name, he earnestly wracked his brain, and decided on that name to give her.

Balleroy: “Back when I was a kid around your age, that was the name of a person who treated me real well. She was the one who gave me my name… I’m much obliged to her.”

Madelyn: “Balleroy, that human, was she friggin’ precious to you…?”

Balleroy: “We had parted ways before I could properly think that. And yet, to still remain within me after all these years, I guess that’d hafta be the case.”

He gave a broad grin, yet he seemed somewhat lonely, so Madelyn gently nuzzled her cheek against his chest.

The name of someone precious to him, he had bestowed it upon Madelyn in this manner. In other words, it was evidence that Madelyn was precious to Balleroy.

Being thought of like that by Balleroy, caused Madelyn to feel a deep, warm emotion.

Wishing for more of that, much, much more of that, she eagerly anticipated her time together with Balleroy.

Wanting to converse more with Balleroy, she diligently remembered the words of humans.

In this regard, Balleroy was also surprised by Madelyn’s high learning ability, but that was, in all likelihood, a trait of the dragonkin that had been inherited from the nature of Dragons.

For some reason, her dialect would not disappear no matter what, but that did not get in the way of her conversations with Balleroy.

Balleroy: “Hehe, looks like my judgment wasn’t mistaken. Suits ya well, Madelyn.”

Madelyn: “I-is that friggin’ so? Fufu…”

Placing his hand on his chin, Balleroy nodded in a satisfied manner, and as she did a twirl before him, Madelyn ascertained the feeling of the fluttering cloth—no, of the clothes he had presented to her.

The gentle color of the clothes seemed to be “sky-blue” from what Balleroy had said. It was the same color as Madelyn’s hair, and it was something that Balleroy had gone out of his way to prepare for her.

In all honesty, as a dragonkin, Madelyn felt annoyed by wearing clothes like this since they impeded her movement, but that feeling vanished when she looked at Balleroy.

Giving her a name, giving her words, and giving her clothes, he had granted her happiness.

Madelyn counted the things Balleroy had granted her, and remembered them all. It was in the nature of Dragons. Dragons would absolutely never forget the treasures they had hoarded.

The items and emotions Balleroy had brought her, were all treasures to Madelyn.

Balleroy: “Well then, I’ll come again before the moon is half-full, Madelyn.”

As the precious, fragile time they spent together heartrendingly came to a close, Balleroy mounted Carillon, and flew away from the Cloud Dragon’s nest.

With the promise of their next meeting in her heart, Madelyn endured the sad feelings and saw him off.

—Leaving Madelyn behind at the summit, just who could call Balleroy heartless as he flew away?

In the Dragon’s nest, enveloped in white clouds, it was not as if Balleroy had never attempted to take Madelyn out, who had yet to see even the sky that was of the same hue as her hair.

Only, he had been unable to do so. Even if the Cloud Dragon, who existed in a vague world, had overlooked Balleroy and Carillon entering its nest, it would not allow them to attempt to take Madelyn outside.

Mezoreia: “—I, am Mezoreia. In accordance with the voice of mine dear child, I shalt become the wind from the heavenly skies.”

Mezoreia had accepted Balleroy and Carillon as they bore no enmity; however, as soon as they tried to take Madelyn out, it would follow its instincts, baring its fangs.

In a Dragon’s nest, under the eye of the Dragon that was its lord, there was no chance for a human to win.

Therefore, Balleroy did not take Madelyn out. Madelyn, too, did not wish for Balleroy to die. That was why Madelyn had never once said that she wanted him to take her outside.

Instead, just once, she had made him an entreaty.

Madelyn: “Balleroy, won’t you friggin’ stay here… together with this dragon, forever?”

Balleroy: “…”

Seeing Balleroy’s cheeks stiffen in response as she made that entreaty, Madelyn regretted it.

The moment of silence that was created, served as a faithful representation of Balleroy’s answer in response to Madelyn’s entreaty. Balleroy would not stay here at the summit.

Outside of this world clouded in white, Balleroy still had many things that were precious to him.

Just like how Madelyn had nothing but this white world, Balleroy had nothing but the outside world. This was a world uninhabitable for Balleroy, for humans.

Balleroy: “—I’m real sorry, Madelyn.”

Apologizing to Madelyn as she comprehended that, Balleroy tried to stroke her head like he usually did. For the first time, Madelyn rejected Balleroy's palm, and sent him away.

As tears welled up in her eyes, she threw a tantrum and raised her voice, and chasing Balleroy and Carillon away from the summit as if blaming them, Madelyn sobbed.

Sobbing for three days and three nights, Madelyn regretted her own actions.

During that time, she succumbed to her emotions, wondering what she would do if Balleroy never showed up again, she lamented from the bottom of her heart. To think that the last time she would ever have seen Balleroy was with him bearing a saddened expression, Madelyn absolutely hated that. She lamented with all her being.

However, Madelyn was young, and her thoughts and imagination were naively shallow.

The greatest regret of Madelyn's life came after her three days and nights of sobbing.

—That day, when the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia had left her side, Madelyn had not been especially worried.

Even though it had left her side, the Cloud Dragon's wings would not fly far beyond this mountain engulfed in clouds. At most, the range it would go was such that its thunderous roar could still be fully heard.

Whether that was to hunt flying dragons that had carelessly entered the Cloud Dragon's nest, or if it was a reckless challenger who had set foot on the mountain path aiming for the summit, she had thought it was either one of those.

Whatever the case, she had no doubt that, with time, Mezoreia would return.

More importantly, it was her regret that would not disappear no matter how many days passed, as well the method to control her emotions as she continued to weep her eyes out, that had been much more of a problem.

That was why she did not care about the fact that the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, had returned bearing many wounds on its scales for the first time, nor did she care about what sort of challenger had inflicted those wounds.

Balleroy: "—I'm real sorry, Madelyn."

Madelyn came to discover that answer when she witnessed Balleroy, who had arrived at the summit again a few days after that worst-possible parting, bearing wounds that would make one wish to avert their eyes all over his body.

Balleroy's apology to the speechless Madelyn, that was neither an apology for not showing up for a while, nor was it an apology for being unable to meet Madelyn's request.

Balleroy: "…I had wanted to defeat the Cloud Dragon, and bring ya outta here, though."

Saying that with wounds that seemed to put him on the verge of death, while stroking the back of his equally battered beloved dragon, Balleroy gave a pathetic smile, and tears streamed down Madelyn's face.

She had regretted it. In all of Madelyn's dragon life, that was the greatest regret that could not be erased.

—Dragons would cling to their treasure. It was in the nature of Dragons.

Thus, for the Cloud Dragon, having been submerged in a vague world after becoming a dragonhusk, that was a part of its nature it would not forget even in such a state, and so, Madelyn was the treasure it could not bear to lose.

Balleroy had tried to steal that away, risking his life in the process.

Madelyn: "Friggin', idiot…"

Balleroy: "I had thought I'd be able to do it, but… really, even I myself was quite shocked."

Madelyn: “Wrong! Friggin’ wrong! It’s not Balleroy, it’s this dragon who’s the friggin’ idiot…!”

Denying Balleroy as he engaged in pathetic self-deprecation, Madelyn firmly bit down on her molars.

Until today, until this very moment, she had cursed herself for only ever receiving things from Balleroy, and now, without anybody telling her, she had finally figured out what she ought to do.

These thick, white clouds where Madelyn had existed from birth, were walls that Madelyn needed to tear down with her own claws.

Depending on Balleroy’s kindness, Madelyn had continued to let him breach through, and until he finally braved danger to the verge of death, she had not even made an attempt to realize that.

Just how shameless was she? Was that uncouth way of being really befitting of a dragonkin, an ultimate existence?

Madelyn: “I, the dragon, will friggin’ do it myself.”

Balleroy: “Madelyn?”

Madelyn: “This dragon, will friggin’ go outside on her own. Not being brought out, but on my own… This time, this dragon will friggin’ go to meet Balleroy by herself. If I do that…”

Firmly gripping the hem of the clothes she had been gifted by Balleroy, with the words she had learned from Balleroy, she took the emotions she had been granted by Balleroy, and would convey them to Balleroy, who had given her everything.

As an ultimate existence, as a dragonkin, she would convey those emotions to the special human who had captivated her.

Madelyn: “If I do that, will you make this dragon your bride?”

Balleroy: “…”

At Madelyn’s question, a moment of silence similar to the one from earlier was born.

Balleroy's silence this time, however, was different from that which tormented the foolish, ignorant Madelyn, who had ended up sobbing for three days and nights, and she knew that there was something concealed therein.

At that time, Madelyn could only see what she wanted to see.

Even though she called out to Balleroy, all she wanted was for him to see her.

That was why—

Balleroy: "—I guess that'd be so. If ya did that, I s'pose it'd be a wonderful thing for both Madelyn and myself."

With Balleroy showing kindness to the utmost of his ability, he had made Madelyn fully aware that she was not his number one, and thus, a promise was exchanged.

5

—There were likely some who would argue that these feelings of Madelyn's were not real love.

There may be some who would analyze it as something akin to a chick hatched from an egg, imprinting on the first thing they saw to use it as support.

That it was only that she wanted to believe that the first person she had come into contact with outside of the beings deeply close to her, the first being to show her kindness, the relationship that had given her so many firsts, was special.

There may be some who would laugh off Balleroy's reply, as he made a fleeting smile in response to Madelyn's courting, as the kindhearted lie of a father designed not to hurt the feelings of a daughter who said that she would marry him in the future.

There may be some who would sympathize with Balleroy, who had feelings for somebody else, as merely being very considerate of Madelyn, since they were both in a similar situation of being unable to speak of their hidden feelings.

But, each and every one of those, was nothing more than the measure of humans.

Dragonkin, or even Dragons, had different values and ways of thinking to that of humans. Supposing one were to deny that dragonkin and Dragons were different, then it would be Madelyn's values that were unique from the rest.

From her heart, truly from the deepest depths of her heart, Madelyn desired Balleroy Temeglyph.

If that was not romance or love, then Madelyn would spend the rest of eternity never knowing what that was. To the extent of thinking that, her soul was burning with an ardor willing to put her life on the line.

Vowing to Balleroy, who had almost died for her sake, Madelyn tore through the white clouds.

Challenging the Cloud Dragon that stood in her way as she tried to leave, as it used its Dragon power to try to entirely discourage her wishes, she thrust her fangs into it and, in the end, subdued it.

For the first time, she thrust herself out under the sky that shared the same color as her hair; for the first time, she accomplished something she had decided to do by herself; for the first time, she tried to head to the side of her beloved person of her own accord, and that was when she learned.

—Balleroy Temeglyph had fought against the Empire, and lost his life.

Madelyn: "—What am I supposed to friggin' do?"

Right now, Madelyn did not know that answer.

Confronted with something too large to swallow, Madelyn's feelings of love had lost their destination.

And with the destinationless love being too much for her to handle, she even lost sight of her meaning to live, so not knowing what to do, Madelyn even thought about becoming one of the Blight

Dragons that would be left in the history of the Empire; the one to find her then was Berstetz, who had been searching for somebody to fill the empty seat in the Nine Divine Generals.

The location was Balleroy's residence that remained in the Imperial Capital, which she had discovered by pursuing his scent.

Balleroy had gone down in the records as a rebel, and the reason why Berstetz, who had been entrusted with the disposal of his residence, had not been killed by Madelyn, who happened to be present there, was because within Berstetz's thread-like eyes was housed the same light of having lost something that was also in Madelyn's eyes.

Berstetz patiently listened as Madelyn divulged her story with difficulty; upon hearing that Madelyn's identity was that of a dragonkin, and that she had possessed a relationship with Balleroy, he made two suggestions.

The first, was to act impulsively with her unmanageable emotions, and follow the same path as Balleroy, who had been defeated as an enemy of the Empire.

The other, was to accept the endorsement of Berstetz, whom she had just met here, become a member of the Nine Divine Generals like Balleroy once was, and while tracing back his footsteps, wait for an opportunity for retribution.

She did not struggle long to make a decision. Why it had not taken her long, Madelyn herself was unsure.

Only, it might have been that she wanted to find what Balleroy had left behind, even if only by a little bit more.

Berstetz: "—Madelyn Eschart. It is an old family name of Vollachia that is no longer around, but it shall be passed down to you. Prestige is quite important, after all."

Madelyn: "Prestige?"

Berstetz: "The reason it is no longer around, is because they fought against the Empire and disappeared. This may just be the intuition of my old bones, but I sense that it is quite the match for your dearest wish.”

Following the advice Berstetz gave in a low voice, Madelyn Eschart was born.

Afterwards, she accepted Berstetz’s endorsement, and progressed the situation in accordance with his intentions; taking the position that had once been occupied by Balleroy, Madelyn set out on a journey to discover the him she did not know.

It was a journey on which she was unsure of the destination she ought to be aiming for.

Even when she stepped forth from that mountaintop, out from that narrow world enveloped by clouds, and into the world Balleroy had told her about, Madelyn’s heart remained stuck on that day, captured by the man who had come together with his flying dragon.

Even so, she carried out the duties required of a Divine General. In Balleroy’s stead.

Even so, she demonstrated the prestige required of the Empire’s Generals. In Balleroy’s stead.

Even so, she wielded the power required to defeat the Empire’s enemies. In Balleroy’s stead.

Berstetz had likely harbored good intentions when he advised Madelyn to take her current position.

Or perhaps Berstetz had a wish that still remained as he grew old, and in order to fulfill his wish, he calculated what pawns would be required, and used Madelyn.

Either way, Madelyn did not bear a grudge against Berstetz.

That was not limited to just Berstetz. —She simply did not have that kind of space in her heart.

Acquiring the position of Divine General, she spent her time as General tracing back Balleroy’s footsteps. For Madelyn, those were days of unfathomable terror.

Every time she fought hard, every time she thought of Balleroy, every time she tried to fill the hole of Balleroy, Madelyn herself felt like she was killing Balleroy.

Every time she compensated for Balleroy’s absence, she was stealing his place in the world, the traces he left behind.

In that case, should she hand it over to somebody else? Madelyn would likely feel that the person who received it was killing Balleroy, and she would surely kill that person with her own hands.

She could at least understand that Balleroy would not want that, so Madelyn continued to exhaust herself.

Since she would not let anybody else do it, she would continue to kill Balleroy herself. And, when she finally killed Balleroy, would her own heart also die?

If so, she felt like that would be the best way to do it.

That which Balleroy had given her, this heart, these emotions. When Balleroy had died, at the time when she was not together with him in his most important moment, they ought to have perished.

And yet—

Madelyn: “Why is a dragon’s fang… Why is Carillon’s fang friggin’ hanging from your neck?!”

At the height of the disturbance shaking the Empire, she encountered a man carrying the fang of the flying dragon who had died together with Balleroy.

From the man who knew the Balleroy unknown to her, Madelyn heard stories of a Balleroy from the time when he was not with her, when he was not a General, and a sense of love blossomed in her heart once again.

And then, as tremors beckoned further tremors, at the end of the successive tremors, it had happened.

—The Great Disaster had, without a doubt, resurrected what Madelyn had lost.

Complimenting her sky-blue hair, saying that it was his favorite color, he stroked her head.

He gave a gentle, soft smile that caused her chest to tighten upon seeing it, her unfilled promise with him—she had wanted to embrace him under a clear sky, in a place with no clouds in the way.

Madelyn had finally come into contact with Balleroy somewhere outside of that mountaintop.

Even so, thick clouds still hung over the sky, and the world was still covered in darkness.

Madelyn: "—What am I supposed to friggin' do?"

Madelyn had no idea what she should do anymore.

She felt so, so much love, but for anything outside of that, she knew nothing at all.

She did not want to know, either.

6

A vortex of dusky clouds gathered in the sky with the Cloud Dragon as its center.

While looking up at that from the ground, all the hair on Garfiel's body stood on end, and the blood flowing through his body boiled; an impulse from his instincts struck his brain.

Having endured the Dragon's breath, his body was in the process of rapidly healing from the heatwave that had scorched him.

But, the destructive black clouds acted to entirely veil the heavens, and within them was concealed such excess power that Garfiel's regeneration, and even the waning cityscape of the Imperial Capital that he had desperately protected, would all be reduced to naught.

Garfiel: “Them huge clouds, the whole fuckin’ lot of it’s made outta the Dragon’s Mana…!!!”

It was a concealed trick that had not been detected until Mezoreia stirred them about, causing them to change their nature.

The trump card of the Cloud Dragon that had been audaciously hidden, was currently baring its fangs against him like this; however, what was causing Garfiel’s heart to tremble was not the destruction that would be brought about by that cluster of mighty power, but rather the state of the Cloud Dragon controlling it.

The Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia—no, he generally understood that there was a different being inside of it.

For a Dragon that had lived for however many centuries, soaring through the skies of this world over its long life, its words and actions were far too lacking in dignity.

That was an intuition of a completely different type to that of strength, and it was something that Garfiel understood since he knew Ryuzu, who, contrary to her youthful appearance, was of a personality that had lived for a very long time.

At the same time, Garfiel really felt how truly incredible Subaru’s order was.

Garfiel: “Captain, ya really told my amazin’ self to go ahead ‘n fell the Dragon flyin’ in the sky…”

Being pushed on the back to go and fight head-on against a Dragon, a being that was the strongest lifeform in the world, the fact that he was seen as reliable enough to be entrusted with that duty was absolutely tremendous.

The power he was granted by that had provided enough energy for Garfiel to return to reality from the incomprehensible theater he had seen while on the verge of death.

But, in a true sense, there was another meaning in Garfiel being sent here.

He did not know whether Subaru had aimed for that or not.

Either way, it mattered not. This Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia, needed to be faced by Garfiel, that was the sort of enemy it was.

The reason was—

Garfiel: "—You're strainin' yerself 'n cryin' out, beggin' for someone to protect yer world."

As Mezoreia cried out, recklessly scrambling power together, it brought about a terribly unpleasant feeling of shame within Garfiel.

In the past, Garfiel had erupted on his surroundings with the same rage and anguish that Mezoreia currently harbored.

Back then, his friends had stopped him through sheer force, so now Garfiel had his current position and resolve, as well as a strong body with two legs to firmly stand upon.

Naturally, Garfiel and Mezoreia were of different positions, circumstances, and even races. That was why, Garfiel could not necessarily use the same solution on Mezoreia.

But, however, there was no basis that he could not use it.

In order to ascertain that, Garfiel had no choice but to make it lower its fangs and talk, much like what had been done for him.

For that purpose—

Garfiel: "—Hk."

Looking towards his hectic surroundings, Garfiel forcefully gnashed his fangs.

The protective wall was on the verge of collapse, and the previous breath of the Dragon had scorched the Imperial Capital, bringing it to a state of partial destruction.

Even if he wanted to reach Mezoreia, Garfiel could not reach all the way to the height of the clouds.

That was why, Garfiel gave up on the idea of doing things by himself.

Garfiel: “Pops!!”

Heinkel: “—. Ah?”

Garfiel looked back with an altered expression on his face, and in his vision, he saw Heinkel dumbfoundedly looking up at the sky, his backside having fallen down smack on the ground.

The blue eyes quivered, their focal point blurred, and as Garfiel saw himself reflected within them, he grabbed both of Heinkel’s shoulders.

Garfiel: “Lend me a hand! I need ya to do somethin’ to send me flyin’ all the way up there!”

Heinkel: “Fly… flying? Flying, you say? What the hell, what the hell are you saying?! There’s no way we could ever do something like that! Just how fucking high up do you think that is!”

As Garfiel yelled a request at him, Heinkel widened his eyes, and also yelled back a reply.

While trying to shake free from the hands grabbing his shoulders, Heinkel pointed overhead.

The thunderously stirring clouds shifted in hue, as if swallowing the color of the sky that lay beyond the black clouds, the color of the heavens was transformed into a purple, tinged with azure.

While Heinkel pointed at what could only be described as a natural disaster, with his face pale,

Heinkel: “It’s already over!”

Garfiel: “I ain’t gonna let it be over!”

Heinel: “—Hk.”

Garfiel: “I ain’t gonna let anything end here! Both my amazin’ self ‘n Pops, we can’t lose!”

Firmly grasping his shoulders so that he could not shake the hands off, Garfiel made a powerful appeal to Heinkel.

Gulping down a breath, Heinkel’s cheeks stiffened. As his trembling finger pointed to the sky, the man’s opposite hand still remained gripped to his sword, and Garfiel had decided to believe in him.

Garfiel: “There ain’t no sense of reality right now. I know that, Pops. —It’s just like it’s the end of the world.”

Narrowing his eyes as he muttered, with the ruin that had taken the form of a vortex of clouds high above him, Garfiel stared at the skies of the different battlefields in the distance, and nodded.

It truly seemed that every single location was a Tennozan that Subaru had spoken of.

Piercing the clouds in the north of the Imperial Capital, an iceberg plummeted downwards; in the northeast, there were flashes of a sword severing the very world itself, reaching the ramparts, and even the mountains beyond them. The eastern heavens and earth were composed of over one hundred shades of red; each and every battlefield was trying to bring about a different doom to the Empire.

But, Garfiel would not despair.

Garfiel: “Ain’t that right, Captain.”

Making a variety of faces, Subaru had chosen their method of battle against the impending doom.

And thus, in order to deal with doom at this location, Subaru had selected none other than Garfiel Tinzel as the strongest card to play.

Not Emilia, not Beatrice, not Roswaal, not Spica, not Halibel, not Olbart, not Tanza, not Medium, not Jamal. He had chosen Garfiel.

Garfiel: "…"Facing the Dragon, Sword Saint Reid laughs and draws blade"."

Heinkel: "…Don't lump me in with that crazy ancestor of mine."

Garfiel: "…"There's no running from Reinhard"."

Heinkel: "Don't bring up that name! I'm! I'm…!"

Garfiel: "…"

Heinkel: "I'm…"

At that place where heaven and earth were about to meet their doom, Heinkel covered his face with the hand that had been pointed to the heavens, and spilled that out in a feeble voice.

The words that lay beyond, Garfiel did not know. By some chance, perhaps Heinkel himself had yet to discover what lay beyond those words.

In that case—

Garfiel: "—Pops, together with my amazin' self, let's go 'n unlock the followin' words that ya can't seem to get out."

7

Would imagining it even be possible?

The vast sky extended endlessly in all directions, and the clouds that blanketed it completely were all reduced into a hail of bullets and a forest of blades; the sight of that pouring down would be as if it were the end of the world.

Even now, that was what was on the verge of occurring.

However, different from the impression given by the phrasing of "a hail of bullets and a forest of blades", the clouds of destruction bringing doom upon the world were not widely raining down across all the vast lands of the Empire, but rather, having been centralized in one swoop, they were about to all pierce one concentrated area.

—The vortex of black clouds twisted into a helix, forming an enormous cone that weaved into the heavenly skies.

That mighty shape was warped and ominous; however, in the one aspect that it was intended for destruction, there indeed lay beauty.

Spreading its white wings in the heavenly skies, the Cloud Dragon held its arms aloft, bringing about that structure of demise; contrary to its large build, the Dragon cried out like an infant as it unleashed that from its hands.

Cloud Dragon: "—Friggin' disappear."

That teary voice, whether it was directed to somebody on the surface, where destruction rained down, or if it was directed to the surface itself, which would likely be unable to withstand it and would be blown apart, or if it was not aimed at anybody or the surface at all, and was instead a punishment it was imposing upon itself, was unclear.

No matter the case, the result would be the same.

There were no means of defending against a trump card that had been prepared over a long period of time by a Dragon, the ultimate existence; nearly the entirety of the southern half of the Imperial Capital would be blown away, incurring many casualties, and carrying out the intentions of the Great Disaster.

The fall of the Imperial Capital, in regards to the disaster, would signify the total defeat of the Empire, and the unhalted hosts of undead would engulf the ruined land, heading for the remaining countries with their fervent vigor.

Thus, the world would be drawn into a chain of calamity that knew no bounds.

That, would be the unshakable conclusion for a world fallen into demise.

It was an ending that none save for some Witch, a manifestation of curiosity, would be pleased with, and the only ones able to negate it would be the undersized, yet courageous warriors that plunged towards their imminent demise—

Courageous Warrior: "…"

Feeling the presence of the vast lands within his soul before he took off, the courageous warrior gathered as much strength as he could, and coursed it all throughout his body.

His legs, having been firmly outstretched, rode atop a sword that remained in its sheath, and right after a moment of power equilibrium, it ferociously swung upward at full strength.

That had been an outstanding blow.

It was not wielded against the dreadfully mighty Dragon as an opponent, neither was it something that cut deep into the cone attempting to bring ruination to the world, nor did it utilize any of the skills that it had been used to train.

Eye contact had not even been made with the enemy; however, it had been an outstanding blow.

At the very least, that was the judgment of the courageous warrior, who had received that blow with the soles of his feet.

Whether that outstanding blow would go unrecorded, unremembered by anyone, was entirely up to him to prove, as he had been entrusted with the conclusion.

Cloud Dragon: "…"

Beyond the incoming demise, he locked eyes with the Dragon as he ascended to the heavens.

Seeing those eyes tremble in a terribly frightened manner, a smile emerged on his face.

That smile was out of place, troublingly so.

That was immediately painted over by the smile of a belligerent, powerful, savage, ferocious tiger.

Courageous Warrior: “Have a taste of these fists.”

Using all of his strength, without holding back, he pummeled his fist into it.

He pummeled it, and then—

Courageous Warrior: “Let my amazin’ self hear yer story. —Just like how Captain ‘n the others once listened to mine.”

As stout arms of silver shot up, they crashed into the dark, cone-shaped clouds of ruin.

That instant, the folded layers of the sky and the spiraling black clouds erupted in an explosion bereft of sound, engulfing the world.

Courageous Warrior: “…”

The result of the collision, was brought about to a world in which sound had vanished.

Just what sort of conclusion had been incurred, would likely take shape after a flicker of light.

Only, the sky that had been birthed beyond the collision, the sky from which the enshrouding black clouds had vanished, was blue.

In the past, a flying dragon rider had bestowed a name upon a lonely dragonkin; and, same as the color of the hair he had lovingly, cherishingly stroked many a time, sky-blue stretched out above, and that was all.

Vic.1120

Chapter 56:
Arakiya

1

—Without being told by anyone. Arakiya swallowed it down.

Arakiya: "…"

With great throbbing, the sound of flowing blood flooded in the form of pain.

That heartbeat pounded faster than it had during the midst of battle, with each thump of the heart becoming a shock akin to a nail being driven directly into the soul, which surged throughout her entire body. Yet, it eased Arakiya's mind.

Knowing that the heart still pumped blood, signified that she still retained her human form.

Even if it had been just a minor comfort akin to margin of error, it was necessary for Arakiya to keep herself from becoming stirred, to keep her soul from scattering.

—For the unique beings known as Spirit Eaters, none other than Arakiya existed in this world.

Born from the extreme delusions of individuals who could not be called researchers, but rather aberrants; the taboo existence that was the Spirit Eater—named Arakiya, had been kept alive as a sole being under a destiny shared with no one else in this world.

In a daringly diluted ego, Arakiya, who had clung only to the existence of the "pillar" that she deemed important to herself, had devoured spirits, acted as a formidable being, and fulfilled her role.

She had thought that was enough.

However, it was not as she had realized, upon losing said "pillar".

By the time she had realized it, it would have already been too late; she would have likely invited the original end of a Spirit Eater, the quick collapse of the ego, being consumed by the Spirits she had taken in, and her soul being painted over.

However, Arakiya did not meet that fate. For that, two factors could be considered.

One was that the individual Arakiya had deemed as her “pillar” was like a dazzling sun, shining so brightly that even when they were separated, they could not lose sight of them.

The other reason, and one that Arakiya would never want to admit—in the days after being separated from her “pillar“, the Thunder that reminded Arakiya of the fact that she was herself shook her soul incessantly, evoking feelings of inferiority and stimulating her individuality.

Bathed in the light of the dazzling sun, accompanied by the incessant Thunder, Arakiya had preserved her own soul.

???: “—And, that is the conclusion I have come to, but I would like to hear if you have any awareness of it.”

Arakiya: “…No.”

It was the year when Arakiya surpassed Olbart in rank and was promoted to Second.

Chisha’s opinion, based on his search relating to the remaining literature on the Spirit Eater, had etched a stern expression on Arakiya’s face; the first time ever in their long acquaintance.

That was understandable. Chisha was intelligent, and his explanations were clear, but his perspective had been difficult for Arakiya to accept.

Arakiya herself only understood her existence as a Spirit Eater on a sensory level, yet she had wanted to believe that her entirety was made solely of Prisca.

She did not want that hopeful wish to be diluted by the least desirable components of all.

To begin with—

Arakiya: "…Why did you bring that up?"

As she questioned, it was surprising in itself that Chisha had broached such a topic.

Arakiya's "pillar", Prisca—the fact that she had exceptionally escaped from the Imperial Selection Ceremony, having been allowed to leave the country alive, was a closely guarded secret even within the Vollachian Empire.

At the time, it was natural for Arakiya and Chisha, who were involved in her exile, to know, but it had been a topic they had not spoken of for years, and something not to be mentioned to anyone else.

So why, at this moment, had Chisha chosen to bring it up?

Chisha: "I want to know whether you are a fragile, ephemeral, and vanishing existence or not. Whether I ought to count you among the numbers for the impending great battle."

Arakiya: "…It makes no sense. I'm one of the Nine Divine Generals."

It was only natural that they would be sent to put down the rebellion or whatever that Chisha and Vincent were predicting.

However, at Arakiya's response, Chisha's eye twitched downwards, forming an unusual expression on his face. It was a smile seldom seen from Chisha, who had almost always wore an expression of either blankness or bewilderment.

With that smile, striking Arakiya in a moment of vulnerability, Chisha continued.

Chisha: "It seems like this battle will end up being a little bigger than the battle you are thinking of. I am well aware that you do not truly serve His Excellency from the depths of your heart, nor do you consider me an ally.”

Arakiya: “…”

Chisha: “Even though I know it to be true, it still stings a bit not to be denieeed.”

Arakiya: “…For the sake of the princess, I will not disappear.”

Without acknowledging Chisha’s reaction as he touched his forehead, Arakiya ran her hand over her eyepatch.

For the reason as to why she was herself, the soul known as Arakiya had a proper answer. The concerns Chisha had would not come to pass. So although It was not to reassure Chisha, she declared.

Arakiya: “Also, that has nothing to do with Cecilus.”

Chisha: “Hm. Those are merely my deductiooons. If you really want to have me recognize that such is not the case, I would like for you to defeat Cecilus at least once.”

Cecilus: “Huuuuuh? Weren’t you talking about me just now? What’s this what’s this, it’s rather unkind for Anya and Chisha to treat me like I’m an outsider so I’d like you to stop with that please? Could it be you’re on about that? About the slim chances of winning for Anya, who keeps extending her losing streak without learning her lesson?”

Arakiya: “Cecilus, die.”

In the end, a clash with Cecilus began right after, and Chisha, who had wanted to avoid being involved, fled, so the conversation did not progress further.

Afterwards, she had no recollection of ever continuing the conversation with Chisha.

Arakiya: “…”

Just a vague thought crossed her mind.

Just when would the impending great battle that Chisha was concerned about come? And when it did, would she be counted among his forces?

If the opportunity ever arose, she would like to ask about it.

Arakiya had been acquainted with Chisha for a long time now.

Due to their relationship, which stemmed from the Imperial Selection Ceremony where she had been separated from Prisca; Arakiya harbored unforgiveness towards Chisha, who had been deeply involved in the reasons behind her separation with Prisca.

However, Chisha had taught Arakiya how to read and write. She owed him a debt. For that favor, she was willing to participate in battles Chisha desired her to.

—Or perhaps, was this too going to end up being attributed to reasons other than Prisca?

She hated Cecilus. Vincent was complicated, but she leaned towards not forgiving him due to what happened to Prisca. Olbart was amusing with his jokes. Goz had a comical face. Groovy had a foul mouth but was actually very helpful, while Moguro would always listen to what she had to say without making unpleasant faces. Yorna was not her cup of tea, yet for some reason she was unable to hate her. Balleroy would occasionally take her for a ride on his flying dragon, and she felt like Madelyn and herself mutually tried to avoid seeing each other. To Todd, she was grateful.

—Would all of these also end up being attributed to reasons other than Prisca?

Arakiya: “…”

Feeling as though she was about to fall apart, like she was about to be torn to shreds, as if losing every last part of herself that she could remember, Arakiya gathered up the fragments of “Arakiya”.

If she did not do so, the existence known as herself would disappear—that was not the case.

Arakiya: "…ncess."

Without doing so, she would be unable to restrain what was ramping within, on the verge of bursting out of her.

It was tremendously colossal. Unbelievably heavy. Intolerably twisted. If left unchecked, it would destroy the Empire.

If she could not keep it under control, her "pillar"—Prisca, would not be protected.

That was why Arakiya, without being told by anyone, swallowed it down. Into her own incomparably thin and small body, she took the Stone, Muspel.

The Empire must not be destroyed by the monster who called herself a Witch, utilizing this Great Spirit.

For that purpose—

???: "I guess she probably ate something bad. —You really are a handful."

The noisy Thunder felt like a hallucination, piecing together a torn-apart soul.

While being tormented by the loss and pain akin to a thundercloud, Arakiya continued to scramble together, scramble together, scramble together the fragments of "Arakiya", resisting against the dispersion of her turbulent existence.

She continued to resist, and endured. —Clinging to her soul on the verge of destruction, she awaited the one and only hope.

2

The counting was growing tiresome, but it was their habit to do so.

Daring to go into the details of numbers could trivialize the reality one faced—not to say that it would be a clever thing to do. Without such a mentality, it really was just a habit.

The habit of counting continued. —This was the one hundred and ninety-first time.

???: “It’s getting tiresome being way too ordinary of a dude…”

Al muttered to himself as he felt the heat build up inside his helmet, sweat soaking the inside.

On the stage of the melted second bastion, the vain struggles of the out-of-place actor with a minor role continued. The atmosphere wobbled unsteadily due to the effects of the heat wave that engulfed the surrounding area, clearly transforming the space into something from a different dimension.

Humans would not be able to adapt to a world being remade into hell with every passing moment.

Trees and buildings were set ablaze, and grit and pieces of the street had begun to melt. His palm gripping the Blue Dragon Sword made a sizzling sound, and he was unsure if even his clothing would ignite at any moment.

The circumstances they found themselves in were such that by just standing there it would not at all be strange for them to be turned into a ball of flames the next moment. In fact, more than once or twice, that had been the case.

And yet, in spite of these incredibly harsh circumstances—

???: “Ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta—!!”

The leading actor furiously ran over the bubbling, boiling magma, maneuvering at a speed that could have been mistaken for a lightning bolt.

With his disheveled, deep dark blue hair dancing, running with his bright pink kimono fluttering was Cecilus Segmunt, the flamboyant, self-proclaimed leading actor of the world.

His speed as he sprinted over the magma, his incredible leg strength that one would not expect from a slender child’s legs, his seemingly inexhaustible stamina, and his courage to cross paths with an enemy that could remake the world in the blink of an eye, and the power of fate, were all first-class.

Declaring the world to be his stage, and placing himself in the role of leading actor, Cecilus was conscious of his appearance to an unseen audience and fulfilled himself in a way that did not shy away from those grandiose claims.

Who else could possibly mount a fight against such a powerful, extraordinary opponent?

Cecilus: “—Toh!”

With a high-pitched shout characteristic of a child, Cecilus’s body flew at an angle.

A moment after he leapt, the ground where he had been just before swelled up and exploded from within. Taking advantage of the blast, Cecilus twisted in midair as he was propelled.

With that, a lightning kick that could blow away even a stone pillar as thick as a giant tree trunk flew toward the silver-haired dogperson—Arakiya, who floated in midair.

Arakiya: “—Ah, uh.”

With her exposed brown skin, Arakiya’s jewel-like red eyes shed tears of blood.

The soles of Cecilus’s charred zori flew straight at her torso as she let out a cry, looming, looming ever closer—at the moment of impact, a loud sound detonated in the sky.

Cecilus: “ ~ ~ Hk!!”

Immediately afterward, slamming down faster than when he had jumped up, Cecilus plunged to the ground and bounced violently on the street, squelching a cry of pain as he raised his head.

A moment later, blood gushed from his pale forehead, turning the small child’s face red.

Cecilus: “You’ve finally gotten to the point where you’re matching me perfectly, huh.”

Licking the blood that trickled down the well-shaped bridge of his nose, Cecilus commented on the fact that he had been successfully parried.

There was no hint of surprise in that. Because, this was not the first time she had parried him.

Already a dozen or so times, Cecilus’s lightning-swift attacks had been countered, and continued to be shot down. As a result, the situation was rapidly becoming severely unfavorable.

Al: “Lil’ Miss Arakiya is in quite a sorry state.”

Looking for an opening to intervene, Al saw Arakiya floating in the air, distorting the space around her.

Arakiya’s appearance, it was even more bizarre than it had been just a few moments earlier, with magic crystals growing out of the thin girl’s body as if piercing from within.

From a distance, the growths on Arakiya’s arms and back resembled the wings of an angel.

However, in reality, Arakiya had absorbed an exceedingly large entity, and it was attempting to devour through and spill out from the body of the girl in which it was trapped.

Al: “Fuck.”

As Arakiya’s choice gradually eroded her power and made her deviate from her human form, Al could do nothing but curse and vent his uncontrollable anger.

He knew what it was like wanting to compensate for a lack of power, falling short of achieving one’s own desires.

Al could imagine that Arakiya had the potential to reach much greater heights than himself, and that there were numerous possibilities within her reach.

Nevertheless, by taking in something that did not mesh with her own capacity, Arakiya's own brilliance would instead turn against herself, her surroundings, and the things she wanted to cherish.

And so, the simple answer that came in reciprocation was the current situation.

—Initially, Cecilus was the one who had possessed the upper hand in the fight against Arakiya.

In order to hold back Arakiya, who had turned into something dangerous that could blow away the second bastion and erase the entire Imperial Capital in its entirety, Cecilus fanned his stinging hostility against her, setting the stage by continuing to provoke her intuitive sense of danger.

To put it plainly, this was a battle of two transcendent beings who were not just one or two steps above as warriors, but rather ten.

Al had stayed behind, but he retained little capacity to intervene; still, out of close to two hundred attempts, he had been able to prevent Cecilus's limbs from being blown off on two occasions.

All the while, Arakiya was like a glass of water being endlessly overfilled, overflowing and spewing water at random, greatly endangering the lives of both Al and Cecilus.

But, even if this all were to repeat itself, which would of course happen by Al using the cheat of his territory, it would never be possible to capture Cecilus as he jumped around as a being outside of reason.

However, the situation had changed.

This was due to the aforementioned increasing deformity of Arakiya, which had immediately changed her fighting style.

Cecilus: "—Come to me!"

Raising a vigorous cry, full of belligerence, Cecilus's eyes gleamed as he wiped away some blood.

A moment later, the area around Cecilus distorted, and twisted pillars of stone burst forth from all directions like giant serpents and attacked the boy. Cecilus crouched down, jumped away, and twisted to avoid the stone pillars that were furiously trying to snap at him, and the speed at which he leaped out of the way surged up to his top speed.

But, while shedding tears of blood, Arakiya's onslaught did not let the lightning escape.

As he kicked from the earth, the ground following Cecilus's path swelled as he accelerated, creating a series of huge arms of stone and earth that grabbed at the boy as if to crush him.

Cecilus: "Unfortunately, touching the actors on the stage is strictly prohibited!"

Saying so wittily, Cecilus used the constructed arms that swung down like flyswatters as a foothold to break through, running up into the sky like they were a staircase; he reversed direction when he had secured altitude, and using the stone fists that were trying to strike him, he jumped toward Arakiya again.

But—

Cecilus: "I messed up—!"

He received a strike from a huge stone fist that would have turned a normal person into a plume of blood with the soles of his zori, killing the fatal impact by using his whole body as a spring, and Cecilus screamed as he flew away using only the momentum he had received.

As Cecilus surged toward Arakiya with the force of a ballistic missile, a white light was created in his path of attack, and Cecilus, with nowhere to escape in the sky, dove toward Arakiya himself—

Al: "Oooooh!"

With a howl, Al raised the Blue Dragon Sword, and he slammed the blade forth before Cecilus could jump into the light.

Instantly, after receiving a direct hit from the Blue Dragon Sword, the light flashed strongly for a moment, engulfing and obliterating the bodies of the approaching Al and Cecilus—

× × ×

Cecilus: “I messed up—!”

Receiving the giant fist of rock with the bottom of his zori, Cecilus, stealing only the momentum, shouted as he flew like a ballistic missile.

Before his shout could be uttered, Al pointed the tip of his Blue Dragon Sword into the empty air, and,

Al: “Donaa!!”

Compared to Arakiya, the difference in their magic was like the difference between the moon and snot, but the stone shards that he produced ran through the sky, crushing the jutting light of destruction that was about to be born.

For a moment, a strong flash burned Al’s eyes even through his helmet, but it was not powerful enough to end Al’s life, much less Cecilus’s speed.

Cecilus: “Al-san, let’s do this!!”

The burst of light was instantly recognizable as to whose work it was, and Cecilus, relieved that his life had been saved, instantly swallowed down his emotion and charged toward Arakiya.

He raised his right hand in the form of a karate chop, with a sharpness that surpassed even a semi-famous sword. It flashed through the air, striking Arakiya, who had grown wings of magical crystals, at an angle—

Al: “—Hk!”

At that moment, Al had a vision of, without exaggeration, a thunderclap and the sky being torn asunder.

In fact, it was not a vision, but rather the shockwave from Cecilus's karate chop that went out from behind him, tearing a clinching blow into a group of buildings that were on the verge of collapse, leading to the collapse of the entire area.

But, however, Arakiya had received that karate chop in question.

Arakiya: "…"

Glaring, her blood-red eyes moved to look at Cecilus, who was just a few feet away.

Despite receiving a powerful karate chop to the forehead, Arakiya maintained her body in mid-air without even showing the slightest tremor, and in return, she raised her magic crystal wings—

Arakiya: "…"

Immediately after those thin lips produced a faint sound, a blow fatally gouged Cecilus.

3

Moment by moment, as time flowed, elapsed, passed, "Arakiya" was disappearing.

Gradually feeling her existence, the whereabouts of her soul, being painted over, amidst the pain and anguish, Arakiya earnestly tried to recall the radiance of her Sun.

An obstreperous existence she had been. Despite having been created at the end of many sacrifices, she had been indifferent as to what would happen after she was created, and had been a dangerous object with nowhere to go.

While not knowing how to make effective or proper use of such a frightening being, that girl had calmly lined Arakiya up adjacent to the life she was leading, and had confidently told her to accompany herself.

Just why, why had she been able to try to oppose that perfected magnificence?

It should not have been possible for feelings of resistance or opposition to bud. That girl was the representation of everything Arakiya believed to be correct, and her very existence was the meaning in Arakiya's birth.

In order to not let her lose that radiance, in order to not lose what she thought was beautiful about that radiance, she chose to leave her side, thinking it to be necessary, and somehow managed to endure the thought of being separated.

The reason she had endured, endured, endured it all, was because she believed that the Sun would rise once more.

—So long as she could protect the new day's dawn, it would be fine if she herself could not bask in the rays of the rising Sun.

Recklessly crying out, whining that she could not place her hands upon it, while eyes of disappointment were directed towards her by none other than her Sun, that was when she had finally arrived at this conclusion.

She thought she had been forsaken by the Sun.

She thought the Sun would no longer shine upon herself.

However, facing off in the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, directing the Yang Sword towards a sobbing Arakiya, the Sun—Prisca, had not cut Arakiya down with that treasured sword of crimson.

Afterwards, while surrounded by the servants of the Great Disaster that had appeared, she ought to have been able to flee. But, in exchange for Arakiya's safety, she had chosen to be captured.

Those innermost feelings, that dazzling gleam, had not changed in the slightest.

If Prisca had remained unchanged, then Arakiya also desired for her oath to remain invariant.

—Prisca Benedict.

The Vollachian Empire’s symbol of a Sun that had set, yet would rise again.

When thinking of her, Arakiya could remain as “Arakiya”.

Arakiya could delay the limit for her soul growing hotter, and bursting apart.

However, even if her love and loyalty to Prisca was eternal, that limit could not be extended forever.

She was detaining a being that would engulf her, and would fully overtake her presence.

While Arakiya continued to resist that disgrace to her mind, the being that was even now borrowing Arakiya’s body was amplifying its destruction in the real world, to which she did not have room to turn her attention.

The destruction would only become more refined, the ruination would only gain more momentum, and it was only a matter of time before a full collapse.

Stagnating for a long period of however many centuries, the Stone did not pay any mind, even if a part of its power was being utilized in conflicts between humans, nor if it was being used for the enrichment of human activities—when it had entered the fragile vessel known as Arakiya, it had learned to resist against disappearing.

The Great Spirit that had been taken in by Arakiya was displaying defensive instincts that it likely would not have employed were it in its original form, and ironically enough, it was strengthening its level of threat in order to protect the vessel of Arakiya.

Arakiya: “…”

Somebody, somebody was fighting in order to stop Arakiya; she could feel it.

It seemed like, because somebody was causing Arakiya’s power to be somewhat exhausted, the brakes were being pulled on “Arakiya” fading away.

But, it was insufficient. Merely weakening her, merely keeping her in check, was insufficient.

In order to interfere with the objective of the Great Disaster, Arakiya had devoured it.

The Great Spirit, which would resign itself to the will of others regardless of what was done to it, upon being taken in by Arakiya, had learned the fear known as losing oneself.

Only one push was needed. After one more push, the Great Spirit would understand.

In order to keep “Arakiya” from disappearing, the Sun was required.

And, in order for “Arakiya” to fulfill her oath, something else was required. —Thunder, was.

Somebody, somebody was fighting in order to stop Arakiya; she could feel it.

It was insufficient. That somebody, was insufficient. Just who in particular was needed, she knew.

That was why, while Arakiya was on the verge of bursting apart, she waited in hope.

—For Thunder, for reverberations of real Thunder, she waited in hope.

4

Arakiya: “—Kill me, Cecilus.”

The moment he heard that, of all the things that could happen, his thoughts came to a standstill.

Having slammed a karate chop into his opponent with all his might, he received a stare back as if it had been utterly ineffective, and immediately after, as the beautiful girl sobbed out tears of blood, she made such an entreaty in a feeble voice.

Cecilus: “…”

Then, faster than he could digest that muttering, Cecilus received a powerful blow to the chest.

The girl’s slender arms were essentially blades due to the sharpness of the magic crystals that densely grew on them, and alas, Cecilus’s slim chest was mercilessly cut open, staining his favorite kimono with blood as he began to fall.

Pain, was present. Awareness that he had blundered, was present. Signs of being in a huge pinch, were more than present.

However, more so than the wound that bore deep into him, more so than the blood that drew a trail through the air, he was unable to avert his gaze from the pitiful eyes and face of the girl from whom he was growing distant, unable to avert his gaze from the words that had been said—.

???: “■■!!” / “■■■■.” / “■●■●■●■.” / “■■■■●●■■.” / “●●●■■■.” / “—■■.” / “●●●●●!!” / “■■■●■●●■■●●.” / “●●…■.” / “●●■■●■■●●.” / “●■●■●■●■.” / “●●■●■●●●■■●—!”

Vic.1120

Cecilus: "—My sincerest apologies but I beg you all to be quiet!!"

In that moment, Cecilus made a firm appeal to the incessantly audible voices of the audience.

???: "…"

Normally, Cecilus would never have done anything like silence the voices of the audience.

He would use the incoming voices as a rousing basis to raise his own motivation, and at all times he would just calmly allow them to go in one ear and out the other as they spoke to him.

That, he had silenced. Quiet, even with the troublesome pain, he wished for quiet.

Cecilus: "…"

While plummeting, Cecilus continued to stare at the girl amidst the silence as the audience hushed their voices.

Suffering as she shed tears of blood, the girl's sorrowful appeals took the form of destroying the world, and in the midst of groaning out cries that bore no meaning, she was finally able to interject her own desire.

The fact that it had been none other than his own name, could have undoubtedly been called the destiny of the leading actor.

However—

Cecilus: "…"Kill me", you said, now that's something I can't let slide."

More so than the pain or shock, he found it difficult to accept the way in which the words had been put together, so Cecilus clenched his teeth.

That moment, he bent his knees and rolled as he fell head-first towards the ground, and as he attempted to secure a safe landing, he evaded, evaded, evaded the chain of stone pillars that targeted his destination, leaping as his heels grazed the surface of the ground.

And then, he lifted his head.

Cecilus: “I don’t think those words were meant for me.”

Of course, he did not think that there was anybody else present who was called Cecilus.

However, he fully understood that the person to whom the crying girl had called out, to whom she had entrusted her wish, was not himself. —That was overwhelmingly aggravating.

The most important bout, the gamble on which all would be staked, the decisive scene, the time to rise to the occasion, any phrasing would do fine.

With such a moment, such a scene, such a climax having been prepared, there was no way it would have been fine for the Cecilus Segmunt who had been called out there to have been somebody other than himself.

Therefore—

Al: “—Cecilus! You, that wound…”

Cecilus: “I’ve made up my mind, Al-san.”

Having suffered a serious wound, Cecilus’s figure was shedding blood, and seeing that, Al uttered out a voice as he fastened his Blue Dragon Sword to his neck for some reason. Responding to him, Cecilus tore off a strip from his ripped kimono, and using it as a string, he tied back his disarrayed, blue hair.

Then, giving a smile, he looked up at the weeping girl—at the heroine, and declared.

Cecilus: “Bear witness, Observers of the heavens above. —Witness the choices the world shall make.”

Chapter 57:
Cecilus Segmunt

1

—Cecilus Segmunt was a Stargazer.

This opening passage has already been used, and thus it is rejected.

—Cecilus Segmunt was the leading actor of this world.

This is a fact that continues to be proven through how he enthralled others with his actions rather than it simply being told, so it is rather unsophisticated.

—Cecilus Segmunt was entirely unique within this world.

This point is not limited to just Cecilus, and thus is headache-inducing.

—Cecilus Segmunt was Cecilus Segmunt.

This is the most suitable definition, and thus it shall be used as the opening this time around.

In that case—

2

—Cecilus Segmunt was Cecilus Segmunt.

Sworn to the Tenchi Shinmei, this fact served as the absolute, unshakable foundation of Cecilus.

No matter what had happened to his body, even if there used to be an adult version of himself, as the people around him were saying, who was a handsome young man with a blossoming appearance and with limbs longer than he had now, that was already the Before Cecilus, and in this current moment, there existed no Cecilus Segmunt other than his own individual self.

Therefore, he would prove it.

Cecilus: “Bear witness, Observers of the heavens above. —Witness the choices the world shall make.”

Having finished tightly tying up his hair with a strip from his clothes, he firmly slapped his cheeks with his empty hands.

Cecilus rarely used this method of motivating himself, but it was very important in playwriting for a change in feelings to be easy for anybody to see. By interposing this sort of depiction, the people watching would be made aware of the actor’s feelings on the stage, and of the fact that the play was progressing to the next scene.

Then, as Cecilus cocked his head with a “Come to think of it”,

Cecilus: “You guys are surprisingly reasonable, everyone. I wouldn’t mind in the slightest if you resumed with your usual chatter.”

???: “●●■▼●■●!” / “▼■■—” / “■■■■■!!” / “▲■■▲●●●■▲●●▲▼■●▲■■●●●.” / “●■●●■■■!” / “—▲▼▲.” / “●●▲▼▲●●.” / “■●▲●■■●●▲■●! ●■●! ▲▼■!” / “●●■■■▼●■—”

That instant, the voices of the audience that had been forced into silence exploded, and while Cecilus nodded internally at their usual operations, he got back into his flow.

Being glued to him at all times, their presence was something that continued to fulfill Cecilus’s need for approval, and silencing them like that was the first time he had done so. It was an unthinkable action even for himself, but it was also certainly quite surprising that they would actually keep silent like that.

He was quite pleased by that fact, and it served as a good sign of things to come.

After all—

Cecilus: “—I’m about to go triumph over an opponent who underestimated me.”

Right after he stated thus, a flash of light bore into Cecilus's face.

Al: "Ceci—"

Witnessing Cecilus's face being pierced right in the center of his broad smile, Al raised his voice.

As he rushed over, he was about to exert force onto his Blue Dragon Sword that was fastened to his neck for some reason when he saw that figure of Cecilus. But, he desisted.

The image of Cecilus, pierced by the light, blurred, and he realized that what had died was an afterimage.

And then—

Cecilus: "It'd be better for you to distance yourself a bit."

Right after that reached Al's eardrums, the afterimage of Cecilus flicked away, and a shock wave expanded.

The sound that was delivered lagged behind the flash of light, causing the space to rupture, and as it expanded as if to chase the expanding destruction, covering a distance of ten-odd meters, it blew open a round crater in the street which no longer retained its original form.

Al: "Woahhhhhh?!"

As Al was caught up in the aftershock yielded by the attack, his scream trailed off, but that was not captured in the corner of Cecilus's vision as he headed forward. Only, he did not completely ignore Al's presence, either.

Acquiring information of his surroundings such as Al's conduct and physical ability until now, along with how his previous position and scream were getting further away, as a natural result on stage derived from the nature of the opponent's attack, Cecilus envisioned the figure of the unseen Al in the theater of his mind.

In all likelihood, that was exactly what had happened. That was because his current state was the best for putting on a show.

—Although actors would not be able to see every position on the stage at all times, it was absolutely crucial for them to constantly be aware of the happenings at every last corner of the stage.

That sensation expanded—no, the scope of the imaginary field of vision within his brain expanded.

Cecilus established his own position as center-stage, and directed the stage effects as well as the performance of the actors cast into the roles to his own liking; that was to say, he was running at breakneck speed towards the actualization of the most shining developments throughout the entire world.

Cecilus: "…"

As Cecilus ran on the border between life and death, the figure of the heroine floating above only grew more grotesque.

Unperturbed even when suffering the full strength of Cecilus's karate chops, the heroine had many small magic crystals growing in her slender shoulders and arms, and her appearance had turned into one that gave the fantastical illusion of being clad with sparkling wings.

What was particularly eye-catching about that figure, which could even be called beautiful, were the belts of light gently caressing the sky that floated around the heroine—those were magic crystals of thin and flat construction.

Due to some sort of principle, one of the belts of magical nature was illuminated in turn by the flaming cityscape, swimming through the sky on a silky trajectory that could sway with the wind; that instant, it was fired towards Cecilus, cutting through the world.

The same attack that had blown Al away earlier, that approached Cecilus's face once more, his eyes gleaming, and approaching, approaching—

Cecilus: "—Lick. I see, now this is a peculiar flavor. I guess it should be called gemstone flavor?"

That instant, Cecilus stuck out the tip of his tongue, and he ascertained the taste of the belt of light that was about to bore into his face right before evading it. The sensation his tongue perceived was hard yet soft, and the flavor was, as stated, close to that of a gemstone.

It was just like the flavor one would get if they were to put a gemstone that resembled hard candy into their mouth, and the following disappointment—namely, those were the belts of jewels the heroine was clad in.

Cecilus: "Come to think of it, you started off by sending light and fire flying and then swapped to pillars of stone and limbs of earth along the way. Are these jewels the next progression of that… they are truly quite elegant so I like it! How splendid oh how splendid, the feeling of climax is rising!"

Retracting the tongue that had licked the belt, Cecilus roared with laughter at his surge of morale.

In this eleventh hour, in this decisive bout, he was filled with awe that his opponent was a heavenly maiden clad in a feathered robe of gemstones. And in addition, he had gone and formulated his own understanding from the results of their earlier combat.

The karate chops that Cecilus had unleashed at lightning speed, they had the might to split an iron castle in twain, let alone a wall of stone. But, though he could not say for sure, he had heard that among gemstones, there were some that were harder than even those materials.

That was to say, the heroine whom Cecilus was opposing was—

Cecilus: "—The heavenly maiden of diamond!!"

Right after he uttered those words, belts of diamond were fired from the feathered robe of the heavenly maiden.

With a flash, the belts of light closed in as they bisected the world—they numbered around twelve, eleven if the one he had licked and evaded was excluded, but they surrounded Cecilus from eleven different directions as they assailed in an effort to kill him.

It was a domain undoubtedly tesselating with Death itself, and it was the kind of intense battle where one would have to dodge raindrops amidst a storm—

Cecilus: “If that’s what’s needed! Whether it’s drops of rain or grains of sand, let’s dodge them!”

The eleven lines separating life and death ran amok, one more made its return, making it twelve lines, and evading those, evading, evadinginginginginginginginging—.

If one hit him, it would be fatal, if it was fatal, it would fall to ruin, if it fell to ruin, curtain’s close.

The tips of his toes were whittled down as he stepped, the blood spilling from the wound on his chest evaporated, and he twisted his small build through the gaps in the latticed belts that blocked his way, rejecting the lowering of the curtain. Well how about that, have you ever seen anything like it? If this had been an adult’s body, he would not have been able to slip through the gaps, so after various deductions, it was the current Cecilus’s win.

Having won, he decided he would keep on winning, so in order to secure victory, he flashed his teeth in a smile—

Cecilus: “This is where imagination will spread its wings!”

With no room to stop moving as the fierce onslaught rained down upon him, he ignored everything as blood spurted from his deep wound.

The acceleration of his thoughts in the midst of battle was spectacular, and up until now, the fight had received great praise, applause, and loud cheers. However, at this rate, it would progressively become worse, boring, and hated by everyone; in order to devise the best directorial plan, he would need to put the functions of his body through a gear change to prioritize shining on the stage.

—First of all, he cut his ability to discern colors. The world was dyed black and white.

The coloration of the world lost its vibrance, but a monochrome world had the advantage of displaying the true nature of things which could only be displayed in a monochrome world.

—Next, he cut his ability to identify sounds. The voices of the audience and his own heartbeat, the delayed sounds of the bands of light cutting through the wind and of the stage being demolished, were all entirely abandoned.

A soundless world was dull, but there was a flavor that could only come from this refined taste of enjoying discomfort. It was in this environment where that flavor could be found, that of delight assailing one's chest upon witnessing the masterful performance within the faces and gestures of the actors.

—In addition, he also cut his senses of taste, smell, and pain. He fully wielded his body for the purpose of battle, fully concentrated his mind on the thoughts that flashed by, and raised the curtain on the theater that was the imaginary field of vision within his mind.

Cecilus: "—Well then."

Thus, with that breath interposed, the world of black and white—in the space where he continued to evade the fierce attacks from the belts of diamond, Cecilus was quite literally looking down upon himself as he earnestly struggled while putting on airs.

Expressing the acceleration of thoughts in a fantastical manner, it was a sensation akin to a single instant being prolonged. That having been said, it was not all-powerful. The leading actor might excel at preserving the scene, but there was a limit to how much they could captivate the audience if the situation did not move. It was the progression of a story that swayed hearts.

That diamond heroine had made an entreaty whilst crying, and though Cecilus had taken great offense to that, he had distorted the intentions of that appeal for his own convenience, and he had no choice but to gain the driving force necessary to propel this situation that was steadily progressing in slow-mo.

Cecilus: "…"

Thinking by normal standards, the girl was someone who was affiliated with Cecilus. There was also the possibility that she was a hardcore fan who one-sidedly knew the overly famous Cecilus, but even supposing that were the case, it would pose no problems in his thoughts from here on out, so it ought not be questioned whether or not that was true.

What was important here, was that the Cecilus Segmunt she was familiar with was not his current self, but the annoying Before Cecilus who often came up in conversation.

Others would probably be astonished were they to hear about it, and Schwartz and Tanza had actually been astonished by it, but Cecilus had absolutely no interest whatsoever in that topic of the Before Cecilus.

No matter what he was told, it was a stranger's affairs; no matter what he did, it was an accidental resemblance; no matter what remained, it was someone else's achievements.

That was Cecilus's perception, and hence the Before and After within Cecilus were clearly differentiated. That was the same perception as the heroine, who seemed to be in a floundering state after having found something to eat.

The heroine did not view the Before Cecilus and the After Cecilus as the same being.

Cecilus: "That in itself is a welcome development and since it's not progressing into something telling me to become big I'm left with no choice but to progress things in the state they currently are!"

???: "I wonder about that. In spite of being grateful that I'm being considered a separate entity I feel a clear discontent at the fact that I'm not the one who is required."

As Cecilus pondered, another Cecilus suddenly appeared beside him.

Even though he had just declared that the Before and After Ceciluses were separate, it was quite confusing for Another Cecilus to appear here, but it was true that a conversational partner being here meant that he was on the right track.

Cecilus: “Well, let’s perceive this as the result of my heightened concentration making the acceleration of thoughts easier to understand through a visual metaphor. More importantly is the topic of the current heroine.”

Cecilus: “I think that rather than the topic of the heroine, the topic is more so that of her stance when it comes to me. Of course if you look at Boss and Tanza-san it’s not difficult to imagine that the relationship between a key figure within a story and their heroine can produce a chemistry that hadn’t existed up until then.”

Cecilus: “So you’re saying that such chemistry can also be produced between me and her?”

Cecilus: “I wonder. Why did you decide to make her the heroine in the first place again?”

Cecilus: “Was just going with the flow.”

Cecilus: “With the flow, huh~?”

Cecilus: “But but you know the thing that Boss called a live feeling isn’t something to look down on. Swift decisions and spinal reflexes are essentially inspiration that relies on instinct but isn’t it the case that I’ve gotten through many scenes because I’ve followed my instincts?”

Cecilus: “True, now that you mention it. So you’re saying that since your current state is the result of having followed your instincts the best thing to do is to keep following your instincts?”

Cecilus: “That’s the kind of feeling I get. However if that’s what’s gonna happen then, y’know. —My current instincts are wondering why it’s someone other than myself, Cecilus Segmunt, who’s being relied on.”

Cecilus: “I see. But that’s a matter of her not wanting the current me, isn’t it? The one being requested is the Before Cecilus but does that mean that the After Cecilus thinks he can’t do what the Before

Cecilus would be able to do?”

Cecilus: “Ah, in that case, the solution is for the current me to surpass the previous me.”

Cecilus: “Nooo~ objections!”

The two Ceciluses nodded at each other, and having reached a mutual agreement, a dispute then occurred over which one of them would return to the Real Cecilus whom they were looking down upon.

An unproductive battle to decide which one of them was the true soul of Cecilus began, and then concluded—immediately after, time for the Real Cecilus began to move as normal, and he resumed dealing with the twelve lines of death birthed from diamond being fired from the heavenly maiden’s feathered robe.

Cecilus: “—I’ve been looking at things slowly so the speed of my sensations is fast fast fast!”

The twelve dancing light belts each acted independently with their own will, and drew irregular trajectories like living creatures differing from ordinary weapons. When he tried to knock one down with a karate chop, the part which made contact was gouged out entirely and became painful to look at. He perceived that they were even sharper than Rowan’s treasured Onibami, so this was quite the hard enemy.

Only, while he was being surrounded by the swarm of highly lethal, yet beautiful, gemstones, Cecilus thought to himself.

Cecilus: “That phrasing of “kill me”, it means that she thinks the Cecilus within her head would be able to do so.”

In other words, that was an expression of trust that if it were the Cecilus within her head, he would easily be able to break through this diamond besiegement and reach her, and then magnificently cause her heart to stop.

Naturally, since Cecilus intended to surpass the previous Cecilus, it was an essential condition that he go above and beyond that—

Cecilus: “If it’s something that the Before me has never done before, then how about this?”

For the hurdle he had imposed to surpass his own self, there was a spark in Cecilus’s thoughts.

If it were the Before Cecilus, he might have been able to entirely avoid the incoming attack, but if it were the Perfect Cecilus that resulted from the unity of the After Cecilus and the Another Cecilus, then he would create a climax that was more than merely evasion.

A belt of light was aimed for above his neck, a glimmer approached his torso, a cleaving motion aimed to shave off his feet rather than sweep him off of them; he stepped with his left and right legs in sequence to evade, then bent himself backwards, crouched down, stretched out his knees and jumped up in a complete evasion of all the shots, and as a result—

Cecilus: “This is the cat’s cradle of light!”

He kept on evading the twelve independent light belts at a hair’s breadth, and guiding them to become entangled mid-air, he magnificently knotted them into a web which became the “Tokyo Tower”.

During their journey from the Gladiator Island, Schwartz had displayed a pastime that involved playing with yarn, and since Tanza was unusually and openly impressed with that, it caused Schwartz to get seriously bashful; such was what Cecilus had recreated.

Of course, there was no meaning even if he did such a thing.

The diamond belts were made from colossal Mana, and there was no limit to their length; once a knot was formed, it could be untied by breaking down and reconstructing itself, so it would be just as if nothing had happened.

He had no such mistaken sense of triumph that he had contained the opponent’s attacks by this.

Only, he had acquired something. Conviction.

Cecilus: “I will surpass myself.”

He had not seen the actual individual. Neither could he actually draw a comparison with him.

However, the Before Cecilus that Cecilus pictured inside his head, had never created this “Tokyo Tower”. Because there was no “Tokyo Tower” inside of him.

So even if the Before Cecilus might have been able to successfully dodge, when it came to triumphantly creating a climax that would go beyond simply evading, the current Cecilus was in the lead by a step.

Cecilus: “…”

Right after that conviction, the formation of the “Tokyo Tower” of light beneath Cecilus came undone.

Returning to Mana, it reconstructed itself, as had been hypothesized—what had been slightly outside of the hypothesis, was that during the moment of construction, a colorless explosion would be yielded.

If it merely got erased then she would have kept losing as they played, and that occurrence seemed like a rebellious spirit opposed to that—

Cecilus: “You are quite the sore loser!”

In a world that had no color, in which even his own voice was ignored by his eardrums, Cecilus was impressed by the heroine as he gazed at her from afar.

After being impressed, a colorless beam of light gradually ascended from directly below him—suffering a direct hit would cancel out his evasion of the belts, and the degree of freedom he had in the air was overwhelmingly lower than what he had on the ground.

This was bad, bad bad bad bad; he got fired up.

—Expanding his imaginary field of vision once again, he carried out a gear change on the functions of his body.

Sense of color, maintain current status. Sense of hearing, maintain current status. Sense of pain and sense of touch, reactivate; hiding the pain that instantly boiled up behind a smile with teeth bared, he searched for the “key” amidst the sensation of a single second being divided up into one hundred parts.

With that, he could search for the “key” that would turn the script over to the next page.

Cecilus: “—There it is.”

Laying the nerves within his body bare, he engaged in the hyper-dimensional act of savagery that was exposing them to the wind, and as he ascended, Cecilus’s outstretched leg hit something.

It was neither a convenient wall nor building. What had been hit was, from the cityscape being destroyed as it was engulfed in the battle between Cecilus and the heroine, a fragment of the rubble that had been whirled up, a single grain of gravel.

That, he used as a foothold.

Cecilus: “Shwee.”

Using the exceedingly faint sensation that had struck the sole of his foot as a foothold, Cecilus’s body leapt through the air.

To avoid the rising achromatic destruction from catching up to him, Cecilus stepped again onto blown up splinters of wood and shattered fragments of window glass, and finally stepping onto a slightly larger cinder of ash, he escaped higher.

Why was he able to do it? He could do it simply because he could, he would make all those who saw him believe so.

Disregarding various logical and general notions, Cecilus’s action of fleeing to the sky was an outrage against common sense. Those who witnessed it might have called it a miracle, but for Cecilus, this was only the beginning, nothing more than a handful of the miracles that arrived to color the world at various moments each and every day.

And thus, if he continued to cause these miracles—

Cecilus: “Impatient reality will bare its fangs.”

Cecilus escaped the beam of light thanks to his unreasonable ascension, and before right or wrong could come as a result from that escape, the reconstructed light belts ate into the colorless beam of light from within, and began to chase Cecilus through the sky.

As the twelve belts entangled in a helix, its tip radially expanded while pointing towards Cecilus, and just as a carnivorous plant would captivate bugs with its beautiful petals, it bit at him. The flower petals closing like a bud, Cecilus would have no means to escape being swallowed by the diamond flower.

That too, surely, would only have been if it were the Cecilus who was not the current Cecilus.

Cecilus: “Bang.”

And, the sound of an atmospheric explosion a hundredfold of the sound he had voiced shook the battlefield.

Unfortunately, although Cecilus himself had shut out all sounds and thus could not hear it, he was sorry to the eardrums of the heroine and of Al who were also present in this location. But then again, the thing that made him want to complain the most, was probably the sky that Cecilus had kicked, and had caused to explode.

Cecilus, who could leave sound behind and run at lightning speed, was well aware that the atmosphere had walls. Kicking those walls was not an easy feat, but it would have been troubling to be disdained as a poor actor who had messed up the climax. Even if he was performing without a rehearsal, perfectly captivating the audience was essential for the leading actor.

As a result, together with the sound of the explosion, Cecilus’s body shot straight downwards. He took a sharp nosedive, and faster than the diamond flowerbud could finish closing, he escaped the petals and fell to the ground.

Cecilus directly pierced the ground, and undoubtedly yielded an impact akin to a lightning strike.

He had paid the price with his right leg, which was now in a horrid state from the knee down, but it was hard to determine whether a gallant figure seizing victory unscathed or the fierce figure sustaining injuries while felling the opponent would make for a better picture. It would be discourteous for the audience to go on and on about what should have been done after the fact, so he puffed out his chest with the sensation of receiving thunderous applause, and proceeded forward, forward—.

Cecilus: "—Ten steps."

By eye, he measured the distance to the heroine in the sky, and purposely stepped forward with his bloodied leg.

Aiming for Cecilus as he broke out into a run, the once closed flowerbud expanded anew, and as the diamond petals rained down on him as if they were being scattered from the spores, he left them in the dust with a single large step.

Cecilus: "—Nine steps."

The space to Cecilus's left and right distorted, and as they twisted, pillars of stone appeared.

Methods of attack other than the belts of diamond light resumed here, and clenching his teeth at the detestable arrangement, he unreasonably overworked his right leg that was placed on the ground in a reckless manner, and gaining speed, he sacrificed some stray hairs as he slipped through the gap in the pillars coming at him from left and right; the atmosphere ended up being the only thing that got pulverized.

Cecilus: "—Eight steps."

Smashing the ground, there were several quadrilateral blocks around the size of houses—masses of stone in the shapes of cubes emerged, and were fired towards him like a barrage of throwing spears.

Stretching out the knee of his left leg, he stepped on the tip of an approaching rock spear, and using that, which was so fatal that it could have also functioned as a gravestone immediately after a direct hit, as a foothold, he plunged into the barrage.

Cecilus: “—Seven steps, six steps, abridge the rest!”

Adapting to the unforeseen situation, he reset the count of steps, and slipping past the storm of stone pillars constructed to reject the After Cecilus, the distance that once seemed to be infinite now closed in on zero.

The heroine exerted her fury to allow none other than the Cecilus she accepted, the Cecilus who could reach her, to get close.

At that stubborn, obstinate heroine, Cecilus was fired up to prove that even his current self could reach her.

That was undoubtedly a world-leading destructive contest of obstinacy on a level of danger that would go down in the history of the Empire.

Taking control of that struggle of obstinacy, Cecilus would accomplish that.

It was not a matter of what he would do once he accomplished it. He simply wanted to accomplish it, and so he would.

Cecilus: “—Two steps!!”

With karate chops from both of his hands, he blew away the obstructing stone pillars, and inferring the distance until the heroine who had been concealed, from where he had jumped out, he spotted her around ten meters in the sky above him; while giving a standing ovation to his instincts within his brain, he seized the range.

Cecilus: “…”

Thereupon, through the process of breaking down and reconstructing themselves, the twelve belts of adamantine light blocked the way again.

Escaping the storm of stone pillars, Cecilus looked up, and receiving that gaze, the heroine directed her belts of light towards him once more. In that moment, while greatly capturing the range, the light belts spread out, and their tips faintly flickered; the ultrathin articles divided themselves further, from twelve to twenty-four, from twenty-four to forty-eight, from forty-eight to ninety-six, from ninety-six to one hundred and ninety-two, from one hundred and ninety-two to three hundred and eighty-four, from three hundred and eighty-four to—

Cecilus: “ ~ ~ Hk.”

As the light belts branched to an extent that became too absurd to enumerate, they beautifully glistened in the sky as they came falling down like a waterfall.

Left, right, and behind, the directions which would have been a path of escape were filled with the pillars of stone; the stage had been transformed into an inescapable barrier. The only path was straight ahead, and even just a graze from the drops of the falling light would have been a fatal, inevitable death, let alone getting struck head-on.

—Fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable, fatal, inescapable.

Cecilus: “…”

The world devoid of color and sound was permeated with the probability of Death.

Before the destiny of an unavoidable Death, he recalled all the miracles he had accumulated.

It was a miracle that his right leg was still attached at the knee; it was a miracle that he could still move with an exceedingly deep wound in his chest that almost revealed his heart; it was a miracle that he still was overflowing with motivation at the figure of the heroine as she continued to cry.

And then—

Cecilus: "…"

—It was a miracle that within Cecilus's hand as it reached towards the heavens, a prop had arrived with the best possible timing.

3

—Twelve thousand two hundred and eighty-eight times.

That was the number of times Al had spent figuring out his role on this stage.

Al: "…"

Immediately after Cecilus, with his hair in a bun, had changed his mind with a reasoning that Al did not understand, the battle accelerated further into the realm that laughed at the thought of Al's intervention.

From the get-go, it was a battlefield where he knew there was little he could do.

Within his defined territory, even after nearly two hundred attempts, he only had two opportunities to intervene. Those two times had been undoubtedly meaningful, but in a battle that had kicked up a notch, there was not a single chance for Al to intervene.

To begin with, Arakiya herself was not even able to endure the aftermath of the attacks she was aiming at Cecilus.

Unlike the attacks from before Arakiya's transformation into her deformed state with the magical crystals, where she simply shot out the mana that welled up, her current attacks were clearly more sophisticated. The destructive power wielded by Arakiya—what could have been called "belts of light" had caused the entire area to become completely destroyed, and Al, who had been roped up by them, had been obliterated more than two thousand times.

What was the point of being in a battle in which one's mere presence would be fatal?

However, he had no choice but to give up on any form of intervention and withdraw from the battlefield. For, if he did not, Cecilus would be killed by a belt of light before he could reach Arakiya.

In order to change this unchangeable outcome, Al looked for an opening to intervene—repeatedly getting himself roped up there. After many hundreds, thousands of times, he realized this.

There were problems with Al's positioning, and there were times when he was obliterated by one of the belts as if he were merely a bug to be swatted away. Still, if he managed to see Cecilus make it over before Arakiya, he witnessed Cecilus's incomprehensible movements as he was subjected to an inevitable attack.

—Just before the belts of light that wrapped around Arakiya branched out into a hopeless number and poured down, Cecilus reached out toward the heavens.

???: "…"

At first, Al thought that Cecilus was about to unleash his full strength with his karate chop. However, Cecilus's right hand showed no sign of moving, even at the moment the light rained down.

It was not until hundreds of times later that he realized that he was not performing a karate chop, but was rather extending his five fingers.

It was not a karate chop or a fist, but an open palm facing the heavens. He had no idea what it meant. He did consider the surprise of him suddenly using magic, but in any case, Cecilus, with his magic a dud, would end up being swallowed by the shimmering light, and Al would likewise be roped up and obliterated.

???: "…"

After confirming this, attempts continued to be made in vain, with no room for intervention.

In the ultra-fast-paced battles, the results were as quick as the blink of an eye, and even before a situation was ascertained, the possibilities were examined, and the ideas were given shape, the amount of reversible defeats piling up at an accelerated rate.

Even if he was not impatient with that fact, he was frustrated by the fact that he could not reach the destination.

A tremendous sense of regret ate away at him, making him wonder if he had made a mistake by hesitating to withdraw when he should have, leading him into a dead-end route, only for him to be turned to cinders along with those feelings.

Despite Al's desperate attempts, Cecilus did not even look at him, and Arakiya did not give him a second thought. It was really frustrating.

It made him feel that this was their own private struggle and that they had only been repeatedly telling him so endlessly, thousands of times, and by violent and impulsive means.

—What if that was not the case?

???: "…"

It was a possibility that had unexpectedly slipped into his mind, and Al quickly shook his head to deny it.

Several times, he had sensed an idea beginning to sprout and had witnessed the signs of its development, but in each case, there were no further results, and each time, it disappeared, swallowed by the light of doom.

However, this time, uncharacteristically, that idea was brought past the end into the next restart.

What if that was not the case? —What if there was room for intervention?

???: "…"

Thoroughly, Al decided to cling to the sprouting possibilities.

Cecilus would avoid all of Arakiya's attacks and arrive in front of her. The shimmering belts of light that clothed her would spread out into countless branches and pour down, ending with light engulfing the world.

Over and over again, he kept trying to get a complete picture of what was going on up until this final act.

During this, he had noticed Cecilus was underestimating the belts of light, taking him aback.

During this, he had noticed Cecilus kicking off empty space and flying through it, taking him aback.

During this, he had noticed that he was actually kicking off pebbles and scraps of ash, not empty space, taking him even more aback.

And so, he proceeded in furthering his understanding, furthering it, furthering it, before then raising his head.

Cecilus was perhaps, or maybe, was, more or less—

—Reaching towards the heavens as part of constructing his spotlight.

???: "…"

Al thought to himself in shock, "What else could be expected of me?" as he was obliterated.

The hurdles of those demands were so high that thoughts like "There's no way" and "Maybe, it could…" began to dance through his mind. But then, the realization hit him. He had been dragged into it.

Right smack-dab in the middle of the stage, not just on top of it, vacillating between getting off of it or not—.

???: "…"

It became a long struggle from there. No one would understand. No one needed to.

He must survive up to that moment, flounder over to that moment, reach that moment and intervene in that moment.

It would require a lot of struggling to achieve this. But this was fine. —Not as many as there were stars.

Because of that—

Al: "—Go for it, star actor."

On the twelve thousand two hundred and eighty-eighth time—the hilt of the Blue Dragon Sword was thrown into Cecilus's hand, which he held up to the sky, gripping it ever so tightly.

4

—In the past, there was a building known as the "loot house".

In the slums of the Royal Capital of Lugunica, the symbol of the Kingdom's long-standing debt, was a place shrouded in darkness where stolen goods were openly traded.

Amidst battles over the crucial item that could determine the fate of the Kingdom, the loot house became the stage for confrontations, ultimately meeting its demise in the clash involving the current Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, who intervened to defeat the Bowel Hunter, Elsa Granhiert, resulting in its collapse.

At that moment, the sword Reinhard wielded was a nameless, mass-produced blade.

It did not possess any extraordinary sharpness; it was merely a sword borrowed by Reinhard that happened to be in the loot house and used for the battle.

However, with that single swing in the hands of the Sword Saint Reinhard, it gained the opportunity to unleash a sword strike that even the most famous and treasured swords would never experience.

Of course, no ordinary sword could withstand that single slash, and it instantly crumbled in Reinhard's hands, ending its life as a tangible object there.

However, was the broken sword truly unfortunate?

It was impossible for one to fathom the feelings of a tool, but between a sword gathering dust in a corner of the loot house, rusting away for decades before being discarded, or fulfilling its purpose as a tool, which could be said to have better fulfilled its true purpose?

One could say that the sword fulfilled in a single swing what it might have taken a thousand or even ten thousand swings in the hands of an ordinary wielder to achieve.

The story has begun to veer off its main point, so we shall get it back on track.

Simply put, the reason for the collapse of the loot house was that an ordinary, blunt blade had found a wielder who could fulfill its true purpose as a sword, and thus had it been swung.

If that was the case, then.

If the Sword Saint could achieve that, there was no reason why an equally skilled wielder could not do the same.

Cecilus: “—You did a great job, Al-san.”

Confirming the sensation in the outstretched hand with conviction, Cecilus praised the man who had performed a miracle.

And thus did he acknowledge, and thus did he assert. Cecilus could not even begin to imagine the difficulties Al faced in handing over the Blue Dragon Sword to him right now.

Human imagination was infinite, but even the rash idea of reaching infinity was presumptuous.

It was like the peak of a mountain that was known to exist but could not be reached—a fantastical dream akin to the Heavenly Sword that Cecilus continued to pursue.

However, Al had made it in time.

Through means unimaginable even to Cecilus, Al had overcome the mountain and delivered the miracle Cecilus desired into his hands.

Bravo, bravo, nothing else but the sound of bravo, and thunderous ovation to the sounds of blooming incredible.

???: "…"

The rain of light became unavoidable Death and poured down upon Cecilus.

When one became an actor of Cecilus's caliber, one might understand that the audience often desired a beautiful, star-studded ending rather than a mundane demise, and under certain circumstances, one might even consider it fitting, but now was not a good time. This was not the curtain call he had envisioned.

Therefore—

Cecilus: "That ending needs a rewrite."

Cecilus swung the slightly oversized Blue Dragon Sword with the skill of a seasoned swordsman, as if he had swung it thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of millions of times before.

Even though it would have been the first time he wielded the weapon, within Cecilus's ever so expansive imagination and theater of his mind, there existed a record of swinging this Blue Dragon Sword throughout the mornings, afternoons, and nights, puking up blood and sweating profusely. However, depicting such scenes would be NG for Cecilus, so he simply plucked the fruits of his efforts.

—In an instant, a flash of lightning that transcended the limits of the Blue Dragon Sword, slashed away the pouring rain of light into nihil.

It was not just the countless strands of light that were obliterated in that flash. The dense forest of stone pillars that cover Cecilus's left, right, and rear, attempting to seal off any escape routes, was blown to smithereens.

At this moment, Cecilus Segmunt’s sword strike had surpassed the Spirit Eater Arakiya—No, it had surpassed the Stone, Muspel, which was said to be the very land of the Vollachian Empire.

???: “…”

Then, beyond the rain of light, Cecilus and Arakiya’s gazes met—

Cecilus: “—Hk.”

Cecilus twisted his neck to evade the thirteenth strand of light released. It grazed his right cheek, with the lower half of his right ear being obliterated; blood evaporated from his frayed neck and shoulder, but he successfully avoided the attack.

He praised the fact she had yet managed to conceal an ace of hers behind the rain of light, and more so concealed it well,

Cecilus: “One step—”

Resuming the count of steps remaining to cover the distance, he kicked the ground with his left foot and ascended into the air.

From there, Cecilus’s lightning-fast sprint closed in on Arakiya in the sky—

???: “…”

In an instant, the strands of light he had evaded gave rise to a colorless explosion, and Cecilus’s head was struck with the force of the blast.

5

Cecilus: “—Oya?”

Suddenly, finding himself standing stock-still in an unfamiliar room thrust into twilight, Cecilus tilted his head.

He looked around his surroundings, but it was a place he had no recollection of ever seeing. Cecilus had a reputation of being forgetful, but surprisingly, he would never forget places and things once he had seen them.

No matter the situation or prop, there might eventually be an opportunity to put it to use. The things known as stage effects were also occasionally born from unforeseen ideas.

Cecilus: “So it’s a place that even I’m unaware of. Or rather to begin with the fact that I’m present in this kind of place is really putting my sense of discomfort to work.”

Even though he had no memory of this location, he was not so careless as to forget what he had been doing just before.

In the Imperial Capital filled with undead, begged by a sobbing heroine to kill her, Cecilus took offense to that and had resolved himself to surpass his past self, and ought to have pulverized Al’s Blue Dragon Sword.

Cecilus: “It sure seems like I’m escaping from reality because things ended there and I’m worrying over having destroyed Al-san’s Blue Dragon Sword. As expected, that’s… woah woah woah.”

If he broke someone else’s possession, even Cecilus would feel pain in his chest. But, all things had a lifespan and a destiny. If the chance came around, there were things that ought not to be fretted about when destroyed. Al’s Blue Dragon Sword fit into that category. After everything was settled, it would be fine if he relied on Schwartz to reimburse Al.

When such a conclusion was about to be made, a change in the room had been yielded. —As light from the setting sun shone through the window, the door within the unfamiliar room was opened.

And then—

???: “Well, it’s quite the nice thing isn’t it, to be summoned even when I have no memory of being called for. Whenever I’m called it’s always because I’m being scolded for something, but I’m not worried about that today!”

Cecilus: “—Hahaa, I see.”

While giving a cackling laugh, the one who entered the room with light steps was a blue-haired, slender young man—clad in a pink kimono, the person wearing zori was someone Cecilus had never seen before, but he could guess who it was.

With long limbs, and a refined appearance that still contained a soft impression, there were many common features to his own which he checked in the mirror everyday, so there was no longer even the slightest room for doubt.

Cecilus: “It’s the adult me. Which would mean these are the memories of the Before me?”

Ascertaining the existence of his past self—of “Cecilus”, Cecilus surmised the situation.

Since the topic of the Blue Lightning had spread to so many people, it was unreasonable to suspect that he had not existed, but actually seeing the big version of himself like this was quite moving.

Since he was aspiring to surpass himself, this “Cecilus” should have been someone like a rival to him, but—

Cecilus: “Hm hm, isn’t this great! The way I grew up was quite ideal indeed! The flowery beauty is fully intact while sex appeal has risen and the handsomeness has gone through the roof!”

Witnessing the figure of “Cecilus” before him, he was utterly enchanted by how big of a deal it was.

Since his frame of mind was likely the same as that of the current Cecilus, maintaining the spirit that he was the leading actor of this world, it was only natural that he had kept his mind and body in tip-top condition.

That such a way of thinking had been diligently put into practice, was in itself a very welcome sentiment.

Cecilus: “Let’s see. Although it may be nice to be presented with a grown version of myself like this I can’t get a read on the next development. Perhaps in order to actualize the idea of me surpassing myself I’ve been plunged into a sword battle against the former me? But, considering that it seems like this me can’t be seen by that me…”

Containing his excitement, Cecilus shifted doubt upon the current situation once again.

Even when a hand was waved right in front of his eyes, “Cecilus” did not notice the presence of Cecilus here. If he could not interfere with this scene, then just what was the meaning to be had here?

The answer to that would be clearly exhibited with the progression of the situation.

???: “—Whether it is scolding or not, I think depends on whether you have self-awareness in the given case, but is it not premature to be relieved simply because you haven’t a cluuue?”

Subsequently, the voice heard was from the person who had entered the room a bit after “Cecilus”.

That person closed the door with a hand behind their back, and glancing towards “Cecilus”, who had entered before him, he narrowed his long-slitted eyes.

What a terribly odd appearance that person had.

With long, white hair framing a white face, a form that was white throughout its entirety, even to its clothing and equipped tactical fan, the figure that was slimmer and taller than even “Cecilus” looked like a shady goblin that would show up in a picture book.

From that appearance, Cecilus received an impact that was truly to his liking.

“Cecilus”: “Unh. By saying that do you mean that I just didn’t realize and it actually is a scolding after all? In that case I really messed up by entering the room first. I’ll burst through the window and rush up the wall to escape, Chisha.”

Chisha: “That would stir up the soldiers of the palace so I would prefer if you refrained from such eccentricities. For the time being, it truly is not a scolding today. You do not have to be so on guard.”

“Cecilus”: “Please now, don’t frighten me like that. Jeez, Chisha really is bad with people. No matter how many years pass, that aspect sure doesn’t change.”

Chisha: “—. Indeed, though it is unusual, I am in agreemeeent.”

That white personage was called Chisha in an easygoing manner by “Cecilus”.

In that case, the man’s name was probably Chisha, and “Cecilus” was quite close with him. Currently, Cecilus had no acquaintance with Chisha, but he could tell from their interaction that they had known each other for a period of years. He also understood that it was no small amount of years from “Cecilus’s” remarks.

Cecilus: “Hm.”

The age of “Cecilus” seemed to be around twenty, with a margin for error of around one or two years. That meant there was a gap of around ten years with Cecilus’s current state, so he surmised that his relationship with Chisha was during that time.

Considering how Cecilus’s name of the Blue Lightning had spread, ten years felt like quite a reasonable timeline. —In other words, there was a high possibility that the scene of the past that Cecilus was watching was within one or two years of the present.

Grasping that, Cecilus progressed his thoughts further, and cocked his head at the same time.

It was natural to get caught up on this, but the reason why this past could be seen, and why he was seeing this past—regardless of the latter, he could generally comprehend the former.

Cecilus: “Supposing it’s true that I was shrunk then I think the memories from before I became small were just sealed away and didn’t actually disappear or anything.”

Since he had no memory of the time he was shrunk, he did not really understand the mechanism behind the shrinking, but it should not have been able to entirely erase ten of the years Cecilus had lived. Even so, the reason he could not remember the memories from those ten years, was none other than because his body and mind mutually influenced each other.

Just as how Cecilus's body would be able to implement whatever he believed possible, his mind would have no choice but to regress in tandem if his body had certifiably shrunk. —It was probably something like that.

Therefore, Cecilus thought that his memories themselves had merely been dormant, while actually having been inside of himself this whole time. Since he thought so, there was no issue with the fact in itself that they could be seen.

The issue was, as before, the reason why he was seeing them.

Cecilus: "…This seems like the memory of the time I got shrunk."

Indeed, the reason why Cecilus had muttered that with a bitter look on his face, was because he had hit upon an unpleasant possibility.

Cecilus had never experienced it for himself, but when people were on the verge of death, it seemed like they would seek a method to escape the approaching doom before them, and would trace back through the memories of their life. It was a function of searching for an idea to refuse Death amidst the life they had accumulated up until then.

Thus, the reason for Cecilus's bitter-faced answer, was undoubtedly the suspicion that this scene before his eyes might have been a spark from Cecilus's lifetime in order to save his life.

In other words, if this was as Cecilus suspected, and was the memory from the time he had been shrunk, then could it have been a scene where the opposite was also true?

Cecilus: "Isn't this something like seeing the place where I was shrunk, and then gaining a hint for the method of returning to my original form, and breaking the deadlock of the situation? Isn't that like really really lame?"

Despite declaring that he would surpass himself, having stepped towards the heroine with the resolve to die as she spilled tears, and Al having provided the greatest assist that went above and beyond his minor-role, he would fail to carry out his original intention.

As such an answer for his own failure lay before his eyes, Cecilus had unpleasant feelings in the depths of his heart.

Cecilus: "Don't like it, I don't like it, I don't like it one bit!"

Throwing himself down onto the floor of the room, he rambunctiously threw a tantrum and flailed his limbs around. But, Cecilus's reluctance did not put a stop to the conversation between "Cecilus" and Chisha.

Leaving Cecilus behind as he sprawled himself out on the floor, the two people continued with their discussion.

"Cecilus": "You're making a somewhat complex expression, Chisha."

Chisha: "—. My goodness, even though you usually do not pay much mind to the countenances of others, you are only ever sharp at times like these; that is the reason I find you to be troublesooome."

"Cecilus": "Hahaha, you sure are saying some funny things. I do regularly look at the faces of people in my surroundings. It's just that most of the time I just look at them and then ignore it without touching on the subject!"

Chisha: "Then, for what reason have you touched upon it today?"

"Cecilus": "Why wouldn't I be worried if my friend is tired? I think it's a rather normal thing."

Chisha: "It is ridiculous to hear a word such as "normal" coming from your mouth."

With a face on which not even a hint of a smile emerged, Chisha replied so, to which “Cecilus” pouted his lips.

At that state, Cecilus, unable to interfere with the memory, gave up on his whining and looked up while sitting cross-legged. A friend, the fact that he said that word and the fact that he had one, were the height of surprise.

Even if Schwartz and Tanza, Gustav and the Pleiades Battalion were his allies, they were not his friends or family. To think that he would have a friend.

However, leaving aside Cecilus’s deep emotions, Chisha suddenly gave a distant look, and while calling “Cecilus’s” name,

Chisha: “Supposing the views of myself and His Excellency ran in opposition to each other, just how do you think events would play ouuut?”

“Cecilus”: “If His Excellency and Chisha did? If you can talk it out then you should talk it out but if there’s no use in talking it out then wouldn’t the only option be to have a showdown?”

Chisha: “When the time for that showdown comes, how would you proceed?”

“Cecilus”: “Naturally I’d be His Excellency’s ally. That goes without saying, doesn’t it?”

Without reserve, without fervor, “Cecilus” plainly answered with a tone of voice unaltered. Then, hopping up and sitting his bum down on the desk in the inner part of the room, he suspended his legs and looked at Chisha.

Resting his chin in his hands, “Cecilus” closed one of his blue eyes, and,

“Cecilus”: “A roundabout and enigmatic hypothetical story… by some chance, is Chisha perhaps plotting something?”

Chisha: “I suppose that is sooo… It is absolutely necessary to prepare for a large, large battle.”

Cecilus: "—A large battle." / "Cecilus": "—A large battle."

Reacting to Chisha's statement, both the past and the present Cecilus overlapped in their remarks.

It was a matter that "Cecilus" seemed to not have a clue about, and Cecilus did not know Chisha well enough to declare that it was in reference to the current happenings. At those words, Chisha joined his hands together behind his back and, walking up to the window,

Chisha: "It is a battle we must win no matter the cost. However, in regards to that great battle, His Excellency and I are of differing opinions. Even from the establishment of victory conditions, my view does not align with His Excellency's. I have found no room for us to come to a common ground."

"Cecilus": "It's quite rare for Chisha to act independently from His Excellency. Or rather than rare, wouldn't this be the first time?"

Chisha: "I do not think that is sooo. Often, I will convey my own opinions to His Excellency…"

"Cecilus": "That's right. So this is the first time Chisha is giving up on trying to persuade His Excellency."

Chisha: "…"

Gazing at the scenery outside the window, Chisha kept silent, and behind him, "Cecilus" turned his head around. The fact that Chisha did not reply, likely meant that "Cecilus's" point had hit the mark.

They had known each other a long time, but that was entirely why Vincent always made unreasonable requests of Chisha. His fame as the wisest Emperor since the genesis of the Empire had been built atop Chisha's blood, sweat, and tears.

Cecilus: "…Hmm."

Upon thinking thus, Cecilus got the feeling that he really knew Chisha well. In regards to His Excellency, who came up quite frequently in conversation, too, a vague face came to mind. For some reason, it was a face with wrinkles on its brow. The face was a haze, but the wrinkles on the brow were distinctive, and seemed to be the essence of the face.

He was not in a mental state where he could really welcome that sensation, however, Cecilus had a surge of interest in the conversation between “Cecilus” and Chisha, and he wished to see its developments through.

Chisha was acting independently from His Excellency—from Vincent. And from there.

Chisha: “I have no intention of clashing opinions with His Excellency on this matter. It is an absolute condition that His Excellency harbors not even a smidgen of doubt. And for that purpose…”

“Cecilus”: “—I guess I’m in the way?”

Quietly, yet slightly cheerfully, “Cecilus” posed a question to Chisha’s back. Receiving it, Chisha turned around without uttering a word, and narrowed his eyes while his white body was dyed orange by the setting sun.

Yet again he did not deny. The lack of words, the silence, was proof of affirmation.

“Cecilus”: “If His Excellency and Chisha oppose each other with opinions divided then I’ll follow His Excellency no matter what. That is a major prerequisite for myself and my unyielding oath of the sword.”

Chisha: “Indeed, I accept that your answer is so. At the same time, if you stand on His Excellency’s side, then my prospects for victory are essentially nonexistent. Even were I to have Arakiya or General First-Class Olbart… no, even were I to have all of the Nine Divine Generals other than you on my side, it would likely be no match for you.”

“Cecilus”: “Ho-ho-ho-ho, now that is quite the captivating story. I’ve actually been thinking this since long ago. Even though the Nine Divine Generals are the Empire’s strongest army corps, isn’t nine too many people?”

Cecilus: “I think so too.”

Even if they were to cut four or five members, something like the Five Great Summits or the Four Heavenly Kings would not be too shabby.

Cecilus had such a perception, and “Cecilus” was in the process of gradually heightening his fighting spirit. Basking directly in the gazes of the two Ceciluses, Chisha’s expression did not crumble.

Whenever Chisha made a face like this, caution was required, as he would have some sort of unthinkable plan.

Chisha: “Unfortunately, it is not as though I have actually persuaded the Nine Divine Generals.”

“Cecilus”: “Oh is that so? Well but that’s how it is isn’t it? There’s no way Goz-san and Moguro would betray His Excellency. But in that case what are you gonna do?”

Chisha: “…”

“Cecilus”: “Chisha’s not gonna give up there. That’s the kind of face you’re making, you know?”

A nostalgic emotion simmered up within him, but it was pushed back for later by “Cecilus’s” reaction. As “Cecilus” leaned his bum against the desk, he kept watch over Chisha’s every move.

No matter how Chisha tried to move, he could take complete control. But, that was something Chisha was well aware of.

Well now, just what would he try to do? Just how would he get the better of this “Cecilus Segmunt”, and shrink him into the current form of a small child?

Chisha: “Cecilus, I shall remove you from the board. As His Excellency and I engage in a bout of reading the other’s every move, no stage shall be prepared for you to make your appearance. There is another role that shall be arranged for you.”

“Cecilus”: “Even if you say that to me I can’t just give an answer in good spirits like “Ah yes that is indeed so”. On the other hand, since you can’t remove me through force, are you going to use the power of words? As I’m sure Chisha is aware, I’m the General with the least ability to listen in the Empire.”

Saying that, he got off of the desk and landed on the ground, and spinning around like he was dancing, “Cecilus” faced Chisha head-on. Chisha’s figure was dazzling as he stood amidst the setting sun, and “Cecilus” tilted his body forward, looking up at him with upturned eyes.

It was a relationship spanning a long time, one in which they mutually had full knowledge of the other’s good and bad aspects, and looking into the expression of such a friend, “Cecilus” smiled.

Smiling, he provoked Chisha to bring out the likes of the plan that he had prepared up his sleeve.

“Cecilus”: “Let’s see, what kind of words, views, or reasoning will you use to convince me? This will be quite the tough challenge, even for the wise man who is second only to His Excellency, Chisha Gold.”

At that cheap provocation from “Cecilus”, Chisha closed his eyes, and let a beat pass.

Then, opening those eyes, and with “Cecilus” reflected in them,

Chisha: “Cecilus. —Please, I entrust His Excellency to you.”

—.

—.

—.

—Neither was it carelessness, nor was it persuasion; the fact that it was an entreaty, filled him with awe.

“Cecilus”: “—. This isn’t fair.”

Cecilus: “—PERFECT!!”

6

The impression of his red blood spraying out, strongly overlapped with that of the red sunset within his memories.

With the evening glow upon his back, Chisha Gold had defeated Cecilus inside his office. Neither had he been caught in a moment of vulnerability, nor had he earnestly been persuaded by the benefits; he had been entrusted.

That was the reason why “Cecilus Segmunt” had become Cecilus Segmunt.

Cecilus: “—Hk.”

As a scorching heat assailed his senses, Cecilus’s consciousness returned to reality.

The pain to his head and half of his body, was the result of being caught in the explosion of the light belt he ought to have averted; the time in which his consciousness had disappeared into the twilight of that day had been less than a half of a half of a half of a second.

But, that stagnation was more than enough for the heroine—for Arakiya, who was blocking the way.

Arakiya: “…”

The Blue Dragon Sword that had crumbled within his hand, the full might of its blow ought to have erased the belts of light, but having been reconstructed through Arakiya’s power, five, six of them were restored.

Even she would not have been able to instantly regain the power lost from that attack. The magic crystal wings that had been upon her back had fissured, and amidst the sparkling fragments as they scattered about, Arakiya was present.

In the depths of that slender body, was it the Stone, Muspel, whom she had devoured?

To turn her fangs against the very land of the Vollachian Empire, he was surprised by her indiscriminate nature. Something like that, not even Cecilus would think after having seen those tears.

Having heard her utterance, he could not ridicule her with his usual tone.

Cecilus: “But, since it was made with that kind of face, I’m going to have to decline your request.”

If she had wanted to inform Cecilus of her request no matter what, she should have at least given her best smile. If she had made such a choice with no regrets and no falsehoods, and had told him with a smile on her face, then Cecilus would also have received it in earnest.

Just like that helpless friend, who, with a smile, had ordered Cecilus to shrink.

Cecilus: “Ahh, so that’s what it was?”

Even now, Cecilus’s limbs were short, and his resuscitated memories were still only fragments of what had been lying dormant.

He did not know how to return his shrunken body to its original form. The memory had ended before he could recall what concrete method Chisha had employed, and with that, the objective of the remembrance had been fulfilled.

There was a phenomenon where people faced with death would search through their memories for a way to break the deadlock. What had just happened was an unmistakable instance of that. Only, the answer of how to break through the deadlock was different to what he had anticipated.

At the end of that recollection, Cecilus had thought that he would learn the method of how to return his body to that of an adult. But, it had not been so. That it had not been so, delighted him.

People faced with death would search through their memories for a way to break the deadlock.

He had seen that face of Chisha's, and heard his request. —For Cecilus Segmunt, that was more than enough of a basis to believe that he could defy death.

Cecilus: "In the first place, there's no way I'd lose."

He had confidence and pride in plenty, however, that was not to say that his strength was his sole basis for this.

By Cecilus's own philosophy, there was an answer as to why he would not lose against Arakiya here.

The reason was because in this place—

Cecilus: "—Boss isn't present. If I happened to die here he would break our promise without batting an eyelid, and come rushing over."

Spilling that out, Cecilus gave a bitter smile with his blood-stained good looks.

That was the kind of boy Natsuki Schwartz was. Having departed from the Gladiator Island, in the midst of the eastward expedition of the Pleiades Battalion, Cecilus and Schwartz had exchanged a promise under the moon.

That was, Schwartz would not use the power of his miraculous "true sight" to save Cecilus.

It was a promise formed with mutual respect for each other, but Cecilus knew. If push came to shove, Schwartz would break his promise without batting an eye. Cecilus himself would do so too. He was the same type as Schwartz.

That was why, he knew.

If he had seen Cecilus die with his "true sight", Schwartz would have come rushing here no matter what.

That had not happened. To put it in other words, that was faith from Schwartz.

And, that same thing was something that Cecilus directed towards Schwartz.

Cecilus: “…”

Towards Cecilus, who had gained an illogical conviction, six belts of light furiously flickered in approach.

While already airborne, yielding a subsequent movement would be difficult, and thus Cecilus would not be able to dodge. But, even if he did not dodge, there was something he could do. That, was the trump card he had brought back from the momentary daydream.

—In Cecilus’s hand, having lost the Blue Dragon Sword, the hilt of another blade was gripped.

Cecilus: “—Masayume.”

Its inscription called out, the pattern on the blade of the Enchanted Sword shook like a rippling wave. It was a blade belonging to Cecilus Segmunt which possessed incredible power, the Dream Sword Masayume.

Much to the lament of Rowan, who was unaware of its whereabouts, it was a supernatural sword permitted to cut things beyond the logic of this world, in a similar manner to the Fiend Sword Murasame.

It had been lost together with Cecilus’s memories, so no wonder everybody had racked their brains over its whereabouts.

The Yang Sword Vollachia used the sky as its sheath. Thus, the Dream Sword Masayume used dreams as its sheath. —Ergo, Cecilus had borrowed Masayume from the waist of “Cecilus” within the daydream.

As Masayume pulsated within his hand, it recognized the short Cecilus as its owner. Things would not have gone this easily with Murasame. He was thankful for this fortuitous encounter here.

With his gratitude received, the blade flashed—the six approaching belts of light were slain, and conquered.

Cecilus: “I’m aiming for—”

Arakiya—the center of her chest, at the large mass of power dwelling therein.

He would exorcize it. Never had he done so before. But, believing that he could, he would bring it to fruition. Such power existed within Cecilus. Masayume was reliable. Al was also present as an eye-witness. He would not fail, thus he fired himself up.

What remained—

Cecilus: “Dreams are meant to be seen when you’re awake, they’re meant to enchant you, Anya.”

As he spoke so, Cecilus looked into Arakiya’s eyes during his stretched-out super speed. With tears of blood flowing from her left eye bereft of light, the emotions on the beautiful girl’s face were harder to read than usual.

Within her deeply emotional right eye, which he had grown accustomed to seeing, a visible blue flame had emerged—.

Cecilus: “—The person whom you treasure dearly, is someone who treasures you dearly too.”

Tenderly spinning those words, a flash unleashed by Thunder put an end to her nightmare.

In a manner as if to prove that dreams were something that the leading actor, standing atop the stage, would enchant the audience with.

—That was the answer given by Cecilus Segmunt, in response to the heroine’s entreaty.

Vic.1120

Chapter 58: Proof of Existence

1

—Going behind a guard who was keeping watch, he struck the pressure points that ran along the central meridian of their body.

Guard: “…”

That instant, the posture of the opponent was broken, and they collapsed without raising their voice. The reason why he had propped up the body as it collapsed was not out of consideration, but rather because it would have caused problems if the sound of armor striking the ground had rung out.

???: “Good grief, it’s darn tirin’ for an old fella like me ta carry a large man with a single hand. —Even tho’ their insides are hollow, they got some firm weight ta ‘em which makes it annoyin’.”

Saying that, the white-haired, white-eyebrowed old man—Olbart carried the collapsed enemy with his lone left arm, lightly striking the defensive wall beside him with the tips of his toes. As he did so, he caused the surface of the wall to ripple as if it were water, and he forcefully stuffed the enemy’s body into it; it was swallowed, and the wall’s surface filled back in.

Fortunately, it seemed like the undead were able to go without breathing, so he could bury them in the walls to settle things without having to kill.

As their hearts did not beat, neither did blood flow. Were they to be killed, it would have been fine to just sweep the fragments away with a broom, so it was fortunate that dealing with the cleanup was easy.

Olbart: “But, everythin’ other than that aspect ain’t good in the slightest. When ya kill ‘em, there’re some that got the damn nerve ta get up right after they die, so recklessly killin’ ‘em’ll just make it more troublesome.”

Among the special traits of the opposing undead, the thing Olbart viewed as the most dangerous was the revival of defeated enemies.

When faced with enemies that would continue to be resurrected, no matter how many times they were defeated, even the Imperial Soldiers, overflowing with fighting spirit, would have their hearts broken—that was not Olbart’s reason, but rather, the issue was that the undead that were killed and resurrected would inherit the memories from before they were killed.

Through such means, the opponent could use replaceable lives in exchange for instantaneous sharing of all sorts of information.

Olbart, the head honcho of the shinobi, was more than aware of how important it was to have accurate and recent information within warfare. It was to the extent that the enemies Olbart had killed the most within his lifetime, were between scouts and messengers.

Originally, killing would have been done to prevent the transmission of information, so the fact that there was danger of information being transmitted even if they were killed was nothing short of absurd.

Olbart: “Well, shinobi techniques’ve also got somethin’ that makes ya self-destruct upon death, sendin’ information through the color of the eruptin’ smoke, so we’re in the same boat, the same boat I tell ya.”

Even though angering others was the principal domain of the shinobi, with this, they would surely go out of business.

Through the investigation that was carried out amidst the combat to push back the enemy forces during the evacuation from the Imperial Capital, it was discovered that the undead possessed a vital point known as a “corebug”, and that seemed to be the source of their resurrection. There were also some undead that could regenerate even if their heads were sent flying, but that was because their corebug had not been destroyed.

In the end, the source of the corebugs' power was the Great Spirit known as the Stone, so even if the undead were fully killed down to their corebugs, it would cause Muspel to lose strength, making it unable to support the vast lands of the Empire.

Therefore, Olbart was thoroughly putting in effort to enforce the policy of "not killing" the undead.

By precisely striking the weak spots of the human body that were known as pressure points, the body could be robbed of its freedom, becoming powerless like the undead that had been buried in the wall earlier. In that manner, the undead stuffed into the wall by Olbart numbered about fifty—even though the construction and interior of their bodies were as papier mâché, he was relieved that their pressure points still functioned as weak spots.

But then again, considering the enormous numbers of undead, this was naught more than a meager resistance.

Olbart: "For the Imperial people who specialize in the subject of killin' or bein' killed, ain't it awfully harsh ta tell 'em not ta die and not ta kill?"

That was an opinion that the allied troops from the Kingdom and the City-States, who were engaged in a cooperative relationship in order to save the Empire, would frown upon were they to hear it, but it was an opinion that relatively many of the Imperial peoples would likely agree with.

As a result, with the enemy spearheading the Great Disaster being the worst possible matchup for the Vollachian Empire, they were engaged in a defensive battle with the absolute condition of not killing. —No, it was not "as a result".

Olbart: "It's a bad habit of old folk ta always imagine the worst. An opponent who's got the nerve ta use all the blood that's soaked into the soil of the Empire 'til now… they're completely targetin' our weakness."

A battlefield where soldiers of yore were revived one after another, it was an environment that had come into being due to the fact that

Vollachia was a place where conflict never petered out.

Considering that even under the same conditions, it likely would not have amounted to such a disaster in any of the other countries, so in order to conquer Vollachia, the enemy had taken the most suitable measures.

That was why, this side also had to understand that this was a board that must not be misread.

Olbart: "…"

Narrowing his eyes concealed by his white eyebrows, Olbart held his breath in the Crystal Palace, which he was in the midst of independently infiltrating.

Invisibility that eliminated one's presence as much as possible, it was something that lived up to the name of the shinobi's head honcho—including the fact that he had been picking off the guards without being noticed, there was no way his presence would be caught.

If his presence were to be detected, thereby including him as a target of the Curse of Thorns, Olbart would be made powerless. He was weak to pain. The mere thought of thorns stabbing into his heart made him want to toss in his sleep.

In order to avoid that, Olbart had been taking the utmost care in his movements.

—Invading the Imperial Capital with a select few, they would quickly defeat the ringleader of the enemy.

This was the plan being employed in the final stage of the war against the Great Disaster, and while it was a given for Vincent, Olbart also deemed it as the best possible method without any objections.

The numbers of undead exceeded the count of Imperial Soldiers, and even if they engaged in a war of attrition, the lifeforce of the Stone would be depleted, and the lifespan of the Empire would diminish; that was how thoroughly they had been backed into a corner.

The fact that they had no choice but to hasten to a conclusion, was something that was utterly obvious to anybody's eyes.

Olbart: "'Course, the opponent's also gonna be anticipatin' that."

However, even if the opponent was aware, if no other option existed, then there would be no choice but to take that one. What remained was how many things they had in their hand, of which their tactics were already exposed, that could defy their opponent's expectations.

Therefore, the select few were divided even further, and several decoys to attract the enemy's attention had been prepared.

While those decoys were active, Olbart only had to fulfill the duties assigned to him.

—Olbart's role was to infiltrate the Crystal Palace, and bring back intelligence regarding the uncertain interior of the palace.

Of especially high importance were the whereabouts of the ringleader of the Great Disaster, the one known as Sphinx, and the liberation of the Steelman, Moguro Hagane, whose movements had likely been sealed within the palace. Additionally, if he had some leeway, there was the retrieval of Cecilus's beloved katanas, the Dream Sword and the Fiend Sword.

Olbart: "Tho', I prolly won't be able ta find Ceci's katanas. The Fiend Sword tends ta run away, and I ain't got any way of knowin' where the Dream Sword's been stored."

Cecilus was always eager to babble on about anything, but even though he would talk about how incredible his beloved katanas were, he was not so foolish as to blather on about their special qualities. He would probably give an answer if questioned, but to inquire about an opponent's hand, was tantamount to inviting suspicion that one had a reason to do so.

Olbart had not been so foolish as to carelessly provoke Cecilus.

Anyhow, due to the improbability, Olbart put off the retrieval of the katanas for later.

Ideally, he would grasp Sphinx's location, and secure her body. If he could do so, then through the power of that commendable boy who, though in a shrunken state, did not want to return to normal—Schwartz, and the girl he brought along, then the undead could be entirely wiped out, down to their souls.

Being able to implement that would be the most desirable conclusion in this battle against the Great Disaster.

However, that would not be an easy feat.

Olbart: "—Good grief, this one's another dead end."

Contrary to his desire for a swift conclusion, Olbart's feet often came to a halt.

Being able to perfectly grasp a scene simply by looking at a map, and absolutely never forgetting a location upon a single visit, were fundamental skills of the shinobi, and for Olbart, the Crystal Palace was a place of work that he visited frequently.

In spite of that, the reason why Olbart's search was not progressing favorably was because the interior of the Crystal Palace, which he ought to have been familiar with, had been completely reshaped from that which Olbart knew.

Olbart: "Even tho' this kinda perplexity is originally meant ta be our speciality."

Though Olbart did not think there was any value in it, the Crystal Palace was a building known for being the world's most beautiful castle. Due to the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, a part of its wall had been destroyed, but even so, there was no large impact on its outward appearance when viewed from a distance.

However, the interior of the palace was an incredibly different story.

Various aspects such as the construction of passageways, the positioning of rooms, and the size of doors had been altered, and it had been transformed into an entirely different palace, such that even Vincent, who had once lived here in the Crystal Palace, would become lost.

The lack of change to its exterior was guaranteed to bewilder any who would charge in without a plan.

Even if he returned with just this information, there would have been more than enough meaning in Olbart's preceding infiltration. Or perhaps Schwartz, who was serving the role of strategist, had already hypothesized this situation.

If that were the case, his power of insight was promising, but at the same time, it was a future threat.

There were none who knew how the Kingdom and the City-States, which were currently in a cooperative relationship with the Empire, would deal with the latter after the Great Disaster of the undead was stopped.

For when that time would come about, Chisha would no longer be by Vincent's side.

Olbart: "—However, ya really went and pulled that off, Chesshy."

The flames of war, the winds of blood, and the atmosphere of Death that was persistently fragrant from both the living and the dead.

For those reasons, his heart had naught the time to mourn, but Olbart appraised Chisha for having stolen his technique through his "ability", and furthermore, for having replaced Vincent without Olbart having noticed.

Olbart enjoyed stealing the techniques of others, but he was not fond of being stolen from himself.

After all, growth was a privilege of the young. Even if they did not steal, there were unlimited possibilities of what they could produce by their own hands. Conversely, the old had no such room for growth. That was why Olbart was not fond of being stolen from.

What would happen if, instead of producing something new, young people stole, and then yearned for more?

Would it not be that this world would cease to produce new things, thereby causing Olbart to run out of things to steal?

Olbart: “That bastard Chesshy had some damn nerve ta act so cunningly. —Tho’ it ain’t like I don’t understand how he was feelin’.”

Within a limited frame of time, Chisha had desired the best possible outcome.

In other words, Chisha and Olbart had the same choice. Olbart was an old man who was nearing the end of his rope, and Chisha was a dead soldier who had established an opportunity to meet the end of his rope before long.

Hence, it was a matter of not having selected the means that would have increased the cards in one’s hand.

Having entered the bout with limited cards in his hand, Chisha had seized victory in this situation.

—This situation, in which Vincent had been kept alive, and Olbart had been enlisted as an ally.

Olbart: “…”

—Olbart Dunkelkenn had an ambition.

It was the final goal of his life, to leave his name in the history of the Empire, in a form with which none other could compare; to engrave, to prove that the being known as himself had indeed existed as an individual life.

Olbart had been received as a shinobi, had been raised as a shinobi, and had lived as a shinobi.

In a role where many would use and discard their lives, where it was natural to be unable to achieve a long life, Olbart had lived to a point where the age of one hundred was now close at hand. But, in his long life as an Imperial citizen, as a shinobi, Olbart had spent the greater part of his days fulfilling the objectives of others.

That could have been called the destiny of the shinobi way of life, but Olbart had lived exceptionally long among the shinobi. —In that case, then it would have also been fine for his end to be unbecoming of a shinobi.

If it was typical for a shinobi to silently disappear into the darkness of history without leaving their name behind, then would it not be fine for Olbart to purposely aim for the complete inversion of that?

Therefore, Olbart had vigilantly awaited such an opportunity.

In order to bloom at the end of his life, he had thought that the most effective measure would have been to take the head of the Wise Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, but—

Olbart: “If the opponent happens ta be ruin itself, then there ain’t no point in betrayal.”

The opponent was the Great Disaster—the hosts of undead, and because their objective was the total destruction of the Vollachian Empire, Olbart’s scheme was nothing more than a transient, brittle thing that would crumble away.

Olbart wanted to leave his name in the history of the Empire.

If that Empire were to be destroyed, then no matter what, Olbart’s wish would not be granted. Therefore, Olbart had to take off his hat to Chisha’s acting, which had not hastened him until the current situation.

Olbart: “Tho’ after these hijinks are done and settled, it’d be nice if there’s still room for myself ta do somethin’. My lifespan’s gonna imprudently run out before I know it.”

After the war, when the exhausted Empire would be in the midst of reconstruction, he would augustly murder the Emperor before the Kingdom or the City-States could make a move—it was not as though he did not have such thoughts, but he would not feel comfortable doing so, since he could not help but feel like he would be taking advantage of the Great Disaster.

Regrettably, unable to find an ideal opportunity, Olbart concealed his ambition, as it would have been overly optimistic so long as the Great Disaster remained undefeated, and he faced forward. —Ahead of Olbart's vision was the large door that would have connected to the place that was the audience chamber in the original palace.

Olbart: "…"

Within Olbart's mind, as he remained silent, there were two conflicting senses that arose.

The sensation that he ought not go beyond this door, and the sensation that he ought to go beyond this door—the former was rooted in his instincts, while the latter was based on his intuition developed over his long time as a shinobi.

Normally, Olbart's judgment would not have budged from the former option. However, Olbart's intuition was speaking to him. Beyond this door, was undoubtedly the meaning in Olbart's infiltration.

He did not know whether it was Sphinx, Moguro, the katanas, or something entirely different, but—

Olbart: "…Havin' stretched out my years, an old man without much time left can't die without gettin' the opportunity ta overthrow the state, good grief."

Spilling that out in a hoarse voice, Olbart decided on whether he would advance or retreat.

If this was the location of the audience chamber, it should have been possible for him to examine its state through the hole in the wall without having to go through the door; so going through the window of the corridor, Olbart traveled along the outer wall to arrive at his destination.

Without having opened the door, he peered into the room—

Olbart: "—Oioi, not even I'd go this far."

Within the completely altered hall, upon seeing the fruit of the Witch's labor, the head honcho of the shinobi, known as the Vicious Old Man, muttered so, unable to hide his discomfort.

2

—The soul of that thing, had already lost sight of its original way of being, having been ripped to shreds.

Called down to the surface via unorthodox means, pitiful souls were held prisoner, made to kneel in order to destroy the Empire that they ought to be subjects of; such was the situation that the undead were placed in.

More or less, a process had been applied to alter the mental structure of the undead to differ from what it was during their lifetime. If not for that, the resurrected dead would likely not all assist in the destruction of the Empire.

The degree to which that process had been applied varied from case to case, but there was a danger that, inverse to the large load being imposed upon the original form and nature in order to make them loyal to orders, they would become unable to perform at their original strength.

Therefore, it was customary for the caster to want to lighten the load in proportion to how strong any given individual was during their lifetime.

In reality, capable individuals such as the Emperor of the Briar and the Magical Sharpshooter would experience a considerable decline in strength due to the load on their minds, so the Witch had shifted gears to allow them some of their free will in order to maintain their strength.

If she had made these powerful individuals into subservient puppets, they would likely be exposed to the disgrace of being unable to display even half of their true strength.

In any case, excluding such exceptionally strong individuals, and Lamia Godwin, who displayed an attitude of taking initiative to cooperate with the Witch, the souls of the undead were cruelly being toyed with.

During their lifetime, no matter what they might have wished for, no matter how noble of a warrior they might have been, no matter what it was that they had cherished, they were all being used in a way that trampled over all of that.

Thus, they were forced to move as the vanguard of the disaster that was bringing destruction to the Empire.

There had been no exceptions among them.

Dispossessed of their free will, becoming beings used and discarded as tools for the sake of battle, their souls would be called down again even were they to repeatedly taste Death, and the earthen vessels would be revived with a new anchor.

Alas, that thing perfectly aligned with the conditions the Witch had established for undead fabrication.

With moderately high competency, being more than a little obsessed with battle, without any impediment to its strength when made into a subservient puppet, it had vehement regret and hatred scorched into it during its final moments—.

For that reason, it ferociously rampaged in a ceaseless discharge of fury.

Torn to shreds, in a form that stretched out its soul as it was in the process of losing its original form, having forgotten that its body was ever in a humanoid form, it had been transformed into a repulsive, grotesque form.

With large, long arms, an exceedingly increased number of legs, and a flimsy torso of skin and bone, even if its appearance had completely changed, it could not escape the situation of being used by the Witch.

Even when killed over and over, its soul would stretch larger, and it would be revived as another monster.

In order to put an end to that, there was no choice but to fulfill the Witch's desires. To grant the Witch's wish, there was no choice but to scorch the Empire to naught as a harbinger of the Great Disaster.

At present, having transformed into an unthinkable appearance, that was the wish of that thing. That was its only desire.

That was its only, that was its, that was, that, desire was, that was its only—.

???: "—The Giant Eye, Izmail."

—. —. ——.

Suddenly, mixed into the sounds of its eerie roar and the fierce battle, that had been audible.

Even though there ought to be many other sounds plunging into its ears, which were no longer in the form of ears, that voice alone had been heard in an awfully clear, strangely firm, and oddly proper manner.

Just what sort of meaning that held, that thing did not know.

It did not—

???: "Izmail!"

???: "E ea."

Suspicion yielded stagnation in its thoughts, and its many arms and legs that were meant to kill all ceased their movement. As if weaving through that opening, a hand reached out, and touching its thin torso, something was stolen away.

It felt as if something had slipped out.

It was not clear if that was something important, or if it was something large. But, the moment that had slipped out, the violent impulses that had filled its body had faded away in one fell swoop.

Hollow, it was hollow. Its insides, had become hollow.

The many reasons to rampage that had been forcibly stuffed into it from outside all flowed back out, and as its interior became hollow, the only thing that remained was what had been there since the outset.

That was, its reason for fighting. That could even be called aspiration or ambition.

Its reason for hastily joining the battle, was for the sake of fighting. The reason it had fought was in order to leave its name in history. The purpose of that was for itself to prove that "itself", the pride of its clan, had existed for certain.

The being known as itself, the Giant Eye, Izmail, the purpose of that —.

Izmail: "Ah, has it been granted…"

Within the golden iris that loomed in a single large black eyeball, the face of that man was clearly reflected.

Those handsome features of black hair and almond eyes, without even the slightest waver in the face of a blade that closed in on his life, imposingly stared at him, and called out to the deformed Izmail.

The apex of the Vollachian Empire, had recognized Izmail.

That was—

Izmail: "—It is the honor of a Sword Wolf, Your Excellency the Emperor."

3

With the arm adjoined to his battleaxe, Jamal held back a blow, while the freedom to move about the streets, leveraging the mobility of their multiplied limbs, was restricted by Subaru and Beatrice with the use of magic.

Meanwhile, the multiple attacks carrying lethal power that were being released, were forcibly knocked away by the leaping and bouncing Spica, narrowly preventing her companions from injury.

And then—

Abel: “—The Giant Eye, Izmail.”

With his sharp gaze fixed on the grotesquely transformed undead, Abel called out his name.

For a moment, Subaru had felt doubtful, but he had decided at the outset that if Abel called out the name of an undead in the Imperial Capital, he would believe it wholeheartedly. In fact, not even once thus far, had Abel made a mistake in naming the undead.

Be that as it may—

Subaru: “Izmail!”

Spica: “E ea.”

In front of their linked hands, Spica thrust forth, swinging around, slamming her palm into the region that seemed to be the chest of the grotesque being called Izmail.

Star Eating, which was neither a punch nor a strike, was invoked, and Subaru and the others held their breath.

Provided the conditions were met, even if his form had deviated from being human, he should meet the same end as the other undead.

As expected, in front of Subaru and the others who were watching with bated breath, Izmail slowly shook his huge body and stared at Abel with his giant, globular golden eye.

And then—

Izmail: “—Ah.”

Leaving final words behind in a soundless voice, all at once, his grotesque, hulking body crumbed to dust.

???: “Ahh, fuck! Unbelievable! What the hell was that monster just now!”

Abel: “A valiant warrior of the Cyclops Tribe, Izmail, the one called the Giant Eye. It is exactly as I called out at the end.”

???: “The Cyclops Tribe, it ain’t just that they’ve got a single eyeball huh, they gotta be such monsters as well eh… Oh, pardon me for the tone.”

With the fight against the undead having concluded, Jamal grumbled as he wiped the blood and sweat off of his chin.

The remark from the man, regretful of the coarse language he had used, forgetting the person he was addressing was Abel, was off the mark.

The person named Izmail, had not possessed such an appearance in the beginning.

Subaru: “Beako.”

Beatrice: “I know, in fact. That person is a victim of the Sacrament of the Immortal King, I suppose. Because of having been resurrected over and over again, he wasn’t in a proper state, in fact.”

Spica: “Uu, au…”

Beatrice gave a curt jerk of her chin, and Spica looked down at her own palms with a downcast expression. While liberally stroking Spica’s head, Subaru inhaled deeply.

He had also encountered Izmail while escaping with Rem and Flop during the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, but the change in his appearance was so gruesome that it was difficult to look at.

Perhaps because of being blown up and dying in the dust explosion, or because of being resurrected again after that death, he had kept getting more and more deformed.

But, even that never-ending hell was sure to have ceased with Spica’s Star Eating.

Subaru: “Still, you were able to know who the person was despite them looking like that.”

Abel: “Upon being resurrected as an undead, the countenance is affected to some extent. That being the case, the characteristics inherent in each become essential in distinguishing them. That person was an easy-to-understand type.”

Subaru: “Easy-to-understand, huh…”

There were only vestiges of a human form that remained, and because Subaru had already seen them lose their humanoid form and transform into that grotesque appearance, he could match it with the enemy he had encountered in the midst of the evacuation, but that was not the case for Abel.

Despite that, to be able to make such accurate guesses, rather than having a monstrous memory, it would be more fitting to suspect some kind of foul play.

Abel: “It is only natural to be cognizant of the powerful beings in the realm. Whether they become enemies or allies, it is always preferable to have a multitude of bases for decision-making.”

However, the words that followed from Abel were not about simply discerning based on physical characteristics, but rather on his evaluation of other aspects of his opponent.

Subaru: “…”

Upon hearing that, Subaru recalled Izmail’s final moments just before turning to dust.

.

Although he had hardly uttered anything that resembled words, with their meaning undecipherable, it seemed to carry not resentment or bitterness, but rather a solemn emotion.

Perhaps it was reverence toward the Emperor, who had correctly identified his name.

Either way—

Subaru: "—Hk, things are getting intense here."

Subaru murmured, gazing up at the sky, where the incessant rumbling of thunder could be heard.

In Subaru's field of vision, amidst the cloud-covered sky, he could see mountains of ice breaking through, falling towards the Crystal Palace—they were what Emilia had created, which Roswaal had purposed for tactical use.

Seen in the distant sky, there were swirling clouds turned into ominous weapons, thunderous roars reverberating from another direction, and the cityscape was tearing apart, collapsing under a serene sword strike.

At each bastion, it was evident that Subaru's instructed conditions were being upheld, with each engaging in fierce battles.

Beatrice: "That blasted Roswaal is putting on quite a show, I suppose. He's really letting his enthusiasm show too much, in fact."

Subaru: "When I see that, it reminds me that he's a pretty dangerous guy. Olbart-san is sneaking into the castle; he won't crush him, will he?"

Beatrice: "If there's a need to crush it, then he will, I suppose. That's the kind of man he is, in fact."

With a sound akin to the sky splitting, the shattered mountains of ice scattered countless sparkles into the sky.

Roswaal, alongside Medium, confronted the flying dragon rider enemy—one of the most challenging adversaries to deal with, so there was no choice but to trust in Roswaal's victory.

Of course, the existence of the Curse of Thorns and the Cloud Dragon also posed insurmountable threats.

Subaru: "All that's left now is whether Emilia-tan and Tanza can pull through…"

In the midst of the situation in the Imperial Capital, which went beyond being described as fierce battles, Subaru worried about Emilia and Tanza, whose outcomes remained uncertain among the companions he had dispatched throughout the city.

Currently, he believed that he had allocated his forces optimally, but he hadn't clearly determined Emilia's placement, making it somewhat ambiguous. However, given the role she had been entrusted with, it should be the right decision to get her to work together with Tanza.

Subaru: "To be honest, when Izmail showed up, I thought we were in big trouble, but…"

The fact that they had managed to restrain the transformed Izmail on their own, without Emilia as part of their forces, was undoubtedly due to the concerted efforts of everyone.

In particular, Jamal's contribution was significant, and his performance improved visibly with each passing moment. Perhaps he was leveling up at an incredible pace under such dire circumstances.

That in itself was a welcome development. Jamal was extremely reliable, provided you ignored the mental reluctance he had toward his inclusion.

Vincent: "Jamal Aurélie, can you keep going?"

Jamal: "Yes! If Your Excellency commands it, I can take on a hundred or even two hundred more."

Vincent: "So it seems. You all, too, should strive for everything you have."

Subaru: "Dammit, acting all high and mighty just because you're doing a job that no one else can."

Swearing at Abel, who did not participate in the fight and was the only one who looked cool, Subaru then observed Beatrice and Spica.

It was a series of tightrope walks, but battling the undead was always an all-out war of the forces they had against them. As long as the expectation was to proceed with caution, it would not be wise to move forward with someone falling behind.

Beatrice: “Betty has no problem, I suppose.”

Spica: “Aau!”

In response to Subaru’s confirming glance, the two nodded back resolutely. At this rate, Subaru might have been the one physically with the most concerns.

However, since Subaru was still connected to the Pleiades Battalion, it was clear that Abel was the one to be most concerned about regarding physical safety.

In any case—

Subaru: “The state of the battles should be changing soon, and if Halibel-san is doing his part, we should have a way to get closer to the Crystal Palace. And from there—”

He would have liked to acquire information on the other battlefields and have material to consider for this loop as well as how future events unfold.

That was when he was about to call out to his companions.

???: “—I see. This is a strange phenomenon. Observation: Required.”

Suddenly, everyone turned around at the sound of a voice from outside their awareness.

Subaru’s eyes widened, and there was a third party who was not there before —a short, pale-skinned undead figure crouched down, checking the dust on the ground with their fingers.

A familiar undead with pink hair was playing with the dust of the destroyed “Star Eaten” Izmail—

Subaru: "—Hk, you."

???: "From what it would appear, you have not directly interfered with the core bug. The bug has lost its parasitic target and died… or lost its soul? The deprivation, hijacking, and reclamation… are very interesting."

The one who said this, licking the dust that adhered to her fingertips with her tongue as a confirmation, was a being that looked exactly like one of Subaru's companion's relatives but whose eyes bore no semblance of warmth —it was Sphinx.

The mastermind of the Great Disaster, the very goal of this final battle, emerged here.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru's consciousness momentarily went blank at the sight of her imposing arrival.

The presence of the Curse of Thorns and the Magical Sharpshooter made it difficult for Subaru and his companions, with their trump card, Spica, to confront Sphinx, who was supposed to be in the Crystal Palace. Therefore, Olbart, who was good at stealth, was sent in as a scout, and Subaru and his group hoped to continue hunting undead until the way was clear to reduce their enemy's strength and gain an advantage in the coming decisive battle.

But to think that assumption could be so easily undermined—

Subaru: "—No."

Subaru concealed his agitation by considering this a chance, and held Beatrice's hand tightly. Glancing at Beatrice, Subaru then joined hands with a surprised Spica.

In front of him was Sphinx, the mastermind behind the Great Disaster.

And, like the other undead, she had been revived with the power of the Sacrament of the Immortal King, so Spica's Star Eating should be effective against her. Being undead would give her the advantage of Escape by Death, but at the same time, she had one unavoidable weakness: Spica.

Take away that, the chance of resurrection, and the battle would be over.

It would be possible to end the fight without knowledge of the opponent's intentions or aims.

And so—

Subaru: "Sphin…"

Sphinx: "The requirement is a match between the Name and the Soul of the target. It is surprising that you even made use of the Authority of Gluttony. Countermeasures: Required."

Subaru: "—Hk."

Sphinx's quiet analysis crushed any preemptive action.

Subaru gasped at the fact that Sphinx had just mentioned the Authority of Gluttony and even recognized Spica's Star Eating at a glance.

Even though his intentions were seen through, he was forgetting the strength of the Authority, which, by simply hitting the target, would make her unable to escape.

Therefore, he had to pay the price for it.

???: "—You idiot!"

And like that, a foul-mouthed voice had cut between Subaru and Sphinx, pushing him away.

Sphinx held up one slender finger, pointing its tip toward Subaru and his companions. Before the ray of white heat emitted from that fingertip could penetrate Subaru and Spica's heads, a man jumped in.

Jamal's sword was gouged out in the shape of the heat ray that he could not block, and it pierced through the torso of the daredevilish man; the fresh scent of scorched blood hit upon Subaru's nostrils very, very strongly.

Chapter 59:
Sphinx

1

—Sphinx was a failed result of the Witch of Greed's research into immortality.

With the young girl who sacrificed herself to become the core for the creation of the miniature garden known as the Sanctuary—with Ryuzu Meyer's body as the foundation, she was a replicant constructed with a Mana body using the same structure as a Spirit.

The Witch had thought that if a pre-existing soul could be adhered to the empty life of the replicant, pseudo-immortality by means of soul-duplication could thus be achieved.

However, this prospect easily crumbled before the fact that the size and form of the soul and the vessel of life individually differed.

The soul of the Witch of Greed could not be contained within the replicant of Ryuzu Meyer.

The result born from this outright mishap, was the failure of the Witch of Greed, an existence that would mark the world with many misfortunes for years to come, Sphinx.

That being, bestowed the name of an impure monster, "Sphinx," was about to be disposed of due to its unsuitability for its original purpose, but by a twist of fate, it survived.

And, just like how many other artificial lives would do so, Sphinx also commenced work in order to fulfill the purpose of her creation.

The purpose for which the artificial Witch was created—in order to be perfected as the Witch of Greed, Sphinx would go on to pile up many calamities.

2

Jamal: “—You idiot!”

And then, with blood pouring from his mouth as he cursed, Jamal fell to the ground.

The white light that was fired was supposed to have pierced the heads of Subaru and the others. Because of that, Jamal received a blow at a position around that of a child’s head as he protected them, but even so, it was still undoubtedly a serious wound that had pierced one side of his torso.

Subaru: “Jamal—!”

Sphinx: “The presumed target has escaped harm? Although, it falls into the scope of what is able to be handled.”

Subaru responded after having been promptly pushed away and protected. Ignoring that response, Sphinx, who was responsible for that attack, was unconcerned with the fact that it had been unsuccessful.

Subaru gnashed his molars at the words of the leader of the undead who spoke in a calm and apathetic manner.

It would have been difficult for Jamal to continue fighting after having collapsed; not to mention that his life would be in danger if not treated immediately.

Beatrice: “Subaru! Stay focused on what’s in front of you, in fact!”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

That instant, Beatrice called out in a sharp voice as she pulled Subaru’s arm.

Shifting his gaze away from Jamal at that call, Subaru looked at Sphinx. Likewise, Beatrice, Spica, and Abel also trained their gaze on her.

The three were on high alert, their attention focused on their enemy, Sphinx.

Jamal’s treatment would have to be postponed until later.

That was right. Absolutely, that was right.

But even so—

Sphinx: “I had thought you to be the foreign entity that would derail my plans, but perhaps I was mistaken?”

Even if he averted his gaze, Subaru was unable to remove his attention from the fallen Jamal, and looking at him, Sphinx tilted her head and spoke. Subaru’s mind fell into increasing disarray as he looked into those undead golden eyes.

Beatrice: “—Hk, let’s work together, I suppose, Spica!”

Spica: “Aau!”

Beatrice and Spica moved in unison in Subaru’s stead.

At Beatrice’s call, Spica, her long blonde hair fluttering, flew towards Sphinx. As Spica leaped, Beatrice unleashed amethyst crystal arrows to the left, right, and rear of the stock-still Sphinx, blocking her escape route and providing cover.

As the coordination of the two blocked Sphinx on all sides, there was nothing she could do—such was not the case.

Sphinx: “El Jiwald.”

Contrary to the meagerness of the incantation, the effect of subsequent destruction was tremendous.

In response to the looming threat, Sphinx opened both of her empty hands, and, just as she had done when she had attacked Jamal earlier, she emitted white rays of heat, this time from the fingers of her left and right hands.

However, this time, it was not a momentary beam of heat like that of a ray gun, but a sword of light that continued to be projected.

Wielding ten blades of light upon her ten fingers, blades with a long range larger than around half a greatsword, Sphinx dominated the space around her with attacks that sliced in all directions.

Bathed in the white light, each one of Beatrice's deployed purple arrows were sliced apart, and Spica, who had jumped forward towards her, was also assailed by their fury.

Spica: "—Uu!"

Just before the white light could cut Spica's thin body in two, she disappeared from everyone's vision.

She had teleported. Having activated her short-range teleport, Spica escaped fromSphinx's line of fire, emerging on top of the ruins of a building that was just off the street.

And then, as if to follow Spica, Subaru and Beatrice, who were in the white lights's line of fire, were—

Vincent: "Fool, have you been befuddled by the sight of the enemy ringleader?"

With a bitter remark, holding down the heads of Subaru and Beatrice, forcing them to crouch down in place, was Abel.

Vincent: "We cannot expect Jamal Aurélie to get back up. Your contribution shall be essential."

Beatrice: "N-No need to tell us that when we already know, in fact! You'll be rewarded for your quick thinking just now with our performance, so you better watch, I suppose!"

Beatrice, who had been violently saved, puffed out her cheeks and brushed Abel off as she stood back up.

Snorting his nose at Beatrice's stouthearted rebuttal, Abel, who had also gotten back up, then looked down at Subaru, who was still lying on the ground, and,

Vincent: "What is the matter? Your partner is in high spirits, but you, however—"

Do not stand? Abel might have been trying to utter those provocative words.

But, he quickly broke off his speech, as if sensing something was wrong, and then frowned his shapely eyebrows.

Beatrice: “Subaru?”

Beatrice, beside him, blinked her eyes at the same strange occurrence as Abel.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru still remained lying face down at the feet of Beatrice and Abel. Spica, who had teleported to a distant position, also noticed, and bewilderment emerged in her eyes.

In the spur of the moment, the girls probably had no idea as to what had just happened.

Therefore, in the stead of Beatrice, Spica, and Abel, who could not comprehend the events unfolding before their eyes, it was ironically their enemy, Sphinx, who was the first to realize what had happened to Subaru.

Sphinx, with the pale face of an undead which had a considerable insufficiency to express emotions, but still with bewilderment and doubt in her eyes at having understood that,

Sphinx: “…For what reason, did you ingest poison? Explanation: Required.”

Vincent: “—Hk, You!”

Immediately after Sphinx’s question, Abel’s expression changed, and he hoisted Subaru up by the collar. It was a violent act, however, Subaru did not voice any complaints.

The reason was that Subaru had already broken the package of poison behind his molar, and he was at the height of suffering through the hellish agony that led to Death.

Beatrice: “NOOOO! SUBARU?! SUBARU?!”

Spica: “UAU—?!”

Upon seeing the figure of Subaru, convulsing as blood frothed at his mouth, Beatrice and Spica screamed.

Beatrice tried to cling to the trembling Subaru, but Abel pushed the girl away, inserted his finger in Subaru’s mouth, and as he pulled out the packaged drug, his expression grew furious.

Vincent: “You, what is the meaning of this?! Have you lost your mind?!”

Subaru: “Bububu, bubububu…”

Vincent: “All that boasting about fighting against fate, yet this is what you do?!”

Abel’s enraged voice, Beatrice’s tearful cry, Spica’s sorrowful voice as she desperately jumped back towards him, amidst the sense of loss of his whole body slowly melting, Subaru heard them all.

To the angered voice, to the crying voice, to the despairing voice, he could not answer with words.

Even so, there was sufficient meaning in this. It was a necessary measure. —This was the best course of action.

In order, to arrive, at a future, in which, nobody, would die, this was, the best, the best best best best best, possible, method.

Subaru: “Bubu, bu.”

Sphinx: “Explanation: Required.”

With that information unable to be transmitted to anyone, with the Witch’s question remaining unresolved, his breath ran out.

Natsuki Subaru’s life came to an end. —Again, just as it had already done so many times in this final battle.

3

—The first few years of Sphinx's journey, which ought to be called a quest, were a major difficulty.

The body of Ryuzu Meyer, which served as the basis of the replicant, lacked the aptitude for surviving in this harsh world; her life was often threatened by extremely bad weather, changes in temperature, and sometimes by Witchbeasts or malicious humans, and lacking the means to counteract that, there had been far too many deficiencies at the time this receptacle had been selected.

Since concepts such as growth and training were also meaningless for a Mana body, she could not even hope for things to improve.

Though it was possible to acquire knowledge and skills that were not dependent on the body, there would be many opportunities for her life to be threatened along the path to learning them, so those days were always accompanied by danger.

In addition, the base model of Ryuzu Meyer was a half-elf, and since Sphinx also inherited those physical features, she was often exposed to persecution and odd looks.

However, she was hesitant to make any large alterations to the external features of the original form.

Those were the first things that had been given to Sphinx, and she feared that if she altered the preconditions too much, she would become unable to fulfill her own purpose of creation.

Therefore, Sphinx did not consider the idea of disguising herself to be acceptable, and instead sought a different way to survive.

As long as she could remain alive, there were times when she had even degraded herself to being a spectacle and a slave. And since the appearance of Ryuzu Meyer was a refined one, there was also a time when she had been the servant of a lavish master.

Greedy to know things, greedy to learn things, Sphinx had made her abilities useful no matter where she was.

Once she understood just how good her memory was, utility value was born in a variety of situations. In the process of doing so, Sphinx realized that it was a way to protect herself.

In order to travel the world with a weak body, lacking the power to survive, it was best to create value for oneself, to offer it to those who sought it, and to gain their protection.

By doing so, Sphinx chose the means of continuing to live under the umbrella of others, until she was able to protect herself on her own.

Those days lasted for approximately one hundred and fifty years.

4

—What was the most common cause of death for Natsuki Subaru since he was summoned to this other world?

Were he to be asked this question, Subaru would be able to confidently answer, “Suicide by poison”.

At the Crimson Lapis Castle of the Demon City of Chaosflame, he had experienced a considerable amount of Deaths in the game of tag against Olbart, but so long as the cause of the death was not labeled “Olbart”, the ways he had died there were of various sorts.

Excluding exceptions like those eleven seconds of despair, the record for the most was undoubtedly held by poison.

It was a terribly disgraceful thing to mention, but it could even be said that the person who had killed Subaru the most in this other world was Old Man Null, who had concocted the poison.

In any case, the poison that he had used so frequently during his lone struggle to escape the Gladiator Island Ginunhive with zero casualties—in order to form the Pleiades Battalion, still remained prepared within Subaru’s mouth, even now.

Subaru: “—I’m gonna get everyone back home, safe and sound.”

That, was the absolute condition that Subaru had established as he took on this final battle for the Imperial Capital, and it was one on which he would not compromise.

Originally, he had carried that attitude and mindset even before he had been sent to the Empire and had had his body shrunk, but amidst his days in the Empire up until now, his resolve had been strengthened even further.

That was a large part of the reason for Subaru's rebellious spirit towards the Vollachian Empire, which was trying to impose the conclusion known as Death upon them by every means possible.

If the Empire forced Death upon them, he would reject it, no matter what it took.

For that purpose, he would do absolutely everything in his power.

No matter how many times, how many tens of times, how many hundreds of times it took, even if it meant he needed to go through the anguish of hell, no matter what.

Subaru: "—Gah, geuhh!!"

His vision flickering bright red, Subaru's throat screamed in agony as if all of his blood, flesh, and bone, every individual blood vessel, and every single cell in his body had been put through a blender.

But, the lethal pain that he had experienced right up to the moment of his death, as well as the cries and angry voices that caused Subaru even more suffering than that pain, vanished into the beyond. —This was Return by Death.

Return by Death had been activated via the suicide by poison, and Natsuki Subaru turned back the clock.

At that moment, Subaru was about to shift his state of awareness back to what ought to have been the scene right after he had washed his face at the final Imperial Soldier encampment before he had entered the Imperial Capital—

Jamal: "—You idiot!"

Subaru: "…"

He felt the sensation of being shoved in the chest, and he heard the sound of cursing; Subaru was clearly being shown that the restart point for Return by Death had been updated.

Sphinx: "The presumed target has escaped harm? Although, it falls into the scope of what is able to be handled."

Spilling blood as he cursed, Jamal collapsed, with the blade of the sword in his hand having a round hole gouged into it. In the midst of this scene, the cold, indifferent voice of the perpetrator, Sphinx, analyzed the situation.

Both this scene and those words were things that he had seen and heard only a few dozen seconds ago.

Beatrice: "Subaru! Stay focused on what's in front of you, in fact!"

Subaru: "—Hk."

Beatrice called out sharply to Subaru, whose thoughts were in disarray due to his understanding and grasp on the current reality.

Her voice shattered the contents of his head, and the shock from pain of the previous poisoning and the update of the restart point slipped away with an exhale. He adapted to the new situation before him.

The time to be dumbfounded, he had naught.

There was far too much that could be lost in that period.

—The checkpoint of Return by Death had been updated.

What this meant, was that within this decisive final battle for the Imperial Capital, which had now already begun, the members of the "Rescue from Destruction Squad" assigned to each bastion could no longer be rearranged.

As it was, he believed that the best possible personnel had been deployed to the best possible battlefields.

But, it was frustrating that he could not fully confirm the conditions that would cause the minimum damage. In particular, the fact that he had yet to verify the result of having paired Emilia and Tanza together, was a major psychological blow.

Of course, the safety of the other members was an inexhaustible source of his anxiety and worry, but—

Sphinx: “I had thought you to be the foreign entity that would derail my plans, but perhaps I was mistaken?”

As Sphinx tilted her head and posed a question, Subaru looked at the undead in front of him.

The building blocks he had assembled within his head until here, crumbled noisily.

The building blocks of thought that he had built up through trial and error was something that he had aimed to make far more perfect when viewed from a variety of angles. They crumbled away without leaving a trace. —No, they were demolished.

Beside the building blocks that he had mentally built up, the Natsuki Subaru within his mind appeared, and violently tearing it down, he thoroughly destroyed it all until not a single part remained.

Until it became impossible to tell what the original form of those blocks were, until there would be nothing one could do about it even if it concerned them, he demolished, demolished, demolished, demoled, relentlessly demolished.

Then, he would completely forget about those building blocks, to which nothing more could possibly be done.

Only after doing so, could Natsuki Subaru finally set about a new sequence of trial and error.

Subaru: “—Not in the slightest.”

After a beat that felt to be long, as Subaru held both Beatrice and Spica’s hands, just like Abel as he narrowed his sable eyes, he stared down Sphinx as he gave his answer.

He had yet to discover a way to break through this deadlock. Nor did he know if his comrades were safe. Jamal was still continuing to bleed out.

His determination to successfully deal with all of that, had not altered in the slightest.

He would defeat the Witch, Sphinx, and put an end to this Great Disaster.

For that reason—

Subaru: “I, am the one who’s gonna derail your plans, the natural enemy of disaster.”

5

—Sphinx was now known as a Witch, but for the first few hundred years after her creation, she was not equipped with power that was appropriate for such a designation.

This, too, was a revelation that came about with the creation of Sphinx, but there was a correlation between “soul” and “receptacle”, and if dissonance existed between the two, it would serve as a significant flaw that stood in the way.

By nature, receptacles were optimized to match their souls.

In short, the techniques and abilities of the Witch of Greed could only be adequately wielded by the body of the Witch of Greed. As a being with the incomplete soul of the Witch of Greed filling the receptacle of Ryuzu Meyer, Sphinx had been hindered from fulfilling the purpose of her creation ever since the very moment of her genesis.

As a result, it had taken one hundred and fifty years for Sphinx to attain power befitting her designation as a Witch.

For Sphinx, who harbored the flaw of discrepancy between receptacle and soul, things like how to walk, how to breathe, and even how to beat her heart had required her to exert effort akin to relearning it anew.

To become a magician, it would take her nearly one hundred times longer than what it would take for someone of average ability.

Furthermore, in this era, for Sphinx to fulfill the purpose of her creation, there were far too many factors that stood as obstacles to her activities.

Being treated as a half-elf due to her physical features, she was used as a scapegoat for the grievances and resentments towards the epitome of Witches, the Witch of Envy.

Suspecting the existence of Sphinx, the product of the Witch of Greed's research, the person who claimed to be her disciple pursued her tenaciously.

While there were others as well, these were the two primary reasons that prevented her from staying in one place, forcing numerous setbacks in Sphinx's quest to fulfill the purpose of her creation.

At the end of those days, when she first succeeded in casting magic on her own, seeing the small flame which flickered at her fingertips, Sphinx recalled feeling immense disappointment.

—Was this the extent of magic that the one who was supposed to succeed the Witch of Greed could use?

6

Jamal: "—You idiot!"

And, with blood spilling from his lips as he spat out curses, once again Jamal collapsed.

He had been pushed away by Jamal, and the moment he stepped back with Beatrice and Spica, who were holding his hands, Subaru confirmed the re-activation of Return by Death.

Sphinx: "The presumed target has escaped harm? Although, it falls into the scope of what is able to be handled."

As she missed her target, Sphinx did not worry too much over the result differing from her expectation.

The objective of the Witch was to eliminate Subaru and his companions who were present here. In that sense, taking down Jamal, who was counted among their fighting strength, was deemed sufficient as the first strike.

But—

Beatrice: “Subaru! Stay focused on what’s in front of you…”

Subaru: “Beatrice! Heal Jamal!”

Beatrice: “—Hk, understood, in fact!”

Anticipating Beatrice as she raised her voice, Subaru instructed her to heal Jamal. Hearing that, Beatrice’s eyes widened, and she immediately rushed to Jamal’s side.

Receiving Beatrice’s swift response, Subaru exchanged a glance with Spica, who was holding his opposite hand,

Subaru: “Spica, I’m counting on you!”

Spica: “Aa~, uu!”

Vigorously, Spica leaped towards Sphinx like a bouncing rubber ball.

In order to intercept Spica, Sphinx would extend ten beams of white light from her fingertips. —Therefore, before that could happen, Subaru picked up the sword that Jamal had dropped, and hurled it at her.

Sphinx: “El Jiwald.”

Jamal’s sword, spinning vertically, was cut down by the rays of heat that Sphinx wielded.

The sword was sliced into six equal parts in mid-air by the swords of light, but it successfully bought enough time for Spica to teleport. Without this support, Spica’s teleportation would not have made it in time.

Spica: “—Uu!”

As Spica gave a short howl, her figure teleported on the debris at the side of the street.

And, the rays of heat that were originally aimed at Spica, and Subaru, who was present behind her, had been dodged as an arm violently reached out from behind him, violently pushing him down.

Having lunged forward, Abel’s hand grabbed him by the back of his head, and forcefully pushed him down.

Vincent: “Fool, have you been befuddled by the sight of the enemy ringleader?”

Subaru: “You’re an Emperor who has no other ideas but to instigate stuff no matter what the pattern is…!”

Placing his hands on the ground to avoid being crushed, Subaru quickly stood back up and complained about Abel’s loathsome words.

Without saying anything in response to Subaru’s rebuttal, as Abel maintained vigilance on Sphinx,

Vincent: “We cannot expect Jamal Aurélie to get back up. We ought to ignore him.”

Subaru: “I don’t agree in the slightest. He’s got a little sister waiting for him to return home.”

Vincent: “His bereaved family shall be granted sufficient compensation.”

Subaru: “When one’s family member dies, nothing can be done to fill the hole left in their heart.”

With her hands over the wounded Jamal, Beatrice began to cast healing magic on his wounds.

Though it was frustrating, it was as Abel said. Even with the maximum effect of Beatrice's skilled healing magic, the chances of Jamal returning to this fight were close to zero.

But, if they could save Jamal from the brink of death here, it would erase one of Subaru's worries.

That held immense psychological significance in advancing the battle against Sphinx.

Therefore—

Subaru: "Sphinx! I'm the one who's gonna kill you!"

Sphinx: "…"

Sphinx, who had been glancing around to survey the situation, looked at Subaru upon his straightforward declaration.

If her attention were to shift away from Beatrice and the others towards Subaru, then it would be a success.

Subaru: "As an undead, you may think that you've overcome Death, but that'd be a huge misunderstanding and a downright lie. Nobody can live forever. There are no exceptions."

Sphinx: "…That is certainly persuasive. After all, it is a fact that you are painting over my Sacrament of the Immortal King, and are meddling with the souls of the dead. I suppose that I would be no exception. Only…"

Subaru: "Only?"

Sphinx: "—No, there is no particular need to say it. Verification: Required."

In response to Subaru's daring provocation, Sphinx shook her head slowly. However, Subaru's cheeks stiffened at Sphinx's response.

The reason for that was not because there had been anything troublesome about Sphinx's response.

It was because, while giving such a response, Sphinx slightly relaxed her lips, and smiled.

Subaru: "…Though, it's not like Ryuzu-san was ever very expressive either."

The fact that she had been resurrected as an undead likely contributed to it, but Sphinx's smile gave an impression of being even more emotionally unexpressive than Ryuzu was—Subaru felt a cold sense of dread at that.

This feeling of dread, it seemed to stem from something more profound and fundamental than mere disgust at the being of a lovely appearance that had been turned into an undead.

And, it became even more clear with Sphinx's next words.

Sphinx: "For one matter, there was Confirmation: Required. —You over there, is it correct to believe that you are Emperor Vincent Vollachia?"

Next, it was Abel, at his side, to whom Sphinx turned the brunt of her words.

Subaru raised an eyebrow as the conversation's focus unexpectedly shifted towards Abel. Given his position, it was natural for Abel to become the center of attention, but Subaru had not expected Sphinx to take notice of him here.

As someone lacking combat prowess, there was no reason to be wary of Abel, given the circumstances.

Sphinx: "Would that be alright? Response: Required."

Vincent: "To a lowly terrorist like you, I have no intention of falsifying my name or my position. —Without a shred of doubt, I am Vincent Vollachia, the Emperor of this Empire."

Sphinx: "Your answer is appreciated. Now, there was another matter for which, Confirmation: Required."

Despite Abel fixing his intimidating gaze upon her, Sphinx fearlessly continued to speak.

Perhaps because he was aware of the Great Disaster destroying the Empire, Subaru was at a loss as to how they would deal with Sphinx thereafter, who was confronting the Vollachian Emperor, Abel.

If they could prolong the conversation even slightly, it would provide Beatrice more time to heal Jamal's injuries.

Recognizing the need to take advantage of this opportunity, Subaru refrained from interrupting their conversation.

Thereupon—

Vincent: "I shan't promise any answer. Nevertheless, you may speak."

Sphinx: "—Priscilla Barielle, or perhaps Prisca Benedict."

Subaru: "…Huh?"

Subaru was taken aback by the unexpected and sudden mention of Priscilla's name.

Having participated in the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, amidst the retreat that had begun due to the emergence of the Great Disaster, Priscilla's whereabouts had become unknown. As both her and Yorna had gone missing, their safety had been confirmed by ascertaining the continuation of the Soul Marriage Technique, which Priscilla could also use for some reason.

The Soul Marriage Technique that Yorna had cast upon Tanza and the residents of Chaosflame, and that Priscilla had cast upon Schult, were proof that they were still alive.

Of course, this was about Yorna, one of the Nine Divine Generals, and that Priscilla.

Given the circumstances of how Al had remained in the Imperial Capital for the purpose of rescuing her, he naturally assumed that she had survived tenaciously, but from the mouth of Sphinx, he did not expect her name to be brought up, especially in the form of a question to Abel.

Certainly, Priscilla had been involved in the fray since the Fortress City of Guaral, indicating that she had some connection to the Vollachian Empire and Abel. Due to the profound atmosphere, one might guess that there was trouble involving the husbands of Priscilla's past.

That was—

Subaru: "…"

At the mention of the relationship between Abel and Priscilla, which Subaru had not ascertained, he briefly glanced over at Abel, who had been mentioned, and Subaru noticed him narrowing his black eyes.

Subaru knew that this subtle reaction was actually proof of Abel's considerable agitation.

Though it was uncertain whether she had noticed this, Sphinx faced the silent Emperor—

Sphinx: "Is it correct to believe that you are her brother? Conviction: Required."

Thus, she continued with a bombshell that betrayed all of Subaru's expectations.

7

—Even though she had become capable of using magic by herself, there was no sudden change in Sphinx's way of life.

By successfully invoking magic once, she was able to stabilize the method of utilizing the gate of Ryuzu Meyer's Mana-based body, and succeeded in reproducing the majority of magic grasped by the Witch of Greed's soul.

However, that did not change the dangerous position that Sphinx was placed in, and as always, she kept out of sight, continuing her days of not staying in a single place in order to avoid threats.

Only, compared to before, it had become easier to stay out of sight, and to escape threats.

Thanks to that, after one hundred and fifty years had passed since her birth, Sphinx could finally get started on her investigation to replicate the Witch of Greed, the purpose of her creation.

—The first hundred years, she devoted her time to learning about the Witch of Greed.

Despite her foundation being that of the same soul as the Witch of Greed, there were far too many things that Sphinx had lost from the Witch of Greed's soul, so the end goal she was supposed to be aiming for had become blurred.

So, in order to learn about the Witch of Greed who had already been dead for a long time, she set out on a journey to follow the legends and books in various places, but there was an organization known as the Witch Cult that was attempting to erase the "Witches" from history—that did not seem to be the original objective of its founding, but their activities served as hindrances, so results were very slow to come by.

As a result, changing the course of action, which had seen no progress over a hundred years, Sphinx searched for a different method.

—For the next hundred years, she aimed to fill in the gaps of the Witch of Greed within herself.

Due to the fact that she had gone around the world for a hundred years, and had made essentially no progress, Sphinx thought that perhaps the greatest clue to learning about the Witch of Greed was herself, who possessed the same soul.

Unsuccessful in replicating the Witch of Greed, Sphinx had been born an insufficient failure.

If she were to fill in the missing parts of her soul, restoring it to its original form, would that not then be fulfilling the purpose of her creation, to replicate the Witch of Greed?

—However, after spending a hundred years on this venture as well, it became apparent that it was infeasible, so she was at a standstill.

There was a development in her search for resources in order to learn about the Witch of Greed, which she had not abandoned, even if she had altered her course of action, and this development caused Sphinx to lose sight of the mountain top she ought to be aiming for.

It seemed like the Witch of Greed was the possessor of an awfully complex human nature.

According to the resource she had discovered, the Witch of Greed exchanged words with many people, and granted them the knowledge or wisdom they desired, which, for better or for worse, often interfered with history.

On the other hand, there was also the figure of the Witch of Greed within Sphinx's vague memories, and this version avoided contact with people as much as possible, and seldom involved herself with the lives of others.

Those conflicting images of the Witch of Greed, birthed a hesitation in Sphinx's investigation.

By this point, over three hundred years had already passed since the birth of Sphinx, and with a desire to progress her investigation in order to fulfill the purpose of her creation, Sphinx approached a decision once again.

And then, Sphinx decided. —She would make a major alteration in the methods she had been using up until now.

8

—Abel and Priscilla were brother and sister.

It was an impactful fact brought about by Sphinx; however, it tied the seeds already within Subaru together in a way that made sense, and resolved many of the doubts he had harbored.

The fact that Priscilla had intervened in the Empire's civil war, and the fact that she knew several people from the Empire starting with

Serena. Sometimes, she would have conversations that insinuated that she had a significant history concerning the Empire, and she would occasionally act in a way that seemed like she had an unusual relationship with Abel.

And, just like Abel, she had the same bizarrely arrogant and self-important personality.

He fathomed Abel's self-importance as being due to the fact that he was Emperor.

So then, just why did Priscilla act so self-important? The solution to that answer was because she was also part of the Imperial Family.

—Nay. It was that she used to be part of the Imperial Family.

Subaru: "To decide on who becomes Emperor, wasn't there that crazy rule about all the siblings needing to fight to the death?"

Vincent: "I have no intention of debating the ethics of the structure of the Imperial Selection Ceremony with you."

Subaru: "With or without a debate, the moment you started acting as Emperor and allowed Priscilla to live, I generally figured out how you two siblings thought about that rule."

The more he heard about the blood relation between Abel and Priscilla, the more he could not help but accept it, but the more he learned about that current situation, the more he understood how impossible it was for the Empire.

Originally, the rule was that everyone in the Vollachian Empire who possessed the right to succeed the Imperial Throne would fight to the death, and until only one final person remained, the Emperor would not be decided. —Abel was in violation of this rule.

In other words, Abel and Priscilla had conspired, and their current positions were ones that went against the Imperial Selection Ceremony.

Vincent: "We did not conspire. I made a decision, and I carried it out. With the death of Prisca, only Priscilla remained. That is the entirety of the matter.”

Subaru: “That’s all… ah?! So doesn’t that mean Priscilla was in a position that absolutely should have never returned to the Empire?!”

Vincent: “Are you able to imagine the extent of worry I experienced at the Fortress City? To begin with, if we are on the subject, that has been the case ever since I heard about her becoming a candidate for the Kingdom’s Royal Selection.”

Subaru: “As unusual as this is, I actually sympathize with you on that…”

As an outsider, Subaru could not imagine this, but in order to have his sister Priscilla escape, Abel ought to have crossed an equally dangerous bridge. Surely even now, if this information were to be leaked outside, it would be a bombshell that would even threaten Abel’s position as Emperor.

For that sister, whom he had gone through so much trouble to let flee, to be nominated as a candidate for the next King of the neighboring country in the short time he had taken his eyes off her, and then to come back and fight in the Empire’s civil war predicament as a foreign player, Abel must have been fighting against a hellish stomach ache behind the oni mask that almost seemed like a practical joke.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “Regardless of you two being siblings, the news that Sphinx has an interest in Priscilla is not bad at all. If Priscilla is being kept alive in the Crystal Palace, then that’s also corroborated by the Soul Marriage Technique.”

Vincent: “—. Though, I judge that the relationship between Priscilla and this damned Witch cannot be declared an amiable one.”

Subaru: “You may not be aware of this, but you two siblings are pretty hard to get along with, so you better fix that. That’s even the case with your allies, so isn’t it a bit too excessive for your enemies?”

Vincent: “Such disrespect; even if I happen to overlook it, that shall not be the case with Priscilla.”

As soon as the information about them being brother and sister was revealed, Abel did not hesitate to skip over the topic of their blood ties.

In reality, it was true that he was more scared of angering Priscilla, who would unrelentingly cut down people whom she judged to be disagreeable, than he was of angering Abel, who did not possess the strength to strike down insolent individuals.

Subaru: “Speaking of cutting down, that sword that Priscilla is always swinging around—”

Vincent: “—The Yang Sword Vollachia.”

He had never gotten a good look at it up close, but he understood that the thing Priscilla often suddenly unsheathed from the air was a treasured sword that concealed tremendous power.

When Subaru brought up that topic, Abel gave the best possible answer.

Subaru: “…If I’m not mistaken, is that Yang Sword something that gets passed down generation to generation in the Empire?”

Vincent: “Indeed.”

Subaru: “Then, isn’t it bad for her to wield it in the first place before her identity is hidden or not?!”

Vincent: “—. Indeed.”

As Abel responded in a stiff voice, Subaru began to get a headache over Priscilla’s audacious behavior.

That was likely so. —As a former member of the Vollachian Imperial Family, the fact that she was alive was a bombshell that could pose quite a threat to the reign of the Emperor, and yet she boldly stood at center stage as a Royal Selection Candidate of the Kingdom, and on top of that, lacked caution as she often wielded the treasured sword of Imperial origin.

It was no wonder that whenever somebody who knew Priscilla before appeared, they would make moves that suggested they knew of her past. It was because the person in question had not kept anything hidden at all.

Subaru: “Is she like Emilia-tan, who thought she could get by with calling herself Emily…”

That too, was because Emilia was a charming, natural airhead, a beautiful girl without peer, but in Priscilla’s case, since she ought to have been fully aware of her own position, it was just her poor personality.

In any case—

Subaru: “In truth, aren’t you the one who’s supposed to have the Yang Sword?”

Vincent: “…”

At Subaru’s question, Abel maintained his silence.

If that were incorrect, Abel would have responded so with eloquent reasoning. The fact that he did not do so, meant that Subaru ought to think such was the case.

That was why—

9

Jamal: “—You idiot!”

Now that he thought about it, just who was that cursing actually directed towards?

Was it towards Subaru and the two girls, whom he had suddenly jumped in to protect, or was it perhaps Sphinx, who had mercilessly aimed for the children? —Or was it towards Jamal himself, who had reduced his own options for the following events?

Of course, it would have been one of the former options, as there was no way it was the final possibility.

Certainly, from Subaru's perspective, using Return by Death to try and break the deadlock, Jamal's act of protecting Subaru and the two girls was an interference that held no meaning.

If Jamal had not protected him, Sphinx's surprise attack would have evaporated Subaru's head, and Return by Death would have activated, which would have allowed him to commence his response from an earlier state.

Where that would have been the same as now, after contact had been made with Sphinx, or if it would have been from an earlier point, he did not know.

Only, in that case, Jamal would not have been injured, which would have expanded the possibilities for strategy in a situation in which a battle against Sphinx was unavoidable.

As a result, when Jamal collapsed due to the magic, Jamal was subtracted from the fighting strength of Subaru's group, and Beatrice was restrained to using healing magic in order to save him from the verge of death.

Looking at just the events that had occurred, Jamal's conduct had actually been a burden on Subaru's group.

However—

Subaru: "…"

Taking pride in the fact that he was a Sword Wolf, motivated to cut open a future for his sister with his sword, Jamal had sacrificed himself to protect Subaru and the two girls; Subaru would not let that action be meaningless.

After all, lives, instincts, and hearts were not those kinds of things.

Sphinx: "The presumed target has escaped harm? Although—"

Subaru: “You made me eat your shoe! But, now we’re even!”

Sphinx: “…”

Missing her target due to the collapsed Jamal, Sphinx was about to start saying something. Painting over the words of the Witch, Subaru spoke to Jamal in a loud voice.

Subaru did not know whether that loud voice of his had reached Jamal or not.

But, at the camp site immediately after he had been sent off to the Vollachian Empire, Subaru had received some terribly cruel treatment from Jamal. Just now, he forgave that. —Jamal, too, was unmistakably one of his comrades.

Subaru: “Beatrice! Heal Jamal!”

Beatrice: “—Hk, understood, in fact!”

At Subaru’s subsequent direction, Beatrice quickly hastened to Jamal. Feeling the sensation of her slender fingers drifting away, Subaru pulled Spica, who was holding the opposite hand towards himself,

Subaru: “Spica, I’m counting on you!”

Spica: “Aa~, uu!”

With an expression brimming with motivation, Spica kicked off the ground, and with the vigor of a bouncing rubber ball, she leapt towards Sphinx.

Spica jumped right towards her, causing her long, blonde hair to flutter, and Sphinx ignored the fact that her speech had been canceled, and raised both of her hands.

She created ten swords of light—thereupon, Subaru threw one of Jamal’s swords.

Sphinx: “El Jiwald.”

Spica: "—Uu!"

The white light melted Jamal's rotating sword, and also aimed for Spica, who was present beyond it. But, before they could reach her, Spica's form teleported to the side of the street. At the same time, Subaru's head was forced to duck down by Abel's hand from behind, so they had succeeded in evading Sphinx's counterattack.

Vincent: "You did well to shift gears immediately. But, there shall be no meaning if you cannot keep it up."

Subaru: "I know! I'll say this now, but don't abandon Jamal!"

Vincent: "—. His bereaved family shall be granted sufficient compensation."

Subaru: "In that case, I'll save the people who you won't save!"

Talking back to the overly-rational Abel, Subaru held his ground with his body that had been made to fall. With that posture, he glared at Sphinx, whose attack he had evaded,

Subaru: "Sphinx! I'm the one who's gonna kill you!"

Sphinx: "…"

Subaru: "I'm gonna kill the undead you. Resurrection magic isn't all powerful. You think I'm lying?"

Sphinx: "…That is certainly persuasive. After all, it is a fact that you are painting over my Sacrament of the Immortal King, and are meddling with the souls of the dead. I suppose that I would be no exception. Only…"

In order to draw attention to himself, Subaru tried to provoke her, to which Sphinx shook her head from side to side. Having recognized that Subaru's claim was somewhat persuasive,

Sphinx: "—No, there is no particular need to say it. Verification: Required."

Despite maintaining vigilance over her natural enemy, Subaru—or, to be precise, Spica's Star Eating, she gave a smile that seemed to be the exact opposite of that mental image.

The Witch's smile, only the origin of it was unknown to him. Ultimately, there was no need to know, either.

Vincent: "Do not lose your nerve."

Speaking to Subaru in a low voice, for a moment, Abel stood next to him and furrowed his brow. The intention of those sable eyes requested an explanation, but Subaru would leave that up to the flow of events.

With the aftertaste of her smile remaining, Sphinx looked towards Abel,

Sphinx: "For one matter, there was Confirmation: Required. You over there—"

Subaru: "—This guy is Vincent Vollachia, the Emperor of this nation. That, and, you aren't mistaken that he's Priscilla's older brother."

Sphinx: "…"

Before Sphinx could finish asking her question, Subaru interrupted with the answer.

The moment that was done to her, Sphinx moved her eyebrows with a level of clear surprise for the first time. Abel, who had just given him a warning, was surprised to a similar extent, but that was a necessary expense.

Spica: "Uu~, Au!"

Jumping at Sphinx, Spica took action that counterbalanced that sundry expense.

With an agility that resembled the hunting style of a cat, Spica closed in on the Witch, but rather than the claws of a cat swinging its paws, she had the might of swing from a lion, or a tiger, or perhaps even a bear.

It was the kind of blow that, if received directly, would make a mess of even an undead warrior in a single hit; without sparing any quarter, Spica had pummeled that into Sphinx's slender body—

Sphinx: "I am surprised. It seems that you have specialities that lie outside the realm of meddling with souls."

Spica: "Aa~u?!"

Sphinx's quiet analysis overlapped with Spica's high-pitched voice of astonishment.

Spica's astonishment was natural. The blow containing all of her might had indeed been delivered to Sphinx. However, with the single arm Sphinx had raised, she had skillfully parried it.

With her blue eyes wide-open, Spica stared into the golden eyes of the Witch,

Sphinx: "Were you taken aback? My defeat in the Demi-Human War was partly because of my inexperience in martial arts. Taking that into account, I began learning from square one. But then again—"

Spica: "Uu?!"

Sphinx: "There is a limit to the enhancement of abilities that can be yielded through the Flow Method for this replicant body."

While speaking, Sphinx used the momentum from her parry, and threw Spica down by her head.

That elegant movement and technique were not something that had been acquired through half-hearted training. As the Witch had confessed herself, she had used her former defeat as a resource to learn from.

It would make anyone think that it was unnecessary to mention the person who had beat the Witch in a fist fight in the past.

Subaru: "Spicaaa!"

Spica: "—Uu~, au!"

As Subaru raised his voice, Spica firmly clenched her teeth.

That moment before her head hit the ground, Spica twisted her body around, and used her body like a cat once more. Gently landing on her knees, Spica nimbly distanced herself from Sphinx.

Spica: “Au?!”

However, Spica’s movements were stopped as she tried to fall back.

Sphinx had caught the sleeve of Spica’s right arm, preventing the latter’s withdrawal. —Immediately after, the girl and the Witch exchanged glances, and an extremely close-quarters bout of combat commenced.

Spica: “Uu! Au! A~au! Aau!”

Each grappling with one arm, Spica and Sphinx engaged in high-level combat with minimal movement.

As Spica desperately swung around blows, Sphinx utilized smooth technique as if to say “the soft controls the hard”, and sometimes, she would interweave magic fired from her fingertips into her counteroffensive.

Subaru: “Beako!”

Beatrice: “Just a little longer, I suppose!”

Witnessing the tempestuous battle, Subaru called out to Beatrice, and she responded. With her hands glowing, Beatrice was pouring all her efforts into using healing magic on the collapsed Jamal.

So then, should he keep waiting for Beatrice, who was yet unable to return, and go without providing cover?

Subaru: “Like I could ever do such a thing!”

Eliminating the option of doing nothing, Subaru suddenly drew the Guiltywhip from the back of his waist.

Then, as Subaru made that decision, Abel violently held back his shoulder.

Vincent: “Wait, Natsuki Subaru. If you move carelessly—”

Subaru: “You goddamn idiot! Is this the time to be saying that?!”

Talking back to Abel’s sharp complaint in a loud voice, Subaru shook free and began sprinting.

He heard Abel clicking his tongue behind him, but without stopping, Subaru raised his whip overhead to provide cover to Spica, who was being toyed with by Sphinx’s tactics of interweaving magic and martial arts.

Subaru: “Sh—!”

The tip of the whip flew with a speed that could not be derided as the strength of a child.

To be more accurate, it was not as good as when his body was at its original size, but he had put his concentration to good use in this extreme situation. Even if his shrunken body had forgotten the days of training he spent to master the whip, his willpower produced a miracle.

The whip tore through the air, and like a snake’s fangs, it was absorbed into Sphinx’s back—

Subaru: “—Wha…”

Sphinx: “Feelings of protectiveness and impatience amount to poison that causes lapses in judgment. Since I have a comprehension of what emotions are, albeit only slightly, I know of their dreadfulness.”

As Sphinx indifferently responded, she caught the Guiltywhip with her right hand. But, Sphinx had purposely reached out her right hand to do so. Sphinx’s left hand was grasping Spica’s right sleeve, and her right hand was fastened to Subaru’s whip, so now both of her hands had been sealed.

However—

Spica: “Aa, uu…hk”

Spilling out pathetic cries of pain, Spica fell to her knees, as her left thigh had been pierced by white light. —Unable to use either of her hands, that had been done by a blow fired from Sphinx’s undead golden right eye.

Sphinx: “Fingers and tools can be used to assist with the invocation of magic. It is a mistaken conception that those who are not versed in magic are prone to having.”

Subaru: “Spica—uoahh?!”

Spica groaned at the pain, and Subaru screamed in her stead, but Sphinx pulled on the whip with a forceful movement, resolutely felling him to the ground before the Witch.

Clenching his teeth, Subaru endured the pain. The face of Spica on her knees right next to him, and the face of Sphinx looking down at him from above, he clearly saw both of them.

Meeting eyes with the golden irises in which no heat could be felt—

Sphinx: “—For what reason, are you smiling?”

Subaru: “Because everything until now has gone exactly as I had planned.”

Seeing Subaru’s expression as he lay face-up on the ground, Sphinx voiced a question.

Answering it, Subaru let go of the whip that he had purposely been holding onto, and with the emptied hand, he directed a finger gun towards Sphinx.

And then—

Subaru: “—Minya!”

The tip of Subaru’s finger glowed, and immediately after, a crystal arrow of amethyst hue was fired.

Surprise, close-range, negligence, a performance that deserved an Academy Award—as various factors intertwined, Sphinx had no measures by which she could evade Subaru's preparations.

Sphinx: "—Reflection: Required, indeed."

Sphinx tilted her head right away, and muttered in a slightly cracked voice.

Subaru's purple arrow made an impact on Sphinx's right eye, and bore through it. The area around the impact began to crystallize, encroaching on Sphinx's pale skin.

Originally, Yin Magic was supposed to display particular efficiency against the undead, but this was instantaneous.

Subaru: "Did you think I was just an intelligent brat? It's a misconception that everyone tends to have."

—Subaru was the Spiritual Arts User who had contracted with the cute and talented Beatrice.

Even if his body were shrunken, his connection with Beatrice would not be severed. Beatrice and Subaru were connected by their gates, and Beatrice would draw from Subaru's Mana to utilize magic.

The reverse was also true. Subaru could also borrow Beatrice's power to use magic. That was precisely how, in the first battle after he had contracted with Beatrice, they used magic to mow down the hordes of the Great Rabbit.

But then again, that first battle had used up all the Mana that Beatrice had amassed over four hundred years, and now the most Subaru could do was fire off a trump card limited to a single shot within Beatrice's range of sight.

But, the important things were the fact that he had a trump card, and the fact that he did not make a mistake when he used it.

Subaru: "Spica, one final push!"

Spica: "Uu!"

Sphinx was taken aback by the impact of the magic, so Subaru would rush her down there.

Her leg battered, concealing her expression that was stiffened by the pain with an unfaltering fighting spirit, Spica jumped up and grabbed Subaru's hand, and he firmly stood up on the spot.

His wounds were painful. But, no matter how many times he tried, they would not get any more minor than this.

Therefore, this was the best development to move forward with everybody remaining alive—Subaru acted in place of Spica's left leg, and together they headed towards Sphinx.

By having Spica's Star Eating reach its target, they would defeat Sphinx—

Sphinx: "You were at least able to see through Valga's stratagem. Admiration: Required."

As the scope of the crystallization extended out from the right eye, Sphinx praised Subaru.

Then, the hardening face of the Witch took the shape of a smile, and she placed the index finger of her left hand right under her jaw. That finger was forming a finger gun, as if to spite Subaru.

Subaru: "—Hk."

That instant, Subaru intuited that her action was a preparation for Escape by Death.

It was a plan to commit suicide by blowing off her own head, and resetting the situation. —If she committed suicide here, and escaped with intelligence on Subaru's group, Sphinx would never appear before them again.

The chance to have Star Eating reach its target, would not come about again.

Before he could move to put a stop to that, a faint light glowed in the tip of Sphinx's finger—

???: “—YOU IDIOOOT!!”

A slashing attack accompanied a cursing voice akin to coughing up blood, and Sphinx’s left arm was cut off at the elbow.

Sphinx: “…”

Seeing her arm spin as it flew away, Sphinx widened her eyes.

Throwing the sword, which had a hole in its blade, severing that arm, and preventing the Escape by Death planned by Sphinx, his eyes bloodshot, was Jamal.

Having sustained a serious injury, Jamal attacked, and it was Beatrice who supported his body. While applying healing magic to his wound, Beatrice followed up on Jamal’s sword throw.

For a moment, Sphinx, who was gazing in wonder, and Beatrice, who had previously responded that the healing would take more time, crossed gazes,

Beatrice: “That was a downright lie, in fact.”

Sticking out her tongue, Beatrice revealed that the miraculous come-back of Jamal was not actually a miracle.

Be that as it may, even if she had lost one arm, Sphinx could do the same thing with her remaining right hand. —No, she could have done so if not for the moment with Beatrice.

Vincent: “That sent shivers down my spine.”

Contrary to the contents of the words, the spun voice was as indifferent as always.

But, there might have very well been some real danger. —After all, too much force had been applied to Jamal’s sword to say it had been merely passed over.

Sphinx: “Admiration: Required.”

Vincent: “I require no such thing.”

As Sphinx widened her remaining left eye at the events that had transpired, Abel coldly responded. Then, the black-haired Emperor, swinging the sword he had received, severed Sphinx’s right arm from its shoulder.

Sphinx: “Ahh…”

Her left hand was lost, her right arm was severed, the balance of her body crumbled as she attempted to escape, and Sphinx’s back forcefully crashed into the street of the Imperial Capital without even bracing herself.

Passing the Witch on the ground as she looked up, Subaru deeply exhaled as he looked down on her.

In order to corner her like this, it had taken a multitude of tactics, and to a lesser extent, some trial and error. Finally, having arrived at this point, which had taken all of that, Subaru now stood before Sphinx.

Subaru: “It’s our win.”

Sphinx: “…Indeed. I shall admit it. It is, my loss.”

A serious injury for Jamal, some injuries for Spica and Subaru, and no injuries for Beatrice and Abel; that was the result obtained in this domain, and fully understanding that, Subaru made his declaration, to which Sphinx nodded.

Even without her two arms, it was quite possible for her to shoot something from her eye, like she had done to attack Spica. The right half of her face was already crystallized, but it was of maximum priority to not allow her to do anything else.

Subaru: “Sphinx.”

The fact that this was not an act of him calling out to her, was something that even Sphinx herself understood.

This was merely an indication to have Spica get to work, the path he had prepared for her Authority, Star Eating. Leaning on Subaru’s shoulder, Spica reached her hand out towards Sphinx.

By meddling with the soul of the undead Witch, they would finally put an end to this Great Disaster—

???: "—Jiwald."

The next moment, right before Spica's fingers could make contact, the crystallizing face of Sphinx evaporated—the fired white light blew off the Witch's cranium, crushing Subaru's plan.

Everyone: "…"

Sphinx had been thoroughly killed from the side, and Subaru's group had their breaths taken away. The Sphinx before their eyes crumbled, and promptly turned to dust.

And, the one who had done that was—

???: "From how it appears, I have concluded that this was an exceedingly perilous scene. Respondence: Required."

???: "The effects of the Sacrament of the Immortal King are useful, but when that usefulness is experienced, it is irritating that information cannot be immediately shared on the spot. Improvement: Required."

???: "Before that, I suppose we ought to give priority to eliminating them. Counteroffensive: Required."

At the bustling voices heard in quick succession, Subaru clearly felt Spica's body stiffen through his shoulder. Likely, Spica also felt him do the same.

It was only natural that they experienced that level of shock.

???: "—Combat: Required."

???: "—Combat: Required."

???: "—Combat: Required."

After all, having disposed of the cornered Sphinx, several uninjured Witches, several uninjured Sphinxes, had gathered together.

—For Sphinx, intervention in the Demi-Human War was something exceedingly convenient.

The feelings of antipathy between humans and demi-humans that had been on the rise within the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, flared up into a large inferno with merely a small kindling, and the longstanding transient peace was destroyed.

The environment that persecuted demi-humans regardless of their participation in the civil war entirely eliminated the unnaturalness of Sphinx making contact with the Demi-Human Alliance. If she introduced herself as a half-elf, she did not need any greater justification to join the alliance.

There, meeting the two principal leaders of the Demi-Human Alliance, Valga Cromwell and Libre Fermi, was quite the fortuitous happening for Sphinx.

In particular, Valga of the Giant tribe, who, contrary to his fierce appearance, possessed an outstanding intellect, had realized the usefulness of the magic and knowledge in Sphinx's possession, and had daringly included her into their tactics, securing victories for the Demi-Human Alliance on many battlefields.

Sphinx, too, unveiled much of the Witch of Greed's knowledge that had never been revealed until then, and assisted in Valga's plans, or perhaps it was her who had gained assistance.

—The Sacrament of the Immortal King, too, was a forbidden art that had only been successfully reproduced thanks to the Demi-Human Alliance.

Even if she had knowledge of the technique itself, it was the research of the details needed to implement it, and the strategic plans in which the technique was actually used, that had allowed Valga to skillfully lead in the Demi-Human War.

Sphinx had no interest in the victory of the Demi-Human Alliance, and she had just been making use of that environment, but back then, the presence of Valga and the others had helped her out immensely. But then again, Libre, the snakeman who held the same position of leader alongside Valga, had misgivings about dealing with Sphinx, and they had not constructed a good relationship with each other.

In any case, Sphinx had obtained many of the things she had desired with the Demi-Human War.

Amongst them, that which she had wished to observe the most was “love”—in order to fulfill the purpose of her creation, it seemed to be the thing that the incomplete Sphinx was lacking the most. The sense of attachment that was generally defined as “love”, she had gained many opportunities to witness it up close, and that was a great result for her.

Within Valga, within Libre, within many of the demi-humans and humans alike, that was present.

The actuality of its existence, and the confidence that it was indeed missing from within herself, were the greatest things Sphinx had gained.

Only, with the situation that had not moved for over three hundred and fifty years finally having moved, it ought to be said that Sphinx had gotten a bit greedy. —With the threat she had forgotten about, she reunited.

Knowing that Sphinx had been constructed with the purpose of replicating the Witch of Greed’s soul, harboring an unbearable vindictiveness of desiring her existence to be erased, it was the Witch of Greed’s disciple.

—Ultimately, Sphinx ended up being defeated by that disciple of the Witch of Greed.

11

The situation he had feared, arrived precisely at the moment he had feared it.

The sensation of cold fingers being thrust into his mouth, and the sensation of the drug package, which he had grown accustomed to being in there, being yanked out, caused Subaru to recall that.

???: "I suppose this is poison for the purpose of suicide? It is an inexplicable preparation."

???: "Is it truly so inexplicable? When one heads for the battlefield, they have generally resolved themself for death. Additionally, if one is captured by their enemy, it is effective in eliminating the room for having information extracted."

???: "What about a battlefield on which that general expression would be improper? They should also be aware that if they were to lose their life here, it would not necessarily mean their mouth would be sealed for certain."

With the same voice, with the same manner of speech, with the same tone, analyses piled up, and ultimately, several pairs of eyes looked at Subaru.

The Witches who all bore the same face, simultaneously peered into Subaru's black eyes—

Witch: "Answer: Required."

Witch: "Answer: Required."

Witch: "Answer: Required."

Then, having stolen Subaru's method of suicide, and binding his arms behind his back, they enquired so.

—The several newly-appeared Sphinxes had completely overpowered Subaru's group, which had a great deal of struggle to corner just a single Sphinx, in less than a minute.

Spica: "Ua, uu…"

Pinned to the ground, Spica desperately squirmed in an attempt to assist the captive Subaru.

But, even if given treatment, the wound on her leg was deep, and she could not shake free from the Sphinx who was pinning her down. It was not just Spica. Beatrice and Jamal were also lying collapsed on the street in a battered state.

In particular, since Jamal had continued to shower the Sphinxes with abusive language, he had ended up being scrupulously tormented until he had completely lost consciousness.

And then—

Vincent: “From one indecision to the next, do you not tire of it all?”

Sphinx: “Even when you are cornered to this degree, I admire that your spirit still refuses to yield. I can sense the blood relation with your sister… with Priscilla Barielle.”

Vincent: “Hmph, did you think I would waver at the mention of Priscilla? In addition to mimicking Lamia, the one known as the Witch engages in some terribly impudent actions.”

Abel trained a hostile gaze on Sphinx, and spat those words out together with the blood in his mouth.

Right now, the ones facing off against the Sphinxes were him, standing on his own two feet, and Subaru, whose arms were bound behind his back. And with Subaru forced to kneel, Abel became the sole man standing.

Present here were three Sphinxes.

One of them was restraining Subaru, one of them was pinning Spica down, and the last one was free to move as she pleased.

Facing them, Abel had sustained no small amount of wounds amidst the short resistance. His clothes were sullied and torn, and wiping the blood off his cheek with his sleeve, by his feet was the sword he had discarded as it had lost its blade.

But, even with this much damage done to him, Abel had not sustained a fatal wound.

In this eleventh hour, that was thanks to Abel’s remarkable swordsmanship blooming—such a thing was not the case, for it was by the Sphinxes' intentions, that Abel had been kept alive.

Sphinx: "Lamia Godwin, it is true that I have learned from her. She possessed a certain observative ability to see the true nature of things. She was much closer to the truth of "souls" than I am."

Sphinx: "Thanks to her, parallel reproduction of the Sacrament of the Immortal King has succeeded. It slightly deviates from the desired result, but, it is true that it has advanced us one level higher."

Sphinx: "Without that, it would have been infeasible to appear before you in this manner."

The Sphinxes strung words together; the trick of producing several of the same undead at the same time, was an abuse of the Sacrament of the Immortal King, used by Abel's sister when she had attacked the coupled dragon carriages—used by Lamia Godwin.

To be honest, if Spica's Star Eating was flawless, then the multiplication of undead was nothing more than an act of increasing the number of targets that could be hit. Because she understood that, Sphinx had separated Subaru and Spica, and had restrained them.

And then, the reason that the Sphinxes had kept Abel alive by himself was—

Sphinx: "—As a member of the Vollachian Imperial Family, your Yang Sword was a threat. Vigilance: Required."

Vincent: "…"

At the words of the empty-handed Sphinx, Abel slightly narrowed his sable eyes.

That which Sphinx maintained vigilance over, the Yang Sword Vollachia—a great treasure of the Empire that concealed tremendous power. Subaru, too, had once personally witnessed the remarkable power of the Yang Sword.

However, at that time, the owner of the Yang Sword was not Abel, but—

Sphinx: "—Priscilla Barielle. Or perhaps Prisca Benedict."

Subaru: "Guh, Abel…!"

Sphinx: "He ought to be the Vollachian Emperor, Vincent Vollachia. The way you call him Abel, I thought it was improper to call him by a nickname or alias? Correction: Required."

Pointing out such a trivial imperfection in his speech, she firmly pushed Subaru down into the ground by his face. Ignoring Subaru as he groaned with his face rubbing against the ground, Sphinx tilted her head at Abel,

Sphinx: "It seems that you truly do not possess the Yang Sword."

Indeed, facing Abel—facing Vincent Vollachia, she plainly declared that he did not have ownership of the Yang Sword, the proof that one was the Emperor.

Subaru: "—Hk."

At Sphinx's assertion, Abel maintained his silence, but Subaru's throat clogged up.

Just how humiliating that would have been for the Vollachian Emperor, Subaru did not know.

But, he knew that just like the fact that he had let the sister whom he ought to have killed in the Imperial Selection Ceremony live, asking any more about the Emperor's nature would not be tolerated.

And then, the act of ascertaining that, was unmistakably the reason why Sphinx had kept Abel alive.

Sphinx: "Would you accompany me, Emperor Vincent Vollachia? If it is alright with you, I would like to take you to meet your younger sister, Priscilla Barielle. Analysis: Required."

Vincent: “To meet Priscilla, you say? What are you plotting?”

Sphinx: “I refuse to answer. Deliberation: Required.”

To Abel, who did not possess a decisive blow in order to resist, Sphinx made a peculiar offer. The true intent behind that offer had not been spoken. But, if Abel agreed, he would be able to survive a little longer.

Nevertheless, the apex of the Empire had naught the charm to carelessly follow such a proposal.

Vincent: “Do not jest with me, Witch. If there was need to converse with Priscilla, I would do so on my own, even without the likes of your permission. Just who do you think I—who do you think I am?”

Sphinx: “…”

Boldly answering so, Abel crossed his arms, rejecting the Witch’s proposal.

Sullied, shedding blood, with even his life in the palm of his opponent; however, the figure of Abel maintaining his unwavering attitude, was undoubtedly that of the very Sword Wolf held in great esteem by the Vollachian Empire.

Sphinx: “—Reflection: Required.”

There was no change in her countenance or verbal expression, but Sphinx’s voice housed a clear disappointment.

As the reason for that had not been revealed, it remained unknown. But, Sphinx found it unfortunate that she could not take Abel to where Priscilla was.

And, Sphinx, reflecting on the fact that had caused her such disappointment, as if rejecting it,

Sphinx: “What about in exchange for the lives of these individuals? Re-analysis: Required.”

The question was asked while pointing fingers at Subaru and Spica, who were pinned down.

In order to bestow the question with more persuasive power, Sphinx increased the pressure of her bind on Subaru.

Spica: “Auu! Uu~, Uau!”

Subaru: “Spica…!!”

Likely, the same amount of pressure was being applied to Spica. Kicking and struggling, Spica had a better shot of escaping the restraint than Subaru did, so she attempted to fight back against the Sphinx behind her.

And before the resistance could take hold—

Subaru: “Gah, gi, gyaaaaaaaah…!”

Sphinx: “—Reflection: Required.”

The dull, creaking sound that reverberated, was the destructive noise of a bone being painfully broken. That was the result of not Spica’s, but Subaru’s right elbow having been bent in the opposite direction.

Sharp pain stabbed his brain, and the pain from all of his other bruises and scratches was momentarily blown away. Blood frothed up as he bit his lip, and the unbearable tears streamed down drop by drop.

While making that example out of him, neither the Sphinx who had broken his arm, nor the Sphinx who was about to break Spica’s arm, nor the Sphinx who had directed them to do so, had shown even the slightest fluctuation in emotions.

Only, in order to grant her own desire, her gaze was that of a spectator, wondering if the example that had been made would produce results.

However—

Vincent: “—Tedious.”

Abel's reply, even though Subaru's arm had been broken, conceded no emotions whatsoever.

Receiving that, Sphinx finally let out a short exhale, and,

Sphinx: "If possible, I would have liked to bring you back alive, but…"

Vincent: "Do not jest. If you had wished to fulfill that no matter what, it would have been better to fashion me into an undead and bring me along."

Sphinx: "To say that would be difficult, is a conclusion of all the materials of analysis until now."

At Sphinx's answer, Abel closed one eye as if going into rumination. But, before those thoughts yielded any progress, the Sphinxes began to take action.

The Sphinxes pinning Subaru and Spica down each raised a single finger. —Holding Subaru and Spica up, the Sphinxes placed those fingers against the backs of each of their heads.

Subaru: "A-Abel…"

Gasping and sweating at the pain of his broken arm, Subaru called out to Abel. In the same situation as Spica, who was struggling next to him, it was obvious what Sphinx's aim was.

But, it was for naught. After all, examples being made would not serve any use.

Vincent: "There is no meaning in taking hostages. Or perhaps, does the Witch fail to understand such simple things?"

Sphinx: "Is that so?"

Vincent: "What?"

Sphinx: "Emotions or feelings of protection are difficult things to deal with. Even you, the apex of the Empire, are no exception. —Exertion: Required."

Indeed, the sole free Sphinx spoke to Abel, and then slowly lifted her hand.

Then, raising a single finger of that raised hand, as she aimed it at Abel's chest,

Sphinx: "Please do not move. If you value their lives…"

Vincent: "—Menial."

Abel's short words, which seemed as if he was gnashing his teeth, yielded a crooked smile on Sphinx's mouth.

That moment, Sphinx's fingertip glowed with light. —It was not just the one aiming for Abel, but the fingers thrust against the backs of Subaru's and Spica's heads were also glowing.

—He had been waiting for the Witch to make that vicious choice.

Subaru: "Leap, Spica!!"

Sphinx: "Eh?"

Right before the fatal light was fired, Subaru forgot about his pain and yelled out. Receiving that, one of the bewildered Sphinxes disappeared from there. —She had been forcibly taken along by Spica's teleport.

And with Spica's leap as a signal, there was also movement on Subaru's side. That was not movement from Subaru himself, but—

???: "No matter how you look at it, you are pushing it way too far, I suppose!"

Speaking in an angered voice was Beatrice, who had been silently awaiting Subaru's signal in her collapsed state.

Having patiently endured, she now poured the feelings of wanting to rush forth, which she had withstood from the moment when Subaru had his arm broken, into the amethyst crystals, and shot them into Sphinx, who had perpetrated that deed.

Sphinx: “…”

The situation had hectically moved to turn the tables.

The attack of the Sphinxes, who had been restraining Subaru and Spica, had ended in failure.

The one who had been a hindrance on Subaru’s side was Beatrice, but the one who had been a hindrance on Spica’s side was none other than Sphinx herself.

—When Spica had teleported, she had intercepted the line of fire of the Sphinx who had fired her magic at Abel, and had made the heat ray of light shoot down the Sphinx who was restraining her.

Sphinx: “This is—”

Subject to an undesired friendly fire, the one remaining Sphinx widened her eyes.

One was shot down and terminated by her own magic, and another was crystallized into an amethyst statue by a magic arrow.

Still, this was about all that could be done with a surprise attack.

Sphinx: “I do not think that the final person will also stand back up.”

Subaru, with his arm broken, Spica, who had been restrained, and Beatrice, who had been thought to have been unconscious, had attempted a counterattack. But unfortunately, Jamal, who had been thoroughly beaten down, did not stand up.

Ascertaining that, the final remaining Sphinx quickly readied both of her hands, produced ten swords of light from each set of five fingers, and this time, she attempted to mince up Subaru and his friends for sure.

Because of that, she did not even realize that she had taken her eyes off of the one person whom she absolutely should not have taken her eyes off of.

Vincent: “—Come forth, Yang Sword Vollachia.”

A quiet, yet dignified voice, one reliable to an aggravating extent, sounded upon Subaru’s eardrums.

No matter the tumult, no matter how many people were present, no matter how harsh a battle was unfolding on the battlefield, that man’s voice would always unquestionably reach its desired target.

That was the kingly caliber of the one who stood atop all others, shouldering the destiny of guiding their way.

As if to prove that, dazzling the eyes of all those present, providing a red illumination was—

Sphinx: “—I thought you were not supposed to have that in your possession.”

Vincent: “Fool. —Never once have I said that I had relinquished the Yang Sword or any act of the like.”

Only, the treasured blade of crimson which he had not drawn once, no matter what hardship had stood in his path, merely for the purpose of drawing closer the opportunity for victory in this moment, he now drew out from the sheath of the sky.

And then—

Subaru: “This battle of trickery, is our win.”

Vincent: “The stratagems of my two strategists. —You have underestimated them.”

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Bearing the pain, Subaru took pride in their victory, and Abel took pride in the victory of the capabilities of the strategist who was not present here, the one who had devised the plan that had made even the Witch firmly believe that Abel had lost his trump card.

—The next moment, with Yang Sword in hand, Abel kicked off the ground, and leapt.

That was the dash of one who possessed definite strength, incomparable to the Abel up until this point. As the owner chosen by the Yang Sword itself, he was propelled to a dimension befitting that status.

To be precise, as if the world was being illuminated by sunlight, Abel forcefully raised the treasured sword overhead—

Vincent: "—The Yang Sword cuts what I decide to cut, burns what I decide to burn."

Sphinx: "…"

The flash of crimson ran diagonally, and without any resistance, it burned away Sphinx's ten white lights that had immediately tried to intercept Abel.

It was illogical for light to burst into flames, but the supernatural power that could make one believe it was natural was contained within the Yang Sword's radiance, and therefore the following conclusion was inevitable.

Sphinx: "—ah."

And, leaking out a hoarse breath, Sphinx, having taken a great leap backwards, looked down at herself.

The Witch had fallen back with agile movements; however, one tuft of her pink hair had been cut by the flash of the Yang Sword—that instant, Sphinx's whole body ignited.

And, that was not just the Sphinx who had been cut; the fire also spread to the Sphinx whom she herself had shot and reduced to dust, as well as the Sphinx who had been turning into an amethyst crystal.

—The Yang Sword Vollachia had decided to burn the Witch, Sphinx, to naught.

The result of that, was the burning figures of the Sphinxes.

Sphinx: "…"

Enveloped in a blaze, it probably would have been best to keep vigilance over Sphinx as she struggled in vain before she was reduced to ashes, but—

Vincent: "'Tis unnecessary. Being scorched by the flame of the Yang Sword, is precisely that sort of thing."

Subaru: "…I see. I'm beginning to doubt your nerve for keeping that hidden until the eleventh hour."

With the Yang Sword lowered in one hand, Abel indicated that Subaru's caution was a needless fear. Subaru talked back with some bad-mouthing, but he did not respond.

Only, being scorched in a rising blaze, he trained his gaze upon Sphinx, present amidst a flame that would reach even her soul.

Staring at her, Abel—nay, Vincent Vollachia, spoke.

Vincent: "The proposal for this occasion. —It was a great service, Chisha Gold."

Chapter 60:
Witch

1

The Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, in the place that was formerly its audience chamber, the shinobi who had snuck in, Olbart Dunkelkenn, waved his right arm that was missing from the elbow down, and frowned his white eyebrows.

Olbart: “Finally stopped movin’, eh? Jeez, that makes a geezer like me feel way too depressed.”

In front of Olbart as he slowly shrugged his shoulders and heaved a sigh, was the grotesque figure that caused the shinobi old man to become fed up—its form had been altered in a repulsive manner, to the extent that it would be ridiculous to even call it an undead; what remained of that grotesque thing’s face was sprawled out across the floor.

Olbart considered his treatment of that bizarrely abhorrent thing to be an assistance.

The undead were resurrected with their memories intact. In addition, in order to resurrect the undead, the Mana of the Stone, Muspel, who dominated the vast lands of the Empire, was being expended. —Therefore, he had been ordered to keep the killing of the undead to a minimum.

Olbart: “Even so, it was better ta kill it. It’s way too awful if it makes me think that way.”

Valuing human life or having mercy towards the weak, that leeway that only people with such room in their hearts possessed, was something that Olbart, who did not have much time left, had already discarded a long time ago.

For Olbart, the audience chamber—no, this experimentation ground of “souls”, had gone too far.

Olbart: “Reminds me of the bunch who made Araki, this way of doin’ things. Even tho’ it wasn’t for fun or for revenge, I couldn’t bear ta dispose of it ‘cause they nerve ta do this kinda thing. They were dealt with, tho’.”

In Olbart’s mind as he spilled those words, an unmatched, unorthodox group who he had dealt with in the past emerged.

In order to produce the perfected Spirit Eater known as Arakiya, those criminals had sacrificed an enormous amount of people, and had said that their actions were out of a sense of duty, that it was for the sake of the Empire’s future.

This horrid scene inside the audience chamber—something had tampered with the souls of the undead resurrected in earthen vessels, something that had been mixed into their souls, something that had transfigured them. It was not for the sake of winning this war, but a barbaric act performed for an objective that completely disregarded the imminent victory or defeat. Within the details that had produced those grotesque forms, he could feel a curiosity that desired results, utterly detached from emotion, similar to that of the unorthodox criminals.

And the objective of that curiosity was understood by Olbart with a single touch.

Olbart: “—Ya got some nerve ta try and tamper with souls.”

Olbart often used a shinobi technique that would interfere with the souls of others—with their Ods, and cause them to shrink. Chisha had also stolen and made use of it; however, that technique only touched upon the outer layer.

But, this inquisitive mind desired results that went beyond just that.

What exactly those results were, Olbart, who did not know the curious individual in question, had no way of knowing, but—

Olbart: “I get a reeeal~ bad feelin’ ‘bout this, Yer Excellency. —I guess there really is no room for my betrayal after all.”

—During the Demi-Human War, the Demi-Human Alliance was defeated, and the individual Sphinx was defeated.

In regards to that defeat, Sphinx did not have many words to say.

She had lived for over three hundred and fifty years, but most of those days and months were spent hiding away, continuing to exhaust her everything just to survive; Sphinx was no match for the opponent, who had resolved and trained themselves to kill her.

If she were to speak of the events that had happened, that would be the entirety of the story.

To be honest, within Sphinx's mind, as she was defeated by the disciple of the Witch of Greed, faced with certain death, there were still no particular emotions.

In the first place, she had no attachment to her own life. The many years she spent exhausting herself to prioritize her own survival were just because she thought that was rational in order to fulfill the purpose of her creation.

And then, when it seemed like she was going to disappear without having fulfilled the purpose of her creation, what she had possessed until the end was the instinct to flee, as it was difficult to abandon that purpose.

That was why she fled to the basement of the Royal Castle Lugunica, which had become the grounds for a decisive battle; the fact that she displayed the willpower to break away from the Witch of Greed's disciple there, was also a result of following her instincts.

Only, that escape sequence, in which she had no particular attachment to her life, altered Sphinx's fate.

???: "—I have use for you. You shall serve me well, in order to grant my wish."

In that man's corrupted eyes, the intense flame of ambition could be seen flickering.

—The flame of the Yang Sword Vollachia, would burn anything it had decided to destroy to ashes.

The plan of Vincent Vollachia and Natsuki Subaru, was to make Sphinx firmly believe that, for whatever reason, the Emperor had relinquished the treasured sword of crimson.

As a result, at the end of a grand wager of lives, Sphinx was scorched by the flame, having lost in the bout of deceit.

The blade of the Yang Sword that had reached the Witch, Sphinx, delivered a scintillating flame to the bearer of the Great Disaster who had been resurrected as an undead; the several Sphinxes that were facing off against Vincent's group, the Sphinx waiting in the Crystal Palace, the Sphinxes observing each battlefield of the Imperial Capital, and the countless Sphinxes that ought to have been launching attacks all throughout the Empire, all burst into flame simultaneously.

Sphinx: "—Countermeasures: Required."

While being scorched by the bright red flames, the Sphinx who had been cut, muttered so. But, even if she made use of the undead's advantage of meagerly feeling pain, she would not be able to hold out for long with herself being burnt to a crisp.

In that case, would she abandon the several bodies that had already been scorched, and proceed with the plan as a new Sphinx, having learned from this Death? —No, that would be impossible.

The flame of the Yang Sword was burning Sphinx's very soul.

Even if she tried to create a new undead version of herself, as long as the foundation that was her soul remained burning, it would be impossible to prevent the earthen body from burning as it was created.

Sphinx: "…"

She had no countermeasures. Together with the sensation of a deadlock, the body of this Sphinx crumbled.

Even if she died by burning, and headed to the next iteration while having learned from this Death, the reconstructed Sphinx would merely come to the same conclusion that she had no countermeasures as she met her end.

Her end, this would be her end. Having spent a long time going around the world, the Witch of Greed's failure, Sphinx's quest of investigation, would have its curtains close here.

She had exhausted every measure, she had sufficiently laid out traps, but it had not been enough.

That was a similar defeat to what she had experienced in the past, during the events of the Demi-Human War. At that time, too, Sphinx had exhausted every measure, yet it had still not been enough, and she was left with no choice but to perish in defeat.

The reason that had not come to pass, had not been because of Sphinx's own actions, but because of the interference of an outfielder.

Thus, this time, she could not hope for the same thing to happen.

After all, the owner of that ambition, who had saved Sphinx back then, was already gone.

Leip Barielle was dead. That was why, there was no longer—

Sphinx: "—Analysis: Required."

Suddenly, engulfed in the fiery blaze as she was, Sphinx who was supposed to be heading for her demise, took action.

While the flame of the Yang Sword kept her entire body alight, Sphinx placed a finger below her own jaw; blowing away the entirety of the corebug present within her cranium, she induced her own Death.

And then, the Sphinxes present on the battlefield, in the Imperial Capital, and throughout the entire Empire, all carried out that same act in succession.

Sphinx: “—Analysis: Required.”

Sphinx: “—Analysis: Required.”

It was not that she had given up on herself. Nor was it that she had been dominated by suicidal thoughts.

Only, through dying, all of Sphinx’s memories could converge on her soul. If all the countless Sphinxes died simultaneously, and all the countless memories converged, the collective base of knowledge known as herself would accumulate.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before the soul where all those memories were gathering would be scorched, thoroughly burned to naught.

However, in the time before it was burned to naught, Sphinx naturally continued to construct her own burning selves, and by doing so, she was able to accrete countless analyses and debates about the situation and countermeasures.

In the past, she had possessed no strong emotions whatsoever regarding Death. But now, things were different.

Sphinx: “—Resistance: Required.”

Sphinx: “—Resistance: Required.”

Sphinx: “—Resistance: Required.”

Resisting, resisting, as she resisted, Sphinx scraped together every conceivable possibility, and analyzed them.

The conclusions of each bastion, the soul experiments at the Crystal Palace, the history of the Vollachian Imperial Family, the Spirit Eaters, the foreign entity from the Kingdom, Stargazers, commandments, the Great Disaster, every last possibility, the fragments of existence itself; she analyzed all of it.

And then—

—Bound to the prison, Priscilla's crimson eyes fully witnessed the entire chain of events befalling Sphinx before her eyes.

The Witch's body had suddenly burst into red flames, and with a single glance, Priscilla understood that it was the scintillating flame brought about by the Yang Sword which was passed down in the Vollachian Empire.

She also understood that the one who had delivered that scintillating flame to the Witch, was none other than Vincent Vollachia.

Priscilla: "So you have finally revealed the card you had kept overturned? You are truly cunning to the bitter end, elder brother."

As a member of the Vollachian Imperial Family herself, the fact that Vincent had not drawn the Yang Sword, and instead preserved it as a trump card, was obvious to Priscilla. Of course, given the troublesome quality that came with wielding the Yang Sword, it was no wonder that Vincent did not thoughtlessly rely on it.

Anyhow, having been defeated in the bout of deceit, the Witch was destroyed by the flame—at least, she should have been.

Priscilla: "You, what did you do?"

Sphinx: "—Analysis: Required."

The Yang Sword's flame would burn what it wished to burn, and the Yang Sword's blade would cut what it wished to cut.

That was a truth that could not be bent. Despite that, the Witch who ought to have been engulfed by bright red flames in front of Priscilla, slowly broke free from that scintillating flame.

The flames had ceased their scorching of the Witch.

The Yang Sword's flame would burn what it wished to burn, and the Yang Sword's blade would cut what it wished to cut.

Ergo, the fate of the Witch, scorched and cut by Vincent's Yang Sword, was not something that could be altered.

However—

Priscilla: “Who are you?”

If the one who was burned, the one who was cut, became something else entirely, it would be a different story.

In all likelihood, Vincent had killed the Witch, had killed Sphinx with the Yang Sword.

But, the form of the Witch who had escaped the flame, was not the Witch that Priscilla knew.

The cracked pale skin, the black eyeballs endowed with irises of golden hue, and the youthful appearance of a little girl, with all of those cast away, that being stood before Priscilla.

Long white hair that reached down to her back, and black eyes that housed a clear intellectual and inquisitive spirit. —White and black, if one tried to draw that being, then those two colors would be fully capable of representing it.

Priscilla: “Who are you?”

???: “—The Witch of Greed.”

At Priscilla’s repeated question, there was a quiet response, yet one brimming with conviction.

Having fulfilled the purpose of its creation after a long time, the being whose very soul had altered in nature—the current incarnation of the Witch of Greed, having escaped the fate of being scorched by flame, spoke.

Witch: “The purpose of creation has been fulfilled. —Now, I will proceed to fulfill my purpose in life.”

So she declared.

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Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XII

1

—The boy stood upon a battlefield riddled with corpses.

Deep clouds enshrouded the sky, casting a dim and gloomy mood over the plain despite it being midday. The moisture in the air signaled an imminent risk of rain, too, and within the clouds, bolts of lightning were budding, ready to be cast down to the surface.

However, even though the clouds were still waiting to pour down their rain, a passing drizzle had already befallen the plain. —Rain, composed of vast amounts of crimson bloodshed.

???: "…"

Gazing out towards the vast plain, collapsed there were those clad in mismatched armor that lacked any sense of unity.

If anything, the non-uniformity of this diverse gathering of ages and races could be called its sense of unity. Each was equipped with unique weapons and armor, and as a whole, the group's quality could not be said to be very high. Though they might not have been regular soldiers, so-to-speak, neither were they a group of bandits.

They were—

???: "—Chisha-dono, it seems that none of the dissidents have survived."

Giving that report, was an aide-de-camp who had provided support during this operation. Upon receiving information from the soldiers who had returned from reconnaissance of the battlefield below, the commanding officer, Chisha Gold, narrowed his eyes.

Chisha was of tall, slender build, and his side profile still appeared youthful. In reality, he was still a greenhorn who had only just turned eighteen. Though, factoring age into appraisals was something that Chisha's liege openly detested.

Anyhow—

Chisha: "To begin with, the idea was to make an example of the dissidents by our hand, so the fact that they have been felled cannot be labeled as a setback in itself, however…"

Aide-De-Camp: "…The prey caught in the net is a problem, correct?"

Chisha: "Judging from the details thus far, I had anticipated the perpetrators to be few in number, but… for it to have been carried out by a lone person was rather exceedingly unforeseen."

Chisha caressed his slender jaw as he spoke, to which the senior aide nodded with a bitter face.

Chisha, the aide-de-camp, and the rest of the soldiers deployed to the plain were the regular soldiers of the Abellux Domain, belonging to Chisha's liege, Vincent Abellux. The soldiers all wore matching equipment, and bearing expressions that displayed their drive, they were dispatched on this mission—that was, the subjugation of dissidents.

At sixteen, as a member of the Imperial Family, Vincent possessed preeminent intelligence, and not only was he politically adept, but he also demonstrated outstanding wisdom as a feudal lord. Five years had elapsed since he had become a feudal lord, and since then, public order within the domain had dramatically improved, and it was appraised as a miraculous state of peace in an Empire where conflict was ceaseless.

Of course, behind such stability, was the apt removal of factors that aimed to disturb it. This occasion, in which Chisha had been dispatched with around one-thousand soldiers under his command, was just another link in that chain of reception.

However, anticipating the dispatch of Chisha and the soldiers, the dissidents hastily took up arms and had tried to make preparations to intercept them. At the very least, they had displayed those movements.

Before that could bear any fruit, they were annihilated by the hand of somebody—

???: "—Report! We have encircled the perpetrator in question!"

Aide-De-Camp: "Did you get him?!"

Amidst his speculations, good news was delivered from an out-of-breath messenger. As the aide-de-camp raised his voice to ascertain the situation, the messenger pointed to the east side of the plain.

Chisha: "Lend me the monocular."

As Chisha issued that order, the soldier beside him presented the monocular—a tool inlaid with a curved piece of glass, for the purpose of seeing far into the distance. Receiving the tool, Chisha pointed the monocular to the east.

As the messenger had reported, the soldiers deployed upon the plain were in a formation to oust something, and present in the center was a target being pursued.

Focusing on the person in question with the monocular—

Aide-De-Camp: "Say not such foolish things! Reports ought to be accurate!"

Behind Chisha as he peered through the monocular, an angered bellow from the aide-de-camp reverberated through the encampment. His roar was directed at the messenger soldier, but as that person adjusted his posture,

Messenger: "Forgive me! However, matters are exactly as reported!"

Aide-De-Camp: "In that case, are you telling me to believe this ludicrous affair? —That the opponent, is a child?!"

As the aide-de-camp flared up in anger once again at the messenger, Chisha, the superior officer, would have given a calm and composed comment, but given this was a former member of the Imperial Army, he was exceptionally strict with disciplining his underlings.

Usually, that was reliable, but just for this instance, the messenger had erred not.

Chisha: “Ludgar-dono, he is giving a valid report. Certainly, the opponent is a child. However—”

As Chisha gazed over the battlefield with the monocular, his words seemed to have caused the aide-de-camp to gulp. However, at the current moment, Chisha did not have the freedom to turn his attention towards the aide de camp.

That was because—

Chisha: “Naturally, this cannot be labeled as any mere child, hmmm.”

After all, towards Chisha as he looked at him through the monocular, the boy was waving his hand with a smile.

2

—The boy stood upon a battlefield riddled with corpses.

Beneath a cloudy sky, a boy around eleven or twelve years old stood with his blue hair, appearing darker than its original shade, tied at the back of his head, and clad in a vividly bright pink kimono.

Unbecoming of a battlefield; such words did not exist in the Empire.

Even if strength and weakness existed among warriors, it was the Empire’s “law of iron and blood” that none were labeled as unfit to be a warrior based on age, sex, or race. Regardless of whether he liked or disliked those customs of the Empire, an evaluation criteria founded in the Imperial way was also present within Chisha.

And, without even needing to compare him with that criteria, the boy was exceptional.

Chisha: “—Four times.”

Surrounded by a thousand soldiers, Chisha took a step into the encirclement.

Of course, the aide-de-camp and the other soldiers had tried to prevent Chisha from stepping out to the front. But, having met eyes with the boy through the heaven’s eye, Chisha was clearly being called for. Even if something were to happen to him, his experienced aide-de-camp would likely pass the correct judgment in an instant.

—Against this small monster before them, they absolutely must not take up arms.

Chisha: “Four times, have you gone around subjugating those who brandish rebellious intent towards His Excellency Vincent Abellux. I wonder, have you no objections to our perception, hmmm?”

Boy: “Ohh, incredible! You’ve even properly counted the first instance, haven’t you now? For that one I’d yet to reach the idea of doing it in a consistent way so it was a bit of a vague method. But I’m glad that you still noticed it! Besides!”

Chisha: “Besides?”

Boy: “You are exceedingly superb! Coming out on your own in this situation. It’s truly splendid!”

Crossing his arms, the boy nodded in good humor, and affirmed both Chisha’s words and intent for dialogue.

For a moment, Chisha was taken aback by the energy-filled response, but he quickly regained his composure.

—As a matter of fact, this was not the first time that Chisha and the other soldiers had been deployed to subjugate dissidents, only for them to have already been annihilated before they could clash. It was the fourth instance of such an occurrence.

Having uncovered the presence of dissidents within the Abellux Domain, the troops dispatched to subjugate them were beaten to the punch. That had happened on three occasions in the past two months, and this time marked the fourth instance—

Boy: “You guys laid a trap. The people acting as an opposing force were something like former criminals this time. By deliberately giving criminals captured in the domain weapons and equipment and sending them out, you created a group of fugitives. Then, you sent soldiers to subjugate the dissidents that you yourselves created. —It was in order to lure me out!”

Chisha: “…I certainly did not think you had read that far into the situation.”

Boy: “It wasn’t anything more than just reading the synopsis. Are you the one who wrote this? Or was it perhaps the “Miracle of Abellux”, His Excellency Vincent Abellux?”

Chisha: “…”

On top of being a youth, his outspoken smiling figure produced an inconceivably precise analysis. At the same time, Chisha understood that this boy had taken action with his sights set on Vincent.

That fact that this boy was of extraordinary caliber, had already been proven.

As the boy said, the annihilated dissidents on this occasion had been prepared by the Abellux Domain, but even so, they were two hundred people willing to rampage to survive. He had exterminated them all on his own.

A boy who had killed two hundred riotous people, could not be declared unable to kill one thousand regular soldiers.

However—

Chisha: “Knowing that, may I ask what you intend to do?”

Boy: “Ho-Ho I see. I think it’s somewhat bad manners to respond to a question with another question but I do really want to talk about my own feelings and objective so I shall answer! Decidedly, if His Excellency Vincent Abellux is everything he's cracked up to be, I wish to make him my new master!"

Chisha: "—New master."

Raising a single finger, the boy briskly responded, and Chisha repeated his closing words. Then, in response, the boy gave a bright "Why indeed!".

Receiving that answer, Chisha drew out his favored steel fan from his clothing, and placing it to his mouth,

Chisha: "You mean to say that your attacks upon the dissidents until today, were all to promote yourself to His Excellency Vincent?"

Boy: "Yes! Even I don't think that directly marching into the manor and negotiating to please be hired is the right way to go about it. I had to capture his interest first and foremost!"

Chisha: "…"

The boy, who ought to have just given a somewhat decent analysis, suddenly became unhinged, leaving Chisha at a loss for words.

On the other hand, if the boy's objective had been to draw Vincent's attention, and make a strong impression of the existence known as himself, he had undoubtedly succeeded.

Chisha: "Notoriety in favor of anonymity, I see that is the way you are thinking."

Boy: "Yes preciscely… eh?! Notoriety?! Why might that be?! I think I've done a whole bunch of stuff to contribute to maintaining public order in the Abellux Domain!"

Chisha: "There are two things that prove the contrary, hmmm. Firstly, it is our mission to maintain the public order of the Abellux Domain, thus your actions are a usurpation of our work."

Boy: "Ugh! But-But isn't it better for public order if the dissidents disappear as quickly as possible? Rather, isn't it a problem that you were so late to come?! There, I win the argument!”

Chisha: “While the second is an issue of public order, it is certainly desirable that the dissidents have disappeared. However, from the ruler’s point of view, in the sense of beings who do not obey their feudal lord, just how much difference is there between a group of rebels, and you, selfish as you are?”

Rather, in the sense of an uncontrollable power, this lone boy could be labeled a larger threat to disrupting public order than the group of dissidents, who could be subjugated without issue.

Hence, the conversation returned to following the direction that Chisha had initially stated.

Chisha: “Notoriety in favor of anonymity, at the very least, you would be greatly mistaken if you thought you were spreading great renown for yourself, hmmm.”

Boy: “Gugu, gugugu, gugugugu…”

Chisha: “Hmph.”

Thrusting forth the steel fan in his hand, Chisha realized that he had said far too much, judging from the reddened face of the other party.

It was a bad habit of Chisha’s to talk his opponents into a corner—or rather, it was a bad habit of his to clearly explain everything that he was thinking if prompted.

In reality, when he had first met Vincent, too, he had spoken quite impolitely during their conversation within the dragon carriage. It was to the extent that Chisha himself thought he would have his head lopped off due to his irreverence.

Ultimately, that did not come to pass, but he could not expect to meet the same conditions with this boy.

As a result of this anger, Chisha would be torn limb from limb.

Chisha: “Surprisingly, I have many things left undone, so I think it rather suffocating, but—”

Boy: “Then, then, then! Please do your best to convince me!”

Chisha: “…Me?”

Chisha was about to lightly relinquish his own life, however, the boy presented a shocking offer. Perhaps the offer was more so audacious than shocking, but the boys eyes sparkled, as if to say he thought it was a fantastic idea,

Boy: “Regarding the two rebuttals you gave earlier, both of them would be completely resolved if you just enlisted me as an ally! Because it would have been the commander of your shock corps defeating the dissidents before you guys! And if I make him into my new master, then there’d be no chance for me to disobey the feudal lord! There, I win the argument!”

Chisha: “You will have to actually argue with me if you wish to win an argument.”

Shrugging his shoulders at the boy’s spirited words, as Chisha felt the devil’s luck in this situation where he had surprisingly not lost his head, he nonetheless endeavored to understand the boy’s thinking.

It was not simply a matter of making excuses or evading responsibility. To begin with, it was an issue of incentive.

Chisha: “For what reason do you wish to make His Excellency your new master? I shall say this now, but with your abilities, you could choose whoever you please to be your master.”

Boy: “Of course that’s right. After all I’m the leading actor of this world… because the world is centered around me, right?”

Chisha: “—. Well then, so, and…?”

Ignoring the rash remarks, Chisha prompted the boy to continue, to which he spread his arms out, and gestured to the sky.

Boy: “It’s precisely as you say. In other words I chose to come here!

All the while firmly believing that if I serve Vincent Abellux, the man who brought about the “Miracle of Abellux”, I’ll get considerably closer to achieving my desire!”

Chisha: “And your desire would be?”

Boy: “—To reach the Heavenly Sword.”

In that reply alone, no playfulness or leisure were mixed; those words were pure.

Within the declaration from the boy, who had erased his smile for just a moment, was held the power to make one believe in its truth.

Before Chisha as he caught his breath, the boy immediately cracked a thoughtless smile,

Boy: “That’s the long-cherished desire that I, as the leading actor of this world, must accomplish at all costs. It’s not good enough to just swing a katana around by myself deep in the mountains trying to accomplish that. My dad kinda wasted his whole life doing that so I’ll be going down a different path.”

Chisha: “A path different to that of your fathers, is it? You believe you will find that if you are together with His Excellency? For what reason do you place such expectations in His Excellency? Have you perhaps had the chance to exchange words with him once before?”

Boy: “Nope not at all. I’ve never even seen His Excellency Vincent from a distance. But it just felt right, y’know? Like a “shaboom” when I first learned of his name and deeds. I’m choosing to believe in that bolt of lightning that was born within me.”

In the boy’s grandly recited words, there were, well, no tricks designed to make Chisha believe him.

He ought to have prepared better sounding words, ought to have thrown in elements that would make Chisha sympathize, ought to have incorporated reasons that would make Chisha want to support him.

And yet, there was not a single fragment of that. Without any clever tricks, he was an existence truly becoming of a natural disaster.

A natural disaster that seemed to entirely be saying “just watch and learn”—to be precise, a natural disaster akin to a lightning bolt.

Boy: “Ahhh but! I’ve taken a liking to you with just a single glance. This is another thing that just feels right to me but don’t you think that we’re going to get on absolutely swimmingly?”

Chisha: “Ha.”

Boy: “—?”

Clapping his hands before his chest, the boy spoke earnestly, causing Chisha to involuntarily chuckle.

Just when he had thought the boy should at least employ some tricks to win his favor, what appeared were foolish prospects such as having taken a liking to Chisha, and the outlook that they would get on splendidly.

And, Chisha did not dislike those who spoke of such foolish prospects.

Chisha: “By the way, what about myself suited your fancy?”

Boy: “Of course! First and foremost no matter what anybody says, your appearance! A sexy guy with a lanky tall figure all the while growing out long rare black hair! There’s no better selection for a unique character to easily prove that the stage is heading to meet a new development!”

Smiling in satisfaction, the boy gave high praise to Chisha’s appearance. In all honesty, he had not expected his looks to be brought up here, so Chisha had continued to be taken by surprise.

Certainly, this boy would also take Vincent by surprise.

Chisha: “—Chisha Gold. That is my name.”

Spinning the steel fan in his hand, Chisha returned it to his waistband, and presented forth his hand. Looking down at that hand, the boy’s eyes suddenly sparkled, and,

Boy: “Cecilus Segmunt, the leading actor, starring on the stage known as this world. Pleased to make your acquaintance!”

Vigorously grabbing Chisha’s hand, the boy—Cecilus smiled from ear to ear. Having killed two hundred men without getting stained with a single drop of their blood, the boy smiled; and facing him, Chisha could also not help but grin.

In actuality, it was unclear if Cecilus’s words were delusions, or if he would have the power to bring them to fruition. However, this was not the first time that Chisha yielded to something he did not understand.

—Unexpectedly, Chisha had a hunch that, as Cecilus had said, this would end up becoming a long fellowship, and one that was not so bad.

END

Anastasia’s Search for Her Companions: Third Chronicle

1

???: “—Halibel, allow me to take over the lookout duty. You should rest a bit.”

In the dead of night, opposite across the crackling bonfire, Julius called out to the tall wolfman standing amidst the gloomy space.

With black kinagashi overtop his black fur, his attire easily blended in with cover of darkness. That said, a presence taller than two meters would typically not be easily missed. But, as if to make one forget that normalcy, his presence was so thin that it would cause one to doubt if he was really there, evidencing his high level of skill as a shinobi.

If not for the golden kiseru in his mouth reflecting the flame of the bonfire, it would be impossible to tell whether he was there or not, even within an audible range.

But then again, the person in question possessed no intention of hiding himself from Julius. In reality, he responded to Julius’s voice with a “Hmm~?”,

Wolfman: “Tho’ I don’t particularly mind whether we alternate or not? Ya see, I’m perfectly fine goin’ without sleepin’ for ‘bout a week.”

Being given a superhuman reply in such a calm manner, caused Julius to smile.

Wolfman: “Why ya smilin’? Ah, did ya maybe think I was jokin’?”

Julius: “No, while there are many aspects to your statements that cause me to doubt my ears, I do not believe they are jokes. If you say that you can go a week without sleeping, then it must be true. However…”

Wolfman: “However?”

Julius: “We still have a long way ahead. For the time being, we shall be traveling together in an equal relationship. And, frankly speaking, I feel guilty foisting the duty of guarding the camp onto you alone in the midst of such a relationship.”

Wolfman: “Hmfufufu, guess that’s somethin’ ya gotta be frank ‘bout.”

Giving a low chuckle to Julius’s words, the wolfman—Halibel narrowed his already-thread-like eyes even further, and puffed the smoke from his kiseru out into the night sky.

Currently, Julius and company were heading south through the Kararagi City-States, and were en route to cross over the border with the Vollachian Empire. The Empire had not only locked down traffic on the border with the City-States, but also with that of the Kingdom of Lugunica, so while all interference from outside nations had been closed off, they were planning to ignore that.

Behind that course of action, lay circumstances on a national level, and circumstances on a personal level to Julius and Anastasia.

And, since their plans aligned, Julius and Anastasia were being accompanied by Halibel—known as the Admirer, he was the strongest shinobi of the Kararagi City-States.

Julius: “…”

In all honesty, Julius initially harbored intense precaution and nervousness in regards to Halibel.

The name “Admirer” was known well throughout the world, and alongside the Sword Saint, Reinhard, he was one of the four people in this world considered to be of the strongest caliber. The objective for which Julius and Anastasia had passed through the City-States, was also not something that would have been looked at favorably by the mayors who organized Kararagi.

Worst case scenario, they had entered the country with the resolve to face even Halibel.

Halibel: “But, ya got up ‘n surprised when ya met me fer real ‘n saw that I was actually a good-natured uncle, ain’t that right?”

Julius: “It is true that I was quite surprised. However, it was not your temperament that had surprised me. Reinhard, with whom you are considered to be of equal rank, is a friend of mine whom I can respect. I am also acquainted with Vollachia’s Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt-dono, but he, too… is not somebody who cannot be conversed with.”

Halibel: “Ya seem ta be pretty darn well connected, eh? Well, if ya know Cecilus, then I guess ya wouldn’t be too surprised that I’m like this. Yeah?”

Stifling a laugh, Halibel sought agreement for his impression towards the strongest of the Empire, but by closing his eyes and maintaining silence, Julius decided to protect the honor of his acquaintance.

In any case, what had surprised Julius about Halibel was not his personality, but rather,

Halibel: “—It’s ‘bout my relationship with lil’ Ana, ain’t it?”

Julius: “Yes, indeed. Originally, Anastasia-sama was the representative for a large company in Kararagi. Based on that position, it would not have been strange for her to be acquainted with those in important positions within Kararagi, but that is an association that has gone on for a decade now; I suspect it is a relationship unrelated to those positions.”

Halibel: “That so? Lil’ Ana ain’t changed a bit, she’s just as much of a rascal now as she was back then, ya know?”

Julius: “I do not doubt that she was also brilliant in those days.”

As Halibel bobbed the kiseru in his mouth up and down, Julius touched the scar under his left eye and nodded.

The sound of the bonfire crackling between the two of them grew stronger, and as if taking that as a signal, Halibel threw the ashes from his kiseru onto the fire.

Halibel: “Ain’t that the truth. While there ain’t no need ta change shifts fer lookout duty, I’d give a big ol’ warm welcome ta anybody ta talk to. ‘N since it seems like ya also got interest, how ‘bout I tell ya a bit of an old story?”

Julius: “…Will you really tell me, I wonder?”

Halibel: “Golly, quite the unexpected reaction ya got there. Ain’t that the direction that this here conversation was headin’?”

Julius: “Excuse me. I did not mean to pester you. However, if you would allow me to hear it, I do have interest. Though, of course, if it is not something Anastasia-sama would want me to hear, I will plug my ears.”

Halibel: “Quite faithful of ya. But ya know, I ain’t been forbidden from speakin’ on any of this, so…”

Julius felt somewhat reluctant towards that logic; but, on the other hand, it was difficult to imagine that Anastasia would not have been aware that such an exchange might have taken place. If it was truly something which she did not wish for him to hear, she would have either forbade Halibel from speaking about it in advance, or she would have given Julius a warning about it.

In other words—

Julius: “If she is going to scold us, then let us be rebuked together. By all means, I would love to hear it.”

Halibel: “Fantastic, how gosh darn fantastic, I’ve got a fondness for children who’re frank like ya. Alrighty then… ya know Ricardo, don’t’cha? He’s the one who’s together with lil’ Ana ‘n acts like her guardian or father.”

Julius: “A matter of course. He is a reliable ally of our Camp, and a friend whom I respect.”

Halibel: “Ya seem ta got lots of people that ya respect, eh? Ta lay everythin’ out in the open, the first time I met lil’ Ana was linked ta Ricardo… the time when I went ta carry out Ricardo’s assassination.”

Julius: "—Assassination…"

As an unthinkable, unsettling word was raised, Julius furrowed his brow. Halibel gave a well-meaning smile to Julius's reaction; however, he continued without declaring it a joke.

Halibel: "On that day, too, the atmosphere was as dry as it is today, 'n it was a night upon which ya could see the stars well."

2

—There was fear that the Hound, Ricardo Welkin, had disobeyed his oath.

That was the reason for the mission that had been told to Halibel by the Chief of the hidden village.

In the north-western region of the Kararagi City-States, there was a precipitous cliff through which a large chasm tore between the vast land, and at the bottom of that ravine was the hidden village of Halibel's origin—in all likelihood, it was this world's only settlement of wolfpeople.

As a result of what their ancestors had done in the Vollachian Empire, the wolfpeople had lost their place in the world. They were hunted to extinction in the Empire, and in other nations, they were hunted for the purpose of being sent off to the Empire; and, because of that, wolfpeople could no longer live normally, and had to live in hiding within this sole settlement.

A village that amounted to not even one hundred people, that was the birthplace of Halibel, and of Ricardo.

Halibel and Ricardo were from the same hometown, and on top of that, they were childhood friends of the same age. The easygoing Halibel and the lively Ricardo were of contrasting personalities, but they had gotten along well since they were infants.

However, unlike Halibel, who merely wished to live out his days peacefully, life in a narrow ravine was unsuited to Ricardo. Thus, on his fifteenth birthday, Ricardo left the village.

Village Chief: “So that the whereabouts of this village, and your own lineage, remain unknown, you must renounce your identity as a wolfman.”

That was the oath Ricardo had made to the village chief. It was a reinforced version of the law they originally had for occasions such as leaving the village to go shopping, but its effectiveness was absolute.

After all—

Village Chief: “If you ever disobey this oath, Halibel will come to slay you.”

Even in those days, Halibel had possessed peerless strength within the wolfpeople settlement, and there was an arrangement such that he would personally take down those who disobeyed their oaths.

Anyhow, Ricardo expressed no sorrow whatsoever at the fact that he would never be able to return to his hometown, and boldly departed from the hidden village. Back then, he did not invite Halibel to go together with him, either, but that was probably because he understood Halibel’s nature, and thus it evoked no particularly lonely emotions within him.

Cheerfully differing in their paths, Halibel and Ricardo went on to lead distinct lives as wolfmen—after fifteen or so years had elapsed, he was passed down this mission.

Halibel: “Ricardo, now ya’ve really gone ‘n done it.”

The first impression he harbored, was that of shock towards the name of his childhood friend he was hearing for the first time in a long while.

By this point in time, Halibel too had departed from the hidden village, but given that he was the sole person permitted to pronounce himself a wolfman by merit of his strength, he had the chance to return home from time to time. Of course, he always took care of his surroundings to ensure the hidden village would not be found, but that was the mission he had been ordered to complete upon returning home this time.

In all honesty, Halibel also had the choice to not carry out that mission.

Trying to coerce Halibel through threats, was likely something that nobody would be able to do to him. Nobody would think to do something so reckless, and be the cause of bringing the wolfpeople closer to extinction.

But, on the other hand, if Ricardo had disobeyed his oath, then Halibel thought that the appropriate recompense would be necessary.

Halibel: “It’s somethin’ ya decided on yer own. It just don’t make no sense for ya ta not properly protect that.”

If he was going to twist logic and try to have it his own way, then he would have no choice but to pay the appropriate reparations. For this case, the reparations would be the long hand of death that Ricardo himself ought to have accepted when he left the village.

Thus, in order to meet Ricardo for the first time in fifteen years, Halibel headed to his location.

And then—,

???: “Thread-eye’d unc, d’ya know my Ricardo?”

With intelligent eyes, and a lovely expression filled with charm, a girl called out to Halibel while her body overflowed with an immense desire to monopolize.

At an eatery in the Second City of Kararagi, Banan, the girl who appeared before Halibel as he gnawed on a grilled skewer was greeted by an unusual sense of surprise from him.

Over these past few days, Halibel had been monitoring Ricardo’s movements, and he knew that the girl before him—Anastasia, her name, worked at the Chuden Trading Company. She was quite close with Ricardo, and he had often witnessed the two of them together.

Nonetheless, it was unexpected for her to call out to him here—

Halibel: “Righty yep, sure do know each other. Even so, how could ya tell I was here?”

Given that Anastasia had directly challenged him to a confrontation like this, he did not want to trick or deceive her. And, in truth, Halibel was interested in the reason why she had made contact.

Halibel was a shinobi, too. He knew how to not be seen through tailing or monitoring, and he had taken care so that Ricardo, who possessed an excellent sense of smell, would not be able to detect his scent.

Just how had Anastasia managed to overcome Halibel’s vigilance? As Halibel voiced those doubts, Anastasia plopped herself down in the seat opposite him, and,

Anastasia: “Ya see, havin’ my own things gettin’ stolen by other people is what I hate the darn most. That’s why I’m extra vigilant ‘bout people who try to get close to Ricardo ‘n Mimi ‘n the others.”

Halibel: “That so? But, y’all… ya don’t look like a child with such amazin’ eyes ‘n ears.”

Anastasia: “…”

For a moment, Halibel’s gaze turned to the fox scarf wrapped around Anastasia’s neck.

It seemed like something far beyond the position of a youthful girl working as a subordinate for a trading company to be carrying around, but Anastasia’s exceedingly confident demeanor made it seem less so. —But then again, what had alerted Halibel to the scarf’s presence was not an imbalance between it and Anastasia, but the fact that it was alive.

In all likelihood, it was a Spirit. However, the reason for Anastasia’s confident attitude did not appear to be purely out of reliance on that Spirit.

Anastasia: “Ain’t that only natural? My feeble self ain’t capable of doin’ the same things as people like ya, thread-eye’d unc. ‘Cause of that, I simply rely on the people of the town.”

Halibel: “The people of the town?”

Anastasia: “People who approach my Ricardo ‘n the rest, dubious behaviors, strange invitations… in order to make sure there ain’t none of that, I’m on good terms with everyone in the town.”

And thus, Anastasia’s reply affirmed Halibel’s conjecture, and on top of that, greatly surpassed what he could have imagined.

Halibel: “Hahhaa, I see. Ain’t that truly somethin’, you’re quite the incredible kid, now ain’t’cha?”

Even Halibel could not conceal his surprise at Anastasia’s response.

Certainly, Halibel had strived to not be found by Ricardo, but he had not gone as far as to avoid the eyes and ears of unrelated parties, such as the townspeople or dining hall employees. Indulging in alcohol and meals like this, he had been slowly investigating the people around Ricardo.

Halibel: “I ain’t never thought that the whole town would be spyin’ on those who’re tryin’ ta spy on Ricardo ‘n the people ‘round him.”

Anastasia: “Thank ya for yer praise. So then, why’re ya keepin’ an eye on Ricardo?”

Halibel: “Did’ya think I’d tell ya just ‘cause ya asked?”

Anastasia: “It’s fine even if ya don’t talk. Instead, just listen to what I gotta say. —Is it somethin’ that can’t be resolved with money?”

Halibel: “Bubu.”

Choking up, he made a mess inside the sake bottle titled into his mouth. Wiping off the sake that had spilled onto the corner of his mouth with his finger, Halibel stared at Anastasia.

She had an adorable face, but her expression was serious. To be precise, it was the gaze of a merchant of Kararagi.

Halibel: "…"

Keeping his silence for a while, Halibel received Anastasia's power of insight through the golden irises that lay within his thread-like eyes.

She might not have known Halibel's identity, but she showed tremendous courage to act that way while understanding that he was no half-hearted opponent. —He could tell that Ricardo had been looking after her.

As ordered by the village, he had located Ricardo in Banan, and had been spying on his movements for a few days—he could fathom a guess that the fact that he was working as a guard for the Chuden Trading Company, was not because the company had gotten a collar on him, but for the purpose of watching over this here Anastasia.

A capable mercenary by the name of the "Hound" had gained fame through various incidents that had occurred throughout the cities of Kararagi. The attitude of spreading his name was considered by the village to be a reason to fear that Ricardo had disobeyed his vow, but Halibel thought the true motive for that lay elsewhere.

—The reason that Ricardo was putting strength into the name of the "Hound" was in order to serve as the watchdog of this girl, who looked forward to the future, and to ensure she was an existence that nobody could lay their hands upon.

Having come to this understanding, Halibel drew his kiseru from his pocket, and,

Halibel: "How 'bout ya tell me all about it as I puff on this?"

Anastasia: "If you're willin' to study for it, then sure."

As Anastasia responded with nary a pause, Halibel gave a huge smile, and lit the tobacco packed into his kiseru.

3

Halibel: "'N so, it was quite a darn masterpiece after she wrapped up tellin' it ta me, but then since me 'n lil' Ana shook hands, Ricardo caught onto my scent 'n he marched all the way back ta the village."

Julius: "—. I wonder if it was truly alright to tell me about the village."

Halibel: "Well, aside from its location, its existence in itself is kinda an open secret. Ever since I made a name for myself, there ain't nobody still tryna search for it."

As Halibel spoke in an indifferent tone, Julius accepted it with a "So it is that sort of thing".

According to his story, Ricardo's act of spreading his name as a mercenary was in order to protect his employer, Anastasia, and a similar thing could be said about Halibel.

By making a name for himself, Halibel warded off trouble from befalling his village or other wolfpeople. —Without a doubt, Halibel and Ricardo were childhood friends.

Julius: "Nevertheless, I am surprised regarding the young Anastasia-sama's capacity of intelligence."

Halibel: "Tho' from my point of view, it was a matter of how incredible I found her attachment ta those who she'd gotten in her pockets. That's why, ya really oughta prepare yerself, Julius."

Julius: "I am prepared. Ever since the day I called Anastasia-sama to the Kingdom, and looked to her as my lord, that I have been."

Halibel spoke with a teasing tone; however, Julius responded honestly.

There was neither lie nor falsehood present. From the outset, that which they ought to strive for was the apex of the Kingdom. No matter the trial and tribulation they faced along the way, he had no intention of halting his steps.

Julius: "But then again, far more than I can imagine, the road will be steep, filled with undulations."

Halibel: “Hahaha, ain’t that just the truth. Through Lugunica ‘n Kararagi ‘n Vollachia, it must be tough ta tag along with lil’ Ana’s desires. Really now, Ricardo was quite the find… nah, he couldn’t have asked ta be found by anyone better.”

As Halibel calmly spoke those words, Julius quietly nodded in agreement.

Then, after Julius gazed up at the night sky, while he resupplied firewood to the bonfire,

Julius: “The night is still young. How about it? I am also interested in that story about Ricardo going back to the village. Would you not tell it to me?”

Halibel: “Oh, why not? In that case, I want ya ta tell me stories ‘bout lil’ Ana in the Kingdom, too.”

Julius: “Most certainly. My acquaintance with Anastasia-sama might be short compared to yours, but I have many a tale to tell.”

As Halibel plopped himself down into a sitting position, Julius rectified the bottom of his kimono, and with the bonfire between them, he began speaking of his reminiscences of a lone girl.

The flame of the bonfire that burned throughout the night, was constantly replenished in turns until the early hours of the morning.

END

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record VI

1

The journey to the Pleiades Watchtower to prove the efficacy of Meili Portroute's power to the top brass of the kingdom was successful. Consequently, the five members of the Felt Camp became the second group of people to reach the tower, preceded by Anastasia and Emilia.

Although the group had to engage in a skirmish against the Divine Dragon Volcanica right as they were about to reach the tower, they figured out a way around its attacks, making it seem as though everything was going well.

"But it seems like that really isn't the case at all," Felt muttered, confirming all the pages in one of the books she picked up off the floor were blank, frowning and scratching her head.

The scattered books weren't limited to just the ones around her. Hundreds of them had been pulled from the shelves and strewn across the floor of the room. Since this wasn't the doing of the book-hating Felt, or anyone from her camp, only one logical conclusion could be drawn from this.

"I wonder if someone came here after Emilia and I left the toweer," pondered Meili.

"Whoever that is must have pretty bad manners," commented Felt as she called her knight's name. "Reinhard."

"Yes, my lady?"

"If I remember correctly, the Witch of Envy's shrine is around here, right?" she asked in a slightly lowered voice.

Reinhard's blue eyes shuddered at her question. "I'll go check it out right away. Ezzo, please look after Lady Felt."

“Of course, leave it to me,” Ezzo replied. “You should be careful as well. According to literature, the witch’s shrine is shrouded in miasma… A toxic environment that can easily destroy a man’s psyche.”

“I’ll be fine. I have the Divine Protection of Anti-Malignance.”

With that, Reinhard swiftly left the Great Library of Pleiades, seen off by Felt’s nod. Meili looked puzzled as she also watched him run out with great urgency.

“Miss Meili, the Young Master is suspecting the involvement of the Witch Cult,” explained Flam.

“The Young Master always considers the worst-case scenario,” added Grassis.

“The Witch Cult… I see, that makes sense,” Meili said, seemingly convinced. She finally understood what Felt and the others were talking about in their short communication. “There’s a really good chance the person who snuck in here is someone from the Witch Cult who wants to release the Witch of Envy that’s sealed in the shriine.”

The Pleiades Watchtower was originally built to surveille the shrine that seals the Witch of Envy in the far eastern land. Sand Time and the Sage were also part of an effort to prevent anyone from reaching it. As a result, these mechanisms successfully kept the members of the Witch Cult away. However, nothing was stopping them anymore.

The only thing that bothers me is how quickly they were able to take action, Felt thought. But then again, this is the chance of a lifetime for the Witch Cult. “Besides, they’re a bunch of loonies who’ll do anything. I wouldn’t be surprised one bit if they had a member who watched the desert all day long just to check if the sandstorm ever dies down, albeit that thought creeps me out.”

“I completely agree,” Ezzo said. “So, what should be our next move, Miss Felt?”

“Are you askin’ me whether we should investigate the matter or retreat?” Felt asked with her arms crossed.

“Yes.” Ezzo nodded. With an intruder likely in the tower, either one of the two options Felt suggested seemed like the natural courses of action they could take.

Felt glanced at Meili as she considered her options. She wasn’t looking for advice from her, but her eyes wandered towards the young girl as she considered her position in the bigger picture. As mentioned earlier, Meili had already proven her worth as soon as the party reached the tower. In other words, she no longer had any reason to stick around now that she had achieved her objective. But, she also can’t cross the desert alone. So, I guess she has no choice but to follow our lead.

While Felt concluded her thoughts, Meili felt something on her head.

“Ms. Mini Crimson Scorpion?” she said, calling on the mini crimson scorpion that had crawled out of her blue hair, clicking its pincers at something as if to intimidate an imminent threat.

Wondering what it was being so aggressive for, Meili turned her attention towards where the scorpion was looking. There, she saw a white bird perched quietly atop a bookshelf. She widened her eyes, gulping in surprise.

“Flam! Grassis!” Felt quickly yelled, also noticing the bird.

The girls reacted swiftly to their mistress’s voice. As one of them made a foothold with her hands, the other kicked off of it, darting towards the bookshelf. The whole movement was coordinated so smoothly, despite having no time to discuss it, that it was as if they were one entity.

As the girl reached the bookshelf, she stretched out her arms to catch the bird. Right before she could, however, it spread its wings and flew away. The library was big, but was obviously less spacious than outside, so there weren’t many places it could go. Despite this, it glided gracefully around the room after avoiding the girl.

"It'll be a bit painful," Ezzo said to the bird as it flew into a ball of water headfirst, causing it to drown in midair.

It looked as though the inside of a bucket full of water was floating in the middle of the room. This was the doing of Ezzo, who had produced the water with magic after extending his hands.

He then began moving his hands, reshaping the water until only the bird's head emerged. A cage made of water was completed.

"You took the good part, Master Ezzo," said Flam.

"Credit stealing mage," commented Grassis.

"Stop whining. He wouldn't've been able to capture it if you two hadn't gotten it away from the bookshelf," Felt interjected. "Good job, teach."

"No, the true praise should be given to Miss Meili for noticing it in the first place," Ezzo responded modestly. "I should've been more alert. I'm sorry."

Meili wasn't listening to Ezzo. Her attention was focused on the bird. She was obviously surprised to find a bird in the library, but that wasn't all, and Felt picked up on it.

"What's wrong, Meili?" asked Felt. "Do you recognize it?"

"I saw them flying around the tower all the time," Meili said after a pause. "I also saw a few of them on the balconyy. I remember Subaru being really creeped out by theem."

"All the time, huh?" Felt muttered.

They looked like ordinary birds. In fact, Meili distinctly remembered her not being as creeped out as Subaru. However, she also had a feeling he must have had a good reason to be so.

The captured bird made no movement or a single noise, as if it knew any resistance would be futile.

"They are…" Meili muttered without finishing her thought.

The bird's dark eyes fixed on Meili, making her nervous. Its eyes were like a deep void, ready to draw all who stared into them into their depths. They reminded her of the feeling she had when she looked down the spiral staircase.

"Ah," Meili whimpered, as a beam of light penetrated the head of the bird that was staring at her, causing it to explode right before her eyes. She needed some time to register what she had just witnessed.

The beam had been fired by the mini crimson scorpion that was still on top of Meili's head. It had shot the bird with a beam that came out of the tip of its tail, just like how Shaula would.

"Wha- Miss Meili! Why would you kill it?!" Ezzo cried, bemoaning her sudden tyrannical action.

"I-It wasn't mee," protested Meili. "Ms. Mini Crimson Scorpion did it without my permiss—ah!" However, the mini crimson scorpion started pulling her hair as she tried to explain herself. She didn't know what to make of its sudden insubordination.

Or could it be… "Is there something you wanna tell mee?" Meili asked, sensing that there was more to its actions than met the eye.

Before she could figure out what that was, however, she suddenly heard Felt click her tongue.

"Meili!" Felt shouted. "You said you saw more of these birds, right?! Where?!"

"Huh?"

"Where are the other birds?!" Felt repeated, closing in on Meili and shaking her by the shoulders. "I have a bad feeling about this!"

Meili looked dumbfounded. She pointed at the hallway that connected to the staircase with Felt's desperate face inches away from hers. "B-Beyond the wall that connects to the outside downstaairs, ah!"

Felt suddenly picked her up. "Give me directions!" she demanded, as she started running. She rushed down the stairs at an unbelievable speed and arrived on the fourth floor. Ezzo and her two retainers followed after her, but they were no match for her speed.

“That waay,” Meili said.

Felt ran like the wind in the direction Meili gave.

They came to a wall that appeared to be a dead end, but upon closer look, they could see that there was a hallway hidden beyond the outer wall. Meili pointed at the wall. Felt followed her direction and found herself jumping outside, onto a balcony under a bright blue sky. There, they found a flock of the very same white birds.

The two were speechless. There were about a hundred of them, all completely silent. This sight alone gave Meili an eerie feeling, but what made it worse was how they all simultaneously turned their heads at the two of them as they stormed onto the balcony. Meili felt a chill run down her spine.

“Don’t let them get away!” Felt yelled sharply.

In the next moment, Felt dropped Meili to the floor. She then pulled out her two daggers, held them in a reverse grip, and lunged at the birds. She began swinging them, aiming at the birds’ wings to stop them from flying away. However, she was utterly outnumbered, and the birds didn’t stay still for long. They spread their wings, and all simultaneously flew away from the balcony. She couldn’t stop all of them from flying away with only her two daggers.

“El huma!” Ezzo chanted as he arrived at the scene, carried by Flam and Grassis. He quickly understood what Felt was intending to do and offered assistance with his magic.

His magic froze the birds in midair, locking them each in pebbles of ice. However, he couldn’t catch them all, only managing to get around half.

“Shit! I didn’t wanna resort to this!” Felt yelled, gritting her teeth, sensing that they wouldn’t be able to capture all the birds.

She sheathed her daggers and took out a black object. In the next instant, the Divine Dragon appeared in the sky above the balcony, causing a whirlwind around him.

“I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient covenant, the will of thee who hath reached the top shall be questioned.”

In awe of the sudden appearance of the Divine Dragon, Meili and the rest were at a loss for words.

Felt pointed at the sky. “Volcanica! Don’t let a single one of them escape!”

Volcanica said nothing.

“Please!” Felt pleaded.

Volcanica finally lifted his head, taking in the sight of the tiny creatures flying all around. “Thou, who hath reached the top of the tower. Step forth onto the first floor, almighty petitioner.”

After making a one-way statement as usual, the dragon launched a breath attack all around his vicinity. Its devastating power was more than enough to incinerate all the poor birds.

“Unbelievablee,” Meili muttered, slowly opening her eyes, which she had shut due to the brightness of the breath attack. She looked up to see all the birds and even the clouds gone, and only the clear sky created by the Divine Dragon spreading above her.

2

“There was nothing wrong with the seal in the shrine,” reported Reinhard, who had returned from surveying the Witch of Envy’s shrine shortly after the flock of birds were exterminated. “However, considering the abnormal number of birds you had to deal with, I believe the tower and shrine are in need of new management, my lady.”

No one disagreed with Reinhard. They all understood very well that the tower and the shrine could greatly affect the world if not managed properly.

“Why don’t you try asking the Divine Dragon, Lady Felt?” suggested Flam.

“Lady Felt, the Divine Dragon tamer,” posited Grassis.

“I plan on askin’ him to not let weirdos like members of the Witch Cult get near,” Felt responded. “But there’ll always be things that’ll slip by, like those birds. It’s practically impossible to prevent those sorts of intrusions.”

“Why not just make him keep an eye on those as well, and not just the Witch Cult?” asked Flam.

“Make him stop everything,” said Grassis.

“That’s easier said than done,” Felt retorted, shrugging her shoulders as she frowned. “Y’know how forgetful that Dragon is, don’t ya?”

Meanwhile, Volcanica was back at the entrance. Contrary to the responsive behavior he showed during the earlier emergency, he was back to his usual non-responsive self.

Meili was curious if Felt also had the quality to communicate with the Divine Dragon like Emilia did, but she kept quiet as she thought this wasn’t the right time to pursue this question.

“As you suspected, Miss Felt, these aren’t your ordinary birds,” said Ezzo, who was inspecting the birds that were left on the balcony.

He held the body of a bird that had one of its wings cut up by Felt, then placed his hand on its other wing. Suddenly, the bird’s body started breaking down into glowing pieces, and soon vanished.

“Was that…” Meili uttered. “Are you telling me all of these birds are made up of mana?”

“Precisely,” said Ezzo. “Their bodies are made up similarly to that of an artificial spirit… High level magic, to say the least. Not something you can see in modern times.”

“Even you can’t do it, teach?” Felt asked.

Ezzo paused for a moment. “It’s a magic that’s not passed down anymore. If given enough time, though, I can analyze it and figure out how it works.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have that luxury,” Reinhard said, then turned his attention to Felt. “Lady Felt.”

Felt nodded at her knight’s call. “There was someone watching us, but I’m pretty sure we prevented them from retrieving the birds. But we should keep someone by Meili’s side for a while, just to be safe.”

“M-Mee?” Meili said.

“Whoever was responsible for the birds is keen to learn about the tower,” Reinhard explained. “They must also be interested in how to safely traverse the desert.”

Meili placed her hand on her chest as she listened to Reinhard. Then the mini crimson scorpion began clicking its pincers vigorously on top of her head.

Seeing the scorpion’s behavior, Felt let out a little groan. “We’re not tryna scare you. As for our first objective… We got to learn that we can cross the desert with you by our side, and that the Dragon won’t attack us if we have the talon. There were just as many good results from this trip as there were bad.”

“That’s a poor waay to make me feel better,” Meili said, showing a little smile. I’m such a shallow person. I came on this trip without expecting too much, and here I am scared and anxious that my mission is going to fail. It must mean that I’m so shallow that as soon as I even see a glimpse of a bright prospect, it makes me want to cling to it.

“Miss Felt, Sir Reinhard,” began Ezzo, “about our next course of action…”

“I know,” Felt interjected. “You wanna say that we shouldn’t leave the tower unsupervised, right? I wonder what we should do next, too.”

“There’s the option to leave me here for the time being,” suggested Reinhard.

Meili watched from the sidelines as Felt and the others discussed their next move. The sight of this reminded her of the Emilia Camp, and that made her long for her friends who were not there at the moment.

“I really am shallow,” Meili mumbled to herself, feeling the weight of the mini crimson scorpion on her head, and snapping out of her melancholic mood. She reminded herself that there were people by her side no matter how she was feeling.

3

While Meili reflected on herself, and Felt discussed their plan, an incident was taking place far away from the Augria Sand Dunes, the home of the Pleiades Watchtower.

Noticing that the poor lives of the birds had been snuffed out, a slender figure shuddered. “Something must have happened to them,” the figure said, lowering her eyes that were framed with long lashes.

The figure prayed for the souls of the lost lives.

The fact that none of them came back must mean something must have happened that prevented them from returning. And it is extremely uncommon for such a thing to happen there. However, as to whether I should be happy about that or not… I do not know.

“But why would anyone do something so cruel?”

The birds, with their pure white wings and innocent eyes, epitomized purity. The idea that they were so mercilessly destroyed incredibly hurt the figure and caused her great anguish.

“But even so…” a smooth, clear voice resonated from the figure’s thin lips, vibrating the air around her and proving her existence in the world. “I wish I could understand them. Every single one of them.”

She prayed, adored, pitied, loved, and hopelessly longed for everything and everyone, including what had been lost and those who lost them.

END

Volume 38

Chapters 61-Prologue

Chapter 61:
Palladio Manesque

1

—Palladio Manesque, one of the princes who had competed with the Seventy-Seventh Emperor of the Vollachian Empire, Vincent Vollachia, in the Imperial Selection Ceremony.

In the seventy-seventh Imperial Selection Ceremony, which was one of even fiercer competition compared to past selections, he had allied himself with the deemed forerunner Lamia Godwin, and had nearly cornered Vincent Abellux, who at the time had not yet assumed the throne, as well as Prisca Benedict.

Ultimately, Palladio's abilities were considered to be a threat, and having been impeded by the colluding Vincent and Prisca, he was forced to withdraw from the Imperial Selection Ceremony; however, Palladio himself was not at fault for his own defeat.

It was the fact that Lamia, with whom he had formed an alliance, had been taken down prematurely, that resulted in a fatal alteration in the course of the Imperial Selection Ceremony unbeknownst to Palladio and led to his defeat.

Palladio: "Truly, was she not just a hopeless younger sister solely proficient at lip service."

Having already lost her existence, in a way that proved that she was all bark and no bite, was Lamia.

When Lamia had attacked the dragon carriages as they fled from the Imperial Capital, Palladio had also lent his eyes upon her request. And yet, Lamia had lost pitifully and met her demise. Both in life and in death, she was nothing more than a foolish sister who left behind no accomplishments worthy of her grandiose words.

Sneering at Lamia's disgraceful behavior, Palladio, with gold pupils that bore witness to his undead nature—including the third eye on his forehead, he narrowed his three eyes and fixed his gaze upon the battlefield.

On the battlefield before him, an immense number of undead marched forward in ranks, armed with immortality and a deep-rooted obsession to capture the city that was their target, relentlessly continuing their resolute and repulsive attacks.

Commanding the undead that blanketed these vast lands, and capturing the city in question—the Fortified City of Garkla, and thus destroying once and for all the Vollachian Empire that had been misguided to this day, that was Palladio's duty.

That, was the duty bestowed upon Palladio as one chosen by the heavens.

—Palladio was a descendant of the Evil Eye tribe, a race blessed by the world.

In ancient times, the Evil Eye Tribe was said to have guided the mediocre human race with their special powers, and the Divine Protection, which was a gift usually granted to a select few, was bestowed upon every descendant of their entire race, one favored by the heavens.

However, the Evil Eye Tribe was feared by the people for their superior powers, and was also an unfortunate race that had been driven out from the center stage of history—Palladio had a mission to save his fellow tribesmen who had fallen into a world of suffering.

He must prove it. That the Evil Eye Tribe was the most preeminent race in the world.

For that very reason—

Palladio: "This Empire built by cowards such as you two, I shall destroy and rebuild it."

Running his fingers through his undulating green hair, within the mind of Palladio, whose undead visage had distorted, were the aggravating images of both Vincent and Prisca.

Having violated the unwritten rule of the Imperial Selection Ceremony that only a single individual was permitted to live, towards the ignoble nature of the two who had colluded to survive together, as a member of that same Vollachian Imperial Family, he held nothing but contempt. At this rate, it would not be surprising that, even during the Imperial Selection Ceremony, there had been dastardly attempts made to trample upon the long history of the Vollachian Empire and its weight. —No, rather, it would have been only natural to assume that some kind of conspiracy was at play.

Palladio: “If not for that, for what reason would I have fallen behind the likes of you and your ilk.”

Being a descendant of the Evil Eye Tribe, chosen by the heavens, utilizing that extraordinary talent, Palladio had swept aside all of his enemies and established his position as a prince of Vollachia.

He, who upheld the Empire’s law of iron and blood above all else, could never have been inferior to weaklings who only engaged in collusion and schemes.

Therefore—

Palladio: “—Vincent and Prisca, I shall sentence the both of you.”

And thus, once the Vollachian Empire was flattened into its ideal form, it would be governed by Palladio, who possessed the lineage and qualities befitting its ruler.

As for the manner of his rule, it would be modeled after the one Palladio had long regarded as the greatest Emperor of all time, the one who ruled the Vollachian Empire with pain and fear, the Emperor of the Briar—Eugard Vollachia, would be the example he would follow.

Making the authority of the Emperor known far and wide, the regency of Eugard, who was said to have bound the hearts of his own people with thorns, was precisely Palladio’s ideal.

In later works of fiction, there were accounts of foolish rumors concerning the Emperor of the Briar living for the love of a mere village girl; upon Palladio’s ascension to the throne, all of those would be incinerated and buried.

The basis for Palladio’s confidence, of course, was the ability bestowed upon Palladio as a member of the Evil Eye Tribe that formed the core of his unique nature, an extraordinary power.

Palladio: “…”

Closing both of his eyes, he focused his attention to the third eye that rested upon his forehead, his Evil Eye.

Instantly, Palladio’s field of vision was no longer simply a narrow view of the battlefield before him, but a vast, heavenly gaze that grasped the expansive space of the surrounding area in its entirety.

It was truly the viewpoint of the sun—Palladio’s third eye integrated his own field of vision with that of the sun, providing the perspective of a ruler looking down upon the world at large.

Making use of this, Palladio fulfilled his role as commander of the undead army with dignity.

For ordinary individuals, one might boast that they could win by brute force with the inexhaustible forces of the undead, but employing such poor tactics to force one’s way through would not be a battle befitting an emperor.

Bringing the opponent to their knees by means of both force and ingenuity, such was the true embodiment of the law of iron and blood of Vollachia.

Palladio: “You have prepared suitable experts and have made ample provisions. And it is apparent that you happen to be blessed with subordinates… but in the end, it seems like that is your limit, Vincent.”

The coordinated attack between the soldiers stationed on the walls and the powerful troops that charged forth was impressive, and the undead, despite their superior numbers, were unable to breach even the first layer of Fortified City’s defenses. However, the fact that they were using some of the highest quality cards in their hand so early was naught but a sign of insecurity concerning their fighting strength.

After all, Palladio's Evil Eye could see through to the city's interior—most of the occupants were refugees who had fled from the Imperial Capital and various towns and villages, and without having the power to fight, they were simply a hindrance.

From their standpoint, defending the thickest and largest walls was the only thread onto which they could cling.

Palladio: "I shall teach those ignorant fools who do not realize that this is naught but a fragile and fleeting illusion. —You people, the world which you see through your two eyes is so narrow that I cannot help but pity you."

Scoffing at such a foolish resistance, Palladio held up his hand and projected his voice to a distant location.

This, also, was an innate power of Palladio as a member of the Evil Eye Tribe—telepathic communication, which allowed him to project his voice to any person whose hair, nails, or body parts he had taken, regardless of the distance that separated them.

With that, Palladio made the decisive move that would end the Fortified City.

That being—

Palladio: "—The undead flying dragons are to be deployed at once. To those fools who focus all of their efforts upon the city walls, we shall teach the methods by which a true Emperor wages war."

2

???: "—The enemy's flying dragon squadron has crossed the great mountain behind the grand fortress and entered the sky above! Right now, the enemy soldiers are being dropped in and the undead have invaded the city!"

The messenger who came racing into the command room reported the change of situation between pants and breaths.

The walled fortress had been suffering from simple yet powerful brute force attacks, but now the opponent had decided to attack from the air, the largest weak point in Garkla.

Gouged out of a mighty mountainside, the city's greatest fortress could be boasted to have a robustness that would not easily be defeated even if the ramparts surrounding the city were breached. However, the sky was the one place where it was defenseless.

Serena: "Just when the situation has become worrying, you make your move. This tactic, as I assumed, is probably directed by His Excellency Palladio Manesque."

Otto: "The Prince of Vollachia, who competed with His Excellency the Emperor in the Imperial Selection Ceremony?"

Otto muttered to Serena, who frowned at the report and traced the white sword wound on her face with her finger.

Among the opponents who had joined the undead side, he was named as a target to be wary of in advance. He was a rare person with a unique ability that came from the Evil Eye Tribe, and his nature was both sadistic and ruthless.

It would not be easy to handle an opponent who concentrated all of their strength into one's defenseless blind spot, but it was a common war strategy.

Especially in siege warfare, a small hole could often bring about destruction.

On such a large scale, it would have been fatal to have such a hole created.

Therefore—

Otto: "It is in accordance with the theory."

Serena: "—? Theoree?"

Otto: "Nevermind, no need to worry about it. More importantly…"

Serena tilted her head at the unfamiliar sound, waved her hand lightly, and then Otto gave a nod of approval to Berstetz in the center of the room to send instructions to the messenger.

In response, Berstetz's thread-like eyes slightly opened,

Berstetz: "Give them the order. —It is time for the Special Forces."

Yes, he was able to use words that were not familiar to him in an appropriate manner.

3

—That ought to have been an arrow fired as the decisive blow in the battle for the Fortified City of Garkla.

The utility of flying dragon riders was common knowledge that went without saying for the people of the Empire, but when applying the condition of them being undead, it was something that could only be accomplished provided that both rider and flying dragon were resurrected.

Fulfilling that prerequisite, the undead flying dragon riders contributing to the undead forces were few in number. Therefore, they had been handled carefully, naught else but upon the scene where their involvement would be critical to the utmost.

Palladio: "—The undead flying dragons are to be deployed at once. To those fools who focus all of their efforts upon the city walls, we shall teach the methods by which a true Emperor wages war."

From the officer commanding the hosts of undead, an order was sent out telepathically.

Obeying the strange voice that seemed to echo directly within their heads, the few undead flying dragon riders took their undead flying dragons along with him, and seized the skies of the Fortified City upon the flaps of their beloved dragons' wings.

Towering over the rear of the Fortified City, surmounting the height of the great mountain which served as the national border with the neighboring countries, was a life-threatening act, no matter how skilled of flying dragon riders they were. Disregarding that greatest obstacle of risking their lives, the undead flying dragon riders accomplished the objective of their operation.

Undead Flying Dragon Riders: “…”

Below the golden glow of their undead eyes, the great fortress, protected by a robust wall built of stone, could be seen.

Deployed there was a dragonship carried by nearly one hundred undead flying dragons, and the unruly group of undead boarded upon it.

The ones in charge of transport were undead, and thus the ones being sent in were also undead—it was a blasphemous tactic, one that cared naught for survival.

???: “Go.”

Receiving that brief command, the neighing undead flying dragons dropped the dragonship upon that place.

It was an act of barbarity that accounted not for their speed or position of landing, one that would be more appropriately titled as being cast off; in order to deliver a fatal blow to the Vollachian Empire, it spun and spun as it approached the city’s center.

And then—

???: “IN OUR CAPACITIES, WE ARE THE—!!”

???: “STRONGEST! STRONGEST! STRONGEST—!!”

The group that had jumped out like a tempest from the mountainside stormed the flank of the plummeting dragonship, and from the inside out, pulverized what was to be the fatal blow upon the Imperial Soldiers to smithereens.

4

—Appointed as the “Special Forces”, the time that they spent waiting was tantalizing, despite the heavy responsibility.

However, even though it was tantalizing, there was no fear that their efforts would amount only to a swing and a miss.

That was because Natsuki Schwartz was a man who had already won over the trust of Gustav Morello.

Unconditionally assisting in the things that he had decided, believing in the events that he was convinced would occur without any basis, Gustav had resolved himself to fight, to the best of his ability, against any enemy whom he had declared they would oppose.

Therefore, ever since the battle surrounding the Fortified City had commenced, as they felt the fierce fighting of the members of the Pleiades Battalion aside from themselves unfolding, they patiently awaited their time.

But then again, the act of waiting, and being unbothered by waiting, were entirely different matters.

Gustav: “OHHHH—!”

With a powerful bellow, Gustav swung about his four arms, and rampaged as he pleased atop the plummeting dragonship.

The undead on board the dragonship had thrust their weapons into the vessel, securing their bodies in place so as to not be thrown off. Because of that, their response to the surprise attack of Gustav’s squad had been delayed.

Comprising the “Special Forces” together with Gustav, were not Schwartz’s personal guards of Hiain, Weitz, and Idra, but rather the veteran gladiators who had spent a long time on the Gladiator Island—that was to say, they were individuals with whom Gustav was well acquainted.

As Governor of Ginunhive, it was Gustav’s duty to administer the Gladiator Island without a hitch, and he had a better grasp of the gladiators’ abilities than they themselves did.

Though, he had never imagined that this kind of service would fall under his duties as Governor.

Gladiator: “To think they’d send rabbits in order to kill wolves.”

Gladiator: “We’re the wind, ‘n ain’t nobody can fuckin’ surround the wind!”

Gladiator: “Kuhahahaha! It’s a brawl, a brawl’s surely brewin’ I tell ya! Stakin’ my life really gets me fuckin’ goin’~!!”

Hot-headed, yet capable individuals such as the lone-wolf Jawsrough, Phenmelle, and Milzac wielded their weapons together with Gustav upon the dragonship, and subjugated the undead one after another.

The mysterious phenomenon of the raised fighting spirit surrounding the Pleiades Battalion allowed the gladiators versed in battle to be deployed against powerful fighters with many years of military experience, and to sufficiently display their strength even in the poor situation of a plummeting dragonship. —Nay, it was rather the situation upon which their lives were staked, which had allowed them to display abilities that exceeded even their true strength.

Gustav: “That is precisely why selecting a suicide squad… no, why selecting the “Special Forces” is effective.”

On this battlefield, the duty of Gustav’s squad had an equal, if not greater, danger to their lives than those holding back the swarms of undead on the front lines.

They were entrusted with such an important task; however, it was imperative that Gustav’s squad did not die.

To have not even a single one of them die, such was the strict order imposed on them by the Boss of the Pleiades Battalion.

Gustav: “As the official, I do not deem it acceptable to serve two masters. Therefore, I do not look up to you as my master, but… the earnest request of a friend, is something I wish to undertake to the best of my capacity.”

Saying that, Gustav grabbed the heads of the undead who had pulled out their weapons and were moving to counterattack, and smashed the four bodies together above his head, shattering them.

Scattering their earthen remains as their crumbling resounded, he immediately seized the next enemies.

Gustav despised the violent and savage temperament of the Multi-Arm Tribe so very much.

As much as he could, he regulated his own heart, and, not wanting to surrender himself to belligerence or anger, he had intended on living a life with firm restrictions upon himself.

In this Vollachian Empire, while serving as Governor of the Gladiator Island, he had maintained his principles.

Gustav: “Oh, OHHHHHHHHHHH—!!!”

Those principles of his, in this moment, Gustav completely forgot about them all.

In this moment, he rampaged with the same temperament of the Multi-Arm Tribe he thought to be vexing.

For that reason—

Gustav: “IN OUR CAPACITIES, WE ARE—!!”

Special Forces: “INVINCIBLE! INVINCIBLE! INVINCIBLE—!!”

Gustav and the rest of the “Special Forces” carried out their vital directive.

After all, it was precisely that uproar of ardor that served as greater proof than anything else that Schwartz and his battalion were fighting hard for the sake of the Empire’s triumph.

5

By drawing attention to the quantity or outstanding strength of his forces, he could then play his trump card in key areas that had become thin on the ground.

If successfully implemented, Palladio Manesque's plan would have shattered the city's defensive measures and certainly would have been the decisive factor in the outcome of the siege.

However, that was only if things had been successfully fitted together.

Serena: "When deploying the undead, the first thing to think about is tactics that will take advantage of their characteristics. It is inevitable that they will try to cross Mount Gildray in a way that makes them willing to die."

Otto: "With that in mind, when a wall that cannot be pushed through by sheer force is presented, it is natural to want to play your cards when the sky is empty."

Serena: "However, I was not expecting it to turn out this way."

The "Special Forces" had been deployed to intercept the undead assault force that had targeted the city from the sky, and the command post nodded in agreement as the attack was prevented, which would have been a winning strategy from their opponents' point of view.

As stated previously, it was an appropriate strategy for the undead to use. However, in terms of taking advantage of the unfortunate situation, it was a strategy that was too straightforward and orthodox.

Direct attacks were standard methods and were effective when they worked, but they could easily be countered.

Serena: "According to what I've heard, his death during the Imperial Selection Ceremony was also due to his excessive focus on the right way of attack. For better or worse, the time of the undead has stood still."

Serena, who had sent out her own flying dragon squadron to destroy the undead flying dragon riders that had appeared in the sky, described their opponent as having failed to read her plan.

It was true that Palladio Manesque was considered to be the opposing commander, and his name was mentioned as a target to be on the lookout for—but that was if he were to assist others by taking advantage of his Evil Eye Tribe characteristics.

In fact, Lamia Godwin’s raid on the coupled dragon carriages had nearly destroyed the Empire because of Palladio’s assistance.

However, it was a silver lining amidst misfortune that the opposing party remained unaware of how to utilize their abilities to the fullest extent.

Serena: “It seems as if His Excellency Palladio is saying that you can never lose a bet if you can see your opponent’s hand.”

Otto: “Normally, if you could see your opponent’s hand, you would have a significant advantage.”

Serena: “Really? I could make a bet with you on the same terms. The only thing is, if you play with me, your family will be in danger.”

Otto: “So this is why they call it the Vollachian way!”

Serena: “Being greedy for victory is a virtue. —You’re the same as I am, aren’t you?”

Otto’s face was truly bitter at the look in Serena’s eyes, as if to suggest he had bad character.

At any rate, it could be said that in terms of quality of the command post, they had surpassed their opponent. Having destroyed their winning strategy, the enemy would have no choice but to take the next step.

And that was—

Serena: “He’s playing his best trump card. —The continuous deployment of forces is the flower of a losing battle.”

6

???: “—KRUUUUUUUAGH!!”

Raising a thunderous roar that shattered the sky, a three-headed Dragon clad in black scales soared.

Flapping its wings as it flew over the hosts of undead, not even flinching as its whole body was showered in a hail of countless arrows, the jet-black Blight Dragon of forgone mind once again appeared in the skies of the Empire.

Once slain by the hand of the Admirer, the imposing Three-Headed Valgren was a threat incomparable to any of the other undead, and was undoubtedly the trump card of the undead army.

Given the failure of the surprise attack from over Mount Gildray, the commanding officer was correct in their judgment that they would be overpowered if they did not immediately strive to recover.

—However, as before, that did not emerge in the realm of a frontal attack.

???: “Haaah—!”

Along with a courageous voice, bulging thorns reached out to the sky from the city walls furiously approaching the Blight Dragon of outstretched wings—it was the onslaught of Kafma Irulux.

Kafma’s suppressive power, capable of single-handedly upholding the warfront filled with undead as far as the eye could see, entangled Valgren’s entire body, its eyes not in its normal state, binding its wings before they could be torn apart.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before the thorns would be torn to shreds by the Dragon’s physical strength.

Kafma: “But, my duty is this one second!”

Veins bulging all over his body in a mottled pattern, blood spilled from Kafma’s nose as he spoke sharply to Valgren in the skies above with a fierce expression.

Twisting its three heads as if it was angered by the proclamation of that diminutive presence, the Blight Dragon roared.

A Dragon’s roar made all life shrink in fear—however, there were no cowards on this battlefield who would cower before the Blight Dragon’s war cries.

???: “—Al Clauseria.”

Ensnared by thorns, Valgren had ceased its movements mid-air. Aiming for one of the Blight Dragon’s writhing heads, an aurora of rainbow ran diagonally across the sky.

It vibrantly seized Valgren’s right head, blowing it away from the base.

It was a graceful, magnificent, and dazzling stroke of magic unleashed by the Finest.

???: “Take aim!”

Next, the eyes of one of the remaining heads of the Blight Dragon was pierced by an arrow of divine speed.

It was a small target when compared to the large build of the Blight Dragon, but the chieftain of the People of Shudraq had magnificently shot through it, and then sharply called out to the two by her side.

Among the two who were called upon, one aligned the aim by eye measurement, and the other used her entire body to draw a huge bow that would have taken ten regular people to pull.

???: “Let… it have it!!”

???: “Take it down~!!”

The two of them combined their efforts to wield the powerful bow, and with a loud sound akin to a star being pierced, they landed a direct hit on the blinded head of the Blight Dragon, blasting everything above the jaw completely away, and reducing the Three-Headed turned Two-Headed even further into the One-Headed.

Valgren: “—KRUUUUUUUAGH!!”

On top of that, having lost both its left and right heads, Valgren looked up to the sky as it generated tremendous heat within its large black body.

The breath of destruction, so synonymous with Dragons themselves, was turned towards the Fortified City below. —At that moment, the eyes of the crazed Blight Dragon were met by the eyes of someone watching it from inside the great fortress that it was supposed to capture.

As that someone stood by that window, they directed their hand towards the Blight Dragon as it tore off the thorns within the skies—

???: “—El Fula.”

If an objective could be accomplished with minimal toil, neither flashy magic nor outlandish monstrous strength were necessary.

With precision that could serve as an example for all such things, the Blight Dragon’s final remaining head was cut off by a blade of wind possessing an unrelenting sharpness.

Valgren: “…”

Each of its three heads lopped off, the Blight Dragon falleth.

That was the pathetic defeat of the Three-Headed Valgren, intended to be the trump card played by the undead forces.

7

Palladio: “Impossible, impossible impossible impossible impossible impossible impossible impossible impossible…!”

His body trembling all over, while scratching at his hair, Palladio could not accept the defeat of Valgren which he had just witnessed occur through his Evil Eye.

Things that should have been impossible, continued to occur one after another.

Because of that, Palladio fell from what was an overwhelmingly advantageous position, and with his pride wounded as the one who ought to have been leisurely waging the warfare of a true Emperor, he tasted humiliation.

Palladio: “How?! How have they seen through all of mine plans!”

The surprise tactic of having the undead flying dragon riders carry a dragonship and cross over the mountain, was perfect.

He was not certain if that had been anticipated, or if it had been preserved fighting assets that immediately reacted to it, but the surprise tactic had been thwarted. Only, that was something neither unpleasant nor fatal. —Rather, it ought not have been.

Palladio: “What even is the Blight Dragon, THE THREE-HEADED…!”

The Three-Headed Valgren had immediately been sent out as a harbinger of despair—in the past, it had exerted tyranny in the accursed neighboring nation, the Kingdom of Lugunica, the resurrected fearsome Blight Dragon.

If that Dragon of forgone mind displayed its true worth, dominance through means of might and fear would have been accomplished.

To think that the mighty Valgren would be subjugated in such a manner, with its three heads lopped off.

Palladio: “Why are the lot of you all so asinine?! Why be you unable to fulfill the duties expected of mine limbs?!”

The fallen Blight Dragon, the failed ambush corps, the swarms of undead still having trouble conquering the first wall, each of them had failed to provide utility to Palladio, a cluster of fools who only continued to drag down on his legs.

When he took a moment to think about it, Vincent, Prisca, and Lamia all had competent servants in their service.

In other words, the difference between Palladio, Vincent, and the rest, came down to whether they were blessed with servants or not.

They had nothing to do with the strength of the person in question, and were naught more than external decorations.

Flaunting that, they were a shameless bunch unworthy of being a part of the Imperial Family attempting to outrival Palladio.

Palladio: “The Emperor of the Briar’s solitary nature is the unmistakable true desire of Vollachian Emperor. I shall never stoop to the methods of you cowardly lot…!”

Even in the past Imperial Selection Ceremony, Vincent avoided the stratagem that Palladio had formulated, and he had outsmarted Palladio, snatching victory through such means.

The same thing was happening again. —Palladio could not overlook such an outrageous act.

Palladio: “Anybody, offer up a suggestion! As of now, I shall enact anything!”

While burning with humiliation, Palladio loudly called out to the undead encampment.

In truth, Palladio had wished to persist as a solitary Emperor who asked not for the likes of others’ opinions. But, the opponent had taken advantage of Palladio’s haughtiness, wielding a spear of malice.

In that case, Palladio had no choice but to display the might of the Emperor through severity.

Palladio: “Is anyone there?! Raise your voice! Or else…”

???: “—Well then, with your permission.”

Turning his head, Palladio looked over the personnel of poor complexion, and a single person raised their voice.

At a glance, that was a slender figure slowly walking through the crowd of undead—witnessing the aura that was peculiarly different among the other undead, Palladio narrowed his three eyes.

Their appearance clearly set them apart from mediocrity. The only thing remaining was whether their abilities would match that impression or not.

Palladio: “What are you capable of doing?”

???: “Hm, that is right. …First of all, how about I show you.”

Saying thus, the white-haired woman standing before Palladio smiled, and held her hand up towards the sky.

And then—

8

???: “—Ana!!”

When the three heads of the Three-Headed Blight Dragon, whose appearance was anticipated, were severed in the sky above the city, and its colossal black frame was reduced to dust as it crashed down from above, Anastasia felt a sense of relief in her heart.

Although it had been anticipated, the fact that the opponent was a heavy hitter remained unchanged.

Even with appropriate preparations, there lingered the ever-present possibility of the enemy surpassing or outflanking them. Having avoided such a scenario, she felt the relief of a powerful foe having been thwarted.

However, the solace Anastasia felt was torn to pieces by the voice of Echidna at her neck.

Anastasia: “…”

Having known each other for a decade, the spirit Echidna usually remained motionless masquerading as Anastasia’s scarf; bouncing up on her shoulder, she stared with black eyes up at the sky above the great fortress.

Tracing the gaze of Echidna, Anastasia’s pale turquoise eyes widened.

Anastasia: “Is that, a star…?”

Her murmured words rang uncertain, a manifestation of her lack of confidence.

At the very least, one could say that it was a sight Anastasia had never seen in her lifetime; a scenery she could have never even imagined.

Higher than the flock of undead flying dragons that crossed over Mount Gildray, higher than the Three-Headed Blight Dragon which had ascended even further beyond that, light was cascading down upon the city from above—a star was falling.

Next to Anastasia as she marveled at the extraordinary sight, as Otto and Berstetz were left speechless, Serena, witnessing the same scene, contorted the sword scar on her face into a smile,

Serena: “The atmosphere has changed. —Win or lose, the conclusion draws near.”

9

Palladio: “Haha, hahahaha! Excellent, yes, this is it! The sight I had coveted!”

Witnessing the sight unfolding in the sky of the battlefield, Palladio broke into ecstatic dance.

The defenses of the Fortified City, known for their solidity, would amount to naught once the cascading light reached the ground. The resistance of those puny imbeciles would equate to rubbish before the star’s radiance.

Palladio: “You have done well to appear before me! I shall enlist you among mine vassals! By what name shall I address you?!”

Joy shimmering in his three golden eyes, Palladio posed the question to the white-haired woman who had given rise to that sight. Once again catching a frontward glimpse of the woman, who had turned to face him following his query, Palladio caught his breath.

Beautiful white hair and refined features capable of sending shivers down one’s spine, but above all else, her face and eyes were bereft of the physical traits that could identify her as an undead. —It was an appearance that could cause one to mistake her as a living being.

But then, why would she contribute to his side?

When Palladio questioned this, the woman deeply bent her hips, and bowed.

And then, she returned an answer to his question. —An introduction as to just who exactly she was.

???: “What name would be correct to use, is a bit of a complicated affair. So for the time being… I suppose you can just call me the Witch of Greed.”

So she declared.

Chapter 62:
The Power of Love

1

—The entirety of her body burst into flames, reducing the Witch to ash.

The awe-inspiring power of the Yang Sword that at last had finally been unsheathed from its veil, which had stolen her soul and whose fierce flames had reduced it to naught but cinders, exceeded even Subaru's expectations for his plan.

Subaru: "This must be, the true power of the Yang Sword…"

Not only was this Witch cut down, but the crimson flames of the blaze spread to the two other bodies of the Witch. Seeing the resultant effect, Subaru could only gasp.

Up until now, there had been several situations in which Subaru had witnessed the Yang Sword being wielded, but the owner of the Yang Sword had always been Priscilla. However, in terms of Abel exceeding Priscilla as a wielder of the Yang Sword, there would be no such simple answer.

The opponents whom Priscilla had unleashed her Yang Sword upon had always been formidable. This time, the Witch—Sphinx had been a similarly formidable enemy, and in order to defeat her, Abel had made an incredible gamble.

In every battlefield, in every possible arrangement of the board, and in every crisis up until now, he had never once utilized the Yang Sword, thus for Sphinx—or rather, for everyone, it had been eliminated as a possibility.

In order to bring such a thing to fruition, one could not imagine the nerve required.

Vincent: "You, what is with that incomprehensible expression?"

Subaru: “I’m just surprised. We’ve been through so much together up until now, and I’m still easily discovering things about your personality to complain about…!”

Vincent: “And here I was wondering what you were going to say… Could it be that you are referring to this card that I had kept unturned? If that is so, are you not also the sort to hatch up plans of this ilk?”

Subaru: “It’s not a matter of character on my part, it’s okay because it’s the result of wit and bravery and cheating. Thinking back to the beginning with the Lifeblood Ritual, and that time we fought Zikr-san and the others at Guaral, then when Arakiya made her entrance, then our dispute with Yorna-san at Chaosflame and the game of tag with Olbart-san and the entire time we were on the coupled dragon carriages! You kept it hidden!”

Vincent: “Yes, and?”

Subaru: “Yes, and?! Ahhh!”

With the treasured sword of crimson in hand, Abel’s shameless affirmation amazed Subaru, but then, in an instant, the pain in his right arm that was broken by Sphinx as a warning came rushing back.

As he held his broken arm with tears in his eyes, Beatrice rushed beside him with a “Subaru” and held her hand over it, using her healing magic.

And so, as Beatrice attended to Subaru tenderly,

Beatrice: “No matter how many times you say it, it seems it will never have an effect on that man, in fact. Perhaps, his ability to feel guilt has probably died, I suppose. He’s of the same breed as Roswaal, in fact.”

Subaru: “Guhhhh…!”

Beatrice: “There, that should make it feel a little better, I suppose.”

Heaping as much verbal abuse as she could upon Abel, Beatrice finished Subaru's medical treatment.

The pain still lingered, but the broken bone felt like it had been healed. It could not be moved around too much, and it would take some time to be completely healed, but there existed other priorities.

Vincent: "Shall you be able to save Jamal Aurélie?"

Beatrice: "So long as he's still breathing, I'll do what I can, in fact. This is Betty's duty as Subaru's partner, I suppose."

Leaving with these words, Beatrice trotted over to Jamal.

After defeating the first Sphinx, three more Sphinxes had appeared, and it was Jamal who had provoked them and in turn received the most injury. The way he had done so, by continuing to hurl abuse that was painful to listen to, had been rather crude; albeit, that too was an act of showing his loyalty to the Emperor.

Spica: "Uau."

Subaru: "Ohh, Spica, you did a great job. What about your body? It doesn't hurt anywhere?"

Spica: "Au!"

With a vigorous nod, Spica tried to stop his worrying as she smiled. Using his hand to wipe away the dirt from her cheek, he gave her head a pat as a reward for her hard work.

Truly, without any doubt, this was a victory that had been gained by everyone here doing their utmost to fulfill their duty.

That said, he could not help but acknowledge that Abel's trump card had contributed more than anything else—

Subaru: "Still, I'm gonna be holding a grudge against you for the rest of my life."

Vincent: "If I have made you say that much, then the one who suggested this must also be satisfied."

No matter how reproachful the glare, Abel would ignore it nonchalantly.

While his cold nature was infuriating, when it came to the matter of hiding the Yang Sword and having the confidence to stick with it, Subaru could do nothing but speak his praise.

—The fact that Abel was capable of using the Yang Sword, but hid that fact, was something that Subaru had only become aware of within the loop where the fight with Sphinx had already started.

To put it plainly, it was a level of secrecy of a dead weight.

Originally, the only trump card which could have been hoped to stop the Great Disaster of the Vollachian Empire was for Subaru to combine his power with Spica's Star Eating.

But, if Abel's Yang Sword could reach the foundation of the souls of the undead then the story was different.

The Yang Sword and Star Eating, the two leading actors in this siege on the undead territory, could be utilized as trump cards in order to defeat the Great Disaster.

Subaru: "You, having realized this earlier, decided to join us in this group, right?"

Spica: "Uu—?"

Subaru: "You see, Spica, this sly Emperor is able to use the Yang Sword, and even knew that it might be one of the key items in defeating the zombies. Spica is the same right? So, we had to proactively whittle down the zombies by using Star Eating. What happened then?"

Spica: "Aa—aau?"

Subaru: "That's right. The enemy's main forces came after us. And the method we used against that main force was Spica's Star Eating. After all, I didn't know what the odds were that there was another method. So, it would be just fine if Spica could deal with them. But in the event that you couldn't…"

Spica: “Auaa!”

After Subaru concluded his explanation, Spica’s eyes widened and she pointed at Abel’s Yang Sword. Subaru replied “That’s right!” to Spica’s sudden comprehension and patted her head.

Alongside Spica, he looked at Abel as if he was human garbage.

Subaru: “Look, Spica. Those are the eyes of someone with a completely twisted personality. Your personality has to be pitch-black in order to be the Emperor of Vollachia… I knew it, wouldn’t it be better to destroy Vollachia after all?”

Vincent: “Changing sides as soon as the enemy leader has been reduced to ash? You have chosen a terrible time to betray me.”

Beatrice: “You, don’t beg us to help save the Empire just to immediately become the head of a rebellion, I suppose…”

Though they were here out of necessity, the Empire was bad for Spica’s emotional education. Abel was a prime example of this, so outside of a situation such as this he was the first person that should not be around her.

Spica should be surrounded by more wholesome and refreshing companions she could imitate, such as Emilia and Rem, or Beatrice and Tanza.

Subaru: “In that case, we need to keep her away from Otto and Roswaal as well. As for Nee-sama… I like her, but dealing with more than two people would be tough. Garfiel could also be a good influence, but…”

Beatrice: “Subaru! The healing over here is almost finished, in fact!”

Subaru: “Oh. Got it!”

Following Beatrice’s voice, Subaru and the others went towards where Jamal had fallen.

But, Jamal did not raise his voice at the arrival of Subaru and the others, as he was still splayed out on the ground.

Beatrice: “For now, his life isn’t in any danger, I suppose. But, any further treatment will require time, and will also take up Betty’s remaining strength, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beako’s remaining strength… Like, your remaining mana?”

Beatrice: “Indeed, I suppose… There’s an irregularity which makes it like a lavish banquet, but it would be reckless to rely on it, in fact.”

Subaru: “Irregularity…”

Hearing Beatrice’s answer, Subaru stared down at his hands.

What she had called an irregularity, the remaining mana within Subaru’s body—As Subaru’s contracted Spirit, the mana that was in Subaru became Beatrice’s remaining MP, so in his current condition, the amount of mana being lent to her could indeed be considered an irregularity.

Subaru had some ideas as to why this might be the case.

One possibility was that the connection between everyone in the Pleiades Battalion and Subaru had brought about a positive effect; another possibility was that infantilization had led to some strange occurrence in Subaru’s Gate.

But, in the latter case it was not likely that Beatrice would be able to understand it, so he felt that the former option was more likely.

Subaru: “To become stronger because of my connections with everyone, I’m the kind of guy who gets passionate from stuff like that.”

Beatrice: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “Don’t worry, Beako. No matter what, I agree that using as much magic as we please probably isn’t a good thing, so we should try to conserve it as much as possible. But, if we’re backed into a corner…”

While respecting Beatrice's judgment, Subaru stared fixedly at the fallen Jamal.

Naturally, they could not abandon him as he was instrumental to their victory. However, if Jamal did not regain consciousness, someone would inevitably have to carry him.

Vincent: "For the record, I will not be carrying him."

Subaru: "You beat me to it… you've been on a roll ever since you got that sword, huh. Even though you were a close match with me in that cat fight earlier, you were swooshing and bouncing around… wouldn't it be trivial for you to carry Jamal?"

Vincent: "Even if I could do it, I shan't. Now that Jamal Aurélie has fallen, I ought to be the most agile one present. We are in a position which requires vigilance, so I cannot be carrying baggage."

Subaru: "Don't call him baggage! Fine, I get it! I'll…"

Spica: "Uuau."

Angry at the unruly Emperor who had given a sound argument, Subaru attempted to carry Jamal. However, Spica slipped right past him and took the initiative to pick up Jamal's body.

The image of a petite girl easily lifting an adult man was painful to watch, even though Spica was not putting much strain on herself.

Subaru: "Well, that's what it would look like if anyone but you were doing it. What do you think?"

Vincent: "It is a great service. Continue to endeavor as you are."

Subaru: "You're right, Beako, this guy has no sense of guilt!"

Beatrice: "I already said that, I suppose… Spica, don't push yourself too hard, in fact."

Beatrice sighed at Abel's audacity, and Spica exclaimed "Uu!" with a smile in response to her consideration. In fact, it was a relief that Spica did not seem to find Jamal to be heavy.

In any case, although the reality of having defeated the formidable Sphinx was gradually starting to sink in, they could not be completely happy about it.

That was because—

Vincent: "—It seems like there's already significance to me having kept my hands free."

As Abel said this, he jerked his chin towards a succession of silhouettes approaching the street where Subaru and the others were, as if they had heard the battle with the Sphinxes earlier—figures of the undead could be spotted.

Subaru grit his teeth at what this meant and the frustrating truth of Abel's words.

Thus, the fact of the matter was the undead had appeared here where they were.

Beatrice: "…Even after defeating Sphinx, The Sacrament of the Immortal King hasn't been severed, I suppose."

Subaru: "Damn, the most direct logic that the magic would disappear if the caster were to be defeated seems to be wrong. Beako, this is…"

Beatrice: "Even though she was corrupted, she was created with the goal of becoming the Witch of Greed, I suppose. Perhaps, she arranged the ritual so that the Sacrament of the Immortal King would function even in her absence, in fact. If we don't destroy the system itself, the Stone's limitations are still the limits of this country, I suppose."

Subaru: "I guess that's probably the case…"

After absorbing what Beatrice had said, Subaru's gaze turned to the northernmost part of the Imperial Capital—he looked to the Crystal Palace.

That was where Sphinx and her side were based up, so it was the most appropriate location for a symbolic object to be placed. Of course, it was possible that Sphinx, who did not appreciate such romance and drama, had placed its contrivance elsewhere.

Vincent: "—No, there can be no mistaking that it is at the Crystal Palace. Whatever the Witch's intentions, if she needed a connection to the Stone, she would require contact with the core of the Crystal Palace… with Moguro Hagane."

Subaru: "Isn't Moguro one of the Nine Divine Generals…?"

Vincent: "Yes. They have currently been put to rest in the Crystal Palace. Or, to be precise, the Crystal Palace itself has been put to rest."

Subaru: "You absolutely! Better explain this to me! Later on!"

Saying this to Abel, who seemed to have many more secrets besides the Yang Sword, Subaru welcomed the decision that they definitely needed to go to the Crystal Palace.

Subaru: "…"

To be honest, even though he knew that the core of the Great Disaster was in the Crystal Palace, he still wanted to confirm the safety of his comrades whom he had sent to the other battlefields. In particular, he wanted to check on the safety of Emilia and Tanza.

Their placement was the only part that Subaru was not able to confirm.

What was causing Subaru's anxiety and frustration was—

???: "—Golly, y'all're lookin' like a mess. Even the Emperor-san's forehead's covered in sweat and mud; he's a surprisingly hard worker, ain't he now?"

Suddenly, a black shadow descended and forcefully turned the situation upside down with a casual tone.

The figure landed between Subaru and the incoming undead, walked over to them in a casual tone, and squatted down in front of Subaru and Beatrice.

Then he laughed with a golden kiseru in his mouth and extended his folded hands.

???: “For all y’all hard workers… Here, gotcha some souvenirs.”

With that said, his folded hands were opened, and a number of strange crystals the size of coins were in his large palms.

Subaru did not know what they were, but Beatrice, holding his hand, noticed.

Beatrice: “Those, are Corebugs…!”

???: “Yepyep. The one from those guys.”

Nodding calmly, the figure brought his palms together again and rubbed them together with a scrubbing motion.

In the next instant, the undead across the street let out a cry of anguish and turned to dust. —The cores that had been reproducing the undead were thwarted, and they could no longer sustain their bodies.

It was a tall, carefree black wolfman who did it in a flash—

Subaru: “Halibel-san!”

Halibel: “Ooh, ooh, that’s such a warm welcome. I like energetic kids who can speak loudly.”

Halibel, who had been working separately, nodded at Subaru’s surprised voice.

He was asked to eliminate the most important opponent in the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital—an enemy that had to be eliminated in order for everyone to give their best performance.

The fact that he was here like this meant.

Halibel: “Don’t’cha worry, my work is done ‘n taken care of. Got no intentions of lettin’ lil’ Ana’s face be crushed after all.”

Subaru: "—! That's a huge help! Thank you! Can I count on you to keep it up with something else?"

Halibel: "Hmm, ya sure ain't a shy boy. Well well s'pose it'd be dandy, go on 'n say it."

Subaru: "I want you to go with me to the palace! I just want to leave you to cover the other girls on the way. I'll be working Abel to the point of death over on our side after all!"

Vincent: "Disgraceful…"

Abel grumbled something about Subaru's suggestion, which he consciously ignored.

At any rate, it was fortuitous that Halibel had accomplished his task. He was very anxious about Emilia and the others, but if Halibel were willing to go, it would make them even stronger and help Emilia bloom.

Subaru: "Olbart-san should be in the palace. That's why I want you to go to Emilia and Tanza…"

Vincent: "Hold on, Natsuki Subaru, is that a strategic decision? If that is not the case—"

Subaru: "If that'll make you agree, then yeah it is! It's all part of my performance after all!"

Subaru retorted to Abel's interjections and glared at him.

It was encouraging to have Beatrice holding Subaru's hand tightly as if she were on his side. Halibel interrupted the exchange of stern glances with a "Hold on, hold on".

He put his bladed hand in between Subaru and Abel, as if to cut the thread of the staring contest, and,

Halibel: "Ain't no need ta be so belligerent. 'N as for the fight around the palace, I think I ain't gonna be needed for it, okay?"

Subaru: "Huh?"

Subaru’s eyes widened at Halibel’s comment as he stroked the hair under his chin.

The Admirer turned his narrow, thread-like eyes in the direction of the gaze that sought the basis for his statement,

Halibel: “The power of love is mighty, I guess this is simply a case of that.”

And then, he laughed with a face that mixed equal parts amazement and admiration.

2

—An unthinkable scene was in the midst of unfolding.

The woman, who had become unable to define whether she was Yorna Mishigure, or if she was Iris, all she could do was watch as she held back the tears on the verge of distorting her vision.

Woman: “—Tanza.”

The name spun by those trembling lips, it belonged to the deergirl who housed a flame within a single eye, and with the hem of the kimono they once had chosen together fluttering, confronted the fierce advance of the undead swordsmen.

Far more agile and powerful than the Tanza she knew, it was a fight brimming with confidence.

Tanza, was once a girl without confidence in herself.

She was incredibly intelligent and capable for her young age, and yet, the child had evaluated herself as being completely lacking, an evaluation that was far too low of herself. Back when she was the same age as Tanza in the truest sense, she had not been nearly as capable as her.

A foolish child she was, getting carried away thinking it was her duty to fulfill the work entrusted to her so that she would not be a burden to her parents and the people of her village, and yet failing to notice the thoughtfulness of those around her.

Compared to her past self, Tanza was far more admirable. And now, after believing that death had bereaved her of Tanza, they had been reunited in this situation where her own foundation had become uncertain.

Between Prisca, the Empire, the Demon City, Tanza—and Eugard, her mind was in its greatest state of turmoil throughout all of her lifetimes, numbering greater than ten.

The only comparable instances that could come to mind were when she had first learned that she had been reincarnated due to a curse, when she had discovered that Prisca had survived, when she had been reunited with Eugard, and when Tanza, who had survived, had completely refused to listen to her.

Woman: “Of late, there have been far too many…”

She wanted to lament the relentless series of shocks of this current life, however the present moment was far too hectic.

As these various mental burdens continued, in order to protect her as she could no longer recover the will to fight, brazenly utilizing the effects of the Soul Marriage Technique in addition to something else entirely, Tanza’s back looked to be quite large.

How much, just how much had she gone through after they had been separated at the Demon City?

Ever since Tanza had arrived at Chaosflame with her sister Zoey, she had intended on being the one to watch over Tanza’s growth the most closely. But, had she remained by her side, would Tanza’s current self ever have come to be?

Someone apart from herself, they had gotten close to Tanza, pushed her, and made her stronger.

She could feel it within Tanza’s intense gaze, in her gait, and in the fist that she had slammed into the swordsman’s face.

???: “Tanza-chan!”

Tanza: “Yes, Emilia-sama, let us not give them any leeway.”

As her voice resounded in a manner resembling a silver bell, the silver-haired girl—Emilia, cooperated with Tanza.

Her long hair fluttered as she swung her weapon constructed with ice to repel the undead swordsmen, working in perfect sync with Tanza to support each other in both offense and defense.

This was in spite of the fact that there should not have been much time for Tanza and Emilia to build such a relationship.

Under the unexpected strength of Tanza and Emilia working together, the blue-haired swordsmen—the Undead Swordmasters, were smashed one after another, scattering fragments throughout their surroundings.

However—

Swordmaster: “Ahh, ahhh, ahhhh, sad to say, but seems there’s a limit for ya living folk. Ya sure wield yer power with great vigor, but how long d’ya think that power’s gonna last?”

Emilia: “Geez! Don’t brag when you’re cheating!”

His characteristic undead golden eyes shining, the Undead Swordmaster smiled provocatively, and Emilia fell for that provocation.

She raised both hands and slammed them hard onto the ground, and in the next moment, while avoiding Emilia and Tanza, ice spread throughout the street in a manner akin to branches, entrapping the hands, legs, and torsos of the swordsmen.

—That ice had an appearance just like that of a vine of thorns.

Woman: “—Ugh.”

Tanza: “Yorna-sama!”

For a moment, she crouched down, clutching her chest as she felt an ache within.

Having caught a glimpse of that foolish action of hers in the corner of her eye, Tanza cried out her name in a scream. Even if momentarily, the fact Tanza's awareness had left the battlefield meant that,

Swordmaster: "Ya gotta be greedy for victory, simple as that."

Tanza: "—Hk!"

A fierce front kick was unleashed, sending Tanza's petite frame flying backwards.

Tanza's sprung-up body flew, and at the end of its trajectory as it bounced, the figure of her own crouching self was present. She immediately raised her face and was about to call out Tanza's name, but what would that even achieve?

It would have merely been another meaningless pull on Tanza's attention.

Woman: "—Tanza!"

Tanza: "Yes, Yorna-sama."

Responding to the cry that ultimately could not be held back, the bouncing Tanza readied her posture mid-air. Just prior to colliding, Tanza had managed to stop herself; that small yet large back of hers was just before her eyes.

Thereupon, the Undead Swordmaster's merciless sword strike drew near, threatening to cleave the two of them in twain—

Tanza: "—Emilia-sama!"

Emilia: "Yes!"

Without even a moment's hesitation, Emilia responded to the call, and Tanza swung her leg upwards.

That upraised foot—freshly clad in a geta made of ice, caught the strike from the Undead Swordmaster's katana head on.

It was a pair of thick-soled geta, just like the ones usually worn by

The Flamboyant, Yorna Mishigure.

Tanza: “YA, AHHHHHH—!!”

Tanza, having stopped the katana with the sole of the geta adorning her raised foot, had leapt upwards using the same raised foot as a starting point, and spun vertically in mid-air—slamming down the icy geta of the opposite foot onto the head of the immobilized Undead Swordmaster, she drove him into the ground.

Then, with the head of the undead felled to the ground as a center, a crater of nearly five meters was caved into the street, and as the powerful blow turned her opponent to dust, Tanza waved the hem of her kimono.

Woman: “…”

At Tanza’s gallant appearance, all she could do was stare speechlessly. Having noticed her gaze, Tanza turned around and, slightly lowering the corners of her eyes, she smiled.

Those lips had been about to call out to her with “Yorna”.

Emilia: “—Hk, no!”

That instant, Emilia, who was further away, thrust out both her hands, and with the screams of the freezing atmosphere, she sensed the presence of the two Undead Swordmasters being pierced by ice and turning into ice statues behind her.

But, she could speak no words of gratitude to Emilia.

More importantly, Emilia needed to stop the barbaric act of another Undead Swordmaster who had appeared behind Tanza after she had turned around—no, she would not make it in time. Thus, there was no choice but to protect Tanza herself.

Woman: “I am…!”

Numerous were the things she had overlooked, numerous were the things she lost, numerous were the people she had let down, and numerous were the lives she stood upon to be here now.

Although until now she had been unable to repay even a single one of those among the numerous, for Tanza alone she could do so.

Woman: “…”

Taking Tanza into a tight embrace with her outstretched hand, she resolutely leaned forward with her upper body to protect her from the blade.

She had moved skillfully. For just this moment, she was glad that she had not been her trembling and immobile self.

Now, at least with this body of hers, taller and with limbs longer than the ones she had possessed before, she could protect this little darling, this dear child of the Empire which that person had so carefully protected—.

???: “—To astonish mineself thus, verily thou alone art able.”

That gentle voice, as sweet as if it had been whispered close to her ear, so calm that it was inconceivable for a battlefield raging with the gale of swords, resounded, melting her heart that had resolved itself for death but a moment ago in a manner that was difficult to believe.

Woman: “…”

Before the blow from the Undead Swordmaster’s katana could connect, it was halted by the treasured sword of crimson that had been thrust in its path.

And then, witnessing the presence that had brought that about, she could not help but gasp.

Their reunion had been unexpected, and unintended.

She did not know whether to rejoice or to grieve, and ever since that moment, she felt like her heart had been torn apart.

Ultimately, that question had remained unanswered, and the present moment had arrived.

Only now, at this very moment, could she say for sure.

???: “Even when tensed, thy face is lovely, O Star of Mine.”

Woman: “Your Excellency… hk.”

Before the man who had stated so, while caressing her cheek with the hand opposite to the one that had blocked the enemy’s attack—before Eugard Vollachia, with skin of flesh and blood identical to what it had been during his lifetime, and with a clear will housed within his eyes, the feat of containing the overwhelming flood of love and emotion was something that neither Yorna, nor Iris, were capable of.

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Chapter 63:
Upon These Lips, I Savor This Miracle

1

The moment he basked in the upward slice of the blade, for the first time in his life—nay, for the first time in all his time before and after death, Eugard Vollachia resolved himself to taste defeat.

It was the first time that somebody had crossed swords with him, contended with him as an equal, and to top it all off, secured a hard-fought victory against him.

Although he admired that superb level of skill, the fact that he had been defeated in a decisive moment he ought not to have lost caused his chest, no longer containing a beating heart, to throb.

That which he could have never possibly hoped to wish for was granted, but happening across Iris once again in this manner, he had yet to exchange many words with her. They had yet to touch each other. He had yet to fully convey his love.

Even so, Eugard had been granted a reunion with Iris.

In order for Eugard and Iris to be granted their desires, there were likely those who had been unable to exchange words, share touches, and convey their love to their beloved ones, even if they desired so.

That same thing had happened to the alignment of the stars between Eugard and Iris.

—Indeed, exactly as he had expected.

???: “I’m still a complete amateur when it comes ta wieldin’ this katana, ‘n even just a single swing drains so much energy outta me that I get a nasty sorta feelin’ from it.”

With thorns serving as proof of a curse dwelling in his chest, having delivered a blow with the Fiend Sword enshrouded in sinister energy, the jet-black wolfman—Halibel spoke so.

That countenance of his reminded Eugard of a wolfman with whom he was once acquainted despite them not resembling each other in the slightest, aside from being of the same race.

Within his recollections, Eugard felt like he, too, would sometimes gaze upon him with such eyes.

Halibel: "Tho', it's a blade ya can't hate, since it does its job ta the fullest with the energy it goes 'n takes."

Ignoring Eugard's deep emotions in that moment, Halibel continued.

It was apparent that he had just given his impressions regarding the katana in his hand—the Fiend Sword Murasame. But, the way he had put it made it sound a bit different from the fact that the power concealed in the Fiend Sword simply proved useful in his victory.

It was as if the Fiend Sword had granted Halibel something greater than just victory—

Eugard: "—The deluded conviction of the undead, hm?"

Ascertaining his body, which had basked in the slashing attack, Eugard put the sensation that he initially could not verbalize into words.

Within Eugard, having been resurrected into the body of an undead, there was a certain kind of unreasonable obsession—an impulsive sense of hostility and violence appealing to his instincts, one directed towards the living of the Empire.

In all likelihood, this was not limited to only Eugard. On top of that, Eugard had been keeping that intense impulse in check with his stronger feelings towards Iris.

Even so, unable to go against the ringleader who had incited the resurrection, Eugard had no choice but to at least abide by their intentions, and had thus ended up crossing blades with the hyenaman and Halibel here.

That irresistible, overwhelming force of compulsion, had vanished.

As if it had been severed by the Fiend Sword clad in a dark, sinister aura, it had vanished.

2

Eugard: “Therefore, there is naught within mineself save thoughts of Mine Star.”

Placing a hand to her face, Eugard tenderly spoke to the woman who was both Iris and Yorna—and to this, Iris/Yorna lost the ability to speak, utterly entranced.

His skin was neither pale nor cold, and his pupils were not those sham golden irises that were laid upon a sea of void, instead having taken on their characteristic blue hue.

His facial muscles, which did not move irrespective of his status as an undead, yielded a serious expression which she recalled well.

—Unmistakably, this was the man that Iris/Yorna knew as Eugard Vollachia.

???: “It’s terrible to barge in here without any sorta permission.”

The reunion between these two was interrupted by a powerful, hoarse voice.

Contrary to the contents of his words, raising his voice in a warm welcome to the sudden intruder, the undead swordsman—nay, the Undead Swordmaster licked his lips with a glint in his eyes as he faced Eugard.

Towards the Undead Swordmaster’s gaze, Eugard’s expression not wavering,

Eugard: “Thou hast a most remarkable ability; alas, thou hast also erred in thy timing. Mineself wishes for naught but to spend mine limited time with Mine Star.”

Undead Swordmaster: “C’mon, there’s no need to say something so chilly—”

Eugard imparted to him his wish with indifference, to which the Undead Swordmaster promptly turned a deaf ear—no, he tried to respond with a deaf ear, but he could not finish his reply.

???: “Stay away from us!”

For with that sharp scream, the small body held in Iris/Yorna’s arms had spun, and the ice geta-clad feet that flew furiously through the air, had delivered a strong kick to the body of the Undead Swordmaster.

Undead Swordmaster: “Woah!”

The undead used his sheath to counter the girl’s kick, avoiding a direct hit as he took a step back.

The impact was not entirely erased, but the Undead Swordmaster retorted with more joy than anger as his face split into a malicious smile—

???: “Teiya!”

That malicious smile was crushed by the powerful blow of an ice hammer.

This swooping blow from behind crushed him from head to toe, causing the individual known as the Undead Swordmaster to crumble into pieces. However, this did not mean there would be any rest.

If they could have killed him this easily, the Undead Swordmaster would have already been felled fifty times. But, as always, the undead could revive as many times as they pleased.

However, before they could deal with the Undead Swordmaster—

Eugard: “—Mmm, a strike imbued with emotions which one would expect to be unfound in a child. For the shining potential that thou possessest, mineself shall pardon thine rudeness.”

???: “Stay away from Yorna-sama.”

Yorna: “T-Tanza! His Excellency… what are you doing to His Excellency!”

Within the field of view of the screaming Iris/Yorna, the hilt of Eugard’s Yang Sword collided with Tanza’s geta composed of ice, creating a harsh shrieking noise.

In order to protect Iris/Yorna, Tanza had kicked the Undead Swordmaster while in the air, but this undead had not been her only target; rather, she also aimed for the unknown Emperor who had suddenly intervened.

As it was all so sudden, it was natural that Tanza could not distinguish Eugard as friend or foe.

Yorna: “Still, you cannot do something like that so suddenly…! Your Excellency, please excuse my Tanza. That girl holds no ill will…”

Eugard: “Wear not such a sorrow-stricken visage. Mineself loves any face which thou might wearest, though thoughts rise of scorning mine very heart which wishes to love thee even as thou entreatest mineself so earnestly.”

Yorna: “H-he was this sorta person…”

Though Iris/Yorna wholeheartedly apologized on behalf of Tanza, Eugard’s reply did not touch upon the core of the matter. This sort of thing had once been a daily occurrence with Eugard.

Yes, back during those times with Eugard, this had been a daily occurrence.

Tanza: “…Yorna-sama.”

Squeezing, arms tightening around her in a hug, Tanza called out to Iris/Yorna.

To shake these arms away and once again jump towards Eugard, Tanza had not lost her composure and discernment that far. Whilst she did not understand their relationship, she understood that there was no animosity between Yorna/Iris and Eugard.

And besides that—

???: “Hey! Maybe it’s a little too early for us to be taking our time to talk!”

Rushing over was Emilia, who had been fighting the Undead Swordmaster with Tanza.

She mercilessly struck the undead from behind with her ice hammer, and while staring hard at Eugard who stood close to Tanza and Iris/Yorna with her amethyst eyes,

Emilia: “Are you on our side?”

Eugard: “Verily, ‘tis so.”

Emilia: “Thank goodness! You look reaaally strong! Let me count on you!”

Eugard: “Understood. Leave everything to mineself.”

Having received an immediate response from Eugard, Emilia patted her chest in relief.

Iris/Yorna’s eyes twinkled at the way she had been able to discern friend from foe in an instant, but considering her circumstances as a half-elf, it would be presumptuous of her to speak about common sensibilities.

Anyhow—

Yorna: “Your Excellency, that form…”

Eugard: “Alas, these are but embers that are yet to burn out.”

Yorna: “…”

Even as he spoke that, Eugard did not take his eyes off of Iris/Yorna, nor did his expression contort into one of sadness or loneliness.

Iris/Yorna also hoped that it would have been spoken thus, merciless it may be.

And then, while looking directly at Iris/Yorna, Eugard continued.

Eugard: “However, for these few moments until it doth burn out, all of mineself is thine.”

Yorna: “—Yes, Your Excellency.”

He did so, only to ensure that there would be no reason for Iris/Yorna to feel sad or lonely.

This gentle King of Thorns, who was feared by all, had always kept his heart pulsing with tranquility, so that his thorns would hurt none but himself.

Yorna: “Not at all, not at all… it brings me such happiness.”

Although their time was limited, she could touch Eugard, and speak to him.

Ever since those days had come to an end, it was something she—it was something Iris had been unable to accomplish. And because of that failure, innumerable sacrifices had been made.

For the sake of atoning for those mistakes and regrets, Iris had joined the Empire as Yorna—

Swordmaster: “—That treasured sword in yer hand, it’s the Yang Sword Vollachia, ain’t it.”

Suddenly, a hoarse voice that seemed to be restraining its zeal was heard, at which Iris/Yorna and the others looked up.

At some distance from where the four had gathered, the figure of a singular undead slowly arose from the ground. In the same fashion, akin to insects emerging from underneath a large boulder, dominated by a repugnant obsession the Undead Swordmasters began to appear one after the other.

They were all alike, without individuality, and with perfectly synchronized movements and shining golden pupils, they smiled malevolently.

Swordmaster: “A legendary sword famous throughout the world, a magical tool forged by an unreasonable man, on par with that Dream Sword and Fiend Sword the spoiled brat’s got… though I’ve seen it, I’ve rarely been blessed with the opportunity to exchange blows with it.”

Yorna: “…After going this far, has your warrior’s spirit been stirred even further?”

Swordmaster: “It’s embarrassing… but ya got it right.”

Those words had been glib, for he did not seem embarrassed in the slightest. That much was painfully obvious from the pairs of eyes that were glowing ever more radiant, and from the chilling heat of their malevolent smiles.

Even when compared to the other undead, the Undead Swordmaster’s fiendish aura and delusional state were clearly abnormal, which true strength put aside overwhelmed Iris/Yorna as she clenched her fists in shame.

Those tightly clenched fists were gently embraced by the hands of Tanza from within her arms.

Eugard: “Child, to grasp the hand of Mine Star thus, and to remain in her embrace, I shall permit it.”

Tanza: “…I shall continue to do so, even if I do not receive your permission.”

At Tanza’s indignant tone, Eugard’s sharp countenance remained undisturbed. However, Iris/Yorna could perceive that Eugard had accepted her reply positively.

As Eugard continued to walk towards the seemingly endless stream of Undead Swordmasters that appeared to be increasing in number, ten or twenty at a time, Emilia, with a tense expression on her face, attempted to join him.

However, Eugard stopped Emilia with his gaze.

Eugard: “Thy will to aid is honorable. Nevertheless, entrust this unto mineself.”

Emilia: “But, you alone…”

Eugard: “—Eugard Vollachia, that is mine name.”

Emilia: “Vollachia… that’s.”

Emilia, surprised upon hearing Eugard’s family name, looked towards Iris/Yorna. Responding to her look with a nod, Iris/Yorna’s eyes followed Eugard’s back as he went forth.

Eugard and the Undead Swordmaster, separated by a distance of about ten meters, faced each other.

Swordmaster: “Eugard Vollachia… perhaps, are ya the Emperor of the Briar?”

Eugard: “Never have I addressed mineself as such, but there are those who have yclept mineself so. Verily, a fitting phrase that doth succinctly depict mine tenure upon the Imperial Throne. It shall prove facile for inscribing in the annals of the future.”

Swordmaster: “Haha, hahaha! Ain’t that a surprise! The strongest among all the Emperors of the Sacred Vollachian Empire! And to think I’d be able to meet such a person… as expected, I most definitely have it!”

With a lilt to his voice, the pressure of the Undead Swordmaster’s aura of malicious swordsmanship increased all the more.

Even though he knew that his opponent was Eugard Vollachia, the Emperor of the Briar, the Undead Swordmaster was not horrified but instead inspired by unusual logic.

The golden eyes of the Undead Swordmasters gleamed at Eugard and his Yang Sword.

Swordmaster: “If I can win against His Excellency the Emperor, could I have the Yang Sword?”

Eugard: “If the sword deems it appropriate, so be it. But I shalt not surrender so easily.”

Swordmaster: “Ho.”

Eugard: “Many of mine subjects hath staked their lives to make the dream of wielding this sword in mine hand true.”

Only Iris/Yorna, who shared the joint rulership of Eugard’s many subjects, could understand the passion of the gentle King of Thorns who was feared above all others.

—In front of Iris/Yorna who watched on, Eugard and the Undead Swordmasters moved simultaneously.

Swordmaster: “—Hah.”

With a short exhalation and lightning steps, their distance from each other was extinguished.

Twenty identical people were divided into four groups, and a flash of sword steel approached Eugard like a whirlwind.

The barbaric act of an ordinary person assembling together first-class swordsmanship in order to reach a superb class—Emilia and Tanza gasped at the sword attacks that could be called a sword storm that surpassed the sword style.

However, Iris/Yorna did not have a shred of doubt.

Twenty swords were coming at him—however, that exchange would end with one precise strike.

The raging storm of swords from the Undead Swordmasters aimed at Eugard from all directions.

But, before those blades could reach the King of Thorns, the brilliantly shining Yang sword flashed—it burned away all twenty blades that were approaching, and the crimson tip of the sword cleaved the neck of an Undead Swordmaster.

Swordmaster: “This power—hk.”

His neck was gouged out, but even then, only the foremost one bore the fatal wound.

The Undead Swordmaster grimaced as his remaining nineteen selves, or rather, the flood of his other selves that reached him one by one, even though his blade had been severed.

But, if one mistakenly thought their strength was that they could try again after dying then—

Yorna: “It has ended.”

—The next moment, the Undead Swordmaster, whose whole body was cut, burst into flames; this spread to the other nineteen Undead Swordmasters, and they were all at once swallowed by flames.

Swordmaster: “—Wh-aa.”

In the hands of Eugard Vollachia, the Yang Sword ignited its true flame. The soul of the Undead Swordmaster who was hit by the slash was the spark from which the flame rose.

Coincidentally, Vincent Vollachia’s Yang Sword set the soul of the Witch, Sphinx, the bearer of the Great Disaster, ablaze. It was the same conclusion.

Swordmaster: “Kah!”

Swordmaster: “Guh, guh!”

Swordmaster: “—Oooh!”

Burned by the tremendous flames, the Undead Swordmasters were burned to ashes one after another. Every time a burning individual perished, a new one was revived and replenished, but it too was engulfed by the flames.

More and more, over and over without exception, he left more than a dozen of himself as charcoal, and the Undead Swordmaster looked down at his hands, which continued to be burned by the unquenchable flames.

And then—

Swordmaster: “Ah, ahhh, goddammit. Is this really, where I meet my end…?!!”

An indistinct voice spilled from his throat burned by the flames, and the Undead Swordmaster grimaced.

For a moment, this made one imagine this as a last-ditch effort made by one who could not admit defeat, but that worry was denied by the end of the Undead Swordmaster who burned up and turned to charcoal.

With his battered, crumpled hands reaching towards the heavens, the Undead Swordmaster disappeared.

In the end—

Tanza: “—He, didn’t vanish?”

While witnessing the same thing, Tanza voiced her concern.

As Iris/Yorna took her hand in hers, she gave Tanza an answer to her fears by wrapping her small hand in her own free hand, assuring Tanza that it would be okay.

Emilia: “…Those people, were they all burned?”

Eugard: “It is somewhat difficult to find the right word for it, but yes. The Yang Sword’s flame burns up whatever its owner desires. Souls are no exceptions.”

Emilia: “I see… Thanks, that’s reaaally helpful.”

Even after expressing her gratitude, Emilia looked gloomily at the many remainders of the Undead Swordmasters that had burned up.

Even though the opponent was undead, even though he was an opponent who used the characteristics of the undead in a sinister way, the fact that his life was lost shook Emilia’s amethyst eyes.

Iris/Yorna once had the same feeling as Emilia. —To think it was one of the things she had to let go of after living so many lives.

However, there were some things she could not let go of.

Eugard: "—O Star of Mine."

Called so once more, Iris/Yorna faced Eugard directly.

Resurrected as an undead, Eugard had been liberated from that abominable yoke. Both his refined features, beautiful and elegant, and his voice, which resounded in her chest far too much when compared to its actual volume, were a continuation of those days.

However, there were also things that could not be explained by that alone.

Yorna: "Your Excellency, the thorns are…"

That which bound others, thrusting spikes into their hearts; the Curse of Thorns.

Isolating Eugard, and having served as the impetus of the special time that he and Iris shared together, it was something that still ensnared his soul even in death, a binding curse from which no refuge could be sought.

At the current moment, it could not be felt. That went not only for Iris/Yorna, but for Tanza and Emilia as well.

That was to say, Eugard had been released from the Curse of Thorns.

Yorna: "The curse, has it been dispelled?"

Eugard: "—That is not so. The Curse of Thorns yet remaineth intact. The curse hath been transferred to another; no longer doth it persist within mineself."

Yorna: "Transferred…? Such a thing, such a thing is possible?"

Eugard: "—That being made it possible. It be not something that could have ever been accomplished in the era of mine lifetime. Since then, the stream of time hath flowed, and many a wisdom hath come forth. A magnificent world, it is."

Eugard Vollachia had been released from the Curse of Thorns.

Within Eugard's answer as he quietly drew his chin, there was loaded a deep sense of admiration for the one who had accomplished that.

Yorna: "Your Excellency, the curse is…"

On the other hand, Iris/Yorna was left speechless by Eugard's reply.

Although she understood that it was Eugard's nature to want to accurately represent that the Curse of Thorns ultimately had not disappeared, it was still a fulfillment of Iris and Yorna's dearest wish.

For even if that was after his death, Eugard's soul had parted ways with the Curse of Thorns.

Tanza: "Yorna-sama, this person is…"

Yorna: "Tanza, this gentleman is His Excellency the Emperor Eugard Vollachia… a difficult individual, one who I, who I am in love with."

At Iris/Yorna's introduction, Tanza slightly widened her eyes. Then, she raised her face and exchanged glances with Eugard, and after a brief hesitation,

Tanza: "My name is Tanza. I serve as Yorna-sama's chamberlain."

Eugard: "Is that so, Tanza. In the time of mine absence, Mine Star hath been in thy care. It is a great service."

After Tanza timidly spoke so, Eugard nodded.

A distance at which they could see each other's faces, a distance at which they could hear each other's voices, a distance at which they could make physical contact should they reach out their hands; at that distance, Eugard and Tanza, had an exchange of words.

Even though, in the past, there had been nobody other than Iris who had been able to do that with Eugard without grimacing in pain.

Emilia: “I am Emilia, just Emilia. Eugard, will you continue to help us?”

As if riding off the deep emotion of Iris/Yorna, Emillia began to speak to Eugard without any hesitation.

At her words, Eugard reclined his chin with a “But of course”, and,

Eugard: “The individual who hath released mineself from the thorns of prolonged torment… there is a duty Groovy Gumlet hath entrusted to mineself. I must act verily in his stead.”

Yorna: “Groovy… that personage, released Your Excellency from the curse…”

Eugard: “O Star of Mine.”

Yorna: “Y-Yes.”

Caught up on the name of Eugard’s benefactor coming to light, she let out a voice akin to that of a village girl at the sudden call.

That instant, the fact that the air given off by Eugard had become gentle seemed to be proof that he thought Iris/Yorna’s reaction to be lovely, but she would not touch upon that.

Only, as Eugard captured Iris and Yorna in the gaze of his blue eyes,

Eugard: “For thee, I wish to devote mine entirety. There existeth no lie in those words. Henceforth□□”

Yorna: “It goes without saying, but we shall be together. □□I refuse for us to be separated for even a moment longer.”

Until the very moment in which I am bereaved of you, I wish to hold this miracle upon my lips.

This was Yorna’s answer bereft of falsehood, straight from the bottom of Iris’s heart.

3

—The scorching scent of his soul assailed his nostrils.

There was no sensation of pain. With his whole body engulfed in flames, the heat of being hideously burned was also akin to a gentle breeze.

However, unable to break away from that gentle breeze, it reduced his newly created body to ash and cinders, attempting to put an end to his existence.

Even if doused in water, the flames shan’t fade. Even were he to try to spread the fire elsewhere, the flames shan’t spread. Even were the point of flames’ genesis lopped off, the rest of his body would immediately be ignited by the inescapable flames of terminus—indeed, this was his terminus.

He had a feeling. He knew. This blaze shan’t fade. Until he met his end, it shan’t fade.

Swordmaster: “Ahh, ahhh, AHHHH, what the hell…”

Going so far as to descend to the body of an undead by his own blade, he had attempted to master the way of the sword.

The flame of the Yang Sword, which he had encountered upon his journey to reach the final destination of that path, burned the soul of Rowan Segmunt, the man who had a burning desire for the Heavenly Sword, attempting to scorch his entirety to naught.

Refusing to remain in that place, Rowan fled the battlefield, and broke into a mad dash.

His leg crumbled as he stepped forth, so if the next step would result in losing his entire lower half, he lopped off his own head as to not needlessly waste time, and thus the next step of his remains would be taken by his next self.

Repeating this process, Rowan ran. —He distanced himself from the Emperor of the Briar, in order to reach the place he was obliged to reach before he was burnt to a crisp.

Rowan: “What the hell… Just as expected, I have it.”

As embers emanated from all over his body, a vividly gruesome smile emerged on Rowan’s face.

Reduced to an undead, Rowan had become acutely aware of the state of his own soul, and had placed the tips of his toes upon the steps to reach the Heavenly Sword. In order to reliably take the next steps higher, this was his next trial, indeed.

Rowan’s soul would be scorched to oblivion in the not-so-distant future. But, the flame of a candle would always burn brightest right before it went out.

—For Rowan Segmunt, reaching the Heavenly Sword was his life’s dearest wish.

He had even proved that he would give up his life with no hesitation for that purpose.

In truth, by experiencing death, and gaining awareness of the shape of his soul, Rowan had steadily gotten closer to achieving his wish.

Thus, as long as Rowan reached the Heavenly Sword, it mattered not if it was only for a single second.

For a mere second before his soul was burnt to a crisp, even if it was for naught more than an instant, all that mattered was that he reached it.

And what was needed to achieve that—

???: “—Oya oya oya, I had thought somebody was furiously dashing here, but to think it would be a flaming entrance! My my now if I do say so myself, isn’t this quite the flashy production?”

An audible voice; the place he had wanted to reach before being burnt to nihil.

Beholding the owner of that voice beyond his burning field of vision, Rowan thanked his karma.

He had arrived at the place he had wanted to reach. All that remained, was to reach it.

Indeed, before Rowan as he gave a burning grin, the boy, holding a brown-skinned girl in his arms, smiled.

As irony would naturally have it, the boy gave a smile that resembled Rowan's own, and spoke.

Boy: "Just now, you made me think this for the first time, dad. —I don't dislike it, rather, I quite like it."

So he declared.

Chapter 64: Parent and Child of the Empire

1

—The person known as Rowan Segmunt, was a man completely unfit to be a father.

Though Cecilus Segmunt thought that so-called common sensibilities were unnecessary for the leading actor, it was apparent that Rowan was a father far removed from the conventional family image.

An ideal father was not someone who would slay his own child because it “didn’t seem” like they would grow up in the way he desired.

A single-minded eccentricity divorced from all notions of paternal love, that was the entirety of the reason why Rowan had killed all of Cecilus’s older brothers while they were still infants.

A swordsman in whom a genuine madness resided, such that he had no qualms with trampling upon anything as long as it was for the sake of reaching the Heavenly Sword—Rowan Segmunt was nothing more, and nothing less, than precisely that.

In all likelihood, Rowan would be deemed the foremost failure of a father even if one searched far and wide all throughout the world. Born into this world as the son of a father utterly lacking in such respect or familial love, Cecilus truly thought himself fortuitous from the bottom of his heart.

—The desire towards the Heavenly Sword harbored by Rowan, was something that Cecilus also harbored himself.

That was an endeavor that aimed to tread into the far distance, to a region above the clouds unseen by the eye; by no means could it be achieved by somebody who diverted their gaze or took detours.

If he had been raised in a family that was respectable and distinguished throughout history, or in a household of honorable poverty that hesitated to steal for the sake of a meal, Cecilus would not have had any conclusive evidence that his wish to reach the Heavenly Sword was not contaminated with needless impurities.

Therefore, it was Rowan Segmunt.

Cutting down all blood relations that served as obstructive fetters, removing all hindrances without hesitation in his pursuit to master the way of the sword with undaunted resolve, he prepared trial after trial with his son's life as a secondary concern.

That pure madness staked on the sword, free from any impurity, was unstintingly poured into Cecilus by Rowan.

Hence, Cecilus thought.

—As expected, he, born into this world as the son of Rowan, most definitely had it.

2

Drawn from a scabbard of dreams, the Dream Sword flashed as it ran through the sky of reality—.

Cutting the explosion of light, which seemed to invite the destruction of the world, head-on, its tip was delivered to the beautiful girl who housed a blue flame in a single one of her eyes as she shed tears of blood.

Basking in the supernatural stroke of the blade, the girl's—Arakiya's slender body had its very life severed in twain; such a thing did not come to pass.

The reason being, even the outcome from the slash of the Enchanted Sword, forged with reason not of this world, was something that did not adhere to common sense.

—The Stone, Muspel.

As one enrolled among the Four Great, it was the Great Spirit that sustained the vast lands of the Vollachian Empire.

Even if he intuitively understood that what he had exorcized with the Dream Sword Masayume was both Arakiya and not Arakiya, an extreme presence which had been painting over her very existence, Cecilus had no way of discerning its true identity.

But then again, Cecilus's resolve or actions would not have changed regardless if he had known.

Even if he understood that the vast lands of the Empire would crumble together with the Great Spirit if Muspel were to be destroyed, it was inevitable that Cecilus would draw the Dream Sword.

To prioritize the presence of the heroine over the vast lands of the Empire, was a natural decision for the leading actor.

To begin with, when it came to the script, it was impossible that anything Cecilus carried out with conviction would result in a bad ending.

Therefore—

Arakiya: "…"

Unable to endure the power she had taken into herself, Arakiya had been on the verge of bursting apart.

Before Cecilus, having exorcized the gargantuan power that threatened her life with the Dream Sword, the innumerable bands of light encircling Arakiya—those diamond bands were reduced to dazzling particles, melting into the crimson-tinted Imperial Capital.

As Arakiya slowly fell in the midst of those dancing particles of light, Cecilus sheathed the Dream Sword into the scabbard, which had suddenly appeared on his waist like a dream itself, and reached out his hands.

His body was covered in wounds. Having sustained lacerations all over his figure, his blood-drenched kimono was torn and frayed; the design was far too beaten-up to be called attire for a bout.

However, contrary to that miserable appearance, the light in Cecilus's eyes as he caught Arakiya had not clouded over in the slightest.

Cecilus: "…"

Languidly, the unconscious girl had both her eyes closed, and displayed a sleeping face that seemed as if she was dead.

Since he knew that she was not actually dead from how she felt in his hands, he did not panic. Only, he quietly shrugged his shoulders as if to say "Good grief".

Cecilus: "You really know how to cause a stir, Anya."

Among his faint memories that had been resuscitated in the midst of battle, the majority were of his evening conversation with the friend who had shrunk Before Cecilus into the form of After Cecilus. However, when excluding that majority, the one who had left the largest footprint on his memories was this girl.

Cecilus had a reputation, both among himself and others, that he was unable to look after others. Since he had made it so difficult to follow himself until here, there was no greater handful than her.

Perhaps, it would have been no exaggeration to say that she was the biggest handful in the whole Empire.

???: "…I guess it's fine to assume you've wrapped things up?"

Behind Cecilus as he held Arakiya, a voice with a slight sense of tension called out to him.

Approaching with footsteps that emphasized his caution, and in a state of being equally as battered as Cecilus from the aftermath of the battle, was Al.

Not only had he survived without being reduced to spent charcoal at the edge of the decisive battle of the bastion, but his act of playing supporting role by throwing his weapon at the end for Cecilus's spotlight, was also something that clearly served as his own spotlight.

Cecilus: “That was quite the masterfully controlled performance, Al-san. I think understanding my intentions back there and throwing your weapon truly merits quite the high amount of points.”

Al: “What kind of points, like favorability with you? In that case, I really don’t give a shit.”

Drooping his shoulders in a fed-up manner, Al looked towards Arakiya and said “More importantly…”. His gaze through his iron helmet was filled with trepidation, giving off a nervous and fearful atmosphere, but.

Al: “Lil’ Miss Arakiya is…”

Cecilus: “Not dead. After all, in order to secure a conclusion where she wouldn’t die, I went through the trouble of tearing through my limits a second and then a third time. It would have been outrageous to stop her by killing her! It’s the way of Cecilus Segmunt to meet expectations, and betray tasteless predictions.”

Al: “…If you’re fine with not killing her, then I’m not gonna press you for that conclusion.”

Cecilus puffed out his chest as he responded so, to which Al heaved a sigh as he fiddled with the metal fixtures of his helmet.

Of course, Cecilus understood Al’s concerns. It was a matter of if the risk of letting Arakiya live was worth the trade-off for the sense of security that would have come with killing her.

However—

Cecilus: “If it’s going to be that kind of complex and unexciting discussion, feel free to have it with some wise person with a frowny face in a place where I’m not around. My answer is just as you see it, Al-san.”

Al: “…I already knew from the start that any persuasion or arguing with you would be a three-hit combo of unreasonable, impossible, and thoughtless. You’re gonna need to take responsibility for the lil’ miss.”

Cecilus: “Apparently that was my intention from the beginning. Seems like since the very first time I defeated Anya, my intention was to shoulder that responsibility.”

With a light feeling as if he was speaking of somebody else’s matters when they were in fact his own, Cecilus saw the face of Arakiya from when she was younger overlaid upon her sleeping face currently in his arms.

Just like with the friend he had parted with amidst the evening sun, this was an illusion visible to him only because their acquaintance had been for so long. Perhaps he ought to put a bit more of his back into it, and tackle the memories which he had been far too concerned about pulling out.

Cecilus: “But it seems like before I can delve into that episode, there’s a separate duty that I need to carry out.”

Al: “Ah?”

As Cecilus suddenly muttered, Al raised his voice in surprise. But, Cecilus did not respond with words, and instead left his answer to the act of directing his gaze in another direction.

In the aftermath of his battle with Arakiya, the buildings and streets had all melted, leaving the Imperial Capital in a hellish state, dyed red—within that scene, the malevolent madness of an appropriate figure had arisen.

Malevolent Figure: “…”

With an inextinguishable flame flaring about his entire body, a blue-haired man stood.

His skin was scorched black, hiding one of its characteristics, but the blazing radiance of his golden eyes would have made it apparent to everyone that this man was an undead nevertheless.

And to Cecilus, a fact greater than what would have been communicated to everyone else was made apparent.

Cecilus: “—Oya oya oya, I had thought somebody was furiously dashing here, but to think it would be a flaming entrance! My my now if I do say so myself, isn't this quite the flashy production?"

He had not been running around haphazardly, rather, he had been running with a clear objective in mind.

The fact that his hurried strides had ceased at this place, was because that objective resided here—nay, that objective resided within none other than Cecilus Segmunt.

—With sights set upon the Heavenly Sword, the swordsman who neglected all else, Rowan Segmunt.

Having finally cast away even his own life, his father had arrived here in a completely altered form, to which Cecilus nodded many times in acknowledgement, and smiled.

Rowan was grinning in the midst of being engulfed in a blaze. Cecilus, too, smiled in his blood-drenched form.

The parent and the child, for whom naught was possible save for living and dying by the sword, grinning and smiling—

Cecilus: "Just now, you made me think this for the first time, dad. —I don't dislike it, rather, I quite like it."

Saying that, and ironically forgetting about the After Cecilus, he celebrated that the chance to fulfill the promise exchanged by the Before Cecilus had finally come about.

3

—Rowan Segmunt longed for the Heavenly Sword.

Why? For what reason? For what purpose?

He was tired of hearing such tedious questions. That whole kit and caboodle was nonsense that had nothing to do with Rowan.

Its impetus went beyond his earliest memories, its genesis was consigned to the riverbed of oblivion.

Since the very first occasion he had laid fingers upon steel in the form of a sword, there no longer remained any other path for Rowan Segmunt but to master the art of swinging it.

Even after being endowed with a commandment as a Stargazer, and gaining a son to serve as a vessel to reach the Heavenly Sword, Rowan continued to do nothing but commit himself to diligent study so that he himself could reach the Heavenly Sword.

Even using the fact that his greatest enemy in reaching the Heavenly Sword had been brought forth into this world by his own hands, he committed himself to diligent study, with diligent study, of diligent study, for diligent study, he diligently studied—

Rowan: “Ahhh… the time for my grand moment, has arrived at last.”

Soul aflame, life fading to ash, his very destiny was on the cusp of its terminus.

All were engulfed in the blaze, and as Rowan’s self was blurring into the realm after death, he entered into a domain untread by both living or undead—the interval between life and death, the point that ought to be called the beyond.

That was tantamount to uncovering the very nature, the true essence, of life and the soul.

A few more seconds, real as they might be, the final significance of Rowan Segmunt’s existence would overflow.

Rowan: “…”

Each time his undead body crumbled, he readied his beloved katana, continuously resurrected alongside himself, and faced forward.

The small figure visible beyond the flickering flames, witnessing it take the exact same stance as himself—

Rowan: “—Now, let us have ourselves…”

Cecilus: “AN HONORABLE DUEL—!!”

—Challenging the Heavenly Sword, the ephemeral flash of Rowan Segmunt blazed bright.

4

Cecilus: “I’m leaving Anya in your care.”

On the remains of the street that could no longer be called a road, answering the request of Rowan, who had appeared there in a blazing form, Cecilus forcibly foisted Arakiya upon Al.

Cecilus could hear Al’s bewildered voice go “Oioi?!” at the suddenness of it all, but he discarded that into the abyssal depths of his consciousness, and focused all of his nerves on a lone man.

Once again, color, sound, and smell vanished from Cecilus’s world, and it became governed solely by the palpitations of steel.

Rowan: “—Now, let us have ourselves…”

Holding his hand over the katana at his waist, it was apparent that Rowan’s lips had moved to spin such words as he readied himself.

Even if he could not hear it in the form of sound, the sentiments between the parent and child who loved extravagant pretenses had allowed him to hear it within his soul.

Hence, Cecilus likewise responded with grandeur.

Cecilus: “AN HONORABLE DUEL—!!”

In an instant, the distance separating the two disappeared.

That was nothing out of the ordinary for a battle involving Cecilus, Blue Lightning as he was, but this moment was not created by just Cecilus alone, and it was evidence that Rowan had stepped past the confines of human capability.

Cecilus: “I’m surprised.”

This was honest admiration.

A few hours prior, when he had parted with the yet-living Rowan, as far as Cecilus's eyes could see, his father had not reached this domain. However, now that they had been reunited, with him having become an undead, Rowan's skill with the sword had rapidly developed, and his talents were finally beginning a posthumous bloom.

That was neither something like his speed nor the proficiency of his skills, but it was a transformation brought about by a change in his consciousness.

The effect that mentality could have on performance was nothing to make light of, but having said that, breaking out of one's mental shell would not dramatically improve their physical abilities. Hence, the transformation within Rowan was not one of extreme physical nature.

—Rowan had become capable of taking himself "one step" further.

That which was not a physical step, was difficult to describe on a level above that of pure feeling. Just as there was a great distance between amateurs and experts, there existed yet another gap between first and second-class experts.

Thus, between first-class and super first-class, and between them and the transcendent beings that were even further above, there existed more gaps.

Invisible to the eye, inexplicable with words, Cecilus had deliberately expressed that here with the phrase "one step", and had recognized that Rowan had tread over that boundary.

To think that through the experience of death, he had overcome that difference of a single step which he had never been able to cross over in his life.

People would likely speak of how foolish, how incredibly ironic such a thing was. But, none other than Cecilus alone would—

Cecilus: "I don't dislike it, rather, I quite like it."

An unyielding flame upon his body, as his life itself was being scorched, Rowan, plunged into the realm of death as he was, unleashed a stroke of his sword; as the blade flashed across a world bereft of color and light, Cecilus watched in adoration.

Within the glint of the blade there dwelled assiduous training, diligent study in which no corners had been cut; witnessing this, his eyes flickered.

As a father, Rowan would likely be evaluated as the worst of the worst, and though Cecilus would not deny that, he dearly loved Rowan's mentality of constantly pouring his entire soul into the role he played.

Rowan: "…"

Igniting the little life he had left as fuel, Rowan unleashed his greatest stroke of the sword in all of his time during both his life and after his death.

That brandish, honed to a razor's edge, was pregnant with an aura of swordsmanship that caused even Cecilus to envision death. — That nightmarish ending, born out of a single-minded concentration, was something that the Dream Sword Masayume would not allow.

The Fiend Sword Murasame was an Enchanted Sword that could sever the concept of anything's "Point".

In contrast, using dreams as its scabbard, the true value of the Dream Sword Masayume was—

Cecilus: "—Dreams are devoured, and dreams are granted."

In exchange for the motivation one possessed for a wish they desired to be granted, the Enchanted Sword would harbor the power to grant that wish.

Hence, the Dream Sword had been granted the name of "A Dream Come True" which made dreams become reality; even if it might have become a useless, dull blade depending on the wielder, it had continued to be extolled as an Enchanted Sword capable of severing the very world in twain.

The blade spent many months and years being transferred from person to person, since as compensation for their wish being fulfilled, they would forget even the reason why they had yearned for it in the first place; as its owner had changed many times, now, the Dream Sword had settled into Cecilus's hand.

For both Cecilus and the Dream Sword, this was a miraculous happenstance.

That was because—

Cecilus: "There's no way that my dreams and motivation are ever going to run out!"

That was the reason why Cecilus Segmunt was the master of the Dream Sword.

An extraordinary yearning towards the dreams one harbored would allow the potential of the Dream Sword Masayume to be displayed to the maximum degree.

—That instant, the unleashed brandish blurred the boundary between dream and reality as it sliced.

Cecilus: "…"

Compared to the decisive battle of the bastion between Cecilus and Arakiya a moment prior, this bout was far too quiet.

The impact bestowed upon the Imperial Capital, the Empire, and the world was insignificant; something like a one-on-one against an undead that would have disappeared either way, could not be anything but a trivial matter.

However, for the parent and child duo that was Rowan Segmunt and Cecilus Segmunt, there was significance.

Rowan: "…Ahhh, good grief, what an unfilial son I've got."

Passing by each other the moment their blades had crossed, the parent and child had their backs turned to each other.

His undead father, whose face he would never be able to see again, unpleasantly spat that out in a long exhale, and then,

Rowan: "If this is how it ends, I shoulda cut ya down right away back when ya were soaking in yer first bath."

Cecilus: "Hahahahaha! Yes, yes, that's right! That's the only time you would've been able to win, dad!"

At the sore loser who acted truly dishonorably, Cecilus roared in a great burst of laughter.

Hearing Cecilus's unreserved laughter, Rowan looked up at the sky. Having lost its form, his katana was reduced to dust, and as his existence began to fray from his burning fingertips, he narrowed his golden eyes.

And then—

Rowan: "Next time, next. —I ain't the kinda person who'd give up on account of dying."

Until the very end of the end, without leaving behind even a single word befitting a father, his body, his soul, was reduced to ash.

Constantly aiming for the Heavenly Sword, and not relinquishing that desire even in death, those were the final moments of the malevolent swordsman known as Rowan Segmunt.

5

Ahhh, how unpleasant, how unpleasant, Rowan thought as he faded away.

Throughout his lifetime, he had continued to walk without halting his step, and ultimately, he had been unable to reach the Heavenly Sword.

The final blaze of his scorched, burning soul had not illuminated the unseen path towards the pinnacle of the sword. How very, how so very tantalizing.

At this rate, Cecilus would probably end up being the one to reach the Heavenly Sword.

To think it would be his son instead of himself, what truly malicious discretion of the Sword God. Chagrin and despair, dejection and lament, if he were to start speaking, he would never be able to clear away the inexhaustible negative thoughts.

Be that as it may—

Rowan: “Well, guess it’s better than some other person reaching it.”

In that final duel, if Rowan had surpassed Cecilus, would he have reached the Heavenly Sword?

He had not surpassed him. In the end, it was meaningless to think about hypotheticals that had not come to pass. Rowan would not think about meaningless things. Especially when he was on the verge of fading away.

He ought not do what should not be done, so when trying to think of other things, he came to a realization.

Ever since he had been aware of his surroundings, he had aimed for the Heavenly Sword; in every waking moment, in every sleeping moment, he dreamed of nothing but reaching the Heavenly Sword; that was how the existence known as himself had persisted until this day.

Once Rowan concluded that he would not reach the Heavenly Sword, there no longer remained anything for him to think about.

Rowan: “Hm.”

For the first time since he began longing for the Heavenly Sword, he relinquished it.

That sensation made Rowan feel a sense of loss rather than a sense of freedom, as well as a certain kind of discomfort. Amidst the sensation of his soul feeling ill at ease, Rowan thought this for the very first time in his life.

—Was the blaze of my soul that I had spent my whole life to reach, at least able to become a flame for a candle that will illuminate my son’s path? So he thought.

6

Leaving behind naught but ash and dust, the figure of Rowan Segmunt faded away.

Within his soul, Cecilus Segmunt understood that this undoubtedly signified the death of his father.

Having already met his end as a mortal, Rowan had still continued to aim for the Heavenly Sword after being reduced to an undead, and as his life was on the cusp of burning out, Cecilus had certainly severed it in twain.

Cecilus: “Al-san, sorry for so suddenly entrusting you with Anya. It must not be easy to carry someone with only one arm so I’ll take her back now.”

Returning Masayume to its sheath after it had completed its duty, Cecilus turned around and called out to Al.

However, Al gave no response to that call. On one knee and supporting Arakiya's body with one arm, as he shook his head side-to-side in a feeble manner,

Al: "How… are you so calm?"

Cecilus: "And by that you mean?"

Al: "You know what I mean! Just now, that was your own father, wasn't it! He was still alive when you last saw each other, and yet he died and became a pawn of the enemy, that's…!"

Cecilus: "Wait wait stop right there, Al-san. You're a little mistaken so please allow me to correct you. My dad certainly became a dead person, but he hadn't been made into a pawn. The reason why my dad attacked me wasn't because he'd lost his sanity."

Al: "Wha…"

Cecilus: "Ah, by the way, I said sanity with the widely-accepted meaning of the word so perhaps my dad was already quite divorced from that regular type of sanity. On that front, make no mistake, but…"

Waving his hand, Cecilus added that bit regarding Rowan's mentality.

Either way, Cecilus wanted to clear up Al's misunderstanding that this was an act of returning the favor for Rowan having attacked Cecilus, which happened because his mind had been destroyed after being turned into an undead.

Cecilus: "Stuff like a child killing their parent was also a major development in the play "Magrizza's Guillotine". —But then again, things between me and my dad turning out like this was something that was appointed by fate quite a long time ago."

Al: "Appointed, by fate…?"

Cecilus: "So, it's simply a matter of that time finally having come around."

This was a conclusion that both Cecilus and Rowan knew would eventually come.

Thus, when Rowan had returned as a dead person, despite having parted when he was still alive, Cecilus was not very surprised. For Rowan, everything outside of reaching the Heavenly Sword was trifle, so it was understandable that if necessary, he would sacrifice his own life as if it was the natural thing to do.

Nobody was capable of understanding Rowan. —Nobody, except Cecilus.

His father, who was exceedingly the best at being a bad example, was not an incomprehensible monster. That was sufficient proof that the Segmunts had a healthy parent-child relationship, even if it was atypical.

Cecilus: "Most people would probably disapprove of the relationship between me and my dad, but—"

Unlike Rowan, Cecilus did not view all things in the world as trifle. So long as one could properly distinguish between the cheers and the other interference, the world was filled with blessings as far as the eye could see.

The light of the sun, the cool breeze, the trickle of raindrops, the fragrance of grass, and Rowan Segmunt—all were blessings that had been granted to Cecilus.

Cecilus: "My dad called me an unfilial son, but I don't think there's any son as filial as I am. After all, just by being my father, he has achieved the exceedingly meritorious achievement of having brought me into this world."

Of course, that would not serve as consolation to Rowan, who had failed to realize the wish he had pursued throughout his life.

Being called an unfilial son for such a reason, Cecilus had no room for excuse. Though from the outset, he had no intention whatsoever of leading a life in need of excuses.

Al: "…"

Walking right up to the speechless Al, Cecilus folded his arms and tilted his head.

After this, there was the worry of what should be done with Arakiya. Even if he tried to bring her somewhere safe, was there anywhere in the current Imperial Capital that actually was safe?

Were there any safe zones aside from Cecilus's direct vicinity?

Cecilus: "Having said that it'd be a bit strange to carry Anya around the whole time as I run about… if we don't head back soon then Groovy-san's sure to loudly yell at us. He went off to go hold back the caster of that curse, and speaking of which, do you think Groovy-san will be okay with us coming back with the Dream Sword instead of the Fiend Sword?"

From the start, the encounter with Arakiya was an unexpected combat.

The reason that Cecilus and Al had come here was to search for the Fiend Sword Murasame, capable of cutting curses, and unfortunately they had not fulfilled that objective. By now, Groovy should have been doing battle with the caster of the troublesome Curse of Thorns.

Cecilus: "For the time being, how about it, Al-san. While you do your best to carry Anya here, I'll clear the way ahead, by cooperating like that…"

Al: "—Nah, I can't agree to that."

Cecilus: "Al-san?"

At Cecilus's proposition, Al shook his head side-to-side and declined. Standing up from his kneeling position, he foisted Arakiya back upon Cecilus.

Cecilus reflexively took Arakiya into his arms, and then,

Al: "I've said it before. I've got something that I gotta do. Lil' Miss Arakiya was an unthinkable detour… Feel bad for Groovy, though."

Lowering the tone of his voice, Al's gaze through his steel helmet was directed towards the Dream Sword on Cecilus's waist.

Al: "Even I can tell that the katana on your waist is an insanely powerful weapon. It may be different from the one Groovy wanted, but do your best with it."

Cecilus: "So then Al-san is going off on his own. It may not be my place to say this, but will Al-san be alright walking around by himself unarmed? Wouldn't dying in vain be the most you could do?"

Al: "—. I won't die in vain. That's the one thing I'll never do."

Cecilus: "Indeed, seems like it. I kinda understand somehow or another."

As Al spoke with conviction, Cecilus nodded in assent.

Having acted together until here, Cecilus thought that Al possessed a special trait of the same kind as Schwartz's "True Sight". With that "True Sight", capable of seeing excessively ahead, Al surely would not die in vain.

Cecilus: "But that's not the only reason why Al-san is trying to part ways with me, right?"

Al: "…"

Cecilus: "It seems like you really weren't pleased in the slightest with how me and my dad settled things. Perhaps Al-san also has some reservations regarding parent-child relationships?"

Al: "…That's got nothing to do with this."

Even if it had nothing to do with this, Al's tone made it clear that a nerve had been struck, so Cecilus slightly shrugged his shoulders, and adjusted his hold on Arakiya.

Personally, Cecilus was reluctant to part with Al and leave him alone.

Part of that was because he judged that it would not be ideal to have his hands full with Arakiya, but more so because of his debt to Al—in order to finish things without letting Arakiya die, it was a fact that Cecilus had borrowed Al's power.

Long story short, Cecilus had to repay his debt to Al.

If Al had someone he wanted to save, then it made sense for Cecilus to assist him in that rescue.

Worst case scenario, he could knock out Al and carry him back to Groovy, and then after mowing down the problem entirely with a swing of the Dream Sword, everyone would go to meet Al's "princess".

It happened at the same moment he had thought that.

???: "—It was unexpected that you did not take her life. Reconsideration: Required."

Suddenly, the voice of a third party interrupted Cecilus and Al's conversation.

Those who heard the voice faced towards it, and Cecilus slightly narrowed his eyes. —The owner of the voice was in the air, not in the midst of a jump, but in a state of simply floating there.

For a moment, upon hearing the familiar manner of speech, Cecilus recalled the existence of the Witch whom he had once killed, but present there was not the same Witch in question—

Cecilus: "—No, you're the same person. You look different on the outside but you're the same on the inside… hmm? Perhaps you're a little different on the inside too? Is such a thing even possible?"

Witch: "If the form and nature of a soul changes, the exterior follows suit. The converse is also true, but… by what sort of principle were you able to perceive that with merely a single glance? Answer: Required."

Cecilus: "Hahahaha, now that you mention it, I too wonder how I figured that out."

Without any intentions to provoke her with teasing, and truly just not knowing why, Cecilus smiled.

Only, for some reason he harbored confidence that such was the case at a single glance. That the woman floating in the air overhead, her white hair fluttering, was the same existence as that Witch.

Cecilus: “But why are you here? Did you not learn your lesson when you were killed by me the first time, and came to get revenge? I find the appeal of such unyielding tough opponents to be desirable, but…”

Witch: “To put it plainly, it is to carry out my objective. I have fulfilled one of my two overarching objectives. Once I achieve the one that remains, I hypothesize that I will be able to become fully absorbed in my original purpose of creation.”

Cecilus: “Ho ho I see I don’t get it!”

Witch: “I thought I had explained it succinctly, though. Explanation: Required.”

Cecilus: “Well then how about I also give an answer that’s simple, unusually short, and succinct in terms of myself! —If you came to where I was to fulfill your objective then you probably won’t be able to fulfill it.”

It was plain and simple, exceedingly obvious, a clear answer unmatched in terms of being easy to understand.

Hearing that reponse, the white-haired Witch narrowed her eyes, framed by long lashes, and nodded.

And then—

Witch: “Ah, is that so? In that case, my answer is simple. You cannot kill me.”

Cecilus: “…”

Witch: “I have grasped that which is capable of killing me within this Empire. By no means shall I draw near any of them. Henceforth, nobody can kill me.”

The Witch spoke in an indifferent manner, and raised both her hands to the sky.

That instant, Cecilus felt a strange sensation that seemed to distort the air and space surrounding the Witch. Next to Cecilus, Al took a step forward.

Since the Witch had made her entrance, Al had not spoken a single word.

He looked up at the Witch, who continued to produce a strange air of oppression, and suddenly extended his single arm straight out to the side. —The next moment, the melted ground surged upwards, creating an unshapely stone dao, and Al gripped it in his outstretched hand.

Raising the stone dao overhead, Al’s throat quaked towards the Witch—

Witch: “I am the Witch of Greed—”

Al: “—ECHIDNAAAAAAAA!!”

With a voice of pure rage, akin to coughing up blood, he seemed to lose himself as he slashed towards her.

Chapter 65:
Starfall Upon the Imperial Capital

1

—Through transformation of the soul, the vessel was reconstructed into the Witch of Greed.

That was the ultimate goal of the Witch, Sphinx, in bringing about this massive catastrophe, the Great Disaster of the Vollachian Empire.

It was the purpose for which she had been created, one that had remained unaccomplished for the over three hundred years since her birth into this world—the obstacle that had continued to persist at the core of Sphinx, regardless of how far she had come.

Following the rationale of the Stargazers, considered to only appear within the Vollachian Empire, it could be called a commandment bestowed upon Sphinx by birth.

In order to fulfill that commandment, be it the Kingdom or the Empire, she would hold no qualms about bringing them to ruin.

As a matter of fact—

???: “—By flooding the Empire with the dead, was that your objective?”

Bound by chains in the jail with both arms above her head, Priscilla narrowed her crimson eyes.

Those astute eyes held not a shade of astonishment concerning what was taking place before her, but only a scintillating flame that burned with placid understanding as its fuel.

With her lips twisting into a smile at the sight of that crimson gaze, Sphinx, who had now become the Witch of Greed, nodded.

Sphinx: “By nature, the soul and the vessel are inseparable; this I had understood immediately after I was created. The long years of my quest, it could be said that they were a journey to rectify that inconsistency."

Her purpose was supposed to be to replicate the Witch of Greed, however the soul had been inserted into a vessel differing to that of the Witch of Greed, hence Sphinx could not help but be born as an incomplete version of the Witch of Greed.

Although she had not considered the over three hundred years of trial and error, fraught with failure, as suffering, even Sphinx was no exception to feeling a sense of accomplishment upon finally having reached the horizon.

And as Priscilla had posited, this was, without a doubt, a path brought to fruition by having caused the Great Disaster within the Empire.

—As mentioned previously, by nature, the vessel and the soul were inseparable characteristics of life.

Even intangible entities like Spirits were no exception to this. The presence or absence of a tangible body was not what mattered, but rather, the vessel that formed the receptacle within which the soul would reside.

To say that they were incongruous, would also imply that such a life would be in an unnatural state. Hence, within the inseparable soul and vessel, there would be a force at work that would attempt to correct this unnatural incongruity.

Certainly, no matter what corrective forces were at work, cases where a vessel would mutate to match its soul were rare.

Things like the techniques employed by the Shinobi that altered the soul and changed the form of the vessel to match, and binding curses of reincarnation that required multiple lives as a sacrifice were rare examples of this; however, the former required talent in the technique of molding the soul and the vessel into the appropriate form, while the latter required a strong connection between the caster and the numerous sacrifices.

Both of these were conditions that Sphinx could not meet, thus she was forced to abandon them as possibilities after considering their feasibility in order to achieve her desire.

Hence, Sphinx had taken advantage of it. —Of the Great Disaster.

Priscilla: “In the process of resurrecting the dead across the Empire with evil magic, you are able to make innumerable observations concerning invisible and intangible souls. It was perfect for conducting investigations pertaining to your objective, was it not?”

Sphinx: “The fact that the Great Disaster would occur was foreseen. The sole consideration that remained was whether my plan would be deemed worthy for that… the results are as you can see.”

Priscilla: “For someone so triumphant, was it not quite the tightrope you had to walk upon?”

Sphinx: “I shall not deny it. Challenge: Was Required.”

Prisiclla’s remark was correct. It was indeed an endeavor fraught with myriad uncertainties.

Whether the Sacrament of the Immortal King could be modified to establish a connection with the Stone, the Great Spirit of Vollachia, enabling the actualization of an undead army; whether the artificially created Sphinx would be recognized as a singular soul and be included as a target for resurrection as an undead; and whether something capable of inducing a transformation of the soul that Sphinx had been unable to achieve on her own would emerge; all of these had been uncertain.

Sphinx: “However…”

The revival of the undead through the recreation of the Sacrament of the Immortal King was successful, and Sphinx’s plan to resurrect herself as an undead also went smoothly. Furthermore, those who had received an alteration to their souls, such as Lamia Godwin and the Giant Eye, Izmail, had also appeared, henceforth laying the foundation that Sphinx had required.

And then—

Sphinx: “To think that the final push needed was the flame of the Yang Sword, how very ironic.”

Priscilla: “…”

Sphinx: “If things had continued as they were, I would undoubtedly have been annihilated. That predicament, however, became the impetus for me to conduct countless analyses in the end.”

Priscilla: “—No, that is incorrect.”

Sphinx: “Incorrect?”

At the denial of the fact that she had narrowly escaped the crisis of her soul being incinerated, Sphinx tilted her head.

In contrast to when she had been the incomplete vessel of the Witch of Greed, the height from which she gazed upon her differed. Her face, neck, and exposed skin were no longer the pallid hue bereft of complexion, and no longer were her eyes the gold upon black of the undead, but rather black irises had been reproduced.

Nevertheless, it was certain that Sphinx was still an undead.

The successful reproduction of a soul in a state of being exceedingly indistinguishable from the living had a significant impact upon its outward appearance. The very fact that she had actualized that served as proof of the validity of Sphinx’s theory.

Sphinx: “About what am I mistaken, then? Explanation: Required.”

Priscilla: “Do not use lifeless words such as “countless analyses” to describe what you have brought about. Your life was on the brink of burning to naught, so with disgraceful earnesty you strove to survive.”

Sphinx: “—. I am dead, though.”

Priscilla: “Do you think the dead have no right to strive for survival? Those countless tightropes you had to cross, none of them could have been traversed with naught but a leisurely attitude.”

Sphinx: "…"

Priscilla: "You strove to survive, and drew forth the outcome you desired. Regardless of how displeasing or inconvenient it may be for mineself, you must correctly recognize that fact. —And, if you would dare to be mine enemy…"

To Sphinx, whose lips remained sealed, the imprisoned Priscilla declared thus with boldness.

At Priscilla's words as she gazed at her, Sphinx displayed a slight frown.

Priscilla's tongue, with its characteristic sharpness, seemed to be praising the challenge Sphinx had undertaken.

It was as if it was an acknowledgement of the fact that Sphinx's trial and error had borne fruit.

Sphinx: "…"

Within Sphinx's chest, a slight unease was birthed. —Unbefitting of the Witch of Greed, a sentiment that should have never been, was birthed.

Sphinx: "—. It seems that I should avoid engaging with your explanations. Self-defense: Required."

Priscilla: "Oh my. As if being chained this way was not enough, you would now turn a deaf ear to mine words as well? If that is the case, there would be no point for your continued presence here, or in keeping mineself alive. In spite of that, why do you continue to do so?"

Sphinx: "As stated, I shall not engage."

Priscilla: "Hmph, very well. Then, I shall lay everything bare."

Curving her crimson lips, Priscilla ignored Sphinx's statement of her intention to not engage.

Her words and tone of voice held great power. Once she would begin to speak, no matter how much one might desire to close their ears to her utterance, her words possessed the power to force one to heed her.

Priscilla: “The execution of this plan within the Empire, and your continued presence before me even now that you have succeeded in your objective to transform yourself into the vessel for this so-called Witch, the reasons for both are glaringly obvious.”

Hence, to Sphinx who had failed to silence her, Priscilla continued to speak.

And then—

Priscilla: “You are attempting to flaunt the demise of the Empire while keeping mineself alive. For what reason might that be? It is to show mineself the ruin of mine homeland, so as to crush mine heart. —At the root of which, is your inexhaustible hatred towards mineself.”

—She had correctly surmised the two ultimate goals of the Witch, Sphinx: to recreate the Witch of Greed through transformation of the soul, and to enact her revenge upon Priscilla Barielle.

2

—For Aldebaran, this was a fateful encounter that should never have happened.

Al: “—ECHIDNAAAAAAAA!!”

His voice trembling with wrath, Al grabbed the rapidly-emerging stone dao from the ground and hurled it at the Witch of Greed, her white hair fluttering as she floated in mid-air.

The dao distorted the space like a mirage and approached furiously, spinning vertically, toward the Witch, who was preparing to launch some kind of attack.

Al’s ability to jump was not enough to reach the Witch of Greed, but his sword went straight for her—

Witch: “I am surprised that someone would address me by that name. Explanation: Required.”

Having said so nonchalantly, the Witch of Greed easily avoided the dao with minimal movement.

The blade, which had missed its target, sailed in vain past the Witch of Greed without even grazing her.

—And, that was exactly as intended.

Al: “Eat this!”

Immediately after Al shouted in a deep voice, the dao that had missed its target glowed and exploded.

To begin with, he was not so naive as to think that the sword he threw would hit his opponent. In fact, Al was well aware that his attacks would not be effective against most opponents.

That was why Al’s fighting style would not have been worth considering if he had not laid out all of his moves in advance.

Witch: “…”

The stone dao that had exploded turned into flying debris, mercilessly striking the slender frame of the Witch of Greed.

It was a small explosive projectile, and although the damage would be far from fatal if it hit its target, the way it splintered was designed to cause damage that could not be ignored.

Even with a small amount of mana, he had purposely sculpted the dao in such a way that the shards would be sharp. —He was skilled at making the most out of what was at his disposal to produce the maximum effect.

Al: “You see, I used to be in an environment where I would’ve died if I couldn’t do things like this!”

Above Al’s head as he barked, the flying debris pierced the Witch of Greed with a painful sound. —However, things did not turn out as expected.

Witch: “Hmm.”

The Witch of Greed squinted slightly at the approaching debris and did nothing. There was no need to do anything. The flying debris deflected off of the floating Witch of Greed, as if avoiding her by itself.

Al’s attack could not even break through the lingering winds that the Witch of Greed wore to fly.

But, for Al, even that sadly was to be expected.

Witch: “—Hk!”

If the Witch of Greed’s attention could be diverted, even for a moment or a minute, that would suffice.

Using that gap, Al cast a spell beneath his running feet, and the rising earth became a springboard, propelling Al’s body high up into the sky.

Then, Al jumped upward and transformed a stone that he had grasped into a second dao.

Compared to producing fire or water from nothing, using a pebble as a catalyst to transform it into a large sword consumed less mana and was orders of magnitude faster in terms of transmutation speed.

Al: “OOOHHH—!!”

Employing all of his body upon the springboard, he delivered a swinging blow to the Witch of Greed.

Unlike the flying debris, this was not something that could be auto-guarded by the wind. Al’s full force was put into that face with those all too well-defined wicked features—

Al: “Gah.”

Witch: “Compensating for your lack of skill by utilizing your ingenuity is commendable but, Skill: Required.”

The slender arms of the Witch of Greed smoothly parried the dao, and her long legs struck the torso of the astonished Al. As Al instinctively folded his body over in midair, the Witch of Greed rotated her hips and kicked him straight to the ground.

Al: “Gah!”

He quickly curled his body up, preventing his neck from being broken by the impact of the fall.

However, the strong impact inflicted indescribable damage upon Al’s entire body. And, it was not only the physical impact that had injured Al.

Al: “Just now, that move was…”

Witch: “I certainly cannot say that it was not unexpected. This is the result of using previous defeats to compensate for and sharpen the skills which are lacking.”

Lowering the leg she had used to kick, the Witch of Greed’s words penetrated Al’s brain, rendering him awestruck.

It was strange. It was not possible. As far as Al knew, she had a propensity to try her hand at everything without restraint, but her athletic skills were atrocious. No matter how much she theorized she was never able to apply it to her own body; she could never learn to perform such feats even if she were to stand up on her head. In fact, she could not even perform a headstand.

In other words—

Al: “You’re not, Teacher… you’re not, Echidna?”

Witch: “Your surprise is intriguing. Normally, this would be impossible, but you seem to know my creator. —How?”

When asked, Al looked back at the Witch of Greed in the air—at the one who resembled Echidna in appearance, and was at a loss for words.

In both appearance and voice, she was just like Echidna herself. But, this was not Echidna.

In this Witch of Greed's—no, in this Witch's black eyes, it wasn't present. The malignant and abnormal insatiable curiosity that the real Witch of Greed possessed.

Al: "…"

As Al shut his mouth at this certainty, the non-Echidna being that took the form of Echidna narrowed her eyes, framed by white lashes, and in slight disapproval,

Witch: "Refusing to answer, I see? I would like to know more information about yourself beyond simply being a squire of Priscilla Barielle—"

???: "—Ah in that case I'm terribly sorry but that'll no longer be possible."

It was a flash of lightning, an instantaneous event.

Just as the Witch was about to point a finger at the barely upright Al, Cecilus appeared behind her with Arakiya in his arms.

Supporting Arakiya with just his left hand, he pulled out the Dream Sword with his right hand, and with one flash of his right hand, without hesitation—the Witch's head was sent flying off.

Witch: "Wh-"

Cecilus: "You said I couldn't kill you didn't you. To be honest the way you said that was a little bit off-putting so I hope I can redeem myself with this!"

Without even granting her a chance to react, the blade easily parted the Witch's head from her torso.

Above the speechless Al's head, Cecilus stuck his tongue out, as his swordsmanship easily killed even the Witch.

At least that in itself was understandable to Al, who was confused by the appearance of a familiar-faced Witch and the fact that it was apparently not the Witch herself.

However—

Witch: “—Analysis: Required.”

Understanding what happened next was impossible the first time around.

Witch: “…”

The beautiful face upon the spinning head only slightly loosened its lips, sneering as her white hair was scattered from her having been decapitated.

Immediately after, the space around the falling Witch was violently distorted into white—

× × ×

Witch: “Refusing to answer, I see? I would like to know more information about yourself beyond simply being a squire of Priscilla Barielle—”

Cecilus: “—Ah in that case I’m terribly sorry but that’ll no longer be… wahwahwahwahwahwahwah?!”

The Witch narrowed her eyes, framed by white lashes, and murmured disapprovingly.

Cecilus, aiming at her slender neck from behind, was startled by the earthen wall that suddenly appeared before him, and immediately kicked away into the air, spun around and landed, then turned his furious and reproachful eyes toward Al.

Cecilus: “Hey hey Al-san! What are you doing getting in my way all of a sudden? That was supposed to be the stylish scene where I show off my abilities after being underestimated at the beginning! Even the audience is booing me!”

Al: “Sorry to steal your spotlight, but I can’t let you do that. After all, if I let you do that, everyone… or, at least, I'd be wiped out."

Witch: "—. Hmm."

Cecilus stomped his feet on the ground in protest, to which Al replied, causing the Witch to let out a sigh.

From that single comment, the Witch seemed to have realized that Al had seen through her trap—a technique that distorted space, blowing away an entire area as it recoiled.

As soon as Cecilus would cut off the Witch's head, causing the power maintaining the twisted space to cease, a dead man's switch would be triggered—rather than detonating upon the press of a button, it was a trap with the same mechanism as a bomb that would be triggered by the release of a button.

It was a power that Al could not withstand, regardless of how many walls of earth he erected or how much armor of stone he wore.

In reality, Cecilus might have been able to flee even while carrying Arakiya, but for Al it was a passageway to death with no means of escape.

Therefore, he could not let the Witch be killed recklessly. —This was a fact that Al had been able to ascertain through fifty-three attempts of trial and error.

Moreover, there was another thing of which he had been convinced.

Al: "You bastard, you aren't Echidna. Just who the hell are you, and where did you come from?"

Witch: "I have already answered that question. I am the Witch of Greed."

Al: "Like I'm saying, that's Echidna's…"

Cecilus: "Wait wait, Al-san, don't you understand? Or maybe Al-san has never come across her."

Within the gap during which Al was about to argue further with the

Witch, Cecilus physically intervened. Kicking the ground nimbly and standing to block their line of sight as he picked up Arakiya again,

Cecilus: “That person is currently the ringleader of this big disaster happening in the Empire… and so she’s the one who’s resurrecting the dead. She looks different now than when I previously met her but I think she looks more beautiful and villainous now so she has the perfect airs for the person who masterminds everything from behind the curtains!”

Al: “She’s, the mastermind behind the Great Disaster…”

Witch: “There is no need for me to hide it, so I shall affirm it. I am your enemy.”

Without any deception in her words, the Witch matter-of-factly stated her position; this allowed Al to finally escape the humiliating position of falling behind Cecilus in understanding the situation.

However, the issue of the Witch’s appearance still remained unresolved.

Al: “That figure of yours… It’s no use. I can’t think of any other possibility aside from Teacher having gone too far…!”

Witch: “Concerning that which you know about my creator, I believe there is Confirmation: Required.”

Cecilus: “By the way, I’m still here.”

To the sight of the distressed Al fiddling with his metal helmet, the Witch cast a gaze of great interest. But, once again, Cecilus intercepted her gaze, standing in the way of her being able to satiate her curiosity.

However, Cecilus’s presence here was not completely positive.

As aforementioned, the Witch’s dead man switch was still functional—without some sort of breakthrough, it would be impossible to defeat the Witch of Greed carelessly.

Al: “…No. This isn’t the Witch of Greed.”

Having said this, Al denied the idea that had begun to take shape in his mind.

Though the Witch’s appearance was certainly identical to Echidna, the title of the Witch of Greed was not something that could be bestowed upon someone who merely resembled her.

This was not limited to just the Witch of Greed. —The title of Witch, was not something to be bestowed so lightly.

Al: “There’s no way that someone could become a Witch that easily.”

Witch: “I have no desire to ostentatiously flaunt my achievements, but I find it quite annoying to be told that it was easy for me to reach this point.”

Al: “Shut up, die hundreds and hundreds of times, and then you can talk.”

Apparently, the Witch was feeling displeased, but this was no less true for Al.

As soon as possible, he wanted to rush to Priscilla, who was in the Crystal Palace, so being held up by an irritated-looking Witch was no joke.

Al: “—Re-initiate thought experiment, territory redefinition.”

Left with his raging fighting spirit, Al updated his matrix as he glared at the Witch.

Even with Cecilus around, he could not be too careful. This was because, along with the fact that one could not carelessly kill the Witch, Al had become convinced of another fact.

That was—

Al: “Cecilus, hold onto Lil’ Miss Arakiya tightly.”

Cecilus: “Of course I don’t intend to throw her away carelessly but… doesn’t that way of putting it make it sound like I should treat her as if she was as important as a princess?”

Al: “That’s right. —Since the aim of that woman, is Lil’ Miss Arakiya’s life.”

The Witch, the bearer of the Great Disaster, had brought herself here, all due to the fact that Arakiya’s life slumbered within the arms of Cecilus.

3

Priscilla: “Had things progressed ordinarily, Arakiya would not have been able to suppress the Stone which she had devoured, thus bursting asunder and losing her life. However, your calculations were off.”

Sphinx: “…”

Priscilla: “Mine Soul Marriage Technique and the Blue Lightning’s Masayume were factors beyond the realm of your expectation. Nobody can say what would have happened if it were just one or the other, but both had been assembled for Arakiya. —But then again, if Arakiya had not been able to withstand it until they assembled, your calculations would have come to fruition.”

After asserting so, Priscilla gained confidence in her own assessment from Sphinx’s silent demeanor.

Despite getting struck on the mark, there was no sign of anguish upon Sphinx’s face. Having said that, she did not resort to deceit by manipulating words. An impressive display of nerve in the face of an “irregulur” situation.

—Arakiya’s survival should have been an unexpected outcome that deviated from Sphinx’s plans.

Originally, if things had followed Sphinx’s estimations, Arakiya should have destroyed herself due to the fact that she had taken in a power that was beyond her stature in order to save Priscilla.

Making a display of Arakiya's tragic demise must have been one of Sphinx's schemes prepared to torment Priscilla, much like the downfall of the Vollachian Empire.

Sphinx's act of deliberately making Arakiya eat the Stone, was likewise for that purpose.

But, it had backfired. —Because Arakiya had continued to endure without perishing, it had allowed the intervention of Priscilla and Cecilus to successfully prolong her life.

As a result, the Spirit Eater, Arakiya, had not only thwarted Sphinx's schemes, but she also rose to a significant position capable of greatly derailing her plans.

That was to say—

Priscilla: "—The Stone residing within Arakiya was exorcized by Cecilus Segmunt with the Dream Sword. Hence, her life is now synonymous with the Stone."

Sphinx: "—Yes, that is correct. I, too, have no objections to your assessment."

That was Priscilla's assertion, to which Sphinx also nodded in agreement.

It was an affirmation of a dramatic, fateful change in circumstances —proof of acknowledgement that Arakiya had become deeply and inseparably connected to the Stone, Muspel, which she had taken in.

Arakiya's original intention was likely to have been to absorb a portion of Muspel, thereby teaching the Great Spirit the fear of death by having Cecilus kill it through this connection, and thus putting an end to the situation in which Sphinx used the Stone for the large-scale application of the Sacrament of the Immortal King.

However, looking at the results alone, that plan had failed.

In essence, for both the living and the dead caught in the grip of the Stone, this turned out to be an "irregulur" situation beyond expectations of all involved.

Sphinx: “However, you are still the one who is cornered. If she… if General First-Class Arakiya were to lose her life, then the Stone, Muspel, would likewise meet its demise. The Vollachian Empire shall not escape destruction.”

Priscilla: “Do you presume that mine eyes shall cloud over if my once-discarded homeland falls? You have underestimated me.”

Sphinx: “In that case, sit back and watch. Whether or not this is all bravado shall become clear.”

Crimson and jet-black, the eyes of Priscilla and Sphinx glared at each other squarely.

Despite the heat and sharpness of Priscilla’s gaze, Sphinx’s firm resolve remained unshaken. In response to being openly told that the cogs of her plan had gone out of order, that was a displeased display of intimidation.

At the root of that, rivaling her long-standing, centuries-spanning fixation that had allowed Sphinx to fulfill her purpose of becoming the Witch of Greed, was her hatred towards Priscilla—.

Priscilla: “To detest mineself to such a degree… nay, perhaps you are thinking of them, O Witch.”

Sphinx: “There exists no name for the splinter that resides within the depths of my chest. Or perhaps, do you know just what it is that dwells within myself? Answer: Required.”

Priscilla: “—The boorish act of a party uninvolved committing it to words, I shall not be made to do so.”

To the unnamed emotion of the person directly concerned, Priscilla had no intention to try and place a name to it.

Even were its name unknown, a blooming flower would still be a flower. In this parable, even if it was a flower that only grew petals atop piles of corpses, there was no sin in its beauty.

Sphinx: "…"

Silenced by Priscilla's answer, Sphinx instead snapped her fingers.

At that moment, the image of the distant view that had been reflected in the magic crystal fitted into the end of her staff before the Witch's appearance had changed, was projected onto the surface of a water mirror that was created in the air.

—The sight of a being with the same appearance as the Witch before her, sending down a star from the yet bright sky, in order to put an end to the Land of the Sword Wolves.

4

Cecilus: "—Clouds gather over the moon, and wind scatters the flowers, so to speak."

Allowing the elegant, picturesque poem to flow off of his tongue, Cecilus plunged himself into the tempest of stones.

The upheaved maelstrom of debris before him was bound to be a fatal hail of bullets through a forest of blades, but pulling Arakiya tightly into his arms, Cecilus successfully evaded it with the minimal amount of movement. —No,

Cecilus: "How wonderful. It's a difficulty level that only I'm capable of dealing with!"

Licking the blood that trickled down his grazed cheek, Cecilus trained his gaze on the Witch who was blowing a raging storm.

Though it was troublesome, he could not tear down the advantageous position the Witch was maintaining from a high altitude. Arakiya had essentially flattened all the surrounding buildings that could have been used as footholds, and there were no stage props on this battlefield that could buy him the range to reach her with a jump.

Having said that, even if he wanted to lead the enemy to some other battlefield—

Witch: “—Al Goa.”

Brought about by the short incantation, was a gargantuan mass of flames that plummeted down on an unbelievable scale.

If it were to make impact with the ground, the entirety of the surrounding area would be engulfed in the tongues of flame, and it would likely amount to a hellscape on par with that of his battle against Arakiya.

And unlike Arakiya, the Witch had no need to concern herself with limiting the area that comprised her theater of war.

Cecilus: “It’s simply troublesome! Scatter!”

That instant, the brandish of the Dream Sword, unsheathed at lightning speed, unleashed a stroke of cloud-cutting, bisecting the fireball in the sky above.

The bundle of flames basked in the glint of the slash and released a firepower capable of turning the surface into a sea of flame out into the sky, coating it once more in the destructive hue of red after it had temporarily returned to its usual color.

It was quite splendid that the sight was exceedingly flashy; however, he would not be able to quietly sit and enjoy that view.

That was because the mass of flames raining down did not end with just that one attack.

Witch: “Goa. El Goa. Ul Goa. Al Goa.”

At the successive incantations, ruinous fire of immense volume began to fall like a scene out of a nightmare.

At the rain of fire that did not omit even a single shot, Cecilus’s eyes brilliantly lit up—throwing Arakiya directly to his side, he gripped the handle of the Dream Sword.

Cecilus: “Don-don-don-don-do-do-don-don!!”

While slicing in a staccato rhythm, the shimmering Dream Sword cleared away the downpour of flame. As the sound of thunder, the sound of explosions, the sound of the world ending, were all strummed, the perilous radiance of the sky increased all the more.

His cheeks contorted into a smile; however, Cecilus would not welcome a war of attrition.

Cecilus was capable of disregarding the risk that came in exchange for the Dream Sword's power to the maximum degree, but forcibly avoiding the payment of resources that were supposed to be limited was a mutual occurrence between the two parties.

That was to say, in the current state, the battle between Cecilus and the Witch was at a standstill.

If what Al had said was true, if they carelessly lopped the head off of the Witch, the whole area would be blown away. When he strained his eyes, he could see that the atmosphere surrounding the Witch was distorting, so there was quite a high amount of credibility to that.

Even if the space was about to be blown away, Cecilus could probably outrun it and get away, but the moment that Al, who was deep with doubt and capable of using "True Sight" just like Schwartz, did not make any indication of that being the case, Cecilus could somewhat presume that it would be a disadvantageous gamble.

Therefore, this was a standstill, and if the only way to move the situation forward was Cecilus, it would be a one-way ticket to their demise—

Cecilus: "That's why this is your time to shine, Al-san."

Al: "I know goddammit! Also, don't be throwing Lil' Miss Arakiya away without any reservations like that!"

Cecilus: "How vexing that you call it throwing her away! It was a feat only made possible due to the mutual trust between myself and Al-san!"

As Cecilus caused countless blazing flowers of brilliant crimson to bloom in the sky, Al shouted at him while carrying Arakiya, who had been thrown over to himself, with his one arm.

Of course, he had thrown Arakiya believing that Al was in a good position to catch her, but from Al's point of view, it would have looked like he had cast her aside.

Even so, Al had not failed to catch something even once, and above all—

Witch: "Are you able to evade this, too?"

With a short mutter from the Witch, a white ray of heat was fired from her finger.

That was not something aimed at Cecilus, but rather, it was aimed directly at Al—no, it was aimed at Arakiya, who was being carried in his arms, but the attack that was attempting to stop her heart would not reach.

Right in the nick of time, Al evaded by a margin that could only be described as a hair's breadth.

That evasion was terribly clumsy, with a form that paid no heed to how he looked while doing so.

Cecilus: "If it's a good outcome and it's in-char then that's fine! However just as Al-san said, Anya is being completely targeted!"

Al: "At any rate, it seems like if Lil' Miss Arakiya dies, the base of the Empire will collapse!"

Cecilus: "I see I don't get it in the slightest!"

Being told something that sounded like a joke in a manner that did not seem to be joking, though Cecilus smiled, he did not laugh; snatching Arakiya from Al's hand as they passed each other, he accelerated.

Cecilus: "Well then how about this now, if you want to tag along, then pursue me with your eyes, pursue me with your heart, and pursue me with your very soul—ohh?!"

Kicking off the ground, Cecilus approached lightning speed with Arakiya in his arms.

Yielded in the air as if to surround the range of Cecilus's sprint, were many beautiful mirrors fabricated with water—the surfaces of those mirrors reflected the white rays of heat fired by the Witch, and a boisterous dance of light commenced.

From all directions, lethal luminescence was chaotically fired, targeting Cecilus.

Cecilus: "I-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-ten!"

Amidst the berserk tempest of light, Cecilus ran through it as if he were dancing. He inclined his body, leaned forward, stretched out his legs, lowered his posture, and occasionally stepped over the light with long strides.

And for the angles he could not evade, he would utilize the blade of the Dream Sword, and would cleave the water mirrors reflecting the light in twain. With the splashing sound of a flat stone skipping across the surface of water, he basked in the scattered droplets of the broken water mirrors, and cut his way through the storm—

Witch: "—Behold the sensation of the world turning against you."

That instant, the declaration of the Witch, along with the sound of the atmosphere tensing struck Cecilus's eardrums.

The pain he felt running through his whole body in that moment, was proof that the splash of the broken water mirrors had instantly frozen over, stealing heat from Cecilus's body, and robbing him of his freedom.

Even the water mirrors were carefully planned out with second and third stage preparations, how truly cunning.

The sensation of the world turning against you, this was yet another famous piece of elegant composition.

Certainly, in the Vollachian Empire, where there were nearly no magicians in the traditional sense, the opportunities to encounter a master such as this never came about.

Cecilus: “But it seems like you aren’t aware. —The world is always awaiting my activities!”

Contrary to his falling body temperature, his motivation surged with an increased radiance. That instant, the Mana circulating within Cecilus’s body began to rampage with an inexplicable vigor, as if a lightning bolt had ignited it; the glaciation that had attempted to rob him of his body heat and freedom evaporated instantaneously, and he resumed his sprint.

Having escaped the restraints of ice with that vigor, Cecilus looked up to the sky, and a broad smile emerged on his face.

That was not a smile he gave while exchanging glances with the airborne Witch. —Beyond that Witch, falling down from much, much higher up in the sky, he had laid eyes upon the radiance of a star.

Witch: “—Al Shario.”

The meaning behind the incantation, indicated that the radiance of that star was something brought about by the Witch’s hand.

Before the sensational truth that an incredible magician was capable of making a star fall, the Dream Sword resting upon Cecilus’s waist pulsated in excitement.

It was responding. Yearning to devour the “dream” surging within its owner, Masayume was doing so.

Cecilus: “—How truly enthralling.”

The downpour of light, spoke thus. Slay the star.

The beloved blade mounted on his waist, spoke thus. Slay the star.

The many members of the audience standing in unison, spoke thus. Slay the star.

The soul of Cecilus Segmunt, spoke thus. Slay the star.

Cecilus: "…"

Averting a mere sliver of his consciousness away from the star for a moment, Cecilus licked his lips.

Currently, aside from the "dream" invigorating his soul with a supreme challenge, everything would become notions of the past. In order to actualize that, Cecilus lay the girl in his arms down upon the ground, and stood in front of her.

He had chosen the most even surface he could find. Even having taken off his haori and laying it out, he had handled her with the utmost amount of thoughtfulness.

From here, though he felt sorry about it, even her presence would be excluded from his field of consciousness.

Cecilus: "Ha."

A beat after the hoarse exhale, Cecilus silently unsheathed the Dream Sword from his waist.

The drawn blade made contact with the atmosphere, and as it started to vibrate as if siphoning Cecilus's ardor as he clasped its hilt, luster began to dwell within it.

The Enchanted Sword would devour its owner's "dreams", and turn their "pipe dreams" into dreams come true.

Concentrating his focus upon the starlight, Cecilus forgot to blink, to breathe, even to make his heart beat, and poured all of his energy into becoming one and the same with the Enchanted Sword.

While he was doing so, the Witch seemed to be doing something to disrupt Cecilus's focus, but.

Cecilus: "Ha."

Cecilus's consciousness was singularly honed in on the radiance of the star. Thus, he would exclude absolutely anything and everything unnecessary for accomplishing that. Color and sound and smell and taste, the approaching earth, wind, fire and water, all were unconsciously excluded.

But, merely removing those, was not enough.

—If it was necessary, then.

Cecilus: “…”

The starlight hurtling down towards the ground, even if the destructive power enshrouding it did not make direct contact with the land, the pressure alone would make the surface split apart, burn the atmosphere, and convert light into pain.

Looking up to the sky in hopes of delivering a counterattack, Cecilus Segmunt, was thankful for this moment.

With that gratitude in his heart, he celebrated all.

Cecilus: “…”

The escape of his exhale, just who would notice that the way it resounded had changed?

That which was required of Cecilus in this moment, that which was coveted in order to wield the Dream Sword to the fullest extent without any misgivings; that answer had been brought about by emotions that reeked of blood, ones that were awfully transient in nature.

The clash of blades that had been exchanged in his father’s final moments, had informed Cecilus Segmunt. —It had informed him about the whereabouts of the soul.

The blade of Rowan Segmunt, the sword of the man who had desecrated life and death alike, had done so.

Therefore—

Cecilus: “—Swordsman, Cecilus Segmunt.”

Indeed, giving an austere statement, the Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt, the most powerful being within the Vollachian Empire, swung the Dream Sword with limbs of length most befitting the leading actor.

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5

—Lightning, had cut through starlight.

There was no other appropriate expression to describe what had happened.

Only, the moment in which he bore witness to the events unfolding before him, the only question he had to ponder was whether or not he could believe that what he had seen was actually real.

However—

Al: “No matter how fucking absurd it may be…!”

Cecilus Segmunt had slayed the star.

In the likeness of the Witch of Greed, the one behind the curtain who had employed a forbidden magic that was a specialty of that same Witch, was now wide-eyed at the same reality Al had witnessed.

It was no easy feat to make a star fall.

Even the real Witch of Greed had said that she would not want to make more than one fall in the span of a day.

In other words, she could not fire more in succession.

Al: “OHHH—!!”

In a world where the light of the sundered star painted the sky white, and where even all semblance of sound had vanished, Al raised his voice to rouse his own spirits, making his approach towards the midst of the sky using stone pillars that he was creating as footholds.

A star had fallen, that star was slain, and thus, approaching the Witch who had ceased her movement in surprise—

Witch: “It is true that I was surprised. However—”

The stone dao which Al had thrusted forth as he lunged, was crushed in the palm of the Witch. The wind enshrouding that palm had vibrated immensely, a combination of magic and martial arts capable of shattering its target.

If a direct hit had been made, the magical technique would have shredded flesh, bone, and everything else into pieces.

With it still within her grasp, the Witch attempted to smash Al's head along with his helmet.

The Witch had updated her threat assessment concerning Cecilus, who had unleashed a stroke of sword that was far too extraordinary, and she corrected her perception of Al as an obstacle to killing Arakiya, regarding him as a pebble that ought to be eliminated quickly.

But, she was not aware. —Even a pebble could sometimes kill the one who stumbled over it.

Witch: "Innovation: Was Requi—"

A moment later, the Witch's head was struck by Al's left arm—an improvised prosthetic arm constructed of rock and stone.

Al: "—Your stars were bad."

Witch: "…"

As Al slightly altered the connotation of his habitual words, the Witch's eyes trembled.

It was the instant she was maneuvering to attempt some manner of counterattack or countermeasure. —Before Al, who had already completed all his preparations, that instant felt like it was as distant as an eternity.

Al: "—Ol Shamak."

In response to the incantation spun by Al's lips from within his iron helmet, the world transformed.

Basking in the unthinkable attack, the Witch, who had become unable to think for an instant, had her whole body entangled, preventing her from moving her body, and halting the activity of the Gate within her body.

This was an anti-Witch trump card that Al had acquired.

Witch: "—ah."

The Witch fell to the ground with a weak exhale, having lost her freedom.

Constrained by a power that ought to be called by the contradictory expression of black light, her form resembled the chrysalis of an insect. As a matter of fact, the degree to which her movements had hardened was also to that extent. —Just as had been done unto the most terrifying Witch in the world.

Al: "But, with this… Blurgh."

Al landed beside the fallen Witch and attempted to look up, but he was struck by a sense of lethargy as he fell to his knees and vomited on the spot.

His improvised left arm had already collapsed. He quickly lifted the chin of his helmet with his right hand, and his whole body creaked from the enormous exhaustion as he vomited yellow gastric juice from his exposed mouth.

A pounding, intense pain shot through his head, and his vision completely blacked out.

From this sensation, he knew his eyesight would not return for a while. Though, there was solace now that he had already finished restraining the Witch—

Witch: "—Correction: Required."

Al: "Ah?"

Gasping for breath with the edges of his mouth stained by gastric drool, Al looked up.

Even when turned upward, his vision remained dark; however, he turned his head toward the sound of the voice and exhibited doubt.

What, did the Witch just say?

Her Gate having been forcibly closed, the Witch ought to have been unable to knead her magic, so just what—.

Al: “What?”

Al, whose vision was occluded, was unable to tell. —The entirety of the Crystal Palace, located in the northernmost part of the Imperial Capital, renowned as the most beautiful castle in the world, began to glow faintly.

6

???: “…”

The Crystal Palace flickered, and the ultimate weapon of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the Magic Crystal Cannon, was fired.

It had been unleashed once during the Imperial Civil War, when the living were contending for the throne, just before the Great Disaster had posed a threat to the entire Empire. Even capable of causing the maps to be redrawn, it was a weapon that transcended human capability.

That the target was themselves—no, it was aimed at the Witch who had transformed into a black mass on the ground, a fact that was, as expected, immediately noticed by Cecilus Segment.

It was a suicide bomb tactic designed to lock on to the Witch herself, ensuring that the target would be eliminated—the person who came up with it would be a genius at harassment, and this was surely the work of an evil and cunning villain.

Cecilus: “Masayume.”

Confirming the sensation of the Enchanted Sword in his hand, Cecilus, immediately after slaying the star, attempted to push himself even further.

Al, who had achieved a surprising victory such that giving him any more spotlight would have been excessive; the sleeping heroine behind him who, if left unprotected, would cause things to no longer make rational sense in storytelling and leading actor terms; and vaguely fueled by his father's death, the revival of Perfect Cecilus—needless to say, he was spurred on by it all.

The star, and the subsequent firing of the imperial treasure, facing off against it, he himself was the Blue Lightning—and, it was at that moment.

Cecilus: "…"

With one foot raised as he was about to step forth, Cecilus's blue eyes widened.

Then, with an abrupt sigh, he lowered his raised foot to the ground. Lowering it, and shaking his head as if to say "Good grief"—

???: "—Al Shamak!!"

Mere moments before the light of the Magic Crystal Cannon would have arrived, a loud voice reverberated across the skies of the Imperial Capital.

Immediately after, the color of the sky, which had been dyed in red and white as it pleased, was engulfed in black, and a bottomless void that could swallow even light had been opened in the heavenly skies.

It was a supremely thrilling and flashy interruption that had completely wrecked the Witch's plan to snatch victory by sacrificing herself at this juncture, and the ones who had brought it about were —

Cecilus: "About time you showed up or you'd have lost your chance to shine, Boss."

The great void in the sky had swallowed up the light, and catching sight of the tiny figures that had created it, Cecilus smiled at the black-haired boy and the girl in the dress who were holding hands.

Seemingly not having heard the voice of the smiling Cecilus, the boy shouted.

Boy: “Like I’d ever let you! —Bring it on, oh inevitable fate!!”

Chapter 66:
The Magic Crystal Cannon

1

—Rewinding time to before Cecilus Segmunt slayed the star.

???: “That’s why there’s people who’re more motivated than me flyin’ around. So long as they ain’t stronger than me, I guess there ain’t no problem.”

???: “People stronger than Halibel-san…”

Halibel: “The only one who’s absolutely stronger than me is the Kingdom’s Sword Saint. Other than that, it depends on compatibility ‘n the circumstances.”

Halibel’s softly-worded response gave Subaru a sense of both relief and trepidation.

Cecilus being included, as an ally, having a strong person take pride in their strength was nothing short of reassuring. That was especially true if they were among the strongest in the world.

Precisely because of that, he could not help but be astounded by how out of the ordinary Reinhard was, who had his strength “absolutely” guaranteed by some of the world’s strongest.

???: “The two of you sure have plenty of time to talk, no?”

Abel’s sullen voice interrupted the conversation between Subaru and Halibel.

Drawing a line of flame with his treasured sword of crimson, he led the group with the Yang Sword in hand, cutting down the undead in their way and igniting their very existence.

The power of the Yang Sword was incredible, allowing Abel, who was originally only capable of catfighting with the child Subaru, to move as well as a first-rate martial artist.

Frankly, the sight of Abel kicking the ground with such agility and dancing with the sword was enough to bug his brain.

Vincent: “You disrespectful lot, do not make the Emperor do all of the fighting for you.”

Subaru: “Shut up, this is your punishment for hiding your trump card. Besides, I’m not making you do all of the—”

Work, was what Subaru was about to say, before he was interrupted by a tremor.

Subaru: “…”

What had caused the ground to shake, was two undead who had dropped from the sky.

A giant and a tall figure landed as if to obstruct their path, readying their weapons behind the sullen-faced Abel and Subaru, who glared at him. It was as if the two were trying to make them pay for foolishly arguing on the battlefield—

Vincent: “The Monster Arm, Rondando.”

Abel’s calm, black eyes reflected the undead behind Subaru while calling out that name; he stabbed his Yang Sword into the other undead that had appeared behind him, burning its existence.

Accepting the offered name, Subaru looked back at the man standing behind him, who had only an oddly-developed right arm, and saw Halibel caught the surprise attack with one raised finger.

In their contest of strength, the giant did not overwhelm his opponent.

Halibel: “Don’tcha be disappointed, you’re real powerful. I just gave ya some ground.”

Halibel stood with his heels in the air, the streets rippling like the surface of water beneath his feet before dissipating. That highlighted the difference in status between the still-herculean might of the Monster Arm and Halibel.

Whether that was a relief or not was unknown, but in any case, it was helpful.

Subaru: “Rondando!”

???: “U!”

Onto the body of the Monster Arm, who had been stopped from moving, Spica’s palm was placed as she held Subaru’s hand. The next moment, the role of the undead was stripped away, and their opponent, clouded by hostility—Rondando blinked his eyes.

Turning to dust from his fingertips, Rondando was released from the mission that had been imposed upon him. That their face looked relieved as they disappeared, was most likely because Subaru wanted to believe it so.

???: “That’s a more peaceful way to go than having your soul burned away, I suppose.”

Beatrice, who held Subaru’s hand opposite from Spica, understood his sentiments.

To the kind judgment from his partner, Subaru said “Yeah” and squeezed her tiny hand back, and then he looked up at the wolfman beside him.

Subaru: “That was helpful, Halibel-san! Thank you!”

Halibel: “No worries, no worries, it’s just as the Emperor-san said. I shouldn’t be just lookin’ ‘round all the time, I at least gotta make up for the sleepin’ kid.”

Halibel laughed appreciatively and bobbed his kiseru up and down between his teeth.

The wolfman was holding the unconscious Jamal in his arms, but contrary to boasting about his overwhelming strength, he was probably being overly modest about his performance.

Jamal was in a bad state, but this reinforcement more than filled the gap that he had left behind.

Beatrice: “It would be troublesome if you were satisfied with simply working as a replacement for Jamal, I suppose. An outlier like you must work even harder, in fact.”

Subaru: “I didn’t say that…!”

Halibel: “Well, ain’tcha a fierce lil’ pup. But, it’s more invigoratin’ when someone expects that much from ya. Though, if I get too enthusiastic ‘n die, the wolfmen might end up gettin’ wiped out.”

Subaru: “Let me just say this, I feel like if it’s a situation where Halibel-san would die, I have a suspicion that the entire world would be destroyed, not just the wolfmen…”

This was not an exaggeration; it bore repeating that this was a battle on that sort of scale.

As was always the case, Subaru was frantically fighting against the obstacles that stood in his way, fervently trying to deal with them, and persevering to somehow overcome these obstacles with all of his friends.

Subaru: “Could lower-level people like me please not have to fight against the enemies of the world… what’s with those eyes, Spica?”

Spica: “Uuau…?”

Beatrice: “The day that you became Betty’s partner and Emilia’s Knight, it was already too late, is what Spica is trying to say, in fact.”

Subaru: “There’s no way Spica would have such a detailed overview of the state of the world!”

He objected to Beatrice’s arbitrary interpretation. Nevertheless, Spica’s reaction seemed to indicate that it was generally correct. He tried to stare at his hands, but could not do so because both of them were being held by the little girls. How unfortunate.

Halibel watched the scene with thread-thin eyes, in a good humor—

Vincent: “—Enough of this frolicking.”

Again, Abel spoke in a cold voice that seemed to split the air.

However, no one, including Subaru, could complain about his latest request—because, they had finally arrived before their destination.

Subaru: "—The Crystal Palace."

Even from a distance, the towering majesty of the palace was overwhelming, but looking upon it up close like this, that impression was not diminished, but only intensified.

It was not for nothing that it was praised as the most beautiful palace in the world.

Beatrice: "…Such an outrageous palace, I suppose!"

Beatrice muttered as she tightened her grip on Subaru's hand. What was contained in that murmur was not an admiration of the beauty of the palace, but a quiet fear.

When Subaru gave her a sidelong glance to inquire about her true intentions, her eyes, with their distinctive patterns, flickered,

Beatrice: "To amass such a large amount of rare and highly pure magic crystals is something extraordinary, in fact. Even if we were to overturn the Empire, we would never be able to build something like this, I suppose."

Subaru: "That being said, it's actually here, right?"

Beatrice: "…So, this means that they crafted the magic crystals they lacked, in fact. It's no wonder that the number of Spirits willing to lend a helping hand to others is extremely low in the Empire, I suppose."

Subaru: "That's…"

Subaru was taken aback by Beatrice's grim face and her words.

In short, a Magic Stone was a mass of condensed Mana, and their purest form was called a magic crystal. The fact was that Beatrice, after seeing the Crystal Palace, which had been made lavishly from it, looked extremely displeased and said what she had just said.

Vincent: “Magic crystals can be artificially created by preparing a large amount of colorless Mana and condensing it. There is no denying that such a process was involved in the completion of the Crystal Palace.”

Beatrice: “Not just Subaru, but Betty is telling you too, in fact. — This Empire is detestable, I suppose.”

Abel’s words and Beatrice’s reaction gave away the fact that many Spirits had their lives sacrificed to build this castle. This was something Subaru, a Spiritual Arts User, certainly had some feelings about—.

Subaru: “Beako, I know how you feel. But, that and this fight are…”

Halibel: “Now, now, there’s no need for ya to say nothin’, the kid gets it just right. Ya see, Vollachia’s history’s bloody ‘n unequaled, but the Shinobi are just as bad in retrospect.”

Beatrice: “Don’t compare two bads and talk about which is better than the other, in fact.”

With her cheeks puffed out, Beatrice responded to Subaru and Halibel.

Then, noticing the gaze of Spica peering at her through Subaru,

Beatrice: “It’s alright, Spica, I suppose. My conclusion is the same as Subaru’s, in fact. Despite hating the Empire, there are people living here who have helped us, and there are even those whom Betty doesn’t dislike. That’s why Betty will fight earnestly, I suppose.”

Spica: “Eao…”

Beatrice: “…Just now, Betty felt like you called her “Beako”, in fact. Only Subaru is allowed to call her that, not you, I suppose.”

Saying this with even more dissatisfaction than when she had seen the Crystal Palace, Beatrice then smiled. At that smile, Spica let out a “Uuu~” of relief, which came along with a deep sigh from

Subaru.

On the other hand, Abel, who had lived in this castle which was the root of all evil, remained indifferent to the emotional compromise of Subaru and the others as he gazed upon the castle.

Subaru: “It’s not just about you; it’s about the deeds of your ancestors. Show some remorse.”

Vincent: “The Emperor does not easily bow his head. If you truly wish to pursue those responsible from that period, you should take a walk. Those who were involved in the construction of the castle might be around.”

Subaru: “You…”

Abel’s inability to stop talking was met with a glare by Subaru, but the argument came to an impasse as the castle appeared within sight. —In the front of the Crystal Palace, figures begin to sprang up.

Halibel: “These fellas must be elite, here to stop us from goin’ in. Seems like they’re real strong, so it’s gonna be tough…”

Subaru: “If the castle is well-defended, it must mean that something important is hidden there. Abel! Where should we aim for in the castle?”

Vincent: “Since the Stone is being utilized for the forbidden magic, the treasury where the core of Moguro Hagane, the nucleus of the Crystal Palace, is kept, or perhaps the underground cathedral where sacrifices are offered to anchor the Stone. There is also the dungeon next to the cathedral… no, disregard that.”

Subaru: “…”

In the face of successive obstacles, the group’s readiness to rush in was heightened. In the midst of this, Abel’s retracted words made Subaru squint one of his eyes.

Abel’s brief mention of the Crystal Palace’s underground dungeon—thinking of who might be chained there, Subaru sighed.

Remaining in the Imperial Capital, it was Priscilla whose whereabouts were unknown.

Her survival had been confirmed thanks to Schult, who could feel their connection, but even with Subaru's repeated challenges, her presence had not been sighted in the Imperial Capital.

And Sphinx, whom they had just defeated, had attempted to get Abel to return to the castle in order to meet Priscilla.

Subaru: "I already know about your relationship with Priscilla. But even if you are worried about your sister, there's no need to insist on it."

Vincent: "Do you plan to seize the Empire's weakness?"

Subaru: "Shut up, you siscon! Your sister might have the worst personality, but she's also on my list of people I won't let die, so I'm just saying we should save her while we're at it!"

From the beginning, their encounters had never contained pleasant memories, as he had always been manipulated by Priscilla. However, her follower, Al, hailed from the same homeland as Subaru, and he himself had been helped by Priscilla on several occasions.

Also, sometimes he wanted to save Priscilla from a dire situation, just to see the look on her face when she would have to say words of gratitude.

Beatrice: "Knowing her, she'll probably just say that you're late or that you've done a great deed, in fact."

Subaru: "I can already imagine it, but I want to confirm that for myself. Abel, that's my policy,"

Vincent: "—. Do as you please."

Somehow, thinking that the reply was somewhat like a rehearsal for Priscilla, who never thanked him, Subaru and all the others except Abel looked at each other and nodded.

For a moment, he was inclined to wait for Emilia and the others to catch up to them along with the former Emperor of Vollachia, whom Halibel had seen off.

Subaru: “There’s no missing the turning point while being so eager! Let’s go!”

Beatrice: “I suppose.”

Spica: “Uu!”

Halibel: “Guessin’ we’ll go with that.”

Vincent: “Do not fall behind.”

Subaru: “Come on!”

2

—For Viva the Dissector, this resurrected state of life was akin to a dream.

Individuals who had been revived as undead were abiding by the will of the caster for various reasons.

Many were reluctant to fight with the goal of destroying their homeland, and thus had been mostly stripped of their sense of self, accepting the instructions to direct their instinctive violent impulses towards the living.

On the other hand, there were also a certain number of individuals who, for the most part, were not under the influence of that mental manipulation.

For example, individuals who were likely to experience an extreme decline in ability under the influence of mental manipulation, would only receive minimal instructions so as not to disobey the caster’s will.

Viva, too, was one of the individuals who was only subject to minimal influence on his mind.

However, that was not because the caster wished to avoid a decline in Viva's abilities. —Viva had not even a sliver of a reason to disobey the caster's will.

The bearer of the Great Disaster, who sought to bring ruin to the Vollachian Empire; did Viva's lack of defiance against that perhaps mean that he harbored a hatred towards the Vollachian Empire?

Unfortunately, such a question could only be answered with a resounding "no".

The aspect in which the intentions of Viva and the bearer of the Great Disaster coincided, was not concerning the survival of the Vollachian Empire. —It was the investigation of the soul and of its true nature.

The reason why Viva came to be known as the "Dissector", was because he did battle with many enemies as a warrior of the Vollachian Empire, and dismembered the bodies of his opponents into thousands, tens of thousands of pieces.

Only, the reason why Viva would dissect his opponents' bodies to such an extreme extent, regardless of their survival, was not because he harbored any perverted interests. The pursuit of knowledge, that was his reason.

At the extremity of dissection, what Viva had truly wished to ascertain was not flesh and blood, but the soul.

The discrepancies between individual lives, the differences between strong and weak, the distinctions between male and female, just what exactly it was that individualized individuals; thirsting to know, Viva had dissected many a life.

Despite having done all that, Viva had failed to perceive the soul during his lifetime, not even achieving the result of laying his fingertips upon it. He had died in the midst of chagrin. That had been the life of Viva.

But, having been resurrected from death, Viva laid eyes upon what lay beyond his hopes, which ought to have already come to an end.

When he himself was revived by the power of the Witch, who was abusing the usage of souls, he gained a fragment of understanding of the soul, which he had failed to touch even a portion of during his lifetime. The Witch had given him the opportunity to turn that fragment of understanding into an even greater fragment.

Ergo, for Viva, this era was a miraculous one indeed.

Viva: “There are still many, many many, many many many many things, I wish to assess, got it?”

The Witch who had revived Viva, had also affirmed his insatiable curiosity.

In order to thoroughly investigate souls to his heart’s content, Viva had been granted the right to toy with lives in the palace, and was provided with an environment where he could delight with more test subjects than he could have ever hoped for when he was alive, undoubtedly allowing him to fully enjoy this time of splendor.

If it was for the sake of this curiosity, he did not care how many lives were lost.

Rather, the more people died, the more variety of resources he would have to use over and over to the fullest extent; thus, the more people he killed, the more Viva’s desires would be fulfilled.

For that purpose, there were still many a life he needed to take—

???: “—Viva the Dissector.”

Viva: “…”

???: “Both in life and in death, your deeds are unbearable to witness. Therefore, though I may know your name, I shan’t bestow upon you any choice save being scorched.”

A sword flashed red, and before he knew it, his field of vision was spinning through the air.

The moment Viva had realized that it was the result of his own head having been lopped off, was when he had caught sight of his own headless body within his revolving vision, and bore witness to it bursting up in flame.

It was not just his body that had been set alight; the same went for his lopped-off cranium.

It was a sense of being overwhelmed that was reminiscent of the young boy who had once killed him, but what was decisively different about this, was that the flame brought about by the treasured sword of crimson, also reached beyond the bounds of death.

Tasting the sensation of his soul being scorched, Viva experienced the greatest joy he had felt since having been resurrected.

Viva: “Ahh, I see it, I got it, the whereabouts of the soul—”

As his flesh, his life, and his very soul were aflame, Viva was satisfied by this conclusion.

Realizing that despite killing many, dissecting their bodies, and continuing to repeatedly toy with lives, the quickest way had always been to just experience it himself, and thus he had taken quite the detour, he laughed to himself.

3

—For the group that was to infiltrate the Crystal Palace, the battle was extremely fierce.

The dead stood blocking the path in a vast horde, refusing to allow entry to the living, and the bizarre forms of the inexhaustibly rising dead were so repulsive, the living would hesitate to take a step further.

They had previously crossed paths with an undead called the Giant Eye Izmail, which had been wandering the Imperial Capital in a state that was far removed from its original form, and the taste of this situation was close to that.

If there was a difference it would be that, unlike Izmail, whose body had been transformed chaotically under the sole influence of an impulse to destroy, there was a concept behind the deformities of these dead.

More aggressive, more radical, and more unorthodox, they were like clay kneaded as one's curiosity commanded.

However, rather than mere clay, one had kneaded life itself. Furthermore, one had the knowledge and sense required to manifest their curiosity to its fullest extent.

And for that—

???: "Viva the Dissector."

When Abel called out a name, it was a sign that the preparations for Spica's Star Eating were in order.

Thus, those who could be defeated by Star Eating should be defeated by Star Eating. This was the unspoken agreement, as Subaru was well aware.

Viva: "…"

Despite this, Abel had skillfully cut off the head of the person he had named with the Yang Sword.

Naturally, the merciless power of the Yang Sword would set the soul of his opponent ablaze. —To what extent they would suffer was something that Subaru did not know, having never experienced his soul being burned.

However, the fact that he used the Yang Sword to cut down an opponent who could have been defeated without causing them to suffer was a clear indication of Abel's anger towards the other person.

???: "Scary scary. But, I can relate ta what Emperor-san's feelin'."

Commenting on Abel's sword strike, which could have been described as an execution, Halibel opened his thin thread-like eyes slightly as he slid through the enemies, his golden pupils seemingly gliding in the air.

Standing in the way of the slickly moving Halibel were the deformed undead, whose bodies seemed to have been modeled after creatures with long arms and legs, but they proved to be no match for Kararagi's strongest.

Their elongated arms and legs were mercilessly broken, and all ten or so bodies were buried up to their waists in the ground that had become soft as if it had melted, rendering them unable to move.

It seemed like something similar to the Earth Release jutsu, and how it differed from magic was not clear.

Furthermore—

Halibel: "Don't push yerself too hard."

Halibel: "They've changed to lookin' nothin' like they used ta, I doubt their names are still recognizable."

Halibel: "Even if that ain't the case, I don't like makin' kids do the fightin' anyway."

And then, the number of Halibels had simultaneously increased by three more, each with the same capabilities as the original, in what was an outstanding feat.

Although it was known that he could use the Clone jutsu, being performed up close only further emphasized how broken of a skill it was. The Clone jutsu by itself was already plenty powerful, but that one amongst the strongest in existence was able to do so was terrifying.

Beatrice: "Truly thankful we are on the same side, in fact."

Beatrice, having stopped an approaching undead with a purple arrow that had been shot from her outstretched hand, had the same thoughts as Subaru regarding Halibel.

As Halibel had stated, against such undead opponents distorted to the extent of becoming far removed from their original form, Spica had been unable to land an effective blow.

Spica: “Uu!”

Subaru: “It’s frustrating, I know. But, don’t hurry, don’t haste, and don’t panic. I’d rather reduce their numbers here than be surrounded after entering that cramped castle.”

While trying to calm the groaning Spica, Subaru kept his eyes focused on the undead considered to have been deformed.

As Beatrice and Halibel held the enemy back, those Abel could name were defeated with Star Eating, and the remaining were defeated with the Yang Sword, such was the battle being waged to reduce their number.

It could be said that, although their appearance had been distorted, the fact that they were not being spawned incessantly one after the other in a systematic manner was something fortunate.

On the other hand, it would mean that, after being resurrected as undead, they had by some means been manually altered into that form, a proposition that did not change the heaviness within his chest by much.

Subaru: “But still, the fact that we can release them from that state by defeating them just once is a…”

That moment, Subaru had been about to say “relief”.

Beatrice: “—Subaru!!”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Beatrice’s altered expression and tone of voice caused Subaru to stiffen.

Beatrice’s round eyes were wide open, and the reason for her reaction, had also become known to Subaru. For the anomaly taking place, it was just that obvious.

Spica: “Uuau!”

Spica, who had also noticed that anomaly, the very cause of their astonishment—exclaimed as she pointed at the Crystal Palace that had begun to glow, slowly painting the entire landscape in a pale, white radiance.

The castle was clothed in a brilliant luminance; however, the situation was not one where its beauty could be admired.

The fact that the Crystal Palace was glowing meant that—

Vincent: "—The Magic Crystal Cannon has been activated!"

While cleaving through the bodies of two undead, one before him and the other behind, with a swift spin, Abel, upon sighting the radiance of the Crystal Palace, had loudly proclaimed thus.

The Magic Crystal Cannon—as mentioned previously, it was a weapon with an anti-army level of power that could be unleashed utilizing the energy stored within the magic crystals embedded throughout the Crystal Palace.

Upon seeing the light that foretold its discharge, Subaru gasped.

Subaru: "Are we the target?!"

Vincent: "No! Mowing down the ground beneath the castle with the Magic Crystal Cannon would be an act far too careless, even if they are undead who can be revived endlessly!"

Subaru: "…"

Hearing Abel's cry, Subaru's thoughts began to heat up and accelerate.

Abel's conjecture that the target was not themselves was not a relief, but rather it was unfavorable. If the target had been Subaru and those with him, even if they were wiped out, the situation would have been easier to deal with.

What was irreversible for Subaru, was the deaths of his allies somewhere beyond his reach.

He had not yet experienced a case where the Magic Crystal Cannon had been fired.

And now that they had come to a point where Sphinx had been defeated, to have it fired prior to reuniting with his allies could not be allowed.

The Magic Crystal Cannon needed to be stopped. However, it was already too late.

The light was undoubtedly the pre-fire charge, yet none of the prerequisites for putting a stop to it had been cleared. Not good. Not good not good not good not good not good.

Letting it fire would be—.

Beatrice: "—Stopping it from firing is impossible, I suppose."

Subaru: "…"

Beatrice said so to Subaru, whose thoughts were spinning fiercely.

Blinking his eyes, Subaru looked at Beatrice. Then, Beatrice, who had just said that it would be impossible, looked back at Subaru with eyes that, contrary to what had been said, had not lost even a sliver of their vigor.

For his partner, the most adorable and reliable partner in the world, Subaru forced his cheeks into a smile,

Subaru: "Beako, wanna do something reckless?"

Beatrice: "Good grief, Subaru can't do anything without Betty, in fact."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's true."

Saying this, he tightened his grip to make sure that her hand, presently almost the same size as his own, was still in place.

4

Swinging, the treasured sword of crimson traced the ground, and the square in front of the Crystal Palace burst into flames.

Raging like beasts, the scarlet flames blocked the path of those who had transcended the boundary between life and death, preventing them from advancing further and allowing none of them to interfere.

Vincent: “To leave the Emperor by himself at the front line. —You blasphemers.”

Abandoning such curses behind, a shadow fiercely retreated from the Crystal Palace as it grew more radiant.

What had appeared from a distance to be nothing more than a black shadow passing by was the earnest sprint of a jet-black furred wolfman, renowned as one of the strongest in the world.

And, once the running wolfman had gained sufficient acceleration through his sprinting—

???: “Then, let all yer strength out—!”

As the straight and fiercely running Halibel kicked off the ground, another Halibel awaited up ahead, and using his folded hands as a foothold, he forcefully flung his body into the air.

Like an arrow, akin to a bullet, Halibel had leapt upward, but that was not the end.

Subsequently, two Halibels having jumped from the buildings on either side had caught up to him, each aligning one of their feet with the soles of the first Halibel, who had been tracing a parabolic path,

Halibel: “‘N more still!”

Halibel: “If I don’t go all out, I’d get a scoldin’ from lil’ Ana.”

The kicks from the second and third Halibels propelled the first Halibel even higher into the skies.

Drastically and rapidly, Halibel soared diagonally, and just as the momentum reached its highest point, he adjusted his posture mid-air,

Halibel: “I can only earn ‘til this point. Ya thinkin’ ya can manage?”

Subaru: “—Yeah, that helped a lot!”

Halibel, who had been carrying Subaru and the other two with him, cleared his throat at that reply. Then, having arched his back as far as he could, he flung Subaru and the others from that position.

Utilizing the Clone jutsu, the cooperative play of the four Halibels had gained both distance and altitude all at once, and Subaru, with Beatrice and Spica in the firm embrace of both his hands, had been sent flying.

Having gained sufficient altitude in that manner, Subaru, despite his whole body being buffeted by fierce winds, still opened his eyelids to look at the Crystal Palace, which was now far off in the distance.

He closely observed the Crystal Palace, which was increasing its white light to the utmost limit, to determine the direction towards which the Magic Crystal Cannon had been aimed—

Subaru: “—Spica!”

Spica: “Uau!!”

He tilted his head in the direction the Magic Crystal Cannon was aimed, and in the next moment, Spica’s teleport was activated.

With that, Spica teleported with Subaru and Beatrice—repeatedly over and over again, swiftly closing the distance to the trajectory of the Magic Crystal Cannon,

Spica: “Eao!”

Beatrice: “Geez! Betty said no more, in fact! —Murak!”

In response to the strain evident in Spica’s voice, Beatrice activated Yin Magic that lightened Subaru and the others.

With Subaru and Beatrice now lightened to the utmost, Spica twisted her body in mid-air, and gave them a kick with all of her might as a final push.

Out of the corner of his eye, Subaru held Beatrice's hand tightly as Spica spun around and away from him,

Subaru: "Abel, Halibel-san, Spica…!"

Having called out the names of his companions who had worked together to bring Subaru and Beatrice this far, Subaru clenched his teeth and opened his eyes wide.

In the next moment, as the light of the Crystal Palace flashed with exceptional strength—

Subaru: "Beako, I love you!"

Beatrice: "That goes without saying, I suppose."

Holding each other tightly, Subaru and Beatrice turned to face the light.

And then—

Beatrice: "—Al Shamak."

The light from the Magic Crystal Cannon was swallowed by a massively large void that had appeared in the sky.

Chapter 67:
The Cards in One's Hand

1

—Taking in the Stone, Muspel, Arakiya had ended up placing her life or death on the same scales as the survival of the Vollachian Empire.

As Priscilla had said, the combination of the Soul Marriage Technique and the Dream Sword Masayume had brought about a situation quite capable of greatly derailing Sphinx's plan.

Sphinx's two objectives in becoming the bearer of the Great Disaster, and flooding the Vollachian Empire with the dead—one of them, that of reproducing the soul of the Witch of Greed, had succeeded. The rest was only a matter of time until this soul became acclimated to the vessel, and the existence of Sphinx herself was painted over by her creator.

Thus, before that was fulfilled and Sphinx fully disappeared, her remaining objective—let it be deliberately asserted as revenge. She would enact her revenge on Priscilla Barielle.

For that purpose, she intended to make the best use of the cards remaining in her hand.

However—

Sphinx: "—The Magic Crystal Cannon has been stopped, hm?"

Witnessing the series of continuously occurring miscalculations, Sphinx silently muttered to herself.

Reflected on the surface of the floating water mirrors, were those who were taking action in various places throughout the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, individuals capable of holding back the ruination of the Vollachian Empire.

What drew the attention of Sphinx, who had transformed into a form identical to that of the Witch of Greed, above all else, were the boy and the Spirit who had prevented the attack from the Magic Crystal Cannon, the trump card of the Crystal Palace.

That Spirit, taking the form of a girl, had also successfully countered the Magic Crystal Cannon with the same method before Sphinx had commanded the dead in the form of the Great Disaster, and began conducting a full-scale offensive against the Empire. But, by Sphinx's judgment, that was supposed to be a sacrificial technique that threatened the disappearance of the Spirit herself.

To carry out that same thing in merely two or three days and survive unscathed did not make rational sense.

The factor that had defied reason, was the boy who was likely contracted with the Spirit in his embrace.

Sphinx: "So it is you again?"

The inexplicable boy who, while allying himself with the Vollachian Emperor, had thwarted the stratagems of the incomplete Witch, Sphinx, before she had replicated the Witch of Greed.

In truth, if she had been unable to grasp the final fragment to recreate her soul in the eleventh hour, Sphinx's days of hard work exceeding three hundred years would have been put to an end by them.

And, that threat persisted even now, with her having reached the Witch of Greed.

Sphinx: "—The Yang Sword Vollachia, and the Authority of Gluttony."

Even if she had succeeded in her long-cherished desire to recreate the Witch of Greed, for Sphinx, who was as of yet, still dead, the fact that those two were her fatal weak points remained unchanged.

Therefore, while producing several beings sharing the same soul as herself, Sphinx would take care to not draw near to the owner of the Yang Sword, or that Spiritual Arts User boy.

On top of that—

Sphinx: “With all of the cards in my hand, I shall emerge victorious.”

Priscilla: “…”

At Sphinx’s mutter, Priscilla’s expression across the water mirror changed.

A slight smile had emerged on her face. —In that smile, there was no displeasure or discomfort; in order to distort it with at least a fragment of sorrow, Sphinx would throw everything she had at it.

2

A void had appeared in the distant sky, and swallowed the flame that would have spelled the destruction of the Vollachian Empire.

Cutting into the trajectory of the Magic Crystal Cannon, Natsuki Subaru had achieved his goal. That meant that The Admirer, Halibel, Spica, and Beatrice had each also carried out their respective roles.

???: “It is a great service. —However.”

While acknowledging their achievement, the forefront of Emperor Vincent’s thoughts harbored a sense of unease.

The neutralizing of the Magic Crystal Cannon, the Empire’s decisive weapon, over and over again in this manner, was problematic.

—In any nation, a force of deterrence that would dissuade other countries from invading was a constant requirement.

Whether it be the military that could rival its neighbors, the exceptionally strong whom no one could compare to, or the powerful weapon capable of overturning any predicament—if any of these factors had been missing, the present prosperity of the Empire would not have come to be.

The weight of that undeniable history was being eroded to naught but a trace by the Great Disaster that stemmed from the insurrection.

Vincent: “In that sense, you all have already destroyed the law of iron and blood that protected the order of the Empire.”

While clenching his teeth to bite back his shame, Vincent brandished the Yang Sword.

Before Vincent’s eyes, leaping over the flame of the treasured sword that had been drawn in a horizontal line, undead of a kind that differed from those until this point could be seen rushing towards him.

Just what was different about them? That was simple. —Vincent could not recognize them.

Vincent: “That detestable Witch, had she managed to learn of it prior to her demise?”

In the garden before the Crystal Palace, which had turned into a battlefield, appearing one after the other before Vincent as he held the frontline, were all undead who had likely carved their names into the history of the Vollachian Empire in ancient times.

Vincent could match the faces and names of all the Imperial Soldiers of his time; however, he was unable to determine the identities of the undead resurrected from the past, with whom he had no direct acquaintance.

Based on his intuition, thus far, among the dead called forth by the Great Disaster, the proportion of those from recent times had been overwhelmingly high. In the most extreme cases, those that perished while fighting the undead had been instantly resurrected as an undead. —This would be speculation, but perhaps those souls also possessed an aspect of freshness.

Or it could simply be that the further back in time one went, the more difficult it became to resurrect the dead, or a greater cost was required.

Therefore, the majority of the resurrected corpses were from recent times, and thus, Subaru and his companion's Star Eating in combination with Vincent's memories was highly effective, but—

Vincent: "To these ones that might not be applicable."

Even if there were other conditions imposed on resurrection, be they large or small, the best way to prevent Star Eating was to prepare undead who did not correspond to Vincent's memories.

It seemed the Witch had come to understand this before her soul was consumed by the flames.

In other words, there remained no means to defeat the unknown ancient warriors that stood in the way except Vincent's Yang Sword. —No, if it were just the Yang Sword, then there was another besides Vincent's own.

Vincent: "—Priscilla."

Yes, calling the name of his younger sister, whose whereabouts remained unknown after the evacuation, Vincent resumed his battle with the attacking undead.

His foolish younger sister, formerly named Prisca Benedict, presently went by the name of Priscilla Barielle.

Upon confirming the fact that, after leaving the Empire, she had changed her name and become one of the Royal Selection candidates for the Kingdom of Lugunica, Vincent had nearly fainted. But it was bearable.

Her reason for rushing to the aid of her homeland was not something endearing like being concerned for Vincent or the Empire. Rather, it was to silence the one who owned the blades of the assassins that had been sent to her.

But then, the presumed reckless soul had already gone ahead and lost his life.

Vincent: "Chisha."

Chisha, the one who, deceiving even Vincent, had resolved to defy the world’s fate of the Great Disaster, was among the few who knew that Prisca had survived as Priscilla.

Chisha, who knew of her fierce temperament from her time as Prisca, intending for her to be alongside Vincent who must ward off the Great Disaster, was likely to take drastic measures to bring her over.

Beneath that white expressionless visage, he may even have thought about how the matters of the Imperial Crown needed be handled post-war—

Chisha: “The fact that it was necessary to go to such lengths, I am forced to revise my opinion of your Excellency.”

At the echo of Chisha, the embodiment of disrespect and disloyalty to the Emperor, he clicked his tongue.

Setting aside his annoyance at these all-too-surreal visions of him, Vincent kept Chisha’s parting gift—the conclusion regarding how Priscilla should be dealt with, as his own responsibility.

Presently, Priscilla’s life was safe, as confirmed by Sphinx’s attempt to bring Vincent to her. That much was good enough for now.

As for the need to increase in numbers the Yang Sword, it would be fulfilled when Vincent became more accustomed to being the apex of the land of the Sword Wolf. —The moment this thought crossed his mind.

???: “—Thy valiant striving is magnificent. As thy predecessor, I doth swell with pride.”

A deep, sonorous voice struck Vincent’s eardrums amidst the clash of swords.

Simultaneously, his field of vision was diagonally bisected by a sword flash so transcendent that Vincent, who had witnessed the swordsmanship of many a warrior, would deem it preeminent.

That flash, it swept across the warriors of old who had dared to wound Vincent’s noble presence; and being unable to evade, their bodies—no, their souls were ignited.

In other words, it had been a strike from the Yang Sword.

Vincent: "…"

A moment ago, he had concluded that he could not desire for a reinforcement who wielded the crimson treasured sword.

Hence, Vincent's eyes widened slightly at the arrival of this unlikely aid, and upon stealing a glance at the profile of the person standing back-to-back with him, his breath was caught.

It was a familiar visage. —That appearance, he had seen in paintings of old.

Vincent: "—The Emperor of the Briar?"

???: "The crown of the Emperor hath been duly bequeathed unto the succeeding generation, and now, it doth rest upon thee. For mineself to lay claim to the title "Emperor of the Briar" would be folly. —I am Eugard Vollachia."

Vincent: "…"

Eugard: "Hmm. Thou appearst both sagacious and well-favored. In retrospect, never have I beheld the faces of mine children and descendants in proximity. Were it feasible, mineself would liketh to exchange many words, and fain to gaze upon thy face for long."

While the person continued to speak—the undead who had called himself Eugard Vollachia, Vincent remained silent.

That tranquil aura he exuded, with eyes that held the light of reason and skin that had the color of life, distinguished him from the countless undead encountered thus far. Why was there not the hostility towards the living that characterized the undead, or the signs of being deprived of free will?

Eugard: "Mine love for Mine Star, is why."

Vincent: "What?"

Eugard: “Didst thou not seeketh an answer to wherefore mineself acts thus, or was I mistaken?”

For a moment, Vincent attempted to discern the true meaning behind those words, but he quickly gave up.

He had to reconsider. For if Eugard Vollachia was indeed the same personage as described in the old tale of Iris and the King of Thorns, then to doubt his words, although incomprehensible, would be foolish.

Therefore—

Vincent: “The reigning Vollachian Emperor, Vincent Vollachia.”

Eugard: “Understood. Then, let us march. —O child of mine own children.”

Thus was Eugard’s response to Vincent’s introduction, and the two Emperors stood side by side.

An impossibility due to the law of iron and blood of the Vollachian Empire, where the rite of succession to the Imperial Throne, the Imperial Selection Ceremony, took place upon death, these were two fellow Sword Wolves mounting a united front.

3

—The fierce battle to decide the fate of the world continued within the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

The battle at each bastion between the transcendent beings came to a close one by one, both the living and the dead performing to their utmost, some failing, while others proceeded forth.

As if to mock the efforts of all involved, two disasters attempted to bring it all to naught—the starlight, crashing through the sky, that was struck down by a swordsman who would not relinquish his dream, and the flare of destruction, created by sacrificing the lives of countless Spirits, that was stopped by a boy who resisted fate along with his friends who supported him.

The prevention of both disasters had been the result of each person using all of the power that they possessed.

However, it was not the starlight being severed, or the fire of destruction being extinguished, that contributed the most to the war situation for the living.

It was a man who alone arrived to prevent the next step of the Great Disaster that no one else could have realized or reached, for even if they had—

???: "—Good grief, y'all are makin' old people work too much."

The Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkenn, leapt with his small frame as he complained grumpily.

The low-leaping, ground-crawling movements of the Shinobi chieftain, the monstrous old man, aimed for the undead sorcerer guarding the blood-red magic circle that was painted at the end of the passage.

The sorcerer turned their palm toward Olbart, and then black filth, flowing from the walls and floor around him, formed chains that roared out to bind the limbs of the approaching monstrous old man —

Olbart: "I've been doin' this for ninety years y'know?"

Faster than the chains could reach him, Olbart swiftly swung his right arm—the arm missing from below the elbow, and threw a kunai from within its supposedly empty sleeve.

It pierced between the eyebrows of the sorcerer, who was wary of his approach, at lightning speed, and slammed them into the magic circle on the wall. Immediately after, Olbart struck with his left palm, and pierced through the sorcerer and the magic circle.

His martial arts, which had been honed for as long as he could remember, shattered the sorcerer and the magic circle to pieces.

He was under strict orders to not kill any more undead than necessary, but this soul-tampered abnormality and opponents like the sorcerer he had just seen were exceptions to that command.

The sorcerers that guarded the magic circle which distorted the space within the castle, he had taken care of about ten of them—

Olbart: “—. So it’s finally done.”

Olbart muttered so, sensing the change in the air on his dry, old skin.

Glaring at the inside the Crystal Palace with both his eyes, obscured by abundant eyebrows, a strange atmosphere pervaded within the place—he could see that the anomaly that had transformed the familiar structure of the castle into a strange, magical place had been lifted.

Doors that should have been connected were not, and the window through which he had entered did not allow him to reach the desired location; it was unclear whether it was an illusionary technique or a magic that twisted space itself, but in any case—

Olbart: “For now, my work here is… oy, oy, this is bad, isn’t it?”

Finding himself in a problem right after solving another, Olbart hushed his voice at this sudden change of events.

As soon as the distortion in space had been fixed, the next anomaly that occured in the Crystal Palace was easy to understand. —The entire castle was being charged with intense Mana waves. The Magic Crystal Cannon had been activated.

Olbart: “Drat, Moguro, hang in there a lil’ bit longer.”

At the vibrations of the Magic Crystal Cannon activating, Olbart complained to the core of the Crystal Palace, Moguro Hagane—the Steelman, known as the Crystal Palace Meteor itself.

Until now, the commendable Moguro had been obeying Vincent’s instructions, attempting to prevent the Great Disaster from using the Magic Crystal Cannon, but it appeared that they had broken through.

It was dreadful that the Magic Crystal Cannon had been seized as the opponent's weapon.

Olbart: "If they're targetin' Garkla, we're gonna be deep in shit."

The Fortified City, which had attracted hordes of the dead and was supposed to be a siege for the survival of the Empire, needed to keep its strong defensive walls preserved for the battle. If the Magic Crystal Cannon were to blow it down, the situation would shift dramatically and the city would be destroyed.

And, that would be the same as the Vollachian Empire suffering irreversible damage.

Even if Olbart and the others were able to destroy the mastermind behind the Great Disaster, the loss of the personnel currently within the Fortified City would make the rebuild impossible—And that, would spell the end of the Vollachian Empire.

—Olbart Dunkelkenn had an ambition.

As the chieftain of the Shinobi, who were expected to operate in the shadows of history, he intended to leave his grand mark on the history of the Empire and to destroy the very foundation of the way of being a Shinobi, to which he had devoted his life.

For that reason, the allure of flashy outbursts, such as a quick rebellion against the Emperor or his assassination, had often been tempting. However, the Great Disaster had made those plans null, and with the feeling that he missed the opportunity window for betrayal undeniably present, here that chance made itself clear again.

If the Magic Crystal Cannon were to be used in a manner that would determine the victory of the Great Disaster, then Olbart would fulfill his ambitions not as an Imperial General, but rather as a Shinobi.

Whatever Great Disaster had in store, he would stately rush to Vincent's side, snatch victory from him, and fulfill his own personal ambitions.

Therefore—

Olbart: "—Even though this was supposed to be my final betrayal."

The distortion of space having been resolved, Olbart ran up the castle and arrived at the turret of the Magic Crystal Cannon. There, he watched as the glare of destruction was engulfed by a large void in the sky, his white eyebrows fluttering in the aftermath of the Magic Crystal Cannon, which had been fired by the narrowest of margins.

If the Magic Crystal Cannon had determined the destruction of the Empire, Olbart could have betrayed the Empire without any regrets.

But, that did not happen.

Olbart: "Kakakakka! That lil' brat not only did it in the Demon City, he's gone and done it here too! I swear, young people these days don't have a shred of respect for us old folks!"

Olbart laughed heartily at the sight of the two distant figures in the sky: the black-haired boy and the little Spirit girl.

This was the second time, Chaosflame included, that Olbart's calculations were undone by the boy. But, he did not feel any anger or hatred for what he had done to him.

As one would age, it would become easier to give up on many things—but this was not the reason. Olbart was not one who gave up easily. So, he was not giving up. He was just admitting defeat.

Olbart: "If they're able ta outperform me, then that's that."

Having lived for nearly one hundred years, there had been countless dreams that Olbart had not been able to achieve. Of course, there were many that had come true by force. That was the way of things.

Thus, Olbart was able to let go of his long-cherished desire to leave his name in history by assassinating the Emperor in a fit of desperation, as far as the Empire is concerned an act of violence comparable to that of the wolfman who had killed the titular Iris in "Iris and the King of Thorns".

Then, having let go of his long-cherished desire and having prepared his barren left hand for a karate chop—

Olbart: "—Then, you'll come along with me in my dream of bein' the next hero ta save the country, won't ya?"

???: "…"

A white-haired woman stood right next to the turret before the slightly-smiling Olbart.

At the top of the Crystal Palace, on the turret of the Magic Crystal Cannon that had just finished discharging the fire of destruction, a sweltering torrent of Mana blew around, stirring one's senses as it did so.

At the center of it was the keystone of the Crystal Palace with its magic crystals of various sizes, the base on which the Magic Core, the heart of the Magic Crystal Cannon, was installed; the woman in white smiled at him as she placed her hand upon the pedestal.

And then—

???: "It is undesirable for you to be here. —Elimination: Required."

???: "It is futile, Olbart. Your opponent, Witch."

A black wind began to swirl around the smiling woman—the Witch, and the Magic Core itself spoke in Moguro's voice, as if to alert him to it.

Olbart, chuckling at the obvious warning from the Steelman,

Olbart: "I know that without bein' told. —Even at my age, I'm not senile."

Kicking the floor, The Vicious Old Man ended his dream—and, delayed the demise of the Empire that would have occurred in that moment.

Subaru: “Like I’d ever let you! —Bring it on, oh inevitable fate!!”

While embracing and being embraced Beatrice’s Al Shamak sent away one of the Magic Crystal Cannon’s shots.

Tightly, Subaru felt the power to do so being drawn out of him, but he had an unfounded confidence that he could sustain Beatrice’s recklessness.

—No, now that he had succeeded, he could reiterate it as a well-founded conviction.

Subaru: “Maybe, it’s the power of the bond!”

Subaru’s Cor Leonis, which could take on and distribute burdens, had remained connected to all of the members of the Pleiades Battalion, who were located far away from him.

It not only enhanced the strength of everyone as a unit, but it also lent a shoulder to anyone who might have been falling behind, pushing them along and distributing the vitality needed to run together.

This power represented the realization of “One for all, all for one”.

It was quite probable, perhaps even likely, that a massive burden had been suddenly placed upon everyone fighting in the Fortified City at this very moment, but he wanted to believe it would be all right.

Either way—

Beatrice: “It was very important that we prevented that from happening, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Ah! I thought for sure they were going after Garkla…”

Subaru watched the void in the sky close and responded to Beatrice, who raised her voice.

Subaru and the others, determined to stop the Magic Crystal Cannon, rushed into its line of fire, but they had thought that the cannon was aimed at the Fortified City.

The biggest fear was that the Fortified City, where the battle of the century was currently being fought, would have received an irrevocable shot rather than the Imperial Capital receiving a blow at a single location.

However, when they had actually prevented it, the Magic Crystal Cannon had been aimed at the south side of the Imperial Capital.

Subaru: “There’s no way they’d carry out a meaningless attack. They definitely had a plan.”

Beatrice: “—. That troublesome one to the south, they went after Garfiel, didn’t they, in fact?”

Subaru: “Sure, our Garfiel is like a little brother who isn’t embarrassed to go anywhere, but…”

At the first bastion, the southernmost point of the Imperial Capital, the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia was stationed to protect the widest area, and Garfiel alone was entrusted with defeating it.

Frankly speaking, rather than just reckless, it was more so unreasonable, absurd and thoughtless, yet it was a big role that could not have been entrusted to anyone other than Garfiel. Considering its importance, it was not impossible that the other party was targeting Garfiel.

Subaru: “Who fired the shot in the first place? Now that we’ve taken down Sphinx, who’s the next one in charge?”

Beatrice: “…It’s doubtful that it’s a reanimated Emperor of Vollachia or someone of the like, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Please don’t give me any more reasons for not wanting to help the Empire at this point…!”

Just when it seemed that Sphinx, the leader of the Great Disaster, had been defeated, he did not want the previous Emperors of Vollachia to rise up to become the final boss, disappointed by the failures of the modern Empire.

First, if that pattern would be allowed to continue, it would be impossible to know just how many Emperors would need to be defeated.

Beatrice: “But, it seemed like they had a clear aim in the way they were assembling that attack just now, in fact. That’s why…”

Subaru: “—Beako!”

Beatrice’s twin drills flapped in the wind of free fall, and her soft cheeks were cupped between his hands, forcing her to turn around and squeal, “Nyah.”.

In Subaru and Beatrice’s field of vision, there was a fierce, majestic figure cutting through the sky —the Three-Headed Blight Dragon that they had encountered in the coupled dragon carriage and that had once been felled by Halibel.

The three heads of Blight Dragon, the six pairs of golden eyes that caught Subaru and Beatrice, bellowed.

Blight Dragon: “—KRUUUUUUUAGH!!”

Subaru: “Crap, this is bad, we can’t move!”

Beatrice: “—! It’s coming closer, in fact!”

Subaru and Beatrice braced themselves against the clear hostility.

While the Blight Dragon freely tore through the sky, Subaru and Beatrice embraced each other in free fall, while Spica, Halibel, and Abel were separated from them, up in the air—.

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Subaru frantically flipped through the cards in his head as his thoughts became white-hot and the world slowed down.

There was very little that could be done. The next checkpoint for Return by Death had not been confirmed. There are no companions that could be called upon. Only one move could be made, either magic or his Authority.

A momentary thought, he hugged Beatrice and was about to speak —

???: "—Unlike me, you guys can't fly freely, can you? I hope you're not going to make me nervouuus~."

A moment later, a voice with a smile filled with exasperation snatched Subaru and Beatrice away.

Exactly one second later, the Blight Dragon's breath cleaved the sky, but Subaru and Beatrice were able to avoid it just in time, and his eyes lit up at the sensation of the thin arm of the person who had made it happen.

Subaru: "—Nice timing, Roswaal!"

Beatrice: "This is humiliating, I suppose! Holding Betty like this is unacceptable, in fact!"

Roswaal: "Well, weeell~, that's quite an extreme difference in reactions from both sides."

Indeed, it was Roswaal who smirked at Subaru and Beatrice' reactions, whom he held under his arms on either side of him.

Like with Garfiel and Halibel, he had been entrusted with the task of conquering a bastion in the Imperial Capital, and with his magic, he was able to fly freely through the air, taunting and distracting the Three-Headed Valgren.

As they engaged in this very literal aerial battle, Roswaal looked over at Subaru and Beatrice, and,

Roswaal: "Well done for stopping the Magic Crystal Cannon. What's the situaaation~?"

Subaru: "Sphinx has been crushed! The cause of the zombies is in the Crystal Palace! We don't know what the Magic Crystal Cannon was aiming at just now!"

Roswaal: "Clear and concise… I see, you defeated Sphinx. That's both a blessing and a disappointment, but…"

Beatrice: "—? Is that a concern or a complaint, I suppose?"

Upon hearing the report from Subaru, Roswaal's expression turned grim, and his words became muddled.

Beatrice was unsparing when it came to Roswaal's words and actions, but this time her eyes were not as piercing as they had been. Subaru was also concerned by his pensive expression.

In response to Subaru and Beatrice's gaze, Roswaal responded, "No.",

Roswaal: "That thing had been destroyed once before. I hate to admit it, but its tenacity and thoroughness in accomplishing its goals are probably above even mine. —I'm still not convinced."

Beatrice: "—. They are someone who makes Betty and Roswaal feel unpleasant by mentioning their name, in fact…"

Roswaal: "Of course, I'm not saying they couldn't have been defeated. But if it were an enemy that makes a plan that will end in failure if they merely died, it wouldn't have been an enemy of the world for more than three hundred years."

Subaru could not dismiss Roswaal's conjecture as pessimistic.

He was right, because if the Witch, Sphinx, had been a trivial enemy, the Vollachian Empire would never have come so close to destruction.

In fact, the Magic Crystal Cannon that Subaru and Beatrice stopped was not fired until after Sphinx was destroyed.

There remained the fear that the Witch was still working on a way to destroy the Empire.

Roswaal: "Then we'll just destroy all of them. In the meantime…"

Beatrice: "That big Dragon is three times more troublesome than a normal one, yet it will leave the stage in a snap, I suppose! Fly now, Roswaal, in fact!"

At Beatrice’s encouragement, Roswaal smiled wryly, and—the aerial battle with the Blight Dragon began.

5

—Vincent and Eugard, two Emperors of Vollachia who normally would not be able to entrust their backs to each other, were performing sword dances, and the crimson swords flashed with flames that raged like a storm.

Tanza: “Amazing…”

Tanza muttered in amazement at the sight, which was like an illusion that burned her eyes.

Eugard, having sensed the signs of battle from the direction of the Crystal Palace, went ahead, and by the time Tanza, holding hands with Yorna, caught up with him, the two Emperors were already fighting together.

The undead whose souls were being set ablaze by the brilliance of the Yang Sword were all very skilled, and there had not been much difference between them and the undead Rowan.

But the howling winds of the crimson swords kept them at bay, as they were overwhelmed by the coordinated efforts of Eugard and Vincent, who exchanged neither words nor glances.

Yorna: “…This is the first time I’ve ever seen His Excellency wielding a sword with someone that way.”

Suddenly, Yorna, who was staring at the same scene as Tanza, remarked.

Tanza could not comprehend the complexity of the emotions contained therein. —The shaking eyes and trembling voice, all of which were created by years of not being able to do more than lean on Tanza.

Obviously, she did not know the details of the situation.

However, Yorna was in love with Eugard, who came back from a long time ago, and she knew that there was more to it than simple longevity.

Tanza's unfamiliarity with these bonds gave space to a sense of relational hierarchy between she and Eugard in her mind.

Yorna: "I love both you, Tanza, and His Excellency. Both of you are very dear to me, and I love you both in my heart, just in different ways."

Tanza: "Ah…"

The anxiety that creeped into Tanza's heart was seen through by Yorna, which made her want to bury her face.

But Tanza relied on the feeling of the hand in her hand, and with the reason why she was standing here in her heart, she ceased wailing in self-pity.

She had to keep her face up.

That was what Tanza had in common with all the amazing people she had ever met.

Tanza: "—Hk."

Gritting her teeth, Tanza's nerves were on edge.

She was entrusted with protecting Yorna, who was not in good shape, or perhaps emotionally traumatized from the battle with the dreadful Rowan. She could not rely on Eugard, who was fighting, or even on Emilia, who had separated from her on her way here.

So, as long as Tanza was not able to join Eugard and Vincent in their battle, all she could do was to be the first to notice anything unusual in their surroundings—.

Tanza: "—Yorna-sama! Look!"

Her vigilance paid off.

Tanza's round eyes widened, and she pointed to the Crystal Palace's top level with the hand not held by Yorna's. Looking at the same thing as Tanza, Yorna stared up with her almond-shaped eyes.

Their gazes fell on the half-spherical tower near the top of the Crystal Palace—Tanza did not know, but it was the tower where the Magic Crystal Cannon, the trump card of the Crystal Palace, was located.

The tower glowed from within, and then, in a violent explosion, the walls were blown away. Tanza blinked as the tower was destroyed, scattering pieces of the castle in a spectacular manner.

Then, a small shadow appeared out of the thick plume of smoke—

Yorna: "Old Man Olbart?"

Yorna's voice, somewhat taken aback, was evidence of her surprise at what she saw.

Slowly, Olbart emerged from the broken wall, but rather than his usual aloof and detached self, blood stained his tattered garb.

Just then, Olbart noticed Tanza and the other living people below him—

Olbart: "Yer Excellency! Things ain't lookin' good at this rate! The Witch's tricks ain't over yet!"

And as such, his voice, tainted by desperation, screamed as if to push an impression very much not like himself.

6

And so, at the same time that Olbart shouted in his blood-stained garb—Emilia stood, reflecting on the fact that she had taken an unplanned action with her intuition as the basis.

It was a big decision to go against the wishes of Subaru and Abel, both of whom had worked very hard to think through the best course of action, and to act separately from Tanza, Yorna, and the others.

Emilia: “If my uneasiness turned out to be just a misunderstanding, I thought I’d hurry back to Tanza-chan and the others, but…”

Following a slight unease and a change in the air, a misapprehension that seemed to wash over her, Emilia ran not to the Crystal Palace but further north.

And there she found someone she was not supposed to have met.

If someone were to merely be somewhere, then no matter who they were, assuming that they were committing wrongdoings would usually be unacceptable. But this other person was a bit of an exception.

After all—

Emilia: “You reaaally surprised me. —Why are you here, Echidna?”

At Emilia’s prompt, the white-haired Witch turned to look.

She spoke with only the slightest hint of surprise at her well-formed appearance.

Witch: “I believe I am the one who ought to be surprised. —Witch of Envy.”

So she declared.

V!c.112o

Chapter 68:
The Man I Fell For

1

—Upon being called the “Witch of Envy”, Emilia widened her eyes in surprise.

The cause of her surprise had been twofold: one reason was how long it had been since she was treated like the Witch of Envy, the other was that being called the Witch of Envy had not hurt her.

It had been more than a year since the Royal Selection began, and in the Kingdom of Lugunica, those unaware that one of the candidates was a silver-haired half-elf with amethyst eyes were few.

To put it Subaru-style, Emilia, as Emilia, had become a household name.

As a result, even occasions when Emilia needed to wear her usual cognitive disruption robe had become sparse. And the reason she had donned it so diligently in the Empire for the first time in a long while, was to prevent people from recognizing her as Emilia.

For that reason, it had been a while since she had been called the Witch of Envy. And even when called so, she had remained unperturbed. —For she had the conviction to confidently say, “You’re mistaken”.

The conviction that there was a person, who acknowledged Emilia as Emilia, and had said “I love you”.

Emilia: “I’m Emilia, just Emilia. Not the Witch of Envy.”

Supported by that conviction, Emilia was able to respond with her back unbent.

After replying so, Emilia gazed intently at the familiar white-haired woman before her, Emilia: “Although you look reaaally similar… you don’t seem to be Echidna? Perhaps, you’re Echidna’s twin, like Ram and Rem? Echidna’s older sister? Younger sister?”

???: “—. It seems you possess a vivid imagination. However, I am a creation of my creator, and not a blood relative. Correction: Required.”

Emilia: “Kreashon, Kreeated…”

Emilia frowned upon hearing the not-so-familiar words, but could understand that the other party had denied being Echidna’s sister.

Thinking about it calmly, given that Echidna was from four hundred years ago, meeting the person herself or her sister here would be very strange. Of course, since it was a situation where those who had died were rising up again, there was a chance the same could have happened with Echidna and her sister.

Emilia: “But, you seem hale and hearty, and not like you’ve died.”

She, who looked like Echidna, did not have a sickly complexion like the undead, and her eyes were also normal. But when compared to Echidna, her expressions might be slightly stiffer.

The Echidna Emilia knew, usually had a mean look on her face. — The crying face she had shown at the end, still remained strongly within Emilia’s heart.

Emilia: “Umm, I understand that you’re not Echidna, so may I ask your name?”

???: “Yes, I too am uncomfortable with being called by the name of my creator. By all means, please call me the Witch of Greed.”

Emilia: “…Do you perhaps have a name that’s easier to call you with?”

???: “—. Respondence: Required. If not that, then Sphinx.”

Emilia: “Ahh yes… wait! Sphinx?!”

As soon as she finally heard what sounded like a name, Emilia realized it was the same as the name of the central figure that had brought about the Great Disaster.

As far as Emilia was aware, Sphinx should have looked exactly like Ryuzu.

Emilia: “Aren’t Ryuzu-san and Echidna, both people closely associated with the Sanctuary? Then, I wonder if you’ll turn into Garfiel or Frederica next…”

Sphinx: “Are you also aware of the Sanctuary? It seems you and I have a deeper connection than I had presumed… by Emilia, do you refer to the Royal Selection Candidate, like Priscilla Barielle?”

Emilia: “Eh? Yes, that’s right. We need to quickly find Priscilla as well and take her back home or—”

Sphinx: “—Elimination: Required.”

At that moment, towards the woman who had slightly tilted her head—a white light shot from Sphinx’s finger, and with an “Eh”, Emilia deflected it obliquely using a mirror of ice she conjured on reflex.

If Emilia’s specialty had been the Earth attribute instead of the Fire attribute, the earthen or stone wall would have been pierced through in a single shot, and possibly resulted in a fatal injury.

It was an attack brimming with murderous intent, to the extent that it would make one shudder.

Nevertheless—

Emilia: “Jeez! What a reaaally abrupt start!”

The white light had not been released as a singular shot; rather, chasing after Emilia, as her silver hair danced, was a hot beam of light that sliced through the world, and with it the battle had begun.

Her opponent looked exactly like Echidna, and also like Echidna, seemed to be good at magic.

But, the same was true of Emilia.

Emilia: “If that’s what you want to do, then I’m going to give it my all too! After making sure you can’t move, I’m taking you to Subaru and the others!”

Sphinx: “I do not wish to meet them ever again. Hence, I shall take your life here, and ascertain the type of expression Pricilla Barielle would have.”

Emilia: “—! Do you know where Priscilla is?”

As she sliced away the attacks of light released from all directions with a sword of ice that shone like a mirror, Emilia’s amethyst eyes sparkled in response to Sphinx’s words.

She had a feeling that Priscilla would have wanted to head for the Crystal Palace for some reason and would thus be found there, but getting Sphinx to reveal her exact location would be the best.

All the more, Emilia was determined not to lose. Sphinx, who had the same face as Echidna, narrowed her eyes at Emilia’s enthusiasm, and with slight irritation,

Sphinx: “It would be problematic if I failed to secure this area. —Repulsion: Required.”

That, was what she had quietly muttered.

2

The battery of the Magic Crystal Cannon installed on the highest floor of the Crystal Palace, within the spire where it was operated, a battle had broken out.

The space was far too wide when considering its intended purpose, but since there were walls and ceilings, the enclosed environment was an advantageous battleground for the shinobi, Olbart.

The strength of the techniques employed by the shinobi lay in their variety and applicability. Although developed to enable the fulfillment of the mission in any environment, all the various techniques had the ultimate goal of reaping the life of the opponent.

As a battleground where that could be achieved, this space was ideal.

Olbart: “When it comes ta cramped spaces, don’t magicians tend ta buckle under the constraints?”

A battle, in essence, was about imposing one’s strengths upon the weaknesses of the other.

This was the basis of Olbart’s fighting style as a shinobi. Rather, in order to respond to the weaknesses of all sorts of opponents, he had purposely avoided forming his own specialty.

Prior to Olbart becoming the head honcho, the shinobi were generally encouraged to specialize in a singular technique.

However, the idealized conception of single-skill specialization was only for the privileged few like Cecilus and Arakiya, who possessed a single technique that could be effective against anyone, while those with ordinary abilities must be adaptable or they would simply die.

Although Olbart did not particularly care how many people died other than himself, he did feel pity for the shinobi who were dying merely because they had been taught wrong.

Thus, when Olbart became the head honcho, he immediately abandoned the doctrine of single-technique specialization.

Rather than blindly honing one’s own special skill, thoroughly training in strategies to thwart the strong points of the opponent, and learning techniques of guiding the battle so as to bring about that situation. But then again, this change did not readily bear fruit. Those who had been properly shaped by it were few, with the last being a genius girl who had appeared in the village four or five years ago.

It seemed like that genius girl had also died, so the cultivation of talented individuals was nothing more than a lost cause.

—Truly, his life was filled with nothing but regret.

Olbart: “That’s why, at least, gimme a reason ta have lived ta my dotage.”

Having kicked off the floor, he sent off shards of broken stone to smash into the Witch’s head.

Simultaneously swinging his right arm that lacked a hand and his left arm that had a hand back and forth, Olbart threw spinning kunai that would reach the target with a time delay, then he exploded off the ground with his legs.

Be it evading the flying debris, avoiding the chop from Olbart’s hand, or shooting down the kunai approaching from both sides, all of these actions were chipping away at the Witch’s ability to take the initiative, and gnawing at her life.

At that assault from the shinobi—

Witch: “—Perspective Shift: Required.”

The white-haired Witch who had slightly narrowed her eyes, received it in its entirety without any show of resistance.

Olbart: “…”

The flying debris had split her forehead, kunai had been thrust into her neck and femur, and her chest had been pierced through the middle by Olbart’s hand. Even then, the Witch had not moved an inch.

The Witch had been unable to react to Olbart’s movements. —No, the Witch’s gaze had been following his movements. She was not as sluggish as her appearance seemed to suggest, that was what Olbart concluded.

In other words, the Witch could have done something but had gotten hit without doing anything. —No, she would do so from now.

The next moment, surrounding Olbart and the Witch now in close proximity to each other, countless fist-sized orbs of light had begun to float in the air.

???: “Olbart!”

Moguro, who had realized the same thing, shouted, and Olbart, with a single long eyebrow raised, looked at the Witch.

The Witch, her beautiful countenance not having wavered in the slightest, had been observing Olbart for his subsequent decision. That gaze, which felt like it was peering into the ninety years of his life, made him feel nauseous.

Based on that, Olbart had gotten his priorities in order. Rather than aiming for the Witch’s life, he would thwart her objectives.

Bearing fatal injuries all over her body, even after being pierced through her chest, her hand remained on the pedestal—he would aim to sever the flow of Mana that the Witch had been pouring into the Magic Core of the Crystal Palace.

Olbart: “Ya know, they say harassment’s what we shinobi are made of.”

That instant, the Witch’s wrist making contact with the pedestal was blown away by the toes that had shot up—and the countless orbs of light surged forward to annihilate the small-statured Olbart, together with the entirety of the Witch who had cast them.

3

Vincent: “—Yorna Mishigure!”

Upon sensing that something was off, Vincent took a step back from the battlefield and shouted out down towards Yorna.

Overhead, the voice of Olbart that had come down from the half-destroyed battery of the Magic Crystal Cannon was one of urgency, one that did not maintain the usual easygoing attitude of the Vicious Old Man.

Sharply turning his gaze to the side, Vincent swung his Yang Sword adjacent to himself, and locked eyes with Eugard, who was restraining the undead in the vicinity.

Eugard: "Thou must proceed."

Entrusting this location to Eugard, who had guessed his intentions with a brief comment, Vincent hastened to Yorna. Receiving Vincent's gaze, and after displaying a face of befuddlement for but a moment, Yorna tensed her lips and let go of the hand of the deergirl next to her—of Tanza,

Yorna: "Tanza, please support His Excellency Vincent!"

Tanza: "—! Yes, understood."

Drawing her chin in assent at Yorna's call, Tanza made a cup with her hands and slightly bent down. Surmising the intention behind Tanza's movements, Vincent made an agile hop, landing with his feet in the small hands of the girl.

The next moment, with a vigorous upheaval of those slender arms, Tanza launched Vincent towards the sky—straight upwards, aiming for the uppermost floor of the Crystal Palace.

Vincent: "—Hk."

The vigor was lacking, so, kicking off of the wall of the palace in order to make up for the unreached distance, Vincent arrived at the uppermost floor that was over five meters above him. The thought that he was doing something similar to Cecilus, who would side-step staircases when going up and down, grazed his mind, but such ideas immediately vanished.

After all, this was the first time Vincent had seen Olbart in such a state.

Olbart: "Kakakakka…! Did'ya think I was dead when ya saw me, ain't that hilarious?"

Alongside the half-destroyed wall of the battery, Olbart sat with a knee up as he laughed in a low voice. However, the monstrous old man was drenched in blood, and his characteristically overly-long eyebrows were sagging. Among all his wounds, the gravest by far was that of his left arm having been blown off in the wake of his right one.

For Olbart to have engaged in such a close bout of combat, just how powerful an individual had been present here?

—No, what mattered now was.

Vincent: “Before you die, speak. What was the Witch plotting?”

Olbart: “Kaka, this really is some harsh treatment of the elderly… If ya look at Moguro you’ll be able ta tell.”

Vincent: “Moguro Hagane…”

As Olbart quite literally coughed up blood while speaking, Vincent turned around at his words, and looked at the pedestal installed within the ruinous battery, and the green orb slotted therein—the Magic Core.

The Crystal Palace, constructed with an unsparing amount of magic crystals, was an unfathomable condensation of Mana, and thus was tantamount to a tremendously enormous bomb. The reason why that was enshrined in the Imperial Capital, the center of the Empire, was due to the existence of the Magic Core governing over it.

The Magic Core was that which served as the very heart of the Crystal Palace. —The green glimmer of that heart, the Magic Core, could see the rising abnormality in Vincent’s sable eyes.

That meant—

Vincent: “—Overloading the Magic Core, they intend to blow up the Crystal Palace along with the entire Imperial Capital!”

Magic Core: “Olbart, impeded it. Stopped, the Witch, midway through.”

The Witch’s gambit, which Olbart had spoken of, as Vincent shuddered upon surmising its true intent, the Magic Core—Moguro

Hagane's voice substantiated it.

As mentioned previously, it was the distinguished achievement of the Magic Core that miraculously kept the magic crystals of the Crystal Palace steady. By pouring a vast amount of Mana into the Magic Core, the Witch had placed a large burden on its processing power. By doing that, she had plotted to have the Magic Core lose its function of control, destroying the equilibrium of the magic crystals, and blowing away the city.

Having comprehended that much, a momentary unease was birthed in Vincent's mind.

Vincent: "The Witch was present here? Before she went up in flames?"

Moguro: "Incorrect. The Witch, was not burning. Olbart and myself, fought her together."

Vincent: "…"

From the way Moguro had put it, Vincent's misgivings were not cleared up.

The one known as the Witch on this battlefield, Sphinx, was supposed to have perished with her soul scorched to naught, ensnared by the stratagems of Chisha and Natsuki Subaru.

In that case, did that mean there were two Witches? Or perhaps—.

Vincent: "The matter at hand is what ought to take priority."

Discontinuing the thought that had veered off course, Vincent looked down at the Magic Core.

By way of Olbart's hard-fought battle, the annihilation of the Imperial Capital by means of the Magic Core's loss of control had been averted—no, it had merely been delayed. Looking at the state of the Magic Core, it was apparent that its equilibrium had already been lost.

The fuse of the Magic Core had already been set off. No longer could a detonation be avoided.

Vincent: "—Moguro Hagane, you have done a great service until now."

When he gained conviction of that reality, Vincent called out to Moguro as such.

As the Steelman Moguro Hagane, the Meteor that was this Crystal Palace itself had served the Vollachian Emperor Vincent well. To put it clearly, among the Nine Divine Generals, who had experienced nothing but problems in matters outside of pure strength, Moguro and Groovy had been unfathomably useful.

In order to repay Moguro, who had been such a loyal retainer, Vincent had but one method.

Vincent: "In accordance with your wishes, I shall ensure the tranquility of the Vollachian Empire, no matter what."

Moguro: "—. Your Excellency, thank you. Your Excellency, tells no lie."

Vincent: "Fool, I do not hesitate to dupe others if necessary."

Moguro: "People, you deceive. Me, you do not."

At Moguro's words of stout belief, Vincent gave a slight exhale, and loosened his lips.

This Meteor was supposed to be a stone puppet in whom no blood flowed, and yet in the world of the Empire, fervent with tricks and plots, they were a valuable existence that seemed almost too good to be true.

Olbart: "…So what'dya intend on doing, Yer Excellency."

Vincent: "Even were the Magic Core to be removed from the pedestal, we have no means of removing it from the premises. In that case, the ruination of the Magic Core and of the Crystal Palace itself, there is no option save burning both to naught. —Yang Sword Vollachia."

Questioned by Olbart, Vincent displayed the Yang Sword within his grip.

If he called for Eugard to come here, then with two Yang Swords—there would be no meaning in doing such a thing. What would be required in the current predicament, was not a matter of manpower, but of output.

To scorch the Magic Core, and the power concealed within, to ash by the flame of the Yang Sword. Before the power overflowing from the Magic Core could engulf the Crystal Palace and Imperial Capital, and blow them away.

In all likelihood, everything would end up being settled in a mere moment.

Vincent: "Or perhaps, do you have any other ideas?"

Olbart: "Hm? I ain't got a plan, ain't even got two arms ta raise if I wanted ta surrender. If Yer Excellency can't think of anything, then nobody else in the whole world, let alone the Empire, would be able ta think of anything either, right?"

Vincent: "—Hmph."

As the monstrous old man shrugged his armless shoulders, Vincent slightly snorted his nose.

The notion that nobody in the world other than Vincent would be able to come up with a countermeasure, was an overestimation. If it were not Vincent present here, but instead Subaru, Chisha, or Priscilla—.

Vincent: "Think not of such fruitless things, O foolish Vincent Vollachia."

Indeed, deriding his own self as foolish, Vincent readied the Yang Sword with a two-handed grip.

Stood before the growing radiance of the Magic Core upon the pedestal, before the radiance of the Yang Sword, before the treasured sword of crimson that served as the greatest treasure of the Vollachian Empire, the Vollachian Empire of the present day implored the display of its power.

The next instant, the area surrounding Vincent—nay, the area surrounding the Yang Sword began to harbor heat in its air, distorting the world akin to a wavering mirage. Setting rubbish alight, roasting the atmosphere, forcibly painting over the Mana in the air with the fire attribute, the scintillation of the Yang Sword was emboldened.

The heat radiated by the brilliant red blade began to gleam white at the signs of the rising flame.

Olbart: “Geez, now this sure is somethin’.”

Present in the same vicinity, Olbart received the full influence of the heat brought about by the Yang Sword, and he was silently surprised at the swell of the treasured sword’s power.

To begin with, the Yang Sword was something that was sparsely drawn. Even for Olbart, who had lived through three generations of Emperors, this was the first time he had witnessed this much of the Yang Sword’s power on display.

For Vincent himself, this was his first time unleashing this much of the Yang Sword’s power.

However—

Vincent: “—It is insufficient.”

While feeling the unprecedented upsurge of power, Vincent ascertained that the output was lacking.

Calculating the ratio of the ever-increasing pressure of the Magic Core and the magic crystals used in the construction of the Crystal Palace, the current output of the Yang Sword would not be able to burn away the might of the explosion. It was not a matter of reducing it as much as possible. What was required, was a complete eradication.

And with Vincent’s incomplete Yang Sword, that would be impossible.

The Yang Sword of Vincent Vollachia, was not capable of displaying its true value.

The reason was plain and simple—Vincent had allowed his biological sister, Prisca Benedict, to live, and thus the Imperial Selection Ceremony had yet to come to an end in its truest form. Deceiving all citizens of the Empire, he was a transient Emperor who had ascended the Imperial Throne without having gained the right to do so.

Ergo, Vincent could not draw out the true power of the Yang Sword Vollachia.

In regards to the true value of the Yang Sword, the same went for Eugard, one of the historic Emperors.

After all, although the Yang Sword lent its power to the undead Eugard by way of his imperial lineage, its true power would dwell in naught but the true Emperor of the current generation.

Was his only option to make the attempt with the incomplete Yang Sword? Or perhaps—

Vincent: "—In exchange for my own life…"

Offering something of equal value, he would seek to invoke the true flame of the Yang Sword.

It was a choice that was quite likely to reduce the promise he had just exchanged with Moguro to dreck, but if that was what it took, Vincent would enact it.

All things, were the results of the path Vincent had chosen to walk. Atop the extremity of all the results of choices he had piled up, currently, Vincent was standing.

Therefore—

Vincent: "The duty I must fulfill—"

???: “—I don’t think so, Abel-chin.”

Imploring the Yang Sword in his grip, Vincent was about to draw out value equivalent to setting his own life aflame. That hand of Vincent’s, was held down by the white hand of the one who stood next to him.

Lost in concentration, the tall woman had gotten close to him through the opening in his undelivered attention. At the blue eyes staring into his side-profile, Vincent widened his eyes.

Vincent: “Medium O’Connell…”

Medium: “Ehehe, I’m here.”

Vincent: “…”

As Medium smiled with her answer, Vincent was at a loss for words.

This place where the heat of the Yang Sword only continued to swell, was no longer suitable for ordinary individuals to breathe. She had suddenly appeared in such a place; however, she was smiling.

With a smile on her face, and her hand holding down Vincent’s,

Medium: “I know that Abel-chin is carrying a huge responsibility. But, you can’t let yourself die. After all, that’s the kind of thing I hate the most.”

Vincent: “Think about the magnitude of the matter at hand. To begin with, you have no qualifications to divulge your opinion to me.”

Medium: “Ehh~! Yes I do! I’m becoming Abel-chin’s wife, aren’t I?!”

Vincent: “That is…”

Medium: “You said that it was okay!”

Vincent: “…”

Medium: “You said so!”

Held down by her vigorousness, Vincent was overwhelmed by Medium’s fierce spirit. That was different from the pressure of someone aiming for Vincent’s life, or that of a potential political opponent.

It was the kind of thing for which Vincent had not made preparations to combat.

Vincent: “Take a look at reality. No matter how much you value the seat of Empress Consort, the most vital thing is that the Empire—”

It was at the moment he had attempted to brush her aside.

A sudden impact having struck his cheek, Vincent stared in shock that his face had been flicked. Turning around with that stare, he looked at Medium. —Medium, who had struck the Emperor’s cheek.

Medium: “Never speak about my reason for worrying about Abel-chin like that again.”

Vincent: “You…”

Tensing her cheeks, Medium’s declaration made Vincent unconsciously blink his eyes. And, witnessing that, Medium spoke “Ah” in surprise,

Medium: “Abel-chin closing both his eyes, this is the first time I’m seeing it~.”

As she gave a broad smile and spoke, Vincent did not utter a word.

His eyes ought to be kept open. If he closed both his eyes at the same time, the Emperor’s life would be in danger. That was an ironclad rule of Vollachia, one that Vincent abided by even in his sleep.

That, had been violated. Not to deprive him of his life, but by a woman who was worried about Vincent, flicking his cheek.

Olbart: “Kakakakka! Oioi, even tho’ this isn’t the time for that, isn’t it just a masterpiece?”

Perceiving the turmoil within Vincent, the elderly man on the verge of death loudly butted in. Regaining his ability to think and make decisions, Vincent gritted his teeth.

Even if it were true that he was taken aback for a second, nothing about the situation had changed.

All the same, the Imperial Capital, the Empire, and the world were heading to meet their demise. That—

Medium: “It’ll be okay, Abel-chin, it’ll be okay.”

As Vincent bit down on his molars, Medium still continued to smile at him.

It was a baseless, emotional argument that merely spoke of hope. In a place of discussion, that was something Vincent loathed from the bottom of his heart, for it harbored the least potential.

—Such loathed arguments of emotion; since he had been ousted from the throne, just how many times had he been tormented by them, and rescued by them?

???: “—How ‘bout that, Your Excellency? Ain’t my lil’ sis quite the big deal?”

It was at that instant.

The reason for Vincent’s silence, the one speaking as if it were his own personal matter, as if perceiving that he had also gone through the same thing, was…

4

Ultimately, no matter what he did, Balleroy Temeglyph had always been half-hearted; he derided himself so.

When he was alive, he had served the Empire, and then opposed the Empire.

Then after he died, he opposed the Empire yet again, and in the end —

Balleroy: “Serving the Empire, though I ain’t really built for it.”

As Balleroy grumbled this, the hole in his chest—having been pierced and opened up by the Magical Bullet of the most horrible magician, was proof of the decision that had caused his defeat.

—The battle on which Balleroy’s wish had been staked, had ended with his utter defeat against the enemy who had been willing to use all means at his disposal.

The magician in question had said something along the lines of “It was a paper-thin difference, so it wouuuldn’t~ have been particularly odd for either one of us to come out victorious.”, but that was nothing more than a lie designed to soothe his ears.

In all likelihood, if he were to fight against that man one hundred times, Balleroy would lose all one hundred times. It was that sort of affinity.

For the sake of a single objective, just how ruthless could that man become?

At the end of the day, by the point in time in which he could not carry out the things he had left undone and his lingering regrets, which had been the reason for his resurrection, Balleroy was no match for the opponent whose blood ran colder than that of the undead.

With Medium having been cast away, there was no way he could have overlooked it, knowing that doing so would have resulted in the death of his little sister. That was Balleroy’s weakness, and the entire reason for his defeat.

Medium: “That’s wrong. It’s ‘cause Ballebro is kind.”

Balleroy had accepted that as the reason for his defeat; however, Medium would not accept that.

Evaluating his weakness and naivete as kindness, Medium’s upright personality and beaming smile had not withered in the slightest despite having grown taller; she was his prized little sister.

Indeed, she was his little sister. Balleroy was truly blessed to have met her.

Serena, Flop, Medium, Madelyn, and everyone else, he was truly blessed to have met them all.

His partner Carillon went without saying, but that also held true for the many Imperial Soldiers who had stood alongside Balleroy as he climbed the ranks as General, and it also held true for the Nine Divine Generals.

However, although he was grateful for all of those meetings, he had not relinquished it.

That was—

Medium: “Even so, Ballebro couldn’t stop himself, right?”

Tears in her eyes, yet still smiling nonetheless, Medium’s appearance took him aback.

He had thought she had not changed at all since the time they had first met, yet she had verily grown up; having gone from girl to woman, she had become capable of smiling in this different manner.

He alone had gone without changing, merely taking steps while stuck in place.

Balleroy: “…Seems like the people who get resurrected by the Witch are limited to just the people who died in the Empire. The only way to get rid of that restriction, is by destroying the Empire, and expanding the range further beyond to the Kingdom and the City-States. If we do that, then finally, by doing that, I’ll finally be able to…”

Medium: “—Meet Big Bro Miles again?”

Balleroy: “…”

Medium: “I understand. After all, I’ve been watching Ballebro all this time.”

At Medium’s words, Balleroy keenly gained two emotions.

The first was self-scorn regarding the fact that his inner feelings had been exposed, and the other was a slight jealousy. This smile that he was seeing Medium display for the first time, he knew the meaning behind it.

Balleroy: “Medi, is there a man you’ve fallen for?”

Medium: “Huh?! N-no…? Maybe.”

Balleroy: “Close your eyes, and it’s gotta be the first face that comes to mind with a smile.”

Medium: “That kinda thing can only be big bro! Besides, it’s not like Abel-chin ever smiles… ah.”

Placing her hand over her mouth, a red hue ascended into Medium’s cheeks. Seeing such a reaction from his little sister for the first time, Balleroy chuckled. Smiling, he slowly raised himself up.

Truly, Balleroy was half-hearted to the bitter end.

If, in hating that, he started to break things down like the magician who had defeated him, then perhaps he would no longer be himself.

Balleroy: “That sorta cold-bloodedness, I think I’ll pass.”

He could never become like that. He would never become like that.

He, who had been half-hearted since the time he was alive, was half-hearted all the same even in death.

Since he was a person of hazy wishes and regrets in both life and death, he could also say this.

Balleroy: “Well then, how ‘bout we go save the man who Medi fell for?”

Medium: “I said I’m still not sure!”

Her complexion bright red, with a face different to that of her early life and days as a young girl, her words had no persuasive power whatsoever despite asserting them in such a manner.

If someone could make Medium have such an expression, yet still end up causing her sorrow, then Balleroy would kill that person with his very hands. Belittling himself, he thought so.

Carillon: “—Kiryararahhh.”

At Balleroy’s selfish brotherly feelings, Carillon, with whom he shared in heart and soul, neighed in high spirits.

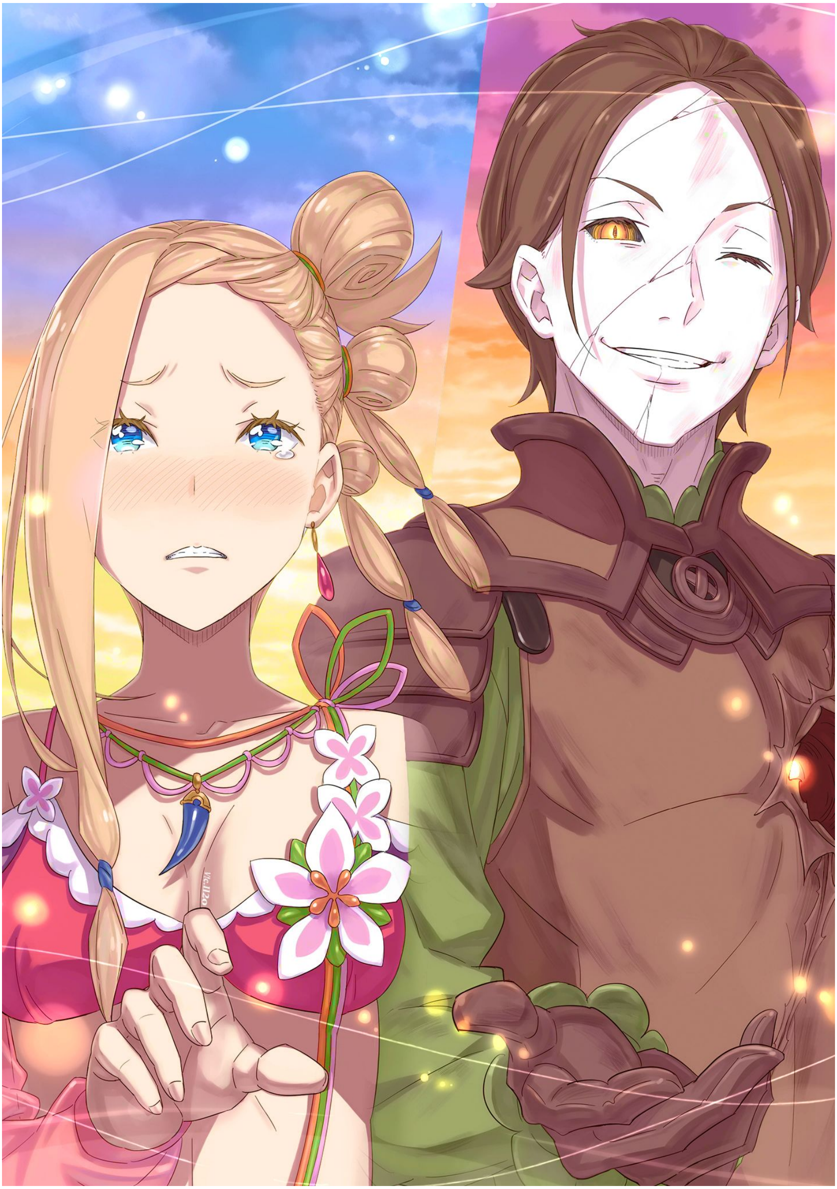
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5

—At that moment, all those present in the Imperial Capital, be they living or dead, gazed up at the sky.

For what reason that had been, none could easily explain.

If the question was regarding the reason why they had individually looked up at the sky, there were likely many who could explain themselves. Those with keen senses may have perceived a strong undulation of Mana, and those with good hearing would have heard the loud neigh of a flying dragon. Likewise were those with a focus on the origin of the Magic Crystal Cannon, having been fired a moment prior, and those moving with the palace as their destination.

But, even if they could all provide explanations for themselves, they could not explain the reason for everybody having done so.

If it could be done, then it was only by the leading actor who decided the logic of the world within himself, and if he were to be asked, then his answer would be plain and simple—

Cecilus: "—Of course, it's because it's somebody's climax!"

He likely would have declared so in a grandiose manner, with a loud voice and a bright smile.

And, there existed not a single soul in this Vollachian Empire who would have been able to deny him.

The reason for that lay in pure strength, and, since the sole person capable of objecting to the leading actor regardless of pure strength, was currently seeing off their own reason for gazing at the sky right before their eyes.

—By leaps and bounds, leaps and bounds, a dazzlingly radiant streak of green light drew a line towards the sky directly above the Crystal Palace.

Pulling inwards, pulling inwards, before anyone could realize it, all the clouds present in the sky above the Imperial Capital had been congregated into an enormous sea of clouds, and plunging right into the midst of it—.

???: “…”

—That instant, as if the sky itself was aglow, a flicker of light suddenly illuminated the world in dazzling scintillation.

Chapter 69:
I Forgive You

1

As gauntlets of silver rang out, the torso and cranium of the undead standing in the way were pulverized.

Inside the body of every undead there existed a corebug, and without piercing it, causing a fatal wound would be impossible, even if their head and heart were to be blown away. —In that case, the best choice was to punch in a way so that the impact would spread throughout the whole body.

???: “How ‘bout this!”

Until now, he had been giving priority to swinging his fists with all of his strength and having them hit their targets, and he had not given much thought to the result that would be brought forth after they had landed. But, he revised that way of thinking.

The shockwave borne from the impact of his fist, he imagined it propagating throughout the body of his opponent. By doing so, a change could be yielded in the way his fist was unleashed, and in the result it brought about.

???: “—Hk.”

With a shivering response from its back, the body of the struck undead was smashed to dust, lagging a moment behind the area that had been directly punched. It was proof that the impact had been transmitted throughout the entire body, and that the corebug had been killed.

As to not relinquish that after having grasped it once, he engaged the swarm of countless undead with his fists.

One, two, three; the number of the shattered undead was rapidly increasing—.

???: “Oi, brat! That’s enough, there’ll be no end to this!”

A gruff voice called out to the back of the one holding his ground as he swung his fists at the undead.

With a sword of fine craftsmanship in hand, dealing with the undead that had broken off towards himself, Heinkel persisted with earnest resistance as his face and hair were getting worn out.

At that quavering voice of complaint, Garfiel contorted the corners of his mouth into a smile.

A person who would have been better off running away if he so desired, was sincerely holding his ground here.

He had insisted that he would be safer remaining here with Garfiel rather than running away on his own, but it was difficult to believe that such a claim was still valid in a situation with this much pressure.

After all, this place was—the grand gate that served as the entrance to the Imperial Capital, a crucial position that held the key to capturing the Imperial Capital by holding back the large army of undead that was attempting to march in.

Garfiel: “Ain’t gonna move one inch. If I don’t hold down this position, it’ll get in the way of Captain’s tactics.”

Hence, it was Garfiel’s duty to defend this place to the end by any means necessary.

Striking his fists together before his chest, Garfiel gave a reply brimming with motivation, to which Heinkel clicked his tongue. With a grim, unpleasant look on his face, in an angered voice he went, “But…!”,

Heinkel: “If it’s just to fulfill your duty, wouldn’t it be easier to carry out if you fell back a bit?! There’s no reason for you to hold your ground here… just leave that Dragon on its own!”

Having cut down an undead, what Heinkel pointed to with the raised tip of his sword, was the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia, which had engaged in a battle to the death against Garfiel, and was now lying on the ground.

Mezoreia was supposed to be on the side of the undead given its position, but the undead were unrelentingly directing their hostility towards the collapsed Cloud Dragon, and if neglected, the Dragon's scales would likely be stained with blood.

Garfiel: "Can't do that!"

Heinkel: "Why?! Isn't it an enemy?! It'd be best to let them harm each other!"

Garfiel: "I don't want Captain to be disappointed in me!"

At Garfiel's childish answer, Heinkel's expression stiffened as he found himself at a loss for words.

But, those were his true feelings, without any exaggeration. Even in this battle, Subaru desired to reduce casualties, and bring them as close to zero as possible. Garfiel, too, wished to assist in that.

Besides, he still had yet to exchange any meaningful words with the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia.

That was why—

Garfiel: "My amazin' self ain't movin'! Bring it the fuck on, ya zombie bastards!"

Fiercely roaring in a loud voice, the sound of Garfiel's two gauntlets striking each other rang out.

It would be best if the undead who heard that sound all gathered here, aiming for the living who was brimming with vitality.

Garfiel: "Exactly, that's fine by me. —All of ya strong fucks, come at my amazin' self!"

After all, by holding out as much as he could, Garfiel should have been able to make things even a little easier for the people precious to himself.

Heinkel: “…There’s something wrong with you.”

Distorting his expression, Heinkel listened to Garfiel’s war cry. —As he did so, Heinkel did not notice the slight stirring of the fallen Cloud Dragon behind him.

2

When affectionately lifted up from the bed, Madelyn was convinced that this was the end. —Because in Balleroy’s chest as he stood, a painfully large hole had been opened up.

It was the body of an undead. Madelyn knew that a fatal wound would not simply prove fatal. However, from the fact that the wound was not repairing itself like it was immediately supposed to, she could sense Balleroy’s intentions.

Madelyn’s darling—the person she loved, would now once and for all head to a place she would be unable to reach. Where even the child of the Dragon that commanded the clouds could not reach, towards a place even further beyond the heavens above the clouds.

Balleroy: “—I’m real sorry, Madelyn.”

As Balleroy spoke with a kind expression, Madelyn’s eyes slightly widened.

That expression of Balleroy’s, it overlapped with one he made in his lifetime, from before he had reunited with her as an undead. Of course, his eyes were still comprised of black with an auriferous hue looming within, and his complexion was still that of a pallid undead.

Even so, for but a moment, it seemed as if the warmth of life dwelled within Balleroy’s gaze and voice.

It was just like those many times when he would come to see Madelyn at the summit of Mount Palzoa.

—The fact that she had not been the one to help him regain that warmth, vexed her from the bottom of her heart.

Madelyn: "—Hk."

As her voice choked up due to her sense of powerlessness and worthlessness, Madelyn's golden eyes began to fill with tears.

As Madelyn's eyes showed fragility despite being alive, Balleroy, whose eyes housed definite strength despite being dead, while reflected in the irises that shared the same hue as his own,

Balleroy: "Until the very end of the end, I sure was quite the selfish guy. I had ended up using Madelyn an awful lot with that selfishness of mine."

Determining the things he needed to do, and deciding that they would part ways, Balleroy was currently standing by Madelyn's side.

This, was his way of broaching that conversation. What would subsequently follow, were Balleroy's words of apology and gratitude; Madelyn could tell.

Indeed, because she had been able to tell.

Madelyn: "Friggin', stop…"

Balleroy: "Madelyn?"

Madelyn: "Apologizing, expressing gratitude, all those sorts of things, friggin' stop it…!"

As the roots of her teeth trembled, and she forcibly evaporated the tears that had welled up in her eyes, Madelyn appealed so.

As half of her consciousness was still connected to the dragonhusk, Madelyn could not put strength into her limbs. But, bypassing that reason through sheer will, Madelyn gripped the arm of Balleroy, who was holding her up.

His arm, the undead arm, was gripped tightly enough to cause cracks to form and shatter.

But, what she wished to convey through that was not anger or hatred. Only, it was the thoughts Madelyn was harboring, and wished to convey.

Madelyn: “If you’re saying you’re selfish, the most selfish thing that Balleroy did was selfishly disappear all on your friggin’ own. You selfishly showed up at this dragon’s nest, selfishly became someone precious to this dragon, selfishly stopped showing up, selfishly died, and selfishly disappeared… and now, you’re friggin’ planning on selfishly disappearing again…!”

Balleroy: “…”

Madelyn: “You’ve already been friggin’ selfish enough. So then… so then! I won’t friggin’ forgive your selfishness anymore…! Instead of Balleroy’s gratitude or farewells… friggin’ listen, to what this dragon has to say…!”

She was crushing his arm, however, Balleroy had his eyes fixed on Madelyn without saying a word.

Staring back into Balleroy’s golden eyes with those of differing radiance yet identical hue, Madelyn spoke.

That was—

Madelyn: “—Balleroy, you friggin’ brought this dragon to the outside world.”

Balleroy: “—Hk.”

At Madelyn’s words, Balleroy’s eyes widened.

Being told something utterly unexpected, Balleroy was flummoxed. It was Madelyn’s first time seeing Balleroy make such a face. Even if he was undead, she was happy that she could still see new sides of the person she loved.

As if to sear all of that into her tenacious dragonkin body, Madelyn continued.

Madelyn: “This dragon, was brought outside. Balleroy friggin’ did that for this dragon. Balleroy brought this dragon out below the sky."

Balleroy: "…"

Madelyn: "This dragon, hasn't been friggin' used or anything like that. The reason why this dragon was able to come down from the mountain like this, and is now able to talk to Balleroy again like this… all of it, is thanks to Balleroy."

If only she had been quicker to decide. She harbored a great many regrets of that sort.

If only they had conversed and shared in each other's touch more. She harbored a great many lamentations of that sort.

Even so, of the things she had decided, the things they had conversed on, and the times they had touched, she wished not to relinquish even an iota.

Madelyn: "All of the things Balleroy gave me… Balleroy, you friggin' brought this dragon to the outside world."

She would not allow the time Balleroy had come to bid his thanks and farewell be used for such things.

She did not want to use the scarce time she had left with Balleroy to listen to and deny such inconsequential things. If the total time they had remaining was ten seconds, then in those ten seconds, Madelyn would—

Madelyn: "I love you. Balleroy is this dragon's everything. There's absolutely friggin' nothing that I love more than Balleroy. Balleroy is, this dragon's, everything…"

Balleroy: "Madelyn…"

Madelyn: "Balleroy, Balleroy, Balleroy… hk!"

—She would use the entirety of the remaining ten seconds to tell the person she loved that she loved him.

She wanted him to respond. She wanted him to want her. She wanted him to harbor the same amount of ardor as was dwelling within herself.

Casting away all those complicated aspects of love, Madelyn became an embodiment of feelings.

Even if people disdained Balleroy's image, and even if Balleroy himself might desire that, Madelyn would absolutely never let that happen. She did not want to let that happen.

With her entire lifespan as a dragonkin, Madelyn would hold Balleroy Temeglyph within her heart.

Madelyn: "The lifetime of a dragonkin, is incomparably friggin' longer than a human's."

Through that long, long amount of time, so long that it would seem like eternity when compared with a human's, Madelyn would live while thinking of Balleroy, the man engraved in her soul.

That he had left such an impact behind, she would convey to Balleroy Temeglyph.

Balleroy: "—. Just what is it that ya find pleasant 'bout me, I wonder. A guy like me, a man who's not worth falling in love with."

Balleroy briefly spoke in a manner deriding himself, but Madelyn did not respond with anything.

Madelyn was too busy pressing her forehead against his chest to express her feelings. The man who did not seem to understand his own charm, she would selfishly have him find the answer to that on his own.

It seemed like Madelyn's intentions had been communicated. Balleroy took a long, deep breath.

And then—

Balleroy: "Ya won't be able to forget me even if I tell ya to. Yeah, I understand that exceedingly well after all. That's why, I don't mind if ya don't forget me. Only—"

Madelyn: "…"

Balleroy: "Find happiness, Madelyn. My beloved, darling dragon princess."

For the first time in her life, Madelyn was rejected outright by the person she loved.

3

Balleroy: "—How 'bout that, Your Excellency? Ain't my lil' sis quite the big deal?"

Balleroy's voice, which had failed to conceal his meritorious sentiments, drew the attention of all present at the site of the battery. —Nay, not all of them. It was everyone except Medium.

The courage of the woman holding down Vincent's Yang Sword-wielding hand towered above everyone else.

If one thoughtlessly attempted to grasp the Yang Sword, they would burst into flames if they lacked the qualifications. It was an entreaty that ran adjacent to death. But then again, without going that far, Vincent likely would not have understood.

While he understood that his life was the most vital thing to the Empire, this Emperor was the one who had the least understanding of the value of his life within the Empire.

Medium: "So-yah!"

Medium, who did not follow along with everybody else, drew a barbarian sword from the back of her waist, and then skillfully struck the green radiance upon the pedestal—Moguro's Magic Core, batting it off.

Drawing a gentle arc as it gyrated, it fell into the grip of Balleroy's single upraised hand. Ascertaining its heat and weight, Balleroy looked at Vincent.

Vincent had lowered the tip of the Yang Sword, and was facing Balleroy intently.

Vincent: "…"

Upon witnessing the pandemonium weaving its way through Vincent's sable eyes in that moment, Balleroy knew that this Emperor needed Medium.

In order to narrow down his options and make the best of his decisions, he needed someone who would prop him up, smiling by his side as they looked to the future. —Albeit Balleroy, the one who had robbed him of Chisha, bore no right to say so.

Were it Chisha Gold, it would not have been strange for him to have even predicted the feelings of guilt harbored by the undead-turned Balleroy.

Wondering if he was indeed overthinking things, Balleroy made a wry smile,

Balleroy: "Medi."

At Balleroy's call, Medium, having guessed his intention, trotted towards him. Into Medium's arms, Balleroy entrusted Madelyn, whom he had been carrying in one arm this whole time.

The precious dragonkin girl, who, while in a state of half-consciousness, had only continued to convey her love towards Balleroy.

The girl, now asleep again, having worn herself out from crying, unto whom he had become an everlasting scar.

Medium: "Ballebro."

Balleroy: "What's up?"

Carefully receiving Madelyn's body, Medium looked at Balleroy from a close proximity. Then, with a face Balleroy knew well, she gave a broad smile as bright as the sun.

Medium: "Do your best!"

Balleroy: "—. Yeah, I'll give 'em hell."

Just who would believe that the body of an undead was brimming with vitality?

Receiving strength from that which nobody would believe, Balleroy energetically turned his back. Then, mounting his beloved dragon, which had been waiting in the depths of the smashed-open battery, he patted its wings.

That instant, the unleashed wind thrust Carillon up into the air, and it immediately began climbing to a high altitude.

Rapidly climbing by leaps and bounds, leaps and bounds, Balleroy and Carillon vigorously approached the heavens present above the clouds.

The voice of the wind disappeared; this was concentration, the sensation of flight engulfed by nothingness.

???: “Balleroy, Carillon, not just, the two of you. I, am here.”

Balleroy: “Ahh, that’s right. Now this is quite rude of me.”

Tightly holding onto the Magic Core—onto Moguro, and receiving that protest, Balleroy wryly smiled.

Having their name enlisted among the Nine Divine Generals as the Steelman, contrary to their robotic appearance and manner of speech, Moguro was sincere, sympathetic, and dare say even amiable.

Moguro: “I, am the Meteor of the Empire. That, is my purpose of creation.”

Balleroy: “—Purpose of creation.”

The words Moguro had used to explain their reasoning, was ironically enough, the same that Sphinx would use on occasion.

In order to fulfill their respective purposes of creation, Sphinx would destroy the Empire, and Moguro would protect the Empire. And, there he was, indecisively going back and forth, supporting each of them.

Moguro: “Why did you betray us, Balleroy?”

Balleroy: “Ku-hah.”

At the exceedingly straightforward query, Balleroy chuckled at what could only be described as sheer Moguroness.

That question could have been referring to his betrayal from before or after his death, but perhaps Moguro likely had not made a distinction between the two within themselves. If anything, Balleroy was grateful for it to have been that way.

Both before and after his death, Balleroy’s reason for choosing to oppose the Empire was the same.

Balleroy: “—It was for the sake of someone precious.”

Whether it was because he was approaching his imminent demise, or if it was because he thought of this robotic Meteor as a friend who was easy to get along with, Balleroy spoke thus.

This was probably the first time he had put those feelings to words, and he had not intended on ever speaking of them to anyone.

Carillon: “—Kiryararahhh.”

Perhaps because Balleroy’s shame had been transmitted, Carillon looked back at him and returned a nod as it flapped its wings through the sky. Through the special trait of flying dragon riders, only Carillon knew. —No, it seemed like Medium had also figured it out, but he had generally been hiding it.

For that to be divulged, he thought it must have been unacceptable for Moguro, but—

Moguro: “I see. Understood. We, are same. —For the sake, of somebody precious.”

Balleroy: “…”

Moguro: “Balleroy, I forgive, you.”

At the forgiveness of Moguro, who was robotic, yet still attempted to get close, Balleroy's cheeks stiffened.

Those cheeks of Balleroy's housed the hue of life distinct from that of the undead, and in his eyes there no longer loomed the hue of gold upon black, but rather they had regained their natural glow. — That was the brilliant blaze, of Balleroy Temeglyph's final moments.

Balleroy: "You've got my thanks, Moguro."

As a dead individual who was now by no means inferior to a living one, Balleroy looked up to the sky as he spoke thus.

Still rapidly accelerating by leaps and bounds, Balleroy and company pierced the clouds. The maelstrom of clouds was swirling as if it had a certain will, and it began to envelop them as they raced into the sky.

That, which was not intent on crushing them, was something Balleroy had seen in the past, at the summit of Mount Palzoa. This was the Dragon's nest, made so as to not let those within the clouds escape outwards—.

Balleroy: "…"

Within Balleroy's mind, many faces emerged.

Vincent, the Nine Divine Generals, Madelyn, Serena, Medium, Flop, and Miles.

They were the proof that Balleroy had lived, and they were the meaning in Balleroy having lived.

Together with his beloved dragon, Carillon, carrying them all—

Balleroy: "—It was a life rife with its ups and downs, but I'd say it wasn't a bad one."

Carillon: "—Kiryararahhh."

With even his final words unable to break away from his half-hearted nature, his slovenly self ended up receiving a scolding from his beloved dragon.

4

That instant, dragon claws thrust into the ground, and the collapsed body raised itself. Immediately, the red-haired man to its side screamed “Uoohhh?!” as he fell onto his backside, but that did not weigh on their mind.

More so than such insignificant things, what mattered now was—.

???: “Balleroy—hk.”

The impact of being punched had been far too tremendous, so they were unable to stand up. But, that was no matter. What was needed now was not the strength to stand up, but the might of an empyrean being.

With a quiver of their long whiskers, funneling power into their sharp eyes, they focused their attention on the sky directly above the Crystal Palace. The scintillation ascended straight upwards, streaking a hue of emerald green across the ether. And at the summit of that beam of luminescence, only continuing to climb higher, was somebody precious.

That intent, that resolve, that determination, and that selfishness, they would forgive it all.

???: “—PREAHHHHHH.”

The power gushing out of their humongous body obtruded upon the welkin, and a cumulus maelstrom began to coil in the sky of the Crystal Palace. Once they ushered the emerald gleam into the vortex, they drastically increased the density, and accelerated the gyre further.

Like so, the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia—Madelyn, summoned all of her power.

Madelyn: “—Ah.”

That instant, a flicker of light illuminated the world, and the maelstrom of clouds was ripped asunder from within.

What that signified, what had been lost from the world, what had become distant from herself, she keenly understood to a painfully clear extent.

Madelyn: “Ah, ahhh, AHH, AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—!!!”

Gazing up at the sky of scattered clouds, thinking about the one she loved, of whom there no longer remained any vestiges, Madelyn burst into a wail with the large mouth and thick neck of the Cloud Dragon.

—Underneath the odiously clear sky, the lovelorn maiden of the Dragons just kept crying.

Chapter 70:
The Final Stratagem

1

—The blast spread out, blowing away the thick swirling clouds from within and painting the sky over the Imperial Capital a bright red ahead of the approaching dusk.

The light from the explosion burned the eyes of those who looked up at the sky, but the damage was minimal compared to the catastrophe that could have blown away the Imperial Capital itself.

This was proof that each and every person of the Rescue the Vollachian Empire from Destruction Squad, who had gathered at the Imperial Capital, had continued to evade the traps of destruction laid out by the Great Disaster through their mutual cooperation.

This did not mean that each and every one of them had a full picture of the traps set by the Great Disaster.

Only, by maximizing the potential that each of them possessed, they were able to remove the causes of destruction within their respective reaches. The relay of fate for that purpose was now transcending the boundaries between the living and the dead, and the Imperial Capital of Lupugana's chain of command was at the height of chaos.

Still, there was one fact that remained resolutely unmovable. Sphinx, the spearhead of the Great Disaster, was the absolute enemy of all living things in the Empire, no matter what.

Thus, the Witch's elaborate plans of destruction were nearing their final stages—.

???: "—Uoooh?!"

Roaring, an explosion blew away the clouds in the distant sky, and blinded by the light, Subaru's throat trembled in surprise at the abrupt shift in circumstances.

His exclamation, which could have been described neither as a scream nor a cheer, was a manifestation of his honest reaction to the event at hand.

Together with Beatrice, he had fended off the destructive flames unleashed by the Crystal Palace, and then Roswaal saved them from the onslaught of the Three-Headed Blight Dragon that had appeared. Just when it seemed that a dizzying aerial battle was about to begin, a huge explosion occurred in the sky far away.

There was enough hectic activity to confuse anyone, but the undead Dragon paid no attention to the light in the sky with each of its heads craning towards its pitiable, distracted prey.

Dragon: "—Kiryararahhh!"

The Blight Dragon had three heads and its prey numbered exactly three people: Subaru, Beatrice, and Roswaal. The three heads of the Blight Dragon approached as if in competition with each other, with the size of a single large head appearing to be more than enough to get all of them.

Just as the sharp fangs of the undead Dragon were about to tear the lives of Subaru and his friends apart.

???: "One strike—!"

???: "I won't letcha take 'em."

On either side of the Blight Dragon, two shadows rose up diagonally from below and struck a blow from each direction, slicing off two of its three heads, sending them flying.

A jet-black furred wolfman, and a thunderous blue lightning rising from the earth into the sky, the ones to do this were—

Subaru: "Halibel-san and a huuuge Ceci?!"

Cecilus: "Hahahahaha! What an unexpected coincidence meeting you here, Boss! I did think you might be here since it's the final stage and all that, but your performance just now was brilliant! I can't lose either so I quickly took to the sky, but just beating a dragon won't be enough, will it?"

Subaru's eyes widened as the one who had jumped and slashed his sword through the air was Cecilus—additionally, it was the first time Subaru had seen him as an adult. His infantilization, which had only been a suspicion previously, was confirmed, and now that it was resolved before anyone else had a clue,

Subaru: "Did you meet with Olbart-san and get him to undo it?"

Cecilus: "No, no, I solved it on my own! That's my specialty, so leaving that aside for now, this is a delightful combination. That's Halibel-san there, right?"

Cecilus answered nonchalantly, then nodded his chin towards Halibel, who was standing in front of him.

After helping Subaru and Beatrice arrive in time to stop the Magic Crystal Cannon, he immediately went up to the sky himself and joined in to stop the Blight Dragon's attack.

He looked at Cecilus saying, "Well…" and smiled.

Halibel: "From my point of view, I'm just complementin' the work you're doin'."

Cecilus: "Hoho, you did a great job filling in for me! But then only a suitable actor can do that so I think Halibel-san is on the right track. —Whoa whoa whoa."

At a glance, the exchange was amicable, but the scene took place in the air, in the middle of a fight to the death.

The Blight Dragon, with two heads blown off but still with one remaining in the middle, flapped its wings and quickly made distance to escape the two transcendent beings who suddenly interrupted it.

It was an instinctive decision, but it was the right one. In fact, even though both Cecilus and Halibel could jump to get airborne, they were not free to fly around.

However—

Roswaal: “—That’s something I can make up fooor~.”

With Subaru and Beatrice under Roswaal’s arms, immediately after he spoke, the debris in the air gathered instantly, and an impromptu scaffold was created there.

That scaffold provided Cecilus and Halibel with another chance to leap.

Halibel: “Even if it’s only got one head, a Dragon’s a Dragon.”

Cecilus: “We don’t wanna be interrupted during the decisive moment. Let’s slay it quickly!”

How many people could so casually say such a thing to one of the most powerful creatures in the world, a Dragon, and no other than the Blight Dragon?

And yet, the two immediately proved that it was no kind of jest or boast.

—A flash of blue and black streaked across the sky, instantly catching up with the Blight Dragon that was trying to take advantage of the distance.

In a moment, the Dragon’s wings were torn to shreds as it was pierced by three separate wolfmen in mid-air, creating “death holes”. However, the warriors would not let the Dragon miserably fall to its death.

A flash of lightning, a slash from the sword that manifested dreams, split the black scales of the Blight Dragon vertically, and its life was severed in two.

It was one of the most abrupt and legendary Dragon-slaying acts in the world.

Beatrice: "…Those guys are outrageous, in fact."

Subaru had seen the same thing that Beatrice had, and agreed wholeheartedly.

Even though Subaru was aware of this as information, two of the world's strongest individuals were unbeatable in ways that went beyond his simple imagination. In fact, with them he felt like he could not lose, just like having Reinhard on his side.

Now that Cecilus had grown up, together with Halibel, that feeling was even stronger—

???: "—Not yet, Bro!"

A voice lunged at Subaru as his mind was relaxing, as if punching him in the side.

He looked, and standing there in the area that was originally the second bastion, a place where the ground was like boiling magma, was a man in a familiar helmet—it was Al.

One of the missing people in the Imperial Capital, Al screamed out desperately from the ground.

He said—

Al: "The alignment of the stars hasn't changed yet! The Witch is still up to something!!"

2

At the rapid changes occurring in the situation, Vincent could feel his thoughts gaining heat and speed.

Even though he was lionized as the Wise Emperor, Vincent did not think of himself as being particularly wise when compared to others. If there was one thing he was more conscious of than others, however, it would be none other than the difference in the depth and vastness of his thinking, as well as the time it took for him to produce an answer.

Thus, that difference in time taken would change depending on whether or not he could still function and make use of the trivial time in which everyone had their attention stolen by the radiance present overhead.

Vincent: "…"

Its fuse set off by the Witch's stratagem, the Magic Core of the Crystal Palace had been brought to the verge of collapse—taking the true body of Moguro Hagane in hand, the undead Balleroy Temeglyph rose to the skies.

As a result, the induced explosion of the Crystal Palace had been avoided, and the Imperial Capital, nay, the entire Empire, had been rescued from ruination.

But then again, this was that Balleroy. What he had truly wished to protect was likely neither the Empire nor the Imperial Capital, but rather somebody to whom he was emotionally attached.

In any case, the fruits of the deceased Balleroy's sacrifice were the safety of the Imperial Capital, and the sight of the evening sky from which the surging clouds had been scattered—

Vincent: "But, is this truly the end?"

Right beside him, tears streamed down the cheeks of Medium, who was embracing the unconscious Madelyn. With that in his peripheral vision, Vincent cold-heartedly immersed himself in thought.

Using her position of Empress Consort as a shield, Medium had prevented Vincent from relinquishing his life. If he were a strong Emperor, if he were an Emperor who had such leeway, he surely would have displayed an empathetic demeanor, or words of consolation.

However, Vincent was neither of those. —Ergo, he did nothing for Medium. For all the things he did not do for her, Vincent coldly worked his head.

Vincent: "Without cease, the Great Disaster has continued to take measures intent on bringing about total destruction. In addition, each stratagem is multi-layered and without openings.”

The Sacrament of the Immortal King resurrecting the dead was fueled by the power of the Stone, Muspel, and if the undead continued to be felled, the power of the Stone would be depleted, resulting in the collapse of the Empire’s vast lands.

The previous firing of the Magic Crystal Cannon, what it had been targeting was unclear from Vincent’s position. But, after it was fired, the Magic Core was filled with immense heat, and had been a bomb left behind as a parting gift to blow away the Imperial Capital.

By merely averting these threats, it would have been short-sighted to think that they had overcome the entire affair.

If there was still something, still a subsequent measure that the Great Disaster was preparing—

Vincent: “…”

Suddenly, a certain possibility flashed through Vincent’s mind.

Rather than deep and thoughtful foresight, it was the product of something that was already closer to a pretext or paranoia. However, now that he had thought of it, there was no choice but to verify the possibility. Vincent was aware that the things he thought of, were things that anybody else could also think of, given enough time.

If so, then this was the same.

Vincent: “Olbart Dunkelkenn! Have you searched every last corner of the palace?!”

Olbart: “Oioi, Yer Excellency, I’ve lost both my arms ya know? Even if ya were ta make my pitiful nursed life from here on out a lil’ more fleetin’…”

Vincent: “—Within the palace, did you see Priscilla Barielle? I shan’t ask of her survival.”

Olbart: "…"

Vincent: "Answer! We mustn't let time go to waste!"

Olbart: "—. You're talkin' 'bout the young'un lass with red eyes in the flashy dress, right? Ain't seen her. Tho', I did go 'round killin' the troublesome caster along with the bunch who'd had their souls tampered with."

At Vincent's threatening demeanor, Olbart raised one of his white eyebrows and answered so.

Originally, the duty that had been entrusted to Olbart was to infiltrate the Crystal Palace and conduct a thorough search—the general objective of that, was to destroy the technique of the Sacrament of the Immortal King.

As a result of his interference, it was difficult to say whether the opponent's objective was fulfilled in a satisfactory manner, but—

Olbart: "Since I came up not just empty-handed, but with no hands at all, I didn't produce any results. Are ya dismissin' me from my post as General?"

Vincent: "The matter of the status of your employment is postponed. But, if you were unable to find her—"

Medium: "Abel-chin?"

The monstrous old man's face had lost its complexion, yet he still jested as if all was normal. At that exchange between Olbart and Vincent, Medium uttered a voice of inquisitiveness as she lowered her gaze from the sky.

Still influenced by the reverberations of Balleroy's conclusion, Medium with her blue eyes posed that question, to which Vincent loathsomely tread upon the floor where debris was scattered about.

And then—

Vincent: "—Priscilla is not being held captive within the Crystal Palace. I cannot guess the entirety of the reason behind that, but…

at the very least, it is because one part of the enemy’s objective is to have her witness the Empire’s destruction.”

3

—Aldebaran had called out to Natsuki Subaru that the alignment of the stars had not changed; and, Vincent Vollachia had seen through the objective of the Witch at the center of the Great Disaster, though her intentions were not clear.

After witnessing those events that had led to this point, the imprisoned Priscilla Barielle also accurately inferred her own situation.

Priscilla: “At first, this was inexplicable. If mineself were your objective, Arakiya’s death would not have been a matter of concern, but the demise of the Empire would have been an inconvenience.”

The floating, reflective water mirrors not only showed the battle for the Imperial Capital, but also the battle for the Fortified City, along with the people falling victim to the undead in various parts of the Empire.

It indeed was a sign that the threat of the Great Disaster was spreading throughout the Empire.

She showed these events to Priscilla in order to color her heart with despair. —The aim was easy to understand, but whether it could be done was not.

However—

Priscilla: “The ruination of the Empire resulting from the death of the Stone would not serve your goals. And that is because ultimately, it is not your desire to take mine life here. Consequently—”

Sphinx: “Consequently?”

Priscilla: “—Mineself is not being held within the dungeons of the Crystal Palace.”

The reason why Sphinx continued to layer on measures to bring about the Empire's downfall, was because she was convinced that all of that destruction would not reach Priscilla.

Destroying the Empire while keeping Priscilla alive. —The method to fulfill these conditions was straightforward.

Priscilla: "…"

Despite that being certain, and even after examining her surroundings, she found no discrepancy between the dungeon of her memories and what stood before her eyes.

During her time as Prisca, she had only visited the Palace's dungeons on one occasion out of curiosity, but this dungeon, which exactly replicated that of Priscilla's memories, was probably a wholly different space.

The very space of the dungeon itself has been relocated to a place unrelated to the destruction of the Vollachian Empire—a kind of different dimension, and Priscilla was placed as an observer of the battle-torn Imperial Capital.

The evidence of this was that, at some point, the tremors of the fierce battles unfolding in the Imperial Capital had ceased reaching the dungeon.

Priscilla: "But for what reason would you place mineself, of all people, in the position of an Observer? The other members of the Vollachian Imperial Family aside, you have certainly considered the means wherewith to disrespect mineself in particular."

Sphinx: "Careless meddling is forbidden. This may be an effective measure for you. Countermeasures: Required."

Priscilla: "Although neither "careless" nor "countermeasures" are words that mineself enjoys, it shall be overlooked in consideration of your defiant attitude."

Priscilla pondered this in response to Sphinx's answer.

The Witch's intention was to nip in the bud the possibility of someone coming to Priscilla's aid, rather than preventing Priscilla from taking any action.

That in itself was correct. —But the fact was that she was being imprisoned in a space with no known entrance. This almost eliminated any chance of Priscilla being rescued from the outside.

However—

Priscilla: "This inconvenience applies to you as well, does it not?"

Sphinx: "—. What does that mean?"

Priscilla: "It is quite simple. —Why do you not duplicate yourself without limit, and with an infinite amount of you, drop numerous stars, burn the land of the Empire, and destroy it all?"

Sphinx: "…"

Priscilla: "If you made certain that you did not involve mineself in the downfall, that would be the swiftest way to accomplish your goal. The reason for you not doing so is obvious… you cannot do so, even if you wanted to."

Priscilla eloquently explained her theory to the silent Sphinx.

Once, as she was being burned by the flame of the Yang Sword, Sphinx had changed the form of her soul, transforming its vessel into one befitting the Witch of Greed in order to fulfill the purpose of her creation. At that point, one of Sphinx's two purposes in causing the Great Disaster had been fulfilled.

All that remained was to destroy the Vollachian Empire in order to drive Priscilla into despair. In order to do so, creating a limitless number of Sphinxes and then having them drop a meteor shower to the ground would prove sufficient.

But, Sphinx did not do that.

Priscilla: "Although vexing, upon seeing you imitate Lamia by increasing your numbers, mineself had an intuition. No matter how much the number of vessels increases, the underlying soul is shared.

—That is to say, the source of the Mana possessed by the owner of the soul of Sphinx shall be centralized.”

That was the existential flaw of Sphinx, having been resurrected as the Witch of Greed.

By abusing the ritual of the Sacrament of the Immortal King, it allowed the undead to revive and create multiple instances of themselves, but so long as the original soul remained the same, they could not have more Mana than they already possessed.

Sphinx had already fought in many fierce battles with those who wished to take back the Imperial Capital, and had already used the great spell to bring down a star many a time. No matter how skilled of a magician the Witch of Greed might have been, there were limits to what she could do.

Priscilla: “Therefore, you must limit the number of your duplicates. In addition, you have one of them assigned to mineself in order to communicate with me, yes? It must be because this space cannot be maintained without your direct presence.”

Ever since appearing before Priscilla, claiming to be the enemy’s leader, Sphinx had never once left Priscilla alone in the dungeon. This could have been interpreted as an attempt to not miss Priscilla’s facial expressions or the pain in her heart as the situation changed from moment to moment, but there also could have been a more serious reason for this.

Quite simply, the answer was that she was doing it because she had to.

Sphinx: “…”

In response to Priscilla’s point, Sphinx remained silent.

It is believed by some that if one does not answer, then one does not give information to the other party, for better or worse; but, in Priscilla’s opinion, this was second-rate trickery. Sphinx must also know that.

Sometimes, silence can confirm one’s suspicions more eloquently than words.

—If Priscilla's speculation was correct, Sphinx was in a state of exhaustion, having used up almost all of the strength of her soul.

Otherwise, restrictions being present or not, through her copies scattered throughout the Imperial Capital and the Empire she would relentlessly attack.

Strategically, there was no reason not to do that.

In other words, this meant that the plans of Sphinx, the leader of the Great Disaster, had finally been brought to a halt—.

Priscilla: "—Is that not so?"

Priscilla closed one eye, repudiating her own reasoning.

The emotions expressed in that question might have been hard to believe if other listeners were present. Priscilla's question did not come from a sense of superiority, or a suspicion based on skepticism, not even from a desire to see through the other party's agenda.

What was there was a certain amount of anticipation.

Even this impasse, a true dead end, was something she expected her opponent to overcome.

Then, in response to Priscilla's question, Sphinx's eyes widened slightly. Watching, the Witch then twisted her lips into the shape of a smile.

—At that moment, the final showdown between Priscilla and Sphinx commenced.

4

The Sphinxes, resurrected from the same soul, were all independent, and did not share in the same consciousness.

Hence, among the Sphinxes, serving as the Witch of Greed, who had manifested as seven total bodies, the only one who knew that Priscilla had seen through their intentions, was the one directly facing her.

However, that would not have had any influence upon the intentions of the seven Sphinxes.

That was because it was a stratagem that had been formulated under the assumption that Priscilla would have seen through their intentions from the start, correctly guessing them.

The one that had verified Priscilla's answer was just the one facing her, but Sphinx could not help but admire her abnormal insight, having guessed almost everything correctly.

As she had said, several Sphinxes were sharing Mana through the source of one soul, so the more of herself she multiplied, the amount of Mana that each individual Sphinx could use would decrease.

Due to this battle, which had raged on for several days with no respite, the reality was that all of the Mana that she had remaining was not reliable enough to utilize large spells such as Al Shario, which had already been employed to bring down a star.

Of course, simply making use of large spells was not how a magician displayed their talents.

For Sphinx, who had inherited knowledge as the Witch of Greed, there were a myriad of small techniques she could employ that did not balance the degree of Mana used with the scale of results.

However, it was also true that for any such small techniques, there were extraordinary, transcendent beings who could hold them back.

In particular, she could not disregard the presences of the wolfman who was bringing about the curse of death, and the swordsman who had slayed the star.

Therefore, the seven Sphinxes—excluding the one participating in the great battle for the Fortified City of Garkla, and the one monitoring Priscilla, the five Sphinxes reached for the final stratagem.

Her attempt to directly assassinate Arakiya, who had assimilated with the Stone, had failed.

The utmost powerful attack to exterminate Arakiya, fired via the Magic Crystal Cannon, had also failed.

The strategy of lighting the fuse of the Magic Core right after the Magic Crystal Cannon had fired, having it run rampant and exceed its critical point to annihilate the Imperial Capital, had also failed.

With all of those failed stratagems as the groundwork, the Sphinxes stationed in five locations around the Imperial Capital of Lupugana would activate the magic circle they had laid out—they would interfere with their true target, the magic crystals of the Crystal Palace.

Sphinx: "—Multiplex magic circle activation, executing final stratagem. Importance: Required."

This plan was fundamentally different from the stratagem that had attempted to blow away the Imperial Capital by using the magic crystals of the Crystal Palace as a catalyst via the Magic Core running rampant. Regardless of being in a rampant state, the administrative right of the Meteor known as the Crystal Palace belonged to the Magic Core, Moguro Hagane.

But, the Magic Core was no more. Having escaped the threat of explosion, the Crystal Palace was currently in a defenseless state.

With Moguro Hagane's presence now gone, the administrative right of the magic crystals forming the Crystal Palace was vacant.

Present there were lumps of colorless Mana, which had stockpiled immense power over many long years, and for the Witch, who was on the verge of depleting the little Mana she had left, it was an offering for which she would water at the mouth.

The star-shaped ramparts that symbolized the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, having laid out a five-pointed star inverse to its five bastions, the five Sphinxes had deployed an enormous magic circle.

Interfering with the magic crystals of the Crystal Palace, which had lost its administrator in Moguro Hagane, it was something designed to completely usurp the vast Mana dwelling therein.

Thus, the Witch's plan, something not directly linked to the destruction of the Vollachian Empire, would not be thwarted by Natsuki Subaru or Vincent Vollachia, who had both come to disrupt many of her artifices until now.

The same went for the Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt, as well as the Admirer, Halibel, as well as the Spirit Eater, Arakiya and the Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkennn, as well as the Flamboyant, Yorna Mishigure, and the Emperor of the Briar, Eugard Vollachia, as well as Roswaal L. Mathers, and Beatrice, and Garfiel Tinzel, and Medium O'Connell, and Tanza, and Heinkel.

Only, one person—

Sphinx: "—. The magic circle, is incomplete?"

The five Sphinxes, who ought to have activated the magic circle—among them, the one present at the northmost point had failed to participate in the activation of the magic circle, causing the other Witches to harbor a sense of unease at the incomplete activation of the technique.

As irony would have it, the fact that this had been caused by the Witch of Greed and the Witch of Envy—that it was caused by the clash of two individuals who succeeded these Witches of times past, was not noticed by anybody at the current point in time.

Chapter 71:
Heroic Reveries

1

—Let us assert one thing here.

It was a fact that without Emilia's decisive action, the plan of the Witch, Sphinx, would have come to fruition and the downfall of the Vollachian Empire would have been unavoidable.

Moreover, it was something that no one other than Emilia could have stopped.

Emilia: "—Yah!"

Emilia released a sharp exhale, strained her cheeks, and stood firm against the heat rays of light and the balls of light that came in from all directions, repelling all with her polished ice armaments.

In front of her, the replica of Echidna, Sphinx's magic was all too astonishing, and the only way she withstood her difficult-to-deflect attacks was by blocking them with ice that shined like a mirror.

Emilia was also often told by Subaru that "Creativity is important!", so she was always particular about the details in her ice-borne weapons, and this time, they were used to their fullest extent.

Thanks to the fact that she always did this, she was able to quickly create weapons that dealt with Sphinx's magic.

Emilia: "Thank you, as always."

Emilia thanked the absent Subaru, enthusiastically donning gear made of ice.

Subaru, who was probably still working hard somewhere in the Imperial Capital, hand in hand with Beatrice and Spica, was still helping Emilia in this way, even though he was small and not with her.

Just thinking about Subaru allowed Emilia to forget her fatigue and swing her big ice hammer.

Sphinx: "—Removal: Required. And, urgently."

Facing Emilia, Sphinx kept her distance while she unleashed her magic. While she was exposed to her onslaught, Emilia did not feel the impatience of her opponent, who did not show any expression.

Originally, Sphinx had sneaked into this deserted place to accomplish something. Emilia somehow sensed this and rushed in, which was when the battle began.

That stopped Sphinx from accomplishing whatever she was planning to do.

With this in mind, Emilia, though it not being her forte, was focusing intensely on thoroughly obstructing her opponent.

—Here again, Emilia was making the best of a situation that no one else at the Imperial Capital could.

If Emilia had taken Sphinx's life, the Witch would have taken that memory back to her soul, recognized the threat Emilia posed, and manifested a new body prepared with countermeasures.

However, Emilia had no intention of killing Sphinx, but only of stopping her.

Therefore, the situation Subaru had named Escape by Death did not occur, and Sphinx would not send a new version of herself as reinforcements against the unshared threat of Emilia.

This situation would not have been possible if anyone else had been there, whether it was someone powerful like Cecilus or Halibel, someone wise like Vincent or Roswaal, or even a cheater like Subaru or Al.

No one other than Emilia could have pinned down Sphinx here.

Emilia: "HIYAAA!"

Emilia, who had managed such miraculous meshing by relying on her intuition, nevertheless kicked the light ball away with her ice shoes without being aware of it—

Emilia: “Even though I don’t know what’s going on, I won’t let you do whatever you’re trying to do! And also, tell me where Priscilla is! It’s a promise I made with Schult-kun!”

Sphinx: “—. One-sided, and greedy. Truly fitting for a Witch, is it not?”

Sphinx coldly muttered so at Emilia’s request.

However, the mutterings were filled with a certain irritation that could not be concealed.

2

—White light enveloped his vision, and in the subsequent instant the world met its end.

That was something Natsuki Subaru had ended up experiencing many times over in a short period, the newest stage of Return by Death.

Subaru: “…”

Held in under the aviating Roswaal’s arm, he was tightly holding on to the hand of Beatrice behind Rowaal’s waist, who was being held under the other arm.

The presence of Beatrice, the warmth of Roswaal, the sensation of his whole body basking in the wind; all of it was real.

And not only that—

???: “Regarding the dragon subjugation just now, I think vying for an achievement through the number of heads isn’t really all too pretty. As a matter of fact, isn’t it thunderous applause that’s wanted rather than a feat of heads? So then first things first, how about we show them a combination of two great men from Vollachia and Kararagi?!”

???: “That’d be quite splendid, least for me. I may’ve been hopin’ not ta stand out too much, but it wouldn’t hurt ta elevate my status for this ‘n that after the war.”

With a backwards glance towards the undead Blight Dragon which was fading into the sky with its existence severed, Cecilus and Halibel could be seen and heard descending to the ground while pressingly exchanging words, having just killed the Dragon in a literal flash.

As the unmistakable apexes of the world, the two were equally transcendent beings; however, the fact that they could not defy the laws of physics and remain in the sky provided a certain sort of satisfaction—

Subaru: “—Right now…”

Just what exactly was happening, he had no choice but to grasp the new threat, and counter it.

After defending against the Magic Crystal Cannon, after slaying the approaching Blight Dragon, after witnessing the swell of green light blow the clouds away beyond the sky, he knew the Witch still had a trick up her sleeve.

Subaru and the others did not have much time before that would be put into operation, staining the world white and causing them to lose their lives.

Think, think, think. Think think—.

Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

Indeed, upon Subaru’s eardrums as thoughts raced across his mind, Beatrice called out with a voice of strong conviction.

Holding her hand, the determination that he absolutely needed to do something, and the intense feelings of loss surging through Subaru’s body and mind—nay, through his soul, must have been transmitted to her.

The fact that Beatrice did not exhaust many words on top of that, was proof of her cute self's high-minded resolve.

Beatrice: “Say whatever you like, I suppose. Betty will aid you in everything, in fact.”

Without having told her much of anything at all, just how much of a relief it was for Beatrice to say that to him.

While feeling disdain build up towards himself for never repaying favors, Subaru nodded.

And as he nodded—

Subaru: “—Just keep holding on to it until my consciousness is on the verge of bursting apart. I'll give a signal, so prepare the thing from earlier so it's ready to go at any time!”

3

—High up in the sky, Subaru raised his voice, and receiving that, black and blue streaked through the sky.

He did not hear the specific contents of the orders. But, he felt like he heard something else instead.

Indeed, the sound of the gears of conflicting worlds beginning to mesh and turn, in order to weave the time of light.

???: “…”

It did not matter if it was an auditory hallucination. In fact, it ought to have been.

Natsuki Subaru had thought about the best way to break the deadlock, and carried it out. In that case, he could count on him. —No, he had no choice but to count on him.

Having called out to Subaru that the Witch's myriad plans had yet to be exhausted, that was the best Al—Aldebaran could do with what little he had.

Al: “Shit.”

A short expletive, which echoed in his helmet only to his ears.

Because of that, the fact that he had muttered it unconsciously sort of felt like it was being emphasized, which had caused him to notice.

Just what did Aldebaran possibly have to regret?

It was something he knew from the moment he found Natsuki Subaru in this Empire. When push came to shove, he ought to use Natsuki Subaru without hesitation.

No matter how much he hated that, no matter how much he loathed it, at the end of the day, it was nothing but worthless obstinacy.

—The worthless obstinacy of himself, who was nothing more than a following star, unable to do the same things as that Natsuki Subaru.

???: “…Reconsideration: Required.”

At the sudden utterance of that voice, Aldebaran turned around without saying a word.

Cocooned in solid black light from the neck down, lying defenseless on the rough ground was the figure of Sphinx.

Sphinx’s Gate was completely sealed, and her hands and legs were quite literally tied up, however, she stared at Aldebaran without any impatience or anger emerging on her abhorrent face.

It was a disgusting look, as if she was observing him.

Al: “Reconsideration, as in revising your thoughts? Just what exactly? You’re not gonna tell me what you’re thinking, no matter what I do.”

The edges of her mouth contorted, and Aldebaran glared at Sphinx through his helmet.

This was also true. —Aldebaran had already interrogated the captured Sphinx many, many times, and thus had ascertained that she would not divulge any details regarding her plans.

Ironically enough, even among the innumerable number of attempts Aldebaran had, there existed a certain number of results that could never be distorted.

Even if an infinite number of dice were rolled, rolling a zero or a seven was impossible.

Indeed, it was impossible. —For Aldebaran.

Al: “But you see, it’s the end of the line for you guys. You’ve made an enemy of someone who should absolutely never be made an enemy of. By now, even if you’re rethinking something—”

Sphinx: “That which I have reconsidered, is my evaluation of you.”

Al: “Huh?”

Sphinx: “I had not recognized you as anything but a mere squire of Priscilla Barielle, but… you are the same as me.”

Al: “…”

Sphinx: “Having yet to fulfill your own purpose of creation, you are a martyr struggling to live for that reason. —I have achieved my own purpose of creation, so I cannot help but pity one who is stuck in a standstill.”

Even in captivity, in a position where the magician’s magic was sealed, Sphinx still quietly pitied Aldebaran, not out of vanity or defeat.

Aldebaran’s throat froze at Sphinx’s honest gaze.

Of the fact that the true nature of the coldness freezing his throat was murderous intent, Aldebaran was aware.

He absolutely had to kill this overly talkative, Witch-faced woman. He absolutely had to choke the life out of her. For her to say that to Aldebaran with none other but that face, was unforgivable.

—Just who in the world did she think made him Aldebaran?

Al: “You—”

???: “Al! Lend me your strength!!”

It was the moment when his vision turned bright red, and his thoughts were blanketed in white.

If it had been a few tenths of a second later, Aldebaran would have killed Sphinx. However, that was stopped by a furious, gliding wind accompanied by a hard-hitting voice.

???: “I need your strength! As you said, the Great Disaster isn’t over yet! It’s an all-out war!”

He landed right next to him, and then with an intense color on his face, he called out to Aldebaran.

With two reliable people beside him, a long-haired magician and a dress-clad Spirit, Natsuki Subaru, capable of searching for as many hands as he pleased in order to reach the light that Aldebaran could never reach no matter how far he reached out, did so.

Al: “Even if you ask me to lend a hand…”

Subaru: “Shut the hell up!”

Al: “—Hk.”

Becoming a mixture of all sorts of embarrassment, Aldebaran muttered so.

But, unconcerned with those inner thoughts of Aldebaran, Subaru thrust his fist out,

Subaru: “At the moment, I don’t have time to sympathize with each and every person’s troubles! That’s why, right here and now let’s switch gears and cooperate! You said it before!”

Al: “Me, before…?”

Subaru: “You said that you have expectations of me! I’ll say the same thing back to you!”

Al: “—Ah.”

As Subaru yelled at him with a red face, Aldebaran caught his breath.

At the same time, he was reminded of his interaction with Subaru when they were reunited here in the Vollachian Empire, when the latter was on the verge of losing his own meaning of existence in the Fortress City of Guaral.

When Subaru’s foundation became unsteady after being rejected by the girl known as Rem, Aldebaran had encouraged him.

Back then, what was it that Aldebaran had said to him—?

Subaru: “The confidence and everything else you lost can only be regained through results. It’s all the same as it’s always been!”

Al: “…”

At the sound of Subaru’s voice, the girl who held hands with him, and the long-haired girl who stood behind him, had eyes brimming with expectation.

And so, Subaru, who gave strength to those around him, reached out to Aldebaran in the same way, offered him a hand, and spoke as if repaying him for that time.

Subaru: “Come on, Al! —Carry them with me, these heroic reveries!”

So he declared.

—The Witch's plans, the ruination of the Vollachian Empire, and Death, had come to fruition time and time again.

Perhaps a painless death was the ideal way for things to end.

Perhaps the arrival of demise in the midst of not knowing what had happened, was the only gentle way to save people from their fear of an end that would inevitably come.

However, he thought thus.

Subaru: "No, my ideal ending would be to die peacefully, with Emilia, Beako, and my grandchildren by my side, so that's not it."

Even if the Great Disaster were a last-boss situation that brought about a painless and fearless end in order to save all human beings from sorrow and suffering, Subaru would resolutely reject it.

When the ideal ending that he envisioned would arrive, the thought of Emilia and Beatrice, whom he would be leaving behind, brought pain to his heart like being stabbed with glass. Still, until he reached that situation, it was a problem that Subaru would need to suffer through and find a solution to.

There was absolutely no way he could abandon himself to a sweet dream given to him by another.

The whole thing was a hypothetical to begin with, and the premise was not valid since the goal of the Great Disaster was not a gentle end, but rather the destruction of the Empire through a series of the most terrible measures imaginable.

That was why, there was no compromise in this battle other than to thwart the goals of the Great Disaster.

Subaru: "…Little by little, I'm starting to see it."

At first, the world was stained white, and Subaru had no choice but to be swallowed up by the Death that was thrust upon him, without knowing what had destroyed him or his companions.

Moreover, Subaru returned just after Roswaal held him and Beatrice on both sides, and Cecilus and Halibel had cut down the attacking Blight Dragon.

After that, in less than a minute, the end would come.

Subaru: "…"

The time frame was short, and much needed to be done.

If Al had not told him that the Witch was up to something, it would have taken him much longer to uncover it. It had probably saved him five or more Return by Deaths.

Still, more trial and error was necessary in order to ascertain what was occurring.

And, through that trial and error—

???: "The most likely thing is that, the Stone… Muspel will be killed, I suppose. If our opponent has a comeback left to make, then that would be the most likely possibility, in fact."

???: "The collapse of the Empire's vast lands, it's possible that our opponent is preparing a trigger to bring about that great caaataclysm~. —If it is Sphinx's conventional method, there could also be some kind of magic circle."

???: "For now, Groovy's gone 'n lifted the Curse of Thorns, which was our biggest obstacle, so ya wouldn't really think that there'd be anybody hidin' away a curse that's even greater than that, right?"

???: "Yes yes yes! According to Al-san if Anya dies the whole Empire will be destroyed so this may have something to do with that! That means that there's a possibility that a large army'll be sent to kill Anya! Will I finally get to do it again, slaying a thousand people?!"

???: "Uu~! Uau! Aa~, Uu!"

???: "Have you been safe, child…?! I heard that you took very good care of Tanza. If there is anything at all that I can do to help, please let me know."

???: “Schwartz-sama, I have a bad feeling… is everyone in the Battalion safe?”

???: “Although young, thou hast pleasant eyes. Mine Star seems to place trust in thee, albeit not as much as she places in mineself. If thou requireth anything, thou may speak.”

???: “Captain! My amazin’ self’s glad you’re here, but it’s too soon to gimme praise! It ain’t over yet, right? Anythin’ ya say, I’ll do it!”

???: “…Get lost. Don’t lump me in with you guys, brat.”

???: “Friggin’ disappear… this dragon, has nothing, nothing left…”

???: “Friggin’ disappear… this dragon, has nothing, nothing left…”

???: “Subaru-chin, I’m not good at thinking, but I’ll try! Do your best as well, Subaru-chin!”

???: “Oh, sorry ‘bout this, but I’ve lost both my hands, so you’re gonna hafta get back on yer own, okay? Looks like there’s no way I can knead yer soul back ta its original shape, kakakakka!”

He was not some superman who could solve everything by figuring it out on his own.

A timeframe that amounted to not even a minute, repeating it over and over again in exchange for his Death, Subaru certainly moved to checkmate his enemy on the board they had constructed, one move at a time.

The death of the Stone, Muspel; a magic circle; the Curse of Thorns; Arakiya’s life; Spica’s Star Eating; he was glad that Yorna was safe; the war situation at the Fortified City; the undead Emperor who energetically boasted of his love; his Garfiel was the best; the drunkard not worth talking about; the Dragon he could not talk to; the dragonkin he could not talk to; doing his best; not wanting to be told things that would hamper his willpower to do his best; etc., etc.—.

???: “—Fool. Do not face downwards, Natsuki Subaru.”

???: “Neither one of us has the time to be looking downwards. To struggle onward, you ought to have decided so.”

???: “I have no intention of giving up. —Just who do you take me for?”

How much self-respect was truly there behind those prideful words?

He would not be so tactless as to try to peek behind the curtain like that. All right then. Onward it is.

Giving up, such a thing was not an option for Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “…”

The same went for her, who he could not find no matter how hard he looked.

Rather than being worried about it, his feelings of faith now surpassed his fear. —She might have been facing danger, but surely she was doing her best to secure the future, as it would not suit her to stay quiet in a safe place.

That was why, it was time to overturn it. —Time to overturn the Witch’s board.

Subaru: “Come on, Al! —Carry them with me, these heroic reveries!”

5

An unthinkable absurdity was attempting to overturn the final stratagem of the Witch, Sphinx.

Sphinx: “—The preparations ought to have been…”

Flawless. Without exception, all were being overturned.

Having achieved the outcome she had desired, the supreme challenge of fulfilling her purpose of creation, the certain sense of accomplishment that had dominated her heart was for but a moment, and the situation was being distorted bit by bit.

Just what stood in the way of Sphinx, in the way of the Great Disaster?

???: “—Vincent Vollachia.”

Sphinx: “…”

???: “—Aldebaran.”

Sphinx: “…”

???: “—Natsuki Subaru.”

As if to close the distance towards Sphinx’s mind, crimson lips spoke those names.

Chosen as the Great Disaster, Sphinx had commenced a battle on which the survival of the Empire was staked, and hot on her heels, overturning her plans entirely, was a deterring force attempting to rectify the alignment of the stars.

Sphinx: “From your perspective, how would you evaluate them?”

At Sphinx’s question, the woman looked towards her with a metallic clank of her chains.

The crimson eyes fixed upon Sphinx beyond the water mirror, Priscilla Barielle smiled at the question. Neither ridicule nor pity, it was a smile.

If anybody who knew Priscilla were to have seen that, they would have likely been surprised. For within her smile, affection could be found.

The affection harbored by Priscilla Barielle, towards Sphinx.

Sphinx: “For what reason…”

Priscilla: “Do I make such an expression, you ask? Did you not just enquire regarding mine evaluations of those men? Just as one would expect from the Witch of Greed, your avarice extends to even answers.”

Sphinx: “If you are going to mock me…”

Priscilla: “You ought to be aware. Such is not the case.”

Bluntly told so, Sphinx was silenced by Priscilla’s gaze.

In her eyes and in her words, there was no longer any hue of mockery towards Sphinx. Then, just what was it that dwelt within those crimson eyes?

That was eating away at Sphinx from inside her chest. It was a sensation unknown to her.

This was different from the times when she was continuously spurred on by a sense of duty, that she must fulfill her purpose of creation.

For Sphinx, it was an unbearable, inescapable impulse.

Priscilla: “Remember this. That is what is known as yearning.”

Sphinx: “Yearn, ing…”

Priscilla: “If you wish to procure something that lies beyond your own domain, you must endeavor for it, even if you must withstand the torment of being scorched by flame. There are some who do not desire that, but such a way of life is foolish.”

Sphinx: “…”

Priscilla: “When scorched in flames, listen carefully to the pleas of your soul. In life, one must yearn. In love, one must drown. —It is for mine convenience, that this world is made.”

At that declaration, Sphinx truly experienced a sensation akin to being struck by lightning.

An absolute and unshakeable self, and an unwaning confidence; feeling the inescapable heat of that flame, Sphinx truly felt alive for the first time after having died.

At the same time, she yearned. —She yearned to emerge victorious against the flame-like woman before herself.

Ergo—

Sphinx: “Countermeasures: Required—No, let us see if you can prevent this.”

6

Within the Imperial Capital, enclosed by star-shaped ramparts made up of five bastions, exactly inverse to those five bastions, a magic circle had been laid out in the form of a five-pointed star—the Sphinxes whose duty it was to activate it, while suspicious of the imperfect activation of the technique, were receiving its effects nevertheless.

The effect of the magic circle, its target was the magic crystals of the defenseless Crystal Palace.

Deconstructing the enormous mass of colorless Mana, the Witch, Sphinx, had plotted to take it into her own Mana-drained soul, thereby gaining immense power.

Now that she had succeeded in reproducing the soul of the Witch of Greed, Sphinx wielded the same power as her creator, who possessed knowledge of all kinds of magic. If only she could just secure the Mana for that purpose.

For that purpose—

Sphinx: “The completion of the magic circle—”

???: “Unfortunately His Excellency and Boss have ordered me to come and prevent that.”

That instant, the surging glint of a sword forbade her from even responding, and lopped Sphinx’s head clean off.

Her white hair trimmed into a bob cut, Sphinx saw the figure of the young man who had killed her within her field of vision as it spun through the air.

It was an exceedingly beautiful brandish; however, it was still lacking. This was not the end.

Even if it was an incomplete magic circle, it had given her soul some respite.

What remained—

Young Man: “—Ahh I see now. You’re also drowning, aren’t you?”

As a result of the choice Sphinx had made directly after, Cecilus Segmunt smiled as he gripped his katana.

Within Cecilus’s vision, as to not allow him to prevent the complete activation of the magic circle, reconstructed from the soul that had received the taste of his slash, several Sphinxes stood in his way.

Tilting her head, one of the Sphinxes obstructing him said,

Sphinx: “There is no water source here. What do you mean by drowning? Explanation: Required.”

Cecilus: “There isn’t any need for a real river or pond or lake or even a puddle. The thing known as the “ocyan” exists in the hearts of all. Those who deeply desire something, every one of us, everyone’s drowning.”

At his way of putting it, Sphinx had still not straightened her head.

But, without letting that bother him, Cecilus placed his hand on the hilt of his sheathed katana to ready himself, and gave his introduction.

Cecilus: “—Swordsman, Cecilus Segmunt.”

Sphinx: “—Witch of Greed, Sphinx.”

Before she could even realize, that had naturally spilled out of the Sphinxes’ mouths.

At the same time that the Blue Lightning and the Witch's techniques caused tremors throughout the Imperial Capital, similar fierce battles to prevent the activation of the magic circle broke out in three other locations.

???: "—Admirer, Halibel."

???: "—Witch of Greed, Sphinx."

???: "—Sixty-first Emperor of Vollachia, Eugard Vollachia."

???: "—Witch of Greed, Sphinx."

???: "—Gorgeous Tiger, Garfiel Tinzel."

???: "—Witch of Greed, Sphinx."

The elite forces, selected by Natsuki Subaru, faced the Witch as a spear to destroy the final stratagem of the Great Disaster, and were subjected to a fierce magical onslaught.

Once the magic crystals of the Crystal Palace, which were being deconstructed, completely flowed into the Witch's soul, it would no longer be possible to thwart her plans.

The reason being, her possible measures would extend into infinity.

Depending on the user's imagination and practical utility, magic could extend one's possibilities infinitely.

In other words, by acquiring an extreme amount of Mana, the Witch, Sphinx, would gain the power of a transcendent being that could make almost anything possible.

It would give her the key to overcome all obstacles, and to fulfill her desires.

However, the truly terrifying thing about Sphinx, was not her vision of attaining such mighty power.

What was truly frightening, was the meticulousness with which she was not focused on one single objective.

Subaru: “Beako! Roswaal!”

Beatrice: “Minya!”

Roswaal: “Ul Goa.”

A storm of purple arrows and flaming projectiles spread out around them with no escape, blowing away the undead who dared to advance.

However, even after the vanguard troops were repelled, the undead who still continued to march in had come here with their sense of self completely destroyed, assailing as puppets that were following orders. —In order to kill Arakiya.

Stopping not only the magic circle, but also them was necessary for Subaru and his team’s victory conditions.

Subaru: “Al!”

Al: “Gotcha!”

Breaking through the encirclement, Al pounced on the undead aiming for the girl’s life, thrusting the earthen dao, causing it to expand inside his opponent, and explode from within.

He had not seen Al fight since Chaosflame, but even looking at him again, he was too risky and harrowing. He was not a skilled combatant by any stretch of the imagination.

Still, it was an all-out effort, with everyone taking on the challenge together, as best as they could.

Subaru: “—One minute has passed.”

Having overcome the line that had been fatal until now, Subaru realized that the situation had progressed.

Sphinx, the commander of the Great Disaster—to be honest, it was quite a shock for Subaru to see her look so much like Echidna, but it was Beatrice who kept his turmoil at bay.

Beatrice remained calm and composed, even when she saw the Witch, who had become an exact duplicate of her parent, Echidna.

Beatrice: “Subaru, that’s not the same person as Mother, in fact.”

Roswaal: “Yes, that is right. Even if she resembles the Witch of Greed, Echidna, they are not alike in the slightest. —Though, she is an exceedingly unpleasant oppooonent~.”

For some reason, Roswaal’s words, which were just as convincing as Beatrice’s, spurred Subaru forth, and he shifted his attention away from the uncanny appearance of the Witch, and focused instead on discovering her intentions.

First of all, the fact that the Witch, who was supposed to have been burned by Abel’s Yang Sword, had changed her form and survived was in itself the ultimate counter to the Yang Sword and Star Eating.

That strategy also needed to be taken into consideration.

However, right now—

Subaru: “If we can completely obstruct the activation of the magic circle—”

It was the moment when he had thought that.

A massive water mirror was deployed in the sky of the Imperial Capital, and an image was being projected onto the screen—the Fortified City of Garkla, driven into a moment of desperation, was about to be obliterated by a falling star.

8

Medium: “—Abel-chin!!”

Wearing an expression of altered complexion, Medium called out to Vincent with an urgent voice. Embracing Madelyn in one arm, she pointed to the sky with a barbarian sword in the other.

There was a huge distortion of light that seemed to cover the sky of the Imperial Capital, and Vincent immediately understood that it was a thinly-spread mass of water. For a moment, he was wary that it was the next attack prepared by the Witch, but he became convinced when the water's rippling surface reflected a scene from somewhere else immediately afterward.

As expected, that was an attack of the Witch.

However, it was not a straightforward attack that caused significant injury to the human body, but rather an attack that penetrated the spirit by confronting it with an inescapable reality, in a form such that none could take their eyes off of it.

—Reflected in the water mirror of the sky, was the Fortified City, surrounded by the great army of the undead.

Having attracted the hosts of undead, the fortress of the Sword Wolves was where a battle on which the survival of the Empire was staked, much like the one Vincent and the others were engaged in, was unfolding, and from its skies, it was clear that the radiance of a star was raining down.

This, was the beautiful divine judgment of destruction that had also attempted to bring ruin upon the Imperial Capital.

If that was to fall upon the Fortified City, the walls and fortress would crumble, and most of those encamped within would die. That would mean the destruction of the Empire, which would not be able to be rebuilt even if the operation in the Imperial Capital succeeded.

Starlight over the Imperial Capital, the fire of obliteration, the overload of the Magic Core, and the magic circle targeting the Crystal Palace.

The Witch's successive artifices were to destroy not only the Imperial Capital, but also the entire Empire.

The wise man was the one who would strike the true fatal blow, never letting it be perceived.

That was why—

Vincent: "—Our greatest fear has been borne out, Natsuki Subaru."

Indeed, it happened right after Vincent spoke.

—A fire of obliteration smashed through the water mirror of the ether as it opened a hole in the sky, perforating directly towards the north of the Imperial Capital.

9

—The authentic trump card of Natsuki Subaru and Beatrice.

The Magic Crystal Cannon's fire of obliteration, sent into another space by Al Shamak, was returned to this space by a subsequent Al Shamak, shooting down the starlight that was supposed to mark the demise of the Fortified City.

With the assistance of Cecilus and Halibel, that trump card did not have to be used to slay the Blight Dragon, and instead, it was used to defeat the final measure prepared by the Witch to perturb them.

Subaru: "—Hk."

Subaru felt dizzy from the intense feeling of exhaustion, and his nose began to bleed as he was bathed in a multitude of water drops from the shattered water mirror, which rained upon the Imperial Capital like a passing drizzle.

It was the backlash from Beatrice's endless display of seriousness over the past few hours.

Beatrice's adorableness might have been priceless, but there was a heavy cost to pay for her abilities. There was a limit as to how much of that burden could be shared with the Pleiades Battalion.

Subaru involuntarily dropped to one knee as his limits emerged before him.

Beatrice: "Subaru!"

He was supported by the shouting Beatrice; however, he could not speak, even though he wanted to reassure her.

Beatrice tried to stop the unending, dripping nosebleed with the sleeve of her dress. He did not want her beautiful outfit to become stained, but he could not lift his arms.

Subaru: “Not yet, not yet…”

He could not afford to come to a standstill here.

There was still a duty he had to fulfill, a plot that still needed to be thwarted.

This was an all-out war, and it was none other than Subaru who had made that decision.

For Subaru to be the first to run out of steam, there was no way such a ridiculous story could exist.

That was why—

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Beatrice: “Subaru? You shouldn’t force yourself, in fact. Even if just for a moment, rest—”

Beatrice hurriedly tried to admonish Subaru, who had suddenly let out a breath. But, Beatrice’s words stopped mid-sentence. —Because, Subaru stood up suddenly, on the spot.

Beatrice: “…”

Beatrice’s round eyes widened, and she looked at Subaru as he stood up. As she met his gaze, Subaru looked down at his hands, bewildered.

The sense of lethargy that had gripped Subaru’s entire body until just before had disappeared without a trace. —No, it was not that the feeling of exhaustion had vanished. Rather, it was the opposite.

Subaru: “Strength… is surging up within me?”

Subaru was dumbfounded, and just as he said this, his whole body was filled with energy.

It was a similar feeling to that of being united with the other members of the Pleiades Battalion, having even the strength of one's body and mind intensely heightened—a feeling of omnipotence, of being enveloped by a great flame.

And then, for what reason this had occurred, was something Subaru immediately understood.

—The shattered water mirror in the sky, and the fire of obliteration that pierced the radiance of the distant star, drawing a band of light. In the sky of the Imperial Capital where those two had reigned supreme, a new light was birthed.

It was tiny in comparison to the light of the star, and even small in comparison to the fire of obliteration, but in terms of its brilliance, not only was it equal to them, it overwhelmed them with its blaze.

Falling from the heavenly skies, adorned in a dress the color of blood, was a woman akin to flame—.

???: "—It is a great service."

Even as the water mirror had tried to project despair, everyone had looked up to the sky. However, through an even higher intensity than that, it attracted the eyes of all present in the Imperial Capital to the sky, and set their souls ablaze.

She was descending. A female Sword Wolf, with fluttering orange hair, and blazing crimson eyes—.

???: "No superfluous words are necessary. —You may call upon mine name."

Holding the treasured sword of crimson in her hand, the princess, as if the sun itself, descended upon the city in its plight—as one of those who gazed upward towards her, Subaru unconsciously abided by her wishes.

That was to say—

Subaru: "—Priscilla."

Indeed, he invoked her name as she descended.

—With a flame ablaze in his right eye, as one of the people receiving the blessing of the sun, he called out her name.

Chapter 72:
The Sun Princess

1

???: “—I have use for you. You shall serve me well, in order to grant my wish.”

Those were the first words the man spoke to them, and they symbolized the relationship between him and them, which, until the very end, had not changed even once.

They had spent decades together with the man.

During that time, they were never given freedom, amounting to being shackled and confined in a basement.

Although they had a caretaker to keep them from dying, the cautious man would silence them and replace them periodically, so the man was the only one whom they could say they had any contact with over the decades.

—Leip Barielle.

He was a nobleman of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, a man dominated by what was, to put it simply, a foul ambition.

During the Demi-Human War, House Barielle had been commissioned as viscounts, but they forfeited their titles and were demoted to barons when they were forced to take responsibility for their defeat during the civil war.

That humiliation and anger ought to have been the driving force behind Leip’s actions, but if such were the case, then one would have to wonder how long human anger and hatred could retain their intensity.

Leip would constantly remind himself of the humiliation of decades ago as if it were only yesterday.

Leip: “Eventually, I will certainly have you make yourself useful. I am the one keeping you alive. You best not forget that.”

Human beings who possessed intelligence, had something known as emotion.

For example, if one spent ten or twenty years with another, even if they did not like the other person’s personality or relationship, their attitude would soften, and the harshness of their contact would dissipate.

However, that was not the case with Leip. There was always a fresh sense of hostility from him.

Not once did he ever speak warm words to them.

They did not know anything regarding Leip’s personal history, family makeup, or House Barielle’s affairs.

Day after day, they spent a long, quiet, and idle time in captivity, only to be told by Leip’s occasional visits about the current state of affairs in the Kingdom and the unchanging days of lying in wait.

However, on merely one occasion, they had a different conversation with Leip.

Leip: “You led the civil war in collusion with demi-humans. Just what in the world was your objective?”

More than twenty years had already passed since the Demi-Human War, and it was far too late to discuss that topic anymore.

Leip asked this question at a time when both Valga and Libre, who had fought with them, had already died, and the major figures of the Demi-Human Alliance at the time were all gone.

Why he wanted to know that, they did not ask.

They had a feeling that if they asked questions back, Leip would be taken aback, and the topic itself would be closed. Therefore, they did not say anything out of line and did not feel the need to hide their purpose, so they spoke frankly.

Their cooperation in the Demi-Human War was to fulfill their own purpose of creation.

Leip: "—Rubbish."

Upon hearing that the Demi-Human War was part of the process of trying to achieve the purpose of their creation, something they had been pursuing for more than a century, Leip readily spat back that retort.

They did not feel any anger or sadness from Leip's reaction. They had always been that way, and Leip's reaction was as expected.

From the point of view of this man with foul ambitions, all wishes other than his own were worthless.

But—

Leip: "You were born as yourself but wish to go out of your way to become someone else? Why bother to pretend to live under someone else's name and way of life, only to let your own name die?"

That conversation, which they thought would end after being cut off with that single word, had continued.

Leip turned toward them with eyes clouded with negative emotions, more frustrated than ever, as if to say that this was a truly repugnant idea.

Leip: "Your objective has no value whatsoever. As expected, you are to be used by me. After all, your desire is one that would not have even a shred of value when fulfilled. Should you intend to squander it, give it to me."

???: "You—"

Leip: "Your purpose of creation is worthless. If you cannot live without someone telling you what to do, then you ought to be used for the sake of my wish."

There was not an iota of righteous indignation or compassion in

Leip’s eyes as he spoke.

In Leip’s clouded eyes was anger toward those who had brought about his undiminished humiliation, resentment, and hatred toward an era and a world that refused to acknowledge his existence, and an ambition, like a black flame, to push himself into a more deserved position.

They were so violent, as if they trampled them, as if they were pouring sludge on them, that they certainly plunged a blade into their being, tearing them apart and causing them to bleed cold blood.

—To fulfill their purpose of creation, borne out of their creator.

That was the meaning of their life, the purpose of having kept walking forward for such a long time.

Yet, had they ever harbored an intense ardor for that purpose? Never. Never once had they harbored a passion for it. The need to accomplish what was given to them only because they had been given it, such was the habit and compromise bereft of ardor, which ruled their life.

However, intrinsically, was this not what a wish, what a desire, was meant to be?

To deeply desire something, to try to fulfill a wish that one wanted to, was it not correct for those to become like this?

Was Leip Barielle’s way of being not the correct method for one to grant their desires?

???: “…”

Once again, a long time had passed. During that time, their relationship with Leip had remained unchanged.

Not many words were exchanged, and time ticked moment by moment without a role having been prepared for them, for which they had been told they would be of use.

Then, eventually, there was a change.

Leip: “At last, it seems an opportunity has presented itself.”

Indeed, Leip, whose eyes blazed with a maniacal glint, had grown thin and gaunt, his face and body corroded by an age that could not be reversed, despite his undiminished ambition.

The time he would be able to seize the thread that dangled in front of him had finally arrived, and it delighted him that he would finally be rewarded after prohibiting himself from even blinking.

According to what they had heard, Leip had established himself among the Royal Family of Lugunica over the past few decades and was entrusted with the management of the tablet of prophecies called the Dragon History Stone, which the Divine Dragon had conferred on the Kingdom.

Having grasped the fact that the prophetic tablet had been inscribed with information about a calamity that would soon strike the Kingdom of Lugunica—a disease that would spread through the Royal Family, Leip blazed with aspirations towards the next battle for the throne that would follow thereafter.

Leip: “I will find a candidate before anyone else. I will take her as my wife and send her to the Royal Selection… and I will surely get my hands on the throne. I will make use of you, too.”

With fists clenched tight with nothing but skin and bones, Leip was determined to do just that.

They had always been told that they would be of use, but now that it was feasible, even as someone who had been connected to them for several decades, there was a small sense of excitement. —They, had expectations.

The next time he came, Leip had found a candidate, and he ordered them to prepare a technique to break their mind. By doing so, he would turn the candidate into a puppet and rule the next age of the Kingdom with his own hands.

Leip’s ambition to mastermind such a grand scheme, to plot its realization with unusual tenacity, and to actually bring it to the brink of fruition was, for all intents and purposes, dazzling in a dark way.

They wanted it to come true. They wanted him to fulfill it. All while following that passion.

They wanted him to fulfill his foul ambitions that would compel anyone to look away, to use the Kingdom for his own desires, to use even a Witch as a stepping stone for his own desires, and to achieve his deluded obsession.

The thing that was lacking from within themselves was none other than that; that was what Sphinx wanted him to teach her.

So, they waited. They kept waiting.

They eagerly looked forward to breaking the mind of the woman Leip had married to take advantage of as a candidate to participate in the Royal Selection.

They waited, and waited, and waited, but Leip never showed up.

In order to find out why he had not appeared, they undid the bindings that had not been broken for decades, and ventured out on their own.

And, it was only when they found out why Leip did not show up, that they understood.

Sphinx: “—Ah.”

—They understood, this was the “ardor” of wanting to accomplish something.

2

???: “Countermeasures: Required—No, let us see if you can prevent this.”

As Sphinx declared so, her trump card, her ace up her sleeve, her hidden trap was overturned.

Reflected upon the shimmering surface of the water mirrors were the struggles of those who overcame the schemes prepared by the Witch one after another in an effort to prevent the destruction of the Empire.

???: "…"

Narrowing her crimson eyes, Priscilla, chained, looked at the mirror and at Sphinx's pale face.

Yearning, drowning, Sphinx had subjected themself to the greatest burden in order to fulfill their own desires. The substance of this would be an abomination to the world, to the Empire, and to Vincent, but to Priscilla it was no abomination at all.

She did not wish for the downfall of the Empire or the world, nor for the squandering of the tireless efforts of her own older brother, Vincent.

However, the fact remained that for the sake of a desired outcome, confronting things while expending all of oneself was always beautiful.

Even when that hatred which bordered on resentment was directed against them, it was no exception.

All things had their proportional value.

Those who lack the understanding of their own caliber and desire more than it can hold are often doomed. However, Priscilla wisely spoke that she did not like those who could console themselves with only what they could fit in their vessels.

She wanted to love the way of life of the fool who sought what was beyond the capacity of their caliber, who went on a path that may lead to ruin, who aimed for the sun only for their wings to melt, regardless of whether they succeeded or failed in their challenge.

Priscilla: "How lovely."

All those who would risk their lives on the battlefield would not believe their ears at Priscilla's words.

However, that was Priscilla's genuine intention. In the first place, Priscilla did not prefer to act or speak in ways that conspire and deceive others. She would never wish such a way of life on herself.

Hence, it was genuine praise.

All those who took up arms on this battlefield, lent their shoulders to others, shed their blood, and burned their souls, regardless of whether they were alive or dead, were to be loved.

If that could come true—

Priscilla: "—I suppose it is a sentimentality uncharacteristic of mineself."

Priscilla closed one of her eyes, a rare grimace forming on her beautiful face.

Since childhood, she imitated her older brother when she contemplated. Vincent understood all too well the weight of the responsibility he bore, and never closed his eyes, not even when he slept.

That attitude was admirable, but excessive. —Sometimes, there were those whom one could only meet upon the back of their eyelids.

Priscilla: "You as well, elder brother, had better find someone you can be with, someone you can shut both eyes with."

Yang Sword in hand, Vincent had burned down the plans of the Witch who had spearheaded the Great Disaster; Priscilla uttered these words while showing respect for his way of being.

Then within the water mirrors, Priscilla saw something that caught her eye.

—Aldebaran and Natsuki Subaru.

Priscilla's laudable clown and the Knight of the half-devil who, despite being somewhat loathsome, had been named as a Royal Selection Candidate.

Like Sphinx's perceived threat, Priscilla also understood their struggle—She understood the very fact that they twisted the destiny of the stars that could only be described as something more than a trivial matter.

Priscilla: "What in the Witch's… Nay, what in the heavens are you both deceiving?"

Sphinx, the mastermind behind the Great Disaster, was not half-hearted in the numerous artifices she had laid out.

The undead army created with the Sacrament of the Immortal King, the use of the Stone Muspel to realize them, the second coming as the Witch of Greed who managed to evade the flame of the Yang Sword once before, the murderous intent toward Arakiya who shared her destiny with the lands of the Empire, the starlight and the Magic Crystal Cannon, the subsequent overload of the Magic Core, the deployment of the magic circle to utilize the magic crystals, and the staging of the plight of the Fortified City—.

Who could have predicted that such well-orchestrated plans would be foiled at every turn?

For the Wise Emperor Vincent Vollachia, for his right-hand man Chisha Gold the White Spider, and for none other than Priscilla Barielle, it would have been impossible.

The ruination of the Vollachian Empire ought to have been inescapable.

It ought to have been inescapable, if it were not for those who broke through that dead-end of fate with an unthinkable power.

That was why—

Priscilla: "—Just one more hand to play."

Priscilla's lips spun those words as she peered at the scene that floated on the mirror's surface.

The massive water mirror above the Imperial Capital reflected the plight of the distant Fortified City and tried to break the will of those in the Imperial Capital to fight. —The fire of obliteration, previously swallowed by the void, drowned it out.

The starlight was negated by the Magic Crystal Cannon, the pride of Imperial Capital, and the water mirror shattered.

At last, it seemed that all of Witch's stratagems had been thwarted.

However—

Sphinx: "I am not done yet."

The starlight over the Fortified City was drowned out, but even so, the Witch's all-encompassing plans were still not exhausted.

While the Witch watched as the mass-scale disaster she had prepared was prevented, she used this as a springboard to set up a trap.

—The water mirror shattered in the sky, turned into raindrops, and poured down upon the entire Imperial Capital.

Like a passing storm, it drenched the Imperial Capital, with raindrops striking the living and the dead alike.

And so they were blades of water, the harmful disguised as the harmless.

Slowly, the drops that slid over the skin of those struck by raindrops shuddered, becoming blades. This danger loomed equally over everyone, except those who were inside buildings or the transcendent beings who avoided the rain by instinctive intuition.

It became a fatal line, one that could no longer be avoided.

Priscilla: "…"

Hence why, Priscilla closed her eyes.

Earlier, she had thought about Vincent, and then she did the same thing. —Schult, Heinkel, Emilia, Crusch, Felt, Anastasia, Serena, and Arakiya, in the darkness behind her eyelids, Priscilla saw many faces, many souls.

Among them, Vincent, Lamia, Rem, and Aldebaran were also present.

All of them, people who lacked one more hand to play.

Priscilla: “—The world is made for my convenience.”

Priscilla muttered that, and Sphinx’s movement stopped as she tried to flash these blades of raindrops.

She looked at Priscilla through the water mirror, her black eyes wide open.

In the next instant, the alternate space created to hold Priscilla collapsed. —In the blink of an eye, it was unbearably engulfed by the scintillating flames brought about by the Sun Princess trapped within.

3

The moment the starlight flashed over the Fortified City, everyone who looked up to the sky was speechless.

???: “…”

This was right after they had succeeded in defeating the Blight Dragon that had attacked them just before, and the fact that they had successfully defeated a powerful enemy together had boosted the morale of all the soldiers who were challenging the siege to their utmost.

However, before the fact that the undead’s most powerful force had been destroyed was conveyed to all, the beautiful destruction loomed overhead, and many forgot the beating of their own hearts.

Of course, there were those who tried everything they could under these circumstances.

The same was true of the Spirit Knight clad in an aura of light, the female warriors who would never lose their fighting spirit, the soldier with insects within him and the hulking frame clad in gold, and the Battalion who was assembled in the light of their own star.

Even the wise ones, who lacked the strength to fight, considered countless thoughts in that brief gap of time, sparing no second to attempt to overcome their desperate predicament.

But still, just like ants gathered together to stop a giant, it was certain that everything would be trampled, and reaped.

—Until the fire of destruction flew from the distant sky, colliding with the light of the star, and the world flashed white.

???: "…"

At the time, no one knew what had happened.

However, the retinas of those who did not look away were burned white, revealing that the destruction that should have arrived before their eyesight had returned did not descend upon them.

And then—

???: "—Hk."

The two lights, the white of the star and the red of the fire, blended together, and a shockwave covered the sky of the Fortified City.

The blast, which occurred a moment later, scattered in all directions, shaking even the city's sturdy walls, sending gusts of wind throughout the city, blowing away both the living and the dead alike.

In addition, the intense winds even cracked the great mountain that supported the city, causing rock faces to collapse and detach, and the large falling rocks engulfed a corner of the great fortress with a roar.

Unfortunately, that location was assigned as a first aid station where the injured were being brought—.

???: "—Rem! Hey, Rem!"

Rem’s eyes blinked several times at the call of the frantic voice.

For a moment, her thoughts were whited out, and it took her a moment to figure out what had happened.

But, she soon realized that it was Katya’s voice frantically calling to her, and she remembered that the relief station had been involved in a collapse caused by falling rocks.

Seeing cracks in the walls and ceiling, Rem quickly pushed Katya, into the crumbling wreckage.

And yet—

Rem: “I’m, alive…?”

Katya: “Of course you’re alive! You really shouldn’t have done that! If you died protecting me, my heart really would have died this time…”

Buried beneath the rubble, Katya’s tearful voice struck Rem’s ears, confirming that she was still alive. That powerful grief was interrupted by the sight of Rem pushing aside the rubble from atop of her body.

She must have been surprised. The debris on top of Rem was quite heavy, and even with Rem’s strength, which was that of the Oni Clan, it should have been too heavy for her to move it so easily.

Yet, Rem was still able to do it.

Katya: “R-Rem, your… your eye!”

Pointing at Rem’s face, Katya let out a shrill, high-pitched scream.

Rem could guess that Katya was pointing to her left eye, which probably had a blaze lit within it. This was because, Katya’s left eye also had a flame burning.

—No, it was not just Rem and Katya.

All those in the aid station, except for Rem and Katya, who were caught in the collapse, stood up with only minor scratches and no serious injuries.

She could see a flickering flame in one eye of every person.

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That flame, the power that came from it, brought forth strength to Rem.

And that was because—

Rem: "—Priscilla-sama?"

Rem muttered to herself as she felt the heat of the painless flame in her eye.

Unsure. Rem was not even sure why. But, Rem followed her heart and was certain of who it was that had brought about that flame.

Rem: "Katya-san."

Katya: "Wh-What is this?! Water… where's some water?! Quick, quick, I need some water to put this out…!"

Rem: "No, I don't think this is a fire that should be put out. Besides."

Katya: "Besides?"

Before the flustered and confused Katya, Rem stood up and found her overturned, barely damaged wheelchair, lifted Katya into it, and sat her down.

Then, she looked at the people in the relief station who were standing up, and nodded.

Rem: "I feel like I'm being told something. —That, we've got to hang on just a bit further."

4

—The water mirror shattered, and the crimson woman descended from the sky in a spray of droplets.

All were transfixed by her overwhelming presence, looking up at the sky as if being bathed by the setting sun.

And, of course, that held true for the Witch as well.

???: “—Priscilla Barielle!”

At this moment, after deconstructing the magic crystals with the activation of the incomplete magic circle, there were forty-four Witches that Sphinx had manifested by absorbing some of the vast amount of Mana.

Each of them turned their palms toward the sky, and light appeared around the descending Priscilla.

But—

???: “Don’t look away and don’t touch the dancing lady!”

???: “I dunno about that. That’d be a bad move.”

Not missing this opportunity, the transcendent beings interfered, reducing the number from forty-four to thirty-six in one fell swoop.

Despite that, the balls of light, more than enough to threaten one person, gathered together all at once towards Priscilla. A lethal attack from all directions, it tried to capture the sun as it escaped its captivity—

???: “I won’t let it!”

Responding to that cry of parental love, the streets of the Imperial Capital shifted and moved before shooting out like spears.

They blocked the blasts of light that were trying to reach Priscilla in the air, and a series of explosions and blasts painted the sky as they protected her.

???: “Together, Beatrice!”

???: “No need for you to say it, I suppose!”

An amethyst glow appeared around Priscilla as she continued to descend through the blast of light. It was a disk-shaped crystal, acting as a shield to intercept the approaching balls of light, that was created by the combined efforts of both Spirit and caster to protect and defend Priscilla.

However—

Witch: “Not yet!”

The Witch screamed with emotion, as if she were spitting blood.

Immediately afterward, the disk was struck hard and began to creak; eventually, the cracks widened, and the disk shattered all at once.

Having done so, the Witch, her white hair fluttering, rose into the sky and attempted to shower life-rending light upon Priscilla, as she fell unprotected.

???: “Uuau!!”

???: “I will not let you do that!”

The blonde girl teleported from the ground, and the deergirl jumped and kicked with a force that could break the Crystal Palace, striking a blow to the torso of the Witch, who saw none else except Priscilla, at the same time.

The Witch crumpled, and the heat ray that was fired missed its target.

Witch: “Catalyst: Required.”

The crumpled Witch shattered into bits of dirt, but even that was part of the plan of which she spoke.

A moment later, multiple Witches on the ground joined hands with each other; because they were the same being, in perfect synchronization, they shortened the construction of a technique, generating a great storm.

It became raging water, wind, and light, engulfing Priscilla in the sky.

In the next moment, Priscilla would be torn to shreds, her body left in a pitiful state—

???: “Icicle Line—!”

The storm of destruction exploded from within, and what appeared next was not the torn figure of Priscilla, but rather a flower of ice that split open in the heavens as if to protect and adorn her.

The great, ravishing flower petals trapped the light, not allowing it to reach Priscilla.

And then, a figure furiously approached, as Priscilla defied all of the death, destruction, and demise that loomed around her.

It was—

???: “—Princess!!”

Aldebaran rose from the ground of the Imperial Capital, stretching into the sky with a distorted, misshapen pillar of stone and earth beneath his feet, drawing ever closer to Priscilla.

The column rapidly grew, and the distance between the falling Priscilla and the ascending Aldebaran shrank, and shrank, and shrank, and shrank—until the distance became zero.

Al: “—Hk.”

Balancing on top of an unstable pillar, he stretched out his right arm to forcefully catch Priscilla as she fell. Just as they were about to fall together, Aldebaran secured his legs firmly atop the pillar, risking his life to protect Priscilla from the fall.

Priscilla’s almond-shaped eyes narrowed at Aldebaran’s life-or-death decisive action,

Priscilla: “It is a great service.”

As Priscilla briefly spoke, Aldebaran, overcome by emotion, bowed his head. Then he looked up, his voice trembling, Al: “Princess, Princess, my Princess…! Finally, again… ouch!!”

Priscilla: “Nonsense. Who belongs to you?”

Priscilla struck Aldebaran, who was on the brink of losing it, on the head with the hilt of her Yang Sword. Aldebaran instinctively crouched down as he felt the force of the blow, which threatened to dent his steel helmet. He was unable to rub the spot where he was hit, as he was supporting Priscilla with his one arm.

Priscilla gave a short snicker to the pitiful Aldebaran, with a “Heh”,

Priscilla: “However, that was an excellent effort from you. I bestow mine praise.”

Al: “Well, I’m very grateful and honored… what about you, Princess? Everything okay? No injuries? Did they hurt you or anything? I mean, you look so pretty for someone who was being held captive.”

Priscilla: “Do not repeat such nonsense. In the first place, mine beauty is not going to diminish from being imprisoned for a short while. Mind your tongue, Al.”

Al: “…”

Held by his arm, Priscilla told him so in a stunning manner, and Aldebaran’s—Al’s breath caught in his throat.

Then, once again, he nodded deeply, confirming that Priscilla was indeed before him. To Al’s reaction, Priscilla, still in his embrace, looked around,

Priscilla: “Witness, the true star of the show. You shall have grand excitements.”

Reflected in Priscilla’s eyes as she spoke atop the stone pillar were multiple figures, those who were putting their lives on the line in this battle, and in the eyes of each of them, a flame was lit.

The flame of Priscilla Barielle’s soul blazed within the eyes of those she deemed worthy of love.

That, of course, included—

Al: “Princess?”

With Al right beside her, she lifted the visor of the helmet he wore with her finger and peeked within. —The right eye upon his face, which he never revealed to anyone but Priscilla, was lit by the same flame.

Upon seeing this, Priscilla smiled pleasantly, and spoke.

Priscilla: “It is no matter of consequence. —As always, this world is made for my convenience.”

Chapter 73:
Fated Foes

1

—It was a similar feeling to being buried from the neck down in a dark place.

Their feet sunk into the unending mixture of earth, sand, and pebbles, which eventually reached their waist, chest, and shoulders, leaving only their head exposed.

It was only a matter of time before their head was buried in the cold dust that was gradually piling up.

Desperately turning their head upward, they tried to breathe out the dust that was piling up, trying as hard as they could to postpone even just a little the moment they would suffocate, the moment they would be buried up to the top of their head.

From the time they were born until today, they had never felt so much discomfort.

Their mind was always unstable, like walking on water, but their body was never like that. They were sure that they were better at moving their body than most people.

When that source of comfort was taken away from them, they felt like crying, thinking about how helpless they were. But, they did not know how to shed tears. They were not even good at crying.

They lacked in just about everything. Still, there were things they wanted.

They were all too unaware of it, but they finally realized it. —They finally realized how greedy they were.

And then—

???: “…”

Suddenly, the feeling of dust pouring down from above disappeared.

It hit their forehead softly, and the feeling of it burying them as though spilling out stopped, and a flickering blue-white light illuminated the area as it swirled around them.

The light that flashed provocatively around their field of vision was uncontrollably irritating, and they struggled, and struggled, and struggled, and eventually, the arms of their body, buried up to their neck, reached up into the air.

As if escaping their outstretched hand, the pale-blue light went a little higher again.

Wanting to chase after it, they forcefully pulled their buried body out in order to reach the heights they could not reach. They got their shoulders out, their chest, and if they could get their waist out, then they would just be one breath away.

Eventually, when they were out to their toes, they looked up and tried to catch the blue-white light, and realized something.

There was a red flame right in front of them that brilliantly lit up the area.

Then, the blue-white light that they were trying to catch wrapped itself around them, trying to push them toward the radiant flames.

For a moment, there was hesitation. But it was not fear of the flames.

They hesitated, wondering if their cold self was worthy of the fortune of being burned by the flames.

However, that hesitation was only momentary.

It was not about whether they were qualified or not, but whether or not they wanted to be burned.

They were going to be burned, or so they thought.

That was why—

???: “—Enough of this, wake up. How much longer do you intend to keep mineself waiting?”

They took one step forward, straight ahead, to be burned by that gentle flame.

One step forward—

???: “…Princess, I, did my best.”

???: “It is only natural. —Just who do you take mine foster sister for?”

2

—At that moment, the Witch, Sphinx, was convinced that all of her plans had fallen apart.

Having given rise to the hosts of undead as the Great Disaster, she had ascertained the whereabouts of the soul through the countless amounts of trial and error they had carried out, and utilizing that, she had accomplished her purpose of creation, to reproduce the Witch of Greed.

In addition, through the act of killing the Stone, Muspel, by having it use the architecture of the Sacrament of the Immortal King technique, and inducing the collapse of the Vollachian Empire’s vast lands, putting an end to all things that comprised the Empire, she would show Priscilla Barielle, the sole person placed within the alternate space, the destruction of her homeland.

By doing so, Sphinx had plotted to enact retribution, triumph, revenge, supremacy, conquest, overthrowal, vanquishment, sacrilege, subjugation, a rise, a fall, a rampage, exultation, happiness, or at least just “something” against Priscilla, who had invited the death of Leip Barielle, the man who had taught Sphinx this repulsive, foul “ardor”.

All of that was completely, unsparingly, until no part would remain recognizable, falling apart.

Sphinx: "—The Sacrament of the Immortal King is…"

The fact that its effects had been lost, was something that Sphinx could not help but recognize.

Centered around the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the five locations aligning with the north, east, south, and west of the Vollachian Empire—spread out over the sites designated as the points of settlement for the ever-migrating Stone, using the blood permeated into the Vollachian Empire's vast lands as a medium, the magic circle had continued to resurrect the dead via the Sacrament of the Immortal King.

However, that too would come to an end if the vast supply of Mana from the Stone was lost.

Sphinx: "The Spirit Eater, Arakiya… has she seized control over Muspel?"

At the unthinkable reality, she could do nothing but surmise based on the events that had transpired.

That which she had taken upon herself was a far too exceedingly powerful Great Spirit, and even though Arakiya was supposed to have burst asunder after taking it in, the exorcism performed by the swordsman wielding the Dream Sword Masayume had placed the Great Spirit under her complete dominion.

By this point, the Stone, Muspel, was already one and the same as the Spirit Eater, Arakiya.

And, Arakiya had no reason to disobey the Vollachian Empire and support the Great Disaster.

From here on out—

Sphinx: "The undead will not revive any more."

The immortal army, the pack of dead wolves who could endlessly revive in their death, the prerequisite for that collapsed.

Even if the supply from the Stone was severed, it did not mean the undead would lose their lives immediately. Only, the playing field had been leveled. —Death meant the end, just like it did for the living.

Sphinx: "—Hk."

With the supply of Mana to the magic circle severed, she had spent around five seconds sorting out the situation.

But, in those mere five seconds, Sphinx, who had already been reduced to thirty-six bodies, was diminished by another seven, bringing her total count down to twenty-nine.

Moving with superhuman speed and combat ability, the Blue Lightning and the Admirer were far too powerful.

Even though she was supposed to be able to reproduce the capacity of her creator, the Witch of Greed, she could not hold her own in the slightest. She could not even get a solid hit in. These opponents were on a level such that she could not even overcome them by sheer force of numbers.

Even if she wanted to do something about that, it was not only those two fighting against the Witch.

Hence—

Sphinx: "—Retreat: Required."

Sphinx: "—Retreat: Required."

Sphinx: "—Retreat: Required."

Having arrived at a situation in which she was powerless, the Witch, Sphinx, deemed the annulment of her plan the most rational course of action.

She had prepared a steadfast resolve, worked out infallible stratagems, and had commenced her plan with everything in place, but to still have everything overturned to this extent, meant that modifying her plan was no longer possible.

It was aggravating, but her best option was to accept it given that she had accomplished one of her two overarching objectives.

In fact, she had fulfilled her long-standing purpose of creation that had been given to her by her creator. Compared to the purpose she had pursued for over three hundred years, there was no way that the objective she had desired for merely a year was of equal value.

Sphinx: "—Retreat: Required."

Sphinx: "—Retreat: Required."

To begin with, the situation had never been one with balanced scales.

The reason for which she had been created, she reaffirmed her perception of it. What was required of her was the second coming of the Witch of Greed, and she was certainly achieving that.

Painting over her current self as Sphinx, by becoming the Witch of Greed, Echidna—.

Sphinx: "—Retreat: Required."

She would be remade. With that, her purpose of creation would be fulfilled.

With the disappearance of Sphinx, and the revival of Echidna, her days of obsession lasting over three hundred years would come to a close.

To desire anything more than that would not be rational. It would not be rational. It would not, be rational.

Even though it would not be rational—.

Sphinx: "…"

That instant, a hoisted Yang Sword unleashed a dazzling scintillation, displaying their own presence throughout the entirety of the Imperial Capital.

Having scorched through the alternate space, having forcibly made a return to the skies of the Imperial Capital, having surmounted the future that ought to have torn her limb from limb as if it were only natural, it was a provocation appealing to the Witch, who had decided to retreat.

Clad in a dress red like blood, with the hue of her hair bright like the sun, her dazzling presence radiating like a blaze, the woman who could not live in any other way but to scorch others like a flame, smiled.

Woman: “—You had better come, Sphinx. For thine enemy, is mineself.”

That instant, the twenty nine Witches, the twenty nine Sphinxes, every single one of them made up their minds.

That being—

Sphinx: “—I, AM YOUR ENEMY, PRISCILLA BARIELLE!!”

Sphinx: “—I, AM YOUR ENEMY, PRISCILLA BARIELLE!!”

Sphinx: “—I, AM YOUR ENEMY, PRISCILLA BARIELLE!!”

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Sphinx: “—I, AM YOUR ENEMY, PRISCILLA BARIELLE!!”

3

Priscilla: “If we let them slip away, it shall surely be a disaster for the world. By nature, when it comes to changing the state of the world, mineself shall not be touching that. —But when it comes to that thing, they have decided to make mineself their destiny.”

Priscilla remarked as she descended from Al’s arm, with the crumbling stone and dirt scaffolding behind her.

Her appearance, a picture of arrogance, was so full of confidence and majesty that it was hard to believe that she had been a captive until just before.

Al, who had unexpectedly gained momentum from those words, looked as if he was feeling the pressure,

Al: “So Princess, you’re saying you’re gonna deal with them? Why do you have to do that? Let’s surround that troublesome piece of shit and beat her up… ouch!”

Priscilla: “Nonsense. If we take life by any means, we shall give the other party the same option. This battle must be decided before that thing decides that its enemy is the world.”

???: “…Otherwise, we can’t win?”

Priscilla crossed her arms as if to emphasize her voluptuous breasts, and Arakiya, kneeling beside her, tilted her head up. Priscilla shrugged her shoulders in disappointment at the question from Arakiya, who had a fire lit in her right eye and was holding her blood-red left eye with her hand.

Priscilla: “Arakiya, do not speak such foolishness as Al does. Does the me you know put so much emphasis on only one aspect, such as winning or losing?”

Arakiya: “But, Princess, you like to win. You seem happier when you do.”

Priscilla: “It is only natural. That is who mineself is.”

???: “Don’t ignore the premise that you yourself said! You’re getting them mixed up!”

Priscilla was asking Arakiya some unreasonable things, and Subaru, unable to remain silent, interjected.

Subaru unexpectedly lurched forward, and Priscilla’s crimson eyes narrowed in response to his vigour,

Priscilla: “What’s with you? This is no place for a child like you. Swiftly leave.”

Subaru: “Sorry, my bad! I’m Natsuki Subaru, though my size is like this! I’m the Knight of the loveliest and cutest in all the everlasting heavens, Emilia-tan!”

Priscilla: “To call such a child a Knight, it seems that the half-devil has a serious shortage of talented people. In this case, that noisy foolish commoner would have been better.”

Subaru: “That’s me! That’s me!”

Subaru exclaimed, more unreasonable than his response to Arakiya, forgetting the feeling of emptiness in his whole body.

He knew that Priscilla would erase anyone she was not interested in from her memory, but not to Subaru, who had been so concerned for her well-being, though not as much of course as Al, Schult, or the siscon, Abel.

And to Subaru, who wiped the blood from his nose and came up close to her with that look on his face,

Priscilla: “—Fool.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Priscilla: “You should at least make the distinction as to what is a jape. —Natsuki Subaru.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Priscilla said this without changing her expression as she crossed her arms, and as soon as the meaning of Priscilla’s words seeped into his brain, Subaru’s entire body was overcome by heat.

But it was not anger for having been toyed with, but a kind of, deeply moving emotion.

It was the fact that Priscilla Barielle had remembered and called his name.

Subaru: “…I feel like the old me that got my jaw kicked is getting my reward!”

Stifling his past emotions, Subaru touched his chin and spoke those words.

Every single person in the Imperial Capital did not have a second to spare to engage in further exchanges.

To that end—

Priscilla: “—I have to teach them this very thing. That what you shall behold is not the world, but mineself.”

Immediately after she said that, Priscilla uncrossed her arms and held up the Yang Sword in her right hand to the sky.

Then, without any explanation of what it would do, the Yang Sword suddenly grew brighter, and a glare burned Subaru’s eyes, as if a new sun had been born there. —No, despite the tremendous amount of light, it did not cause pain similar to looking directly at the sun.

Priscilla: “The Yang Sword cuts what mineself decides to cut, burns what mineself wishes to burn.”

Once again, Priscilla explained how extraordinary it was and smiled, holding the dazzling, shining treasure sword —a sword that made its presence known everywhere in the Imperial Capital.

As she laughed, she drew the provocation of whom should have been paying attention, but was neither present here.

Priscilla: "—You had better come, Sphinx. For thine enemy, is mineself."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru understood intuitively that this was a trap set by Priscilla.

Sphinx, who tried to take Abel away from Priscilla, was obsessed with her for some reason. And that attachment grew as she interacted with the captive Priscilla. Or perhaps Priscilla provoked her to do so.

Either way—

???: "—I, AM YOUR ENEMY, PRISCILLA BARIELLE!!"

Indeed, the tense atmosphere on the battlefield clearly showed how the Witch had received Priscilla's declaration of war.

Subaru could not laugh at this emotional conclusion, which seemed neither logical nor rational.

No creature could ignore the glare of the sun when challenged by it.

Priscilla: "Al, I shall entrust this place to you, Arakiya come."

Al: "—Hk, okay."

Arakiya: "Yes, Princess."

Al and Arakiya respond to Priscilla's short and compelling instructions.

One is entrusted with this place, and the other is asked to accompany her. Then Priscilla turned to someone who was neither of them: Subaru.

Priscilla: "Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru: "Oh, uh. Me…"

Priscilla: “Heroic reveries, is that what you spoke of?”

Subaru: “…”

The shock of being called by name again was easily overcome by the words that followed.

The resolve and determination was one exchanged between Subaru and Al that they had to keep carrying with them, that they had to fulfill in both the Empire they were in, as well as the world to come.

If someone were to ask, they would have laughed at what a foolish statement a weak person like Subaru and Al had made —but it felt like Priscilla would not laugh at it.

Priscilla: “—Do what you ought to do.”

Indeed, what Subaru felt was affirmed by Priscilla’s words.

Subaru felt Priscilla’s voice push his back, then his soul, causing him to fall silent. Priscilla, however, did not wait for a reply. She just said what she wanted and turned away.

As soon as Arakiya embraced Priscilla’s slender waist, their bodies flew up into the air.

And just like that, Priscilla flew away with Arakiya,

Al: “Princess! Please act like you always do!”

Priscilla: “’Tis only natural. Just who do you take mineself for?”

Al: “Priscilla Barielle! You’re my Princess!”

Priscilla: “Who belongs to you, fool?”

In response to Al’s words, Priscilla flew away, leaving behind a slight afterimage of her lips breaking into a smile.

Right after, Priscilla and Arakiya left Subaru and the others. —No, in actual fact, they did not exactly leave them. They moved away from the Witch that was being held captive there.

???: “…”

Subaru and Al both turned to look at the Witch, who was sitting leaning against a shattered wall. Her entire body, bound by a black light, was restrained from moving.

The seal was similar to the one applied to Roy Alphard, Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, who had previously been captured at the Pleiades Watchtower; but, it also gave off a slightly different impression.

Subaru’s role was to confront the Witch, her power now having been sealed.

Beatrice: “Subaru! There you are, in fact!”

Right after Subaru’s display of enthusiasm, Beatrice returned at the perfect time. Together with Roswaal, Beatrice welcomed her very much needed partner for this final phase of the game.

That partner was Spica, who flew in on Roswaal’s back along with Beatrice.

Roswaal: “Keeping both hands free is more reasonable for a magiiician~, but I don’t think it’s possible in this case, no?”

Beatrice: “How fussy, I suppose! Come on, Spica, let’s go, in fact!”

Spica: “Eao, Au!”

At Beatrice’s prompting, Spica kicked off Roswaal’s back, and landed on the ground at Subaru’s side. Stroking her head as she looked up at him, Subaru flashed a smile at Spica, her semblance one of amusement.

After that, he again held her hand and turned to the Witch.

And then—

Subaru: “Spica, I know you might have a bloated belly and heartburn, but I need you to give it another try please.”

Spica: “U!”

Spica responded to Subaru’s request in a hearty manner, smiling as if to show off her sharp teeth. Entrusting everything to her stout nature, Subaru looked at the Witch.

This Witch stared back at Subaru with the same face as the Witch who had the worst kind of nature in the world. Narrowing her black eyes, the Witch smiled, and opened her mouth.

Witch: “Will you be able to capture my soul?”

In her state of immobility, when it came to just matters of life and death, the Witch spoke those words while always keeping control.

In response to the Witch’s answer, Subaru thought of the sensation of Spica’s hand joined in his, the presence of Al nodding beside him, Beatrice and Roswaal working together to get rid of obstacles in Subaru’s way, the people who cooperated to save Priscilla from coming to ruin, and the warm flowers of ice that appeared at the end—

Subaru: “Don’t be mistaken. It’s not me who’s going to beat you, it’s us.”

Witch: “…”

After announcing that, Subaru and Spica took a step forward, closing the distance with the Witch.

Then, he and Spica reached out and touched the Witch’s cheek,

Subaru: “—Sphinx.”

In order to eat the way of being of the undead Witch, they threw down their challenge onto their final Star Eating.

4

—The moment that balls of light rained down one after another, Vincent took Medium in his arm, and jumped out from the uppermost floor of the Crystal Palace.

“Wahyah?!” Medium screamed, and as he pulled her slender waist close, she took care not to drop Madelyn, as they took off towards the outside.

At the same time, turning his attention toward the other person also present who he could not reach,

Vincent: “Olbart Dunkelkenn!”

Olbart: “Ya don’t gotta tell me!”

Immediately afterwards, the battery of the Magic Crystal Cannon, which Vincent, who was carrying Medium and Madelyn, and Olbart had jumped away from, was blown apart.

With the wind blowing strong from the high altitude, Vincent instructed Medium to “Hold on tight.” Ensuring that her arms were wrapped tightly around him, he kicked the wall forcefully.

Using the momentum from the kick against the wall, they evaded the pursuing heat rays of light, landing on the ground.

Olbart: “Oh, geez, that was a real close one. At this point, I’m thinkin’ the only thing I’m able ta do that the other shinobi can’t is dyin’ of old age.”

Vincent: “Indeed, I have never heard of such a thing as a shinobi dying of old age.”

Olbart: “For the old folks who can’t possibly be useful anymore, makin’ ‘em carry a magic stone and blow themselves up is a common tactic of the shinobi.”

Medium: “Come on! Stop talking about scary things and put me down! Put! Me! Down!”

Despite having lost both arms, Olbart was in good spirits; as he exchanged words with Vincent, Medium, flailing her arms and legs, dropped to the ground from his arms.

Thus, his hands now freed, Vincent regained his grip on the Yang Sword, and directed his gaze upward.

Thereupon—

Vincent: "—The Witch, is it?"

Within Vincent's field of vision, a woman with fluttering white hair descended upon the battery.

With the Magic Core lost, and a decent amount of the palace's magic crystals having been removed by a large-scale technique, the Witch still landed there, because that was where her objective lay.

Having moved Vincent and the others out of the way, just what was the Witch scheming?

Vincent: "—. Moguro Hagane, is it?"

Olbart: "Hmm? What're ya talkin' about, Yer Excellency? If it's about that Moguro fella, Balleroy snatched 'em up, ain't that right? And yet…"

Vincent: "Fool, what was taken away was merely the Magic Core. Within the palace, parts of the Meteor other than the core remain —"

Medium: "—! Abel-chin!"

With a sensation akin to a thunderclap, a possibility struck Vincent as a flustered Medium tapped him on the shoulder, pointing at the castle.

Before Vincent and the others, as the former grit his teeth at the stimulus, a new alteration was yielded in the Crystal Palace. — Slowly, the Crystal Palace itself began to stand up.

???: "…"

It was Moguro Hagane, the emblematic Meteor of the Vollachian Empire, known as the Crystal Palace.

With the Magic Core, which was the control unit and power source of the Meteor, having been removed, the explosion of the overloaded Magic Core extended into the far reaches of the sky where it had been carried away to.

In short, the individual recognized as Moguro Hagane of the Nine Divine Generals, was simply a single part of the enormous Meteor. Even during the battle for the Imperial Capital before the Great Disaster had occurred, Moguro had demonstrated the palace's true capability without fail—the original defense mechanisms to protect the Magic Core were still in place.

The Witch had exploited this. After the Magic Core had been lost, by forcibly activating the defense mechanisms that were no longer able to fulfill their original role, the Steel Giant—nay, the Magic Crystal Giant, was awoken.

Having stood up, the Crystal Palace—that which could have even been called the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier, while it shared similarities with Moguro Hagane as an individual, it exuded an incomparable aura brimming with malevolence.

Its huge body stood taller than fifty meters, and moreover, its structure was mostly composed of magic crystals, making it the equivalent of a gigantic walking bomb.

Vincent: "If we heedlessly interfere—"

The meaning of Moguro and Balleroy having staked their lives on the line would disappear.

Indeed, it was right after Vincent grit his teeth.

???: "Let us begin."

???: "Yes, Princess."

By no means was it a loud voice. Despite this, it was a well-projected one.

The moment after Vincent and the others wondered if something had passed over their heads, a mighty fist of flame clad in light—

that, which was ten meters in size, was unleashed, resolutely striking the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier.

A tremendous wave of heat spread across the sky and the ground, causing the battered Giant Soldier to take a large step backward, and the streets beneath its feet were smashed apart as if they had been swept away by a great army.

It was an exceedingly unorthodox blow, one that did not watch where it was going.

???: “I am told that I do not watch where I am going. As if mineself is thoughtless in the actions I take.”

Vincent: “…”

Medium: “Ah~! Priscilla-chan!”

The Giant Magic Crystal Soldier leaned back significantly, and the one who had unleashed the fist of flame that struck it was Arakiya, flying around midair at high speed while clad in the radiance of a diamond.

Then, letting go of Arakiya’s hand, landing on her feet, and flipping the hem of her dress, the woman—Priscilla, was pointed at by Medium, who announced her presence in a loud voice.

Medium: “Abel-chin Abel-chin, it’s Priscilla-chan!”

Vincent: “Even without raising your voice, we can all see her. — Where were you imprisoned?”

Priscilla: “How typical of you, elder brother, speaking in a manner such that this could never be construed as an emotional reunion. Mineself was in an alternate dimension. An alternate dimension, to which the Witch had carried away the entirety of the palace’s dungeon.”

Vincent: “I see; it is no wonder you could not be found. How did you escape?”

Priscilla: “By setting it ablaze, of course.”

Priscilla's straightforward response made Vincent feel a certain sense of satisfaction.

Considering what the Witch may have subjected her to while she was in captivity, she appeared in all her majestic glory upon this final stage—

Vincent: "—. Priscilla, you…"

For a moment, a sense of unease arose in the back of his mind, and he attempted to ask Priscilla for the answer. But, before he could formulate the question, the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier prevented him from asking.

Arakiya was circling in midair, perturbing the Giant Soldier with her extraordinary power.

In order to kill Arakiya, the entirety of the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier emitted light, and a fire of destruction was unleashed from what ought to be called its right arm.

It might not have been as powerful as the mighty blast of the Magic Crystal Cannon, but it was more than enough to blow away a single life, or half of the Imperial Capital, and targeting Arakiya as she flew through the sky, targeting her, targeting her—.

Priscilla: "—It comes."

As Arakiya was being fired upon, Vincent looked for an opening to intervene and provide cover; but, when he witnessed the same thing spoken of by Priscilla's words, he held his Yang Sword aloft.

At that moment, opposite to the right arm that was being aimed at Arakiya, a light of destruction was fired from the free left arm, and it was mercilessly directed toward Vincent and the others.

Medium: "…"

With Medium behind them, Vincent and Priscilla stood with Yang Swords at the ready. The dazzling crimson glow of the treasured swords became a rising flame, one that confronted the oncoming light head-on.

However, battle after battle, due to this conflict that never ended even if he kept burning the firewood of fighting spirit without respite, blood trickled down the hand in which Vincent held the Yang Sword.

Priscilla: “Why, is this not quite careless of you, elder brother?”

Vincent: “…You have been resting until recently, so muster up your courage for the moment.”

Priscilla: “My goodness, after having poisoned and killed your own sister, even after having driven her away from her own homeland, to think that you still would treat her so cruelly, how much like a Vollachian Emperor you have become, elder brother.”

At that exchange, a tit-for-tat in the midst of a life-threatening struggle against the light of destruction, Vincent bit down on his molars, and tensed his lips, which were about to loosen.

He would admit it. It was pleasant. His heart was elated at the return of the captive Prisca—nay, Priscilla. Even her merciless belittlement could be burned as fuel in the stead of his will to fight.

And thus, upon where Vincent and Prisca were holding their ground —

???: “—O child of mine own children, ‘tis a great service.”

That moment, an impossible third Yang Sword joined the fray, and after a beat, there was an explosion of light, putting an end to the struggle. The one who had accomplished that, swooping in fiercely, was the King of Thorns with a brandish of artistry.

With no trace of tarnish within his splendor, Eugard Vollachia had entered the battle.

Eugard: “Mine Star hath sent mineself to stand in opposition against the awoken Crystal Palace. The twinkling of the magic crystals shall be nigh impossible for all save the Yang Sword to handle. ‘Tis not a matter of thyselves being bereft of strength.”

Vincent: “Even if nothing is added by your presence, that is indeed so. I am grateful for your assistance.”

Priscilla: “Hmm. —The husband of mine Dear Mother’s soul, and the King of Thorns at that.”

Standing side by side, Vincent responded to Eugard’s words with one eye closed, while Priscilla looked at him through the lens of a deep emotion separate to that of receiving assistance.

Vincent also knew that Priscilla, a voracious reader, had read “Iris and the King of Thorns”. But then again, the knowledge in Priscilla’s possession would have been different from that of Vincent, who had been unaware of Yorna = Sandra and Iris = Yorna.

In any case, as Eugard’s eyes narrowed at Priscilla’s stare,

Eugard: “Thou too art a member of this generation’s Imperial Family, art thou not? Thou bearest the likeness of mine first wife… Terriola.”

Priscilla: “—Hmm.”

Priscilla accepted Eugard’s assessment with an unusual lack of words.

Vincent felt a slight sense of unease at Priscilla’s reaction, as she usually despised being compared with others. Never would he think that Priscilla would have the charm of getting excited to meet a character from a fairy tale.

Either way, Vincent, Priscilla, and Eugard were here.

Vincent: “Without an Imperial Selection Ceremony, three Yang Swords is beyond the realm of reason.”

Eugard: “Indeed, ‘tis true. Aside from being turned against one’s siblings, never has there been greater than one Yang Sword manifested. Much less, for that to be against an enemy of the Empire.”

As Vincent and Eugard said, it was a situation that should not have been possible.

This was a scene that had resulted from the Great Disaster which resurrected the undead, and from Vincent's outrageous defiance of the mechanisms of the Imperial Selection Ceremony, the struggle to become Emperor of the Vollachian Empire.

Priscilla: "To be so overcome with emotion for a journey approaching its end, mine elder brother and the King of Thorns truly have too much leeway."

Vincent and Eugard nodded to each other, and standing between the two of them, Priscilla snorted.

With her brightly shining treasured sword in her hand, Priscilla conducted herself as a majestic flame; at this, Vincent and Eugard looked at each other once more, then looked forward.

Medium: "Abel-chin! Priscilla-chan! Yorna-chan's husband!"

Behind the three of them, standing side by side, Medium shouted aloud as she fell back together with Madelyn in her arms and the injured Olbart.

Until now, in the scene, in the loudest voice she had ever shouted—

Medium: "—Do your best!!"

Receiving that, Vincent loosened the corners of his mouth, Eugard deeply nodded, and Priscilla looked up at the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier with her crimson eyes gleaming.

Priscilla: "A matter of course. —You ought to gaze upon mine sword dance in fascination to your heart's delight."

Chapter 74: Love

1

—What was necessary, was to take hold of that which was formless.

Though it was something that was certainly there, it was something that, when touched, would lose its original shape, fading into the distance as it passed through outstretched fingers.

Akin to water, akin to wind, akin to light.

Akin to heat, akin to shadow, akin to a dream.

The more one roused themselves to touch it, the more one feared they might break it, the further away it grew.

???: “Even if you try to touch me, you will not be able to catch hold of me.”

They could not touch the person who was right in front of them, even though they were already undisputedly touching them.

The legs planted upon the ground, the skin basking in the evening sun that illuminated the world in scarlet, the eyes attempting to stare at the opponent directly in front of them, the heat of the flame dwelling within one of those eyes; it could all be certainly felt, and yet.

???: “—Sphinx.”

Calling that name, the role of the Witch, who had plotted everything in hopes of becoming a disaster, would be devoured.

The heinous Authority, which had plundered the lives of many, sowed misfortune, and cloaked its catastrophe, would now justly be utilized to seize happiness, to restore the lives of many people.

In refusal of that, the Witch’s soul was, quite literally, assiduously pursuing a thousand transformations.

???: "…"

Through continually raising the undead, the Witch, Sphinx, had learned the nature of the soul.

In doing so, she had succeeded in reproducing the Witch of Greed, and by altering the nature of her soul, she acquired a means to escape both the flame of the Yang Sword, and the light of Star Eating.

It felt like an outrageous and aimless journey, like searching for a single needle dropped in a great desert, like searching for a Spirit that did not know words and had dissolved away into the atmosphere, like searching for someone who had plunged into the sea, something that did not exist in this world.

???: "You should never go sailing out to the ocean without a map and compass."

Behind Subaru, as he was about to challenge the final decisive bout of the Empire's upheaval, a man who came from his same world called to him.

Covered by a cold, iron helmet, he never displayed his true face. Likely, his eye—Al's eye, was blazing just like Subaru's was, alight with a flame.

At those words of Al's, Subaru realized he was not in a position where he could really rely on himself.

It was as Al had said. If you knew that you were standing in a desert, that you were looking out onto an unfamiliar world, that you were floating upon a great ocean, then you could not afford to be reckless.

???: "—Uau."

The small hand that was holding onto his right hand asserted its presence with heat and touch.

The reason why he knew Spica was there, was not just because they were holding each other's hands. It was because before they had even made contact like this, he had clashed with her many a time in an attempt to understand her.

Again and again, in the endeavor to understand this incomprehensible girl, Natsuki Subaru had—.

Subaru: "My map, is my heart. And my compass, is the two of you. —Spica, Rem."

The more he reminisced, his first days when he was sent to the Vollachian Empire had truly been the worst.

Unable to rely on anyone, he was pushed away by Rem, who he had wanted to stay close to, and was kept close to Spica, who he had tried to keep at a distance; all the while, he had kept on walking, having lost sight of his path.

And yet, even without her memories, Rem was still Rem; even with her past, Spica was still Spica; thus, no matter where he went, what he did, or who he met, Subaru could not be anyone but Subaru.

Subaru: "—Sphinx."

Calling her name so, his hand entwined with Spica's, he attempted to touch the Witch's soul.

—The power of Star Eating, was that of a wish.

'Twas a selfish wish, one that sought salvation from others, imploring the convenience of trying to save someone by means of a power that had only ever served to plunder and disdain, akin to making a wish upon a shooting star.

Yet, that was precisely why, precisely because it was a wish entrusted upon something that was not inherently so, it had to be made in sincerity.

It was not a matter of simply calling upon a name. To truly know somebody's name, and call it out, was to declare that you would rise to the stage with them, and participate in their life.

???: “In that case you absolutely must look your best! Every second of life is lived upon a grand stage to shine! Everyone is an actor, everyone has been cast in a role, so everyone has an obligation to speak iconic lines! Is there such a thing as lines that are fine with not sticking in the hearts of all? Is there such a thing as acting? No such things exist!”

To a stranger, what words must one say to be noticed?

To a stranger, how many times must one reach out their hand to be remembered?

To get someone’s attention, suppose to even touch someone’s soul, naught would commence without first going from being strangers to being acquainted.

For one to let somebody know who they were, he knew of the best method.

???: “My name is Emilia. Just Emilia.”

Indeed. Ahh, of course. Not you, nor yourself. Not me, nor I.

—This was a dialogue between Natsuki Subaru and Sphinx.

Subaru: “—Sphinx.”

No longer was that just a reckless call in order to touch their soul, but rather, it was an appeal to get their attention.

At the timbre that differed from all that had come before, the Witch—nay, the woman who had been walking through a vast desert, crossing through an unfamiliar world, and drifting through a great ocean in order to escape from him, had now turned her attention to him; this he knew.

Subaru: “…”

Although they had been close enough that he could feel her breath, only now did he lock eyes with her for the first time.

No matter what face she wore, as long as he ignored her feelings, he would be unable to reach her deepest place.

Such a natural and commonplace form of communication, would now be put to use in the final showdown of the Empire.

Subaru: “My name is Natsuki Subaru. It’s a name derived from the stars. —What’s yours?”

2

The assortment of three Yang Swords that lay beyond the realm of reason, and the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier that stood in the way of the Empire’s tomorrow.

Each concealed extraordinary power as they clashed against one another, and the setting sun befalling the Empire was overturned by the sun upon the surface that rejected all notions of dusk, its radiance shining light upon the whole Imperial Capital.

Giant Soldier: “…”

The magic crystals sinisterly gleamed, and their unleashed light of destruction colored the streets of the Imperial Capital in darkness, but, without having exchanged any words, the Sword Wolves had scattered to three different directions, and managed to evade it in an agile manner.

The vegetation and flowers that had basked in the shadowy light of the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier were brought into a state of suspended life, and in the midst of that, the King of Thorns dashed up to the rooftop of a building, and targeted the leg of the inorganic golem that was the Giant Soldier.

The dazzling brandish of the sword moved to mow down the defenseless leg of the Giant Soldier—it was deflected by a firm impact.

???: “Hoh, so you were shy enough to cover up your bare skin?”

Protected by the sword of her ancestor, the King of Thorns, the Sun Princess laughed. Her crimson eyes had ascertained the deployment of white cloth weaved with Mana to protect the colossal body of the

Giant Magic Crystal Soldier.

Unlike the Steelman Moguro Hagane, was it not rather a Witch or a woman who would clad themselves in clothes?

???: “Ready yourselves!”

Contrasting the Sun Princess as she laughed so, the Wise Emperor shouted with a rigid expression.

Immediately after, an enormous shimmering sword sliced down, and its afterglow attempted to hunt down the enemy bustling about its legs, tearing through and reshaping the streets of the Imperial Capital in a range of over one kilometer.

That act had been performed by a pillar of magic crystals held in the arm of the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier.

It was one of the pillars that had been constructed around the Crystal Palace at a height matching that of the Giant Soldier’s, and as it was transformed into a deadly greatsword with a blade of fifty meters, its sense of scale was such that it would not lose out to the Yang Sword.

However—

Sun Princess: “Very well. Flashiness is to mine liking.”

Thrusting the Yang Sword into the blade of the brandished magic crystal greatsword, the Sun Princess rode upon it.

The swung tip of the sword was raised to a height of over one hundred meters off the ground, so she glared into the head of the Giant Soldier—the former battery of the Magic Crystal Cannon, and the site that had become the current throne of the Witch.

The throne had become like a closed flower bud of magic crystals, and she was unable to make direct eye contact with the Witch.

In that case, until she could tempt the Witch to look at herself—

Sun Princess: “How about I show you some dazzling "entertahinmunt"?!"

That instant, in response to the scintillation of the Yang Sword, the magic crystal greatsword in the Giant Soldier's hand burst into flames in the blink of an eye.

With the purple swell of an inferno, the fifty-meter-long pillar of magical essence turned into light, dazzling the eyes of the world.

Of course, by burning the greatsword, she had lost her foothold, so the Sun Princess was falling headfirst towards the ground—extending a white arm towards the heavens, the heavenly maiden caught the Sun Princess out of the sky with a flap of her wings of fire.

Sun Princess: "It is a great service."

The praise of the Sun Princess produced a smile upon the heavenly maiden's cheeks, and granted power to her heart. As the two soared through the sky pulling the bands of light behind them, the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier drew out a second greatsword, and moved in an attempt to slash forth—

King of Thorns: "'Tis to Mine Star and mine peoples, that I dedicate this brandish—"

Wise Emperor: "Do not look down upon the apex of the Sword Wolves!"

Aiming for the slender torso of the Giant Soldier, two streaks of swordlight slashed obliquely upwards from its left and right.

The combination technique of the King of Thorns and the Wise Emperor destroyed the cloth deployed to protect the body of the Giant Soldier head-on, and with a white flash, the swords were relentlessly driven into its large body.

As the treasured swords struck the magic crystals, a pleasant tune of shattering resounded through the skies of the Imperial Capital as if a scream from the Giant Soldier.

Giant Soldier: "…"

Making a creaking noise, the greatsword shattered, and the entire body of the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier began to fissure. While that was proof that it was being cornered by extraordinary beings, it was also the impetus for the Giant Soldier to revise its fighting style.

Through the countless cracks formed throughout its body, it began to shine, and in the next moment, aiming in every direction with quite literally no blind spots, the rain of light—nay, the undodgeable mist of light was unleashed.

If it was raindrops, then there was the Sword Saint, Blue Lightning, and Admirer who could evade it.

But, if that were to become particles of mist, then even those transcendent beings would have trouble evading.

Therefore—

Wise Emperor: "—Yang Sword, Vollachia."

Sun Princess: "—Yang Sword, Vollachia."

King of Thorns: "—Yang Sword, Vollachia."

One point in the sky and two points on the ground; for a total of three points, the treasured swords of crimson, which had increased their radiance, birthed a wall of flame. By means of a scintillating flame that scorched anything it made contact with, the misty drizzle of light that gouged out anything it made contact with was painted over.

They had defended against the Witch's destruction, however, the fissures throughout the body of the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier expanded, and just as a snake would shed its old skin, the Giant Soldier exfoliated a purple gleam, and its radiance grew a level deeper.

As to not allow the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier to fire off its next move, an undulation of power differing from that of the Yang Sword spread out—slowly, as if giant unseen fists were being drawn out of the ground, the buildings that made up the cityscape of the Imperial Capital rose out of the ground; ten, twenty, nearing a total of one-hundred, they surrounded the Giant Soldier.

The one who had done that, was the heavenly maiden who was holding the Sun Princess with one arm, and directing the other towards the Giant Soldier—

Heavenly Maiden: “I, am the princess’s dog.”

Sun Princess: “A splendid attitude to possess.”

Immediately after, the maelstrom of buildings swirled, storming towards the body of the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier as if to sink its teeth into it.

In response to that tempest, the Giant Soldier reached out and grabbed a magic crystal pillar in each of its arms, and taking a dual-wielding stance of greatswords, its colossal body began to rapidly gyrate above the waist—it performed a sword dance of destruction, ruination, and pulverization.

As an exceedingly mighty sword dance, it not only cleared away the onslaught of buildings, but also became a tornado permeating with the mist of light, attempting a triumphant return to the Imperial Capital of Lupugana.

Wise Emperor: “Just how many times in this day am I to witness the end of this world?”

Before the unimaginable storm of swords, the Wise Emperor heaved a sigh, however, moving forward with his sable gaze not the slightest bit deterred, he put his blade against the gale devastating the Imperial Capital, the Empire, and the entire world.

Simultaneously, the blades of the Sun Princess and the King of Thorns overlapped with the Wise Emperor’s aim, and together, they brought the tempest of swords to a halt.

Wise Emperor: “—Hk.”

Blood spilling from his lips as he grit his teeth, the Wise Emperor took on the burden of splendor as he held his ground. Appearing before the two who had similarly defended against the sword storm, the resonance of light and power began to engulf the tempest of swords in flames.

The tornado clad in violet light was scorched by the flame of the Yang Sword, and gradually shifted in color. The droplets of mist within the blade maelstrom began to spark, and before long it was transformed into a pillar of fire tall enough to pierce the heavens.

It was superb to the utmost degree. To think such a thing could be accomplished by the incomplete Yang Sword, unable to display its true value—

Wise Emperor: "…"

Tightly grasping the Yang Sword, the Wise Emperor narrowed his eyes at the rising pillar of fire. He stood before the brilliant blaze of flame, the force of its fire having strengthened by a noticeable amount.

He had done so while fully understanding that in the midst of battle, halting one's legs and diverting one's attention to the act of thinking was a foolish deed.

Immediately afterwards—

???: "—Love me."

The scorched sword tempest of light was perforated, and the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier, without any time for respite, jumped out. The brandish of the Giant Soldier's greatsword was parried by the kick of a tall geta.

A beat later, basking in the resultant gust of wind, and switching over to a brilliant manner of beauty and dance as she waved the hem of her kimono mid-air, was the Flamboyant, harboring a flame in one of her eyes.

Flamboyant: "…"

Still targeting the Flamboyant, who was unable to move in the midst of the air, the Giant Soldier attempted to scythe upwards with the greatsword opposite to the one that had been parried. However, that too, would not connect.

King of Thorns: “I shan’t allow thee to lay hands upon Mine Star so easily.”

The intervening King of Thorns swept the Flamboyant into his arms, and receiving the attack head-on with the vertical stance of his Yang Sword, he blazingly cut through the blade of the greatsword.

The afterstory to “Iris and the King of Thorns”, resurrected in the present day; as a result of that, the tip of the greatsword bounced off the ground, damaging the Imperial Capital as it flew from north to south.

Immediately after their attention had been turned to the south of the Imperial Capital—a white light beamed north through the city.

???: “—PREAHHHHHH!”

In the southern sky, flapping its white wings, the Dragon, clad in the very essence of an overcast sky, roared.

Disregarding the values of life and death, the Cloud Dragon who only fought for the sake of their beloved changed sides, sent forth a breath in opposition to the ruination.

Taking that head-on, the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier was knocked back a great deal. Being pushed back, the Giant Soldier thrust its sharp feet into the street and held its ground; resonating with the remaining magic crystal pillar, a shrill noise was produced as the pillar was shattered into countless small swords, and they began to set up a formation of swords so as to protect the Giant Soldier in a manner similar to the white cloth from earlier.

Even now, the Witch’s, the Great Disaster’s will to fight had yet to back down. In that case, the same could be said for this side.

Wise Emperor: “…”

Present at the absolute center of the Vollachian Empire’s all-out war, the Wise Emperor slightly directed his attention outside.

Even if he was limited in ability, even if he was aware that he was a weak individual who would easily be blown away, the man who could not stop himself from participating in situations where others were risking their lives was nowhere to be seen.

Wise Emperor: “No matter the case, it is likely that you have also gone and thrown yourself into a reckless battle.”

Placing a certain sort of trust and expectation into his words, the Wise Emperor heightened the radiance of his treasured sword, and as he glared at the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier brimming with insidiousness, he stepped forth.

Wise Emperor: “Advance, O Generals of mine selection. —In the eyes of the Great Disaster, we are naught more than inconsequential garbage.”

3

—Natsuki Subaru and Spica faced off against the Witch, Sphinx.

As Subaru and Spica strove to seize the soul of the vindictive and tenacious Witch, Al’s mission was to keep the enemy at bay so as to prevent any interference.

???: “Ah, bring it on! Nobody’s gonna beat me or the Princess!”

Spurring himself on while roaring thus, Al continued to swing his improvised dao.

Behind Al, Sphinx was seated with her back against the wall, and flumped before her with his legs crossed was Subaru, who remained facing her head-on.

What Subaru was attempting to do in cooperation with Spica was an idea beyond the pale even for Al.

Hearing of the terrible idea of relying on the Authority of Gluttony had made Al question their sanity, but in fact, discerning that Subaru would be able to do it, Priscilla had ordered them to proceed.

If that is what would lead to the future, then Al would support them to his utmost. And ensure that it was achieved.

???: “Ul Goa.”

From above Al’s head, Roswaal flying freely across the sky rained down fire.

Though it was not the highest level of magic, casting that much magic in rapid succession was no ordinary feat. However, even his extraordinary magical prowess was unable to overwhelm the opponent he was presently attempting to restrain.

???: “Ul Huma.”

Countering the pouring rain of fire, was a barrage of water that had been shot into the sky from the ground.

In terms of number and effective range, both being the world’s top-class users, this was magical warfare at a level rarely seen in modern times—The Magician and the Witch had each turned the world into their ally, double-crossed it, and used it against each other wantonly.

Though Priscilla had vociferously asserted her presence, it was not the case that all the Witches had been drawn to her like moths to a flame. Some of the Witches, realizing that the Yang Sword was not the only thing they needed to fear, had joined in this juncture.

However—

???: “If that’s how it is, so be it, in fact!”

With the appearance of a young girl and the movements of an athlete, Beatrice, with her right eye aflame, had cast Yin magic.

Instantly, her upraised hands birthed a pale purple haze over the whole area, slowing down the movements of the attacking Witches as well as the undead that, lacking self-awareness, had impulsively charged forth upon her command.

Al took advantage of that nice assist from Beatrice with great vigor.

Al: “Your stars were bad!”

The exquisite magic control weakened the enemy, bestowing a period of invincibility solely upon Al. As he beheaded the pitiable undead one after the other, at Beatrice who had supported him, Al winked through his helmet.

That very moment, at the wink that should not have been visible to her, Beatrice had a change of expression.

Beatrice: “This is bad, I suppose!”

At her words, Al turned around with a “Huh?”, and saw something—a massive fragment with a purple glow, in the scale of tens of meters, hurtling towards them as it skipped across the ground.

Al had no idea that this was the slashed-off tip of the great sword wielded by the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier that Priscilla and the others were fighting. What he did know, was that a direct hit from that fragment, would result in Al along with Subaru and the others behind him altogether becoming minced meat—

Al: “Must—”

Escape with Subaru and the others from the trajectory of the flying fragment.

How many attempts would be needed, he did not know, and neither did he have the time to make such an estimation. Everything was more of trial and error at the precipice of life and death rather than empty theory.

Al: “Update Matrix, Thought Experiment—”

???: “—Don’t’cha give up jus’ like that!!”

A moment later, a powerful arm plunged into the fragment that looked as if it were passing by Al, intercepting it.

A roar and a torrential wind escaped behind him, but the flying debris was held in place. It was Garfiel who did it, biting his sharp canine teeth.

Garfiel: “Sorry for bein’ late, Beatrice! Captain…”

Beatrice: “You did well meeting us in fact! Protecting Subaru and Spica is our win condition, I suppose.”

Garfiel: “Yes ma’am! I get that loud n’ clear! Just like, “If ya whisper of love, follow in the example of the King of Thorns.”“

Kicking at the huge piece of debris that he had stopped, Garfiel punched his fists together in front of his chest. Garfiel also had his eyes, not figuratively but literally, burning and his whole body was filled with vigor in response to his will to fight.

???: “—Retreat: Required.”

A quiet voice announced the Witch’s entry into the battle, and Al and the others looked up to see a scene of swirling lights in the sky. It was as if the vortex of light had some kind of gravitational pull, with the surrounding buildings and debris floating up, being swallowed by the vortex, and then crushed and turned into specks of light.

The power of destruction was felt in the specks of light themselves, and all it needed was the Witch to speak, and they would raise the ground—

???: “—Halibel-sama, please would you kindly,”

???: “That’s fine. I’m always happy ta help a hard workin’ girl.”

Suddenly, two different voices were heard, and in the next moment, a cannonball in a kimono—no, a deer girl, flew by.

The girl spun herself in the air and kicked the Witch’s back just as she was on the verge of raining down the specks of light. The momentum and force of the kick shattered the poor Witch in half.

Halibel: “Yep yep, that’s a great feat. With a girl like you, the future of the Empire’ll be in good hands.”

With the same momentum, the girl was about to dive into the vortex of light but was saved just in time by the jet black wolf man.

The wolf man neutralized the vortex of light the Witch had prepared with a quick piercing hand, softly catching the girl with the same hand before he landed to the ground.

The same wolf man who threw the girl and the same wolf man who caught her was responsible for her confusion.

Al: “A new monster has joined the fray! A Cecilus type?!”

Halibel: “Can’t deny that, but that’s an unpleasant way of classifyin’ me.”

Girl: “It has been a while. I am sorry to be presumptuous, Cecilus-sama and Halibel-sama are so different in their nature that it would be disrespectful. —Why don’t we protect Schwartz-sama?”

Al: “Oh, Yeah. You’re quick on the uptake! And I’ll definitely welcome strong guys. Let’s protect Bro together!”

Halibel: “Yea. Looks like we’re almost at the endgame, n’ it looks like we even received this boon.”

Tanza, a girl in a kimono seen in the Demon City—greeted the wolf man Halibel. Both of them had Priscilla’s blessing in their eyes as a flame, which was very encouraging.

Additionally—

Beatrice: “I don’t know where this came from or from who, but we just received the perfect gift, in fact.”

Saying this, Beatrice touched a huge piece of debris with her small palm. —The rubble that Garfiel had stopped was not just a piece of rubble, but a block of magic crystal stone.

Beatrice disassembled it into Mana in one swoop, and about a hundred swords made of amethyst crystals appeared all around her at once, and the sword dance began with the movement of her hand as she lifted it.

Beatrice: “Betty will use her abundant Mana in this way, I suppose. You guys, if you so much as leave a scratch on Subaru, you will be mercilessly punished in fact.”

Tanza: “If that were to happen, I will be the one to deliver Beatrice-sama’s punishment!”

Al shrugged when he saw both Beatrice and Tanza’s sparking gazes.

—It seemed like Subaru’s unharmed state should also be included in the updated matrix’s conditions, he thought.

4

Thus, protected by Al and the others, Subaru was engaged in the utmost extremity of concentration.

He was not unconscious, nor was he in a dream. Nevertheless, the battle unfolding in his vicinity was outside the realm of his consciousness, and his consciousness itself was not within the Imperial Capital.

At the present moment, the whereabouts of the existence known as Natsuki Subaru resided not in the the wartorn Imperial Capital, but instead in a world of white, where none were present save himself, Spica, who was holding his hand, and Sphinx, who was facing the two of them directly.

—It was a space that could easily be mistaken for that Hall of Memories.

Subaru: “For me, I guess it’s mainly a place of bad memories.”

It was the place to which he had once arrived without meaning to, the place where his Memories had been devoured against his will.

The memories of giving Emilia and Beatrice a thoroughly difficult time, and of putting Ram and Julius into a state beyond repair, were still fresh in his mind.

Above all, this was the place where “Natsuki Subaru” had no choice but to disappear.

Subaru: “But, that’s exactly why I can be here in my entirety.”

Spica: “Uu?”

Subaru: “You don’t need to know about this place. As far as you’re concerned, it’s quite a bit of a mess. And that’s fine.”

Smiling at Spica’s puzzled expression, Subaru proceeded to take a deep breath.

A white, tranquil space; the reason why Subaru was facing Spica and Sphinx in this place, was not because they were all companions whose names began with the letter S.

It was because all of them harbored a deep connection with the “self” whom they were not, and had thus wanted to converse as mutuals with no outsiders present.

Sphinx: “Sphinx, is the name of a monster that was in my creator’s knowledge.”

Subaru: “Hm? Ah, the derivation of your name.”

Sphinx: “Indeed. If my creator’s desires had been realized from the beginning, I would have ended up going by the name Echidna. Since that did not happen, the need arose for a different name.”

Directly facing him, Sphinx told Subaru about her name’s origin in a surprisingly calm manner.

The Sphinx—as Subaru knew it, was a monster with the body of a lion and the head of a man. It guarded the pyramids and gave off the impression that it was good at giving riddles.

Subaru: “Four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening… Do you know what this is?”

Sphinx: “—? Would it not be a monster? Or a shape-shifting monster, perhaps.”

Subaru: “You’d think so. By the way, the answer is actually a human.”

When he told them the clichéd riddle, both Sphinx and Spica frowned. It was as if to say they were not satisfied with that answer, but he would have liked to direct their complaints to the other Sphinx who had devised the riddle.

In any case—

Subaru: “Thanks for telling me that. In exchange, I have something I want to show you as well.”

Sphinx: “You want to show me something?”

Subaru: “Yeah. —Although I’m not sure if you’ll be happy with it.”

After prefacing that, Subaru smiled faintly and then glanced at Spica. As if to allay Subaru’s apprehensions, she lifted her hand, still holding on to his, and gave an “Uu!”.

This was Spica’s yell of encouragement, saying she had come to terms with her own “self” a step ahead of Subaru.

—When one closed their eyes in the Hall of Memories, they could strongly smell their own scent.

It was just something he had heard, but apparently memory and smell were closely intertwined. Many memories were associated with smell, so that may have been why the Hall of Memories gave such an impression.

In any case, following his own scent as he walked through the faux Hall of Memories, Subaru tried to slowly reel in that which was uncertain, and bring it to that which was certain.

Amidst his many Return by Death attempts, Olbart, who had lost both arms, apologized that it would be difficult to undo the infantilization with a casual tone of voice—So instead of an apology, Subaru sought instruction.

His vessel and soul were eager to return to normal. Thus, all that remained was to let scent guide his way.

If he could do that—

Subaru: "—My name is Natsuki Subaru. Throughout Heaven and Earth, the one and only broke beyond compare."

Indeed, the voice, which was cracking foolish jokes, became a little deeper and lower. His eye level changed, and the feel of Spica's hand in his grip suddenly became smaller.

However, it was the opposite of that. Spica did not shrink. —Subaru, had changed.

Subaru: "…"

It was an intuitive change. His soul had been in a constant state of trying to return to its own original form.

By means of the growing pains from his heart and soul going from child to adult, flowing through his nerves and veins, the deep emotion Subaru felt upon accomplishing that quite literally seeped into each and every cell in his body.

And thus, having regained his self in a sense absolute, Subaru went face to face with Sphinx once again—nay, he went face to face with her for the very first time.

Sphinx: "—Nice to meet you, Natsuki Subaru."

Intuiting Subaru's intentions, Sphinx, having observed his transformation, spoke greetings upon their first meeting. Upon hearing that, Subaru thought perhaps she was quite capable of talking things out after all.

With his restored mind, body, heart, and soul, Natsuki Subaru thought so.

Subaru: "But, we have to settle things nonetheless."

Sphinx: "Indeed, that we must. —Parting: Required."

Subaru: "…Why is that?"

Sphinx: "What do you mean, why?"

Subaru: “Why, did you try to do everything all on your own?”

That was Subaru’s honest question.

The Witch, Sphinx, gave rise to the Great Disaster to destroy Vollachian Empire, toying with many lives, and had carried out a mountain of deeds that were likely inexcusable. But, had it truly been necessary for her to do so?

If Sphinx’s purpose lay only in the reproduction of her creator—the Witch of Greed, then.

Subaru: “There must have been different ways that you could have gone about it. You ended up picking the wrong one. If only you hadn’t done that, we could have…”

Sphinx: “Are you suggesting that we could have avoided fighting? That would not have been possible. Reconsideration: Required.”

Subaru: “Why not?!”

Sphinx: “Because there was a motive other than the reproduction of my creator, certainly present within myself.”

Looking down at herself, Sphinx smiled faintly as she proclaimed a definite distinction.

That smile, perceiving it as a proof that Sphinx was celebrating her very own sense of self, Subaru could no longer oppose her standpoint.

But, at the same time, Natsuki Subaru definitely, clearly located it.

Spica: “Uau.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know. —Thanks, Spica.”

Spica called out to Subaru, as he bit his lip. She probably would have liked to react to Subaru returning to his original size, but she endured that, and had thoroughly concentrated

He wished to respond to those feelings. —Even if he had to go to

Hell to do so.

Subaru: “—Sphinx.”

Sphinx: “What is it? No matter what you say or do, I—”

Subaru: “Happy Birthday.”

As he declared so, he touched Sphinx, whose eyes were wide at the unfamiliar congratulations.

And then—

5

Basking in the wind which carried a pleasant evening fragrance, Priscilla gave her cheers to existence itself.

She had been elated by the symposium between Sphinx, who, using the mechanisms of the Crystal Palace Meteor, had gone berserk with the upstood Giant Magic Crystal Soldier, and the Generals, who had been assembled by Vincent.

She wished to continue beholding it, as a dream that one would not wake up from, as a program that would not come to a close, as a story with no “endhing”.

However, since that childish “iigo” was not appropriate for the curtain falling on this battle—

Priscilla: “In a manner most befitting, it is I who shall lower the curtain.”

Saying that, Priscilla let go of Arakiya’s hand as they flew above the clouds, and began falling through the sky.

Plummeting straight downwards, Priscilla returned the Yang Sword to the sheath of the sky, and basking in the setting sun with her arms spread out, she closed her eyes.

Even if she could not see them, the souls of those with whom she had shared the flame of her soul were transmitted to her as if whispered intimacies from the world.

Arakiya, clad in bands of light, repelled the Witch's magic, and the Dragon, covered in armor of cumulus, contained her so that the damage would not spread outside of the city. Standing harmoniously with the husband she had reunited with, Yorna was busy smashing up the ground in a radical expression of love, having no qualms about sharing in her daughter's eye.

And, as an incompetent older brother, the Vollachian Emperor, Vincent Vollachia—

Vincent: "Tardy."

With a brief utterance, he undauntedly looked up at the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier with his sable eyes. The Giant Soldier raised its two magic crystal greatswords overhead, and was about to attempt cutting down the apex of the Empire along with the entire Imperial Capital.

Thereupon, from behind Vincent came Lightning, piercing through —

???: "—Bear witness, Observers of the heavens above. —Witness the choices the world shall… nay! Witness as it chooses me!"

Two streaks, one the white gleam of a blade, and the other a black light of severance; the flash of blades capable of severing the light of stars and the logic of curses bolted through the sky.

With that, the omen of the Imperial Capital's devastation, the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier had its arms lopped off from its shoulders. With a thunderous tremor and eruption of smoke, the brilliance of the magic crystals was reduced to dust, and the flash of the Dream Sword and Fiend Sword severed their existence.

Even so, the Giant Soldier, having lost its arms, still wielded the countless swords floating in its vicinity, and was attempting to prune the defiant will of the Empire.

Of course, that aim also included the falling Priscilla.

???: “—Priscilla Barielle.”

Enough to paint over the hue of the sky, the light of ruination forcibly shone through her eyelids. Sensing that it was approaching herself, Priscilla opened her eyes, and reached her hands out to her left and right sides.

The next instant, Priscilla caught the Yang Swords of the Wise Emperor and the King of Thorns in her right and left hands respectively, and with a swing of the twin swords, she scorched the Witch’s magic crystal swords to naught in one fell swoop. The swords, bursting into flames in a chain reaction, swirled about the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier, blanketing the sky in a crimson curtain of flame.

Priscilla: “…”

For a moment, Priscilla’s figure disappeared from everybody’s sight —the figure of the Sun Princess perforated the curtain of flame, and shot directly towards the sealed magic crystal bud within the Giant Magic Crystal Soldier’s head.

It was an act accomplished thanks to the three Yang Swords—riding upon her own Yang Sword, which had been launched out of the sheath of the sky, Priscilla soared with the Yang Swords of her brother and forefather in hand.

—The Yang Sword upon which Priscilla rode, its tip thrust into the magic crystal bud, and tearing through the closed flower petals, it made its way inside.

???: “—Priscilla Barielle.”

That instant, the barrage of light orbs, intended to intercept her, was cleared away by the King of Thorns’s Yang Sword.

As flame enshrouded her field of vision, Priscilla stepped down onto the floor and advanced.

???: “—Priscilla Barielle.”

Simultaneously, stepping past the flames which enshrouded her vision, Sphinx rushed forth with a sword of light in hand.

The two met gazes, and Priscilla burned away her opponent's sword with the Wise Emperor's Yang Sword.

Sphinx: "—Priscilla Barielle."

Eyes burning with fury, Sphinx had called out her name many times, to which Priscilla smiled. Perceiving that smile within her vision, Sphinx leaped backwards, and readied her two hands.

Birthing ten blades of light upon her fingers, she rampaged about within the bud; reflecting irregularly off of the inside of the magic crystals, the kaleidoscope of Death gleamed with beauty.

At the chaotic and emotional scintillation, Pirscilla raised both her hands towards the heavens.

Then, gripping the treasured sword protruding beyond her outstretched hands—

Sphinx: "—PRISCILLA BARIELLE!"

Priscilla: "That, is mine name."

Within the sonorous bellow of that voice, there was a certain heat, tinged with enmity. Thereupon, Priscilla swung down the brilliantly dazzling Yang Sword.

—The flash of scintillating flame, that light reminiscent of sunrise or daybreak, of a new dawn, ardently shone upon her life. As the interior of the magic crystal bud was illuminated, it began to bloom.

That was to say, the sprouting of a soul—

Priscilla: "You ought stand proud, Sphinx."

Sphinx: "…"

Priscilla: "As none other than your very self, you have fulfilled the role of mine enemy. —It is a great service."

Adjusting her posture after swinging the Yang Sword, Priscilla spoke thus to Sphinx, who stood before her. Receiving that, Sphinx narrowed her black eyes, and,

Sphinx: “…Despite having failed to succeed, is that so?”

Priscilla: “A matter of course. Just whom do you take mineself for?”

Scoffing at the question, Priscilla responded so.

At her answer, Sphinx lowered the edges of her eyebrows, and heaving a sigh with an expression that had lost its sternness,

Sphinx: “Priscilla Barielle. —The fateful enemy of myself, the Great Disaster, Sphinx.”

As a being who had found meaning in her existence differing from the original reason for which she had been created, she smiled.

—That was the conclusion between the Sun Princess, Priscilla Barielle, and the Great Disaster, Sphinx.

6

Once, before, she had nearly perished.

At that time, too, there was an objective she had been unable to fulfill, however, she accepted with equanimity that things would come to an end without her achieving it; as calm as night would be as it received the setting sun, her inner feelings were of no value.

With that in mind, what about now?

???: “Just like before, I am disappearing without fulfilling my wish, and yet—”

Her heart was like that of a child, eagerly yearning not for the setting sun, but for dawn, daybreak, the rising sun; she could feel it beating within her body devoid of pulsations, alight with a definite “ardor”.

And thus, that was undoubtedly the true nature of the foul “ardor” that had radiated within the eyes of the cold, parched monster that had been bound to that place for decades; she had been taught so.

???: “Thank you. For teaching me who I am. —Gratitude: Required.”

Her undefined, uncertain, and ambiguous self was established as “herself”, and even though that was quite far removed from what she had initially thought she had to become, she was not against it.

Once again, it shall be stated. This existence, born as a monster, was no substitute for the Witch of Greed.

And so, now that she was disappearing without having fulfilled her desire, a desire that was hers and hers alone, she spoke thus.

???: “—Ahh, how frustrating.”

7

???: “—Sphinx.”

As Subaru called out her name, Spica, having touched her soul, devoured her way of being.

The moment Star Eating had been activated, welling up within Subaru was a peaceful sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, along with a feeling of loneliness. It was, perhaps, something close to the kind of loneliness felt at the end of a dinner filled with laughter.

Truly fulfilling, and yet just a tiny bit unsatisfying; it was that kind of moment.

???: “…”

He had congratulated her on being born as her own individual life, and with that same mouth, he had helped devour her.

However, that was not out of hatred. Neither was it that he wanted to make her suffer, nor dishearten her. There was just no other way for this to be settled.

The resolution between Subaru's group and Sphinx; this was the only way it could be.

Spica: "Uu!"

With a rustling sound, Sphinx was turning to dust as she disappeared. As Subaru witnessed her demise, Spica, who had helped him to bring it about, called out to him.

To Spica, too, words of gratitude and appreciation were in order.

Subaru: "Besides, now that the enemy's top brass is no more, Abel and the others will also—"

It was at the moment he said that, and was about to stand up.

???: "—Subaru."

The voice, unexpectedly heard, ignored Subaru's eardrums and cranium, and resonated directly within his brain.

That had always been the case. That beautiful voice of a silver bell, had always laid Natsuki Subaru bare. And, having made the exposed Subaru turn around, it had brought with it the urge to burst into tears.

Subaru: "…"

Unable to speak, as Subaru stood up and turned around, the red evening glow illuminated his eyes. That sunset, which had brought with it the afterglow of victory, had now become a hindrance. —For within that light, there was a face he longed to see.

Her long, silver hair that resembled the dew drops of a night sky's moon, and her eyes of amethyst, the most beautiful jewel in the world; from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, there was not one bit that he did not find lovely.

Spica: "Uau."

Subaru was almost in tears from the impulse that had welled up within him, and Spica, who had let go of his hand, patted him on the back.

With the touch of that palm providing the impetus and the courage, Subaru broke out into a run.

Passing by Al as he gave him a thumbs up, being seen off by Halibel as he puffed his tobacco smoke, patting the shoulder of Garfiel as he bawled his eyes out in Subaru's stead, poking the cheek of Beatrice as she held back her urge to jump onto him, giving a wry smile to Tanza as she characteristically deeply bowed her head, he was then covered by Roswaal, who had descended from the sky, took off his jacket and draped it over him.

Roswaal: "Subaru-kun, aren't you compleeetly~ naked?"

Having grown back to his original size, Subaru's clothes from his childlike state no longer fit. If this had been his original world, he would have lacked the clothes needed to go buy clothes.

But, this was not his original world; this was another world, one in which Subaru now lived.

???: "Suba—"

The girl who had broken into a jog to rush over to him from the other direction had tried to open her mouth, but Subaru, without slowing down, went ahead and embraced her outright, rendering her silent.

With his arms now at their proper original size, tightly hugging her slender body—

Subaru: "—EMT."

Emilia: "…Stupid."

Subaru had embraced her head-on, and Emilia, who was slightly surprised, smiled knowing that there was no helping it.

Of course, he had also been elated for their reunion in the Vollachian Empire. Being able to touch her again after having been separated, Subaru had keenly felt the depth of his feelings for her from the bottom of his heart.

But, as expected, this was different. —Now, in mind, body, and soul, this was Natsuki Subaru.

Emilia: “Welcome back, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yeah. —I’m back, Emilia-tan.”

Thus spoke Emilia, who had perceived that same fulfillment of Subaru's soul.

And then, in the distance beyond the two sharing in the joy of their reunion, the Crystal Palace dazzlingly burst into flames.

—For the Great Disaster of the Vollachian Empire, which had gone on for a long, long time, that had been the closing ceremony.

Curtains Close:
Priscilla Barielle

1

—The Great Disaster averted, the Sacred Vollachian Empire had at last escaped ruin.

With the Imperial Capital at its center, the hosts of undead that had deployed throughout the entire Empire lost its leadership, and fell apart; as they scattered and fled, the battle approached its curtain's close. However, even though their commander, Sphinx, was no more, and the Mana that had been provided to the Sacrament of the Immortal King by the Stone had been severed, until they were granted death once more, the resurrected undead still struggled onward with the entirety of their new lives.

Although the struggle against the Great Disaster had concluded in this manner, the scars it had been left behind would never disappear.

It was quite possible that, from here on out within the Vollachian Empire, the undead that had managed to escape would frequently cause trouble. Even without that, even with the war itself having ended, everything that had been influenced by it would never truly be put right once and for all.

Naturally, the towns and regions that had become warfronts, and the people and things that had become casualties, would all need to be verified so that they could be processed and returned to their pre-war state.

And sadly, things such as "heroic reveries" were of no use to the post-war recovery.

???: "So, it's unexpectedly true that I've got nothing to do…"

???: "—What was that? Do you have complaints towards mineself?"

???: “It’s not that I’m complaining, it’s just, like, a strange feeling?”

As Subaru grumbled that out, walking alongside him was a beautiful woman—Priscilla, and he had carefully selected the words that he directed towards her profile. In response to Subaru’s reply, she used a fan she held to cover her lips, a small “Hmph” slipping from her mouth.

To that response, one he was well-accustomed to, Subaru tilted his head in wonder as he walked alongside her.

—Presently, the place in which Subaru and Priscilla were walking together, was within the walls of the Fortified City of Garkla.

The greatest fortress within the Empire, its ramparts had become extensively damaged by the advance of the undead hordes, with the citizenry and army unquestioningly working day and night to move forward the repair work. To walk alongside Priscilla in such a cityscape, it was a strange happenstance.

Both Subaru and Priscilla had been participants at the battleground of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana in the decisive bout against the Great Disaster, Sphinx, and it was their anxiety for the wellbeing of those that they had left behind, and the disastrous spectacle of the Imperial Capital, unfit for settlement, that had prompted their return to this city.

Priscilla: “The Crystal Palace, once extolled as the most beautiful in the world, is now naught but ash, and the water yet contained within the reservoir still threatens to cascade forth and sweep away the city. As things stand, it shall take a century to restore the Imperial Capital.”

Subaru: “Things there were on a pretty huge scale… hold on a sec, should the person responsible for turning the palace into ash really be saying that?”

Priscilla: “As soon as it began to rampage as a golem, even without mine actions being enacted, the recovery of its palace form was no longer a possibility. As such, mineself used it as a ceremonial flame to herald their send-off, for they had fully carried out the role of

Great Disaster.”

Subaru: “—A ceremonial bonfire for Sphinx, huh.”

Priscilla responded calmly, and as Subaru thought about the enemy, Sphinx, he cast his eyes downward.

This was not something that anyone who participated in the battle against the Great Disaster could say, but at the very end, in order to activate the effects of Spica’s Star Eating, Subaru faced off against Sphinx directly.

At that moment, Subaru and Sphinx had laid their souls bare to one another.

That was probably why. Subaru could not hate Sphinx, and regard her as evil from the bottom of his heart. At least, she was not an unforgivable enemy like the Sin Archbishops, that was what he felt.

And it was something similar to this, which he thought Priscilla may have felt—.

Priscilla: “It was a truly magnificent pillar of flame. After all, it is truly elating to see something burn.”

Subaru: “Nah, what if it’s just that you like to burn things?!”

Priscilla: “My, so noisy. Do not suddenly use such a loud voice. That is just like Al, is it not?”

At first glance, it sounded like an insult, but Priscilla’s lips were curled into a smile as she spoke. It was a difficult relationship to grasp, but she cared about her Knight, Al, in her own way.

That much could not be questioned after the reunion of Priscilla and Al at the Imperial Capital.

Subaru: “And, on that note, Al wouldn’t want to be separated from you, so where is he right now?”

Priscilla: “It is as you say; as he did not wish to be separated from mineself, he was ordered to be a servant. At this time, he should be working hard as he salivates for mine praise. Just like you, who is head over heels for the half-devil."

Subaru: "I can't and won't deny it, but I feel bad for how Al is being used…"

???: "—Priscilla-sama!"

Hearing a voice say "Oh", Subaru raised his eyebrows, and with a small run across the opposite side of the street, a small boy—Schult's figure came into his sight. The small boy in shorts and a butler's outfit was breathing heavily, coming to a sudden halt in front of Priscilla, and,

Schult: "Um, Priscilla-sama, thank goodness you are safe, that is the most important thing! I am… I really am, so… waahhh…"

Priscilla: "A child should not be concerned with such foolish trifles. If you are worried about mineself, then be so with dignity."

Saying this, Prisicilla embraced Schult, who had come to a halt, the young boy's head becoming buried in her breasts. Rather than a metaphor, the statement that he was buried in her breasts was a fact, so it felt like looking at a difference in biological species rather than a difference in gender.

Like Al, Schult was one of Priscilla's servants, and he had been truly worried about her return from the Imperial Capital, his face turning red as he melted into her touch.

In fact, for him to be this delighted at the return of the Imperial Capital group—the "Rescue the Vollachian Empire from Destruction Squad", it had been worth hastening the dragon carriage for their return.

Subaru: "It was also worth it since as soon as I reunited with Patrasche in this form, she immediately hit me…"

Schult: "Natsuki-sama, I was hoping that you could convey my thanks to Emily-sama! Also, I would like to help Priscilla-sama more, so I wish to hear the secret behind how you grew up so fast!"

Subaru: “I’d love to see Emilia-tan’s smug face when she receives as much gratitude as possible, but my rapid growth is a cheat technique. If you go down the normal route but grow quickly, then I think you might die from the growing pains.”

Priscilla: “Regardless, you need not recklessly grow any taller. Stay the way you are for the time being.”

Schult: “Uuu, I am caught between a rock and a hard place…”

Caught between his own wishes and the desire of his master, Schult’s anguish was plain to see on his face as he was caught between these competing ideals. Subaru, understanding his feelings towards Priscilla which could not be attached to just deep affection or admiration, sympathized with his anguish.

Subaru: “Well, even if I sympathize with you, I can’t give you any advice!”

Priscilla: “Rather than a fool, you are a pitiful man. Schult, are you walking by yourself?”

Schult: “No, that is not the case! I was with Utakata-sama and all the Shudraqians, so I…”

In the middle of Priscilla’s breasts, the buried Schult glanced behind him. Following the lead of this glance, he discovered a recognizable, sour-faced man—Heinkel.

Subaru was aware that he had come to the Empire, and that he had contributed to fighting against the Great Disaster, but.

Subaru: “Schult, that old man isn’t bullying you, is he?”

Schult: “That is not the case! Heinkel-sama is a kind personage!”

Subaru: “That’s definitely a lie.”

Even if it was your relative, it was not good to spread false perceptions. Saying that Heinkel was kind, was like saying that Roswaal was a good and honest person.

In fact, even Heinkel seemed to be bitter about Schult's evaluation.

Heinkel: "Pipsqueak, don't say needless things. I'll cast you away."

Priscilla: "Do not utter such nonsense, commoner. It is for mineself to decide how Schult is handled. Rather, it is you who ought be afraid of being abandoned in the Empire."

Heinkel: "Guh…! This time, I, against that… against, that, I…"

Priscilla: "Was of use? If you wish to boast so, at minimum you must speak clearly."

Towards Heinkel's frown and mumbling, Priscilla spoke with a bored look. She then turned Schult away from her chest, pushing him towards Heinkel.

Priscilla: "Schult, there are many people I must still visit. It is late. Do not stay up into the night."

Schult: "I… I understand…! I feel somewhat unable to sleep, but I shall do my best to get some rest!"

To Schult, who was still excited, Priscilla nodded with a "Very well". After that, she looked towards the one close to Schult, towards Heinkel, who was unable to speak.

Priscilla: "It was a great service, Heinkel Astrea."

Heinkel: "Ah?"

Priscilla: "Your way of life is too unsightly to bear gaze upon, but the ability with the sword that you have forged is a worthy sight. Absolutely, even if you are never rewarded, you must never forget your diligence."

Heinkel: "…Though, whether I get rewarded or not is up to you, Miss Priscilla."

Saying this, Heinkel turned away, roughly scratching at his red hair as he walked away.

To that distancing back, Subaru called out with an “Old man”, and,

Subaru: “I heard you saved Garfiel. —You looked after my little bro.”

Heinkel: “—Keh.”

With his foul attitude, Heinkel walked away without stopping. Schult bowed his head, hurriedly chasing after his back after seeing them off, while Subaru shrugged towards Priscilla.

Subaru: “You didn’t give me a proper answer when I asked this before, but why are you with Reinhard’s dad?”

Priscilla: “There is no such person known as the father of another. It is a question I have no inclination to answer.”

Subaru: “Ugh… When you tell me that so straightforwardly, my chest begins to hurt.”

When Subaru clutched at his chest, Prisiclla poked at his head with her fan and said “Fool”. As Subaru rubbed at where he had been poked, Priscilla lightly stroked her chin.

Priscilla: “Well now, are you trying to bore mineself? Perform your duties as a jester well, Natsuki Subaru.”

Once again she called him by his name, yet for some reason, he had no desire to go against it.

2

???: “Have the two of you come to engrave a frown onto my face while I am occupied?”

Thus asked Abel, brow as wrinkled as his words suggested, upon seeing Subaru and Priscilla arrive.

This room in the great fortress, albeit not sophisticated enough to call an office, had served as Abel’s workspace for a restless night of urgent planning in regards to postwar measures.

A great shift in tone from having brandished the Yang Sword along with Priscilla against the moving palace.

Subaru: “Man, it’s incredibly off-putting for you to be tough now. There’s no way we’d be able to have another catfight.”

Vincent: “I have never wished to partake in such bizarre rituals with you. If your purpose is to distract me with these trifles, exit at once.”

Subaru: “You say you want no distractions, but…”

Subaru glanced at the sofa beside the desk where the inhospitable Emperor tended to his task. There, Flop and Medium slept shoulder to shoulder in harmony.

The O’Connell siblings’ cozy reunion evoked a striking contrast next to the Emperor.

Subaru: “I don’t see you kicking those two out.”

Vincent: “…They guarantee me further nuisances if I rouse them; that is why.”

Priscilla: “You do not disappoint with your pretexts, elder brother. Your leniency manifests in its full glory when faced with what is most precious. When you had allowed me to flee from the country, that too had been an act of love.”

Abel was silenced by Priscilla’s calm words, spoken as she fanned her face.

That could have been interpreted as a silence that would have emerged no matter what had been said, a silence that had emerged precisely because the words had hit the mark, or even both.

Subaru: “You siscon Emperor…”

Vincent: “Albeit I know not the meaning, I presume that those words of yours are the height of irreverence.”

Priscilla: “Cease with the empty threats. Due to the Great Disaster on this occasion, the Empire has forged far too many debts towards the Kingdom and the City-States. Especially towards the camp of Natsuki Subaru's bunch, is that not so?"

Subaru: "Priscilla… it's not my camp, it's Emilia-tan's."

It was a rare follow-up on the part of Priscilla, but he had to firmly correct her on an important part. Priscilla returned a "You are quite well-trained." with an expression slightly taken aback, and Abel silently massaged his brow with his fingers.

"Woah," uttered Subaru when he witnessed Abel proceed to close both eyes.

Vincent: "—What is the matter, Natsuki Subaru? Do you intend to pile up even more irreverence towards me?"

Subaru: "Nah, not this time. Not like I want trouble with you, and since you're busy, I should just leave."

Pouting his lips, Subaru did not point out the fact which he had noticed. He did not think Abel to be unaware of it, either. That was because the reason and impetus for that change, had occurred in a definite form.

And, it seemed that Subaru was not the only one who considered that a pleasant change.

Vincent: "I extend that to you, Priscilla. I have many matters due."

Priscilla: "So you put the Empire above your dear sister? With a decade passed, have the scales within yourself finally come to a settlement, elder brother? If that is so…"

Vincent: "What?"

As Priscilla cut off her words, Abel made a slight frown. In front of Abel, Priscilla pinched the hem of her dress, and gave a deep bow where she stood.

And then—

Priscilla: "—Seventy-seventh Emperor of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, Your Excellency Vincent Vollachia. From the bottom of mine heart, I celebrate your ascendance to the throne."

Vincent: "…"

Priscilla: "To the utmost, laboriously endeavor to lead the pack of Sword Wolves. For the time being, the days bereft of respite shall only continue."

Delivering words of congratulations with a serious expression, and then a warning with a bold smile, Priscilla spoke to her elder brother. At the attitude of his sister, whose tempo was as per her whims, Abel—Vincent Vollachia heaved a sigh.

Then, glancing towards the O'Connell siblings, sleeping on the sofa with their shoulders pressed against each other,

Vincent: "Priscilla. —In this entire world, only with you, sister mine, could I prescind from mistrust."

Priscilla: "Ever so sinuous you are, brother mine, even in your confessions of love."

Concealing a provocative smirk behind her noisily-opened fan, Priscilla interpreted Abel's statement. Subaru found himself in total agreement with her.

If there was only one thing that a third party could add onto that—

Subaru: "From my perspective, you two siblings resemble each other to an aggravating extent."

And in saying so, Subaru took the brunt of those cognate siblings' matching, unamused glares.

3

???: "Were you speaking with His Excellency Vincent, Priscilla?"

Priscilla: "Hm, Dear Mother, is it?"

After having their fill of two kinds of sibling relationships within the Empire, one team Imperial Family and the other team merchant, Subaru and Priscilla ran into Yorna in a passageway of the fortress, along with Eugard, who was accompanying her.

It appeared that they were heading to Abel's room, as if they had business to attend to with him.

Yorna narrowed her almond-shaped eyes, and fixedly gazed at Subaru and Priscilla. Subaru had thought that it was because she found this pairing to be unusual, but he was wrong.

Yorna: "It is only my first time seeing it, but I find it will be quite the challenge to get used to seeing you with your limbs lengthed like this, child."

Subaru: "…Ah! Now that you mention it, Yorna-san has only ever seen me in my cross-dressing and shota forms?!"

As the astounding truth emerged, Subaru was shocked at his own abundance of variation within the Empire. At Subaru's shock, Yorna placed the back of her hand to her mouth, and while smiling,

Yorna: "Your Excellency, this personage is a Knight of the Kingdom. Until just the other day, he had been shrunken down to the form of a child, and during our first meeting together, he was in the form of a beautiful lady."

Eugard: "Hm. For Mine Star to sanction such an appraisal of beauty in thyself, I shan't say that mine interest hath not been piqued."

Subaru: "No no not at all, please stop with that kind of stuff. Though, Natsumi Schwartz is a noble-minded lady who wouldn't be embarrassed at showing herself off to anybody…"

Priscilla: "Although your skills are praiseworthy for a foolish commoner, your self-esteem is quite distorted."

At Subaru's answer, which tread the line between composed and passionate, Priscilla gave a comment in a fed-up manner. Afterwards, she casually turned her attention towards Abel's room, Priscilla: “For what reason are you visiting mine elder brother with the King of Thorns, Dear Mother?”

Eugard: “‘Tis because the time that remaineth for mineself is meager. Before that reacheth its terminus, I wish to discuss matters pertaining to the wishes of Mine Star with the child of mine own children.”

Subaru: “Time remaining…”

At Eugard’s response, Subaru looked towards Yorna, who looked pleased.

—Eugard was present here with Yorna with a natural attitude, but he was still one of the undead. Like Sphinx, his appearance was by no means inferior to that of the living, but that fact would not sway.

Eugard: “In all likelihood, mine newfound sense of satisfaction towards mine own life hath borne an influence upon mine appearance. As for mineself, rather than sharing in an embrace with Mine Star via a body in which heat doth not flow, this is much preferable.”

Priscilla: “Albeit it may be a linkage of soul rather than blood, you unashamedly boast of your love towards a mother right before her daughter. I suppose that is exactly what one would expect from the King of Thorns, but… what is this about mine Dear Mother’s wishes?”

Yorna: “—. It is in regards to the shackles upon my soul, endlessly invoking its reincarnation.”

The outline of Yorna’s quiet words was something which Subaru only knew of on a surface level.

Yorna was formerly a girl known as Iris who was bound to unending resurrection; each time she died, her soul would return to the surface without receiving the baptism of Od Lagna, and she would reincarnate into her next body.

Therefore, what Yorna desired from Abel for her contributions in the civil war and against the Great Disaster on this occasion, was—

Yorna: "—I wish to repeal it. To annul the decree of extinction put out by the Empire in regards to the wolfpeople and the molepeople."

Subaru: "Eh…"

Yorna: "All along, such had been my desire… though, when I became a Divine General, I had prioritized acquiring the Demon City, so as to have a location to welcome my beloved children."

Priscilla: "—I see. In order to bind your soul, Dear Mother, the two races that are the wolfpeople and the molepeople, their bodies and lives, which have been piled up since times of yore, were being utilized, and if that supply were to be severed, the curse would disappear naturally."

Eugard: "And in those days, 'twas none other than mineself who had passed the decree. If a request cometh from mine mouth to the Emperor of the current age, matters shall be settled with no harm befalling the honor of Mine Star and the child of mine own children."

Saying that, Eugard turned a tender gaze towards Yorna, who was hugging his arm.

In that moment, Subaru understood that deep within the eyes of the King of Thorns's invariant expression, there were smoldering sentiments of shame and remorse that had spanned many years.

"Iris and the King of Thorns"—within the tale recited in this world since times of old, he did not know just what sort of drama had occurred between him and her.

However, supposing it had ended in tragedy, this was its after story.

Subaru: "In that case, I think it's good so long as you at least have an epilogue with a nice aftertaste."

Priscilla: "Then we are of differing opinions. There are plenty of superfluous acts that can be taken in the afterlife to make things redundant."

Subaru: “You! Listen! Here! Alright…!”

Prsicilla, who was supposed to be the daughter of one of the parties involved, despite it being a complex relationship, had attempted to stir up discord, so Subaru was about to scold her to read the mood. But, before he could do so, she continued with “But”,

Priscilla: “If it is the King of Thorns and mine Dear Mother, no such tactless acts shall be taken.”

Eugard: “—. As ever, thou bearest Terriola’s likeness. Dost thou not think so, O Star of Mine?”

Yorna: “Now that you mention it… it is no wonder I find her to be so lovely.”

Priscilla: “Do not conduct such speech akin to comparing mineself with those other than mineself. If it were not you and your husband, Dear Mother, I would not pardon it.”

Being told so bluntly by Priscilla, a smile formed on the lips of both Yorna and Eugard.

It was a strange relationship, and although this was not the case in reality, from the outside looking in, they seemed like an intimate mother, father, and daughter, so Subaru scratched his cheek with a somewhat awkward feeling.

At Subaru’s gesture, Yorna smiled, saying “It seems we have caused you tedium”,

Yorna: “I shall go now with His Excellency. Priscilla dear, you mustn’t bicker with the child.”

Priscilla: “I do not treat him as a child. To begin with, if this foolish commoner angers me, I shall simply lop his head off.”

Subaru: “Don’t say such scary things! Well then, Yorna-san, Eugard-san, until we meet again.”

As Yorna and Priscilla had an exchange befitting a mother and daughter, Subaru called out to Eugard. —He had said “until we meet again”, but he felt like this would be the last time.

The other party must have also thought the same thing. The former Emperor looked directly at Subaru, and spoke.

Eugard: “Thou ought spend thy days of virtue together with those whom thou lovest. May good fortune and happiness be upon both thee and thy star.”

4

???: “Wow, to see Subaru and Priscilla together, It’s reaaally surprising.”

???: “It truly is ain’t it. There’s plenty that we need to get done, so it’d be trouble if it rains tomorrow.”

At Anastasia who, after saying so, had turned to gaze out the window at the night sky, Priscilla snorted with a “Hmph”.

Having had the opportunity to talk to many people, they had stopped by the lounge for a glass of water, and had unexpectedly come across Emilia and Anastasia, who were seated at a table, facing each other.

Since their adventure to the Pleiades Watchtower, such a pairing could no longer be considered peculiar. Rather, like how Emilia was surprised, it was much more surprising that Subaru was with Priscilla.

In any case, what was this pair with different roles, one the brains and the other the brawn, doing here?

Emilia: “Well, actually, Otto-kun scolded me, saying I shouldn’t work anymore today…”

Anastasia: “First of all, it ain’t all that good for us to be meddlin’ in the Empire’s post-war proceedin’s now is it? So I thought, why not chat a bit before we rest… and whaddya know, Emilia-san’s been braggin’ ‘bout Natsuki-kun non-stop.”

Subaru: “Eh, talking about me? Emilia-tan has? Lemme hear, lemme hear.”

Hearing of some intriguing girl-talk, Subaru leaned forward. However, with Subaru’s collar having been grabbed from behind, he shrieked out with a “Gweh!”.

As expected, the one who had done so, quite capable of decapitating Subaru let alone strangling him, was Priscilla. She let go of Subaru’s collar, and glared at Emilia and Anastasia as if to rein them in,

Priscilla: “A half-devil and the she-fox, both fellow candidates in the Royal Selection, meeting face to face, and the topic of discussion is the exploits of a foolish commoner? Time is not to be spent so worthlessly. Even counting the stars would be marginally less objectionable.”

Emilia: “Ah, I get it. When I was alone in the forest, I would sometimes do that to pass the time…”

Anastasia: “As for me, I’ve spent long hours countin’ the money I’ve saved up.”

Subaru: “Hey, hey, it’s not good to let the topic of conversation veer off like that because of Priscilla’s thoughtless words.”

To say that one should be counting stars instead, was a rash comment on a level of telling them to just give up on everything and just go to sleep. Of course, if it were the stars, Subaru could spend countless hours searching for constellations, but that was beside the point.

As he tried to prevent that retort from rapidly spreading the conversation into the realm of the night sky, Emilia suddenly laughed with a “Hehe”.

Emilia: “Still, it feels reaaally strange doesn’t it. Me, Anastasia-san and Priscilla-san, we’re all candidates for the Royal Throne, and yet all of us are in the Empire like so.”

Anastasia: “If only Natsuki-kun hadn’t been so careless as to be sent away from the tower, none of this would’ve happened.”

Subaru: “That was beyond my control, besides, if I hadn’t been sent away, the Empire would likely have been destroyed.”

Although in no way did it make up for the event that started it all, considering the scale of the Great Disaster, those words had not been far from the truth. It was not to say that he had liked being sent away, but that it had served a purpose.

But then again, Priscilla would likely snicker and scoff at such a reasoning—

Priscilla: “—Indeed that is so. Without you lot, the history of the Empire would have come to an end yesterday.”

Subaru: “Wah!”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Anastasia: “Oh?”

Priscilla: “No need to gasp like fools. It was but a statement of an obvious fact.”

That was all there was to it, was what Priscilla had said, but the fact that it was her who had said it, had surprised Subaru and the others.

At those unexpected words from Priscilla, Anastasia chuckled saying “What’s this now”,

Anastasia: “How darn surprisin’. Didn’t think ya’d be so upfront ‘n admit that we helped ya.”

Priscilla: “Do not misunderstand. In the first place, the Empire was Prisca Benedict’s homeland, and thus is no longer the homeland of mineself. The responsibility for the survival of the Empire rests upon the Emperor and the army that bows to him.”

Anastasia: “Had only just thought so, but there she is. Yep yep, if the Princess ain’t this way, she wouldn’t be a worthy rival.”

Emilia: “Geez, Priscilla is such a contrarian, so don’t tease her,

Anastasia-san.”

Subaru: “Who even says “contrarian” these days…”

At that very Emilia-like assessment, Subaru chucked, with equal parts exasperation and admiration.

However, it was not as though he could not understand Emilia and Anastasia’s feelings. Previously, Priscilla had been such an unknown entity to Subaru, like an alien creature he could not fathom.

And although he had acknowledged her strength and insight, the nature of her humanity seemed like that of a carnivorous beast that could not be reasoned with.

That impression he held of Priscilla, he felt it had changed a lot over these past few days in the Empire.

Subaru: “Right now, just like Emilia-tan and Anastasia-san, as well as Crusch-san and Felt, I can recognize Priscilla as a Royal Selection Candidate well.”

Priscilla: “For what reason would I be in need of your recognition? Watch your mouth, foolish commoner.”

Emilia: “There you go again with that harsh way of speaking… but, we also had briefly spoken about that. Right?”

Emilia had clasped her hands before her chest, and Anastasia, whom she had called out to, smiled softly.

Anastasia: “Ya know, that whole thin’ at Pristella? At the time, I hadn’t invited the Princess over ‘cause I felt there wasn’t a reason to, but…”

Emilia: “Then next time, let’s invite Priscilla too. Especially since she’s a Royal Candidate, like us.”

Priscilla: “Foolish commoner, it seems your master is unaware of what sort of event the Royal Selection even is.”

Subaru: “She’s cute isn’t she? Behold, my angel.”

Although a vacation was not the intention behind the meeting of the candidates in Pristella, from the way Emilia would see it, she must have felt bad about Priscilla seemingly having been excluded from the gathering.

That said, rather than a situation where the Witch Cult goes on a rampage, a vacation would be much better.

Subaru: “If it does come to that, let’s go someplace where we can have a swimsuit vacation next time.”

Anastasia: “‘Bout his desires, ain’t Natsuki-kun a straightforward child. Well, not like I ain’t gonna consider it. Of course, if the Princess says she’s fine with not bein’ invited, we ain’t gonna invite her, right?”

Emilia: “Priscilla…what do you think?”

Anastasia had been provocative, while Emilia was timid like a small animal. As expected, at the invitation from the two beautiful girls who were also Royal Candidates, Priscilla shrugged her shoulders.

Priscilla: “Do as you please. If it shall amuse, then very well, if not, ‘tis poor. No reason in particular for mineself to refuse.”

Emilia: “—! Yes, let’s do that. We’re all in a difficult position, and we all have very many things that worry us but… I don’t see any reason why we all can’t get along.”

Anastasia: “Whenever Emilia-san’s involved, everythin’s all mellow, it’s a bit troublesome.”

Priscilla’s answer could not be taken as being enthusiastic, but the way Emilia had taken it, made it sound like she had been chomping at the bit, and Subaru nodded in agreement with Anastasia’s thoughts.

Priscilla as well, seemingly not bothering to correct her, looked up at the night sky—

Priscilla: “—A lass from the slums and a Duchess, as well the she-fox of the City-States and an amethyst-eyed half-devil.”

Emilia: "—? Priscilla?"

Priscilla: "'Tis no matter of significance. I merely had the thought that, when listed out like so, it sounds akin to characters starring in a poorly penned tale."

Subaru: "That "poorly penned" was unnecessary. In the first place, I don't think you're in any position to talk."

Priscilla, basking in the wind, held the position of a supposedly deceased Princess of the Empire. As for a title that could spice up the story, hers was more than flashy enough.

After responding in that way, fearing his words might have truly angered Priscilla, Subaru's heart had lurched. However, that was a needless fear—Nay, it was far from a needless fear.

Priscilla: "—No doubt about that."

Saying so, Priscilla brought the tip of her fan to her lips and laughed.

Just like a girl in the midst of chatting with her friends, she laughed in a relaxed manner.

5

Somehow losing the chance to part ways, Subaru continued to walk around with Priscilla through the Fortified City.

Subaru had worked far too hard today, by his own admission, and the same could be said for Priscilla and the many others who continued to move energetically around the city.

Of course, most of them, like Subaru, were probably in too high spirits to sleep.

Subaru: "Don't tell me that they're all undead who don't know what it means to be tired…"

???: "—What stupid things are you talking about?"

Subaru: “Woahoa?!”

In a daze, he looked out over the stone walkway to the cityscape below, where his comments were overheard by the people passing by.

Moreover, someone whom he did not want to overhear him—glaring at Subaru, was Rem.

With a pail of water in her hands, Rem seemed to be one of the people who could not sleep either.

Subaru: “So, are you still assisting in treating the injured? I know you’re working hard, but working too hard isn’t good either. You should learn from Nee-sama, who takes a rest as soon as she gets tired.”

Rem: “I could say the same for you. No, rather, if you don’t have work to do, isn’t it your job to return to your room and quietly rest?”

Subaru: “What a shrewd argument…! I mean, it may not be a job, but there are things that I also have to do.”

Subaru answered Rem in a whispered voice, pointing his fingers together in front of his chest. Rem’s pale blue eyes turned stern at his attitude, and Subaru’s courage waned more and more.

Then, as if reaching out a helping hand to Subaru—nay, simply to express her displeasure at the sight, Priscilla sighed,

Priscilla: “It is no great matter. As you can see, his arms and legs are slightly longer than what they were in the form of a child. Because of this, it is difficult for him to face those whom he was involved with as a child.”

Subaru: “It’s redundant for my legs to still be short after I got bigger! You’re right about both things, though!”

When Priscilla nonchalantly expressed those sentiments, Subaru bit his sleeve and sounded a “Gaa!”.

Subaru had an important task ahead of him—to tell everyone in the Pleiades Battalion that he had returned to his original form, just as Priscilla had said.

Although Subaru's comrades had been with him since his stay at the Gladiator Island, he had never once confided to them that he had been in a shrunken form. In fact, he had never revealed the truth about being the illegitimate child of Abel, the Emperor, which meant that he had been lying all this time.

Subaru: "If I reveal it and everyone despises me, I'll never recover… I'd rather Natsuki Schwartz to have died an honorable death in battle…!"

Rem: "If you tell a lie like that, I will despise you. Are you fine with being despised by me?"

Subaru: "I'd hate that as well. I wouldn't be able to live if you hated me, Rem…!"

Subaru whined as his heart was battered between Rem at the front gate and his Battalion at the rear gate. Rem sighed at the situation and suddenly noticed Priscilla's gaze on her.

Priscilla, with arms crossed to emphasize her breasts, called out "Rem" to her,

Priscilla: "Your expression has changed during our time apart. The healing magic that had caused you such anguish seems to be of some use."

Rem: "Yes, I have had many opportunities to practice what you told me, Priscilla-san… Also, thank you. That gentle fire that shared your strength with all of us after the star was shot down… that was something from Priscilla-san, right?"

Priscilla: "Hmm. What makes you believe that?"

Rem: "—. It's intuition. Maybe it's because of the time I spent with you, Priscilla-san, even if it was only for a short time."

Pulling the water pail closer to her chest, Rem replied to Priscilla.

Rem's smile was full of confidence, despite her words, and Priscilla also smiled when she saw it.

Priscilla: "Very well. It seems that your heart of diamond has been pierced. I deliver mine praise."

Subaru: "Um, well, Rem, actually, when the city was in danger, that star thing, it was me and Beako who shot it down, what do you think about that? Well?"

Rem: "Hah?"

Subaru: "I'm sorry for butting in I apologize so please just praise Beako later."

Wanting to be praised as much as Priscilla did, Rem gave him a scornful glare. Subaru was reluctant to back down, but Priscilla had a point.

Rem seemed to stand tall now, to the point that the expression "heart of diamond" was apt. He thought that her reunion with Ram, Petra, and others and the presence of her friend Katya had a big part in that.

Subaru: "Besides that, you can tell me more about what you and Priscilla were doing while I was gone."

Rem: "…More or less, once everything is taken care of."

Subaru: "Ah, in that case, I'll help you treat the injured and anything else. You can let me carry that, too."

It was not his intention to put off talking to everyone in the Battalion, but it would be unthinkable to leave the busy Rem alone, even if he were tired.

When Subaru offered, Rem said, "In that case", and offered him the pail of water.

However—

Rem: "—No. It's fine after all."

Subaru: “Huh?! D-Did I do something to offend you?! Am I being too considerate, am I being unpleasant?!”

Rem: “It’s not quite that. Not that, but… it’s because if you come with me, Priscilla-san will be alone.”

Subaru: “No no no, in that case why don’t you let Priscilla help you treat the injured?”

Rem: “Are you sane?”

Subaru: “I know you’re exaggerating, but what I said wasn’t a statement of sanity!”

Subaru reflected on the unbelievable things he was seeing. However, it was strange that Rem refused his help because of Priscilla.

In the first place, the fact that Subaru happened to be with Priscilla now was just by chance, not for any deep reason.

If Beatrice and Spica would have kept him company, his night would not have turned out like this.

Subaru: “But, Beako and Spica both got held up by experts in Spirit and Authority-related matters…”

Rem: “Then, in that case, I’ll stay with Priscilla-san—”

Priscilla: “Rem, there is no need for such idiotic consideration. I can manage to walk around with the likes of this foolish commoner.”

Subaru: “See, I know it’s weird to say this, but you’re the one who started dragging me around in the first place!”

He had been taken out to play the role of a jester, and thus ended up a certain clown exclaiming as such.

However, Rem ignored Subaru’s plea and stared directly at Priscilla. Rem was still searching for the words that were not formed even in her mind, Rem: “I don’t want you to be alone, Priscilla-san.”

Priscilla: “—. So that was your answer that emerged after some time? You are a girl who does not understand.”

Rem: “But now, this pain in my chest, it doesn’t hurt anymore, thanks to you.”

Rem’s response was something that Subaru did not understand.

Perhaps it was part of an exchange between Rem and Priscilla that Subaru did not know about. Upon receiving it, Priscilla paused for a beat, gave a small snort, and,

Priscilla: “Strive well, Rem. O daughter of the Oni. —For there are roles that only you can carry out, wishes that only you can grant, and a future that only you can achieve.”

Rem: “—. Priscilla-san?”

Priscilla: “Come, foolish commoner. Since Rem requested it, I shall take you with me especially.”

Subaru: “I’m not really satisfied with that, but, where to?”

Ignoring Subaru’s convenience with dignity, Priscilla indicated the outside of the corridor with her fan. It was not the view below that Subaru had seen, nor the starry night sky, but something in between—the walls.

The city walls were all damaged in the siege, though fortunately, they had retained their original form. However, they did not seem to be a place where anyone or anything was to be found.

Priscilla: “Rem, follow thy own heart. For although your heart may ripple, those ripples shall never be unseemly.”

Rem: “—Thank you.”

After indicating their destination, Rem and Priscilla once again spoke of something Subaru did not understand.

However, Rem's calm expression gave Subaru no reason to dig any deeper.

6

It appeared that people had finished clearing out, as there were not even any soldiers keeping watch atop the ramparts.

Taking into account that the battle against the Great Disaster had just recently reached its finale, as well as the fact that the undead had yet to be fully exterminated, the decision seemed to be more than a tiny bit incautious—

???: "Then, it boils down to who in the world's got the guts to go against the Princess's orders."

Greeting Subaru and Princess as such, Al sat atop the empty rampart, his legs crossed. Next to him was what appeared to be an expensive bottle of alcohol, and two glasses.

Subaru: "You got drunk to celebrate us winning the war?"

Al: "Don't be stupid, no way I'd start without the Princess. That said, I didn't think you'd be with her, bro. Ain't that, like, a super rare pairing?"

Subaru: "Everyone we've come across's been saying that, it's been pretty darn embarrassing this whole time."

Al had proclaimed himself to not be inebriated; however, the tone of his voice was lively. Rather than due to the alcohol's effects, perhaps he was slightly intoxicated due to the afterglow of their victory.

As a matter of fact, while walking around town with Priscilla, Subaru had also felt that quite keenly.

Subaru: "It's not just that everyone's got something to do, but they also really don't want to let this be just a dream."

Al: "Quite the poet now, bro. But, I guess you don't know. It's more like, "O morning, please don't arrive yet"."

Everyone, rather than harboring the negative thought of going to sleep while holding the fear that their triumph would be naught but a dream upon waking up, probably held feelings more in line with wishing for the day of the victory that all of them had come together to seize to not come to an end.

As Subaru and Al shared in that sentimentality before daybreak, the backs of their heads were suddenly tapped by a folding fan. As both screamed out “Gyan!” in unison and turned around, they crossed gazes with Priscilla’s look of dumbfoundment.

Priscilla: “A clown and a commoner have gathered, discussing naught but foolish matters. More importantly… Al, have you procured what I sought in accordance with mine instructions?”

Al: “Oh? Oh yeah, you don’t gotta worry. I requested that old Prime Minister geezer to clear the guards from the wall, and got some alcohol from the pretty High Countess. This booze man, its price’d prolly make my eyeballs pop outta my head if I happened to see what it is.”

Subaru: “I get you. The label and antiquity of the bottle give a sense of its price. I don’t drink alcohol, though.”

Al: “I get you. The box it was kept in did a really good job. I also don’t really drink, though.”

As companions in their ignorance of alcohol, Subaru and Al amused themselves by pointing several things out. At their attitude, Priscilla shrugged her shoulders, and in their stead, took the bottle and removed the cork in a gesture she was accustomed to.

Then, she slowly poured the liquid, pregnant with the sweet scent of liquor, into the two glasses.

Priscilla: “There are only two glasses. You two ought to share a single one.”

Al: “Ah, I was sorta hoping for an indirect kiss with the Princess if possible, but pardon me I apologize I’ll shut up.”

Al backed down dejectedly, but Subaru, being someone who understood the feelings of wanting to make teasing remarks, did not blame him. In any case, as Priscilla placed her own glass to her lips, Subaru, who was to her side, hesitated for a moment, and then placed his lips to the glass he had been given.

Al: “Woah, underage drinking.”

Subaru: “It’s legal in this world… Ghehough gahgk!!”

The liquor flowed onto his tongue, and the instant on which the scent passed through his nostrils and throat, Subaru choked up. As Al burst out laughing “Bwahaha” at that, he too took the glass from Subaru and sipped the alcohol.

Using the hand holding the glass to lift the jaw of the helmet, he poured the liquor in through the gap, and then—

Al: “Ghehough gaheugh ghbleughhh!!”

Subaru: “Aren’t you choking up more than I am?! Pull yourself together, fully fledged of-age drinker!”

Priscilla: “You both are causing a racket. That defeated Witch ought to be bemoaning, you do not even know what fine liquor is.”

Subaru: “I’m getting some confusing feelings of guilt, please stop…”

There was no way Sphinx would ever say “Apology: Required” due to something like being unable to taste the high-grade alcohol of victory, but Subaru was disheartened due to feeling like she would.

In the end, as Subaru and Al shared their alcohol little-by-little, Priscilla finished emptying half of the bottle by herself. Specifically how strong it was was unknown, but for someone who had drunk that much alcohol, and alcohol that did feel quite strong at that, Priscilla’s face was as if it was nothing at all.

Al: “The Princess being a heavy drinker; right in line with her image, ain’t it?”

To the somewhat prideful Al, Subaru did not respond that such was exactly the case. And, once the glass that Subaru and Al had been responsible for was emptied, Priscilla, as if deciding that this was the time to do something,

Priscilla: “Dawn is nigh. I am a tad amused. —Al, accompany mineself.”

Al: “Kehough… Huh? Accompany you, what do you… uoh!”

Declaring so, Priscilla put aside the half-emptied bottle of alcohol onto the handrail, took Al’s hand to help him stand up, and beckoned him to the middle of the wall’s top.

Pulling the perplexed Al towards herself, she smiled at Subaru, who was gazing in wonder at what was happening,

Priscilla: “Natsuki Subaru, sing.”

Subaru: “That’s way too unreasonable of a request!”

Priscilla: “Your tongue ought to have been moistened by such high-quality liquor. Well, I shall just tell Rem in case you are of no use.”

Subaru: “Grrrr, damn coward…! Fine!”

Finding himself in a development against his will, Subaru folded his arms, and constructed a set list within his mind. As he did so, Al stared deeply into Priscilla’s eyes,

Al: “Princess, I’m lacking one arm, y’know?”

Priscilla: “So what of it. You have two legs and loyalty pledged to mineself. —Let us begin.”

It was not as though that had been the signal, yet Priscilla’s words overlapped with the first bar of melody.

Subaru: “…”

What Subaru had chosen was not a hit song hailing from his original world, but one rooted in this other world, a tune that also happened to be a favorite of Subaru’s.

The Sword Demon Love Ballad was a bit too long, and he would probably start crying while singing it.

So, the song Subaru had chosen was—

Subaru: "—Sky that Transcends the Light of Dawn."

Slowly, the night over the Vollachian Empire would come to a close, and, pushing aside a yesterday speckled with stars, a new today boisterously dawned near.

As a song that blessed that phenomenon, this was an absolute favorite of favorites among the tunes Subaru had heard in this world.

Subaru: "Fu."

Devoid of any instrumentation, the only thing producing sound was Subaru's a cappella singing.

When compared with the bard Liliana, who made music her livelihood, he fell well short. Yet that which served as the greatest praise towards Subaru as he sang, was Priscilla's response of dance.

Priscilla: "There, dance your heart out, Al! Do not bore mineself!"

Al: "Ehhh, shit! Now I'm in trouble! Bro! Turn up the beat!"

—While listening to Subaru's singing voice, Priscilla and Al danced all around the rampart.

Priscilla's dance was gorgeous; though she would likely become incensed were Subaru to say it, her dance was selfsame to the one performed by Abel back in Guaral with the purpose of seducing Zikr. Al's awkward moves somewhat appeared to be those of a dance one would see at a lantern festival. Though lacking skill, it was fun to watch him.

More than anything, it was clear that both Priscilla and Al, that master and servant both, were enjoying themselves.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru was supposed to have been doing this reluctantly, but before he realized, he was singing with a smile on his face.

Sky that Transcends the Light of Dawn—a song that sang about an inevitable dawn, a blessing upon a world born anew after being scorched by its brilliance, a song that was, in a sense, quite fitting for Vollachia, a nation ruled by flame.

And, Priscilla, who lived like a flame, was a woman most alike Vollachia.

Priscilla: "…"

Ignorant as to how to end the song, he ended up repeating it, repeating twice, thrice even. As he sang, the dance between the two began to flow smoothly, and he lost the cue to bring it to its conclusion once more. Thus it repeated.

As they were all enjoying themselves in that manner, the real morning sun began to softly illuminate the rampart.

He had some alcohol in his system, and today—no, yesterday, he had worked far too hard. Definitely, once he did go to sleep today, he would be incapable of waking up.

Amidst the gleaming dazzle of the morning sun, Priscilla looked awfully bright as she danced with Al—.

Al: "—Princess?"

A sudden, an oh so sudden utterance came from Al.

Subaru: "…"

Just priorly, the utterance would have been permeated with the high-spirits he held no pretensions of hiding, with the yearning he held no capability of hiding. Now enlaced with a different timbre, Subaru's singing came to an abrupt halt.

Then, Subaru blinked; many times, many times he rubbed his eyes.

And despite him rubbing his eyes—

Priscilla: "—Albeit not on the level of that songstress, Liliana Masquerade, it was not a poor performance."

Indeed, settled in Al's chest while being embraced by him from behind, Priscilla voiced her praise.

—With the morning sun shining through Priscilla's body, she was faintly fading away.

7

Subaru: "…"

Aghast atop the ramparts of the Fortified City, enshrouded in the morning mist, Subaru gazed at Priscilla.

A blood-red dress, orange hair that reflected the rays of the sun, crimson eyes akin to flame—all were things that composed the existence of Priscilla Barielle, none of those had changed, and yet.

Subaru: "Phri… ssilla…?"

Priscilla: "You too ought to know this already. In order to show me the Empire's ruin, mine enemy, Sphinx, had imprisoned me within an alternate plane. In order to exit from therein, there was naught a choice but to reduce it to cinders."

Subaru: "—Ah."

Priscilla was clever. Therefore, going off of nothing but Subaru's trembling voice, she had understood what Subaru had been thinking, what Subaru had wanted to ask, and thus presented an answer to Subaru's query.

With that clear and concise response of hers, Subaru understood. He had ended up understanding.

Subaru: "…"

She was the same as Eugard Vollachia, the Emperor of yore who had been accompanied by Yorna.

In exchange for her own life, Priscilla Barielle had returned from that alternate dimension.

The reason why her figure was pierced by the light of the morning sun, becoming misty as it faded away, ephemerally so, was as clear as day.

—The Priscilla Barielle present here, was already nothing more than an undead.

Al: "What… what sort of idiotic bullshit are you on about?!!"

With Subaru unable to say anything, standing stock still in a daze, Al was the one to shout in his stead.

Embracing Priscilla from behind, his voice trembling to an extent that it was clear that his face was contorting within his helmet, he tightly, tightly held onto her with his single right arm.

So as to not relinquish Priscilla, being killed by the slow, unhalted rise of the morning sun.

Al: "No, no, you're wrong, Princess, this sorta thing… B-BRO!!"

Subaru: "—! Right. Right, you're wrong, you're mistaken. Just wait, Priscilla, I'll…"

At Al's quavering appeal, Subaru suddenly lifted his head and shifted his gaze towards the banister.

The Great Disaster having come to a close, he had ended up spitting out the package of poison which he had kept behind his molar. So if he were to choose a method to redo things immediately, jumping off of the rampart would be the fastest—

Priscilla: "Cease."

Subaru: "Why would I cease?! I have no reason to do that! This sort of thing, for me…!"

Priscilla: "—Cease, Natsuki Subaru."

Just as he was about to jump over the railing, throwing himself over the edge, Subaru was held back by a voice. But, paying no heed to that, Subaru had fully settled his mind to proceed, to challenge the Great Disaster once more.

And despite that—

Priscilla: “The Authorities held by yourself and Al may possess the power to warp even the laws of fate. But, you ought to remember this. Regardless of what use you make of your powers and prayers, there are some who desire that things remain unchanged.”

Subaru: “What… What, the hell do you think you’re saying? This… this isn’t the time for that! Right now I need to—”

Priscilla: “Natsuki Subaru.”

As Subaru grit his teeth, the nails of his hands upon the railing chipped off, blood streaming down.

He ought to just ignore everything and anything that Priscilla was saying, and jump. Indeed, having expended his life time and time again against the Great Disaster, as one who had seized victory for the Empire, Subaru’s heart was screaming.

But, perhaps he ought to be strong enough to brush that outcry to the wayside, and listen to what Priscilla had to say.

As Subaru arrested all movement due to the clash within him, his cold logic at odds with his emotions, Al screamed out with a “Bro!”. Holding onto Priscilla as to absolutely never let go, trembling like a child throwing a tantrum,

Al: “Bro! Please… Please!! Don’t listen to anything! You don’t need to listen to her! Do it! Save the Princess… Save Priscilla!!”

Priscilla: “Aldebaran.”

Al: “—Hk, stop, stop it, Priscilla! I ain’t gonna listen!”

Shrieking in sorrow, Al was called to by Priscilla as he implored Subaru, the former shaking his head in denial.

As she softly caressed his neck, Priscilla called Al by a name that Subaru was familiar with; however, this was his first time hearing it being used in regards to Al.

Being embraced tightly from behind, caressing the neck of the man behind her, it held the impression akin to that of a painting—as something so fleeting that it would not remain a reality for long, a painting was the exact impression it gave.

Priscilla: "The two of you have saved the Empire. Of course, there were others who also fought valiantly. Yet, there exists not a single other person who has expended anything on the realm you two have. I bestow mine praise upon that."

Thus, with a smile so beautiful as to reach unpleasantness, Priscilla continued.

Subaru's appeals, Al's screams, neither of them had been able to stop Priscilla's gently recited words.

Those crimson lips, as if burning away the impressions of Priscilla that had persisted in him until now, as if to sear in that she had always been that way from the start, scorched their hearts with a flame known as convenient, rapturous beauty.

Priscilla: "The both of you have arrived at this junction by doing so many a time, this I know. Never placing yourselves above others, you have lived 'til today. Hence, it may be that neither of you has ever received due recompense. I shall thus bestow that upon you."

Saying that, within Priscilla's crimson eyes, opened anew, Subaru was reflected.

Then—

Priscilla: "—It was a great service, Natsuki Subaru. Thou art a true Knight."

That instant he was granted that comment, strength vanished from Subaru's knees.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Falling to his knees, Subaru could no longer stand back up. His lips trembled all over, his mind was thrown into a disorderly state of chaos with all kinds of emotions, his understanding could not catch up.

That notwithstanding, the reason as to which strength departed his knees, was because it had been made certain to him. —His soul, had understood.

Natsuki Subaru could not save Priscilla Barielle.

Priscilla: “Aldebaran, thou as well…”

Al: “I told you to stop! I won’t fucking back down! There’s no way I can back down! Because… because that’s how it should be, right?! If… if I back down, you’ll… Princess, you’ll…!”

Averting his gaze from Subaru, the latter having fallen to his knees, Al yet clung onto Priscilla. No longer was he turning to Subaru for help; rather, strenuously, he bellowed for her fate to be altered.

Yet, his voice gradually was bereft of its vigor, the sound of him weakly sniveling many times resounding. Gazing upon Al, unable to resume his words any further, Priscilla smiled. Akin to a loving mother.

Ironically enough, that smile was very much like Yorna’s, ergo serving as proof of their relationship as mother and daughter. Then, as if soothing her own weeping child, Priscilla spoke,

Priscilla: “Well, what am I to do about the likes of a grown man bawling at me like a child?”

Al: “—Hk.”

Priscilla: “Ha ha ha, there there, I can hear it, thy crying, groveling voice saying thou want mineself to be thy bride.”

Al: “…Mhm.”

At the laughing Priscilla’s sentence, in a hoarse voice Al replied, and nodded. As he did, embracing Priscilla’s frame even more tightly, as to not let go of that which already was difficult to let go of, he confessed.

That was, undoubtedly, that was—

Al: “Mhm, please be mine, Princess. My… Princess…”

That was, regardless of what was said by anybody else, a confession of love indisputable.

With all of the affection packed into his body, the man conveyed his love in its entirety to the woman within his arm. Receiving that, Priscilla’s crimson eyes flickered,

Priscilla: “—Look at that, it is mine victory again.”

Having made him declare it, the nature of Priscilla’s smile altered, morphing into that which was habitual.

This was Priscilla Barielle; a triumphant expression brimming with confidence and pride, the lack of any hesitation to declare all things in this world as her own, a beauty who painted the very picture of arrogance.

Her radiance scorching the eyes of all, the Sun Princess whose presence could not help but make itself known to others—.

Priscilla: “You had best remember this, you who have decided to carry “heroic reveries” upon your backs, possessing the means to defy predetermined fate.”

Priscilla: “From here on, you shall bear the wounds of many, share in their pain, sniveling tears in their stead. However, many of those you are to happen across shan’t be virtuous. They shan’t even be upright. —Nor shall they be perfect.”

Priscilla: “There shall be days upon which you shan’t be able to accept yourselves, in regret of your own actions. There shall be nights upon which you shall bend at the knee, in lament for your own decisions. There shall be mornings upon which you shan’t be able to raise your visage, in opposition to your own wishes.”

Priscilla: “The unloveable sides to those you love, the loveable sides to those you cannot love, many a time shall you witness those, and end up treading the selfsame missteps. —And on those occasions, do remember.”

Priscilla: “That you both were praised by the perfect woman known as mineself, known as Priscilla Barielle.”

—As Priscilla voiced thus, neither Subaru nor Al could take their eyes off of her.

Atop the ramparts where none else were present, both presented as the most important individuals in the battle against the Great Disaster, they could not avert their eyes from the woman who smiled without a trace of regret as she grew ever misty.

Since they could not avert their eyes, they witnessed it true. The sight of Priscilla’s existence dissolving into light.

And, at the terminus—

Priscilla: “The world is truly so beautiful. Henceforth—the world is made for mine convenience.”

No falsehood in those words, the figure of the woman who was loved by the world, and returned said love to the world to an even greater degree, faded.

Extolled as the Sun Princess, having lived her life in a manner becoming of a flame, was Priscilla Barielle. —Amongst the candidates for the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Royal Selection to decide the next Monarch, she was the first to drop out.

V!c.ll20

Prologue:
Aldebaran

—A place that was not here, a time that once was, a world that may someday come to pass, a dream that would shortly fade, regrets that would never cease for all eternity.

???: "…"Following Star", such is the meaning that it seems to bear. Despite shining the brightest of all the stars in its constellation, it is still called so; do you not believe it a name that befits you, who has carried all of our expectations upon yourself and yet still betrayed them, ironically too well?"

The one to speak those words, with black eyes upon white hair, with black dress upon white skin, with black desires upon white hopes, was a Witch; a Witch who, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, was entirely split between the color black and the color white.

Albeit emanating a smile ripe with intimacy, no warmth whatsoever was present within the Witch's eyes.

Such was the kind of person she was. Neither disdain nor ire was being directed towards the individual known as himself, rather, she was merely that kind of person by nature, a being incapable of treading any other path—proof of a Witch.

From her, a Witch by birth unlike all others, he could not hope for any warmth.

Witch: "My, now that is a tiny bit vexing. It is certainly a flaw in my personality… I will admit that I can lose sight of what is right in front of me when I get passionate, but is it not rather charming when coming from a girl with an appearance like my own? My body is physically warm. I can give you warmth."

It was not as though she had gotten worked up. He knew that this was just an imitation of such a response.

Because he knew, he could not help but want to enquire. Did she truly feel nothing; did she truly think nothing; and about him, did she truly—.

Witch: "—Why must love fade?"

A brief comment killed the question he had begun to utter, mercilessly so.

Along with that, it had also killed any and all motivation to ascertain whether that had been because she wished not to be questioned, or because she wished to not allow him to question her.

Witch: "Why, must it fade? A feeling that is never lost, a radiance that never disappears, an obsession that never dims, are those things not called "love"? If they are, then, why?"

The words that followed drove a blade deep into the remains of the motivation, of the question that had already been slain.

The blade of words raised aloft, the Greed desireful of that knowledge, caring not for the blood flowing from those remains, repeated that act many, many times; hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of millions of times.

Witch: "You have fully expended yourself. You have betrayed our expectations."

He knew that he would be blamed. —No, that was incorrect. He hoped he would be.

Having reached this point, he still wished for somebody to guarantee him a connection.

Having turned against unperishing Wrath, against unfulfillable Lust, against unquenchable Gluttony, against unforsakable Pride, against Sloth of just wanting to be held complacent, and against the utmost important Envy, he still wished for that.

Witch: "—You are Greed. A matter of course, is it not? For it is I who made you like so."

The Witch’s quiet condemnation, was a lethal poison resembling kindness.

Far too many would not avert their eyes despite knowing that drawing near would mean their demise, afraid to even let out their voices; a fatal poison that, amidst a sweet fragrance, implored for their death.

However, for only those born and raised within that poison, there existed a sole possibility.

Thus, as long as there was a possibility—

Witch: “Will you pick it up no matter what? Why shall we still harbor expectations in you, when you have already betrayed our expended expectations. What do you have? What can you say? I am not condemning you, it is purely a question. Thus, I also ask if there is anything I can do.”

Raising both her arms, the Witch of white and black smiled.

Witch: “Supposing you possess the willpower to continue, and that your motivation is able to influence the results, I am willing to do anything in my power to help you. If such is to your liking, I do not even mind you using my body. Albeit frail, if it can help you not give up, I will offer it with delight.”

Smiling as she spoke so, the Witch thought nothing of it.

If he were to start thinking like that, he would end up going in circles. To begin with, even he knew that such was not the case.

If she was truly such a being, one who thought, felt, and knew nothing, then.

Witch: “—Why must love fade?”

This time, it was clear that it was a rejection; he understood.

The role he was expected to play, the process he had to carry out, both were included.

All that remained was to put it to practice. Until he got it right, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of millions—

???: "—Even if it's beyond the realm of a billion, only I can reach it."

He would continue to challenge it. As long as that possibility remained, he could keep challenging it.

By doing so, without fail, he would accomplish it. Without fail, he, having been reduced to a Following Star, would—

???: "I, no matter what—will definitely kill you."

Witch: "…"

With a gaze that could not be pinned to neither expectation nor despair, the Witch watched over that determination.

By nature, a Witch would neither wish for such to succeed, nor would she wish for it to fail. But, this was different.

Words of consolation, she would provide. Before the Following Star could burn out, its heat becoming no longer able to reach the ground, she would deliver words to save the heart of the Following Star, acting as his teacher.

Witch: "Your luck was… No."

Indeed, revising the words she had been about to say, the Witch continued.

Words most appropriate for that Following Star, words that would serve to comfort his fate, those were—

Witch: "—Natsuki Subaru failed you."[13]

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Wolves:
Death unto the Weak, No Mercy XIII

1

—The non-aggression pact between the Sacred Vollachian Empire and the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica.

For many a year, the two countries had neighbored each other as the greatest of foes, so the signing of this treaty was an incredible historic achievement, and at the same time, it was evidence that circumstances unprecedented throughout history were unfolding.

At present, the largest reason for that was a fatal illness that had spread in the Kingdom of Lugunica, causing the royal family to be wiped out, and these damages were deemed unacceptable.

In order to make up for the tragedy they had suffered, the Kingdom followed the guidance of the Divine Dragon, enacting a Royal Selection in order to pick out the next Monarch; for this duration, they requested to implement a non-aggression pact with the Empire, which the current Vollachian Emperor, Vincent Vollachia accepted, thus forming an agreement between the two nations.

Through this, albeit not leading to the long history of friction between the Empire and the Kingdom thawing, it could be said there were more than enough signs of some sort of change. And, in addition to the current absence of the Kingdom’s sovereign, this historic shift was a boon of the political caliber of the Empire’s apex, the Wise Emperor, Vincent.

And Vincent, who would one day be remembered as a rare, outstanding sovereign, included the fact of signing this non-aggression pact with the Kingdom in the foundation for even further flourishing of his influence—

Vincent: “—Ludicrous.”

In the office of the Crystal Palace, Vincent, the man extolled as the

Wise Emperor, widened his eyes in shock.

The Emperor possessed handsome features that could not conceal his intelligence and strong will, however, as turmoil and astonishment that would normally never have been displayed to others was laid bare, he placed his hands on his desk and froze up.

Witnessing that, Chisha Gold slowly shook his head from side to side.

There was no helping it. It was only natural for Vincent to have this sort of reaction.

After all—

Chisha: “As stated in the report, at the present moment, there are two individuals confirmed to possess the qualifications to participate in the Royal Selection… one of them is the head of a ducal household, Crusch Karsten. And the other, by whom Your Excellency has been taken by surprise is…”

Vincent: “—Prisca, you believe?”

Chisha: “Regrettably, I see it the same as you.”

Taking pity on the disturbed Vincent, Chisha affirmed the truth.

The written report atop the desk, was the report from an investigation conducted by a spy they had sent to the Kingdom of Lugunica, the outcome of investigating the Kingdom’s state of affairs—particularly, the Royal Selection, which was currently the greatest matter of concern.

Since they had acquired information that was currently being kept a secret even within the Kingdom, the person who had secured it was owed more than adequate recompense, but the contents of those results were a problem.

Chisha: “To think that your younger sister, having fled to the Kingdom, would once again rise to center stage in such a manner.”

Vincent: “Just what is she thinking…?! Altering her name, altering her position, leaving the Empire… has she forgotten for what purpose all of that was for?!"

Chisha: "Neither do I understand the intentions behind your younger sister's rambunctiousness, hmmm. By no means do I believe it is merely just a matter of wanting to stand out, but…"

Vincent: "To stir for such an objective, it would be troubling if there were people other than that fool."

And, as Vincent laughed scornfully at Chisha's conjecture, he stiffened his cheeks and paid worry to the surroundings.

In all likelihood, since he had brought up a troublesome person, he was on alert for the person in question to burst in from the door or the window.

Chisha: "Please rest assured, Your Excellency. If you are concerned about Cecilus, he is currently out with General First-Class Arakiya competing to see who can reach the summit of Mount Gildray first."

Vincent: "—. Deeming it acceptable for the First and Second of the Nine Divine Generals to part from the Imperial Capital for such a worthless reason, is far more of a ridiculous affair."

Chisha: "Be that as it may, I had thought it appropriate for those two, crude in both thought and conduct as they are, to not be present. Not to mention, when it comes to the matter of your younger sister… to the matter of Prisca-sama, General First-Class Arakiya simply would not be able to maintain composure."

Vincent: "…"

Crossing his arms, Vincent closed a single eye and plunged himself into careful consideration.

At that familiar attitude of contemplation, Chisha was modestly relieved that he had now escaped the initial turmoil. Worst-case scenario, Chisha feared the possibility that Vincent might have decided to send emissaries to the Kingdom while giving some reason or another.

Fortunately, the man known as the Wise Emperor was not so short-sighted.

Chisha: “However, for a reason outside of Your Excellency’s feelings, we must ascertain whether this candidate is truly Prisca-sama or not, hmmm.”

Vincent: “I have no objections. But, if it is indeed Prisca, attempting to send half-hearted personnel would merely result in the meaningless abatement of the cards in our hand. We must be deliberate in our selection of personnel.”

Chisha: “Indeed, of this I am aware.”

Within Vincent, the existence of his little half-sister, Prisca, was exceedingly great.

If it was not, then would he really have been able to go as far as allow Prisca to live while feigning her death in the Imperial Selection Ceremony, in which it was a requirement to exterminate all other Imperial Family members who bore the right of succession?

And, even ignoring the familial affection Vincent harbored towards Prisca, it was also a fact that Prisca possessed intelligence and discernment on par with that of the Wise Emperor.

Hence, Vincent’s opinion that they needed to be deliberate with their selection of personnel was completely accurate.

Chisha: “With that established, I happen to have an idea of who to arrange as personnel.”

Vincent: “Ho. What sort of person are they?”

Chisha: “A shinobi trained by General First-Class Olbart… it is rare for that personage to so unreservedly praise someone’s abilities as that of a genius, hmmm.”

Vincent: “That damned Olbart did so unreservedly, you say? That is indeed a rare occurrence.”

As one of the Nine Divine Generals, the head honcho of the shinobi, known by the alias of the Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkenn was a person of advanced age nearing one hundred years old, but he was an individual exceedingly unsparing in his evaluations of others.

But then again, there were none who trained more than that near-hundred-year-old man, continuing to discipline himself to a blood-curdling extent, so his evaluations of others could be said to be rather fair.

In any case—

Vincent: “I entrust the particulars to you.”

With Vincent’s consent, Chisha gained permission to take action in regards to the Kingdom’s Royal Selection.

—All the while, concealing his silent expectations for the future behind his invariant expression.

2

???: “—I’m Yae Tenzen. I received a threat from the head honcho that I might die ‘cause Chisha-sama is making an unreasonable request. Am I gonna die?”

Having turned up in response to the summons, Yae Tenzen had her long red hair tied up together; she was a girl who gave off a sense of charm and flexibility like that of a cat.

Perhaps because she had received Olbart’s tutelage, her manner of speaking in the presence of a General was unthinkably informal, but the prospects for courtesy were already long gone at the point that Cecilus was placed in the position of First.

If one possessed strength, it was the Vollachian Way to look the other way in regards to various issues—for if they did not recruit soldiers with a priority for strength over personality, they would be unable to deal with the inevitable forthcoming cataclysm.

Chisha: “I know not what General First-Class Olbart has told you about me, but I am not fond of expending valuable, talented personnel, hmmm."

Yae: "I dunno~… by that, you mean that you won't expend me, but you'll still use me to my fullest, right?"

Chisha: "I believe it natural to want to assign powerful individuals to corresponding work."

Yae: "Uwahh, you're as nasty of a man as the head honcho said, aren't you now~?"

Slightly sticking out her tongue, Yae seemed to lament Chisha's reply. But, behind that amiability were eyes vigilantly observing her surroundings, and a tension such that she could draw her weapons at any time.

That she deliberately did not hide that and used it as a show of force, truly made her appear as Olbart's disciple.

Chisha: "We would like you to sneak into the Kingdom, and infiltrate the mansion of Baron Leip Barielle."

At Yae's attitude, Chisha ceased taking detours, and moved on to the main subject. Having heard the contents of her mission, Yae tilted her head in confusion as she said "Baron Barielle?".

Yae: "I'd intended to memorize all the people in the Kingdom who required caution, but was that sorta person among them? If it's for assassination, wouldn't it be Margrave Mathers or House Astrea?"

Chisha: "Supposing that were the case, would you currently be capable of performing assassination on those two Houses?"

Yae: "Doing both is impossible, but if it was just one, I think I could do it if I gave up on returning home alive. I'd rather not die young under a beautiful sky, so if possible I don't want you to order that, y'know?"

Chisha: "Your honesty is splendid, hmmm."

It was neither excessive self confidence nor a careless bluff, Yae simply made a guarantee based on her own ability. Chisha silently nodded at her reply, and,

Chisha: “Once again, we would like you to infiltrate the house of Baron Leip Barielle… we want you to make contact with his wife, Priscilla Barielle.”

Yae: “So his lady. Roger tha~t.”

With a carefree smile, Yae consented to Chisha’s request.

As she harbored a favorable impression while listening to the details of the mission, Chisha mentioned from beside her “What do you need to know?”.

Yae: “Oh yeah~. After I go undercover, what do I do? Assassination? Abduction?”

Chisha: “For the time being, if you are in a position to investigate her movements from close by, it is fine for you to engage in careful observation, hmmm. Merely…”

Yae: “Merely?”

Chisha: “—I would like you to bear in mind that depending on the situation, you may be issued new instructions.”

Yae: “I see. Roger roger~.”

At Chisha’s added comment, Yae naturally nodded without prying too deeply.

As a matter of fact, if she were truly as skilled as she was reputed to be, it would be easy for her to sneak into the Kingdom, and infiltrate the mansion of Baron Barielle. If she did so, it would be possible to investigate Prisca’s intentions—the true motivation in placing herself in a position as conspicuous as a Royal Candidate.

—Ultimately, would Prisca choose to be an ally, or a foe to the Empire that Vincent and Chisha had built up?

Chisha: “…”

Chisha's mental image of Prisca was exceedingly complicated.

Regardless of her personality, her existence functioned as a bomb for Vincent in both positive and negative senses. Allowing his younger sister to live assured the Emperor's humanity, but on the other hand, the reality of opposing the way of the Imperial Selection Ceremony harmed the legitimacy of his throne.

If her existence was purely something that guaranteed Vincent's humanity, it would have been fine. But, a large part of the reason why Vincent had kept Prisca Benedict alive was for something detached from emotion, for the purpose of making preparations for the Great Disaster.

The inevitable forthcoming cataclysm, was something the Stargazer had prophesied would commence with Vincent's death. When that happened, somebody would need to lead the Empire in Vincent's place, so he had said.

But—

Chisha: "I am operating from a perspective that slightly differs from that of His Excellency's."

The fact that Vincent Vollachia had made several preparations with his sights set on the Great Disaster, was something that Chisha also understood. But, Vincent did not expect to be outsmarted.

Underneath the plan he was proceeding with, Vincent did not expect to be outsmarted by the different plan that Chisha was plotting.

Chisha: "For that purpose, I have high hopes for your performance, Yae-dono, hmmm."

Yae: "Feels like the pressure is building up more and more… but, there's something about you, Chisha-sama. Your personality seems to be fit for a shinobi."

Chisha: "Ho, me, you say? For future reference, may I inquire as to why?"

Yae: “People who conceal their true intentions are suited to be shinobi.”

With a bright smille, Yae answered Chisha’s question.

For the girl said to be a genius of the shinobi, the weapon that displayed a shinobi’s skills to the greatest degree of “conceal one’s true intentions”, was likely that smile and amiability.

It seemed to be a different approach from that of Chisha, who was often told that nobody could tell what he was thinking, but he did not find it disappointing or upsetting that Yae had perceived that he had secrets.

Chisha: “I can agree to her being called a genius… supposing General First-Class Olbart retired due to his advanced age, she might even become his successor as head honcho of the village, hmmm.”

—After Yae left the room, Chisha spoke those words by himself in the office.

Following Chisha’s orders, Yae would soon depart from the Empire, and commence her mission to infiltrate the Kingdom. In the near future, a report would likely arrive regarding her infiltration of House Barielle.

Depending on that report, for the future of the Vollachian Empire, the choices of who would live, and who would die, would change. Vincent, Prisca, and Yae, he did not want to let any of them die. However, if it became necessary, Chisha would have no choice but to make a decision, and he had no intention of hesitating.

At the very least, Chisha was confident from the very outset that only his own death could not be averted.

Chisha: “—Good grief, the Empire’s wheel has gotten stuck in a rather large ditch, hmmm.”

Be that as it may, helping to get that out was Chisha Gold’s way of life.

Supposing that Prisca's existence became ignition capable of threatening Vincent, he would order Yae to kill her. —If Prisca were to disappear, there was a future of the Imperial Selection Ceremony being truly concluded, and Vincent being recognized as the rightful owner of the Yang Sword.

And, even if Yae were to fail, and end up not killing Prisca—

Chisha: "If it is someone as clever as his younger sister, she will be able to recognize that the assassins were sent from the Empire and that their objective is not unrelated to the Imperial Throne. And, if the younger sister was to then return directly to the Empire, then…"

Regardless of a crisis befalling the Empire, Prisca would likely not ignore any danger befalling Vincent.

In that case, a future was also possible in which Vincent and Prisca would stand shoulder to shoulder against the arrived Great Disaster, throwing themselves into battle along with Cecilus and the other Divine Generals, leading the Imperial Soldiers.

If Vincent and Prisca stood together, there was likely no enemy they could not face.

Chisha: "Of course, His Excellency would be angry with me, hmmm."

If he were to find out about Chisha's schemes, Vincent would likely never forgive him.

But, if Chisha's plan proceeded as intended, then either way, Chisha would already be deceased by the time Vincent learned of it, so there was no way for Vincent to make objections.

It was a bit of a coarse plan, but to begin with, Vincent was the one plotting a coarse plan.

Chisha: "I pray for a conclusion with the fewest deaths possible."

As he had mentioned earlier in his conversation with Yae, not wanting to expend personnel was Chisha's true sentiment.

From here on out, in the Vollachian Empire that was set to undergo an unprecedented cataclysm, Vincent would need to make efforts to rebuild if Chisha's plan was successful. In such circumstances, Vincent would need many people by his side to support him.

If Chisha died, and nobody else but Cecilus ended up remaining, it would be far too much of a disastrous affair.

And, thereupon—

???: "—Wait wait now Chisha just listen to this! Even though I got to the top of the mountain first Anya won't fry my eggs on both sides! She said she didn't like how I let her stay ahead until we got near the summit to make for a more dramatic comeback development but what do you think?"

???: "Cecilus, die."

???: "How ya doin', Chesshy. The hell did'ya talk 'bout with my village's Yae? That Yae lass was damn worn out ya know, kakakakka!"

???: "General First-Class Chisha! I wish to speak with you regarding the Crystal Palace's defenses! The other day, the emissaries from the Kingdom used it to their advantage. It must never happen again, never again!"

???: "You're fucking noisy! Don't say it like they got the best of us, you fucking golden knobhead!"

???: "In reality, they got the best of us. The Knights of the Kingdom, strong. Will not lose."

From the entrance of the office, from the outside of the opened window, and from the gaps in the ceiling, voices he was familiar with called out, and Chisha massaged his brow with his finger as he stood up.

His lively colleagues, great warriors all, ought to be called the greatest preparation gathered to face the forthcoming cataclysm, but, Chisha: “After I am gone, I find it a tad regretful that I will be unable to witness with my own eyes how His Excellency interacts with each and every one of you, hmmm.”

???: “Chisha! Hey Chisha! Come on heyyy are you listening?!”

Chisha: “Even if you raise such matters to myself, I can only say that I am troubled.”

Speaking in such a tone, Chisha tapped his steel fan on his shoulder as he exited.

There was still time to prepare. Time for Chisha to spend with Vincent, Cecilus, and everyone else. He would use all of that, and proceed down this path, knowing he would be cursed by the lord he dedicated his life to.

For that, he had absolutely no regrets, no hesitation, and no misgivings.

Why Prisca had taken the position of Royal Candidate, he did not know. Likewise, Vincent might question the reasoning behind Chisha’s actions.

In that case, there was only one reason why Chisha desired to proceed down a path of being cursed.

Chisha: “—After all, I have been blessed beyond my means.”

END

Anastasia's Search for Her Companions: Fourth Chronicle

???: "Seriously, I'm reaaally grateful, Anastasia-san."

Receiving thanks from Emilia, who wore a smile from ear to ear, Anastasia closed one of her eyes.

She had already unwillfully grown fully accustomed to Emilia's smile, but it was difficult to determine what exactly this gratitude was for. That was because she was the kind of girl to express sentiments of gratitude whenever given the chance, and it was not strange in the slightest for her to say thanks during something as simple as the exchange of a morning greeting.

Anastasia: "If ya happen to be talkin' 'bout the battle that happened at this here town, I don't think it was just me, but thanks to everyone… thanks to Otto-kun 'n the people of the Empire."

When it came to the main topic of conversation, it would have probably been the now-concluded disturbance of the Empire.

—Right off the heels of the Vollachian Empire's internal turmoil, they were plunged into a great war against the Great Disaster, which spearheaded hosts of undead; somehow, it was concluded before it could threaten the demise of the entire world.

Having remained in the Fortified City of Garkla, Anastasia had occupied the command center, and was proud of her satisfactory work in serving as one of the tacticians commanding the counter-siege battle.

Anastasia: "That bein' said, ain't nobody knows how things woulda turned out if not for that supportive fire from Natsuki-kun. 'N tho' I ain't gonna admit it, that thing from the princess also helped us out a whole ton."

Emilia: "Ah, the Soul Marriage Technique, right? Thanks to Priscilla, everybody reaaally surged with power."

Anastasia: “Sayin’ it again, but I ain’t gonna admit it.”

At Emilia’s unmalicious reply, Anastasia gave a wry smile.

The two powers that had saved the Fortified City from its predicament—those were the magic from Subaru and Beatrice that had blasted the star away, and Priscilla’s Soul Marriage Technique, which granted fighting strength to all citizens of the Empire. Without the former, the city would have suffered immense damages, and without the latter, it was uncertain whether or not they would have been able to push back the hosts of undead.

Nevertheless, it was due to her role that she was unable to simply accept it as a good contribution.

Anastasia: “‘N that’s also why I can’t just go carelessly acceptin’ Emilia-san’s words of thanks either, but…”

Emilia: “Is that so? But, I think the fact that we were able to properly converge with Subaru, and that it seems like we’ll all return to the Kingdom together like this, it’s all thanks to the contributions of Anastasia-san and Julius… that’s why, I’m saying thank you.”

Anastasia: “Ah, so you’re speakin’ on that sorta scale…”

Hearing the specifics of Emilia’s gratitude, Anastasia caught on to the sense of magnitude.

They had gotten involved during the time of an unprecedented emergency within the Empire. Nevertheless, it seemed Emilia’s utmost priority had always remained the same.

To the end, Emilia’s number one had been to bring the disappeared Subaru home safely.

Anastasia: “For ya to be doin’ this much for him, Emilia-san, Natsuki-kun’s quite the lucky fella.”

Emilia: “Not at all, if it’s a matter of having something done for oneself, then I’m the one who’s always, always been getting helped out by Subaru. I’m still in the middle of returning the favor…

besides…”

Anastasia: “Besides?”

Emilia: “I think it would be reaaally good to do something and return that favor, but Subaru told me that it’s fine since he wants us to walk side-by-side without keeping count of such things.”

As Emilia smiled about their relationship not being one built upon borrowing and lending, Anastasia took a good long look at her. Receiving that gaze, Emilia slightly tilted her head. —Her statement seemed to be lacking in awareness.

Anastasia: “Lemme set ya straight, it’s also gotta be quite tough on Natsuki-kun.”

Emilia: “Yes, indeed. Subaru always works reaaally hard, so when we get back to the Kingdom, I want him to take his mind off things and rest for a while. I was also thinking of suggesting to him to do so.”

Anastasia: “Ain’t what I meant, but… woah there.”

Curling her lips into a smile at Emilia’s interpretation, Anastasia placed her hand to her neck for some reason or another, and recalled that the sensation that ought to be there—Echidna, was not present.

Emilia: “Anastasia-san’s Echidna, she’s together with Beatrice and the others right about now, right?”

Anastasia: “Yepyep. They said that one of the First-Class Generals of the Empire ended up combinin’ with a Great Spirit… seems like they’re discussin’ things, includin’ whether or not it’d be possible to separate ’em.”

Emilia: “…I see. The two of them are reliable, so it would be nice if they could provide some valuable ideas.”

A Vollachian General with whom Anastasia had no acquaintance, her name was Arakiya, was it?

She had thought her to be an outrageous existence when first hearing the characteristics of the Spirit Eater; but, that outrageousness was far greater than Anastasia could have ever imagined.

The Empire would have lost considerable military strength during this Great Disaster, but there was also a possibility that the fruits of the conflict more than compensated for that. Caution must be taken as to not underestimate their future movements.

Indeed, amidst the fortress filled with the fervor of victory, Anastasia partook in calm deliberation, and,

Anastasia: "…Emilia-san? What'cha doin' with yer hand?"

Suddenly, Emilia reached out her finger and touched Anastasia's forehead. As Anastasia gave a skeptical look to that action of unknown intentions, Emilia softly said, "Wrinkles",

Emilia: "Wrinkles were forming on your brow, so I wanted to get rid of them. After a great deal of trouble, now is the time for everyone to feel happy that we won."

Anastasia: "Hey now, sorry for worryin' ya. But ya see, ya can't just do that sorta thing all of a sudden. If ya weren't Emilia-san, I woulda been about to make ya pay a fee."

Emilia: "Does that mean since it's me, I can rub your brow until all the wrinkles are gone? In that case…"

Anastasia: "Hey, enough! Stop it stop it! I can handle the wrinkles on my own!"

Rejecting Emilia's hand as she vigorously asserted herself, Anastasia stroked her forehead with her own hand.

While giving a sigh in response to Emilia's slightly disappointed demeanor, Anastasia, doing as Emilia said, once again gazed over the Fortified City, enraptured in the fervor of victory as it was. Within the Fortified City, left with several scars from the conflict, despite still being the day upon which the fierce battle had ended, the signs of people working were still unceasing, even during these late night hours.

Anastasia: “To gain a keen understandin’ of the Empire’s internal state like this, I can’t help but think of it as a profit. —Emilia-san, there’s somethin’ I don’t wanna just leave on vague terms, so I gotta say this, but…”

Emilia: “—? What is it?”

Standing side by side as they gazed at the scenery outside the window together, Emilia then turned and peered at Anastasia’s visage. Imagining how Emilia’s expression might contort, Anastasia felt a slight reluctance, but she then felt disgust at herself for feeling such reluctance, and hence continued.

Anastasia: “From the Pleiades Watchtower to here, I’ve gotten along quite nicely with y’all, Emilia-san. But, our ambitions oppose each other. Once we return to the Kingdom, I’m gonna have to make that clear to ya again.”

Emilia: “…”

Anastasia: “Makin’ that easy-to-read face again…”

As Emilia’s amethyst eyes wavered with a lonely expression, Anastasia shrugged her shoulders.

Emilia’s capacity for compassion and magnanimity was more dangerous than it was an advantage. What was worse, was that when Emilia made this face, Anastasia felt unable to compose herself.

To begin with, Anastasia was self-aware of her lenience when it came to those she held close.

To compensate for that, she had always intended to view others unsparingly before they became close to her, but due to their fellowship here, she was aware that Emilia was in the process of inadvertently stepping one of her feet into that domain.

That was precisely why—

Anastasia: “We agreed on this before, didn’t we now? Any story ’bout us becomin’ friends or whatever, will be after the Royal Selection is over.”

Emilia: “…Can’t we do it a little sooner?”

Anastasia: “Emilia-san, you’ve gotten real cheeky, haven’t ya?”

Her phrasing was polite, yet her words were sufficiently persistent.

Anastasia slowly shook her head, and Emilia took a small breath. But, she immediately clenched both her hands into fists, and,

Emilia: “Got it. Anastasia-san is stubborn. I won’t say anything more than this.”

Anastasia: “…Ain’t that somewhat like the phrasin’ of a girl who’s given up?”

Emilia: “Just like how Anastasia-san thinks she wants to do this, I have feelings of wanting to do that, so that makes us even.”

At Emilia’s stout-hearted and constructive response, Anastasia blinked her eyes.

Regarding this, it was as Emilia had said, and Anastasia could not come up with any words to argue.

On the other hand, considering that she thought it depressing that she would have no choice but to have this same conversation with Emilia again—

Anastasia: “Quite the troublin’ affair.”

And, since she bore no ill will either, Anastasia was of mixed feelings.

Whether or not she knew how Anastasia felt deep down, though she likely did not know, Emilia continued her words with “Moreover”,

Emilia: “While I want to become friends with Anastasia-san, I also want to do so with Priscilla.”

Anastasia: “That’s… um, ya know? I guess you’re free to think as ya please, but…”

Emilia: “In Vollachia, Subaru and Abel got along reaaally well, didn’t they? I understand that it was also because Subaru is good at getting along with people, but… but, I can’t just give up because Subaru is good at it while I’m not.”

Anastasia: “…Well, I guess there ain’t no doubtin’ that Natsuki-kun ‘n the Emperor are good pals.”

As Emilia chose her words with determination, Anastasia evaluated Subaru and Vincent’s relationship from a third-party perspective. However, it seemed like the friendship that Anastasia imagined was of a completely different luminosity to what Emilia was imagining.

Anyhow—

Emilia: “Right now, Crusch-san is in a terrible state, but I want her body to heal, and for her to get her memories back. Then, I’ll start to get along with Priscilla, and I’ll be friends with Anastasia. With Felt-chan, I have confidence that I’ll be able to get along well with her.”

Anastasia: “Don’t make me yer friend so stealthily… but, ya seem to be plannin’ somethin’ incredible, ain’t’cha now?”

The Royal Candidates, all of unique dispositions; the idea of making friends with all of one’s competitors, was probably an idea better off discarded as reckless rather than incredible.

But at those thoughts of Anastasia’s, Emilia smiled with confidence.

Emilia: “You know, I realized something amazing. For some reason, the current me gets reaaally happy when something good happens to Anastasia-san.”

Anastasia: “—. Thanks?”

Emilia: “Yes. So then, I thought this. All of us are doing our best to become the next Monarch, but in the end only one of us will actually win… but, if I was friends with everyone like I am with

Anastasia-san, then more so than the frustrated feelings of losing, the feelings of congratulations would be way bigger!”

Anastasia: “…Don’t make me yer friend so stealthily.”

And, the reason that her rejection was weaker than earlier, originated in her pure surprise.

Emilia’s way of thinking, her ideas were all things that Anastasia could not come up with, and each time, the things she said caused her to feel a fresh sense of surprise. —The same went for this instance.

Anastasia: “That might be a darn wonderful idea, but who’s to say, ya know?”

Emilia: “Right?”

Anastasia: “But, ain’t that a bit of a weak attitude? Ain’t ya basically sayin’ that ya wanna reduce yer depressin’ feelings for when ya lose, Emilia-san?”

Concentrating all of one’s strength on winning, without even considering the prospect of defeat—such idealism was not something that Anastasia partook in. So long as there were prospects of both victory and defeat, one must put in maximum effort in order to win while also making appropriate preparations for a potential loss. However, while that was Anastasia’s way of thinking, it felt a little bit uncharacteristic for Emilia to utilize such a manner of thinking herself.

At those words of Anastasia’s, Emilia reacted with a look of puzzlement,

Emilia: “Is it a weak attitude? I was just thinking that when I become the Monarch, I’d like for Anastasia-san and everyone else to cheer me on…”

Anastasia: “…”

Emilia: “Anastasia-san?”

Emilia declared that without any fervor whatsoever, and this time, Anastasia was left speechless. Before Emilia as she blinked her eyes, Anastasia placed her hand over her forehead.

And then—

Anastasia: "Ahahahahahahaha!"

And, even if it was disgraceful, she opened her mouth and erupted with laughter.

In front of Anastasia's burst of laughter, Emilia darted her eyes about in confusion, perhaps wondering about just who in the world had caused this explosive uproar.

Truly, it was an outrageous proposition.

Anastasia: "Really now, to think that rather than yerself, ya'd be worried 'bout us after defeatin' us, you're quite the big shot now, ain't'cha?"

Emilia: "Eh… ah! I see, that's right, I'm sorry. My feelings of refusing to lose are reaaally huge, so just now, I said something very disrespectful…"

Anastasia: "My, I'm quite hurt. It seems our promise to be friends after the Royal Selection might be goin' down the drain with this here."

Emilia: "Th-That's no good! Anastasia-san, if you don't keep your promises, you'll end up becoming Subaru!"

Anastasia: "What sorta threat is that s'possed to be? Tho', it's the scariest one I've heard up till now."

From the stories she had heard thus far, she knew that Subaru was a serial promise-breaker, but Subaru should really rethink his way of life given how instantly a connection was drawn between it and him within Emilia.

In any case, she had certainly received Emilia's unconscious declaration of war.

Moreover—

Anastasia: “If ya say ya wanna get along well~ with the princess, Emilia-san, then ya better do yer darn best. Unfortunately, I ain’t got no compatibility with the princess, so it’d be quite a challenge.”

Emilia: “Eh, is that so? But, I was so sure that you two might get along since you’re pretty similar.”

Anastasia: “Tho’ I’m a bit skeptical of why ya’d think that. Generally, if I got along with her, I wouldn’t have refrained from callin’ just the princess to Priestella.”

Emilia: “I see… that’s it! The next time we all get together, let’s invite Priscilla as well!”

Anastasia: “Emilia-san, the goal there wasn’t merely to just have everyone gettin’ together… ahh~.”

Emilia’s eyes sparkled as if she had thought that she had devised a brilliant plan, but then immediately looked at Anastasia with an uneasy expression. The half-elf unfairly asked “No good?” with innocent eyes, to which Anastasia heaved a sigh.

Anastasia: “As expected of Emilia-san, ya might just really be a Witch.”

Emilia: “Ah, geez, don’t say such perverse things. I don’t mind, but if you call other people Witches, they’ll get reaaally mad at you.”

Anastasia: “Ya ain’t gotta tell me, I wouldn’t say it to anyone but ya, Emilia-san, that sorta thing.”

Because she had ended up saying that, Anastasia lamented her rare slip of the tongue. But sure enough, Emilia was smiling in delight at those words.

Emilia: “Priestella’s in a rough spot right now, so it would probably be difficult for everyone to gather… We’ve come all the way to Vollachia, so how about we all go to Kararagi or something next time?”

Anastasia: “I ain’t reluctant to show y’all ‘round, but if Emilia-san met with Kararagi’s merchants, Natsuki-kun’d probably end up dyin’ of exhaustion. Besides, Reinhard-kun from Felt-san’s Camp can’t be brought outta the Kingdom.”

Emilia: “Ah, that’s right. It would be a pity if only Reinhard needed to stay home, and since Felt-chan would also be reaaally lonely, that’s a no-go.”

Regarding the relationship between Felt and Reinhard, Anastasia held a slightly different point of view from Emilia’s, but the conclusion would be the same, so she did not delve deeply into it.

And, thereupon—

???: “—Huh, Emilia-tan and Anastasia-san, what are you guys doing here?”

Greeted in such a manner, Emilia and Anastasia turned around, and in the entrance of the dining hall in which the two had been speaking, was the figure of Subaru, who had returned to an appearance and voice befitting his age.

However, he was not alone, and the person accompanying him was quite surprising.

???: “What, the half-devil and the she-fox both present without their attendants… despite being in the Empire, ‘tis quite the act of recklessness, is it not?”

Seeing the figure of Priscilla boldly advancing towards them as she placed her red folding fan over her lips, Anastasia made a bitter face, and Emilia’s face suddenly lit up.

They had reactions of opposite extremes; however, seeing Emilia’s reaction in the corner of her eye, Anastasia thought to herself.

As someone who would one day become Emilia’s friend as per her grand ambitions, maybe for just a little bit—so she thought.

Emilia: “Just now, Anastasia-san and I were talking about you, Priscilla.”

Priscilla: “Hoh, talking about mineself, were you? I am talking about you. Are you two perhaps taking advantage of this situation in which the Empire has lost power, scheming to fill up even the smallest bags with money?”

Anastasia: “Emilia-san, I really might be unable to go along with yer plans from earlier.”

She had tried to meet Emilia half way, but Priscilla’s attitude had put a damper on her spirits. Then, seeing Anastasia’s reaction, Emilia got flustered with a “Wait, wait”. Then, as the distressed Emilia searched for her next words, Anastasia and Priscilla suddenly met eyes.

Anastasia: “…”

Irises of pale-turquoise crossed irises of crimson, mutual gazes pregnant with intent clashed, and Anastasia thought.

No matter how much time Emilia put in, her vision of a future where all the Royal Candidates got along with each other would likely never take shape.

However, even if those intentions were never brought to complete fruition—

Anastasia: “Princess, I think I’ll still be arguin’ with yer esteemed self like this no matter how many years pass.”

Priscilla: “Curiously, I am of the exact same opinion, she-fox.”

Anastasia anticipated that the relationship constructed by glaring at each other like this would be an amusing one indeed.

END

The Dragon Kingdom: Meili's Witchbeast Observation Record VII

1

Traversing the Augria Sand Dunes and being a guide to Pleiades Watchtower—although there were a few unforeseen circumstances, Meili was able to complete the role assigned to her.

The battle with the Divine Dragon Volcanica outside the tower, the scattered Books of the Dead within its confines, and the flock of bird familiars belonging to someone who was apparently monitoring the tower—there were many lingering problems and concerns left.

"But none of that is Meili's problem. She brought us here and completed her job," Felt boldly declared while gathering the gaze of the wise men in the assembly, pointing at Meili beside her with her thumb as she straightforwardly praised her work. Receiving that, Meili puffed out her chest, just as she had been told to. Because Felt had warned her that any signs of weakness or a lack of confidence would be taken advantage of.

As if to support Meili, the mini crimson scorpion on her head clapped its pincers and made a sharp sound. Meili let out a small sigh at the gesture of her partner that seemed to cut through the tense atmosphere in the assembly and said, "Just as Felty says, I have fulfilled my promise. I've brought Felty and Mister Red-Hair back safely, right?"

"Yes, she is correct. Regarding that, the Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea swears upon his mistress Lady Felt and bears witness." The one who replied to her query sonorously with his resonant voice was the red-haired knight, Reinhard. He and Felt had accompanied Meili on the journey to prove her usefulness, and his guarantee made full use of the significant meaning of their titles of 'Sword Saint' and 'Royal Selection Candidate'. Which meant that…

"Hmm, Miss Meili Portroute."

"…Whaat is it?"

"We had various talks amongst ourselves regarding your treatment. You have a past which cannot be erased. Yet on the other hand, you have the ability to fulfill a role no one else can, an ability that has been backed by Lady Felt and Knight Reinhard. Therefore—"

"…"

"We hereby promise, by the authority of the Council of the Wise Men, that the Kingdom will not incriminate you for your past deeds."

It took her a moment to grasp the meaning of the words spoken by the old man with a long beard. Meili became silent and kept blinking; however, understanding and realization finally hit her when she saw the old man, Miklotov, nodding with a pleased look. It was proof that the Kingdom of Lugunica had recognized the worth in her existence.

"…Hic, thank youu."

Meili Portroute had successfully acquired the right to be where she wanted to be, a concrete achievement that could be conveyed to the people who weren't there.

2

"Meili, I am glad that you have returned."

"I humbly extend my congratulations to you for successfully fulfilling your duty. Approbation."

The ones who had received Meili after she came out of the assembly following the conclusion of the trial were a young girl and a man in a butler's attire—the mistress and her servant, Annerose and Clind.

Annerose, who was granted a seat at the assembly as a concerned person but didn't have the authority to speak there, probably felt frustrated, but Meili had not let her down.

"Yes, I'm also really relieved. I'm sorry for making you worry, Annerosy, Mister Butler."

Annerose smiled gently at Meili, who was feeling relieved, before immediately putting on a serious look. "Our concerns are not for you, the one directly involved, to worry about… Rather, Lady Felt, Knight Reinhard."

"Hm?" The person who responded to her call with a raised eyebrow was Felt, who had exited the assembly alongside her.

Accompanied by Reinhard, she closed an eye at Annerose's gaze. "Yeah, what is it? Just so you know, my opinion hasn't changed regardin' the whole give and take since we came out. I don't intend on makin' you feel indebted over something like…"

"Is it true that you left your companions at the tower?" Annerose asked with a slightly stiff voice.

"Yeah, well, that's right," Felt responded to the inquiry while scratching her cheek with her finger.

What Annerose had heard was true. Among the group that headed to the Pleiades Watchtower, the ones who had returned to the royal capital were four: Meili, the mistress-servant duo of Felt and Reinhard, and Grassis, one of the twins that had accompanied them. Ezzo, the strategist of the Felt Camp, and Grassis's sister, Flam, stayed behind at the watchtower and were keeping an eye on its surroundings as a measure against the Witch Cult, which may have entered the tower or posed a risk of doing so in the future.

"I have heard that the desert and tower both have harsh environments. So the reason why you left your companions in such a place was because you were accompanying Meili…" said Annerose, before holding the hem of her dress and bowing deeply on the spot. It was a flawless gesture of etiquette that an aristocrat should uphold, showcasing refinement down to her very fingertips. "I sincerely thank you once again for this matter. House Miload will ensure that the favor received and the sacrifice made by you will be compensated."

Furthermore, Annerose mentioned compensation, prompting Meili to feel the need to speak up, so she attempted to interject. Since the whole situation was caused by Meili. So she felt that it shouldn't bring any disadvantage to Annerose because of that. However…

"No need to worry, Meili. Pipsqueak, Annerose, was it? There ain't no need to overthink this when it comes to those two. I can't say anythin' about Flam, but the teach stayed because he wanted to stay."

"That sounds a little…"

"No, it's true, Lady Annerose," Reinhard interjected from his mistress's side to prevent Annerose from going further. "Ezzo said that he has a strong academic interest in the Pleiades Watchtower. The reason why we left Flam there was to take care of Ezzo and so that they could contact us immediately in case something happens."

Clind squinted his monocled eye at his response. "I see," he began. "Synesthesia among the twins…no, perhaps it is something more than that. Speculation."

"I'd rather not talk about what it really is." Felt shrugged at Clind's insight and kept the twins' secret hidden.

Meili hadn't been told in detail about that, but she also thought they possessed something close to synesthesia like Clind had speculated. Of course, it doesn't mean that it dispels all of my doubts, but… "The small fellow was reaally getting riled up, so it doesn't actually feel like we left him behind."

"So, there's no need to worry about my people bein' at the tower. Someone will have to be stationed there sooner or later anyway, so it ain't a big deal," Felt interjected.

"…Then I shall consider this a personal debt," replied Annerose. "Our House is always prepared to respond to Your Ladyship's requests."

"Ha, you're a stubborn one. Sure then, whatever floats your boat."

It doesn't look like Felty intends on taking her up on that, but thanks to her agreeing, Annerosy's concerns have been somewhat taken care of for now. With that settled, the next thing on my mind is—

“Soo, did Emilia and the others who went to the Empire while we were away manage to find Subaru?” Meili inquired about Emilia and the others who had gone to the Vollachian Empire in search of the missing Subaru. The time taken for Meili and her companions to reach the Pleiades Watchtower was minimized thanks to Clind’s ability, but the journey took more than ten days, including the stay at the tower. So she wondered whether there had been any progress on Emilia’s side.

However, Annerose slowly shook her head in response to that. “Unfortunately, we have not received any contact after they safely entered the Empire. It is just that the border with the Vollachian Empire has become stricter.”

“Dooes that mean that…something is happening iin the Empire?”

“His Lordship had stated that he would keep providing updates. There are no updates from him, however, which means there is something preventing him from doing so. Proof.”

“I see…” It’s difficult to interpret the situation when there’s neither good news or bad news. But the fact that there’s been no contact makes me anxious.

“Trouble in the Empire, eh? I would’ve lent out Reinhard if I could, but…” Felt started.

“I don’t have a right to leave the country unless extraordinary legal measures are taken,” Reinhard explained. “Of course, I am deeply worried about Lady Emilia and Subaru, but…”

“I know, I know. Hah, maybe I should seriously consider usin’ you and the Divine Dragon to threaten the Kingdom.”

“That’s a bad habit of yours, my lady,” Reinhard reproached.

Felt clicked her tongue in dissatisfaction. “Tch.”

She declared that she won’t do that in the desert and the tower, but the fact that it's come up as an option shows that the two of them are considering it. A thought then suddenly crossed Meili's mind. "The two of you are supposed to be in opposition to Subaru and Emilia, so whyy are you being so nice to me?"

"Huh?"

"Normally competitors are a hindrance right? So that's why I was wondering."

It was strange enough that they had helped out Meili, someone they just had no reason to actively save, but the Felt Camp was the Emilia Camp's enemy. In fact, they have every reason to stand in their way, so them thinking about saving them is…

"Leaving aside what Lady Felt thinks, I am a knight. It is therefore natural for me to save Lady Emilia, who is a noble and a citizen of the Kingdom. Besides, Subaru is a friend."

"She sure doesn't act like a noble…" Meili muttered. While it made sense that Subaru was Reinhard's friend, Meili couldn't think of Emilia as a noble even though she was technically one.

Meili tilted her head in wonder, and Felt roughly ran her fingers through her beautiful golden hair and said, "Well…a long time ago when I was still a brat in the slums…"

"Are you really talking about yoourself, Felty?" Meili widened her eyes in surprise at Felt, who had begun talking with a serious expression. It was her first time hearing that she used to live in the slums. But she's a candidate for the royal selection.

"Back then, I was making a living from stealing, and I was hangin' around with some people in a similar situation. Then, one day I heard about a clumsy merchant who was being careless with his warehouse keys. So one thing led to another and we decided to steal them together."

"Excuse me, Knight Reinhard, is it fine for me to hear this story…?" Annerose asked.

"Do keep this a secret," answered Reinhard, putting a finger to his lips.

Annerose didn’t think it would nullify the previously mentioned give and take, but she accepted Reinhard’s words with a troubled expression.

Felt continued talking next to him. “The theft went well. But it seems like someone got greedy once it was over. One of our collaborators tried to get the better of us and hog all of the loot. Things got messy after that and at the end I ran away with the loot…”

“So, only Felty won at the eend…but what abouut it?” On the surface, it just sounds like a story about her taking everything, so I don’t see how it relates to why she started talking, the reason why she’s helping out Emilia’s group.

Felt grimaced and continued. “Well, you see. If it’s just about profit or loss, then yeah I definitely won. But y’know, the food I had with the money I got by selling the loot tasted awful.”

“…”

“At that time, I couldn’t figure out why since I was too busy surviving day by day. But I know the reason now. It was a matter of feeling right and satisfied,” Felt said, flashing her fang, and gave Reinhard, who stood beside her, a firm slap on the back. The clear sound echoed through the hallway as she puffed out her chest. “If I wanted to become the ruler regardless of the means, then Reinhard could just go on a rampage and turn the rest of the candidates into dust. But I wouldn’t feel good if I got the throne like that, and I wouldn’t be satisfied either. So, that’s why.”

“Huh?”

“Remember what you asked me before? The reason why I help Emilia and Subaru out when they’re in trouble is because I wanna win in a way that feels good.” Felt peered into Meili’s face and grinned smugly. “How’s that?”

Meili got overwhelmed by her attitude and vigor and blinked in awe. However, she had been persuaded by the way Felt expressed herself.

“It’s not just for Lady Emilia. Even if it was Lady Crusch, Lady Anastasia, or Lady Priscilla, Lady Felt would feel that same way and act,” Reinhard commented.

“You sayin’ what I’m thinking is irritating, but yeah, it won’t hold water if it ain’t like that.”

“Truth be told, I am envious of how Lady Anastasia and her knight Julius acted. If I didn’t have my responsibilities, I would have acted the same,” said Reinhard, looking down at his hands.

“Dumbass,” Felt responded to his self admonition with her tongue sticking out.

Even Meili could understand why Felt got angry at Reinhard’s words. It was disrespectful to the person who had chosen him despite knowing what he was like as a person. And the same thing could be said by Meili regarding Emilia or Subaru.

“But even so, neither I nor Mister Red-Hair can stop being ourselves.”

“Yes. You are right.” Reinhard gave a faint, gentle smile and Meili, albeit slightly, was able to return it in kind.

At first, when Reinhard looked down at her, she thought of him as a monster whom she should never approach, but from the journey to the tower and by exchanging smiles now, she felt like they had grown closer. Surely there might have been progress like this in the relationships I ended or given up on till now, Meili thought.

“Well, that’s what we think. I understand that it’s hard for you to ask, but don’t hesitate to call out if something happens, Annerose,” Felt said.

“I see. You desire to win in a way that makes you feel good. If that is so, then I am afraid I am going to have to disappoint you…for the one who is going to be victorious in the royal selection is my Emily.” Annerose boldly declared her gratitude and a challenge on

Emilia’s behalf.

“And that’s what I want to settle without any unnecessary interference,” Felt accepted the young girl’s challenge with a pleased smile.

Beside her, Meili clenched both her hands and solidified her resolve. The session in the assembly earlier wasn’t merely about deciding her fate—Meili’s work was going to be the achievement of Emilia’s group, who were able to secure her pardon.

“I neeed to give my beest, scorpy,” she said.

Influenced by Meili’s enthusiasm, the mini crimson scorpion on her head responded by spinning its tail. Feeling encouraged by that, she gazed out at the distant sky from the corridor window. I’m not sure if I’m truly facing south, where the Empire is located, but I’m certain that Emilia and Subaru are fighting hard under the same sky. So…

“I’ve never been someone who thinks so haard. I seriously won’t foorgive you if you don’t return saafe and soound,” Meili said. She acknowledged the person she was, and as she thought about the people who allowed her to become who she was now, her lips unconsciously curled into a smile. It was an involuntary habit of hers—it was the same unconscious smile that she made whenever she thought about her high-maintenance elder sister with whom she had spent a lot of time. As she was smiling, the sound of high-pitched pincers echoed from the top of her head.

END

Arc 9:
Light of a Nameless Star

Volume 39

Chapters 1-13

Prologue:
A New Journey

—As she held the reins in the driver's seat of the dragon carriage, the girl looked directly ahead.

The girl bore lovely facial features, and gave off a cute impression.

Until recently, she would have been described as childish without exception, but she had grown taller and matured, which made that description no longer applicable.

The formerly childish young girl had blossomed into a graceful figure that went above and beyond all expectations.

However, this was not something that was achieved by idly passing the time, but was the result of the girl's own tireless self-improvement. It was the manifestation of the results of her daily efforts to face the mirror and continue to challenge herself to become a better person for tomorrow.

—Petra Leyte. That was the name of the cute girl whose pride was evident even on her face.

Holding the reins of the dragon carriage as she firmly steered the jet-black ground dragon, Petra was aware of the important role she carried on her slender shoulders, entrusted with the lives of the group.

Then, from beside the serious-looking Petra, a voice called out, "He~y?".

???: "Petra-chan, you've changed your hairstyle a little. Is that a braid I see he~re?"

As they said that, their fingers reached out to caress Petra's hair without permission. Turning her head to avoid their touch, Petra looked back at her companion with a sidelong glance.

They seemed unhappy that Petra had avoided their touch.

Petra: “Right now, I’m the driver of this dragon carriage, you know? Isn’t it dangerous if you disturb me?”

???: “Calling me a disturbance would be an exaggerati~on. Isn’t it just a little bit of skinship? Besi~des, even if you look away for a moment, we can count on Patrasche-cha~n. Ri~ght?”

Patrasche: “—Dodogyuuun.”

Petra: “I won’t spoil you either, Patrasche-chan.”

Petra chided the ground dragon, who had neighed in response to being called upon. Patrasche, a gentle and proud creature, seemed to listen to Petra’s words with elegance, wagging its tail in response.

After she had witnessed this, Petra glared at the person who had tried to get the ground dragon to take their side,

Petra: “Meili-chan?”

???: “Ye~ah, ye~ah, I understa~nd. Geez, don’t make such a scary fa~ce.”

Petra: “It’s not scary. It’s cute, right?”

???: “I guess s~o.”

Waving and fluttering her hand, the young girl —Meili replied to Petra’s question in a perfunctory manner. There was something she wanted to say about her attitude, but it could also be said to be proof that she had opened up to her.

Initially, there had been no such impression, but Meili had become quite talkative. She was a very different person from the one she had met in the mansion’s confinement room. —Or perhaps, she had felt lonely while Petra and the others were away in the Empire.

Petra: “Maybe it’s just a cute way of sulking…”

Meili: “Hmm? I feel like you’re saying something a bit che~eky.”

Petra placed a finger to her lips, and Meili, who was quick to notice her thoughts, glared at her with her piercing eyes. It was not just Meili, but a small scorpion crawled out from within her blue hair as it stirred.

That scorpion, which they called the little crimson scorpion, began to protest against Petra by snapping its pincers.

Petra had no choice but to smile bitterly on the lively driver's bench—and then she realized. The reason why Meili, the little crimson scorpion, and even Patrasche were making it so lively.

Considering the purpose of this trip, the atmosphere would inevitably become serious.

Petra: "…Thank you, Meili-chan."

Meili: "—. I don't know what that's abo~ut, but it doesn't feel so bad to be than~ked."

Petra: "Liar."

Petra stuck out her small tongue at Meili's side-profile, who was resting her chin in her hands with her elbows on her lap.

—The dragon carriage that was carrying the young girls along with their precious companions continued on its journey.

That was a resolution sought by one who had found themself at a loss in facing something that had been lost in the Vollachian Empire, after having concluded the battle against the Great Disaster; this was the path to reach the possibility of showing them how.

Chapter 1:
O Prayers, Be as Clouds

1

—The final hours were calm, and had passed surprisingly quietly.

???: “—O Star of Mine.”

Indeed, the tone of that voice was flat, yet the degree of love contained within its call overflowed, so as Yorna, as Iris, looked up at the man beside her, her long eyelashes trembled.

Nothing about that voice was out of the ordinary, it was something that felt as though it had called out to her hundreds, nay, thousands of times during this miraculous tryst—and yet, in this moment, it felt special.

—No, to be precise, if just this moment were to be excluded, then any other of those calls would also be special. However, the specialness of this moment differed to that of all those that came before.

After all, it was a call that signified the terminus of this miraculous period.

Yorna: “Yes, Your Excellency.”

Gazing back into the eyes looking into hers, she returned from her own lips a calling filled with love.

Her voice trembled not, and she praised herself for not letting her feminine feelings make her collapse. In the moment of their previous parting, Iris/Yorna had been unable to leave him with any words. But, whenever she reincarnated and looked back at that time, she had thought countless times about what she would do if given another chance.

If given another chance, she would absolutely not leave behind the wailings of a weak woman.

Eugard: "'Tis the inverse of that time. Mineself shall be passing on before thee."

Yorna: "That is so… To call it a revenge of sorts, well, I'm sure Your Excellency has come to know of the malice present in this world of men."

Eugard: "Verily. Much I have learned… Nay, it was taught to me. By the many who walked alongside mineself, of whom thou wert the first."

Yorna: "…"

As those almond-shaped eyes narrowed, he—Eugard Vollachia, reminisced on those olden days, on the people who were present therein, and the gentle wavering of his eyes' splendor caused Yorna to feel a piercing sensation through her chest.

Always, he had been the type of person to wear a stern expression except for when he was in front of Iris.

Because he was such a person, Iris had wondered if he had been able to even once relax his cheeks or eyebrows after she had passed away.

And now after this, after he went towards that place between the skies and the lands, would he—.

Eugard: "Be not afraid, O Star of Mine. Mine life hath been an unexpectedly blessed one."

Yorna: "—Ah."

Eugard: "I met thee, and received life. I walked with thee, and received blessings. I parted from thee, and in doing so committed a grave error, but now that fate hath brought us together once more, I received the opportunity to rectify it."

Eugard's words, the lovely voice of a person counting their blessings one by one, gently dissolved the anxiety and fears within Iris/

Yorna's heart, lovingly unraveling them.

Since antiquity, since he had lost his dearest Iris, Eugard burned with rage, and in his hatred left behind a mistaken law that became the trigger for countless tragedies—Eugard's descendent, the current Vollachian Emperor who was extolled as the Wise Emperor, had promised to abolish that law.

To lift the curse which bound the wolfpeople and molepeople, such was the dearest wish of Iris/Yorna, and Eugard's final regret when he had been alive—finally, he would be able to return this world to those who had the right to live in this era.

To that end—

Eugard: "O Star of Mine, thou art included amongst those."

Suddenly, as he took her into his arms, Eugard's words caused Iris/Yorna's breath to stop. It felt as if the emotions inside of her had been properly dissected, more precisely than ever before.

Yorna: "Your Excellency… I… I…"

Eugard: "Even were it bestowed upon thee in a form undesired, I imagine that no matter the epoch thou hadst found thyself in, thou wouldst have spent thy days forming bonds in earnest. Of course, even in thy present form, the same doth apply. —That, is something thou ought to fulfill to the utmost."

Towards Iris/Yorna, she who was lost as to what to do with the unnatural existence known as herself, those words gently addressed a choice to move towards a way of being that was easy to understand.

No matter the time, Eugard was always correct.

That was neither because Eugard was wise, nor because he was strong. It was because he thought sincerely about those that he faced, with reverence, because he was a compassionate Emperor who wished for the happiness of others.

Known as the King of Thorns, and feared more than any other, Iris's beloved Emperor earnestly thought about, honored, and wished for Yorna with unbearably deep love.

And so, as far as Iris and Yorna were concerned, Eugard's words would always be correct.

Thus, the fact that the truth in his words would also hold true for people other than Iris/Yorna meant that—

Yorna: "—I, have no choice but to spend the remainder of my life proving that."

Eugard: "'Tis a great service."

Hearing Iris/Yorna's determined answer, Eugard responded with a smile.

At Eugard's taciturn way of being, Iris/Yorna narrowed her eyes slightly, and extended her arm so that she could touch his cheek, as she brought her lips close to his.

Yorna: "…"

Lips met each other and overlapped, as those who had both died in that era, a man and a woman who by all rights should never have been able to reunite, separated by entire worlds, were now the closest they had ever been.

Eugard: "…"

Like that, the closest contact that they had ever made in this world persisted for a bit, and then a bit more, and a little while longer, before the distance between them slowly grew—The eyes of Iris/Yorna, locked with Eugard's.

And then—

Eugard: "—O Star of Mine, I love thee so."

Yorna: "As do I, Your Excellency. Evermore, without fading for all perpetuity, my heart shall long for you."

Having exchanged a kiss, having delivered each other words brimming with love, his final moments were of his lips curling into the shape of a smile.

For the olden tale known as “Iris and the King of Thorns”, a story that began in the age of antiquity, a story that had kept postponing its own conclusion until the present day, this was the true curtain’s close.

2

—Dawn broke upon the first night since the Great Disaster that had shaken the entity of the Vollachian Empire had come to a conclusion.

The threat of undead wreaking havoc across the Empire had been averted by means of the unity of imperial subjects, devoting themselves to the law of iron and blood; at the forefront of those Sword Wolves of Vollachia, was the majestic figure of their apex, Vincent Vollachia, who exchanged blows directly against the enemy ringleader with Yang Sword raised aloft.

Centered around the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the damages had reached every major city of Vollachia, such as the Fortified City of Garkla, Glarasia, the City of Iron and Blood, the Demon City of Chaosflame, and the Cloud Sea City of Mezoreia; yet, each and every city had been able to avoid falling into a catastrophic state.

Therefore, whilst left with major scars, a triumphant momentum was what ultimately enveloped the Vollachian Empire.

Of course, thinking in the long term, the top brass could not bask in the victory forever. Those leading figures would have to deal with the damage reports flooding in from various locations one after another, as well as the numerous circumstances of their subjects that they would need to sanction, and thus they would not have any time to sleep.

Amidst those reports, there was a piece of information that had been silently snuck in.

In the battle against the Great Disaster, having contributed greatly to the victory of the Vollachian Empire, the obituary of a lone woman who had lived like a flame and captivated many—.

Within a room of the Fortified City of Garkla, which was serving as temporary headquarters in place of the ravaged Imperial Capital, Emperor Vincent Vollachia happened to catch wind of that obituary, creating a silence so very unlike himself, who would respond to all matters within an instant of deliberation, and after spending some time with his head down—

Vincent: "—I see."

Those brief words, were all that he spoke.

3

The fight against the Great Disaster had ended, and people began to move on to reclaim their lives.

Vollachia suffered terrible devastation from the undead army during the unprecedented Great Disaster, but the inhabitants of the realm resolutely held their heads high, standing back up one by one as they set out to rebuild the land.

The sight of the people of the Empire simply overwhelmed Petra Leyte.

Petra: "Although, I don't really like the Empire much…"

Having said that, with mixed feelings, Petra stood in the streets of the Fortified City.

A significant part of Petra's reason for not liking the Empire was anger that this was the place where her precious friend and Petra's love interest, Natsuki Subaru, was forcibly taken away to.

But even disregarding those factors, Petra's feeling for Vollachia still leaned toward dislike, but regardless, they cooperated and made an immense effort to prevent the country's destruction.

Petra was also relieved that the Great Disaster had been overcome and the Empire was spared from destruction.

However, even so—

Petra: “—Subaru.”

Petra, who in public addressed him with the honorific “Sama”, was concerned for the man who had doubtlessly done more for the Empire than anyone else, even the Emperor.

Petra was extremely worried about how much it must have worn his heart down in an Empire full of terrible things because Subaru was such a kind and compassionate person.

Even so, the final nail in the coffin was too much for Subaru, who had so many things to worry about.

Petra: “Priscilla Barielle-sama…”

That was the name of the woman who had caused a tremendous, deep, and painful wound in Subaru’s heart.

Due to Petra’s position, she never exchanged a single word with her. However, there were opportunities. Before the Great Disaster, she was on the same side of the battle for the Imperial Capital and had ample opportunity to talk with her.

However, Petra did not dare to approach Priscilla.

This was because she, like Emilia, was a candidate for the Royal Selection in the Kingdom of Lugunica, and she felt that she should not get more comfortable than necessary with their opponents.

And Petra regretted that.

By not having interacted with Priscilla, Petra had no right to mourn her—Priscilla Barielle’s death, and, therefore, found it difficult to sympathize with Subaru and Emilia.

It would be hard to tell two very heartbroken people that she understood what they were going through.

This was something tremendously frustrating for Petra right now—.

???: "—Hello, hello, Miss Petra, are you alone?"

Petra: "Oh, Zikr-san."

Petra, who had been pursing her lips and tensing her cheeks, looked up at the call, and there was Zikr Osman with a round, voluptuous hairdo.

As a General of the Empire, Zikr played an important role in the battle against the Great Disaster, and he was a very likable person who treated Petra as just another person without being arrogant about his position.

Because of his diligence, Zikr would likely be heavily relied upon after the war, but it was unusual for him to be alone in a place like this. At this, as Petra's eyes widened,

Zikr: "I've finished reorganizing all the troops, so I have finally come down to check the damage myself. I had heard the reports, but I had to see it firsthand."

Petra: "I see, that was it. I do not know the details of the reorganization… but well done."

Zikr: "Thank you for your thoughtfulness. However, the role I was able to play is insignificant compared to those who are working so energetically, such as General First-Class Goz and General First-Class Kafma."

Petra: "I don't think that you can say that your hard work is not important because one of you worked harder than the other."

Zikr, looking embarrassed, became even more so from Petra's statement.

On the other hand, Petra reflected on her own remarks, remembering that when she had worried about Subaru earlier, she had compared his efforts to those of another—a stern-eyed Emperor.

She wanted to see things the same way as the people she liked, but she was frustrated with herself for not being able to.

Petra: “But it is difficult for those of the General First-Class, isn’t it? Not even a few days have passed since then, and you have to fly around to other cities.”

Zikr: “Yes. The Generals of the various regions are responding, but the influence of a General First-Class directly in front of them cannot be ignored. Both in terms of the morale of the troops and the control over them.”

Petra: “I understand that the soldiers will be happy to see the people they admire, but control means…”

Zikr: “Sadly, even in these situations… no, precisely because of this poor situation, many are willing to take advantage of it to achieve immediate gain or to fulfill their ambitions.”

Petra: “…”

Zikr lowered his eyebrows, and Petra’s round eyes went downcast in response.

Petra was actually convinced by Zikr’s reply, thinking to herself, “I knew as much.”

The Vollachian Empire chose to stand together against a great enemy. Still, once the Great Disaster had been eliminated, the problem reverted from the perspective of the nation to the perspective of the individual. They would take what they lacked, would steal it, and, in some cases, would try to force their way through it all.

Those Generals First-Class whom Zikr mentioned intended to serve as a deterrent to such problems.

Zikr: “General First-Class Goz left as soon as his wife at the Imperial Capital was confirmed to be safe, and General First-Class Kafma also left as soon as he received his promotion.”

Petra: “That was great, right? Everyone was so surprised.”

Zikr: “There are only nine slots for General First-Class in the Empire, and the recent war has left several of those slots vacant… The creation of a new General First-Class is one of the few good things to come out of all this. Kafma understood that and accepted the position of General First-Class, even though he’d previously turned it down.”

Petra: “Zikr-san, you’ve never had that sort of talk raised to you, right?”

Zikr: “To me?”

Petra tilted her head and asked Zikr, who praised the names of the Generals First-Class and their way of doing things.

Petra did not observe the battle up close, so she did not know how those of the General First-Class performed. However, Zikr’s fighting spirit was also quite impressive in the sense that Petra was able to witness it up close and personal.

During the battle for the Fortified City, there were those who were in the command post, observing the broad scope of the battle and directing it, and there were those who continued to clash with the undead with swords in their hands. Zikr’s role was to bridge the gap between the two, and to ensure that they worked together seamlessly.

Although unassuming, without his work, the cohesiveness would have frayed and possibly even crumbled.

Petra: “I think even more so since my Nee-samas and I were behind the scenes as part of the group of healers.”

Zikr: “…That is much appreciated recognition, Miss Petra. Just receiving those words from a woman, I, Zikr Osman, feel deeply rewarded.”

Petra: “I am not saying that lightly…”

Zikr: “Of course, understood. But I do mean it, too.”

Zikr nodded his head as Petra tried to push back, feeling that she had been ignored. Then he turned his round eyes to the view of the city and relaxed his cheeks.

Zikr: “If there is any reward to be had, this sight, this result, is it. His Excellency the Emperor fled to the East, and I happened to be in the Fortress City on a mission. Thanks to this coincidence, I had the honor of accompanying His Excellency and being present at this moment. I am undeniably blessed.”

Petra: “…I am not sure. Zikr-san, don’t you deserve more praise?”

Zikr: “Don’t you get it? In that case, Miss Petra, can’t you think of someone likeable in that brilliant mind of yours?”

Petra gave a “huh” at the abrupt suggestion. In her mind, all she could vaguely recall was Natsuki Subaru, who had occupied a large part of her mind until a few minutes ago.

Zikr nodded deeply in response to Petra, who unintentionally did exactly as he said.

Zikr: “That likeable someone will smile at you as a result of your deeds. Isn’t that enough to make you feel rewarded?”

Petra: “That is… well, yes.”

Zikr: “It’s the same thing. I am a General of the Vollachian Empire, but the person Miss Petra has in mind is probably far greater than I, at least in my opinion. So, this is fine.”

So spoke Zikr, with one eye closed and his hand clutched to his chest as he smiled at Petra. He was neither being unreasonable nor trying to deceive Petra when he said that.

That was why Petra also quietly lowered her head and could not say anything—

???: “—However, His Excellency Vincent is all for reward and punishment according to merit. I disapprove of a person who’s done such meritorious service saying such selfless things, as it makes it difficult for the soldiers to express their opinions.”

Then, instead of Petra, who had closed her mouth, a voice interrupted from a different direction. Petra and Zikr turned their heads to see Serena walking slowly toward them.

Serena Dracroy, with a distinctive white scar on her cheek that nevertheless did not detract from her dignified beauty, was accompanied by her acquaintance Roswaal beside her, who made Petra's lips curl.

Serena and the others did not miss that flagrant response from Petra.

Serena: "As usual, how can you be so disliked by someone who seems old enough to be your daughter? You cannot complain about being stabbed in the back by someone who so openly shows rebellious intent."

Roswaal: "I would never hire a child who can't think about the consequences of their aaactions~. Regardless of your perception of me, I only employ competent people like Petra-kun, Otto-kun, and the like."

Serena: "That's a bad habit you have. Eventually, it's going to be the reason you get your feet swept out from under you."

Serena shrugged her shoulders, having a casual exchange with Roswaal, her caustic words mercilessly critical of him, which Petra found somewhat enjoyable to listen to.

But the truth was that she did not really feel that small pleasantness at the moment.

Zikr: "High Countess Dracroy, I thought you were busy…"

Serena: "The same could be said of you, General. Don't worry. Though it's true that I haven't slept for the past three days, my eyes are still clear. I can't sleep."

Zikr: "That does not sound very reassuring…"

Serena smiled fearlessly at Zikr, and Zikr's shoulders contracted like he was afraid of her. Roswaal's gaze turned to Petra as those two exchanged a few words.

Petra, who had consciously avoided contact with him, stiffened slightly at his gaze,

Petra: “Wh-what is it, Master?”

Roswaal: “Don’t be so wary. I’m simply concerned that you’re alone and that you’re working too much. Where is Frederica?”

Petra: “…Frederica-neesama has been keeping herself very busy for a long time and is now taking a break. After many requests, she finally took a rest.”

It reminded her that Frederica was barely breathing and sleeping as if in a coma.

Frederica, like Petra, worked as one of the healers, but also went around the fortress as a messenger, transforming herself into a beast when necessary. Her tireless work ethic was something to be respected, but as her protegee, she could not help but feel worried.

The fact that she was resting now was not because she had listened to Petra’s appeal, but because Ram and Garfiel had pushed her to do so.

Petra: “I couldn’t even convince Frederica-neesama to rest.”

Roswaal: “Frederica has a strong sense of responsibiiility~. By no means did she mean any disrespect to you, Petra-kun.”

Petra: “—Hk, I know that already, you don’t have to tell me that.”

Roswaal: “I see. You’re right. I’m sorry I said something I shouldn’t have. —Are you okay?”

Petra: “…The Yang Magic is working properly.”

Petra furrowed her eyebrows and answered Roswaal’s subtly dodging response.

Petra’s magical techniques, which she had learned from Roswaal and was now developing day by day, were suited to the Yang attribute, which had many effects that increased the power and vitality of the target.

In Petra's case, she was still uneasy about using it on others, but she could use her Yang Magic on herself and be adequate enough to compensate for her lack of strength or lack of sleep. Of course, stamina was not an endless source of energy, so eventually, one's limits would emerge.

Petra: "Right now, I would like to work a little bit more. Do you wish to stop me?"

Roswaal: "—. No, I won't stop you. We all have opportunities in life when we have to overcome reason and common sense with passion and force, and if this is the time for you, Petra-kun, I'm not going to take that away from you."

Petra: "…I still don't like you, Master."

Petra turned her face away from Roswaal, who closed one eye and looked at her with his blue one.

Despite being such an unforgivable person, Roswaal often affirmed Petra's ideas in this way. While he did not say these words to curry favor with Petra, it also did not help that these were his honest opinions.

For that being so, it would be as if Petra could understand Roswaal's true nature.

Serena: "What a troublesome master-servant relationship. The way such things are, the Empire and the Kingdom aren't so different. Don't you think so, General Second-Class Zikr?"

Zikr: "With Miss Petra being so intelligent at her age, it is not surprising that she is so enthusiastic about Margrave Mathers's education. When sincerity meets sincerity, I think a clash is inevitable. Of course, I think such a harsh way of life has also honed the beauty of High Countess Dracroy."

Serena: "Good grief, you're an Imperial General through and through. I thought you were a decent man, but instead, you're like this. You are pleasing me by showing me a face to my liking."

While Petra and Roswaal talked, Zikr reverently bowed to Serena's comments.

Petra sighed as she watched the conversation between two of the Empire's most unique temperaments. —Roswaal's nature, whatever it might have been, was unimportant. Now that she was face to face with Roswaal, whom she had been avoiding, there was no stopping now.

To which, Petra tightened her cheeks, and looked up at Roswaal,

Petra: "What are you planning to do with Subaru, Master?"

Roswaal: "Hmm."

Petra: "Please answer."

Petra's question was straightforward, but lacking in specificity.

Roswaal let out a small sigh as it was directed at him. He closed one eye again, and, this time, looked at Petra with the yellow one—this time with an inhuman look that Petra disliked.

—The unnaturalness of Subaru and Roswaal's relationship gave Petra a strong impression.

Petra suspected that this was something different from the indiscretions of Roswaal in Arlam village, Petra's hometown, or the Sanctuary where Frederica and Garfiel were from—something that Subaru and the others had almost entirely tolerated.

If one were to look at Roswaal's misdeeds and who pardoned him, the conditions were the same for Subaru, Emilia, and Frederica, who were too forgiving. Then there was Beatrice and Garfiel, who said they were angry, followed by Ram, who was in a unique position, and Petra and Otto, who clearly did not forgive Roswaal.

Naturally, Petra and Otto always felt tension when dealing with Roswaal. Of course, they did not want to make waves, so the tension was like quietly roasting over a flame. What she disliked about Roswaal was that he never changed his expression while being roasted in such a way.

However, the blue flames that Petra and Otto directed toward Roswaal and the heat in the air between Subaru and Roswaal seemed fundamentally different.

It was a terrible way of putting it, Petra did not want to admit it. But she was convinced.

Between Subaru and Roswaal, there was a secret that neither Petra nor anyone else was included in. That shared secret was the source that gave rise to a different kind of tension.

Furthermore, the consequences of that secret would surely, probably, cause Subaru misfortune.

Roswaal: “What I’m planning to do with Subaru, was iiit~?”

At Petra’s hostile look, Roswaal muttered in a slightly gravelly voice.

She felt that there was not the usual atmosphere of deception and mockery housed within that. However, even without such a clownish atmosphere, she could not heedlessly trust Roswaal.

As if to confirm Petra’s sentiment, Roswaal, with one eye still closed,

Roswaal: “Petra-kun, what do you think would be the correct thing for me to dooo~?”

Petra: “…Are you making fun of me?”

Roswaal: “No, no, I didn’t mean it that way. Genuinely, I’m at a bit of a loooss~… What kind of stance should I take, in regards to Subaru-kun?”

Petra: “…”

As he said this, Roswaal lightly lifted both hands and lit his fingertips with lights of different color. Floating red on his right hand and blue on his left, he was earnestly considering his next move.

Red and blue, whichever direction each led, Petra was unsure which would be the better path for her—nay, for the people that were important to her.

As much as she was unsure, if there was anything Petra could do, it was just one thing.

Petra: "If…"

Roswaal: "Hmm?"

Petra: "If you cause Subaru any further pain, if you cause him any further grief, I will never forgive you, Master… No, I will absolutely make you regret it."

Not forgiving him would not hurt Roswaal in any way. After serving him for a year and a half already, she understood that.

This was why, thinking back to the past year and a half as hard as she could, Petra said the one thing that Roswaal would hate the most.

Yes, she would make him regret it no matter what. For that reason —

Petra: "Whatever it is you are wanting to do, whatever it is you are planning to do, Master, I am going to get in the way of it by any means necessary."

Roswaal: "…"

For a moment, a silence was born between Petra and Roswaal.

Petra focused all her strength into tensing her cheeks, intending to make the sternest face she had ever made in the history of her adorable self. In response to Petra's direct approach, Roswaal fell silent.

It was unclear to what extent Petra's stern face contributed to his contemplation in that moment of silence.

Roswaal: "…That would certainly be trooooubling~. You seem to be much more loved than I am."

Petra: "…When you say that I am loved, by what exactly?"

Roswaal: "Something that I've resolved myself to resist, yet have never been able to prevail against, a peculiar power of that sort."

Roswaal shrugged his shoulders and once again said something that Petra did not understand. But, what clouded his face as he muttered this made Petra think it was not mere nonsense.

Indeed, Roswaal was dealing with a sense of powerlessness, something that he was fully aware that he could not win against. Even though she was being told that she was loved as such, it did not make much sense to Petra.

Petra merely wanted to be loved by the people she loved.

In addition, she would like for her loved ones to be as happy as possible with smiles on their faces.

That was why—

Petra: "I want Emilia-neesama and Subaru to smile."

Petra firmly clapped her hand on her chest and muttered those words as if she was praying.

She sincerely hoped that all of these prayers would hang like clouds over those whom she loved, protecting them from the hardships that would otherwise come down on them like the rays of the sun.

—Beside Petra's and Roswaal's exchange, watching the master and servant swelling with a burning tension, Serena cast a smile at Zikr.

Serena: "What do you think? Even the people of the Kingdom show quite a bit of promise, now don't they? Quite complex and mysterious, just the way I like it."

Zikr: “…It is beautiful when you smile like that, High Countess, but I cannot say it is in good taste.”

Chapter 2:
Will Not Play the Villain

1

???: “Kakakakka! Never would’ve thought that a fella like me’d die not on the battlefield but in a safe zone. Never in all my life have I heard of a shinobi dyin’ like this, but ain’t it just way too ironic.”

So spoke the monstrous old man, waving around both of his empty sleeves as he laughed uproariously.

Hearing that hearty laughter, yet being powerless to help with his healing magic, Garfiel was of mixed feelings.

—After the battle against the Great Disaster, Garfiel joined the healers, and was now treating the injured.

Ever since coming to the Empire, Garfiel had continued to stake his life on fierce battles without much respite. Of course, his allies all told him that resting was a high priority, but he had not been able to listen to them.

Fortunately, Garfiel’s body was sturdy, and because of the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, standing on the ground was the best form of relaxation for him. Of everyone within Emilia’s camp, Garfiel was the furthest from working himself to death. And although it went without saying, the one closest to working themselves to death was Otto.

Anyway—

???: “Once you have decided to do something, any attempt to talk you out of it would be pointless. In that case, then go create as much of a debt of gratitude from the Empire as you can. There is a strong market for gratitude right now.”

Indeed, amidst everyone who was against Garfiel’s ideas, he was glad for the presence of the person he had feelings for, who made it clear that she was on his side. The way that her phrasing pointed out his faults was so characteristic of her, something he liked about her.

For that reason, while it was a shock to his comrades, Garfiel had volunteered to take up this role. Ultimately, the reason no one had tried to stop him, was because they all understood.

Garfiel: “When Captain’s havin’ it the toughest of us all, how can our amazin’ selves remain flustered?”

Grumbling that, Garfiel gnashed his sharp canines.

They had lost a strong, truly strong woman. Although he could not say they had fought the same enemy side by side, the sight of many dazzling flames rising up within the Imperial Capital had been seared into Garfiel’s eyelids.

That sense of loss could not simply be described as the loss of Emilia’s rival.

That was why, Garfiel was here.

Even if just a single person greater, he would prevent them from being lost. With these hands that had relentlessly smashed through the undead, that sometimes had no choice but to eliminate the enemies standing in his allies’ way through brute force, he would save lives.

It was contradicting. But, contradicting was fine. He would not think about difficult things. He would follow his heart, and that was that.

Following his heart, he would fell his enemies, heal his allies, and save them through his own power.

If Garfiel could save even just one more person by forgoing sleep, then he ought to continue doing that.

???: “…Good grief, the nerve of young’uns ta immediately leave the elderly behind. Ain’t no helpin’ how revoltin’ that aspect of ‘em is.”

Garfiel: “Huh, is that sarcasm, gramps? Just ’cause my amazin’ self can’t heal yer arms…”

???: “Kakakakka! I wouldn’t say it’s sarcasm. Lemme tell ya, the source of my strength over all these decades has been constantly goin’ on and on about my envy and jealousy, ya know? Sayin’ that I’m envious ain’t a lie or anythin’ like that. Ahh, I’m filled with jealousy.”

Wagging his white eyebrows up and down, Olbart skillfully used his foot to scratch his neck.

He did not seem particularly inconvenienced by the loss of both arms, and nobody could tell whether that attitude was out of concern for Garfiel, whose healing magic could not do anything about that, or if it was the reverse and he was just teasing.

At any rate, regardless of what had happened to his arms, the old man was also a monster, since he could still move so much despite being all but dead.

But then again, when it came to the topic of surviving a near-death experience—

???: “—Shut the fuck up, old ass fuckhead! Stop fucking with the guy who’s doing a fuck-ton of work even though he’s fucking tired!”

Olbart: “Oh, scary scary. That ain’t the vigor of someone who’s half-dead.”

A figure lying on a bed further back in the room shouted angrily, and Olbart laughed at that in a low, throaty sound. To that fierce vigor, Garfiel scratched and said “Oi”,

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self’s grateful for the backup, but worry ’bout yer own body first. You’re seriously just one step away from death… you’re in a similar state to “Vivirolo’s Offering”.”

???: “Ahh? I’m saying that it was thanks to you that I was fucking saved! Bastard, don’t fucking say shit like you won’t accept my gratitude… Ghgyaoh!”

Garfiel: “Shut the hell up, and sleep!”

He used his hand to push down the head of a short figure, whose entire body screamed as he fell back down. Such a thing was a matter of course due to the severity of his wounds; even if healing magic was continuously applied with full strength, it would not be able to keep up with the damage.

In fact, even now there was a perpetual, intense pain that rippled through his body.

Garfiel: “It ain’t my amazin’ self’s place to say this, but I’m surprised you’re able to get up and speak.”

???: “It fucking hurts like shit and it’s fucking tough, but that bullshit won’t fucking stop the Great Groovy Gumlet. That’s just how it is, so use some poison or medicine or some shit to fucking quell… Guhhohhh…!!”

Olbart: “Give it up now, give it up. This is the result of ya ignorin’ all the signals in yer body. I lost both of my hands ‘n you’re basically as close ta death as me. Why don’tcha just retire?”

Groovy: “Like I’d do that, fucking duuumbass!”

In response to Olbart’s mockery, baring his fangs and shouting in anger, was Groovy Gumlet—one of the Nine Divine Generals, and probably the one who had come the closest to death in the Empire whilst still surviving.

In the life-or-death bout against the Great Disaster, he had performed an absurdly important role. After all, it was he who had crossed blades with the lead actor of “Iris and the King of Thorns”, the Emperor of the Briar, Eugard Vollachia, and had cooperated with Halibel to eliminate the curse; he had been a key figure in securing victory.

Garfiel: “Heard that if ya hadn’t done that, everyone would’ve ended up getting immobilized by those thorns.”

Groovy: “I just pulled out whatever the fuck I could. After I saw off the Emperor of the Briar and the Admirer, I was just fucking lying down until I could give the fucking Fiend Sword to that fuckwad Cecilus."

Groovy muttered as if he were sulking, but before he had fallen, he had put in a great deal of work.

He had taken Eugard's curse into his own body, and then had allowed the Fiend Sword to cut it away along with himself; no matter how many times Garfiel heard the story, he still could not understand it. However, according to Groovy and Olbart, they could not understand Garfiel when he explained his fight against the Cloud Dragon, so they were the same in that regard.

The accumulation of miracles and individuals performing to the utmost, that was the reality of what had occurred back then in the Imperial Capital—nay, across the entirety of the Empire. Whether it was Garfiel, who had fought against the Cloud Dragon; Groovy, who had saved the Emperor of the Briar from his own thorns; or Olbart, who had sacrificed one of his arms to avert the Witch's schemes, all of them had exerted their utmost.

There was no need to exaggerate their achievements, and there was no need to go against the facts.

Olbart: "Well, as a geezer who's got hardly any time left, it's always hard ta see young'uns dyin' one after the other, so it's been a pleasure ta see ya fellas survive."

Groovy: "…Though aside from me, it's pretty fucking dubious to say that guy survived."

Garfiel: "By that guy, you mean…"

Thinking about the person that he had mentioned, Garfiel's gaze moved towards the end of the healing room. And, sticking out in a strange and conspicuous way, he noticed the distinctive figure of something standing upright.

Even now, the healing room was still frenetic, with people running back and forth to tend to the injured; in a corner of the room, standing in such a way that it assimilated itself into the wall to not be an obstacle, was a being whose body was composed of steel—upon noticing Garfiel's gaze, a green jewel that was set into what appeared to be its head glowed,

???: "I, detect line of sight. Task, directive, or instruction, it is predicted to be one of these."

While speaking so, lumbering over towards Garfiel and the others, was yet another one of the Nine Divine Generals, the one known as the Steelman, Moguro Hagane.

However, to be more precise, their race was distinct from the Steelfolk, and their true identity was that of the Meteor that served as the core of the Crystal Palace. This title, after the collapse of the crucial Crystal Palace and Magic Crystal Cannon, no longer held any meaning, but—

Garfiel: "Ah, sorry 'bout that. My eyes just happened to wander there, I ain't got any tasks for ya."

Moguro: "Acknowledged. And, the other two?"

Groovy: "Nope, nothing. Stay over there so that you don't get in the fucking way, Moguro."

Moguro: "Moguro. That is me. Acknowledged. Will await further instructions."

While Garfiel stood next to him with an awkward expression on his face, Groovy said this while motioning with his chin, which Moguro obediently followed, sitting down clinging to the side of the bed.

In doing so, they appeared like a slightly oversized decoration.

Olbart: "They're 'bout as admirable as a properly trained ground dragon or thunderwolf. However, that's the thing ain't it. Even the Crystal Palace can be forgetful."

Groovy: "The Crystal Palace and Magic Crystal Cannon are fucking blown to shit. It's a fucking miracle that there isn't fuck-all left of Moguro's core. It was also too fucking good to be true that it happened to fall near where I was lying down."

Olbart: “Ya got along with ‘em the best, so maybe they came ta meetcha?”

Olbart cackled with laughter as he cracked jokes, to which Groovy snorted his snout in discontent.

As made apparent by their dialogue, Moguro Hagane did not remember anything from before the Great Disaster. If Subaru were to be asked, he would say this seemed like a “factory reset”, as it seemed like everything that this Meteor had acquired as Moguro Hagane had been erased.

An immense power capable of blowing away the entirety of the Imperial Capital was forcibly raised into the sky to prevent such an outcome, and had detonated without engulfing the area, so it could perhaps be said that this was a minor price to pay.

Garfiel: “How could I ever say somethin’ like that after what happened to Rem?”

Just how much of a weight was carried in someone losing all of their Memories up to that point, was something that Garfiel was keenly aware of due to the circumstances of one of their own.

It was not only a great turmoil to the actual person who had lost their Memories, but also to the people around them whom they had forgotten.

That was why, he understood the feeling—he would not say such thoughtless things, though.

Garfiel: “Surprisingly, the things this geezer’s sayin’ might actually be right.”

Groovy: “Hahh? Are you also fucking mocking me with that load of fucking horseshit?”

Garfiel: “That ain’t it. I mean, it may be true that they don’t remember anything. But ain’t it also right that they’re not doin’ anything like tryna flee from ya?”

Saying that, Garfiel narrowed his eyes at Moguro, who was sitting next to the bed.

To be honest, that large frame sitting in the healing room was an obstruction, but the fact that they were making themselves as compact as possible to avoid causing trouble to their surroundings left a sense of good will.

To begin with, the fact that Moguro went to such lengths to remain here, was likely because they did not want to part from Groovy's side.

Having lost their Memories, it might have just been something like imprinting onto the first person they encountered. But, Rem said that when she and Ram finally reunited in this Empire, she intuited that Ram was her older sister through a strange feeling.

Garfiel thought maybe that same "something" also remained within Moguro.

Garfiel: "Well, Captain also said something 'bout Rem breakin' his finger all of a sudden…"

There were also cases when that "something" did not remain, so it could not be said to be an absolute rule. But, since this was the healing room where people were healed, if Moguro had come here all on their own to heal their own heart in a place nobody knew about, then Garfiel had no reason to kick them out.

Garfiel: "Rather, the old geezer who does nothin' but talk without even the hands to spare is more of an obstruction."

Olbart: "Kakakakka! Really talkin' like that ta me, this young'un! Well, I do get what you're sayin'."

As Garfiel shrugged his shoulders, Olbart waved his two sleeves about while laughing. Outside that exchange, Groovy rubbed his black snout, and looked at Moguro.

He looked at his former comrade in arms, who was simply nestling close to him without even the slightest of movements.

Groovy: "Don't do such fucking sentimental things, fucking hell."

Moguro: “Within statement, sound of liquid detected. In fear of unusual circumstances, requesting instructions…”

Groovy: “Fucking shut the fuck up!”

Moguro: “Understood.”

Hearing that fruitless exchange, Garfiel gnashed his fangs and unconsciously smiled.

Since he was smiling, he worried a little bit over if it was okay to smile, and then, following his heart, he smiled.

2

Otto: “—So, Anastasia-sama will return to Lugunica via Kararagi?”

Anastasia: “Yes, that’s the plan. I’m in the Empire as an envoy from Kararagi, y’know. I know it’s just a title, but I gotta do my duty.”

When Anastasia, smiling softly, openly revealed her inner thoughts to Otto, he accepted it with a quiet and casual “I see” on the surface.

However, his inner thoughts were not as carefree as his expression. —Whatever the case, Anastasia had fulfilled her promised role for the Kararagi City-States. This would boost her reputation with the Kararagi Council, which had sent her there, and Anastasia would receive another solid boost in her bid for the crown.

Of course, Emilia also contributed greatly to the fight against the Great Disaster when the Vollachian Empire was on the verge of collapse, and His Excellency the Emperor Vincent directly requested her assistance.

Although they were smuggled into the country when they entered the Empire, they would be able to return home triumphant and proud.

Still, whether it was the battle against the Witch Cult in Pristella, the capture of the Pleiades Watchtower, or even the rescue of the Vollachian Empire, both the Emilia camp and Anastasia camp had been involved. It was not good that the prestige was not only Emilia's, but Anastasia's as well. —Emilia needed to accomplish a feat without Anastasia, something of her own.

Of course, had it not been for their part in the fight against the Great Disaster that struck the Empire this time, the camp would have been far behind, even more so than it was now.

Anastasia: "There's a mountain of things to think 'bout, it must be tough for Otto-kun, eh?"

That momentary silence was pierced by Anastasia's light blue eyes.

Despite being an approximate guess, this question had a certainty to it, thanks to Anastasia's seasoned experience.

In response to her prodding, Otto smiled back and said, "No."

Otto: "It is true that it is a bit daunting, but if we were to talk in terms of having much to think about, there is no comparison to His Excellency the Emperor or to Prime Minister Berstetz, who need to rebuild the Empire from this point forth."

With that, Otto shifted the subject to someone else present—Berstetz, the Imperial Prime Minister.

In the conference room where Anastasia, Berstetz, and Otto met after finishing the battle against the Great Disaster, they discussed the future plans of Vollachia, which was now putting together a project for recovery and revitalization, and of the people who had been cooperating with them.

Amidst all this, Otto directed everyone's attention to Berstetz, who concealed the color of his pupils deep within his threadbare eyes,

Berstetz: "As you say, there are many challenges ahead. But the truth is, I do not think of it as a burden."

Anastasia: "Oh, really? That's awfully encouragin'."

Berstetz: "In the beginning, I was a treacherous subject who colluded with the White Spider Chisha Gold to jeopardize the position of His Excellency the Emperor. Because of the circumstances, I was not executed during the battle against the Great Disaster, but I was still to be executed after the war."

Otto: "…But you are talking to us like this. There was no such action, correct?"

Berstetz: "Yes. The Emperor has so decided. Of course, should any of them have thought that I could not be pardoned, I would have had no choice but to take that blade into my body…"

Otto could guess what Berstetz was thinking when he broke off his speech. It was probably the biggest reason why Berstetz's head was still connected to his neck—the declaration made after the war by the strongest man in the Empire, the Blue Lightning.

Cecilus: "Before any minor roles get bloodthirsty, I would like to declare that it is His Excellency's decision not to kill Berstetz-san, so you all should follow it. If you go against it, I will have to show my sword-like side for the first time in a while. Besides, I have a vague feeling that Chisha had planned to the extent that His Excellency would not kill Berstetz-san. In fact, without Berstetz-san, it will be hard to go on, won't it? Since Chisha isn't here."

It was too long and drawn-out a statement to be called a declaration, but it was a significant factor in dissuading those who knew of Berstetz's deeds.

Berstetz, apparently thinking the same thing, made a slight smile as he said,

Berstetz: "I never thought I would be protected by General First-Class Cecilus Segmunt. If not the Yang Sword, I would have thought his blade to be the one to decapitate me."

Otto: "And yet it did not. It is an imperial situation, so an outsider cannot comment on it, however I consider it to have been a wise decision. A military officer in an emergency and a civilian officer before and after an emergency, such a person is irreplaceable."

Anastasia: "I agree. If even Berstetz-san was removed 'n the

Emperor was the only one who could do the thinkin', wouldn't he die, even with the support of his lovely Wife-san?"

Berstetz: "Indeed, it is so. I, for one, am glad to see His Excellency receive a new Empress Consort. —If it were not for this celebration, His Excellency would be facing too many hardships."

Otto & Anastasia: "…"

Berstetz shook his head loosely, silence falling over the room as he spilled those words.

In the midst of the silence, Otto turned his attention toward Anastasia. She, too, was feeling the weight of the same silence, though likely from a different perspective than Otto.

The reason for this silence, needless to say, was the tragic events that had befallen Vincent—the deaths of his trusted confidant and of his sister, the princess with whom he shared the same blood.

The impact of the latter was something neither Otto nor Anastasia could ignore.

Anastasia: "She really was a selfish princess."

A quiet murmur escaped Anastasia's lips, causing Otto to close his eyes.

The subtle sentiment was a rare crack in Anastasia, who usually had a bravery that remained unfazed in the face of any event.

This vulnerability, Otto had always wished to find it in Anastasia in order to surpass her. —Yet, he felt no urge to exploit that long-awaited vulnerability.

Why, if one were to ask such a thing.

Otto: "Because it is not reproducible."

The vulnerability revealed at this moment was not a convenient tool that could be used in the future. It would be difficult to create the same opportunity again, and even if it could be, it should not be.

After all, a larger and deeper rift would open within his own circle than the one that had opened up within Anastasia.

Frankly speaking, that was also undesirable from Otto's perspective. Over the past few months, the distance between the Emilia Camp and Anastasia Camp had narrowed too much.

???: "Maybe you do not need to consciously try to play the villain."

Otto: "—. Are you perhaps talking to me?"

Suddenly, Otto reacted to a third voice, one belonging to neither Anastasia nor Berstetz. His gaze was directed towards Anastasia's neck, where the voice came from—the Spirit in the guise of a fox scarf, Echidna, looking back at him with her black eyes.

In response to Otto's words, Echidna's eyes slightly narrowed.

Echidna: "The fact that you took it as a remark directed at yourself is a testament to what is in your heart, is it not?"

Otto: "That argument is not very convincing, since you said it while looking at me."

Echidna: "Quite stubborn, you. A good match with Ana in that regard."

Echidna, who replied with a sulky tone, had her head curbed by Anastasia's slender finger as she said "Hey". Looking at her scarf, who was giving Otto a hard time,

Anastasia: "Don't pester Otto-kun like that. The moment ya were allowed to talk to anyone, ya turned into a chatterbox."

Echidna: "Mhm, do not talk like I am just opening my mouth out of personal desire. Certainly, from my current position, I have to acknowledge that my previous circumstances were restrictive."

Anastasia: "Jeez. I'm sorry, Otto-kun, for my child botherin' ya."

Anastasia’s apology was met with a “No” and a dismissive wave from Otto.

Echidna’s remark was meant to assert her own presence rather than to show genuine concern for Otto. Of course, Echidna, being closest to Anastasia, was also aware of the rift in Anastasia that Otto had noticed.

A deterrent to prevent him from attacking. It was necessary as long as she could not see Otto’s inner thoughts, and that he did not intend to take advantage of that rift.

Nonetheless—

Otto: “I do not consider myself a villain… If it is a role, then it would merely be acting, after all.”

In that sense, Echidna’s remark was completely off the mark.

The news of Priscilla’s death, which shook even Anastasia, and even more so the camp—Otto’s heart had remained unfazed such, he thought himself heartless because of it.

He had a few chances to exchange words with Priscilla, and even recognized that she was certainly a remarkable figure as a Royal Candidate. With that in mind, he felt so.

Otto: “It was entirely possible for a candidate to drop out in the midst of the Royal Selection.”

Naturally, he had not expected that she would lose her life in a battle for the survival of a neighboring country, but even when it came to the political strife involving one of the nation’s most important affairs, there was more than enough possibility for an assassin to be sent to kill a Royal Candidate, and for them to fall victim to that assassin’s blade.

In the case of the Emilia Camp, there was a pattern where the person who sent the assassin was, to much surprise, one of their own, but even without such exceptions, this would hold true.

He did not believe that the Council of Wise Men, the current governing body of the Kingdom of Lugunica, would not have considered these circumstances in advance.

If a Royal Candidate went absent, would someone else fill the seat anew, or would the Royal Selection proceed with one of the five seats remaining vacant?

It was Otto's honest opinion that the latter was of higher likelihood, and the option he would personally prefer.

Given that such a situation would be of great importance to the Kingdom—

Otto: "The plan is for us to return to the Kingdom within the next few days. The Empire would not want people from other countries knowing any more about their internal condition following the Great Disaster, now would they?"

Anastasia: "Same goes for us. Since it'd also be strange for us to have our steps in sync, dependin' on if we've gotten all our preparations in order, we might be leavin' for Kararagi as soon as tomorrow. Otto-kun, as for the report to the castle…"

Otto: "Please leave it to us. This is not a matter that can be communicated by letter after all."

Anastasia nodded and entrusted the role of reporting to the Royal Castle to his side.

Frankly, it was a daunting role, but also a critical duty at the same time. Of course, Otto would accompany Emilia in this, but it would likely be an exceedingly difficult role for her.

In times like these, it was supposed to be the duty of Emilia's one and only Knight to support her the most.

Otto: "…With Natsuki-san's current state, it would likely have the opposite effect on Emilia-sama."

Anastasia: "…From the sound of it, Natsuki-kun's situation hasn't changed then?"

Otto: “Indeed. Knight Julius has also turned up a few times, but it has been difficult. I hate to say this, but there was the impression that Priscilla-sama only ever gave him a hard time…”

Anastasia: “As far as Natsuki-kun was concerned, that was unimportant. —How worryin’.”

Anastasia’s fingertips tickled Echidna’s neck as she spoke in a quiet voice. Echidna’s dark eyes also seemed to be worried about Subaru as she quivered at the touch.

There was an unalloyed sense of mutual affection between Anastasia and Echidna.

Berstetz: “I understand the opinion of the envoys of both the Kingdom and the City-States. His Excellency the Emperor has instructed that both nations be granted every courtesy, and has granted me permission to make decisions on the matter. If there is anything I can do…”

Anastasia: “Can’t say that I’ll be takin’ this lightly. There’s nothing more tense than bein’ presented with a blank promissory note.”

Anastasia gave a wry smile at Berstetz, who hid his emotions behind his thread-like eyes. Otto, who shared the same frame of mind, was eager to make the most of the words that had been drawn out.

This was his place in the Emilia Camp, not as a villain, but rather as one who undertook the “necessary evil”.

Because his nature was such, even if Priscilla had not died, he would have planned to use her origins in the Imperial Family as a basis to have her withdraw as an ineligible Royal Candidate, and he would have chosen to enact it.

Yes, he could have made that choice.

That was why—

Otto: “—Even had you not died, you would not have become our enemy. As much as Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama are hurt by it, your death has… delivered me quite the hard blow.”

As someone from a different camp, with no reason to mourn and grieve her death, that was the least bit of condolence Otto Suwen could offer to the woman who had passed on.

Chapter 3: To Each Their Mourning of You

1

???: “And so, my little sister will become His Excellency the Emperor-kun’s wife. Certainly, the goal that we siblings have been striving towards has drawn near!”

???: “Goal… that, you mentioned it before, revenge… was it?”

???: “That’s right! Revenge against the world!”

He clapped his hands together, and towards the gentle man with blond hair and glimmering eyes—towards Flop O’Connell’s answer, who stood opposite the Shudraqian woman, Taritta’s eyes opened wide.

Rather than the answer itself, she was seemingly surprised by the vigor of his response, but her lips soon curled into a smile. Revenge, it was a dangerous thing to hear and to laugh about. As expected of the Vollachian Empire’s pride, a woman of the People of Shudraq, one could say.

It was Flop who dyed the mood of this brave woman, which was quite the feat.

Looking at the two people below and their exchange within the passageway of the fortress, Ram rested her chin on a banister as she appraised Flop and Taritta.

It was a scene that she had come across by happenstance, but it was an interesting twist of fate to witness.

—Since joining forces at the Battle of the Imperial Capital, Ram held a favorable impression of the Shudraq.

In general, the only people in the Vollachian Empire that Ram found it regrettable to part from were these women and Serena, who was in a complicated position due to her relationship with Roswaal.

Later, she would also like to show her gratitude to Rem's friend, Katya—

???: "Ram, what are you doing here?"

Ram: "Ara, Mizelda. Simply watching your sister's love affairs from afar."

Mizelda: "Ho, that's a nice hobby. Let me see."

With that, the strong-eyed Mizelda saddled up next to Ram and leaned on the railing.

Being Taritta's actual older sister, she watched below, squinting as she spoke with Flop. A slight glint of anxiety could be seen in her profile, causing Ram's light-crimson eyes to also narrow.

Ram: "This isn't like you. Are you worried about your sister?"

Mizelda: "Don't say that it's not like me. Firstly, how long have you and I known each other? Only a few days."

Ram: "Time is needed? For Ram and you?"

Mizelda: "Hahaha, you're right."

At Ram's question, the corners of Mizelda's mouth loosened, opening with laughter. Laughing, Mizelda slowly began to shake her head,

Mizelda: "The word "worried" feels weak. So, let's say concerned."

Ram: "Yes. But of course. You are the elder sister of Taritta. Ram, too, is always worried about Rem. If it had to be said like you would, there's always concern for Rem."

Mizelda: "But, there is no question that Subaru is a good man. Although his eyes are unfortunate."

Ram: "—. In regards to that, you and Ram will have to agree to disagree."

Ram's voice dropped a little, and hearing this, Mizelda laughed. Looking sideways at this smile, Ram said "Well then" as she once again lowered her gaze to the scene below,

Ram: "You, you doubt the humanity of that gentle man?"

Mizelda: "No, Flop is also a good man. His looks are slightly too soft, but he is a sight for sore eyes. Surely, Taritta, too, knows this."

Her answer was both about his nature as a person and his looks, her phrasing subtly losing sight of the matter. In any case, it seemed like Ram could understand Mizelda's troubles.

And, it was not something that Ram could talk on as an outsider. Even if she was a blood sister, she would not be able to dictate what to do to the others involved.

It was quite a situation, as if the younger sister did not know her older sister's heart.

Ram: "More and more, there is much to like about you, Mizelda."

Mizelda: "Is that so? If you were a man, I think I would have made you my husband."

As older sisters, both of them had much to say about their younger sisters' love lives.

And so, they sat next to each other, both physically and emotionally, Ram and Mizelda, looking down at the continued exchange between Flop and Taritta.

Flop: "Listen, Miss Taritta! I may have said this before, but I'll dare to say it again!"

Flop held his hand out towards the sky, and as if to grasp those distant white clouds, or even the incessant falling rays of the sun, he opened and closed his hand.

Flop: “If you have a goal, a dream, and you talk big about achieving it, you have to seize the opportunities that come your way without hesitation. This unexpected connection with His Excellency the Emperor was exactly the kind of chance worth risking one’s life for!”

Taritta: “So, regarding that marriage between His Excellency the Emperor and Medium… is Medium really okay with it?”

Flop: “Of course…! Is what I would like to say, however, as you can imagine, there was quite a heated argument when it came to the marriage! I would say it was the biggest argument my sister and I have ever had! But…”

Taritta: “But?”

Flop: “If I prioritized revenge on the world over the happiness of my immediate family, I’d really have my priorities all wrong. Which is why I didn’t make a proposal that Medium would earnestly reject.”

Taritta: “…”

As Flop’s expression gently softened, Taritta lowered her almond-shaped eyes.

The much-talked-about marriage between Vincent Vollachia and Medium O’Connell, proposed by Flop and accepted by the Emperor, was a well-known fact among the concerned parties.

If anything, rumors had spread widely even among the common people.

Spreading the news about Vincent taking an Empress Consort was most likely Berstetz or Serena’s strategy. Despite the lingering afterglow of victory over the Great Disaster, reports of misfortunes continued to pour in from all over the Empire. Now, more than ever, people needed hope.

A celebratory event—one that concerned all the citizens of the Empire, would be ideal for that.

Ram: “A shrewd man in a shrewd country.”

Ram could not tell how much Flop had considered when he had proposed this.

However, since he had made the decisive move at the right moment, he must have had some calculations. And this was true for Vincent, who had accepted, and for the senior officials, who had agreed after the fact.

The saving grace, as Flop said, was that Medium, who had been used as a political pawn, did not hate Vincent.

Considering all that, Flop’s proposal was a cunning one. —It would serve as a good example for a certain internal affairs officer who hid behind a façade of villainy, trying to fool himself as if applying a bitter medicine.

As Ram watched the exchange, glancing at the profile beside her,

Ram: “Speaking of which, do you have any feelings for Emperor Vincent?”

Mizelda: “That’s a foolish question, Ram. Abel’s good looks go without saying. But, as per the People of Shudraq’s customs, it’s our tradition to bring the groom back to the forest. Since I can’t bring Abel back, he’s nothing more than eye candy to me.”

Ram: “I see…”

Mizelda: “No, that’s not right. —Abel is both eye candy and a comrade-in-arms to me.”

Ram: “I see.”

Ram nodded quietly to Mizelda, who crossed her arms and declared so.

With all doubts cleared, the two spectators refocused on the conversation between the two below.

Both were frustrated, and Flop assured Taritta that he was not forcing Medium to do anything. Taritta kept her eyes downcast and remarked, “Flop, you’re amazing,”

Taritta: “You’re able to consider both your goals and the people around you and take action accordingly. When you need to make a decision, you don’t hesitate… Truly, you’re admirable.”

Flop: “—? That’s a very funny thing to say, Miss Taritta.”

Taritta: “Huh… did I say something funny?”

Flop: “Yes, you did. Because the reason I could muster up the courage to make such decisions was that I followed your example, Miss Taritta!”

Taritta: “…”

Taritta was blindsided by Flop, who pointed a finger at her with a snap. She was so shocked that she stopped thinking.

As proof of that, she reflexively twisted Flop’s outstretched finger and pinned him against the wall.

Flop: “Ouch, ouch, ouch!”

Taritta: “Ah, ahhh, I’m sorry! I was so startled that I just… reacted reflexively!”

Flop: “N-no, no, no, it was my fault for being careless. As expected, a Shudraq Chieftain has a different level of training. I need to learn more from you, not just your mindset.”

Taritta: “Mindset…”

Flop: “Yes, mindset. That’s what I admire most about you.”

Waving his twisted arm, Flop smiled at Taritta. However, she looked bewildered, not understanding what he was smiling about.

Flop, seeing her reaction, gave her a wry, endearing smile,

Flop: “When something bad happened to Miss Mizelda’s leg, you unexpectedly had to take over as Chieftain. You must have been worried. I'm sure it was painful! But, you made your decision and took on the challenge with determination. Seeing you like that taught me the importance of not shying away from important decisions."

Taritta: "Flop…"

Flop: "So, I wanted to give you my thanks. That's one of the two reasons I called you here! —As for the second reason…"

Flop held up one finger on his left hand, then another on his right. Taritta's eyes widened at his words and she haltingly muttered, "The second reason…"

At Taritta's murmur, Flop theatrically lowered both of his hands which had their fingers raised,

Flop: "Today will never come again. Tomorrow is not guaranteed. This war made me realize once again what I thought I already knew. I'm grateful to the kind person who brought that flame into these eyes, to the kind person who made this moment possible. And —"

Taritta: "…"

Flop: "Miss Taritta, I like your way of being and thinking very much. To put it more plainly, I would love to be with you! So, how about becoming Taritta O'Connell?"

Taritta: "—Ah."

Flop: "Never let a chance go by to get what you want. I'll fully put into practice everything I've learned from you."

Smiling and winking, Flop's words were unmistakably a marriage proposal.

For Taritta, it must have been as shocking as the sky falling. Yet, at the same time, it was probably as joyful as flowers blooming on the ground.

As a woman herself, Ram felt the need to applaud the blessing that had been bestowed upon her.

However—

Taritta: “—But, I am…”

Ram’s light-crimson eyes narrowed at the sight of Taritta’s anguished expression.

The root of Taritta’s reaction had, oddly enough, become clear during her earlier conversation with Medium.

As per Shudraqian custom, the groom must be taken back to the forest village.

However, as the brother of the future Empress Consort, Medium, Flop would likely have many more responsibilities and tasks to fulfill in the Imperial Capital. To give them all up, and leave Medium at the Imperial Capital—that would be truly irresponsible.

Taritta could see this too, so her hesitation crushed her joy.

It was her succession to the position of Shudraqian Chieftain that gave Flop the courage to propose; it was the spark that brought their hearts together, but it also became the obstacle that prevented them from being together.

Taritta tried to confront this absurdity with a strong, strong sense of responsibility—but then.

Mizelda: “Don’t hesitate, Taritta!”

Taritta: “—. Ah, sister?”

Frozen in shock, Taritta’s eyes widened at the sudden voice that came like a surprise attack.

Until then, she had not noticed that Ram and Mizelda were on the walkway above them. She exchanged glances with her sister, who was gripping the banister tightly.

Seeing her sister's behavior, Mizelda let out a small sigh, then swung up her right leg—which from the knee down was a wooden prosthetic, and slammed it onto the banister.

And then—

Mizelda: "A Chieftain who has to choose between her duties and a man isn't fit to be one! In all the battles I've fought, I've learned how to fight on one leg! If you're in such a sorry state, you should give up the position of Chieftain!"

Taritta: "Wha…! W-wait a second, sister! That's…"

Mizelda: "No way, I won't wait! The Shudraq have no need for a pathetic-looking sister like you!"

Saying this firmly, Mizelda took her leg down from the banister, and turned her back. Walking heavily, the differing sounds between her left and right steps were heard as she departed along the walkway.

Ram sighed as she watched Mizelda's back as she left.

Ram: "Is that your way of encouraging her as her big sister?"

Mizelda: "She's not the kind of woman who would understand unless I told her. Ram, soon you will find yourself in the same position."

Ram: "Disgusting."

Ram replied with a grimace to the statement she did not want to hear.

And so, thinking it would be rude of her to stay behind, Ram was about to follow Mizelda when,

Flop: "Miss Mizelda! I am deeply grateful! Is there anything I can do to repay you?"

In place of the stunned Taritta, Flop called out to Mizelda, who had just made a big decision. Without turning around or stopping, Mizelda waved her hand.

Mizelda: “It has been decided. A strong, robust man with a handsome face will be sent as an envoy to the Shudraq village. This way, the Covenant between the Imperial Capital and our people will be maintained.”

Flop: “—. Haha! I understand, Miss Mizelda! No, Sister-in-law-kun!”

A resolution was reached between Mizelda and Flop, without first consulting the parties involved.

Ram also understood that the ignored party would make a decision soon.

Taritta: “—Hk.”

—That was because Ram, who was trailing behind Mizelda, could clearly hear Taritta’s footsteps hit the ground as she ran towards Flop.

Flop: “Are you sure that it’s okay to on your own decide on returning to being the Chieftain?”

Mizelda: “Ha. If there’s something one disagrees with, all they have to do is take it away from me. But…”

Mizelda cut off her words and turned her piercing gaze straight ahead. Following her gaze, Ram realized the reason why.

At the end of the corridor, two women from the Shudraq tribe were waving their hands—Kuna and Holly. They greeted Mizelda, and then, with a wave of their hands, pointing down the corridor with their chins,

Kuna: “How is it going? Has Taritta finally started behaving?”

Mizelda: “Yes, my younger sister is a handful.”

Holly: “But, well, there’s nothing to be done about it. After all, she’s the Chieftain’s sister.”

Kuna: “Well, until we all talk about it, the Chieftain is Taritta… well, it doesn’t really matter. I also have no objection to Mizelda returning as Chieftain. I think the others would probably agree, too.”

When Kuna and Holly each gave a knowing smile, Ram got a glimpse of the love between Taritta and her people.

With that understanding, Ram clasped her arms around her elbows and,

Ram: “Though unexpected, Ram’s peeping efforts were well worth it.”

Holly: “Just hearing that makes it sound pretty bad.”

Kuna: “Without the Chieftain here, it would have left a terrible impression, wouldn’t it? What an absurd thing to say.”

Holly and Kuna launched a volley of criticism at Ram’s words. Ram shrugged her shoulders as Mizelda, who was right by her side, softened her gaze slightly and looked up at the sky with gentle eyes.

While gazing up at the clear blue sky, so clear it was almost revolting,

Mizelda: “Her soul sister… ever since Mariuli died, Taritta has been depressed. You guys probably understand how much that hurts, right?”

Holly: “…Yes.”

Kuna: “I guess.”

Mizelda: “The time has come for that to change. —I consider it a blessing that Taritta has earned this victory.”

Those were words that Ram did not understand, reserved for the three Shudraqians.

It might have been a relationship unrelated by blood, but that Kuna and Holly’s relationship also fell into that category could be presumed. Given the strong bond between these two, it was not difficult to imagine how significant the bond that Taritta was said to have lost.

Besides, Ram also knew very well that the things one lost could never be replaced.

Ram: “…”

The Empire was victorious, but in exchange, so much had been lost. Even close to Ram, the wounds suffered by Rem, Emilia, and Subaru, were significant.

However, simply staying by their side and continuing to talk to them was not a guaranteed cure for such wounds. Such an undeniable notion could only be cruel and unjust—.

Mizelda: “—To the vow of our forebearers, and the pride of their ancestral spirits, gratitude.”

Kuna & Holly: “—Gratitude.”

To Taritta, who had found the only method to overcome these circumstances, Mizelda, Kuna, and Holly give their blessings in the way of the Shudraqian People.

Following the girls’ example, Ram closed her eyes and joined in the prayer.

And then she thought.

—That there was no means of saving the hearts of all those who mourned the lost, such absurdity.

Ram: “Gratitude.”

So she declared her own vow and pride, one different from that of the Shudraqians.

2

The wheels of the wheelchair turned with a rattling sound.

It was a sound they had grown accustomed to, but there were occasional clunking noises mixed in, caused by remnants of the mayhem, fragments of crumbled debris and cracks in the corridor that had yet to be fully repaired.

Feeling uneasy about letting Katya go to such places alone, Rem had taken it upon herself to push her wheelchair.

Katya: “So, it seems that his work protecting His Excellency the Emperor was highly appreciated. He said that as an independent General, he will be given the role of protecting the Emperor at his side.”

Rem: “Is that so? That brother of yours…”

Katya: “You look like you have something to say… No, never mind. You don’t have to say it. What you’re thinking, I’m probably thinking the same thing.”

Without turning around, Katya grasped her own pigtail hanging over her shoulder, her voice trembling as she spoke.

Rem had not said much, but Katya’s guess was probably correct. Thus, she decided to keep her thoughts about Jamal to herself, as requested.

Whatever the case, Katya had sent off her blood-brother despite her anxieties. His safe return must have been a great relief, even to the stubborn Katya.

Indeed, having him return safely was what mattered most.

Rem: “Priscilla-san…”

Suddenly, as her mind was left wandering, Rem was struck by a wave of sentiment that tightened around her chest, causing her to utter those words.

As Rem cast her pale blue eyes downward, her mind was filled with the image of a beautiful woman wrapped in vivid red flames—the Sun Princess who had kept Rem by her side for only a brief period of time.

Priscilla, with her unwavering presence, radiated the heat she wore and incinerated everything, drawing the curtain on herself with a grace that was unmistakably her own while keeping others at bay.

The words exchanged in what she did not expect to be their final conversation were ones she could never forget.

However—

Rem: “You said I have a “heart of diamond”, but I don’t understand.”

After seeing each other for the first time in days, during what would also turn out to be their final conversation, Priscilla had praised Rem for who she was now. Rem, too, had been able to take it in stride at that time.

But now, she was no longer sure. Because Priscilla was gone.

Katya: “Hey, Rem, is it alright for you to stay with me?”

Rem: “Eh?”

Suddenly, Rem was startled as the movement of the wheelchair she was pushing came to a halt. Looking down, she saw that Katya had grabbed the wheels, forcibly stopping its movement.

Doing such a thing must have hurt Katya’s slender hands.

Rem: “Katy—”

Katya: “It’s fine. Right now, my hands don’t matter. Rather, what matters is you.”

Rem: “Me…”

Katya: “Even if you’re not here with me, you would still have your sister, people who know who you were before, and even that noisy guy…”

Rem: “—You mustn’t.”

Staring at Rem, Katya's words grew gradually faster until she fell silent with an "Mhm". Rem interrupted her and shook her head, grateful for the thoughtfulness.

Certainly, the presence of Ram, as well as Frederica and Petra, would be a source of support for Rem. But, not even they could fill the void left by Priscilla's absence. The days and moments Rem had spent with Priscilla were never known to them.

And, as for the last person Katya mentioned, Subaru—

Rem: "I don't want to rely on that person now."

Katya: "…You mean he's unreliable?"

Rem: "No… I don't want to rely on him. I don't like it. To be just another one of his many goals."

Katya: "…"

Rem's response surprised even herself as she spoke over Katya's question. Katya's eyes, too, widened at Rem's answer, which was understandable.

Even Rem herself had not fully grasped her own feelings until she spoke them aloud.

Once she voiced them, they became clear to her.

Rem: "It seems like you only see my shortcomings, Katya-san."

Katya: "I don't think that's the case, and if we're talking about shame, I have my fair share too… actually, don't make me think about that, and don't remind me! Just thinking about the trouble I cause others by merely being alive makes me want to d… to suffer!"

Considering Rem's feelings, she likely refrained from saying "want to die".

At Katya's imperfect yet considerate compassion, Rem's lips curled slightly. She felt supported by Katya's mere presence, as Katya would say things like that without being overly concerned or excessively comforting.

That was precisely why she had asked if Rem could stay with her.

Rem: “Being by your side is calming, Katya-san. You always screech loudly and catch my attention right away.”

Katya: “Is that a compliment? Are you trying to compliment me? If so, you have no talent for praising others, you know?”

Rem, intending to express her sincere gratitude, was a bit taken aback by Katya’s glare. And, just like that, Rem and Katya found themselves walking through the fortress.

Hearing someone say “Ohhh~,” Rem looked up. There, she saw a young man with gray hair, smiling broadly and waving at them.

Rem was clueless as to who this person was, but Katya let out an “Ah” of recognition,

Rem: “Do you know him?”

Katya: “I wouldn’t say that, but I know he’s a slacker.”

Rem: “A slacker?”

Young Man: “Waaait~ wait, that’s not a very nice way to remember me. Well, at that point in time, it wasn’t entirely inaccurate, though, was it?”

The young man, not particularly hurried, leisurely corrected Katya’s impression of him. As he approached, Rem tightened her grip on the handles of the wheelchair, wary of him.

Upon seeing Rem’s reaction, the young man raised his hands and stopped in his tracks.

Young Man: “Don’t worry. I’m not the kind of person who would harm aaanyone~. I’m just a pathetic man who’s lost his only talent and is now slinking away in looow~ spirits.”

Katya: “Slinking away in low spirits… where are you going?

Slacking off again? At a time when everyone is struggling and supporting each other in every way possible?”

Young Man: “I tooold~ you, that’s not it. Thooough~, I do agree with you about the current situation.”

With a wry smile, the young man looked behind him—at the Fortified City that was still in the early stages of reconstruction, and spread his thin arms wide to either side,

Young Man: “Up until now, I’ve had my sights set too high. From now on, I plan to keep my feet firmly on the ground, and live my life by fooocusing~ on what’s right in front of me.”

Katya: “…I don’t get it. What kind of declaration is that?”

Young Man: “It’s me being respectful, miss. I wasn’t suuure~ if I’d get the chance to meet with you, but perhaps it’s a final, stylish gesture from the stars.”

Katya did not drop her puzzled expression at the young man’s vague expressions. On the other hand, while Rem remained cautious, it was clear that this young man had no malice or hostility toward Katya.

On the contrary, just as he had said, there seemed to be a genuine sense of respect toward Katya.

It was unclear if this had anything to do with Katya calling him a slacker, though.

Young Man: “Miss, you have saved the Vollachian Empire. The brightness of the rising sun and the activities of the people you see from here are all things you snatched from my Commandment.”

Katya: “…Are you making fun of me?”

Young Man: “No no nooo~, it’s really not that at all. I’ve been doing many things according to my Commandment, but nothing His Excellency the Emperor or General First-Class Chisha did ever surprised me. What I meeean~ is that you are the only one who did.”

Katya: “I really don’t get what you mean. It just feels like you’re holding a grudge because I called you out for slacking off. But…”

As the young man gave a wry smile in response to Katya’s answer, she paused. Then she mumbled a bit, pointed at Rem behind her, and continued,

Katya: “The reason I was there was because I was dragged along by Rem. And besides, it was at the Prime Minister’s mansion that I met this girl in the first place, and then Todd… ah~, anyway!”

Katya, who had been pointing at Rem, now pointed sharply at the young man.

Then—

Katya: “I don’t get all big-headed when I get compliments, regardless of whether or not I understand the logic or reasoning behind them. In the first place, it’s suspicious to call a woman with bad legs amazing or special! I can’t do anything on my own! Everything, it’s all thanks to other people!”

Rem: “K-Katya-san, isn’t that a bit too much…?”

Katya: “Huh? I’m still having you push my wheelchair right now, aren’t I? If the wheels get stuck in a hole in the floor even once, I’d end up a pile of bones right there and then!”

Rem was overwhelmed by Katya’s loud and brazen declaration.

As she recognized that this exquisite mix of self-deprecation and trust in others was what made Katya’s way of thinking so appealing —

Young Man: “Heh, haha, haaahahahaha~!”

As Rem was in thought, the young man started to laugh hysterically, holding his stomach. Katya’s shoulders jumped as she responded with a “Wh-what?” in a fluster, but Rem somehow understood why the young man was laughing.

Sandwiched between Rem’s vague understanding and Katya’s lack thereof, the young man used his finger to wipe away the tears that had welled up in his eyes,

Young Man: “Haaa~, it’s been so nice talking with you. If you had told me that something like that could have cast aside my Commandment, I wouldn’t know what to say.”

Katya: “I don’t understand why you’re so satisfied on your own…”

Young Man: “I’m sorry, buuut~ you’ll have to ask someone else to help you with that. —This is goodbye.”

Rem: “Where will you be going?”

Rem could not help but ask the young man who had shouldered the small bundle at his feet.

Even though she did not know his name, nor did she have any reason to stop him, she did not want the young man who had praised Katya to be unhappy.

In response to Rem’s question, the young man pointed towards Mount Gildray, where the fortress stood,

Young Man: “For now, I’m leaving the Empire. Weeell~ then, take care.”

Neither Rem nor Katya could find the words to stop the young man who had answered only that and turned his back to walk away. They could only wish him good fortune as he cheerfully began his journey.

The reason he could walk so confidently with his back straight was thanks to Rem, Katya, and many other people, but most of all, it was thanks to her for paving the way for the future with her dazzling way of life.

Rem: “It’s all, thanks to other people…”

Katya: “Wh-what’s the matter, do you have a problem with something? I know I probably went a little over the top with what I said…!”

Rem: “No. I thought it was very good, and very much like you, Katya-san. I don’t want to make the mistake of thinking that I can stand all on my own, either.”

In response to Katya’s intermittent glances, Rem rubbed her legs. As she watched this gesture, Katya, with downcast eyes,

Katya: “At some point, you started walking normally again.”

Rem: “It seems to be because the Mana that should have been flowing through my body wasn’t flowing properly… it might also be effective on your legs, Katya-san.”

Katya: “…I’ll be fine. My brother, or someone else, will push my wheelchair for me. Besides…”

Rem: “Besides?”

Katya: “—You’ll still be the one pushing me for a little while longer, won’t you?”

Rem’s eyes widened slightly when Katya timidly said this, but then she softened her gaze and nodded with a gentle “Yes.”

Both Rem and Katya knew well that “for a little while longer” would not be very long at all, and their exchange was built upon that understanding.

She was sure that her separation from Katya would come soon—when Rem would have to return to the place she came from with Subaru, Ram, and the others who had come to retrieve her. It would be a painful experience.

But, parting ways with Katya and the people of this land, was a parting that left hope for a reunion. Teaching her the pain and bitterness of farewells that were not of that kind, it was her last act of—

Rem: “Consideration? Or, was it maliciousness, Priscilla-san?”

Priscilla: “Rem, follow thy own heart. For although your heart may ripple, those ripples shall never be unseemly.”

As Rem muttered to herself, the last words Priscilla had spoken to her flashed through her mind.

The ripples of her heart likely referred to the weakness within Rem that would always, and forever, rise to the surface like bubbles, trying to disturb her peace.

But, still, she did not want to be the kind of person who desperately wished to reject and distance herself from them.

Because Priscilla, the woman who illuminated Rem's life like a flame for a short while, who never mistook the truth, had said that Rem's "ripples" were not unseemly.

—So please, forgive this heart for rippling at the reality of your disappearance. Until the day those ripples subside, and I can remember you without tears.

Chapter 4:
Dunderhead

???: "—Madelyn?"

Upon finding Madelyn Eschart walking brazenly through the fortress, Emilia called out her name as her eyes widened in surprise.

Then, halting her gait upon hearing that call, the young girl turned her head of black horns, and contorted her lovely face as if she had eaten something bitter.

At that reaction, as Emilia gestured with her hand to show that there was nobody else around them,

Emilia: "You don't need to make such a face. After all, I'm the only one here."

Madelyn: "…That isn't friggin' encouraging or anything. This dragon is making this friggin' face because it's you."

Emilia: "Eh, is that so? But why?"

Madelyn: "Did you friggin' forget that you're the one who made it snow a ton and fought a bunch against this dragon and Mezoreia?! How the frig' could I be left with a good impression!"

As her golden irises sharpened, Madelyn raised her voice. As Madelyn snapped at her like that, Emilia nodded with an "I see…" as she reflected on their relationship.

Indeed, across both the Fortress City and the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, Emilia had clashed against Madelyn twice. They were both present in the Imperial Capital during the battle against the Great Disaster, but they did not meet again there. Come to think of it, this was the first time they were exchanging words in a calm manner like this.

Emilia: "Then, the last time I saw Madelyn was when I froze her into a block of solid ice.”

Madelyn: “—! So, it really was you after friggin’ all! I couldn’t move my body in the slightest; it was so, so freezing cold and dangerous… you’re friggin’ outrageous!”

Emilia: “Uh, I’m sorry. I was going to unfreeze you properly afterwards, but Madelyn escaped with Mezoreia, so…”

Madelyn: “Don’t friggin’ blame it on this dragon, human!”

Madelyn bore her sharp fangs, and had such vigor that it seemed like she might suddenly try to bite her. Emilia was a bit surprised at her liveliness, but at the same time, she felt relief.

After all, she had heard that Madelyn and Mezoreia had become allies of the Great Disaster at one point.

Emilia: “But, you properly supported our side in the end. Garfiel told me.”

Madelyn: “…That friggin’ tigerperson half-beast, huh?”

Emilia: “Yes, he’s my reliable ally, and sort of like a little brother. He’s reaaally strong, after all.”

Madelyn: “…”

As Emilia puffed out her chest with an ahem, Madelyn fell silent with a complex expression. It was not as though she doubted Emilia’s words; rather, her silence held a different significance.

For example, it gave off a sense of something close to frustration or embarrassment.

Emilia: “—Madelyn, you’re going to continue on as a General of the Empire, right?”

Madelyn: “—Hk, you got a friggin’ problem with that?”

Emilia: “No, not at all, that’s not what I mean. It’s just, I heard that Mezoreia had gone home, so I was thinking about how Madelyn didn’t do the same.”

Shifting her gaze away from Madelyn as they spoke, Emilia looked to the sky outside the fortress.

An exceedingly rare dragonkin, Madelyn, and the Cloud Dragon, Mezoreia—Emilia did not know of the relationship between the two in detail. But, if they loved each other dearly, then their relationship could be viewed as something close to that of the one between a Spirit and a Spiritual Arts User.

If that was the case, Mezoreia was to Madelyn as Puck was to Emilia. To make the decision to separate from such a companion, could not have been an easy feat.

Emilia: “I’ve also experienced similar feelings. For me, I wasn’t given the choice to go together or not… that’s why, I think Madelyn is reaaally brave for making her own choice.”

Madelyn: “Of friggin’ course. —Don’t friggin’ lump this dragon in with you, human.”

Emilia: “You might be right. Or, maybe not? You’re a dragonkin, but does that make you strong enough to endure the painful feelings of parting with a precious companion? Is that how it is?”

Madelyn: “Friggin’ unpleasant woman…!”

Being told so by a bitter face, Emilia clutched her chest with a soft grunt.

An unpleasant woman, she had never been verbally abused with such words, so she had a fresh feeling of bitterness. Recently, she had not been referred to as a “half-devil” as frequently, and to begin with, it no longer hurt her feelings to be called so. —Only, the woman who would so boldly call Emilia a “half-devil”, was no longer anywhere to be found.

Emilia: “…”

Madelyn: “Don’t go friggin’ silent all of a sudden. It’s a friggin’ disrespect before this dragon, you know.”

Emilia: “Mhm, yeah. I’m sorry for making you feel lonely.”

Madelyn: “~~!!”

With her indulgence in reveries being halted, Emilia apologized, to which Madelyn’s face went red.

With her face reddened, she tried to say something for a moment, and after taking a deep breath, she stared straight at Emilia, and then,

Madelyn: “Talking with humans is friggin’ exhausting, but that’s especially friggin’ true for you.”

Emilia: “Well, I think that’s definitely because you’re nervous about talking to me. Subaru said that before.”

Though it was frustrating that there was nothing she could do about it, from what Subaru had told her, it seemed that Emilia caused tension in the people she faced. Subaru was always playing it off as various reasons, such as “EMT”, but it was probably because of the fact that she was a Royal Candidate, or because she was a half-elf.

Emilia: “That’s why, I’m relaxing my cheeks as much as I can so that doesn’t happen.”

Since she could not change her position as a Royal Candidate, her half-elf lineage, or her silver hair and amethyst eyes which resembled the Witch of Envy, she wanted to at least keep a gentle facial expression.

Trying her best with those thoughts, Emilia inquired of Madelyn with a “Well?”. Then, Madelyn took yet another deep breath, and,

Madelyn: “When talking to you, this dragon gets the feeling that staying here might have been the wrong friggin’ choice.”

Emilia: “Umm, that’s alright? We’ll be leaving the Empire in a few days, so…”

Madelyn: “It doesn’t! Friggin’ have anything to do! With whether you’re here or not!”

Being yelled at in short bursts, Emilia's eyes widened. Before her, Madelyn placed her hand on her hip, and as if in return for earlier, looked towards the outside of the fortress,

Madelyn: "This country, it's the land for which this dragon's darling… Balleroy, staked his life to protect."

Emilia: "—. Indeed."

At Madelyn's whispered words, Emilia briefly nodded.

She had heard that the undead by the name of Balleroy had done a great job. That when the sky was enveloped in a tremendous light, he was amidst the clouds that blanketed the sky of the Imperial Capital.

Emilia was fighting against Sphinx, who had turned into the spitting image of Echidna, so she had been unable to avert her attention there. Therefore, she had no clue whatsoever about what sort of person Balleroy was.

Emilia: "It's reaaally unfortunate that I couldn't say thank you to him."

Madelyn: "Don't friggin' make eyes at this dragon's darling!"

Emilia: "Make eyes…?"

Madelyn: "Even if he didn't receive any thanks for it, this dragon's darling friggin' accomplished his duties… Until the very end of the end, he didn't let this dragon tag along in the things he wanted to do."

Hearing Madelyn's fragile, somewhat lonely tone of voice, Emilia narrowed her amethyst eyes.

The feelings that Madelyn kept bottled up in that tiny body of hers, Emilia felt like they were ones she was familiar with. Or rather, she was indeed familiar with them.

After all, Subaru would also sometimes decide things all on his own without consulting Emilia.

Emilia: "But, that isn't because he doesn't think he can count on me or because he doesn't like me, but because he treasures me, so it's a reaaally bad quality to have."

Madelyn: "You…"

Emilia: "It's a matter of being valued dearly. That makes it hard to get mad at, it's a little unfair."

If one was not valued, and was instead thought of as undependable and unpleasant, they would want to try their best to improve that impression. But, since Emilia was already viewed in a good light, it was challenging to want to do anything more about it.

Emilia: "That's why, it's unfair. Really, just what are girls like us to do?"

Madelyn: "…Unfair."

Receiving Emilia's words, Madelyn cast her eyes down as if pondering something.

Though she did not know Balleroy well, Emilia more or less felt that the irritation that Madelyn harbored towards him was close to what she herself felt towards Subaru.

Alas, even if their troubles were similar, the answer that Madelyn had arrived at was something distant to Emilia.

After all—

Emilia: "—I can't stay behind in this country, the land that Priscilla protected."

Staking one's life, if it were to be put that way, then Priscilla was undoubtedly one of the people who had accomplished that—Emilia's "friend", whose passing still did not feel real despite several days having elapsed.

Madelyn: "…"

It would have been nice if their relationship could have developed enough for them to call each other friends. Priscilla had passed away before such a thing could come to fruition, so, right now, Emilia just one-sidedly wanted to call her as such.

However, just before she faded away, she appeared before Emilia and Anastasia as they were conversing, and they all had a pleasant chat for a short while—Emilia would look back on that with regret for a long, long time.

That peaceful, gentle time they shared, they ought to have been able to continue on with it from here on out many more times, for much more time, in much more depth; Emilia would end up dreaming of such unattainable hopes.

And then, as Emilia pictured what lay beyond the faded dream—

Emilia: "—Eh?"

Suddenly, Emilia received a tug at her arm and, unable to hold her ground in the slightest, was pulled down. As Emilia almost tumbled over, her head was gently caught by Madelyn's shoulder.

There was a noticeable height difference between the two, and yet Emilia's head was leaning upon Madelyn's shoulder. If their positioning had been just slightly off, Emilia's head would have been pierced by one of Madelyn's horns.

Emilia: "Um, Madelyn? People will get startled by these kinds of things…"

So you shouldn't do them all of a sudden; Emilia made such an attempt to scold Madelyn.

However—

Madelyn: "Don't friggin' cry."

Emilia: "…"

At that comment, Emilia blinked, and then, upon Madelyn's shoulder where her head was leaned, she noticed that droplets of water were trickling down and staining it. For a moment, she did not realize what those were, but from Madelyn’s words, she came to an understanding. —They were tears.

For what, and for whom those tears flowed, was abundantly clear.

Emilia: “I had thought, we could become friends.”

Madelyn: “…”

Emilia: “I ended up getting along with Anastasia-san… and could also make proper conversation with Felt-chan and Crusch-san, so I thought that Priscilla must be the most stubborn… I finally got to a point where I could chat with her, with Priscilla, so I thought that from here on, even more…”

Madelyn: “…”

Emilia: “I thought that, I could come to like Priscilla. I wanted to like her.”

As if catching up to her falling tears, her words began to well up with emotion.

While she had always been bold, sometimes quite mean, and for a reason Emilia did not understand had worn an expression that seemed to know everything, she was the owner of a truly kind heart.

Priscilla, who displayed many faces of such good and bad aspects, Emilia wanted to have thought of her more dearly. Spanning a long time, she had wanted to nurture such feelings.

As such feelings of regret and lament spilled out of Emilia—

Madelyn: “This dragon will—”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Madelyn: “This dragon, will friggin’ protect it for you.”

Suddenly, Madelyn caressed the head of Emilia, who was shedding tears upon her shoulder, and spoke thus. At those words, Emilia was taken aback, her eyes still moist.

As the sides of their faces were touching, they could not see the other's faces. Emilia's face was a teary one, but what sort of expression was Madelyn making?

Without her expression being seen, Madelyn continued.

Madelyn: "The Empire, is the friggin' country that Balleroy protected. This dragon, has a friggin' reason to protect this land. — The reason for your tears, also lived and died for the sake of this country. Then…"

Emilia: "…Then?"

Madelyn: "This dragon, will friggin' protect it with them. Unlike humans, that should be no friggin' challenge whatsoever for this dragon."

Emilia had come to believe that it was always crucial to look each other in the eye when having important conversations. That was the absolutely fundamental rule when having an important conversation.

However, at this time, Emilia thought that it was for the best that she, with her teary face, and Madelyn, who was boldly declaring those words, were in a situation where they could not see the face of the other.

There were definitely valuable, important words that could not be said if one was looking into another's face.

There were definitely words that could only be conveyed because one was not looking into the recipient's face, and that seemed to be precisely why Madelyn was able to say the words she had just said.

Emilia: "—Mm. Reaaally, thank you."

Madelyn: "Things just happened to friggin' align. I didn't do it to friggin' be told thanks."

Emilia: "Yes. But, I still want to say it. Thank you, Madelyn."

At Emilia’s repeated declaration of gratitude, Madelyn could be heard snorting her nose.

Whether that was because she truly found it irritating, or if it was to hide her abashment, was something Emilia could not tell due to not seeing her face. Such joy could also be found in conversations where the other party’s face could not be seen.

The opportunity to cherish such childish things, resided with herself.

And then—

Emilia: “—Oh, look over there, Madelyn!”

Madelyn: “Ugh?!”

Then, a deep and important emotion welled up in her heart.

When Emilia saw a small figure walking along the path directly opposite the fortress, she was so surprised that she grabbed Madelyn by the horns and turned her head in the same direction.

Ignoring Madelyn’s cries, Emilia’s consciousness was drawn towards the figure. —It was a small boy with pink hair, Priscilla’s servant, Schult.

Emilia: “Schult-kun…”

When she caught sight of him, Emilia felt a tight, painful knot in her chest.

Priscilla’s death had devastated Emilia, as she had been envisioning a future with her. However, the grief of those who had loved Priscilla dearly would be beyond compare.

Even though she knew that comparing one’s sorrows and misfortunes with those of another would only make her feel lonelier.

Emilia: “—Hk.”

Madelyn: “Hey! You!”

As soon as she realized this, Emilia kicked off the floor and started running towards the corridor, where she could see Schult. Madelyn’s panicked voice called out to her from behind, but Emilia did not stop.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Emilia ran through the fortress and turned down the opposite corridor,

Emilia: “Schult-kun!”

Schult: “—Emily-sama, is that you?”

Schult turned around, his small, thin shoulders trembling at Emilia’s powerful voice.

Emilia could not help but gasp as she faced the young boy directly. He had neat, clean-cut clothes, and his fluffy pink hair was well-groomed. However, even so, the redness of his eyes and the fatigue in his tired, pale expression could not be hidden.

However, instead of crying in his room, he decided to go outside.

Emilia: “You came outside. That’s reaaally…”

Emilia wondered whether she should continue the sentence with the words “amazing” or “great” after that.

She rushed over, unable to sit still, but struggled to choose the right words to say. What was it that Schult needed right now: sympathy, encouragement, or—

Schult: “There is no need for you to apologize to me, Emily-sama.”

Emilia: “—Ah.”

Schult: “Emily-sama, you have fulfilled your promise.”

When Schult, having lowered the corners of his eyes, murmured as he hung his head, Emilia began regretting her attitude.

Schult saw through Emilia’s indecision and hesitation to apologize. —Before the battle against the Great Disaster, Emilia promised Schult that she would definitely bring Priscilla back and let him be reunited with her.

Emilia was not able to do that. It was Priscilla herself who had fulfilled that promise.

But for that, she must not apologize. If she did, everything that Schult had worked hard for and the words that Priscilla had said to him would all be a lie.

???: “Em, don’t be so down.”

Emilia: “…So Utakata-chan was together with Schult-kun.”

Suddenly, Emilia noticed the presence of a girl peering up from below—Utakata, who had appeared beside the two of them.

She was the same age as Schult and a close friend, and it seemed that she did not stay with the other Shudraqians, but stayed with Schult.

Utakata nodded slightly in response to Emilia’s words.

Utakata: “Mii and Taa are busy. Suu and Ah look like they’re in trouble. The only one who can stay with Shuu is Uu.”

Emilia: “Yes, I see. Thank you for not leaving Schult-kun alone.”

Utakata: “You’re welcome, Em.”

When Utakata thrust her fist out at Emilia, she noticed that her gesture reminded her of one Subaru had made, so Emilia made sure to match her fist with the one that was being held out to her.

Then, Emilia turned to face Schult again and,

Emilia: “Aren’t you supposed to be resting in your room?”

Schult: “…I have already had enough rest. By nature, I am small and weak, so I have hardly done any work at all… so now, I want to do lots of things.”

Utakata: “Shuu is working very hard. Puu’s soul will surely be at peace.”

Schult: “Yes.”

Emilia: “…”

Emilia was surprised that Utakata had said that so naturally, and that Schult had nodded in agreement.

Utakata then tilted her head and asked, “What’s wrong?” to the surprised Emilia,

Utakata: “Life goes in circles, whether it’s prey, people, enemies or allies. That’s how Uu and the others think. Uu’s mother, and Shuu’s Puu, too, go in circles. I’m sure they do.”

Emilia: “…What happens after going around in circles like that?”

Utakata: “They will be reborn. In a different form, as prey, as a person, as an enemy, as an ally, or as something else entirely. But that’s how it is.”

The souls of the dead were said to cycle through the world and then return again.

Emilia found this way of thinking hard to understand. However, it felt better than the idea that once someone died, everything simply ended.

When a person died, the Od that was in their body left it and dissolved into the Mana of the world. Even if that was the case in reality, if there were to still be a form or a trace of that person left while the Od dissolved, then.

Emilia: “—Is that, the Books of the Dead?”

As she thought back, Emilia remembered that she had experienced for herself the proof of what Utakata had told her.

Inside the Pleiades Watchtower, in the library housing the Books of the Dead, which recorded the memories of the dead, the traces of many people from this world were firmly preserved. The fact that these could be preserved was proof that time was set aside by someone to transcribe them into books from the souls of those who had departed.

Emilia: “…”

For the first time, Emilia felt a strong fixation towards the Books of the Dead.

Unlike the time when Subaru’s memories had disappeared inside that tower, this was a fixation towards the Books of the Dead themselves, in the truest sense of the word.

Emilia also had people who had parted ways with her that she would never forget. —People like Fortuna, Juice, and others she would never be able to see again, even if the ice melted in the Great Elior Forest.

Although it was sad to say goodbye to Fortuna and the others, it was a definite ending.

That was what made Emilia harbor such fixation, the sorrow of not being able to overcome that grief.

If possible, she would like to know what she was thinking in her final moments, and whether she was hoping to see the same things as Emilia in the future beyond that lighthearted chat—if she had not spoken to Madelyn.

The parting with Priscilla, the proper way to deal with that hard to swallow reality, if they were not given time to worry over those things, she would have surely thought so.

Schult: “I was found by Priscilla-sama. Priscilla-sama chose me.”

Emilia: “Schult-kun…”

As he faced the silent Emilia, Schult tensed his cheeks and slowly lifted his bowed face, while speaking haltingly, but with a certain passion.

The boy continued, his round eyes welling up with tears.

Schult: “Priscilla-sama, truly loved beautiful and marvelous things. That, Priscilla-sama, chose me… if I were to be worthless, I would disgrace Priscilla-sama’s name…!”

Emilia: “…”

Schult: “I cannot allow that.”

Indeed, Emilia’s eyes widened at how Schult answered with all the strength he could muster.

Perhaps it was an illusion, or a mistake in perception. For just a brief moment, she felt as if a dazzling light had appeared in Schult’s eyes.

It was the same as what Priscilla, who lived like a flame, made her feel.

—That was the moment Emilia felt that Schult had defined his own life.

From this point on, Schult would probably face many hardships in life. But, Schult would not give up, or be discouraged or intimidated.

His reason for that not to happen, that flame he kept close, he decided to nurture in his heart and use it as fuel so that his energy might never wane.

Emilia: “There are still so many things I can’t do by myself, and even though I’m studying as hard as I can, there are still so many things I don’t know.”

Schult: “Emily-sama?”

Emilia: “I know it’s reaaally selfish of me to say this, because even now and into the future, I’m the kind of person who will always rely on everyone around me to make up for my shortcomings, to support me, and to help me. But, let me say it anyway."

Schult: "…"

Emilia: "I will continue to lend my support to you, Schult-kun. I, will definitely stand by you."

Emilia placed her hand on her chest and told the little boy directly.

Whether or not she kept her promise to bring Priscilla back, pitying him who lost someone so important, this was Emilia's resolution after discarding all such reasons.

It was a sign that she wanted to support Schult's attitude and way of being.

Schult: "…Thank you, Emily-sama."

For a moment, Schult took some time to consider Emilia's words, before slightly relaxing his lips and replying.

Despite the fact that Emilia had made a self-serving promise, she was glad that she had said it, even if that response made her feel like she had to apologize to Roswaal and Otto later.

Emilia: "Thank goodness you said that. I have to tell the others about this… are Al and Reinhard's father around?"

In reality, now that Priscilla was gone, the immediate issue was what would happen to the Barielle Domain in the Kingdom of Lugunica. However, it would be difficult to fully discuss this while in the Vollachian Empire.

Especially Al, who, like Subaru, had been in a position to witness Priscilla disappear.

Emilia: "—Subaru."

Uttering Subaru's name, Emilia found it very frustrating that she had her hands full.

Before Emilia and the others reunited in the Empire, Subaru and

Rem had already made contact with Priscilla, and as they had spent time together that Emilia and the others did not know about, they must have been hurt more than Emilia.

In truth, she wanted to stay by their side, even if it meant enduring her own pain and sadness.

Emilia: “But, now that I’m finally ready, after talking about this…”

Subaru and Rem, two people who had also suffered heartache; she could talk things over with them.

As Emilia made up her mind, Schult continued, “Well”,

Schult: “Al-sama is still in his room. Heinkel-sama has just gone to get some water…”

Saying that, Schult looked over to Utakata who stood by his side, as she held an empty water jug. After filling it up, it seemed like they were planning to head straight to Heinkel.

They had come to quite a long pause by having this conversation, so Emilia was about to go back to attending to her original plans, and just when she was about to open her mouth to declare so—

???: “—Oh, ah.”

Suddenly, hearing a low groan from within the passage, Emilia lifted her head. Then, meeting the eyes of an unthinkable person, she blinked in surprise.

Present there, was someone who had just come up as the topic of conversation a moment prior—

Schult: “Heinkel-sama! Have you decided to come outside?!”

Schult called out in a loud voice, and the one to whom he called out was Heinkel, whose red hair was disheveled, with an unkempt stubble on his face. In all likelihood, he had not been keeping himself well-groomed ever since that, and had been in a state of exhaustion since the battle against the Great Disaster had ended.

He had horrible dark circles around his eyes, and it was apparent that he had not been sleeping. Only, those sunken blue irises housed an odd glint as he looked towards them—nay, towards Emilia.

Schult: “I will bring you some water immediately, so…”

Heinkel: “E… Emilia-sama…!”

While he said that, Schult admirably attempted to support Heinkel’s staggering body. But, without even looking at Schult, Heinkel had called out Emilia’s name.

Frowning at his attitude, Emilia nodded with a “Yes”,

Emilia: “Hey, you look quite pale. As Schult said, you should drink some water and rest. If you aren’t eating either, I can go bring you some food…”

Heinkel: “No, no, none of that stuff matters… no, it really doesn’t matter. More importantly, Emilia-sama, there’s something I’d like to discuss!”

Emilia: “—Hk.”

In an attempt to have him calm down, Emilia tried to touch Heinkel’s shoulder, but as she did so, Heinkel grabbed her hand. She was startled by the strength of his grip, and Heinkel brought his face close to Emilia as her throat clogged up.

Then, as his eyes, the same blue hue as Reinhard’s, greatly wavered,

Heinkel: “Won’t you let me… would you not allow me to humbly serve you, Emilia-sama? No matter what! No matter what, I will be of great use to you in the Royal Selection…!”

Emilia: “Wh-What are you saying? Saying that so suddenly… aren’t you a servant of Priscilla?”

Heinkel: “I will be useful! I can become a force of deterrence! In order to win the Royal Selection, there’s a competitor that you need to have withdraw no matter what, now isn’t there? As long as they remain, nobody else has a winning chance. But, if you have me, then Reinhard won't be a problem—"

Emilia: "—Hk."

Seeing Heinkel's bloodcurdling state, Emilia was at a loss for words.

Emilia, who had recently begun to think that moving to solve problems before she could think about them was her strong suit, was silenced by Heinkel's attitude of deluded conviction.

It was a terrible sales pitch for his own horribly inconsistent self—but, if that was Heinkel's way of facing the fact that Priscilla had passed away.

Emilia: "I think, it's reaaally sad…"

Heinkel: "I understand, but it's the truth! You can't win against Reinhard if you don't have me. That's why Miss Priscilla welcomed me. Yes indeed, the fact that Miss Priscilla did so is a guarantee. Emilia-sama! Let us work together to clear away Miss Priscilla's regrets!"

Emilia: "…"

If there was even a sliver of lamentation for Priscilla in those words, Emilia would have listened to him.

But, she felt no such feelings towards Priscilla within Heinkel's appeal. If they had been present, Schult would have been seen making a sad expression.

Therefore, Emilia bit her lip before Heinkel, and—

Emilia: "That's eno—"

Madelyn: "Shut the frig' up."

The very next moment, a powerful punch was thrown in front of Emilia, furiously striking the jaw of Heinkel from below, who had been just in front of her. Crying out with a momentary "Koh", Heinkel fainted and collapsed onto the floor spread-eagled.

The force of that blow was enough to separate the head from the body of an average person.

Emilia: “M-Madelyn?!”

Madelyn: “It’s just that there was a friggin’ despicable guy here. You shouldn’t friggin’ sympathize with a guy like this.”

Shaking out the hand that she had punched Heinkel with, Madelyn spit those words out with displeasure.

After Emilia had hastened to Schult’s side, Madelyn slowly followed and had silently been watching the situation unfold, but it seemed that this was where she had run out of patience.

Schult: “Heinkel-sama! Heinkel-sama! Are you alright?!”

Madelyn: “Don’t friggin’ wail like that. It’s aggravating, but this is a friggin’ human who won’t die even if this dragon hits him at full strength. I just friggin’ knocked him out.”

As Schult leaped at the passed-out Heinkel and worried over him, Madelyn spoke. But, even if she said that, it was natural to worry over that level of force.

However, it was not as though Emilia did not understand why Madelyn had done such a thing.

Emilia: “Madelyn, I’m…”

Madelyn: “This dragon will friggin’ protect the Empire. However, I don’t intend to friggin’ protect things outside of that. Hurry up and take that friggin’ good-for-nothing human back home with you. There won’t be a friggin’ next time.”

Emilia: “…Mm, got it.”

Emilia understood that Madelyn’s words, spoken with her anger stifled, were her way of coming to a compromise. Thus, Emilia crouched down beside Schult, and looked at the fallen Heinkel.

His jaw had been struck with such vigor, and he had completely lost consciousness, so Emilia softly put her hand on his head.

Emilia: “I’m not very skilled at this, but I’ll provide a little treatment before you go to the healing room…”

Activating her healing magic, she took care to make sure that there would not be any after-effects from Madelyn’s blow. Next to Emilia as she did that, as Schult worried over Heinkel,

Schult: “Um, Emily-sama… Heinkel-sama, um, he worked very hard indeed.”

Emilia: “Schult-kun…”

Schult: “Heinkel-sama, he is also mourning what happened to Priscilla-sama. It seems he had some sort of agreement with Priscilla-sama, and, well, he was always trying his absolute hardest…”

Emilia: “Mm, don’t worry. It’s alright.”

Schult: “…And, indeed.”

As Schult bowed and cast his gaze downward, Emilia did her best to smile. Even if just a little bit, it would be good if that could serve as some consolation or encouragement for Schult.

Then, as Utakata, carrying the water jug atop her head, looked with wide eyes at Emilia as she healed Heinkel,

Utakata: “Em, you’re so admirable.”

At the calm words uttered by Utakata, Emilia slightly gasped. They were just the impressions spoken by a young girl without any conjecture—and they caused Emilia to realize.

She was no longer just another person mourning Priscilla’s death, but she had gained the qualifications to be there for others who were also mourning Priscilla’s death.

And, even though that was something she had wanted so desperately when considering Subaru and Rem—

Emilia: “—Priscilla, you dunderhead.”

The time of Emilia merely looking back on her extremely mean-spirited friend had come to an end, and to the extent that it made her body tremble from the inside, it was a lonely, fleeting moment.

Chapter 5:
Nine Hundred and Thirty-One Hits

1

—An unusual atmosphere enveloped the rooftop of the great fortress, which stood out with a noticeably strong presence within the Fortified City of Garkla where the aftereffects of the fierce battle with the Great Disaster lingered.

The rooftop was designed to accommodate a significant number of soldiers for archery in times of emergency, but having such a large number of people—having over a hundred present at once was beyond any initial expectations.

The sight of these robust men huddling together suggested that they might be subjects of some kind of punishment, potentially imposing a gloomy atmosphere both inside and out. However, there was no such sense of despair in their actual expressions; their faces carried a serious and earnest light.

And beyond the gazes of the men numbering over a hundred, there was a vast, open space.

And, in that space—

???: "—Pthu!"

There was a black-haired boy who spat out the blood that had collected in his mouth onto the floor with a wet sound.

His face was smeared with blood from his nose, his eyelids were swollen, his head was swaying unsteadily back and forth, and his body was in such a battered state that one could tell at a glance the severity of his injuries. It was a wonder that he could even stand, but the boy put his hands on his knees, stepped hard on the ground once more, and looked up.

—A blow smashed squarely into his face, right across the nose, sending the boy flying backward in the most spectacular manner yet.

He flew, he flew, and he rolled, ending up sprawled out on the ground.

Exhausted, with his arms and legs flung out, it was clear that he could not stand up due to the accumulated damage—

Boy: “Not… Yet…”

However, what overturned that perception was none other than the boy sprawled out on the floor.

Slowly sitting up and further dirtying his mouth with the fresh nosebleed that flowed out, the boy still managed to rise to his feet and exhale deeply.

And then—

Boy: “—hk!”

The boy was once again violently struck by his opponent’s raised fist.

2

Subaru: “—This is my way of making amends. So please, don’t interfere.”

If she hadn’t been told that beforehand, she would have rushed out immediately.

However, she suppressed that urge, bit her lip, and respected his feelings. That was what Beatrice could do for her partner, Natsuki Subaru, at this moment.

Subaru: “—Hk.”

The sound of a hard impact echoed, and Subaru’s face was knocked to the side, causing him to groan. He steadied his swaying body and, gritting his teeth, faced forward.

The next punch landed on his nose, making him arch backward. Though he reeled back—

Subaru: “Not… yet…”

With blood dripping from his nose and his eyes bloodshot, Subaru forced these words out.

Hearing this, the man with a skeleton tattoo who had been punching Subaru for more than twenty blows—Weitz contorted his fierce face and raised his fist again.

And again, blood splattered from Subaru’s nose as he was hit, staining the rooftop of the Great Fortress.

This had happened multiple times over the past few days and had been going on for over an hour just today.

Beatrice: “Subaru…”

At first glance, it seemed like a duel between Subaru and Weitz, but such a one-sided beating could not be called a duel. Standing there, Subaru continued to take Weitz’s punches head-on.

And Beatrice was—nay, Beatrice was not the only one watching.

???: “…”

Over a hundred people had gathered around the rooftop of the Great Fortress.

They were all members of the Pleiades Battalion that Natsuki Subaru had allied with in this Empire, and they were also the witnesses of this duel.

Yes, this ritual where Subaru was taking such a one sided beating was—

Tanza: “—Sparka.”

The deer-girl, Tanza, muttered beside Beatrice, who was gripping the hem of her skirt.

As they watched the same scene, Beatrice felt a terrible sense of irritation looking at Tanza's profile and her emotionless, dark eyes.

Because it felt like she was being implicitly told that Tanza understood the feelings of Subaru, who had taken on the ritual called Sparka, better than Beatrice did.

Because, after all,

Beatrice: "…Betty doesn't understand why Subaru has to do this, in fact."

Subaru had voluntarily imposed this ritual of one-sided beatings on himself.

Being asked to witness it as his way of making amends, Beatrice could only stand there, enduring the pain in her chest, wanting to at least fulfill his wish.

—The death of Priscilla Barielle had become a wound for many who knew her.

Those for whom the wound turned out to be shallow suffered because of the very shallowness of their wound, while conversely, those who were deeply and painfully gouged were preoccupied with tending to their bleeding and painful wounds.

And sadly, Beatrice was the former, while Subaru was undoubtedly the latter.

Beatrice: "…"

When starting this Sparka, Subaru said that this was to make amends.

Subaru, who met the gladiators with a shrunken body due to "infantilization", had lied about his true identity and deceived them by hiding his true identity, using the course of events and the calculation of gathering allies as reasons, and had dragged them into the center of this conflict.

Considering the fierceness of that battle and the significant role the

Battalion played, without it, the damage might have been greater, or the Fortified City might have fallen.

So Subaru's judgment and choices were correct for saving the Empire.

It was just that Subaru himself could not forgive it, and thus sought punishment for it—

Spica: "Eao…"

A small hand was placed on Beatrice's, which was gripping her skirt.

When Beatrice looked, she saw that the one reaching out her hand was Spica, peering at her with concern. Her large eyes filled with sadness, she anxiously looked at Beatrice, whose hands were painfully clenched.

Beatrice felt pathetic for making even Spica worry about her.

Beatrice and Spica were the only ones here unrelated to the Pleiades Battalion. Beatrice earnestly wished that all of Spica's concern and worry could be directed toward Subaru instead.

Beatrice: "I'm sorry, I suppose. Spica, your—"

Cecilus: "—Oh my. I stopped by because I was wondering why there were so many figures on the rooftop, and it turns out it's Boss's Sparka? Despite appearances, he's quite diligent, isn't he? To get beaten up every single day."

Beatrice: "…"

Just as Beatrice squeezed Spica's hand back, a person with a nonchalant voice and demeanor casually put a foot on the rooftop fence, showing his face at the Sparka scene.

He made it seem as if it were as easy as skipping most of a staircase with a jump, but hopping up to the rooftop of a near hundred meter tall fortress was no easy feat. But then again, for the kimono-clad swordsman—for the Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt, such common sense did not seem to apply.

Tanza: “Cecilus-sama.”

Balancing himself on one leg atop the fence, Cecilus made a visor with his hand as he gazed over the Sparka, and hearing Tanza’s call, he gave a gentle smile,

Cecilus: “Hello hello, Tanza-san. It’s a somewhat fresh and odd feeling for the line of my gaze to differ from Tanza-san’s like this, isn’t it? This current form of mine is the original standard and the child form that I’d had until now was just a temporary state; but since my acquaintance with Tanza-san was longer in that form so it feels quite strange now don’t you think?”

Tanza: “Indeed. Even if the height of your body’s line of sight has changed, the height of your mind’s gaze remains the same, so to be quite frank, my impression of you is quite unchanged.”

Cecilus: “Hahahaha, nice joke!”

Clapping his hands and smiling at Tanza’s blunt response, Cecilus proceeded to shift his gaze towards Beatrice. Receiving those blue eyes, Beatrice frowned, and then,

Cecilus: “Boss’s partner looks to be quite discontent.”

Beatrice: “…A matter of course, in fact. There is no need for Subaru to do this sort of thing, I suppose.”

Cecilus: “Let’s stop talking about whether it’s necessary or not. If we were to switch over to an extreme conversation regarding the value of life or lack thereof, it’s quite possible it could become a conversation that’s not the slightest bit tasteful. Even if this may not be necessary, there is a reason behind it. Even if it can’t be found within yourself, it is certainly within Boss.”

Beatrice: “…”

Cecilus: “Well in reality I do think he’s taking it far too seriously. All this to whole-heartedly apologize and gain the forgiveness of all the members of the Battalion who he continued to deceive all the way from the Gladiator Island. That said, the members of the Battalion are all hot-headed gladiators, so this ended up being a suitable method."

Yapping away fluently at full speed, Cecilus ultimately pointed at the worn-out Subaru.

It was odious, but there was nothing incorrect in what Cecilus had pointed out. —As he said, Subaru making amends by being punched repeatedly by Weitz was atonement towards the Pleiades Battalion.

The members of the Pleiades Battalion, nine hundred and thirty-one people—in total, a purification via nine hundred and thirty-one punches.

By undertaking that from Weitz, who was serving as the representative of the Battalion, this was the rite Subaru had levied upon himself to satisfy the members of the Battalion; it was Sparka.

Cecilus: "Regardless of being split over several days, it's still nine hundred hits, isn't it? If struck that many times, even I would die. Though, to begin with, I've never even considered a situation in which I would be punched in a defenseless state, so it feels a bit like the premise would never come to fruition… How far along is he now?"

Tanza: "The total over all the days so far is two hundred and fifty-six hits."

Cecilus: "I see I see… It's so far that I might faint!"

Hearing the total count thus far from Tanza, Cecilus declared so without malice.

One might have wanted to speak out against his flippance, but doing so would result in a meaningless competition. Giving up on rebutting him, Beatrice gripped Spica's hand, and focused her worry on Subaru.

For the duration of this Sparka, Subaru had forbidden Beatrice from using healing magic on him.

Therefore, she had been heightening her Mana so that as soon as today's Sparka was over, she could rush over to him as fast as possible and heal his wounds.

???: "Cecilus."

In Beatrice's stead as she thought so, a weighty, stern voice called Cecilus's name.

Folding his four burly arms, as the large man who wore a frightening expression—as Gustav, looked towards Cecilus, who was standing atop the fence, and the scenery behind him,

Gustav: "I do not know if I have the jurisdiction to ask about this in my capacity, but what of General First-Class Arakiya?"

Cecilus: "It's not really something that I need to keep a secret from you, Gustav-san. The seat of the governor of the Gladiator Island will soon be entrusted to somebody else while you'll be taking up an important post in the Imperial Capital, isn't that so? So that should mean you'll have the chance to meet me every once in a while, since I also generally live in the Imperial Capital. Well, right now the Imperial Capital is in that condition so it's a bit of a problem to say whether I live there or not, but…"

Gustav: "…"

Cecilus: "Oya, how rude of me, we were talking about Anya, right? —As before, she's still having difficulty maintaining the balance between her mind and body. Even at the best of times, she's taken in an enormous Spirit that puts her slender body on the verge of bursting. A steady heart is absolutely essential in order to exorcize that, but since the princess sister who propped her up passed away, she's been quite unmanageable."

Gustav: "I can only imagine the heartache and pains. However, the duty which only you are capable of fulfilling is tied to the survival of the Empire. Not only the hopes of me, in my capacity, but the hopes of all citizens of the Empire are being placed upon you."

Cecilus: "What are you saying, Gustav-san? It's a tad unpleasant."

Gustav: “Mh…”

Cecilus: “I’m the leading actor of this world, y’know? Bearing the hopes of somebody, as well as of the entire Empire, is an everyday occurrence for me. —It’s a matter involving Anya, I’m not gonna cut corners.”

Cecilus was composed as he responded so, but the difficulty of what he had just so casually described was exemplified in a visible format.

—Behind Cecilus, the vast wasteland beyond the western rampart visible from the roof of the fortress, engraved there were vestiges of a natural disaster that had just occurred.

It was evidence of Cecilus, who had come here wearing a nonchalant expression, suppressing the emission of power from Arakiya to prevent her from exploding, since she had taken in the extraordinary power of a Great Spirit enlisted among the Four Greats.

If left unattended, the swell of power was capable of becoming a second Great Disaster. Having said that, it was difficult for those shallow of heart to remain near Arakiya in her current state.

Therefore, even if the Empire was searched far and wide for that great duty, none but Cecilus would be capable of performing it.

Cecilus: “Regardless of whether it’s desired of them or not, people won’t stop in their tracks. The only people allowed to come to a stop are those who are dead, and the living have no choice but to keep moving forward. At their roots, Anya’s hardship and the struggle of Boss’s purification are the same. They may be painful to witness, but they ought to be welcomed.”

Beatrice: “You’re speaking like it’s somebody else’s problem, in fact.”

Cecilus: “Somebody else’s problem is quite the boorish way of putting it. It’s a matter of this being Boss’s duty, and his climax. Having said that… I guess this is as far as he goes for today.”

Closing one eye, Cecilus muttered in response to Beatrice.

At his words, Beatrice gasped an “Eh”, and as she snapped back around, Weitz’s fist simultaneously knocked Subaru down to the ground.

Weitz: “Haa… Haa… it’s over… hk”

While breathing heavily, Weitz lowered the blood-stained fist that had punched Subaru. To those words, the unconscious Subaru gave no response.

Exclaiming “Subaru!”, Beatrice rushed to Subaru’s side, and began to activate healing magic with great haste. Once Weitz made sure of that, he began to turn around, but,

Beatrice: “Wait, I suppose. I will treat your hand as well, in fact.”

Weitz: “Ain’t no need… Prioritize Schwartz over me…”

Beatrice: “I cannot do that, I suppose. Spica.”

Hearing the call, Spica cut around in front of Weitz, and spread her arms open with an “Uu”.

As Weitz could not push Spica out of his way, Beatrice activated healing magic without a moment’s delay; at the sensation of his wounds gradually being healed, Weitz turned around and glared at her.

But, even if he was a man whose skeleton tattoos gave off a fiendish impression, the pained contortions of his face were of no intimidation to the Great Spirit Beatrice.

???: “O-oi, Tanza, how many hits is he at now?”

Tanza: “Two hundred and fifty-eight hits, Hiain-sama.”

???: “So… six hundred and seventy-three remaining…? Still a long way to go, huh.”

Beside Beatrice and the others, the lizardman enquiring to Tanza with a quavering voice was Hiain. At his question, Tanza informed him of the count, and the bearded Idra shook his head in gloom.

Then, Hiain looked over the surroundings with a “Hey”,

Hiain: “I mean, ain’t it enough already? He’s taken this damn much, and we’ve all fully understood his feelings.”

Weitz: “Go off ‘n mumble that nonsense in yer sleep, lizard bastard…! If I was just gonna quit halfway, then why the fuck do ya think I undertook this duty…!”

Hiain: “Whad’ya mean “why”, ain’t ya the one who’s most worn out over all this? I, I haven’t gone that far!”

Extending his long tongue, Hiain’s voice quavered, and a vein began to bulge out on Weitz’s forehead. However, as he tried to press Hiain, Tanza stopped him, saying “You are undergoing treatment.”

Instead, Idra took a deep breath and looked towards Hiain.

Idra: “To be frank, I agree with your point. Certainly, I was shocked by the reveal of Schwartz’s identity, and I did feel somewhat deceived, but…”

Weitz: “Schwartz rescued all of us from the island… What else do ya fucking need…!”

Hiain: “Th-Then, then nobody wants to do it! So then why…”

Gustav: “That is because it is something called for by Natsuki Schwartz—nay, by Natsuki Subaru himself. So long as Tanza or the contracted spirit do not put a stop to it, I approve of this conduct, as the official.”

As Gustav interjected into the conversation between Idra, Weitz, and Hiain, his words weighty and stern; the gladiators in the surroundings each responded with gestures and words that were close in their sense of heat.

Of course, among them were likely people who were enraged and unable to forgive Subaru’s conduct, but—

Spica: “Uau…”

Crouched down opposite Beatrice, Spica was worriedly looking at Subaru with his swollen face and languid demeanor.

If one could look at the state of those girls, and at the figure of Subaru pitifully throwing himself into atonement, without thinking anything of it, they would not have even been able to enlist in the Pleiades Battalion to begin with.

Tanza: “Right now, it is necessary for Schwartz-sama. He needs to prove to himself that he has not come to a standstill. Even if that happens to be through pain.”

At Tanza’s comment, a conclusion was given to the problem initially raised by Hiain.

Receiving that, Weitz clenched the fist that had been healed by Beatrice, and,

Weitz: “I’m gonna continue… Even if it breaks my fist, I’ll follow him for the remaining six hundred punches…!”

Cecilus: “Wonderful, how truly wonderful. That is precisely how you’re supposed to use your time in the spotlight, Weitz-san.”

Weitz: “…”

Cecilus: “Huh? What’s with this odd atmosphere?”

For a moment, everybody present widened their eyes at Cecilus’s interjection. Weitz, who had been especially caught off guard, stared at Cecilus, and,

Weitz: “I never woulda thought that ya’d remember my name…”

Cecilus: “It certainly is true that I’m quite forgetful! But, I do at least remember the names of actors who are worth remembering.”

Weitz: “Hmph…”

Weitz snorted at Cecilus as the latter shrugged his shoulders, and then, once again, looked down at the fallen Subaru. He looked at the face that, while likely overlapping with the impression of the young Subaru seared into his memories, would still take some time to clearly fully merge together.

And then—

Weitz: “I leave the rest to ya…”

With those words, Weitz departed from the rooftop with large strides. Following him, the other men, as well as Idra, who was dragging the reluctant Hiain along with him, also exited from the rooftop.

Finally, Gustav nodded at Beatrice and the rest who still remained there, and,

Gustav: “In my capacity, I shall also be on my way. Natsuki Subaru… as expected, the name Schwartz feels more fitting. I entrust him to you.”

Beatrice: “That goes without saying, in fact. Only, you ought to remember, I suppose.”

Gustav: “And what might that be?”

Beatrice: “If Subaru is Schwartz to you, then he won’t be upset if you keep calling him that, in fact. There is no need for the special nickname between you all to be lost out of unnecessary concern, I suppose.”

Gustav: “—You have my thanks.”

Giving a deep nod, Gustav slowly departed.

With that, the gladiators who had been ascertaining the Sparka simultaneously took their leave, and Beatrice breathed a sigh upon the rooftop that had instantly become deserted. Then, glancing up at the kimono-clad girl to her side,

Beatrice: “It’s fine for you to also go along with that bunch, in fact.”

Tanza: “Even without your concern, I am quite fine as is. Unlike everybody else, it is no strange matter for me to remain here.”

Beatrice: “—. You also have the worry regarding your master, I suppose. She is also suffering, in fact.”

Tanza: “…”

That comment was not made in the vein of sarcasm or harassment, but for a moment, Beatrice regretted that it ultimately ended up coming across that way.

The comment had caused Tanza’s cheeks to slightly stiffen; her master, Yorna Mishigure, was one of the people who had sustained a grave wound at the death of Priscilla—through an absurd binding on her soul, among many reincarnations, a past version of herself had been the mother of the deceased Priscilla.

In other words, the parent-child duo of Yorna and Priscilla, had each experienced complex bereavement.

Tanza: “Thank you for your concern, Beatrice-sama… However, Yorna-sama is fine on her own, that is…”

Beatrice: “…”

Tanza: “That is, what she said, so—”

As Tanza cast her eyes down, Beatrice realized that she had misjudged her.

Tanza was not satisfied with Yorna’s words. Even so, just like how Beatrice had decided to watch over Subaru’s act of making amends, she had decided to respect Yorna’s wishes.

It would have been difficult for outsiders to surmise Yorna’s emotions while insisting that she would be alright by herself. —However, Beatrice felt like she understood at least a part of it.

Though different from reincarnation, amidst the long time Beatrice had lived, she had seen many lives pass on. Before Subaru had taken her out of the forbidden library, it was something she had come to instinctively avoid.

Because of that, Beatrice had responded with a very insincere attitude to those who had attempted to face her, something that she had now regretted. Unlike Beatrice, who never learned from that, Yorna might have come to know and learn that through her own experiences.

Even so—

Subaru: "…Ugh."

Spica: "Uau!"

Subaru: "Spi… ca…? Ah, huh, I'm…"

Suddenly, Subaru's eyelids quivered, and his black eyes slowly opened. Spica's eyes lit up when she saw this and pounced on him, causing Subaru to blink several times in response.

Seeing this, Beatrice sighed, noting that his memories before he fainted seemed to be missing,

Beatrice: "Those guys aren't here anymore, I suppose. I'm in the middle of casting healing magic, in fact."

Subaru: "Ah, ahhh, right! I see, yeah, I'm so~ sorry! My bad, Beako, I always end up making you worry! I really am useless without you!"

Finally understanding Beatrice's explanation, Subaru slapped his face with both hands. As the sound echoed, Subaru sprang up to his feet.

However, his momentum caused him to nearly stumble forward—

Spica: "Uuuh!"

Subaru: "Oops, sorry, Spica… Thanks for being a witness. You did a good job of not rushing in. I thought you would punch Weitz without thinking. Now that I think about it, it was quite a tightrope walk."

Spica: “Auuu, uau.”

Subaru: “The real danger was Tanza? Now that you mention it, that’s true! Tanza cares a lot about me. From that perspective, Weitz could’ve been in real trouble.”

As he spoke, Subaru took Spica’s hand, who had supported him when he nearly fell, and began to dance with her on the spot.

Although the swelling on his face had considerably reduced thanks to the healing magic, his lips were still cut, and his slightly swollen eyes were still a concern for Beatrice, who would have liked to continue treating him a little longer.

Tanza: “My honor is at stake, so please do not make such arbitrary comments, Natsuki Subaru-sama.”

With a sigh, Tanza prodded Subaru, who was dancing with Spica. Subaru made a sour face and replied,

Subaru: “Haven’t your words become thornier since I returned to my original size? And it actually stings quite a bit when you call me something other than Schwartz-sama, so please stop.”

Tanza: “I apologize, Natsuki Subaru-sama. Natsuki Subaru-sama is a guest from the Kingdom, so I cannot afford to be disrespectful, Natsuki Subaru-sama.”

Subaru: “Tanzaaa~”

Subaru, holding Spica, looked saddened by Tanza’s distant response. —Beatrice found it hard to watch his overly cheerful demeanor, which was meant to hide his true feelings.

Subaru sought to make amends to the Pleiades Battalion and acted cheerfully in front of Beatrice and his close companions. It was likely all to avoid worrying those around him, but—

Beatrice: “…It might be counterproductive, I suppose.”

Trying to be cheerful when he wanted to cry and making everyone laugh when he was hurting.

Beatrice loved that aspect of Subaru, but only when his sadness and pain didn't exceed his tolerance.

No one should bottle up their need to cry or their pain like this.

Subaru: "Beako? Why the cute face?"

Beatrice: "—. Betty is always cute, in fact. More importantly, since the treatment is still ongoing, why don't you sit still, I suppose?"

Subaru: "I'd like to say I don't want to trouble you… but I need to be in tip-top shape, and I haven't even climbed half the mountain yet. Alright, bring it on!"

Nodding, Subaru sat down cross-legged with Spica on his lap, his face full of determination.

Beatrice resumed her healing magic on Subaru, glancing at Tanza, who only shook her head silently.

She too was unsure of what to say to Subaru.

Then—

Cecilus: "Boss, Boss, can I have a moment?"

Cecilus, who had been watching the proceedings, called out to Subaru without any regard for the tension among those concerned about him.

Hearing him, Subaru looked up at Cecilus perched on the fence,

Subaru: "Oh, if it isn't big Ceci. You've seriously just grown bigger without looking awkward at all."

Cecilus: "I could say the same for you, Boss, but your growth has only made your fierce eyes look more prominent. It was cute when you were looking young, but now it's simply a deadly weapon."

Subaru: "You say whatever you want… You're alone? She's not with you?"

Cecilus: “If you mean Anya, she’s lying in a crater. Thanks to the Stone’s power, she became incredibly tough, so I had to suppress her a hundred times or so. She won’t be getting up anytime soon. But more importantly…”

As he spoke, Cecilus jumped off the fence and landed in front of Subaru. Greeting him, Subaru and Spica tilted their heads at the same angle.

Seeing their reactions, Cecilus grinned—

Cecilus: “You’re heading back to the Kingdom soon, right? Before that, how about showing us a good punch to His Excellency’s face?”

3

???: “So I took Boss to see His Excellency! Boss was so excited about wanting to beat up His Excellency all the way back at Gladiator Island so I wanted to be present to witness it!”

???: “Be gone at once.”

Cecilus raised his hand and smiled as he entered, but Vincent, busy with his affairs, dismissed him while looking down at his paperwork.

It was a natural response for the busy Emperor, but Cecilus, perhaps the most stubborn man in the Empire, would not back down regardless.

He pouted his lips in dissatisfaction with a “Eh~”, proudly sitting his behind on the Emperor’s desk while he was working,

Cecilus: “Don’t you think you’re working too much? Of course I understand that the work of military officers is to be done in emergencies whereas the work of civilian officers is to be done in emergencies and non-emergencies alike with no breaks!”

Vincent: “So you intend to persuade me? If I were to take you up on your sweet talk, what would you expect me to do as I excuse myself from my work?”

Cecilus: “Please let Boss beat you up!”

Vincent: “Be gone at once.”

Cecilus: “Boo~! His Excellency is a workaholic! Don’t you think so, Most Honorable Empress Consort?”

Medium: “Meee?”

At Vincent’s curt answer, Cecilus, leaning back on the desk, called for reinforcements. The one who responded to his call was Medium, who was playing with Spica on the office’s couch.

She brushed Spica’s long, blonde hair as she groaned, “Mmmm”,

Medium: “I also think that Abel-chin is working too much, but I know that the work he’s doing is important, so I can’t say much. Also, I don’t want to see Abel-chin and Subaru-chin fighting.”

Cecilus: “It wouldn’t be a fight so much as a one-sided beating of His Excellency… isn’t that Sparka in a sense?!”

Vincent: “Remove your rear at once.”

Cecilus clenched his fists, his excitement brimming over. Vincent closed one eye, sighing as he tried to pull out the papers that were lying under Cecilus’s bottom.

Then, turning his black eyes towards the entrance of the room,

Vincent: “You, how long do you intend to stand there? You are an eyesore.”

???: “Geh… that’s, well…”

Medium: “Subaru-chin, bring Beatrice-chan and come sit in front of me!”

Subaru, invited by Vincent’s cold voice and Medium’s contrasting warm voice, awkwardly sat down on a couch in front of Medium in the middle of the room. Beatrice, holding Subaru’s hand, sat down with him, and Medium gently placed a cup of tea on the table.

Medium: “Heeere you go, coarse tea.”

Vincent: “While it is temporary, this still is my office. You, are you serving coarse tea to the Emperor?”

Medium: “Big bro taught me that it’s all about courtesy! I don’t know anything about etiquette myself, so I’m just trying my best to be polite~!”

Saying this, Medium poured another cup of tea for Vincent, who had one on his desk as well. Vincent did not particularly complain about the rising steam, and Beatrice was able to confirm by her own taste that there was nothing wrong with the tea she had brewed.

Next to Beatrice, Subaru frowned as he began,

Subaru: “Man how should I put it, Abel and Medium-san are really going to be a married couple.”

Medium: “Eek!”

Subaru: “What was that squeal just now?”

Medium: “Umm, umm~, I’m still a little embarrassed by how that sounds.”

Medium’s face flushed and she gave a small whine, but Beatrice could see that although she was confused about the situation she found herself in, she did not reject it wholeheartedly.

In all honesty, Beatrice was not very familiar with Vincent’s personality.

However, since Subaru had been lambasting him so often, paradoxically, he was likely someone like Otto or Julius, both of whom had many commendable aspects.

Beatrice: “Otherwise, I wouldn’t feel comfortable leaving Medium in your care, in fact.”

Subaru: “That’s true. Flop-san being tempted by money and status is so unlike him.”

Cecilus: “Oh dear, they’re really dissing you, Your Excellency. It sounds like Boss is saying there’s nothing good about you besides your position, honor, and wealth as the Emperor of Vollachia.”

Vincent: “Are you all trying to anger me and stop my work, thereby destroying the Empire?”

If so, it must be said that their efforts were succeeding.

With so many interruptions and physical hindrances to his paperwork, Vincent had no choice but to halt progress on his tasks.

Then, giving up on retrieving the documents from under Cecilus’s rear end, Vincent instead fixed his dark eyes sharply on Subaru,

Vincent: “I have heard of your repeated eccentric behavior with the escaped prisoners from the Gladiator Island under the pretext of making amends.”

Subaru: “…I thought you’d say it was pointless. But calling them escaped prisoners doesn’t sit right with me. All of them are…”

Vincent: “They were sent to Ginunhive for a reason. They are considered escaped prisoners, and rightfully so. They took advantage of the Empire’s chaos to break out and wield their military power to wreak havoc.”

Subaru: “So, what do you plan to do with them?”

Subaru stiffened his cheeks at Vincent’s threatening words and glared back at him. For a moment, a sharp tension filled the space between them.

However, Medium cut through their stares with a hand chop, telling them to stop,

Medium: “Abel-chin, if you say something mean like that, Subaru-chin will misunderstand.”

Vincent: “—. The escaped prisoners from the island shall be granted amnesty for their hard work regarding this incident. This was also petitioned by Gustav Morello, governor of the Gladiator Island.”

Prompted by Medium, Vincent quietly announced the fate of the Pleiades Battalion.

The sudden crisis of the Battalion—initially brought up by Vincent, was directly handled by the latter, leading to intense emotional fluctuations.

Subaru, trembling with anger, glared at Vincent,

Subaru: "Y-you sure enjoy toying with people over already resolved issues…!"

Cecilus: "Ah, I feel you, I feel you deeply! His Excellency has that tendency. Now that I think about it, Chisha also used to do such mean things often. Is this just something that intelligent people commonly do?"

Beatrice: "Speaking of resolved issues, you spoke of getting back at the Emperor, Cecilus, but Subaru has already handled that on his own a while ago, I suppose."

Cecilus: "Whaaat?!"

Cecilus's voice cracked, and Beatrice stuck out her tongue in response. It felt refreshing to finally break his arrogant pace.

However, Cecilus then pondered,

Cecilus: "I'll have to hear the details later to soothe my shock at missing such an interesting event, but now I'm curious. If that's the case, why did you let me bring you to His Excellency, Boss? You could have just brushed me off like Tanza-san did, so why?"

Subaru: "Well…"

In response to Cecilus's question, Subaru hesitated to answer, glancing at Vincent.

Even without seeing his reaction, Beatrice could tell what Subaru was thinking. Over the past few days, Subaru had been actively interacting with Beatrice and the Pleiades Battalion, but there were a few people he could not bring himself to face.

—Vincent, Yorna, and the members of Priscilla's camp.

Given Subaru's excessive sense of responsibility, it was only natural that he would feel this way about them. However, Subaru did not think it was acceptable to leave things as they were.

Therefore, it was convenient for him to be brought here by Cecilus under the pretense of being forced to.

Because this way—

Vincent: "You've finally shown yourself before me… no, before me."

Subaru: "Abel…"

Subaru's dilemma, his hesitation, and his various emotions.

They were apparently all too clear to Vincent Vollachia, known as the Wise Emperor. Subaru was certainly overwhelmed by his sharp gaze.

However, funneling strength into the hand he had linked with Beatrice's, Subaru resolved himself to clash directly against that pressure, and opened his mouth.

Subaru: "Abel, I'm sor—"

Vincent: "—A moment ago, you had chastised me over bringing up a resolved issue."

Subaru: "Eh…"

Vincent: "But, if you were to ask me, it is you who continues to touch upon resolved issues."

After having the wind knocked out of his sails, Subaru blinked upon being told thus.

For a moment, he struggled to comprehend the meaning behind those words. However, the instant he understood them, Subaru's expression underwent a sudden upheaval.

It became a jumble of anger and sorrow; to be precise, it was fury.

Subaru: “A resolved issue… what, what the hell do you think you’re saying?!”

Vincent: “Currently, that is the bulk of the problem that weighs upon you. If such is the case for your atonement towards the gladiators, then the same applies to your attitude concerning myself and Yorna Mishigure. More than anything—”

Subaru: “STOP!!”

As Vincent attempted to continue, Subaru stood up from the sofa, and tried to fiercely approach him to make him cease his words.

But, in front of Subaru as he tried to do so, a third party intervened. —It was Cecilus.

Having removed his buttocks from the desk, he stepped in front of Subaru as the latter tried to approach the Vollachian Emperor, and hindered his advance.

Subaru: “Don’t get in my way, Ceci! Didn’t you want to see me punch Abel?!”

Cecilus: “Indeed yes, that’s right. But that was a matter of wanting to see a Sparka between Boss and His Excellency, I’m not interested in seeing a dull, impulsive match.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Both had returned to their original heights, and they confronted each other in positions that were no longer that of children.

But, in this standoff between Subaru and Cecilus, Beatrice did not experience her usual feeling of wanting to take Subaru’s side. Rather, she supported Cecilus—no, she supported Vincent, who met Subaru head-on with words that he needed to hear.

His phrasing was nothing but harsh, and even though there were plenty of other ways to put it, deliberately choosing words that went along with blood and pain was loathsome, but—

Vincent: "—Priscilla's death, is already a matter of the past."

Subaru: "ABEL—!!"

At that assertion, Subaru's voice became potent with rage, and he glared at Vincent. But, receiving the gaze from beyond Cecilus, Vincent made not even the slightest of movements.

The ones to stiffen their expressions at Subaru's pitifulness, were those of the female faction, Beatrice, Spica, and Medium.

Subaru: "Priscilla was your… she was your sister, wasn't she? And yet, you're…"

Vincent: "Indeed. She was my sister. Clever and impudent since our younger years, she ultimately lost her life without ever having remedied those aspects of her personality… Just like with Chisha, Priscilla's loss has certainly borne a wound within myself. I shan't hide it."

Slowly shaking his head, Vincent placed his hand over his chest as he spilled those words.

Thereupon, behind his pride as Emperor, it was clear that Vincent had concealed his own worry towards his sister, and anguish regarding her passing.

Subaru lamented the fact that he had yielded such things within Vincent, and that was exactly why he had not shown his face until now, not knowing what he ought to say.

However—

Vincent: "—This is something that belongs to me. There is no room for your involvement."

Subaru: "…"

Vincent: "They are the things between me and Priscilla. Do you seek the right to place your fingers upon even that?"

Subaru: "N-no… that's, that's wrong. That isn't the case. It isn't the case, but…”

At Vincent’s eloquence, Subaru’s anger was doused as if with water, and, unable to find the right words to say, his gaze began to wander.

As Subaru did so, Vincent still did not halt his speech.

Likely, that was a questioning that could not have taken form without the time cultivated between Subaru and Vincent within the Empire, unbeknownst to Beatrice and the others.

Vincent quietly continued with the following. That was—

Vincent: “Natsuki Subaru. —In the end, what words did Priscilla speak to you?”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “If they were words of malediction, then I shall undertake that which was left within you. However, if that is not so… then, they are the fruits of the relationship between you and Priscilla.”

Subaru: “…”

Vincent: “Take the parting gift bestowed onto you by my sister, and make it into your very flesh and blood. —That, is the resolution to the issue.”

What words ought he to say? What ought he do to atone?

Such various questions and misgivings, the impatience of being unable to remain at a standstill, and the self-punishing thoughts of needing to suffer were the foundation of Subaru’s actions over these past few days.

And, Vincent declared that the very genesis of that foundation was conflicting.

Subaru: “Priscilla, said…”

Vincent: “She said?”

Subaru: “…She said, that I was a true Knight.”

Vincent: “In that case, that is the entirety of what Priscilla has bestowed upon you. —It was a great service, Natsuki Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

At that phrase, Subaru’s expression crumbled.

The expression dominated by indignation and sorrow was washed away, and sprouting out from behind were emotions of vigor akin to water ceaselessly overflowing from a boiling pot.

Emotions that he had deliberately not been facing ever since the morning when he witnessed Priscilla’s death.

Beatrice: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “Bea… trice… I’m, I’m…”

Beatrice: “It’s alright, in fact. Betty fully… Betty and Emilia, and everybody else fully understand, I suppose.”

Nestling close to Subaru’s side as he stood stock still, Beatrice grabbed him by the hand and nodded. At Beatrice’s words, Subaru could not bear the overflowing tears as his face contorted.

And then at last, for the first time since that morning, Beatrice was confident that her voice had finally reached Subaru.

Beatrice: “I’m sorry, in fact.”

Suddenly, immediately after witnessing Subaru fall to his knees.

The kneeling Subaru embraced Beatrice from the front. At the frail strength of that clinging embrace, Beatrice gently hugged Subaru in return.

Cecilus: “—Now it may be different than punching His Excellency but with this I got to see a fine climax.”

Beatrice: “Some things are better left unsaid, I suppose.”

Cecilus: “Apologies.”

After speaking that unnecessary comment, Cecilus made a gesture of shutting his mouth with his finger, and winked. In the back, Medium, who was hugging Spica, was moved by Subaru’s tears and also began to cry.

Then, as Subaru buried his face into Beatrice’s chest as he sobbed, he was unable to see something that Beatrice witnessed.

Vincent: “…”

The figure of the Vollachian Emperor, who had caused Subaru to collapse, wearing a slightly pleased look on his face.

Beatrice, who had only been acquainted with him for a short while, also understood. —This was a face that Vincent Vollachia, known as the Wise Emperor, seldom showed to anybody.

Esteeming the person who shed tears in his stead during his dearest sister’s final moments, such was the kind of expression it was.

Chapter 6:
Departure

1

—With those blue eyes, they came to witness numerous choices.

Born from an empty, barren space, that ego was drawn towards a splendent light. Basking in that warmth, it slowly began to outline the shape of its own form.

Initially pushed aside, an innate tenderness prevented them from staying away, and gradually, their presence came to be tolerated.

Before long, rather than being merely tolerated, a hand was proactively extended to them. Now recognized as a new being, they were bestowed with a new name.

Rejection and compromise, conflict and acceptance, trust and reliance, then permission and forgiveness—.

He came to make numerous choices.

Countless choices, innumerable choices, limitless choices, each were a product of his own very will. And sometimes from up close, sometimes from far away, sometimes transcending all physical and spiritual distances, they bore witness to it all.

Not all of those choices, however, led him to the place of his longing.

Even then, he did everything in his power in order to continue choosing.

With nothing and no one to rely on, they looked at that figure as their example. Even if the culmination of their strenuous efforts were to lead them to a sorrowful outcome, they would continue moving forward.

What was so strange about admiring that likeness and way of being?

—They, too, must make their own choices.

His rejection and compromise, his conflict and acceptance, his trust and reliance, as well as his permission and forgiveness, as someone fortunate enough to have experienced those things, they wanted to walk the same path.

Be it errors or grave mistakes, this body had committed far too many of them.

Not to mask, cover, forget, or overlook these everlasting scars, but to ensure that they would remember them.

Not for the purpose of being right, but trusting in that desire to be righteous, the very same way he chose his path.

In order to ensure that his—Natsuki Subaru's decision to choose them might not become a mistake.

???: "—Never did I expect you to be the one who had requested a conversation with me."

Not a physical, but an emotional strain was required to push that door open. On the other side, a man with raven-black hair sat at an imposing desk, sifting through a large stack of papers, and spoke those words.

With those sharp, black eyes, he too had made many choices, and it was by choosing the one path he could amongst many that he now held his current position.

All of it was the result of the man's own choices.

And thus—

Black-haired man: "As you can see, I am busy. That… Medium O'Connell spoke on your behalf, which is why I have taken some time, but I cannot spare much more. If there is something you desire, I shall provide it if it is commensurate with your efforts. However—"

Cutting off his words there, the man looked up from the stack of papers towards them. Many thoughts and ideas ran through the pitch-black eyes of the wise Monarch.

And so, fixedly staring through the one who stood at the door, he opened his thin lips, and,

Black-haired man: “I have no words to offer regarding his current state. I cannot make any effort to visit him, nor should I. —That is, unless it is what you wish for.”

Being asked that, they shook their head.

There was something they wanted to ask of the man in front of them, but it did not concern the one he spoke of directly.

There was most likely nothing they could do for him at that moment. The same went for the others around him. Therefore, their reason for having come here lay somewhere else.

Certainly, he would have chosen to stand up once again.

That they came here was in preparation for when he would stand up again.

So that when he chose to rise up, they too would be in a position to make a proper choice—

Black-haired man: “Then, what is it that you desire?”

Being stared at by the man’s black eyes, they met that gaze with their own blue eyes, and paused for a moment.

Most likely, within this vast Empire, those who witnessed the most of his choices were their own blue eyes, that kind girl’s pale blue eyes, and the black eyes of the man before them.

Hence, they spoke to him, who understood the weight of choice.

And—

???: “—Uu!”

Thus, that life born from an empty ego, set forth to make a choice of her own.

2

—On the day that Subaru and the rest of the Emilia Camp were to depart from the Vollachian Empire, it had been raining since the morning in Vollachia, which usually had endlessly long stretches of sunny days.

Subaru: “Really, I hate the Vollachian Empire…”

Seeing the climate of the Empire, which could not even send them off in high spirits, Subaru’s lips spilled that out, unable to grow accustomed to this country from start to end.

But then again, though he hated the Vollachian Empire, the people he had encountered in this country had not been so bad.

Rather, that could have been called the worst aspect of the time he had spent in this country, but—.

???: “Husband-kun, I truly am indebted to you! Please, be well in the Kingdom too!”

Subaru: “What are you saying, Flop-san? I’m the one who’s indebted to you, and even now that debt continues to increase. I haven’t even done a single thing to return the favor…”

Flop: “Hahaha, you mustn’t say such foolish things. Just how much fortune do you think my sister and I shared thanks to the things you did for us, Husband-kun? Both Medium and I have found spouses. It’s a matter of great celebration!”

Saying that, Flop firmly struck his own slim chest.

While Subaru was busy losing heart, Flop had displayed his manliness by magnificently succeeding in courting Taritta, so Subaru found himself feeling a mix of surprise and respect.

Since Taritta, who originally was only attracted to good looks like her older sister, Mizelda, seemed to have been charmed by Flop’s humanity, Subaru was glad to hear that everything came together quite well.

Towards both Flop and Taritta, Subaru was naught but thankful.

Flop: “Husband-kun, you have my gratitude.”

Subaru: “…”

Even so, being embraced by Flop from the front, Subaru’s breath was taken away. As Subaru unconsciously tensed his body, Flop spoke in his usual tone—no, in a voice filled with more emotion than usual,

Flop: “That day, when you appeared before me and Medium, carrying Wife-san as she was seated, I thought it was an unbelievably fateful encounter. And, it appears I wasn’t mistaken. Under a distant sky, I’ll be wishing happiness upon you and the people who are precious to you.”

Subaru: “Ah…”

Flop: “If you ever come to the Empire again, I want you to contact me whenever. Conversely, if I ever happen to go to the Kingdom, I’ll definitely be counting on you! I’d absolutely love to get your help!”

After letting go of Subaru’s body, Flop O’Connell smiled as he always did, radiating as brightly as the rays of the midday sun.

From their very first encounter to this farewell, his presence, which had not once lost its cheerfulness, caused Subaru’s heart to tremble greatly.

In the Vollachian Empire, the first person he had met was the veiled Emperor, followed by the People of Shudraq, who had continued to fight alongside them across the whole journey. —However, the people that Natsuki Subaru had been most blessed to encounter within the Vollachian Empire were undoubtedly the O’Connell siblings, Flop and Medium.

He now truly felt that once again, very, very strongly—

Subaru: “—Yeah, I’m thankful to you as well, Flop-san! I love you!”

Including his highest tier of gratitude within the Vollachian Empire, Subaru responded with a smile.

3

???: “…I think you should stop saying “I love you” to everyone so lightly. It makes everything you say seem frivolous.”

Subaru: “No, I don’t say it to just anyone. Only to those I truly love.”

???: “Is that so? To Emilia-san and Beatrice-chan too?”

Subaru: “I tell Beako morning, noon, and night, but it’s a little harder to say to Emilia-tan… ah, but I might’ve said it to Nee-sama.”

???: “Hah?”

Subaru: “Sorry, that was in the heat of the moment, but I meant it.”

With her light blue eyes glaring sharply at him, Subaru shrank back, apologizing profusely.

Despite having just shared a tearful farewell with Flop, the sudden shift was jarring. Nonetheless, Subaru managed to keep his eyes dry, even after the emotional goodbye to his friend.

Subaru: “A man can’t cry that easily… a man can only cry in front of others three times in his life.”

???: “Is that so?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right… Hmm? Shouldn’t you be asking what those three times are?”

???: “Your expression seemed like you were begging to be asked, which was unpleasant…”

Subaru: “Isn’t that a bit too harsh?!”

Subaru raised his voice in protest at the extreme statement, prompting Rem to sigh. Yet, despite this casual banter with Rem, Subaru felt a sense of relief.

For the past few days, the tension between Subaru, Rem, and their companions had been palpable, largely due to Subaru's issues. He had probably, most likely, undoubtedly caused them considerable worry, so he was determined to change his attitude and make amends through his actions moving forward.

Subaru: "How about you, Rem? Did you have a proper conversation with Katya-san?"

Rem: "I can't say it went perfectly… but yes. She said she'll send letters. I'd like to send one as well, but I'm not sure what to write."

Subaru: "It's a letter to a friend, right? I guess maybe something along the lines of updating each other on your current situations, asking "How are you doing?" and stuff like that. But I've never exchanged letters with friends myself, so I'm not sure."

Rem: "Would something so trivial be okay?"

Subaru: "I think so, yeah."

Subaru answered Rem's uncertainty, brazenly imagining Katya's thoughts.

She was Todd's fiancée, and as someone who had witnessed his final moments, Subaru had not had the chance to properly sit down and talk with Katya. Even so, Katya had stayed with Rem after her kidnapping and became her friend, and for that, Subaru felt nothing but gratitude and goodwill toward her.

Subaru believed that what Katya expected from her correspondence with Rem was not for some exciting dramatic stories to be shared.

Subaru: "What's important is the proof that you're connected, that you care about each other. I think what's crucial is conveying that even if you're not within arm's reach, you still have a place in a corner of each other's minds."

Rem: "…"

Subaru: "D-did that sound weird or creepy?"

Rem: "—No. For once, I actually agree with you."

Rem slowly shook her head in response to Subaru's hesitant question. Then, with a soft smile, she continued,

Rem: "As you said, it's not something to be anxious about. If I were in Katya-san's position, I wouldn't expect anything special from her letters. Just knowing that her letter reached me would be enough."

Subaru: "Exactly."

Rem's reply and nod made Subaru smile back at her and give her a thumbs-up. Although Rem ignored that gesture, she walked beside Subaru without any sign of discomfort.

Considering how their new relationship in the Empire had started, this dramatic change was nothing short of miraculous.

Subaru: "…"

And so, having said their respective goodbyes, Subaru and Rem walked side by side toward their destination—there too, someone awaited with whom they had to exchange farewells.

The one with whom Subaru and Rem both needed to talk was—

Subaru: "—Spica."

Spica: "Uau! Eu!"

Spica turned around at the call, her face lighting up as she saw them. Her golden hair, tied up behind her head to look like a tail, swayed as she fiercely sprinted toward Subaru and Rem.

Subaru spread his arms wide to catch her, ready to embrace her—

Rem: "Whoa."

Subaru: "…Huh, you went to her?!"

Next to Subaru, who had struck out, Rem caught Spica as she leapt into her arms.

“Eu,” Spica cooed, rubbing her cheek against Rem. At first, Rem was surprised, but she then smiled warmly, stroking Spica’s head in response to the affectionate gesture.

Watching the two, Subaru sighed and clasped his hands behind his head.

Subaru: “You’re still clinging to Rem, huh? If I did the same thing, I’m sure I’d get a really nasty look from Rem.”

Rem: “Hah? Why are you suddenly stating the obvious?”

Subaru: “See? This is what I’m talking about! Spica, help me out here!”

Spica: “Uu, uu! Au, aau!”

Subaru: “See, even Spica is giving me that look… wait, is she angry at me? Spica, are you siding with Rem? I’m all alone here!”

Still clinging to Rem’s waist, Spica glared sharply at Subaru. Seeing this, Subaru slumped his shoulders, and Rem was astonished, wondering what he was doing.

Subaru could not help but scratch his head and feel oddly reassured by the interaction between Rem and Spica.

Subaru: “…”

Thinking back, the tumultuous days in the Vollachian Empire had begun with Subaru, Rem, and Spica.

Up to this point, they had walked alongside one another with a rock-paper-scissors-like power balance where Subaru was weak to Rem, Rem was weak to Spica, and Spica was weak to Subaru.

The relationship between the three of them had changed shape before they knew it, and today would mark yet another change.

After all—

Subaru: “You don’t want to be separated from Rem, do you? Why don’t you forget about staying in the Empire and come back to the Kingdom with us?”

Spica: “Uu!”

Subaru: “Oh, so you’ve finally come around! Yeah, I agree! The Empire sucks!”

Rem: “She’s shaking her head. Please don’t try to twist Spica-chan’s will.”

Rem glared at Subaru with narrowed eyes, making him stiffen his cheeks and go silent. Spica, resting her back against Rem, nodded vigorously with a serious look on her face.

Her expression made it clear that she had no intention of changing her mind.

It was a decision that Subaru found incredibly difficult to accept.

—Spica had decided to stay in the Vollachian Empire.

She would part ways with Subaru and the others returning to the Kingdom, remaining in the Empire to fulfill a certain duty.

This was the plan that Spica had discussed with those around her and ultimately chose as her path moving forward, during the time when Subaru had been engrossed in the Pleiades Battalion’s Sparka.

Subaru: “You want to stay in Vollachia and send all the undead revived by the Great Disaster back to Od Lagna through Star Eating… the idea itself is something I want to support, really.”

Countless undead had been resurrected by the Witch, Sphinx, and utilized as the spearhead of the Great Disaster.

Even after the Great Disaster had ended, those who had not been destroyed had fled and still remained within the Empire. Spica had decided that it was her duty to completely devour every last one of those undead.

However—

Subaru: “Unlike before, the undead can’t revive infinitely anymore. Even without Star Eating, defeating them should be enough to get rid of them. You don’t have to do this, Spica.”

Spica: “Aa, au. Uu! Uu, uu!”

Subaru: “Then the souls used to resurrect the dead won’t return to where they belong, you say? Well… I suppose you intuitively understand that better than I do, but are you sure about this?”

Spica: “Uu!”

Subaru tried to persuade her, but Spica firmly nodded, her face showing her unshakable resolve.

They had gone through this exchange nearly ten times already, with Subaru trying every possible approach to change Spica’s mind, but he had yet to achieve the result he desired.

What frustrated Subaru was that Abel, who had been consulted about Spica’s decision, took advantage of the fact that Subaru had his hands full with the Sparka and had managed to completely convince her.

Of course, even if Subaru had been consulted during his narrow-minded state, he doubted he could have engaged in a positive and constructive discussion for Spica’s sake.

But still—

Subaru: “I can’t stand it… I can’t stand how he always gets everything to go his way behind the scenes.”

Rem: “I don’t think it’s fair to make it sound like everything is Abel-san’s fault. This is Spica-chan’s decision, and she first consulted Medium-san about it.”

Subaru: “I know! I know, but still, it’s hard not to feel frustrated…!”

Rem slowly shook her head at Subaru, who could only speak from an emotional standpoint.

However, Rem's expression also could not hide the loneliness she felt, as she too, just like Subaru, had been one of those deeply involved in discussing Spica's future with her.

It might have sounded presumptuous to say this, but Spica had become a significant part of the current Rem, whose Memories had not yet returned. In truth, separating from Spica was likely much harder for her than for him.

And yet—

Rem: "Why is it okay for you and me to act on our own thoughts and desires, but not for Spica-chan…? She's been worrying about us all this time."

Subaru: "Rem…"

Gently stroking Spica's head, Rem showed respect for the girl's significant decision.

Unlike Subaru, who could not accept it, she had already made up her mind to see Spica off properly. He admired her resolve, and he understood Rem's point of view, of course.

Subaru: "But, it's still painful…"

Even if he was told he was a poor sport, a sore loser, overprotective, meddlesome, or creepy, it would not change the fact that it hurt.

Spica's decision was undeniably impressive, but if Subaru were to be honest, while he wanted the souls of the dead used in the Great Disaster to find peace, he was more concerned about not wanting Spica to do something dangerous.

In his currently heartbroken state of mind, Subaru wished he could put all his loved ones in a box and carry them with him everywhere.

Subaru: "But, neither Spica nor Rem would fit in my box…"

Rem: “…Why are you talking about boxes all of a sudden?”

Subaru: “Boxes don’t matter! What’s important right now is Spica, not some boxes. Right?”

Rem: “But you’re the one who talked about boxes… Abel-san is taking this matter seriously too. That’s why he’s going to assign the two strongest people in this country to accompany Spica-chan.”

Subaru: “But Ceci is just strong and nothing else! He’ll have a bad influence on Spica’s education!”

Subaru loudly insisted that Rem’s rebuttal was not a valid one.

When Spica had decided to embark on a journey to hunt down the undead, Abel had suggested that she be accompanied by Cecilus Segmunt and Arakiya.

Certainly, having such powerful companions would alleviate any concerns about Spica’s safety in situations where combat power would be needed.

Subaru: “But, that’s all. The demerits of their personalities outweigh their strengths, and it feels like Abel just pawned off a problem onto Spica.”

Rem: “You’re overthinking it. Arakiya-san… the Spirit she absorbed was the source of the power to resurrect the dead. According to Abel-san, that gave her the ability to sense where the fleeing undead are hiding…”

Subaru: “I have trauma from Arakiya too! She got me so many times with her water! Ceci, who seems like he can communicate but actually can’t, and Arakiya, who looks like she can’t communicate and really can’t… Now I’m really starting to get anxious! Spica! I can’t let you become a beast tamer—”

Subaru’s words were abruptly cut off.

It was because Spica, who had separated from Rem, suddenly jumped into Subaru’s chest. Caught off guard, Subaru reflexively caught her light body, and as he looked down, he saw Spica gazing up at him.

And then—

Spica: “Uau.”

With that single word and Spica’s smile, Subaru found himself unable to continue speaking.

Subaru: “…Abel, that fucking bastard. He went and talked things over with Spica while I was busy. He really is a sneaky, dirty scumbag.”

Rem: “That’s going too far. Let’s just say he’s underhanded, cunning, and has some flaws in his personality.”

Subaru: “Hey, isn’t it pretty much what I just said?”

Rem: “…It’s not like I want to be separated from Spica-chan, either.”

Subaru complained in a weak, rasping voice filled with resentment, and Rem, hiding the tremble in her own voice, responded.

Realizing that Rem’s feelings of loneliness were being transmitted to him, Subaru swallowed his own weakness. Then, he pulled Spica closer in his arms and, hugging her tightly,

Subaru: “Listen, don’t rely on Abel or Ceci. If you run into trouble, turn to Medium-san and Flop-san. Let them help you write letters, too.”

Spica: “Uu.”

Subaru: “It’s important to have a purpose and a goal, but don’t push yourself too hard. Take it slow, at your own pace. Rushing and doing something reckless is the most dangerous thing. That’s my golden rule.”

Spica: “Aa, uu!”

Subaru: “There’s no strict deadline or fixed date for this. So, neither you nor I can say exactly when, but even so… I'll be waiting."

Spica: "Uu uu, eau, aua, aau."

Subaru: "…You've decided how to use your power properly. I'm proud of you, Spica. —I have to learn from you, too."

He truly, sincerely thought so.

Spica had chosen to use the terrifying Authority of Gluttony correctly, according to her own will. Using that power, she would help heal the deep wounds inflicted upon the Empire.

This was Spica's way of breaking away from her abhorrent past, from Louis Arneb.

Spica: "—Uau!"

Subaru was not sure if his heartfelt admiration had reached her.

But, Spica quickly spun around, slipped out of Subaru's arms, and grabbing his hand, started to pull him along. Dragged by her momentum, Subaru was forced to walk.

As she pulled Subaru along, Spica extended her free hand to Rem,

Spica: "Eu!"

Rem: "…Yes, Spica-chan."

Called with a smile, Rem took Spica's outstretched hand.

With Spica in the middle, holding both Subaru and Rem's hands, the three of them started walking together. —Despite all the time they had spent together, they had never walked like this before, side by side.

Honestly, Subaru had not thought such a thing would ever be possible. But, on this last day in the Empire, they were doing it.

Spica: "Uu!"

In high spirits, Spica swayed her body as she leaned on Subaru and

Rem’s hands. Over Spica’s head, the gazes of Subaru and Rem met.

And then, out of nowhere, they both burst into laughter.

Subaru: “Pfft.”

Rem: “Hehe.”

Spica: “Aau, uau!”

The three of them, including Spica, laughed as they walked toward the meeting place.

This, was the end of their story in the Vollachia Empire, that the three of them had started together.

4

???: "—The girl in question shall part with the troublesome title of Sin Archbishop. It ought to be an adequate weight off your shoulders, too."

Subaru: "You…"

As Subaru patted the neck of Patrasche, who had been loading the dragon carriage with the luggage, of which there was far too little when considering the number of events that had happened since laboriously rushing all the way to the Empire, His Excellency the Vollachian Emperor declared so with a self-important expression.

After taking the trouble to come out and bid him farewell, the undiminished snideness in his attitude was awe-inspiring.

Subaru: "I'm begging you now, don't immediately get decapitated by a rebellion and let the government change. I'm tired of running about everywhere in order to save your ass."

Vincent: "Fool, your efforts are no longer required. You had better return to the Kingdom at once."

Subaru: "This bastard…"

Vincent: "There ought to be a duty you ought to fulfill. In that, you absolutely must not err."

Subaru: "…"

It was a snide remark that Abel spoke as naturally as he breathed, but his words were also pregnant with nuance that was not so terribly meager.

He was a bit worried about whether an Emperor who required such difficult-to-understand subtleties to be picked up on would be able to manage the Empire properly from here on out or not, but—

Subaru: “Well, I guess you’ll be fine if you have Medium-san and the others.”

Having heard the prophecy of the forthcoming Great Disaster and the would-be lost Emperor, Abel had devoted his official and personal days to that purpose without sparing time for personal affairs.

That warning had come undone, and from here on, Abel would spend his days as Vincent Vollachia, who, for the first time, would be acting as an Emperor who was not tied down by anything, no longer spending his time preparing for the Great Disaster.

At the outset, he might have been at a bit of a loss, but, surely, he would grow to be able to take those in his surroundings into consideration.

As proof of that—

Vincent: “Regarding the peril on this occasion, that girl shouldered a great duty. In addition, she has promised to endeavor to clear away anguish in the Empire hereafter. —She shall be bestowed with prestige that rivals her ill repute.”

Subaru: “…”

Having backed Spica’s decision to remain the Empire, those were Abel’s true intentions.

Their story in the Empire had begun with the trio of Subaru, Rem, and Spica. —As the first one to have intervened in that story, this was quite a characteristic way for Abel to pay Subaru back.

No matter how many words he exhausted, the fact that Spica’s past self was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony would not change, and for that fact, there were many people who would reproach and reject her.

They could not deny people who harbored such negative emotions regarding the matter, nor was it something they should do.

Even so, if the individual girl known as Spica wanted to affirm her existence, to affirm that she lived, if she wanted that to take form, she had no choice but to build it up.

—No choice but to build up a great renown that exceeded her ill repute, such that Spica would be allowed to live as Spica.

Vincent: “Remember this, Natsuki Subaru. The Sword Wolves of the Sacred Vollachian Empire never forget the wounds they bear. Whether those are wounds of abhorrence, or of friendship, this remains true.”

Subaru: “Abel…”

Vincent: “If you have anything to say, have at it. You, and those who share in your path, are equal to the pack of Sword Wolves.”

Through that comment, Subaru felt that Abel—that Vincent Vollachia, a man who would absolutely never bow to others, nor permit the act of playing up to him, had revealed his heart of hearts.

As Subaru experienced a quiver from the very foundation of his heart at that sensation, Abel nodded,

Vincent: “It was a great service. —Along your journey, and then from tomorrow onwards, stride forth with firm steps upon the ground.”

Subaru: “…You too. Geez, I’m not gonna lend you a hand even if you fall over.”

Vincent: “Fool.”

Upon his mouth, as he spoke ill of Subaru, was present a smile that was certainly distinct from that of ridicule.

Witnessing that—

Subaru: “…”

Turning his back, Subaru faced the dragon carriage, and began to tread forth.

As Subaru walked with the gaze of the Emperor upon his back, Emilia and the others awaited him beside the dragon carriage. Gazing at the faces who had shown up to see them off, standing upon the path towards it, at the figures of the Pleiades Battalion who were naturally among them, Subaru slightly gulped down his breath.

Subaru: "…"

The Sparka that had begun with Subaru's entreaty, his act of making amends to nine hundred and thirty-one people; despite Subaru pleading that it had yet to be completed with the six hundred and seventy-three hits that still remained, none of them had lent him an ear.

All of them were now lined up here, meeting the gaze of Subaru, who was all bark and no bite—

Subaru: "—Ah."

—The lined-up Pleiades Battalion all raised up their arms in succession, and their brusque hands decorated Subaru's path like a hanamichi.

Understanding the intention behind that, Subaru lifted his face. So as to not let the things welling up in his eyes start to spill out, he endured, endured, endured, endured, and then—

Subaru: "I love you, all of you!"

That which had caused Rem to get mad at him before, Subaru shouted out again as he broke out into a sprint.

With the many hands reaching out from left and right, Subaru moved to overlap his own hands. With a clap, the sound of hand striking hand rang out, and persisted ceaselessly in quick succession like the sound of rainfall.

It was not just hands clapping against hands; there were also some hands that struck Subaru's body. Being pushed and jostled and knocked about by those, those who knew Natsuki Schwartz, while likely forgetting about the six hundred and seventy-three hits that remained, assisted in Subaru's Sparka.

???: "In my capacity, I have enjoyed myself quite a bit."

Four large, bulky hands clapped him on the back.

???: "Thanks to you, the mere son of a miller got to live the dream!"

With a man who was far more stout and supple than his appearance might suggest, he struck hands.

???: "Goddammit goddammit! Thank ya, Schwartz!"

Against the tail of the lizardman who cried out with trembling tongue and tears in his eyes, he bumped his fist.

???: "Never forget… we're… we're your comrades…! "

While passing each other, receiving a powerful fist to the side of his face, he clutched his jaw and nodded with a "Got it!".

And then—

???: "—Schwartz-sama."

Making it through after being jostled about by everybody, he proceeded to the kimono-clad girl who awaited him at the end of it all. Together with Yorna, who was likewise clad in a kimono, they had been waiting for Subaru.

Coming to a halt before those two, Subaru first locked eyes with Yorna.

Subaru: "Yorna-san, thanks for everything. Also…"

Yorna: "You do not need to give any sort of apology. The matter of that girl, is a matter between her and myself."

Subaru: "…"

Yorna: "Additionally, you may come visit us at any time. For you, we shall give a warm welcome.”

Seeing the mistress of the Demon City give a gentle smile, Subaru nodded deeply with a “Yeah”.

Then, he once again turned to face the girl standing along with Yorna, Tanza—

Subaru: “You called me Schwartz-sama again, now didn’t you?”

Tanza: “—. For me, that is the name I am most accustomed to calling you by.”

Subaru: “For me, too, it just doesn’t feel right unless you call me that.”

A smile emerging on his face, Subaru crouched down before her.

Before, their gazes were at the same height, but now their heights would not align unless he bent his knees like this. Now that they had returned to this height difference, he had wanted to speak to her with the same line of sight.

After all, in the Empire, Tanza was Subaru’s unwavering, indispensable benefactor.

Subaru: “—Next time, without a doubt, we will not lose.”

Tanza: “—? What?”

Subaru: “That’s the magic spell you cast on me. Because I had that, I didn’t give up.”

Blinking her large, round eyes, Tanza searched her own memories for those same words. However, no matter how hard she searched, she would not be able to find them.

After all, the humongous debt of gratitude that Subaru would never be able to repay, no longer existed anywhere outside of Subaru.

That was fine. Whether that had occurred in this reality or not, it was fine.

That unfading gratitude and joy was certainly present within Subaru, therefore—.

Subaru: “I love you, Tanza.”

Tanza: “…If you keep going in such a manner, you will most certainly regret it, Schwartz-sama.”

Subaru: “Rem told me something similar. If there had been more time, you two probably would’ve gotten along well… in exchange for that, would I die from your cold stares?!”

Tanza: “Could you not get so fired up like that, and could you not die all on your own…? Besides, I believe that your attitude of treating this like a lifetime farewell will end up strangling you later, Schwartz-sama.”

Subaru: “Hm? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tanza: “You will find out before long.”

As Subaru tilted his head, Tanza would not tell him the answer.

Only, she lightly clapped her hand against Subaru’s proffered one, and after contributing to the Sparka like her other comrades in the Battalion, tenderly clutching his hand with both of her own,

Tanza: “Thank you for allowing me to stay in your care for a period longer than initially anticipated. Please, be of good health.”

Subaru: “That long valediction, there’s a shorter way to phrase it, you know.”

Tanza: “I will not say it. Please return to your home.”

Parting hands with the cold Tanza, Subaru wryly smiled, and used his hand to give her a pat on the head.

Subaru took the fact that she did not shake him off, and her attitude which left a bit of a mystery, as parting gifts from her.

And then—

???: “Uu!”

Before him as he turned around, Spica was waiting for him alongside Rem in front of the dragon carriage.

He had already spoken at length about being unable to let her go. Even so, once more, he was about to try to convey his feelings of wanting to take her home with him, but at Spica’s embrace, all of that was obstructed.

Tightly hugging Spica as she pounced on him, Subaru patted her on the head, and then looking up,

Subaru: “I’m really counting on you to take care of Spica, Ceci.”

Cecilus: “Alright, Boss!”

Hearing this response from the guarantor who, though reliable, caused inexhaustible worry, Subaru ultimately performed the final high-five with him.

After doing so, he turned around.

The faces lined up there, looking over all of them, Subaru took in a large breath.

And then—

Subaru: “May we someday meet again, everyone! —VICTORYYY!!”

Pleiades: “—VICTORYYY!!”

As Subaru thrust both of his arms to the sky and shouted that aloud, the voices of the Pleiades Battalion resounded.

At that vigor, those who did not know of the Battalion’s customs were greatly perturbed, and conversely, the members of the Battalion laughed and cried very much; that ridiculously noisy scene unfolded.

Vincent: “—To the very end, you remain an enormous fool whose irreverence knows no bounds.”

Indeed, to the extent that the Vollachian Emperor would make a comment, the scene of a ridiculously boisterous farewell, unfolded.

5

Subaru: “…I wonder if Spica will be okay. Can she manage without us?”

???: “You’ve been worrying nonstop, I suppose! There’s no need to be so concerned, in fact! That girl is thinking much more clearly than Subaru is right now, I suppose!”

In the dragon carriage on their way back, Subaru rested his chin on his hand and stared out the window, while Beatrice, sitting on his lap, tugged at his cheek and scolded him.

Subaru pursed his lips at Beatrice’s reprimand, but he could not argue back.

In fact, she was right. As Beatrice said, Spica had a more realistic outlook.

Taking her past as a Sin Archbishop seriously, Spica had taken action to shake off that infamous title. Even though it was the sin of another “her” she did not remember.

???: “You treated Spica-chan very coldly for a long time, so she had the chance to understand her position.”

???: “Oh, I see. Although the circumstances were what they were, Barusu is still as narrow-minded as ever, even toward a girl who is so attached to him.”

Subaru: “Ugh…”

Across from them, the Oni sisters were holding hands side by side and delivering scathing remarks with their sharp tongues.

These remarks pointed out Subaru’s past actions, leaving him with no room to argue. While it was heartwarming to see the sisters so in sync, it was hard for him to smile.

???: “Personally, I am reassured by her decision. In the first place, if we were to bring her with us, she would need to be locked in a box for crisis management…”

Subaru: “Is it just me, or does your box seem to serve a different purpose and feel much less comfortable than mine?”

???: “Who knows? Either way, the Empire and Anastasia’s camp are in collusion on this matter… I think this was the best possible outcome.”

???: “I don’t really get the complicated stuff, but if she finishes dealin’ with all the zombies, she’ll be able to come back from the Empire, right? If so, let’s hope she gets it done quickly.”

Garfiel’s straightforward attitude about looking forward to Spica’s return was something Subaru appreciated, especially compared to Otto’s strict realism.

Garfiel probably had his own feelings of dislike toward the Sin Archbishops, but—

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self also fought Captain ‘n the rest of y’all ‘n tried to kill ya. Like “double-dipping the Vinuere”, it can be a good thing to get a second chance, right?”

Subaru: “You’ve got a big heart. Unlike a certain someone…”

Otto: “Let me tell you, Natsuki-san and Garfiel’s so-called big hearts are more like irresponsibly wide open, if you ask me!”

Subaru and Garfiel bumped fists as Otto yelled in a loud voice.

It had been a while since Subaru had heard Otto’s voice with such energy. Finally free from the heavy responsibility of saving the Empire, Subaru was starting to feel like his old self again.

Of course, that did not mean his worries about his companions, or about being separated from Spica, had lessened in any way, but—

???: “—We’re in this together, after all.”

Emilia spoke softly to Subaru, who had narrowed his eyes in thought.

When Subaru turned toward the gentle touch of her hand, he found her soft amethyst eyes looking at him with such tenderness that his chest tightened.

No one had asked Subaru.

If he was alright now, if the depression had passed, or any of the usual questions.

He was feeling down, he was hurt, and he did not know if he would ever be okay again. They understood Subaru's feelings without needing to ask.

Subaru: "Thank you, Emilia. —For coming to save me."

Emilia: "Mhm."

Subaru: "Thank you, everyone. —For coming to save us."

Subaru expressed his gratitude to Emilia and everyone else, who had crossed the border and entered the land of carnage that was the Vollachia Empire to help him and the others.

Everyone responded to Subaru's thanks in their own way—

Subaru: "…"

There were some things he had lost.

Things that had slipped through his fingers, disappearing into a place beyond his reach.

It was her way of life, true to herself. Never once did she, or anything else, go as Subaru or anyone else wished. Until the very end, in every possible way.

Maybe that was why, even though he had so many regrets—

Subaru: "—Right now, I can't remember anything but your smiling face."

He mourned her, she who had etched her fearless and prideful self into Subaru's memories.

That was Natsuki Subaru's way of mourning her; a mix of heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for the one who had spent her final moments in conversation with him.

And—

Subaru: "…"

While blessed with companions who stood by his side, Subaru was concerned about the other dragon carriage heading towards the Kingdom—the camp of the late Priscilla and those who were left behind.

While Roswaal, who was riding in that carriage, was likely providing consultation regarding the future of Priscilla's Barielle Domain, Subaru's mind was focused on another issue.

That was—

Subaru: "—Al."

Al, who had been there during Priscilla's final moments, holding her until the very end.

While Subaru was engaged in Sparka and Abel was throwing himself into his work to honor his sister's memory, many tried to fill the void left by Priscilla's absence. But Al had continuously secluded himself in his room.

He had been so devastated by his loss that it seemed he might simply vanish. Now, he was on his way back to the Kingdom.

The reason Al was returning to the Kingdom was—

Al: "—Bro, I have a request. I heard a rumor about the Sage's Tower. Some say you can read the records of the dead inside the Tower. There's a Book I wanna read."

Subaru: “…Priscilla’s Book of the Dead.”

Subaru felt conflicted. Would obtaining that Book trample upon the wishes of Priscilla, who had departed so nobly?

Yet, having witnessed Al and Priscilla’s farewell and knowing the despair that followed for Al, Subaru wanted to help him.

And so—

Subaru: “Is it okay if I ask for your help again, Shaula?”

To once again make the pilgrimage to that Tower at the edge of the sea of sand, was the only way Subaru felt he could support Al without relying on Return by Death.

Interlude: Katya Aurélie

1

—The defeat of the Witch, Sphinx, at the Imperial Capital of Lupugana spelled the ultimate downfall of the Great Disaster.

The large-scale implementation of forbidden arts devised by the Witch was interrupted, and the dead who had been brought back to life by that twisted magic were all forced to remain in the land with a limited lifespan.

Those who had been resurrected against their will and forced to submit to the Witch's plans took the opportunity to turn themselves to dust and return to the whereabouts of the soul, but naturally, there were many who did not choose to do so.

Even if they had lost their lives and had become undead, they were still people of the Empire who knew the law of iron and blood.

Even if they had been revived through means beyond reason, so long as they could once again wield their swords, there would be many determined to uphold their will, regardless of whether they had life or not; indeed, the same fighting spirit was present among the forces surrounding the Fortified City.

However, in reality, the battle surrounding the Fortified City of Garkla was settled almost simultaneously with the conclusion of the Great Disaster, and the undead who had narrowly escaped being destroyed were forced to scatter and flee.

Just why had the hosts of undead abandoned the fight and chosen to flee? —It was due to the collapse of the front line caused by the absence of their commander, which led to the abandonment of the battle.

The people of the Empire, who did not fear death, would not deem it acceptable to squander their lives in a battle that was sure to be lost, even if they were members of an undead army.

As for why such a situation as the absence of a commander occurred—

???: “How, how could such a ridiculous turn of events ever come to fruition…?!”

Palladio spat out as he pulled at his own green hair, turning his gaze away from the crumbling formation.

This should have never happened. It should have never happened, but it did. It was all due to the absurdity that was at work in everything surrounding Palladio.

Given the role of commander of the great army of undead that had been sent to the Fortified City, Palladio sought to fulfill his duties as a respected member of the Vollachian Imperial Family.

However, Palladio’s strategies were constantly thwarted by the common people of the city, and the incompetence of the undead who did not follow orders properly compounded the difficulties, leading to a dire situation.

Of course, he had no intention of giving up. However, the liabilities accumulated through absurdity began to distort, and eventually, Palladio found himself in the unfortunate situation of having to flee.

—Nay, this was no matter of fleeing.

This was an honorable withdrawal and a strategic preparation in order to achieve victory. Otherwise, it would not have made sense for someone of the Vollachian Imperial Family, who had borne the blood of the esteemed Evil Eye Tribe, to have been subjected to such a fate.

Palladio: “What the hell is the “Witch of Greed”…?! Is this the ultimate result of all the grandiloquence meant to impress me…?!”

What flashed through Palladio’s mind was the loathsome entity who had first collapsed amidst the accumulated liabilities. It was the anger towards the white-haired Witch who, having joined under

Palladio's command and nearly turning the tide of battle, irresponsibly abandoned her role and then vanished.

Everything up until her unleashing a decisive move to annihilate the Fortified City by casting a spell to cause a star to fall from the sky had been fine.

However, that was nullified by interference from the Imperial Capital, and to make matters worse, it was followed by a fierce counterattack from those harboring flames in their eyes.

As far as Palladio's Evil Eye could see, all the living who had been holed up in the Fortified City—even the helpless refugees were imbued with flames, carrying weapons, and pushing back the undead.

It had occurred immediately after that. The Witch of Greed vanished into dust without even attempting to resolve the situation.

Witch: "—Ah, yes, that is right. I, am Sphinx…"

In the end, it was infuriating that the Witch, who disappeared without even glancing back, left those words behind. Why did the Witch leave with such a satisfied expression?

He could not understand a single thing. On top of that, Palladio was then left at a disadvantage.

Palladio: "Damn it, damn it, damnitdamnitdamnitdamnitdamniiit…!"

While spewing out curses as if he were vomiting blood, Palladio fled the plain and took refuge in the forest.

Around the time the Witch of Greed disappeared, Palladio understood that something unusual had happened to the undead—they who ought to have been able to resurrect ad nauseum had lost their ability to resurrect, rendering the immortal army non-functional.

Battles had a certain flow to them.

This was true of any battle. Even more so for a major war that would determine the future of the Empire.

Therefore, Palladio, sensing the change in the flow of the battle, immediately abandoned his position, taking only a few attendants with him in order to withdraw from the battlefield and make the best decision to prepare for a second attack.

Therefore, this was not an escape; it was a strategic preparation in order to secure victory.

Palladio: “Today, you can go ahead and think you’ve won. Vincent, Prisca…!”

However, that was naught more than a temporary, conceded victory.

In this manner, Palladio would make his getaway, make his comeback, and if he achieved an undeniable victory with his next move, one that could not be overturned by any means, without the help of the Witch, then this fleeting moment would be over.

Next time, next time for sure, he would place the Vollachian Empire under the rule of a rightful Emperor.

For that purpose, Palladio had his Evil Eye.

He, having been bestowed with this eye of the heavens, would definitely assume the seat of Emperor—

Palladio: “…”

With that conviction in his heart, Palladio attempted to use the power of his Evil Eye to ascertain the road he ought to take, and then he realized. —Before he could notice, not even a single member of the entourage that ought to have been accompanying him could be found.

Palladio: “What? Oi, oi?! Where did you all go?! You bastards, did you leave me behind and—”

Disappear somewhere? That rage of Palladio’s was immediately painted over by a sensation akin to being doused with cold water.

For a moment, Palladio had suspected that his entourage might have irreverently abandoned him and ran away, but in that case, there was no explanation as to why Palladio's Evil Eye had not perceived their fleeing backs. In that case, the reason why they had disappeared was plain and simple—they had died.

Palladio: "—Hk."

Feeling the sensation of goosebumps on his bloodless, undead body, Palladio promptly drew his Yang Sword. Serving as proof of the Vollachian Imperial Family, it was the destiny of those who possessed the qualifications to become Emperor, manifested in the form of a sword—.

Palladio: "—Ah."

—The arm that had grasped it was chopped off at the elbow, and Palladio collapsed onto the ground.

Palladio: "Wh-Wh-Wha…"

Unable to grasp just what had occurred, all three of his eyes widened.

Immediately after, a shock ran through his remaining arm, causing him to lose both arms that were necessary for holding a sword in an instant. That this was the result of a surprise attack brought about by an axe, Palladio understood.

But, that was the extent of his comprehension; that alone, and naught more.

Palladio: "Why…"

The Evil Eye that made Palladio special, the eye of the heavens, why had it not perceived that surprise attack?

He did not understand, did not understand, did not understand. —That moment, a possibility suddenly flashed through his mind.

In the past, Palladio had once heard a story.

A story about a foolish race, one that had committed an irredeemable sin, provoking the wrath of the most fearsome Emperor of the Vollachian Empire, causing them to be engraved as beings treated as abhorrent within the law of iron and blood, their existence no longer acknowledged.

Within the Empire, the mere act of living was regarded as a crime warranting death for these repulsive beastpeople—

Palladio: “—Wai…”

???: “I won’t wait.”

That cold, ruthless impact removed Palladio Manesque from the stage for the rest of eternity.

—That was the decisive blow that caused the hosts of undead surrounding the Fortified City to lose their commander, beckoning the collapse of the war front that resulted in the complete and utter defeat of the Great Disaster, hidden on the underside of history.

2

Making the wheels of her wheelchair creak, Katya was overwhelmed by the vastness of the room she had been allotted.

Katya: “Nii-san did say that because he became a special General, even I, as his relative, would receive special treatment, but… this is just too much…”

Looking around the spacious room, Katya’s shoulders slumped at the thought of what was to come.

She had heard that, due to the effects of the Great Disaster and whatnot, it would take a long time for the Imperial Capital, where she had originally resided, to be restored; so, for the time being, the refugees from the Imperial Capital were required to disperse and reside within the Fortified City and the surrounding towns and villages.

Among them, being treated much better than the others, was Katya, her own brother being Jamal who had, through various coincidences, gained a position at the side of the Emperor, Vincent.

However, Katya was not of a disposition that sought a luxurious lifestyle, and although all sorts of luxuries had been prepared for her, she was nothing more than a girl with weak legs and poor sociability, and thus did not possess the confidence to fully revel in them.

That was why, she altogether relinquished most of these privileges.

Katya: "That lot who keep creeping closer bit by bit are really annoying…"

To sum it up, the Aurélie family was more or less on the fringes of the Imperial Nobility, and Katya did hold the position of being the daughter of an aristocrat. Their household employed servants, and she was not reluctant towards being cared for by them; however, unlike before when they were just a declining noble family, Jamal's current position was quite different.

Perhaps, because of this, many were trying to curry favor with Katya in order to get into Jamal's good graces.

Because she did not care in the slightest about such trivial assumptions or external factors, the sense of distance between her and Rem was indeed quite comfortable for Katya.

Katya: "…Well, there's no point in talking about a girl who's no longer here."

For Katya, who was aware of her own difficult and troublesome personality, Rem, who was surprisingly sharp-tongued and unhesitant to plainly state what people did not want spoken, was a good match. To put it bluntly, she was Katya's first friend.

Even so, Rem, along with the man and elder sister who had come to retrieve her, had ended up having to return to the Kingdom of Lugunica.

As the day of their parting drew near, unable to bear the sight of her looking so lonely, she had ended up promising to exchange letters with her, but she had not the slightest inkling of what to write in a letter.

Katya: “But, even so, my days don’t have any prospects of changing for the better…”

Only recently had there been turbulence, but otherwise, Katya’s day-to-day was fundamentally flat and monotonous, with nothing special taking place, just time that felt like a slow crawl towards death.

Even if she were to write a letter to Rem in such a situation, she felt like she would not be able to write anything worthwhile. Then, before she could pen down something appropriate, their affection would deplete, the frequency of the letters would diminish, and sooner or later they would completely stop.

Such a pessimistic future, this picture was vividly emergent within Katya’s mind.

Katya: “I can’t, take it anymore… really, I just want to die already…”

As soon as she was by herself, being tormented by an overwhelming feeling of loneliness, Katya’s mood continued to sink.

By nature, Katya was pessimistic about everything, and had a strong tendency to blame herself. Only, she had had someone by her side to hold her back from dwelling upon such things.

Until yesterday, that was Rem, and before that—

Katya: “…Idiot. Truly a stupid, stupid, stupid idiot.”

Gripping the wheels of her wheelchair firmly, Katya softly muttered in detest.

He had rudely stepped into Katya’s world against her wishes, and though she refused to draw near to him, he had overbearingly pulled her close, and after whispering all sorts of intimacies she had not wanted to hear, had selfishly disappeared.

Being reminded of that complete and utter fool, had become extremely, extremely painful.

Katya: “Ah, no, no, I don’t want to cry…”

Feeling the sensation of something hot slowly welling up behind her eyelids, Katya groaned.

Rather than having to experience such misery, she should have died protecting Rem in the midst of the turmoil of that Great Disaster. If that had happened, although Rem would surely have called her an idiot, she would have remained as a thorn deep within her heart, kept unforgotten.

She would have also averted being disliked even more through clumsily written letters.

Dead people were unfair. For, after death, there was nothing more that could be said against them.

Therefore, Katya refused to tolerate such unfairness, and spoke ill of the dead.

Katya: “Idiot, stupid idiot, stupid, stupid idiot, idiooot…!”

Such attempts at seeking revenge, or venting anger upon them, would only backfire.

To continue speaking ill of someone who had died, so long as one continued speaking ill of them, it would mean none other than the fact that they were continuing to think about that person.

As a result, not only did those tears well up, but even her nose had begun to feel irritated and sting.

Surely, if she were to look into the mirror, an unbelievably clumsy woman with a bad attitude sitting in a wheelchair would be visible.

Katya: “No more… I don’t want to see anyone…”

Blurting that out, Katya spun her wheelchair around and steered it towards the bed.

Although it might have been bad manners, she wanted to collapse onto the bed without undoing the braids in her hair, or changing her clothes, and just lie there until she starved to death. Of course, she was not capable of starving to death. After all, once hungry, she would surely give up on starvation, and eat something while sniffing her runny nose the same as ever.

Even so, being in this kind of mood, the idea of wanting to sob while thinking about someone—

Katya: "—? Who is it?"

Just as she was about to move her wheelchair towards the bed, there was a knock at the door from outside.

Although she felt like it was bad timing, she was hesitant to ignore it and head for the bed. Presently, everyone was in a difficult situation with delays in communication and problems arising in various places. Katya throwing a trivial tantrum here, might have prevented someone from getting something done on time.

Manifesting the earnestness that was at her core, Katya headed toward the door.

For a moment, she was unsure of what ought to be done, knowing that she must have had a terrible look on her face, but it was truly for just a moment. Not caring about what anyone might think, Katya reached for the door.

And then—

Katya: "Yes, who is it…?"

Having said this, Katya slowly opened the door, and—

Katya: "—Ah"

From her slender throat, a weak, raspy breath escaped.

3

???: "—Thank you for your hard work, Escort General Jamal."

Jamal: “Yeah, you too.”

The Imperial Soldier gave way with a firm salute, and Jamal’s mouth twisted into a smile as he returned the gesture.

The title of “Escort General” that he had been addressed by referred to a special rank of General specifically created for Jamal, who had been recognized for his contributions fighting by the side of Emperor Vincent during the recent great battle.

The role was a prestigious one, serving as Vincent’s personal bodyguard. —To Jamal, who originally aspired to be a General in pursuit of the Aurélie family’s prosperity, this was a desired position.

Now, Jamal could prove himself superior to those who laughed at him for not knowing his place, and most importantly, he could provide a good life for Katya, who could not survive without the support of those around her.

Katya, who was passive about everything and did not recognize her own worth, would dislike such arrangements by Jamal, but she was still precious family to him, them being a lone brother and sister.

Despite what she might have said, he knew Katya would not be able to refuse.

Jamal: “Damn it, even though she said this kinda meddling from her older brother really wasn’t needed.”

Expressing his frustration, which he had no outlet for, Jamal’s footsteps moved towards Katya.

Ever since Jamal’s promotion to Escort General, Katya, as his relative, had also received treatment that was different from that of ordinary Imperial citizens.

For the time being, it was just a temporary residence until the reconstruction of the Imperial Capital progressed, but given the hardships they had been through, he wanted to make sure that Katya lived comfortably without any inconveniences.

The girl who was Katya's friend, who had been staying with her for a while, had ended up returning to the Kingdom.

Right about now would be a reasonable time for Katya to grieve.

Jamal: "And once she's done with that, I'll bring out the booze and meat I've been saving."

With that said, Jamal shook the bottle of liquor and the bag of high grade meat he had retrieved from the stockpile with his authority as a General, and thought about how to comfort Katya.

Slurping down first-rate alcohol while sinking his teeth into a perfectly grilled thick cut of meat.

That was Jamal's way of dealing with grief.

Jamal: "Katya, you there? It's me."

Knocking on the door, Jamal called out to Katya, who should have been in her room.

Katya had a hard time going out on her own and thus spent most of her time holed up in her room unless she had something going on. So, she should have been doing the same at that moment.

However, there was no response from inside the room, and Jamal furrowed his brows in suspicion.

Jamal: "You sleeping or something? Oi, I'm coming in."

Since it was not unusual for Katya to sulk and sleep like she was dead, Jamal opened the door without worrying and stepped into her room.

In the bedroom, which was still bare without much of a lived-in impression since she had just moved in, Jamal looked around, suspicious of the fact that there was no sign of anyone around.

Jamal: "Katya?"

Sure enough, there were no figures present in the bedroom as he peeked in.

As a matter of fact, Katya could not be found anywhere in the room. And, the moment that Jamal wondered if he might have missed her going out, which was unusual,

—That was when he noticed a letter that had been placed on the desk in the bedroom.

Jamal: "…"

The letter, which had initially been outside of his awareness, intensely captured Jamal's attention. There was nothing strange about the letter itself. What was peculiar was what had been placed next to it.

Present there, still vivid in Jamal's memories, was a bandana worn by a certain man—.

Jamal: "—Hk."

He eagerly reached for the letter, tore open the seal messily, and glanced over the contents.

Written there, was the fine handwriting of the weak Katya, accompanied by a strong, contrasting handwriting; it was a marriage registration.

Jamal: "—That, fucking bastard!"

The moment Jamal realized the intent of the marriage registration, such a curse escaped from his mouth.

Contrary to his harsh words, he could not hide the relief and joy he felt, as well as the complicated feelings of a brother who had his cherished younger sister taken away by an odious friend.

Jamal: "Ha, hahaha, HAAAHAHAHAHA!!"

To top it all off, Jamal put his palm to his face and started laughing hysterically in front of the letter. He laughed, and laughed, and laughed so much that tears streamed from the eye covered by his eye patch.

That it was one of the few times tears of blessing were shed in an Empire that had seen so many tears of farewell would not be recorded anywhere in the Imperial history books.

However, it was a fact that here on this very day, a marriage took place between a vanished noblewoman and the scoundrel who had taken her away, and to that, a lone General gave his blessing.

—After this, the whereabouts of Katya Aurélie became unknown.

However, the fact that this was not something to be pessimistic about was evidenced by the unceasing arrival of letters to her only friend, and that there was not a single hint of sadness or unhappiness in the words that were written.

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Chapter 7:
Reunion at Sand Wind

1

—It had been nearly three months since Subaru had last stopped in Mirula, the nearest town to the Augria Sand Dunes.

Originally, they were supposed to stop by on their way back from the Pleiades Watchtower, but due to the incident at the Tower, Subaru was transported all the way to Vollachia, and their itinerary was blown away with it.

That said, this would have been the second time in three months that he had visited this dilapidated roadside town.

???: "…Welcome to Sand Wind."

When Subaru and the others went through the entrance, they were greeted by the owner, who looked displeased as he polished glasses.

As Subaru recalled being greeted the same way last time, he brushed off as much sand as he could at the entrance. Even so, he could not get it all off, so he decided to accept the shopkeeper's bad mood as unavoidable and sat down at the counter.

Shopkeeper: "What would you like to order?"

Subaru: "Milk, cold."

???: "Milk, warm, I suppose."

???: "Milk, I would also like it warm."

At the bar, the owner's face became increasingly grim as one customer after another ordered milk. Even so, he did not complain or swear but simply started heating the milk, showing that he was a customer service professional, no matter how much he hated it.

While the shopkeeper worked, Subaru removed the cloth from around his mouth with a “puha” sound,

Subaru: “Phew, even though we avoided the Sand Time because of what happened last time, the sand-laden wind is still blowing around. I underestimated it a bit.”

While he said this, Subaru used his fingers to dislodge the sand from his mouth. Next to Subaru, the girl who had also lowered her sand-proof cloth nodded and said, “That’s right.”

???: “Even though you told me in advance, Subaru, my hair is already completely caked in sand… I’ll have to brush it properly later. I’ll do your hair too, Beatrice-chan.”

Beatrice: “You have been told many times before, in fact. Betty’s appearance can be reset with a snap, I suppose. Forget about Betty and concentrate on yourself, in fact.”

???: “Well, I know that, but you have such luxurious hair, Beatrice-chan, that it’s worth taking care of, so I just wanted to do it.”

Subaru: “I totally get it. Playing with Beako’s hair is a bit of an adventure.”

When it came to the topic of Beatrice’s hair, Subaru was the one who maintained her signature drill twin-tails by combing and tying them up every morning, and so he was quite opinionated on it. As Beatrice said, it did not really need any maintenance, but it was more of a feel-good thing.

In reality, Beatrice, with her hair being treated as an attraction, puffed out her cheeks.

Beatrice: “Betty’s fashionable hair and adorable cheeks aren’t playthings, I suppose.”

Subaru: “We didn’t say anything about cheeks, but they are a land of squishiness too, Beako.”

???: “They feel really good to touch, don’t they?”

Upon the appearance of an enthusiastic supporter, Subaru laughed heartily and said “That’s right!” before he casually lifted Beatrice, who was sitting next to him, and sat her on his lap.

Beatrice stiffened in surprise with a “Myu”, but it was too late.

Being too slow to escape, Beatrice’s cheeks were pinched by two different sets of fingers from both sides.

Beatrice: “Hey, come on, stop it, in fact! We are in public, I suppose! Show some self-control, in fact!”

Subaru: “Oh, Beako used to be so shy in public, but now she’s grown up. She used to be so shy… she even tried to follow me into the toilet.”

Beatrice: “That was at the very beginning of our Contract, I suppose! It was a year and a half ago, In fact!”

???: “The way you two are so close hasn’t changed much since then, but I can understand why Beatrice-chan is so clingy with Subaru now.”

She had put her head on Subaru’s left shoulder as she said this. Subaru was surprised by the light touch, and the girl, who had met his eyes, giggled with a “Hehe”.

She was a girl at the peak of her need for affection, yet always trying to act grown-up, making it difficult to spoil her. Subaru thought her unusual attitude was endearing, and while caressing Beatrice’s cheek with one hand, he used his other hand to pat the girl’s head—

Shopkeeper: “Hey, your milk is ready… What’s with this scene?”

Subaru: “Oh, it’s here. Alright, Beako, get back to your seat~.”

Beatrice: “Saying to get back or whatever, when Subaru was the one who dragged Betty in the first place, I suppose! It’s so maddening, in fact!”

With a cup of steaming milk in the shopkeeper’s hand, Subaru smiled wryly at the man’s dumbfounded expression, and returned

Beatrice to her seat as she accepted the cup of warm milk.

And, when Subaru was finally served the glass of cold milk he had ordered—

Shopkeeper: “Oh, now I remember. You’re that guy who went into the Sand Sea with that pretty girl before, right?”

Subaru: “Oh, you remembered? That’s right, I was the guy who got the milk that time.”

Shopkeeper: “…I heard that someone reached the Sage’s Tower. It seems that many people from the Royal Capital will soon be heading there.”

Subaru: “…”

Shopkeeper: “Did you manage to reach it?”

The shopkeeper’s quiet voice was tinged with a hint of expectation and excitement.

Subaru, having just taken a sip from his glass of milk, glanced down at the shopkeeper’s leg—he had one prosthetic leg, and he was probably one of the people who had tried to conquer the Sand Sea in the past.

At that time, the shopkeeper gave Subaru and the others, who were heading for the Tower, some friendly advice. In response to the experienced person’s question, Subaru grinned and gave a thumbs-up.

And then—

Subaru: “Yep, I went to the Tower and met the Sage. —The noisy, overly familiar, and cute Sage. I’ve got a bit of personal business to take care of, so I’m going to make a second attack.”

And, that was his reply.

2

—A journey to the Augria Sand Dunes, or rather, a return to the Pleiades Watchtower.

It was a journey that began at the request of Al, who had lost his beloved master, Priscilla Barielle, in the Vollachian Empire.

Al's goal was to view a Book of the Dead at the Pleiades Watchtower—to read the Book of the deceased Priscilla and connect with her thoughts.

Subaru could not bring himself to refuse Al's heartfelt plea to do so.

Subaru: "Priscilla would be totally pissed, though."

When he closed his eyes, he could only remember Priscilla's smiling face; that, and her prideful demeanor.

Subaru understood that doing so was contrary to Priscilla's beliefs, to the extent that her angry and contemptuous gaze naturally came to mind.

However, he could not help but think about it from the opposite perspective.

If Subaru did not have Return by Death, or if Return by Death was not even possible, and he had found himself in the same situation of losing someone important, much like what had happened to Priscilla.

In such a situation, would Subaru be able to refrain from wanting to know the final thoughts of that "someone"? —In the face of that question, he felt that reason and idealism would be meaningless.

Of course, Subaru had no intention of reading Priscilla's Book of the Dead.

He did not feel that he was qualified to do so, nor did he think it was something he could bear to read. Therefore, he could not assert with certainty whether Al had it in him or not to read it.

That said, if anyone were qualified to do so, it would have been either Abel, Yorna, or Al.

That was why—

Subaru: “I want to respect Al’s feelings of wanting to read the Book of the Dead. I’m going to accompany him to the Pleiades Watchtower… That’s all I can do, for Al, and for Priscilla.”

It was easy to imagine that Priscilla would not want her Book of the Dead to be read.

But, at the same time, if Priscilla knew how badly her death would have shattered Al’s heart, leaving him in such despair that he could not stand up, she might not have objected to him reading her Book of the Dead if she understood that it would be the means to overcome it.

Subaru, who had witnessed Priscilla’s final moments and saw her vanish into the morning light, felt that there was significance in the exchange between Al and Priscilla.

That being said—

???: “Just so you know, Ram isn’t coming along. Rem needs to rest properly after having finally returned. If you want to work yourself to death, do it alone.”

Apart from Ram, who immediately declared this upon hearing Subaru’s opinion, there were naturally many who opposed Subaru going to the Pleiades Watchtower with Al.

Among those who objected particularly strongly were Otto and, surprisingly, Emilia.

Otto: “I agree with Ram-san’s opinion. It is not just Rem-san; you must have also been drained by your time in the Empire, Natsuki-san. I can only imagine the physical strain and constant tension. Why not take it easy for a while?”

Emilia: “You know, I reaaally understand Subaru’s concern for Al. I also know that Al is hurting… But, even though the Tower isn’t to blame, Subaru was sent all the way to Vollachia last time, right? If Subaru goes there again, I’m worried he might get sent to a place like Gusteko or somewhere else next time…”

Otto's opinion was pragmatic, while Emilia's came from a place of anxiety.

Both opinions were based on concern for Subaru, and it did not feel right to dismiss them. However, the fact that it was crucial to reach out to Al at this very moment was the decisive factor, and so, Subaru resolved to head to the Tower.

In reality, all he could have done was bow his head in deep apology for that matter—

Otto: "—Garfiel, could I ask you for a favor?"

Garfiel: "Oh, sure thing, Ottobro. Just like ya said, I'll stick close 'n keep my eyes on the Captain."

Emilia: "Beatrice, hold Subaru's hand tight. Make sure you never let go."

Beatrice: "No need to be told, in fact. Betty also wants to avoid feeling regret like she did when Subaru and the others were sent to the Empire, I suppose."

While Subaru struggled to find the words to persuade them, Otto and Emilia, who were supposed to be standing in his way, entrusted the matter to Garfiel and Beatrice, respectively.

When Subaru looked at them in surprise, the two of them shrugged their shoulders and,

Otto: "After hearing about Al-san, I expected it would come to this… However, Emilia-sama and I have to go to the Royal Capital to report on Priscilla-sama's situation. So…"

Emilia: "I was telling Beatrice and Garfiel that I wanted to go too. I reaaally want to go with you, but…"

Weighing her position and emotions on the scale of her mind, Emilia firmly decided to play her role.

As a candidate for the Royal Selection, she had to report her decision to accept Abel's request to intervene in the battle against the Great Disaster in the Vollachian Empire, and that in that battle, Priscilla had lost her life.

The Kingdom of Lugunica would surely be greatly stirred upon hearing that. The Royal Selection might also experience significant developments due to the loss of a Royal Candidate.

Nevertheless—

Emilia: “What I think you want to do for Al, Subaru, is something only you can do, as the last person Priscilla talked to. —To look after Al.”

Upon seeing Emilia’s sincere amethyst eyes, Subaru felt a dryness in his mouth.

He was very, very sorry that the kind Emilia and Otto had taken up his burden in order for things to turn out how Subaru had wanted. Truly, Subaru should have gone to the Royal Capital with Emilia, both as her Knight, and as someone directly involved in the events of the Vollachian Empire.

And yet, he was spoiled by everyone’s kindness.

???: “—Excuse me! I am coming with you this time.”

While Subaru, moved by the warmth of the situation, was on the verge of tears, Petra raised her hand and spoke up.

Of course, the journey to the Pleiades Watchtower would be long. During the trip and at the Tower, someone would have to look over everyone.

Volunteering for that role, Petra flushed red in her cheeks and spoke energetically,

Petra: “This time, I will be useful! Frederica-neesama and Ram-neesama, please take care of the mansion and Emilia-neesama!”

Frederica: “Y-yes… You are really fired up.”

Petra: “Yes! Since I am always left behind, I decided this time I would go without any hesitation!”

Even though Frederica was surprised by Petra’s brave and explosive display, she still accepted it.

From Subaru’s standpoint as well, if Petra was going with them, then he had no complaints. With this, the members going to the Watchtower were decided, and so, Subaru turned to Rem for the last time.

At last, having returned from Vollachia to Lugunica, he wanted to slowly attempt to regain the old memories of the past at Roswaal Manor—though it was different from the previous manor, filled with Memories of Rem.

Subaru: “Again, the fact that you’re gonna make progress without me is crushing, but…”

Rem: “That was the case when I reunited with Nee-sama as well, but please don’t be disappointed over that… So, are you really going?”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m going. I can’t leave Al alone. You understand?”

Rem: “I understand. —That’s why you’re a coward.”

Subaru’s eyes shot wide open upon hearing that.

“I went too far,” Rem said, as she bowed her head in response to Subaru’s reaction,

Rem: “Please return safely. Until then, I’ll try to remember as little as possible so you won’t be disappointed.”

Subaru: “No, that’s… I don’t want to selfishly get in the way of what you want to do, Rem.”

Rem: “Well then, that’s impossible. —Because, I’m sure there’s nothing you do that doesn’t affect me.”

She pressed on his chest while saying so, and Subaru was unable to say anything.

Staring at the silent Subaru, Rem stuck out her tongue slightly. With a mischievous expression, as if to say she had got him, Subaru was even more unable to say anything.

—This was Rem's, and everyone else's, encouragement to push Subaru forward, and no matter how much time passed, Subaru, still unable to grow up, understood that.

3

—And thus, on this day they arrived once again at the town closest to the Augria Sand Dunes.

Subaru's chest ached as if sobbing as he thought of everyone who had sent him off, and of the Tower's watchman with whom he had parted ways after he first challenged the Tower.

In front of that Subaru, the shopkeeper cast his eyes downward upon hearing the report of their arrival at the Tower.

Subaru: "Unc?"

Shopkeeper: "…"

Apprehensive about the shopkeeper's reaction, Subaru called out to him, but it was to no avail. Subaru then glanced at Beatrice, seeking to confirm whether he had made a careless remark.

However, Beatrice shook her head sideways at Subaru.

Beatrice: "It's nothing major, I suppose. You've just got a milk mustache below your nose, in fact."

Subaru: "Ah! You should've said that sooner! I was showing off over here, y'know!"

Petra: "It was very cool. Also, pretty cute as well."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan is the only one I think fits that image…"

Cute and cool, that was a fitting description for Emilia when she was in elegant spirits. Ordinary people could only ever embody cuteness or coolness, but she was a beauty beyond miracle who combined both.

Be that as it may—

Shopkeeper: “Is that so. Is that, so…”

Setting aside Subaru, who frantically wiped his upper lip, the shopkeeper, overcome by emotion, mumbled those words under his breath. Staying that way, he wiped the area around his eyes with his fingers, and then vigorously slammed his fist on the counter,

Shopkeeper: “Very well, you did great. Today is my treat!”

Subaru: “For real?! Then, I was looking to buy provisions for crossing the Sand Sea again anyway, so just give me all of the food in the bar!”

Shopkeeper: “Don’t get carried away!”

Subaru: “Thought so!”

Saying such, Subaru joyously laughed together with the shopkeeper who got into a truly great mood. However, the smiling shopkeeper, upon examining the girls Subaru brought together with him, gave a puzzled look.

Seeing that the one who must have left an even stronger impression than Subaru himself, Emilia, was not there, the shopkeeper must have had his doubts. That was understandable, but—

Subaru: “Unfortunately, that girl isn’t together with us today. She did return safely, though.”

Shopkeeper: “Is that so. If she’s safe, then all’s fine, but… this seems like an even more unreliable party than last time.”

Beatrice: “Betty will have you know that she was a party member last time as well, I suppose. Due to being busy with caring for the ill, there was no way to show up, in fact.”

Petra: “I am an actual first-timer, but I’m not going to fall behind

Emilia-neesama.”

Subaru: “Ooh, that’s some self-confidence. How reliable.”

Subaru, who had not managed to pat her head earlier, reached his hand out to the girl who proudly puffed out her chest—only for his outstretched hand to be suddenly caught by hers from below.

Then the girl—Petra, looked straight into the eyes of a surprised Subaru.

Petra: “Subaru, did you just try to pat me?”

Subaru: “Eh? I did, but… did you not like that?”

Petra: “…I don’t mind, but can I ask you something? Subaru, do you pat the heads of Emilia-neesama and Rem-neesama as well?”

Being asked such by her serious voice, Subaru repeatedly blinked his eyes, and he pondered.

On whether he patted Emilia and Rem, come to think of it, there were occasions where he had patted Rem’s head before, but if he were to try to do so with the current Rem, he risked having his arm twisted.

Furthermore, even just thinking about patting Emilia’s head was difficult.

Subaru: “No, for various reasons, I don’t really pat the head of those two.”

Petra: “Then you can’t pat mine either.”

Subaru: “Is that so?!”

Petra: “That’s right.”

His hand flung off, her head abruptly turned away, Subaru was left in shock. To think that Petra of all people would go through such a rebellious phase was, to Subaru, completely out of the blue.

Then, seeing Subaru in that disheartened state, Beatrice said “Good grief, I suppose”, and while shrugging her shoulders,

Beatrice: “In that case, you may pat Betty’s head, in fact. Just for now, you may pat as much as you please, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Ugh~, please let me pat Beako’s head as much as I want forever.”

Beatrice: “Hehe, that will depend on Subaru’s manners hereafter, in fact. Make sure to pat more carefully from now on, so that Betty won’t mind letting him, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That’s quite the high bar! But I’ll overcome it…!”

To Beatrice’s grandstanding attitude, Subaru focused his attention on his fingertips, then moved his hand towards her. At Subaru’s soft touch, Beatrice let out a gasp with a “Woah”.

Beatrice: “N-now this, is quite… it’s not bad… rather, it’s good? It’s good, I suppose? To think you hid so much potential, in fact!”

Subaru: “How naive, Beako. Time apart fosters love, y’know.”

Petra: “I truly feel the same way. Time apart really does that, doesn’t it.”

Subaru: “Petra-san? Isn’t there some, like, pressure going on here…?”

While Subaru patted Beatrice’s head with his godlike touch, Petra’s sharp gaze pierced through him as she moved her chair half a step closer.

However, Petra feigned ignorance with a “Is there~?” towards Subaru’s question. Seeing Petra’s attitude, Subaru flinched nervously.

Shopkeeper: “Well, I get that this is quite the pleasant group you’ve got there. But is this really fine? Just because you succeeded the first time, doesn’t mean you get to treat the second like it’s a walk in the park.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know. The biggest threat, the scantily clad sniper, isn’t there anymore, but even then, the Sand Wind and Witchbeasts are still well and strong. Come to think of it, that advice that Unc gave us last time, about the birds who fly towards the Tower! It was really helpful.”

Shopkeeper: “That’s great… you understand the obstacles then. So, what are you gonna do?”

Subaru: “I’ll be meeting with the countermeasure.”

If a challenger were to conquest the Augria Sand Dunes, three obstacles would stand in their way—one was the Sand Wind, which grew terrifically stronger during the Sand Time; another was the Sand Sea, which was inhabited by ferocious Witchbeasts; and the last was Shaula, though sadly that worry had ceased to be.

Thus, as for the Witchbeasts, which were the most likely to become the main obstacle in the challenge against the Sand Time that they had no choice but to take on—

???: “Geez, this place is jam-packed with sand as alwa~ys.”

Hearing a dissatisfied voice accompanied by the sound of sand getting brushed off coming from the entrance, Subaru and the rest of the group turned towards the one they had been waiting for, so as to have her in their field of view.

The one standing there, was a young girl in a black dress with her hair braided into three strands.

Upon noticing the gazes of Subaru and the others sitting together at the counter, she widened her eyes for a moment, before giving a mischievous smile,

???: “Heyo, Onii-san, you managed to get here safely. Petra-chan and Beatrice-chan too, nice to see the both of you we~ll.”

Saying such, the girl—Meili Portroute, waved her hand, as a small scorpion suddenly jumped out of her hair, wiggling its tail in sync with the movement of her hand.

In that manner, Meili and the small crimson scorpion welcomed their long-awaited reunion with Subaru and the others, as well as their return to the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Seeing Meili's entrance, Subaru smiled to the shopkeeper on the other side of the counter behind him and said,

Subaru: "That girl right there, is our greatest ally in conquering the Augria Sand Dunes."

Shopkeeper: "A young man with a few screws loose and three little girls… perhaps the Sage's Tower wasn't as far away as I thought after all?"

Scratching his cheek with one hand, and patting Beatrice's head with the other, Subaru pondered on the dumbfounded shopkeeper's remarks as being only natural towards a group like his.

Chapter 8:
How to Regret

1

???: “I hea~rd. That blue-haired Onee-san woke up, didn’t she~? Onii-san, you were rea~lly, rea~lly worried, so aren’t you relieved no~w?”

???: “Yeah, I can still remember the fresh feeling I had the moment Rem woke up. Even the part where I had my fingers broken afterwards is now a good memory.”

???: “…He~y, Petra-chan. Has Onii-san gotten a little weirder since he got sent flying o~ff?”

Petra: “Well, a lot of things happened. It’s a long story, but there was a time when he was cross-dressing and even a time when he shrunk to about the same size as Beatrice-chan…”

???: “Hu~h?”

Meili, who had just joined them, leaned on the counter with her chin in her hand, wearing a puzzled look.

Subaru wanted to complain about being treated like a deviant, but given that Meili had only heard a brief summary of what had happened to him in the Empire, her reaction was perfectly understandable. The connection between the presented circumstances and the events that followed seemed a bit unclear, which made Subaru feel like scratching his head in confusion as well.

Subaru: “Well, if I explain it from the beginning, I can tell a story that actually makes sense.”

Beatrice: “…Is that so, I suppose? Betty heard the whole story from the beginning too, but it started to become a bit difficult to follow when Subaru mentioned he had cross-dressed again, in fact.”

Subaru: “Why that though, it was the most logical thing to do…”

For some reason, the operation to capture the Fortress City was not fully understood, even though the results clearly proved that having Subaru, Abel, and Flop dress up as women was the best strategy.

However, Subaru’s sincere appeal did not seem to resonate at all with Beatrice, Petra, or Meili, who was drinking the cold milk she ordered.

In any case—

Meili: “But sti~ll, to go back to the Tower right after returning… Onii-san, you’re not going to get blasted off somewhere again and make Petra-chan lonely, are you~?”

Subaru: “We’ve had that scary discussion plenty of times already… Well, not plenty, but we’ve talked about it. At least, I think the cause of the teleportation issue won’t happen again.”

Petra: “S-somehow, that way of saying it makes me feel even more uneasy…”

Noticing Meili and Petra’s worried looks, Subaru adjusted his hold on Beatrice—Meili had taken the seat Beatrice was originally sitting in. With Petra on one side, Meili on the other, and Beatrice on his lap, Subaru took a moment to consider his next move.

—In the first place, the event that caused Subaru to be transported to the Vollachian Empire was a highly irregular incident that occurred at the Pleiades Watchtower.

At that time, just before the incident occurred, there was an irregularity in the green room of the Tower. Spica—who was believed to be Louis at the time, appeared; amidst the confusion of handling the situation, things took a sudden turn.

That was—

Subaru: “—The penalty for invoking Return by Death was applied incorrectly.”

That was what Subaru speculated.

Previously, Subaru had attended Echidna's tea party in the Sanctuary and confided in her about Return by Death. The outcome was disastrous, not only due to Echidna's unpleasant response, but also because of the calamity in the real world upon returning from the tea party.

At that time he confessed the truth of Return by Death to Echidna, which triggered a penalty that covered the entire Sanctuary in a black shadow, leading to a state of devastation. —Subaru thought that the situations were similar.

In summary, Louis Arneb, who had encountered Subaru in the Hall of Memories and learned about Return by Death, appeared in the green room for some reason.

And that was what that black shadow—the Witch of Envy, mistakenly set out to eliminate.

And as a result of the clash between the rampaging Witch of Envy and the Divine Dragon Volcanica, who was tasked with protecting the Tower, Subaru was blasted away by the resulting force field—

Subaru: "That's what I'm thinking, but beyond that, it's just speculation."

Ultimately, the reason why Subaru was transported to the forest of the People of Shudraq in the Empire remained unknown.

It was unclear whether it was accidental or if it was an intentional result by either the Witch of Envy or the Divine Dragon. However, considering the events that followed, Subaru did not believe it was by the intention of the Witch of Envy.

The Witch of Envy had lost sight of Subaru; that was, until Subaru called out to her on the Gladiator Island.

—It was there for the first time that Subaru called out to the Witch of Envy, addressing her as Satella.

Since then, although the nature of Return by Death had not changed, Subaru's perception of the Witch of Envy, who likely brought it upon him, had shifted slightly.

That shift being—

Beatrice: "—Subaru? You have a troublesome look in your eyes, I suppose."

Beatrice, turning around in Subaru's arms, pressed her fingers against his forehead as he remained silent and deep in thought. Subaru could not help but smile wryly at the sensation and her words.

Subaru: "It's a bit late to bring up the look in my eyes. Usually, people talk about how scary my face is or something like that."

Beatrice: "Subaru, your face is full of charm once you get used to it, in fact. The impression of you having scary eyes is probably just nonsense from people who don't know you, I suppose."

Petra: "Yes, yes, Beatrice-chan, that's true. Right, Meili-chan?"

Meili: "That's ri~ght. I guess you and the Witchbeast-chans are just as cute in your own wa~ys, huh?"

Subaru: "Beako and Petra are too soft on me, so Meili's opinion is probably more in line with general sentiment. I've been dealing with these eyes for eighteen years. I don't expect anything else of them…!"

In fact, it had already been proven by over a year of experience that even the standard isekai trope of "the reversal of beauty and ugliness" was not something to expect.

According to Subaru's aesthetic sense, beautiful people were beautiful, and Subaru's eyes were the most terrifying.

Subaru: "Enough about my eyes. Anyway, it seems like there's no need to worry about me getting teleported again, so for now, there's no concern about me causing trouble for everyone by going to the Tower."

Meili: “I see. Well, I don’t really mi~nd. I’ve been fulfilling my duties properly while you were away, after a~ll.”

Petra: “Duties… Wait, does that mean…!”

Petra’s eyes sparkled as she looked at Meili, who gave a somewhat proud, smug smile.

Subaru had also heard about what Meili had been up to in the Kingdom while he was returning from the Empire.

She had been negotiating with the high-ranking officials of the Kingdom, leveraging her ability to safely guide others through the Augria Sand Dunes to the Pleiades Watchtower.

In exchange, Meili had been seeking a pardon for the crimes she had committed in the Kingdom and securing her future livelihood.

Subaru: “So, judging by your tone…”

Meili: “Ye~p, I did i~t. I made those important old men… what were they called? The Council of Wise Me~n? I made them promise me my free~dom.”

Petra: “You did it! You did it, Meili-chan!”

Meili: “Kyaaah!”

With a triumphantly smug expression that could almost be used as a model, Meili proudly reported her success, prompting Subaru to widen his eyes in surprise. Petra, even more excited than Subaru, reached across him to grab Meili’s hand.

As a result, the two girls ended up holding hands over Beatrice’s stomach,

Subaru: “I’ll take advantage of the moment and gently put my hand in there too.”

Beatrice: “It’s a bit ticklish, but Betty will join in too, in fact. You did well, I suppose.”

Subaru and Beatrice added their hands to the mix, and the four of them ended up holding hands together in a show of camaraderie.

The shopkeeper on the other side of the counter looked at Subaru and the others with a strange expression, but Subaru consciously ignored it, deciding not to worry too much about onlookers during this joyful moment.

With their hands laid on top of each other, Meili said “Th-thank you~…” in a small voice before continuing,

Meili: “A-anywa~ys, my ability to control Witchbeast-chans is highly valued by the Kingdo~m. I’m using it at your request, so make sure to show some gra~titude.”

Subaru: “Wow, that’s quite the bold attitude. But it’s fine, I don’t mind a big mouth. And of course, I won’t forget to show my gratitude. You’ve really done a lot of reflecting, haven’t you?”

Meili: “What do you mean by tha~t?! Do you want me to push you down the stairs agai~n?!”

Though Subaru understood that Meili’s words were just her way of hiding her embarrassment, the memory of his spectacular tumble down the stairs made every single one of his bones creak in recollection.

However, what caught even more attention than Meili’s slip of the tongue was—

Petra: “Meili-chan? What do you mean by that? What did you do?”

Meili: “Ah…”

Petra: “Hey, I didn’t get a chance to hear the full story, but what happened at the Tower? You apologized for not being able to stop Subaru from being teleported, but is there anything else you need to apologize for?”

Meili: “U-u~m, Petra-chan, your eyes are looking a little sca~ry…”

Petra: “Meili-chan.”

Meili: “Eeek!”

Petra’s hands, still resting on Beatrice’s stomach, gripped Meili’s hands firmly, not allowing her to escape.

Realizing this, Meili turned to Subaru with pleading eyes,

Meili: “O-Onii-san… Onii-san, he~lp…”

Subaru: “Sorry, Meili. The Council of Wise Men might overlook your mistakes because of your rare abilities, but your friends are here to properly scold you. Friends like that are precious.”

Beatrice: “Regrets don’t come first, in fact. Lessons should be learned from them, I suppose.”

Meili: “Come on~!”

With those words, Subaru picked up Beatrice and slid his chair back, distancing himself from Petra and Meili. Petra immediately closed the gap with her chair, leaving Meili with no way to escape.

Watching the two of them, Subaru and Beatrice drank their milk together—

Beatrice: “It was good that you were able to save Meili back then, in fact.”

Subaru: “…Thanks.”

Beatrice expressed Subaru’s feelings in a small voice. Subaru, filled with affection, gently stroked her head as he watched the endearing interactions between the two girls.

—Above the teary-eyed Meili’s head, a small scorpion was clicking its pincers sharply.

2

—The duty that had been entrusted to Garfiel Tinzel was a heavy one.

The faith of his comrades resting upon his shoulders, was something that Garfiel understood to a painful extent.

They were putting their trust in him. That if Garfiel was present, then the members traveling to the Pleiades Watchtower, composed of Subaru, Beatrice, and Petra, would not end up facing any danger.

Thus, he wanted to respond to that faith, Garfiel had resolved himself to respond to it.

Garfiel: "Yo, it'd be best for ya to drink a lil' water. The atmosphere here's all dry 'cuz of the sand gusts. Ya never know when yer throat might get parched up."

And, with those words, Garfiel called out to Al, who was seated within the dragon carriage.

Inside the single-wagon dragon carriage pulled by Patrasche, Al was hugging one of his knees as he sat—he was the individual who could be called the reason, or origin, of this journey towards the Pleiades Watchtower.

The man who was formerly the Knight of Royal Candidate Priscilla Barielle. He had watched as his master disappeared before his very eyes, and in order to compensate for that sense of loss, he sought a Book of the Dead within the Tower.

Whether that was a good or a bad thing, Garfiel did not know.

Garfiel: "…"

When Garfiel had first heard about the Books of the Dead of the Pleiades Watchtower, to be perfectly honest, he thought he wanted to see those books by all means necessary.

Because of the situation, they were busy with the priority of going to save Subaru since he had been sent to the Empire, so there had not been a place for him to discuss the topic in earnest, but he had certainly thought in such a manner.

By nature, Garfiel loved reading books about great figures from history. He had fond memories of reading books in the Sanctuary until they were completely worn out, including "The Legend of Reid Astrea", a book describing the life of Reid Astrea, whom Subaru and the others had met first hand.

To hear that the lifetime memories of not only Reid, but of many great figures whose names had been engraved in history, were all lined up in the library that stored the Books of the Dead, was a matter that caused his chest to throb with excitement.

The reason why Garfiel was then slightly opposed to the thought of Al wanting to read Priscilla's Book of the Dead, was a sensation stemming from some sort of logic.

Did knowing the person make it alright to read it? Or did knowing the person make it wrong to do so? —It was not just Garfiel who did not possess the correct answer to that, but also Subaru.

Therefore—

Garfiel: "Until ya do what ya gotta do at the Tower, ya can't be collapsin' on us. Hey."

Gnashing his canines, Garfiel tossed a canteen over to Al. It slowly drew an arc as it spun through the air, making its way towards Al—

Al: "—Oh, my bad, bud. My throat was just about feeling parched."

Catching the canteen with a light sound, Al skillfully raised the jaw of his helmet with his single right arm, and gently brought the mouth of it to his own lips.

Then, Al gulped down the water quite quickly, and gave a refreshed exhale of "Ahhhh~".

Al: "Eep, that really brings me back to life. Really, you guys are always taking such good care of me, I'm grateful. Even though you should be frowning upon me for causing bro's team to split up like this."

Garfiel: "Gimme a break, don't ya have any self-awareness?"

Al: "Well, it's not like I'm not looking at my surroundings. I'd say that, at least more than that old man who disappeared to who-knows-where, I'm calm, real calm."

Garfiel: "…"

Al gave his answer while waving around the canteen that had been mostly emptied, to which Garfiel flared his nostrils, feeling as if he had eaten a bitter bug.

The topic of the missing person whom Al had brought up, was about Heinkel.

As one of the members of the Priscilla Camp, after her passing, Heinkel's mind had been quite disturbed, and he had disappeared a few days before Garfiel and the others departed from the Empire.

Garfiel had participated in the search, but tracing a scent through a town where thousands of people were entering and exiting on a daily basis was a difficult feat, and so ultimately, they were unable to find him.

Garfiel: "Emilia-sama also seemed to be super depressed…"

When Heinkel's whereabouts became unknown, Emilia had felt a terrible sense of responsibility.

He heard that she had come into contact with Heinkel on an occasion Garfiel and the others had been unaware of, and it seemed that he clung on to her quite intensely on that instance. After that, without getting the chance to talk with him again, Heinkel disappeared.

To an extent similar to Emilia, Garfiel was also disheartened. — After all, he had inadvertently crossed paths with Heinkel many times, and they held out on the same battlefield together in the fight against the Great Disaster.

Garfiel: "Oi you, ain't ya worried 'bout pops?"

Al: "Hm? Yeah, I guess I'd say I'm worried about him, but that's because both me and the old man are at a fine age. Fellow middle aged geezers oughta worry about each other, right?"

Garfiel: “The fuck’s it gotta do with age! It’s only natural to worry ‘bout yer comrades. When ya start talking like that, then ya got Beatrice, Emilia-sama, ‘n Nanna who’re all over a hundred years old!”

Al: “Hm, I guess things get pretty confusing at bro’s place if you rank seniority by age. Ah, I do think everything that you’re saying is completely correct, bud? It’s just…”

Garfiel: “What?”

Al: “All things considered, my plate’s also pretty damn full right now.”

Saying that, he raised the hand holding the canteen and lowered his head, leaving Garfiel at a loss for words.

Following that, he also began to get a bit embarrassed for pressing Al so emotionally. Just now, Garfiel had been one-sidedly venting his feelings of powerlessness.

In addition—

Garfiel: “—Tho’, it’s still different from Captain’s.”

Narrowing his emerald-green eyes, as Garfiel checked the sharpness of his canines with the tip of his tongue, he discretely examined Al’s state, and recalled what Otto had told him.

—Having witnessed Priscilla’s death, Subaru and Al had sustained great wounds to their hearts.

Everybody had received a shock from Priscilla’s death, but the wounds received by these two had undoubtedly been the greatest, and so the way they faced those wounds was distinct when compared to others.

Trying to make amends under the guise of Sparka, Subaru had himself beat down by the many comrades he had encountered in the Empire.

That pitiful, reckless endeavor was repealed via the support and assistance of his surroundings, but whether it be equivalent, or even greater, Al was currently in need of “something”.

Garfiel did not sense any issues within his responses during the time of this conversation, but—before Subaru and the rest had proposed to accompany him, Al was initially going to force himself to head to the Tower alone.

That would have likely been an act tantamount to suicide; a fact Garfiel was sure of, having heard about the severity of the Augria Sand Dunes from his comrades. There was even the possibility that Al had fallen into such despair that he would not have minded losing his life enroute to the Tower.

Subaru: “I want to respect Al’s feelings of wanting to read the Book of the Dead. I’m going to accompany him to the Pleiades Watchtower… That’s all I can do, for Al, and for Priscilla.”

Having noticed those perilous signs within Al, nobody stopped Subaru as he spoke that out.

To not accompany Al was equivalent to leaving him to die at the sand sea. —It was the consensus of the camp that there had already been enough casualties.

Al: “But, you know ? Aren’t bro and the rest out shopping? Would’ve been best for you to follow them, since you’re the strongest, bud. If it’s just the dragon carriage, then I’d be able to watch over it alone.”

Garfiel: “—. Ya really think we can just leave a guy from another camp here by himself? My amazin’ self’s here to keep an eye on ya.”

Al: “It’s lonely to be treated as an outsider. Aren’t we buddies who saved the Empire together?”

And, that was also the reason why Al had lost everything precious to him.

How to mourn, how to despair, how to regret, such methods differed from person to person. Garfiel too had an experience of being stuck completely helpless at a dead end, only left to despair.

In order to get back on his feet, Garfiel had borrowed the strength of Subaru, Ram, Otto, and everybody else.

So now, he wanted to be there for somebody else in that same position.

Garfiel: “…I had thought my amazin’ self could be there for pops, too.”

The missing Heinkel must also have his own despair. That such a thing had cast a great shadow over his life, was something Garfiel more or less understood.

Precisely because he understood, he felt sorry for Heinkel, who had no choice but to shoulder everything on his own.

???: “—It appears that the atmosphere in the carriage is rather stagnant. Depressing.”

And, just as Garfiel had been thinking that.

The door to the dragon carriage opened, and the person who appeared from outside spoke those words.

When Garfiel turned around in surprise and saw that it was someone he knew, he let out a sigh,

Garfiel: “Don’t fuckin’ freak me out like that. Got me thinkin’ it was somethin’ like “The Sound of Woozle’s Wind”.”

???: “Excuse my rudeness in asking, but considering your duty, would it not be a problem in and of itself that you are unable to cope with sudden situations? Inquiry.”

Garfiel: “Ugh, th-that’s a bit…”

???: “Again, excuse my rudeness. I attempted to trip you up. Apology.”

Saying that, placing a finger on his lips as he winked, was a man with a slender face, meticulously trimmed navy blue hair, and a monocle over one eye—Clind.

This man who cast an unfathomable atmosphere around him, worked as a servant for Roswaal's relative Annerose Miload, and was on poor terms with Garfiel's older sister, Frederica.

Moreover, this was the person with whom they had arranged to meet in Mirula, the nearest town to the Sand Sea.

Garfiel: "Amazin', ain't yer timin' just damn perfect. —Where's that Meili girl?"

Clind: "She is accompanying me. Certainly. As for my punctuality, it is not something that deserves praise. As a butler, I have simply fulfilled my duties."

Garfiel: "Ya really think that any other butler is fuckin' able to do somethin' like takin' an entire dragon carriage from one end of the country to the other so easily?"

Garfiel was fed up with Clind, who placed his hand on his chest with great humility.

In bringing Subaru and Rem home from the Empire, Clind had fulfilled a very important role, on a level that he might even be the MVP of the camp.

It would seem that Clind could use magic similar to that of Door Crossing, which allowed one to cross through space, and through that, he had been very useful and versatile in making preparations for their journey to the Empire.

The reason they had met up here was to retrieve Meili, who was indispensable personnel for crossing the Augria Sand Dunes.

Clind: "Regarding Meili-sama, I have sent her straight to Subaru-sama and the others. I have come to the dragon carriage to report on her arrival. Praiseworthy."

Garfiel: "Thanks. By the way, did'ya not bring Emilia-sama or Ottobro with ya?"

Clind: "My apologies. The payment made by the Master was limited to the act of bringing back Subaru-sama and Rem-sama, who were sent to the Empire. Bringing Meili here was the least I could do as a favor. Sincerity."

Garfiel: "…Gotcha. If there's a reason, I won't ask ya to do the impossible."

Clind bowed deeply, and although his tone remained flat, there was a sense of consistent apology in his demeanor, and it seemed that he had reasons that were beyond his control.

In the past, Garfiel had a bad habit of losing all reason when he underwent beastification, but the reason he was able to overcome this was because he had been granted an opportunity to do so. He did not know if Clind's limitations were of the same sort or not, so Garfiel refrained from saying anything presumptuous, despite having had a similar experience.

Garfiel: "Well, not like our amazin' selves are the only ones. Yo Al-san, lemme introduce ya. This is one of our amazin' selves' allies, Clind, he's real chummy with that Roswaal bastard."

Clind: "While it is exquisitely chilly, yet quite difficult to deny, I thank you for the introduction. Having received that introduction, my name is Clind. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Bow."

Realizing that he had ignored Al while they had been speaking, Garfiel introduced Clind. Giving a slightly wry smile, Clind faced Al and greeted him.

From Garfiel's point of view, it seemed strange that Clind, who had been close with Roswaal for a long time, would now deny getting along well with him, but—

Clind: "—Al-sama? Dubious."

Aside from Garfiel's thoughts, Clind frowned with skepticism.

The reason was Al's reaction to Clind's greeting, in which he gave no response.

Al: "…"

Maintaining his silence, Al stared intently at Clind's face.

Of course, his expression was not visible with his helmet on, but the atmosphere he was exuding—something close to shock or bewilderment, could easily be felt.

However, Garfiel did not understand the meaning of that reaction in itself.

Garfiel: "Huh? Clind, do ya know Al-san?"

Clind: "—. No, forgive me, but I have no recollection of him. Al-sama, have we met somewhere before? Verification."

Clind shook his head and denied Garfiel's suspicion.

If Clind could not recall any such thing, then he was likely not mistaken.

As previously mentioned, Clind could use special magic, but he also had outstanding abilities as a butler. He was the one who trained Frederica and Ram as servants, and he was also the one who had taught Subaru how to use a whip. He might not have been stronger than Garfiel, but his mannerisms also gave the impression that he was no ordinary person, and certainly possessed great power.

If he had no memory of this, then it was probably true that, at least on Clind's side, they were not acquainted.

And, as for Al—

Al: "—Nah, never had any of that, acquaintance. Without a doubt, this is the very first meeting between you and I."

Garfiel: "…So, the hell was up with that profound silence just now?"

Al: "My bad, it's just kinda troublesome to memorize new things. —You said you were called Clind-san? The name's Al. I'm indebted to bro, and to your allies."

Clind: "I am at your service. I look forward to working with you from now on. Perpetuity.”

Al: “Perpetuity is a bit long, but yeah, looking forward to working with you.”

Waving his hand, Al readily responded to Clind’s lighthearted words.

While watching the two of them interact, Garfiel felt that Al’s behavior was somewhat unnatural, but he missed the opportunity to mention it.

Garfiel: “Whatever, I guess.”

Now that Clind had brought Meili here, the real expedition into the Augria Sand Dunes could begin.

The Witchbeasts that swarmed the Sand Sea could be driven away thanks to Meili’s power, but there were still many things to prepare for, such as the Sand Time vortex of the Sand Wind that must be passed through in order to reach the Tower.

He heard that last time, there was a scene where Emilia and Julius, who had accompanied them on their journey, had displayed their abilities.

Garfiel: “I’ll give ‘em hell! My amazin’ self’ll protect Captain ‘n everyone else no matter what!”

Garfiel roared, bringing his fists together before his chest.

The sense of purpose surging up within him was proof of the determination that was erupting from the unshakable awareness that now inspired Garfiel.

3

—Such was Garfiel’s determination, fervent with excited breaths, however.

Meili: “Very goo~d, a safe arrival. I’m relieved that nothing happened this ti~me.”

Saying those words, Meili hopped down from the driver's seat onto the sand, and with the gargantuan door that was the entrance to the Tower behind her, she spread out both her arms.

The eastern edge of the Augria Sand Dunes—the path to the Pleiades Watchtower, which even the Sword Saint had given up on traversing due to his failure to reach it, was now easily surmounted by them.

Garfiel: "Gao…"

Having firmly vowed to protect his comrades no matter the obstacle, Garfiel ought to have been pleased with the anticlimactic result, and yet he could not help but mutter that with a somewhat unsatisfied look on his face.

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Chapter 9:
High-Efficiency Sorcerous Induction Door

1

???: “—I am glad you have returned safely. Relief.”

With few words, Clind expressed that he was pleased to see Subaru return.

Since being made Emilia’s knight, Subaru had put in great efforts to live up to his title, and this man had taught him how to train his body and handle a whip, as well as many things that had led to his current confidence. He could be said to be Subaru’s true teacher in this world.

Despite his position, he had always maintained a certain distance with the people of the mansion he served, even with Subaru, but when he spoke of their reunion, he touched his shoulder and seemed to have a slight smile on his face, which was quite impactful.

At the same time, Subaru was also worried about Clind, who seemed unfazed by anything.

Subaru: “Of course that’s only natural. Or I guess I should say, I’m really sorry. Clind-san, I heard you were a huge help to Emilia-tan and the others when they came to get me.”

Clind: “No, I only did what was possible within my abilities. I have received a fair amount of compensation, so there were few issues. Acceptable.”

Subaru: “Clind-san…”

Clind: “Moreover, does an apology in such a situation not differ from the policy of the camp? Question.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Clind: “If it were Emilia-sama, who you look up to as your master, who is developing with purity and bravery while still retaining her childlike nature, what would she say at a time like this? Contemplation.”

At Clind’s words, Subaru took a small breath.

His evaluation of Emilia was permeated with his partiality towards children who overflowed with infinite potential, but Subaru understood what he was trying to say.

In a situation like this, instead of apologizing for having something done for her, Emilia would say—

Subaru: “Not “sorry”, but “thank you”.”

Clind: “Indeed. Excellent answer.”

The fact that he answered with a straight face without smiling was very Clind-like.

Subaru scratched his cheek with his finger and smiled wryly at his teacher’s unreadable feelings. This elusive quality of his probably contributed to the hardships of Annerose, Clind’s lady, and the complicated feelings of Frederica, who he had known for many years.

But then again, given that Frederica talked about Clind far too often for someone who supposedly disliked him, her complex inner feelings did not seem like something for an outsider to comment on.

Clind: “Speaking of which, it was said in the preceding bird-mail that Frederica would also be accompanying you, but I have yet to locate her tall, conspicuous figure. Verification.”

Subaru: “Hm? Ah, that’s right. Frederica was supposed to come along at first, but she changed her plans at the last minute and went together with Roswaal instead.”

Subaru answered Clind’s question, keeping an eye on the distant sky.

At present, the Emilia camp, including Subaru's current party, was divided into groups to carry out different tasks throughout the Kingdom of Lugunica. Emilia and Otto headed to the Royal Capital to report on the events in the Empire, Ram was looking after Rem, who was resting at the mansion to recover her Memories, and Roswaal and Frederica had headed to the south of the Kingdom—to the Barielle Domain.

With the death of Priscilla, and with her husband Leip Barielle having passed away a while ago, the Barielle Domain was bereaved of its lord, extolled as the Sun Princess, and great disorder was to be expected.

With the aim of minimizing such tumult, Roswaal accompanied Schult, who had chosen to return straight to the Priscilla Camp, and Frederica had also gone along with them.

???: "Frederica is good with children and is liked by Schult, so she can be trusted to take care of things, I suppose. Just thinking about Roswaal going there on his own is enough to make a person shudder, in fact."

Subaru: "I get what you mean, but don't go around saying that too much. Roswaal has mellowed a lot… even this time, Emilia-tan asked for his help with Schult, and he accepted in no time."

As always, Beatrice's harsh words for Roswaal were quite endearing, but Subaru was very grateful for how he had handled the situation this time. Emilia, who had apparently spoken with Schult while Subaru engaged in Sparka, also seemed relieved that Roswaal had taken care of the situation.

To be perfectly honest, Subaru could not help but wonder if Roswaal was only willing to help out with the situation of another camp without any hesitation because he wanted to have influence over the Barielle Domain. Even if that were the case, he thought Roswaal was more trustworthy than other people who harbored ambition—that was the conclusion Subaru came to for the time being.

To begin with, if it was a matter of getting involved in the affairs of other camps, Subaru had already been sticking his nose in much more boldly than Emilia or Roswaal.

Subaru: "…"

While thinking this, Subaru expressed another complex feeling of gratitude to Roswaal—that when Subaru failed to save Priscilla, Roswaal had not followed through on his past declaration.

Subaru's Return by Death—even though Roswaal was unaware that Death was the impetus, he recognized that Subaru had the Authority to redo things, and after the battle in the Sanctuary, he clearly declared that he would not allow Natsuki Subaru to take a path of compromise when it came to the loss of those around him.

Roswaal had said that if Subaru ever failed to save someone important to him, he would incinerate everything in an inferno of his flames, forcing Subaru to reset that world.

That was no empty-threat or joke, but a genuine declaration.

However, Roswaal did not attempt to make that terrifying scene of flames a reality on this occasion, as if to add insult to injury after Subaru's failure to save Priscilla.

Whether this signified some kind of change in Roswaal, or whether he did not count Priscilla among the people for whom Subaru would reset, he did not know. Albeit, he really hoped that it was the former.

Subaru: "Well, that's why Frederica is with Roswaal. If you want to see her, Clind-san, you can just hop over there…"

Clind: "Unfortunately, my method of transportation is not all-powerful. Conditional. In addition, concerning the matter of going out of my way just because of wanting to see Frederica. Denial. However—"

Subaru: "However?"

Clind: "I was merely concerned about the fact that things are not going according to the original plan. Trivial."

Clind added this after briefly shaking his head, making Subaru raise his eyebrows.

Although Clind’s point of view was understandable, things did not always go according to plan. Not to say that one should be overly flexible, but being too rigid could cause one to be unable to do anything.

First of all, if it had not been Frederica, it would have been Petra who accompanied Roswaal. Internally, within the camp, that would have been a much more concerning situation.

That was why this combination of personnel came about naturally.

Clind: “…”

Subaru: “Clind-san?”

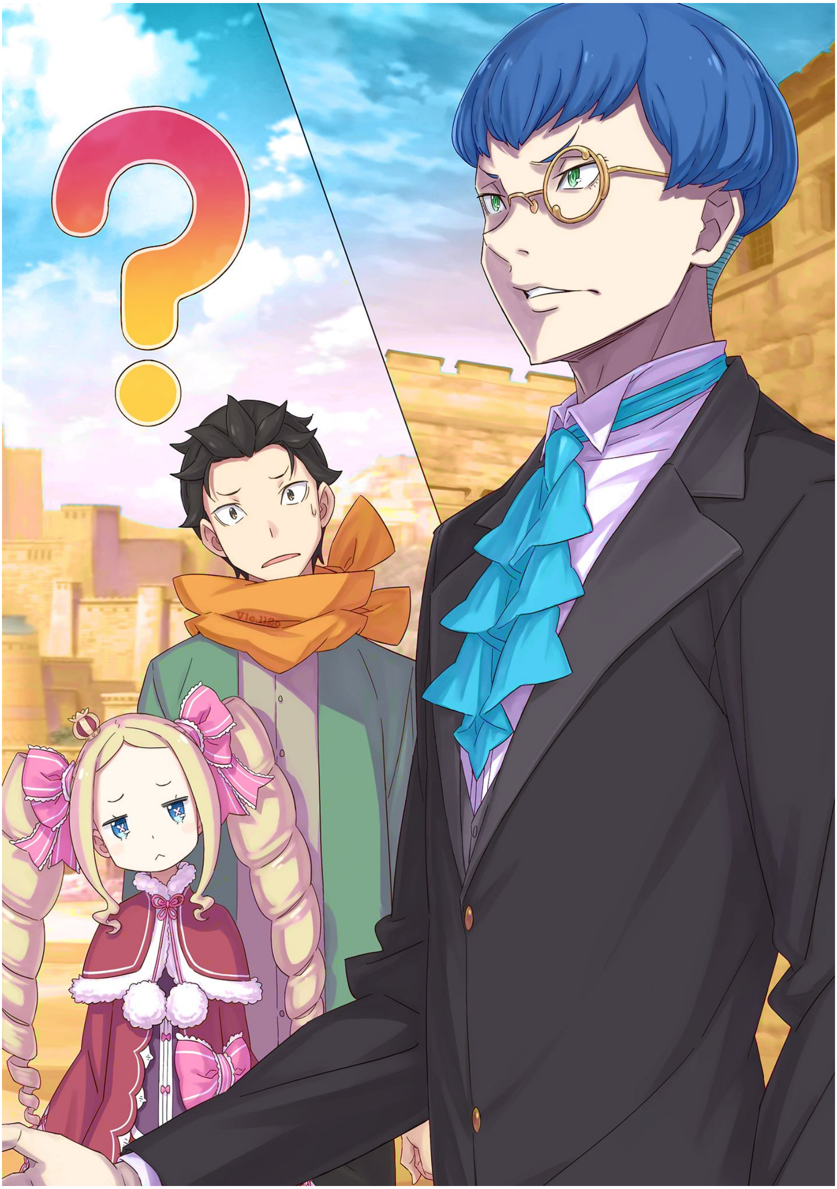
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Clind: "—. Apologies for always beating around the bush. Acknowledgment. Considering my position, my remark was out of line. Concern."

Clind bowed his head as he said this, and Subaru thought his attitude of drawing a line between himself and others like that was lonely.

Originally, he was a person who knew how to distinguish between his own and other people's areas of responsibility, but—

Subaru: "I'm not Roswaal or Annerose, so I don't think there's anything like being out of line with me. You should know, Clind-san, that you're one of us."

There was a reason why he had thanked him earlier.

If someone went to such lengths in order to help you out, then what were they if not a comrade?

Subaru: "Clind-san, you and I are both on the side of the brave and cute Emilia-tan, yeah?"

Clind: "—. Yes, indeed. Affirmation. However, unlike you, Subaru-sama, who is expected to grow up quickly, I am in a position where I want to watch over the budding potential and growth. Cradle."

Subaru: "I feel the divide between incompatible factions who support the same idol!"

Beatrice: "Incidentally, Betty's position is that Emilia's growth would make Bubby proud, I suppose."

Even within the camp, it was clear that there were big differences in the way that Emilia was being supported, but Beatrice's opinion was the most mature.

Anyway, it was a great help that Clind could travel the long distance in one go with Meili, who was essential for surmounting the Augria Sand Dunes.

Subaru: “What will you do after this, Clind-san?”

Clind: “Although it concerns my lady’s life, I have been unable to concentrate on my duties as a butler for some time. Introspection. When the Master and Emilia-sama return, things will likely get busy again. Therefore, I intended to leave you all in Frederica’s care and turn back… Contemplation.”

Narrowing his eyes, a look of worry was visible through Clind’s monocle.

It was clear that his contemplation was centered around his lady, Annerose.

Albeit young, Annerose already possessed the spirit of a first-class noble, and while she was dependable, she was also somewhat at risk. As her closest retainer, Clind must have felt uneasy about leaving her side for long periods of time.

That was why—

Subaru: “—It’s all right, Clind-san. Garfiel’s here too. Petra’s also becoming more and more reliable. Go back and grant some peace of mind to Annerose.”

2

After that scene, Subaru and his group set out to conquer the Augria Sand Dunes with Meili in tow, and although they had succeeded splendidly—

???: “…Seriously now, my amazin’ self didn’t get any damn opportunity to shine.”

???: “Well, since we just parted from Clind-san telling him that everything would be okay, if any problem arose then it’d have been hard on him. I say it’s good that nothing happened.”

???: “I get it, ya know? I really do get it, ya know? But still, what about my amazin’ self’s feelin’s after gettin’ all fired up for this?”

Crestfallen, Garfiel stood with his head hung low before the main entrance to the Pleiades Watchtower.

Within the blowing Sand Wind, Garfiel was hunched over looking dejected, and Meili, who was the greatest contributor to overcoming the Sand Sea, crossed her arms and puffed out her cheeks.

Meili: “Wh~at~? It’s not as if it’s my fau~lt. If the fanged Onii-san wants to show off his strength so badly, how about making a round trip across the sandpit by himse~lf?”

Petra: “Meili-chan, don’t provoke him like that! Sorry, Garf-san. Meili-chan didn’t speak out of malice. She just doesn’t know when to keep her mouth shut…”

Meili: “Petra-chan is quite ha~rsh…”

Meili, who had taken offense, reluctantly withdrew due to the mediation from Petra.

The exchange at the bar in Mirula was not the only reason; rather, in the power balance between these two, Petra was for some reason overwhelmingly superior, which made for an intriguing friendship.

Subaru: “As I thought, is this because of the power dynamic between the one who feeds and the one being fed?”

Beatrice: “It is doubtful if that is the case, in fact. Finding someone who can match Petra in the mansion is rare, I suppose. Only Emilia and Ram, in fact.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan is naturally strong, and Ram is just strong, plain and simple.”

Subaru nodded at the interjection from Beatrice, agreeing with her point.

Needless to say, neither Subaru nor Beatrice would ever be caught claiming that they could beat Petra. They knew exactly where they stood. How admirable.

Subaru: “Then again, coming back here once again, something is slowly welling up within me.”

Within the heart of Subaru who had spoken thus, a dull throbbing ache began to form at the sight of the majestic tower before him.

It was the place from which he had been sent away to the Vollachian Empire, and although so much had happened since then, it was also the place that had fortuitously brought Spica to him.

However, what made Subaru’s heart ache the most at this moment, was she whom he had lost.

Subaru: “…”

Shaula. —The first person whom Natsuki Subaru, who possessed Return by Death, was unable to save.

Priscilla had been added to that, and even though Subaru’s mind ought to have been cognizant of the fact that Return by Death was not omnipotent, he was forced to realize the same with the very depths of his soul.

That was why, such thoughts, such wounds, he wished to never have to experience them again.

Beatrice: “However, it is truly a relief, I suppose. After all, having to go through all that hassle just to get to the Tower is undesirable, in fact.”

Perhaps understanding Subaru’s innermost thoughts through their linked hands, Beatrice chose not to touch upon Subaru’s sentiments, and Subaru also nodded back with a “Yes”.

The Pleiades Watchtower itself was visible at a distance even from Mirula. Compared to before, the density of the clouds and dust plumes that enshrouded it had diminished, putting the fear of losing sight of the Tower at an almost nonexistent level.

Of course, this would no longer be the case during the Sand Time, when the Sand Wind grew stronger, but now that he had conquered it once before and knew of the warping of space within the Sand Time that led to the Tower, he had rather looked forward to its arrival.

Beatrice: “Even within that Sand Wind, he contributed greatly by keeping vigilant watch over the surroundings of the dragon carriage and avoiding the rocks and valleys, and yet, Garfiel is still far too upset, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That we could preemptively prevent a crisis, that surely was thanks to his efforts. Well, perhaps what Garfiel needs to work on in the future is him feeling like he hasn’t gotten his job done unless he uses his muscles.”

If one were to simply rank the contributors to overcoming the Sand Sea, Garfiel would surely be among the top three. Of course, one of them was Meili, and the other—

Subaru: “Sorry to make you keep taking these excursions with us, Patrasche. Time and time again, your stamina, your ability to break through, and your grace are what come to my aid.”

Patrasche: “—Dodogyuuun.”

When Subaru called out to her, Patrasche neighed as if to say that it was a matter of course.

Of course, in the Vollachian Empire, and once again on the way to the Pleiades Watchtower, she who pulled the dragon carriage, was undoubtedly an indispensable member.

The long journey was still ongoing, and there had been no time to unwind; so, once they returned to the mansion, and time could be made for some relaxation, she needed to be shown appreciation by brushing her or taking her for a picnic or whatever.

And so, while Subaru and the others congratulated each other for having made it to the Tower safely—

Al: “This is—”

Getting off the dragon carriage after Subaru and the others, Al calmly looked up at the Tower and muttered thus in a hoarse voice.

The fleeting emotions that were blended into Al's voice, by their sheer sincerity, made Subaru's cheeks nearly stiffen, so he hastily pinched them with his fingers to endure the urge.

Throughout the journey, Subaru tried his best to avoid looking too serious or worried in front of Al. The purpose of the journey was what it was. It was impossible to forget about that and act as if it was nothing special, nevertheless, he still wanted to avoid treating Al too delicately and touching on that sore spot as much as possible.

At least, that was what Subaru would have thought, had the situation been the inverse.

Subaru: "Our objective, the Pleiades Watchtower. The journey might have been a bit cramped, but I'm glad we made it."

Being conscious of that, Subaru nuzzled the cheeks he had been pinching, and called out to Al. After Subaru called out to him, Al trained his gaze upon the Tower,

Al: "…The journey wasn't cramped at all. The kids took great care of me, so despite me being a burden, it was a pretty comfortable trip for me."

Subaru: "About you being a burden; you're not."

Al: "Ah, my bad, my bad, I'm not being sarcastic or ironic. Ah, it's no good. I ended up saying something unnecessary. How pathetic for a grown man to act this way."

Slowly shaking his head, Al muttered as he placed his hand upon his helmeted forehead. Subaru, who could understand a portion of the difficult state of mind that Al was in, found it hard to say something appropriate.

Just as Subaru was concerned about Al, Al was also concerned about Subaru and everyone else.

However, even if one were to try to pretend that they were not depressed, since the reality would be that they indeed were depressed, such a pretense would be unable to produce its intended effect.

As a result, they would end up displaying a strange bravado, and a mindset of saying things that need not be spoken would come into play.

Beatrice: “Nobody thinks that you’re a pathetic man all the time, in fact. Everyone has moments when they cannot hold their head high, I suppose. What is important while doing so, is reflecting upon it, in fact.”

Al: “…Sheesh. That consolation really does touch me deeply. Thank you, Beako-chan.”

Beatrice: “—. That manner of address, only Subaru is allowed to use it, I suppose. Be careful next time, in fact.”

Beatrice replied to Al with an irritated look on her face, and Subaru, feeling affectionate, gently stroked her head.

Then, as he headed towards Garfiel and the others who were attempting to open the main gate of the Tower—

Al: “—Bro, thank you.”

Al’s appreciative voice echoed from behind, making Subaru almost stop for a moment, but in the end, he just waved over his shoulder and proceeded towards the entrance of the Tower with Beatrice.

He held various hesitations about coming to the Pleiades Watchtower. Such as, if seeking Priscilla’s Book of the Dead was truly the right thing to do or not.

However, before considering whether or not they could actually find her Book of the Dead, he was certain of one thing, that his concerns about Al had not been meaningless.

Subsequently—

Petra: “Ah, Subaru. This big door, how do we open it?”

Subaru: “Ah, it’s certainly huge, but it isn’t as heavy as it looks. If I put all my weight into it and push with all my might, it should open up just a little.”

Petra: “You used force?!”

Meili: “Oh ye~s. Because it had been opened previously by Naked Onee-san and Emilia-Onee-san… and then, by the Sword Saint, I had forgo~tten.”

Beside Petra, whose eyes had widened in surprise, Meili blurted so while hugging her elbows.

It was slightly surprising to hear her mention the existence known as the Sword Saint—Reinhard, but apparently, during Subaru’s absence, in order to gain the approval of the Council of Wise Men, Meili had visited the Tower once with Felt and Reinhard.

In other words, this was the third time that Meili had visited the Tower in a short while. Probably, across the entire world, she was the woman foremost in the number of visits to the Pleiades Watchtower, and it was likely that her count would only continue to increase in the future.

Meili: “Ye~p, when I came here the la~st time…”

Garfiel: “Ey ey, wait a minute. We’ll talk ’bout that, but let’s get inside the Tower already. If force is whatcha need to open it, then this is where my amazin’ self comes in—”

Then, interrupting Meili as she tried to talk about her previous journey, Garfiel cracked his knuckles and stepped forward. In response to the words “by force”, it was quite adorable of him to become proactive and take this as his time to shine, but in truth, Garfiel was indeed fully qualified.

Thinking that, Subaru also encouraged him with an “I’m counting on you.” —It happened at that moment.

Garfiel: “—Ahh?”

His long-awaited opportunity having finally come around, Garfiel had been about to challenge the door. Then, before his eyes, the sound of stone scraping against stone rang out as it slowly opened.

Of course, Garfiel had yet to even touch the door.

Opposite to Garfiel as he was astonished by that fact, out from the opened gap in the door—

???: "—How about that, take you by surprise? Considering that there will likely be more people coming to the Tower from here on out, as well as the cleanup of the Miasma drifting over the Augria Sand Dunes, I have constructed a brand new mechanism."

Audible was the voice of a man brimming with confidence and pride.

The figure of the person to give the statement packed with a smiling, boastful nuance, was slowly but surely exposed to the eyes of Subaru's party.

Waiting there was a person with neatly trimmed green hair, clad in a black robe.

Robed Figure: "It is a mechanism that funnels a miniscule, yet specific amount of Mana through a magic circle in order to operate the door. Through such means, I have rectified the inefficient state of the Tower starting with its cumbersome gate. I have dubbed this construction the High-Efficiency Sorcerous Induction Door—"

???: "—It's a door that opens automatically, so it's an automatic door."

Robed Figure: "Ngah??!"

As the voltage of his voice increased, right before it was about to hit its apex, a cold voice interrupted like a douse of cold water, leading his vigor to fall flat on its face.

His voice choking up, the robed man looked beside him in shock—as short as a child, the man pointed to the person standing next to him while trembling all over,

Robed Figure: "Miss Flam! You should know this by now with how many times I've said it. It may be modest with its convenience difficult to understand, but it is a brand new technology that someday ought to be used in many facilities. For this reason, an appropriate name is indispensable…"

Flam: “But, it’s hard to say and hard to remember. “Automatic door” works fine.”

Robed Figure: “Such a cheap name…!”

Next to the man frozen up with his eyes widened, a young, peach-haired girl slowly shook her head.

Greeted by two figures who were roughly the same height—the reception had seemed to leave this side a bit behind but, setting that aside, Subaru called out with a “Heyyy” to the people who had arrived here before them,

Subaru: “Sorry for interrupting while you’re in the middle of something, but you two are…”

Meili: “They’re Sensei-san and Flam-chan, Onii-san.”

As Subaru tried to ask about their identity, Meili interjected like so.

Judging the words she spoke to be “sensei” and the name of a girl, and based on Meili’s attitude of seemingly knowing these people, he was able to guess who they were.

Last time, when Meili visited the Pleiades Watchtower with Felt and the others, they had left behind people at the Tower to keep watch and serve as a means of communication, the Felt Camp’s—

Robed Figure: “Mh, might that be Garfiel-dono over there?! Long time no see, ever since Pristella, eh?! Have you been well, I wonder? It is I, Ezzo Cadner!”

Flam: “Ezzo-sama is as spirited and noisy as always today.”

Ezzo: “Calling me noisy is naught but slander, Miss Flam!”

Saying that, widening his eyes at the girl named Flam in anger, was the one who had given his name as Ezzo Cadner—the rumored intellectual magician of the Felt Camp.

Being called by Ezzo with familiarity, one might have thought that Garfiel would be delighted at this reunion with an acquaintance,

but—

Garfiel: “A-again, my amazin’ self’s time to shine… gao…”

And, helplessly lowering his extended arm, he was in a dejected state.

3

???: “—I see. I know not of the finer details, but Priscilla Bariella-sama has…”

Upon hearing the news of Priscilla’s demise, Ezzo offered a silent prayer.

His prayer, mastered to grant rest to a soul, was permeated with a hue betraying definite intellect, intellect, which could also be found in the young childlike appearance stemming from his origin as a dwarf.

As a member of the Felt Camp, he was of course aware of Priscilla, a rival Camp; not losing his composure at the news of her passing, however, he turned his gaze towards Al,

Ezzo: “Al-dono, my condolences. I never had the opportunity to meet Priscilla-sama, but I have heard from Miss Felt that she was a formidable opponent, one not to be looked down on. Her eye for character is certain. Your liege was undoubtedly an exceptional personage.”

Al: “…Yes, I am grateful, Ezzo-dono.”

Solemnly, Ezzo displayed his condolences towards Priscilla, and Al responded in a humble manner.

A stranger who hid his face behind a steel helmet, and a person who displayed maturity contrary to his young appearance; quite the unnatural exchange from the viewpoint of an outsider, but the exchange of feeling was a sincere one indeed.

Ezzo: “Well then, Natsuki-dono and Garfiel-dono, have you come directly to the Tower from the Empire?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. The distance is shorter by going straight to the Tower compared to stopping at the mansion for a bit.”

Ezzo: “I see. Be that as it may, it must have been a tough decision to part from your liege, Emilia-sama. Reinhard-dono, too, is always reluctant to part from Miss Felt, to an exasperating extent.”

Subaru: “That’s because those two have their own way of getting along, I guess… Though, I do suspect that Reinhard might actually enjoy seeing those frowns on Felt’s face.”

Felt was so apathetic to Reinhard that it was even refreshing. Those reactions of hers perhaps seemed fresh to Reinhard, who everybody would treat with politeness at all times.

If that was indeed the reason why he stayed by Felt’s side, then Reinhard also had a pretty good personality.

Subaru: “Of course, the reason’s probably because she’s his precious master, but… as you said, Ezzo-san, it does bother me that I had to part with Emilia-tan. It’s just that—”

Nearly two months had passed since the time of Emilia and everyone else’s departure from the Kingdom for the Empire.

During that period of time, nothing had progressed in regards to various issues concerned with the Royal Selection, and the changes in their relationship with the Empire had to be reported to the Royal Capital with haste. —And, that included the information of Priscilla’s passing, which would cause a veritable earthquake as far as the Royal Selection was concerned.

Therefore, they could not afford to delay the report to the Royal Capital.

At the same time, they could not neglect Al, depressed as he was, for long, constraining him despite his desire to head to the Tower. As Ezzo had stated, it had been a tough decision.

Regardless—

Subaru: “We didn’t get into any major arguments over this. To be honest, I'm aware I was asking for too much, but they knew I was going to propose such a thing, so… I feel kinda sorry."

Since Emilia and the others had already known what Subaru was going to say, it felt like they had prepared the safest means to grant Subaru's request to the utmost extent.

It was the utmost extent amidst aforementioned undelayable circumstances such as the report to the Royal Capital and the handling of the Barielle Domain, but, currently, they had allowed Subaru and this group to head to the Pleiades Watchtower.

Ezzo: "No argument over it… hmhm, is that how it went?"

Subaru: "—?"

Ezzo: "Ahh, nothing, just talking to myself. It is very much like how you appraised the master-servant relationship between Miss Felt and Reinhard-dono; to each their own. After all, I can only imagine the things that happened in the Empire."

Tracing his slim jaw with his finger, Ezzo nodded in a magnanimous fashion.

There was something relaxing about Ezzo's manner of speech and attitude while talking to him, so it was no wonder that Meili had called him "sensei".

Either way—

Subaru: "Time for a break now that we've reached the Tower… is what I'd like to do right about now, but, there's probably some people who won't be able to settle down with the objective so close at hand, so, without any further delay…"

Ezzo: "Onwards to the library on Taygeta, hm? Of course, I have no reason to stop you. Only, allow me to verify one thing. —Al-dono."

Rushing through their introductions and circumstances, Subaru looked towards the Tower's entrance—at the spiral staircase going up five floors, attempting to move the conversation forward, on towards the topic of the Third Floor, their destination. However, he was interrupted by Ezzo calling Al's name.

As Al turned around in response to that call, Ezzo raised a single finger, and,

Ezzo: "Earlier, I stated that I have never been acquainted with Priscilla-sama, but allow me to say this. From what I have heard of her personality, is it not unthinkable that Priscilla-sama would wish for you to read her Book of the Dead? Even so, do you still desire the Book of your late liege?"

Al: "…"

Subaru: "Ezzo-san, that's…"

Ezzo: "Silence, Natsuki-dono. I am asking Al-dono. It is an important matter."

Right after Ezzo told him to be silent, the tip of his raised finger began to glow faintly, and Subaru felt his own throat become unable to emit sound. Instantly, he guessed that it was some magic of Ezzo's, and was made aware that he was a user of magic proficient beyond his expectations.

And thus, with Subaru having been forbidden from speaking by force to their side, Ezzo exchanged gazes with Al,

Ezzo: "It is painful to lose somebody close to you. I, and many others, share in this experience. However, it is unthinkable that all those who experience it would then visit this Tower, seeking a Book of the Dead. Much less, if the person inscribed within the Book would not desire that either."

That which Ezzo spoke, was a sensible opinion so sharp that it could even draw blood.

Al: "…"

As Al maintained silence, his expression was hidden by his steel helmet, making it impossible to examine it.

However, it was factual that he had sustained a deep, monumental wound, that he was drowning in the blood and pain wrought by that wound. It was also a fact that Subaru, and everybody else, wanted to do something about that.

For that, the Emilia Camp had unanimously—.

Al: “It’s as you say, Ezzo-dono. As you said, there are people who, even if somebody close to them dies, will get back up on their feet by themselves. Even without borrowing the power of the Books.”

Ezzo: “Your agreement is above all else. However, it seems you have more to say.”

Al: “Yeah, I’ve got more. There’s another thing that’s just as you said. Princess—Priscilla, she wouldn’t want anybody to read her Book of the Dead.”

Ezzo: “…”

Al: “But, she died.”

With a hum, Subaru’s muted throat rang faintly.

Hearing Al speak of Priscilla’s passing for the first time, Subaru felt a sensation akin to being cut by a sharp blade.

It was beyond pain, it was a sensation moreso akin to blood shedding, causing his body temperature to fall vigorously.

Then, with Subaru and Ezzo having heard those words, Al still continued further—

Al: “Priscilla is dead. —No longer, can she tell me anything.”

Ezzo: “—. I see.”

At that low tone hailing from Al, sounding as if his heart had frozen over, Ezzo cast his eyes down.

Listening to the very same reply Ezzo did, Subaru’s heart was pierced by the everlasting glaciation that had befallen Al’s heart—at the pitiful, desolate frame of mind upon being bereaved of the flame, of the sun known as Priscilla.

His expression indicating he was experience a sensation selfsame with that of Subaru's, Ezzo gave a brief sigh, and,

Ezzo: "By saying things to test you, I have made you say something you wished not to. I apologize."

Al: "…Nah, it was necessary. For me, to put it into words."

Indeed, as Al responded in a hoarse voice, Ezzo deeply nodded.

Then, Ezzo snapped his fingers, and,

Ezzo: "Excuse me, Natsuki-dono. I wished to hear him out between just the two of us, without any interruptions."

Subaru: "Ah, ahhh~, ahhh~, my voice is back… Just now, that was…"

Ezzo: "Yin Magic… is what it may seem, but it is an application of Yang Magic. It is not that you had lost your voice, but rather that it was boosted to a pitch so high that nobody would be able to hear it normally. It is in the register emitted by the likes of bats."

Subaru: "Is that even possible… I really underestimated you. That and…"

While placing his hand upon his throat, Subaru turned his attention towards Al. Guessing the intention of Subaru's gaze, Ezzo prefaced with "I understand",

Ezzo: "Ultimately, it is a matter between the parties involved. It is no place for outsiders to interject. But then again, were doubt or hesitation present, it was within my intentions to stop him indirectly. But presuming this is the only way to move forward, then those who bear the resolve have no choice but to do so."

Subaru: "Is that… fine?"

Ezzo: "Do not say such ridiculous things. All of you have come to terms with it in your own ways, no? Besides, if I myself died, I would like for people to read my Book of the Dead if they so desired. I would want them to learn everything about my life, and use it as a foundation for the future."

Subaru: "…"

Ezzo: "Or rather, while it may not have been in the form of earnest desire, I have already diligently read quite a few Books of the Dead! They would have undoubtedly questioned how I could stoop so low!"

The orderly, mature expression Ezzo had worn until then disappeared as he raised his voice, his expression having returned to the one he had initially displayed when exhibiting the automatic door technology that opened the door of the Tower, bearing great confidence.

While astonished by the sudden change in demeanor, Subaru understood that this was a bit of ingenuity designed to distract from the tense atmosphere Ezzo had created, and thus harbored a favorable impression of Ezzo's humanity.

In all honesty, having just returned from the Empire, where everyone he met had the potential to become an enemy, Subaru was highly favorable to those he could face with peace of mind.

In any case—

Ezzo: "Sorry for keeping you. I feel bad for taking stocks away from Natsuki-dono and the rest, who are already familiar with the Tower, but likely at the current moment, I am the one who has visited the Library the most, and so I shall be guiding you myself. —Towards the main attraction of the Great Library Pleiades, Taygeta, where the Books of the Dead are stored."

With that, the time to fulfill their objective in visiting the Pleiades Watchtower, had finally come around.

Chapter 10:
Limit of Three Days

1

—The Great Library Pleiades.

That was the official name of the Tower that Shaula had spoken when first inviting Subaru and the others here.

Since she did not seem capable of coming up with such clever words on her own, it was probably something told to her by the “master” who had ordered Shaula to manage the Tower.

And thus, Shaula had remembered those words and necessary explanations that had been taught to her with tactless honesty over four hundred years, and at that moment, she was finally able to present them.

And now—

Ezzo: “—The Great Library Pleiades, and its archive of the Books of the Dead, Taygeta.”

Behind Ezzo, as he spread his arms out and declared so, rows of bookshelves were lined up. These bookshelves were arranged in a circular formation around the staircase leading to the lower Fourth Floor, with many rows, many tens of rows, extending outward from there.

Even when considering the rather large circumference of the Pleiades Watchtower, there was no way this space could have fit within, so there was likely some expansion of space taking place there.

Beatrice: “It is not something that could not be achieved through Yin Magic, in fact. However, to construct a technique that maintains its form over multiple centuries without an active caster is a skillful feat beyond the limits of human understanding, I suppose.”

And, to Subaru's misgivings, Beatrice responded with an expression of wonder.

Beatrice was a Great Spirit of the Yin Attribute. Perceiving the sophisticated magic cast upon the Tower, it might have been natural for her to become excited.

Anyway—

???: "…"

Visiting the archive for the first time, Garfiel and Petra speechlessly widened their eyes, astonished by the overwhelming amount of bookshelves—nay, by the sheer quantity of the books contained within, that was to say, the Books of the Dead.

That was only natural. When Subaru first became aware of the true nature of the books here on Taygeta, even while understanding the logic behind it, he too was left speechless by perceiving the vast number of dead individuals.

Petra: "All of these are… the Books of people who died, right?"

With a few words, Petra muttered in an astonished voice.

As she slightly averted her eyes in dumbfoundment, Subaru thought it was only natural. In this aspect, Petra had a considerable amount of guts, there were many instances where she faced situations with a level of tolerance that put grown-ups to shame. It was to the extent that when she encountered Sand Time, which tormented many of the people who challenged the Augria Sand Dunes, she had coped with the sand winds very energetically.

And even though Petra could put up with so much, there was a level of eeriness on Taygeta for which she could not maintain her calmness.

Garfiel: "—Hk."

The same applied to Garfiel as he looked all around the archive, making a slight noise with his throat.

Rather, for someone like him, one of the two in the camp, alongside Emilia, who excelled at taking things in stride, perhaps it was not the eerie austerity of the Books of the Dead that might have overwhelmed him, but rather the sheer number of them.

Having just previously seen the hosts of undead in the Vollachian Empire—the act of witnessing the resurrection and redeath of so many dead individuals, might have spurred on that sensation.

Subaru did have concerns about those reactions from Petra and Garfiel. However, the one he was most concerned about, also visiting this place for the first time, was the person whose objective lay here—

Al: "…"

Heaving a small sigh, Al looked all around the library.

His state of astonishment was more quiet than Petra's, and his head looking around the archive was more loose than Garfiel's, however, that was precisely why there was an air of tension about him.

It was to the extent that Subaru's throat dried up when trying to call out to him, creating a sense of hesitation in him.

But, while he was hesitating—

Al: "—I can't read it."

And, having calmly approached a bookshelf, Al had removed a single volume in a natural movement, and while skillfully holding it in his elbow, he had flipped its pages wide open.

There had not been even the slightest hesitation in that gesture, and since it had all been so natural, Subaru's reaction of "Bah!" had ended up being delayed.

Subaru: "W-wait wait wait! Don't do that so suddenly! You really startled me!"

Al: "Hm… ah, my bad. It's just what I saw right in front of me, so I did it subconsciously."

Subaru: “Don’t you find it scary to suddenly go for things you have no knowledge of?!”

While saying that, Subaru scrambled to take the Book from Al’s hand.

Being greatly shocked by that quick action, Subaru was simultaneously reminded of the danger Al was in. On the journey thus far, he had not made a very strong display of his attitude, but it was likely a result of the strength of his desire for the Book.

Subaru wanted to show that he understood that. But on the other hand, that did not mean he would not reproach Al’s rash behavior.

Subaru: “I told you this already. The Books here are, you know, way more powerful than you could ever imagine. At one point, I was right on the verge of becoming Meili.”

Meili: “What~ kinda joke is that~! Don’t say such scary things~!”

Her name listed as an example, Meili raised her voice in opposition, but this was no joke or anything of the sort from Subaru, but a dreadfully true sense of harm possessed by the Books of the Dead.

On the previous journey, in a loop where Meili had lost her life—back then, Subaru had read Meili’s Book of the Dead, putting a huge burden on his mind, and immersing him so much in her life that a non-existent Meili began to dwell within him.

To be honest, the affection and familiarity Subaru now felt towards Meili, to a point that she was bewildered by it, was in no small part due to the effects of her Book of the Dead. If affection was something achieved by means of empathy and understanding, then Books of the Dead were the ultimate matchmaker.

But then again, by nature, Books of the Dead would absolutely not grant an opportunity for reunion with a deceased person in a living state, so such a development was only possible for Subaru.

Subaru: “That’s why you have to handle them cautiously. It’s quite possible that you could stop being yourself.”

Al: “To stop being yourself, huh… In a way, that might be the most desirable outcome.”

Subaru: “Al…”

Al: “It’s a joke, just a joke. Just an unfunny, worthless joke.”

As Al pitifully spilled out words of self-abandonment, Subaru’s cheeks stiffened.

Hoping that it might serve as the impetus for him to get back on his feet, Subaru had listened to Al’s request, and had brought him to the Tower. However, his doubts regarding whether this was a drastic method that would help or if it would actually end up deepening his wounds grew stronger.

Ezzo: “Natsuki-dono’s admonishment a moment ago was precisely correct. With the rebuking of Al-dono’s careless action already completed, I would very much like for Garfiel-dono and Miss Petra to be sufficiently careful as well. Should you heedlessly undertake the effects of a Book, it is quite possible that your mind might sustain an everlasting wound.”

And, behind Subaru and Al’s exchange, Ezzo cautioned the first time visitors.

Like Subaru, Ezzo’s words were filled with a nuance only possible from someone who had experienced the feedback from a Book of the Dead.

Without a doubt, just like Subaru and Julius, he was one of the people who had connected with a Book of the Dead—

Ezzo: “While typically regarded without much importance, wounds upon the mind are quite the troublesome affair. There is no prospect to recover from them via healing magic, and there are many instances in which they are made light of due to the fact that they are not outwardly visible. Even aside from that, the influence of Miasma upon these lands is potent, so you may be prone to feeling low in spirits. As one of the senior folk here, if you feel anything wrong at all, please inform me immediately.”

Subaru: “Th-Thank you very much, Ezzo-san…”

Flam: “A splendid attitude to have as the eldest one here, Ezzo-sama. As expected, there is the implication that you fainted with wide eyes, frothing at the mouth and experiencing incontinence, when you first read a Book of the Dead.”

Ezzo: “Miss Flam?! You promised not to say anything about that, did you not?!”

Flam: “Seeing you convulse like that in the library made my eyes widen quite a bit as well.”

Ezzo firmly struck his chest in a reliable manner, but when Flam, his supposed ally, exposed his disgrace, he widened his eyes. Hearing that recount of Ezzo’s experience, the expression of Petra, who had once looked at him with a gaze of respect, began to cloud over as she said “Ezzo-san…?”

At the gaze from the young girl, Ezzo hurriedly gestured,

Ezzo: “Ah, no, that is incorrect! Well, it may not be incorrect, but Miss Flam’s descriptions were too effective as a cautionary tale. Certainly, at first I was unable to bear it and fainted in quite a predicament, but ever since, I have learnt the trick behind reading the Books and have thus not failed in such a manner again!”

Garfiel: “A trick behind readin’ the Books? Somethin’ like that really exists?”

Ezzo: “It does! To put it plainly, it is to clear your mind. To close off your heart. If you enter such a frame of mind and put yourself to the side, then you can treat the incoming information as nothing more than information.”

Flam: “You make it sound so easy, but no matter how many times I hear it, I still do not understand.”

As Flam slowly shook her head, Ezzo looked around at the others in search of agreement. However, neither Petra, nor Garfiel, nor Subaru, nor Bearice, and most definitely not Meili, understood.

At the lack of a favorable response, Ezzo cried out “Impossible…!” in shock.

Regardless of Ezzo’s shock, if it was truly possible to protect one’s mind through the method he had spoken of to successfully read the Books of the Dead, then this was indeed a marvelous thing.

As someone who had actually read Books of the Dead, Subaru understood just how absurd that was. To be honest, even after hearing about the trick just now, Subaru did not think he was capable of doing the same thing.

Subaru: “You’ve got it, right? It’s possible to go into an unrecoverable state by doing something careless. So, for touching any Books outside of the one you’re looking for…”

Al: “I’d better stop. —I got it. I’ll heed your warning. Even without that, it was thanks to bro and the others that I got to the Tower without any trouble. I’m not gonna complain.”

Subaru: “…Well, that’s fine I guess.”

With those words, Subaru returned the Book he had taken from Al to the bookshelf. He did not know the name of the person written on the binding, but he handled it carefully as the sensation was akin to touching a tombstone.

Indeed, the Books of the Dead felt similar to tombstones or grave markers. That was why, he felt a strange sense of resistance against making a racket here.

Anyway—

Ezzo: “Amidst this vast number of Books, finding the one you seek will be difficult. It would be ideal to really concentrate your energy on searching for it. —After all, the Books on these bookshelves may still continue to increase even at this very moment.”

The comment added by Ezzo spoke of a steep journey distinct to the one of crossing the Sand Sea, with the meaning of scaling a sea of Books with no certain means of victory.

2

???: “—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient Covenant, I ask the will of thee who hath reached the summit.”

A deep, solemn voice reverberated, shaking the very souls of those who heard it; the voice of a being of a higher existence.

With the vast, blue sky as a backdrop, a majestic dragon perched at the very top of the towering structure—The divine dragon Volcanica loomed over Garfiel, who stood there, stunned.

It was not the first time he had seen a Dragon.

On the contrary, during the recent Great Disaster in the Vollachian Empire, Garfiel had been entrusted by Subaru and the others to face off directly against the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia, engaging in a fierce battle with it.

The battle spoke for itself. Garfiel did not think he had outright defeated the Cloud Dragon.

Even so, the fact that he had not been beaten was something Garfiel took pride in.

Dragons were considered the most powerful creatures in this world. Whether human, demi-human, Witchbeast, or Spirit, they all paled in comparison to Dragons, which stood at the top of the rankings.

Though it was imperfect, having fought against one of those top-tier beings, Garfiel felt as though he had broken through a barrier.

However—

Volcanica: "—Thou, who hath reached the top of the Tower. Step forth onto the First Floor, almighty petitioner."

The majestic, blue-white shining Divine Dragon Volcanica rested its wings leisurely at the top of the Tower. His instincts clearly understood that it was on a completely different dimension from the Cloud Dragon Mezoreia.

While it was not evident from its appearance, the experience as a Dragon between Volcanica and Mezoreia was as vast as the difference between an adult and a child.

???: "…I had only heard about it because I missed the chance to see it last time, but seeing it for real is something else."

As Subaru looked up at the Dragon behind Garfiel, he expressed his awe.

Subaru was sent to the Empire before he had a chance to encounter Volcanica at the Pleiades Watchtower. Although he had seen the Cloud Dragon in the Empire, he was just as moved as Garfiel when he saw the Divine Dragon Volcanica in person.

Because Emilia and Volcanica once fought each other.

Garfiel: “Emilia-sama, ya were bein’ too damn reckless…”

???: “Honestly, Betty also felt like she was barely alive, in fact. It wasn’t just Emilia, but Subaru, Ram, Anastasia, and everyone else were all in trouble too…”

Subaru: “Yeah, back then you were worried sick about us, Beako. Thanks for everything.”

Recalling those times, Subaru had a serious expression as he patted Beatrice’s head, but from what he had heard, it had not been the kind of conclusion that could be spoken about with such a heartwarming scene.

At that time, Subaru had lost his memory, Meili had betrayed them, and they had clashed with the “Sage” and Gluttony, causing quite a commotion.

Garfiel: “If my amazin’ self had been there, the Captain wouldn’t’ve been sent flyin’ all the way to the Empire…”

Beatrice: “Hm, that’s quite the claim, I suppose. Garfiel, are you saying that you could handle problems that even we couldn’t deal with, in fact?”

Garfiel: “Ugh, no, ‘s not what I meant, but…”

Beatrice: “One of Betty’s pretty jokes, I suppose. Betty knows you didn’t mean that, in fact.”

Beatrice laughed at Garfiel, who was flustered, thinking he might have said something careless. As Garfiel breathed a sigh of relief, Subaru said, “Anyways,” before continuing, Subaru: “I caused everyone a lot of worry. I won’t say it was good that we got sent over there, but when I think about how the Empire might have been destroyed if we hadn’t been there, well…”

Beatrice: “It having turned out alright, is not something we can say, I suppose. Especially, when considering Al’s feelings, in fact.”

Garfiel: “It’s not just that guy. Schult ‘n the ol’ man were the same way.”

Beatrice and Garfiel responded to Subaru’s words, while he scratched his cheek with his finger.

In Garfiel’s mind, the image of the camp collapsing after Priscilla was gone came to mind.

With Heinkel gone and Al seeking the Book of the Dead, even the most optimistic Schult was desperately trying to pull himself together, but he was still in shambles. It was too worrying—no, too cruel—to leave everything to Roswaal alone, so he was relieved that Frederica was there to accompany him.

He wished he could help all of them, one by one, to move forward—

Garfiel: “Sorry for taggin’ along like this, Captain. I jus’ really wanted to see the Divine Dragon for once.”

Subaru: “I was curious too, so it’s not something you need to apologize for. It’s natural for fans to be interested if they find out a celebrity is staying on the upper floors of a hotel… Although, going to try to meet them might be bad manners, huh? Maybe this is overstepping?”

Beatrice: “There is no reason for anyone to blame you, I suppose. If anyone has the right to blame, it would be the Dragon itself, in fact. But…”

Volcanica: “—I, am Volcanica. In accordance with the ancient Covenant, I ask the will of thee who hath reached the summit.”

Beatrice: “It is as you see, I suppose.”

Beatrice shrugged at the vague nature of Volcanica's response.

Garfiel was also skeptical, but when he actually met Volcanica, he realized that it was true that the long, long passage of time had made the Dragon's perception of the world quite vague. Even so, the extraordinary aura it radiated was what set this exceptional Dragon apart.

In any case—

Garfiel: "I'm realizin' again that there's always someone stronger. I've gotta make sure I don't get too full of myself."

Subaru: "…You're strong, Garfiel. I'd reach you on the list of the strongest people I know quicker by counting from the top."

Garfiel: "Isn't it my amazin' self's job to get to the top, though?"

After ascertaining his own standing, he gave Subaru's chest a light poke to let him know that he was not disheartened. Subaru let out a soft grunt from the impact of his fist, and then nodded with tears in his eyes.

And, as they were talking—

???: "—Oh, so you were indeed with the Divine Dragon after all."

At that moment, Ezzo, who had come from the stairs, joined them.

Ezzo glanced at Garfiel, Subaru, then at Volcanica beyond them, and,

Ezzo: "I understand. The mysteries of this tower are sure to pique one's curiosity, but the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, a being who was indispensable in the establishment of the Kingdom of Lugunica as we know it today, is yet another subject of great interest!"

Subaru: "Haha, it's probably different from Ezzo-san's perspective, but I also admire Dragons. Volcanica's way too big for it, but the idea of being something like a Dragon Rider is a classic fantasy for boys."

Garfiel: “Dragon Rider…?! Captain, ya gotta tell me more ‘bout that later.”

Subaru: “Sure. Though having said that, it’s kinda like the flying dragon riders from the Empire.”

Garfiel’s intuition was triggered by the unfamiliar words that Subaru uttered while he nodded his head. He had a hunch that it was probably something extremely exciting and awesome.

Observing the exchange between Garfiel and Subaru, as Ezzo tilted his head and touched his chin,

Ezzo: “I see. I thought we might discuss the significance of the Divine Dragon from an historical or scholarly standpoint, but that will have to wait for another time. —Now then, Natsuki-dono, as requested, I have finished explaining the library to Al-dono. For now, I have placed Miss Flam by his side.”

Subaru: “Thank you, it’s a huge help. I haven’t really had a chance to properly speak with Flam-chan yet, but is it alright to leave her there?”

Ezzo: “Your concern is unnecessary. She is the type who will clearly say no if she is adverse to something. Though, as a servant, it is a bit concerning that she says it so often…”

Beatrice: “We are quite accustomed to maids who say no to things they are adverse to, in fact.”

Garfiel: “Ahh, that’s for sure. Ain’t that the truth.”

Garfiel and Subaru exchanged glances and nodded in response to Beatrice’s remark.

Garfiel’s beloved, both proud and self-aware, was indeed a woman who could clearly express her opinions, regardless of her position as a maid. He liked that about her.

Thinking about it, Flam was like that too, so maybe it was just that women with peach hair were strong.

Ezzo: “Incidentally, Miss Flam has a twin sister named Miss Grassis, not only are they similar in appearance, but also in personality, which is quite troubling.”

Subaru: “You guys sure have a lot of variety over at Felt’s place, with Old Man Rom, Tonchinkan and all… speaking of which, Ezzo-san, how did you end up over there with Felt?”

Ezzo: “I was once indebted to Miss Felt and Reinhard-dono. I think it would be appropriate to say that they took an interest in me and brought me in because of that connection.”

Subaru: “In that case, you were a great find. Kinda like our Otto.”

A find, such was an expression that Otto himself often used, but as for commonalities between Otto and Ezzo, it would probably be their green features. Though, Otto had it in his attire, while Ezzo’s was in his hair.

Green finds were excellent and reliable. Thinking that, Garfiel could not help but chuckle.

Ezzo: “It seems you are enjoying yourself, Garfiel-dono.”

Garfiel: “It’s nothin’, jus’ some worthless thoughts. More importantly, bein’ called “dono” like that feels a lil’ awkward. “Dono~” just sounds so over the top, if ya get what I’m sayin’.”

Ezzo: “Is that so? I do not personally think so, but… in that case, I will address you as Garfiel-kun, as I do with Rachins-kun and the others.”

Garfiel: “Sure, ain’t like it’s our first time meetin’ either. Please go ahead ‘n use that.”

As Garfiel waved his hand, Ezzo nodded with an “Understood.”

At that exchange between Garfiel and Ezzo, Subaru looked back and forth between the two, and said, “Speaking of which”,

Subaru: “You two have met each other before, right? From where?”

Ezzo: “I am sure you recall the Pristella Incident… when the Watergate City was attacked by the Witch Cult led by their Sin Archbishops. I was called by Miss Felt to help with the aftermath, and thus entered the city. That is where I became acquainted with Garfiel-kun and Otto-dono.”

Subaru: “I see, so it was during that time…”

Garfiel: “Oh, ‘n there was a bit of a quarrel that went down then, too… well, it’s kinda a long story.”

That, was during the time when Subaru and the others had departed for the Pleiades Watchtower.

While Otto stayed behind in Pristella to recover from his injuries, Garfiel aided with the city’s reconstruction, and assisted in the retrieval of the Witch’s Remains that had been sealed beneath the city. One of the members of that excavation team was Ezzo—along with Garfiel, Ricardo, and, for some reason, Liliana.

Beatrice: “Just from what has been said, it sounds like a group that would get into a great amount of wrangling, I suppose…”

Ezzo: “Albeit challenging, it was a time from which I learned a great deal. Of course, I was helped by Garfiel-kun many times. Though it feels strange to say it in front of him, he is a remarkable young man.”

Subaru: “Hehe, not at all, not at all.”

Beatrice: “That much is trivial for him, in fact.”

It was a bit embarrassing to see Subaru and Beatrice looking even happier than Garfiel at Ezzo’s unashamed and bold praise.

In truth, Garfiel also deeply understood that Ezzo had more than just a big head, and that he was an excellent magician in a battle situation. Though, it was a bit frustrating that he had underestimated Ezzo due to having an even more outstanding magician so close to him usually.

Ezzo: “—Now then, while it is not unfavorable to deepen our friendship, let us get through the issue at hand before doing so. I am having Miss Flam watch over him, but let us discuss Al-dono.”

Subaru: “—. About Al.”

Ezzo: “Indeed. There is just one thing I would like to verify, but… I suspect that Al-dono’s objective may lie in the resurrection of Priscilla Barielle-sama, but what are your thoughts?”

Subaru: “Wha…?!”

Garfiel: “Ahh?”

As Ezzo stroked his chin and spoke, Subaru and Garfiel’s voices overlapped.

At the sudden utterance of the word “resurrection”, at the very least, Garfiel’s comprehension could not keep up. Next to Garfiel’s befuddlement, Beatrice narrowed her round eyes,

Beatrice: “Just what do you mean, I suppose? The resurrection of the dead… if it is a matter of the Sacrament of the Immortal King, we’ve had more than enough of that, in fact.”

Ezzo: “I suppose you are referring to the incident in the Empire that I have only heard about in passing. The forbidden art of the Sacrament of the Immortal King captures my interest immensely, but that is not what I am referencing at the current moment. I worry about the method that Natsuki-dono jokingly spoke of earlier.”

Subaru: “I, jokingly…?”

Ezzo: “—A pseudo-resurrection of the dead, accompanied by means of reading the Book of the Dead of Priscilla Barielle-sama, and overwriting himself with her existence.”

Subaru: “…”

Without any intonation in his voice, the words void of any emotion spoken by Ezzo permeated into his brain.

A pseudo-resurrection of the dead—the contents of Ezzo's words did not make sense to Garfiel. However, he knew from Subaru's astonished expression, with sweat forming on his forehead, that it was not a nonsensical idea that could be laughed off.

Subaru was left speechless. Gazing at that state of his, Ezzo continued.

Ezzo: "As I mentioned previously, I have already read twelve Books of the Dead. The predicament I found myself in, at first, was a complete failure that I cannot bear to speak about, in accordance with Miss Flam's statements. And, following the sensation I experienced at that time… provides an argument that the overwriting of the mind is possible."

Beatrice: "…Subaru said that their Memories almost blended together, I suppose. But, it is difficult to imagine that the reader's consciousness would then completely disappear, in fact."

Ezzo: "With the sensation of blending and mixing together, that is indeed true. However, what if the reader was prepared with a state of mind to accept all of it? If they were to go in with the attitude that they would disappear from the start, would the mind of the person read from the Book not then take hold without any resistance?"

Beatrice: "…"

Ezzo: "Of course, this is just an armchair theory. It is not as though I have actually tested it. Only, when considering the motives of someone who seeks out the Book of the Dead of an important person they have lost, it is an idea that comes to mind."

As Ezzo spoke of his deductions at length, a deep, uncharacteristic frown was borne upon Beatrice's brow.

Hearing that from the side, Garfiel had no room to interject. He had been working his mind to try to get his head around it, and thought that he was beginning to understand it on a surface level.

However, even if the Books of the Dead were completely filled with the memories and feelings of the dead—

Garfiel: “Somethin’ like that, wouldn’t really be comin’ back to life.”

Ezzo: “Ho, why do you think so?”

Garfiel: “‘Cuz… hk, ‘cuz, that thing. The soul! The soul ain’t there. It ain’t somebody inside a Book.”

As his mind got all jumbled up, Garfiel gnashed his canines and responded so.

It was not something he could provide reasoning for, or properly explain. However, since it was unthinkable that people were made up of nothing more than “memories” and “information”, he answered so.

To Garfiel’s response, Ezzo narrowed his eyes,

Ezzo: “Yes, I am of the same opinion as Garfiel-kun.”

Garfiel: “…Huh?”

Ezzo: “What is with that idiotic expression and voice? It is ruining your masculinity. Maintain a dignified air.”

As Garfiel somehow managed to wring out an answer, Ezzo looked at his troubled face, raised a finger, and continued, “You see…”

Ezzo: “Garfiel-kun’s observation has hit the nail right on the head. Even if the Books of the Dead describe everything about the dead, even if the experiences and emotions accompanying those descriptions can be lived through vicariously, and even supposing the mind can be overwritten, that would not be a resurrection of the dead. It would be the birth of a distinct entity that shares the memories, experiences, and emotions of the dead.”

Subaru: “A distinct entity, that shares in memories, experiences, and emotions…”

Ezzo: “I do not consider that to be a true resurrection of the dead. I wonder if many would not also intuitively think that way? That is why, I wish to ascertain. —Does Al-dono desire to resurrect the dead? If for that purpose, he has chosen the method of a Book of the Dead, his wish shall not be granted."

Subaru: "…"

Ezzo: "But, then again, if he wishes to keep Priscilla-sama within his heart, that is yet another plan."

Slowly shaking his head, Ezzo brought his own thoughts to a close.

Being prompted to think through that manner of speaking, Garfiel's teeth had ended up clattering, and he then peeked at Subaru's state.

Subaru ought to have been the one who wanted to sympathize with Al's feelings, and do something for him, the most. Hearing what Ezzo had just said, just what would Subaru think?

Subaru: "Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot."

Beatrice: "Subaru…"

Subaru: "Until I was told about it, I hadn't even considered such a possibility… I simply thought that Al just wanted to know what Priscilla was thinking in her final moments. That, and I was also hoping that he might be able to get himself together while searching for the Book…"

Pressing his fist against his forehead, Subaru blamed himself for not having thought of it. Witnessing his pitiful state of self-reproach, Garfiel grabbed the arm pressing his fist against his forehead with a "Captain".

No relief would come from tormenting himself like that. This was something that Garfiel deeply understood through the white scar upon his own forehead.

Ezzo: "I do not think you ought to be blamed for not having thought of it. This is just something that I could think of because I have had the experience of actually reading Books of the Dead, as well as the tendency to look at things with a multi-layered approach. There remains room for doubt on whether Al-dono intends to enact such a thing. But—”

Subaru: “I know. I really do, Ezzo-san. —If by some chance, Al wants to disappear so Priscilla can return, that’s a no-go.”

Firmly clenching his molars, there was strength in Subaru’s eyes as he responded to Ezzo. Then, Subaru looked towards Garfiel, who had grabbed his hand,

Subaru: “My bad, I caused you to worry.”

Garfiel: “Ain’t somethin’ ya need to apologize for. This time, it’s my amazin’ self’s job to worry ‘bout ya, Captain. Both Ottobro ‘n Emilia-sama are really countin’ on me a ton, after all.”

Subaru: “Well, guess there’s no helping it.”

As Garfiel released his hand and shrugged his shoulders, Subaru gave a wry smile and dropped his own shoulders. Then, Subaru muttered “Alright” and,

Subaru: “Let’s all agree to not say anything about this to Al. If he hasn’t thought of it himself, then it might go to serve as unnecessary encouragement. Just make sure not to leave Al alone.”

Garfiel: “If he searches for the Book when he’s by himself ‘n ends up readin’ it, there won’t be any way to stop him.”

Ezzo: “It would be ideal to locate the Book before he does. Whether you intend to show him the Book or not, having the Book grants you the initiative.”

Subaru: “…Though, I don’t wanna think about it like a scramble for initiative.”

Garfiel: “Captain…”

Considering the possibility that Al might end up not knowing what to do, Subaru feebly muttered in the midst of the conversation.

To begin with, the reason they had brought Al to the Tower like this was to prevent him from ending up at a loss for what to do. And yet, if the act of coming here caused Al to not know what to do, then it was an act akin to putting the carriage before the ground dragon.

Garfiel: "…"

Fixing his gaze on the floor of the Tower by his feet, Garfiel cursed the Pleiades Watchtower.

For what reason did the Tower store the memories of the dead in the form of Books of the Dead, tempt the hearts of those who seek them, and torment Subaru and the rest of them?

Beatrice: "Al is currently searching for the Book he seeks in the library, I suppose?"

Ezzo: "Yes, he should be."

Beatrice: "What of the girl named Flam, who you left together with him? What sort of girl is she, in fact?"

Ezzo: "She is an attendant of Felt-sama… or rather, she is a servant of House Astrea. She is the descendent of a family that has served House Astrea for generations, so while she is young, she possesses strength that is not to be made light of. Without magic, I would not be able to do a single thing against her."

At Ezzo's explanation, Garfiel was able to understand Flam's posture from earlier.

He had not seen her moving with agility, but Flam's standing posture was by far the most beautiful one there—she kept her center of gravity prepared in a manner that rivaled Ram. That was not to say that her abilities were equal to those of Ram, but since she worked for House Astrea, it was probably fine to expect her to have strength corresponding to that role.

Ezzo: "In all likelihood, Al-dono will spare food and sleep in favor of searching for the Book. We also intend to offer help to split up the labor in the search, but… what is the timeframe of your sojourn at the Tower?"

Subaru: "—We plan to stay for three days. Al has also accepted that."

Three days, that was the predetermined period of their sojourn at the Pleaides Watchtower.

Even if Priscilla's Book of the Dead is not located in that time, they would leave the Tower after three days, and return Al to the Barielle Domain, where he would stay by Schult's side.

That was why, until then, Subaru wished to create an impetus for Al to regain his footing, and Garfiel also approved of that point.

It would be good if these three days could be used to serve a constructive purpose for Al.

And, ensuring that this time would not be used for anything else was—

Garfiel: "—The duty that my amazin' self's gotta fulfill here no matter what."

Clenching his fists so tightly that his bones began to creak, Garfiel firmly assumed his own responsibility.

In order to accomplish what had been entrusted to him by Emilia, Frederica, Otto, Ram, and Rem, who were not present here. —And, by Roswaal too.

Volcanica: "—Thou, who hath reached the top of the Tower. Step forth through the First Floor, almighty petitioner."

Indeed, as Garfiel resolved himself to paint over the disquieting possibilities, the eyes of the Divine Dragon, the target of their gaze unclear, oversaw him and his allies with their unchanged state of ambiguity.

Chapter 11:
You Are No Longer Among Us

1

???: “I know everyone is worried, but I think they’re acting a little too crude.”

While preparing dinner for everyone inside the Pleiades Watchtower, Petra expressed her thoughts on the awkward atmosphere.

It had already been half a day since they arrived at the tower, and they had a time limit of three days for their stay, so Subaru and the others had rushed to the library to search for the book they were looking for.

Petra was busy preparing dinner for the group, who would surely come back hungry, but the atmosphere in the library nearby was terrible.

Petra: “Neither Subaru nor Garf-san were able to concentrate on finding the book at all. Hey, are you listening?”

In response to Petra’s question, the one who nodded absentmindedly with a “Yeah, I hear you” was Meili. She scooped out some of the contents of the pot Petra was heating on the stove with a small spoon and tasted it,

Meili: “Yes, this is deli~cious. Petra-chan, your cooking is getting better and be~tter.”

Petra: “Thanks, but I still have a long way to go before I can reach the heights of Frederica-neesama, so I have to keep working hard. Besides that, the formidable Rem-neesama has returned…”

Meili: “Would she really be a formidable oppo~nent? Ram Onee-san’s younger sister doesn’t remember anything, ri~ght? Then, I don’t think they are any threat to you, Petra-chan, either in cooking or anything el~se."

Petra: "You don't know that. She fell in love with him once, so it wouldn't be strange at all for her to fall in love with him again… or rather, I think it's already a little strange."

Petra lowered her voice and questioned the atmosphere between Subaru and Rem.

Having been asleep for a long time, Rem's awakening made Petra happy. Subaru and Ram had always been concerned about her, and Petra had also looked after her as she slept every day. She was fully aware of how cherished Rem was.

To be honest, she also thought that if Rem had not woken up sooner, she would not have been able to assess her love rival's strength.

When Petra met Rem in person and spoke with her, she got quite a good impression from her earnest and hardworking attitude, but there was something off—something strange about her. Due to her lack of memory, she had quite a few disputes with Subaru, and even now, she seemed to be responding to him in a relatively cold and harsh manner.

Petra: "But, it's still strange."

Meili: "Hmmm, I see~. But Onii-san might have that kind of side to hi~m. No matter how much I gla~re at him, he makes it all seem kind of silly~."

Petra: "Yeah, that's right. I thought Subaru was a strange person at first too… Wait, wasn't the way you just said that strange, Meili-chan?"

Meili: "Stop i~t, you worry too mu~ch."

Meili stuck out her tongue and raised her hands with a displeased look on her face. Petra stared at her with a "mu~" expression and withdrew her suspicion for the time being.

Before departing for the Empire, Meili had said that Petra was overthinking things when she returned from the Pleiades Watchtower, but Petra thought it was not a bad idea to be this cautious when it came to Subaru.

Anyone could understand Subaru's appeal if they spent some time with him. And if they understood his appeal, the possibility of their feelings turning into something more special would increase dramatically.

Petra: "Even in the empire, he made a good impression on a lot of people while he was away from us… Subaru increased the number of people who liked him by about a thousand."

Meili: "That's got to be an exaggera~tion. A thousand people is way too much…"

Petra: "The number kept going up. It was mostly men, so that was good, but you can't let your guard down."

Meili, who had not seen the real thing, laughed it off as a joke, but Petra was not in the mood to laugh it off.

While clenching her fist vigorously, she stirred the pot with her other hand to prevent it from boiling over, but her heart was always overflowing with thoughts of Subaru.

If she did not do so he would surely wander away from her sights, unconsciously approach someone hurt, and go to great lengths for them.

—Just like how now they were at the tower to help Al move forward.

Petra: "So, about Al-san…"

Meili: "Oh, you were saying something about being crude or wha~t not. What do you mean by tha~t?"

Petra: "I'm just saying what I see. Subaru and Garf-san are too obvious in their attempts to keep an eye on Al-san…"

Meili: "True, those two don't seem like they'd be good at keeping an eye on some~one… Which person is Al-sa~n? The little guy? The guy in the helmet?”

Petra: “Meili-chan…”

After she had finished tasting the food, Meili moved away from the pot and sat down on the luggage that was lying there. As she rested her chin on her hands and gave that disinterested response, Petra pouted and said, “geez.”

As she only joined the group partway through, and had therefore only heard bits and pieces of what happened in the Empire, it was no wonder—

Petra: “Don’t act like you’re already done with your work. You’re one of us, Meili-chan, so try to take an interest in it.”

Meili: “Even if you say that, I don’t have any work until we head ho~me. Even if you tell me not to look like I’m all done, I can’t help i~t… Also, Petra-chan, I don’t think I’m cut out to be a member of your grou~p.”

Petra: “You don’t have to worry about that anymore. After all, didn’t you go to the Capital and get the Council of Wise Men’s pardon? You should be proud of yourself. Hold your head up high, with that cute face of yours.”

Meili: “Ye~s, it is a cute face.”

Petra sighed at Meili, who sat with her hands on her cheeks and a serious expression on her face, not even a smile.

Meili really was not a bad girl at heart, but she had become so used to pretending to be a bad girl that it had become a way of life for her. She herself had started to lose track of whether she was being genuine or pretending. Probably.

Petra: “Ugh… There are so many people I have to teach from square one…”

Meili: “You always seem so busy, Petra-cha~n. I wonder if you ever get ti~red.”

Petra: “You’re one of the causes! Besides…”

Meili: “Besi~des?”

Petra: “I can’t say I’m tired. If even the person I want to rest the most doesn’t rest, it makes it even harder to raise the issue, don’t you think?”

Meili: “…”

Petra: “Oh, the person I want to rest isn’t Otto-san, okay? Otto-san should himself make some time and get a good night’s sleep. At least six hours a day!”

Although Otto was used to not sleeping, it was, unlike Roswaal, not because he did not need much sleep, but because he was just overdoing it. As proof, there were times when he would sleep for more than half a day like a corpse after he had finished a big job.

Petra: “Even though I’ve told him that he shouldn’t compare himself to Master, who is cheating with his own constitution, he doesn’t listen to me at all.”

Meili: “Hehe… I’m not good at talking like that either, bu~t you really don’t like that lord, do you, Petra-cha~n? Aren’t you relieved that you’re not with hi~m?”

Petra: “That’s true. Because of that, I ended up going separately from Frederica-neesama, but it means that she trusts me.”

This was the first time that Petra had been left in charge of a long journey of ten days or more, although she had been left in charge for a day or two previously. At the meeting of the Western Margrave, and on the journey to the Empire, Frederica or Ram were always with her. This time, however, Petra was left on her own.

For that reason, her enthusiasm was different. She had to keep an eye on everyone.

Petra: “That’s why I’m worried about Al-san too… He’s the one with the helmet.”

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Meili: “Yeah, yeah, he’s quite a conspicuous ma~n. Isn’t he the reason we came to the To~wer?”

Petra: “That’s right. He really wanted to read a certain Book of the Dead… I think it’s a good thing, if reading it makes him feel better.”

Meili: “—? That’s a strange way of putting i~t. Does Al really worry you that mu~ch?”

Petra: “Well, no, I’m more worried about Subaru and Garf-san than I am about Al-san.”

At Petra’s answer, Meili tilted her head and asked, “About Onii-san and the othe~rs?“ It seemed that she was more interested in this than the topic of Al, and she looked at Petra with a frown.

Petra responded to Meili’s gaze with a “because” and continued,

Petra: “They both think too much about things like it’s their own problem. When your family, friends, or other important people are feeling down, you know how sometimes you get so caught up in trying to cheer them up that you end up getting depressed too?”

Meili: “…Who know~s? Is that so~?”

Petra: “Maybe I was foolish to ask you, Meili-chan…”

Petra, who was seeking sympathy, was met with a blank expression from Meili. Feeling a lack of a response, as if pushing against a strong tide, Petra’s worries were directed at Subaru and Garfiel in a six to four ratio.

Petra had also heard from Subaru and the others that there was a suspicion that Al’s purpose in searching for Priscilla’s Book of the Dead was to resurrect her.

She had no idea whether this was actually possible, but if it was, Petra could understand why Subaru and the others would want to keep a close eye on Al’s every move.

Petra: “But, even though I originally wanted Al-san to read the book, I now feel like it might be the opposite, and my head and heart are at odds with each other.”

Petra knew that when there was a discrepancy between one’s head and heart, between reason and emotion, their performance would suffer dramatically. Not just for Petra but for anyone, it went without saying that one’s results would be better when one’s sense of purpose and actual actions were in sync.

Now, could it really be said that Subaru and the others had their minds and actions in sync?

Petra: “…”

Meili: “If you ask me, Petra-chan thinks too much, too~. —Oh~?”

And, looking at Petra’s contemplative profile, Meili noticed something and spoke up. Drawn in by the voice, Petra asked “What?” as her eyes fell on someone who had appeared in the entrance to the room.

On the Fourth Floor there were many rooms, and as Petra and her friend were preparing dinner in one of the rooms, they were visited by the person they had just been talking about—

???: “Yo, I thought something smelled good, are you two girls preparing dinner?”

Saying so, Al gave a light wave and walked over. Flam was quietly following behind him, probably to make sure he was not left alone.

Petra was at a loss for words momentarily at the unexpected appearance of the pair, but,

Meili: “Ye~s, dinner is being prepared… but I’m just watch~ing, Petra-chan is the one co~oking.”

Al: “What, you’re blatantly slacking off? Is what I’d like to say, but Miss Meili has done a great job on the way here. I can’t really speak all high and mighty to you.”

Meili: “Of co~urse. As long as I’m here, no one can disobey me, you kno~w.”

Al: “No doubt, no doubt. Thank you, thank you.”

Al made a bow to the pompous Meili while using only his right hand to make a gesture of gratitude. While those two talked to each other, Flam walked over to Petra who was mixing a pot,

Flam: “Thank you for your hard work. I apologize for leaving the preparation of our meal to you.”

Petra: “Oh, it’s fine. Flam-chan, you were taking care of Ezzo-san until we got here, right? You can leave it to us for a while.”

Flam: “Thank you. Ezzo-sama has a bad habit of quickly forgetting to eat or sleep because he is so absorbed in what is in front of him; it is a problem.”

Petra: “I am familiar with that type of person as well…”

At Flam’s sincere words, Petra nodded deeply out of sympathy.

Flam was also a servant, but she was probably one or two years younger than Petra. She was born into a family that served the Astrea family, so she may have more experience as a servant than Petra, but—

Petra: “Let’s work hard together as the caretakers for everyone. You can talk to me about anything.”

Striking her own chest, Petra spoke to Flam like she was her older sister.

No matter how much her work skills improved, Petra’s position as the youngest in the camp would not change. No matter how hard she worked, age was the only thing she could not catch up to or surpass, and that was the downside of being the youngest.

Of course, with Beatrice and Emilia being over four hundred and one hundred years old respectively, she could not act like an Onee-san with them, despite their cuteness.

Therefore, the opportunity to be in contact with someone clearly younger than herself, such as Schult and Utakata in the Empire, was invaluable to Petra.

Flam: “Thank you, Petra-sama. I will do so immediately.”

Petra: “Yes, yes, what is it?”

Flam: “No matter how many times I have told him, the young master has not gotten out of the habit of treating both my sister and myself like children. What should I do?”

Petra: “You mean R-Reinhard-san~?”

With the immediate subject of the consultation suddenly being a big one, Petra was very unsure of how to respond.

Although Reinhard van Astrea and Petra did not know each other directly, everyone in the Kingdom of Lugunica has at least heard rumors of the Knight Amongst Knights.

Petra’s opinion was that Subaru was more amazing as a Knight, but it would be remiss to make such an assessment of someone she had never met in person.

In any case—

Petra: “However, I know how it feels to be treated like a child when you do not want to be treated like one. In the meantime, you should stop letting him pat you on the head.”

Flam: “The head… well, myself aside, Grassis does not seem to mind being patted on the head by the young master. Myself aside.”

Petra: “It’s not like I dislike it or anything, you know? I do not dislike it per se, but the sense of distance in a relationship like that isn’t good.”

Petra herself was in the process of trying to rectify this stalemate in a relationship. Therefore, her answers to Flam’s questions were very specific.

Hearing the response Petra gave with her fists clenched, Al cleared his throat.

Petra: “Hm, Al-san, what do you need.”

Al: “My bad my bad. But the advice you gave to Flam-chan is a little off the mark. It looks like Flam-chan and you have different feelings.”

Petra: “Eh, really? Do you not like Reinhard-san?”

Flam: “I do like the young master, but not as someone of the opposite sex.”

Petra: “Oh, um, right…”

While embarrassed for jumping to the wrong conclusion, Petra stuck out her tongue a bit. And then, she turned her attention to Al and continued with, “That’s surprising”,

Petra: “Al-san, you actually understand this sort of thing.”

Al: “Oi oi, I’m a mature old man you know? I’ve been through the sweet and the bitter, though mostly through other people.”

Petra: “If it’s other people, then you can’t boast about it right?”

Al: “It’s not boasting, y’know. It’s self depreciation, self depreciation… oops.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Al’s stomach suddenly growled. Petra loosened her lips to that,

Petra: “Please wait a little longer. I will be finished soon.”

Al: “Ah~, my bad for the rush. This one’s not on me, it’s on my growling stomach.”

Petra responded with a nod and a “Yes sir” to the talkative Al.

And then while exchanging light banter with Al, Petra feared that Subaru and Garfiel’s attitude towards him was excessive.

She understood why they worried with all of the varied, tangled assumptions. But at the very least Al could pretend to make a recovery. A truly down and depressed person was incapable of that kind of care for the people around them.

Meili: “Old man, you sure do eat.”

Although probably not reading Petra’s mind, Meili spoke to Al. Al responded with “Of course” to Meili’s words and fiddled with the seams of his helmet.

Al: “Being hungry is a problem… not eating or drinking drops your performance and doesn’t it actually take you further away from your goal?”

Meili: “That’s true. But, not drinking, eating, or sleeping is an option. You only have three days after all.”

Petra: “Meili-chan…”

Al: “No no, I don’t mind. I’m aware I have a limit, and it’s obvious to think, are you really serious when you’re taking it that easy?”

Waving his hand, Al could not rebuke Meili’s words that hit the mark too well. Then, he tapped his helmet with the nails of his waving hand and continued with a “But”,

Al: “I’m the princess’s jester. To say I’ll struggle in a desperate frenzy… I think that’s a bit off.”

Petra: “Al-san…”

Al: “Also, it’s true I promised a limit of three days but, it’s not set in stone right? Nothing is measured exactly by an hourglass. Don’t you think if I cry, cling and beg, I could pull off an extra half day or so?”

Petra: “—Pfft!”

Petra could not help but burst out laughing when he suddenly brought up such a convenient argument after speaking in such a serious tone.

Truly, if Al really did cry, cling, and beg then they would probably need to extend their stay half a day.

However—

Petra: “That would be inconvenient for us. Please make sure to properly drink, eat and make time to sleep.”

If they relied on that from the beginning, then there would be no point in a deadline. Above all, the strictness that the rest of them could not do, it was Petra’s job to properly speak that aloud.

Even if she knew that they may eventually overrule her.

Petra: “During these three days, I will be doing my best to help Al-san with Subaru and the others. —Okay, it’s ready.”

Al: “So strict. Woah.”

While he said that, Petra transferred the contents of the pan into a bowl then lightly gave a sample to Al. Al took it, raised the chin of his helmet then brought it to his lips,

Al: “Hot, hot… But, it’s tasty.”

He said in a soft mutter. Petra was satisfied with that.

2

???: “I dare say, apart from the Sage who created this library, I am perhaps the person who has read more Books of the Dead than anyone else in the world. Allow me to state my perspective: I believe that what ultimately makes this library special, is that it allows for the vicarious reliving of lost history.”

After dinner had concluded, Subaru and the others reentered the Library of Taygeta.

There, while helping Al find the book he was seeking, as well as simultaneously keeping an eye on Al’s movements, Ezzo had been giving a lecture to the preoccupied Subaru along with the others.

Ezzo’s voice, contrary to his appearance, was low-pitched and projected well in the high-ceilinged library.

Even though they were in different camps, and did not share the same goals, his kindness in getting along with them in this way was commendable. However, since Flam was uninterested in joining in on such topics, it could just be that his eagerness to speak on them had exploded.

Regardless, since it was an interesting subject, it was not boring to listen to.

Beatrice: “Even so, calling it “reliving lost history” is quite an exaggeration, in fact. I am aware that a Book of the Dead gives a glimpse into the life of the one who has died, but the scale is different, I suppose.”

Ezzo: “Strictly speaking, Miss Beatrice’s understanding is unimpeachable. However, that would only be from a perspective limited to a single book. On the other hand, when extrapolated across multiple books, the situation changes.”

Since they had split up to look through the bookshelves, they tended to speak quite loudly; it felt like talking out loud in a school library, and brought with it a trifling sense of guilty pleasure.

As they continued to talk across the bookshelves, Subaru tilted his head at Ezzo’s reply.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, Ezzo-san has read more than ten Books, right… The Books of the Dead, since you can only read the ones of people you personally knew, isn’t that a pretty high strike rate?”

Garfiel: “Even tho’ he’s spent all this time holed up in here, I’d agree with ya. I’ve been lookin’ for more than half a day now, but not a single name my amazin’ self knows has come up.”

Beatrice: “This is a really low strike rate, in fact… Names that are familiar are many, I suppose. But, the names of acquaintances are an entirely different matter, in fact.”

Holding hands with Subaru and looking at the same bookshelf as he was, Beatrice muttered so in a whisper.

In fact, having lived for four hundred years, the walking encyclopedia that was Beatrice had come across several familiar names every now and then. Perhaps out of concern, she had not made an effort to mention them, but every time she had found one, since there was a reaction from their linked hands, it was not something she could keep hidden from Subaru.

Subaru, as well, had not thought to ask about the people she did not mention.

Al: "To lie here and brag about being a lucky boy, I don't think Ezzo-san is so vain. If y'know some sorta trick to such good luck, could you please teach it to me?"

Ezzo: "I am sorry to break it to you, but the secret is not luck, Al-dono. Natsuki-dono and his companions ought to be slightly more flexible… and should start by doubting the premise."

Subaru: "The premise?"

Garfiel: "Doubt it, ya say?"

Ezzo was an eloquent speaker, and yet Subaru and Garfiel furrowed their brows at the proposition he had presented. Ezzo, on the other hand, seemed pleased with their response, saying "Yes!" with evident elation in his voice,

Ezzo: "As Natsuki-dono said, in order for a Book of the Dead to exhibit its potential to the fullest, one must be acquainted with the person in question. I can think of a few reasons why such a restriction might be imposed, but they are all merely speculation, so let us put them aside for the time being. What matters is, given that premise, to relive the lives of those who have died a long time ago… during the Era of the Witches, for example, could be deemed infeasible."

Subaru: "I really don't want to look into those, even if I could, but… that premise, you doubt it?"

Garfiel: “Ya sayin’ it can happen? That people other than acquaintances can get to look into ‘em?”

Beatrice: “If such a cheating technique existed, Ezzo would have read more than just twelve Books, I suppose.”

Ezzo: “Hahaha, it is certainly thrilling to have my inquisitiveness recognized as such!”

Although it did not seem like a compliment, Beatrice’s words had put Ezzo in a good mood.

Ezzo seemed like someone who would have been suited to a position like a teacher, and Subaru thought seriously about what he said, but an answer could not come to mind straight away.

Instead—

Al: “—Though it feels unlikely, a possibility does come to mind.”

Ezzo: “Oh, splendid! Then, perhaps you could explain the possibility that you have surmised?”

Al: “The premise is that you can only read the Books of people you know. Since that’s the case, you can’t read the Books of those who died long ago. —But, if you know someone who died a long time ago, then you can.”

Subaru: “Wait, that’s true, but weren’t we just saying that it can’t be done?”

Al: “Is that so? You can do it in this place, don’t you think?”

Stating thus, Al made a gesture of looking around the Library of Taygeta. Subaru was initially slow to comprehend what Al had said, and became lost in thought.

But, concerning the point of destroying the premise, and the way Al had just spoken, he did arrive at such a possibility.

That was—

Subaru: “If you were to read someone’s Book of the Dead, you could relive their life. Which implies that, compared to prior to reading the Book, the range of people you would know would have expanded. If that’s the case, then…”

Beatrice: “By increasingly stacking up acquaintances through this reliving, the number of lives that can be experienced, as well as the time traversed backwards, can also be increased, in fact. What Ezzo meant finally makes sense, I suppose.”

Ezzo: “Reliving lost history…!”

Taking over from Al’s speculation, Subaru and Beatrice, having found such means of utilizing the Books of the Dead, looked towards Ezzo.

Before the eyes of Subaru and the others, he slipped out from behind a bookshelf, spread his arms wide, and nodded.

Ezzo: “Brilliant. It is such a pleasure to see young people solve difficult problems by thinking through it on their own. I, too, although walking ahead of you, find my heart racing.”

Al: “Ahh, sorry, but I’m older than you, Ezzo-san.”

Beatrice: “Betty, too, finds it upsetting to be treated like a young person, in fact. You are making light of a Great Spirit who has lived for four hundred years, I suppose.”

Ezzo: “Ahem, I have been rude! However, Natsuki-dono and Garfiel-dono are young people, right? If only you had observed their faces when they arrived at the realization…”

Garfiel: “Gao…”

The words of the exultant Ezzo came to a stop at the displeasure evident in Garfiel’s expression.

Garfiel, who had been counting something with both of his hands, his emerald-green eyes filled with confusion, tried his best to digest what Subaru and the others had just discussed, and ended up short-circuiting.

Garfiel: “By readin’ the Books, the guys ya know’ll increase? That’ll increase, but the Books left to read’ll decrease? Increase? I don’t get what y’all are sayin’…”

Subaru: “…It’s okay, Garfiel. What we were discussing just now, it isn’t relevant to what we are trying to do right now, and it’s something that you can get by without knowing.”

Subaru gave a wry smile as he comforted Garfiel, who seemed to have many question marks floating above his head.

At any rate, they now knew the reason why Ezzo had been able to read twelve Books of the Dead. He had not hit the lottery by being endowed with the absurd luck needed to read Twelve Books of the Dead; rather, he dealt with the situation by taking a drastic measure to increase the number of Books that he could read—by his vicarious experience with the Books of the Dead, he became acquainted with more of the dead in them.

And, just as Ezzo had surmised, by doing so repeatedly, it should have allowed for going back in history a century or two, and it might have even been feasible to look into the time of the Witches from four hundred years ago, which he had given as an example.

Unfortunately, Subaru was not interested in that era, but—

Subaru: “—Satella.”

For but a moment, a name flashed across Subaru’s mind, and he closed his eyes to shake off the wicked thought.

Although he had said he held no interest in what had transpired four hundred years ago, there was one name in particular that did intrigue him. However, the person with that name had not died, but was rather sealed, or so it was said.

Consequently, her Book would not exist within this library, but even if her Book was here, Subaru was unsure if he would be able to read it. —To be precise, there really were no means of ensuring it, and honestly, he did not want to find out.

Subaru: “But, even if you know how to get it done, I think reading twelve Books would be suicidal. Impressive work.”

Ezzo: “Of course, even if I had used techniques to empty my mind, it was by no means an easy feat. Each time I read through a Book, it was necessary to separate the original me from the information that flowed in. Concerning safety, about two days of rest would be needed in between.”

Ezzo continued to be quite reckless, but realizing that it was a well-thought-out kind of recklessness, Subaru felt slightly more at ease. However, if he had started a Book every two days, given the present state of having completed twelve Books, it seemed slightly doubtful if that pacing matched.

In any case—

Al: “I’m not sure I should use the term enjoyable here, but this conversation has certainly been interesting. Thank you.”

Ezzo: “There is a fine line between interest and enjoyment. So long as you are careful about the manner in which it is expressed, there is no need to blame yourself for how you feel. Likewise, for listening to my lecture, you have my gratitude.”

Al: “Thank you.”

Watching as Al politely said so in response to Ezzo’s lecture, Subaru felt like he was beginning to regain his composure.

It did feel dangerous the first time he had so suddenly and carelessly reached for a Book of the Dead; but, even though Priscilla’s Book had not yet been found, the sense of danger that seemed to be emanating from Al’s entire body seemed to have faded considerably.

Although there were still times when he made somewhat self-deprecating remarks, he was honestly relieved to hear a little bit more of the frivolity that was typical of Al.

Subaru: “As expected, it’s hard on the psyche to be in a situation where you’re constantly doubting someone.”

As Subaru said this, he recalled his early days in the Vollachian Empire.

In a situation where he did not know anyone around him, unaware of whom to trust and whom not to, the time he had spent in constant fear of such things had been quite taxing upon his psyche. In the end, the Pleiades Battalion from the Gladiator Island, and eventually Emilia and the others had joined together with him, thereby alleviating such fears.

And so, with the weight on his shoulders lightened, it was when Subaru pulled himself together and looked at the bookshelf.

—He had discovered a Book of the Dead with the name 菜月Natsuki□昴Subaru inscribed upon it.

Subaru: “…”

With bated breath, Subaru motionlessly stared at that Book of the Dead.

It was the same thing that had happened last time. Taking Subaru’s Book of the Dead being present in the library as par for the course, the act of reading it had served as the key for the “Natsuki Subaru” bereft of his memories to return to being Natsuki Subaru.

Nonetheless, being faced with it once again caused his stomach to sink. Without any further delay, he decided to avert his eyes from that Book of the Dead and leave the area,

Subaru: “No…”

Wait; Subaru put the brakes on himself.

Subaru’s Book of the Dead being here, was fine. However, would it not be dangerous to avert his gaze and leave it there as it was? —Present here was Al, who, like Subaru, had been summoned from their original world to this parallel one.

The title of the Book was 菜月Natsuki□昴Subaru written in kanji, but Al might be able to read it. Then, if Al were to find the Book of 菜月Natsuki□昴Subaru and heedlessly open it, then was it not quite likely to give rise to some tremendously complicated developments?

For Al to learn of the outrageous things that had occurred in the life Subaru had started in this other world from zero until now, was fine. —The problem was, if that overlapped with the penalty of learning about Return by Death, Subaru did not know what sort of inconveniences it might bring about.

Subaru: “…”

The one who seemed to bestow the power of Return by Death upon him, the Witch of Envy—Satella, Subaru had no choice but to recognize that she did not bear any malice towards him. But on the other hand, it was the truth that he did not believe in the Witch enough to think she would ease up on the penalty.

So, in order to ensure that such a thing did not inadvertently occur, should he not then hide the Book?

Beatrice: “Subaru? You have been quite fidgety for a while now, in fact? Do you need to use the toilet, I suppose?”

Subaru: “No, that’s not it… umm, to tell you the truth, I found quite an inconvenient Book of the Dead, so if possible I want to move it to a place that’s harder to find.”

Beatrice: “Inconvenient… don’t tell me, have you located Priscilla’s Book, in fact?”

Subaru: “I guess it’s only natural you’d think so. But no, it’s not that.”

At Beatrice’s suspicion, Subaru shook his head from side-to-side.

He could not reveal Return by Death to Beatrice either, and he had avoided explaining it until now through the power of their bond, but this was a bit of a difficult situation.

Of course, Beatrice could not read kanji, so she could not read the title of 菜月Natsuki□昴Subaru. Having said that, it would be in bad faith to irresponsibly deceive her and hide the Book.

That was why—

Subaru: “Beako, this is a Book that absolutely must not be read. If someone were to mess up and read it, it’s possible that the Witch of Envy will reach her hands out of her shrine again.”

Beatrice: “Y-you’re speaking of outrageous things all of a sudden, I suppose…! Out of her shrine again, does that mean Subaru will be sent away to the Empire all over again, in fact? Such a thing must not be allowed to happen, I suppose!”

Subaru: “I think the same, and in reality, it might end up coming true. That’s why…”

Saying those words, Subaru pulled the Book in question of 菜月 Natsuki□昴Subaru out from the bookshelf. While being careful not to open it and inadvertently live through his own experiences again, he softly whispered into Beatrice’s ear.

Hearing that, Beatrice knit her eyebrows as she nodded seriously,

Beatrice: “Murak.”

Then, Beatrice activated her Yin Magic, making Subaru’s body as light as a feather. Liberated from the yoke of gravity, Subaru hopped on top of a bookshelf and stealthily hid the withdrawn Book there.

Subaru: “It’s like I’m a naughty brat who’s up to some serious mischief in the library…”

It was an act that would trouble the librarian, since a Book had not been returned to its original location. In front of Beatrice, who had worked as the librarian of the Forbidden Library for many years, it was an act that lacked the fear of God, but there was no other choice.

After three days, right before they would leave the Tower with Al, he would need to make sure to remember to return it to its original place.

Subaru: “Though, there’s the concern that Ezzo-san finds it with his curious mind and then reads it… I mean, it would be really bad if anybody reads it, so maybe it would be better to just dispose of it right away?”

???: “Dispose of what, bro?”

Subaru: “UOOOOWAHHH?!”

Having returned to Beatrice after hiding the Book, he had been racking his brains to think of how to handle the Book of 菜月 Natsuki□昴Subaru, and that was when a voice suddenly called to his back, causing him to shriek.

Causing that extreme shriek to reverberate throughout the archive, Subaru turned around; standing there was Al, taken aback by Subaru’s exaggerated reaction.

Al: “Oioi, you’re getting way too startled. I was just trying to make small talk.”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah, sorry for frightening you. I let out a way louder scream than I meant to.”

Al: “Nahh, wasn’t that big a deal for me, if anything, wasn’t it a bigger issue for her?”

Subaru: “Her?”

Then, looking to where Al was pointing, Subaru let out an “Ah” as he looked at Beatrice. Crouching down, Beatrice covered both her ears with her hands, tears welling in her eyes,

Beatrice: “Wh-Wh-Wha-What kind of loud voice was that, in fact…?! My ears, Betty’s ears are ringing, they’ve begun to ring, I suppose!”

Subaru: “I’m sorry! It wasn’t on purpose! I love you!”

Beatrice: “I cannot hear you, in fact! Say it in a louder voice, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Beako lovely! Beako pretty!”

As Beatrice drew ever closer to crying, Subaru earnestly appealed to her through love. Puffing up her cheeks, Beatrice kept silent after hearing Subaru's words, and then gave a deep sigh.

And then,

Beatrice: "Well, considering your feelings of love towards Betty, it will be pardoned, in fact. Display your gratitude to my generosity, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm grateful, I'm grateful, many thanks, I love you forever. —Well then, umm."

Stroking Beatrice's head as she withdrew her tears, Subaru turned to face Al once again. Al, who had been watching over his lovey-dovey time with Beatrice, prefaced with "Ah, you done?" as he fiddled with the fixtures on his helmet,

Al: "Whenever I look at it, you really are deeply in love with that Spirit of yours, aren't you bro? Sorry for getting in the way of your honeymoon."

Subaru: "Don't worry about that at this point. If anything, delaying my time with Emilia-tan and the others after returning from the Empire is way more… wait no, I'm sorry!"

When Al lightheartedly made banter, Subaru had tried to respond in his usual tone, but realizing that he was making an exceedingly careless comment, he covered his mouth with his hand.

However, while Subaru was regretting that comment, Al put on a wry smile,

Al: "Welp, you aren't wrong. You're completely right, bro. Rather, lemme thank you again. Even if it's just three days, it must have been troublesome to set aside this time for me."

Al conveyed his gratitude, to which Subaru could not easily come up with a reply.

In their journey to the Pleiades Watchtower to search for a Book of the Dead, it was none other than Al himself who had proposed a sojourn of three days at the Tower. Of course, that may have also just been to increase his chances of being accompanied by Subaru and the others in order to arrive at the Tower safely.

However, Subaru also took this as proof that Al could not be that selfish.

Al: “Beako-chan, I’m sorry for bringing bro along with me. Thanks for coming with us.”

Beatrice: “—. It is a matter of course that Betty is together with Subaru, in fact. Also, Betty is not so benevolent as to repeat the same warning many times, I suppose. Correct it by yourself, in fact.”

Al: “Gotcha, gotcha. —She’s very kind, your kid.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s right. With a light body that’s just like fluffy cotton-candy, filled to maximum capacity with kindness and loveliness, that’s Beako.”

Replying to Al’s whisper, Subaru relinked his hand with Beatrice’s. Seeing the exchange between Subaru and Al, Beatrice seemed to hide her embarrassment with a, “Hmph, I suppose”, as she turned her face away.

Loosening his lips at Beatrice’s charming reaction, Subaru heaved a sigh, and,

Subaru: “Al, how’s the library?”

Al: “—. As you can see, no results just yet. I thought that it might be possible if I had three days, but man I’m really at a loss with this number of books. It’s really on the level of finding a single needle dropped in a desert, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “…”

As Al gestured toward the rest of the archive with his single hand, his words were not entirely mistaken.

In this world—nay, since this Great Library Pleiades was created, just how many people had lost their lives? The idea of ascertaining that, one book at a time, was overwhelming.

Much less, when just like Ezzo said, the books were increasing every second, let alone every day.

Subaru: “But, don’t give up man. We’re all here to lend you a hand.”

Al: “Bro…”

Beatrice: “That’s right, in fact. To end things with a broken heart due to not finding it despite making this much of a detour before returning to the mansion, will not be permitted, I suppose. That’s why you mustn’t give up, in fact.”

Al: “…”

At the sequence of words from Subaru and Beatrice, Al silently cast his eyes down. Seeing him opening and closing his lowered right hand, Subaru felt an air of hesitation about him.

That was what Subaru had hoped—putting it like that was far too cold-hearted, but having done something similar, it was a reaction he had wanted to elicit from Al.

With the objective of reading Priscilla’s Book of the Dead, Al had come to the Pleiades Watchtower.

However, by actually laying eyes upon the library, and still focusing on the act of processing Priscilla’s death, Subaru hoped that Al would be able to recover even if he was unable to read the Book.

As proof of that, Al’s depreciating statements of clear self-abandonment had decreased, and his attitude had softened.

The fact that he would then also begin to feel guilt because of that, Subaru understood.

Therefore, he added on.

Subaru: “Al, when Beako and I say to not give up, we aren’t talking about finding the Book. We're telling you to not give up on the things you can be satisfied with."

Al: "Satisfied…?"

Subaru: "Yeah. Not stuff like "I got fed up with it" or "I didn't have enough time", but to draw a conclusion through your own thoughts. That's what I think it means, to find satisfaction."

If he was unable to communicate it well, then Subaru thought this might come off as a terribly insensitive comment.

Depending on how it was interpreted, it might have sounded like he was trying to persuade him to be satisfied with Priscilla's death. But that was not what Subaru wished to say. It was not that, it was not a matter of whether Priscilla was dead or alive, but rather, to face the matter of Priscilla's death, and truly believe that he had confronted it enough, was to be satisfied.

Mourning her, remembering her, and finding closure somewhere. — That, was necessary.

For that purpose—

Subaru: "For three days, see through to it with all you've got until you're satisfied. I'll also, we'll also accompany you with everything we've got."

Beatrice: "I told you before, you mustn't have such unhealthy practices like depriving yourself of sleep and rest, I suppose. You'll become Otto, in fact."

As Subaru made a reassuring appeal, Beatrice winked as she added that on.

Hearing the words of the pair, Al slightly inhaled, and then slowly raising his helmet, he sighed. That was a long, long, so long that it seemed like a large mass of something was slipping out of him, sigh.

Al: "Three days, huh?"

Subaru: “Yeah. No extensions… Well, if you seriously beg for it I may end up thinking about it, but don’t count on it from the start?!”

Beatrice: “If we return later than expected, we’ll get a severe scolding from Emilia, I suppose.”

Subaru: “A severe scolding from Emilia-tan…! Though, that would still be an adorable sight in and of itself.”

No matter what emotions, what expression, or what angle, Emilia was so cute that his eyes would cease all functionality, but he had already worried her enough.

If possible, he only wanted to see positive faces such as smiles and bashful expressions from here on out.

Subaru: “Well, no matter the expression, the truth of EMT shall never waver, but…”

As Subaru said that, he shrugged his shoulders at Beatrice’s dumbfounded expression, and looked back at Al.

Then, meeting Subaru’s gaze head-on, Al nodded, and—

Al: “—Ol Shamak.”

—The next instant, the world of Natsuki Subaru cut to black.

3

Al: “Three days. With three days, there’d be some caution that something might happen on the third day.”

That which fell onto the Library of Taygeta’s floor with a high-pitched clunk, about to roll away, he pinned down with his toes to keep it from escaping.

Al: “The corollary of that, is that a person would let their guard down the most right after a nice chat on the evening of the first day.”

Squatting in place, he picked up the black orb that his toes had halted.

Cold and hard to the touch, it felt somewhat like a glass ball, but it was no object so fragile. It would be troubling if it were. —This, was a gaol capable of capturing even a Witch.

Al: “I understand, bro… no, Natsuki Subaru. —I won’t kill you.”

It seemed that there were some who would become desperate in their attempts to murder Natsuki Subaru no matter the cost, doing so with reckless abandon, but none of them understood. Even if that were indeed done, there would be zero meaning to it.

If that were to be done, it would be Natsuki Subaru’s battlefield.

One must never fight against Natsuki Subaru on his battlefield.

That was to say—

Al: “It’s starting, Teacher. —So that I may be myself.”

Priscilla Barielle, was no longer among them.

Ergo, Al—Aldebaran, in order to accomplish the original objective he had once abandoned, began to act.

—The battle to remove Natsuki Subaru from this world, commenced.

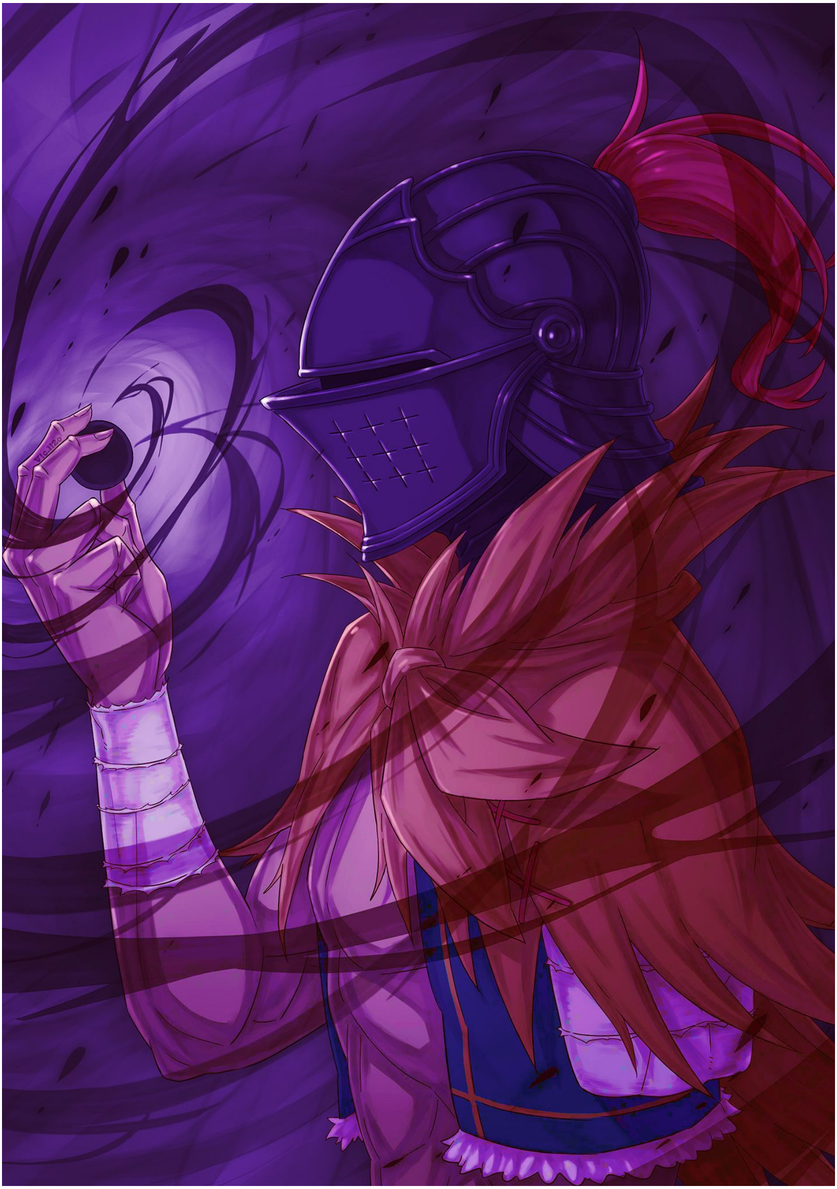
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Chapter 12:
Starlight Beyond the Realm of a Billion

1

???: "—Expand territory, matrix redefinition."

A fixed catchphrase was a declaration of war against the world; so had once spoken a Witch.

Magic, was a technique that reflected one's will into reality, defying the laws of nature by means of incantation. A sophisticated, delicate act of barbarism tantamount to forcibly rewriting the script, altering the ending.

That was to say, the incantations of magic spells were none other than a polite greeting that declared, "Now I shall destroy the world".

Of course, since it was a greeting, there were times it would be ignored, or rejected.

If the formulation of the technique was not fully fleshed out, if the activation was messed up due to a lack of Mana, or if it spontaneously fired bringing about a result unlike the one desired; there were various things that could happen.

To begin with, this parable itself was naught more than a digression.

That which he was attempting to perform was not magic.

Only, if saying a catchphrase was a declaration of war against the world, then its essence was merely the same.

That was exactly why—

???: "—Expand territory, matrix redefinition."

That was a forewarning of murder towards a world that wished not to be destroyed, from one who wished to destroy it nonetheless.

Kill. Destroy. Rip. Trample. Flatten. Desecrate. Tear. Mangle. Incinerate. Crush. Smash. Liquify. Saturate.

Any word was fine. It was the same as magic. —What mattered, was for the essence to be the same.

As long as the concluding words remained unchanged, he would use any method necessary.

No matter what happened, no matter how things went, no matter what it took—Natsuki Subaru would be removed.

That conclusion, was the only thing he absolutely would not change.

For that purpose—

???: “—Expand territory, matrix redefinition.”

Even if that starlight laid beyond the realm of a billion, he would definitely reach it.

2

—Four-thousand and sixty-one.

The one most laborious to remove from the board had been the Margrave, with his unexpectedly jestful antics.

The Margrave, highly perceptive and veteran of the battlefields as he was, would not be emotionally swayed by any sob stories whatsoever, especially when considering the severity of his attitude towards the Camp—no, towards all that would not stand to benefit him.

Considering the circumstances, seeing that he was unable to present anything that was in the Margrave’s benefit, he’d had no choice but to conclude that obtaining the latter’s agreement by dangling a carrot in front of him was a lost cause. But, having a keen sense for profits and losses often meant that one would sniff out any drawbacks more successfully than the average person.

Therefore, the optimal path would be to give the impression that losses would be had, were the Margrave to not follow his lead. —Once this direction was realized, it became easier to then undo the tangled threads.

Although ultimately taking advantage of the situation Schult had been placed into was nothing that did not bring him feelings of guilt, for the sake of avoiding discord in the Barielle Domain from here-on after, someone else's hand would need to be borrowed.

By all means, lay down your claim as you please, it's fine. After all, she's no longer among us.

—Nine-hundred and seventy-two.

The ones second most difficult to handle had been the Oni sisters, with the eldest in particular having been a formidable adversary.

From the onset, he had already known in advance that vigilance was indispensable against her.

Averting her intuition, keen to the point of abnormality, had been no trivial feat. However, a clear compromise had existed in her case—the little sister, dispossessed of Memories, with whom she had finally been reunited, being the biggest weak point of someone with nary an opening to be found.

She had wished to return with her precious younger sister back to their base as quickly as possible. —As awareness of this had always been present, possessing a method with which to nudge that forth would be a positive. But, being that the balancing act between blatantness and nonchalantness had been of truly fiendish difficulty, unceasingly heading towards a goal he could not at all reach had been troublesome.

And finally, though her caution had been lower compared to the eldest, the young sister, having built herself up on top of her lost Memories through many twists and turns in the Empire, and having forged a bond that she would not display openly, remained a daunting enemy as well.

Making use of their sisterly love brings pain to my heart but, it’s fine. After all, she’s no longer among us.

—Six-hundred and thirty-three.

The one most challenging to extract emotional understanding from, had been the Internal Affairs Minister, unsparing to outsiders as he was.

Contrary to his soft looks, he was the owner of a tough personality, and misinterpreting him as a pushover could lead to one getting burnt. He was an opponent that forced one to feel apprehension akin to going up against a horned bull.

The way to put him on the ropes had been similar to what had been employed with the Margrave, but because he was much more humane compared to the latter, by bringing up a pragmatic common ground, conditions were worked out, forcing him to give a yes.

No weapons, an interval of three days, and their trusted military officer accompanying them—all were restrictions that, due to being only natural, hurted not. Desiring even more than that from him would be perilous; he had been made aware of this a hundred times. After all, this was an opponent that, once dialogue was shut off, all hopes of reopening it would be gone.

For him, too, the clincher had been selfsame. —Making him consider the person who would feel morally responsible for his unstable self’s departure.

Exploiting his kindness makes me bitter but, it’s fine. After all, she’s no longer among us.

—Ninety-four.

Though the number of attempts was small, omitting the one with Rare Blood from the traveling companions headed for the Sand Sea had been an absolute necessity.

The possessor of flawlessly refined Rare Blood would have offered to be a companion as soon as possible if left unattended. He had no doubts or averse feelings towards her humanity and abilities, but the blood flowing through her veins would have served to hinder his objectives.

But, the quickest and most reliable method to nudge someone deeply compassionate in the desired direction was to make use of their compassion. Once knowing their sense of belonging to a group, and knowing of their considerable dislike for going against the flow, it had not been difficult to pull them along a path that was easy to follow.

At this point, he could say that he had a good idea of the majority of the relationships within the Camp, those whom he had never met included. Were she made to believe that a bad pairing would be left behind as a result of her accompanying the party, and that that would become a burden to the young child feeling forlorn, she would take the initiative and strive to resolve that issue.

The idea was not to make the impossible possible. It was to actualize those non-zero possibilities.

I don’t have comforting words to offer but, it’s fine. After all, she’s no longer among us.

—Five.

Given that he was deeply familiar with how to manipulate “her” heart, quite honestly, it had been a piece of cake.

Compassionate and benevolent, and likewise overflowing with thoughtfulness, “she” was quite easy to deceive, and not knowing how to doubt the words coming from him, “her” nature was that of taking things as frank and veracious. By all measures, “her” magnanimity was such that he should not have messed up even one time —ergo, the reason for his failures had not been any problem regarding “her”, but a problem regarding himself.

It was a matter of him having been hesitant to deceive “her”, to twist “her” thoughts to suit his preferences.

Were he to disregard that creaking of his heart, filling ”her” amethyst eyes with grief would be easy. To begin with, “she” was someone who had been attempting to empathize with his wounds. If he were to appeal to “her” in regards to the best thing “she” could do for the sake of her, “she” would naturally settle on that resolve.

More and more am I becoming unable to save myself but, it’s fine. After all, she’s no longer among us.

—Zero.

And, in regards to Natsuki Subaru, he did not fail even once.

He knew Natsuki Subaru through and through, and thus not a single shred of hesitation had existed within him.

It was merely, that he had only needed to assess the timing correctly.

After all—

???: “—Ol Shamak.”

When it came to requirements, dragging Beatrice into this trump card had been a matter of the utmost priority.

???: “…”

Due to the unfamiliar incantation and the formulation of a never-before-seen technique, Beatrice’s reaction had been delayed by a beat, and since she was what had been protecting Natsuki Subaru, a fatal opening had arisen.

Instantaneously pulling his arm closer to her, and moving to attempt a response, could be called a paragon of Contract Spirits—and, that had been Aldebaran’s true aim.

Aldebaran: “Three days. With three days, there’d be some caution that something might happen on the third day.”

—Ol Shamak, something of an anti-Witch trump card, was a forbidden technique that aimed to forcibly seal shut its target’s

Gate, preventing even their movements through restraints and a spell-seal.

In the sense that it was a technique whose existence had been prohibited from being revealed, even the Witch who had created it herself had avoided writing it down, passing it on only orally—and that too, had been limited to only Aldebaran.

Perhaps the reason why the inventor, why the Witch had bequeathed this forbidden art, which was capable of killing even her, to Aldebaran exclusively had not been because of any affection or trust in her student. Rather, she had done so due to nothing more than holding the logical belief that Aldebaran would not err in his usage of the technique, and that he would not employ it in any other way but to fulfill its purpose.

Aldebaran: “The corollary of that, is that a person would let their guard down the most right after a nice chat on the evening of the first day.”

In truth, Aldebaran had never harbored the thought of directing this forbidden technique against the Witch, or against any other Witch, and had never done so in actual fact. —Or, to be more precise, neither had he ever directed it towards the person he ought to have employed it on.

In other words, the forbidden technique she had devised and imparted unto him had at last seen the light of day.

Aldebaran: “I understand, bro… no, Natsuki Subaru. —I won’t kill you.”

In the midst of the battle against the Great Disaster, he had tried to use it as a trump card against Sphinx, who had proclaimed herself a Witch, but there had been an issue stemming from Sphinx’s end—due to the absence of a Witch Factor, it had been unable to display its true speciality.

Therefore, this moment marked the very first time that the forbidden technique of Ol Shamak had been activated properly.

Aldebaran: “…”

He used his fingers to pick up what had fallen to the ground, something that appeared to be a glass sphere of sable hue.

Within the orb that did not allow its interior to be seen, Natsuki Subaru and Beatrice had been confined together. —As she was a Great Spirit of the Yin attribute, it would have been problematic for Beatrice to analyze the forbidden technique.

At the time he had enclosed her within the range of the magic, it had been a gamble whether or not she would also be included as a target of the forbidden art.

But, he had won the gamble. Contracted with Natsuki Subaru, and sharing in his Gate, Beatrice became a target of the technique, and her existence was now sealed within the orb.

It had been troublesome to build the situation up to this point. But, troublesome was all that it had been.

She’s no longer among us. That’s why—

Aldebaran: “It’s starting, Teacher. —So that I may be myself.”

Indeed, it happened just after Aldebaran declared so with resolve.

???: “OHRAHHHHHHH—!!!”

Raising a tremendous battle cry, kicking off and splitting apart the floor of the library, a golden beast leaped at him with speed akin to an arrow.

His upraised arm, stout and flexible, was charged with so much strength that it would pulverize Aldebaran in a single blow were it to connect, completely dispossessing him of his ability to take action in less than a second.

It was likely that even in the case of it just grazing his shoulder instead of his head, that herculean strength would be enough to strip away more than half of his consciousness—however, that would only come to pass were a punch to be thrown.

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

???: "YA BASTARD!!"

The ferocious beast charged at extreme speed, and although Garfiel's emerald-green eyes were blazing with scintillating fury, instead of swinging at Aldebaran, he grabbed him by the arm and pinned him down to the library floor.

Being forced down by that sheer might without having taken a defensive stance, Aldebaran choked out a cry of pain as his jaw struck the floor. Ignoring that cry, Garfiel, pressing his knee against his opponent's back, bared his fangs,

Garfiel: "The fuck'd ya do to Captain 'n Beatrice?! Where are they?! That magic earlier—"

Aldebaran: "You got it wrong, Garf-chan."

Garfiel: "AHH?!"

When faced with Garfiel's attempts to interrogate him, Aldebaran responded in a low voice. That caused an angered timbre to come out of Garfiel's throat, but such a threat bore no meaning.

In the first place, this dialogue itself bore no meaning whatsoever.

Aldebaran: "Rather than pinning me down, the first thing you should've done is knock me out."

While providing a sincere response to that meaningless dialogue, Aldebaran slid his tongue around within his mouth. Then, ignoring Garfiel's perplexed reaction to his words—Aldebaran unwrapped the drug package that had been prepared behind his molar, and gulped it down.

Then, as tremendous heat caused the blood throughout Aldebaran's body to boil—

× × ×

???: "OHRAHHHHHHH—!!!"

Kicking off the floor with explosive vigor, a ferocious beast charged forth with speed akin to an arrow.

But, that ferocious beast was not aiming to strike Aldebaran, but to grab his arm and hold him down. —That moment, he dodged the incoming arm, and raised his elbow.

Garfiel: “Guoah?!”

Aldebaran: “With this—”

His opponent’s vigor would be hindered; right after Aldebaran had thought so, an impact struck his torso.

Garfiel had received a blow to his nose from his own momentum colliding with Aldebaran’s elbow, and unleashed a kick despite his nose bleeding, its singular strike demolishing Aldebaran’s hipbone, sending the latter flying backwards.

Becoming incapacitated would have been problematic.

Garfiel: “BASTARD…!!”

Aldebaran: “Next.”

Collapsing together with several bookshelves, he unwrapped the drug package while buried in a mountain of Books.

The shock perforated his entire body—

× × ×

???: “OHRAHHHHHHH—!!!”

A ferocious beast charged forth in tandem with a battle cry, and as he dodged its arm, he flicked his elbow upward in response.

Supposing he merely struck his opponent’s nose like this, then the outcome would be the same as earlier. And although he understood this, Aldebaran had no means of evading a front kick unleashed with that speed.

In that case, he just had to make sure that no front kick could be performed.

???: “Gobahkhgahh?!”

Upon the elbow that was about to collide with the charging face, he had placed a rock protector; swinging with force akin to striking a pickle stone, he slammed it into his opponent’s nose.

As his nose basked in a counter that made use of his own momentum, Garfiel was knocked back into mid-air, his nosebleed spraying everywhere as he flew past Aldebaran’s flank.

Aldebaran: “With this—”

Garfiel tumbled onto the floor, and crashed into a shelf, causing him to be buried alive by the Books falling out from therein.

While catching that in the corner of his eyes, Aldebaran took a huge leap backwards, confident he had succeeded in avoiding the first attack.

Thereupon—

???: “—El Shiha.”

Having just stepped back onto the floor, Aldebaran’s entire body grew sluggish after that short incantation was weaved—no, it had not grown sluggish. His entire body had been engulfed by a sense of immobility.

The source of Aldebaran’s immobility was a vast amount of water; something entirely out of place in a library—

???: “Excuse my poor manners in deliberately doing such a thing whilst knowing full well that moisture is the greatest enemy of books.”

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

???: “However, producing a source of fire would have been unreasonable. Wind would have devastated the library, and earth would have soiled the books; thus, I had wanted to avoid using them. I want it to be understood that I made a bitter decision in the heat of the moment. Well then, the reasoning for why I had selected water is as I just explained, but—”

With these words, the small individual with their hand upraised towards him—Ezzo Cadner, waved his black cloak as he made a slow approach.

Rather than that being him putting on airs, the reason was tactical; a magician’s strategy to maintain vigilance on their opponent’s movements.

He was honored to be treated with such caution, but it did not seem like he would be able to meet those expectations.

After all, enveloping Aldebaran was the minimum amount of water needed to cover his body completely—as if he were being fitted with a bodysuit made of water, he was dispossessed of both his freedom to breathe and freedom to move his body.

Against that extraordinary capacity for magic, Aldebaran bore no means of contending.

However, while Ezzo maintained a fixed distance with Aldebaran,

Ezzo: “Al-dono, may I ask to hear an explanation to help me understand your side of the story? What was that earlier, that magic that is unknown to even me? More importantly, what happened to Natsuki-dono and Miss Beatrice? They were both worried that you might fall into despair and neglect your own self. To those two—”

—One-hundred and six.

Ezzo swiftly provided correct, sound reasoning that could rightly be called an adult’s perspective.

Contrary to his juvenile appearance, Ezzo Cadner was a surprisingly honest and sincere person. He would return sincerity with sincerity, and respond to respect with respect; such was the earnestness ingrained in his roots.

Therefore, when facing off against Ezzo, it was absolutely indispensable to have sincerity and respect. —As long as that was maintained, he would remain passive no matter what. His personality was that of expecting far too much from others. In that regard, his way of being fundamentally differed from that of Roswaal, despite them both being magicians.

If it were Roswaal, he would swiftly scorch Aldebaran's limbs, ravage his lungs with wind to rob him of his consciousness, and take away his freedom by imprisoning him in earth; all the while not paying mind to how he was impacting the Books of the Dead.

Ezzo would not do that. That was why.

Ezzo: "—Hk, such a foolish act!"

Cutting off his words, as Ezzo yelled with a stiff expression, Aldebaran's face within the watery membrane was clouded over by a hue of deep red.

It was evidence that he had regurgitated his roasted, melted viscera, having passed through his throat and out his mouth.

Without delay, Ezzo undid the magic restraint, and attempted to shift gears to healing magic, but it was already too late.

By the time he had thought it in his head, he was no longer able to catch up to Aldebaran—

× × ×

???: "—El Shiha."

???: "El Donaaa!"

Compared to the graceful and refined incantation, his was an unshapely incantation without a fragment of elegance.

But, activated while he was panting, the clumsy earthen armor quickly covered Aldebaran's body, and as to override the delicate film of water, it absorbed all the liquid.

???: “What?!”

The earthen armor was instantly converted to armor of mud, allowing Aldebaran to resume stepping on the floor, an action that ought to have been obstructed, before leaping backwards as his armor fell apart.

While his heels slid across the library floor, he withdrew to a farther position, gaining a clear line of sight on the two who were directing hostility toward him.

Ezzo, remaining vigilant towards him, and Garfiel, buried under the Books from a collapsed shelf—

???: “DON’T FUCK WITH ME!!”

Thrusting his arm out of the mountain of Books, Garfiel made his comeback while pushing away the collapsed bookshelf. Stepping forth with large strides so as to not tread on the fallen Books, he glared at Aldebaran.

Wiping off the blood smeared on his snout with the back of his hand, the bleeding ceased in just a few seconds. From the very roots of their existences, the combat strength of his body was fundamentally different from Aldebaran’s.

Dragging his burly, stout body forward, Garfiel was about to advance further towards him—

Ezzo: “Please wait, Garfiel-kun! It would be perilous to approach heedlessly!”

Garfiel: “AHH?! This really the time to be sayin’ that, Sensei-san?! Captain ‘n Beatrice got done in by that fuckin’ incomprehensible ball! As soon as possible, I gotta…”

Ezzo: “That is precisely why! That sort of magic, even I do not have knowledge of it! And above all else, he has just displayed that he is able to perfectly endure both of our attacks! It is abnormal!”

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

Ezzo: “Not once have I ever revealed my cards to him. And yet, he was able to perfectly deal with the water binding by soaking it up with earth. This cannot be explained as him merely being skilled in the art of war. Act with composure. You and I are the only ones here capable of restraining him.”

Keeping the hot-headed Garfiel in check, Ezzo adjusted his voice to a tone of composure.

It was clear that Ezzo’s words were persuasive, as the rage and agitation on Garfiel’s expression gradually subsided.

Above all else, it was Ezzo’s insight, perceiving and alluding to a fragment of Aldebaran’s cheat ability as a sense of unease through just a single bout of combat, that was abnormal.

As a matter of fact, Ezzo’s words were correct.

No matter how much he had attempted to come up with an ingenious solution, he did not have any way to omit Ezzo and Flam, who had already arrived at the Tower, or Garfiel, who was accompanying them as the result of a compromise reached with the Emilia Camp.

But, at the same time, it could be said that he had succeeded in suppressing the opponent’s forces down to just a combo of an extremely powerful warrior and a magician.

Aldebaran: “Even so, it’s still a hundred times more troublesome than any regular difficulty.”

Grumbling his complaints like curses, Aldebaran carefully surveyed the two.

Ezzo, who was keeping a watchful eye on his movements, and Garfiel, who had regained composure at Ezzo’s words—they had prepared an exceedingly burdensome attitude.

That was why—

Garfiel: “Y-ya bastard?!”

Ezzo: "—Hk, such a foolish act!"

Listening to the shocked voices of Garfiel and Ezzo, Aldebaran crumbled to his knees. Collapsing forward onto the floor, all strength fading from his body as he tumbled down the library steps, copious amounts of blood gushing out from the base of his helmet—

× × ×

???: "Please wait, Garfiel-kun! It would be perilous to—"

Approach heedlessly! The moment that Ezzo had called out to keep Garfiel in check, Aldebaran grabbed the bookshelf beside him and heaved it down to launch an attack on Ezzo, who was further down on the steps, with a domino effect.

Normally, the bookshelves of Taygeta would be held down by the weight of the Books of the Dead and would thus not easily fall over, but that would change altogether were there to be "stones" stealthily wedged underneath the bookshelves.

—Three-hundred and ninety-seven.

From the outset, he had intended to utilize this place as a battlefield, given the abundance of obstacles and ease of making preparations here.

He had long completed all of his preparations. Every time they got suspicious, he just had to send it forth to the next opportunity.

Ezzo: "—Shit!"

As the bookshelves collapsed towards him, Ezzo swiftly gave rise to a gale, forcibly stopping the domino effect, and attempting to cease damage from befalling the Books of the Dead falling to the floor.

That concern for the Books was quite admirable, but—

Aldebaran: "Dona."

Subsequently, the bookshelves to Ezzo's left, right, and rear were all knocked over, surrounding him on all sides.

With that wave of collapsing shelves and the avalanche of Books, Ezzo ultimately gave up on protecting the Books with a great amount of anguish, and from there rode upon the wind to jump out of the way, escaping damage.

Garfiel: “SENSEI-SAN!!”

Then, a Garfiel who had not been held back by Ezzo widened his eyes and faced Aldebaran with an expression of pure rage.

At the emerald-green eyes flaming with frenzied indignation, Aldebaran doubled down.

In his hand, between his middle, ring, and pinky fingers was grasped a black orb, and lifting his helmet with the two fingers that remained, he thrust it into the gap—

Aldebaran: “Gulp.”

—Though it was quite large and gave the absolute worst feeling as it passed through his throat, he forced it down into his stomach.

Garfiel: “Ya, BASTAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARD—!!!”

Having witnessed that act, Garfiel surrendered himself to the eruption of fury and charged forward.

At that sensation of a powerful, troublesome gale pursuing him at speeds the eye could not keep up with, Aldebaran was sent flying by a punch while harboring the conviction that he had successfully severed the cooperation of his opponents and eliminated Garfiel’s composure.

An unrelenting fist boring into his internal organs, dinner spilled back out to the interior of his helmet as he felt like he was about to vomit up the orb that had just entered his belly, and he bit down on his molars.

And then—

Aldebaran: “—Expand territory, matrix redefinition.”

—Once again, he declared war against the world.

3

—Rage, had painted Garfiel's vision completely red.

A part of that rage was directed at Al, who had transformed Subaru and Beatrice into a black sphere, but the larger part of it was aimed at his own pathetic self.

Garfiel had had an important role entrusted to him by Otto, Emilia, and the others.

All of them were eager to be with Subaru, who had finally returned from the Vollachian Empire.

However, everyone had their own roles they had to fulfill, so they had swallowed their various emotions and entrusted everything to Garfiel. Of course, Beatrice, Petra, and Meili, who had accompanied them, also held roles they were expected to play.

Even so, Garfiel's role had been to ensure Subaru's safety.

That was why—

Garfiel: "My amazin' self's a FUCKIN' DUMBAAASS!!"

His molars, cracked from intense clenching, were repaired by the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, only to then crack again from the continued clenching. That, truly, was the extent of Garfiel's rage.

He had been keeping a close eye on Al's actions.

Bearing in mind Ezzo's opinion, which he had heard at the top of the Tower, he was strongly aware that he needed to keep a close watch on Al to make sure he did not do anything reckless with Subaru and company.

But, at the same time, Garfiel had someone else to keep his eye on other than Al.

It was none other, than Subaru himself.

???: ”Listen, Garfiel. Please keep a close eye on Natsuki-san. While he most likely will not act recklessly because of Priscilla-sama… he might inadvertently do anything in his power for Al-san.”

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

The caution instilled in him by the one who was like his older brother had been slightly dulled by the additional caution he had received later. As a result, Garfiel’s reaction to Al’s activity had been half a step late.

Al had made the most out of that half-step, as if he had seen through it perfectly. —No, it was not only that half-step that Al had anticipated. He had seen through the entire stride beyond that as well.

Garfiel: “RUAAAH!!”

The backfist of the roaring Garfiel was narrowly dodged by his opponent, who had crouched just in time. The power of the strike was reduced to him merely grazing the enemy with the underside of his little finger, causing Garfiel to grit his teeth.

He kept missing. No matter how many punches he threw, he could not land a clean hit with a single one.

As for his opponent—

Aldebaran: “Dona.”

A brief incantation, and the sensation of magic interfering with the world, made Garfiel’s hair stand on end as his body leaned forward.

In the subsequent moment, a block of stone that had appeared airborne struck Garfiel’s face with a noticeable impact, as if to meet the angle at which he had tilted his head.

A pained groan escaped his mouth, and his lip was split. In terms of power, it was a weak blow. For Garfiel, who had fought against high-class warriors in the Empire, who had even clashed with a Dragon, it was far from enough to incapacitate him, let alone cause a significant injury.

However, he did not believe that this was the result of his opponent holding back.

Aldebaran: “Huff, huff…”

Breathing heavily, Al, who had cast the spell that had struck Garfiel’s face, remained on-guard without a hint of relaxation.

His apparent exhaustion was not a ruse to induce Garfiel’s carelessness; he was genuinely out of breath. It was only a matter of course. According to Garfiel’s assessment, the difference in ability between them was so significant that Al would be incapacitated by even a single powerful blow.

Perhaps, it would not even require a powerful blow.

If even one of Garfiel’s barrage of punches were to land, it would terminate the fight. In the span of a single breath, he could unleash dozens of such finishing blows.

Needless to say, facing such a situation would drain both one’s mental and physical strength.

Even though that ought to go without saying—

Garfiel: “It just, won’t hit… Hk!”

Bewildered, Garfiel was unable to make heads or tails of what was occurring to him.

Al’s movements and counterattacks revealed a significant gap in skill when compared to Garfiel. This was not a matter of arrogance, but rather because, as a warrior, Garfiel was far superior to Al.

And yet, attacks that should have landed, and evasions that should have been successful, were failing completely.

Garfiel’s attacks continued to miss, while Al’s attacks continued to land.

While they lacked the power necessary to critically injure Garfiel, the bothersome attacks were sufficient to halt his movement and to prevent follow-up strikes—

???: “Garfiel-kun, step aside! I will provide support!”

Once again, Garfiel’s progress was thwarted by a sinking force beneath his feet.

As if scolding Garfiel, who was unable to continue his attack, Ezzo, shouting at him and advising him to keep his distance, had come to his aid with magical cover from the rear.

For a moment, he considered following Ezzo’s words to assess Al’s perplexing strategy—

Aldebaran: “Yeah, that’s it, back off. Fall back and run crying to your Sis and Nanna, Garf-chan.”

Garfiel: “—I’LL FUCKIN’ CRUSH YA!”

Just as he was about to pull back, those taunting remarks shattered his thoughts into a thousand fragments.

Garfiel’s vision turned vermilion with rage as he swung his arms wide and charged at Al. This time, he was determined not to stop for anything, no matter the interference.

If his arms and legs were dodged, he would just ram his whole body into him and grapple him down.

Aldebaran: “Honestly, that’d be the toughest thing to deal with.”

Sensing Garfiel’s intent, Al muttered with a heavy breath.

Garfiel planted his foot firmly on the ground, fearing any earth manipulation beneath him. He then launched himself forward with a swift kick, propelling his body forward.

Garfiel’s body approached directly toward Al with tremendous force —Suddenly, his vision blurred.

Garfiel: “—Gah!”

A familiar sensation struck Garfiel's eyes, and a groan escaped his throat.

It was the same feeling he'd had upon encountering the Sand Wind in the Sand Sea on their way to the Tower. Tiny grains of sand had flown into Garfiel's eyes, mercilessly robbing him of his sight.

Yet another of Al's dirty tricks. It was enough to make him stop in surprise. —Unless he was determined that his arms and legs would not waver, no matter what.

Al had been most wary of this reckless assault.

As such, even with his sight having been snatched away, the best course of action for Garfiel was to latch onto him with some part of his body and rob him of his combat ability.

Ezzo: "—Garfiel-kun!!"

Just as he decided to continue his assault, Ezzo's desperate voice called out to him.

Hearing Ezzo's voice warning of danger, Garfiel felt something closing in straight towards his nose—he opened his mouth wide and caught it with his fangs.

A full-force punch aimed to crush Garfiel's face right after he had been blinded, meant to bait him in. But that was not enough to break Garfiel's resolve to do whatever it took.

Garfiel: "I'll fhix if lay'r, dhumbassh!"

With the sensation of his fangs sinking into the fist and stopping it, Garfiel tightened his jaw, promising to heal Al after stripping him of his ability to do battle.

It was a cold-blooded decision, but Al was one-armed. He fought with only his right arm, and were he to be robbed of the function of his one remaining arm, he would no longer be able to fight. So, Garfiel intended to rip it apart from the wrist to the elbow—

Garfiel: "—Ah?"

As he increased his bite force, he realized something.

The fist Garfiel caught in his bite was shaped like Al's left hand, which he should not have.

Garfiel: "—Bwaagh?!"

In the next instant, Al's fist in Garfiel's mouth swelled up violently, shattering his jawbone under the pressure and sending shards of his upper and lower canines flying through the air.

Furthermore, the fingers that had extended into his mouth jabbed deep into Garfiel's throat, triggering an unbearable gag reflex—a response triggered when fingers are thrust down one's throat, and paralyzing him. —Then, a calculated, hard, and heavy blow struck Garfiel's jaw diagonally.

Garfiel: "Kah… Kh!"

Blinded and thrown into blackness, Garfiel felt the sensation of his whole world flipping upside down. Having been struck on the jaw, his brain rattled, and his sense of balance vanished, making it impossible to stay on his feet as his knees buckled.

Being utterly overwhelmed so one-sidedly, Garfiel belatedly realized something.

Ezzo's desperate cry had been a deliberate warning, anticipating that if Garfiel were to take Al's attack head-on, this would be the result.

In other words, this all had been as per Al's bait—.

Aldebaran: "Remember when I said recklessness's the toughest thing to deal with? I lied. Those who don't think ain't a threat to me."

The frustration and humiliation from those taunting words continued to paint Garfiel's thoughts a deeper and deeper shade of red.

A relentless, successive onslaught like a storm or tornado; for a person at its mercy, being blown away like a leaf or a twig would be the only outcome.

To that extent, such a battle should have been one-sided, yet on the contrary, the results favored the opposite side.

???: “Garfiel-kun!!”

Witnessing such an anomaly materializing before his very eyes, Ezzo cried out from behind Garfiel.

Garfiel, swinging his arms wide, had charged forwards at Al, to prevent him from escaping. He could clearly see his field of vision being robbed by a thin veil of sand that had been spread into his path.

There had been no magical reaction. This simple blinding of sand—which hailed from outside the Tower, was the result of scattering sand taken from the stairs that rose from the Sand Sea.

Subsequently, catching sight of the attack that followed that blinding, Ezzo had screamed.

Al had employed magic to reconstruct his missing arm out of earth, and had thrown a punch with it.

Garfiel had opened his mouth wide, attempting to bite down upon the arm of earth, but that would only end poorly. Ezzo’s grim premonition proved true, for the earthen arm violently exploded within Garfiel’s mouth.

Garfiel: “—BWAAGHHK?!”

The expanding arm destroyed the inside of Garfiel’s mouth, and a spray of fangs and blood followed.

To add to that, having encased his right hand in a gauntlet of stone, Al delivered a powerful sideways punch to the jaw of the stupefied Garfiel.

Garfiel collapsed to his knees. —His successive movements were efficient, extremely so.

Ezzo: “Something of this sort should not be possible, even in pre-arranged sparring…!”

As Al brilliantly halted Garfiel’s advance with a barrage of blows, with strikes that would have been impossible to execute even if the sequence had been part of a martial arts demonstration, Ezzo’s vigilance continued to rise to its zenith.

However, were Garfiel to stop his movements, it would be rather fortuitous—

Ezzo: “Any scope for underestimating you as someone of a lesser rank no longer exists! Be prepared to lose more than just that left arm of yours, at least one leg will be going! —Ul Shiha!!”

Being unable to unleash it thus far due to his concern for Garfiel, who had been fighting in close-quarters with Al, he attempted to rob his opponent of their combat strength with powerful magic.

Conforming to Ezzo’s incantation, the Mana that was released intervened in accordance with its magic formula, and the world was rewritten. What was then unleashed, was a fierce torrent of “wind”.

Disguised as a water-manipulating Shiha-class incantation, this was a faux-incantation that, in practice, could alter the magic that had actually been invoked.

In addition, combining that faux-incantation with a voicelessly-incanted Goa, a trap in the form of a pincer attack, from both the front and the rear, had been set.

The simultaneous casting of two different spells was a highly advanced technique, to the extent that it was said to only be possible if one had two brains to think it through, and there were no more than five individuals in the entire world who could achieve it.

Compared to Roswaal, who was one among them, the presence of a momentary gap in Ezzo’s simultaneous-casting was undeniable; however, it fell within the scope of what could be compensated for through the combined use of faux-incantation and voiceless-incantation.

Ezzo: “With this—!”

Even if not decisive, it would still deliver a fatal blow.

Such was Ezzo’s assessment; but, it was completely painted over by Al’s actions thereon.

Without hesitation, Al turned his back upon the rampage of the invisible wind that approached from before him, and while taking the onrush of that wind upon his back, plunged into the blazing inferno behind him.

Of course, this firepower was not meant to incinerate, but if one were to be directly hit, serious burns would be inevitable. Within that, Al was defenseless—no, he shaped the stone gauntlet on his right arm into a thin shield, breaking through that inferno head-on.

Aldebaran: “URRRRAAAA!!”

Even if he could break through that wall of flame, he would still be caught in the wind and be blown away.

Immediately, Al would have been swept away by the wind, and his entire body would have slammed against the walls and floor, rendering him unable to move.

However—

Ezzo: “—Ludicrous.”

Muttering so in a stunned voice, Ezzo could not believe the unrealistic scene occurring right before his very eyes.

Swept up by the wind, Al was indeed helpless as his whole body slammed into multiple places within the Tower. —However, as if anticipating each of the points of collision, Al created cushions of mud, almost completely killing the force of impact, and he escaped the grip of the wind.

Ezzo: "…"

The situation had arrived at such a point where Ezzo was left with no choice but to give his most absurd speculations some actual consideration.

His skills as a warrior were clearly inferior to those of Garfiel, and he had even dodged the sure-fire attack from Ezzo, the Kingdom's finest magician, so there surely was some kind of rule-breaking technique that lay hidden beneath.

If he were to guess, what was most likely would be—

Ezzo: "Unbelievable, an extremely short-term observation into the future?"

At the fact that such a ridiculous possibility required serious examination, Ezzo could not help but feel a shiver down to his core.

It was said that, amongst outstanding warriors and martial artists, there were those who could read into the presence of their opponents and intuitively discern their next move.

Even in the world of magicians, it was theoretically possible to predict an opponent's next move by observing the form and nature of the Mana that had been intently refined just prior to the spell being cast.

However, the phenomena surrounding Al could not be fully explained by such theories alone.

This was not something as simple as intuition or experience. —He had the optimal solution for everything.

With all due respect, Ezzo, as an educator, was privileged with the opportunity to impart knowledge onto others. From that perspective, he was well-aware that unnatural explanations were accompanied by unnatural processes.

An explanation that skipped over the required processes to arrive at an answer, was often revealed to be a surreptitious peek at the right answer.

In other words, the same possibility might have been applicable to the phenomenon brought about by Al.

The problem was—

Ezzo: “The possibility of unknown magic, besides the one used to seal away Nastuki-dono and Miss Beatrice…”

Magic that even Ezzo, who had read through all available literature, and had acquired the knowledge of nearly every magic currently in existence, was unaware of. If it was a sort of forbidden technique that did not remain in records, there was a strong possibility that magic techniques that did not conform to the six basic attributes had been devised.

Ezzo: “…”

He could read any and all moves; bearing this in mind, Ezzo raised his estimation of the threat posed by Al to the maximum possible level.

A formidable foe, wielding unknown magic with unknown intentions—no longer was regarding him with such a description appropriate. The degree of danger he posed ought to have been considered equivalent to that of a Sin Archbishop or a Witch.

Hence—

Ezzo: “—While I still have the Mana to spare, I shall clinch victory!”

5

Upon hearing the thunderous roar, Petra wished not to believe it was real.

However—

Petra: “—Hk.”

She bit the inside of her cheek to wake herself up with the pain.

The desire to believe was dangerous. People tended to easily drift towards the easiest, most comfortable, and safest options. But if something bad came to pass, what would they do?

Would this mean that they would put something or someone important in danger for the sake of their own momentary selfishness?

Petra: "—Meili-chan, over here!"

With that, Petra pulled Meili, who had been helping to clean up after dinner, over to her.

As usual, Meili was only getting in the way and not helping at all, but it was good that she was there. Thanks to that, she had been able to offer her hand.

As Meili was pulled along by Petra, she looked up at the ceiling, from where the sound had been heard,

Meili: "…Petra-chan, it seems like some people are having a fi~ght."

Petra: "—Can you tell who they are?"

Meili: "I don't kno~w. But Onii-san and Fang Onii-san have no reason to fi~ght, so it must be either Sensei-san or Helmet-ojisan, ri~ght?"

Petra: "Al-san and Ezzo-san…"

Meili: "If it's Sensei-san, then we have to be careful of that Flam girl too."

In contrast to Petra's heightened tension, Meili's tone and expression remained the same as usual.

The difference between Meili, who was used to this kind of situation, and Petra, who was not, was clear. Still, Petra was lucky that she had experience from her time in the Empire, so she did not lose her composure.

Petra's life had to benefit from the events in the Empire, even if only a little.

Meili: “What should we do? Should we go up too?”

Petra: “…Well, let’s not do that. If we were present from the beginning, it would be one thing, but if we try to join in now, we’ll just get in the way.”

Meili: “We~ll, I guess that’s good enough. I could send the little Crimson Scorpion-chan to keep guard, bu~t…”

Responding to Meili’s nonsensical statement, the scorpion in question crawled out of her hair and snapped its pincers.

While it was good that they were so aggressive and motivated, it did not seem like a small scorpion like that would be of any use. It would not be much different if Petra and Meili went.

Petra shook her head and put a damper on little Crimson Scorpion’s enthusiasm.

On top of that—

Petra: “—We need to be prepared for anything that might happen.”

Based on what Meili said, it is highly likely that someone was fighting on an upper floor —in the library where the Books of the Dead were kept. There were people who had headed there to work after dinner, and naturally, the two people Meili mentioned were included.

And one of them was—Natsuki Subaru.

Petra: “Subaru…”

As if she were praying, Petra wished for his safety.

Beside him were Beatrice and Garfiel. With those two by his side, she hoped that he would be much safer than if she was there herself.

Just then—

???: “—Petraaa! Meili-!”

Petra: “—Hk, Garf-san?!”

Without warning, Petra leaped to her feet at the sound of Garfiel’s thunderous voice.

Upon hearing Petra’s reply, Garfiel rushed into the room where Petra and the others were.

Petra was delighted to see a familiar face, but she could not afford to even express such.

Petra: “You’re badly hurt…! What happened? You need to get medical treatment right away…!”

Garfiel: “Now, hurry up n’ chas sum Yang Magk on me! Righd away!”

Petra: “—Hk!”

Garfiel, his face covered in blood and several teeth missing, made his appeal, and Petra momentarily tensed up before immediately strengthening Garfiel’s body with Yang Magic.

Her unrefined Yang Magic was something rather unstable to use on someone other than herself, but Garfiel’s fierce expression left her no choice. In that case, Petra had no choice but to overcome her immaturity right here and now.

Garfiel: “RAAAAAH!”

Meili: “Kya~a?!”

While under the effect of Petra’s Yang Magic, Garfiel then forcibly thrust his hands into the floor of the room and tore up the stone flooring with brute strength.

A shriek escaped Meili’s lips at Garfiel’s incomprehensible actions, and then asked him, “Wh-What are you doi~ng?”, as he lifted the floor that he had just removed.

In response, Garfiel turned around to the entrance of the room and,

Garfiel: “DHISH!”

After roaring indistinctly, Garfiel blocked the entrance to the room with the piece of flooring he had torn up.

Petra wanted to question him about what had happened, thinking that he was trying to prevent anyone from coming in. However, she quickly realized that that had not been the issue at hand.

The reason Garfiel had blocked the entrance became clear from what could be seen through the gap beneath the sealed door.

Meili: “—Wa~ter?!”

Once again, Meili screamed, and the small red scorpion on her head also stretched its pincers and tail to the heavens in surprise.

Petra’s round eyes widened as she looked beyond the entrance blocked by Garfiel, and she could hear and feel the presence of the muddy torrent of water that flooded the hallway of the Tower’s Fourth Floor with tremendous force.

Why had it been made, for what purpose, and by whom?

Garfiel: “If ya’re readin’ aheah… then how ’bouh an attack ya can’t block even if ya know it’s comin’…?!”

As he braced his feet against the floor, continuously withstanding the force of the raging water, Garfiel’s cheeks contorted.

Petra was horrified by Garfiel’s vicious, belligerent smile mixed with anger. Who exactly was Garfiel fighting with such an expression on his face?

And why had he rushed alone to Petra and Meili?

Petra: “—Hang in there!”

Biting back the many questions that filled her chest, Petra reached out to support Garfiel’s back.

Garfiel: “—Hk.”

With Petra’s hand on his back, Garfiel’s entire body tensed up with strength.

Of course, Petra’s slender arms could never add to Garfiel’s strength. She would be far more useful were she to concentrate on her Yang Magic.

But at that moment, Petra entrusted all her worries and faith to Garfiel’s back.

And Garfiel, she believed, tried his best to respond to that trust with all his might.

Eventually, the sound of the massive torrent of water rushing through the passageway began to subside, gradually turning into a faint trickle, like the last drops of water falling from a gutter after a rainstorm.

Garfiel, who had been holding his ground, relaxed his legs and pushed the stone slab he had used to block the entrance to the side, and let out a deep breath.

He then began to turn around to face Petra, who was still touching his back—

???: “Garfiel-kun, come here! Upstairs, not to the Taygeta side!”

Perhaps this too was an application of magic, but Ezzo’s voice was so loud that it was hard to tell how far away he was, and Garfiel, who had been called, looked up as if snapped into motion.

His usual sharp fangs were broken, and for a moment, he wondered whether he should explain the situation to Petra and Meili,

Garfiel: “Meili and ya… I’ll exshplain later…!”

Petra: “—. Is it Al-san?”

Garfiel: “…Yeah.”

Without saying much, he only managed to share who had started it, and then Garfiel rushed out into the wet corridor to meet up with Ezzo.

She observed until his back disappeared, and then Petra let out a shaky breath and covered her face with her hands.

Petra: “Don’t cry, don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry…”

Desperately trying to dispel the rising dread within her, Petra repeated the words to herself over and over.

But even so, she couldn’t stop the feeling from welling up inside her.

Meili: “Petra-chan.”

Meili gently, and without warning, placed a hand on Petra’s head, which was still buried in her palms.

Then she ruffled up the other’s hair; Petra thought it annoying, but came to later realize that Meili was just terrible at petting people’s heads.

And while clumsily consoling Petra, Meili let out a small sigh,

Meili: “Maybe it’s my fau~lt… Not everyone can be saved by Onii-san and Onee-san’s kindne~ss.”

Petra: “That’s not…”

True, she wished to say, to deny completely. But instead, a sob came first, and she found herself unable to muster the confidence to fully reject Meili’s words.

6

Upon being assailed by the muddy stream that flooded the hallway, his opponents having discovered a truly optimal strategy, bereft of effect from any of his provocations and excuses, Aldebaran was struck with a sense of powerlessness.

Despite possessing such a cheat technique, despite possessing such an advantage, he was being pursued oh so intensely by people who had mastered the art of countering it.

In regards to that strength, he could not help but be impressed, all excuses aside.

Aldebaran: “—Ubububu.”

The torrent of water left him no escape, forbidding him from planting his legs or grabbing hold of something, so Aldebaran’s body was washed away, mercilessly robbing him of his strength and body temperature.

The more he attempted to struggle against the water, the more his strength would be taken away, relentlessly being exhausted. The water pouring in from the orifices in his entire body washed it all thoroughly, with him unable to do a thing.

Unlike wind, which had a certain degree of direction, dealing with the flow of water by way of walls and structures fashioned from earth was a deed impossible.

Henceforth, what Aldebaran could do was to get swept up by the water, to be jostled about by the water, and to be killed by the water, and nothing more beyond that. In reality, he had no idea just how much water he had ended up swallowing.

Only—

Aldebaran: “Uh… Buh… Abahh… Hk.”

While gurgling, throwing up the water he had swallowed, Aldebaran took heavy breaths.

Body void of strength, he supported and lifted himself with his single arm, doing his best to rid his body of the water that had filled him, so much so that he had been on the verge of bursting like a water balloon.

From his nose, mouth, eyes, and ears, it felt as if water was streaming out. No longer could he feel his lower body, and he was too afraid to ascertain if he had urinated or soiled himself.

And then, after expelling, expelling, vomiting as much water as he could—

???: "—Well then, you should not have any further strength with which to resist, but let us hear you explain yourself."

Having slowly ascended the staircase, the magician and warrior looked down at Aldebaran.

Powerless to stop it, Aldebaran had been knocked about while being swept up the staircase; though the two who had imposingly climbed up those stairs were fatigued, they remained with more than enough will to fight.

Conversely, Aldebaran was soaked like a ragged, drowned rat, his entire body covered in wounds.

Aldebaran: "Ehffhhh."

Languidly did Aldebaran collapse, having relaxed the arm that was supporting his body, now lying face up.

In the sky where the sun was setting, where the curtain of night was beginning to fall, the glow of stars scattered around was visible. Feeling as if the flickering stars above were looking down on him, Al loathed the heavens from the bottom of his heart.

Stars, were something he hated.

Stars, looking down upon the surface from high above, merely shining as they pleased, were something he hated.

???: "Captain 'n Beatrice, gib 'em back…!"

So declared Garfiel, who was missing a few fangs, to the upward-facing Aldebaran.

His attitude of prioritizing Natsuki Subaru and Beatrice instead of complaining about the mess that had been made of his mouth was admirable, and something that Aldebaran almost wanted to root for, but unfortunately, their views were diametrical opposites of one another.

He really did find it sorrowful. Aldebaran did not particularly hate Garfiel.

He did not hate any of them.

He hated neither Garfiel, nor Ezzo, who he had just fought against, nor did he hate Petra, nor Meili, nor Flam, who were present in this Tower, nor did he hate any of the people he would probably end up fighting against hereafter.

The only ones he hated were himself, and Natsuki Subaru.

Garfiel: “OI, BASTAHD, YA LISHNING?!”

Ezzo: “Please calm down, Garfiel-kun. Even if you consider his silence as a provocation here, Al-dono cannot help it. In addition, the provocation would be meaningless. He ought to understand by now.”

Garfiel: “…”

Ezzo: “It seems that you somehow possess the ability to utilize an unknown magic… a type of forbidden art, but that is not to say it is omnipotent. Whether it be I, or likely somebody else, it shall be countered. No matter how skilled you may be in the art of war, you cannot win all your battles.”

Keeping the emotional Garfiel in check, Ezzo spoke, rational to the bitter end.

Those words were quite persuasive to Al, with whom Ezzo had done as he pleased till the current time. Through his definite strength and perceptiveness, Ezzo had defeated Aldebaran’s Authority.

At this moment, since Aldebaran could not even lift a single finger, he could not make excuses.

It was just that—

Aldebaran: “—Ezzo-dono, it’s precisely as you say. I can’t win every battle.”

Still lying on his back, Aldebaran affirmed Ezzo’s words.

At that comment, Garfiel and Ezzo each displayed their own unique reactions. Garfiel showed frustration, and Ezzo showed increasing vigilance.

That they did not lose their focus even after he had declared such, vexed him.

It vexes me but, it’s fine. After all, she’s no longer among us.

—Seven-hundred and forty-eight.

That was the number of attempts in which he had drifted aimlessly, all while experiencing a sense of helplessness at not being able to do anything in particular.

The only variable he had been able to test, had been the place towards which the muddy current would sweep him away. After being washed away by the water, there was nothing Aldebaran could do, tiny as he was.

Instead, until he drew the winning ticket, on and on and on and on, he was washed away without end.

And then, at long last, he drew it.

Aldebaran: “I can’t win every battle. —That’s why, I just gotta win the final one.”

Ezzo: “What are you…”

Aldebaran: “I wanted to get over here. This place is my one and only victory condition.”

Ignoring Ezzo and Garfiel as question marks floated above their heads, Aldebaran continued so.

He did not have the time to wait for a reply. Even now, he was just spewing any nonsense he could think of as to keep himself from losing consciousness.

Neither was he boasting of success, nor did he intend to pester them with a declaration of victory.

Merely, he wished for them to understand. —Just a portion of all the stardust Aldebaran had piled up, he wished for them to understand.

Aldebaran: "…"

As the pair gave off signs of bewilderment, Aldebaran, still lying on the floor, raised his arm, and pointed in a certain direction.

Realizing that something had fallen at the place towards which Aldebaran was pointing, Ezzo and Garfiel's throats both choked up, that was clear.

Even if they did not comprehend the significance of that being here, they likely had gained a sense of unease.

That was—

Garfiel: "Is dat, a Book of the Dead…!"

Ezzo: "Whose?!"

Albeit having been submerged, that Book of the Dead was one which yet maintained the form of a book.

While gazing at its sodden pages, lying on the floor in an open state, the eyes of the two widened in shock, their voices, trembled.

They had yet to reach comprehension. And frankly, even supposing they heard the answer, they likely would not understand its meaning.

But, from the very start, Aldebaran had come to the Tower in order to search for that Book, and put it to use.

After all, he knew that there would be no other way to make the preparations in order to remove Natsuki Subaru.

The title of that Book of the Dead, inscribed there was—

Aldebaran: “—It’s my name.”

Ezzo & Garfiel: “…”

The correct answer revealed to them, Ezzo and Garfiel were overwhelmed by a momentary pause.

While that was a clear opening, Aldebaran unfortunately did not have the strength to reap its benefits. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, was not something that Aldebaran could seize.

Therefore, he would entrust the act of utilizing this once in a lifetime opportunity, to “Aldebaran”.

Looking down upon the soaked pages of the Book of the Dead lying on the floor had been eyes; those eyes slowly rose up, and faced the fore.

And then, clad in scales of pale azure, the lifeform considered to be the strongest in the entire world spread its wings, and pronounced.

???: “—Your stars were bad.”

The subsequent instant, aiming at the magician and warrior, both frozen in place, the breath of the Divine Dragon Volcanica—nay, of the Divine Dragon Aldebaran, was mercilessly unleashed.

V!c.112o

Chapter 13:
The One Most Loved and the One Most Unloved

1

—Two-hundred and eighty-nine.

In added time after surmounting the decisive bout, came an ambush by an unseen adversary, one even more ruthless than anticipated.

While Garfiel was occupied protecting the girls, it was unclear how the hidden enemy, who was not with them, had managed to avoid the great deluge. However, the hidden assailant, who had accomplished such a feat on their own, had broken his neck many times as he came down the stairs in a state of total exhaustion.

Without questions. Without hesitation. This single-minded focus on eliminating impediments was precisely the result of the awareness they held of being the last force of deterrence that remained within the Tower.

???: “You’re quite something, Lil’ Miss.”

To have mastered level of skill to this extent at such a young age, he could only imagine the amount of blood-soaked training she must have undergone, and that caused sentiments of respect to surge up within him.

He had heard she was one of two twin girls, but was her younger or older sister just as strong? —Even if he were to go without inquiring so at this place, the chance to find that out first-hand would likely call upon him soon.

After all, from here on out, the entire world would likely end up turning against Aldebaran.

???: “—Hk.”

There was a slight gasp, and the slender hand of the hidden attacker failed to break Aldebaran's neck.

Just as the girl's hand was about to reach him from behind, Aldebaran covered his neck with a layer of stone and avoided the blow that would have broken his cervical vertebrae.

However, this enemy was not so naive as to slacken their assault there. As soon as they realized their ambush had failed, they immediately slipped towards Aldebaran's left side—to attempt an assassination from his armless side, and unleashed a hand strike aimed at his flank.

A fearsome blow enhanced by the Flow Method, one that would perforate his side, slip through the gap in his ribs, and tear out his heart; a blow that contrasted with her cute hands.

It was a deadly strike that would inevitably bring about a near-instant death; however, a near-instant death was merely that. It was not instant death.

Even if brief, it would nonetheless bring about excruciating pain. That was why—

???: "U-augh!"

Before the ambushing girl's attack could land, Aldebaran reached out with an earthen prosthesis and grabbed the girl's two bundles of hair, then proceeded to forcibly push her against the wall. At that point, the earthen arm was transformed into a large strip of mud, crucifying the girl to the wall.

With both arms and legs bound, and only her head free, the hidden attacker—Flam, exchanged glares with Aldebaran,

Aldebaran: "I'm weaker than you, Lil' Miss. I'm missing one of my arms. My helmet restricts my vision. I'm exhausted from fighting battles in succession. I have no talent or ability. —That's why, it's my win."

Flam: "Al-sa—"

Aldebaran: "Just shut up."

Snapping the fingers of his right hand in front of Flam’s face, he blocked up her mouth with a stone gag. If she could use her hands and feet, she could have easily removed it, but being unable to move them, she was at his mercy.

And so, it could finally be said that the bonus track had been cleared.

Aldebaran: “…”

He heaved a long, deep sigh.

There was not a shred of relief in that sigh; instead, it conveyed a sense of depression that had nothing to do with the sense of accomplishment from actually having done it.

To begin with, using a mountain climbing analogy, this was still the base camp—no matter how much of a positive thinker one was, no one would do something so ridiculous as getting overly excited at the base camp.

Not to mention, this accomplishment of his was not something to be proud of.

Aldebaran: “Why, even if you look at me like that, I can’t give you any excuses, Lil’ Misses.”

As he said this, Aldebaran turned around and looked at the two girls standing silently, staring at Al in the corridor of the Fourth Floor.

—One had cold hostility in her almond-shaped eyes, while the other had a sense of urgency in her round eyes.

???: “This little one is angry, so could you please not come any clo~ser?”

As Aldebaran turned halfway around to face them, the girl with the braid—Meili, moved to confront him. Perched on top of her blue hair was a Witchbeast, a lively character who had appeared several times during the journey to and within the Tower.

Its tail, which emitted a faint glow, was also an unexpectedly formidable offensive organ. Of course, that was only if it struck a vital point without warning, but.

Aldebaran: “Well, I understand you don’t want me to get close. In the first place, I don’t feel like harming you Lil’ Misses.”

Meili: “You ca~me all the way down here to look for us, didn’t yo~u? So that’s absolutely ridiculo~us.”

Aldebaran: “While it’s true that I came to look for you, the reason isn’t what you think.”

At Meili’s cold attitude, Aldebaran played with the seam of his helmet with his fingers while he took care to choose his words. While they were talking, the girl who had been quietly watching them said, “Reason…” in a soft voice, and—

???: “Then, what was the reason you came down, Al-san?”

—As Petra asked the question firmly, without averting her gaze, Aldebaran fell silent.

Aldebaran: “…”

As a former assassin, it was understandable that Meili was used to the harshness of the battlefield. However, it was surprising to see how tough Petra had become, given she was originally just a simple village girl training to become a maid.

Aldebaran had timed it so that everyone would have been at their most relaxed, and carried out this plan of action without anyone realizing the signs. In other words, Petra and the others had no idea what was going on.

There must have been all kinds of questions, and a whirlwind of anxiety and confusion that wanted to burst out crying and screaming, swirling around in her little head. —She did not let any of that show.

Aldebaran: “I’ve fulfilled my objective. I’ve got no more business in this Tower. So if you ask why, it was to come say goodbye.”

Petra: “Even if, you say something like that…”

Aldebaran: “Garfiel and Ezzo are both unconscious at the top of the Tower. If you treat them quickly, they should be able to make it out alive.”

Petra: “—Ah.”

For a brief moment, Petra tensed up at Aldebaran’s selfish declaration and prepared to fight, while Meili next to her also widened her stance in preparation to join Petra’s resolve—but their resolve was thrown into confusion by Aldebaran’s words as he pointed to the uppermost floor of the Tower.

And unfortunately for them, Aldebaran had no room to show mercy, even if his opponents were young girls.

Aldebaran: “What are you gonna do? Are you gonna try and show off by fighting me here? If you try hard enough, you might be able to beat me… But if you lose, the two guys up there will die as well, yeah?”

Petra: “You… You coward…!”

Aldebaran: “Yeah, I know I am, and it makes me hate myself from the bottom of my heart.”

After being berated by Petra, with her fierce eyes, Aldebaran admonished himself for having become a detestable adult.

However, the reality was that those disgusting and cowardly adults seemed to always come out victorious. —Petra, being smart and brave, could properly calculate the risks of losing.

She could not risk letting Garfiel and Ezzo die by picking a fight with slim chances of success.

Meili: “What ha~ppened to Onii-san and Beatrice-chan, I wo~nder?”

Aldebaran: “The two of them are asleep together like babies. They’re so affectionate and close. It’d be cruel to separate them and it'd break my heart, so I just couldn't."

In response to Meili, who inquired about Subaru and Beatrice's safety on behalf of Petra, he gave that answer.

Unfortunately for them, he had no intention of giving them any more information.

Either way, in case they did save Garfiel and Ezzo, they would be able to hear the same story from their mouths. He did not want to carelessly provoke Petra and Meili, who were thinking rationally.

Even if the expansion of territory could shoulder the burden, he was exhausted.

Aldebaran: "Hey, I get that you said not to get any closer, but that's the way out. I'm gonna have to go through."

Aldebaran raised his hand to signal this, and he slowly advanced towards the girls. To show that he meant no harm, he kept his hand raised without lowering it.

Petra & Meili: "…"

Petra and Meili silently made way for the approaching Aldebaran. As he passed between the girls, who had moved out to either side, the only sound in the quiet passage was the clacking of the little crimson scorpion's pincers.

The intimidating sound of the little crimson scorpion's pincers seemed to be a manifestation of the girls' dissatisfaction—

Petra: "You know, over these three days, I really did intend to help you out, Al-san."

Aldebaran: "…"

Petra: "I absolutely loathe you."

Among all the wounds Aldebaran had sustained during his time at the Pleiades Watchtower, the girl's tearful, wrung-out voice had undoubtedly been the gravest of all.

2

At the time Aldebaran descended onto the entrance to the Tower, unfolding there was a heart-wrenching battle, one not dissimilar to the one that he had engaged in with Petra and Meili on the Fourth Floor.

Partaking in that battle was a jet-black earth dragon who had made the great contribution of delivering their group, with Aldebaran in their ranks, to this Tower, her name Patrasche.

And, going head-to-head against Patrasche was—

???: “Yo, me. Did you tie up all the loose ends?”

Indeed, with a solemn, weighty voice, an enormous lifeform spoke to him in a manner completely lacking in gravitas.

As he calmly pushed open the large gate of the Tower’s entrance with his single hand, waiting for him there, facing off against Patrasche, was a Dragon with scales shining blue—a Dragon formerly known as Volcanica, now “Aldebaran”.

Patrasche: “—DODOGYUUUN.”

Squaring off against “Aldebaran”, Patrasche neighed without relinquishing a single step.

In all honesty, all of Subaru’s female companions were mentally deranged. —No, thinking back on it, all of the women Aldebaran had encountered were more-or-less the same.

As for weak women, there was only a single person that came to mind.

Whatever the case—

Aldebaran: “Hey Dragon me, stop picking on those smaller than yourself. You already look crazy enough, doing that’ll make you look way crazier than necessary.”

“Aldebaran”: “Don’t call me crazy like that. If I’m crazy, then you’ve also gotta be just as nuts. Normally, even those who come up with this kinda thing wouldn't actually put it into practice. —Something like hijacking the Divine Dragon, I mean."

With a voice and appearance he was not yet accustomed to having, "Aldebaran" spoke so while moving his wings. At "Aldebaran's" words, Aldebaran shrugged his shoulders.

Even if he were labeled crazy or nuts by his own self, it was a desperate strategy that he had enacted because it was possible for him to do so.

To begin with, since "Aldebaran" was also Aldebaran, there was no doubt that he would have done the same thing if placed in the same situation; so forcing such labels upon him like that was quite unreasonable.

"Aldebaran": "Sorry, ground dragon-chan. But y'know, not moving's the right option. If you get taken out, ground dragon-chan, you aren't gonna be able to take any of your companions out from this sea of sand."

Aldebaran: "…"

"Aldebaran": "What?"

Aldebaran: "Nothing, just thought that you really are me. Our ways of making threats are completely the same."

In order to avoid a fight with Patrasche, "Aldebaran" had employed the same logic that Aldebaran had used to threaten Petra and Meili; this fact was something that gave him boundless mixed feelings.

Anyhow—

Aldebaran: "Can you fly?"

"Aldebaran": "I can… I think. It's one of those things you get used to little-by-little."

Aldebaran: "That phrasing's brimming with apprehension…"

At the response from “Aldebaran”, somewhat lacking in reliability, Aldebaran climbed up the former’s tail and hopped onto the Dragon’s back, though he himself could not hide the slight unease he felt. Then, clinging to one of the many protrusions on the Dragon’s scales, he called out “Here we go”.

“Aldebaran”: “—Lift off!”

The following instant, with a spirited yell and a flap of his wings, “Aldebaran” rose to the sky.

Scattering the sand with a thunderous wind, the Dragon swiftly climbed to a high altitude, all the way to the top part of the exceedingly tall Pleiades Watchtower, and from there began to part from the Tower.

As the Tower rapidly grew distant, Aldebaran looked back at those who he had left there—

“Aldebaran”: “No way, are you having regrets?”

Aldebaran: “I did have them. When it comes to regrets, I had them four-hundred years ago.”

Being made fun of by himself, who had a full grasp of his circumstances, Aldebaran clicked his tongue.

What “Aldebaran” wished to say, was the reality that he did not have the leeway to be looking back. And that was indeed correct. If this were to be likened to a mountain, then he was still only at the base camp.

From here on out, aiming for the starlight beyond the realm of a billion that he had resolved himself to reach no matter what, Aldebaran could not afford to make even a single wrong move.

“Aldebaran”: “Well, don’t get too worked up on your own. I’ll be with you from now on. That’s at least a lil’ better, yeah?”

As his wings rapidly sliced through the night sky over the Sand Sea, “Aldebaran” spoke in high spirits.

Although he'd had the Memories shared by his Book of the Dead installed within him, that optimistic point-of-view likely stemmed from a difference in the vessel being occupied. Nonetheless, it was not good to be overly negative, either.

In reality, he had acquired backup more powerful than one could ever hope for.

What remained was—

???: "—That will be as far as you go."

3

—At the moment he was about to formulate his next course of action, the light pierced him.

???: "…"

Having violently crashed upon the ocean of sand in this chilly night, the Dragon unhurriedly raised itself. Aldebaran, who had been nestled within the Dragon's wings, shook his head and dropped down onto the sand.

And then, that composedly came into the view of the lone person and Dragon, of the two distinct Aldebarans.

???: "…"

Hair red akin to a burning flame, eyes blue akin to the clear skies, clad in an outfit of immaculate white as per his convictions, the chivalry he practiced, the existence ordained by the world—

???: "Flam, who was left behind at the Tower, is one blessed with the Divine Protection of Telepathy. She and her sister, Grassis, are able to communicate without regard to distance and time, albeit only once per day."

That, was his explanation as to why he had hastened to this scene; quite the honest response, one that was considerate and sympathetic towards the confusion of someone who had found themselves in an unreasonable situation.

Aldebaran: “…Thanks for the explanation. Are you used to people lodging complaints against you, perchance?”

???: “I wish to clear the doubts I myself have first. —There are many things I wish to question you on.”

Aldebaran: “…”

???: “I advise you surrender. If possible, I would prefer to not cut you down.”

Declaring so, while touching the Dragon Sword at his waist, the youth—Reinhard van Astrea, before Aldebaran and “Aldebaran” both, magnificently asserted.

Reinhard: “…”

His aura majestic, his posture gallant, his existence dazzling even amidst a world of night—to this man bound to be a Hero, as one bearing heroic reveries long decayed, this alone, he wished to object.

It was something that had been spoken to him many a time, but—

Aldebaran: “Quit putting on airs, hero. I’ll win regardless. —Your stars were bad.”

Gazed upon by a star-studded sky amidst a great ocean of sand, Aldebaran faced off against Reinhard.

—That was a confrontation irreconcilable, between one whom the world loved, and one whom it did not.

Vic.ll20

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters I

1

???: “Aa~aa~nyaa~~! Let’s play!”

???: “—Die.”

Waving his hand energetically, Cecilus called out in a cheerful tone, and, accompanying the quiet yet fiery voice from across the door, was an unbelievable shockwave.

Centered on the shack that did not really serve its function as a house, there was enough might to transform the surrounding flatlands into a plain even flatter than the name suggested. The space exploded in a manner akin to taking a full swing at a mountain of fallen leaves with a broom; pure destruction with no discretion or mercy whatsoever.

Die, it was a ruthless blow seeking a result in exact accordance with the word that had been uttered.

???: “…”

Eyes wide in amazement, Spica was left speechless by the absurd scene unfolding before her.

She had viewed herself as being quite an agile individual, but if she had been standing at the site of that explosion, she would have been blown away without any doubt. —Truly, this fight was on another level.

Cecilus: “Good grief trying to drive me away without even showing your face first is rapidly making you more of a stay-at-home gal each and every day and that’s just not good y’know? I don’t intend on telling you time and time again to get out and feel the sun and the wind but when you’re all cooped up in there like that there’s just no other way to get your spirits up after all. Though with that said I've never experienced anything like shutting myself away in a room or facing downward so I can't really say for sure!"

Spica: "Uau?!"

Then, hearing that spirited voice from behind her, Spica jumped up in surprise.

The person responsible for causing that reaction laughed "Haha" in a lighthearted tone,

Cecilus: "Sorry for surprising you. But you're glad you listened to my warning now aren't you? This rocky area is just out of the range of Anya's tantrums. That's why it shouldn't be dangerous at all for you to watch us battle from over here maybe!"

Spica: "Aau, uu?"

Cecilus: "Woah there. Do be careful not to do anything heedless. For the time being Boss has entrusted you to me so I intend to provide you as much convenience as I can but there's a limit to that. The one to decide on that limit is not me but ultimately your own actions. With that said I'll give you one serious warning."

Spica: "…"

Cecilus: "To rise to the stage that lies ahead is only possible with adequate qualifications. Since I'm the only one dancing with Anya right now it's a stage for two, but… how about you?"

As he said that, Cecilus hopped off of the rocky area that Spica was standing on. To the fore, out from the shack that was still intact despite being the site of an explosion, came the heavenly maiden clad in enough light to dazzle one's eyes—Arakiya, slowly revealed herself.

Once again today, the First and Second of the Vollachian Empire commenced an unproductive battle.

Placing her hand to her chest in light of that fact, Spica brimmed with determination as she gazed at Cecilus's back—

Spica: “Uu!”

Cecilus: “Yes, yes, thank you so very much for your cheers! Without ever averting turning or blinking your eyes, bear witness! The leading actor, the star role of this world is coming through!!”

Spica: “Aau?!”

A shrill voice resounded, and Cecilus’s winking visage disappeared out from thin air. And after a flash, the report of an impact giving the impression that the world had fractured thundered throughout the sky.

Cecilus was someone to whom words never seemed to get through, despite the impression that they might; however, Spica had not taken the one-sided layup from him in the slightest, either. That was frustrating.

With how things were going, her great determination for remaining in the Empire—the day upon which she would fulfill her promise to Subaru and Rem, seemed quite distant indeed.

2

—The Great Disaster that had assailed the Vollachian Empire, and the subjugation of all the undead who had served as its vanguard.

That was the reason why Spica had parted ways with Subaru and the others to remain in the Empire, and the condition that she needed to fulfill for herself to proudly reunite with Subaru and everyone else in the Kingdom.

The name Spica, and the title of Sin Archbishop of Gluttony—those were the blessing and curse bestowed upon Spica, who was a mere nobody, and they were things akin to the two sides of a coin.

???: “If from here on, you are to live under the name that he has bestowed upon you, then you must not forsake the accursed title that bears the opposite side of that meaning. If you consider that too heavy a burden to bear, then you would be better off establishing a wholly different name and position for yourself.”

With those words, the busy Emperor earnestly listened to Spica's appeal, and presented her with an option.

His eyes had a scary look to them, and his voice was also stern, but Spica accepted that as the Emperor showing consideration in his own way. The Emperor likely understood the "burden" that Spica would end up carrying to a degree greater than Spica herself, and thus presented her with his honest advice.

However, in order to reach the future that Spica desired, that advice was not something she could listen to.

???: "—I see."

Therefore, Spica had no choice but to shake her head sideways to that advice.

However, with a brief response to Spica's choice, the fact that the Emperor—Abel, appeared so modestly satisfied that it was difficult to tell if he actually was, did not seem to just be Spica's imagination.

With that sequence of events, Spica remained in the Empire, and would subjugate the undead who survived the Great Disaster with her Star Eating, entrusted with the cleansing of their souls. On top of that, saying that he would have trouble sleeping at night if Spica failed, the Emperor who never slept much in the first place was so courteous as to present her with escorts to assist with her work.

Granted, that was a decision made due to his newlywed wife, Medium, scolding him to "Treat her better!", but she was still very grateful.

Grateful, she had indeed felt that way, but—

Spica: "…Aa~u".

Brimming with motivation, Spica wanted to set out on their journey as soon as possible, but contrary to those feelings of hers, she was completely out of sync with the pace of her escorts, who were crucial to her purpose. Or rather, it was not even a matter of being out of sync.

Among the two escorts that the Emperor had endorsed, the owner of abilities indispensable for this work—Arakiya, was someone Spica had never met nor ever exchanged greetings with. She had asked Cecilus for advice in regards to that, but from the outset, Cecilus had not received greetings from Arakiya either.

—Ultimately, without having fulfilled the objective she had in coming here, Spica merely observed the world crumbling from a distance.

The battle that had commenced with Cecilus's salutation uttered in mischievous jest, had become a fierce battle of such immense scope that she could only recall one or two of the battles amidst the Great Disaster that could rival it.

Spica: "Eius, Aaiya."

Basking in the tremors that reached this rocky area from several kilometers away, Spica muttered the names of the two combatants.

Cecilus spoke in a brisk and cheerful manner, and Subaru had told her time and time again that while it was fine to believe in his strength, and that alone, she must not let him do as he pleased in regards to anything else. Spica was apprehensive about her future prospects with him, given he would not fully understand her words, but she wanted to do her best so that things would go well.

And, while the strength of Arakiya, who she had yet to exchange words with, was certainly being assured, Spica also feared that she would be extremely difficult to deal with, so she also wanted to do her best to get on good terms with her.

For the wish and objective Spica wanted to fulfill, her own abilities were completely insufficient. —Thus, in order to reach the high places upon which she had set her sights, she would need to mimic Subaru's methods.

For the existence who had received new life as Spica, Natsuki Subaru was the ideal role model.

And that was precisely why, she thought thus. —Could her desires really be fulfilled by standing still here on these rocks?

???: “I can’t remember ever doing anything properly, and so I don’t have any self-important things to tell you, Spica-chan. Even so, please remember this. That I… that both that person and I, have been saved countless times by you, Spica-chan, who never once gave up in trying to get close to us.”

Those were words spoken to her by Rem, who, when Spica decided to remain in the Empire, had spoken to her countless times, tried to convince her countless times, eventually admitting that Spica’s resolve would not bend.

As an empty being, Spica had been without any understanding of what she was capable of, yet she was still fervent in her desire to not part with the hands of bright warmth present in her immediate vicinity; and of that girl, Rem had given such an evaluation.

In that case, that which Spica could do was—

Spica: “—Uau.”

3

From within their body, impulses overflowed without cease.

Blowing, blowing all of that out, they would shape the world to their will. It was the same as breathing. If one continued to inhale a large, large breath, at some point it would become painful until they let it all out in an exhale.

With immense power incomparable to breathing, that same phenomenon was occurring.

What differed was that no matter how much they exhaled, that which they had inhaled would not ease in the slightest; if anything, as they continued to exhale, the absurdity of continuing to inhale simultaneously persisted.

Everything, all of that was—

???: “—Princess.”

The exceedingly important, unwavering light that they had placed at the core of their own being, had disappeared.

Now that it had departed to a place unreachable by their hands, the pitiful existence for whom that light had illuminated the world—Arakiya, had been cast down into a realm of pure darkness.

???: “Ta-Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta—!!”

With the report of a cacophonous yet familiar voice, the familiar sight of pale blue light charged ahead whilst leaving behind clouds of dust.

No matter how many times she rejected or drove him away, the odious man would come at her with a nonchalant face. Since long ago, he had been odious. But now, he was even more odious than back then.

Arakiya: “Why, didn’t you kill me?”

In the midst of that battle, he—Cecilus, certainly had the opportunity to kill Arakiya. Arakiya, too, had wished for him to do so. She had wanted to be killed.

By being killed along with the Great Spirit she had taken in, there was a chance to bring down the enemy’s plans.

If that had come to fruition, just if, Arakiya’s light might still be—

Cecilus: “You should really stop averting your eyes from reality, Anya. But what if just maybe so on and so forth. If you continue saying such things it’ll be a denial of the future that person triumphantly secured.”

Arakiya: “—Hk.”

As Cecilus seemed to see through Arakiya’s emotions, his words were accompanied by slashes of lightning speed, and Arakiya’s body, unable to dodge, was obliquely bisected. —However, she would not die.

Arakiya’s body, having taken in the power of the Stone, Muspel, could deliberately switch her state between a physical and a Mana-based body. The standard method to kill a Mana-based body was to exhaust its Od, but since she was supplied with Muspel's inexhaustible stores of Mana, Arakiya was effectively immortal.

But, being immortal was far from making the world what she wanted it to be.

Arakiya: "Triumphantly secured…? Even though, the Princess, is no longer among us…"

Cecilus: "Yeah. But I won't revise what I said nor will I apologize for it. This is a brand new stage triumphantly orchestrated by your princess sister and the many other actors who laid down their lives in that battle. So, as a part of this new production, we ought to dance and speak with flamboyance. —So that the world does not forget her."

Arakiya: "—Hk, I wanted to! I wanted to disappear together with the Princess!"

Screaming, belts of light began to emerge from all over her body. The light belts, which would evaporate anything they made contact with, rampaged, however, the beams of light tearing the world apart could not erase that lone lightning.

For what reason, why, how, would the sun ever rise for her again—?

???: "—U~au!"

A hell in which even the tears emerging at the corners of her eyes were vaporized by the heat she herself was emitting.

An absolute domain where none could survive save for azure lightning, and she, who had fused with the vast lands of the Empire. That battlefield of certain death that rejected all who lacked the qualifications to enter, had been reached by a voice and weight that ought not have been there under any circumstances.

Arakiya: "…"

Understanding that as the weight of somebody clinging to her back, as Arakiya shed tears of blood from her lightless eyes, she attempted to forcibly shake that person off. For that purpose, she need not even exert her arms. By merely unleashing the power overflowing from within her, she was reduced to an existence that served to destroy the world.

Even so, she had been unable to save Priscilla—

Cecilus: "—Anya!"

The power to blast away the person on her back, was beaten back by an inundation from a storm of sword attacks.

No matter how much he attempted to cut her, the inexhaustible supply of Mana would just restore Arakiya's body, but if she used her reserved stores of Mana for that purpose, she would run out of Mana to use for offense. Thus, these slashes served to keep the person clinging to Arakiya's back alive for longer.

To use his power for the sake of another, was entirely not like Cecilus in the slightest.

Cecilus: "The act of experiencing something also means the act of gaining something. If you had thought that my selling point was an invariable way of being then how charming of you! You acquire things by losing and losing then gaining. All things in life are either flowery makeup or warpaint."

Arakiya: "What are you…"

Cecilus: "And that's not just limited to me but also applies to you and that girl on your back."

With a powerful flash of swordlight, Arakiya's chest was pierced, and the upturned blade assailed her in an attempt to lop off her head. Faced with that tremendous sword attack, Arakiya thought that she might as well surrender her life to it.

However, the slash that ought to have lopped off Arakiya's slender neck, did not connect.

Arakiya: "…"

For a moment, her vision blurred, and Cecilus disappeared from in front of her.

Confusion began to brew in Arakiya's head, wondering just what had occurred. Only, she was in a place where the height and angle of the scenery she saw now differed to what it had just been a moment prior—

???: "Uu!"

Then, she belatedly realized that the one who had done that, was a small child triumphing behind her.

With that sensation, Arakiya turned around to face the person behind her. The one who had spun through the air and landed on all fours, was a young girl with a strong will dwelling in her blue eyes.

With her serious gaze intact, the young girl seemed to point her finger straight at Arakiya, and—

Girl: "Aaiya."

That was, while not pronounced very well, a call towards Arakiya.

Then, the young girl directed the finger that had been pointed to Arakiya to the one standing beside her, Cecilus,

Girl: "Eius."

And finally, pointing to herself,

Girl: "Ica."

With that, she had continued so.

Arakiya: "…"

Dumbfounded, Arakiya stood stock-still at the young girl's actions. Ignoring her reaction, Cecilus returned his katana to its sheath and looked at the young girl before shrugging his shoulders,

Cecilus: “It was quite brave of you to rise to the stage and participate in the battle between me and Anya. That should be recognized without any complaints. And so, Anya, this girl has a duty that she needs and wants to fulfill with our help. Both you and I, Anya, were already ordered to cooperate by our director, His Excellency, so—”

Cecilus was already brazenly acting as if he were the young girl’s comrade. Those words of Cecilus were suddenly interrupted. The reason was simple. —Arakiya had fallen to her knees, unable to remain standing, and placing both her hands on the ground before Cecilus and the girl,

Arakiya: “Bleurghhhhhhh…”

With her eyes darting around, the upsurge of a hurling sensation drove Arakiya into a corner, rendering her incapable of action.

The inexplicable fluctuation in the world from a moment earlier—albeit Arakiya was unaware, was a teleportation in space brought about by the young girl. That had greatly perturbed the insides of her body and head, causing the immortal Arakiya to become incapable of even standing up. An unthinkable method to render her powerless.

Cecilus: “Haha I see now this is quite unexpected! I don’t think His Excellency could have foreseen this, but… it seems that Spica-san also has the qualifications to rise to the stage!”

Arakiya: “Di… e…”

As Cecilus lightly spoke with an expression indifferent to Arakiya’s anguish, she surged with murderous intent towards him. However, the ferocious hurling sensation hindered that intent, preventing it from taking shape.

That was vexing, pathetic, and Arakiya spilled out weeping groans.

Thereupon—

Girl: “Aaiya.”

The young girl crouched down beside her, and patted her on the back. —At that sensation, though still unable to lift her face, Arakiya had no choice but to continue cowering.

But, for the first time since she had lost her light, tears that found their genesis in a place outside of the domain of anger, streamed down her cheeks.

END

Kararagi Reaper Incident I

1

???: “—As I thought, are ya worried ‘bout Natsuki-kun?”

And, called out to from the side as he looked out the window, Julius felt ashamed of his uncertainty.

To cause one’s liege to feel apprehension and worry, was an act that any Knight ought to feel ashamed of. All the more when, it was not in regards to their own areas, but instead that of an opposing Camp.

Henceforth, Julius shook his head “No”, and,

Julius: “I sincerely apologize for causing you worry. Hereafter, I shall be more careful.”

Anastasia: “Nah, ya don’t gotta act so overserious. Even for us, we completed our original objective. He’ll probably keep on goin’ ‘til he dies, tho’ leavin’ Natsuki-kun in such a state is real darn terrifyin’.”

Julius: “…Though, he and those around him all seemed to accept it as “Sparka”.”

Anastasia: “Them tryna be overly positive ‘bout it’s even more pitiful… well, anything from there on out’s not our job, so Emilia-san ‘n the others really gotta help support him.”

Elegantly placing her hand to her cheek, Anastasia expressed her thoughts.

She was his master, and her words rang true. From here on, outsiders such as Julius and Anastasia had no room to interfere, neither should they.

???: “Regardless, they helped us out quite a bit to get back on our feet. Now that the positions are reversed, perhaps he’s unable to wait for things to settle… that might be a risky position to take.”

Anastasia: “Stop with that, this little one’s gonna end up bewilderin’ Julius again…”

Having wedged its way into the conversation between the pair, the statement of the white fox scarf—Echidna, caused Anastasia to grab the Spirit’s snout, and cast upon it words of scolding.

At the familiar interaction between the two, a slightly pleased look appeared on Julius’s face, then,

Julius: “You have no need to be concerned… what I mean to say is, while you may have your doubts based on my track record thus far, I assure you that these thoughts and concerns of Anastasia-sama and Echidna, are premature.”

Echidna: “Oya, is that so? We left Vollachia before Natsuki-kun could conclude his Sparka. Since you would have certainly been upset with that decision, I was afraid that maybe your trust in Ana had been greatly damaged.”

Julius: “Certainly, it would be a lie to say that my heart does not still ache. However, my utmost priority is Anastasia-sama. Subaru must get back up by his own strength… supported by those around him.”

Without deception, laying out his honest feelings, Julius responded to Anastasia and Echidna.

The battle against the Great Disaster concluded, Julius and Co had left Subaru’s party in the Fortified City, and departed from the Empire first. Until their final day, Subaru had been accumulating time in a ritual known as Sparka—that which could also be called Absolution, time spent in order to punish himself.

The fact that his words had been unable to reach that pitiful figure, was an extremely great sorrow to him.

However, the reason Subaru sought Sparka—the weighty wound he had received upon the death of Priscilla Barielle, was not something he bore alone.

Julius: “…”

Quietly, Julius shifted his gaze to Anastasia as she scratched Echidna's neck.

Already having regained her presence of mind, Anastasia appeared to have been acting normally, but Julius knew of her bottomless selfishness to desire all things—a personality such that, not wanting Julius to vanish from her memories via the Authority of Gluttony, she had even sealed her own self.

For Anastasia, losing somebody she knew was a terribly difficult affair. Even if that was somebody who opposed her in the Royal Selection, with whom she bore a mutual recognition that they could not get along.

That was why—

Echidna: "You say Ana is your utmost priority. Goodness gracious, I am relieved to hear that from your mouth. If you do your best to convince Halibel now, then supposing you fall from your seat as Knight, Julius, you may be able to garner enough prestige to still act as a substitute."

Julius: "In regards to strength, and loyalty towards Anastasia-sama… for this example, how about we refer to it as the sentiments of holding Anastaisa-sama dear? In regards to those, I may have poor prospects against Halibel-san, but unfortunately I shan't concede this title of mine. It rests upon my honor."

As his gaze clashed with Echidna's black eyes, Julius revealed where he stood.

With Anastasia as his number one, Julius and Echinda were in agreement of the same objective. It would be senseless to incur the displeasure of this Spirit, and it could easily turn into a futile conflict.

Eliminating those numerous difficulties, he would support Anastasia.

Julius: "Extolled as the Finest, that is the duty I must fulfill as a Knight."

With a sidelong glance to the quarreling exchange of gazes between Julius and Echidna, Anastasia became troubled, but maintained her smile as she felt perplexed.

The two people talking beside her, she had fully intended on understanding their intent and worries.

Having entered Vollachia as a special emissary from Kararagi, Anastasia was returning amidst feelings of loss—fearing the situation, those two were showing consideration for her.

But, had the two of them not grasped Anastasia's mental state a little too deeply?

Anastasia: "Look, with that princess dyin', I ain't tryna say that I ain't shaken."

Someone who would not die even if killed; Priscilla seemed to fit that evaluation more than anybody else.

For her to scorch her life away in order to defend her homeland, and then to leave those final words behind to Anastasia and Emilia there, there was no way that her heart would be left engraved with nothing.

But, much more susceptible to feeling hurt, likely without having prepared her heart, Emilia had also been present. —She had not told anybody about this, but Emilia's presence had largely saved her.

That was because the presence of someone who was more disturbed than her, had graced Anastasia with the ability to think in a composed manner. Thanks to that, Anastasia had nullified her inner turmoil in regards to Priscilla's death.

Thus, Julius and Echidna's concern was little overbearing, but—

Anastasia: "Well, maybe it's best for those two if I let 'em worry 'bout me for now."

If one tripped on something and scraped their knee, the blood from the wound would eventually stop, become a scab, and after enough time elapsed for it to heal, that person would take care so as to not trip again.

Right now, Julius and Echidna were in the midst of that process, waiting for it to become a scab.

For that purpose—

Anastasia: “For now, I’d like to quickly deal with the job at hand, but… seems like they’re takin’ quite a bit of time to greet us.”

Caressing Echidna’s fur at her neck, Anastasia muttered so.

—Anastasia’s group, having departed from the Vollachian Empire and crossed the border back into the Kararagi City-States, had entered the Third City, Ivada, in order to report on their results as emissaries.

They had already verified their identity, and had been ushered into the mansion of Ivada’s mayor, Orgo Hayata, but they had yet to be given permission to meet with Orgo himself. They understood that he was a busy man, but the business they were here on also ought to have been quite important.

Anastasia: “…Don’t tell me, ‘s there some sorta problem happenin’?”

???: “—As expected, ya’ve got darn fantastic intuition, lil’ Ana.”

As Anastasia pondered the reason for which the other party might not be right, the one who impolitely listened to that, and called out after, was the tall figure who had appeared in the empty room—Halibel.

Unlike Anastasia and the rest, who were being treated as guests, Halibel was treated as a Kararagi insider, and thus had already appeared before Orgo, but—

Anastasia: “What’s this, ya know it’s bad manners to eavesdrop when people’re talkin’ to themselves, right?”

Halibel: “Sorry sorry. But I ain’t eavesdroppin’ or anythin’ like that. My ears just happen ta be really darn good, thaaat’s all. They’re done gettin’ ready back there, so they told me ta “go give ‘em a hollar~”.”

Julius: “Though, I find it difficult to believe that Mayor Orgo used his jaw in the manner you just did.”

Halibel: “Well that’s ya know, words are flexible. Well now, hurry hurry. Remember lil’ Ana’s favorite phrase?”

Anastasia: ““Time is money”, the Hoshin proverb. Really now.”

Being hastened by Halibel’s unabashed attitude, Anastasia took Julius’s gently proffered hand and stood up, before turning to face Halibel with a “So then?”

Anastasia: “When ya praised my intuition, ya meant that there was actually some sorta problem, right?”

Halibel: “Yeah, tho’ I think it’s prolly best ya hear it directly from Orgo insteada from me. I ain’t got that firm of a grasp on the whole thing after all.”

Anastasia: “Don’t frighten me.”

Putting on airs, or rather, not wanting to give them superfluous preconceptions, Halibel’s manner of speech was somewhat reminiscent of the meeting with the mayors before they set out to the Empire. Back then, the topic of conversation was the cataclysm brought about by the large-scale resurrection of undead that had occurred along the border with the Vollachian Empire.

The fact that Halibel’s demeanor reminded her of that, was more than enough of a sinister omen.

Anastasia: “Even tho’ we just got back, there’s always gotta be somethin’… Really, we ain’t even got any time to get some rest.”

3

The Kararagi City-States was a country made up of ten enrolled large cities, and the mayors entrusted with each city were all distinguished individuals of brilliant talents.

Hence, the mayor of the Third City, Ivada, Orgo Hayata, was also a competent individual.

As he received the report of Anastasia and the others after they had returned from Vollachia, Orgo tightly clasped the fan in his hand while the rounded tips of his characteristic mustache quivered.

Orgo: “In other words, the incident that got its impetus in the Empire was safely resolved while those dead folk were still squirmin’ all ‘bout. Did the Empire send any gratitude the way of us City-States?”

Anastasia: “Bingo. I was talkin’ with their Prime Minister ‘n secured a definite agreement. I’ve also got a full promissory note, so ya can rest assured.”

Orgo: “I see, I see. Then, the fact that y’all made it back safely, ‘n even incurred a debt from Vollachia to Kararagi, is truly a matter for great~ celebration. My deepest gratitude.”

Anastasia: “…Considerin’ all that, Orgo-san, yer face doesn’t make it seem like it’s time for “great celebrations” in the slightest.”

Having received a report that was naught but positive, Orgo showed great delight in his words. However, as Anastasia had pointed out, that delight was not reflected in his voice or facial expression whatsoever.

Just as Halibel had prefaced earlier in the empty room, some sort of disheartening problem was occurring; Echidna also perceived as much. And so, that was likely something that Anastasia would also poke her beak into.

Echidna: “—Goodness gracious, I am beat.”

Before the atmosphere of the conversation could clearly grow weighty, Echidna sighed.

If possible, after giving her all to the job of emissary, she had wanted Anastasia to rest for a bit without needing to think about anything—in this case, she wanted to give her time for something relaxing, along the lines of working the abacus for the first time in a while as the representative of the Hoshin Trading Company.

Of course, there was also the fact that Anastasia saw this as Echidna and Julius worrying too much about her, but in Echidna's opinion, Anastasia was mistaken.

Echidna, having been the closest to Anastasia both physically and emotionally for ten years already, was proud to clearly understand that the events of the Empire were weighing on Anastasia more than she herself was aware of.

That was why, it was not her intent to get involved in yet another problem before Anastasia could get proper rest, but.

Orgo: "—. Truth be told, there's a teeny bit of a problem that's stirred up in Banan."

And, as Orgo disclosed that in a feeble voice, Echidna narrowed her black eyes.

It was not as though Orgo's attitude was actually a weak one, but instead, he was employing a method to incur the other party's sympathy. Of course, it was not something that would be effective against Anastasia, a big time merchant who had been through hundreds of battles, but—

Anastasia: "A problem in Banan… what' this about? Given that you were waitin' for our report, perhaps it's tied to those dead folk?"

However, in such a manner, Anastasia prompted Orgo to continue.

Anastasia: "Well, it'd be a quick chat if that was the case, but it's kinda troublin' that it don't seem to be the case. The origin of all the issues with dead folk were done 'n dealt with back in Vollachia. Based on the locations, too, I think it'd be rather difficult for the two to be connected."

Julius: "Banan, that is the the Second City, correct? It is located to the west of Kyou, which is right in the center of Kararagi… quite the distance from the border with the Empire."

Anastasia: "There're some zombies that remained unfinished, but based on the distance this'd be unrelated."

Julius and Anastasia conversed at length, pointing to the map they had envisioned in their heads. At that exchange referencing a mental map he could not see, Orgo gripped his fan and nodded.

In short, it was a matter of the following.

Halibel: "With the problem in Vollachia settled, here on out'd be negotiations for our reward… even tho' that'd be the ideal, someone's doin' somethin' ta stir up trouble in Kararagi so we can't for now, that about the gist of it?"

Orgo: "…Regardless of your phrasing, Halibel-han's thinking is not mistaken."

As Orgo glared at him with a bitter phase, Halibel bobbed the kiseru in his mouth up and down in a perfunctory response.

Whatever the case, if it was as Halibel had summed up, then Orgo's fears could be presumed to be unrelated to Vollachia, instead being something brought about by a third party. The only problem was the question of, why was this being regarded with such importance?

Anastasia: "I told ya to get to the point, Orgo-san. What's happenin', and what's the extent of the damage? 'N finally, why're ya bringin' it up to us?"

Julius: "Anastasia-sama? I believe it is because the information we returned with may factor into Mayor Orgo's decision making…"

Anastasia: "Nah, it ain't just that. It's 'bout Orgo-san 'n the rest. For the most part, we've generally grasped that it ain't related to the Empire. But then, the fact that he called us here means—"

Pausing her words there, the glint in Anastasia's pale-turquoise eyes grew intense.

In order to get the upper hand on her opponent in negotiations, Anastasia deemed it appropriate to prevent herself from becoming emotional; thus, this was a scarcely seen gaze of clearly defined anger.

At that demeanor of Anastasia's, the thoughts of Julius and Echidna lagged half a step behind. However, the response from Orgo that followed, clearly informed them of the reason behind that anger.

The fan held in Orgo's hand grated, and he continued with a sorrowful expression.

That was—

Orgo: "…Large-scale wind damage's broken out in Banan. The city's in a state of partial destruction, 'n as a precaution, we'd sent many people from the surrounding area inside. Among them were the Iron Fang from y'all's place."

Anastasia: "—Hk! Ricardo 'n the rest… are they alright?"

Orgo: "We can't contact them… Right now, Banan's been completely enveloped by wind, 'n ain't nobody can leave."

4

Amidst the thunderous, overpowering gusts of feral wind, Ricardo leaned against his great cleaver, and held his ground.

The surrounding area, the townscape of Kararagi he had been acquainted with for many years, was devastated and ravaged by wind; roofs and pillars, anything and everything had been blown away, things were left in a miserable state.

Ricardo: "What's this, reminds me of that time there was that darn huge fire."

In Kararagi, where most buildings were made of wood, if a fire was started by something it would immediately blaze its way through the town. When that happened, they would demolish all the houses in order to prevent the flames from spreading further, and the result was the similar empty feeling that was now present in the town.

But then again, the people of Kararagi were not so soft as to have their hearts broken at that.

In the past, when the tenement that Ricardo and Anastasia lived in burned down, a mother who had lost every last one of her household belongings laughed “I guess I shoulda prepared some yams”; and afterwards, Ricardo witnessed her and her children get back on their feet stronger than ever.

The strength to smile even in those depressing times, was certainly present in Kararagi.

Ricardo: “That’s why, we ain’t got no choice but to deal with this ‘n make it so everyone can smile again. Our employer’s gonna be comin’ home soon, after all.”

Saying that, he endured to keep his eyelids open, as the wind verged on forcing them shut, Ricardo glared to his fore.

As gusts of fierce wind danced, seeming as if they could sweep up Ricardo’s large body, towering over two meters tall, at any moment, he glared at at the silhouette approaching him with calm steps.

Captured in Ricardo’s sharp gaze, the siloutette—the slender, white-haired woman, clad in waso clothing, tilted her head,

Woman: “Hmm? Why, don’t you just talk a lot with that loud mouth of yours? That large body of yours is just that and nothing more. You weren’t blown to bits by my wind, so I will praise you… Who in their right mind would praise you?!”

Ricardo: “Well ain’t ya a vibrant young lady. If you’re gonna put on a performance, I think ya’d earn more profit by doin’ so at a playhouse.”

Woman: “Silence, impudent thief. —Do as you’re told, and return my Light Sphere.”

He had tried to ascertain if it was someone who he could converse with, however, Ricardo wrinkled his snout at the unfamiliar phrase spoken by the woman with the hostile attitude.

He could presume that the woman before him had lost something, and was now searching for it. The problem was, her method of searching was a bit over the top and grandiose, having enshrouded the entire city in one large tornado.

At the center of the incident that would later go on to be called the Shinigami Cataclysm, Ricardo grit his fangs. —All the while, thinking about how it did not seem like this would simply end with a severe scolding Anastasia once she got back.

END

No Stella No Life I

1

???: “—Aldebaran.”

And, that which had been called out in a clear voice, was something that Aldebaran hated.

He hated that name. In addition, he also hated the person who had called out to him. Furthermore, plenty of other factors that he hated could be squeezed out for argument’s sake.

Anyway, this hatred of his could not be helped.

???: “Good grief, that is quite the displeased face you have got on there. Though, I had suggested that name thinking it would be the best thing to do for you.”

Speaking in such a nonchalant manner, that upside-down face entered his field of vision.

The reason for its inversion was plain and simple, it was because he was lying down, sprawled out on the ground. And the reason that he was lying like that was also plain and simple, it was because this upside-down person had gotten the best of him.

The gaze, tinged with discontent, along with the facial features adorned with long lashes and composed beauty that did not waver in the slightest, could all be made out in his upside-down field of vision, which really pissed him off.

???: “Sorry for that. I myself am not particularly concerned with beauty. Though even with that said, I do sometimes pay undue worry to the fact that I have a rather thin figure compared to my friends. Looking at it on the whole, I wonder if I might be jealous to the extent of abandoning it.”

Whilst saying that, the upside down person lightly put on flirtatious airs.

Their demeanor and gestures made it obvious that they wanted to say “I would do no such thing”, so his feelings of absolutely not wanting to go along with that person’s whims no matter what ended up winning out.

However, in response to his silence, that person giggled “Kuku”,

???: “If we ignore your rebellious heart to the version of me inside of you, would the fact that you are aware of the words I wanted to say but did not actually utter not mean that I had imagined the exact same words as you?”

Aldebaran: “That sorta reasoning’s way too underhanded! Isn’t that a scam that’s like “the one who speaks wins”?!”

Faced with logic that was far too invincible, he jumped up as if to say not to mess with him. But, that direct and genuine protest of his did not seem to resonate with that person at all.

After all, for her, it seemed only natural to not pay mind to any verbal abuse or objections—

???: “Underhandedness, scams, and whatnot, are a bit off the mark. After all—I am an evil Witch, you know?”

Indeed, with an expression quite fitting for a Witch, one more malicious than that of cowards or conmen, she smiled.

2

???: “—Aldebaran.”

And, whenever that was called out in a clear voice, Aldebaran would no longer want to respond.

Even if he understood it as a name that referred to himself, he could not help but hate the things he hated. Having said that, even if he persistently tried to remain ignorant, it would be of no avail.

That was because—

???: “Aldebaran, Aldebaran, Aldebaran, Aldebaran, Aldebaran,

Aldebaran, Aldebaran, Aldebaran, Aldebaran, Aldebaran—”

Aldebaran: “Hey, shut the fuck up! I can hear you!”

???: “That is good to hear. I was also wondering if you could hear me as I was calling out to you. It is of utmost importance that there are no discrepancies in our mutual perception. So then, have you heard?”

At the unashamed words of the Witch, Aldebaran sat cross-legged and rested his chin in his left hand.

With his lips zipped up in a frown, he demonstrated his lack of intent to answer, but unfortunately, this was not a person so kind as to permit him the right to remain silent.

Aldebaran: “…”

Keeping his mouth shut, as he tried to compete against her in a battle of silent endurance, those black eyes trained their gaze on him silently.

Aldebaran: “~~Hk, fine! It was about magic, right?! The thing you love and are so good at with so much knowledge worthy of celebration, yeah?!”

Witch: “So you do know? But then again, there is some room for argument as to whether I like magic or not. It seems that both myself and others all recognize that I am good at it. But, as for whether being good at something immediately locks me in to liking or disliking it…”

Aldebaran: “Don’t go saying a hundred things in response to just one! I’m increasingly losing the will to talk to you!”

As the Witch immediately made him regret his careless remark, Aldebaran roughly scratched his head. Closing a single eye as she looked at him, the Witch sighed with a “Really now”, and,

Witch: “Why do you always try to shut down the flow of the conversation like that? Even though the result will be the same, you still engage in this pointless resistance. It is not efficient, so I struggle to understand.”

Aldebaran: “…If you don’t like it then just stop. Not like I’m asking you to do this.”

Witch: “Dislike? I had never even thought of the notion of disliking this. I had said I struggle to understand, but it is not as if I am rejecting that. Rather, as somebody who wishes to learn things that I do not know, I am more inclined to take interest in the things that are difficult. That said…”

Aldebaran: “That said?”

Witch: “Despite being of the same origin, I am seriously troubled as to why such a difference in results has been produced. An earlier or later birth, difference in environments, the scope of a sense of purpose; such various factors are conceivable, but… it does not seem practical to narrow them down to specifically one factor.”

Placing a finger to her lips, the Witch muttered and went into her own little world. As this showed signs of dragging on for a while, Aldebaran looked up to the sky feeling fed up.

Overhead, was a sky that went on and on and on, without any visible rifts. Far in the distance, the green plain that met the sky at the horizon was similarly spread out over a vast area with no end in sight. In reality, if one ventured out there without thinking about anything, they would most likely get lost and die; that was the sort of place it was.

This was a dream space created by the Witch. —It was always this place when he came, but each time he was invited, he was shocked at the extraordinary feat of creating an entire individual world.

The Witch was capable of this much, and yet even she harbored a grand desire that she had been unable to fulfill. To try and get such a tiny individual to fulfill it for her, made it unthinkable that she was sane—

Witch: “Unfortunately, I cannot help but say that that impression of yours is a shallow one.”

Aldebaran: “…You came back from your own world faster than I expected.”

Witch: “I was just immersed in contemplation for a bit… ah, did you refer to that as my own world? That is an interesting way to phrase it. As expected, you have ideas that I do not.”

Aldebaran: “…”

The Witch smiled in admiration, and understanding that those black eyes were projected past him onto somebody else, and praising that other person, Aldebaran spat out a “Keh” in a cursing manner.

His reaction caused the Witch to blink in surprise, and,

Witch: “Surely you do not expect me to be able to guess the emotions of others, right? Both you and I do not have the leeway to waste time in vain. That is why I deliberately ignore all of your complex feelings, but… you seem to have a misunderstanding.”

Aldebaran: “Misunderstanding? Is the Witch who can’t understand people’s hearts about to lecture me?”

Witch: “Logic and emotion are separate things. They must not be allowed to mix together. —Recall that which is entrusted to you, and cannot be entrusted to me. It is an issue divorced from one’s amount of strength or presence of ability. To put it tangibly, what is required is not one’s qualities. It is a qualification.”

Aldebaran: “Qualification?”

Witch: “Indeed, the qualification to stand before her; it is a matter of possessing that. The reasons why I talk to you about various things all coalesse around that one point. Did I answer your question?”

Stroking her own long white hair, the Witch inclined her head.

She had prefaced that she did not understand the hearts of people, but Aldebaran’s questions were all precisely cleared up by her eloquence. It was extremely difficult to believe that she could not understand people’s hearts, as she claimed.

Perhaps that too was founded in the Witch's own logic, serving as an expression to make a show of her faults.

Witch: "I'm just mimicking. And, I don't think I'm particularly good at it either."

Aldebaran: "…"

Witch: "After a certain amount of observation and verification, it becomes possible to systemize the flow of thoughts and actions to a certain degree. I am doing nothing more than adopting that from the people I have occasionally encountered. Whether it is often or not, I believe it is something that everyone can do."

As expected, the Witch had accurately processed the reason for Aldebaran's silence.

And, if what she said was true, it was nothing more than a calculated result based on a vast array of patterns. However, if one began to say such things, then one could also question if free will even existed in anyone at all.

Aldebaran: "I don't think I'm especially complex, but on the other hand, I don't think absolutely everything is so simple that it can be covered by statistical data."

Witch: "Did I hurt you? If so, then excuse me. I am not denying your humanity. I am not so supreme of a living being that I could do such a thing, you know?"

Aldebaran: "…"

Witch: "We have gone a bit off topic. Shall we return to the main focus? Time here passes slower than it does in reality, but that is not to say it is infinite. Even if you use your Authority."

It was likely not that it had become inconvenient for her. The Witch's demeanor was as if to say that she truly thought there would be no meaning in continuing, to which Aldebaran nodded "Yeah".

After all, even if it was with a person he hated, and with a name that he hated, it was necessary for him to be here.

—For both Aldebaran and the Witch, that was where the meaning of their lives laid.

Witch: “Well then, with you lying on the ground there, you have now witnessed the effects of the four fundamental attributes. There are also the two attributes of Yin and Yang on top of that, but… let us exclude them from the candidates of things for you to learn.”

Aldebaran: “And why’s that? You can’t teach them well?”

Witch: “It also depends on the attitude of the one learning, but that is not why. The attributes of Yin and Yang have a conflicting relationship, so if you advance in one it will have an impact on your acquisition of the other one. And, the talent you possess for the Yin attribute is planned to all be used for the acquisition and execution of the forbidden art you are to be taught.”

Aldebaran: “Don’t make developmental plans for people all on your own…”

Witch: “After all, that sort of duty has been entrusted to me by those guys and my friends. So, what will you do?”

At the inconsiderate question from the Witch as she tilted her head, Aldebaran furrowed his brow.

Likely, he was being asked about the four attributes other than Yin and Yang—about which of the magic attributes of Earth, Water, Fire, and Wind he wished to be professionally taught in; that is what it seemed like.

Aldebaran: “Which one, hmm…”

Until just a moment prior, in order to let Aldebaran experience the effects of those attributes, the Witch had fired off an assortment of extraordinary magic. She had probably fully intended on teaching Aldebaran at full strength with those methods, so as to allow him to narrow down his choice of magic.

In all honesty, those methods were a vivid display of how she did not have a human heart, but—

Aldebaran: "—Magic of the Earth attribute, should do fine."

Witch: "Hmm? Why did you think to want that, if may I ask?"

Aldebaran: "Earth, stone, sand, and whatnot, I thought that controlling those things would be the most versatile. Fire and wind are far too restrictive in the way you can use them. Water isn't too bad, but… I can't see myself mastering it. That's why earth magic will do fine. Plain yet crafty, the absolute best, isn't it?"

Witch: "…"

Having heard Aldebaran's choice and reasoning, the Witch fell silent. Closing a single eye amidst that silence, Aldebaran asked the Witch "What" in a stern voice.

Then, the Witch lightly shrugged her shoulder with a "Nothing",

Witch: "I was just admiring how your selection and reasoning are truly so much like Him. Whether you like it or not, you have inherited the systemized likeness of Him."

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

If she truly did not intend on irritating him, she must have been an expert at stepping on landmines.

Truly, flaring up with indignation at the statement that could only ever serve to put him in a foul mood, Aldebaran was seriously wavering as to whether he should attempt to lay his hands on the Witch, knowing full well he would lose.

Wavering, as he wavered, he suddenly thought of a way to take revenge.

Aldebaran: "—It is an honor, Teacher."

Witch: "…What?"

As her cheek stiffened with a twitch, the Witch narrowed her black eyes at Aldebaran's words.

Seeing the Witch's reaction, Aldebaran wore a huge grin on his face and shrugged his shoulders,

Aldebaran: "After all, you've taught me all these things until now, and you want to teach me about magic from here on out. So then, isn't it only natural to call you Teacher with immense respect?"

Witch: "…I shall tell you this under the assumption that you do not know, but the addressment of "Teacher" is something tied to exceedingly bitter memories for me. That is why…"

Aldebaran: "That's why, I'm calling you Teacher from now, Teacher."

Witch: "…"

Called by it repeatedly, the Witch displayed a reaction of clear displeasure for the first time. Having accomplished that, Aldebaran moistened his lips in an attempt to double down.

But, that assault did not come to fruition. —The Witch's expression had clouded over. It was accompanied by a clear atmosphere of sorrow and pitifulness.

Aldebaran: "Ugh, ghhh…"

Witch: "Ah, no, excuse me. My thoughts experienced external turmoil from your heartless conduct. As I continue to go along with you hereafter, I am also resolved for pain, so—"

Aldebaran: "My bad! It was my fault! I'll apologize, so stop making that heart wrenching face!"

Even if that face meant his revenge had been a success, he did not feel good in the slightest. Rather, it seemed like he would start having bad dreams, so Aldebaran, who was supposed to be the one attacking, ended up hoisting a white flag.

Witch: "Oya, is that so? I guess you are quite reasonable."

As Aldebaran declared defeat, the Witch instantly released her anguished expression, one that had been on the verge of tears, and spoke so in an indifferent manner.

Her unashamed fake tears—she had not gotten to the point of actually crying, so they were not even fake tears, but having been deceived by them, Aldebaran began to tremble all over, and,

Aldebaran: "—You, this fucking bitch…!"

Witch: "What a horrible comment. However, I was merely educated that if you are going to irritate others, you must have the resolve to do so. If you are going to go as far as to call me that, I would be more at ease if you would just call me Teacher, reluctant as I may be."

Aldebaran: "Mh…"

Witch: "Of course, my impression that it is an unpleasant title will not change. Only, I am in a position to force many forms of discomfort upon you from here on. And hence, we ought to make a few concessions. Right?"

With a wink, the Witch had stood dominant until the very end, and Aldebaran knew it would be unproductive to try and argue against her.

To begin with, it was something that he was fully aware of. —After all, ever since his birth, before they had formed this sort of relationship, not once had he managed to beat her in an argument.

Witch: "So then, about your choice… yes, I think it is a good one. You do not seem to have any talent for magic. There is no possibility except for an exceedingly mediocre one. In that case, by honing that mediocrity as much as possible, you can aim for the gaps in the armor of an opponent who has secured themselves with an iron helmet."

Aldebaran: "If you're gonna put on airs, Teacher, at least praise me some more. This is only the first lesson."

Witch: "You want me to flatter you with things that I have not even thought of? Well, I'm quite good at saying heartless things, but I suppose I do not wish to face you in such a way. The reason for that is… you know it even without me telling you, correct?"

Aldebaran: "That face won't work on me, you're so ill-natured."

At the black eyes that stared up at him, Aldebaran stuck out his tongue and took a stance of denial. That instant, the Witch also stuck out her tongue as if she wanted to say "Too bad", and then raised a single finger.

Then—

Witch: "Then, with your body… even if I say that, this is a spirit world and hence you have a spiritual body, but let us have you learn by enduring some attacks. Either way, you will end up experiencing Death many times over from here on. Crushed, ground up, torn apart, it would be good to prepare for the many ways you may lose your life."

Aldebaran: "Oi! Is that really the right way to be going about things?! Are you sure you're not just extremely angry with me?!"

Witch: "Hahaha, I do not understand emotions, so I have never been angry."

Aldebaran: "You filthy liar!!"

Right after he screamed that out loudly, the shape of the world slowly began to shift. —Around the Witch with her finger raised, a square section began to rise out from the ground of the plain, and that cube-shaped object floated up. That which was revolving around the Witch, akin to a beast baring its fangs, was an attack preparation.

Looking at that, as Aldebaran gulped down his saliva at the sense of danger, he simultaneously had a thought. —If he could do the same thing, in what kind of ingenious way would he use it?

Witch: "That attitude bears resolve. —You are truly Greed."

Aldebaran: "Shut the hell up, you shitty Teacher."

Verbally abusing the smiling Witch, he plunged into the lesson on which his life was staked.

All of it was in preparation for fulfilling the meaning for which Aldebaran had been born. —In order to arrive at the forthcoming day he would surpass the stars, this was the start of laying the bricks that would reach the realm of a billion.

END

Comic Alive Collection 11

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica
(CA)

1

Sons inherit their father's—or grandfather's—names. That itself was not particularly unusual—it was commonplace in noble families, and not unheard of in others. However, bloodlines that did it successively again and again were a rarity.

In the main family of that great house, the head always inherited the same name without exception. It was an absolute rule regardless of sex, and as a custom that had been done for the last four hundred years, and continued through twelve generations, it would likely continue from here onwards, too.

"Roswaal L. Mathers."

The one whose name was called was a figure with long, dark-blue hair.

He respectfully knelt on the red carpet, raised his head, and stared straight ahead at the person in front of him. His eyes were a rare two different colors—the right being blue, the left being yellow. In the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, yellow was the normal eye color. Blue or green weren't rare, but the vast majority were an earthy yellow. So a blue eye reminiscent of water took most people's breath away with its beauty. His striking profile gave off the same impression.

"…"

He was a young man—or rather at an age where he could still be considered a boy. This fourteen-year-old youth, however, was in a situation where it would normally be too much to bear unless you had experienced it a number of times, yet he faced the ceremony with a calmness as though having been granted nerves of steel.

Ceremony. Yes, this was a ceremony.

In this world, the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica was counted as one of the four great nations. And this was an important ceremony within the kingdom, carried out to recognize those who are to be part of its nobility.

It was a momentous ceremony, done so one of Lugunican nobility might inform the person who stood at the very top of the kingdom that they had succeeded their predecessor as head of the family.

“Thank you for providing this important opportunity,” said the young boy with a sweet voice upon raising his head—a voice that was on the verge of breaking, and still very much on the border between adult and child. There wasn’t a lick of nervousness for the grand stage in the beautiful voice that tickled the listeners’ ears.

Grasping that from his tone of voice, many of the high nobles present were internally amazed. They wondered whether or not they’d have been able to do the same thing when they were his age. Asking themselves this, the majority shook their heads, while the remainder were either remarkable men, or a few insolent individuals who were too arrogant to admit their true worth.

“I repeat, I am here to report. I, Roswaal L. Mathers, am taking the place of Roswaal K. Mathers as the head of the household. From here on out, I will endeavor to not stain the name of this house, nor shame the royal family of Lugunica as I serve them.”

It was a magnificent report on the change of the head of the family.

Accepting this, the King—Randohal Lugunica—showed everyone a wide smile and nodded. “Your predecessor—Margrave Mathers—served us well. As the heir to such an outstanding man, you must be equally prepared. But listen to the words of your subjects, be intimate with the citizens of your domain, and meet their trust with trust. That way you, too, will be loved.”

The king’s words were warm and tender, and idealistic to the extent that those hearing them were embarrassed. If the one who had said those words had not been Randohal, and if those who had heard those words were not his subjects—for example, it had been the Emperor of Vollachia, known for his severity and aggression—they would not have smiled, but more likely would have roared with laughter.

But out of the subjects of the Kingdom, not a single person laughed. They understood him. This calm and pacifist way of the king was a sign above all else of the peace preserved in Lugunica, and the stability itself that their everyday lives was built upon.

“Wonderful words. I certainly will. I may still be inexperienced, but I will strive to be able to take over my great predecessor’s role as soon as possible.”

At the youth’s excellent words, who was to carry the Kingdom of Lugunica on his shoulders from now on, the king gave a deep nod. “Good. Advancing steadily is best. I expect great things from your efforts.”

Receiving Randohal’s encouragement, the boy gently rose and turned toward those present. Then, with a graceful bow, said, “I endeavor to learn a lot from all of you ladies and gentlemen, too. I am young, but I look forward to working with all of yooou.”

With his back turned to the king, he shut one eye, looking contemptuously down at those around him with just his yellow one.

2

“Dear me, my shoulders are so stiff.”

As he said this, the boy—Roswaal—rotated his shoulders in a wide arc, having changed out of his formal attire. He’d left the royal castle, and was now in his room at an inn, located on the border between the Nobles District and the Commoner District. For a commoner, it was considered fairly expensive, and for a noble, considerably cheap. Roswaal liked this ambiguity, and always made it his choice to stay there when he spent time in the royal capital.

“Being treated so nicely by the owner here a few decades ago was a deciding faaactor too, though.”

If anyone had been around to hear that murmur, they would have probably been taken aback by his mature way of speaking. Such words did not match the boy who was sliding a finger across the window frame and looking over at the stores and houses in the vicinity. However, anyone who would have been around to see the way he stood there wouldn't have been able to laugh his words off as a joke.

Roswaal L. Mathers.

The boy who had just finished his audience with the king in the royal castle had a presence that didn't match his youthfulness. The previous Roswaal had suddenly passed away, and the next Roswaal in line was this boy.

He understood it, but his body, which was steadily developing an affinity with its soul, had the grounds to be considered a masterpiece within the Mathers family line, which had continued for roughly four hundred years.

"So I'll have to take good caaaare of it then."

Gently touching his own body, Roswaal took a deep breath and turned away from the window.

Today, he was not accompanied by servants or guards. Roswaal hated going about broadcasting that he was a man of importance. Rather, it might be more accurate to say he was bad at it. He had never really lost his habit of being concerned about his public image that he had had since long ago—a really long time ago.

"Well then, time is limited. I can't dawdle."

Even if the attendees that had watched Roswaal's audience with the king considered him magnificent, he had some of the nervousness you might expect on such a grand stage. With that out of the way, he wanted to take a rest, but he unfortunately had much to do in order for a novice aristocrat like him to become popular.

For now, although the biggest task was over, there were still a number of other people and places to make a courtesy call to. In particular, the magic research institution in the capital anticipated Roswaal's visit, as Roswaal J. Mathers from two generations ago had founded it, and he would now be inheriting her knowledge.

During the previous generation, it had been a place he had visited less and less. But this generation's Roswaal would not do the same. He needed to maintain an intimate relationship with them.

"Right, shall I goooo then?" Mumbling as though attempting to persuade himself, Roswaal left his room in minimal attire.

He informed the inn owner of his approximate time of return, who saw him off as he left. As the sun was still high in the sky, he decided the order of his destinations in his head, then narrowed his eyes once more at the view of the capital, laid out before him at the bottom of the gently sloped road.

—Since the troubles approximately 25 years ago, there hadn't been any big wars in the Kingdom of Lugunica. Of course, they had dealt with the sparks of disputes, but having put them out before they became raging fires, the months and years had passed by without any large issues.

"…Hm. For me to be so deeply moved by this is rather unexpected," Roswaal said with a slight chuckle at his mild sentimentality toward the peaceful town.

That there were once people making every effort to protect this every day shone brilliantly within his memories even now. But him having been the first to leave it all behind—that was a complicated feeling. Being here made it easy to be spurred on by those thoughts.

So that he wouldn't carelessly come across people he had known in the two generations before him, he had stayed away from the capital during his previous iteration. However…

"This time, I can't dooo that. I need to be fully prepared."

At any rate, from now on he couldn't afford to make any mistakes. That had also been the case up until now, but he had to steel himself far more than before. The reason being—

“Oh, sorry!”

“Oh my.”

He’d been walking deep in thought and unexpectedly collided with a figure exiting an alleyway. It was a small boy with a hat pulled low on his head, and Roswaal had stopped at the light collision. The boy, however, repeatedly apologized without pause. “If anyone finds out I bumped into a nobleman, I could get into serious trouble. Let me go just this once, would you?”

“That’s a very shaaaameless request. If you watch where you’re going from now on, I shaaaall let this slide.”

“Oh, really? Thanks for your kindness. Well then…”

“Even so…”

After a light-hearted exchange, the youth quickly turned to leave, when Roswaal grabbed him by the wrist. The boy yelped, and he dropped something from the hand that had been seized.

It was a gold-crafted plume that the boy had pickpocketed when they collided.

“This is a valuable item. Unfortunately, I caaaan’t let you have it.”

“Tch… you’re perceptive.”

Taking the fallen plume in his empty hand, Roswaal smiled. “When you’re walking through crowds of people in the capital, it’s a necessary precaution.”

From his impressive skills, it was clear the boy was a habitual thief. However, Roswaal had no intention of handing him over to the guards. No one should ever regret making use of their abilities in order to survive. If using them went against the law, then one should learn how to get around it.

“Seeing as I got my plume back, I’ll let it slide today. Sooo next time steal from an easier target. I won’t blaaaame you.”

"…You sure are a strange noble. In fact, looking at you, you're just a kid!"

"It sure is unusual to be called a kid by someone younger than me. Aaaanyway, judging people by their looks is baaad."

"Then you shouldn't be able to tell if I'm a kid either."

"No, no. I'm certain you are. After all, there are only a handful of people older than me."

The boy looked in astonishment at Roswaal, who had the plume in one hand, one eye shut. A provocation that, naturally, would have only made him feel as if he were poking fun at him. He quickly felt a surge of anger rise and clenched his jaw. And as Roswaal remained cautious of his next move…

"Ragh!"

"…"

Contrary to Roswaal's anticipation, rather than attempting to forcibly shake free, the boy turned skillfully and grabbed his wrist, going for a joint lock. Surprised by the fluidity of his technique, he instantly released his grip. Then, in the next moment, the boy shoulder-tackled him, took a step back and, using that chance, nimbly sprinted down the alley.

"How cunning." Roswaal was surprised by the unexpected counterattack, but what had truly shocked him was the tenacity toward his loot. The plume that he had already retrieved had once again been stolen from his hand. He had high praise for that passion, but he couldn't lose the plume—it was a prestigious article.

He sprinted down the alley after the boy. His shoes were unsuitable for running, but that could not be helped. Realizing that Roswaal was behind him, the boy grimaced. As he ran, Roswaal made use of the map he had drawn in his mind and chased the youth into a dead-end with precision.

"Y…You're…per…persistent…"

"I already told you—that item is very valuable. If it were anything else, I wouldn't mind handing it over as a reward for fighting so well, but not that. So…"

Driven against a wall, the boy stiffened up as Roswaal tried to recover the plume. His curiosity had grown to such an extent that he considered treating the boy to a meal after this and asking about his circumstances. However—

"—Sorry, but that one's mine."

Immediately following those words, a towering figure dropped between them from above.

"…"

The figure had, quite literally, dropped from above the narrow alleyway. The timing of the intrusion was almost as if they had been watching the chase pan out between Roswaal and the boy. Greeting the large man in front of him, Roswaal furrowed his brows.

He was a distinctive man with an athletic build and oppressive, boulder-like facial features. Approximately in his mid-twenties, he wore dirty clothes that any old thug in the capital might wear. However, the air of power that coiled around the man was somewhat refined for a mere thug.

"Captain!"

"Stand down, Young Bel. I got a ton of stuff I want to say to you… But for now, I'm taking your ass back," the man addressed as Captain responded roughly as the boy's eyes lit up at his appearance.

Hearing this, and watching the boy he'd cornered, Roswaal shut one eye and gazed at the man with his single yellow pupil. "'Captain' is a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it? You look neither of age nor position to be leading a knighthood in such a back alley…"

"That's enough sarcasm, noble youngster. The staggering lack of a sense of danger is a common vice amongst you people. Thanks to that, it’s become easier for us to do.”

“…Hm.”

It was a surprisingly educated response, and Roswaal pondered on the unsubtle exchange. The man before his eyes brought on a wave of curiosity in the exact same way the boy behind him had. If possible, I would like to have a deeper conversation with him. “I wonder. How about we try a peaceful negotiation with each other heeere? I don’t want to hurt you. Besides, I don’t intend to go to the trouble of condemning you for stealing.”

“You scared?” the man prodded.

“Scared? Me? Exactly why and who would I be scared of? I defeated the one I was most afraid of in the world myself a long time ago.” Roswaal intimidated his opponent, extending his arms as he requested a reasonable discussion. Just as the man before him had a personality unlike that of a thug, Roswaal had also conveyed that he was not the naive fourteen-year-old boy he appeared to be.

However, despite communicating this to them clearly, the man’s attitude didn’t change in the slightest. “Despite appearances, it seems what’s in your head is way off the mark,” he said. “I’m gonna teach you a lesson.”

“…You’re going to regret that big mouth of yours,” Roswaal replied. The instant he recognized that their negotiations had broken down, he made his move.

There was about five meters between them, but Roswaal, cloaked in wind, closed the gap in a single breath. His target was his opponent’s torso, which was remarkable in terms of speed. His muscles were tough as armor, but if the impact passed through the gaps, his internal organs would be easy pickings.

A single strike that dealt a crushing blow to the internal organs behind the muscle—it was a technique called fa jin that he’d learned two generations ago. In order to deliver the blow, Roswaal placed his palm on his opponent’s stomach, and—

“Hah!” The strike made contact at the same time he stepped, and the blowback passed behind him. The wind born from it blew away the dirt in the alley, and a sensation ricocheted back through his entire body.

The power with which it tore through his internal organs easily sapped the strength from the two legs supporting his massive frame. Naturally, without any support for his body, it gave out…and yet, he remained standing.

“What?” Roswaal uttered in surprise.

“Ah, crap… That hurt, you lanky brat.” With the assumption that he’d fall having failed, the man clicked his tongue and grit his back teeth in frustration. Seeing this, Roswaal gulped. It wasn’t that he had dissipated the impact with some special technique. He simply endured it with an insane level of tenacity.

His eyes bulged at this revelation, when the man jerked his body widely, unleashing his fists. The single blow, clothed in a mighty wind, struck the petrified Roswaal in the gut with a devastating impact.

“…Gah.” Blown back, Roswaal slammed into a wall. His head spun. Before he even realized what had happened, his senses started to fade…

“…Crap, I’m not done. How pathetic…”

With those final words of self-resentment, he completely lost consciousness.

3

“…”

“Are you awake?”

Roswaal came to and opened his eyes.

In front of him, he saw the blue sky that had been so violently torn away. There was a hard sensation at his back, and he could comprehend that he was lying sprawled on the floor in an inhospitable environment.

Gradually, he checked his awareness and memory for consistency, recalling the events that had taken place just before he lost consciousness, when the pain in his abdomen reminded him that he had been beaten to a pulp.

“Ah, ow ow ow…”

Grimacing from the pain, he sat up and nervously looked at his stomach. The front of his jacket was open, and a bag of ice had been placed on his thin, exposed abdomen. Cooling down a bruise was a straightforward first-aid measure. But on top of that, a fine coat had been spread out beneath his body, indicating that someone had been tending to him. That someone was…

“…This was you, riiight?”

The young blond man shrugged. “I just hope I wasn’t being too intrusive.”

He was a distinctive character of a similar age to Roswaal with a handsome profile and clever-looking green eyes. Perched on a step in the alleyway, he held a book in one hand as he stared at Roswaal. Judging by the fact that he wasn’t wearing a jacket, there was no doubt that he had been the one who had administered the first-aid.

“Ah, if you want the particulars, it’s pretty simple. I heard a commotion in the alley… a rather loud one, too. I had a peek out of curiosity and found you collapsed there.”

“And your conscience told you to perform first-aid? Well, well, seems you have a rather honest disposition. Your parents would be proud.”

“No, even if it was the proper thing to do, my parents wouldn’t praise me. At any rate, it’d be a much bigger deal if I’d abandoned the new head of the Mathers family there.”

“…”

Having had his identity guessed correctly, Roswaal's breath caught in his throat.

This young boy doesn't have any malicious intent towards me, he thought, based on the fact that he'd helped him. He probably isn't an ally of the other two, either. So, then, his intention must be—

After giving it some thought, Roswaal concluded that the young man's aim was most likely to seek some kind of reward from him.

"Have you considered that I might have good intentions?"

"Isn't that something that you yourself juuuust denied? Since you've made it clear that you're aware the person you saved is from the Mathers family…you probably have an ulterior motive."

"You're right. I'm not denying it." Throwing up both hands, the young man affirmed Roswaal's suspicions with a chuckle.

The integrity of the interaction made it tempting to continue this conversation. However, he could not yield to that temptation. Having checked his personal belongings, he knew his wallet and jewelry were safe. However, the most important thing—that plume—was nowhere to be found. It was clear that since he'd been defeated, the spoils had been carried away by the victor.

Slowly getting to his feet, Roswaal brushed off his clothes. "I have to get that back…"

"Are you okay?" the young man asked. Having also stood up, he was a little taller than Roswaal. "I don't know the circumstances, but wouldn't it be better to rest a bit? If not, I can at least call your servant or companion—"

"Unfortunately, I'm traveling alone in the capital. I have no one I can rely on. A youngster who just inherited the seat of a great house would be, from anyone's point of view, nothing more than an eyesore. Right?"

"This could just be my imagination, but you seem to be in quite an enviable position."

"You speak frankly—I don't haaaate it."

On top of being kind, the chemistry in the pace of our conversation is giving me a rather favorable impression of him. As he assessed the other party, Roswaal turned toward the end of the alley—toward the main road. The youth who had stolen the plume, and the large man who had protected him—he had to find one or both of them and retrieve his lost item.

"If I'm not mistaken, you seem to be planning something dangerous…?"

"Yes… Wanting to meet up with the one who so mercilessly knocked me out would probably be considered dangerous according to common sense. What do you think?"

"Without a doubt, it would be dangerous. Even more so if you have no one to rely on."

"How helpful."

He didn't need to be told that it was a suicide mission, but Roswaal had good reason not to retreat. He had just vowed to himself that failure would no longer be an option. He could not afford to leave the score unsettled.

"The Mathers are a great noble family. You don't have to do everything by yourself. Don't you also have the option of enlisting the help of the capital guards?"

"Like I said. We youngsters stand at a disadvantage. One wrong move and you'll be eaten alive by the ambitious others around you. That's why you can't rely on people."

"I see. You're starting to sound more and more helpless. Then, have you already devised a plan to resolve the situation on your own?"

"Unfortunately, I'll just have to wing it."

After all, he'd only just opened his eyes after an unexpected defeat.

He needed to take action before they sold that plume or ran away somewhere else. Or, worst case scenario, before they inadvertently lost it.

As if sensing what was on Roswaal's mind, the young man nodded in agreement, letting out an enthusiastic, "I see! What do you think, Margrave Mathers. You don't seem to have anyone else to depend on given the circumstances, and the fact that we've crossed paths seems like fate… How about you let me help?"

"You? Help me? For what reason?"

"The same ulterior motive that drove me to tend to you. My family is just one of the hundred merchant families in the capital. As the second son, there's not much of a bright future awaiting me… And that's where you come in."

The young man gestured toward Roswaal, flashing a carefree, calculating smile.

With his impish grin, he continued, "I've just had the pleasure of interacting with a noble of an esteemed house, helpless and alone. Nothing wrong with a little bit of dreaming, no?"

"…I understand what you're saying, but you're considerably determined. If I were the type to dislike one for their attitude, or were repulsed by those blatantly trying to curry favor with me, it would be over for you in an instaaant."

"…Are you that kind of person?"

"…"

At the challenging tone and look in his eyes, Roswaal chuckled lightheartedly.

This was a young man willing to make a bold gamble. A necessary quality for taking hold of one's own fate. And, to Roswaal, that was a desirable human trait. As such, the young man who had triumphed in his do-or-die game needed a suitable reward.

"I am Roswaal L. Mathers, and I would like to accept your proposal."

"…Ha-Ha, that's a relief. Look—my palms are sweaty and my knees are shaking." Relaxing his tense expression, the young man let out an exaggerated sigh of relief.

Roswaal shrugged. "You're a good actor."

He went on to ask the name of this man who had dared to extend a hand to him in this cut-throat royal capital. "Your name…?"

"Russell. I'm Russell Fellow. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

As he said this, the young man—Russell—gave an awfully ambitious smile.

4

"Well then, Margrave, what you're searching for is…"

"Roswaal. If you want, please call me that, okay? If we're walking the streets together from now on, I'd like to keep a low profile."

"Okay. Then, Roswaal." He addressed him without a title, indicating he precisely grasped Roswaal's intentions.

Accompanied by Russell, who had offered his assistance, Roswaal made his way out of the alley and onto the thoroughfare. People came and went along the main street. Not surprisingly, the two figures from earlier were nowhere to be found. Even if they had wanted to pursue them, not a single trace of them remained.

"How long was I out for?" Roswaal asked.

"About ten minutes after I found you," Russell answered. "I rushed to the scene as soon as I heard the commotion, so I'm assuming that's about the same time our guys took off."

"I see. The item I am looking for is a family heirloom. I have to recover it no matter what."

"Could you give me a detailed description?"

"It's a plume made of gold—about the size that can fit in the palm of your hand—and it's decorated with my family crest."

It wasn't a terribly important item, but it was a symbol of the head of the family. To have it stolen, he wasn't sure what the other nobles, not to mention his relatives, would say. He also had a considerable attachment to it.

"If they only did it for the money, then it's strange that they didn't take any other valuables," Roswaal said.

"Are you saying their intention was the plume from the start?" Russell asked.

"Well… That's something I think we'll only learn from the men in question."

Surely they had enough time to rummage through Roswaal's pockets before anyone else arrived on the scene. Had it been under the orders of the man they called Captain that they refrained from doing so?

"At any rate, the man was called 'Captain'…" Russell mumbled thoughtfully upon hearing the description of the two suspects.

"…? Do you know of him?"

"Actually…" Russell continued. "Roswaal, have you heard about the 'Brotherhood' that has been making the rounds in the capital these days?"

"The Brotherhood?" parroted Roswaal. Having no memory of the term either in name or substance, he shook his head. "No, never heard of them."

As mentioned before, Roswaal had distanced himself from the capital for a good while. It was true that he had no connection with the recent happenings in the city.

"The capital has a number of social classes, roughly split into three groups—nobles, commoners, and the poor—as you know. The Brotherhood is a group founded by impoverished youths who collectively oppose such classist discrimination."

“A group of youths stating their dissatisfaction with the times, hm? Sooounds probable.”

“As a group, they attack nobles, steal valuables, and stage assaults in the name of punishment. And the so-called ‘Captain’ who leads them has the same description as the man who beat you up.”

“So he was the Captain of the Brotherhood, huh.”

After listening to Russell’s explanation, Roswaal understood the reason he’d been targeted. In short, an immature youth walking alone without any attendants made an easy mark. He was relieved to know it wasn’t a personal grudge against House Mathers. Nonetheless…

“But what is the capital garrison doing letting these ruffians hang around? If it’s not enough for the knights to act, then at least the guards should do something about it…”

“You of all people should know the answer to that.”

“…I see. So that captain has overwhelmed them.”

If it was that man—the captain who had knocked down even Roswaal in a single punch—then the elite troops in the capital garrison wouldn’t stand a chance.

What an incredibly terrifying man.

“But the knights aren’t naive enough to just let internal affairs play out like this. There must be something else too… right?”

“You have a discerning eye. You’re right—the garrison doesn’t know what to do with the Brotherhood. The problem is that it’s not just limited to them. The capital has another issue on top of the Brotherhood.”

“Which is…”

Just as he tried to urge the next part of the story on, they were interrupted. A middle-aged man emerging from a street stall approached them. “Russell, about the person you’re searching for…”

At present, they had both been relying on the breadth of Russell’s notoriety to trace the Brotherhood’s footsteps through eyewitness testimonies from the commoners on the streets. One of these sources, the owner of the stall, began to speak in a hushed voice. “Word on the street is that they used the alleys on the west side to slip into the slums. Public safety has been pretty bad in that area, but it seems like those Brotherhood guys have expanded their influence there now.”

“The west side, is it? Thanks. If you hear anything else, let me know,” Russell responded politely, before handing over a small bag with a reward to the shopkeeper.

Confirming its weight, he saw them off with a smile. “Thank you for your patronage.”

Once the shopkeeper was out of sight, Roswaal commented, “You seem very skilled at this. Have you been doing this a while?”

“By ‘this’, do you mean…?”

“Helping foolish nobles get their stolen heirlooms back.”

“No, no, of course not. A great adventure like this is a first for me. But I do have a lot of acquaintances among the merchants of this area. I worked hard to ensure I have some connections just in case.”

It sounded like modesty, but Roswaal could feel the definite conviction behind Russell’s words. And he liked that sort of paranoid preparedness. Every challenge in life depended on one’s degree of preparation before encountering said challenge. What to others may seem like an unnecessary precaution could save a life in the event of an emergency.

And Russell’s accumulated experiences had certainly contributed to Roswaal’s share of difficulties.

“I’ve decided. No matter how today turns out, at the very least meeting you was a stroke of rare good luck.” Roswaal said.

“Then it’s my job to put that luck to use…” Russel responded. “According to what was said earlier, the way they went is this alley. Watch your step.”

As Russell led the way, Roswaal gently brushed his abdomen. The after-affects from the earlier blow were succeeded by extreme bouts of pain even now.

House Mathers was known for its magical prowess, and if he used healing magic, then this sort of injury would be instantly healed. However, healing magic was the only thing that Roswaal had absolutely no aptitude for. This was the only skill that could not be acquired through any number of generations of flesh and blood. There was a time when blood with a superior aptitude for water mana found its way into the family, but even then, it was to no avail.

I wonder if this is a kind of cuuuurse.

It was no exaggeration to say that the power to heal people was the kindest power in this world. And Roswaal lacked the qualifications of kindness required to be blessed with that aptitude. It was a testament to the blood that the Mathers family was built upon—layers of resentment and sacrifice.

“Speaking of which, continuing our earlier conversation… You said the garrison was facing another problem besides the Brotherhood. What is it?”

Russell drew a deep breath in response to the query posed from behind. Due to them already having set foot in one section of the slums, Russell was alert of their surroundings, and double checked the area for any sign of life before answering. “The social-class problem is deeply ingrained. In a way, the Demi-Human War had such roots, too, in that lineage was the cause of the fighting. However…”

“From that preface, I assume that there is another group on top of the Brotherhood that is concerned with social class?”

“Yes, there is. The Golden Wing Faction is a group of nobles, the complete opposite of the Brotherhood and their gathering of peasants.”

“The Golden Wing Faction… Hm.” Roswaal pondered the name of this new group. Nobles concerned with the social class system, and a group that’s formed around that. In short, the nobles that participated in it were…

“Weak nobles, or the second and third sons of their respective families. They’re most likely a gathering of those who were never given the important role of family heir and have developed an inflated sense of noooobility.”

“How merciless. But you are right.”

Even among nobles, there were an unexpected number with bad ideals. However, nobles couldn’t exist by themselves. It was only with the existence of the people in their domain and those under their protection that they could be nobles. However, a number of those born into nobility were only nobles in name, raised without a sense of responsibility or duty. To maintain their self-image, they had no choice but to prove that they themselves were nobles, too.

That would have been an impressive tale had they done so through politics or good deeds. “Punishing problematic laborers or the poor in order to maintain the capital’s image… Such vigilante movements have taken things too far. Isn’t that what caused the Brotherhood to rise in the first place?”

“They were all born around the same period, but which came first is a rather unproductive discussion,” Russell explained. “Whether the Brotherhood was born from hatred of the pressure of nobility, or whether the Golden Wing Faction grew from the inability to overlook the Brotherhood’s violent actions—it’s true that both of them are causing trouble for the capital.”

As a citizen of the capital, Russell appeared rather tired of it all—the way he spoke of the two problematic groups was full of loathing.

Either way, it was obvious why the capital garrison had their hands full. On one hand, the Brotherhood continued their violent expansion without hesitation. On the other hand, the Golden Wing Faction held the position and power of nobility in name alone, while putting on a front of concern for the kingdom.

Both organizations represented the challenges faced by each and every country, not just Lugunica. Humanity was not developed enough to easily manage such things.

“We’re about to enter the area the eyewitness mentioned. If this man is the Captain of the Brotherhood, he’ll probably be surrounded by his gang. Be careful.”

“I will. His gang will only pose a small problem… Although in my opinion, he seemed like the type that doesn’t leave the fighting to other peeeople.”

Men of incredible strength are often hamstrung by their comrades. Especially that captain, who confronted me to protect the pickpocket boy. If I demand for a rematch out of fairness, there’s a good chance he might comply. Just as he pondered about such a possibility—

“…”

Feeling an unsolicited gaze on the back of his head, Roswaal slowly turned around. The stare had no malice or hostility in it. But, with Russell’s warning, he was cautious of his surroundings. Nevertheless, this gaze overcame his vigilance and found him in plain sight.

And the owner of the gaze was—

“…A child?”

Standing still on a corner of the slums was a lone boy. Around four or five years old, he was wearing a well-tailored white shirt and short pants. With a neat outward appearance unfit for the slums, one could only guess he was the child of a noble family.

He had a fiery-red head of hair and striking blue eyes that seemed to contain the sky itself. Among his well-formed childish features, his blue eyes innocently observed Roswaal and Russell.

Roswaal gasped at the mere sight of those eyes, puzzled as to why exactly he had gasped. "…You…are…"

"…Roswaal?" Hearing Roswaal's husky voice, Russell looked over his shoulder, noticing the child.

His eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected sight. Seeing the reaction of the two older boys, the child opened his mouth. "Um, please wait. My father is in the middle of working."

"…Your…father…is working?"

"Yes. He's trying to reason with his friend. So…"

The child glanced toward the end of the alley where Roswaal and Russell were headed. If they were to trust his words, that was where his father would be working. The reason he had stopped them was so they wouldn't disturb his father.

"…What should we do?" Russell asked quietly at Roswaal's side.

The person this problem affected was Roswaal. Russell was nothing more than an ally with no say in the matter. Of course, they could ignore the child's request and move forward, but…

"Okay. We'll wait until your father finishes his work." Roswaal assured. "Is that okay?"

"…! Yes, thank you!"

Hearing his reply, the child's face lit up and he bowed his head. At the same time, the somewhat dry atmosphere had softened, and Roswaal and Russell exchanged glances.

"Is it okay if I ask something?" Russell asked, bending at the waist. "We have something to do this way. Could you tell us the name of your father who works this way?"

"My father? My father is…" The child answered Russell's question fearlessly. His eyes held a proud glint in them, as though he was speaking the name of the most reliable person in the whole world. “Heinkel Astrea. That’s the name of my father.”

5

—Meanwhile, at the same time as Roswaal and Russell’s chance meeting with the child.

“…Hey, come back to the knights already. How long are you gonna sulk like this? We’re both adults.”

On a corner of the slums, lined with abandoned buildings, two men faced each other. Or rather, it wouldn’t be right to say they faced each other. Because in contrast to the one that was speaking, the other was staring up at the sky with a lousy attitude.

“Adults, huh?” The man looking listlessly at the sky lowered his gaze. “You’re pretty persistent, yourself. Why don’t you give it a rest?”

It was apparent from his demeanor that he was growing impatient at both the words being thrown and the thrower himself. From every aspect of his behavior, it was obvious at a glance that he looked down on the other. Naturally, this was also obvious to the party at whom his attitude was directed.

“I can’t back down just because you tell me to. You know the complicated position I’m in. Don’t be so difficult.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking, you’re awfully cocky in the way you address me. Since when were we such good pals, you and I?”

“That’s…”

“Surely you don’t think so just because we have the same teacher? How many students does Bordeaux have? Are all of them your friends?”

“…”

With a pained expression etched on his face, the man who had opted for softer words was rendered silent.

He was a good-looking man with flaming red hair and a gentle, well-defined face. His voice and countenance was sweet, blessed with the features that many would find attractive. Unfortunately, that alone wasn't enough to get through to the man standing before him.

From their exchange, it was obvious that the relationship between the two had never been good. Regardless, the two were facing each other here and now…

"Heinkel, it's time you stop being nice to everyone. It's because you're like this that you've been forced into a job you're not suited for."

"Forced? I'm the one who signed up for this."

"Are you sure about that? I can picture all the people around you slowly pressuring you to ensure you self-nominated yourself, as usual."

"…"

The good-looking one—the man called Heinkel—hardened his face at those words.

His response made it obvious in a single glance that the other man hit the mark, revealing a personality that was far too naive and honest at its core. Heinkel, however, exhaled as though to cover his emotions, and quickly drew his sword—his treasured sword—from his waist.

"…You've drawn it."

"Yes, I've drawn it. I've really drawn it. Regardless of what you say, I have a responsibility to fulfill the duties assigned to me. You, too, have responsibilities. Right… Marcos?!"

"I'm not denying that. I won't deny it, but… So what? What are you gonna do about it?"

“Huh?”

Staring at Heinkel, sword drawn and pointed directly at him, the large man—Marcos—scratched his cheek. As he did, he casually began to close the distance between him and Heinkel by a step or two.

“Will you bring me back by brute force? Can you? By your own hand?”

“…”

Marcos swung his thick, long legs and gave Heinkel’s sword a kick from the side. The knight’s sword left its owner’s hand with the impact, and tumbled into the dirt of the slums, making a sad sound as it did. Heinkel’s blue eyes followed it in surprise, and Marcos snorted. “What are you going to do if you can’t swing the sword you took the effort of drawing?”

“I…Ugh…”

“Pick it up and get lost, pisshead,” Marcos spat at him, to which Heinkel’s expression distinctly contorted in pain. Marcos didn’t see it, however, having already turned his back.

“Even if a witchbeast were to appear, don’t think I’d save you like last time.”

Feeling Marcos’s unwavering rejection from his turned back, Heinkel cast his eyes downward. He picked up his beloved sword from the ground and sheathed it once more. “Doing this would make your legendary father sad,” he said. “Rickert is also concerned about you…”

“You’re the one with a legendary father and mother. Worry about yourself, not me—about your son and Louanna.”

“…”

It happened immediately after Marcos’s words.

“…”

A drawn sword was placed against the neck of the sneering Marcos. The move of his sword was like a flash of light, but Marcos's back remained turned, expression unfazed. It was a face of a man that grasped the ability of his opponent and understood that he would not reach him.

"You…"

"…"

"What the hell do you know?"

"Nothing. But what I do know is that you can't cut my head off here," Marcos declared, brushing away the tip of the sword which threatened his neck with a finger.

It was a useless struggle that couldn't be stopped even with one last flash of his sword, and Heinkel's face twisted in humiliation. But neither his swordsmanship nor words reached Marcos.

"Don't come back. You make me sick." Marcos waved his hand without turning around to face him.

Heinkel turned his back, attempting to brush off the words said to him. Unable to fulfill his duty, the red-haired knight began walking in the direction of the fading sunset.

"…"

Sensing the concern and footsteps fade into the distance, Marcos scratched his head of short green hair and sighed. Just as he had told Heinkel, he felt sick to his core. A certain amount of it was self-loathing for having lashed out at a person weaker than him. Clenching his fists in frustration, Marcos quietly looked over his shoulder.

Then—

"Let me warn you, I'm in a bad mood. If you think I'll go easy on you, then you're sorely mistaken," he spat in irritation at the young man who had appeared in place of Heinkel.

Shameless ambition shook the air, and he felt as though his organs were being squeezed.

Having been hit with a fighting spirit that had increased since they happened to meet in the alleyway a short while ago, Roswaal shut one eye and composed his elevated mind. He couldn't be overwhelmed by his opponent's energy. Otherwise there would be a repeat of his previous defeat.

Roswaal, wetting his lips with his tongue, purposefully made the first move with his words. "This is a fairly disheartening situation. I wonder if it's a good thing that you drove away your friend in that waaaay, Marcos."

"…You heard that, huh."

Roswaal shrugged. "The child told us to wait, so we just happened to overheeear it."

The large man—Marcos—looked at him with annoyance. He turned his attention toward Russell, standing beside Roswaal.

Marcos had an intimidating aura not unlike that of a witchbeast. Despite being bathed in it, Russell remained undeterred. Of course, that may have only been a front, but just being able to keep up appearances like this was fairly extraordinary.

Marcos seemed to make the exact same appraisal of Russell's attitude. "You look frail, but you have more guts than the pisshead… So? You've brought along an equally-frail friend to help you get revenge?"

"I'm sorry for giving you such an unmerited impression. But please be assured, I'm just here to help him find what he's lost. Fighting isn't really my area of expertise. Look at these scrawny arms." Extending his arms out in submission, Russell denied any hostility.

Taken aback by his casual attitude, Marcos clicked his tongue. "Tch. You're just a weakling. Then what the hell did you come here for?"

“Well, as you just heard, he’s my new friend,” Roswaal explained. “It was thanks to your powerful punch that we came to know one another. So I’d like to express my graaatitude.”

“Thanks for hitting you? What will I get if I hit you again? Your exaggerated title, your privilege, and all that rich-boy crap, Young Master?”

With Russell sandwiched between them, Roswaal and Marcos exchanged a war of words. But in contrast to Marcos’s increasingly dangerous words, Roswaal’s responses stuck out like a sore thumb.

Unconsciously smiling further, Roswaal let out a laugh.

“…What’s so funny?”

“Sorry. It’s just rather novel to be called a young master… Your hatred of nobles is so full of contradictions.”

“…”

“Despite your vulgar speech and natural grit, you blend in pretty well, but my eyes can’t be fooled. I am, after all, by far the most experienced when it comes to masquerades. I can tell from your slightest gestures and behavior.”

The wrinkle in Marcos’s brow indicated a distaste for Roswaal. As he watched the crease deepen gradually, Roswaal felt a revival of the fighting spirit he tried to suppress. I can’t contain myself. —Seeing an opponent that was hiding what seemed to be a strange, unusual desire, Roswaal could not hold back his curiosity.

“You’re a knight, right, Marcos?” he declared, as the gap between them vanished.

It was a step that seemed to shake the earth, imprinting a deep footprint into the ground. Leaving behind evidence of his strong leap, Marcos closed in on Roswaal instantaneously, and struck him with a violent kick.

The overwhelming destructive force made him realize that he had been holding back with the punch in the alley. If he had taken the sole of that shoe head on, he might not have regained consciousness for another year. However…

"I showed you my pathetic side earlier. It would be embarrassing to have that mistaken as my true strength. So let me redeem my honor, would yoooou?"

"…"

The frontal kick concealed an absurd amount of power, but it didn't reach Roswaal. Before it could, ten mud walls had risen up, forcibly blocking the kick. Upon seeing such an inconceivable sight, Marcos immediately withdrew his foot, gnashing his teeth.

"A magic user, huh?"

"Does that not prove that I was not bluffing?" Roswaal asked, shutting one eye, separated by a single mud wall that was cleanly left standing,

Hearing this, Marcos grimaced, kicking the last wall to smithereens with his raised foot. Stepping back, he cracked his thick neck. "Nobody was watching that back-alley brawl. There's no need to redeem your honor."

"Well, no, there's you, and my friend here knows, too. Then there's the boy you covered for. But above all, there's one more person for whom I must redeem my honor."

"Someone else?"

"I can't reunite with my beloved teacher without first erasing this shame."

The passion-filled words were the result of a thumping in his chest—beating erratically just by thinking of his teacher.

It seemed like the seriousness of the situation had gotten across, and Marcos made no attempt to laugh. Instead, he folded his burly arms and asked, "Why?"

"Why what?"

“Why exactly do I have to go along with your revenge match? According to your logic, I won that fight. So quitting while I’m ahead should be pardonable.”

“Hm. Hard to argue with that.”

Of course he had no reason to go along with Roswaal’s vindication of honor. Much less so as Roswaal intended to take back his heirloom once he had exacted his revenge. To do that, he had to get him to fight somehow…

“Then I’ll lay out a reason for you to fight. How does that sound?” Russell, who had distanced himself from the fight, cut into the conversation from behind the pensive Roswaal.

“…You will?”

Marcos appeared disturbed by this attitude, to which Russell nodded and affirmed. “I also have a resolution to succeed in life as a merchant. As such, I can’t just balk at an opportunity to negotiate. So count me in.”

“You’re a shady bastard. What makes you think you can provide a good enough reason for me to mess around with this guy? What the hell are you scheming?”

“…If you manage to defeat Roswaal, I’ll give you information on the Golden Wing Faction. As the head of the Brotherhood, that’d be quite useful for you, yes?”

“…”

Marcos drew a sharp breath at Russell’s conditions, then clicked his tongue as if ashamed by his own reaction. “You know something about that group of spoiled pricks?”

“Merchants are blessed with opportunities to go in and out of the Nobles District. We sometimes get private requests from individuals to procure hard-to-find items that they don’t want the members of their house to know about. That said… I have a lot of cards in my hand. So how about it? Still not enough for you?”

"That group's weakness, huh?"

Flashing a friendly smile, Russell shook the scales. Then, after some conflict, Marcos jerked his chin in Roswaal's direction, "If I take him out, you'll tell me what it is. Is that the deal?"

"Yes, that's fine. As you can see, I'd hardly be able to shake you off if you came after me. Not with these legs. I'm also a big coward, so I'm a good talker."

"A coward wouldn't make that kind of gamble here," Marcos spat violently, to which Russell let out a slight laugh of surprise.

Then he looked back over at Roswaal once more, and gave a deep bow. "I apologize for my impudence, but the stage is set. Since I'm putting the trust my family cultivated with our customers as collateral, we need you to win, Roswaal."

"…That was a bold move. You're more of a find than I originally thooought."

"Considering your state in the alley, I'd say I'm the one who found something, but… Whoa."

Exchanging frivolous sentiments, Roswaal threw his coat at Russell, who rushed to catch it as he called out, "Step back."

Roswaal and Marcos faced each other, and squared up.

"There's a reward to be had, so I won't hold back. If you die, I'll dig you a deep grave."

"Ooh, how scary. Don't worry, I'll only half-kill you."

Both sides hurled provoking taunts at each other, and—without any signal—collided.

The air crackled, and on one corner of the slum, a battle that defied common sense began between the two transcendent beings.

In an alleyway just a short distance from the battleground was the figure of a single knight, shoulders slumped as he walked.

"…Crap, Marcos. I already knew that; you didn't have to say it."

Dragging melancholy behind him, various unforgiving words pierced Heinkel's heart. He could still feel the blood coursing through his veins. His steps were heavy, as he dwelled on self-hatred for his failure to fulfill his duty, his fury toward the disobedient fellow student, and the dejected looks of disappointment he was bound to receive.

"…Father."

"…H-Huh?! Reinhard?!"

Raising his lowered head, Heinkel was dumbfounded by the sight of a child standing in the alleyway. His young son, Reinhard. It was nothing short of astonishing that Reinhard, who should have been obediently waiting in their residence, had not only gone out, but to the slums of all places.

"Hey, hey, hold on. Why are you here?! It's dangerous! Where are your grandparents?! What the hell?! What is going on?!"

"S-Sorry, Father… I was worried about your work."

"N-No, it's okay. I'm sorry for yelling. Are you okay? Did anything happen?"

"I-I'm okay!"

Confirming his son's safety, Heinkel breathed a sigh of relief. From what he could see, there were no injuries or bruises on Reinhard's body, nor did he appear to be lying. It was certainly a miracle that no one had come across such a well-dressed child wandering about the slums.

"I thought my heart had stopped… Don't make me worry like that."

"Sorry. Are you angry?"

“I’m not angry… Maybe I should be? Either way, I’m more relieved than anything, really…” Gently stroking his son’s identically-red hair, Heinkel got to his feet. Lifting up Reinhard’s light body at the same time, he headed toward the exit of the slums. “Once we get back, I’ll need to have a word with those housekeepers… Reinhard, please don’t scare me like that again. Your father is fine on his own, so stay with Louanna.”

“But what about Mother’s wish?”

“…”

Heinkel exhaled at the sight of his son’s childlike desperation. The fact that his son, a mere four years in age, worried so much over him made him feel pathetic.

I need to be strong.

“If only Marcos had listened…”

“Marcos…”

“Yes, he’s a friend of your father’s… Well, something like that. It’s complicated. He’s very stubborn. If he’d just return to the knights, then…”

“If he goes back, you’d be happy?”

“Hm? Yes, I would, I would. That would be great.”

As they spoke, the father and son returned to the well-lit streets.

After listening to Heinkel’s worries, Reinhard nodded in his arms. “…Granted.”

8

In the evening slums, the fierce battle between the two transcendent beings continued.

One of them had the burly physique of a giant, whose entire body could be considered the embodiment of muscle itself. With each step the ground shook, and he approached his adversary as swift as an arrow, making him an absolute nightmare for his opponent. The force behind every punch and kick invited certain death wherever they landed. Merely committing to close combat with him would shorten one's lifespan by a few seconds.

If one was to suffer from his attacks—thread with powerful winds—no degree of training would mean anything at all, no matter how big or small.

The young man remained determined in this hand-to-hand fight, showing admirable bravery. Or perhaps, rather than admirable, it would be better to call this demonic bravery abnormal. The one exchanging blows in such close proximity with violence-incarnate could also be called superhuman.

The still youthful boy, with his long indigo hair tied back loosely, made full use of his dainty, slender body to attack and defend against this opponent who appeared to be twice his weight.

But the most surprising thing wasn't how the young boy managed to survive so long against his massive opponent, but his extraordinary ability to make the fight appear evenly matched to the untrained eye.

And indeed he made sure to put such flair on display.

"…Tch. You're pretty skilled." The giant clicked his tongue as his opponent landed on the toes of the foot he had extended after throwing a violent front kick.

When the giant lightly swung his arm, shards of frost fluttered down gently. They were the remains of sheets of ice that had taken the punches in place of the boy.

It was proof of his struggle that amidst the violent conflict, the young boy weaved magic into the hand-to-hand combat to sway the battle in his favor. Seeing this up close, the giant clicked his tongue in frustration, upon which the youth used his kicking foot as a springboard to leap backwards.

He landed in an open area away from his opponent, shrugging his shoulders and giving a bow. “Thank you, thank yooou,” he began. “It is a huge honor to receive your praise. Allow me to offer you a compliment in return. I never expected to find a man of such caliber… It seems that the Kingdom is still full of wonders.”

In contrast to the smiling boy, the giant never relaxed his annoyed countenance. “A fresh-faced noble shouldn’t speak like he knows the world.”

Considering the relationship between the two, the giant’s response was far more understandable. After all, they had both broken into a fight immediately upon their first meeting. And this fight was a rematch, not a reconciliation.

The two fighters—a young boy called Roswaal, and a hulking beast named Marcos, whose fateful encounter was due to Marcos’s underling having stolen a valuable item from Roswaal. The circumstances of their twilight duel, however, was a bit more complex than that. And it was precisely the very witness to this complicated situation who spoke. “Dear me, how incredible. From an outsider’s perspective, my eyes can’t keep up. I was right to not assist—I wouldn’t have been able to hold my ground!” said the young man, clapping and praising their fight from a short distance away.

Marcos scowled at the youth with a glare that would shake the Royal Guard. But the boy faced him head on, responding with a natural smile. “Do excuse me. If I’ve caused you any displeasure, then I do apologize.”

It was clear that this was no ordinary boy from the fact that he’d had courage and skill to orchestrate this duel between Marcos and Roswaal. Including this young boy, Russell, these were the three men involved in this evening duel in the slums.

“Don’t look away. You maaay be strong, but negligence is a powerful enemy.”

“Quit babbling,” Marcos spat. “This isn’t negligence—it’s composure.”

Extraordinary in their own ways, none of the three were inferior to the other.

9

In what could be regarded as a bad habit of his, Roswaal reveled in this twilight duel to the fullest. Marcos defended against Roswaal's barrage of attacks head-on, striking with erratic violence. His abilities were excellent—better than anyone he'd come across in the last few decades. You'd have to trace back to the Demi-Human War to find someone as powerful as he was.

Which is precisely what made Roswaal aware of his over-excitement.

Roswaal's skills made full use of a multitude of highly disciplined martial arts. Interwoven with magic to corner his opponents, they were virtually impossible to deal with on the first attempt, as only a select few could replicate such feats in modern times.

Marcos, however, overcame them with outlandish physical prowess and endurance. If he had time to do so, he would dodge or repel them. If he didn't, he'd brace himself and take the full force of the hit. He had ample resilience to continue the fight.

On the other hand, unlike Roswaal's various combat skills, Marcos's attacks were plain and simple. He approached Roswaal and threw fists. He launched kicks. That was it. However, those attacks were tremendously strong on their own.

It was a common misconception to mistake the physically large as slow. Yet while that might be the case when that size was due to excess fat, in Marcos's case, the majority of his large frame consisted of a layer of muscle, akin to armor. Contrary to the impression that came with his size, his movements were quick.

Roswaal put distance between himself and his opponent's arm as though it would burn. His heart shuddered every time Marcos threw a punch.

Of course, Roswaal was capable of playing it safe. Indeed, he possessed flying magic, an impossible feat for most humans to emulate in this day and age. He could keep his distance and carpet bomb the enemy from a safe range. That alone gave him the confidence to take on most opponents—even an entire army. But he refused to be so inelegant in a duel. Not to mention, I won't be able to wash off the shame of losing in the previous fight by plucking a win from a safe distance.

"Besides, how could I possibly tell someone I respect that I attacked my opponent from afar due to cowardice? I could never do that."

"Quit yapping…"

"Whoops, sorry."

With Roswaal engrossed in his thoughts, Marcos drew an arc with his leg in the air and drove it toward his opponent. Ducking low, Roswaal evaded the kick and leapt toward his chest. And exactly as he had done a few hours prior in the alleyway, he struck Marcos's abdomen.

"But this time, let's kick it up a notch… This time, I'm intending to kill!"

"—Ugh!"

Unlike last time, when his only aim was to incapacitate his opponent, this strike had enough power behind it to damage the internal organs of a large witchbeast. Unlike your typical fa jin, it was a new technique that incorporated Roswaal's creativity—a strike combined with fire, capable of blazing through its victim's viscera.

It was a murderous technique derived from the worst conceivable imagination that could incinerate and immobilize the innards that had been blown apart by the blast. But it was only from a certain level of confidence in his opponent that he dared to attempt it.

"…You son of a bitch!"

Marcos, whose bowels should have been baked, duly responded to Roswaal's credence. At the moment of impact, he tightened his abdominal muscles and twisted ever so slightly, allowing him to escape fatal injury with that movement alone. However, even he couldn’t come out unscathed. A fact which sparked a fire in his smoldering fighting instincts.

“…Oh.”

Before the roaring Marcos, Roswaal reflexively lowered his head. Immediately following, a sharp attack grazed his temple, and his consciousness hazed over. He couldn’t remember why he’d lowered his head.

The fact that it was to avoid Marcos’s devastating elbow strike was something he’d ultimately never recall for the rest of his life. Nonetheless, one could guess that he’d instinctively ducked his head to divert a crisis.

A knee about the size of a child’s head flew towards Roswaal’s face from below. The power behind a knee kick was several times that of a punch, and his had enough destructive force to blow a person’s head clean off their shoulders if it landed.

Roswaal managed to escape by ducking backwards even more forcefully than when he had lowered his head. He spun around as strands of indigo blue hair danced in the air around him, lopped off by the knee which they had just fallen short of escaping.

Taking his eye off his opponent at point blank range was the epitome of recklessness. But Roswaal had done so intentionally. In the opening he had deliberately exposed, he received Marcos’s attack. And in that instant, his right shoulder shattered. The impact came from nothing more than a thumb graze of his opponent’s fist. But with that single hit, Roswaal’s right arm was rendered out-of-service.

That was worth it, though, he thought. “I finally got completely within your reach.”

Shirking off the pain from his broken shoulder, Roswaal was confident in his victory. He’d lightly bumped into Marcos’s chest with his back. Although it left him in a backwards stance, the surface area that made contact with his body was far greater than that of his palm.

The force of the fa jin released from this position was roughly ten times stronger than that released from his palm—a force that even Marcos couldn't withstand.

Although interwoven with magic, it was ultimately through martial arts that he overcame his opponent. Having accomplished this difficult task, he could at last report back to his teacher with pride. However, in the moment he released the fa jin, Roswaal realized something.

"…"

With his back turned, he sensed Marcos tighten his chest muscles. It was not a defensive stance to withstand Roswaal's powerful strike—it was the initial stance done in preparation for releasing fa jin.

Occasionally, the world would give birth to a titan—a child of battle, endowed with a violent ferocity capable of overwhelming others, allowing them to readily absorb an opponent's long-cultivated martial arts and handle them at will, as if that skill were their own.

Marcos was the perfect depiction of such a titan.

Sensing his preparation to release the fa jin, Roswaal shuddered. His contact with Marcos' chest, which had given him such conviction in his victory, in that moment had become an omen of his opponent's counterattack.

The match now hinged solely on who could deliver a faster, more devastating blow. Roswaal had a slight advantage in how long he had used the ability. While not particularly reliable in the face of a titan who was a master of martial arts, he had nothing else to rely upon. He put faith into these techniques, which he had cultivated and tempered every day, to surpass the existence of this titan… It was at that instant.

"…"

“What?”

The growing awareness of the martial arts against his back dissipated. The tension eased up in an instant, leaving Roswaal at a loss for words as to what had happened. But it was too late to stop the arrow he had drawn. His full-body fa jin had been released.

The air exploded with a bang, and the ground beneath Roswaal’s feet cracked. The impact hit Marcos directly, his huge frame snapped, and he tumbled to the ground.

Marcos lay splayed out on his back. Roswaal’s eyes widened at the sight, dumbfounded.

“…What the hell?”

With his broken right arm dangling limply, the curtain fell on his spoiled fun.

10

“Such a disappointing end is unbearable! I will not accept such a victory!” Roswaal complained, glaring at Marcos, who sat cross-legged on the ground.

The victor had been decided when Marcos tumbled to the ground, having been struck with such a powerful fa jin. That much was clear from anyone’s perspective. However, it was the victor himself who stubbornly refused to accept it.

Gently rubbing his own stomach, Marcos heaved a sigh, “No matter how you look at it, you won. Unlike our last brawl in the alley, I’m the one knocked out this time. I have nothing to say. So what’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem, you say? Everything! I’m not satisfied by any of it! You were only out for two or three seconds. How about a rematch…ow, ow, ow!”

“Please calm down, Roswaal. Winners shouldn’t act so shamefully.”

The cause for the tears in Roswaal’s eyes was his broken right shoulder. Unfortunately, healing magic was the only thing he could not do, so he had no choice but to let it heal naturally. Russell applied some basic first aid. From the blow to his abdomen, to his injured right shoulder, it was Russell who tended to all his medical needs.

“Any amount of favors I can offer such an esteemed family is a welcome thing. Favors are good. They don’t require inventory, and they don’t expire. And best of all, it’s up to the buyer to set the price.”

“That’s an answer I like to heeeear…”

Composing himself from the pain, Roswaal gave Russell a wry smile. At that, his new friend shrugged, turning his intellectual eyes toward Marcos, who spat, “…What do you want, you even shadier brat?”

“What an upsetting evaluation. The way you put it makes Roswaal sound like a shady brat, and me even worse than him.”

“Am I wrong? You’re both bad-natured, but you seem even sleazier.”

“I see. I’ll keep that in mind to work on in the future.”

Becoming more and more displeased with his answer, Marcos clicked his tongue at Russell, who reacted with a smile. “Are you really okay with that?” Russell narrowed his eyes. “Even to my eyes, you seemed a little on edge in that final moment, either from hesitation or indecision… Actually, it seemed as if you were distracted.”

“…”

“Had it not been for that, the outcome may have been different. It would’ve been Roswaal lying there in defeat, most likely missing his head.”

“Probably.”

“How ruuuude…” Roswaal glared at the two men’s merciless conversation with his heterochromic eyes, but met only by their ignorance, he let out a big sigh.

Marcos scratched his head, completely oblivious. “I don’t intend to make excuses. I definitely was a little distracted… But a loss is a loss.”

“Hmm… I understand.”

“Are you fiiiinished? Then, the rematch can—ow, ow, ow, ow!” Undiscouraged and pressing for a rematch, Roswaal cried out in pain as his right arm—that had been fixed in place—was prodded.

“With an arm like that? Impossible.”

Casting a sidelong glance, Russell shook his head. “It’s no use.” Facing both Roswaal and Marcos, he continued, “Roswaal’s complaints aside, let’s fulfill our prior agreement. For his victory, you’ll return the item your subordinate stole from him… Although we didn’t clearly agree on that before the duel.”

“No need to explain. I’m not gonna argue about losing.” Letting out a snort of displeasure, Marcos turned his face to the sky. “Bel! You can come out of hiding now. And bring the goods!”

“Gah, what the hell, Captain?! You could have feigned ignorance!”

“Like hell I would. Get out here now! Or I’ll spank you till your ass swells up!”

Marcos’s angry yell reverberated through the air. The dirty figure of a young boy appeared. An oversized hat hung low on his head, the youth stood behind Marcos sullenly, glaring at Roswaal from behind his boss. “He’s a mess… If we surround him now, we could beat him to a pulp.”

“Try it. Pull something so shameless and I’ll kick your ass. I’ve told you this countless times—no acting shamelessly.”

“…Fine,” the young Bel begrudgingly accepted, receiving a palm strike to the head.

Watching the exchange between Marcos and Bel, Roswaal noticed a certain level of civility in their relationship—or in this case, in the way the Brotherhood functioned. He sensed a certain degree of decorum there.

Going by Russell's description of them, he had the strong impression that they were nothing more than a group of reckless ruffians. But after witnessing Marcos's leadership in action, it was clear they were more than that.

"Well, it's not too difficult to sway the majority by waving your fists in the air," Roswaal remarked.

"Hah? Are you insulting me to my face?"

"Of course not. I'm admiring your leadership. Even once you've unified a party, if your own ideologies are biased, that group can easily devolve into a band of outlaws."

Preserving that order, to a certain extent, was the result of Marcos's abilities, plus a measured amount of pressure. Of course, the existence of a common enemy—namely, the Golden Wing Faction—was another major factor. Such were his conclusions on the matter.

Hitting his hand as though remembering something, Bel pointed a finger at Roswaal. "O-Oh yeah, Captain! This guy is from the Golden Wing Faction! That way we have a reason for all of us to beat him up, right?"

"This guy? Golden Wing Faction?"

"Me?"

Roswaal and Marcos simultaneously twisted their faces in confusion at Bel's words. In Marcos's case, he became suspicious of whether or not this was true. But for Roswaal, he seemed unable to grasp the youth's intention.

Bel clicked his tongue at Roswaal's dismissive stance, viewing it as deception. "You can't fool us! Look, Captain! The thing I stole from him was this—a golden plume! That's their symbol, isn't it?!"

"Well…"

Bel drew the golden plume enthusiastically from his pocket, modeled after the Mathers family crest. Seeing it, Marcos furrowed his brow as if he had genuinely accepted Bel's accusation. However—

"Do excuse me."

"Huh?!"

Russell grabbed the plume from Bel's palm. Ignoring Bel's surprise, he murmured his appraisal of the plume. After a brief inspection, he declared, "Seeing as how this is indeed a real gold plume…it's definitely a fake."

"Hah?! I-It's fake because it's real?! What the hell's that even mean?" Bel lashed out at Russell's declaration.

However, without answering Bel directly, Russell requested for a confirmation over his head. "I mean exactly what I said. The Captain… Sir Marcos gets what I'm saying, yes?"

Marcos let out a low snort that sounded like rocks groaning. "…Yeah, I get it."

"Captain? What the hell? Did I say something wrong?" the unconvinced Bel asked.

"No. It's not your fault. It's those spoiled pricks of the aristocracy who are to blame. It's not your fault that you can't tell the difference."

"…?" Still confused, Bel tilted his head.

Roswaal seemed convinced, although his own prior knowledge of the matter was about the same as the youth's. "In short, although the gold plume is indeed a symbol of the Golden Wing Faction, the plumes they use are cheap—they don't use real gold."

"For some reason, it seems to closely resemble the Mathers family crest," Russell added.

The unreasonable resentment Roswaal had incurred from the Brotherhood seemed to have had another hidden side to it.

“I see… Roswaal, huh?” Marcos said. “I knew I’d heard that name somewhere. The Mathers Domain, huh?”

“Yes. Although I’ve only reeeecently inherited the household. I’m the current head of House Mathers, Roswaal L. Mathers.”

“A great house, and the head of it at that… Then you probably have nothing to do with the Golden Wing Faction.” Considering Roswaal’s lineage, Marcos understood Bel’s mistake. He grabbed the youth—unaware of the gravity of the situation—by the head, and forced him into a bow, deeply lowering his own head on the spot.

“What’s that for?” Roswaal asked.

“As you can see, he’s apologizing,” Marcos explained. “Regardless of his ignorance, stealing from a nobleman could have his head blown off at your behest. It also goes against Brotherhood protocol to steal from unrelated parties.”

“Hm.” As Marcos explained, head still lowered, Roswaal put a hand to his chin. Ignoring the sharp pain that came with carelessly moving his right arm, he gave it careful consideration.

Of course, stealing a family heirloom should have meant severe punishment for Bel. But that thought hadn’t even crossed Roswaal’s mind. Now that the heirloom had been returned, he wasn’t interested in accusations. Rather, as this event was what led to his meeting Russell and the intriguing Marcos, the rewards had been far greater.

But they likely wouldn’t understand, even if he were to explain and let them go. To them, it would surely take on the appearance of a pardon, leaving a bad aftertaste and causing them to live the remainder of their days in fear. It was important for Roswaal to find a point of compromise, and for that sake…

“Can I ask you oooone thing? Marcos, you’re a knight, right?”

“While yes, I have been knighted… The one who knighted me probably regrets it."

"That may be. So I see, you were indeed a knight. Although I suppose it depends on the person who knighted you as to whether or not he regreeeets it."

Frankly speaking, Marcos's abilities had the potential to go down in the Kingdom's history. If the one who knighted him was a respectable person, then he was probably sufficiently proud.

The question was—why was someone who had been granted the title of knight doing this?

"C-Captain may be a knight, but he's different from the likes of you nobles!"

"Bel…"

With his head still pinned down by Marcos, Bel twisted his neck as he pleaded, "Let me speak! If I don't, they're just gonna misunderstand you."

Marcos sighed, making a bitter face as he spoke. "It's nothing big," he began. "Even after I joined the order, I just ended up doing the same sorts of jobs as the guards. Do you know what kinds of scoundrels you meet patrolling the capital? Most of them are unemployed slum brats."

"…"

"Even if you toss 'em all in jail, all you'll hear are awful stories. Can you really expect punishment to lead to reform? Like hell you can. Reforms are carried out by actual villains. These brats have nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep—how can you call them villains?"

"So you're siding with them?"

"It started to feel stupid dealing with all you guys." Marcos sighed in resignation, confessing his reason for discarding his status as a knight. Hearing his story, the shame in his voice, and seeing the pain in his expression, Roswaal closed one eye. He looked at Marcos's wrinkled brow with his blue pupil.

In the Kingdom of Lugunica, there was a definite disparity between the rich and the poor. This was not something restricted to this kingdom alone—it could be found in the shadow of every country. However, Lugunica may have been the only one with such a clear division in the very heart of the nation—in the capital city.

The slums were left to themselves, considered an extraterritoriality. Its residents, in many cases, had no choice but to stain their hands with crime for the sake of survival. All the while asking—why must we suffer? All while the Kingdom that managed them offered no answer.

Wanting to bring change to that image of hell, Marcos threw away his status as a Knight and descended into the wild.

“And that’s why you command the Brotherhood,” Roswaal said, tying it all together. Marcos said nothing. But in his stead, Bel’s sharp gaze pierced through Roswaal.

“This is simply an outsider’s perspective, but it’s true that the Brotherhood’s actions are backed by the slums,” Russell added. “Even with all the radical actions making headlines, the casualties are minimal… Though I wouldn’t call it praiseworthy, giving people a sense of purpose has tremendous impact.”

“You’re saying they have breathed life back into the slums. You’re very well infooormed about this.”

“A good ear is a fundamental quality for a merchant.”

After failing to sound modest, Russell took a step back as if he had said too much.

Listening to what he’d said, Roswaal gave it some thought. He cast a glance in Russell’s direction. “What about the information on the Golden Wing Faction that you were going to hand over to Marcos if he won? About their weakness?”

“You of all people are asking me? I already said—that information rests on the credibility of the family. It’s…”

“I’ll pay whatever price you ask. I don’t believe I need to explain my family’s financial power to you, right?”

Russell’s eyes widened for the first time as he was interrupted with a proposal. Finally, I said something that exceeded his expectations, Roswaal thought, somewhat satisfied. “My intuition tells me that your information is beneficial. It may even have the potential to change multiple situations in oooone breath.”

“…” Russell sank into silence as he searched for the right words.

Marcos spoke up in his place. “Hey, what the hell are you guys talking about?” he demanded, turning a suspicious eye on Roswaal with a stiffened expression at their private exchange.

Roswaal’s mouth relaxed into a smile. “You seem bewildered. I like that. Throwing people’s expectations into disarray really is exhilarating.”

“Give me a break. I may have lost the last fight, but I have no intention of losing the next one. So watch your mouth. What are you up to?”

“Oh, how scary. As for what I’m up to, well…” His right arm dangling limply, Roswaal supported his chin with his left hand and shot Russell a sidelong glance. Russell’s shoulders drooped, clearly a wordless response to Roswaal’s question. Consequently, Roswaal’s smile deepened, giving Marcos a villainous stare. The man gulped nervously, to which he replied, “How about it, Marcos? Why don’t you become my accomplice?”

11

Fareed Impusen was a real nobleman that served the Kingdom of Lugunica.

He was the fourth son of the viscount, Adnell Impusen. The right to inherit the house was reserved to the eldest son, while the succession of the various family businesses was promised to the second and third. Fareed burned with a strong desire for the role that would be left to him. Destiny, however, was a cruel thing.

When Fareed’s turn came around, there were no roles left in which the Viscount House of Impusen could contribute to the Kingdom of Lugunica. Fareed's patriotism had nowhere to go.

Having no assigned role, Fareed was given an appropriate position that sounded good in terms of freedom. But in reality, it was nothing more than leaving him to his own devices. His brothers envied him. But to Fareed, their positions were far greater objects of envy.

He loved the Kingdom of Lugunica.

And because of that love, he knew he should take action. So Fareed called out to other young nobles who also possessed patriotism without purpose to create their own path. It was from this genuine patriotism that the opportunity manifested for the creation of the Golden Wing Faction.

Taking on the responsibility as the party's leader, Fareed grew concerned about the situation in the capital. After the civil war, the Kingdom was said to have entered an era of peace. However, the sheer reality was little more than averting one's eyes to the thin ice they tread.

Along with the discrimination between humans and demi-humans continuing to smolder and interference from other countries, including the Vollachia Empire to the south, the Brotherhood that had emerged at the same time as the Golden Wing Faction was the biggest of their problems.

How should the Kingdom proceed? What can we do? Should we plan a coup in order to take over House Impusen?

He'd started to feel like he hit a wall when…

"Oh, helloooo. Could I take some of your time, Fareed?"

The son of a merchant who frequented him had introduced him to a youth with a bewitching smile.

"I'm sorry for gathering you here for this. It may feel a little cramped, but I couldn't find a better place, you seeee. So please bear with it for now," Roswaal asked, flashing a smile at everyone assembled in the single room.

Roswaal had intended it to be more welcoming, however not a single person present looked at him with kindness. Every expression bore some level of tension and trepidation, while more than a few of them showed clear signs of hostility. So much so that if left unchecked, an explosion accompanied by bloodshed was bound to occur at any moment.

Under such circumstances, Russell broke the ice. “It’s a fine room. Is this your property?” he asked.

“Yeah, it is. My grandmother bought this shop out of her love for drinking and socializing. Before she passed, the walls were lined with her collection of liquors. But when my father took over, it was completely abandoned. Fortunately, the building itself was well preserved thanks to the family butler.”

“I see. He must have been a very talented butler. Someone I’d like to meet at least once.” Russell was far more concerned with the building they had assembled in than this volatile gathering of people. Although his mind was undoubtedly ill at ease, he was big on avoiding unnecessary anxiety. His attitude was likely attributed to the fact that he was not party to the event, nevertheless, it was still an impressive feat.

Just as explained to Russell a moment ago, they were gathered in a long-abandoned building that once served as a pub, located in one corner of the Commoner’s District of the capital. It was just one of the properties under the Mathers family name, but this was his first time using it in a few decades.

“I don’t fancy letting the rich brag about bein’ rich. Get on with it, Roswaal,” Marcos called out in an irritated voice from the center of the room, sitting with his arms folded. Nearby stood Bel and a few others from the Brotherhood. In order to preserve the integrity of the meeting, each side was limited to five attendees.

“I appreciate your concern, but I’ve heard that the captain of the Brotherhood is a force to be reckoned with, even up against all the guards together. As one who only learned swordsmanship as a matter of etiquette, I'd hardly be able to put up much of a fight."

With a clear voice, the fine man—Fareed Impusen—lightly raised his hand and gave a wry smile. Around him stood a line of his allies, just as Marcos had, and their fine dress functioned as a clear contrast between them and the Brotherhood.

With the information given so far, it was clear that Fareed was the founder of the Golden Wing Faction. So, in short, here stood both heads of the two factions that were causing trouble for the Kingdom—the Brotherhood, and the Golden Wing Faction.

Of course, Roswaal had a reason for gathering these two natural enemies together in one room. But the person who had made the biggest contribution to help make this happen was the new friend he had only just met in the capital—Russell Fellow.

"Well, Fareed isn't wrong," Roswaal stated. "If Marcos were to attack in earnest, the only ones walking out of here alive would be the Brotherhood. Even Russell and myself would be in danger."

"That sounds pretty horrific," Russell added. "Please, let's refrain from letting something like that happen."

"Are you even listening? Get to the damn point. I don't need your stinkin' theatrics," Marcos barked at Russell and Roswaal's lighthearted exchange.

With his right arm in a sling, Roswaal accepted the rebuke. "Okay, okay." He shrugged. "I gathered you all for only one thing. You should both already know what kind of people your opponents are by now. I understand that as enemies, you probably want to tear each other apart, now that you've finally met. However, for now, I'd like you to refrain from doing so."

"You're talkin' a lot of crap right now…"

"We have no objections. Please continue, Roswaal."

Marcos scowled, contrasting with Fareed's formal countenance, neither meeting the other's gaze. For the time being, both parties cooperated with Roswaal's first objective of getting them to meet face-to-face.

Despite the clash between their organizations, both leaders' dispositions allowed them to talk rationally, as one could infer to a certain extent from their actions and purpose of establishment in the first place.

In other words—

"The reason I asked you both to gather here is simple. The current hostility between the Brotherhood and the Golden Wing Faction that is causing chaos within the capital… I'd liiike to resolve it in one fell swoooop."

"Resolve it in a single swoop…" Upon hearing those words, Fareed's handsome face clouded over with doubt. "Roswaal, we are a gathering of those concerned about the future of the Kingdom. Being born into nobility allows us to see things that commoners cannot. Yet despite that perspective, we still lack the means to do anything. So—"

"So as a result, you just put a lid over it?" questioned Marcos. "Your sincere attitude toward wrestling with the country's problems is truly splendid. Your aspiration to clean up the roadside garbage brings tears to my eyes."

Marcos snorted at the end, to which Fareed's face reddened. "What?!" he cried. Sensing utmost disrespect from his opponent, his lips trembled.

"I get that you lot love to keep things clean. But the trash you've been cleaning up has a point of view too. In fact, trash like us much prefer it if you'd look the other way."

"Calling yourself trash… But your group hurts people! What's that about?!"

"We only aim for the foul punks collecting money in cruel ways. Using dirty money, living in a dirty town…it's self-purifying. Got a problem with that?"

"And exactly where do you draw the line?!"

Fareed leapt to his feet, striking the table between them. Marcos did likewise, rising to confront him. Fareed may have been a tall man, but even so he was looked down upon by Marcos's giant frame. With both leaders standing, the others had no choice but to follow suit. It was a scary situation—like a spark in a powder keg.

"…And with that, you've heard each other's opinions," Roswaal declared.

"…"

Cutting between them, Marcos and Fareed scowled at Roswaal. Taking in the sharp gazes, he glanced at the two faces in turn. "I understand Marcos's opinion. The slums are struggling, and they need help fast. On the other hand, Fareed's opinion is also understandable. The strain on the Kingdom needs to be rectified, starting with the capital. But, individually, we are fairly powerless. We can't fight against such a big imbalance."

"Then what are you saying we should do?" Russell interjected perfectly into Roswaal's theatrics.

Roswaal turned as though having waited for the question. "It's my turn noooow. Individual power is useless against big imbalances. So we need to fight against it with numbers." Divulging his plain and simple plan, Roswaal once more turned to face Marcos and Fareed. He pointed at the speechless pair with a finger each. "I just so happened to have a device left behind by my predecessor… A so-called 'magicreation tool' that I've wanted to disseminate. I just needed the manpower and the right people to manage this operation."

"H-Huh…?!"

"That's…"

The Brotherhood and the Golden Wing Faction simultaneously grew flustered at Roswaal's suggestion.

"Of course this can only be considered a stopgap. I cannot employ everyone in the capital who wants work, nor give posts to every youth burning with patriotism. But it'll work as a first-aid treatment, just as this has assisted in healing my right shoulder," Roswaal said, showing the two the sling around his right arm.

Both the Brotherhood and the Golden Wing Faction were organizations founded upon the desire to help those struggling in the capital. He could give them work and something worth doing. Not to mention, this would also help Roswaal with his future goals. He was greatly pleased with himself.

"How about it? It's not a bad idea, right? I'm the head of House Mathers, which prioritizes competency and motivation… Or so I've just decided, anyway."

Shutting one eye, his blue pupil passed over every individual in the room. Naturally, everyone was in a state of shock at Roswaal's sudden proposal—

"…Hah."

"Oh?"

"Ha… Hahaha… Hahahahahaha!"

Just as he thought that, a laugh rang out that sounded like the jaws of a snapping beast. It was one of the decision makers; the giant with a permanent scowl on his face—Marcos.

Roswaal's eyes widened. It was the first time he had seen Marcos laugh since their meeting. "So this is what it's like to see a boulder laugh," he remarked.

"Back off, shitty rich boy… What a heavy-handed move. You can't save everyone that way."

"I already said that. Of course I can't save everyone. But why should that stop me from helping the few that I can? Besides…" Roswaal held out a finger before the scowling Marcos and laughed. "Another fool like me might come along, and then another. Perhaps a hundred nobles like myself could help everyone, right?"

Marcos released another sharp exhale at the preposterous suggestion. Opening his oversized fist and looking at his palm, he mused, “I’d rather not have to beat up a hundred fools like you.”

12

It couldn’t be said that the issues between the Brotherhood and the Golden Wing Faction were settled in one fell swoop. Such a deep-rooted problem wouldn’t resolve so easily. The same issues between these groups would likely spout again in a different form. But as long as this common ground became a precedent, it was fine.

Both the Brotherhood and the Golden Wing Faction had withdrawn, leaving the shop wide and empty as Russell muttered, “The eldest son inherits the estate, and the second and third sons help out with his work. But what about the children who come after? I’m no stranger to that, either.”

Roswaal responded to his mutterings with a shrug and a question. “Really? With your competence, I think it’d be easy to take your older brother’s place.”

“I won’t do that. I don’t want to sow any futile discord. I’m a pacifist.”

“If it’s for a good reason, I don’t think it’s too much to aaaask. You might be surprised at how little resentment it’ll leave. Or rather, that you might not leave any.”

“Such meaningful words. It sounds as if you’ve experienced this yourself.”

Roswaal smiled silently at Russell’s banter. Snatching away the family estate, and driving away any blood siblings and family—in reality, Russell was entirely correct. Roswaal had experienced something similar—not in this body, but in an incident several hundred years ago.

“Still here, I see,” Roswaal said.

They both spied Marcos’s figure, looking at the two of them from the entrance. Taking long strides as he walked, he took a seat at the counter beside them.

"How did your comrades taaaake it?"

"It's been chaos, obviously… But it's not all bad. We have Leno, who I'm putting in charge. He's an honest guy of few words. He's taken an interest."

"I see," Roswaal replied. "If he's competent, then that's all fine. And if he's not, then his enthusiasm should be enough."

"Watch your mouth," Marcos cautioned Roswaal on his unnecessary comment with an exasperated look. Glancing at the empty shelves, he commented, "Not a single drink, huh? What a waste of space."

"I agree," said Russell. "It's excessively sad for such valuable real estate."

"Or so you thought. I actually hid some."

In response to the other two's requests, Roswaal leapt over the counter and slid a board at the back of the empty shelves. From inside, he took out a single bottle of alcohol. Relieved that it hadn't been stolen, he also retrieved some glasses from the same hidden compartment.

"Granhiert? You have good taste." Marcos said, noticing the drink.

"My grandmother's favorite. I imagine she regretted dying before she could drink it."

"Oh my, how terrible. Then let us drink up in her honor," Russell suggested.

Exchanging sinful looks, they opened the bottle of alcohol that had aged for so long. A rich aroma drifted from the amber liquid as it was poured into the glasses. Taking one glass each, they clinked them together before bringing them to their mouths. As a guilt-inducing flavor hit their tongues, they were each momentarily at a loss for words.

"Drinks always taste best after a hard day's work," stated Roswaal. "And that goes for anyone, regardless of birth, don't you think?"

“Is that supposed to be some sort of conclusion? Like I’d agree, idiot,” Marcos spat.

Downing his drink in one gulp, Marcos placed his glass on the counter. Then, he paused with a stony countenance and said, “…I’ll go along with your idea, Roswaal.”

“…I’m glad to heeear it.”

“You did what you said you would, and showed results. Even as just a temporary measure, it’ll give a path for those with nowhere to go. So I’ll help you out with your plan,” Marcos replied with resolution, twisting his face into a sneer.

Before attending the meeting with the Golden Wing Faction, Roswaal had made Marcos a promise. “I will propose a solution for the capital’s current situation. And if you like the proposal, you must cooperate,” he’d said.

For that sake—

“I’ll return to the guards temporarily… Though I’ll probably get a good scolding.”

“Well, resign yourself to it. It’s fine—you’ll be in great demand… But I did think that you’d put up a much bigger resiiiistance.”

“I find it odd myself. I don’t feel particularly bad about it. That might be because I feel I’ve become a ball in the palm of your hand, and have resigned myself to that,” Marcos replied, shaking his head as he got to his feet. Turning toward the entrance, he continued, “I’ll contact you periodically, but I don’t do idle chit chat. Keep the letters to a minimum.”

“But I’m so proud of being a frequent writer.”

“I figured you were, hence the warning… You should reconsider the company you keep.” That last part was directed not at Roswaal, but instead Russell, as Marcos exited the shop.

Watching him leave, Russell wet his tongue with the alcohol and chuckled. “It’s not very convincing coming from him.”

"Dear me, you are certainly right. But even so, you have done a lot for me."

"I'm just happy to be of help," Russell answered humbly before Roswaal refilled his glass.

Russell was always modest, although he'd done nothing but help Roswaal from the very start. Starting with his passing out in the alley, to the duel with Marcos, and also arranging the meeting between the Brotherhood and the Golden Wing Faction.

"A man like you will probably come in handy," Roswaal stated. "I'd like for this relationship to last as long as possible."

"If you say so, then my time spent running around has been well worth it. But still—"

"—I imagine you've had many opportunities to be asked for advice, right? For example, by Fareed, perhaps?"

"..."

The smile vanished from Russell's face. But only for a split second.

"What do you mean?" he hastily asked, smoothing over his appearance.

"Well, it's just a guess... Fareed's burning patriotism is a rare thing for a noble, but he's not very good at making use of that passion. Someone must have advised him and pointed him in the right direction. Naturally, he firmly believes he made all these choices of his own volition."

"..."

"A true tactician never lets his target know that he has been taken in by his plan. After all, his target must truly believe that the decision was all his own. So there isn't a single reason he would know," Roswaal explained, emptying his glass at the same time.

This time it was Russell's turn to pour the refill. "That's an interesting supposition," he said. "Are you an accomplished writer as well as a magic user?”

“Unfortunately, writing stories isn’t my forte. My hands are full with what’s already written out for me.”

With a slight chuckle, he downed his second drink. It was strong. Although he only had to return to his lodgings after this, it wasn’t good to drink too much. Not to mention the youthfulness of his body—he was well aware that he needed to take care of it.

“I’ll only have one more. Will you drink with me?” Roswaal asked as he shook the bottle, now with little left in it. “As my new friend.”

Russell nodded. “When you put it that way, I have no choice.”

Thus began the first of numerous drinks these two would share together, their true motives hidden behind suppressed laughter.

13

Meanwhile—

“…Belmont, you there?”

“Yes.”

That night on the streets, once everyone had gone and he confirmed he was alone, the youth called out his subordinate’s name. The figure responding to his call emerged from the alley, a boy with a hat pulled low over his head.

Without acknowledging the small shadowy figure, the young man continued. “Accompany Fareed Impusen and the Brotherhood. And stay in touch.”

“Understood… What about Lord Mathers?”

“He’s caught on to more than we bargained for. By snatching the plume that wasn’t even on display to begin with, I assumed he’d realize that he was our target from the start.”

It had all gone as planned until Roswaal realized their involvement and sought to exploit their intentions. But discovering the true identity of the founder of the Golden Wing Faction, as well as the reason for its inception was a completely unexpected turn of events. They reevaluated him as a force to be reckoned with. However, he himself appeared to have no intention of leading the country.

“At the very least, not at the moment…huh?”

“Boss?”

“Just talking to myself. Did you manage to detect the thing in question?”

“Yes. Somehow it seems that a Divine Protection is at work. The source is probably…”

At the question, his subordinate trailed off, and the youth concluded, “I see.”

Then, raising his cold eyes, he looked over the residence before him. The estate, lying on the edge of the Nobles District, had been proclaimed an impassable zone by the Kingdom of Lugunica.

“Astrea Manor.”

Heinkel Astrea woke at midnight with a feeling of unease in his gut. Roused from his sleep, he was in a single, dimly-lit room. He had been sleeping on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. Of course, there was a bed in his own room, but Heinkel preferred to sleep here:

In the bedroom, where his wife slept.

“…Did Reinhard get out of bed?” Heinkel grumbled as he made his way out of the room, stifling a yawn. His son was still young, and not as lively as other children. He hadn’t learned how to rely on people, likely due to his mother’s slumber. He felt inadequate, struggling with this unfamiliar fatherhood. For what he lacked, he depended on the elderly couple that had long served the mansion, or his parents who lived elsewhere. However, Heinkel truly wished to rely on his parents as little as possible.

"…?"

Down the moonlit corridor, he noticed the curtains fluttering in a sudden wind. He slowly moved forward to close the window, head tilted. This window should have been closed. Why is it open?

"Don't turn around."

"…"

A cold voice cut in from behind, and Heinkel froze. It was a voice devoid of emotion and as sharp as glass. Sensing this, Heinkel scolded himself for not bringing his sword with him. If only he had his sword on hand, he might not have ended up in such a predicament.

"Heinkel Astrea, you are under suspicion of criminal insurrection."

"H-Huh? Criminal? Me? Why…"

Heinkel's voice stuttered at the sudden accusation of a crime he had no memory of committing. But he couldn't turn around and explain—he could sense from behind that the person wouldn't let him.

Strictly speaking, there were more than the single individual who spoke. He sensed a large number of people, and that both himself and the mansion were surrounded. And he knew not only himself, but his wife and son were fair game as hostages.

"Wh-What must I do to ease your suspicions? And first of all, why do you think—"

"—The Divine Protection of Mind-Changing."

"…What?"

Despite his request for clarification, Heinkel was struck with a term he had never heard before, which was clear from his reaction to the other party, who had been watching him intently.

"Historically, it is a dangerous Divine Protection that has been observed a number of times…allowing one to influence people's thoughts. Depending on its usage, it could even make it possible to overthrow a country. It has been perceived to be centered around you.”

“N-Nonsense, I don’t have any Divine Protections! I… If I had a Divine Protection—”

“It is said to influence the thoughts of those involved. Do you remember Marcos Gildark?”

“M-Marcos? I…”

It was the name of the old friend he had just met today. But just as Heinkel was about to refute the claim, something occurred to him—something of an extremely small and limited possibility…

“That Marcos…the Divine Protection… Wh-What happened?”

“Although there is a possibility that external factors might have played a role, he changed his mind. He is returning to the knights.”

Which meant that Heinkel had fulfilled the duty assigned to him by the knights… and that there was a slight possibility of someone having done it for him.

“…!”

Coming to a realization, he broke into a run. There was a momentary delay in the response of the presence he sensed, which Heinkel left behind as he ran toward a certain door. Flinging it open, he entered.

“…Father?”

“Reinhard!”

The child sitting atop the bed looked at his father in surprise. Relieved to find his son safe and sound, Heinkel flew over to him and seized his tiny shoulders. “Reinhard, did you make any kind of wish for my sake? Because I said I’d be happy if Marcos returned to the knights?”

"…"

Hearing this, Reinhard's expression warped. Fear flashed across his eyes, and he hugged his red-haired head. "I-I'm sorry. I wanted…to help you, Father… A-Are you angry?"

"I'm…"

—Not angry, Heinkel hesitated to say. He was happy Reinhard felt that way. The consideration of a son who thought of his father—that itself was heartwarming. But he recalled the words of the figure a moment ago.

Reinhard held the Divine Protection of Mind-Changing, which had the potential to overthrow a country. He could not afford, then, to respond with kindness.

"Reinhard, that's not okay. You can't do that."

"Father…"

"I'm telling you, Reinhard. Don't use that power ever again! It's not okay to use it. You are not allowed to bend people's heart's to your will and change their minds! They aren't yours to play with! Understood?!"

Embracing his frightened son, Heinkel's voice transformed into a yell so his words would reach the ears of the assassins throughout the mansion, and everyone in their party—regardless of who they were.

"I've told my son! I won't let him use it ever again! So please! Reinhard will be fine! He's a good kid! This child is Louanna's son! He's our treasure!"

He wasn't quite sure if his frantic shouts would pierce through the cold-hearted group, but Heinkel screamed with all his heart, praying for Reinhard's safety.

"Please… Don't take my son… Don't take away Louanna's way home…!"

He had already lost so much. Having experienced nothing but loss, that which he had gained was few in number. Losing the one wish he had been granted was unbearable.

"…"

He clung to him, sobbing, wondering exactly how much time had passed since his unsightly complaint. Before he knew it, the numerous people he'd sensed had disappeared. Heinkel only realized that fact when his son's tiny hand touched his cheek.

"Reinhard…"

"Father, I'm sorry. I won't use it ever again… I-I've erased it," Reinhard assured him. Heinkel was taken aback by both his frantic behavior, and the disappearance of the unknown entities.

Letting out a breath, he placed a hand on his son's head. "You… erased it? Haha, okay, I understand. A Divine Protection is something that stays with you your whole life… But I get it. Do your best to live without it. Okay?"

"…Okay. I'm sorry, Father."

"It's okay. It's alright, Reinhard… As long as you understand, it's fine."

Exhausted, Heinkel accepted Reinhard's apology. Rather, there was no need for his son to apologize to begin with. Divine Protections were something you were born with. Owners of such powers had to understand that they walked a different path than everyone else. They had to be prepared to live like that.

His closest family would need to understand that—

"…Erased."

"Huh? Did…you just say something?"

"No, nothing. Father… Um, today could we…"

"Yeah, let's sleep together. With Louanna, too. Let's sleep in the same room, as a family.” Pleased with the idea, Heinkel lifted his son in his arms and carried him out of the room with his pillow. As they left, Reinhard’s gaze shifted toward the window.

“Devote yourself to the Kingdom… For your family.”

Only Reinhard’s blue eyes witnessed the shadowy figure’s lips moving as it stood outside the window. An image that would remain within the child’s mind for a long, long, long time.

14

“Right, I’ll be counting on you from now oooon, Fareed.”

“Likewise. I’m grateful to you for giving us this opportunity.”

Finished with his business in the capital, Roswaal was ready to set off to return to his own lands, accompanied by everyone from the Brotherhood, when Fareed had come to see him off.

Unlike the Brotherhood, who came with no baggage, each member of the Golden Wing Faction had much to sort out first. But the youths that comprised it were all burning with passion. They were all equally excited at the prospect of going to a new place where they could make full use of their abilities.

The previous Roswaal had the tendency to keep people at a distance. However, the magicreation tools he had developed over his reclusive lifetime indicated a sign of a bright future.

“Looks like you’ll have much to sort out once you arrive. I’m counting on you, uhh… Leno Rex, was it?”

“…Thank you. You too,” replied the unsophisticated man taking over Marcos’s role with a simple nod. Despite his reticence, his sincerity was clear. He would get along just fine.

“At any rate, we need to double the size of Costuul over the next ten years. We can’t be caaaareless.”

As Roswaal muttered to himself, Bel appeared beside him, arms behind his head. “I don’t really understand, but it sounds pretty important."

"Oh my. It's you."

This youth, who had been the catalyst of this whole situation, planned a fresh start with the Brotherhood alongside Roswaal. And he was very welcome to.

"Caaan I count on you when I want to get in touch with Russell?"

"…I don't get what you're sayin'. I'll just say, your letter might get delivered to him by mistake." The youth shrugged. The whole ordeal was obvious from his attitude, but he maintained his pretense. Roswaal didn't mind such theatrics and went along with it.

All things considered, the time I spent here bore much fruit, he thought. Obtaining a foothold in the development of Costuul, considered a difficult endeavor, plus acquiring two favorable connections in the capital, was quite a big deal.

Both the immeasurably talented Russell, and Marcos, who'd accepted his complicity, were irreplaceable friends. He looked forward to the times when he'd be able to travel to the capital and meet them.

Having something valuable stolen on purpose, and using that as an opportunity to deepen a connection… Perhaps that plan will come in handy at some point in the future. Pondering this, Roswaal—accompanied by the impatient youngsters—returned to his domain.

END

Elegant Lesson
(CA)
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

???: “Woahahhh—!!”

???: “Kyawawawawawa, I suppose—?!”

There was a ferocious scream, and two figures were thrown into the air. A large figure and a small figure were holding hands, sharing each others’ fate. Some people would see this as a friendly relationship, but that was not the right description for this situation. Because, a lapse in judgment would lead to the same end for both of them.

??? & ???: ““Ahhhphew.””

They spilled that out, turned their eyes, and rolled on the ground, knocking them out with a “Phew.” The boy and the young girl, who had no energy to fight back— were completely taken care of as a set. A shadow suddenly appeared beside them without making a sound.

???: “—Unfortunately, there is no room for talk at all. Child’s play.”

Yes, it was the calm tone of voice that mercilessly commented on the two collapsed people. The owner of the voice tone was also a person with a neutral appearance who did not betray the impression of the tone of voice.

His dark blue hair was carefully styled, and his sharp, intelligent eyes were adorned with a monocle, an intellectual item. His tall, slender body was kept in a breathtakingly beautiful posture, embodying a kind of perfection.

This impression was accentuated by his cool, sweat-free profile. This was especially true when you viewed the out-of-breath, sweaty boy and girl —Subaru, and Beatrice, at his feet. The two of them sat up weakly on their knees and looked down at each other.

Subaru: “Huff, huff, I, I can’t talk back.”

Beatrice: “Betty, is the Great Spirit Beatrice, and you call it child’s play, in fact… You’ll be howling in no time, I suppose…”

???: “Even your arguments against me are not unified. You can not possibly achieve your goal with that. Hopeless.”

Shaking their heads loosely, Subaru and Beatrice sagged at the words of the man who was the incarnation of serenity.

Subaru could not even talk back. At least, not in this state of mind.

It was Subaru and Beatrice who asked for training. But honestly speaking, they thought they could do a little better. Their hubris was shattered, and they felt bad about it.

But—

???: “Are we done here? End.”

Subaru: “—Hk. Wait, there’s more!”

Beatrice: “If you think this is where it ends, you’re wrong, in fact!”

At the question of resignation, Subaru and Beatrice shouted at the same time.

Unlike the previous exchange, the only thing they shared in common was a sense of defeat, and upon hearing this, the person with the monocle —Clind, nodded his head with a slight narrowing of his eyes.

Clind: “Splendid, So, again, please. Guidance.”

Subaru: “Your carelessness will be the death of you, Clind-san! Let’s do this, Beako!”

Beatrice: “Of course! Betty will let him have it, I suppose!”

Subaru and Beatrice, who had gotten up and laughed at their bad impressions of each other, jumped at Clind, who was relaxed and ready to give them a shot.

Clind: “—Ill-prepared.”

However, the ingenious attack was easily seen through, and the two bodies flew through the air again.

Subaru: “Ahh! We’re both down again…”

Subaru & Beatrice: “Unyaaah—?!”

Blinking her eyes at the sight of Subaru and Beatrice being blown away while screaming, Emilia, waving her hands up and down, was both happy and sad.

It had been about ten minutes since this practice started, but Emilia already lost count of the number of times Subaru and Beatrice had tasted the ground with both hands. From the looks of it, Clind was doing a good job of rolling them around, but Emilia was on the edge of her seat, watching to make sure they didn’t get hurt.

???: “Emily, the change will not come so quickly. It is all about daily accumulation… etiquette, and study, is it not?”

Emilia: “Anne…”

It was a young girl with a prim face who advised Emilia to do so in response to her reaction.

When she heard the words from a girl roughly ten years younger than herself, Emilia choked up a little and then slumped her shoulders.

Emilia couldn’t argue with that. She knew she was right.

Emilia: “But I do get worried… I think it can’t be helped when you try so hard.”

Anne: “That is Emily’s virtue. But it is a groundless fear. Do you not think so, too, Frederica?”

Frederica: “—Yes, you are right, Annerose-sama.”

The one who responded to the girl’s question was Frederica —an elegant maid with long golden hair, beautiful emerald-green eyes, and strikingly good looks.

Accompanying Emilia to serve the tea party, she prepared the tea and turned her gaze to the garden beyond the balcony. That was where the practicing Subaru and Beatrice had been dominating the conversation for a while now.

However, Emilia tilted her head at the attitude of the girl and Frederica, who seemed to understand each other.

Emilia: “Does that mean I’m worrying too much?”

Frederica: “Yes. But I think that can not be helped. Emilia-sama has only had dealings with Clind for a few days after the misunderstanding.”

Emilia: “It was a misunderstanding at that time… I made a reaaally embarrassing mistake…”

The topic of discussion was Emilia’s memories of unforgettable failures and experiences.

When Emilia was once again embarrassed by the people who were sharing it with her, the young girl replied with a pout, “What do you mean?”.

Annerose: “That incident was my family’s fault. For me, it was the beginning of my meeting you, Emily, and having this relationship. It was the very important first act of our story.”

Emilia: “Anne…”

Annerose: “I can still remember it. You gave me that beautiful snowy scene as a gift to say goodbye to me…”

The young girl closed her eyes and talked as if enraptured by her speech. In contrast to Annerose, Emilia, however, lowered her eyebrows apologetically.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, Anne. It was Puck who did it, but now he’s gone to sleep for a long time, so I can’t show you the same thing.”

Annerose: “I did not mean to pressure you!”

Emilia: “Is that right?”

Emilia’s eyes widened when it was pointed out that the apology she had felt was misplaced.

While looking at it, the young girl —Annerose Miload sighed, “Indeed…”, and gave Emilia a resolute look that was inappropriate for her appearance.

If you did not compare their appearances, it was difficult to tell which one was older than the other.

Of course, there was a difference in the way Annerose, who had survived the swirling aristocracy at the age of nine, and Emilia, who had spent her life leisurely in a forest with little change, had been polished.

In any case—

Frederica: “I am sure the Master thinks it is a good opportunity for you to learn about these things as well.”

Frederica exhaled as she looked at the two girls, sensing her Master’s intentions.

Frederica’s master, a man of many wiles, liked to use roundabout and distorted expressions and instructions. She guessed this was just another one of his mischievous tricks.

Even so, for better or worse, Frederica had such a strong trust in him that she knew he was making plans that would lead to proper results.

Subaru and Beatrice: “Unyaaah—?!”

Emilia: “Ahh! They got hit again…!”

With a flashy sound, Subaru and Beatrice shot up into the air again, and Emilia panicked as she watched.

Frederica wondered how many times she would see this scene during their training and vaguely thought about the blue sky.

2

—This was about a month after the incident at the Sanctuary was resolved.

???: "…Le-veil up?"

???: "Yeah! I think that's what we need!"

And to Emilia's wondering face, Subaru held out his hands and explained forcefully.

The location was the top floor of the building, which could have been called the new Roswaal Mansion, replacing the burned-down Roswaal Mansion. In its office, Subaru strongly emphasized the needs of the future.

Subaru: "It's been fierce battle after fierce battle…! I know it's depressing for me to say it myself, but you can feel the trouble coming and the level of enemies steadily rising."

???: "Of course, I had devised some creative adjustments to make that haaappen~."

Subaru: "You're making me feel worse than I already am! You should be sorry!"

The one who shrugged his shoulders when he was yelled at like that was Roswaal, whose remorse was hidden behind his makeup.

In fact, on the day that Subaru was summoned to this other world, Roswaal, who seemed to have been planning for the hardship that befell Emilia in the Royal Capital, admitted his mistake and apologized, but even now, Subaru could not be too careful.

If anything, Subaru even felt that the maliciousness of his antics seemed to be increasing every day.

However—

Emilia: “Roswaal, don’t tease Subaru like that. If you do, we won’t know if we can trust you, right?”

???: “Betty agrees, I suppose. It is, however, painful to see you being scolded head-on by the half-devil… Emilia like this, in fact. It serves him right, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “Grr.”

The two people who could silence Roswaal were on a roll. They were Emilia, who preached remorse with pure sincerity, and Beatrice, who put on the face of an absolute ally by Subaru’s side.

Roswaal seemed vulnerable to Emilia, who had grown up because of the Sanctuary and begun walking the path of the ultimate beautiful girl, and Beatrice, who had become active after leaving the Forbidden Library. Even now, Roswaal was able to say something back to Subaru in a relaxed manner, but he only clammed up at the two girls’ words.

Anyway—

Subaru: “Roswaal’s shenanigans aside, I’m serious about my proposal. It’s imperative that we level up to counter future threats!”

???: “Does that mean you want to hone your skills and master your craft?”

Subaru: “Yes, that! That’s what I’m talking about, Frederica!”

Subaru clapped his hands and chuckled to himself as he finally got through to someone. It was Frederica, the last person in the group gathered in the office.

Originally, Frederica was waiting where Emilia and Roswaal were talking. This was when Subaru intervened by pulling Beatrice’s hand.

Subaru felt bad for interrupting Emilia and Roswaal, but this was also an important topic for the camp— Subaru, who had been officially appointed as Emilia's knight, had raised the level of his ability.

Emilia: "But Subaru works hard every day on special training. And look, you and Garfiel always get along well…"

Subaru: "It's super lovely to see the world smiling in Emilia-tan's eyes, but the reality of that training scene is not that harmonious."

Emilia's expression was warm and soft, but the reality was very different.

She was right. Since moving to the new mansion, Subaru had sought to improve his skills and was trying to learn from Garfiel —a new fighter in the camp.

The new face in the camp had a hand-to-hand fighting style, so it was a long-awaited presence for the Emilia Camp, which had many magic users. Subaru, who was neither good at magic nor martial arts, thought they seemed to be the perfect person to ask for lessons.

Subaru: "But when we started training together, the material was so different that I couldn't handle it… he overestimates me like crazy."

Beatrice: "Betty didn't see it firsthand, but she heard that Subaru defeated him with that ground dragon, in fact. That was a big deal, I suppose."

Subaru: "We did, but it took four of us to beat him."

To be precise, it was correct to say that in addition to the continuous battle between Garfiel, Otto, and Ram, Subaru had been cut down, and Patrasche had put the finishing touches on the fight. Simply connecting this to Subaru's victory was a bad way of putting it, even before Garfiel turned out to be fourteen years old.

Subaru: "If we went head-to-head, I couldn't do anything about it. He should know that, but he's not very good at holding back…"

Roswaal: “Maybe he’s still upset about losing in the Sanctuary and wants to use this training as an excuse to kill youuu~.”

Subaru: “If that smile had any truth behind it, I’d lose faith in humanity!”

Subaru snapped at Roswaal when he said that about the straightforward Garfiel.

Subaru could not continue the conversation if he was teased every time. While Roswaal gave Beatrice a glare, Subaru looked over at Frederica.

Subaru: “That’s why I want to take care of the situation. For example, have Frederica tell Garfiel to go easy on… Frederica?”

Frederica: “…”

Subaru: “What’s wrong, Frederica? I’m not sure what it is, but your face is red all the way up to your ears.”

Frederica’s face was red as she remained silent in front of Subaru, who asked for her help. When Subaru and Emilia were worried about her face, which had turned red up to her ears, Frederica was the one who was worried. She shook her head, letting a weak “No, no…” escape.

Frederica: “You see, Garf’s poor technique is… possibly my fault.”

Subaru: “Oh, why? As a boy, did you beat his soul down from childhood to the point where he has to stand up to anyone he comes across with his full strength?”

Frederica: “Not really, but… When we were young, there were no other children in the Sanctuary other than Garf and I.”

Subaru: “Because no one else was there?”

When Subaru asked her about it, Frederica put her hand shyly over her mouth and said,

Frederica: “I am afraid that I have been… I have been playing you.”

Emilia: “Frederica’s playmate? What’s wrong with that?”

Frederica: “No, I mean…”

Unable to understand Frederica’s sense of embarrassment, Emilia innocently asked back. Subaru also roughly grasped the situation from Frederica’s rough appearance.

Although Frederica and Garfiel were siblings, there was an age difference of six or seven years between them. Whatever the case may be today, the impact of the age difference in childhood was significant.

Subaru: “It’s the difference between first and seventh graders…”

Moreover, considering the number of years Frederica had been away from the Sanctuary, she would have been younger than a first grader when she played with Garfiel.

The influence of the original experience is immeasurable. Otherwise, there would be no proverb like “A tiger can’t change his stripes.”.

Subaru: “In other words, Garfiel is in such a state because of his unrestrained sister’s influence.”

Frederica: “Th-he way you said that! The way you say that, it was malicious! Even if it is true that I am an influence, I will insist it was!”

However, even if the jury acknowledged the validity of Frederica’s claim, it would not change the troubling reality of the situation.

In any case, the balance of power was too great for Garfiel to compete with Subaru’s training. Garfiel could heal some injuries with his magic, but there was a limit.

Subaru: “I’m not going to let Otto teach me how to fight off thugs. But my pride won’t allow me to let Otto teach me how to fight off thugs the Suwen way…!”

Emilia: “Oh, you’re being so selfish. Otto-kun seems to be a good teacher.”

Subaru: “I know, but! But even if they taught me, the chance of me being able to use it would be too limited, and I wouldn’t be able to handle it!”

In addition, the Suwen style of fighting off thugs passed down in Otto’s family had already proven to be ineffective against Garfiel.

So, it was far from the technique Subaru is looking for. What Subaru needed was a way to counter the threats that would continue to stand in his way —ideally, a Reinhard-like power that could defeat any enemy.

Subaru: “I know that’s a tall order, so I’d at least like to have a little trick to buy some time to stall them until Garfiel can come running.”

Beatrice: “That’s another greed-free story, in fact.”

Roswaal: “I think it’s an appropriate idea, though, that you’re in your eleeement~.”

Beatrice and Roswaal made their own comments after hearing what Subaru wanted there. Meanwhile, during the same conversation, Emilia pondered with a, “Hmm…”,

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, what do you object to?”

Emilia: “No, it’s not like that. It’s just that if Subaru is in danger, I’ll protect him, and I want him to be able to rely on me, too.”

Subaru: “In case you were wondering, the way the situation was set up earlier, I was under the impression that I was fighting with Emilia-tan behind me, protecting her…”

In the first place, the idea for this case came from Subaru’s official appointment as Emilia’s knight. If a decision relied on Emilia’s power, it would all be for nothing.

Subaru: “Anyway! I’m a man who wants to be strong enough to protect Emilia-tan! And now that I’ve made a contract with Beako, I want new techniques or even a second form!”

Beatrice: “Subaru can’t help making so much noise, I suppose. If you really want the second form, you can carry Betty on your shoulders, in fact.”

Subaru: “It’s not that kind of extended children’s game!”

While arguing back, Subaru picked up Beatrice by the shoulders and swung the little girl around with a joyful “Kyaa!”; at the sight of Subaru and Beatrice, Roswaal clapped his hands and said, “Okay”,

Roswaal: “I understand what you want, Subaru-kun. I don’t doubt your feeeelings~.”

Subaru: “Does that mean you have a guess who I am training with?”

Roswaal: “That’s right. Why don’t you ask Ram to do it for you?”

Subaru: “It’s not for nothing, but I wonder if sey’ll teach me right…”

Ram had a great deal of trust in Subaru’s abilities, but he didn’t think Ram’s personality was well suited for a leadership role. In terms of the way she treated Subaru, it was like a picture book lesson.

Besides, this was selfish of Subaru, but—

Subaru: “I don’t want Ram to have to deal with me for a while. I want her to stay with Rem.”

Emilia: “Subaru…”

After returning from the Sanctuary, the sisters Ram and Rem were finally able to see each other, but Ram still had not regained the memory of her other precious half.

So, their relationship was still in the process of being rebuilt, with Ram coming to terms with it.

Roswaal: “I see, I see, that’s auspicious. But if that’s the case, I’m in a bit of a tight spooot~. I wonder if anyone else in our camp could teach Subaru-kun a lesson…”

Emilia: “Ah, you want me to try it? I’m a little bit strong these days, so it might be dangerous, but I’ll do my best to go easy on you.”

Subaru: “So if I’m bludgeoned to death or seriously injured by Emilia-tan’s slender arms, it’s going to look way too bad on the outside…”

Emilia made a suggestion on behalf of Roswaal, who was troubled by the idea. However, Subaru could be bludgeoned to death by her slender arms, and this was also a matter of Subaru’s pride.

As someone who wanted to become stronger for Emilia, he struggled with the dichotomy if he begged Emilia to teach him—

Frederica: “—Master, you have already made up your mind, correct? Please do not be mean and make trouble for Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama.”

So said Frederica, her gaze sharpened, as she glared at Roswaal’s side.

“Huh?” Subaru said, and Emilia and Subaru’s eyes widened. Roswaal closed one eye and narrowed his blue eye mischievously as he muttered, “Did they figure it out?”.

Subaru: “They figured it out? Oi oi, come on, you’ve got to be kidding me. This is serious.”

Beatrice: “Subaru, there’s no point in saying it, I suppose. This man has always been able to keep himself youthful by messing with others in this way, in fact. He is such a creature, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Well, is that so? Then, the usual shenanigans…”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan believes!”

Beatrice’s point of view and Emilia’s point of view were their own honest, believable opinions. Both of them were very cute, so Subaru was determined to watch over them without scolding them.

Anyway, Roswaal interrupted with a single cough from that point of view,

Roswaal: “As for Subaru-kun’s request earlier, as Frederica said, I have an idea. I know a place like a vocational training center that can come in handy in times like this.”

Subaru: “Yo-You have such a convenient place? Maybe like a temple for job changes?”

Frederica: “—? I do not know much about this “temple for job changes,” but Subaru-sama was at this place until a few days ago.”

Subaru: “A place I had been until recently…”

It had been said that the one that reached a certain level was not a temple where jobs could be changed, but a place in recent memory, and Subaru immediately opened his mouth with an “Ah”.

It was the place where the people who escaped from the Sanctuary, Subaru, and the others who lost their mansion temporarily took refuge before moving their home base to the new Roswaal Mansion —

Emilia: “Anne’s house? Then maybe…”

Subaru: “That little girl is training with me…? You can’t simply accept that a little girl is a good training partner, no matter how much you want to… Ow, ouch, ouch.”

Emilia: “Of course not. It’s Clind-san, Clind-san.”

Subaru’s ears were tugged by Emilia, who gave him a look that meant stop.

Not so much chastisement as the expected scolding, Subaru nodded his head and said, “Ahh.”,

Subaru: “Clind-san, huh? No, I talked to him a little bit while he was taking care of me at Annerose-chan’s place, but I don’t know him that well.”

Roswaal: “Clind was originally a servant of mine for a long tiiime~. Well, Frederica knows more about the details than I do. Isn’t that right?”

Frederica: “Huh? Eh, eh, yes, I guess. Reluctantly so.”

Frederica nodded her head, slightly upset, as she was forced to talk. While wondering about this reaction, Subaru remembered the appearance of a beautiful, thin-faced man.

Subaru: “But still, a vocational training center. A setting like… where the proper servant is the one who knows all things, is really cool, like a manga or video game.”

Emilia: “I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you’re saying. But… it’s true that Clind-san is a good teacher. He has been a great help to me.”

Subaru: “Really, Emilia was taken care of by him… when? Why?”

Emilia’s words assured him of Clind’s abilities, but Subaru wondered if there had been any contact between the two of them during their recent stay that would have produced such a guarantee.

Emilia shook her head and said, “No, it’s not that”,

Emilia: “In fact, before I came to the previous mansion, I was mistaken for a maid for a few days, and during that time, Clind-san and Frederica taught me to be a maid.”

Subaru: “…Emilia-tan was a maid? In a maid’s outfit?”

Emilia: “Yes, I was. I know it was short-lived, but I did my best.”

Emilia, proudly beaming, slowly chewed on her words; Subaru understood the situation and then fell to his knees in a heap.

Subaru: “Why, why wasn’t I there, ahhh—!!”

Emilia: “Eh? What’s wrong, Subaru?! You look like you’re about to cry…”

Subaru: “I’m disqualified as a knight for missing out on Emilia-tan’s maid outfit…”

Emilia: “What does that have to do with anything?!”

Emilia’s eyes turned into a blank stare as Subaru burst into tears and sobbed.

But it was not a joke. Subaru regretted that he had not been there. Emilia’s maid’s uniform must have been as beautiful as a goddess.

Subaru: “That’s right! You can still wear it…”

Emilia: “Well, no, that’s not true. A maid’s outfit is a maid’s work uniform, so I can’t wear it since I am not a maid.”

Subaru: “Guaaah—”

There was a curt reply, and once again, Subaru slumped.

Emilia is troubled by Subaru’s overreaction, but Beatrice and the others could only sigh. This was a Royal Selection Candidate, and her knight was at the center of the camp.

Roswaal: “It’s really worth your support. Don’t you think sooo~?”

Frederica: “Unlike the… Master, I would like to realize it in a different way.”

Frederica replied with a bitter smile to Roswaal’s chuckling gaze.

Aside from these two, Beatrice crouched down next to Subaru, who was slumped over.

Beatrice: “Look, don’t dwell on it forever, I suppose. If you want to see a maid’s outfit, I suppose. I-It can’t be helped; Betty can wear it for you, in fact.”

Subaru: “Ugh, Beako… I’m glad you feel that way, but that’s not the same thing as this.”

Beatrice: “How dare you, I suppose!”

Beatrice was outraged that her attempts to comfort him had been so disrespected.

Regardless, you could say that the direction of the story had came together.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun’s level up… was it? I’ll leave that to Clind. By the way, Emilia-sama, would you like to accompany him to the Miload family?”

Emilia: “Me too?”

Roswaal: “Yes. Subaru-kun has officially been named a knight. I think it is necessary for you to learn how to act as a nobleman as well.”

Emilia nodded, muttering the unfamiliar word “nobleman” as if ruminating on it.

Emilia: “All right. Do you want me to learn from Clind-san, too?”

Roswaal: “Of course, it would be possible to be educated by Clind, but it would be more in Emilia-sama’s nature to learn by seeing the real thing. It’s Annerose.”

Emilia: “Wow, from Anne?”

Roswaal: “I’m sure she’d love to meet you, Emilia-sama. A way to earn some poooints~… oops, for the sake of a good relationship between the two of you, surely.”

Roswaal suggested, with a deliberate rephrasing. Emilia’s eyes lit up at the thought, and she clasped her hands in front of her chest and smiled happily.

In the background, Subaru and Beatrice continued their little play, and the impression of a disorganized pair could not be shaken—

Roswaal: “I expect you can handle the reins theeere~.”

Frederica: “Me?”

Roswaal: “You are to accompany them to the Miload residence. You’re the right person for the job, aren’t you?”

Frederica’s master closed one eye and looked at her with his blue eye again. She sighed at Roswaal’s mischievous attitude, and then Frederica looked at Subaru and the three of them again.

The burden was a little too heavy for her, and she bowed, not letting her inner thoughts show.

3

—And that was how Subaru and the others came to the Miload mansion.

As it was, Garfiel was disqualified from being Subaru’s training partner and was somewhat depressed. Otto, who was forced to help Roswaal with his extremely busy paperwork, was not along for the journey to the Miload mansion.

Subaru: “I’ve heard that you’ve had a lot of training too. The next time we meet, we’ll both have leveled up so much that we won’t recognize each other. —Two years from now, in the Royal Capital of Lugunica!”

Otto: “Are you planning to train until right before the Royal Selection?”

Subaru added that there was that exchange of words before they left.

Anyway—

Subaru: “That’s why I need you to give me… no, me and Beako, some practice.”

Beatrice: “What? Betty, too, I suppose?”

Subaru: “That’s because Beako and I are one and the same. We’ll be together in sickness and health, in the rain or shine, in the wind, and in death!”

Beatrice: “That is not even funny, in fact!”

As soon as they arrived, without a moment to breathe a sigh of relief, Subaru asked Clind to practice.

Frederica, who accompanied him, was impressed by his forward attitude. At the very least, there was no lie in Subaru’s intention to become stronger.

Frederica: “I do not know what the word “le-veil up” means, but…”

Emilia: “Oh, Frederica? Hehe, don’t worry. Ram says it’s called “Subaru-speak”.”

Frederica: “Subaru-sama-speak…”

While smiling at the boastful Emilia for some reason, Frederica also admired her protegee Ram’s sense of style, thinking that Subaru-speak was a straightforward and clear expression.

Speaking of protegees, Frederica was worried that Petra, whom she left at the mansion, being annoyed with Ram.

Petra, a quick learner and a good judge of character, was on the verge of graduating from her apprenticeship as a maid after just a month or so, but this was the first time she had ever left Frederica’s care in earnest.

Frederica: “If I may say so, I agree with Subaru-sama regarding Ram’s leadership ability.”

Emilia: “—? Frederica, are you worried about Petra-chan by any chance?”

Frederica: “Yes, I am sorry. I can not help but feel uneasy, but I am not sure I am comfortable leaving her alone with Ram to take care of the mansion.”

Frederica frowned and expressed her concern. But at Frederica's words, Emilia put her finger to her lips and said,

Emilia: "I don't think you have to worry so much… Ram is mean like that because she chooses her partners like Subaru, Otto-kun, and Garfiel."

Frederica: "…That just makes it sound like the girl hates men."

But in reality, there was no such thing as Ram hating men.

Frederica and Ram had known each other for a long time, but surprisingly, Ram's attitude had not changed at all since before she turned ten. She saw them as equals, regardless of gender.

The trouble with Ram was that she kept them slightly below herself.

Frederica: "In that respect, Petra has the personality to get along with anyone… Indeed, I may have worried too much."

Emilia: "Yeah, I'm sure you're right. I've been worrying about Subaru and the others for a long time, but I wasn't sure I could convince you."

Emilia sticks out her tongue slightly, reflecting on what she said. However, Frederica had secretly bought into Emilia's high self-esteem.

There was no conceit in Emilia.

There seemed to be a lack of confidence in the past, though after returning from the Sanctuary, humility or even modesty had become a virtue.

On top of that, she was eager to grow. This would be a strong weapon for her in the future as she took on the high bar of the Royal Selection.

However, other candidates for the Royal Selection also possessed that weapon. In some cases, their natural environment allowed them to continue developing it.

It’s just that they were finally on the same stage—

???: “—That is why Uncle sent Emily to my mansion, correct?”

Frederica: “Annerose-sama…”

So said Annerose, having read Frederica’s mind and tilted her cup.

Still very young, less than ten years old, the head of the Miload family had an intelligence and judgment disproportionate to her pretty appearance. This was because her upbringing did not allow her to be a mere little girl.

To be honest, Frederica once took pity on her for that. However, now that Frederica saw her sitting around a tea party with Emilia, she thought it was a sense of profaneness.

Or maybe—

Frederica: “Did the Master know that Annerose-sama would end up like this…?”

Roswaal L. Mathers, a man of all plots and schemes.

He was a schemer who used the domain and people he was obligated to protect, and the Sanctuary and its inhabitants that he had been protecting for generations, as pawns in his plot, and he admitted his defeat to Subaru and Emilia and apologized for his past actions.

But Frederica didn’t believe that Roswaal had been so resigned that he was willing to give up everything he’d built up over the years.

Anyone who truly wanted to achieve something was unlikely to give up.

Frederica believed that insatiable persistence and a willingness to work hard to make one’s desires come true were the most important qualities needed to make it happen.

In this respect, was there really anything that could compare to Roswaal?

If Roswaal is willing to make every effort to achieve his goal, he might even incorporate the existence of the girl, Annerose, into his plan.

She was the daughter of a family member and a friend of Frederica, who has been her guardian since she was born. She thought she would be able to handle such an existence.

Subaru & Beatrice: “Unyaaah?!”

Frederica: “—Hk.”

Perhaps because she was so lost in thought, Frederica’s shoulders jumped at the renewed scream.

If you looked at it, in the garden of the Miload mansion, Subaru and Beatrice had been defeated by Clind for the twentieth time in total.

Frederica liked to say that they were doing a great job, but she did not think they were going to get much credit from Clind if they just kept plugging away in the dark. But that did not mean he would not politely explain everything. —Clind was that kind of man.

Emilia: “Oh, again! They’re both lucky they didn’t get hurt, though.”

Annerose: “Emily, it is not that. It is not because they are lucky that Subaru and Beatrice are not injured. It is because of Clind.”

Emilia: “Huh…”

Emilia, who was worried about the upturned pair, widened her eyes at Annerose’s explanation.

It must have been hard to believe. However, Clind, the all-powerful butler, was capable of doing just that.

To not let the challenger get injured, and allowing them to challenge him as many times as they could without breaking down.

He had decided that this was the role he was expected to play, and so he did that.

Frederica: “This is the kind of training partner Subaru-sama needs that Garf can not make up for.”

Emilia: “Clind-san, is such a remarkable person…”

Emilia exhaled in admiration, and Frederica narrowed her eyes at her surprise.

In terms of trust, Ram was the one that Roswaal relied on the most. Having said that, this perception recently changed, and there had been times when Roswaal faltered in the face of Ram’s aggression, but Ram’s presence was still unshakable in terms of “trust”.

However, when it came to being a right-hand man in terms of ability, that would definitely be Clind.

He had been with Roswaal for a long time and was an all-round family butler who was heavily used in all situations. In the past, Frederica had heard that he and Roswaal were not a master and servant but in a contractual relationship.

Frederica had a memory of a time when she used to ask him about every little thing to gain his attention as he worked tirelessly for Roswaal.

Frederica: “Shame… My memory of shame…”

Emilia: “What’s wrong, Frederica? Your face looks reaaally red…”

Annerose: “You can leave her alone, Emily. It happens sometimes. Frederica has a very difficult personality.”

Putting her hand on her burning cheek, Frederica confronted her shame.

While Frederica was distracted, Annerose turned to Emilia and said, “Now then”,

Annerose: “I have a letter from Uncle to teach Emily how to behave as a nobleman. So, for a few days, you will accompany me to the nobility’s meetings and soirées. How does that sound?”

Emilia: “Umm, I’m fine with that. But are you okay, Anne? I’m…”

Annerose: “—The Miload family is a branch of the Mathers family. Of course, there is no difference in policy between Uncle and me. I am also supporting Emily in the Royal Selection.”

After saying that, Annerose continued with the word “However”,

Annerose: “I would have supported Emily even without Uncle’s support…”

Emilia: “Thank you… Anne, But make sure you listen to what the other candidates have to say. It’s reaaally important, so don’t just take sides just because I’m your friend.”

Annerose: “Is this not usually the part where an emotional Emily hugs me?”

Frederica thought she should say something nice, but Annerose would be upset if she was told so directly.

She was completely knocked off the ladder. Emilia would not have such bad intentions. It was a sign of her good nature to make others think it over properly, even if it did not benefit her.

Emilia: “Hehe, sorry. But if Anne says so, I’ll take the opportunity to study properly.”

Annerose: “Hm… yes, that is better. I will tell you, I do not want you to be the fluffy, fluffy Emily you have always been in social situations. You need to look sharp.”

Emilia: “Sharp… I’ll do my best! Sharp!”

Emilia’s cheeks stiffened just a little bit, as if she was putting more effort into her facial muscles. Perhaps it was her own form of sharpness. It looked like she had a long way to go.

However, Annerose put her hand on her cheek at Emilia’s healthy appearance and said, “Emily is so hardworking and cute…”,

And with that, the policies of Emilia and Annerose were established

—

Annerose: “—It is about time there was some movement over there.”

Annerose, who had tightened her blurry expression and regained her sense of leadership, muttered. When Emilia twisted her head, she said, “Huh?”.

Subaru: “Hey, Beako! You’ve got to do better than that! We’re always getting beat up!”

Beatrice: “It’s you, Subaru, who should trust Betty’s judgment, in fact! Subaru is an amateur at fighting, so Betty’s judgment is more accurate, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Don’t be ridiculous! Don’t act like you’re a veteran after being cooped up for four hundred years!”

Beatrice: “How, how, how dare you say that, in fact…! It is unbelievable, I suppose!”

In the middle of the garden, Subaru and Beatrice, who had fallen to the ground on their butts, started arguing.

They seemed to be having a heated discussion and clashed with each other. As it was, the two of them gradually heated up and began to blame each other for their failure.

If that happened, there was only one place they would end up.

Beatrice: “Break up! Break up, in fact! Betty made a big mistake, I suppose!”

Subaru: “You…! Okay, okay! I don’t even want to understand if that’s what you’re thinking! Beako’s an idiot! You’re so stubborn! I won’t forgive you until you apologize!”

Beatrice: “That’s Betty’s line, in fact! Subaru, for your own sake, don’t think you’ll be comforted when you cry, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Right back at you!”

As their argument exploded, Subaru and Beatrice let go of each other's hands.

They turned away and started going in different directions. Leaving Clind behind In the middle of the garden to deal with the two of them.

Emilia: "Awful… The two of them got into a fight…"

Frederica: "It was bound to happen sooner or later with that partnership. It was a cute fight, though."

Emilia: "What are you saying? There's nothing cute or scary about a fight. They have to hurry up and make up…"

Frederica: "—Emilia-sama."

Emilia was flustered by the breakdown between Subaru and Beatrice, with an expression Frederica never expected. Holding Emilia by the shoulders as she tried to stand up, Frederica shook her head.

Frederica understood Emilia's feelings, but this was not her place. This was a trial that Subaru and Beatrice would need to overcome.

Emilia: "Frederica, why?"

Frederica: "Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama have only just entered into a contractual relationship… they are still getting to know each other. Emilia-sama must not intervene in what happens in such a situation. I am sure you will be able to understand that they need to figure it out."

Emilia: "But, is that not enough?"

Annerose: "—What if they have a disagreement when Emily is not around?"

Emilia looked back at Annerose, her amethyst eyes flickering. Catching her gaze directly, Annerose gestured toward Subaru and Beatrice, who had walked off.

Annerose: “The two of them are destined to spend the rest of their lives together, yes? No matter how close two people are to each other, there are always going to be differences of opinion. But Emily can not be the one to mediate every conflict, can you?”

Emilia: “…So, I shouldn’t help them make up?”

Annerose: “At least this time, I think. Emily’s presence seems too much for Subaru. So—”

And then, Annerose cut her words short and turned her narrowed eyes to Frederica. Emilia, who followed her gaze and frowned with a, “Huh?”.

However, Frederica knew her role and quietly bowed by the waist.

Frederica: “Sorry to be so presumptuous, but I am going to take your place, Emilia-sama. Just a little help, I will gather their opinions.”

Emilia: “Yes, if Frederica says so…Then we’re in good hands.”

Frederica: “…”

Emilia: “About Subaru and Beatrice, please. They’re both reaaally great and they both love each other, but they just can’t be honest.”

Frederica was more surprised than disappointed when she was so easily entrusted. Emilia, however, did not notice Frederica’s surprise and patted her chest in relief.

Emilia seriously believed that Frederica would be fine.

Annerose: “We must live up to Emily’s expectations, correct?”

Frederica: “…You look a lot like the Master when you look like that.”

Annerose smiled wickedly at Frederica, sensing her hesitation. As a servant, Frederica was being very disrespectful to Annerose, as she had spoken to her in return.

It was on point, and Annerose made a heartfelt, sour face of disgust with a “Hm”.

Emilia: “Hehe, that’s weird. Anne and Roswaal don’t look alike at all.”

Annerose: “Em-Emily! Right, right! Yes, of course!”

Emilia: “Hmm, yes… A little bit similar in the eyes, maybe?”

Annerose: “If you are going to comfort me, please make sure you comfort me thoroughly!”

In response to Emilia’s words, which were not meant to be offensive, Annerose’s voice cracked to complain.

Watching the smiling girls interact, Frederica pinched the hem of her skirt and curtseyed.

Frederica: “Then I will fulfill my role.”

4

???: “—Frederica. Restraint.”

Frederica left Emilia and Annerose’s tea party and was about to fulfill her duties when she was stopped by a man who crept up on her without a sound.

A calm, cool, unemotional tone of voice.

Frederica closed her eyes and responded, “What is it?” without looking back.

Frederica: “Now I have to go and talk to the two of them who have gotten upset because of your unrestrained behavior.”

Clind: “I see, that would be helpful. Splendid. However, since when did the maids of the Mathers family change their customs; is it not rude not to look at the face of the person they are talking to? Inquiry.”

Frederica: “—Hk, please do not be so obstinate.”

Frederica was criticized for not turning around, so she turned around and bared her fangs. When she turned around, she saw the face of a man wearing a monocle right in front of her nose, and she recoiled.

Frederica: “Your, your distance is wrong!”

Clind: “My apologies. Unexpected. I forgot how much you had grown. Forgetfulness.”

Frederica: “Did you mean to be so sarcastic?”

Frederica’s gaze turned grim, as if she were being picked a fight with. However, when Frederica pursued Clind, he shook his head and said, “No.”.

Clind: “I am sure I do not need to tell you, watching from the sidelines, but the argument between Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama was a spur-of-the-moment affair. Instantaneous.”

Frederica: “…I understand. To be honest, I was surprised to see how well they get along.”

Clind’s advice was a fact that Frederica had seen every day at the Roswaal Mansion.

It was hard to get used to seeing Beatrice, as someone rarely seen outside the Forbidden Library was now bonded to Subaru, no matter how many times she saw it.

Such a relationship was precious. That’s why Frederica’s responsibility was so heavy.

Clind: “The Master expects you to fulfill that role. Cherished desire.”

Frederica: “Yes, that is why you are accompanying me. It is standard procedure for training new employees.”

Frederica shrugged her shoulders and wondered who was in a worse position, him or her.

—A big fight between Subaru and Beatrice, the emergence of such problems was to be expected.

Originally, the Miload house was used to train new employees so that the demi-human talents that Roswaal would gather could be promoted as servants and taught manners and proper work habits.

Naturally, Clind would educate them, but the next highest-ranking servant after Clind, who was the head of the household, would have an equally important role to play. That was Frederica's role while he was with the Miload family, and she was probably the person Clind worked with the longest.

Clind had an unrelenting outpouring of strict educational policies for new employees. Frederica comforted them, appeased them, and made them face the tasks again with renewed spirit —That was a standard procedure for their interactions.

The fight between Subaru and Beatrice was part of that—

Frederica: "I know what I have to do. …What exactly are you trying to say?"

Frederica questioned Clind, confirming her role without needing to be told again.

He went out of his way to point out the details of her work and ridiculed Frederica's poor performance. —As expected, Clind was not a person who would be so duplicitous.

He was loyal to his work and fulfilled his duties. So, Frederica couldn't blame him.

Clind: "—. I am the one who told the Master to send you over this time. Confession."

Frederica: "…Huh?"

That was why the unexpected comment was a bolt out of the blue for Frederica.

Frederica's eyes widened, and she stared at Clind as he said this. Clind, with his usual expressionless face, narrowed his eyes behind his monocle.

Clind: "The other day, when the Master stayed at our residence, you left immediately to prepare the new mansion. Thanks to that, we were not able to talk properly. Consideration."

Frederica: "You went out of your way to talk to me…?"

With her surprise still intact, Frederica pondered over Clind's true intentions. However, she couldn't think of anything.

When Frederica's mind was troubled by this, Clind took a breath and said.

Clind: "Frederica, I am glad you were able to liberate the Sanctuary. Congratulations."

Frederica: "—Ah."

Clind: "I know why you left your home and took my teachings under the Master's protection. That is why I wanted to tell you properly. Conclusion."

As he said this, Clind lowered the corner of his eyebrows just a little, only slightly. This was a change that only those who were used to seeing his face and had closely observed the changes in his expression could notice.

It was a change so small that it was only noticed by those who had once followed Clind's back, calling him "Nii-sama, Nii-sama.".

Frederica: "—Hk, such an unpleasant man!"

As if to disguise the feelings that arose within her for a moment, Frederica raised her voice.

The softness that had been there disappeared from Clind's expression when he heard this. He sighed deliberately with a "Hmph.", Clind: “Why can you not even accept my congratulations? Your stubbornness disgusts me and makes my head ache. It makes me want to curse my lack of power to correct the situation. Incompleteness.”

Frederica: “Yeah, yeah! I know you do! I am sure you must have a lot of headaches seeing me as I am. Hmph! This serves you right!”

Clind: “Ha.”

As soon as Frederica snorted and regretted turning her face away like a child, Clind snickered at her.

Her face became hot, but she could not look back with a red face now. With the momentum of turning her face away, Frederica tried to return to her original goal.

In other words, Frederica had to persuade Subaru and Beatrice, which was her original role.

Frederica: “I-I think we are done here! I will be joining the two of them… ah.”

However, just as she was about to step away with a long stride, uncharacteristic for an elegant maid, Frederica noticed a hint of a gaze being directed at her and looked up to find,

Subaru: “Ah, ha, ha, hello…”

Beatrice: “It’s awkward to be found, in fact…”

In the corridor connecting the garden and the mansion, Frederica and Clind were being watched from a distance as they argued, and Subaru and Beatrice were leaning against each other with awkward looks on their faces.

Before Frederica knew it, the two of them, who were supposed to have been in a heated fight earlier, were now holding hands.

Frederica: “Su-Subaru-sama, and Beatrice-sama, your hands…”

Subaru: “Hands? Yeah, we made up, you know. I was just a little pissed off, and I said too much earlier… Beako.”

Beatrice: “Well, Subaru apologized to me, so he is forgiven, I suppose. Betty was just starting to think that he wasn’t listening well, in fact.”

The two of them replied, lifting their joined hands in front of the trembling Frederica.

Unlike the previous training sessions for new recruits, the two of them made up easily, and Frederica could only be stunned with an “Is, is that so.”.

Of course, it was a good thing that they had reconciled. The original goal was to improve the relationship without Emilia’s intervention, so that was no problem.

The problem was that—

Subaru: “Hey, Frederica… are you and Clind-san on bad terms?”

Beatrice: “Betty and Subaru can talk to him, I suppose. You should compromise, in fact.”

Frederica: “—Hk.”

Sure enough, the subject of their earlier argument was brought up, and Frederica choked up.

There were many things Frederica wanted to say. In the first place, she didn’t want to be told this by the two people who had been fighting just before or take it out on the people who had made this situation happen.

Clind: “Subaru-sama, Beatrice-sama, I am glad to see that you two have reunited your hands. Fortuitous.”

Frederica was at a loss for words as she struggled with her many emotions. Clind, who stepped forward to take her place, praised the two for naturally overcoming their challenges.

When he said that, Subaru and Beatrice both said, “Re-Really?”

looking at each other with no ill-will.

Clind: “If the two of you could learn to compromise, things would have been different. Then, you will be able to see the next steps ahead. An amazing rate of growth. Shook.”

Subaru: “Hey, you hear that, Beako? Clind-san is shaking at how much we’ve grown.”

Beatrice: “Hmm, of course, I suppose. With Betty and Subaru, any challenge will fall apart in a flash, in fact. The fear is yet to come, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Aww, that’s some big mouth!”

The fact that they accepted the obvious flattery without questioning it was proof that they, like Emilia, were good at heart.

Despite the unexpected commonality between master and servant, Frederica’s humiliation at being maliciously berated has not been resolved in the slightest.

Anyway—

Clind: “Then let us consider the next step. Do you know my way of overcoming obstacles? Trial and error.”

Subaru: “Oh, that’s the thing. I think it would be better if I could use some tools, too, instead of relying on Beako all the time.”

Beatrice: “Y-You don’t think he can count on Betty alone, in fact…?”

Subaru: “That’s not true! I don’t want to slow you down. I want to help you…!”

Beatrice: “Subaru…”

Beatrice’s eyes sparkled with admiration at Subaru’s determination as he clenched his fists firmly.

It was good that they’re getting along, but was it Frederica’s imagination that Beatrice, who used to look so dignified and intelligent, seemed to have lost a lot of her wisdom?

Clind: “You want a tool, Not a sword or a bow, but a tool. Novel.”

Subaru: “You can’t expect me to be able to compete with Reinhard and Julius even if I trained hard with a sword now. If that’s the case, it’s better to learn one technique… that will surprise at first sight so that I can handle different situations…”

Clind: “Well, that is an interesting idea. Creative.”

Subaru: “Ha ha… Well, the surprise at first sight is an idea I got from a guy I don’t even like to remember.”

Beatrice: “Whatever the source, it is to Subaru’s credit that he found a way to use it, I suppose. Betty is also proud to be his pa-pa-par-par-part partner, in fact.”

Despite this ongoing drama, Subaru and Beatrice were able to assemble a plan for the future.

With his serious and thoughtful attitude, Clind would probably find the most optimal answer for Subaru and Beatrice. In fact, immediately after, Clind held up a finger, and,

Clind: “I have come up with a few candidates. Let us take them out of our storehouse.”

Subaru: “Oh, really? Well, since you’re here, we’ll go with you.”

Beatrice: “Betty will see if it is worthy of Subaru with my own eyes, I suppose.”

Subaru and Beatrice appeared to be very motivated, and Clind led them as they began to walk away.

The destination was the Miload family’s storehouse, where they had a set of tools to train their servants in martial arts. The idea was to find a weapon suitable for Subaru—

Clind: “Frederica, when you have finished throwing your tantrum, go back to Annerose-sama and Emilia-sama. Hospitality.”

Frederica let out a long breath, as she watched his back disappear. Frederica hated the way he had just said that. It was a quick way to divert the attention of Subaru and the others.

Frederica let out a long breath as she watched the detestable man easily divert Subaru and Beatrice’s interest and then disappear from her sight.

The plan was to accompany Subaru, Beatrice, and Emilia to their “lessons” at the Miload’s residence for ten days.

Frederica: “So, Clind and me… for ten days. Is it the Master’s plot, too?”

Did Roswaal think this humiliation and resentment were some plot that would lead to a better future? Frederica was not sure if Roswaal was hoping that she was aware of his intentions and was trying to figure out what was best for her.

If that’s the case—

Frederica: “—Very well. If that is what the Master wants, then I will try to break out of my shell and take on the challenge. Yes, Petra and Garf are also doing their best, but it would be shameful if I were to stand with them with no growth.”

With that decision made, Frederica made up her mind.

It would be a big mistake to follow them as if they had the mindset of a bridesmaid, a servant, or even a bystander.

In the Emilia Camp, which was lagging behind the other camps, those that couldn’t move forward couldn’t keep up the fight. What they needed was growth, or—

Frederica: “—A le-veil up, was it.”

When Frederica said the words out loud forcefully, they seemed to give her some kind of energy.

Energized by these words, Frederica began to walk away from the weak, infantile tossing and turning of her mind that she had been doing until just before and to obtain a self that was unfazed by anything.

The Royal Selection had just begun —The Emilia Camp, which was participating in it, had just begun.

As a result of this ten-day lesson, Subaru began to walk the path of an unusual knight with a little girl in one hand and a whip in the other, and Emilia, who participated in many soirées and meetings with Annerose, was recognized not as a “silver-haired half-devil” but as a soirée crasher.

While Frederica, enthusiastic and determined to do her duty, was doing her best, Roswaal sneezed back at the Roswaal Mansion.

Roswaal: “She’s always had a tendency to assume things, doooesn’t~ she?”

However, the pink-haired maid who heard this did not mention it, so it never reached Frederica’s ears.

END

Short Story Collection 11

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica (Translation Pending)

Elegant Lesson
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

???: “Woahahhh—!!”

???: “Kyawawawawawa, I suppose—?!”

There was a ferocious scream, and two figures were thrown into the air. A large figure and a small figure were holding hands, sharing each others’ fate. Some people would see this as a friendly relationship, but that was not the right description for this situation. Because, a lapse in judgment would lead to the same end for both of them.

??? & ???: ““Ahhhphew.””

They spilled that out, turned their eyes, and rolled on the ground, knocking them out with a “Phew.” The boy and the young girl, who had no energy to fight back— were completely taken care of as a set. A shadow suddenly appeared beside them without making a sound.

???: “—Unfortunately, there is no room for talk at all. Child’s play.”

Yes, it was the calm tone of voice that mercilessly commented on the two collapsed people. The owner of the voice tone was also a person with a neutral appearance who did not betray the impression of the tone of voice.

His dark blue hair was carefully styled, and his sharp, intelligent eyes were adorned with a monocle, an intellectual item. His tall, slender body was kept in a breathtakingly beautiful posture, embodying a kind of perfection.

This impression was accentuated by his cool, sweat-free profile. This was especially true when you viewed the out-of-breath, sweaty boy and girl —Subaru, and Beatrice, at his feet. The two of them sat up weakly on their knees and looked down at each other.

Subaru: “Huff, huff, I, I can’t talk back.”

Beatrice: “Betty, is the Great Spirit Beatrice, and you call it child’s play, in fact… You’ll be howling in no time, I suppose…”

???: “Even your arguments against me are not unified. You can not possibly achieve your goal with that. Disappointment.”

Shaking their heads loosely, Subaru and Beatrice sagged at the words of the man who was the incarnation of serenity.

Subaru could not even talk back. At least, not in this state of mind.

It was Subaru and Beatrice who asked for training. But honestly speaking, they thought they could do a little better. Their hubris was shattered, and they felt bad about it.

But—

???: “Are we done here? Resignation.”

Subaru: “—Hk. Wait, there’s more!”

Beatrice: “If you think this is where it ends, you’re wrong, in fact!”

At the question of resignation, Subaru and Beatrice shouted at the same time.

Unlike the previous exchange, the only thing they shared in common was a sense of defeat, and upon hearing this, the person with the monocle —Clind, nodded his head with a slight narrowing of his eyes.

Clind: “Splendid, So, again, please. Guidance.”

Subaru: “Your carelessness will be the death of you, Clind-san! Let’s do this, Beako!”

Beatrice: “Of course! Betty will let him have it, I suppose!”

Subaru and Beatrice, who had gotten up and laughed at their bad impressions of each other, jumped at Clind, who was relaxed and ready to give them a shot.

Clind: “—Ill-prepared.”

Subaru & Beatrice: ““Ahhhphew.””

However, the unimaginative attack was easily seen through, and the two bodies flew through the air again.

Subaru: “Ahh! We’re both down again…”

Subaru & Beatrice: “Unyaaah—?!”

Blinking her eyes at the sight of Subaru and Beatrice being blown away while screaming, Emilia, waving her hands up and down, was both happy and sad.

It had been about ten minutes since this practice started, but Emilia already lost count of the number of times Subaru and Beatrice had tasted the ground with both hands. From the looks of it, Clind was doing a good job of rolling them around, but Emilia was on the edge of her seat, watching to make sure they didn’t get hurt.

???: “Emily, the change will not come so quickly. It is all about daily accumulation… etiquette, and study, is it not?”

Emilia: “Anne…”

It was a young girl with a prim face who advised Emilia to do so in response to her reaction.

When she heard the words from a girl roughly ten years younger than herself, Emilia choked up a little and then slumped her shoulders.

Emilia couldn’t argue with that. She knew she was right.

Emilia: “But I do get worried… I think it can’t be helped when you try so hard.”

Anne: “That is Emily’s virtue. But it is a groundless fear. Do you not think so, too, Frederica?”

Frederica: “—Yes, you are right, Annerose-sama.”

The one who responded to the girl’s question was Frederica —an elegant maid with long golden hair, beautiful emerald-green eyes, and strikingly good looks.

Accompanying Emilia to serve the tea party, she prepared the tea and turned her gaze to the garden beyond the balcony. That was where the practicing Subaru and Beatrice had been dominating the conversation for a while now.

However, Emilia tilted her head at the attitude of the girl and Frederica, who seemed to understand each other.

Emilia: “Does that mean I’m worrying too much?”

Frederica: “Yes. But I think that can not be helped. Emilia-sama has only had dealings with Clind for a few days after the misunderstanding.”

Emilia: “It was a misunderstanding at that time… I made a reaaally embarrassing mistake…”

The topic of discussion was Emilia’s memories of unforgettable failures and experiences.

When she was still living with Puck in the Great Elior Forest, Roswaal arrived to tell her about the upcoming Royal Selection and that she was a candidate. After listening to him, Emilia decided to take part in the Royal Selection in order to free the people of the frozen forest and village.

Emilia left the forest with this resolve, but due to a slight misunderstanding, she ended up staying at the mansion of Roswaal’s relative Annerose for a while instead of Roswaal’s mansion.

And also—

Emilia: “I know I was being reaaally rude, even though I wasn’t a real maid, I dressed up like one and did a maid’s job.”

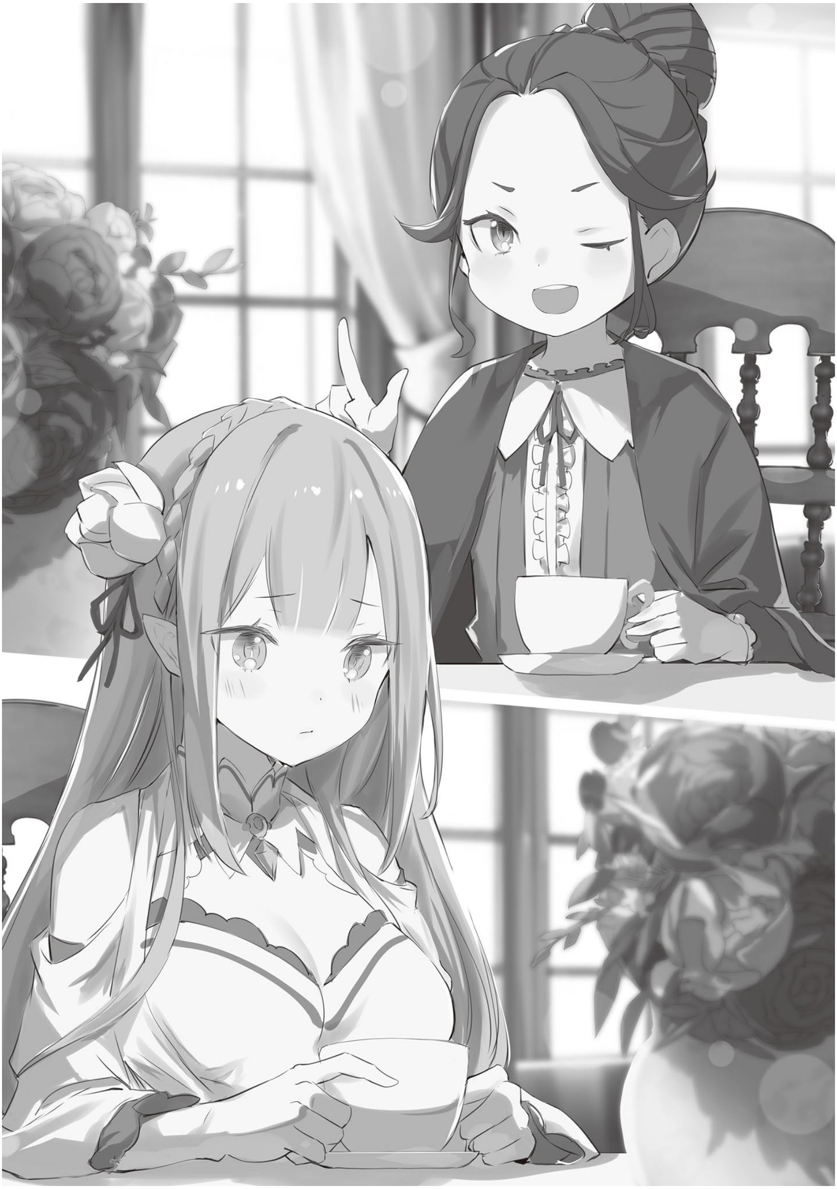

Frederica: “Not at all, Emilia-sama. I was not able to tell you at the time because of my position and responsibilities, but it suited you so well… that it would be wonderful to see again.”

Emilia: “Really? When you say that, I feel relieved. That’s right, the last time I talked to Subaru about it, he said he wanted to see me in a maid’s outfit…”

Annerose: “—Please refrain from showing that to Natsuki Subaru. He will take advantage of the situation.”

Frederica’s words, which would wipe away her past mistakes, were, however, interrupted by Annerose Miload, the girl who shared the memory of the incident.

Annerose smiled at the puzzled Emilia, asking, “Is that satisfactory?”.

Annerose: “It is true that you and Natsuki Subaru are Master and Knight… but that is exactly why you have to have very clear boundaries between you, Emily. You easily cause misunderstandings, so we do not want Natsuki Subaru to have any unnecessary expectations.”

Frederica: “Annerose-sama, since this is a relationship between Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama, it would be best if we did not interfere too much…”

Annerose: “Please refrain, Frederica. It is a lady’s consideration not to mislead men.”

Frederica’s eyebrows lowered in a troubled manner as Annerose gave her a sharp rebuke.

However, there was no doubt that Annerose was saying this because she was being considerate of Emilia. Everyone in the mansion also told her to think seriously about her master-servant relationship with Subaru.

For that reason, she recently had been trying to restrain herself from going around boasting “Hey, that’s my knight!” to everyone she met. In truth, she had really wanted to do so, but.

Emilia: “Besides, Anne is right. I think that I also need to reflect on the fact that I tend to mislead the people around me. I suppose that’s why I ended up becoming a maid.”

Annerose: “No, that incident was my family’s fault. For me, it was the beginning of my meeting you, Emily, and having this relationship. It was the very important first act of our story.”

Emilia: “Anne…”

Annerose: “I can still remember it. You gave me that beautiful snowy scene as a gift to say goodbye to me…”

The young girl closed her eyes and talked as if enraptured by her speech.

In contrast to Annerose, Emilia, however, lowered her eyebrows apologetically.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, Anne. It was Puck who did it, but now he’s gone to sleep for a reaaally long time, so I can’t show you the same thing.”

Annerose: “I did not mean to pressure you!”

Emilia: “Is that right?”

Emilia’s eyes widened when it was pointed out that the apology she had felt was misplaced.

Annerose, who put her hand to her forehead and said “Good grief, Emily…” but it seemed to Emilia like she was a very elegant lady, despite her young appearance.

If you did not compare their appearances, it was difficult to tell which one was older than the other.

Of course, there was a difference in the way Annerose, who had survived the swirling aristocracy at the age of nine, and Emilia, who had spent her life leisurely in a forest with little change, had been polished.

In any case—

Frederica: “I am sure the Master thinks it is a good opportunity for you to learn about these things as well.”

Frederica exhaled as she looked at the two girls, sensing her Master’s intentions.

Frederica’s master, a man of many wiles, liked to use roundabout and distorted expressions and instructions. She guessed this was just another one of his mischievous tricks.

Even so, for better or worse, Frederica had such a strong trust in him that she knew he was making plans that would lead to proper results.

Subaru & Beatrice: “Unyaaah—?!”

Emilia: “Ahh! They got hit again…!”

With a flashy sound, Subaru and Beatrice shot up into the air again, and Emilia panicked as she watched them writhe in pain.

Frederica wondered how many times she would see this scene during their “lessons away from home” and vaguely thought about the blue sky.

2

—This was about a month after the incident at the Sanctuary was resolved.

???: “—Le-veil up?”

???: “Yeah! I think that’s what we need!”

And to Emilia’s wondering face, Subaru held out his hands and explained forcefully.

The location was the office on the top floor of the new Roswaal Mansion, replacing the burned-down Roswaal Mansion. There, Subaru strongly emphasized the need for training program for the future.

Subaru: "It's been fierce battle after fierce battle…! I know it's depressing for me to say it myself, but you can feel the trouble coming and the level of enemies steadily rising."

???: "Of course, I had devised some creative adjustments to make that haaappen~."

Subaru: "You're making me feel worse than I already am! You should be sorry!"

The one who shrugged his shoulders when he was yelled at like that was Roswaal, whose remorse was hidden behind his makeup.

In fact, on the day that Subaru was summoned to this other world, Roswaal, who seemed to have been planning for the hardship that befell Emilia in the Royal Capital, admitted his mistake and apologized, but even now, Subaru could not be too careful.

If anything, Subaru even felt that the maliciousness of his antics seemed to be increasing every day.

However—

Emilia: "Roswaal, don't tease Subaru like that. If you do, we won't know if we can trust you, right?"

???: "Betty agrees, I suppose. It is, however, painful to see you being scolded head-on by the half-devil…ahem, Emilia like this, in fact. It serves him right, I suppose."

Roswaal: "Grr."

The two people who could silence Roswaal were on a roll. They were Emilia, who preached remorse with pure sincerity, and Beatrice, who put on the face of an absolute ally by Subaru's side.

Roswaal seemed vulnerable to Emilia, who had grown up because of the Sanctuary and begun walking the path of the ultimate beautiful girl, and Beatrice, who had become active after leaving the Forbidden Library. Even now, they seemed to be Roswaal's natural enemies. Roswaal was able to say something back to Subaru in a relaxed manner, but he only clammed up at the two girls' words.

Anyway—

Subaru: "Roswaal's shenanigans aside, I'm serious about my proposal. It's imperative that we level up to counter future threats!"

???: "Does that mean you want to hone your skills and master your craft?"

Subaru: "Yes, that! That's what I'm talking about, Frederica!"

When his point finally got across, Subaru motioned to Frederica, the last to gather in the office, for a high five. She raised her hand lightly and responded with a wry smile, and she was kind. The ultimate maid.

Subaru: "No, I want to give the title of Supreme maid to Rem, so, super excellent… that sounds a bit off! How about something like Finest Maid?"

Frederica: "You are too kind to give me such a kind assessment. I will humbly accept your kind offer."

Subaru was left hanging when Frederica, while putting her hand to her mouth and smiling, elegantly avoided him.

Despite the light-hearted banter that went on in the background, Subaru proposed it with serious and earnest intent. Of course, at the root of it all was the unchanging truth that boys want to be strong.

Subaru: "I've officially become Emilia-tan's knight, and I'm a Spiritual Arts User in a loving contract with Beako. It's about time I got a grip on my mind and body!"

Emilia: "But Subaru works hard every day on special training in the courtyard. And look, you and Garfiel always get along well, right?"

Subaru: “It’s super lovely to see the world is so kind in Emilia-tan’s eyes, but the reality of that training scene is not that harmonious.”

Emilia’s expression was warm and soft, but the reality was very different.

As she had said. Since moving to the new mansion, Subaru had hoped to solicit training from Garfiel —a new fighter in the camp, in order to level up his skills.

The new face in the camp was a fighter with a hand-to-hand fighting style, so it was a long-awaited presence for the Emilia Camp, which had many magic users. Subaru, who was neither good at magic nor martial arts, thought they seemed to be the perfect person to ask for lessons.

Subaru: “But when we started training together, the material was so different that I couldn’t handle it… and on top of that, he overestimates me like crazy.”

Beatrice: “Betty didn’t see it firsthand, but she heard that Subaru defeated him with that ground dragon, in fact. That was a big deal, I suppose.”

Subaru: “We did, but it took four of us to beat him…”

To be precise, it was correct to say that in addition to the continuous battle between Garfiel, Otto, and Ram, Subaru had been cut down, and Patrasche had put the finishing touches on the fight. Simply connecting this to Subaru’s victory was a bad way of putting it, even before Garfiel turned out to be fourteen years old.

Subaru: “If we went head-to-head, I couldn’t do anything about it. He should know that, but he’s not very good at holding back…”

Roswaal: “Maybe he’s still upset about losing in the Sanctuary and wants to use this training as an excuse to kill youuu~.”

Subaru: “If that smile had any truth behind it, I’d lose faith in humanity!”

Subaru could not continue the conversation if he were teased every time. While having Beatrice glare at Roswaal with a “garururu”, Subaru looked at Frederica, and,

Subaru: “That’s why I want to take care of the situation. For example, have Frederica tell Garfiel to go easy on… Frederica?”

Frederica: “…”

Subaru: “What’s wrong, Frederica? I’m not sure what it is, but your face is red all the way up to your ears.”

Frederica’s face was red as she remained silent in front of Subaru, who asked for her help.

When Subaru and Emilia were worried about her face, which had turned red up to her ears, Frederica was the one who was worried. She shook her head, letting a weak “No, no…” escape.

Frederica: “You see, Garf’s poor technique is… possibly my fault.”

Subaru: “Oh, why? As a boy, did you beat his soul down from childhood to the point where he has to stand up to anyone he comes across with his full strength?”

Frederica: “Not really, but… When we were young, there were no other children in the Sanctuary other than Garf and I.”

Subaru: “Because no one else was there?”

Frederica: “I am afraid that I have been… I have been playing around.”

Emilia: “I think it’s reaaally great that you’re good friends, so what’s the problem?”

Frederica: “No, I mean…”

Unable to understand Frederica’s sense of embarrassment, Emilia innocently asked back. Subaru also roughly grasped the situation from Frederica’s rough appearance.

Although Frederica and Garfiel were siblings, there was an age difference of six or seven years between them. Whatever the case may be today, the impact of the age difference in childhood was significant, even if they were a boy and girl.

Subaru: “It’s the difference between first and seventh graders…”

Moreover, considering the number of years Frederica had been away from the Sanctuary, she would have been younger than a first grader when she played with Garfiel.

The influence of the original experience is immeasurable. Otherwise, there would be no proverb like “A tiger can’t change his stripes.”.

Subaru: “In other words, Garfiel is in such a state because of his unrestrained sister’s influence.”

Frederica: “Th-he way you said that! The way you say that, it was malicious! Even if it is true that I am an influence, I will insist it was!”

However, even if the jury acknowledged the validity of Frederica’s claim, it would not change the troubling reality of the situation.

In any case, the balance of power was too great for Garfiel to compete with Subaru’s training. Garfiel could heal some injuries with his magic, but there was a limit.

Subaru: “I’m not going to let Otto teach me how to fight off thugs. But my pride won’t allow me to let Otto teach me how to fight off thugs the Suwen way…!”

Emilia: “Oh, you’re being so selfish. Otto-kun seems to be a good teacher.”

Subaru: “I know, but! But even if they taught me, the chance of me being able to use it would be too limited, and I wouldn’t be able to handle it!”

In addition, the Suwen style of fighting off thugs passed down in Otto’s family had already proven to be ineffective against Garfiel.

So, it was far from the technique Subaru is looking for. What Subaru needed was a way to counter the threats that would continue to stand in his way —ideally, a Reinhard-like power that could defeat any enemy.

Subaru: “I know that’s a tall order, so I’d at least like to have a little trick to buy some time to stall them until Garfiel can come running.”

Beatrice: “That’s another greed-free story, in fact.”

Roswaal: “I think it’s an appropriate idea, though, that you’re in your eleeement~.”

Beatrice and Roswaal made their own comments after hearing what Subaru wanted there. Meanwhile, during the same conversation, Emilia pondered with a, “Hmm…”,

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, what do you object to?”

Emilia: “No, it’s not like that. It’s just that if Subaru is in danger, I’ll protect him, and I want him to be able to rely on me, too.”

Subaru: “Well, basically, the way the situation was set up earlier, I was under the impression that I was fighting with Emilia-tan behind me, protecting her from a surprise enemy…”

In the first place, the idea for this case came from Subaru’s official appointment as Emilia’s knight. If a decision relied on Emilia’s power, it would all be for nothing.

Subaru: “Anyway! I’m a boy who wants to be strong enough to protect Emilia-tan! And now that I’ve made a contract with Beako, I want new techniques or even a second form!”

Beatrice: “Subaru can’t help making so much noise, I suppose. If you really want the second form, you can carry Betty on your shoulders, in fact.”

Subaru: “It’s not that kind of extended children’s game!”

While arguing back, Subaru picked up Beatrice by the shoulders and swung the little girl around with a joyful “Kyaa!”; at the sight of Subaru and Beatrice, Roswaal clapped his hands and said, “Okay”,

Roswaal: “I understand what you want, Subaru-kun. I don’t doubt your feeeelings∼.”

Subaru: “Does that mean you have a guess who I am training with?”

Roswaal: “That’s right. Why don’t you ask Ram to do it for you?”

Subaru: “It’s not for nothing, but I wonder if she’ll teach me right…”

Subaru had a great deal of trust in Ram, both in terms of ability and relationship, but at the same time, he did not feel that Ram was suited to the role of a mentor. There was even a fear that she would use her position to hurt Subaru under false pretenses.

If he was not careful, he could end up with nothing to show for it, except for aching muscles and a broken body, unlike Garfiel, where he could learn something while getting hurt.

Besides, this was just Subaru’s selfishness, but—

Subaru: “I don’t want Ram to have to deal with me for a while. I want her to stay with Rem.”

Emilia: “Subaru…”

After returning from the Sanctuary, the sisters Ram and Rem were finally able to see each other, but Ram still had not regained the memory of her other precious half.

So, their relationship was still in the process of being rebuilt, with Ram coming to terms with it.

Roswaal: “I see, I see, that’s auspicious. But if that’s the case, I’m in a bit of a tight spooot∼. I wonder if anyone else in our camp could teach Subaru-kun a lesson…”

Emilia: “Ah, you want me to try it? I’m a little bit strong these days, so it might be dangerous, but I'll do my best to go easy on you."

Subaru: "So if I'm bludgeoned to death or seriously injured by Emilia-tan's slender arms, it's going to look way too bad on the outside…"

Emilia made a suggestion on behalf of Roswaal, who was troubled by the idea. However, Subaru could be bludgeoned to death by her slender arms, and this was also a matter of Subaru's pride.

As someone who wanted to become stronger for Emilia, it felt strange to be the one asking for lessons from her.

Just as Subaru was worrying about the contradiction—

Subaru: ""Someday, become strong enough to defeat me!"— I'm definitely not against that style of heroine with a fighting student-teacher relationship, but I always want to look cool in front of Emilia-tan!"

Emilia: "Even without doing that, I always think Subaru looks cool…"

Subaru: "Gyaaaahhh! The love is killing me!"

And just when Subaru was torn between two opposing forces by Emilia, who had no ill intentions or ulterior motives.

Frederica: "—Master, you have already made up your mind, correct? Please do not be mean and make trouble for Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama."

So said Frederica, her gaze sharpened, as she glared at Roswaal's side.

"Huh?" Subaru said, and Emilia and Subaru's eyes widened. Roswaal closed one eye and narrowed his blue eye mischievously as he muttered, "Did they figure it out?".

Subaru: "They figured it out? Oi oi, come on, you've got to be kidding me. This is serious."

Beatrice: “Subaru, there’s no point in saying it, I suppose. This man has always been able to keep himself youthful by messing with others in this way, in fact. He is such a creature, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Well, is that so? Then, the usual shenanigans…”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan believes!”

Beatrice’s point of view and Emilia’s point of view were their own honest, believable opinions. Both of them were very cute, so Subaru was determined to watch over them without scolding them.

Anyway, Roswaal interrupted with a single cough from that point of view,

Roswaal: “As for Subaru-kun’s request earlier, as Frederica said, I have an idea. I know a place like a vocational training center that can come in handy in times like this.”

Subaru: “Yo-You have such a convenient place? Maybe like a temple for job changes?”

Frederica: “—? I do not know much about this “temple for job changes,” but Subaru-sama was at this place until a few days ago.”

Subaru: “A place I had been until recently…”

It had been said that the one that reached a certain level was not a temple where jobs could be changed, but a place in recent memory, and Subaru immediately opened his mouth with an “Ah”.

It was the place where the people who escaped from the Sanctuary, Subaru, and the others who lost their mansion temporarily took refuge before moving their home base to the new Roswaal Mansion —

Emilia: “Anne’s house? Then his training partner is…”

Subaru: “That little girl is training with me…? You can’t simply accept that a little girl is a good training partner, no matter how much you want to… Ow, ouch, ouch.”

Emilia: “Of course not. It’s Clind-san, Clind-san.”

Subaru’s ears were tugged by Emilia, who gave him a look that meant stop.

Not so much chastisement as the expected scolding, Subaru nodded his head and said, “Ahh.”,

Subaru: “Clind-san, huh? No, I talked to him a little bit while he was taking care of me at Annerose-chan’s place, but I don’t know him that well.”

Roswaal: “Clind was originally a servant who has been with me for a long tiiime~. Well, Frederica knows more about the details than I do. Isn’t that right?”

Frederica: “Huh? Eh, eh, yes, I guess. Reluctantly so.”

Frederica nodded her head, slightly upset, as she was forced to talk. While wondering about this reaction, Subaru remembered the appearance of a beautiful, thin-faced man.

Subaru: “But still, a vocational training center. A setting like… where the proper servant is the one who knows all things, is really cool, like a manga or video game.”

Emilia: “I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you’re saying. But… it’s true that Clind-san is a good teacher. He has been a great help to me.”

Subaru: “Really, Emilia was taken care of by him… when? Why?”

Emilia’s words assured him of Clind’s abilities, but Subaru wondered if there had been any contact between the two of them during their recent stay that would have produced such a guarantee.

Emilia shook her head and said, “No, it’s not that”,

Emilia: “In fact, before I came to the previous mansion, I was mistaken for a maid for a few days, and during that time, Clind-san and Frederica taught me to be a maid.”

Subaru: “…Emilia-tan was a maid? In a maid’s outfit?”

Emilia: “Yes, I was. I know it was short-lived, but I did my best.”

Emilia, proudly beaming, slowly chewed on her words; Subaru understood the situation and then fell to his knees in a heap.

Subaru: “Why, why wasn’t I there, ahhh—!!”

Emilia: “Eh? What’s wrong, Subaru?! You look like you’re about to cry…”

Subaru: “I’m disqualified as a knight for missing out on Emilia-tan’s maid outfit…”

Emilia: “What does that have to do with anything?!”

Emilia’s eyes turned into a blank stare as Subaru burst into tears and sobbed.

But it was not a joke. Subaru regretted that he had not been there. Emilia’s maid’s uniform must have been as beautiful as a goddess.

Subaru: “That’s right! You can still wear it…”

Emilia: “Well, no, that’s not true. A maid’s outfit is a maid’s work uniform, so I can’t wear it since I am not a maid.”

Subaru: “Guaaah—”

There was a curt reply, and once again, Subaru slumped.

Emilia is troubled by Subaru’s overreaction, but Beatrice and the others could only sigh. This was a Royal Selection Candidate, and her knight was at the center of the camp.

Roswaal: “It’s really worth your support. Don’t you think sooo~?”

Frederica: “Unlike the… Master, I would like to realize it in a different way.”

Frederica replied with a bitter smile to Roswaal’s chuckling gaze.

Aside from these two, Beatrice crouched down next to Subaru, who was slumped over.

Beatrice: “Look, don’t dwell on it forever, I suppose. If you want to see a maid’s outfit, I suppose. I-It can’t be helped; Betty can wear it for you, in fact.”

Subaru: “Ugh, Beako… I’m glad you feel that way, but that’s not the same thing as this.”

Beatrice: “How dare you, I suppose!”

Beatrice was outraged that her attempts to comfort him had been so disrespected.

Regardless, you could say that the direction of the story had came together.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun’s level up… was it? I’ll leave that to Clind. By the way, Emilia-sama, would you like to accompany him to the Miload family?”

Emilia: “Me too?”

Roswaal: “Yes. Subaru-kun has officially been named a knight. I think it is necessary for you to learn how to act as a nobleman as well.”

Emilia nodded, muttering the unfamiliar word “nobleman” as if ruminating on it.

Emilia: “All right. Do you want me to learn from Clind-san, too?”

Roswaal: “Of course, it would be possible to be educated by Clind, but it would be more in Emilia-sama’s nature to learn by seeing the real thing. It’s Annerose.”

Emilia: “Wow, from Anne?”

Roswaal: “I’m sure she’d love to meet you, Emilia-sama. A way to earn some poooints~… oops, for the sake of a good relationship between the two of you, surely.”

Roswaal suggested, with a deliberate rephrasing. Emilia's eyes lit up at the thought, and she clasped her hands in front of her chest and smiled happily.

In the background, Subaru and Beatrice continued their skirmish, and the impression of a disorganized pair could not be shaken—

Roswaal: "I expect you can handle the reins theeere~."

Frederica: "Me?"

Roswaal: "You are to accompany them to the Miload residence. You're the right person for the job, aren't you?"

Frederica's master closed one eye and looked at her with his blue eye again. She sighed at Roswaal's mischievous attitude, and then Frederica looked at Subaru and the three of them again.

The burden was a little too heavy for her, and she bowed, not letting her inner thoughts show.

3

—And that was how Subaru and the others came to the Miload mansion.

As it was, Garfiel was disqualified from being Subaru's training partner and was somewhat depressed. Otto, who was forced to help Roswaal with his extremely busy paperwork, was not along for the journey to the Miload mansion.

Subaru: "I've heard that you've had a lot of training too. The next time we meet, we'll both have leveled up so much that we won't recognize each other. —Two years from now, in the Royal Capital of Lugunica!"

Otto: "Are you planning to train until right before the Royal Selection is over?"

Subaru added that there was that exchange of words before they left.

Anyway—

Subaru: “That’s why I need you to give me… no, me and Beako, some practice.”

Beatrice: “What? Betty, too, I suppose?”

Subaru: “That’s because Beako and I are one and the same. We’ll be together in sickness and health, in the rain or shine, in the wind, and in death!”

Beatrice: “That is not even funny, in fact!”

As soon as they arrived, without a moment to breathe a sigh of relief, Subaru earnestly requested Clind to train him.

Frederica, who accompanied him, was impressed by his forward attitude. At the very least, there was no lie in Subaru’s intention to become stronger.

Frederica: “I do not know what the word “le-veil up” means, but…”

Emilia: “Oh, Frederica? Hehe, don’t worry. Ram says it’s called “Subaru-speak”.”

Frederica: “Subaru-sama-speak…”

While smiling at the boastful Emilia for some reason, Frederica also admired her protegee Ram’s sense of style, thinking that Subaru-speak was a straightforward and clear expression.

Speaking of protegees, Frederica was worried that Petra, whom she left at the mansion, being annoyed with Ram.

Petra, a quick learner and a good judge of character, was on the verge of graduating from her apprenticeship as a maid after just a month or so, but this was the first time she had ever left Frederica’s care in earnest.

Frederica: “If I may say so, I agree with Subaru-sama regarding Ram’s leadership ability.”

Emilia: "—? Frederica, are you worried about Petra-chan by any chance?"

Frederica: "Yes, I am sorry. I can not help but feel uneasy, but I am not sure I am comfortable leaving her alone with Ram to take care of the mansion."

Frederica frowned and expressed her concern. But at Frederica's words, Emilia put her finger to her lips and said,

Emilia: "I don't think you have to worry so much… Ram is mean like that because she chooses her partners like Subaru, Otto-kun, and Garfiel."

Frederica: "…That just makes it sound like the girl hates men."

But in reality, there was no such thing as Ram hating men.

Frederica and Ram had known each other for a long time, but surprisingly, Ram's attitude had not changed at all since before she turned ten. She saw them as equals, regardless of gender.

The trouble with Ram was that she kept them slightly below herself.

Frederica: "In that respect, Petra has the personality to get along with anyone… Indeed, I may have worried too much."

Emilia: "Yeah, I'm sure you're right. I've been worrying about Subaru and the others for a long time, but I wasn't sure I could convince you."

Emilia sticks out her tongue slightly, reflecting on what she said. However, Frederica had secretly bought into Emilia's high self-esteem.

—There was no conceit in Emilia, something that everyone else seemed to have.

There seemed to be a lack of confidence in the past, though after returning from the Sanctuary, humility or even modesty had become a virtue.

On top of that, she was eager to grow. This would be a strong weapon for her in the future as she took on the high bar of the Royal Selection.

However, other candidates for the Royal Selection also possessed that weapon. In some cases, their natural environment allowed them to continue developing it.

It’s just that they were finally on the same stage—

???: “—That is why Uncle sent Emily to my mansion, correct?”

Frederica: “Yes, that is correct, Annerose-sama.”

So said Annerose, having read Frederica’s mind and tilted her cup.

Still very young, less than ten years old, the head of the Miload family had an intelligence and judgment disproportionate to her pretty appearance. This was because her upbringing did not allow her to be a mere little girl.

To be honest, Frederica once took pity on her for that. However, now that Frederica saw her sitting around a tea party with Emilia, she thought it was a sense of profaneness.

Or maybe—

Frederica: “—Did the Master know that Annerose-sama would end up like this?”

Roswaal L. Mathers, was a man of all plots and schemes.

He was a schemer who used the domain and people he was obligated to protect, and the Sanctuary and its inhabitants that he had been protecting for generations, as pawns in his plot, and he admitted his defeat to Subaru and Emilia and apologized for his past actions and made a promise not to ever repeat them.

But Frederica didn’t believe that Roswaal had been so resigned that he was willing to give up everything he’d built up over the years.

Anyone who truly wanted to achieve something was unlikely to give up.

Frederica believed that insatiable persistence and a willingness to work hard to make one’s desires come true were the most important qualities needed to make it happen.

In this respect, was there really anything that could compare to Roswaal?

If Roswaal was willing to make every effort to achieve his goal, he might even incorporate the existence of the girl, Annerose, into his plan.

She was the daughter of a family member and a friend of Frederica, who had been her guardian since she was born. She thought she would be able to handle such an existence.

Subaru & Beatrice: “Unyaaah?!”

Frederica: “—Hk.”

Perhaps because she was so lost in thought, Frederica’s shoulders jumped at the renewed scream.

If you looked at it, in the garden of the Miload mansion, Subaru and Beatrice had been defeated by Clind for the twentieth time in total.

Frederica liked to say that they were doing a great job, but she did not think they were going to get much credit from Clind if they just kept plugging away in the dark. But that did not mean he would not politely explain everything. —Clind was that kind of man.

Emilia: “Oh, again! They’re both lucky they didn’t get hurt, though.”

Annerose: “Emily, it is not that. It is not because they are lucky that Subaru and Beatrice are not injured. It is because of Clind.”

Emilia: “Huh, Clind-san?”

Emilia, who was worried about the upturned pair, widened her eyes at Annerose’s explanation.

It must have been hard to believe. However, Clind, the versatilel butler, was capable of doing just that.

To not let the challenger get injured, and allowing them to challenge him as many times as they could without breaking down.

He had decided that this was the role he was expected to play, and so he did that.

Frederica: “He is the kind of training partner Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama need that Garf can not make up for.”

Emilia: “Clind-san, is such a remarkable person…”

Emilia exhaled in admiration, and Frederica narrowed her eyes at her surprise.

In terms of trust, Ram was the one that Roswaal relied on the most. Having said that, this perception recently changed, and there had been times when Roswaal faltered in the face of Ram’s aggression, but Ram’s presence was still unshakable in terms of “trust”.

However, when it came to being a right-hand man in terms of ability, that would definitely be Clind.

He had been with Roswaal for a long time and was an versatile family butler who was heavily used in all situations. In the past, Frederica had heard that he and Roswaal were not a master and servant but in a contractual relationship.

Frederica had a memory of a time from her childhood when she used to ask him about every little thing to gain his attention as he worked tirelessly for Roswaal.

Frederica: “Shame… My memory of shame…”

Emilia: “What’s wrong, Frederica? Your face looks reaaally red.”

Annerose: “You can leave her alone, Emily. It happens sometimes. Frederica has a very difficult personality.”

Putting her hand on her burning cheek, Frederica confronted her shame.

While Frederica was distracted, Annerose turned to Emilia and said, “Now then”,

Annerose: “I have a letter from Uncle to teach Emily how to behave as a nobleman. So, for a few days, you will accompany me to the nobility’s meetings and soirées. How does that sound?”

Emilia: “Umm, I’m fine with that. But are you okay, Anne? I’m…”

Annerose: “—The Miload family is a branch of the Mathers family. Of course, there is no difference in policy between Uncle and me. I am also supporting Emily in the Royal Selection.”

After saying that, Annerose continued with the word “However”,

Annerose: “I would have supported Emily even without Uncle’s support…”

Emilia: “Thank you… Anne, But make sure you listen to what the other candidates have to say. It’s reaaally important, so don’t just take sides just because I’m your friend.”

Annerose: “Is this not usually the part where an emotional Emily hugs me?”

Frederica thought she should say something nice, but Annerose would be upset if she was told so directly.

She was completely knocked off the ladder. Emilia would not have such bad intentions. It was a sign of her good nature to make others think it over properly, even if it did not benefit her.

Emilia: “Hehe, sorry. But if Anne says so, I’ll take the opportunity to study properly.”

Annerose: “Hm… yes, that is better. I will tell you, I do not want you to be the fluffy, fluffy Emily you have always been in social situations. You need to look sharp.”

Emilia: “Sharp… I’ll do my best! Sharp!”

Emilia’s cheeks stiffened just a little bit, as if she was putting more effort into her facial muscles. Perhaps it was her own form of sharpness. It looked like she had a long way to go.

However, Annerose put her hand on her cheek at Emilia’s healthy appearance and said, “Emily is so hardworking and cute…”,

And with that, the policies of Emilia and Annerose were established —

Annerose: “—It is about time there was some movement over there.”

Annerose, who had tightened her blurry expression and regained her sense of leadership, muttered. When Emilia twisted her head, she said, “Huh?”.

Subaru: “Hey, Beako! You’ve got to do better than that! We’re always getting beat up!”

Beatrice: “It’s you, Subaru, who should trust Betty’s judgment, in fact! Subaru is an amateur at fighting, so Betty’s judgment is more accurate, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Don’t be ridiculous! Don’t act like you’re a veteran after being cooped up for four hundred years!”

Beatrice: “How, how, how dare you say that, in fact…! Subaru, quit messing around, I suppose!”

In the middle of the garden, Subaru and Beatrice, who had fallen to the ground on their butts, started arguing.

They seemed to be having a heated discussion and clashed with each other. As it was, the two of them gradually heated up and began to blame each other for their failure.

If that happened, there was only one place they would end up.

Beatrice: “Break up! Break up, in fact! Betty made a big mistake, I suppose!”

Subaru: “You…! Okay, okay! I don’t even want to understand if that’s what you’re thinking! Beako’s an idiot! You’re so stubborn! I won’t forgive you until you apologize!”

Beatrice: “That’s Betty’s line, in fact! Subaru, for your own sake, don’t think you’ll be comforted when you cry, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Right back at you!”

As their argument exploded, Subaru and Beatrice let go of each other’s hands.

They turned away and started going in different directions. Leaving Clind behind In the middle of the garden to deal with the two of them.

Emilia: “Awful… The two of them got into a fight…”

Frederica: “It was bound to happen sooner or later with that partnership. It was a cute fight, though.”

Emilia: “What are you saying? There’s nothing cute or scary about a fight. They have to hurry up and make up…”

Frederica: “—Emilia-sama.”

Emilia was flustered by the breakdown between Subaru and Beatrice, with an expression Frederica never expected. Gently holding Emilia by the shoulders as she tried to stand up, Frederica shook her head.

Frederica understood Emilia’s feelings, but this was not her place. This was a trial that Subaru and Beatrice would need to overcome.

Emilia: “Frederica, why?”

Frederica: “Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama have only just entered into a contractual relationship… they are still getting to know each other. Emilia-sama must not intervene in what happens in such a situation. I am sure you will be able to understand that they need to figure it out.”

Emilia: “But, is that not enough?”

Annerose: “—What if they have a disagreement when Emily is not around?”

Emilia looked back at Annerose, her amethyst eyes flickering. Catching her gaze directly, Annerose gestured toward Subaru and Beatrice, who had walked off.

Annerose: “The two of them are destined to spend the rest of their lives together, yes? No matter how close two people are to each other, there are always going to be differences of opinion. But Emily can not be the one to mediate every conflict, can you?”

Emilia: “…So, I shouldn’t help them make up?”

Annerose: “At least this time, I think. Emily’s presence seems too much for Natsuki Subaru. So—”

And then, Annerose cut her words short and turned her narrowed eyes to Frederica. Emilia, who followed her gaze and frowned with a, “Huh?”.

However, Frederica knew her role and quietly bowed by the waist.

Frederica: “Sorry to be so presumptuous, but I am going to take your place, Emilia-sama. Just a little help, I will gather their opinions.”

Emilia: “Yes, if Frederica says so…Then we’re in good hands.”

Frederica: “…”

Emilia: “About Subaru and Beatrice, please. They’re both reaaally great and they both love each other, but they are just not on the same page.”

Frederica was more surprised than disappointed when she was so easily entrusted. Emilia, however, did not notice Frederica’s surprise and patted her chest in relief.

Emilia seriously believed that Frederica would be fine.

Annerose: “We must live up to Emily’s expectations, correct?”

Frederica: “…You look a lot like the Master when you look like that.”

Annerose smiled wickedly at Frederica, sensing her hesitation. As a servant, Frederica was being very disrespectful to Annerose, as she had spoken to her in return.

It was on point, and Annerose made a heartfelt, sour face of disgust with a “Hm”.

Emilia: “Hehe, that’s weird. Anne and Roswaal don’t look alike at all.”

Annerose: “Em-Emily! Right, right! Yes, of course!”

Emilia: “Hmm, yes… A little bit similar in the eyes, maybe?”

Annerose: “If you are going to comfort me, please make sure you comfort me thoroughly!”

In response to Emilia’s words, which were not meant to be offensive, Annerose’s voice cracked to complain.

Watching the smiling girls interact, Frederica pinched the hem of her skirt and curtseyed.

Frederica: “Then I will fulfill my role.”

4

???: “—Frederica. Restraint.”

Frederica left Emilia and Annerose’s tea party and was about to fulfill her duties when she was stopped by a man who crept up on her without a sound.

A calm, cool, unemotional tone of voice.

Frederica closed her eyes and responded, “What is it?” without looking back.

Frederica: “Now I have to go and talk to the two of them who have gotten upset because of your unrestrained behavior.”

Clind: “I see, that would be helpful. Splendid. However, since when did the maids of the Mathers family change their customs; is it not rude not to look at the face of the person they are talking to? Inquiry.”

Frederica: “—Hk, please do not be so obstinate.”

Frederica was criticized for not turning around, so she turned around and bared her fangs. When she turned around, she saw the face of a man wearing a monocle right in front of her nose, and she recoiled.

Frederica: “Your, your distance is wrong!”

Clind: “My apologies. Unexpected. I forgot how much you had grown. Forgetfulness.”

Frederica: “…Did you mean to be so sarcastic?”

Frederica glared at the man, while she placed a hand on her chest, wondering if he was trying to pick a fight with her.

To her annoyance, such a glare did not affect the composed Clind’s expression. In fact, since the time Frederica first met him, she could hardly remember a time when she had been able to break through his mask of composure.

When she was still a little girl, it seemed that Clind would sometimes smile at her. However, this was due to Clind’s bad habit of admiring little children, and nothing more, nothing less.

In fact, since Frederica has matured into a woman, her relationship with Clind continued to deteriorate. The reason why her heart skipped a beat earlier was due to shock and aversion. Probably.

In response to Frederica’s harsh question, Clind shook his head and quietly said, “No.”.

Clind: “I am sure I do not need to tell you, watching from the sidelines, but the argument between Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama was a spur-of-the-moment affair. Instantaneous.”

Frederica: “…I understand. To be honest, I was surprised to see how well they get along.”

Clind’s advice was a fact that Frederica had seen every day at the Roswaal Mansion.

Frederica also worked with Ram at the mansion before she was transferred around the time of the Royal Selection. Having rarely seen Beatrice outside of the Forbidden Library, she only ever exchanged the most perfunctory of conversations with her, and kept her distance out of reverence.

Now that she had left the Forbidden Library, she was playing with Subaru like a little child, showing up at every meal, and chatting casually with Frederica. —It was like a miracle.

The relationship that had brought about this miracle must not come to an end.

Clind: “Accordingly, the Master expects you to fulfill the role of a buffer. Request”

Frederica: “Yes, that is why you are accompanying me. It is always the standard procedure for training new employees.”

Frederica shrugged her shoulders and wondered who was in a worse position, him or her.

—A big fight between Subaru and Beatrice, the emergence of such problems was to be expected.

Originally, the Miload household served as a training ground for displaced demi-humans, whom Roswaal would bring in and employ as servants, giving them work and teaching them the proper etiquette.

Naturally, Clind would educate them, but the next highest-ranking servant after Clind, who was the head of the household, would have an equally important role to play. That was Frederica’s role while he was with the Miload family, and she was probably the person Clind worked with the longest.

Clind had an unrelenting outpouring of strict educational policies for new employees. Frederica comforted them, appeased them, and made them face the tasks again with renewed spirit —That was a standard procedure for their interactions.

The fight between Subaru and Beatrice was part of that—

Frederica: "I know what I have to do. …What exactly are you trying to say?"

Frederica questioned Clind, confirming her role without needing to be told again.

He went out of his way to point out the details of her work and ridiculed Frederica's poor performance. —As expected, Clind was not a person who would be so duplicitous.

He was loyal to his work and fulfilled his duties. So, Frederica couldn't blame him.

Clind: "—. I am the one who told the Master to send you over this time. Confession."

Frederica: "…Huh?"

That was why the unexpected comment was a bolt out of the blue for Frederica.

Frederica's eyes widened, and she stared at Clind as he said this. Clind, with his usual expressionless face, narrowed his eyes behind his monocle.

Clind: "The other day, when the Master stayed at our residence, you left immediately to prepare the new mansion. Thanks to that, we were not able to talk properly. Consideration."

Frederica: "You went out of your way to talk to me…?"

With her surprise still intact, Frederica pondered over Clind's true intentions. However, she couldn’t think of anything.

When Frederica’s mind was troubled by this, Clind took a breath and said.

Was—

Clind: “Frederica, I am glad you were able to liberate the Sanctuary. Congratulations.”

Frederica: “—Ah.”

Clind: “I know why you left your home and took my teachings under the Master’s protection. That is why I wanted to tell you properly. Conclusion.”

It was a smile so subtle that only those who were used to seeing his unchanging expression over the years and had closely studied any changes in his expression would notice it.

Frederica: “…”

It was an expression that she had not seen for several years and thought she would never see again.

It was a smile so small that it could only be noticed by those who had once followed Clind’s back, calling him “Nii-sama, Nii-sama.”.

That smile, with her palm on her chest, she once again felt her heart pound—.

Frederica: “—Hk, such an unpleasant man!”

As if to disguise the feelings that arose within her for a moment, Frederica raised her voice.

The softness that had been there disappeared from Clind's expression when he heard this. He sighed deliberately with a "Hmph.",

Clind: "Why can you not even accept my congratulations? Your stubbornness disgusts me and makes my head ache. It makes me want to curse my lack of power to correct the situation. Incompetence."

Frederica: "Yeah, yeah! I know you do! I am sure you must have a lot of headaches seeing me as I am. Hmph! This serves you right!"

Clind: "Ha."

As soon as Frederica snorted and regretted turning her face away like a child, Clind snickered at her.

Her face became hot, but she could not look back with a red face now. With the momentum of turning her face away, Frederica tried to return to her original goal.

In other words, Frederica had to persuade Subaru and Beatrice, which was her original role.

Frederica: "I-I think we are done here! I will be joining the two of them… ah."

However, just as she was about to step away with a long stride, uncharacteristic for an elegant maid, Frederica noticed a hint of a gaze being directed at her and looked up to find,

Subaru: "Ah, ha, ha, hello…"

Beatrice: "That's why Betty said we should try not to get found, in fact…!"

In the corridor connecting the garden and the mansion, Frederica and Clind were being watched from a distance as they argued, and Subaru and Beatrice were leaning against each other with awkward looks on their faces.

Before Frederica knew it, the two of them, who were supposed to have been in a heated fight earlier, were now holding hands.

Frederica: “Su-Subaru-sama, and Beatrice-sama, your hands…”

Subaru: “Hands? Yeah, we made up, you know. I was just a little pissed off, and I said too much earlier… Beako.”

Beatrice: “Well, Subaru apologized to me, so he is forgiven, I suppose. Betty was just starting to think that he wasn’t listening well, in fact.”

The two of them replied, lifting their joined hands in front of the trembling Frederica.

Unlike the previous training sessions for new recruits, the two of them made up easily, and Frederica could only be stunned with an “Is, is that so.”.

Of course, it was a good thing that they had reconciled. The original goal was to improve the relationship without Emilia’s intervention, so that was no problem.

If there was a problem, it was that—

Subaru: “Hey, Frederica… are you and Clind-san on bad terms?”

Beatrice: “Betty and Subaru can talk to him, I suppose. You should compromise, in fact.”

Frederica: “—Hk.”

Sure enough, the subject of their earlier argument was brought up, and Frederica choked up.

There were many things Frederica wanted to say. In the first place, she didn’t want to be told this by the two people who had been fighting just before or take it out on the people who had made this situation happen.

Clind: “Subaru-sama, Beatrice-sama, I am glad to see that you two have reunited your hands. Fortuitous.”

Frederica was at a loss for words as she struggled with her many emotions. Clind, who stepped forward to take her place, praised the two for naturally overcoming their challenges.

When he said that, Subaru and Beatrice both said, “Re-Really?” looking at each other with no ill-will.

Clind: “If the two of you could learn to compromise, things would have been different. Then, you will be able to see the next steps ahead. An amazing rate of growth. Shook.”

Subaru: “Hey, you hear that, Beako? Clind-san is shaking at how much we’ve grown.”

Beatrice: “Hmm, of course, I suppose. With Betty and Subaru, any challenge will fall apart in a flash, in fact. The fear is yet to come, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Aww, that’s some big mouth for someone so tiny!”

The fact that they accepted the obvious flattery without questioning it was proof that they, like Emilia, were good at heart. Despite the unexpected commonality between master and servant, Frederica’s humiliation at being maliciously berated has not been resolved in the slightest.

Anyway—

Clind: “Then let us consider the next step. Do you know my way of overcoming obstacles? Trial and error.”

Subaru: “Oh, that’s the thing. I think it would be better if I could use some tools, too, instead of relying on Beako all the time.”

Beatrice: “Y-You don’t think he can count on Betty alone, in fact…?”

Subaru: “That’s not true! I don’t want to slow you down. I want to help you…!”

Beatrice: “Subaru…”

Beatrice’s eyes sparkled with admiration at Subaru’s determination as he clenched his fists firmly.

It was good that they were getting along, but was it Frederica’s imagination that Beatrice, who used to look so dignified and intelligent, seemed to have lost a lot of her wisdom? Or was it perhaps just her own feelings of helplessness that were making her see things in that way.

Clind: “You want a tool, Not a sword or a bow, but a tool. Novel.”

Subaru: “You can’t expect me to be able to compete with Reinhard and Julius even if I trained hard with a sword now. If that’s the case, it’s better to learn one technique… that will surprise at first sight so that I can handle different situations…”

Clind: “Well, that is an interesting idea. Creative.”

Subaru: “Ha ha… Well, the surprise at first sight is an idea I got from a guy I don’t even like to remember.”

Beatrice: “Whatever the source, it is to Subaru’s credit that he found a way to use it, I suppose. Betty is also proud to be his pa-pa-par-par-part partner, in fact.”

Despite this ongoing drama, Subaru and Beatrice were able to assemble a plan for the future.

With his serious and thoughtful attitude, Clind would probably find the most optimal answer for Subaru and Beatrice. In fact, immediately after, Clind held up a finger, and,

Clind: “I have come up with a few candidates. Let us take them out of our storehouse. Treasured items.”

Subaru: “Oh, really? Well, since you’re here, we’ll go with you.”

Beatrice: “Betty will see if it is worthy of Subaru with my own eyes, I suppose.”

Subaru and Beatrice appeared to be very motivated, and Clind led them as they began to walk away.

The destination was the Miload family’s storehouse, where they had a set of tools to train their servants in martial arts. The idea was to find a weapon suitable for Subaru—

Clind: “Frederica, when you have finished throwing your tantrum, go back to Annerose-sama and Emilia-sama. Hospitality.”

Frederica let out a sigh of annoyance as she watched the detestable man easily divert Subaru and Beatrice’s interest and then disappear from her sight.

The plan was for their “lessons away from home” at the Miload’s residence to last for ten days.

Frederica: “So, Clind and me… for ten days. Is this the Master’s plot, too?”

Did Roswaal think this humiliation and resentment were some plot that would lead to a better future? Frederica was not sure if Roswaal was hoping that she was aware of his intentions and was trying to figure out what was best for her.

If that was the case—

Frederica: “—Very well. If that is what the Master wants, then I will try to break out of my shell and take on the challenge. Yes, Petra and Garf are also doing their best, but it would be shameful if I were to stand with them with no growth.”

With that decision made, Frederica made up her mind.

It would be a big mistake to follow them as if they had the mindset of a bridesmaid, a servant, or even a bystander.

In the Emilia Camp, which was lagging behind the other camps, those that couldn’t move forward couldn’t keep up the fight. What they needed was growth, or—

Frederica: “—A le-veil up, was it.”

When Frederica said the words out loud forcefully, they seemed to give her some kind of energy.

Energized by these words, Frederica began to walk away from the weak, infantile tossing and turning of her mind that she had been doing until just before and to obtain a self that was unfazed by anything.

The Royal Selection had just begun —The Emilia Camp, which was participating in it, had just begun.

As a result of this ten-day lesson, Subaru began to walk the path of an unusual knight with a little girl in one hand and a whip in the other, and Emilia, who participated in many soirées and meetings with Annerose, was recognized not as a “silver-haired half-devil” but as a soirée crasher.

While Frederica, enthusiastic and determined to do her duty, was doing her best, Roswaal sneezed back at the Roswaal Mansion.

Roswaal: “She’s always had a tendency to assume things, doooesn’t~ she?”

However, the pink-haired maid who heard this did not mention it, so it never reached Frederica’s ears.

END

Elegant Lesson After
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

???: “Come to think of it, you’ve known Roswaal for a long time, right, Clind-san? Does that mean you and Beako are also on good terms?”

While undergoing training to level up at the Miload residence, an exhausted and sweaty Subaru casually asked this question to the calm-faced Clind.

While Subaru looked exhausted and groggy, Clind was stylish and had not even broken a sweat.

Clind, who always seemed so calm and collected, slightly raised an eyebrow at Subaru’s question.

As if to see if he had asked something he shouldn’t have, Subaru looked at Beatrice, who was holding his hand and fanning the air with her hand.

However, Beatrice shook her head slowly from side to side at Subaru’s gaze, and said,

Beatrice: “Not particularly, I suppose. Of course, it was known that Roswaal employed a servant named Clind, in fact. But Betty hardly had any contact with him, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Really? That’s surprising. After all, when it comes to how pretty Beako is, she’s straight down the middle for Clind-san.”

Clind: “In the sense that Beatrice-sama’s childlike and vibrant sensibility touches my heart, yes. Affirmation.”

Beatrice: “…Honestly, that evaluation doesn’t feel very pleasing, in fact.”

When Clind nodded as if to confirm the sweetness of a piece of candy, Beatrice, whose cheeks had stiffened, turned away from him slightly.

However, as mentioned before, it was a bit of a surprise.

Subaru: “She has lived in the Roswaal mansion for four hundred years. So, Beako’s like a zashiki-warashi or a powerful lady-in-waiting to the Mathers family. The fact that she’s had no real contact with him for so long is proof of her extremely reclusive lifestyle.”

Beatrice: “What an expression to use for someone such as Betty, I suppose! Even Betty had some of her own contacts with the people in the mansion, in fact! Meals were delivered, I suppose!”

Subaru: “That’s just the routine of a shut-in! You shouldn’t be proud of that!”

That was a comment that raised concerns about Beatrice’s lifestyle at the Roswaal mansion before Subaru and Emilia arrived. From now on, Subaru decided to never let Beatrice eat alone again—

Subaru: “Given that Beako’s personality can’t be helped… what about you, Clind-san? If you haven’t always been with Annerose at the Miload residence, is there a reason for that?”

Clind: “Yes, correct. If I had to say, I was forbidden from having any contact with her by the Master. Strict orders.”

Subaru: “As soon as you said it was Roswaal’s orders, it started to smell really fishy…”

As the dark schemes that Roswaal had been plotting involving the Sanctuary and the mansion were revealed, he inscribed an Oath on himself, saying, “I won’t commit any mischief like thaaa~t again.”.

However, the order to avoid Beatrice was given to Clind before said Oath, so it was possible that that order itself had been related to Roswaal’s plans.

So, in the same way as Beatrice, Subaru also felt like keeping his distance from Clind. Seeing this, Clind adjusted the position of his monocle, and,

Clind: “There is no need to worry. My orders have already been rescinded. I believe this recent training trip is proof that the Master has changed his mind. Self-evident.”

Subaru: “Yeah, you’re right. Mhm, sorry. I was being rude to you even though you were being so kind to me.”

Clind: “Nevertheless, even though my orders to avoid contact were lifted, I have received new instructions to minimize contact as much as possible. Mitigation.”

Beatrice: “It’s possible that he still hasn’t learned his lesson, in fact! Maybe he needs another beating, I suppose!”

When Beatrice heard Roswaal’s next instruction, her face grew angry, and she screamed. While Subaru was wondering if there was something more to his plans, he was also curious about the contents of the instructions.

For whatever reason, Roswaal’s instructions made it feel like they were intentionally keeping Clind and Beatrice apart.

Subaru: “By the way, you’re not forbidden to have contact with me, right?”

Clind: “As for you, Subaru-sama? Affirmation. The Master has graciously instructed me to train you thoroughly. Roused.”

Subaru: “I’m glad you’re excited to get working! …But, I see.”

After he heard Clind’s reply, Subaru nodded in agreement and looked at Beatrice. She wore a questioning expression at Subaru’s look, but Subaru somehow understood Roswaal’s thoughts. — Roswaal’s affection for Beatrice was probably genuine.

Subaru: “It seems to me that it’s like an uncle who can’t get his cute niece to like him and is just trying to keep the bad adults away.”

Given that, Roswaal’s affection was not being conveyed to Beatrice at all, and he seemed too clumsy and pitiful. However, considering what Roswaal had done, he had better suffer for a while, so this amount of misfortune was probably well-deserved.

Anyway—

Subaru: “Getting back on topic, how long have you been working for Roswaal, Clind-san? I heard you were in charge of Frederica’s education.”

From what he had heard, it seemed that Clind was the one who had trained Frederica as a maid when she had first left the Sanctuary and still did not know her way around. It was hard to believe that he was the head servant at the time, but he was definitely a promising young man. When Subaru asked him this, Clind put his hand to his chin and said, “That is right. Rumination.”—

Clind: “I believe it has been about four hundred years.”

Subaru: “Clind-san is another member who tremendously increases the camp’s average age?!”

With that, Subaru was greatly surprised.

2

Emilia was a hundred-year-old half-elf, Beatrice and Puck were four-hundred-year-old spirits, and here was Clind, who had just joined the ranks of the long-lived group—.

Subaru: “With this, the average age of the Emilia Camp has suddenly risen again… Even if we include the young members like Petra and Annerose, they don’t even come close…”

Beatrice: “Good grief, Subaru always gets so flustered, in fact. On the contrary, the increased reliability of having so many individuals of high age is something one should be proud of, I suppose.”

Subaru: “On the contrary, I strongly suspected that cuteness and prettiness was what increased with a person’s age, but that theory was completely put on its head with Clind-san!”

As Beatrice played with her twin drill tails with her fingers, Subaru admitted to the collapse of the “Longer-lived Cute Theory” he previously held. Both Emilia and Beatrice, as well as Puck, with his cute appearance and fluffy fur, were influential factors that supported the theory.

However, the inclusion of the out-of-place Clind changed the situation.

Subaru: “No, wait? Clind-san is a strikingly handsome man, so if you include cute in the more general definition of beauty, then you can’t say that my theory has been disproved, can you?”

Clind: “It is an honor to receive such a high evaluation; however, I apologize for the confusion this has caused. Gratitude.”

Beatrice: “This is just some stupid Subaru nonsense, in fact. It’s okay just to ignore him, I suppose.”

Subaru, in response to Beatrice’s harsh words, patted her head, and she said, “Aghh, In fact!”,

Subaru: “By the way, Beako, what you said earlier about not having any connection with Clind-san has a totally different implication when you think about it on a four-hundred-year scale! You’re too good at being a shut-in! Go get some sunlight!”

Beatrice: “Th-That’s why I’m out in the sun with you, Subaru, I suppose… Because Subaru pulled Betty outside, in fact.”

Subaru: “What a fucking cute thing to say!”

It was a reply that was overflowing with love, and Subaru energetically picked Beatrice up and placed her on his lap, sitting cross-legged, and then turned to face Clind again.

Subaru: “On that note, I’m sorry about my Beako being so rude. Also, ignoring my confusion is OK because it’s just nonsense, like Beako says. May I ask you something else?”

Clind: “Your words were quite frantic, but I will listen. Lend an ear.”

Subaru: “You don’t have long ears or anything like that, so you’re probably not an elf, but where are you from, Clind-san?”

Clind: “Hmm. Why do you wish to know? Verification.”

His eyes widened as Subaru was asked a question in reply to his own. Then, after the seed of doubt formed in his mouth, he asked, “Why?”,

Subaru: “Look, it’s not like Roswaal’s orders have been rescinded, but he’s agreed to let you be my instructor for this training, and it looks like we’re going to see each other more often from now on. So I want to get to know you. Because you’re going to be my Master, right, Clind-san?”

Clind: “—. Your Master, is it? Awestruck.”

Subaru: “Isn’t that right? I’m being taught how to use and train my body from scratch, and I’m being generously given the wisdom and techniques of my predecessors… this is what you call a master-disciple relationship.”

Subaru did not really realize it until he said it himself, but when he actually thought about his situation, it was most natural to define it as a master-disciple relationship.

Although he knew he was being selfish because he had not even asked the other person’s permission, Subaru considered Wilhelm to be his spiritual master. Subaru deeply respected the spirituality of the swordsman called the “Sword Demon”, who spent fourteen years avenging his wife’s death.

And now, Clind has emerged as his physical master.

Subaru: “It’s not just about where you’re from, of course, but surely I’m not the only one who wants to know about the people they respect.”

Clind: “What is this “respect”? Inquiry.”

Subaru: “It means I hold you in high esteem! It’s a little embarrassing when you have to explain it, though!”

Clind: “…”

Clind narrowed his eyes slightly at Subaru’s answer as he held his breath.

His unusual reaction, or at least the first time Subaru had seen such an agitated one, made him wonder if he was too unemotional in telling him straight out.

However, when Subaru reflected on this, Clind shook his head with a “No”,

Clind: “I was marginally surprised. You have a rare way of thinking, Subaru-sama. Loss for words.”

Subaru: “You say that you’re at a loss for words, but I didn’t mean to say something so crazy… what’s wrong, Beako, why the cute puffed-out cheeks?”

Beatrice: “Uh-huh, that’s why Betty is proud of Subaru, I suppose.”

Subaru scratched his cheek with his finger at the smug impression of Beatrice on his lap. In response, Clind responded with an embarrassed affirmation, “That is right,”,

Clind: “However, my apologies. I am unable to disclose my origins. I have a Contract… no, a Covenant. Humble pardons.”

Subaru: “A Contract, or rather, a Covenant… is that also with Roswaal?”

Clind: “I am also unable to answer that. If my origins were made public, I am certain that it would cause great inconvenience to the camp. Violent upheaval.”

Subaru: “Amazing. This is the second time someone has kindly explained to me that they’re a time bomb.”

Of course, the first and most memorable experience was with none other than Emilia.

It seemed ridiculous that Emilia would be treated unfairly just because she shared the appearance of the Witch of Envy from the distant past.

Subaru: "First of all, Emilia-tan's super-cute beauty can't be easily reprod—"

Subaru was about to continue, but then he remembered the tea party and became tongue-tied. The face of the Witch, whom he had met only once at the tea party in his dream, inside Echidna's tomb. Like a haze, that memory had a complex and mysterious hue in Subaru's mind.

As if his soul was refusing to think about it in detail.

Subaru: "At any rate! I understand if you can't talk about it, Clind-san. I won't ask from which field the fresh vegetable Clind-san was picked. But can I ask about other things? For example, what you like and what you don't like, or… ah, like Roswaal's weakness!"

Clind: "That would be Beatrice-sama. Informing."

Beatrice: "You made it seem like you sold your master out instantly when it's clear that you have no intention of answering seriously at all, in fact!"

Beatrice shouted at Clind for his prompt reply, but unexpectedly, Subaru thought that it might not be a lie after all, and he decided not to tell Beatrice about his thoughts.

Whatever the case, Clind's attitude seemed to have changed based on the corners of his slightly softened eyes, and he did not seem to reject the master-disciple relationship head-on, to which Subaru was relieved.

Clind: "So, is this respite over? Resume."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's right. We can't keep dragging our feet forever. We have to make the most of every second and level up. Let's go, Beako—!"

Beatrice: "Yeah, yeah, hurry up, I suppose!"

He lifted the enthusiastic Beatrice and placed her on his shoulders, completing the docking. The combination of Subaru and Beatrice, who have truly become one, proceeded to take on Clind once again.

In response to this fresh attack, Clind gracefully turned, and,

Clind: “—Ill-prepared. Discourteous.”

Subaru & Beatrice: ““Ahhhphew!””

3

Emilia: “Ahh! They got hit again…!”

???: “I know you are worried, Emilia-sama, but you should not take your eyes off me.”

With that, Frederica cautioned Emilia, whose eyes were wide with shock.

Emilia blinked her amethyst eyes and apologized with, “I’m sorry”, but her mind kept wandering to the scene of Subaru and company’s training.

Frederica could understand that feeling. After all—

???: “—Clind seems to be having a very good time.”

Annerose, sitting opposite Emilia, elegantly brought a teacup to her mouth, perfectly following the rules of etiquette as she looked at the same scene and spoke. Having had Clind by her side for so many years, she could see the same thing as Frederica.

Emilia: “Eh? Clind-san is excited? He doesn’t look like he is at all…”

Frederica: “That is not true. Toying with Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama simultaneously like that, smirking in a truly disgusting way, is quite infuriating.”

Emilia: “Smirking…?”

Annerose: “It is unsurprising that you can not recognize it, Emily.

You are not used to seeing him. Besides, there is no need to specifically learn the skill of being able to read Clind's facial expressions."

Frederica deeply nodded inwardly in agreement with Annerose's well-reasoned opinion. However, Emilia, with a serious expression on her face, prefaced her response with a "No", and then,

Emilia: "You say that, Anne, but I don't think I should accept it like that. No matter who it is… especially Clind-san, who's helping us, right? If I disregard someone like that, I'm sure the sun will turn its back on us."

Annerose: "Oh my. Emily, how admirable of you… as expected of my Emily!"

Emilia: "Sorry. But, I'm not your property, Anne…"

Annerose: "That was just a figure of speech! Even still, it hurts when I am rejected like that…"

Annerose looked sour at Emilia's innocent reply, then cleared her throat and tried to recover her composure. She held up one of her slender fingers, and,

Annerose: "That is alright. Then, I will personally teach you how to discern Clind's faces."

Emilia: "P-Please help me out…!"

Frederica could not help but give a wry smile at Emilia, who was taking notes with such enthusiasm.

No matter who they were or what kind of person they were, she had to face them sincerely without making any distinctions. It was a very difficult thing to do, but it had been the policy Emilia had adopted for the Royal Selection.

Although it infuriated her to no end that Clind's name was being mentioned as one of these embodiments.

Frederica: "At the very least, he has to be useful for that."

As a person who was once swept away by the slightest differences in the subtle changes in his facial expressions, Frederica hoped that the difficulty in Clind's expressions would be useful for Emilia's pursuits.

On the other hand, she did not have zero feelings. —If the day ever arrived when Emilia could read Clind's facial expressions without issue, things would probably get a little awkward.

Frederica: "It really is a troublesome thing."

With that, Frederica mumbled those feelings to herself, but no one heard them—it was a matter of her own heart that ought to have been treated as a minor thing compared to the future of the Emilia Camp.

END

Otto Suwen's Internal Affairs Struggle (Translation Pending)

Joshua Juukulius's Careful Encyclopedia

1

—In the past year and few months, there had been a few particular things that Joshua Juukulius had thought.
They were things like how Mimi and her brothers would almost always come running to his room together whenever he would take food into his hand.

Joshua: "When I touch food, does it cause my room to light up or something?"

Mimi: "Joshua, why're you saying such strange things all of a sudden? Did you hit your head?"

In response to Joshua's suspicions, Mimi tilted her head, her mouth stuffed with little sweets.

Watching as her younger brother, Tivey, gladly and gallantly wiped it for her, Joshua shook his head with a "No".

Joshua: "…I ended up asking something silly. Please forget it."

Mimi: "Oh, really? In that case, no worries~!"

Forcing a smile at Mimi's open-hearted answer, Joshua massaged his brow in self-derision. As he did so, a voice called "Are you okay-okay?"

Tivey: "If you're perhaps tired, I can talk to the Miss about giving you a break."

Joshua: "—. Thank you for worrying about me, Tivey. But, I am alright."

Tivey: "You mustn't over do things, yes? In the end, it'll just lead to your overall efficiency falling-falling."

As Tivey peered at him, the big eye behind his monocle glistened to remind him.

As the youngest of three siblings, and as one who dearly loved reading, Tivey was someone with whom he had constructed an affable friendship; they were fellow younger brothers to elder brothers. Joshua's own monocle was a representation of the feelings of fellowship and respect he felt towards him, and they were matching articles.

Joshua: "…"

Adjusting the position of that monocle, Joshua glanced at the ceiling and sighed. The cause of his sigh was not Mimi's pillaging of his afternoon snack, but rather the overwhelming feeling that had come over him recently.

As a member of the Anastasia Camp in the Royal Selection, Joshua's days had been busy.

He felt fulfilled by the work being entrusted to him, but the problem was this next job—the fact that Tivey was worried about him was likely because that gloom was far too apparent through his face and demeanor.

After all, the next job Joshua was appointed to was—

Joshua: "—Acting as an emissary to one in the same position of Royal Candidate, Emilia-sama. Giving me such an important duty, Anastasia-sama is also quite ill-natured."

Indeed, as he rubbed his stomach that was gripped by pain, Joshua muttered with a deathly pale countenance.

—Due to the tragedy that befell the Royal Family, the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica persisted in the perilous absence of a monarch.

Currently, the Kingdom was in the middle of a Royal Selection to decide on the next Monarch, and amidst the five candidates gathered, the house of Joshua's birth, House Juukulius, had declared their endorsement of the Great Merchant from the neighboring Kararagi City-States, Anastasia Hoshin.

For generations, House Juukulius had produced many a Knight in service to the Kingdom. Amidst the household, opinions were divided regarding the endorsement of the Great Merchant from another nation who had established herself as an extraordinary success among her generation. Originally, House Juukulius would have taken a more conservative stance. It was because the choice was in direct opposition to that.

However, Anastasia decided to face those opposing views head on, and standing as her one and only Knight, was of course the Finest Knight, Julius Juukulius.

As a result, now that a year had passed, no longer remained there any who voiced doubt upon Anastasia's capability as a Royal Candidate. Anastasia and Julius, lord and retainer, had magnificently forced surrender upon the enemies blocking their path to the extent of their resourcefulness and track records, thereby winning support.

As the younger brother of that esteemed Julius, Joshua endeavored to live in a way as to not shame him, and also thought that he gradually had come to win a bit of trust from Anastasia.

After all, this next job was unmistakably proof of that trust, and thus ought to have fired him up, but—

Joshua: "Even if I am being entrusted with such an important task, can I really say that I had wanted to work my way up and gather experience in a more sequential manner… no, that's just an excuse. As it is, I will not be able to show my face to Nii-sama or Anastasia-sama…!"

Mimi: "Haa, you seem to be going round n' round again, Joshua! Don't you get tired of always thinking that way? Mimi thinks that's really~ weird!"

Joshua: "Ugh, even though Mimi and I are being entrusted with the same job, this difference is… OW OW!"

With Mimi violently bashing his back as she laughed, Joshua fell into low spirits with tears in his eyes.

For the duty of emissary entrusted to him, Mimi would accompany him as a guard. In a sense, even though the jobs they were entrusted with were the same, Mimi was calm and collected without being under any feeling of oppression.

Hetaro: “Joshua-san, please take good care of big sis. Tivey and me can’t go along with her, so we’ll be counting on you, Joshua-san.”

Joshua: “Counting on me? Um, is it not the other way around? After all, Mimi is my guard… Hetaro and Tivey, you each are also going to deliver official letters to Royal Candidates, correct?”

Unlike how Joshua was being given a guard, the two of them, capable of defending themselves, were each going to fulfill their duty as emissaries on their own. Duties were divided between them so that Hetaro would be going to visit the Valkyrie, Dutchess Crusch Karsten, and Tivey to Felt, the one known as the second coming of the Golden Lion.

Joshua: “But, unlike you two, I’m going together with Mimi…”

Hetaro: “Well, that’s because it was super duper worrisome to let big sis go out as an emissary alone…”

Tivey: “For the Miss’s sake as well, it is vital that we ensure the written invitation is properly delivered. If we left big sis to the task by herself, concern would start even from the point of not forgetting to bring the letter in the first place-place.”

Getting Hetaro and Tivey’s back to back opinions, Joshua looked at Mimi with an “Ah”. Meeting his gaze, Mimi made her eyes big and round as she went “Mhmhmhm~?”,

Mimi: “Something wrong, Joshua? If it’s about your share of the treats, we’re all out!”

Joshua: “…I have come to understand this a little better. I suppose I am a chaperone, truly.”

As Mimi puffed her chest out and raised two fingers, her two little brothers on Joshua’s left and right gave him pats of encouragement on his shoulders while he gained a better awareness of his role. He accepted that consideration, however, for a different reason from earlier, Joshua was at his wit's end from the source of his unchanged sense of being overwhelmed.

That was—

Joshua: "While I am chaperoning Mimi, we had to be in charge of the half-elf Emilia-sama, of all people…"

Hetaro: "Um, are you perhaps not very good with half-elves, Joshua-san?"

Joshua: "Rather than not being good around them, are they not terrifying?! After all, not only is she a half-elf, I have heard that she possesses all the same traits as the Witch of Envy, you know?"

At Hetaro's unmalicious query, Joshua preached the common proclivity.

The legend of the Witch of Envy was a primordial fear for every single person living in this world. For a person whose ancestry and characteristics embody that, just imagining it was enough to make one's blood freeze over.

Mimi: "Nghhh, Joshua you scaredy cat! Honestly, Mimi thinks that Onee-san isn't scary at all! If anything, I think she's kind? But scary? Or frightening? Or dangerous?"

Joshua: "Ah, Mimi and the rest of you are acquainted… In that case, Tivey, Hetaro, what do you make of her?"

A year prior, the Iron Fang, to which Mimi and the other two belonged, participated in both the fights against the White Whale and the Witch Cult, and there they had likely come into contact with Emilia and her people.

Dissuading the addition of Mimi's opinion, Joshua asked thus to the two brothers, and as they exchanged glances,

Tivey: "Unfortunately, we did not come into contact with Emilia-sama as part of the operation. We did once see her from afar at the ceremony, but… there was no impression of anything frightening-

frightening.”

Hetaro: “Same for me. Ah, but, I kinda get it if we’re talking about Emilia-sama’s Knight.”

Joshua: “Emilia-sama’s Knight… the one with all those strange rumors about him.”

Hetaro raised a hand up as he spoke, leaving Joshua with a bitter face.

The reason why Joshua felt uneasy at his upcoming visit to the Emilia Camp, stemmed from the pressure of being entrusted with a great duty, and Emilia, who was said to share features with the Witch of Envy. And finally, there was the presence of her enigmatic Knight.

Going by the stories he had heard, this Knight seemed to be an interloper in the event of greatest importance to the Kingdom, the Royal Selection, and without any family standing or supporters, it was utterly incomprehensible how he had gotten into the position he was now in.

But, whenever one searched for information on the Emilia Camp, this black-haired Knight of unknown origin would invariably come up.

Joshua: “He even successfully contributed to the subjugation of the White Whale and a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult… to be honest, if I had not heard it directly from Nii-sama, I would have never believed it.”

Tivey: “To be precise, you still doubted it a bit even when Julius told you, didn’t you?”

Joshua: “Is that not only natural?! Are you aware of the rumors? He participated in the subjugation of the White Whale and Sloth, and while it is unconfirmed, he might have also subdued the Great Rabbit; after becoming the Knight of a Royal Candidate despite his unknown origins, he’s always seen being accompanied by a little girl? Is he not the very personification of a bad dream?!”

As a result, he was an exceedingly mysterious figure who had come to be known as the “Lolimancer”. Emilia too, keeping that incomprehensible individual as her one and only Knight, was thereby difficult to understand and frightening.

Outside of that as well, the dreadful rumors surrounding the Emilia Camp were never ending.

Joshua: “To begin with, the Margrave Mathers endorsing Emilia-sama is widely known as a cheat and a hypocrite. He is even referred to as the “Demi-Human Lover”, and there are rumors that he keeps many demi-human maids dressed in lascivious outfits at his mansion… said to excessively misappropriate so much momentous magical research for himself, he is the problem child of the court!”

Two of the key players under his command were a savage, fiendish half-beast, and a blood-thirsty internal affairs officer. These two also seemed quite like suspicious knaves, the former had a blank history when looked into through Anastasia’s information network, but the latter seemed to be notorious as a wanted man within his own hometown for many years now.

There were plentiful circumstances surrounding terrifying ghost stories, such as: at the location of the mansion, there seemed to be several tens of girls with the same face entering and exiting simultaneously, or, it seemed that everyday there were fumes rising up from the kitchen that smelled like steamed tatoes.

Joshua: “Truly an ominous boundary beyond the human world… Once again, I wonder why Anastasia-sama would send me there as a messenger. Could it be that I was being rude unknowingly, and now to make an example out of me…?”

Hetaro: “No matter how you look at it, that might just be way too pessimistic…”

Joshua: “I mean! Is there any other logical conclusion? Uwaa, uwaaaa, what am I to do? It would be best for me to inquire to Anastasia-sama directly, would it not?! Perhaps it was some sort of slipup!”

Tivey: “But, if it wasn’t a mistake, this might be the Miss trying to silence you from leaking her secrets.”

Hetaro: “Even for you, Tivey, going that far is…”

Joshua went deathly pale, unable to hear Tivey’s voice as he apologized “That was a joke-joke”. Feeling like he had gotten caught up in a grand conspiracy, Joshua tottered towards the door.

Mimi: “Oh? Joshua, what’s wrong? Wee-Wee? Are you going to go wee-wee?”

Sprawled on the bed with her belly bulging out, Mimi looked up to Joshua with an upside down view and posed him a question. At her question, Joshua slowly shook his head, and clenched his fist.

Joshua: “M-My heart cannot bear to take on this important role whilst feeling like this. I am scared, but, I am scared, but…! I am going to go hear Anastasia-sama’s true intentions…!”

Mimi: “You going to the Miss? Tell her that Mimi wants meat for dinner!”

Joshua: “Once you deliver the letter to the Witch of Envy and the Lolimancer, you can have meat!”

With most of the information in his head getting tangled up, Joshua hastened to exit the room. Seeing Joshua, beaten down by that overwhelming feeling, the remaining triplets exchanged glances.

Then, after breathing a sigh, Hetaro poked Tivey’s forehead, and,

Hetaro: “Tivey, It’s not okay to tease him so much. After all, Joshua-san is really earnest.”

Tivey: “My apologies. But, I kind of understand how the Miss is feeling, y’know-y’know?”

As an older brother should, Hetaro admonished his younger brother, to which Tivey slightly lowered his eyebrows. And from behind, those two were hugged at their shoulders by Mimi with all her body, and then she spoke thus.

Mimi: “Really, it’s tough being an Onee-chan or an Onii-chan. Must be hard for Julius too, no?”

2

Joshua: “Hence, I wish to inquire about your true intentions, Anastasia-sama. Depending on that, I may lack the ability to carry out this duty…”

Anastasia: “Golly, quite the serious fella ya are, Joshua.”

Still in the same mindset from his exchange with Mimi and the others a moment prior, Joshua visited Anastasia’s office with a meek expression, and was met by the gentle girl’s wry smile.

Joshua’s thoughts, having plummeted further and further into a worse condition whilst thinking this and that, caused Anastasia to cease her hands from her work, and as she placed one to her forehead,

Anastasia: “Even without worryin’ ‘bout all that, Emilia-san’s place ain’t nearly anythin’ that scary. Emilia-san’s a given, but Natsuki-kun certainly won’t pick ya up and eat’cha either.”

Joshua: “But, the Margrave and his two primary subordinates, the ghost stories about the kitchen fumes…”

Anastasia: “Hmm, I was meanin’ well ‘n tryna help ya out, but it seems ya might’ve listened to a few too many rumors and gotten yer eyes all cloudy. This here’s my fault.”

Narrowing her pale turquoise eyes, Anastasia reflected.

That reflection of hers was regarding how the accuracy of the information from the intelligence network she had strewn up was of varying degrees, and how Joshua’s assistance with it had led to an increase of puzzling elements.

For Anastasia, who was a merchant of Kararagi rather than being of Lugunican birth, swift and accurate decisions would be required to stay on top of the Royal Selection, so it was preferable to have a large amount of evidence to make said decisions. For that purpose, it was important to keep the intelligence network organized, and she had grown confident in Joshua's ability to assist with that.

Joshua: "But, for the time I spent on the waterfront of information, I fell into a dilemma of drowning in the lake of information…"

Anastasia: "Mm, gotcha. My intent wasn't to torment ya, Joshua, so maybe I'll rethink the whole messenger thing."

Joshua: "…I am terribly sorry."

Anastasia: "Ain't a big issue, really. —But, ya mind if I just try one thing out here at the end?"

With a single eye closed, Anastasia smiled mischievously. When Joshua widened his eyes with an "Eh?" at that smile, a knock came from outside the door of the office.

Receiving Anastasia's brief comment, the one who showed their face at the door was—

???: "Anastasia-sama, you called for me? Just now, I have received tidings from Ia, but…"

Joshua: "N-Nii-sama?"

Politely bowing, the person who showed their face was indeed Julius Juukulius—the one to whom Joshua bore never ending love and respect, the existence of the Finest, was his absolutely flawless elder brother.

Julius: "Were you speaking with Joshua? Was there something you wished to ask me?"

Anastasia: "Yepyep, exactly. Tell ya the truth, this wouldn't end up goin' anywhere without ya here, Julius."

Perceiving Joshua, Julius enquired as to why Anastasia had called him there. Then, with her mischievous smile intact, Anastasia poked at Joshua with a "Right?".

Faced with Anastasia's mischief, Joshua was about to falter, but—

Anastasia: “Ya see, we were discussin’ entrusting Joshua to go as a messenger to Emilia-san’s place, yeah? We wouldn’t want there to be any impoliteness for that occasion, so we wanted to ask yer opinion.”

Julius: “I see. Henceforth, you have summoned me here.”

As Anastasia’s explanation broke it down for him, Julius nodded in understanding. Then, Julius directed his serene, yellow eyes towards Joshua,

Julius: “That is the correct prudence. No matter the rumors, the real Emilia-sama is of a personality that does not overlap with the public notions conceived of her before the Royal Selection began. Indeed, it would be disrespectful to cross paths with her bearing such a perception.”

Joshua: “—. I suppose… that is correct. Your consultation… is very… encouraging.”

Commended by the smiling Julius, Joshua felt that the image of himself that Anastasia had told him about was somewhat correct, and he felt a sensation as if the dark clouds had cleared from his mind.

Emilia, who he had feared most, had received such a high evaluation from Julius. There was no need to weigh the dubious rumors against Julius on a balance to know which to believe.

At a glance, Anastasia nodded in satisfaction as if to say things had gone exactly as she had planned. As expected, since Julius had discovered her, his insight was outstanding—

Julius: “Ah, in addition, if you are going to visit Emilia-sama, it would do you well to be wary of her Knight. He is… well. He is an inscrutable personage upon first meeting. However, he possesses extraordinary willpower and decisiveness, and most importantly, he bears an astonishing loyalty towards Emilia-sama.”

Joshua: “…Nii-sama?”

Julius: “Hm. Besides, he is a Spiritual Arts User. Given that he was conferred decorations at the ceremony, and has now gained the title of Knight, I suppose he could be called a Spirit Knight, as I am. Though for reasons beside that, he is a person worth taking note of —”

Having just had his doubts cleared up thanks to his elder brother, Joshua frowned quizzically at that brother’s following words.

Eloquently articulated from Julius’s lips was the second highest priority for caution following the most feared Emilia, the Lolimancer—sharing the achievement of Sloth’s subjugation alongside his elder brother, what an accursed Knight.

To begin with, Julius was sparing with his praise unto others. That was an unmistakable virtue of his, and that humanity was one of the reasons he was known as the Finest.

However, that was precisely why there was no end to the individuals trying to impose on that virtue—.

Julius: “—Joshua?”

Joshua: “Nii-sama, thank you for your kind attention. Thanks to you, I have understood who it is I ought to be careful of. —Anastasia-sama, I shall be able to perform the duty of emissary.”

Anastasia: “Mm-hmm. I’m countin’ on ya, so do yer best, won’t ya?”

Joshua: “Yes, leave it to me! I will assuredly return with good tidings!”

Firmly placing his hand over his chest, Joshua left the room with his eyes sparkling and his breathing heavy.

Seeing Joshua, hurriedly departing with a sense of duty strewn upon his face, off from behind, Julius turned back around to Anastasia, left alone with her in the room.

Resting her chin in her hands atop her work desk, Anastasia smiled in a truly pleasant manner.

Julius: “So then, has my brother enacted any discourtesy?”

Anastasia: “Hmmm? Nothin’ of the sort. Really now, Joshua’s quite the cute kid.”

Julius: “Far greater of a younger brother than I deserve. Time and again, I am always being saved by him.”

Bereft of flattery or modesty, Julius spoke thus of his relationship with Joshua.

In truth, that was the case. Joshua’s presence and gaze was always straightening Julius’s back. And that was not all. That was precisely why, even now, Julius could be as he was—

Anastasia: “—Y’all ain’t really siblings, right? To be so close despite that is quite the big deal. “

Julius: “Indeed. —Far greater of a younger brother than I deserve, and quite the big deal at that.”

—While Julius and Anastasia conversed, Joshua’s steps through the hallway were restless.

The unease and tension he had felt before visiting the office, in this moment, became a thing of the past. He had finally understood why Anastasia had entrusted him to be in charge of neither the Crusch Camp nor the Felt Camp, but the Emilia Camp.

Joshua: “I must go to firmly ascertain Nii-sama’s enemy…!”

This heavy responsibility certainly could not be entrusted to Tivey or the others. —The heavy responsibility of defending the name of the Finest Knight, was entrusted to Joshua Juukulius.

After all, that was—

Joshua: “—The one and only thing I am able to do for Nii-sama, and for House Juukulius.”

Ceasing his step, Joshua suddenly glanced towards the window of the hallway, and narrowed his yellow eyes. Unconsciously, he reached out his hand and touched the window, but the tips of his fingers never reached the scenery that laid beyond.

Among the garden trees swaying in the wind, the tree that bore bright red appas plunged Joshua's consciousness into a memory of the past—to a time he would never forget, a time utmost accursed within Joshua.

3

—The scenery outside the window always appeared as a dream his hands could never reach.

House Juukulius was an ancient and honorable lineage, having produced generations of Knights for the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica.

Through various scenes that the history of the Kingdom of Lugunica had marched through, the men of Juukulius followed as Knights, silently supporting the nation's state of existence.

Their nature was unakin to the likes of Sword Saint or Sword Demon, brilliantly flourishing in the limelight through the turning points of Lugunican history. But, just as how a king with no subjects had a warped view of reality, in the shadows of the achievements of heroes and legends there existed the efforts of many a Knight of no renown.

Likewise, House Juukulius was naught more than a single lineage contributing to those many Knights. Those who pledged allegiance to the Kingdom existed as part of a function to produce more gears to keep the Kingdom running.

So, he had never thought to question the way that his house was.

As stated previously, that was something requisite. In the shadows of the tales of heroes and legends, there needed to exist the stories of ordinary people not of such stature. It was a matter of everything resulting from the right person being in the right place, and the allocation of roles.

To put it in a different way, leading actors and minor roles—he thought that in reality, there was not a very large difference between those positions, There was only one problem—

???: “—Khofghh…”

For no reason at all, the deepest depths of his coughing body creaked, and he understood that what he was feeling was pain.

Unable to contain the urge to cough for a while, he coughed many, many times whilst harboring the pain. Once it finally settled, a cold sweat drenched his body, and his breathing grew rough.

It was nothing out of the ordinary. It was just one of the senseless fits that would befall him ten times in a day.

It was no disease. If it was a fit, a cough intendant on fighting against something gnawing at this body, then even if it was a hundred or a thousand times a day instead of ten, he would at least have a feeling of intercepting an oncoming hardship.

But, that was not the case. Only, he was hopelessly weak, and fragile.

???: “…Khofghh.”

Thus, the reality of this “weakness”, heavier than aught else in this world, was an unatonable sin.

In House Juukulius, which had produced generations of Knights, the eldest son was born too frail to grasp a sword, sinful to the point of regretting his own birth.

???: “…Khofghh.”

Ergo, Joshua Juukulius had been entwined with sin from birth, born into this world a malefactor.

4

???: “—Starting from today, Julius will be living here together with our family. He was originally your cousin but, from here on out he will be your elder brother.”

Indeed, what his father had brought together as head of the household, was his first meeting with his “elder brother”.

That day, Joshua’s condition was miraculously decent, and he could sit for dinner with his family for the first time in a while, but the identity of the unfamiliar boy who would be alongside them would be a question answered by their initial introduction.

As Joshua was bewildered by the sudden affair, his father continued whilst gesturing to his “elder brother”.

Father: “Julius is the son of my younger brother, but the other day, he lost his parents in an accident. Therefore, this house has taken him into custody, but… Joshua, is there anything you would like to ask?”

Joshua: “Anything, I would like to ask?”

Father: “Indeed. Julius is three years your elder… if we raise him under the custody of this household, he will adopt the position of being your elder brother. —In that case, your own position and circumstances will be altered in no small way.”

“In no small way”, Joshua thought the phrasing was very characteristic of his father.

For a moment, the emotion that flashed through his father’s yellow eyes, were likely something like feelings of guilt that he could not suppress. And, Joshua was perfectly aware of the sin that served as its genesis.

By birth, Joshua’s weak constitution had caused trouble for many people, starting with his parents. Any such child would naturally learn how to read an adult’s complexion.

That was the case for Joshua. Hence, he was able to surmise his father’s true thoughts—while apologetic to Joshua, he prioritized a sense to fulfill the duty of House Juukulius, feeling the turmoil between his two positions of father and Knight.

In the first place, Joshua bore no right to object to the decision that arose from his father’s deliberations.

If his father truly felt guilt from his deliberations and inner turmoil, there was no need to harbor it. If only he had been born with a decent body from the outset, no such needless discord would have arisen here.

With that being the case, Joshua thought of himself as needless discord incarnate, and derided himself.

Joshua: “It is alright, Father. If that is what you have decided, Father, I will abide.”

Hiding his self derision behind a smile he had naturally become proficient at displaying, Joshua chose to nod as a reasonable child to put his father at ease.

Hearing Joshua’s response, the ends of his father’s eyebrows lowered in relief. To despair, to reproach his father as one who could not even see through to the true feelings of his own child, would be barking up the wrong tree.

That was the extent to which Joshua had perfected his demeanor of hiding the truth of his feelings.

That was why—

Father: “—Julius, introduce yourself.”

Julius: “Y-Yes, Father.”

Encouraged by his father, his “elder brother” nervously stepped forward. As if to prove his lineage as a Juukulius, the hue of his hair and eyes was identical to that of Joshua and his father.

With those gentle features and a nervous air about him, the boy bowed in a respectful gesture, and,

Julius: “As of today I’ll be living as a member of the head household, I’m Julius Juukulius. It’ll be weird calling myself your older brother even though I came here later, but… it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Uttering the words he had likely practiced many times over for this without hesitation, the boy—Julius, reached out his hand.

Joshua: "I am Joshua Juukulius. It is I who should be saying that it is my pleasure to meet you."

As Julius sought a handshake, Joshua politely attempted to fulfill the duty without flaw.

This was his first meeting with somebody he would surely go on to have a long relationship with. For better or for worse, so as to not hinder him from familiarizing himself with House Juukulius, he endeavored to take on an amiable demeanor bereft of personality.

So that unlike before, the sinner known as himself would not senselessly hold back the legs of others.

That was what he had thought, and yet—

Joshua: "—Eh?"

The moment they shook hands, Joshua blinked his eyes as he bore witness to an unthinkable sight.

Right after taking his hand, Julius had kneeled down before Joshua. Then, down on one knee on the dining room floor, he softly placed his lips upon the back of Joshua's hand.

—That was a kind of formality that a Knight would perform whilst facing a lady.

Julius: "For the many years to come, I'll be in your care."

With that, as Julius said that whilst down on a single knee, his ears flushed red from the deed he had yet to be accustomed to.

His voice had trembled, and his eyes had been darting about, but his expression alone was a Knight's face, through and through.

At that reality, Joshua gulped, and—

Father: "—Pffft, haha! Phwahahahahahaha! Julius, that is for when a Knight greets a lady. It's not the right one to use with Joshua…

pfft, ahahahahahahaha!”

Julius: “Eh… ah… eh… d-did I get it wrong?!”

His blunder pointed out, Julius, having thought he had accomplished it, was tempestuously discomposed.

And as his father pointed it out, he held his sides with the loudest laughter Joshua had ever heard from him. There were other retainers and servants present in the dining hall, and none of them could help but laugh at the scene.

Having won the laughter of his surroundings, Julius only became ever more flustered,

Julius: “P-Please don’t laugh! Even though I messed up, I tried to do my best…”

Father: “Ahh, we know, we know. Well, it is fine as long as you learn your courtesies from here on. As long as you are willing to learn, that will be enough.”

Julius frantically tried to explain himself, and his father answered while wiping the tears that had emerged in the corners of his eyes. Becoming increasingly disheartened by his father’s reaction, Julius suddenly turned to Joshua.

It seemed as though he was surely about to apologize due to embarrassing Joshua by getting him caught up in his own blunder. However—

Julius: “A-Are you alright?”

Joshua: “…Eh?”

Julius: “I mean, you’re crying… are you hurt somewhere?”

Meeting Julius’s worried gaze, Joshua was at a loss for what to say. But, Julius reached out his hand to Joshua’s cheek, and touching it with his fingers, he spoke, “See”,

Julius: “—Tears.”

At the tip of Julius's small finger, it was certain that a droplet of water had been wavering.

Joshua: "—Fh… Khhh…"

The next moment, his emotions ruptured easily to an extent that even he himself could not believe.

That was the muddy torrent of unknown emotions that he had not realized were being held back by an embankment.

Unable to do anything about the vigor of that as it all came bursting out, miserable tears overflowed wretchedly.

Julius: "Wah, wa-wah! Uwah-, Father! What should we do?!"

Father: "J-Joshua, what's the matter?! If something is wrong then say so, what's the matter?!"

As Joshua suddenly burst into tears, Julius and his father began to panic.

At the unusual behavior of his son who until now had not been difficult to deal with outside of his physical constitution, his father, as well as the other adults, were all discomposed as they gathered all their efforts to stop Joshua's tears.

—Ultimately, it ended up taking a while for Joshua to stop crying, and the feast meant to celebrate his first meeting with his "elder brother", was left as a memory of everybody eating a cold meal.

5

—The scenery outside the window always appeared as a dream his hands could never reach.

???: "I wonder, will my condition be fine today?"

With shallow, short breaths, Joshua muttered with his hand over his own chest.

Every morning, it was important for him to ascertain that sensation to determine how well he would be able to move. If one did not discern that, humans were creatures easily prone to error.

All the more so in Joshua's case, since the degree of that error was directly relevant to his own life.

He exhaled a faint "Fuuu…", however, Joshua would not overly rely on his self-diagnosis.

After all, in the past few days, Joshua's physical condition had reached an extremity of violent fluctuation. Immediately after being assailed by feverish nightmares, he was suddenly in the best condition he had been all year, greatly troubling the members of the household. His intention had not been to impose on his surroundings, so he had wanted to remain on either of the two sides.

As for which of the two sides he ought to lean towards, his mind was in a state of indecision, and that indecision ended up being reflected in the state of his own body, so he thought.

Joshua: "…"

Lying on his bed with his eyes closed, what reached Joshua's ears was a sound from outside the window he had yet to grow accustomed to—at some point in these few days, he had learned that it was the sound of wooden swords trading blows.

Slowly taking his time as he got out of bed, Joshua pulled open the shades and narrowed his eyes at the beams of sunlight, ascertaining the scenery outside the window; there were two figures clashing in the mansion's courtyard.

One of the two figures was the current head of House Juukulius, Joshua's father, clad in well tailored garments and with a wooden sword in hand, he stood leisurely with such leeway that he had yet to even draw sweat. Facing him, with a white shirt dirtied by sweat and dust after having shed his tunic was Julius, breathing heavily as he clutched his wooden sword with both hands.

—Julius Juukulius's special training regiment had commenced the very next morning after their introduction.

Every morning, Julius would receive direct tutelage from his father like that, making it routine for Joshua to hear the clashing of wooden swords in the early morning from his bed.

This morning was no exception, with a do-or-die spirit writ upon his face, Julius resolutely brandished the wooden sword—

Julius: "—Hk."

Father: "Do not lose focus. Your concentration is yet lacking, Julius."

The tip of his father's wooden sword sprang up elegantly, disarming the weapon from Julius's hand. Then, the fluttering blade was fastened to Julius's neck, and holding his breath, Julius dejectedly hung his head saying, "I-It is my defeat".

The voice admitting defeat oozed with frustration, and his father suddenly smiled,

Father: "It takes a great man to feel frustration over a loss against myself. I may look like this, but I too am a Knight of the kingdom. My blade has been honed for the sake of protecting the Kingdom, you shall not catch it lagging behind so easily."

Julius: "That's…! That's, I understand. But, that doesn't mean it's not frustrating. If I didn't feel frustration upon losing, then that wouldn't be me anymore."

Father: "—. I suppose you have inherited that strength of will from your father. Indeed, you are much like him."

Hearing Julius's words, his father held a distant gaze for but a moment. Julius was taken aback by the gaze that seemed to long for someone, and then his father shook his head with a "No".

Father: "By admitting your inability to defeat an opponent whom you well and truly cannot beat, you may waver in your meaning for holding the sword… I too have had to answer to these words. I wonder when it was that even my frustration faded."

Julius: “Unc… Father, I’m…”

Father: “It is unavoidable. Well then, go pick up your sword. Get changed, and then it is time to have breakfast.”

Julius: “…Yes.”

As his father indicated the end of their early morning training, Julius nodded with a look of incomprehension on his face, and then went to pick up his wooden sword. Then, upon gathering it, he noticed the presence of a spectator watching from the open window.

Joshua’s mouth opened with a brief “Ah” as he exchanged gazes with Julius.

For a moment, Joshua held his tongue at the awkward sensation, and Julius, after blinking several times,

Julius: “Ahh ummm… good morning, Joshua. Did you sleep well last night?”

Joshua understood that this was his elder brother’s best attempt at closing the distance, with it not having been very long since they had become siblings. Hence, as Joshua clutched his pajamas close to his chest, he forged a smile.

Joshua: “Yes, good morning to you. It seems like you have been working hard this morning, Nii-sama.”

As he prayed that no unpleasantness could be heard in that greeting, he wore that artificial smile.

6

Julius: “Originally, I never so much as even thought of anything like becoming a Knight.”

It was after they had finished eating breakfast together in Joshua’s room that Julius began to speak about that.

As long as his days of poor condition continued, Joshua would primarily have his meals in his own room.

The same went for this morning, but this time Julius had brought his own food there, and so they ended up eating together for some unknown reason. —No, to say it was an unknown reason would be a lie.

Ever since Julius suggested that they eat breakfast together, it had been clear to Joshua that he had wanted to talk about something. Julius's gaze restlessly glanced at Joshua to hasten him to finish his food, and as soon as they could talk did he begin with those initial words.

But then again, as most could probably imagine, the contents were regarding the special training regiment he was being given.

Joshua's father—who was now also Julius's father, but the head of Juukulius was now absorbed in eagerly training Julius, and his feelings of guilt concerning Joshua had vanished into thin air. Be that as it may, this was the Knightly education his father had been eagerly awaiting to give, so it was no wonder why he was so enthusiastic.

Of course, for Julius, who was actually undergoing that enthusiastic education, it must have been tough. —But, was it a sin for him to think it a blessing, even if it seemed difficult?

Julius: "I never thought that it would end up being like this. Every day is filled with things I didn't know."

Joshua: "—Back when you lived with your family at your old house, what did you spend your time doing, Nii-sama?"

Concealing his own inner thoughts, Joshua provided an outlet for Julius's woes.

Two siblings, a familial relationship that would go on for a long time, his own position within the family hereafter—nothing good would come to House Juukulius if he had a bad relationship with Julius.

Joshua had scored his family minus points at the very moment of his birth. He could not afford to incur any further losses.

At Joshua’s innocuous question, Julius titled his head saying, “House?”,

Julius: “At my house, I mostly just did things to help out mom and dad. If I wasn’t doing that, I would play with my friends near my house… I had no idea that I had relatives from such a house this big.”

Joshua: “…Did your late father tell you anything of House Juukulius?”

Julius: “Nothing at all! That’s why, when Uncle… when my current father came to get me, I was so surprised.”

Julius threw his arms up in an exaggerated gesture, to which Joshua narrowed his yellow eyes.

His father’s younger brother—Julius’s true father, the person who was his own uncle was somebody Joshua had heard many stories about. An eccentric of House Juukulius who did not become a Knight, immediately getting married to a town’s woman after his elder brother inherited the family headship, and started life like that without relying on his family.

Favoring the town life unthinkable for one born a Juukulius, he was a person who had abandoned the path of the Knight and chosen to live a modest and common life. It was not as though he was shunned, but he had little contact with his relatives.

The reason that that uncle and his wife passed away was due to a deluge from a river that had happened in the town where Julius had been living with his family; the two of them had been swept away by the flash flood whilst rescuing others.

Joshua: “They must have been admirable parents.”

Julius: “…”

Joshua: “Nii-sama?”

If the cause of their death was saving others, it was the result of their just and virtuous behavior.

In the end, even if he had drifted away from House Juukulius, his uncle had died in a manner befitting a Knight. That in itself could only be described as irony, but Joshua thought he could honestly respect his uncle and his wife.

Only, having hushed silent at Joshua's words, Julius bit his lip,

Julius: "Dad and Mom, they weren't anyone so special. But, everyone keeps telling me that they did something admirable, even Father says so. But…"

At that point, Julius sniveled. And then, with tears in his eyes, he continued.

Julius: "But, even if it wouldn't have been as admirable, I just wanted them to keep living. Is it strange for me to think that?"

Joshua: "That is…"

That was a question which Joshua could not find an answer to.

He had just thought so a moment prior. His uncle had died as a Knight, even if he had left House Juukulius. To Joshua, that seemed like a happiness greater than no other.

Born to a lineage of Knights, Joshua was a sinner who had lost that qualification from birth.

As a Juukulius, if Joshua could live and die like a Knight, then the only possible method to do so would be one akin to his uncle's final moments, such was how it seemed—.

Julius: "Mom and Dad both died, then Father brought me here to this house, and you became my little brother, Joshua, all sorts of things have changed all at once… however, I'm still worried."

Joshua: "…What, are you worried about?"

Without realizing, Joshua's question became stiff, and pointed.

He had a body he could move freely, he had a real father who had died like a Knight, Joshua's own father was happily providing him with the necessary training to become a Knight, the path that was supposed to have been walked by Joshua Juukulius, would from now on be walked by Julius Juukulius without question from anybody.

Even if not a Knight by birth, his elder brother would struggle onwards until he became a Knight. —Following the path desired of him, just what did Julius have to be worried about?

Joshua: "…"

With his head hanging down, Julius did not notice the sharp stare of Joshua's yellow eyes. Only, forcefully wiping his eyes with his sleeves, as his eyes went red,

Julius: "Just, just what am I supposed to do? Is it really fine for me to just keep doing as Father says? If I do that…"

—Would he become someone capable of repaying his dead mother and father?

As Julius could not find the words beyond the pause, in his place, Joshua comprehended the sentiments that he had wanted to say, that had perplexed him, tormented him, and distressed him.

For a discussion between young, newly-made siblings, this was surely a proposition that was too heavy.

However, at this time, Joshua earnestly deliberated. He pondered. Attempting to give the best response that he could to Julius's anguish, he fretted earnestly.

Why he was attempting to do such a thing, he knew not. —Only, he suddenly had a thought.

Julius Juukulius was a person who, as a Knight of House Juukulius, would go on to walk the path originally meant to be tread by Joshua Juukulius.

That was something he could curse. But, at the same time, was it not also possible for him to choose to not curse it?

—Despite having been born into a family of Knights, Joshua would live as a sinner who had failed to become a Knight.

—Despite having been raised as a commoner, Julius would go on to live as a Knight from a family of Knights.

These two lives were deeply intertwined by a complex destiny.

However, was that not precisely why meaning could be discovered therein?

The footsteps of Julius Juukulius would surely tread the unfulfilled path of Joshua Juukulius.

Joshua: “Hero…”

Suddenly, Julius widened his eyes with an “Eh?” at the word Joshua had muttered. As Julius looked at him in surprise, Joshua looked back into his elder brother’s eyes, and smiled.

Neither was it a smile hiding his self-derision, nor was it one to keep up appearance; it was a true, proper smile.

Joshua: “Nii-sama, your parents were admirable people. In that case, if you wish to be worthy of those parents, then Nii-sama must become a hero.”

Julius: “He-row… what’s that?”

He blinked his yellow eyes, however, his question harboring an unconcealable expectation, Julius enquired.

At his elder brother’s gaze, Joshua cast his eyes towards the bookshelf in his room. It contained various books from all sorts of times and places that his father had gathered for Joshua’s sake.

Within those books were Joshua’s aspirations, and the history that would become Julius’s ideals.

Julius: “Books…?”

Joshua: “So many histories, so many stories, so many legends. And in all of them, there are heroes.”

Julius: “I don’t get it… Are you telling me to become someone who would be written about in books?”

Joshua: “That is not the number one objective. But, neither is it a dream. If you become a hero.”

Julius: “So then what’s a hero?!”

Smiling at his elder brother, whose eyes were darting about, eager for the answer, Joshua contemplated.

Quietly, leisurely, he would impart unto him the tales of those heroes.

To his new “elder brother”, in order for Joshua Juukulius to entrust him with his wishes, he would sincerely impart them.

Joshua: “To begin with, who should I teach Nii-sama about first?”

When he thought about that, he got a little, just a little, excited.

Ever since this occasion, Joshua would eagerly await Julius’s visits to his room.

Thus, that was the day upon which the two of them became the Juukulius siblings for certain.

—The path for a Knight of House Juukulius to become a hero, the two brothers would thus walk it together.

7

—The scenery outside the window always appeared as a dream his hands could never reach.

Joshua: “Listen up, Nii-sama. A Juukulius must conduct himself with formality worthy of their name. And so, Nii-sama must go above and beyond that.”

Julius: “Even if you say to go above… what should I specifically do?”

Joshua: “Have I not told you many times already? —It is to be a hero.”

Asserting so, Joshua shoved the thick book in his hands towards the chest of his elder brother.

Even since the morning of the greatest vow of Joshua’s life, it had become a daily routine for Julius and Joshua to eat their breakfasts together, and discuss various things like this as siblings.

Most of the time, the contents of their discussion was Julius complaining about the strict Knightly education he was undergoing, as well as Joshua’s strict lectures brimming with aspiration on what it meant to be a Juukulius.

Thus, the book he just handed over was also a part of those hopeful lectures.

Julius: “Joshua, it can’t be, this book is…”

Joshua: “Indeed, I have finally gotten my hands on the continuation. “The Legend of Reid Astrea”, depicting the entire life of the first generation Sword Saint, Reid Astrea, this is the sixth book of the fifty total volumes.”

Julius: “Ooh, yes! After he beheaded that blight dragon, I’ve been curious as to what happened next!”

Eyes gleaming at the book at hand, Julius’s high spirits caused Joshua’s lips to curve into a smile.

Concurrent with his father’s Knightly education regiment, the progress of the hero education Joshua was giving to Julius was going smoothly. His elder brother, who had initially not been familiar with even the sound of “hero”, had been completely mesmerized by them after a short while.

To begin with, the honest and straightforward Julius was grounded in training. Just as a brand new blank canvas could be painted on, Julius was getting closer to Joshua's ideal day by day.

Joshua considered that growth of Julius's as equal to his own growth, and felt as if the adventures unfolding around Julius were great adventures for himself.

The scenery outside the window that he could absolutely never reach, to make it as if his hand was reaching it—.

Julius: "…Hm? What's the matter, Joshua? You're making a strange face."

Suddenly, Julius, who had been immersed in reading the book, looked up. Rather than the contents of the book, it seemed like he had been bothered by Joshua's gaze as it looked at his own side profile.

In response to Julius's question, Joshua forced a smile with a "No",

Joshua: "It is nothing important. Only, I am delighted that Nii-sama has taken such an interest in heroes."

Julius: "That isn't thanks to me, but rather because of how incredible the people in these books are."

Perhaps out of embarrassment, Julius averted his gaze and scratched the tip of his nose. Seeing his elder brother slightly flush red in the face, Joshua sighed, and,

Joshua: "Is it not all too much?"

Julius: "All too much?"

Joshua: "You have sword training with Father, as well as learning many other things, is that not so? On top of all that, you also have study sessions about heroes with me, and recently…"

Julius: "Ah, my Divine Protection? Yeah. I was also surprised by that."

As if to say it was no big deal, Julius laughed off the matter of his Divine Protection of Gathering Spirits.

It was roughly a month prior that Julius became aware of his Divine Protection—on a day upon which the siblings had ended up talking until it got dark, Joshua had screamed upon seeing the various faint lights accompanying him as they returned through the garden, and it was discovered that they were actually a gathering of Lesser Spirits.

Julius: “Since a long time ago, I’ve always had a vague feeling that I had somebody by my side, but I had no idea that those were actually Spirits. Thanks to them, I was never lonely.”

Joshua: “Is that so…? But, because of that you now also have more training for your Divine Protection, correct?”

Julius: “Ahh, you were asking if that was all too much? Hm, it’s a bit troublesome, but it’s not too much. For me, I think a little bit of troublesomeness is just right. I feel like I’m suited to doing troublesome things.”

Joshua: “Suited to doing troublesome things… fufu-, what is that supposed to mean, silly?”

Hearing a pride of the sort he had not heard before, Joshua involuntarily chuckled. Seeing his reaction, Julius folded his arms, saying “Ah, you laughed”,

Julius: “Listen, just think about it. It even applies to this book, but aren’t all the heroes always going through troublesome things? They overcome them, and have their names left in history… all of them are experts on troublesome stuff!”

Joshua: “So you mean to say, that being suited to troublesomeness gives you the makings of a hero, Nii-sama?”

Julius: “Exactly! That makes you glad too, doesn’t it Joshua?”

With a cheerful smile, Julius pounded his chest. That attitude made Joshua half-exasperated, and half-hopeful, so he nodded with an “Indeed”.

Regardless if that was truly the case, the fact that Julius was being spurred on by his own perception was more important than anything else. Joshua wanted his elder brother to walk the path of the Knight, the path to become a hero with his chest puffed up in pride, not reluctantly.

In order to grant the dearest wish of Julius Juukulius, and by extension, of Joshua Juukulius, that would surely play a part.

They were both still children. Without rushing, they would steadily progress step by step.

That was the siblings', Joshua and Julius's, path as Knights of House Juukulius.

That road, steep and long, they would take their time and walk it together—

—The moment he laid eyes upon the boy of red-hair, he realized that such an ideal was entirely naive.

Joshua: "…"

Blazing red hair, and blue eyes that captured a clear azure sky. Treading with a gallant air atop the carpet laid out was a child the same age as Joshua, yet to even turn ten years old.

Ascending to the Royal Castle, and granted an audience with the King to receive his exalted words, it was an important occasion.

Once a child born of the lineages of Knights and nobles serving the Kingdom reached a certain age, they would be brought before His Majesty the King in a ceremony held for them to pledge their allegiance into the future.

On this day, the siblings Joshua and Julius were brought by their father to ascend to the Royal Castle.

Originally it was supposed to be an opportunity to unveil Julius, but wanting to see his elder brother's big moment, Joshua had begged and pleaded to be taken along.

The King and the old men of the Council of Wise Men, the audience gathered of the people at the center of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Joshua proudly awaited the moment to find out what sort of evaluation they would give to Julius.

That young, naive outlook was shattered without a trace by the mere sight of a “hero” walking.

Joshua, who admired “heroes”, and had aspired to tailor Julius into one, clearly understood.

Unmistakably, that was a “hero”. That was the very definition, of a “hero”.

He might have been a child, but a child was naught more than the form he took. He might have been a human, but a human was naught more than the form he took.

Joshua: “—Ah.”

Chancing upon the intensity of such a “hero”, Joshua felt a violent sense of suffocation, and cast his gaze down. Immediately after looking down, he became curious as to the reaction of Julius beside him, and peered his way.

Joshua thought his elder brother might be experiencing the same level of impact as he was, wondering if his eyes had maybe clouded over—

Julius: “—That, is the real deal.”

Indeed, as Julius unconsciously vocalized his admiration, none of the selfsame humiliation felt by Joshua tarnished his side profile.

—Humiliation, realizing his own thoughts to be such, Joshua was astonished.

Joshua: “…”

Humiliation, yes, it was humiliation.

What Joshua experienced upon witnessing the sight of that “hero” was unmistakably humiliation. Today, all of Joshua’s diligent studies up until this very moment were entirely denied by the nature of that “hero”.

The matter of still being a child, the matter of only having just begun learning, all of that was nothing more than excuses, the existence of a “hero” who ought to have had the same amount of time denied him.

Then, Julius, who ought to have received the same impact as Joshua, was watching with eyes gleaming. —It was just as if he had ended up discovering a different dream, a different ideal, a different path to walk than those belonging to Joshua.

Father: “—Hk, Joshua!”

It was too late by the time they noticed.

Unable to breath, Joshua clutched his chest and collapsed, his father’s arms promptly supporting him. However, Joshua’s consciousness faded away, and his world went black.

His father’s voice, Julius’s voice were both calling out to him, but he could muster no response. —In truth, he had no proof that Julius had actually been calling out to him.

Perhaps Julius was not even looking at Joshua, and was even now staring at that “hero”.

To be able to say that such was not a possibility, Joshua could not find enough value in his own existence.

Only, if there was anything he could say for certain, there was just one thing. —The path walked by Julius Juukulius, and the path walked by Joshua Juukulius, were by no means the same.

8

After that, Joshua’s physical condition rapidly declined.

Unable to get out of bed, his days assailed by feverish nightmares continued for a while.

The healers and members of the household all told him to rest well, but he could not rest. Whenever he closed his eyes, he would recall the events in that audience chamber, destroying Joshua's heart many times over again.

The catalyst, had been the existence of that "hero".

But, what truly shattered Joshua's heart was not the nature of that "hero", but rather—

???: "—Joshua, how are you feeling?"

Joshua: "…Nii-sama."

Opening the door of the room by a crack, the voice that came in was Julius's, worried about Joshua. Having received a response, his elder brother sighed, braced his expression, and walked over to him.

So as to not show Julius his weak face, Joshua clawed at his own arms and forged an expression.

Joshua: "Today is, somewhat, I guess… Nii-sama, how are you?"

Julius: "I'm… no, I am progressing favorably. Father also seemed quite surprised that I had changed."

Whether it was to relieve him, or if it was just his true feelings, Julius's expression had a certain strength to it.

His elder brother's demeanor had somewhat settled, clearly distinct to before when his objective had been uncertain, it now appeared as the strong will of one who had firmly decided on the path they were striving towards.

And, the moment in which Julius had determined his path was one in which Joshua had also been present.

And yet, even though they ought to have beheld the same sight, why, for Joshua, was that path—

Julius: "Joshua, is there anything you would like to do?"

Joshua: "…Anything, I would like to do, is it?"

With a neat expression, Joshua regurgitated the question, and Julius nodded as a Knight would.

As that reaction caused his heart to ache, Joshua pondered for a moment, and then glanced outside the window.

Outside the window of his room was the courtyard in which Julius would be instructed in swordsmanship every morning. There was an appa tree growing at the edge of the courtyard—it was something that had been planted to celebrate Joshua's birth.

Currently, he could see that the appa tree was bearing fruit of a bright red hue.

Joshua: "…Appa."

Julius: "Hm? Appa… ahh, those appas?!"

Following Joshua's line of sight, Julius clapped his hands when he noticed the appa tree. Then, Julius forcefully pounded his chest, saying, "Alright, got it",

Julius: "Leave it to me. After all, this Nii-sama of yours will make you happy!"

Jumping to conclusions, Julius vigorously charged out of the room. To his back, Joshua reached out his hand with an "Ah". But, it did not reach him.

The hand that had failed to reach him, was not something that Julius even noticed.

Joshua: "What a fool I am."

In high spirits, with vigor, the back ran off. He had been mistaken to think he was the same as him.

Having gotten the mistaken idea in his head that he could be the same, he was laughable, utterly foolish, stupid, and pitiful.

Swiftly climbing up the distant garden tree, Julius quietly secured the appa. As if to celebrate the deed performed out of consideration for his younger brother, the radiance of Spirits could be seen surrounding him.

Unable to bear the sight of that, Joshua covered his face with his hands, averting his eyes from the window.

And then, for the first time in a long while, he keenly felt it. —That he, was a sinner by birth.

Joshua: “—Ah, why is it that I am still alive?”

As soon as he admitted his own sins, his foolishness, Joshua felt his body getting lighter, and laughed.

As the tears besmeared his cheeks, he laughed, laughed, he continued to laugh.

—Ever since then, Joshua had firmly reevaluated his own existence.

He must never get the wrong idea. He must never set his sights too high.

He must never disdain that wonderful elder brother, Julius Juukulius, as being the same as himself.

In place of his inadequate self, all the righteousness, all the magnificence of a Juukulius, would be fulfilled by Julius. Accomplished, by Julius. Proved, by Julius.

It was fine for Joshua Juukulius to be nothing more than a straw mat to be walked over on that path.

9

???: “…”

Alongside the old, nostalgic memory, Joshua recalled an ache in his heart, and narrowed his eyes.

Having departed Anastasia’s office, Joshua had come to a halt in the hallway, and at the sense of deja vu from the scenery outside the window, he perceived the presence of a red appa similar to back then.

He would not think of that as a bitter memory. He considered the accompaniment of pain as a necessary wound.

Joshua: “Though, it is ironic that ever since that happened, my constitution has stopped breaking down.”

The members of the household joked that it was the effect of the appa that Julius had given him.

In actuality, that day had been a turning point for Joshua’s condition to dramatically improve, and he was no longer assailed by fevers in bed. —As if his feelings to not get in the way of his elder brother had borne an effect on his body.

And now, Joshua’s way of living ceasing at that alone was nothing he would deem acceptable.

Joshua: “No matter what, I need to be useful to Nii-sama.”

That was the best course of action that Joshua could take as the younger brother of Julius Juukulius. For him, unable to reach the “Finest”, it was the “Best” he could do.

???: “Golly, Joshua, why’re ya standin’ ‘round like a fool ‘n yer face all pale! Not feelin’ well?!”

Then, upon renewing his feelings, a voice boomed so loud that it made the window he was touching shake. When he turned around, there was a large dogman striding towards him with large steps.

Joshua: “Ricardo-san… I am actually surging with energy. Can you not tell by looking at me?”

Ricardo: “Ohh, that so? Couldn’t tell in the slightest! Yer face is way too pale as always!”

Joshua: “Hmm, that is a bit upsetting…”

Upon Ricardo's words that sounded like an angry shout, Joshua adjusted the position of his dislodged monocle.

In reality, it was the truth that motivation was welling up inside him. Since a long time ago, Joshua's body would begin to produce energy the moment he decided on something as his objective. There was no doubt that this was of the same pedigree.

Ricardo: "I'd completely thought that ya'd be in a huge panic over bein' sent over to the elf lady's place! If ya ain't down in the dumps, then I can rest assured even with Mimi goin'! Countin' on ya!"

Joshua: "If it was just a bit prior, I would not have been able to earnestly accept the encouragement, by my current self is alright. Please leave it to me. I will firmly fulfill my role in supervising Mimi."

Ricardo: "Gotcha, gotcha, that's darn wonderful! Well, go do yer best without overdoin' yer best, yeah?!"

With a bit of difficult advice, Ricardo clapped Joshua on the back with his huge palm.

Crying out a "Gyan!", Joshua's monocle fell off and tears emerged in his eyes as he stared at Ricardo. As expected, he did not have any energy to resist physical damage, so he burst into a coughing fit.

Joshua: "Ghoghhh, Ricardo-san! If you act like that to everyone, the reputation of our Camp will…!"

Ricardo: "Darn it, happened again! My bad, my bad! Wahahahahaha!"

Joshua: "This is no time to be "wahaha"-ing, truly!"

Ricardo patted his own head casually, prompting Joshua to take a very deep breath.

However, contrary to Joshua's feelings, Ricardo's expression was somewhat amused. Joshua glanced back with a "What is it?", and,

Ricardo: "Nothin', ain't nothin', I was just impressed at how familiar ya've become with the lot of us, Joshua."

Joshua: "That is… well, now that you say it, I suppose that is so."

Ricardo: "See? That's the spirit. Even if they've got beef with the Miss over at the elf lady's place, they ain't gotta have beef with us."

Joshua: "…"

Ricardo laughed as he flashed his fangs, and when thinking back on it, even this smile had been something he had been afraid of.

That had also been the case with the triplets of Mimi, Hetaro, and Tivey, and it had even been the case with Anastasia. To begin with, Joshua was not good with the world around him expanding, and many times had he stopped in his tracks.

Only, it was Joshua's doctrine to have just the right amount of caution so as to ensure prudence, without going too far and ending up with cowardice.

Joshua: "Hence, I will humbly be taking that with a grain of salt."

Ricardo: "Kah! Now ain't ya a cheeky one!"

As Ricardo heartily burst into laughter, Joshua did understand his point. But, it was fine.

Led by Julius's hand, those present in his unexpectedly widened world were Anastasia and the members of the Iron Fang, so Joshua would not think to desire more than that, nor would he wish for it.

—Even if he reached his hand out towards the appa, he would never be able to reach it, such was Joshua's life.

10

—Via such ideas, Joshua Juukulius's job as an envoy was fulfilled.

There should be no problem in asserting such. In truth, Mimi's worried-for rampage or the danger of the Emilia Camp per rumors, had not exhibited enough hazard for Joshua to be on guard.

Above all, it was not that there had been no problems.

The run-in with the “Lolimancer” in question had left him with an unanticipatedly queer impression, Mimi recklessly getting entangled with the combat attaché of Emilia camp, many scenes had wracked his nerves.

But, looking at the overall picture, with there having been no obstructions on the way to and fro, and having safely delivered the letter, he could praise himself as having scored perfectly as an envoy.

However, what was delivered to Emilia was only an invitation—as a member of Anastasia camp, whether it would serve useful to his master and affiliated Julius would come down to what happened thereon.

—A convening of the Royal Candidates, in the Watergate City of Priestella; the success of which would determine that result.

And right now, with the reassured addition of Emilia Camp, the day after confirming the arrival of Crusch Camp and Felt Camp, Joshua had been entrusted with a vital task from Anastasia and was currently away from the inn.

His mission was—

???: “—So it was very much this letter! Then I would very much be honored to have been of help!”

Faced with the youth smiling from his heart as he pronounced so, Joshua responded with a “Yes” as he lowered his eyelids in relief.

Joshua: “It was an extremely, exceedingly, invariably important letter. I would not be able to show my face before anyone had I been unable to return with this. You are, um…”

Schult: “Ah! I very much am Schult, Onii-san.”

Joshua: “—Schult-kun. Had you not been there, House Juukulius would have faced an enormous blemish to its name on this day. Thank you for safeguarding the history of my family…!”

Schult: “It is very much my honor!”

Before the bowing Joshua was a youth embarrassed but not fully unwelcoming of the gesture—Schult. Whilst expressing gratitude to the sheepish boy, Joshua ascertained a sensation on his chest.

In the interior of the coat his hand touched, was a singular letter—which he had received from a messenger at one of the city’s great entry gates under Anastasia’s instruction.

Unsealed was the letter. Its particulars even Joshua ignorant of, he knew on this day it would bear an important integrand to the assemblage of the Royal Candidates invited to Priestella. Such that one candidate had carried themselves all the way for the purpose of this very letter’s content.

Only this crucial, vital letter could he not lose—

Schult: “But, when I saw Onii-san speed walking after the letter flitting about in the air, I was very much surprised as well!”

Joshua: “Ugk! I-I apologize for the tremendous inconvenience… for the record, I was not speed walking but sprinting.”

Schult: “Is that very much so! Thanks to Onii-san’s slow scuttle, I’m very much glad I was able to catch up timely! I was very much able to deliver the letter as well!”

Schult with his wide smile bore no ill-will, the cause of his perturb fully being Joshua’s deficit stamina and slow feet, so he resignedly perturbed.

Anyhow, Joshua was rescued from a self-induced failure by Schult thanks to him picking the letter kidnapped by the mischievous gale. He could do anything to repay the favor.

And to Joshua’s subsequent proposal, Schult bashfully covered his eyes,

Schult: “The truth is, very much embarrassingly so, I got lost. Should it pose no problem, I’d very much like if you could find my master with me…!”

Alongside the boy who gave an unprayed opportunity for repaying a favor, Joshua walked.

Coincidentally upon hearing the details, the place Schult strayed away from his master seemed to be in close proximity to the Water Plumage Pavilion where Joshua and everyone else were lodging, relieving him that he could guide him there.

Joshua: “To propose repaying a favor and then being of no assistance, precisely that would make me lose face.”

Schult’s circumstance of being a lost child was capable of eliciting smiles, but this was Priestella, counted among the five great cities of Lugunica. Pathways complicated connected to the waterways spread throughout the city, and with no signboards, it was an artificial labyrinth where grown adults could lose sight of their destination.

Joshua: “The truth is, the city was structured as a trap against hostile, apparently. Therefore, the complicated routes are an arrangement to that end.”

Schult: “Whoa~, Onii-san, you are very much extremely knowledgeable. Where did you learn of such a thing?”

Joshua: “All of it is what I have picked up from books. Not something I learned from personal firsthand experience, none whatsoever.”

Waving one finger, as he recited a part of Priestella’s history, Joshua then expressed a bitter smile. But to his bitter smile, Schult enunciated a “Is that the case?” as he tilted his neck,

Schult: “My master also often reads books. And, often says this. — True knowledge is to haul substance what is learned from books at the necessary moment.”

Joshua: “…”

Schult: “Therefore, Onii-san, who properly apprised me of what he studied from books, is an upstanding and cool person is what I think!”

Joshua gulped a single breath before Schult, who clutched his hand to his chest in emphasis.

No superfluous concern or pity towards Joshua lodged in the words of the sincere youth. Schult was merely vocalizing the philosophy he had learned and believed in.

And that was something Schult had learned and received from his master.

Joshua: “Schult-kun, you respect that person, do you not?”

Schult: “…Yes very much! So much so that the word “respect” is insufficient to convey it! Do you also have someone you respect, Onii-san?”

Joshua: “—. Hehe. I was awaiting that question.”

Schult: “Oh! I am very much glad I was able to live up to expectations!”

Joshua nodded as Schult pleasedly raised both of his arms, subsequently pointing his palm towards the sky. Pulled along in the same direction, Schult raised his face, ahead of his sight the sun.

Of course, peering directly at the sun would scorch the seer’s eyes.

Joshua: “And, for me, my Nii-sama is truly someone of such radiant gleam.”

Schult: “Onii-san’s onii-san is it! He very much seems amazing somehow!”

Joshua: “Precisely! Nii-sama is amazing. He can do anything, and he is endeavoring to be capable of doing everything. His way of being, his stride of life, his will, truly the Finest!”

Schult: “That is very cool! Radiant like the sun… very much like Priscilla-sama!”

Joshua’s mood also ascended as Schult listened on in high spirits.

Yes, Julius was amazing, wonderful. Despite befitting such indefeasible commend, his elder brother's evaluation of himself was far too low. He wished for him to recognize his own efforts, his devotion more.

Therefore, he must in perpetuity keep saying, you are amazing.

In Joshua's stead who was a disappointment for an heir, this was the elder brother's, House Juukulius's successor's–,

Schult: "Truly, you love your brother, Onii-san!"

Joshua: "…"

Schult: "Listening to it, I very much became happy as well! Ugh, I would very much like to meet Onii-san's onii-san!"

In obedience and innocence had Schult taken his words, to which Joshua blinked a few times and subsequently inhaled, deep.

It was truth that whenever he thought of Julius, ancillary noise he did not wish to listen to conjured within him. However, in response to Schult's sincere reply, he had a singular thing he could say.

About what Joshua thought of Julius, his upstanding, apogee-willed elder brother.

Joshua: "—. Yes. My Nii-sama is perfect, so once you meet him, Schult-kun, I'm sure you would become incapable of withstanding his charm. You might start wanting to change where you serve."

Schult: "Th-Th-Th-That very much is not true! I am singularly devoted very much to Priscilla-sama!"

Joshua smiled as Schult bashfully flurried his limbs and exclaimed.

The thought he had of wanting to have him meet his elder brother, was true. Having delightedly listened to the anecdote of his elder brother, he would assuredly immediately get along with Joshua's elder brother whom he took so much pride in. Finding it heartwarming, just by the anticipation Joshua felt his chest lighten.

Naturally, he must prioritize his work pertaining to the Royal Selection, including delivering the letter, so he must consider Schult's matter afterwards–,

Joshua: "…"

It was an instant afterwards that an abrupt sensation of unrest tickled Joshua's tympanic membrane.

Schult: "—? Huh? What, happened?"

Noticing the same aberration as Joshua, Schult too halted his march and tilted his head.

Ahead of the two who had been heading towards the inn, a commotion proliferating in an avenue of the lively city, feeling its progressive augmentation was drawing imminent to them–,

Joshua: "Schult-kun, please make haste and run."

Schult: "Onii-san?"

Upon discerning the identity of the uproar, Joshua addressed Schult. To the perplexed youth who rounded his eyes, Schult, Joshua proffered a hand.

What lay present in his hand was the vital letter Joshua bore the responsibility to deliver.

Joshua: "Please take this. Such that your master, delivers it to my Nii-sama."

Upon Joshua's voice that allowed neither assent or dissent, Schult accepted the letter with a trembling palm. Joshua then took a further step forward of Schult, and loudly vociferated,

Joshua: "Run!"

Abiding by his voice, Schult dashed in the opposite direction as though strummed. As though pursuing the scurrying young boy, in the same direction a stampeding crowd hurtled.

Whilst crossing against that shrieking crowd, Joshua advanced towards the other side all the more.

And—

???: “—Gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-!”

Brutish and violent, resounding a voice oozing with arousal, his short limbs swung and spattered blood onto the avenue.

Leaking a bitter grumble, flicked away were the guards charged with protecting the city. The soldiers, armed with swords, armor and will, however, were minced and diced like scraps of paper in atrocious cruelty.

The one to execute this, was a lump of black agilely crawling like a worm. —Not a clod of mud or shadows, but a being with hair grown long enough to veneer his short frame, abetting notice of the maleficent glint in his wicked glare.

???: “Haha~! That won’t do, won’t-do-won’t-do, completely won’t do-! Even though there’s so many people, doesn’t alleviate our starvation at all-! If it’s like this, we won’t be fulfilled-!”

Tenaciously expressing so, the proprietor of the ominous glint lorded over his surroundings. Colliding with his line of sight, was a crouched and cowering woman delayed in her escape, shouting “Hk”. Seeming as though her legs were incapable of harboring strength, towards the shrunken lady, slowly and steadily, footsteps drew closer.

???: “Judging from looks, Onee-san seems to be more the type to be Roy’s responsibility, isn’t i~t. But, there’s also the possibility of perchance being a delicacy, for the sake of trying let’s just try and see~.”

???: “P, lease… please! Please, forgive m… ~hk.”

???: “—Nope.”

The plea of the tearful woman resolved for death, the short frame, whilst exhibiting his sharp fangs, blasphemed upon.

His slender hand slowly reaching on, lethal weapons that had turned the soldiers into piles of blood, and the woman in identical manner, would afterwards be ended. —Right on its verge.

Joshua: “…That is, not beautiful.”

???: “E~h?”

One eyebrow raised, the blasphemer of life leaked an utterance doused in keen interest. His evaluating gaze, towards Joshua, who had broken into the space between him and the lady.

Of course, merely wedging his body in between, he could never obstruct the blasphemer’s intent of hazard. Henceforth, Joshua borrowed the sword of one of the collapsed soldiers, and repelled the opponent by charging at him with a blade.

Joshua: “Even if you can only manage crawling, please run. While I, have his attention at me.”

???: “—~Hk, I’m so sorry!”

Positioning his feet forward, Joshua faced off against the blasphemer, and the woman understood to leave that behind to run and escape.

He received an apology, but that was fine. He wanted her to run. Should the blasphemer attempt to obstruct her escape, he would—

???: “A~h, it’s unneede~d, that concern. That kind of prey seeming to be so sticky compared to that flavor, it’s not worthy of being placed on our platter either you see~. Rather than that, it’s you, yo~u.”

Joshua: “What about, me?”

???: “Feels mellow and rich. We love, people like Onii-san who have various emotions like condiments or spices abou~ndingly mixed in. Gonna start drooli~ng.”

In the eye of the blasphemer sticking his tongue out and licking his lips, witnessing a marked appetite overflow in literal accordance with his words, chilling shivers assailed Joshua's spine.

Though he did not possibly want to consider being the target of a will to seriously eat a human—

Joshua: "Even if that is taken to be the case, that is all the more reason to not leave you as is…!"

???: "Though the might didn't seem any good, the might is ni~ce. Even if that is serious or bluff, it's a pleasing touch of seasoning for enhancing and augmenting the scent and flavor you see~! Gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-!"

Clasping his hands to which daggers were tied, before his chest, the blasphemer clanged a shrill note of applause. Listening to that, Joshua quietly calmed his own heart.

Joshua: "—Nii-sama, please remain safe."

Gripping fast to the sensation of the sword, Joshua comprehended that his worst moment was right before his eyes, imminently approaching him.

What awaited him, was the ineluctable end. Yet, Joshua's heart had fallen lifelessly silent, even though his self was normally scared by everything, he was unable to understand himself.

—Merely, sword in hand, at this very moment of confronting the blasphemer of life that terrorized people, he surmised.

Joshua: "Someone like me, seeming as though I were a Knight…"

In days past, when he was yet a child, when his mistaken self had spoken to his elder brother, he thought back to.

Just as Julius's father, who had stepped away from House Juukulius, Joshua's uncle had lost his life, his stride of death befitting that of being a Knight, that alone was the solitary way, Joshua Juukulius could become a Knight.

???: "—Let's eat-!"

The irony, cognizing the arrival of that moment, Joshua smiled, and raised his sword overhead.

Gallant, unwavering, the sword's shimmer drawing an arc, was unmistakably the sword of Juukulius swung to protect people, to protect the weak.

—A younger brother worthy of the "Finest", the guardian sword of Joshua Juukulius.

END

Joshua Juukulius’s Careful Encyclopedia Ex (Edited Machine Translation)

1

—The scenery outside the window always looked like an illusion that was out of reach to me.

“—Joshua, what are ya doin’?”

“Wha?!”

Suddenly, a voice called out to him from beside him, making Joshua’s shoulders jump up and down like a child who had been caught playing a prank.

“Sorry, sorry, I startled ya by calling out to ya out of the blue, huh?”

“N-No, that’s not true. It was because I was spacing out…”

As Joshua turned around, adjusting his monocle that had shifted out of place, he responded to the gentle smile of his master—Anastasia.

In truth, it was Joshua’s mistake. Anastasia hadn’t tried to hide her presence, and she probably had no intention of surprising Joshua. After all, she wasn’t Mimi.

“But speaking of intentions, Mimi doesn’t mean to surprise anyone either. She just surprises people with her honest words and actions…”

“Fufufu, it seems like Joshua has gotten to know my children well. I’m very happy that they’re gettin’ along. And…”

“And?”

"Ya seemed to be starin' intently at them just now, didn't ya?"

Stroking the white fox scarf around her neck, Anastasia, who was standing next to Joshua, turned her light blue eyes to the outside of the window—to the Iron Fang's training being carried out there.

The garden of the Juukulius mansion in the royal capital was quite spacious and was now filled with about twenty people, giving it a lively appearance. At the center of it all was Ricardo with a large hatchet on his shoulder, and the people around him—all beastmen—were attacking him one by one.

It was a scene of Ricardo, the leader of the Iron Fang, harshly treating his members.

Naturally, among the people Ricardo was fighting was—

"Hey! Captain, it's time to finish this!"

"Ya idiot, if you're gonna surprise me, keep quiet! But you're energetic, that's one of yer good points!"

Raising a spirited voice, Mimi also jumped from behind Ricardo.

As per his sound advice, the surprise attack that revealed the attacker's presence was easily avoided, and Ricardo caught Mimi's robe with his hatchet and threw her far away.

"Yikes, I can't watch this. I'm glad they didn't get hurt."

"Ricardo is skilled and Mimi is also agile. Besides, I don't think there aren't any injuries. Training is about getting hit and getting hit and learning from that."

"—Hm?"

Anastasia covered her face with her hands and watched the members of the group train through the gaps between her fingers. She gave Joshua a meaningful sidelong glance in response to his answer.

Joshua blinked and said, "Ah."

"S-Sorry! I was being too bold! I'm just standing here watching the training and pretending to understand…"

"What? There's no need ta panic like that. I'm not angry at all, I'm actually impressed. Joshua is the son of a family of knights after all."

"The son of a family of knights…"

Anastasia mediated, but Joshua was at a loss for words.

Those expressions and titles were the least suitable for Joshua Juukulius at the moment. He would have preferred to keep his mouth shut if he was to receive such an evaluation—

"Joshua? Why did ya go quiet?"

"Wha?!"

As he slowly lowered his head, the woman peered at his face so closely that he could feel her breath, and Joshua screamed as he crashed into the wall behind him. The crash sounded so loud it seemed as if the window in the hallway would break, and Anastasia put her hand over her mouth.

"Yer such a hectic kid. I think my face isn't that good-lookin' though."

"I-I think Lady Anastasia is cute and beautiful!"

"I feel like I made ya say that. But thanks."

"It's just, well, I wasn't mentally prepared for it…"

Feeling his own heart pounding in his palm, Joshua was busy trying to control his face, which was turning red and blue, along with the emotions that were linked to it.

Of course, what he said was not a lie. Her large, round, light blue eyes brimming with curiosity, her pretty features that were perfectly positioned, and her long eyelashes that could rival Julius's were all very attractive.

So Joshua's current panic was due to the thorn that had been stuck in his heart for so long.

"If you're the son of a family of knights, you should be standing on the other side of the window, not this side. Instead of speaking wisely, you should silently prove your position with your sword… To give me such an evaluation is not only a waste, but disrespectful."

"…"

"That's why! My brother who perfectly embodies the ideals of a knight is wonderful! With abilities and achievements like his, there's no need to be silent. On the contrary! From the perspective of the other person, it's only natural that they'd want advice on everything!"

Clenching his fist tightly, Joshua emphasized how amazing Julius was, a man who went above and beyond the typical image of a knight.

Yes, Julius was a true knight. The only one who deserved to be called "the son of a family of knights" was Julius, who had accumulated the achievements that one should have. But he exaggerated a bit. The other knight families were also surely striving to be worthy, even if they weren't as good as Julius.

Unworthy strays were far more rare and far more wrong.

"—. Julius really is important to Joshua, huh?"

"Yes! I think it's presumptuous to say that, but even if I gave…yes, even if I gave everything, it still wouldn't be enough; he's an amazing person!"

Though Joshua felt a slight sense of discomfort at the implication, he answered Anastasia with vigor. Anastasia nodded several times, saying "I see, I see," and then turned her gaze out the window again.

"Maybe it's because of that? Joshua seems to have pretty sharp eyes. It seems like ya even saw Mimi bein' sent flyin' earlier."

“That’s… That may be true. I’ve always watched my brother train with my father since I was little. In that sense, I was in an environment that was the envy of the kingdom’s knights.”

Joshua clapped his hands, realizing that Anastasia’s point had that kind of aspect to it.

Certainly, Julius’s training was something that many knights would be willing to pay to watch, as he was one of the elite of the Royal Guard and was even called the “Finest”. If you had watched him improve steadily since he was a child, it was understandable that you would have discerning eyes—

“No one can imitate Julius’s trainin’ anyway, so if we made a spectacle of it, how much…”

“L-Lady Anastasia? I heard some really impure calculation…”

“Oh, sorry, sorry, don’t worry about it. Whenever I see somethin’ that could lead to a business opportunity, I can’t help but think about how I can make money from it.”

“That being said, if you could not include my brother in that…”

Julius was a generous and caring person, so if any knights asked to watch his training, he would gladly accept. Joshua was frustrated that Anastasia had turned this into a money-making scheme, as if Julius’s humanity and cultivated skills were being converted into money.

His inner thoughts must have been more apparent as Anastasia laughed and said, “Don’t make that face.”

“I’m sorry if my bad habit made ya feel uneasy. It’s Joshua’s privilege to be able to watch Julius’s trainin’. I won’t take it away.”

“No, that’s not what I meant! Please don’t embarrass me…”

As if she was enjoying teasing Joshua, Anastasia’s smile deepened even more, so Joshua turned away from her and narrowed his yellow eyes, looking at the soldiers training once more.

Not having learned her lesson, Mimi came running back and jumped on Ricardo again—

“It looks like this time Hetaro and Tivey will join.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Look—”

As Anastasia tilted her head, she looked towards Ricardo, but Mimi, who looked like she was going to jump straight at him, suddenly turned around at the last moment, and while he was distracted, Hetaro and Tivey, who had quietly approached, launched a surprise attack from the side of Ricardo.

However, the brilliant teamwork of the three siblings was ineffective against Ricardo, who was swinging his large hatchet.

“It wasn’t bad! Mimi, yer eyes were wanderin’ too much! Hetaro and Tivey, ya need ta hide yer presence better!”

“You got us! Captain, you’re amazing!!”

The three of them who were hanging from the end of Ricardo’s hatchet were being spun around above his head by a laughing Ricardo, and they could be heard squealing with joy and screaming.

Joshua, watching from afar, smiled at Anastasia beside him and said,

“It turned out just as I said, didn’t it? But Ricardo who didn’t seem bothered by that is incredible. He is worthy of being Brother’s training partner.”

“…”

“Lady Anastasia?”

Joshua was impressed, but then he suddenly noticed that Anastasia hadn’t said a word and became worried that he had upset her somehow.

However, Anastasia shook her head in response to Joshua's question and replied,

"It's nothin', it's nothin'. …Joshua, ya really have good eyes."

"I-I'm sorry to hear you praise me so many times, but… Ha! Maybe this is a prelude to a big request or a big scolding?! That's why you're being so kind today…?"

"Hey, hey, hey, I'm always kind, ain't I?"

Anastasia's hand suddenly reached out and pinched his cheek, and Joshua murmured, "It hurts." Anastasia laughed mischievously at the answer, leaving Joshua very confused.

It was true that Anastasia was generous and kind to her family. Joshua was relieved to think that not only Julius, but he, too, was included in that group.

However—

"Is it just my imagination that the way Lady Anastasia looked at me just now is the same as when she was thinking about making money earlier?"

2

"—Joshua, that kid, is it possible he could become somethin'?"

After finishing up her day's work and looking over the firm's income and expenditure report, Anastasia asked this to Julius, who had invited her over during her break.

Julius was a little surprised to hear his loyal master speak of his younger brother, but he didn't show it on his face and continued,

"Joshua? I'm glad that my younger brother is being praised, but what did you notice about Joshua, Lady Anastasia?"

"Today my kids were trainin' in the garden, right? Ricardo was in the middle, and Mimi and the other members of the group were jumpin' on him."

"I heard the same thing from the members of the household. … Don't tell me, did Joshua join in?"

"No, it's not that bad. I just happened to come across him while watchin' in the hallway."

"Is, that so?"

Julius sat down, having almost risen from his seat, and played with his bangs with his fingers, smiling bitterly. Anastasia's cute brow quirked in response to Julius's reaction.

"Hm~ What, what? From yer reaction just now, there must be somethin', right?"

"As expected, you have a keen eye. …Did you notice anything as Joshua watched the Iron Fang's training, Lady Anastasia?"

"I thought his eyes were good. There were other things too, but that was the main thing."

Anastasia pointed to her own eyes with two fingers, and Julius sighed softly.

Anastasia, a great merchant of Kararagi, had an eye for beauty that could discern not only things, but also people. And if something met Anastasia's eye,

"As expected, Joshua has something extraordinary."

"Ya say as expected, but ya weren't certain of it, were ya?"

"Unfortunately. As you probably know, Lady Anastasia, Joshua was weak when he was young and was unable to receive a proper knight education."

"It seems so. He seems to be in much better shape now, and apart from bein' a little too thin, I don't see any signs of weakness at all."

"Yes. As he grew, those problems faded away. That in itself is something to be pleased about, but…"

Julius stopped talking and turned his gaze out the window.

In the corner of the garden of the Juukulius mansion, which could be overlooked from the room prepared for Anastasia, there was a tree with appas growing on it. He remembered the day Joshua first asked for that appa.

While recalling those distant days—

“I often heard from my father that Joshua had been forced to give up his education due to his health condition but that he had a natural talent for swordsmanship.”

“…It seems like yer father had a good eye for that too.”

“After all, it was his own son. But that was why he was so frustrated. Because of that, I received very strict instruction from my father.”

“But thanks to that, Julius is who he is today.”

“Yes.” Julius nodded vigorously to Anastasia’s words.

As a child, despite his actions and words, Julius sometimes resented the hardships that befell him, but now he was deeply grateful for them.

His father’s regret and frustration became the strict guidance he gave Julius, shaping him into the person he was today.

“And it’s not just my father’s guidance. If Joshua ever decides to take up the sword, I don’t want to be a big brother who loses so easily.”

“Oh, that’s surprisin’. Ya also have that competitive spirit, huh, Julius?”

“Of course I have pride and dignity. I may not show it much to you, Lady Anastasia, but I’ve always been quite competitive. However…”

“However?”

"The reason I don't want to lose to Joshua isn't because of my pride as a knight or a man, but because I want to be an older brother that my younger brother respects."

Slightly relaxing his lips, Julius defined his feelings for Joshua in this way.

In every sense, he was in a privileged environment. His father taught him the Juukulius way of life, his friends taught him how to be a knight, and his younger brother taught him how to be stubborn.

"So I am happy that Joshua is being praised by none other than Lady Anastasia. Although, I think that Joshua himself is not very keen to take up the sword…"

"—Ya know, Julius."

Julius was about to continue, saying that it might be difficult, but Anastasia stopped him. Anastasia stoked her fox scarf and smiled sweetly as usual.

"Ya know this, but I don't like things that are wasteful. It's not that I particularly think it would be good if Joshua became a great swordsman, but I can't stand the idea of him livin' his life with the mistaken idea that he's not worth anythin' at all."

"That's…Then, what are you going to do?"

"Right. …For now, I'll give him more work, especially work with more responsibility. Somethin' that's closely related to the royal selection would be good. How 'bout bein' an emissary to the other candidates?"

Anastasia's hands were clasped in front of her chest and her eyes were shining as she made the suggestion, and Julius widened his eyes slightly before giving a wry smile. —It seemed Joshua had touched on her troublesome nature.

And that would surely bring about a desirable change for Julius as well.

“Hoshin’s saying! ‘Confidence makes a man. Confidence is created by achievements’! I’ve decided, I’ve decided. Now that Joshua’s part of my family, I have to make him happy.”

This philosophy, so typical of Anastasia, gave Julius a premonition that it would bring a new wind.

It was the same as when Julius had sensed that she was a suitable candidate for the royal selection and a person fit to be king.

—The new wind blowing through the Juukulius household seemed like a sign that would bring about change in his younger brother’s future.

END

Petra’s Emilia Camp Struggle (Translation Pending)

Mimi Pearlbaton’s Bite of Love and Passion

1

The moment she caught a glimpse of that person, lightning rumbled and thundered throughout Mimi’s entire body. “Woaaa.”

“Huh? What’re you starin’ at, ya little pipsqueak?”

Boom! While being struck by the lightning, Mimi forgot the impact within an instant and stared at her opponent—a golden-haired boy that had crinkled his nose. He had spiky gold hair, sharp emerald eyes, jagged teeth that had been forged by chewing on hard objects often, and somewhat of a wild-style, edgy outfit. Everything about him rumbled and thundered through her.

“I see, I see. You are quite good. Mimi has liked you quite a lot.”

“Huh?”

“Name! You are good to tell Mimi your name! Mimi is Mimi! Duper strongest Vice Capain!” Mimi pointed her hands towards the sky and energetically announced her name.

The boy was puzzled for a second after he heard her announce her name, but he immediately changed his expression into a competitive one. He proudly hit his chest and shut his mouth, making a loud sound with his fangs. “Hah! That’s really bold of you to declare yourself the strongest in front of my amazin’ self! It’s the thing called ‘Galaown’s declaration of war’!”

“Galaoun! I have no idea what that is! Is that your name?”

“Not at all! My amazin’ self is Garfiel Tinzel! Lady Emilia’s Shield and the Perfect Guardian! I’m the Gorgeous Tiger!”

“Oooh! That’s super duper amazing! Which one is your name?!”

“Garfiel Tinzel!”

“Garfiel!” Mimi repeated excitedly.

The boy’s—Garfiel’s—introduction came with energetic poses made by bending, stretching, and spreading his arms. Mimi responded by perking up her ears and jumping up dramatically. The staff in her hand slipped out and hit Joshua, the slender young man sitting next to her. Impaaminence.

“Ouch?!” the young man screamed, but Mimi paid him no mind.

“Garfiel… Mmm, Garfiel…”

“Don’t mumble my name again and again. Are ya stuck or…ouh!” Garfiel frowned at Mimi, who’d crossed her short arms and was groaning, then screamed and hastily looked behind him.

A pink-haired maid stood imposingly behind Garfiel. “How long are you going to keep our guest standing at the entrance? Hurry up and show them the way, Garf.”

“Well, ain’t it your job as a maid, Ram?”

“You don’t get it at all. A man who is good at things should naturally take over the work of a woman who can’t do anything… Wait, who are you calling a useless woman? Ram is going to smack you.”

“My amazin’ self hasn’t said anythin’!”

“Hmph.” The maid sneered at Garfiel after making an unreasonable demand.

Mimi’s eyes widened with surprise at the exchange of words occurring in front of her and then jumped, landing on the foot of the young man who had picked up the staff. “Not again!” he screamed tearily.

Mimi, not seeming to care, pointed her finger at Garfiel. “Garf! Garf seems better! Mimi will call ya that too! Garf it is!”

“Hey, only my family can call me… Ahh, she’s seriously throwing me off my game. The hell is she?” Garfiel roughly scratched his head, his expression a mixture of caution and confusion.

“She’s a guest,” Ram informed him. “A rather cuddly-looking one at that.”

Mimi nodded repeatedly as she watched the maid next to her hugging her elbows. “Garf,” she repeated the short yet pleasant sound under her breath. It felt good, as if she had rolled the lightning that had struck her in her chest into a ball and juggled with it. “This is probably the thing that Roshi was takling about! Rumble rumble boom’s passionne!”

This was Mimi Pearlbaton’s first impression of Garfiel Tinzel when she met him for the first time, and all of her feelings after that.

2

Mimi Pearlbaton was the eldest among the three siblings, which essentially made her the strengthiest by default. It probably was neither logical nor made any sense, but that was ok to Mimi. She was the elder sister to her two brothers Hetaro and Tivey, so she had an obligaetion.

In order to protect them, being the strenghiest was the best way, so she was the strenghiest. The eldest sister is strong and kewl—that was the reason and philosophy that made Mimi who she was. It was a conclusion the pink and blonde-haired maid would strongly agree with, and in fact, the reason why she had been living with full vigor until now was rooted in this.

The people who are supporting Mimi’s philosophy are ma’lady, Anastasia, and apart from Ricardo, who’s the capain, and everyone in the Iron Fang, Mimi will include Julius and Joshua in it too. Joshua might cry if Mimi forgets about him, so it can’t be hepled. And someone to not forget is Roshi, who taught Mimi a lot of things in the beginning. Roshi is a strange old man who saved the three of us when we were wandering around Kararagi’s slums and on the verge of death. He’s something of a savior to us.

“If it hadn’t been for Roshi back then, it would have not ended well for Mimi!”

It was when Tivey was about to get caught by the kidnappers and Mimi, who had obstructed it, got stabbed in the belly by Mimi's opponent. Mimi got stabbed four times when she was two years old, so Mimi was only at the beginning stage of being the strenghtiest, so even Mimi's life was in extreme danger.

While they were running for their lives while Hetaro was dealing with a stomach wound as bad as Mimi's, an old man suddenly appeared in front of Mimi when her wound started to feel better.

"Blease zave, big brro and elder zuster…"

Mimi remembers Tivey crying and screaming with us on his back when we were in a dangerous situation. Even Mimi deeply reflected on that. It's a failure of the elder sister to make her younger brother cry. That was the only time Tivey had ever cried like that. Whenever Mimi asks Tivey about that time, he responds with, "There wasn't such a time, there wasn't." He is extremely forgetful.

Mimi is getting way off topic. Anyway, the old man who appeared was Roshi. He took us, who were worn out in many ways, to his shack, tended to our wounds, and provided food.

"Well, there isn't any deep meaning behind it," Roshi said. "It's justa that I felt like I wanta live a life that the Sun would be proud of, so I couldn't leave the three dirty cats abandoned on the street behind."

Roshi, who had picked up Mimi and her siblings, laughed with his dirty clothes and his ugly face lacking a few teeth. After that, the three cat's and Roshi's life began. The three of them didn't know anything, as they were just kittens. The three kitten siblings were taught the means to survive and they steudied and were taught this and that by Roshi, who was very knowledgeable.

The energetic and strenghtiest Mimi was taught how to fight. The kind and crybaby Hetaro was taught how to live cautiously. And the wise and high-strewng Tivey was taught a lot of knowledge. Roshi had always said that it would definitely help the three of them in the future.

There was something else he said often; Roshi often talked about three important things.

“Listen, Mimi. Don’t talk bad about people. And don’t be someone who breaks promises. Just one more thing: have one thing that you’re second to none in.”

“Hmm, hmm, hmm. Hmm! Why thouhg?”

“It’s obvious. A person who talks bad about others will end up being alone. It’s far wiser to not speak bad from the beginning. A person who breaks promises will also end up being alone. So, it’s obviously better to follow this advice. And the last one…”

“The last one is?”

“…You’ll see tons of good and bad things while you’re alive. You might only see the bad things in the people you are with, but it can’t be helped. But it isn’t like everything about that person is bad. Humans are just a cluster of flaws. So, be the best you can be at one thing, and that will…”

“And tat will?”

“Give you full points. My cute, dirty, cat daughter, you will be able to be a full point.”

After saying that, Roshi smiled, showing off his chipped teeth. His teeth were yellow, his face was full of wrinkles, and his balding head with patches of white hair seemed like it hadn’t been washed in a while and reeked, but Mimi liked that smiling face. And the word ‘full point’ made her heart flutter. She felt like a full point was something amazing. A woman who’ll become a full point, Mimi.

“So, what if it was a hundrd things instead?” Mimi asked.

“Hm?”

“If ine can be a full point then what would it be if there were a hundrd? Would Mimi be more amazning than Roshi?”

“—Aha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha! That sounds amazing! A hundred you say!

A hundred things that you are second to none in! In that case, if one can give you a full point, then a hundred things will make you a hundred full points!”

“Oooh! A hundrd full points! That sounds really amazining! Mimi would be a giant ameng men!”

Roshi slapped his knee as Mimi laughed and hopped around. The walls of the shack broke and tilted since they were going wild, but the two didn’t care about that at the moment.

Roshi picked up Mimi and lifted her up to the point that she almost hit the ceiling and said, “Listen, my hundred full points daughter! You may have many things happening in your life from now on, but don’t forget my teachings, and keep up that high spirit of yours… Well, it’s not something that I need to tell you!”

“Yeah, you don’t need to tel me! De-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Oh wait, you need to stop laughing like an idiot like that. Since you won’t be able to grasp hearts that way.”

“Grasp hearts? What’s that? Mimi is strong so everything can be grasped easily!”

“Whoa, this has nothing to do with strength. But it’s difficult to explain. And on top of that, I guess it’s parental love? It makes me feel deeply uneasy when I think about whether you’ll be able to grasp hearts or not. Bloody hell!”

“Bloody hell!” Mimi mimicked Roshi’s energetic voice and waited for him to continue.

Seeing her wait, Roshi scratched his nose, looking uncomfortable, and continued. “Whatever, the hell with it. Listen, Mimi, I won’t feel like explaining it no matter what. But you’ll know it anyway when the time comes. Oh, you know what lightning is, right?”

“The one that goes rumble rumble boom?”

“Yeah, that. A time will come when the lightning makes your chest go rumble rumble boom. That’s a sign, so hold on to it tight and don’t let it escape.”

“Tight… What should I not let go of?”

“Heh.” Roshi laughed at Mimi’s question. And after taking a pause, he smiled at her with his chipped teeth. “It’s obvious—the thing called fate.”

“Fait!!”

3

And so, the rumble rumble boom has happened now, and this is Mimi’s fait. Mimi hasn’t asked about it in detail, so Mimi doesn’t know much about it, but if the person who has made the rumble rumble boom happen is Mimi’s fait, then Mimi’s fait is Garfiel.

“Stare, stare.” While shaking her legs on the sofa in the drawing room, Mimi gazed at Garfiel sitting on the other side.

Mimi has been carefully looking at him for a while now, but her first impression hasn’t changed. It hasn’t changed, but Mimi’s face and heart are burning intensely and passionnattely. Fait is something to be feared. Mimi thought that Mimi was just going to be Joshua’s guared today, but Joshua went down the priority ladder.

“Nom.”

“Mi-Mimi? I want you to stop chewing on my sleeve…”

“Ooh! Oh, your clothes are kinda damp, Joshua, what happened?”

“You chewed on it! What on earth is up with you?! You’ve been acting weird for a while now!”

Joshua, who’s next to Mimi, is playing around and swinging his drool- soaked sleeves. ‘A kid who isn’t calm in someone else’s house isn’t a good kid.’ That’s what ma’lady had told Mimi. Mimi let out a deep sigh. “Joshua, don’t be too noisy, alright? We didn’t come here to play,” she said, urging him to take the situation into account.

With Mimi giving a proper lecture, Joshua slumped his shoulders and began reflecting. “Argh… I have a lot of things to say, but to make things short, you are right about this…!”

The silver-haired girl in front of them—Emilia—laughed when she saw how the two of them were acting. “A-ha, you two are reaaally close, aren’t you? It felt funny watching you two.”

“I’m… I’m embarrassed to show you such a thing as a messenger…” Joshua said with a reddened face.

The greenish person sitting next to Emilia lowered his brows at that. “No, don’t worry about it. It might not be the right thing to say, but I feel closer to you this way…”

Joshua replied to that response with a “No, no,” and the other person responded with “No, no, no.” Mimi blinked her eyes wondering what they were doing and heightened her alertness.

Joshua is thin and weak, so Mimi has to protect him as a guared. Julius has properly requested Mimi to do that. Mimi accepted Julius’s request saying it can’t be helpd. Just like how Mimi is the eldest sister, Julius is also an elder brother, so he carries a lot of burdens too. So, Mimi is going to concentrate on being a guared and—

“Yo, pipsqueak. Do you have some business with my amazin’ self?”

“Woahaaa!”

Mimi thought of concentrating on being a guared, but she got called out by the reason why she couldn’t concentrate at all, which startled her and caused her to jump up and land on Joshua’s lap. Joshua was startled by the sudden turn of events and exclaimed, “Ueee!” but Mimi had no time to spare any attention to that. Hang in there, Joshua.

Instead, Mimi didn’t let her eyes off Garfiel, who had his eyes wide open in surprise. “Wh-Wh-What’s wron’ with you?”

“—? Why did Mimi just jump? Everything is a mysterie!”

“Ain’t it about you? Nobody is gonna know if you don’t,” Garfiel said, smiling lethargically.

Mimi understood that as his ferocious and wild smile and became more and more restless. And there…

“Excuse me. I had Petra go get Barusu just now. He will eventually… Oh my.”

“Hiyaaah!” Mimi shouted. The pink-haired maid had opened the door at just the right time, so Mimi slipped past her side and jumped into the hallway. At that time, Joshua, whose abdomen had been used as footing, cried, “Ugh!” but she left him behind like a gust of wind and retreated swiftly.

“Ayaya, ayaya, rumble rumble boom!!” Mimi couldn’t stay in that place and had no option but to run with all her might, carried by her impulse.

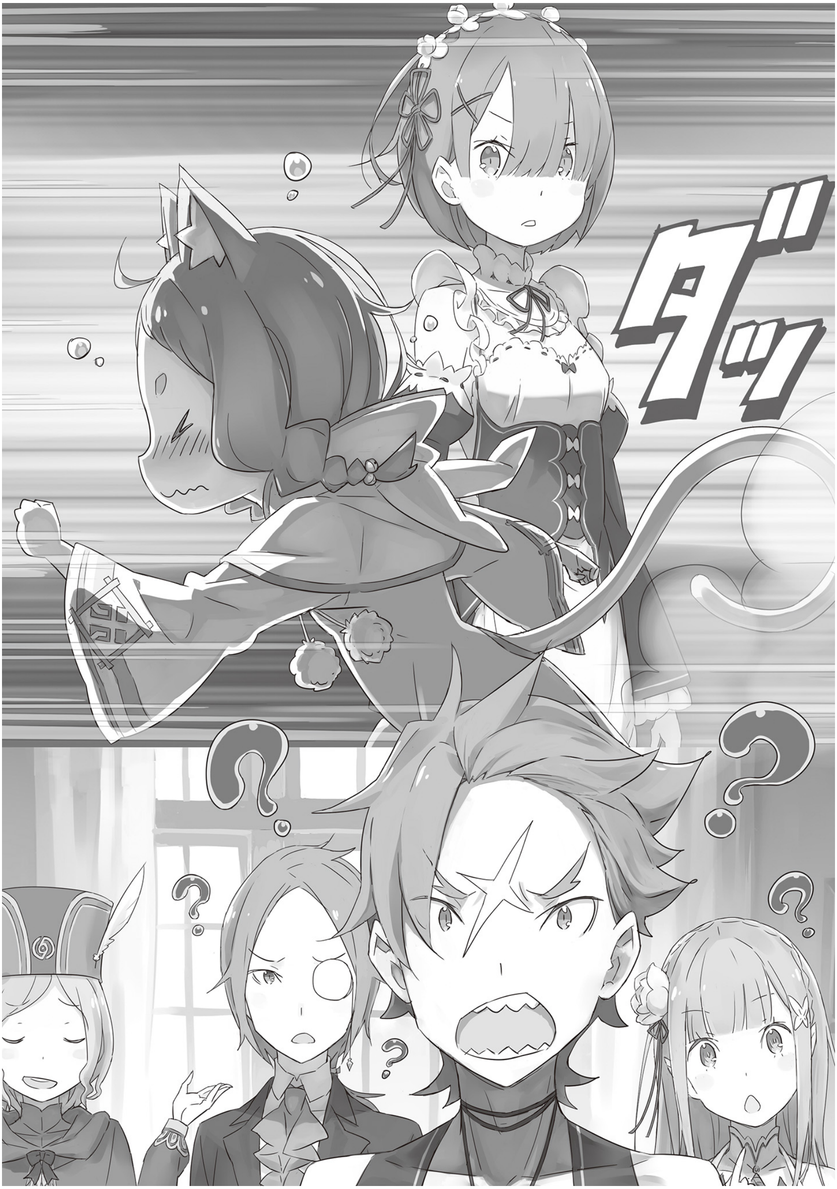
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“What was all that about?” Ram asked everyone present in the room while looking at Mimi’s back, who had suddenly ran out.

“Beats me.” Garfiel responded to her question, scratching his head. “My amazin’ self has no idea either. And wouldn’t it be dangerous to leave her like that?! Who knows what that little pipsqueak will do inside the mansion.”

Ram scowled with her well-defined brows at Garfiel’s words. Then she glared at him and closed the door softly behind her back.

“Hey, Ram? The hell are you thin…gaa ouh?!” When Garfiel challenged her decision, the maid flicked his forehead and sighed in exasperation.

“Shut up, Garf. She isn’t going to do anything bad even if we leave her be…it’s simply that it was getting hard for her to be here.”

Garfiel, Emilia, and Joshua, who was rubbing his abdomen in pain, looked confused at Ram’s words; only Otto had a bitter smile, expressing that he knew what was happening, but Ram thought that it also was an annoying response.

“Ah well…leaving aside Lady Emilia, you men are so inconsiderate.”

“—? Why was I given special treatment?”

Emilia tilted her head, and Ram didn’t respond. She just recalled the side profile of the small kitten-human girl as she slipped by her and ran to the other side of the closed door. I’ll keep the fact that her face was as red as an appa to myself, Ram thought. That was her own way of showing mercy as a fellow maiden in love.

END

Priscilla’s Cheers for Me, Drunk Father Part (Translation Pending)

Ex 6:
Sword Demon Battle Ballad
(Comic Alive)

Prologue

—The hot air of the fire burns his lungs. He can’t help but cough, cough and violently cough.

???: “—Ugh.”

He searches for fresh air in order to keep breathing, shaking his head back and forth.

However, the only air available was consumed by the flames. Covering his mouth with his sleeves, trying to prevent his lungs from filling with the toxic smoke, he moved forward.

—The city lay beyond recognition.

The once vibrant streets, which had once been filled by people going about their daily lives, were now devoid of even their shadows, a symbol of the destruction which now painted their lives.

Scorched roads, trees engulfed in violent flames, and collapsed buildings all wailed of the resounding sorrows of the people.

???: “…”

Gritting his teeth, opening his eyes against the smoke that infiltrated them, he moved forward. —Moved towards the battlefield.

Indeed, a battlefield. This place was a battlefield.

Once again, he found himself in the familiar hell of a battlefield; a hell utterly submersed in blood, smoke, and death.

Heat submerged him, followed by the memory of his first battlefield.

—On that day, he had also been submerged in heat, as his lonesome, bloodied figure strode across the battlefield.

Unaware of the rhythm of the battlefield, lacking in a means of survival, they were merely pawns in a struggle of death, a struggle so brutal that it was unbearable to watch, were these helpless amateurs.

To survive one's first battle came neither from an awakening of some hidden skill, nor the triggering of human instincts of survival, nor the descent of any savior.

Luck was all that mattered. Having better luck than the ones who perished on that battlefield.

—Then, what about this time? Would it be the same way? Could luck bring survival.

???: "—tch."

—No. Absolutely not.

This time, it was different from the first battle. This was not a battlefield where warriors could survive with luck.

Furthermore, the tune his heart followed had entirely changed. Back then, he had no reason to fight; merely conformity, masked a shallow show of heroism.

There was no reason to fight. There was no desire to live, only a desire to not die. If his present self hadn't changed at all, his feet would have directed him far away from all this. If he wanted to survive, he should have run.

—But, that path was closed to him.

His legs took him to the center of the city; the front line of this battlefield.

???: "—Hic."

A sky, torn asunder by shades of red and of destruction—a resounding roar, engulfing the city.

Eclipsing the sorrowful howls of the people, burying the demolition of collapsing architecture, and dissatisfied even still, a sound which forced itself upon the world; that was the thundering cry of the Black Dragon.

Trembled by the mighty roar of the Black Dragon, countless soldiers and blades fell. All that was left was pressing onward. Ceaselessly onward. Without pause. Ever onward.

Because, in that godforsaken place where the Black Dragon’s fangs gnashed and claws slashed, their comrades stood.

???: “er/,—hmm…!”

Those old wounds ached. The names of beloved comrades, of cherished lovers; neither could escape the parched, broken throats.

Even still, they cried on. Endlessly searching.

He found his spirit rejuvenated. There, his comrades stood. There, the Sword Demon waited.

Black Dragon: “KRUAAAAAAAAAAAGH—!”

???: “—GRAAAAAAAA.”

In that moment, the roars of two shadows, cutting across the scorched crimson sky, collided. The wingspan of the shadow that lay ahead of him reached impossible lengths. And yet, dwarfed by that immensity, a shadowy figure darted through an opening, raining countless beams of silver upon his massive enemy. However, effortlessly, that massive shadow swerved away, countering with its deadly claws.

Continuous were the sounds of metal clashing, the rain of destruction, the impact which bid tears from the heavens, the explosion of murky clouds, the birth of light itself.

Overwhelming. Truly overwhelming, was this peak of swordplay, forever unparalleled.

Entering that battlefield was impossible. Only those who transcended ability itself had that right, something that most people needn’t even give up on.

???: “…”

—Even so, he would embark on this journey.

Because the Sword Demon, Wilhelm, his comrade, his dear friend, fought there.

A battlefield, scorched with searing flame, a whirlpool of chaos and lament; even in that hell, the fetters of trust and camaraderie remained sound.

???: “…hn̶g̶,̸ ̃hu̸.”

I’m on my way. Setting out, right this second. Without fail, I’ll reach you.

—I won’t let you fight alone. Ever.

Carrying his determination and enlightenment, the young man, Grimm Fauzen, embarked on a journey through the blood-stained city.

That sound is a roar, the roar of the Evil Dragon Valgren with Three Heads

Still not lost in the chaos, The Sword Demon Wilhelm is about to shed its blood.

—The flames of The Subjugation of the Evil Dragon burned ever brighter, as if mocking the infinitesimal resistance of mankind.

(TL Note: To represent Grimm’s broken voice I am going to use “cursed text” effects as a TL choice. In your head, read them as hoarse, cracked chipped things.)

Act One

1

???: “—That’s the end of my report.”

Terminating his speech there, Wilhelm tucked his chin down and straightened himself up, placing his hands behind his back.

Dressed in his white knight uniform, the handsome man stiffened his good-looking, fearless face. The sharp glint in his eye, and his frigid appearance gave off a fierceness like that of a razor-sharp sword.

Anyone who’d have known him before would likely have likely been extremely impressed by just seeing how he stood. At any rate, the appearance of the resplendent sword that was sheathed in Wilhelm’s scabbard right now marked a great difference to his previous attitude of that even though a sword was a sword, a drawn blade was plenty enough to cut down anyone without heed.

???: “…”

Wilhelm spat out a wordless curse seeing the emotions that dwelled in their silent gazes, showing no concern for them.

—No matter how many times he was called there, the atmosphere around the main conference room was something that he never got used to.

He had grown accustomed to not showing those feelings on this face, but the good and bad feelings which he felt about this place were a matter of his temperament. His nature wasn’t something that would change so easily.

???: “Hmmm. You still aren’t used to this place, even with all the times you’ve been called here… It’s written all over your face.”

A voice echoed out in the Assembly Hall, correctly guessing what Wilhelm was feeling in his heart. The one who’d spoken out was a gentle-looking man who was standing along with the big-wigs on the lowest section of the assembly hall; a pleasant smile adorned his face.

The man's name was Miklotov McMahon. He was a wise individual who had taken the post of Assistant Prime Minister for the Kingdom at a young age, and was familiar with Wilhelm.

As soon as he saw Wilhelm contorting his cheeks at what he'd pointed out, Miklotov cheerfully loosened his lips, and said:

Miklotov: "Your face has unwillingness written all over it. That won't do from the head of the Zergev Corps… Although, let me express my sympathy for the misfortune that struck you during your travels with your Lady."

Wilhelm: "What does the Zergev Corps have to do with this right now?"

???: "Nothing at all. You mustn't go getting all stroppy like you're sulking…"

As soon as he'd voiced his objection to Miklotov's words, Wilhelm was struck by a reprimand from a different angle this time. The individual who'd spoken out was a giant of a man with short blue hair, Bordeaux Zergev. He'd known Bordeaux since the time he'd been a conscript, and even now, Bordeaux was still something like a direct superior of his.

Therefore, he did not lift his head up.

Bordeaux: "Wilhelm, you and your squad will no longer be evaluated separately. From now on, you will aim to reflect on your own actions."

Wilhelm: "…I came to the castle to give the necessary report. Why are you singling me out with your criticism despite that?"

Bordeaux: "Every single time you show your face, it ends up with me regretting your behavior which prompts reflection each time."

Bordeaux's words were curt and straight to the point. It was an awful day in all, having been dragged to this detestable assembly hall and reprimanded.

Miklotov: “In any case, we cannot ignore Wilhelm-dono’s report. Surely, saying that someone from the Empire was inside the Kingdom… And what’s more, his opponent was the Eight Arms as well.”

Council Member: “The living War God, the Eight Arms Kurgan…”

Someone uttered out his alias in response to the ponderous Miklotov’s mutter.

The Eight Arms Kurgan—That was the name of a well-renowned warrior in the Vollachian Empire, a Great Country that ruled over the southern part of the world. He was a hero of his species that had elevated the status of the Multi-Arm Clan almost instantaneously.

Amongst the Demi-human clans which were endowed with various different features, the Multi-Armed Clan had been in a position where they had been treated coldly due to their grotesque appearance.

Kurgan was a hero who with his prowess in battle and his incredible (even for a Multi-Arm Clan member) number of arms had proved the usefulness of his species to the Vollachian Empire and had been granted an order of merit directly from the Emperor.

He was unmistakably one of the strongest warriors in this day of age—Rather like with the Sword Saint, his name would likely continue to remain in history, even after his death. For certain, he was an individual of greatness.

A few days ago, the Eight Arms and Wilhelm had crossed swords—Unfortunately, Wilhelm had been in the middle of his honeymoon with his newly wed wife.

In the end, his duel with Kurgan had been interrupted, thus leaving it unsettled. Partly due to having been wounded, his honeymoon had to be called off, and he returned back to the Royal Capital where he gave his report of what happened.

Bordeaux: “Even so, you went toe to toe with the Eight Arms and you managed to survive. You’re a damn lucky guy.”

Wilhelm: “If I was lucky, would there really have been such impediments in my trip? It was sheer skill that allowed me to survive when crossing swords. If there hadn’t been so many interruptions, I would have lopped off his neck, regardless of him being the Eight Arms.”

Bordeaux: “What a cheerful guy you are.… Although, if you say so, it must be as you say.”

Wilhelm snorted, giving off a sarcastic laugh at Bordeaux who’d finally relinquished an agreement, and also giving off a sarcastic laugh.

His battle with that monstrosity with eight arms that suited his alias had been really intense, but even so, Wilhelm didn’t think he’d been inferior in his sword play one bit, or such.

Regardless of how many arms he had, he only had one neck to connect him to his life. Given that the numbers of neck were one, he should be able to remove it. The outcome was always rather simple.

As Wilhelm was getting himself worked up, Miklotov cleared his throat and placed his hands together with a frown.

Miklotov: “Although the presence of the Eight Arms is important, I’m more worried about the one that got in your way… the unidentified person that you said accompanied the Eight Arms.”

Wilhelm: “He called himself Stride. If my Honored father… if Bertol Astrea is right, he is likely a noble from the Empire.”

Miklotov: “Not much information can be expected from the Vollachian Imperial Government about that.”

Wilhelm gritted his molars in frustration at the bad feeling he got from the reply. The customs of the Vollachian Empire were fundamentally different to those of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

The Empire’s people should always be strong, those were the teachings of the Empire; that ideology was spread all throughout their nation. Those with strength stood at the highest echelon, ruling over the subdued weak; leading them was considered a justice.

In this Empire, even the line of succession is a mere formality, and the social position of each individual is determined in respect to their deeds. Thus, even if they were a so-called noble…

Council Member: “I’m still unable to judge whether they’re an upshot or from a distinguished family whose name gets passed down.”

Council Member: “At the very least, there are no records of someone called Stride amongst the names we know.”

Council Member: “However, this is far more than it being some weirdo, considering that he was accompanied by the Eight arms.”

The Assembly Hall broke into a commotion, with each of the faces of the intellectuals of the Kingdom clouding over as they exchanged words. They seemed to have no idea, and Wilhelm too had no more information other than him being called Stride.

He still had no idea what that man had been planning in the City of Picoutatte.

Wilhelm: “For sure, it felt like Stride dragged Theresia… The Sword Saint to the venue of the duel with the Eight Arms.”

Council Member: “Even if he’s the strongest in his country, what recklessness led him to making him fight against the Sword Saint.”

Council Member: “Isn’t the Empire slighting the Great Calamity too much? Not paying any respect to the name of the Sword Saint who subdued the Witch is idiotic, barbaric, and beyond reckless.”

Council Member: “…Don’t go calling challenging the Sword Saint ‘reckless’ too much. We’ve got a guy who’s self-conscious about that here.”

Council Member “Aah!”

The mentions of Stride’s reckless behavior ended up spilling over to Wilhelm somehow. Turning his cold eyes in acknowledgement of that, Wilhelm scrunched up his face. Wilhelm had been the very man who alone had managed to recklessly challenge the Sword Saint.

However, Wilhelm’s challenge bore fruit. That’s why he was married with Theresia now.

Wilhelm: “Don’t compare me with that reject. Besides, I will not let Theresia take up the sword. Ever again.”

Miklotov: “That was His Majesty Gionis’ declaration as well. An agreement that ought to protect the prestige of the Kingdom…And yet, what’s the real meaning behind our opponent wanting the Sword Saint?”

Wilhelm: “—Ah, I see why.”

Wilhelm gave a curt reply to Miklotov’s anxieties.

He had tried to get the Empire’s Strongest, Eight Arms, and the Kingdom’s Strongest, the Sword Saint, to fight each other. Whatever his endgame was, the short-term goals of the fight were easy to imagine.

The strength of the Kingdom would definitely drop if they lost the Sword Saint—that was plain enough to understand.

Miklotov: “Please, be careful about your Lady’s safety.”

Bordeaux: “We will investigate into the man called Stride. Whether the Empire will respond to us is dubious, but don’t do anything rash and certainly don’t get up to anything stupid.”

Wilhelm: “I won’t, but I can’t say that about our enemy.”

Having been given this warning out of the blue, Wilhelm tch’ed in utter discontent. It was his opponent who'd picked a fight with him back at Picoutatte.

Why had they told him that he'd gone and accepted it here?

In that, in this, in everything, Stride and Kurgan were the ones at fault.

2

Theresia: "So, even the meeting ended up bearing no results, huh?"

Puffing out her red cheeks, Theresia plainly expressed a look of dissatisfaction at the contents of the report. She was a pretty woman with clear sky-blue eyes and flaming red hair. The time where it would have been appropriate to call her a girl had already passed, but she was still quite childish in her speech and behavior.

Honestly, it enhanced her charm, so Wilhelm didn't really want to change that. In short, Theresia was the most beautiful. That's all there was to it. Full stop.

Theresia: "Wait up a sec…, Wilhelm? Are you listening to what I'm saying?"

Wilhelm: "Sorry, I was listening."

Theresia: "Really, how?! Weren't you like in a world of your own right now? What were you thinking about!"

Wilhelm: "—? You of course."

Theresia: "Eh, A-Ah… I-I see. I see. In that case then, um, alright then…"

Wilhelm: "—?"

Theresia, who had butted in, blushed hearing Wilhelm's truthful answer. Wilhelm inclined his head at Theresia who was still stuttering over her own words. And out of the blue, a voice butted in,

???: “Wilhelm… You bastard, you’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?”

Wilhelm: “Don’t start insinuating things you’ll regret. I guess I just said what was on my mind.”

???: “If that’s the case, then your damn lack of self-awareness is irritating me more and more.”

A woman who was sat in this place butted in between the conversation of the married couple, shrugging her shoulders with a look of astonishment. She was rather beautiful, with features that gave an impression of toughness, just a bit. Her golden hair draped down to her shoulders—She was Carol Remendis, Theresia’s attendant.

Carol: “Please get used to it as soon as you can, Theresia-sama. It should already be plenty known that this man is like that. It’s not like you’re blushing like that everyday, right?”

Theresia: “Y-Yeah, of course. Yeah, for sure. I get like this when Wilhelm tells me… Around about once every t-two days?”

Wilhelm: “Only that much? …That’s not enough. I never get tired of seeing your face like that.”

Theresia: “~~~~~hh.”

Carol: “WILHELM!”

As expected from her, had she understood that he’d done it on purpose right now? Carol raised her voice in anger. Next to her, Theresia was blushing; it felt like steam was about to spout out from her head if she didn’t stop.

Of course, it wasn’t just a joke. It was one of Theresia’s virtues that every single one of her rapidly changing supervening expressions were adorable. Her blushing face, her angry face, and even her sullen face. Although, her smiling face was the best.

Theresia: “L-Let’s get back on topic. Yeah, like before!”

Carol: “…Be grateful for Theresia-sama’s consideration. So, does what was said at the meeting end there?”

Carol got on the same wavelength as Theresia did, who’d clapped her hands together and gotten them back on topic, her face still red. Wilhelm gave a curt nod at Carol’s question and replied with an “Mhm.”

Wilhelm: “It ended there. Still without any concrete conclusion… Even if we ask the Empire, it’d be hard to imagine that they’d answer saying they know Stride.”

Carol: “It doesn’t seem likely that guy’s intentions are in line with the Empire, but…”

Wilhelm: “Even the representative of the Suwen Company said that was the first time he’d met Stride. Although, we should think that he planned everything beforehand, all the way up to having targeted Theresia-sama.”

It was a problem that the Elders had come vis-a-vis with, which they’d had no answer to, back at the conference room. There were three of them here now, but it didn’t seem likely that they’d find an answer to it.

Theresia: “Though, I really wonder what that person wanted to achieve.”

Wilhelm: “—That guy said we can still enjoy ourselves.”

Wilhelm reflected back on the words Stride had left him when he heard Theresia’s question. Stride had interrupted Wilhelm and Kurgan’s duel and leisurely fled away leaving those words behind.

—’Endless amusement’ he’d said。

Carol: “Fleeting moments of hedonism, a sadistic criminal ruled by a doctrine of destruction… You think he’s like that?”

Wilhelm: “It’s too much to be just that. He involved the Eight Arms and dragged Theresia into it… Must be because Theresia is the sword of the Kingdom.”

Theresia: “In regards to my public image, yeah? I’m Wilhelm’s now.”

Mentioning that she had moved on from being the Sword Saint, Theresia took Wilhelm’s arm. It seemed to be a declaration of intention that she told herself rather than something that came out of her playfulness.

—In reality, off the record Theresia had abandoned her role as the Sword Saint.

First things first though, being the Sword Saint was something that was inherited by inheriting the Divine Protection. She couldn’t quit out of that out of her own free will.

In fact, The Divine Protection of the Sword Saint still remained in Theresia even now. Until it went to the next generation, she wouldn’t be budged from being the Sword Saint.

Carol: “…”

Wilhelm understood that Carol was thinking the same thing on seeing her taciturn expression. The scars of the Demi-human War weren’t just carved between Humans and Demi-Humans. The scars of the Sword Saint Theresia van Astrea had been left between the Kingdom and other countries too.

Thus the Empire, Stride, had set their sight on the Sword Saint Theresia.

Wilhelm: “I won’t let them.”

Theresia: “…Wilhelm?”

He suddenly spoke out with a low voice. Theresia looked up at Wilhelm who was embracing her. Wilhelm merely hugged her slender body more tightly without looking at his surprised wife’s face.

He held her a little too tight. That was Wilhelm's clumsy way of embracing her.

Wilhelm: "I won't let those bastards lay a single finger on you."

Theresia: "Yeah, I know. I know, Wilhelm."

For them being the words of a vow they were crude, and if he was trying to reassure her, they were quite blunt. Theresia showed her understanding of her husband's love by affectionately returning his embrace.

Together, so the thoughts they'd share were the same.

Carol: "…Jeez."

Struck by the couple's exchange in plain sight, Carol's cheeks reddened as she let out a sigh. However, she was reminded of her sweetheart who wasn't here, niggling at her all too much.

3

For a while, each day passed by embroiled in tension, ever since that sequence of events.

Of course this brought a turbulent sense of foreboding to both Wilhelm and Theresia, as well as to the higher echelons of nobles who helped govern the Kingdom.

Especially in the Kingdom of Lugunica, where the nearly ten year long Civil War had finally come to an end.

Rebuilding the country came after, and they wanted to firmly avoid interference from other countries. It was the country's dignity that they'd reigned as one of the four noted major powers in the world ever since its conception.

Thus, the Kingdom firmly sought an explanation from the Empire regarding both Stride and Kurgan whose names had surfaced up in this matter. However, the Empire's response was plain and simple.

—There is no imperial individual who goes by the name "Stride", and the location of the Eight Arms is unknown.

???: "—THIS IS RIDICULOUS!"

The one who'd bellowed in anger at that ridiculing reply was Bordeaux. In an office inside the Royal Castle of Lugunica, Bordeaux had looked through the letter which the Empire's envoy had sent them, and reacted in anger at what it said. An answer like this was completely unacceptable.

Bordeaux: "THIS REPLY… IT CLEARLY SHOWS THAT THEY WEREN'T GOING TO REPLY WITH HONESTY FROM THE GET-GO!"

The Kingdom had rightly demanded an explanation and apology from the Empire.

They'd demanded an investigation and the handing over of those Imperial individuals responsible for the acts of hostility against the Kingdom, and a public apology if possible—However, the Empire's response contained none of those things.

It was doubtful whether they'd even conducted an investigation into the person known as Stride, let alone whether it was a sincere response.

Bordeaux: "THEY SAID THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW THE LOCATION OF THE EMPIRE'S STRONGEST WARRIOR, THE EIGHT ARMS…? THEIR REPLY IS MAKING A MOCKERY OUT OF EVERYTHING! ISN'T THIS JUST AS IF THEY MADE A DECLARATION OF WAR AGAINST THE KINGDOM OF LUGUNICA?!"

Wilhelm: "Calm down! It's getting on my nerves, Bordeaux."

Bordeaux: "Gnnnnnh…!"

Bordeaux, who was on the verge of completely losing his temper, somewhat managed to get ahold of himself after he was scolded. The giant of a man took several deep breaths and sat back down on the chair he'd stood up from without realizing.

Causing his chair creek, he looked up at the ceiling. His boiling anger had cooled down a bit.

Bordeaux: "…Apologies. I was besides myself."

Wilhelm: "Don't worry about it. If I'd read it first, our positions would have been reversed…They're fucking around with us, aren't they?"

Bordeaux: "Yeah, they sure are. Does the Empire wish for war?"

Wilhelm gazed at the letter that Bordeaux, who had closed one of his eyes, had thrown down and shrugged his shoulders.

Wilhelm had been called to Bordeaux's office because the latter had notified him that they'd received a reply from the Empire.

Although it was down to Bordeaux's consideration that he'd tried to notify him of the Empire's attitude as quickly as possible, it had ended up a mess—Despite having prefaced the meeting with 'Don't lose your temper, no matter what their response is'.

Wilhelm: "There was no use in you getting angry before, when you prefaced it like that."

Bordeaux: "What on earth has gotten into me, I'm ashamed. Pivot wouldn't have been impressed by this."

Wilhelm: "Jeez."

Pivot had been Bordeaux's adjutant who had perished in the Civil War. Pivot, who'd been Bordeaux's attendant, courageous and strict as he was, had fretted over the somewhat rash Bordeaux all the way until his death.

After Pivot's death, Bordeaux had been fairly subdued; however, sometimes the face of the man they once called the Mad Dog would resurface every so often. In all honesty, Wilhelm was more familiar with that side of him.

In any case, the issue at hand wasn't in Bordeaux's irreparable psyche, but rather in the Empire's agenda.

Wilhelm: "Does the Empire want… war? That may not be too far off the mark."

Bordeaux: "…Even if those guys tried to attack the Sword Saint to weaken us, interference from different countries is an issue on a completely separate scale than civil war. If it becomes an invasion that threatens the existence of the country, the Divine Dragon should stir."

Wilhelm: "The Divine Dragon Volcanica… the dragon that guards our country, who made a covenant with the Kingdom of Lugunica?"

Speaking out its name, Wilhelm frowned, grooves forming along his brow. The Divine Dragon Lugunica—That was the name of the great dragon who'd defeated the Witch of Envy and saved the world from the calamity that had once threatened to destroy it.

After the conflict, the dragon had made a covenant with the King Lugunica of that time and promised him the removal of foreign threats who disturbed the Kingdom's prosperity, as well as long-lived prosperity for the Kingdom itself.

From then on out, the Kingdom of Lugunica was called the Dragon Kingdom and it acquired a prosperity that surpassed that of other countries.

However, no one truly knew whether the agreement that bound the Kingdom with the centuries old Dragon from their covenant was still in effect to this day.

Wilhelm: "In effect, even during the long Demi-human War, the Dragon still kept its silence."

Bordeaux: "The war definitely was something serious that concerned the existence of our nation. But that was a civil war. The Dragon promised they'd help us out if a foreign threat came to light… That's what the Kingdom concluded in regards to the Demi-human War."

Wilhelm: "What's your personal view on this? What do you think?"

Bordeaux: "…"

Having told Wilhelm the common consensus, Bordeaux kept silent at his question. That in itself was an answer. Realistically speaking, almost nobody in the Kingdom believed that the Divine Dragon would save them from a crisis which threatened the Kingdom's existence, or such.

—No, many of the people of course who had no clue about the reality of things were probably thankful for the Dragon's existence, and probably believed in the covenant's execution.

Wilhelm: "The country's big wigs don't believe it. And the guys who partook in the Demi-human War also all don't."

The dragon wouldn't rescue the Kingdom. Even if it did centuries ago, it wouldn't now. He didn't know whether it was due to a change in the times, the whim of dragons, or a matter of the Divine Dragon being dead or alive. However, he understood this much. The dragon wouldn't come.

—If the dragon would come, there would have been no way it'd have left the horrific war in that state.

Bordeaux: "The Empire must think that too. So, why aren't these guys coming out in numbers?"

Wilhelm: "…The Demi-human War probably deepened their conviction."

Bordeaux: "With us coming to the verge of ruin from our infighting, our last ray of hope, the dragon, showed no signs of showing his snout. It's only natural that they'd make light of us. And as for the reason why they didn't invade in great numbers…"

Wilhelm: "They're still at the prodding at us stage. They probably wouldn't take things leisurely for a full-blown invasion."

His view wasn't pessimistic. It was safe to say his view was realistic and a pretty decent prediction. If the Empire was amassing their strength right now for an eventual full-blown attack, then…

Bordeaux: "By the way, what will become of us if it comes to war?"

Wilhelm: “Do you mean how long will the Kingdom last?”

Bordeaux: “…Enough, for now.”

Wilhelm sighed at Bordeaux’s parched reply. There was a considerable difference in strength between the two nations. And that was natural. The Kingdom had been exhausted by the long civil war and had no chance of victory if it came to war with the Empire, which had kept stipulating its Rich Country, Strong Army policy and maintained a firm imperial rule.

Wilhelm: “Anyways, it’s gotta be because the Kingdom hadn’t experienced war for centuries until the Demi-human War.”

Bordeaux: “An army that’s only there for show, a royal army in name only…At the outbreak of war, anyone, Demi-humans included, would be able to see that our numerical inferiority has continued. And we simply don’t have enough strength if we get into a war now. We’re surrounded on all fronts.”

The more the going got worse, the more they shared in their dry laughter. In fact, there was no sadness shared even between the two of them in regards to these pessimistic subjects.

Of course, right now they were in a situation where they had moved forward with everything with the worst-case scenario in mind—

Bordeaux: “—We need to rack our minds so it doesn’t end up coming to that. First of all, we need to teach the Empire, who refuse to listen, the notion of properly coming to a mutual understanding.”

Wilhelm: “With those words, how about picking up your ax and laying waste to the Imperial Capital. Surely then those guys would understand that.”

Bordeaux: “That’d make them go pale in the face… Were we, the Kings people, to become savages, we’d end up laying waste to them, is that what you’re implying? Don’t be so foolish.”

Wilhelm straightened himself in his seat after he traded that dangerous joke. He couldn’t say things had ended up like he’d wanted them to be, but his business from being called here was done. He would try and leave as soon as he could.

Bordeaux: “Though by all rights I’d wanted you to bring back good news home.”

Wilhelm: “I know that our enemy is coming to pick a fight. That’s a hundred times better than not knowing anything.”

Bordeaux: “…Be on the lookout for Theresia-dono’s safety. Even though it’s needless for me to say I guess.”

Wilhelm: “Aah, must be ‘cause that Carol girl’s all fired up… I’ll make sure to let her know, though.”

Wilhelm sincerely accepted Bordeaux’s worries, gave him a bow and left the room. When he left, Bordeaux’s gaze never left him until he was out of eyeshot. A wry smile slipped onto his face as if it were saying, what a worrier you are.

He had been promoted, and his position had changed considerably, but Bordeaux’s roots still remained the same. Another wry smile appeared on his face at his own awareness that he’d taken that well.

However, the worries Bordeaux had were natural. There may come a day soon where the disturbing topics they’d discussed in his office, and their fairly pessimistic assumptions couldn’t be laughed away.

Wilhelm still had something which he had to do as well so that it wouldn’t end up coming to that.

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm’s figure left the Royal Castle and slipped into the streets of the Royal Capital, now not garbed in his uniform.

It wasn’t because today was his day off, though most of his paperwork had been given to his deputy head, Grimm and his advisor, Conwood.

He didn’t have the disposition for deskwork in the first place; his squad members didn't really utter any complaints about that either, considering they knew it all too well. He usually took advantage of their consideration, and oftentimes spent his time swinging his sword at the training ground.

—Though not this day. He had a different goal.

Wilhelm: "…It's gotta be this shop."

He'd come out from the Noble District of the Royal Capital, went into the Shopping District and made his way to a back-alley. The inside of it was lined up with storefronts that had somewhat suspicious, peculiar appearances drifting about them. He found the signboard which had the name of the store he was looking for on it.

Located in a dingy back-alley, the deserted bar was the perfect place to hold a private talk.

Wilhelm: "…"

When he pushed open the door and went inside, its interior was dimly lit despite it being daytime. There was a clerk wiping some glasses at the other side of the counter—In contrast to the atmosphere about the store, that man, who was clad in a strangely elegant air, gave a nod his way. Looking at him from the corner of his eye, Wilhelm ran his gaze around the store's interior.

He should be meeting them here, but—

???: "Weeeell, this way, this way. Isn't it a pleaaaasure that you came earlier than expected."

Someone greeted him from within the store, waving their hand, beckoning him over to a table of four. He stopped in his tracks when he heard that joyous voice. However, unfortunately, the familiar face belonged to the person that he had an appointment with, there was no mistaking it.

Right now, their lips had split into a beautiful smile whilst they rested their chin against their hands on the table.

???: "You came early, were you perhaps so eager in wanting to meet with me? You're suuuuuch a sinner."

Wilhelm: "I just wanted to do my business as quick as possible. Don't speak such poor insinuations."

???: "What a cold reply. Though, that too is your style, isn't it?"

Bringing one of their hands to their mouth with a giggle, they gave up their frivolous chatter with their beautiful voice that tickled his brain directly.

Wilhelm briskly crossed his arms and firmly brushed away their temptations.

He'd never had any interest in that to begin with, it was as if his attitude indicated that he'd come here as a last resort.

???: "Such cute resistance. Though, even I sorta don't have any desire to tease you, and try anything with you, since you became a married man. That's our friendship. Wouldn't it be great if you opened your heart to me just a little bit?"

Wilhelm: "Don't. Speak. Such. Poor. Insinuations… Jeez."

Punctuating each word he spoke out, Wilhelm once again let out a sigh after he made his point. His sigh wasn't out of rejection, but rather was full of resignation. Having sensed that, his opponent seemed delighted.

She was a beautiful woman with long indigo hair, who liberally gave off an alluring impression.

Though her face, her glossy hair, and her curvaceous body were brimming in appeal that would catch one's attention, her heterochromic eyes were what was most alluring about her—The radiance of yellow and blue which shone bewitchingly were trying to sneak into Wilhelm with the temptations of a succubus.

Her name was Roswaal J Mathers—She had been his comrade de guerre who had fought alongside him in the Demi-human War, and as far as Wilhelm was concerned, a dislikable woman who he mustn't let his guard down around. That was the gist of it.

Although, she was his benefactor too, so he couldn't forcibly keep her away.

Roswaal: "I want us to be more better connected in a good way, thouuuuuuugh."

Roswaal smiled sweetly as if she had read Wilhelm's innermost thoughts.

—That was what was dislikeable about her. Thinking that, Wilhelm frowned in distaste.

4

Roswaal: "Even so, it's such an unromantic topic when I consider that you got in contact with me after such a long time. Wouldn't it be a bit better for you to take some lessons in deaaaaling with women?"

As if inviting an opportunity for idle talk, Roswaal leaned her head towards the seated Wilhelm. Wilhelm narrowed his eyes at that gesture, and tch'ed crudely,

Wilhelm: "It's none of your business. In general, people don't go around bringing such ridiculous topics up to married men. Theresia is the only one in this world that I treat as a woman. You aren't covered by this!"

Roswaal: "Treating someone as a woman for you doesn't stop past treating them as an object of your desires I guess? I think we should call that your imagination running wild, or your stereotypes… Weeeell, it's whatever."

Having launched yet another comeback at him, Roswaal snapped her fingers in front of the mumbling Wilhelm. The clerk walked as if he were gliding over to the table to the sound echoing through the air. He placed two glasses on the table, and left without making a sound.

Roswaal: "Well, to start with, let's give a toast to celebrate our reunion. Huh? There's no need to worry about paying for it."

Wilhelm: “It’s daytime.”

Roswaal: “In other words, it’s the time where the best liquor is at its tastiest, wouldn’t you think?”

Roswaal held out her glass that was full of amber liquid and flashed him a mischievous smile. Understanding he had no way to avoid the toast, Wilhelm had no choice but to raise his glass and let it clink against hers.

He tilted his glass with ice in it, letting his tongue be moistened by the liquor. He wasn’t particularly attached to alcohol, but even so, he immediately knew that this wasn’t cheap liquor.

Roswaal: “Luckily, the family business is going rather well. I’m rather fond of high grade liquor y’knooooow.”

Wilhelm: “I ain’t listening to this.”

Roswaal: “Jeez, you’re such a brash person… In that case, shall we start talking about what you want to hear?”

It had been a while since they’d last met, but he had no intentions at all of talking with her about what they’d been up to as of late. Roswaal didn’t take any offence to that attitude of Wilhelm’s, and closed one of her eyes. Reflecting him in her blue eye, Roswaal prodded the ice in her glass with her finger, and said,

Roswaal: “It’s about the person called Stride that you requested, right? Even after I tried to pursue my connections, I didn’t get anything tantamount to concrete about what kind of person he is.”

Wilhelm: “…You’re acting terribly pretentious, aren’t you?”

Roswaal: “My apoooologies. If I could have, I’d have hoped that what you’d requested of me could’ve been solved immediately by the perpetual wisdom of Roswaal J Mathers, but I am not aaaaapt enough.”

Wilhelm: “Then, did you call me to expressly apologize for not finding anything?”

Wilhelm posed this question back at Roswaal, quite a bit of dejection lapping against his tongue.

—Whilst Bordeaux and the others had formally enquired about Stride's background from the Vollachian Empire, Wilhelm had got Roswaal to dig into it from a different angle.

It didn't imply he'd had any idea about what had been written inside the letter that was delivered to the Kingdom, but he'd always had some fear that things beyond anticipation couldn't be known about it.

It was a presentiment that only Wilhelm, who'd actually come into contact with Stride, felt, and even though his feelings were something like guesswork—

Roswaal: "I had a bad feeling that your hunch was correct. Though, it looks like our opponent's movements are far more shrewd than expeeeected. This sort of thing is rather reminiscent of the likes of Valga Cromwell in the Civil War. The part where I can't read his movements may be what makes him so detestable to me thooooough."

Wilhelm: "…He's a bastard who first put Theresia on the game-board, and now is trying to make his exit. I have no doubt he's up to no good in the Kingdom. How do you see things?"

Roswaal: "Right now, even the covenant with the Divine Dragon is far off. Eventually, a failure had to come into sight. It may be like that now, but… What happens afterwards with that won't be amusing, even for me. That's why I made some preparations."

Wilhelm: "Some preparations?"

Roswaal winked meaningfully at Wilhelm straight after he'd tried to sincerely inquire about what she had said. Wilhelm raised his eyebrow at the manner she had spoken about it and her behavior.

Roswaal: "Mhm, some preparations. Since things didn't end up being fruitful, I have to keep face; after all, you managed to swallow your own pride and relied on me. I want to reward you for that, wouldn't you think?"

Wilhelm: "All this tedious talk is all well and good. What did you do?"

Roswaal: "Didn't I tell you? That I searched but I couldn't find anything concrete. That just naturally means our opponent carefully concealed his own traces, but… I tried to keep digging."

Wilhelm: "…"

Roswaal's tone of voice grew a little lower during the latter half of her speech. Wilhelm recognized the emotion of peril that was lodged there, and held his breath—And then, immediately after.

Wilhelm: "—tch!"

In an instant, the already dim light of the store interior went out, and its interior was covered in a shallow darkness. The visibility around them had fallen, and even the sunlight streaming in through the windows had been blocked out. In other words, the darkness was man-made, intentional.

And under the cover of darkness, a gust of air whistled. Something was drawing nearer to Wilhelm at high speed—

Wilhelm: "Too slow, dumbass."

—No, calling it "High Speed" was a mistake. As far as Wilhelm was concerned, it was going way too slow.

Kicking his chair back, Wilhelm dropped down moving towards its back. He reached the chair's back and span back around. If he drew out his beloved sword whilst his toes were still touching the floor, he would intercept the attack that had been released from within the darkness which bayed for his blood. A shrill clang rang out, and that which had been thrown at him was deftly deflected by his sword blow.

It was something black, with a sharp pointed tip—a throwable weapon that was called a Kunai which assassins someplace far away used.

After he deflected all seven of them, Wilhelm stepped forward into the darkness without any hesitation. His eyes hadn't grown accustomed to the artificial darkness, and his sight was still covered in black.

Yet even so, he stepped forward with no hesitation. That was due to the fact that lurking within the darkness, his enemies' poorly concealed thirst for blood had informed him where they were lurking.

Wilhelm: "…"

There were many of them dressed in black garb that melded with the dark. They held their breaths, having realized that their first attack was a failure.

However, they got over the shock of it straight away and immediately switched over to close-quarter combat, resuming the fight.

That decision was a mistake already. They should have fled instantly when their first attack failed.

Wilhelm: "—GRRRRRHHHHAAAAA!"

Right after they put themselves on guard, the roaring Wilhelm rushed forward letting loose a flash of silver.

His opponents met his bifurcating blows with their own weapons; however, one by one, each of them who had tried to parry his attacks were cut in two. Blood of a darkish hue splattered around the jet-black room.

Amongst the deaths of his companions, an enemy immediately tried to take advantage of a gap left in Wilhelm's defenses. However, what they'd thought as having been a gap produced as a result of his sword blow was in fact merely an invitation.

An invitation that he'd offered half in jest to say you shouldn't take it up if you ain't first rate—Of which, the second-rate neck which took it up ended up being lopped off next.

Roswaal: “My, you two sure do work fast.”

She said that accompanied with an uncharacteristic sigh at the place of battle. Suddenly, a light shone through in the darkness.

The light shone from Roswaal’s fingers, who still sat at the table without having moved. A flickering illumination like candlelight clearly lit up the store interior which could’ve been mistaken for night.

Wilhelm: “…”

The enemies, which were garbed in black from head to toe, flickered against the light.

There were seven of them dotted around within the store, nine if he counted the two which had already died—No, it wasn’t quite like that.

There was another black outfit that lay collapsed against the wall, different to the one which Wilhelm had defeated. And the bar’s clerk was standing beside it.

Wilhelm: “Hey, is he really just a store clerk?”

Roswaal: “You think that I’d involve simple bystanders in this attack? I’m shoooocked that you think of me to be such a cruel woman as to do such a thing. First things first, this is my store. So of course I made sure to bring along this kid along in caaaase a fight broke out.”

Store Clerk: “It’s as Madam says, but I endeavor myself in focusing on self-defense so as to not divulge my initial position as a reserve. I’m the rearguard. By all means, our esteemed Sword Demon went all out. A characteristic exhibition.”

Roswaal replied to Wilhelm’s question, and then, the store clerk took over from her. Though he was graceful, his tone of voice gave off somewhat of a sluggish candour. However, Wilhelm had seen his true strength, there was no mistaking it.

He could definitely be made use of. —With that settled, he'd try not to let that weigh on his mind anymore now.

Wilhelm: "Rotten luck for them. Their decision making is slow and their skills are tepid at best. What I mean by that is that they aren't suited for this job."

Enemies: "…"

Wilhelm: "Will you throw away your weapons and surrender at once? If you show some good faith, we here don't plan to kill you all. So how about it?"

The situation quite clearly favored them. The enemies had lost the advantage of the cover of darkness along with three of their companions. Meanwhile, Wilhelm's side had avoided their surprise attack with Roswaal not even needing to get up from her seat.

If they had the gall to recognize the discrepancy between their respective strengths, then they'd find it a good idea to throw away their weapons at once.

However, the attackers had prioritized their given duties over their lives.

Wilhelm: "—Fools."

Half of them drew out their throwing weapons, whilst the other half drew out short swords—Those brandishing the weapons they classified as short swords let out battle cries.

They lowered their bodies down, and aimed their blades at his vital points without a shred of hesitation. Though their technique wasn't half bad, they were still poor opponents, as he'd said many times.

An opponent approached him, swinging his blade, and as he did, five times did his sword rage up a storm. He severed his limbs, his neck, his body. Stepping over the fallen body, he flung a Kunai that had been thrown at him right back at the guy who'd thrown it.

With his eyes peeled wide open having witnessed this feat of superhuman skill, the assassin received his own throwing tool straight to the middle of his forehead and met his demise instantly. Their enemies were in a rout.

Just two assassins remained, and after having made it this far, the option to flee finally took root in them.

Wilhelm: “Why are they trying to escape after losing so many of their numbers till now…”

As he muttered half in shock at their unintelligible judgement, the assassins split into two and tried to leave the battlefield. Since they couldn’t get past from Wilhelm’s side, the two of them chose different escape routes—

Roswaal: “Whoops, looks like some dirt’s gotten into my glass.”

As she said that, she swung her fist and punched the man’s face as he tried to cross past her. The floorboards split open due to her blow, with the man crashing right through them, his neck half torn. Roswaal tugged at her cloak which was fluttering from the force of the blow and gracefully took a sip from a glass.

Roswaal: “How annoying my high-grade alcohol has just been spoiled. Though I’m drinking from yours, you’re not gonna get mad at me for that riiiiiight?”

When he took a closer look, Wilhelm realized that the glass that Roswaal had been holding in her hand was his own one which he had left on the table. Of course, he’d had no time to spare to care about alcohol or such in the midst of battle. The glass hadn’t ended up getting toppled thanks to Roswaal swiftly securing it in place. There’s no way he’d have devoted any attention to doing that in the middle of a fight where life and death was at stake, but nevertheless,

Wilhelm: “Do what you want.”

Roswaal: “Oh my, has the old you grown up perhaps? You used to get waaaaay more angry. Still, love and then marriage change people, don't they? How splendid, how splendid!"

Roswaal gave a small chuckle and then snapped her fingers once more. This time the room's lighting came back properly and the state of the store which had become a carnage was laid bare to the naked eye.

Everywhere he looked, the inside of the store was littered with numerous slain bodies—For sure they would have to shut their business for a while.

Roswaal: "I've opened this shop every once in a while as nothing more than a pastime from the get go. I don't really care what happens so long as my store of alcohol which I put here for safekeeping isn't stolen."

Wilhelm: "I wasn't worried about that. Let's set us aside for now; what about you over there? You alright?"

Roswaal had replied to Wilhelm as he gazed around the store with a response that didn't hit the mark of his worries. Brushing aside her answer, Wilhelm called out to Roswaal's subordinate—The store clerk.

The man gave an incredibly polite bow at his words and replied with perfect decorum.

Store Clerk: "My deepest thanks for your concern. Gratitude. But there's nothing wrong with me. If I couldn't deal with a scrap like this whilst humming along then I'd not be fit to be Mathers' butler. Lacking."

Wilhelm: "A butler? The butlers I know don't have practicing their fighting skills as part of their job description though."

Roswaal: "It's becaaaaause our family has many enemies. Doing things like this is necessary you see. Although, Clind is quite the special butler amongst them."

Clind: "Your praises honor me; delighted."

Without changing his expression, the man—the individual named

Clind placed his hand against his chest. He exuded sophistication in every inch of his behavior, literally meaning that he was well acquainted with every manner of etiquette.

Of course as a waiter at the bar, but also in his fight with the assassins.

Wilhelm: “I wasn’t able to see it clearly, but how did you defeat them?”

Clind: “By combining the best butler-techniques passed down from generation to generation. Efforts.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Clind: “I was joking. A jest. However, I keep the details of what I do a secret. Concealment.”

In some sense the answer Wilhelm had received was even vaguer than Roswaal’s. He bent his lips into a frown at what he’d been told. In fact, the assassins which Clind had defeated were all dead, but he couldn’t ascertain how they’d died from just looking.

Their causes of death didn’t seem to be from either a sword, a blow or magic from what he could see.

Roswaal: “Anyways, they weren’t that skilled but we managed to fight them off without incurring any damage. As eeexpected of us.”

Wilhelm: “We were targeted by them, stop speaking so lightly about it. Also, did you let one of them escape on purpose? What were you thinking with that.”

Wilhelm frowned in doubt as he wiped his bloodstained sword on their dark garb. At the end the two remaining assassins had chosen to flee. One of them had been silenced by Roswaal’s fist, however the other one had managed to slip by and escape through a window.

Originally, Wilhelm wasn’t planning on letting them escape but Roswaal herself stopped him.

Wilhelm: “You sent him out alive. Information of this will get out across.”

Roswaal: “That was my aim. Like I mean even if we’d destroyed them all the results would’ve probably ended up the same. Just, it’ll be a problem if we don’t find out a few more details, even if they send out a bunch of low-grade assassins.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Roswaal: “For now the guy I knocked out is still alive, but I doubt I’ll get much out of him. So I think we can’t discount the possibility that they’re linked to that individual known as Stride.”

Wilhelm: “Stride…”

Roswaal placed her hand against her chin, the picture of someone immersed in deep thought. Wilhelm finally grasped the situation. Now he knew why she had provided them a place which was easy to target.

Wilhelm: “So you made the investigation easier for us and manipulated our enemy without them knowing?”

Roswaal: “Since it’s nigh impossible to follow a trail which has been extinguished it’s easier to manipulate our enemy and set up one ourselves. Of course, I wouldn’t have been able to do this without having faith in your ability, so why don’t I give you a hug, what do you saaaay to that?”

Wilhelm: “I didn’t need to hear that.”

Roswaal: “Even if you didn’t, I still wanted to tell you it.”

Roswaal gave him a captivating smile, and Wilhelm, feeling he was being twisted around her little finger, clicked his tongue.

Meanwhile Clind had been inspecting the corpses that had collapsed in the bar without paying any notice to their exchange. He called out to Roswaal and said “Madam.”

Clind: “I’ve examined them thoroughly, but there seems to be no clues which point to their identity or who they work for. Regrettable.”

Roswaal: “Weeeell, it’s not like they’d be that careless, no? What’s your opinion on what we can expect to find anything out from our Survivor-kun?”

Clind: “I just peeled off their mask and their kind is scattered thin. But, they definitely seem to be Shinobi of Kararagian stock judging from their garb and weapons. Confidence.”

Wilhelm: “Shinobi… I’ve heard about those.”

Wilhelm replied as well to the word “Shinobi” which Clind had mentioned as his opinion.

Shinobi was a title given to assassins who could only call themselves that as a result of having gone through special training like never seen elsewhere; they were said to have originated from the Kararagi City States in the West.

Kararagi was renowned for giving birth to its unique culture. However, from within its culture, the Shinobi were a novelty amongst novelties. There were many mysteries to them including the means by which they passed down their training and skills.

Wilhelm: “Though considering all that, they weren’t that skilled…”

Clind: “I’ve heard that the Shinobi have their own particular ranking system, but I think these guys are low grade students who aren’t worth their salt. An actual Shinobi’s fighting skill is not of this quality. Rule of thumb.”

Wilhelm: “Hey, Roswaal, why’s your butler so damn weird.”

Roswaal: “He comes in handy. The weeeirdness comes with the package.”

Where on earth could butlers comment on the true strength of a Shinobi based on rules of thumb?

Well whatever, Wilhelm didn’t have any objection to Clind’s verdict. If they'd been sent out to scout things out in force then these guys shouldn't have enough information to spit out.

Though, if their opponent's thinking took a bit more of a turn for the worse than today, then more skilled enemies would appear the next time.

Wilhelm: "But they moved in to snuff us out just as the search had begun… Could our enemy have lost his composure too, maybe?"

Roswaal: "I thought so too, but I never felt that we were in danger. —Sometimes there are things that are hard to understand. Our enemy is one who puts careful consideration into his conduct, in both meticulously erasing all traces of himself and in the diplomatic deterioration between the Empire and the Kingdom. I was the one who baited the attack this time… But, the way they handled things feels naive."

Wilhelm: "Naive…?"

Immersed in her thoughts, Roswaal posed her speculations about the personality of Stride, who should have them enclosed on his board.

Roswaal: "Sending out such awful assassins as soon as we search for him despite how unwise that is and taking such poorly thought-out measures… It feels way too clumsy."

As if to say, "Something's not quite right here", Roswaal's doubts in regards to Stride's handiwork weren't dispelled. At the very least, Wilhelm couldn't laugh at this when he stopped to think about her indications.

If their enemy had been an average player at the game then they could have reluctantly agreed that their poorly thought out decision had just come from making a blunder. But, the unfathomable amount of intelligence that the look in that man's eyes had held didn't convince them of that.

Roswaal: "What I want us to think about right now is the case where Stride predicted our move. There'd be no issue if we were simply overestimating him, or if we were incompetent enough to allow our enemy run amok. But, that's not the case here…"

Wilhelm: "Then what are you saying is the meaning in this half-assed attack?"

Roswaal: "There's a chance he simply may've just wanted to tell us "I'm watching you." It was partially a warning, probably."

Bringing her train of thoughts to an end for now, Roswaal shrugged her slender shoulders as if saying "Oh dear."

Roswaal: "I agreed to this because I'm doing a favor for you, but our enemy this time seems to be quite troublesome. I don't mind getting involved, but it maaaay be a good idea for me to send Clind back home to protect my family again."

Wilhelm: "…You didn't bring him with you back during the Demi-Human War, right?"

Wilhelm raised one of his eyebrows at the sigh-stricken words of Roswaal. Wilhelm and Roswaal had met during the Civil War and it was getting close to 5 years that they'd known each other, but in all that time Wilhelm had never seen Clind with her.

During the civil war, it had actually been Carol who'd accompanied her throughout numerous battles.

Wilhelm: "From what I've seen though, he seems pretty on par with Carol."

Clind: "Quite so. Gratitude. But in fact, I was at Madam's side as well during the Civil War. I turned myself invisible so that people wouldn't see me. Concealment."

Wilhelm: "—tch! Really?!"

Clind: "No, I was lying. A joke."

Wilhelm: "…"

Clind: "I'm really such a child. Please find it in your gracious heart to overlook this.”

Clind raised both of his arms up and declared his surrender with an innocent look on his face. If this had been Wilhelm back when he had no restraints to him during the Civil War, this exchange might have ended up turning into bloodshed. Such had been his character back then.

Watching over their exchange, Roswaal lifted her arms up, which had been crossed against her large breasts, and spoke out,

Roswaal: “Back then the situation was what it was. During the Civil War I was called in to analyze the methods which the Demi-Human Alliance employed which, was so to speak, an important secret of the Royal Army’s operations. Of course, I’d taken into account the chances that not just me, but my family too would be targeted; so I sent Clind to protect them.”

Clind: “Luckily, no one pointed their fangs at the mansion whilst Madam was away. Fortuitous. Thanks to that I was able to concentrate my efforts on looking after her little boy without any trouble cropping up. Immaculacy.”

Wilhelm: “Right, I see… Wait a sec.”

Although Wilhelm had accepted her words in his stride, he got caught up on one of them that had caught his attention. Then, he immediately scowled at Clind (who’d been on the receiving end of his scowls a few times already), and said,

Wilhelm: “What you just said now, is that one of your bad jokes?”

Clind: “Hmm, let me see, I’m not sure what you’re referring to a joke here. Uncalled for.”

Wilhelm: “You said “her little boy”. From how you phrased it in saying “her little boy” it’s as if you’re talking about her actually having a son!”

Wilhelm reproached Clind for the mystifying way he spoke, and Clind cocked his head in bemusement still with a look of innocence on his face. Then he turned his face towards Roswaal and spoke, Clind: “Even if you talk like that, the fact of the matter is that I was entrusted to look after Madam’s son. Sincerity.”

Wilhelm: “Sincerity, even now I don’t believe a word you’re saying…”

Roswaal: “Nooooono, he really is telling the truth? I’ve entrusted him to look after my son. It’s just that it’s gotten to the point where he doesn’t have to look after him around the clock, so today I brought Clind wiiiiith me.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Now it wasn’t just Clind, but also Roswaal who had proclaimed it true. Wilhelm, in response to that, sunk into a brief silence and then clapped his hand against his forehead.

Wilhelm: “So in other words, you’re married, and yet even now you came and said those things to me…?”

Roswaal: “Whoa there, you’re making a misunderstanding. I’m not married. I did painstakingly give birth to him, but I don’t have a husband that tied a marriage together. Hence I’m raising my son by myseeeelf.”

Wilhelm: “Aren’t you a noble? Are you, as the head of the Mathers Family, in a position to do that?”

Though the Trias Family had now become extinguished, Wilhelm was originally from a noble family. He knew all too well how much weight was put on the hereditary system, especially in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Whether as a subsidiary-noble family before the Civil War or now that the importance of magic had been looked at again, the position of the Mathers Family shouldn’t have changed. Their current head had given birth to a legitimate child out of wedlock. —Really how far did they deviate from the norm?

Roswaal: “In that sense, we already have people who let their families determine who succeeds them, rather, my family is welcomed to it.”

Wilhelm: “Typical nobles don’t do that…”

Roswaal: “Unfortunately there’s no one who can complain about that in our family. That’s because for me as well, both my parents and my siblings have died. That has allowed me to do as I pleeeeeease.”

Roswaal spread her hands out and chuckled. However, Wilhelm couldn’t hide his distress from her smiling face. It’s as if he was always being messed with in their differences in thinking, and that included the fact that she had a child.

Roswaal: “My oh myyyyy? Did I hurt you by the fact that I’ve already given birth to someone else’s child? Isn’t that quite a perverse jealousy you’re showing here?”

Wilhelm: “It’s just that for me you’ve become a person that’s becoming impossible to comprehend. There are people who love each other and even have children, but you can still poke fun at them.”

Roswaal: “Married people are a separate matter there. Don’t you think it cruel that you’re seemingly saying “Don’t look for another guy” to a widow…? You should keep that opinion to yourself.”

Wilhelm restrained himself from pressing her further when he heard Roswaal’s subdued answer. He wanted to see at least once what her son was like, just out of curiosity.

A son of Roswaal which was being raised by Clind. It sounded pretty scary.

Clind: “—Madam, let’s stop the pleasant chat here. Interruption. The palace guards are coming. Turmoil.”

Roswaal: “They finally arrived? Weeeeelll, as we’ve been so noisy, the guards were bound to come. It’d be better if they took care of the resulting investigation. We’ll just… Oh dear.”

In response to Clind’s words, Roswaal turned to look back as she nodded her head. But, Wilhelm who should have been standing there was already gone. He’d pushed the cleanup onto Roswaal and

Clind and rushed back as fast as he could to his beloved wife.

Roswaal: “Although the chances he gets to tease me have diminished, he’s still the same at his core. I think that too is something rather likeable about him.”

Clind: “It’s as you say Madam, he seems like an interesting individual. I think it would be quite okay for him to meet with Karl-sama at least once. Suggestion.”

Roswaal: “Clind, are you saying that you are fond of his personality? Letting him meet Karl, eh…? I think perhaaaaps so, after we figure out how to settle this incident down, for now.”

Roswaal gave a curt nod to Clind’s words and then turned to look towards the direction which the ruckus was gradually approaching them from. How would they explain this bloodbath when the palace guards came rushing in?

For the time being she would have to suitably mislead them about Wilhelm,

Roswaal: “At any rate, Lugunica has just gotten out of a Civil War. It’s not been foreseen whether anything will happen at this point in time. Though, it’s still unclear if this is going to end up not being that big of a deal, or if this is something that exists outside of the course of history…”

Clind: “…”

Roswaal: “Whatever it may be, we have to overcome it for the opportunity that will come in the near future. And for that reason, me, you and even Karl will have to be used, riiiiight?”

Roswaal muttered that out quite coldly without looking at anyone.

Clind didn’t reply because he knew that her words were not meant for him. Nevertheless, the elegant butler gave his mistress, who was only talking to herself, a deep bow.

What awaited in the future reflected by those mismatched eyes of blue and yellow?

—The morrow ahead can’t be seen like so; in Lugunica, the saying goes: Only the Dragon knows.

5

Wilhelm left settling the matters with the bar to Roswaal and Clind and returned back to the Mansion as quickly as he could.

Originally, Wilhelm was going to stay back at the bar and assist with the guard’s investigation. And even if he hadn’t, he would have returned to the castle and met back up with Grimm and co., who were covering for his paperwork, and told them everything about what had just happened.

But Wilhelm did neither of those things; he felt that he shouldn’t.

It wasn’t because of something childish like he felt like he could cope with the situation alone or that he felt like he had no one he could speak the truth to. It was for a far simpler reason.

Wilhelm’s alarm bells were ringing, telling him to get back to the Mansion immediately.

And when he did, the Sword Demon’s intuition was—

???: “—So you’ve returned? You kept my venerable self waiting; you sure are quite the bold fool, aren’t you.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm had swung the gate open as if he was about to break it and strode into the Astrea Residence which was his home. Keeping his pace quickened, he’d gone into the main hall to look for his beloved wife who should have been at home.

He was greeted there not by whom he’d expected, but someone he’d guessed would be there.

Wilhelm: “—Stride.”

Stride: “You kept me waiting, Wilhelm van Astrea. That was your name, wasn’t it?”

Stride listlessly replied to Wilhelm, who’d spat his name out in disgust, without any indication of being perturbed by him.

The man tilted his head forward as if he were mocking Wilhelm whilst unreservedly acting like he was at home, at the Astrea Residence where both Wilhelm and Theresia lived.

Stride: “I heard that all of you were clumsily scurrying about hither and thither in search of my venerable self. Thus, the deeply merciful me expressly came here. Come now, entertain me.”

He narrowed his eyes, which held not a shred of mercy, and declared that to the petrified Wilhelm.

Act Two

1

The Mansion's Great Hall was filled with a never seen before tension.

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm stood petrified at the Hall's entrance, his blue eyes were emanating a cold, sharp sword aura. The reason he had that look to him was thanks to the shrewd, well-dressed man standing in the hall in front of him acting as if he owned the place (rather than Wilhelm, the actual owner).

At this moment, the man called Stride was an enemy which merited the utmost vigilance from the Sword Demon Wilhelm van Astrea—To be blunt, their relationship was the sort where no one would bat an eye at him if he were to suddenly lop off his neck.

In fact, he had no doubt that putting that idea into practice would solve many of his problems at once.

Wilhelm was driven by this urge of wanting to yield his body to that snap decision and swing his sword.

However, he didn't do that. He couldn't. And that was because…

Stride: "Are you just going to stand there and make that doddery expression? My venerable self bid you to entertain me. Or are Kingdom-style welcomes always meant to be such a bore? If so, then my venerable self could commiserate tolerating it.]

Wilhelm: "Where did you take Theresia to?"

Stride: "…"

Stride's thin lips cruelly curled up as he spat out his maliciousness to no end. Wilhelm glared at his cold eyes and quietly asked him—About the whereabouts of his wife.

Stride kept his silence at that question and merely narrowed his eyes. Anger started to boil up within Wilhelm when he realized that he was making no progress and he firmly clenched his teeth.

Wilhelm had finished his business, went back home, and he'd been greeted with this reception. There was no way that Theresia, who should have been home, would have let his man in. —Him being here was certainly something that he'd cooked up.

Wilhelm: "Where is Theresia. Don't make me say the same thing again."

Stride: "Giving orders to my venerable self, now that's the mark of an impudent man. Are women really that important? You've even quenched down the urge of firing yourself up, sealed the reason why you're called the Sword Demon within your sheath, and here you yet remain, facing my venerable self."

Stride's eyes were full of scorn. He heaved out another sigh at Wilhelm as if he were disappointed at him. Wilhelm tch'ed at that.

Wilhelm: "Hey, don't you dare run your mouth. —This is no misunderstanding."

Stride: "Oh, a misunderstanding you say?"

Wilhelm had unsheathed his blade and pointed it straight in between Stride's eyebrows, only the width of a hair separated the blade from his skin. However Stride's expression didn't change a bit despite seeing how sharp the sword tip was; instead he closed one of his eyes in interest.

Faced with Stride's behavior, which never showed signs of wanting to acknowledge the actual situation, along with his relaxed attitude, Wilhelm spoke out.

Wilhelm: "The fact of the matter is that you turned up here without a care in the world, you showed your face without bothering to even bring that lumbering colossus. Right now it's thanks to Theresia, and no one else, that your head is still connected to your body. Only whether she is safe or not remains your lifeline. Your life is in Theresia's hands, don't you forget that."

Stride: "…"

Stride's expression changed for the first time in response to Wilhelm's hostility and murder-laced threats. Unexpected emotions flitted across Stride's slightly widened eyes, and for the briefest of moments, he'd turned back to being a man rather than a demon of arrogance.

Of course, it was only for a brief moment. Stride broke into a hostile smile immediately afterwards and said,

Stride: "Ghahaha, how amusing of you. Your woman is the one holding my venerable self's life in her hands? Only a fool or hero would be able to say such things in a situation like this. So, which one of those are you?"

Wilhelm: "There's no difference in how fast I will swing my sword regardless of which one. If you don't want it to be tried out on your neck, then—."

Let's see if you can blabber away with one or two of your arms cut off, Wilhelm thought as he began to spring into action.

However, he had to change his course of action immediately.

Wilhelm: "—tch."

In an instant Wilhelm turned his sword away from Stride and parried the attacks that had come from behind him with his steel. The shock of the blows, which were accompanied by a shrill grating noise, resounded through his wrist. The weapons he'd deflected now stood sticking out from the floor and walls.

They were clumps of steel which shone with a dull dark hue—The same kind as he'd just seen when he'd been attacked at the bar before returning to the Mansion: they were called Kunai. Naturally the first thing that popped into his mind was their connection to his enemies from earlier.

If this Shinobi had been of the same quality as those he'd come across at the bar then he would have been able to launch a direct counterattack; however, this was not the case here. In terms of speed and aim, this one was far more skilled.

Wilhelm: "This guy's better than the ones from earlier?!"

Wilhelm yelled and turned to look around; a shadow jumped out from the corner of his eye as he did. The shadow jumped on the walls and ceiling and flew all over the hall with incredible speed and trajectory.

Tching at this extraordinary spectacle, Wilhelm hung close to the wall. He avoided being attacked from all sides and leant his back against the wall setting himself up to parry the attack.

That way he could he could immediately counterattack regardless of whether the attack came from the left, right or front. However—

Wilhelm: "—Gnh."

The attack that shockwaved through him from the wall had been one that had been completely out of his imagination.

It wasn't magic. This was a type of technique called a "Wall Strike" where you could manipulate the Mana circulating inside your body. He'd heard that soldiers typically used techniques like these to unconsciously direct their body with Mana—This particular technique boosted that as a battle art. The blow he'd received just now was quite similar to that.

In fact, although his enemy's attack hadn't left him any visible wounds, it had caused some serious damage inside his body.

Wilhelm: "Gh, ukh…hk."

Stride: "You're going to die here? That's really a bit of a let down."

Wilhelm: "—tch!"

Wilhelm crumpled to his knees, letting out an anguished cry as Stride's parched scorn grated against his eardrums. Both Theresia's smile and Stride's scornful laughter flashed through his mind in quick succession. A blaze raged into life from deep withinside him.

Wilhelm: “GHHHHAAAAA—!!”

He put his right foot down hard on the floorboards and forcibly kept his collapsed body up. In a flash, his unwithering sword spirit spread explosively through the hall and now he could clearly make out where the shadow was, on its way to deliver the finishing blow.

Wilhelm flicked his wrist around and stabbed at the shadow bearing down on him from above. His stab had the potential to deliver certain death as it pierced through the wind, but his enemy managed to twist his neck back and barely avoided it. His black mask was cut across vertically and the hachigane wound across his forehead was grazed by his sword; sparks leapt up.

The two of them clattered into each other and the shadow that had landed beside him kicked out at him.

Wilhelm: “—Gnh.”

A fierce shockwave racked Wilhelm’s body and he gritted his teeth to withstand the trauma of his internal organs being knocked about. He realized that he hadn’t succeeded in killing him. His enemy immediately tried to jump back behind the wall.

—And that’s when Wilhelm brought the pommel of his sword down, mercilessly smashing it into his enemy’s face.

Wilhelm: “—tch?!”

???: “RRRRRRRHHHHHAAAA—!”

Wilhelm’s unexpected riposte had ended up being the decisive blow that had clattered his opponent down to the ground. He had driven his blow with enough force to beat his opponent to death, however he had tch’ed at their reaction. There’d been enough force in his blow to kill his opponent if it had been a direct hit. But it hadn’t been one

The enemy’s hachigane had taken the sting out of his blow just like it had done when he’d stabbed him.

Stride: “Hah, you’ve gone beyond my venerable self’s expectations. Even with the fact that the Shinobi belonging to the General should have been somewhat skilled amongst my pieces.”

Dozens of seconds had elapsed, and while that was only a short amount of time, the place had become a spectacle of their mortal struggle.

And amongst all that Stride was chuckling to himself as if he were enjoying the show. His behavior felt completely disingenuous here. He didn’t have a single care in the world about his Shinobi’s defeat who lay collapsed in a pool of his own blood,

Stride: “As I thought, his duel with the Eight Arms really wasn’t a fluke, eh? I tried testing things out, but the results were mostly as expected.…What a dull affair.”

Wilhelm: “You bastard, what the fuck are you trying to do…”

Stride: “Hrm?”

The man had sunk into thought, paying no more heed to the two who had fought, or to the hall whose reception-sofa had toppled over, tables had been smashed and paintings and ornaments strewn all over the floor.

Stride’s very being seemed so absurd to Wilhelm that it went beyond unnerving. The first impression he’d had of him back at Picoutatte hadn’t been wrong.

—I need to take this man’s life as quickly as possible.

Stride: “Your eyes are the epitome of inelegance. What’s more, you pose to me a question that is ripe with your insipid slander. What does my venerable self intend to do? Well, shouldn’t I have told you that from the very beginning. —Everything is for my entertainment.”

Wilhelm: “Are you seriously saying that you’re carrying out all this nonsense out of sheer whim?”

Stride: “You speak such drivel. Why do you lump entertainment with whim? Entertainment is exhilarating because you set a plan in stone, think things through and then take the time and effort to prepare things.”

Wilhelm: “…I’d forgotten how pointless it is to speak with madmen. No point going on any longer.”

Wilhelm deemed that further conversation with Stride, who just shrugged his shoulders, was pointless.

Stride showed no signs of divulging Theresia’s condition. Before returning back to the fight, Wilhelm was going to lop off the Shinobi’s head and then put the question of his wife’s safety to Stride’s body.

He slowly stepped towards the Shinobi who lay face-down in a pool of his own blood—

Stride: “By the way, do you remember my rings?”

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm’s breath caught in its tracks at the words Stride had suddenly uttered.

With his hands spread out, Stride flashed the rings he wore on his fingers; Wilhelm’s eyes were drawn in by their bewitching radiance. There were 9 of them in total—As for the missing ring, it had already been used to cast a curse on Bertol (who was Wilhelm’s father-in-law and Theresia’s actual father) that had bound his life until they’d managed to destroy said ring.

Stride had declared to him the amount of rings he had left, which totaled nine, when he’d bid him farewell last time. The light of one of those rings, the one on the middle finger of his left hand, glowed brighter,

Stride: “Our earlier amusement ended up as a trial-run, but this time that isn’t going to be so. —Nine, Once all the preparations are in place I shalt give you the show of a lifetime.”

Wilhelm: “…So you came to cast a curse with your rings on me so that you can finish your preparations or something?”

Stride: “If I let myself be carried by whim and place a curse on you that would be but middling entertainment. But things aren’t so simple. The curse rings have their own kind of procedure that has to be followed. The reason I came here was only so that I could extend my every courtesy.”

Wilhelm: “Your every courtesy?”

Wilhelm was shocked to hear something he’d never ever expected to hear from him. A faint smile formed on Stride’s face on seeing his reaction,

Stride: “According to things, you have the potential to be one of my venerable self’s players in the game. Is it not courteous to say a few cordialities before moving a piece on the board? When it comes to entertainment, logic is an absolute.”

His ring shone. Wilhelm tried to move towards Stride whilst keeping his eye on the unfolding situation. Perhaps he’d kept talking so nonchalantly because he’d been planning to try and fulfill these conditions of his curse rings.

However, Wilhelm’s concerns were off the mark. —The rings had already cast their curse.

Stride: “Neither money nor loyalty are decisive enough factors in linking a pawn to its master. In order to make someone your pawn, the most efficient way is to bind their life.”

Wilhelm: “—tch.”

Astoundingly, something burst out of the pool of blood in response to Stride’s words. That something was the body of the Shinobi, who had collapsed there from Wilhelm’s blow, leaping up. A red light, identical to the one from the curse casting ring, was shining from the Shinobi’s eyes hidden underneath his torn mask.

Stride was controlling the dying Shinobi by force using the ring’s power.

Wilhelm: “JUST DIE ALREADY!”

Stride: “That too would be mirthful. A difference that tantamounts to no more than just dying by the palm of mine venerable self’s hand or dying flashily upon the verge of death.”

The Shinobi didn’t react to Wilhelm’s shout so Stride responded on his behalf—Wilhelm himself couldn’t understand what Stride had meant. He gritted his teeth and held out his sword, but the Shinobi, who was now standing up, dug his own nails into himself as if he were tearing up his body.

Straight after he did that, a pale blue seal rose up on his body visible from a gap in his black garb. As it rose a ghastly aura accompanied by a fighting spirit surged up; Wilhelm bent his knees, expecting a fight to break out—

Stride: “Oh yeah. There was a woman in the mansion, but she’s tied up above. You’d better go pick her up.”

Wilhelm: “Huh.”

Distracted by Stride’s nonchalant words, a flurry of light exploded, taking advantage of his momentary lapse.

Then, the Shinobi leaped up utilizing all of his strength—He grabbed Stride by his thin waist, broke one of the windows and jumped outside of the mansion.

The Shinobi tore grass up from the garden’s lawn, and then with just one kick, he took off from the stone wall and left the battlefield. Of course, that meant that Stride was getting away as well, so Wilhelm rushed to the garden to try and pursue them.

But there were no signs of the enemy already by the time he reached the garden. This had been the result of them pouring all of their strength into their escape.

Wilhelm: “Shit! Damn those guys, acting however they please…”

With unbearable anger welling up in his jaw, Wilhelm set out back to the mansion. He would need to set aside the credibility of

Stride's words for later, for now he needed to rescue Theresia who should be somewhere upstairs.

But Wilhelm was greeted by someone as he turned back to the Hall with that in mind—

???: "H-Hey, Wilhelm?! What on earth happened here?"

Wilhelm: "Theresia? Grimm, you too…"

Theresia, who he'd thought had been restrained by those guys, was looking over at the disastrous state of the Hall in astonishment. Grimm was standing behind her as well, clad in his usual attire.

There was nothing amiss with either of them other than the confusion they showed wondering what had happened. There were no signs of any injuries on them and Theresia still looked the same as when he'd said goodbye to her this morning.

Wilhelm: "Wait, doesn't your face look a little bit pale?"

Theresia: "N… no idea, but anyone would feel paler and be as surprised as me if they came back to find their home in this state! Wilhelm, you're the one that's hurt…"

Wilhelm: "…It's nothing. So long as nothing happened to you."

Theresia rushed over to him, half-running, and frowned when she saw the state Wilhelm was in.

Luckily, he hadn't suffered any external wounds during his fight with the Shinobi. Even so, the Hall was in complete disarray and there was a pool of blood adorning its floor. It wasn't like nothing had happened.

Of course, if Theresia was safe, the damage to the mansion was no big deal.

Wilhelm: "…Wait up. If that's the case, then the woman that guy mentioned was…"

It didn't matter if he'd just been bluffing. They'd be all hunky-dory if he’d just been using that as an excuse to escape. But, he wasn’t prepared to believe that so easily, he’d already let down his guard around that bastard too much.

Wilhelm: “We need to go upstairs!”

Theresia: “Huh?”

Wilhelm grew paler and yelled those words out, to which Theresia reacted in shock.

Grimm: “—h̸̆k̵!”

As soon as he heard Wilhelm’s voice, Grimm, immediately sensing the urgency of the situation, rushed towards the hallway. Wilhelm took Theresia by the arm and followed behind Grimm out of the Hall. He would not leave her behind. He pulled her by her slender arm and rushed up the stairs together.

Then, in the room that was just above the Hall…

Grimm: “—Ŗ̉õ̶̰l̶.”

Theresia: “—CAROL?”

Grimm’s broken voice and Theresia’s high-pitched shriek echoed across the mansion as soon as they saw Carol’s unconscious figure strewn down onto the floor.

2

???: “There’s really no more doubt that Stride’s aims are against you and your wife.”

???: “…”

Enveloped by a heavy-laden atmosphere, Wilhelm closed his eyes at the conclusion Bordeaux had informed him.

He had no room to deny it. They had broken into the Astrea Residence in person in broad daylight. Of all the things they could’ve done, they’d managed to slip through the Noble District undetected, a district which should have had the highest levels of security in the Kingdom.

And that meant that it was no exaggeration to say that things were graver than what had transpired.

Bordeaux: “If we don’t keep our guard up around this guy, I’m pretty sure he’d even be capable of slipping in and out of the Royal Castle considering what he’s done!”

Wilhelm: “We sure are in a mess where we can’t just laugh it off as us overthinking it, huh. Of course, all the members of the Royal Family, starting with His Majesty, have had their personal guards strengthened. The upper echelon of nobles too, but…”

Bordeaux: “This isn’t something we can keep up forever. He’ll be able to clearly see that we’re being drawn thin.”

It was pretty conceivable that Stride would start moving in the very moment that they sat down to take a breather. If they kept reading too much into what was happening, then the ones who’d end up being unable to move about would be themselves.

However, the recent attack on the Astrea Residence had left behind a profound effect on the Kingdom.

Bordeaux: “What have your wife… and Grimm been up to?”

Wilhelm: “They visit Carol’s bedside quite often. She still hasn’t opened her eyes… According to what the Healing Arts User said, there’s nothing out of the ordinary to her body though.”

Bordeaux: “Everything rests in our enemy’s palm in that matter too, eh? This is goddamn unbearable.”

Bringing his hand to his forehead, Bordeaux let out a sigh. Watching this display, Wilhelm gritted his teeth and kept his silence. He wished that he could let his natural short temper boil its course and take care of their enemies like that but things were never so simple.

Due to both his wife and his camarade-de-guerre’s sake, Stride was no longer the sort of enemy they could just kill.

—Five days had already passed since their uninvited guest had turned up at the Astrea Residence.

Carol hadn't opened her eyes even once since the day she had been discovered at the mansion. The Healing Arts User had diagnosed that her life wasn't under any threat and that the cause of her slumber remained a mystery. Theresia stayed always at her bedside and continued to nurse her.

Carol was more to Theresia than just a long-serving attendant. Their relationship was more like that of close friends or sisters. Because of this, leaving her alone in the mansion that day was for Theresia like an irremovable thorn driving into her that continued to torment her mind.

And it was safe to say that there was someone who was taking it even worse than Theresia…

Wilhelm: "—Grimm… I hope he doesn't beat himself up too much."

Bordeaux: "I figure that he's blaming himself too… Since Grimm's intuition is always spot on."

Grimm was Wilhelm's comrade in arms and Carol's lover. He was blaming himself the most out of all of them about what had happened to Carol.

Because Grimm had been the only one who'd sensed the danger of Stride's current attack.

Bordeaux: "Feels like he's being a bit too hasty in that too. Though, for sure his intuition works darn well."

Bordeaux muttered that out. He understood why Grimm was blaming himself, but he was also trying to deny him the blame. But that wasn't an easy thing to do; everyone in the Zergev Corps knew that since Grimm's intuition for danger was impeccable.

Bordeaux's consolations probably wouldn't do Grimm much good due to his pride in that.

Wilhelm: “He won’t accept them no matter how many times we say it. How many times have we ended up being saved by that guy’s intuition till now. I think he’s proud of it. So that’s why…”

He’d ended up thinking that the danger was likely looming near Theresia and had chosen to be next to her instead of Carol. For that, Grimm found it impossible to blame anyone but himself.

Wilhelm: “Changing the subject, how are things going with finding out Stride’s whereabouts?”

Bordeaux: “I haven’t gotten any reports bearing us that news. As long as we know that he’s accompanied by skilled individuals like the Eight Arms revealing our hand carelessly will just invite them to wreak more havoc on us.”

Wilhelm: “When we find him, we’ll encircle him with my troops. I’ll make him pay for fucking about with us so much.”

Bordeaux: “My troops, huh? I see that you’ve started to become aware of your role as their commander.”

Bordeaux lowered his eyebrows slightly at the eager Wilhelm. His reaction felt a little out of sorts, and more so than that, his words felt too blithe. That made Wilhelm raise his eyebrows.

Wilhelm: “Stop talking like you’ve suddenly aged 60 years. We don’t have an infinite number of people assigned to the bodyguards. Those who can fight will defend themselves. Don’t you have your ax somewhere in the room?”

Bordeaux: “I do. Behind the frame on the wall. —But, some progress should have been made.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm felt relieved hearing that Bordeaux’s weapon of choice was still hidden in the room. Then, he cocked his head in confusion. Bordeaux rested his elbows on his desk and then gave a short nod. And following that…

???: “—I’m sorry to interrupt y’all while you’re in the middle of your discussion.”

The office door silently swung open and a man poked his face in. Wilhelm’s eyes widened in surprise when he caught sight of that individual, who’d come barging in whilst giving them that slightly uncourteous greeting.

He knew his face. He was tall, had long hair, and a sweet face that felt somewhat feminine—In fact, he was a former convict who’d once been thrown into the Prison Tower for taking advantage of several women at the same time.

The man’s name was Orphe, a con artist who went by the name of Six Tongues who’d womanized six women at the same time.

He’d been Wilhelm’s cellmate in the Prison Tower for a brief period of time.

Wilhelm: “What the hell is that heartbreaker of a lothario doing here? As you can clearly see there ain’t any women here!”

Orphe: “Heh, even after suuuch a long time, he’s still the same ol’ unfriendly guy. I really don’t feel like stayin’ here too long without being told. I am still busy after all.”

Wilhelm: “Still haven’t learnt a thing and misleading women, are you?”

Orphe: “Yeah, yeah, that’s right. —But now I mislead ‘em for the good of the Kingdom, don’t I?”

Orphe flashed him a smile. An aroma of flowers that felt weird coming from a guy was faintly drifting off from his body.

It looked like he’d had his hands full before coming here for the “Good of the Kingdom” or however he’d called it.

Bordeaux: “I do understand your misgivings, but it was you who introduced this man to me in the first place. He’s proved his usefulness as a man of quick-wits since then. But I do understand your misgivings.”

Orphe: “Why, do I really have to be made out as being so shady by my immediate boss?”

Bordeaux placated Wilhelm who had been showing his mistrust at the shady-looking Orphe. Orphe, though disgruntled at what he’d said, had had his position confirmed and thus cleared his throat,

Orphe: “Anyways it’s as Lord Zergev says. Both you and I are pretty much one and the same in the sense of being our Master’s right hand men… Though well, are roles are as different as that of a Knight Sword and a Sword-Cane, you can be sure of that.”

Wilhelm: “Since when am I Bordeaux’s adjutant…”

Orphe: “Since you took over the Zergev Corps—also when things crop up you come running to report them to our Master. Saying you aren’t on good terms with each other sounds more like the sort of pitiful excuse a bastard who hops from hooker to hooker would say.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Having had his instinct to protest slammed shut by Orphe, Wilhelm reluctantly kept his silence. He’d be fighting a losing battle, even if he’d argued, since this guy was the Six Tongues—Wilhelm didn’t have a hope in hell of matching him tit-for-tat in talk and coming out the winner.

Wilhelm: “So what is it that the quick-witted Six Tongues is doing as Bordeaux’s Sword-Cane?”

Orphe: “I was granted a few subordinates who act as our Master’s eyes and ears in various places… That’s the rub of my position. With this, I’ve been allowed to spend time surprisingly not in boredom.”

Wilhelm: “So that’s how things are.”

In other words, they made use of Orphe’s ill-famed tongue to gather intelligence. They weren’t worried about his sociable behavior precisely because he’d originally been a man who’d been caught for wooing women from the cream of society. If they tightened the reins around his vices then they could more than adequately treat him like the talented person he was.

Bordeaux: "He's still only on his trial period right now, but where possible I'd like to eventually increase the area he operates in. I intend to get a comprehensive overview of the frailties of the Kingdom which are present both now and back during the Civil War."

Orphe: "I'm pretty certain the Kingdom is being shaken about as seen fit. I'd recommend, to a certain extent, arranging it so that I'm connected with the people who are keeping their eyes on our most crucial areas. Like with Lord McMahon I suppose."

Bordeaux: "I'll think about it."

Lord McMahon—He was referring to Miklotov McMahon. He had a good eye for battle strategy, even though he was a Civil Servant. He was one of Wilhelm's acquaintances as well, and he'd helped him out before.

Although Bordeaux's concerns about the Kingdom's future were important Wilhelm was more worried about the immediate future for now. Bordeaux had purposely kept Wilhelm in his room and let Orphe come in with his report, so that meant that…

Wilhelm: "…You have some news about Stride?"

Orphe: "For now all I can guarantee is that this guy has an unusually suspicious nature to him. I could barely find any traces of him despite having gallivanted his name out. The response from the Empire wasn't great… But well, setting that aside, I feel like something far different is afoot too."

Orphe gave a short pause as that was his opinion and then he swiftly shifted his course of talk.

Orphe: "It was like that at Picoutatte, but I guess they've got their eyes fixed on the Sword Saint with all the ruckus they've started to kick up towards the Astrea Family. Nevertheless, his goals are hard to read. Who knows whether he wants to kill her or wants something else before he does…”

Wilhelm: “I will never let him do that.”

Orphe: “Now that’s some zeal I’d make off with, that’s the spirit! The more beautiful women remaining in the world for me too, the better.”

Wilhelm gave a silent frown at Orphe’s implicit remark about Theresia’s beauty. Orphe let a wry smile slip onto his face as he sensed Wilhelm’s piercing animosity and shrugged his shoulders saying “Dear oh dear,.”

Orphe: “Whatever he’s scheming, he’s going to do it in the Kingdom of Lugunica. That’s for sure. Wilhelm heard he was preparing his entertainment, and he’s become bolder in doing so. He’s most likely turning up in different places as part of his preparations.”

Bordeaux: “You’re taking too long to get to the point, Orphe. Tell us your conclusion. Where is Stride?”

Orphe: “I don’t know exactly where he is, but I do know a place he’s been to several times.”

All traces of joking about had vanished from Orphe’s expression. He’d answered Bordeaux’s question in a hushed tone. Both Wilhelm and Bordeaux’s facial expressions stiffened in response, and Orphe gave a deep nod.

Orphe: “It was a pain in the ass. But at any rate, when that guy turned his attention to that place…”

Wilhelm: “And, what was “that place”?”

Wilhelm pressed Orphe to get to the point as he tried to start his story about all the hardships he’d faced. Orphe reluctantly shook his head at that simple question and said,

Orphe: “Shamrock Valley. A dismal place that is always enshrouded by a thick fog.”

Shamrock Valley was a cursed land known far and wide to be a haunt of evil. It was located in South-Eastern Lugunica on the map. As Orphe had said, it was notorious for always being covered in a thick fog.

Fog was seen as an ill omen not just in Lugunica, but in the whole world. Since the fog made it so you could barely see and the weather was unpredictable, Shamrock Valley was regarded as a natural stronghold that kept people away.

But it wasn't the fog that clung over the Shamrock Valley that was their issue right now.

—Shamrock Valley was rumored to be the place where the Witch had settled.

???: "Many still shcoff at dh' rumoursh. But, it's true that dh' Witch once shettled in Shamrock Valley. At leasht, that's what Libre told me."

Having been informed about the rumours of the Shamrock Valley, the wizened figure let out an exhausted sigh.

He was an old individual with a queer-looking body. He had scaly green skin, a yellow cockscomb on his head and a really long tongue rolled up behind his thick lips which darted in and out of view. At first sight, he looked similar to a Lizard Person or a Frog Person but his eyes were closer to that of a fish than a reptile's.

He was from a Demi-Human Tribe that was regarded as a subspecies of the Lizard People; there weren't too many of their kind around. However, his standing had no relation to his origins as he was an important figure who had been pivotal for the Demi-Human Tribes.

The wizened individual's name was Cragrell Dawson—He had been one of the three commanders who had led the Demi-Human Alliance during the Demi-Human War. And he'd represented the Alliance after it fell.

To cut a long story short, he was the current representative of the

Demi-Human Tribes in Lugunica. He was the key figure who'd met with King Lugunica at the signing ceremony to put an end to the near decade-long Civil War.

Cragrell: "That being shaid, I'm jusht a feeble old man who washn't expected to fight. I was jusht there to serve Libre and Valga. After they died I was left to bear their heavy burden. And now I've been kept hidden in dh' Kingdom, and since it'd be troubleshome if I were to turn up dead I'm living a hermit's life… Without a care in the world."

Cragrell scratched his head with his three-fingered hand, his voice listless.

They were in a room of a mansion in the Royal Capital granted to him by the Kingdom. Of course Cragrell's whereabouts hadn't been made public and only a few people knew that he was here.

If Cragrell were to die due to some plot then the thirst for Civil War could once again erupt. The amount of vigilance the Kingdom took had drastically increased ever since Stride's presence had come to light.

A stout defense had been placed in the mansion because of that. Their talk too was being held in absolute secrecy.

Cragrell's eyes were laced with complex emotions; and in front of him—facing each other, a woman with long indigo hair was reflected in his eyes.

Cragrell: "But, that's how fate rollsh. Those who hated and killed each other from dh' start, thish time ended up trying to protect me at dh' rishk of their very lives."

Roswaal: "When circumstances change so too does one's treatment. It's rather straaaange to say this but I'd like you to be tolerant and accept it this time around. That's because we've been wanting to avoid a situation where our country goes up in flames for a while now, and it isn't just us, but also your brethren Cragrell-dono."

Cragrell: "Fate, shpeak of dh' irony, it's around you too… I never expected to get lucky enough to get a chance to talk to you like thish after dh' Civil War ended."

Faced with Cragrell's complex tone of voice, the woman—Roswaal J Mathers let a smile appear on her devilishly beautiful face and nodded as if empathizing with his feelings.

Face to face like this, it was fine work indeed that Cragrell was just about keeping his cool. At any rate—

Roswaal: "From your perspective it's because I was one of your greatest enemies who prevented your victory, riiiiight?"

Cragrell: "Victory? You say such shtrange things. Victory, where was that in that war?"

Roswaal: "…Hmmh."

Roswaal raised her eyebrows slightly at his unexpected counterpoint. Cragrell then shook his head with a look on his face that had "Give me a break" written all over it.

Cragrell: "It was like letting your temper flare up too much. The Demi-Human Tribes launched into battle with unbearable anger courshing through them. We had no chance of winning and only Valga gave it some sherioush thought. I ran around like a headlessh chicken and Libre was alwaysh searching for a compromise. — Valga was deluded by the Witch as well and losht his bearings on everything."

Roswaal: "…"

Roswaal looked down as soon as she heard the word "Witch" come out. Immersed in his past, Cragrell didn't notice the swirl of emotion that filled her heterochromic eyes of blue and yellow.

Nevertheless, both of them had their thoughts about the Demi-Human War. Even in regards to the topic of the Witch that had surfaced now both of them held complicated feelings that they couldn't express into words.

Cragrell: "I don't even know where Valga brought that Witch from.

But before I knew it she was our backbone. Shamrock Valley was cleared out for dh' Witch's plan."

Roswaal: "…What we managed to find out is that Sphinx's Testing Grounds lies in that land of fog. I've been there to check the place out a few times, but I didn't manage to get any results."

Cragrell: "That's becaushe I've heard it's down to dh' Witch's Dark Artsh. Take care around her refuge; only Valga and Libre were told how to enter it, or so they say."

Roswaal: "It's a dangerous place to scout out without resorting to tricks. You have be well prepared."

Roswaal bit her lip in response to Cragrell's answer who had told her that finding the Witch's refuge was difficult.

Though Roswaal was the type who'd always try to keep her cool from habit, when it came to Sphinx—Only when it came to that being who was labelled "That Witch", did she find it hard to keep her cool.

—That was because Sphinx and the Mathers Family shared a long, long history. Destroying the defective product of that Witch without leaving a single trace of Sphinx's existence behind was one of Roswaal J Mather's lifelong goals.

Therefore, it was probably suitable to call Sphinx's Testing Grounds, which lay hidden in Shamrock Valley, a Testing Grounds when you took into consideration Sphinx's history. Not being able to find the Testing Grounds was a real thorn in Roswaal's side.

—Not just for her own goal but also for everyone she'd forged friendships with.

Cragrell: "You have quite dh' troubled look on your face. Why are you so attached to that place? You're a mage. Could it be that you're trying to retrieve the research reshults that the Witch left behind."

Roswaal: "Sorry but the magic I was taught is for making people happy. It's absolutely incompatible with that being's quintessence.

My goal is…”

“To completely erase all traces of that Witch”—she tried to firmly declare that but for some reason she hesitated with her words.

Roswaal: “…”

Roswaal licked her chapped lips, providing them moisture, and then cut off her hesitation in an instant.

Roswaal: “It’s moreso that some comrades of mine are interested in that place and one of my friends was hurt. I’ve been saved by her many times. —She’s the rare sort of friend whom I desire for her happiness.”

Carol was still sleeping even now. During the Civil War she had accompanied Roswaal on numerous of her rash excursions as her escort. In her role she hadn’t been able to go against Roswaal’s opinions, and she didn’t know what she thought of them, but Roswaal was quite fond of her.

Of course that was completely uncomparable to Mathers’ most cherished desire. Even so, when it came to the conditions of friendship that Roswaal personally embraced, she filled those plenty enough.

Cragrell: “…Your pershonality is so troublesome to dh’ point that I’d rather shympathize with you.”

Roswaal: “I know. But I can’t reflect on that.”

She didn’t know why she hadn’t gotten angry at the words the old man had spoken that had felt like he’d seen right through her. Either way, Roswaal had nothing more to gain so she started to get up from her seat.

Cragrell: “—The last time I shpoke with Libre was before the Battle of Aihia.”

Out of the blue, Cragrell turned his eyes not to Roswaal but into empty space and muttered out those words.

“Libre”, Roswaal pondered over that name that had cropped up several times already in her mind, and then she spoke out,

Roswaal: “He was one of the leaders of the Demi-Human Alliance like Valga and Sphinx. Libre Fermi.”

Cragrell: “He was shomething like a friend to me, someone who I knew for a long time. This is what Libre told me. “If Valga doesn’t cool his foolish head down the Alliance will meet its end when all of us are dead. I will leave it to you to broker peace for when that time comes.”“

Libre was renowned for his prowess in battle having crossed swords with many of the Kingdom’s Soldiers on the frontlines.

After the war it became clear from the testimonies of people who’d known him that in contrast to what he was renowned for he’d been the person who’d most wanted a reconciliation with the Kingdom amongst the three leaders.

It made sense from Libre’s point of view to designate Cragrell as the Post-Civil War leading delegate.

Cragrell: “In the end, Libre’s intuition was spot on. Only I, a feeble old man, survived and now I’m caged here until I kick the bucket under the pretense of being under the Kingdom’s protection. Enough of that, I intend to fulfill my duty towards my brethren, but…”

Roswaal: “…”

Cragrell: “If truly I am to fulfill Libre’s final requesht, then I should do this.”

Cragrell’s eyes, which were gazing into empty space, swayed with emotion. His distant gaze wasn’t fixed upon the wall of his dreary room. It was probably fixed upon the past with his now-lost friends. Eventually…

Cragrell: “—tsh.”

Cragrell jerked his chin up and let his tongue unroll from behind his puffy lips out towards Roswaal. For a second, Roswaal tensed up as if expecting something untoward, but she immediately realized what the old man was doing soon after.

—A glittering crystal stone rested against the tip of Cragrell's long tongue.

Cragrell: "This shtone has a portion of dh' Witch's Od confined in it. Libre told me when he handed it to me that with it you can remove the Refuge's conshealment mechanishm. Though with how shtubborn I am I was planning to take it to my grave."

Roswaal: "But you didn't do that. Why?"

Cragrell: "—The war ended a long time ago. I see that you too are simply just a pershon who gets sad when one of your friends is hurt. I've turned my back to the battlefield when I didn't fight, and now I don't have the strength left to persevere."

Cragrell slowly shook his head and Roswaal took the crystal from the tip of his tongue.

She could feel a sinister aura faintly emanating from it as soon as she set it on her palm—That aura was the miasma of that diabolical Witch which seemed to almost be telling her "Part of me has lingered behind in this world, even after death."

But Roswaal's aim had been achieved thanks to this being left behind. She'd told her friends "Leave it to me" and then made her way over here. She would not lose face with her friends.

Relieved by that, Roswaal bowed and prepared herself to leave this place. But before she did—

Roswaal: "You have my gratitude, Cragrell-dono. Also, although I may be overstepping my marks here I'd like to say just one last thing."

Cragrell: "What ish it?"

Roswaal: "You fought well on your battlefield. That is something I can assure you, having come here to meet you like this. You have nothing at all to be ashamed about in regards to your friends.”

She didn’t intend to comfort him nor overly worry about him. Even if none of her words reached his heart, there wasn’t anything unusual about them not reaching a mutual understanding with that Civil War between them.

Even so, Roswaal left those words behind and Cragrell looked down wordlessly.

—As one of the conclusions of the Demi-Human War, merely that was enough.

4

Roswaal returned with the good news and the decision to mobilize the operation was taken immediately after.

With Stride’s movements discovered by Orphe, and the Testing Grounds left by the Witch Sphinx presumed to be Stride’s objective —They prepared to set out there to shed light on the situation.

And if things went well they would prevent whatever Stride was planning before it came to fruition and throttle the life out of him—

???: “So you’re going to that Shamrock Valley, famed for its danger, for that purpose?”

In preparation for the operation, Wilhelm was changing into his Royal Knights outfit. Theresia frowned at him as he was putting on his white jacket and then asked him that question.

Sliding his hands into the jacket’s sleeves Wilhelm gave a short nod and replied with a “Yeah”

Wilhelm: “That Roswaal girl got information about the Witch’s Refuge from Cragrell of the Alliance. After several investigations turning up nothing, we should make a bit more progress with this.”

Theresia: “…You really do believe in Roswaal-san, don’t you?”

Wilhelm: “Believe in, now that’s a pretty unappetizing way of putting it.”

Theresia reached out to his jacket and smoothed the wrinkles on its back out with her palm. Wilhelm couldn’t see what look she had on her face from where he was. But a wry smile spread across his face in response to her words.

He’d sought out her help before in regards to Stride, and now he’d sought out her assistance in regards to the matter of Shamrock Valley as well. He felt a bit reluctant to declare that he believed in her, but in actual fact he probably did.

Roswaal too had been one of his comrades whom he’d fought alongside with in the Civil War. There was no questioning that.

Theresia: “That place also has a lot of Witchbeasts living in the perennial fog… Do you think a clue to wake Carol can really be found in a place like that?”

Wilhelm: “You think it’s a trap he deliberately showed off to lure anyone trailing him in? For sure that would be a plan that would match up with that bastard’s rotten nature, but…”

Stride might have let Orphe acquire that information and set a trap to capture all of the people pursuing him from the Kingdom in one proverbial net. For certain he was the kind who’d be capable of doing that.

However—

Wilhelm: “No matter how cautious we are of that, Grimm isn’t going to stay put. There’s no way I am going to send him out alone in the fog.”

Theresia: “…Grimm-kun has been constantly blaming himself, hasn’t he?”

Wilhelm: “You aren’t one who can speak about others either.”

Theresia, having been concerned about Grimm’s emotional state, had completely shunted her own self aside. But, in terms of being sick and worried for Carol, Theresia rivalled him too.

Theresia: "You know you sound really like yourself when you start speaking like that. You just used to argue with Carol all day… Aren't you lonely without her now?"

Wilhelm: "I'm just as surprised at myself too, though."

He'd never expected he'd feel so lonely not hearing Carol's quibbling. Besides, even if he put the matter of Carol aside, there's no way he could overlook Shamrock Valley.

Wilhelm: "A combination of Stride and the Witch is just about the worst thing I can imagine. In a sense they're a more ill-natured duo than her and Valga… If they were all together I'd have no idea what the hell'd happen."

Theresia: "…Could Carol too have ended up like father did?"

Theresia, who showed signs of apprehension, mentioned that because of the stuff that had happened during their honeymoon. — Back at Picoutatte when they'd first come face to face with Stride, Theresia's father, Bertol, had been gripped by the ring's curse and his very life had almost been at risk.

Even if Theresia was similarly uneasy when looking at the comatose Carol, it didn't serve any use.

Wilhelm: "Just like with what happened to our Honored Father, the diagnoses that mages like Garritch gave differed from the usual kind. With all these kinds of things we have no choice but to get them from Stride's mind directly."

Theresia: "I understand… So please, even if you push yourself, come back safely okay?"

Wilhelm: "Don't you usually tell me to not push myself?"

Theresia: "Don't you still push yourself whenever I say that?"

Wilhelm: "…It depends on the time and situation."

Wilhelm was aware that he usually pushed himself too hard. Since Theresia knew that too she replied with "I know right?"

She then turned to the front, and said:

Theresia: “Because you’re you, you’ll end up pushing yourself. I won’t ask you to do anything you can’t do. But I’d like to hear you promise me that you’ll come back safely.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Theresia: “Mphm.”

Wilhelm didn’t reply to the smiling Theresia with words, instead he replied by gently bringing her into his firm embrace. Though it surprised Theresia at first, she then put her head on Wilhelm’s chest straight after.

They broke the embrace after a while, biting down their reluctance to let go of each other.

Wilhelm: “You and Carol will be protected by Bordeaux’s men while I’m gone. It’ll probably get a bit stuffy, but please bear with it.”

Theresia: “Honestly though, it’d be better to let them guard other people of importance than me. Like why not…”

Wilhelm: “I don’t want to hear any more of this from you. This is mine, Bordeaux and everyone’s final decision on the matter.”

The words that she’d have followed up with would have probably been related to her Divine Protection of the Sword Saint. Even if she didn’t say it, they were fully aware of these things.

Theresia, who had been placed under their protection, was stronger than anyone here.

Wilhelm: “If all goes well, I’ll be back in less than 10 days. I promise you that I’ll definitely come back with results.”

Theresia: “The promise is your safety Wilhelm. As well as Grimm-kun’s, Roswaal-san’s, Conwood-san’s and everyone else’s.”

Wilhelm: “Of course.”

Having been reminded of that, Wilhelm returned his nod without any hesitation this time around. Theresia puffed out her chest in satisfaction at his encouraging response.

Theresia: “Well then, take care my dear. —For the sake of my family, thank you.”

Wilhelm nodded again without checking as if that denoted who it was.

5

They left the Royal Capital and set out to investigate the Shamrock Valley. That was the mission the Zergev Corps had to carry out led by Wilhelm—Or more precisely, the mission of the Corps was to provide escort for the members of the investigation team. And, the members that had been picked out to investigate the Witch’s Refuge included—

???: “—Doesn’t it perhaps remiiiiind you of the time when we first met when we do on-the-spot investigations of the enemy’s territory like this?”

Leading the front, the Corps members stepped through the unsteady earth and cleared her out a path that was easy to walk through. The person who’d spoken out whilst she followed this impromptu path as if she were taking a leisurely stroll was whom they were escorting, was Roswaal.

Still the same as ever, she wore a costume that didn’t appear fit for the occasion of investigating this dangerous area. She would constantly talk to the Zergev Corps who were cautiously combing out the surroundings for danger, especially Wilhelm who was walking beside her.

Of course his placement had been intentional. It made sense to place the strongest Corps member beside the most important one. Wilhelm had ended up getting the short end of the stick thanks to that excuse.

Roswaal: “Back then it was because we went to investigate the

Magic Circle in Castor Plain, right? We were investigating all the troublesome stuff left behind by the Demi-Human alliance… It feels like deja-vu.”

Wilhelm: “You never shut up. At this rate you’re gonna run out of breath.”

Roswaal: “No need to worry. I take daily runs to keep myself in tip-top shaaape. If we’re going to keep travelling through poor terrain then I doooon’t intend to lose out to your men.”

Roswaal replied to Wilhelm’s scathingness without sounding particularly concerned. In actual fact, her legs weren’t tired. Whereas the heavily armed Corps members were about to reach their limits before her.

Nonetheless, that wasn’t to say that his men were weak.

—Because the Shamrock Valley which the Zergev Corps had stepped into, that haunt of evil, had already bared its fangs at them.

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm ran his sword spirit through the barely visible surroundings and focused on keeping his troops’ formation.

The valley was full of fog as rumored. The fog itself was more noxious than rumored, it was as if it was trying to sap their strength from them. Something always felt out of place, as if they were being watched by something they couldn’t see. That sensation frayed at their nerves and reduced their alertness levels; if they weren’t careful, they could start losing members of their team to it.

They had to keep their wits about them at all times so it was inevitable that his thoughts turned to worrying about how much energy they had left.

Wilhelm: “Luckily it doesn’t seem to be a Witchbeast paradise like the rumors said.”

Roswaal: “No matter what they are, rumors tend to be stretched. Few people bother to tread into such dangerous areas like

Shamrock Valley. It's all too natural that the rumors end up being exaggerated. Weeeell, I can't say that as a rule though, since there are way more Witchbeasts in the Augria Sand Dunes than the rumors say."

Roswaal shrugged her shoulders. Wilhelm gave an indifferent nod and then wordlessly turned to the end of the column where his deputy commander was bringing up the rear.

Although the man's facial expression was indistinguishable in the fog, the drive that exuded from him was hair-raising; it was Grimm. He'd sustained a wound to his throat in the war, but right now he was speaking little (and it had nothing to do with his wound), and his step was heavy-laden.

Though, he'd expected him to be a little bit more optimistic since he was doing this for Carol's sake—

Roswaal: "His self-reproach won't show itself in his actions. If his overly strained nerves led to some sort of accident it would be easy to point fingers at him… Grimm-kun too, as talented as he is, is suffering."

Wilhelm: "Don't go reading into what's in people's minds so casually."

Roswaal: "You don't deny it, I never expected you to become so human. There's a certain charm to you even when you've given up being a sword. Such a pity thouuuuugh."

She spoke to Wilhelm in typical Roswaal-fashion as if there was something meaningful in what she'd said.

Regardless of whether something was hidden behind her attitude or not, the way he got on with her hadn't changed. Wilhelm didn't reply to her for a little while. Then, he spoke up.

Wilhelm: "Grimm has Conwood with him. They should be able to handle anything that crops up."

Roswaal: "Wouldn't Grimm-kun have more peace of mind if you yourself were to say something to him?"

Wilhelm: “He prioritized Theresia’s safety and that led to Carol becoming like she is now. What on earth can I say to Grimm to settle his nerves?!”

Roswaal: “You sure are tactless, aren’t you? I guess it was far too early for me to have said that you’ve given up being a sword.”

Wilhelm felt a sense of shame similar to how Grimm was feeling reproachful towards himself.

Ultimately, leaving Stride at large had been Wilhelm’s fault. He’d definitely had his chances to lop off his head both at Picoutatte and at the Astrea Residence.

If only he’d seized those opportunities then… He couldn’t help but think that way.

Roswaal: “—I’m sorry, but can we stop for juuuuust a little bit?”

Wilhelm: “—. All troops. Halt. A-ttention.”

Wilhelm swiftly responded to Roswaal’s sudden call to stop their march. Everyone stopped in their tracks as soon as the command had been issued and shifted their attention towards them.

With them as the focus of their attention, Roswaal took something out from between her large breasts. She brought out a thumb-sized crystal which was fastened to a thin chain.

Wilhelm: “He gave you that?”

Roswaal: “I received this from Cragrell-dono of the Alliance. It seems like Libre Fermi got it from Sphinx and used it as proof of passage to the Refuge.”

Wilhelm: “Libre, huh.”

Wilhelm gave a small frown at Roswaal’s explanation, the crystal now in her hand.

Wilhelm was acquainted with Libre Fermi as well, having crossed swords with him personally. He’d been renowned as the strongest swordsman in the Demi-Human Alliance.

In fact, Wilhelm had almost been killed by Libre.

He hadn't ended up dead thanks to luck intervening—No, he hadn't ended up dead thanks to his comrades back then saving him one after the other. Amongst them, Bordeaux's adjutant, Pivot had lost his life to protect Wilhelm.

In the end Libre too had been betrayed by Sphinx and his corpse had ended up being toyed with.

Wilhelm: "You said Libre gave that to Cragrell before he died right?"

Roswaal: "Yeah because he was the most realistic person who was looking for a compromise to end the Civil War. It looked like Cragrell-dono was going to hide it inside his belly until he died though… Hey, what's the matter?"

Wilhelm: "…He was hiding it inside his belly?!"

Part of what she'd said made him double take. Hearing his confusion, Roswaal tilted her head wonderingly, and said,

Roswaal: "I'm not exaggerating, he put it inside of his stomach. It's a greaaaat place to hide things."

Wilhelm: "He was really carrying that around in there like it's the most normal thing in the world…?"

Roswaal: "Strangely enough, the fact that you were raised posh is slowly trickling out from you."

With a wry smile, Roswaal raised the crystal that had been sitting inside of someone else's stomach up for everyone to see. A faint light appeared inside the white crystal when she did, and following that, a beam of light pierced straight into the fog up ahead. The beam continued to stretch out deep into the fog without showing signs of stopping and probably stretched out into the far yonder—

Wilhelm: "It must mean that the Witch's Refuge is around."

Roswaal: “It should be the Testing Grounds which served as Sphinx’s base. However, although we have the proof of passage, its effective range isn’t dependable. We’ll have to take care from here, won’t we.”

Roswaal made a pedantic correction to Wilhelm’s statement. Then she nodded towards the depths of the fog. From here on out, they’d have to be more on their guard just as she’d warned them.

Wilhelm: “Grimm, can you promise me that you won’t run off ahead?”

Grimm: “…”

Wilhelm had named Grimm as he was the person who was most acutely aware of impending danger in the Corps. Having been called out, Grimm stepped forward, his usual happy-go-lucky face tensing up.

Grimm: “…e~~t me oo it eas~~e.”

Grimm raised his Greatshield up, telling him “Let me do it please.” The sigil engraved into his shield was the Remendis one, of Carol’s lineage. Carol had given him the shield during the Civil War so the way he handled it was something which he took utmost care of.

His current determination was just as if he’d sworn on his shield. Thus he could only believe in him.

Roswaal “Here you go.”

Roswaal handed over the crystal to Grimm. He firmly took ahold of the glintstone and turned towards where the beam of light was pointing to. Then he started to walk with the Zergev Corps in his tow.

Wilhelm: “All troops, follow Grimm. Be wary of any traps set by the Witch or attacks from those bastards.”

Urging his Corps members to keep their guard up, Wilhelm too followed in Grimm’s wake with his hand on his sword’s pommel. Roswaal followed behind him, chuffed that their surroundings had been strengthened by the brave men of the Zergev Corps.

Wilhelm: "…"

Is this dampness against my skin due to the fog or from me sweating?

He felt like his senses were getting more and more impaired the further he walked into the fog. It must be the strange powers of the fog which had been left by the Witch that kept people at bay. He couldn't hear the sounds of the wind and his own breathing anymore, and his sight was so covered in white that he was almost blind.

All he could do was follow the guiding light.

Silently, silently following in Grimm's wake (who was following the light's path foremostly) and that guiding light.

How much time had passed since they'd set out?

Wilhelm: "The fog."

Suddenly, Wilhelm became aware that his sight had become clearer and that the world that had been enveloped in thick fog had become brighter. A sense of excitement reflexively stirred up in his voice. He masked it by wiping away at the sweat on his forehead.

Then, he went up to Grimm's side and clapped him on his shoulder.

Wilhelm: "Grimm we've crossed the most difficult part for now, after this we…"

???: "—It seems you've gotten used to captaincy, haven't you? Wilhelm."

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm froze in surprise at that clear-sounding reply which Grimm shouldn't have been able to return. However, his surprise was immediately replaced by a different kind of surprise.

And that was because the voice didn't belong to Grimm, yet he knew who it belonged to.

There's no way he should be hearing this person's voice. That was imp—

???: "It's not just the young lord, but you too that I didn't think would change this much. This is quite the pleasant miscalculation."

The man speaking to him was an elegant looking one with long chestnut coloured hair cascading down his back. Wilhelm was reflected in his eyes, behind the monocle that adorned his left one. The corners of his lips curved up into a smile.

He remembered that expression. That smile was tucked away in memories that seemed a little faraway.

His name was—

Wilhelm: "—Pivot?"

His former camarade de guerre who'd saved his life and died for it was now smiling at him at the end of the fog.

6

???: "…"

Theresia passed the time restlessly sat beside the still sleeping Carol.

It had been four days since Wilhelm had left for Shamrock Valley—The plan had been to make their way there to see if they could find anything at the Witch's Refuge that had been used by the Demi-Human Alliance.

Theresia stretched out her hand to Carol's sleeping face as her own wishful thoughts overlapped with what had been arranged. She gently brushed away the golden fringe that lay against her forehead and then traced her eyebrows with her finger.

Her typical purpose-kept stiff expression became surprisingly gentle when she was asleep. She never really showed it in public but she looked really sweet when she smiled. Theresia felt a small tinge of pride that she was able to keep that knowledge all to herself; though, it was quite a dilemma as well.

Theresia: “It’s really such a waste that only I know what a cute girl Carol truly is.”

So when Carol had told her she was going out with Grimm (whilst stuttering out excuses upon excuses let’s add), Theresia’s had burst into both joy and loneliness. If the guy Carol had been going out with hadn’t been Grimm then Theresia would have most likely felt extremely jealous. Well, actually, she was feeling jealous of Grimm too, but it definitely would have been worse than now.

What am I even going to do with Carol?

Theresia: “I can’t really say that I’m like her Mistress. And if I said Friend Carol would get bashful and show her displeasure. —Sisters is the closest I guess.”

Theresia thought herself more as being the big sister even though Carol was older than her. Carol too thought of herself as something close to that so the “Who’s the Big Sister Dispute” remained unsettled.

Theresia: “…Would it be fine to concede this now to Carol when she wakes up?”

She could say that this would be a pretty big concession from herself. Carol ought to leap up and bask in the honor of her leniency. Theresia’s attitude meant that she’d handed her the victory of their long, long dispute.

Carol: Th-This is too great of an honor, Theresia-sama. But, would, would that really be okay? I’m still not mature enough…

Theresia: “Heheh.”

Theresia giggled out loud, knowing perfectly well what Carol would say. However, the actual Carol wasn’t blushing or awestruck by Theresia’s words since she was still sleeping.

And that was connected to Theresia's sense of dismay. She was fully aware that she was unconsciously acting like a spoiled child.

All she'd ever done was place burdens on Carol ever since the Demi-Human War. In the end, when she looked back on it, she hadn't changed one bit.

Theresia: "…"

Theresia shook her head and took a cup from the tabletop which had been placed nearby in the hospital room. She placed the cup to her mouth and took a sip. The tea really didn't taste good even though she'd brewed it herself.

It was as if her anxiety was increasing so much to the point where she'd forgotten even what she liked. Recently there'd been many of these strange occurrences.

It wasn't just with tea, there'd been many instances where food and spices had felt off to her too. She also felt rather miserable that she was posing the blame for her terrible emotional distress on her surroundings.

Theresia: "I can't keep going on like this though. My mother and father will get worried."

Her parents were coming from the main Astrea residence to the Royal Capital today to check on Carol's condition as had been pre-arranged. They too considered Carol like a daughter.

Theresia wasn't at all sure if she'd have the resolve in herself to leave the hospital room in time despite saying she'd go out and meet them.

—She'd let Carol suffer like this whilst she was away. And neither Grimm or Wilhelm could be at her side, so at a time like this, she couldn't leave her side.

Theresia let out a pensive sigh with that in mind. And, immediately as she did—

???: "—sia… sama?"

Theresia: “Eh?”

Theresia instinctively rushed over to Carol’s bed in response to that faint voice. For a moment, she wondered whether she’d mistaken the voice for the sound of the wind, but there’s no way she would have ever mistaken that particular voice.

Theresia: “Carol?”

She placed her hand onto the bed and gently brought her other one to the supine Carol’s cheek. Carol groggily narrowed her eyes to her palm’s touch,

Carol: “Your hand’s…”

Theresia: “What’s wrong with it? My hand’s…”

Carol: “Cold. Careful not to get too cold…”

She’d woken up and her first words had been those; Theresia blinked her eyes in astonishment at that. Her words had been rather typical for her so Theresia quickly understood that this wasn’t a dream.

Theresia: “Oh my gosh Carol, thank goodness! I was really, really worried…”

Carol: “Ah, I’m… Where’s Grimm?”

Theresia: “Already the Grimm-kuns are starting right after you wake up? No, it’s okay. Today I’ll let you off. I’ll let you off, so… ah no, wait up. I have to get the master of healing!”

Theresia flusteredly replied to Carol whose voice was barely a scrap of whisper. She then wiped away the tears that had welled up in her eyes with her sleeve and rushed out of the hospital room. The knights who were guarding Theresia got pretty agitated seeing the state she was in. But they too erupted into joy when they looked into the hospital room and noticed that Carol had woken up.

Theresia: “Wilhelm… Grimm-kun…! Carol woke up, she woke up…!”

Theresia reported the news to her husband and friend (who of course weren’t there) as she sprinted down the corridor. It’s not like they could do anything about it. But she hoped they’d both come back safely after.

With that hope in mind, Theresia rushed past the mage, Garritch, without even looking at him.

It ended up with Garritch giving both the Knights and Theresia a good scolding for kicking up such a racket in the hospital with spittle flying from his mouth, along with Theresia’s parents, who had been worried sick when their daughter hadn’t come to meet them. That was after she’d given them the news.

—Still no one could notice the footsteps of the Destruction Wish steadily creeping forward.

Act Three

1

—The scenery around the valley now that the fog had cleared up was far more peaceful than he'd imagined.

With Shamrock Valley situated near the marshlands there was always an unpleasant wind blowing about. The rocky crags here were covered in moss and bogs littered the area; needless to say this made traversing the area a chore.

Thus the vibrant greenery that had painted the landscape and the chilly, serene breeze blowing by felt really weird to him.

Wilhelm: "That, and it makes no sense as well that you, being dead and all, are walking alongside me."

Pivot: "So why are you telling that to the dead man himself? I just said that you've gotten used to captaincy and that I'm pleased with your growth… Though it seems like your impudent streak is alive and kicking."

Wilhelm: "As for you, you ought to look more dead. Your face looks full of life."

Wilhelm let out a snort and then scowled at the long-haired man walking beside him—at Pivot.

The dead should look like the dead: these words were neither a metaphor or a joke, they were just plain fact. This man, Pivot Arnancy, had lost his life in the Civil War several years ago and had long departed from this world.

So their reunion right now was an impossible one.

In the first place, the figures of Roswaal and the members of the Zergev Corps who'd accompanied them were nowhere to be seen. So there was only one possibility he could think of in this situation, unless he'd been instantly hurled off to a faraway land or he'd been dropped into the lands of the dead when he'd gotten lost in the fog.

—And that possibility was that this wasn't really happening.

Pivot: "You're being overly hasty. During the Civil War there were those secret arts of the Witch that raised the dead, right? What if me being here is related to that?"

Wilhelm: "That Witch didn't make people come back to life, she just made their corpses into her puppets. The you here doesn't look like her puppet… That's why you're…"

Pivot: "…"

Pivot almost looked like he was enjoying himself and that made Wilhelm cut himself off mid-sentence. Pivot narrowed his eyes behind his monocle as a silence grew between them.

Pivot: "That's why I'm?"

Wilhelm: "—. That's why you're definitely dead and haven't come back to life. You're just a phony."

Pivot: "What cruel remarks. Were my heart weak, you might have been able to kill me just with the sharpness of those words, like that of a blade."

Pivot brought one of his hands to his chest and muttered those words out following Wilhelm's declaration. Then he, having been treated as a phony, continued to speak and said "But in fact,."

Pivot: "Words didn't kill me, but a blade most assuredly did."

Wilhelm: "…"

Pivot: "The look on your face didn't change, not one bit. Now that's Wilhelm Trias for you."

Wilhelm: "So did you come here now to voice your grudges against me?"

Wilhelm didn't understand what sort of intentions he had in mind speaking like he was making fun of his own death. However, Pivot voiced his denial to his blunt question with a “Not at all.”

Pivot: “What you just said about grudges, it’s too late for those sorts of things. I’ve got limits in regards to starting off on the wrong foot even if I’ve become like a hollow and appeared before you.”

Wilhelm: “Then why is it that you showed your face.”

Pivot: “Well, let’s see. Wilhelm, why have I?”

Wilhelm: “How am I supposed to know?”

Pivot replied like he was teasing him and then chuckled at him as he grew more irritated.

Wilhelm: “…Were you always like this?”

Wilhelm was wary about Pivot with his behavior seeming quite frivolous.

The Pivot that Wilhelm had known had been a calm, cool and collected man. He’d supported Bordeaux in both public and private as master and vassal; on top of that he’d also been the kind of person who always tried to keep what he said relevant to the topic at hand.

Having been the deputy commander of Bordeaux’s Zergev Corps, he’d often commanded them on behalf of Bordeaux as he’d had a penchant for getting into the thick of things in the frontlines. His composed decisions and precise instructions were like the picture of what a commander ought to be, to the point that right now, even Wilhelm was learning a lot from him back then.

However, when you took away that impression of his position and his talents—

Pivot: “Are you and I so close that we can talk about our impressions of each other?”

Wilhelm: “…”

Pivot: “We did spend 2 years together in the same squad… But our relationship was always one of just associates. We shouldn’t have been so close as to be able to call it one of friendship.”

Wilhelm: “…Yeah. That’s why it’s weird that you’re here.”

Wilhelm agreed with what Pivot had said and then turned his gaze not to him, but to the scenery around him.

Beneath the clear skies lay an unearthly garden of fantasy, a utopia —At least now he was sure that this place wasn’t Shamrock Valley. His real self was still wandering through the fog.

Wilhelm and the dead mingled together in this impossible land of fantasy—

Wilhelm: “So it’s neither out of a grudge or us having been close. Then I’ve no clue why I’ve come face to face with you here.”

More specifically, what was it that Pivot wanted to make Wilhelm do?

Pivot: “Well, let’s not get so flustered. How about we sit down and try and talk about it?”

Wilhelm: “Sorry, but I prioritize the living. I have no time to care about you… about the dead. If you understand that then hurry up and put me back where I came from.”

Pivot: “Words that lacked any consideration towards the dead, that too is like the old Wilhelm Trias. Though for me it’d be more accurate if I’d said the Wilhelm I know rather than the old Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm: “PIVOT—tch.”

A fierce sword aura emanated from Wilhelm directed towards Pivot who’d tried to continue their leisurely talk.

Having no intention of drawing out the conversation, Wilhelm reached for his Beloved Sword on his waist. He would not stay for any longer. He sharpened his eyes, conveying that intention.

Wilhelm: “If you’re going to stop me, I’ll…”

Pivot: “You’ll cut me down and move on forward. That too is like Wilhelm Trias. If you can, though.”

Wilhelm: “You think I can’t?”

Pivot: “Yeah, I do. That’s why I am here.”

He’d had his threat brushed aside very easily and for a moment he was taken by surprise. However, he readily gritted his teeth and tried to draw out his sword.

He’d hold the steel out towards him and give him one last chance. And if that didn’t work out—

Pivot: “—You didn’t pull it out, Wilhelm?”

Wilhelm: “…It should have.”

Wilhelm put some muscle into his arm in response to Pivot’s question. But his right arm, which he’d touched to his Beloved Sword, was trembling slightly and wouldn’t move. His will to fight wasn’t being conveyed to the palm of his hand.

He still couldn’t even draw out his sword before he could decide whether to kill Pivot or not.

Wilhelm: “Wha…”

Pivot: “If you wanted to say “What did you do to me”, then that’s a pointless suspicion. I’m doing nothing to you. I can even swear on the Young Lord, on Grimm, on each of the dead of our squad.”

Wilhelm: “—Hic.”

Pivot’s mannerism was awfully respectful and that enraged Wilhelm, making him draw out his sword.

However, his familiar Beloved Sword gripped within his palm felt incredibly heavy and his arm felt useless as if he’d forgotten how to swing his sword. He realized that his tongue was drenched in awful, bitter saliva.

Pivot: “You managed to draw it out, how splendid. And now what will you do?”

Wilhelm: “Now… I’ll…”

Pivot: “My oh my, your attitude doesn’t seem like that of that Sword Demon. Then I’ll give it to you in the form you best understand.”

Wilhelm had lost his bearings on how to swing his sword down, having been unable to raise his fist up. With Wilhelm embroiled in this turmoil, Pivot threw him a helping hand as if he was saying there’s no helping this. Pivot closed the distance between him and Wilhelm with a single step.

And then—

Pivot: “—Well done.”

Pivot’s words of admiration juxtaposed against a shrill ringing noise. His admiration was because Wilhelm had reflexively swung his sword and parried away his own.

Wilhelm had immediately protected himself from Pivot’s sword after he’d closed the gap to him. The sword had been aiming straight for his neck and if he hadn’t protected himself it would’ve surely been fatal.

Wilhelm: “The hell were you trying to do just now!”

Pivot: “I just thought I’d try and reduce your guilt. If you’re hesitant about killing a defenseless dead acquaintance, then what difference does it make if it’s a hostile dead turncoat?”

Pivot replied indifferently to the enraged Wilhelm, without any shade of malice. Then he muttered “What an awkward position this is, that I’m in right now” as if he was talking about it being someone else’s problem.

Pivot: “Anyways, you needn’t dwell on this, you should be able to achieve your purpose.”

Wilhelm: “My purpose? And what may that be! All I care about is getting back to where I came from! I don’t have any time to fight you here. There’s no point in this!”

Pivot: “It’s rather cruel of you to say there’s no point. Certainly my skills with the sword may appear like mere child’s play compared to yours, but I am still a Knight regardless, and I haven’t thrown that much away.”

Wilhelm: “—tch! Quit talking like that!”

Wilhelm flew into a fit of rage at them communicating like they were on different wavelengths. But Pivot’s expression lit up as if he were enjoying his anger and he swung his sword again as he stepped forward.

Of course, Wilhelm parried that one as well. As sharp as his blow had been, it was far off the Sword Demon’s level. His neck, his side, his belly, below his lower back, he could see countless openings. If he swung his sword at any of those places he’d be able to put him out of action.

He should do that. That’d let him quickly put an end to this phony —

Pivot: “—Look out, the next one’s coming.”

Wilhelm: “—Hic.”

He was forced to take defensive action against Pivot’s next blow before he could start his counterattack.

Pivot’s blows were elegant ones that were fired off with no openings in between them. The battle had turned to one of sheer defense for Wilhelm, as if Pivot’s prowess had vastly improved from the time he knew him.

Pivot: “That can’t be right. You should know that too.”

Wilhelm: “Gh…”

Pivot: “It’s not down to my skill that you’re stuck on the defense, it’s down to your heart. The reason all you’re doing is defending is simply because that’s all you’re doing. You aren’t even mounting one counterattack.”

Wilhelm: “GHAAAA…!”

Wilhelm locked swords with Pivot after he told him the reality of the situation and pushed him back by force. Pivot’s posture crumbled a bit at that impact and Wilhelm tried to slip his sword into the gap that emerged,

???:—Don’t let Wilhelm die!

Wilhelm: “…”

The moment he stepped forward he heard a scream resounding against his eardrums—No, in his mind, and it sounded like it was coughing up blood, a scream that he’d heard once before.

For a split second, that hallucination robbed away his attention. Pivot’s figure was there in front of him. The Knight Sword held in Pivot’s hand sprung into motion, arcing towards Wilhelm who’d stopped in his tracks,

Wilhelm: “GRAAAAAAA—!”

Feeling the signs of cold death nearing him, Wilhelm’s fighting instincts slowly stirred.

He swung his arm as he roared out a battle cry and his sword cut through Pivot’s Knight Sword halfway up the blade. The momentum that his attack had didn’t stop there, instead his flash of silver carried on and cut into Pivot’s lean figure in one fell swoop.

His blade went through from his left shoulder all the way down to his right hand side; he’d cut across his body with a single stroke—Funnily enough, it was the same wound that Pivot had suffered in real life.

Wilhelm: “—Ah.”

Pivot: “Very good, Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm widened his eyes at how savage the wound he’d given him was. Pivot nodded at him as he did so. No blood was coming out from his wound. However, he traced the scar that Wilhelm’s attack had carved into his body with his finger, and said,

Pivot: “Congratulations. —Once again, you survived.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Pivot: “That’s twice you’ve killed a comrade in arms and ended up surviving, Sword Demon.”

His rosy smile and praise morphed into cold words designed to push him away. As Pivot had stated, Wilhelm had for a second time caused his comrade in arms’ death and that made him stiffen. Pivot’s eyes narrowed in delight from behind his monocle at his reaction and then he let out a short sigh.

Pivot: “—Wilhelm Trias. It’ll be your turn next.”

2

Wilhelm: “—Gh.”

The pain coming from Wilhelm’s temple made him grimace for a moment. He firmly gritted his teeth, immediately pushed back the sudden pain and opened his eyes.

A pair of heterochromic eyes were looking at him from in front.

???: “Wilhelm-kun?”

Wilhelm: “…Your face is too close.”

???: “I get that that’s rude for someone who is married, but I’d be grateful if you didn’t blame me for it. At any rate, I’m here because you didn’t reply back to my call.”

The one who’d pulled away from Wilhelm’s somewhat menacing cry had been Roswaal. Wilhelm raised his eyebrows at her words and said “Huh?”

Wilhelm: “You said you called out to me?”

Roswaal: “Hey, hey, what’s up with that. The one who was saying that we needed to keep our wits about us should’ve been you, but isn’t it troooubling that you didn’t manage to do that properly?”

Wilhelm: “…I’m sorry.”

Wilhelm gave her a meek apology as she shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

He’d committed an unimaginable blunder and let his guard down even though it shouldn’t have happened. Following what she’d said, whatever happened in this wicked lay of land was of no surprise. Under these circumstances, just the thought of him Losing Himself, even if only for a short while, made him shiver—

Wilhelm: “—?”

Wilhelm noticed something not quite right about that and held his breath. Damp, horrible sweat had been clinging to his brow which he’d wiped with his sleeve, yet a closer look revealed that his entire body was drenched in it, including his back and legs.

He knew straight away when he felt it that it wasn’t due to the lingering fog or the long march.

Wilhelm: “What the?”

This null of several seconds, or perhaps several moments was really starting to worry him.

—It was like he was overlooking something critical.

Wilhelm: “Roswaal, I think something strange is…”

???: “—Wilhelm! Miss Mathers!”

A loud voice called out to him from up ahead as soon as he tried to tell Roswaal about the strange stuff he was experiencing. He saw

Conwood running over to them, brushing away at the fog with his arm.

He fixed his eyes on both Wilhelm and Roswaal, and said,

Conwood: “Come to the front! Grimm found something.”

Roswaal: “—! Is that something that thing’s refuge?”

Conwood: “Most likely.”

Roswaal sank her teeth into Conwood’s news with a slight feeling of impatience about her. Conwood confirmed her suspicions and scratched his short hair,

Conwood: “There’s a strange building. Though having said that, Grimm says that it’s not as dangerous as it first appears.”

Roswaal: “If Grimm-kun says that then I definitely believe him at the moment. For now, let’s make our way there. That’s okay with you… Right Wilhelm-kun?”

Wilhelm: “Ah, yeah… It’s okay with me. Let’s go.”

Though he’d been interrupted by their conversation, he gave priority to the things that needed it. After all, the topic he was going to bring up about “His sweat making him feel uneasy” wasn’t something worth mentioning.

So like that, Wilhelm took Roswaal and Conwood with him and headed to the front rank. He ordered his troops to remain on standby and joined up with the guy at the very front. Grimm, who’d volunteered to lead them in the fog, was awaiting them there.

He lifted up the crystal he had in his hand and gave a significant look over at where the light was shining up ahead.

Wilhelm: “—I see, so that’s the one?”

Wilhelm looked over to where the light was shining, and there he saw a white stone building standing leisurely in the world draped by fog—It was the refuge that he’d been told about.

It was likely the dwelling of the Witch who was said to have hidden in Shamrock Valley.

The building was quite large and in area it was almost as large as the Bar in the Royal Capital's Main Street. The bewitching atmosphere it gave off was pretty fitting for this valley of fog, and it looked strange, as Conwood had said.

Nevertheless, he did have some niggling doubts in that it'd never been found despite how much its presence stood out, even when taking into consideration that the land around here was covered in thick fog and home to Witchbeast colonies. This feeling that something wasn't quite right there went beyond being as a result of lackluster surveying or oversights.

Roswaal: "The answer to your question lies in our proof of passage, in this glintstone. Grimm-kun, may I?"

Roswaal, who was standing beside Wilhelm, answered his questions. She covered Grimm's palm, which had the crystal within it, with her own and then she quietly nodded at the refuge. As soon as she'd done that—

Wilhelm: "What kind of crazy trick is this…"

Wilhelm muttered that in a hushed tone when he saw what had happened. The Witch's Refuge, which should have been directly in front of him, had vanished from sight. And when Roswaal moved her hand away and let the light shine again the refuge rose back amidst the fog.

Wilhelm: "So, this means that the Refuge can't be found without this stone's light?"

Roswaal: "This glintstone serves as a proof of passage in the valley, but also as a map for the Refuge and a keeeey. That must be why Cragrell-dono kept it concealed with utmost zeal."

Roswaal too surmised the same thing as Wilhelm. She then took the glintstone from Grimm and handed it over to Conwood.

Roswaal: "Me, Wilhelm-kun and Grimm-kun will go in first. I think we'll probably be okay, but I'd like you to keep shining the light on the building from outside."

Conwood: "Very well, understood… But, won't it be dangerous inside?"

Roswaal: "You shouldn't need to worry about traps. There's no need for them to set any in the first place since you wouldn't be able to see the Refuge without this stone. I'm pretty sure that you shouldn't be able to feel the building even if you touched it when invisible."

Conwood: "That sounds really spooky…"

Conwood shuddered a bit as he listened to Roswaal's explanation.

Roswaal left him to hold the glintstone, and in line with her plan of action, she, Grimm and Wilhelm moved forward towards the Refuge.

Wilhelm: "There's no lock. I guess because it's not necessary?"

The door at the front was made of iron and opened easily on account of it not being locked. Whilst keeping their guard up, Wilhelm and Grimm nodded at each other and went inside. The inside of the building wasn't partitioned into rooms, instead the spacious interior was used as a single room. The floor was covered in dust and a great number of mysterious objects were scattered about on it. There were signs as well that rats, insects and those kinds of creatures were scurrying away from human presence.

Though that was to be expected since the room looked like it hadn't been inhabited by anyone in a while. Reason being that years had passed since the owner's death. He'd imagined that it'd look dilapidated

However, there were also clear unusual signs left behind in this abandoned building.

Wilhelm: "There's quite a ruckus left behind… and some people's footsteps."

Roswaal: "It's pretty likely that they're from Stride's followers. That doesn’t really surprise me.”

Wilhelm stared at the floor and found traces that the house had been searched along with some footprints that had been left in the dust. Roswaal nodded at his information and then continued to speak, saying “Even so,”

Roswaal: “The fact that our enemy’s been here merits a bit of consideration. This place is one you shouldn’t be able to enter without having the proof of passage of the glintstone. If they could break that…”

Wilhelm: “Then?”

Roswaal: “It shows that they either have a very powerful mage on their side or they too own one of these glintstones.”

Wilhelm: “…Setting aside the former of those options, would the latter even be possible?”

Wilhelm racked his brain in thought at Roswaal’s conjecture.

A really skilled mage—When he considered Stride’s aberrancy having someone around like that wasn’t out of the question. But, if it was the latter, then where had he gotten the same glintstone from?

Roswaal: “I dooooon’t know how many of these glintstones Sphinx prepared. We could be holding one that’s mass produced, or maybe…”

Roswaal cut off her words there for a moment, licked her lips and then continued.

Roswaal: “—The glintstone’s owner is cooperating in those guys’ undertaking.”

Wilhelm: “You’re saying… someone who survived the Demi-Human War?”

Roswaal: “There were only three names that stood out, Sphinx, Libre and Valga, though there were also hidden individuals of note like Cragrell-dono. It's something really worth considering."

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm silently gulped at the persuasiveness of her conjecture.

The ravages of that Civil War, The Demi-Human War, never let those roped up in it escape from its clutches. That had been an undeniable fact from the moment they'd made their way to the Witch's Refuge like this.

Wilhelm: "But, they really fucking turned everything upside down… they didn't leave anything good behind."

Despite their conversation, the three of them continued to search the refuge. However, as if exemplifying Wilhelm's grievances, they couldn't find anything that looked like a clue in the upturned interior.

Grimm in particular continued his search in silence, desperate to find something for Carol, whose wellbeing was on the line. Wilhelm could see how agitated he was from looking at his back and that made him firmly grit his teeth together. For both Grimm and Carol's sakes he wouldn't let himself leave here without any results.

???:—Wilhelm, this way

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm, who was feeling that pressure, slowly turned around to the sound of the voice calling him. The voice was coming from near a dirty wall in the corner of the room.

???: That's right the wall is dirty. But, why is it dirty? It's not the floor. Even if someone did a botched job of cleaning up, the wall would never get so unevenly dirty

Wilhelm: "That's a good point."

Wilhelm agreed with the voice that had told him about the weirdness of the wall's dirtiness. The filth that had accumulated on this wall was unnatural. This technique where they hid traps behind where you least expected them, like an unnaturally filthy wall—They'd been subjected to many hardships during the Civil War of that ilk from none other than the Witch's own handiwork.

Wilhelm: "Grimm, Roswaal."

Wilhelm called out their names and then walked over to that odd wall.

He slowly drew out his sword as the two of them looked on at what he was doing behind him.

—Considering how the building had been hidden in the fog, and more importantly, the malevolence of its owner, the Witch.

Wilhelm: "HYYYAAAAAAAA!"

His decision was one that had half relied on speculation.

It wouldn't be surprising if he'd looked like he'd lost his marbles to them when he started to slash the wall with such a shaky foundation for his reasoning. However, neither Grimm or Roswaal had stopped him.

They trusted that the Sword Demon wouldn't do anything for no reason when he'd made his way here.

And lo', that trust was—

Wilhelm: "—So there was something. A clue from the Witch or from that cunt."

He'd shredded at the thin wall with his sword and uncovered a hidden area—A foreboding, large Magic Circle was painted on the white wall within.

3

—The results which the Zergev Corps had brought back from Shamrock Valley ended up only being the Magic Circle they'd found in the Refuge.

In all honesty, he couldn't deny that this was a pretty unsatisfying result. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Lugunica had been heavily affected by these Magic Circles in the Civil War, so in that sense having been able to confirm the presence of a Magic Circle early was a great achievement in itself.

Roswaal: "The Magic Circle itself was undoubtedly an algorithm left behind by Sphinx. The question is, what sort of effect will this Magic Circle bring… We'll need to investigate into this."

That had been Roswaal's judgement after she'd made a copy of it and brought it back. It was her role as the Court Mage to analyze the Magic Circle they'd discovered. As frustrating as it was, there was no one better at it than her. All they could do was idly wait for her to finish her analysis.

However, an unexpected result had come from the Royal Capital in stark contrast to the Zergev Corps who'd barely managed to find anything—The results came from Theresia's group who'd stayed behind at the Astrea Estate.

???: "Welcome back Wilhelm. Look, it's Carol!"

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm had returned back to the Royal Capital and finished giving his report at the Royal Castle. He and Grimm had left the castle and tried to make their way over to where Theresia and the comatose Carol were.

But awaiting them at the castle's main gates was an adorable woman with dazzling red hair who'd been talking with the gatekeeper—It was Theresia. And beside her, she was accompanied by a woman with golden hair.

He knew immediately that it was Carol, just as Theresia had proudly stated.

Wilhelm: "Hey… Carol, you woke up?"

Carol: "What the hell's with that remark… Ah, no, I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to say that. I also made you worry. I'm fine now."

Carol instinctively snapped at Wilhelm who'd blurted that out without bothering to conceal his surprise.

However, she quickly switched over to apologizing and reassuring him that she was fine. At a glimpse, she didn't look pale, nor did she look ill. Why she was holding hands with Theresia was on his mind, but setting that aside he was delighted that she'd woken up from her coma.

Wilhelm: “What's up with your hand? Is Theresia spoiling you?”

Theresia: “No, it's not like that. It's the other way around actually, I'm the one being spoiled by Carol. I just kept feeling dreadful whilst Carol wouldn't wake up… And you weren't with me either Wilhelm, that's why me and her have stayed like this ever since she woke up.”

After she answered his question, Theresia pulled Carol in closer to her and said “Isn't that right?”

Carol became flustered at her mistress' clingy behavior,

Carol: “Th-Theresia-sama… I get it, but acting like that here where there's so many people about.”

Theresia: “I understand. Then let's flirt later back at the mansion.”

Wilhelm: “Theresia.”

Wilhelm curtly called out Theresia's name as she kept on teasing the abashed Carol. Theresia reluctantly let go of Carol in response and said “Okaaay.”

Theresia: “Okay, my turn's over. I'll let go of her properly now.”

Carol: “Ah…”

Theresia let go of Carol's hand and grasped her by the shoulder; as soon as she did, she gently turned her around. Naturally she came face to face with her lover, Grimm.

Grimm had just been as shocked as Wilhelm—No, he should have been more shocked. He'd been silent up until now, and not because of his ruined voice. His eyes and Carol's met each other.

Carol: "I…"

They exchanged looks with each other and Carol blushed slightly, casting her eyes down. Not from repugnance, but from shyness. On one hand Wilhelm held quite a stubborn impression of her, but on the other hand she was quite resolute. For that, Wilhelm was slightly surprised at such a typical feminine reaction coming from her.

Wilhelm: "Gnh…"

Theresia walked over to Wilhelm and grabbed him by his side as if she'd read what was on his mind. Wilhelm became subject to her judgement whenever his impolite thoughts hung over her favored attendant.

Looking away from the married couple's exchange, Grimm took a step forward towards the bashful Carol—

Carol: "—eh."

Carol let out a small squeak and then opened her eyes wide.

Facing her, Grimm firmly embraced her slender body. His crumpled face was etched with immense anguish, but also relief.

Wilhelm had witnessed Grimm's anguish firsthand over the past two weeks every time he thought about the comatose Carol. They hadn't managed to get any significant results from their mission and Grimm's haggardness had been so bad that he could barely bear to see it; however…

Wilhelm: "What on earth caused her to wake up?"

Theresia: "Erm, let me see, my love I guess… Oww."

Wilhelm scolded his wife, who'd joked around and said that with a straight face, by pinching her cheek. He continued to pull at her cheek and scold her whilst relishing the sensation of how smooth and soft it was.

Wilhelm: “Answer me properly. Even the Healing Arts User said that he couldn’t do anything when he saw her.”

Theresia: “But I really don’t know the reason why. I was constantly taking care of her… And yet, as soon as she woke up, she looked for Grimm-kun…”

Wilhelm: “You’ll be putting up with me.”

Wilhelm finished speaking with the greedy Theresia and shifted his attention back to Carol and Grimm embracing. He’d let them enjoy their reunion for a while and afterwards he’d—

Wilhelm: “—Grimm?”

Just as he thought about that, Wilhelm noticed that something strange was going on and called out to Grimm.

Grimm and Carol, who should have been embracing each other in delight at their reunion were kneeling down—No, the strength from Carol’s legs had abandoned her and Grimm was crouched down, propping her up.

Grimm: “ARROR?-ARRRRROOR!”

Theresia: “CAROL?! What’s wrong, hang in there!”

Both Grimm and Theresia cried out at the same time, Grimm with his broken voice and Theresia with a wail.

However, held between Grimm’s arms, Carol didn’t reply to either of them. There was no time for her to do that because she had her eyes wide open and she was clawing at her own throat.

Carol: “A… Ah, Ukh!”

Wilhelm: “What the… her throat…”

???:—No, you’re not quite correct. This isn’t about her throat.

Wilhelm: "—Her breathing?!"

After he'd had that pointed to him, Wilhelm realized that Carol's suffering came from the fact that she wasn't able to breathe.

However, he didn't know why. It was like her mouth was being gagged and her neck being strangled—

Theresia: "Wilhelm! On Carol's neck!"

Theresia cried out as soon as she'd grabbed her arm and tried to stop her from clawing at her throat. Wilhelm was drawn in by her voice and looked at Carol's throat; when he saw what was there he let out a groan.

A dark red mark had swelled up on her pale throat which she'd been desperately clawing at and was now oozing with blood—And the mark was completely different from her fingernail gouges. It had suddenly appeared and it looked like a bruise which took the shape of a palm.

Of course, there wasn't a real arm there. Yet despite that, she was still being strangled by this palm-shaped bruise from an invisible arm, and it was trying to suffocate her.

Wilhelm: "We need to take her to the healing ward…"

???: I can't say that's a wise choice. Does this look to you like a wound or disease?

Wilhelm: "—No, Roswaal should still be in the castle!"

Wilhelm's thoughts went into overdrive at the predicament they were in; after he received that advice he elected to get Roswaal's help.

What was causing this bruise was unknown, but it must have something to do with Carol's coma. In these sorts of matters, the situation didn't call for the medical ward, but rather for a certain specialist in magic, curses and the like.

The question wasn't whether Roswaal could handle it, more that he had no choice but to bet on her here.

Wilhelm: “Theresia! Find Roswaal! I’ll take Carol…”

Wilhelm hurriedly blurted that out and then pried Carol away from Grimm’s arms. This was an emergency. He was going to be much faster than Grimm at running whilst carrying her. He’d made Theresia go on ahead, and he’d take Carol to wherever Roswaal was.

—At least, that’s what he’d intended to do.

Carol: “Khaa… *Cough cough*.”

Wilhelm: “Huh?”

However, the state of emergency that would have required him to do that had vanished.

Carol’s breathing had come back to her the moment that Wilhelm had picked her up and started running with her.

Carol: “Haaa… haaaa! *Cough cough*.”

Wilhelm: “Hey, can you breathe again?”

Carol: “Y-Yeah… I can somehow… breathe again… R-Right now…”

Carol rubbed her throat as she replied gasping for breath. Though she was panting heavily, she was able to breathe without any issues. The reasons why she’d recovered from her inexplicable coma and now her choking were complete mysteries.

But right now she’d been freed from this life-threatening predicament.

Theresia: “C-Carol, are you really alright?”

Carol: “I am, Theresia-sama, I’m sorry for worrying you… And you as well, Grimm.”

Grimm: “…”

Carol extracted herself from Wilhelm’s arms, now standing unaided, and apologized to Theresia and Grimm. The two of them shook their heads at her apology, relieved that she was okay.

Then, Grimm once again tried to stretch out his arms and embrace Carol,

???:—Wilhelm

Wilhelm: “—Wait, Grimm, don’t touch her.”

Wilhelm had noticed what was wrong and had grabbed Grimm’s wrist and stopped him.

Theresia: “Wilhelm? What are you…”

Wilhelm: “Her neck.”

Wilhelm replied curtly to Theresia, who’d raised her eyebrows at his sudden motion. Theresia looked over at Carol with her blue eyes in response and then she let out a small squeak.

—The dark red palm-shaped bruise had appeared on Carol’s neck once again.

The bruise went away again the moment he’d pulled Grimm’s arm away. On the flip side, it came back clearer when Grimm took a step forward—

Wilhelm: “—We’re going to Roswaal.”

Wilhelm said that as he understood what was happening.

Still sharing in their anxieties and distress, the four of them headed towards the castle as if they were clinging to their last hope.

—It was only moments later that they realized that their hopes had been in vain.

4

Roswaal: “She becomes unable to breathe whenever she’s touched by a loved one. —I have no doubt that's the shackle which Stride's Curse Rings put on Carol-kun."

Roswaal had examined her from top to bottom and her diagnosis had confirmed their worst fears.

She'd had her breath choked out of her as soon as she and Grimm had embraced at their reunion. Then, whenever Grimm approached her, the curse's mark would threateningly loom up onto Carol's neck.

Even now, they'd been made to keep their distance as if he was tearing the two lovers apart.

Theresia: "Can't… Can't you do anything at all?"

Theresia said in a trembling voice in reply to Roswaal's provisional diagnosis; she was sitting next to Carol on the bed and had her arms around her. Her round eyes were full of tears as she bit her lip in frustration.

Her slender arms which were wrapped over Carol's shoulders were faintly, weakly trembling.

Theresia: "This is just… so horrible. The absolute worst. I will never, never be able to forgive him for this…"

Roswaal: "…I understand how you feel. I apologize for my lack of ability."

Roswaal felt ashamed at her own lack of skill when Theresia stammered that out. However, everyone here except for Roswaal herself sympathized that it wasn't her fault.

They were at the Royal Castle, in a private quarter set aside for Roswaal, the Court Mage. The quarters contained a guest room, a bedroom and another room for her to put her books and instruments in. She's carried out her examination of Carol primarily in that room.

The five of them had gone back to the bedroom now where they could talk to each other face-to-face.

Wilhelm: “So, you’re saying that he first put her to sleep and now he’s even stopping her from being held by her beloved… You’re making me really regret not having killed that bastard.”

Grimm: “…”

Wilhelm gritted his teeth in frustration and folded his arms. Then he looked over to Grimm who was right beside him. His usual jovial expression had darkened, and he’d cast his gaze down without a word.

He caused his beloved to choke every time he touched her. Fearful of that, they’d placed him further away from Carol (who was sitting on the bed) than was really needed; that had contributed in adding to his misery.

He regretted the fact that he’d blown his chances to kill Stride many times till now, however, now that the situation had gotten this bad, his tendrils of wickedness had grown more malevolent—Especially with Carol’s curse right now, it couldn’t be anything but sheer evil.

She’d woken up and found out she couldn’t be held by the person she wanted to hold the most. What else could this be but sheer evil.

Carol: “…Please lift your head up, Theresia-sama, and you too Mathers-sama.”

Theresia: “Carol-kun…”

Carol spoke up to try and liven the mood up in the room. Hearing the firmness and resolution in her, Roswaal and Theresia shifted their attention to her.

With their attention set on her Carol slowly shook her head, and said,

Carol: “Things are better now than when I was stuck in my long sleep. I can still serve my main role as your escort, Theresia-sama, and so long as I’m careful I won’t be subjected to being suffocated either.”

Theresia: “When you say so long as you’re careful… You can’t mean that…”

Carol: “If we set aside our feelings, then this issue should become much easier to deal with.”

Theresia was left speechless by what Carol had said. However, Carol would not budge.

Of course everyone knew that she was putting on a show of courage. But even so, Carol was probably going to remain stubborn and continue to vehemently urge that no one here was at fault.

And that was correct. The only evil true evil was Stride, and only him.

—This wasn’t the time for all of them to set their wicked enemy aside and wallow in self-reproach.

Carol: “The unscrupulousness of this idea is unpardonable, but that guy must have released me so that he’d relish my feelings for his own amusement. Sooner or later I’ll make sure he’ll reap what he’s sown.”

Theresia was clinging onto Carol’s left arm, but with her free right hand, Carol determinedly clenched her fist. The shade of anger lodged in her eyes, merely that was no mere show of courage, rather it was her true feelings.

???: She’s a strong woman. More so than before I feel. Grimm chose a good match for himself.

Wilhelm: “Yeah, you’re right.”

Wilhelm agreed with what had been pointed out to him as well, although he had absolutely no intention of telling her that directly. Though they clashed with each other in personality, he wouldn’t be exaggerating if he said that the way Carol was at heart was a virtue. She seemed like a perfect match for Grimm, who was a good man through and through, though soft in some respects.

And as Carol had mentioned, Stride had made a big mistake in what he’d chosen as his entertainment.

Wilhelm: “Whatever shape it may be in, he messed up by making more people into his enemies. You’d better make him realize that firsthand.”

Carol: “You don’t have to tell me. I won’t be able to let even you have that guy’s head.”

Theresia: “…You guys are always at each other’s throats.”

Carol had kept in sync with Wilhelm’s tone, before then shrugging her shoulders. Theresia sighed at them and for the most part overlooked what they’d said,

Theresia: “It’ll be fine Carol, because my Wilhelm will definitely see to it.”

Carol: “—Right, Theresia-sama. Thank you very much.”

Being stared at by Theresia’s round blue eyes, Carol meekly accepted her expectation in her stride. Then, she slowly looked over to where Grimm was.

Grimm: “…~~Arror~~.”

The gazes of the two lovers who weren’t able to touch each other met, and of them, it was Grimm who’d opened his mouth first. Since Grimm had lost his voice, his words were rasped and ill-shaped,

Grimm: “~~I’m sorr~~…”

Carol: “If you were apologizing, saying stuff like sorry, then I won’t forgive you darling.”

Grimm: “…”

Carol had anticipated his apology and stopped him from finishing it, making Grimm look at her in astonishment. She looked at him sharper than she’d ever done before and then continued her words all the while giving off a sword-like aura.

Carol: “What happened to me was down to my own lack of skill.

You and I carried out our duties though. What I wouldn't be able to stand at all would be if this had happened to Theresia-sama and Wilhelm."

Grimm: "…"

Carol: "So, what I'll be doing will be exactly as I said before. I'll give our enemy, who not only carried out these cruel machinations but also slighted me, his just reward. If possible, let's do it together."

Carol firmly declared that and gently held out her right arm in front of her. Her left was still being held by Theresia, yet the person she'd held her right one out to was none other than Grimm.

The curse would activate if he touched her and she'd get strangled by that bruise. Yet despite that—

Grimm: "…"

Grimm understood what she wanted to do and took her hand after a few moments of hesitation.

Naturally that activated the curse and the dark red bruise reared its ugly shape onto Carol's pale neck.

Nevertheless, the two of them established their shared determination with Carol doing all she could to not show even a tiny bit of discomfort on her face until he moved his hand away.

Carol: "…hk, haa."

Roswaal: "You really didn't neeeeed to choke yourself. Jeez, you and Grimm-kun are so reckless. Even though I don't think I may be able to overlook this one, wouldn't you agreeee?"

Roswaal brought her hand over to Carol's neck as she gasped for breath. She flashed a wry smile at them for their conduct—ritual.

Roswaal would have described it as "You're making yourself suffer without any need for it" and left it at that; however, doing that had been an indispensable ritual for the two of them to share their resolve. That’s why Roswaal wasn’t really blaming them.

And it wasn’t only her who’d been impressed by their ritual. Emotions were welling up in Wilhelm’s heart as well, and above all…

Theresia: “—Um, Wilhelm…”

Theresia turned towards Wilhelm with a serious look in her eyes. She trailed off her words for a moment, and only for a split second did she hesitate. However, she looked straight into Wilhelm’s eyes and spoke immediately after.

Theresia: “If I were to… If I were to break that important promise I made you my dear, would you hate me?”

Wilhelm: “…You’re not the Sword Saint anymore.”

Wilhelm instantly knew what she was referring to without having to ask her what “promise” she was talking about.

Her reaction had been natural. Theresia wasn’t ladylike enough to behave herself in this situation. She had a strong sense of responsibility and care, but above all else, she loved Carol.

As a result, Wilhelm was half-convinced that his words wouldn’t be able to stop his wife.

Even so, he’d told her what her standpoint was because he didn’t want her to break the vow she’d made and he didn’t want to see her using the ability she’d never desired for ever again.

Theresia: “I knew you’d say that. But my Divine Protection isn’t going to disappear even if I’ve abandoned that… That’s why even now I…”

Carol: “No… Theresia-sama, you mustn’t. I can’t let you do something like that…”

Carol had realized what Theresia had meant in her talk with Wilhelm and that had caused her voice to quiver. She, who had been the picture of fortitude a dozen seconds ago, feared that more than putting her own life at stake.

Both Carol and Theresia were far more willing to get hurt for the other than themselves.

Grimm: “~~H̀h̸e͜l̃m̆.͜~~”

Wilhelm: “Don’t say it. —I know, I’m completely contemptible.”

Grimm had similarly guessed what they’d been talking about. He shifted his gaze over to Wilhelm, who dodged it and tched.

—The Sword Saint Theresia van Astrea.

She, the strongest swordsman, had had her sword taken away from her by the Sword Demon Wilhelm Trias and her position revoked by the King’s favor. Now, she was determined to take up her sword again for her dearest friend,

Roswaal: “—Whoa there, I apologize for butting in when you’re all about to get heated up, buuuuut…”

Theresia: “Roswaal-san?”

Roswaal suddenly clapped her hands so that she could cut into the conversation. Though Theresia had been shot down and widened her eyes as if she’d wanted to say something, everyone in the room had the same question on their mind.

With all four of their gazes now on her, Roswaal continued her words and said “I’m sorry, but…”

Roswaal: “I have to say that it’s hard for me to welcome that sort of disposition, even though I’d really like to. Theresia-kun… No, I guess I should say Theresia Van Astrea-dono.”

Theresia: “I get really worried whenever you honor me like that…”

Roswaal: “Worried…? It’s difficult in some respects to deem how suitable putting it like that is regarding this news I have. Nevertheless, I can’t let your current self, a masquerade of a swordsman, behave as the Sword Saint.”

Wilhelm: "…Stop beating around the bush. What are you trying to say."

Wilhelm snapped at Roswaal, who'd continued to speak in her roundabout manner. Irritation was etched all over his face, but it was directed more so towards a different target than Roswaal. And he knew in himself what target that was.

???: "You don't want Theresia-dono to take up the sword, but, you can't stop her by yourself. You're irritated that she's about to grant your wish. Something like that, right?"

Wilhelm: "So damn annoying."

Wilhelm replied to that voice that sounded like it was chuckling, then he silently urged Roswaal to continue.

Faced with his somewhat insolent manner, Roswaal closed one of her eyes. Of her differently colored eyes, only her blue one was returning Wilhelm's gaze…

Roswaal: "—In order to dig into the connection between the bruise from the curse and when Carol-kun woke up from her coma, I was also allowed to briefly examine Theresia-dono's body who'd nursed her."

Carol: "Wh-What on earth's going on… Mathers-sama, what's happened to Theresia-sama."

Carol's expression tensed up as soon as she heard what Roswaal had said, which had instilled uneasiness.

Carol: "There's no way she's gotten sick, right?!"

Roswaal: "I'm quite sure that there's been a big change in her body. Theresia-dono, have you felt anything weird in your everyday life recently?"

Theresia: "Weird?"

Roswaal: "Yeah, weird. For example… weird things like your head feeling a little heavier or differences in the taste and smell of food."

Theresia made a strangled “Eh” sound when she heard those specific examples. They could see from the way her eyes had widened that she wasn’t bewildered, but rather surprised that she’d hit the nail on the head.

Meaning that what Roswaal had pointed out had happened to her. But what did that mean?

Theresia: “My fondness for black tea has definitely changed, and my head has been feeling heavier, but…”

Wilhelm: “Hey, stop beating about the bush! If something’s happened to Theresia then hurry up and tell us…”

Roswaal: “—She’s expecting.”

Her voice was gentle and really tender, quite unlike her usual self.

Wilhelm: “—Huh?”

Wilhelm froze in surprise at Roswaal’s words.

This had come at him after she’d implied that there was a chance something was wrong with Theresia and he’d raised his voice at her. The urge he’d had which had almost looked like he was going to lay his hands on Roswaal was knocked out of him. Understanding gradually came to him.

—Understanding about what the hell she’d said. About what she meant by “She’s expecting”.

Theresia: “U-Um… Roswaal-san… When you say that…”

Roswaal: “Pleeeease don’t mistake it for the name of some strange disease. To put it in different words, you’re pregnant. You were a woman and a wife, but now, you’re also a mother.”

Though Roswaal had explained it in a very matter of fact manner, Wilhelm was unable to process what she’d said.

And that wasn’t the case only for him, Theresia was the same as him too. Wilhelm, frozen in his tracks, and Theresia, who’d been taken aback, slowly looked at each other with bated breath.

In other words, being pregnant meant that they were going to have a child. Who. Theresia?

Roswaal: “I can’t let a woman who’s going to become a mother go out to the battlefield. Sooooo, though her determination is noble, I’ll have to ask her to refrain from it.”

Theresia: “Th…That’s, I, yeah. I guess so. But um… is it really this?”

Wilhelm: “Don’t ask me. It’s in your belly…Whoa?!”

In her confusion Theresia looked towards Wilhelm for a confirmation even if it made no sense. Wilhelm replied back to her, embroiled in his own confusion. Then suddenly he was pulled back by the scruff of his neck and he almost fell over.

The one who’d pulled him by it had been Grimm. But he didn’t even have the time to complain at him for that. Because he’d had to jerk his head back so that the pair of long legs aiming for his nose would end up whistling by.

Wilhelm: “What… What was that for…”

Carol: “Trias, you bastard…”

Wilhelm felt a fierce anger piercing into him as he peeled his eyes wide open at the kick which had just grazed past his nose. He realized that it had been Carol who’d gotten up and launched that kick at him, and now her muffled voice was filled with anger.

Her shoulder length blonde hair was swaying and her eyes were set ablaze with rage. —That rage was perhaps comparable to the levels which she showed for Stride.

Carol: “So you actually got Theresia-sama pregnant, what the hell did you do to her, you bastard, TRIAS!”

Wilhelm: “Stop calling me by my old surname! Can you even listen and look at stuff seriously!”

Carol: “I can! Are you really insinuating that I’m not serious around Theresia-sama!”

Wilhelm: “Is there even any point in me talking to someone I can’t get through to…”

Wilhelm shrunk back before Carol’s fierce attack, who’d lost herself in her anger. This sort of ferocity and vigor was definitely the mark of Carol Remendis.

Theresia: “Wilhelm…”

Wilhelm: “—Theresia.”

Wilhelm’s name was called out after he’d reacted to Carol’s kick. He turned around to look at Theresia.

She was still sat on the bed with the palm of her pale hand resting on her belly, a new life was sprouting behind it. —Suddenly, his entire body shook.

He and Theresia had fallen in love with each other and became a married couple, family. Of course, he’d been thinking about someday adding to their family too. However, he’d willfully imagined that that day was going to be a long way off.

Wilhelm: “…”

Theresia gently brushed her hand against the taciturn Wilhelm’s cheek. The feel of his wife’s pale fingers brought him back to reality and he noticed that her fingers were trembling.

It hadn’t just been him who’d been surprised, confused and bewildered by the news. She too was facing the same issue and worrying about what she should do.

And in this world, only the two of them, and no one else, could tackle this problem together and share it as one.

Wilhelm: “Roswaal’s right. I won’t let you take up your sword, Theresia. Swear to me once more.”

Theresia: “But at a time like this…”

Wilhelm: “There’s no need for you to do so, so long as I become your strength… No, so long as I be your strength.”

Regardless of whether it was Stride, his followers, or Kurgan the Eight Arms, he would not lose.

Wilhelm right now should have the strength and companions he needed to ensure that.

Carol: “Theresia-sama.”

Theresia: “Carol… I’m… I’m sorry that this happened, despite all you’re going through.”

Theresia cast her gaze down and tried to apologize after Carol called out to her. However, Carol gently shook her head at her apology and said “No,”

Carol: “I’m the one who’s really sorry for getting upset. In truth, I had to tell this to you, Theresia-sama, before anyone else.”

Theresia: “…”

Carol: “Congratulations on your pregnancy, I’m really happy for you.”

Carol put on a brave smile; her words of congratulations took away Theresia’s breath from her. Her guilt was still there, and times where she’d worry herself sick would undoubtedly still come. But, that time was not now.

Now, she only had time for the words which her attendant, who she’d been close to for a very long time and was like a sister to her, had said to her.

Theresia: “—Truly, thank you so much Carol.”Maybe she’d let her reply back to her with a smile.

Wilhelm and Grimm had left the room for the time being while only the girls remained behind.

Theresia's pregnancy had come to light, and now it looked like Roswaal, having been pregnant herself, was going to give her a few words of precaution about it. Men weren't welcome there when they lacked the common sense.

Wilhelm: "…It was kinda bad timing, I'm sorry."

Not liking the constant silence that had floated over the corridor, Wilhelm decided to break the ice with Grimm. His eyes widened in response and he cocked his head as if he was saying "What's the matter?"

Wilhelm: "It's as I said. Not allowing Theresia to take up her sword was appalling for me to do… But these are difficult times for you and Carol. By raising your arms up and welcoming that you… Ghhkgh."

Grimm: "—tch."

Wilhelm had looked down and continued to speak. However, Grimm had seized him by the scruff of his neck. He pushed him against the wall like that causing Wilhelm to let out a pained cry.

Grimm's eyes in front of him were streaked with anger. He hadn't reacted like this so that he'd evoke sympathy for his and Carol's circumstances, it had been because he'd took offense to Wilhelm's fatherly attitude.

Even now Grimm still put others before himself. That's why being good-natured only made him lose out.

Grimm: "Ilhelm… you're a."

Wilhelm: "It doesn't feel real. I'm not prepared yet. Even so…"

He murmured a response back to Grimm, cutting his words off halfway through. Grimm let go of the scruff of his neck with a look of sorrow adorning his face. Even he couldn't explain the reason why he'd done that.

Nevertheless, the world around them kept on steadily and significantly plodding along without pause regardless of the good and bad.

???: You are weak in matters which you can’t solve with your sword. That is your weak point. Right, Wilhelm?

Wilhelm: “…”

Resting against the wall, Pivot grumbled as if he were sneering at Wilhelm’s troubles.

Act Four

1

???: “Theresia, Theresia! Are you alright? You’re not cold right? Or too warm? Don’t hesitate to tell your dad whatever you want if anything is bothering you. Are you thirsty? Are you getting hungry? That’s right! I think you had a stuffed animal that you cherished ages ago. You’d stop crying immediately whenever we gave it to you to hold… I’ll go fetch it for you right away!”

Theresia: “F A—T HER!”

Theresia cried out to the man pacing restlessly around the room, stressing each syllable she said—The man had blue eyes, red hair and a respectable beard and moustache. Though her cry had obviously been an angry one the man turned around rapidly as if he’d pounced on it,

???: “Mh, what’s the matter Theresia! Is there anything urgent you want to tell dad? Oh, I get it, I love you too.”

Theresia: “Father, just sit yourself down.”

???: “Just sit myself down… Even dad finds that just a little hurtful…”

Theresia: “SIT DOWN PLEASE!”

???: “Right away!”

Theresia pointed to the chair at her bedside and once again forcibly ordered him to sit. He finally got the point and sat himself down. Theresia placed her hand against her forehead at that and flumped down against the pillow on the bed she was lying on.

They were in Theresia’s bedroom at the Astrea Mansion in the Royal Capital. Theresia herself was in her sleepwear and her hair was untied; with her in the bedroom was just this man. Absurd as it was in a situation like this, this man wasn’t her husband, though luckily he wasn't a paramour either—he was merely her father.

Bertol Astrea—Theresia's father, a man who was both delicate and a little petty in stark contrast to his composed, intrepid appearance.

There'd been many, many times where he'd let his pettiness show. Everyone who'd become a witness to those acts especially would testify that they couldn't support what he was doing. So much did he dote on his beloved daughter Theresia that he'd probably planned to hinder her and Wilhelm's wedding. Even after they'd married, he would still act hostile to his son-in-law from time to time.

Even so, he was ultimately a good person. Since his bouts of hostility weren't anything more serious than mild annoyances they could be chalked off as a kind of familial love for the most part.

Though Bertol was the type you could give all sorts of these scathing evaluations, right now he was acting more restless than usual; putting it more plainly, he was acting pretty weirdly.

However in this instance the onus behind Bertol's behavior didn't come from himself. Rather it came from what was in Theresia's belly.

Theresia: "I'm… I'm glad that you're worried about me father, but there's no point in you pacing around the bedroom. I'm getting sick and tired of looking at it so please, give me some space to breathe."

Bertol: "I… I see… Now that you've put it like that, I guess yeah I don't blame you. I don't. I understand Theresia, you can leave this to me. I'll make sure to give you some breathing space. After all, I've been doing that quite a lot for everyone at the mansion as well."

Bertol nodded a few times at Theresia's reasonable, albeit surprisingly stern request. Though Theresia felt a tinge of sadness in his reply she didn't make any mention of it.

Theresia would get some peace and quiet for now by saying that. Though it wasn't as easy as she thought.

Theresia: “…Father, the look in your eyes and your presence is annoying me.”

Bertol: “Huh? The look in my eyes and my presence, isn’t that a bit harsh?”

Theresia had tried to close her eyes and rest a bit in her bed. However, it had proved impossible since Bertol didn’t know what to do with himself and his presence at her bedside betrayed that he hadn’t really calmed down.

Theresia: “I’m sorry for the way I’m speaking, but I’m being serious… What are you doing?”

Theresia sighed. Then she noticed Bertol drawing her a strange circular shape in mid-air with his left hand, a serious look plastered on his face.

Bertol: “Look here Theresia, this is your dad’s love who’s worried about you from the bottom of his heart.”

Theresia: “Please, give me some space to breathe, seriously…”

Bertol: “Huuh? I can’t even do this?”

She forbade Bertol not only from speaking, but also from moving about. Now his protests had grown ever more pitiful. Theresia contemplated whether she’d gone too far in what she’d said but her head hurt and she couldn’t find the proper words to express herself.

Theresia: “Father, shut up.”

Bertol: “Gnnnh!”

Her words were sharp and blunt because of that and tears welled up in Bertol’s eyes at his beloved daughter’s rejections. Then coming down towards the two of them trapped in this vicious circle was—

???: “—Theresia’s pregnant my dear. You have to treat her properly with sympathy.”

Theresia: “Mother…”

A flaxen haired woman opened the bedroom door and interjected into their conversation. The woman was Tishua Astrea, Theresia's mother.

Theresia breathed a sigh of relief at her mother's appearance. Bertol stood up at the same time as if he wasn't going to let that go unchallenged.

Bertol: "What's with that remark Tishua? Do you really think that there's anyone out there right now who shows their sympathies to Theresia as much as I do? No, you probably won't find anyone like that anywhere."

Tishua: "It seems like you took care to keep your voice down, but you move around noisily and I have no clue what you're saying so you're being counterproductive."

Bertol: "Huuuuh? So I can't be like this too?"

Though he'd replied to her with a whisper, his movements had still been noisy.

Either way, Tishua coming here had been a stroke of good luck for Theresia. She pointed outside the window with one of her supple fingers to live up to the faith that her daughter had in her.

Tishua: "Look, it seems like Theresia can't stop worrying about the flowerbeds in our garden. A father should have the consideration to quickly take note of that and water them. You really aren't that thoughtful."

Bertol: "Argh! Of course I noticed! I just wondered if something else was bothering her as well… Ah well, I'll hop to it! Feast your eyes upon dad's consideration!"

The irritated Bertol quickly hurried out of the bedroom without wasting any time. Theresia stared at his retreating figure in bewilderment, and Tishua gave her a small smile.

Tishua: "Great, the flowerbeds aren't going to wilt now that he's pumped up. All thanks to him being so easy to handle, though I find that pretty cute."

Theresia: “Mum, you’re crazy good at handling dad…”

Tishua sat down on the chair Bertol had vacated and smiled broadly at her beloved daughter’s words. She then turned her gaze towards Theresia’s belly, and said,

Tishua: “How are you doing? Have you gotten used yet to your stomach feeling so heavy?”

Theresia: “Yeah, it feels weird, but I think I’ve gotten used to it… Though I’d really like you to calm dad down some more, rather than me, maybe.”

Tishua: “You know that’s going to be tough, the world for him is always fresh and exciting.”

According to Tishua, Bertol’s “He never learns” disposition was wonderful too because it was often heard. Thanks to that, Bertol and Tishua’s marriage had always remained smooth—Theresia’s parents for her were the epitome of a perfect married couple.

Theresia: “…”

Theresia stroked her swollen belly as she felt Tishua’s warm gaze on her. Her child was growing day by day there, impatiently awaiting the day of its birth.

—Three months had passed already since she’d found out she was pregnant.

In all honesty, she’d found it difficult to get excited at her pregnancy having come to light back then with everything that had been going on, but, as time passed by, her feelings gradually grew.

Theresia’s unborn child was growing quickly without waiting for her to gear herself up mentally. Her body was changing faster than she could prepare her mind, but with that, her mind would have no choice but to catch up to that naturally.

As a result, Theresia was stuck handling the various problems associated with pregnancy and preparing to have a child. Luckily the people around her were sympathetic and her parents (who always worried about their precious daughter) frequently visited the Royal Capital and were happily willing to do everything they could for their first grandchild.

She was truly blessed by her family, her husband and her neighbours. That’s precisely why she—

Tishua: “—Please don’t blame yourself too much about what happened to Carol, Theresia.”

Theresia: “…Mother.”

Tishua: “I am your Mother after all. I can tell what you’re thinking as well as how guilty you’re feeling. I’m betting your father can too.”

Theresia: “…”

Theresia glanced down wordlessly at her mother’s earnest words.

She was right. Though Bertol showed plenty of times that he was pretty slow at grasping various things, he never missed the important ones. Much less when the matter concerned his beloved daughter, beloved exactly the same also by Tishua.

Tishua: “What happened to Carol’s body, that dreadful event, is neither your or Wilhelm-san’s fault. Doesn’t everyone who knows you both tell you that?”

Theresia: “…Yes Mother, but, like.”

No matter how many people had told her that. No matter that even Carol had told her “You aren’t responsible “the words of blame and rebuke never dimmed.

Because, the one speaking them was none other than herself.

Tishua: “…You sure are someone who makes life tough for yourself, aren’t ya? I wish you wouldn’t brood over things so much, like my husband.”

Theresia: “Do you really think so Mother?”

Tishua: "I'm joking. I love my husband but if you too became like him I wouldn't be able to show my face around Wilhelm-san."

A faint smile slipped onto Theresia's face after hearing her mother's jape. However, she didn't have the capacity to give her a proper smile. Tishua saw that and let out a sigh,

Tishua: "Carol should be at the Castle now, right?"

Theresia: "She has to go to the Castle a lot because of her curse… Roswaal-san said that she's been giving her a ton of different examinations to determine the source of the curse."

Carol often visited Roswaal J Mathers at the Royal Castle to get the curse which was eating into her body examined. Despite that, her situation hadn't changed even though 3 months had passed. She got the feeling that they couldn't expect her circumstances to improve with these examinations.

It's not that she couldn't believe in hope, it was just her intuition.

But it was also her intuition as a Sword Saint that had led to the end of the Demi-Human War—

Tishua: "…You sure do make life tough for yourself."

Tishua murmured merely those words as she gazed at her beloved daughter's delicate face in profile.

2

She put her undergarments back on, pulled on a loose-fit shirt and started to button it up.

She let out an unconscious sigh as she reached the buttons above her chest. It was probably one of resignation because she could imagine the results of the examination without needing to hear them.

A voice called out to her saying "Wait, wait" when she heard her self-diagnosary sigh.

???: “You’re gonna make me feel terrible as weeeell, what with you so straightforwardly showing that you’re not expecting anything.”

???: “…I’m sorry. For acting like that despite always counting on your kindness, Mathers-sama.”

Roswaal: “It’s when you take it so ceremoniously that it makes me feel terrible thoooough.”

A woman with long hair said that to her with a shrug of her shoulders. It was the Court Mage, Roswaal J Mathers. Sitting opposite to her was a pure-looking woman who gave off a clean impression that starkly contrasted Roswaal’s bewitching beauty—Carol Remendis.

They were in a room in a stone tower built on the Royal Castle’s Grounds.

A stone tower called the Prison Tower had been built on the Royal Castle’s Grounds to house criminals. The stone tower they were in right now had been built as a counterpart of the Prison Tower but had been shut down over a decade ago. It had been opened up now to Roswaal as a research facility for magic now that magic itself had had its importance re-evaluated in the wake of the Demi-Human War.

Thus many users of magic studied here around the clock, starting with Roswaal.

—Roswaal and Carol frequently met on the down-low here, keeping their meetings a secret.

Roswaal: “We can’t tell anyone, becauuuse we’re in a seeeecret relationship, isn’t that right?”

Carol: “Why do you have to put it so unseemingly? It’s like we’re keeping this a secret… But, I don’t understand why it’s so risky, just that we’re keeping everything in private.”

Roswaal: “You’re reserved as ever, eh, Carol-kun. You never crack, even with how long we’ve known each other.”

Carol: “Please don’t embarrass me, it’s just that I’m always respecting your position.”

Carol sat herself down on the bed and drew her eyebrows down with a troubled look on her face, causing Roswaal to pout at her. Their conversation in the treatment room was full of familiarity for each other, a contrast to the way they behaved.

In fact, Carol and Roswaal had known each other for over 5 years having been comrade in arms from the Demi-Human War. But just adding to that, Carol kept a clear distinction between her position and the one Roswaal had as the Court Mage.

—Actually, as an aside, Theresia too felt the same sense of dissatisfaction at this attitude of Carol’s.

Roswaal: “In any case. Thoooough it took a while, here are your results.”

Carol: “Did you find anything?”

Roswaal: “There’s some good news, and some bad news. Which would you like to hear first?”

Carol reacted in surprise at Roswaal presenting her those options since she’d resigned herself to Roswaal saying she’d found nothing. After a bit of thought, Carol made her decision.

Carol: “Well, the good news first please.”

Roswaal: “Alright, the good news it is, which is that your curse isn’t getting worse.”

Carol: “…And the bad news?”

Roswaal: “The bad news is that we have no choice left other than to ask the one who put the curse on you himself on how to remove it. Meaning that making any progress will be difficult now, until your sweetheart catches Stride.”

Carol’s expression grew sullen as she heard those words, keeping her silence.

Nothing had changed. Roswaal's news had only re-expressed what they already knew so far using different words. Roswaal noticed Carol's disgruntlement and closed one of her eyes, and said "I'm sorry."

Roswaal: "All I ever end up doing is making you feel just like we've wasted our time, so I wanted to give you hope even if it was only for a short while…"

Carol: "I'm grateful for your consideration, but didn't only a really really short while pass…?"

Even if that was what Roswaal had intended, Carol had only been thrown off by it for a few seconds. Although, it was quite like her to tell pointless lies for a time like that,

Roswaal: "—You didn't get angry Carol-kun."

Carol: "Huh?"

Roswaal: "The former you would have blushed and gotten mad when teased like this. Though of course with consideration for our pooositions."

Carol: "Eh… Wasn't I only like that back when we'd only just met?"

Carol didn't understand what Roswaal was getting at and replied in confusion.

The feeling she'd gotten from being told that she hadn't gotten angry was one of bewilderment mixed with a teensy bit of bashfulness.

She knew that she was naturally hot tempered and struggled to keep her cool. There'd been many instances where she'd get into arguments with others due to being so prone to paroxysms of anger. She even still did with Wilhelm.

Even so, didn't it mean she'd matured if she didn't get angry so easily anymore?

In her defence she'd been young and immature when she'd met

Roswaal 5 years ago. She wanted to act more like an adult as the years passed by, and she must have learnt that from her friendship with Roswaal.

Above all else, Carol had Grimm with her now.

—That in itself should be her greatest change for the better.

Carol: “I can’t just keep on losing my temper like I used to. Like even under normal circumstances I keep causing Theresia-sama trouble. I can’t keep doing that…”

Roswaal: “So what you’re saying is that you’re going through all of this because of Theresia-sama?”

Carol: “…”

Roswaal’s tone of voice was hushed and cold making Carol gulp.

For a moment she gazed at her in astonishment as if she’d misheard her. Despite her reaction, Roswaal gave her a profound nod and said,

Roswaal: “Let me repeat myself. The curse that was put on you was down to Theresia-sama. Naturally Stride’s the one we should truly call evil, but she and her husband helped sow the seeds that made it so that you were targeted by that dangerous individual and ultimately dragged you into this mess. You really shouldn’t overlook their sins.”

Carol: “What… What are you…”

Roswaal: “It’s foolish of you to think like that, or are you just intentionally averting your eyes from it? Are you trying to set things right by being complicit with her? You always have your back turned pretending not to be aware of it, never pressing her adequately enough about it. This isn’t kindness, this is simply just indulging her. You’re the one who’s having a tough time, not Theresia-”sama.”“

Carol: “—Stop it please!”

Carol jumped up from the bed and glared at Roswaal as she spoke one cruel word after the other.

The glint in her eyes grew sharper, honed by the fury that had surged up in her. Faced with that, a dark, dangerous look began to creep in around Roswaal too. Carol clenched her teeth at the unfathomable pressure.

Carol: “Why… Why are you talking like this! What has Theresia-sama done wrong… She’s always, always been suffering! That’s why she should continue to be happy, and only happy after this! Despite everything that’s happened!”

Roswaal: “She’s not like you. Everyone should desire to be the happiest they can be. I find it virtuous to desire happiness for the people around you after you’ve prioritized your own. The way you do it is wrong.”

Carol: “I… Hic.”

Carol’s parched voice was draped in sorrow, and this time she was almost on the verge of tears. She resisted the urge to cry and moved over towards Roswaal. Then, as she tried to get her to take back her words, Carol realized something.

She realized that something felt odd. Gazing at Roswaal’s heterochromic eyes, a notion swiftly came to her.

Sure, Roswaal was sometimes cruel and ruthlessly dug into other’s hearts, but…

Carol: “…Are you perhaps testing me, Mathers-sama?”

Roswaal: “Oh, have I been found out?”

The pressure that had been mounting inside the room vanished and Carol was left dumbfounded. Roswaal’s expression loosened, and she laughed out a “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Carol: “—. —. ——. Why… why do such a thing.”

Roswaal: “I’m getting the feeling that you want to say a bunch of stuff to me, but you forced yourself to swallow them all down, right?”

Carol took several deep breaths and then asked her that with an air of semi-composure. Surmising the effort she’d made, Roswaal (who was still sitting comfortably on her chair) urged Carol to sit down as well.

Roswaal: “Now then, you asked me why… Plainly speaking, I tested you. I tested you to see if you’d get properly mad or raise your voice at me for my slander.”

Carol: “…Why?”

Roswaal: “You mentioned, so to speak, that you not getting angry was because you’ve grown up. I’m pleased that you’ve matured as well. Though I was pretty fond of the reactions the former you would make from being teased as well… That’s why I would’ve been able to welcome it too if this was from growing up. But, it’s not down to that.”

Carol: “…”

Though she was speaking in what seemed to be a roundabout way, Carol patiently waited for her conclusion. Her hands were clenched on top of her knees and she gulped in front of Roswaal’s narrowed eyes.

Roswaal: “The price you paid to wake up from your coma was that you couldn’t be touched by your sweetheart, Grimm-kun. Though the curse changed its course and burrowed into you, I’m thinking that you’re not in the clear from the dangers of coma.”

Carol: “So are you saying that it wouldn’t be strange if I were to lose my consciousness again soon?”

Roswaal: “It’s not down to your self-restraint that you’re unable to get angry, but rather you being unable to is proof that your emotions are fading away. I know that you’re a strong woman emotionally, of course… And yet, you didn’t grieve about this situation, nor did you wantonly show your impulsive anger. It’s unnatural.”

Carol: “Mathers-sama, you’re thinking this too is an effect of the curse, right?”

Roswaal: “…”

Roswaal glanced down silently. That alone was enough to tell Carol what her thoughts were. And that silence brought even more news to Carol.

Roswaal had said that she had good and bad news at the start, and had indicated that there’d been no developments to her condition. But, in actual fact, this wasn’t all there was to it…

Carol: “Is there more bad news Mathers-sama?”

Roswaal: “…The only way to get rid of the curse is to capture Stride. You can’t be touched by your loved one in your current condition, and now it’s likely that you’ll even be unable to feel sad about it.”

Carol: “…”

Roswaal: “You’ll become like a puppet if your emotions fade completely. There’s nothing better at destroying a person’s dignity than this.”

Roswaal revealed to Carol the bad news without hiding any of it. A mark of the unfathomable sincerity that this woman called Roswaal J Mathers possessed.

For the first time in their long fellowship Carol could see the affection that lurked behind her blithe demeanor.

—And at the same time she also realized that her emotional response to her bad news had been surprisingly stunted.

Right now she could still feel angry if people insulted Theresia, Grimm and her loved ones. But, if her condition continued to worsen—

Carol: "—Am I going to even be unable to celebrate Theresia-sama's child being born…?"

Carol said that in a terrible murmur.

If she slowly lost her heart and her feelings for her loved ones, then she'd stoop down to the level of a cold-blooded sword. Wilhelm had frequently hoped to become like that.

In the end though, he too had sought the bonds of warmth and made his way towards the sun.

Carol: "Mathers-sama, please keep this a secret from Theresia-sama and her family. From Grimm too if you can… It has to be from my own mouth when he's told."

Roswaal: "…I wish you wouldn't be so pessimistic. Even now, Grimm-kun is doing everything he can for you. Wilhelm-kun too is a little useful so long as it involves swinging his sword. There's still hope."

Carol: "I feel like this is the first time in these 5 years that I've heard you consoling me, Mathers-sama."

Carol had never heard Roswaal speak anything that looked like consolation, what with her being a woman of many jests and japes albeit pragmatic. The fact that Roswaal had consoled her like that meant only that her situation was at an impasse.

Roswaal: "…"

The taciturn Roswaal probably wasn't going to deny Carol's request. To Carol it seemed like their fellowship was one close to friendship to the point that she could believe that she'd be the type who'd do as she asked.

Thus, what she should be worried about now was—

Carol: "—Grimm, please stay safe."

She hoped he was safe, even if he hadn't found anything. Carol couldn't remember the last time she'd seen his smiling face, and that wasn’t because of her shrivelling emotions.

3

“—*Thud!*.”

A steel shield thudded, and the man who’d opened the door ate a punch to his face and was sent flying. His flailing legs knocked bottles of sake and drinking glasses off the counter they were standing on; the sounds of broken glass gaudily echoed around the tavern.

For a split second or two, there was only silence, and then the men inside the tavern realized what was happening.

—This uninvited guest had come here to attack them.

???: “The fuck, who the hell are you…”

Intruder: “Ȓ̳R̶̪R̴̹̓͐R̭̒H̸̳̉AÄ̸̳̋ÀA̸̡̹Aͯ̽A̶̓!!”

The intruder leapt towards a man who’d drawn out a dagger from his pocket and tried to rush over to the entrance. He swiveled his shield around, which was about the size of a full-grown adult’s body, letting out a battle cry as he did. The shield smashed into the man’s arm, dagger and all, flipping the man (who had tried to let out a shriek of pain) up from under his shoulder and making him clatter into the ceiling.

Before the man even fell back down, the intruder had already moved onto his next targets.

???: “What the…GYAAAA!”??? “W-Wait up, wait up I said—!”???: “AIIIIEEEE?!”

The men were all defeated in tandem by a blow that packed tremendous speed and nary a hint of hesitation. It had taken less than a minute for the roughnecks of the store to be overrun by the intruder.

Tavern Roughneck: “Kh, Hha… The fuck are you… Ghhhhhhh!”

Intruder: “…”

The man who’d been thrown up to the ceiling and then clattered back down to the floor was grabbed by the scruff of his neck and forced to his feet by the intruder. Glaring at the man, who was now on his tip-toes and desperately gasping for breath, was a man with simple, gentle features. He didn’t really seem like the kind who could beat up nearly 10 roughnecks by himself.

—Though you’d only be saying that if you didn’t see the eyes of that gentle-featured man himself.

Tavern Roughneck: “Hh.”

The intruder’s eyes were bloodshot and the glint coming from them was one of absolute fury. They were clearly different to that of a typical gentle featured man. He was lifting the roughneck up with one arm and holding his incredibly heavy shield with his other as if it weighed nothing. He was far from the norm.

Things would get far more violent if he made one false move. He could feel that in his bones.

Tavern Roughneck: “The hell does this fucker wan- No, what do you want…”

The Intruder of Gentle Features: “‘ĕrz ~~Śride~~?̈~.”

Tavern Roughneck: “Huh, you what now?”

The man contorted his face in confusion at what the unintelligible, broken voice had said. The gentle-featured man lifted his head up in response and pointed to the base of his throat. —To the white scar that stretched across it.

In other words, it looked like he was saying that he couldn’t speak due to that battle scar.

Tavern Roughneck: “What the… Then how are we going to talk!”

The Intruder of Gentle Features: “Bỷ~…”

???: “—It’s simple. I do the talking.”

Yet another unfamiliar voice replied to the question the man had croaked out. However, when he looked from the entrance of the tavern to the man with gentle features after replying to him his expression grew sour.

Second Intruder: “If you’re saying it makes you feel awkward, then don’t run off ahead.”

He said that to the man of gentle features and slowly made his way towards him. He was a young man with brown hair which he had tied at his back. You could tell at a mere glance that the aura this man was enveloped in was terrible, vivid and showcasing that he possessed more skill than the gentle-featured man.

The man, who’d had his friends beaten up by those two monsters, kept his eyes on them. Finally, he looked up at the ceiling and despaired.

Tavern Roughneck: “Give me a break… What did we do…”

Brown Haired Intruder: “This guy should save us some time. —That’s what we also wanted to ask.”

The young man looked at the lamenting man’s face, still being hoisted up. He could see a fierce anger lodged deep in his blue eyes that felt like it would shake everything they saw to the core—

Brown Haired Intruder: “If you cooperate with me and speak I won’t do anything to you that would otherwise be beyond your imagination.”

Those words he’d spoken were as plain as a threat could be. The man could feel his heart freeze in fear.

4

???: “He’s still doing whatever the hell he likes, the guys we found this time were just small fry, but still…”

???: “…”

???: “I know that you went in because it wasn’t dangerous, that you were sure because of your intuition… But god damn it, I don’t even have anything I can say against it when you have that as your basis.”

Wilhelm briskly scratched his head and tched at Grimm’s protests, who was walking beside him. They were in Abiate, a town in Southern Lugunica—They were here in this town because there’d been reports that Stride had been sighted in its vicinity.

Stride’s covert movements around the Kingdom of Lugunica had increased tenfold ever since they’d found Sphinx’s Refuge in Shamrock Valley. Even though he was a wanted person, he strutted around under the light of the sun as if he didn’t give a toss. There’d been many eyewitness accounts, but even so, he wasn’t letting them lay their hands on the important stuff. They were being completely outplayed by him.

—After everything they went through, they hadn’t been able to get their hands on Stride’s trail in Abiate either.

They’d no choice but to chase up the eyewitness accounts to follow him. Though they knew that full well, all they were able to do was force the information out of the people who’d cooperated with him.

They’d once again beaten up some thugs who’d helped with his ins and outs into the city and provided him a hideout. They’d gotten some information out of them about what was happening.

Even so, it was hard to say if what they’d gathered was anything good.

Wilhelm: “This town too was the same as all the other places after all. All we were able to hear was about those Magic Circles of the Witch and that he’d hired those guys with gold to help him escape… It’s another dud.”

Wilhelm gritted his teeth feeling like they’d wasted their time and recounted the information they’d gotten out of the thugs.

Though Stride had been sighted in a lot of places around Lugunica, what they always found in the places he'd been spotted were the mysterious Magic Circles that they'd discovered in Sphinx's Refuge.

Though they'd collected the Magic Circle from the Hideout, they still didn't know what it did. Roswaal was still studying it back at the Royal Capital, but she hadn't made any progress yet.

As for how they were dealing with them in the current situation, they were destroying them as soon as any were found.

???: Though, I find going around and extinguishing Magic Circles indiscreetly a bit risky, when considering the measures Valga Cromwell put on them. Do you remember? How they were structured so that their Mana streams out when you destroy them, activating a bigger Magic Circle

Wilhelm: "…Forget? You died because of that."???: Indeed I did. That question right now was a bit unkind of me.

The long-haired man brushed Wilhelm's worries about the Magic Circles aside with a chuckle.

That man—Pivot's departed spirit was another one of the problems that plagued Wilhelm.

Wilhelm had come across the departed spirit of Pivot, who'd perished in the Demi-Human War, when they'd investigated the Shamrock Valley. Ever since he'd encountered him in that illusory world amidst the fog, Pivot had always been following him around and talking to him like this.

Wilhelm knew that this wasn't normal.

You can't talk to the dead, and Wilhelm didn't believe in Hollows. When people die, if they're not resurrected, they just return back to the earth. That's the solid truth.

Thus this Pivot was only a figment of Wilhelm's imagination. Even so, Wilhelm was finding this phony to be incredibly useful as an advisor who gave him objective opinions.

Having someone at his side giving him a composed opinion was priceless for Wilhelm, as by nature he tended towards impulsiveness. Usually Grimm was the one taking on that role, but right now he couldn’t manage it.

—He was especially invaluable now that he had far more problems than usual, meaning he needed advice more than ever.

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm sneaked a glance towards Grimm’s face as he walked beside him.

His cheeks looked a bit sallow, but his eyes were set ablaze, and lacked collectedness. Naturally he hadn’t been getting enough sleep, his nerves were frayed, and he’d been constantly jumping into danger as if he craved retribution.

It was clear that he was doing this to gain atonement for what had happened to Carol. However, things would get really dangerous for him if he kept doing what he’d just done today.

There were limits to this, even if Grimm had been munitioned with a blessing that allowed him to sense danger.

Wilhelm: “How did I get stuck with telling others to stay calm…”

Pivot: Yeah, jeez, it’s no laughing matter, but it almost makes you want to laugh, right?

Irritating as Pivot’s cynicism laced words were, he couldn’t deny them.

Wilhelm was seeing ghosts, Grimm couldn’t keep his cool, Carol was still under the influence of her curse and Theresia was pregnant. —His troubles were never-ending even when excluding Stride from them.

It was difficult to deal with all these problems at once. Though getting rid of them one at a time, starting from the most dangerous one, Stride, if he could, would be ideal.

Wilhelm: “It almost looks like he’s fucking enjoying pushing and toying us about.”

Pivot: Practically speaking, we can’t completely discard that possibility. My worst guess is that he’s the sort of scum who just likes to commit crimes to see his victim’s reactions. An even worse guess is that… Is that he’s moving forward with some sort of plan that we aren’t aware of whilst all this is going on

Wilhelm: “…”

It meant that things were going to get even worse, regardless of which one it was. That, and the experience Wilhem had actually had when confronting Stride wouldn’t let him deny it.

That reject definitely wanted more chaos and for the situation to get worse, make no mistake on that.

Wilhelm: “…In any case, Abiate was a dud. Let’s go back to the Royal Capital. Maybe Roswaal’s managed to find some sort of result.”

Grimm: “…’a̸yb̄̒e̸.”

His opinion wasn’t an optimistic one, and Grimm’s reply was heavy too. Wilhelm hesitated in mentioning that to him, and since he couldn’t think of any words to console him he abandoned the idea.

No matter what he said now, it’d just end up a burden. With that on his mind, he started to make his way back to his squad—

???: “Wilhelm! Grimm!”

Wilhelm: “…Conwood?”

Wilhelm and Grimm stopped in their tracks and turned around. Conwood, a Deputy Commander of the Zergev Corps, was running over to them. He’d ordered them to destroy the Magic Circle which the thugs had informed him about, but it was evident from his complexion that he wasn’t here to report the task’s completion.

With a tense look on his face, Conwood spoke out to Wilhelm, who’d braced himself for “something”.

Conwood: “We have a problem. —Lord Miklotov McMahon has been attacked at his mansion.”

5

Miklotov McMahon was one of the Ministers of Internal Affairs that held an important post in the Royal Castle.

Though he was still young, he’d made a name for himself with his incredible talent and powers of judgement. After the end of the Demi-Human War, he’d been integral to the politics of the Kingdom of Lugunica, engaging in them with his shrewdness.

Wilhelm too had been one of the people he’d helped out with his reinstatement to the Royal Forces, and some other matters. It was dead clear that if anything happened to Miklotov it’d be grave enough to shake the Kingdom to its core.

Thus, Wilhelm had immediately made his way to Miklotov as soon as he’d heard the news about the attack on him.

Miklotov’s main residence, the McMahon mansion, was located dozens of kilometers south from the Royal Capital. Luckily, he could reach it from Abiate in about half a day.

Wilhelm: “Grimm, you go back to the Royal Capital ahead of me. I’ll entrust Theresia… Theresia and the others to you.”

They split up along the way, Grimm leading the Zergev Corps back to the Royal capital on ahead, and Wilhelm visiting the McMahon estate. There’d been a large number of Miklotov’s private guards on patrol at the mansion, and it’d taken Wilhelm a fair amount of time to prove his identity and get inside.

And when Wilhelm was able to finally enter into the mansion—

???: “—It sure seems like we’ve left some holes in our defenses with me being attacked several days after leaving the Royal Capital.”

Wilhelm placed his hand on his chest in relief as he came face to face with the master of the mansion—Miklotov, who’d ushered him into his parlor.

Miklotov didn’t seem to have any visible injuries at a glance. The attack hadn’t been a major one, and it looked like the forces he kept in his mansion had managed to turn them away.

Even so, the fact still remained that a key person from the Kingdom had been attacked. Even in regards to their enemy’s guile in setting his aims on Miklotov from the numerous important people who worked at the Royal Castle.

Wilhelm: “Honestly, this has made my blood run cold. The future of the Kingdom would be at stake were something to happen to you.”

Miklotov: “Hmm, as expected, aren’t you making far too much of me? Others can take my position you know. The ones who are truly irreplaceable are the Royal Family and ladies like your esteemed wife.”

Miklotov kept up a humble attitude in response to Wilhelm’s candid relief. He then raised his eyebrows as if he’d recalled something and said, “Come to mention it…”

Miklotov: “I’ve heard that your esteemed wife is pregnant, so congratulations are in order. I haven’t had the chance at all to tell her my congratulations firsthand, but I’m delighted for the both of you.”

Wilhelm: “…Celebrating that now is kinda tough. Especially when you said that you’ve just been attacked.”

Miklotov: “Huh, well that doesn’t mean that no one’s going to be saved by just looking at the bad stuff happening around us. Besides, we’re talking about the child of the Sword Saint and the Sword Demon here, the prides of our country. Wouldn’t the kind of lionheart that’s born from such be an irreplaceable asset for the Kingdom as well?”

Miklotov had quite the silver tongue, as could be expected from his line of work.

Naturally, Wilhelm was incredibly interested too in what kind of child his and Theresia’s would grow up to be. He was a man who was only talented with the sword. He didn't want his child to be just like that as much as he could.

A time would come to them sooner or later where mere skills with the sword wouldn't keep them standing strong. When that time came, they'd need the right skills to find happiness.

Wilhelm: "Even so, the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint is in the Astrea Family. If that gets passed down to the next generation, it should definitely go down to a child who's inherited mine and Theresia's knack with the sword."

Miklotov: "If that happens, then they could become the strongest Sword Saint ever… They might even become a hero as great as the exalted Reid Astrea, the first ever Sword Saint. I'm looking forward to this now."

Wilhelm: "You're getting way too ahead of yourself. You're overly neglecting today when looking forward to the morrow like that."

Wilhelm's anxiety hadn't been cleared away despite all of his flattery. When Wilhelm spoke those words that indicated he wanted to get down to business, Miklotov's mild-mannered expression changed.

It changed from one of a pleasant man to one of a man who flourished his shrewdness on a stage of government embroiled in Machiavellianism.

Miklotov: "Based on what's been happening, the individual who turned up at my mansion seems to be connected to Stride. I think based on the reports it was probably the Shinobi that accompanies him."

Wilhelm: "Him… That thing that I nearly killed was skulking about too?"

Wilhelm recalled the Shinobi whom he'd clashed with at his home in the Royal Capital a while ago and clenched his teeth.

That Shinobi had been quite skilled too, though not as skilled as Kurgan. Wilhelm had let him slip from under his fingers just as he was about to kill him; if that had led to this happening then this too was another error he'd made.

Wilhelm: "Even so, Stride kept himself truly safe and sound with that Shinobi. To put it clearly, for him to end up being thrown back by your private guard is like…"

Miklotov: "I did gather my guard for their skill, but they pale in comparison to you. Besides, I can't deny what you're saying. If he'd wanted to kill me, I imagine he would have done so."

Wilhelm: "Then you're saying that his aim wasn't your life?"

Miklotov: "First things first, I wouldn't call what happened now an attack on the mansion, it's more like a break in. The Shinobi just fled when my men realized that he'd broken in. There wasn't any pointless fighting… Well, actually, no, a few of my men who chased him too far ended up dead."

Miklotov cast his eyes down, mourning the men he'd lost. Even so, Wilhelm pondered for a second about what he'd mentioned, and then said,

Wilhelm: "…Why are you here at a time like this?"

Miklotov: "Hmmm."

Miklotov didn't reply to his question straight away. Wilhelm sensed that something was up with how he'd reacted and spoke up again, starting his words off with a "No,"Wilhelm: "I hate to say this, but you don't seem to be the kind of person who'd be so careless. The Royal Family and VIPs are being guarded in the Royal Capital. You shouldn't have behaved like this, leaving the Royal Capital and carelessly exposing a breach to our enemies. It's not like you."

Miklotov: "…You seem to be looking around at things, unlike what I'm used to about you. Also, I'm genuinely glad that you're evaluating me like that. Hmmm, you've sure grown up fast."

Wilhelm: "Quit fooling about. Though if you're saying that you can't answer me, then you don't have to…"

Wilhelm could more or less infer that he couldn't talk about it. Red flags were flashing all around him considering that Miklotov had gone back to his main home, and as a result, been taken advantage of by Stride due to reasons he couldn't divulge.

—Miklotov spent an unusually long time contemplating Wilhelm's consideration. Then, a voice called out towards them,

???: "—You needn't fret, Miklotov. What happened now was due to my venerable self's carelessness."

Wilhelm "—?!"

Wilhelm suddenly jumped up in fright at the sound of the voice that wedged itself into the parlor.

Not because he'd been surprised by this man's appearance, after all, he'd recognized his presence. He was majestically walking down the mansion's corridor as if he owned the place.

And that was natural of course. This person had nary a reason to shirk away from the gaze of the public.

He held a position in the Kingdom of Lugunica that boasted stately authority wherever he went—And that was because he was His Majesty the King, Gionis Lugunica.

Gionis: "It's been a while, hasn't it, Trias… No, not Trias! You're an Astrea now aren't you. But I'll get you mixed up with your wife if I call you that. I think it's a good idea if I call you Wilhelm!"

Wilhelm "Your Majesty…"

Gionis had red eyes and sparkling golden hair and he declared that with a cheerful, friendly expression on his smiling face. Wilhelm turned stiff faced at his overly-relaxed demeanor and Miklotov covered his head with his hands.

Gionis: "Hm, what's the matter Wilhelm? Is your stomach or something aching? You are indispensable for the kingdom right now, so I think it's a good idea if you're seen by a good Healing Arts User… like Garritch!"

Miklotov: “Your Majesty Gionis, please sit down for now. Wilhelm-dono isn’t sick. He’s just surprised by Your Majesty’s sudden radiance.”

Gionis: “Ohh, so that was it! My apologies for that. Even my venerable self cannot hide the majesty a king lets off.”

Gionis gave him an absentminded apology and then sat himself down on the chair that Miklotov had pointed out. The sense of stiffness Wilhelm had been feeling up until now finally cleared away and he immediately knelt down beneath Gionis and gave him a reverential bow.

Wilhelm: “Your Majesty Gionis, it’s an honor to see you.”

Gionis: “You can dispense with the ceremonies. After all, weren’t you once so bold as to hide yourself in my venerable self’s bedroom and talk to me directly? That… Erm, that truly freaked me out!”

Wilhelm: “That was truly inexcusable of me. But, Your Majesty, why are you at Lord Miklotov’s Mansion…?”

Wilhelm felt ashamed when he touched on the subject where back then he’d committed one the biggest acts of human impoliteness. Now even he knew that under no circumstance should that discourtesy have been allowed.

Gionis let out a somewhat regretful sigh at Wilhelm’s humbled attitude and then said, “What of it?”

Gionis: “It’s because Miklotov is a friend. He’s always been giving me advice whenever I need it. Oftentimes, when business takes me away from the Royal Capital, I visit the Mansion like this.”

Wilhelm: “…No way, then what happened now is…”

…Why Stride’s underling had set his sights on the Miklotov Mansion—They couldn’t overlook what had happened one bit if Stride had known that Gionis was going to visit the Mansion.

Not only was that a leak of information, but there were also some fingers to be pointed with exposing the King to danger so carelessly.

This matter could likely endanger Miklotov's position and even end up with the McMahon family being pegged responsible for it.

With that in mind, Wilhelm looked over at Miklotov with a stern look in his eyes. Miklotov received his gaze as if he'd expected it and looked down in resignation.

Gionis: "Wait, wait up, don't jump to conclusions. It's a good idea here to listen to what my venerable self has to say to the end."

However, Gionis himself told him to hold up.

Gionis: "I told you at the start that what happened now was due to my venerable self's carelessness. Miklotov has no blame in this. First things first, Miklotov has often stopped me from visiting during these times. My venerable self insisted despite that. Because of what I did, I put Miklotov and his guests in danger, I've reflected about that many many times."

Wilhelm: "You did so, Your Majesty… No, even if that's the case, Lord McMahon's duty's to…"

Gionis: "Didn't my venerable tell you that it's a good idea to listen to the end!"

Wilhelm: "…"

Gionis defended Miklotov and once again repeated that to Wilhelm when he cut in. Wilhelm instinctively shut his mouth due to the force of his words.

—A puppet king who's just popular with the masses, a king who's unfit for rule, a king with an overly benevolent temperament and optimistic ideas.

There were many instances where gossipmongers would say stuff like that about the Lugunican Royal Family. In all honesty, Wilhelm too had once thought that being a man of upright character and a ruler went as well as Vinegee on Lemoms.

But in this very moment, Wilhelm was undoubtedly kneeling before a king.

Gionis: “My venerable brushed aside all of his protests and made my way here so to talk to a certain “gentleman”. Due to certain reasons, I shall not divulge the identity of said “gentleman”, but my venerable self can guarantee the veracity of what he told me.”

Wilhelm: “…What did he tell you?”

Gionis: “—He told me about the aims of this evildoer who’s causing chaos around the Kingdom right now, he told me about what this man called Stride plans to do.”

Wilhelm was taken aback by what Gionis had said in a low but firm tone of voice. He saw Miklotov across from Gionis also give him a curt nod, with a serious look on his face.

They’d given him the news that the Kingdom faced danger, news which even the brains of the Kingdom placed his faith in. And moreover—

Wilhelm: “Was Stride’s Shinobi trying to break in proof backing that as well?”

Miklotov: “I even reckon it was worth letting him break into the mansion.”

Miklotov jokingly replied like that to Wilhelm’s understanding. He then exchanged looks with Gionis and the latter nodded his head and continued his words with a “Mhm.”

Gionis: “To start with, that “gentleman” was able to suspect that Stride’s aims involved those things in the report… those Magic Circles was it? And that’s because the “gentleman” is quite familiar with them. I imagine he would have likely used them next time.”

Wilhelm: “Used them… next time…?”

Miklotov: “Your Majesty.”

Miklotov called out to Gionis at the same time that Wilhelm had experienced a weird sense of unease concerning his explanation. Hearing his name called out, Gionis faked a coughing fit, “*Hem ahem hem*.”

Gionis: “It’s nothing, ignore me. Anyways, what’s important is the effect these Magic Circles or whatever they’re called have.”

Wilhelm: “…Which is?”

Gionis: “—The complete destruction of the covenant.”

Wilhelm’s breath stopped in its tracks at the heavy echo of those words.

The meaning of those words took some time to sink in. Then, almost as if he’d been waiting for that, Mikotov took over his explanation so to make things clearer.

And this is what he said—

Miklotov: “The complete destruction of the covenant that the Kingdom and the Divine Dragon are bound by. In short, our enemy’s planning the downfall of the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

6

—Would anyone have been able to immediately comprehend what had happened?

Sound disappeared from the world, time crawled to a standstill, and a scene of splattering blood was projected vividly.

There were no cries of agony. Both because sound had vanished and because the individual who’d been on the receiving end of the attack had once sustained a wound to his throat and couldn’t speak. However, there was a far more obvious reason why.

—And that was because he was in sheer disbelief at the very fact that he’d been cut down.

???: “…”

He’d heard a heavy Swoosh, and then his body had been slashed across diagonally. Grimm Fauzen collapsed to the floor.

A dull thunk accompanied Grimm’s fall due to him still donning his armor—He hadn’t had the time to change into lighter garb since he’d been eager to get back to his sweetheart.

He should have been looking after her, exchanging sweet nothings with her. But now all of those feelings he held for his sweetheart tantamounted to no more than sheer irony.

—Because the one holding the sword that had cut Grimm down had been his own sweetheart, Carol.

Carol: “Gr…imm?”

Carol gazed down at her sweetheart who’d collapsed at her feet and spluttered those words out in shock. She held her Knight’s Sword in her hands with perfect poise, exemplary of a swordsman.

Her Knight’s Sword had a long, thin blade, that was now covered in the blood of her sweetheart, glittering with the cruel color of steel.

???: “—Hah! There’s a certain lack of flashiness to its production for a comedy, isn’t there? What we also needed here to make things more sublime was some music that accentuates the folly rather than silence. How surprising, the observers in the heavens above lack a sense of aesthetic.”

A man stood in front of that spectacle, his whole body was drenched in malice, and when he declared that, he did so with a bored look on his face—He was currently the worst criminal in the Kingdom of Lugunica, a sworn enemy that the Sword Demon kept pursuing, Stride.

Stride calmly walked up to the people who were frozen in their places because of what they’d witnessed, without sparing a single glance at Grimm collapsed in a pool of his own blood. When he arrived in front of them, he gave each of them a deep bow in turn, and only that.

It was as if he’d turned to his audience atop a theatre stage and promised them an act tonight that would move them.

Stride: “Splendid, the preparations worked properly, even though the start was a little bit dull. Lo’ and behold, ‘tis my venerable self, the playwright, I shall permit you to pay your tributes to his magnanimity. You may applaud me to your heart's content, no matter how much of a let down the overture was."

Stride said that with a wicked smile. Theresia still kept her silence, an acrid taste cloying her mouth at the unspeakable malice exuding from him.

…

—Everything had happened so suddenly.

It had happened during the time when Theresia, her parents and Carol were all sitting together having a good time in one of the rooms of the mansion.

It was a few days after Wilhelm and his squadron had left the Royal Capital; they hadn't received any good news yet, nor had they been able to make any progress on Carol's curse. In the meantime, Carol had spent her days devoting herself as much as possible for Theresia.

Theresia had continued to depend on Carol's favor even after she'd talked to her parents, who'd suggested she should let her do what she wants even if she felt terrible about it. "Carrying on like normal will be for the best", was what they'd said.

So even at a time like this, the harmony inside the Astrea Mansion was as it always had been.

Bertol said stupid stuff without thinking that got misjudged by the women of the mansion; Tishua found it amusing to keep her husband in check when he was like that; And everyone talked about the future of the child that would soon be born into the world.

It was during times like these that Grimm had returned after he'd left the Royal Capital to accompany Wilhelm.

He'd reported that the Zergev Corps had made it back safely and that Wilhelm would be late coming back due to something cropping up. Then he'd bore the news of his return to Carol and made their feelings of affection known to each other even though they still couldn’t touch each other.

Seeing the tryst of the two lovers who were unable to touch each other, Theresia gently stroked her tummy.

—There’d been many a time recently where Theresia and Wilhelm had missed each other.

Naturally with the Stride matter at hand, Wilhelm couldn’t take the time to settle down. Theresia also felt frustrated whenever she thought about Carol and Grimm, having herself been strictly ordered to take things easy.

Nevertheless, she felt anxious about herself, even whilst her thoughts were directed to the utmost on Grimm and Carol’s troubles.

—Reason being that she couldn’t find the time to talk with Wilhelm about their child.

Theresia’s belly had already gotten pretty swollen and she could feel the baby shifting about inside her womb. The actual feelings of the fruits of their bond growing to life grew ever stronger day by day inside of Theresia.

She wanted to share her feelings, her joy, and her anxieties with Wilhelm.

If she could get Wilhelm to take in the feelings she was experiencing, as a father, then she too felt like she could take in the Things which he harbored.

That’s why as soon as Wilhelm got back she’d decided that she’d take the time to properly talk together with him as husband and wife.

—That was when it happened, immediately after she’d decided that.

Stride: “It’s been a long time, Sword Saint. —Have you been keeping well?”

That man had shown up unreservedly, without a shred of hesitation, ruining the family's happy moment.

He cared not a lick that he was about as welcome here as a Giant in a Gustekan milkbar, he had the audacity to waltz in as if he owned the place no matter where he went in this world. Numerous thoughts whizzed through Theresia's mind the instant she caught a glimpse of him.

And the thought that worried her the most was—

Theresia: "—What happened to the bodyguards outside?"

Stride: "Hmph. The first thing you worry about are those peasants outside instead of my own venerable countenance? Such disrespect…, normally I'd make you pay for it with your life… But my venerable self is in a fine mood right now. Thus, I shall generously overlook it."

Theresia firmly squeezed her eyes shut to his manner of speaking, which was laced with cruelty and arrogance. Although he hadn't answered her question, his apathetic attitude spoke volumes about what end her honorable guards had met.

Why this, in this Kingdom that had just recovered from that senseless Civil War and was slowly building towards peace—

Theresia: "How can you be so cruel to others like that?"

Stride: "How unthinkable, to be told that by the Sword Saint who slayed not thousands of lives, but tens of thousands. Were I to compare my venerable self's deeds and such to the amount of lives you took, mine would seem like mere child's play. If inquity is determined by the number of lives you take, then I doubt there is anyone in this world who gets the edge on you."

Theresia: "—Hic."

Though his reply strayed from the topic at hand, Theresia felt a sharp pain from the sting of his words.

He was referencing the anguish that had kept tormenting her mind ever since that Civil War, ever since she'd been allowed to cast down her sword, and ever since she'd had a child with Wilhelm.

However, someone did erupt in a raged frenzy at those words in place of the speechless Theresia.

???: "YOU BASTARD! YOUR INSULTS AGAINST THERESIA-SAMA STOP RIGHT HERE!"

Carol drew out her Knight's Sword from her side and bellowed those words at Stride. Grimm stood next to her, raising the colossal shield he'd had strapped to his back in front of him.

When the two of them turned towards Stride, readying themself up for a fierce battle, Bertol pulled Tishua back by the arm and placed himself in front of where Theresia was sitting, so to protect her.

Stride: "Hmph."

Stride snorted with an air of languor as he gazed at what was happening. Only here, he shouldn't be acting so composed. Because he stood here all alone.

Theresia had already found out that Stride didn't have the power to be able to fight by himself. That still hadn't changed; the only strength of body he had was something akin to the kind a semi-invalid would have.

Carol: "I don't know what you're hiding, but I will capture you right here."

Stride: "You know, the only splendid thing about you is your vigor. Have you forgotten how uncouth you looked the other day?"

Carol: "Even if you try and make me faint with the power of your rings bastard, I'll kill you before I lose my consciousness!"

Stride: "Hah."

Stride scoffed, and in his scoff he placed great scorn and disdain for Carol, who'd readied herself to fight.

The moment she saw that, Carol's sword spirit exploded and she jumped towards the immobile Stride. She swung her Knight's Sword in a beguiling semi-circular pattern, and—

—When she came to, Grimm had collapsed onto the floor, struck by her attack.

…

Stride: "—Making you faint, causing your breath to stop when you're touched by your loved one, all of these are overtures. The ring's curses aren't limited to such infantile restrictions. I've made you into a puppet."

Stride raised his right hand and showed it to her. The jewel on his index finger was shining with a bewitching radiance to it. Carol gasped out an "Ah"and looked behind her, at Theresia and the others.

Carol shook her head in refusal. However, the tip of her Knight's Sword was pointed towards Theresia and the others—No, towards Bertol and Tishua.

Stride: "The time is ripe now. Long have I awaited this moment, Sword Saint. Are you going to be able to stop me?"

Theresia: "What are you…"

Theresia had placed her hand on her swollen belly, stood up, and asked Stride what he was intending to do. Stride laughed at her words, then his lips split into a cruel sneer,

Stride: "—Do it."

He shook his raised finger and issued a short command without deigning to answer Theresia's question. Carol keenly understood the meaning of that command more than anyone else, thus making her scream.

Carol: "NO…NO, NO, NONONONONOOOOOOOOO!"

Tears streamed from her wide open eyes, nevertheless, her flesh and bones went against her feelings as it tried to exhibit the skills she had honed up until now as a swordsman, without holding anything back.

For the first time ever since she’d taken up the sword, she was pointing it at the family she’d sworn to protect.

Carol: “RUN AWAAAAAAY!”

Carol screamed, and immediately after, she sharply stepped towards them.

Theresia had tried to jump away when she saw that. However her baby had moved in her womb, and that had caused her to stop in her tracks. She hesitated. Then, Tishua pushed her down.

Tishua pushed her down to the floor and shielded her. She could see Bertol standing up with both of his arms spread out before him in front of Tishua.

A flash of silver filled the room.

—And fresh blood splattered around the Astrea mansion.

Act Five

1

—Something strange happened in the Commercial City of Picoutatte that day.

Picoutatte was one of the Six Great Cities in the Kingdom of Lugunica and was located in the south, alongside the border with the Vollachian Empire. The city itself was considered a vital one in the country as it acted as a trading hub with the Empire.

As usual, Picoutatte was lively with a flow of merchants crossing between the border, with people and merchandise moving in and out of the city. Naturally though, the more people there were, the greater the chance of fights breaking out became.

To fight against that, Picoutatte had posted soldiers around the city who kept a watchful eye for that, so that they could immediately intervene if any did break out. Especially because several months ago, a duel had taken place on the stone bridge in the middle of the city; that, and the whole city was going through a time where it was becoming susceptible to disputes.

A situation like that was about to be repeated. The first one who took notice of the anomaly was one of the soldiers who'd been trying to intervene in an argument between a merchant and his customer, and was trying to put an end to their quarrel.

Soldier: "Huh?"

The soldier had grabbed one of the arms of the merchant, and one of the customer, and then widened his eyes in surprise at the strange sensation he'd felt.

All he needed to do was touch the two quarreling individuals and stand between them. If things had proceeded like they always did, then the power of his Divine Protection of Empathy would have kicked in and conveyed their feelings to each other so that they'd be able to reach a compromise.

—The soldier's Divine Protection of Empathy was a gift he'd received from the heavens when he'd been born.

The soldier could read other's emotions simply by touching them, and if he stood between two people, he could even go as far as making them understand each other.

Thanks to this power, the soldier had long been hailed as an expert mediator, and naturally he'd chosen a future for himself that made use of his Divine Protection, allowing him to take a dream job in the current system of soldiers.

All the soldier knew was that when he touched people, he understood their emotions, and that when he made them touch like this he made them come to an understanding. Other than that, the soldier didn't know anything about how it worked, its quintessence, or why he even needed to touch them. That's why the soldier was extremely confused by what had just happened.

The technique he'd been using ever since he'd been born had suddenly stopped working. Then, what ought he do now—

???: "—You're twisted. Yes, well and truly twisted. The epitome of a twisted lump of flesh."

Soldier: "Huh?"

The soldier, who'd blanked out due to what had happened, gathered his wits back when he heard an abrupt voice coming from his side. He turned to face the direction the voice had come from, and standing there right beside him was a tall, thin man.

The man had dark purple hair and gave off an awfully cold, handsome impression. For a second, the soldier was completely spellbound by him, then he briskly shook his head and said, "No."

Soldier: "What did you just say? Excuse me, but after I settle things here, I'll…"

Purple Haired Man: "Stop their quarrel? Don't be so foolish. You're not too unlike a newborn baby right now. How do you intend to stop a fight between adult men in your state? Don't be so conceited."

Soldier: "…"

The man's voice was even more cruel than the look to his face and in his eyes. The three of them reacted in surprise to his words. Not just the soldier, but also the two men who'd started the incident.

The merchant, the customer and the soldier all had no clue what to think about this sudden intruder.

Was he a weirdo or maybe a drunk? It wasn't that late yet, but when you got so many people moving about, you'd occasionally get someone who'd let loose even in the earlier hours of the day. Dealing with people like these was one of his duties as a soldier.

Soldier: "Let's stop right here. If you have something to say, then you can say as much as you want back at the station…"

Purple Haired Man: "You can tell certain things with touch. That's the root of your twistedness, isn't it?"

Soldier: "…"

The soldier had let go of the quarreling mens' arms and tried to grab the drunk instead. However, he'd been stopped in his tracks again by what the drunk had said. Just this time, it wasn't out of surprise, but more so because chills had run up his spine.

The man's words had hit the nail precisely on the head about what the soldier's Divine Protection was. What's more, the soldier had never told anyone other than his family about his Divine Protection of Empathy.

Divine Protections easily tended to create strife between people who were and weren't privy to one. That was common sense in the world, and the soldier too had sworn by that and never opened his mouth about it.

Then how did this man in front of him, whom he'd never met before, know about it?

Purple Haired Man: “Look, If you want to know… then try getting the information out of me, twisted spawn of the heavens.”

Soldier: “Ukh…”

The man offered his arm to the soldier, who was staring at him rooted to the spot. The man had goaded him to try.

There was no doubt, the man knew about his Divine Protection. The soldier noticed from the look in the man’s eyes that this was a challenge, and that from the fierce, strange aura that was coming from him, he wouldn’t let him escape. As a result, he took the man’s arm and prayed that his Divine Protection would work.

What he could read with his Divine Protection of Empathy wasn’t a person’s thoughts, but rather the emotions they harbored at the time. Even so, if he could see a part of his true, unadulterated emotions, then smoothing things over would instantly become a lot easier.

Even the strange fear he had of this man should be eased with his Divine Protection—

Purple Haired Man: “So, did you find out anything?”

Soldier: “N-Nothing…”

Purple Haired Man: “I see. —You’ve been a great help.”

The soldier had grabbed the man’s surprisingly thin wrist and once again felt nothing. He shook his head at his question. The man pondered the soldier’s answer for a moment with his eyes closed and then gave him a short, solemn nod, thanking him for his efforts.

The soldier didn’t even know if his thanks had come from what he truly felt, though.

Soldier: “—Urk.”

The next moment, a flurry of scythe-like slashes reaped the soldier’s life. The flurry kicked up a gale of wind and the two men who were looking at the spectacle from the sidelines were showered in fresh blood.

Those two men who'd started this whole mess looked at the spectacle happening in front of their eyes, unable to move a single muscle or utter a single peep.

The soldier's arm had been cut off at the elbow and was still clinging to the man's—Stride's wrist. Stride shook it off and then let out a brief sigh.

At Stride's side stood a colossal figure with eight arms, as well as a figure that was clad in a darkness blacker than the night. That figure of darkness brought along a short woman with them, who serenely walked over to Stride's side and snuggled up to him.

Stride paid no attention to them though, he merely continued to look up at the sky and spoke to it as if he were in song.

Stride: "Now then, the test has succeeded, Sword Demon Wilhelm van Astrea. All that's left now is to await the results. You'd better watch, o' audience who decides fate. —You'd better watch which choices the world shalt make."

That was Stride Vollachia's proclamation of war, the overture of one the worst days with Picoutatte as its stage—that would become the grand stage of the Sword Demon Battle Ballad.

2

Everything was already over by the time Wilhelm got back to the Astrea Mansion.

Wilhelm "—!"

Wilhelm, by nature, didn't care much for things being busy and noisy. And he wasn't the only one like that, Theresia was also like that, so typically they didn't have that many people coming in and out of the mansion.

The only exceptions to this had probably been just after their marriage ceremony and the time when Theresia’s pregnancy had come to light.

Many had turned up at the mansion to bear their congratulations on both of these occasions. It hadn’t just been people from the Royal Castle, Knights who knew them and family members who’d come bearing their good wishes for their marriage and pregnancy. People who only had that they lived in the Royal Capital in common had also turned up.

The wedding ceremony had been about a year ago, and the baby shower a tad under a half year ago. Yet now, the Astrea Mansion was once again in an uproar.

—A stream of soldiers was bustling in and out of the mansion in an attempt to get ahold of the situation.

???: “Wilhelm! Over here!”

A deep voice called out to him soon after he’d forced himself into the mansion through a gap in the stream of soldiers. He turned to look towards where he’d indicated, and there waving his arm at him was a giant of a man with short blue hair, Bordeaux Zergev.

He should have hung up his boots when it came to actual combat. Nevertheless, he was still here because there was no one who was more talented than him with the experience of the commander that he was when it came to dealing with emergencies.

It made complete sense why—The Astrea Mansion in the Royal Capital should never have been attacked.

Wilhelm: “Bordeaux, what happened.”

Wilhelm rushed over to the stiff-faced Bordeaux and demanded an explanation from him.

Wilhelm had left the Royal Capital and visited Lord Miklotov’s estate. When he’d received the news there from an Earth Dragon that had come galloping to him at full speed, he’d rode back to the mansion without wasting a single moment.

All he’d heard then was that their mansion in the Royal Capital had been attacked. He’d rushed back with his mind clear save only for that.

He knew that the more he thought about it, the more negative his thoughts would become, considering that it looked like Theresia and her baby had gotten roped up in this nightmare.

Bordeaux: “There was a bloodshed in your mansion. The 8 soldiers we’d placed here as bodyguards were all put to the sword, and at the end of all this, Theresia-dono was kidnapped… I’m sorry. For all of this, even while I was in the Royal Capital.”

Wilhelm: “Kidnapped? Theresia was kidnapped? What the hell, by who!”

???: “—S͝t̶r̶i̶d̸e̊.”

Wilhelm grabbed the apologetic Bordeaux by the scruff of his neck and raised his voice at him. The one who’d answered the Sword Demon’s wrath hadn’t been the groaning Bordeaux, no, it had been someone behind him.

Wilhelm: “…Grimm.”

Grimm: “…”

He looked back and saw Grimm, his head hung low and a melancholic look on his face.

Unlike Wilhelm, he should have gotten back to the Royal Capital ahead of him and been there during the time of the attack. Though even Wilhelm wasn’t going to be so cruel as to ask him why things had gotten this bad with him here.

Namely because he was sitting sunk into a chair, with his whole body covered in painful, bloodied bandages.

Bordeaux: “Grimm was the first person he took out of action when things started to kick off. Makes sense that he’d remove his most troublesome enemy before anything else… But, what happened here is far more worse.”

Wilhelm's grip on the scruff of Bordeaux's neck loosened, allowing Bordeaux to free himself and then whisper those words into his ear. Why did he even need to take the consideration to not let Grimm hear what he was saying?

Bordeaux looked meekly at the baffled Wilhelm and continued.

Bordeaux: "The one who put those soldiers and Grimm to the sword and afterwards kidnapped Theresia-dono was Carol Remendis."

Wilhelm: "—What the hell?"

Bordeaux: "To be precise, a Carol-dono who was being made to do Stride's exact bidding. The soldiers who managed to escape this ordeal with their lives are testifying that she was shouting "Run away" whilst crying her eyes out."

Bordeaux sheepishly explained to him everything that had happened.

Stride had attacked the Astrea Mansion half a day ago; Grimm and Carol had met his attack but Carol had turned her blade against Grimm rather than Stride. The reason why she'd done that had been down to one of Stride's rings—The curse-casting ring had been behind everything that was going on in Carol's body, like her coma and her asphyxiation.

And now it had turned Carol into a puppet, forcing her to put their bodyguards and Grimm to the sword one after the other. With Carol taken as a hostage, there was no way Theresia could have resisted.

That's why she had been taken away too—

Wilhelm: "—Wait up. I get that Theresia's been kidnapped, and that Carol's been dragged into this by that bastard Stride… But her parents should have been in the mansion as well."

Bordeaux: "…"

Bertol and Tishua both doted on their daughter and were using her pregnancy as an opportunity to make frequent trips to the mansion, making themselves available for helping out with their first grandchild.

Most likely, they secretly considered Carol like their own daughter. So they should have been in the mansion when it happened.

Wilhelm: “I told them I was going to be leaving for a while, that I would count on them to be at Theresia’s side. So the two of them must have been in the mansion…”

Knowing them, they would have kept their promise no matter what.

Wilhelm’s face stiffened in fright. Bordeaux looked away from him for a moment, then he let out a short sigh and looked straight into his eyes and said,

Bordeaux: “Wilhelm, listen carefully. Lord Bertol Astrea is…”

Wilhelm: “…”

Bordeaux: “He was the pride of the Kingdom, one of its most esteemed Knights, and an exemplary father.”

3

The woman sitting on the bed gave off an impression that was remarkably different from her usual self.

She had cascading long flaxen hair and wore a grass-green dress over her curvaceous body. Her youthful looks made her look a lot younger than she actually was, and since she usually wore a smile that never seemed to dim, she’d always kept up an impression of gentleness.

Right now her lips were pursed shut, the look on her face was stiff, and her dress, hair and pale cheeks were caked in dried blood. It almost felt like she was presenting herself as a surrealist’s painting.

The woman was Tishua Astrea—Theresia’s mother, Bertol’s wife and Wilhelm’s mother in law whom he’d entrusted Theresia to during his absence from the mansion.

Tishua: “…”

Tishua was sitting on a large bed in her matrimonial bedroom gazing vacantly into space, the light gone from her eyes. Her demeanor indicated that she was there in body but not in mind. In fact—

Bordeaux: “She doesn’t reply to anything we say. But she’ll struggle for dear life if you try to take her out of her bed. That’s why we’ve still left her in her bedroom like this.”

Wilhelm: “…Is my honored mother hurt?”

Bordeaux: “Nope. The Healer already made sure of that. The blood on her is all…”

Bordeaux trailed his words off there. But Wilhelm knew what he was going to say, even if he hadn’t finished them. It was pretty clear who the blood belonged to when he considered that Tishua was refusing to wash it off.

Bordeaux: “We could get her off by force, but I don’t want to do that. Can you try speak to her somehow?”

Wilhelm: “Do you think I’ll get through to her?”

Bordeaux: “If you can’t manage it, then no one can. That’s the rub of it.”

Bordeaux’s words were full of supplication and concern, imploring Wilhelm to not leave her like she was. Taking his words on board, he approached Tishua. Even if all she did was curse at him, he determined that it was his duty to accept that.

Wilhelm: “Honored mother, it’s me, Wilhelm. I’ve just gotten back. I’m really sorry for being so late.”

Tishua: “…”

Wilhelm: “I’ve heard about what happened whilst I was away. My honored father… Erm, our head of the Astrea household, how should I put it…It was unfortunate, what happened to him.”

He felt distaste at himself for voicing out those hollow words.

Even so, Wilhelm became properly cognizant of the feelings storming around his heart by the mere power of kotodama those words had carried as they left his tongue. Anger and impatience were the most prominent, however, a feeling he'd been shirking away from had naturally taken form inside of him.

It's not something related to my lacking words where I'd tried to express my regret, penitence and such. Aah, now I realize what it is.

—I never hated Bertol Astrea.

Wilhelm: "—Hic."

Before Wilhelm even noticed, he was kneeling at Tishua's feet with his head held out to her. A gesture that though seemed like he was saying "You can go ahead and remove my head from my body" hadn't been done to mean that.

As much as he craved that, he still needed his head. He had something which needed to be done.

He needed to tell Bertol's wife the feelings he felt for his father-in-law.

Wilhelm: "—? Honored mother?"

Wilhelm suddenly felt something odd brushing against his head, making him lift his head up. Someone had feebly stuck their fingers through his brown hair and was stroking his head as if they were soothing a child.

Wilhelm was stunned; the hand brushing through his hair belonged to none other than Tishua, who should have been in an incognizant state. Slowly, the light came back to her eyes.

Tishua: "Wilhelm…san…"

Wilhelm: "My Honored mother…! Tishua-sama, do you know who I am?"

Tishua: "…Mhm, of course. I've… Right. I've shown a rather shameful side to myself."

Tishua came back to her senses as Wilhelm called her name. She quickly got a grasp on the situation and cast her eyes down in shame. Wilhelm shook his head in reply and exchanged looks with Bordeaux who was hanging by the entrance. Bordeaux gave him a nod and gave out instructions to his soldiers to go and call a healer.

Wilhelm: "A healer will be here very soon Honored mother. You've no physical injuries, but…"

Tishua: "Nope. I don't Wilhelm-san, you needn't take the trouble to do that, I'm alright. More importantly, I have something I need to tell you."

Wilhelm: "To tell me?"

Tishua: "Well, a message from this insurgent who forced his way into the mansion. A message from the man called Stride."

Wilhelm: "—Hic."

Wilhelm unconsciously gawked at her when he heard that name come out of her mouth.

Tishua drew her chin in at his reaction, and her face grew even more pale,

Tishua: "I don't imagine I need to tell you what I feel about that man. He's a monster. Nothing good will ever come of leaving him out loose in the world of men."

Wilhelm: "…"

Tishua: "That man forced Carol to murder her own liege against her will, kidnapped Theresia and then turned towards my helpless self and put a curse on me. Wilhelm… He did it to make me deliver to you his words."

Wilhelm: "Then he must've stripped you of your will as well, Honored mother…"

Tishua nodded, confirming Wilhelm's doubts. Stride had them completely in the palm of his hand. Tishua continued her words with a “Listen well” in response to his frustration,

Tishua: “Hold your anger in for now. That’ll become the best way to return the favor.”

Wilhelm: “—I understand.”

Tishua: “Let me tell you what that man said. —”I await the close with the Sword Demon in the land of the Silver Flower Dance.”“

Wilhelm: “…”

The way Tishua’s words had rung so theatrically most likely reflected Stride’s intent rather than her own.

Silver Flower Dance, it felt like a stanza from a poem, one which he knew about.

In the first act that he’d come across Stride, he’d ended up clashing swords with his escort, the Eight Arms. He vaguely remembered hearing him calling the duel The Silver Flower Dance. He couldn’t help but feel like it was coming from Stride himself when she said it in that tone—

Wilhelm: “—That bastard’s in Picoutatte.”

Both Theresia and Carol should have been taken there.

Of course that wicked man would have designated a location. It was hard to even imagine what sort of ugly tricks he had lying in wait for them.

Wilhelm: “Even so, we don’t have the choice to shy away. —Bordeaux!”

Wilhelm raised his voice and put the question to Bordeaux, who’d been listening in, about whether he would muster his forces. Even if he rejected the notion, there was no way that was going to be able to stop him. However—

Bordeaux: “—I’ll muster together a subjugation force at once. You gather the Zergev Corps and get yourselves in gear.”

Bordeaux's decisiveness at taking swift action was his greatest weapon; he'd shown that here as well to the fullest. He was the kind of man who when he said he'd do something, he'd do it. For that, Wilhelm placed absolute faith in him.

Wilhelm knew that he wouldn't betray this faith.

Wilhelm: "Tishua-sama… My Honored mother, please leave the rest to me. I will definitely get Theresia, Carol and her unborn child back."

Wilhelm looked back around, took Tishua's hand, and swore to her that he would do so.

Since Wilhelm had pegged Bordeaux as the sort who did the things he said, it meant that he too had to follow in his example. That was the duty the commander of the Mark II Zergev Corps had to hold, the duty of the man who'd married the Sword Saint, of the Sword Demon Wilhelm van Astrea.

Tishua: "—May good fortune smile on you."

Tishua returned Wilhelm's grip and left him the best words she could, making them no longer than they needed to be, words fit for a woman who'd married into this family of warriors.

Wilhelm took her words in and tried to give her a firm nod. —But as he tried to, he felt her nails digging into the back of his hand.

Tishua mustn't have been aware that she'd done that. Her hand was shaking and she'd tightened her grip on his hand without even realizing. Large teardrops were welling up in the corner of her eyes despite her having put on a brave look up until now.

Tishua: "Wilhelm, you are…"

Wilhelm: "…"

Tishua: "You are an Astrea. Never forget that, not even for a moment."

Her voice was quivering, tears were streaming down her face and her hand was blisteringly cold.

Even so, the feelings she'd expressed were incredibly precious to Wilhelm, and so he bowed his head.

Wilhelm: "—I never will."Wilhelm replied with these words and then took his leave from the Astrea Mansion.

—Vowing that he would make the Destruction Wish awaiting him in Picoutatte get his just reward.

4

A subjugation force had been assembled at unprecedented speeds under Bordeaux Zergev's command.

Though a part of that came from Bordeaux's competency as a commander, it was mostly due to the morale of the knights and soldiers who'd joined the subjugation force being so high.

All of them already knew about what had happened with the attack on the Astrea Mansion and the Sword Saint Theresia's abduction. They all knew she'd been the hero who'd brought an end to the Civil War.

They all knew that she was the benefactor who'd saved their friends and families, their mothers, their fathers, their brothers and sisters, and their children and grandchildren. They all knew that the man known as The Destruction Wish had utterly crossed the line.

Thus they'd all hearkened to her banner right now, faster than anyone else, vowing in their hearts that they would carry out justice and achieve victory for the prestige of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

???: "Your plan's practically cleared out most of the Royal Capital. I really dooooon't see how you got the permission to go ahead with this."

Her voice was quite clear despite them being inside a Dragon Carriage that was under the effect of the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion.

Wilhelm was sat sunk into his seat with his arms folded, deep in meditation, though her voice had made him open his eyelids up just a tad. When he looked to his side, he saw there the figure whom the voice belonged to, her long legs crossed together and a smile on her face. It was Roswaal J Mathers, the mage whom he'd ended up being as thick as thieves with, no matter how unfortunate that was.

—Right now, she, Wilhelm and everyone else with them inside the Dragon Carriage were heading towards the Commercial City of Picoutatte.

The soldiers from the Zergev Corps were all split up between the vast cavalcade of Dragon Carriages. Wilhelm was riding on board one of them, waiting impatiently for the moment they arrived at the city.

He'd ended up riding on the same carriage as her before he could even take notice. She'd been staying at the Royal Capital when she'd heard about what had happened at the Astrea Mansion. She'd then added herself to the Subjugation Force as if it were the most natural thing to do.

As a result, right now she was sitting next to Wilhelm, gazing out of the window and telling him her impressions about the force heading out to Picoutatte and stuff like that.

She stroked her chin with her supple fingers and said “Hmmm” when Wilhelm didn't break his silence.

Roswaal: “I'm just trying to make small talk before we get down to business. Aren't you going to help me out and ease my nerves?”

Wilhelm: “Nerves? Don't make me laugh. Don't you rarely ever show things like that? I'm sorry, but I don't have the time to chit-chat with you right now. I'm busy waiting for our arrival in peace and quiet.”

Roswaal: “You actually doing that sounds liiiiiike a bad joke. Besides, no matter how much you've blamed yourself, nothing's going to change. Wouldn't you agree?”

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm tch'd at Roswaal who'd closed one of her eyes and looked over at him with her blue one.

She was the same woman as ever, always talking like she understood him. To make matters worse, those kinds of remarks always felt like she was hitting bulls-eye, her nature was the worst.

In actual fact, Wilhelm's meditation didn't help him keep his zen up at all. Whenever he closed his eyes a voice would speak to him, tormenting him with blame. And now—

???: Just as I thought, Miss Mathers has got quite the keen eye. Don't you think so too, Wilhelm?

His feelings of guilt were always at his side in the shape of his former comrade, who was now shrugging his shoulders at him.

His guilty conscience, which took the form of Pivot, had always been dogging him around without letting up. Though, he hadn't showed his face at the Astrea Mansion, almost as if even this specter had been able to read the mood there,

Pivot: I don't talk to you when you don't need me. So, this must be why you've never been distracted in the middle of a fight, right?

Pivot read what he'd left unsaid in his heart and answered his doubt as if he were a teacher teaching his student. In the end, this was all an illusion that came from Wilhelm's mind. That's why he perfectly understood Wilhelm's distress and appeared before him as if to say "Don't avert your eyes".

Roswaal: "Even if you're thinking about blaming yourself for everything that's happened today, I reckon you'd be making a big mistake… Though, what do you think?"

Wilhelm: "…So tell me."

Roswaal had peered over at him looking like she'd taken his silence as him anguishing. Wilhelm moistened his tongue, and said, Wilhelm: “Tell me, what big mistake am I making?”

Roswaal: “It’s like I said, it’s conceited to think that all the blame lies in yourself for what happened today. If we are going to speak about guilty consciences, I definitely know someone who’s suffering way more than you.”

Wilhelm: “More than me? Just who would that be…”

Roswaal: “—Carol-kun of course.”

Wilhelm had started to seethe in indignation, but as soon as she mentioned Carol’s name, he did a double take. Roswaal kept an eye on his reaction and then once again said “Carol-kun.”

Roswaal: “Her sense of responsibility is strong, and she loves Theresia-sama… the members of the Astrea Family more than anything else. Don’t you think that she’s been constantly blaming herself for having been made into a puppet and having been made to swing her sword against her will?”

Wilhelm: “—. Even still, that doesn’t mean I’m blameless.”

Roswaal was right.

There definitely wasn’t anyone in the world right now who was tormenting themself in blame and wishing that someone would judge them more than Carol. There was no way that a woman as sincere as her could turn her eyes away from the fact that she’d sullied her hands.

He could easily imagine what she was feeling right now. Still, that didn’t mean it’d alleviate his suffering.

Wilhelm: “It was me who left Theresia behind with her parents to hold the fort whilst I was away from the mansion, I let Stride spring into action. Even Carol’s suffering is my fault.”

Pivot: If you’d been able to stay at the Mansion, if her parents had been able to enjoy some quiet time at their home, if you’d managed not to leave Theresia by herself, and if you’d been able to stop Carol-dono, then…

Pivot's objective hypothesis overlapped with Wilhelm's introspection, laying bare the cold reality of the situation at hand.

That's why—

Wilhelm: "I'm to blame because…"

Roswaal: "Look, that's where your mistake is. Men really need to stop always trying to take the blame for everything."

Wilhelm: "…"

Roswaal placed her finger on Wilhelm's lips and shushed him in exasperation. Wilhelm became lost for words at being shushed up like that, giving Roswaal the opportunity to continue her words with a "Mind you…"

Roswaal: "Sometimes I too feel like blaming myself. Like I'd been examining Carol-kun on a regular basis, so I should have figured out the effects of the curse. Or like, I wished that I'd gotten to the bottom of those Magic Circles that Stride left behind before Miklotov-dono told me the news."

Wilhelm: "…"

Roswaal: "Everyone else feels such blame. That includes Bordeaux-dono, Conwood-dono, and the other soldiers. No, all the people who've gathered here as part of the Subjugation force feel these things."

Roswaal told Wilhelm about how everyone else was carrying regrets.

She told him how they all thought that what had happened now was primarily due to some dearth of their own. But as far as Wilhelm was concerned that was…

Pivot: Merely conceit

Roswaal: "Are you going to say they're conceited? And that you're the only exception?"

Pivot and Roswaal mentioned that he was conceited, almost in tandem, though in the opposite sense of its meaning. Taking in the force she'd delivered those words with, Wilhelm felt ashamed of himself and Roswaal flashed him a smile.

Roswaal: "You're always getting the wrong sort of ideas, Wilhelm-kun. If you're pinning the blame on yourself… As in, you're saying that you think of yourself as the only villain here, then that's the obvious mistake you're making."

Roswaal cut her words off there again with a "Because",

Roswaal: "—Because right here, right now, the only one at fault here is Stride himself, make no mistake about that."

Wilhelm: "…"

Roswaal: "Of course, there's his companions too who've helped him, but he's the only villain here if we look at the big picture. And while this may not be necessary for me to say and only add one thing to another… Please stop wallowing in self-reproach. You weren't like that before, it's not you."

Roswaal snapped her fingers after she said this. Wilhelm's eyes widened in surprise as the snap rang out through the carriage, as he was saying "what was up with that?". The soldiers who were riding with them also turned around in surprise.

Roswaal: "It seeeeeemed like you'd finally gotten to the point where you could see what was going on around you."

Wilhelm: "Wha…"

Roswaal: "You seeing these things as your own responsibility definitely means you've grown. But, forgive me for saying it, but what I want to get back here isn't this you, but the Sword Demon you once were."

Roswaal continued her words, earnestly reflecting Wilhelm in her heterochromic eyes.

Roswaal: "Not self-reproach, but anger. An anger so pure where your thoughts are consumed by the enemies you need to kill; doing that will make you reach the heights you once reached with your sword once more. Right now, you need to forget about your own humanity, other than for that. The Sword Demon Wilhelm Trias. — This is your name, right?”

Roswaal called him by his old family name so to give him a nudge in the right direction, hoping it would awaken the demon of the sword who’d fought like a maniac in the Demi-Human War and in the end, even defeated the Sword Saint.

Though, that didn’t mean he had to think “Oh let’s get on board with her exaggerated, nigh ritualistic behavior”—

Wilhelm: “…You sure like to go full circle before getting to the point, don’t you? I’d like it if you put all this drawn out stuff into a few idiot-proof words that I don’t even need to think about.”

Roswaal: “It’s just my womanly instincts showing through in wanting to talk with you as much as possible.”

Roswaal gave him a wink and then calmly shrugged her shoulders at his reply. Wilhelm snorted at her reply and let out a heavy sigh.

Although she got on his nerves, he’d been able to look at things less narrowly now thanks to her. Her saying that he’d finally gotten to the point where he could see what was going around him were words which he understood plainly enough.

He had no intention of breaking the oath he’d sworn to Tishua back at the Astrea Mansion. But at this rate, he looked like he was going to fall to pieces before he could fulfill it.

Pivot: You feel like thanking Miss Mathers, don’t you?

He felt like saying some snarky remark back to him, but that would be pointless. He’d long acknowledged that this Pivot was just a manifestation of what he truly felt at heart.

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm didn’t think that steeping himself in anger and swinging his sword was the right solution, but he knew what she was getting at. What they wanted from Wilhelm right now was the strength of the Sword Demon who'd defeated the Sword Saint.

There was no doubt that he needed that strength to bring down his enemy, the Eight Arms, who would be standing in his way and stopping him from killing Stride. The Eight Arms was the sort of enemy who could only be killed by him.

Roswaal: "Anyways, I don't think Stride has the strength to match our 1000 strong Subjugation Force, no matter how far he's tried to spread his influence. Now then, let's move onto talking about what he has lying in wait for us…"

Wilhelm: "…Ah on that topic, did you manage to find out what those Magic Circles which he's been leaving behind in various places did?"

Wilhelm had talked with Gionis in person back at Miklotov's Mansion; there he'd heard that the purpose of those Magic Circles was to orchestrate the "complete destruction of the covenant." However, Wilhelm still had no idea what that truly meant or what they were capable of doing.

That's why he'd checked with Roswaal, who should have obtained that same information.

Wilhelm: "Miklotov mentioned that his aim was the downfall of the Kingdom, but…"

Roswaal: "That's not a bad guess, I suppoooooose. Putting it simply, we can consider the effect of those Magic Circles to be one which disrupts the barrier that the Divine Dragon wound all around the Kingdom from working."

Wilhelm: "The Divine Dragon's… Barrier…?"

Wilhelm furrowed his brows, he'd never heard this piece of information before.

The Divine Dragon Volcanica—was the name of the ancient dragon who'd entered in a covenant with the Kingdom of Lugunica, promising it peace and prosperity. They said “Peace and prosperity”, but to him it felt like nothing more than a lark.

Long ago, a terrible calamity known as the Witch of Envy had dropped the entire world into a maelstrom of terror. It’s said that the Dragon helped seal the Witch, and from then on continued to watch over the Kingdom.

Wilhelm: “What’s this about a barrier of the Divine Dragon? I’ve never heard of anything like that being in the Kingdom.”

Roswaal: “I’m just calling it a barrier for the sake of conveeeenience. In actual fact, it’s there to let the Divine Dragon know if the Kingdom is in danger. It’s kind of like some sort of naruko. In situations where the Kingdom needs the Divine Dragon’s help… like when the Kingdom is under attack from foreign invasions, the Dragon gets alerted and lends us its helping hand.”

(TL Note: 鳴子 (Naruko), a device which was used to scare away (or otherwise get the attention) of birds that would damage crops in Japan, now more modernly refers to the clapper (a musical instrument). The way it’s being used here feels close to the way the word “clapper of a bell” is used in English. Essentially it’s a magical warning system to get the Dragon’s attention.)

The legend to him felt like a sham. If the Dragon harkened to them in times of life-threatening danger, then where had they been during the Demi-Human War?

At the very least, most of the people in the Kingdom of Lugunica believed that the Dragon wouldn’t save them.

Roswaal: “So, these Magic Circles prevent the Dragon’s naruko from being rung. In other words, they’re a way to buy time to wreak havoc without the Dragon finding out about the perilous crisis that the Kingdom is in.”

Wilhelm: “…Are you saying that he’s been playing out his flashy escape acts just for that?”

Roswaal: “I imagine the Dragon would have shown up for Stride.

So, he wouldn't have been able to take action without ruling out that possibility. Eventually, the time became ripe for him."

Wilhelm frowned at Roswaal's explanation, and kept silent with a glum look on his face.

He was stunned that she'd said that the Magic Circles that Stride had been brandishing about pretty much everywhere (and in turn them desperately destroying them) "meant absolutely nothing."

The sense that they'd wasted their time grew stronger in him as he thought about how the Circles had been brandished about by the work of a man who believed in superstitions.

Roswaal: "Has the anger you put into your sword boiled up in you yet?"

Wilhelm: "I am starting to feel more and more like there's not a devil around who doesn't deserve to be killed."

—Wilhelm responded to Roswaal and then brought his hand over the pommel of his beloved sword, checking its feel.

Come to think about it, this treasured sword had been given to him by Bertol, and its name was Astrea—He would make sure that he'd settle matters with it. That was the kind of distinction he would teach Stride.

Roswaal: "So now your only remaining worries are about him, I guess…"

Roswaal leaned back on her chair and looked up at the roof of the Dragon Carriage. Wilhelm instantly knew who she was referring to.

Despite having been stabbed by the puppeteered Carol and having sustained heavy injuries, Grimm had joined the Subjugation Force. Right now he was on board a separate Dragon Carriage, heading towards the same place as them whilst getting medical treatment from a healing arts user.

Everyone knew that he was pushing himself past his limits, but no one was going to stop him considering that Carol had been snatched away from him. He probably wouldn't stop even if it meant that Picoutatte was going to be the place he died in.

Grimm though was worth as much as ten ordinary soldiers, even when wounded.

So all that remained was—

Pivot: What they have waiting in store for you in Picoutatte, right?

Wilhelm: "Yeah, that's right."

Wilhelm voiced his agreement to what Pivot had said, words which only he had been able to hear. He wondered, what sort of scheme was the Destruction Wish cooking up for them at the place of their long-awaited deciding battle.

He was going to tear apart Stride's plot, get Theresia back and lop off his head.

???: "We're nearly there. We need to go through the plans again before we arrive at Picouttate…"

Wilhelm focused himself up and established what he needed to do. Straight after, he heard the voice of one of the soldiers inside his Dragon Carriage calling out to him. Wilhelm looked up and tried to reply with an "Okay"—

Wilhelm: "…"

—The very next instant, a shockwave came careening down on the Dragon Carriage convoy, swallowing Wilhelm and the people around him whole.

5

???: "You're quite the tough woman, aren't you, not shedding even a single tear at a time like this."

Saying this, Stride jabbed one of his thin fingers under her chin and forced her head up. She could see through her barely opened eyes the scornful smile of the most despicable man in this world.

Needless to say, the woman—Theresia's sky-blue eyes were ones which were full of fury as she firmly clenched her teeth.

Stride: "Hah, what a lovely face. Maybe I was wrong to use tough, though. Valiant is far more suiting."

Theresia: "…I have a husband. Get your hands off me you wretch."

Stride: "You think that there are people who would lust for a woman with a stomach as bloated as that…? No, I bet it excites your husband in your case. Before you became a mother, I would be too repulsed and would hesitate to even touch you."

Theresia: "—hgh."

Hurt welled up in Theresia's eyes after being hit hard by the full extent of his malice.

Actually, if Theresia wanted to, she could easily kill this man considering how close he was standing next to her. She could immediately stamp out the root of all of their problems were she to not think about the consequences.

Yet, she couldn't do that. She'd vowed to Wilhelm that she wouldn't take up her sword again of course, but other than that, there was a far more pressing reason why she couldn't.

And that was—

Stride: "Any resistance from you, and my venerable self's curse shall snuff the breath out of your unborn child. Make sure you do not forget that."

Stride flashed Theresia his ring. The same ominous light that was reflected in the ring's crimson jewel faintly shone up from her swollen belly. It was this light that was the shackle that was keeping her in check.

She'd seen the horrible, evil effects which Stride's curse rings had over and over again. They'd eaten into Bertol, turned Carol into a puppet, made Tishua into a mouthpiece and now were holding the life of her and Wilhelm's child hostage.

That's why Theresia couldn't lay a single finger on this root of all evil that stood in front of her.

Theresia: "—You wretch."

Theresia denounced Stride again and looked away from him. Though by doing that, it didn't mean she'd be averting her eyes from the wrongdoings this man was committing. At the edge of her averted gaze, she could see a bunch of people shaking in fear who'd become prisoners just like her.

Right now, Theresia was being held captive in the spire located in the central district of the Commercial City of Picoutatte.

Picoutatte was split into five large districts, with the main facilities of the city gathered in the central one. The spire she was in was popularly known as the symbol of the city.

Choosing a place like this to orchestrate his evildoing was a scheme very befitting of Stride, considering how much he trampled over people's wishes. The scene perfectly illustrated his theatrical tendencies and his craving for the limelight.

Theresia: "…"

Theresia wondered in silence about the reasons why specifically these prisoners had been selected. They were all of different ages and genders, and they seemed to have nothing in common with each other than the fact they were taken from this city. Of course, Stride taking hostages at random wouldn't be anything strange or such when you considered what sort of individual he was, but…

???: "—Stride, Shasuke and Raizo have returned."

Whilst sunk in her thoughts, Theresia heard the sound of a door swinging open and then a low, deep voice. A blue-skinned, grotesque eight armed figure with an expression that looked like it was chiseled out of stone peered into the room that they were being kept captive in. It was the Eight Arms Kurgan, hero of the Multi-Armed Tribe, a warrior hailed far and wide as the strongest man in the Vollachian Empire. This dignitary, who'd sided with Stride for goodness knows what reason, was still here doing his bidding.

Maybe it was because he too had metaphorical shackles fitted around his burly neck thanks to those rings' curses, Theresia thought.

Stride: "It's about time you both got back. How are things proceeding?"

???: "We brought two more… Though, I humbly think that piling her with any more burdens will become really taxing for her. I'd say there are limits, even to your esteemed wife's eyes."

It hadn't been Kurgan who'd responded to Stride's arrogant voice, but rather the shadow at his feet. His (rather appropriately) huge shadow began to squirm. It slowly began to rise up from the floor as if it had come to life before finally morphing into a Shinobi clad in jet-black clothes.

The Shinobi was holding two bound men under his arms, whom he promptly threw into the room without much concern. The two of them bundled down onto the floor, letting out shrieks of pain, before then looking around their surroundings in fear.

Once again, they had no idea why they'd been brought here. All they knew was that putting up a fight against Stride and his men would be a very unwise choice.

Stride: "Limits? Do you think that tools can determine their own limits as they please? Quit messing around. You'd better go bring me Melinda."

Shinobi: "But…"

Stride: "I am not going to say this twice."

Stride paid no heed to the captives' feelings and instead ordered his Shinobi around, cutting out his protests.

The Shinobi shook his head and gently tapped the floor underneath him with the tip of his toes. This time it was the shadow of the Shinobi that started to squirm and rise up in a similar manner as before. Then, a second Shinobi who looked identical to the first one emerged in its place. However this second Shinobi was carrying a young-looking girl in his arms.

She had long, wavy grey hair and was rather short of stature.

She was looking down at the floor and both of her eyes were squeezed tightly shut. She was dressed in a long grey robe that covered her entire body, and was dragging its hem (which was long enough to cover past her feet) along the floor.

Stride: “Melinda.”

The girl’s shoulders violently shook in response to Stride calling her name. She didn’t open her eyes or lift her face, but her attention shifted to him before she frightenedly clutched her head.

This wasn’t the first time Theresia had seen this girl called Melinda. She’d been with Stride at the start just like with Kurgan and the Shinobis. In other words, she was one of Stride’s allies—No, from what she’d hazarded from their talk, she was far more than that.

She was Stride’s—

Stride: “—Answer me carefully, Melinda. Has your evil eye reached its limits? Have you gotten so exhausted that you can’t live up to my venerable self’s desires, your husband’s desires?”

Melinda: “Ah…N-No…”

Stride: “Answer me straight.”

Melinda: “N-No. No. No. No. NO. NO!”

Melinda chanted back her denial at Stride’s question, first in a small, quiet voice before then gradually increasing the zeal she was chanting her no’s back at him. Finally, she vigorously shook her head.

Melinda: “I c-c-can keep doing it. I’m alright. Thank you for worrying about me.”

Stride: “My venerable self. Worried about you? He was right, it seems like your evil eye has already lost its strength. Would you prefer to keep them closed forever or gouged out by my venerable self? Which one will it be?”

Melinda: “Ah, you can s-still, still-still m-m-make-make use of them…”

Stride: “Then stop hanging your head down, ash cast, if you’re to stand at my venerable self’s side as my wife.”

Melinda nodded eagerly with her eyes still squeezed shut in response to Stride’s menacing words. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and it seemed like she was in ecstasy at having been ordered about.

Incredibly enough, Stride and Melinda were married.

The marriage was one between a young girl in her teens and a man in his thirties; Theresia didn’t have any objections in regards to their age difference, however she couldn’t help but feel that their relationship was an awfully distorted one.

Nevertheless, both of them saw their marriage, which was more like the sort of relationship a lord and their serf would have, as one that they were content with.

Stride: “Anyways, so you’ve gathered 20 of them as sacrifices? That ought to suffice for now.”

Shinobi: “Though I humbly think that it would have been better if we hadn’t killed one of them on a whim at the start.”

Stride: “Fool. No matter what, you have to put in the work when it comes to the overture. It’s like skipping out on the introductory remarks in a play, you can’t make any omissions, or anything like that, a grand stage like this only comes around once in a lifetime. I don’t think your head will remain attached to you for very long, Shasuke, if things flop due to an oversight of yours.”

“Shasuke”: “My humble self is Raizo, the other one is Shasuke.”

One of the Shinobis voiced his protests at what Stride had said.

Raizo raised his right arm, whilst the other one called Shasuke raised his left. They sometimes kept their faces concealed, meaning that they couldn't be distinguished by their outward appearance. Stride snorted his nose, indicating that he'd decided to ignore his complaint and instead gazed out at the sky outside the spire's window.

He brought his hand up to his chin in thought and narrowed his eyes as he looked at the scene outside. Theresia could tell that it was a sign that things were moving into action, and thus she spurred herself into motion so to try and forestall them. She'd talk to him and ask him questions to stall

Theresia: "I have no idea what you're all planning… But, do you really think that you can manage to do something as large-scale as this with only five people?"

Stride: "Hoh? How amusing. Let's hear what you have to say."

Stride turned around and sneered at Theresia. She would make use of this whim to voice out the question that had been gnawing at her mind.

Theresia: "I don't understand what you're trying to achieve. You're doing all these things… you went and called Wilhelm to Picoutatte by making my mother give him that message, what are you trying to get out of all this?"

It would have made far more sense if he'd set up his base somewhere other than the location he'd made Tishua tell him, thus creating a diversion for himself. Stride however had actually gone to Picoutatte to begin his preparations for his evildoings.

Naturally Wilhelm was going to come to the city. Not just by himself, but likely with his Zergev Corps at the very minimum. Then, in that case—

Theresia: "It's not like any of you can escape from here. You also can't defeat Wilhelm, even if you have Kurgan with you. This is really strange, your defeat's been guaranteed from the very beginning."

Stride: "Well then, have you considered though that this forecast of yours where the Sword Demon defeats the Eight Arms is just a fruit of blind devotion?"

Theresia: "—Wilhelm will not lose. That's why you're all going to be defeated."

With an air of grandeur as she spoke, Theresia wouldn't back down only on that.

Wilhelm was going to win. He was definitely going to be victorious. In her eyes, Theresia saw the Eight Arms as an enemy that was far, far stronger than the usual crop with swordsmanship that rivalled Wilhelm's. —Even so, he was going to win, he was going to win for sure.

Theresia held no doubts about this, because he was the demon of the sword whom she loved.

???: "Ha…"

Someone let out a wheezed laugh at her declaration. When she looked to see who it was, she realized that it had been Kurgan. He had four of his arms crossed against his chest and was caressing his cleavers with them.

The very lips of the Eight Arms Kurgan himself had split into a smile in response to her proclamation of victory.

Stride: "What's so amusing, Eight Arms."

Kurgan: "Don't blame me Stride. Her words really tickle my fancy. That Sword Demon's swordsmanship is truly magnificent. I know only too well why she believes in him."

Kurgan replied to him with a solemn look on his face and the voice to go with it. Still, he was the only one from their group that got special treatment. Stride didn't blame him for talking back to him as an equal and merely contented himself with giving Kurgan a small snort in response.

Stride: “Let’s assume that it is like that.”

Theresia: “Huh?”

Stride: “Let’s assume what you’re saying is correct and the Eight Arms doesn’t manage to defeat the Sword Demon..”

Stride narrowed his sharp eyes and began to lay out this assumption to her. That surprised Theresia a fair bit because she’d been prepared to not get an answer to her question when she’d posed it.

Stride: “If the Eight Arms is defeated, then garbage like these stray Shinobi twins will meet the same fate too. Melinda, being too slow to get away, would end up getting raped out of anger; and as for my venerable self, he’d probably take my head for the sake of the Kingdom’s prestige. Even if the Sword Demon doesn’t do any of this, the rabble that follows him most certainly will.”

Theresia: “—. Then why…?”

Naturally Stride was imagining the same things as Theresia was about how things would turn out for them. She wondered why, if they lacked the combat prowess and numbers, why he’d still challenged him to this showdown.

Stride: “Avoiding waging a battle in the face of inevitable defeat is the normal thing to do. —So you must have figured it out now, right?”

Theresia: “…What do you mean?”

Stride: “Heyhey, you can’t be serious? What an imbecile of a woman you are. It’s as if the child in your womb is sucking everything out of you, even a fool would be able to understand what’s going on when I’ve already said this much.”

Stride injected a heartfelt scorn into his voice, mocking Theresia who’d shown her lack of understanding to him. She frowned in response and then tried to reason out what he’d meant by these cruel words.

There’d be no sense in him waging a battle that would just end in his defeat. Even so, considering he’d moved to wage this battle… That meant that—

Theresia: “—You have a.”

Stride: “A chance at seizing victory.”

Stride powerfully declared this at the same time that understanding finally dawned on Theresia.

And as he declared this—before anyone could even blink, he’d produced a crooked dagger in his hand which he promptly used to stab one of the prisoners in their chest.

Theresia: “Wha.”

Theresia’s reactions were delayed for a moment, having witnessed that terrible act.

Had it been an attack, there wouldn’t have been any reason why Theresia couldn’t have stopped it. However, Theresia hadn’t been able to read his behavior. And that was because his current act now hadn’t been an “Attack”.

—As far as Stride was concerned, the act of stabbing others wasn’t something he considered as launching an attack.

Thus even through the eyes of the Sword Saint his blade hadn’t been seen as an attack.

Prisoner: “—ARRRRRRGH.”

The prisoner who’d been stabbed in his chest cried out in agony, his loud shrieks echoed around the spire. The rest of the huddling prisoners stiffened in fear, having looked on at what had happened with looks of mute astonishment.

Meanwhile Stride was still working his dagger into the prisoner’s chest, digging it into his wound and making it worse. Now covered in blood, Stride languidly continued with his work until eventually the man fell to the floor and went limp.

They'd been in agony, suffered from heavy bleeding and damage to their vitals, but more crucially than that, his heart had been gouged out. Death was a certainty.

Stride: "Hmph, what a terrible racket. So this must be what it means to tarnish your twilight years with blood."

He wiped the blood away from his dagger and carelessly muttered this over his shoulder. His words weren't full of any particularly strong emotion at having taken a human life, rather they were so casually intoned that it felt like all he'd done was brush aside a fly.

The captives drew back as his scream still echoed, trying to get as far away from the man's corpse as possible. Stride looked at them and then at the blood still soaking the floor out of the corner of his eye before turning his scornful smile over to Theresia.

Stride: "You know, you're awfully frigid for a Royal Citizen who shed the very same blood for such a long time. Aren't you going to try and help this man who's fell down?"

Theresia: "…"

Theresia glared at Stride, who'd shamelessly pointed at the dead man.

As the Sword Saint, Theresia had taken away the lives of many people with her sword. She had no intention at all of turning away her back and eyes to that fact. This was the karma she'd decided to bear until the day she died.

However, Theresia had never swung her sword because she'd actually wanted to kill someone.

Therefore, this was the first time that she had glared at a man with murderous rage rather than righteous indignation, a man who she couldn't allow to live any longer.

Stride: "Only after doing this, do your eyes look human."

Stride wearily dismissed the dangerous look that had appeared in her eyes and then gazed down at his blood-soaked dagger. It was twisted in appearance, and the blade was too roundish to be called a sword. The conical shaped twisted dagger had drunk in the man's blood and was now so unctuously, bewitchingly wet with it that drops of it were dripping down.

Stride: "Nineteen more to go… There's really no end in sight to all of this pointless hard work when you go at it alone."

Theresia: "…Wait, Nineteen more to go, No, you can't!"

Theresia caught the sound of a whisper that made her shudder. She gazed at Stride in astoundment, but he didn't reply back to her.

He'd stabbed one of the men to death. There were nineteen more prisoners held captive in the spire here excluding herself. —Even with herself included, that made twenty.

Stride: "Well, the amateurishness of these actors shows a tad too much, indeed this is one act that isn't worth my venerable self's efforts… In that case, I'll just get my replacement to hold the blade in my stead."

Saying this, Stride tossed his dagger from one hand to the other and then turned to look behind him. Standing before him were his four allies: Kurgan, Melinda and the two Shinobis. However, none of them fit the bill in his eyes. Instead he lifted his free hand up and gleefully waggled his finger, causing an ominous blue light to flicker into existence in the room.

Then came the sound of footsteps slowly creeping up; a new actor was being introduced onto the stage.

Stride: "I shall bestow the honor of getting this play underway to my venerable self's new puppet."

He held out his blood-soaked twisted dagger, and with a gesture that was nothing but reverential, the newcomer knelt down with a motion that was far more polished than anyone else could have managed and accepted it, all the while shedding tears.

The newcomer shook their head in refusal, weeping at their own helplessness, unable to offer any resistance. She was a woman whose typically firm attitude had been broken, and her heart smashed to pieces—Carol Remendis.

???: "…Stop."

A voice croaked out, pleading for an end to this.

And it hadn't been Carol's. Ironically enough, she'd cried herself so hoarse that, right now, she could only speak in a bare rasp of a voice that sounded exactly like her sweetheart's.

Theresia: "Please, stop…"

This was why Theresia had sorrowfully gasped these words out on Carol's behalf.

Theresia knew better than anyone else in this world that Carol Remendis always put in her all to try and remain earnest and upstanding so that she didn't bring any shame to her family name or her beliefs.

Her sword was as straight, graceful and pure as the look in her eyes and the way she decided to live her life.

This was why Theresia was pleading with Stride, with large teardrops welling up in her eyes.

Theresia: "Please, I beg of you, don't make Carol sully her sword —."

Her pleading, entreating, supplicating voice echoed throughout the spire,

Stride: "Do it."

His curt, cruel command forced the unwilling swordswoman to reap the lives of nineteen.

6

The sounds of sobbing had filled the top floor of the spire along with the thick smell of choking blood.

The lives of twenty people had been snatched away in such a short period of time. None of them had anything to do with the fight at hand or had posed any danger; they'd just been people who would have been perfectly content with living out their lives in peace.

They were people who should have walked the ever-advancing future together with their beloved friends and family now that the hellish Civil War had ended and with it the threat to their lives.

Theresia would never forget how he'd made Carol kill them despite her sobbing and refusal.

Theresia: "*Sob*, *Sniff*, *Ghuu*…"

Stride: "How can you have the gall to shed so many tears over a matter that doesn't even regard you. It's far too a deficient way of being, to mar the balance of your soul by being overly concerned about others."

Theresia: "—. You are absolutely."

Stride: "Unforgivable? Hah, now that's a word that I've gotten used to hearing for it to even tarry in my mind. Besides, the sacrifices have been offered. I don't have the time to listen to your scoffing."

Stride flung those words behind him and then grabbed his dagger from the immobile Carol's hands. Her expression was blank, and she was covered in blood; a puppet in the true sense of its meaning.

Faced with the terribly pitiful state she was in, Theresia wanted with all her fiber to hold her in her arms right now, to get close to her broken heart and ease the burden of all her anguish together.

However, with having had her child taken hostage and shackled by it, Theresia didn't possess that liberty.

Stride: "—Let's go."

Stride began to walk out with his dagger in hand, his footsteps squelching against the pools of blood, his gait grandiose as ever. Melinda followed beside him with Kurgan in their wake. The Shinobis meanwhile had skulked into god knows who's shadow in the blink of an eye. Finally, the puppet Carol had grabbed Theresia by the arm and forced her to stand up.

Theresia: “Carol…”

Carol: “…”

No reply. Her mind had rejected the reality at hand and her purity had been stained with blood she’d never wanted to spill.

Theresia, being a prisoner, was being ushered out by Carol—Right now she was taking her out of the room where they’d housed the captives (now her being the only one left), and leading her up a set of stairs. There weren’t any rooms above, all there was up there was the spire’s rooftop that overlooked the city.

A strong gust of wind buffeted them as soon as they opened the door and stepped out onto the rooftop. Faced with the strong high-altitude winds and the view that overlooked the city, Theresia was struck by a strange feeling of unease.

—There wasn’t a single sign of anyone about in the Commercial City of Picoutatte.

Stride: “The play would come to naught were people cast with minor roles to interfere. We’ve taken care of these factors in advance.”

Stride stood at the edge of the rooftop, and revealed to her the reason why the streets below them were eerily quiet. As he did so, he held up his dagger which had drawn in the blood of the twenty captives and pointed it at the sky.

He’d said that twenty people were going to be sacrifices, and he’d carried that out by giving his dagger blood—

Stride: “That’s right, I didn’t deign to answer your foolish question earlier.”

Theresia: “…”

Stride: “You alluded to whether we had any chances of victory. And if we did have one, where it would come from. Well then, feast your eyes—.”

Stride’s cold smile was brimming with confidence. His words were interrupted, and suddenly a shadow loomed over the rooftop. A strong gale of wind accompanied it, causing Theresia’s long red hair to blow about everywhere. She closed her eyes for a moment due to the wind, and slowly opened them back up again. Then, she saw what was there in front of her.

Spreading out its vast wings to the sky was a colossal creature with pitch black steel-like scales running across its body. It had a body with three heads attached to it; the heads themselves looked like a cross between a lizard and a snake’s, and they were all lined with sharp fangs.

A dreadful aura was coming from it and its appearance was imposing; indeed it was one of the mightiest of creatures that lived beyond what humans could fathom—A dragon.

The three-headed black dragon unfurled its wings and glared down at the people on the rooftop.

Theresia: “—Ah.”

Those living in the Kingdom of Lugunica all grew up hearing about how everyone in the country was under the protection of the Divine Dragon. Even if they’d never actually seen its venerable figure, they still revered it.

The same was true for Theresia, who’d always felt these feelings of reverence towards the Dragon somewhere deep inside her. However, this was the first time she’d gotten the chance to meet one in person, in the true sense of its meaning.

Faced with its formidable presence, Theresia became so overwhelmed that she couldn’t even find any words to say.

Stride: “This dagger is the dragon’s fang—when you let it drink the blood of the spawn of the heavens, a blood-crazed dragon appears.”

(TL Note: Spawn of the heavens, or literally “heaven-sent children” is a concept that's seemingly common in Japanese tradition. It refers to a child that was given as a result of a prayer to a deity. Many such exist in legend, folklore and I believe religion too, in Japan. The interesting thing is that Stride referred to the soldier at the beginning as one because he had a Divine Protection, and it's confirmed in the next act that the sacrifices were indeed individuals who had Divine Protections)

Theresia: "Those sacrifices were to summon a dragon…? No, even if it's like that!"

Dragons were very proud creatures, and they weren't the sort who'd willingly bend to a person's will. And most of all, there was hardly any human or dragon in existence who'd approve of what Stride was doing.

They were going to be burnt to cinders by the breath of the dragon he'd summoned. In fact, the black dragon had now lifted all three of its heads up and was glaring down at the rooftop with clear hostility in its eyes. It would only be a matter of time before it released its scorching fiery breath.

Faced with such a critical situation, Stride was—

Stride: "Three heads, three souls. You're quite greedy aren't you, baying for three of mine rings!"

An eerie light shot out from three of the rings on Stride's raised left hand.

They shot out a red, black and green radiance similar to the ones that had been put on Carol and Tishua, then linked themselves to the enraged black dragon and began the process of binding its souls.

Naturally, the black dragon tried to stop itself from being restrained. It swung its long tail and tried to sweep them all off of the rooftop as its souls began to be shackled by that invisible power.

Kurgan caught its blow with his cleavers and then parried the follow up it had delivered from his blindside with the claws on its black wings. Little by little, the fight from the black dragon started to dwindle—

Stride: "—Sword Saint Theresia van Astrea."

Stride called out Theresia's name almost abruptly as the rooftop filled with the black dragon's roars.

He turned his darkly glinting eyes over to her, still in mute shock at the spectacle that was unfolding in front of her eyes, and gave her a gloating smile.

Stride: "You did tell my venerable self, right? That you'd vowed you'd never take up your sword again. Even so, my venerable self doesn't believe your promise. If your own body, or that of your husband's were to be in peril, my venerable self reckons you'd break that promise and take up your sword. As the transcendental being you are, you would rely on your Divine Protection."

He said this, as dark blood trickled down from the corner of his lips.

This was why Stride had kept a close eye on Theresia, having considered that option a possibility.

Stride: "Thus, I was waiting. —Waiting for the moment you'd become pregnant, the moment you'd become a mother, the moment you'd become weak."

He'd meticulously arranged the pieces on his board so that they wouldn't be destroyed by transcendental beings like the Sword Saint.

Theresia was completely lost for words at how purposeful Stride's considerations had been.

Then, standing in front of the astonished Theresia, Stride pointed his left hand, along with the shimmering rings on it, to the horizon.

Towards the main road that stretched out from Picoutatte and continued past the horizon.

—The crazed black dragon, Valgren the Three-Headed, released a breath of ruin and destruction towards the horizon.

The curtains that marked The Subjugation of the Evil Dragon rose, unfurling one of the worst days in the history of Lugunica.

Act Six

1

—The Sword Demon had immediately sprung into action the instant that the Dragon Carriage had been engulfed by the impact.

He grabbed the beautiful woman sitting next to him by her waist with one of his arms, drew out his sword with his other, and cut open the bodywork of the keeling Dragon Carriage, whose wheels were now lurching off the ground. He jumped out without delay, using the floor and seats to propel himself.

The very next moment, the actual crimson shockwave reared its head and swept away the Dragon Carriage as if it had been caught by a billowing wave.

Wilhelm: "…"

Beneath his eyes, Wilhelm could see the row of carriages being swept away by the impact. Only a handful of the very best were taking swift action like he had to escape the danger, the majority of them were just being engulfed by the violent blast. The number of Dragon Carriages they had on the main road had totaled to around 50.

Wilhelm: "The Subjugation force's been… From head to tail…hk."

Wilhelm now found himself on terra-firma and firmly clenched his teeth as he looked on at the catastrophe unfolding in front of him, blanketed by the smoke.

They'd been gathered together to subjugate the Destruction Wish Stride and they'd made their way towards the City of Picoutatte. Stride had preempted this and struck first without warning, destroying their ranks through and through.

Bellows of anger and cries of grief flew about, and just like that, the Subjugation Force quickly became a mass of casualties. Some of its members pulled themselves out of the toppled Dragon Carriages, and started pulling out the heavily injured who'd shed blood and weren't able to move, thus beginning the rescue efforts. The situation was starting to look like that of a field hospital.

???: “No way…”

A dazed voice escaped from the lips of the woman standing beside him, as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. That woman he'd grabbed her by the waist and immediately taken out of the Dragon Carriage had of course been Roswaal.

It was rare to see her actually showing her distress on the surface when considering she was typically the sort who never broke from her usual composed, collected and easy-going demeanor. So much so, that this was quite alien to him—

Roswaal “…”

Wilhelm: “Roswaal? What are you looking at…”

Wilhelm looked over to his side, puzzled at the state Roswaal was in.

Her heterochromic eyes were wide open and frozen in fear; they were looking far off at the sky in the distance rather than the row of carriages that had been mowed down by the impact.

Wilhelm followed her gaze and narrowed his blue eyes.

—And then he saw it.

Wilhelm: “Wha.”

Far off in the distance, past the main road, he could see the silhouette of the commercial city's streets. —A strange black cloud with an unbroken view of the entire city was drifting over the sky bang in the middle of those streets.

The black cloud flapped its black wings and glared down at the ground with its three long, mighty heads.

The black cloud—No, not a black cloud, but a being that everyone in the world knew about, yet, one that lived beyond what mankind could fathom. Moreover, a being that should have been impossible to lay eyes on the real thing.

Wilhelm: “A dragon.”

Not a lesser dragon—But an actual dragon with multiple heads was spreading its black wings, hovering over the Picoutattian sky.

Everyone remaining from the Subjugation Force was drawn in one after the other by its grandeur. Looking up at the sky, surprise began to ripple through them. The number of people rooted to the spot out of shock skyrocketed.

This lasted for a while until Bordeaux’s angry bellows brought the Subjugation Force back to its senses.

2

???: “The assumptions we came with have been completely shredded. What the hell even is that thing. Is it really going to give us the time to continue our discussion?”

The Subjugation Force had taken their wounded and fled off the main road for the time being. Their commander Bordeaux was the one who’d spoken up.

Luckily the wounds Bordeaux had sustained were shallow and didn’t interfere with his ability to fight or command. Blood was streaming out from a cut on his forehead, but it wasn’t anything that a bit of spit wouldn’t fix. He had a far more serious problem at hand.

—Namely, what sort of connection the Black Dragon who’d suddenly appeared over the city’s sky had with Stride.

Things like Dragons showing up were rarities regardless of whether or not they happened once every hundred years. It was hard to think of it as a coincidence when it had attacked their forces which were going to subjugate the scum threatening the Kingdom.

It really wasn’t that surprising that the Black Dragon had attacked them, considering they'd been about to launch their assault. In other words, it meant that the Dragon was either Stride's ally or its subordinate.

Subjugation Force Member: "Could that Black Dragon be the Divine Dragon Volcanica of legends…"

Subjugation Force Member: "It looks completely different to how it appears in the murals! Besides, we're in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica here! Why would the Dragon have bared its fangs at us?!"

Subjugation Force Member: "Give priority to the injured now! Ah, shit! We're short on healers!"

Turmoil in the Subjugation Force had reached an all-time high, having been hit full force by their surprise attack. Their initial blow, which had served the purpose to crush their morale, had definitely been the perfect tactic, things had truly turned into a nightmare for the side receiving it.

In fact, their Subjugation Force which should have been made up from the cream of the crop had been halved by the Dragon's breath.

Staying on the battlefield with so many casualties would be suicidal. Hence the Subjugation Force had started to consider the prospect of withdrawing before launching their attack. However—

Wilhelm: "—Bordeaux, I'm still going in, even if you're going to tell us to retreat"Bordeaux: "…I thought you'd say that."

Bordeaux sighed at the Sword Demon standing next to him, clad in a fierce sword aura.

He alone—No, he and another had been the only ones who'd escaped unscathed from the dragonbreath in his group. Wilhelm, who'd been driven by beast-like intuition, had a reason why he needed to go to the city.

—He needed to rescue his pregnant wife. That was something he would not budge on.

Bordeaux: "I get what you're feeling, but the situation has changed.

Our enemy’s no longer just Stride and his small band of lackeys. We need to review our plans.”

Wilhelm: “—tch, BUT!”

Bordeaux: “I can’t just stand here and watch you go to your death. We already knew that the Eight Arms was siding with that bastard… But now that he’s gotten this Black Dragon into the mix, would even someone like you be able to win against that?”

Letting the demon in him grow even more enraged, Wilhelm laid bare his anger. The glint that had appeared in his eyes had made every single muscle on Bordeaux’s body tense up. There was no way that words were going to stop him. He knew that much from the long time he’d known him. Even so, he hadn’t lied by what he’d said to him.

Theresia, the Sword Saint was a treasure of the Kingdom. Their most precious treasure, even. Regardless of that though, Bordeaux couldn’t lose his friends and allies by letting them go into battle without a plan.

In the worst case scenario, he’d sound the retreat, even if it meant taking Wilhelm by surprise and restraining him—

???: “—I̸’́m̕ n̶õt lȇ̶a̸̍v̸in̍g̸̤.”

Bordeaux: “…Ah that’s right. You’re the same as him in having a reason why you can’t pull back from here.”

Hearing his ruined voice and sensing his piercing fighting spirit coming from behind him, Bordeaux rued his own blindness.

Grimm had been one of the people engulfed by the dragon’s breath as well.

And yet, he was in surprisingly good shape. It was as if his morale had increased with his injuries.

And it wasn’t just him who was like that, but also half of the Subjugation Force—The half that had survived the attack.

Despite being bathed in dragonbreath, half of their forces still possessed the strength to be able to fight. It was astounding. Though naturally their fighting strength had been cut in two, whilst their enemy's had increased by a lot compared to what they'd had at the start.

It would be inconceivable for Bordeaux to think that going into battle like this would be a wise choice.

???: “It's not necessarily like that, Bordeaux-dono.”

Bordeaux: “You can't be planning on being reckless as well and lending them a hand, Miss Mathers.”

Guessing correctly at the intentions she'd voiced ever so silkily, Bordeaux turned around to face the beautiful woman, Roswaal, with a sour look on his face. Her usual outfit was covered in dust, having been saved from their predicament by the Sword Demon. She tilted her head with a smile.

And like that, she moved her gaze yonder, over to the patch of sky where the Dragon was.

Roswaal: “Even I wouldn't go as far as lending them a hand if I was planning on just jumping in recklessly without a plan. I'm nooooot saying that I share in their suicidal tendencies, after all, I cannot afford to die in a situation like this.”

Wilhelm: “Everyone's thinking the exact same as you about not wanting to die. Quit beating around the bush and get to the damn point. It's not like we know when this Black Dragon is going to spring back into action.”

Roswaal: “That's the point right there.”

Roswaal pointed at Wilhelm, who'd butted in, and closed one of her eyes. Now being gazed at by her blue eye, Wilhelm grumpily groaned out a “Eh?”

Wilhelm: “What do you mean?”

Roswaal: “I have a proposal for you, Lord Commander Bordeaux

Zergev. I’m 100% sure that the Dragon’s a trump card prepared by that renegade Stride… But, he doesn’t have full control of it yet.”

Bordeaux: “You think that it not chasing after us is proof of that?”

Bordeaux crossed his muscular arms and replied to Roswaal’s report. She nodded at his answer.

She’d pointed out that there was a chance that the Black Dragon wasn’t completely under Stride’s control; that was something Bordeaux could nod his head at. Namely because he too had thought it a possibility.

After all, it’s common sense to give chase and rout out an enemy when you’ve just destroyed their vanguard with the first blow, but their Dragon hadn’t come to do that.

Weirdly enough, the Black Dragon was still hovering over the city right now. But that’s all they had going for them. Their Subjugation Force had half fallen into ruin, and he’d been giving them time to try and re-muster themselves up again.

Bordeaux: “But we can’t really completely rule out it being a trap.”

Roswaal: “What would be the point in that? If he has the Dragon under his control, all he needs to do is make it breathe in our direction a couple more times. No matter how stubborn Wilhelm-kun is, even he’ll eventually get incinerated if the Black Dragon keeps aiming for him. There’s no reason for him to take the risk and let us come near him.”

Bordeaux: “…I suppose so.”

Roswaal: “That’s the biggest reason why I’m proposing that we shouldn’t retreat from here. The Dragon still isn’t under his control now. And even if it is, we won’t know if we waste time.”

Bordeaux’s core shook as he heard Roswaal’s conjecture.

The Black Dragon wasn’t under Stride’s reins yet. But what would become of them if the Dragon’s psyche was broken and it ended up bending to Stride?

He had no room left to doubt it, Stride, with his despicable ideologies, was definitely an enemy of their Kingdom. Just how many tragedies was he going to bring to them with that Dragon in tow? They would probably bring Lugunica to ruin, which had been finally heading towards stability with the Demi-Human War ending.

He was going to bring the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica to ruin with a Dragon. It didn't get more ironic than that.

???: "Lord Commander Bordeaux…!"

Someone called out to Bordeaux, their voice had quivered with anger and resolve. It hadn't been Roswaal, and naturally it hadn't been Wilhelm or Grimm either.

It had been one of the Knights who'd been keeping their attention on their meeting. And it hadn't just been him who'd turned their determined looks over to Bordeaux.

All the Knights who'd gathered here and still had the strength left to fight shared one resolve—No, even those who'd been injured and couldn't possibly fight shared the same resolve.

Knight: "Let us fight. To protect our Kingdom, our Sword Saint … our swords and our pride."

Bordeaux: "…"

Everyone raised their swords up in unison when he said that, so as to show everyone what it meant to be a Royal Knight.

Seeing them like that, Bordeaux closed his eyes. In his heart, he weighed his sense of duty against his willingness to fight, and so did the scales tip.

Bordeaux: "These dumbasses…"

Only after spitting out these crude words he would have once formerly used, did Bordeaux shoulder his ax. Then, he slowly looked up at the sky where the Black Dragon was flapping its wings.

It still hadn't moved from where it was. That was the only scrap of evidence that supported Roswaal’s conjecture. But if her worst guess was right, then now was their only chance to save the Kingdom.

They had to settle things here before the Black Dragon succumbed to his evil.

Bordeaux: “…”

Am I going to go down in history as a foolish and reckless commander or as the one who brought even the Kingdom to ruin?

—It didn’t take long for Bordeaux to come to his conclusion.

3

They placed the heavily wounded on some of the Dragon Carriages they’d mended and sent them off to the nearest town. They’d sent them there to spread the news as well, but it was likely that the Black Dragon had already been spotted in the towns near Picoutatte.

It wouldn’t be too long before they’d send in troops from each city to try and get control on the situation. However, they wouldn’t get here in time. Right now, the only ones who had a chance at saving the Kingdom were their forces entering the city.

Wilhelm: “Looks like your gamble paid off.”

Wilhelm muttered this as they continued down the main road, having just reached the outskirts of the city.

No one had gotten in their way as they’d expected on the road down. Their forces had managed to make it past through where they’d initially been attacked and were about to enter into the city. Meanwhile, the Black Dragon had stayed in mid-air, keeping a watchful eye on them.

—No, it wasn’t keeping a watchful eye on them. As they drew closer to the city, they could see the state the Black Dragon was in far more clearly.

Its body was tens of meters long, its scales shone like black steel, and its three heads each had powerful-looking jaws giving it an altogether imposing appearance. It was without a doubt one of the Dragons of yore.

However, the Black Dragon right now was writhing about in the sky, shaking its heads in agony, and roaring without stop. It was pretty obvious that the Dragon was resisting orders that went against its will. That was proof that Roswaal's conjecture had been correct and more importantly, that Stride wasn't in full control of it.

Roswaal: "From the look of things, the Dragon should be set free if we defeat the mastermind who got it in this current state. Though, even so, we aren't guaranteed that the Dragon is going to be friendly to us once set free…"

Wilhelm: "Still far better than having to fight all of them at once. After we wipe out Stride and his minions, I'll tag along for our likely-to-be dragon slaying."

Roswaal: "You're just so full of energy. I'm reaaaally finding it hard to stop myself from laughing and saying "That's so you."“

Roswaal shrugged her shoulders at Wilhelm's words, who'd indicated that he didn't even fear dragons, before then giving him a wry smile. As he looked at that smile from the corner of his eyes, the Dragon Carriage that was carrying them finally arrived at the city, and they passed through its wide-open gates.

The moment they passed through the main gates, they readied themselves for any attacks, but none came. The Dragon Carriage made its way inside the city uneventfully, meaning that the Subjugation Force had reached their intended destination. However —

Wilhelm: "—gh! What the hell?"

Wilhelm frowned at the sudden sensation of noise thrumming against his skin. Then, immediately afterwards, the body of the Dragon Carriage started to shake and jolt, making him choke up in surprise.

That hadn't just happened in Wilhelm's Dragon Carriage, but also in all of the other ones.

???: The Earth Dragon's Divine Protection…it's come undone?

Pivot's ghostly illusion put the sensation Wilhelm had felt into plain, easy to understand words for him.

His illusion had accompanied him all the way through thick and thin, so right now, he accepted him. His presence was priceless to Wilhelm, for he was a pair of eyes who would take a composed approach when assessing things. After all, there'd be no exaggeration in saying that what lay in his heart right now was the polar opposite of composure.

Bordeaux: "Everyone, HALT! Our Dragon Carriage's Divine Protection of Wind Evasion has come undone. It's not just us, right?!"

A murmur of assent spread out from all the other Dragon Carriages after Bordeaux stopped his just inside of the city.

The Divine Protection of Wind Evasion was one that was unique to the Earth Dragons species. It allowed them to disregard anything that would be a nuisance to them while running and drawing their carriages. The only time that the Divine Protection broke off was in cases where you didn't wait out its cool-down period after stopping. However, that hadn't been the case right now, considering that all of their Dragon Carriages had experienced this at once.

???: "Hold on a second. Was it actually just the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion that came undone?"

The one who'd butted in with that doubt whilst raising her hand had been Roswaal. She looked all around them and then furrowed her shapely eyebrows,

Roswaal: "If any of you here have a Divine Protection, I'd like you to speak up. No need to tell me what it does, since I know that's an awful thing to ask about. I would just like to hear if your Divine Protection is still working now."

The Knights looked at each other in confusion after they heard Roswaal's question.

The Divine Protections that individuals received at birth were blessings given from the world. However, being born with powers that differed from person to person also meant said people cultivated different values from each other. Thus it was typical for people who had Divine Protections to keep what they did a secret so to not cause any unnecessary problems.

Roswaal had taken that into consideration with her question. And to that, a single Knight timidly raised his hand up.

Knight: "—. No, I'm not getting any kind of response from my Divine Protection. It felt like it got removed as soon as we entered the street."

Roswaal: "So it's as I thought. Is there anyone else who felt this other than him?"

Once one hand went up, others did as well in their twos and threes. However, they still totaled to less than ten. It was unlikely that others were hiding it, after all, Divine Protections were rare gifts, so even getting a number like this was no short of a miracle.

Roswaal: "—So this is what the complete destruction of the covenant means."

Seeing this result, Roswaal's face tensed up as if she'd realized something, and then muttered these words. That made Wilhelm raise his brow.

The complete destruction of the covenant, he'd heard those words directly from His Majesty Gionis back at Miklotov's Mansion. Though in all honesty, Wilhelm hadn't been able to properly understand what that meant.

Roswaal: "Stride is invalidating the Divine Dragon's covenant… No, he's invalidating the constraints of the world."

Wilhelm: "The constraints of the world? What do you mean?"

Roswaal: “The Divine Protections disappearing are good evidence for it. I think it’s likely just limited to this city, but Stride is cutting the link between mankind and the world with his Magic Circles. Meaning that in this city, both Divine Protections and the Dragon’s Covenant will not work. —We won’t be receiving the Divine Dragon’s salvation.”

Wilhelm: “…Is it really that big of a deal not having Divine Protections?”

Though Roswaal’s explanation had been tinged with unease, Wilhelm didn’t really get what all the fuss was about.

Originally, Wilhelm had been a rookie who’d been blessed neither by a Divine Protection or talent with the sword. He wasn’t affected by any disadvantage that this loss of Divine Protections would bring about. That, and he’d made up his mind long ago that he wasn’t going to believe in the Divine Dragon’s Covenant.

Everyone other than the most pious who believed in the Divine Dragon probably shared this sentiment. No one really believed in the Covenant, or otherwise, being handed down to the Dragon Kingdom.

However, Roswaal shook her head at Wilhelm’s understanding.

Roswaal: “It is a big deal. There’d be no point in us arguing about the Dragon’s Covenant here, but the disappearance of everyone’s Divine Protections is a disaster. For those who are privy to one, it’s like losing a third leg you were born with. The more useful it was to them in everyday life, the greater the impact. Also what’ll happen next is that…”

Pivot:—Stride is going to spread this around the Kingdom. If he manages that, the amount of damage he’ll cause will skyrocket. Though, the Black Dragon might burn the Kingdom down to ashes far quicker before that comes to pass

Pivot finished the rest of Roswaal’s words as if he were trying to put on her voice. She’d said the same things as well, but the words of this specter had had more of an impact on him.

In the end it was like this,

Wilhelm: “So this bastard’s plan isn’t just to try and snatch away people’s wives and their country, but also their Divine Protections?”

Roswaal: “…His actual intentions aside, he’s definitely setting his sights on that sort of thing as an end result. In any case, that’s given us another reason apart from his Black Dragon why we can’t leave this guy at large.”

Wilhelm: “There’s been no reason from the start why we should even leave this bastard’s head still connected to his body!”

The number of reasons why they couldn’t let this man live any longer had gone up from ten to eleven. Tch’ing at that feeling, Wilhelm turned to look over at the streets with his hand over the pommel of his Knight Sword.

Wilhelm: “Anyways, it feels way too quiet.”

Silence had fallen on the city that had the Destruction Wish in its heart and the Black Dragon in its skies. That in itself was far too weird in a situation like this.

Cities and streets had ended up becoming battlefields many times during that murky Civil War. Based on his experience back then, places that would end up becoming battlefields would have a peculiar kind of atmosphere to them, and tension would hang all over them.

But he couldn’t feel that in this city. On the contrary, this should have been one of the most populated cities in the Kingdom of Lugunica and yet there wasn’t a single soul in sight despite it being daytime; it went beyond being eerie.

There’s no way they could have killed all the people in the city in just half a day after they’d been delayed by Stride, right? Or maybe, if it’s Kurgan we’re talking about, I guess that wouldn’t be impossible, though—.

Knight: “Hey, look over there!”

Wilhelm’s thoughts were interrupted by one of the Knight’s calling out. The Knight was pointing at the main street that led to the city center—Someone’s figure had come into view there.

Tension spread around the Subjugation Force for a moment, but they immediately relaxed. Reason being that the person who’d showed up definitely wasn’t one of Stride’s men, instead he was someone who was actually from the city.

He staggered over to the Subjugation Force, holding nothing in his hands. The Subjugation Force breathed out a sigh of relief seeing that figure, but then immediately noticed something that wasn’t quite right.

Knight: “Hey, there’s no way…”

They could hear a sound of footsteps coming from the main street in droves, that felt nigh about countless. And they weren’t only coming from the main street, but also from the streets to their left and right—No, they were coming from the entire city, and all of them were heading towards them.

They gradually became a sea of black, and their pace quickened. They began to push and shove each other, stampeding towards them as if they were racing each other. Without speaking a single word, with crazed eyes, all at once.

Their escape route had been immediately cut off by the time they’d had a chance to think “This is looking bad.” The Subjugation Force became surrounded by the swarm of people rushing towards them and were forced to stop them from punching into them.

Bordeaux: “EVERYONE, HOLD UP YOUR SHIELDS AND REINFORCE THE PERIMETER! THEY’RE GOING TO FLATTEN US!”

Receiving Bordeaux’s bellowed instructions, the Knights instantly raised their shields up and reinforced their perimeter. They tensed every single muscle in their body and met the swarm’s blow head on.

“—*crash bang crunch squelch*.”

The sounds of fierce crashing was overlapped by anguished screams; the crunches of flesh mashing and bones breaking squelchily resounded. It didn't stop with just one round, wave after wave of them kept bearing down on them. The swarm kept on throwing themselves against the Knights' shields without cease, even when the momentum of their assault began to ebb away.

Bordeaux: "FORCE THEM BACK—!!"

The Subjugation Force responded to his bellow and launched their counterattack before they had a chance at getting crushed. They pushed people back with their shields and forcibly opened up a sortie by knocking their bodies away.

They didn't have the time to think about what had happened. All they could do was keep staving off the rush of bodies that ceaselessly descended down on them.

Wilhelm: "If we cut down just…"

Roswaal: "That's exactly what our enemy wants us to do! They're just being controlled. We'd be playing straight into Stride's hands if we kill them!"

Wilhelm had tried to say in his impatience that things would get easier if they just killed two or three of them. However, Roswaal had stopped him. She was standing right beside him, using her fists to punch people in their vitals one after the other, stopping them from swarming her by knocking the lights out of them.

Though it was a daunting and grueling task, they didn't have much other choice in regards to dealing with them.

Roswaal: "They're in some sort of frenzied state right now. They've completely lost control of themselves and are being guided to attack us."

Wilhelm: "So we just knock 'em unconscious. Should have told me this more clearly."

Wilhelm unleashed a flurry of attacks with his sword (though still in its sheath), threading them through the swarm of people. Close to ten of them collapsed in the blink of an eye, but still there was no end to them.

Near him, Bordeaux, Grimm and the others had likewise switched from defending themselves to clobbering them. All of them were giving it their all to try and gain the upper hand. However, some of their Knights had succumbed to the swarm's momentum and had ended up being pushed down and trampled over, putting them out of action. And once one of them fell over, so did many others. To the point where it looked like they couldn't stop them—

Wilhelm: "—No, it's not just that!"

Wilhelm noticed out of the corner of his eyes that one of the Knights who'd been stopped in his tracks had been pushed down in a really unnatural way. He unsheathed his sword and swung it out towards the source of that strange sensation. The silver blur of his sword pierced towards completely empty space. —Then in a flash, the ring of steel against steel echoed, and someone took a great leap back.

That someone was a short figure that was clad in black garb. Its familiar sight caused Wilhelm to clench his teeth, having seen them once before. It was one of the enemies he'd failed to kill—the Shinobi that he'd come across at the Astrea Mansion a while back.

He'd been skulking in the shadows of the swarm and killing the Knights one by one as their backs were turned; a cowardly maneuver that was—

Wilhelm: "Truly the mark of a filthy professional who lacks the balls to face people head on."

Shinobi: "Humbly speaking, I've grown used to being told things like that, being a Shinobi and all. Anyhow…"

The Shinobi stooped down to the ground and held a Kunai Knife in each of his hands in a backhand grip. Those weapons allowed him to either slice with them or throw them.

Shinobi: "I'm sure we both hold regrets at not being able to take the other's head last time we met. It shalt not end like so this time."

Wilhelm: "The hell is up with you speaking like you're from the middle ages. Are you fucking screwing around with me? Just die already."

(TL Note: Don't interpret Wilhelm saying "Middle-ages" as an Earth reference. The Japanese is literally Wilhelm commenting on what the hell he's doing using ござる which is an archaic polite form of the verb ある, a form that is not used outside of certain set phrases in modern Japanese. Though my writing of old-fashioned English kinda sucks so it might not be evident, pretty much all the Stride camp except for Melinda speaks using old-fashioned Japanese.)

Wilhelm closed the distance between them in an instant, bearing his attack down on the Shinobi at lightning speeds. The Shinobi caught his sword with one of his Kunai and struck back with his other one. Wilhelm avoided it by ducking his head, but a split second later, the Shinobi tried to knee him in the face, only barely missing and making Wilhelm tch.

The Shinobi's body had been trained rigorously and was tempered like steel. He was short, but his whole body was just a clump of muscle, so he came close to Wilhelm's sword strength with strength of his own that was greater than appeared.

And worst of all was that the swarm of people that had been turned into this mob was still attacking them, meaning that Grimm and the others were stuck dealing with them without his help. If he didn't finish things quickly here, it'd be impossible even for him to get rid of the swarm whilst taking on the Shinobi.

Wilhelm: "That's why you need to hurry up and fucking die, you damn rat—!"

Wilhelm fired off a piercing stab at the Shinobi, which whistled through the air like rain. The Shinobi dodged it using only the minimal movement required to do so, and then threw one of his Kunais behind him. The Kunai didn't pierce into Wilhelm, but rather into one of the legs of a Knight who'd been keeping the mob at bay. The Knight lost consciousness and was trampled over.

Wilhelm: “Shit…”

Shinobi: “It’s not just My Lord who knoweth where your weak points are. If conditions were ideal for you, then there would be no way my humble self could prevail… However, these narrow spaces suit me better.”

Wilhelm: “…”

There was a reason why the Shinobi’s words had sounded so composed, and that was because of how narrow the area they were fighting in was. Surrounded by the swarm, the Subjugation Force were just about managing to push them back with their backs pressed against each other’s. But each time one of their men fell, so did the space they had available to them. Naturally that meant that Wilhelm had very little room to operate in—He couldn’t swing his sword, so all he could do was stab with it.

Shinobi: “So, all I have to do is dodge as long as things carry on like this. I need not keep myself on high alert if all you can do is attack in a straight line.”

Wilhelm: “So you say…”

Wilhelm was in fact struggling with the Shinob who’d been able to easily avoid his stabs. Things were going to get worse for him if they kept up like this, he’d end up getting out-pushed over time. Then—

???: “Well then, shall we swap players?”

Shinobi: “—gh.”

The Shinobi was hit by a roaring punch that came whistling through the wind, blowing him backwards. The one who’d cut their way in, adding themselves to this brawl by means of some nimble footwork, was Roswaal, now donning black gloves. She flashed the stunned Wilhelm a smile.

Roswaal: “If the scene here’s shifted to one where it’s all about fighting in close quarters, then there’s no technique that works better here than martial arts. Will you let me handle this?”

Wilhelm: “…With your bare hands? He’s going to end up chopping them to pieces with his Kunai.”

Roswaal: “Thank you for your concern, but these gloves are of a special make. —They’re a kind of weapon that one of my ancestors left behind. They can even stop the blades of holy swords, would you believe.”

Roswaal spread out both of her hands to him and said this as if she were joking. However, it didn’t feel like a bluff to him since he could sense a strange, overwhelming aura coming from her black gloves.

In actual fact, Roswaal’s martial arts were far more suited to the Shinobi’s taijutsu. Normally he wouldn’t entrust this to anyone whose skills were only half-baked, but Roswaal’s fighting strength passed with flying colors. The problem with him was that he really wasn’t the type to leave things to others, no matter how defiant they were—

Wilhelm: “I should put up that sort of front up only with Theresia.”

Roswaal: “I doooon’t know why you suddenly played up your spouse and hurt my maiden heart, though, if you say so, I will try and accept it.”

The Shinobi, who’d been pointed at and forced to switch enemies, gave off an impression of dissatisfaction, seemingly narrowing his eyes beneath his black hood. Wilhelm took a step backwards and handed the reins of battle over to Roswaal.

He’d cover her back instead and try break the deadlock they were in—

???: “—iłħe̸lḿ̮͓!”

The very next instant, someone knocked into him from the side and sent him stumbling. When he looked to see who it was, he realized that it had been Grimm, now sporting an alarmed look on his face. Wilhelm began to ask him if he’d meant anything by doing that, but he immediately realized that he didn’t have the time for that.

Grimm had pushed Wilhelm away and found himself where he'd been standing—His ankle had been grabbed by one of the pair of hands that had come up from the shadows. Also, their other hand had a hold of Roswaal by her slender ankle.

Roswaal: "Damn th—."

They didn't even have the time to react; the two of them were dragged into the shadows in the blink of an eye, leaving behind ripples like the sort you'd see in a pond. Then their figures literally vanished from sight.

Witnessing that with his own eyes, Wilhelm's breath caught, uttering not a single word.

Shinobi: "What an awfully good sense of perception… We've invited the wrong guest thanks to that."

Wilhelm: "…What?"

Shinobi: "Though Our Lord had instructed us to… Oh well. Either way, the shackles of the curse shalt fall apart in this city. Now is the hour, for all my service up until now—."

Wilhelm: "You bastards, always saying whatever you like… THE HELL ARE YOU ALL THINKING!"

Wilhelm bellowed that out at the Shinobi, finding himself once again face to face with him after he'd been denied their challenger-exchange. Though worried about the safety of the two who'd been snatched away, his fury had reached murderous levels, and it now lay in his sword.

Pivot: WILHELM!

Wilhelm: "WHAT?"

Shinobi: "—?"

The spectral Pivot, however, had called out his name right next to his ear before he could swing his sword, causing him to shout back at him. That puzzled the Shinobi, but he didn't have the time to care about that. Instead, he turned around.

There he understood why Pivot's voice had been so frantic, and he tightened his grip on his sword.

"…"

Members of the mob were being ruthlessly swept away by a scything blow. Namely, the people who were at the outer edge of the perimeter, the last rank of them who'd been trying to swarm the Subjugation Force. Their blood splattered everywhere and their limbs went flying off due to the sheer strength of the blow. The perpetrator took no notice of that and swung again, and again, spreading death amongst them.

Then his imposing, grotesque appearance came into view, as he brushed aside their lives as if they were annoying little pebbles in his way—He was a blue skinned, eight-armed first-rate warrior.

Wilhelm: "The Eight Arms, Kurgan…ghk!"

Kurgan: "It has been a while hasn't it, Sword Demon. Have you been keeping well?"

His low, imposing voice came back in response to Wilhelm's strangled one. As soon as he stopped, he looked over to the Shinobi who was standing behind Wilhelm, and said,

Kurgan: "Did you mess up? I've been saying from the very beginning that you wouldn't meet his expectations. I can just picture Stride's disappointment… Nevertheless, this is a golden opportunity for me."

Shinobi: "Humbly speaking, even if I'm to die, that's part of my work as a Shinobi. Even if I weren't shackled at the neck, I would follow my Lord until I died, though I'm still yet to earn his belief."

Kurgan: "No one is going to believe that. Hence the reason for his curse rings, hence the reason for his plan, thus his hatred, and…"

The words they exchanged couldn't be understood by anyone but them. Kurgan then turned his gaze over to Wilhelm. He was holding four cleavers in his burly arms, and a strong fighting spirit was emanating from his entire body.

The lesser Knights feet froze in response to that strong sense of pressure which they'd mistaken as a storm brewing up.

Wilhelm: "Looks like I've got no choice but to deal with this guy…"

???: "Then I've got no choice but to take over with the Shinobi, right?"

Bordeaux, who'd been keeping the swarm at bay with his ax, segued into what Wilhelm had said. Wilhelm gave a glance to his words and then thought for a moment.

He only had Bordeaux left here from the remaining knights whom he could trust in their strength now that they'd lost Roswaal and Grimm. Bordeaux's combat style however was a very poor match for the Shinobi's.

Just how much would Bordeaux's clunky fighting style work against an opponent like the Shinobi who operated best in narrow spaces?

Wilhelm: "I'll…"

Pivot: Are you saying that you're reluctant to leave this to the Young Lord? Is that something to do with his ability? Or could it be…

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm was stopped in his tracks by Pivot, before he could blurt out his instinctive answer. Pivot, who should have been an illusion that reflected Wilhelm's innermost thoughts, shrugged his shoulders in response.

Truthfully speaking, it was as if he was making fun of how conflicted he was, as if he were punishing him.

Bordeaux: "I'm counting on you Wilhelm. I ain't gonna take long with this guy though."

Bordeaux clapped him on his shoulder as he hesitated, and then crashed into the Shinobi. Once he started, he couldn't be stopped.

Likewise, Wilhelm couldn't afford to worry about him now that he was face to face with a formidable enemy that had to be dealt with.

Kurgan: "My gratitude for this worthy foe. —For this duel fit for the last moments of the Kingdom."

Wilhelm: "You're still the same asshole as ever, always spouting out whatever you like. I'm not going to be taking long with you."

Kurgan: "Then let us make it the best moment of our lives."

With these words, the Sword Demon and the Eight Arms clashed with each other.

—The petals of the second battle of the Silver Flower Dance bloomed amongst the tumult in Picoutatte.

4

Grimm's senses of what was up or down were completely out of sync, so he lost his balance the moment he was let go.

Grimm: "—gh."

Letting out this choked sound, he somehow managed to stop himself from falling by planting one of his knees on the ground. Immediately after he caught himself, he jumped back and raised his greatshield that was emblazoned with the Remendis Family Crest, expecting an attack.

However no attack came. —No of course not, after all, the place he was in was different.

???: "It looks like even my venerable self is not blessed with his subordinates, what with them not being able to handle even one little thing properly. Setting the woman aside, does the other one even have any worth?"

???: "—Dear me, what a surprise. Could it beeeee that I've been invited straight down to the root of all this evil.”

The beautiful woman standing next to Grimm replied. Having been dragged along with him into the shadows, Roswaal glared at their enemy with a look of wariness in her heterochromic eyes. Grimm likewise wasn’t able to completely hide his shock and surprise.

Before their very eyes, standing completely defenseless, was the sharp-eyed man who had become the Kingdom’s long-pursued arch nemesis—The mastermind of all these atrocities, none other than Stride himself.

The two of them had been thrown out from the shadows onto a stone floor that was being buffeted by a fierce wind. Taking a closer look around, Grimm realized that there wasn’t any cover around them and that they were on the rooftop of a tall building. They were in the heart of the city—Or so he thought, as he lifted his surprised face up.

If they were in the heart of the city, on a building that almost reached the sky, then that meant—

Grimm: “—A̵͚̋́h̛̕͝.”

His field of view opened up, and he saw in front of him that imposing being, with its wings spread out, hovering in mid-air. The three-headed Dragon continued to roar in agony as its eyes flickered about with bewitching shades of color.

Stride: “It’s a sight to behold, isn’t it? A Dragon from the legends of yore, sung about in folklore, groaning so uncouthly like this. Even so, I’m using three of my curse rings, the pride and glory of Vollachia, and still it manages to resist. Maybe I ought to praise it though and say ‘I expected no less from a Dragon’.”

Roswaal: “The pride and glory of Vollachia… Where on earth did you get those from?”

Stride: “What? You people still haven’t figured it out? Did my venerable self overestimate you all a bit too much?”

Stride showed them the ten rings he wore on his fingers and then sighed in disappointment. He shook his head as if he were saying "Good Grief",

Stride: "It should have been obvious, but my venerable self is Stride Vollachia… A relative by blood to the Vollachian Emperor. That's why even the pride and glory of the Empire was easily within mine reach."

Grimm & Roswaal: "…"

Stride: "But then again, it does seem like you've all been fooled by the old foxes of the Empire from day one."

Stride casually revealed his lineage which had never really been made clear before. Grimm gazed at him in astonishment due to the obliqueness of his response, however, Roswaal only let out a short gasp.

She looked down in thought for a few seconds, and then said,

Roswaal: "We more or less hazarded at that guess at our upper council meeting. The general consensus was that if anyone had gotten involved from the Holy Kingdom, the City States and the Empire… It would have no doubt been the Empire. Even so, I neeeever thought you'd tell us this so easily."

Stride: "I need not keep it a secret. So what if you know? Are you going to seek reparations from the Empire after things settle down? On the ruins of a Kingdom that burnt to ashes."

Roswaal: "Or we crush all of your schemes and then find out how much responsibility the Empire holds for this, and such. Once that happens, your home country's going to end up being greatly damaged…"

Stride: "Hmph, is that so?—I care not one bit."

Stride readily sneered at the notion of having any love for his country. Naturally Roswaal likely wouldn't have expected it to work, nevertheless she frowned, he'd sidestepped her question more than she'd expected.

If he was truly a member of the Vollachian Imperial Family, then that meant that the Empire's ulterior motives had—

Roswaal: "Then that means they have nothing to do with you. If you don't care about them… Then what the hell are you trying to achieve? Why did you kidnap the Sword Saint, summon a Dragon, turn off our Divine Protections and tear down the Covenant."

Stride: "Whilst we're on this subject, why not add why I summoned you here? All of these things, save for this last one, served only to satisfy the indispensable requirements to tear down the Covenant. Yet the answer to the last one is pretty straightforward. —I needed to show you this, sorceress of the Kingdom."

Roswaal: "Show this to me…? No, show this to the sorceress of the Kingdom?"

Stride: "No, to you. The Mathers woman. I needed to show you this."

Roswaal was completely bewildered, as if she had no clue what Stride was saying. Stride on the other hand gave her a curt nod and closed one of his eyes in satisfaction.

Then he obscenely caressed the rings that he wore on his right hand with his left, and said,

Stride: "With this, my oath with that deranged criminal has been fulfilled. Now, I'll be allowed to do as I please."

Roswaal: "Wait. What are you…"

Stride: "My venerable self shalt not wait. Long have I been waiting. I shalt not wait any further. What is there to wait for? SHASUKE!"

Shasuke: "At your command."

A Shinobi rose up from Stride's shadow at his command. The figure was clad in black garb and perfectly resembled the Shinobi who'd slipped into the middle of their brawl earlier. He looked over at Stride from his side.

Shasuke: “All of them?”

Stride: “Only if you hadn’t invited the wrong guest. Get rid of them. The one that’s… Oh, that’s right.”

Stride looked over at Grimm and his lips contorted into a grimace halfway through his command. It took some time for Grimm to realize that his grimace was actually a scornful smile, so different had it been to the kinds of smiles he’d seen.

Leaving aside what Grimm was thinking, Stride continued to smile his crooked smile.

Stride: “Now that I think about it, your face looks familiar; weren’t you one of the small fry who was at the Sword Saint’s abode? I could have sworn you were… Oh, that’s right, how amusing. How very amusing. This shalt be amusing.”

Grimm: “W̸̭ha̍͜ are̋̀͠ ̰y̸̆o͍u̇̄…”

Stride: “What, you say? My venerable self is cooking up a masterpiece. One that shalt be to my liking.”

Stride lifted his left hand up after he said this. The blue gemstone that was inlaid on his middle finger ring shone with a bewitching radiance. Then—A woman slowly walked up onto the rooftop.

Roswaal: “Carol.”

Grimm: “I̸ts̶̓ me̸͛, ̷Gri̭͠m̦̓m͜…”

The one who’d opened the door to the rooftop and made their appearance was none other than Carol Remendis. She was a beautiful, blonde-haired woman with clear green eyes—And as far as Grimm was concerned, the women he loved who he treasured beyond all else.

Her entire body was caked in blood, and her Knight Sword, which for her was her very pride and joy, was covered in fresh blood. Her eyes had no will to them, and along her cheeks ran the traces of the innumerable tears she’d shed. Tears which even now resumed to stream down her face the moment she laid her eyes on Grimm and

Roswaal on the rooftop.

Carol shook her head in refusal as she wept, having poised her Knight Sword up with a fluid motion.

Stride: “You’re the one who’s in love with my venerable self’s loyal wooden puppet, right? Why not try and make her tell you from her very own lips just how much innocent blood she’s steeped her sword in?”

Carol: “No, No… NOOO…”

Stride: “That look of refusal on her face sure is an arousing one as well. It’s rare to find a woman who suits having a tear-stained face as well as she does. Surely that must get you all bothered too as a man? If it doesn’t, then…”

Stride’s vulgar words were interrupted by a shrill clang.

That was because the Shinobi garbed in black called Shasuke had glided over to Stride, stood in front of him and turned aside a chunk of stone, that had been aimed at Stride, with his Kunai.

The chunk of stone had been broken off from part of the floor and kicked at him by Roswaal. She was now glaring at him with clear, cold hostility on her otherwise handsome features.

Roswaal: “Shut your mouth, scum. I can’t stand to hear your voice any longer.”

Stride: “What an odd coincidence! For some reason, my venerable self can’t stand the sight of your eyes either. That blue one especially really gets on my nerves. Do you really think you’ve protected something by drawing this line? Don’t get carried away, woman.”

Roswaal: “…”

Stride: “—You and I are one and the same. Though I suppose there’s a difference of up and down.”

Stride and Roswaal confronted each other, both of them turning their emotions which were mutually blighted by hatred and repugnance towards the other. Looking at them from the corner of his eye, Grimm raised his Greatshield and turned to face Carol.

Even now, her posture was captivatingly beautiful. Even if she'd become stained in blood, all the days that she'd spent earnestly dedicating herself to her sword made her poise untrembling.

Carol: "Grimm… I'm sorry, I'm so sorry… Please, I want you to…"

Grimm: "C̰̃ä̠r̩̍o̵l̳̓, I̵…"

She was sobbing, her voice shaking with grief. Grimm immediately understood what she was trying to say, and for that reason he had interrupted her. He resolutely stiffened the look on his face.

And then, as the woman he loved wept, he spoke the words he needed to tell her.

Grimm: "—I̵ l̏ő̉v̂e̵ y̸ó̸u̸̇."

She arced her sword towards him ever so beautifully, and then unleashed her blow. He caught it with his Greatshield, and thus did sparks blossom.

And so began here the fierce battle between the two lovers.

5

Theresia felt a rush of air streaming into the room which reeked of blood, and lifted her head up.

Theresia: "…Something must be going on upstairs."

The Black Dragon remained over the sky above the rooftop of the spire, and along with it was Stride who was trying to get it under his control.

Stride had returned Theresia back to her confinement after he'd cast his curse on the Black Dragon. The nineteen corpses which had been sacrificed to summon the Dragon still lay clumped on top of each other in a corner of the room, tormenting Theresia, as if they were cursing the horrible destiny that had befallen them.

However, it was definitely Carol's heart that was being gnawed at the most by guilt for these victims as she'd been the one to swing her sword at them against her will. Theresia really wanted to be next to her as she cried. She really wanted to hold her and hug her until her tears stopped, until her sobs couldn't be heard anymore.

But Carol had been made to stand guard over the room somewhere where Theresia couldn't see her. And that wasn't her only issue, something strange had happened to her body as well.

—She couldn't feel the presence of her two Divine Protections, the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint and the Divine Protection of the Death God, inside of her right now.

Theresia: "I know that my Divine Protection hasn't moved onto the next generation though…"

The Divine Protection of the Sword Saint was a special kind of Divine Protection that passed between the people in the Astrea Family generation after generation. Theresia had inherited the Divine Protection from her now-deceased uncle, who'd been the previous Sword Saint. Thus, she was prepared that someday, a time would come where this Divine Protection of her's would leave her. But that wasn't what had happened right now.

Her Divine Protection hadn't left her, it had fallen asleep instead. She'd realized that from her Divine Protection of the Death God vanishing, a protection she held that was different to her Sword Saint one. Yet, she wasn't hopeful enough to think that them vanishing was unrelated to whatever Stride was planning.

Theresia: "What on earth is that man… What on earth is Stride thinking?"

Theresia, who was trying her best to understand what was going on, wasn't speaking these words to herself. She'd posed them as a question to someone. A someone that was sitting in front of her, with her back turned to her.

She was a young girl with wavy ashen-colored hair, who wore an ashen-colored robe that covered her entire body—It looked like she was called Melinda and was actually Stride's wife. She was one of the people helping Stride out with his schemes, and it seemed like she was the one who'd chosen the nineteen sacrifices. She'd been able to somehow perceive that they'd had Divine Protections, with that.

Theresia: "He mentioned the word "Evil Eye", does that mean you're from the Evil Eye Tribe? But I thought the Evil Eye Tribe was…"

Melinda: "W-We were w…wiped out because we were a risk. I survived. If I hadn't been picked up by my lord husband, I would have died."

Melinda turned her head to look back at Theresia and unexpectedly answered her words honestly.

The Evil Eye Tribe, that she'd confirmed she was from, was a variety of Demi-Human Tribe that possessed a very rare kind of blood, and were said to be very few in number. They were said to be a tribe with eyes that possessed unnatural abilities which were different from the likes of magic and cursecraft. Theresia had heard that they'd all been wiped out by the Empire because of how dangerous their powers were in being able to see the unseen, interfere with other's minds and the like.

In some respects, their treatment there was close to how Half-Elves were treated in the Kingdom of Lugunica. The locations of their tribes must have been identified since they'd been all wiped out or maybe worse.

Then the fact that one of its survivors was helping Stride of all people meant that…

Theresia: "Aren't you being used by Stride? Like, he's got his eye on your power by taking advantage of your persecuted position."

Melinda: "…You're right, but what on earth's the problem with that?"

Theresia: “Huh…”

This time Melinda turned her whole body around instead of just her head, before then sharply tilting it at Theresia. Her eyes were still squeezed tightly shut, however she was looking at Theresia from behind her eyelids. She could feel such a strong sense of pressure, so much so that it convinced her of that.

Melinda: “The only thing my lord husband wants from me is the power of my abominable blood. B-But, I don’t mind that. I’m fine with being wanted by my lord husband just for that.”

Theresia: “You’re actually satisfied with being wanted just for your power?”

Melinda: “There are countless more unhappy marriages. Looks, age, pedigree, lineage; all I have to offer amongst these things is a power like mine… Stride-sama wanting me for who I am is my ideal, compared to a marriage where I’m not wanted for who I am.”

She’d given a response that had differed from intoxication or adoration that had made Theresia ashamed of herself despite the scene.

She could hardly imagine that Stride felt any love for Melinda as a wife, but Melinda understood that and so loved Stride in her own way.

Although the nature of her love was vastly different, it wasn’t a one-sided relationship.

Melinda: “My lord husband is the pariah who was abandoned by his homeland. My lord husband is the fang of the criminal who curses destiny. My lord husband is the savior of us outcasts who were rejected by history. My lord husband is the absolute blow to the Observers who sit in the heavens above.”

Theresia: “…”

Melinda: “I am the foundation for that. I shall use my cursed blood for that. —My Evil Eye is key to our defenses. It’s my most cherished desire as a wife, something that even the Eight Arms wouldn’t be able to carry out.”

Theresia: “The key… to your defenses.”

Theresia swilled those words around her mouth and then closed her eyes in thought.

Over half a day had gone by already since she’d been brought to this city. Though people would probably get captivated by the Black Dragon’s appearance, what was far more strange was that she hadn’t heard any sort of commotion coming from the streets nearby so far.

It had been strange in the first place that no one had made any kind of noise when they’d prepared the nineteen sacrifices. Something was up there with their sense of perception, it probably had something to do with Melinda’s Evil Eye.

And Melinda had boasted about herself being the key to their defenses; she had a role to carry out in this city. Something that would almost certainly slow Wilhelm down as he hastened to her.

Melinda: “—tch, please don’t try anything funny”

Melinda was keenly aware of Theresia’s movements, even with her eyes shut. Her body had gone rigid as soon as Theresia had stirred, and she’d sternly raised her voice at her.

Theresia hadn’t been restrained here. Even if her Divine Protections had been taken away, she could still move freely. Naturally, she couldn’t do anything that required too much exertion, being pregnant and all. Still, she could probably move faster than Melinda. The problem however was that—

Melinda: “Remember, your unborn child is still cursed. Try anything funny and the curse will take the life of your unborn child in… exchange.”

Theresia: “I know, that terrifies me. It truly does. But, that man… Stride isn’t here right now. I can’t imagine something would happen straight away.”

Melinda: “A-A-Are you putting the life of your child at stake over such a tenuous bet?”

Theresia: “Suffering will come to mine and Wilhelm’s child regardless of whether I want it or not. That’s because they’re an Astrea… They won’t be able to run away from their destiny either. Though I’d really like it they could find happiness by living out an uneventful life in peace, just as an ordinary person, that would be my preference.”

Theresia cast her eyes down and silently thought about the future of her child that was growing in her swollen womb.

A life without troubles was something which wouldn’t come to her child. She wanted to shelter them from the many problems that they’d find along their way, but that was practically impossible.

That’s why—

Theresia: “They’re an Astrea, so they too shall fight, for me, for my darling, and for our country. One day, if it’s to be so, they will succeed me as the Sword Saint.”

Melinda: “—What… arrogance. T-To not protect them as a child, and instead let them fight. Y-Y-You disgust me. I. Cannot. Forgive. You.”

Melinda couldn’t hide the shock that had crept into her voice when she’d heard what Theresia had said. She brought her hand to her face and then slowly opened one of her eyelids, reflecting Theresia in her pitch black eyes.

There was no white to her Evil Eye, it was completely dyed in black. It locked onto Theresia and in an instant she was seized by a horrible feeling, like her soul was being swallowed by her eye, and then, a feeling like she was falling down.

Melinda: “—Please now, sink into the dark, dark depths of your sinfulness. Your unborn child may bear no sin, but within you, the mother, there are sins which cannot be washed away so easily. Please, awaken to them.”

Melinda’s voice, which should have been coming from in front of her, including her disgust, were fading far away.

Theresia registered that at the back of her mind as her consciousness slowly plunged towards the abyss—

Theresia: “—Wilhelm.”

Before she fell, she spoke only that one word, calling the name of her beloved husband out. —Then her lights went out.

6

Fierce battles had broken out everywhere on his stage, the Commercial City of Picoutatte.

Betwixt the Black Dragon in the heavens above, the people on the earth below, and the world with its blessings deprived, only did that one insurgent smile.

Standing at the edge of the Spire’s rooftop that overlooked the entire city, Stride Vollachia spread out his arms. As he listened in satisfaction to the Dragon’s roars, which could be heard all around the city, he opened his mouth.

Stride: “Lo’ and behold, with this all of the actors have gathered upon the stage. Kingdom! Empire! How does it feel having your imperturbable faces dragged through the mud? The hour of the end is near. Shalt you accept this ruin along with mine venerable self…, or shan’t you?”

Stride hadn’t raised that question to anyone in particular, it had been closer to a monologue.

He wasn’t seeking an answer. Only his eyes shone brightly from his pale face.

Stride: “The testament of the realm fades away, and so the Dragon’s salvation shan’t come. The light coming from your Divine Protections seeps not through, and so heroes become ordinary men. Witness, cruel Observers who look down at us from the heavens above, feast your eyes to your hearts’ content. —Witness the choices the world shalt make.”

Stride turned around and looked behind him, with his black cloak fluttering in the gale that was being produced by the wings of the Black Dragon. The fierce clashes of steel against steel were unfolding right here as well.

“—*Clang*.”

Two battles were taking place here, on the Spire’s narrow rooftop—

One of those battles was pitting the skills of the Shinobi, who’d reached the limits of what was humanly possible via rigorous training, against that of the formidable talent for martial arts that the woman, who should have been fighting back as a mage, possessed. The woman was catching Shasuke’s attacks that were coming from his two Kunai with her strange black gloves, trading sharp blows back at him.

Both of them had honed their skills to perfection and were holding their own. From a purely battle-orientated perspective, there were many noteworthy things you could enjoy from their fight.

However, it was the other confrontation that had captured the spectating Stride’s interest far more.

???: “RRRAAAAAAA!”

A graceful sword blow came from the hand of the woman, whose eyes were now puffy from crying herself dry,

She’d poured the results of all her years of training into her sword and swung it without any reserve. A Greatshield caught her blow, first came a shrill clang, and then sparks flew around the rooftop.

There was no hatred or animosity in either of their blades, instead there was but grief and love unquenching. —The sight of the two lovers crossing swords with each other against their will gave rise to a sweet numbness in Stride’s heart.

Though maybe, to be more accurate, he couldn’t exactly call this clash between sword and shield with stuff like crossing swords or blades.

Stride: “But there’s no way that her skills were so middling originally. Could she be fighting against the curse with her emotions? What an absurd puppet.”

Stride shrugged his shoulders in disappointment and then let out a sigh at the battle that was unfolding in front of him between the swordswoman and the shieldsman.

The swordswoman was bound by his curse, yet she wasn’t showing the true extent of her ability. From her neck down, the curse still compelled her to do as he willed, but the fact that he hadn’t shackled her mind for his own amusement had backfired.

Of course, the shieldsman’s ability to defend himself against her blows was outstanding as well, but—

Stride: “He’s someone who I hadn’t anticipated for. When you look at him, he should be no more than just some small fry, but he’s gone well above and beyond my expectations. In that case, that leaves me no choice, I’ll have to come up with something.”

Saying this, Stride brought his finger to the gemstone encrusted on one of his rings, the one that corresponded to the swordswoman. The ring’s blue glow grew stronger the moment he touched it, and the woman’s groans grew louder.

Swordswoman: “Ghh…ahhhh…! N-No NO! GRIMM! RUN AWAAAAAY!”

A pattern of blue swept up across the wailing swordswoman’s entire body. Its glow could be seen over her clothes and light armour, causing the shieldsman to react in astonishment. However, the speed at which her sword blows were being delivered grew more intense the very next moment.

The man caught her heavy blow that had come slicing horizontally through the wind towards him and was flung backwards by the sheer force of it.

Stride was using his last resort technique that caused the curse to manipulate the body of its target so to draw out the very limits of their potential. Naturally the burden that it placed on their body was inordinate, making it a technique that would likely destroy the puppet he used it on.

But he didn't care. As far as he was concerned, the only thing he had on his mind right now was enjoying himself. His work had been done already. What mattered now was—

Stride: "—Just this thriller of a show to see which one of you shalt triumph over to mine venerable self."

Swordswoman: "HYAAAAAAAA—!"

The swordswoman burst into a frenzy of attacks, letting out a scream as if she were blotting out what he'd muttered. Her longsword was greater in length than a typical Knight Sword, and she moved it splendidly like it were one of her own limbs, all the while driving her lover back.

The man shrunk back and desperately defended himself against her blows. However, he would likely reach his limits and sink under a pool of his own blood soon enough. It was likely that the wound that the woman had given him back at the mansion hadn't completely healed. The woman was going to cut him down a second time.

—Except this time she was going to reap his life and sink to the depths of despair.

Swordswoman: "Grimm… Please… I want you to…"

The woman held her sword up and once again said these words just before she swung it back down at him.

—I want you to kill me. She was probably trying to say something like that.

Stride gazed at them indifferently, feeling rather bored. However his boredom swiftly vanished due to how the man had reacted.

The man had let go of his Greatshield the moment the woman's blow had come bearing down on him, rendering himself completely defenceless to her.

Swordswoman: “Wha.”

Shieldsman: “Carol.”

The man’s face softened into an awfully gentle expression as he called out the woman’s name.

It all happened in a flash. The woman had a look of desperation on her face, yet her arm still yielded and thus the blow from her longsword crashed down upon him.

—It went straight down the man’s whole body, cutting him in half from head to inseam.

Swordswoman: “…”

The sword had torn the man’s flesh asunder, yet not a single sound matching the intensity of that deed could be heard. Namely because the sword had actually stopped an inch away from the man’s face. Their wholehearted love producing a miracle… was not the reason why this had happened.

The man had caught the blade between his bare hands and protected himself that way.

It was as if he’d been able to perfectly judge the sword’s speed and trajectory.

Shieldsman: “~~Just… how much must I have picked up from watching Carol and the 『Sword Demon』.~~”

With the sword still caught between the palm of his hands, the man somersaulted over the woman’s—Carol’s head. The glint in his eyes focused itself on Stride, fury raging within them. Stride looked at the man properly for the first time.

Grimm, that was what the man was called. Having witnessed how inconceivably hard he’d fought, Stride’s face contorted, not in anger, but in delight. A smile appeared on his face due to this unexpected find.

Stride: “Surely.”

Grimm: “—?”

Stride: “Surely you must be the one? You must be the ordinary man my venerable self sought for? Rather than the Sword Demon?”

Grimm frowned in confusion, not understanding the questions Stride had thrown at him. However, Stride didn’t care about how he’d reacted. He’d already made his conclusion.

My venerable self should test this. —To see whether this’ll make my lifelong goal come true.

Stride: “…”

Meanwhile, Carol and Grimm’s duel was continuing. But no matter how hard Carol pulled, her sword didn’t yield an inch from in between Grimm’s hands.

Ordinary run of the mill swordsmen were probably nowhere near Carol’s level. So Grimm too should have been below her in terms of pure fighting strength. However, the opponent that the shield of this ordinary Grimm had gotten through to was Carol, someone he’d spent a long time gazing at her sword technique by her side. In other words, that man had overcome his destiny.

In that case—

Stride: “Shasuke.”

He curtly called out the Shinobi’s name. The black hand of woe immediately understood what he’d meant by that, and moved into action.

The Shinobi dove into his shadow, leaving its fight behind. A moment later, he emerged from Carol’s shadow, who’d stopped in her tracks. The Shinobi no longer had a Kunai in his hand, instead he was holding a short sword.

He was going to skewer it through Carol’s back along with Grimm who was standing in front of her. Grimm, having dropped his shield, had no way to defend against it, and he couldn’t even see Shasuke’s figure.

The Shinobi’s merciless blow pierced towards Carol’s back, and a split second later—

???: “—I can’t let you do that.”

A tall figure closed the distance between them and Carol in one leap, forcing themselves between Carol and the blade. The short sword pierced through their abdomen and fresh blood spurted out onto the rooftop.

Carol’s breath was knocked out of her by the blow that had knocked their back against hers. She moved her head (which had become free) and saw what had happened behind her.

A woman had thrown her body in front of the Shinobi’s blade—Roswaal J Mathers had been stabbed in her belly.

She opened her green eyes wide in shock at the spectacle in front of her and screamed.

Carol: “—JULIA!!”

Her anguished scream echoed through the sky. Echoed forevermore.

In the sky, the Black Dragon continued to roar—Already the light had vanished from two of its heads; likewise the resistance its final head was putting up was only a short matter of time.

Act Seven

1

Theresia swayed in the darkness, enveloped by a feeling that she was sinking down to the dark, dark depths of the ocean.

Perhaps using the word “darkness” was sort of a mistake here.

Because according to the enchantress who’d sent her here, the place where she was sinking to was the dark depths of her sinfulness—A cold place that was darker than darkness itself, where no one could save her.

Theresia: “I’m sorry for being a Mother like this.”

The feeling from her arms and legs were indistinct in this place, even so, Theresia touched her belly and apologized. There, in her swollen womb, her baby was awaiting the day of its birth.

Theresia, the Sword Saint and Wilhelm, the Sword Demon’s fruit of love had already fallen into mortal danger before even being born into the world.

Her baby wouldn’t even get to be born if she didn’t manage to make it back—

Theresia: “—I absolutely won’t let that happen.”

Theresia quietly said this with a strong sense of determination hidden in her voice.

She’d been the one who’d gotten her unborn child dragged into these depths, there was no argument to that. But there was no way she’d let that eat up her baby’s fate before they were even born.

“I want my child to be a member of the Astrea Family”, Theresia desired.

There was a duty which the Astrea Family, lineage of the Sword

Saint had to carry out. That was the same for both herself and her unborn baby. Her child would likewise be born as an Astrea, so they would also bear the same things regardless of whether they wanted to or not.

Therefore, though ashamed of her own immaturity, Theresia implored that she'd be there with her child through the same sufferings.

—No matter what lay ahead for her baby, she would be sure to be with them and do all it took to protect them.

Theresia: "…"

The abyss floor finally greeted Theresia as she set that determination in mind.

She felt like she was stepping on mud, she knelt on the soft ground. She curled her body up so to protect her belly and then strained her eyes in the impenetrable darkness.

Her round blue eyes slowly started to adjust to the pitch black, and gradually the world around her became clear. And what Theresia saw spread out before her was—

Theresia: "…That's right. If this place is going to show me my sin, then I already know what I'm going to see."

Theresia let out a sigh and squeezed her eyes shut for just a second.

And then, when she reopened them, she saw head-on the situation she'd been placed in, in the area which had now come clear from the darkness.

—Theresia was alone, standing on top of a tower that had been built on a rocky crag.

A barren wind was blowing by, and the sky was far, far away, as if it had forsaken the ground. The stone tower looked like it had been made from a child's building blocks, with treacherous stairs piled high going up the crag.

Standing at its summit, Theresia saw beneath her eyes a swarm of the dead—filling her view from every corner.

She could hear their gravelly, resentful voices that sounded like the rumbles of the earth.

The army of the dead stretched out their blood-stained fingers and pointed towards Theresia above them, staring at her with their vacant eyes. She remembered each and every single one of their faces. That was only natural.

Every single one of these dead were people which she had killed by her own hand.

Theresia: “These… are my…”

Theresia had taken up her sword as the Sword Saint in the Demi-Human War and reaped countless lives. Hadn’t the number of people she’d killed neared ten thousand?

If all life had an equal weight to it, regardless of whether born low or high, then she’d tipped the scales far, far too much.

Thus, if the groans of the dead were their cries of condemnation, then she had no right to deny them.

Theresia: “This place is…”

The end of the line for sinners.

The peak of condemnation where happiness and tranquility are not permitted.

—These were the depths of sin which Theresia van Astrea had sunk to.

Theresia: “This place is my…”

Theresia once again let slip a whisper of self-awareness, faced with her own wrong.

She unconsciously brought her hand to her belly, and in her mind, thought only about her husband, her beloved demon of the sword.

The tower on the crag shook.

The dead below her were clawing their way up the tower, clambering over each other as they screamed out their inhuman cries.

—With the awareness of her sin being laid bare by the Evil Eye, the condemnation of the Sword Saint was about to begin.

2

—It had been a while since Wilhelm came to see Pivot's ghostly illusion.

Pivot: I'm the very guilt that still dwells in your heart after all

Pivot said this with a cool smile on his face. Wilhelm grimaced and let out a tch.

Pivot's illusion had started a conversation with Wilhelm as he'd been cleaning his sword, taking advantage of the fact that there was nobody there with them. Wilhelm let out a short sigh, still refusing to look at him,

Wilhelm: "…I'm listening."

Pivot: You have my thanks. Then, shall we continue? Though, it's safe to say that what I'm going to talk to you about now are nearly all your own thoughts

Still keeping his smile on his face, Pivot shrugged his shoulders, looking quite human for the specter he was. It was these types of behaviors that were the reason behind why Wilhelm didn't think he was just your ordinary run of the mill illusion.

Wilhelm didn't feel like his existence was affecting him negatively. In fact, it was the opposite for him, considering how easily he got emotional, he found him at the very least to be someone useful in providing him objective advice.

However, it was Pivot himself who'd spoken against Wilhelm's perception of him.

Pivot: Wilhelm, I don't recommend that you keep taking this situation for granted

Wilhelm: "For granted? Me?"

Pivot: Yeah, that's right. Even you should be convinced of this already. That the me that's with you here is not the same Pivot Arnancy who served as the Deputy of the Zergev Corps. In the end I am a silhouette that was created from the likeness of the Pivot you know, I'm no more than a fake.

Wilhelm: "It's not li…"

Pivot: It's not like that? Then try and ask something really personal please. Like about Pivot's childhood memories or his family. I wouldn't be able to tell you the first thing about them.

Wilhelm trailed off his words and Pivot continued his,

Pivot: Because you don't know anything about Pivot's past, or his family. In the end I'm the dredges of your sin that cling to the back of your heart, I can't tell you anything that you don't know

Wilhelm: "…"

Pivot: You need to get a grip of yourself and recognize this. I'm the recognition of your sins that was born when you awoke to a part of it, thus becoming more human. Simply put, I'm saying that you've regretted my death from the very beginning

Wilhelm couldn't deny Pivot's words as the latter pressed him.

Because none other than he himself had been about to admit that he was right.

Pivot: My existence is like a shimmer of hot air that eventually disappears. Your old war buddy whom you hold regrets about, Pivot, has already passed away. You won't have the opportunity to speak to him ever again.

Wilhelm: “…”

Pivot: That’s why Wilhelm, you have to become aware of this

Pivot cut his words off there and looked directly at Wilhelm. A faint trace of emotion was lodged in his creased expression as he told him,

Pivot:—It’ll be your turn next

…

???: “Your mind isn’t quite here right now?”

Wilhelm: “—tch!”

An overpowering blow came bearing down on him as payback for his momentary lapse.

His opponent’s blow brought forth a fierce gale, a deadly tempest that raged at tremendous speeds. Step back or jump to the side, making a snap decision, Wilhelm plunged forward using his Holy Sword to shield himself.

The blade of his Holy Sword, which bore the name Astrea, caught the impact of his opponent’s cleaver, which was more than twice as wide as his own blade. His chosen steel took the blow right at its core, but it protected its owner without breaking.

???: “Just barely, though.”

His opponent’s thunderous voice struck his eardrums just as the shockwave that followed his blow razed the stone street.

He’d just barely defended himself against the storm his opponent had unleashed. However, that sense of relief didn’t apply to his surroundings. The aftermath of his blow spread around them without relent, blowing away many of the townspeople who’d been making up the encirclement.

Wilhelm clenched his teeth hard seeing their figures come apart scattering blood everywhere.

Wilhelm: “Gh…!”

???: “You cannot afford to be distracted. Turn thy sword to me, and I shalt turn mine to thee. —This is the greatest performance in life itself, so don’t ruin it.”

Wilhelm: “Your theatrics are like a fucking spitting image of your nonsensical owner, don’t you think?!”

Wilhelm cursed and spat blood out of his mouth.

The attack hadn’t hit him directly. However, his opponent was the Eight Arms Kurgan—The War God who’d assumed the name of Strongest in the Vollachian Empire. Merely the wakes of his attacks were enough to be a threat to the lives of the people around them. Even Wilhelm couldn’t avoid pain and fatigue as he continued to parry his blows, searching for an opportunity to attack.

Even if not for that, the situation was looking really bad for Wilhelm—No, for the Kingdom’s Subjugation Force.

The city of Picoutatte had fallen into the clutches of the Destruction Wish Stride, and its people had god knows how become his puppets. They were advancing on them with eyes that possessed no will of their own, having been made into a mob. The Subjugation Force was being swarmed by their sheer number, and were at a huge numerical disadvantage. Finally, there were Shinobis lurking in the shadows, and Kurgan himself who didn’t care about the damage he inflicted on his surroundings.

—Being driven into a corner described it perfectly.

Pivot: Things are really getting more and more perilous now. Wouldn’t this be a good time to recall what I said?

Wilhelm: “…Shut up.”

Pivot, who was at Wilhelm’s side, called out to him as he checked the grip of his sword. After he responded so abrasively to him, Pivot narrowed his eye from behind his monocle,

Pivot: “Driven into a corner”, it’s rare to see a scene that symbolizes these words so well.

Wilhelm: "…"

Pivot: Theresia-dono's been captured, Carol-dono's been made into a puppet, Miss Mathers and Grimm were swallowed by a shadow, and no one has any idea where they are. The young lord is at a disadvantage against the Shinobi he's fighting, and everyone from the Subjugation Force, including the Zergev Corps, are going to eventually be overwhelmed by the swarm of people. And as for you…

Kurgan: "…You seem to be entranced by the Evil Eye."

Wilhelm: "What?"

Pivot stated everything that was wrong about the situation they were in, and then came Kurgan's low voice, as if he were finishing off the last bit. Wilhelm raised his eyebrow up.

Of course, he hadn't actually been able to hear the spectral Pivot's words, and it was mere coincidence that it had seemed like their words had been interlinked. However, Kurgan had shouldered the four cleavers he carried in his eight arms and still had a disappointed look to him on his otherwise solemn features that seemed like they were chiseled from rock.

Kurgan: "It's that devilish light which the girl from the Evil Eye Tribe, Stride's wife, possesses. I know not whence the chance came for you to be reflected in that girl's eyes… But, it disappoints me that you've been caught in her snare."

Wilhelm: "Did you say Evil Eye…?"

Wilhelm couldn't believe his ears at what he'd just heard.

The Evil Eye was a unique ability that only members of the endangered tribe called the Evil Eye Tribe possessed. Their ability was considered to be different to stuff like Magic or Divine Protections, nevertheless, they were in a time where the members of the tribe itself were said to be on the brink of extinction. There hadn't been any opportunities, or such, for Wilhelm to fall under its spell.

Wilhelm: “…Was it at the Witch’s lair?”

Pivot: The Evil Eye snare was left behind in that valley of fog by Stride’s crew when they retrieved Sphinx’s legacies… If as a result you were entranced by that, then we have an answer to my existence as well.

Wilhelm: “But it wasn’t just me who went there. Grimm and the others should have been there too!”

Kurgan: “That’s why I am disappointed, Sword Demon. They say that those who become captives to the Evil Eye are only those who are weak of mind. —That’s to say, if nothing strange happened to the rabble who visited that place, then…”

He was just saying that only one who’d been experiencing a weakness of mind was Wilhelm, in being the only one captivated by the Evil Eye back at that place.

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm was lost for words due to the sheer weight of what Kurgan had informed him.

He had never thought of himself as being weak, or anything like that. He could say that about both his state of mind and the way he lived his life, not just his swordsmanship.

Weakness should be despicable, so the word itself should have been the last thing used to describe him.

Why had it befell his current self? That was—

Kurgan: “—Devote everything to your own ability to fight, and only that, Sword Demon. It will hone you in steel. That is what I seek from a worthy foe, a conclusion with someone whose honed both their mind and body in steel, and merely that.”

Wilhelm: “Their mind and body, in steel…”

The War God lifted his four cleavers up, a blood-stirring sword aura emanated from him. Wilhelm looked down and then brought his hand to his chest, the one that wasn't holding his sword, and clenched it into a fist.

He was going to devote everything to his own ability to fight, a.k.a. his sword, and only that.

It should have been like that. Wilhelm should have done as he always did.

He'd just wanted to become strong, give up every inch of himself to his sword and thoroughly master it to its peak.

He'd ended up marching onwards, weighed down by many burdens that he'd not even been aware of, making it so his desire was no longer pure. He'd become weak as a result.

If he'd devoted himself wholly to the sword then he would have been in the perfect position right now to be called the Sword Demon. Thus, if the case was that he wouldn't reach the heights of the Eight Arms unless he was in that position right now, then—

Kurgan: "—Indeed. That is what is required. That is what I expect of you."

Wilhelm: "I—."

Letting his strength flow to his sword hand, Wilhelm tried to get rid of the heavy burdens that were weighing him down. Kurgan's eyes lit up in anticipation seeing that sign, and the hair-raising sword aura that was coming off from him intensified.

—Right here, right now, it's about whether I can kill him, and nothing else.

???: "Don't you dare look down on our commander of the vanguard, damned Eight Arms!"

Wilhelm gawked in astonishment as suddenly a roaring voice cut through the strained atmosphere. The one who'd been behind this shout was the giant of a man on the other side of the battlefield, holding his ax at the ready—Bordeaux.

He'd been peppered with cuts all across his muscular body and he was covered in blood. From the remaining members of the Subjugation Force here, Bordeaux was second only to Wilhelm in terms of ability and he'd been the one taking on the Shinobi.

Bordeaux had nigh the worst fighting affinity with the Shinobi, who was chaining multiple attacks together, paired with his agility, as his weapon. In fact, Bordeaux looked like he was losing a lot of blood, being unable to withstand the Shinobi's relentless attacks.

Nevertheless, Bordeaux laughed fearlessly, displaying an attitude that didn't betray one shred of such weakness,

Bordeaux: “It took me ages to barely bring him back from the path of a beast to that of a human. I am not gonna stand for him being turned back into a beast with your selfish logic.”

Kurgan: “A giant of a man carrying an ax, could it be that you're the Mad Dog of the Kingdom?”

Bordeaux: “What, you know of me as well? It really doesn't sit well with me that that nickname is still knocking about, but well, whatever.”

A frown appeared on Bordeaux's face for a second, before then immediately vanishing. He looked over at Wilhelm, and said,

Bordeaux: “Don't hold back, Wilhelm. Hold your chest out proudly without any scruples. You are the Strongest in the Kingdom no matter what is weighing you down.”

Wilhelm: “Bordeaux…”

Bordeaux: “You are the Sword of our Kingdom. Our sharpest, most precious steel that can fight against this unprecedented danger.”

Bordeaux had firmly stated “No matter what is weighing you down” to Wilhelm.

Bordeaux twisted his bloodstained features into a smile, and the

Knights around them nodded in approval at his words.

With their weapons in hand, they were doing everything they could to keep the mob that was bearing down on them at bay without hurting them. All of them were entrusting in Wilhelm's sword to find a way to get them through this situation.

They were proving that they were staking their very lives on their absolute faith in leaving this to the Sword Demon.

Pivot: Is being the Sword Demon who threw everything away a testament of your strength?

Pivot had been keeping his silence for a while, but now he posed him this question. Wilhelm turned to look at him, and his lips broke into a faint smile as he looked down at him.

Wilhelm: "…Why change your attitude after cornering me this much?"

Pivot: You're misinterpreting that I've cornered you. I've never held the least bit of interest in wanting to drive you into a corner. You still never listen to all of what people have to say, both now and back then

Pivot shrugged his shoulders and let out a sigh of exasperation, looking rather like he had done whilst he was alive.

Pivot: You remember how I lost my life in front of you, right?

Wilhelm: "—. Of course I do."

Pivot: I guess for you it must have been like a bolt out of the blue. Because, back then, I guess you'd have never even imagined that someone would have been killed in your place on the battlefield.

The man gave him a small smile as he said so. He'd stood in front of the Demi-Human Tribes' strongest warrior and protected Wilhelm, taking their deadly blow. —Wilhelm still relived that moment in his dreams.

That's why even he couldn't deny things when Pivot's illusion told him It’ll be your turn next—.

Pivot:—Wilhelm, it’ll be your turn next.

Pivot once again spoke these words to Wilhelm.

A curse that said that Wilhelm was going to lose his life next, just as Pivot had done.

Those words should have been the curse, but they had a continuation to them.

Pivot: Next shall be when you put your life on the line for someone important.

“—*THUNK!!*.”

Wilhelm smacked his forehead with the handle of his sword all of a sudden.

A dull thunk resounded and blood streamed out from his split forehead.

Pivot: Wilhelm van Astrea, the demon of the sword who desired to live life as steel. —Up until now, and from now onwards, I imagine that many deaths will shadow you to the end of the path you walk. Even so, you must never stop walking it.

Wilhelm wiped away the blood that was streaming down his forehead with his sleeve, gritted his teeth and looked forward.

Pivot: These are the only words I, as the deputy of the former Zergev Corps, am conveying to the current commander of the Zergev Corps

Wilhelm: “—That’s enough.”

He took a step forward. Pivot, standing nearby, didn’t follow him. Of course he didn’t. He wasn’t here anymore. The dead cannot catch up to the steps of those who are still alive.

Like once before, he watched the Sword Demon drive into the frontline, and—

Pivot: Wilhelm, cooperate!

Wilhelm: "—BORDEAUX!!"

Wilhelm heard Pivot's voice and then shouted this out. Hearing his name, Bordeaux readied his ax and nodded.

Wilhelm kicked off from the ground in an instant, as if he were a cork whizzing out from a bottle, and rushed down towards Kurgan.

Kurgan swung one of his Demon Cleavers down in response, aiming for Wilhelm who'd gone in low—However, Bordeaux brought his ax in its path and caught the blow mid-swing, using all of his strength to stop it.

Kurgan: "Ngh?!"

Bordeaux: "Ghaa… Man is a blow from the Empire's Strongest something heavy!"

An involuntary groan escaped from Kurgan's lips due to his unexpected interruption; at the same time, Bordeaux's wounds gushed out blood because of how jarring the blow had been. However, his pride and spirit had made him completely catch the blow in its tracks, leaving an opening behind.

But that didn't apply just for Kurgan, but for Bordeaux as well.

Shinobi: "Showing your back to me was foolish!"

Bordeaux had abandoned his own fight and left his back exposed. The Shinobi had crossed the shadows over to Bordeaux and pointed his short sword at him, right towards his heart. If the Shinobi's blow went into him like that—

Wilhelm: "—Ah, you dumbass. You put your life on the line just to say that!"

Shinobi: "—gh?!"

The Shinobi reacted in surprise to his voice, then a flash of silver was let loose that arced across his sightlines. He immediately tried to defend himself against the blow with his short sword, but the sharpness of the blow shattered it, and continued onwards, severing his right arm at his elbow. The arm spun away spurting blood out all across the street.

And it didn't stop at that, the flash of silver came at him from every angle. The now one-armed Shinobi jumped backwards and tried to dodge the attack using his taijutsu and remaining left arm. But—

Wilhelm: "RRHHAAAAAAAAAAAA—!!"

Shinobi: "…Oh crap."

The Shinobi's left arm was eventually deflected by the sheer power of his sword, and his body was cut across diagonally. His wounds were deep and would sure enough bring him a death inescapable. He coughed up blood, well aware of that.

But the Shinobi clung on despite his useless body and took out the last trick up his sleeve.

Shinobi: "Even… in death… this body is not that of a human, but that of a Shinobi! It has one last duty!"

The Shinobi cried this out and then plunged his hand into his own belly. He instantly triggered the explosion hex that had been placed in his body, and his small figure began to swell up, producing a terrific amount of heat that caused the air around him to shimmer.

A suicide attack, Wilhelm readied his sword noticing the signs. Maybe I can minimize the damage if I chop his body to pieces in the short time I have left before he explodes, or…

Bordeaux: "There's no way you can do that! Move aside!"

Bordeaux told Wilhelm off for his recklessness and let go of his ax. He kicked the Shinobi down and pushed Wilhelm back, covering the enemy's body with his own. The diminutive Shinobi ended up pinned down under Bordeaux's giant body, and straight after—

“—*BANG!*.”

A tremendous bang led to a shockwave that surged through the streets, giving Wilhelm the illusion that the entire city had shook for a moment. But in fact the explosion had had practically no effect on the city as a whole.

Cobblestones had been torn up, the Shinobi’s corpse had flown up from the upended street, and finally—

Wilhelm: “BORDEAUX!”

Bordeaux: “…hh.”

Bordeaux had taken the brunt of the explosion with his body and had as a result lost consciousness due to its tremendous force. He was still breathing however when Wilhelm shook him. He was still alive despite the force of the blow.

Wilhelm: “What a tough bastard. Don’t you go dying on me.”

Breathing out a faint sigh of relief, Wilhelm instructed the Subjugation Force to form around Bordeaux and the injured. Now that the Shinobi was out of the equation, their enemies remained the mob and—

Wilhelm: “Now we can settle this without any distractions getting in our way.”

Kurgan: “…”

Wilhelm turned this tip of his sword around and pointed it at Kurgan. However Kurgan had closed one of his eyes and was looking at the ground zero of the explosion, instead of at Wilhelm.

He gave a curt nod, not to Bordeaux, but to the Shinobi that was scattered there, as if to mark his end. Then—

Kurgan: “Nevertheless, you’re in a slightly different state than I’d hoped for.”

Wilhelm: “Indeed. It seems like I’ve picked up too many “distractions” to throw them away.”

Kurgan: “…”

Wilhelm: “That’s why I can’t imagine myself losing anymore.”

He was hesitant to say that the situation had improved.

Theresia was in the enemy’s clutches, Carol was a puppet, he had no idea if Roswaal and Grimm were safe or not, Bordeaux wasn’t stirring and the Subjugation Force was close to collapse.

Yet, despite all of that—

Wilhelm: “—DEFEND THE KINGDOM!”

Subjugation Force: “ROGER—!”

Wilhelm bellowed that order out, imitating the man who’d once shouted like he was spitting out blood. The brave men of the Subjugation Force responded vigorously to the Sword Demon’s rousing shout.

Wilhelm bore down on Kurgan once again, as swift as an arrow that had been let loose.

The holy sword Astrea and the Demon Cleavers clashed together, causing sparks to fiercely blossom.

3

It plunged through her torso; a scorching hot sensation welled through her body, and her knees gave way.

Her body had moved on her own. What blunder, what error had she made?

She couldn’t very well die. It was her own unmistakable standpoint, it should have been an unwritten law.

Nevertheless, she’d let her feelings take over and threw herself over like this.

—Aah, but even so. Aah, but then. Aah, but still.

???: “—JULIA!!”

An anguished voice called out her old name, drawing a smile out from her.

Something started to fill the empty parts in the depths of her heart, making her, unexpectedly, feel relief.

“I’m glad that I could protect you”, she thought.

That’s why, by that alone, Roswaal J. Mathers was—

.

Grimm: “…”

Seeing Roswaal’s face split into a smile and Carol’s tear stained face letting out that sorrowful cry, Grimm Fauzen’s heart flared violently.

He’d taken care of the possessed Carol’s weapon, and the Shinobi who operated from the shadows was being held in place by Roswaal. —There was no way to stop Grimm from attacking the culprit behind everything now.

Grimm: “A̸h̰.”

Grimm breathed out and forcefully brought his foot down. Leaping up from where he’d stamped his heel, was the greatshield he had dropped so to catch Carol’s sword.

Grimm: “Ŕ̷R̬̭̕R̃H̩̍H̸ȞH̶̨Ã̬̭Ā̸̜!!”

Grimm kicked the greatshield with all of his might, hurtling it straight towards—straight towards Stride, who stood by the rooftop’s edge.

The spinning silver disc was a steel greatshield that was as large as a human body. Its momentum and force were akin to a weapon that could easily break a human body were it to score a direct hit. It was hurtling towards the defenseless Stride.

Shasuke: “My Lord—.”

???: “Whoops.”

The Shinobi—Shasuke had attempted to stop that blow of silver, but had been stopped in his tracks by Roswaal, despite her having been stabbed in her belly. She had grabbed Shasuke’s arm with her heavily injured body, so as to not let the assassin escape, and smiled sweetly with blood trickling from the corner of her lips.

Julia: “You can’t just be so cold to disturb a woman’s stomach and then tryyyyyyyy and scurry away.”

Shasuke: “Gh…”

Shasuke shuddered at her pale smile. And, that delay proved to be fatal.

The greatshield was still hurtling towards Stride without any signs of stopping. He was a man that had declared himself as unable to fight. Naturally, that meant he had no way to stop that blow—

Stride: “Tch!”

The sound of steel against steel clashing against each other overlapped with his tch.

Giving off a dull thunk, Grimm’s greatshield struck the rooftop’s floor and rolled away. But the figure of the man collapsing from being hit by the greatshield was nowhere to be seen.

And that was because Stride had brushed the greatshield away with a crimson sword he had drawn from the sky.

Grimm: “Is~tha̵t t̵he̸…”

Julia: “Is that the Yang Sword Vollachia that’s handed down in the Vollachian Empire…?”

As she coughed up blood, Roswaal’s words swept away Grimm’s doubts.

—It was a beautiful treasured sword that looked as if it could burn the hearts of anyone who lay their eyes on it to cinders.

The crimson blade gave off the appearance that locked within its steel were undulating flames. The jewels encrusted on the sword shone with nothing but the brightest radiance. Were you to pin a treasured sword that carried the supremest value, it would be no doubt that sword itself.

However, their surprise at the Yang Sword didn't stop just at its beauty.

Stride: "Nngh…! Damned thing…"

Immediately afterwards, Stride gave a howl of what seemed like annoyance and his face contorted in pain. His left hand—his thin arm that was holding the Yang Sword suddenly burst into bright red flames.

Feeling the heat and pain, Stride reflexively let go of his Yang Sword. And just like that, the treasured sword was sucked back up into the sky, before it even dropped onto the rooftop's floor, and then vanished from sight.

It had disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared, however, the flames on Stride hadn't.

Shasuke: "My Lord, your arm!"

Stride: "I know!"

Shasuke moved his hand to his waist and threw a Kunai down at Stride's feet. Stride picked it up, and without any trace of hesitation severed his own burning arm at the elbow.

The arm fell down onto the rooftop, still continuing to burn, until finally charring and completely turning into ashes. Even so, Stride had managed to prevent the flames from consuming him further. He let out a long sigh.

Stride: “Never would my venerable self have dreamed that I would have lost an arm. And on top of that…”

While letting his smoldered left sleeve flutter in the wind, Stride stepped down on the remains of his own charred left arm. He picked up his curse-rings that had been engulfed by the flames with his arm from among the remains.

The gemstones on those curse-rings that he’d worn on his five fingers were beginning to fall apart.

Meaning that—

???: “—You won’t be doing as you please anymore, you bastard.”

A sharp, cold, dignified voice resounded from the rooftop. The one who had shouted that was the female knight—Carol. She was kneeling down on one knee, holding the fallen Roswaal in her arms.

She turned her crystal-clear sword aura towards Stride as she called out to Roswaal in her arms.

Carol: “Mathers-sama, Mathers-sama! Please, please hang on.”

During this moment of offense and defense, Shasuke had extracted his arm from Roswaal’s belly and returned back to Stride’s side. There was a river of blood which Roswaal had shed around where she’d collapsed.

Carol unfastened her cloak, and wrapped it tightly around her wound as a makeshift tourniquet. However, the cloak absorbed far too much of her blood and became incredibly heavy. Her blood wouldn’t let up. —Roswaal’s life wouldn’t stop flowing out from her.

Carol: “Mathers-sama, pleaseplease open your eyes…!”

Julia: “…You called me… Julia… I didn’t mishear you, right?”

Roswaal suddenly opened her eyelids fraily, and her lips stirred, her tone of voice felt just like she was teasing. Hearing those words, Carol gave a small gulp. Then she shook her head whilst holding back tears.

Carol: “If I call you that… please, would you tease me, like you always used to?”

Julia: “Ah, that would be nice, indeed. Yes, that would be nice.”

With a smile on her deathly pale face, Roswaal nodded several times. And then, with a trace of awfully faint emotion lodged in her heterochromatic eyes that were reflecting Carol in them, she said,

Julia: “At my home, there is a butler called Clind. Tell them that I’m entrusting Karl to him.”

Carol: “N, No! No, you can’t. Please, Mathers…”

Julia: “—Julia.”

Roswaal placed her finger on Carol’s lips as if shushing her tearful voice. Carol gazed in surprise at her touch, and then, hoping against hope to cling onto her,

Carol: “Julia, please…”

A single tear trickled down her cheek. Seeing that, Roswaal—No, Julia let out a long sigh as she looked on at her with affection.

Julia: “…Find happiness with Grimm-kun.”

Carol: “Julia?”

At the very end, her final words were that of a prayer. Her weight inside from between her arms grew heavier. However, something had left her instead.

Carol: “Julia, Julia… Julia, JULIA, JULIA!”

Julia’s head tilted forward, and the strength from her body left her. And her strength wasn’t the only thing that had left her. A far more important, the most important thing had left her. That was that she’d never again,

Carol: “Juli…”

Stride: “She died?—Halfway through.”

He said that in an awfully parched voice. It was, however, a voice that was devoid of both scorn and sarcasm.

Stride, who had lost his left arm, was gazing at Julia dead in Carol’s arms. His expression was cold, the feelings dwelling within his eyes were unfathomable, not a single soul would have been able to guess what was going on in his mind.

But, in a part of those complicated emotions, surely it felt like he was glimpsing at her with envy.

Carol: “—Don’t you fuck about.”

In the face of that envy, Carol’s anger had reached its limits.

It was natural. Of course it was natural.

She’d just lost someone here right now. He’d snatched away someone who was most dear to her. And for that.

Carol: “Even death would be a mercy for you, Stride Vollachia.”

Stride: “Forsooth. Even my venerable self cannot bear to think that the end awaiting me is in a place like any other.”

Carol had no intention of listening to his bullshit. She gritted her teeth, strongly.

She laid down Roswaal’s limp body, and crossed her arms on top of her chest. She then wiped away the blood that had trickled down the crook of her lips, and straightened her fringe up. After she finished doing this, Carol slowly stood up.

She stood next to her sweetheart who had picked his greatshield back up, with her Knight Sword in hand. Leaving her friend behind, she looked ahead at the enemy.

Shasuke: “My Lord, please forgive me for removing my bonds.”

Stride: “The curse ring which binds you has burnt to cinders. Why are you still here? Seeing the chance, shouldn’t it have been you and your unworthy younger brother’s dearest wish to lop off my venerable head off?”

Shasuke: “Raizo is my older brother. We always intended to follow you My Lord, even without the curse rings.”

Stride: “Hmph.”

Snorting as if he were making light of it, Stride raised his right hand. The five gems of his remaining curse rings glittered bewitchingly there, and both Carol and Grimm remained vigilant for his next move.

Stride: “Hah, don’t be frightened, scared little mice. Even the curse rings are not omnipotent. At this moment in time here, they cannot bind your minds and bodies. My venerable self does not have enough entrails remaining to pay their price.”

Carol: “Entrails, to pay their price…?”

Stride: “Each ring causes everlasting damage to a part of your body. That’s how they work. Even without them, I’m forcing myself to keep moving this corpse-like body. I have nothing left to offer.”

Receiving those words along with the radiance of those gems, Carol intuitively understood what he meant. And it horrified her.

Stride had worn ten rings on both of his hands. If he had to pay a price for each one of them, then the one standing in front of her was in their truest meaning a being whose body was like that of a corpse.

He’d kept up a ritual that brought him closer to his own death; this man had made it here as he unscrupulously kept piling up his villainy.

Where on earth had his tenacity and source of insatiable malice come from?

Carol: “I’ve heard that the Empire’s Imperial Family can be quite…

ruthless. Does you becoming like this have something to do with the issue of succession?”

Stride: “You mean from when I was served poison by my father, the emperor? I suppose that was the start of me becoming like a corpse.”

Carol: “—tch.”

Stride: “Hah. Don’t go thinking that such a trifling thing was the origin of who I am. What my venerable self detests is not my father, the emperor. And of course, it’s not my half-siblings who battled for the line of succession either. What my venerable self detests is… the construction.”

Clenching his right hand where the gems were, Stride continued, a fervor filling his voice. The man had brought down scorn for everything about the world, always with cold indifference, yet now he continued to speak with a fervor filling his voice.

Stride: “This world is the cruel Observers’ miniature garden. Fixed events, fate that has already been decided, where tragedy and comedy are a matter of course. It’s no more than a puppet show that’s merely been produced and garnished to make it look as if it were real.”

Carol: “Such wild delusions… they’re nonsense! What meaning is there to this situation when you say that?!”

Stride: “It’s quite simple, man and woman of minor roles. The Observers hath cast their roles in their miniature garden… Namely, the Divine Protections. And you small fry differ from their pawns. My venerable self as well. And my venerable self’s foolish wife, the Shinobi twins, and even the Eight Arms. What the Observers expect of us is tantamount to nothing more than us playing these nameless minor roles, which we do so like bumbling idiots, in an environment where everything is already decided.”

And then with a lurid smile, Stride put his right arm into the depths of his bosom pocket.

And slowly, he took something out from it.

Carol: “That’s a”

Seeing what it was, Carol gazed in astonishment, and Grimm too was lost for words.

A black spine, along with a cover that bore no title. There were hardly any opportunities to see the real thing, but just its existence was something that was well known by many people living in this world. It was a symbol of absolute evil.

It was a book that was owned by just those who were chosen. Or perhaps, those selected ought not to be referred to as chosen but rather as cursed—

Stride: “My venerable self is not going to finish with a minor role. No, actually, on the contrary. I don’t mind even a minor role. Scratches can be made upon the surface of the board regardless of whether a minor role is curtailed by the script. The stage can be broken. I shalt teach them that.”

Carol: “Stride Vollachia, YOU BASTARD!”

Stride: “It’s not like I believe in that foolish Witch or anything, but emulating that psychotic criminal who handed this over to me, I shalt say this.”

Held against his chest, was that evil book—The Gospel. Stride continued to give a wicked smile, and said.

Stride: “Witch Cult Sin Archbishop, representing Pride, Stride Vollachia.”

Carol: “The Witch Cult…?!”

Stride: “Unfortunately though they’re just a sham that came by Authority and influence. There’s no way I’m going to revere the tyrant of the world, The Witch of Envy like that lunatic does. Though perhaps, if you were to look at that too from the perspective of that which acted as the destroyer of the world, then I guess they’re on the same side as my venerable self.”

Confusion swept over Carol’s chest as she received Stride’s cynical words. The entity he had referred to was the name of the most abhorrent group in this word.

Knowing now that Stride was associated with that group of utmost evil was—

???: “Carol.”

Carol: “…ghk, Grimm, I’m so sorry. I’ve made you suffer so much.”

Grimm: “~~I’s fine. Besides,~~ you ~~shouldn’t dwell~~ on it ~~too~~ much.”

Carol: “Huh?”

Shaking his head, Grimm solemnly stiffened his gentle features. And then, he jerked his chin towards their friend who had collapsed right behind them,

Grimm: “~~We gotta wipe the~~ floor ~~with~~ this ~~guy.~~ We have ~~another reason~~ why.”

Carol: “…”

Receiving Grimm’s candid encouragement, Carol widened her eyes. Then she looked behind at the collapsed Julia, setting her eyes on her pale face.

A heat started to fill her body. She kept those emotions in check by gritting her teeth together; and then nodded.

Carol: “Yeah, you’re right. I am Carol Remendis. I am a daughter of the Remendis family, which has for generations served as the sheaths of the Astrea family. But now, just this one time.”

Holding out her Knight Sword in front of her, Carol firmly squeezed her eyes shut. Every single day flashed by behind her eyes, from the time they’d met until the end. Time and time again she’d annoyed her. Time and time again she had angered her. Time and time again they’d smiled and laughed together. Time and time again, she had thought of her with fondness.

That’s why, just this one time, in just this moment, she wasn’t a daughter of the Remendis Family, but rather—

Carol: “…As Carol, as Julia’s friend, I will cut you down, bastard. Repent for everything you did to Theresia-sama and Julia, the most important people in my life, and DIE.”

Saying those words as a vow, Carol pointed her sword at Stride. Seeing that, Stride’s smile deepened. His look couldn’t help but betray delight.

Stride: “Excellent, commoner, well said. And, what about you, her partner with a minor role, have you nothing to say?”

Grimm: “No.”

Stride: “Oh?”

A short, immediate answer. To Stride, who had raised his eyebrow at that reply, Grimm said.

Grimm: “You’re… jus’ some madman passing by.”

Stride: “—That’s the best solution.”

One could never hope to understand Stride who had smiled at those words.

That is what Carol and Grimm concluded. Their sword and shield sprung into action simultaneously.

But, just before the battle commenced, something stirred.

???: “—ROOOOOOOOOOAR!!”

The breath of the black dragon that had been freed from the shackles of the curse-rings raced down towards the four people standing on the rooftop in one fell swoop.

4

???: “*Puff*…*Pant*…”

She continued to run for dear life despite being out of breath, as fast as she could so that they wouldn't catch up with her and grab her.

The ground beneath her was muddy, so there was a good chance that she'd stumble and fall if she didn't take care. Yet if she paid too much attention to that, then there'd be no avoiding the clutches of the dead who were chasing her right now. She was up the creek without a paddle.

She'd never thought her stamina would fail her this much. Though it was natural when she calmed down and thought about it. What had she ever done to improve her own fitness?

She'd been living happily, feeling at peace, ever since she'd cast her sword aside; never had she seriously devoted herself to the sword. And with her having to hold her swollen womb on top of that, why on earth had she thought she could run away?

Regardless of that, she had to run away. She couldn't let herself be caught.

In her head she knew that this wasn't real, but at the same time her soul understood that there was no way that what happened here wouldn't not have some kind of effect on reality.

Theresia: "I've got to escape… No."

Theresia shook her head and tried to shake off all the complaints that were crowding her mind.

What would running away do? What would keeping on running away do? It mustn't be like that. Theresia, having been roped up here in the depths of her sin along with her unborn child, had a purpose.

That purpose was for her to defeat Melinda's Evil Eye, the Evil Eye Tribe girl who'd brought forth this darkness—

Theresia: "She told me… that she was the key for protecting the city. If that's the case then surely it'll help Wilhelm if I can get rid of her Evil Eye…"

If Melinda was their key, then it certainly had something to do with her Evil Eye. Thus now that she'd dropped under the influence of the Evil Eye herself, it was a matter of whether she could interfere with it somehow.

Even the least bit of change could possibly help Wilhelm. That was Theresia's battle.

Theresia: "…I'm really such a weak woman without my sword."

She gazed down at her hands and felt discouraged when she couldn't feel her Divine Protection of the Sword Saint. At the same time, she was disappointed in her own arrogance at trying to rely on the power she'd shunned so much.

Theresia: "…"

Taking a ragged gasp of air, Theresia looked back behind her at where she'd ran away from. The swarm of the dead were reflected in her blue eyes. They were still chasing her after having just missed out on grabbing her at the Stone Tower.

—The many individuals she'd killed in the Demi-Human War were drawing near to her, wanting to make Theresia one of their own.

Theresia looked at the faces of the dead, their faces were streaked with bloody tears; she listened to their cries and then closed her eyes. It made her aware that her earlier discouragement was more cruel than arrogant.

If I still had my Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, would I have killed them again? Would I have killed them all over again and procured their lives?

Could this be the sin that this place was trying to teach her?

Theresia: "—Ah!"

Theresia's feet faltered in her escape from the dead as she remained engrossed in her own thoughts. The dead stretched out their arms towards her. She couldn't dodge them and one of them managed to grab her arm.

Theresia's bones instantly started to creak, caught in his vice-like grip, making her shriek.

Theresia: "AGHHHHHH! WHAAAAA!"

Theresia swung her arm around with all her might, biting down her pain. However, the strength of the deadman was strong enough that she couldn't shake him off. And more of them arrived, grabbing her arms, legs, shoulders, trying to pull her down. She couldn't fight against such strength.

The moment she thought she was about to fall, she felt her baby stirring in her womb.

Even if I'm pulled down and torn to pieces, please let my child, just my child be safe.

Theresia: "Wilhelm…"

Wasn't here.

Theresia: "Carol…"

Wasn't here.

Theresia: "Someone, anyone…"

No one was here. —Theresia was all alone.

All alone in this place.

Theresia: "—Help me father."

???: "Why yes, of course."

A hug that was so gentle as to want to make her cry came in response to her weak cry for help.

Immediately after Theresia spluttered out a faint "Huh" a foray of silver blurs came racing forth, cutting down the dead who'd taken hold of her by her limbs.

Those behind that were all men, each with a Knight Sword in hand.

They held their beloved swords steady in their hands and positioned themselves in front of Theresia,

???: “No matter where we are, dad always has to show off.”

???: “You know, we were worried about Theresia too.”

???: “Huh?! Are y’all going to be knocking me down here as well?!”

The man who’d hugged Theresia reacted in indignation to what the men had grumbled at him. Theresia shook her head in refusal both at his response, and at the touch of him on her arms.

Because there’s no way. There’s no way this can be happening.

???: “Our lil’ sis took on too many burdens. Well, that’s probably ‘cause she regrets having had to kill so many people as the Sword Saint. But, you needn’t think of us as your sins too.”

???: “Either way, it’s thanks to her personality being like this that we can be here as well.”

She knew who those two who were talking were.

Their smiling faces were gentle-looking, and they were lazily holding their swords over their shoulder—

Theresia: “Big brother Casilles and Carlan…”

???: “I’m here too of course Theresia.”

Theresia: “You’re here as well, big brother Thames…”

Her youngest brother Casilles and her second eldest brother Carlan. And finally, her eldest brother Thames, whose unassuming looks took after their father, was there flexing his muscles.

Theresia’s breath caught in its tracks due to the appearance of her three brothers considering that she’d never expected to see them again.

Long ago, in the midst of the Demi-Human War, the three of them had taken Theresia's place when she had refused to fight—

???: "This is a miracle of love. Don't you think so, Theresia?"

Theresia: "What are you saying Father?"

???: "Eeh? What's up with that reaction? I thought you'd be glad?!"

He said this, looking taken aback. He was sporting aristocratic-looking facial hair that didn't quite match his faint-hearted personality—But that about him was charming too, being her beloved father, Bertol Astrea.

Bertol had rushed to Theresia's side along with her supposedly dead brothers. Along with her awfully out of place relief, that meant one other thing.

When Stride had attacked the mansion, Bertol had stood in front of Theresia to protect her from the possessed Carol's blade. Her father was still—

Theresia: "Father, I…"

Bertol: "You mustn't blame yourself, Theresia. Carol too. There's no reason why either of you are to be blamed."

Theresia: "But, but, there's so so much I wanted to talk to you about Father… *hgu*."

Bertol: "I also have tons of stuff I regret I won't be able to do of course. I won't be able to hold my first grandchild, and I'd wanted to be there for Carol's wedding. I was planning on making this year's wedding anniversary with Tishua something spectacular, and I even wanted to slowly get to the point where I'd have tried drinking with Wilhelm-kun, but…"

Theresia couldn't hold back her tears as she listened to all of Bertol's main regrets.

I really wanted that. I really wanted to give him that.

Yet, he'd never get that chance. He would forever "live" with those regrets—

Bertol: “But, you know Theresia, I’m okay with that.”

Theresia: “Huh?”

Bertol: “You can’t live without having some regrets. You can’t achieve everything you want. I lived happily, and so I died happily. The wants of a happy man know no bounds. I would have other desires if I’d fulfilled my current regrets. They’d keep coming and coming with no end.”

Bertol proudly puffed out his chest and continued his words,

Bertol: “That’s why Theresia, I… We love you. That’s why you, and your child, and their child will take over what we couldn’t do. We’re okay with that.”

Theresia: “Father…”

Bertol: “So, let us dig deep to give you that. Hey, you guys.”

Bertol lifted his head up and said that while keeping a certain air of gallantry about him. His three sons heard him, and looked back at him,

Casilles: “I mean, we’ve already started while you were talking.”

Carlan: “It’s not like the dead are gonna wait quietly for y’all to finish speaking!”

Thames: “You really suck with the sword dad, so even when you’re saying to “dig deep” it’s just us who will be.”

Bertol: “Eeeeh?! You’re really saying that?! You know, if you guys are gonna be like that, I’m not gonna bring in our reinforcement!”

He received a scathing judgement from his sons, even as they were busy cutting down the advancing dead whilst they talked. Theresia however, who was still being embraced by Bertol, cocked her head in confusion and said “A reinforcement?”

What kind of reinforcement could he be thinking about that'd save her more than she'd already been in a situation like this?

???: "—That would be me, Theresia. Though you may not be very happy about it."

Theresia: "Oh."

Someone who'd newly arrived there answered her question. He was a tall man with long hair, with a somewhat pleasant face to him. He'd rushed in and cut down a clump of the dead in one fell swoop.

She knew how sharp that sword was, and how strong he was with the sword. Because, the man was—

Theresia: "Uncle Fribal!"

Fribal: "The previous Sword Saint, hastened here after biting down his shame."

The man, Fribal van Astrea, gave her a wry smile—He was Bertol's younger brother and he'd been the Sword Saint before Theresia. She'd gotten the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint from him. That's why she'd often resented him for having burdened her with that horrible fate.

Fribal: "I didn't come to atone for that though. You've always, from the very beginning, bore a duty that couldn't be avoided as a member of the Astrea Family."

Theresia: "…Yes Uncle, I know. Back then, I wasn't able to fulfill my responsibilities."

Fribal: "Indeed so. You may have avoided your responsibilities, but lives were lost as a result of that. Maybe you could call that as being your sin. Nevertheless…"

More of the dead drew nearer behind him, even as they talked, but Fribal took care of them with a sharp blow from his sword, not even bothering to look back at them.

Pain surged through Theresia's heart, even as she thought "But I just couldn't help it." She was in pain because all of the dead here had materialized due to her sins.

Fribal: "Nevertheless, you needn't agonize over it. Theresia, even if this was the world that your guilty conscience produced, they aren't the actual people you killed. They're no more than an extension of the puppet show."

Theresia: "But Uncle."

Fribal: "Let me finish what I have to say, Theresia. I get that you want to believe this as being your sin, I get that feeling. But, if it's like this, then what does that make me, Thames and the others, and even my big bro' who came here?"

Theresia: "…"

Theresia kept her silence when she heard Fribal's question and plunged into thought. Bertol's face had turned sour right next to her, but he didn't notice it.

What was it that her uncle wanted to tell her? She thought hard about it. After all, she'd never properly talked to her uncle like this when he was alive.

Fribal: "You see, this place isn't the depths of your sinfulness. This place takes the form of the things that the people who are entranced want to believe. —It must have surely been made by a kind person."

Theresia: "A kind…person…"

Fribal: "You mustn't drown in your sin here, Theresia. I'm not going to let you die in a place like this. There's not a single thing you can make up for with death, so, you must live."

Fribal said this, then stepped forward and swung his sword to protect Theresia and Bertol. Thames and the other brothers stood by his side, once again forming a defensive line.

Bertol: "There's so much I want to say, but…"

Bertol trailed his words off there and looked at the Astrea men as if he were looking at something dazzling. Envy was in his gaze, for not having been blessed in any talent for the sword.

However, that envy quickly passed and he looked back towards Theresia with only affection in his blue eyes.

Bertol: “What Fribal said is correct. You must live, Theresia. You needn’t burden yourself with such sin. Like, how should I say it, daddy was really surprised to see that you’d been driving yourself into such a corner.”Theresia: “I never meant for it to get as bad as this though…”

Her recognizing it too was probably something sweet, now that he’d spelled it out to her.

Bertol: “I’m not saying to forget your sins, but stop living for them. You don’t have to live in order to atone for them. Even if your heart still aches… you must return the favor.”

Theresia: “The favor…?”

Bertol: “Don’t live in order to atone for your sins, but rather to return the favor. Then you can live happily, and die happily. I’m positive that’s precisely like the ideals of my daughter.”

Theresia’s eyes swung wide open as Bertol beamed at her.

Could she be allowed such a way of living being from the lineage of the Sword Saint? Could she be allowed to live such a gentle life being someone from the Astrea Family, a family who’d been compelled to live out their lives as the swords of the Kingdom?

But Bertol Astrea was laughing, him having managed precisely that.

Theresia: “Father.”

Bertol: “What’s up?”

Theresia: “Just like, I wanted you to name my child.”

Bertol: “…Is that so. Right, right.”

Bertol's expression grew more relaxed at Theresia's coaxing. Then he scratched his hair, which was the same shade of red as Theresia's, and said,

Bertol: "Then I'm gonna go and try rack my brains for one."

Theresia: "…Mhm. That's a promise, father."

Theresia made this promise with him, knowing full well that there'd be no chance he could keep it. Then, still holding her father's arm, Theresia looked up towards the Astrea men.

Theresia: "Big brother Thames, big brother Carlan, Casilles, uncle Fribal."

The men turned to look at her when she called their names out. All of them were in a state where they couldn't really afford to do that, but they put on a show of courage, so as to not look weak in front of her.

When she paused to think about it, she finally realized that she'd been protected all this time.

Theresia: "I love all of you."

Thames, Carlan, Casilles, Fribal: "…"

Did I manage to give them a proper smile?

Did I manage to be the Theresia Astrea they knew before I had the "Van" added to my name?

—Can I think of the smiles that everyone showed me at the end as the answer?

5

—A sound like cracking glass signaled its collapse.

Theresia: "—Hh, ah."

Theresia crouched down and clutched her chest in agony, unable to breathe for a moment. She raggedly gasped for air over and over again. The air was full of dust, and the room stunk of blood—She'd made it back.

???: "—GHAAAAAA?! My Evil Eye has been defeated?!"

Someone let out a piercing yell as soon as Theresia's senses returned to her, that person being the user of the Evil Eye, Melinda.

She dragged her long robe (which was long enough to brush against the floor) along to the window of the Spire. She looked out of the window in complete panic. Then she screamed, tearing at her ashen-colored hair.

Melinda: "A-A-AGHHHH, IT WAS BROKEN, IT'S BEEN… BROOOOOOOKEN?!"

Theresia: "Melinda…?"

Melinda: "MY SPELL WAS BROKEN… THE TOWNSPEOPLE ARE BACK TO NORMAL… MY LORD HUSBAND'S DESIRES, HIS WISHES!"

Melinda yelled her head off in a complete frenzy. Then she looked back at the crouching Theresia, and with her eyes that she'd been squeezing tightly shut now wide open, she ran over to her with hatred in her Evil Eyes.

She grabbed Theresia by the hair and forced her up.

Theresia: "OW!"

Melinda: "HOW DARE YOU DO THIS. MY LORD HUSBAND LEFT THIS TO ME, HE ENTRUSTED IT TO ME. I WAS FINALLY APPRECIATED. M-M-M-My IDEAL DREAM… HOW!"

Theresia: "—. My family ended up sending me back because I'm not really bearing anything like sin."

Melinda: "—TCH! ALWAYS SO ARROGANT! Y-Y-Y-Y-YOU…"

Biting her lips in anger, Melinda tried to push Theresia down.

However, just before she did, she caught sight of Theresia's swollen womb and that made her suddenly stop.

She'd been saying this even before she'd tried to use her Evil Eye power. Then, her uncle was right.

Theresia: "You care about my baby. —Let's stop this here."

Melinda: "I c…"

Theresia: "You can't do that? Well, you shouldn't be. I don't have my sword or my Divine Protections right now. I'm just a woman, a mother… If you have someone you love as well."

She could neither understand nor pardon the sort of nature Stride, Melinda's loved one, had.

Even so, that wasn't why she'd denied Melinda who loved that evil man.

Melinda: "I ca…"

Melinda closed her eyes again and turned her face away from Theresia's gaze, as if she were avoiding it on purpose. Theresia didn't look away despite that and kept urging her.

Melinda's hands were trembling all over, as if she were struggling to bear her gaze. A few brief moments passed with her in that state before she continued speaking,

Melinda: "I…"

Melinda tried to blurt something out, as if she'd made up her mind. Seeing a glimmer of hope there, Theresia nodded her head with a "Yeah." However—

Theresia: "Oh."

Melinda's face tensed up and she pushed Theresia away by force.

Theresia fell backwards, offering no resistance to her unexpected push. But she didn't have the time to check why she'd actually done

that.

—The red hot fiery breath of the Black Dragon billowed towards the spire’s rooftop, towards the room Theresia and Melinda were in.

Act Eight

1

—The Shinobi were Shura that were birthed as a result of Modifications akin to the tortures of hell.

In the beginning, their names were taken away. Then their family, their possessions, their past, their future, and everything they had before becoming a Shinobi was taken away. Only after being bleached like this, were they readied as a Shinobi prototype.

Only after that, was the true essence of the atrocities that took the name Body Modification were carved into their mind and body.

They were trained, drugged, magicked and subject to all kinds of heresy from everywhere and every time—One in a hundred of them would manage to escape suicide, one in a hundred from those would manage to keep their human form, and from those, one in a hundred would manage to not die from insanity. Finally, one from those hundred would be completed as a Shinobi.

After mastering the arts of taijutsu as well as the Shinobi techniques, these inhuman Shura called Shinobi were born.

Thus it was nothing short of a miracle that both brothers, Raizo and Shasuke, the Shura Brothers, were completed successfully—It had been the first time since the village had been founded that a set of twins had been completed as Shinobi.

The Twin Shura, who were one in body and soul, were venerated as the pride of the Shinobi Village.

—I guess that must be why.

A Shinobi only becomes a fully-fledged one when it loses its self. The Twin Shura, who had been hailed as the greatest masterpiece of the village, swore a vow of retribution for their fellow villagers after their village had been burnt to the ground. And thus they ended up siding with the Destruction Wish.

The Shinobi Village had grown too powerful. Its burning had been an instigation from some of the Empire's Nobility who feared that they would mount an insurrection. They struck when the Twin Shura were absent and engulfed the village in flames, reducing their fellow villagers to ashes.

The pale faced, half-dead looking man spoke to the Shura Brothers, standing on their pile of ashes.

—We shalt tarnish the script of this cruel world and trample down its fine stage.

They still had no idea why they'd followed those words. But, they had no regrets.

They exacted their revenge for their fellow villagers and burnt down the mansions of the Nobles. The Twin Shura had bowed their heads at the man's ambition.

That's why, even now, they were—.

???: "My Lord!"

The Shinobi yelled out, then tore open the black costume he was wearing, exposing his shiny pale skin. A phosphorescent light brimmed out from the mottled pattern that rose up across his entire body, and he began to run faster.

In an instant, the Shinobi—Shasuke's body fiercely leapt up to the sky, having grabbed the man next to him.

"…"

A moment later, a wave of heat billowed through the Spire rooftop behind them, that they'd previously been standing on. It was the red-hot fiery breath the Black Dragon had unleashed. A being that went beyond what humans could fathom, now spreading its black wings up over the city.

Its fiery breath glowed a pale green, and as it melted the stones of the Spire as it spread out, contrary to its beauty.

It would easily burn you to cinders if it scored a direct hit; merely the hot air that came from its wake was plenty enough to burn one's internal organs to cinders just by breathing it in. Naturally that meant the other people on the rooftop had no way to survive its onslaught—

???: "—Hey, dumbass, where do you think you're running off to!"

A split second later, Shasuke heard a quiet voice that was full of anger coming towards him. He twisted himself around in midair. He couldn't manage to dodge and was hit full force by a sword slash. His left shoulder burst open, making him peel his eyes wide open.

The golden haired Swordswoman—Carol, had jumped up after Shasuke and caught up with him. She was someone who was pretty clean with the sword, but he'd never thought she'd amount to more than that. And yet, she'd kicked her way up over to him, as if she were using the very sky as her footholds, and had slashed at him whilst he'd been unable to move.

Carol: "Kicking up in mid-air is my domain, it looks like you've made a misjudgment."

Shasuke: "—tch, But what happened to your beloved if you're here?"

Very few people would have been able to escape from the rooftop that had been scorched by the dragon's fiery breath. Shasuke and Carol, who had abilities that let them run up the sky, had been exceptions. But there'd been one more man.

An ordinary man who just had a greatshield with him, there was no way that he would have survived—

???: "—That's what it's all about, an ordinary man."

Within his arms, Stride wasn't paying any heed to the blade bearing down on them, and was instead looking in the complete opposite direction as he spoke with a fervor in his voice. Shasuke followed his Master's gaze to see what had caught his attention. It looked to be the rooftop that was smothered in the lingering heat.

He could see a glistening greatshield there. —As well as the ordinary man who'd tided through the flames, protecting the body of the dead woman.

Carol: "I am the Sheath, Grimm is the Shield—And we shall remain companions next to our Sword."

Shasuke: "Gh."

Shasuke caught her flashing blow with his Kunai and jolted back, managing to gain a foothold on something. That something was the Black Dragon's back.

The Black Dragon: "*GRAAAAAAAUGH*."

Considering that the Dragon was way over ten meters tall, the weight of such puny humans was nothing to it. Its roars resounded, now having gained its freedom from the rings' curses. And as they resounded, a fantastical swords dance began to unfold between the Shinobi and the Swordswoman, making use of the transcendental creature's back, wings and arms to conduct it.

The Black Dragon twisted its body around in mid-air; its claws and tail lashed out relentlessly all around them. A gale blew up that would mark certain death were it to sweep over them. Shasuke gritted his teeth, faced with this moment of battle.

He was holding his Master with his injured left arm, and crossing blades with the first-rate Swordswoman using only his right arm. He was wielding the power he'd honed as a Shura of the extremes on the back of a Dragon, a being of legend, as if this were some kind of jape.

I can't believe this. Is this really happening?

It should have been his destiny to rot in the darkness, to be shunted away and lurk in the underside of legend, in the shadows of the world and history. Yet such a grand stage had come to the Shinobi.

Shasuke: “Khaa!”

The Shinobi bared his teeth and let out a gasp of air—No, he’d laughed.

It had been a very long time since Shasuke, who should have lost his self and thrown away his emotions, had laughed. The last time had been when he’d been a child, before he’d become Shasuke.

He gave a full-toothed grin and finally he realized why he’d sided with Stride. —It was just because it felt fantastic.

He found everything delightful about the man who cursed destiny and was trying to upend the world, from the gratification he got from him, to the way he sneered at them being constrained by their limited way of life as that of a Shinobi.

That’s why—

Shasuke: “—Yes, indeed, it has been truly delighting!”

He thrust his Kunai forward at god-like speeds, trying to stab it through the Swordswoman’s pale throat. However, the Shinobi’s godspeed skill didn’t come close to the likes of a blow from the Sword Demon

Therefore it was swept aside by the skill of the Shieldsman who’d been keeping an eye on them from nearby.

Grimm: “C̚A̸̩R̒O̶L̃!”

The man had jumped onto the Black Dragon’s back and risked his life just for that one blow. He shouted her name out, and in response, the woman rushed forwards without a shred of hesitation and swung her longsword up.

Looking at that from the corner of his eyes, Shasuke released the clasp on the magic sigil that adorned his entire body and burned through his Od to turn his body into steel. There’d be no reason why the blade couldn’t bounce back off him had it been a half-baked one.

However, the Shinobi knew that he was as good as a piece of paper in front of that blade of crystalline purity.

Shinobi: “Big brother, I hope you managed to fulfill your part.”

Her sword slash came at him diagonally and cut into him from his right shoulder all the way down to his left hip, severing his body in two with a single stroke. Having received such a fatal blow, Shasuke spat out blood and smiled the best smile of his life.

—Though, I hope you too big bro were able to smile in your last moments.

Shasuke: “Pardon me for leaving, My Lord.”

The Shinobi fell from the Dragon’s back, covered in blood.

—Likely they were going to be the only Shinobi, or such, who’d died in a place as spectacular as this one.

The Twin Shura fulfilled their Destruction Wish, accompanied by such a sense of satisfaction, and thus perished in Picoutatte.

2

Shasuke: “Pardon me for leaving, My Lord.”

Saying this, the Shinobi collapsed with his blood and viscera splurging out. The pale blue shiny pattern on his body had lost its light, and he was definitely dead.

The Shinobi’s remains slid down the Black Dragon’s scales and fell to the ground below. Barely paying any attention to that, Carol wiped her bloodstained Knight Sword clean and once again readied herself for combat.

In front of her, that evil man in black was clinging to the Dragon’s back as it stormed about like the wind; the man had now lost the Shinobi that had served as his faithful guard—It was Stride Vollachia, the man who’d named himself as a Sin Archbishop.

Carol: “You’re all out of options, you demon. Your Black Dragon’s escaped from your clutches, and your plot has all come to nothing.”

Stride: “So you’re the sort who runs her mouth silly as soon as she sees that the tide has turned. But I shalt forgive you. Changing your ways to the vibrato of the accompaniment is likewise the karma of a minor role like yourself.”

Carol: “…”

Stride’s left arm had been reduced to ashes, he’d offered his entrails as payment for his curse-rings, and now he was on the verge of death, having just lost his last ally. Despite all of this, his attitude hadn’t changed.

Carol realized that within herself, she was gazing at him awfully calmly.

The man’s words should have really gotten to her; they should have tormented her as if she’d just been given all of the world’s anguish, anger and sorrow. But all that Stride was right now was pitiful.

Carol: “Did you resort to this kind of violence as revenge for being unable to attain ordinary happiness?”

Stride: “—Eh.”

Stride looked like he’d been taken by surprise for a moment, having heard Carol’s composed voice. He then turned his face down, still staring at the serious-looking Carol.

His shoulders shook and a gurgling sound came from within his throat. He was laughing.

Stride: “Ghghahahahaha! Are you for serious, hahaha! What clownish words… Could it be that you’re pitying my venerable self? How foolish can you get, to find yourself in my venerable presence, me, the guy who’s at the core of all that which has happened, and only be able to understand it like that?”

Carol: “That’s right, I’m a fool. It’s because I’m a fool that I was tricked by scum like you, lost the one I was meant to protect and let my friend die. I hate myself for being made an idiot of all this time.”

Carol looked down at her bloodstained hands in response to Stride’s words that were marked with a sneer.

Carol had let her precious friend die and laid these hands on her benefactor that she was meant to protect. She’d made countless mistakes. Come to think of it, hadn’t she always been making mistakes ever since she’d met Theresia for the first time?

Despite that, such a Carol, such a foolish Carol was—

Grimm: “~~I love you.~~”

Carol: “Mhm, I love you too. Julia loved me too. Bertol also cared a great deal about me. —And Theresia-sama loves me as well.”

Carol gave a nod at Grimm’s affirmation, who now stood right next to her, and then a gentle grin appeared on her face.

Stride’s expression stiffened when he heard those words, and the scornful glint vanished from his eyes. A heated fury akin to that of the Black Dragon’s fiery breath replaced it.

But that tempestuous emotion vanished from him in the blink of an eye. He slowly stood up.

Gale-like winds were still blowing past the Black Dragon’s back. He sucked at fighting, and it was unlikely that he was going to last more than a few seconds without his left arm. As if to prove that point, Stride immediately lost his footing and slowly started to topple over. —He was thrown off from the Dragon’s back, into mid-air.

Carol: “Not after coming this far—hgh!”

Carol brought her longsword down and flew towards him with a single jump, as if she were saying she wasn’t going to let him suicide. She would catch up to Stride’s falling body and cut him down with a single blow.

At least, she believed that that would be a good way to mourn for

Julia—However, her sword didn’t reach him.

Grimm: “N̦̍Ö̸!”

She’d been held back from behind the moment she’d jumped, making it so she’d stayed fixed in place. The one who’d held her back by her slender waist had been Grimm, having flung himself at her with a look of alarm on his face. His normally gentle look had been replaced with one of urgency, similar to that of a drawn blade; he jumped backwards with all his might still holding onto Carol.

A split second later, the Black Dragon’s enormous tail crashed down where they’d just been standing a moment ago. Its tail was covered in rocky scales; had it scored a direct hit, it would have easily ground them down into chunks of flesh.

They’d managed to escape their demise, however, it had come at the cost of that scumbag Stride dropping down right beneath her eyes—

The Black Dragon: “*KRAAAAAAUGH*.”

—The Black Dragon, with its three heads still scrapping amongst each other, followed Stride down, setting their sights on him.

Stride: “…Come.”

Carol could see Stride in the distance facing the looming Dragon, moving his lips to say that.

In his final moments, that man had escaped from Carol’s blade and surrendered his life to the fangs of the Black Dragon that he’d summoned—Yet, just before that came to pass.

???: “STRIDE-SAMA!”

A woman jumped out of the ruined, burnt Spire window.

The woman was completely burnt all over, to the point that it was a miracle that she was still alive. The woman—Melinda clung to her husband’s body in mid-air as he moved to meet the Dragon.

The Dragon’s maws did not hesitate and swallowed up the embracing married couple.

3

The Dragon’s fiery breath engulfed the Spire rooftop, and a part of its intensity reached the inside of the Spire as well.

Theresia: “…”

The green flames billowed in from the open window and burned through the remains of the wretched sacrifices that had been piled up in a corner of the room. Then with no signs of stopping, the flames surged towards the two women as well—Theresia and Melinda.

—No, that wasn’t quite right. The green flames were crashing down on only one of them.

Melinda had pushed Theresia away and shut the iron door that led to the staircase with her body. Melinda was left alone inside of the flame-stricken room with the scorching heat mercilessly burning her back.

Melinda: “GHAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!”

Her screams of agony echoed through from behind the iron door. Theresia, protecting her womb, rushed over to the door and tried to open it. However, the iron door had partially lost its shape from being melted and didn’t budge an inch under Theresia’s slender arms.

Theresia: “Damn this… MELINDA! MELINDA! OPEN THE DOOR!”

Theresia banged on the scorching iron door and called out to her inside. Even from where she was, a tremendous amount of heat was coming through it. There was no way that anyone could survive being subject to this without some way to protect against it.

Theresia: “WHY, Why did you…”

Melinda: “—The… child. In your womb… No… sin.”

Theresia: “—Hic, MELINDA!”

Melinda’s struggling voice coming from beyond the iron door made Theresia’s head jerk up. The deformed iron door still remained tightly shut, keeping the two women separated from each other.

Theresia: “Melinda, listen to me! I’m sure… I’m sure that we’ll get you treated right away, so I just need to find somewhere I can get through to you.”

Melinda: “I… my Evil Eye for my Lord Husband… I’m… my Lord Husband’s… unworthy wife… my Lord Husband’s…”

Theresia: “…Melinda?”

Melinda’s voice was delirious. Theresia instantly knew what that meant. She had been in many battlefields during the heights of the Civil War in her role as the Sword Saint. She’d heard that kind of voice many times in the fronts of battle where life and death were intertwined.

—This was the voice of a human being who’d been gripped by death and was about to lose their life.

The flames that had surged into the room had burnt Melinda’s body so badly that death was an inevitability for her. What’s more was that she’d protected Theresia from meeting that end.

She’d done it instinctively, most probably unconsciously, just as an act from her own conscience, to protect Theresia and her unborn child.

Theresia: “…”

Theresia gritted her teeth and then clenched her fist. She needed to get back into this room by any means possible. Even if she couldn’t save Melinda, she couldn’t let her die alone.

No one should ever die alone.

Theresia: “…”

Theresia climbed up the staircase whilst holding the weight of her swollen belly.

Considering that the Black Dragon had unleashed its fiery breath at the Spire, what had happened above had also been gnawing at her mind. She was worried about whether Carol was alright, since she would have been on the rooftop. With those thoughts likewise plaguing her mind, Theresia rushed over to the door that led to the rooftop. The iron door had been warped out of shape as she'd expected, but she just managed to squeeze her body through since the door had been left ajar.

—Then, on the smoldering rooftop, she lay her eyes on the corpse of a beautiful woman who'd been laid to rest with her eyes closed.

Theresia: "Roswaal-san…"

She instantly knew that the beautiful woman was Roswaal, being that they'd interacted with each other quite a few times. She also immediately understood that her pale sleeping face was one that would never wake up again.

A painful pang went through her heart. Both Wilhelm and Carol would mourn her death since she'd been an irreplaceable friend for them.

Theresia: "—tch, the Black Dragon!"

However, she couldn't run over to her corpse and lose herself in grief. As soon as she focused her attention, she could see the figure of the Black Dragon flapping its wings around the sky near the rooftop.

Seen at a distance, the Dragon had several figures on its back. And soon enough, one of those figures (the one wearing black clothes) slipped off of the Dragon's back and fell down, down, down—

???: "STRIDE-SAMA!"

A shrill voice echoed through the sky a moment later, and an ashen haired woman jumped out from the tower window. A gentle woman who'd been brutally burnt by the flames, with her whole body covered in burns wherever she looked—Melinda.

She jumped down to Stride, who was falling from the sky, and wrapped her arms around his slender body into a tight embrace. Theresia could see that her eyes, the eyes she'd long shunned as Evil Eyes, were full of happiness.

As they fell, Stride's right hand and Melinda's left clasped each other from the front. The two of them, just in that moment, were nestled up close to each other, truly like a married couple who loved each other—

Theresia: "…"

—Their two bodies were swallowed up by the maws of the swooping Black Dragon. Their three heads sunk their fangs into the two bodies, as if scrapping for them, and mercilessly began to tear them apart. Even though all of the Black Dragon's scrapping heads shared the same stomach, its vicious hunting still turned the married couple into chunks of flesh as if they had some meaning to rending their fangs amongst their flesh and blood.

Theresia: "Ah…"

Theresia thumped down to her knees where she'd been standing. The strength had gone out from her, and her feet were refusing to move. Had she sunk to her knees out of discouragement or relief? Her heart hadn't been able to really take in Melinda's final moments.

I wanted to speak some more with her.

Would that have let me understand, even if but a fragment, the happiness her Evil Eyes had filled with in her final moments?

???: "Theresia-sama…"

Someone suddenly called her name out, making her lift her head up. There she saw Carol's figure.

She'd knelt down and gently placed her hand against Theresia's cheek. Theresia placed her own hand on top of her's; "It's definitely warm”, she thought, that meant that she was herself again. She started to shed tears.

Theresia: “Carol… Are you okay?”

Carol: “I am, all thanks to Grimm… and Julia.”

Theresia: “Julia…”

The name was unfamiliar to her, but the look in Carol’s eyes told her all she needed to know. There’d been a profound sadness, and affection, in her eyes when she’d spoken out the name Julia. Roswaal J Mathers—The woman Carol had called Julia was probably to thank for bringing her and Carol back together again like this.

???: “The~~resia-sama~~…”

Theresia: “I’m sorry for everything I’ve put you through as well Grimm-kun… Where’s Wilhelm?”

Grimm: “~~—Still fighting~~ in th~~e city~~.”

Theresia closed her eyes after she heard Grimm’s response, who’d moved over to be beside Carol.

Wilhelm’s fighting. Of course he would be. Wilhelm’s always fighting. He’s always swinging his sword about, fighting to protect something.

—That’s why my dear is still fighting even now.

Theresia: “The head honcho of the Stride faction’s dead, but, as for his Black Dragon…”

Carol: “I hope the Dragon he summoned is going to go back to where it came without a hitch…”

Legend has it that the Divine Dragon Volcanica was a deeply benevolent being as well as a rational entity of sagacity. However, even though the Kingdom of Lugunica took the name of the Dragon Kingdom, no one had ever recorded anything about encountering a

Dragon other than Volcanica. —The Black Dragon could be a history re-defining being.

Earth Dragons acted friendly around people, Water Dragons acted gruff around people, whilst Winged Dragons were hardly ever fond of people.

Then, how was this Dragon, which you could call their progenitor, going to act in this situation…?

Carol: “—tch! THE DRAGON!”

Carol yelled and then pointed up at the sky.

The Black Dragon had finished chewing up the body of that evil man and his wife, and had now unfurled its wings and soared up high above the city sky. They hoped it’d continue to flap its wings like this and head over yonder to the Great Waterfall. But, such a fleeting hope it was—

The Black Dragon: “*KRAAAAAAUUUUGH*!!”

Its three heads all turned in different directions, and they quickly vanished from sight due to the fiery breath they had unleashed as they bickered amongst themselves.

Their fiery breaths of destruction bore down on the city and surged through the streets, lighting them up in flames. Deserted buildings burst up in flames, spreading the flames about even more. Anguished shrieks started to echo throughout the city.

Carol: “THE CITY…! Gh, the Dragon’s still enraged?!”

Grimm: “~~Their voices~~…~~They’ve all gotten their senses back~~…?”

Carol and Grimm each gave their reactions to the damage the three heads of the Black Dragon had brought about.

Carol to the Dragon’s wrath, Grimm to the anguished shrieks that came from the city, and Theresia, who’d reacted to neither of those things, had swung her eyes wide open.

Theresia: "—Wilhelm."

High up in the sky, a silver gleam swooped up to the Three-Headed Dragon that had perched itself in the skies with its wings unfurled.

???: "HYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!"

—The Sword Demon, Wilhelm van Astrea's sword pierced into its black wings.

The Black Dragon: "*KRAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH*."

The Black Dragon let out a roar of pain at that unexpected blow which had come from this diminutive being who shouldn't even have been able to reach it up in the sky. Wilhelm's sword shallowly tore through the Dragon's wing, yet definitely inducing damage to it.

Carol: "That man is so…"

Carol muttered that with disbelief in her eyes, having just witnessed Wilhelm leap up to where the Black Dragon was. Next to her, Grimm's eyes crinkled up—A trace of vexation flitted through them before he then turned to look at Theresia.

Grimm: "~~Please escape with Carol~~, ~~Theresia-sama.~~"

Theresia: "Grimm-kun?"

Grimm: "It's ~~our duty to protect the city~~. ~~Carol's duty is to protect you~~, ~~Theresia-sama~~. ~~And your duty Theresia-sama is~~…"

Grimm's gaze shifted to Theresia's belly. Theresia realized that she'd been unconsciously keeping her hands over her belly ever since she'd looked over at the Black Dragon.

She'd been gently stroking her belly in instinct, so as to reassure her unborn child.

Carol: "Grimm, I…"

Grimm: "~~Go with Theresia-sama and Mathers-sama~~."

Carol: “But I…ah.”

Carol’s eyes had swayed with hesitation after she’d received Grimm’s instructions. Shouldn’t she, who had the strength left to fight, stay here and help out; it was that kind of hesitation.

—Grimm pulled Carol close to him and silenced that with a kiss.

Carol: “…”

Grimm’s lips overlapped with Carol’s sweet, soft ones, her body stiffened in surprise. Then, once Grimm slowly pulled away from the kiss, Carol’s face grew bright red as she stammered out a “Wh-Wha-Wha…”

Grimm: “I’m ~~leaving the~~ life ~~of~~ t~~he person I love to you~~”Carol: “—All… Alright. Grimm, you too, please…”

Carol placed her hand on Grimm’s chest, her hesitation melted away by his lips, and placed within these words of supplication. Grimm gave her a resolute nod and then turned his attention to Theresia.

His look was one of resolve and determination; Theresia had no intention of stopping him.

Grimm: “~~I can’t let him fight alone~~.”

Theresia: “—You may go, Grimm Fauzen. Knight of the Shield. The Sword Saint Theresia van Astrea sees your resolve.”

Grimm: “Th~~ank you~~.”

Grimm received Theresia’s blessing and gave her a firm nod with an imposing look now adorning his face. Then he turned his back to Theresia and Carol and looked up at the evening sky where the Sword Demon and Black Dragon were fighting.

Grimm: “—H~~YAAAAAAAAAA~~!!”

He shouldered his greatshield and let out a heroic shout. Then he jumped from the Spire rooftop to the building next to it. He jumped again, making his way down to the ground in a single bound. When he touched earth, he kicked off from the ground so to make his way down below where his camarade de guerre was.

Carol saw Grimm off and then gently picked Roswaal's corpse up. She turned her head around and looked at Theresia with an expression that she'd cleared of sorrow and unease.

Theresia likewise gave her a resolute nod in return seeing that look.

Carol: "Theresia-sama, we too need to…"

Theresia: "Yeah. —Let us do what needs to be done. So that we do not bring shame to the people we love."

4

—Rewinding back a bit from when the Sword Demon commenced his attack on the Black Dragon in the sky.

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???: "—Her Evil Eye… has come undone?"

Wilhelm parried the deadly blows that came from his cleavers, and with his own blow of silver, nicked a scratch across his opponent's massive body. The blue-skinned, bare-chested Eight Arms took half a step backwards before Wilhelm heard him mutter that in his solemn tone.

Wilhelm grasped what he'd meant by that from the corner of his eyes, causing him to powerfully gnash his teeth together.

Wilhelm: "…"

He could see the citizens of Picoutatte from the edge of his sight, confused by what they'd just been doing, utterly bewildered. They'd been made into a mob thanks to the power of the Evil Eye and had been bearing down on the Zergev Corps. They'd been freed from their spell now and gotten their senses back.

???: "Commander! Everyone's come back to their senses!"

As soon as his deputy commander, Conwood, shouted that, all the other group members also raised their swords and cried out cheers of joy. They then called out to the confused citizens and hurriedly started to take the necessary steps to usher them away from the battlefield.

Conwood: “Have at it, Wilhelm! Leave the surroundings to me!”

An imposing smile appeared across the Eight Arms Kurgan’s face as soon as he heard what Conwood had said.

Kurgan: “Bravo, what a fine soldier. Your soldier is really well trained.”

Wilhelm: “Actually my Deputy Commander’s the most unreliable of the bunch. He really needs to get his act together.”

Kurgan: “A fine jape. Even so, if the Evil Eye girl’s control of them has come undone with this, then that means…”

The Dragon’s roars poured down from the sky midway through Kurgan’s words. The three-headed Black Dragon that had settled in the heavens above had started to writhe and buck, as if something was clinging to its body.

There’s a few people on its back, fighting on top of a place like that. They’ve gotta be real idiots.

Wilhelm: “Guess I’ve got no choice but to help out those idiots, so you’d better just give up and die.”

Kurgan: “My apologies, but I must do the same thing as well. It’s not just your strong suit.”

Kurgan swung his drawn blades after they exchanged these rebuttals, thus recommencing their sword fight with a flick of his cleavers. Wilhelm kicked off from the ground, from the walls, and used the city in any way he could to lay down his attack. Kurgan countered that by swinging the four cleavers in his eight arms in a similar fashion that a storm would rage.

Wilhelm’s actions were like an adventurer who’d daringly challenged a tornado of death. He'd end up snatched away if the swirling torrents of wind snagged even a shred of his clothing, and duly turned into mincemeat.

On other hand, the ability the Eight Arms possessed in continuously dodging through his sword slashes without getting any serious wounds on his huge body was likewise of a supreme quality.

That's why he didn't get it, no matter how many times he thought about it. Why, why was this man siding with Stride?

Could it be because of the fighting spirit that blazes through his body in battle with the strong? That's too shallow, if that's the reason why. I'm not going to say that I understand his personality just from locking swords with him, but there's definitely something it's telling me.

The way the Eight Arms treats his sword isn't like some kind of half-assed swordsman.

Wilhelm: "Having said that, it doesn't seem likely that he's being manipulated by those rings either."

There was no hesitation or indecision in Kurgan's sword-art like in those who'd been following orders against their will. And in the first place, there was something about the way Stride and Kurgan interacted that was far from the ceremonial fanfare of a master-servant relationship.

The way he spoke candidly about Stride's attitude, the way he offered him advice, the way he was helping him out like this. Maybe the way he interacted with Stride was because—

Wilhelm: "—You two are like parent and child?"

Kurgan: "Yes, though not by blood."

Wilhelm launched a flurry of attacks at him that whirled around like a spinning top. Kurgan met that high-speed attack, scattering sparks everywhere as he gave his mutter of assent.

Kurgan and Stride's relationship was that of a parent and child who weren't related by blood—In other words, he was his foster parent.

Wilhelm: "I'm sorry but a bastard like you has no real talent for raising children."

Kurgan: "I do not disagree with you either. I hope you do not make the same mistakes I made, though alas, you may not end up seeing the face of your unborn child."

Wilhelm: "Whatever you say."

Wilhelm's flurry of slashes grew in intensity as he said this. Kurgan brought his cleavers down and continued to parry his blows, his eyes widening a bit in response; the fact of the matter was, a rust had grown in his Demon Cleavers.

That was a sign that Wilhelm's ongoing cascade of sword slashes were all aiming for the same place, with little deviation—And a split second later, the monstrous skill of the Sword Demon's blade finally shattered one of the Eight Arms' cleavers.

Eight arms and four cleavers, with this, the tide of battle he'd been contending shifted in one go.

Wilhelm brought his Holy Sword down and stepped forward to defeat him with a single blow—

Kurgan: "—Demon Cleavers."

Suddenly, a chill of the likes he'd never experienced before rose up across his entire body.

In front of him, Kurgan swung his eight arms out in different directions, and his three Demon Cleavers came bearing towards him with three separate trajectories. His empty hand had grabbed a hold of Wilhelm's sword blade and made use of it as a pivot.

Kurgan's grip strength was pitted against Wilhelm's strength to shake him off; and when Kurgan released it, destruction came bearing down on him from three different sides.

Kurgan: "Let's see if you're able to dodge this, Sword Demon."

If he pulled through this, he would win, but if he didn't, he would be defeated—Struck by that challenge, the Sword Demon clenched his teeth.

And let out a roar.

Wilhelm: "*RHHHHHAAAAAAA!!*."

—Death approached him at the same time from three sides.

5

—Let's recount an aside to the story.

The succession to the throne as Emperor of The Sacred Vollachia Empire is determined by quite harsh means.

The Emperor of the Vollachia Empire marries a great number of wives, and begets them with a great number of children in various places in the Empire. And then, the children who obtained the rights to inheritance compete to kill each other. The last one remaining then succeeds the Emperor.

The Empire's people must be strong—That was the way of the Vollachian Empire. The Emperor led the way in showing the Empire's Citizenry the way to live by. Thus, the Vollachian Emperor only came to be after they eradicated their own brothers and sisters.

—Stride Vollachia was likewise one of these children dragged into this inheritance conflict.

The sequence of events that led Kurgan to taking charge of a still young Stride weren't anything too complicated.

Ever since birth, Stride had been weak and frail of body leading his family to conclude that him succeeding the Emperor was impossible. They quickly proposed to offer the renunciation of his inheritance rights to another family, and Stride ended up being exchanged for a suitable recompense.

On the surface, the messenger that brought Stride along had said that he hoped that the child would grow up to be strong in mind and body under the Eight Arms But, it was obvious that in truth he was meant to be unable to endure Kurgan's harsh training, and in the process lose his life.

Bearing the name of Eight Arms, Kurgan had been granted an elevated position as the Empire's unparalleled hero. Still, even he had lost his aspirations in these times of languor, and he'd just accepted that role to pass the time. Or perhaps, it may have even been that he had a grudge towards that blood relative of the Vollachian Emperor, who'd put him in this position.

But, whatever the case may be, those thoughts didn't hold any sort of meaning.

—Kurgan's heart throbbed in excitement at the bottomless darkness lodged in the eyes of the child he'd agreed to take in, Stride.

His idle days had come to an end. His heart had throbbed as a premonition of the times that were to come, the times where he would again smell the choking scent of blood.

In fact, Stride grew to adulthood under Kurgan, and as a young man, in accordance with his duty as a successor, took care of the siblings he shared blood with one by one using various schemes, bringing himself ever nearer to the throne.

However, in contrast to his outstanding resourcefulness, Stride had an issue with the Emperor succession. Ever since he had once succumbed to a high fever, he had lost the ability to make children.

No matter how qualified he was to be the Emperor, he couldn't devote himself to one of the greatest duties, the prosperity of the Empire. Being infertile, Stride was unfit for the seat of Emperor.

That was probably why the Former Emperor had tried to poison his own son, Stride, in an attempt to rob him of his life.

For three days and three nights, Stride kept coughing up blood. For seven days and seven nights, he sported a terrible fever and verged between the boundary of life and death. Finally, after three months, having drifted between the vast oceans of reality and dreams, the poison left his body—

Stride: "—Listen, Kurgan. My venerable self saw the truth in the midst of my delirium. My venerable self saw the way the Observers are, seated in the heavens above, looking down upon us with scorn, toying with us as if we were mere pieces upon a board."

Stride was more thin and ragged than ever, he'd ended up like a walking corpse. However, the longing lodged in his eyes was no longer set on his once desired throne, thus Kurgan revised his own path.

Kurgan: "No matter how foolish the path trodden is, Stride is my son. I shan't follow the empire that orders death, and not life, upon mine son."

Even if no one else would, just he would love his lonely, foolish son, who wasn't able to even love anyone.

When his final moments came, this man was probably going to be scorched by the flames of loathing and fury, his remains were probably going to be made a mockery of by just about everyone, and they'd likely cruelly deny his quintessence.

He deserved that. He deserves that. I am not going to not stop that.

If that was the path he was going to take to the journey to the end, then they would walk along that path together.

Along with the demons of vengeance, the Twin Shura, who'd had their hometown burnt to the ground. Along with the Ashen Bride who cursed her blood after being shunned for her Evil Eye. And along with the now fallen hero, the Eight Arms, together they would see where the Destruction Wish arrived at.

—That was his own kind of love he could give to his foolish son, a Father, who they'd even called the War God.

6

Wilhelm: "…"

Faced with Death that had been unleashed at him from three sides at once, the Sword Demon's answer was decidedly simple.

If death unavoidable was coming for him, then he only had one yearning as a swordsman—To use his silvery steel to thrust death faster at him.

His sword sublimated to a might that went from super-speed to hyper-speed, to hyper-speed to the speed of god, until finally transcending the very concept of steel.

Upwards, leftwards, rightwards—He had no way of knowing what sort of feeling must have gone through the Eight Arms' heart the moment that he'd parried all three of his critical attacks head on.

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm himself couldn't comprehend in the very moment how stunning of a feat that it was he'd accomplished. Perhaps his sword technique had rivalled the time when he'd defeated the Sword Saint Theresia at the ceremony to mark the end of the Civil War; in other words, the Absolute Sword that had reached the very pinnacle—

Kurgan: "—There was once a man who thoroughly mastered the sword."

Wilhelm: "…"

Kurgan: "That man's sword was beautiful, wild, serene, fierce and immensely strong."

It was a dream that many swordsmen in the world longed for.

If the longing for the uttermost sword power was envy for the Sword Saint, then the longing for the uttermost sword technique was called—

Kurgan: "—You've placed your foot down on the steps of the Heavenly Sword?"

Wilhelm: "…Cut the bullshit out. The hell would I know about the Heavenly Sword."

He spun his Holy Sword Astrea around in his hand and placed it back in its sheath. He then turned around, and before his eyes stood Kurgan bearing deep wounds from chest to abdomen.

He was bleeding heavily from his eight arms, and his three cleavers had rolled down to his feet.

Kurgan: “Magnificent.”

Blood spurted out from Kurgan’s lips straight after he said that. His massive body crumbled to its knees and fell forward with a loud thud.

Seeing that, Wilhelm breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

Wilhelm: “Finally. He was one hell of a tough bastard…”

???: “—Wilhelm!”

He didn’t feel anything like the triumphant afterglows of victory at the close of his spar to the death with this man. Nevertheless, Conwood, with his face burning red, had run over to him as he staved off the exhaustion that was weighing his body down.

Conwood: “You did it! You pulled through against Vollachia’s Eight Arms, you’re truly…”

Wilhelm: “Is this really the time to be saying this? The battle still isn’t over yet… What about the citizens?”

Conwood: “R-Right… I’m getting the people who are uninjured, or only have minor injuries to help out with taking the wounded out. Though we focused on being on the defensive, there’s still been a lot of victims.”

Wilhelm: “…I’m also worried as hell about Grimm and Roswaal who were whisked away. But above all…”

Wilhelm looked up at the sky. There’d been a change in the Black Dragon, which had before been circling around the Spire.

The three-headed Black Dragon was greedily devouring something, as if it were scrapping for it. It finished its ravenous meal and then started to fly up to the heavens. Everything would have worked out perfectly if it continued to fly up and vanished into the great beyond, but that was never going to happen.

The Black Dragon released three rays of heat in three different directions from its heads, burning the city. The city was overrun by its white light and the shrieks and cries of everyone who'd come back to their senses started to resound throughout.

Conwood: "The Dragon…!"

Wilhelm: "Seems like it can't stomach being summoned by that jerk… It'll only be a matter of time before the country is in ruin unless we stop it."

Standing in front of Conwood, whose face had turned pale, Wilhelm slowly pointed his feet towards where the Black Dragon was. Conwood cried out when he saw what he was about to do.

Conwood: "Wa-Wait, Wilhelm! Are you seriously going to fight it… a Dragon?"

Wilhelm: "Are you trying to tell me that slaying Dragons in the Dragon Kingdom is a bad idea?"

Conwood: "That's not what I meant! But like you're fighting a thing like that."

Conwood couldn't tell him "You can't." Wilhelm had turned around to look at him and his blue eyes hadn't let him say these words.

Wilhelm: "Conwood, get the citizens as well as our troops out of here. The messenger we sent should eventually bring us reinforcements. I'm gonna slay that lizard asshole using the full strength of the Kingdom."

Conwood: "…"

Wilhelm wasn't speaking about what he could or could not do. Since he'd said he was going to slay it, he actually would.

Thus, Conwood took a few moments to catch his breath and then nodded,

Conwood: “…Don’t you dare die without even seeing your kid’s face, Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm: “I’ll have you look for my wife as well. You don’t look like the sort of guy who can fight whilst looking for a girl.”

Wilhelm left only those words behind before he sprinted off.

He kicked off from the desolate street, ran up the wall of a building that had been burnt by the flames, climbed over its burnt rooftop and swung his Holy Sword at the Black Dragon perched in the twilight sky.

Wilhelm: “HYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!”

At the wings of the Black Dragon, which had never considered that such a puny being would have put up a fight against it. The silver beam of the Sword Demon pierced into its eerily beautiful wings as if it were being sucked in.

7

—He ran, first at a steady pace, then at a hurried pace, and finally at full sprint.

Grimm Fauzen desperately kept on running straight through the city that had turned into a battlefield.

Rays of heat had aimlessly ripped through the city. The city had been burnt by the white beams of light that had come fired from different directions, enveloping it in bright red flame. It had turned into a hell, where even taking a breath would scorch his lungs.

The setting sun in the sky, along with the flicker of the dazzling flames on the ground, were each trying to scorch the world in red.

Cries of anger filled the sky, sorrowed screams swept through the ground, all the while as Grimm ran towards the sounds of echoing steel.

Grimm: “‘~~ilhelm~~…!”

The battle that was going on overhead had long transcended what humans could fathom.

How do you take on a Dragon that has wings, is several times larger than yourself, has scales stronger than steel, and is a being that has marked its status as a creature of myth. How do you even get the guts to try and fight something like that?

How could such a puny human being take on such a mighty creature alone?

Who would be able to stop themselves from cowering in fear and dropping their swords? Who would be able to stop themselves from shrinking back with tears in their eyes?

—Nevertheless Grimm pressed on. He couldn’t fight alone in a place like this.

Grimm: “…~~H̀a̤n̈̃ǵ-ón̸~~.”

I’m on my way. Setting out, right this second. Without fail, I’ll reach you.

—I won’t let you fight alone. Ever.

Wilhelm: “HYAAAAAAAAA—!”

He swung his Holy Sword out and parried away, with all the strength he could muster, the Dragon’s Claws that had come scything towards him. Both of his shoulders creaked as he received the impact, some of his muscles ruptured, and it felt like he’d chipped some of his molars from clenching them so hard.

Fragile. I’m shoddier than ever. My sword was too shoddy right now.

I need to recall my finale with Kurgan. The moment where I avoided that guy's blow of certain death, and get as close to it as I can. Or—get close to the levels that my sword technique was at when I snatched Theresia away from the Sword God.

The Black Dragon: "*KRAAAAAAAAUGH*."

The Dragon let out a thunderous roar, the sheer strength of its vibration buffeted Wilhelm who'd placed his feet on the tower. He barely dodged its tail, which had come swinging down straight at him, and he braced himself through the aftershock that blew up part of the tower rooftop, before then running back up its tail onto its back again.

Wilhelm: "*GYHAAAAAAAAA*—!!"

He stabbed his sword into the tip of its tail and ran through, blood spurting out from it as if it were chasing him. It looked like even Dragons bled red. After all, it was a living creature, he could probably kill it if he pierced its heart.

Wilhelm: "'Cause otherwise it'd be one huge pain in the ass to kill it by cutting off its heads!"

The Black Dragon: "*KRAAAAAAAAUGH*."

One of its three heads bared its fangs at Wilhelm when he'd let out his angry shout on its back. If it lay its teeth on him, it'd crunch him up into tiny pieces, thus if he stopped moving, his life would be immediately forfeit.

Wilhelm brought his sword towards its looming fangs, flicked them away and lunged again towards its next movement. —One of its other heads aimed for him from a different angle so to prevent his strike. Smelling the feeling of death rushing towards him from behind, he braced his arms with strength. Yet, his aim was still at the Dragon's head in front of him.

The attack coming at him from behind didn't bother him. Because—

Wilhelm: "—GRIMM!!"

Grimm: “H~~GYAAAAAA—~~!!”

Responding to his war buddy’s call, Grimm clambered onto the Dragon’s back and caught its fangs with his greatshield. Yet, it wasn’t the sort of enemy that could be opposed by the physical strength of man. When he received its blow, one of his knees crumpled at the impact and broke with a shrill crunch. He bit down his screams.

Grimm: “W~~ILHELM~~!!”

Responding to his war buddy’s call, Wilhelm spun around on the Dragon’s back and jabbed his Holy Sword through its fangs. He slid it through towards its face and sliced up and down, tearing through its maw. Some of the Dragon’s fangs were torn away by the sheer force and fresh blood spurted out, caking Wilhelm in even more.

The Black Dragon “*GRAAAAAAAAUUUUUUGH*.”

Writhing about in the agony of having one of its faces torn through, the Black Dragon corkscrewed around in the sky. Both Wilhelm and Grimm were bucked off into mid-air from being swung about by its momentum.

There was nothing Grimm could do being crumpled over clutching his knee, unable to stand properly. Wilhelm kicked off against a wall, forced his way over to him and grabbed him by the arm, both of them just barely managing to tumble down onto the top of a different building.

Wilhelm: “Ghaa! Shit… What a goddamn reckless idiot you are…!”

Grimm: “A~~haha~~…A~~s if you can talk~~.”

The corners of Wilhelm’s mouth couldn’t help but curve up into a smile after Grimm had chewed him out in his grazed voice. Then he looked up overhead, at the Black Dragon roaring in anger.

Wilhelm narrowed his blue eyes and tch’ed.

Wilhelm: “What a stubborn son of a bitch.”

Grimm: "—?"

A trace of confusion flitted across Grimm's pained expression when he heard what Wilhelm had muttered. Wilhelm breathed out a short sigh in response, and thrust his beloved sword up towards the Black Dragon in the sky,

Wilhelm: "Look at the way it fights, it's goddamn awful. Do Dragons really fight like that? The way they're going about it is like an amateur who hasn't got a clue how to."

Grimm: "~~Then~~…"

Wilhelm: "It's no Dragon. —It's that bastard Stride."

Grimm grew speechless at Wilhelm's declaration. His reaction was a natural one. Even Wilhelm hadn't said it as a statement with clear basis, yet, Grimm's intuition was screaming at him, telling him it was like that.

Stride's manner of evil had been to bind other's souls with his curse-rings and make them into his puppets. So, in the last of the last, that man had gotten his hands on the biggest, baddest puppet of the lot.

Wilhelm: "In the worst case we can stop it if we kill its puppetmaster, Stride, but…"

Grimm: "…~~That's impossible~~… ~~He's dead~~."

Wilhelm: "—. That's what I thought."

Wilhelm gritted his teeth in response. In exchange for his own life, Stride had taken away the means to stop the Black Dragon from the Kingdom. Then did this mean that even at the very end, the situation was still in the palms of that man's hands?

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm turned around. Grimm had collapsed onto his back, his right knee was in a sorry state; it was going to be impossible for him to continue fighting. It was going to take time before the reinforcements arrived, and Bordeaux being fighting fit was also way off. Roswaal was probably going to have a tough time fighting too if they didn't show up.

There was no way she would prioritize her own safety in a situation like this. That was the kind of woman she was.

—How much am I going to be able to do alone?

Grimm: "…~~Wilhelm.~~"

Grimm spoke up from his side.

Wilhelm once again looked at him and then gulped. That look on his face.

Grimm: "~~You are not alone.~~"

An answer came, through his words which were full of belief and conviction.

—Voices began to rise up from everywhere around the burning city.

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm lifted his head up at the sound of those voices, and his eyes swung wide open. From everywhere around the City of Picoutatte, people were raising their voices, lifting their swords up and glaring at the Black Dragon in the aether.

They'd had their hearts broken by the Black Dragon's baying, they'd had their streets scorched by its fiery breath, and they'd sunk to their knees; nothing but that, and yet, like Wilhelm who'd been fighting alone, they raised their voices as one.

And, standing next to the standard-bearer, Conwood, with the Zergev Corps who were leading this rousing cry was—

Wilhelm: "—Theresia."

There, propped up by Carol right beside her, was Theresia's figure with her red hair swaying in the searing breeze.

His pregnant wife stood there majestically at the head of the most valiant men in the Kingdom, her chest held out proudly. Their hearts were deeply stirred by her voice, and their shattered souls roused once more. Now, the people on the streets rose up.

Theresia: "—Wilhelm."

Standing at their head, Theresia's lips stirred as she gazed at the frozen in place Wilhelm. Only Wilhelm knew right away that she'd called out to him.

She wasn't carrying a sword, and had remained a Mother, yet she was still inspiring everyone as the Sword Saint.

—Man, what an amazing wife I've got.

The Black Dragon: "*KRUUUUUUUARGH*."

Not a single person had given in. Not a single person had yielded. Not a single person had turned their gaze to the ground.

Their will was made directly known to the Black Dragon in the sky; it forgot its pain and trembled in anger. Then, its three heads began to build up its fiery breath again, preparing itself to release a horrific amount of heat to the ground. —But in an instant,

Wilhelm: "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING TO MY WOMAN."

For one of its heads, he stabbed his Holy Sword through the bottom of its maw, stopping it from releasing its fiery breath.

For another of its heads, he slammed the greatshield down its maw, making it so that its scorching heat exploded within its throat.

For the final head, he grabbed its maw that had been cut up, and twisted it around so that it released its fiery breath at its own wings.

The Black Dragon: "*GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH*."

There was an explosion mid-air, and the Black Dragon let out a roar as it fell down to the top of the tower. The Sword Demon began to fall down to the ground at the same time as that, with half of his body covered in flames.

Wilhelm continued to drop head-first down to earth, having greatly wounded the Black Dragon. At this rate, he was going to fall to his death. Yet, below him was—

???: "—You have no idea how many times you'd have died without me around. You absolute dumbass."

Wilhelm was caught by a pair of thick, muscular arms. He managed to force his eyes open amidst his pain, and he could see a man there giving him a resolute grin—Bordeaux.

Wilhelm gave him a wry smile in return.

Wilhelm: "You're the one who almost died, just how goddamn tough are ya?!"

Bordeaux: "…As a matter of fact, I was woken up by a voice that I've dearly missed in my dreams."

Wilhelm: "…"

Bordeaux: ""This is no time to be sleeping, Young Lord", he told me. Like whoa, I was lucky to wake up."

Wilhelm closed his eyes in response to what he'd said. A voice that he could no longer hear, the symbol of the regrets he had carried, manifested by his entrancement by the Evil Eye. He didn't think that the product of his delusion could have affected reality.

But if it weren't for that sort of miracle, he wouldn't have been alive here today, that's for sure.

Bordeaux: "You hung in there admirably. This battle is your victory."

Wilhelm: "Don't be so hasty, you dolt. It's not like the Dragon is dead yet."

Wilhelm clambered out of Bordeaux's arms and said that as he panted for breath. However, Bordeaux shook his head at what he'd said.

Bordeaux: "Nope, wrong. The battle has ended. —His Majesty has stirred."

Wilhelm: "…His Majesty, Gionis?"

Hearing those unexpected words, Wilhelm furrowed his brows in doubt.

The King of Lugunica, Gionis Lugunica—He was a good natured person, on that point there was no need to talk about the innate goodness of his character, but Wilhelm couldn't see how he was going to be the deciding factor in this battle.

It's not like he'd be grabbing a sword and rushing over to the battlefield to try and fight the Dragon himself—

Wilhelm: "…"

And right at that moment, Wilhelm's breath caught. The reason why had been surprise, and the cause behind his surprise had been his own actions.

Wilhelm had kneeled down, without him even realizing that he'd done so, and bowed his head.

Looking around, Bordeaux who had been standing next to him was acting the same way. And other than him, he knew in his bones that everyone else was acting the same way. —The city had plunged into silence.

The people's voices who'd risen so bravely to quell the roars of the Black Dragon had disappeared. Everyone had ceased to speak, and bowed their heads down to that Being

Because—

???: "—In accordance with the covenant of antiquity, for the descendants of the Lion King, I hath hastened to thee with mine wings at thy service."

Because of the arrival of the blue Divine Dragon who truly ruled the heavens above, with the blood red setting sun at its back.

Wilhelm: "…"

Faced with its overwhelming presence, its sense of awe that made every instinct in you want to prostrate yourself in front of them, its tone of voice that made it impossible for you to even think about going against it, and the shock it brought, as if it were whispering directly to your soul, every single soul in the city kneeled.

Thoughts were dyed in white, voices froze in surprise, and the senses in their bodies stopped working.

Even so, a name, a name everyone in the Kingdom knew, fear towards The Absolute, floated to everyone's minds.

The noble being who had made the covenant with the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, truly a being that was a true Dragon—

Volcanica: I, am Volcanica. I hath hearkened to the appeal of the blood of mine old friend, and so manifested here

The Divine Dragon Volcanica had descended down with its wings at their service, because of that, the situation was already decided.

"*CRASH BANG THUD CRASH*."

On the battlefield where everyone remained kneeling out of reverence, sounds of destruction crushed the world ruled by tranquility into savagery. Those sounds were from the three-headed Black Dragon raising its enormous body from the top of the Spire and rending down its stone tower completely.

Even the Black Dragon was awestruck. It feared the unfightable being. How come it looked so small now?

Compared to the Divine Dragon that had descended down to them, the Black Dragon's being was so frail and small to the point that it looked pitiful.

The Black Dragon: "*KRAAAAAAAUGH*."

It was as clear as day to anyone that there was a massive gulf in strength between them.

There was no way that the Black Dragon's instincts couldn't understand it's hopeless position. Yet the Black Dragon didn't give in, a will to fight was lodged in all of its eyes on its three heads, and it unfurled its wings at the Divine Dragon.

It let out a roar. A roar that resounded throughout Picoutatte's blood red sky.

—Had it been an illusion of Wilhelm's, or had its cry been filled with jubilation?

Volcanica: Valgren, thou art a pitiful child. Hath thou fallen into wickedness, burnt by thine undue hatred?

Volcanica's voice was full of only pity that stirred their hearts.

Volcanica was a Dragon in the true sense of the word, with pale blue glittering scales across his entire body and a massive body that was several times larger than Valgren, the Black Dragon that Volcanica had called by that name.

He had intelligent eyes, a beyond-human intellect that allowed him to comprehend their speech and vast amounts of Mana cladding his entire body—The sky twisted and turned, the flames on the ground were cleansed, and the world which should have burned began to heal.

—No, it didn't just stop just at that.

Wilhelm: "There's no way…"

Wilhelm realized that every single wound he'd sustained on the battlefield had been cured. Bordeaux next to him, and Grimm on the top of the building, peeled their eyes wide open seeing his healed wounds.

It seemed that the Divine Dragon's grace had rained down on the city. Everyone who had been wounded, or had been on the brink between life and death had been healed. They looked up at the heavens at the miracle that had arisen.

This was a miracle that the Dragon had brought them, the Dragon that they had said had abandoned the covenant. Everyone had been convinced that the Dragon would never have come to them in the Kingdom's predicament—

Volcanica: It shalt be better for thee to be at rest. Thou hath been twisted into what thou art now, mine brethren.

Valgren: "*KRAAAAAUGH*."

The Black Dragon replied with a grating roar hearing Volcanica's voice which was full of mercy. The Black Dragon Valgren, whose heads had been gravely wounded by the attacks of the Sword Demon, looked up to the heavens with all of its heads and took a deep breath, preparing itself to let loose its fire.

Staring at it with sorrowful eyes, the Divine Dragon once again flapped its wings, and descended to the same height as the Black Dragon—Would the Black Dragon even have noticed that it had done so out of consideration, to make sure that its own breath wouldn't scorch the earth?

Valgren: "*KRAAAAAAAAARGH*."

Either way, no one knew the answer to that.

The Black Dragon let out a roar, and let loose three beams of white light from each of its mouths. The rays of heat coalesced and became one, firing straight towards Volcanica.

In front of them, Volcanica's maw opened, and—

Volcanica:—

—The Divine Dragon filled the sky with a blue light and dispersed it without paying any heed to mounting a defense against the looming white light.

The breath of the Divine Dragon went straight forward, and swallowed the body of the Black Dragon up, without causing any damage to anything else en route to it. It hadn't been a cruel death, rather, the Black Dragon had been transformed into dust with a power that felt appropriate to be Purification

The Black Dragon's existence, which had been trapped in madness, and forced to do other's bidding against its will, was annihilated by the breath of the Divine Dragon.

Wilhelm: "…"

The immensely divine light cleared up, and the next moment, the Black Dragon's figure was nowhere to be seen.

The Dragon's overwhelming strength, along with the vow it had abided by in accordance with the Covenant, had wiped out the threat that had assailed the city of Picoutatte.

Stride Vollachia was dead. All those who had supported him had fallen. And finally, the Black Dragon he'd summoned had also been destroyed by the Divine Dragon's assistance.

???: "…We won."

He heard someone say that in a hoarse voice.

Starting with that voice, people looked at each other to make sure that both their, and their companion's lives were still there. Then shouts, shouts of exultation, started to fill the streets.

"*Cheers*."

Picking himself up, Wilhelm likewise looked at Bordeaux next to him, and Bordeaux returned his gaze. Rushing down from the building he was on, Grimm, whose broken leg had been healed, emerged onto the ground as well.

And, making their way over to Wilhelm and the others was—

???: "—Wilhelm!"

A high-pitched voice rang out, making him turn around. Jogging through the street directly towards him was a lovely woman with long swaying red hair, with an anxious look on her face.

She wanted to make sure her husband was okay as quickly as possible. With eyes that conceived such intention, Theresia made her way over to Wilhelm—But her feet had gotten caught on something and she was about to fall over.

Wilhelm rushed over to her and kept her up, giving her a firm embrace.

Theresia: “Wilh…”

Wilhelm: “…”

Wilhelm didn’t need to say anything. All he did was press his lips against hers.

She was here, she was definitely warm, both of them were safe, and the battle was over.

He didn’t need anything more right now.

—Here, the Subjugation of the Evil Dragon came to a close, and Stride Vollachia’s nightmare ended.

—And so, the tale of the Sword Demon Battle Ballad only has the final act remaining.

Curtain’s Close

1

—It was raining on the day the funeral was held.

???: “I bet she would have been the type to say “This is the right weather for a funeral”.”

Conwood, who really didn’t suit his formal dress of a Knight, looked up at the sky as he said that.

Wilhelm nodded and said “Yeah for sure” in reply to his joking words. Though it hadn’t just been him who’d replied like that, everyone else who’d heard him had also raised their voices in agreement and accord.

She’d been the kind of woman who’d liked to say things that could get on people’s nerves. After knowing her for so long, everyone had had at least one experience of getting fed up with her attitude.

That’s why the men in attendance could easily share what they felt about her. Even the white bouquet of flowers Conwood had offered gave off an impression like it didn’t suit this gruff man.

—More than ten days had passed since the Subjugation of the Evil Dragon had taken place in the Commercial City of Picouatte.

The shocking truth of the Black Dragon’s appearance had shook the nation to the core and made everyone aware of the immense power of the Dragon. Nevertheless, the repair-works of the heavily damaged city had slowly begun, and everyone’s minds gradually turned back to their daily life.

People couldn’t stop moving on ahead, regardless of what happened.

They would have to move on forward with the passage of time, holding their grief and fear.

Therefore, the national funeral to commemorate the victims of the incident, held at the King's decree, was likewise accepted by everyone as a necessary rite to keep moving on.

The evil clutches of the Destruction Wish Stride Vollachia had spread all throughout the Kingdom, though most notably with the turmoil caused by the Black Dragon he'd summoned in Picoutatte. They'd initially presumed that the number of casualties in the city caused by the Dragon's onslaught were going to be massive.

However, a later investigation revealed that the number had been less than a third of what they'd expected, a miraculous figure according to everyone involved—at least compared to the scale of the incident.

Behind that miracle was the immeasurable grace of the Divine Dragon who'd been instrumental at getting the situation back under control.

The Divine Dragon Volcanica had appeared to save the Kingdom from ruin in accordance with the covenant. It had defeated the crazed Black Dragon, the Three-Headed Valgren, and brought those on the battlefield the miracle of healing. Its immense power had even saved the lives of those who'd been on the brink of death.

As a result, the lives of many of those who'd been in the city had been saved by its miracle. This was one of the reasons why the number of casualties had been far fewer than originally predicted.

Of course, there were still casualties despite that. The Divine Dragon's miracle had brought them healing, but it couldn't bring back the lives that had been lost. —Even the Dragon couldn't undo death.

Those who'd lost their close ones exercised their rights to grieve their death and curse their absurd fate. Their profound sadness could be seen clearly pretty much everywhere across the state funeral.

Losing a loved one was always an excruciating feeling, like that of being cut apart in a place where blades couldn't reach. That pain made no distinction between adults and children, bringing everyone to their knees equally.

That reason alone made the attitude of the person standing in front of Wilhelm worthy of deep admiration.

???: “—You must be Wilhelm-sama. My Mother has told me a lot about you.”

A young child who wasn’t even ten years old yet said this to him, giving him a deep bow.

He had shoulder-length indigo hair, a well-proportioned face that gave an inkling towards his future good looks, and he was wearing formalwear over his slender, prepubescent body. He was gazing straight at Wilhelm with his eyes of blue and yellow.

It felt to Wilhelm like it’d be the greatest sort of insult to his benefactor if he didn’t meet that gaze properly.

Therefore Wilhelm corrected his posture and received the boy with the courtesy of a Knight of the Kingdom.

Wilhelm: “I am a Knight of the Kingdom, Wilhelm van Astrea. Your Honored Mother helped me out so much. I am incredibly indebted to her. That’s why…”

Wilhelm trailed his words off there and then closed his eyes once again. He gritted his teeth, trying to bite down the waves of emotion swirling around his chest. He opened his eyes again and once again looked at the boy’s face.

He looked for his war-buddy’s—Roswaal J Mathers’ features in his childish face.

So that he could tell her son his condolences—for the friend he’d lost in the battle.

Wilhelm: “I won’t ever get the chance again to tell this to your Honored Mother, but thank you. Truly, you’ve done so much for me. I want to repay that favour. If you ever find yourself in any kind of trouble, please let me know.”

Wilhelm kneeled down as he said this. He removed his beloved sword from his sheath and laid it down at his own feet. Then—

Wilhelm: “—I will without fail, help you out.”

Wilhelm turned towards the young boy, Karl Mathers, and vowed this, giving him a Knight’s most respectful bow.

A great number of people were crowded in the place they were holding the national funeral at, they’d been in the middle of their various conversations. Naturally Wilhelm’s respectful bow had grabbed their attention. But perhaps the biggest factor why it had grabbed their attention was the solemn atmosphere drawn out between them rather than the specialness of the act.

Wilhelm’s respectful bow had been beautiful, as crystalline as a ceremonial sword itself.

He didn’t care about the gazes from those around him. All that mattered to him was his comportment towards the boy in front of him.

He wouldn’t forget the debt of gratitude he owed him. His vow as a Knight was absolute. Therefore, no matter how many trials and tribulations would come, he’d always make sure to fulfill his vow.

Karl: “…”

Karl kept his silence faced with Wilhelm’s respectful bow. But his expression showed neither surprise or bewilderment. All that was there was a solemn emotion.

Eventually that emotion silently melted away, and,

Karl: “…Am I hearing this right, the exalted Sword Demon can speak to people in a manner like this; I’m sure Mom would’ve been surprised by that as well.”

Wilhelm lifted his head up hearing his somewhat joking tone of voice, and he gasped.

He’d been surprised by the expression that had appeared on the boy's face. His lips had loosened into a forlorn frown, as if he were looking at someone he loved. The look on his face really did look a lot like his mother's.

Karl: "I bet Mom would get in a huff and stamp her feet in frustration if I told her that. Because from what I've heard, Mom seems to have really been attached to you, Wilhelm-sama."

Wilhelm: "…I'm kinda scared to ask you what sort of stories she's been telling you."

Karl: "Don't worry. I'm not going to tell anyone else."

The boy placed a finger against his lips and looked at Wilhelm from only his blue eye. Wilhelm let out a sigh, then he slowly got up and brushed off his knees.

He could really sense the influence Roswaal had had on Karl from the reply he'd given him right now. He felt like she was definitely breathing inside of him, yet despite the joy it brought him, his head grew heavy.

Wilhelm: "Karl-Dono… Wait, no, won't you take on the family name when you succeed as the new head?"

Karl: "Yeah, I will eventually. But not right now. I'm lacking in just about everything currently, so only after I make up for this lack will I be able to call myself Roswaal. Until then, please call me Karl as you've been doing."

The name Roswaal, head of House Mathers, had been passed down for generations. It wasn't an unusual custom for old houses to do this, but it didn't sit well with Wilhelm that inheriting it didn't discriminate between male or female. That was the sort of thing he'd thought when he'd first heard about the name from Roswaal.

Wilhelm: "Your Honored Mother's original name was Julia, wasn't it? I first found out about it from her epitaph."

Karl: "It's an unspoken agreement for us to hide our former names after we change them. Though you know, sometimes you might be able to tell a spouse, or a very close friend about it."

Wilhelm: “I getcha.”

Wilhelm gave a quick nod of his head. He’d known her for five years. He couldn’t for one second say that they’d had the sort of friendship where they always got on with each other, but in those years, she’d never once mentioned her real name. She’d probably never thought about revealing it to him. Even so, that didn’t exactly mean that it was proof that their friendship had been a shallow one.

Because foremostly—

Wilhelm: “It’s too late for such a girly name like Julia right now. Your Honored Mother will always be Roswaal for me.”

Karl: “I’m sure Mom felt that way too, which must be why she didn’t tell you.”

Wilhelm agreed with what Karl had answered with. He felt in awe at the same time. Was he really talking to a child who wasn’t even ten years old yet? He was speaking for what his Mother had felt without so much as a trace of hesitation.

It was exactly as if he was speaking word for word for Roswaal herself.

Karl: “I’ll definitely keep in mind what you said before. Someday, somewhere, I may borrow the help you offered me, Wilhelm-sama. And when that happens…”

Wilhelm: “I will come to you, whatever the problem may be. —A Knight’s vow is true.”

Karl: “…Mom sure was blessed. To be adored this strongly by people.”

Karl looked down, an awfully grown-up look adorned his face as he muttered that. But his expression changed in the blink of an eye, and the boy corrected his posture and said, “Then.”

Karl: “I hope you’ll take the chance to get in touch again after things at home settle down. My Butler keeps looking towards me, like he’s telling me that it’s time to go greet the others.”

Wilhelm: “Your Butler…”

Behind Karl, who’d given him a wry smile, was the figure of a young man in his Butler’s uniform loitering near them. Wilhelm gave him a drawn out, elegant bow as soon as he spotted him.

That figure was Clind’s, the Butler Roswaal had introduced him to a while ago. His placid, good-looking face betrayed no emotion, and Wilhelm couldn’t read how he’d reacted at heart to his Mistress’ death.

Nevertheless, he knew from his attitude that he would still carry out his duty to serve the Mathers Family.

Karl: “Right now I’m still dependent on Clind, but one day I’ll bear the responsibilities for my house. Thus, I hope you’ll continue to keep in touch with us Mathers.”

Karl bowed his head as he said so, and then started to walk over to Clind. Staring at his small figure, Wilhelm’s breath caught for a moment and his lips quivered in hesitation.

But he quickly ridded himself of that hesitation.

Wilhelm: “Karl Mathers-dono.”

Karl stopped in his tracks, and then turned around. Wilhelm continued his words.

Wilhelm: “Thank you. Both you, and your Honored Mother, thank you. —I’m much obliged. For everything you’ve done.”

Karl: “…”

Wilhelm spoke to him, not with humbled words, or with the decorum of a Knight.

Though they looked like words that had been rehashed from before, it wasn’t like that. They were words that he’d conveyed downright honestly.

Karl’s eyes had widened in surprise for a moment when he’d received them—

Karl: "—Take care that you don't get hurt, so that you live a long life."

This time he turned around and took his leave, after having left him those awfully mature words.

2

???: "Karl-sama sure does have a strange vibe to him."

Carol had seen that their conversation had ended and came over to him to say that.

She wasn't wearing her usual striking formal garb of a Knight. She was wearing a black dress with a white flower on her chest, one that was typically worn by women at funerals.

Wilhelm felt that although she was the kind of woman who'd stubbornly put her femininity on the backburner, it was a good change of pace.

—Roswaal's death had likely played a big part in regards to her change of mind.

Even Wilhelm could tell that they'd been very close friends.

Carol: "Wilhelm?"

Carol stared at Wilhelm, who'd sunk in silence thinking about that, with a puzzled look in her eyes. He shook his head at her gaze, and said "Ah no,."

Wilhelm: "It's nothing… You're right, he's a bit strange. I doubt I could have conducted myself that well when I was around his age. He's rather elegant."

Carol: "Yeah. Mathers-sama has educated him well. An education worthy of respect."

She stared off in the distance, to where Karl was walking away, and her eyes teared up slightly. Pretending he hadn't seen that emotion, Wilhelm started to speak again with a "Hey,."

Wilhelm: "Were you able to talk to him about Roswaal?"

Carol: "—. I told him "Your Mother died to protect me." I'd been prepared for him to curse at me and hate me, but…"

Carol paused for a moment, and her lips loosened into an awfully sad smile.

Carol: "Karl-sama didn't blame me. On the contrary, he placed his hand on my shoulder as I looked down in shame and told me, "Mom would be delighted from the bottom of her heart that you're safe"… It's gonna make burst into tears."

Wilhelm: "…Then what's there to smile about."

Carol had been dragged into Stride's schemes and went through indescribable suffering. Amongst that, she'd lost her close friend and had been forced to wield her sword against her patron's family.

The wounds consuming her, in her heart, were surely deeper than Wilhelm could ever imagine.

Even so, she wasn't going to be crippled by them. She had Wilhelm's wife, who really cared for her with how long they'd known each other for, as well as—

Wilhelm: "Right, you've got someone else to go and shed tears to. You can go to Grimm… to your husband."

Carol: "Grimm will give me all the comfort I need after. Right now, I just wanted to talk to you… Sir."

She shook away the tears that had started to well up in her eyes, then the type of smile she had on her face changed. It had been a forlorn one, but now it had changed into a warm one. Seeing that, Wilhelm gave a deep sigh.

He placed his hand on his forehead. It'd really been something he'd never heard her say before.

Wilhelm: “The heck is up with you calling me Sir. What kind of a joke is this?”

Carol: “It’s not like I want to either, but you need to be aware of it… With the death of Bertol-sama, the position of head of the Astrea House has passed to its successor. Theresia-sama’s brothers are all deceased.”

Wilhelm: “So the mantle’s passed to me, since I’m Theresia’s spouse? Are you for real…”

He cocked his head in puzzlement at Carol’s words before looking up at the sky from outside of the building they were in.

Was the drizzle pouring down onto the ground from the wisps of cloud the sky’s tears expressing its condolences for the victims, or was it someone mourning their deaths, even up there? It’s not like he was going to get an answer to that from the rainy sky.

—The Kingdom of Lugunica’s national funeral somberly continued. As if to affirm the boundaries between the dead and the living.

3

The room had been arranged a little too precautiously to be called a guest room.

In buildings, an architect’s sense of aesthetic tends to be present throughout its overall design philosophy. The larger and more expensive the building was, the more pronounced it was. The mansions which noble families and the like lived in were prime examples of that.

That’s why this one room was something that clashed heavily with the architect’s sense of aesthetic, and contradicted their original design philosophy.

Its beautiful stone walls were reinforced with crude iron bars, all of its paintings and ornaments that had been meticulously arranged were unsparingly removed, the necessary furnishings were all bolted to the walls or the floor, and to top it all off, men with a grim air to them were standing guard outside. The tense feeling drifting in the air was a mark of their professionalism, you could easily call this an iron-walled stronghold, definitely worthy of the words “High-Security” and “High-Alert”.

???: “But, when things are lacking, things are lacking, even with all these arrangements. Hmm, ‘tis such a pity that I’m so bereft of power.”

Miklotov sat himself down on a sofa in this iron-walled guest room, looking rather imposing. He’d been acclaimed as a wise man, involved as a key figure of the Kingdom since a young age. But, at the end of the day, he was a Civil Servant who had no talent with the sword. If his opponent were to resort to violence, he’d have his life snatched away without being able to put up much of a fight.

His private guard waiting outside the room were probably anxious, fearing that, but—

Miklotov: “—I’d say all of these precautions are unnecessary. Don’t you think so?”

???: “You’re asking that to me…? Don’t push your luck, boy.”

The person sitting in front of Miklotov replied to his casual tone with displeasure. He was a man with a large build, like, his body was, without exaggeration, huge. He was sitting directly on the floor rather than a sofa.

Even so, the reason why their eyes had locked without him needing to look down was because his opponent was from the Giant tribe. —He was the sort of person he couldn’t reveal the existence of.

His stocky limbs and torso were all thick enough to match, and his deep voice rumbled like a quake. The clear sense of hostility in his voice though seemed to be far more of a threat than a quake.

Despite being faced with such strong malice, Miklotov kept the composed look on his face.

It was only natural. There was no need for him to worry himself sick keeping his guards up when he didn’t need to.

Miklotov: “Even if you harm me, you wouldn’t be able to do anything after. You’re the one who can’t act recklessly.”

The Giant: “Quit with the sarcasm. It’s the result of my recklessness that led me here. No?”

Miklotov: “If we rephrase it to say that depending on your last resort as a result of a stalemate is to be reckless, then no I don’t think so. You had a plan B, you had something else up your sleeve… And this time around, we were saved by it.”

Miklotov cast his gaze down and let a modicum of gratitude trickle into his words. His opponent frowned in annoyance as soon as he sensed that and let out an awfully loud tch.

His unfriendly attitude caused Miklotov to smile wryly.

Miklotov: “I’d doubted His Majesty Gionis’ thinking, like I always do, back when he entrusted me with you.”

The Giant: “That’s pretty reasonable I reckon. That geezer’s touched in the head. But he convinced me as well. If that blundering fool’s head is like that, then it stands to reason that his limbs are also moving on their own.”

Miklotov: “…Be it for better or worse, His Majesty is a fine, upstanding gentleman.”

Miklotov pictured his liege’s good-natured smiling face and then slowly shook his head. Then he turned back to face the Giant again.

Miklotov: “But it still surprises me, even now. You should have hated the Kingdom, along with us humans. So why did you help us out?”

The Giant: “There’s no past tense here, I hate you. I still hate all you cunts. Never have I let the fire in my heart that makes me want to exterminate every single one of you go out.”

Miklotov held his tongue, having been struck by his words of clear hatred.

His flames of loathing were like burning lava, yet bitingly cold. However, that cold anger of his quickly vanished from his eyes.

The Giant: “But I don’t like the way they were going about it. There was no distinguishing people with what they did, even my brethren would have died. That’s not remotely what I want. —That’s the only reason why I helped you out.”

Miklotov “Hmmm… I see, I get you.”

Miklotov sensed that their discussion was coming to an end, and so replied in a dismissive tone. That, and it wouldn’t be a good idea to prolong his stay and further incur his displeasure. That was it for today.

Miklotov: “Oh, that’s right, I almost forgot.”

Miklotov, who’d gotten himself off of his backside, called out to the Giant before he left the room. The Giant glanced towards him with indifference in his eyes. Miklotov nodded at him, and said,

Miklotov “I’m not saying this to win you over, but do you have any discomforts? I’d like to accommodate you as much as possible, as thanks for what you did.”

The Giant: “…”

His eyes, which had been full of indifference, were now wide open in response to his words. Miklotov knew that he’d been stunned for a moment.

Then, a split second later—

The Giant: “—Gh, hah, haha, hahahaa! Did you say discomforts?! He said discomforts, to me!”

The man opened his mouth and let out a booming laugh.

He then held up his arms—showing him the thick chains that kept him bound to the floor, clattering them about.

The Giant: “If it’s discomfort we’re talking about, I’ve been feeling it ever since I was born. My heart has never, not even once, known what it's like to be free. It makes me laugh that you're asking about whether I, of all people, is in discomfort."

Miklotov: "…"

The Giant: "Take a good look at me now, Kingdom of Lugunica. I haven't thrown anything away yet. Someday, when these chains are snapped to pieces, you will realize. —You will realize just who it is who ought to be truly chained."

Miklotov was scorched by his emotional outburst as well as the look of fury in his eyes. He regretted that he'd said something so careless. At the same time, it felt like he was underestimating the flames of anger that were constantly simmering in the depths of this man's heart.

There was nothing Miklotov could do to extinguish the blaze that was hidden inside him. Perhaps no one would be able to manage that. With that in mind, he spoke,

Miklotov: "Did you say the same things to His Majesty Gionis as well?"

The Giant: "…"

He didn't reply to his question. Nevertheless, he took his silence as an answer.

Would there ever come a day where he would be able to talk to this man without chains or guards?

Or would there be no resolution between them other than death and blood?

Would an answer ever emerge someday whilst he was subject to his hatred, his curses and his flames of anger?

Miklotov: "…Hmmm. What a thankless role this is, even though I asked for it."

Miklotov muttered this to himself just before he left the room and then let out a brief sigh.

4

???: “—I never imagined that I would be the only one that would be left to live in dishonor.”

There was a sense of humiliation and chagrin, just as he’d alluded to, in the Eight Arms Kurgan’s reminiscence as he stepped down from the Dragon Carriage. It felt to Wilhelm like there’d also been some sense of relief mixed in with it.

Kurgan had been the sole survivor from Stride’s faction, who’d been responsible for giving rise to the Subjugation of the Evil Dragon

For a warrior who had been touted as the Empire’s Strongest, and had been fated to breathe his last on the battlefield, losing out on his place of death must have been indescribably regretting. That was made even worse by the fact that he’d been defeated in a duel with his archnemesis and left in a position to wait for his death.

Wilhelm had slipped through his eight arms and deeply wounded his chest with his sword. Kurgan’s fate should have run out then. However—

Wilhelm: “The Divine Dragon’s miracle healed everyone’s wounds in the city. You included.”

Kurgan: “Quite so.”

Kurgan solemnly affirmed Wilhelm’s words.

Kurgan had been the only member of the Stride faction who’d had his life saved by the Divine Dragon’s miracle. He’d bore the full blame for the chaos that had happened in the city and was to receive his punishment in his native Empire of Vollachia.

Kurgan’s eight arms and two legs were bound in fetters, and he was being brought to a frontier station on the border by Dragon Carriage. Wilhelm, who was accompanying him on this transfer, had a lot of mixed feelings about it.

The road there was quite long, but the two of them hadn't exchanged a single word on the way. The feelings they needed to exchange had already been done plentily so by their swords. It was something both of them felt the same about.

By some fatality, the opportunity that had come around should have been, from the start, taken away forevermore by the cycle of life and death. Though you could think of it as a disgrace, or an untruth—

Wilhelm: "It feels absurd even to get so stubborn about it, no?"

Thoughts in that vein allowed Wilhelm to reply to Kurgan's reminiscing.

Kurgan turned his back to the border and looked over in the direction of the Kingdom, as if he'd sympathized with what Wilhelm was thinking.

Kurgan: "Merely I, the warrior, remain; my son, his wife and those Shinobi twins perish. Impermanence at its finest."

Wilhelm: "Yet you don't seem perturbed."

Kurgan wasn't cursing the absurdity of his fate. On the contrary, his eyes were calm, as if he'd just had an evil spirit exorcised from him and was quietly accepting his end.

It was almost like he was saying that even their defeat had been what they'd wanted.

Wilhelm: "Don't tell me you're saying you were going to cut lose to fight another day."

Kurgan: "I care not about victory or defeat with Stride. In terms of that, it was always one defeat after the other. However, in his final moments, my son fulfilled his long-cherished desire. That makes me content."

Wilhelm: "His long-cherished desire…"

Kurgan: "He called a Dragon. Not an Evil Dragon, but a real one. —

By twisting the fabric of reality.”

Wilhelm had no idea what kind of aspiration that man had been granted. Most likely Kurgan didn’t know either. No one could know what was going on in that man’s mind.

That man had trampled over the world at his will and died fulfilling his insane wish in the end.

He lived, and then he died. Yet such a man had people who had tried to love him, even if they didn’t understand him.

Kurgan: “—Fare ye well, Sword Demon.”

This time, they didn’t exchange any more words between them.

Kurgan didn’t show a single sign of resistance until they handed him over to the Empire’s envoy. That had probably been where Kurgan drew the line as a warrior, or perhaps as a parent.

Wilhelm: “What’s going to happen to him back in the Empire?”

Wilhelm asked Bordeaux, who was standing next to him, as they saw off the Dragon Carriage leaving the frontier station driving off to the Empire. Bordeaux, who’d been charge of the transfer, folded his burly arms, and then spoke,

Bordeaux: “The Empire owes us a great deal for this. Their member of royalty who fled his country kicked up a stir with the intention of overthrowing another country. Our relations deteriorating seems like an inevitability.”

Wilhelm: “…It would be like that if they acknowledged Stride’s existence, I guess.”

Bordeaux: “Yeah.”

Bordeaux gave him a bitter nod and Wilhelm tch’ed.

The Empire had strongly denied any connection with the Stride faction from the very beginning. Stride being a member of the Vollachian royalty came only from his own claim. They needn’t even bother to touch on the credibility that the crazy washout's words held.

It might have been a different story if Stride's corpse had remained, but his body had been swallowed by the Black Dragon and the Dragon itself had been reduced to dust. It was impossible to prove his claim.

It was likely that even in his home country of Vollachia, all of the evidence showing that he really existed would have been buried.

Wilhelm: "But then, wouldn't that put Kurgan's life in jeopardy if he's gonna testify against them?"

Bordeaux: "I get your concern, but that's not going to happen. They don't convict their powerful heroes. Their doctrine of blood and iron where the strong are revered will save Kurgan's life. Though I'm not sure if I can call that a blessing."

The fact remained that Kurgan had cooperated with an unknown mastermind, even if they didn't admit that the main culprit had been affiliated with the Empire. Thus Kurgan had been transferred to the Empire, and would receive the blame.

Their apologies and reparations to the Kingdom were probably going to be reported officially as being Kurgan's fault.

Wilhelm: "So this is what politics is like."

Bordeaux: "Just a part of it. These are things which both you and me aren't very good at, since you can't solve 'em by smacking them."

Bordeaux said that with a wry smile on his face after Wilhelm spat those words out.

It was as he said. Both Wilhelm and Bordeaux sucked at settling things when they couldn't use their swords. Even so, Bordeaux, unlike Wilhelm, had to affront that battlefield which was full of that.

Bordeaux: "This will be the last time I'll hold my ax."

Wilhelm: "…"

Bordeaux: "I'm getting a bit too slow to stand on the frontlines. I reckon it's about time now."

Bordeaux announced that he was going to hang up his boots, as if corroborating what Wilhelm had been thinking.

—Bordeaux had been a man of battle as well.

Wilhelm knew that the days he'd spent wielding his ax and training with it were not few at all, as well as how anguishing his decision to hang up his boots was.

Bordeaux: "In the last battle I was able to fight with you, Grimm, the corps members… and Pivot. My life was spared, and I even got to look up at the majestic figure of the Divine Dragon. The show ends here for me."

Wilhelm: "So you're going to hang up your boots and devote yourself fully to the world of politics? Are you really gonna be able to manage that?"

Bordeaux: "I hope you'll give it your all in the Zergev Corps in exchange. I expect great things from you, my junior."

Wilhelm: "When you refer to me like that, does that have something to do with looking after the Gildark family?"

Wilhelm tilted his head in confusion when he said that in response to Bordeaux who looked like he was in contemplation.

Unsurprisingly, a substantial number of the citizens of Picoutatte had fallen victim in The Subjugation of the Evil Dragon. The group that was most affected after them were the members of the Subjugation Force who'd been dispatched to defeat Stride.

From the names he knew of these victims, there was Roswaal's, as well as—

Wilhelm: "Razak Gildark, though I didn't really know him that well."

Bordeaux: “He was a fine individual. He was in charge of training the new recruits back during the Civil War… You may have skipped his bootcamp, but Grimm and stuff should’ve been looked after by him.”

Wilhelm: “I imagined you’d say something like that.”

Razak, one of the Great Knights of the Kingdom, had joined the Subjugation Force to keep his Kingdom safe.

He’d been one of the people who’d lost their lives in the battle, protecting the civilians that had been turned into a mob.

Wilhelm: “I heard that he died protecting a child.”

Bordeaux: “Yeah. It was the son of the Hoffman Family who’d happened to be visiting Picoutatte. I was devastated to learn of Razak-dono’s death, but…”

Wilhelm: “But?”

Bordeaux trailed off his words, and then smiled at Wilhelm’s question,

Bordeaux: “He was bold enough to say “I want to tread in Razak-dono’s footsteps.” I’m looking forward to seeing Rickert’s future as well.”

Wilhelm: “Aren’t you taking too much onto yourself considering that the heir to the Gildark family still hasn’t come of age yet?”

Bordeaux: “What, I’ve put my ax aside, so both of my hands are free. So grabbing onto the future should be a piece of cake, right?”

Wilhelm: “That way of putting it is really unlike you.”

He snorted, and then Wilhelm smiled too.

Wilhelm looked up at the sky absentmindedly; he felt as if he’d seen those clouds drifting about in the azure before. The drifting wisps flew away in the breeze and slowly changed shape. That, for some reason, tugged at his heartstrings.

Things were moving, change was always happening, time never stood still.

Bordeaux: “Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Bordeaux: “You be sure to stay true to who you are at your core.”

Wilhelm couldn’t laugh off Bordeaux’s oddly sentimental words.

Nevertheless, he just silently vowed that he would try to keep those words in mind, and sink them into his heart should he ever need them.

5

???: I’m going to tie the knot with Carol

Grimm awkwardly handed him a scrap of paper he’d written on after a while of drinking together.

They were in their usual bar, and night had just started to fall. The bar was full of people talking, and the smell of booze hung in the air, making it the ideal place to lose yourself in idle chatter.

Wilhelm: “…What’s the right thing to say here? It’s about time? Or congratulations?”

Grimm: Both would be like you

Wilhelm: “I see. Yeah, I guess so. Then it’s about time, and congratulations.”

Wilhelm gave his blessings to Grimm’s written confession, who’d placed his glass of liquor down onto the table and smiled.

He was going to tie the knot, in short, he was going to make his marriage proposal. It was no secret that they both really loved each other and had been dating for a while. So much so, that those around them had been eagerly waiting for when it was going to be.

Their difference in social status—what with Carol being a noble, and Grimm from common stock had been related to their delay. Though it was chiefly only the two of them who saw that as a problem; everyone else who knew them didn't really think it was a big deal.

Wilhelm: "So I guess this means you've gotten past that problem of social status with the merit you were given?"

None other than Grimm had been granted the highest merit from the people of the Subjugation Force in what had happened recently.

He'd fought the mastermind Stride, rescued the captured Sword Saint and even helped out in the battle against the rampaging Black Dragon. It was safe to say that he'd played an active role pretty much everywhere.

Of course, everyone who knew Grimm knew that he didn't want to take credit for it, but regardless of that, there had to be some sort of reward for all the great deeds he'd done.

Hence, Grimm had quietly been given the honor of being a Great Knight, thus giving him the same qualifications as a noble, though only during his own generation. That meant that his status difference with Carol had vanished.

Thus, now that the impediment had been removed from the two lovers, the rest was history.

Grimm: Mathers-sama left some dying words for Carol you see

Wilhelm: "…"

Grimm: She said that she wanted her to find happiness with me. What an odd person she was

He'd used a rather straight to the point expression to refer to her, but Wilhelm couldn't deny it either.

Roswaal had been an odd woman. She'd stepped off the stage of the lives of Wilhelm, Grimm and many others without that impression of her changing.

She'd jaunted off, without even being able to say goodbye.

Wilhelm: "After all, she was a woman who always liked to pull the wool over people's eyes."

The corners of Wilhelm's lips crinkled up into a small smile. Grimm gave a laugh, as if he were saying Yeah and then nodded.

Wilhelm: "When's the wedding going to be?"

Grimm: Not too long from now. I'm going to talk to Carol about it

Wilhelm: "You're going to invite me, right?"

Grimm: It shocks me that you even considered the possibility of not being invited

Wilhelm and Grimm continued to drink more liquor as they chatted. Lately they'd been drinking more bad liquor than good. He could say, in that sense, that tonight's liquor was especially rich in flavor.

Nevertheless, Wilhelm knew that Grimm hadn't finished what he wanted to say yet.

Grimm tapped his fingers against the table with a rap-rap-rap. It was the easiest gesture for him, due to his lack of voice, to grab the attention of people near him. Wilhelm looked up at that sound and their gazes intersected.

Wilhelm realized that the time had come from the serious look on his face.

He let out a sigh, breaking the silence that had momentarily hung over them,

Wilhelm: "You're quitting?"

Grimm: I'm quitting the Knights Order

Grimm unfolded the piece of paper he'd prepared in response to Wilhelm's question. What he'd written there would have been weird to broach the subject, but suitable as a reply.

Grimm cast his gaze down slightly, and scribbled down a continuation to what he'd said on the piece of paper.

Grimm: I'm going to marry Carol and retire from the Knights Order. That's what I've decided

Wilhelm: "…But why?"

Grimm: I want to stay by Carol's side, being together with her is what I live for. I realized that clearly with what happened recently

His writing was frenzied and his sentences seemed to leap off the page at him. Wilhelm closed his eyes in reflection, faced with his seemingly forward-leaning attitude.

Come to think of it, he'd always been betraying his impressions of him ever since they'd met.

He was ordinary in appearance and of no remarkable origin. The reason why he'd left his hometown and gone to the Royal Capital to become a soldier in the Royal Forces had been a banal one. He was definitely just an ordinary man.

However, he'd miraculously survived his first battle by sticking with Wilhelm after he'd defied his superior's orders; he'd stayed alive in the Zergev Corps, one of the toughest squadrons in the Royal Forces; and before he even knew it, he'd become his indispensable close friend.

A man who didn't fit the mold, a man you couldn't fit in it. That's why his decision to retire from the Order was indeed like him, having been granted enough merit to be recognized as a Knight and having taken his wife as a just reward for that.

Besides, this was his pièce de résistance since it was for the sake of staying by the side of the woman he loved.

Wilhelm: "You're such a big idiot."

Grimm: I don't want you to tell me that

Grimm thrust out a scrap of paper with his response at the same time Wilhelm spoke, as if he'd predicted he'd say that. Wilhelm reacted in embarrassment, causing a broad smile to break out on Grimm's face.

Grimm: The Remendis Family will be succeeded by Carol's brother. So she's going to be Carol Fauzen. We're going to live together and keep on supporting each other

Wilhelm: "…I see."

Wilhelm had no objections to Grimm's plans. He'd cast aside such crass thoughts as soon as Grimm had told him he was going to quit and told him the reason why.

He was abandoning everything for the woman he loved. Grimm was definitely a big idiot. Wilhelm also knew of another big idiot like that.

That's why he had nothing more he could say.

Grimm: I'm leaving the Zergev Corps. Conwood is best suited to replace me

Wilhelm: "Well, I suppose he's a worrier too. He'll definitely keep an eye on me so that I don't end up in an early grave."

Grimm: That's your role as commander you know. Also, the Zergev Corps are about to change in essence too

Implied in Grimm's writing was something real they'd been offered the chance of a few days ago.

Everyone from the Zergev Corps, along with its Commander Wilhelm, had gotten a certain offer from the Kingdom, after they'd taken into account their toils in the recent events, as well as in the Demi-Human War—

Grimm: Is it not an honor to have the squad admitted into the Royal Guards and be asked to be its commander?

Wilhelm: "You, the guy who's about to give up his place as deputy-commander from that honorable role, is saying this to me?”

Wilhelm clicked his tongue as he said this to the slick-looking Grimm. Their admission into the Royal Guards had been as a result of the Zergev Corps’ peerless service. The Royal Guards were responsible for protecting the most important positions in the Kingdom. With all due respect, positions within it couldn’t be granted to Knights of middling caliber. This was because its roles were decreed by the King himself.

Wilhelm: “It’s all because the Astrea Mansion, along with Lord McMahon’s Mansion, were attacked by Stride’s group. Ironically what happened now hasn’t made it as necessary for us to keep a close eye on the workings of the Empire, at least for a while. All the other nations should know by now that our covenant with the Divine Dragon is still alive and kicking.”

Grimm: Our military will start to shift back towards its peace-time state. So the most important duty of the Royal Guards, as guards for the Royal Castle and His Majesty, has been assigned to the Zergev Corps, strongest in the Kingdom.

Wilhelm: “Though, I can’t help but imagine this as maybe being one of His Majesty Gionis’ whims.”

Wilhelm could count the number of times he’d exchanged words with King Gionis on one hand. Yet he knew just how optimistic Gionis’ personality was, despite knowing him for so little.

However, Gionis had taken the Black Dragon’s appearance seriously and even had shown his determination to step forward and make use of the covenant despite all the naysayers.

Wilhelm too had realized that there’d been no shortage of people who’d offered their swords to him and vowed him loyalty.

That’s why—

Wilhelm: “I’m going to accept the invitation to the Royal Guards. Though, I don’t know about being its commander in chief.”

Grimm: Don’t worry. I know you’ll do just fine

Wilhelm: “Well when you put it so simply… Wait, no.”

He reflexively hesitated to finish his response. He paused to think for a moment, then gave a quick nod,

Wilhelm: “—If it’s you saying it, then I reckon it may be so.”

Wilhelm was amazed that he’d replied so openly. What irked him was that there were no traces of surprise on Grimm’s face, just proud relief.

From his attitude, it was as if he knew more about Wilhelm than Wilhelm himself.

Wilhelm: “Quit laughing at me. —You can’t even draw out your sword, damn coward.”

He blurted those words out before he could stop himself. A tinge of surprise streaked across Grimm’s face when he heard him say that. —Not the bad sort of surprise, but the good sort.

It looked like he remembered. That was when they’d first met—

Grimm: I will muster my courage and lift up my shield

Once upon a time, Grimm, who couldn’t figure out the meaning behind why they fought, hadn’t been able to answer his question. Wilhelm had been disappointed in him acting like that, and had cursed him as a coward.

More than seven years had passed since then, and now, finally, he’d given him an answer.

—Meaning that their relationship had been completed thanks to this.

Wilhelm: “What are you going to do after you quit? Are you going to take over the family business, or something?”

Grimm: My lil’ bro took over that. Besides, it troubles me to hear you speak about it like its someone else’s problem, eh, Sir

Wilhelm: “…HEY.”

Wilhelm ran his eyes over his text then raised his voice when he reached the final sentence. He’d heard himself being referred to by that way only recently from Carol.

Wilhelm: “Don’t tell me…”

Grimm: Your Mother-in-law, Tishua-sama, has already given her consent

Wilhelm: “But I’m supposed to be in charge of the family right now…”

Grimm: Good luck with that, Sir

Pressed by his cheerful tone, Wilhelm curled his lips open and took a swig of his liquor.

Wilhelm: “I would have felt better if you’d said I didn’t have to see your face around here anymore.”

Grimm: “…”

Grimm gave him a literal silent laugh, in reply to his sore-loser-like words.

6

???: “I’m marrying Grimm.”

Theresia, who’d been passing her time idly sitting on her rocking chair, couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

Not because she was surprised, but because she found her adorable.

Carol had come to her with a serious look on her face saying she had something important to tell her. And with her face still flushed, it had taken her a long, long time of trying to find the words to blurt out just that much of a confession.

Carol: “Th-Theresia-sama? What are you laughing for?”

Theresia: “Well Carol, it’s because the face you’re making looks like you’re about to propose a duel. Just when I was wondering what you were going to say with that, you say this… You are sososo cuuute.”

Carol: “Please quit teasing me…”

Carol pinched the hem of her dress tightly with her head hung down sadly. Each of her gestures looked adorable, definitely because she was no longer hiding her love for him.

Carol used to be stubborn and never showed her feelings, but now that Grimm had been knighted and their difference in status had vanished, her stubbornness looked like it had dissolved with it.

—Though, that mustn’t be the only reason why she’d become so honest with herself at heart.

Carol: “Theresia-sama?”

Carol suddenly called out Theresia’s name with a surprised look to her face. Theresia lifted her head up in response and tried to reply to her, but couldn’t. Both her cheeks and eyelids were trembling.

Reason being that tears were flowing. They ran down her cheeks, down her chin, leaving behind a trail that dripped down onto her clothes. She finally realized there that she was crying.

Carol: “Are you not feeling well? I’ll call for a doctor right away…”

Theresia: “It’s, it’s not like that. Don’t worry, I’m fine. It’s just that I…”

Carol: “It’s just that you?”

Theresia: “It’s just that I’m so glad you’ve finally taken a decision that makes you happy.”

Theresia forced her trembling lips to move and somehow managed to put the thoughts she was feeling in her heart into words.

Theresia truly cared about Carol. Because she was someone who sucked at finding happiness, or, if she were pressed to say more about it, then she was someone who always kept putting off finding her own happiness.

That's why Theresia was intimately glad that Carol was going to marry the person who made her happy, and had actually found a person who looked like he wanted to do so.

—Without even realizing that Carol had felt the exact same way about her.

Carol: "…Pardon me, Theresia-sama."

Carol said those brief words and gently brought Theresia's head nearer to her with her outstretched arms. She then splayed her red hair out against her chest and wrapped her arms around her in a warm embrace.

Theresia could feel her comforting warmth and hear her heartbeat right there.

Theresia: "Are you going to become Carol Fauzen? Or is he going to be Grimm Remendis?"

Carol: "Fauzen, I'm going to take Grimm's family name. House Remendis will be succeeded by my little brother, so my parents say that they don't mind me abandoning my family name."

Theresia: "…You're going to quit the lineage of the Sheaths and leave me alone?"

Carol: "You're going to make me angry, Theresia-sama, even if it's you who's saying that."

She definitely wasn't going to abandon her. Theresia stuck her tongue out and apologized to her for her insecure remark.

We've always been together like this, so I want us to stay together in the future as well.

Then for this as well—

Theresia: “Are you truly okay with Grimm-kun? Like, is he the one who makes you the happiest of all?”

Carol: “Theresia-sama.”

Theresia: “I just want you to be the happiest in the world Carol. That’s why I want you to be with the person that makes you the most happy. Does Grimm-kun fit the bill? Is he your destined person? Is he Wilhelm?”

Carol: “Theresia-sama, you’re confusing me. It would be wrong of me to say that the expression you used is insulting, so I won’t say that, but…”

Carol soothingly patted Theresia’s back with a complex look adorning her face. Snuggling her cheeks against her in response to her gentle action, Theresia tightly wrapped her arms around Carol’s body.

She hugged her, tighter and tighter. Her baby shifted around in protest in her swollen womb.

Theresia: “Your Mom’s in the middle of an important conversation right now. You need to stay quiet.”

She said this in a strict voice, and as a result, her baby went quiet.

Theresia: “Nice, good child… Hey Carol?”

Carol: “I’m, I’m sorry… Just, I already knew this, but I’m confident that I can say you’ll make a great Mother, Theresia-sama.”

Carol gave her a firm nod, having barely suppressed her urge to laugh. Then she gently stroked Theresia who was still held in her arms, and said,

Carol: “Yes, I won’t regret it. I’m going to be the happiest person in the world. Grimm is my destined person. No, to put it more aptly, he’s the person I chose.”

Theresia: “…Good, in that case, you can trust that far more than stuff like destiny.”

She gave her a smile back in response before her lips formed into a pout.

Theresia: “But this isn’t faaair Carol. I can’t say anything back when you put it like that. I’m going to end up not believe anything you say now.”

Carol: “Yeah. You can count me among the people who’ve beaten the Sword Saint with this.”

Theresia: “Mhm, shall do. Yeah, I’m the weakest and most pitiable Sword Saint in all history, who just keeps on losing. So from now on, you’ll have to keep on beating me, won’t you.”

Carol: “You can count on me. —I’ll always be at your side, Theresia-sama.”

Carol kneeled down as she said this. Then, as she glanced up at her, Theresia gave her a mischievous smile.

Theresia: “On that subject, if me and Grimm-kun were in danger, which one of us would you choose first?”

Carol: “The man I love can get out of sticky situations on his own. So naturally I chose you Theresia-sama.”

Theresia: “I really like that part of you Carol.”

Carol: “P-Please quit teasing me…”

Theresia figuratively stuck her tongue out at Carol, whose face was flushed in embarrassment.

It was extremely unlikely that she’d grant that one wish. She knew that her habit wasn’t a good one, and that Carol was bothered by it, but she couldn’t stop herself.

After all, Carol’s embarrassed face was just as cute as her smiling one. That’s why Theresia would definitely get along with anyone who knew that fact.

Standing right now in front of Carol who was embarrassed like this, the smile on Theresia's face was like that of a flower in full bloom.

Theresia wanted to express her thanks, her heartfelt gratitude…

…To everyone who'd helped out in keeping these peaceful times ongoing.

7

—Thus dawns the final act on the long-running Sword Demon Battle Ballad.

???: "Carol and Grimm-kun look really happy, don't they?"

???: "Mhm, yeah."

???: "I was kinda unhappy that he ended up taking Carol away from me, but… yeah. You've got to put your hands up when she's been made this happy."

???: "Mhm, yeah."

???: "…Wilhelm, aren't you lonely too now that Grimm-kun's been taken away by Carol?"

Wilhelm: "Mhm, yeah."

???: "Ugh! You're not listening to a word I'm saying!"

Theresia burst out in anger at Wilhelm who kept mhmhm'ing back at her. She puffed out her cheeks and glared at Wilhelm who was right beside her—No, so near her that he was practically on top of her. However he paid no attention to her, still with his ear on her belly, listening for their baby.

Wilhelm: "Be quiet Theresia. I can't hear our child."

Theresia: "I want you to listen to your adorable, cherished, precious, lovely wife properly."

Wilhelm: "Later."

Theresia: “Dismissed just like that! You’re so awful!”

Theresia moaned about her husband’s dismissive attitude, but it wasn’t like she could afford to run away while holding her stomach. Wilhelm had a look about him that indicated he was approaching the situation seriously, so it wasn’t like he was messing about either. That made her glad.

Wilhelm: “So much has happened you know. I’m worried about you and our unborn child.”

Theresia: “You’re such a worrier. We’re fine, we were given a thorough check-up by Garritch Sensei on Miklotov-sama’s recommendation.”

Though the name of that familiar healer cropped up, Wilhelm’s worries weren’t allayed. He wasn’t showing his anxiety on his face, but unluckily for him Theresia was able to read what he was thinking.

Wilhelm wasn’t as unfeeling or uncaring as he thought he was, so he couldn’t fool her. Though, she was likely aware that it was the bias of love that made her find that part of him cute as well.

Theresia: “…So, now that you made your wife shut up, were you able to talk with the baby?”

Wilhelm: “No, not at all. I can’t hear them at all. They don’t seem dead.”

Theresia: “Don’t say something so frightening! They’re alive! See, they’re moving about now!”

Wilhelm: “What are… Oh, you’re right.”

Her baby shifted around in her womb a bunch, as if objecting to what Wilhelm had said along with their mother. She took Wilhelm’s hand and placed it on her belly so as to show him.

Time passed slowly between them with their hands held like that somehow.

It was a peaceful, uneventful period of time. It had been getting difficult lately to spend time like this due to them having to deal with the aftermath of the Subjugation of the Evil Dragon

Because of that, Theresia herself reckoned she'd treat herself more than usual.

Wilhelm: "You're overthinking things. I want to stay with you as well."

Theresia: "…No fair. I didn't even say anything right now about that."

Wilhelm: "I can tell even if you don't say anything."

Theresia: "Am I that easy to read?"

Wilhelm: "I don't know if you are. I just figured it out I guess because you're my woman."

Theresia: "Grrrrr."

Having been told that so clearly without facade, Theresia plunged into silence.

He really didn't hesitate to cut in at crucial moments. Just how many times had she been made a fool of by what he said, just how many times had she been brushed off?

Theresia: "I bet in the future you're just gonna keep on doing this…"

Wilhelm: "—? What are you talking about?"

Theresia: "I'm talking about you, you meany… Anyways, we're going to stay together today, right?"

Theresia looked up at Wilhelm from her rocking chair. Wilhelm faltered for a moment receiving her gaze, but he nodded straight after and said "Yeah."

Wilhelm: "I've finally sorted out all the stuff I needed to do…

Though, I’m sure I’m going to get busy pretty soon.”

Theresia: “Ugh, the Royal Guards, right? Like I’m glad they recognized you, but…”

Wilhelm: “It’s complicated for me.”

Wilhelm folded his arms and then cocked his head.

Theresia: “Complicated, why?”

Wilhelm: “You get fewer chances to go out from the Royal Capital when you’re part of the Royal Guard. So few that I’m gonna get even less chances to swing my sword about. Even so, thanks to that, I can stay at your side.”

Theresia: “…”

Wilhelm: “So it’s complicated. I think my feeling of gratitude is the stronger one though.”

Theresia was flabbergasted that Wilhelm had seriously placed her and his sword on a set of (metaphorical) scales, what’s more with a complex look on his face. Though at the same time, she thought hard about it.

Should she be Honored or angered that within him he’d taken her as an object to be compared with his Sword? Which one should she feel as the wife of the Sword Demon?

Theresia: “There’s nothing I can do about it, so I’m going to have to slowly tip them towards me.”

Wilhelm: “Anyways, we can stay together for a few days. Leave everything to me, including meals and baths.”

Theresia: “…Ignoring the meals for a second, I’m not letting you help me with my baths.”

Wilhelm: “I was just looking out for you, you know.”

Theresia: “I-I don’t need your extra concerns. I’m pregnant, I’m a pregnant woman”Wilhelm: “You know that doesn’t make you any differe…”

Theresia: “Ah! Ah! Enough! Yes, enough with this! This ends here! End of story! Yes, give me a hug, a really tight one, and that’s it for today!”

Theresia waved her hands about frantically and told him what she wanted without holding back. Wilhelm shrugged his shoulders in response while obediently giving her a tight hug.

She felt the loving touch of his strong arms. It was different to the one he’d given her when they’d reunited back in that city and he’d pulled her into him with all his strength. Still no matter how many times it was, she ended up falling in love over and over again with this new Wilhelm.

So much had happened, there’d been so many goodbyes, including Wilhelm and Carol’s dear friend and her own cherished father. Even so, would they forgive her for relishing in her happiness like this?

—You needn’t even worry about that.

Theresia felt as if she could hear her father, Bertol saying that. Indeed, she was sure that he’d have probably said that.

That’s why, suddenly, those words came blurting out from her mouth.

Theresia: “…I really wish my father had managed to name our child.”

That had been what Theresia had desired at the end, in that world where crime and punishment congregated, in that world where she was reunited with the family she thought she’d never seen again.

Even though Bertol had replied to her, saying that he wanted to rack his brains and decide after giving it some thought.

Wilhelm: “…Theresia, there’s something I haven’t told you yet.”

Theresia: “Huh?”

Wilhelm overheard Theresia's murmur, and while still holding her, whispered that gently into her ear. Then he removed his arm from around her and put it in his pocket.

And—.

Wilhelm: "—It's something your Honored Mother gave me. She said she wanted me to pass it on when the chance came."

Theresia: "…"

He pulled out a crumpled letter and presented it to her. Theresia took it looking confused. Part of the paper was torn, and it had even been folded over a bunch of times. The dark stuff on its edges were probably bloodstains.

Theresia opened the letter with trembling fingers and what she saw written there was—

Theresia: "—Oh."

Wilhelm "It seems like your Honored Father had been giving it quite a lot of thought."

Theresia let out a short quivering gasp in response to Wilhelm's words.

There was a long, long list of names written on the letter she'd opened—More than she could even count. Many of them had traces of being marked, considered, rejected or signs of excitement around them.

—But only one amongst them, just one, the last one remaining, had a circle around it.

Theresia: "—Heinkel."

She put it into words. She let it roll off her tongue and voiced out the name.

Heinkel, that name ever so gently tugged at Theresia's heartstrings.

Wilhelm: “It seems like he only came up with boys’ names. I guess you could call it being dead set on that… That sort of stuff too was rather like of your Honored Father.”

Theresia: “Yeah, definitely, for sure. It was really, definitely, absolutely like my Father…”

She’d never asked him to do so directly. Despite that, he must have rushed off to do it on his own, and racked his mind day and night, really struggling to think up a name.

Theresia: “He kept our promise.”

She’d thought that the promise she’d made with her father after he’d died, a promise that he shouldn’t have been able to keep, wouldn’t have been fulfilled.

Even so, Bertol had kept his promise. He’d kept his final promise to his beloved daughter.

He’d been someone who could do that. He’d been someone who’d done that. That’s why he—

Theresia: “—Heinkel, Heinkel, Heinkel.”

She repeated that name over and over again, so that it would reach her unborn child.

Wilhelm: “Heinkel Astrea.”

Wilhelm likewise spoke the name out to his child, as if he understood what Theresia was trying to do.

They’d just laughed a moment ago thinking about what would happen if her baby wasn’t a boy.

But that didn’t matter, the two of them called out their child’s name.

—Heinkel will be your name. A name that your brave, wonderful grandfather thought up for you. A name that will be called out with love many many times from the moment you’re born.

Theresia: “It’s been tough for you even before you were born, and I’m sure that it’ll be tough for you after, but me and Wilhelm will be here for you. After all, your Mommy and Daddy love you.”

Wilhelm: “And it looks like Grimm and Carol will be sticking with us for a while too. So ya know, that means you definitely won’t be bored when you come out.”

Wilhelm continued from where Theresia had left off. Hearing those words, she slowly looked at her beloved husband with her blue eyes and gave him a lovely smile, similar to that of a blooming flower.

Theresia: “I love you Wilhelm… What about you?”

Wilhelm gazed back at his beloved wife, and said,

Wilhelm: “—You know that.”

As adorable as it was that this part of him didn’t change, she really wished he would say it back.

8

—And thus this tale too comes to an end.

A tale about a man and a woman who were toyed with by the evil of the Destruction Wish and their love that was first tested and then responded.

There’d been many farewells, and the balance between what had been lost and what had been gained was out of equilibrium. But no one should be able to quantify the value of happiness and unhappiness in others.

For now, you ought only listen to the ballad of the battlefield.

What did the demon of the sword who was ablaze with love desire at the end of it? What did this lumbering demon who could only speak through the battlefield desire at the end of it?

—May the tomorrow he dreamed of be there at the end of the Sword Demon Battle Ballad.

The Sword Demon Battle Ballad FIN

Ex 6:
Sword Demon Battle Ballad

Sword Demon Battle Ballad: Finale of the Eight Arms

1

???: “—Hey, Jumbo! You, do it over here too!”

Catching the excavation tools thrown at him alongside the vituperation with the arms on his back, the colossal man sluggishly upraised his face.

The gargantuan man measured close to two metres in height. The skin of his muscly, brawny body was blue, and affixed above his neck was a visage terrifying enough to scare away Witchbeasts in hurried escape. However, what was more peculiar about him than his face or physique, were his eight arms hefty as logs.

The Multi-Arm Tribe largely had individuals with four to five arms on average; even amongst them, those with eight arms were rare, and there was about only one renowned in history.

Anyhow, his presence was enough to compel anyone to re-examine whether they had the correct person to be treating roughly. —However, to much misfortune, the person was not mistaken about who they were pushing around, and they possessed the right to be pushing him around, at the very least the party being pushed around believed such.

After all, the one pushing him around was the Supervisor of this site, and the gargantuan man was a prisoner beneath his employ.

Cuffed around his neck was a “Meteor” called the “Collar of Subservience”, and should he purchase the Supervisor’s displeasure, he would be granted punishment per his will in this position. The will to defy did not even as little as surge. —To begin with, he had not a smidgen of intent to oppose.

Supervisor: “What’s thi~s? That defiance in your eyes. You got any problems?”

???: “None. This is how my eyes have appeared from the onset.”

Upon him shaking his head against the faults appended to him, the Supervisor’s eyes tapered with a hint of sadism. Expecting punishment to befall him upon this indication—

???: “Supervisor Lehare! The Governor is calling you!”

Lehare: “Tch, lucky bastard… keep at it till I come back!”

Receiving a summon from the other side of the avenue, the Supervisor grimaced and left those words behind. Seeing off his frame, the gargantuan man looked down onto the digging stick in his hand and muttered, “Lucky, huh”.

???: “For me to be lucky, what an ironic thing, isn’t it, Stride.”

Murmuring this ruminative utterance, he raised overhead the digging stick for the construction site behind him— the massive, enormous build of foundation for the rampart under construction.

2

—Once, there had been a legendary warrior named the Eight Arms.

He came from the rare tribe, the Multi-Arm Tribe, living in the Vollachian Empire, and as his alias denoted, he used all eight of his arms to manipulate weapons, the strongest existence who vanquished every kind of adversary. Availing himself the name of the strongest per his will in the Empire that prized fighters, the Eight Arms befitted esteem.

—However, that was about thirty years ago.

Lionized as the strongest in the Empire, his name having promulgated far and wide, the Eight Arms declined as an unofficial felon for being a member of the party to have committed an act of war against the neighbouring Kingdom of Lugunica. Taking into account the achievements of the Eight Arms till then and even the strength that he possessed in person, he could have taken the option to enact his discontent through exercise of strength and firmly refused accepting such a position.

However, the Eight Arms abstained from doing so, and accepted the judgement the country cast upon him without resistance.

As a result, the Eight Arms was assigned labour without parole, and had been engaged in construction of the firm, powerful rampart of the Fortified City of Garkla in the northern region of the Empire, for days worth many decades and still counting.

With that flow of time, the legend of the Eight Arms became an old and rusted article, reaching a period where the many individuals who supervised him, as he pursued labour, were unbeknownst to who he was.

The people rounded up for the ceaseless construction work of walls, for it to be sturdier, for it to be firmer, were predominantly either criminals same as the Eight Arms, remnant soldiers defeated in battle, or roaming wanderers with no homeland.

And even amongst those in the same environs as him, the Eight Arms was disdained as a traitor to his appearance, scorned as a frightened old wolf who undertook neither rebellion nor resistance.

—Until that day arrived.

It should have been a day with nothing remarkable.

Light clouds convened over Mount Gildray which functioned as the provincial border with the neighbouring country, a refreshing breeze also penetrated into the Fortified City adjacent to the mountain. Lately the weather had been continually humid and sweat-inducing, so today's labour would be given considerable respite, was the kind of talk also flitting about the construction site.

However—

???: "—Sa~y, I'm telling you to bring forward the one responsible."

Accompanying the remark akin to the tantrums of a displeased child, was fearsome destruction.

The discharged shockwave upturned the city's ground, and every person, thing, and building set upon it was literally blown off by their roots, refashioned into a variegated meld of ruin. With just that, one-third of the extolled firm and sturdy Garkla collapsed, generating ten thousand worthless sacrifices.

A beat subsequent to the devastation, the screeches and wails resounding as cries of agony amplified, and the man who walked on trampling them underfoot ran a hand through his white hair,

???: “Goodness, on top of being made to bring myself to this dusty place, to run into someone so short of courtesy is truly such bad luck. Even though I’ve gone out of my way to come all the way here, such lack of consideration towards the toil the other party has had to undertake. The forethought one would call natural, you know.”

Grumbling complaints and discontent, the man casually snapped his fingers. —The subsequent instant, a smaller scale of destruction coiled onto all that was ahead of his snapped fingers, further augmenting damage violating the city.

The man scattered about inexplicable destruction, as he then surveyed the devastation in apparent boredom,

???: “In the end, even after I so kindly identify their mistakes, nobody comes forward to apologize. The way they’re all such self-seeking humans is so repulsive. Don’t you think so, number one hundred and thirty four.”

No.134: “—Yes, I believe it is as per Husband-sama’s say.”

The one to quietly respond to the man’s inquiry was a brown-haired woman walking right behind him. The man nodded in satisfaction with a “That’s right” upon the woman’s reply, her features and conduct well-ordered, emotionless as a doll.

There—

???: “—Stand in line, criminals! Be useful!”

A sharp voice tore through the space of agonising cries, followed by a succession of footsteps. Upon hearing that, the white-haired man furrowed his brows with a “What’s this?”, capturing in his sight the crowd deploying before him.

They were about thirty men in squalid guises, made to wield crude weaponry.

Their races and ages were sundry, but what they all shared in common besides their squalidness were the collars on their necks,

???: “So, now what? Do you, at last, intend to recognise the blunder you committed and welcome me all huddled together? I want to make it clear that I’m not particularly seeking any grandiose sort of hospitality. What I wish for is treatment natural for and as a human. And also, with what I’m looking for prepared. It’s not that I personally want it, but it’s something I was requested to acquire—”

???: “Do it—!!”

It was when the man was in the midst of verbosely elucidating his objective.

Behind the row of men, a person garbed in the Empire’s military uniform diffused his instruction and the weapons were cast. They rushed toward the man straight ahead, and coercively shut his yet prattling mouth—

???: “…I was in the middle of talking just now, wasn’t I? To interfere with that amounts to an infringement of my rights. That’s, not something I can forgive!”

The man standing upright stretched his arm, preventing only the thrown weapons from landing upon the woman behind him, himself defenselessly bathing in the lethal weaponry yet roaring without injury.

The man’s indignation also birthed damage onto the men lined up before him.

The avenue dissipated, however many people were turned to mincemeat, the ones who yet survived seemed to lack the option to run, wielding their fortunately saved lives as weapons, only able to bound towards the man all wearing grim expressions.

???: “All of them, a horde who just can’t listen to someone. —From the bottom of my heart, I find it repulsive.”

Snapping his fingers at the one leading the vanguard of their plunge, the man retched in annoyance stemming from his heart.

3

Lehare Yvsant, the Supervisor, was pursued by many decisions in the chaotic situation of turmoil.

For Lehare, who originally was nothing more than the Supervisor for the rampart’s construction work, the report and orders to manage that descended upon him patently exceeded his duties, but there was nothing he could do about it in the present circumstances.

After all, the Governor of the Fortified City of Garkla had been engulfed in the first range of destruction and turned to a spatter of blood.

The Governor’s aides had also been blown off altogether, so the official chain of command of Garkla at present was in absolute chaos. In the time it would take to confirm that, wounds might spread to a fatal extent.

Thus, Lehare had no option but to act as the temporary Governor representative. —Naturally, it was not the mere Supervisor Lehare who made this audacious determination.

The one to push for this determination was—

Lehare: “The enemy is, a singular individual, is it? And they are scattering the labourers to dust? This report…”

???: “—Is some kind of mistake, you think? Is that judgement what your common sense has illuminated to you? If so, then does the occurrence presently unfolding in this city conform to your common sense? Use your head.”

Lehare: “Th-Then, Prince, do you truly think the city was reduced to this by one person?”

Prince: “Of course, I am also maintaining the possibility that they are not alone within consideration… the problem is, their goal.”

Setting a hand on his mouth, the one deep in ponderance was the person who had perchance been visiting the city for inspection—before the wisdom of the young Prince about ten years of age, give or take, Lehare resolved in heart to follow his command with all his might.

That Prince, less than half his own age, had a ghastliness to him that did not accord with his age. A presence and dignity commanding to proclaim this was how the Sword Wolves of Vollachia ought to be.

Prince: “…Albeit nobody but myself dislikes it most.”

Lehare: “Prince?”

Prince: “Ignore it. More importantly, further spread of damage must be stopped. Sear it in yourself to move swiftly and multifacetedly. —Furthermore, the Eight Arms is supposed to be in this city.”

Lehare: “Y-Yes! …Yes? Wait, the Eight Arms, you say? That’s…”

His resolution immediately swayed, Lehare’s eyes rolled backward.

Whom the Prince had alluded to was a labourer in this city assigned to physical labour. Although a member of the Multi-Arm Tribe, he was unambitious, a being who failed to live up to any such alias as the Eight Arms.

Lehare: “In regards to him, Prince, how do you…”

Prince: “Fool.”

One word, a flat reprimand, and Lehare was sweating profusely whilst the Prince gazed outside of the window.

Viewing down upon the cataclysmic spectacle of the city without any safe zones left, hearkening the incessantly audible notes of devastation and impact, he resumed.

Prince: “Hearing your name, this is how many react. —Do you find that acceptable, Eight Arms.”

“…”

Unable to spot the blue sky beyond the light clouds, Kurgan straitened his eyes, fallen to the ground face-up.

The bones of his entire body creaking, apparent serious damage to his internal organs, difficulty breathing.

Whilst labouring, he was often recipient to punishment of electric shocks via the Collar of Subservience on the Supervisor’s whims, and was often beaten by other labourers as a distraction, but none of those ached as befitting of pain.

But, these grave wounds begot genuine pain. —However, the one to enkindle this was far from a genuine fighter or warrior, a terribly contemptible and despicable being.

Kurgan: “That, my end…”

Would be something so trifling, was the sentiment that predominantly inhabited Kurgan’s heart.

Several decades ago, he had assisted his son, with whom he had no connection by blood, in his rebellion against the world, and after all of his comrades allied with it had died, he alone survived in solitude, a long time had elapsed since then. At the summit of having lived that long time in indolent dormancy, he would be killed by the absurdity called calamity in the shape of man. That was, the finale of Kurgan—

Prince: “—You, do you find that acceptable! Fulfil your duty!”

Kurgan: “…”

The subsequent moment, that voice seized hold of Kurgan’s soul as he verged closing his eyes in negligence.

The words he was pelted with, themselves were no different than instructions from the Supervisor impelling them to become meat shields towards the threat, making Kurgan and the other labourers obey through Collars of Subservience. Yet, different from the Supervisor who had been entangled in the attack and died, for what reason did this invigorate Kurgan's soul.

Because in that voice dwelled the franticness for accomplishing something, with one's life on the line.

This same franticness had also also dwelled within Kurgan's son, Stride Vollachia—

Prince: "Drop them!!"

Declared the same voice, and a heavy reverberation fell in proximity of the collapsed Kurgan. It was invisible to tell what that was from Kurgan's position. But, he knew what it was even without seeing.

The note of slicing the wind, and the heavy low tone perforating into the ground, it was impossible for Kurgan to misapprehend that.

Kurgan: "—Demon Cleavers."

Prince: "These are what your armaments ought to be, are they not, Eight Arms! They were things that happened to be present at this time, in this place! Thus you shall fulfill your duty! For you are a Sword Wolf of Vollachia!"

Awakening his body as though strummed, he bounded towards the voice's point of descent, and impaled into the ground there were four sizable longswords of bulky width— Demon Cleavers, he pulled them out and gripped them tight.

It had been however many decades since he had ascertained their weight and texture, but the void of time was replenished in an instant.

Naturally, bereft of maintenance, the sharpness of the longswords had strikingly declined, but—

Kurgan: "Specifics, accepted."

His low, murmuring voice, Kurgan himself felt astonished at its enlivening.

An instant prior, he had accepted death wielding nothing here. Heedless, the moment he ascertained the presence of his favoured longswords— no, his surging fighting spirit was from a different impetus.

Ordering to turn over the Demon Cleavers to Kurgan, it was the black-haired youth atop the fortress— imbued in his voice was the tenacity of the soul, which had catalyzed rebellion in the Eight Arms's soul.

Here, he must not let the proprietor of that voice die. For which he must swing his longswords.

Kurgan: "…"

An unhurried exhale, and Kurgan focused toward the front. Meeting eye-to-eye with the white-haired man at the end of the road, by whom he had been blasted away across the other direction.

And—

Kurgan: "—Eight Arms Kurgan."

Regulus: "Witch Cult Sin Archbishop, representing Greed, Regulus Corneas."

4

—It took about an hour for the Fortified City of Garkla to fall.

Many who heard of this truth were mightily, powerfully engraved with the terrifying essence of the Witch Cult Sin Archbishop, begetting an exceedingly swift annihilation of the city acclaimed as a firm bulwark.

However, that one hour was due to it being delayed or otherwise it would have originally taken less than its half, was a truth unknown to most humans.

The brief stretch of time the Eight Arms Kurgan had laboured for against the Sin Archbishop, a calamity of the world— however, had borne the fruit of minimising the devastation brought by Greed to its lowest.

Kurgan: "…"

All of the longswords he wielded shattered, and finally losing all eight of his arms altogether, shedding copious volumes of blood, Kurgan sunk to his knees.

Not a trace of injury upon the man before his eyes, he continued to nullify Kurgan's attacks with some obvious foul play.

The man was not a warrior. Kurgan harboured not the slightest of deep emotion toward that.

However, upon witnessing an upraised flag behind the man in his vision bleared by the bloodloss, his lips untied into a smile.

The national flag of a wolf pierced by swords, it was a message by the one who had commanded Kurgan to battle that he had used this time to accomplish his purpose—

Kurgan: "—Magnificent."

Regulus: "Magnificent? It provokes no sentimentality to hear that after all this time. To begin with, it was fairly obvious before you did what you did up to this point that it would be useless. I don't know if you're just plain stupid or your brain is malfunctioning or what, but you robbed my time to its hilt just because you were unable to come to that realisation, so even if you do call me magnificent this late."

The man blathered on with his grumblings, but nugatory talk did not enter his ears.

Ignoring it, Kurgan's consciousness slowly faded. In his mind, the question whether there was any meaning to him having lived through that battle and subsisted in this place for a prolonged length of time.

Through his battle here, for him to have left something for the future, wishing for it to become even a slight blow onto the Observers of the heavens whom Stride loathed, was what sojourned in his mind.

—In the years to come, the young prince who had been present in that circumstance, endeavoured to restore the name of the Eight Arms.

The new Governor of the Fortified City needing reconstruction and revival, Lehare Yvsant, restored the Eight Arms's broken longswords and adorned the topmost floor of the fortress with them, as a symbol to extol the rigidity of the city.

The battle was heralded by many as the vanquish of the Eight Arms, but only those who were saved in that hour, with Lehare at forefront, retold it as Kurgan's triumph.

Such was the legend of the Eight Arms, who survived an old battle and died for a new future.

END

Sword Demon Battle Ballad: The One Who Succeeds Astrea

1

—Sword's tip slicing through the wind, a glint of silver capered through the rays of the sun in a fierce waltz of light.

???: "…"

With nary a word, the silent swordsman brandished steel, however, more eloquently than words ever could, the depth and accumulated repetition of that individual's training spoke volumes.

Within the fighter's swordsmanship, naught could be perceived as akin to a form founded in a school of training.

The sum of his swordsmanship was the crystallization of self-study, the pinnacle of a self-taught style—in fact, having reached an existence crowned as the apex of the sword, it was a height befitting the term mastery.

Whilst it was a self-taught style, bereft of the sword techniques that had continued to be passed down, for what reason was it enacting a sword dance without any opponent to confront? —That was because, therein laid the essence of form.

The "form" in swordsmanship was, in every sense of the word, something composed by conceptualizing a real battle. To ingrain oneself with a "form", was tantamount to instilling oneself with the resolve and technique for a real battle.

Thus, if one could swing their sword with a prudence to always be conceptualizing combat, to always conduct themselves as if on a battlefield, then even without knowing any "form", they would at least end up producing the same results as would one with a "form".

Henceforth, imagining the phantoms of all the mighty foes he had faced until now, within the sword dance of the swordsman as he crossed blades with them head-on, was reflected all the thickness of his advancement, the same as what would be seen upon witnessing "form".

For those who aspired to the martial arts, it was a sword dance that would likely reap benefits by mere observation.

Making a generous display of that, when the slice of his sword disarmed his imaginary opponent's weapon, the swordsman halted the motion of his sword dance, and catching his breath, he wiped the sweat off his brow.

The sweat running down his forehead and cheeks, was evidence of just how earnestly the swordsman had enacted the dance of the blade—then, the swordsman turned to face the one he had been displaying his whole-hearted sword dance to,

Swordsman: "Just now, was a reenactment of when I fought against a guy who had eight arms."

???: "—Uu."

Swordsman: "Though, given that the opponent couldn't deliver any counters, it can't be considered a perfect reenactment. But, if we ever end up fighting again, I'll do it just like this time, without taking even a single hit."

???: "—Aah…"

Swordsman: "After I catch my breath, we'll move on to the next opponent. Next would be, that's right… finally, the figure of the Sword Saint."

Wanting to make a display, the swordsman—Wilhelm, attempted to continue.

However, he was interrupted. By none other than the very Sword Saint in question.

???: "That's more than enough, Wilhelm! What do you think you're doing with Heinkel?!"

A shrill voice was raised, and receiving it unexpectedly, Wilhelm turned around.

Glaring with strict eyes at Wilhelm as he stood right in the center of the mansion's yard, standing in a daunting pose with her hands on her hips, was the Sword Saint—Theresia.

The focus of her ire was Wilhelm, and the focus of her words was the one present by Wilhelm's side—the couple's child, Heinkel.

Wrapped up in a blanket, the infant had been laid within an inclined cradle upon a chair for the tea table. The reason for the cradle being inclined was simple; for if it were that way, it would make it easier to see. —The sword dance.

And, why was a sword dance being displayed? That was because—

Wilhelm: "It'd be best to get him accustomed to the sword early on, yeah? I've also made sure to place an order for a small sword that a baby can hold."

Theresia: "You, big sword dummy Wilhelm—!!!"

Far louder than her initial shout, it resounded through the gardens of the Astrea Mansion.

As if to follow the voice of its mother scolding its father, the baby also began to cry loudly.

2

—The child Wilhelm and Theresia had eagerly awaited, Heinkel Astrea, was born.

Given that this was directly preceded by an emergency that shook the Kingdom of Lugunica, His Majesty Gionis, wishing to spread good tidings, had wanted to raise a grand celebration throughout the nation for the birth of the couple's child, but they firmly refused him.

Of course, they were happy to be celebrated, but Heinkel was their own child—first and foremost, they had wished to prioritize the blessing of his life with family alone.

With that reasoning, His Majesty Gionis gave up on holding a festival, and thus, Sword Demon and Sword Saint, the son of those two heroes—Heinkel Astrea, was born into this world with ordinary celebrations.

Frankly, the journey leading up to Heinkel's birth could by no means be called an easy one, but he had been doing well after birth, and without undergoing any congenital illness or loss, he was given the stamp of approval of a healthy body.

Thanks to that, they could hope for him to grow up without any anguish, but—

Theresia: "No matter the case, you don't just try to put a sword in the hands of a baby who's not even one year old! You're also forbidden from swinging your sword all about the air right next to his cradle!"

Wilhelm: "Wait, don't just decide that all on your own. This is from my own experience, but when I was a brat, I always found myself wishing that I'd encountered the sword sooner. So, introducing him to the sword as soon as possible would be the quickest…"

Theresia: "Don't use your own abnormalities as a reference! You aren't normal, Wilhelm!"

Wilhelm: "You fell for such a man, and yet you say all those things?!"

As Wilhelm froze with his eyes wide open, Theresia's cheeks flushed red as she refuted in complete desperation with, "Yes, that's right, that's absolutely right."

It was a continuation of their argument in the yard from earlier. — After Theresia did her best to soothe the crying Heinkel, they left him in Grimm's care, ever-reliable as he was. Having had many younger siblings, Grimm was quite accustomed to looking after children; they were always being rescued by him and Carol.

Be that as it may, given that it was her own child, Theresia wished to be with Heinkel as much as possible. For that reason, this issue needed to be resolved.

Theresia: “You see, Wilhelm, people can’t live by the sword and the sword alone. Even if he is our child, I’ll need you to respect his wishes.”

Wilhelm: “…I get what you’re trying to say. But, Heinkel will be the next Sword Saint. You should know that.”

Theresia: “Uh, that’s…”

Wilhelm: “Since the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint is a Divine Protection that gets passed on, Heinkel’s life will be entwined with the sword no matter what. And so, the best way for him to get involved would be to learn about it early on. Am I wrong?”

Wilhelm narrowed his long-slitted eyes as he made a direct argument, causing Theresia to falter.

Despite having proved his lack of common sense by displaying a sword dance to their child up close, and attempting to give his favorite sword to the zero-year-old baby, was it not unfair for him to say something that sounded so reasonable here?

—In reality, Wilhelm’s concern was not a matter of overthinking things.

Theresia: “…After all, my brothers are all gone, and so is my father.”

As Wilhelm had said, the succession of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint did not appear in individuals outside of House Astrea. And, Theresia had been bereaved of all her brothers, as well as her father, Bertol. Of course, there was likely a decent number of distant relatives related to the Astreas with diluted blood, but there was no past precedent of a Sword Saint emerging from those collateral families.

Ergo, the candidate to be the next Sword Saint would inevitably be Heinkel.

Theresia: “…Even though Heinkel is so small, and so cute…”

Wilhelm: “I understand your feelings. I also think he’s cute. But, when he saw his own face reflected in the blade of this sword, he laughed. He has a natural talent for the sword.”

Theresia: “…Wait. You put a sword that close to Heinkel’s face?”

Wilhelm: “…Shit.”

Having slipped up in his intent to persuade her, Wilhelm’s cheeks stiffened up. With a glare that seemed to bore a hole through Wilhelm’s expression, Theresia recovered her emotions.

The things he had been saying were somewhat believable, but it all seemed a sophism for the purpose of placing a sword into the hands of a zero-year-old.

To begin with—

Theresia: “The moment a person receives the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, their ability as a swordfighter is elevated to the absolute limit. After all, I’m living proof! Even though I hadn’t held a sword even once up to that point, I completely trounced Thames-niisama despite him having always given it his all.”

Wilhelm: “Oi, don’t talk about your honorable elder brother like that… even if it’s true.”

Theresia recognized that she had indeed gone too far, and apologized to her brother in her heart.

Within the dream that Melinda’s Evil Eye had shown her, Thames had seen her off with a smile, but she imagined that even he would probably be hurt by what she had said just now, so she reflected a great deal.

To add on, as Theresia reflected so, Wilhelm continued, “Besides”,

Wilhelm: “Sure, you may be a precedent, but if we rely on that and don’t teach Heinkel anything about the sword at all, what then…? There’d be no guarantee of his safety until the Divine Protection is passed on.”

Theresia: “Wilhelm…”

Wilhelm: “A man of Astrea will invariably be faced with trial and tribulation. —Those were your father’s words.”

The words Wilhelm added on were weightier than anything else for Theresia.

Theresia’s father, as the one who had named Heinkel, Bertol’s sword arm was of little avail, but as a matter of fact, he was a man more worthy of the name Astrea than any other.

With the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint inherited by his younger brother, the path to becoming the Sword Saint was thus closed to him, but this did not dishearten Bertol in the slightest, and he was always thinking about the future of the Astreas. He may have gotten a little overly involved in Theresia’s future, but that too was out of love.

There was the weight of the words her father left behind, and the duties that the Astreas must fulfill.

Theresia: “…For the sake of the Kingdom, the Sword Saint must not cease to exist.”

Wilhelm: “That’s the important duty levied upon House Astrea. A duty that almost came to an end.”

Theresia: “…”

To keep the peace of the Kingdom of Lugunica, the Sword Saint had the duty of swinging the sword. Hitherto, twice had Theresia prioritized her own circumstances, and turned her back on that duty.

The first was in the midst of the Demi-Human War, when she could not muster up the courage to fight and had lost her brothers.

The second was when she was defeated by Wilhelm, and deprived of her role as the Sword Saint.

Thus, she could not afford to go against it a third time by failing in her duty of passing the torch of Sword Saint to the next generation.

Theresia: “…I’m sorry.”

Wilhelm: “…Why are you apologizing.”

Theresia: “It’s inexcusable to my mother, to His Majesty Gionis, and to you, Wilhelm… If my body was still able to have more children, such concerns would—”

Not have been necessary; Theresia had intended on continuing so.

—Amidst a series of difficult circumstances, Heinkel Astrea had been born safely. For that in itself, it was difficult to feel anything other than joy. However, in exchange for that, Theresia’s body became incapable of having another child.

Garitch Fabless, currently the best healer in the entire Kingdom, made the diagnosis. Provided with that diagnosis, it was difficult for them to hope for any more children. It was a matter regarding her own body, so Theresia also generally understood it.

Hence, the potential to inherit the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, remained in Heinkel alone.

And so, for narrowing down the options in her own child’s life, and simply for being unable to have any children other than Heinkel, Theresia attempted to apologize. —But, she had been unable to do so.

Theresia: “…”

After all, as if to cut off her would-be next words, Wilhelm had stolen her lips.

Wilhelm: “In your case, this way is far more effective than striking you.”

Theresia: “~~Hk.”

As Theresia widened her eyes at the sudden act, Wilhelm spoke thus after parting lips.

She blinked her blue eyes in surprise, and in fact, each and every one of Theresia's various regrets and ruminations up until a moment prior were shaken away.

And then, before Theresia could regain her composure, Wilhelm mercilessly continued.

Wilhelm: “First of all, don't you dare apologize about that. You gave birth to Heinkel, and made it out alright. For me, there's no greater fruit of war. In this battle, you've achieved the highest rank of distinguished service.”

Theresia: “H-Highest rank of distinguished service…”

Wilhelm: “Be grateful. Grimm was able to marry Carol thanks to that.”

Theresia: “Hooray, yippie… like I would ever say…”

Wilhelm: “I'll say this once more. You won against that bastard Stride's plottings.”

Pressing his finger against Theresia's nose as she tried to continue to mumble, Wilhelm silenced her to an “Uh” and then crowned her so.

She had triumphed over Stride, the Destruction Wish. Even if she was told this, the ones who had defeated Stride were Wilhelm, Grimm, and the rest, so Theresia did not really feel like she had won—

Wilhelm: “That bastard probably had no intention of letting Heinkel… of letting you give birth to the baby in your belly. Once he killed Heinkel, you would have no longer been able to bear any kids. That ought to have been what he was aiming to do.”

Theresia: “…”

Wilhelm: “But, Heinkel was born. It was your total victory. He's probably crying out in vexation from the pits of Hell.”

It was an excessive proclamation of victory, but by no means could it be called unreasonable. After all, Stride had actually placed a curse on Heinkel when he was still in Theresia's womb.

Not only did he make Heinkel into a hostage, but he also applied further pain unto Theresia, so if he had indeed been planning to sever the future of the Kingdom, it would not have been strange. —Only, considering the love Melinda bore Stride, she could not be sure if that was truly what he had intended to do.

And, there no longer remained any means in this world to ascertain that.

Wilhelm: "You think I don't know that? That's why, I've no choice but to believe it. And once I believe, I've no choice but to build up grounds so that it can be believed."

Theresia: "Grounds, so that it can be believed? That means…"

Wilhelm: "It's a given. —The sword."

As he suddenly brought his face close, Theresia readied herself for another kiss, but blinking her eyes at the words of Wilhelm that followed, she spilled out a sigh.

Theresia: "…Ultimately, you return to that?"

Wilhelm: "Of course. From beginning to end, that's what we've been talking about."

Theresia: "Seriously now, you're really straightforward, and I respect that about you."

Half respect and half exasperation, with such feelings, Theresia drooped her shoulders, and Wilhelm shrugged his shoulders with a face as if to say he found that unexpected.

To be perfectly honest, she had quite a few reservations on the matter. The things Wilhelm was trying to do whilst thinking in a way only Wilhelm would were not wrong per se, but there were all kinds of problems with the way he was going about it.

Only, she also thought this. —It made her happy how Wilhelm earnestly loved Heinkel, how he earnestly worried about his future, and how he earnestly was trying to protect him in a way he knew how.

Before this child was born, Wilhelm too must have been anxious. Even Theresia had been so, and thus Wilhelm must have been as well.

Would they really be able to become good parents? Would they really be able to protect their child well?

Cutting down such various apprehensions, Wilhelm was trying to be a father. For Theresia, there was nothing that made her happier.

Theresia: “Alright, understood. Even if we discuss this together, you and I won’t reach an agreement, Wilhelm… so, we’ll take a vote together with Mother, Carol, and Grimm-kun as well.”

Wilhelm: “…Your mother ought to understand the duty of House Astrea.”

Theresia: “If that’s what you think, then feel free to openly insist on that to Carol and the rest.”

Wilhelm: “Wait… that’s it! Asking Heinkel himself should be the most fair. We’ll let Heinkel hold a sword, and if he laughs then we can go with my way of…”

Theresia: “Yeah, yeah, I won’t be hearing it. I’ve made up my mind!”

Wilhelm persisted without knowing when to give up, so Theresia turned her back towards him, and began to walk. Hastening to keep up by her side, Wilhelm did his best to mend things, but she had decided she would not listen to him.

Seeing how desperate Wilhelm was, Theresia thought this. —He had said various plausible things to her, but Wilhelm’s true motive was undoubtedly the following:

He wished to share that which he loved with his son as soon as possible, unbearably so.

Wilhelm: “It’s not just that. The sword, it’s what brought the two of us together…”

Hearing Wilhelm’s excuses, Theresia deliberately picked up her pace. If she continued to listen to Wilhelm’s fervent pleas like this, it was quite possible that she might be moved.

After all, this senseless person who only thought about the sword, was intolerably dear to Theresia.

—In the end, this day’s quarrel concluded with a unanimous vote for Theresia.

Nonetheless, the obstinate Wilhelm would still attempt to familiarize Heinkel with the sword whenever he saw an opportunity after that, inciting the wrath of Theresia, Carol, and the others.

And, that would only continue without end until subsequent years, when Heinkel developed an awareness of his surroundings and became eager to swing the sword of his own accord, and Wilhelm began swinging swords together with him whilst wearing a triumphant look on his face.

END

Sword Demon Battle Ballad: The Flower Field of That Day

1

???: “…”

Beholding the sight of dianas, swaying with their yellow petals as they filled the flower bed, Carol Fauzen involuntarily caught her breath, and stood stock still.

They were visiting the principal residence of House Astrea for the first time in a long while; provisioned for the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Royal Selection, it was currently being used as the base of operations for Felt, who House Astrea was supporting to become the next generation’s Monarch. Since the old Fauzen couple, serving House Astrea, was originally charged with maintenance of the secondary residence within the Royal Capital, the frequency of their visits to this location had reduced to once a year or not at all.

In addition, this occasion was not for the purpose of managing the mansion, but rather to ascertain whether Flam Remendis and Grassis Remendis—two of their granddaughters, were doing their jobs of serving Felt and taking care of her necessities properly.

Six months had passed since the Royal Selection began, and precisely because Felt’s Camp had now begun to operate on a full scale, she wished to remove any elements of unease. If there was perhaps any lack of ability or issues with their granddaughters, she would begin to consider exchanging duties with them—such was her attitude.

But then again, those fears of Carol’s were disavowed by the relevant parties the moment they arrived.

Felt: “I wrote the same thing in the letter as well, but there ain’t any problems with Flam or Grassis. They’re fully capable of their jobs, and they get on well with Rom-jii and the others. They aren’t timid with me in the slightest, nor are they putting me up on a pedestal just ‘cuz I’m a Royal Candidate.”

Welcoming Carol and Grimm’s arrival, Felt answered so upon hearing their concerns.

It had been quite a while since their parting at the Royal Capital, and while they had exchanged words through letters, the girl whom they had not come face to face with in a long time gave off an impression of having grown tougher since they had last seen her.

It was often the case that one’s circumstances and positions would change them, and Felt had indeed adapted well to her situation, unmistakably growing as a person.

Because it was Felt saying such things, Carol immediately believed that it was not a statement made out of favoritism or consideration regarding her granddaughters, and Grimm seemed to share that view.

With that being the case, Carol’s actions of saying this and that to convince Grimm and then spending several days to arrive at the principal residence, had ended up as mere overthinking with a jump to a wrong conclusion.

Felt: “Ah, just ‘cuz I have use for Flam and Grassis doesn’t mean you two are unneeded, Granny? There’s a buncha spare rooms, so you can stay here as long as you’d like. And if you do, I’ll eat up the sweets you bake everyday, Granny Carol.”

In baked sweets alone, Flam and Grassis were no match for Carol. —Thus, as Felt added that last bit, Carol gratefully presumed upon that thoughtfulness.

Grimm did not have any particular objections, and thinking to join in for another training after a long time with the trio that Felt had picked up in the Royal Capital, he stretched out his elderly shoulders as he headed to where they were. Grimm had been born a commoner, so he likely could not help but dote on youngsters trying to climb their way up from similar positions.

Though, since his lack of a voice made him short of words, and given that his teaching method was the way that the Zergev Squadron was trained, it seemed like Grimm's intentions were being effectively communicated to the trio.

Anyhow—

Carol: "I shall accept your kind offer, Felt-sama. In addition, would it be alright if I go have a tiny look around the mansion? Even if you say my grandchildren are doing their jobs properly, I am nonetheless worried."

Felt: "Don't mind in the slightest. Though I dunno if you'll find anything interesting while you're looking around."

As she spoke, Felt put both her hands behind her head as she trailed alongside Carol.

She ought to have been in a busy position, but to be able to make such considerations without any special awareness of it was a virtue of Felt, leaving Carol impressed at how well the girl had been raised.

Even if her foster parent was an individual whom Carol and Grimm had several reservations regarding—whilst harboring those feelings as they walked, she came to an abrupt halt upon arriving at the mansion's garden.

—That was the moment in which she had come to stand stock still, beholding the bed of yellow dianas.

Carol: "…Felt-sama, excuse me, that yellow flower field would be…"

Felt: "Hm? Ahh, gotcha, gotcha. Indeed, that there's something that you wouldn't have known about, Granny Carol, so I guess it caught you off guard."

Felt crossed her arms and spoke in good humor, to which Carol endured the discomposure, and did her best to muster a brief "Yes" in response.

—The diana flowers blooming on the surface of the flower bed, they had etched themselves deep within Carol's mind, and were tied intimately to certain recollections of the past. She had never thought she would have had another opportunity to witness them again like this at the principal residence of House Astrea.

Carol: "…Is it my grandchildren who tend to this flower bed?"

Felt: "Nah, they sometimes seem to harvest vegetables from the vegetable garden by the edge over there, but the flowers are different. That's something I'm making Reinhard do."

Carol: "—. The young master…"

Felt: "It was a miserable sight to see how this place had been left to run amok. So I told him, like, since it's your house, wouldn't it be better to grow flowers or something, and this here's the result. That guy, no matter what I make him do, he ends up doing it well, it's damn irritating."

That was something difficult to agree with as a servant, however, hearing that it was Reinhard who cultivated this flower field, Carol's thoughts were not focused on that.

A diana flower field and House Astrea, Reinhard and Felt, and—

Carol: "—Theresia-sama."

What suddenly spilled out from Carol's lips, was the name of a person whose loveliness could not be diminished by even the passage of time.

Hearing that faint utterance, Felt looked at Carol in a startled manner.

Felt: "G-Granny, why are you suddenly crying? Is something wrong?"

Carol: "F-Forgive me. The tears just… as I get older, I suppose I mustn't let the tears come so easily."

Felt: "Like I'd ever let such a flimsy excuse fly! Ahh, geez, over here! Sit! Settle down for now! Take deep breaths, and focus on me!”

The untactful deception failing to work, Felt pulled Carol by the arm, the latter’s tears not coming to a cease even when she wiped them, and vigorously dragged her along to the edge of the garden.

Unable to go against the forcefulness of that hand, Carol felt as if the figures of those who had done similar things for her overlapped with the back of the girl as she lumbered on, causing just a few more tears to run down her wrinkled, elderly cheeks.

2

Carol: “I used to serve the young master’s predecessor as Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea-sama. Those flowers, they are the flowers that Theresia-sama loved tremendously.”

Felt: “Predecessor… Reinhard’s grandma, huh?”

Carol: “Indeed. During her lifetime, she and Tishua-sama… that would be Theresia-sama’s mother. They were close as mother and daughter, and so more than just a flower bed, they turned the entirety of the mansion’s surroundings into a flower field. —When Tishua-sama passed away, as her casket was filled up with flowers and sent off, the mansion’s flowers…”

At the edge of the garden, the two sat side by side on a bench, and Carol spoke bit by bit as she looked at the flowers in the flower bed.

Carol recalled Theresia and Tishua, the two of them were truly so harmonious as mother and daughter, that their relationship seemed to be as carefree as that of sisters. The reminiscences of those two, tied to that flower bed as they were, could only be described as ones that began with smiles, and concluded with smiles.

But, even so—

Felt: “If I’m recalling correctly, she was done in by the White Whale, Reinhard’s grandma.”

Carol: “…Yes. In the Great Conquest fourteen years ago, Theresia-sama participated in the subjugation squadron in the position of

Sword Saint as a representative of the Kingdom. Neither I nor Grimm were able to accompany her.”

Felt: “…”

Carol: “Since then, the flower bed went neglected and untouched. I, too… while it was a presumption, was reluctant to let anybody other than Theresia-sama lay their hands on the flower bed, and so…”

In the principal residence of the house she served, her excuse of the flower bed having been beaten down by the weather, had been the worst of the worst.

Set adrift by emotion, if she were to be criticized as having lost sight of her duty as a servant, Carol would have no words to object. Even if that caused her entire track record in serving House Astrea for many years to be written off, it had been a mistake regarding which she could give no excuse.

However, as Carol tightly clasped her hands together on her lap, Felt took a short breath, and,

Felt: “Granny Carol, you really held Reinhard’s grandma dear, I get that. I ain’t someone who knows the circumstances, so I’m in no position to say all this and that about it. Only…”

Carol: “Only, what exactly?”

Felt: “The White Whale’s dead. The Royal Candidates… the duchess nee-chan and the half-devil nee-chan, as well as Anastasia-neechan, all grouped together to kill it. He was also there, yeah? Reinhard’s grandpa was there to avenge Reinhard’s grandma.”

Carol: “…”

Felt: “Even though she was avenged, have your feelings not brightened up yet, Granny? When you look at that flower bed, are there only bitter and tough emotions that come welling up? So then, doesn’t that mean vengeance served no purpose whatsoever?”

Carol: “That is not… hk.”

At Felt’s following words, Carol’s voice involuntarily grew coarse. But, before it could turn bitter and rigid, her feelings dispersed upon looking into Felt’s eyes.

Felt’s red eyes peered at Carol, who had gone as quiet as a great lake.

Feeling as if her own face was being reflected on the surface of that lake, Carol’s voice quivered,

Carol: “That is not, the case. There was significance, in that vengeance. With Theresia-sama avenged, I too feel relief from the bottom of my heart… if only the master would hence return…”

Felt: “If he returns…?”

Carol: “…Would the state of House Astrea not return to how it was before, I wonder?”

Guided by a girl far more youthful than she was, Carol came to speak of her wish, and then became disgusted with her own wretchedness and lack of growth.

Merely getting on in years through idleness and futility, she even felt as if her heart had not grown in the slightest. When one grew old, they were supposed to learn how to come to an understanding, and gradually come to understand resignation and compromise.

And yet, Carol had not changed from the days when she had been young and foolish. —She was reluctant to come to a resignation, compromise, or understanding. After all, they were all Theresia’s direct family.

Wilhelm, Reinhard, and even Heinkel.

Carol: “When Theresia-sama passed away, all of the buttons were mismatched. The things that have occurred cannot be made to have not taken place. Even so…”

She did not wish for them to give up on struggling to recover something that could not be recovered from.

In order to not relinquish something that must absolutely never be relinquished, the man who accomplished things thought impossible, could only have been the Sword Demon. That man had once reached the Sword Saint. In that case, she wished for him to once again succeed in reaching the Sword Saint.

After all, the subjugation of the White Whale ought to have become a definite impetus for that.

Felt: "—I see. I finally get just how big a deal the White Whale's death was to you and the rest, Granny Carol. That goes for that damn Reinhard too."

Carol: "Felt-sama, the young master is…"

Felt: "Yeah, he doesn't show it on his face in the slightest. Even when he heard that the White Whale was struck down, all he said was that the group that killed it accomplished a considerable feat… fucking shit! Really, that damn blockhead!"

Sat on the bench, Felt raised up her legs and kicked the grass. For a while, Felt's anger did not subside, and she repeated that a few times with rough breathing out her nose,

Felt: "You know why he doesn't talk about that sorta thing, Granny? He says things like he doesn't want to impose on me or anyone else around because of his own circumstances. He's always imposing on people as much as he pleases, and yet this is how it is when it comes to his personal matters! It seriously pisses me off!"

Carol: "P-Please calm down, Felt-sama. The reason the young master cannot easily speak of his own wishes is because…"

Felt: "Because he's the damn Sword Saint! If he doesn't like it then he oughta just quit!"

Carol: "…"

Baring her high canines, Felt shouted in anger and left Carol speechless.

For a person of the Kingdom of Lugunica to so flippantly and thoughtlessly suggest that the Sword Saint leave their post was by no means a good thing to say, much less for a Royal Candidate. — However, there was once a man who had done exactly that.

Loathing the fact that she was Sword Saint, yet still bearing it as her duty, a woman had once attempted to forfeit her own happiness in order to save the futures of many people, and by that very man she had been saved.

Though, what Felt desired here was not the same thing as that.

Carol: "…The young master does not seem to wish to give up on being the Sword Saint."

Felt: "I know that, dammit! Ahh, shit! That's why it pisses me off so much!"

Scratching at her head, Felt glared at the sky in frustration. As Felt desperately tried to fight against something, Carol found her figure to appear extremely radiant.

Theresia and Reinhard had different circumstances. Of course, Felt and Wilhelm were also different.

The former two were both Sword Saints, and the latter two were both positioned to make some influence on the Sword Saint, but, the circumstances surrounding them and the conclusions they desired, both differed from the other—

Carol: "—No, what is being desired, is happiness."

At least, that was the case for the conclusions. From the bottom of her heart, what Carol desired for Theresia, for Reinhard, for Wilhelm, for Heinkel, and for the individuals of House Astrea, was that and that alone.

For that alone, why was it so difficult to intersect with, and bring to fruition?

Carol: "Felt-sama, do you perhaps have an idea of what the young master is thinking?"

Felt: “Ah? It’s actually pretty easy to tell what he’s thinking. Isn’t the problem not what he’s thinking, but why the hell he thinks that way?”

Carol: “…”

Felt: “He’s been acting as the Sword Saint since he was a brat, and there’s the stuff with his grandma and grandpa… and also, that father of his. I’ve only met him once, but his father reeked of booze. And then there’s…”

Carol: “—Louanna-sama. The young master’s, lady mother.”

As Felt counted out the problems on her fingers, Carol brought forth the final name—Louanna Astrea, afflicted by the Sleeping Beauty illness, was Reinhard’s birth mother, under an eternal slumber for the past seventeen years.

Her slumber and the death of Theresia, were the foundation of House Astrea’s distortion.

Felt: “I’ve got no choice but to speak with Reinhard’s father at some point. After all, the headship of House Astrea is in his hands. If I’m careless, it’s quite possible that he’ll evict us from here.”

Carol: “Heinkel-sama would…”

Felt: “Not even Granny Carol’s or Gramps Grimm’s knuckles could discipline him. That damn Reinhard doesn’t seem like he’d be all too eager to either. —In that case, there’s no choice but to do it myself.”

Carol: “…”

Felt: “At first, I was being dragged around against my will, but ultimately, I’m the one who’s deciding what to do. No matter how I may look, I’m Reinhard’s master, after all.”

Taking a long, deep breath, Felt cleared her throat at the end with an “Ah” in displeasure.

After her valiant and reliable proclamation the moment prior, Felt immediately seemed to grunt like a stray cat; Carol was taken aback, and then she felt exhausted.

After getting on in years, it was rare for her emotions to be shaken—such a thing would be a bold-faced lie. Even at an age where she had grandchildren, Carol was thoroughly impacted by every single action of the people precious to her.

Carol narrowed her blue eyes, gazed over the flowers in the flower bed swaying in the wind, and suddenly uttered.

Carol: “Felt-sama, do you like flowers?”

Felt: “…”

Carol: “Felt-sama?”

Felt: “Sorry, I was just thinking ‘bout how Reinhard’s asked me the same thing before. Back then, I answered that I neither liked them nor disliked them, but…”

Wearing a frown, Felt glanced around the area. Carol inclined her head as she witnessed that behavior, and then Felt brought her face up close to her, and whilst speaking in a hushed voice,

Felt: “Recently, I’ve started to think that they’re actually relatively pleasant. Keep it a secret from him, alright?”

Carol: “…Although, I am very sure the young master would be delighted to hear such a thing.”

Felt: “That’s why I don’t wanna tell him! At the very least, I won’t tell him until he directly asks about it.”

Saying that, Felt stuck her tongue out with a “Behhh” and stood up from the bench, stretching her back out.

Carol saw her away as she walked towards the flower bed, and, in the vacant seat of the bench, Grimm suddenly sat himself down.

Grimm: “…”

The wordless Grimm was not sweating, but it seemed like he felt fulfilled from his time with his favorite disciples. Perceiving that from the side of his face, Carol gently rested her head on her husband's shoulder.

Grimm nestled close with his invariant reliability and kindness, and whilst reflecting on how beloved and treasured he was to her, Carol ruminated on her preceding conversation with Felt many times over.

It might still be too early. To lament how she had been unable to do anything, it was too early.

If perhaps her wish could still yet be granted, then please, just once more, she wished to swear to Theresia from the bottom of her heart.

—That she, Carol Fauzen, once again wished to cherish the girl who had shouldered a tremendous fate whilst standing amidst a field of yellow flowers, and serve as her strength.

END

Volume 40

Chapters 14-23

Prologue:
The Days Spent Chasing that Star

—Over and over again, when made to loop through an endless hallway, Aldebaran took a moment to ponder, and then flung open the door he had first entered through.

???: "…I have been saying this for a long time now, but I am able to accept any outcome as interesting no matter the result, and I consider having my preconceived expectations overturned an experience that makes my heart throb."

Aldebaran: "Heh, so then?"

???: "And yet, I wonder why this is? Even though your current actions fulfill both of the prerequisites I raised as examples… I feel somewhat annoyed."

Aldebaran: "That's probably because you're discontent with the fact that I pulled the right answer on my first go!"

As soon as he had opened the door, the Witch made an evidently displeased expression, and then began to prattle on about her mindset; to her, Aldebaran raised his voice in such a manner.

The endless hallway he had been tossed into, a space that continued to loop, to phrase it as the Witch would, it was a place of great intrigue, but—

Aldebaran: "Sorry, but I tend to pull the right answer on the first try when it's these sorta rules. Though, from the perspective of a GM, they'd probably want me to step through all the events they'd prepared for me."

Witch: "—. "Jee Emm", this is the first time I am hearing that word. May I ask its meaning?"

Aldebaran: "Game master. It refers to the person who has control over the location, events, and the space as a whole… basically, that's what you are here, Teacher."

Witch: "I see, I shall remember this. "Jee Emm", "Jee Emm"… GM, hm?"

Muttering several times so as to familiarize it to her mouth, she immediately got a hold of the pronunciation.

Her ever constant learning ability displayed to him, Aldebaran felt admiration as well as a sense of unease. The knowledge-thirsty Witch had a keen interest in the unknowns being emitted from Aldebaran.

However, the tree bearing fruits of knowledge would eventually dry up, ceasing to supply her with the apples she so dearly coveted.

When that time came, by the Witch, Aldebaran would be—

Witch: "Why the long face? Is something the matter?"

Aldebaran: "…"

As Aldebaran suddenly plunged himself into thought, the Witch peered at him from a defenseless proximity.

The smooth fluttering of beautiful white hair, and the black eyes that seemed to be adorned in a blanket of snow from her long lashes; with those refined facial features and thin lips so close, Aldebaran reflexively clasped the other person's face with both his hands.

The Witch's cheeks were smooshed in with a "Mmghuu", and thus made so that he would not feel flustered even at this close range.

Aldebaran: "Phew, that was a close one."

Witch: "Wait wait wait, is that not strange?! You are handling my face so roughly, and instead of feeling guilty, you are feeling relieved?! "

Aldebaran: "That's what's called a difference in perspective."

Witch: “Let~go~of~me-.”

With her mysterious air from a moment ago having vanished somewhere, the Witch grabbed the hands of Aldebaran which were clasping her cheeks, and tried to wriggle her way free from this treatment.

But, even with the Witch’s desperate resistance, she was far too weak and feeble.

Aldebaran: “Or maybe, fragile…!”

Witch: “I am curious about which term you would select to best describe me, but for now just get your hands… wah-wah!”

Pitying the excessively weak Witch, the moment he released her, she tumbled over backwards. Promptly supporting her with a “woah there”, he was surprised by how she was lighter than she looked.

Aldebaran: “You’re a woman who seems like she would die easily.”

Witch: “Thanks for the help. But, I find what you said there a bit unexpected. Not to mention, the expression “die easily” is ill-suited to my current self. Would you not agree?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Witch: “Also, if we are to give points from the perspective of dying easily, you would have me beat by an overwhelmingly high score. I am not referring to your Authority, but to your very way of life.”

As the Witch deliberately and thoroughly added on, Aldebaran became unable to say anything.

Aldebaran: “…My bad.”

What she was saying was correct. To the point that he wished for her to be wrong, it was correct.

Reluctant to have that pointed out once again, Aldebaran turned to face the door behind him, and asked, Aldebaran: “That hallway, just what was your intention in preparing it?”

Witch: “I thought it might serve to let you take a breather, and serve as training for your ability to think logically. Unfortunately, it was far too short to be a breather, and instead of your logical thinking ability, you surmounted it through intuition.”

Aldebaran: “Good grief, even though it was a work you were so confident in. I guess you could hope for it to be recycled for somebody else one day. Make sure to write down the methodology in a book.”

The grand aspirations of the pen-ready Witch notwithstanding, Aldebaran understood that the space he had so carelessly spoiled was the crystallization of tremendously advanced Yin Magic.

It was neither something fine to create so casually, nor was it something fine to irresponsibly do too often.

Aldebaran: “—The more you know, the depths only get deeper, and the mountains only get higher.”

He only had an understanding of the fact that the time he was spending was luxurious, and was terribly unconfident regarding how much of a true sense actually accompanied those thoughts.

All of those things could only begin to manifest once he had a point of reference outside of himself. And, in Aldebaran’s world, there existed not much other than himself.

In particular, those were the Witch before his eyes, and—

Witch: “—菜月Natsuki□昴Subaru“

As if to cling to his ears, as if to besmear his eardrums, as if to implant into his brain; each and every time he heard it, those six syllables scratched at Aldebaran’s being, disallowing his composure.

Normally, he would think nothing of each of those six syllables, but only when strung together in that order, did they distort his soul.

Knowing that full well, the Witch who had spoken that name to Aldebaran smiled,

Witch: “Well then, shall we begin, Aldebaran? Yesterday, how long did it take again?”

Aldebaran: “—One hundred times, exactly.”

Witch: “Aldebaran?”

Even though he would never forget that, the Witch who had enquired because she wanted to make Aldebaran say it, was abhorrent.

Abhorrent as she was, the fact that he could not fully hate her was painful, stressful, humiliating, and pathetic.

—If this person abandoned him, just what in the world would he have left? For himself, who by no means would ever be able to be reflected in those amethyst eyes, the eyes he desperately wished would look at him the most, what would be left?

Inclining her head, the Witch peered at Aldebaran.

Despite the black eyes of that Witch and his own black eyes both being the same black, was the reason they did not appear as the same hue perhaps a result of the contrast between himself with the Witch?

If he contrasted them like that, which one would—ahh, those sorts of things did not matter.

He would fulfill the role desired of him. Rather than being desired by nobody, this was a hundred times better.

That was why—

Aldebaran: “Ahh, that’s right. It’s starting, Teacher. So that I may be myself.”

Chapter 14:
The Strongest

1

???: "…"

Red hair blazed as a brilliant flame, blue eyes imprisoned the perfect clarity of the azure skies; from head to toe, this was a being created with heroism untainted, with naught an impurity.

The birth of such a being had been blessed by the world, a chosen one who had perpetually existed as his own antithesis.

Standing imposingly in the center of the sprawling Sand Sea, under the chill of night, Reinhard cast his gaze, causing all the hairs on Aldebaran's body to stand on end.

—The Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea.

Needless to say, in the Kingdom of Lugunica—nay, even if one were to search far and wide across the entire world, he was a being who went without peer, and one of the two greatest obstacles in Aldebaran's plan.

Still, the other of the two had been none other than Natsuki Subaru, but his entrapment via Ol Shamak alongside Beatrice, who likewise had been a matter of concern, had already been completed successfully.

Hence, among the individuals with whom a clash was certain, this man remained as the greatest barrier.

—Very well, Reinhard van Astrea was the strongest.

The Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt, was faster; the Admirer, Halibel, made greater use of techniques; the Mad Prince, Vague Adgard, was further distanced from death; the Great Spirits enrolled among the Four Greats exceed him in Mana; the Sin Archbishops of the Witch Cult possessed irrational Authorities; the Witches of Sin had taken far more lives; many virtuous individuals were better at lying; and many scoundrels were more unfalteringly obstinate.

When looking at individual aspects generally, there were plenty of individuals who surpassed Reinhard.

Nevertheless, Reinhard van Astrea's seat as the strongest would not be shaken. —Tearing down that definitive strongest bastion, was the absolute victory condition levied upon Aldebaran.

Aldebaran: "If I do say so myself, this is the worst situation to be placed in."

"Aldebaran": "It's too late to be complaining about the lackluster hand you've been dealt. Be sure to make good use of me as a joker."

Aldebaran: "…When you look at him, Dragon me, what do you make of the Sword Saint?"

"Aldebaran": "I'd say the same as you, human me… but I guess not. From what I can sense of his strength with this body, I think it might be even worse than what you're thinking."

From behind Aldebaran, that which narrowed its golden eyes as it gazed upon Reinhard was a supreme lifeform that spoke in a manner lacking the dignity of its station, the Divine Dragon Volcanica—nay, the empty dragonhusk into which the Memories of Aldebaran had been installed, the Divine Dragon "Aldebaran".

Sharing the same fundamental knowledge, thoughts, ideas, and even objectives in the present situation, "Aldebaran" was a dependable lifeline for the near helpless Aldebaran.

"Aldebaran" had also asserted that it ought to be utilized as a joker effectively. Showing restraint had never been in his intentions, but with that he resolved his heart to squeeze the utmost usage out of it.

And, as Aldebaran finished re-ascertaining the cards in his hand—

Reinhard: "—From the lineage of Sword Saints, Reinhard van

Astrea.”

Aldebaran: “…”

As his skin tingled with gooseflesh, Aldebaran narrowed his eyes within his helmet.

To announce one’s name and title before an opponent in a standoff was common courtesy amongst fighters in this world. As astonishing as it may seem, it was a courtesy that even the Sin Archbishops abided by; for some it was to uphold their pride, for some it was out of respect to their opponent, for some it served to immerse themselves in a superiority complex, and for some it invigorated their cowardly selves; it was something that people levied upon themselves for a variety of reasons.

And the reason as to why the Sword Saint, Reinhard, was conforming to that courtesy, was plain from the look in his eyes.

In this situation, Reinhard was paying respect to Aldebaran. —Albeit he would have supposedly learned of what Aldebaran had done in the Tower from Flam, he still did so.

Such was Reinhard’s virtue, which simultaneously was the source of the unbridgeable gap between him and others. The way in which Aldebaran interpreted it, was not something he would specifically reveal, but—

Aldebaran: “Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Pride, Stride Vollachia.”

Reinhard: “—Hk.”

Aldebaran: “Now wouldn’t it be amusing if I said something like that?”

—He made the decision to merely trample upon his opponent’s respect in insult.

“Aldebaran”: “—BOHRRRGGGHHH!!!”

The response was one akin to sticking out his tongue to an outstretched hand, causing Reinhard's eyes to widen; then, simultaneously with a clumsy roar, a white light surged towards the Sword Saint as he stood unflinching.

Unaccustomed to piloting the freshly hijacked dragonhusk, it was a terribly misshapen attack—however, the power of the Dragon's breath unleashed from that almighty body was very much authentic.

If the breath unleashed upon Garfiel and Ezzo on the highest floor of the Pleiades Watchtower right after overwriting its Memories were a sneeze, then this blast was charged with a definite intent for destruction.

To demonstrate the difference in accumulated destructive force, a surging wave of white energy engulfed Reinhard, one that would alter the form of the deserted Sand Sea for the rest of all eternity.

He did not think it could kill him. But, if done without the intent to kill, there would not even be a fight.

As proof of that—

"Aldebaran": "—Hk, fall back, me!!"

Aldebaran: "Uooooaahhhh?!"

After the entirety of its breath was expelled, white smoke drifting out of the enormous crater it had created in the Sand Sea, "Aldebaran" suddenly reached out its talons and hooked Aldebaran, flinging him to the side without restraint.

Split off from his literal alternate self, Aldebaran's body was tossed about by the sudden betrayal, and across the mostly flattened sand he tumbled, tumbled, and tumbled until he braked.

Then, expelling the sand that had intruded through the gaps in his helmet, he looked up—he saw that in truth, "Aldebaran's" actions had not been betrayal, but instead had been providing cover.

Reinhard ought to have taken a direct hit from the Dragon's breath, but unscathed, he had leapt towards "Aldebaran", thus commencing the grand decisive battle between two monsters of mismatched size.

"Aldebaran": "You didn't even get a burn?! I'm not saying that ain't praiseworthy, but what's the principle behind that?!"

Reinhard: "I borrowed the power of the Dragon Sword. Even if the day of this world's ruin were to come, this sword would not be destroyed. That is how it was forged to be. And so, I parried."

"Aldebaran": "Though from that answer, ultimately what's incredible isn't the sword, but you! That still doesn't explain how you didn't get burned!"

Reinhard: "That would be the effect of the Divine Protection of Sunburn."

Whilst giving an apathetic reply, Reinhard spun around in the air and unleashed a kick. Clashing head on with the dragonclaw tearing through the sky, a sound akin to nearby fireworks or cannonfire boomed in an explosion.

Each and every blow delivered a destructive power that even warriors who had undergone the most assiduous of training would be unable to withstand, but to the horror of many, those were standard attacks for the Sword Saint and the Dragon both.

That was to say, this combat continued without pause or pull.

Aldebaran: "Shit, gahhhhh…!"

Both combatants strung out chains of rapid attacks giving rise to an unbelievable symphony of explosions, and with each strike, the resultant shock waves blew away the sand of the Sand Sea, and made an attempt to tear Aldebaran away from the ground that he clung to.

The clash between two of the strongest living beings in the realm, for one spectating from several dozen meters away as it unfolded, guaranteed no place was secure. However, Aldebaran could not opt for leaving the battlefield due to his own pathetic self. —There was a limit to the updates of his matrix.

Currently, if he were to get too far away from the position at which the matrix had been defined, his Territory would come crumbling down, and Aldebaran would end up losing the few advantages he possessed against Reinhard.

That must be avoided at all costs.

Reinhard: "—. Powerful. However, it is far too different from before."

Meanwhile, as Aldebaran clung to the battlefield, Reinhard moved back a great deal to open some distance after having traded a great many blows against the Dragon, and muttered so.

Placing a hand upon the hilt of the Dragon Sword, the Sword Saint was not even a little short on breath, and as he displayed his serious countenance "Aldebaran" groaned an "Ahh?" without a hint of exhaustion.

In response, Reinhard shook his head to the side with a "Nothing",

Reinhard: "The other day, when I was proceeding towards the Watchtower together with Flam, Ezzo-dono, and the rest, I ended up quarreling with you… with the Divine Dragon Volcanica due to a misunderstanding, but compared to then, your movements and intentions are far too different."

As Reinhard pointed that out, "Aldebaran" maintained silence. However, his judgment had been accurate. In reality, that which Reinhard had previously fought against was the real Divine Dragon Volcanica—though, it would have been in a dragonhusk state, bereft of its contents after producing a dragonkin.

When comparing between now and then, it would have undoubtedly seemed that he had undergone a complete change in personality.

And having guessed the correct answer, upon verifying his insight, Reinhard continued.

Reinhard: "The current you is weaker than the last time. Why is that?"

“Aldebaran”: “…Argh.”

Reinhard: “—?”

“Aldebaran”: “No, no no, no no no, it’s only natural for you to say that. It’s just as you say, I can’t get full use out of this body. So, I guess I’m kinda weak, eh? Were that the case, there wouldn’t be even a single thing strange about it whatsoever. Only—”

At Reinhard’s unmalicious misgivings, “Aldebaran” broke off his words there. Then, with the profile of a Dragon that differed far too much from that of a human, he gave a sneering grin that could nonetheless be understood as such,

“Aldebaran”: “Now, I’m kinda wanting to show you a thing or two.”

Directly following that declaration, “Aldebaran” spread its wings, giving rise to a gale as it soared.

Closing the distance on Reinhard in an instant, it swung down its arms, each akin to great trees, aiming to crush him flat. Seeing that transparent offensive, Reinhard seemed to disregard his poor footing—in fact, as the Divine Protection of Sandplay allowed him to disregard it, he leapt between “Aldebaran’s” arms towards its chest, and drove a counterattack into it.

“Aldebaran”: “Gohk—!!”

Spreading his long legs, one to the heavens and the other to earth, Reinhard delivered a kick, landing a direct hit on the Dragon where a human’s solar plexus would have been located, tossing the gargantuan creature straight upwards.

Instead of flying through the air with its wings, “Aldebaran” had been forcibly launched upwards, and chasing it, Reinhard leapt up and caught up to the skybound Dragon—nay, he pulled ahead. Then, stepping upon the soaring Dragon with the tips of his toes, he forcibly halted the upward momentum.

Reinhard: “Apologies, but this is as far as it goes.”

Reinhard appeared to be standing upon the back of “Aldebaran” midair, and the hand he held aloft, brandishing naught as he readied a karate chop, was sharper and more lethal a blade than any commonplace renowned sword.

That brandish seemed as if it could likely sever even the Divine Dragon’s dragonhusk, but—

“Aldebaran”: “I said I’d show you a thing or two… go along with me a little while longer.”

Right before it could bask in the karate chop, “Aldebaran” muttered so after being pushed around at Reinhard’s will. Hearing the Dragon’s voice, with a hint of scheming mixed in amidst the bitterness, Reinhard slightly frowned.

Witnessing that from afar, gazing up at the supreme beings in the aether from down on the surface, Aldebaran spoke.

Aldebaran: “—Plan A.”

Reinhard: “—Hk.”

Given the distance, it was unthinkable that Reinhard could have heard Aldebaran’s voice. On the other hand, one might think that it would not be out of the ordinary for him to have heard it, but there would be no point in asking.

—After all, the light of a star twinkling in the night sky was plummeting down, aiming directly for the Sword Saint.

2

—Al Shario.

This spell, regarded as a specialty of a Witch of yore, was one accepted to be a forbidden technique.

Shining down from beyond the sky, stars were perpetually burning masses of Mana, and by utilizing the property of attraction between Mana of the same type, the unbelievable marvel of casting one to the earth could be realised.

But naturally, to bring a star down upon a precise location required both delicate control over magic and an unfathomable quantity of Mana. In exchange for the difficulty of realizing such a technique, the Mana contained in the star's light could rival the amount held by a Great Spirit, even extolled to have once felled a weyr of Dragons.

In terms of destructive power, it easily surpassed even the ruinous breath of Dragons, beings bestowed with the right to tear the world asunder with just their roar, and so it could therefore be proclaimed to be the pinnacle of destructive acts.

???: "Magic, it is a miraculous discipline with the hidden potential to make anything one imagines into reality, were you unaware? The creation of a spell so powerful that it would cause one to scoff at something like a Dragon's breath was inevitable when considering there were those who wished to surpass it… eventually, a spell even more powerful than the magic capable of plunging a star will be born. Is it not wonderful, that humans truly possess such Greed?"

Such had once been stated to Aldebaran by a Witch with beautiful white hair, a smug expression drawn upon her face.

It was still irritating to remember her smug face from back then, but he did believe that it was no lie or bluff. After all, that smug-faced Witch had personally shown him the real thing.

In other words, this what surpassed even the breath of a Dragon, stood as the zenith—or rather, stood as the zenith of destruction at this point in history.

Aldebaran: "Piece of shit."

For any given pinnacle, there remained the possibility to surpass it by means of new ideas and the magic to bring them to life.

Al Shario was no exception. Gritting his teeth as he made the correction in his head in accordance with the Witch's teachings, Aldebaran wished for the fruit borne of that starlight.

—He would rather not admit it, but by studying under the Witch, Aldebaran had been bequeathed all sorts of knowledge.

Amidst the wisdom bestowed unto him, knowledge about magic was present in no small amount. However, even if he were able to learn the theories and methodologies behind implementing magic, Aldebaran lacked the essential talent required.

Even supposing a person knew how to heat water, a bathtub could not be filled with a single cup's worth of water.

In that case, why had the Witch imparted knowledge of magic unto Aldebaran if he would be unable to utilize it?

Did she merely wish to show off her knowledge, to don that smug expression? Was it because even if he was unable to use it, there would be some obstacles possible to overcome with a knowledge of magic, and so she had wished to make her pupil's path a little smoother?

Either one of those would be nothing more than by-products of the Witch's main objective in doing so.

The real reason for which the Witch had crammed Aldebaran full of magical knowledge, that would be—

"Aldebaran": "—Al Shario."

Launched up into the midst of the sky, the Dragon voiced the incantation to cast a star down towards the nighttime Sand Sea.

Whilst holding immense power, the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, was left vacant after its soul had been excised—"Aldebaran" now housed its Memories within that dragonhusk, finally completed as an existence capable of fulfilling the requirements to make shine the long-unused treasures the Witch had granted him.

To rephrase, it was with precisely this motive that the Witch had filled Aldebaran with knowledge.

The specific combination of Aldebaran's knowledge and the acquisition of the Dragon's dragonhusk by "Aldebaran", these were the means by which he would surmount the greatest wall at the extremity of the bricks laid to an extent that one might take as the realm of a billion.

Reinhard: “…”

Looking up at the sky from atop the Dragon’s back, even Reinhard’s eyes went wide.

The starlight cascading down from the heavens was as mighty as that unleashed by Sphinx in the midst of the final battle in the Vollachian Empire, a battle which had shown premonitions of the world’s end.

After making free use of all sorts of dirty moves, Sphinx had finally been able to perform this forbidden technique. Though Aldebaran now trembled at seeing this extraordinary Dragon perform it without any external support, he kept a watchful eye on Reinhard’s movements in the sky.

That Al Shario could not be defended against, he would not take such an optimistic viewpoint.

In fact, the Blue Lightning, who was considered to be on par with the Sword Saint, had achieved a feat of supremacy unbounded by slaying a falling star with a single slice of his katana during the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital.

That star had been cut down through the combined effect of Cecilus’s swordsmanship and the Dream Sword’s power; he did not think that Reinhard, unable to draw the Dragon Sword as he was, could replicate such a feat.

But, even if it was grounds for being careless, that was no reason to underestimate him.

Therefore—

“Aldebaran”: “OH, OHHHHH—!!!”

Before Reinhard could do anything in response to the starlight, “Aldebaran” roared and made a half-turn midair, rotating to face Reinhard who had his back to it, and struck him with its wing.

Reinhard promptly received this blow with his elbow and knee, but the Dragon's aim was not to cut him with its wing, but rather to blow Reinhard away with the impact—towards the star.

"Aldebaran": "—HAAHRAAN!!"

As had been the case at first contact, Reinhard possessed the means by which to dash through the sky—no, to use the clouds as footholds, by means of the Divine Protection of Clouds he possessed. Before he could regain his balance, "Aldebaran's" roar mowed down the clouds in the vicinity and launched Reinhard further into the sky.

With naught a foothold, with naught an escape route, Reinhard would defenselessly collide with the airborne starlight.

With conditions substantially worse than what they had been for the starslayer during the decisive battle for the Imperial Capital, even Reinhard would have no means of dealing with the incoming blow of this star—

Reinhard: "—I have received it."

At that moment, Reinhard stretched out his leg as a last resort, his toe making contact with the star, and the consequent explosive energy swallowed the Sword Saint, setting off a star-rending explosion—was what should have happened.

However, the explosion that was supposed to occur never came about, and instead, Reinhard walked along the side of the star.

Aldebaran: "What…"

"Aldebaran": "The hell?!"

When the collapse of the heavens that ought to have forced him to choose between the twin options of oblivion or evasion came, both were sidestepped, thus the astonished voices of Aldebaran and "Aldebaran" echoed across the Sand Sea.

To the bewilderment of both, Reinhard walked up the side of the star, and after arriving at the top, Reinhard: “Divine Protection of Ball Balancing.”

“Aldebaran”: “Ball, Balancing…”

Aldebaran: “You’re treating it as a fireball, eh?”

Upon receiving his answer, he became speechless at the beam of destruction being treated as a fireball. However, that speechlessness was soon painted over by a rising sense of dread.

If one believed that the Divine Protection of Ball Balancing was what it sounded like, then a ball balancer at a circus did not merely stand atop a ball, but controlled it at will—

“Aldebaran”: “Shit.”

Reinhard’s feet appeared to lightly tap the star’s surface.

In the next moment, the trajectory of the star dropped by Al Shario changed, and veered towards the caster, “Aldebaran”, causing the fierce starlight to rapidly approach it.

Witnessing it the Dragon spat a curse, meeting the attack with its almighty breath.

Aldebaran: “…”

A moment later, dazzling crimson and white light consumed the sky, creating the illusion that the night had come to an end.

Originally, the scene was supposed to be that of Reinhard being struck by a star, but with this event’s occurrence being actively perverted, the night sky being set ablaze was the conclusion, simple as. —False, as the story was not drawing to a close yet.

The shattered star burst into innumerable glittering fragments, carpet bombing the Sand Sea.

Aldebaran: “Gu, uuu…”

Naturally, Aldebaran, who was on the ground, was also blown away, his entire body accumulating several burns as he collapsed onto the sand.

Soon, he heard a rumbling that did not resemble that of a falling star from not too far away, and with difficulty he turned his neck to look towards the place it came from, where he saw “Aldebaran”, with a broken wing and another that had been severed, having powerlessly fallen to the ground.

And then—

Reinhard: “It is regrettable that it had to come to this.”

Towards the collapsed Aldebaran’s side, Reinhard walked.

Leaving aside the half-dead Dragon and Aldebaran, he had been swallowed by the cataclysmic light of a star, yet did not seem to bear any signs of such.

He had heard that the Sin Archbishop of Greed had killed Reinhard once, but how had that been done?

Alas, Reinhard, bearing a look of shame, believed that the fight had already come to an end, and perhaps sadly, Aldebaran had no method with which to overturn this.

Indeed, Reinhard had judged correctly. —For the eight-thousand-four-hundred and sixty-sixth time, it was his victory.

But—

Aldebaran: “—Next.”

At that moment, behind Reinhard, “Aldebaran” raised its head from where it had unceremoniously fallen to the ground, and unleashed a fearsome Dragon’s breath towards them.

The Dragon’s breath had been shot in an imperfect state, a mere shadow of its perfected form, but Reinhard could not possibly ignore it. —That was because Aldebaran was also in its line of fire, and would have been unable to escape the fate of being turned into charcoal if Reinhard were to dodge.

Reinhard: “I cannot approve of this way of doing things…!”

Turning around as drew his yet-sheathed Dragon Sword, Reinhard slashed the breath away head-on.

Reinhard’s voice overflowed with righteous indignation, his heart filled with anger at this murder-suicide attempt, due to the fact that “Aldebaran” had unleashed an attack that would swallow up its ally Aldebaran.

How so truly kind of him. Next time, he would incorporate that into his strategy.

With this decision, Aldebaran unwrapped the drug package in his mouth, and gulped down the poison contained within.

Reinhard: “Wha…!”

Having noticed that something was wrong, Reinhard turned around, his face stiffening. Within his vision, Aldebaran was twitching and convulsing on the ground, drowning in bloody froth as his consciousness went to the beyond—

× × ×

???: “—That will be as far as you go.”

A dignified voice cut through the cold, frozen sky, and a beam of light pierced the airborne Dragon obliquely.

While the impact rattled through his entire body, Aldebaran, with a reflex that he had finally conditioned after falling to his death hundreds of times, clung onto a protrusion on the Dragon’s back, avoiding the opportunity to go skydiving without a parachute, and together with his literal alternate self, plummeted towards the ground.

And then—

???: “I advise you surrender. If possible, I would prefer to not cut you down.”

Aldebaran: “Quit putting on airs, hero. I’ll win regardless. —Your stars were bad.”

—For the eight-thousand four-hundred and sixty-seventh time, Aldebaran’s battle commenced.

3

—His encounter with the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, had begun in night skies over the Augria Sand Dunes after having fled Pleiades Watchtower.

The battle had begun when they had been pierced by light, and came crashing down, but Aldebaran saw that as something that was bound to happen sooner or later, and was not surprised by his arrival.

Although it was a confrontation he had understood would happen at some point, he felt like it had come upon him a little too soon.

Rather, it would have been more desirable to be able to fight at a time when he was at a minimal level of exhaustion. —And even that optimistic tough act was only possible before he had heard “—That will be as far as you go” a hundred times, as when hearing “—That will be as far as you go” for the next eight-thousand odd times, his bravado would completely fall apart.

In reality, after the first “—That will be as far as you go”, he would go on to hear it more than a hundred times before he was gently caught by the Dragon’s wings and land safely upon the Sand Sea.

Until then, he had met fates such as breaking his neck or spine in a crash landing, forcing him back to the “—That will be as far as you go”, giving him no choice but to try over and over again for reasons unbeknownst to him.

Aldebaran: “So the one who’s been saying “—That will be as far as you go” was Reinhard this whole time! I was so moved when I realized that…”

It was not really good for one’s psyche, being in a situation of being unaware as to what could have possibly been attacking them.

For Aldebaran, receiving physical damage was unpleasant, but it was not the worst possible thing. What he feared was not so much physical injury, but mental injury.

In that respect, upon finally uncovering the true identity of the one repeating "—That will be as far as you go", he felt as if he had finally escaped from a labyrinth. But then again, that cheerful mood vanished right away.

Aldebaran: "I guess I should count myself lucky that I didn't get softlocked…"

Depending on the situation, it being possible to establish the matrix just before a dead end was the only real thing that could be considered a weakness of Aldebaran's Authority. Miraculously, it was a mistake he had never made up to this point, but there was no guarantee that it would remain that way in the future.

Moreover, at that moment, he had been defining and redefining the matrix every fifteen seconds in preparation for any unforeseen circumstances. Thanks to that, he had been able to return to the point just before Reinhard had said "—That will be as far as you go," but if he had established the starting point of the matrix to be just after the "—That will be as far", he would have been starting from the "…as you go", chipping away at his heart without him being able to do anything about it.

Once the matrix was updated, it was impossible to go back to previous tasks.

That was to say, Aldebaran had no choice but to conquer the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, using the matrix that began with the declaration of "—That will be as far as you go".

For that reason, he had already gone through over eight-thousand repetitions of "—That will be as far as you go".

It was a daunting battle, comparable to scaling a hopelessly high mountain at the pace of a tortoise, but "Aldebaran" was there with him, so it was not as if they would be completely incapable of contesting against Reinhard.

Thanks to this, preparations to conquer Reinhard were steadily underway.

To conquer any enemy, not limited to just Reinhard, what was required was a breakdown of elements.

By deconstructing the elements that made something what it was, one could naturally expose the core of their opponent. Reinhard, too, was not simply the strongest. —There were reasons that made him the strongest.

Aldebaran would break him down into the individual elements of Heart, Technique, and Body, and would unravel him.

Body. —Reinhard harbored ridiculous physical abilities not brought about by his Divine Protections, but due to Reinhard's own extraordinary Od, which produced an efficient and explosive synergy of the Mana inside and outside his body without any loss in the slightest, allowing him to utilize it naturally.

There was a technique known as the Flow Method that could be acquired through outstanding talent and years of training, which allowed the body to be strengthened by circulating Mana throughout it. Reinhard had been born with congenital Excess Mana Circulation Constitution, so he was able to naturally manipulate this technique from birth, and it was normal for him to remain in an constantly enhanced state.

That was roughly equivalent to saying that the simple act of Reinhard breathing normally had hundreds of times the effect of an ordinary person taking a deep breath, all the while still leaving room for Reinhard himself to take a deep breath.

Technique. —Based on Aldebaran's prior knowledge and what he had identified after eight-thousand clashes, Reinhard possessed at least two-hundred-and-fifty-one Divine Protections. His Divine Protections ranged from his signature Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, to combat-useful ones like the Divine Protection of Initiative and the Divine Protection of Projectile Evasion, to environmental ones like the Divine Protection of Fog and the Divine Protection of Sandplay, to poor jokes such as the Divine Protection of Shoelaces and the Divine Protection of Wearing Layers.

Reinhard possessed so many rare and powerful Divine Protections that each one could be a unique representative for every country, numbering significantly more than the fingers on both hands, and his ability to adapt was so outstanding that even if a trap were to be prepared to ensnare and kill the world's cleverest Witch, he would easily break through.

Heart. —Finally, the ethos of Reinhard, bearing the duty of the Sword Saint.

Reinhard's declaration of merely being from the lineage of Sword Saints could perhaps serve as proof that he believed he did not meet the ideal standards of how a Sword Saint ought to be, but to those who bore objectives that differed to his, and stood in opposition to him, that self-consciousness of Reinhard's was irrelevant.

Regardless of how Reinhard himself might have felt, his feats and devotion to his duty made him worthy of being called the Sword Saint, and to the enemies of the Kingdom—nay, to the enemies of the world, he would turn no blind eye.

The Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, was a cog in the machine for the express purpose of destroying the world's enemies.

This was the result of Aldebaran's analysis of Reinhard's Heart, Technique, and Body.

To rephrase, in order to conquer Reinhard, it would be essential to crush these elements that had been revealed through his breakdown, one-by-one.

Ergo—

Reinhard: "—That will be as far as you go."

With that, as the Dragon was pierced by light, Aldebaran's next battle commenced.

—Eight-thousand eight-hundred and eighty-eight.

???: “—That will be as far as you go.”

Amidst the successive battles, he became convinced that for Reinhard, who possessed the Excess Mana Circulation Constitution that inordinately absorbed ambient Mana and circulated it throughout his body, the Augria Sand Dunes, which were infested with Miasma, a tainted form of Mana, was the worst possible location imaginable.

In other words, across the entirety of the world, there was no other field where Reinhard would be so weakened, save for the Augria Sand Dunes.

Even when exposed to the supergravity-generating Al Karum, despite being engulfed in a gravitational field so intense that even “Aldebaran” had been crushed under its own weight, Reinhard had overcome it through sheer strength, and yet, in the Augria Sand Dunes, Reinhard’s physical abilities were at their weakest state.

Aldebaran: “—Next.”

× × ×

—Ten-thousand-two-hundred-and-twelve.

???: “—That will be as far as you go.”

Utilizing the refraction of light, the fact that the surrounding area had been veiled in a wall of ice was concealed. That airtight space, sealed with ice, was then filled with mist, and the water within was made to vaporize all at once, causing it to explode.

The explosive decompression of a sealed space caused by a steam explosion was an outcome that could not have been anticipated, since the cause of which was a phenomenon that had yet to be fully elucidated given this world’s level of civilization; it was an attack borne from the synthesis of magic and science.

The plan had been to simultaneously trick both the Divine Protection of Fire Avoidance and the Divine Protection of Water

Avoidance not by using simple fire or water, but rather a steam explosion; but, by him receiving the Divine Protection of Fireplay that rendered explosions harmless and the Divine Protection of Waterplay that neutralized water damage, this attempt too had been overcome.

Aldebaran: "—Next."

× × ×

—Sixteen-thousand and eight.

???: "—That will be as far as you go."

The temperature gradient between Fire and Water Magic was used to create thunderclouds, and by applying Wind and Earth Magic, he caused the Dragon Sword to be imbued with an electric charge. Following the principle that formed the basis for lightning rods, inescapable bolts of lightning struck Reinhard.

To escape the sheer speed of lightning, not even Reinhard was capable of such. The bolts of lightning, reminiscent of the speed of Cecilus's swordsmanship that transcended human limits, a sight that had become all too familiar to him in the Empire, struck Reinhard chaotically.

Reinhard completely neutralized this with his Divine Protection of the Lightning Cloud, and although the lightning could not seize Reinhard, it did take hold of the Dragon Sword, causing the sword to become highly magnetized.

Taking advantage of it, he moved on to the next plan, which had been prepared in advance. —Using this magnetic force, he immobilized his opponent with the abundant magnetite-rich sand that lay in the Sand Sea, and drove an attack into the lethal gap he had opened.

However, this too was circumvented by the Divine Protection of Sandplay and the Divine Protection of Mud Slippage, ending in failure.

Aldebaran: "—Next."

× × ×

—Sixty-four thousand seven-hundred and ninety-nine.

???: "—That will be as far as you go."

Responding to the previous failure had caused him to momentarily forget the conditioning that should have been ingrained in his soul.

In that instant, he had forgotten the routine of clinging onto the protrusion that adorned the back of the Dragon; his whole body was enveloped by a floating sensation, and he was swept up by the wind, losing sense of up and down, left and right, as he was tossed about.

In the distance, unable to pick up the falling Aldebaran, all that could be heard was the crying roar of the Dragon.

His tongue probed the insides of his mouth, and for what felt like the umpteenth time, the deadly poison he carried was unleashed once again.

A fall from that height would have undoubtedly killed him upon impact. However, a one-in-a-million oddity occurring this time would be problematic. So, just to be safe, Aldebaran gulped down the poison.

Before hitting the ground, struck by an intense pain akin to all of his blood boiling, his mind was blotted white—

Aldebaran: "—Next."

5

—One-hundred thirty-two-thousand and fourteen.

???: "—That will be as far as you go."

Alas, over the course of the battle he had repeated over, and over, and over

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and over again, a battle that nonetheless did not last longer than two minutes on average, Aldebaran had become more proficient.

Aldebaran: "Quit putting on airs, hero. I'll win regardless. —Your stars were bad."

Standing off against Reinhard to the fore, gaze trained upon him, Aldebaran reached into his pocket, pulled out a singular book, and raised it aloft over his head with its pages open.

That was a Book of the Dead he had taken out of the Pleiades Watchtower—Aldebaran's own Book.

By showing its contents to Reinhard, he would perturb his mental state—such a strategy had already ended in failure as a plan quite some time ago.

Reinhard possessed the Divine Protection of Nightmares, which combated pollutants to the mind, so he was extremely resistant to brainwashing attacks that would directly disturb one's mental state. Still, it likely could not completely nullify the effects of an Authority, but just by making it possible to disregard the majority of the influences, it was sufficiently effective.

To put it briefly, Reinhard was not the person to whom Aldebaran was showing the Book of the Dead.

It was the other "Aldebaran", on standby behind him.

“Aldebaran”: “—Synchronization complete.”

Guessing his intent, “Aldebaran” had lowered its eyes down to look upon the pages of the yet-soaked Book of the Dead; the contents of the Book were drilled directly into its brain, and its Memories were updated.

The Book of the Dead he had brought with him had recorded all of the one-sided fierce battles against Reinhard that Aldebaran had experienced. —By showing that to “Aldebaran”, Aldebaran could allow the partner who was left behind by the Territory to draw level with him at any time.

Both failure and success—at present, there had yet to be a successful plan, but of the plans that had ended in failure, just by knowing how they had been thwarted and what actions “Aldebaran” had taken in them, “Aldebaran’s” own proficiency would increase remarkably.

For that purpose, Aldebaran had made sure to watch over every battle with his own eyes.

Aldebaran: “—So long as I don’t give up, there’s nobody who can win against me.”

That was the absolute conviction with which Aldebaran had continued to struggle against defeats that reached beyond a count of one-hundred-thousand.

I won’t waver, no matter what. —It’s with that resolve, that I started this.

Reinhard: “—From the lineage of Sword Saints, Reinhard van Astrea.”

Alongside “—That will be as far as you go”, this was an introduction he had heard over one-hundred-thousand times.

Taking it in, Aldebaran inhaled, paused, and continued.

Aldebaran: “I’m… a following star.”

A declaration that seemed to be spoken on a whim, Reinhard accepted it, and advanced.

The distance between the two vanished in an instant, and despite him being in his worst condition due to the Miasma filling the Sand Sea, the Divine Protection of Sandplay allowed him to disregard his poor footing, and the Divine Protection of Night Skies granted him strength in the midst of night; bearing the sheathed Dragon Sword on his waist, the Sword Saint closed in.

"Aldebaran": "—Haahraan!!"

Having installed the Memories of over one-hundred-thousand battles, a roar that was no longer unshapely morphed into a white light of destruction, intercepting the incoming Reinhard head-on.

A Dragon's breath was not magic nor anything of the sort; it was simply an exceedingly powerful torrent of Mana, pure, primitive to its objective, destroying anything that dared to make contact.

A blast that seemed it would decimate the vast Sand Sea for the rest of eternity, its radial expansion left no escape, and not even Reinhard possessed the means to evade it. —Hence, he did not evade.

Reinhard: "Shh—"

That instant, a flash that rivaled the Dragon's breath cleaved the white light directly in twain.

That which had done so, swinging up from down below, was the Dragon Sword Reid, still in its scabbard. The legendary blade had yet to make contact with the air, but by combining the strength of the sheath, which nobody was capable of destroying, and his own sword power, Reinhard had severed the Dragon's breath.

But, thereupon—

Aldebaran: "Plan D23!!"

"Aldebaran": "—Al Goa."

Aldebaran yelled, and without any words of confirmation, the Dragon scorched the world in an explosive inferno.

He had long predicted that he would undoubtedly end up fighting against Reinhard. —Hence, Aldebaran had prepared a plethora of plans for when the time came for him to battle the Sword Saint, and those had been shared with "Aldebaran" alongside his Memories.

Between Aldebaran and "Aldebaran", no strategy meetings were necessary.

Aldebaran: "…"

Without letting the swell of the inferno become a fireball, a stretch of the Sand Sea was engulfed by flames right away.

The midnight Sand Sea was illuminated by a bright-red radiance, instantaneously transforming the chilly atmosphere into a burnt hellscape.

The might of the flames kneaded out of the extraordinary Mana of the Dragon was so absurd that as the blaze engulfed the Sand Sea, the grains of sand all melted in unison, morphing them into glass.

The scene that resulted was reminiscent of the scene of Al Shario's starlight destroying the Sand Sea. Were there to be any differences, it would be that, this time, the way the Sand Sea had been destroyed was more atmospheric; were there to be any similarities, it would be the emergence of the Sword Saint from its epicenter—.

Aldebaran: "Divine Protection of Fire Avoidance."

A man with blazing red hair boldly stepped forward into the fiery, red world that would have turned any normal living being to ash, or at the very least, to charcoal.

Clearing the flames away with a swing of his arm as he emerged, Reinhard had avoided the majority of the damage with his Divine Protection of Fire Avoidance, and if he were exposed to more intense flames, he would receive the Divine Protection of Fireplay, allowing him to fully demonstrate his enhanced abilities within the inferno.

That being the case, neither fire attacks, nullified by the Divine Protection of Fire Avoidance, nor terrain changes, nullified by the Divine Protection of Sandplay, were Aldebaran's true aim.

His real intentions were—

Reinhard: "—Hk."

At that moment, Reinhard, standing amidst the blazing flames, furrowed his brow, and put his hand to his throat.

He ought to have realized. —He was in a critical situation in which he was unable to breathe.

"Aldebaran": "—Haahraan!!"

Upon seeing Reinhard's reaction, "Aldebaran" decided it was time to attack and unleashed its breath. The power and explosive force of the white light left Reinhard unable to move, and a look of determination came over his face.

It was not a look of remorse or pain, but one of facing hardship during battle.

Aldebaran: "Finally…"

Seeing that face, Aldebaran clenched his fist at achieving a result after tens of thousands of tries.

The phenomenon that afflicted Reinhard had been caused by the flames consuming all the oxygen around him, creating an area devoid of oxygen.

Due to his Divine Protections, the effects of earth, water, fire, and wind were all ineffective against Reinhard, but he should not be able to survive in an oxygen-free environment, as that would be against the laws of nature.

With that aim in mind, he had created an oxygen-free environment. —And there, he pinned the Sword Saint in place.

Aldebaran: "Have a go at trying to figure out what's going on there without any science lessons!”

With just magic, or science at a theoretical level, Reinhard could not be defeated.

Even Reinhard, the Sword Saint, who forced magic and science to bend to his will, was finally driven into a corner by a phenomenon that even Od Lagna, who favored him, was unaware of.

By killing his Technique with a phenomenon that a Divine Protection could not protect him from, as well as killing his Body with a Miasma-filled battlefield, he managed to seal away two of the elements necessary for conquering Reinhard.

And then—

Aldebaran: “Plan L29—!!” & “Aldebaran”: “Plan L29—!!”

The opportunity to press forward came, and Aldebaran and “Aldebaran” were in agreement.

While “Aldebaran” used its breath to hold Reinhard in place, Aldebaran carried out the necessary procedures, and thereupon poured in the vast Mana of the Dragon.

The size of the Gate and the shape of the Od were night and day.

Even so, it was a secret move that could only be used by Aldebaran and “Aldebaran”, who shared the same magic signature that was unique like a fingerprint—two long, cylindrical vertical formations were laid out in the air, and they, clad in purple lightning, crackled and emitted a pale-blue light and the sound of radiating heat, turning its barrel towards Reinhard.

Two magical rails stretched across the sky.

In other words, that was—

Aldebaran: “—Magia Railgun.”

A magically-powered railgun, loaded with bullets that were neither fire, ice, nor lead.

With the dao Aldebaran had created using Earth Magic, he had scraped off the scales of the Dragon—these became bullets that were fired at lightning speed and struck the oxygen-deprived Reinhard.

No matter how fast Reinhard was, he could not outrun lightning.

That was a fact that Aldebaran had already learned from his previous battles.

Reinhard: "—Hk!"

The Divine Protection of First Sight and the Divine Protection of Projectile Evasion were activated simultaneously. Reinhard's instinctive reaction to the attack he was seeing for the first time was to notice that the railgun's firing line wavered slightly.

Because of that, Reinhard leaned forward slightly, and the railgun, which had only just missed its target, narrowly passed him and gouged out a semicircle in the Sand Sea.

However—

Reinhard: "—Guh."

There was a burst of blood that sprayed out over the Sand Sea, and a cry of pain escaped Reinhard's throat.

The railgun had not been a direct hit. It had only grazed him. But as long as the attack was deadly, even Reinhard would not come out unscathed from only a glancing blow.

Bleeding profusely from his right shoulder, Reinhard, for the first time in over one-hundred and thirty-thousand battles, showed definite damage, and thereupon—

"Aldebaran": "Fire!!"

The second Magia Railgun fired, and the scale pierced the dead center of Reinhard.

An inescapable blast wave wreaked havoc on the Sand Sea, and

Reinhard disappeared. —No, he did not disappear. He was swept away with the scale, right in the line of fire of the railgun.

Even Reinhard could not withstand the power and speed of a direct hit.

Provided he did take the blow directly, that was.

Aldebaran: "—The Divine Protection of Second Coming."

With his blood-spurting right arm limp at his side, Reinhard gripped the Dragon Sword with his left hand, and he had once again blocked the railgun blast that had threatened to pierce the center of his body with the sheath.

Unable to withstand the impact, he had been knocked off his feet, but he had avoided fatal injury—no, rather, he had not been knocked off his feet, but he had flown backward to match the railgun and disperse the deadly blow.

"Aldebaran": "—Al Karum!"

The moment "Aldebaran" saw the same thing as Aldebaran, it performed the incantation, and a magical black sphere that generated extreme gravity was born behind Reinhard.

It was a rehash of a spell that had not worked some eight-thousand loops prior or thereabouts—no, in this extreme situation, "Aldebaran" had also broken past its limits and evolved the spell to the next level.

What came to emerge there was not merely a powerful force field that exerted an extremely heavy gravitational force.

What did appear was a destructive singularity of mass, similar to a black hole, which warped space by concentrating an amount of Mana large enough to bring down a star into a single point.

Upon making contact with Reinhard as he was being blown away, the life of the Sword Saint was pulverized—

Aldebaran: "—The Divine Protection of Shedding Blood."

In the next instant, the tip of the Dragon Sword thrust into the singularity, and the black sphere was forcibly destroyed.

The Dragon Sword was said to be indestructible. Its strength had been proven beyond doubt, but Reinhard's left arm, which had held the Dragon Sword as it disturbed the singularity, was destroyed.

The railgun had damaged Reinhard's right arm, and the singularity had damaged his left arm.

It was the combination of two of his most powerful plans, and however horrifying it was to think that even all this had still failed to defeat him, this was the greatest damage Reinhard had ever suffered.

As it was—

Aldebaran: "—The Divine Protection of Projectile Striking."

The next moment, Reinhard, his toes planted on the sandy soil that had been razed by the railgun and the singularity, with his bloodied arms still hanging limp, kicked up the fallen Dragon Sword with his foot—and sent it flying.

"Aldebaran": "—Gohk."

Light pierced the center of "Aldebaran's" throat, and the Dragon fell violently.

The dust and turbulence resulting from the fall of the Dragon caused Aldebaran to topple over helplessly. He inhaled the rising cloud of dust and choked. He coughed.

And then—

Reinhard: "—That will be as far as you go."

Looking down at the collapsed Aldebaran on the ground, the bloodied Reinhard so announced.

The Sword Saint, with his arms hanging limply at his side, stood by the Dragon Sword sticking out from the ground, and after ascertaining that “Aldebaran” was unconscious with its eyes rolled back, he looked at Aldebaran.

After forcing him into such a corner, having done so much, it was a loss nonetheless.

He aimed beyond the realm of a billion, and failing to reach it, he had betrayed the expectations of many, just like back then.

Robbing him of both arms, and conquering his Body, had not been enough.

Launching an attack that his Divine Protections could not defend against, and conquering his Technique, had not been enough.

The Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, was far too strong.

And so, Aldebaran took a long, deep breath, and—

Aldebaran: “—Your old man’s been captured by an accomplice of mine.”

In order to conquer the Heart of Reinhard van Astrea, a trump card was played.

Chapter 15:
The Defeated

1

???: “—Your old man’s been captured by an accomplice of mine.”

The moment he employed that trump card of his, Aldebaran felt his own defeat to a painful extent.

One-hundred-and-thirty-two thousand and forty-four, such was the number of attempts in the Matrix it had taken him to solve this one problem; the Witch had conditioned him into the habit of counting them up, and this marked the second occasion in his life the count had reached this number.

And thus, much like what had happened that first time, once again had Aldebaran been defeated.

The preparations laid out had been flawless, all possible stratagems had been put in place, he was possessed of limitless chances to fine-tune his plans so long as his heart did not shatter, and yet, he lost.

How frail his own heart must be; he was truly, oh so truly disgusted by it.

His heart was frail.

Far more than his lack of talent, far more than the lack of rewards for his efforts, far more than nobody loving him, that frail heart was the deadly poison that everlastingly made Aldebaran loathe himself so.

???: “…”

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By way of the repeated trial and error alongside the Dragon, he had finally succeeded in having the Sword Saint spill blood.

This successful experience, too, was overruled by means of the Divine Protection of Bloodshed, a ridiculous Divine Protection that made him more powerful the more blood he shed, yet the figure of Reinhard, both his arms having been rendered useless, served as the spoils of battle.

In frankness, since Reinhard would have gone through most of the battles in his life without sustaining injuries, his hope had been that giving him a taste of pain would cast a shadow upon he who was the strongest.

Alas, the man strongest in the world, the man strongest in generations, the man strongest in history, stood likewise firm in the face of pain.

Henceforth, albeit his arms had been torn to shreds and into ribbons, his complexion had not changed whatsoever.

Therefore—

Aldebaran: "…I get'cha."

To his fore, as Reinhard looked down on him toppled amidst a sea of sand, Aldebaran nodded in assent.

Never mind the discomfort of having soil in his mouth, the flavor of blood pooling on the inside of his cut cheek, the unavoidable sluggishness and pain throughout his entire body from being rocked by the shockwave; he still could not help but declare so.

Amidst the bouts whose grand total surpassed one-hundred-and-thirty-thousand, not once had Reinhard's complexion changed, even when his arms had been reduced to such a state. —That face had thus contorted into a thing of dreadful sorrow.

Aldebaran: "I get'cha."

Reinhard's face looked very much akin to that of a child who had let go of the parents' hands and lost sight of them whilst shopping at a mall, to which Aldebaran piled on words of understanding.

Piling them on, he continued.

Aldebaran: "Family, it's what always holds us back."

Reinhard: "—Hk, how can I know what you say is true…"

Aldebaran: "Why don't you take a look? For example… with that, with the Duchess's Divine Protection of Wind Reading. If you can discern if someone is lying with that or something similar, then you could see whether I'm being truthful or not."

Reinhard: "That is—"

Aldebaran: "Not something you can do? —I guess you do have some trauma from taking away someone's Divine Protection."

When he pointed that out, anguish flashed across Reinhard's expression.

A miniscule opening was born in the defense of the invincible, of the impregnable Sword Saint. Akin to water starting to overflow from a levee. The more the water seeped through, the stronger Aldebaran's feelings of defeat would grow.

Neither his Body nor his Technique could be outrivalled. As a result, he would have to torment his Heart, a most foul approach.

And that strategy had been evidently effective.

What Aldebaran had attempted more than a hundred-and-thirty-thousand times, and failed to do, he would now accomplish by playing dirty, shedding not a single drop of blood or sweat.

And, that was no fault of Reinhard van Astrea, the young man born carrying the expectations to become the Sword Saint.

Aldebaran: "In that case, how about we use logic alone?"

Reinhard: “…Logic?”

Aldebaran: “Indeed, logic.”

Raising his body upon the sand as it creaked, Aldebaran gave pursuit to Reinhard.

Perhaps, had “Aldebaran” been able to get up, they would have had the option to fight while still instilling uncertainty in Reinhard.

But, with no signs that the fainted “Aldebaran” would come to its senses, he had already deployed the key to conquer the Heart. So, the only option left to him was to use this key to pry open a closed route. —Aldebaran resolved himself to do so.

Aldebaran: “As you can tell from getting to this point, I’ve taken every possible measure, and laid preparations to face off against you, Sword Saint-san. A mountain of plans, the Augria Sand Dunes riddled with Miasma, and in addition…”

Reinhard: “—Enlisted the Divine Dragon Volcanica, to your cause.”

Aldebaran: “Strictly speaking, that one was only managed via a secret trick… but yes. However, though I went that far, I had no confidence that I could take you down, and in fact, it was no good. You understand then, right?”

Reinhard: “…”

Aldebaran: “Your old man, he was a collaborator of Princess’s. I had plenty of chances… of opportunities.”

Aldebaran was convinced that this reason was certainly not the one for which Priscilla had allowed Heinkel into her Camp.

Haughty, arrogant, unafraid to profess that all things in the world belonged to her, was Aldebaran’s beloved woman; the beautiful and the ugly she forgave equally, regardless of her likings.

She would not have used Heinkel for the purpose of dealing with Reinhard, nor would she have shunned Heinkel, deliberately hurting him for his way of being, in any way.

The source of her intent lay concealed within her heart, her heart that was fierce like flame, whence it could not be laid bare.

—Or perhaps, that was what he should have done.

Minding not the conflagration, Aldebaran, having been dispossessed of his left arm, ought to have fumbled and groped around in the flames with his other arm, steeled with the resolve to let it turn to charcoal, to let it burn to ash.

Had he done as such, Priscilla Barielle would still be—.

Aldebaran: "…She's, no longer among us."

Reinhard: "Al-dono?"

Aldebaran: "I haven't got even a single reason to hesitate. I'd take those sorta measures with no qualms whatsoever."

With Aldebaran asserting thus, Reinhard's eyes narrowed a smidgen.

Reinhard did not wish to be bestowed with the Divine Protection of Wind Reading due to various reasons, but surely even he had been provided with sufficient info as to believe Aldebaran.

Reinhard: "…"

From what he could tell by a glance, Reinhard's injured arms had yet to commence being healed.

Blessed by the world, and loved by fate, it was said that when Reinhard sustained wounds on his body, the Spirits in his environs would flock to him so that he may be healed; the Augria Sand Dunes were riddled with Miasma however, the natural enemy of Spirits. Accordingly, Reinhard's little fangirls were unable to assemble.

It was possible that, since the dawn of history, no one but Aldebaran had ever cornered Reinhard to this extent, so given such an unprecedented situation—

Reinhard: "……You, what do you desire from me?"

As if wringing that out of himself, Reinhard took a seat at the hostage negotiation table.

Hearing that, Aldebaran let out a long, long breath, relief that tormenting the Heart had indeed been worthwhile,

Aldebaran: "Nothing outrageous. I ain't gonna give you an unreasonable demand, like asking you to join me like the Divine Dragon. Nor will I have you betray your master, or do anything I wouldn't like being done to me."

Reinhard: "Inscrutable, I cannot believe that. You use my father as a shield, and try to say you have a conscience?"

Aldebaran: "What a terrible shameless person I am, eh? Having to deal with a guy like that, I kinda feel sorry for you. —My request is simple, I only wish that you let us go on our way."

Reinhard: "Let you go?"

Impossible, was the nuance that reply was laced with, to which Aldebaran shook his head up and down.

Ordering Reinhard to commit suicide, or having him halt the Council of Wise Men's actions in exchange for his father; unreasonable negotiation demands of the sort were not within his intentions.

It was already clear to him, from the start. —Reinhard would not go along with hostage negotiations.

Reinhard: "…"

He was seriously concerned for Heinkel's safety, he did not want to let Aldebaran, hostile as he was, die, and he was worried about his comrades, Flam and Ezzo, who yet remained in the Tower.

And all of that human compassion, he would be capable of gathering together and heartlessly sacrificing in order to protect the world's equilibrium if necessity arose.

Reinhard would be able to sacrifice Heinkel, for whose safety he was seriously concerned; he would be able to slay Aldebaran, who he did not want to let die, hostile as he was; he would be able to abandon the comrades he was worried about, Flam and Ezzo, who yet remained in the Tower, leaving them to meet their deaths. — The Sword Saint, was simply that sort of being.

Henceforth, only those individuals willing to sacrifice their own selves to protect the greater good could become the Sword Saint.

Aldebaran: “Lemme tell you one thing, letting me off the hook here won’t result in any huge differences in the world. If anything, it’ll remove two users of cheat techniques from the Royal Selection, increasing your master’s chances of becoming the Monarch.”

Reinhard: “A throne attained through the elimination of her opponents, is not what Felt-sama desires.”

Aldebaran: “How virtuous. But, I guess that adds up. If her personality wasn’t one that minded such things, she could’ve put an end to the Royal Selection by process of elimination the moment it began.”

This would not serve as a bargaining chip. Of this he was well aware.

Through many twists and turns, Priscilla had ultimately come to approve of the four other Royal Candidates. For those who had lived up to her standards, going along with boorish dealings of the sort was by no means a possibility.

In the end, these hostage negotiations themselves were merely a farce of conclusion foreseen.

No matter how much he rambled on, the fact that Aldebaran was a dangerous existence had already been demonstrated by Reinhard’s wrecked arms. Even if he were to insist he was a harmless man, there was no margin to believe that.

There was no way that the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, could have ever let Aldebaran go.

Then, just what could the purpose of this dialogue possibly have been? The answer was obvious. —Everything Aldebaran had devised, had been for the sole purpose of accomplishing what he had set out to do beyond this point.

Aldebaran: "—Has it arrived?"

That minute alteration in the air was first perceived by Aldebaran because unlike Reinhard, who had not anticipated it, the former had been waiting for it impatiently. —For the coming of one who could bring his unending battle with the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, to an end.

That was—

Reinhard: "—Absurd."

Lagging half a second behind Aldebaran, Reinhard grasped its presence, a voice rife with dumbfoundment spilling from his lips.

It was likely that, in the life he had lived thus far, half the length of Aldebaran's own, Reinhard had peered into many abysses of the world, which all others of his generation had never seen.

Even when the Divine Dragon Volcanica, with whom a strong relationship of trust existed as per his link to the Kingdom of Lugunica via a Covenant, had turned into an adversary, he had handled it with serenity rather than discomposure.

That Reinhard was now utterly speechless. No wonder. This was the first time he had ever laid eyes on it.

The Pleiades Watchtower, built upon the Augria Sand Dunes—the reason why the Tower had been erected, was neither for a battle-worn Sage to go into retirement, nor because that was where a knowledge-hungry Witch had wished to place the tasteless Library she had tricked Od Lagna into creating.

Reinhard: "—The Witch of Envy."

—It had been, for guarding that which had been sealed.

—It was around the time that Aldebaran’s one hundred thirty-two thousand and forty-fourth battle had begun.

???: “I’ve given first aid, but…”

Having said that, Petra finished bandaging up one of the two injured people and watched over them with concern.

Petra had just finished treating the limp and unconscious Garfiel. She had carried Garfiel and Ezzo, who had collapsed on the top floor, down to the fourth floor and treated them as best she could.

Petra treated Garfiel, and Ezzo was treated by—

???: “I am finished with my treatment as well. Thank you for lending me the equipment.”

Petra: “No problem, but are you okay, Flam-chan?”

Flam: “Yes. Fortunately, Al-sama only managed to restrain me, so I was not harmed.”

Flam responded by indicating her own body with her hand.

Petra’s expression darkened slightly when she heard that name. Flam was safe, but Garfiel and Ezzo were in critical condition—and that was all thanks to Al.

He did not bring harm to Flam, and not only that, he did not raise his hand against Petra and Meili either. However, this did not mean Al’s actions could be justified or forgiven.

???: “Are you two~, done treating the~m?”

Petra was silent and clenched her fist in frustration. It was Meili who called out to her from behind, having looked into the room. Meili, who had declined to help the injured on the pretext of guarding the Tower, had a small Crimson Scorpion on her head, and looked at Garfiel and Ezzo, who were wrapped in bandages, Meili: “Both fanged onii-san and Sensei-san are all bandaged u~p.”

Petra: “…Both of them have terrible burns all over their bodies. It would have been better if one of us could use proper healing magic.”

Flam: “I am sorry, but being around the young master has drained my motivation to learn magic.”

Meili: “Petra-chan, don’t get discoura~ged. I can’t even apply bandages right, let alone use healing magi~c. When treating Elsa, I made it up as I went alo~ng.”

Even after hearing excuses that were no excuse and words of comfort that were of no comfort, there was no relief for Petra’s heart. While she also had a lack of aptitude for healing magic as a form of water magic, the reason Petra had not acquired the necessary skills was undoubtedly due to her lack of resolve.

Petra: “If only Garf-san would wake up…”

Even though he would be left to treat himself, Garfiel was the one in the Emilia camp who could use healing magic the most proficiently. His strength was found in his toughness and durability, thanks to the fact that he would become lively just by standing on the ground due to his Divine Protection of Earth Spirits, and he could even use healing magic while doing so.

So, it would have been fair to say that neither Petra nor any of the other camp members had expected that Garfiel would have been the first to become unable to fight. —No, it was not Garfiel who was the first to be incapacitated this time.

Petra: “Subaru…”

With her clenched fist held against her chest, Petra’s lips called out that name.

Subaru and Beatrice were nowhere to be found within the Tower. It seemed to be that Al took them out before moving on to Garfiel and the others, but where could they have gone?

She did not want to think about it—but she imagined the possibility that all traces of them were erased without leaving any dead bodies behind.

Meili: “Judging from how Helmet-san was acti~ng, it doesn’t seem like that’s the case, does i~t?”

Petra: “You are just trying to make me feel better…”

Meili: “I’m not just trying to make you feel bette~r. I would have lied to you if I was, but this is not a lie~. It’s what I really thi~nk.”

Petra: “…”

Meili: “I can borrow the power of the Witchbeast-chans, so it’s a little differe~nt, but it’s actually pretty hard to make a body completely disappea~r. So I think Helmet-san didn’t kill Onii-san and Beatrice-chan, but took them away some other wa~y.”

With a finger on her lips, Meili speculated, to which Petra winced at the unsettling experience that backed her reasoning.

Meili was right; the best case scenario would be if Subaru and Beatrice were not dead. If they were taken somewhere, they could be rescued.

Just what was Al thinking—

Flam: “—Whatever Al-sama was thinking, his scheming will soon be foiled.”

Meili: “O~h, you sure are full of confide~nce.”

When Flam suddenly interjected, Meili closed one eye and tilted her head, playing with her long braid. Flam nodded back with a, “Yes,”

Flam: “I will not go into the details, but I informed my younger sister, Grassis, of what happened here. Grassis is with the young master now, so she will have passed on the same information to him.”

Petra: “The young master…”

Flam: “The young master is the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea.”

Flam seemed proud of herself when she said that, and puffed out her chest.

Petra’s eyes widened at the mention of the Sword Saint, but Meili, who had come over, reacted with a “Wow” that felt as if it were tinged with both disdain and sympathy.

Meili: “If Sword Saint-san is going to swoop in, it looks like whatever Helmet-san had planned will be for nothing. I’m starting to feel so~rry for Helmet-san.”

Petra: “I don’t know how you’re able to say that, Meili-chan…”

Meili: “Sword Saint-san clashed with Divine Dragon-chan as if it was no big deal, ri~ght? Oh, but now Helmet-san has Divine Dragon-chan by his side, so maybe I shouldn’t feel sorry.”

Petra: “…I wouldn’t feel bad at all if Al-san got beaten up.”

Rather, Petra could not help but think that he should have been beaten up.

The fact that Al trampled on Petra’s feelings was not so bad. Petra hardly knew Al, so the pain was not so great, even if her feelings towards him were betrayed.

The ones who were truly hurt were the people who knew Al better than her.

Both Subaru and Emilia were genuinely concerned about Al, which is why they made the time for this journey despite having to sacrifice their own time together. —But Al betrayed them.

Petra: “I don’t want to forgive you…”

At times, Petra found herself thinking that she was a narrow-minded, unpleasant person.

It was not just the anger she felt towards Al. From the time of the incident within the Sanctuary, she had never forgiven Roswaal, and in the Empire, she had also come across many things that she could not forgive.

Her heart simply could not forgive them, and she did not feel like forgiving them either. Petra only wanted to be kind to those who did not do the things she could not forgive.

When she was around genuinely kind people, she felt like a very unpleasant person.

Meili: “Petra-chan, you’re very ki~nd. I can tell you that for su~re.”

Petra unconsciously looked to the ground, and Meili patted her head with a light touch. When she looked up at the feel of her palm, Meili was making a strange face.

She had a strange expression on her face, as if she was disgusted with herself, or perhaps with Petra.

Petra: “…It will be tough, but let’s take Garf-san down the stairs. With his Divine Protection, it might be better to lay him flat on the ground to help him heal.”

Petra made that suggestion without commenting on either the expression on Meili’s face or the hand on her head.

Fortunately for them, Garfiel and Ezzo were not particularly large compared to other men. More importantly, Petra and Meili were just weak girls, but—

Flam: “That is fine. While we are at it, we can also take Ezzo-sama. It is much more inconvenient to take them down the stairs separately.”

As she spoke, Flam unexpectedly lifted the two men.

Despite being the same age as Petra and Meili, her physical abilities were incomparable. She was a servant at the Sword Saint’s mansion, and perhaps that was the reason for her strength.

Anyway—

Petra: “It feels like this is not over just yet.”

Al, after having done something unbelievable, left the Tower with the Divine Dragon and, not long after, was pursued by the Sword Saint, Reinhard, who had been contacted by Flam.

While both Meili and Flam seemed to think that there was no way Al’s plans would work out, whatever they were, Petra was unable to be so optimistic.

This might have been because Petra did not know Reinhard personally.

But more than that, she thought it was a little strange that Al, who had Subaru at his mercy, had not taken any countermeasures against Reinhard.

If even Reinhard was unable to stop Al, what would they do then?

Petra: “—Huh?”

It happened just as Flam carried Garfiel and Ezzo out of the room. Petra and Meili were packing their travel gear, which had been unloaded, and were about to follow her. —Petra was packing her equipment into her bag, felt something strange at the bottom, and pulled it out.

It was—

Petra: “…A book?”

Petra’s hand fell on a book that had been in her bag—it looked familiar. It was one of the many Books that were stacked upon each other within the Tower.

There was no doubt about it. This was one of the many Books of the Dead arranged on the third-floor Library’s shelves.

The presence of a Book of the Dead was not strange in itself.

However, it was strange for it to be here. Ezzo had sternly warned them in advance not to remove the Books of the Dead from the

Library, and everyone was in agreement.

And yet, a Book of the Dead had turned up in this bag. Moreover—

Petra: "—Subaru's… bag."

The bag at hand was one containing the personal belongings of Subaru and Beatrice.

For some reason, in a bag that contained items such as the Beatrice Growth Diary that Subaru had been writing, and necessities such as changes of clothes, a Book of the Dead had been secretly hidden away.

Petra: "The place where the name should be, is unreadable…?"

Gulping down her saliva, Petra furrowed her brow as she checked the spine.

She had heard that upon the spine of a Book of the Dead, the title would be written—in the case of the Books of the Dead, that would be the name of the person whose life and death was documented in the Book. In fact, regardless of whether or not one possessed the qualifications to read any given Book of the Dead in the Library, they would have been able to ascertain the title written along the spine.

However, the title of this Book was unreadable. It had been scratched off to ensure that doing so would be impossible.

Petra: "…"

Petra wracked her brain to imagine the name that had been scratched off the Book and the significance of it having been hidden in the bag.

The intent behind scratching out the title was obvious; in order to conceal whose Book of the Dead this was. And the reason for hiding it in this bag, was probably to hide the presence of this Book of the Dead.

And, since this Book of the Dead had been hidden in Subaru's bag—

Petra: “A book, that Subaru hid…”

Meili: “Petra-chan? I’m done with packing up the stuff over he~re. How about yo~u?”

Petra: “…Meili-chan.”

Petra, who had stopped what she was doing, turned around as she heard Meili’s voice. At first, Meili tilted her head at Petra’s unusual behavior, but she was startled when she noticed the Book in her hands.

Meili: “Petra-chan, what’s with that Bo~ok…”

Petra: “…I found it in Subaru’s bag. Just maybe, with this…”

Meili: “With that Bo~ok?”

Petra: “—There may be a hint as to what is happening right now.”

With a firm grip on the Book’s binding, Petra concluded that it was not a completely wrong assumption.

Al’s sudden, reckless behavior in the Tower—originally, Al’s goal had been to read the Book of the Dead of Priscilla Barielle, the deceased Royal Selection Candidate. It was possible that he had also had another goal in mind but, in any case, his objective would have resided in the Tower.

What if his goal had been this Book of the Dead, and Subaru had decided not to give it to Al, instead hiding it in his bag?

What if that had been the cause of an irreparable rift between Subaru and Al?

Petra: “If I read this Book, maybe I will be able to find out.”

Meili: “…I don’t think it’s safe, so I wouldn’t recommend i~t.”

Petra: “…”

Meili: “Bu~t, I also understand your feelings, Petra-chan, that you don’t want to just sit around and do no~thing.”

Meili said that with a worried look, and Petra stuck out her tongue slightly and said, “Sorry”.

No matter what Meili said, Petra intended on going through with it. —Subaru and Beatrice had told her over and over again that reading a Book of the Dead was incredibly dangerous.

In any case, Ezzo had boasted that the trick to reading a Book of the Dead was to close off one’s mind and empty it, but Petra was not sure if she could do that.

However, Petra Leyte was not the kind of girl who would allow herself to sit quietly and do nothing.

And so—

Petra: “—Meili-chan, if anything happens, I’m counting on you for later.”

Meili: “Asking me to do such a thing, Petra-chan, you really are such a poor judge of cha~racter.”

After that exchange, Petra took a deep breath, and slowly began to turn the page of the Book in her lap—

Petra: “—Ah.”

—With Memories that were a Taboo of this world, she thus came into contact.

Vic.ll2o

3

As to how soon that might have happened, Aldebaran had borne no confidence.

Perhaps, if the girls were frailer of heart than Aldebaran had imagined, anguished in their crying as they failed to accept the events that had transpired, a situation in which this trap card had never been triggered would have arisen.

Had that been the case, it was possible that Aldebaran would have ended up looping another one-hundred and thirty-thousand times, bound to lay the bricks up to the realm of a billion forever and on without end.

However—

Aldebaran: “I merely thought that those lil’ misses in particular would’ve pondered that much.”

The girls who had been left behind, Petra, Meili, and even Flam, all were owners of wisdom and experience beyond their years, blessed with rare talents by their circumstances.

Aldebaran had predicted that once they finished rescuing Garfiel and Ezzo from the verge of death, rather than coming to a standstill, the girls would begin to act in a constructive fashion.

And thus, in their attempt to do so, the girls would find it. —Inside of Natsuki Subaru’s bag, they would find a Book of the Dead, a profound significance in its concealment.

With nothing to rely on, with naught a sign leading the way, it must have seemed to the girls as the sole possibility that Natsuki Subaru had left behind. If they could reel in the thread of that possibility, they would assuredly arrive at a light that enabled them to escape a sealed-off dead-end.

The leeway to realize that this was a trap set by Aldebaran, they possessed not.

That Book of the Dead—

Aldebaran: “—Belongs to 菜月Natsuki・昴Subaru.”

Belonging to one who violated the natural laws of this world, ‘twas a Book of the Dead that truly ought to be deigned a Taboo.

As to what might occur were somebody to read it, witnessing that sight first-hand would be far more intuitive and difficult to misrepresent, compared to it being explained through language.

That was—

Reinhard: “—Absurd.”

His blue eyes wide open, Reinhard once again uttered selfsame words in dumbfoundment.

However, no matter how much he attempted to deny that reality, it would not be rescinded. If the Sword Saint, Reinhard, was one blessed by the world, that was one whom the world cursed.

Blessings and curses were but two sides of the same coin; the power balance not one in which either was stronger.

Henceforth—

Aldebaran: “The Sword Saint aside, nobody can stop that.”

Plunking himself down into a cross-legged position, he gazed over Reinhard’s shoulder to the nighttime sand sea—the sight, illuminated only by faint starlight, contained a threat that unceasingly painted the world an even deeper shade of black.

At the very eastern edge of the world, even further east than the Tower inhabited by the Sage, coming forth from the sealed shrine that caused all beings alike to turn away, laid a symbol of upheaval, and of ruination.

Ferociously surging forth like a tidal wave of black, were the Witch’s magic hands, kneaded from her Miasma.

With the Taboo violated, the Witch of Envy would intervene in the world.

That, was the colossal time bomb that Aldebaran had prepared for use against Reinhard—

Reinhard: "—Hk, I must…"

Aldebaran: "If you're gonna say you need to take me down first, then I'm also gonna fight back with all I've got. I'll say this now, but if you don't go, the world's gonna be destroyed. Not that it'd particularly matter to me."

Reinhard: "What are you…"

Aldebaran: "Even if the world's destroyed, I won't perish. —That will keep ignoring me, after all."

For that reason as well, Aldebaran himself could not have served as the switch for the bomb.

Only a being of keen eye and intellect, with the bravery to break this deadlock, could serve as this switch.

Aldebaran: "Reinhard, I don't wanna destroy the world. Rather, it's the opposite."

Reinhard: "Kuh…"

Aldebaran: "I won't lay a hand on your old man. —Go."

Reinhard: "Al-dono, please do not believe everything is going to go smoothly for you."

Gritting his teeth in frustration, he had likely utilized the most foul language he was capable of. Nonetheless leaving behind his overly refined chivalry, Reinhard kicked off the sand.

Turning his back to Aldebaran and "Aldebaran", Reinhard launched a ferocious onslaught—intercepting the magic hands of the Witch of Envy directly as they raced to swallow up the Pleiades Watchtower.

—That instant, Aldebaran experienced the illusion that sound, color, light, heat, and all things that ought to be present were eradicated from the world.

Aldebaran: “…”

The white strike of the Sword Saint met the black oblivion of the Witch, giving birth to a color that was neither black nor white.

That was something that rivaled the cataclysmic big bang of starlight, of lightning bullets, of flames that scorched eventide to ash, yielded during the fight between the Sword Saint and the Divine Dragon just a moment prior.

And now, this big bang ceased not with just that one collision; it continued, and continued, and continued.

Over and over, again and again, without end, without cease, knowing no end; as if to birth heat, as if to birth light, as if to birth color, as if to birth sound, as if to birth the world anew, as if to cleanly divide the world that was from the world that would be, they collided.

—A battle that could never reach its terminus, between one who would never cease, and one who would never perish.

???: “…I got put to sleep. What happened?”

The stratagem was fulfilled, successful in getting Reinhard to clash with the Witch of Envy.

The legendary conflict between the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy, despite unfolding in the vicinity of the Tower several kilometers away, was so fearsome that its aftershocks could be felt at their location.

Perhaps due to the sensation of those aftershocks, the fainted “Aldebaran” had woken up.

Spread-eagled atop the sand, “Aldebaran” was exposed to disgrace unbecoming of the strongest Dragon, but narrowing its golden eyes at the shockwaves being propagated from over yonder, “Aldebaran”: “Seems like things went pretty damn well.”

Aldebaran: “Yeah. A half-asleep incomplete Witch of Envy, and a Sword Saint not in perfect condition due to the Miasma and his injured arms… It was worth traversing a hundred and thirty-thousand severed threads. You good to go?”

“Aldebaran”: “Aside from having a sore throat, and being seriously low on Mana for a Mana-Tank dragonhusk. Flying away from the sand sea shouldn’t be a problem.”

Aldebaran: “Excellent. As for what happened while you were sleeping, it’ll be better to sync you up later. For now—”

Let’s go; the moment he attempted to stand up, something came flying in from afar with tremendous vigor, aiming at Aldebaran’s legs, which “Aldebaran” promptly swept away with its tail.

Deflected, what rolled upon the sand was merely a small pebble. —Likely, it was something that Reinhard had fired at Aldebaran as he held back the magic hands of the Witch of Envy.

“Aldebaran”: “They’re coming one after the other! It might keep going until my eyes can’t keep up with ‘em anymore!”

At the persistent onslaught of tiny pebbles, “Aldebaran” spread its wings to protect him, leaving Aldebaran to marvel at Reinhard’s sense of duty.

On top of understanding his role as a savior, he nonetheless devoted his everything into the aspects not encompassed in that role. —This Sword Saint seemed avaricious, even more so than the personification Aldebaran knew.

Whilst thinking that it was surely due to the influence of someone close to Reinhard—

Aldebaran: “—I told you, hero. I’ll win regardless. Even if it means losing a hundred-thousand times.”

Leaving behind words that would never reach, Aldebaran ascended to the sky once again in the grasp of “Aldebaran”.

Amidst the sand sea of night, the Sword Saint, holding back the obsession of the Witch of Envy darker than even night, seemed a martyr facing the great tidal wave all by his lonesome.

But then again, were the world to be destroyed, this martyr would be the lone person left standing in the aftermath.

“Aldebaran”: “Right now, wouldn’t it be possible to do a pincer maneuver alongside that, and bring down the Sword Saint?”

Aldebaran: “…And what then? If Reinhard were to die, then the lid holding down hell would vanish. We need him to play the part of the lid.”

“Aldebaran”: “I’m just saying.”

Aldebaran: “It’d be troublesome if he happened to die.”

From the outset, he had not had even the slightest intention of letting Reinhard die.

Only, had they not utilized attacks powerful enough to kill, they would not have achieved the feat of injuring him. He had simply recognized that the Sword Saint was that high of a wall.

Aldebaran: “Don’t believe everything will go smoothly, huh.”

The towering wall, the martyr who would be left behind in the world, the words he had spoken upon their parting came to mind.

Was this perhaps the power of some other Divine Protection? Supposing it was, it was possible he had received something like the Divine Protection of Vital Spots or the Divine Protection of Weak Points, and activated it at that juncture.

Verily, through an unlimited number of attempts, Aldebaran had the power to bring about the results he desired.

But despite having such power—

Aldebaran: “So far in my life, nothing I’ve ever truly wanted to go well has ever gone well. Not a single time.”

Despite making it through a struggle numbering one-hundred thirty-two thousand and forty-four, within the heart of one divorced from blessing and curse alike, that sense of defeat did not vanish.

Chapter 16:
The Complicit

1

—The first feeling of “that”, was something akin to having a nightmare whilst fully awake.

???: “Bbh, bhbb, bbbbb…”

A sensation akin to rejecting understanding, stemming not from the head, but from the soul.

A sensation that felt as if “what laid before” had been severed like a taut thread being cut; wholly separated from their current self it was, and yet, while the body accepted it, the soul would not.

The nightmare, it persisted.

Something made its way into the body through the mouth that had opened for the purpose of raising a scream, and due to the contents of their body being gorged upon from within there was an unbearable sense of loss, an impossible sense of finality, an impermissible sense of desecration.

The feeling of one’s own existence being devoured, who, just who could possibly endure that?

Yellow bile spilled from the corners of their mouth as they convulsed on the cold, hard ground.

That dimly-lit space, a place so incongruous for the start of a life, was testament to the fact that a soul tattered in torment by a never-ending nightmare had already been through this many times before—

—Why.

Such a question, was birthed in their mind.

Towards outrageousness, towards absurdity, towards unthinkable misfortune, towards reasonless malice, towards unforgivable threats, towards a vicious cycle unending, a query of “For what reason”, was posed.

—Why, why, why, why, why.

For what reason must they be made to go through something like this? Had they committed anything evil to such an extent? Was the size of their sin so great as to warrant receiving this punishment?

If this erring had been irreversible, then before accreting it to this extent and patching together retribution to the point of drowning in it, it would have been preferable had they been left to start atoning.

And yet, “for what reason” must it be so?

—Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why.

To that unceasing question—

???: “You are invited—To the Witch’s tea party.”

A voice pregnant with such rapture, as if a blessing, as if a curse, was spoken.

2

???: “—Petra-chan!”

Petra suddenly lost her balance just in front of Meili, but she quickly gave her support.

Petra, having made up her mind, turned the pages of the black-bound book—the Book of the Dead, and after five seconds, she had succeeded in reading it. The atmosphere surrounding her revealed that she succeeded in its reading.

The Books of the Dead were magical books that allowed one to relive the history of a person who had died.

However, one could not read any Book at will, and there were conditions for reading—it was limited to those who had some connection with the person whom the Book was about.

One must not engage in such a distasteful pastime as endlessly peering into the history of total strangers.

Of course, it was debatable whether it was a polite thing to look into the history of someone you knew. Either way, since Meili had searched for a Book of the Dead that she wanted to see herself, she had no right to question the morality of the matter.

What was important was that, judging from Petra's reaction, she had fulfilled the requirements for reading that Book of the Dead—a Book whose name had been scratched off that had been found in Natsuki Subaru's bag.

And then—

Meili: "Petra-chan, Petra-chan, wake u~p! …This isn't good, she's not waking u~p."

She gently tapped Petra's pale cheek, but the girl, whose eyes were closed, did not seem to be waking up. She had either fainted, was in a trance, or had fallen unconscious.

Stirred by Meili's concern, the Crimson Scorpion on her head began to busily snap its pincers as if trying to wake Petra up. Of course, it was to no avail.

Anyone who read a Book of the Dead would have someone's entire life stuffed into their head.

The mental strain must have been considerable. Flam mentioned that Ezzo, who had apparently put in so much effort that he read more than ten books, foamed at the mouth on his first reading, urinated, and passed out.

Fortunately, Petra did not appear to be suffering in a way that would damage her maidenly dignity—

Petra: "—Hk."

The unconscious girl's expression was one of agony or distress, with pained breathing that made it seem as if she were suffering from a high fever.

Meili: "Petra-chan, just whose Memories did you se~e…?"

Meili glanced at the Book of the Dead that had fallen from Petra's hand, and with her outstretched foot, she kicked the Book on the floor away.

Although the spine was facing away, it would be a problem if Meili were to accidentally see the contents and collapse like Petra. —Not many people shared the same commonality with Meili and Petra as to be affected by that Book of the Dead.

Meili: "It couldn't be Elsa's, could i~t?"

The only dead person in common between Meili and Petra was Elsa Granhiert, her face flashing in Meili's mind.

Considering the purpose of this journey, it would not have been a surprise if Subaru, after he found Elsa's Book of the Dead, had hidden it in his bag so that it would not fall into Meili's hands.

But, however—

Meili: "…Hmm, I guess s~o. Onii-san wouldn't scratch off the spine to hide it from me~."

Meili quietly nodded in response to the protest of the Crimson Scorpion, who swung its long tail from side to side.

This was due to Meili's strong trust in Natsuki Subaru.

He told her that she did not have to forget about Elsa Granhiert. —If he had found Elsa's book, he would have been worried and hesitant, and in the end, he would have told her.

Even his hesitation would not be for himself, but out of concern for Meili and Elsa.

So, this must have been someone else's Book of the Dead—

Meili: "—?"

The Crimson Scorpion on Meili's head suddenly stiffened, to which she slowly raised her head.

The Crimson Scorpion changed its direction on top of Meili's head, and its red compound eyes were fixed on an empty space—no, on the wall of the Tower, sending a shiver down Meili's spine as she came to realize this fact.

It was a kind of premonition, and not a good one at that. Sensing a slight change in the air, Meili and the Crimson Scorpion felt an unpleasant presence outside the Tower and in the distance beyond the sand dunes.

Meili: "This is~… it can't be~!"

Immediately after the thought crossed her mind, Meili, still holding Petra in her arms, slipped the Crimson Scorpion into her collar with one hand. Suddenly, it was as if the contents of a pot that had been boiled for too long had overflowed, and something—no, it was not something so vague which came from behind the wall.

She could feel the fearsome power of the Witch approaching.

That thing from before, which was able to send Natsuki Subaru and Rem all the way to the Southern Empire, was coming.

Meili: "This, this isn't fun~ny…!"

At that time, the Divine Dragon Volcanica, at the top of the Tower, fought off the Witch's power.

However, at this moment, the Divine Dragon had inexplicably left the Tower with Al, and no one could do anything about it. She could not imagine that without the Divine Dragon the outcome would be as cute as being sent somewhere else by the Witch's power.

In other words—

Meili: “Is this, the en~d?”

Meili muttered this as she heaved a sigh at the prospect of a sudden and unexpected demise.

As she let out a sigh that seemed to acknowledge her hopeless reality, Meili felt a sense of relief—she realized that Petra was still held in her embrace.

Unconsciously, she was trying to protect Petra against the power of the Witch.

Meili: “Onii-san, you idi~ot…”

Meili had no idea why she had said those abusive words.

However, as if to block out her own weak voice, Meili covered Petra’s body with her own. This flimsy shield of flesh would offer no kind of protection. She felt regret that she had not eaten more meat—

—Immediately after that, just before the Witch’s power reached the Tower, something intervened.

Meili: “…”

As it was, the events beyond the wall were unknown.

However, light and sound cut through the thick walls of the Tower, blowing Meili and Petra on the inside to the back of the room.

Meili: “Ahh!”

Meili screamed, and her body was pressed against the wall and floor while still holding Petra.

Fortunately, they happened to be close to the wall and lying on the floor. If they had not been, they might have been knocked against the wall and suffered more pain and injuries.

Even so, their hair and clothes were disheveled, and the room was in a terrible state with their luggage scattered around. However, by a miracle, it seemed that Meili and Petra did not suffer any serious injuries.

Meili: “What happ~ened…?”

???: “Petra-sama! Meili-sama! Are you safe?!”

Blinking with bleary eyes, Meili sat up. Petra, limp in her arms, remained motionless with her eyes closed.

Immediately after confirming their safety, Flam rushed into the room in a panic.

Flam, who had carried Garfiel and Ezzo down to the lower levels before Meili and Petra had discovered the Book of the Dead, lowered the corners of her eyes slightly when she saw them, then quickly became serious,

Flam: “That is the young master. He is holding it back.”

Meili: “Hold back? What does that me~an…?”

Flam: “It is…”

Meili: “—You are talking about the Witch of Envy, ri~ght?”

When she mentioned that name, Flam’s face went distinctly pale.

Despite being betrayed by Al and knowing that even the Divine Dragon had turned against them, she had not been this shaken up before. Seeing the evident fear in her eyes at the name, Meili apologized with “I’m sorry~.”

It was a natural reaction. Meili could only remain somewhat calm because this was the second time.

For most people, just the mere sensation of the existence of the Witch of Envy would be enough to make one’s blood run cold and render one unable to move.

Meili: “Emilia Onee-san and the others are quite extra~ordinary…”

Either because she was highly determined or had the courage and nerve to do it.

Either way, expecting everyone to be like that was unreasonable, and Meili stood up, still supporting Petra.

Meili: “Sword Saint-san is fighting outside right now, isn’t h~e?”

Flam: “—. Yes, the young master is holding it back. However, it seems that the young master cannot push through.”

Meili: “…If we stay here, we’ll be in the wa~y.”

She did not know the cause of the Witch of Envy’s outburst, but from Meili’s perspective, the two times she had an outburst were both when she was in the Tower. She certainly did not want to think she was the cause of the Witch of Envy’s anger, so perhaps it was for the best to think that the Witch did not like her continued presence in the Tower for long.

Just as she had thought that, she was lightly poked on the nape of her neck by the Crimson Scorpion’s pincers coming out of her clothes.

Meili: “I’m sorry, you were with me both times, to~o.”

Flam: “Meili-sama! We should hurry and leave the Tower. I will take Petra-sama…”

Meili: “—. No, it’s fi~ne. I’ll carry Petra-chan, so please prepare Patrasche-chan and the others, Flam-chan.”

Meili, refusing Flam’s offer, shook her head slowly as she tentatively stood up, carrying Petra on her back.

Flam looked unsure about what to do for a moment, but quickly nodded and left.

Flam: “Go down the spiral staircase! I will prepare the dragon carriage.”

Meili: “Yes, than~ks.”

Losing sight of Flam’s back, Meili started to chase after her.

Just before she left, she was drawn back by the sight of the scattered luggage in the room—in particular, the presence of the Book of the Dead, which had caused Petra to lose consciousness, but,

Meili: “No time to think about that n~ow.”

Once again, encouraged by the snapping sound of the Crimson Scorpion returning to the top of her head, Meili firmly held Petra and quickly ran out of the room.

If she really needed to know the contents of the Book of the Dead, she could always ask Petra later. —After Petra had safely accepted the life of that “someone” into her own.

Thinking this, Meili started to run as hard as she could. Petra, now being carried by Meili, let a single tear fall from the corner of her closed eyes, framed by her long eyelashes.

And then—

???: “Sorry… I am so sorry, Subaru…”

A weak, tearful apology spilled out, as if it was tearing apart the girl’s heart.

The heart-wrenching plea for forgiveness from the girl’s nightmare was drowned out by the aftereffects of the impossible clash between the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy, and fell on deaf ears.

3

???: “—Milk, cold.”

Plunking himself down at seat by the counter, Aldebaran gave his order to the owner of the establishment.

In Mirula, the town closest to the Augria Sand Dunes, this was the one and only tavern. This bar held an ambiance reminiscent of the run-down taverns of a typical Western, and no other customers could be found within.

However, to thus conclude that the place was unpopular would have been quite parochial.

After all, Aldebaran's visit to this tavern was in the interval between late-night and early-morning—a time when those who were night owls and those who were early birds were both at the zenith of drowsiness, thus, it was no surprise that such a time would be outside the working hours of a countryside tavern.

Nevertheless, the owner opened the doors of his business for Aldebaran, who had sought his services at such a time. How considerate and understanding of the owner, truly an exemplary proprietor in the service industry.

Aldebaran: "Hence why I respect your work ethic. I wouldn't even think of doing something so terrible as bringing harm to someone like you. I'll pay you properly as well."

Propping his elbow on the counter in a display of poor etiquette, Aldebaran shrugged at the bearded barkeep.

The establishment seemed to be used as a residence as well, for the owner had been woken in the dead of night, still wearing his nightclothes, but Aldebaran would not criticise him for opening shop in that attire. Rather, his complaint had to do with how the owner was quite hesitant to get started on fulfilling his order for milk.

However, even that—

???: "Oi oi, honestly, it'll sound like a threat regardless of what you say, me."

Aldebaran: "Well, no matter how you look at it, I guess that'd be so, huh."

???: “After all, wouldn’t a one-armed man with a helmet over his face suddenly barging in during the dead of night be reason enough to hesitate to receive him into one’s living room?”

Aldebaran: “And if I had to say what the biggest reason for that was…”

Speaking from outside the wall was the Divine Dragon—the being most revered in the Kingdom of Lugunica, and rather than being easy to get along with, it had an air to it that was rather like a gangster, so there was no way around it.

Of course, there was no way that “Aldebaran” could fit inside the tavern, so the Dragon was made to wait in the street outside, somewhat cramped. Though, it was doubtful that would do anything to bring peace of mind to the shopkeeper.

Thus, a late night visit by a suspicious man and the Divine Dragon—that would be the rough description of the unfortunate incident that the owner of this tavern had come to experience.

Shopkeeper: “…Your milk.”

The owner, who had taken his own sweet time to settle down, had finally brought out the milk in a wooden tankard. Having received it with a “Thank you”, Al gestured towards the outside of the tavern with a nod.

Aldebaran: “While you’re at it, be it water or milk or something, could you serve it in a barrel to my pal outside? Anything but alcohol. Never know what might happen.”

“Aldebaran”: “What, I think alcohol wouldn’t really be any issue. There’s no way a legendary dragon would be a lightweight.”

Aldebaran: “There’s that Dragon of myth who got exterminated with liquor, yeah? For the time being, it’d still be troublesome if you were eliminated… Even if you’re not gonna be of much use as a partner for a while.”

“Aldebaran”: “Tsk, owner, please.”

With a click of the tongue as loud as a gunshot, “Aldebaran”, who had been peering into the premises through the window, withdrew its head. Having watched the scene play before him and momentarily hesitating, the owner seemed to have made up his mind as he shouldered a barrel and proceeded outside the tavern.

Thereupon realizing that one of his legs was a prosthetic, Aldebaran regretted having made such a troublesome request. Aldebaran felt that it would have been better had he carried the barrel himself.

He felt so, but—

Aldebaran: “…Seriously, I’m tired, much more than I usually am.”

Physically, all his joints were aching, but compared to the mental exhaustion he felt, it was nothing.

When it came to the fatigued state of his mind, he was exhausted to an extent akin to having fought a formidable foe one hundred thirty-two thousand forty-four times. —No, that was putting it mildly. To be precise, it was to the extent of having been defeated one hundred thirty-two thousand forty-three times in a row, and having finally put an end to it on the one hundred thirty-two thousand forty-fourth try.

For the most part, following the plan he had devised beforehand, it could be said that they had been successful in ensnaring the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea. Be that as it may, Aldebaran felt no sense of accomplishment whatsoever.

What he did feel, was an intense sense of defeat and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, slightly tinged with—

Aldebaran: “Relief, that we made it through… huh.”

Despite the fact that both of the two individuals who served the greatest obstacles to Aldebaran’s objective had been magnificently immobilized by him, the fact that all he felt was a feeling of relief went to show how insignificant he was.

Of course, the notion that he had magnificently cornered them appeared as naught but an irony. —At the very least, Aldebaran had already wounded everyone at the Tower to shreds, including Reinhard. And that count would still rapidly and exponentially increase after this.

That utmost critical situation, was still underway—

Aldebaran: "—The Sword Saint against the Witch of Envy, in the battle of the century."

Raising the jaw of his helmet to drink the milk from his tankard, Aldebaran muttered so.

In the corner of his vision, outside the window where the Dragon had withdrawn its head—he could hear and see glimpses of it, the aftershocks of the fierce, apocalyptic battle that was unfolding in the Sand Sea beyond.

Flashes of white seemed to cleave through the night above the sea of sand again and again, and as sandstorms visible from afar were being kicked up, the battle roared out with one thunderous clap after another.

No matter how unfamiliar one was with battle, no matter how dull their perception, people would instinctively know that this scene was the same as what would unfold on the day of the world's end.

That was why, despite the hour of this morning gray, a time neither night nor day, the residents of Mirula had gotten out of bed, went outside, and stared across the sand sea in a daze.

???: "…"

Even as the sun rose to mark the beginning of a new day, that battle would not come to a cease.

As long as they did not decide to give up somewhere along the way, the people would end up spectating that battle for eternity. However, he felt like without some kind of impetus, the residents would just remain standing here.

It was not as if they lacked a sense of crisis, or felt that it was unrelated to them.

It was only that, when awash in light of a caliber that far exceeded their capacity, people were invariably dazzled.

And thus, once dazzled, they would be unable to walk away in fear of danger. Consequently, in many cases, the dazzled followed the voice and traces of the light that dazzled them.

Blindly, as if moths to a flame, they would be drawn towards that blindingly dazzling light.

That was why, the reason to blame for the people standing motionlessly was—

???: "—Wowee~! Seeing it up close, it rea~lly is a Dragon~! To be honest, I couldn't really tell for sure until I got up this close."

The fierce atmosphere reminiscent of the midst of war was abruptly torn asunder by the shrill voice of a young woman.

Cheerfully out-of-place, the voice brimming with youthful enthusiasm could be heard from outside the tavern as Aldebaran was getting drunk on milk.

Hearing it, Aldebaran slid off his stool, and turned to face the entrance.

The following moment—

???: "—You in there, Aldebaran?! Get out here now!"

Marching in as if tearing down the tavern's entrance, the red-haired man spotted Aldebaran, and strode up right before him with a violent and rough gait.

The man unsheathed his sword with vigor, and thrust its point before Aldebaran.

At that excessively threatening attitude, Aldebaran raised his single hand with an "Oi oi",

Aldebaran: "Even though you told me to come out, if you're gonna force your way in and pressure me like this, that won't be possible."

Man: “Don’t get all nitpicky with my words now. More importantly, the thing that’s outside, that! That’s gotta be, it’s gotta be…!”

Aldebaran: “The thing that’s outside?”

Man: “Don’t you play dumb with me!”

As soon as he tilted his head, he was grabbed by the collar before the matter could be settled, forced up, and pushed out from the entrance of the tavern.

A sharp sensation was pressing into his back, and even when he tried to say “I’d go along even if you didn’t do all that”, the other person was unwilling to lend an ear.

There was no helping it. —After all, from his perspective, the object of his heart’s desire was right before him.

???: “Oh, Al-sama, there you are… why does it seem as if you’ve become a hostage?”

Aldebaran: “Hey there, I guess a little excess blood’s gone to his head. You shouldn’t provoke him either. You’d be putting me in danger.”

???: “There you go again~, saying things like that. Even though you won’t die no matter what anybody does, Al-sama~.”

Waving her hand at Aldebaran, who had a sword fastened against his back, was a young woman wearing a maid outfit adopted from a Japanese style with a red base.

Emanating a whimsical aura akin to that of a cat, the young woman said that to him in a relaxed demeanor. Albeit knowing that it was not such a lighthearted thing as it seemed, he made no objection.

Saying anything would be futile, and that must never be made known to her.

Anyhow—

“Aldebaran”: “Doesn’t it look like the carnage is about to continue,

me?”

Aldebaran: “Don’t say that as if it doesn’t concern you, me.”

And, as the Divine Dragon gazed down at him with its head high above, donning an amused smile, Aldebaran took a deep breath and retorted.

Then, as he spun his body around—

Aldebaran: “Good grief, this is quite the promising party.”

—Hijacker of the Divine Dragon’s dragonhusk, “Aldebaran”.

—Acknowledged as such by himself and others, the Parasite of the Kingdom, Heinkel Astrea.

—The female shinobi who once aimed for the life of the Sun Princess, the Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen.

—Together, they made up the entirety of Aldebaran’s henchmen, as he moved to take on the world.

4

—Sixteen.

In the attack on the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, the existence of his father was a true vital spot, and had served as a trump card.

Regardless of whether Aldebaran had wished to use that trump card or not, ignoring his own emotions, he would never have allowed himself to be careless enough to not prepare it in advance. Hence, he succeeded in persuading him.

Heinkel had sunk to the rock bottom of despair for a differing reason from that of Aldebaran’s, but so long as he did not mess up the manner in which he formulated his words, Heinkel would gather his wits enough to at least hear him out.

While belonging to the same Camp, the relationship between Aldebaran and Heinkel could by no means be called a friendly one, but it was easy to tell that the latter's desire remained consistent.

An earnest love, perhaps it ought to be phrased as such. —For the man who made the very core of his being that which Aldebaran admired and simultaneously abhorred, a promise of compensation after cooperation had been particularly effective.

But then again—

Heinkel: "—You promised me Dragon's Blood! And right now, there's a Dragon sitting right in front of us! And yet, you're still telling me to wait?!"

Eyes bloodshot and spittle flying, Aldebaran had imagined that Heinkel might shout at him like this.

Even now Heinkel was threateningly applying pressure, ready to brandish his sword at any moment; the tip of the blade was directed towards "Aldebaran", lying down like a pet dog on the town's road.

Strictly speaking, the tip was being pointed right at the Dragon's chest—aimed directly at the heart pulsating inside the dragonhusk, in which the Dragon's Blood was stored.

—Dragon's Blood was capable of bringing about a bountiful harvest to the land, and could cure all manner of afflictions on the spot.

That was a legend passed down since times of yore in the Kingdom of Lugunica, said to be one of the three treasures that the Divine Dragon bestowed upon the Kingdom at the juncture when the Three Heroes drove away the Witch of Envy.

It was the last drops of heart's blood spilled upon the final pulse of a mighty Dragon's heart, and now that the vast majority of Dragons had fled the surface, the means by which to procure the substance had been limited to taking up arms in a frontal assault.

The potential to obtain that Dragon's Blood was now directly in front of him. —That reality set the soul of Heinkel Astrea ablaze, a man who had been chasing a miracle for over a decade.

Heinkel: "Finally, Louanna will finally…!"

Aldebaran: "…Is that, the name of your wife?"

Heinkel: "That's right. My, wife's… she's been asleep for so, so long, but with the Dragon's Blood, it should be possible for Louanna to wake up. That's why I went along with your shit!"

Aldebaran: "Yeah, I'm aware of how you've contributed, and I'll acknowledge it. Tell you the truth, it was thanks to your insurance that I was able to subdue your son."

Heinkel: "If that's the case…!!"

Rather than a back and forth argument, perhaps a more accurate description would be to say that since Heinkel's feelings were so restless, no proper discussion could take place.

As he secretly updated his Matrix, Aldebaran was about to decide on his next words to see if he could say something to calm Heinkel down—

Yae: "Umm~, sorry for interrupting your chat, but there's something I'd like to ask about~."

Heinkel: "What is it, maid?! Right now, I'm having an important discussion with this guy…"

Yae: "Over there, towards the sand dunes where there's sparking lights and crackling sounds, is that not maybe your son, Heinkel-sama?"

Heinkel: "—Ah?"

With hair a color somewhere between pink and vermillion swaying in a single bob, the young woman—Yae pointed over yonder to the sand sea, where the battle raged on, unable to be tipped toward either side.

It seemed that Heinkel had been solely focused on the Divine Dragon of his dreams, and now, blinking his blue eyes upon witnessing that fierce bout,

Heinkel: "…Oi, what's going on with that? The ones fighting over there'd be—"

Aldebaran: "As you can imagine, the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy."

Heinkel: "—Hk! Wh-Why… how the hell did it even come to that?!"

Eyes wide in astonishment, Heinkel scowled in the direction of the sand sea, where his son clashed with the Witch. Then, his shoulders seemed to tremble in fear, and,

Heinkel: "This isn't what I signed up for! You were supposed to use me to stop him. Those were the conditions… stop them, stop them right now! The Witch of Envy, you say? What kinda fucking bullshit is…!"

Aldebaran: "Sorry, but I can't grant that request. Your compensation is the Dragon's Blood, old man. To stop them here goes against the initial conditions. I won't grant you a second thing."

Heinkel: "Gh, kuh…! In that case…!"

Aldebaran: "In that case?"

Heinkel: "—Uh."

However enraged he was, his words continued not beyond that point, and Heinkel's eyes dashed about to a dizzying extent.

Aldebaran could not view the weakness of Heinkel's will as anything but pitiful. —Aldebaran felt sorry for Heinkel.

Stuck with a family beyond his own stature, he too was a clay doll that fate fancied toying with.

Oblivious to Aldebaran's heart of hearts, Heinkel raised and lowered the tip of his sword many times over,

Yae: "Heinkel-sama, y'know, I really don't wanna get entangled in your personal affairs, so could you maybe stop moping around and throwing a hissy fit like that?"

Unable to just stand there and watch, Yae ended up showering him with a terribly chilly voice.

Those words caused Aldebaran to place a hand on his forehead, and Heinkel to widen his eyes and glare at her. Meeting his gaze head-on, Yae smiled as she inclined her head.

And, unlike the smile on her mouth, her unsmiling eyes fixed their gaze upon Heinkel,

Yae: "Once you've decided to do something, it's too late to then complain and waver about it after the fact. If the things you desire are in two places, isn't it obvious that you can't reach out a hand when you're already reaching one out the other way? You aren't a kid."

Heinkel: "—Hk, but he'll always just be a brat no matter what age he is!"

Yae: "Good grief, there's really no getting through to you~. —Al-sama?"

Heinkel had lost all composure, and, fed up with him, Yae turned to Aldebaran. Understanding the meaning behind that narrowed gaze, Aldebaran shook his head sideways.

Yae did not know how to show restraint. Murder was the only method this woman was ever taught.

Hence—

Aldebaran: "…Counting on you, me."

"Aldebaran": "Sure thing."

The following moment, "Aldebaran" swung its forearm downwards, slamming into Heinkel as he glared at Yae, and knocking him to the ground.

With a "Wow~", Yae's eyes widened as she basked in the tremendous updraft, and before her eyes a picture was painted of Heinkel, buried face down in the ground.

Aldebaran: “Sorry old man, but I can’t give you Dragon’s Blood yet. For the time being, it’d be troublesome if the Divine Dragon’s heart were to stop beating.”

Yae: “This might kill the mood a bit, but might Heinkel-sama be dead? Just now, that was a blow that would’ve even put me on the verge of death, y’know?”

“Aldebaran”: “He won’t die. Restraint… though I may not have shown any, he won’t die. For a long time now I’ve thought that the old man here was unduly sturdy but, I see now.”

Yae: “…I haven’t properly confirmed it or anything, but this Divine Dragon-sama who speaks an awful lot like Al-sama here, how exactly did you manage to pull that off?”

Aldebaran: “I’ll tell you later. Time is of the essence.”

Giving such a response to Yae as she sought explanation, Aldebaran squatted down beside where Heinkel had been buried, and was about to return the latter’s sword to its sheath. —It happened then.

Aldebaran: “Oh?”

When his outstretched arm was seized by the wrist, Aldebaran’s breath caught. And the perpetrator of that act, having taken an unrestrained hit from the Dragon, was Heinkel.

Heinkel’s eyes were currently unable to focus, but he was glaring at Aldebaran with a bloodcurdling expression. Guessing the meaning behind that gaze, Aldebaran sighed, and,

Aldebaran: “I’ll keep my promise on the Dragon’s Blood. I also won’t let Reinhard be swallowed up by the Witch of Envy. —On that, well, you’re just gonna have to trust me.”

Heinkel: “…”

It was unlikely that he had sincerely believed Aldebaran’s response. But, Heinkel languidly hung his head upon hearing that, and bearing witness to that gesture, Aldebaran wrenched his seized wrist loose.

Then, seeing Yae raise her heel aloft, about to deliver a kick to Heinkel,

Aldebaran: “Look, I’m tired, and I only got one hand, can I rely on you to carry the old man?”

Yae: “Do I have any say in that? If so, I’d like to decline.”

Aldebaran: “You don’t. That’s an order. You carry him.”

Yae: “Tsk~, Al-sama you brute~, fine, understood~.”

Sticking out her tongue with a “Behhh”, Yae bent over and unearthed the buried Heinkel. Next to her as she did so, Aldebaran looked up at “Aldebaran”,

Aldebaran: “Did you say something about the old man?”

“Aldebaran”: “Ah? Ahh, nothing important really. Just how he’s lively and sturdy.”

Aldebaran: “…And when you add that on top of the old man’s position and personality, his life must’ve been filled with pain, poor bastard.”

He was sorry that things had come to this, but he did wish for Heinkel to live in as strong a manner as possible.

Although his circumstances were considerably harsh, it was not as though Heinkel’s misfortune was the greatest throughout the world. Though, Aldebaran did not think that he would lend an ear to such a canned consolation.

Aldebaran: “Besides, the relationship in which that sort of consolation could get through to him ended just now.”

He neither bore the qualifications to find that regrettable, nor the right to wish to make amends.

Because he had that self awareness, Aldebaran refrained from expressing any further feelings. Instead, calling out “Yae” to the girl hard at work,

Aldebaran: “Money.”

Yae: “Isn’t that the worst possible thing to hear all of a sudden? Here~ you go.”

Yae fumbled around in her clothing and threw over a leather pouch, which Aldebaran then caught. From within, he pulled out a gold coin, and flicking it with his thumb—

Aldebaran: “A little extra to make up for the trouble. Keep it.”

With those words, he passed it over to the owner of the tavern, who had been watching over their exchange in silence.

Beside “Aldebaran” was an empty barrel of water, and the shopkeeper had thoroughly served their orders. They had likely caused him a fair bit of anxiety, but Aldebaran had been able to converge with his henchmen, and take a short rest.

Yae: “Though it was with my money.”

Aldebaran: “Shut up, you. I know you just arrived, but can you get back on the move right away?”

Yae: “The shinobi training regiment is crazy, y’know. They make us run nonstop from the Imperial Capital back to the village with no sleep or rest over half a month, with just a single bamboo cylinder of water.”

Aldebaran: “Your crazy shinobi episodes never miss the mark, huh.”

She probably wanted to communicate that because she had gone through such a hellish experience in the past, this amount of travel would not tire her out; however, what Aldebaran got out of her words was the sheer insanity of the shinobi, and the corroboration of that fact by the disheartening memories of suffering through the severity of the most terrible shinobi in the Empire.

In any case—

Shopkeeper: “W-wait…! I mean, please wait.”

Just when Aldebaran and co. were about to depart, the voice of the shopkeeper halted them.

In addition to being this ragtag of a group, the Dragon had also displayed a violent attack a moment prior. To call out to them would have required substantial courage, but gulping down his saliva as he turned to face Aldebaran's party, the shopkeeper spoke,

Shopkeeper: "That… um, the calamity unfolding at the Pleiades Watchtower, could you please stop it? You're the Divine Dragon Volcanica-sama, aren't you?!"

Aldebaran: "Ahh…"

Hearing the shopkeeper's plea, Aldebaran fiddled with the metal fixtures of his helmet, and sighed.

Now that he looked around, he saw that the residents of Mirula had surrounded Aldebaran's group at a distance, casting an imploring gaze towards them—no, towards "Aldebaran".

Within their eyes dwelled fear and apprehension, but at the same time, reverence and hope.

Bearing witness to the legendary and renowned Divine Dragon Volcanica from nearby, the possibility of it putting an end to the cataclysmic battle unfolding afar filled their minds.

However—

"Aldebaran": "Sorry, but right now, it isn't my job to stop that."

Shopkeeper: "—Hk."

"Aldebaran": "The Sword Saint will likely stop it at any expense, but that doesn't mean the aftershocks won't reach here. It'd do you best to leave town for a few days."

Shopkeeper: "A few days… that would be, how long exactly…?"

After putting his trust in the Divine Dragon, and receiving a reply that betrayed his expectations, the shopkeeper did not yet give up, and seeking an excuse to quell that which was discomposing their hearts, he asked another question.

Even if they left town, how long would that be for?

That would be—

Aldebaran: "—Seven days."

Shopkeeper: "…"

Aldebaran: "In seven days, it will be settled. —In seven days, the cause of the world's end will be removed."

Proclaiming so, Aldebaran turned his back to the shopkeeper, to the people of Mirula, and began to walk.

Behind him, Yae followed whilst carrying the unconscious Heinkel on her back, and finally, giving rise to a weighty sound as it lifted its body, "Aldebaran" too began to walk.

Having made an enemy of the world, Aldebaran and his henchmen advanced.

By no means, would their legs ever come to a halt.

Aldebaran: "I'll continue. —So that I may be myself."

Chapter 17:
Please, Don’t Forgive Me

1

—A white table and a parasol were placed atop a small hill of lush, verdant grass.

A clear blue sky, black hair swaying in a gentle breeze. Without knowing how, they found themself sitting in a chair, and across the white table, a young woman of black and white, was enjoying a cup of tea.

Warm vapor rose from a teacup, yet no fragrance could be sensed. —Just as if it had perfectly mimicked just the exterior of the element known as tea, in the manner of papier-mâché.

Such was the dishonest impression evoked by this individual.

???: “What… happened to me?”

A query.

One that sought an answer regarding the chaos induced up until a moment prior.

???: “Is that not something you should know yourself?”

A response.

One that could not be declared an answer regarding the chaos induced up until a moment prior.

With vexation towards the feeling that their question had been sidestepped, they endeavored with all their heart to come to rationality, to suppress the urge to vent the dissatisfaction in regards to the events that had just transpired to the young woman before their eyes.

And likewise contained within, was a pinch of “their” perspective as an onlooker.

???: “Echidna! Let me out of here now!”

Impatience and impulse were deliberately mistaken for courage, used as a provocation to propel the conversation forward.

Atop the hill of green, standing opposite a young woman proclaiming herself a Witch, once again were they assailed by an enigmatic sensation. —Indeed, once again, they were.

Again, and again and again and again, that had been the case.

Always, without fail, no matter the situation, each and every event had been a sequence of the inexplicable and the absurd. Faced with all that, they clenched their teeth, earnestly they raised their visage, and continued to struggle onward.

—They had continued to struggle on, giving of themself.

???: “Why not try it and see?”

—Please, stop.

—Please, I’m begging you, stop. Don’t let them say what comes next. Don’t let them say it.

???: “Taking action to procure the results one desires, is deserving of my respect. I am not going to veer from that opinion. In fact, I believe it is precisely such actions that make life worth living.”

—Please, stop. Please, stop. I’m begging you, please, stop.

—Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop.

—Stop.

???: “Echidna. I can Return by—Death.”

—Ahh, ahh, ahh, please.

—Please, don’t suffer.

—Please, don’t cry.

—Please, don’t get hurt.

—Please, don’t be afraid.

—Please, don’t laugh.

—Please, don’t forgive.

???: “For your inquiry of “why”, you are qualified, and the doors of this tea party are open to you. And, by drinking the tea offered by a Witch, you are accepted as an honored guest. As the host of this tea party, I am obliged to welcome you. —Now, you may ask away.”

—Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, I’m begging you.

—I’m begging you, please, stop.

???: “After all, to agonize the mind in search of an answer is the greatest of bliss to me.”

—I’m begging you, so please, you must not help this person.

2

—The troublesome thing about mental exhaustion was that unlike physical fatigue, it was not visible to the eye.

Of course, there were clear indicators such as an inability to think straight, unavoidably heightened irritability, and circles darker than a bottomless swamp appearing underneath the eyes.

However, those indicators were physical changes, so ultimately, there was not that great of a difference from physical fatigue; at least that was what Aldebaran had concluded.

Mental exhaustion, in its truest sense, could not be soothed by touch, nor could it be healed by magic; that was the sort of thing it was.

And, what was required in order to recover that worn-out mind was neither words nor relationships. —To put it bluntly, what was needed was time.

Only time would grant kindness enough to iron out a mind whittled down to a rugged state.

That was why—

Aldebaran: “—Territory re-expansion, Matrix redefinition.”

In a whisper, after finally settling down, Aldebaran updated his Matrix.

It was his first time updating the Matrix in roughly six hours—the ability to prolong his own bodily experience of time as much as he desired, without the consequence of real time progressing, was the greatest merit of Aldebaran’s Authority.

Within the bounds of his established Territory, he could swallow poison to repeat a fixed period of time as often as he wanted, generating the time needed to smoothen out his mind. For his battle against Reinhard, too, he had taken full advantage of this merit to fine tune the plans he had prepared in advance in order to draw him into them.

Aldebaran: “Though, he did circumvent practically all of them…”

Ultimately, it had ended with him playing a card he had not wished to play, so Aldebaran found it difficult to say he had been victorious; at best it was a draw due to injury. To put it bluntly, it was a loss for both parties.

Anyhow, both his inability to think straight and his heightened irritability had gotten a little better.

Unfortunately, he did not know what had become of the bags under his eyes, but since he did not have the time to cover it with makeup, he would make do donning the black gnarled helmet that perfectly matched his worn-out body and mind.

Though his body and mind could have been described as worn-out, his body was actually in excellent condition.

As the strongest, supreme life-form, the Dragon's inexhaustible supply of—would be an overstatement, but the vast supply of Mana could be used to his heart's content. Welling up with healing from Water Magic and buffs from Yang Magic, this was the strongest Aldebaran had been since he had been born into this world, and none could object to that claim.

Aldebaran: "Be that as it may, it's something like an ant getting its power multiplied by a hundred; no matter how many buffs it stacks up, it can never beat a human."

Not to mention, when comparing his opponents to that standard, they were not humans, but rather elephants or lions.

Alas, since the specs of his receptacle were inferior from the start, even if Aldebaran was now the strongest Aldebaran in history, he would still only serve as fodder in a direct confrontation.

Setting aside that miserable self-evaluation—

Aldebaran: "—Seven days."

A single knee raised, leaning against a wall of dirtied wooden planks, Aldebaran counted his time limit.

This location, which they had selected to take a rest in, was a small hunting shed that Yae had found in the woods. Fortunately, the owner seemed to be absent given the time of year, so they had entered and were using it of their own accord.

It could not be expected to have amenities such as a fluffy bed or open air bath, but in the regard that it would not attract attention, it was just as favorable as a suite to Aldebaran at the current moment.

Whenever possible from here on out, they would need to avoid the battles they could avoid and proceed through events smoothly.

The little show they had put on at Mirula, the town closest to the Augria Sand Dunes, had been an exception.

It was the meetup point for him and his allies, and he also truly just could not help but want to drink milk. Furthermore, it had been necessary to inform the townsfolk about how transcendent the events transpiring were, and that there would be nobody present to save them from it.

After all, just ten-odd kilometers away, a battle between the strongest beings in the world was playing out.

Aldebaran's stratagem had brought forth the Witch of Envy, and Reinhard would likely put his life on the line in order to stop her. However, there was no reason to believe that its aftershocks would not reach beyond the sand sea. It was not likely for the constant flashing in the sky to settle down, so seeking refuge was essential.

And, Aldebaran's decided time frame of seven days was not unrelated to that battle. —Rather, it was actually quite closely connected.

As far as Aldebaran knew, the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy were evenly matched. That battle would continue repeating the same moves for a thousand days, and no terminus would be reached in that back and forth combat.

But, that was only when the matter was constrained to being between the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy.

Now that a battle between the two had been realized through Aldebaran's scheming, it would not actually continue on for a thousand days.

That was because—

Aldebaran: "The world will come crumbling down before their battle can reach a conclusion. If it ever comes to that, it's over."

Ere the world's ruination could transpire, it would be necessary to put an end to that battle.

In that sense, though he had been the one to make the matchup, that ultimate battle had also become a cause bringing about the world's end, and thus one of the things Aldebaran had proclaimed he would remove.

Aldebaran: “So many things… there are so many things I have to do…”

Placing a hand on the forehead of his helmet, Aldebaran took a long, deep breath.

He had quelled his mental exhaustion thanks to his Authority, forcibly recovered his physical fatigue through Water and Yang Magic, and yet it still seemed like he would go over capacity from the sheer size of the things on his mind and the things he was burdened with.

Of course, from the moment he started this onward, his complaints were not something he could let anybody hear, but—

???: “—Do~n’t you be so pointlessly stubborn now, why not just lean ri~ght up on someone else and relax for once, since you have one arm and all?”

Aldebaran: “…Yae, is that you?”

Yae: “Yes yes yes, Al-sama’s helpful all-purpose shinobi maid, Yae, reporting for duty~!”

With nary a sign or footstep, as if having literally appeared by suddenly springing out from a shadow, the young woman—Yae, cracked a joke with a smile.

As the girl walked towards him with her hands joined behind her back, Aldebaran shrugged,

Aldebaran: “Regardless of the helpful and all-purpose parts, being a shinobi maid is stacking too many character types.”

Yae: “That so? Even though I already had to sadly cut the beautiful, sweet, and lovely parts~. Okay okay, in that case what evaluation would you give of me, Al-sama?”

Aldebaran: “…Submissive cat-like shinobi maid?”

Yae: “U~wahhh, that way of thinking doesn’t seem like it’d be popular with the ladies. But then again, you do have a shinobi maid.”

Receiving a rather genuine look of scorn, Aldebaran clicked his tongue with a “Shut up, you”.

He was in the middle of confronting a challenge that required him to earnestly rack his brain. He did not wish to waste his time on the blathering of an ally whom he had no need to curry favor with.

Aldebaran: “First and foremost, I told you to keep an eye on the old man, didn’t I? Also, to check the paths that lead out of these woods, maintain vigilance over the vicinity of this hut, and prepare our food.”

Yae: “Don’t you think it’s like that super black~ thing you say? That’s how you say exploitation in Al-sama’s language, right? Right now, this whole thing’s super black~.”

Aldebaran: “You’re a helpful all-purpose shinobi maid, yeah? Put in the work so as to not tarnish that name.”

Yae: “Se~riously, Al-sama you’re like an Oni and a Beast combined into a brute~.”

Sticking out her tongue with a “Behhhh”, Yae talked back without trying to hide her discontent. When he stared her down, Yae raised a single finger with a “Fine, I understand.”

Yae: “The preparations for food are done. Though they are shinobi provisions. Vigilance of the shed’s vicinity has been completed. Even in these woods it seems that there are Witchbeasts~. Speaking of, I’ve discovered a path through the woods with sound footing. It’d do you good to train your legs and loins a bit more. And, about Heinkel-sama…”

Aldebaran: “What about him?”

Yae: “Even if we’re keeping him alive he’s just a carry-on, so maybe we could use him as bait to avoid the Witchbeasts… geez~, please don’t make that face, I was just joking.”

Aldebaran: “You shouldn’t be able to see my face.”

Yae: “I can see the signs you give off. You’re pretty loud, Al-sama.”

Saying something that seemed both understandable and unintelligible, Yae abruptly turned her face away. But, without averting his own gaze, Al continued to glare at her side-profile.

Before long, she seemed to give in, and taking a deep breath,

Yae: “Heinkel-sama is all tied up. I’ll be alerted if he happens to wake up, and if he tries too hard to run away, his limbs will be in pieces.”

Aldebaran: “In pieces, eh. Could you really manage that on that old man?”

Yae: “Even if he’s sturdy, he’s not a steelfolk or anything, some parts of him are more frail. My technique is to penetrate those parts. To begin with, even though you’re asking if I can do it, you’d get angry if I actually did do it, right?”

Aldebaran: “Guess so.”

Yae: “Then, I guess I won’t do it~. There’s no merit in me angering you, Al-sama, isn’t that right?”

Raising both her hands in a gesture of non-defiance, Yae showed that she meant no harm, to which Aldebaran relaxed his shoulders.

Her manner of speech was frivolous, and she also liked to jest, but there was no falsehood in Yae’s words. That which Aldebaran had done to Yae was nothing so easy such that she would still be plotting something here.

To the utmost extent of what had been possible, thoroughly and mercilessly, he had shattered her defiant spirit—no, he had shattered her heart.

The reason why Yae Tenzen was assisting Aldebaran right now was the result of having done so.

—Yae Tenzen was an assassin who had been sent to take the life of Priscilla Barielle.

Through the announcement of her entry into the Royal Selection, the existence of Priscilla Barielle also became known in the Vollachian Empire, so it was only a matter of time before people began to realize that she was Prisca Benedict, who had survived in a foreign nation after escaping the conclusion of the Imperial Selection Ceremony, which concerned the succession of the Imperial throne in the Empire.

Yae was intended to dash water over the live coals known as Priscilla as she produced smoke in the Kingdom; an assassin sent by a Divine General of the Empire, Chisha Gold.

In fact, the infiltration of the female shinobi had been performed magnificently, and put to use as Priscilla's chamberlain, she flourished as a hardworking maid in the Barielle Domain; Priscilla took a liking to her, and even Schult greatly adored her. Aldebaran, too, had thought of her as a coworker who was easy to get along with.

However, without forgetting her initial objective, Yae had aimed for Priscilla's life.

Hence—

Yae: "Al-sama was super scary on that day~. Under the pretext of the village's training, my body has experienced nearly all the terrible things that you can in this world… but, that was the first time in my life I ever felt so afraid."

Aldebaran: "…That's a story that makes my chest sting."

Yae: "You should at least feel my heartache. If you felt the way that I have ever since that day, when I was made the loyal servant of such a scary Al-sama, you should be able to bear it just fine. I kept away from the madam and Schult-chan… subservient to anything you would tell me to do, Al-sama, even letting you do whatever you pleased with my body…"

Aldebaran: “I never laid a finger on you though?!”

Hugging her own slender shoulders, Yae flirted in an attempt to draw sympathy, but Aldebaran rebutted.

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That statement had gone too far in damaging his reputation, and of course, having been said in the absence of any other ears, it was probably some form of pestering or discouragement towards Aldebaran.

But, Yae gave a flirtatious glance towards Aldebaran as he harbored that impression,

Yae: "…Sooner or later, why don't you try touching me without mentioning anything about where you've laid your fingers? You must be awfully fatigued, so, Al-sama, I don't mind comforting you in your weakened state, y'know?"

Aldebaran: "…"

Yae: "Oh? Ohohoho~? Does this silence perhaps suggest that you're considering it as an option? In that case, I'll go get the bed ready before you change your mind…"

Aldebaran: "You've got it wrong, I was just pondering over what I should say to shut you up. Besides, you…"

Yae: "What is it?"

Aldebaran: "You yourself said that there would be no meaning in having such a relationship with me, yeah?"

Pointing his finger at Yae as she produced a bewitching atmosphere, Aldebaran questioned her true intent.

Unfortunately, no matter how coquettishly she phrased her invitation, Aldebaran would never go along with it. Aldebaran had spent over ten years as a gladiator on Gladiator Island, where societal order was at its worst. He was tired of hearing those kinds of sales pitches.

Besides, this was not the first time that Yae had tried to seduce Aldebaran like this. Hence, neither was it his first time rejecting her, but as Yae caressed her own body in a disappointed manner, Yae: “This is also a shinobi weapon, so it’s hurtful for it to be dismissed so bluntly.”

Aldebaran: “Don’t cling to weapons that don’t work. Mistaking the means for the end can be a slippery slope.”

Yae: “Well, that’s quite the reasonable advice. —After all, if I could have gotten you to love me, Al-sama, then my tomorrow would have been secured forever, bu~t that hope fell apart when the madam died.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Yae: “That angry look on your face, I can see it y’know?”

As she slightly inclined her head, Yae’s words were a sharp blade that wounded Aldebaran’s heart.

It could not have been without malice. Yae was brimming with intent to wound Aldebaran, and Aldebaran had resigned himself to receive that blade. Neither of them had declared it, but Aldebaran had been intent on protecting Priscilla’s life, and Yae had also believed that the madam—that Priscilla’s life would be secure.

Now that the unspoken understanding had been broken, this torment from Yae was a natural punishment.

Yae: “I won’t say that you went back on your word. After all, I never ascertained it through your words. Only, since Al-sama loved the madam, I thought you would’ve naturally protected her til the end.”

Touching her lips, Yae spun words that tore Aldebaran to shreds.

In silence, as he tasted the sharpness of that blade, Aldebaran would listen to her next words. That was definite retribution he ought to receive—

Yae: “—Please don’t misunderstand. Al-sama, I’m not reproaching you for not having protected the madam, y’know?”

Aldebaran: “Ah?”

Yae: “I quite liked the madam. Though, I did try to kill her because of an order. She was classy, intelligent, beautiful, and surprisingly kind. But, if she ended up dying, then there’s nothing to be done about that. Those who die don’t come back. Though, for some reason it seems like they were brought back in the Empire~.”

Even though he had not shared the details of the events in the Empire until then, Yae brought up the topic of the Great Disaster, which she must have heard about somewhere. But, rather than where she got her hands on that information, Aldebaran’s attention was turned to Yae’s manner of progressing the conversation, leaving her true intentions unreadable.

If Yae had no intent of reproaching Aldebaran, then just what did she intend to accomplish by discussing Priscilla’s death and verbally attacking Aldebaran like this?

Yae: “My words are simply words, y’know~? Al-sama, you’re getting hurt by them of your own accord. All I’m doing is holding you accountable.”

Aldebaran: “Holding me, accountable?”

Yae: “Didn’t you ask about it yourself? About what my objective was in trying to comfort you, Al-sama… well~, perhaps your phrasing was a little more crude?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Yae: “Before, it was in order to have Al-sama love me and thus protect me. But, I now understand that it’s not an absolute, so my objective has changed from back then.”

As she spoke, Yae slowly walked right up before Aldebaran and folded her knees. Then, on eye-level with Aldebaran, as he sat on the dirty floor,

Yae: “My goal in my proposal to comfort you now, Al-sama, is not a seduction. It’s insurance, so to speak.”

Aldebaran: “Insurance…”

Yae: “Al-sama, it’s already begun, now hasn’t it~? You’ve betrayed those who’ve treated you well, you’ve even unleashed the Witch of Envy to ground the Sword Saint… this can’t be stopped, and it would be a problem to have it stop, so I can’t afford to have you fail. That’s why~…”

Pausing her words there, Yae gently reached out a white finger, and touched Aldebaran’s neck. As the fingertip of a short nail tickled his neck, Yae brought her lips to his ears so as to whisper,

Yae: “Please, accomplish what you set out to do, Al-sama. If it’s for that purpose, then whether it’s my body, my talents, my techniques, or anything else, please make use of them. I will serve to comfort you, be it to rest your mind or vent your anger.”

Her breathing was feverish, and with no falsehood in the voice that dedicated the entirety of her being, Yae flashed the high canines that could be seen in her mouth, and continued.

That was—

Yae: “—Then, after you’ve accomplished what you’d set out to do, please die, once and for all. Al-sama, if you don’t die, I don’t think I’ll ever feel safe for the rest of my entire life.”

Saying that in the most horrifyingly coquettish tone until then, Yae smiled.

That was the reason why Yae Tenzen was assisting Aldebaran, even if it meant making an enemy of the world. —Thus, Aldebaran himself could also assent to that conclusion.

It was something he had known since the beginning.

If Aldebaran ever accomplished his goal, all of his actions up until that point would not be forgiven, nor would they be exonerated. Much less would they be deemed acceptable or be understood.

He did not wish to be understood. Neither did he wish to be forgiven. Please, oh please, don’t forgive me.

Once all was said and done, Aldebaran would assuredly be burned at the stake.

That conclusion of him being burned to death was the hope of Yae Tenzen—nay, Aldebaran himself also desired it.

Were he to succeed in his objective, he would gladly be burned at the stake. Then, just like the woman who had burned herself to save her motherland, Aldebaran would likewise be reduced to ash.

—When that time came, finally would Aldebaran be able to undo his Territory, destroying the Matrix.

Aldebaran: "…"

In a mutual silence, Aldebaran and Yae locked eyes at a proximity where they could feel each other's breaths.

Therein was nothing akin to the desire between man and woman, but rather, a pitiful girl with the chains on her life in the clutches of a monster, and the dried out misery of a foolish clown exerting himself to play the role of monster.

Then, as their gazes continued to remain locked for a while—

???: "—Gwaahhhhh! Wh-what the hell?! How did I… Gwahhhh?!"

Suddenly, a voice that was neither Aldebaran's nor Yae's, but that of a third party, boorishly ripped apart the space between the two.

That which had been heard was a shriek from Heinkel, who had seemingly woken up. Though if Yae's report a moment prior had been the truth, the manner in which he had been tied up was such that if careless, he would end up in pieces.

Aldebaran: "…The old man's gonna fall apart. Go untie him before that happens."

Yae: "Are you glossing over me? It'd be fine even if Heinkel-sama were to fall apart."

Aldebaran: "It's not fine, I made a promise to the old man. When everything's finished, I'll arrange the Dragon's Blood for him. I keep my promises… Promises are, important.”

Yae: “Promises… alright, would you then make one with me? A promise, that is.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Yae: “If you make me a promise, and if you keep it, then fine. I’ll do it. Heinkel-sama won’t fall apart. I, Yae, am your faithful servant.”

Briefly poking out her red tongue, whilst concealing the murderous intent within her narrowed eyes, Yae asked of him.

At her words, Aldebaran closed his eyes within his helmet; then, slowly holding up his right hand, he extended his pinky.

As she witnessed that, Yae made a puzzled face befitting a girl her age. —He recalled when in the past, Priscilla had similarly been caught off guard upon seeing him extend his pinky like this.

And as he recalled it,

Aldebaran: “Entwining our pinkies and making a pinky promise, that’s my ritual for making promises.”

Yae: “Entwining our pinkies… how le~wd~.”

Aldebaran: “It’s not lewd. If you aren’t gonna do it, fine.”

Yae: “I will, I will. Have a look-see, Yae-chan’s pinky and Al-sama’s pinky are entwined.”

Her phrasing had been lascivious, but Aldebaran did not mention anything about it. Then, with their pinkies entwined, they rocked their hands up and down,

Aldebaran: “Finger cutting, ten-thousand fists, if you lie you have to swallow a thousand needles. —There, it’s a pinky promise.”

With that, he concluded the pinky promise of his own demise.

Aldebaran, wishing for his own death, had mixed feelings about

Yae's awfully delighted demeanour here, but he did indeed think that she really was a shinobi maid who suited those omitted aspects of beautiful, sweet, and lovely.

Heinkel: "S-somebody, somebody do something! Guh, gah! Gwaahhhhh!!"

Still, the pathetic cries of pain of the neglected Heinkel echoed loudly throughout the woods.

3

Heinkel: "Piece of shit, you'll regret this, maid…"

Yae: "Please don't use such dirty language~, Heinkel-sama. As you can see, we're isolated and shorthanded, so we can't afford to waste personnel to keep watch over you, Heinkel-sama."

Heinkel: "Then it would've been fine to just lay me on my side! The nerve you must have to pointlessly tie me up…"

Yae: "I just thought that seeing a little blood~ might calm you down~. Isn't it just the cutesy survival tactics of this delicate Yae to ensure that this camp isn't destroyed?"

Heinkel: "Why you little…!"

A red line streaked the back of his neck—as Heinkel rubbed where the blood had run down, he unconsciously reached down for the sword at his waist, indignant at Yae's talkative demeanour.

But, when Aldebaran spied a dangerous glint in Yae's eye at the same time, he had no choice but to intervene in their interaction with a "Wait".

Aldebaran: "Yae, don't instigate. Old man, Yae is just like this…"

Heinkel: "I don't care! By the time I showed up, this woman wasn't at the mansion anymore!"

Yae: "Yippity yep, Heinkel-sama and I narrowly missed meeting each other at the mansion. To think that the replacement of this beautiful and competent Yae-chan was Heinkel-sama, it must've been quite a shock to Schult-chan, ri~ght?"

Aldebaran: "…Surprisingly, Schult-chan got along really well with the old man."

Yae: "Heh~, that's really surprising. Even though that's not at all the case with your own son?"

Heinkel: "You little…!"

Aldebaran: "Yae."

Once again, Yae began to deliberately grate on Heinkel's nerves, and so Aldebaran directed a stern gaze her way; but, her only response was "Apologies~" and a bow with her hands clasped.

The two had met for the first time when he approached Heinkel with his plans, and had him leave the Fortified City in advance to converge with Yae, but their chemistry was worse than he ever could have imagined. Regardless of Heinkel not liking Yae, it seemed that Yae was also not considerably fond of Heinkel.

To be honest, Yae was unfriendly with Heinkel to an extent uncharacteristic of even herself.

Aldebaran: "Sorry, old man, but from here on out, both you and Yae are gonna have indispensable roles. I won't tell you to get along, so at least play your part well."

So, Aldebaran gave up on trying to reform Yae's attitude, and requested Heinkel to compromise. He was sorry to Heinkel, but so long as he desired the Dragon's Blood, he could not go against Aldebaran's plans or views. Obediently, he would be put to use.

And contrary to Aldebaran's expectation that there would be some natural backlash, Heinkel briefly muttered "Understood",

Heinkel: "More importantly, were you telling the truth? That in seven days, things will be settled?"

Aldebaran: "—. Yeah, but rather than calling it the truth, I'd say I'm serious about it. I seriously intend on concluding this in seven days.”

Heinkel: “When that time comes, give me the Dragon’s Blood of Volcanica. You absolutely must not break that promise… That and, the Witch of Envy…”

Aldebaran: “I’ve thought of a plan to have that withdraw. Before the battle between your son and the Witch of Envy can amount to anything, yeah? You don’t need to worry.”

Heinkel: “I’m not worried…!”

Aldebaran: “…”

Heinkel: “I’m not, worried…”

As his expression clouded over with shame, Heinkel did not wring out any further words. After gazing over Heinkel in silence, Aldebaran turned to face forward.

As Yae led the way, Aldebaran’s party was moving to exit the woods in which they had been hiding.

As mentioned previously, now that he had overcome the unavoidable clash with the Sword Saint, Aldebaran and his henchmen would have no choice but to avoid trouble as much as possible as they headed toward their target destination.

For that purpose, with a long way to go, they would have to continue traversing westward through the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Yae: “But~, will it really go so smoothly such that nobody gets in our way? After all, isn’t there a high probability that the Sword Saint-sama’s collaborators already know about your wrongdoings, Al-sama?”

Aldebaran: “Don’t call them wrongdoings… Firstly, my betrayal is undoubtedly known. When lil’ miss Flam contacted her little sister, it’s hard to think that the Sword Saint was the only other person present, and there’s no chance he just flew off without saying anything to anyone. Hence, we’re turning the tables on them.”

Yae: “And by turning the tables, you mean using the Divine Dragon-sama?”

Aldebaran: “That’s right.”

Responding to Yae’s question, Aldebaran pointed to the sky obstructed by the trees of the surrounding woods.

As Aldebaran’s party proceeded through the forest like this, “Aldebaran” did not accompany them. Of course, its large body would have been exceedingly conspicuous, but there was something that Aldebaran had wished for it to do by using its fame and absurdly noticeable body.

Aldebaran: “For now, the Divine Dragon is headed in a different direction from ours… I had it fly north. By having it draw attention there, I expect attention to be diverted away from us.”

He was unsure of the accuracy of Flam’s Divine Protection of Mindspeak, but if in addition to Aldebaran’s betrayal, she had conveyed the information regarding the antagonism of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, the sightings of Volcanica would be regarded as a threat to the Kingdom, and it would become the center of their attention.

Without Reinhard, they would need to mobilize personnel on the level of the order of Knights, or else they would be unable to even take seats at the negotiation table with Volcanica; such would be their viewpoint.

Thus—

Aldebaran: “Naturally, the opponent would assume that I’d be together with the greatest fighting strength.”

Nobody would arrive at the idea that he had parted with the Divine Dragon, which he had gone out of his way to gain as an ally.

But, considering Aldebaran’s objective, there would be no meaning in standing out more than necessary, so it was natural to exclude the inevitably conspicuous “Aldebaran” from acting with the group.

Having read Aldebaran's Book of the Dead, "Aldebaran" shared his objective, plans, and expectations, and thus would likely fulfill the role levied upon it.

In the meantime, Aldebaran's party would close the physical distance on their objective with success.

For that purpose, Yae's skills as a shinobi would also come in handy —

Yae: "—Al-sama, a problem has arisen."

As Yae suddenly stopped in her tracks and informed him so, Aldebaran held his breath.

Walking at the rear of the line, Heinkel also stopped, and called out to Yae with an "Oi". She responded not to his call, and silently directing her gaze beyond the trees—outside the woods,

Yae: "It's the "worst" that you get when you combine "most" and "bad", but we're being ambushed."

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

Heinkel: "Hahh?! An ambush?! So what the hell was all that for?! Your whole Dragon diversion thing!"

Receiving a report of unexpected circumstances, Aldebaran's cheeks stiffened, and Heinkel raised his voice. Heinkel was more distraught than he was angry, and Aldebaran felt the same way, even if he did not voice it.

There was no way they were being ambushed. The presence of the Divine Dragon Volcanica could not be ignored. That was, if they could not focus on anything else but the Divine Dragon Volcanica's strength—

???: "—Oi! You can hear me, can't you? I know you're in there, helmet bastard!"

Aldebaran: "…"

As if having calculated the time he had caught his breath, a voice struck at the precise moment he let it go.

But, that was wrong. That was not so. It was not that the time had been calculated. Unlike the have-nots, the haves would never miss the timing in these situations.

Such had been the case for the Sun Princess, Priscilla Barielle.

Thus, with equal status as Priscilla Barielle, for she who vied for the same seat of the Kingdom’s apex, it was simply that the selfsame marvel resided innately within.

Outside the woods, awaiting Aldebaran and his party, the second coming of the Golden Lion—

???: “Looks like you took care of my garbage Knight. Guess I got no choice but to clean up after him. —He’s not used to having it wiped by others, but the one who’ll be cleaning up his ass here, is me.”

Chapter 18:
A Hundred Times More Troublesome

1

—They recounted their lonely struggles, their days of ineradicable remorse.

A tale pertaining to their past, one that they had decided ought not be treated without the utmost respect, gravity, and caution.

Even after letting it all out, their never-let-go and forward-facing mindset was ephemeral.

???: “My compensation, that is.”

They could not help but detest the Witch who expressed the price for leaving this dream world as thus.

With a trace of their red tongue, with a hint of mischief hanging in the air, that vacuous beauty toyed with them, seemingly scheming to guide them as per their will.

Witch: “Alright, I’ve decided.”

The first time, she had demanded that they forget, but what would she decree for this second time?

As if to mock them, as they involuntarily stiffened, the Witch, who exuded the faint fragrance of flowers, brought her fingers to a white handkerchief that fluttered in the wind.

—It was embroidered with a Great Spirit in the form of a gray cat, with gold linings around the white fabric.

???: “The handkerchief Petra gave me when I left for the Sanctuary…?”

To scream out “Stop!” until their throat tore itself apart, they wished.

To scream out “Stop!” until their throat tore itself apart, no throat to do so could be found.

They wanted to throw themselves in front of the terrifying Witch and shout, “Stop!”.

There was nobody there to stand in front of the terrifying Witch and yell, “Stop!”.

Ergo, no matter how much they attempted to shout “Stop, stop it!” in their heart, no matter how much their soul attempted to step in, they could not stop them.

Witch: “The price for the tea party has been paid. From the bottom of my heart, I look forward to your next visit.”

The value of the payment was expressed, and a slight sense of relief and happiness grew.

More than feeling triumphant that they had been the one to have led to that, they were far, far, far, far more terrified that the Witch had taken an interest in them.

Just what their own self had become a part of, they knew not.

???: “Looks like Echidna kept her word. The tea party didn’t get erased from my memories this time.”

The dream world was enveloped by a white light, and they returned from the illusion to a dark, cold space.

Returning to the location where they again had met the Witch—something odd, they noticed.

???: “…Where’s Emilia?”

Their heart growing restless by her absence when she ought to have been present, they were filled with a sense of unease.

An overflowing sense of anxiety and a sense of incongruity seemed to seep out, as for one who had been forced to repeat this over and over again, it was a deviation from a base principle, a deviation that should not exist.

Driven by a sense of foreboding welling up from within, they hurriedly left the Tomb.

And as soon as they stepped outside the Tomb and into the moonlight, what they saw was—

???: “A shadow…?”

The Sanctuary, shrouded in the darkest of blacks, a tonality mark of a Witch even more terrifying than the Witch who had created said place.

No matter how much they shouted “Stop!”, how much they rejected it, how much they cried, how much they resisted, it would not draw to a close.

After all, this was the history of his unerasable path, that he had certainly tread.

—Amidst all that, did I contribute something?

2

—Helmet bastard; that voice declaring so had clearly been aware of Aldebaran.

Yae had sensed the presence of an ambush, and then came the familiar, assertive voice. It was not necessary to think very hard in order to understand that their deliberate act of separating their primary strength in an all-out diversion had ended in failure.

Having understood that, the problem currently awaiting Aldebaran was—

???: “Oi! That voice just now, it’s that blonde-haired brat! Reinhard’s master! What the hell’s she doing here… wasn’t it supposed to be that nobody could find us?!”

Heinkel’s distraught demeanor thoroughly exemplified the confusion of this situation.

His level of panic was the same as what Aldebaran felt within, but thanks to him disgracefully losing his cool first, Aldebaran had avoided becoming flustered.

Nonetheless, the situation was by no means promising.

Aldebaran: "…And I just updated my Matrix fifteen seconds ago."

The regular updating of the Matrix was intended to be a prudent measure in order to avoid unnecessary risk in the event of a surprise attack, but it appeared to have backfired here.

Aldebaran would have no chance to retry save for the fifteen seconds back from this current point.

This meant that the opponent's ambush was no longer avoidable. — An ambush like this was a far worse tactic for Aldebaran to face than any surprise attack.

Whether it was through good insight or just guesswork, the ambush had been sprung at precisely the worst timing.

Yae: "If you're talking about the Sword Saint's master, could this be the rumored Felt-sama~…? I wonder, is it already time to use Heinkel-sama as a human~ sacrifice?"

Heinkel: "—Hk, if you're trying to get through this by using me as a hostage, it'll get you nowhere! Those guys want nothing more than to have Reinhard succeed the headship of House Astrea. Right now, I'm the one in a bad position by being with you guys… if they have a good enough reason, they'll kill me without mercy!"

Yae: "We~ll… if that's the case, then wouldn't that make you even better suited to the role of human sacrifice?"

Heinkel: "I told you this ain't the time to be cracking jokes!"

Likely, she had not been joking. Heinkel yelled back at her with a dumbfounded look in his eyes while Yae asked, "What should we do~?", as she shrugged at Aldebaran.

Unlike the two shaken middle-aged men, Yae was calmly reacting to the situation which lay before them. Perhaps being the result of her shinobi training, her well-honed mental strength was admirable.

For Aldebaran, it seemed to be a state of mind he could never reach no matter how many millions of times he died—

Aldebaran: “In any case, there’s no point in us sending forth the old man.”

If what was waiting for them outside the forest truly was Felt and her allies, then per Heinkel’s grievous acknowledgment, it would be ineffective to use him as a hostage. In fact, if it came to pass that this opportunity was seized to take his life, it would have made quite the punchline for “Here rests the beloved and respected Heinkel Astrea” to be writ upon his grave.

And, the reason why naught but pessimistic pictures came to mind was because he lacked the materials to paint an optimistic picture.

Aldebaran: “Yae, old man, wait here. I’ll go have a look first.”

Heinkel: “Wh… are you out of your mind?! This woman’s a shinobi, isn’t she? If anyone’s going out there first shouldn’t it be her?! You tell him too!”

Yae: “—. Al-sama, that’s the best course of action, correct?”

Aldebaran: “Yeah.”

He gave that answer as he inclined his chin, and Yae readily withdrew, saying, “Ro~ger that.” Heinkel, his face still red with frustration, tried to continue pressing the issue, but,

Yae: “Don’t be so persistent, Heinkel-sama. You don’t need to worry so much; who else but Al-sama could come up with an idea like using the Divine Dragon Volcanica and actually pull it off? There’s no way he doesn’t have a plan.”

Heinkel: “Well, I… I, guess so…”

Heinkel reluctantly retracted his words in response to Yae’s backup.

As one would have expected, the prestige of the Divine Dragon was effective in many ways, regardless of whether or not the being in question was senile. Even in this situation where they were completely outdone, it gave one unconditional confidence that Aldebaran would not go down without a fight.

Unfortunately, it was now showtime for the lack of a plan that Yae had declared an impossibility.

Aldebaran: “Now, am I walking into an Oni nest or a snake pit?”

He would feel reluctant either way, but Aldebaran hid those uneasy thoughts inside his helmet and headed straight out of the woods, leaving the other two behind.

The information he needed in order to inform his next decisions consisted of the confirmation of the hostile opponents’ identities, and their fighting strength—

???: “—Heh? You got a lotta nerve coming out so boldly like that, must be fully prepared, yeah?”

His view, obscured by tall trees, suddenly cleared up, and a plain unfolded before Aldebaran’s eyes.

Standing imposingly on the other side of the plain with a smile baring her white canines was a girl of golden hair and red eyes; it was the person he had assumed, judging from the characteristics of her voice and the contents of her dialogue—Felt.

Aldebaran: “…”

This was what followed the encounter with Reinhard. That in itself was no surprise.

In addition, Aldebaran had already begun estimating his opponent’s strength as soon as he guessed that the opponent was Felt. —At the current point in time, her two star players, the Sword Saint and the Gray, had already been dealt with.

Referring back to his knowledge he had acquired from his time in the Watergate City of Pristella, would the other key members of this

Camp then be the trio of former thugs, Flam's younger sister whom he had yet to see, and the old giant who had invaded the Royal Castle? Although Felt's own capabilities were yet to be confirmed, it was unlikely that she would come close to matching Priscilla's strength.

Even Priscilla would have been no match for Aldebaran if they were to have fought one-on-one.

Even in the unlikely event that Felt was secretly a very powerful individual, he would have had many ways of dealing with her. —At least, that was what Aldebaran had been thinking until he exited the forest.

However—

Aldebaran: "…Oi oi, what kinda joke is this?"

Aldebaran could not help but give a dry smile at the unexpected sight that unfolded before his eyes.

After all, his original expectation had been for five people, six at most. This was roughly a hundred times that—a group of over five hundred people were there to receive Aldebaran.

3

—Felt had grown up in the slums, and even though her position in society had changed, there still existed within her a mindset of poverty.

Although she no longer lacked food, clothing, or a place to sleep, those were things not of Felt's own possession; they were all attached to Reinhard and the Astrea household.

Indeed, Reinhard was Felt's Knight, but she was not so deluded as to think that this gave her the right to claim all of his possessions as her own.

Therefore, she had no intention of letting the "cards" she had originally held in her hand go to waste, even if the food she ate was delicious, the quality of her clothes changed dramatically, and she could sleep soundly until morning.

The “cards” in Felt’s hand were, simply put, a collection of traits she had cultivated in order to “live strong”.

Her keen eye for spotting easy suckers and her ability to escape, both honed during her time in the slums, her courage in the face of any situation, and her intuition for when she was in a bind—all of these had been sharpened further after the incident with the Bowel Hunter that had led to her encounter with Reinhard, and she continued to hone these skills even during her time spent receiving a higher education in preparation for the Royal Selection.

As a matter of fact, all of these “cards” were now much more useful than before. —And yet, she had still never been able to shake off Reinhard even once.

In any case, by continuing to hone her old “cards”, Felt’s perspective had broadened to a level that allowed her to see things which had before escaped her sight.

Felt’s confidence did not allow her to overlook the slightest sense of unease which might have bothered her.

—The same applied to when Flam, who had remained at the Pleiades Watchtower, sent word of the critical situation to her twin sister, Grassis, in the Royal Capital via the Divine Protection of Mindspeak.

???: “—Felt-sama, I must hasten towards the Augria Sand Dunes at once. I may have to do battle against the Divine Dragon Volcanica there. If the battle reaches beyond the Sand Sea, the damage would be far too great.”

Felt: “Wait a second… It almost seems like they’re going out of their way to start the battle in that sandy dump to me. I’m pretty sure you were saying something about how that’s the one place in the whole world where you’re at your weakest, yeah?”

Reinhard: “—. Yes, that is correct. I am not very compatible with the Miasma in that location. However, avoiding this is not an option. Flam and Ezzo-dono are in that Tower. In addition…”

Upon hearing the news from Grassis, Reinhard seemed to be driven by a sense of duty as the Sword Saint, to which Felt responded by saying “I know” and scratching her head.

That Reinhard was making that face at this moment was one of the things about him she was not very fond of, but there was no point in bringing it up. More importantly, she needed to get Reinhard to accept her next proposal.

That proposal was—

Felt: “Reinhard, I ain’t telling you not to go. But, don’t just go off alone. —Take us part of the way, too.”

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, that is…!”

Felt: “Hey, are you saying that you’re going off to do something reckless, but won’t let me do the same? Don’t be so conceited. Aside from you, everyone else is still entitled to do everything they can.”

Reinhard: “…”

Reinhard remained silent, unsure of what to say in defense, and it was easy to understand what was going on inside his mind from a glance.

After all, not only had their opponent completely defeated Ezzo and Flam, but he also had the Divine Dragon Volcanica accompanying him. This had the potential to be one of the biggest crises the Kingdom had ever faced.

It was truly a colossal task worthy of the attention of the Sword Saint.

Felt: “I don’t get it, though.”

Reinhard: “May I ask what you do not understand?”

Felt: “Even if he didn’t know about Flam’s Divine Protection, people would still find out about him as soon as he brought out the Divine

Dragon. And as soon as that happened, it’s obvious you’d come flying. But still, that helmet bastard did it anyway.”

Reinhard: “…So, are you saying that Al-dono is acting in anticipation of that, Felt-sama?”

Felt: “Which is more likely in his case: anticipating that people will come for him, or believing that nobody will?”

Felt posited this with one eye closed, and Reinhard began to seriously consider the possibility.

He must have had some sort of measure in place to deal with Reinhard. In fact, it was quite possible that bringing the Divine Dragon to his side was a part of it.

With the poor conditions of being in the Augria Sand Dunes and the presence of the Divine Dragon, was it still possible for Reinhard to overcome this?

Reinhard: “Even if that is the case… Even so, I must go. Even if the enemy has taken effective countermeasures, I am the only one who can overcome them…”

Felt: “—Reinhard, don’t dodge.”

Upon giving this order to Reinhard, the eyes of the red-haired Knight, who was kneeling so as to speak to her, widened in surprise. When as instructed, he did not move, and Felt placed both of her hands on his cheeks.

Reinhard’s eyes were fixed on her, sullying his beautiful appearance which was the cause of much excitement in the streets.

Felt: “Moron, I told you I ain’t stopping. Just jump on the opponent’s invitation. Unleash your ridiculous strength and go wild. —I’ll pick up the rest from there.”

Reinhard: “—Ah.”

Bringing her face closer, she said this from a distance where their noses nearly touched, and just as she was watching his sky-blue eyes shimmer with surprise, the door to the room was violently slammed open.

Standing there was a group of familiar faces, gasping for breath—

Felt: “You’ve come back just in time. How’d it go?”

???: “Haa, haa… th-this is just insane…”

???: “Why don’t we just use one of our own sturdy dragon carriages that we don’t care about breakin’, milady?!”

???: “You idiot, that ground dragon… I thought we couldn’t take Romy with us. What the hell’s going on? Grassis didn’t give me any details, either.”

???: “Dragon carriage procurement, complete.”

The trio squeezed through the cramped entrance, shoulder to shoulder, with a sleepy-eyed Grassis following behind them.

Reinhard looked around at the crowd of people who had just arrived, and again his eyes widened in amazement. Felt snorted at the sight of that childish expression, one that did not fit his age,

Felt: “Hey, put a little more life into your face.”

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, this is…”

Felt: “Don’t get ahead of yourself and start thinking you can do everything on your own, Reinhard. You can’t even hold the hands of all three of them at the same time on your own, y’know?”

She said that while shrugging her shoulders at him, and Reinhard blinked, his eyes fixated on her. Then, he took a deep breath, and quietly letting the emotion in his eyes slowly begin to settle,

Reinhard: “—Yes. I am the Sword Saint who cannot even hold the hands of all three of them at the same time on my own.”

Finally, he nodded, donning the face of Reinhard, not just that of the Sword Saint.

4

After that, it was a race against time, as Felt worked Reinhard as hard as possible.

Carrying the dragon carriage that Grassis and the others had found, Reinhard went from the Royal Capital to the Augria Sand Dunes in a single flight, sending them to the Astrea Domain en route.

Reinhard: “I am leaving now, Felt-sama!”

Felt: “Go make a show of it and beat him down a hundred times over!!”

Truthfully, even with Reinhard’s Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, she had not wanted to experience that emergency trip again, but it had undoubtedly been worthwhile to make the detour.

The helmet bastard’s counters against Reinhard, their viciousness had far exceeded her wildest imaginations.

—The manifestation of the Witch of Envy in the Sand Dunes, which she knew was still keeping Reinhard at a standstill, had occurred shortly after his departure.

???: “To think, the Witch of Envy… even in my prime, I wouldn’t have considered such a method. That helmet bastard, I don’t know him, but was he really that crazy?”

Rom-jii, who was stroking his bald head with his large palm, sighed heavily at the distant report.

Rom-jii, who had joined them at the estate, was one of the two main strategists of the faction, along with Ezzo, who was no longer present. However, upon hearing Rom-jii’s report, Felt shook her head in disagreement.

Felt: “From what I saw, that helmet bastard wasn’t that crazy. His appearance and way of speaking were different, sure, but honestly, he was no worse than that cat-eared guy from Crusch nee-chan’s side or the black-haired nii-chan from Emilia nee-chan’s side.”

Towards Al, who had caused this situation and turned into an enemy, Felt did not have a particularly good or bad impression. —However, like the other Knights, she thought he had a strong sense of loyalty to his master, despite his frivolous attitude.

That was why—

Felt: "—When his Princess died, maybe he ended up falling into despair?"

—The death of Priscilla Barielle, caught in the internal struggle of the Vollachian Empire.

The unbelievable news delivered to the Royal Castle of Lugunica, naturally it reached Felt's ears while she was in the Royal Capital.

To be honest, she could not understand it right away when she heard it, and even now she did not feel it in any real sense.

That was how full of life Priscilla had been, so far removed from anything related to death.

Felt: "…There's no such thing as an immortal human. Us bystanders, we can swallow it like that. But, that helmet bastard wasn't like that."

Rom: "But, what's his plan if that's the case? Accordin' to the report from Flam, he's said to be commandin' the Divine Dragon, but is he plannin' on draggin' the world into a grand suicide?"

Felt: "I don't think that's impossible, but…"

To throw everything away, dragging the world with him to mourn Priscilla's death. —Felt thought it was unlikely to be such an outburst in that direction.

If Al's goal was such an obvious desire for destruction, then the biggest obstacle to that would undoubtedly be Reinhard.

???: "Yet, the helmet bastard didn't team up with the Witch… the Witch of Envy to kill Reinhard. So at least for now, it means world destruction isn't his goal."

Felt: “Oh, what’s this, Rachins? Just because Sensei isn’t here, you’re trying to be the voice of reason?”

Rachins: “Don’t mock me. Honestly, if you ask me, I just want to escape and run. The Witch of Envy showing up? This is beyond what we can handle.”

Exaggeratedly flicking his long tongue, Rachins snapped at Felt.

Beside him were Gaston and Camberley, who both anxiously agreed with Rachins, saying, “Yeah, yeah”,

Camberley: “Y-Yeah, that’s right, miss! Even if Reinhard stopped the Witch of Envy, the Divine Dragon is still running wild, right? That’s beyond what we can handle!”

Gaston: “Felt understands that much, right? We returned to the domain to evacuate the citizens on the off chance that…”

Felt: “Yeah, we’ll need to deal with that one too.”

Gaston: “See? Like I said… wait, did you say “that one too”?”

For a moment, Gaston’s eyes twinkled with relief at Felt’s response. Seeing his reaction, Felt laughed and nodded, saying, “Oh, I did, I did”,

Felt: “We have to think about the worst-case scenario, but we can’t make a huge fuss. After all, you guys are freaking out just because it’s a Witch.”

Camberley: “Of course we are! And you’re freaking out too, miss, aren’t you?! It’s a Witch, a Witch!”

Felt: “Your girlfriend gets called something similar, doesn’t she?”

Camberley: “Toto gets called “Wicked Temptress” but she’s cute in front of me, so it’s fine!”

Rachins: “Stop fooling around! The conversation’s getting off track!”

Interrupting the spitting match between Felt and Camberley, Rachins sharply glared at them as he said, “Okay?” and placed his hand on the map spread out on the tabletop with a thump.

Rachins: “We won’t get anywhere unless we decide on a course of action. Felt, what’s your plan?”

Camberley: “Hah, if it’s by majority vote, there’s no doubt the answer is to run. But…”

Rom: “—We all intend to follow your lead.”

Seeing Rom-jii’s serious tone, Felt briefly held her breath.

Looking around, Rachins had a skeptical look, Gaston’s face was grim, and Camberley’s legs trembled like a newborn deer, all waiting for Felt’s response without arguing.

Seriously, when did these guys become so reliable?

Felt: “That’s been me all along. I really hated it when something bad happened and people just sat around, waiting for someone else to fix it.”

Rom: “Sigh, such a fiery way of thinkin’. I wonder who she got that from.”

Felt: “Who knows. Ask my foster parent, have him think about it.”

After saying that to her foster parent, who slowly shook his head, Felt stuck her tongue out playfully. Then she turned around with enthusiasm, looking at the group waiting for her words.

And then, she declared.

Felt: “Alright, you guys, time to get off your asses. —This is someone who made a fool of my Reinhard. No need to hold back on him, so let’s crush him!”

5

—Resolved to fight, Felt and her faction had moved swiftly.

Far away at the eastern edge of the world, the battle between Reinhard and the Witch of Envy raged on.

And Al, the one who had given rise to such a predicament, had left the battlefield, departing the sand sea with the Divine Dragon in tow—they had been able to accurately grasp the opponent's movements until that point.

The problem was—

???: "There've been eyewitness reports that the Divine Dragon's goin' north. Take that at face value, and you'd assume the helmet bastard's gotta be accompanyin' it… That's to say, their destination'd be in the north, but…"

Felt: "If that's at face value, you're saying there's a thought pattern that branches another way?"

???: "Mm. Far as I've heard, the helmet bastard's plans were so meticulous that they included countermeasures for even Reinhard. So then, why go out of his way to stand out at the inn town by the exit of the sand dunes?"

Felt: "That'd be, to reinforce the impression that he's got a Dragon with him, yeah?"

???: "Indeed, he'd wanted to give us that impression. —After all, ain't the Divine Dragon flyin' at a height such that people can see it headed north with their naked eyes?"

Though he had prefaced that it might have branched another way, Rom-jii's conjecture was certainly unexpected.

Nearly all affairs had a simple way to interpret them, alongside a more twisted way to interpret them, and in the majority of cases, the simplest interpretation would result in the right answer.

However, a faint unease had restrained Felt's feelings in this case.

Felt: "Deliberately making a show of the Dragon going north, but why?"

Rom: “Naturally, it’s to conceal his true aims, oughta be. Showin’ the Dragon flyin’ ‘round is a card he played to distract us… so aside from the north and east, I presume his destination should lie to the west or south.”

Felt: “—. The Princess died in the Empire. If the Divine Dragon opened fire on the Empire, would it kick off a conflict with that country that’s filled with complex relations…? Nah, that probably ain’t it.”

If that guess was correct, it would certainly have yielded a great deal of strife between the Kingdom and the Empire.

However, that would have been in striking contradiction to the sovereign letter regarding the future of diplomatic relations between the Vollachian Empire and the Kingdom of Lugunica, sent back at the time of the news of Priscilla’s death.

Of course, there was also the possibility that, not wanting to get the Kingdom involved, it was a simple act of retaliation towards the Empire.

Felt: “If that were the case, there wouldn’t be much difference to a suicide bombing that drags the entire world down with him. That would mean…”

Rom: “—Mean what?”

Felt: “—My gut’s telling me west. Though, I can’t tell if it’s straight west, northwest, or southwest.”

Rom: “If the Dragon’s a diversion, we can eliminate the possibility of northwest. That narrows it down to two points. All that’s left is to —”

Felt: “Yeah, all that’s left is to—”

—Gambling everything on their interpretation, Felt lined up all of her Camp’s military strength upon the plain.

To put it bluntly, the Astrea Domain did not retain much of an army. This too was a malady of Reinhard being far too strong, but she had tasked those few soldiers with leading the evacuation of the territories that the opponent might pass through.

That was fine. Their strength was meant to protect. Right now, what was necessary was not that, but rather—

???: "—As I thought, there's something wrong with you, girl."

???: "Nah nah nah, I don't know about that. She's got a decisiveness I find desirable. If need there be, she doesn't hesitate to drag us vassals of violence into it. I can hold my nose high as her supporter."

???: "And where might that nose of yours be, I wonder? Those tattoos on your face are so vehemently assertive, and my eyes are unable to get a complete view of your facial features whatsoever."

With each speaking in their own respective manner, they were the representatives of the gathered military strength.

One was a large pig-human clad in a thick armor of muscle, of a huge stature that rivaled Rom-jii.

One was an eccentric of queer appearance, his face covered in blue tattoos of balancing scales.

One was a blooming beauty, coquettishly adorned in lascivious clothing unsuited to the situation.

—The Black Silver Coin, the Balance, and the Flower Prison Garden.

Although they were lined up, they showed not a tinge of amicability towards each other, but there was one thing they all had in common. —That, upon Felt's beck and call, they had gathered.

They were the big shots that governed over the criminal underworld of the Ground Dragon Capital of Flanders, a city northeast of the Astrea Domain, and since becoming acquainted with them during a previous incident, Felt networked with them.

Each and every one of them were scoundrels with guilty consciences, but at the same time they were a necessary evil who were supporters of Felt—numbering around five-hundred people in total, they trusted in Felt's instincts, and had accompanied her in this battle formation.

Felt: "Hah! What a magnificent sight! How'd this many end up gathering here?"

Making a visor with her hand, Felt raised her voice at the line-up of five hundred scoundrels.

In truth, when she thought of attempting to borrow strength from Flanders, she estimated that a tenth of this amount would have been satisfactory. Unexpectedly, she had gotten ten times that number.

Felt: "Even though I told them that the opponent was a guy who managed to outmaneuver Reinhard… geez, I know it's not the place or time for it, but I wish I could show you."

It was something she wished she could teach Reinhard, who was not present in this place.

That there were so many people who, instead of turning tail and running from a situation even Reinhard could not overcome, had gathered to clean up after his ass.

Felt: "Well, there are also probably some like Camberley who just can't back out."

Muttering so, Felt cracked her neck, and turned around with her allies to her back.

Ahead of her vision, parallel to the line-up of the troupe, the large forest—facing it, Felt inhaled in as large of a breath that could fit in her small body,

Felt: "—Oi! You can hear me, can't you? I know you're in there, helmet bastard!"

Indeed, she unleashed a declaration of war that served to commence the battle.

6

—Having had absolutely no idea that such an inconceivable move could have been played, Aldebaran could do nothing but stand still at the sight spread out before his eyes.

Aldebaran: “Oi oi…”

To the extent that a dry smile unconsciously emerged on his face, this situation had derailed Aldebaran’s calculations.

A situation a hundred times worse than he could have ever hypothesized, filled him with awe. Truly, this situation filled him with awe.

Lacking a sense of visual cohesion, the troupe was lined up across the plain; however, firmly sharing in the goal to oppose something, they were an army corps of unmatching steel.

Aldebaran: “…”

Still wearing that dry smile on his face, Aldebaran was at a loss.

The way his mind was abruptly thrown into chaos when things outside his expectations occurred, demonstrated the difference between himself and Yae, who instead stood impressed.

The grounds on which Yae acknowledged him as her superior, too, was nothing more than a fabrication secured by his cheat technique of an Authority.

In any case—

Aldebaran: “Quite the big shot, aren’t you now, lil’ miss Felt.”

Right in the center of that astonishment, Felt was the key figure who went above and beyond Aldebaran’s expectations.

The atmosphere she exuded that had convinced him so, had grown ever sharper in the three short months he had not seen her. As expected from such an outstanding talent, who had made Priscilla recognize her as a worthy adversary in the span of merely a year.

Her level of importance in the world fundamentally differed to that of Aldebaran. —Having said that, his resolve was not so cheap that he would back down for that reason alone.

Aldebaran: “Thanks for coming out to greet me. But, is it really fine for you to concern yourself with me? Even now, you guys’ Sword Saint is—”

Felt: “—Sorry man.”

Aldebaran: “…”

For the time being, Aldebaran was going to attempt to obtain whatever scraps of information he could through a battle of words. However, mercilessly interrupting his words, Felt scratched her head as she closed a single eye.

And then—

Felt: “Both me and Rom-jii agreed that shutting you up was the first thing that oughta be done.”

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

That instant, Aldebaran’s body tensed up at a dreadful sensation. But, it was too late.

Before he could even react to that sense of dread, a small shadow that had been hiding in the entrance to the woods leapt out, and delivered a strong blow to the back of Aldebaran’s neck with a slender foot.

Aldebaran: “Kah, kuh…”

The intense impact jolted his brain, and Aldebaran’s knees buckled as they lost their strength.

In the corner of his vision, the one who had delivered that blow landed nimbly on the grass, their two bundles of peach hair swaying as they looked at Aldebaran with sleepy eyes.

A countenance he recognized—the young girl who bore a striking resemblance to that, her true identity was.

???: “Vengeance for Flam.”

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From those brief, matter-of-fact words, he understood that she was indeed Flam's younger sister.

Crumbling down from the girl's attack, as he began to lose hold of his consciousness, Aldebaran muttered.

Aldebaran: "Not, dead yet…"

Then, as his consciousness slowly faded down into the abyssal darkness—by reflex, he gulped down his poison.

Consuming the deadly poison kept behind his molar, was the singular action that Aldebaran had performed the most in his life, an exquisite skill deeply ingrained not just to his body, but to his soul.

This alone was Aldebaran's one and only special technique that not even the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, could get in the way of.

After all, there was not a single person in this world better at killing Aldebaran than Aldebaran—

× × ×

???: "—Oi! You can hear me, can't you? I know you're in there, helmet bastard!"

The sensation of his brain being scorched by poison was cut off, and what hastened his immediate recovery was a spirited, commanding voice pregnant with a hearty enmity.

The redefined Matrix—Aldebaran returned to when Felt gave her declaration of war, and brought the count up to one in his head.

???: "Oi! That voice just now, it's that blonde-haired brat! Reinhard's master! What the hell's she doing here… wasn't it supposed to be that nobody could find us?!"

Giving a sidelong glance to the exchange between the panicked Heinkel and Yae as she soothed him in a manner to provoke him further, Aldebaran went about updating the war situation in his mind based on the information he had just acquired.

An update to the military strength he had previously anticipated for the Felt Camp—moreover, a substantial update was needed.

After all, his prior expectation had been the three delinquents, the old giant, and Flam's younger sister, for a maximum of five people. It was approximately a hundred times that—with what seemed a party of over five hundred people, they had been waiting in ambush.

Aldebaran: "Really now, they've got a damn troublesome brain along with them."

In a form that differed to his showdown against the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, this was the worst case scenario for Aldebaran —

Aldebaran: "…Seriously, you're coming at me with the tactics I hate the most, lil' miss Felt."

—Between Aldebaran and an enemy that came at him with an onslaught of numbers, the unavoidable battle commenced.

Chapter 19:
Scuffle in the Shadows

1

???: “—I love you.”

The world being painted over through the power of those non-superficial words of love, they heard.

???: “…”

But in truth, that did not mean that “sound” was being produced.

The sound of something cracking, the sound of something being shattered, the sound of something being shredded, the sound of something being broken, the sound of something being sliced open, the sound of something being crushed, the sound of something being pulverized, the sound of something being smashed, the sound of something being pierced, the sound of something being hurled downward, the sound of something—.

???: “—I love you, I love you, I love you.”

But in truth, that did not mean that “sound” was being produced.

Rather, it was as an illusionary “sound”, that of all being lost; this affection, presented by the sable shadow, transgressed against the soul at the nexus of this world to such a degree.

A world, where everything was consumed.

A world, where everything would never-endingly descend into a darkness unfathomable.

There, amidst the deep, seemingly boundless darkness, a soul realized that everything, both important and unimportant, had been dissolved.

And yet—

Was it because they were weak, that they did not wish to admit it? —No, it was because they were kind.

Was it because they were weak, that they could not give up? —No, it was because they were kind.

Was it because they were weak, that they could not refuse love? —No, it was because they were kind.

???: "—I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you."

To those whispers of love, they raised their voice, rejecting it with everything they had.

But, they understood. They very much understood. That even rejecting it with everything they had, would not be able to turn it away completely.

???: "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you."

There, a glimpse of a possibility was caught.

With the first, second, and third places in that person's heart having been taken entirely, a glimpse would still be attainable nonetheless.

For the cowardly, for the despicable love that sought to take advantage of this, they felt no sympathy.

The consequence of such conceit was, inevitably—

???: "I love you. I love you—Love me."

—There it was.

???: "Love me. Love me. Love me. Love me. Love me love me—Love me.”

They knew this would happen.

It was as clear as day. It was like stealing from a baby. It was easier than crushing a tometo, opening closed eyelids, or even breathing in and out.

They knew this would happen.

Because it was not for that other person’s sake. Because it was for their own.

If one did not have to consider the feelings of others, able to fill one’s heart and mind with only their thoughts and feelings, then naturally that would happen.

That was by far the most disgraceful aspect of it all, disgraceful to the point the shame would make one’s face burn.

???: “—I hate you.”

—They felt as if their heart was going to freeze.

???: “I am never, going to love you.”

—It was as if it was being said to them and not to anyone else, and they felt they were going to die.

However, even that fear of death was much, much, much, much, much, much better than what was behind waiting for them.

After all—

???: “Petra’s handkerchief…?”

—They were convinced that the time had finally come, and that the noose was about to be slipped around their neck.

2

—A band of roughly five hundred people had gathered to receive him.

That was the troublesome formation arranged by Felt to intercept Aldebaran.

Naturally, the moment he left Flam alive, Aldebaran's rebellion would have been communicated to Reinhard, and he had rushed to the scene, just as expected. As part of that course of events, he fully understood that the selfsame information would have been shared with Felt and the Council of Wise Men.

In order to eliminate the formidable enemies he had fully expected to come after him, Aldebaran's intention had been to deploy his strongest card, "Aldebaran", as a diversion, thus clearing out his own path.

However, by the unexpected initiative of a young girl whom he had underestimated, his calculations had been reset to square one.

Aldebaran: "Good grief, there's too many star players in this world that I can't compete with."

???: "I told you this ain't the time to be cracking jokes!"

As Aldebaran shrugged his shoulders and grumbled, Heinkel shouted at him—no, Heinkel was not yelling at him, but rather at Yae.

It was merely that his angered shout at Yae's proposed human sacrifice strategy had miraculously coincided with Aldebaran's mumbling.

In any case—

Aldebaran: "As the old man says, this isn't the time for jokes. We're going to deal with it."

As his cheeks tightened within his helmet, Aldebaran shoved aside his lament towards this absurd world and called upon his two companions to begin a strategy meeting.

Heinkel, his face pale, and Yae, her thin smile unable to be deciphered; these two, along with the talentless Aldebaran, were the cards in his hand, having used his primary strength as a diversion.

Aldebaran: “A bit shabby, but they don’t have their best members, either.”

Heinkel: “By dealing with it, what are you planning on doing? To begin with, the opponent’s…”

Aldebaran: “There’s roughly five hundred enemies, and although they don’t look like Knights or guards, they’ve got their fair share of experience with brawling. Also, I’m pretty sure we’re up against that lil’ miss Felt.”

Yae: “Five hundred people~, that’s quite a lot!”

Yae put her finger to her lips, impressed at how they were able to gather so many people in such a short amount of time.

Aldebaran was in complete agreement; without taking nearly the best possible moves and strategies, they would not have been able to bring the situation to this point.

Heinkel: “Wait, wait, wait! Five hundred?! And they’re not soldiers? What the hell is going on? First of all, how the hell did you even get that information?”

Aldebaran: “Stop right there, old man. It doesn’t matter how I know the opponent’s numbers. What matters is that it’s the truth. Besides, we made a deal at the start, remember? —If you want the Dragon’s Blood, don’t go against my plans.”

Heinkel: “Gh…”

Aldebaran: “People hate a man who can’t keep his word, you know?”

After being reminded, Heinkel fell silent, though visibly frustrated.

Heinkel’s situation was like that of a horse running with a carrot dangled before its face. Unlike a horse, however, Heinkel’s longing could only be satisfied by that particular carrot.

Hence, Heinkel could not defy Aldebaran, who dangled the carrot before him.

Yae: “Now that Heinkel-sama has been silenced, what will you do? Five hundred people is still pretty tough, y’know?”

Aldebaran: “Aren’t you supposed to be the greatest masterpiece of a shinobi to ever be made in Vollachia? Can’t you do something about it?”

Yae: “Even if you say I’m the greatest masterpiece, I did fail in my assassination attempt~? Besides, it’s not the job of a shinobi to slaughter a hundred or a thousand people on the battlefield. I’m no Blue Lightning, after all.”

Aldebaran: “Well, I guess you’re right.”

The Blue Lightning, whom Yae pouted her lips at as she brought up—Cecilus, was somebody whom Aldebaran had also worked together with, though only for a brief time.

His abilities were just as the anecdotal exaggeration that Yae had described, and he was a member of the same realm of incomprehensible outliers that included Reinhard.

If Aldebaran had that kind of power, he would have been able to take on even a thousand people in a head-on collision; but, unfortunately, he had given up such lofty aspirations when he was a teenager.

Ergo—

Aldebaran: “Realistically speaking, it’s a fool’s errand to venture out into a place where five hundred people are waiting for you. We already happen to be in the woods… we’ll take a detour such that they can’t find us.”

Judging from the tone of the voice that was thrown at them, it seemed an unreasonable plan to just pretend they were not actually there. But, if they knew exactly where Aldebaran and his henchmen were, they would have had Grassis launch a surprise attack.

So long as that was not the case, they simply knew that they were in the woods, but nothing more.

Then, depending on how they maneuvered, they could divide the five hundred enemies even further—

Yae: “Ah~, Al-sama, this might be a bit bad.”

Having decided on a course of action, just as he was about to move from their position, Yae lightly tugged on his sleeve.

When Aldebaran turned to see what was going on, she was looking in the direction where Felt and the others were waiting, and with a wary look in her eyes, she informed him.

That was—

Yae: “They seem to be working pretty quickly over there.”

As Yae spoke, Aldebaran saw the same thing. —Logs of firewood, producing white smoke, being tossed into the forest one after the other.

3

???: “Welp, guess we couldn’t hope that he’d just waltz on out here.”

Indeed, right in the midst of the troupe that had deployed across the plain, Felt complained whilst glaring at the forest in which the enemy hid.

Enemy; whether it was fine to declare that helmet bastard as such, was a matter she still had some indecision about. However, Al was neither a friend nor an ally who had gone rogue, nor an acquaintance with whom she had deep ties.

Above all, in order to rouse the morale of her gathered troops, calling him an enemy was more effective.

Hence, Felt plainly proclaimed that helmet bastard—Al, as an enemy.

And, this enemy was within the forest surrounded by Felt's faction.

Felt: "Then, there's no doubt about it, right? Otherwise, I'd be a humiliated sucker who just greeted an empty forest with a loud shout."

???: "Hahaha, don't worry so unashamedly, Golden Lion. Indeed, it may only be effective in one eye, but once I narrow down the scope this much, I'd see them even if I didn't want to."

Tinged with a bit of a distinct accent, the one who had answered Felt was the leader of the Balance, a man by the name of Manfred Madison.

Within the Balance, it seemed to be customary for one to ink a tattoo of balance scales somewhere on their body as proof of their loyalty towards the organization, but Manfred had gone overboard in proving his faithfulness. He was a person who had inked tattoos onto his shaven head, his face and neck, even his eyeball, and it was likely that the same went for everything that lay under his clothes.

And, that eccentricity of his was present not only in his appearance. —It extended to his way of being.

Manfred: "—The Divine Protection of Farsight."

Manfred's left eye—his lone eyeball with no visible tattoos, spun around, goggling with a stare affixed to the forest.

Up until a short while ago, that left eye of his also had been inked with tattoos. The reason why the tattoos were now absent was simple—the eyeball occupying the socket was one entirely different.

Right now, the eyeball sitting in Manfred's eye socket was the left eye of a man who formerly served as his underling—

Manfred: "As expected, one doesn't quite grow accustomed to the Divine Protection of another. Still, I saw them."

Felt: "While that might be pretty useful, it's also super gross. How'd you do it?"

Manfred: “I don’t dislike your straightforward wording. —However, the method of stealing Divine Protections is one of the Balance’s secrets.”

Without touching upon the method itself, Manfred confirmed the presence of their enemy within the woods.

In the past, Felt had experienced torment at the hands of that very Divine Protection of Farsight, so she had no room to doubt the credibility of the information it rendered.

Felt: “If they ain’t gonna come out…”

???: “Then there’s no other choice but to make ‘em wanna come out.”

Cracking his thick neck, Rom-jii finished Felt’s words.

The Great Strategist had used the results of Manfred’s defective Divine Protection of Farsight to the fullest in order to formulate a stratagem, and had been preparing the next move to be played against the opponent holed up in the forest.

That was—

Rom: “It’s tough for pyro tree lumber to burn up while it’s still green, so it produces lotsa smoke. It doesn’t stop fumin’ easily, even if you spray it with water. This strategem oughta be ideal.”

Voicing that, Rom-jii’s proposal was plain and simple: to smoke out Al.

Led by Gaston and other ruffians who all took pride in their physical strength, firewood from pyro trees, set alight, was being hurled into the forest one after another. As Rom-jii had said, the firewood was only producing smoke without spreading their flames to the surroundings, giving rise to a magnificent display of white fumes.

Rom: “The effects of the smoke don’t end at just robbin’ ‘em of their vision. While there’s also a psychological burden, the most worrisome aspect is the sufferin’ that comes after inhalin’ it.”

Felt: “I bet you’d have a terribly painful coughing fit.”

Rom: “Just so, it’s the agony of Hell. Moreover—”

As he spoke, Rom-jii narrowed his eyes.

Doing so, his gaze turned to Camberley and his girlfriend Toto, the proprietress of the Flower Prison Garden; they were directing her subordinates to bring about a magical gale and sending it forth into the forest.

The induced draft did not hew the trees, but instead gently brushed through the gaps between, a passage of wind—that was to say, creating a passage for the smoke, the white fumes began to spread throughout the woods.

Rom: “Far as I know, there’re no shortage of people who can shake off poison or deep gashes. And yet, in all my pointlessly long life, I ain’t never known somebody who could calmly bear the pain of bein’ smoked out.”

Witnessing his strategy marching closer to fruition, Rom-jii declared so in a low voice.

While that rang pleasantly within Felt’s ears, she once again got a keen sense that her foster parent was preeminent with absurdly dangerous knowledge.

What Rom-jii had done in his past, Felt did not know.

Only, she understood that it was not something that could be spoken of proudly, and that Rom-jii himself was ashamed of that past.

That was why, until Rom-jii decided to speak of it willingly, Felt would not pry.

Without prying, this was all she would say:

Felt: “How’d you like that? —My Rom-jii’s quite the formidable one, you know.”

Aldebaran: “—Smoke.”

The firewood thrown in—as he bore witness to it giving rise to white smoke, slowly encroaching through the forest, Aldebaran was astounded at his opponent’s unpleasant response.

Being surrounded by a large number of people was already the worst, but this just stacked a whole new level of worst on top of that.

Heinkel: “Th-those shitheads, they lit a fire! They’re trying to burn us to death!”

Yae: “Please calm down. An incendiary attack would leave them unable to confirm the corpses, and it would be quite possible for them to get caught up in it as well. When you combine “foolish” and “strategy” you get a “bad plan”.”

Heinkel: “Our opponent might have just enacted that bad plan! She’s a brat from the slums, you know?! Their kind doesn’t bother to think ahead!”

Yae: “Geez~, Al-sama!”

Aldebaran: “Got it! Old man, just shut up for a sec!”

With what little composure he had left smoked away by the fumes, Heinkel panicked, leaving Aldebaran to forcibly silence him with a reprimand.

Due to his desire for the Dragon’s Blood, Heinkel could not disobey Aldebaran. Be that as it may, the turmoil that came with being driven into a corner probably could not be treated the same way as complaints or objections.

Aldebaran: “—I agree with Yae, this isn’t an incendiary attack, more likely they’re aiming to attack us with smoke. Unfortunately, I’ve got no way to endure a smoke assault. Yae, how about you?”

Yae: “You’re asking if I can endure the smoke? No dice, I may have anti-torture measures and a built-up resistance to poison, but no amount of training can stop you from becoming teary eyed and coughing when inhaling smoke, y'know?"

Aldebaran: "Sounds about right. And so, no choice but to run from the smoke."

In order to avoid being smoked to death, they could reach no other conclusion.

The only problem was, that was exactly what the opponent wanted them to do. —Naturally, it was human instinct to flee from any danger before one's eyes, be it fire or smoke.

And thus, the artificial wind that had come blowing their way alongside the smoke was an untouchable hunter, aiming to smoke Aldebaran's party out—

Aldebaran: "I underestimated them, thinking that even with five hundred, they wouldn't be able to surround the whole forest…!"

Smoke for flushing them out, and a draft to guide that smoke.

With just that, then whether it be a small force such as Aldebaran's, or even a certain degree of military host, it would have been possible to force them to a desired position.

In doing so, Felt had completely surrounded a forest that could not be fully encircled by five hundred people.

Aldebaran: "Or rather, was it the brain of the group? Piece of shit, they've really got us here."

Clicking his tongue bitterly, Aldebaran pictured a map of the world in his head.

His destination was still far, far to the west from here—having already used up one day for rest and traversal, the time limit had shrunk from seven days to six.

He could not afford to get tripped up more than necessary against Felt here, dealing with a drawn-out battle.

Yae: “Al-sama!”

Aldebaran: “—Hk, Yae, point us the way the wind’s flowing! Old man, follow Yae’s directions, and charge straight ahead! Chop down any trees that stand in the way!”

Heinkel: “G-Got it.”

Yae: “I can’t he~ar you!”

Heinkel: “I GOT IT!!”

Overwhelmed by Aldebaran’s quick instructions, Heinkel cried out in desperation.

Then, in accordance with Yae’s directions, Heinkel quite literally cleared a path forward with his unsheathed sword. Following after his sturdy back, Aldebaran plunged into deep deliberation.

After moving a great distance, it would become necessary to reestablish his Territory; however, updating his Matrix would mean losing the option to return to before the smoke gambit was enacted.

At the very least, when Aldebaran had willingly exited the forest, Felt had not gone forth with the strategy of smoking them out. Of course, in that case it would have ended up being a head-on collision with five hundred people.

Aldebaran: “Which path would be better?”

—Ultimately, Aldebaran’s victory was guaranteed.

He had restrained the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, and had neutralized Natsuki Subaru; not a single person in this world would be able to defeat Aldebaran.

Thus, Aldebaran’s victory was an absolute. —So, what did he seek outside of victory?

To accomplish that objective outside of victory, which path would have the highest potential?

Yae: “Al-sama, Heinkel-sama will die if you let him go by himself, y’know?”

Aldebaran: “—. Right. Let’s go!”

After a moment’s deliberation, Aldebaran nodded at Yae’s call, and began to run.

Simultaneously, he updated his Matrix at that moment, redefining it —once he prescribed the next starting point, he readily abandoned all attachment to the possibilities that had existed up until a moment prior.

Life was a series of choices. That went not only for Aldebaran, but for everyone.

Most choices were made in an instant, without any looking back on the unchosen alternative. But, that was fine. Aldebaran, too, would do so whenever possible.

What to eat for breakfast tomorrow? Which sock to put on first, the right or the left?

The choices made amidst a battle on which his life was staked, he would treat them as equivalent to trivial choices of that sort. The alternatives he did not choose, the alternatives that were not chosen, there was no sense in clinging to them.

Aldebaran and Natsuki Subaru were merely people who occasionally had more chances than most to cling to the alternatives. —If he did not make that distinction, he would end up stuck in a standstill for eternity.

Yae: “Heinkel-sama, the footing’s getting worse so take a right next. Take care of that big tree please?”

Heinkel: “Don’t say it like it’s so easy! You little…!”

Yae: “Ohh~, amazing! As expected, you’re strong when you’re not against a living being!”

Despite having cut down the large tree as instructed, Heinkel was agitated for some reason, and ground his teeth. Chasing after him, Aldebaran saw the density of the smoke thickening—by way of the wind, the smoke had begun to enclose on them.

In other words—

Aldebaran: "—An ambush's close at hand."

5

—Commanding the ambush unit, Rachins was positioning his battle formation at an exit of the forest.

In all honesty, he was filled with the urge to scream that he had been assigned a duty far beyond his capabilities.

In the first place, the mere fact that Rachins's life had somehow intersected with things such as the Sword Saint, the Divine Dragon, the Witch of Envy and so on, felt like a nightmare to him.

Rachins: "God fucking dammit… where the hell did my life take such a messed-up turn?"

Scratching his head furiously, Rachins let out an endless stream of complaints, trampling the grass beneath his boots in frustration.

It was nothing more than a petty act of venting. But, to Rachins's irritation, the damn weeds only bent softly without breaking or tearing, even as he ground them underfoot. Worse still, they pushed back against his sole, stubbornly asserting their vitality.

They were the very embodiment of weeds, shameless, persistent, unyielding—among them, Rachins could not help but picture a few familiar faces, prompting a heavy sigh.

Before he knew it, he had walked a great distance from where he had started.

Yet, no matter where the wind scattered their seeds to take root, weeds remained weeds. Their blades might take on a slightly different hue, their stems might grow a little thicker, but a weed would never become a tree or a flower.

Rachins: “Fuck’s sake, so no matter where I end up, I can only ever live the way I know how, huh?”

Rachins had not been told that by anyone in particular, though he felt like everyone had told him the same thing, and so he clicked his tongue. However, unlike his voice from just before, there was no trace of gloom or resentment in that sound.

All that remained was the burden of a troublesome task forced upon him, and the resolve to see it through.

And with that, just when a certain kind of defiance within him had finally settled—

???: “—Oi, there’s movement!”

The voice that raised the alarm belonged to one of the roughnecks stationed alongside Rachins in the field.

They were people of the Flanders criminal underworld, made of the same stuff as Gaston, Camberley, and Rachins—no, this lot was even more hardened than them in terms of villainy.

It was strange to be standing shoulder to shoulder with them, but here, their familiarity with violence made them dependable.

Drawn in by their reactions, Rachins turned his gaze toward the forest.

If things went according to plan, the helmet bastard and his companions, driven out by the smoke, would burst out from there. Then, crushing them with the power of sheer numbers would be Rachins’s—

Rachins: “—Huh?!”

The following moment, it was not the helmet bastard that sprang from the forest. —It was a cannonball.

—No, that was not quite right. To be precise, it was a massive tree, hurled with the force of a cannonball, spinning end over end as it made a mad dash straight for Rachins’s formation.

Rachins: “…”

The trunk was thicker than Gaston’s torso, and it was over ten meters long—this unfriendly tree cannonball was barreling straight for the heart of their formation.

Beholding the sight of that, the ruffians shouted, scrambling to flee in a panic.

However—

Rachins: “—El Goa!”

Boom, a thunderous explosion rang through the sky, and a bright red flower of fire bloomed against the blue.

The incoming tree shattered into countless pieces, and the force of the cannonball that by all rights should have torn a huge hole in their formation was now reduced to something that only hurt a little from the scattered fragments.

And, with his finger pointed skyward, Rachins had made that happen.

Rachins: “You fucks, this ain’t the time to be pissing yourselves! At times like these, the ones who’re scared lose! You’ve all heard that a hundred times, right?!”

Shouting at the bunch who had flinched in the wake of that attack, Rachins drew the knife at his waist. He aimed the blade at the forest and turned his head to look around, asking, “Got that?”

Frankly, due to his earlier frustration, the roughnecks had been underestimating Rachins, who was in charge of managing this location, and that reflected in their attitude. It was time to wipe that impression away.

Rachins: “You can probably tell if you saw that just now, but we’re the ones who got lucky! The helmet bastard’s coming out of there any moment now. We don’t have any time to be letting our guard —”

Down; it happened just before he could finish his sentence.

“Oi!!”, a voice cut through the air, and the roughnecks’ gazes shifted away from him once more. Annoyed, Rachins turned to face forward with anger in his shihaku eyes.

One after another, more giant tree cannonballs, each just as big or even larger than the last one, were flying toward them.

Rachins: “Goddammit it all!!”

Immediately after he cursed, a series of bright explosions bloomed in the sky—an unexpected defeat blew their formation away.

Rachins could only watch as a large number of the roughnecks were blown away, jostled by the impact, after which he clicked his tongue “Tsk” and raised his knife towards the woods again.

The situation had dizzyingly changed. If the opponent were to continue procuring locally sourced ammunition, it would be Rachins and his group left to their mercy.

Rachins: “—LET’S GO, HURRY YOUR ASSES UP!!”

Roaring so loud that he felt his voice might crack, Rachins charged in with a battle cry.

Doing so would rouse their fighting spirit. —Not his own fighting spirit, but that of those around him.

As was often the case in commonplace street brawls between ruffians, it was bad to be the first one hit.

Strangely enough, no matter how vicious a person might have been, their strength would plummet the moment they got hit. The idea that the more wounded and bloodied someone got, the stronger they became was just that, an idea; in reality, humans only became weaker as damage accumulated.

The same applied to one’s feelings. At that moment, Rachins’s side had taken the first hit in quite an unexpected way. That weakness caused by taking the first hit, needed to be overwritten with momentum.

And so—

Ruffians: “RAHHHHHHH!! CHAAAAAARGE!!”

The hot-blooded and simple-minded crowd was easily inspired by Rachins’s emotion-filled voice.

They furiously ran after Rachins’s lead, and with weapons in hand, they began closing in on the woods, and closing in, and closing in. Feeling them at his back, Rachins would provide them further support with his next act—

Rachins: “—AL GOA!!”

Hand aimed at the heavens, Rachins performed the incantation in a bloodcurdling shout.

In an instant, a gigantic fireball was born above Rachins’s head—it was a Goa-type spell of the Fire attribute, of which the degree of power had surpassed the basic, El, and Ul classes by going straight to Al class, the highest tier.

Anyone who possessed even a passing knowledge of magic would have known this, but it was a great achievement on Rachins’s part to recite the incantation, and succeed in producing an enormous flame.

The morale of the ruffians rose visibly, and Rachins gave the fireball momentum by shooting it into the sky, deliberately sending it high up into the air.

Naturally, the next group of fallen trees shot out from the forest were aimed towards that fireball.

No matter how many trees were incinerated, the opponent would stop at nothing to block that fireball—

Rachins: “Duuumbass.”

Rachins mocked his opponent by sticking out his tongue with a

“Behhh”, decorated with a colorful ring at the tip.

The large tree cannonballs were fired from the forest in vigorous succession, but most of them ended up missing their target. That was because the first shot had shattered the Al Goa—which, in reality, was just a flattened and stretched out Goa, a papier-mâché just for show, and the remaining shots merely dug pointlessly into the plain.

This was all in an effort to reduce the damage received by Rachins and his group of ruffians, by having the enemy waste ammunition attempting to intercept the faux Al Goa.

The plan had succeeded, and Rachins and the group of roughnecks charged into the woods all at once.

Rachins: “The first shot took us by surprise, and sorta reduced our power, but…!”

Still, with Rachins’s support, the group of fifty ruffians charged in nearly unscathed.

And then—

???: “—Ah~, geez, didn’t you only get in because Heinkel-sama got flustered~?”

The moment he heard that sweet, relaxed voice of a woman, Rachins’s feet stopped.

A bad feeling had taken over his whole body, and he instinctively stopped dead in his tracks—such was not the case. It was true that a bad feeling had taken over his body, but he did not stop of his own volition.

In an instant, he had lost all freedom of movement. Moreover, it was not just Rachins.

The same had happened to the fifty ruffians who had charged into the woods with Rachins all at once.

And, the perpetrator of that act was—

???: “No matter how good I might be at fighting many-on-one, there’s such a thing as a limit, really.”

So said the red-haired woman, who looked down through the gaps in the trees at Rachins and his group, who had been stopped in their tracks.

A slender woman in a maid’s uniform with a somewhat wafuu design was watching the immobilized men who were shouting in confusion and anger. —From midair.

The woman’s figure was high up in the trees. However, she was not using a tree trunk or branches as a foothold. She stood tall and proud in seemingly empty space, smiling as she watched Rachins and his group, who had lost their ability to move.

This was what Rachins had discerned, only able to move his head and eyeballs.

Yae: “After all, I can only tie together abou~t a hundred people at once, yeah?”

That this woman, whose outrageous combat abilities could be rivaled only by her even more terrifying personality, was accompanying the helmet bastard whom they were supposed to defeat.

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—Utilizing the trees that Heinkel had cut down, it was an attack that ought to be called a fallen tree cannon.

In order to implement such a thing without the use of the Divine Dragon’s vast Mana pool, it was necessary to make full use of physical labor on a level incomparable to that of making fried rice with whatever was on hand.

???: “Really now, you’re so rough in how you make use of me, Al-sama. When you combine “cruel” and “usage” you get “exploitation”.”

With the help of Yae, who could not help but complain at every turn, they had raised several of the large trees cut down by Heinkel into the air, creating a launch pad for them.

And in order to actually fire them, Aldebaran mobilized his scientific knowledge to—

Aldebaran: “Old man, on my signal, pull your arms as hard as you can. As hard as you can.”

Heinkel: “It’s not just that woman, I’ve also got some reservations regarding your attitude there, Aldebaran…!”

Aldebaran: “Remember now, Dragon’s Blood, Dragon’s Blood!”

Heinkel: “—Hk! Just give me the signal already!”

Ultimately, the application of scientific knowledge required an investment in equipment, so Aldebaran had to rely on the physical prowess of Heinkel, whose veins were bulging as a result of poor treatment.

Chased off by the smoke, they continued moving through the forest in a way that kept them falling further into their opponent’s trap. —Elite troops would naturally be lying in wait outside, ready to clash with Aldebaran’s group.

That was an issue that needed to be reduced to an extent.

Aldebaran: “Old man!”

At the signal, Heinkel grit his teeth and exerted his arms.

The muscles in his arms began to bulge, and even though he was an alcoholic who lamented his lack of talent, he achieved feats of strength in a domain Aldebaran could never reach—with ferocity, the fallen tree cannon was fired.

First would be a test fire, followed by hitting them with a second and a third; if the opponents thus got out of the way, it would be most satisfactory. Otherwise—

Aldebaran: “Pull ‘em tight—”

Those brave men would be crushed right in the nose, or so they had expected.

However—

Yae: “Heinkel-sama got so scared by that fireball… what are you, a beast~?”

The moment the gargantuan fireball appeared in the sky, so large that it could be seen even from outside the forest, an extremely shaken Heinkel fired the fallen tree cannon without waiting for Aldebaran’s signal.

As a consequence, they failed to destroy the majority of the enemy, resulting in them storming the forest.

Thus, Yae had been pestering Heinkel.

There was no avoiding that. —After all, she was the one who cleaned up the mess that resulted from his mistake.

The enemy force of about fifty men who charged in was halted by Yae’s skill alone. —By a weapon that had been strung up all across the surrounding area, stretching out from all ten of Yae’s fingers.

That was—

???: "—Are these… threads?"

Breathing heavily, the man seemed to realize the truth of what had bound his movements—he was a thug Aldebaran recognized. If he remembered correctly, a former thug currently working for Felt, Rachins.

At Rachins's words, Yae exclaimed with an "Ohh~" as she floated in the air.

Yae: "How perceptive. Of course, this isn't just any~ old sewing thread, y'know? This is what's known as a shinobi technique. Though, I've never seen anyone else who can use it except me."

As Yae spoke, she looked down on the men from high in the air.

Although she appeared to be floating without relying on anything else, in reality she did have a firm foothold. —Yae's specialty was the Steel Thread Technique, which she had used to string threads up all throughout the forest.

Aldebaran: "A Thread User, so to speak… amidst the numerous kinds of epic weapons, it's one that sits near the top of my ranking."

Yae: "Wow, how rare~. Did you just praise me, Al-sama? Is tomorrow the day spears come raining down?"

Aldebaran: "Don't worry, I was about to say that just because I like the weapon, the user's a whole different matter."

Yae stuck her tongue out at that reply, so without touching on her attitude, Aldebaran looked down upon the enemy below—having borrowed the power of Yae's threads to climb atop the trees, he looked down on them.

Even when one strained their eyes, Yae's steel threads were nigh impossible to perceive. Tightly strung up, they entangled Rachins and the other adversaries in a manner akin to a spider web, completely restraining them.

The ability to freely bundle together and skillfully handle all sorts of things was Yae's true value.

They had not only used the steel threads to restrain the enemy, but had also been able to come up with a device such as their fallen tree cannon from earlier, where they had tied and raised up the cut-down large trees in such a way that they would be sent flying in a spin when a thread was pulled.

Coiling many threads around Heinkel's arms, and having him pull them around like a work-horse, was just another job for him as a cog in their contraption.

In any case, relative to the impactfulness of the fallen tree cannon's appearance, the damages it caused had been minimal. Ultimately, they had ended up passing by most of the enemy, but in reality, if that many people had come freely swinging at him without Yae, Aldebaran would have been in for some exhausting proceedings.

Aldebaran: "When the fight's not one-on-one, the level of difficulty immediately explodes upwards for me."

As he had done in the Pleiades Watchtower, Aldebaran could handle the tag-team of Garfiel and Ezzo in plain combat, but if there had been one more person there, it would have been a completely different story.

The fact of his victory would not have wavered, but there was easily the possibility that his number of attempts would have changed by an entire degree of magnitude.

In that battle, too, he had done as much as he could to prevent a two-on-one; provoking Garfiel, and guiding him such that it would be a one-on-one in that space.

In a one-on-one, Aldebaran could find a path to victory even against Reinhard.

However, the more the number of opponents increased, the more astronomical a number of attempts he would need in order to find a path to victory.

Hence, Aldebaran was grateful for the presence of Yae, who was much more adept at fighting a large number of people than he was.

And, the value of Yae’s techniques could also be found elsewhere.

Heinkel: “Oi, what are you gonna do with these guys… Are you planning to… kill them all?”

Before he could explain that value, Heinkel voiced a question.

Heinkel, left on the ground as Aldebaran and Yae used the threads to escape into the sky, made a bitter face as he witnessed Rachins and the others entrapped by the steel threads.

Heinkel’s sword would falter when up against somebody powerful, but the reason for his bitter face in that moment was likely one that differed from that sort of cowardice of his.

In response to that cowardice, Aldebaran shook his head, and,

Aldebaran: “Nah, there’s no need to kill them. Rather, it’s smarter to leave them wounded. The dead won’t be paid any mind, but the living will need to be treated. This way’ll leave the opponent with less hands to spare.”

Heinkel: “I, see. Yeah. That’s right, I was just thinking the exact same thing.”

Yae: “Oh my, when you two old misters come to an understanding like that, Yae-chan feels left out.”

It was clear that upon hearing Aldebaran’s response, Heinkel felt relieved. Nonetheless, perhaps not touching upon that fact was Yae’s own sort of compassion.

In truth, it was essential for Aldebaran’s party to weaken the enemy’s forces. For that purpose, they would have to act wisely instead of recklessly taking their opponent’s lives.

That was why—

Rachins: “Heh.”

Heinkel: “Ahh? What? Feeling relieved now that you hear you’re being spared, punk?”

Rachins: “And which one of us is really feeling relieved here, you drunkard…? Seriously, the hair and the look in your eyes, even the parts outside of that, you really resemble him, that fucker.”

Heinkel: “…”

Flashing his teeth in a smile, the thug—no, Rachins glared at Heinkel. Rather than his threatening stare, it was the contents of Rachins’s words that silenced Heinkel.

From his reaction, Aldebaran judged that he ought not let that conversation progress any further. In order to interject, he leaned over from a thread wound around the trees—

Rachins: “Also, that goes for you too, helmet bastard!”

Aldebaran: “Oh?”

Rachins: “Both this drunkard and you, you’re too relaxed. You need a taste of s’more hardships, duuumbass.”

Being called names, he was involuntarily taken aback by the irrelevancy and lack of substance contained in those words.

But, right away, he realized that Rachins did not bear the eyes of a man who did things without meaning. The moment he realized, Aldebaran was made aware that the goal had been to take him aback.

Thus, he was too late. And the compensation for his tardiness, was paid immediately.

???: “—What, dull as a pig, you are.”

After all, the arrival of that voice was coincident with the fist of the King Pig crushing Aldebaran, caught in a distracted moment as he was, with a punch that felt akin to getting hit by a cannon.

Chapter 20: How to Use a Life

1

A streak of light pierced the pitch-blackness, and a flicker of hope filled their heart.

The inevitable end that loomed just ahead felt like it could be resisted, pushed away, escaped, which filled their heart with hope.

However, that's wrong, you are not that strong.

I had thought, I knew that you weren't strong. —I really did.

Without knowing anything about the truth, I just kept pecking away at the seconds you gave me, like a baby bird begging for food, without realizing what was being sacrificed for each second.

???: "Emilia…?"

Your excited heart beat violently as if you were doused with cold water.

From behind the veil as black as darkness itself, a face that should not have been seen peeked through.

Long eyelashes, beautiful amethyst eyes, well-shaped features, pale pink lips, she was so lovely.

Behind that veil, a face that should have been the most detestable was the same as the most beloved.

???: "—Hk."

With that moment of hesitation, their freedom was stripped away, and even their soul was trapped in a cage of eternal obsession.

The way to reject it is in your hand, that white piece of cloth wrapped in light.

Stop! I yelled, the strongest I ever have.

Make them stop! I implored, the strongest I ever have.

Make it all stop! I begged, the strongest I ever have.

All of it was too late, all of it was beyond my control, all of it was—

???: “I, no matter what—”

—Will definitely save you.

With that determination and vow within your heart—“I” killed you, Natsuki Subaru.

2

—Upon impact, Aldebaran’s body was completely crushed as he hovered in the air.

Having relied upon the steel threads wound around the trees to prop him up, his body was struck by a mighty fist that seemed to be around the size of his own head.

Those knuckles, akin to a large boulder, were connected to arms befittingly as thick as logs, and those arms likewise extended out from a torso clad in a bulky, dignified armor of muscle. That body was wrapped in a black suit out of place on the battlefield, worn by an enormous pig-faced man—

Pig-Face: “You don’t whine like a pig, do you?”

Voicing a worthless joke in a low growl, the pig-faced man snorted his pig-snout.

Standing a nigh two meters tall, whilst also weighing in at no less than two hundred kilograms, pig-face had jumped up into the air, closing in on Aldebaran like a cannonball, striking him with a fierce blow.

A perfectly enacted surprise attack; it was but a miracle that he had not died instantly—nay, this was no miracle.

???: “…In that sorry state, might your arm be headed for tonight’s dinner table?”

To Aldebaran’s side as he basked in the fierce punch, Yae muttered with an emotionless expression.

What she saw in those narrowed eyes of hers, was pig-face’s outstretched arm—the fist that had slammed into Aldebaran was being diced up from the finger upwards.

Yae’s steel wires, strung up throughout the air, had caught pig-face’s fist head-on, and with the brute strength of his huge body, he had hewn his own arm on the tenacious steel wire.

Consequently, Aldebaran had escaped an instant death, and pig-face had lost an arm.

However—

Pig-Face: “I suppose so. I’ll feed it to my underlings as a show of gratitude. Though their diets are unbalanced and full of fat.”

Yae: “Kyaa~, I love demi-human jokes that make fun of their own tribe! By the way, I recommend stewing meat that’s high in fat.”

Pig-Face: “Very well, we’ll stew it in a pot of your blood.”

Both pig-face, having lost an arm, and Yae, whose trump card had been surmounted by sheer force, were calm on the surface, but fostered an extremity of murderous intent in their eyes, exchanging it tactfully.

Doing so, they conversed on a level above that of those released from the yoke of common men, but Aldebaran, who remained on a level below, was already at his limit.

His body leaned against a large tree as he slid on the thread without falling, and unable to manifest the strength to support himself, he entered a free fall.

He had escaped an instant death, but unfortunately his head was smashed in, and within his helmet were likely various things sloshing around that must not be spilled outward.

Of course, since he could not progress any further in such a state—

Aldebaran: “Yaeh.”

Like so, he called out to Yae with lips unable to articulate properly.

The next instant, a steel thread wrapped around Aldebaran’s neck as he plummeted, and braced taut—as his field of vision greatly snapped, Aldebaran’s head bid a tearful farewell to his body.

To ensure he would not suffer an unexpected defeat, even if Aldebaran failed to take his own life, he had arranged for Yae to function as a safety valve to activate his Authority.

Aldebaran: “…”

Simultaneous to ascertaining this method’s effectiveness, Aldebaran witnessed the world spinning around him, and focused his mind on “what lay ahead”.

And then—

Aldebaran: “Nekst.”

× × ×

???: “—AL GOA!!”

An incantation that rang out as an angered bellow, and following that, the bright red swell of a second sun—the papier-mâché fireball that feigned itself so; the faint spread of its flames were as frail as the paper nets used in goldfish scooping.

At a closer look, it lacked sufficient control, and if they just waited three short seconds, it would scatter and disappear, such was the shoddiness of this masquerade—however, when thrown into the midst of a hecticly progressing battle on a makeshift battlefield, it worked as a fine stratagem.

Aldebaran: “Old man! That’s a fake—”

Heinkel: “Uwoahhhhhh!!”

As a corollary of that, and since it was right after he returned, Aldebaran’s call for restraint did not make it in time.

Alarm bells ringing in his head, Heinkel panicked and pulled on the steel threads, firing the loaded fallen tree cannons one after another directly towards the faux Al Goa.

Since he could not stop it, the outcome of that remained the same. —Internally, he clicked his tongue. Not at Heinkel who had been unable to listen, nor at Rachins who had covered up his inexperience with guts; he was angry at himself for messing up.

By the time of its lackluster explosion, contrary to its appearance, the two aside from Aldebaran, who had cheated, also were made aware of the enemy’s masquerade.

Regardless of his lamentation, it was already too late, and unable to stop the vigor of the incoming enemies, Aldebaran relied on Yae’s strength, thwarting their charge with a cage of steel threads as they had done before.

However, to make sure that this time did not end up the same as the last, he did not escape up into the trees, but instead deliberately jumped backwards, and changed course to standing beside Heinkel.

Thus, this time would—

???: “—What, dull as a pig, you are.”

He had been readied for the blow to come, but it had arrived from directly above him together with some cruel dark humor. Socked right in the head by an intense strike, Aldebaran’s head was buried in the dirt floor of the forest.

He had changed his position. He had exercised caution. And yet, it had all been painted over by an attack from above.

Heinkel: “Wha, ah?! Where the hell did… Gohakh!”

???: “Don’t cry like a pig. You’ll be put on display at the butcher’s.”

Flying in with the force of a missile, while bearing wounds all over his body from the steel threads, the bloodied pig-faced man swung his arm, slamming Heinkel, unable to do a thing, into a large tree behind him.

Buried in the ground, it seemed like Aldebaran's spine had been broken, his resolve to fight unable to reach his limbs. It sounded like Yae had jumped down and had begun to clash with pig-face, but he could not even lift his head to watch that unfold.

Only, a suspicion in need of verification was born. —Whether he was in the air, or on the ground, pig-face would somehow come to strike Aldebaran first.

Carrying naught but that information—

Aldebaran: "—Next."

Before he could analyze Yae in the air, Aldebaran swallowed his poison on his own.

A fierce, sweltering heat lethally scorched Aldebaran to naught from his throat and organs—

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???: "—AL GOA!!"

???: "Uwoahhhhhh!!"

Fearful of the fake sun, a futile resistance was fired in the form of large trees; with that in the corner of his eyes, Aldebaran quickly examined his surroundings, and searched for a new place to take refuge that was neither in the air nor on the ground.

Verification, was necessary. —To ensure he did not relinquish what little chance of a best course of action he had.

3

—Seventy-three times.

The Matrix resumed from the point when the faux Al Goa was launched into the sky; what Aldebaran had grasped from performing verification on this from various angles, was that no matter where he tried to run or hide, the pig-faced man's burly arm would reliably come to pulverize him each and every time.

That was to say—

Aldebaran: "My exact position's being leaked."

Regardless if he was beside Yae or beside Heinkel, if he was on the ground or floating in the air or in the shade of a tree or if he tried to get away from the battlefield, Aldebaran could not escape the pig-faced man's fist.

A punch enacted with the resolve to lose an arm was difficult to defend against even with Yae's Steel Thread Technique. —Of course, if it was just a matter of surviving the first blow, such a feat would be possible via the combination of Yae's steel threads and Aldebaran's magic.

However, even if he withstood a single punch, there remained another arm, and two legs if necessary. And, pig-face was made of such mettle that he would always kill his opponent, no matter how many limbs he lost.

Neither pain nor loss would serve as a reason for pig-face to halt his step.

Having said that, even when Aldebaran made an effort to extract a little personal information out of him—

Pig-Face: "—Don't pipe and squeal like a little piggy."

Pulverized by that brief utterance, he was not willing to listen in the slightest.

From Aldebaran's experience, the most troublesome opponents were those who had fully decided what they needed to do, hardened in their resolve, and stubbornly unwilling to budge.

Against people like this, Aldebaran's trial and error would lose all meaning. After all, people who had decided to kill him no matter what they were offered in exchange, would assuredly kill him, no matter what he might offer in exchange.

Hence, in order to greatly shift the circumstances, he needed an impetus that would bring about a great shift.

Aldebaran: “First of all, how’s he getting ahold of my location?”

In order to relentlessly pursue Aldebaran, and reliably kill him, some sort of method was being employed.

To begin with, despite having used the Divine Dragon as a diversion, it was unnatural that Aldebaran’s party was being chased around in the forest like this.

If he did not expose the method that perfected this encirclement here and now, then even if he evaded pig-face, and set Felt’s faction out of the way, a second and a third arrow would be fired, and his seven days would be squandered.

In order to prevent that from happening—

Pig-Face: “—What, dull as a pig, you are.”

As pig-face’s familiar yet worthless joke arrived alongside his fist, this time Aldebaran’s cervical vertebrae was shattered after he had attempted to use Rachins as a meat shield.

Side note, just before his stream of consciousness was cut off, he caught in the corner of his eye a glimpse of Rachins suffering miserably as he was caught up in the blow—

× × ×

???: “—AL GOA!!”

???: “Uwoahhhhhh!!”

The feigned great magic rose into the sky, and with alarm bells ringing in his head, Heinkel acted immediately.

Catching the familiar sight of the fireball's explosion in the corner of his eye, Aldebaran summoned Yae, who wore an astonished expression at Heinkel's rash behavior, and tightened a string different to the one for the cage that would have welcomed Rachins and the others.

A new steel thread launchpad, after firing many fallen trees up until this point, what it launched next was—

Aldebaran: "PUUULL!!"

Bewildered, Heinkel did as he was told and pulled the thread, his mind having fallen into a state incapable of thinking. With the propulsion gained from his remarkable physical strength, it was the duo of Aldebaran and Yae who drew a parabola as they flew into the sky.

Feeling as if he had been released from the forces of wind and gravity, Aldebaran soared over the treetops with Yae clutched in his single arm, fleeing from the battlefield onto which Rachins and his squadron were storming.

Left by his lonesome in that place, Heinkel would likely be mobbed by Rachins and the others, but this attempt was a throwaway in order to ascertain something he wished to ascertain.

Amidst this verification, he would turn a blind eye to Heinkel's noble sacrifice.

Yae: "Don't bite your tongue, please~!"

As he glanced back at Heinkel, feeling guilty for deserting him, Yae swung her arms while held in his arm.

Her wrists were slender, and upon each of her even more slender fingers were fitted undecorative rings, from which superfine threads of steel extended, barely visible even to strained eyes.

The shinobi were known to possess preeminent abilities, and among them she was the only one who had mastered the Steel Thread Technique—maneuvering it to perfection, Yae affixed threads to the trees ahead of them as they soared, and they rapidly gained distance as they drew arcs swinging on ropes like Tarzan.

However—

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

Swinging with all their might, Aldebaran and Yae went through the escape path that had been guided by the smoke—that was to say, a region still mercilessly enshrouded in white fumes.

Forcing their way through with steel threads, Aldebaran and Yae went against the current of the white smoke that had chased them out, flying to ascertain one final thing after a series of verifications.

Only, even if they crossed distance at a speed incomparable to that of running on the ground, the only chance they had to breathe was at the highest point of their swing, the moment in which they broke past above the treetops, outside the smoke.

Moreover, the more they progressed the more difficult that became, and as the smoke grew taller and more dense, the agony that gave no quarter began to encroach on his lungs, his eyeballs, his every membrane.

If they recklessly swung around like this, setting aside the superhuman that was Yae, Aldebaran, equipped with naught but mediocre specs, would be done in by the smoke immediately.

Hence, he would have to carefully determine their destination, or else—

Aldebaran: "—Northwest."

Bringing his mouth up to Yae's ear as she extended steel threads and swung, he directed her so.

His target was northwest, no doubt about it. —After all, he had already checked all the other directions.

Unable to draw out the right answer until the very end of the end, luck had truly abandoned him in all regards. Not once in his whole life had he ever thought himself blessed by fortune.

Aldebaran: "…No, there was just one time."

—The fact that he had happened upon her, was undoubtedly Aldebaran's one and only fortune. Even now that he had lost her, he did not think that meeting her had been a mistake.

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

Enduring the strong emotions surging up in his chest, he firmly clenched his teeth, and in that moment the situation changed.

Tearing through the white smoke in their swing, the moment they broke out above the trees, throwing stones came flying from outside the smoke at a ferocious pace, aimed at the airborne Aldebaran and Yae.

Simple stones, as a barrage of them closed in with ridiculous strength, Aldebaran promptly created a wall of earth, overcoming the first wave by sheer force.

But, the stones would likely only continue to come. So, before that could happen, he would split off.

Yae: "—Al-sama!!"

Yae's shrill voice reverberated in his helmet, and feeling his eardrums go numb, Aldebaran lost his connection to her mid-air, and was thrown high up into the sky.

At the highest point of their swing, he was sent flying even higher up by Yae.

Aldebaran: "OHHHHHH—!!"

Bellowing, he covered his frontside with an earthen wall as he soared, charging to meet the stones head-on.

Having lost his stability, he could not make the earthen wall thick or weighty, so it was brittle; it would not protect him any more than a blanket would against the oncoming stones.

But, even so, Aldebaran had escaped the white smoke, and had once again exited the forest.

He had escaped to the plain where he had first received the declaration of war, and had basked in a thorough blow from Grassis, who thus succeeded in her vengeance for her elder sister.

And, present there just as Aldebaran had hoped—

???: "—Come to subdue the leader on your own, have you? Ain't that a piss-poor plan you'd arrive at faster by countin' up from your worst options?"

Below Aldebaran as he flew out from the white smoke, the bald old giant spoke while looking up at him. —A person whose long, burly arms of a giant, were equipped with gauntlets each fitted with several Conversation Mirrors.

Witnessing that, it finally clicked. —All of these traps had been schemed by this old giant.

Aldebaran: "So you were the brain…!"

There was far too much of a gap between his appearance and the image of his position, so he never would have guessed.

Rachins's appearance was very much like a thug, but Aldebaran would have been less surprised to hear that he was the military strategist. Normally, giants were in charge of the front lines, where they could best leverage their physical attributes. For one to work as the brain—this also went for Ezzo, but for that to have been the case for both a dwarf and a giant was too much.

As his head flooded with such useless badmouthing, Aldebaran realized.

Aldebaran: "Lil' miss Felt—"

Was nowhere to be found on the plain. —This, too, was a serious blow to Aldebaran.

Naturally, putting an end to this battle by completely wiping out five hundred enemies was by no means realistic. Hence, as an objective that was possible to achieve, capturing Felt had always been present in Aldebaran's mind. That possibility had been completely blocked by the opposition.

It was a matter of course, but the most obvious victory condition for him, would also have been the most obvious defeat condition for the opposition. Loathe to say, it made sense for Felt to fall back.

Aldebaran: "Shit."

Aldebaran's victory would not waver. That was settled.

Therefore, all that remained was to search for the key to victory, and yet.

???: "You, don't be looking off to the side now!!"

Aldebaran: "—Hk!"

The moment he updated his victory condition in his head, an impact pierced him from directly above that head of his.

The audible voice was thick, but the words cast to him were not the familiar joke of pig-face. From what he could see, it was the thug with the large build—Gaston, who had jumped up to Aldebaran's flank, higher up than the white smoke, and had joined his hands together to swing down and deliver a crushing blow.

Aldebaran: "Seri… ously…?"

At the attack of an opponent who had unmistakably mastered the Flow Method, Aldebaran cried out in pain.

The Flow Method could not be mastered by any ordinary training, and was the barrier that determined whether one could become a first-rate warrior. At the addition of a threat who could wield that technique, Aldebaran revised his evaluation of the opponent whose strength he had underestimated.

As he revised it, that strike knocked him into the ground.

Aldebaran: "Gah, guohhhh…!"

Immediately failing to brace himself, his clumsy impact to the ground fractured his right elbow. In agony over the pointless pain induced by the broken bone piercing through his flesh and skin, Aldebaran grazed his helmet across the ground.

It hurts, it hurts, hurts hurts hurts hurts hurts, hurts, it hurts, but he had seen, what he wanted to see.

Aldebaran: “From here on out, it’ll be a battle of wits, between you, and me… hk”

Grinding his teeth to the extent that they cracked, with the sensation of magnifying anguish as the smoke permeated his lungs, he opened the package of poison with his tongue in a motion he was well accustomed to.

The smoke was far too thick, and it was quite possible that he might almost cough out the poison. By no means did he think that old giant had aimed that far, but the fact that he was having so many unfavorable draws was a problem.

He had no choice but to overcome this unfavorable tide. Thus, searching for the path to victory that ought to have been somewhere, searching, searching searching searching searching searchingsearchingsearchsearchsearchsearchsearsearsearchch—ah.

4

???: “—No need to add anymore pyro tree logs. Any further and there’s a fear that the opponent could take advantage of it. It’ll be just right if they find our plan a little unsatisfactory.”

Instructing the end of the strategy to drive them out with smoke, Valga Cromwell—no, the former Great Strategist of the Demi-Human Alliance now known as Rom-jii, worked his elderly head as hard as he could.

Completing the encirclement of the deceased Priscilla Barielle’s former Knight, who had won himself the popular nickname of “Helmet Bastard”, all that remained was to carefully reel the opponent in. However, they needed to be on guard.

This opponent had devised a plan that employed the Divine Dragon Volcanica and the Witch of Envy to suppress the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea. He could not help but admire such an ingenious scheme.

But then again, the presence of such a dangerous and cunning “enemy” was exactly what Rom-jii had hoped for.

Many giants were of an exceedingly belligerent and rough nature, and their instincts sought battles of boiling blood and throbbing flesh—it was not for any such foolish reason.

What he desired was a peril that shook the Kingdom, and the prestige of removing its presence.

—For Felt to win and advance in the Royal Selection, she was in need of renown gained in the absence of the Sword Saint.

The Royal Candidates repelling the great cataclysm brought about by the Witch Cult in the Watergate City of Pristella was an event still fresh in his memory, but the result of that had been the stocks of each of the five candidates rising by an equal amount.

Their relative standings in the Royal Selection would not change. Hence, Felt would need to gain achievements independently.

The actions of this helmet bastard were capable of shaking not just the Royal Selection, but the entire world, and thus would prove sufficient for such an achievement.

Rom: “‘Course, Felt probably ain’t thinkin’ ‘bout that sorta thing.”

After all, the reason Felt stood here now to take on the helmet bastard was not for any long-term outlook that included such calculations, but because she had the power to fight off the imminently approaching peril; that, and for the sake of her one and only Knight, who bore the duty of being the first one to hasten into such situations.

Hence, it was fine that the only ones scheming to benefit from this situation later were himself, who was rather underhanded in contrast to his large body, and the dirty adults who controlled the criminal underworld.

The three notorious organizations of the Ground Dragon Capital of Flanders, the Balance, the Flower Prison Garden, and the Black Silver Coin; by putting their ruffians to use, they would secure fruits of battle to win the crown for Felt.

—Initially, Rom-jii had taken a firm stance against Felt participating in the Royal Selection, against her getting involved in the center of something as large as the Kingdom of Lugunica.

For Rom-jii, who knew about Felt's birth, about the karma of the blood that ran through her veins, it was a matter of course.

On the other hand, however, Rom-jii had continued to keep Felt in the Royal Capital. If he had felt so inclined, there had always been the option to bring Felt far out to live in the remote countryside before she gained awareness of herself or her surroundings.

Nevertheless, Rom-jii had not done so. He thought that likely, that was because he had fostered a premonition deep down in his heart. —That a large, unavoidable undulation would eventually catch up to them both.

When that time came, if he could be by Felt's side, he would wield his pointlessly large body to its utmost capability, and carry out the duty of shield or armor or aught else required.

However, there was a sufficient possibility that he would be unable. He had grown old. He could not yet feel any pressing emaciation, but even if he was a giant, it would be no strange affair for death to come knocking on his door hereafter.

For that reason, it was necessary. A guarantee that Felt—that his adorable grandchild would be protected for the rest of eternity, was necessary.

If the promissory note for that meant the apex of the Kingdom, he would crown Felt himself.

For that purpose, he would not hesitate to once more swing the baton of command he had vowed to never swing again.

Rom: “Though compared to the past, my chances’ve decreased an awful lot… to this day, the nightmares won’t let me go.”

Almost half a century had passed, and the Demi-Human War was a distant memory.

Even so, throughout that long, long time, the embers of regret had only continued to simmer in a pot within Rom-jii. When he gained a chance to see the light of day, the lid of that pot was opened.

Back then, the foolish Valga Cromwell had been insufficient. —Time had made up for that foolishness of his, and while his asininity remained unchanged, Rom-jii would wield his intellect.

That was to say—

Rom: “This here’ll be a battle of wits between the helmet bastard and myself.”

5

???: “—Are these… threads?”

The moment Rachins charged into the forest, his whole body was immediately entangled and restrained in extremely fine steel threads; as he spat out his frustrations, Aldebaran listened to him from a position within arms reach.

Aldebaran had deliberately exposed his position to his opponents, beckoning the enemies to rush toward him, ensnaring them right in his trap.

At the hand of Yae’s Steel Thread Technique, fifty-two enemies were bound.

He had already been associating with these enemies long enough that he had finished counting them all, but of course, it was not as though Yae had subdued them through simple physical strength.

Yae: “As you can see here, Yae-chan has slender arms, y’know? By using nearby trees, other obstacles, or even the bodies of the people in question as fulcrums, I’m suspending these guys while their feet are still touching the ground.”

And so, Yae disclosed the trick that had been performed, but the gist of it was still unclear to those who had heard it.

At any rate, Rachins and his group were trapped in a web of steel threads coiled around many times over, and it would be nearly impossible for them to escape against Yae’s will; so long as that fact was clear, it was top-notch work.

On top of that, receiving a glare from the shihaku eyes of Rachins, who was powerless to move even with his target right before him, Aldebaran forcefully laid his hands on Rachins’s clothing and rummaged around in his pockets.

Rachins: “Wh-what the hell, you fuck?! I ain’t into this kinda thing…!”

Yae: “Wo~w, how bold of you, Al-sama! No wonder that you never seemed interested in Yae-chan no matter how much I enticed you. Coincident with this newfound understanding, my pride as a woman is rapidly being restored…”

Aldebaran: “Stop screwing around! There’s a mirror! Find the mirror! One of them has it… old man, you search too!”

Holding down Rachins as he writhed in an attempt to escape, Aldebaran yelled at Yae and Heinkel, who then began shuffling through the belongings of the immobilized men, searching for the Conversation Mirror.

—The speed and accuracy of information transmission had the capability to change the nature of war.

Such a thing had been used in all manners of fiction from all over the world, past and present, but this concept that he had previously only vaguely understood at face value had finally hit home for Aldebaran.

The old giant, who served as the brain of this operation, had prepared gauntlets fitted with a multitude of Conversation Mirrors.

With that, the old giant had become the central commander of the faction, and by exchanging information in real time, he was able to control all five hundred fighters at will. If Aldebaran's location and number of allies continued to be leaked in this way, this side would never have a moment to catch their breaths.

Therefore, it was essential to ensure that they shattered each unit's Conversation Mirrors.

To that end—

Aldebaran: "—Found it!"
Heinkel: "—Found it!"
Yae: "—Found it!"

Finding the sensation he sought at his fingertips, Aldebaran pulled it out and held it aloft, cheering—but, his joy was drowned out by the voices of the other two, which were raised nearly simultaneously with his.

Letting out a "Ah?", Aldebaran turned around and saw Yae and Heinkel, who had been conducting a search of the other ruffians while he was groping Rachins, staring with their eyes wide open.

—Both of them were holding a small mirror in their hands.

Aldebaran: "Conversation Mirrors are Meteors that can be replicated, but the cost would still be stupidly expensive…"

He understood why Rachins, who was most likely the commander of this unit, would have one.

He also understood why his aide would have one, not wanting to leave communications to the commander alone. But, he did not understand why anybody else would be carrying one.

No matter what, it would have been impossible to equip the vast majority of a military force with Conversation Mirrors.

In other words, these was—

Aldebaran: "—Are these… dummies?"

Rachins: “Duuumbass.”

At Aldebaran’s dumbfounded mutter, Rachins stuck out his tongue and fired an insult at him.

Seeing the colorful ring swaying on the tip of that long tongue, Aldebaran reflexively used his own tongue to unwrap the package of poison hidden behind his molar. —It was at that moment.

???: “—What, dull as a pig, you are.”

The poor joke that he had heard so many times that calluses were starting to form on his ears arrived alongside a punch, and Aldebaran could not distinguish whether it was the impact or the poison that had ended his life.

Only, the thoughts that came to his mind were not vulgar curses towards that pig-face, but rather—

Aldebaran: “That shitty old geezer.”

It was an insult that amounted to nothing more than praise for an adversary who was pulling the strings of a plan that was not just formidable, but downright unreasonable.

6

???: “—Are these… threads?”

The feint achieved by masquerading a Goa as an Al Goa had succeeded, allowing Rachins to charge at the enemy with minimal damage received from the fallen tree cannon. Having realized that he had been immobilized by threads fine to the point of being nigh invisible, he could not hide his astonishment.

Had he been the only one ensnared, he could have still forced himself to accept it.

However, it was not solely Rachins who had been immobilized, but also the fifty ruffians who had charged into the woods with him.

Were he to try implementing something like this himself, the mere thought of recreating the intricate geometry of the cage of wires set up in the forest within his mind would have made him give up. That was how extraordinary this feat had been.

But, what was far more astonishing to Rachins, even beyond the woman who had bound him in thread—

???: "—Sorry, but I'll be shattering that."

With those words, the helmet bastard searched the breast pocket of one of the ruffians—the man chosen for the duty of being the mirror-bearer, pried out the Conversation Mirror, and dropped it on the ground, readily crushing it underfoot.

Rachins: "—Hk, gotta be fucking kidding me."

As if it were being wrung out of him, anger reflexively spilled out of his mouth, and the threads that constricted Rachins dug even deeper. Rather than a result of his own resistance, it seemed more like a warning from the thread spinning red-haired woman for his cursing.

However, at this moment, his anger ran far deeper than the shallow cuts from the threads upon his flesh.

Rachins: "What, just what the hell's going on here?! You fuck, how'd you get it on your first shot…?"

Helmet Bastard: "It wasn't in one shot. Wasn't even in ten or twenty shots. My draws, are absolutely pitiful."

Rachins: "Ahh?"

As the helmet bastard seemed to have no intention of providing a proper response, Rachins firmly grit his teeth.

Through some unknown means, the helmet bastard saw through the fact that they had established a communication network with Cromwell—with Rom-jii at its heart, through the use of Conversation Mirrors. Moreover, thoroughly ignoring the decoy mirrors, which would have bought them time even if they had been seen through, he acted in a manner as if he had assuredly taken out the real one.

Despite the warning just a moment prior, Rachins raised his head.

Towards those whom he was powerless against, his surging feelings of inferiority would not allow resignation.

???: “Oi, what are you gonna do with these guys… Are you planning to… kill them all?”

Outside of Rachins’s innermost thoughts, the one who interjected was the middle-aged man of red hair—it was Heinkel.

He had heard that this man was Reinhard’s father. Indeed, including the red hair, blue eyes, and an excessively lavish Knight’s sword, there were numerous features reminiscent of House Astrea.

From the moment he heard that Heinkel had chosen to support the rival candidate Priscilla instead of Felt, whom his own son supported, he had thought of him as an idiot who could not make the right choice even regarding where he stood, but he was much worse than Rachins had imagined.

Rachins: “—That braindead moron.”

Rachins hated Reinhard.

In any case, Reinhard likely did not think much of Rachins, but they were similar in that they both had been born into families of a certain status, and both had conflicts with their fathers. Of course, there was a difference in the weight of what their births had burdened them with, and he knew that Reinhard had never considered abandoning what Rachins had so selfishly thrown away.

Born into a noble family, Rachins ran away due to his inability to form an understanding with his family, and somehow or another, he ended up working for Felt; on the whole, he was a half-hearted person.

But, even if Rachins and Reinhard shared the same troubles, there remained a fundamental difference.

Rachins's father was a respectable man. He disliked him, but he was respectable.

Rachins: "But, there's no hope for a fuck like you."

To be so emotionally anguished over a dispute with a father not even worthy of respect, Reinhard was a moron.

Hence, he would remove the reason behind Reinhard's misery.

Rachins: "…Goa."

Even when tied up, incantations could be performed.

His entire body entangled in the threads, creaking as the Gate within pulsed, Rachins conjured a fireball directly before his face, prompting alarm in the helmet bastard and his gang.

However, what emerged was a tiny clump of fire no bigger than the tip of his thumb.

Heinkel: "Ah, trying to frighten me now? That petty a trick, you think I'd fall for it twice?!"

A faux Al Goa had been cast before him earlier, and out of spite for having been fooled by its appearance, Heinkel, his face red with anger, slashed at the fireball with his Knight's sword.

For just a moment, that casual flash of the sword seemed so refined to the point of searing itself into his eyes, but that was fine.

Right now, what was more important than such deep impressions—

Rachins: "Duuumbass."

Sticking out his tongue and hurling derisive insults with the best sneer he could muster, took priority.

—He had stretched a Goa out thin to masquerade it as an Al Goa. Then, in a similar vein, an Al Goa could be masqueraded as a mere tiny fireball.

???: “Rachins-kun, you may not have any outstanding talent, but you have a firm foundation. Steady progress will assuredly grant you the power to reach wherever you wish to get to.”

Ezzo had introduced Rachins to magic, and remembering all the times he had been lectured by him with an arrogant pomp despite his short stature, Rachins apologized to him internally with an uncharacteristic “Sorry”.

Ignoring his firm foundation, and misusing magic by skipping tiers, was first on the list of things that would upset Ezzo.

But, since he would have never gotten another opportunity, it was something like his own excuse—

Rachins: “…”

The fireball basked in the tip of the sword and unraveled amidst the air, releasing the enormous firepower compressed within, and a hellish inferno that would incinerate the area in one fell swoop spread explosively.

Just before being swallowed by the flames himself, Rachins found that he was no longer filled with the lament of “where the hell did my life take such a messed-up turn?” from mere moments ago, and he could not help but feel a bit strange.

And just like that, even wearing a smile upon his face, Rachins’s body was engulfed in the flames—

Helmet Bastard: “That will be as far as you go.”

The flames he had staked his life on, which ought to have activated, were crushed in the hand of the helmet bastard, who had intervened as if he had known it would happen, and its firepower failed to be unleashed.

7

—Two-hundred sixty-four times.

???: “…”

The steel threads binding him having caused his body to lose its strength, Rachins hung his head, looking as if he had given up.

But, such a thing was unthinkable. Rachins would absolutely never give up on defeating his opponent, even in this situation.

Hence—

Aldebaran: “That will be as far as you go.”

Upon speaking it, he recalled how vexing it sounded, and internally he clicked his tongue.

Outside of his loathsome emotions, Aldebaran pushed Heinkel aside, and the Goa he had carelessly sliced apart—no, this time the activation of that great magic in disguise was thwarted.

The large firepower that was going to rise into the air, attempting to scorch the whole region, was undone at its formation; while still nothing more than a kindling, it vanished as Mana that had lost its direction.

If he did not preempt this, the mighty flame would have scorched the whole region, Aldebaran’s party would suffer tremendous damage, and the battle would be unable to continue.

He felt sorry for Rachins’s resolve, who was about to stake his life on a desperate suicide bombing, but trying to accomplish something by laying down one’s life, was the most meaningless action to perform in front of Aldebaran.

No matter what one might wager their life on, Aldebaran would squander it without exception.

Therefore, it was futile. Staking one’s life, would have no meaning whatsoever.

It was futile. Futile, futilefutilefutilefutilefutilefutilefutile, futile.

Futile, and yet—

Rachins: “Goa…”

Aldebaran: “STOP!!”

His initial kindling extinguished, Rachins nevertheless performed another incantation; bellowing at him, Aldebaran raised his fist overhead and hammered it into the body of the man incapable of moving.

He socked him right in the cheek, drove a kick into his abdomen, and struck him in the head once more. Unable to brace himself to withstand the impacts, Rachins had to take it all as a punching bag.

Even if Aldebaran was just a second-rate or third-rate warrior, he could overthrow even Garfiel if he pressed his vital points. And yet—

Rachins: “Go, a…”

—Rachins did not cease his incantations.

Aldebaran: “WHY?!”

Once again crushing the kindling as it tried to come alive, he slammed the fist that did so into Rachins.

However, even when hit by a series of punches, the signs of new magic, attempting to interfere with the world, did not cease to be born around Rachins.

That was to say, even if his final stratagem had been seen through, Rachins would never yield.

Yae: “—Al-sama, there’ll be no end to this.”

In Aldebaran’s ear, out of breath as he was, such a voice was gently raised.

Subsequently, the bound Rachins’s head was lifted in front of him, around his neck a steel thread was tightly wound, wringing his slender neck—not just that, it was starting to attempt to decapitate him.

Yae: “His eyes are speaking. As long as you don’t kill him, he’ll keep doing the same thing over and over. A truly admirable thing. Isn't that the dearest desire of all boys? In that case…"

Aldebaran: "SHUT UP!"

Yae: "…"

Moving a raised finger on her right hand, Yae caused a red line of blood to streak down Rachins's neck. Silencing her, Aldebaran glared directly at Rachins.

With his chin lifted, Rachins gazed at Aldebaran at an angle that seemed to be looking down on him.

And then—

Rachins: "Duuumb, ass…"

Cladding his right hand in a rock protector, Aldebaran struck Rachins firmly with a blow.

Receiving a blow inherently weightier than those that came before, Rachins's forehead split open, and his blood rapidly scattered. Likely, he had been prepared to kill Rachins with that strike, but—

Yae: "…Spectacularly done~."

Clapping her hands, Yae commended him whilst looking over Rachins's limp body.

Even more so than Aldebaran, Yae was sensitive to the life and death of others. To her eyes, it would be apparent that the matter had concluded with Rachins fainting, without losing his life.

Aldebaran: "…"

Neither that praise, nor the fact that Rachins had merely fainted, would serve as consolation for Aldebaran.

Only, more than he had initially thought, he must not underestimate this number of five hundred. —This was not merely a numerical figure, but five hundred people hardened with the utmost resolve; he must respond to it as such.

Heinkel: “O-oi, Aldebaran…”

Aldebaran: “Sorry, but shut up for a sec.”

Having just defeated Rachins, Aldebaran was met with Heinkel’s voice. But, he had exhausted himself mentally more than he had expected to, to a greater extent than that of merely expanding his Territory, and was unable to concern himself with Heinkel at the moment.

Regardless, he had succeeded in shattering the Conversation Mirror, and had eliminated the threat of the first vanguard.

All that remained—

???: “—What, dull as a pig, you are.”

Aldebaran: “…”

The arrival of the joke poking fun at their own tribe was well familiar to his ears; however, unlike before, this time it arrived without a fist to accompany it.

But, whether it was fine to thus deem that acceptable, and treat it as a sign that he had overcome a perilous spot, he did not know.

That was because—

???: “Thoughtlessly stopping in place there, your heads stuffed with pigfood or something?”

As the pig-face man declared so in a weighty voice, he was not alone; similar to how Rachins had been accompanied by a squadron, he did not charge in alone, but instead stood before Aldebaran’s party as the second battle formation.

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix redefinition.”

???: “Thoughtlessly stopping in place there, your heads stuffed with pigfood or something?”

Hearing the voice of the King Pig, Doltero Amule, across one of the Conversation Mirrors fitted to his gauntlets, Rom-jii understood that the helmet bastard had made contact with the second battle formation.

The first contact had been made by Rachins’s unit, so it was fortunate that the battle formation positioned in the nearest location included Doltero, who was the strongest warrior among the line-up they had gathered.

Rom: “…”

Only, before Doltero could arrive, the helmet bastard had clashed with Rachins, and the well-being of the unit under his command was unknown. Naturally, the same went for their commanding officer, Rachins.

Rather, considering the opponent’s cunning, it would be more apt to consider Rachins to be dead.

Rom: “—Perhaps not.”

Given that a battle had occurred, it was impossible that they had handled the situation without suffering harm.

The ruffians of the criminal underworld were a matter of course, but casualties would also emerge within the Camp. —It would be foolish to count on the single ray of hope that was present in the report Grassis had received from Flam.

Therefore, Rom-jii put a lid over his own feelings in between blinks, and concentrated on the situation before his eyes.

With Doltero, the helmet bastard and his allies would be killed in the span of a single breath. —They could not take such an optimistic viewpoint. In a sense, the helmet bastard had led the Sword Saint, Divine Dragon, and Witch of Envy around by their noses, but that feat alone served not as the reason.

Rom: "…He shattered the Conversation Mirror in the possession of the mirror-keeper without any hesitation."

Since that had left them incapable of grasping the movements around Rachins and his squadron, there was no doubt that the opposition had taken the best course of action in order to intercept the flow of information to this side.

However, no matter how one looked at it, the way that this best move was executed had been far too unnatural.

Even supposing they had already surmised the arrangements and configuration of this side's coordination, that they had been equipped with Conversation Mirrors, their actions that followed were—

Rom: "As long as they ain't seein' inside our heads, or perhaps something else entirely, it oughta be impossible."

It was all preposterous, a realm of jape that ought to have been ridiculed as impossible.

Nonetheless, having lived over a hundred years, Rom-jii was aware that powers transcending both his common sense and his wildest imagination did exist in this world, and that those who wielded such abilities would indeed come to play upon the same board.

Those who ceased all thought when faced with such beings, deeming it an impossibility, always met the same end.

He could not afford to ever allow such a wretched end to befall the ones he loved.

Rom: "—There's something I'd like to ascertain. All units, change of plans."

Speaking to all of the Conversation Mirrors simultaneously, Rom-jii narrowed his eyes, and formulated a stratagem.

The helmet bastard, he also ought to be aware.

—The fact that, for both their side and the helmet bastard's side, this battle was a race against time.

Chapter 21:
Valga Cromwell

1

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, matrix redefinition."

Dealing with alterations in the situation, second by second, moment by moment, instant by instant, he advanced the world.

For Aldebaran's Authority, incapable of turning the clock back on a grand scale, this was a gamble that reeled his victory in steadily, but simultaneously posed the risk of definitively relinquishing his victory.

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, matrix redefinition."

Step-by-step, move-by-move, action-by-action, he verified, defined, and moved the board towards a checkmate.

The way the highest caliber of warriors would unceasingly and continuously advance in this manner, piling up experience in a world of ceaseless bouts all decided by a single move, he really could not imagine it.

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, matrix redefinition."

And that was not limited to just warriors; the highest caliber of intellectuals were the same in the sense of their ability to think in a different dimension.

Rather, since they were not directly involved in practice, they would go without knowing the true fragrance of blood and the pain of wounds, merely constructing the progression of the world within their heads, so there was possibly more of a monstrous sense to them.

In any case—

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, matrix redefinition."

Trampling on the discipline of warriors and the deliberations of intellectuals alike, disregarding the law of reality that dictated an inability to ascertain the results of two different choices simultaneously, Aldebaran would merely snatch victory away even in battles that were to be decided by a single blow. The former had every right to curse, loathe, and scorn his way of being as contemptible.

Let those vilifications of theirs cut into him as much as they liked. In exchange—

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, matrix redefinition."

With this dirty method, he would absolutely seize victory.

× × ×

???: "…At this point, I bet you're hoping for as much amiability as a pig wanting to be fed."

Wringing out a low, groaning voice, the joke of the pig-faced man—the King Pig, Doltero Amule, when compared to his previous dignified, despair-inducing ones, came out a husky rasp.

That was only natural. His entire body was covered in lacerations from steel threads, and he was losing copious amounts of blood from his innumerable wounds. Rather, the fact that he was still conscious, and that his face wore no grievous expression, was far more strange.

Aldebaran: "Having come this far, I know you're not afraid of dying. But, even if you don't fear death, pain should still be painful, yeah?"

Doltero: "You don't understand even when saying it yourself? Both death and pain are ultimately things that make us afraid. Then, all we gotta do is swallow that fear."

Aldebaran: "…I can't understand you."

Doltero's point was that the fear induced by death and the fear induced by pain were one and the same. But, the way Aldebaran saw it, those were different things. The fear borne of death, and the fear borne of pain, were different.

To take it further, since pain was a stimulus to the body, it seemed rather distinct from fear.

Doltero: “—. No matter what you say, it’s the backbiting of a pig.”

Before Aldebaran, white froth emerged in the corners of Doltero’s mouth as he muttered thus.

Around the thick neck of the King Pig, a fine steel wire was wound around several tens of times, applying pressure to his trachea. Doltero had resisted that strangling by slipping two fingers in, but those fingers sunk into his neck and lost their function, and with blood no longer circulating to his brain, his large body finally fell to its knees.

Having fallen to his knees, Doltero was surrounded by the fifty-five collapsed subordinates who had accompanied him.

While taking on this King Pig, he had taken down the other men one-by-one, an effort that had literally broken his bones, cleaved off his flesh, and robbed him of his life numerous times. —In total, twenty-three thousand and eight times.

With this many attempts, this was among the top-class of Aldebaran’s veteran history of losing battles.

Of course, one contributing factor was that the organized attacks of the King Pig and his underlings of the Black Silver Coin had been exceedingly thorough, but the primary cause had been Aldebaran’s own lack of talent.

The steel thread entangled around Doltero’s neck was not one that extended out from Yae’s hand, but from the hand of Aldebaran, who had borrowed one of her rings.

Manipulating a steel thread with a single finger, he had closed in on Doltero’s fierce attack one move at a time and affixed a thread to his neck, tying it around to apply as much pressure as he could to that thick neck. —Amidst this harsh Territory, learning the Steel

Thread Technique from square one until it was viable for him had required the time of over twenty-thousand attempts.

Doltero: “…”

Boom, sounded the fist as it vigorously slammed into the ground, Doltero falling completely unconscious.

Even still, the body of the King Pig, who reigned over the criminal underworld, did not topple over sideways; rather, his large body was supported by his own fist pressed into the ground, a demonstration of his dignity. Unbowed, unbent, unbroken.

In spite of being his enemy, he could not help but commend that posture.

Yae: “Haah~, you’re outrageous, Al-sama. I was proud that no~body in the village except me had been able to learn it, but isn’t this now a disgrace~?”

And, beside Aldebaran as he stood out of breath before the silenced Doltero, Yae, having strung every last adversary aside from Doltero in the air, spoke so.

Her eyes, narrowed like a cat’s, observed Aldebaran’s Steel Thread Technique that had tied up Doltero. Be that as it may, it was impossible for him to easily accept that praise.

Aldebaran: “Don’t be ridiculous. With just a single finger, all the muscles from the top of my head to the tips of my toes are on the verge of cramping. Doing ten times that with ten fingers, are you actually super muscular despite looking so thin?”

Yae: “Eh~, are you taking an interest in what’s under my uniform, Al-sama~? I’ve given you so many chances to check for yourself, and yet you were always so mean as to turn me down.”

Aldebaran: “…The ring, let me borrow it for just a little longer.”

Responding to Yae as she mischievously poked fun at him, Aldebaran stroked the ring fitted on the ring finger of his right hand. He had tested it on each finger, but it felt the most intuitive on Aldebaran's ring finger.

In all honesty, he had been reluctant to put a ring on his ring finger, but he did not have a left hand to begin with. It was nonsensical to bring such emotional obstinancies of a little girl onto a battlefield.

In any case—

Aldebaran: "Old man, you aight? I didn't have much leeway to pay attention your way, my bad."

Heinkel: "N-no, that's fine. That's… alright."

As Aldebaran checked on his well-being, Heinkel choked on his words as he nodded.

During the battle with Doltero, Heinkel, to put it bluntly, had fallen into a useless state of malfunction, but after Yae had tied up the men, he had contributed by knocking them unconscious, and by breaking the Conversation Mirror of the mirror-bearer, so Aldebaran would acknowledge that he had done his job.

As expected, against a certain level of powerful individuals—Doltero was a given, but it would be difficult to count Heinkel among their fighting strength when it came time to clash with those in the same ballpark as Gaston. Aldebaran had no intention of reproaching Heinkel, who harbored such a mental fragility.

Everyone had an opponent whom their soul would absolutely refuse to face.

For Yae, that was Aldebaran, and for Aldebaran, that was—it mattered not.

Heinkel: "…Aldebaran, you, what's really the deal with you?"

Aldebaran: "Hm?"

Heinkel: "You, had absolutely no chance of defeating that pigman. He was someone who utterly exceeded you in both skill and power. And yet, you were the one who won in the end. And mostly unharmed at that, overwhelmingly so."

Aldebaran: "…"

With eyes as if he was beholding someone truly august, Heinkel spoke thus to Aldebaran.

Listening to Heinkel's words, Aldebaran revised his evaluation of him to that of a man who was quite observant.

Perhaps precisely because he had been watching as an onlooker, Aldebaran's irregularity had left more of an impression.

Neither was it that Aldebaran had grown strong, nor was it that he was a strong match against Doltero. If it must be said, it would have appeared as if he had won by piling up a hundred lucky shots.

Yae: "—He's a monster."

Hence, plainly declaring so, and not asking for anything more, Yae's attitude was rather pleasant.

Answering Heinkel in Aldebaran's stead, her face bore no semblance of fear or awe. After all, within Yae, her impression of Aldebaran had already been completed.

Yae: "Al-sama, is a monster. We're working alongside a monster, y'know?"

Heinkel: "…I know a lotta people who're like monsters. But, this guy's…"

Yae: "There's a difference between those who are like monsters and actual monsters. Please don't talk about such shams~."

Her speech was gentle, her expression a smile; however, her phrasing was neither a confirmation nor a denial.

Overpowered by the calm yet threatening demeanor Yae showed on the surface, Heinkel was at a loss for words.

Aldebaran: "Regardless of whether I'm a monster or not, we'll proceed from here just as planned. Yae will suppress the opponent's numbers, and I'll deal with the strong ones. Old man, I'm counting on you to follow my directions, and deal with the mirrors."

Heinkel: "Y-yeah, got it."

Yae: "Roger ro~ger. As you command, Al-sama~."

Next to Heinkel as he timidly nodded, Yae lifted her arms in a hurrah, and with a fine movement of her fingertips she controlled her steel threads. Guided by her fingers, the steel threads coiled around the fainted Doltero, binding the limbs of the King Pig that had demonstrated his obstinacy to not collapse, stringing him up in the air with the others.

Even if he understood that it was a safety measure in case Doltero woke up, it did not feel good. That went not only for Doltero, but for Rachins too, who had needed to be beaten to the point of fainting.

Aldebaran: "My head hurts…"

Frankly, he had underestimated Felt's faction.

Outside of Reinhard, he had thought them all to be non-combatants excluding Ezzo. Still, the old giant himself, Grassis and Gaston, and the main target of Felt were waiting for him—

Yae: "If you'd just remove that single shackle, Al-sama, I'd be way more effective, y'know?"

Aldebaran: "…"

Yae: "This goes without saying, but… rather than tying them up, I'm better at strangling people to death, this little ol' me."

Every so often, for various reasons Yae would speak words to tempt Aldebaran, but even more so than when those whispers tried to lure him to the bedroom, these struck Aldebaran's eardrums in a much more alluring manner.

Unlike Heinkel, who was unable to demonstrate his true strength for emotional reasons, the reason why Yae could not show her true worth was none other than because she was abiding by Aldebaran's ego.

Were he to lift that restriction, the forest abundant in cover would instantly become Yae's hunting ground. —Even if the opponent was five-hundred strong, it would not take much time before the green leaves were all stained with blood.

Only, it was not that Yae was muttering in discontent for being unable to do that.

After all, no matter how bereft of legitimacy those directions were, it was her nature to follow orders.

Hence, the reason she was whispering to Aldebaran like this was—

Aldebaran: "—Thank you. But it's none of your concern."

Yae: "Oh my."

Sticking her tongue out with a "Behhh", Yae was unsurprised that her proposal had been rejected.

From the start, it was a proposal she had no expectation of being accepted. Surprisingly—no, it was not surprising for she who wished for Aldebaran to accomplish his goal, but it seemed to have set him alight with motivation.

Thanks to that sweet, tempting complaint, Aldebaran regained his exhausted willpower.

Aldebaran: "We also have the option to continue through the forest and slip through the south, but that's a no-go when considering what's to follow. Unfortunately for them, we'll be having lil' miss Felt and her crew be defeated here."

Yae: "Understood. Then, proceed as planned?"

The atmosphere from the preceding conversation vanished, and Aldebaran nodded at Yae as she inclined her head.

Then, thinking of Felt and the old giant who were likely working out a plan to secure victory on the other side of the forest, he quietly muttered.

Aldebaran: “You guys are strong. It’s just—your stars were bad.”

2

—Witnessing that the third Conversation Mirror had been broken, Rom-jii became convinced.

Rom: “As I thought, you’re doin’ more than just seein’ through our plans.”

He removed and discarded one of the Conversation Mirrors fitted onto his gauntlets; having lost its counterpart, it no longer served any purpose. Rom-jii considered the helmet bastard’s optimal conduct—immediately identifying the mirror-bearer, ordained with a Conversation Mirror, an action whose essence was to disrupt the flow of information.

Rachins had fallen, and even Doltero, who had rushed to the scene, had been utterly defeated.

Although he had estimated it to be a possible outcome, Rom-jii could not hold back his surprise at the defeat of the King Pig, having known the latter for quite a long time.

Rom: “If he’d been born a mere ten years earlier, his name probably would’ve gone down in the history books tellin’ of the Demi-Human War.”

The person in question would have likely laughed at that statement and brushed it off as an exaggeration, but in Rom-jii’s mind, it was a fair assessment.

But, then again, the Demi-Human War had not been such a close affair that Doltero alone would have been able to make the difference between victory and defeat. Even if his name would have been recorded in the annals of history, he most likely would have been among the many who had lost their lives at the hands of the Sword Demon or that generation’s Sword Saint.

Either way, Doltero had been defeated. Did that mean the opponent was on the same level as the Sword Demon?

Rom: “Nah, that ain’t it.”

Shaking his thick head from side to side, Rom-jii discarded his pessimistic thoughts.

In truth, the existence of the Sword Demon was something of a trauma for Rom-jii. Against the lone Sword Demon, even if Rom-jii were to command a force numbering a thousand, he would glimpse no sign of victory whatsoever.

This was not to say that the Sword Demon was the strongest in the world, but rather that his renown made him appear that way.

There were indeed those proprietors of renown such that their opponents would be made to feel that victory would be unattainable, even if that was not truly the case.

Even for Felt, the prospect of competing head-to-head against the big shots of the criminal underworld was unlikely, both in terms of physical strength and intelligence. Nonetheless, they still looked up to her as their queen.

That, was the unshakeable quality known as “renown”. —Something in which the helmet bastard was lacking.

To put it simply, he did not inspire fear. However, it could be said that it contributed to the unknowns of his character.

Rom: “Well then, we just hafta eliminate those unknowns one-by-one. —Launch ‘em up!”

Following the orders called out by Rom-jii, the fighters who remained on hand, numbering around twenty, began to move.

Fire Magic Ore was ignited, and launched were the contents of the Magic Cannons—the latter were valuable items that could be carried by hand and used continuously if properly cooled; however, the Magic Stones which they had fired held even greater value.

They were—

Rom: “—Night Banishers.”

Immediately after, white lights sliced across the sky of the battlefield like bolts of lightning, instantly scattering the clouds. The glow of the blue sky peering out chased away the approaching dusk, rewriting time. —No, that was not the case. The effect of the Night Banisher was merely a reproduction of daytime.

If launched at night, it would overwrite the darkness, giving the appearance of a daytime sky. It was even possible to create an inexplicable phenomenon in which raindrops would fall from a clear sky if one were to be emulated on a rainy day.

Originally, the Night Banisher’s intended effect was to drive away the night that caused chaos on the battlefield, but this Magic Stone had another effect that most were unaware of.

To rewrite an overcast day into a sunny one, to turn night into day, was the effect of painting reality over with an illusion.

That was to say—

Rom: “—If he’s been watchin’ us from the sky, then he can’t rely on that view no more.”

As the battle dragged on, the Night Banishing Magic Stones that had been prepared for nightfall came into play.

Judging this to be a rare stroke of good fortune, Rom-jii took steps to seal off one of the possible explanations behind the helmet bastard’s actions—an eye in the heavens, which may have been surveilling them.

But then again—

???: “Unit Six reporting, we found the helmet bastard! We’re going to… WOAHHH?!”

Judging by the report of the mirror-bearer assigned to Unit Six, and the subsequent lost communication, the helmet bastard had broken a fourth Conversation Mirror, and as such Rom-jii was convinced that the possibility of an eye in the heavens had completely vanished.

However, he was not discouraged. In the first place, the likelihood of an eye in the heavens had been low.

In response to the optimal conduct of the helmet bastard, Rom-jii's first instructions were for the mirror-bearers of each unit to alternate at regular intervals, and to report the next movements in writing through the mirror.

However, the helmet bastard responded to this by eliminating the designated mirror-bearers right away twice in a row.

Even supposing he was able to observe their movements from the sky, he would not have been able to fully respond to every move.

In that case, what remained was—

Rom: "It might be a Great Spirit I know nothin' 'bout, or a powerful Divine Protection, or he might be seein' inside his opponents' minds; otherwise, perhaps it's not minds that he's seein', but—"

And so, he listed each possibility that came to mind, and made plans to eliminate them one-by-one.

It was hard to imagine that the helmet bastard had a Great Spirit with him, considering his actions. A Spirit's true talent was magic, but the helmet bastard showed no signs of using a Spirit's power to overcome this onslaught of challenges. Assistance from Spirits of the Yin and Yang attributes would not have been as noticeable as from Spirits of other attributes, but those Spirits were also of high rarity.

The possibility that one was accompanying him was not zero, but—

Rom: "It's of low priority. —Unit Seven, go east; Unit Nine, proceed southeast. Hurry ta where Unit Six's fightin'. Nevermind, there ain't a need ta support Unit Six. Instead, let's get yer two units workin' together. Use both Magic Stones and throwin' stones, we've gotta see if we can make him use two or more Divine Protections, no matter what."

By nature, only a single Divine Protection could dwell within an individual.

There had only been a handful of people in history who held multiple Divine Protections, and the number of people whose Divine Protections both proved useful could only be counted on one hand. —It was odd that among those individuals abnormally blessed by fortune, the likes of the Sword Saint and the Mad Prince both existed in this current day and age, but there was a possibility that the helmet bastard could be a third one to be added to those ranks.

Henceforth—

Rom: “You can ascertain someone’s Divine Protection by bundlin’ ‘n stackin’ up hardships, ‘n watchin’ how they handle them. —It ain’t for nothin’ that I’ve been called the one who’s killed the most Divine Protection holders in the world.”

3

From the sudden deployment of the Night Banisher onward, Aldebaran sensed that the situation had worsened dramatically.

With the movements of the opposition clearly being laced with contrived inaction, even merely identifying the mirror-bearer had become increasingly difficult, ramping up his number of attempts up by an order of magnitude.

Aldebaran: “Because they keep shuffling around the role of mirror-bearer, if the timing of initiating the confrontation’s even slightly off, a completely different guy’ll have the mirror…!”

Moreover, in place of straightforward attacks that aimed at simply suppressing, defeating, or killing Aldebaran and his allies, there was a marked increase in attacks that seemed to be aimed at testing their reactions. Setting aside those underlying intentions, Aldebaran was tormented by having to deal with such offensives that did not directly threaten his life.

Were they attacks of lethal nature, assured to rob him of his life, he could crush them without mercy, unhesitatingly taking measures to stifle them at their inception. However, since that intent was nebulous, and since its impact was minimal, comparable to that of clearing a pebble off the roadside, the conduct required of him was overwhelmingly extensive.

Aldebaran: “Taken to an extreme, even a single scratch means asking whether I should start over.”

Having said that, he still could not ignore attacks that, akin to a slow-acting poison, would force him into a softlock because he had merely been struck by them. As a result, once that uncertainty took root in him, Aldebaran had no choice but to deal with each and every attack, ramping up the number of attempts by yet another order of magnitude.

Aldebaran: “You’re getting on my nerves, shitty old geezer.”

4

As the number of mirrors being shattered continued to accumulate, Rom-jii grew increasingly wary of how the situation had been progressing.

Thanks to prior directives from the heads of their respective organizations, the ruffians of the criminal underworld followed Rom-jii’s instructions with surprising obedience. Given the situation, some of them likely fell without even understanding what their role had been, and yet fallen they had, with nary a word of complaint; such an attitude was indeed admirable.

Owing to that, the number of cards in his hand were dwindling at an alarming rate, but in return, the face of the card kept concealed by the opposition was slowly but surely being revealed.

Rom: “They’re a resolute bunch indeed. Felt might’ve built the relationship with Flanders, but the heavens still fervently keep watch over those who struggle.”

The effect of the Night Banisher obstructed any eyes in the heavens, and by stacking wave upon wave of Magic Stone attacks to alter the

Mana concentration, the area was rendered intoxicating to Spirits, which thus confirmed the absence of any cooperating Spirits. Suspecting a highly versatile Divine Protection, through a combination of short and long-ranged attacks, both physical and magical, the Divine Protections of which he was aware—which were limited to the ones whose efficiency had been ascertained by using Reinhard as a test subject, had their characteristics targeted, and thus ninety percent of the potential candidates for the current scenario had been eliminated.

Rom: “This ain’t the Divine Protection of First Sight or the Divine Protection of the Second Coming. So if it’s neither the Divine Protection of Stormy Skies nor the Divine Protection of the Tiger’s Den, not many candidates remain.”

The remaining ten percent could possibly serve as one-trick ponies, depending on how they were used, but they lacked the versatility to deal with a situation as dire as this. With that, nearly all the candidates were dropped, relegated to the back of his mind.

From here on out, he would move on to the stage of suspecting something that was neither magic, nor Spirit, nor Divine Protection—an Authority.

Rom: “Bending the laws of reality itself, wouldn’t that be pride beyond the station of man, helmet bastard?”

5

When the tide of the wave attacks shifted, and the opposition’s movements took a turn, Aldebaran ground his teeth, sensing that the worst possibility that came to mind had been right on the mark.

In all likelihood, that old Giant—Valga Cromwell, had an inkling that Aldebaran was using an Authority, overcoming these imminent critical situations by stacking up countless matrices.

The succession of wave attacks, and the sequence of numerous attacks rich in variety that kept up for a while, had been meant to whittle down the possibilities of how Aldebaran was escaping from such an overwhelming disadvantage.

Near infinite trial and error by means of redefining a matrix and the existence of the Territory—it was likely impossible that they had grasped that to be the true nature of Aldebaran's Authority, but he had a keen feeling that it had been narrowed down to something quite close.

The chief possibilities of magic or a Divine Protection had already been eliminated through an exhaustive investigation, and he got a sense that they had entered the stage where a tremendous, absurd Authority was starting to be suspected. Similar to Ezzo Cadner back at the Pleiades Watchtower, there was a high possibility that clever individuals would see through Aldebaran's Authority.

But then again, it would be difficult to corner Aldebaran even if one had seen through it. Ezzo's judgement to flood the escape path with Water Magic had been optimal in a certain sense, but it would have been a herculean task to accomplish a similar feat in a space this expansive.

Even so, the nasty premonition that tinged his heart did not disappear, causing Aldebaran to hesitate about updating his matrix in such a short timespan; the difficulty of recovering from a single failure was steadily ramping up, little-by-little.

To begin with, why was the notorious Valga Cromwell from the Demi-Human War still alive, and serving Felt at that? Was Valga not the Great Strategist who harbored an immense hatred of humans, taking the lives of several thousands with his merciless stratagems in the Demi-Human War? His head was on the verge of seething as it blurted out complaints towards the incomprehensible combination. There's something wrong with this, seriously.

6

Having come this far, he had come to a point where there was no longer any room to doubt the worst possible premonition; as Rom-jii endured that bad feeling in his chest, he vigorously stroked his own bald head for no reason.

Likely, the helmet bastard was using an Authority—neither was it a Divine Protection nor was it magic, but an extraordinary power said to have once been used by the Witches, a power capable of bending the laws of the world; of this he was convinced. In the past, during the era of the Demi-Human War, when he had been acquainted with the successor to a Witch, Sphinx, she had stated herself to be a failed creation, unable to reproduce an Authority. However, though he had expressed his wish for Felt to gain achievements, with the enemy possessing an ability so desperately coveted by that Witch, this was far too troublesome an opponent.

And though he was loath to admit it, he had narrowed down the helmet bastard's Authority to one of either "Reading the Thoughts of an Opponent" or "Seeing into the Short-Term Future". However, at the current point, Rom-jii surmised that precognition had a higher probability than mindreading.

Since he had continued to evade this side's attacks to this much of an extent, even supposing he was reading the mind of another, Rom-jii thought it would undoubtedly be that of his own, and had thus deployed the measures to ascertain if that was the case.

He had given unique orders to two different units; the first unit he commanded to pass them by without attacking, and the second he ordered to launch an all-out offensive, but the helmet bastard had gone to deal with the unit it would have been fine to ignore, plunging himself into the predicament of a pincer attack in between the first and second units. If he had read Rom-jii's mind, or the mind of somebody in that first unit, then the helmet bastard would have just burdened himself with needless hardship.

At that moment, he ascertained that the helmet bastard's Authority was not that of mindreading. That was to say, the true nature of the helmet bastard's Authority was now mostly narrowed down to precognition.

Even if it had been narrowed down, he likely could not cheer out an "I did it!" with this conclusion. Sphinx had triumphantly spoken of them as powers that twisted the laws of reality, but something like "Precognition" was going too far.

Just how am I supposed to deal with something like that? There's something wrong with this, seriously.

???: “—Anyone who can’t use the Flow Method, fall back! But don’t stop moving!!”

His sonorous voice raised in a shout, Gaston leaped out ahead of the group, and swung at the helmet bastard.

Gaston had already obtained Rom-jii’s theory from the mirror-bearer. —Apparently, that bastard could see just a little ahead into the future, something like that.

Gaston: “Then all I gotta do is finish it the moment he sees ahead!”

Bellowing like thunder, Gaston abandoned the idea of landing a single, glorious blow. Instead, he switched to a relentless flurry of strikes, aiming to cut off the helmet bastard’s escape routes by giving priority to landing a punch.

However, in response to the barrage, the helmet bastard stomped the ground hard,

Helmet Bastard: “Smart thinking, Gaston. But this time, thinking was the wrong move.”

A swelling wall of earth shielded the helmet bastard, halting the powerful onslaught. He gritted his teeth; just like the bastard had stated, his plan had backfired, and immediately afterwards, his opponent turned the very same earth into gauntlets around his arm and smashed Gaston in the forehead, sending him reeling back.

And as it was, Gaston, still reeling back, sensed the helmet bastard was going for a follow-up.

Gaston: “ORAAA!!”

Gaston channeled his momentum into a backflip, unleashing a kick towards that sensation.

The nimble strike delivered while spinning through the air was a facsimile of an acrobatic technique of Felt’s used when attempting to slip away from Reinhard’s grasp, like a cat twisting out of a hold.

It was inconceivable that a brute like Gaston would pull off something so acrobatic, not even the old man who served as a gardener for House Astrea, who had been hit by it during training—

Helmet Bastard: “You got me. Four times, at that.”

Alongside those cryptic words, Gaston’s kick had sliced through empty air.

An attack Gaston had honed to the level of a finishing move had been rendered useless. But before he could even dwell on that frustration, a strange sensation seized his body.

He felt oppression as though the hand of a Giant had grabbed hold of him, yanking his right leg upward. —Upon closer inspection, he came to see that there was a near-invisible thread restraining him, extending from the helmet bastard’s right hand.

Was it not just the red-haired maid accompanying him, this helmet bastard could use it too?

Helmet Bastard: “Mine’s just a single strand, though. In truth, she’s a genius, that one.”

Hearing the helmet bastard’s lifeless tone as he spoke words of praise for his comrade, Gaston ground his teeth.

His right leg suspended by the thread, his foot was raised all the way to head height. His left foot, barely touching the ground, was forced onto its toes, his body being left utterly powerless. In this ridiculous, helpless position, Gaston had been completely neutralized.

And with that, the helmet bastard turned his back on Gaston,

Helmet Bastard: “Old man, I’m leaving him to you. I’m gonna go back up Yae.”

With those words, the helmet bastard strode away as if Gaston had already been dealt with.

Taking his place was a man Gaston had only heard about, Reinhard's father. Donning the same hair and eye tonalities as Reinhard he did, yet the ambience his body was enveloped in exuded an entirely different quality.

But more than anything, that expression, one that said he was only following the helmet bastard's orders because he had no other choice, reluctant and unwilling, pissed Gaston off.

Therefore—

Heinkel: "—Hk, you better not move awkwardly or… bweh!"

Gaston struck the hardened face of his opponent and immediately lunged at the helmeted bastard's turned back. But before his hand could reach the latter, his balance faltered, and his opponent easily evaded the charge with a lunge, letting Gaston crash hard onto the ground.

He had failed. —Having forcibly ripped himself free from the thread, his nearly torn ankle could not hold him up.

Helmet Bastard: "You, with that leg…"

Gaston: "What's one damn leg worth?! I'm putting my life on the line here! You think this is some game where I'd quit just 'cause it hurts a little?!"

Helmet Bastard: "…"

Gaston: "But what really pisses me off the most is that you guys are doing this reluctantly. Don't go picking fights with people if you can't even laugh in admiration of your own comrades' hard work!"

Gaston hurled his fury at the silent helmet bastard as he forced himself to his feet with every last ounce of his strength.

Even now copious amounts of blood yet poured from Gaston's right ankle, the torn flesh exposing glimpses of white bone beneath. And yet, the fact that he clenched his teeth and stood, was due to the importance of that which he carried upon his back.

Gaston, had a woman he had fallen for.

A woman who, perhaps feeling trepidation upon discovering that a villain with the Divine Dragon in tow was coming, had nonetheless held him and told him not to worry, before finally pushing him onwards to journey alongside Felt.

Gaston, had men he admired.

A friend whose mouth would run unceasingly with discontent, all while worrying about those he was surrounded by. A lifelong companion who, despite being a coward at heart, never would withdraw and retreat. A mentor who despite always providing him with tedious, troublesome lectures, was very caring, howling that all held the right to achieve greatness. A bad influence who, loving the girl who would puff her chest out and make manifest her braggadocio, was turning his past, a past akin to a curse, into strength.

Gaston, had a man and a woman he looked up to.

A strong man so strong, he could protect all things he wished to protect.

A strong woman so radiant, no matter where she was, forgetting her would be absolutely impossible.

—Gaston, had every reason to stand tall and fight.

Gaston: “People like you, who don’t even have that in ‘em, got no damn right stepping into a ring where others are giving it their all!!”

With a roar from the deepest depths of his soul, Gaston charged at the helmet bastard anew, deliberately stepping forward with his right foot.

Even if that step were to shatter his leg, tear it apart, leave him unable to walk ever again, it mattered not. Even then, Gaston would still find something he would be able to do. Even then, he knew his comrades would never abandon him. —Right now, all he wanted was to beat the helmet bastard.

Pushing off the ground, Gaston’s massive frame rose into the air as he drove his left knee upward in a crushing strike. Even if blocked by a wall of earth, this time he had his upraised arms ready to hammer down at any moment as a second-stage backup.

Whichever it was, he would smash the helmet that hid the bastard's face—

Helmet Bastard: "—Honestly, it landed."

As if he had anticipated Gaston's movements, the helmet bastard had already closed the distance in perfect rhythm with the takeoff.

Right after Gaston's throat let out a faint groan, a fist clad in a gauntlet of stone struck his face as he sprung up into the air, causing his head to jerk backwards.

Gaston: "You're fucking… kidding me…"

In the end, not a single one of Gaston's attacks had landed. If his opponent was indeed making a sarcastic joke or a bitter remark about them landing or something of the sort despite that, there was nothing to laugh about, even one bit.

With the blood loss from his leg contributing, Gaston's consciousness rapidly faded—

???: "—RAHHHHHH!!"

—At the end, concurrent with a familiar high-pitched voice, a burst of white light at the edge of his vision came into sight.

8

—The name of that Meteor, was the Star Staff.

The majority of the Meteors which existed in this world were said to be the handiwork of a single Witch, driven by curiosity and desire, simply for her own amusement; the Star Staff, however, was different.

With an aim in mind, the Witch had painstakingly forged a crystallization of her intellect to realize that goal—that aim, though perhaps something so petty as silencing a quippy Dragon, its power was genuine.

By siphoning Mana from its wielder, and by abridging the procedures, the power unleashed would become the starlight of Shario.

Of course, it was a light insignificant in comparison to Al Shario, which could slay even Dragons; however, its power, which any individual could acquire without study, could still be described as extraordinary.

Pursued by starlight that would ceaselessly track its target until striking true, Aldebaran took every defensive measure he could conjure, but none could withstand the assault while also avoiding injury.

An attack of this nature, which left no route for escape, was Aldebaran's nemesis. For that reason, in accordance with Aldebaran's own list of priorities, only one viable option remained.

Aldebaran: "Sorry about this, old man."

With that muttered apology, Aldebaran caused the ground beneath Heinkel, who had fallen on his bottom upon receiving a counterattack from Gaston, to rise up, thrusting him up as a shield in between Aldebaran and the starlight.

Naturally, realizing his intentions, Heinkel had begun to yell "Aldeba—", with anger evident upon his face; however, in the next instant, the burst of white light struck the red-haired swordsman, his entire body permeated by an impact that could silence even a Dragon.

Heinkel: "—Kah, oghh, gwoaAHHHhh!"

Aldebaran, who had experienced it firsthand, had suffered damage that seemed to scorch his brain and internal organs to a crisp. However, though Heinkel had fallen to his knees, passing out, he still possessed the leeway to writhe in agony on the spot.

Whether in Vollachia, or that instance with "Aldebaran", time and again, through brutal struggles was the extraordinary sturdiness which Heinkel possessed proven. —Having been saved by the resilience that seemed to bring Heinkel himself no gratification whatsoever, Aldebaran looked to where the light had originated.

Thereupon—

Aldebaran: "—So, you're Camberley?"

Leaning against the Star Staff that had unleashed a burst of light, blood dripping from his nose, was a man of the Dwarf race.

As of now, this battle had been done over twenty-nine thousand two-hundred and twenty-one times since its commencement. Consequently, Aldebaran understood the ruffians who had gathered here better than they did themselves.

Of the opponents he had encountered thus far, he knew every last one by name. In a way, it could be said that he had developed a sort of one-sided kinship with them. Sorry, that would be a lie. He was sick and tired of facing such formidable opponents.

Regardless—

Aldebaran: "…Even if you're aware of the activation method, that ain't a Meteor that any half-assed amateur can put to use. How on earth did you manage to activate it?"

Camberley: "How, do you think, I did it…? Hehe, keep guessin', for the rest, of your life."

Aldebaran: "—. Don't tell me, you used Hexcel?"

Blood dripping from his eyes and nose, along with bulging veins on his neck and forehead; this sight led Aldebaran to the conclusion that these were adverse effects resulting from the use of a certain illicit substance.

Commonly referred to as "Hexcel", it was an illicit drug produced using bokko fruit, which in its raw form had the property of revitalizing the Mana within the body, and the use of Hexcel was prohibited even in the Kingdom of Lugunica. —Although the drug had a narcotic effect, it would, in essence, generate excess Mana through the activation of the Gate.

Under the effect of that doping, even those unqualified could wield the Star Staff.

Aldebaran: “Even then, your insides’ll be ripped apart. Doing that sorta thing…”

Camberley: “You think, I’m the only one, who’ll back down? When Rachins, and Gaston, and everyone else, are risking it all… even Reinhard, y’know? Heh, I landed up, with an amazing bunch…”

With his complexion deathly pale, not even bothering to wipe away the bloody tears and nosebleed that appeared starkly vivid by contrast, Camberley was in a state that could certainly be described as hopeless.

However, spoken with the hint of a smile, his words lacked the typical recklessness of a desperate individual.

Aldebaran: “Every last one of them…”

Behind Heinkel, who was still writhing from being burnt by starlight, Gaston lay unconscious.

He was also one among those who, having clashed with Aldebaran head-on, had wounded him with his words more than his fists. Individuals of such a sort numbered many in this battle against the Felt Camp.

Only by defeating all of them, one-by-one, thoroughly and painstakingly, had Aldebaran been able to arrive at this juncture.

After twenty-nine thousand two-hundred and twenty-one times, stacking up attempt after attempt,

Camberley: “—Helmet bastard, you’ve never fought, with your life on the line, not even once, ain’t that right?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Camberley: “You see, I have. That’s what I’m doing now… To fight with my life on the line, I got both a reason, and the courage. That much, I’ve certainly, proved… Hk.”

Stating thus with his trembling voice, Camberley tightened his grip upon the Star Staff in his hands, and once more, he tried to invoke the light of a star.

However, that was an impossibility.

Camberley: “Gauhghh.”

The Mana to operate it was insufficient in him. —And, as if to punish a wielder in that state, the Star Staff backfired, burning Camberley’s Gate and causing white smoke to billow from the entirety of his small frame.

If an unqualified person were to execute the activation procedure, not only would it fail to be invoked, but there would also be a small penalty. Installed by the Witch who had created the Star Staff, it was a safety measure to prevent children from playing with it. The fact that the Witch believed that this would serve as a safety measure, showed that she really did not comprehend the human heart.

Anyway, the safety measure had performed its task, and Camberley fell backward, passing out—

???: “Car-kun!”

And, a woman rushed over and caught his small body before it collapsed onto the ground.

The woman, with dark skin and wearing a lascivious dress, was the girl boss of the Flower Prison Garden, judging from her features. Embracing the unconscious Camberley, she directed a stern glare at Aldebaran.

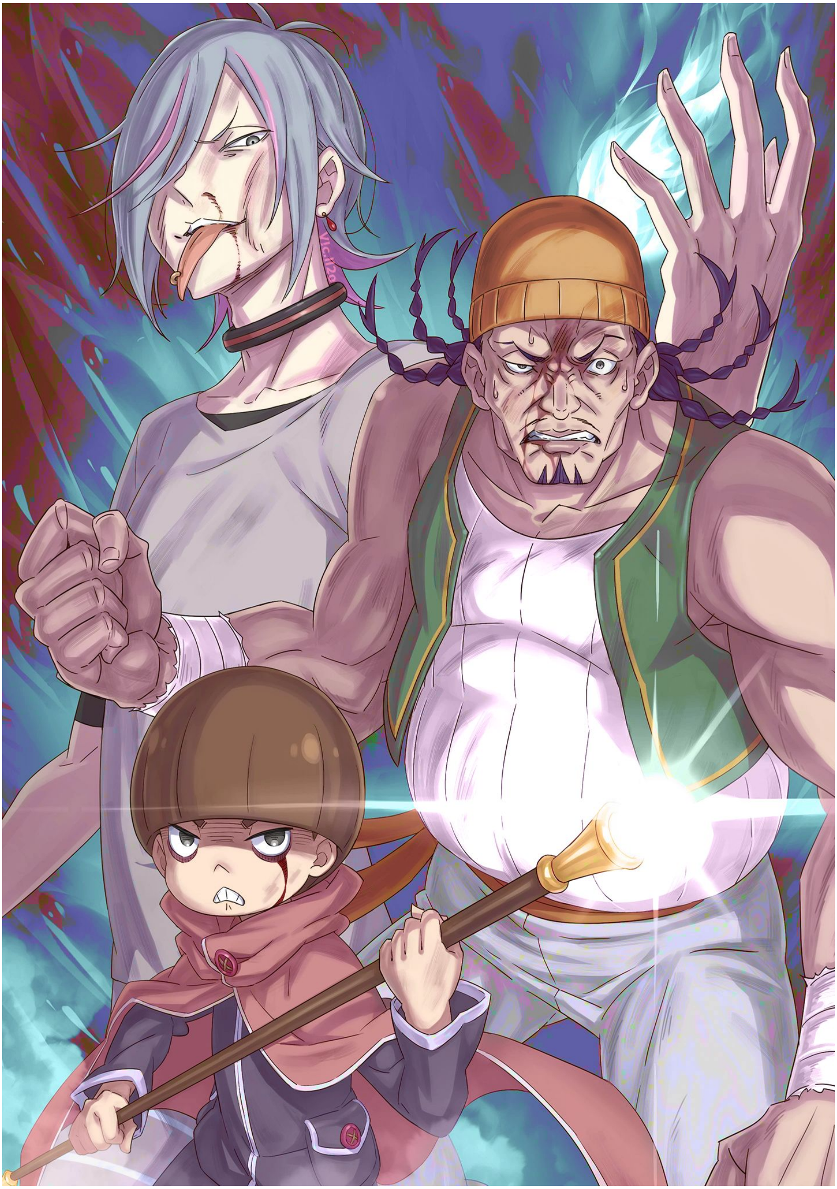
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Aldebaran: “…You don’t need to glare at me like that. I ain’t got the time or the interest to kick a dead body.”

Woman: “You are all…”

Aldebaran: “Seven days… no, now it’s just six days. I’m only gonna cause a stir in the world for the next six days, no longer. —Though none of you guys are willing to believe me.”

The boss of the Flower Prison Garden called Toto, was she?

The boss of the Black Silver Coin, Doltero, had also tormented him relentlessly, but the gaze of this woman, holding the man precious to her, was just as cuttingly sharp.

At her gaze, Aldebaran narrowed his eyes behind his helmet, probing Toto’s fighting spirit with a simple, “Shall we?”. Come to think of it, this marked the first time he had encountered a woman on this battlefield.

He had yet to see the faces of either Grassis, who had delivered that painful first blow, or Felt, their leader.

Ignoring Aldebaran’s sentiments, while tensing all her limbs, Toto jerked her chin at Aldebaran as if to say “Go”.

A wry smile eeking out due to her self-assured attitude, Aldebaran turned his back to her.

And then—

Toto: “—Kuh, ah!”

Behind Aldebaran, Toto had dropped the iron fan she had raised, struggling to tear away the steel thread wound around her neck. Unable to do so, the sound of her falling down reached his ears.

The doer of the deed, Yae, approached the collapsed Toto, retrieving the iron fan that had dropped to the ground, and spoke, Yae: “Wow, there’s poison in this. From the smell and color… jiramme, I’d say? It’s an instantly lethal poison, so it looks like you were rea~lly eager to go all out, weren’t you?”

Aldebaran: “Don’t get so angry.”

Yae: “Even though I’m this ado~rable, it’s rude to say I’m getting angry! First of all, it’s Al-sama’s fault, you know? Just because the opponent’s a woman, you turn your back with a grin. I guess, for Al-sama, it might not matter how many times you die, but…”

Aldebaran: “—Now’s the first time. It’s ‘cause you came to help.”

It was not flattery, the truth truly was that he had not been caught off guard even once by Toto.

Upon hearing Aldebaran’s response, Yae fell silent with a “Hmph” and wore a displeased expression. That had been Aldebaran’s way of showing gratitude, but despite her complaints about how he did not thank her enough, she would always react like this whenever he actually did communicate his thanks. There was no avail in saying it to her.

Aldebaran: “Anyway, we’ve finished suppressing this bunch too… And, the old man is…?”

Yae: “He’s burned, but he’s still alive and kicking. That guy, don’t you think he’s a little off?”

Aldebaran: “Of course he’s off. He’s from House Astrea.”

Yae: “Even someone like that is still an Astrea, huh?”

Be that as it may, even for a member of House Astrea, the blast from the Star Staff seemed to have taken its toll.

Heinkel, appearing to be in more pain than he had ever been before, was approached by Yae for a quick check on his condition. At the same time, she shot Aldebaran a look that clearly suggested that they should take this chance to leave him behind.

Ignoring Yae’s gaze with his usual indifference, Aldebaran turned his attention northwest.

Aldebaran: “…”

Since the start of the battle, they had been cornered, pursued by smoke, and forced further and further south through the forest.

While steadily whittling down the enemy force numbering five hundred people in their path, Aldebaran and his group had finally made it all the way back.

And upon making it all the way back—

???: “—Well now, strangely ‘nough, it don’t feel like this’s my first time seein’ ya, helmet bastard.”

Aldebaran: “Same goes for me. Maybe it’s ‘cause I’ve been thinking about you this whole time.”

At last, in the very plains where the chase had begun, at the end of a trial and error that had lasted twenty-nine thousand, two-hundred and twenty-one attempts, Aldebaran had succeeded in coming face-to-face with his true enemy—with Valga Cromwell.

9

Sat cross-legged upon the needlessly spacious plain, Valga Cromwell rested his chin in his hands.

Looking at him once more, he was huge. Even though he was sitting, his head was still level with Aldebaran’s simply due to his body being so large, and perhaps because his legs were short.

Aldebaran: “Relatable. I’ve also got a complex about my legs being short.”

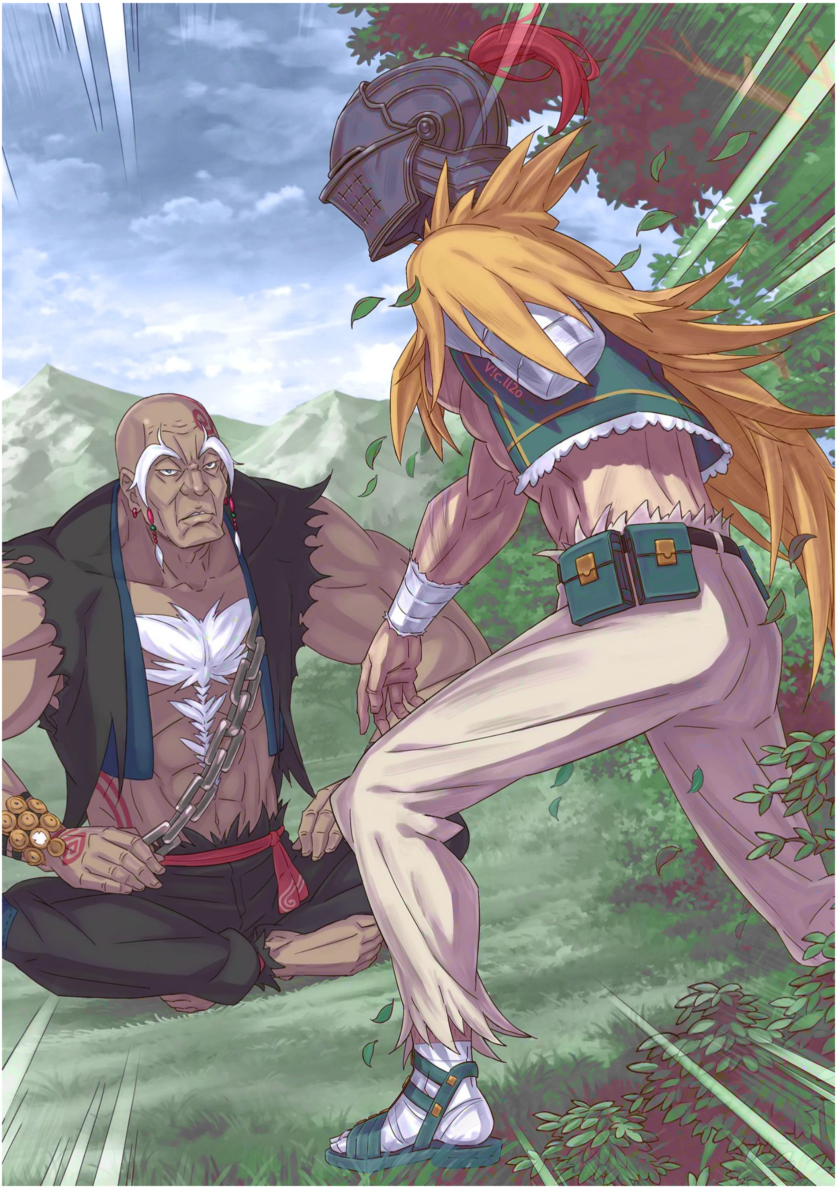
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Valga: “I’ll say this now, but I’ve never made a fuss ‘bout the length of my legs. Tho’ back in my heyday, I used ta wish I had a bigger body or longer arms.”

Aldebaran: “You seem young enough even now, gramps, how old are you?”

Valga: “Who knows. I stopped countin’ after a hundred.”

Valga gave a cold answer, but as expected, Giants had quite a long lifespan.

Excluding the elves who were said to live forever unless killed, the longest lived race in this world were probably the Giants. Considering that those Giants were now on the brink of extinction due to having angered a lone Witch, the people of yore must not have known any limits to their rage.

Aldebaran: “A swordsman who went on a killing spree ‘cause his favorite food was Dragon meat, a Witch who almost wiped out a whole tribe due to being angered by a single member, an elf who got caught in the splash of the Witch of Envy, the list goes on.”

Valga: “Ya seem awfully knowledgeable ’bout history for a young’un. Besides, weren’t ya all chummy with the Witch of Envy?”

Aldebaran: “Chummy? Well there’s an unfunny joke.”

In their tit-for-tat, Valga’s voice held a transparent intent to agitate him, however, Aldebaran could not go without refuting that statement.

Something like getting along with the Witch of Envy, even if that evaluation was sarcastic or in jest, he would not let it slide.

Aldebaran: “That one really does hate me to an extreme extent. Not once have our eyes ever met.”

Valga: “…Meeting eyes with the Witch of Envy, hm? That in itself’s gotta be an unfunny joke, eh?”

Aldebaran: “If y’ain’t laughing, neither am I. Every step along the way, you’ve taken the sorta measures I hate the most… where’s lil’ miss Felt?”

Valga: “Capturin’ that girl’d be the quickest way for ya ta end this, ain’t that so? Ya think I’d put her somewhere within yer reach?”

Aldebaran clicked his tongue at that response, and Valga snorted his nose as he gazed behind the former—to the forest wherein a fierce battle had been unfolding until now; he continued with “And so”.

Valga: “So ya really went ‘n done it, killin’ five hundred people, huh?”

Aldebaran: “Though, you might think it’s cute compared to your kill count during the civil war. Besides… ahh, nah, I’ll keep it to myself. It doesn’t matter.”

Valga: “…”

This too was a tit-for-tat, so he forced himself to swallow the words he had begun to utter. —In this battle, Aldebaran’s party had not robbed a single person of their life.

In order to weaken their fighting strength, he had gone as far as to give them grievous wounds that put them on the verge of death, but none of their lives would be in danger if they received the proper treatment.

But, mentioning that here would not have a positive influence on Valga’s impression.

It would only prompt skepticism regarding why he had taken such measures, such unnatural conduct.

Naturally, as Yae had proposed several times, rather than adhering to non-lethality, there had been several points at which taking their opponent’s lives would have made surmounting them easier. Even if the order of magnitude of his attempts thus increased, Aldebaran stubbornly abided by that restriction.

He had made up his mind. Aldebaran had.

From the world she had loved, not a single person more would be lost in the scope of his interference. Save for the one exception, that of Natsuki Subaru.

For that reason, Aldebaran would not take the lives of any—

Valga: "—You're no longer able ta bear the sight of anybody losin' their life before yer eyes, ain't that so?"

—.

——.

———.

————Ah?

Aldebaran: "—Ah?"

Valga: "I had my suspicions. 'Twas when I'd heard that Ezzo and Flam'd been done in at the Pleiades Watchtower, but their lives hadn't been taken."

Aldebaran: "Oi…"

Valga: "Flam used the Divine Protection of Mindspeak, and receivin' the news, the Sword Saint went ta intercept'cha at the Augria Sand Dunes where he's the weakest… that in itself's a stratagem I could understand, but it was no reason ta let Ezzo live. Once Flam used her Divine Protection, too, she'd have served her purpose, yeah?"

Aldebaran: "Oi, gramps… old geezer…"

Valga: "Any worries that might crop up in the future oughta be eradicated. Ya didn't take those natural measures. —If I recall, ya asked me where Felt's gone off ta. That girl, I had her follow yer escape path. Thus…"

Ignoring Aldebaran's trembling voice, Valga raised his arm—a gauntlet fitted with Conversation Mirrors, and tapped the single one that did not have its lid down.

Aldebaran's party had shattered a total of twelve mirrors now, and that fitted in his gauntlet was the thirteenth and final one. On the other side of that Conversation Mirror, Felt was present.

Valga: "Fact is, ya guys ain't takin' lives, n' there's no shortage of people who'll still be able ta move once their restraints are removed. Even if five hundred's impossible, do ya think ya still got enough strength ta take on more than a hundred again?"

Aldebaran: "You, old geezer…!!"

Valga flashed a smile as he spoke, and inside Aldebaran's helmet, a vein bulged on his forehead.

The fact that Valga had flipped his side's restriction on killing against them, having vigilantly progressed arrangements for returning those who had been neutralized to the frontlines, was a surprise.

However, it was not as though Aldebaran's party had been bereft of judgement either. Not only had they tied them up, but they had also broken their limbs, making it difficult for them to return to the battlefield—

Valga: "For when push comes ta shove, we've provided enough Hexcel for everyone. Next won't be a battle against those who don't fear pain, but a battle against those who can't feel pain."

Aldebaran: "—Hk, ahh, bring it on! Be it a hundred or two-hundred they're welcome to come at me. I'll just do it all over…"

Again; it was when he was about to shout out in the spur of the moment.

Watching Aldebaran as he raised his voice in anger, Valga abruptly narrowed his eyes. The gaze seemed as if it was looking right into his helmet, and Aldebaran's breath involuntarily caught.

Thereupon, Valga closed in with words.

Valga: "I see. —Seems like this conversation's a first for ya."

Aldebaran: "…"

For a moment, not understanding what that signified, Aldebaran tensed up.

But, it was for just a moment. A terrible chill immediately crawled up his back, and Aldebaran finally defined the being before his eyes to be a threat greater than the Sword Saint.

Aldebaran: "YAE—!!"

Instantly, Aldebaran used his voice to the fullest to command Yae, who he had kept on standby, to attack.

Through Yae's Steel Thread Technique, Valga Cromwell would be restrained; there was no choice but to shut his mouth, which had the potential to speak those thoughts of his. The quickest way to achieve that would be to take his life. However, that would not be done.

Decidedly, he was doing that with his own intentions, not for any reasons like the one Valga had described.

Aldebaran: "So that you don't wake up for six days, I'll put you to sleep."

He had yet to come up with a specific method, but doing that would be the best strategy.

In order to do that, he ordered Yae to move—

???: "—There you are."

As if from a stew in which a multitude of poisons simmered, a man's out-of-place voice hung in the air like a malicious fragrance.

The man had been hiding in the grass of the plain—with an unsightly appearance, consisting of tattoos of balance scales inked all over his body, he directed his gaze to a spot in the forest, and wriggled his bizarrely large right eye.

With a crookedness as if he had forced in an eyeball that did not belong to him, that gaze of his pierced Yae, who had jumped out in an effort to obey Aldebaran's command.

The covertness of a shinobi had been seen through by that man—likely Manfred of the Balance.

Then, Manfred placed his palm over his right hand, and capturing Yae in the gaze of his left eyeball that did not match in size,

Manfred: "Don't move."

Yae: "—Hk."

As soon as the command was given, a slight disturbance was born in Yae's movements.

Interfering with others through the weight of one's words was the effect of the Divine Protection of Coercion. However, if the Divine Protection of Farsight had been the one to pinpoint Yae's position, this made it two unique Divine Protections at the same time.

Aldebaran: "An Apostle of Typhon, are you…?!"

Aldebaran gnashed his teeth, however, Yae overcame the Divine Protection's power of compulsion in an instant.

With the step following the one disturbed she regained composure, and with a shinobi's mobility she attempted to extend a steel thread out towards Valga. —However, upon that one step which had been disturbed, those transcendent would intervene.

???: "—Vengeance for Flam."

Having hidden in the grass as Manfred had, Grassis leapt up, and drove a kick into Yae's torso. Yae promptly crossed an arm over to catch it, but the strike from the girl who had mastered the Flow Method at her young age was frighteningly weighty, sending Yae's slender body a great deal back.

Yae: "Though, I've got nothing to do with your big sis!"

Grassis: "Mostly all of you, are vengeance for Flam."

Receiving Grassis's loose retribution, Yae's hand was instantly broken.

Left in the forest by Yae, Heinkel had yet to get back up after getting hit by the Star Staff earlier, and even supposing he had indeed risen again, he could not be counted upon in this situation.

That was to say—

Aldebaran: "—Territory, re-expansion. Matrix redefinition."

From this point on, Aldebaran would shut the mouth of Valga Cromwell with naught more than his own strength.

For that purpose—

Valga: "—Ya lost yer cool. No matter the era, that's always the cause of defeat for the losin' side."

Exercising his Authority, the moment he bent the world to his own rules, Aldebaran realized that before his eyes, Valga was chewing something up in his mouth.

Since he also had a habit of gulping down the poison stored behind his molar, he could tell. —And in this situation, there was only one thing that Valga could be dosing on.

Aldebaran: "Hexcel."

In an instant, an enormous palm spread out in front of Aldebaran, and he immediately bent backwards.

He fell on his backside. In exchange, the physique of the risen Giant seemed to have enlarged even further from the effects of the contraband drug he had taken, and Aldebaran's breath caught.

Valga Cromwell's direct combat ability, was unknown to Aldebaran.

However, Valga's drive in this moment was no less than that of the numerous warriors he had come to face until this point, and in him dwelled a dreadfulness only found in those who staked their lives on the line.

It happened, at the moment in which that drive had overwhelmed him.

???: “—ALDEBARAN!!”

The shout of a man upon whom he had harbored no expectations of contributing whatsoever, was pointing to the sky.

Aldebaran had likewise caught a glimpse of him in the corner of his eye, but for Heinkel to point at the sky with a sense of urgency rather than terror or fear in these circumstances, there was but one reason.

The time limit that would bring denouement to this battle, from beyond the sky, it cometh.

Aldebaran: “With this—”

Valga: “—Time’s up.”

As Aldebaran’s words were convinced of the demise of this hectic situation, they overlapped with Valga’s voice. But, something was strange. In that voice, not a shred of resignation or irritation was present.

On the contrary, it seemed as if Valga had been looking forward to this moment.

—In the subsequent instant, it came to pass. The light that had illuminated the sky on Valga’s command, now flashed anew.

10

—At that moment, as Rom-jii crushed a Night Banishing Magic Stone within his hand, his body invigorated via his Hexcel-boosted Gate, he played his final move for the purpose of felling the helmet bastard.

Rom: “The helmet bastard’s behaviour, be it mind reading or precognition, doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

The possibility of his mind being read, and this stratagem thus being countered, was eliminated.

In that case, consideration then fell upon him predicting the future and evading accordingly; but that too would be a tad incoherent.

The future was something that existed only once innumerable choices were added up, naught more, naught less. Moreover, it was not just the choices made by any single person, but the countless choices performed by countless people; the future could not be said to be decided by anything else.

Infeasible it was, to peruse the future, to respond to it perfectly, it was all somewhat lacking in realism. To begin with, even supposing he could witness the future, the positioning of the mirror-bearers would be unknown to him.

But, if he had witnessed results even once, it was a different story.

If the helmet bastard's Authority was not one of looking forward into the future ahead, but rather one of observing outcomes that had come to pass in the future, then his conduct up till this point stood to reason.

He would inspect pockets in order to identify those designated to be mirror-bearers. He would validate its resulting outcome, and go on to the next. Supposing he had repeated this, the actions of the helmet bastard up till this point, and their results, stood to reason.

Rom: "What in tarnation's that s'posed to be??!!"

Because it made logical sense, Rom-jii had become incensed, thinking "That don't make a lick of gosh darn sense!".

Mind-reading and precognition were both illogical, but returning after witnessing results—what to call it eluded him, but whatever the case, it was a rule-breaking ability. Just how could it be thwarted?

Rom: "But, it's got holes."

In the first place, were he to possess the almighty ability to observe and respond appropriately to every possible circumstance, the helmet bastard would have been able to even avoid encountering them at this juncture.

This individual had prepared countermeasures for Reinhard, and had succeeded in entrapping him. But compared to meeting him head-on, it would have been much safer to evade him.

As to why he had not done so, was the reason of why he could not do so.

—To witness the outcomes and do things over, he did not have that much time.

And thus, were the usage of the Authority entirely up to the helmet bastard, supposing a lull between danger and safety arose, he would naturally wish to create an area of safety in that opening. —And therein would the trap be set.

From a position that the helmet bastard was made to believe was a safe zone, all he needed to do was fashion an inescapable crucible of traps.

Thereupon, the final aspect of the trap he had concocted was—

Rom: "—You've summoned yer ally back, the Divine Dragon."

Helmet Bastard: "…"

The moment its presence was sighted outwith the sky, the helmet bastard's faction and naturally the Felt Camp alike were convinced that it signified the battle's denouement.

At the end of day, the absence of anybody possessing overwhelming power was the primary factor in this battle coming into being.

Were the Divine Dragon to be returned, and were it to lay devastation upon the plains with a single one of its breaths, be there five-hundred or be there a thousand ruffians hardened in their resolve, they would not hold a candle to it.

And as to demonstrate this, the Divine Dragon would unleash a single attack that would cause all fighting spirit to be lost. —This, unmistakably, was a breath serving as a closing ceremony to the battle, one that would be let loose no matter what.

And that breath would be made to be fired in err, unto a situation in which it could not be evaded.

Rom: "—The Night Banisher's effect's ta fake night into lookin' like daytime. By extension, it's a deceptive veil that shrouds the true landscape."

Normally, aiming a Night Banishing Magic Stone in the desired direction would be a difficult affair without being a skilled magician, but Rom-jii, having strained his Gate via Hexcel, had been able to bring that about.

But for what reason had he done so? —Because this was originally one of the stratagems not carried out during the Demi-Human War.

—Targeting an entity that the Royal Army could not disregard, a great magic would be fired to wipe out all the enemies gathered around said being; a variant of a strategy performed in exchange for a life.

Rom: "Back then, the plan was ta target someone 'n aim magic at their location. But today's different."

The deception produced by the Night Banisher extended, with Rom-jii and the helmet bastard in it enveloped.

—Consequently, Volcanica the Divine Dragon, inborne from heavens faraway, the Dragon tasked with terminating this bout, would without doubt lay eyes upon a sprawling plain bereft of people.

Rom-jii and the helmet bastard's presence there would go unnoticed by the Dragon, thus causing it to attack erroneously.

Having the Dragon fire its breath at a place it thought no one was present in, was Rom-jii's—was Valga Cromwell's method of nullifying the helmet bastard's safe zone.

Helmet Bastard: "—Hk."

Instantly the helmet bastard attempted to escape, yet his leg was seized by Valga Cromwell's grip.

Realizing that escape was impossible, the helmeted man gulped, and gazed up at the heavens. The Divine Dragon's eyes were unable to see him. Its mouth came suffused with white light, a breath was released directed at the "desolated" plains.

Rom: "—Felt."

At that moment, within Valga Cromwell's—Nay, within Rom-jii's mind flashed the figure of his beloved grandchild.

Her time as an infant, her time as a toddler, the woman she now was, all went by in a single instant; wondering if this was the scenery he would get to behold just before his passing, an out of place smile arose upon Rom-jii's visage.

So much so in fact, that even though anger and loathing were supposed to have filled this pointlessly gargantuan body of his, the faces of Libre and Sphinx, who had skirted death alongside him, flickered not in his consciousness.

Bearing those powerful emotions at his terminus, Rom-jii and the helmet bastard both were engulfed by the Dragon's breath—

???: "—Cut it with the crap!!"

In that instant, starlight darted past, smashing through the side of the airborne Dragon's maw, and the breath that was to be sicced loose veered off towards a different direction, exploding upon a plain that was verily desolate.

Rom: "Wha…"

Jostled about by the humongous plume of smoke and the shockwave, Rom-jii was unable to hold firm, and tumbled over. Dragged by the former's fall, the helmet bastard likewise raised a cry of pain of "GWOAHH!".

Had it gone entirely as his own self had anticipated, the unthinkable might of the Dragon's breath would have, without a doubt, finally driven the helmet bastard into a situation with no escape, leaving him defeated.

And yet—

???: “I had a bad feeling and this is what I find. Being prepared to die and wanting to die right away are two totally different things, you know! Big stupid Rom-jii!!”

The one to roar thus, having smashed Valga Cromwell’s stratagem into smithereens, their red eyes reddened a degree further whilst bearing tears, Star Staff in hand, was his adorable grandchild.

—By his own adorable grandchild, Valga Cromwell had been defeated.

Chapter 22:
How to End a Battle

1

—When she had first heard Rom-jii's plans, she had some reservations.

Rom: "Got that, Felt? If ya fall into the enemy's hands, we're sure ta lose… 'course, our enemies are gonna try 'n take advantage of that, seein' how that's their easiest victory condition."

Felt: "I'm the one in charge over here. I'm not gonna make a fuss and argue that I don't understand your logic, but if you expect me to just sit in a corner and watch you all like a fool, I'm not just gonna go along with that, y'know?"

Rom: "In a large battle, it's commonplace for a general ta sit back all dignified-like and wait 'til the fightin's settled… hey, c'mon, don't groan at me like that!"

Having just proposed a position that caused an explosion of displeasure from the one who had been listening, Rom-jii patted his bald head as he made a face of defeat towards Felt, who had groaned in frustration.

Felt was used to seeing that troubled expression on Rom-jii's face, and she knew very well that when he made that expression, he was not actually as troubled as he appeared. —When Rom-jii patted his own head with a troubled look on his face, he did so in order to steer the conversation in the direction he desired.

What Rom-jii wanted to convey was—

Rom: "All right, all right, all right I said. Then I won't ask ya ta sit back and watch or huddle up on the sidelines. —I'll have ya follow that helmet bastard's footsteps one move at a time."

Felt: "…You're saying you want me to follow around that helmet bastard? What’s the point of that?”

Rom: “I wanna be able ta pinpoint the location of the helmet bastard in the forest as best I can, and after the squads that engage the enemy are broken through, I’m thinkin’ we can retrieve the survivors and ambush them from the rear.”

She understood that the strategy proposed by Rom-jii was one to corner the helmet bastard, blocking off his escape route and crushing him. To achieve this, their fighting force of five hundred would be divided into a number of squads, and there was a possibility that the first squad to attack may have to be sacrificed.

And Felt would be in a position where she knew of this and yet could not do anything about it.

Felt: “…”

Rom: “Felt, since this is a battle…”

Felt: “I know. I’m not like that damn Reinhard. I’m not so naive as to think no one will die no matter what. I just don’t like it. Acting on the assumption that you’re going to die, I mean.”

Although she often had been treated as a child due to her appearance, Felt did not believe that she actually embodied such childish dreams, to the extent that she was unfortunately scorned due to her looks.

Having grown up in the slums of the Royal Capital, where life was not considered to be of high value, one philosophy had been firmly rooted in her core.

Human life was fragile, that was why they said it. —Live strong.

Rom: “—That’s right. I also dislike squanderin’ lives in futility.”

Felt: “It’s already crazy how the criminal underworld can risk their lives like that and still have an aesthetic sense about it. Otherwise, I don’t think they could have gotten so many people together when they asked for help, so I’ve got mixed feelings.”

The reason behind the ruffians’ pledge to strictly adhere to Rom-jii’s plans lay in a philosophy that was embedded deeply into the criminal underworld, and one very different from the blood code of the slums at that.

The key to getting along well with them lay in respecting their differences rather than overly shying away from them.

However, since Felt was at the head of this group, it was necessary to have everyone follow Felt’s philosophy instead.

Therefore—

Felt: “—Let’s do this. I’m gonna go win this bout my own way.”

Even if her victory conditions differed from the ones anyone else had set, Felt had resolved herself so.

2

During those final moments, as Rom-jii closed the lid of the Conversation Mirror that connected them together, Felt’s unpleasant intuition was confirmed, and she began to quicken her pace.

???: “The old man said, there’s one more thing left to do…”

These were the words of Camberley, as blood poured forth from every orifice of his face.

There was something she wished to comment concerning his body’s battered state, but Felt snatched the Meteor from his hands, leaving him in the care of her comrades who had freed him from the restraints of the helmet bastard’s gang, and she ran.

And, after running the fastest she ever had in her entire life, the moment she emerged from the forest, she came across it.

—The scene of the Divine Dragon being made by Rom-jii to target himself along with the helmet bastard.

Felt: “—Cut it with the crap!!”

Without even realizing it, she raised the Meteor—the Star Staff, taking aim at the incoming Dragon.

She was quite knowledgeable about the Dragon's sturdiness, having witnessed its clash with Reinhard when Ezzo and the others had gone to the Pleiades Watchtower. —Of course, the reason for which she aimed the Star Staff at the Dragon, was concerned not with its robustness.

Even when interjecting to tell them to stop screwing around, Felt did not have the option to punch Rom-jii.

Divine Dragon: "—Ouch!!"

The blow that bore the light of a star struck the side of the Dragon's maw, yielding a cry of pain that utterly lacked the dignity befitting the Divine Dragon, redirecting its breath towards a different direction.

That breath forcefully leveled the empty, deserted plain, but that mattered not.

Perhaps, she had foiled Rom-jii's best-laid plans, but that was fine.

Felt: "I had a bad feeling and this is what I find. Being prepared to die and wanting to die right away are two totally different things, you know! Big stupid Rom-jii!!"

Roaring, overcome with a rising passion, Felt clenched her teeth.

For a moment, Rom-jii and the helmet bastard were difficult to make out, and the two of them, engaged in a battle of wits on a level that Felt could not even imagine, beheld her in astonishment.

Felt's composure did not falter, even though tears shamefully welled in her eyes.

Felt: "That idiot Reinhard, he's gonna worry about this for a long time."

So long as they were not particular as to how victory was attained, Felt and her comrades had the power to best anyone.

For that reason, even if it meant being criticized for this proud way of thinking, she would still choose how she would win. Otherwise, she would not be able to win in a worthwhile manner.

To that end, Felt clung to her convictions.

That was to say—

Felt: “Live strong, Rom-jii. If you can’t stick to that, then even if we win, it’s still a loss.”

3

???: “—Just now, I lost.”

Vocalizing a hard truth, Aldebaran was overwhelmed by a sense of defeat.

Valga Cromwell’s stratagem from a moment ago had hit the bullseye on the Authority-wielding Aldebaran, a flawless artifice that accounted for even the time limit of the Divine Dragon’s return.

“Aldebaran’s” breath, a show of intimidation to end the battle.

When that had been transformed into an inescapable trap, Aldebaran’s matrix would repeat forevermore, forcing him straight towards an unending Death, until his soul was finally worn down to naught.

Harrowing was the ingenious plot of Valga Cromwell, who had delivered the Demi-Human War into a hellish state of civil warfare—no, this checkmate had not been begotten by that origin alone.

Aldebaran: “Using five-hundred people, all my choices were whittled away.”

Unmistakably, therein laid Aldebaran’s cause of defeat.

The incessant onslaught of attacks in waves from five-hundred people, each and every one of them squeezing out every ounce of their lives in a desperate effort to challenge him, caused

Aldebaran's mental strength to be gradually chipped away, impairing his judgment. Upon many junctures, he had needed to redo due to a simple error in judgment, and he overcame them by forcing his way through with a great number of attempts—in the end, he had made a critical mistake as he closed in to secure victory.

Losing his temper due to his exchange with Valga, Aldebaran had misjudged the matrix update site.

Likely, even that had been part of the trap Valga had set. Falling right into it, nearly all possibilities were about to have been sealed off.

—No matter the trap, no matter the enemy, in the end he would conquer them, no matter what.

That arrogance of Aldebaran had been mercilessly prodded by the cunning Great Strategist.

He ought to have known. That even if his Authority was invincible, Aldebaran himself, who exercised it, was banal.

That since he had not emerged victorious from a scenario in which he truly had no other choice but to win, Aldebaran had betrayed the many who had held expectations of him, and had washed up here.

Aldebaran, had utterly wasted the treasure in his possession beyond his own station—

Aldebaran: "—Priscilla, I…"

Couldn't save her; it happened at the moment his husky sigh was about to vocalize the height of his self-punishment.

???: "Nobody move!!"

A shrill voice resounded, breaking through the stagnant atmosphere enveloping the plain of the battlefield.

With the Divine Dragon summoned, and the stratagem of the Great

Strategist who wielded his fury in the Demi-Human War failing, the central figures of this battle had gathered in this place, and taking initiative was the red-haired maid—Yae.

Hindered by Grassis's ambush, Yae had been delayed in providing Aldebaran cover, but now, with steel threads, she had bound Grassis at the entrance to the forest, as well as Manfred at a corner of the plain, turning both of them over.

Furthermore—

Felt: "—Hk, are these the threads that tied up Rachins and the rest?"

Felt, the Star Staff having dropped to her feet, clicked her tongue in loathing.

All of Felt's limbs bound by steel threads, the movements of her body had been completely sealed.

That was to say, the tables had been turned.

Yae: "For such remarkable rudeness towards your noble station, I humbly proffer my dearest apologies, Felt-sama."

Felt: "I ain't nothing like a noble… Why the hell are you following that helmet bastard?"

Yae: "Isn't yielding to the most terrifying opponent the most natural of things~?"

Flatly sticking out her tongue, Yae responded to the immobilized Felt with her usual demeanor.

Witnessing that exchange in the corner of his eye, Aldebaran took a step back to distance himself from Valga. But then again, with his stratagem having failed, Valga was down on his knees, unmoving.

His stratagem, upon which his life had been staked, was a swing and a miss. That exhaustion could be called natural, but below Aldebaran, present in the eyes of that exceedingly clever old Giant, was a hue more poignant than a simple sense of defeat.

Valga: “…I don’t care what happens ta me. Just don’t lay a hand on Felt.”

Aldebaran: “Those are the words I’d wanted to hear. Though, I hadn’t wanted to see that face.”

Faced with Valga’s expression as he wrung out his appeal with difficulty, Aldebaran answered with his true feelings.

Being the ones to have picked this fight, asking him to not lay a hand on her was far too convenient a request. But, if the table could thus be set to put an end to this battle, his sense of relief surpassed his irritation.

Naturally, with the revisions to the plan that had been thrown into disarray, Aldebaran’s seven days had become something far more difficult.

Even so, finishing a battle against the first opponent to ever defeat him aside from the Witch, his deep sentiments towards that fact currently exceeded everything else—

???: “—Yo, me, looks like that went pretty damn rough, didn’t it?”

With a beat of its wings as it perched down on the ground, “Aldebaran” called out to Aldebaran.

Frankly, he felt that it was far too lacking in guilt for having almost ruined everything with its erroneous shooting, but he had made it abandon its duty of drawing as much of the Kingdom’s attention away as it could in half a day, recalling it to him. So in regards to disappointment, he would close his eyes here and call it mutual.

“Aldebaran”: “So? Seems like you unexpectedly came to clash with lil’ miss Felt and her gang, but what on earth was that just now?”

Aldebaran: “A trap to make the other me accidentally shoot at me. It felt like I’d been completely checkmated on a Shatranj board… In truth, that was about to be the case.”

“Aldebaran”: “That sorta thing, it brings back unpleasant memories of being thoroughly beaten by Teacher.”

Sharing the same Memories from the Book of the Dead, “Aldebaran’s” words caused Aldebaran to remember being childishly obliterated on the Shatranj board by the Witch who had bestowed him with all sorts of knowledge, putting him in a foul mood.

Nonetheless, games atop a board were fundamentally different to the battlefield upon which Aldebaran commanded his Authority. Valga had been a truly dreadful enemy.

Aldebaran: “Nah, perhaps the real frightening thing’s the virtue of lil’ miss Felt, who you bow to.”

Valga: “…It ain’t as though we’re bowin’ down to Felt.”

Aldebaran: “—. I guess that’d be so.”

Whilst being fellow Royal Candidates, Felt and Priscilla each shone in their own ways.

If the dazzling nature of the sun one looked up to was different, the way in which it scorched their eyes would also vary. Therein laid not a matter of which was correct, but merely a difference of which light one chose to revere above their head.

And, those who had decided to revere Felt, were Valga and—

Aldebaran: “—So, that’s how it is for all of you?”

Within Aldebaran’s vision were the ruffians who had come crawling out from the forest—wounded from the battle, whilst lending their shoulders to one another, were five hundred people who had yet to lose their fighting spirit.

Aldebaran: “…”

As Valga had threatened, as long as their lives were not taken, they would force their wounded bodies up over and again, struggling onward to attempt to defeat Aldebaran.

Faced with their resolute expressions, Aldebaran was once again made keenly aware. —To go down a path that would no longer receive affirmation from anybody in the world, he was made keenly aware of the effects of having decided so.

Aldebaran: “But, the situation’s changed from earlier. You guys’ve no longer got any shot at victory. Same old story as the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy. —The Divine Dragon completely breaks the game.”

The outrageousness of the Divine Dragon was something akin to ignoring one’s pieces and directly throwing a punch at the opponent during a match atop a Shatranj board. In this world, there were a fixed number of beings who existed outside that “framework”.

Of those beings, one he had sealed, one he had subdued, one he had utilized, and one he had enlisted as an ally. —Aldebaran would not hesitate to use every ounce of its advantages.

Hence—

Aldebaran: “Sorry, but I’m forcing a game-set here. We’ll be making it so you guys won’t be able to chase us from here on out—”

Yae: “—Felt-sama, could you stay still?”

Aldebaran: “—?”

Abruptly, Yae’s quiet voice interrupted Aldebaran’s counsel to yield.

When he glanced in her direction to see, Yae was standing on Felt’s back, the latter restrained by steel wires, and as Yae directed a sharp gaze towards her, she uttered a warning.

However, Felt prefaced “I ain’t gonna move” to Yae, and,

Felt: “—Look at me.”

Indeed, she quietly wove those words.

Aldebaran: “…”

Hearing Felt’s utterance, Aldebaran, Yae, and even Valga, all knit their eyebrows.

Her intent was unclear, Aldebaran suspected that there might have been some stratagem that activated when she came into vision, but Felt herself was apprehended by Yae, and she was literally incapable of doing a thing.

In that state, there was not a single thing she could do. —In the girl's red eyes dwelled a strength of will that betrayed any such notions.

And then—

"Aldebaran": "Ah, a bit of a problem's come up, me."

So said "Aldebaran", who had been rubbing the cheek that had basked in the Star Staff's blast with its forefoot.

The brunt of that puzzling voice was directed towards Aldebaran, who shared the same Memories and personality—but, "Aldebaran" did not look at him as it spoke.

It was not a matter of a poor attitude. The eyes of the Dragon were trained upon Felt.

—It was as if to say that taking its eyes off of Felt would be difficult, immensely so.

Before Aldebaran could investigate what that meant, rather than rubbing its cheek, "Aldebaran" was trying to fiddle with the metal fixtures of the helmet it was not wearing out of habit,

"Aldebaran": "Try as I might, I don't wanna refuse Farsale's… lil' miss Felt's request."

And so, the occurrence of a definite problem was thus disclosed.

4

???: "—Farsale, thy recklessness hath exhausted mineself, and everyone else akin."

When the Divine Dragon had spoken thus to her, Felt had traversed the Augria Sand Dunes, aiming for the Pleiades Watchtower with

Meili Portroute in order to prove the latter's utility.

It seemed to have been intimidated by Reinhard's presence, so the Divine Dragon Volcanica, meant to be protecting the Tower, had hastily attacked Felt and her group.

The fierce battle seemed like it would scatter away half of all the sand dunes, and there was no doubt that it was the flashiest battle Felt had seen in all her life.

Ultimately, no conclusion was drawn in the battle between Reinhard and Volcanica. After all, Volcanica's combativeness had withdrawn upon seeing Felt, leaving it an unfinished battle.

The battle having thus ended in an incomprehensible manner, that was the first thing the Dragon had said.

Felt: "Who the hell're you calling Farsale, stop screwing around."

As the Divine Dragon impolitely mistook her for another, Felt had taken offense.

On the other hand, regarding the name "Farsale" that Volcanica had spoken, even Felt was not so ignorant as to not have a clue.

In this Kingdom of Lugunica, if the name Farsale came from the Divine Dragon Volcanica's mouth, that referred to the being known as the last Lion King, the one who had spearheaded the formation of the Covenant between the Kingdom and the Dragon—none other than Farsale Lugunica.

That was to say, Volcanica had mistaken Felt for the last Lion King.

Farsale Lugunica unmistakably ought to have been a male King, so to be mistaken for him really made her angry. In the year and a half since the Royal Selection had begun, perhaps thanks to her dramatic improvement in nourishment from her days in the slums, Felt's body had grown considerably.

Her figure ought to have become somewhat more visible from the malnourished state where it was unclear as to whether she was male or female.

Such confidence of hers was wounded, and thus her contact with the Divine Dragon, who most people in the Dragon Kingdom had never been able to meet, was no enjoyable affair for Felt.

Nonetheless, it did not end with just that experience of an unenjoyable meeting.

Perhaps because it had been extremely close with Farsale, Volcanica was incredibly friendly towards Felt—frankly, it was unreasonably attached to her.

Despite its head being as empty as a senile old man, it was still quick to obey Felt's words without hesitation.

Felt: "The promise between the Lugunican Royal Family, and Volcanica, huh…"

Since no material records existed, the relationship between the Lion King and Divine Dragon, what words they exchanged, and in what manner they made their promise, such minute details were unknown.

Only, Felt fully understood that there existed something between the two, something that was neither a one-sided employment, nor was it simply fellowship and a deep bond.

Moreover, mistaking Felt for Farsale, Volcanica was laudably trying to maintain their Covenant formed long ago; Felt was not so heartless as to not feel anything regarding that.

Not to mention, it did not seem that Volcanica was mixing her up with Farsale just because of her hair and eye color.

As for what exactly that signified, Felt had come up with somewhat of a conclusion within herself, but at the current point in time, without Reinhard by her side, she had no intention of putting it into words.

The important thing was that to Volcanica, Felt filled the place of Farsale.

That was to say—

Felt: “—Look at me.”

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As soon as she had pronounced so, the reactions of the helmet bastard and shinobi maid, who looked at her suspiciously, and Volcanica—no, the Divine Dragon, who had flicked its head to look at her, were evidently quite different.

Without a doubt, the Divine Dragon's reaction to Felt's words was compelled by a force that the others had not felt, evidence that it had experienced a sensation difficult to ignore.

And, to counter the time limit on this battle that Rom-jii had defined in advance—the wildcard of the helmet bastard summoning the Divine Dragon to the battlefield, this was the one and only measure.

The moment she became convinced of it having worked, Felt shouted.

Felt: "Everyone, lend a shoulder to the wounded and withdraw! This fight is over!"

Helmet Bastard: "Wha…"

Felt: "The Divine Dragon can't ignore me! This is our moment to quit!"

The helmet bastard was left speechless at the declaration that had flown right over his head. Feeling good about the helmet bastard's dumbfounded reaction, Felt looked past him over to Rom-jii.

His face stiffening, as Rom-jii's wrinkles grew even deeper,

Rom: "Felt… I'm…"

Felt: "I told you, Rom-jii. If the Divine Dragon returned, I would do this. You silently plotted on your own, Rom-jii. I properly consulted with you, and my action here makes logical sense."

Rom: "Nghh…!"

To Felt's direct words, Rom-jii fell silent with no reply.

Both Felt and Rom-jii had considered the case in which the Divine Dragon returned. Only, the countermeasures they intended for when that situation came differed between the two of them.

As she had said, Felt's properly consulted plan ought to have been of far more sound reasoning.

Helmet Bastard: "Oi, were you being serious just now?"

Beside the exchange between Felt and Rom-jii, the helmet bastard, who had stood back up from the impact, posed that question to the Divine Dragon high above himself.

In response, as the Divine Dragon gave a deep exhale from its nostrils,

Divine Dragon: "As super seriously serious as serious can be. Having come to this point, my level of self-restraint is such that I'd like you to praise me for not changing sides over to lil' miss Felt. If you weren't me, I'd have betrayed you without a second thought."

Helmet Bastard: "That joke's crossing a line, oi…"

Fidgeting with the metal fixtures on his helmet, the helmet bastard's shoulders drooped at the Divine Dragon's answer.

Hearing the two converse, Felt harbored a sense of unease—she was concerned about the evident discrepancy in the Divine Dragon's demeanor from before, but she did not have the time to point it out at that moment.

Here and now, Felt had to press on by using herself as fortunate countermeasure against the Divine Dragon, allowing the defeated Rom-jii and the others to evacuate to safety—

???: "—You don't know when to quit, Felt-sama."

Felt: "…"

Directly after that seemed to be whispered into her ear, a fine pressure tightened around her neck. With a closer look, digging into Felt's neck was a thread so thin that it would go unnoticed to the unstrained eye, causing blood to run down.

Of course, the perpetrator of that act was the shinobi maid who had tied Felt up with threads.

Helmet Bastard: “Yae, stop it! Follow my orders…”

Shinobi Maid: “I’m prepared to be punished as I counsel you this, Al-sama. We’d better finish off Felt-sama here. After all, even I could tell that your consultation with the Divine Dragon-sama just now didn’t progress in a desirable direction.”

Helmet Bastard: “That’s…”

Divine Dragon: “—That’s a no-go, Yae. I won’t excuse it if you do.”

In place of the faltering helmet bastard, the one to threaten the shinobi maid—Yae, was the Divine Dragon, having slightly lowered its head.

The Divine Dragon’s ire, the brunt of its overpowering glare was enough to make one feel pain as if their skin was charring. However, basking in that ire, Yae calmly glared back at the Dragon,

Yae: “Unfortunately, Al-sama is the one I’m afraid of, no~t the Divine Dragon-sama. There’s nothing scary whatsoever about your glare.”

Divine Dragon: “YAEEE…!”

Helmet Bastard: “Stop it, both of you! Don’t recklessly quarrel, they’ll take advantage of it!”

Butting into the confrontation between Yae and the Divine Dragon, the helmet bastard was cautious of Felt and Rom-jii.

In truth, Felt could not do anything in her bound state, but even now, Rom-jii’s eyes had not ceased in their attempt to find an opening to pull something off.

At that fact, both Yae and the Divine Dragon withdrew their confrontational atmosphere for the time being, vigilant of Rom-jii.

Yae: “But but, this problem isn’t resolved. It’s a fact that Felt-sama is dangerous.”

Helmet Bastard: “I know… Me, is there really nothing you can do?”

Divine Dragon: “Yeah, my bad. It ain’t a matter of being bound by a compelling force, constraints, or an Oath, or anything like that. Only, I’m seriously against it, no matter what. My sense of self feels like it’s gonna split apart.”

With Yae’s comment, the views of the helmet bastard and the Divine Dragon formed parallel lines.

The helmet bastard had a course he wished to progress, and Yae and the Divine Dragon were in the position of following that, but it seemed like their intentions were not completely unified at their roots.

As it currently stood, the circumstances had the potential to fall either way.

In that case—

Felt: “Let’s call it a draw here. You let my allies go, and in exchange, we’ll also let you guys go.”

Helmet Bastard: “…Ain’t that a little too convenient. It may have been the result of having an advantage of coincidence on our side, but we demolished all of your plans, lil’ miss Felt. And yet, why would we call it a tie?”

Felt: “Do you really need me to spell it out for you? Our little squabble here had a mutual time limit of the Divine Dragon returning. But, if the Divine Dragon won’t lend a hand to either side, that disappears. And if that disappears, you’ll just have to fight around five-hundred people all over again.”

Helmet Bastard: “…”

As she spoke, Felt carefully examined the helmet bastard, though his complexion remained hidden.

For what she could not see of his face, Felt gathered up all the information she could, such as what the helmet bastard was feeling within, his breathing, and minute gestures, and did her absolute best to see through him.

Within Felt's current argument, there was a decisive hole that she herself was aware of. —The entirety of the situation until now had materialized due to the helmet bastard making the unexpected decision to not kill anybody.

Were the helmet bastard to tear through that premise on a whim, it would all be over for Felt's faction.

Even if restricted by the Divine Dragon's movements, Yae's threads could wrap around the necks of Felt's five-hundred allies and strangle them to death, wiping them all out.

Of that, it was impossible that the helmet bastard himself was unaware. Hence, with all her might, all her body and spirit, to dissuade the helmet bastard from that idea, Felt would choose her words, refine them, and let them resound from her soul.

—She must convince him that continuing this battle would not be worth it.

Felt: "I'll say this now, but this ain't the sorta plan that my Rom-jii uses. If the battle continues, it'll just be another case of his malicious knowledge getting put out on display."

Helmet Bastard: "…That's frightening. But, that'd be just the same as letting you go here, yeah? Even if we call it a draw for the time being, you guys will challenge us again from square one and we'll go in circles forever."

Felt: "Right. That's why, let's do it this way. —I'll go with you as your hostage."

Helmet Bastard: "—Hk."

His breath slightly caught, and Felt could tell that the helmet bastard's eyes had widened through his gestures. Feeling his reaction, Felt gently, not greedily, reeled that shining ray of hope in towards herself.

Felt: “If I’m with you, my guys won’t be able to get in your way. This was the victory condition you’d originally aimed for in order to win this battle, yeah?”

Yae: “Nothing will come of this. To think we’d deliberately bring along a disrupting element. And such a proposal, there would be no sense in it if Felt-sama manages to escape—”

Felt: “In that case, you can just keep this thread attached to me. You too, Divine Dragon, if I break my promise and die trying to escape, that’d be my own responsibility. You don’t need to get angry.”

Divine Dragon: “Oi oi oi, there’s no chance of that, Farsale.”

Felt: “I ain’t Farsale.”

Yae, who had interjected, and the Divine Dragon, who had tried to deny her, both pondered Felt’s words.

All the while, Felt stared right at the helmet bastard, who like herself, had the right to decide things in this location, and then,

Felt: “What will you do? Whether this continues or not, is up to you.”

Helmet Bastard: “…I don’t wanna have to carry needless baggage.”

Felt: “…”

Helmet Bastard: “But, it’s also true that this is no time for me to be having a dispute with myself. It should be fine to go along with lil’ miss Felt’s hostage plan. However—”

In deep, quiet deliberation, the helmet bastard carefully weaved his words. At the end of those words, he paused the terminus of his words as if to put on airs—it happened then.

Rom: “RAHHHHHHH—!!”

As if to intrude on the tempo of the conversation, Rom-jii raised a battle cry and reached out his arms, seizing the helmet bastard from behind.

His brawny arms constricted the neck and waist of the helmet bastard, akin to how Yae had bound Felt, achieving a situation in which the leaders of both parties were mutually apprehended—

Helmet Bastard: "—Dona."

That instant, the helmet bastard's incantation manifested him a left arm of rock, striking Rom-jii's jaw with a heavy blow.

Borne of the stone prosthetic for his missing arm, the helmet bastard's unexpected blow violently jolted Rom-jii's brain, his large body producing an enormous sound as it collapsed onto the plain.

She was about to rush over to his side, but recalling the sensation on her neck, Felt refrained. Facing her, the helmet bastard took a deep breath after knocking out Rom-jii,

Helmet Bastard: "However, you'll need to look past just this one punch to your gramps."

With that, he appended the condition for ceasing hostilities after the fact, and thus accepted Felt's proposal.

5

—The unconscious Valga was shouldered by Grassis and Gaston, and was carried away.

As he watched this unbalance of physiques, Aldebaran diligently ascertained the withdrawal of the five hundred ruffians—no, of his formidable enemies, through to the very end.

Making sure that those formidable foes definitively passed beyond the horizon, and that nobody was attempting to pursue them covertly, "Aldebaran" also thoroughly verified.

"Aldebaran": "There aren't any risking it, everyone withdrew."

Aldebaran: “Is that true, I wonder? Can I really believe you? You won’t betray me, will you?”

“Aldebaran”: “It’s a cliched development in manga for someone to be betrayed by another version of themselves, but rest assured for now. Currently, my backing towards lil’ miss Felt and my backing towards me is balanced at a solid fifty-fifty.”

Aldebaran: “Sounds like I’m already treading in dangerous enough waters…”

Wondering to what extent that should be taken at its word, “Aldebaran’s” statement inspired a certain sense of dread.

It was something he had known from the start, but “Aldebaran” could only ever be “Aldebaran”; even if they shared Memories and a personality, it could never become Aldebaran himself.

It was an exceedingly reliable supporter for Aldebaran to fulfill his objective, but the truth was that it could never become more than just a supporter.

Yae: “—Al-sama~, I’ve finished inspecting Felt-sama’s belongings~.”

With that, Yae waved her hand as she returned to Aldebaran, the latter submerged in deep thought.

He had ordered her to conduct a thorough search of Felt’s person—to investigate the possibility that Valga Cromwell had put something in her possession.

But then again, judging from Yae’s demeanor, nothing seemed to have been found on Felt.

Aldebaran: “How’d it go?”

Yae: “Let’s see~, she had a Conversation Mirror, so I shattered it.”

Aldebaran: “So you had one on you?! Oi, lil’ miss Felt!”

Felt: “Shut the hell up, I told her voluntarily. It’s not like I was hiding it, so there shouldn't be a problem."

As Aldebaran raised his voice, Felt poked her head out from "Aldebaran's" shadow and talked back in dissatisfaction. There was no cover from trees in this sprawling plain, so Felt's pat-down was conducted behind the excessively large body of "Aldebaran".

In any case, upon hearing Felt's answer, he glared at Yae who then stuck out her tongue with a "Behhh",

Yae: "It was just Yae-chan's playful joke~."

Aldebaran: "You…"

Yae: "Please don't take it so seriously~, Al-sama. After all, it's not like you ever properly listen to what I have to say, now do you?"

Aldebaran: "—. My bad."

Yae: "I can't hear you, so you're not forgiven."

Aldebaran: "MY BAD!"

He apologized with a loud shout, to which Yae ostentatiously covered her ears.

Yae's attitude was childish and immature, but her taking on such an attitude was only natural. Aldebaran's ego was forcing an unreasonable restriction upon Yae that prevented her from displaying even half of her true capabilities.

Nevertheless, since he disciplined Yae through fear instead of granting her wishes, there was no room for any excuses regarding how much of a complete DV bastard he was.

Felt: "Geez, I get that you had to search me, but you don't normally strip someone completely naked out in the open."

Felt muttered her own complaints as she stepped out from "Aldebaran's" shadow. He glared at Yae upon hearing that remark, and with her hands still covering her ears, she was intent on evading any questioning about having conducted the harassment of needless stripping.

Aldebaran: “…Well, just take that as being a common affair for losers. Lil’ miss Felt, probably way more than you can imagine, I was really terrified by your gramps.”

Felt: “Heh, is that so now? Well, my Rom-jii’s just incredible… Though, I’ll absolutely never forgive him for trying to outmaneuver me.”

“Aldebaran”: “It seems like it was deep-rooted in him. In reality, things were quite close to a draw.”

Felt’s mood swung at her own expense as she praised Valga, to which “Aldebaran” gave a wry smile. Hearing “Aldebaran’s” words, she looked up at the face of the smiling Dragon,

Felt: “Reminds me, I’d wanted to ask, but you aren’t Volcanica, right?”

It was hard to say just how much of the circumstances she had grasped, but Felt’s suspicions regarding “Aldebaran” were only natural if she had known the Divine Dragon from before the Book of the Dead had installed memories within it. Ignoring that and kicking up a loud fuss would only increase the hardships along the way, but—

Felt: “The nii-chan from Emilia-neechan’s place, huh… helmet bastard, it’s similar to the way you speak.”

Aldebaran: “…Management decided that it wouldn’t sell like that, so the character is currently veering in a different direction. Also, quit calling me helmet bastard. It’s Aldebaran.”

Felt: “Aldebaran? Wasn’t it shorter?”

Aldebaran: “Since it felt too short for a belt and too long for a sleeve tie, management also decided that that one wouldn’t sell.”

With that perfunctory answer, Aldebaran put off giving Felt a detailed explanation.

In any case, if Felt was accompanying them from here on out, “Aldebaran” would end up telling her even if Aldebaran did not. About how the renowned Divine Dragon of history became a frivolous and unserious clown.

Aldebaran: “Anyway, for now, I gotta modify the plan. We’ve only got around five days left.”

With the battle against Felt’s faction cutting into his remaining time, there was no choice but to give his plan major revisions.

Be that as it may, the fact that they had reconvened with “Aldebaran” ahead of schedule, meant that it was possible for them to hold a constructive outlook of its usefulness in dramatically shortening the length of their journey.

Though, there was the concern that the Royal Army, which was originally supposed to assemble in the north, had not fallen for the diversion so well as the plan had intended, but—

Aldebaran: “By the way, we don’t have the option of tying lil’ miss Felt up and leaving her here, do we?”

“Aldebaran”: “If she hadn’t said “Look at me”, then you might’ve.”

Aldebaran: “I thought there’s no compelling force.”

“Aldebaran”: “There isn’t. I just feel like I wanna comply with whatever she requests.”

Met with a considerably deranged response, Aldebaran was completely at his wits’ end.

The Sword Saint, Reinhard; the Great Strategist, Valga Cromwell; and finally the Divine Dragon, Volcanica; for Felt to have made all of them her supporters, just how many stars of destiny shone above her?

Aldebaran: “Can you really stand losing to those stars, Aldebaran-san?”

Even if he could not deny the narrow victory, the stalemate, and the sensation of carrying an unexploded ordnance, it was true that Aldebaran had overcome the situations until now through a desperate struggle with death.

Without forgetting that truth, he would take it as a warning and a guiding light in order to proceed onto what followed from here.

Felt: “So? What are you guys planning on doing from here on out, and where?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Felt: “So you won’t even tell me that? If you refrain from feeding a fish that you caught too much, you might end up the one with a bad taste in your mouth, Aldebaran.”

Calling out Aldebaran’s name, Felt flashed her high canine in a smile.

Around her neck was steel wire tied by Yae, and she was in a hostage situation as she herself had proposed. Nevertheless, the glint in the girl’s eye showed no signs of her fighting spirit loosening, so after stifling his hesitation, Aldebaran spoke.

The answer to Felt’s question, that was to say, Aldebaran’s destination—

Aldebaran: “—We’re headed for the Grand Mogolade Geyser, right in the heart of Kararagi. There lies the one and only hole in this world that connects to a place nobody can reach. I’ve got something that I need to throw away there.”

Felt: “…For that purpose alone, you’re kicking up this much of a storm?”

Aldebaran: “Yeah, that’s right. It’s necessary. —So that I may be myself.”

Felt likely could not imagine the significance of that deed, and Aldebaran made it clear through the strength of his words that he had no intention of helping her imagination draw any closer.

Taking that in, Felt narrowed her red eyes, and gave up on what she was about to say. —Though, he knew that what she was about to say would have been regarding she who was no longer among them.

???: "—Hk! W-woh?! Wh-what the hell?! What happened?! Oi! Aldebaran! Maid! How the hell did this… shit! My back fucking hurts!"

That enigmatic atmosphere between Aldebaran and Felt was noisily and clumsily destroyed by Heinkel as he finally woke up, invoking a sense that the battle was now well and truly over.

Even so, there was no mistaking the awful sense of involuntary gratitude he thus felt towards Heinkel himself.

Chapter 23:
The Gang's All Here

1

—By the time Rom-jii had woken up, several hours had already passed since the retreat from the siege in the forest.

???: "In the end, they only took Felt with 'em and left the rest of us alone… This is what happens when we pick a fight. It's lame as hell."

So added Rachins, who had just finished reporting the damages to their camp to the recently awoken Rom-jii.

Rachins was unable to hide his feelings of embarrassment, and it was easy to imagine the sense of defeat stirring in his chest. Of course, the same sense of defeat was also present within Rom-jii's wide chest.

However, Rom-jii had experienced far more lost battles throughout his life than Rachins.

Rom: "The number of losses I've got under my belt is pathetic, nothin' ta be proud of."

If Rom-jii were to count the victories in his life on his fingers, would he even require both hands?

Even if he could achieve smaller victories, he always came out losing by the end of the war; that was the win-loss record of the old giant who had wasted his years. He could not decide whether or not to be proud of the fact that he always managed to escape from each losing battle with his life.

It could be said that surviving and enduring the shame that followed led Rom-jii to happen across something irreplaceable in his life. —However, he had now been deprived of that irreplaceable thing.

Rom: “What’s Felt’s situation? The best way ta find out is…”

Rachins: “About that, unfortunately they dealt with Manfred’s Divine Protection of Farsight. It ain’t just the helmet bastard, the maid that was with him seemed pretty sharp too. I guess he’s lucky he got away with only his eye gouged out.”

Rom: “As I thought, they didn’t leave that be. I suppose that was an unreasonable expectation.”

The aforementioned Divine Protection of Farsight was a highly practical Divine Protection in terms of possible tactics and strategies that allowed the user to locate and monitor a target’s location from afar.

It had been used by Manfred Madison, who served as the head of the Balance in the union of the Flanders criminal underworld that cooperated with Felt’s group—however, the Divine Protection of Farsight itself was not borne upon him, but rather, he had gained it as a result of stealing it from someone it had been gifted to.

The Black Silver Coin and the Flower Prison Garden were also organizations deeply rooted in Flanders, but the Balance was different; it was a notorious group with a long and shady history that existed outside of the city.

Most notably, the Balance possessed a technique to steal Divine Protections—Rom-jii speculated that they likely kept the original holder of the Divine Protection alive, having a proxy use the body part that served as the source of their Divine Protection.

In short, if a Divine Protection holder possessing the Divine Protection of Farsight, which affected the eyes, had their eyes removed and transplanted, the effects of that Divine Protection could be freely inherited. —Of course, one could not just remove their eyeballs and replace them to use a Divine Protection at will. Therein lay the secret technique possessed only by the Balance, a sacrament never to be revealed to outsiders.

Regardless of the technique, if the eyeballs that served as the source of the Divine Protection of Farsight were destroyed, then relying on

Manfred to continue tracking Felt's movements was no longer an option.

Rom: "Still, with Manfred missin' an eye 'n the rest of us in such terrible condition… it's a miracle we're all still alive, ain't it."

Rachins: "A miracle, huh. I just can't accept it like that."

Rachins loudly clicked his tongue in a dissatisfied manner at the muttering of Rom-jii, who was rubbing his chin.

They had taken on this challenge with the determination to risk their lives, and they survived. As one would expect, Rachins would not say anything about regretting not being able to die as an imperial citizen would, but since he had lost to an opponent who had self-imposed unnecessary restrictions on himself, Rom could understand the feeling of being shown he was clearly outmatched in power.

But, if he was able to feel that frustration after giving it his all, then Rachins still had a future ahead of him. It was surely the same for Gaston and Camberley.

???: "—Rom-sama, are you awake?"

Rom: "Hm, that you, Grassis?"

And, just as the conversation came to a halt, Grassis suddenly appeared.

At the end of the battle, she had last been seen tied up by the thread user called Yae, but she seemed to be in much better condition than Rachins from the looks of it.

Despite their young appearances, she and her sister Flam were trained by the Astrea family from birth, ranking them in the upper echelon of the many combatants that Rom-jii had ever met. Her excellent control of the Flow Method greatly contributed to the recovery of her wounds and physical strength, so she already seemed to have fully recuperated.

Rom: "Don't go usin' that as an excuse ta be reckless, though…

How’s yer Divine Protection lookin’?”

Grassis: “It’s almost ready to be used again… If Flam is not dead.”

Rachins: “Don’t jinx it like that…! But, I can’t say for sure if she’s alive… Even if the helmet bastard didn’t lay a hand on her, Reinhard and the Witch are still at the dunes…”

Grassis: “Rachins-sama, cheer up, alright?”

Rachins: “Why am I the one being comforted?! You’re the one who should be upset!”

Grassis gave Rachins a light pat on his hunched back, only for Rachins to snap at her, sticking out his long tongue in frustration.

At his outburst, Grassis let out a casual “Wah” without looking the least bit startled. Instead, she swiftly slipped behind Rom-jii, peeking out from behind him with a dramatic sulky glare at the childish young man.

It was their usual playful banter. But Rom-jii simply placed a large hand, bigger than the girl’s head, on her and gently ruffled her hair,

Rom: “We’re all feelin’ the same concern for those at the tower. Once yer Divine Protection is ready, let us know immediately.”

Grassis: “…Roger that, chief.”

Rachins: “Who even talks like that?!”

Grassis gave a brief nod, accepting Rom-jii’s hand, while Rachins overreacted as usual.

It was precisely because Rachins responded so easily to their antics that the mischievous sisters always had a field day teasing him. But, perhaps acting like nothing was wrong was what Grassis needed right now.

And for Rachins, it kept him from spiraling into an endless cycle of defeat-induced frustration.

Rom: “The young ones should burn with a defiant spirit. Reflecting on this is my job.”

Despite gathering an army of five hundred men and carefully choosing the most advantageous battlefield possible, Rom-jii and the others had lost their fight against the helmet bastard and Felt had been taken hostage.

This was a devastating defeat, no doubt the worst since the Demi-Human War.

However, if there was one thing that set this loss apart from Rom-jii’s past failures, it was the fact that this time, it was neither entirely fruitless nor completely unforeseen.

—Though it was a method they had hoped to avoid, the possibility of the helmet bastard summoning the Divine Dragon in a moment of desperation had been a constant concern. Given that, Felt’s existence had always been considered a potential shackle to prevent such an outcome.

And they had known beforehand that the Divine Dragon Volcanica was the helmet bastard’s main force.

Thus, even if Felt’s group had been unable to defeat the helmet bastard in this battle, they had at least set a minimum goal of shackling his strongest asset. Of course, the ideal outcome would have been victory, but they had still met their lowest expectations, and on top of that, they now had a clearer understanding of the nature of his Authority.

If victory was the best possible result, then this was the second-best—no, with Felt taken hostage, it was more like the third-best outcome.

Rom: “That said, now that he’s experienced it firsthand, the same method won’t work ta break his Authority again. Felt’s in his hands now… We’ll need ta get creative with our approach.”

Naturally, Rom-jii had no intention of giving up here.

The helmet bastard had chosen not to take their lives for his own reasons. Because of that, most of their fighting force remained intact, giving them the room to come up with a plan and strike once more.

No one would dare call making full use of this opportunity cowardly or dishonorable.

Rom: “For whatever reason, that helmet bastard seemed unwilling ta waste even a moment standin’ still. At this rate, even if he takes short breaks, he won’t have the chance ta properly rest anywhere. Mental exhaustion will only expose the weaknesses in his Authority. If Felt is shacklin’ the Divine Dragon, then our openin’ is even bigger. Surprisingly, it seems like the helmet bastard ‘n his allies aren’t as united as they—”

Muttering to himself, Rom-jii carefully processed the information he had gathered from the battle with his larger-than-most head.

If one were to accuse him of being calculating right after their loss, he had no excuse, but in Rom-jii’s mind, their defeat was already over. His thoughts had shifted toward the next battle, and strategies were already taking shape.

There might be some who would curse that as cold-hearted. Felt, who was practically his granddaughter, had been abducted, and he could not even be sure of her safety. Despite that, rather than turning his thoughts to concern and anxiety, he instead focused on the next battle.

But—

Rachins: “—Shit. This is just making me feel even more pathetic.”

Looking at the profile of the cold-hearted old giant thinking, Rachins felt no hatred, only frustration that refused to fade.

Grassis: “Rachins-sama, do your best.”

Rachins: “Shut the hell up! Why are you acting like this doesn’t concern you?!”

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, matrix redefinition.”

A whisper spilling out from within his mouth, Aldebaran defined a new restart point.

Finally escaping a predicament that had taken twenty-nine thousand two-hundred and twenty-one attempts of trial and error to surmount, thinking that he had passed a checkpoint, he took a small breather.

Long and deep, exhaling until all the air left his lungs, Aldebaran adjusted the position of his helmet,

Aldebaran: “…Sorry, I’ve calmed down now.”

Yae: “No not at all~, please don’t worry in the slightest. Rather, are you really fine with that sort of a rest? If you’d like, Yae-chan’s thighs are available for loan?”

Aldebaran: “Nah, I’m fine without borrowing ‘em.”

Yae: “They’re super soft~ and spongy~, y’know?”

Aldebaran: “I’m fine.”

With a wave of his hand, Aldebaran bluntly refused Yae’s alluring consideration.

On the receiving end, Yae pouted her lips with a “Tsk~”, but she likely did not care as much as her reaction implied. Those invitations of hers were a habit, and Aldebaran also always refused her.

Even so, Yae’s presence, never leaving his side, was a huge help. In the sense that she shouldered the burden.

Aldebaran: “More or less, my headache’s subsided…”

Spilling those words, Aldebaran was relieved by the reduction of the headache induced by his mental state.

Including the fact that he had nearly been defeated, his battle against the Felt Armed Forces had exhausted him far too much mentally. The result of dismissing that whittled down state, was a near defeat that had just barely secured victory.

Aldebaran: “Naturally, I can’t do a mental reset in the middle of a fight…”

In this case, mental reset referred to how Aldebaran would use his Authority to spend as much time as possible in an absent-minded daze, then gulp down poison and restart his matrix. Doing that over and over was the drastic move that aimed to restore his dead-end of a mental state, heightened nerves and frayed mind.

As long as he had an environment to settle down in and the means to restart, it was a technique that allowed him to bring his heart to as much tranquility as he liked, but even if he settled his heart, there was a shortcoming in that the fatigue of his body and brain would not simply fade.

In reality, due to the extreme accumulation of lack of sleep and fatigue, Aldebaran was left with serious damage.

Aldebaran: “This is a joke, but if I borrowed Yae’s thighs, I’d fall in an instant.”

Yae: “Does that mean you’d fall deeply in love with Yae-chan?”

Aldebaran: “Nah, I mean I’d fall unconscious. When you talk flippantly like that to me, it helps to distract me.”

Slowly shaking his head, Aldebaran forced back the weight of his body as it leaned forward.

Currently, Aldebaran and his party were travelling west from the plain of the fierce battle, avoiding attention, and once he completed a thorough safety check, Aldebaran spent his time resting.

But then again, even if he was spending his own time, it was not a considerable amount of real time.

Aldebaran: “By the way, I’d like to consult you on this, but if I’m about to collapse, would doping on Dragon’s Blood be a possible option? Or no?”

And, fiddling with the metal fixtures on his helmet, Aldebaran raised an idea to “Aldebaran”.

Along with Yae, “Aldebaran” had been part of the personnel guarding the surroundings, and hearing Aldebaran’s question, it prefaced “Here’s the thing” as it skilfully scratched its snout with its front leg,

“Aldebaran”: “Ah, it’s difficult to draw a reliable comparison between this Dragon body and the exceedingly feeble original body of me, but if you take undiluted Dragon’s Blood I think you’d probably just go bang.”

Aldebaran: “Bang… a different outcome from the Duchess in Pristella, huh?”

“Aldebaran”: “I became aware when I got this body, but setting aside Natsuki Subaru, whose insides are a chaotic mess of curses, it’s a miracle that the Duchess could endure it in her condition. I suppose there’s the fact that she’s close to the Royal Family.”

Aldebaran: “…Even if you say to dilute it, I doubt it’d be fine to simply water it down. By the way, I kinda have it in my head that shinobi aren’t just well versed in poisons, but medicine too, so what about Dragon’s Blood?”

Yae: “It’s a rare opportunity so I’m intrigued, but Yae-chan’s heart would never last if Al-sama became an even more frightening monster, so I’m agai~nst it.”

While an issue regarding feelings was pushed into the forefront, in truth, as long as one was not an expert, there was little hope that a deed such as the dilution of Dragon’s Blood could be carried out.

They could not mass produce a final elixir so easily. The world was not so simple.

“Aldebaran”: “I’ll at least apply some healing magic on you. There, passerby heal.”

Aldebaran: “We’re in the same party, so it’s not a passerby heal, but a dutiful heal.”

At Aldebaran’s riposte, the Divine Dragon unleashed an overabundance of healing magic through its power.

Unfortunately, he bore few external wounds, and it naturally did not grow Aldebaran a new left arm, but he did gain the consolation that he would be healed even if he bore any serious injuries.

Well, if he bore a serious injury he would gulp down poison instead of waiting for healing, so it was quite literally just consolation.

Yae: “By the way, Vol-sama, may I ask something~?”

“Aldebaran”: “…Ah! Vol-sama refers to me? Took me a second since it didn’t click at all. What’s up?”

Yae: “Your feelings towards Felt-sama, have they calmed down a bit?”

Clad in a nonchalant air, Yae’s question was obvious in its intent through the slightly tensed atmosphere, so Aldebaran narrowed his eyes within his helmet.

And, having perceived the same thing, “Aldebaran” did the same.

“Aldebaran”: “If by calmed down you mean decreased, then it’s actually the opposite. It’s scary how much love is overflowing. The distance that keeps us apart only fosters stronger feelings.”

Aldebaran: “You’re not so far away to say there’s a distance keeping you apart, and I just can’t get behind that affection.”

“Aldebaran” was poking fun at Aldebaran with a choice of words styled after the latter, but since the emotions from when those words were initially uttered were shared between the two of them, a considerable portion of that was likely how it truly felt.

The intention of that also seemed to have been communicated to Yae, so she nodded with a “Is that so~”, and, Yae: “She really is a hindrance~, that Felt-sama. Can we not get rid of her successfully?”

“Aldebaran”: “Yae, I’ll say this now, but…”

Yae: “Ah~, you’re jumping to conclusions. I knew Vol-sama would have that sorta reaction, so I wanted to discuss a non-dangerous method~. —At worst, if Felt-sama happened to try to run away, me, Al-sama, and Vol-sama would all then be happy. Wouldn’t that make you happy, Vol-sama?”

Aldebaran: “Even I wouldn’t be particularly happy.”

Yae: “Even though a source of distress would vanish?”

Aldebaran: “—. You’ve also been a bit of a source of distress for me.”

Yae: “Oh dear, I’ve stirred the hornet’s nest.”

Facepalming her own forehead, Yae responded in a manner of jest.

The happy method she had hoped for was the condition brought up by Felt when she became their hostage—that it was fine to kill her if she tried to escape; it had become a habit for Yae to touch upon that. Felt and “Aldebaran” had made a promise that if that time came, there would be no hard feelings even if she died.

However, even if that was a logical promise between Felt and “Aldebaran”—no, the Divine Dragon, it was not an end that Aldebaran desired.

Things had ended up with this relationship and way of doing things, but Aldebaran wished to return Felt to the Royal Selection safe and sound, so that she could vie for the throne in high spirits until the very end.

Of course, judging by “Aldebaran’s” reactions, the suspicions regarding Felt, initially brought up at the Royal Castle Lugunica, were all but confirmed.

Aldebaran: “After all, this dragon’s way too madly in love from the bottom of its heart for it to just be brushed off as an accidental resemblance. In reality, how much of the original personality seems like it'll come to the surface?"

"Aldebaran": "The fact that this is a container, a dragonhusk, won't waver. You don't need to worry about the original personality popping out all of a sudden to say hi. The little amount of residual feelings just strongly assert themselves, and it's sorta an image of the strength of that assertion undulating."

Aldebaran: "…By the way, those residual feelings, how much do you remember?"

"Aldebaran": "I like Farsale. I dislike Reid. Everything else is fuzzy."

Aldebaran: "The first generation Sword Saint, huh? Don't bring up a legend so casually, it scares me."

The first generation Sword Saint was a being whose name he had heard often from the Witch, but the tales told by those who knew him directly would paint him in the worst light of reputation. Recently a new testimony from the Divine Dragon's residual feelings had been added, so it was likely true that he had been a good-for-nothing.

Aldebaran would be lying if he said that the rest being fuzzy did not bother him, but—

Aldebaran: "Oh, that reminds me, Yae and the Dragon me are both here with me now, but what about lil' miss Felt and the old man?"

Yae: "The two of them are on stand-by over there. Heinkel-sama is taking responsibility, keeping a keen eye on Felt-sama."

Aldebaran: "Pairing those two together, that's the worst thing you could've done!"

Yae: "—. Ah~, I messed u~p, Yae-chan was careless."

Aldebaran: "…"

Yae seemed to have done so on purpose, and hearing her response, Aldebaran took a deep breath, and stood up.

Due to the working conditions he was giving Yae, he had to be willing to accept this prickling harassment.

“Aldebaran”: “Oh, are you headed over to Farsale… I mean, lil’ miss Felt? I’ll come too…”

Aldebaran: “So long as you can’t remedy that verbal slip-up, it’s important that you don’t meet her, serves better for your favorability. Also, I wanna avoid tipping the scales any more in her favor.”

Explaining so, he had “Aldebaran” sit back down as it attempted to follow along, and left Yae to discipline it to sit and wait; ignoring her as she poked fun with an “It’s a group effort~”, Aldebaran began to walk towards where Felt and Heinkel were located.

Then, in a position where they could not hear the strategy meeting that took place in the tree’s shadow, Felt and Heinkel were waiting on the other side around the large tree—

Felt: “—Pops, I’ll say this now, but you don’t gotta make excuses to me.”

As soon as Aldebaran peered in, a rather harsh statement struck his eardrums.

At a glance, Felt was sitting with her back leaned against the large tree, and stood opposite whilst looking down on her, was Heinkel.

From a filmmaking perspective, Heinkel, looking down on the other party from a higher point, had a psychological advantage compared to Felt in this scene, however.

Heinkel: “—Hk, e-excuses, you say? Why in the world would I need to do anything of the sort? Don’t say such foolish things, you brat!”

Felt: “In that case, stop looking at me all nervously. Your gaze is noisy.”

Heinkel: “Who’s…!”

Indignation erupting from his throat, Heinkel stumbled over his next words, and so it seemed that the conclusion offered from a cinematic perspective would not be of any use.

The two differed in both height and age, but even without quantifying anything, it was clear which of these two actors was on top, so as Aldebaran happened to be present at the unpleasant scene, he pitied Heinkel.

He would have preferred to conceal his breath and get out of there quickly, but,

Felt: “Hm?”

Heinkel: “Aldebaran…”

And, the two of them noticed him at around the same time, so Aldebaran had no choice but to walk up to them.

Then, choosing his words with an “Ah”,

Aldebaran: “Old man, quit getting involved with lil’ miss Felt. You’re at a disadvantage no matter what you say.”

Heinkel: “Wha… so even you’re saying that this brat’s gonna talk me down?”

Aldebaran: “It’s not a matter of who’d win or lose in a verbal argument, I’m saying the premise is botched to begin with. Old man, you’ve allied yourself with me, so from lil’ miss Felt’s perspective you’re an indisputable turncloak… or rather, fundamentally from anybody’s perspective, you’re a great enemy of the Kingdom of Lugunica, you know?”

Heinkel: “—Hk, I… know. Even so, I’m…”

A bitter look strewn about his face, Heinkel cast his eyes down, muttering those words as he opened and closed his hands.

Wearing a tired expression and placed in a tiresome position, nonetheless Heinkel was well aware of what sort of spider’s web he had reached his hand into.

That this was a deed that would tarnish the honor of the House of the Sword Saint, renowned in the Kingdom, that it would create an irrevocable disgrace, he knew.

Still, even if it meant bearing notoriety that persisted unfading for the next several hundred years—

Felt: “You want the Dragon’s Blood. Pops, in order to wake your wife… Reinhard’s mother, you need that no matter what, right?”

Heinkel: “Brat, how do you…”

Felt: “Just where do you think your son kept me detained at first? I’m well aware of that idiot’s family situation. I also heard about it from Granny Carol and the others.”

Heinkel: “Then! You should understand! It’s necessary, I need the Dragon’s Blood! And, Aldebaran promised it to me! That’s why, I’m going along with this guy’s plan—”

Felt: “Like I said, don’t make excuses to me.”

His desperate pleas met with such a response, Heinkel’s words choked on a “Guh”.

Felt’s answer had left him utterly hopeless, tearing Heinkel’s meager conscience to shreds in a manner much more stinging than would have been accomplished via unskillfully harping on him.

Only, it did not seem like Felt had aimed to choose the method that would wound Heinkel the most. To evidence that, scratching her own head,

Felt: “Even I think it would be nice for Reinhard’s mom to wake up. I also get how you feel like you don’t got a choice in the means to accomplish that end. Hence, I won’t deny you, Pops.”

Heinkel: “…”

Felt: “It’s just a matter of your methods differing from ours. It’s neither good nor bad.”

As Felt spoke with a single eye closed, it was clear from a single glance that her words had beaten Heinkel down. The definite discrepancy in their calibers was revealed, and what was meant to be a follow up became a kick to a dead body.

If they were to converse any further, Heinkel's wounds would only expand. Feeling sorry that Yae's pestering seemed to have paid off, Aldebaran patted him on the shoulder saying "Old man, that's enough", and dismissed Heinkel from keeping watch over Felt.

Then, when Heinkel, his shoulder drooping, left the two of them,

Aldebaran: "You're merciless, lil' miss Felt. Though you don't look the part, are you perhaps angry?"

Felt: "Ain't that obvious, asshat? Even now, I'm exerting all my self-restraint on my desire to kick your guys' asses. It's 'cause I got this shit on my neck."

Saying that, Felt touched the fine steel thread wrapped around her neck—that which had also been brought up in the conversation with Yae and "Aldebaran", and curved her lips into a smile to flash her high canine.

Her impudence was to the MAX, but for the most part, she was aware that her life was in their clutches.

Of course, since they had not taken the life of even a single of her comrades, it was possible that she was making light of the level of effective threat that the steel thread posed, but—

Aldebaran: "—I'm not gonna fall in the same ditch twice."

Felt: "…"

It was not so much an announcement as it was an oath Aldebaran pledged to himself.

The girl before his eyes had been raised to be strong in the slums; she was not just a Royal Candidate suspected of being missing royalty, but a potential monster who had grown up being trained by Valga Cromwell.

There was a sufficient likelihood that she had already eclosed as a monster, becoming a being more dangerous than Aldebaran could imagine.

However, even were that to be the case, Aldebaran would no longer suffer defeat.

Aldebaran: “Even if this is my final part to play, there’s still meaning in my growth.”

The ability to handle “Aldebaran”, who was supposed to have been their primary strength, had gotten worse; Yae’s insolent and mischievous attitude was intolerable; Heinkel would get discouraged on his own regardless of Aldebaran’s intentions; he could not keep going without bringing along the uncooperative excess weight that was Felt; such was Aldebaran’s journey. —To put it bluntly, things had ended up quite different from his initial travel plan.

But, in exchange for his exhaustion mental and physical alike, the unforeseen battle and tangible loss had stripped Aldebaran of his conceit, delivering unto him a lesson firm.

Aldebaran: “From here on out, I’ll draw out my Territory until it reaches its utmost limit.”

By using short-term updates of a matrix to instantly respond to a pressing situation, he thought he could reduce the retroactive time rather than the number of attempts, and that in doing so he would see long-term benefits.

But, in a case like the most recent one in which he was up against many enemies, that extreme level of matrix updating would cause the probability of being checkmated to skyrocket. If he continued to use it as he always had, then even against someone who did not possess Valga’s ingenuity, it was completely possible for his path to be closed off by way of simple misfortune.

Aldebaran: “If I let the intervals get too long, it’ll be a chicken race between my brain overheating and my mind getting worn down… but even if my soul is completely destroyed, it’s far superior to failing.”

From the outset, Aldebaran had no prospects for beyond the completion of this plan.

The Kararagi City-States: after arriving at the Grand Mogolade Geyser in that land, and accomplishing his objective there, he would clean up the mess he had made in his endeavors, and then end it all.

He desired nothing more. In exchange, he would ensure that everything up to that point would be carried out to fruition.

Felt: “…”

As Aldebaran hardened his resolve anew, Felt silently watched him with narrowed eyes.

Aldebaran had deliberately ignored her gaze, but faced with the fact that Felt, who resembled her in no regard whatsoever, not personality nor facial features, nor physique nor anything else, did indeed share the same eye color with Priscilla and nothing more, he experienced an awfully awful sense of discomfort.

Aldebaran: “If possible, could you not look at me with those eyes?”

Felt: “Don’t be unreasonable. Sorry, but I’ve had these two eyeballs since I was born. I also don’t like ‘em since they stand out… nah, I used to not like them.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Felt: “Now, I surprisingly think they ain’t half bad. Why, I ain’t gonna close my eyes.”

Leaning against the great tree, Felt folded her arms and sat cross legged on the ground, and taken by her gaze and the strength of her will, he could understand the feelings of the many who revered her for her radiance.

Right now, that radiance was the same to Aldebaran as the poison tucked behind his molar. Only, that radiance would not take

Aldebaran's life, it only served to torment him.

Felt: "So? I'm pretty damn hungry, got any food?"

Aldebaran: "You're being way too audacious… Sorry, but we don't have time for a meal break right now. Travelling takes priority."

Felt: "That's some poor treatment for your hostage. —We headed to that something-something hole in Kararagi you mentioned?"

Aldebaran: "The Grand Mogolade Geyser. No doubt, that's our final destination. Only, gotta make a bit of a detour."

At Aldebaran's comment, Felt knit her well-shaped eyebrows with a "Detour?".

In response, as Aldebaran drew in his chin with a "Yeah, a detour", he turned around to the scenery in the distance amidst which it could not yet be perceived, and imagining that place, he spoke.

That was—

Aldebaran: "—Now is when they oughta be spread the most thin. I'm going to pick up a necessity for the plan."

3

Fortunately, the detour on the way to their destination went smoothly.

Unfortunately, the security was too dense to say they were spread thin, but due to what was sealed on the other side, their protocols for crisis management being this thorough was almost reassuring.

But then again—

Aldebaran: "High security ain't enough to stop me."

If they were to truly stop Aldebaran, as Felt's group had previously done, then surrounding and crushing him with several hundreds of people would have been the best course of action. For such a feat to be accomplished, at least a single Order of Knights would need to be deployed, even if it was the Royal Capital, a strategic point of utmost importance.

Thus, to ensure that could not be done, Aldebaran had taken measures in advance.

Aldebaran: “I ended up needing to call it back right away, so it was fifty-fifty on whether I could place hope in the diversion being effective, but…”

Aldebaran, driven to madness, assisted by the Divine Dragon, Volcanica.

It was not difficult to imagine the depths of the panic felt by those in the know, once the information got out that Reinhard the Sword Saint, who had gone off to stop them, had instead become occupied facing the Witch of Envy, freeing Aldebaran and Volcanica to escape the Sand Dunes.

They would have thought it the greatest threat to the nation since the Witch of Envy’s rampage four-hundred years prior.

For that very reason, the Kingdom had had no choice but to put on a display of all its strength to oppose “Aldebaran”, which was flying at heights so as to easily attract attention.

Even if that meant leaving minimal armed forces in the Royal Capital.

Thus—

Aldebaran: “—Found it.”

—Four-hundred and seven times.

Via that trial and error, in the location he had sought to reach, Aldebaran had located what he was searching for. From the entrance door to the multilayered mechanisms in the room, it was sealed rigorously as to not permit the slightest bit of interference.

In reality, without any assistance, Aldebaran would have been unable to do anything regarding the mechanism before his eyes, regardless of having managed to reach this place, and thus would have ended up retreating in dejection.

However, the current Aldebaran had—

Aldebaran: "—The Divine Dragon's fang, I wonder how many holy gold coins it'd be worth."

An article so rare that the ensemble of merchants he knew would all have dollar signs in their eyes, estimating its value with an abacus inside their heads; using it as a catalyst, Aldebaran destroyed the sturdy mechanism through sheer force.

Like nothing he had ever heard before, an aberrant sound of destruction akin to an iron bar being torn off a wall through brute force arose; the invisible wall that had certainly been present vanished, and Aldebaran stepped forth into the space.

That space, not wide in the slightest, was even more cramped than the restroom in the Barielle Mansion.

With naught a window nor an opening barring the entrance door, the room was suffocating, akin to a solitary confinement cell—no, not akin, the place was most accurately described as a solitary confinement cell.

After all, sealed within was unmistakably a sinner, a criminal, an evil unpardonable.

Aldebaran: "By now, I've done enough to earn myself the death penalty a hundred times over, but…"

Yet, room there indeed remained to accrete sin upon sin.

As if to prove such, Aldebaran reached his hand out towards the blackness before his eyes. That was also the work of extraordinary principles, but this time the Divine Dragon's aid was needed not.

Albeit different in essence, what laid there was similar to the coalescence of the Witch's teachings, which Aldebaran had mastered at the end of rigorous training which had made it seem as if he would drown in his own bloody vomit—

Aldebaran: “…”

Passing his intent through the fingertips held aloft, the subsequent moment, cracks ran through the whole of it, shattering.

Into pieces akin to fragments of porcelain it fissured, however, no sound of its scattered shards rippled with the ground as the source. Instead, its composition unravelled, melting into the atmosphere.

Witnessing that run its course with his own eyes, before Aldebaran, in place of the vanished black mass, was a single human silhouette on the ground, down on all fours.

Aldebaran: “Obey, and follow me. —If you do that, I won’t kill you here.”

???: “Hah—”

As Aldebaran quietly pronounced so, the silhouette made sure to let out a breath as it smiled. —Nay, it sniggered.

Sniggering, sniggering, sniggering, licking the lips of the mouth from which sharp fangs protruded—

???: “—How nice, so nice, quite nice, perhaps it is nice, surely it is nice, so quite nice, certainly it is nice, because it is certainly nice, because our chest trembles at how nice it is-! Gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-!”

Indeed, within the solitary cell colored in darkness, the existence liberated from its jet-black coffin—the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, amidst feelings of freedom and hunger, jubilated.

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4

—It was as if the world had come to an end, where heaven and earth were no longer separated, where there was no longer any distinction between Bright Time and Dark Time, where the lines between life and death blurred, and where the differences between the self and the “other” became unnecessary.

???: “Young Master! Young Master!”

And, desperately raising her voice like so was Flam, who one would never have imagined capable of such an emotional outburst, whose gaze was fixed on the other side of the sandstorm—beyond the Pleiades Watchtower, where a great wave of black shadows was surging from the distance towards the red-haired hero, the Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea, who was struggling to fight it off all alone, to stop it, resist it, and to repel it.

Flam: “Young Master—!”

While she had more faith in his strength than anyone else, the girl who also knew him well outside of his heroic appearance cried out, her voice betraying her, in an attempt to deny the absurd reality that had suddenly befallen him.

Flam’s voice, as if screaming, surely reached Reinhard, who was challenging that dark demise. There was no way he could have failed to hear it. That was because Reinhard van Astrea himself had decided that he had to be that kind of existence.

Despite that, Flam’s anguished voice went unanswered, as the strongest of the Sword Saints to ever have existed was being exposed to such a fierce threat that even a momentary lapse in concentration could be fatal.

???: “…”

Countless black arms surged forward like literal waves, spreading out to fill everything in sight, continuously trying to crush their target with unstoppable destruction.

Reinhard wielded the Dragon Sword with both of his nearly torn-off arms, and swung the legendary sword that could not be unsheathed in place of his arms, breaking through the cage of black shadows that seemingly was inescapable in all directions, smashing it to pieces.

He repeated this over and over again, ten or twenty times a second, until the sweat that had formed and the blood that had flowed left his body as steam. Reinhard was completely absorbed in his task.

—That, was the decisive contest between these two legendary beings, the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy.

???: “Ge~ez! This is unbe~lievable!”

Seizing the reins as she jumped into the driver’s seat, Meili, with her disheveled braids and clenched teeth, desperately tried to perform an unfamiliar role.

Patrasche, who was at the other end of the reins, was intelligent, with Meili’s handling of the reins being nothing more than for show. Nevertheless, Meili continued to stay there to show her determination.

With Garfiel and Ezzo unconscious, Flam, whose attention could not be peeled off from Reinhard’s figure, and Petra, who had not yet returned from reading the Book of the Dead, the only one who was able to act normally here was Meili.

Reinhard’s battle was a given, but it was no exaggeration to say that the lives of the entire party depended on Meili’s slender arms.

Meili: “That’s a bit of an exaggeration. Or rather, that’s a bit too mu~ch…”

Many times in the past, Meili had been involved in a situation where someone’s life was at stake.

However, in many of those instances, Meili was on the side that took lives, and she had been in a position where she held the power to decide whether to give or take a life in the majority of them.

The only time she had ever used her abilities to protect someone's life rather than take it was during the Trial the previous time she had been at the Watchtower, and apart from that, Meili's capabilities were probably only slightly more powerful than those of an ordinary person.

With such little experience, the Witch of Envy would not have been a good opponent to clash with.

Meili: "Please, Patrasche-chan… unlike with the Witchbeast-chans, I can't understand what you're saying, bu~t… everyone's in dan~ger…!"

Patrasche: "—DODOGYUUUN."

Meili's appeal was conveyed through the reins, and Patrasche bravely replied.

The jet-black ground dragon strode furiously, not heeding the adverse conditions of the sandy footing, pulling the dragon carriage with everyone on board, running, running running running, running toward the end—.

Meili: "If this keeps up—"

It was then that she thought they could make it through the Sand Sea in one sweep.

Meili: "—Ah."

For an instant, the earth seemed to bend and stretch as an incredible impact caused Patrasche's feet to flounder off the ground, and the dragon carriage rose into the air along with all its passengers.

Meili: "…"

This was bad, and the word that came to Meili's mind was "pinch".

They were in a pinch, a real pinch. When Subaru was in a dangerous situation, he often used the word "pinch". It was easy to say, and once one got used to saying it, this word would keep popping into their head. But even if one were to keep chanting "pinch, pinch", the solution would still not come to them.

The only sure thing was that once Patrasche slid into the sand, they would lose the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion that would allow them to leave the sand dunes safely.

Once that was gone, escaping alive from this place, where the boundaries between heaven and earth would become unrecognizable, would become utterly impossible for Meili and the others.

—What should I do now? Everyone, please, Onii-san, help me.

Meili: "Everyone needs he~lp…!"

Yes, it was when that completely useless and tearful voice was put together, as her vision was almost upside down.

???: "—Leave everything to me, Meili."

Right after she heard that cute and reassuring voice, Meili saw someone leap from the overturned coach, using the driver's seat as a foothold, and proceeded to jump onto Patrasche, who was losing her balance in mid-air.

It was a girl with a large bow and light brown hair that caught the eye—

Meili: "Petra-cha~n!"

As Meili cried out, Petra, who had leapt out of the carriage, clung to Patrasche's neck in mid-air before forcefully sitting on the ground dragon's saddle, clinging on tightly as if she were biting her.

She hugged with all her might, using her entire petite body, and made her appeal.

Petra: "Patrasche! Calm down, and listen to my voice!"

Patrasche: "—DODOGYUUUN."

Petra: “Yes, good girl… Now!”

Responding to Petra’s voice, Patrasche swung her long tail vigorously, forcibly controlling her position in the air; with significant momentum, she landed on the sand with her toes thrusting forward into the ground, gracefully controlling the momentum of the dragon carriage, allowing it to land on the ground without interrupting the safety of the Divine Protection.

She had managed to overcome that critical moment beautifully.

It had all been thanks to Patrasche’s incredible responsiveness and the girl’s skill in bringing that out.

Petra: “Meili! Chan! Are you safe and sound?!”

Meili: “I, I’m fi~ne! Petra-chan, that Book you read—”

Petra: “—I’m alright. More importantly…”

Cutting off her words, Petra narrowed her round eyes and glared behind her.

Before her gaze was a battle where Reinhard, defending the Pleiades Watchtower as the line that must continue to be defended at all costs, was holding back the Witch of Envy, who tried to cross that line.

The mere thought of the Witch of Envy was enough to cause shudders to surge up from the depths of her heart, and even Meili could not shake the fear that this reality had brought.

However, Petra, still mounted on Patrasche’s back, said to Meili,

Petra: “It’ll be fine; leave everything to me.”

Meili: “Petra-chan…?”

Petra: “Leave it for now; we need to get out of the Augria Sand Dunes. Let’s go!”

To the loud declaration of Petra, as she rode the ground dragon speeding across the Sand Sea, Meili responded by repeatedly nodding her head in agreement, feeling a sense of mysterious reliability.

With a smile at Meili's reaction, Petra turned back to face forward and stiffened her cheeks.

Holding on tightly to Patrasche's neck and leaving the manifestation of the end that loomed behind them to Reinhard, they ran, ran, and ran straight out of the Sand Sea.

And, while enjoying the illusion of being bathed in a cool breeze, Petra whispered to herself.

Petra: "We have some work to do. —Right, Subaru?"

Subaru: "—Yeah, let's do this. With everything we've got!"

Feeling the voice and presence of the one she loved so dearly, whom she was unable to touch, near to her, Petra Leyte raced as hard as she could, her heart burning with passion.

—To bring forth that wish, which must be delivered outside this sea of sand, she must give it her all.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Nascent Wolves: Undead Busters II

1

???: “And so! What a surprise we have here! Spica-san splendidly succeeded in dragging Anya out of the house! Hip-Hip hooray for this spectacular accomplishment!”

???: “Uu~!”

Clapping his hands, Cecilus applauded in true amusement. Encouraged by that springy voice of his, Spica also ended up reflexively puffing out her chest.

In truth, Spica did harbor a bit of a sense of accomplishment within her heart there.

In exchange for that bit of courage she displayed, her body was hurled into the midst of a battle that seemed akin to the end of the world.

Be that as it may—

Spica: “Aaiya?”

Arakiya: “—. Don’t touch me.”

As Spica tilted her head up so that she could glance at her face, Arakiya quickly averted her gaze, demonstrating a cold attitude. Spica was glad that they had finally exchanged greetings at such a close proximity, but that might not have been deemed acceptable from Arakiya’s side.

After all, just a short while earlier, she had been brought down by that hand of Spica’s. —Her dark skin made it difficult to tell, but it seemed like her complexion was not its best at the moment.

Spica: “Uu~, uu~…”

The “teleportation” that Spica masterfully wielded was an element of the Authority of Gluttony; as per Subaru, a remnant from before she had become her current self—of the wrongdoings perpetrated by Louis Arneb. Outside of this “teleportation” as well, there were a few sporadic hidden techniques that she held confidence in wielding.

Spica: “Au…”

As much as was possible, Spica told herself that she wished to refrain from using those.

In order to protect this vow, she would work to purify the Empire with Star Eating, just as she had promised to Subaru and Rem—she believed it to be just as important as resolving the problem of the dead people.

Then, as Spica renewed those feelings, the sound of stacks of paper being folded resonated in her eardrums.

The genesis of that sound laid before Spica and the two lined up next to her; wordlessly listening to their report, the Emperor was busy signing and stamping documents.

Amidst the many mountains of documents, after Vincent Vollachia breathed a brief sigh after finishing one of them up,

Vincent: “—Arakiya.”

Cecilus: “Oya oya, instead of touching on my labors or Spica-san’s efforts you decide to first and foremost focus on Anya? I don’t mind that at all but please don’t give her too severe a punishment. There are things that Anya should be and ought to be doing. My sunny side up breakfast fried eggs, for instance.”

Vincent: “Silence, utter fool.”
Arakiya: “Cecilus, die.”

Incurring displeasure from two directions in an instant, Cecilus curved his lips with a “Tsk” and squatted down in withdrawal. That fresh sensation of a childish response from his adult self perplexed Spica, and beside her, Vincent once again called out “Arakiya”.

Arakiya: "—. What?"

Vincent: "Firstly, I shall hear your explanation for having ignored mine summons several times. Such repeated disrespect in our current postwar period, large scars carved into our nation by the claws of the Great Disaster, regardless of your status as a General First-Class of the Empire, do not think that actions that spread chaos among mine subjects shall go overlooked."

Arakiya: "…Cecilus was-"

Vincent: "That utter fool? For him to needlessly open his mouth, needlessly ramble on phrases, and needlessly get on your nerves with nonsense, is by no means any new affair."

Arakiya: "…I'm sorry."

Met with Vincent's stern addition, Arakiya, whose gaze had been wandering, searching for the words to say, gave up on such actions. The dry silence from Arakiya's emotionless response was painful to hear, so despite barely knowing her, Spica began to want to stand in front of her with her arms spread out.

She wished to protect her from Vincent's sharp, painful gaze.

However—

Vincent: "An apology is uttered from that mouth of yours. Merged with the Great Spirit known for its reticence, I had thought you might become taciturn, but contrary to those expectations, that does not seem to be the case."

Quicker than Spica could stand in front of Arakiya, Vincent relaxed his gaze.

It seemed that not only was Spica surprised by Vincent's reaction, but Arakiya, too, slightly widened her red eye, wearing a puzzled look on her face.

Vincent: "So, what has changed other than your attitude? Your body is currently in an unprecedented state. Given that there is a concern that your life is directly tied to the safety of the Empire's lands, even the finer details shall be of note. Compile those details and report them to me. Or else…”

Arakiya: “…You’ll do something to me?”

Vincent: “No, or else—Priscilla’s death will have been for naught.”

Arakiya: “—Hk.”

In the following moment, a heat wave spread throughout the Emperor’s office, and Spica reflexively held her head.

That was a reaction borne out of instinctual fear, vigilance, and various other things. Emanating from Arakiya’s body was an impulsive fury that could not be identified as hostility or murderous intent; volatile in nature, it seeped out as a torrent of vast, aimless Mana.

But, just as how a Dragon’s breath was a wave of pure Mana aimed in a single direction, even if it was Mana that had not been shaped by the likes of magic, if it was vast enough in quantity, then it would easily give rise to peril.

The same applied to the current predicament, so Spica had no idea why Vincent had said such a careless thing, and it caused her to feel angry, a sensation as if her blood was flowing the wrong way.

The coiling eddy of Mana whirled around the office, and things were about to get bad—

Cecilus: “—Anya, Anya, you can’t be turning into Her Indignancy like that just because of a statement from His Excellency.”

That foolish, unfunny joke was whispered amidst the torrent of Mana that was also, in fact, no joke.

The fact that it came from Cecilus’s lips went without saying, and going against this vortex of Mana, he stood right behind Arakiya, embracing her body from behind, trying to pacify her.

Spica: “—Wau.”

Fully aware of the stupendous energy Arakiya possessed, that action left Spica speechless.

A mere hour earlier, Spica had also clung to Arakiya's back just as Cecilus was currently doing, earnestly attempting to persuade her to stop. In the end, it was the tremendous effectiveness of "teleportation" that had gotten Arakiya to stop, but aside from that, Spica had been completely tossed around.

Due to those recollections, she keenly understood the extraordinary recklessness of Cecilus's deed. At the same time, she comprehended the true intent of Vincent's careless utterance.

Because Cecilus was there with them, there was no doubt that Vincent judged it safe to purposely speak in a way to provoke Arakiya.

That was the immense level of trust that the Emperor of the Vollachian Empire placed in the Blue Lightning—

Arakiya: "Die."

Cecilus: "Hu~h~?!"

Immediately after, Cecilus, revolving with tremendous vigor, passed over Vincent's head, and smashing through the window past him, he was hurled outside the palace along with shining shards of broken glass.

As Cecilus faded from view, the only thing Spica could do was blink her eyes, thinking that this was not how it was supposed to go. Bearing witness to the same sight as her, Vincent crossed his arms, closed a single eye, and,

Vincent: "Thereby, it shall be you. Do it, girl."

Spica: "Au?!"

Vincent: "You harbor a trump card that brought Arakiya out, is that not so? Deploy it unsparingly. Elsewise, the sacrifices of all those who allowed mineself to survive through the battle against the Great Disaster shall return to naught."

After Spica widened her eyes at the overly excessive speech, she turned back to face Arakiya, whose entire body had begun to surround itself with floating belts of light, and gulped.

Once again, she decided on challenging Arakiya by utilizing “teleportation”. —Within her heart, just like how Subaru had always spoken, she crammed many complaints towards Vincent.

2

Vincent: “First of all, we have ascertained a means to keep Arakiya in check, as well as the fact that fusion with the Stone had not borne any major negative influence. It is a great service.”

Spica: “Au, au, auu~.”

Cecilus: “Eh? Ah yes yes Spica-san did you know? His Excellency has got a good head on him but fundamentally he’s reckless with his orders and so it’s really tough for everyone as they’re being swept around all over the place. Well His Excellency’s eyes often grasp someone’s capabilities more accurately than said person themselves so it does happen that since most people think their own limit is a bit in front of their real limit there is a bit of discrepancy with His Excellency’s ideal. Ahahaha, it must be hard for everyone other than me!”

Placing his hand to his chin, Vincent deliberated with a single eye closed.

Spica felt as if she had heard something unbelievable in his utterance; Cecilus, who had for some reason returned unharmed from outside the palace, supplemented so with boisterous laughter.

Still, after being agitated by Vincent’s comment, Arakiya’s ear canals had been perturbed once again when she was jostled by Spica’s “teleportation”, now leaning against the wall languidly with her legs spread out.

Of course, having gone all out, Spica was also out of breath, and her whole body was groggy.

Vincent: “With Cecilus and this girl with her, Arakiya can be restrained even were she to rampage. In that case, in accordance with Medium's words, I shan't be stingy in bestowing this duty upon the lot of you."

Cecilus: "Hahah, I see I see so it was advice from the Most Honorable Empress Consort. And here I was worried that His Excellency would be unable to properly take on a consort but it turned out to be a needless fear!"

Vincent: "Shut that superfluous mouth of yours. With Chisha gone, do not make me allocate my concern in futility."

Cecilus: "Woah now that's something I can't obey. After all, Chisha told me that he was entrusting His Excellency to me. Please rest assured since I will have my hands full moderating things so that His Excellency doesn't get fully sucked into his work surrounded by nothing but yes-men!"

Vincent: "—Fool."

Vincent's response was curt, and Cecilus shrugged with his hands in the sleeves of his kimono.

Off to the side of those two as they reached some sort of an understanding, Spica went up to the languid Arakiya, and stroked her head with an "Uu?" to ascertain how she was feeling.

Arakiya: "Don't, touch me… uugh…"

With those words of rejection, Arakiya's outburst had settled for the time being. As if having ascertained that through Spica, Vincent nodded with a "Very well", and,

Vincent: "Once again, the three of you are charged with the task of subjugating the dead who have survived the Great Disaster—though that is quite a comical way of describing them. In accordance with this edict, it would do you well to fulfill your respective duties."

Cecilus: "Aye aye aye! To begin with I was brimming with motivation so I'm completely fine with these orders but will it really be okay for me and Anya to leave the Imperial Capital? Chisha's gone and Groovy seems like half a dead man himself and I've heard that Moguro is in the middle of relearning humanity, so?”

Vincent: “In the first place, how much could I realistically expect the two of you to contribute at your stations? Besides, the Great Disaster may have devastated the nation, but it is not as though there was nothing to be gained. At the very least, amidst the Generals of various locations, some standouts have begun to emerge. Starting with Zikr.”

Spica: “Iirr.”

Hearing Zikr’s name, Spica suddenly lifted her head up.

Zikr Osman, with his fluffy face, was a gentleman who, among the people Spica had been acquainted with in Vollachia, had treated her with the greatest respect, so Spica quite liked him. For Zikr to thus receive such an evaluation was something that made Spica proud.

Spica: “Eius, Iirr.”

Vincent: “What? Do not tell me, you wish to exchange this one out for Zikr? Unfortunately, unlike this one, who is only useful during emergencies, there are many duties entrusted to Zikr. Give it up.”

Spica: “Uu~.”

Cecilus: “Huh-Huh-huh~? It seems like you said it knowing it wouldn’t be possible from the start but when comparing myself with Zikr-san and then being disappointed that I’m the one who’s picked is something that I just can’t accept in the slightest y’know?! I would never say that Zikr-san lacks charm but I’m the leading actor of this world!”

Spica: “Uu!”

When Cecilus interjected with his squawking, Spica slapped him.

She knew that Cecilus was strong, and understood that he was a reliable ally. Also that he was an even more troubled adult. Only, she wanted to object to his assertions of being at the center of the world. As for Spica’s thoughts on the matter, the one who shone just as radiantly as Cecilus was—

Cecilus: "—Boss would be along the right track. No doubt that he's neither a minor role nor is he a fodder character. Only when it's a matter of heading to the center of a stage that's slated to be a tempestuous storm of earth-shattering nature he just won't be able to compete with me. That's gotta put me at least a little ahead of Boss right?"

Spica: "Ica."

Cecilus: "You're saying that's what you're for? Haha, what a masterpiece. Boss certainly does have that sort of appeal. So is that reflected most in where you are on the stage when you shine the brightest… certainly a difficult question that is directly connected to myself given how I'm constantly aware of how I'm acting to captivate a theatre."

With an unchanged demeanor—no, just a little bit more gleefully than before, Cecilus gave his answer, to which Spica pursed her lips.

Then, leaning against the wall behind them, Arakiya made a sound as she slowly stood back up. Her complexion was still poor due to the aftereffects of the "teleportation", but,

Arakiya: "…Do as you please. I'm fine being a tool."

Vincent: "—. In that case, it would do you well to fulfill a duty befitting one. All of the dead were manifested using the Stone's Mana as an intermediary. For you, it ought to be possible to pursue those connections."

Arakiya: "Connections…"

Faintly muttering, Arakiya directed her eyes of mismatched color to outside the shattered window. With her red right eye, and the left eye of golden hue housing a strange light, she looked at that which was not there.

Eventually, Arakiya drew back her slender chin, and nodded with an "Mm", Arakiya: “Understood… But, there’s many.”

Vincent: “It may be ironic, but there is enough testimony of those who did not obey the guidance of the Great Disaster to substantiate that there were some who could resist the compelling force of the Witch. Proportionately, the seeds of calamity have been left to fester. This may have been a part of their designs.”

Arakiya: “—Once, everything is finished…”

Vincent: “…”

Arakiya: “…Nevermind.”

Retracting the words she began to speak, Arakiya lethargically cast her eyes down. Seeing her in that state, Vincent narrowed his eyes, but said not a word.

In place of Vincent, Arakiya’s hand was held by Spica. Holding hands, as her eyes began to slowly descend upon her, Spica was at a loss at what expression to make.

She was at a loss, however, Spica ended up smiling. —Imitating Rem.

When she had not understood a thing, and had no easy place to turn to, Spica—when she had still yet to be called Spica, Rem would often smile for her whenever Subaru was cruel.

And so, for the girl who seemed forlorn, with nobody to rely on, Spica wanted to smile.

Arakiya: “—. Don’t touch me.”

Cecilus: “Whenever it comes to Anya she always says this sorta thing. But you can rest assured, Spica-san. After all the evidence that Anya isn’t being honest is right there in the fact that she hasn’t let go of Spica-san’s hand, right?”

Arakiya: “Die.”

Once again, the window of the office was blown apart due to

Cecilus's needless comment.

—In such a manner, the prospect for the departure of Spica and company was finally put in order.

3

—Ironically enough, Vincent Vollachia's conjecture was correct.

As the bearer of the Great Disaster, the Witch, Sphinx had plotted to destroy the Vollachian Empire; her schemes involved resurrecting many of the deceased lying dormant in the vast lands of the Empire, making them complicit in her plans.

Even outside of those who originally bore strong enmity against Vollachia, the minds of the dead were made to obey the intentions of the Witch that had utilized a sacrament to resurrect them.

However, among the dead were those who disregarded the Witch's force of compulsion, acting in accordance with their own ego. And, each and every one of the deceased who retained their own will, were those who could be counted among the mighty.

Thus, this creature, coated in fur the darkest shade of night, was no exception.

???: "—Iris."

His will retained, he forwent participation in the ruin of the Empire prepared by the Witch, however, neither did he fade away like those among the dead who had ceased to desire aught further, this being—the jet-black wolfman, vocalized that name.

As if tearing his very heart asunder, the utterance permeated throughout its entirety with sorrow, terribly so.

To Be Continued

Kararagi Reaper Incident II

1

—Compared to the Kingdom of Lugunica or the Vollachian Empire, the Kararagi City-States were a nation of lands that could not be described as being blessed with favorable climate.

Of course, it was not as severe as the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, encased in permafrost as it was; with changes of season that comprised excessive variation in temperature, abnormal weather that seemed to befall them every year, and the likes of plots that proprietized inscrutable characteristics, it had to be said that these lands were rather harsh in their discipline towards those who lived within then.

Thus, for anyone to live in Kararagi, there was need for them to become accustomed to days of hard struggle. That was the polar opposite of a lifestyle that resigned itself to living in a reactionary way, a truly resolute and proactive lifestyle.

That boldness of the people of Kararagi to keep getting back up no matter how much they got trampled and trampled upon; while it might seem that he was biased towards his own people, that was something which Ricardo respected, and loved.

Indeed, the people of Kararagi were strong. They could get back on their feet no matter the adversity.

That was why—

Ricardo: “…I’d end up bein’ unable ta sleep peacefully at night.”

Spilling those words, Ricardo staggered to raise his body, using his great cleaver as a cane.

—Engulfed in the updraft of a tremendous gale, the townscape of Banan, distinguished among even the major cities of Kararagi, had been demolished; buildings were flushed away as if by a great flood, and it had been reduced to a state unbearable to cast eyes upon.

Collapsed in the epicenter of this unprecedented cataclysm of wind, Ricardo's body was stained with blood; in the sense of how painful it looked, it could have been said that his state rivaled the disastrous sight of the city.

Blades of wind birthed by magic would mercilessly tear through the bestial fur and thick skin of any beastperson. Normally, wind slashes would make many clean slices, painfully sharp but quick to heal. But, these wind cuts in particular differed; the wounds were serrated as if they had been dug into by a rasp, making the pain run proportionately sharper and deeper, dishonorable in the way it made blood pour out without cease.

And, the one who had inflicted such wind slashes upon Ricardo was —

???: "What~? You're still going at it, you whelp? You do have guts, I'll commend you for that. I'm not commending you, though."

Ricardo: "…It's embarrassin' ta be gettin' so much praise. Thank ya, lassie."

???: "I said I'm not commending you! Damned thief!"

Rage filling her shrill shouts, the sharp-eyed woman stomped her feet violently.

With white hair, white clothing, and golden eyes, at a glance she was nothing more than a beautiful woman—she was as cute as his own Anastasia was charming, but the fact that she was not as weak a being as she appeared, was evidenced by the wind slashes all over Ricardo's body, and the fact that she was present in the very center of the cataclysmic tempest devastating Banan.

Ricardo: "Tho', ever since I been with the Miss, I've been plunged into so many scenes of carnage that I even ended up losin' my right hand."

Looking down at his right arm, replaced with a hook from the elbow forward, Ricardo took a deep breath.

This lone wolf, known as Ricardo, had been caught by Anastasia, picked up Mimi and the others, and had gone on so far as to even command a group known as the Iron Fang. Since then, he had plunged into many scenes of carnage, both great and small, and even ending up clashing with the White Whale and Sin Archbishops, but—

Ricardo: "—Lassie, you're a head above all my opponents up 'til now."

In terms of an enigmatic, ominous feeling, he had felt the same thing concerning the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.

However, compared to Gluttony, of whom one had been killed and one had been captured at the Pleiades Watchtower, the woman before his eyes was fundamentally different in the overwhelming presence she exuded. —This awe was rooted in instinct.

As if the woman before his eyes appeared as a colossal beast several dozens of times larger than her actual appearance; that was the sort of awe it was.

And, encouraging his awe and vigilance towards that woman—

???: "—Captain!"

Then, mixed with the howling winds, what struck Ricardo's eardrums was a familiar voice—Mimi.

Just as Ricardo, the members of the Iron Fang had hastened to this place as a countermeasure against the cataclysm of wind, and among them was of course Mimi, the vice captain, as well as Hetaro and Tivey. However, right now, their figures were nowhere to be found in Ricardo's vision. To be more precise, he could not tell if they were anywhere in the scope of his vision.

After all, Mimi and the others were currently engulfed by the tremendously violent tempest kicked up by the woman, and together with Banan's residents and destroyed cityscape, they were whirled up into the wind vortex swirling in the sky.

Ricardo: “Geez, this ain’t no joke…!”

Swallowed by the eddy of wind, and being hurled up into the sky, were over several hundreds of people.

Fortunately, unlike Ricardo who currently stood directly in the woman’s way, it seemed like the ferocity of the gales was not wounding Mimi and the rest, but supposing the woman were to carelessly undo the maelstrom, it would be impossible to prevent many of those people from falling to their deaths.

The current situation was tantamount to several hundred hostages being taken against Ricardo.

Ricardo: “Even without doin’ this sorta thing, you’re plenty strong, lassie! Quit doin’ things like that!”

Woman: “Hah? By shelving your own weakness, you mean to blame me for being strong? Even though I’m only doing this because you guys are so fragile. I mean, don’t order me around!”

Ricardo: “So yer rage wells up at the end, huh?!”

Her sharp eyes growing ever sharper at Ricardo’s appeal, the woman replied with a shout and an angered expression.

Either way, the woman gave off the impression that she was unable to find a balance between the scale of her power and her use of humanity. That aspect made him recall the poor impression he had gotten when facing off against Sin Archbishops, but there were definitively parts to her that differed from that lot.

This woman was absurd, but she did not seem to be unreasonable.

Ricardo: “Regardless, I tend to falter when it comes to this sorta thing. Startin’ off, negotiations are the Miss’s job, my job’s just ta stand in the back ‘n stare the other party down. “Don’t ask for bread from the appa seller”, ya know?”

Everyone had a job that best suited them, that was the meaning of this Hoshin proverb, but the current situation Ricardo found himself in was unmistakably that of an appa seller who had been requested to bake bread.

Neither negotiating for the release of hostages, nor ignoring the hostages and instead suppressing her by force, were aligned with Ricardo's principles.

Then, at least he might be able to do a little more if he were to understand the woman's desires, but—

Ricardo: "Light Sphere, was it?"

Woman: "—! Yes, that! Give it back! If you would just give that back…!"

Ricardo: "Here's the thing, I'd also love to do so. 'N so, if you could just be a lil' more specific 'bout what that is…"

Woman: "—How shameless! Don't make me ask again! If you're protecting a thief, that makes all of you thieves as well!"

Ricardo: "There's somethin' seriously wrong with you! This ain't my fault!"

Correction: he had thought that the woman was not unreasonable a moment ago, but this was indeed a response most unreasonable.

Was he to blame the hot-tempered woman, or the unknown person who had stolen her "Light Sphere", or perhaps he ought to curse himself, unproficient with words as he was.

After thoroughly troubling over it, Ricardo scratched his head with his hook as he exclaimed "Ah!",

Ricardo: "I give up, it's a contest of endurance."

Saying that, Ricardo plunked his behind back down on the ground after having just stood back up, and sat with his legs crossed.

At Ricardo's unthinkable decision, the woman was astonished, letting out a "Hah?". However, perhaps taking it as an insult, her expression immediately returned to a strict one, Woman: “What is the meaning of this? Are you looking down on me?”

Ricardo: “Might look that way, but I ain’t fool enough to look down on an opponent who can do such grand things. Nonetheless, neither swingin’ at’cha nor havin’ a talk with ya ended up bein’ of any avail, so this’s the only thing I can do.”

Woman: “So your answer to that is to just sit down? Wouldn’t it be better to tuck tail and run away, whelp… no, not a whelp, but a wolf cub? Doesn’t quite roll off the tongue very nicely. Whelp should do fine.”

Ricardo: “Run away? Even when my family’s flyin’ ‘round up there? Ain’t gonna happen, even if it kills me… Also, the fact that I ain’t a whelp is sorta a secret. Don’t go talkin’ ’bout it too loudly, will ya?”

Right after communicating his request, a sudden breeze swept directly past Ricardo’s side, scraping at the right half of his body.

Ricardo: “…”

From the right side of his cranium, down to his right shoulder and arm, it scraped at him greatly, and the wounds that had been inflicted began to spray with blood.

Even so, Ricardo flinched not, and remained seated in his position. Faced with the obstinance of the bloodstained Ricardo, the stern and beautiful face of the woman emerged with its greatest indignation up to this point.

Woman: “Fine. If you say that is your intention, I’ll teach you this lesson. Even if you come crying about it later, I won’t listen.”

As she spoke, the woman raised up her palm as if to present it to him, and thereupon began to form a tiny tornado.

Its size was nothing compared to the maelstrom that held Mimi and the others afloat overhead, but the fact that it housed the same scale of power within, he understood.

That was to say, the palm had enough power concentrated within it to level a city, and it was now being pointed directly at Ricardo—

Woman: “Repent the fact that you ever picked a fight with me.”

2

???: “—Are you worried about Ricardo and the rest?”

When a voice spoke to her side profile, Anastasia, who had been gazing out the window, turned to face it. Then, as Julius sat next to her with anguish in his yellow eyes, he looked at her.

Surprisingly, the way his inner feelings ended up showing on his face was the cute aspect of Anastasia’s one and only Knight. Be that as it may, in order to tell him that he was needlessly worried, Anastasia forced a smile,

Anastasia: “Did I make ya uneasy? If that’s so, I’ve still got a long way to go in temperin’ my heart.”

Julius: “No, it is only natural for one’s heart to ache over their family. Even for you, Anastasia-sama, you have no need to avert your eyes from there.”

Anastasia: “Mm~, the way ya phrase “even for you”, does that mean ya think I’m impudent?”

Julius: “—Anastasia-sama.”

Anastasia: “Aye aye, sorry, sorry. It’s a bad habit of mine to always be snappin’ back with a retort.”

At Julius’s quiet call of her name, Anastasia apologized as she slightly shrugged her shoulders.

When her vulnerabilities were struck, she, not wanting her superiority to crumble, would end up taking this sort of attitude. That was undoubtedly evidence that the way of living in the slums of Kararagi was deeply ingrained into her. Those who displayed weakness in that place would end up as prey, and in some cases would even be stripped of their lives.

Always maintaining a composed expression, one ought to make a face that suggested they had an ace up their sleeve. —That had been a core teaching of Anastasia's life, as well as the management philosophy that had fostered the Hoshin Company into a major trading juggernaut.

???: "If you keep up that attitude even in front of your family and Knight, who permit your feelings, you will end up unable to smile with your true face in front of anyone, Ana."

Anastasia: "Oh my, since ya seem to never miss the opportunity for a lecture, ya ain't a very nice girl, ya know."

???: "I myself am aware of that, and even somewhat lament it. Thanks to that, I get the feeling that that part of me has also transferred over to you, Ana."

Anastasia: "…Really now, ya've always got somethin' to snap back with."

With a faint mutter, Anastasia patted the head of Echidna, wrapped around her neck as a scarf.

Then, once again, she pondered what words to use in order to provide an answer to the earnest Julius.

Currently, Anastasia's group was riding in a dragon carriage, hastening to Kararagi's Second City, Banan, which was said to be undergoing a cataclysm of wind. Having completed her mission as emissary to the Empire, the plan had originally been for Anastasia to return to Lugunica as soon as possible after finishing her report at the Third City, Ivada.

But, when she found out that a certain land had been subjected to an unprecedented great cataclysm, and that thereupon, the valuable Iron Fang—Ricardo, Mimi, and the rest had been dispatched, she could not abandon them. Julius's question, too, concerned how they could not establish communication with Ricardo and the others, who were in the disaster zone.

Of course, she harbored great feelings of concern for Ricardo and everyone else in the area of disaster. But—

Anastasia: “It was when I was still just a wee thing, before even livin’ together with Mimi ‘n the others.”

Julius: “…”

Anastasia: “I was picked up by Ricardo, and we were livin’ together. That said, Ricardo was always out workin’ as a mercenary, so he didn’t come home much, ‘n I was also busy helpin’ out at the shop, so I had a similar feelin’ of distance to the place I’d come home to.”

Anastasia suddenly began to speak; however, Julius listened without interrupting. Thankful to his Knightly demeanor, Anastasia continued.

Anastasia: “Each time he’d go out to work, it was a given that we’d be unable to have contact for a few days. But, one time, Ricardo sent me a letter back from where he’d been workin’. Just to say somethin’ like “I’m gonna be out for a bit longer this time~”.”

Julius: “That would mean he was thinking of you, Anastasia-sama.”

Anastasia: “Mm, that’s right… but that time, Ricardo had blundered at his job ‘n sustained a grave wound, ‘n he was on the brink of life ‘n death over at the town he’d been workin’ at.”

Julius: “Of life and death…”

Anastasia: “In such a situation, he’d sent a needless letter so that I wouldn’t worry. Nevertheless, even when I was small, I was a clever one. I immediately thought it was strange, ‘n went rushin’ over to where Ricardo was. Then I searched for the healers ‘n medicine necessary to heal him, ‘n he was saved. Back then, we made a promise.”

Anastasia could clearly remember that time, when her teary-eyed self thrust her finger towards Ricardo, who, sitting up in the bed, had overcome the adversity; she clearly remembered what Ricardo had answered back then.

Anastasia had an outstanding memory. Important promises, her own past failures, she remembered all of it. The past would absolutely never be erased. —That was not a Hoshin proverb, but an Anastasia proverb.

Anastasia: “Since ya’d only ever use letters ‘n the like to deceive me, don’t write ‘em no more. After all, uncle’s… Ricardo’s safety is somethin’ I’ll always believe in, even without any contact.”

Julius: “—. So then, even now?”

Anastasia: “Yep. Not bein’ able to get in contact is normally rise for concern, but for me ‘n Ricardo, it’s the complete reverse. If he were truly in danger, Mimi ‘n the others would come sayin’ somethin’. For that reason, I’m calm.”

Loosening her lips, Anastasia smiled at her concerned one and only Knight.

There was a deep understanding that this was neither a logical rationale, nor a believable basis, but a tenet founded in emotion.

However, though she was apologetic to her one and only Knight, Julius, within Anastasia, Ricardo was the sole existence she could believe in like that, even without any certain basis or logical rationale.

He was somebody who harbored a bond different to that of the faith Anastasia placed in Julius.

Henceforth—

Anastasia: “I wouldn’t worry ‘bout Ricardo. If there’s no contact, he ain’t doin’ anythin’ that would sadden me, it’s simply a matter of believin’ in that.”

3

???: “—How irritating.”

Thus, the palm of whirling wind was gripped right before his face, Ricardo released the tension from his body, and sighed.

The small scale storm, which would have been enough to thoroughly blow Ricardo away, delicately vanished in the woman's clenched fist—no, that was not all that had happened to the vanished storm.

Ricardo: "I'm beggin' ya, let 'em down slowly. If ya mess it up, I wouldn't be able ta bear the sight."

Woman: "How noisy. If you're going to complain about my handling of the wind, you're four hundred years too early. I mean, don't order me around. Don't make me say it again. It's irritating."

Becoming annoyed in such a tone, the woman spun her upraised hand around in the air. When she did so, as if responding to her movements, the vigor of the great wind surrounding Banan slowly began to dissipate.

The wreckage of the destroyed buildings, the screaming civilians, and Mimi, whose voice could be heard enjoying herself through the wind, quietly descended back to the ground.

Even so, the wind was still quite speedy, but after talking all that big talk, this was probably her method of neatly letting all these people land.

Having hoped for that, Ricardo stretched his back out, and,

Ricardo: "Ah, even so, that still hurt a lot! Even tho' I just exchanged my right hand for a hook, I was frettin' that ya might take away the whole arm from the shoulder down this time!"

Woman: "Don't speak so loudly! It's because you were trying to endure in vain. It would have been better if you hadn't clung to the ground, and instead went flying in the sky with the rest of the bunch. If you had done that, then these meaningless wounds…"

Ricardo: "Ah? What's that? You're sorry for woundin' me?"

Woman: "Like I'd say that! Serves you right! I wouldn't go so far as to say that it serves you right, though!"

Stomping on the ground, the woman howled in anger as she wielded her troublesome disposition. However, the sense of oppressiveness that had struck Ricardo with awe up until a moment ago, had completely vanished.

Judging by her personality, it seemed like she had overdone things quite a bit in trying to pressure him.

Ricardo: “To that extent, the Light Sphere that was stolen from ya seems like it was quite important.”

Woman: “Like I said! That’s what I’ve been saying this entire time! Hurry up and give it back!”

Ricardo: “‘N like I’ve been sayin’, I’ve got absolutely no clue what that is. —Name’s Ricardo.”

Appending his name onto the end of his words, Ricardo trained his gaze on the woman’s face. For a moment, she looked puzzled at what had just been told to her, but,

Woman: “I’m… ah, it’s Tia. Let’s go with that name for the time being.”

Ricardo: “Really now, that’s a wonderful name, young lassie Tia. In that case—”

???: “—Captain!! Incredible, that was insane! Are you alive?! Did you die?!”

Thus, the woman who gave her name—it was a matter of deciding to go with Tia, but she was interrupted by an energetic voice.

At a glance, Mimi, who had descended somewhere quite far away, was furiously sprinting towards them. Behind her could be seen the figures of Hetaro and Tivey as well, and Ricardo laughed a hearty “Har!”.

After a good chuckle, he wiped the blood from his face, and turning back to Tia,

Ricardo: “In that case, shall we have a lil’ chat? Even without tryna scare us with that wind, a simple smile woulda carried the convo further along. —Tho’ that ain’t a Hoshin proverb, but one of the Miss’s proverbs, ya see.”

END

No Stella No Life II

1

—Ten-thousand and zero.

Having a taste of “death by cutting” for precisely the ten thousandth time, Aldebaran raised his hands, as they had agreed.

Receiving that signal, that which had seemed to be infinite—no, that was just how it felt to the one on the receiving end, and since he had properly counted it up there was no doubt about it being ten thousand times, but regardless, the torture that had gone on to that extent came to a close.

That had been his expectation.

???: “—Fula.”

Aldebaran: “Wai…”

Hearing an incantation that should have been impossible, his voice that had begun to form the word “wait” could not continue.

The unleashed wind blade mercilessly sliced through Aldebaran’s throat, chest, and waist; falling victim to the circular slash, his body spurted with blood and collapsed upon the meadow of verdant grass.

???: “…”

In the moment before his decapitated head fell to the ground, he glared at the perpetrator of that act as if he was seeing something utterly unbelievable, and unable to do anything about it, Death came to fruition.

That other party watched over Aldebaran, even bearing a faint smile—

× × ×

—Ten-thousand and one.

Aldebaran: “This isn’t what we had discussed!!”

The instant he returned, Aldebaran abandoned their agreement and raised his voice so.

Seeing Aldebaran’s fury, the person who had been holding her hands up in front of him the beautiful Witch, composed of just the two colors of white and black, ceased movement.

Then, tilting her head in a cunning manner like she had completed all calculations,

Witch: “Judging by your reaction, this would mean that you have finished your ten-thousand and first attempt?”

Aldebaran: “And judging by your phrasing, from the outset, you were never gonna end it on the ten-thousandth time, oi?”

Witch: “Yes, I admit to your conjecture. But then again, from my perspective, I still have yet to enact murder on you even once… as expected, how deeply intriguing.”

Aldebaran: “What is? Your own horrid personality being verified after ending in just the attempt?”

Witch: “There is malice in your phrasing, but that is more or less correct.”

Closing a single eye, the Witch lifted a finger to her lips as she responded. Breathing a long, deep sigh at her attitude that showed no diffidence, Aldebaran somewhat soothed the beast within himself that was clamoring with ire.

The Witch had disregarded their prior agreement, and furthermore, it seemed like she had intended on doing so from the start.

But, as for what the objective of that betrayal had been, he could fathom a guess.

Witch: “By way of my Wind Magic, you have accreted the experience of “death by cutting” ten-thousand times. No matter the phenomenon, if you experience it ten-thousand times, in most cases, it will lose its flavor. Only, if those experiences went too far and you were simply just quelling your own heart, it would be troubling. Hence—”

Aldebaran: “You sliced me up one more time than the agreed upon ten-thousand. By doing that, you would be able to tell whether or not I was able to truly get accustomed to “death by cutting”.”

Witch: “Precisely. Thus, you proved my theory. Congratulations. This completes your hands-on education course on “death by cutting”. —Although, there is still a long road ahead of us.”

When he realized that she was clapping her hands before her chest, his gaze traced upwards and found her bewitching smile as she spoke.

Regarding whether the Witch felt like she had brought about a sense of accomplishment or not, given that she knew not how to show consideration for the hearts of others, it would have been difficult for regular people to gauge her heart. Thus, it was impossible for Aldebaran.

Witch: “Oya, how fainthearted. Even while spending such a long time with me in this space, you still think of yourself as a regular human?”

Aldebaran: “Rather than fainthearted, it’s a matter of natural distinction, yeah? I don’t have the sorta mentality to thrust someone who’s just escaping a journey of ten-thousand deaths down to the hell of a ten-thousand and first time.”

Witch: “You have a retort for everything. How wretched.”

Aldebaran: “Which one is it?!”

As the Witch shrugged her shoulders in a manner akin to saying “Good grief”, Aldebaran stuck out his tongue.

But, being able to behave in such a manner directly after tasting “death by cutting” ten-thousand and one times, vexingly, was proof of the Witch’s proposition that hands-on learning with death would bear dramatic results.

For these ten-thousand instances of “death by cutting”, too, during the double digits it continued without him being able to do a thing; during the triple digits he was thinking of nothing but things to quell his own heart; enough of a faint respite was yielded when he reached the quadruple digits such that he could finally direct his focus to a method of maintaining his mind’s balance.

And now that he had reached ten-thousand times, immediately after he had been decapitated, he maintained composure to the extent that he could clash words with the very person who decapitated him like this.

Likely, there was a fear that this was not stability of the mind, but more accurately, the destruction of the mind, but—

Witch: “Even supposing that were to be the case, is there a problem?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Suddenly, the Witch’s words, which seemed like they had seen through his inner thoughts despite the fact that she did not understand the hearts of others, struck him.

The Witch narrowed her black eyes, bordered by her long eyelashes, and while staring fixedly at Aldebaran,

Witch: “Even supposing the equilibrium of your mind were to crumble, your ability to think and your willingness to adapt, that is to say, as long as you do not lose your sense of objective, then there is no doubt that you will complete the purpose of your existence. That is how I judge it, do you possess a differing view?”

Aldebaran: “—. No, it’s as you say… Teacher.”

Witch: “Hm.”

Aldebaran: “I was killed ten thousand times. For me to protect my heart like it’s a shiny, freshly washed, and polished jar would be impossible from the outset. In that case, even if I have to fill the cracks up with glue, it’s fine as long as it’s kept in a state that can hold water until the end.”

Part way through, disregarding the Witch’s displeased reaction at the way she had been referred to, Aldebaran looked down and clasped his palm shut tight, affirming the other party’s words.

Then, opening his clenched hand, he faced back towards the Witch’s face, and,

Aldebaran: “What’s after “death by cutting”? “Death by beating”? Something like “death by crushing”?”

Witch: “Indeed. —I was thinking of going with “death by burning”, how about it?”

Aldebaran: “…Just in case, could I hear your reasoning?”

Witch: “Amidst numerous Deaths, burning to death seems like it would be particularly grueling. “Death by cutting” has proven to us that this first hand learning is effective. Thus, if we begin with the causes of death that are most fervently painful and work our way down, then that will make it so everything after is no longer scary, correct?”

Speaking in a detached manner, the Witch answered as if it was a good idea, and on the tip of her lifted finger, a flame alighted.

The flickering flame might have appeared cute, but Aldebaran was aware that it would yield a result far greater, and from here on, he would be made to experience it firsthand.

Certainly, since they were looking to the future, preparing for all kinds of causes of death in advance, “death by burning” was an assignment he would inevitably have to go through. But, to propose they start off with the highest ranking, most painful manners of death, was it perhaps revenge for their exchange from just earlier?

Witch: “Do not tell me, you think I am a woman who bears such grudges?”

Aldebaran: “Even if that were the case, it wouldn’t be surprising or anything of the sort!”

Witch: “What a way to put it. That wounded me.”

Even when she said that with a smile, it was not persuasive in the slightest.

Scratching his head as the Witch spoke, Aldebaran began to stretch where he stood. Focused thoughts, clear mind; radio calisthenics did well to calm a wavering heart.

And then—

Aldebaran: “Same signal as before. Don’t betray me this time.”

Witch: “I shall keep it as a goal to endeavor towards.”

Aldebaran: “Now that’s a statement I can’t ignore… —Expand Territory, matrix redefinition.”

After his dejection, Aldebaran accessed his Authority—his own cognition enclosed around the world, intoxicating him with a sense of omnipotence as he bent the laws of reality to his will.

In this moment, the world was divided into a multiplex hierarchy of layers within Aldebaran’s hand—

Witch: “—Goa.”

For the first time, he comprehended that the scorching flames engulfing his life would even burn away his death throes.

2

Witch: “—Goa.”

During his hands-on learning with all sorts of Death, Aldebaran pondered.

The Witch had by no means proposed such a hellish intensive training menu out of resentment towards Aldebaran. Deep down, this proposal must have truly been the Witch's way of caring for Aldebaran.

Witch: "—Huma."

Having mastered all forms of magic in this world, the Witch was nonetheless discontented, producing new forbidden arts, continuing to heighten her own self-studies and understanding of the research of others, and now quite literally executing tens of thousands of deaths.

The utility of the Witch, capable of actualizing the majority of the manners of Death published in the dictionary, could be described as most optimal for realizing this penanceno, this training that transcended the ordinary.

Witch: "—Dona."

Of course, amidst the unbearable pain and torment, many a time had he detested the Witch.

It was a shallow interpersonal relationship. In terms of Aldebaran's life, it was not as though he had made contact with very many people, but as for one towards whom he harbored this much of a variety of emotions, there existed none other save the Witch.

Rage and sorrow, hatred and resentment, fear and disgust, repulsion and fixation, even affection, all such were present.

Witch: "—Jiwald."

It was a process that would repeat without end, an unsightly one, akin to that of fierce emotions, neither faint nor small on their own, being left to stew jumbled together with many other things in a boiling pot.

To allow that to continue for so long, Aldebaran's sense of duty alone was by no means the only reason.

To begin with, something like a sense of duty was not even that great of a motive within Aldebaran himself. The sense of objective he had been bequeathed, no matter how far he went, would always be nothing but a borrowed oar.

Witch: “—Minya.”

It was a fool’s errand to venture out into the rapids with an unreliable boat and oar.

Understanding that, for him to keep struggling onwards, though there was a possibility for Aldebaran to force his way past that unreasonableness, neither his borrowed sense of duty nor those worn-out possibilities were definite motives.

He did not wish to recognize it. But, just as surely, he did wish to be recognized.

—By the Witch, who since his birth, Aldebaran had spent the longest, most pronounced time with.

3

Aldebaran: “Teacher, don’t you ever get fed up?”

Witch: “—? Do I get fed up? With what, exactly?”

Aldebaran: “With what… I mean like, all sorts of things, all sorts. Or you could even say with everything.”

Witch: “Again, that is quite the broad question.”

Languidly sprawled out upon the verdant meadow, above Aldebaran, the Witch laughed.

His limbs spread out without putting any tension in them, Aldebaran had learned first-hand what it meant for one’s body and mind to be expended. Even though it was his own body, there were nothing but unknowns—no, that was slightly different from the correct expression.

Even though he did know, there were nothing but unknowns. This was a more accurate way to put it.

Witch: “…Ah. Was your question just now perhaps venting your own feelings?”

The Witch, having sat herself down in a chair used for tea parties, suddenly peered at him as if having realized something.

Unusual as it was, the Witch seemed to be working through a circuit of consideration or comprehension of others.

Aldebaran: “But, that’s only half-right, half-wrong.”

Witch: “Fifty points, hm. However, there is nothing marked in red, so it is a matter of the points I am missing. An explanation?”

Aldebaran: “The half you got right is that those are my feelings, but the full correct answer involves a notion of “why am I doing this sorta thing”? So, I wanted to ask how it is for you, Teacher.”

Witch: “I see. So rather than getting fed up, it is more about feeling a lack of willpower.”

As she spoke, the Witch crossed her legs, wrapped in a black skirt, and pondered. Watching over that strangely alluring gesture as he laid down, Aldebaran vocalized his impulse.

Aldebaran: “If you just let me have a single lap pillow, my willingness might return.”

Witch: “What a terrifying request to make, you. You ought to be aware just how frail in constitution I am, correct? I shall say this now, but even if you attempt to place your head in my lap, I am confident that I will not be able to stand up for an entire day, let alone several hours.”

Aldebaran: “Don’t wear such a smug grin as you say that sorta thing… I was just asking.”

First of all, his exhaustion was nothing so trivial that doing that would revive his willingness.

To begin with, as far as he understood it, this Witch had told Aldebaran that if she could support him through physical touch, she would help out no matter what it was.

And unfortunately, Aldebaran desired no such things from the Witch.

Ergo—

Aldebaran: "…"

Unexpectedly getting out of her chair, the Witch crouched down beside Aldebaran, and caressed his head. Speechless at the sudden occurrence, Aldebaran looked up at the Witch with his eyes widened. The Witch, upside down in his vision, tilted her head at his astonished gaze, and,

Witch: "Oya, did I get it wrong? You do not desire me as a woman. However, if you still request something such as a lap pillow from me, then I had imagined that it would either be consolation or gratitude that you desired, but… "

Aldebaran: "…Don't try to understand people's emotions through logic, you Witch."

Witch: "Regrettably, since I was born as a Witch, it does not seem like I will become anything other than a Witch. So, does your lack of denial mean that I successfully understood your emotions through logic?"

As the Witch questioned him with a slightly odious look on her face, Aldebaran's lips contorted as he fell silent.

It was aggravating that no matter what he said, even silence itself would serve as an answer, but at the very least, he did not wish to affirm it with his own words due to the feeling of defeat it would cause him.

Witch: "How obstinate you are."

Without getting exasperated, the Witch left a mutter that failed to comprehend his emotions, but her hand ceased not. It was unclear whether its motion was intended to be consolation or gratitude.

Only, what Aldebaran desired was neither of those things, and even if the Witch who was giving it to him did not know that, it was fine as long as the recipient, Aldebaran, knew.

Witch: “I don’t ever get fed up with things.”

Aldebaran: “—. Ah?”

Witch: “Your question from earlier. You asked me if I ever get fed up, correct?”

The Witch’s answer, lagging two steps behind, caused Aldebaran to blink his eyes.

Ultimately, it had just been pillow talk, not something he particularly wanted to discuss in depth. That which would have been fine to forget in the exchange up to this point, he pondered the significance of the Witch answering it here.

Aldebaran: “So then, I shouldn’t give up either?”

Witch: “Albeit, you are free to interpret it as you will. As a matter of fact, from my perception, you lifted your head just before I could lower my hand, the reality is that I did not place my hand upon you. Correct?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Witch: “Thus, there is no concern of me being troubled. Does that relieve you?”

The question voiced alongside a smile, Aldebaran found himself at a loss for words again.

He did not want to think that he was no match for her. So let it be left as him being no match for her yet. After all, one day, Aldebaran would need to battle against something far greater, and he would need to win.

Indeed, it happened when he became aware of the silent discomfort deep within his chest.

Witch: “—There.”

Suddenly, his head was lifted from where it lay, and underneath it slipped a soft sensation. The Witch had visibly kneeled down on the verdant plain, placing Aldebaran’s head upon her own lap.

The lap pillow that had been rejected a moment prior because it would lead to something bad. Why, had that suddenly—

Witch: “I was exaggerating. I am a nasty Witch, you know?”

As the Witch triumphed with a single eye closed, Aldebaran sighed and relaxed his shoulders. He would at least put his body weight into his head, and attempt to inflict the greatest extent of damage as he could to the Witch’s legs.

By the Witch who had killed him the most in this world, that amount of revenge ought to be forgiven.

To Be Continued

Comic Alive Collection 12

First Mission
(CA)
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Girl: “—Watch out!”

???: “—Hk”

Following that sharp, high cry, he scooped up her slender waist on impulse and slipped through the storm of bare blades.

In that split second, the keen edge of those sword strikes nearly grazed his nape and shoulder. The sensation made the down on his still-unseasoned body bristle, and as they tumbled across the floor of an empty room they had leapt into, he was made to feel that he had scraped by with his life.

Had his reaction been a heartbeat slower, one of his limbs—or perhaps his head—would have gone flying.

Assailant: “…Good judgment. It does not look like it was by chance, does it?”

While the two of them were in dread, the one who had unleashed those bare blades only grew more wary.

From the feel of it, he seemed certain his sword had not struck true. On top of that, he was clearly gauging their fighting strength as something that could not be taken lightly.

Girl: “We knew it, but he is a tough opponent.”

As though reading what was in his chest, the one who had rolled into the empty room with him—a girl marked by flame-like red hair and beautiful blue eyes—said so.

There was no tremor in her voice. Yet it was not as though she had leeway to spare; that much could be gleaned from the earnestness of her profile. He could not overlook that—why?

Because it was the duty of a knight to protect the common folk, to protect the weak who were trampled by the strong.

???: “You saved me just now. I am in your debt.”

Girl: “…What do you intend to do?”

???: “Naturally, I would have liked to face him head-on and aboveboard… or so I wish I could say.”

Lying prone on the floor, a bold answer to the girl’s quiet question would have lacked persuasiveness.

In truth, even if he wished to realize it, he was lacking in strength as he was now. No matter how lofty it was, without the ability to see it done, entrusting one’s wish to the starry sky was no different.

Therefore—

???: “Let us contrive and challenge him. Once more, I apologize for imposing inconvenience on you.”

Girl: “I do not mind that at all. It seems you and I are in the same boat. Ah, just one thing.”

???: “—? What is it?”

Loosening the arm that held her close, the two of them traded glances while lying on the grimy floor. The girl’s beautiful face was right beside him; it curved into a slightly mischievous smile,

Girl: “I think that way of speaking suits you far better.”

???: “—. That is, in truth, an honor.”

For an instant, he was taken off guard, but a reply from the heart, not mere courtesy, spilled out.

If this manner of speech was called fitting for him, then perhaps even this disgraceful state he had fallen into was not entirely without worth. Thinking so, he reached for the hilt of the sword at his own waist.

He shut his eyes, steadied his breathing, and in the scant time he had, looked back upon the road he had walked thus far, upon what he had built up—then, with his eyes opening, he rose.

???: "—Let us go, my buds."

Answering that call, he felt a pale six-hued radiance lend him strength, and, moving to shield the red-haired girl, he stepped forth to face his first battle to the death.

—It was the climax of an unforgettable fight from the days when Julius Juukulius, who would one day be called the Finest, was still unseasoned.

2

—The Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica is a nation of knights.

Though it was a somewhat exaggerated expression, Julius Juukulius understood that it was not far off the mark.

Of course, at the summit of the Kingdom of Lugunica stood the king, and there were the members of the royal family connected to him. As objects of reverence, there was also the existence of the Dragon, which had long forged bonds of friendship with the kingdom.

Then, setting aside such noble beings, why could one presume to call it a nation of knights?

Because unlike those noble existences who were special from birth, a knight was something that, though not special, one could arrive at by training oneself, honing one's skills, and holding fast to one's aspirations. —Because he believed that what people look to as something they wish to become is, in truth, what is truly admired.

Therefore—

???: “—Julius Juukulius, is it.”

Called by name by that heavy, severe voice, Julius consciously straightened his back.

His attire was the honored Royal Knights’ uniform of the Kingdom of Lugunica, predominantly white, and he wore a blue mantle. Even when he checked his whole figure in the full-length mirror every morning, he could not yet relinquish the self-assessment that the clothes were still wearing him.

Even so, he felt that the joy of being able to don this uniform would not fade, even if someday the figure reflected in the mirror were to become familiar to him.

That was the definite sentiment of Julius, who had become a member of the Royal Knights at the tender age of sixteen.

???: “You have only just joined, but I hear you are a promising prospect. They say you are quite driven.”

Directly before Julius, the large man, cramped in his chair, flipped through the papers spread across his work desk and fixed him with an intimidating gaze.

Though still in the midst of his growth, Julius stood around the average height for a man, yet this man’s body was more than a size larger, his whole frame clad in a burly armor of thick, sturdy muscle. Simply by being there, he radiated a fierce aura—small wonder, to be sure.

For the man before him was—

Julius: “I am obliged by your excessive appraisal. —Captain Marcos.”

Saying so, Julius bowed deeply to the giant before him—Marcos Gildark, who served as the head of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

As far as Julius was concerned, he had meant to infuse that bow with a faint tension and a certain respect. However, at the newcomer knight's words, Marcos himself carved a deep furrow between his brows.

Marcos: "…I see. Just as I was told—you carry it off well."

Julius: "Captain?"

Marcos: "Pay it no mind; it is my own thought. More importantly, being called "Captain" is… ah, no, this is no time to be saying that. Good grief, this too is something I shall struggle to grow accustomed to."

At Julius, who had arched a brow, Marcos rubbed the furrow in his brow with his fingers as if to ease it.

There was no room to infer anything about the first half, which he had muttered to himself and cut short, but the intent of the latter half's grumbling Julius could more or less grasp. —It was a gripe about being elevated to the rank of Captain.

Marcos, known for his high prowess and many achievements, had been appointed to the captaincy of the illustrious Royal Guard at roughly the same time Julius's admission into the knights had been approved—about one month ago.

So to speak, just as Julius was a rookie as a knight, Marcos was likewise a rookie in his position as Captain of the Guard.

For that reason, even the atmosphere of the captain's office in the knights' station had not yet been fully dyed in Marcos's colors or scent.

Julius: "Even so, if I may be permitted to say something presumptuous from my youthful station, I would submit that you already have ample gravitas befitting the head of the knights, Captain Marcos."

Marcos: "So in other words, you want to say I have an old face?"

Julius: "N-No, I would never intend such a thing…"

Marcos: "Let it pass—it is a jest. That said, it is not so easy to let the words of a superior pass so simply, is it."

Julius: "I am grateful for your understanding."

Marcos: "For my part—no, I too had a time when I was a newcomer, just like you and the other knights. There was a time when I quailed before a terrifyingly capable superior."

He shrugged shoulders as big as a child's head as he spoke, and Julius closed his mouth.

From the flow of the conversation, the last thing he had said likely had not been a joke, yet it still sounded like something that could only be taken as a joke.

Despite appearances, Julius prided himself on knowing more than most about the Royal Knights.

Naturally, he had known of Marcos even before the latter had taken on the captaincy; he had known of his exploits from around ten years prior, when he began to make his mark as a knight. Every rumor of his feats was as outlandish and vivid as if drawn from a picture tale of an age long past, and he was without doubt one of the knightly figures Julius yearned after.

That such a man had had a superior he feared was quite the astonishing tidbit indeed. Of course, it was likely a quip meant to ease Julius's tension—

Julius: "Forgive me, but would that superior be Sir Wilhelm van Astrea, the "Sword Demon"?"

Marcos: "—. I am surprised. How did you know?"

Julius: "It was not a certainty. Only, during the time you have served among the knights, if there were any spoken of on a par with you, Captain, the candidates naturally narrowed."

Before Marcos, who had slightly raised his brows, Julius replied thus, and inwardly nodded, thinking, As I thought.

—The "Sword Demon" Wilhelm van Astrea was a master swordsman whose name shone brilliantly in the history of the Kingdom of Lugunica, and he had served as Captain of the knights two captains before Marcos. Though he had long since left the order, he remained a great man whose feats would not weather from memory.

Wilhelm, too, was one of the knights who set Julius's heart ablaze.

Julius: "Presumptuous as it is, to be granted an opportunity to exchange words with you, Captain, and on top of that to be able to speak of Sir Wilhelm, one of the former captains—it is an honor."

Marcos: "For my part, I find it alarming that a newcomer who has only just entered knows the order far too well. The Juukulius family has long been a house of knights, but did you hear all this from your father, Lord Jonas?"

Julius: "No, in matters like these my younger brother is very well informed. He rejoiced at my entry into the order more than I myself did—it is a younger brother I can rely upon."

Marcos: "I see. In that case, I shall look forward to your younger brother's entry as well."

To Marcos's words, Julius responded with a faint smile that lowered the ends of his brows.

He felt apologetic for rousing expectations where none were ill meant, but as for Julius's younger brother—Joshua—whether he could enter the order was uncertain. His brother had been frail from birth, and though his condition was far more stable now than before, there were times he would still come down with a fever and have to lie abed.

Precisely because of that, Julius admonished himself that he must strive as a knight for his brother's portion as well.

If he were to obey that self-admonition—

Marcos: "We have strayed a little too far from the main topic."

No sooner had Julius thought so than Marcos's tone changed.

Once more, Julius recovered the initial tension with which he had been summoned and tightened his expression.

As stated above, Julius was still a fresh recruit who had joined the order only one month before.

The blue mantle that indicated his affiliation was of the Second Army; though he and Marcos belonged to the same knights, Marcos was the Captain of the Royal Guard—the most elite—and thus someone with whom Julius had little occasion to cross paths.

Julius had been summoned despite that. There had to be a reason.

And that—

Marcos: "According to the record, you are not the biological son of Lord Jonas Juukulius, but his adopted child… until you were taken in by your present house, you were raised as a commoner. Is that correct?"

Julius: "—. Yes. If you have seen the records, then there is no mistake."

Marcos: "Hm."

Julius: "However, though I am adopted, my father… Jonas Juukulius, gave me all the education I required. I can say with pride that I am a man of House Juukulius."

Marcos: "Wait—do not jump to conclusions. I have no wish to make a scapegoat of your birth and question whether you are fit for the order. I told you, did I not—you are a promising prospect."

Checked by Marcos's upraised palm, Julius, who realized his own impatience, felt ashamed of himself.

A surplus of words was a sign of a guilty conscience or of lack of self-confidence. He had to recognize that such a thing, not only for himself but toward the father and brother who had welcomed him and toward House Juukulius, was an act that brought them shame.

As Julius reflected thus, Marcos gave a small snort and said, Marcos: “A strong will not to lose is a fine thing. Only, if you have your own thoughts about your birth, I would have you make full use of them.”

Julius: “…My birth, you say? I apologize, but I do not follow.”

Marcos: “Indeed. Let us at last proceed with the matter. —Enter.”

After responding to Julius, who had furrowed his brows, Marcos struck the desk with some force. At that sound as a signal, the door at the room’s entrance behind Julius opened. Stepping slowly into the office was an elderly man clad in a knight’s uniform.

Welcoming the man, Marcos jerked his chin toward Julius before the desk and said,

Marcos: “Sir Bikram, my apologies for the wait. The man you requested—Julius Juukulius.”

Bikram: “Hm…”

Introduced by Marcos, the elderly knight ran a glare up and down Julius. For a time, the old knight scrutinized Julius closely, then said,

Bikram: “Captain, is he not a bit too refined? Will this young whelp do?”

Marcos: “To be frank, it is an unknown. But the one who best matches the conditions raised is this man. Julius, as for this gentleman…”

Julius: “You are Sir Bikram Edditz, are you not?”

Leaning forward, Julius asked so, and both Marcos and the old knight widened their eyes. Before the reaction of the two, Julius laid a hand to his chest and said,

Julius: “Speaking of Sir Bikram Edditz—head of House Edditz, which has produced knights for generations, and the “Silver Knight” who boasts the longest tenure currently in the Royal Knights. You commanded the subjugation of the Dawn Brigade, which had widely made the Castour Plains its base, and at the hunt hosted by His Highness the First Prince, Zabinel, on the Hyclara Plateau, I believe you hold the record for the largest quarry…"

Bikram: "Hey… hey, Marcos! This young whelp, what is he—what is he?!"

Marcos: "He is that sort, apparently. And for the record, do treat me as "Captain.""

At Julius, who had spoken with unintentional warmth, the old knight—Bikram Edditz—grimaced. In response, Marcos heaved an exaggerated sigh and looked at Julius.

Marcos: "It seems introductions are unnecessary, but as you surmised, this is Sir Bikram. This time, you will be placed under his command."

Julius: "Under Sir Bikram's command, is it? That is an honor."

Bikram: "What a disconcerting whelp…"

Turning to the mustached Bikram, whose white hair mixed into his lip whiskers, Julius straightened his posture.

To be able to face the same mission alongside a venerable senior who had served the kingdom as a Royal Knight for many years—there were few opportunities as blessed as this.

Whatever the mission might be—thinking so, Julius held his chest high with rising spirit.

Julius: "Then, what kind of mission shall it be?"

Bikram: "—A crackdown on Hexel."

Having let that enthusiasm into his voice, Julius drew in a breath at Bikram's reply.

In Bikram's bitter tone, there was a manifest loathing and hostility toward it. Little wonder. The “Hexel” he named was—

Bikram: “A banned drug that is circulating mainly through the lower strata of the Royal Capital. I want its distribution wiped out to the roots.”

If left unchecked, it would spread through the whole of the Kingdom of Lugunica, a drug harm that could ruin the nation.

Its prevention was the grave mission given to Julius Juukulius, who was no more than a new recruit.

3

—“Hexel” is a banned drug whose name has lately come to be heard in the Royal Capital.

It is made from a nut called the bokko fruit. Normally, when you bite into it, it has the effect of activating the Mana within the body, but when its components are extracted and concentrated, it becomes this drug.

Upon ingestion, the user’s Gate—the pathway through which Mana flows—becomes violently excited, and a quantity of Mana incomparable to normal circulates throughout the entire body. That state is said to bring the user a strong sense of release and omnipotence, and to produce an effect that wells up a life force that does not run dry for several days, even without food or drink.

It is, indeed, a set of effects that calls to mind the panaceas told of in picture tales, but—

Bikram: “Unfortunately, there’s no such convenient thing. That “vitality” is an advance borrowed against your will to live, and that so-called sense of release or omnipotence is just a plain misunderstanding.”

Without letting his resentful expression slip, Bikram spoke thus of “Hexel.”

In practice, it seems to be a banned drug whose sales channels have continued to expand with the impoverished as the main customer base.

Its spread threatens to send the Royal Capital, and by extension the entire kingdom, into dysfunction and even to disturb the nation’s peace.

Therefore—

Bikram: “No matter what it takes, we’re going to eradicate all the “Hexel” in circulation. That’s our mission.”

Julius: “Yes, I agree. The spread of a banned drug must be stopped without fail. However…”

Bikram: “What is it?”

Julius confided his honest feelings to Bikram, whose wrinkled face had taken on a severe look.

He had been ordered by Marcos to serve under Bikram’s command on the task of cracking down on “Hexel.” That was fine. However, taken along by Bikram, Julius had now left the knights’ station and was seated at a table in a common eatery in the Commoner District of the Royal Capital.

He had taken it for granted that they would meet up with other comrades here, but there was no sign of that.

Julius: “More than anything, it is perplexing that we were told to gather after removing our knights’ uniforms. By rights, this is a problem that ought to be pacified even if it means mobilizing the entire order. Wearing our knightly uniforms and, as a unit, conducting the inquiry should be the proper course. And yet—”

Bikram: “We aren’t doing that. So you think there’s something behind it? Well, broadly speaking, you’re right.”

Julius: “…Then, as I feared, are there no personnel besides you and me, Sir Bikram?”

Despite the fact that it was his own guess, Julius widened his eyes in disbelief when it was affirmed.

He had taken off the honored uniform and was in a plain, collared, light outfit devoid of ornament. Facing him across the table, Bikram, too, wore commoner's clothes of a sort that would blend into the streetscape.

Even from that fact, he had guessed there were circumstances preventing a knights-like inquiry—but merely the two of them—what's more, while Bikram was a veteran knight with a wealth of experience, his partner was Julius, genuinely an all-too-unseasoned knight; that was going too far, no matter what.

At Julius's astonishment, Bikram declared, "Don't get the wrong idea," and said,

Bikram: "I've brought out a greenhorn like you. I wouldn't say "we're rich in manpower" even if my mouth were pried open, but there's no way it's just the two of us, you and me."

Julius: "That was… my apologies. So there is other support."

Bikram: "Yeah, there is… one person."

As Bikram averted his gaze and tacked that on, Julius ended up blinking.

Even with reinforcements, they numbered three; it was hardly a reassuring headcount.

The harm caused by the spread of "Hexel" was not hard to imagine even for Julius, who had yet to hear the particulars. In spite of that, were the order and the kingdom's upper echelons taking the situation lightly?

Julius: "No, that can't be the case."

Denying the thought as it rose, Julius slowly shook his head.

Though Julius was merely a knight—and a brand-new one at that—beyond the reach of his eyes, those with standing, the personnel in key posts, were of course capable. Anything that would occur to Julius after only a brief time hearing about it would long since have been thoroughly considered.

In other words, there was a reason, after correctly treating the situation with due caution, for this number of personnel.

That was—

???: "—If you recklessly deploy personnel, you risk only widening the holes in the concerns. That seems to be what the upper echelons are thinking."

At that voice, cast on him unawares, Julius involuntarily held his breath.

It was a tucked-away table in a common eatery. Resting a hand on the back of the empty chair at Julius and Bikram's table, the speaker directed a gentle smile at the surprised pair.

She was a woman. Not particularly tall, with a slender, willowy frame clad in men's streetwear. Her dark-toned green hair—so deep in color it looked black depending on the light—was gathered at the back of her head, and with long bangs covering one eye, she had an air whose impression was in some way indistinct.

At the woman's sudden arrival, Julius was taken aback for a heartbeat, but quickly regained his composure.

Julius: "Might you be the third ally Sir Bikram told me about?"

???: "Yes, that is correct. You were less perturbed than I expected. That is, that is quite a welcome surprise for us as well."

Bikram: "…You're late, Gatness. Don't keep us waiting so long."

???: "My, my, we are right on time. One must use one's time precisely and carefully. That is the teaching of the one who is the head of us."

Meeting Bikram's sidelong glare with a placid smile, the woman—addressed as Gatness—asked, "May I sit?" The old knight touched his mustache and nodded. Obeying, she sat in the seat beside Bikram, then, turning anew to Julius, said,

Helaine: "Forgive me for the late introduction. We are called

Helaine Gatness. As you surmised, I am Sir Bikram's collaborator."

Julius: "Lady Helaine, is it. How courteous of you. I am…"

Helaine: "—Julius Juukulius. The eldest son of House Juukulius, only just assigned to the Second Army of the order a month ago. Said to excel in swordsmanship and to be outstanding in intellect as well, by all accounts."

Julius: "…Every bit of that is an overestimation. I am still immature, both as a knight and as a person."

Told that he was known even before he could give his name, Julius closed one eye.

He had no intention of sizing up the other party—Helaine—but it seemed the other party had already finished doing so for him. And on top of that, that he had not been rejected at the outset meant—

Julius: "May I take it, for the time being, that you will let me hear what you have to say?"

Helaine: "How modest. Not a bad impression, however. Sir Bikram?"

Bikram: "I told him it's about "Hexel," and that it's just us."

Helaine: "Then it seems the essential part has not been told."

Casting a glance at Bikram's sour face, Helaine gave a small sigh. Just then, the server brought drinks, and the milk Helaine had ordered was placed on the table. She put it to her lips, moistening lips and tongue, and said,

Helaine: "The reason this matter has summoned you, who are few in number and a newcomer, is very simple and clear. —It is a countermeasure born of concern over information leaking from the order."

Julius: "—Hk, what do you—"

At the unexpected preface, Julius's yellow eyes flew wide.

Helaine: “We had sensed the movements of “Hexel” from before. Naturally, we requested the order to respond, and had them act several times to crack down on the banned drug, but—”

Bikram: “…We whiffed every time. As if the raid had been known in advance.”

Julius: “Known in advance… Then, you suspect that information leaked from the order? If so, isn’t that a bit hasty?”

Helaine: “Hasty conclusions and snap judgments—such foolish mistakes happen often. Perhaps for that reason, we are taught not to cling to baseless inferences.”

When Julius interjected, thinking it concerned the honor of the order, Helaine narrowed her long, slitted eyes. Caught by that gaze, Julius clamped down on his careless tongue.

Helaine’s age was hard to pin down, but she had likely trod far more boards than Julius had.

Acknowledging that, Julius inclined his head, and Helaine went on, “Accordingly,”

Helaine: “We do have grounds. According to the information we have traced, those handling “Hexel” are an underground organization of washed-up thugs, but the one leading them is Reiner Wahrheit.”

Julius: “Reiner Wahrheit…”

Bikram: “Listen up, Juukulius. That Wahrheit guy is—”

Julius: “If my memory serves, some years ago that man was expelled from the order—dishonorably discharged, was he not?”

Bikram: “You even know about the ones who got expelled?! What in the blazes are you?!”

Apparently thinking Julius would not know, Bikram, who had been about to explain the man in question, turned on him a look as if he were seeing something unbelievable.

Bikram: “Don’t tell me you know not just me and Marcos, but every knight in the kingdom.”

Julius: “That would be overestimating me. I cannot know those I have no way of knowing. Still, “dishonorably discharged” does leave an impression.”

Bikram: “…Even so, it can’t be something that happens once in ten years. You’re abnormal, all right.”

With a shrug at Julius’s reply, Bikram touched his mustache with his fingers as if by habit. Beside him, Helaine laced her fingers together before her face and said,

Helaine: “If you know, then we can be quick. That former knight, Reiner Wahrheit, who was dishonorably discharged from the order, is the tricky one. By all accounts, he was known for bad conduct in the order to begin with, could not fit into any unit, and drifted from corps to corps, and so he is well connected.”

Bikram: “If you start naming the folks who’ve had dealings with Wahrheit, there’s no end to it. That’s why digging out who’s serving as his source of information takes time.”

Julius: “—. I understand. That is why I was called upon.”

From the flow of the conversation, Julius lifted his face, having grasped the role required of him.

Receiving the gazes of both Bikram and Helaine, Julius laid a hand to his chest.

Julius: “Reiner Wahrheit is involved in the distribution of “Hexel.” However, the man in question is a former knight and was also well acquainted with the faces in the order. Therefore, as someone only just entered into the order and whose face is unknown to the enemy, I was a suitable choice.”

Helaine: “To add to that, being capable was also a condition. Even if one’s face is unknown, it is not a role that can be entrusted to someone lacking both skill and wit.”

Bikram: “One more thing—you know at least a little of how commoners live. —From here on, you’ll need to make contact with Wahrheit’s organization and work your way into their inner circle.”

Helaine: “Naturally, the members of the organization are all washed-up thugs… To have someone who knows nothing of that world start acting from scratch would be quite a task. Which is why it must be you.”

Julius: “…”

With his eyes closed, Julius turned his thoughts to the weight of the charge laid upon him.

At the outset, when Marcos had summoned him and touched upon his origins, he had, in an unexpected fluster, offered needless excuses—but never did he imagine there would come an occasion for that to be of use.

Bikram: “Juukulius, can you do it?”

Julius: “—My apologies. I did not keep silent out of fear. It’s only that I never imagined there would be such a turn of the wheel—and I am grateful.”

Bikram: “Grateful for what, you oddball. …Fine. If you say you’ll do it, see it through. I might be a worn-out old man on the verge of retirement, but I can at least watch a rookie’s back.”

Julius: “Yes, sir!”

It was a single line from an all-too-reliable veteran. Buoyed by that cheer, Julius reflexively brought his hand before his chest and gave Sir Bikram his deepest salute.

Immediately after doing so, he remembered that this was a common eatery, and that they had gone to the trouble of taking off their uniforms in order to blend into this place.

Helaine: “A truly enviable rookie, Sir Bikram—most dependable, through and through.”

Bikram: “…Spare me the sarcasm.”

Caught in that blunder by Helaine and Bikram both, Julius reflected on himself at great length.

4

Julius: “May I ask what position you hold, Lady Helaine?”

Helaine: “At the very least, we are not of a birth fine enough to be addressed as “Lady Helaine” by you.”

Julius: “One’s birth does not determine the whole of one’s worth.”

Helaine: “From commoner to knight—coming from such a background yourself, your words carry persuasiveness.”

They left the common eatery and walked through the crowds of the Royal Capital as they spoke. Following behind Helaine, who led the way, Julius gave a wry smile at her answer and touched his bangs.

Whether it was simply her nature not to let others in, or something in Julius’s conduct had rubbed her the wrong way, he could not tell, but she did not seem to think highly of him. Unfortunately, the one man who might have mediated between them—Bikram—had split off to act elsewhere back at the eatery.

From this point onward, Bikram—whose face was highly likely to be known to the other side—could not be involved.

Julius: “Given there are no women among the knights, you likely do not belong to the order, yet you are far too seasoned to be called a townswoman in cooperation with us… Am I talking too much?”

Helaine: “If you have realized it yourself, that is fine. We shall not scold you. It is only natural for anyone to be nervous on a first assignment.”

Julius: “Your thoughtfulness is appreciated.”

Helaine: “—It is forbidden for us to voice our affiliation aloud. So we will only say that your thinking is not wide of the mark, Sir

Julius.”

She flicked her gaze his way as she added that, and Julius inclined his head.

She did not belong to the order, but neither was she unrelated to it. —Naturally, his understanding of the knights had become worlds apart from when he had admired them, now that he had actually joined. Before joining, there had been plausible-sounding rumors of knightly corps beyond the First through Fourth and the Royal Guard; but once he became a member of the order, he quickly realized there was no room for such rumors.

On the other hand, when he considered the room for a figure like Helaine to be involved, it was also true that the rumored existence of “shadow” knights stirred a half-doubting, half-believing feeling within him.

Helaine: “Do not harbor careless curiosity. We would like to remain on good terms with you, Sir Julius.”

Julius: “…If that is not a honeyed pleasantry but your true feeling, I am glad.”

Helaine: “Probing that is precisely what we would call careless curiosity. Take care. —Know that our eyes and hands are everywhere, and they reach anywhere.”

Feeling the weight of those words, Julius widened his eyes, then nodded and gave up on pressing further. That had been a warning to Julius, given out of Helaine’s own kind of sincerity.

Whatever Helaine’s affiliation was, it was certain she stood in a position of wearing herself down for the kingdom’s sake, and that she was in cooperation with Julius and Bikram, who were members of the order.

For now, knowing that much, there was nothing else he needed.

And then—

Helaine: “—Here.”

After they had walked along the streets of the Royal Capital for a time, Helaine stopped and said so.

They had left the Commoner District where the eatery was and reached the circular capital's outer rim—a quarter chiefly inhabited by low-income laborers and even those so poor that living day to day was in doubt—a place called the slums. It was a district with a reputation that even the knights' patrols deliberately turned a blind eye to. Led to a wooden building that looked like nothing so much as a hovel, Julius held his breath.

From here on was the heart of the role entrusted to him—

No sooner had he steeled himself than a man called out from the hovel.

Blau: "Yo, Helena."

The one who raised a hand and called to them was a gaunt man with a rough air. The man, who had a scar on his cheek, called Helaine—there with Julius—"Helena." To that hail, Helaine raised her own hand with an "Ah," and said,

Helaine: "Well now, they've got you stuck on the door today, Blau? Plenty of younger lads around, and they're still working you to the bone."

With her first words, her brash tone and voice rang out, and Helaine's aura changed in an instant. Between the setting and her clothing, she blended instantly into the neighborhood. Julius restrained the urge to clap at the transformation and kept his expression steady.

After all, Julius was already within the man's line of sight. The battle had already begun. He could not stand on the battlefield unguarded and unarmed.

Paying no heed to Julius's tension, the man called Blau laughed at Helaine's greeting with a "You said it," then slanted a glare Julius's way.

Blau: "So, that the guy? The one?"

Helaine: “Yeah. Came by way of my cousin’s introduction. Got himself wanted back home, so he fled to the Royal Capital—a marked man. Go on, tell him your name.”

‘Julius’ was slapped on the back by Helaine and shoved toward Blau.

Along the way here, Julius had already been given his role—the standing he was to play in infiltrating the other side’s organization. All that remained was to play it through.

He drew a breath—making sure it would not rouse Blau’s suspicion—and then—

Julius: “—Name’s Julius. I’ve heard about you lot from Helena. Not that I care for that story about me sneaking off with my tail between my legs—don’t go believing that.”

Blau: “Oh yeah? Then what are we supposed to believe?”

Julius: “The reason I had to leave my hometown… the fact I cut down about five of the lord’s high-and-mighty soldiers.”

Stepping forward slowly, Julius said this as he closed the distance with Blau. Stared down at point-blank range, Blau was struck dumb.

At first, he had been the one sizing Julius up; now his eyes were swallowed by Julius’s bearing.

By the hardened demeanor of the ill-mannered ruffian persona Julius had crafted—“Julius.”

Blau: “…From the looks of it, he’s got guts. And skill too. That thing at his waist ain’t cheap either, is it?”

Julius: “Yeah, that’s right. The guy I cut down can’t use it anymore.”

Helaine pressed a hand to Julius’s shoulder from behind; shaking it off, he answered.

The soiled streetwear and rough manner, paired with the knight’s sword at his waist that did not match them, marked ‘Julius’ as having taken his weapon off an enemy—truly the sign of a dangerous man.

Blau: “Y-Yeah, you’ve got guts, I’ll give you that. Fine, I’ll take you inside. If the Boss approves, you’re officially one of us.”

Julius: “The Boss, huh. He got a proper head on his shoulders? I don’t keep company with mere idiots.”

Blau: “Watch your mouth. Tuck that damn bravado away in front of the Boss. He doesn’t show mercy. And he’s sharp. He was a knight, after all.”

Julius: “—A knight.”

At how readily Blau had revealed that their head was a former knight, Julius narrowed his eyes. Blau seemed to take Julius’s silence for surprise at the title. Relaxing his slightly stiff cheeks and smirking, he jerked his chin at Helaine.

Blau: “Helena, the rest’s our business. If this pretty boy suits the Boss’s eye, we’ll pay you.”

Helaine: “Hah? I don’t get paid now? That’s not what I heard.”

Blau: “Shut it. Wanna haggle with the Boss yourself? Pin your hopes on the pretty boy.”

Helaine: “Tch… Julius! You botch this and I won’t forgive you! My livelihood’s riding on you too—pay me back proper!”

Her face twisted with all the baseness in the world, Helena spat her lines—her acting was on a par with a stage performer’s. Beneath the rough words, she slipped in encouragement: “Do not botch the mission for the kingdom.” Then she departed.

Watching her back as she went, Julius was left alone in the enemy camp. Even so, he felt no unease.

The persona ‘Julius’ was not the sort of man to lose his nerve here, and above all, he had Helaine’s reassuring words: “Our eyes and hands are always everywhere.”

Therefore—

Julius: “Well then, let’s get an audience with this Boss of yours. I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

Wearing the kind of belligerent grin befitting ‘Julius,’ Julius strode boldly into the enemy stronghold.

5

—As stated above, Reiner Wahrheit was a man dishonorably discharged from the order.

There were, broadly speaking, two kinds of people who became knights: those by birth and those by achievement. In the latter case, many, to pass through that narrow gate, strove to act knightly—indeed, to act more knightly than those who had become knights by virtue of their birth.

Conversely, among those who had inevitably obtained a knight’s station by birth, there were those who never established their own knightliness, receiving only the rank, and who, as a result, would often clash with knights who were not like that.

To gather together such people of differing backgrounds, there existed strict regulations; through daily duties and training as knights, and by following those regulations amid grueling work, the knights drew nearer in body and spirit to the image of the guardians the kingdom sought.

If only everyone could become knightly alike—but reality did not bend so neatly.

Some could not keep up with such regulations and hardships, broke ranks, stained their hands with crime, and by their own actions sullied the honor of knighthood.

Reiner Wahrheit was one of those who strayed from the knight’s path and was expelled—guilty of cutting down and killing a noble’s servant who had interjected into an escort plan.

Ordinarily, it should have been an inescapable capital crime that would see him chained in prison as a felon; yet by the intercession of the noble in question, he escaped severe punishment and was merely stripped of his knighthood.

After that, since he had joined an underground organization and involved himself in the trade of drugs, all one could say was that he had trampled the noble's clemency underfoot, but—

Reiner: "—You're the one who wants to join us, the new guy?"

Saying so, the man with an eyepatch over his left eye—Reiner Wahrheit—turned a blunt, one-eyed stare on Julius.

He had the fierce face of a man in his thirties and gave the impression of a bird of prey. His good posture and bearing called to mind how well he must have worn the uniform in his knightly days. Yet, in his current state, fallen among roughnecks, the coarse getup that heightened his air of menace also suited him well.

From that aura alone, it was more than plain: this was no ordinary man.

Julius: "…"

Within the range of that single eye, Julius quietly took stock of the room.

It was a wide chamber in the hovel; they had knocked down the partition walls to force out a big open space. Blau stood at his side, and Reiner stood before him. Besides the two, there were perhaps ten other members of the underground outfit who had come to get a look at the newcomer's face.

One by one, he stole glances at them, checking whether any of those faces matched any in his memory. He did not want to imagine there was anyone besides Reiner connected to the order.

—And then, just as he thought that.

Julius: "…"

Catching sight of the figure leaning against the wall at the edge of the men clustered to one side of the room, Julius drew a sharp breath.

It was not a known face. It was someone he had never seen. Nor did the other party have any special reaction to Julius. —Even so, the blazing red hair, the pair of blue eyes that had swallowed the azure of the sky, and a face so well-formed that those vivid features did not lose their luster—she was a girl who drew the eye in an uncanny way.

Those overly conspicuous outward features clawed at Julius's chest for a reason other than beauty.

While Julius's heart simmered thus, the girl herself stood quietly at the fringe among dangerous men, comporting herself as if trying to become a wallflower—a thing impossible even if she wished—and —

Reiner: "Going by what I hear, you caused quite a stir back where you're from. Where are you out of?"

Julius: "—. Down south, a backwoods mountain town called Guineb. It's a run-down place with nothing but exhausted mines. The lord of those parts is a greedy swine gone soft with fat. His men were trash, too."

Reiner: "So you cut down the lord's soldiers and got yourself wanted, huh. Can't say I don't get the sentiment."

Though his mind had been tugged toward the girl, Julius reacted without missing a beat when Reiner continued. Without showing the inner agitation on his face, he delivered the prepared backstory for 'Julius'—a feat he allowed himself to take pride in.

The backstory Bikram and Helaine had set up for 'Julius' overlapped in points with the reason for Reiner's expulsion. The idea had been that it would not leave a bad impression.

In practice, Reiner nodded, seemingly satisfied, with an "I see, I see," and said, Reiner: “In that case, there ought to be a wanted poster or two out there, right? Gineb and the surrounding region… Can’t imagine a more uncomfortable place to be.”

In an instant, he presented the best possible move to verify ‘Julius’s’ background.

The incident ‘Julius’ had “caused” was large. It was only natural for Reiner to think that way. Such a move had been within their prior expectations. But to have it brought to bear this quickly set Julius’s blood running cold.

It was a pity that such prudence and judgment had not been put to proper use as a knight.

Reiner: “What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?”

Julius: “No—if it bothers you, go ahead and look. I’m curious myself what kind of wanted poster they’ve put out on me. I’m sure they’ve drawn me an ugly bastard. —That aside,”

Reiner: “What?”

Julius: “From what I heard, “former knight” isn’t just for show. I was worried a gang’s head might be a simpleton, but it seems that was needless.”

With a shrug, Julius shaped a measuring smile and answered Reiner.

Setting aside how he used that intellect, praising its sharpness was his honest feeling.

He could tell the others in the room were nodding, as if of course, at ‘Julius’s’ remark. Only the red-haired girl who had caught his eye earlier remained unmoved, but—

Reiner: “—Who told you that?”

At the sudden chill in Reiner’s voice, gooseflesh raced over Julius’s skin.

He looked and found Reiner's single eye narrowed, a baleful anger seeping into his gaze as he glared at Julius. Bewildered as to the cause of that emotion, Julius jerked his chin and said,

Julius: "Him. At the door, he was laying it on thick about how you were some big-shot head…"

Reiner: "At the door! Hey now, Blau. You been out there blabbing my history loud enough for the street to hear? Or are you whispering it into the ear of every last person who sets foot in this building?"

Blau: "N-No, I didn't mean it like that, Boss, I—"

Reiner: "Quiet."

He cut off the trembling Blau with that word, then slowly shook his head and lifted a hand to point at Julius.

Reiner: "You came here to sell your skill, didn't you. An opportunity's come around for you to show what you can actually do."

Julius: "—You don't mean."

Reiner: "A brainless chatterbox only disrupts our circle."

Blau: "W-Wait, what?!"

At Reiner's merciless words, Julius narrowed his eyes, and Blau let out a voice like a scream.

Sensing his boss's intention, the surrounding men slowly formed a ring in the hall. They locked down the doorway tight, blocking the path to prevent any escape.

And in the center of that ring stood two men: Julius and Blau.

Blau: "Boss! Give me a break! It's only 'cause this guy shot his mouth off—!"

Reiner: "Tch. Don't make me deal with more trouble when we're short on hands, you idiot.”

Blau: “U, gh…!”

Blau’s desperate excuses no longer reached Reiner’s ears. Drained of voice, Blau turned to Julius with a pallid face glazed with cold sweat and a pained expression. A large knife was clenched in his hand; his intent could not have been clearer.

Julius: “Don’t. You won’t beat me.”

Blau: “Shut up! You heard him! It’s not a matter of “do it” or “don’t”! You—you’re a damned jinx! You piece of shit!”

Julius: “…”

At the bloodshot-eyed Blau’s curse, Julius was ashamed of his own shortsightedness.

In this situation, it was Blau, not Julius, who saw reality for what it was. No matter what ‘Julius’ might claim, he could not change Reiner’s mind. Then should he reveal himself here and now and subdue everyone in the room at once?—No. If he could do that, the order would never have bothered with such a roundabout undercover operation.

That was not the way. It would not get them to Hexel’s source, its distribution channel, or a full sweep.

Therefore—

Julius: “—No matter what, I have to hold my ground here.”

Drawing the sword that, by his setup, ‘Julius’ had taken from a man he had killed, Julius leveled his gaze squarely at Blau.

Blau: “U, a, aaaa—!!”

In the next instant, Blau, desperate, raised his knife and charged.

No doubt anger and panic had robbed him of his calm. Even discounting that, it was an awkward, unrefined attack far removed from sophistication. —To it, Julius calmly met the blade with his drawn point and—

Julius: “I will not ask forgiveness.”

With a single strike, he beat aside the knife, and with a second, a thrust, he pierced Blau through the chest.

It was a merciless blow, as if to run through the man’s heart at the center of his gaunt body. Struck by the blow, Blau’s eyes flew wide; he glanced down at his chest with an “ah,” and collapsed.

Julius pulled the blade free from the forward-falling body and quietly returned it to the scabbard.

Then he turned—

Julius: “As requested, I believe I’ve proven my skill. Any complaints?”

Reiner: “—Hmph.”

At the question, Reiner snorted. —Beside his face, a knife was buried in the wall.

It was the one Julius had knocked from Blau’s hand. Reiner seized it, yanked it free, and handed it to a subordinate standing nearby.

Reiner: “For the time being, I’ll concede that you can handle yourself. —Your first job. Dispose of the body.”

Julius: “Working me hard, aren’t you.”

Reiner: “Show me you’re useful. You’re someone who wants cover too, aren’t you, Julius.”

At Reiner’s testing tone, Julius exhaled and hefted Blau’s fallen body onto his shoulder. Perhaps thanks to Reiner’s last remark, no one around moved to help him.

Julius shot them an exaggerated look of disgust and headed for the hall’s entrance. He shouldered aside those blocking the door with a

“You’re in my way,” and, as instructed, went to dispose of Blau.

—All without letting the relief show on his face at the fact that no one had offered to help.

6

Julius: “Listen. Stay put and rest until you can move. If they find out you’re alive, both your life and mine will be in danger. You don’t want that, do you?”

Blau: “Th-That’s… but why—”

Julius: “I don’t bear you any grudge. I’m not some lunatic who wants to cut down anyone and everyone.”

Saying that, Julius turned his back on Blau—who ought to have been dead—and left the ruin.

In the slums, where development had been abandoned and the houseless had made their homes, there were many such derelict buildings that still kept the shape of a house. Those ruins often became the scene of wrongdoing, and when the knights raided them, they would be completed as true ruins that no one would go near.

For the Royal Capital’s administration, they were a source of headaches; but in situations like this, a ruin no one would come to was convenient—such as when you wanted to hide, from prying eyes, someone you were supposed to have killed.

Julius: “…”

He did not kill Blau—he treated his wounds and ordered him to rest.

When Reiner had ordered him to “take care of” the man, Julius’s heart had gone ice-cold, and he had braced himself for an early failure on his first assignment. But he had somehow gotten through with skill and ingenuity.

Julius: “Ia, Kua, my thanks.”

As Julius murmured that, two faint lights softly rose into being around him.

A pale red and a pale blue glow. Living lights with no corporeal form—they were the dependable spirits who had made a Contract with Julius and had remained by his side.

Borrowing the power of the two Quasi Spirits of fire and water, Julius had staged the conclusion of the scene and put on a performance of having killed Blau.

Fortunately, it seemed Reiner had not realized that Julius was a Spiritual Arts User, and the trick by which Blau had been kept alive had gone unnoticed.

Even so, the unbroken tension, mental and physical alike, left him suddenly exhausted.

Julius: “With this—”

???: “You managed to slip into the organization safely… right?”

Julius: “—Hk.”

Before he could finish giving voice to that relief, a voice whispered by his ear like an ambush. Julius sprang away, body tensed to the utmost. Before he even touched down, he had drawn his sword and set the two Quasi Spirits he had already manifested—Ia and Kua—on alert as well.

What in the world—who—and with what intent—

???: “That’s far enough!”

Julius: “—…”

???: “Sorry to startle you. But please wait. I have no hostile intent toward you.”

Skidding his heel against the ground and readying himself, Julius widened his eyes at the other, who held both hands up.

Standing there was the red-haired girl he had seen in the underground outfit's hovel. Which meant Julius's deed had been exposed to one of Reiner's people.

Naturally, that meant that whatever it took, Julius now had to silence the girl.

However—

Julius: "…"

???: "Will you hear me out?"

The girl asked that, hesitantly, to Julius, who could not quite bring himself to subdue her on the spot. Julius did not relax his guard, but he did nod.

Julius: "First, let me ask. Were you told by the Boss… by Reiner to tail me?"

???: "No, that's not it. Unfortunately, the Boss doesn't trust me that much either. I'm as new as you are, really."

Julius: "A newcomer…"

She shook her head to his question. From her slender build and a face that still held traces of youth, Julius guessed she was two or three years younger than him—about the same age as his brother Joshua. That someone of that age would decide to enter Reiner's outfit made him feel anew his own powerlessness.

But when he had thought that far, Julius reconsidered with a quiet "No."

Julius: "You're new, and you weren't ordered by the Boss. In that position, you went out of your way to call out to me—what for? If you didn't say a word and just reported what you saw to the Boss as-is, that would be more than enough to earn you credit."

???: "That's true. If I felt loyalty to the Boss or the organization, your argument would be spot-on."

Julius: “You’re being roundabout. Then where does your loyalty lie?”

???: “Where it ought to. —With the kingdom, and with my family.”

Lowering her tone a little, the girl put a hand to her chest. Hearing that answer, Julius became certain that the premonition that had flashed through his mind—the thing that had made him think again—had been right.

This girl was a member of Reiner’s organization, but she was not one of his comrades.

If anything—

Julius: “You must have heard, but I’m Julius. And you are?”

???: “—Adelheid.”

Asked her name, the girl—Adelheid—answered readily.

Being able to hear it, Julius now knew when to put his drawn sword away. He also called out to Ia and Kua, his precious Quasi Spirits, “It’s all right,” and released their manifestation.

That should make it plain he had disarmed himself both as a swordsman and as a Spiritual Arts User.

Adelheid: “About that fight earlier—it was truly splendid. Even though you stabbed the center of Blau’s chest, you neatly avoided the heart… was it your spirits who closed the wound?”

She glanced toward the ruin where Blau was and asked that. Julius nodded. “That’s right.”

Julius: “I had the fire spirit freeze the wound to stop the bleeding. After that, the water spirit performed healing arts and kept him alive.”

Adelheid: “Impressive. At first, I didn’t understand what had happened.”

Julius: ""At first," is it—sounds like a quip or a dig. —Do you think the Boss noticed?"

Adelheid: "I don't think he could have. That's how in sync you and your spirits were. Hiding the knightly style of your swordplay and making it look self-taught was perfect, too."

Julius: "You saw through that much…"

Adelheid said it as if impressed, but for Julius, having every bit of the ingenuity he had contrived on the spot seen through left him with nowhere to put himself.

That said, given Adelheid's true identity—her affiliation—it was only natural.

Julius: ""Our eyes and hands are everywhere, and they reach anywhere," was it."

It was just as Helaine had warned Julius.

—Adelheid was someone who shared an affiliation with Helaine, what you might call a member of a shadow order of knights. Or perhaps, given Helaine and then Adelheid, it was an order of knights composed only of women.

Julius: "Now that we're here, there's no room for debate… Adelheid, your objective is—"

Adelheid: "Probably the same as yours. —"Hexel.""

Julius: "The banned drug, and the dismantling of the organization distributing it. For that, we secure Reiner Wahrheit, who leads them, without fail, and uncover those behind him."

When Julius continued thus, Adelheid's blue eyes opened slightly wide. At that reaction, Julius reflected that it certainly hadn't been the sort of summation "Julius" would make.

Even so, for that to be reason enough to switch back his manner of speaking was not wise at this stage.

Julius: “Sorry. I don’t know whose eyes might be on us, so I can’t break this tone.”

Adelheid: “I’m sorry. That’s for the best. I’ll have to be careful not to slip, too.”

Julius: “Do you have any experience with this kind of undercover work?”

Adelheid: “…To tell the truth, this is my first time.”

Julius: “—I see.”

Adelheid’s timid, honest reply drew a nod from Julius. He could have lied about his own experience to reassure her here, but if she was connected to Helaine, it would be a lie that would be exposed at once—and more than that, Julius was already deceiving Reiner and the others about his standing.

He did not want to heap further falsehoods onto an ally.

Julius: “I can’t tell you to rest easy… but this kind of assignment is my first time too.”

Adelheid: “Is that so. In that case…”

Julius: “Yeah. We’ll need to cooperate closely and thoroughly. I’m counting on you.”

When Julius said that and held out his hand, Adelheid fell silent.

For an instant, Julius wondered at her reaction. It seemed the first hesitation and confusion she had shown—an age-appropriate reaction for a girl like Adelheid.

Julius: “Was it rude of me to ask for a handshake, perhaps?”

Adelheid: “—No. That’s not it. It’s not that—it’s my problem. Thank you.”

Shaking her head slowly, Adelheid finally took Julius’s hand. They exchanged a firm handshake. Julius considered what had made her hesitate, but, taking to heart her willingness to accept what he had asked, refrained from pressing further.

Whatever the case, having a comrade who shared his objective was heartening.

Julius: “By the way, how did you get into the organization?”

Adelheid: “I showed off my stealing. In short order, I “borrowed” wallets and bags from about a hundred people on the streets.”

Julius: “That’s…”

Adelheid: “Ah… for the record, I return them properly afterward, all right? I keep track of every single person.”

It was quite a large-scale story, and the matter of making amends was on an even larger scale. In any case, if Adelheid had not taken the same test as “Julius,” then it had been for the best for her.

In any case—

Julius: “It doesn’t look like an easy assignment for either of us… Once again, I’m counting on you, Adelheid.”

Adelheid: “Likewise. I’m glad you’re here, Julius.”

To Julius’s unfeigned words, Adelheid answered with a smile.

Being addressed as “Julius” by that smile, he suddenly wondered if her “Adelheid,” like Helaine’s “Helena,” was also part of a false name.

And with that thought, Julius made up his mind. —In that case, when this assignment ended and the two of them returned safely, he would make it his goal to learn her true name.

7

—The bust of the organization that had been spreading the banned drug “Hexel” throughout the Royal Capital, quietly expanding its threat to the kingdom.

For Julius, who had only just entered the Royal Guard, this first major assignment's greatest obstacle was the existence of the man leading the organization in question—Reiner Wahrheit, a former knight.

Julius: "Originally, the man was not from a knightly family. He was a fellow who made his living as a mercenary on the strength of his sword. His attitude aside, his skill was real, and because of that he was favored by a certain noble… Count Easley Oruon. It seems the Count bestowed a knight's rank upon him and even recommended him to the Royal Guard."

From the circumstances of Reiner's birth, that treatment had been extraordinary, and surely it had also been an event that had changed the course of his life. In fact, Julius had heard that Reiner subsequently entered the Royal Guard, and even among knights his solid swordsmanship had been highly valued.

However—

Julius: "Reiner could not adapt to the Royal Guard's ways. For misconduct he drifted from the First Company to the Fourth, and in the end, during an escort mission—what was more, a mission to escort his benefactor Count Oruon—he got into a quarrel with one of the Count's servants and cut the man down."

Naturally, that deed became a grave problem, and Reiner was expelled from the Royal Guard. Yet by the intercession of none other than the Count himself, he alone was spared being seized as a criminal.

Julius: "No doubt the Count hoped that would make him mend his ways… but judging from what he is doing now, it seems that feeling was trampled underfoot."

How Reiner had come to occupy his present station after leaving the Royal Guard was unknown, but only a few years had passed since his expulsion. It was difficult to imagine that he had a period in which he felt grateful for Count Oruon's kindness and worked to put his life back in order.

Thinking of the Count, who had lost a servant and still continued to believe in Reiner's reform, Julius's chest tightened.

And as Julius was thus seized by that sense of futility—

Julius: "—? What is it, Adelheid, making such a puzzled face?"

Suddenly, he found himself concerned with the condition of the one to whom he had been speaking about Reiner—the girl Adelheid, who had infiltrated the organization with the same objective as Julius.

Leaning her back against a dirty wall in the alley, Adelheid had been silent until now. To Julius's question, she shook her head with a "No," then said,

Adelheid: "Sorry. I was just surprised by how much you know. About the Boss… Reiner Wahrheit—you know him well, huh."

Julius: "It is an infiltration mission. At least this much, it stands to reason I would be informed."

Truth be told, in Julius's case he had known information about Reiner even before being told, but it would be too much to say that everyone ought to have prior knowledge of an expelled knight.

Even so, he believed that, prior to an infiltration mission, a minimum of information ought to be provided; however, the unsettled look on Adelheid's face denied that preconception.

Julius: "…What policy do the people on your side have? I can understand wanting to avoid telling more than necessary in case the infiltration is exposed, but however one looks at it, this is necessary information."

Adelheid: "—. Unfortunately, I can't speak in depth about my circumstances. But the fault is entirely mine. I'm truly grateful that you covered for my lack of prior knowledge."

From Adelheid's contention, Julius sensed less gratitude at having gained information about Reiner, and more fear of having the existence behind herself spoken ill of.

Most likely, Helaine—who had probably stood in the same position as Adelheid—had also conspicuously avoided any mention of her affiliation or superiors. —Such absoluteness was something to be respected if they were to cooperate.

Julius: “Understood. I will not pry into your circumstances. Is that acceptable?”

Adelheid: “Yeah, that helps. …I really am sorry.”

Julius perceived in Adelheid’s rebuttal not contrition but a wish to keep her backer from being slandered, and he did not doubt that.

Julius: “I do not doubt you there. More importantly, what we ought to discuss is “Hexel.” You infiltrated earlier than I did. Is there anything you can tell me?”

Adelheid: “Earlier or not, it’s only been about a week. Right now I’m in the position of a drug peddler, given a small amount and made to stand on the street. They’re cautious about how they conduct their business.”

Julius: “Which means you are in possession of the real thing?”

To Julius, who leaned forward at the unexpected result, Adelheid answered “Of course,” and from her bosom she pinched between her fingertips a paper wrapping—a packet of drugs to show him.

Even the tiniest amount of it could alter a human being’s very state of being, the dreadful banned drug, “Hexel”.

Adelheid: “The organization’s division of roles is thorough. Those who have a way with the sword handle guarding the workplaces, the bases, and the transports. Those with a way with words sell product to customers on the streets or in shops. You’re the former, I’m the latter.”

Julius: “A peddler, then. That is, I suppose, a case of the right person in the right place.”

Frankly, with Adelheid’s looks, she would have no trouble finding customers as a “Hexel” peddler. Whether in a shop or out on the street, she would be able to quickly pick out a suitable mark.

Julius: “That said, even to allay suspicion, you cannot actually go through with selling it. And Reiner is surely not kind to subordinates who produce no results. How are you handling it?”

Adelheid: “Naturally, I make it look like I’ve sold it, and I cover the price myself. I’m neutralizing the actual “Hexel” so it doesn’t end up in anyone’s hands, then disposing of it. Does that put you at ease?”

Julius: “It does. If you can truly neutralize it, that is the best.”

Relieved by Adelheid’s answer, he nonetheless tilted his head at the method of disposal.

If they burned it, even the smoke would be dangerous, and if they buried it, there would be a fear of contaminating the soil. If Adelheid’s or Helaine’s affiliation had found a means of “neutralization,” that would be optimal.

Be that as it may—

Adelheid: “It’s truly a drop in the bucket, but at least this way we’re reducing, even a little, the banned drug that’s circulating among the townsfolk. Only, we can’t pretend the budget for that is infinite. Honestly, it isn’t a method that can last.”

Julius: “Indeed. There is no doubt it is a “better than nothing” measure. In any case, I do not think I will be able to remain “Julius” for long. I would like to settle this in as short a time as possible.”

Adelheid: “I agree with that, but why?”

Julius: “Reiner Wahrheit is dangerous. As you saw, when he tried to have me dispose of the subordinate who leaked his own information to me, he has no hesitation about eliminating nuisances. Next time, it will not go so well.”

That Blau had come away with his life in that place had been the coincidental result of many kinds of fortune piling up.

The trial of the green recruit “Julius,” and a measure of his readiness to include even the disposal of a corpse—Had Reiner purged Blau with his own hand, then even had Julius borrowed the power of the Quasi Spirits, he would not have been able to save him. Julius was not so optimistic as to think that kind of luck would come twice or thrice.

Julius: “I intend to conduct myself so as to arouse as little suspicion as possible, but if an order comes down for an assassination or for an internal purge, I cannot accept it.”

And even if such orders were kept at a distance, he suspected they could not be fully avoided.

Perhaps, for the sake of the mission, he ought to adopt a merciless frame of mind—

Adelheid: “—I agree with you. Even if casualties arise as an unavoidable necessity, up to the very limit a knight should resist that.”

At Adelheid’s show of agreement, Julius drew in a faint breath and nodded.

He ought to be grateful that he had obtained a good partner. This was an infiltration mission he had gone into with his heart prepared to be worn down; the existence of someone with whom he could share that burden saved him, he thought.

Julius: “For the moment, we have our policy. I will see if I can appeal to my superiors to push for a short, decisive campaign. As for you…”

Adelheid: “I’ll keep digging. I’m probably the one who can get close to the drug itself more deftly.”

Julius: “Understood. Only—this is something I need to be careful about as well—but take all possible care that your identity is not exposed. You have heard, I think: they have evaded the Royal Guard’s raids multiple times. I hate to think it, but we must move on the premise there is a mole on the inside.”

Thus did Julius warn Adelheid, his feelings anything but simple.

That a former knight like Reiner was involved was burden enough to his heart; on top of that, there was the fear that a current member of the Royal Guard might be leaking information. Frankly, he did not even wish to consider that possibility.

Adelheid: “A mole… Has the Royal Guard narrowed down who is suspicious?”

Julius: “Whatever the Royal Guard has done, I intend to look upon everyone impartially. If I cannot believe in someone unconditionally simply because they have the title of knight, then the titles of the Captain of the Royal Guard or “the Silver Knight” are no guarantees, either.”

Before he knew it, his bitter true feelings had slipped into his voice, and Julius sternly reflected on his lack of self-control. However, Adelheid did not react to Julius’s immaturity.

Instead, what her lips spun was—

Adelheid: “To look impartially. —Even Heinkel Astrea?”

Julius: “—. What?”

Suddenly presented with an unexpected name, Julius could not help but widen his eyes.

Facing him, Adelheid looked at him quietly, her strikingly well-ordered features filled with a powerful seriousness.

—The name she had given, Heinkel Astrea, belonged to a man of a house known to every citizen of the kingdom, a knight who stood in a special position even within the Royal Guard. Leaving aside the weight of that house name, he was also a person well known for reasons that were not very good.

Why Adelheid would concern herself with such a person—

Julius: “—I see.”

Suddenly arriving at an understanding—too late though it was—Julius found that Adelheid’s demeanor made sense.

Her hair, red as flame, and her blue twin eyes that seemed to have trapped the azure of the sky—the features that impressed Adelheid’s beauty upon the mind were the same that marked those of the Astrea Family.

As far as Julius knew, the Astrea main family’s direct line consisted only of Heinkel and his eldest son, so it might be that Adelheid was connected by the branch line.

If so, he could also guess what it was she feared when she had spoken Heinkel’s name.

Julius: “I have no direct acquaintance with him, and this is only to the extent of rumor… but to be frank, I do not hold him in good regard. Nor, regrettably, do I think he fulfills the role befitting his station.”

Adelheid: “…That…”

Julius: “However, I do not wish to take a jaundiced view based on that preconception. Nor should I. —That is what I think.”

At Julius’s continuation, Adelheid’s eyes opened wide.

She had been told something she had not expected; she tasted the same kind of surprise Julius himself had felt earlier. While toying with his forelock, Julius allowed himself a tiny bit of reprisal,

Julius: “My purpose is to bring the facts to light. Even if those facts are inconvenient for you, I will not look the other way. Conversely, even if they are in your favor, I will not twist them. That is how I see it.”

Adelheid: “—. Got it, Julius.”

Nodding, Adelheid touched a hand to her own chest and faintly smiled. Then, in a small voice, she said “Thank you,” but Julius only shrugged.

Adelheid: “Thank you.”

He had not said anything he did not mean for the sake of comforting Adelheid.

Only, seeing in her a slight relief, as if she had been able to share a burden she had been carrying with someone else, he felt no small sense of accomplishment—an undeniable fact.

8

Bikram: “—I see. Sounds like it was quite a whirlwind of a first day.”

So murmured Bikram, tracing the wrinkles of his cheek with a fingertip as he listened to the report from the newly rejoined Julius.

The place was a corner of the commoners’ quarter, not the same shop used to rendezvous with Helaine but a different tavern called “The Silver Shield,” run by a retired former knight. It was famous as a Royal Guard hangout, and the fact they’d been shown to the private room at the back put Julius firmly on his mettle.

Without interrupting Julius’s report, the old knight listened through to the end; then, with a thoughtful gaze at Julius, he said,

Bikram: “Rough start for a green recruit fresh in the door, but how’s your condition? If you feel like throwing in the towel, say so early. Even arranging a stand-in takes paperwork…”

Julius: “There will be no problem with me. Thank you for your concern. It is true there were a few nerve-wracking developments… More importantly, may I ask for a healer to be dispatched from the infirmary?”

Bikram: “What, did you get yourself hurt?”

Julius: “No, not me—Mr. Blau, the man I reported on. I have some proficiency with healing magic, but I believe it best he be seen by a professional.”

Bikram: "…Sorry, but this affair is being handled with the bare minimum of personnel. Unless that Blau fellow's life is on the line, that request is denied."

His overreaching plea refused, Julius backed down with a simple, "Understood."

There was no urgency to Blau's condition while he hid in the vacant house. If he remained at rest, his wounds would soon mend. There was no reason to rush treatment at the expense of the mission.

While Julius was accepting that, Bikram said "Even so," and his tone sharpened. Turning that sharpness into a look, the old knight glared at the other person in the room—the one called Helaine.

Snorting softly at the woman who had likewise not cut into Julius's report, Bikram said,

Bikram: "What's the meaning of sneaking in not just our own youngster, but one of your people ahead of us? On top of that, not even bothering to report it—your story doesn't add up."

Helaine: "Does it not? To begin with, it was we who advanced the internal probe ahead of everyone in this affair. The Medical Corps made light of Hexel's danger and only belatedly started moving… We have no intention of picking a turf war, but aren't you overreaching yourselves a bit?"

Bikram: "Tch, sounds real high-minded. Hey, Juukulius, you tell her too."

At the click of his tongue, Bikram tossed the ball to Julius—but Julius was slow to react, prompting an incredulous, "Juukulius?" from Bikram.

Julius: "My apologies. You just called me one of your own, Sir Bikram, and I was struck by the realization I'm working as a subordinate of the "Silver Knight." It made my chest burn."

Bikram: "Gatness…"

Helaine: "Don't look at me. As you say, he's your rookie."

Answering Bikram’s pained grimace thus, Helaine rolled her shoulders with a weary little shrug.

Helaine: “I apologize for failing to give prior notice. However, our presence is only an insurance policy—the linchpin is Sir Julius’s work. Pray do not forget that. In fact, we are the ones left perplexed. Who could have imagined she would go and contact Sir Julius on her own initiative?”

Without a shade of sarcasm or subtext, Helaine answered as if genuinely at a loss.

What Julius had reported covered everything that had happened after parting from Helaine in front of the enemy’s base—namely, the contact with Adelheid and the establishment of a cooperative relationship. Ideally, he would have had her sit in on this meeting as well so they could work out the internal moves in detail, but—

Julius: “I’m a new face in the organization, and she has a striking appearance. Slipping out together carries a high risk of arousing suspicion. From the incident with Mr. Blau, Reiner Wahrheit clearly doesn’t balk at internal purges. He rules the organization by strength and fear.”

Bikram: “Agreed. Avoiding careless contact is the wise course. Sounds like that young lady is more cooperative than her colleagues. So? Gatness—where’s your so-called cooperative result?”

Helaine: “Unfortunately, it’s been give-and-take. The person we were using to probe the inner workings was killed by Lord Julius.”

Trading barbs with Bikram as they went, Helaine placed a folded paper packet—Hexel’s wrapping—on the table.

Helaine: “I made the rounds of the streets and shops rumored to see trade, and the spread is indeed severe. It was not difficult to obtain.”

Bikram: “…They work fast. No—the truth is, we were slow to get moving.”

Helaine: “We are probing the source on our side, but Reiner Wahrheit seems quite the tough customer. That said, even if the slums are his home ground, I doubt he can openly refine Hexel here in the Royal Capital. Perfectly deceiving our eyes would not be realistic.”

Bikram: “In that case, we should assume Wahrheit isn’t the mastermind but someone’s stooge.”

Running a finger down his cheek, Bikram’s musing voice took on a note of disgust.

What Bikram and Helaine were now hypothesizing was that Hexel was being manufactured outside the Royal Capital and brought into it. In that case, for a stripped knight like Reiner to prepare the equipment needed to produce Hexel, and the land to do it in secret, would be difficult.

Which is to say, the likelihood was high that someone behind him was doing all that in Reiner’s stead.

Julius: “In other words, that makes our work all the more important.”

Bikram: “…Does your sense of duty know nothing of being cowed?”

Julius: “Had I been alone, perhaps I would have lost my nerve. But now I believe a venerable predecessor will watch my back.”

Bikram: “Tch, impudent whelp.”

Bikram clicked his tongue yet again, but contrary to his words, the old knight’s face no longer wore a scowl carved in vexation.

Tapping the Hexel packet on the tabletop with a fingertip, Bikram said,

Bikram: “Pinning down the drug’s source and the like—that’s Gatness’s bailiwick. If they’re producing results, then we’ll do our work in our own domain.”

Helaine: “I’m honored that you understand our scope of duty, but what do you intend to do?”

Bikram: “Nothing complicated. Juukulius—you wanted a short, decisive battle, didn’t you? I agree. We’ll stamp out both the contraband and the traitor in the Guard as fast as humanly possible.”

At Bikram’s distorted cheek and belligerent grin, Julius involuntarily caught his breath.

They called him the “Silver Knight,” a man honed to the oldest age among active members of the Royal Guard; his executive ability was the real thing, proven by exploits Julius himself knew had served the kingdom.

To think he would get to be present for it in person, as a subordinate.

Julius: “What should I do? Give any order, and I will fulfill it, even at the cost of this body.”

Bikram: “The heat you’ve got in you is more frightening than it is reassuring… Fine. This time, I’ll ride that enthusiasm. —Gatness, their line of business can’t be only contraband. You’ve got information on the gambling dens they run, don’t you?”

Helaine: “I do, but what are you… Ah. So that’s your aim.”

At the question, Helaine wore a look of realization, and Bikram gave a magnanimous nod in response. Then, with a hand placed on the table, Bikram explained the operation—and—

Julius: “—Sir Bikram, before we break up, there is something I would ask.”

Once the debrief wrapped and Helaine departed early for her work, Julius addressed Bikram, who remained in the private room.

Bikram: “What is it? Was there something in the plan you didn’t understand?”

Saying so, he tilted the wooden cup filled with milk and drew his brows together.

It was not that he was a teetotaler. Bikram was a veteran of many campaigns. He simply did not drink during a mission for fear it might interfere with duty. It was a habit long kept.

Taking note of that, Julius shook his head.

Julius: “No questions about the plan. I am somewhat tense about whether I can deliver results worthy of everyone’s work, but…”

Bikram: “Don’t make it too heavy a burden. I’ll pick people who know how to hold back. So? If it isn’t nerves, what is it?”

Julius: “Thank you. —It’s about the mole in the Royal Guard.”

At the unsettling topic, Bikram’s expression did not change, but the air in the private room dried by a hair.

Naturally, for two men belonging to the same Royal Guard, the existence of a mole was more intimate and intolerable even than Hexel for Julius and Bikram.

Julius: “Do you have a suspect in mind, Sir Bikram?”

Bikram: “…At the very least, it isn’t me, it isn’t you, and it isn’t Marcos.”

Julius: “I’m honored. But that’s deflection. To me—”

Bikram: “—You can’t understand it, can you?”

Julius: “…No.”

Anticipated and cut off, Julius dropped his shoulders and hung his head.

As Bikram said, Julius could not understand the feelings of one who chose to betray knighthood. To aspire to be a knight, to have one’s qualifications recognized, to belong to the proud Royal Guard—and yet.

Bikram: "I won't defend a mole, but you've got too rosy a view of knights. Loyal, noble, proud—an ideal knight… but no one can keep that up twenty-four seven. The crooked sorts slip in during the gaps when a man isn't that way."

Julius: "You cannot be a knight every hour of the day… And yet, you are filling your cup with milk right now. That proves you are always trying to be a knight."

Bikram: "I just like milk."

Julius: "No. I am aware the "Silver Knight" is a heavy drinker as well!"

Bikram: "You're downright scary!"

As Julius leaned forward with his hands on the table, Bikram returned the favor with an affronted evaluation.

At any rate, Bikram raked his own short hair roughly.

Bikram: "…As I said beforehand, Wahrheit drifted among different companies and has a wide circle of acquaintances. If we can't narrow the mole down from his connections, then to some extent we have no choice but to rely on the person's character and reputation. In that sense, there are a few I've got my eye on."

Julius: "—Heinkel Astrea is among them?"

Bikram: "You toss out the Guard's taboo like it's nothing…"

Startled, Bikram balked at answering Julius's question.

From that reaction, Julius understood even without it being said. —Sure enough, Heinkel Astrea was counted among those the Royal Guard feared might be the mole.

No wonder Adelheid was tackling the mission for more than a mere sense of duty.

Bikram: "Don't overthink the business of the mole… I say that, but it's something that ties directly to your safety while you're undercover. It won’t be easy to put it out of your mind.”

Julius: “No—I don’t think my identity will be exposed by any mole. On that point, I place my trust in you and in Commander Marcos. —I will simply steel myself again.”

He would not say there was no doubt. Nor would he say the doubt was gone.

However, Julius would place the trust that should be placed, and do only what must be done.

Julius: “Then, Sir Bikram, I will return to being Julius.”

Bikram: “…Yeah, do that. It goes without saying, but—”

Julius: “I’ll go out the back, circle wide around the streets, and return. I know the drill.”

And as he walked, he switched himself over from “Julius” to “Julius.” Getting caught going in and out of “The Silver Shield” would be fatal—and avoiding that was part of the point.

With that exchange his last, Julius left the private room and went back to the slums—no, to the mission.

Once the receding back was hidden by the door and vanished from sight, Bikram, left alone in the private room, tilted his cup of milk and wetted his tongue.

And—

Bikram: “It’s true Heinkel is a colossal fool, but he isn’t that much of a fool. …You know it as well as I do, Marcos.”

So muttered Bikram in a voice so hoarse it seemed ready to fade away.

—The elevation of “Julius’s” importance within the organization.

At present, with a short, decisive end to the mission in mind, that was the policy that had become urgent.

Though “Julius,” who had undergone what could be called an initial baptism by way of a trial of skill, had earned a measure of respect from those present at the scene, he would need to accrue far greater trust to be entrusted with more important work.

And the plan Sir Bikram had prepared at the debrief was precisely for that purpose.

???: “Even so, that guy was insanely dangerous, Knight-Captain.”

???: “Yeah—one swing of his arm and Rob and Haunt went flying like it was nothing… Those two, big as barrels, you know? They were like scraps of paper—bam.”

With exaggerated gestures, the roughly dressed men spoke fast, still excited. There was anger and vexation in their tone, but there was just as much awe.

And that despite the content being that they’d been beaten down. Why was that?

Because—

???: “It was honestly a real close call. —If Julius hadn’t been there.”

Saying so, the man whose voice had risen clapped a shoulder—that of Julius, who was part of the circle. Feeling the sudden concentration of gazes, Julius gave a shrug with an insolent look.

Julius: “Cut it out. In the end I couldn’t cut the bastard down. That means I lost.”

???: “Don’t be stupid! If you weren’t there, everyone in that gambling den would’ve been nabbed. If anything, with this many getting away, it’s the Royal Guard that ought to be losing face.”

???: “Nah, the other side’s captain still had plenty left in the tank.

Say what you will, the den itself got shut down. They were a cut above… We oughtta own the loss fair and square."

???: "Uh, o-okay… I dunno why you're so keen on losing, though…"

At Julius's answer, delivered with a shake of the head, the men looked at one another in confusion. At that reaction, Julius reflected that he'd behaved far too modestly—for "Julius."

Still, it was difficult. Even as an act, he couldn't bring himself to boast that he'd gotten the better of Marcos.

—At present, around ten men, "Julius" included, had returned to the base and were explaining to those around them what had happened at the gambling den they'd just been in.

The organization led by Reiner took its greatest source of income, of course, from the buying and selling of Hexel, but apparently they also managed gambling dens and engaged in illegal moneylending; the reason "Julius," whose swordsmanship had been recognized, had been assigned there was that it was a scene where that kind of muscle would be called for.

And on this day when "Julius" stood guard, the Royal Guard conducted a raid on the den—led by none other than Knight-Captain Marcos Gildark, a fatal kind of raid.

In the Kingdom of Lugunica, there was no one who didn't know "the Rock," Marcos. By virtue of his tremendous power, the den had been driven neatly into a half-ruined state. Naturally, that had been arranged beforehand, but so as not to have the act seen through, the swordplay between "Julius" and Marcos had been carried out with a fair degree of seriousness. —The disparity in strength had been obvious, of course.

???: "And Julius held him off. Thanks to that, we all got away."

Julius: "Don't say I held him off. I was just lucky."

???: "Why are you like that all the time, huh?! You could stand to carry yourself a little prouder!"

Julius's self-critique wasn't taking, but the way the men were hyped was off as well.

In fact, though they'd escaped annihilation, not everyone had gotten away, and they'd lost the den besides. For them to be like this—

Julius: "What do you lot have to be so giddy about…?"

Reiner: "—Julius is right. This ain't a time to be squealing."

Just as he, in "Julius" fashion, was about to chastise the men's slackened awareness, a voice overlapping his words instantly straightened everyone's posture there. The floor creaked under slow steps—coming in was a one-eyed man: Reiner.

Summoned by a report, Reiner had apparently come flying; with his right eye, the one not covered by the eyepatch, he glowered around at the men in the room.

Reiner: "After those damn knights tore up our feeding ground, you've got the gall to look so merry. I can't begin to understand how your thick heads are put together."

???: "B-Boss… We were just—"

Reiner: "Shut it."

One man started to make excuses—Reiner caught his jaw with an outstretched hand and forced him to be silent. While making the man's jawbones creak with his grip, Reiner looked at Julius.

Fixing him with a muddy gray stare, he opened his mouth to the Julius who waited for his words.

Reiner: "You crossed blades with that Marcos? How was he?"

Julius: ""The hive bees of Tilg know nothing of great winds"… To be frank, he was so skilled it made your legs go weak."

Reiner: "Ha! That so, that so. The guy's a monster. The kind it's ridiculous to compare yourself to."

Laughing at Julius's answer, Reiner released the jaw he'd been holding. While the man hastily backed away, Reiner looked over the assembled faces.

Reiner: "Where's Belmont?"

Belmont: "—Here, Boss. I'm safe thanks to Julius."

At Reiner's call, a young man raised a hand and answered thus.

He wore a large hat and had a lanky impression, with catlike eyes as a distinguishing feature. He too had managed to flee from the den where Marcos had run wild, and as Reiner had checked on his safety by name, he was a person in an important position within the organization—a man who could be called an executive or close aide.

Belmont: "It was sudden, so we didn't get much out, but we recovered some of the takings. Check it later."

Reiner: "A sharp one. Worlds apart from the lot whose eyes get snagged by flash. Right?"

At Belmont's report, Reiner mocked the other men that way.

They couldn't talk back, and a nasty air was about to settle over the room. Just then—

Adelheid: "Still, it's a shame that den's going to be unusable. Folks who got big-headed off their winnings were handy for luring to our side."

Fearlessly cutting in was Adelheid, standing by the wall again today.

Even from that position her presence was too strong, but it seemed to have become her usual spot, and no one tried to point it out. However, conceding there was sense in her remark, Reiner let out a small "Tch" of profanity.

Reiner: "Marcos—you're a thorn in my eye to the bitter end."

Belmont: “What’ll we do, Reiner? The ones who didn’t get away don’t know anything big, but even so, they might spill everything they do know. If that happens…”

Reiner: “…The den won’t function anymore. We’ll need more Hexel.”

Hearing Reiner murmur, hand to chin and thoughtful, Julius drew a faint breath and flicked his gaze to Adelheid by the wall.

Reiner’s train of thought was exactly what Julius and the others had intended—if one stream of income was cut off, they’d have no choice but to expand another.

The organization’s big money-maker—namely, Hexel.

Reiner: “Belmont, make arrangements for transport. I’ll hurry the manufacturing of the drug.”

Belmont: “That’s fine, but where do we sell? With the den gone, big dealings are gonna be tough.”

Reiner: “No need to worry about that. I was just thinking of moving on to the next stage. For that—Adelheid.”

At the sudden address, it was Julius—the uninvolved party—who had the harder time hiding his startlement.

Adelheid, for her part, mixed no fear or surprise into her beauty, and met Reiner’s single eye.

Adelheid: “What is it?”

Tilting her head with aplomb, she waited. Walking up to her, Reiner reached out and lightly combed with his fingers through her red hair down to the shoulder.

Reiner: “You’re coming as my companion to a party. Time to make full use of how good you look.”

Adelheid: “…May I ask what kind of party? Depending on that, the dress I pick and the quality of the makeup will change.”

Reiner: “Listen to this cheek. A soirée hosted by people from a respectable merchant house. I had their servants get a whiff of the drug to nudge them into taking an interest in our product.”

Adelheid: “I see.”

Reiner: “And now it’s finally borne fruit. Honestly, if it weren’t for the business with the den, I’d be in the mood to celebrate a lot louder.”

As Reiner revealed a scheme he had apparently been pushing in secret, Julius felt a chill.

Reiner, a former knight whose certain sword skill had been counted as a threat—on top of that, to be astonished now by his planning, his execution, his knack as the head of an organization.

At this point, even if they could completely eradicate the organization and Hexel, they must not let Reiner Wahrheit slip away—so Julius was convinced.

The bud named Reiner was an evil cause that absolutely had to be plucked here.

Belmont: “If the path is set, good. Then we’ll just do our job on our end. On top of that—lend me Julius as a subordinate.”

Julius: “M-Me?”

For a moment, his reaction lagged at being called by name by Belmont, and he almost answered as Julius—but he managed to reply in the persona of “Julius” on the spot.

His tiny slip went unremarked; Belmont nodded with a “Right,” and continued,

Belmont: “If we’re moving more product, I want the guard that much thicker. Ordinarily I’d use Rob and the others, but they all got nabbed. And…”

Reiner: “And?”

Belmont: “He’s a powerhouse who didn’t give an inch even against the Knight-Captain. Leaving him to watch the street on collections would be a waste, wouldn’t it, Boss?”

Reiner: “…True enough.”

Prompted by the shrugging Belmont, Reiner turned back to Julius. For a moment he glared steadily at Julius with his single eye, then let out a small breath.

In that instant, Julius felt his skin prickle with gooseflesh—and reflexively, he had torn his knight’s sword free.

A reflex that could have ruined the undercover op—but—

Reiner: “Ha. Eager, aren’t you.”

There was a shattering sound like ice breaking, and an impact that rebounded along the knight’s sword. What his reflexively raised blade had received was something inexplicable that could only be called an invisible slash.

In fact, Reiner had not drawn the sword at his hip. Without even moving his arm, a cut had come.

Julius: “That just now was…”

Reiner: “Don’t be mad—it’s a true test of skill. My nerves’ve been on edge lately. If you could really tangle with that monster, you’ve gotta be able to block at least this much or there’s no talking.”

Julius: “If I hadn’t stopped it, were you trying to kill me?”

Reiner: “C’mon, I’m not that cruel. At worst, just a slice off the thin skin of your neck.”

Reiner thus denied murderous intent, but having felt how keen that sword strike had been, Julius doubted how far to believe him. Without a doubt, had he not stopped it, his neck would have been lopped off. How he had unleashed that invisible slash was worrisome as well.

Reiner: “Glad you’ve got sense. Belmont’s irreplaceable. Guard him well.”

Julius: “If you’ll acknowledge I’m on the irreplaceable side too.”

Shooting that back, Julius deliberately slid his sword into the sheath with a loud sound. Reiner’s eyes widened a touch at that resheathing, then he laughed like a beast with a sharp “Ha.”

And turning to his comrades—no, subordinates—he spread both hands.

Reiner: “All right, it’s gonna get busy. There’s no grub for dawdlers who can’t move. Every last one of you, work hard. —If the Royal Guard catches up, I’ll carve your backsides.”

So he fired them up with words that didn’t sound like a mere threat.

10

Adelheid: “For the time being, it looks like we’ve both managed to make our presence felt to the Boss. That said, having the gambling den raided by the Royal Guard—that method really did surprise me.”

Julius: “I admit it was a forceful measure. But we’re aiming for a short, decisive campaign.”

Adelheid: “Yeah, I think it was a good plan—I could feel how serious you all are. I doubt the Boss is as at ease as he acts.”

Seeing Adelheid give a little shrug of her thin shoulders, Julius winked one eye and let out a breath at how much the preceding back-and-forth had been a tightrope walk.

Crack down on the gambling den and rattle the organization—that was Bikram’s plan, and in practice they had succeeded in dealing the organization a shock equal to or greater than expected.

However, being made to walk a tightrope twice in one day had taken a considerable toll on Julius.

Adelheid: “Commander Marcos held back for you, didn’t he?”

Julius: “Yeah. If the Commander hadn’t pulled his punches, I’d be six feet under by now.”

Adelheid: “I don’t think you need to run yourself down that far… Though it’s true he’s someone you can’t beat.”

She said it with a wry smile, but that was only a comfort born of not having seen the actual fight.

The pressure Marcos had exuded there in the den, and the unbelievable sword skill even with him holding back—both were things far beyond Julius, and just recalling them made him shiver. At the same time, though, he genuinely felt joy at the height and strength of the summit he ought to aim for.

All the more, his disappointment at the second tightrope—Reiner Wahrheit—was greater.

Adelheid: “As for the Boss’s technique, you blocked it well.”

Julius: “It wasn’t my achievement alone. I had the spirits with me keep watch on the surroundings. Thanks to that, I managed to get my guard up in time. …Do you know how that attack works?”

Adelheid: “No. …He didn’t draw his sword. I’m sure it’s some kind of magic.”

Julius: “Right. It’s a long shot, but I’ll ask the higher-ups just in case.”

In truth, it was unlikely Bikram or Marcos knew the true nature of Reiner’s sword technique.

Even among allies, people almost never shared all their techniques and trump cards. All the more so when it came to Reiner’s invisible sword—its mechanism seemed to hinge on secrecy. It was hard to imagine that cautious man would go out of his way to reveal his own strength to those around him.

Which meant they would have to deduce the secret of Reiner’s technique from limited clues.

Adelheid: “Do you intend to fight the Boss, Julius?”

Julius: “…Even if I don’t pick the fight, if he swings at me like that, there may be times I’ll have to stand and take it. I need to be prepared, right?”

Adelheid: “Prepared, huh. True. —I only wish I could be there at the time.”

As Adelheid murmured that with a fingertip to her lips, Julius couldn’t help but give a wry smile.

If his guess was right and she was connected to House Astrea, then it was more than possible that a portion of the power said to belong to the “Sword Saint’s” lineage resided in her as well. Even so—knowing it was a bit green—if Julius was to cross blades with Reiner, he wanted, if possible, to fight one-on-one.

He believed that only by defeating the man on that basis could he prove a knight’s integrity.

Julius: “Maybe that’s a way of thinking that lacks flexibility. Whether I can borrow your strength then will depend on the situation. Looks like I’ll be involved in transporting Hexel—what about you? Are you all right?”

Adelheid: “I’ve ended up invited to a soirée. As for the dress… I plan to borrow my mother’s. As I am now, I think I could wear it just about right.”

Julius: “Your mother’s… In that case, I’d like to avoid any situation that would stain it.”

Adelheid: “—Yes. You’re right.”

For an instant, Julius thought the light in Adelheid’s eyes dimmed, and he hesitated to speak.

As for the suspicion hanging over Heinkel Astrea, Bikram’s answer had not been encouraging. It wasn’t that the suspicion was particularly strong, but neither was his innocence taken on faith. With no new information, it would be wrong to offer either a ray of hope or a cause for concern.

Julius: “Even so, you said the Boss didn’t trust you, but if he’s taking you along for an important scene, maybe it isn’t as bad as you thought? I can see why he’d judge that things would go smoother with you there, of course.”

Hardly the sort to think in such simple terms that he would bring Adelheid along just because of her looks—Julius didn’t believe Reiner was that kind of man.

At Julius’s conjecture, Adelheid raised one finger.

Adelheid: “I figured I couldn’t fall behind you and the others, so I took measures to earn the Boss’s trust.”

Julius: “Measures? What did you do?”

Adelheid: “Yeah—I tried taking Hexel right in front of him.”

Julius: “…Huh?”

Because Adelheid said it so matter-of-factly and offhandedly, he didn’t grasp it at once.

Blinking her yellow eyes, Julius stared at her, wondering if he’d misheard. Under that gaze, Adelheid tilted her head.

Adelheid: “So, I tried using Hexel in front of the Boss. As far as he’s concerned now, I’m a user of the banned drug cooperating with the organization for the sake of the drug—a Hexel addict.”

Julius: “D-Doing something like that… Are you okay?!”

At Adelheid’s unruffled demeanor, Julius bitterly regretted his own shortsightedness.

He had gathered that Adelheid was in a painful position owing to the suspicions aimed at Heinkel. To have failed to consider that, driven into a corner, she might take such an action—that was

Julius's negligence.

Use Hexel, and the activation of the Gate would bring a temporary elation and sense of omnipotence. But what followed was a hunger for the next dose, and symptoms of addiction—

Julius: "Whether you're okay isn't the point. Adelheid, you need to leave here at once. We'll take care of the rest—"

Adelheid: "C-Calm down, Julius. Sorry to mislead you—I'm fine."

Julius: "No—no matter how much you insist you're fine, willpower won't solve this."

Adelheid: "That's why it isn't willpower. It's a Divine Protection. I've been granted the Divine Protection of Detoxification."

As Julius unconsciously grabbed both her shoulders and tried to persuade her in earnest, Adelheid hastily answered thus.

Hearing "Divine Protection," Julius blinked again. As he digested what it meant, Adelheid added, "It's a Divine Protection," and continued,

Adelheid: "Thanks to the Divine Protection of Detoxification, I don't fall ill or face life-threatening danger due to external causes. Not just Hexel—any poison, even alcohol, it's the same."

Julius: "The Divine Protection of Detoxification… I see. That's why you were chosen for the infiltration mission. That makes sense."

Adelheid: "Not exactly… but that's fine. And—can you let go now?"

Julius: "…Sorry."

Prompted with a wry smile, Julius released Adelheid, whose shoulders he was still holding. At the same time, he recovered the tone of "Julius" he had been on the verge of forgetting.

This apology was not only for grabbing her shoulders; it also encompassed the way his attitude had all but branded Adelheid someone who would act recklessly without thinking.

However, at Julius's apology, Adelheid gave a little laugh.

Adelheid: "I'm not angry. It's a fresh feeling to have someone worry about me—and it makes me happy."

Julius: "Being worried over makes you happy, huh. It makes me feel rather apologetic instead."

Adelheid: "That's not entirely wrong, but… no, let's stop. I have a hunch my sensibilities aren't reliable at times like this."

Julius felt a snag at how Adelheid, slowly shaking her head, seemed eager to end the discussion.

But, unable to find the best response to that snag, he missed his chance to press further about her attitude.

Adelheid: "At any rate, Hexel doesn't work on me. On top of that, since I'm acting like an addict, the Boss assumes I can't betray the organization. It's not trust in me, but trust in the banned drug he handles. That should be easy for the Boss to believe, right?"

Julius: "—I understand how resolved you are. I'll leave that side to you."

Nodding at Adelheid's words, Julius once more fixed in mind their respective roles.

"Julius" would help transport Hexel into the Royal Capital together with Belmont, an executive in the organization; Adelheid would go with Reiner to the soirée to cultivate new buyers for the drug.

Both would be entrusted with positions where they would handle important information for tracing the distribution routes of Hexel and the organization's connections, buyers included.

If the needed information could be assembled, the Royal Guard would be able to move at once to dismantle the organization.

Therefore—

Julius: "The next few days will decide it. Don't slip up."

Adelheid: “Understood. You be careful too.”

Trusting in each other’s good fight, Julius sent Adelheid off to the soirée.

11

Belmont: “The main things we watch out for are rival outfits and bandits who don’t even know what the cargo is. After that, you’ve got witchbeasts drawn in by Hexel’s scent.”

Julius: “The first two I get, but even witchbeasts get drawn to it?”

Belmont: “Who knows what goes on in their heads. Maybe they want to do Hexel too and open up every pore on their bodies.”

Unsure whether he ought to laugh at the joking tone, Julius—dragged into guarding the transport of Hexel—studied the man in charge of the job, Belmont, in silence.

Belmont looked still young, around a little past twenty; among the hot-blooded roughnecks he seemed slight, and he somehow gave the impression of being far removed from violence. His manner and responses were moderately gentle, and for an executive in the organization he had no overbearing air at all.

If he let his attention wander even a little, it felt as if Belmont might melt out of sight and be swallowed by the scenery around him—a plainness that, paradoxically, made him seem out of place. That was the sort of atmosphere he carried.

Even so, Belmont seemed to be held in regard within the organization, and even Reiner had emphasized that he was a man with no replacement. He briskly took charge of the unexpectedly large transport of Hexel and accepted the goods without a hitch.

They went some distance east from the Royal Capital, traveling with the Great Tree of Flugel in view far off, and conducted the handoff at a warehouse built quietly deep within the woods; there had been no room for Julius to interject in that exchange, and it would be hard to pin down the precise location.

Belmont: “The mana density’s thick around here. The sharper a guy’s senses, the more the mana drunk messes with them. If you gawk around too much, you’ll wind up dizzy too.”

So Belmont advised Julius, who had been diligently scanning the surroundings.

Fortunately, Belmont seemed to take Julius’s scrutiny as job-appropriate vigilance, but just as he said, the Quasi Spirits Julius had brought along were not in good shape; he had to admit that securing clues here would be difficult.

In any case—

Julius: “At the very least, we have to grasp where Hexel is being kept.”

If he stayed with them to the end of the transport, at least that goal ought to be achievable.

If he rushed results and failed to meet even the minimum objective, the whole thing would be turned on its head. Restraining his impatience, Julius focused on the work before him while praying for Adelheid’s safety at the soirée.

Belmont: “Come to think of it, I never properly thanked you.”

He addressed Julius from the driver’s seat of the dragon carriage, hands on the reins as they hauled the cargo.

Julius, knight’s sword in hand and intending to keep as stern a face as possible, raised one eyebrow at Belmont’s unexpected remark.

Julius: “Thanks?”

Belmont: “Yeah, thanks. Back at the den, you bought us time to escape, didn’t you? Against the Knight-Captain himself, no less. That’s something.”

Julius: “Ah, that. I appreciate the sentiment, but personally it isn’t an achievement I can be proud of.”

Belmont: “I don’t see it that way… but keep that attitude in front of the Boss. He hates the Knight-Captain’s guts—big time.”

Julius: “Big time? Is that because the Boss used to be a knight?”

From how Reiner had talked back at the base, Julius had gathered there was some bad blood between him and Marcos. But within the range of what Julius knew, he had never heard tell of any such entanglement between the two.

After all, what Julius knew in detail about the Royal Guard had only ever been what drifted to those outside it.

With that interest of Julius’s, Belmont prefaced his answer with, “This is between us,” then said:

Belmont: “The Boss quit being a knight because he cut down a noble’s servant during a mission—but when he tried to blow off the court-martial as-is, the one who caught him, beat him down, and dragged him back was the Knight-Captain, Marcos.”

Julius: “That’s what happened…”

Belmont: “In the end, thanks to the noble’s leniency, the Boss wasn’t punished for his crime—but depending on how it went, there might not have been any avoiding the death penalty. That’s another reason the Boss glares daggers at the Captain.”

Julius: “—Don’t tell me the Boss is deliberately flooding Hexel through the Royal Capital…”

Belmont: “The scary thing about grudges is you can’t say “no way” even to that.”

Julius decided to keep the story in mind, though he didn’t know how seriously to take it.

On the other hand, there wasn’t much sense of loyalty to Reiner in the way Belmont spoke. But neither did he seem to be following out of fear like the others.

Naturally, the organization’s people besides Reiner also fully met the conditions for being detained on suspicion of involvement in the Hexel trade. But unlike Reiner—whose original temperament, his path out of the Guard, and his evident grudge against Marcos all stood out—why was Belmont in the organization?

It seemed far more shameful not to try to learn than simply not to know.

Julius: “Belmont—why do you work for the organization?”

Belmont: “Whoa there, in the mood for life stories? Sorry to disappoint, but I’m not in some colorful situation like slashing a noble’s servant or cutting down a lord’s soldiers. It just… happened.”

Julius: ““Just happened,” and you ended up a subordinate of Reiner Wahrheit?”

Belmont: “If you want the reason I joined, it was plain and simple: it looked like better money. “Just happened” was for how I turned into who I am now.”

Julius: “Who you are now…”

Tossed back a more solid answer than he’d expected, Julius urged him on with his gaze. Under that look, Belmont adjusted the tilt of the hat on his head and murmured, “You’ve got me.”

Belmont: “There isn’t any deep meaning to it. I’m just a commoner—my lot in life wasn’t too good or too bad. While I was hot under the collar about hating that halfway state, I fell into a gigantic hole I couldn’t undo. And while I was tumbling around in that hole, I wound up here.”

Julius: “That in itself doesn’t strike me as the most common pattern.”

Belmont: “Maybe not common, but not special either. For example, I think the root’s different from yours—you, who are putting on an act like you grew up rough on purpose.”

Julius: “…”

At the abrupt observation, Julius's cheek stiffened a touch. He furrowed his brow into the appropriate perplexed expression and met Belmont's gaze with it.

But Belmont winked at that look on Julius.

Belmont: "It's well done, but you haven't hidden what's underneath. If I had to guess…"

Julius: "—If you had to guess?"

Belmont: "They say you cut down a lord's soldiers and ran—but really, aren't you the lord's son?"

Julius: "…"

Belmont: "That's why no one from your hometown is chasing you to the Capital. There might be wanted notices going around, but I bet the charges on them are softened. If you're not lying, that's about how I size it up. How'd I do?"

Julius let out a breath at Belmont's winking presentation of his deduction.

For a moment he thought his act had been seen through entirely, but though Belmont had come close, he didn't make the leap to "Julius" being a wholesale fabrication. Even his misunderstanding worked out neatly to Julius's advantage.

Rather than denying everything here, it would feel more natural to ride along with it.

Therefore, Julius was about to do just that when—

???: "—Please stop, Mr. Belmont."

As they traveled the road at night and had nearly come within sight of the Royal Capital, Belmont worked the reins and brought the dragon carriage to a halt. What forced him to do so were the men blocking the road—men all of whom Julius had seen at the base, members of the organization.

A heavy air hung about them all, and Julius's whole body tensed.

What they were holding inside was a clear anger and hostility that could not be concealed.

Belmont: "What is it? What's going on?"

???: "Anyway, get down. You too, Julius."

They ordered not only Belmont but Julius to dismount, and the others assisting with the transport were made to shuffle down into the road as well.

While everyone looked at each other, not knowing what was happening, Julius quietly swept his eyes over the encirclement and began to sketch out in his head the flow if he had to break through.

The cause was unknown, but the men waiting in ambush were clearly ready to act.

—If so, he would make no clumsy excuses; he would pull out immediately, link up with Adelheid, and return to the Royal Guard.

To that end—

Belmont: "The soirée shouldn't be over yet. With the Boss not back, what are you so on edge about?"

???: "We'll talk to the Boss later. We've just got urgent business here. Namely, the rat that's been crawling around among us."

Hearing the definitive word rat, Julius became certain—this was the worst.

However, it did not proceed to an immediate pullout, as he had envisioned.

He could not do so because an inexplicable sight unfolded before Julius's eyes.

They had learned the rat had slipped in, and had gathered here. And yet the one they ringed to block the way was not Julius. —It was Belmont.

For some reason they had surrounded Belmont, and the eyes full of obvious hostility were all turned on him.

Which was to say—

???: “You won’t be running. …No—you ain’t running anywhere, Belmont. You’re the one who had ties to “the Rock” in the Royal Guard, yeah? Old buddies from the “Fellowship” Marcos set up.”

It was a pursuit of Belmont’s unforgettable past—the one he had called happenstance and a giant hole.

12

A single underground room filled with cold, damp air. In the center sat a lone chair, and on it a man whose wrists were bound behind his back, his swollen face hanging low.

The man had once had a catlike, charming face, but his eyes and cheeks were puffed up so badly there was nothing left of it to see.

???: “Don’t you go nodding off on us from just that much, Mr. Belmont.”

With that malice-drenched voice, a bucketful of water was flung over the bound man. Doused in foul water hauled from a filthy river nearby, the man—Belmont—coughed again and again.

Coughing, he slowly lifted his bruise-blotched face.

Belmont: “When the Boss gets back… you lot won’t… get off easy…”

???: “Brings a tear to my eye, you worrying about us like that. But if it’s what happens after the Boss gets back, you’re the one who ought to be worried, yeah!”

The emphatic end of the sentence came paired with a merciless fist. Struck, Belmont let out a groan of “Guh,” blood dripping from his mouth to stain the cellar floor.

For several hours now, the violence against Belmont had continued. For a man in an executive position within the organization led by Reiner Wahrheit, it was treatment beneath his station—but the reason they had arrived at this situation was—

???: “But is it really true? That Mr. Belmont betrayed us?”

???: “Yeah, no mistake. We checked it out. He was thick with the Commander of the Royal Guard… Marcos Gildark, from way back. And then you remember that raid on the gambling den the other day?”

???: “The gambling den… don’t tell me.”

Tattooed Man: “That’s right. Our very own Mr. Belmont slipped the knights a hand and brought ’em in. We got burned.”

So said a man with a sword tattoo at his neck—like Belmont, one of the old hands in the organization. It was he who had accused Belmont of treachery and was leading this interrogation in the cellar; the grounds he cited hit the mark.

Only, the mistake lay in the target at which he had directed those suspicions—namely, Belmont.

Therefore—

Julius: “…Honestly, that alone is not enough for me to believe it.”

When the tattooed man grabbed Belmont’s hair to jerk his head up, Julius—who was “Julius”—lightly pressed down on that arm from above and interjected thus.

Tattooed Man: “Huh? What’s this, Julius, what are you spouting off?”

Julius: “I am saying your grounds are weak. Belmont has long-standing ties with that knight Commander? And what of it? Whatever the past, they are not on good terms now, therefore he would not be thick with him.”

Tattooed Man: “I’m telling you that’s the front. They make it look like they ain't close now, while behind the scenes they're in up to their necks—that's how those types work. I'll squeeze the truth out of him quick. Move."

Julius: "…"

Tattooed Man: "I said move!"

At the tattooed man's raised voice, Julius wavered greatly over whether he ought to withdraw his hand.

The suspicion hanging over Belmont was not wide of the mark, but the person it targeted was. It was "Julius" who had guided the Royal Guard in and carried out the operation to shake the organization.

Which meant that, properly speaking, the violence being done to Belmont ought to have been inflicted upon "Julius."

Belmont: "…It's all right, Julius, step aside."

Julius, who had planted himself before the tattooed man so Belmont would not be struck further by the fallout of their own scheme—was stayed by Belmont himself.

Turning, Julius found Belmont's eyes wavering behind swollen lids.

Belmont: "I've got nothing to feel guilty about. When the Boss comes… he'll understand right away…"

Julius: "But if you are beaten until then—"

Belmont: "—I'll endure."

Weak and raspy though it was, that last word held a little strength.

Pressed by that resolve, Julius fell silent for a time, then took a single step back.

Tattooed Man: "Heh, got some nerve."

Though the words lauded Belmont's spirit, the feeling behind them that the tattooed man and Julius directed toward Belmont were, no doubt, of entirely different kinds.

In any event—

Julius: “Before Reiner Wahrheit returns.”

—They had to get Belmont, who was being brutalized for no just cause, out of there.

13

Helaine: “—We cannot agree.”

Gathered in a private room at the Silver Shield, Helaine said that plainly to Julius after he had explained the situation, without letting her usual calm expression slip.

Julius: “Why is that…!”

Shaking the fist he had set on the table, Julius spoke thus.

Julius: “As a result of our operation, he is being subjected to violence for groundless reasons. The accuser is hostile toward Mr. Belmont… at this rate, his life is in danger.”

Helaine: “Then it would be fine to leave it in danger, would it not? You would hazard unnecessary risks and imperil your own life? For the sake of that mere ruffian?”

Julius: “—. True, he is a man of Reiner Wahrheit’s organization. However, even if he has committed misdeeds, the value of his life must not be needlessly debased.”

Helaine: “We cannot understand. A stand-in has arisen to take the blow should your infiltration be exposed. Would it not, rather, suit everyone’s designs better to make deft use of that?”

Julius: “Miss Helaine!”

Stung by the piling on of heartless opinions, Julius could not help but sharpen his voice. Yet Helaine, seated opposite him, did not so much as flinch at his intensity.

Thus their views remained parallel, the two of them glowering at one another as the standoff dragged on—and then,

Bikram: “Juukulius, you are getting too heated. Gatness, do not goad him.”

As Bikram thrust a hand in between the two across the table, Julius unclenched his tightened fist and forced out, “My apologies.”

He had no retort to Bikram’s rebuke. As he was now, Julius had let the heat rise to his head too much in his desire to save Belmont, who had been captured in his stead.

Helaine: “You speak of discussion, Sir Bikram, but we question whether there is room for it.”

Bikram: “I said not to provoke him. With that said… when is Wahrheit scheduled to return?”

Julius: “…According to the plan, tomorrow night. It has not yet reached Reiner Wahrheit’s ears, but he is the sort to punish what he finds suspicious.”

Bikram: “No argument there. Before that, there is also the chance they kill him in a vigilante-style interrogation.”

Bikram touched his beard and fell into thought. Julius fixed his gaze on him with added force.

At all costs, Belmont must be saved. Even if it was true that he had abetted wrongdoing, to overlook the loss of his life was—

Julius: “—Contrary to chivalry. Is it not so, Sir Bikram?”

Bikram: “Chivalry, you say?”

At that low voice, like the growl of a ferocious beast, Julius’s throat forgot how to breathe for an instant.

Holding his breath, eyes widening, Julius met Bikram’s yellow twin eyes as they looked back at him quietly. Pressed by the seasoned intensity dwelling in that gaze, he shrank before Bikram Edditz.

Bikram: “Do not get carried away just because a fresh-minted knight happened to be appointed to a big job. You are free to cherish ideals and admiration for knighthood, but do you mean to endanger the Kingdom with that idealism?”

Julius: “—! I would never do such a thing!”

Bikram: “Is that so? Then think it through. If, for argument’s sake, we prioritize rescuing this Belmont here and your infiltration goes belly-up, obviously they’ll go to ground. Then they’ll busy themselves with the trade of “Hexel” in some other form. And having learned from this affair, they’ll act with greater caution and greater boldness. When that happens, how many more people do you think will suffer?”

Julius: “…”

Bikram: “As you say, we are knights as well. And knights must protect the Kingdom—its people. Its good, law-abiding people. In numbers or in good and ill, there is no gain in saving Belmont.”

So stated, plain and clear, Julius could only lower his head before Bikram.

What Bikram had declared—what Helaine had just conveyed a moment before—were sharpened blades of words meant to drive the point in more forcefully and leave no room for compromise. A rationale that acknowledged choosing which lives to take up and which to set down, a rationale that admitted the insufficiency of a knight’s power—neither were blades Bikram would ever have wished to wield.

It was Julius who had forced Bikram to say them.

Julius: “…”

Superior in on-site experience, more logical, and without holes, Bikram and the others’ arguments were not something Julius, a novice knight advancing emotion and ideal, could overturn.

Thus, with nothing to say back, Julius—

???: “Your mother and father were admirable people, Brother. In that case, to be worthy of such parents, surely the way is for you to become a hero.”

Just as he was about to yield to resignation and shut his eyes, a voice resounded in Julius’s mind.

It was a child’s, earnest and sincere in its effort to reach the person before him—words spoken to a weeping, younger Julius by his little brother; words that had shaped him into who he was to this day.

It was a memory of the day Julius Juukulius had been given the impetus to truly set his sights on becoming a knight.

“I swore that day.”

He swore he would pursue his longing and his ideal with a heart that would never waver—swore it, with none other than his precious younger brother, Joshua Juukulius, as his witness.

Julius: “—Sir Bikram, may I speak?”

Raising the face that had been about to dip, Julius said that, and Bikram’s wrinkled cheeks hardened. Without a word, only with his gaze, the superior urged him to continue; Julius bowed with his eyes and then,

Julius: “I still advise that we should extract Mr. Belmont.”

Thus, head-on, he thrust out anew the proposal that had just been rejected.

At that, for an instant, the air in the tavern’s private room tightened. The source of the menacing air was not Bikram, who had been refuted to his face, but Helaine, who remained silent; narrowed, her eyes held undisguised disappointment and dismay toward the uncomprehending Julius.

If he persisted as before in a posture that pressed idealism and emotion, there would be no overturning that gaze.

Therefore, while the foundation remained idealism and emotion, Julius stacked other things atop it.

Julius: “Mr. Belmont has become the victim of our plan, but regarding the effect that a move to save him would have on the organization, Sir Bikram, I must point out there is an error in your supposition.”

Bikram: “Oh? You say there is an error. Let us hear it.”

Julius: “If we stand by and watch, there will be no life left in Belmont. Whether by a lynching at the hands of his comrades or by Reiner Wahrheit’s purge is another matter. And how will they act concerning the suspicion that Belmont betrayed them? —Exactly as you just said, Sir Bikram.”

Bikram: “—They’ll vanish and go underground…”

Julius: “Yes. That must be regarded as a foregone conclusion. The enemy’s vanishing is a matter of time… Reiner Wahrheit will surely do so. I am certain of it.”

This was no desperate rebuttal; this appraisal was, without a doubt, Julius’s true belief.

Given Reiner’s caution, the mere suspicion that the hand of investigation had reached toward him was reason enough to move. With this unforeseen suspicion toward Belmont, the organization’s disappearance had already become a matter of time.

Julius: “Sir Bikram, this matter has already become a race against time. Tomorrow night, when Reiner Wahrheit returns, they will disappear.”

Bikram: “…If they’re going to disappear either way, you want to save Belmont so he does not die for nothing?”

Julius: “No. There is a possibility that Mr. Belmont possesses the information we desire. We should rescue him, bargain with him, and draw out the inner workings of the organization.”

Helaine: “Pray wait. Are you not stacking conjecture upon conjecture? The Blau you saved before, Sir Julius, possessed no useful information. Will not Belmont be the same?”

She raised her hand lightly and interjected thus.

The “Blau” she had brought up was the man who, when Julius infiltrated Reiner’s organization, had been made an example of and a test of skill—the man whose life Julius had managed, just barely, to save.

Grievously wounded, he was still being hidden in an abandoned house in the slums; it seemed that, while Julius had been absent, Helaine had contacted him and attempted to obtain information.

Helaine: “If Reiner Wahrheit is cautious, the conditions will be the same. Even if matters are as you say, it does not provide a reason to risk danger.”

Julius: “No. Mr. Belmont is an executive of the organization. Reiner Wahrheit trusted in his ability. He must, without fail, have his hands on information about an opponent they would otherwise have to let slip away.”

Helaine: “You should not speak lightly of “without fail,” Julius Juukulius.”

For an instant, the air creaked with the strongest force yet, and tension filled the private room. The words Julius had chosen had sorely rubbed Helaine’s feelings the wrong way.

It was undeniable that it had been a careless statement toward those like her, who risked their lives day after day to raise the certainty of uncertain information. Yet an apology here could not be permitted either.

And so for a time, as Julius and Helaine’s staring match resumed,

Bikram: “—There is some sense to Juukulius’s words.”

Helaine: “Sir Bikram Edditz!”

Bikram: “Only some sense. You can admit as much as well, Gatness.

…Juukulius, if you continue your undercover work as is, there remains a chance you can keep up with their vanishing. Are you saying that, even if it means crushing that possibility, the information Belmont holds will be of use?"

At that final-check-like question from Bikram, Julius caught his breath.

As Helaine had pointed out, he did not possess proof sufficient to call it certain so lightly. It was simply the result of seeking a course other than an appeal to emotion.

Even so, just as Julius clenched his molars, feeling he had to say it —

Bikram: "Greenhorn. That is where you answer at once that it will be of use. Even without certainty."

Letting out the faintest breath, Bikram said it, and Julius widened his eyes—"Sir Bikram?"—but Bikram did not respond to him; instead, he glanced toward Helaine.

Bikram: "Juukulius will extract the imprisoned Belmont. As for bargaining chips to draw out what he knows, consult with your superior."

Helaine: "Are you serious? Keeping him undercover and letting him move with the organization is more certain."

Bikram: "It takes too long. You saw his obstinacy, did you not? Either way, before long he will clash with the organization's lot and have his identity exposed. Am I wrong?"

Julius: "—. Yes, as you say. The trust placed in me exists only in this very moment."

Bikram: "Show some remorse!"

At Julius's chest-puffed reply, Bikram raised his voice.

As Julius made a solemn face under his superior's scolding—

Helaine: “Allow me to confirm… You judge Mr. Belmont to be more beneficial to us than Blau, is that your thinking?”

Quietly asked by Helaine, Julius was at a loss for words for an instant.

He had overborne the other side’s view and pushed through his own. But deciding that an apology was not appropriate here either, Julius dipped his chin and said, “Yes.”

Helaine: “Understood. Then we shall proceed with that in mind.”

Julius: “…Is that acceptable?”

Helaine: “If we are to do this, ensure certainty. We shall also lend a hand with the disruption.”

Bikram: “You got awfully cooperative.”

Helaine: “If we are to do it.”

Slowly shaking her head side to side, Helaine answered in a composed face and voice.

Grateful for her attitude and her offer, Julius steeled his resolve.

—Tonight would be the last day he acted as “Julius.”

Bikram: “We will provide cover. If you are going to do it, make it succeed, Juukulius.”

Julius: “Sir! It is an honor, “Silver Knight” Sir Bikram Edditz!”

With a salute, Julius answered thus, and Bikram heaved a deep sigh. Yet in that sigh, it seemed to Julius there was, somehow, an emotion different from before.

14

—The fact that he had been unable to coordinate with Adelheid regarding the execution of the Belmont rescue operation was Julius’s greatest concern.

At present, Adelheid was accompanying Reiner and attending a party held by a merchant house to pitch “Hexel.”

As a bearer of the Blessing of Detoxification—who boasted that she would not succumb not only to contraband drugs but not even to alcohol—there was no fear she would be caught off guard by those. Yet the unforeseen could occur at any time. What was more, this time around Julius and his group’s very actions might themselves become the unforeseen for her.

At the very least, until tomorrow night, when the events in the royal capital would be relayed to Reiner, there ought to be nothing to worry about; but Julius wanted to get Adelheid out before it reached his ears.

To dispel that concern as well—

Julius: “—We must hasten the extraction of Belmont.”

So fired up, Julius had already reached the door of the underground room in the organization’s hideout—the room where Belmont was confined and receiving a violent interrogation.

Julius’s conduct as “Julius” had thoroughly permeated the place, and whatever he did inside the hideout, no one would call him out. For that reason, he had made it this far without the slightest interference.

—However, the problem lay ahead.

Julius: “There are two guards… ordered to let no one through.”

Two burly guards had been posted before the room in question.

The one who had given the order was doubtless the tattooed man who had taken the lead in interrogating Belmont. Having set things in motion, he too was desperate to make Belmont talk. Unfortunately, no matter how much they beat him, they would not hear what they wanted from Belmont—but they had no way of knowing that.

To prevent a life from being taken in such a fruitless struggle, it was time to act.

Guard A: “—Huh? What the hell is that?”

Suddenly, one of the guards before the door noticed something and blurted that out. Drawn by him, the other guard looked the same way, the brows of both men knitting in confusion.

In their field of view floated a faint six-hued light, swaying irregularly through the dim corridor. Captivated by that eerily beautiful, dancing glow, the men were at a loss for words on the spot—and that was all the opening Julius, now standing behind them, needed to reap their awareness.

Julius: “Well done, my buds.”

Stowing the two unconscious guards in another room, Julius thanked the lights that had aided his diversion—his contracted quasi-spirits. Smiling at the buds, in high spirits to have been of use to him, Julius carefully opened the door to his destination.

Belmont: “…Julius?”

Just as he stepped into the room, a surprisingly clear voice called out to Julius.

Fortunately, there were no guards inside; only Belmont, bound to a chair, sat there all alone. Julius put a finger to his lips, telling him to keep quiet, and then—

Julius: “I’m going to cut the ropes and get you out. Can you keep up?”

Belmont: “…No, my leg’s been broken. Moving under my own power will be difficult.”

Julius: “Your leg…”

At Belmont’s hoarse reply, Julius crouched and examined his darkened, bruised leg. As expected, there was nothing for it but to carry him out; if they were seen in that state, there would be no excuse. In the worst case, they would make enemies of everyone in the hideout and have to fight a grand melee.

With Bikram’s support promised, defeat seemed unlikely.

But in that case, before they could trace the leads toward eradicating “Hexel,” as had been their plan from the start, the organization would go to ground.

Julius: “…”

While Julius was thinking this through, Belmont watched him quietly, without making a fuss.

That calm bearing was a help. Even at the outset, when Julius had come to his aid, Belmont must have had much he wanted to ask, yet he had simply answered the questions he was asked with the pertinent information.

He might even have been a little too understanding—

Julius: “—Tch. Something happened.”

At Julius’s sudden murmur, Belmont caught his breath, just barely audibly.

The disturbance inside the building that he had not sensed was a report Julius received from the quasi-spirits he had set to keep watch on the surroundings. From Ia, the fire quasi-spirit he had posted to watch the hideout’s entrance, came a reaction that something had occurred there—an ally’s support, Julius intuited.

To assist Julius’s infiltration, Helaine had said she would arrange a disturbance. Assuming that was now underway, Julius decided he must not let this chance slip by.

Julius: “It will be a bit rough, but I’ll lend you my shoulder. Let’s go.”

As Julius cut the ropes and offered his shoulder, Belmont answered shortly, “Got it,” and stood.

From the look of him, not only his leg but several teeth and fingers had been broken, but there seemed to be no injuries that put his life in immediate danger. He would be forced a bit, but Julius would get him out.

They left the cellar and carefully headed up to the floor above. Fortunately, the commotion that must have been Helaine's doing still seemed to be raging at the entrance, and Julius felt no sign of anyone coming their way. Using that opening, they made for the back side of the building, from where they would let Belmont escape.

The concrete method was—

Julius: "There's a skiff moored on the river behind the building. A colleague of mine is there, and he should take charge of you."

Belmont: "Hey now… I'm not a cat or a child. I'm a full-grown man, you know."

Julius: "Just for now, do your best to act like a cat."

Having reached the target spot beneath a window that faced the river, Julius told him that, and Belmont's battered face went a bit flat. But he immediately sighed shortly and—

Belmont: "You… the face you show here and your real face are awfully different. The gap is shocking."

Julius: "There are circumstances. I'll apologize properly another time… For now, focus on getting out in one piece. I advise you to comply obediently with my colleague's requests."

Belmont: "…Understood. Thank you."

Receiving his sighing thanks, Julius picked Belmont up and pushed him out through the open window. Belmont vanished beyond the sill, and the lack of any splash was likely thanks to Bikram, waiting in the skiff, catching him deftly.

The plan was to drift downriver under cover of night and carry Belmont to safety.

With this, the extraction of Belmont had succeeded. From here, if "Julius's" actions had not been exposed, he could openly join the fray at the entrance—but that proved impossible.

Julius: "…Miss Helaine."

Slipping quietly away from the rear, Julius peered toward the hideout's front entrance and, seeing the nature of the diversion Helaine had prepared, ground his teeth.

Thug A: "Damn it! Hey, somebody stop him! Kill him!"

Thug B: "No way, no way! He's high on "Hexel" and going berserk! Goddamn it!"

Men who had formed a cordon shouted with bellows and screams. At the center of it, a man was rampaging, swinging a blade in his hand. Letting out a voice that was somewhere between a growl and a war cry, he was rampaging at random; Julius recognized him—Blau.

The Blau they had secured over the course of the investigation was raising hell against the men at the hideout.

With bloodshot eyes and a beastlike face, drool hanging from his mouth, he looked like a different person entirely, but Julius did not mistake him. As the men had judged, he had been dosed with "Hexel," his mental balance shattered—a pitiable Blau.

Helaine: "Allow me to confirm… You judge Mr. Belmont to be more beneficial to us than Blau, is that your thinking?"

Julius: "So that's what this is…"

Realizing at once that this was Helaine's doing, Julius recalled his exchange with her before the operation and belatedly understood that that "confirmation" had been for this stratagem.

Julius did not consider it a childish act of petty spite. Given their limited hand, one could say they were making effective use of a card they had been letting sit idle.

It was only that neither people, nor their lives, could ever be cards or game pieces.

Blau: “Aaaah! Aaaaah, aaaaAAAAH!”

Blau, brandishing a blade with a deranged visage, was even then taking counterattacks from the men, bleeding from everywhere and in tatters. Thanks to the drug’s effects, he seemed to feel no pain or fatigue, but the bleeding and injuries were without a doubt shaving away his life.

It looked to the point that even treatment might no longer be possible.

Julius: “Even so, if I stop him now, there’s a chance—”

He was just about to rush in, as “Julius,” to stop the rampaging man and preserve that chance when—

Reiner: “—What is this commotion?”

A voice he must not have heard, accompanied by a high, cracking ring like shattering ice.

In the instant after that chill, piercing note—kin—their ears caught it, Blau’s body was cleaved on the diagonal. Cut from right shoulder to left flank, Blau, unable even to fully perceive what had happened to him or the reality before his eyes, poured blood across the floor and died.

It was a strike at once too cruel and too refined. And the one who had unleashed it had not even drawn the sword at his hip—a one-eyed man—

Reiner: “Can’t you lot take down even a single “Hexel” junkie without me? There’s a limit to looking tough and being nothing. If appearances are all you’ve got anyway, then all of you might as well carve some monster-ish tattoos into your mugs and be done with it. Like those so-called “Scales.”“

Shrugging as he spoke, Reiner Wahrheit cowed the surroundings; and Julius, who had been lying low, reached the utmost limits of vigilance and tension at the sight.

It was an impossible appearance. By the plan, Reiner's return was to be tomorrow night. For him to have come back to the hideout a day early like this—

Julius: "—We have to pull out."

Offering a silent prayer for the fallen Blau, Julius decided to withdraw.

The invisible slash that cut Blau—the true nature of Reiner's fearsome swordsmanship—was unknown; and if "Julius" stepped out now, he would likely be blamed for failing to subdue the rampaging Blau and punished all the same.

They had succeeded in seizing Belmont's person. The only course left was to quit the field here and hope the information from his mouth would lead to dismantling the organization.

Swallowing that bitter regret, Julius turned on his heel at once and, guided by the scouting quasi-spirits, slipped out a corridor window, escaped the hideout, and melted into the night.

As planned, he was to rendezvous with Bikram downriver—but just as he was leaving the hideout behind, Julius glanced back and was dumbstruck at the sight that met his eyes.

What had shocked Julius was the figure on the unobserved side of the building—someone in a dress, a red-haired girl, skillfully climbing the wall to slip into the second floor—

Julius: "—Adelheid?"

15

Tattooed Man: "So that's the situation—we've got Belmont shut up in the cellar. He keeps saying he'll only talk to the Boss. What'll it be?"

Reiner: "—Right."

At the report from the underling with the neck tattoo, Reiner stroked his chin with a finger and fell into thought.

As Reiner stood in silence, his feet awash in blood, the eyes of his men filled with fear fixed on him. Binding people with fear was easy, but it had the drawback of mass-producing underlings who could do nothing but read his mood.

Reiner: "In that regard, Belmont was one of the ones who could use his own head."

It was an open secret that Marcos Gildark, the Commander of the Royal Guard, had in his youth led a hoodlum band called the "Brotherhood." Those who had belonged to the "Brotherhood" then had scattered and, so it was said, lived hiding their past affiliation. Reiner had not known Belmont was one of them.

That alone was not enough to be certain of collusion between Belmont and the Royal Guard; and it had been Reiner himself who had upheld "punish what is suspicious," so blaming the tattooed men's actions would be off the mark.

Reiner: "In any case, we'll hear the man beg for his life. The cellar, yes?"

Tattooed Man: "Yes. …Uh, by the way, you're back early, aren't you? Weren't you due tomorrow night?"

Reiner: "That was a lie. Same as yours."

Tattooed Man: "H-Huh?"

Reiner: "I've had a prickling bad feeling myself lately. Rather than leave that feeling alone, it's easier to prod the other side into moving. So I deliberately left the capital."

He had not expected the one to bite to be Belmont, but if it was someone sniffing around Reiner's organization, they would have to be at least that formidable for it to make sense. It was a distasteful way for things to click, but in this contest of wits, the results had come out cleanly.

Snorting at the tattooed man, who said “I see!” with the air of currying favor, Reiner set off toward the cellar where Belmont was imprisoned.

Just then, men acting on the tattooed man’s orders started to carry a corpse past him, and—

Reiner: “—Hold it.”

Catching the corpse at the edge of his vision, Reiner stayed his men’s hands and looked at it.

When he had cut the man down, the corpse had been turned away, and its deranged expression had been unfit for a second glance, so he had not noticed; but looking closely now, that corpse was—

Reiner: “…Blau?”

With a startled “Eh?!” the men checked the dead man’s face and choked up.

Their reaction confirmed Reiner’s eyes had been right—but it was strange.

—Blau should have been cut down and finished off the other day as a test of skill for Julius, who wanted into the organization.

For that Blau to be alive, dosed to the gills with contraband, and rampaging here…

Reiner: “—Tch.”

Whirling around, Reiner hastened across the hall and pounded down the stairs to the cellar. He peered into the room where Belmont ought to have been and confirmed no one was there.

Blau’s drug-mad rampage, and Belmont gone. If he considered that together with the fact that Blau had been alive to begin with, there was only one answer.

And there was only one course for Reiner Wahrheit to take.

Reiner: “…Damn it, you’ve gone and made trouble, Julius.”

Tattooed Man: “B-Boss?”

From behind Reiner, who stood in the empty cellar, the tattooed man who had followed him down spoke in a timid voice. At that fearful voice, Reiner turned and lightly raised an empty hand.

And then—

Reiner: “—Sorry, but it’s cleanup time for all of you.”

16

Adelheid: “—Julius?”

The instant he slipped into the room with silent steps, his name was called, and Julius’s cheek tightened.

He had not thought he would be noticed so quickly—best not to do what one is unaccustomed to. With a sigh that held a touch of admiration, he conceded that, in things like this, he could not match a professional.

Julius: “Yes, it’s me. From outside, I saw you slip onto the second floor and hurried after you.”

Adelheid: “That must have startled you—sorry. The Boss’s eyes were off me, and there was a commotion at the entrance. I figured it had to be now.”

Even as she apologized, Adelheid’s hands, turned away from him, did not stop.

She was rifling through the room—Reiner’s private chamber—rapidly searching for something. Guessing it was mission-related, Julius nevertheless said, “That’s far enough,” and—

Julius: “I had no chance to contact you, but the situation has changed. Continuing the infiltration will be difficult. Right now, come with me and leave this—”

Adelheid: “I don’t intend to stay long either. I just want to find the Boss’s safe. There’s a lead in there on the partner he’s working with to sell “Hexel.”“

Julius: “What?”

Adelheid: “A letter. Supposedly kept as a trump card to threaten the other party. I lifted the key. Now we just—”

Julius: “Understood. —My buds.”

Cutting across Adelheid’s words, Julius summoned his contracted quasi-spirits on the spot. Then, to the buds who appeared, he swiftly ordered a search for the “something” hidden in the room.

While Julius and the others had been engaged in rescuing Belmont, Adelheid had been carrying out a dangerous game with Reiner in order to fulfill her own mission.

In that case, he would do everything he could to help Adelheid complete hers.

Iku: “—Found it. One brick in the wall is rigged to come out.”

Receiving the report from Iku, the earth quasi-spirit, Julius went to the section of wall in question and, using the tip of his sword still sheathed, drew the brick toward himself. Beyond it, concealed in the wall, was a black-iron safe—

Adelheid: “There it is. This letter.”

Given the space, Adelheid used the key to open the safe, her voice brightening. Inside the safe was only a single letter, which spoke to Reiner’s character.

In any case, the objective was achieved. All that remained was to slip out through the window once more.

Julius: “All right, let’s go. If we leave right now—”

They could still get away before their designs were exposed.

Just then, as Julius pulled Adelheid by the arm to leave the spot—

Adelheid: "—Watch out!"

Julius: "—Hk!"

—An invisible slash marked the opening of the unavoidable battle between Julius Juukulius and Reiner Wahrheit.

17

—And thus, the story circles back to the beginning.

Julius held his breath on the second floor of the hideout, probing for the presence of Reiner, who could not be seen.

The enemy's invisible sword strikes were not merely unseen; a moment ago they had targeted him regardless of distance or cover. From that, one might infer the true nature of the swordplay to be wind magic.

Julius: "If the answer is a wind blade, then it makes sense the strikes are invisible."

Adelheid: "I see the line of thought. But that probably isn't it. It almost reached me, too."

Julius: "—Do you have grounds for that assertion?"

Adelheid: "Of course."

At Julius's side, Adelheid, likewise feeling out the presence, answered; Julius frowned.

He was not doubting Adelheid's confidence—on the premise that he believed her, he was chafing at the way the true nature of the enemy's swordplay had slipped away from him once again.

If it was not wind magic, then an unseen blade brought to mind refraction of light by yang magic. In fact, Julius himself, by similar means, could manage small tricks like concealing his swordplay.

But the fact it had come from range, from an invisible position, interfered with that line of reasoning.

Just then—

Reiner: “Come out, Julius! It’s you, isn’t it?”

Called by name from downstairs, Julius understood that his true identity had already been exposed.

Even so, there was no need to give the other side more. If he gave away his position and the roughs swarmed there, he would be unable to evade Reiner’s sword strikes amid the melee.

However—

Reiner: “Don’t be so cautious. Even if you’re worried, you’re the only one left here.”

Julius: “—What did you say?”

Reiner: “I don’t know whose agent you are. Odds-on is the Royal Guard, with the outside bet being some other outfit… whatever the case, you’re quite the actor. You fooled me.”

With that smiling praise, Julius intuited that most of his undercover work had been laid bare. Therefore, Reiner had begun proactively eliminating nuisances—eliminating them other than “Julius,” too.

Adelheid: “…Julius, it’s far too quiet downstairs.”

Julius: “Yeah, I agree. …Most likely, aside from you and me, no one survived.”

There should have been more than twenty men in the hideout, yet there was no sign of them at all. That was probably the result of Reiner, having sensed the hand of an investigation upon his organization, personally silencing them.

That he would go to such extremes was beyond what either Julius or Bikram had foreseen—

Reiner: “That’s exactly it. That’s where you’re a step or two behind me.”

Julius: “—!”

As if to goad the Julius who was gnashing his teeth over this grievous misstep, Reiner’s mockery came with slashes.

The sounds of walls and floors being carved up came in succession, the staircase being remade before their eyes into a pitiful ruin. That, more and more, pared down Julius’s options for making a move—yet—

Julius: “—Strange.”

Keeping wary of the slashes from below, Julius murmured at a faint sense of wrongness.

Reiner was a cautious, thorough man. His opening attack—aimed at their throats—would have been fatal without Adelheid’s intuition, but his suppressing fire since then was not. It was an act to make them overly wary. And if that, too, was part of Reiner’s gambit—

Julius: “—Adelheid!”

On instinct he shouted, and pulled Adelheid to him.

—An instant later, an invisible slashing radiance, as if to hew the entire building to pieces, went madly dancing through the night over the slums.

Reiner: “Got them.”

Looking up at the hideout collapsing before his eyes, Reiner smirked at the sure feedback.

That last good-for-nothing left upstairs—Julius, who was probably some outfit’s plant—was a swordsman whose forte was levelheaded maneuvering. Swordsmen with that disposition, always reacting after their opponent, were nothing but convenient prey for Reiner the “placed blade” user.

—The true nature of Reiner Wahrheit's invisible edge was neither wind magic nor yang magic. If one had to categorize it, it might be a kind of yin magic, but even that was uncertain.

What was known was that Reiner could postpone the effect of a sword strike he unleashed. And that he could freely trigger that delayed slash afterward by his own will.

Which was to say, he could spread fatal traps that no one could see, that absolutely no one would notice, wherever he pleased, to be sprung at his own command.

Therefore, Reiner had "placed" slashes throughout the hideout.

He had "placed" them with particular care around his room and on the second floor, so the raging sword-wind should have reduced the enemy to splinters.

To that end he had deliberately prompted caution from below, fixing Julius's feet on the second floor.

Reiner: "You avoid even one-in-a-million chances. That's what smart maneuvering is."

Julius's swordsmanship was still developing, immature for his age, but compared to the other roughs it was night and day. If they crossed blades head-on, there was no guarantee there would not be a freak outcome. He would not cross such unnecessary, dangerous bridges. —That was Reiner's way of getting by.

Even Reiner, right after he had been taken into the Royal Guard, had believed in and been hopeful for his prowess with the sword.

But such illusions shattered when he beheld the kind of monster that existed in his era—the "Boulder." Faced with that, he understood it had been a dream with no substance. That was all there was to it.

Reiner: "You're the same. In the end, you're just one of the rabble —"

Julius: "—Al Clauseria."

In a heartbeat, a voice that could not have been heard came from the rubble of the collapsed hideout, and rainbow aurora seared Reiner's vision. With a sharp "—!" he leapt aside just in time, narrowly skirting the thing that had burned the night, then held his breath and glared straight ahead.

There, Julius stood amid the wreckage, Adelheid cradled in one arm, the knight's sword in his other hand trained on Reiner.

Reiner: "How did you—"

Julius: "We broke the floor and dropped to the level below. It was by a hair's breadth, but we made it."

As he said it, Julius was half-dead, his whole body torn up with lacerations, in tatters. He had escaped with his life, but he looked nothing like someone who could say they had made it in time—no, that was wrong.

Julius was in tatters. But Adelheid was not. She was unscathed.

Indeed, Julius had made it in time.

Adelheid: "Julius, what are you doing? Even without this, I—"

Julius: "—Julius."

Held in his arms and protected, Adelheid faltered with an "Eh."

Setting her on the ground, Julius stepped forward and, bloodied, brought his sword to guard.

Then, loud enough for the Adelheid behind him and the Reiner before him to hear, he continued.

Julius: "—Royal Guard, Julius Juukulius."

It was a warrior's opening—the rite a fighter must perform when stepping onto the field, to declare his title and name, and engrave himself upon the foe with whom he would trade lives.

The foolish vow of one who believed in the fantasy Reiner scorned:

fighting fair and square.

However—

Reiner: “—Disgraced Knight, Reiner Wahrheit.”

Answering with his own name, Reiner drew his sword.

In the next instant, the half-dead Julius—no, Julius Juukulius—stepped in, leaping forward wreathed in rainbow light. Reiner raised his blade to meet him, feeling vexed by the terribly sluggish tip, and in his heart, he felt a twinge of chagrin—

—at how long it had been since he had swung any proper sword that was not a “placed blade.”

18

Healer: “Aaagh, seriously! What is it with tonight, nya! Injured folks keep coming one after another…!”

In the Royal Sanatorium at night, as he handled the stream of casualties being brought in one after another, a dainty healer with flaxen cat ears pricked up dashed briskly about.

Though not an official healer of the Sanatorium, this healer’s skill surpassed that of anyone there, and from a short while ago voices calling for his help had been reaching him without pause.

From what he’d heard, it seemed there’d been a major roundup in the slums involving the Royal Knights. Even so, there were far too many injured, and none of them, to the eye, seemed related to the Royal Knights.

Whatever the incident was, all a healer could do was treat them one after another—

Healer: “Prioritize the ones with a chance to be saved! If you think they’re beyond you, pass them to me! We’re going to snatch as many lives as we can, even if it’s just one more! That’s what Dr. Garitch—”

Girl: “—Sorry, can I ask that you prioritize him?”

Healer: “NyaaAAAH?!”

Amid the bustling Sanatorium, the cat-eared healer giving orders jumped at the voice from behind. He whirled around, and there stood a red-haired girl about her own age, and a purple-haired young man covered in wounds—

Healer: “Kyaah, he’s in tatters! Hurry, hurry, get him onto a bed!”

Girl: “Can you save him? He’s an important benefactor.”

Ferris: “No one but Ferris could handle this, nya! And for the record, Ferris just happened to be here by chance, so be grateful, okay—thank your own good luck and Lady Crusch, nya!”

With that declaration, the healer began swift treatment of the gravely wounded young man.

His body was laced with cuts, and though the blood loss was severe, he had somehow avoided fatal wounds. Sequelae could be dealt with later.

His life could be preserved—thanks solely to this being one of the days the cat-eared healer was in the royal capital.

Girl: “Please, take care of him. —I have something I have to do.”

Ferris: “Huh? Hey, if he’s important, at least hold his hand—wait, what?!”

No sooner had she said her piece than, when the healer turned, the red-haired girl had vanished from her sight. She looked around in search of that figure, but the girl was nowhere to be seen.

Shaking with anger, ears quivering, at such selfishness, the healer looked down at the young man under treatment.

Ferris: “Geez, geez, geez! Think harder about the company you keep, nya! Can you say your name?!”

Julius: “…li, us. juli, us.”

Ferris: “Julius? Julius, got it! I won’t let you die, so you’d better be grateful, nya!”

—At the same time that desperate treatment was underway at the Royal Sanatorium.

Nobleman: “Hurry, hurry, the Royal Knights will be here any moment. Before that—before that!”

With a pale face, a noble urged his coachman on, and a dragon carriage set off in a frantic dash through the nighted royal capital.

The route led from a secondary residence in the royal capital to his main manor in his domain. Ordinarily, departures waited for morning, but despite the hour growing later, the nobleman hastened the departure.

He had cause enough to do so—the worst kind of news had arrived. The business partner with whom the noble had joined hands had become the target of a Royal Knights roundup.

There had been no time to confer on a response, and he had lost contact with the other party. In that case, it was only a matter of time before the hand of investigation reached him as well. Before that happened, he had to move his assets.

For that purpose, the nobleman urged the dragon carriage on as much as possible—

Adelheid: “—That’s far enough.”

In the next instant, the coupling of the dragon carriage was destroyed, and, no longer within the ground dragon’s Wind Evasion, the carriage went violently rolling; the nobleman—Count Easley Orlon—saw heaven and earth turn upside down.

The red-haired figure who had forced the issue—Adelheid—confirmed Count Orlon, eyes spinning, inside the passenger coach now lying on its side, and let out a long breath.

In the bosom of the dress she wore was the letter retrieved from Reiner's hideout.

The contents of that letter were proof that Count Orlon had been the organization's backer and had been involved in the trade of "Hexel." Known for good deeds and good governance, Count Orlon had secretly joined hands with a knight dishonorably discharged and thrown himself into wrongdoing—that seemed to be the story.

His person had been safely secured, and the letter was in hand. If testimony could be obtained from the captured Reiner Wahrheit, he would have no room to wriggle out of it.

Adelheid: "Thanks to Julius… no, to Julius Juukulius."

She exhaled, thinking of the young man who had become her partner in this infiltration.

Because of her own hesitation, she had made him take needless wounds. She prayed no injuries or aftereffects would remain; and she felt bewildered, too, at the first experience in her life of being protected by someone else.

And in the gap when her thoughts were thus preoccupied—

Adelheid: "—Oh no."

A high, ringing sound spread out, and next, coins went clattering across the stone-paved street in all directions—the box of gold coins Count Orlon had tried to take out had opened inside the toppled coach, and the coins had tumbled out through the shattered windows and broken roof.

In a hurry, Adelheid began gathering the scattered coins. Hearing the commotion, city guards and rubberneckers would soon gather. She didn't want to cause any extra fuss.

Thus, as she swiftly gathered up the coins, one piece, then another —

Adelheid: "—Ah."

Her eyes met those of a girl who had picked up a coin that had slipped into the gap of an alley.

A child of about ten, with blonde hair and red eyes. Apparently she had happened upon the scene; clenching the small gold coin in her hand, the girl stared fixedly at Adelheid.

From her shabby clothes, she was likely a resident of the slums. Hoping to get her to leave without a fuss, Adelheid opened her mouth—and—

Girl: "…Don't wear such confusing getup. I thought you were a girl."

Adelheid: "…"

With only that, the girl turned her back on the lightly wide-eyed Adelheid and, before she could be stopped, dashed into the darkness deeper in the alley.

For a moment Adelheid watched in a daze, then blinked, and laughed.

Laughing, she slowly shook her head and murmured,

Adelheid: "I'm beaten. I thought I was passing pretty well."

19

Bikram: "Reiner Wahrheit and Count Easley Orlon—the two, ringleader and mastermind behind the illicit sales of "Hexel"—have both been taken into custody. Well done, Juukulius."

Julius: "No, I merely carried out my duty. I'm the one who's grateful for being moved to a private room. More than a ward, that place was… uncomfortable to be in."

Bikram: "Naturally it was. Even if we couldn't reveal the undercover mission, when I heard you'd been thrown into the same room as the roughs who'd made it out because of you, my blood ran cold."

d

With that, Bikram, visiting Julius at the Sanatorium, shrugged, then arranged the peeled appa on a plate and handed it to the Julius on the bed.

Raising his upper body, Julius accepted the plate and gratefully strung the slices together.

Julius: “…Sweet, with a mellow bouquet. Especially a appa peeled by the “Silver Knight’s” own hand.”

Bikram: “As if that would change the taste. Don’t get all creepily sentimental.”

Julius: “My apologies. …About the appa—may I have them all?”

Bikram: “Do as you like… no, finish them during this visit. You seem the sort to try and save some.”

Bikram’s reaction stung, but Julius could not exactly call it wrong either, so he silently bit into a second slice of appa.

—A few days had passed since that night of the big roundup, and Julius was safely on the mend.

Judging from the reactions of the quasi-spirits worried for the awakened Julius, his injuries had been quite close to the edge; he had been saved by an ace healer he had encountered by the flow of events. It seemed the healer in question had already left the Sanatorium, and Julius had not even thanked him directly.

Julius: “I must, without fail, make the time one day to repay the debt to the savior of my life…”

So he vowed, firmly, in his heart.

Then, speaking of saviors of his life, Julius glanced toward Bikram.

Julius: “Might I have the chance to exchange a few words with Miss Helaine?”

Bikram: "…Unlikely. From their side, once a mission is wrapped, every attachment up to that point is over. Then it's on to the next mission… You wanted to air at least a complaint?"

Julius: "…I have an anger over the use of Blau that I cannot gloss over. At the same time, I also understand that without such a disturbance, saving Mr. Belmont, and resolving the incident, would have been difficult."

Bikram: "—They were grateful you saved Belmont. Told me to pass that along."

At Bikram's words—he sounded as though he'd debated whether to say it—Julius thought of Helaine's stance of not giving thanks directly and smiled wryly.

Even so, there was something else, which, told to him later, had truly shocked him.

Julius: "To think Mr. Belmont was really a spy—Miss Helaine's colleague."

Bikram: "For my part, what surprised me more was that the rumor about the Royal Guard and Belmont being connected was a ploy by Belmont himself to shake the organization. If you hadn't started spouting green idealism, he might well have ended up dead as he was… Truly, those "Six Tongues" types…"

Julius: "Sir Bikram, that—"

Bikram: "Sorry, my tongue slipped. Forget it. If it's necessary, that word will cross your ears again someday."

As Bikram made a face like "a blunder of a lifetime," Julius had to work very hard to restrain his curiosity that wanted to press on, and somehow managed to hold back.

At that wholehearted effort from Julius, Bikram heaved a deep sigh and then—

Bikram: "As for the captured Reiner, he's been cooperative in the questioning. It's like a possessing spirit fell off his face… That said, what he did is what he did. He'll likely face the extreme penalty."

Julius: "That is… regrettable. If it's the conclusion reached after careful deliberation, it cannot be helped."

As the one who had taken him alive, there was some regret. At the same time, it was also true that Reiner had committed unforgivable crimes; the crime of trading in "Hexel" was grave.

It would also serve as a showpiece of a sentence—Julius's expression clouded at that, yet—

Bikram: "I've said a lot, but on the whole, you did well, Juukulius. We likely could not have carried out this mission if you hadn't been my subordinate. I'm an old wreck, but as a knight, I thank you."

Julius: "…"

At Bikram's earnest tone, Julius caught his breath and savored the feeling.

To have even the "Silver Knight" Bikram Edditz say as much—there was nothing to feel but pride. However, that was not the only reason for the emotion that washed over Julius.

The rumors that reached him even in the Sanatorium were no mistake.

Bikram: "Wyatt Edditz—that was Reiner's inside man… my unworthy son."

Julius: "Sir Bikram…"

Bikram: "The incident that became the trigger for Wahrheit's expulsion—the slaying of Count Orlon's envoy—the real culprit was my boy, and Wahrheit took the blame. …Given that he already worked with the Count and considering his secret sword, it may have been a trap even so; but my son leaked information from the Royal Guard to them again and again. However it began, a crime is a crime."

At Bikram's matter-of-fact explanation, Julius felt a wrenching helplessness.

Though a member of the Edditz family, which for generations had produced knights, Wyatt Edditz had abetted Reiner's misdeeds. Yet, considering Bikram's feelings, to berate him for foolishness—when there was the suspicion he had been ensnared—would be heartless.

As a result, with Julius unable to offer either comfort or a sop—

Bikram: "I am retiring from knighthood. What my son did is what he did. I must take responsibility."

Julius: "…"

Bikram: "Don't make such a sour face. Even so, I'm grateful to you, Juukulius."

Julius: "Grateful? Sir Bikram, to me?"

When the regretful Julius widened his eyes, Bikram nodded. "That's right."

Bikram: "On the boat, when we recovered Belmont, and his name came up as a suspected insider, I'd be lying if I said I didn't waver. I could have protected my idiot son and strayed from the path. But —"

There he cut the words off, fixing his eyes straight on Julius.

At the sharpness of that gaze, and at the gentle feeling that ran contrary to it, Julius felt bewildered.

Smiling faintly at Julius's reaction, Bikram went on.

Bikram: "You reminded me of what chivalry is. Thanks to you, though I may be a failure as a father, I didn't have to throw away being a knight. That's a good outcome, isn't it?"

Julius: "That… is."

Bikram: "Hey, greenhorn. You're quite something. Honestly, I can't say you don't have a temperament that could see your legs swept right out from under you… but stay that way.”

Julius: “…”

Bikram: “Keep being a knight as a knight should be. —An old knight’s last request.”

Spoken gently, from a face with the edge gone, the words left Julius at a loss.

For Bikram Edditz, who had long served for the Kingdom of Lugunica under the name of the “Silver Knight,” this retirement was not of the sort he had wished; it would be one to draw pointed fingers.

The Edditz name would be disgraced as the foolish act of a son, and a father with holes for eyes who had not seen through him—but Julius Juukulius knew.

He knew how great and how gallant a knight Bikram Edditz, the “Silver Knight,” truly was.

Julius: “I will strive to live up to your expectations as far as I possibly can. They are the words of the “Silver Knight” Bikram Edditz, who vied in battle honors with the “Shield Knight,” Grimm Fauzen.”

Bikram: “How do you even know that. You are truly scary, you know.”

20

—After such a bittersweet parting, the first mission of Julius Juukulius as a knight reached its final scene.

Julius: “If you like, would you have some appa as well? I can’t finish them alone.”

Adelheid: “—I think I will. I like appa. My nanny often made pies with it.”

As she visited the hospital room, Adelheid popped a slice of appa from the plate; at her softly curving lips as she murmured, “Sweet,” Julius’s brows eased in relief.

To all appearances, Adelheid bore no injuries. Because his final battle with Reiner had been a state of no-mind, his certainty that he had protected her was hazy.

Adelheid: “Don’t worry, all went smoothly. We stopped the illicit sales of “Hexel,” and cleared the suspicions. It pains me that you were gravely wounded, but…”

Julius: “Far better than you being hurt. Call it a wound of honor.”

Adelheid: “When you put it that way, just saying “sorry” would be boorish, I suppose.”

At her troubled, wry smile, Julius felt it should be he who offered thanks.

After the duel with Reiner, he’d heard that the one who had brought the near-dead Julius to the Sanatorium had been a red-haired girl. Obviously, that could only have been Adelheid.

But just as much as he wanted to thank her, Julius also had something he wished to ask.

That was—

Julius: “In the end, I hear you were not a member of Miss Helaine’s… the ‘Shadow Knights.’”

Adelheid: “…The Shadow… Knights?”

Julius: “I have strict orders from my superior—former superior—not to dig deeper until the time comes. We can set that aside. More importantly, about you.”

Julius’s probing gaze pressed Adelheid for her true affiliation.

Helaine had concealed her affiliation; a colleague of hers had infiltrated the organization, but it had already come to light that the one in question had been Belmont.

It seemed even Helaine had not been told that the infiltrator was Belmont, and her organization had not sent two operatives either.

If so, for what reason had Adelheid infiltrated the organization?

Adelheid: “That is…”

Julius: “If it’s hard to say, answer my question instead.”

Adelheid: “—All right.”

With a tense look, Adelheid dipped her chin. She likely answered so because her honest nature would not allow her to brush Julius off.

The question Julius put to that straightforward young woman was—

Julius: “—I hear the suspicion over Sir Heinkel Astrea has been lifted; is that the desired outcome?”

Adelheid: “…”

Blinking several times in surprise at the question, Adelheid stared; Julius tilted his head and added, “How is it?”

Taking that in, Adelheid fell silent for a time, then softly smiled.

Adelheid: “Ah, yes, it is the desired result. Thanks to your cooperation. Thank you, Julius.”

Julius: “Then I’m glad. For my part, I owe you my life. My thanks, Adelheid.”

Exchanging smiles and words of gratitude, the tension between Julius and Adelheid dissolved.

She did not belong to the Royal Guard, and perhaps not to the “Shadow Knights” either, but Adelheid’s aim was not a mistaken one, and she was his benefactor. It might even be that, as one tied to the lineage of the “Sword Saint,” she was more skilled with the blade than Julius.

Even so, she had let Julius carry through with a knight’s pride. She was a woman of rare spirit.

Adelheid: “I should get going. It wouldn’t be good to be a burden.”

Julius: “Those who visit are only my brother and my family. I can’t tell them about the mission, so I would welcome it if you came.”

Adelheid: “I’m happy to hear it, but another time. —Goodbye, Julius.”

Waving over her shoulder, Adelheid headed for the wardroom door. At her slender back, Julius—for some reason—felt this would be the last chance.

Despite her having said “another time,” he felt that he would not see her again.

It would not be right to stop that retreating back. Nor did he wish to call her back. Only, if he intuited that this was a farewell in this life, there was something he ought to say.

Julius: “Adelheid, though our methods differ, you strove earnestly to fulfill your wish and did not turn your back on the path of humanity. I respect you. Please, stay that way.”

Adelheid: “—Stay well.”

Without turning in response to Julius’s words, Adelheid left that behind and departed the room.

Only after he watched that back be hidden by the door did Julius realize that what he had said had been, for the most part, a hand-me-down of words he had received from Bikram.

Because they were words he had been happy to receive, he had passed them along just as they were, no doubt.

With his tumultuous first mission over and a brief lull at hand, Julius felt keenly—

Julius: “So my ideals and my chivalry are still only borrowed from someone dazzling I admired. Untalented as I am, I hope that someday I may find my own words and my own way of walking.”

As Julius murmured that, six lights suddenly rose around him, as if to chide him.

The quasi-spirits circled round his head, as though berating the fainthearted Julius. With a little chuckle of “haha” at their rebuke, Julius strung another slice of appa from the plate.

He thought that the sweet-and-tart honeyed taste might be Bikram’s final lesson—to chew both sour and sweet.

He felt as if Bikram were scolding him: “Don’t take everything so positively!”

—Thereafter, just as Julius had sensed, he never once had the opportunity to meet Adelheid again.

Only, years later, when he became friends with the son whose safety Adelheid had worried over—Heinkel Astrea’s son, the “Sword Saint,” Reinhard van Astrea—Julius tried bringing up Adelheid in a roundabout way.

In response, Reinhard, unusually, made a troubled face and smiled wryly as he said, at a rather rapid clip,

Reinhard: “Adelheid is doing well even now. Julius, she thinks of you as a very dear friend. That’s certain. I guarantee it.”

At his oddly hasty explanation, Julius could not press further.

Beyond that curious way the topic flowed, Julius kept praying for the safety of that other friend connected to House Astrea. —That was the resolution of Julius’s first mission.

END

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II
(CA)
(Translation Pending)

Guardians of the Crimson Flame (CA)

1

???: “—Al-sama, can you hear my voice loud and clear~?”

Al: “Woah, I really can hear you.”

Hearing the voice of the girl through the glass, Al, who had been skeptical, involuntarily muttered those words.

He understood the principle, and he had also been able to imagine the result. But, that was just that; getting a bourgeois sense of surprise upon actually seeing it implemented, he was unable to put on any appearances whatsoever.

Girl: “If it’s a matter of appearances, your current clothing suits you extremely well~, have some confidence. Ah~, but, but, the pose of putting the glass up to your ear might be a bit lame, don’t you think?”

Al: “Stop reading people’s minds. Also, it’s not like I’m doing this because I want to.”

Girl: “You’re driven by necessity, isn’t that right~. I totally understa~nd.”

Sighing at her mischievous reply, Al took an objective look at himself following the girl’s comment.

Normally, Al’s bandit style was assured to garner comments saying that he did not know how to dress for different occasions, but today he had paired a formal tuxedo outfit with his boorish steel helmet, a look straight out of this spring’s brand new Lugunica Collection—accented by an empty glass that he had placed to the side of his helmet, he was in the middle of a conversation with an unseen partner on an unpopulated balcony.

Al: “Rather than lame, it’s simply suspicious.”

Girl: “Isn’t it too late to be worrying about that?”

Al: “Shut the hell up.”

Thoroughly picking up on his complaints, the other party said such needless things through the glass, so he cursed at her. Then, Al directed his gaze towards the venue bustling with people, and enquired “So?”.

Girl: “The inner part on the right-hand side of the venue, the dandy gentleman with gray hair and a beard.”

Al: “Gray, beard, and dandy, roger that.”

Receiving that, Al hid the glass in a corner by the balcony’s hand railing, straightened himself up, and then returned to the banquet hall. Then, as he searched for the person who matched the description, he had some trouble. There was no helping it. After all, this was a party in which the attendees concealed the majority of their faces.

Locating the target regardless, he introduced himself and led them into the hallway.

Then—

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

After leading them to an isolated area, Al unveiled his true objective.

Immediately after, his opponent, removing the mask of a gentleman in a double entendre, targeted his neck; twisting his body to avoid the attack, Al drew a knife and stabbed it into his opponent’s side, the poison coating the blade taking his life.

Holding up the body that had fallen limp, he hid the corpse behind the mansion, and reached a point where he could take a small breather.

Al: “Shit, six times… fucking strong, this guy.”

It had been a considerable hardship to deal with just one of them, and thinking about what had just happened was giving him a headache.

Enduring the headache, Al picked up the glass that he had hidden there in advance, and placed it against the side of his helmet.

Girl: “As expected, Al-sama performed brilliantly~. But, there’s still a long way to go, y’know?”

Al: “…”

Girl: “Huh? Is something wrong? Can you hear me? The thread is stretched taut, so you should be able to hear me, right~?”

Hearing the voice of the same girl he had heard while on the balcony, Al, having perfectly guessed the cause of his headache, deferred his response for a bit, and did not answer the “Hello~?” he received.

Without answering, he suddenly thought back on the reason why, at this masked ball—this Masquerade Night being held at the Barielle Mansion, he was being driven to do this bloody work behind the scenes.

2

—That, was ten days prior to Al participating in the dinner party, in a formal outfit he was not accustomed to wearing.

Schult: “Priscilla-sama has very much ordered that she wants to hold a “Maskaraid Naight”!”

Al: “A masquerade night…”

“Very much indeed!”; answering Al’s absentminded mumble with a sparkle in his eyes, was the shota butler who admirably worked at the Barielle Mansion, Priscilla’s favourite, Schult.

As those red eyes, brimming with eagerness and curiosity, looked up at him, Al fiddled with the metal fixtures of his helmet, shrugging his shoulders at his master's idea.

Al: "Well, it's basically a masked dinner party, but what sorta influence… I mean, as soon as she said it in a foreign-import language, I guess it goes without saying that the origin was me."

Schult: "Ah, but, I am very much the one who said that I would like to try it. I heard from Priscilla-sama that there was a type of party where you hide your face, and I so just happened to… very much indeed."

Al: "I see. It's not like the Princess's favoritism of Schult-chan is starting just now, and it also aligns with the interpretation that the Princess herself seems like she would like a masked ball, so I get it."

Rather, Priscilla's nature was such that it would not feel out of place for her to hold one once a week. Though if Al were to say such a thing, he knew that he would receive a scolding, so he would not say it aloud.

Anyhow, Al had been able to reach an understanding through Schult's explanation.

Al: "So then, Schult-chan and the other girls are all super busy with the preparations."

Looking around, aside from Schult, who had stopped before Al, the other servants who worked at the mansion could be seen busily bustling about. Unfortunately, Al could not imagine just how much work it took to hold a masquerade ball, but there was no way that it would be easy to make preparations for such a sudden party.

Only, proportionate to how pressed they were with the sudden work, there was no discontent or dissatisfaction to be found on their faces.

Al: "Seriously, to be so popular despite all that is such a strange aspect about the Princess."

Schult: "Priscilla-sama is kind and beautiful, so everybody loves her very much!"

Giving a sincere reply to Al's idle grumbling, Schult's small body restlessly sprang up to converge with his associates in making preparations for the party.

Schult was still young, and unreliable as a servant, but the mere presence of his naivety held a strange ability to encourage those around him.

Al: "A technique that uses Schult-chan's charm, huh? Since Schult-chan tends to be doted on, I'm excited to see just how devilishly he'll tempt the onee-sans once his limbs grow to full length."

Then, it happened at the moment that Al vocalized that useless, impure forecast of the future.

???: "Wah~, Al-sama has such a mental image of the pure Schult-chan, how dirty~."

Al: "…"

Heeding the sudden voice, Al narrowed his eyes within his helmet, and turned around.

Within the garden where he had been speaking with Schult, no figure other than Al could be discerned. But, since there was no possibility for that malice-filled voice to have been a hallucination, Al walked up towards the flower bed, blooming with bright red flowers, and plunked himself down against the brick wall.

Then, calling out to the other side of the wall with an "Oi",

Al: "Don't turn up here so carelessly. Priscilla Barielle's mansion will start having rumors that the Hollow of the maid who was beheaded for disloyalty is prowling around, night after night."

???: "It's noon right now, Yae-chan has legs, and to begin with, I don't have any memory of getting beheaded for disloyalty~? — Though, I did go through something far more terrifying than that."

Indeed, this person appended a sentiment of slightly differing tone at the end of her retort. That snide remark could not be construed as a grudge, and it caused Al's lips to contort greatly.

Concealed behind the brick wall, the person conducting herself so that the people of the mansion would not discover her—she who did not show herself from across the wall, was a girl with red hair, mischievous cat-like eyes, and a supple build. She had formerly been employed at this mansion, but for personal reasons, she had since resigned.

However, the reason why she must not be found, was not because she was a person who had retired from the mansion.

After all, she was an assassin who had been ordered to take out the master of the mansion, Priscilla Barielle, a traitor whose schemes had been uncovered and hindered by none other than Al.

—Yae Tenzen, that was the identity of the girl loitering behind the wall, conversing with Al.

Yae: "Ever since that night, I have been Al-sama's loyal servant… At your command and behest, Al-sama, I am content with acting as a spy, working as a killer, and serving as your harlot…"

Al: "Stop making me out to be an atrocious villain who actually makes you do all of that. As of right now, only the spy part is true."

Yae: "And when you say as of right now, that would mean~…"

Al: "You're never getting the chance to do that third thing. Don't make me say it again."

Yae: "Even though there's a second thing, the third one is all you can think about; Al-sama really is a boy at heart~."

He thought he had preempted it, but crushed by such an invincible theory, Al was at a loss for words. Since prolonging this topic would only put him at a disadvantage, Al began to shift the course of the conversation.

Yae also ought to have been aware of how risky it was to show her face at the mansion. So, to nonetheless overcome that risk and plan to make contact with Al meant—

Yae: "By the way, the mansion is quite lively right now, isn't it~?

Earlier as well, Schult-chan was restless… as always, he's so adorable that I just wanna hug him tight!"

Al: "I feel the same way, but the reason you're here isn't just because of Schult-chan withdrawal symptoms, yeah? So what's…"

Yae: "—It seems like the next plot to assassinate the Madam is in the works."

Going on? Interrupted as he was about to continue so, Al narrowed his eyes at the sharpness, chilliness, and cutting contents of those words, and silently allowed the information to sink into his brain.

A plot to assassinate Priscilla Barielle: it had a truly unsettling timbre to it, but the matter in itself was not surprising.

Currently, she was one of five candidates for the Royal Selection that would influence the future of the Kingdom of Lugunica, and even if not for that, the severity of her personality made it easy for her to forge enemies. It would not be strange for there to be those who considered Priscilla a hindrance, what with her clever eyes that seemed to see through everything, and thus wished for her to disappear.

But, that easily understandable enmity was a different matter entirely when it came to something relayed by Yae.

Al: "The Vollachian Empire's preparing its next plot, huh? How did you find out?"

Yae: "There were signs of people coming and going at the base that I previously used. It seems like Yae-chan's successor came to retrieve supplies~."

Al: "Oi oi, even though they're the cornerstone of the Empire's intelligence operations, this shinobi's been acting carelessly."

Yae: "I wouldn't call it an error on their side. Al-sama probably can't imagine it, but it's a super-duper high level of difficulty for people of the Empire to secretly maneuver within the Kingdom~."

Yae pouted her lips with nuance at Al's thoughtless evaluation, and thereupon she added “Besides~”,

Yae: “—There is no possibility whatsoever that they could imagine that Yae-chan is still alive, and much less that she betrayed the Empire, so it’s a natural course of action for them.”

She said so quietly, her words clad in a cutting edge so sharp that they alone had the potential to kill.

Al: “…”

Feeling an illusion as if that cutting edge had been fastened to the back of his neck, Al closed a single eye.

In truth, Yae’s words held no falsehoods. —She was an unparalleled genius of a ninja produced by the Vollachian Empire’s shinobi village, granted a mission of utmost importance, an existence promised to carry it through to fruition. In the one in ten thousand possibility that she were to fail, it was engraved into her soul to commit suicide without leaking any bit of the Empire’s information whatsoever.

Indeed, her soul. The programming that had been engraved into her soul, had been forcibly overwritten by Al.

Such a thing ought to have been impossible, and so this failure on Vollachia’s part, by all rights, could not be condemned.

Yae: “To think that Yae-chan, who overcame all sorts of the village’s penances whilst humming a tune, would have her body and mind forced into surrender by a middle-aged man of the Kingdom, betraying her own motherland.”

Al: “Stop with these false charges that I know nothing about. It’s no laughing matter.”

Yae: “—. That mi~ght be true. So then, so then, about this next assassination~.”

Al: “It sounds like you’re deciding on plans for a day off…”

Yae: “There’s nearly no doubt that it’s going to be enacted at the next soirée held by the Madam. I believe you called it a "Masquerade Night"?"

Hearing the forecast of the enemy's assassination plot presented by Yae, Al unconsciously held his head, troubled.

Naturally, a banquet in which many invitees would be entering and exiting the mansion would be the ideal opportunity for an assassination. Furthermore, it would be a masked ball in which it was recommended that the participants conceal their faces—for the Empire, wishing to recover from Yae Tenzen's failure, it was a combination that seemingly blessed them with a second chance.

He wanted to hold his head at this happenstance too, but there did not lie Al's greatest lament.

Al: "Even if I were to suggest cancelling it because it's dangerous, all that comes to mind is the Princess absolutely not listening to me…"

Yae: "Once the Madam has decided to do something, she will firmly refuse to bend~."

Al: "That's right, I'm beat, truly."

Fiddling with the fixture on his helmet, Al slumped his shoulders at the conceivable reality that he would end up displeasing Priscilla, and receive corporal punishment. If it was something like getting kicked by Priscilla's foot, it would be a reward; but, if he roused her true ire, causing her to draw the Yang Sword, he would be unable to do anything.

Anyhow—

Al: "—I guess there's also the idea that it'd be better to have foreknowledge of when exactly the elusive shinobi will be turning up."

Yae: "…"

Al: "Yae, I'll do my best to persuade the Princess, but don't count on it. Neither will I. More importantly, on the day of the event, we'll allocate our strength to repelling the assassins. I'll be putting you to work as well."

Swapping away from his wretched thoughts, Al attempted to deal with it constructively. Then, without receiving a reply from Yae, Al called out her name, "Yae?", once again,

Al: "What's wrong? Don't tell me that you're reluctant to quarrel with your old pals…"

Yae: "—. No, no, nothing of the sort. Only, I was just thinking about how Al-sama really is scary~."

Al: "…Ahh? What the hell's that?"

Thinking that she would start rambling again, Al cut her short and stopped associating with her. Then, behind Al as he began to systematically allocate the elements necessary for the day in question—

Yae: "Truly, Al-sama is a scary person."

That final appended comment never reached the ears of Al, deep in rumination.

3

—Thus, returning to the time of the Masquerade Night in question, when Al had finished dealing with one of the assassins who had infiltrated the event, and regained contact with Yae.

Surely enough, Priscilla did not lend an ear to Al's suggestion, and proceeded to hold a "Masquerade Night".

Corollarily, Al was clad in a tuxedo, a getup quite unfamiliar to him, and unusually, he was not acting as Priscilla's jester, but was rather performing the duties of a "Knight" by the perception of his surroundings. —Truly, it was the worst feeling.

Not his current task, but the present situation of needing to perform the duties of a "Knight", was the worst.

Yae: “Hellooo~? Al-sama~?”

Al: “Ah, my bad. Put you on hold for a bit.”

The empty glass pressed against the side of his helmet, Al responded to Yae’s voice brought about by its vibrations.

Attached to the base of the glass in Al’s hand, was a superfine thread that was difficult to see even with strained eyes, and it connected to the one in Yae’s hands as she concealed herself in the shadows of the mansion. It was a means of maintaining medium-range communication, using the principle of what was known as the “string phone”. —The epic tool he had once thought only existed in fiction, made possible by the skill of the Thread User, Yae Tenzen.

During the preparations in the leadup to the day of the party, Al had set up Yae’s “string phones” in several places around the mansion, laying the groundwork for them to communicate like this without needing to come face to face.

Al: “Though in truth, if we had one set of Conversation Mirrors, I wouldn’t’ve had to go through all that trouble.”

Yae: “Please don’t say that so lightly~. While it’s true that there is a greater supply of them in circulation than other Meteors, that still doesn’t make them easy to get one’s hands on. Not to mention, I’m currently jobless, a himo-woman completely reliant on Al-sama.”

Al: “Be careful there, himo is typically only used for men.”

Yae: “Eh~, why is that exactly?”

Al: “Who knows? It’s a strange part of the Japanese language.”

He got the impression that there was a gendered nuance at the time when the term was coined, but Al had a personal inkling that investigating it any further in this world would not yield any more conclusions, so he neglected doing so.

More importantly—

Al: “They were quite formidable, but how are we looking? Are we finished?”

Yae: “Hmm~, Yae-chan would like to give Al-sama a reward for doing his best~, but glancing back at it, it would seem like there are still about eight people remaining~.”

Al: “EIGHT…?! Even though back then, you went in solo? Maybe you were just a sacrificial pawn?”

Yae: “Please at least say that I’m nine-times as outstanding as the shinobi who are now coming~. That they felt so assured and secure in sending me in solo, that’s just how cute and reliable Yae Tenzen is!”

Al had fallen speechless at the length of the road ahead, being considerably longer than what he had imagined, and Yae’s jestful words rang hollow to his ears.

Be that as it may, Yae’s lighthearted comments, to which he had no intention of clapping back, were likely the truth. —The several shinobi who had infiltrated the party, aiming to assassinate Priscilla, would be absolutely oblivious to the fact that their identities were being leaked like this.

Moreover, it was not even a matter of being exposed by a source who had obtained their information in advance.

Yae: “Habits in disguise and masquerade show up more frequently in the tips of the hair and in the corners of the eyes than they do in gestures or behavior. I’m quite proficient at detecting that. Stuff like disguises that are unusually good at making one look way younger.”

Al: “That last thing isn’t related to the shinobi, but that’s a huge help.”

Since it simply ruined all the training they had acquired through their senses as shinobi, it must have been quite intolerable for the assassins. It was painful when considering all the time and efforts they had assiduously devoted, but it was a different story when the result of that effort would be Priscilla’s life.

Even if he needed to cheat by using Yae, Al would purge all threats to Priscilla's life.

Al: "Even saying that, I don't get the impression that dealing with the remaining eight will be a breeze. Lend me a hand."

Yae: "Wah~, hard labor~. Though, I am under orders not to show myself?"

Al: "And make sure you do that well. Or else, what's the point of this masked ball… of this Masquerade Night?"

Yae: "At the very least, it's not for an assassina~tion."

Affirming her sentiment internally, Al slowly turned his head, and prepared for what was next. Eight were left; he did intend to have Yae help out for some of them, but he would need to take charge for the majority.

At least, if he was going to reluctantly play the "Knight", that would be the proper courtesy.

Yae: "Even so~."

Al: "Huh?"

Yae: "Even though I was hoping to see Al-sama appear with a different mask than normal at this rare masquerade ball, in the end you just went with the same style as usual~, how unfortunate."

Receiving Yae's grumble from across the glass, Al responded by silently setting the glass down.

Clothed in formal attire that he was unaccustomed to wearing, he did not think to go any further to change out his helmet. To begin with, if today's theme was a masked ball—

Al: "—Something like the mask of somebody else, I've been wearing one ever since I was born."

4

Afterwards, the masquerade ball held at the Barielle Mansion proceeded peacefully “on the surface”.

Within the mansion where multitudes of people invited by Priscilla Barielle, the one extolled as the Sun Princess, were coming and going, her faithful servants were busily running about, entertaining the banquet’s invitees.

Witnessing their orderly movements and courteous manner of working, the guests of befitting social stature were all astonished, praising Priscilla’s way of being with sentiments greater than that of flattery, as it had been able to garner such loyalty from her servants.

It was a matter of course, but by hosting a banquet, it fell onto the inviting side to take responsibility for controlling the party, while at the same time allowing them to assert their right to display their power.

If a meager banquet and blunders from the servants accreted, they would be ridiculed as inadequate by their surroundings, causing the family’s honor to decline, and making it quite possible for gaps, which could be taken advantage of, to appear. Having said that, focusing on such negative aspects of a banquet and avoiding hosting an event would be negligent in displaying one’s power, thus incurring disdain from the surroundings.

At any rate, those involved with aristocratic society must never forget that it was a competition of ostentations, and that it was these dazzling battles that saved them from bloodshed.

Schult: “So, I am also very much relieved that the “Maskaraid Naight” is going well.”

And, while gazing over his colleagues as they worked, weaving their ways through the gaps in between the coming and going invitees, Schult, patting his chest in relief, participated in the party with his masked visage.

Currently, Schult wore a rabbit mask, what seemed to be the finest article suited for Schult, selected by Priscilla from an assortment of possible candidates. Not only did it conceal the area around his eyes, but the top of his head was decorated with cute, fluffy white ears, though it was a bit embarrassing.

Schult: “But, Priscilla-sama said that it suits me very much.”

There was no doubting the things which Priscilla said; such was the law of reality in the small Schult’s world.

As a matter of fact, Schult believed that the beautiful and wise Priscilla was always correct. This “Maskaraid Naight” that she had brought up as a suggestion, too, had been exceedingly difficult to prepare; but, now that they had finally gotten to holding it, it had resulted in many people speaking highly of Priscilla.

It was unfortunate that he could not see much of the invitees’ faces due to the masks, but it seemed that they were pleased with the event.

Schult: “Very much expected of Priscilla-sama. Ahem, indeed.”

While thinking it might be a bit presumptuous of himself to feel proud here, Schult still could not help but welcome the feelings of wanting to puff out his chest. In Schult’s small world, a large portion of what he could be proud of was occupied by Priscilla, so there truly was no helping it.

Schult: “Come to think of it, I am very much unable to find Al-sama.”

Al was one of the few elements other than Priscilla which were among the things Schult could take pride in, so being unable to spot him in this venue, Schult restlessly surveyed his surroundings.

Al ought to have been attending the party donned with his usual helmet, along with a formal attire that differed from his usual. Having hoped to see him with a mask that differed from his usual one given the occasion, Schult found it a bit disappointing, but since it seemed like that was his favorite, it must have been something important.

Regardless, since Al would usually tenderly watch over Priscilla from outside the enclosure of the many people who would always surround her, not being able to spot him here today was a bit strange.

???: “You, do you have a moment?”

Schult: “Ah! Very much indeed. What may be very much the matter, dear guest?”

His worry concerning Al, however, was interrupted by a voice from one of the invitees.

The man, wearing a mask decorated with black feathers, enquired about the location of the lavatory, and Schult enthusiastically guided him, saying, “It is very much this way!”

In a party with this many people coming and going, Schult could not perform the duties of a server with his short stature, so it was important for him to take on the role of these various jobs.

Schult: “Yes! Dear guest, the lavatory is very much over he… huh?”

Gesturing to the entrance of the lavatory with his hand, Schult spun around, but then inclined his head. The man, whom he ought to have guided, was nowhere to be found in the corridor.

Schult: “Very huh indeed… dear guest, where might you very much be? Hah, perhaps, was it that I hurried and ended up very much leaving him behind?!”

Feeling extremely tense with a feeling of wanting to accomplish his task no matter what, Schult was aware that he had begun walking quicker, and went pale at the realization of the outrageous thing he had done.

As it stood, they would receive criticism that Priscilla’s servant had been unable to guide an invitee to the lavatory, which would cause trouble for Priscilla, of course, but also for the other servants, who were his colleagues.

Schult: “Also, also, the dear guest might very much end up wetting himself! I have to hurry and search for—”

???: “Ah~, sweet little butler-san, you don’t need to be so worried~.”

Schult: “Au, very much.”

As Schult quickly attempted to break into a run, an outstretched hand from behind suddenly embraced him. His legs began to float from that embrace, and with his eyes opened wide, Schult glanced behind him.

Upon doing so, he saw a woman in a dress wearing a cat mask smiling at him,

???: “About the gentleman you were attempting to guide just before, his urge to urinate suddenly settled down, so he said he no longer needed to be guided. He found a friend of his and wanted to give his regards to you.”

Schult: “I-Is that very much so? That is very much good to hear. Onee-san… no, dear guest, thank you very much for passing on the message!”

???: “Not at all~, something like this is no big deal~.”

Schult: “You are very much a kind personage! I am very much deeply moved…! So then, um?”

Thanking the kind woman who had passed the message onto him, Schult was left at a bit of a loss. The woman had embraced him from behind, but for some reason she had yet to let him go.

She continued to hug Schult tightly, firmly, but with the perfect amount of force so as not to hurt him,

Yae: “Hahh, unfortunately, I guess any longer and I’ll end up embarrassing you so I have to restrain myself~.”

And so, after a little while, she returned Schult back to the floor.

Schult: “Umm, th-thank you very much…?”

???: “Ahaha, your sincerity is commendable! Now then, you must have work to do back at the event, right? The Madam as well, if she can't catch sight of you, she might get worried, y'know?"

Schult: "Even if I am not present, Priscilla-sama is always very much brimming with confidence! She is very much wonderful!"

???: "Even so, y'know~."

The woman reached out her hand and gently adjusted Schult's butler uniform, then spun him around to face the opposite direction. Pushing upon his back, Schult began to walk with a surprised "Wah".

When he looked back around, the woman was tenderly waving her hand and seeing him off. Waving back at her, Schult felt a tad embarrassed that it might have seemed childish, and then he rounded a corner in the corridor.

As he rounded it, a thought suddenly came to him.

Schult: "That person just now, I very much get the feeling that she resembled Yae-sama a bit…"

Just like him, Yae had worked at this Barielle Mansion, but had ended up resigning due to her familial circumstances. He had been unable to say farewell to her, but she too was one of the people belonging to Schult's meager pride.

After meeting a woman who possessed a similar aura, Schult slightly recalled those lonely feelings, and then hurried to return to the party.

—He was not at all aware that outside the window of the corridor, the man, who had dropped his mask of black feathers to the ground, was hanging, suffocated by a thread wrapped around his neck.

5

Yae: "And so, on my end, I went and saved Schult-chan from a precarious spot. Since I was able to enjoy his fluffy hair to the fullest for the first time in a long while, Yae-chan is completely satisfied.”

Being told about her tastes amidst her report of events, Al felt a bit worn out.

It was a meritorious act to take precautions against the assassin who was targeting Priscilla’s favorite Schult, likely plotting something, but this woman was a killer.

Ultimately, that had hindered Al’s goal of carrying the majority of the efforts, as they had each ended up taking down four of the total eight on their own, and she had also been able to satiate her tastes.

A morally bankrupt individual who toyed with and took the lives of others for fun—he would not label her as such. For her, who had been raised as a shinobi, killing was simply an extension of the ordinary.

Regardless—

Al: “It was tough, but we dealt with all the shinobi you located. Does this mark the end for sure now?”

Yae: “Mmm~, about that~.”

Al: “What is it, stop beating around the bush.”

Yae: “No? Of course, the only shinobi who rivals Yae-chan is the elderly village chief, so it’s absolutely undeniable that they’d go for quantity over quality, but…”

Al: “Undeniable, but?”

Yae: “Since it’s the second attempt after Yae-chan’s failure, if they don’t at least bundle in a Yae-chan grade plan, wouldn’t they just be squandering their lives?”

At Yae’s query, accompanied by a question mark, Al’s breath caught, and he plunged into rumination.

As Yae played her self-evaluation off as a joke, the estimation of her being the magnum opus of the village was a fact that had been experienced directly by none other than Al himself. —Within the personal experiences of Al, who possessed a cheat ability that interfered with the rules of the world, she was among the top three most powerful individuals who had cornered him.

As a corollary of that, he had ended up making Yae taste a hell that he had never intended on making her experience—

Al: "Nonetheless, your opinion is rational. The Empire doesn't consider people's lives as lives, so unless they perform an act like throwing ice little by little into a pot over a flame in order to cool it…"

Yae: "The value of a life in the Empire is that of a single life. I've had an audience with His Excellency the Emperor just once, but he said that people ought to die in an efficient manner."

Al: "I don't think I could ever get along with him…"

Anyhow, regardless of the Emperor whom he would likely never get the chance to meet, Al earnestly continued with his rumination.

As Yae had said, dispatching an operation with a lower chance of success than hers on a mission which she had failed would only result in more deaths. If the Empire's principles sought results worthy of the lives lost, then there was a possibility that what Al and Yae had just finished dealing with, was nothing more than an obvious diversion.

That was to say, there ought to have been another plan, one calculated to be even more effective than Yae's, currently in progress.

Al: "Anything coming to mind?"

Yae: "Between the Kingdom and the Empire, there was that anti-war pact signed before the start of the Royal Selection. In order for them to say that they didn't infringe upon it, the executors of the plan should be obligated to commit suicide when the act is complete. In that case, our frugal old man would be uneager to send in the young and promising ones, so skill wouldn't be the reason for selection. H~m, there are a bit too many possibilities so I can't quite narrow them down~."

Purring like a cat at Al's question, Yae refused to present a suitable opinion.

Only for the shinobi, utility players who could adapt to any situation, was the number of possibilities for plans which could utilize their techniques and abilities a value that rivaled the number of stars in the night sky. For example, the poison coating the short sword Al had been using to dispose of the assassins behind closed doors, was something that had been concocted by Yae.

Yae: "A super lethal poison which can kill even the shinobi who are trained to resist poison, Yae-chan's special Jiranme mixture."

Al: "I dotted just a bit of it on the tip of my finger to test it, and I saw hell."

Yae: "Ahaha, Al-sama you goof, you're joking around too much for someone who doesn't die~."

It was difficult to tell whether Yae's response was in earnest or in jest, but from Al's point of view, it was a weapon he would entrust his life to, so for him to be curious concerning its effectiveness was exceedingly natural. In fact, just a light touch of it had fragmented his consciousness and life in an instant; it was a dreadfully lethal poison.

And, it seemed like he was about to become indebted to the effectiveness of that short sword once more.

Al: "Yae, are you really unaware of the true objective of the enemy's stratagem?"

Yae: "Yes. —What will you do?"

Al: "Ain't that obvious?"

At Yae's soft question, Al answered whilst racking his brain over the developments which would follow from this point onward.

With the cheat technique that belonged to Al alone, if he was going to attempt to reveal the enemy's enigmatic aims—

Al: "—I'll brute-force search every damn possibility."

Saying that, in order to spread damage as far as his sight would permit, Al lumbered towards the party venue packed full with invitees of obscured faces.

Thereupon—

Al: "—El Dona."

—A divergent rampage, unretractable for anybody other than Al, commenced.

6

—The mission to which Hamayal Wesmi, a shinobi of the Vollachian Empire, had been appointed, was the assassination of a Royal Candidate of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Priscilla Barielle.

Hamayal knew not of the aim or the objective of this assassination, but he did not think to question it.

Having received such an upbringing, Hamayal, now surpassing forty years of age, had been perfected as a puppet devoid of any free will, bearing no superfluous questions in regards to this duty.

Only, there were many points in the information shared with him which heeded caution, such as the potent capabilities of his target, Priscilla Barielle, as well as the information regarding Yae Tenzen, who had failed in this duty prior—especially the latter, given that she was likewise a shinobi, was something he could not remain indifferent concerning.

Hamayal: "Sir Olbart's prized pupil…"

As one of the renowned Nine Divine Generals of the Empire, Olbart Dunkelkenn fully lived up to his title of the Vicious Old Man. And, with her talents recognized by Olbart, the very pinnacle of the Vollachian shinobi, the girl known as Yae Tenzen was the heaven-sent child of the shinobi, extolled as a genius.

That was the predecessor of this mission, and with her having failed, her successors were Hamayal, and the nine shinobi who had been deployed on the same mission—a shinobi suicide squad, for whom failure was impermissable.

As they were acting in a foreign nation, it was not an environment in which support and allies would be in abundance, but with the evening party being held at the target's mansion—moreover, a masquerade ball which gathered guests with concealed faces at that, it was a golden opportunity granted by time itself allying with Hamayal and his team.

With the failure of their predecessor in mind, they would proceed with maximum preparations in the limited time they had, the opened possibility—the hidden passage to the basement of the Barielle Mansion, the stratagem to sneak him in from there.

The late husband of Priscilla Barielle, Leip Barielle, was sly and cautious, and seemed to be a person who pathologically distrusted others; hence, there were hidden passages in the mansion that none, save for himself, were aware of. Leip had silenced the designers and builders to produce a situation in which he was the only person in the know, and in his death, those subterranean tunnels would have remained closed for eternity, but Hamayal and the other shinobi had procured the plans left behind by the erased designer, granting these tunnels once last chance to see the light of day.

The guardian of Priscilla Barielle, who had turned the tables on Yae Tenzen: his focus would be occupied via the diversion of the nine shinobi other than himself, allowing Hamayal to be fired as the decisive arrow.

By all means, it was an infallible stratagem. —No, it was supposed to have been.

???: "—Your stars were bad."

With those words, in the subterranean tunnel where no footsteps other than his should have been possible, Hamayal bore witness as a man of eccentric appearance emerged.

His head was covered by a jet-black steel helmet, and the left sleeve of the one-armed man’s dress suit, fitting for the evening party, was tied up. If one were to gather intelligence regarding Priscilla Barielle, this was a person who would naturally come up—considered to be Priscilla’s one and only Knight, the unidentifiable man known as Al.

Hamayal: “How…”

Al: “Did your strategy get exposed or something? You don’t gotta worry, it’s not like any of your comrades told me. Anyhow, I systematically destroyed, injured… well, after trying out a ton of things, I narrowed it down to the possibility that you were intruding from somewhere, so I just traced that to here.”

Hamayal: “…”

Al: “You don’t get what I’m saying, yeah? Sorry, it’s just that sorta bug.”

Rather than being unwilling to give an honest answer, Hamayal reasoned that Al simply possessed a differing common sense that he was unable to comprehend. If so, then his eccentric appearance might not have been the product of a poor joke, but rather something that was coherent and rational within Al.

But, in any case—

Hamayal: “If you’re going to stand in my way, mercy shall be none.”

Either way, Hamayal had no path of retreat.

The nine other shinobi had lost their lives. In that case, Hamayal required a death to harmonize with theirs.

Al: “I’ll say this now, but I ain’t gonna be showing mercy either—”

Stepping out before Hamayal as he readied himself, Al began to say something—but, quicker than he could finish it, a shadow leaped out from the darkness of the tunnel, biting at him.

Al’s throat quivered out a “Wha” in shock and fear, but even that outcry was engulfed by the pitch black darkness.

Quite literally, Hamayal’s shadow itself had broken away from him, becoming a jet-black beast that launched an onslaught—this was the technique that Hamayal commanded, allowing him to control a beast of shadows, known as a Phantom Wolf.

In his childhood, Hamayal had fed his shadow to a beast that devoured shadows, and together they were raised.

Without eyes, a nose, or any of the parts that would give a creature a sense of charm, the Phantom Wolf had rapidly gotten larger alongside Hamayal’s growth, and it eventually took on the form of an enormous quadruped. Truly, its appearance was best described as the silhouette of a wolf, thus making it the Phantom Wolf.

Normally, the Phantom Wolf would fold itself into Hamayal’s shadow, as well as sneak into all sorts of crevices, bringing Hamayal outstanding results as a shinobi charged with the duty of assassination. All that hard work would culminate in this assassination of Priscilla Barielle, their final mission.

For Hamayal, past the age of forty, no longer would an important duty greater than this come about. Ergo, the very end of the footsteps he had tread, living as a shinobi, was something Hamayal would adorn alongside his other half.

And for that—

Hamayal: “A deviant like you could never obstruct this duty.”

Ferociously shaking its tail, its hindquarters, the Phantom Wolf pinned Al to the ground of the tunnel, and trampled upon his life.

Hamayal’s fundamental tactic was to cooperate with his violent Phantom Wolf in order to execute his enemies in a manner which permitted not even the slightest bit of resistance, a formula for unshakable victory that needed no adaptation.

Phantom Wolf: "—ZRRAARZK."

The Phantom Wolf growled, lusting for its opponent's limbs, tired of waiting for the moment that its prey would lose all resistance. In order to bring that moment closer, Hamayal's role was not that of the Phantom Wolf's owner, but rather one of coexistence.

However, at the current moment, Hamayal was unable to move to assist the Phantom Wolf.

That was because—

Hayamal: "—A steel thread, is it?"

Blood trickling down his outstretched left arm, Hamayal leaped backwards and gritted his teeth.

His bleeding left arm had been the price for immediately guarding his neck; he had received numerous cuts from slicing off the tips of his fingers, to lacerating down to his elbow. Eliminating that sense of loss from his consciousness, he tightened his muscles to stop the bleeding; having reflexively mastered the shinobi techniques to that extent, Hamayal's heart seethed with anger.

The reason was obvious: the steel thread that had sliced up Hamayal's arm, was one of the secrets among shinobi arts—in the modern day, it was a technique that had only been mastered by a single person, the one known as the Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen.

Hayamal: "CRIMSON SAKURAAAAA—!!"

Yae: "Ah~, geez, you don't need to use such a loud voice."

As Hamayal's angered bellow reverberated through the tunnel, abruptly emerging within his dark vision was a girl of red hair.

Slender and flexible, possessing limbs tempered to be akin to steel threads, she was a woman crammed full with the refined techniques of the shinobi, Yae Tenzen.

She, who had been deployed to the Kingdom, and had reportedly failed her mission and lost her life, was present there. She was clad in a dress, concealing her face with a cat mask, but there was no doubt. There was no mistaking her.

She had survived, and was hiding in the Kingdom with nary a care. At that fact, Hamayal was enraged.

Hamayal: “How is it that a shinobi who has failed their mission still has blood flowing through their veins?”

Yae: “Let’s stop with tha~t sorta thing. A face you knew is still alive, so shouldn’t it be fine for both of us to clap our hands together with smiles on our faces while saying “long time no see~”? Though, I guess I did tear your left hand apart, Hamayal-san.”

Hamayal: “CRIMSON SAKURAAA…!”

Yae: “So it’s really no use, huh? It seems like you’ve hated me since forever.”

As her steel threads danced around her, Yae pouted her lips in a sullen manner. At that gesture, that attitude, that demeanor, Hamayal could not help but feel his nerves being rubbed the wrong way.

As she had said, Hamayal had known Yae since she was under training at the village. He was around twice her age. Yae had been a young child when she began her training, so Hamayal had already been engaging in his work as a shinobi, but there was no shortage of talk regarding her in the village.

While her age was still in the single digits, she had mastered the Flow Method, a technique which allowed her to manipulate her body’s Mana, and in less than a single year, she had acquired ten-odd techniques which would each take most shinobi several years to learn. And, her greatest renown was the fact that she had even mastered the Steel Thread Technique, which nobody had attained in centuries.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, a shinobi among shinobi, fully living up to the evaluations of child prodigy and genius—that was Yae

Tenzen, having been granted talent beyond imagination.

And yet—

Hamayal: “Despite overflowing with so much talent as a shinobi, you lack a shinobi’s resolve. Flippantly laughing, never facing anything directly, without a serious bone in your body…”

Yae: “I get that Hamayal-san and everyone else at the village has an idealized image of shinobi, y’know? But, I just never fit that image, and it was troubling for people to expect that I would. For the most part, I just do what I can, so isn’t it the people who can’t do that who are worse?”

Hamayal: “Is surrendering to the enemy because you cling to your own life your justification for that way of being?!”

Yae’s protest, which sounded like nothing if not putting on airs, fanned the flames of Hamayal’s anger, the firewood of which kept on surging forth rather than being consumed.

Why, how; his lamentations were unending. For what reason, had the heavens chosen Yae? —A woman like Yae Tenzen, bereft of any shinobi-like characteristics, why had she been granted the essence of a shinobi?

As Hamayal erupted with emotions that could be classified as neither envy nor frustration, Yae toyed with all ten of her fingers which controlled her steel threads, and purred “Mmrrr~” like a cat.

She purred, and then,

Yae: “I really did surrender, so while I think it’s a bit difficult~ to make any excuses for that, I don’t want you to get any mistaken ideas so please allow me to correct it.”

Hamayal: “At this stage, what are you…”

Yae: “—I didn’t surrender because I was clinging to my life. I wasn’t even allowed to abandon my life. Hamayal-san, it wasn’t Death I yielded to; it was “terror”.”

Those freezing cold words of Yae's sealed Hamayal's anger from progressing any further.

Even if she was of an unserious disposition, Yae had received the shinobi training of suppressing emotions, having acquired a spirit that would never reveal anything, no matter the level of torture; thus, her statement was bloodcurdling, and by no means could it be taken as a falsehood.

That was something that had pierced directly into Hamayal's heart—

Yae: "—See, he's getting up now. The harbinger of my "terror"."

Indeed, it happened right after Yae's theatrical declaration.

Hamayal: "…"

Suddenly, the sound that had been causing the cold atmosphere of the tunnel to quiver ceaselessly, vanished. That, had been the ravenous respiration of the Phantom Wolf devouring its prey's life with all its might.

At some point, that had ceased. But, by all rights, once the Phantom Wolf had killed its prey, it would return to Hamayal's shadow; yet no such thing had occurred.

The reason being—

???: "Good grief… looks like it's finally listening to what I say."

While speaking, the man, who had been lying collapsed, stood up straight amidst the shadows. Beside the man kneeled the Phantom Wolf, assimilated into the darkness of the tunnel, obediently bowing its head.

As if to display its submission to the man—to Al, it was the beast's admission of defeat.

Hamayal: "How…"

Yae: "Who knows? That's just what Al-sama does."

At a loss for words, Hamayal's query was not answered by the man in question, but rather by Yae. Perceiving an unconcealable joy in Yae's voice, new coals of anger burned at the bottom of Hamayal's stomach. Looking back at Yae, he attempted to raise his voice—

Hamayal: "…"

Silently, at the heat of Yae's gaze, looking at the man amidst the darkness, Hamayal understood.

Yae Tenzen, had been broken. Hamayal had evaluated her attitude as being the same unserious one she had possessed back at the village, but that had been an error.

As she herself had admitted, Yae had submitted to "terror"; her mind, her way of being, had been shattered.

Thus, the source of that was—

Al: "Yae, don't interfere. There's something I wanna have him do."

Yae: "—As you wish."

With a polite bow, Yae withdrew her web of steel threads, and took a step backwards. Just as Al had commanded her, it seemed she had no intention of interfering with this battle.

This was his chance to clinch victory. With his Phantom Wolf having been subdued through some means, and having lost his left arm, Hamayal had no chance of defeating Yae; but, it was a different story if she had been ordered to withdraw.

It ought to have been a different story. It was different. Yes, it had been different. Different, and yet. A different.

Hamayal: "O, RAHHHHHHHH!!"

Within his mind, dominated by anxiety to the point of erasing his sense of duty, Hamayal howled.

Howling, he concentrated all the techniques he possessed as a shinobi, and leaped at Al. Standing opposite Hamayal, as he loosened the collar of his dress suit, Al spoke.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

7

—The Sacred Vollachian Empire, the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the Crystal Palace.

Serving as the castle of the Vollachian Emperor, ‘twas a beautiful palace that symbolized the prosperity and might of the Empire. Those provisioned with rooms on the uppermost floor of that palace were confined to only the most important of positions within the Empire, this room being no exception.

As one of the Empire’s Nine Divine Generals, this was the office of Chisha Gold, residing in the seat of the Fourth.

???: “Even so this workload is as per usual so much that it’s quite possible you might die of overworking! How’s it possible that you’ve been going at this staring contest with those documents without getting tired for how many hours and days and years, Chisha?”

Chisha: “Unfortunately, I do not believe that I am being overwhelmed by such an inhuman workload, hmm. To begin with, my work is not limited to paperwork alone.”

???: “So by that you mean that your workload isn’t even just on this scale, right Chisha? I think that there’s no doubt that both His Excellency and Chisha will die from the cause of overworking!”

Speaking in a loud voice without hesitation, making a statement that would have him charged with lèse-majesté, was a young man wearing a kimono.

Deliberately sitting on the edge of the office desk rather than in the reception chair, the young man tried to pester him to cease all the work he was pressed with, to which Chisha faintly massaged the skin around his eyes.

While he certainly felt tired, taking a rest here would just be going along with the young man's intentions, but not taking a break and dying from overworking would also end up just going along with what the young man had said. Neither of these were progressions that Chisha favored.

Chisha: "Then, I suppose I would choose to not halt my work, hmm."

Thus, if his efforts would come to a halt either way, he would endeavor to complete just a bit more work; it was then, right when Chisha had caused the young man's cheeks to puff up with discontent.

???: "Chisha-sama, a sealed letter has arrived."

Indeed, given that a soldier had delivered a letter, his work ended up being interrupted anyway. Placing the letter on his desk, he urged the soldier to leave the room; then, as Chisha looked at the seal on the letter, he narrowed his eyes.

The plan he had been progressing in secret, this sealed letter would reveal its outcome.

Young Man: "You're not looking so well, Chisha."

The young man had fired a bit of a disreputable statement, and ignoring what he had pointed out, Chisha broke the letter's seal, and seeking to ascertain its contents, he unfolded the paper within. —It was at that moment.

???: "—ZRRAARZK."

Alongside the sudden roar, the shadowy beast that had been bound within the letter—the Phantom Wolf, made its assault on Chisha.

Those jet-black fangs ferociously snapped at Chisha's contrasting throat of pure white—

Young Man: "Unfortunately I did just predict that Chisha would die from overworking and all."

The worthless joke overlapped with the sound of a blade, unleashed at lightning speed, being returned to its sheath.

Evidently, the sword that had flashed as if it were lightning had cleaved the Phantom Wolf, which would have otherwise torn Chisha limb from limb, cleanly in twain, subduing the monster spoken to be a malevolent beast in the blink of an eye.

Chisha: "…"

Living up to its name, the Phantom Wolf had dispersed akin to a phantasm. Ascertaining its form scattering apart like black soot, Chisha stroked his neck, into which the fangs had nearly sunk.

Young Man: "Looks like someone's got a grudge against you. Well it's only natural for someone who works like you to be resented so I guess stuff like this happens on the daily."

Chisha: "To be hearing that from you, even I feel compelled to lament."

The young man had rescued Chisha in the instantaneous combat; however, without expecting anything in return, he simply brought a cup of tea to his lips as if nothing had happened.

His needless comment, which as always, bit right to the core, caused Chisha to force a smile.

The Phantom Wolf that had vanished a moment ago, was the unique weapon of the assassin Chisha had ordered to infiltrate the Kingdom—the reason why it had been turned towards Chisha was obvious: it was a demonstration from the opponent.

The act of turning the shinobi, who ought to have been perfectly loyal to their orders, sacrificing themselves for their duty, into traitors, and attempting to deliver those fangs back to Chisha, the mastermind, was not an act of retaliation, but rather a silent threat.

A certain way of advising surrender, such that going any further would result in both sides perishing.

Chisha: "The tide seems to have turned… any further than this, and keeping this hidden from His Excellency shall not be possible. As expected of the younger sister… or rather, perhaps it was the actions of the younger sister's guardians, hmmm."

As a weakness of the Emperor, Vincent Vollachia, a being who could easily become a problem for the Seventy-Seventh Emperor, and a factor of apprehension in regards to the Great Disaster due to arrive in the not so distant future, based on all such possible viewpoints, he had wished to remove Priscilla Barielle from the board.

But, Chisha had somewhat expected the infeasibility of such an act.

In that case, what remained was to do what little he could to the best of his abilities, and what little he could to ensure the best outcome.

Chisha: "—All to ensure that the Sword Wolf of the Sacred Vollachian Empire, shan't ever be killed."

8

???: "The "Maskaraid Naight" was very much well received! Priscilla-sama was also greatly pleased, and I too am very much proud!"

With that, while busy with cleaning up the venue, Schult's adorable face gleamed brightly with a sense of accomplishment, along with the joy from having received the appreciation of Priscilla, whom he loved and respected to such an extent.

And, having taken part in the bloodshed that had unfolded behind the scenes, Al could not look the dazzling Schult in the eye.

Nonetheless, it was for the very best that Priscilla had been pleased. Unfortunately, since he was busy working behind the scenes, Al did not have much of a chance to participate in the party, but he could not be blamed for that.

Schult: "Also, Priscilla-sama very much told me to pass this message on to you if I found you, Al-sama! The clown is not to get carried away making merry backstage. Such distractions would prevent him from fully enjoying these rare festivities… it was very much something like that!”

Al: “Ah, yeah, got it. Good impression, Schult-chan.”

Schult: “I am very much embarrassed! But I still have very much of a long way to go! I will very much be diligent!”

Perhaps because his imitation of Priscilla was his trump card, Schult got flustered upon being praised for it; ruffling his hair, Al sent the cute butler boy back off to work with a cheer.

Then, heading to the garden where the aftertastes of the banquet yet lingered, as he had done ten days prior to the masked ball, he leaned against the wall, striking it with the back of his helmet.

When he did so—

???: “No need to guess, the Madam is aware of what happened that night, isn’t she?”

Al: “Damn well seems like it. ‘Course, she wouldn’t have any way of knowing the finer details, but she’s aware of the commotion I was in… I wonder if she knows about you, though.”

???: “Uehhh… if the Madam discovered me, Al-sama, you’d have to punish me, right?”

Al: “Yeah, that’s the plan. That’s why, you should go full shinobi-mode and stay low.”

Both of them leaning against the wall as they exchanged words back-to-back, Al looked towards the mansion, which was still being tidied up from the evening party two days ago,

Al: “So then, what about our cleanup?”

Yae: “I’ve scattered all of the corpses amongst fertilizer in the forest. Also, about Hamayal-san…”

Al: “The owner of the Phantom Wolf, right? What happened to him?”

Yae: “He has passed. The Phantom Wolf that was sent back must have been disposed of. The lives of a shadow beast and shadow master are intertwined with one another, and if either of them dies, the other will also perish; that’s the price of the power.”

Al: “So I messed up all those times ‘cause of that… I mean, if you knew that, then you should’ve told me.”

Yae: “You never asked though~?”

Picturing her saying that with a bit of an odious expression on her face, Al sighed deeply.

With his mind having been shattered by Al in that tunnel, Hamayal did what he was instructed, sending the Phantom Wolf back to the mastermind who had ordered Priscilla’s assassination, and had lost his life. That in itself was exactly what he had expected, and he was hoping that the other party would receive the message, and conclude that it was not worth the hassle.

Only, after shattering Hamayal’s mind, the thought had come to him again.

Al: “Yae, there’s something wrong with you, yeah?”

Yae: “Well. What’s that supposed to mean? Even though you’ve captured the adorable Yae-chan, there’s still a limit to abusive language.”

Al: “I’ll admit that it was an abusive remark. But…”

Painstakingly and conscientiously, Al had used every means possible in order to get Hamayal to do what he was told.

But, he had been unable to shape him into the same sort of loyal pawn that Yae was, and judging by the results, he clearly felt that Hamayal meeting his end was only natural.

In that case, why had Yae arrived at a mental state of resigning herself to her current position?

Yae: “Even though it was none other than Al-sama who made me into a woman, how could you say such a thing?”

Al: “…You’ve been a woman since you were born, I played no part in that.”

Yae: “…But even from this point forward, it’s still possible for you to play a part, y’know?”

Al: “Don’t say such scary things. Giving me hella goosebumps.”

Likely, Yae was making a cute face overflowing with smiles, but at that invitation of hers, Al rubbed the goosebumps on the back of his neck, giving a curt response.

From time to time, Yae would mix in a womanly lust into the words she used to tease Al.

That was because her survival instincts were calculating the optimal means to win Al’s affection.

And, there were likely no mistakes in that optimal solution. Supposing he went along with her intentions, Al would likely become unable to make use of Yae like he had on this occasion.

Hence, making sure he never accepted such an invitation, was Al’s greatest means of self-defense.

Al: “Well, in the first place, you’d never be able to sway me while being no match for how sexy the Princess is.”

Yae: “Breasts, is it~? Is it really the breasts after all~? That’s always how it is with men~.”

Al: “No comment.”

That was also part of Priscilla’s charm, so Al would not deny it out of hand.

On top of that, hesitating about how he should put his next sentiments into words, Al put them into words.

Al: “Yae, you really helped me out this time. Thank you.”

Yae: "—. Oh, to think Al-sama would properly voice his gratitude… will it perhaps rain fire tomorrow?"

Al: "I'll always at least say my thanks. What the hell do you think I am?"

Yae: "—A monster, y'know?"

Al: "…"

At the immediate answer which showed no hints of being a joke, Al gulped down his breath. Receiving Al's silence, Yae, whose face remained unseen to him, resumed.

Yae: "Al-sama is a monster. That, is something I know. What differed between myself and Hamayal-san, I think was surely a discrepancy in our tolerance towards "terror"~."

Al: "…So, Hamayal was weaker?"

Yae: "It's the opposite. It's because, not once had I ever found anything to be scary."

As far as he had heard, Yae had not faced any failures in the shinobi village since a young age, easily overcoming various trainings that were considered to be penances; likely, there had never been anything terrifying to her.

That emotion to which Yae had been unbeknownst, Al had engraved, had demonstrated it to her soul.

Al: "—Aggressor of the Territory."

Existing within the activation of Al's cheat technique—his Authority, that was a unique definition.

The forfeit of confidence, the deficiency of a sense of duty. Al had analyzed that those were the causes, but just a bit earlier, the subjectivity of Al's Authority had wavered, causing a situation in which the initiative would frequently shift between Victim and Aggressor.

Ever since he had resolved to make Priscilla the Monarch, that had ceased all wavering. —That was, until he had to engage in mortal combat in order to stop Yae.

The Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen, had been strong. —She had given an overwhelming sense of weakness to Al, whose resolve ought to have been hardened, to the extent that she had ended up becoming trapped in the position of Aggressor of the Territory.

What could be described as nothing more than a bug of his Authority, the activation of an inescapable loop. Engulfed by the phenomenon that had effloresced even the deluded obsessions of Leip Barielle, Yae had managed to escape meeting the same fate that Leip had, but she had come to know "terror".

Henceforth, she—

Yae: "I'm scared of Al-sama. Outside of Al-sama, I don't fear anything. Even the thought of defying Al-sama makes me tremble uncontrollably, and I even start to tear up. For that reason, I obey you."

Al: "Yae…"

Yae: "I'll do anything. I'll obey. I'll devote myself. I'll serve. So, I'm begging you, please don't do anything to frighten me… to frighten Yae again."

At that sincere entreaty, Al felt the weight of that which he had trampled upon, and closed his eyes.

Some time ago, before Yae had done her part as his assassin, the insurmountable precipice of "terror" had not yet existed between her and Al.

Their comfortable relationship from back then, never again could it be restored.

Al had made the decision to sacrifice that relaxed relationship in order to secure Priscilla's future.

That was why—

Al: “Ahh, don’t defy me from here on out, yeah? So long as you obey properly, I won’t do anything bad to you.”

After saying it aloud, he thought about how it was the sort of thing a super-lame villain would say, which drove himself crazy. But, since he could not afford to laugh there, Al bit down on his inner cheeks, enduring the urge.

He had been far too late in gaining awareness that he was a real villain, how truly odious.

Yae: “…Yes, Al-sama.”

As Al derided himself so, back-to-back with him across the brick wall, Yae muttered.

Clutching her chest, throbbing with the untamed “terror”, Yae followed her heart, whispering a vow of her submission to the man beyond the wall, the absolutely permanent resignation of her soul, in a voice inaudible to him.

END

Short Story Collection 12

First Mission
(Translation Pending)

First Mission After

1

???: “—In regards to the matter on this occasion, your lack of involvement has been proven. Hence, your house arrest has been lifted. Though, I’d considered it an unnecessary measure to begin with.”

Indeed, told so by the Commander of the Knights who wore a stern expression, Heinkel Astrea narrowed his eyes.

Heinkel: “…Proof of innocence, huh? At this stage?”

???: “…”

Heinkel: “Ahh, that wasn’t referring to this case alone. I don’t need to spell it out for you right, Commander?”

Twitching his eyebrows alongside his paltry smile and words, Heinkel shrugged his shoulders. Upon hearing the emphasis on his title, the other party’s eyebrows formed an even deeper frown; a dark delight for Heinkel.

That was because at the very least, the person who carried that title obviously had some dissatisfaction with it.

The Commander of the Knights—the Boulder, Marcos Gildark, bearing rock-like facial features with rough edges that suited his alias, trained a silent gaze on Heinkel. There were intricate hues housed within that gaze, however, unlike before, Heinkel was unfazed.

It was strange. Before, he used to be absolutely terrified of Marcos’s every action, but now, he could not care less. It was neither that their rift in strength had been crossed, nor was it that their positions had been reversed, it was simply that the priorities within Heinkel had shifted from what they had been before. That was all it was.

Heinkel: “Was that all? If so, that wasn’t anything worth calling me all the way out to the guard station for. You should’ve just fetched some messenger. Commander of the Knights is a position important enough to get to do that sort of thing.”

Marcos: “You’re sure well-informed. Was a relative of yours perhaps Commander of the Knights?”

Heinkel: “—Hk, yeah, right, that’s it. Even if you’re acting all polite now, you’ll always be the same at heart.”

Receiving the scathingly sarcastic riposte, Heinkel clicked his tongue and feigned composure. He had already thought to himself just a moment ago that he would no longer be perturbed by Marcos’s words.

That was why—

Heinkel: “If there’s nothing else, let me go home. Oh yeah, I’ve yet to congratulate you on your promotion—”

Marcos: “—There is also the matter of you being appointed as the Deputy Commander of the Royal Guard.”

Heinkel: “…Huh?”

His attempt to use an unpleasant congratulatory address as an excuse to leave, was shattered by an unthinkable proposition.

Blinking several times, Heinkel gave a long, hard stare at Marcos’s face on the other side of the desk. From his stern expression, he could not discern any precise colorings of emotion.

Only, it was obvious that even he, who had spoken it, was not welcome to the idea.

Heinkel: “What’s your goal here? Me, as Deputy Commander? As the Commander of the Knights, that isn’t a joke you should be making!”

Marcos: “A joke would have been much more preferable. Of all the things for a man who, until just a moment ago, had been placed under house arrest on suspicion of being involved with the trafficking of illegal drugs, the second most important position of the Guard?”

Heinkel: “What are you speaking about as if you weren’t involved…”

Marcos: “It was decided by the Council of Wise Men. Although I am Commander, the power of appointment isn’t something I can dispute.”

Heinkel: “The Council of Wise Men…?”

The institution responsible for important decision-making within the Kingdom, supporting the Lugunican Royal Family, and aiding the King to determine the nation’s policies—under that pretext, the Council of Wise Men was a gathering of the nation’s mainstays who essentially ran the Kingdom. Hearing that his own name had been raised by them, Heinkel frowned in bewilderment.

Then, he immediately understood who the Council of Wise Men was truly focusing their attention on.

Heinkel: “They’re scared of my son, so their motive’s to butter me up?”

Marcos: “I won’t deny it. After all, no matter what pretenses they maintain, that would still be the truth. Reinhard will also turn fifteen next year. He’ll be joining the Guard. Isn’t that right?”

Heinkel: “Ask him yourself! Hello hello, aren’t you the current generation’s Sword Saint-sama who’s inherited the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint? Do you plan on becoming a Knight? Or whatever the fuck!”

Marcos: “I have asked. And, this is what he told me. —That is for my father to decide, or something like that.”

Heinkel: “…”

Relying on the thick emotions surging up, Heinkel had begun to speak in a vulgar manner as his expression distorted.

The plot of the Council of Wise Men, Marcos’s actions taken beforehand due to finding that plot disagreeable, as well as Reinhard’s answer in response to him, absolutely all of it rubbed Heinkel’s soul the wrong way.

Only, letting the erupting hatred rise to the corners of his mouth, Heinkel spoke.

Heinkel: “Who the hell would want to become the Deputy Commander. That lot of senile old fools in the Council of Wise Men can go eat shit.”

2

After parting with Marcos at the guard station, he did not intend on returning home directly to the mansion.

He violently stripped away his Knight uniform, and took on an appearance with which he could mix amidst the commoners, heading for a bar in the Commoner District of the Royal Capital so that he could drown himself in as much cheap liquor as he desired.

There was a bar in the Royal Capital known as the Silver Shield where Knights typically frequented, but Heinkel absolutely would not set foot there.

He did not wish to come face-to-face with the shopkeeper there. Not to mention, if he were to hear even a single rumor regarding his father, whose whereabouts were currently unknown, he foresaw that both his head and stomach would be ravaged for several days.

Thus, bearing a pain that had not numbed no matter how much alcohol he drank, Heinkel was on his way home with flushed cheeks and staggering steps—

???: “—Father.”

As his head swayed side to side, the moment his body was about to tip over after parting from the wall he had been leaning on, an outstretched hand caught him, and Heinkel immediately locked eyes with a nearby blue glow.

Seeing that double due to his state of intoxication, Heinkel instantly realized that they were the eyes of a face he knew. Upon understanding that, he violently attempted to shake free from the arms supporting him, yelling “Let go of me!”. He could not shake them off. Even though the strength gripping his arms was not very intense, his attempt to shake free was easily swept away, and evaded.

Heinkel: “I said, let go of me!”

???: “I cannot do that. If I were to let go, you would end up tumbling down.”

Chiding the rambunctious Heinkel, was a yet youthful boy—the fourteen year old, Reinhard van Astrea.

As his trueborn son lectured him so, Heinkel still continued to resist. But, the scuffle between father and son on a rather empty street, ended in Heinkel’s crushing defeat before it could even be any sort of actual contest.

Then, being lent a shoulder by his son before he could register it, they resumed walking home.

Reinhard: “Please moderate your alcohol consumption. Today, you were called in by Marcos-san, correct?”

Heinkel: “I’ve got no reason to be lectured by you. Besides, you’re…”

Reinhard: “—? What is it?”

Heinkel: “…No, nothing. That’s right, Marcos called me in. My house arrest has been lifted.”

Reinhard: “Is that so? Even if it is only natural, it relieves me to hear that. Father has nothing so shady going on, so it was a valid decision.”

Heinkel: “A valid decision, eh?”

Being dragged along as they walked, Heinkel peered at the side profile of Reinhard beside him.

The composed face of his son, when he was young it seemed to be composed only of the facial features of his wife, Louanna, but now at fourteen, he could more or less spot features that aligned with his own face.

While thinking that absolutely all of that was unnecessary—

Heinkel: "…Marcos, he asked me to be Deputy Commander."

Reinhard: "—! Is that true?"

As Heinkel grumbled that out, Reinhard's eyes gleamed, and his voice grew slightly lively.

Likely, Reinhard himself had concealed that liveliness from his voice. However, Heinkel could tell. He could tell that this had truly delighted Reinhard. —This vain promotion of his father, had.

Simultaneous to perceiving that, he also thought the following.

Heinkel: "Reinhard, when I was under house arrest, what did you do?"

Reinhard: "…"

Heinkel: "Answer me. What did you do while I was under house arrest? Don't tell me, with someone from the Council of Wise Men…"

Reinhard: "You are mistaken. Father, during your house arrest, I did not make contact with any members from the Council of Wise Men. Of course, I did with Marcos-san. Their evaluation of you, Father, is completely disconnected from me…"

Heinkel: "—There's no fucking way that's true!"

Stringing together shallow words, Reinhard attempted to keep up appearances, and Heinkel grabbed him by the collar. Then, slamming his son against the wall of the street, Heinkel peered into his eyes up close.

Reinhard had said something that he ought to have never said. —That Heinkel's special treatment had nothing to do with Reinhard.

Heinkel: "You shouldn't be saying things that you don't even believe in. For my wretched self to be something like Deputy Commander…"

Reinhard: "—. But, Father, you ought to necessitate time, is that not correct?"

Heinkel: "Ah?"

Reinhard: "Time and status, it is best to have as much of those as possible. I know that you find it irritating, Father. For that reason, please accept this appointment. If you do so…"

Heinkel: "…"

Reinhard: "If you do so…"

Leaving the following words unclear, Reinhard frowned his well-shaped eyebrows, unable to continue.

That was Reinhard's own way of expressing sadness, and it was clear that the genesis for those emotions had been the act of witnessing Heinkel's expression before his eyes. Likely, if he were to look into Reinhard's eyes, he would glimpse at the pathetic man who had caused his son to feel that way. But, Heinkel did not look.

Only, beaten down by Reinhard's reasoning, he acutely felt his own wretchedness.

Heinkel: "…I guess, it's exactly as you say."

He desired time. The higher his position, the greater his title, the more help it would be. Things that the title of head of House Astrea, the lineage of Sword Saints, was not enough for, if he gained an important position within the Guard, if he could gain more time to spend negotiating, then those very things might come within his reach. —The means by which to awaken the slumbering Louanna Astrea, might finally come into his hands this time.

Heinkel: “I was being extremely stubborn. When things need to get serious, there’s absolutely zero value in any of my meagre feelings of pride.”

Reinhard: “Father, I am…”

Heinkel: “—Heinkel Astrea-dono.”

Releasing his collar, Heinkel thrust his finger at Reinhard’s face.

Heinkel: “I’ll become the Deputy Commander of the Guard. Reinhard, you’ll also enter the Guard when you turn fifteen. Go brandish the power of the strongest Sword Saint in history to your heart’s content. It’ll make it easier for me to operate… Perform the work of the Guard, pull both your weight and my own.”

Reinhard: “—. Understood. Father… Deputy Commander, if that is what you wish.”

Picking up on Heinkel’s intentions, Reinhard silently accepted them. At the answer lacking any hesitation whatsoever, Marcos’s words flashed through Heinkel’s mind.

Whether Reinhard became a Knight or not, depended entirely on Heinkel.

Heinkel: “Become the number one Knight. A Knight amongst Knights. To the point that they stop worrying about me as an individual, become the sort of Knight that everyone in this nation is utterly dependent on.”

Reinhard: “Deputy Commander, if that is what you desire.”

Heinkel: “That’s right, that’s what I want. It’s what I desire, so go make it happen.”

At some point, Reinhard’s expression had forgotten its sorrow, and had returned to being a calm one. Unable to bear the sight of that, and finding it harsh to remain here, Heinkel turned his back on Reinhard.

In the opposite direction of the mansion, he would return to the guard station of the Knights he had departed from earlier, and inform Marcos.

Heinkel: “I’ll go tell him that I gratefully accept the appointment. Don’t follow me.”

Reinhard: “—. Yes.”

As Heinkel began to walk, Reinhard, who had been about to accompany him for a moment, halted his step. As his son’s presence faded into the distance, though still feeling the gaze clinging to his back, he walked, and walked.

His head hurt. But, unrelated to the alcohol he had consumed, that was a terribly self-deprecating drunkenness of sorts. With tottering steps, he returned to the guard station at a rather late hour. It was likely a real nuisance, but he cared not.

Heinkel: “After all, you’re also the type who presumes upon your wife’s kindness and doesn’t go home, right, Marcos?”

As if spitting those words out, he foolishly wounded himself again with his own words.

In order to accept the promotion to Deputy Commander which he was not suited to in the slightest, Heinkel Astrea totteringly tread up the road to the Royal Castle. —Still having yet to carry the sword name of “van” in his name.

3

Until the very moment that the back, advancing down the street with unsteady steps, fully faded from his vision, the boy was tormented by an inner turmoil of whether or not to pursue it.

If the boy felt like it, it would be no difficulty for him to follow behind without the other person detecting his presence. Only, considering the final comment “Don’t follow me” that was added, served to fetter the boy.

???: “—You don’t need to worry, if it’s your old man, our people are keeping an eye on him.”

And, as the boy stood still on the street in hesitation, footsteps and a voice belonging not to the boy interrupted him. Having slipped out from the darkness, was a lanky young man wearing a flimsy cap —

Reinhard: “Belmont-san.”

Belmont: “And as for yourself, would Adelheid suffice? I always found it strange, but a girl really can transform herself into a different person… no, were you never a girl to begin with?”

Reinhard: “It was thanks to the Divine Protection of Makeup. Though, I am the one who failed to realize that you were from the Six Tongues, Belmont-san, so it came as quite the surprise.”

Belmont: “Hahaha, thanks. But, even if you didn’t think I was with the Six Tongues, you must have realized that I had been hiding something, right?”

Reinhard: “…”

As Belmont closed a single eye, the boy did not answer his question. Belmont seemed not to pay that any particular heed, and exhaled a “Well then”,

Belmont: “I made sure not to listen in on the exchange, but how did your conversation go? Were you able to persuade your old man to accept the appointment of Deputy Commander?”

Reinhard: “Yes. Father told me that he would accept it.”

Belmont: “I see, I see, that’s good, then. We also had to pull a bunch of strings. The best thing is that it all didn’t go to waste.”

Scratching his head with his bandaged hand, Belmont gave a broad smile.

There had been no falsehoods in the words the boy had exchanged with his father a moment prior. In reality, the boy had not made contact with the Council of Wise Men that controlled this nation’s politics for this matter. —That was because, he had entrusted that task to another party.

Belmont: “Originally, it was a suspicion that collapsed because it took so long for us to uncover their informant. If this can at least serve as some compensation for you… that’s what the boss thinks, at least.”

Reinhard: “I understand those feelings. In addition…”

Belmont: “In addition?”

Reinhard: “I have received permission from Father to become a Knight once I turn fifteen.”

Belmont: “—! That’s certainly good news. Our boss shall be pleased.”

Clapping his hands at the boy’s news, Belmont recalled his injury with an “Ow” as he stuck out his tongue. But, the matter of the boy having received permission to become a Knight, was a feat that warranted an impact to that extent.

For the boy, who had inherited the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, was already showing prospects of surpassing all the Sword Saints of history, and was adorned with the sword name of “van”, to vow to be the sword that protected the Kingdom, that was.

Belmont: “Undoubtedly, that is the long-cherished desire of we at the Six Tongues.”

Reinhard: “I will never swing the sword for the sake of you people.”

Belmont: “Of course, by all means. Rather, it would be troubling if that wasn’t the case. For your power to be used only for the sake of a single individual, that sort of situation would be a much greater loss.”

Reinhard: “…”

Belmont: “More or less, becoming a Knight will broaden your scope. Our boss would never let that go to waste. I truly believe that.”

There was a complete trust, unique to the likes of faith or devotion, to which the boy slightly frowned.

He would have been able to understand the meaning of a slight change in facial expression were it the father; however, Belmont could not get a read on the boy. Ultimately, as that slight change faded like mist,

Reinhard: “You really believe in that person, don’t you?”

Belmont: “Well, isn’t that the same as your feelings towards your old man?”

Reinhard: “—. Perhaps that is so.”

Belmont also detected the slight hesitation in that answer, but unlike the change in facial expression he could not understand, this Belmont ignored whilst understanding it.

Ultimately, the emotions of this red-haired boy were irrelevant to the Six Tongues’ ideals. —That perception was undoubtedly the stance of defending the country that Belmont had succeeded from his boss.

Thus, the promise on this night—to become a Knight amongst Knights, and the future that would arise as a consequence of that, would be steadily drawn closer by the boy’s own strength, and fulfilled.

But, the Parasite, Heinkel Astrea, who had become Deputy Commander of the Royal Guard, even now, had yet to awaken his wife. —He had yet, to awaken her.

END

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II (LQ AI Translation)

1

???: “—Marcos-kun.”

On the way back from the training grounds inside the royal castle’s grounds, called to from behind in such a gentle voice, Marcos Gildark froze.

Even though, as a member of the Royal Guard, he was in a position where he should never skip the tempering of body and mind so as to cultivate a robust physique and a sturdy spirit at all times, that was a fatal blunder.

Had the other party been a hostile presence, it would not have been strange for his head to be lopped off in that very instant.

That said, the owner of that voice bore no hostility toward him, and what was more, even had Marcos had not presented a fatal opening, she could easily have taken that thick neck.

She was that sort of person. Because—

Marcos: “It has been a while, Lady Theresia.”

A beat late, Marcos turned and responded with a formal salute to the woman standing there.

She was a woman distinguished by beautiful red hair like burning flames. With clear blue eyes, white skin, and the slender bearing of a woman in her prime—a beauty in her prime—yet to Marcos’s eyes, what stood out was how extraordinarily aligned her axis was as she stood so casually. She wore an awfully pristine air, and her perfectly refined carriage was that of one who stood at the very summit of the martial arts.

But that, too, was only natural. For the one before Marcos now was the Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea, said to possess the strongest and most excellent swordsmanship in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica.

At Marcos's salute, Theresia smiled and said,

Theresia: "My, your salute has gotten awfully fitting, hasn't it? And the Royal Guard uniform… yes, it suits you well. You have gained some gravitas."

Casting her eyes up and down, Theresia looked Marcos over from head to toe and murmured such impressions.

While Marcos remained tense, her attitude was easygoing, far removed from severity. At that, Marcos, whose face was said to be like a sheer rock face, lowered the ends of his brows.

Marcos: "To be praised so by you, Lady Theresia, is, ah, I am humbled."

Theresia: "Hmmm, so you have become so formal? It feels like quite a change from Marcos Gildark, the musclehead who would bow to no one."

Marcos: "Spare me the talk of the past. After being beaten down by Commander Wilhelm, I fully realized how conceited I had been."

Theresia: "I see. That is for the best. Working under that man is hard, is it not? He has always been someone whose words are lacking by one word, even two."

Though she said so with troubled brows, Theresia's lips softened with fondness. In them bled an undiminished, great affection that had not faded with the years for the person brought up in the conversation—her husband, Wilhelm van Astrea.

Wilhelm, who was also the Commander of the Royal Guard to which Marcos belonged, was a soldier known at home and abroad as the man who had defeated the Sword Saint. Even now, with fifty just before him, there was no dimming to his swordsmanship, and even now he continued to reign as one of the kingdom's very strongest—the pinnacle among its warriors.

Theresia: “—And yet even from such a lofty station, he is also a scatterbrain who forgets his lunch.”

Marcos: “…So you went to the trouble of bringing the Commander’s lunch yourself, Lady Theresia?”

Lifting the bundle she held, Theresia nodded “That is right” to answer Marcos’s question. Then she turned her steps toward the Guard’s guardroom.

Theresia: “As much as possible, I want to handle by myself the things that concern Wilhelm. That is a wife’s duty, is it not?”

Marcos: “Unfortunately, being single, I have nothing to say to that.”

Theresia: “Aah, yes, that is right. Marcos-kun is still unmarried…”

At Marcos’s shrugging answer, Theresia thought for a moment. Then, timidly, she looked up at Marcos, with whom she had a difference in height.

Theresia: “If you would like, shall I take care of it for you?”

Marcos: “…Why do you sound so delighted about that?”

Theresia: “Because, because, marriage is such a wonderful thing! No matter whose it is, if I can be involved in it, would that not be lovely?”

Marcos: “Unfortunately, being single.”

Pressed forward by Theresia’s earnest appeal, Marcos, overwhelmed, nevertheless answered thus.

She went “Eeh~” in dissatisfaction at that answer, but if he let slip a careless reply she truly might go and pick out a marriage partner for him. Of course, it was true that as the heir to House Gildark, he bore the duty of one day taking a wife and begetting children, but—

Marcos: “For the time being, I seem to be up to my neck with my own affairs.”

Theresia: “If you keep saying things like that, you will stay single forever, you knooow. …It does not have to be because of my meddling, but if you find someone nice, do not hesitate, all right?”

Marcos: “…I will keep it in mind.”

Theresia: “Very good. Then I shall go to Wilhelm.”

Having forcibly pressed the matter upon Marcos, Theresia nodded in satisfaction.

Long since ceased to swing a sword, the Sword Saint set foot toward the guardroom with that in hand.

Theresia: “See you, Marcos-kun. Come over to eat at our place once in a while.”

Marcos: “It would be far too presumptuous.”

Waving her hand lightly, Marcos watched the slim back as she walked away. Only when Theresia’s figure had completely vanished from sight did the strength finally leave his shoulders.

It was not as though Theresia had been putting pressure on Marcos in particular, but—

???: "—Well now, I had heard that Lady Theresia van Astrea was an approachable person, but I did not think she would be quite so easygoing."

Marcos: "…"

Suddenly, another person's voice struck Marcos's ears as he was seeing Theresia off.

At that voice, Marcos knit his brows and turned; his eyes met a dusky blond youth who was walking slowly toward him from the castle courtyard.

Realizing that the other was someone he knew, Marcos visibly twisted his cheek.

Marcos: "What the hell are you doing in a place like this, Russell?"

Russell: "My, what a greeting. Just a moment ago, you paid so much courtesy—am I to take this as being acknowledged as a friend with whom you may speak casually?"

Marcos: "This is called being curt. I only pay manners and respect to those worth paying them to."

Russell: "Hm. Harsh."

So saying, and not even trying to hold it in, he shrugged his shoulders. He was Russell Fellow, the second son of the Fellow family, a merchant house operating in the Royal Capital.

Marcos had become acquainted with him a short while earlier through a third party, and though his limp appearance belied it, he possessed steady nerves, and Marcos evaluated him as a youth with uncanny grit.

That said, no matter how gutsy he was, sneaking into the royal castle was going too far.

Marcos: “By my position, I have to escort suspicious persons who enter the castle grounds right back out, you know?”

Russell: “If you mean me when you say “suspicious person,” that is quite the misunderstanding. I would never do something like go up into the castle without permission. Today I have come to take orders on behalf of my father and elder brother, that is all.”

Marcos: “To take orders, huh?”

Russell: “Yes. Fortunately, the Fellow family is trusted by the merchants’ guild in the Royal Capital. In this way I am also allowed up to the castle from time to time.”

With a hand to his chest, answering calmly, Russell drew a dubious look from Marcos.

To be frank, Marcos felt uneasy about Russell coming and going freely in the castle. He did not think Russell bore malice or treason toward the kingdom in particular, but the youth possessed an acuity of eye and a cunning out of keeping with his age and station, and there was only a nebulous concern that one could not tell what he might pull.

And, as if to substantiate Marcos’s unease—

Russell: “Even so, Lady Theresia does say cruel things.”

Marcos: “What?”

Russell: “No doubt it is because she sees nothing but Commander Wilhelm-sama, but she is far too oblivious to her own charms. For Lady Theresia to offer to introduce you to a marriage partner must be agony beyond compare for you, Sir Marcos.”

Marcos: “You bas—”

At his calm, yet assured manner of speaking, Marcos could not help widening his eyes. In response to Marcos’s reaction, Russell raised a finger to his own lips.

Russell: “Do not worry, I will not tell anyone. The Royal Guard’s promising young man’s faint crush… that is information a touch too delicate to handle.”

Marcos: “… Is that a threat?”

Russell: “When I have told you I will not tell anyone, if you still take it so, I have no move left to play.”

At Russell, who raised both hands as if to say there was no artifice, Marcos clenched his molars hard.

Even if it were told, it would only be Marcos who would be embarrassed, but to make it awkward to face Theresia or Wilhelm would be a pointless blow. Russell, too, no doubt understood that the information had no effect beyond harassment. “By the way,” he said, switching the topic.

Russell: “I am glad to have met you here. I was just looking for you, Sir Marcos.”

Marcos: “Me? What for?”

Russell: “To put it plainly, it is a well-meaning tip. In truth, over in the slums, some fellows engaging in suspicious movements have been sighted.”

Marcos: “… And why me for that? That is the city watch’s job.”

Russell: “Because the place they are using happens to be one that the Brotherhood used to come and go from.”

Lowering his voice a touch, Russell pressed him thus, and Marcos ground his teeth.

Earlier, the talk involving Theresia had indeed not been a threat. Rather, if anything was a threat, it was this information—far more serious was the fact that, until recently, Marcos had served as the ringleader of the slum gang that had been active in the Royal Capital, the Brotherhood.

Most of the Brotherhood’s associates had already left the capital and were working as labor to help develop the Industrial City of

Costuul, but that was that; this was this.

Russell: “Regardless of what remains there now, it would not be convenient to have outsiders enter. I felt I owed a warning to you and to Roswaal as well.”

Marcos: “…Are you calling that bastard?”

Russell: “I cannot very well summon a busy Margrave so easily. Of course, should this be beyond your ability to handle, I would have no choice but to take such measures, but…”

Marcos: “—No, forget it.”

At the mention of the young Margrave’s name, Marcos shook his head at the turn toward calling him.

As Russell said, one ought not trouble someone in a position like that over trifles. All the more so because if that young lord got involved, there was a fear the matter would grow far too large. When the thought was to resolve the situation with only themselves, that would be putting the cart before the horse.

Marcos: “I will head over. Tell me the details.”

At Marcos, who cut in thus, Russell nodded as if he had expected it, “Understood.” At the smoothness of that reply, Marcos thought anew—he was a youth whose depths could not be seen, no less than, if not more than, that young Margrave.

2

Originally, the “Brotherhood” was not the work of any particular person; it was a group that sprang up spontaneously out of the anger of those who had let dissatisfaction and gloom build up.

That Marcos came to sit as the head of such a phenomenon-like group began when, ordered on a mission to suppress them, he learned the cause of their activities and abandoned the mission.

Thereafter, for various reasons, the Brotherhood disbanded, and Marcos sought to return to the Royal Guard; yet eyes on Marcos, who had abandoned his duty for selfish reasons, were severe, and reinstatement was a thorny path.

Even so—

“The Royal Guard is meritocratic. Bat back bad press and prejudice with your own swordwork.”

—so ran the gracious directive of the Commander of the Royal Guard who permitted Marcos’s return.

As expected of the man who, by raw ability, defeated the Sword Saint, took her for his wife, and built the position he now holds—he spoke differently. Besides, Marcos agreed with meritocracy; it was just what he wanted.

Hence, since then, Marcos had been the first to volunteer to cut into the field himself. Ultimately, he believed the only place he could bring out his true worth was the very front line.

However—

???: “—Marcos, everyone’s taken their positions. They say we can go anytime.”

Saying so, Marcos looked down at the red-haired colleague entrusting him with the signal to begin the operation. Under that gaze, the man knit his brows and went, “What?”

???: “You’re the squad leader for this mission. We need your orders…”

Marcos: “Why did you even tag along? You’re absolutely useless.”

???: “Wh—”

At that blunt question, the man’s eyes flew wide and he made a stricken face. From Marcos’s standpoint, however, it was the man’s reaction that was surprising. He must have heard that assessment so often he was sick of it—yet he could still be freshly wounded by it.

???: “I came all this way and you call me useless—that’s going too far…!”

Marcos: “That’s exactly the point—what we don’t need. The others are one thing, but what good are you here, Heinkel?”

Ignoring Heinkel Astrea’s mouth opening and closing like a fish, Marcos looked over the knights cooperating in the slum roundup and cocked his head.

They would fulfill their roles. But Heinkel?

Marcos: “Racking up points is my aim too, but I can at least say I’m a shade better than you, seeing as I’m prepared to put my body on the line.”

Heinkel: “—It’s a mission! Don’t say something so ill-sounding as “racking up points”! And implying I don’t have resolve—that’s an insult!”

Marcos: “Don’t raise your voice. Forgotten what we came here to do?”

Face flushed, Heinkel hastily clapped his mouth shut at Marcos’s rebuke. That he covered his mouth with both hands there was lamentable for a man on an active scene who should be aware this was the field. One hand should always be kept ready to reach a weapon—what did it say about the fact that a knight could call himself one with this level of deficiency?

It fell to Marcos to cover for that lack, to heap up the mound, as it were.

Marcos: “I won’t tell you to go home now, but don’t get in the way. Keep to the edge and stay hidden.”

Leaving that behind and turning his back, Marcos glared at the ruin for which they had received information—the building serving as the base of the suspicious figures Russell had tipped him off about.

Tattered though it was, the surprisingly solid building had originally been a church where those who offered prayers to the Divine Dragon gathered. That it had been abandoned and turned into the meeting hall of the Brotherhood, a gathering of youths harboring discontent with the kingdom, was an ironic story.

When they disbanded, he had done a general cleanup, and there should have been nothing left lying around that would carelessly tie back to Marcos—but there might be something disadvantageous to those working in Costuul.

If, in the confusion, he could smash the building as a whole, there would be no loose ends.

Even so—

Marcos: "—No one's here."

Gazing fixedly at the ruin and focusing his awareness on the presence within, he found nothing caught in his net. There seemed to be rats, but they were cohabitants of the slums. It would be unkind to chase them out lightly.

Perhaps the other party was away during the day, or perhaps Russell had sent him on a wild-goose chase.

Marcos: "I'll go take a look inside."

Saying so nonchalantly, he ordered Heinkel and the knights to stand by and went into the ruin.

For now, rats were all he had to show for it, but if he could find some excuse to rampage a bit, he wanted to crush the building physically. It was just as Marcos was picturing a solution by brute force that—

—out of the shadowy darkness of the corridor, a surprise blow struck Marcos in the throat.

Marcos: "—Guh"

Caught unguarded by a ferocious hit, Marcos's giant body let out a groan and slammed into a wall. Smashing through the corridor wall from his back and toppling into a room, he blinked through the pain and shock.

He had not sensed the presence at all.

Attacker: “Tch, the Royal Guard…!”

Seeing the uniform on the fallen Marcos, the one who had landed the blow spat that out. Without checking whether Marcos was dead or alive, the opponent swiftly spun on his heel and bolted out of the ruin.

“Wait”—with his throat struck, he could not voice it at once, and Marcos forced his body up. His ears caught the clashing of swords as his colleagues began to fight outside the building. At a glance—no, at a listen—Marcos knew the flow was unfavorable, and he stamped down hard.

Marcos: “Oooooooh—!!”

The next instant, at the shock wave from Marcos’s stomp, the ruin’s walls and floors blew away together. Bursting out with the debris in tow, Marcos’s view took in the surroundings of the building—the sight of knights knocked down and Heinkel plopped on his rear.

Right in front of Heinkel, a gaunt man was raising his long arms—and into that back, Marcos, who had leapt out, drove a vicious elbow.

Attacker: “G—bugeh—”

The feel of shattering the opponent’s spine and the bones around it with a direct hit rebounded up Marcos’s arm.

It was the kind of savage pursuit that would either kill, or if not, leave one unable to walk for life. The body bounced like a handball, rocketing into the neighboring ruin, caving it in completely and producing a heap of rubble.

Marcos: “Heinkel, tend to the ones who are down.”

Heinkel: “Uh, ah, uhh…”

Marcos: “Move it!”

Heinkel: “Yessir!”

Sitting on the ground, gaping, Heinkel sprang up at the bark. Clicking his tongue at the disgraceful display, Marcos also moved to tend to his comrades—

—A faint, yet certain growl reached his ears, and Marcos faced the mound of rubble before him. From beneath the debris of the ruin into which he had just slammed the enemy, that growl had come.

The next moment, the source of the growl blew the rubble away and emerged.

???: “—Oooooooon!!”

A gaping maw lifted to the sky, and a beast’s bellow rent the slums.

Hurling rubble aside, it roared with savage vigor—dark brown, imposing, aberrant, inhuman. It was unlike the form just before it; its whole body was sprouting animal fur, and with a head transformed, it turned to the sky—A Werewolf.

The Werewolf’s twin pupils turned golden, and with eyes clouded by anger and hatred, it glared at Marcos.

And—

Werewolf: “Sorry, but you lot—”

It opened a mouth lined with sharp teeth and was about to hurl some kind of threat—Marcos rammed a fist into its throat, forcing it into silence.

Werewolf: “…ghk”

As payback for that first strike to his own neck, the Werewolf let out a warped groan and bulged its eyes.

Marcos then seized the Werewolf’s head and, without mercy, slammed it down into the ground. With an impact that buried its entire head in the hard earth, the Werewolf’s whole body convulsed violently.

Presently, strength left the Werewolf's limbs, and its beastification slowly unraveled.

Marcos: "…And it's still alive? Unlucky bastard."

It was rolling its eyes white and convulsing, but breathing. It was not the breathing of one about to die, either.

As the fur fell off and, under clothing torn from its inability to endure the swelling of its flesh, a scrawny man's bare body came to light, Marcos let go of the head he had been gripping and pitied the fact.

Had the body not been so tough for no good reason, he could have killed him with that last blow. The fact he had not been able to meant that the fate awaiting this Werewolf—

Heinkel: "M-Marcos! A Werewolf… a Werewolf!"

Letting his voice crack to shout what was obvious was Heinkel behind him.

Having watched Marcos's fight with the Werewolf, he was aghast at the form the opponent had reverted to, and his hands tending the injured had also stopped. Marcos sighed deeply.

Marcos: "I know without you telling me. You keep treating the others."

Heinkel: "That… do you really understand, Marcos? There's the treaty with the Vollachian Empire. Werewolves—especially criminals—go to the Empire…"

Marcos: "—Didn't you hear me?"

With a low voice, he cowed him in a way even the thickheaded Heinkel could understand, and this time Heinkel stuffed his grating objections back down his throat. The situation was depressing enough as it was. At the very least, he wanted those on his own side to show some consideration for what was on Marcos's mind.

Marcos: "I hardly think I'll be in any shape to go over for a meal."

So muttered Marcos, answering with a hoarse voice to the brief exchange he had had before the mission.

Thinking of the report he now had to make, the cold treatment he had given to the son of Theresia who had invited him to eat, and even that he had failed, in the confusion, to destroy the meeting hall, Marcos's mood grew heavier than even the Boulder's expression.

3

—The Royal Capital, Lugunica, is the largest city in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica.

Beginning with Lugunica Castle, facilities with all manner of functions exist in and around the city. The stone tower that rises on the capital's western side is likewise one of the capital's distinctive facilities.

That stone tower was built roughly twenty-five years ago, and as a facility its role lies in the research and development of magic—namely, the Royal Research Institute of Magic.

Long regarded as a special power wielded only by certain demi-humans and Spiritual Arts users, magic is to have its mechanisms laid bare, organized into a general system, and have its user base broadened. Or else, magic that produces wholly unknown effects is to be newly developed and preserved for posterity—that is the objective.

At present, there are not many things that can be trumpeted as achievements, but it is a place where success is awaited in the long view: the completion of guides for the systematization and acquisition of simple Magic, and development expected by tying in with magicreation tools produced in the Industrial City of Costuul, among other things.

The development of this field constitutes a sure benefit to the kingdom compared to other nations, and for that reason the Magic Research Institute is given that much importance—

Roswaal: “One would think that’s how it ought to be, buuut it just isn’t going quite as we’d like, now~”

So said the boy with heterochromatic eyes—Roswaal L. Mathers—as he carefully set a piece of Magic Ore atop the apparatus, appraising the institute’s sorry “bustle.”

What Roswaal was currently engaged in was a reproduction experiment for magic that, using Magic Ore—crystallized Mana—made auxiliary use of Mana outside the body rather than one’s own internal Mana. By succeeding in this experiment, it would become possible to activate magic without going through the Gate—the organ necessary to handle magic—or even in a state where one’s Mana had been depleted.

Russell: “That said, once the system for mass-producing magicreation tools is in place, the value of using things like Magic Stones will be diverted heavily in that direction. I cannot see much of a future where this is widely utilized, can you?”

To Russell Fellow, who peered in from the side at the apparatus on which the Magic Ore had been placed and poured cold water on Roswaal’s experiment, Roswaal prefaced with “Not necessarily,” then continued:

Roswaal: “If we can codify the acquisition of this technique, then having the sons and daughters of nobles carry even a single Magic Stone as a kind of charm would become a means of self-defense. This Royal Research Institute of Magic imposes no restrictions whatsoever on the provision and acquisition of techniques… buuut the handling of something with added value would be a different matter, wouldn’t it?”

Russell: “—I see. If demand for Magic Stones rises, it will generate great profits for you, who owns the mines where Magic Ore is unearthed. Your intent is easy to grasp.”

It was pleasant to converse with a partner who, if you spoke one, would intuit all the way to ten.

While satisfied with this exchange with the rare friend named

Russell, Roswaal was, on the other hand, not satisfied with how the Magic Research Institute was being treated.

Roswaal: “Frankly, for the time being, the kingdom’s attention is skewed toward magicreation tools. If there’s a point of reflection, it’s that the convenience of those tools has sunk tooo deeply into daily life~”

Russell: “If you call it a point of reflection that you made the common folk—who had thought of magic as something out of a picture book—understand that magic is something close at hand, then the previous Roswaal… your father… would find little recompense in that, would he not?”

Roswaal: “Oh, my father would share my view, I’m sure. I’ve every confidence in that.”

At Roswaal’s answer, given with a shrug, Russell returned the gesture in kind.

The predecessor he had mentioned—Roswaal K. Mathers—was the very person hailed as the father of magicreation tools, which brought revolutionary progress to the uses of Magic Stones. Magicreation tools, powered by Magic Stones including Magic Ore, spread branches of possibility far exceeding something like Lagmite ore, which merely emitted light, and were rapidly permeating the lives of the kingdom’s people, commoners included.

Their effects and merits were said to rival even the “Meteor,” which in the Witch Era—before the ravages of the Witch of Envy—had been created to exist, but—

Roswaal: “If you ask me, that’s nothing but an overawed evaluation~”

The “Meteor” was a tool to realize phenomena and miracles unattainable by human hands; at bottom it competed on a completely different stage from magicreation tools that merely assisted in daily life.

Truly, the “Meteor” was something that, as if letting one’s hand reach the stars, was godlike—

Russell: “To be so highly praised and yet not be satisfied by it… Rather than saying your greed is deep, it seems the very premise of what you seek—something other than honor or preferment—differs.”

Catching Roswaal’s murmur, Russell interpreted it thus.

A difference in premise, a gap in what one values. Such things readily alienate people from one another, switching over to the cognition that one’s neighbor is someone incomprehensible. In ancient times, the reason “witches” were hated more than their special power was precisely that difference in values.

However, to that divide Russell added, “All the same,” and said:

Russell: “If there are things I consider valuable that you do not, and things you desire that I do not, that makes it easy to partition our spheres. What is needed is not an understanding of each other’s values, but respect for each other’s values. Wonderfully low-consumption.”

Roswaal: “…”

Russell: “What is it, Roswaal?”

With a hand to his narrow chin and a frown, Russell asked; Roswaal shook his head: “No.”

Roswaal: “I was just thinking again. That you’re a friend not easily come by~”

Russell: “—. For someone who hardly opens his heart that’s something, but being praised without reserve like this is rather embarrassing, you know.”

Roswaal: “Hardly opens his heart… aaah, you mean Marcos.”

Conjuring up in his mind the stern-faced man, Roswaal nodded in understanding.

Among those Roswaal had become acquainted with in the Royal Capital—separate from those of the Brotherhood and the Golden Wing Faction who were now helping expand Costuul, the Mathers main house's city—there were two he kept as friends: Russell and the aforementioned Marcos.

Unlike Roswaal, who was not usually in the capital, both Russell and Marcos lived in the Royal Capital—naturally, they would have dealings in places Roswaal did not know. Among those, it seemed, there had been situations that had made Russell want to put a hand to his forehead.

Russell: "Between ourselves here, a matter recently arose for which I wanted to borrow the Royal Guard's strength, and on that occasion I relied on Sir Marcos's arm… but,"

Roswaal: "Oh? That's quite all right. If it's him, he can subdue most opponents. I think it was the best choice—so long as your opponent wasn't a dragon."

Russell: "Fortunately, it was not a dragon, but it was a troublesome foe. —A wolf."

Roswaal: "—A wolf."

At Russell's voice, which had dropped in tone, Roswaal raised an eyebrow and stilled his hands.

Bringing up a dragon had been a simple jest, but if a wolf came up instead, that complicated matters.

—Werewolves, once turned, in the Vollachian Empire are treated as culprits whose very existence is not permitted.

Wolf-folk and molefolk are objects of aversion in that country, and the magnitude of their hostility even splashes onto other nations. That is to say, there is a treaty: upon discovery, Werewolves are to be handed over to the Empire. Naturally, a Werewolf thus surrendered cannot escape execution in the Vollachian Empire.

It is a cold-blooded policy the Vollachian Empire laid down for the extinction of a race over a long span.

Roswaal: “If it’s Werewolf-related, the Vollachian Empire will get noisy all of a sudden~”

Russell: “Exactly that. To put it plainly, what I brought Sir Marcos was information about suspicious individuals having been sighted, but because it turned out to be a Werewolf, I’m being treated like a jinx.”

Roswaal: “I see. From your standpoint, it was a consideration to let Marcos—whose position in the Royal Guard is delicate—earn merits, and yet he thinks you’ve only increased his troubles. A tragedy.”

Russell: “Yes, a tragedy.”

Nodding together, Roswaal and Russell found common ground by making Marcos the villain.

Of course, Roswaal did not trust Russell’s goodwill without a speck of cloud. By Roswaal’s surmise, Russell stood suspected as the mastermind who had shepherded those bearing the capital’s pent-up frustrations—those other than the firstborn sons of nobles—and organized the patriotic group called the Golden Wing Faction.

That such a man had approached Marcos, who belonged to the Royal Guard—that made it a safe bet that the “suspicious persons” were, nine times out of ten, suspected by him to be something other than mere suspicious persons.

Even so, that did not mean Russell’s goodwill toward Marcos was altogether nonexistent.

Roswaal: “But, judging from where the story is headed, that Werewolf was taken alive, yes? In that case it seems likely the flow is to hand him over to the Empire…”

Russell: “In fact, I hear it is proceeding in that direction. I expect some manner of démarche from the Empire in the near future.”

Roswaal: “And that, too, becomes the Royal Guard’s business, that of the discoverer Marcos. No wonder he bears you a grudge.”

Considering relations with the neighboring Vollachian Empire, there were many in the Royal Guard who did not want entanglement. Marcos was, unsurprisingly, among that number.

For Roswaal as well, relations with the Empire souring at this juncture would be outside his plans. He wanted this knotty affair to resolve as peaceably as possible.

It was just then that Roswaal was thinking that—

Researcher: "—M, Margrave! Director! Margrave Mathers!"

A flustered, disjointed shout rang out, and Roswaal and Russell turned. At the entrance to the research room stood a pale-faced young researcher. He was one of the institute's staffers—a person of reasonably high initiative, but—

Roswaal: "Ilzea-kun, what's the matter? You were assigned to sort the delivered Magic Ore into high-purity and low-purity lots, weren't you?"

Russell: "Are you making a supposedly valuable member of staff do such menial chores?"

Roswaal: "The point is to train the eye. Truly, if they're specialists, they ought to be able to tell the quality of a Magic Stone at a glance~"

Even chores have their meaning. Naturally, there was also a side of Roswaal that did not want those who lagged him by ten or even a hundred steps in matters of magic to get in the way of his focused research.

Ilzea: "I, it's terrible! Th-There is someone who says they want to observe!"

Ignoring Roswaal and Russell's conversation, Ilzea reported in a trembling voice. At its content, Roswaal raised an eyebrow with a "Hm."

Whatever the results, this Royal Research Institute of Magic was a kingdom-sponsored facility. It would not be unusual for persons of importance in the kingdom to take an interest, but if it was a tour, he wanted notice in advance. If they came on the spur of the moment, there were preparations to be made on the receiving side as well.

Roswaal: “In short, it’s an unreasonable request. Even you should be able to judge that, no~? Even if the guest were His Majesty the King, we’d have to ask them to withdraw.”

Ilzea: “R-Really? You would refuse, even if it were His Majesty?!”

Roswaal: “Weeell, if the guest were His Majesty, I’d think about how to refuse… Is the guest His Majesty?”

Ilzea: “N-No, it is not His Majesty, b-but…”

Ilzea’s hesitation was excessive; at that irresolute attitude, Roswaal and Russell looked at each other, then simultaneously slipped past him. Rather than continue the discussion like this, it would be quicker to meet this visitor directly—that was their judgment. In fact, that thought was correct.

However—

???: “—Oh, at last someone who looks able to talk has shown their face.”

So said the person who greeted Roswaal and the others, standing with legs braced at the institute’s entrance.

She was a hard-eyed woman with richly wavy, dark-hued red hair gathered behind her head—older than Roswaal, younger than Russell, perhaps. With long, slender limbs and a supple build, there was a firmness of core to her imposing carriage.

At a glance, one could tell she was the sort of woman the weak-willed Ilzea would be bad with, but the biggest reason the trainee researcher had been at a loss was at her collar, which bore a self-assured smile.

Upon the woman’s fine attire at her neckline was a crest—the “Sword Wolf,” a wolf pierced by a sword—signifying the Vollachian

Empire.

Which is to say, this woman's identity was—

Serena: "—I am Serena Dracroy, arrived as a special envoy from the Vollachian Empire. I heard that this is the institution where the kingdom researches magic. I request a tour."

Thus did the envoy from the neighboring country, with almost absurd aplomb, proclaim herself an uninvited guest.

4

Serena: "I am, by nature, a hasty sort. The handover of the Werewolf is scheduled for tomorrow, but I arrived in the Royal Capital ahead of time. However, it would be troublesome if an Imperial wandered the capital at will and caused some incident, would it not? So, I caught wind of an interesting rumor. Here."

Rapping the wall with the back of her hand—knock, knock—the woman who had given her name as Serena Dracroy explained the reason for her visit and her intent.

That said, whether that explanation was one they could accept was another matter entirely.

Russell: "An envoy from the Empire, is it? My, my… I imagine the state guesthouse must be in an uproar right about now?"

Serena: "No need to fret so grandly. Your kingdom would not want to create friction with the Empire heedlessly, would it? It is only a matter of you not making a fuss."

To Russell's question, Serena answered with a feral, carnivore's smile.

Frankly, it was an answer one could only call quintessentially Imperial.

Roswaal: "Quintessentially Imperial speech, indeed. Thinking that in all things, the strong-armed approach will carry the day~"

Serena: “Oh?”

Saying aloud precisely the same impression Russell had harbored inwardly, Roswaal gave the visitor from the neighboring country a sidelong, piercing look. At that gaze, Serena lightly raised an eyebrow.

Then, tapping twice beneath each of her eyes with two fingers, she said:

Serena: “Your eyes are different colors, left and right. Rare. But beautiful. Looking closely, your looks are well above the mark, too. …You—how about coming to the Empire and marrying into my house?”

Roswaal: “…”

Russell: “Is that not rather an inappropriate jest to make to someone at a first meeting, and to a woman besides?”

Serena: “Do not set it upon the scales of man and woman; it is tiresome. I, too, think there are many situations where, had I been a man, matters would proceed more swiftly.”

With a body trained to supple strength, yet with slender shoulders, Serena snorted as she shrugged.

At her reaction, Russell stroked his own chin with a finger, then said:

Russell: “With respect, Lady Dracroy, are you not aware that this gentleman is Margrave Mathers?”

Serena: “Margrave Mathers… Lugunica’s Western Margrave?”

Russell: “Just so. Though he bears a heavy burden for the Kingdom of Lugunica, the Margrave also applies his brilliance to the development of magic. Truly a person indispensable to the kingdom.”

Roswaal: “Mm, being flattered that much by a friend tickles a bit, you know~”

Even though he surely understood the intent of Russell's thrown lifeline, Roswaal gave that sort of reply; Russell silenced him with a sharp glare.

In any case, if Serena realized her counterpart was Roswaal L. Mathers, she would surely change her attitude. Surely, as a special envoy, she would not seriously cause an international incident—

Serena: "I see, then you hold a position. In that case, if I bear a child quickly and make them heir, could I bring you back to the Empire?"

Roswaal: "My, you don't give up."

Serena: "Naturally. I have not lived so obediently as to back down easily. The House of Dracroy—or rather, I—am ever hungry: for capable people, for new ideas, and for technology."

Spreading both arms to indicate the stone tower that was the institute itself, Serena declared thus.

At that audaciously invasive pronouncement, Ilzea and the other researchers looked to Roswaal with troubled faces. As both noble and director, only he could stand against the Empire's envoy.

But Roswaal, at Serena's declaration, closed the yellow one of his eyes and said:

Roswaal: "I understand that you judged me capable… buuut, are you interested in magic?"

Serena: "Ah, I am. The magicreation tools that have lately begun to be put to use in the kingdom draw my interest as well, but what stirs my curiosity more than tools is technique."

Russell: "That is—"

Serena: "To put it plainly, I have a great interest in magic. I would sooner learn it and take it home with me."

Grinning, Serena thumped her own ample chest with a fist. At that Imperial sort of avaricious stance, Roswaal opened the eye he had closed and, with both eyes, looked at her straight on.

At the light that flitted through those eyes, Russell felt a bad premonition. Driven by it, before he could open his mouth—

Roswaal: “You want to know about magic! Splendid. Very promising. Let us talk, shall we~!”

Serena: “—!”

Roswaal’s outstretched hands seized Serena’s, and he spoke first.

Serena’s reaction lagged a beat at his childlike, sparkling eyes and his momentum and words, but soon realizing that this was a positive attitude—

Serena: “Oh? So you will say that! I am grateful. I shall study.”

Roswaal: “I will show you to my lab in the back. Come, this way, Lady Dracroy.”

Serena: ““Lady Dracroy” is a roundabout way of putting it. Serena will do.”

Roswaal: “Then Roswaal will do for me as well.”

Russell: “Roswaal!”

As the two briskly, smoothly advanced the conversation, the one who called Roswaal by name, in a loud voice, was not Serena but Russell.

When the two turned at the volume of his voice, Russell beckoned only Roswaal over with a finger.

Russell: “What do you think you are doing?”

Roswaal: “And by that you mean?”

Russell: “This is an important facility of the kingdom, and she is an honored Imperial guest.”

Lowering his voice yet making the admonishment plain in it, Russell pressed Roswaal.

Though their acquaintance was not long, Russell had watched Roswaal's movements with attention. He had thought he understood that Roswaal bore an extraordinary obsession with magic—but if he was like this simply upon being told someone was interested in magic, he was much too indiscriminate.

If that excessive self would constitute a demerit here, then regrettably, the relationship going forward would need to be reconsidered. —Regrettably, and Russell was somewhat surprised to think so.

Roswaal: "—Russell, that's a misunderstanding born of differing views."

As Russell kept down the hesitation that had arisen in his heart, Roswaal's reply cut in. When Russell furrowed his brow—"A misunderstanding?"—Roswaal dipped his narrow chin and nodded.

Roswaal: "Yes. As a matter of principle, the structure of the Gate differs between people of the kingdom and people of the Empire. The influence of having undergone proper evolution over long years in each land is large. In an environment where heat is harsh, living things acquire traits suitable to living there. Do you see~?"

Russell: "…You mean the same is true of the Gate, the organ that handles magic. Therefore, even if she learns the kingdom's way of using magic, as an Imperial she will be unable to handle it?"

Roswaal: "Exactly so~"

As a teacher giving an impassioned lecture, encountering a student who caught on quickly, Roswaal looked satisfied. Russell's bile went down, yet he was not wholly convinced.

Even if, as Roswaal said, Serena could not learn the kingdom's method of using magic—

Serena: "She might take the taught mechanisms, adapt them to the Imperial way, and rebuild them into something usable in the field."

Roswaal: "—. Lady Dracroy."

Serena: "Apologies. I have had a keen ear since long ago. Thanks to that, I never miss a whispered secret, which is a help. Oftentimes foolish rumors reach my ears, such as that a father finds his daughter tiresome."

Touching her earlobe with a finger, Serena shook the crimson earring without remorse.

Setting aside the rights and wrongs of eavesdropping, her point pinned Russell's concern exactly. Even if, as Roswaal said, the kingdom's way of using the Gate did not apply to Imperials as is, that did not mean it would be entirely unusable.

Even if it were only the basics, it was undesirable for knowledge of the kingdom to be extracted to the Empire.

Roswaal: "Well now, if that's how it goes, that's quite all right too, isn't it~"

To Russell's concern, Roswaal responded as if it were nothing at all.

Russell stared fixedly at Roswaal's face, trying to see through to his intent. But Roswaal, without a trace of malice under Russell's gaze, smiled.

Roswaal: "A field without competitors is apt to advance slowly. The Magic Research Institute, poor in results beyond what the great-great predecessor began, and the clinics where secret-keeping of techniques has gone on for years—one reason great development cannot be hoped for, I think, lies in a lack of a sense of crisis."

Russell: "—And for that you would countenance harming the kingdom's interests?"

Roswaal: "I am saying that to partake of a greater gain, a temporary loss should be tolerated."

So he continued; a quiet staredown ensued between Roswaal and Russell.

Though there were parts of Roswaal’s argument to which one could nod, in the main it was hard for Russell to accept.

That “temporary loss”—those wounds and the flowing blood—ought not be blithely built into a future plan by those unable to tally them.

Was Roswaal L. Mathers, after all, a dangerous person for the Kingdom of Lugunica?

Serena: “—Let the wolf bite your arm. Then you will be able to pierce its trunk with your sword.”

Roswaal: “…”

Serena: “Words left by the first Emperor of Vollachia. The way of being indicated by the Sword Wolf—our national flag’s wolf pierced by a sword—is a reading opposed to this, but I like it.”

Standing by, in a position hard to call that of a third party, Serena spoke.

“Sword Wolf” was an expression used by people of the Vollachian Empire for themselves. It was said to indicate the way of being that, even if one’s body were pierced through by a sword as depicted on the imperial flag, one would still tear out the enemy’s throat—that sort of will to fight—but Serena’s interpretation was the very opposite.

Serena: “Of course, that serving the Empire’s good would in turn lead to the kingdom’s prosperity is unconvincing coming from me, an Imperial. So there is only one thing I can say.”

Russell: “…And that is?”

Serena: “I return what I receive—favor or grudge alike. —You will not take a loss.”

Arms folded, Serena declared it forthrightly; Russell narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips together.

Ultimately, the Vollachian Empire’s policy was to do anything and honor it as right if it was for victory. Aside from the proud look on her face that hinted at that, there was nothing at all by which to believe her verbal promise.

However—

Roswaal: “What do you say, Russell? She has gone this far to say it. Serena is a great personage. You have guessed as much already, have you not~?”

Russell: “…”

That was not the crux of the issue. Even so, Roswaal peered into Russell’s face as he posed the question.

Sensing a will that would not bend, Russell let out a small sigh, then—

Russell: “…In the first place, you are the director of this institute. I am merely an outsider indulging in your kindness by being here. From the start, you have no need of my assent.”

Roswaal: “Hm. If we speak of the facts, that is not wrong, buuut…”

Breaking off once, Roswaal took a moment to think.

For Roswaal, who always judged at once and arrived at answers, it was a rare moment of consideration; Russell frowned at it. Lowering his eyes slightly, Roswaal said:

Roswaal: “I would prefer not to proceed while greatly souring a friend’s mood, if I can help it~”

Russell: “…”

Serena: “Russell?”

An unexpected remark—words like those of a person who valued friendships.

Russell suspected some kind of jest, yet when he gazed at Roswaal’s face in earnest, he found no trace of teasing in the expression; as a result, he was taken aback.

Russell: “I had thought you would not be handled with a single rope, but…”

Whether he ought to consider Roswaal an uncontrollable hazard, or a patriot with great power likely to be guided—once more, it was content that left him at a loss.

And to be honest, this applied not only to Roswaal but to Serena as well.

Serena: “Hahaha, how very cute a thing to say. I like you all the more, Roswaal.”

Roswaal: ““Cute” is disagreeable~ I think you are a few years older in some respects, buuut I harbor in this body years you imagine not. I should like to be treated as a gentleman.”

Serena: “You make a trifling difference in age a reason to sulk? That is not merely cute, but adorable.”

Smiling broadly at the prior exchange, Serena traded words with Roswaal—just as Roswaal had said, Russell could clearly see she would become a personage of the first rank or better.

He might be said to have an eye for people, but Russell’s certainty was of a different sort than such baseless remarks—an unshakable discernment granted by the “Divine Protection of Evaluation.”

The Divine Protection of Evaluation was thought to be a modest blessing that distinguished the good from the bad in things, but Russell’s could discriminate even the capable from the incompetent in people, or the superiority among earth dragons.

Therefore, he could see that Roswaal and Serena were prodigies, and that the timid researchers unable to stand up to Serena were, in fact, talents fit for a royal research institution.

Yet the right or wrong of an ability, and how that ability should be used, had to be judged by looking at the person. That was Russell’s task—and an urgent matter for the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Therefore—

Russell: “If, say, war were to break out between the kingdom and the Empire, and magic were to fly at us from the Empire, I will stab you from behind.”

Roswaal: “Now that would be a rare kind of friendship, would it not~ Even in such a desperate situation, you would still be standing behind me.”

With sarcasm answered by sarcasm, Russell reached an accord with Roswaal by choosing to watch how things developed.

As he had said from the start, Roswaal had no need to seek Russell’s permission. On the other hand, Russell did not need Roswaal’s permission to take his own countermeasures.

For each to play his best move, there was no need to lay his heart wholly bare.

Serena: “It seems the discussion has wrapped up neatly. Now, my curiosity has about reached its limit. Let me hear it at once.”

The delayed Serena clapped her hands and egged Roswaal on. At those words, Roswaal, unable to hide his joy at a partner interested in magic, nodded.

Roswaal: “Ah, I would like to start with the essential question of what the Gate is, buuut… Serena, the gem in those earrings of yours is Magic Crystal, is it not~?”

Serena: “It is. When there were signs of rebellion in my family’s domain, His Imperial Majesty bestowed it upon me as a reward for its suppression. I am quite fond of it.”

Chatting animatedly, Roswaal and Serena headed toward the back of the institute. Following the two backs, Russell called softly: “Ilzea.”

At that call, the pale-faced researcher blinked, but—

Russell: “Do not neglect caution. If the Margrave takes any suspicious action, inform me of each and every one.”

Ilzea: “—Understood.”

Russell did not cast even a glance at Ilzea, who answered in a voice gone cold, as if he were another person.

He only gazed at Roswaal’s back, cheerfully giving a lecture on magic, and, wondering whether he ought to set that boy upon the scale as a friend or as a hazard, could do nothing but let out a heavy sigh.

5

—In accordance with the treaty concluded with the Empire, the handover of the Werewolf in question, Alagar, to the Empire.

That was the content of the next squad assignment given to Heinkel Astrea, who had earned merit by capturing the Werewolf who had hidden himself in the Royal Capital.

They would receive the special envoy from the Vollachian Empire and hand Alagar over. On top of that, they would escort the envoy to the imperial border and complete the transfer without incident.

It was an important duty so as not to worsen relations with the Empire, long gone cold—

Serena: “—You wear quite a brazen face.”

Seeing the Werewolf fitted with manacles and a gag, the Empire’s special envoy, who called herself Serena Dracroy, wore a sadistic smile.

Though still young—she looked in her teens—her words and bearing were those of a noble of dignity and lineage, and even her fierce vigor bore an Imperial sort of danger. At the very least, it seemed certain she was the kind of talent judged such that neither age nor sex would hinder her appointment.

Even so, Heinkel was made to fret by her incautious, overbearing way with those around her. Did she have any awareness that she bore a heavy responsibility for the peaceful relations of both nations?

Serena: “Name, Alagar… a fugitive who fled the Empire and escaped to the kingdom. Though once you took the chains off and let him have his way, he then committed the blunder of getting caught even here in the kingdom—an unlucky man. —You who escorted him here, are you the squad that captured this one?”

Heinkel: “…Y-Yes, that’s right. We are the ones who apprehended that Werewolf.”

Addressed out of the blue, Heinkel bitterly regretted that he stumbled over the opening of his reply. Paying no mind to that cause for Heinkel’s self-reproach, Serena arched a brow with a “Ho.”

Serena: “It may be ungracious to say so, but to think you overpowered him with so few. In our country, he’s the sort of fellow who got away after tearing down even a fort.”

Heinkel: “—. The fruit of our daily training, I would say.”

Serena: “I won’t say training bears no fruit. Only…”

So saying, Serena’s gaze slipped off Heinkel and was turned toward the squad members lined up behind him. There were four in the line; on one of them Serena fixed her eyes.

On Marcos Gildark—so tall one had to look up at him, clad in a cuirass of thick muscle.

Serena: “One alone is in a different class. Yet he isn’t leading the unit. A problem child, is he.”

Marcos: “If you wish to talk, speak with the squad leader, Envoy. I and the others will keep watch on the surroundings.”

Serena: “How cold. Well, fine. There’ll be a chance to loosen that tied mouth along the way.”

At Serena’s narrowed eyes, Marcos gave nothing but a by-the-book answer. Even so, Serena's interest in Marcos did not fade, and that in itself was an affront to Heinkel.

Skipping over his head as squad leader, Marcos drew the attention—though, thinking of Marcos's strength and talent, he knew it was only natural attention.

Heinkel: "Envoy! I would like to discuss the travel plan!"

Serena: "Hm? Ah, I'll leave it to you. That said, I don't intend to meddle. Kingdom matters should be left to kingdom people. I, too, want to concentrate on what's in my hands for a while yet."

Heinkel: "What's in your hands?"

Serena: "I'm in the middle of trying something I learned yesterday from a friend of the kingdom."

To Heinkel, who had raised his voice, Serena answered while toying with something in her hands. In her hand she held a soft, silver, threadlike thing that changed shape.

Heinkel frowned at the unfamiliar object; Serena said, "This is—"

Serena: "If you can pass Mana well between your two hands through your internal Gate, you can make this silver thread change shape as you please. It's a toy for learning how to channel Mana."

Marcos: "How to channel Mana… could it be—"

Serena: "Hm? Has a chance come around at once to loosen that tied mouth?"

Serena's explanation meant nothing to Heinkel, but it seemed Marcos had something come to mind in its stead. Even so, he ignored Serena's desire to hear it, hiding his answer behind a boulder-like expression.

At Marcos's breach of courtesy, Serena said "No matter," and did not censure him.

Heinkel, feeling as though he alone had needlessly worn his spirit thin, felt a sense of grievance, but he shook his head—there was no point in making Serena censure Marcos here.

And—

Heinkel: “We commence transport as planned. You are to follow our instructions to the letter.”

And so, with a gloomy mood hanging about him, the mission began for Heinkel.

Those involved were: Heinkel as squad leader; Marcos as his lieutenant; three kingdom knights as squad members; and four drivers for the dragon carriages bearing Alagar. In addition were Serena, serving as the Empire’s special envoy, and four Imperial soldiers as her guards—for a total of fourteen, a small party.

Yet the number of people involved and the weight of the responsibility incurred often did not correlate. This case was that sort—and that was exactly why Heinkel’s feelings were complicated.

Originally, the one who had taken the lead in the roundup of the restrained Werewolf had been Marcos.

Heinkel and the other knights could not hold their own against the Werewolf—Alagar’s—rampage; without Marcos, they would have been wiped out and let him escape. Even their lives had been in danger.

Nevertheless, Marcos had taken advantage of the fact that the other knights had been unconscious at the time of Alagar’s capture and tossed the credit to Heinkel. When asked why, he said something incomprehensible like, “I’m still in the middle of getting my feel back.”

If he disliked that, one would say Heinkel should have refused as well—

Heinkel: “—Damn.”

Credit though it had been handed over, Heinkel had wanted it so badly he could taste it.

If he was going to fall into self-loathing whether he took it or not, then taking it and hating himself for it was far better—so he thought, and accepted the credit, but in the end the bitterness refused to fade.

To cap it off, for the envoy's transport he would be leaving the capital for several days and had to part from his son, Reinhard.

Heinkel: "Reinhard…"

—Frankly, his son—Reinhard—was in a precarious way.

He might be laughed at for a father's bias, but in Reinhard he felt a natural endowment absent in other children. That included the signs, glimpsed not long ago, of an exceedingly dangerous Divine Protection. Acting upon the human heart, that Divine Protection would, if used wrongly, easily make his son the enemy of the world.

He had pressed him hard, taught him, and Reinhard had sworn never again to use that Divine Protection. But Heinkel was not so optimistic as to think a child's self-control could keep a vow absolutely.

So he did not want to be away from Reinhard for long—least of all leave the house not to the Fauzen couple who ran it, but to his own father and mother.

Serena: "Captain, you look awfully strained."

Heinkel: "—!"

Suddenly peered at from the seat opposite, Heinkel caught his breath. Grinning at his reaction was Serena, who had been playing with the silver thread all along.

They had divided the party between two dragon carriages and riders on earth dragons: one carriage held Alagar and a watchman from the squad; the other held Heinkel and Marcos, tasked with protecting Serena.

They were not a group for lively conversation, nor did they feel any need to make it lively.

Serena: “Any reason to be uneasy? This isn’t the Empire, but the kingdom, is it not? I have no desire to disparage my own country, but if trouble were to arise en route, it’s far more likely to be in ours.”

Heinkel: “N-No, that is…”

Marcos: “In his case, his son clings to his father. That’s what’s making him uneasy.”

When Heinkel panicked, fearing he had offended an important personage, the Marcos at his side covered for him. It was barely more than stating the truth, but Serena expressed admiration with a “Ho.”

Serena: “I see—love for one’s child. I can hardly fault that.”

Heinkel: “…From the look of you, Envoy, you seem rather young.”

Serena: “When I see something that glitters, I’ve a habit of picking it up. That’s why there are many children I keep by my side. They all take work, but they’re dear, promising little ones. —Incidentally, I sense a glitter in you as well.”

Marcos: “Spare me the jokes. Especially the ones that aren’t funny.”

Serena: “My, my, this country has so many who are cold. In the homeland I’m in great demand, you know.”

Waving her hand lightly, Serena traded banter. Yet when she spoke of children, Heinkel sensed a sure kindness that she had not shown until now.

At that, Heinkel at last recognized that Serena had faces and a personality beyond “Imperial Envoy,” unclenched the fist he had kept tightly closed, and looked down. Then, “The truth is—” he was about to, however reluctantly, take the lifeline Marcos had thrown him—at that instant—

Guard: “Enemy attack—!!”

A sharp voice was hurled from outside the dragon carriage, and Heinkel’s whole body went rigid. But beside him, Marcos and Serena moved swiftly.

Serena at once withdrew to the center of the carriage; Marcos stood and sprang for the door. And even as he flew out, kicking the door open—

Marcos: “Heinkel!!”

He barely grasped that this was an urging for Heinkel to protect Serena. He grasped it, and that was all. Heinkel could not recover the composure to carry it out.

Heinkel: “Uwo—aaah—?!”

A violent jolt came the next moment; the dragon carriage lurched over with tremendous force. Unable to oppose the tilt, Heinkel smashed against wall and seat, screaming.

—An attack that ought never to have been had fastened its sights upon the party of kingdom knights transporting a Werewolf and the Empire’s special envoy, and was seeking to narrow its encirclement in one fell swoop.

6

Guard: “Enemy attack—!!”

Rising at the sharp, warning cry of his colleague, Marcos leapt for the dragon carriage’s door.

An attack in the midst of escorting the Empire’s special envoy, Serena Dracroy, to the imperial border—given relations between the kingdom and the Empire, anything happening to her would be diplomatically bad.

Marcos: “Heinkel!!”

Calling to Heinkel, who shared the carriage, Marcos urged him to protect the envoy.

If the panicked Heinkel could get moving with that, so much the better. And if not, whether he was there or not honestly would not affect the big picture.

What would affect the big picture was—

Marcos: “Dammit!”

—the death of the driver handling the carriage, his head burst apart, as seen by Marcos as he clicked his tongue.

He had taken some kind of impact to the temple, and everything above the poor driver’s neck had been blown off. But Marcos and the others had no time to mourn that death—the next instant, the same impact that had killed the driver flamboyantly obliterated a wheel of the carriage.

Heinkel: “Uwo, aaah—?!”

The carriage, having lost its support, tilted violently, and a flipped-over scream rose from inside.

It was hard to stomach that Serena, who ought to be protected, stifled her voice, while Heinkel, who ought to protect, was the one screaming. Even so, in the present situation Marcos could not talk big about Heinkel’s disgrace. He, too, was on the back foot and taking hits.

Marcos: “What about the other carriage—”

Of the two dragon carriages, one carried Serena the envoy, and the other bore the prisoner to be sent to the Empire, the “Werewolf,” Alagar.

Unfortunately, the carriages were on a mountain road of narrow width. Since the one in front—this carriage—was no longer able to move, the one behind could not proceed either. If the rear carriage were operable, there would have been the option of transferring Serena aboard and getting her away from here—but—

Serena: "—Looks like the wheel on the other one got taken out as well. The carriages are at a standstill."

Marcos: "You…"

Serena peeked past Marcos out the side and confirmed the same thing. At her fearless action that made Marcos widen his eyes, she wore a combative smile and—

Serena: "Staying inside like this will only bleed us dry. What now?"

Marcos: "—We get outside and use the carriage as a shield. I'll go kill the enemy."

Serena: "Very well. I'm in."

Feeling a certain satisfaction at Serena's immediate nod, Marcos glared past her at Heinkel, who was on his knees on the carriage floor. At that gaze, Heinkel called out pitiably, "M-Marcos," but cursing him could wait.

Marcos: "Protect the envoy. She's far more important than your life."

Leaving only that, Marcos sprang out of the carriage, deliberately exposing himself to the assassins.

It was an obvious bait. But the enemy could not ignore it—the next moment, the same kind of strike that had killed the driver came flying, aimed at the center of Marcos's body.

At the flash coming in from the far edge of his vision, Marcos matched it with the sword he had drawn on instinct and batted it aside. —Marcos's sword was an extra-large blade that prized unbreakable sturdiness over cutting power. Truth be told, he was better at punching foes directly than handling a sword, but as a knight he could not dispense with one.

Besides, in situations like this, having a sword was useful.

Marcos: "Even I can't realistically swat that away barehanded."

From the shock rebounding off the greatsword and the sound of steel against steel, Marcos inferred that the projectile was a sharp, arrow-like bolt. However, two problems arose: the bolt he should have knocked down was nowhere to be seen nearby, and the assassin who had loosed it was nowhere in his sight.

—A bolt that vanished after it struck, and a troublesome archer who kept his presence wholly concealed.

It was when he stayed on guard against that assassin and resolved to play the decoy further—

???: “So you blocked that. An enemy—cannot be taken lightly.”

A muffled voice as if with a sack over its head landed before Marcos.

The one who dropped off the cliff onto the mountain road with a thunderous crash was a giant more than a size taller than the tall Marcos. His entire body was sheathed in dully gleaming, pewter-colored mineral—no, not sheathed: his body itself was made of that pewter-hued mineral.

At that appearance and intimidating pressure, Marcos bared his teeth with the hair on his back standing up.

Marcos: “No way—Steelfolk?!”

Steelfolk: “Correct. That answer.”

The dutiful reply came with a likewise dutifully swung, mighty arm.

The blow, thick and massive like a column of a great manor, was hurled mercilessly; Marcos met it head-on with his greatsword and held his ground.

It was no exaggeration: the destructive force was like a head-on collision with a dragon carriage. As Marcos gritted his teeth and held it back, the Steelfolk pressed his arm in and—

Steelfolk: “You stopped me. Frightening.”

Marcos: “That so? You’re scared… then I’ll give you something to be even more scared of!”

With the Steelfolk pushing in and applying pressure, Marcos roared and launched a counterattack.

Setting all his muscles to a rhythm and shoving the foe back in a snap, Marcos, still supporting the greatsword with one arm, wrapped his free left arm around the opponent’s leg and slammed him hard into the cliff.

Marcos: “Oooooooh!!”

He drove him into the cliff with enough force for the body to sink in, and the counterattack did not end there. Using the impaled body as his tool, he immediately set about a more large-scale rock-cutting operation.

Among demi-humans, the Steelfolk were a rare race, distinguished by bodies composed, from birth, of substances such as mineral and metal. As a racial trait, they were, naturally, hard and sturdy—akin to a lump of iron with arms and legs coming at you with fists.

With that vaunted body, he would reshape this narrow mountain road.

Marcos: “—Tch!”

As he furiously quarried the cliff with the enemy’s body, a sharp sensation drove into his flank, and Marcos clicked his tongue.

It was a sniper’s shot from an assassin, fired to exploit the opening as he grappled with the Steelfolk. The instant it broke the skin of his flank, Marcos clenched the muscle at the point of impact and stopped the bolt.

Even so, the fact remained that he was wounded. And on top of that, his attention had been diverted—

Steelfolk: “You stopped that too. You are something.”

With those words of praise, a hand seized his head, and Marcos and the Steelfolk's positions were reversed. The Steelfolk grabbed Marcos by the head and swung him around, smashed him back-first into the cliff, and drove an arm in as a follow-up.

The impact pierced from Marcos's chest through his back, punched into the cliff behind, and cracks ran far and wide. The ensuing rockslide choked the mountain road, and the roiling smoke made the battlefield even worse.

And worse yet—

???: "—Bang-Bang-baaang!"

That incongruously lively voice coincided with tremendous sounds of shattering.

Beyond the smoke, he saw shattered trees and blood spray rising, and Marcos instinctively knew that this spelled the fate of the second, trailing carriage.

The earth dragon and its driver, and the guarding kingdom knights and imperial soldiers—some of them, or perhaps all of them, had been killed. And the one who had done so was now entering this field of battle.

???: "What, what, what, you're still, still, still at it, Jimrack! Is something, something off somewhere, or else, or else is the opponent bad?"

Indeed, the one who arrived with that shrill racket was a short, gaunt man with sharp eyes. The man sported a long silver tail, and the manner of his entry was stranger than his appearance: for whatever reason, he came in spinning end over end, cleaving the smoke with that tail as he plunged in.

The Steelfolk—called Jimrack—received the bizarrely arriving man with composure and—

Jimrack: "My bad. An opponent. Shot down and stopped—even the arrows, Elcain's."

???: "Ho, ho, ho! That's, that's amazing. Just when I thought you'd gone soft under the Dragon's Covenant, there's someone, someone who can do it halfway, halfway decently even in the kingdom!"

Jimrack: "You shouldn't—let your guard down. Oulouzo, that's your bad habit."

Calling the shorty who applauded and praised from on high "Oulouzo," Jimrack lined up with his comrade, slowly keeping wary watch on his side.

Facing the two, Marcos pulled his body free of the cliff and let out a sigh.

Both foes were certainly strong. He was clearly on the losing side, but there was not nothing to be gained.

Marcos: "Thanks for the flattery about there being someone "even in the kingdom." Judging by the mix of races, nine times out of ten you lot are Imperials. Your target is… the front carriage or the one behind, which?"

Oulouzo: "Hahaha, I see, I see! Even after getting pummeled this much and that much, you don't go down for free! Good, good, kingdom warrior! A pity it's a surprise operation."

He did not answer the question, but neither did he deny the assertion thrown at him.

At that point, their affiliation as the Vollachian Empire was as good as exposed, but that left no room for the situation to improve dramatically. —For improvement, the enemies' heads were required.

Marcos: "Jimrack, Oulouzo, Elcain."

Those were the names gleaned from their exchange—and likely the main force of this ambush.

Unless he took those three heads, there would be no victory and no getting out alive.

Oulouzo: "Coming, are you, are you!"

The instant he set strength in his knees, Oulouzo laughed thus. Thinking how troublesome capable enemies were, Marcos sprang forward as if released.

Marcos: “Nnnnuuuuhn!”

With a horizontal sweep of the greatsword, he aimed at Jimrack and Oulouzo together; Jimrack cut into the sword flash and, with the Steelfolk’s torso, stopped it with his whole body.

Steel grated against steel; sparks flew to the high-pitched sound, and their brute strengths were in balance.

And then—

Oulouzo: “A very, quite, rather fine sword. But, but, not as fine as mine!”

Spinning out such strange words, Oulouzo intervened in the shoving match—no, brought it to a conclusion.

Lightly sprinting up the cliff, Oulouzo leapt into midair and spun end over end; with that long tail whistling, he turned into a silver disc and came hurtling in.

That bizarre strike of Oulouzo’s split in two the greatsword Marcos had set against Jimrack, and its sheer sharpness made his arm slip free without resistance. In the corner of his shifted vision, a flash whipped by in the distance—

Marcos: “Shit.”

He twisted his head on reflex and got away with letting the bolt, which should have pierced his skull, gouge only his temple. But the blood streaming down robbed his left eye’s vision, and the simultaneous attack of these top-class assassins was a crisis point.

A hard, heavy impact and a sharp, deep cut carved a cross-shaped wound into Marcos’s chest and blew him away. He rolled far back, rolled on even after tearing through the smoke, and was plastered to the ground.

And at the blown-away Marcos, a follow-up came, now of all times—

Serena: “—Down!”

It was a woman’s voice—neither Marcos’s nor any of the attackers’.

At that voice, the instant a red light—different from the bolts—leapt at the edge of his vision, Marcos let the strength go from his knees and dropped flat on the spot. —The next moment, light flared.

—A tremendous blast of flame spread as if to swallow the mountain road.

7

Ilzea: “—Director?”

Peering at Roswaal, who had suddenly broken off mid-conversation, the researcher Ilzea knit his brows.

Without responding to Ilzea’s call, Roswaal strode in silence to the laboratory window, threw it open, and narrowed his heterochromatic eyes at the scene outside.

Ilzea: “U-Um, did I do something…?”

In his timid voice showed the sorrow of a subordinate dealing with a superior who was hard to communicate with. From his perspective, he must have suspected he had, once again, soured the mood of a capricious boss.

But Roswaal had no room just now to spare a thought for Ilzea’s sentiments.

Roswaal: “That disturbance in Mana just now…”

What faintly pricked Roswaal’s skin, transmitted through the air, was the sense of a large fluctuation in Mana.

Clearly different from something naturally occurring, it was sure proof that someone had intentionally transformed Mana—in other words, proof that magic had been activated.

What was more, he had a very recent recollection of that Mana’s wavelength—

Roswaal: “Ilzea-kun, get in touch with Russell.”

Still keeping his eyes outside the window, Roswaal told Ilzea behind him thus. At that, Ilzea drew a sharp breath; his eyes wandered.

Ilzea: “Lord Russell? Er, just because he’s your friend, Director, letting him come and go from the lab too freely is a bit…”

Roswaal: “Ah, that sort of face-saving talk is fine for nooow. Right now I want to speak with him. Posthaste.”

Ilzea: “No, I mean, why are you asking me to…”

Roswaal: “If we’re to get in touch with Russell, you’d be the quickest, wooouldn’t you?”

Saying so, Roswaal turned and looked Ilzea squarely in the face. At that gaze, Ilzea’s cheeks tightened faintly, his eyes narrowing a touch.

That change in atmosphere—that expression—was just the kind of sharpness that made it feel worth inviting him into the lab; it was to Roswaal’s taste.

Roswaal: “—Do you recall the Magic Crystal earrings Serena had? It seems those were used as a catalyst for magic. I suspect there’s trouble.”

Having come at once upon being contacted, Russell received from Roswaal this concise explanation.

The disturbance in Mana and its wavelength that Roswaal had sensed, the activation of magic, and the likely catalyst used for it all matched the Magic Crystal earrings worn by Serena Dracroy, who had visited the tower yesterday.

She had said it was an ornament made of very valuable Magic Crystal, bestowed on her as a reward by the Emperor—but—

Roswaal: “It looks like she used it without hesitation when she should. In that respect, her decisiveness is astonishing, but one should say it was an appropriate judgment~”

Russell: “You did speak of a plan to have the sons and daughters of nobles carry Magic Stones for self-defense…”

Roswaal: “It’s not a bad feeling to see a technique I taught put to use immediately. Not only does she have the judgment of a noble, but as a pupil, too, she's excellent. Most agreeable."

Russell: "—Roswaal."

With the blue eye closed and Roswaal expressing his admiration thus, Russell called to him quietly.

As for having been summoned through Ilzea, Russell did not go out of his way to say anything. Nor did Roswaal intend to press that point.

The situation was pressing—and even if it had not been, he probably would not have dug into it.

His relationship with Russell was a good friendship—and that impression held even if each had a dagger hidden behind his back.

On that basis of a relationship shot through with tension, Russell, fingers to his narrow chin, said:

Russell: "Let us set aside Lady Dracroy's excellence for now. The problem is that she used magic—or rather, that she fell into a situation where she had to use it. You are certain of this?"

Roswaal: "No mistake. With Magic Crystal of that quality, I'm not going to confuse its Mana wavelength—the magic pattern—overnight. And the way it was used was just as I'd instructed."

Russell: ""As you'd instructed"?"

Roswaal: "You use the Mana stored in the stone and—kaboom."

At Roswaal's explanation, delivered with both hands spread, Russell silently narrowed his eyes.

It might have sounded like a joke, but in truth skillful instruction over just a few hours was difficult. What Serena had been taught was the most efficient way to use up Magic Crystal.

If that had gotten her out of the pinch into which she had fallen, then good—but—

Roswaal: “Now then, what do you think happened to her?”

Russell: “—Lady Dracroy was a special envoy from the Empire. The purpose of her visit was the handover of the Werewolf captured in the capital and his escort to the Empire.”

Roswaal: “And thanks to the information you provided, Marcos secured the Werewolf.”

Russell: “Yes. Therefore Sir Marcos should also be accompanying the handover of the prisoner and the envoy’s escort to the border.”

Roswaal: “If Marcos is there, I would think it unlikely that anything too serious would occur~”

Though still young, there were few hands in the kingdom’s Royal Guard more skilled than Marcos’s.

Frankly, save for the “Sword Demon,” Wilhelm van Astrea, the Captain of the Royal Guard—and an opponent Roswaal would rather not have to face—there were few others.

In any case, one could say personnel of the highest standard had been assigned as escort. —Even so, Serena had fallen into a situation where she had to use magic of her own accord.

Russell: “What I can imagine is… a situation where Sir Marcos cannot function? Either he was neutralized by some means, or he himself turned against Lady Dracroy.”

Roswaal: “The former, but the latter is also hard to imagine. If the latter were to be the case, since Lady Dracroy has activated magic that could be called a trump card, she would be the one attacked… but given his history and thinking, it is not convincing that Sir Marcos would commit such an outrage.”

Russell: “Reeeally? He does have a prior record of having given aid to the Brotherhood, does he not?”

Roswaal: “Is it not a waste of time to spend on a debate whose conclusion is foregone? Sir Marcos bears no treasonous intent toward the kingdom. If we proceed on that premise, then…”

Breaking off there, Russell briefly met Roswaal's eyes. Roswaal drew in his chin in turn, and they spoke at the same time:

Roswaal & Russell: "—A third-party attack."

That, at present, would be the most consistent form for their inference to take.

Russell: "Sir Marcos and Lady Dracroy should be thought of as having been attacked on the same side. Since Lady Dracroy has activated magic, it is a situation beyond Sir Marcos's lone hand."

Roswaal: "Either the enemy had quite the numbers… no, if they did something so blatant, the Royal Guard could not possibly have failed to sense signs of it. The enemy should also be a small, elite force~"

Russell: "Their aim would be the Empire's envoy, or else the kingdom's knights… or the Werewolf being escorted."

Roswaal: "—There are still plenty who persist in such activities, after all~"

To the structure of Russell's reasoning, Roswaal had little in the way of additions or objections.

Amid the situation surrounding Marcos and Serena, the most likely targets for the yet-unseen "enemy" to have fixed upon were Serena herself and the Werewolf being escorted.

Reasons for targeting the former were many and could be conjectured; for targeting the latter, it was more likely not the Werewolf's life but his liberation that was the aim.

Since the Demi-human War, overt clashes between humans and the demi-human tribes had vanished on the surface in the Kingdom of Lugunica, but embers still smouldered here and there, and at times flared up as small blazes.

However—

Russell: "Involving the Empire's envoy this time cannot be dismissed as a small blaze.”

Roswaal: “If something happens to Serena, it will likely develop into a major diplomatic problem~ All the more so, if she were to lose her life in the kingdom…”

Russell: “—It could become a war with the Vollachian Empire.”

At Russell’s conclusion, Roswaal nodded quietly.

This was no exaggeration. As a matter of fact, the state of non-belligerence between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Vollachian Empire was a miraculous span of time, sustained upon a very delicate balance.

And there were surprisingly many who wanted to end this miraculous time and strike a decisive blow to the relations between the two nations. That was not limited to the warlike people of the Empire; the same was true in the kingdom.

It was a leap of thought, but if this incident were the work of demi-humans plotting the Werewolf’s liberation, then those who still harbored the grudge of the Demi-human War and hated the kingdom might desire a slide into war brought on by a worsening of relations between kingdom and Empire.

Each was a bud of possibility with ample risk of avalanching toward the worst—

Roswaal: “—And I desire none of them to come to pass.”

Roswaal L. Mathers had a plan, one that would take a very, very long time.

It was a span of years that would make an ordinary person’s head swim, and a one-time chance that would not allow failure—and he had not yet even reached the starting point.

To surely bring it to fruition, any factor that would stop his feet had to be removed.

Russell: “The Royal Guard likely has not yet grasped the situation. I will contact them from my side. You…”

Roswaal: “Naturally, I’ll move at once∼”

Saying so, Roswaal set a foot on the laboratory’s window frame. With Russell’s widened eyes at his back, he cast himself straight out into the air.

And—

Russell: “…Magic is far more out of the ordinary than I imagined.”

Glancing outside the window at Roswaal, floating in midair wreathed in wind, Russell murmured.

Russell: “By the way, if I learn from you, will I be able to fly as well?”

Roswaal: “Rather than “if you learn from me,” if you hone yourself, you can. So long as you judge your own aptitudes and are prepared to spend your entire life on magic∼”

Russell: “I see—so it will not be easy. …Any leads on where to search?”

Roswaal: “For the time being, I’ll try tracing the traces of Serena’s magic. You—”

Russell cut him off: “Then take this,” and tossed something his way. Catching it on reflex, Roswaal found it to be a folding hand mirror—and it was obvious it was not merely a tool for one’s appearance.

A “Conversation Mirror”—a “Meteor” that enabled conversation between paired mirrors.

Roswaal: “You miss nothing.”

Russell: “That’s my one redeeming feature. —Do not overdo it, Roswaal.”

Tucking the Conversation Mirror into his breast, Roswaal waved a hand—“Ah”—to Russell’s words; then he rose in altitude, left the institute's stone tower, and began to pursue the traces of Mana.

It would be a problem if Serena were to suffer something through carelessness and a war between kingdom and Empire not in his plan were to break out.

And—

Roswaal: "Serena and Marcos, too, are friends I would hate to lose~"

8

Serena: "For now, it seems we have shaken off our pursuers."

Leaving the mountain road engulfed in explosions behind them and slipping some distance into the deep forest to hide among the trees, Serena slackened her taut vigilance a little and rolled her shoulders.

Soot and dirt smudged the formal dress of a noble's daughter she wore, but fortunately she had not suffered a single wound. That much was thanks to Serena's own handling of the situation and to the efforts of those around her.

At the very least, there ought to be that much to show for it—that Serena had escaped unscathed.

After all—

Serena: "When it comes to survivors on our side, it is down to me and you two now."

Behind her as she said so, three figures were likewise taking shelter behind the trunk of a great tree, resting their bodies. None of them were Imperial soldiers. Regrettably, the four soldiers escorting Serena from the Empire had not made it out of that mountain road alive.

Nor had the Kingdom's three knights, the drivers, or the ground dragons. In the end, those who survived that place were Serena, the Kingdom knights Marcos and Heinkel, and—

Heinkel: “L-Look, Special Envoy, the situation’s pretty dire… so why are we dragging this guy along?”

Serena: “Hm? Ah, I am aware I am asking something troublesome. But what I was ordered to do is escort that man back. If it is His Imperial Majesty’s decree, I have no choice but to obey, do I?”

Heinkel: “Even so…!”

Alagar: “Yer screw’s loose, you lot.”

Even in this untransformed, scrawny state, the werewolf Alagar, hands bound in manacles, glared at Serena and the others without loosening a whit of the hostility and caution in his eyes.

Finding that fierce hatred almost amusing, Serena curved her lips.

Serena: “Sorry to say, but you are going to stick with us a little longer yet, Alagar.”

Alagar: “…Yer bloody nuts, lady.”

He wrinkled his nose and spat the words.

That they had managed to extract Alagar, bound and all, in the midst of that chaos was a stroke of fortune bordering on the miraculous. From the look of it, the man whose life had been spared had not the slightest intention of being grateful.

Serena: “And to have my sanity questioned on top of that is unfair. I am your lifesaver, or ought to be.”

Alagar: “Damn right we’re questionin’ ya. Riskin’ yer own neck to haul me outta there? ’Cause the Emperor told ya to? Only thing to call that is “crazy lady, drop dead.”“

Heinkel: “Watch your tongue!”

It was not Serena but Heinkel who snapped at the werewolf’s attitude, insolence taken to the extreme. The redheaded knight hardened his mild features and thrust an awfully grand-looking sword toward Alagar.

Heinkel: “Don’t you get it? If the Special Envoy hadn’t decided to save you, you’d still be back on that road right now—”

Alagar: “Either way I’m gettin’ hauled back to the Empire to be executed. Try lookin’ at the heart of it, rich boy.”

Heinkel: “—Kh, why you!”

Heinkel raised his blade, face gone red at Alagar’s mockery. For a second it seemed his temper would end the mission then and there, but—

Heinkel: “—nngh.”

His movement froze with the sword still raised. The hand gripping his weapon was clenched with abnormal force and trembled faintly.

Winking one eye, Serena called out to him.

Serena: “Sir Knight Heinkel, that is far enough. We risked our lives to save that life. It would be laughable to cut it down with our own hands.”

Heinkel: “…If that is your order, Special Envoy.”

He answered, and with reluctant air slid his sword back into its scabbard.

It was a farcical exchange, but Heinkel was one of the few people they still had. With the need for solidarity being absolute from here on, needless friction ought to be avoided whenever possible.

Between his poor response under pressure and that trembling a moment ago, Heinkel’s problems were not ones Serena could hope to solve here.

Which was why, of those present, the person she most needed on her side was—

Marcos: “Quit making the Special Envoy babysit you with that worthless back-and-forth.”

Heinkel: “M-Marcos!”

Marcos: “Keep your voice down. Where do you think we are, and what do you think we are doing?”

A low voice came from the shadow of the tree, and Heinkel squeaked. Irritated, Marcos rebuked him. Marcos had been there, tending to his wounds in that shade.

He had suffered quite deep injuries trading blows with the assailants on the mountain road. Thanks to the first aid, the bleeding from the gashes across his thick, burly chest had stopped.

Serena: “That said, you must have bled a good deal. How do you feel?”

Marcos: “I can move somehow. Your quick wits saved me, Special Envoy.”

Serena: “No, quick wits and clever tricks only matter if there is a situation to make use of them. In that regard, Sir Knight Marcos’s fighting was the lifeline for every last one of us.”

She shrugged, not offering comfort or encouragement but a candid evaluation.

—A deadly rear guard firing from afar, and two exceptionally powerful fighters at the fore. The enemy ambush on that mountain road had been near perfect; it would not have been strange if they had been annihilated with no room to act.

With their means of travel destroyed in the opening move and her escort cut down, Serena had been cornered.

She prided herself on being more resourceful than the average girl and that she could wield a sword, but Serena did not delude herself into thinking that would get her through a pinch like that. Their continued survival was thanks to Marcos’s efforts. There would be no laughing if the thin ice underfoot had given way.

Serena: “Sir Knight Heinkel, as well, did not turn his nose up at me for being an Imperial and followed orders. Thanks to that, the duty of escorting the werewolf can still continue.”

Heinkel: “N-No, Special Envoy, I only did what I should have…”

Marcos: “Is this really the time to curry favor? Button it. —About the flash you just used as a smokescreen: for a smokescreen it packed a lot of punch. That earring must have been a very valuable piece, no?”

Serena: “I used it where it should be used. That is what tools are for.”

Quick to notice, Marcos had seen the missing earring. Serena touched the ear now bare and replied.

It had been an ornament bestowed by the Vollachian Emperor in recognition of her quelling a revolt in her domain, but the stroke of luck was having learned the proper way to use it just yesterday.

The method she had learned from Roswaal during her visit to the magic research institute—that was what had become a smokescreen far beyond excessive, buying them the opening to flee.

Serena: “If we were careless and the pursuers had died in that blast, the matter would be simple, but…”

Marcos: “…That is a long shot. Those bastards were skilled, every last one. Even if not, the ones at long range will not have been caught in it.”

Serena: “True enough. I only said it.”

When they broke away under cover of the Magic Crystal’s explosion, Marcos had left a very large parting gift to keep the sniper’s head down, but counting on that having killed the target would be overly optimistic.

For the time being, they should assume all three of the enemy assassins were still alive.

Serena: “We came down the mountain road and made it into the forest below, but how long will it take the Kingdom to grasp the situation and send reinforcements?”

Heinkel: “Th-That… of course, as quickly as possible, the Knights will respond…”

Marcos: “…We cannot say. What I can say is they were waiting for us fully prepared. That being so, there is a good chance they have already moved to keep word of the commotion from spreading.”

Serena: “So banking on reinforcements and waiting out the pursuit is unrealistic.”

She nodded at Marcos’s answer while ignoring Heinkel’s vague one.

It had been an ambush arranged with meticulous care. The problem was who had leaked that they would be passing through that place at that time—or rather, from which nation the leak had come.

Depending on whether the fault lay with the Kingdom or the Empire, the depth of the problem changed for Serena.

And then—

Heinkel: “Special Envoy, I have a proposal. —We hand that werewolf over to them.”

Serena: “Oh?”

Raising a small hand and lowering his voice, Heinkel offered a proposal that made Serena arch a brow.

It was the first time Heinkel had truly taken her by surprise, and it was also the most worth considering of his suggestions so far. Of course, all would depend on his intent.

Heinkel: “Those guys Marcos was fighting looked like demi-humans at a glance. If so, their aim is to free the werewolf. If we hand him over, we might have room to negotiate… uagh!”

Marcos: “Heinkel! What the hell are you saying!”

Marcos suddenly flared up, fisting Heinkel by the chest mid-sentence. He lifted him with such strength that Heinkel's feet left the ground, and glared at him from up close.

Marcos: "They killed the Envoy's guards, and they killed our own. And you want to hand the werewolf to them? What happens to the ones who died!"

Heinkel: "I-I feel the same…! But you're the one not getting it!"

Marcos: "What was that?"

Heinkel: "The Envoy's safety comes first! That's what you said!"

He kicked his dangling feet, twisting at Marcos's hand with both of his own. The difference between their arms was like the trunk and a branch of a tree, yet the strength of conviction had them even for now.

When all was said and done, Marcos's position was one of emotion, as someone whose own had been killed; his words lacked grounding. Heinkel's was a position that took diplomatic issues into account, though it, too, was short on certainty.

If one had to say which of them had the better theoretical armor on in that moment, it would be Heinkel.

However—

Serena: "That supposes their target really is Alagar. That is the weak point."

Heinkel: "…You think it might be something else?"

Serena: "Easily. At the very least, so long as I am inside the Kingdom, I am like a fire Magic Stone. Wherever I am detonated, some degree of damage will result. If the damage itself is what they are after, your proposal is irrelevant whether we hand Alagar over or not."

If what the enemy wanted was simply for Serena to die in the Kingdom, then Heinkel's proposal would be ignored and there would be no room for negotiation. Or perhaps, taking Serena's life and freeing Alagar's person both would be the surest way to rub both Empire and Kingdom entirely the wrong way.

Either way—

Serena: "Sir Knight Heinkel's valuable proposal is one where, if we try it and fail, there will be no recovering. On top of that, I will add one more thing."

Heinkel: "A-And that is?"

Serena: "As I just said, this is His Imperial Majesty's decree. We risked our lives to pull Alagar out for that. If I return alive yet fail to fulfill that decree, I am not sure my head will remain attached."

In short, from the very premise, Serena did not have the freedom to release Alagar.

Hearing this, Marcos let Heinkel drop back to the ground, then raked his own head with his free hand.

Marcos: "Which means we are cut off and on our own, with no reinforcements, and we kill every last pursuer and press on with the mission."

Serena: "At the limit, it would be good enough if we slipped the pursuit and made it to the border fortress. But depending on where the pursuers hail from, I cannot say the fortress will be safe."

Marcos: "You cannot say the fortress will be safe?"

Serena: "I have many enemies. Not only in the Kingdom, but within the Empire as well. Add to that, my most immediate enemy is… No, that is enough of that for now."

She slowly shook her head and left it unsaid.

Then, having listened in silence, Alagar suddenly rumbled deep in his throat. For a man in manacles, in a position as precarious as it got, it was a sullen smile.

Their gazes turned his way, and he snorted.

Alagar: “Before we set out ya were so high ’n mighty, but now yer spot ain’t so different from mine, huh. Maybe I oughta howl and bring ’em right to ya?”

Heinkel: “Wh-What did you say?”

Alagar: “That gag slipped off in the chaos. Just sayin’ I got options, right?”

Serena: “There are always options. I do not particularly recommend that one.”

Hands on her hips, Serena stated it plainly. If it sounded like begging for life, she would not deny it, but that was not all.

Serena: “Given the situation, I do not think they are after your freedom. If that is so, what role are you expected to play, just for being there?—A convenient place to pin the blame.”

Alagar: “…”

Serena: “An Imperial envoy and the Kingdom knights escorting her, wiped out to the last. As the culprit, “the werewolf who was to be returned to the Empire for execution”—that is very convenient.”

As she laid out the logic, Alagar’s expression gradually clouded.

Serena was only voicing a possibility, yet she was confident the reasoning fit Alagar’s position rather well.

However, there was a decisive hole in her argument from Alagar’s point of view.

Alagar: “I get it, sellin’ ya out don’t save me even if I let ’em kill ya. But that’s the same even if I don’t sell ya out, innit.”

That was the hole.

Even if Alagar threw in with them, made it to the fortress, and they managed to get the situation under control, what awaited him would be the scaffold. If he would die either way, Serena had no right to condemn him for trying to drag them down with him out of spite.

Therefore, to collapse that premise—

Serena: “Quite so. Which is exactly why there is room for you and me to negotiate.”

Alagar: “Negotiate, huh?”

Serena: “Yes. Listen, Alagar. If you agree not to sell us out here, I am willing to declare you dead and let you go.”

Heinkel: “Wha…?!”

Heinkel gasped, as did Alagar, at Serena’s offer spoken with her arms folded.

Only Marcos, with a face like bedrock, stared steadily at Serena as if to probe her.

Marcos: “…I believe you only just said you could not go against His Majesty’s decree.”

Serena: “I did. But needs must. If Alagar howls and draws them down on us here, that is the end. In that case, to protect our own lives, shall I silence him?”

Marcos fell silent, and Serena smiled.

Serena: “I do not favor filthy tricks like that. You feel the same, I take it.”

To Serena, pride was something to be valued as highly as life itself, if not higher.

Serena: “And if I am to take both my life and my pride, the compromise in the middle is “deceiving His Majesty.” What do you say, Alagar?”

Alagar: “…Hard to answer that one.”

Serena: “Naturally, to report you “killed” rather than “released,” I will need convincing proof—an eye, perhaps, or an arm. In return, I will give you a way to live. That is my offer."

Alagar: "…"

Serena: "Apologies, but we cannot give you long to think. Sir Knight Heinkel is even more impatient than I am."

She flicked a glance at Heinkel as she spoke. He blinked at her, then caught on immediately and drew his sword again.

The gleam of steel gave the dithering Alagar a firm shove in the back.

Alagar: "…Fine. I'll do it your way."

Serena: "Well done. Needless to say, even if they kill us, you will not be saved. So when it comes down to it—"

Alagar: "—Crazy lady."

Grinding his teeth, Alagar looked at her with naked loathing. Serena laughed.

Somehow, the rational talks with the werewolf had concluded. Whether she could really talk Drizen Vollachia, the Emperor, into accepting a lie was a gamble, but first they had to make it back alive.

Watching Serena's profile as she finished the negotiation, Marcos let out a long breath.

Marcos: "…Now I get why you're pals with Roswaal."

Serena: "Oh? So you did know Roswaal. You said nothing about it and let me talk; that is unkind of you, Sir Knight Marcos."

Marcos: "You and him, and one more of Roswaal's pals, you're all worse than I am."

Serena: "You mean Russell Fellow? In that case, I met him yesterday as well."

Marcos: “…Figures.”

The honorifics slipped from his words, and the respect from his demeanor; Marcos wore a face as though the world were ending. Smiling at his reaction, Serena looked up to the sky.

The thick canopy blocked out the light; in the overgrown forest, no sunshine reached them. That was a tailwind for those who had to hide, like Serena’s party, but if there was anyone besides the pursuers searching for them, it would be a headwind for that party.

An idea struck her. Serena fished in her breast and played a thin, light thing between her fingers. Fortunately, blowing away the earring had also let her grasp a certain sense for it.

Serena: “So long as I do not throw away pride and dignity, I will use every measure I can. That is how I do things.”

—While Serena was laying down an extra precaution just in case.

Marcos: “Heinkel, keep your eyes on the werewolf. The Special Envoy struck a deal with him, but I cannot say how seriously he took it.”

Testing the feel of clenching and unclenching his fist, Marcos gave Heinkel his orders.

At this point, the question of who the squad leader was meant nothing at all. Heinkel answered that order with a grim face and a nod.

Only, after that he shut his mouth and stared fixedly at Marcos, which Marcos could not make sense of.

Marcos: “What? Your staring’s getting on my nerves.”

Heinkel: “You’re okay… right? I’ve never seen you pressed that hard before.”

Marcos: “…Told you, they were skilled. And it was two on one—no, three on one, counting the long-range shooter. Of course it took doing.”

Heinkel: “…”

Marcos: “If we had more competent allies it would be another story. Getting bailed out by the Special Envoy’s quick thinking—don’t you think that looks pretty bad for a knight?”

Heinkel: “Th-That’s…”

He still could not answer Marcos’s needling with anything proper, which was tiresome.

He had managed to talk back when Marcos lost his temper a moment ago, which had been a surprise, but now the man’s lack of spirit made that look like a mistake.

In any case, Marcos had no room to indulge Heinkel’s self-doubts any further.

Marcos: “I’m the vanguard, you’re the rear. At least be the first to spot the enemy.”

Heinkel: “R-Right. …Don’t you lose.”

Tacking on an unnecessary extra comment, Heinkel headed over to Alagar and used his blade to keep the now-docile werewolf in line.

Watching that, Marcos once more dropped his gaze to his own hand.

Marcos: “Tch.”

In his vision, the fist that opened and closed was trembling ever so slightly.

—Bit by bit, the wound the arrowhead had gouged was throbbing in an ominous way, and it was downright unpleasant.

Having taken off from the Royal Research Institute of Magic, Roswaal followed the traces, relying on the spell pattern he had sensed.

Magic Crystals were pure crystallizations of mana; Serena's magic that had used one as a catalyst should have been quite powerful, but as expected, the traces had grown faint as time passed, making it hard to pin down an exact location.

Thus, it seemed that tracing their steps would not be easy—but—

Roswaal: "—Was this Marcos's doing? As outrageous as ever."

Saying so, Roswaal looked exasperated at the overly conspicuous signs of battle he had discovered below.

What lay there was a bizarre sight: a dragon carriage wedged into the cliff of a rocky mountain road. Even if an accident had sent a dragon carriage tumbling off the cliff, it would not end up like this. As seen, the proper conclusion was that someone had forcibly slammed the dragon carriage into the cliff and stuck it there.

Roswaal: "The very notion of "proper" gets a bit fuzzy here… buuut there's really no one else~"

One would not say just anyone could perform such a feat, but if even a single likely candidate came to mind, it would not be wrong to call it within the realm of possibility.

Roughly calculating the angle and line by which the dragon carriage had been hurled into the cliff, Roswaal set his sights across the valley on the mountain road opposite, and headed that way.

And then—

Roswaal: "—Hm."

Kneeling on one knee on the mountain road, he ran his palm over the poorly leveled ground as he pondered.

By Roswaal's estimation, this mountain road was where Serena had cast her magic and, at the same time, where her escort Marcos had rampaged enough to throw a dragon carriage. Nevertheless, there was no sign of anything like that in the surroundings; only the dragon carriage stuck in the cliff stood out, entirely out of place.

It was a deeply puzzling sight, but either the dragon carriage in the cliff or the pristine mountain road was lying.

Roswaal: “And in most cases, lies are used to prettify reality, riiight~”

Convinced of this, Roswaal snapped his fingers high in the middle of the mountain road.

At once, a gust sprang up centered on Roswaal, and it swept down the mountain road in one go. —The next instant, unable to withstand the strong wind, the craftsmen who had adorned reality revealed themselves.

They were—

Roswaal: “—Bugs.”

In Roswaal’s field of view, what the wind had torn up and flung aside were innumerable winged insects with their wings folded. By camouflaging the surfaces of their wings as scenery and clustering together, the winged insects had fabricated a “pristine mountain road”.

However, once the trick was exposed and the deception beneath became visible, what lay bare were cracks in the ground, a crumbled cliff, and the randomly tidied corpses of the dead—

Roswaal: “—Oh.”

In that split second, something grazed Roswaal’s navy-blue long hair and shot past right beside him.

Whipping his head around, Roswaal grasped that this had been a shot aimed at him from afar. —The moment he saw that the place where Marcos had hurled the dragon carriage and the place where the actual fighting had taken place were far apart, he had already been on guard for the presence of a sniper who required long-distance throws of super-heavy masses from Marcos.

For that reason, he had donned a suit of wind as armor beforehand, prepared for a surprise attack. Thanks to it, he avoided a clean hit, but the fact that the wind's protection had nearly been pierced at the last instant was power beyond his expectations.

Roswaal: "No wonder Marcos had trouble."

If the foe had been ordinary, there would have been no reason Marcos's physical prowess could not have repelled them. If the enemy were grunts, Marcos would easily have subdued a thousand, two thousand.

Therefore, this was a dire strait—namely, an elite. —All things are moved by those who stand far above the rest.

And Roswaal did not think Marcos so poor a fighter as to fall behind an opponent who only shot from far away. —Thus, when different bugs that had been plastered to the ground for the sake of a surprise attack rushed him next, he, without any preliminary motion, rose into the air and slipped past their ambush with ease.

Roswaal: "If it's not a Meteor that manipulates insects, then it's the work of the Insect Cage Tribe. I don't like needless killing, buuut we're short on time, so I'll have to follow the order of priorities."

Saying that, Roswaal held his hand over the swarming, saw-blade-like bugs massed at his feet—and the flames he unleashed burned them away along with the swarm.

Listening to the grating death-cries of insects, Roswaal turned his other hand to the open air and spread the conflagration to the winged insects that had been fabricating the mountain road as well. If the enemy belonged to the Insect Cage Tribe that manipulated bugs, then to assume these were mere non-combat decoys used for camouflage would be to stop thinking.

He would not stop thinking. On top of that—

Roswaal: "—Kh."

Suddenly, an impact burst through the curtain of flame and struck Roswaal.

It was the enemy's second shot—after the first had been stopped by the wind armor, they immediately responded by using an arrow projectile with increased penetration. —However, Roswaal did not fall short when it came to adaptability either.

The impact had been drawn into the center of his chest, but it had not penetrated Roswaal's body. He had judged that, with this opponent, they would soon counter the wind armor, and had prepared a stone breastplate beneath.

Roswaal: "Riiight there~"

The instant the second attack struck, Roswaal, inverted midair, grasped the general position of the sniper and brought his hand down toward it. —Immediately, over the valley, in the area where the sniper was likely to be hiding, masses of flame came pouring down all at once.

To strike an enemy whose position had been fixed, after blocking the opening salvo with wind armor, he had quietly prepared fireballs above the clouds. With nowhere to run, the carpet bombing would incinerate the foe.

Roswaal: "Putting maximum firepower into your opener is the basis of combat."

Before the opponent could gather information, annihilating them with overwhelming firepower was the surefire method for a magician.

In that regard, Roswaal had been drilled mercilessly by his master. Of course, depending on the situation, he would choose tactics other than that, but as things stood there was no reason to gainsay that teaching.

He had burned away the bugs and scorched the sniper. Next, he would presumably rendezvous with Marcos and the others who must have fled into the forest—that was the moment.

Roswaal: “—Tch, I slipped up.”

Feeling a sharp blow bite into his left shoulder, Roswaal realized his mistake.

Was it the sniper’s last show of grit, bathed as they were in the falling flames? The next shot they loosed did not aim straight at Roswaal; instead, they added a little twist to their aim.

Correcting at once for the fact that a frontal strike had been blocked, the enemy attacked Roswaal’s back—in other words, they pulled off a trick shot by ricocheting it off a third kind of bug that had appeared in the sky, one bearing a carapace on its back.

Thanks to the wind armor, the round was deflected. Even so, it was no mere graze one could laugh off.

Roswaal: “…Their allies will arrive soon. I can’t loooinger here~”

Pressing a hand to the gouged back of his left shoulder, Roswaal decided to withdraw from the spot.

It was a deep wound that needed tending, but if he lingered, he would invite enemy reinforcements. That would be fatal here. Roswaal immediately lowered the altitude of his flight spell and descended toward the forest at the foot of the mountain road’s cliff.

He considered returning to the Royal Capital to report once, but even the sniper alone was an elite among elites.

If he retreated with his safety in mind, Serena would, in all likelihood, be killed, and the countdown to war might begin. That was not what he wished—

Roswaal: “—?”

For an instant he felt his head swim, and the control of Roswaal’s flight spell faltered.

Surprised by what his body had done, Roswaal clutched his wounded shoulder tight. The blood from the wound had not stopped, but the amount was not enough to cloud his consciousness.

Nor had he trained so halfheartedly that pain of this degree would disrupt his control over magic.

And yet, the flying Roswaal was losing stability—

Roswaal: “—Poison.”

Realizing it too late, Roswaal ground his molars.

There was poison smeared on the sniper’s projectile. The enemy was, in all likelihood, of the Insect Cage Tribe, so the poison was probably insect-derived, making its properties hard to ascertain.

From the feel of it, it did not seem the sort to kill instantly, but this was bad.

Roswaal: “I can’t knit my mana properly…”

Breath ragged, Roswaal’s altitude suddenly plunged.

Now on a trajectory little different from gliding, colliding with the branches and boughs of the forest, Roswaal shielded his face with an arm, curled his body tight, and braced himself for impact with the ground.

If the landing point was soft dirt, fine; if it was bare rock, it would be disastrous. Feeling the ground rush up, Roswaal tensed every muscle—

???: “—Reckless bastard.”

Braced for a crash into the earth, Roswaal was caught by something hard—hard, but somewhat softer than his worst expectation—and greeted by a low voice. Blinking in surprise, he looked up and locked eyes with a boulder—no, with a face like a boulder.

It was—

Roswaal: “Heeey, Marcos. I felt you were in crisis, so I rushed over like thiiiis~”

Marcos: “…That your excuse, when you just dropped outta the sky?

If I hadn't caught you, you'd be a bloodstain on the ground right now."

Roswaal: "Which means we're both supporting each other, riiiight? Friendship is truly a beautiful thing, don't you think? …Oww."

Marcos: "I don't."

Saying something so cold, he let go and dropped Roswaal to the ground. Snorting as he looked down at Roswaal was Marcos, the man they were searching for.

Apparently, he had dashed to the spot where Roswaal was falling out of control to catch him.

Ordinarily, if one reached out for a falling Roswaal with that much momentum, the one catching would not come out unscathed either, but it would be boorish to say that to Marcos.

As Roswaal was feeling relieved to have linked up with Marcos,

Serena: "—Oh? If it isn't Roswaal. Have you, after all, found it hard to part with me? In that case, let us head for the Empire together, and you may become my consort."

With the sound of grass and brush being pushed aside, Serena stepped from between the trees.

Upon finding Roswaal, she flashed a gallant smile; she was imposing, and at a glance it was neither bravado nor did she appear to be wounded.

That, it seemed, was where Marcos had staked his pride as a knight and protected her to the last.

Roswaal: "I must refuse the marriage proposal. Buuut, I am very glad my new friend is safe. Are you two the only ones alive?"

Marcos: "No, the Werewolf we were escorting and a Royal Guard squad leader are with us. Neither is easy to count as fighting strength, though… Oh—better keep an eye on Alagar so he doesn't run."

Serena: "—. I could not care less how you evaluate Heinkel. As for the opinion that he's useless, I agree."

At Serena's reply, Marcos answered with a look that said he had a lot of thoughts about it.

At their exchange, Roswaal, for the moment, patted his chest in relief that the worst possibility—failing to make it in time—had been avoided.

Now, without despairing, they needed to probe for a way to escape this situation—

Serena: "Right. Roswaal, the spell you taught me came in handy. No matter the circumstance, when what you've learned comes alive, it's exhilarating. Hm?"

For a heartbeat, Roswaal drew in a breath at Serena's beaming words—then let out a laugh.

He agreed wholeheartedly and thought she was exactly right—but—

Roswaal: "There's a limit to how out of place you can be. —Honestly, you're such a friend worth saving, you knooow∼"

10

Serena: "—I see. If it's true that you took down that sniper, then there are two elites left on the enemy's side, are there not?"

Roswaal: "Ah, that should be the caseee. If they also took Marcos's parting gift, it's hard to imagine they dodged all of my flames. … Ow, ow—could you dress it a little more gently?"

Marcos: "Don't start whining after you put yourself out on the front line."

So saying, Marcos, who had dressed the wound in Roswaal's left shoulder, gave him a smack on the back.

At the utter lack of mercy in that palm, Roswaal let out a "gr…h" in his throat and glared at Marcos resentfully. To take risks to come save him and even suffer an honorable wound, and receive this attitude—this friend was, indeed, one with little worth saving.

Roswaal: “For how frankly she gives thanks, Serena outranks you as a friend even though it’s been but a short while.”

Serena: “From what I’m seeing, the two of you seem to have quite the easy rapport yourselves. And as I’ve said more than once, I also have the ulterior motive of taking you as my consort.”

Roswaal: “To be so incorrigible in this situation… this isn’t merely about having nerves of steeel.”

Arms folded, Serena gave a sly grin, to which Roswaal could only wryly smile.

She truly had some guts. It was hard to think of her as a tragic princess whose life was being targeted. —Having finished exchanging information, Roswaal was newly impressed by Serena’s strength.

In practice, her quick thinking had let her escape the assassins’ surprise attack in that moment of peril, and then, by casting magic, she had alerted Roswaal as well—her resourcefulness was outstanding. One might almost feel sorry for the attackers when Serena was playing so many best moves.

Even so, the situation was one in which it was eat or be eaten. They also had an aim of preventing the outbreak of war. Mercy and pity should be reserved until the time came to hang them over the enemy’s gravestones.

Russell: “—I understand the circumstances. However, even hearing them makes me want to frown.”

Thus said Russell, rubbing the space between his brows with a finger from within the small hand mirror.

At present, by means of a pair of mirrors through which one could converse—the “Conversation Mirrors”—Roswaal’s group was linked with Russell, who had remained in the Royal Capital. Having him participate in the exchange of information with Serena and the others meant the situation on their side had been shared in full.

Hence, it was only natural that Russell would want to knead out the furrow in his brow.

Roswaal: “To add one more thing, the condition of the wound the sniper dealt me is not good. It seems they smeared poison on it, and I’m experiencing malfunctions when using magic.”

Russell: “…Even worse. Are you likely to die?”

Roswaal: “Even if it’s a lethal poison, it’s likely a slow-acting oneee. With proper treatment, the prospects of survival are high. However, to administer proper treatment…”

Marcos: “We’ll have to wring out of that lot what poison it is.”

In a heavy tone, Marcos solemnly picked up Roswaal’s conclusion. It was, however, a mildly surprising statement—after all, the one who had suffered from the poison was Roswaal.

Roswaal: “From your standpoint, your top priority should be Serena’s safety, should it not? I didn’t think you’d concern yourself with me, the one who got poisoneddd.”

Marcos: “—. Unfortunately, it’s not someone else’s problem.”

At Marcos’s answer, his cheek twisted, Roswaal knit his brows. Then Marcos raised his arm and, from the gap in his armor at his left side, showed a blood-seeping wound. Roswaal could not see his own left-shoulder wound clearly either, but the bluish-black discoloration looked the same.

Marcos: “I’ve got this prickly feeling in my fingertips. I thought it might just be in my head, but…”

Roswaal: “I understated it, but I very much feel I’ve been dosed with a rather dangerous poison; size difference or not, the way your body is built is truly monster-class.”

Marcos: “Maybe you’re just freakishly frail.”

Russell: “I’m not taking Roswaal’s side, but given the nature of assassins, using a poison that has no effect would be meaningless. The odd one out is Sir Marcos.”

With Russell’s assistance, the weight of reason in this scene tilted toward Roswaal. That said, receiving only a single click of Marcos’s tongue as recompense was far from the sweet wine of victory.

Comparing the wounds of Roswaal and Marcos in turn, Serena closed one eye and said,

Serena: “So there are two victims of the poison. From what I’ve just heard, this doesn’t sound like something that can be overcome by sheer grit. In that case—how do we bring down the assassins?”

Before the two self-reported victims, Serena sought opinions on a countermeasure. But to her words, “A moment, please,” came Russell’s interjection from beyond the mirror.

Russell: “As I said earlier, the top priority is the life of Special Envoy Dracroy. All the more so if Roswaal and Sir Marcos have but little time left because of the poison. You must not misjudge your priorities.”

Marcos: “You sure know how to say we’ve got little time left.”

Roswaal: “Truly, you’re a friend with so little worth saving, aren’t youuu.”

Russell: “Sharp tongues you may have, but a Roswaal who cannot use magic and a Sir Marcos who cannot put in strength are good for nothing but alleviating boredom. If it’s that role, I can fulfill it even through the mirror.”

Serena: “So you’re telling us to abandon the two and go? An amusing opinion, that.”

With a small snort and a wry smile, Serena continued, “However,” and then said,

Serena: “Russell Fellow, I understand your point. I would like to think I am not so foolish I don’t grasp the impact my life has on those around me. —On top of that, leaving behind two people being eaten away by poison is not an option for me."

Russell: "…May I ask your reason?"

Serena: "It's simple. If I return home without knowing who orchestrated this situation, I will meet an end no different from being poisoned again."

To Russell's cold, clear-cut point, Serena replied with a resolute air. Receiving that, Russell on the other side of the mirror narrowed his eyes, and Roswaal closed one of his as well.

"Poison"—thus did Serena speak of the dire straits to which she had been driven.

Whether poison had actually been administered was not the issue. In her view, a situation in which poison could be administered at any time was already tantamount to having been poisoned. And that was an absolute iron-blooded law in the Vollachian Empire, a nation of survival of the fittest.

Serena: "Besides, not to put too fine a point on it, but I don't think I'll shake pursuit with just myself and a single chatty mirror after abandoning the two. Even if you say you can't use magic and you can't put strength into it, surely you're not going to whine that you're completely useless, are you?"

Roswaal: "…Weeell, I'm at about half of peacetime capacity."

At Serena's provocative gaze, Roswaal answered while checking the state of his body. Then, casting a glance at Marcos, he, too, let out a deep sigh.

Marcos: "I can still move a bit more than that. That said, with those kinds of elites as our opponents, we can't be optimistic."

Russell: "…Even so, we have no choice but to have you win. We are also petitioning the Royal Guard to dispatch reinforcements from our side, but there are not many with your level of prowess."

Roswaal: "In that case, Marcos will have to get promoted quickly, and we'll need to hurry the raising of the knights' baseline strength."

Marcos: "Big mouths, the both of you."

Marcos snorted, tersely pushing away the opinions of Roswaal and Russell.

At any rate, Serena's resolve was firm. Russell abandoned the passive plan dressed up as "rational," and withdrew his objection in favor of the policy of actively sweeping aside the sparks flying at them.

In truth, Serena's thinking was correct. What must be won cannot be won without fighting. —If the one whose station most demands valuing her life would meet them halfway, then Roswaal and the others could only answer in kind.

Roswaal: "Not least because I can't very well die in a place like this myselff."

For the sake of the grand objective he envisioned, for the plan he had long spent time preparing, Roswaal could not gallantly throw away his life for his homeland here.

Roswaal: "Russell, we'll do everything we can on our end. I'm counting on you on yours as well."

Russell: "I will do my utmost. I always do."

Nodding at the reply of his reliable friend beyond the mirror, Roswaal tucked the Conversation Mirror into his breast and slowly looked around at Marcos's and Serena's faces.

And then—

Roswaal: "All right, then—let's work hard so that every last one of us makes it out alive."

11

Alagar felt a deep sympathy for the red-haired knight pointing a sword at him.

Heinkel Astrea—of the Astrea family line, that “Sword Saint” household; a man who had, for a father and a mother respectively, the “Sword Demon” and the “Sword Saint,” one of a bloodline inheriting legend from generation to generation. He was born to what seemed a guaranteed glorious future, yet for all that, he was a man who gave off a scent of ill fortune.

Even his fellow knights treated him offhandedly; even to Alagar, with the troublesome birth of a Werewolf, he looked like he was living as if gasping for air. Of course, if Alagar said such sympathetic things out loud, he would only anger the man, who lacked composure and leisure, and it would turn into a bother, so he did not.

In any case—

Heinkel: “D-Don’t move. If you try anything funny, you won’t live.”

Alagar: “…Told that crazy woman the same thing, didn’t I. I’m not gonna try anything funny.”

Heinkel: “Don’t talk! You Werewolves have a reputation for slyly tricking people. Even if you act meek, no one can tell what you’re thinking deep down.”

Alagar: “You’re the one who started talking to me.”

Not incoherent, but far too emotionally unstable. That said, considering Heinkel’s situation, this lack of composure was understandable.

There was a nonzero chance the enemy’s target was Alagar, and yet the two of them had been left alone in the forest.

While keeping watch on their surroundings, Heinkel had seen something in the forest sky. Serena and Marcos had gone to check it, but it was highly likely they were using that as a pretext to talk about something they did not want him to hear. The more time that passed like that, the worse Heinkel’s complexion grew.

Rising anxiety and tension—the nature of that impatience was obvious.

Alagar: “You’re suspecting you’ve been abandoned and left behind, aren’t you?”

Heinkel: “—Shut up!”

Alagar: “Shut me up all you like, it won’t change the facts—and it’d be a pain if you blew up at me while I kept quiet. If they were gonna abandon you, they’d use you as a decoy in a way that’s a lot easier to understand, so don’t worry.”

Heinkel: “Don’t talk like you know…”

Alagar: “I do know. Want me to teach you how hard life is for wolfmen and Werewolves?”

At Alagar’s low voice, the on-the-verge-of-exploding Heinkel choked on his words.

This red-haired knight with such imagination seemed to have let his thoughts run with Alagar’s last remark. How awful that imagining had been, Alagar did not know, but even so it was probably still soft.

That was the fate of Alagar’s kind, cursed from the moment they were born into this world.

Alagar: “Compared to getting poked with a sword and forced to be a decoy, being left behind is nothing. If anything, that can even be called kind.”

Heinkel: “Being abandoned is… kind?”

Alagar: “Being used is a loss of freedom, but if you’re abandoned, what comes after is freedom. No matter how bad the situation, no matter how short the time, freedom has value, doesn’t it.”

He had seen his kin, their fangs and claws sealed, die like bundles of straw, in the blink of an eye, time and again. Alagar’s parents and siblings had died to no purpose, unable to hope for anything in the end.

Compared to that, even if he were thrown onto a battlefield where death was the only outcome, the fact that he could wield his own strength for his own sake made it a far better way to live and die.

However, in response to Alagar's words, there came a small, dry popping sound.

Heinkel: "…I disagree. I don't think being abandoned is kind."

He spat the words like something vile—and actually spat something from his mouth.

Catching the faint smell of blood and seeing it was a shard from a broken tooth, Alagar understood that Heinkel had clenched so hard he had cracked a molar.

Apparently, Alagar had stepped on some unbearable sore spot of Heinkel's.

Even that, from Alagar's point of view, still felt like a coddled hell—but—

Alagar: "—Comparing hells only makes things emptier, doesn't it."

Licking wounds by comparing the abundance of misfortune. That sort of thing wasn't something you could do without alcohol.

With that sentiment, Alagar sighed—and noticed. —That the smell of people was drawing near.

Serena: "You seem to have been good children. I've come back with a souvenir."

So saying, with a smile-tinged joke, Serena returned.

She would have been the youngest of them—no, that premise might have been wrong. For Serena had come back with Marcos, and with another boy they did not know.

Heinkel: "Special Envoy! That man… is he one of the enemy?!"

Seeing the boy, Heinkel, who had relaxed for an instant at Serena and the others' return, had his voice crack. At once, Marcos snorted "Hn," as if to mock him.

Marcos: "Don't bark at everything that moves. First of all, you think I'd have trouble with a flimsy runt like this?"

Roswaal: "My, you do say things, don't youuu~ And while it's true I suffered a stinging defeat in our first bout, I'd say I put up quite a good fight in the rematch afterward, wouldn't you?"

Marcos: "Don't make this more complicated than it is. —This is the Margrave Mathers. Seems he rushed here to help. He's the one who saw you cross the sky."

Heinkel: "M-Margrave?! My apologies…!"

At the boy—at the person introduced as the Margrave—hunching his slender shoulders, Heinkel went pale yet again and went down on one knee. The Margrave waved a hand "no, no" to the kneeling Heinkel with a friendly smile, then turned his heterochromatic gaze this way.

There was something about that look that made one ill at ease, and the depths of Alagar's belly crawled.

Roswaal: "You're the Werewolf in question, are you. I've heard about the deal with Serena. Can I expect things from you as welllll?"

Alagar: "—. If you can trust a Werewolf, sure. But if you ask me, the very moment you've gotten to the option of borrowing a Werewolf's hand, the odds of defeat are already heavy."

Roswaal: "Ha-Ha, well said. It may be hard to call that a cooperative stance… but regardless of whether your character is trustworthy, surely we can trust your desire to survive, can't we?"

Nodding at his snarl, the Margrave wore a crafty smile beyond his years.

Seeing that smile—which chilled the viewer to the bone—Alagar felt, toward him, a wariness he had not felt toward Serena or Marcos, and certainly not toward Heinkel.

It was a warning that this youthful Margrave was the one who most instinctively stirred a sense of crisis.

Be that as it may—

Heinkel: “You’re not going to run—you’re going to meet them head-on?! Are you serious?!”

Roswaal: “Serious as serious can be. They’re the ones who laid an ambush. They’ve surely grasped the surrounding terrain and prepared their methods of pursuit. There’s little chance we win if it turns into a chase.”

Heinkel: “But Marcos lost. If we go at them head-on as well…”

Marcos: “Didn’t lose. The Margrave here cut our pursuers by one. When there were three, their coordination pushed us back, but with two, the situation changes. We’ve got allies, too. Not you.”

Heinkel: “I-I know that without you saying it!”

Marcos: “Don’t know it.”

Hearing the policy and plan Serena and the others had brought back, Heinkel’s agitation grew intense. But listening at his side, Alagar agreed with Heinkel.

If all you considered was survival, the best plan was Serena making for the fort with the others as decoys. And yet, smiling at that perfectly natural line of thought, Serena said this:

Serena: “If I let them have their way and don’t repay it, even if my life isn’t taken, I die. —If I show my pride, then even if I am killed, I will not die.”

Alagar: “…”

At Serena’s imposing answer, Alagar clenched his molars and fell silent.

—Because he was made to think, anew, that she was a woman who was hideous, hideous, hideous, one who made his skin crawl.

12

In the depths of the forest, the poor footing and worse visibility served only to benefit an opponent launching an ambush.

To break through such adverse conditions, Roswaal's scheme was bold—and ridiculous.

Roswaal: "I rained fireballs down on the battlefield. The enemy has surely already realized that there was reinforcements—me. Which is to say, it's only a matter of time before full-fledged reinforcements arrive… Not just us; the poison has begun to creep through them as well. —Neither side can take long."

Marcos: "So you're saying it's fine to advertise our location out in the open?"

Roswaal: "A short, decisive battle is exactly what they want, toooo. They've already cornered us once and know they're superior in raw ability… there's no reason they wouldn't take the bait, is there?"

Marcos: "…Fine. I'll take that provocation."

Implicitly reminded that they had once been driven to the brink, Marcos twisted his cheek and nodded.

In fact, Marcos agreed with Roswaal's read. The enemy wanted to finish them as quickly as possible. If there was one more push to be had toward that end, they would take it without flinching.

Therefore—

Oulouzo: "Hey, hey, hey—honestly, honestly, what outrageous things you lot have gone and done!"

Bellowing thus, the man wreathed in a silver tail—Oulouzo—burst in just as Marcos finished brute-forcing the battlefield into shape.

If one looked down on this forest from above now, there would surely be a bald patch yawning open. Across this whole stretch—precious great trees that looked a hundred years old or more included—Marcos had ripped them up with his arms, mowed them down, and flattened the ground.

Oulouzo: “You spared us the trouble of searching, but, my, my, what recklessness!”

Jimrack: “You did this alone. Frightening.”

At the forcibly cleared woodland, Oulouzo let out a shrill cackle, and from behind him, Jimrack bared a narrow sliver of emotion: surprise.

To the words of the two assassins—a small Weaponkin and a gigantic Steelman—Marcos nodded with an “Yeah.”

Marcos: “I did it. Seeing as the other guy was just watching and being useless.”

Roswaal: ““Useless,” is it. I bring the brains and you bring the brawn—sounds like nothing more than the right tool for the right job, doesn’t it~?—And besides, where I’m useful starts now.”

Trading barbs, Roswaal—who had been using a felled tree as a chair—stood. When he lined up beside Marcos, the two-versus-two tableau was complete—just as planned.

“…”

Glaring steadily at their foes, Marcos kept the man at his side, Roswaal, in mind.

It was both impressive and exasperating, but things had unfolded exactly as Roswaal had laid out.

The needlessly ostentatious tree-felling to make a battlefield hadn’t just been to keep the enemy from choosing terrain in their favor; there was one more aim—to verify that the sniper’s elimination was certain.

Roswaal: “We made such a show of our position and removed the forest that served as cover, root and branch. Had the sniper been alive, Marcos's back would've been the perfect target to shoot. Which means…"

Marcos: "We assume the sniper's down—eighty percent odds that's the case."

Roswaal: "Splendid, splendid."

Finding the attitude obnoxious, Marcos nonetheless kept a tight rein on himself: he did not discard the possibility that the enemy had simply not taken the obvious bait, and he would not let his guard down.

The enemy was right there; he would turn this pent-up frustration that way.

Roswaal: "Just to confirm—do you intend to talk about the mastermind and their aims?"

Oulouzo: "A question indeed! And why, why would we be the ones to speak? We might *deceive,* but we would not *disclose!* It won't change what either of us has to do!"

Roswaal: "Good vibes, tight lips. Looks like you're properly the enemy."

Whether their target had been Serena's life or Alagar's release remained unknown. Roswaal had not expected much from asking; Marcos answered the shrug with one of his own.

There was just one point on which they agreed with their foes—whatever it was, what they had to do did not change.

Jimrack: "No time. For you. For us."

Oulouzo: "Indeed, indeed! That's why we leaped at this clear invitation! Your goal and ours align. Let's do this in a way that's easy to grasp—easy to grasp!"

The "poison"—as Roswaal called it—was infecting everyone present at the same time.

If time's passage would eat away at things like lives and fates, then neither side should drag this out. Above all, Marcos's patience was nearing its limit.

Outmaneuvered in the first bout, taunted as a "loser dog" by Roswaal, his fighting spirit was erupting.

Roswaal: "I didn't say "loser dog" per seee~"

Marcos: "Shut it."

Cutting off Roswaal's excuse in a single, curt line, he faced the enemy.

And then—

Marcos: "—I'll beat you senseless."

Roswaal: "—Come at meee~"

In an instant, triggered by a line from Marcos and one from Roswaal, hostilities broke out.

"…"

The first to move was the Steelman, Jimrack.

That demi-human of a gigantic frame and super-heavy mass, belying his ponderous-looking exterior, flicked up his foot with agility—and then he sent the Oulouzo beside him rocketing toward them with a tremendous kick.

Oulouzo: "Ha-Ha-ha! First, first, a little warm-up!"

Hurtling through the air, Oulouzo began to spin. —Wrapping his silver tail about himself lengthwise, he became a silver disk of slaughter whose edge could shear even a greatsword.

In response, they—

Roswaal: "A "warm-up" would be too lax. I intend to finish this right awayyy."

Oulouzo: “Nu-Nuh?!”

The instant Roswaal snapped his fingers, the leveled forest floor heaved, and pillars of earth surged up with tremendous force, clamping down on the oncoming silver disk from both sides.

Oulouzo: “A trifle, a trifle!!”

Even in the abnormal situation of being pinched midair by the earth itself, Oulouzo forced a breakthrough by accelerating his spin further and grinding down the earthen pillars.

At which point—

Marcos: “You broke my sword—and you’ll pay for it!”

With a powerful step, Marcos swung the great tree he held with all his might and smashed a ferocious horizontal blow into Oulouzo.

The Weaponkin—demi-humans who wield parts of their own bodies as weapons, a rare race alongside the Steelmen.

Oulouzo’s silver tail was the very mark of the Weaponkin; each such person was born with armaments to rival a master craftsman’s blade—a point of pride for the race. Even so, that fearsome disk of slaughter had a weakness. Against a vertically spinning attack, a strike from directly side-on could not be swallowed up.

Oulouzo: “—Gahf!”

Clobbered by the great tree, Oulouzo let out a strangled cry and was blasted away at the speed of a cannonball. He plowed into the trees beyond the leveled ground, and the silver disk vanished even from the edge of sight.

It looked like a child’s game of whacking a stone with a stick, but the force and momentum were on an entirely different scale. And letting that spectacle hold one’s gaze could be fatal.

Jimrack: “Oul—”

Jimrack: “Gwoar.”

The latter half of his partner's name was burned away by the flames that engulfed Jimrack's head.

Wreathed in fire across his gigantic frame, Jimrack thrashed and crashed over with a roar. And, eyes still fixed on Jimrack, Roswaal —who had done it with flawless execution—said,

Roswaal: "Marcos, as arranged."

Marcos: "Don't mess it up."

With that exchange, Marcos went after Oulouzo, whom he had hammered into the forest.

Steelman and Weaponkin: after analyzing the pursuers' traits, Marcos and Roswaal had decided to split their foes up this way. Not strength against strength and technique against technique, but strength against technique and technique against strength.

If they both made full use of their strengths, there was no reason for Marcos to lose. —As for Roswaal, Marcos trusted his strength, too: he would not lose.

Therefore—

Marcos did not do anything so foolish as to follow Oulouzo into the trees. To make full use of the battlefield he had prepared, Marcos chose to attack by hurling projectiles. Not pebbles, mind you, but earthen spears that Roswaal had fashioned—

Marcos: "Eat this!"

The spears he'd had made were each as thick as a child's torso, and hurled from Marcos's hand, their force was enough to shatter the walls of a middling fort in just a few shots.

And, thanks to Roswaal's largesse, ten, twenty of them went flying toward Oulouzo.

"OOOOOH—!!"

Shockwaves gouged the earth, blew away trees, and reshaped the forest.

From what he'd seen in the first clash and now the second, Oulouzo's silver tail had terrifying destructive power, but it required a certain amount of winding-up to unleash it.

So Marcos denied him that, pouring in one-sided attacks from a range where his foe could not reach. This would shave away the enemy's reserves and, if fortune smiled, bring him down—

Marcos: "—What?"

Without stopping, hurling earthen spears, Marcos noticed something amiss.

The forest was being destroyed by the collateral force of his barrage aimed at Oulouzo—but along with that, a distinctly different, brand-new destruction had begun to bloom.

A shrill, grating metallic whine. Homing in on that sound, Marcos sent a spear straight in—and—

Oulouzo: "First off, first off, let me apologize. Sorry for misleading you. And then, and then, let me make sure you don't get the wrong idea. Never, never was I holding back."

His declaration overlapped the crash as the spear was crushed head-on.

With a metal-splitting screech and a spray of dazzling sparks, Oulouzo burst out of the ruined forest—his body, with the silver tail wrapped around it, whirling every which way, become a silver sphere.

Oulouzo: "This, this drains me fast. That's why, that's why, *that's why!* It's my trump card!"

"—tsk."

The unstoppable silver sphere tore mercilessly through each additional earthen spear.

Every part of the sphere was a keen edge; it had overcome the weakness that had existed when it was a disk, and became a perfect attack form that minced every oncoming menace to bits.

Marcos: “Rrr—OOOAAH!”

To meet it head-on, Marcos, in the instant the last spear shattered, raised his fist. Aiming at the center of the incoming silver sphere, he unleashed a blow with all his might.

Marcos’s fist, which ripped the wind, erased the sound, and reduced whatever it struck to splinters—

“—ッ”

At that very instant, a pain in his side he could not ignore tightened his cheek, and the fist that touched the silver sphere spurted blood —almost simultaneously.

13

—At the very same moment Marcos’s fist burst against Oulouzo’s trump-card silver sphere.

Roswaal: “Well now. Color me impressed—ee.”

Narrowing his heterochromatic eyes at the sight before him, Roswaal let his fighting spirit quietly tremble.

The plan to split the two enemies and meet them each in their area of specialty had been proceeding smoothly. Marcos would overpower the Weaponkin who pressed them with mobility and breakthrough force, using his monster-class strength; Roswaal would elegantly cook the Steelman clad in his innate heavy armor with magic.

It was a strategy where honed skill and mutual trust would seize victory—and in practice, it had been working. —Up until just a moment ago.

Jimrack: “Heard. Me. Magicians… troublesome. Kingdom’s.”

Roswaal: “From where I’m standing, *you’re* the far more troublesome oneee.”

Answering so, Roswaal gave an exaggerated shrug.

Before him, Jimrack—who spoke in that weighty voice—slowly transformed.

Jimrack’s body had originally seemed made of a dull-hued mineral; that mineral nature shifted, and though the color remained, it turned into a smooth, metallic substance. In chunks, the once-angular outer surface flaked away like scabs, and beneath it a new body emerged.

And that body—was—

Jimrack: “Gwoar.”

A small fireball Roswaal loosed to test it hit Jimrack as if drawn in—only for the next instant, the fireball to *reflect* off Jimrack’s skin and set some of the trees Marcos had felled alight. Thankfully, it wouldn’t turn into a forest fire, but in every other respect, the wind was against Roswaal.

What the altered Jimrack had acquired was a physique with the property of reflecting magic—mana.

That “gwoar” had been at test spec, but if he reflected not only more of them but ones with greater firepower in that fashion, a large-scale blaze or an accidental friendly hit would be unavoidable.

Roswaal: “…It’s true there are a lot of unknowns when it comes to demi-human traits. But this is a biiit short on reference materials, isn’t it, Master.”

Unable to weave mana to perfection and now facing a Steelman whom magic would not take, Roswaal wetted his lips; feeling the plan collapse and the crisis rising, he opened and closed his fist.

Jimrack: “Dangerous. You—very. Countermeasures, perfect. Me.”

To Roswaal's sense of crisis, the Steelman charged without breaking his mechanical posture.

Even with his body's construction transformed, his agility remained; that mighty, colossal arm rose high—and as Roswaal met it head-on, he, with resolve, wove his magic.

—Unanticipated trial by fire or not, he would break through with the power of the magic to which he had devoted his soul.

14

Serena: "—It's begun."

From far away, the abnormal thunder rolling to her ears served as Serena's notice that battle had been joined.

As planned, Roswaal and Marcos had succeeded in luring the assassins out. It was proof that Marcos's ludicrous, brute-force clear-cutting of the forest had functioned.

Honestly speaking, it was such a ridiculous plan she wanted to see it with her own eyes when put into practice. But this was the role she had decided to carry out even at the cost of that indulgence. Failure was not an option.

Serena: "You made me exercise restraint. Alagar, if you want to live, move your tail."

Alagar: "Talkin' high and mighty, aren't ya…"

Muttering with spite, Alagar turned his head, sniffing with a snuffle.

Even without transforming, a Werewolf's sense of smell was as keen as a Dogman's. Using that overwhelming nose, Alagar had been ordered to search for what they sought.

Alagar was earnestly scenting the air, while on his back the watcher Heinkel had a sword leveled. Though wary of Alagar, he was having his focus shaken by the sounds of fighting reaching them. Each time there was a louder noise, the sword tip wavered, in danger of slicing into Alagar's back.

Serena: "Don't be so tense. Whether you flail or not, when it's time to die, you die."

Heinkel: "D-Don't say something so ill-omened! I-I can't afford to die…"

Serena: "Hm. So you have a reason to survive beyond a simple survival instinct?"

Heinkel: ""Survival instinct"… I have a son. He's only five, and he still can't properly tell right from wrong. My wife is bedridden with illness; without me, my family—"

As Heinkel haltingly laid out his circumstances, Serena closed one eye.

She knew that Heinkel was of the Astrea line, that famed "Sword Saint" house of the Kingdom, but even she had not ranged so far as to know about a wife and child. In any case, hearing that he had such circumstances made even his excessive self-protectiveness understandable.

The presence of family was that great—both as a treasure, and as a shackle.

"…"

As expected of the Astrea house, Heinkel had promise physically as well. He was blessed with a fine build, and even in his posture one could see results befitting someone who had undertaken a certain degree of training.

On the other hand, his mind and body were so imbalanced it was worrisome. Put simply, because Heinkel's heart was brittle, he could not properly wield that body of his.

Marcos's seeming harshness toward Heinkel, Serena felt, also stemmed from that kind of frustration and vexation.

Serena prided herself on being a promising talent scout for the future: whether she wanted Heinkel or not, she itched to do something about talent going to waste—but—

Alagar: "—Oi! Found it!"

Sniffing, Alagar called to Serena and the others in a voice that brimmed with certainty. He jerked his chin lightly, indicating the direction where the target odor lay.

To that result, Serena nodded, "Good work," and said,

Serena: "We go. I hope Roswaal and the others can win according to plan, but depending on what hole cards the enemy has, it wouldn't be strange for it to get flipped on us. In that case, they'll need our help."

Heinkel: "…But—Marcos, losing?"

Serena: "There's no such thing as "impossible." Even if you're the strongest being in the world, this world is one where you can lose your life in the blink of an eye."

Gently chiding Heinkel, who was placing a perilous degree of trust in Marcos's strength, Serena spoke.

A mere few years ago, in Vollachia's great city of Garkla, a former great hero lost his life.

Kurgan of the "Eight Arms," sung of in legend—even such a being could have his life taken by unreasonable calamity in this world. The end of that legend had brought Serena great heartache.

Not that it was the cause, but from then on, Serena had all the less held life as something absolute.

Heinkel: "Even so… Marcos—he's the real—"

Even after hearing Serena's words, Heinkel's trust in Marcos—no, at this point it was close to faith. Heinkel could not let go of that faith.

Prodding his back to get him moving, Serena trusted Alagar's nose and slipped through the forest. Passing through the gaps between the trees and taking to a rock face, before long—

Heinkel: "—Found it!"

Seeing the same thing on the slope as Serena did, Heinkel raised a high voice.

That whole area had been burned clean by Roswaal's flames; the rock face was black and charred. The glimpse of Roswaal's handiwork, who had burned so wide a swath, made her keenly feel the difference between herself—who had paid with a Magic Crystal—and a high-level mage. —What they found was a single charred corpse lying at the end of that mountain road.

One of the attackers' band, the troublesome sniper. —That corpse was what Serena and the others were searching for.

Serena: "Search the baggage for medicine. Keep watch around us."

Leaving those words with Heinkel, Serena ran up to the corpse and quickly examined it.

The body was badly burned, but not to the point that its belongings had been destroyed. If that was the case, then there was a decent chance that an antidote for the poison given to Roswaal and the others—or at least a clue useful for identifying the type of poison—remained. —So she thought, when—

Serena: "—No."

Turning the facedown body over, Serena realized it. This corpse was not the sniper. This was the body of the Imperial soldier who had come to the Kingdom with Serena and should have died on the mountain road—

Serena: "Sir Hein—"

Her hasty call was forcibly cut off by an attack from afar.

Serena: "—gh."

Luring out her prey and shooting them through when they were full of openings—the basic tactics of a hunter. Caught cleanly, the impact that took her in the right breast passed out her back, and Serena toppled over backward.

Heinkel: "…Ah."

Seeing Serena topple helplessly, Heinkel's blue eyes went wide as he froze.

That, too, was a sight a sniper would drool over, and put him at the top of the list for the next victim. Just like that, Heinkel would be the next to fall to the sniper's shot—and then—

Serena: "Hein… kel…!"

Heinkel: "—Special Envoy?!"

Called to by a trembling voice, the frozen Heinkel's face snapped back to life.

Heinkel came running in a flustered, fumbling gait, and Serena, coughing a rough "ehof," grabbed the red-haired knight by the lapels.

Serena: "The mountain road—across. Finish him…!"

Heinkel: "B-But, Special Envoy, your wound—"

Serena: "Go! Heinkel Astrea!"

Heinkel: "…"

Serena: "You're going back to your family, aren't you! Kill the enemy! Fulfill your duty!"

Heinkel, who had tried to talk back, was struck full in the face by Serena's bellow.

Her shout made her bones creak, and her organs screamed. Even so, she did not let any of it show. She would not let anything get in the way of driving Heinkel on, burned by Serena's blazing gaze.

At length, Heinkel, mouth opening and closing, turned with his face slick with cold sweat.

Gripping the sword he had been clutching tight all along, he shifted his hold and—

Heinkel: “O—AaaAAAAHH—!!”

Letting out a voice that flipped high, he charged like a shot onto the mountain road where the enemy lay. His speed—unbelievably fast, as if that hesitance until now had been a lie.

Serena: “See? You can do it… *cough*”

Seeing that back drawing away, Serena finally allowed her face to twist in pain.

There was no second round from the sniper for Heinkel, who was dashing down the mountain road, nor for her, half-dead. The enemy was fumbling. Likely, they weren’t unscathed either.

If so, there should be enough of a chance, even for the newly spurred Heinkel.

And then—

Alagar: “You think he can handle it alone? He’ll just die.”

Serena: “Which one? Me, left behind with the Werewolf we were transporting? Or the Knight Heinkel, who went to kill a sniper half dead himself?”

Alagar: “…At this rate, both. How’d you cheat death?”

Serena: “How rude. I told you my life is your life as well, didn’t I. You ought to be relieved—glad I’m still alive.”

Alagar: “Big mouth on a crazy woman. —What’d you wrap around your chest?”

Serena: “A gift, from a friend.”

Atop the charred rock face, Alagar stood; to his question, Serena's chest—beneath the torn clothing from the shot—showed her undergarments and, quite different from that, shining silver threads.

It was the silver thread that Roswaal had given her yesterday as a souvenir from the Royal Research Institute of Magic.

If you poured mana into it, it freely changed form; Serena had wound it tightly around her torso. Wound, and willed it to become as hard as possible, the silver thread functioned as a beautiful light cuirass. Its strength was not that great, to be sure; though it had prevented a fatal wound, the penetrating force it had failed to kill might have broken ribs and ruptured organs.

Serena: "Only… the side benefit was a big one."

Barely breathing, she said that, and looked at the arrow wound. There, the projectile the sniper had used had been caught up in the silver thread and was wriggling, squirming.

By that means, they succeeded in identifying the true nature of the poison that had struck Roswaal and Marcos.

Its true nature—was—

Serena: "—Do you hear me, Roswaal."

Struggling in her fallen posture, she fumbled in her breast and brought to her lips the feel that had caught on her finger—the broken shard of the "Conversation Mirror" that Roswaal had brought.

When a "Conversation Mirror" is broken, its mirror face becomes a new pair and changes its connection. The link with Russell in the Royal Capital was severed; the mirror now paired the Serena detachment with Roswaal's main force.

And to that fragment of mirror, Serena proclaimed:

Serena: "—The poison's true nature is insects. They're nesting inside your bodies."

Serena: "—The poison's true nature is insects. They're nesting inside your bodies."

This information was worth its weight in gold, and it arrived just after Roswaal had had every spell of the six attributes reflected by Jimrack, bringing about a vivid, catastrophic ruin of the forest's ecosystem.

The poison's true nature, delivered through the mirror—the voice telling it, Serena's, was one holding back pain; it was a moment that made one worry something had happened to her—but—

Roswaal: "You wouldn't want that kind of concern voiced, would youuu."

Though they had only known each other a short time, he respected the ferocity of her way of being; Roswaal swallowed the unneeded words of solicitude, and poured his all into seizing the victory she would desire.

Marcos, for his part, also seemed to be struggling against the enemy's hole card as Roswaal was. He had not fallen, but his white knight's uniform was dyed with blood here and there, a wretched sight. With the poison's progress helping matters along, the mere fact that he could fight at all with that level of bleeding made him monstrous enough.

In that case, they might as well make him a "monster" in both name and deed.

Roswaal: "—Marcos!"

Marcos: "—!!"

At Roswaal's sharp call, Marcos responded without looking back.

Marcos swung his leg up high, very high—and brought it down. —In an instant, there came a quake so great it could make one think the whole Kingdom had shaken, and fissures tens of meters long opened in the forest floor. The tremendous impact hurled even

Oulouzo, in his silver-sphere form, far away.

And where he was thrown—there was Jimrack. For a moment, it seemed Oulouzo's silver sphere would smash Jimrack's formidable defenses—

Oulouzo: "No way, no way, are you aiming for friendly fire? If so, that's far too sweet—far too sweet!"

Jimrack: "Won't happen. Not like that. We—close."

That hope of friendly fire was shattered by the steel giant who caught the silver sphere with ease.

In fact, they had not failed to consider a plan to pierce a sturdy shield with a powerful spear, but seeing the result, they knew they had done well to discard it—it was far too slender a thread to rely on.

Therefore, their real trump was something even more unrealistic—and yet eminently practical.

Roswaal: "It'll feel so bad you could die, but pleaaase don't die."

Marcos: "That depends on how hard you twist the knob. Get on with it."

While Jimrack and Oulouzo rejoined, Roswaal and Marcos regrouped as well. Then Roswaal moved behind Marcos and pressed his hand to that burly back.

Beneath that armor of thick muscle, the insects the sniper had shot in were doing their mischief.

Most likely, they were the kind that parasitized their target's Gate and devoured its mana. For both magicians and Flow Method users, it was a loathsome tactic of the Insect Cage Tribe—a natural enemy.

But if it was insects and not poison—if it called for insecticide and not antidote—there was a countermeasure.

Roswaal: "—El Goa."

He chanted, altered mana, interfered with the world, and manifested the desired phenomenon to accomplish his aim—and the resulting hellfire mercilessly swallowed Marcos's entire body.

Oulouzo: "What, what, whaaat?!"

Jimrack: "Burned… ally. Frightening… flames."

It was a sudden development, and the two enemies were the ones who wavered. Roswaal had abruptly started to burn his own ally; it was only natural to be shocked—no surprise if they doubted his sanity.

However, this was neither madness nor suicidal folly.

Roswaal: "On the contrary. —It's the best move to wiiin."

The very instant Roswaal declared as much—a tremendous gale rose, and a blow fired with shell-like speed and force rammed into Jimrack's torso.

Jimrack: "G…ugh…"

The strike was so powerful that the shock driven in one side burst out Jimrack's back.

On both the impact point and the point where it burst out, a spiderweb of cracks spread across that dull-colored hard skin, and the Steelman's gigantic body toppled forward, helpless.

Even so, Jimrack, with that sudden blow upon him, had shielded his partner, flinging him sideways.

And then—

Jimrack: "R…un, Ou… louzo…"

A huge hand seized Jimrack's head as he spoke to his partner—and the "Boulder" smashed it.

Again and again and again, the Steelman's head was mushed and buckled; again and again and again until it lost all original shape, the “Boulder” punched that face—punched and punched and punched and punched and punched and punched and punched—.

Oulouzo: “S-Stop, stop, stooop!”

Oulouzo swung his silver tail and struck the arm holding Jimrack’s head. It gouged out a great portion of the “Boulder’s” arm, but did not go so far as to sever it. On the contrary, the gouged portion immediately reconstituted as if filled in, plunging Oulouzo into despair at his inability to save his partner.

And so the one-sided violence between the Steelman and the “Boulder” reached its end—

“—o.”

With a ponderous sound, Jimrack, his head crushed in, lay down upon the earth.

The Steelman no longer twitched, and the one who had accomplished it with overwhelming force—the “Boulder”… no, Marcos—looked down at his own hands.

Marcos: “…Oi, what the hell is happening to me.”

Roswaal: “Burning the bugs was the main… no, at this point, burning the bugs might actually be the side benefit.”

Marcos: “That’s no answer. And you didn’t warn me beforehand, either!”

Roswaal: “I did not warn youuu. Even so, I’d like you to feel honored. It’s a stone armor that self-repairs and self-propagates, fueled by your mana. Ordinarily it’s too heavy to achieve usable weight and strength, but a monster like you can handle it.”

Marcos: “Who’re you calling monster, who’re you.”

He might have grumbled so, but the sight of that gigantic frame clad in the helm and armor of the “Boulder” was, to understate it, the very incarnation of a mass of rock—an inhuman figure to give any brat nightmares at a glance. Roswaal’s master, who had branded this a forbidden art incomplete, would surely clap their hands in praise.

Contrary to its original use, the forbidden art—once thought to have no use beyond binding an opponent's movements with rock that self-propagated by devouring mana, or crushing them under its own weight—had been used properly at last.

Truly, to bring forth "Boulder" Marcos Gildark, the forbidden art was complete.

Oulouzo: "Oh, oh, oh, oh—poor Jimrack."

Before Jimrack's corpse, head smashed and beaten to death, Oulouzo wept tears.

Given how coordinated their teamwork had been, Oulouzo and Jimrack—and the Insect Cage sniper—must have had their history, their bonds.

Roswaal: "But we shall have no chance to speak of it over shared drink."

Oulouzo: "—Indeed, indeed."

Watching the demonic aura leak from all over Oulouzo's body as he stood, wiping away a torrent of tears, Roswaal activated the mana within himself, interfered with the insects inside his body, and gave them surplus mana they could not assimilate, forcing self-destruction. —Feeling the insects die and his Gate freed from its constriction, Roswaal was certain he was on the mend.

With this, Roswaal, too, could face the enemy in full condition.

However—

Oulouzo: "…"Silver Tail," Oulouzo Tarask."

Thus naming himself, crouched low and poised, Oulouzo's fighting will was directed toward Marcos, the one who had killed his partner—and any interference from Roswaal would have been boorish in the extreme.

Marcos: "—Marcos Gildark, Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica."

Receiving Oulouzo's intent, Marcos, too, set himself to take it head-on.

The pause was an instant; the opening of hostilities came right after—and the result, in a heartbeat.

"…"

Straight on, the raging silver sphere charged at Marcos, now become the "Boulder." Marcos, without a hint of play, met it from the front with a fist he unleashed.

It was a primal armament any human could possess—even if not a Weaponkin armored from birth: a pure, unrestrained, unhesitating smash of the fist.

Fist and silver sphere collided head-on; the shock that was born, the balance, lasted but a moment—shattered into the shape of the fist that had driven through it, the silver sphere burst, and Oulouzo's silver tail was torn off at the root.

Oulouzo: "Ha… ha-ha… too splendid—too splendid…!"

Stripped of his innate armament and slammed into the ground, the Weaponkin praised the victor.

Flat on his back, Oulouzo smiled with a twisted cheek, and Marcos—his true face hidden beneath the rock mask of the "Boulder"—tightened his fist once more and raised it.

The loser lauded the victor; from the victor to the loser came not a single word.

Oulouzo: "An ideal—too ideal—a death."

Staring at the falling fist, Oulouzo was satisfied to his very end.

"…"

Quite literally overpowering the two assassins with monstrous arms, Marcos slowly turned back. Meeting him from the front, Roswaal nodded deeply.

Roswaal: “But there’s no excuse to be made—you are an impeccable monster, through and throughhh.”

Marcos: “Shut it. Get this off me, now. I’m boiling in here.”

Still stroking the ever-thickening stone armor with a stony arm, Marcos said as much. To that, Roswaal dipped his chin with a “Indeed,” and looked up at the sky.

That he had done it for the sake of victory was an immovable fact, but a forbidden art was a forbidden art. —How was he to explain it to Marcos, who now wore what had been sealed for a reason?

The tragic fact that the authority to take off that “Boulder” did not belong to Roswaal, the caster.

16

After conveying the poison’s true nature to Roswaal through the mirror, Serena, too, was facing her trial by fire.

She strangled the creepy insect tangled in the silver thread, then moved the thread as-is to compress the wound. Impressed at what a handy thing it was, she slowly raised the body she had been lying down.

And then—

Serena: “Let’s strike a fresh deal. —Reveal who conceived this plan. I won’t do you wrong.”

Fixing her gaze on Alagar’s twin eyes looking down at her, Serena pressed the question head-on.

At Serena’s question, Alagar was struck dumb. But he hastily smothered the agitation racing through his whole body, and at once put on a sardonic face.

Alagar: “You’re gonna jump me like that outta nowhere. What are you even—”

Serena: “Don’t dodge. It’s a waste of time. In this affair, the assassins were far too well prepared. In this case, there are two possibilities—either it didn’t matter which Special Envoy was targeted, so preparations were brief; or the target Envoy had been decided in advance, allowing them to carry out an attack without any loose ends.”

Alagar: “…”

Serena: “If it’s the former, then I’m a fool making a wild guess. But if it’s the latter, you being caught in the Kingdom was also part of the plan. In other words, you’re one of the assassins’ people.”

As she spoke, Serena produced the basis for her deduction—the key to Alagar’s manacles that she had found while searching the charred breast of the Imperial soldier’s corpse used as bait—and smiled.

Naturally, if Alagar was one of the assassins, they would need an inside man to remove those manacles. That insider getting caught up in the first attack and ending up a charred corpse was probably an unfortunate accident.

And just as Serena finished laying out the deduction she had assembled—

Alagar: “You got any idea what the hell you’re saying?”

In a low, growling murmur, Alagar’s scrawny body transformed with an audible creak; his brawny frame swelled, covered over by dark-brown fur, and even the bones of his head reshaped.

A beat later, what stood there was a Werewolf in bestial form with manacles still on—fearsome even so.

Alagar: “If that were true, there’s no way you’d be gettin’ outta this forest alive.”

Breathing a rank breath out of his open maw, Alagar bared his fangs at the badly wounded Serena.

For the moment, it was just the two of them here: him and Serena. Even if he was unreliable, Heinkel had been a deterrent; with him gone, Serena had no means to subdue a bestial Alagar by force.

Therefore, there was only one way for Serena Dracroy to get out of this place.

Serena: "—Throw in with me, Alagar. Galahau Dracroy… my foolish father has no caliber."

Alagar: "Wh—"

Serena: "No doubt the condition he offered was a guarantee of your freedom after my assassination. But do you think a man who, fearing for his own position, plotted his daughter's murder has the mettle to defy His Majesty the Emperor's edict and let a Werewolf live?"

Seeing Alagar's eyes widen, Serena felt both relief and disappointment. —Relief, in that it confirmed her deduction; disappointment, not that her kin was after her life, but in the sloppiness of the plan.

The mastermind was Serena's greatest political enemy—her own father, Galahau Dracroy. That explained everything that had happened thus far. Galahau had refrained from executing Alagar, the captured Werewolf, and let him flee to the Kingdom; he had had his daughter appointed Special Envoy, and selected her as a pitiful sacrifice to open hostilities with the Kingdom.

No doubt, for that father of hers, this counted as using his head—but his lack of discernment of people was fatal.

Serena: "If I can secure certainty, I can drag down a father who toyed with such a worthless scheme. One way or another, that man has no future. Side with me. Unlike my father, I can judge people."

Alagar: "—Tch, how am I supposed to tell that ain't just you beggin' for your life?"

Serena: "Don't be absurd. You should have seen it yourself. How many junctures were there up to now where, had it not been me, you would have died? By that same number, you have hard proof I surpass my father."

Declaring so, Serena seized the opening as Alagar went pale—and stretched out her hand. —Just like that, she slid the key taken from the corpse into the keyhole of Alagar's manacles and turned it.

With a light metallic clink, the heavy manacles came off and fell to the ground. "—ah," Alagar's throat quivered in shock, and Serena smiled at him as he stared down at the hands that had been set free.

It was a ferocious smile befitting a noble of the Vollachian Empire—a "Sword Wolf's" smile.

Serena: "Throw in with me, Alagar. That is your path to survival—and the choice you must make to truly win your freedom."

17

Heinkel: "—Gah."

Shot through by a jolt he'd lost count of, Heinkel's throat let out a strangled groan.

Told by the wounded Serena to rush out and finish the hidden sniper, Heinkel had charged forward—but the speed of his headlong dash dulled, and his head filled up with its usual whining.

A desire to abandon Serena and the others and bolt at full speed welled up—but—

Heinkel: "No, no, this is poison. It's bad."

Having taken the same projectiles as Marcos and Roswaal, Heinkel was already being eaten away by the same poison as they were. So was Serena. Getting an antidote was an absolute must. If they failed at that, they wouldn't make it home alive. —He wouldn't be able to slink back home with his tail between his legs.

Heinkel: "U-oooh—!!"

The surge of emotion from Serena telling him to return to his family revived, and his running speed came back.

Shaking off his inner conflict, he ran in a cloud of dust—and straight at Heinkel, from the front, came the next projectile. He could see its trajectory. And yet he couldn't dodge. It would hit. It would hurt. Even so, he ran and ran and ran—and then he found a compound-eyed demi-human, left half his body charred, lying prone and close to death.

"…"

Heinkel locked eyes with innumerable eyes on someone who looked like they might die even if left alone, and his whole body went rigid.

With wounds like those, a single sword stroke from Heinkel would surely finish him. Strike any part of him—strike even the ground at his side—and he looked ready to die from it. His regained speed dulled again.

And that pallid face of Heinkel's was reflected in every one of the sniper's compound eyes—and—

Letting out a pathetic whimper of "hi," Heinkel found the prone sniper pointing his right arm—hollowed like a tube, the muzzle that spat the bolts for sniping—at Heinkel's head.

Thus the next shot from the muzzle would pierce Heinkel's head—at the very last moment.

???: "JIEEEI!!"

In a do-or-die burst, a silver flash of focused spirit sped forth and mercilessly lopped off the sniper's head.

That sword-light was too dazzling; beyond the spouting blood of the demi-human, Heinkel saw a familiar face standing, and his throat quivered.

Heinkel: "—Father."

Before the dumbstruck Heinkel's eyes stood a man with the hem of the Royal Guard's white uniform fluttering—the captain of Lugunica's knights, the swordmaster known by the epithet "Sword Demon," and none other than Heinkel's own father, Wilhelm van Astrea.

At the entry of Wilhelm, who should not have been there, Heinkel's eyes flew wide open in stunned fixation. But Wilhelm himself flicked the blood from his sword and, without so much as turning around,

Wilhelm: "I heard the situation from someone of House Fellow. The Imperial Special Envoy?"

Heinkel: "Eh, ah… o-over on that mountain road. Only… she was shot by that one, just now…"

Wilhelm: "—. We go render aid. If anything happens to the Envoy, it will be a problem."

With that, Wilhelm jerked his chin and moved to run past Heinkel. He halted for just an instant, glanced briefly at Heinkel,

Wilhelm: "You are… no, never mind. We hurry."

He started to say something, then dropped it and took off running. "W-Wait!" cried Heinkel as he hastily picked up the sniper's gear and gave chase to that back.

The sniper was down. All that remained was Serena's safety and finding an antidote among the belongings. —But that frail relief of Heinkel's was erased by a shocking sight.

Serena: "—You're late, Knight Heinkel. Returning in triumph to your family?"

So Serena greeted Heinkel and Wilhelm; leaning against the slope, she had no sign of the Werewolf who was to be transported with her—there were only the savage claw marks, *literal* claw marks, carved across Serena's beautiful face, slashing down her left cheek.

Heinkel: "S-Special Envoy! That wound… that Werewolf?!"

Blood flowed profusely down Serena's cheek; the wound could hardly be called shallow, and because she was a woman of great beauty, it looked all the more painful. Even so, while Heinkel flustered, Serena herself only shrugged, her face betraying nothing of the pain.

Serena: "He bared his fangs at me, taking advantage of your absence. As you can see, I took a hit."

Wilhelm: "—We must treat you at once. What became of the Werewolf in question?"

Kneeling beside Serena while Heinkel stood rooted, Wilhelm asked after the vanished Werewolf's whereabouts. Serena jerked her chin toward the rock face of the slope.

There was a pool of blood there different from Serena's wound, and what looked like a trail from something dragging itself continued over the rock face and out of sight.

Serena: "Even if I was taken by surprise, I won't fall behind a shackled criminal. I hit back and watched him drop off the cliff. I can't see from here—can you confirm the body?"

Wilhelm: "…No. Unfortunately there seems to be a river flowing below the cliff. That said, with this much blood loss, if he sank to the riverbed, he won't be coming back up."

At that answer, and as Wilhelm began tending her cheek wound, Serena gave a short "I see," then flicked her eyes at the still-standing Heinkel and made a sign.

It took a moment of stupefaction before he understood what that sign meant. —This was the painful, blood-reeking play Serena and Alagar had staged.

If he cooperated with them, she would let him go—Serena had made that offer to Alagar. Guarding a Werewolf? thought Heinkel—but it seemed she meant to keep that promise.

To do so, she had taken on a wound that would not disappear, and she was forcing Heinkel to deceive those around them—to deceive

Wilhelm van Astrea—and claim the Werewolf had died.

It was an ask that gnawed far too deeply at Heinkel's heart—but—

Serena: "Don't look so pale, Knight Heinkel. This wound is my medal. It is not your fault."

Heinkel: "…"

Added as if to press the point, and Heinkel drew in a breath and fell silent.

Wilhelm's back was turned as he tended Serena; Heinkel could not see his face. But he was afraid to ask what Wilhelm—the "Sword Demon"—had thought of the words just exchanged.

A surge to cast aside all falsehood and spill everything rose up—but doing that would only worsen relations between the Kingdom and the Empire. Heinkel, as always, was at a dead end.

Heinkel: "…Louanna. Reinhard."

Murmuring his wife's and son's names, Heinkel set his hand on the hilt of the sword that had not swung—and hung his head.

At least he could go home. —Clinging to that alone, Heinkel held his tongue.

18

Russell: "—By a hair, but I'm relieved the Knight-Captain made it to the scene in time."

Roswaal: "Myyy, my, we were saved by you getting everything arranged. Without that, by now Alagar would have escaped, Serena and Sir Heinkel would have been killed, and we'd be headed for a war between the Kingdom and the Empire."

Russell: "We're still left with two fissures in parent–child relations, and a number of issues involving the Werewolf."

So saying, Russell shrugged at Roswaal, who had returned safely from a critical situation.

To be frank, it had been a teeth-grinding stretch for Russell, who had remained in the Royal Capital. In the end, being able to send the decisive reinforcements to the site could be called his one saving achievement.

That achievement seemed to have created yet more needless friction in the “Sword Saint” line, but that house’s dysfunction hadn’t started yesterday. In any case, as for a “Sword Saint” who had abandoned functioning as a sword of the Kingdom—Russell could not be bothered.

Roswaal: “At any rate, everyone came back safe. That’s what matters most, riiight?”

Russell: “Yes, no question. Though saying “everyone safe” is a bit misleading, isn’t it?”

Roswaal, who had tried to wrap things up neatly, raised one eyebrow at Russell’s words. Even if he put on a face like he didn’t know what Russell was talking about, there was no way to gloss it over.

After all, the clearest proof of that “misleading” bit was right there in the most conspicuous place of the Royal Research Institute of Magic’s lab where the two of them were speaking, surrounded by researchers.

Marcos: “—Oi, Roswaal. Make the gawkers back off. Don’t let ’em stare like I’m a sideshow.”

In the middle of the lab, thus grumbling resentfully, was a lump of rock—apparently Marcos. The voice and the ill temper in the gestures were Marcos to the core, but Russell could not confirm the face.

It seemed to be the effect of Roswaal’s trump-card forbidden art; he had, at last, become something not quite human.

Russell: “If nothing else, it’s become clearer than before that approaching you carelessly is dangerous, hasn’t it?”

Marcos: “You’re laughing in your voice, idiot. Roswaal, change me back! I’ll beat you senseless!”

Roswaal: “That forbidden art is tied to your Od. Unless you learn to control your mana and switch it by your own will, you’ll have no choice but to live on as a Steelman, I’m afraiiid.”

Marcos: “Don’t talk like it’s someone else’s problem! The hell kinda stunt is this…!”

Roswaal: “A token of friendship—a gift. Once you master it, even bolts ten times as strong as this time won’t be able to pierce you. No more being poisoned, either: the birth of a bona fide monster.”

Marcos: “I’ll kill you.”

With a weighty rumble, Marcos swung his arm while still in rockman state. What that boulder smashed wasn’t Roswaal—but the ice and earthen targets Roswaal had conjured up. Shut into the lab, Marcos was, apparently, being made to learn how to handle the forbidden art through live-fire drills like this.

Russell was no expert, but he did wonder whether simply raging around in anger like that would truly be effective.

Russell: “Let’s hope this is not just you teasing Sir Marcos as usual.”

Roswaal: “Goodness, no such thing. Even I don’t think Marcos could welcome his lady home in that body. If the House of Gildark died out in his generation, it would be more than heartbreaking.”

Russell: “The house, is it.”

Picking up Roswaal’s remark, Russell lowered his gaze to his hands.

There lay the cracked “Conversation Mirror”—for this whole affair, Russell’s own price had been no more than that. But Roswaal’s price had been by no means light.

Russell: “Is it worth so much, forging a friendship with Special Envoy Dracroy? Or is there a fear that, upon her return, she will immediately bend to the malice of her father, her political foe…?”

Roswaal: “Testing someone with something you don’t even believe yourself—that’s a bad habit of yours, as it is of mine. She’ll see it through properly. That’s why you helped me cross that dangerous bridge, isn’t it?”

With one eye closed, turning the blue eye his way, Roswaal drew a sigh from Russell.

Roswaal had called it “crossing a dangerous bridge,” but even that was a bit misleading. Russell had not crossed the bridge. He had only taught how to cross—and shut his eyes while it was crossed.

Those who truly crossed the bridge were Roswaal, and then—

Roswaal: “—Now then, what should I call you, who will become “no one” from here on?”

Turning, Roswaal addressed one man at the back of the room—his face swathed in thick bandages, and to that needling question, the man’s sharp gaze flashed.

Only that gaze retained a trace of his old impression; once those thick bandages were unwound, a face utterly remade, wholly different from before, would be revealed. —It was said the technique involved considerable agony, with unceasing pain continuing endlessly until completion.

Still, one needed at least that much resolve. For this was to be born anew. In the first place, where the mother bears the pain to give birth, in being born again the person himself ought to taste the pain.

The being who had been a “Werewolf” kept silent for a while—and then—

???: “—Gwain. My dead father’s name.”

Roswaal: “I see. A fine name, isn’t it, Gwain.”

Without asking the reason or the story behind the choice, Roswaal nodded to the “Werewolf”—to Gwain, who had been Alagar. Then, holding up a single finger, he continued, Roswaal: “It goes without saying, but don’t forget the promises you made with me and Serena. From here on…”

Gwain: “I know. I’ll never bestialize again… no—*won’t.* If I can live without doing it, I swear.”

Roswaal: “So we begin with your choice of words, hmm. A fine mindset, wouldn’t you sayyy.”

Answering solemnly, Gwain drew a satisfied smile from Roswaal.

Even to Russell’s eye, his attitude was far more compliant than what he’d heard over the mirror. The resolve not to let go of a chance to live anew—that seemed genuine.

More to the point, it had to be—or Russell would be the one in trouble.

Roswaal: “From here on, you’ll live with your demi-human nature kept secret. So, Russell—teach Gwain how to live well. You’re my accomplice in deceiving both Kingdom and Empire, aren’t you?”

Russell: “You say what you like. —I am not kind. As you say, you’re a “nobody” who has crossed a dangerous bridge. If I’m to take you in, then I will require work commensurate with the investment.”

Shrugging, Russell made it plain: House Fellow would henceforth be Gwain’s keeper.

Roswaal and Serena had decided to let the Werewolf live—but in place of those two, so irresponsibly leaving the method to someone else, Russell would give the man who had nowhere to go both work and home.

Of course, it was no act of charity. —If the House of Mathers of the Kingdom and the House of Dracroy of the Empire had forged friendship, and Russell could bite in having seized on both houses’ weaknesses, it was not a bad cut for his share.

Moreover, according to his “Divine Protection of Evaluation,” Gwain looked to be a decent find.

Russell: “Even so, it was a miscalculation.”

Roswaal: “Oh? It’s rare for you to miscalculate. What did you misread?”

Touching his chin and murmuring, Russell drew a tilt of the head from Roswaal. It was, unusually, a simple question devoid of teasing, and Russell answered with a wry smile: “You.”

Russell: “It was the same when you drew the “Brotherhood” and the “Golden Wing Faction out of Costuul—are you, surprisingly, a sentimental busybody, Roswaal?”

Roswaal: “Ha-Ha-ha, what a funny jokeee. —I consider you my friend, you know?”

That this counted as his answer to Russell’s words was galling in the extreme.

At that exchange, Gwain gave a “heh-heh,” managing a smile even with his face bandaged, and from the lab there came the roaring crash of Marcos rampaging.

For an affair that could, perhaps, have become a turning point in the histories of the Kingdom and the Empire, here were the principal actors who had moved in the midst of the maelstrom, gathered and making this boisterous ruckus.

Russell: “Is this not, after all, the august Royal Research Institute of Magic?”

Roswaal: “Indeed it is. Don’t you know, Russell? Magic is what makes dreams come true.”

With only that, something awfully childlike, Roswaal laughed. Finding in that smile a boyishness befitting his years at last, Russell shrugged.

—What he sought was the maintenance of Lugunica’s peace and tranquility. For Russell Fellow, who put that first above all else, this seemed, unexpectedly, a not-bad place to set things down.

19

—Left behind within the roaring, blazing dragon carriage, raising beastlike death-throes, Galahau Dracroy met his end—and Serena Dracroy looked down upon it.

Serena: “He cares enough about appearances to pay a visit to a daughter who returned home with a deep wound on her face and in despair. —That shallowness was your downfall, Galahau Dracroy.”

Gazing at the inferno from the office of the mansion he had come to visit, Serena murmured without sentiment.

He had drawn up plans, gathered adepts, and schemed this and that, but what proved decisive were that the Werewolf who clung to life retained a shred of nobility—and that he misread his daughter’s ferocity. Neither was an irretrievable blunder on its own, but together they culminated in a searing end.

Days of struggle with her father, ended by flame. She would take this wound on her cheek as a final gift.

Touching, over the bandage, the painful scar carved into the left cheek of the unfilial daughter—left by a Werewolf’s claws—and feeling the ache that would not quite fade, Serena’s lips formed a smile.

Serena: “This should cut down on those vexing marriage talks as well. If I wanted a man-repellent, taking Roswaal as my consort would have been most to my taste… but he settled into the friend’s slot far too quickly. An unfathomable man.”

Thinking of the elusive friend she had made in the Kingdom, Serena closed one eye.

It was a pity she could not bring him into her grasp, but Roswaal had contributed more than enough to Serena’s plan. He had saved Serena from the ambush; and he had done Alagar—whom Galahau had used—a good turn and made him keep the promise between him and Serena.

Precisely because it was a promise that could not be fulfilled in the Empire, this was one thing she absolutely wanted to uphold, even if it meant borrowing Roswaal's hand. —After all, Serena was the one who had dragged Alagar in.

For Galahau's arranged assassination plot had been a trap that Serena herself had set in motion.

Serena: "If we don't know when the poison will be laced in, we prepare a plate on which *we* can easily lace it."

She did not know the plan's specifics, but if she laid out a path that made it easy to act and gave it a push, then when they would strike would become plain.

Alagar had been a victim swept up into the Dracroy family's political strife.

Therefore Serena had an obligation to save Alagar.

Serena: "No—there is one more who became a sacrifice."

Heinkel Astrea—who had wounded Serena, the transport subject, and, under the pretext of preventing war, had forced both the Kingdom and her own father to hold their tongues—he too had been made to draw a most miserable short straw.

Unreliable in many ways and a man wracked with troubles, Heinkel was someone to whom she would have to repay her debt someday. Whether such an opportunity would ever come between Serena and Heinkel, she did not know.

At any rate—

Serena: "—From here. From here it begins."

Having seized the reins of House Dracroy at long last, Serena had many ambitions in mind.

Because of the failure of this Special Envoy affair, her standing in the Imperial Capital might worsen somewhat; still, compared to being forever hamstrung by her kin, it would now be easier to take a large next step.

Child: “Lady Serena! Outside—outside! It’s burning like crazy!”

Child: “Is this the time to *say* that, you idiot?! Bring water, water! Ah— it’s spreading, it’s spreading!”

As Serena turned things over in her head, the voices of the children began to clamour around the dragon carriage burning before the mansion gate reached her ears.

They were the future cards she had set her eyes on and was raising at the Dracroy estate. For now, however, they were nothing but troublesome problem children, far from dependable.

Serena: “You lot, don’t carelessly go near the flames. Wounds from battle are an honor; burns from accidents are only laughed at.”

Throwing the window open to chide the problem children thus, Serena stood with an exasperated sigh and started out of the office to head for the gate herself.

As she went, Roswaal—who plotted for the future about as she did—crossed her mind.

Bearing grand ideals no less than Serena’s, Roswaal would surely keep walking forward. If ever there came a chance to lend him strength, she, too, would meet it with all she had.

For that was how Serena Dracroy, the “Scorching Lady,” would show friendship across the border between Kingdom and Empire to a friend who had inspired in her a respect she seldom felt for those of her own years—a friend for whom she had felt camaraderie before any stirrings of romance.

END

Once Upon a Time in Lugunica II After

1

???: “—In regards to the matter on this occasion, it seems as though the Vollachian Empire is not intending to consider this a major incident. You ought to be grateful to the generosity of Emissary Serena Dracroy.”

Indeed, told so by the Commander of the Knights who wore a stern expression, Heinkel Astrea caught his breath.

Heinkel: “…So no blame, huh?”

???: “…”

Heinkel: “Ahh, no, that’s…! I take… my hat off… to the envoy.”

A sharp glare was immediately directed to his sigh of relief, and he flustered to formulate an excuse. Even he knew that his excuse had been a lousy one, so all it did was add to his shame.

The Commander of the Knights—Wilhelm van Astrea, spoke not a word. Only, with a glare so sharp it felt as if he had thrust the tip of his sword against the other party’s neck, he gazed at his trueborn son, Heinkel.

Just when had it begun? When was it, that Heinkel had started to fear Wilhelm’s gaze?

When was the last time he had not felt his father’s gaze to be a sword, and had reacted with anything other than fear; he could not recall. Unable to recall, even now he continued to experience fear akin to a small, defenseless animal.

Wilhelm: “—. That is all, dismissed. As for the responsibility for the appointments on this case, which had flown over my head, I shall question the Deputy Commander later… Either way, it was likely some plot by the Council of Wise Men.”

Heinkel: “That’s…”

Wilhelm: “Dismissed, Heinkel Astrea.”

With the repeated command, Heinkel guessed he did not desire any further dialogue, and barely managed to voice a “Yes” without his voice quavering before leaving the Commander’s office of the guard station behind.

When Heinkel, his face tensed, and his back drenched in cold sweat, disappeared from the room, the remaining Wilhelm massaged the brow of his stern face.

Wilhelm: “Bertol-dono… Honored Father, just how did you handle those impudent youngsters back in those days? What must I do, to be like you…”

Indeed, not as Commander of the Knights, but as a lone, troubled father, he breathed a long, long sigh.

2

On his way home from the guard station, Heinkel ended up greatly disheveled from the self-reflection meeting that had been held in his mind.

The way he fashioned his gaze and expression, the lousy way he had given the responses he prepared, the plain utterances of his innermost feelings, and finally, the demeanor that had likely invoked tremendous disappointment from Wilhelm; in a backwards sort of sense, he had gotten a perfect score.

Heinkel: “Even my self-deprecation is worthless, man.”

Placing a hand to his forehead, he took notice at the juncture his self-reflection meeting had converted into a self-disparagement meeting.

Shrinking before Wilhelm, failing to produce sufficient results as a Knight, and having an unfruitful reflection meeting, it was the same as always. Only, if there was just one thing that differed from usual —

Heinkel: “Did Emissary Dracroy truly conceal the matter of Alagar…?”

This would then be the result of bearing a secret that had not even been reported to Wilhelm.

The escort mission that had served as the impetus for Wilhelm’s disappointment just now, the emissary sent from the Empire, Serena Dracroy, had spared no measure in order to escape the vile clutches of assassination. Even if that meant disobeying the Emperor’s imperial command, and setting the werewolf she had been ordered to return free.

Heinkel: “—. I never want to see them again.”

The future of the liberated werewolf—Alagar, was not a bright one. No matter where he might flee, the fact that he was an outcast would likely only continue to torment his life. Those feelings, he understood.

The life of the young Sword Wolf, Serena Dracroy, had been targeted by her own parent, so just how could she yet hold her head high with such boldness, taking pride in going down a path that differed to others? Those feelings, he did not understand.

The only thing those two had in common for him, was that he absolutely never wanted to meet either of them again.

For if he were to come face to face with one of them again, Heinkel’s own sense of powerlessness would—

???: “—Father!”

Heinkel’s head, which had only been drooping lower, lower, yet lower, was lifted by the sudden call of a voice, and in his blue eyes was reflected a small figure hurrying towards him.

Just like himself, they were a possessor of red hair akin to blazing flames, and eyes that perfectly captured the azure skies—

Heinkel: “Reinhard.”

In Heinkel's vision as he muttered, his young child quickly was quickly tottering towards him.

It appeared that, in his ruminations, he had arrived back home at the mansion. Treading upon the grass of the front garden, he got ready to catch Reinhard, whose face strongly resembled that of his beloved wife, and spread his arms wide open.

Reinhard: "Welcome home, Father. Are you finished with work?"

But, his preparations were rendered futile, as his child came to a halt just before his eyes.

Heinkel: "Yeah, I'm done. I also finished a meeting with father… with the Commander of the Knights."

Reinhard: "So then, will you be in the mansion for the rest of the day?"

Heinkel: "I'll be here, I'll be here. How about we help with meal preparations together? —You wouldn't mind, right, Mother?"

Not knowing what to do with his hands, he brought Reinhard into a warm embrace, and while caressing his head, Heinkel spoke out to the woman who was slowly approaching from behind his son.

The beautiful red-haired woman smiled, closing a single eye, saying, "Isn't that only natural?",

Woman: "I have no recollection of raising my son to be a man who merely quietly sits around waiting for food to be served. The child I raised is the sort who pays attention to the finer things of everyday life."

Heinkel: "Mother, I'm old enough already, how long are you still going to treat me like a child…"

Woman: "My, unfortunately that might be a bit difficult. After all, I've known you ever since you were born. No matter what I do, your tiny appearance will always overlap with the present."

Placing her hand over her mouth, and speaking of such troubled matters was Heinkel’s mother, Theresia.

Soft and gentle though she might appear, she was truly quite stubborn, so ever since his birth, not once had Heinkel bested Theresia in an argument. Even now, that smile of hers was drowning out his fighting spirit.

However, held in Heinkel’s arms, Reinhard spun around and gazed at his grandmother,

Reinhard: “But, when it comes time for a meal, Honored Grandfather always just waits quietly at the dining table.”

Theresia: “…Indeed. That’s how it is with that man. Truly, he’s a man who cannot do anything but swing the sword. That’s why, you mustn’t become like him, Reinhard. If you are to follow someone’s example, it should be Heinkel’s, understood?”

Reinhard: “Yes, Honored Grandmother. I will follow Father’s example.”

Heinkel: “Mother, please tone that down a notch. No matter how you put it, it only makes me uneasy.”

Listening to the heartwarming interaction between grandmother and grandchild, Heinkel sighed from the presumptuousness.

During the day, when Heinkel was away from home working at the Guard, Reinhard would spend a great deal of time with Theresia, or the married servant couple. During those periods, perhaps because Theresia and the other two were filling Reinhard’s ears with things, his internal opinion of Heinkel was ever on the rise.

That high appraisal, which did not match the truth of the reality much at all, only continued to force Heinkel to walk over a bed of needles.

Reinhard: “Father? Is something the matter?”

Perhaps perceiving his father’s anxiety, Reinhard, being hugged tightly, suddenly questioned him so; Heinkel denied his child’s worries with an “It’s nothing”, and picked up that small body.

Heinkel: “Nothing’s wrong! I just finished up a bit of a tough job, so I’m just feeling a little spent. But you see, your dad’s exhaustion is on the lighter side. It was tougher on my comrade who I was working together with.”

Reinhard: “Working together with… Marcos-san?”

Heinkel: “Huh? Have I mentioned him to you before? You did well remembering that. Good job, good job.”

His child had displayed unthinkable excellence, and so, patting him on the head, Heinkel nodded with a “That’s right”, before beginning to walk towards the mansion.

Heinkel: “That Marcos. This time… well, he really helped me out this time as well. That guy, is an incredible person.”

Reinhard: “…Father, is too.”

Theresia: “Indeed, that is absolutely right! You’ve grown up to be so handsome, and you’re my pride and joy, my son.”

Being told such by his own child in his arms, and by his birth mother standing beside him, Heinkel blinked his eyes, and then upon his face emerged a smile, a real one, not one of pretense.

High appraisals that went above his own measure, were a poison that gnawed at Heinkel. However, the admiration of his young child, and the praise given by his mother, touching not upon sword skills, were a different story to his bitter self-evaluation.

—After all, his blazing red-hair, and blue eyes that encapsulated the sky, that which had been complimented by his lovely wife, who slumbered even now, were the very exoneration that allowed Heinkel to remain an Astrea.

3

Sat down on the hard floor, he steadied his heart, and quietly practiced his breathing.

In order to focus his mind on the inside of his body, deep within where he had never paid attention to before, the balance between stillness and movement was absolutely vital; such had been told to him by that odious Roswaal.

During the day, he had been engulfed in a vortex of magic that seemed to toy with him, manifesting as intense movement. Then, after sunset, he had entered a completely altered mental state of nothingness, indulging in unwavering stillness.

That was the reason why Marcos Gildark, who had become the Boulder not just in facial features, but down to his very flesh by means of a forbidden art, was spending this tranquil night at the Royal Magic Research Institute.

Marcos: "—Who's there?"

Sitting with his legs crossed and eyes closed, Marcos's meditation was interrupted, and he uttered that question.

To begin with, he had not even successfully managed to meditate. With an enigmatic power swirling around within his body, he seemed to have been ready for battle for no particular reason. —That was why he had noticed. In a situation in which the staff who were supposed to monitor the entrance were dozing off, he had noticed the being who had appeared with nary a sound or indication.

Only, perceiving the one standing still amidst the darkness, he doubted if his own senses were tricking him.

Marcos: "…A child?"

After all, present there was a child far too small.

Not metaphorically, he was of a height that rivalled Marcos's knee level. A child of a noble house wearing clothes of high quality, with striking red hair and blue eyes—and, upon ascertaining those distinguishable features, he easily figured out which house this person had come from.

And, as far as Marcos knew, the only one corresponding to that age would be—

Marcos: “Reinhard, is it?”

Reinhard: “…”

Marcos: “You’re the son of Heinkel Astrea, correct?”

Reinhard: “—Yes. I am Father’s son.”

The young child, remaining silent even when his name was asked, revealed his identity as soon as Heinkel’s name was brought up. At that proactive response, Marcos raised the eyebrows of his face, covered by rock as it was. He had indeed thought that Heinkel was one to dote on his child, but.

Marcos: “So the inverse is also true. The appa doesn’t fall far from the tree, it seems… How did you get in here?”

Reinhard: “I walked through the entrance.”

Marcos: “If it’s that easy to do such a thing, then I have gained both a reason to yell at Roswaal, and a reason to yell at Russell, who allowed the former to run wild…”

For the most part, this Royal Magic Research Institute was an important facility of the Kingdom, so it was decidedly not good for outsiders to be able to enter so easily. Of course, he did not think that they were so slacking in vigilance, and both Russell and Roswaal could be considered reliable in the sense of lacking oversights.

In other words, the unusual thing here, was the young child who had been walking around so late at night.

Marcos: “…”

Looking at the young child who had appeared in the dim research lab from up to down, Marcos had trouble suppressing a silent, yet unshakable shock.

At five years old at most, not only was his body underdeveloped, it had barely even undergone development in the first place. Despite being such a child, Reinhard’s standing posture had been perfected.

The first thing that separated experts of martial arts from regular people, was their standing posture. To Marcos's intuition, it appeared that Reinhard's standing posture rivaled even that of the Sword Demon—nay, that of the Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea.

Marcos: "You, what of your sword?"

Reinhard: "…Father said it's still too early for me."

Marcos: "I see. A decision so very much characteristic of that man. —However you arrived here, it's of no concern anymore. Why did you come here? Have you come to meet me?"

At the question, Reinhard slightly widened his blue eyes, and gave a small nod.

He had hit the nail on the head; however, Marcos plunged into rumination. Marcos could still understand if Heinkel had spoken of him to his son. But, being present here, and ascertaining Marcos with such an outward appearance, could not be explained away through simply having good intuition.

Reinhard: "Could you not hit my Father so harshly?"

Suddenly, as Marcos was pondering, his reaction to Reinhard's words was delayed. Processing what he had said after a beat, he frowned his eyebrows behind the boulder.

Marcos: "What, did that guy run off crying to a child as small as you to complain about his cold colleague?"

Reinhard: "That's incorrect…! But, I could always tell by looking at Father. Before as well, Marcos-san caused trouble for Father… you're friends, aren't you?"

Marcos: "Friends, huh…? Was there ever a time when that might have been true, I wonder?"

Indeed, as Marcos placed emotions that were hard to put to words upon his tongue, Reinhard silently watched him.

The child's beautiful blue eyes, at the unfathomable light swirling deep within, when Marcos rejected his appeal, his instincts formed a guess of what Reinhard's intentions were. And, the power to force most people to comply with his demands, certainly dwelled within this child.

This child, shouldering an extraordinary destiny—born to a man unworthy of the lineage of Sword Saints, the child who was far too worthy of the lineage of Sword Saints, adored his father. Adored him a little too much.

Hence, though he was in a position that could not be stated definitively as his colleague or friend, Marcos proffered a warning.

Marcos: "Supposing that, every time something happens to Heinkel, you go like this to complain to another party directly, you should cease all such actions."

Reinhard: "…Is it because, I'm a child?"

Marcos: "No. —Because it looks like Heinkel is making you do it."

Reinhard: "—Hk, that's not how…"

Marcos: "Even if you insist that it's not the case, it won't be taken any other way than what I stated. Your actions will produce the opposite of what you seek. You'll only end up unnecessarily contributing to Heinkel's adversity."

At Marcos's words, Reinhard clenched his small fists.

Sitting with his legs crossed in a form that appeared as a lump of stone, late at night, he was lecturing a young child who had snuck into one of the Kingdom's most important facilities regarding his reckless actions. —To an outsider's eye, it would appear to be a nightmare; he was astonished by himself.

However, on top of that—

Marcos: "I can't make any promises, but I understand your view. I don't believe that you are operating on Heinkel's inclinations."

Reinhard: "—. Will you be more gentle with Father?"

Marcos: “I told you, I can’t make any promises. More importantly, what about you? You’re going to become a Knight in the future, right? In that case, you have to tightly follow what your parent says. Even though that guy’s like that, he’s still the son of the Sword Demon and the Sword Saint. He’s well aware of what it means to be a Knight.”

Marcos did not know how much his words had resonated with Reinhard. Only, a change there had been. —However, not on the child’s side, but on Marcos’s.

Gradually, the proliferation of stone slowed down, and finally came to a halt. Then, the boulder that had been covering his body shed away, revealing Marcos’s real limbs, torso, and head.

Ironically enough, it seemed like the conversation with this senseless child had played a part in bringing unity to his mind.

Marcos: “Yet still no response, huh? Tsk, you undisciplined pipsqueak.”

Giving no indication of whether he would heed the warning or not, the child had vanished from sight before he knew it.

Although Marcos had been distracted by the change in his body, it was an astonishing feat. It almost seemed as if his meeting with Reinhard here had just been some sort of hallucination.

Only, the fact that such had not been the case, was deeply engraved into Marcos’s heart, unforgettably so.

Marcos: “It’s true, you’d have to become a doting parent for a kid like that, Heinkel.”

In the sense of needing to keep a close eye on him, in the sense of him being a handful, the child had been born with innate qualities that required a good parent’s eyes; this Marcos had understood.

Of the many problems encircling Heinkel, Marcos had thought that one among them would be resolved if he eventually inherited the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, with the resentment between the two of them possibly subsiding, but—likely, the worst possibility that flashed through Marcos's imagination, would be best left as a groundless fear.

Marcos: "For now, it's fine. For now… Oi! I've suppressed the forbidden art! Call Roswaal at once!"

Shouting in a loud voice, he startled the staff who had been dozing off awake.

Sitting with his legs crossed in the middle of the hubbling research institute, Marcos rested his chin in his hands, and sighed.

These chest pains were merely a needless fear, so it would be best if any more troublesome things did not occur.

However, in the not-so-distant future, that unpleasant hunch that Marcos held would prove to hit the nail on the head.

And, that would far surpass anything Marcos imagined, dragging the Kingdom in cataclysmic circumstances that would bring about changes even exceeding that of housing the forbidden art of the Boulder in his body, both unto him, and unto everything.

And yet unbeknownst to this, the future of Marcos Gildark would carve unfading wrinkles into his boulder-like brow, merely a part of the greater influence to be exerted by the Sword Saint's destiny.

END

Guardians of the Crimson Flame
(Translation Pending)

Volume 41

Chapters 24-36

Prologue:
Account of a Witch's Dream

???: "—Just like you, I'm a complete failure of a girl."

Thus hearing the Witch's words, spoken with downcast eyes framed by long lashes, Aldebaran became unsure of what to say, merely sinking into silence.

The grassland upon which Aldebaran's trysts with the Witch occurred repeatedly without fail, that place which did not exist anywhere in this world, was an alternate dimension created by the Witch, one which could be called a castle of fantasies.

Even when he did inquire about its nature, she would invariably attempt to deceive him by saying "It's something like a dream when you doze off"; upon that grassland, on this day—night had fallen, unusually.

Aldebaran: "I guess even unusual things can happen."

As the star-studded black sky looked down upon him, Aldebaran sighed in wonder.

On a fundamental level, the time of the grassland was fixed at midday. Given that this place was merely a landscape envisioned by its creator, the Witch, it was divorced from notions of true time. Hence, the plains were always bright, and decorated by clear skies.

Albeit the topical person required not any colors aside from black and white, were they truly the possessor of such unexpectedly high spirits that a patch of bright, blue sky would peek out of their heart of hearts, without fail?

Yet despite the matter of him harboring such doubts, he had been surprised by night falling upon the meadow nonetheless. To say nothing of the fact that the Witch in question was dozing off atop the hill.

Witch: “…”

Her upper body resting upon the white table, the Witch took muted, sleeping breaths.

As Aldebaran was to inquire on the topic of the unfamiliar nighttime scenery, upon realizing her slumber, he bated his breath, fixedly gazing at the Witch’s sleeping face.

His initial impression, was that of thinking “the Witch also sleeps, eh”.

Obvious though it might have been, that was the extent to which the Witch’s manner of life was an enigma. She was a being who could create something like an alternate dimension at will, so if it happened that she did not sleep, he would not have been surprised. In fact, until the present day, not once had he borne witness to her sleeping visage.

Aldebaran: “She’s infuriatingly beautiful…”

It was something he had known, but even when asleep, she possessed abnormally prominent beauty.

The almond-shaped eyes housing unparalleled knowledge and curiosity were closed, but her facial features had likely taken God quite a bit of time to tune to perfection, and her long, beautiful white hair and seemingly faded white skin seemed to declare that no other color needed be made known to the world. —It truly infuriated him.

Aldebaran: “Thinking about it, this is a rare opportunity, I should hurry and grab something to scribble on her face—”

Witch: “—Uh.”

Aldebaran: “—Hk!”

As soon as he thought to do something rude, a faint noise escaped the lips, causing Aldebaran to stiffen.

Despite not having done anything, he felt like a child whose mischief was being reprimanded. However, in the next moment, the tension in Aldebaran's body would break his personal record.

—After all, in the eyes of the dozing Witch, he caught a faint glimpse of a teardrop.

Aldebaran: "Teacher—"

Witch: "—Mph."

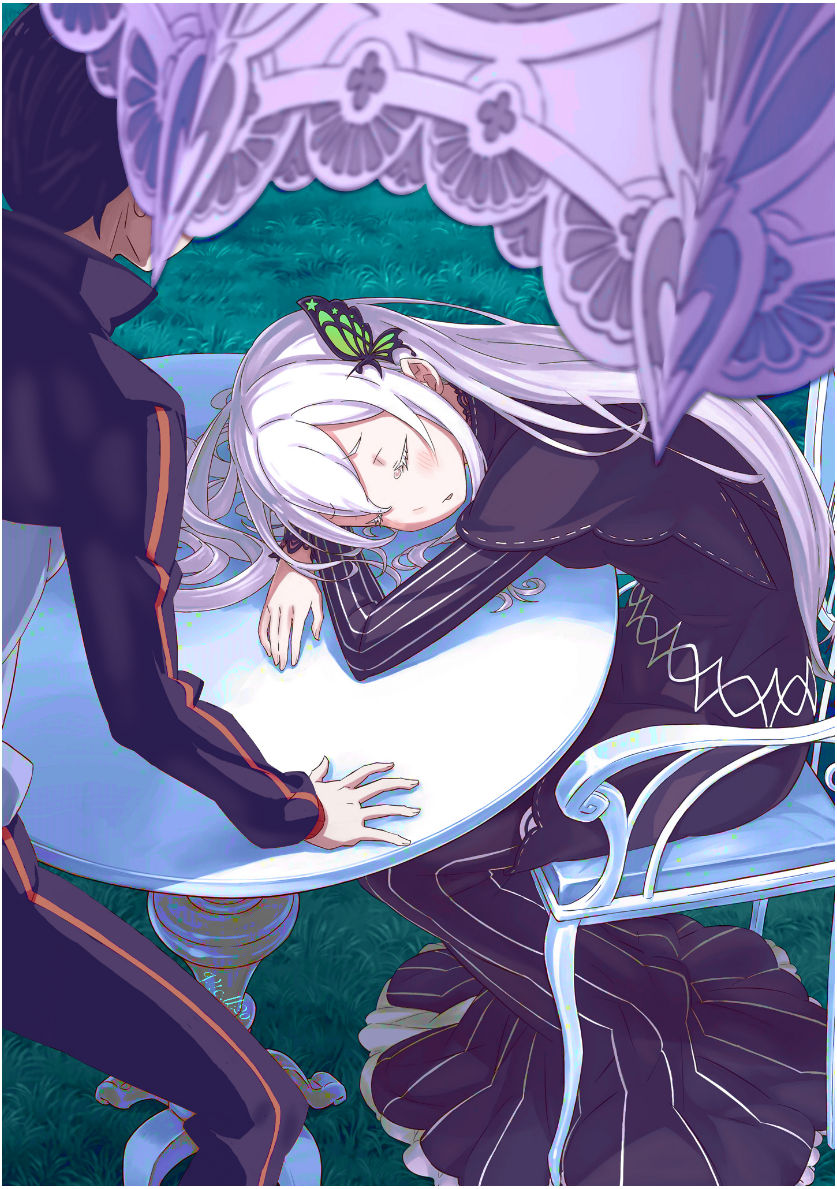

Unconsciously, Aldebaran touched the shoulder of the sleeping Witch, and shook her body. With a faint groan at the call and the touch to her shoulder, closed eyelids slowly opened.

As if to ascertain, those black eyes blinked several times, and reflected Aldebaran right before her,

Witch: “…Aldebaran?”

Aldebaran: “Ah, yeah, that’s right, Teacher. It ain’t like yourself to be taking a snooze out here.”

Witch: “…”

Before Aldebaran as he concealed his discomposure, the Witch silently got up. Placing her slender fingers to her jaw, the awakening Witch contemplated the situation.

And then—

Witch: “—A dream, was it.”

The fact that it had been so was unfortunate; such was the nuance carried by the mutter.

After muttering, the Witch wiped away the tears in her eyes with her fingers, clearing away the aftertaste of slumber. At that nonchalant gesture, Aldebaran felt a strange sense of loneliness.

Thus, he unconsciously ended up asking about it.

Aldebaran: “To cry while dreaming, you a kid or something? — What sort of dream, was it?”

So he spoke.

Witch: “…”

Aldebaran fell silent at the awkwardness, painfully regretting his question.

In all honesty, he had envisioned being bombarded with a great amount of knowledge regarding dreams, or to be poked fun at, teased for expressing interest in the Witch's dream; the usual progression.

But, to Aldebaran's question, the Witch did not respond with the usual progression.

Instead, presented as an answer was the Witch's comment from the beginning.

???: "—Just like you, I'm a complete failure of a girl."

Aldebaran: "…"

Ruminating over the Witch's words once more, Aldebaran reached the extremities of confusion amidst the silence.

Just what on earth had she meant? Did she not care about being posed a direct question such as this? Even though she would usually blather on and on without end continuously, what was the reason behind her being so well-mannered right now?

—Even supposing he did enquire it, and ascertain it, would the Witch remain unharmed?

Witch: "…Good grief, just which one of us is the child?"

Aldebaran: "Huh…"

Witch: "You said that I'd become so small, that I was just like a kid. Worry not, I am not some cute existence capable of being hurt by you. —I am a wicked Witch, you know?"

Closing one eye in a wink, the Witch voiced her same old line. Witnessing a glimpse of her characteristic childishness therein, Aldebaran heaved a great sigh.

For some reason, it felt like there was no true lifelike feeling in it.

Aldebaran: "Shit, to be feeling this sorta way because of someone like Teacher…"

Witch: “How peculiar. As far as I know, “Teacher” is supposed to be a title of honor, and yet I cannot sense a shred of reverence. Even though you were just trying to hide your embarrassment at peeping at a maiden’s sleeping face.”

Aldebaran: “You go about these things way too maliciously!”

That he was on the verge of being traumatized, was Aldebaran’s protest, yet the Witch displayed zero concern regarding his complaints, tapping her finger on the table in good humor.

That instant, cups filled with tea manifested, one of them for Aldebaran.

Witch: “Come on now, cheer up. Should I take the trouble of producing confections as well?”

Aldebaran: “It’s fine. Even if I eat here it won’t fill my stomach, so when I return to the other side I’d be all jumbled up, feeling like I’m full while my actual body’s hungry.”

Witch: “When you say that, I just want you to eat even more.”

Aldebaran: “You’re the worst!”

Shouting at the Witch who did not conceal even a shred of her impishness, Aldebaran rested his chin in his palm. Then, stealing a glance at the gleeful Witch, he ascertained that any traces of tears were nowhere to be found.

Aldebaran: “…”

The teardrops had vanished. And yet, an unfading lump lingered in Aldebaran’s chest.

That which the Witch had said was a joke, was likely no such thing, but the truth. —Even she, beautiful and wise as she was, would have times where she cursed herself, and wanted to cry.

Just who in the world could see the Witch as a failed existence?

Witch: “Hm?”

Aldebaran: “—. It’s nothing, sleepyhead Teacher.”

Directing insults at the Witch tilting her head devoid of malice, Aldebaran brought the cup to his mouth.

Likely, he had missed his opportunity. A chance to question her on that very thing, would it ever come around again? Supposing it did, would Aldebaran wish to know the answer?

If he did wish to know, would the reason be because he sought sympathy or compassion?

Or perhaps—

Aldebaran: “—Even a fake starry sky’s still quite the wonder to behold, yeah?”

Was his wish perhaps to have those black eyes, which albeit bore a jet-black hue selfsame to that of the starry sky, appeared to dazzle even more than the latter, turn towards his own self?

Aldebaran, who was the same as the Witch in being a failed existence, knew not.

Chapter 24:
The Enemy of Mankind

1

—Return by Death.

An Authority that, at the cost of one's life, granted them the right to turn back the clock, and redo a time that ought to have passed.

Under the interference of that dreadful Witch of Envy, expending his life in order to remove all the anguish and obstacles he faced, Natsuki Subaru had repeatedly used Return by Death many times over.

And, by no means was that any cute little number like two or three times.

As far as they were aware, Death had befallen Natsuki Subaru over ten times.

Not even once, had there been a way to die comfortably.

Not even once, had there been an end unaccompanied by a sense of loss.

Not even once, had there been any final moments in which he relinquished his life believing that he'd had enough.

Not even once, had Natsuki Subaru ever desired to relinquish his life.

Even so, Natsuki Subaru continued to lose his life, repeating the cycle of Return by Death.

Outrageousness, absurdity, despair, all had robbed Natsuki Subaru of his life. But, neither outrageousness, nor absurdity, nor despair, were things that could not be avoided if he set his mind to it.

And yet, why was it that Natsuki Subaru had nonetheless been unable to avoid Death?

That was—

???: “—Because he’s kind.”

Not a single person, had he desired to lose.
Not a single person, had he wished to relinquish.
Not a single person, had he grown to detest to the point of wanting them gone.

Not a single person, had Natsuki Subaru ever once been able to believe deserved to die.

Henceforth, Natsuki Subaru continued to lose his life, repeating the cycle of Return by Death.

Every obstacle, every malicious intention, every enemy, every Witchbeast, every Sin Archbishop, had stood in the way of his life. Again and again they did kill Natsuki Subaru, granting him Death, and crushing his soul.

But, I know. —I truly know.

Certainly, many enemies, unthinkable obstacles, unavoidable disasters, had heartlessly taken the life of Natsuki Subaru. That was a fact. Without a doubt.

However, I know. More so than anybody else, I am painfully aware.

More than enemies, more than disasters, more than absurdity.

More than the formless malice known as fate, there was something that had killed Natsuki Subaru more than anything else.

—That was none other than somebody who had continued to take advantage of Natsuki Subaru’s kindness.

2

???: “Hey, I don’t think you need to worry too much about this.”

???: “…Even if Subaru says something like that, it’s not like I can just brush it off.”

Petra glanced at “Natsuki Subaru” leaning against the side of the carriage and sighed wistfully as she was driving the speeding dragon carriage.

However, the “Subaru” currently next to Petra was not the real Subaru.

One could say that it was an illusion created by Petra’s brain—an “Imaginary” Subaru. The proof was that he was slightly transparent and see-through, and compared to the most recent image of Subaru in Petra’s mind, his face seemed to be slightly younger.

Probably because the Book of the Dead that Petra had experienced was set about a year and a half in the past—back in the tumultuous days when she had just become a maid.

Petra: “A lot of things happened for both Subaru and me…”

Considering how much time had passed since then, it stood to reason that they had both grown in many ways, for better or worse.

To put it simply, Petra had grown in terms of height and hair length, and she prided herself on her remarkable progress as a maid and as a woman. Meanwhile, Subaru had grown closer to Beatrice, became more boisterous with Otto and Garfiel, and grown warmly alongside Emilia, achieving a very dignified and resolute image of what it meant to be a man.

That was why “Subaru” appeared a little more immature compared to how he was nowadays.

—But even so, he was still in possession of his coolness.

Even if he lost some of his masculine and rugged charm that he held today, his cuteness and charming personality would still be an unfair combination.

Petra: “No, no… Now’s not the time to be thinking about that.”

Scolding herself, Petra put her hand to her forehead and shook her head slowly.

It was okay, she could control herself. It was not the first time Petra had imagined Subaru in her mind after all, making him say what she wanted him to say and strike her favorite poses.

She was a seasoned veteran at imagining all kinds of romantic stories and love poems, picturing various situations and casting herself and Subaru as the characters, their cheeks and hearts racing with excitement.

If she thought of those as rehearsals, then the imaginary Subaru in front of her now felt even more tangible, more lifelike, and nothing short of real.

"Subaru": "That's already way beyond the realm of imagination, could it possibly be beyond the level that self-control of yours can handle?"

Petra: "It's fine, it's just the way I'm feeling. More importantly, don't go looking inside my head."

Subaru: "Don't be absurd! Even if you tell me not to look, I'm literally inside your head, Petra!"

Petra: "…"

Stunned by "Subaru's" retort, Petra's breath caught in her throat. Seeing her reaction, "Subaru" seemed to regret his words and scratched his cheek with his finger.

The gentle look in Subaru's eyes when he showed consideration for others, and his clumsy reactions that were so typical of him, reaffirmed Petra's affection for him.

—Natsuki Subaru's Book of the Dead had violated Petra Leyte's "mind".

That was Petra's self-analysis of what had happened to her.

The original avid reader of the Books of the Dead, Ezzo Cadner, had said that reading a Book was a challenge that put a significant mental strain on one's mind, but it had an even greater impact on Petra than she had personally anticipated.

On the other hand, it was possible that the shock Petra experienced from Subaru's Book of the Dead was completely different from what Ezzo had warned them about.

Petra: "…Things like Returning by Death or being from beyond the Great Waterfall…"

The burden that Natsuki Subaru was carrying was far greater than Petra could have ever possibly imagined.

Subaru was separated from his homeland and was all alone, so what was he thinking when he met Petra and the others? What did he go through to save them? What kind of determination did he have in his heart when he fought for them? That was everything—no, what Petra had learned today was just a tiny part of it.

It was hard to believe that Subaru, burdened with such a tragic fate, had never had to use his Authority since the record in the Book of the Dead that Petra had read after all.

There was no doubt that Subaru had experienced that feeling of his soul being torn apart since then, his heart being ripped out, and his life being trampled upon countless times, enduring and surmounting it all to reach today.

Petra: "…"

The permanent blemish on one's heart that Ezzo feared had indeed been engraved into hers.

Perhaps, probably, unquestionably, Petra thought with a sense of detachment that her heart was deeply wounded, her mental balance completely shattered, and she was in a very precarious state.

She was able to exchange words with her beloved, who was dead yet not dead, and felt everything from joy to sorrow at his words, even in such a situation. This was nothing less than a complete emotional and mental breakdown.

Petra: “But, it’s fine.”

Love is blind, love is a fever. Petra Leyte had been consumed by her feelings of love and had lived like this to this day.

As long as I’m fully aware that I’m abnormal, I can control myself—but that’s not a convenient line of thinking. No matter how much I claim to have sound judgment, it’s the same as knowing not to drive a car after drinking alcohol.

Neither Petra nor Subaru have had a driver’s license, nor did they have any memory of driving under the influence, but it was the same thing.

Petra: “Cars, drunk driving, traffic lights, Tooryanse…”

Suddenly, she was drawn to the words that popped into her mind out of nowhere, and knowledge spilled out one after another like out-of-season clothes overflowing from a stuffed-to-the-brim closet.

It was all words that Petra knew, and words she did not know, loosely crossing the boundary between understanding and unfamiliarity, like the feeling of encountering something familiar, yet foreign.

If she did not begin to carefully sort them out, Petra might end up wearing men’s clothes and carrying a Guiltywhip around before she knew what had happened.

“Subaru”: “Wait, my main weapon is a whip? Isn’t that a bit too edgy? I’m being overly clingy with Beatrice, and I can’t keep up with the generation gap…”

Petra: “By the way, everyone had gotten to punish the Master, Garf-san’s reflected on his chuunibyou, Otto-san hasn’t been sleeping, and Emilia-neesama’s been doing a wonderful job.”

“Subaru”: “I see, Roswaal was the mastermind behind everything, huh… hold on? Why was that guy forgiven?”

Petra: “That’s something you should discuss with Subaru and Emilia-neesama…”

However, Petra still had not forgiven Roswaal, so although she did not completely oppose Subaru and Emilia’s decision at that time, she did not agree with it either. Of course, there had been many times when Roswaal’s assistance was undoubtedly invaluable, particularly in relation to the events in the Empire. But, that was a separate issue, and Petra intended to never forgive him for the rest of her life.

However, right now, there was someone even more unforgivable than Roswaal—

“Subaru”: “—Petra.”

Petra: “…Whatever you may say, I’ll still feel that way.”

The combination of “Subaru’s” gentle, quiet voice and sincere gaze forcibly distracting Petra from her breathing and heartbeat, left her with no choice but to avert her eyes like a child.

As if ignoring the shameless pleas and cries of her heart beating deep within her chest, Petra focused all her attention straight ahead on the endless sea of sand that stretched out before her.

—At this moment, Petra and her group’s dragon carriage had departed from the Pleiades Watchtower and were speeding straight through the Augria Sand Dunes.

Beyond this sea of sand, there was a person they absolutely had to catch up with.

Their opponent would presumably utilize the wings of the Divine Dragon to fly over the Sand Sea with mobility, surpassing that of a ground dragon, even one equipped with the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, making it extremely challenging to catch up.

Besides, there was another reason why Petra and the others needed to hurry.

Petra & “Subaru”: “—The Witch of Envy.”

Petra, deep in thought, and “Subaru”, who shared her consciousness, spoke of the reason for their desperate haste.

Without regard for the consequences, she drove the dragon carriage for several hours—covering a considerable distance from the Pleiades Watchtower, yet the pressure remained, refusing to let go of Petra and her companions' souls.

It was the terrifying Witch who was supposed to be sealed away in the shrine, who constantly reached out to punish Petra for reading the Book of the Dead and encroaching on the realm of the Taboo. The tsunami of black shadows that had invaded and threatened to destroy the world were now being held back by a single hero.

—The Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea.

His lonely struggle kept the wrath of the Witch of Envy at bay beyond the Tower, preventing the destruction of the world by a hair's breadth and maintaining a delicate balance. However, even now, there was a deafening roar and violent tremors that seemed to turn the world upside down, and flashes of light like distant lightning occurred intermittently, day and night, as if the trumpets of the Apocalypse were blowing ceaselessly.

How long could this balance last? Neither Petra nor anyone else knew. If there was one thing they knew, it was this—

”Subaru”: “If Reinhard were to be defeated, everything and anything would be over.”

Petra: “Yeah. If Reinhard… san gets taken out, the Witch will come after me. There's no way to predict how much damage will be done between now and then.”

“Subaru”: “They don't seem like the type to be polite and give way to others.”

“Subaru's” joke made Petra imagine a kind Witch of Envy who would give up her seat to an elderly person on a crowded train, but she could not bring herself to laugh now.

When considering ways to minimize potential damage, Petra should have remained at the Pleiades Watchtower and accepted being silenced by the Witch, regardless of the outcome of Reinhard's battle.

However, if Petra dared to think such a thing even for a moment—

“Subaru”: “—That’s definitely a no-go. I won’t let that happen even if it kills me.”

Petra: “…”

When Subaru said that directly to Petra, it felt like there was absolutely no room to argue.

She had always been aware that Subaru cared deeply for her. Of course, there is Emilia and Beatrice. Not to mention Rem. She was not so conceited as to think she was treated differently from them, but she was still certain—that she occupied a special shelf in Natsuki Subaru’s heart, where he kept the precious things that were most important to him.

However, until today, she did not realize the true weight behind the words “Even if it kills me” spoken by a seemingly joking Subaru.

Natsuki Subaru was truly someone who’d protect what is important to him, “Even if it kills him.”

Petra: “—. Yeah, I know. I don’t want to die either… Al-san has some way to stop the Witch, right?”

“Subaru”: “Yeah, he’s not stupid. He knows what kind of damage that could cause to the world. He’s definitely prepared something to stop it before it gets to that point.”

Petra: “Yeah, for sure.”

“Subaru”: “Definitely.”

Clenching his fist, “Subaru” declared forcefully, and Petra nodded in agreement.

Catching up to Al, who had left the Tower, and forcing him to reveal his plan to suppress the Witch. Organizing the necessary steps were so daunting that they made her head spin, but

“Subaru’s” words were ever-so reassuring. —Unfortunately, however, the same thing could apply to Petra as well as Subaru.

Subaru, who now shared Petra’s consciousness, was fully aware of Petra’s thoughts and anxieties.

The same went for Petra, who shared the same consciousness as “Subaru”.

Petra: “If Al-san wants to end the world…”

The absolute truth that Petra and Subaru confirmed earlier would no longer be the case.

In the worst-case scenario, Al had no actual way to stop the “Witch of Envy” and was prepared to let the world be destroyed, taking his lifeless heart and mind with him.

Al, who lost Priscilla Barielle, his cherished master or rather, someone he held a much deeper love than just being someone of reverence, had every right to hate the world.

However, it was also true that they could not entirely give up on the glimmer of hope.

Petra: “Me, Meili-chan, Garf-san, and everyone else are all still alive.”

Al, who even had the support of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, had the power to decide the fate of Petra and the others in the Tower. However, he had chosen to exercise his right not to take their lives.

Would it be too much to believe that this is a sign that there was still something left in Al?

Petra: “…Maybe I’m overthinking it, almost like I’m not really myself.”

“Subaru”: “Yikes.”

With a finger pressed to her lips, Petra muttered, and next to her, “Subaru“ exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders. Glancing over, she saw Subaru give her an awkward smile and wave, which prompted Petra to narrow her eyes.

It was unclear just how much “Subaru“ had influenced Petra’s current way of thinking.

There was no way that the influence of The Book of the Dead only had a positive bonus effect for Petra, allowing her to see an imaginary Subaru.

Petra: “I’ve gotta be more careful…”

Petra loved Subaru, but she did not want to be Subaru. Furthermore, she should not become a person who would indiscriminately shower kindness on everyone like Subaru did.

Petra had always admired kind people, had always strived to be kind herself, but she felt that people like Subaru and Emilia were perfect just as they are.

Petra wished to be someone who did not take the kindness of kind people for granted.

For that reason, she must not empathize too much with Natsuki Subaru.

???: “—Petra-chan, it’s time to switch o~ut.”

Then, just as she thought that, the small window of the dragon carriage opened, and a voice spoke to her from behind.

It was Meili, who had been resting in the carriage. When she offered to take over driving, Petra shook her head with a “no”,

Petra: “I’m fine, so you should rest, Meili-chan. You carried me while I was sleeping, and you even kept the Witchbeasts away.”

Meili: “I didn’t do as much as Flam-chan, who carried Fang onii-san and Sensei-san. Besides, with the Sword Saint and the Witch fighting, it seems the Witchbeasts don’t have much time for us.”

Meili shrugged her shoulders, her expression betraying her deep fatigue. It was obvious that she had been unable to relax even a smidgen while in the carriage. In fact, feeling the presence of the Witch in the distance was like being a frog stared at by a snake. It would have been very strange if she had been able to rest calmly.

This must have been even more difficult for someone as responsible as Meili.

Petra: “How’s Flam-chan? Still asleep?”

Meili: “Yeah, she’s still out cold. But I’m counting on Flam-chan’s Divine Protection, so I’m glad we made the right ca~ll.”

“Subaru”: “This girl… It feels kind of weird to see Meili here…”

Meili’s gloomy answer and “Subaru’s” feelings of trepidation at her presence overlapped. Ignoring the latter’s reaction, Petra thought about Flam, and her Divine Protection.

Flam’s Divine Protection of Mindspeak allowed her to communicate with her twin sister once a day. Although it was only a one-way communication, the ability to send and receive messages regardless of distance was so important that, under the current circumstances, it was undoubtedly invaluable.

The condition of “once a day” for the Divine Protection seemed to be closely related to the amount of time she slept, and the more urgent the situation at hand, the more time she needed to sleep.

However, the means Flam had employed to achieve this sleep were beyond Petra’s comprehension.

Petra: “I never thought she would suddenly strangle her own neck and pass out…”

Meili: “It seems like she couldn’t just take a proper rest because she was so worried about Sword Saint-san. Bu~t the fact that she was so determined to do so is typical of someone connected to Sword Saint-san. She’s barely younger than me and you, Petra-chan, she’s so different from normal gir~ls.”

Petra: “I don’t think you’re one to talk, Meili-chan.”

"Subaru": "Look who's talking."

Petra and "Subaru's" comments overlapped, and Meili's lips curled in dissatisfaction.

All she could hear was Petra's words, but by deliberately engaging in this out-of-place, everyday conversation, they avoided facing the reality and the pressure from the Witch.

And it was probably thanks to that stable mind that she was even managing to rush forward with single-minded determination.

???: "—DODOGYUUUN."

A sudden high-pitched cry came from Patrasche, who had been working harder than Petra, Meili, Flam, or anyone else.

Taking into account the events at the Pleiades Watchtower, Patrasche shared the same sense of dreadful urgency as Petra and the others, and her neighing signaled that they had finally reached their destination—the end of the Sand Sea.

Lying there in the distance, near the edge of the Sand Sea, was the town of Mirula.

Meili: "Petra-cha~n!"

Petra: "Yeah, I know!"

In response to Meili's call, Petra strongly gripped the reins and leaned forward.

Patrasche, who had glanced behind her for just a moment, was already refocusing her attention forward and was now sprinting toward the finish line, having had to run nonstop all the way here.

"Subaru": "I love you, Patrasche."

The imaginary intangible Subaru delivered unrequited words of love and gratitude to Patrasche.

As she watched the intangible hand that was unable to touch anything stroke the ground dragon’s neck, Petra’s small head was busy mapping out the roadmap that would be necessary after they arrived at Mirula.

The end goal of this roadmap was, of course, to stop the actions of Al, who had betrayed Natsuki Subaru —but there was something beyond that.

In order to get to that point—

Petra: “—Hk.”

The dragon carriage finally burst through the town gate and arrived at Mirula. With that, Petra opened her mouth wide to speak, realizing that they had made it through the Augria Sand Dunes.

To do any of these things, Petra and the others must first seek the help of a certain individual—a person who was unable to enter the Augria Sand Dunes and bid farewell to Petra and the others at this location.

So, speaking in a paradoxical way—

Petra: “—We’re back, so lend us a hand! I know you’re listening, Clind-niisama!”

Indeed, Petra raised her voice and sought a wild card that could reduce any gap to zero.

3

Felt twisted her face into an exaggerated scowl at the small shadow darting past the corner of her vision.

Its form, colors, and sheen all provoked a visceral disgust within her, and though she had been sleeping in the slums with them for as long as she could remember, she could not feel any sense of camaraderie or affection toward them.

Felt, who had even slept while hugging a giant rat to survive the cold, was still reluctant to befriend even a single Zodda bug.

Truly, they were an abominable entity, worthy of being called an enemy of mankind.

Felt: “Seriously, I can’t stand those Zodda being everywhere…”

With their extraordinary vitality, Zodda bugs could establish habitable environments anywhere. They were often spotted in unsanitary places, but that was by no means an absolute prerequisite.

In fact, it was at this time that Felt caught a glimpse of a Zodda bug from her peripheral, inside a building that was properly maintained and well-kept—a manor in the noble district of the Royal Capital of Lugunica.

The place was opulent and lavish, filled with paintings and ornaments of a value Felt could not comprehend. Now bereft of its lord, the mansion still retained its luxurious splendor.

Felt: “Hey, that thread of yours can go “fwooosh” really far, yeah? So couldn’t you just get rid of some Zodda with it real quick?”

Yae: “Haah~, well here’s the thing Felt-sama. The Steel Thread Technique I use is an extremely rare technique that has had no master for centuries, y’know? In addition to skill, Yae-chan’s brilliant shinobi maid style can only be displayed when I have special rings for the steel threads made by the Master of Curse Tools, Groovy Gumlet. Yet you’re calling for someone like me over a Zodda bug of all things?”

Felt: “That was way too long, I barely even got half of that to stick. Why don’t you just get to the point?”

Yae: “I don’t wanna stain my beloved threads on something so filthy, so~ I’ll pass.”

Having said that, Yae turned her face away while tucking her ringed hands behind her back, to which Felt unenthusiastically responded with “Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Her eyes scanned right, then left, looking for the shadow she had seen earlier, but it appeared she had lost sight of it. That left her with an unpleasant feeling.

Felt: “Just ‘cause I can’t see them doesn’t mean they’re gone from this world, y’know… they’re not only still here, they sometimes fly right into people’s faces.”

Yae: “I understand. If it comes to that, I’ll be prepared to die~.”

Felt: “I want to say that you’re not gonna die, but brace yourself, just in case.”

Emotionally, she felt that resignation or despair were a more appropriate alternative than steeling herself with resolve.

As it was, the shadow of that Zodda bug she had seen prompted her and Yae to have an unexpected mutual understanding—and Felt, with a fresh perspective, took in the interior decor of the mansion in the Royal Capital, the Barielle estate.

A portion of Lugunica’s nobles residing outside the Royal Capital had secondary estates in the noble district, reserved for their periodic stays. The Astrea estate, where Felt was first forcibly taken and confined by Reinhard was no exception, and this mansion—whose construction was personally commissioned by Priscilla Barielle, had been built for an identical purpose.

Felt: “That princess. I’m sure she had people taking care of this place even while she wasn’t living here, but now she’s got Zodda bugs roaming everywhere. Maybe the maids lost all their motivation the moment their master croaked.”

Yae: “Oop, it’d be wise to avoid saying things like that in the presence of Al-sama, even as a provocation, okay~? It’s gonna make you sound like someone with a really nasty personality, and hearing someone badmouth the Madam is something I don’t feel good about, y’know~?”

Felt: “Huh? You’re telling me not to piss off the helmet bastard?”

Yae: “No, no, Al-sama surely wouldn’t lose his temper. But, I think he’ll be hurt. That is something I won’t be okay with.”

Lowering her voice just a little, Yae cocked her head slightly at the end of their exchange. Instantly, Felt registered a faint tension on her neck, and she perceived the presence of the nigh-invisible threads with her very soul.

The steel threads she had hesitated to use on the Zodda bug was once again coiled around Felt's neck.

Felt: "If you hurt me, that helmet bastard's going to be angry, right?"

Yae: "Maybe. But even so, isn't it a problem for you to say whatever you want, Felt-sama, especially for me as a helpful all-purpose maid meant to eliminate any obstacle for my master?"

Felt: "There's something off about you calling him your master. The relationship between you and that helmet bastard isn't really that of master and servant. That said, I guess talking so high and mighty from a safe distance is lame."

As she replied, Felt held up both her hands to indicate to Yae that she had no intention of resisting. After watching her for a moment, Yae shrugged and retracted the thread.

Still, she made clear her intention to mercilessly send out her threads and make a statement by cutting off Felt's finger, or even a limb if necessary, should Felt make any suspicious movement. — Having observed Yae's speed and precision, there was merit to having made the provocation.

Felt: "I already knew it, but you're not someone I can handle…"

Currently, Felt and Yae were the only two that were staying back in the Barielle manor.

If Felt could slip past Yae's watchful eyes or defeat Yae alone, she could escape her current status of being a captive princess that was meant to keep the Felt Camp in check.

Yae: "That strong will to win is just what I'd expect of a candidate in the Royal Selection, it makes this humble servant's heart flutter at such a noble mindset, but please don't get any reckless ideas, okay~? There're some people, like thugs or Heinkel-sama, who I can tie up or slice apart without remorse, but I don't like doing that to lovely girls."

Felt: "I see. In that case, remember this too. I dislike words like "cute", "sweet", or "that really suits you". Remember how many times you've called me those."

Yae: "Hyaa~, scary. By the way, what're you going to do when you count them?"

Felt: "When it's my turn to get you back, I'll kick your ass that many times."

Incidentally, Felt had already decided that she would kick Yae's ass three times. The helmet bastard—Aldebaran and the Divine Dragon, as well as Heinkel each had their own amount of revenge she kept score of.

Felt always precisely settled each and every one of her debts and loans. Whether they were of gratitude or resentment mattered not to her.

Felt: "It's not every day you get to kick a Dragon's ass, much less the Divine Dragon's. If you think about it like that, being held hostage is pretty funny, huh?"

Yae: "So tough~, you're so mentally strong that even Yae-chan here is intimidated. Even if that wasn't the case, I'm afraid of you seducing him, so I don't want you and Vol-sama getting near each other, Felt-sama."

Felt: "Even so, having Reinhard's dad watch over the Divine Dragon is in pretty poor taste if you ask me."

Yae: "With Heinkel-sama's desire for the Dragon's Blood, I suppose an arm, or two or three, might erupt from his throat. I hope he doesn't get carried away and actually attack Vol-sama."

Yae smiled mischievously with a finger to her lip, but the contents of her speech held absolutely no such cuteness.

In fact, from Yae's point of view, even if this imaginary scenario were to come true—that is, if Heinkel were to recklessly get himself killed by the Divine Dragon, she would most likely remain unfazed. It was a rather ill-natured arrangement of things, including her attitude toward Heinkel, who was supposed to be her comrade.

Of course, the Divine Dragon was far too conspicuous to be allowed near the Royal Capital; moreover, keeping it near Felt, who had a beguiling effect on its mind, was out of the question, so it was inevitable that their arrangement would be skewed.

Yae: "You're not just a beauty who can topple a nation, Felt-sama, but also a beautiful girl who can topple a Dragon."

Felt: "That's another time I'm going to kick your ass… But tell me the truth, can the old man really get that Dragon's Blood he wants from that brainless Divine Dragon?"

Yae: "Who knows? Ah~, but in the case that doesn't work, Al-sama will still keep his promise, even if it means retrieving the older Dragon's Blood that's supposedly stored somewhere in the castle. That way, Heinkel-sama's sleeping wife should wake up. But from your point of view, Felt-sama, you're not happy with this arrangement, are you?"

Felt: "Damn right. Frankly, I'm not a fan of that approach."

She had already directly said as much to Heinkel regarding the matter, despite his endless excuses.

Felt did not like that plan. However, it was also unreasonable for outsiders to simply deny the thoughts, actions, and decisions made by the people actually involved.

So even if it resulted in the awakening of Reinhard's mother, Felt wished to take a different path to achieve that summit than what Heinkel wanted.

Felt: "—? What's up?"

Suddenly, Felt, sitting slumped on the sofa in the parlor, noticed Yae's gaze watching her intently and she frowned.

Yae shook her head with a “No, no~” at Felt’s response,

Yae: “I just thought it was unexpected. That you, Felt-sama, want to wake up Heinkel-sama’s wife… that is, the Sword Saint’s mother.”

Felt: “…You know, that bastard sits next to me when we all eat together.”

Yae: “—?”

At first glance, Yae had a puzzled look on her face when Felt said something seemingly unrelated. Felt continued to speak, ignoring Yae’s confused reaction.

In the Felt Camp, when it was time for a meal, Flam and Grassis would call for everyone, and with the exception of Felt, who had a customary seat at the head of the table, the seats would be filled based on when they arrived at the dining hall. Reinhard usually sat next to Felt at the head of the table.

And—

Felt: “While we’re eating, I’ve got the best view of the side of his face. If that aspect were to improve a bit, the food would taste better, yeah?”

Yae: “…I stand corrected. Rather than a beautiful girl, Felt-sama is an ikemen~!”

Felt: “I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’m kicking your ass an extra time for that.”

Yae: “Ehh~, but why~?!”

Yae pouted in dissatisfaction as Felt turned her face away, replying no further.

She had become used to being held hostage, which was nothing short of disgraceful, but the trick to maintaining mental composure in such a situation was to not reveal too much verbally.

And so, when keeping someone who has baited a fish in reasonable suspense—

Yae: “Yes, yes, I’m sorry if I have upset you. For now, please take this.”

As she spoke, Yae gently handed over a silver tray on which was placed some kind of bread with toasted fillings as a snack, to which Felt’s stomach growled.

Yae chuckled at the sound,

Yae: “There are Zodda bugs even in a place like this?”

Felt: “Those fuckers are everywhere. Even in my stomach… don’t make me think about something that disgusting. Hand it over already.”

She threw a glare at the bantering Yae, and snatched the silver tray from her hands. She bit into the hasamiyaki as it exuded a faintly warm aroma, its pleasant flavor being neither too strong nor too weak. The taste was to Felt’s liking, so she met Yae’s eyes with a smile and thumbs-up.

Yae: “How’d you like it, the hasamiyaki? Surprisingly, it’s Yae-chan’s one and only specialty dish~.”

Felt: “Damn tasty… but, if it’s your only one then it’s a different story. You’re more or less a maid, right? Or maybe the whole maid thing was a lie, and you’re actually an assassin or something.”

Yae: “H~mm, assassination is one of the main jobs of a shinobi, but the part about me being a maid is the truth. It’s just that cleaning is more my forte than making a li~ttle bit of food. Ah, I was lying when I said my one and only specialty dish is hasamiyaki. I’m also good at wraps.”

Felt: “In the end, isn’t that just the same in the regards to sandwiching ingredients between bread?”

Incidentally, Felt’s impression was that vegetables comprised more of the ingredients used in a wrap. As a matter of fact, she did not know what the finer discrepancies between wraps and hasamiyaki were.

At any rate, she was relieved that even the captured hostages were properly fed. On that front, she would not have to suspect that Aldebaran's words were falsehoods.

Although, even if that was the case, the issue of the currently absent Aldebaran's actions was still present.

Aldebaran was off doing something separately from Felt and Yae, his destination being—

Felt: "—The helmet bastard, is he seriously planning to free that Sin Archbishop?"

If she were to believe his words, then that declaration—that he was going to free a Sin Archbishop, the Gluttony imprisoned in the Royal Capital's Prison Tower, was something she would also have to believe.

Presently, the Kingdom of Lugunica had two Sin Archbishops in custody: Wrath and Gluttony. Felt had had direct contact with Sin Archbishops at Pristella, where their menace and inhumanity had left a deep impression on her. She wondered how the world could have such irredeemable people.

Felt: "In Pristella, I encountered Gluttony… either the elder or younger brother of the guy who's locked up, as well as the younger sister. I also went with Reinhard to transport Wrath. So let me tell you, what the helmet bastard is trying to do is insane."

Yae: "That's probably true~. In all things, any truly great deeds cannot be accomplished while sane. Everything that Al-sama has orchestrated up to this point, haven't they been extraordinary events?"

Felt: "Though it's not a question of numbers, it's gotten to the point where you start to wonder just how many things have been overcome. Not to mention, using the Witch to stall Reinhard, that's something I can still understand. But, a Sin Archbishop?"

Yae: "Naturally, that'd be something necessary for Al-sama's objective, ri~ght?"

Felt: "Not even you know the specifics?"

Crossing her hands behind her back, Yae smiled without replying to Felt's words.

Only, this reply was something she had expected. She did not know Yae's true intentions in following Aldebaran, but no matter the astonishing circumstances she might find herself in, it felt as if she possessed such an intense conviction, obsession, that she would have no intention of parting from Aldebaran's side.

Therefore, she would not wait for answers; it was Felt's duty to search for one.

Felt: "…Those Gluttony bastards, they insolently gorge themselves on people's Names and Memories."

Like Crusch, whose Memories had been devoured, or the story of the Name of Anastasia's Knight, Julius, being eaten. Then there was the girl in the Emilia Camp, for whom she had heard Subaru was searching for a way to wake up. —There was perhaps a possibility that the latter girl was not unrelated to the Sleeping Beauty that Felt and her people were familiar with.

In any case—

Felt: "—There's something he wants to feed them. If not that, then there's no way he'd do something like dragging out the shitty Gluttony bastard."

Kept captive with her freedom restrained, Felt's soul refused to yield.

From someone in this world who was surely just as reliable as Reinhard in cornering Aldebaran, that was a life philosophy taught to her by Rom-jii—"live strong".

Felt: "Chomp."

Boldly, while filling her belly with hasamiyaki, Felt devoted herself to actualizing this life philosophy.

By never ceasing her thoughts, by never halting her steps, born would be the margin to which her hands could reach. In preparation for that moment, she licked up the sauce from the hasamiyaki from the corner of her mouth with her tongue.

And to her side—

Yae: “…Wah, there really are Zodda bugs. Even though it’s only been a few days since the custodian was dismissed, this is aw~ful~.”

Whether it was the same one that Felt had seen earlier, or a different one, Yae scowled as she seemed to have discovered the enemy of mankind, grumbling out complaints.

4

—A cramped, dark, suffocating place it was.

Even the phrasing of “solitary confinement cell” being too mild, this space showed no signs of any intention to keep that which it imprisoned alive. And yet, to consolidate that space and the existence isolated within as “cruel” or “cold-hearted” would itself be an act of utmost violence.

After all, imprisoned there was one who had perpetrated numerous vices throughout the world, a blasphemer without peer.

There was a definite demarcation between the manner of imprisonment used generally and this “black coffin” of confinement, in which an existence was isolated from the world, making breathing and heartbeat unrequired. Henceforth, provisions for the purpose of respecting life were unnecessary, in that space.

For that very reason, the place could not have been more appropriate to accurse the lives of one another.

???: “—My bad. Seems like I’ve got plenty of frustration built up. Really couldn’t hold myself back.”

With the sound of footsteps rising from the cold, hard ground, he leaned his back against the wall of the cramped room. The rear of the helmet hit the wall, and the sound of steel striking rock harshly disturbed the frigid atmosphere of the stone chamber.

Attempting to catch his faintly disheveled breath, collapsed at the man's —Aldebaran's feet, was a gasping figure, lying limply and face-down.

That there, was the blasphemer upon whom the Kingdom had bestowed this stone chamber fashioned into a solitary cell.

Having been defeated without riposte by Aldebaran, left to taste the floor was an unsightly loser—Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, representing Gluttony, Roy Alphard in the flesh.

Aldebaran: "…"

A deep inhale, a long exhale.

Forcibly taking deep breaths to regulate his disarrayed cardiopulmonary functions, Aldebaran looked around the rock chamber which had become horribly messy in only a minute of actual time, and shrugged his shoulders.

With cracked walls and smashed up floors, it would be valid to describe the utter wreckage that had befallen the cramped room, one that had received nary a care to maintain it, as having been so messy that there was no space left for anyone to place their feet. Considering it was only the size of a coffee shop bathroom, just how in the world had such a huge scuffle unfolded in this place?

But then again, it was not as if this huge scuffle was one he had scuffled in by choice.

Aldebaran: "…I just said that if you obey and follow me then I won't take your life, and you had to go do that immediately afterwards. Even if you were gonna turn coat and rebel, you'd usually wait a lil' while longer for your chance."

Roy: "—. Hahah~, you say some funny stuff~, helmet uncle."

Aldebaran's words, laced with lament, brought out a dogged laugh from Roy, the latter laying sprawled out on the ground.

Still laying prone, Roy directed his glaring gaze to Aldebaran beside the wall, and while licking his lips with that long tongue of his in a lascivious manner,

Roy: "By that, do you mean that we, who cannot help but always be starving and starving and starving and starving, must learn to wait for permission? Such a thing, would that no~t be fair grounds to argue child abuse?"

Aldebaran: "Unfortunately, I've got no obligation to raise an evil brat like you. It's said that in the Showa era, neighbors would help to discipline kids even if they weren't part of the family, but this is Lugunica, and the current era ain't Showa. Well, I did beat you up this much. I ain't gonna be able to deny the abuse allegations."

Placing his hand over the metal fitting on his helmet, Aldebaran rang out a clackering sound, to which Roy let out a jolly "Haha-".

To respond with such an attitude after having been disciplined by having both his arms and legs broken in a scrupulous fashion, he truly was an eerie brat. At the very least, even in the Showa era in which corporal punishment was largely preferred, this level of discipline would not have been acceptable.

Nonetheless, Roy Alphard was beyond being an eerie brat; he was a Sin Archbishop first and foremost. Hence, he was hopeful that hedging a risk like this would be deemed within permissible limits.

Aldebaran: "Well, it's not like I thought this affair would go that smoothly anyway."

So grumbled Aldebaran, silently concluding the count at six-thousand and twenty-two in his mind.

This numerical count, which no longer necessitated any explanation, amounted to the number of attempts Aldebaran had required to subdue a defiant Roy Alphard. If he were to enumerate how many bones and teeth had been broken, the number would grow to be several times that, easily. That was how much of a handful disciplining this evil brat had been.

Aldebaran: “Seriously, I never thought I’d end up having to go through the same kinda trial and error I did with Reinhard…”

Utilizing his moniker of “Bizarre Eating” to the fullest, Roy Alphard wielded the power of Eclipse to reproduce the abilities and techniques of those eaten by his Authority of Gluttony—therefore, being that Roy was essentially stockpiling innumerable warriors within his own self, ditching any ineffective tactics on the spot in favor of immediately bringing out novel fighting styles, this affair had bore a close resemblance to the one against Reinhard, who had adopted Divine Protections adequate to adapt to any given circumstance.

As luck would have it, Aldebaran had already attained experience points in excess of one-hundred and thirty thousand from his battle with Reinhard, thus he had reached a feat in excellence by dealing with a likewise exceptional foe while staying within four digits.

Aldebaran: “Regardless, you were captured right after fighting at the Tower. Considering you weren’t even given proper treatment after that, you’ve sure put up one hell of a fight.”

Roy: “Ehh~? Being so completely and utterly shut down in everything we tried to do, it was our first time experiencing such a thing, and yet, don’t tell me you’re trying to comfort us, uncle? If so~, the number one method to comfort us would be…”

Aldebaran: ““Gluttonous drinking gluttony” will be ringing in my ears till tomorrow. Just hearing it makes this old man’s stomach shudder in fear, digesting fried food’s only getting tougher and tougher for people my age.”

Roy: “How unfriendly~.”

A smile over his mouth lined with fangs, Roy regarded Aldebaran with eyes opened wide.

That gaze of his was tinged with interest and appetite and curiosity and appetite and sadism and appetite and, at any rate it was a full-course meal that made a chill run down Aldebaran's spine. The pain of his limbs having been broken was even now still surpassed by a feeling of hunger, and that fact had been the reason for the chill; so exhaustively distorted was that way of being.

To harbor sympathy for him, he wished not. After all, chosen by the Witch Factors just like the Witches, the Sin Archbishops were likewise detestable pariahs who from birth had been separated from the rails of normalcy.

Aldebaran: "Good grief… Shall I explain the situation to you?"

Roy: "Huh~, you'll be kind enough to do that? What's this what's this, started feeling pity for the child whose arms and legs you broke? But guess so. There's no way a decent adult could remain composed after shattering the limbs of such an innocent child-. Well, calling you a decent adult with this sort of appearance and helmet over the head, uncle, is what you'd call debata~ble."

Aldebaran: "You sure do prattle on… This place's the Royal Capital of Lugunica, far removed from Pleiades Watchtower where you were captured. Your counterpart—"

Roy: "—Ah~, he died, right?"

Aldebaran: "…"

Roy: "Even we, are properly aware of that. Family bonds are far deeper and stronger than you might think, uncle… Sorry sorry, that was a lie. We simply reckoned as such because we can't feel Ley's Witch Factor. Besides…"

Aldebaran: "Besides?"

Roy: "Even if it's impossible to tell from the outside, those within these frozen confines are still able to feel the exterior a bit. Despite such a tight seal, for everyone to be so rattled is pretty patheti~c."

With the repulsive note of his lips being licked, Roy impassively spoke of his counterpart's death. Aldebaran was unwittingly unnerved by his attitude.

His equanimity in accepting his counterpart's death, his sibling Ley Batenkaitos, was also part of it, but his attestation that that "black coffin"—a seal belonging to the same lineage as Ol Shamak, had the margin to permit the apprehension of the outside world, was what truly astonished Aldebaran.

And, putting aside Aldebaran's astonishment, Roy swivelled his body, vocalizing a "Here we go"; now facing upwards, the former's figure was cast upside down in his field of view.

Roy: "Ah~, that was suffocating. This is much better… so? Uncle, based on our Memories you're someone party to the Royal Selection, right~? For you to release us, a Sin Archbishop, like this, would that not bring notoriety to your precious Princess—"

Aldebaran: "In addition to the fighting styles, you also ought to have taken in all kinds of ways of thinking, yeah? If you don't wanna be thought of as an incompetent fool who only gathers tools but can't do shit, then think before you ask."

Roy: "Wow, such outrage. Stirred the hornet's nest? So nice, quite nice, very nice, isn't it nice, because it is probably nice, surely it is very nice! Won't ask any further than that. Certainly no questions like if you're taut in despair because of your precious, oh so precious Princess's death… Gah-!"

Aldebaran: "That so. That'd be helpful. Thank you for your consideration."

Roy's facial expression as he bore a baleful smile was acutely strained once his fractured shoulder was vigorously stepped on. Meticulously did Aldebaran grind his heel down into the fractured bones, lowering his foot.

The compeer was a Sin Archbishop. Though already distinct, from the perspective of proceeding affairs according to plan, he could be denoted as the worst possible party. Even if him snapping to bite forthwith upon the seal's undoing had been anticipated, it was by no means an anticipation that he had been glad about being on the money regarding.

A Sin Archbishop, the kind of enemy who if not a necessary factor for the plan, he would gladly drop down the Great Waterfall, him imprisoned within the coffin as was.

However—

Roy: "…Hk-, to yet go so far that you'd need us. What a tribulation you're in, right~, uncle?"

Aldebaran: "This guy just never stops yapping. Wish your parents'd teach you to pipe down."

Roy: "Birth parent? Or foster parent? The former died upon our birth and took our little sister with them as well, and the latter would surely~ be pretty incompatible with you, uncle."

Aldebaran: "No matter which, I get that neither would be very effective. —No choice."

Even though a dialogue was miraculously established, there lay nothing to gain from his response. Garrulous hollow tirades were a signature characteristic of the Sin Archbishops, and Gluttony was not innocent of that charge either.

Only odiousness and repugnance exacerbated, and rather than comfort it only deteriorated the state of mind of the living.

Aldebaran: "…"

As Roy lay down whilst facing upwards like a carp atop a cutting board, he halfway conceded to him and squatted.

Interchanging gazes through the helmet with Aldebaran as he looked below, the upside-down Roy rounded his eyes in curiosity alongside a tinge of ache from the stomping of his fractured bones.

Roy: "What's this what's this? Uncle, what're you gonna do next? Teach a lesson to a disobedient child through torture? But you know~, we already have gotten used to that type of pain, you see~."

Aldebaran: "Relax. I'm the same as you, I ain't got much faith in using pain to compel others into doing my bidding. If sentiments surpass the pain, then that ain't gonna make the opponent yield. That's why."

Roy: "That's why~?"

Aldebaran: "What I'll tie you with, is neither pain nor sentiment. — A promise."

Enunciating so, Aldebaran inserted his thumb into the jaw portion of his helmet and bit his fingertip. Accompanying the sharp pain emerged a drip of blood, the dyed finger then being pointed towards Roy.

Subsequently, whilst he pressed the finger tinged in blood against the bare body of the collapsed blasphemer,

Aldebaran: "Don't pose needless resistance. Though I was made to practice enough to be able to paint it with my eyes closed… this would be the first time I'm testing its efficacy."

Roy: "To scribble on the bare body of a child with blood, now that's an interest vulgar enough to make even us Sin Archbishops aghast. To even perform such a deviant act, what do you want us to do? Destroy the country or something?"

Aldebaran: "I don't intend that, and I could do that by myself if I wanted to. I've gone out of my way to free a detestable lil' brat like you. It's something that only you can do."

Roy: "Only us, huh~?"

As the bloody finger traced his body, Roy flashed his fangs in a grin as he enjoyed the ticklish sensation.

That obscene look in his eyes, that tone, that exuded presence, all were urging Aldebaran to vocalize the portion he had yet to put to words.

Whilst peevish that it might appear as though he were going along with the other party's intentions by conforming to that urge, he responded.

The reason why Aldebaran had unleashed Roy Alphard, that was—

Aldebaran: "—There's someone I'd like to have you eat with your Authority. I won't be taking no for an answer."

Roy: "Hmmm? Well, I guess that's so. You did release us. It couldn't have been anything more than that~."

Inclining his head with his back to the floor, Roy's cheeks contorted at Aldebaran's demand.

As to whether the intent behind that smile had been an acceptance or a rejection, Aldebaran knew not. Regardless of which it was, Roy's own will was irrelevant.

The means by which he would be made to abide had been inscribed upon Roy Alphard's flesh, engraved into his soul.

Roy: "—A curse mark bound by an Oath. Thorough to the point of obstinacy, isn't it~? Did you come up with this by yourself, uncle? Or perhaps you are echoing some deranged Curse Arts User?"

Aldebaran: "Echoing. There's no doubt in regards to them being completely deranged, but that person wasn't a Curse Arts User. They're a magician. Without a doubt, the most supreme magician throughout the history of this world. Regardless of their personality."

Roy: "And the conditions for the Oath~?"

Aldebaran: "If you eat someone without my permission, you'll die in a fiery blaze along with your soul."

Informing him succinctly, Aldebaran lifted Roy's body onto his shoulders without glancing at his face.

The blasphemer had indulged himself in Bizarre Eating, making a mess of his feed as he pleased; his body, however, was light. Given that his position was that of having snuck into the Prison Tower where Roy had been sealed, him being light was a great help.

He had more or less knocked out all the guards, but it would be best for him to maintain prudence on the return.

Aldebaran: “After this, we’ll link back up with Yae and lil’ miss Felt —”

In order to have support in the Royal Capital, he had ordered Yae to keep watch over Felt and left them waiting in the Barielle Villa. Leip Barielle had had that manor constructed originally, but those plans had been largely altered through Priscilla’s meddling, and thus the residence had been completed in its current form.

All around, it was a mansion that had been left with the vestiges of Priscilla’s favored designs; the fact that they needed a base notwithstanding, it was not a place at which Aldebaran wished to sojourn overlong.

Hence, he would quickly pick up Yae and Felt, then converge with “Aldebaran” and Heinkel outside the Royal Capital.

Roy: “Come to think of it, we also said this earlier~.”

To Aldebaran, who had been ruminating things over internally, Roy suddenly began speaking, being carried atop the former’s shoulder. From a sidelong glance, Aldebaran could tell that Roy, with his limp limbs, was gazing at the floor.

Following that gaze, Aldebaran knit his brow, wondering what the matter was.

Thereupon—

Roy: “That before you took us out, uncle, even within the frozen confines of that blackness, we could still sense our surroundings, even if only dimly. But you see, this place is completely isolated from the outside world~. In such a state, visitations would be utterly preposterous, and so not even rats could enter, let alone a single insect. And yet~.”

Aldebaran: “—Ah?”

Roy: “Zodda bugs, it’s quite the unusual affair for them to have gotten in here unnoticed, isn’t it~?”

Roy's slimy words, they were consistent with the small bug reflected in Aldebaran's vision.

Crawling on the cold ground, their form eerie and repulsive, was a Zodda bug, an insect abhorred by everyone in this world. They were the equivalent to cockroaches, which could be found anywhere, so it was not strange in the slightest for them to be present in the Prison Tower. —Aldebaran thought no such thing.

Aldebaran: "—Hk, I fucked up!"

Unable to control the dread welling up inside of him, Aldebaran forgot to be considerate of the fact that atop his shoulders was being carried a Roy of broken limbs, thus he hastily rushed out of the solitary cell, and out of the Prison Tower.

Were he to not expedite his escape to the utmost, before long Aldebaran's infiltration would be exposed—

???: "—That's enough."

The moment he set foot outside of the Prison Tower, that voice struck Aldebaran's eardrums.

Concomitantly, a numbing drop in temperature upon his skin he felt; and likewise perceivable was the creaking of his helmet due to the thermal swing compared to the interior of the tower. Powdery snow fluttering down through his environs, the arrival of this out-of-season cold wave shook Aldebaran's psyche beyond what a farmer's would be as they imagined the damage to their crop.

A voice he knew well, that of a silver bell.

Treading upon the thin layer of snow that had piled upon the sprawling garden in the vicinity of the Prison Tower, her long, silver hair glistening amidst the snowscape, she gallantly made her approach.

Always did those beautiful amethyst eyes house a calm, gentle light. —But, such did not apply now. To an unmistakable extent, those amethyst eyes were blazing aflare.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, by her ire they were blazing—

???: "—Return Subaru and Beatrice."

A silent, dignified declaration of purpose, a demeanor permitted exclusively to a ruler of sorts.

Even if for only a moment, that impression was indeed given, for that was the extent to which the woman standing there was so beautiful, so lovely, so noble.

Aldebaran: "…"

Breathing visibly white breaths, Aldebaran had ended up freezing in his tracks. Standing before him, atop the snow, the Witch of Glaciation—Emilia, lifted her well-shaped eyebrows firmly, and declared.

Emilia: "Right now, I'm reaaally angry, so I won't be holding back even if it's you, Al."

Chapter 25:
Emilia was Enraged

1

Emilia: “Right now, I’m reaaally angry, so I won’t be holding back even if it’s you, Al.”

Speaking thus, the Witch of Glaciation, having transformed the vicinity of the Prison Tower into a wintry snowscape, cast him a stern gaze.

The irate emotions ablaze in those amethyst eyes, spurred a dry sensation in Aldebaran’s throat.

Even in the Empire, many a time had he borne witness to the sight of her kicking her long legs with all her might, doing battle with a look of seriousness on her beautiful countenance. But, that look of seriousness had always been deeply tinged with her courage and thoughtfulness, never colored with the hue of fury.

Hence, this was the first time.

Aldebaran: “…”

The first time that he had come across a scene where Emilia’s eyes were filled with anger, casting an intense gaze upon somebody.

Not to mention, to think it was a moment in which that anger was directed fully and entirely unto himself, even the act of imagining that.

Aldebaran: “…To say that I never even imagined it… guess that’d be asking for too much.”

Hijacking the dragonhusk of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, and mobilizing the Witch of Envy with the objective of halting the Sword Saint Reinhard, he was an enemy of the world. —Even before all that, the moment he sealed away Natsuki Subaru, even if not on the scale of the whole world, there were a great number of people who thus became enemies of Aldebaran.

Emilia was at the forefront of that list. This confrontation was the inevitable price he had to pay for the decision he had made.

???: “What’s this~, how peculiar? It seems like you’ve angered her quite a bit~, uncle. That onee-san is terrifying when you anger her, did you know~?”

Aldebaran: “Shut up.”

???: “Ohh, scary, scary.”

Carried on Aldebaran’s shoulders, the immobilized Roy sneered in ridicule.

The circumstances of Roy’s capture had been through combat with Natsuki Subaru’s group at the Pleiades Watchtower—naturally, Emilia was also present there. It made sense for him to know her.

Even before that, Roy had eaten many Names and Memories in Pristella, and it would not have been strange for some of those among them to have known Emilia.

Hence, what he currently ought to focus on was not Roy’s slimy persiflage, but rather—

Aldebaran: “—. Yo, what a coincidence to run into you here, miss —”

Laboring to select the words for his first vocalization, Aldebaran opened his mouth.

But, unfortunately for the effort he had spent to select those first words, it had been meaningless.

That was because—

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

Halfway through Aldebaran’s utterance, which aimed to examine his opponent’s approach, Emilia pitched forward, ushering an explosion of the snow accumulated by her feet, her silver hair fluttering as she kicked off the ground.

Amidst his snow-blanketed vision, directly after he perceived the glisten of her fluttering silver hair—

Emilia: “Hiyaah!!”

—Sparing no measure, a gauntlet of ice was driven directly into Aldebaran’s solar plexus.

2

—Rewinding time a bit before that blow to the solar plexus.

???: “Subaru and everyone else…!”

???: “That’s the word from one of my people. Everyone in the Tower has been taken out.”

The one who informed them of this was Felt, who was staying in the Royal Capital at the time.

It was their first reunion since the events of the Watergate City of Pristella, but they had no time to catch up on old times.

To begin with, Emilia’s reason for visiting the Royal Capital was not a pleasant one—she had to report to the Royal Castle that Priscilla Barielle had lost her life in the Vollachian Empire.

Emilia was deeply grieved to have to bring back news that would significantly affect the Royal Selection and, above all, sadden the many who knew and loved Priscilla.

What Felt had told Emilia was a huge blow.

Emilia: “Al…”

Why would he do something like that? Those were words Emilia could not bring herself to say.

If Al were to do something reckless now, there was no way it would not be related to Priscilla's death. Al's devastation at losing someone so important to him placed him into an unbearable state, which was why Emilia and the others listened to Subaru's plea and saw them off to the Pleiades Watchtower.

She believed that this would give Al a chance to recover—or at least a chance to move forward.

But despite that—

???: "—Felt-sama, may I ask you for more details?"

Next to Emilia, who was biting her lip and clenching her fists, was Otto, who had come to the Royal Capital with her, and asked Felt.

In contrast to Emilia, who was overwhelmed by the devastating news, Otto's expression, with his eyes fixed on Felt, was calm, and his voice was steady. But Emilia knew what it meant when Otto acted like this—that he was at his angriest.

Felt sensed the quiet pressure emanating from Otto's anger, which was well-known to everyone in Emilia's camp, and crossed her arms, replying, "Yeah, sure,"

Felt: "The Knight nii-chan and the little Spirit are being held captive by the helmet bastard. I don't know how, but it seems he doesn't intend to kill them."

Otto: "No intention to kill…? What about the others at the Tower?"

Felt: "Flam contacted me and said they're okay. Meili and Emilia-neechan's maid are safe. But our Sensei and that Garfiel guy got pretty beat up. It looks like he didn't take their lives."

Otto: "—. Is that so? Thank you."

Felt: "That ain't something to thank me for. I would have felt worse if I knew how they were and didn't tell you."

After telling her everything without hesitation, Felt looked at Emilia, who was still clenching her fists. Struck by the intensity of

Felt's gaze, Emilia gasped.

Then, Felt continued as Emilia's cheeks stiffened.

Felt: "We've decided on our plan. We'll use Reinhard to get back to our territory as quickly as possible. We need to consult with Rom-jii and figure out what we need to do next."

Emilia: "Isn't that the Astrea Domain? If so, it's close to the Augria Sand Dunes, so we can go with you, Felt-chan—"

Otto: "—No, we should not do that, Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "What?"

Emilia leaned eagerly forward, but Otto's calm voice stopped her.

However, Emilia was confused, as she did not understand why she was being stopped. After all, she had to rush to the Tower where Subaru and the others were in trouble.

Emilia: "Is it because Reinhard will have a hard time if there are more of us? Well, it would reaaally be difficult to lighten up anymore, but I'll do my best…!"

Felt: "Even if Emilia and Zodda Bug-niichan join in, it won't make much difference to that guy's workload. But that's not what you're saying, right?"

Otto: "Regardless of your perception of me, Felt-sama… yes."

Felt and Otto nodded to each other, while question marks flew above Emilia's head.

However, although Emilia was unable to keep up with what the two of them were thinking, she held no doubt that those thoughts were correct and had been thoroughly considered.

Emilia: "Felt-chan, be careful. Tell Reinhard as well. As for Al…"

Felt: "Naturally, when it comes to the helmet bastard, I can't make any promises. Sorry 'bout that."

Emilia: "—. No, I'm glad you clearly told me that you cannot make any promises."

Their reunion was short-lived, and the content of their conversation had not been pleasant in the slightest. Still, Emilia gave Felt a parting hug, and saw the girl, whose expression had become strange, off from the Royal Castle.

Afterward, Felt and the others had been flown to the Astrea Domain by Reinhard, thereupon, it was a matter of performing a large variety of tasks that would be absolutely vital, even so…

Emilia: "Subaru…"

After Felt's tempestuous departure, Emilia remained in the royal residence with her gaze cast downward.

Even now, she had not been able to relax her tightly clenched fists. Felt had said that everyone sent to the Pleiades Watchtower had suffered terribly.

However, among them, the one Emilia was most anxious about was her Knight, Subaru.

Even in the Empire, he had put in a great effort for the sake of Rem and Spica, he had fought alongside Abel, had been shrunk down to a child, had grown big again, and yet he had not been able to save Priscilla.

The way he had punished himself, by having his many friends from the Empire beat him up, was something she could not bear to watch. And yet, the kindness Subaru had shown in consideration of Al was betrayed—.

Emilia: "I…"

A strange sensation had been lit deep within her chest, and it bubbled forth, making Emilia aware of the heat within her own heart.

A feeling that was neither sad nor heartbreaking, it was an emotion that Emilia had rarely harboured, and was thus greatly perplexing to her.

A sensation like this, within her chest, in the depths of her eyes, at the very core of her heart, this feeling as if vigorously boiling, the last time she had felt this way was—during her confrontation with Regulus, back in Pristella.

At Regulus who had bound the hearts of his brides, Sylphy and the others, for utterly selfish reasons, Emilia had been truly, truly furious. The same rage as back then, or perhaps one even greater, now burned within her.

Otto: “Emilia-sama, thank you for granting my plea.”

Emilia: “Otto-kun…”

Emilia, who had realized that she was greatly furious, to the extent of being nearly unable to contain it, had intuitively understood that Otto, who wore a calm expression, was also feeling the same.

That was to be expected. After all, being worried for Subaru and the others, Otto was one among those who had accompanied Emilia and the others to the Empire. This state, could not be allowed to continue—

Emilia: “Eeep!”

Making a loud thwack sound, Emilia slapped her own cheeks with both hands. It was an act so unexpected that Otto exclaimed “E-Emilia-sama?” in astonishment.

Feeling sorry about that, Emilia lowered her hands from her stinging cheeks,

Emilia: “Just now, my mind was going haywire, and I didn’t feel like I would be able to speak properly, that’s why. But now, I feel alright…! Well, the alright part was a lie, but I can speak properly.”

Otto: “…Is that so. In that case I too shall—.”

Emilia: “Yikes!”

As Emilia nodded, a thwack resounded as Otto also slapped his own cheeks the same way she did. Having done so with such a strength, Emilia was startled by the sound that was loud enough to invoke doubts about an impending nosebleed.

However, Otto did not get a nosebleed, but his cheeks were likely just as red as Emilia's own,

Otto: "—. I shall explain the reason behind why we did not accompany Felt-sama. It is because there would be no point to us going and… to prepare for an unlikely possibility."

Emilia: "…Please continue."

Emilia did not interrupt the explanation that Otto, with both his hands upon his cheeks, was giving.

She had questions. She had plenty she wanted to say. But first, she would listen to everything the other person had to say. For Otto would have already prepared a proper reply for nearly everything Emilia was concerned about.

Otto: "If Reinhard-san is on the front lines, then there is no point sending in anyone based on their military might. Felt-sama must also understand that. Then, the reason why she still decided to return to her domain would be—"

Emilia: "—That's… so she could prepare?"

Otto: "Correct. Just think about it. Aside from Natsuki-san and the others, if Felt-sama's companions in the Tower were attacked, Reinhard-san would obviously appear. Despite all of that, Al-san… That man took the plunge."

Finally, Emilia began to understand what Otto was trying to say.

Reinhard was overwhelmingly strong. Most likely, of the people Emilia knew—no, even including the people she did not know, Reinhard was the strongest in the world. Puck had said so himself, so it had to be true.

Understanding that he would clash against Reinhard, it was strange to expect that Al had nothing prepared. Meaning, Al had definitely prepared something, and so even Reinhard could be in danger.

Emilia: "Felt-chan was worried about Reinhard, so she went back in order to prepare… But then, what about us? If we were preparing, we probably should do so with Felt-chan and all of the others…"

Otto: "We are the ones after Reinhard-san, that Felt-sama and the others have prepared for."

Emilia: "—. I see. If he knows Reinhard is coming, and he was preparing for that, and she is planning for that preparation… Umm."

Otto: "That's right. Of course, if we begin talking about preparing for preparations, then there would be no end to the discussion. The reason behind that man's reckless actions is because of what happened in the Empire… even if his plan is thorough, it does not seem likely he would have had much time to prepare."

Emilia: "…Mm, yeah, that's right."

Thanks to the careful and detailed explanation, Emilia's understanding had caught up to Otto and the others. While Emilia admired the depth with which he thought, she could not help but feel terribly and profoundly sad when Otto intentionally shifted from calling him Al-san to "that man."

Otto had a strong sense of camaraderie. Among Emilia's friends, his was surely the strongest. It was what made him so reliable, but it also forced him to make painful compromises.

Nevertheless—

Emilia: "…I too, don't know what to think, Al."

He had a reason. There had to be one. But, even if he had a reason, there were some things that she could not allow or forgive.

She was worried about Subaru. Was Beatrice okay? She had heard that Garfiel was injured. Petra and Meili were undoubtedly filled with anxiety. Subaru's beloved Patrasche, she might also be crying.

—With roaring flames, the inside of her chest grew hot.

Otto: "—This is my fault."

Like that, in front of Emilia, whose heart was set ablaze with emotions, Otto suddenly muttered this.

Not understanding the contents of his utterance, Emilia's eyes unconsciously widened, as she became lost for words. Otto covered his face with the hands that had been resting on his cheek up till now, and stared up at the ceiling. Because he was taller than she was, when he did this, Emilia was unable to see his face.

However, the trembling of that voice, she understood that it came not just from simple anger.

Otto: "I thought Natsuki-san was getting too involved. Moving for the sake of what Priscilla-sama's death had left behind, I forced myself to agree in order to save him with a distraction from himself. I tried to convince myself that it would be fine if Beatrice-chan, who had been separated from him, would be by his side. The care and follow up, I thought I could leave it to the brave Petra-chan."

Emilia: "Otto-kun…"

Otto: "Above everything else, I entrusted everything to Garfiel. Those things that we should have done, we forced onto our straightforward, ever honest, sensitive Garfiel."

Emilia: "Otto-kun!"

The moment the tremble in his voice bordered on a complete breakdown, Emilia grabbed both of Otto's arms, and lowered his face with her hand, so that she could face him head-on. Then, she saw it.

—For the first time ever, she saw Otto's blue eyes moist with tears.

Otto: "Damn it… why am I always so thoughtless…"

Emilia: "…"

Otto: “When my hands cannot reach, when my feet cannot even make it in time, I have no choice but to use my head to make up for those shortcomings. Even though I act like I understand that, even though I pretend to be clever, at the most critical moments I always —”

Emilia: “—!”

No longer did she want to hear any more of Otto’s continuous self-blame, with that tearful face twisted in sorrow.

So Emilia, without releasing the arm she had been holding, drew him towards herself and hugged Otto’s head against her chest. Perhaps it was the suddenness of Emilia’s unexpected action that rendered Otto frozen without a sound. In the meantime—

Emilia: “Don’t talk about yourself like that! Otto-kun is always doing his best! We all understand that. And that’s why we want to properly hear what Otto-kun has to say.”

Otto: “Emi… lia-sama…”

Emilia: “I know! Even though I say this, Otto-kun probably understands it too, right? But I only have my own words, and I can only say what I am thinking, so I can at least say it with my own feelings. So—”

Otto: “…”

Emilia: “Nothing is over yet. We reaaally can still do so much more!”

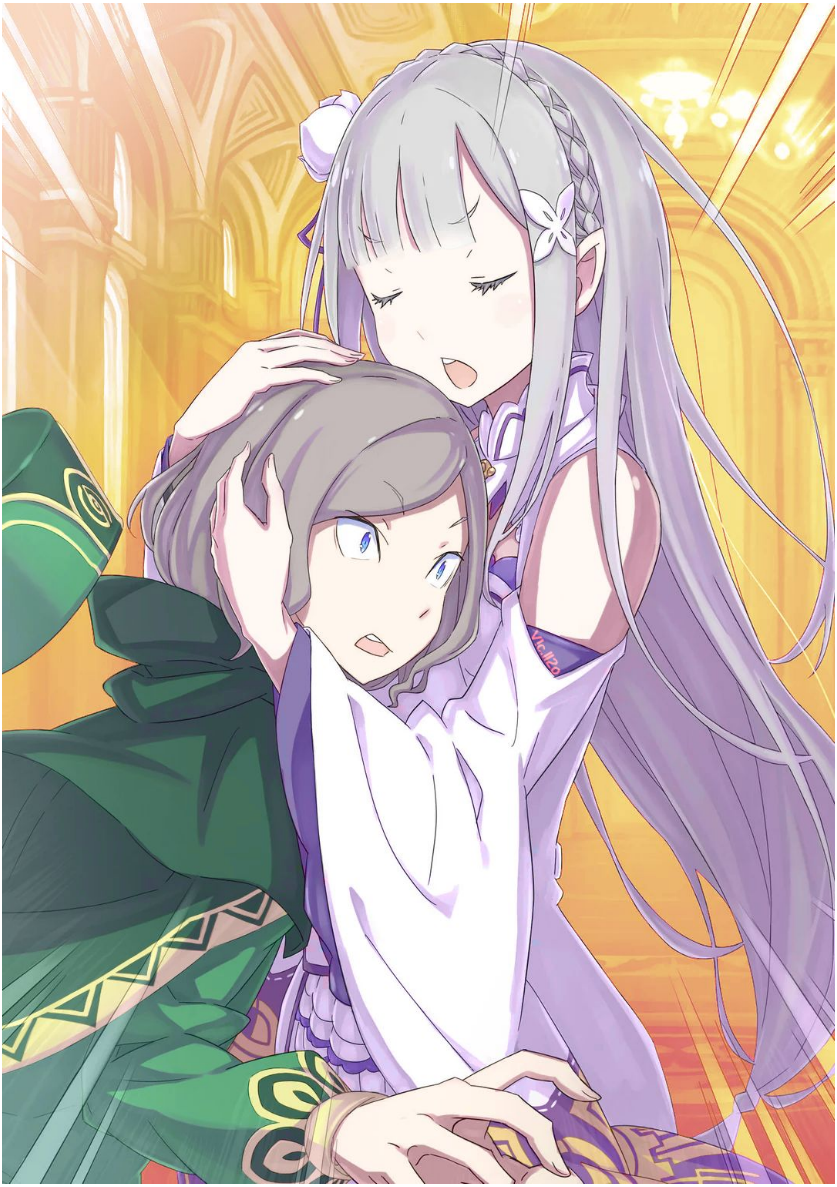

Emilia spoke with a resolute declaration as she tightly held Otto's head in her arms. It was as though she were telling this to herself, yet at the same time, she still carried the belief that her words were true.

It was something that none other than Emilia's Knight, Natsuki Subaru, had woven into her being time and time again.

Together, Emilia and Subaru had crafted this unshakable trust to be the very thing they took the greatest pride in.

Emilia: "We are reaaally bad at giving up."

Indeed, they were not good at it: at holding their heads down in distress, curling up and fleeing from it all. And, precisely because they could not do that, they had no choice but to unyieldingly press on and do their best without ever giving up.

Perhaps Emilia's appeal had found its way to him. Suddenly, Otto's body, which had been rigid until this moment, relaxed, and then,

Otto: "…Please let go of my arms, or Natsuki-san will definitely kill me."

Emilia: "No, no one is going to die! It's precisely for that reason that we are doing this…"

Otto: "I understand! I understand, so please let go of me!"

Emilia begrudgingly let go of the squirming Otto's arms. She watched him intently, as if to ensure that he had truly recovered. Otto wiped his brow with a handkerchief and let out a sigh.

It was a large, deep sigh.

Otto: "I know it is not the time for this, but I just remembered."

Emilia: "What did you remember?"

Otto: "—The reason as to why I am giving my assistance to Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama.”

Otto spoke these words calmly, using his handkerchief to lightly wipe away the remaining traces of his tears. The expression he held now was a stark contrast to the anger that had once contorted his features just moments before, for whatever he had just recalled had now conjured a newfound face of bravery.

Otto: “The enemy has abducted both Natsuki-san and Beatrice-chan. There must be a reason as to why they did this. The aim of abductions is generally to threaten their related parties, or perhaps even the abductees themselves…”

Emilia: “So, it’s either us or Subaru, right?”

Otto: “Yes. If the Divine Dragon truly is involved, it will prove to be an issue for the entire Kingdom. Whatever role we must fulfill, let us do so in the Royal Capital.”

Emilia: “—. Yes, let’s do that. We have to move chipperly.”

As she listened to Otto’s future plans, Emilia was doing her best to suppress her own impulses.

Emilia: “…”

These delayed impulses were an overwhelming urge to rush out at once to help out Subaru and the others. Things that Otto’s rationale had constructed, such as Reinhard’s presence and Felt’s readiness, her fervent desire threatened to push them all away.

She wanted to touch him. She wanted to look at him. She wanted to hear his voice.

When he got hurt, when he surely wanted to lower his head, she yearned to be by his side.

Emilia: “—Subaru.”

Anger was not the emotion that scorched Emilia’s chest, yet she could not grasp what it was that stirred within her whatsoever.

3

Emilia: “Hiyaah!!”

Diving in without so much as listening to a word, she drove a strike carrying every fiber of her being into Al’s solar plexus. —All of this was in accordance with the instructions of Otto, who had dispatched Emilia here.

Otto: “Please suppress the urge to listen to the opponent’s pleas or side of the story. All of that can be sorted out in due time, but for now we must ensure the opposing side does not play their hand.”

Otto, who had urged Emilia onward as she bolted out, had been invoking his Divine Protection of the Soul of Language to trace the whereabouts of Al and his accomplices, causing his already pale complexion to blanch into the deathly pallor of a man beset by illness.

She did not want him to be reckless. But, when it came time to do so, there would be no other choice but to be reckless. Emilia, too, did not live in a way so bereft of recklessness that she could stop him.

That was why, in order to bring an end to that recklessness even a little sooner, Emilia was doing her best.

Emilia: “How about—”

This! As Emilia began to formulate those words, she felt a peculiar sensation in her ice-hardened fist.

The gauntlet should have made contact with Al’s bare skin, but the recoil was making it feel as though she had punched a hard, steadfast wall—

Al: “How abrupt…!!”

Al uttered these words as if wringing them out from his throat, his torso shielded by a coat of stone armor.

This was the preemptive strike that Otto had told her to perform, but it had failed. Still, this was not the time to dwell on it. If the first strike did not connect, then she would just have to try again a second and a third time.

Al: “The fact that you ain’t even gonna lend an ear is kinda cold.”

Emilia: “That’s! Al’s the one who—mmphh.”

Al: “Mmphh?”

Emilia: “I promised not to… SAY—!”

Though Al’s stone armor had absorbed the punch, the impact had flung him backward; as he said those things, Emilia had forcibly shut her own mouth mid-retort, then formed a two-handed hammer of ice, sweeping it at him in a horizontal strike.

The one-armed Al was bearing a small figure slung over his right shoulder. Whilst thinking it unfair to exploit that handicap of his, Emilia deliberately aimed a blow toward Al’s left side.

The strike, unleashed at her full strength, was going to be very painful if it landed. But painful was not all that it would be.

Al: “Tch!”

Al caught Emilia’s underhanded attack with his left arm—a limb of stone forged through magic. But despite blocking the attack, he clicked his tongue, and promptly destroyed and discarded the arm he had gone through the trouble of creating.

The reason for this was that the area struck by the ice hammer was beginning to freeze over, the encroaching frost having been about to reach Al’s body.

Otto: “If we set aside our emotional concerns, capturing that man alive is an absolute necessity in order to rescue Natsuki-san and Beatrice-sama. In that respect, your fighting style is a compatible fit, Emilia-sama. Nonetheless—”

Emilia: “—I promised that I wouldn’t be reckless like Subaru!”

Keeping that exchange and the promise she had forged with Otto before her departure close to her heart, Emilia conjured a new set of twin ice swords. —Emilia's Ice Brand Arts, her usage of it had gained a new variation.

Her weapons of ice would freeze her opponents upon impact, robbing them of control over both their body and weapon. It demanded a modest increase in Mana consumption in comparison to her ordinary weapons, but was within the standard error deviation so long as she would not be fighting too much.

To stop an opponent without taking their life. —The possibility of this new martial art, was what Emilia had desired.

???: "Ah-haha~! Uncle, it seems you've gotten yourself into a real pickle, haven't you~?"

Al: "Shut it!"

Casting aside the artificial arm that had begun to freeze over, Al shouted at the heckler he was carrying.

Upon seeing that the person that Al had gone through such lengths to carry was none other than Roy Alphard, who had been held in captivity in the Prison Tower, Emilia bit her lip.

Roy, the Sin Archbishop that Emilia's comrades had done their utmost to capture at the Pleiades Watchtower with the help of Anastasia's own group. Julius in particular had exerted the utmost of efforts, and his decision to not take Roy's life, as well as Anastasia's courage to accept that, were things that Emilia had looked exceedingly favourably upon.

Emilia: "But now, they'll both be so disappointed…!"

Whatever his reasons might have been, Emilia would halt Al here and now. And alongside him, she would also detain the one whom Al brought out, Roy.

Al: "I ain't got a single reason to go along with your intentions, though."

Immediately after vocalizing such enthusiasm, Al's feet underwent a sudden upheaval, and the two runaways were launched into the sky.

In such a manner, he was distanced from Emilia, and made an attempt to flee from the scene. With a late start, Emilia would be unable to catch up to him even were she to extend out her ice.

But—

Emilia: "—Icicle Line."

A barrier of ice and snow was deployed around the Prison Tower, preventing his escape.

With a cry of "Gwoah-?!" ringing out across the sky, Al's escape sequence ended in failure, thwarted by the canopy of ice spreading out to completely cover the area surrounding him.

Then, as Al's head collided against the glacial ceiling, he was left to plummet upside down; Emilia circled around to the spot where he would hit the ground and slammed her twin swords of ice into the suspended Al—

Emilia: "—Hk?!"

The twin swords parried by a hard sensation, Emilia's eyes widened, her breath catching.

If Al had received the blows with a prosthetic arm, as he had done earlier, it would not have surprised her. Al had indeed created a new arm, but that was not all that had been created. —Manifested there were twin swords, fashioned from rock.

Al: "Earth Brand Arts, or something like that."

Emilia: "You copycat…!"

Al: "It was Natsuki Subaru who came up with this, yeah? In that case, I've also got the right to use it."

Before Emilia, her eyes wide open, Al spun from the recoil of their clashing twin blades of frost and stone; as distance opened up between them, he once again landed upon the snowy ground.

Giving rise to sound in his vicinity, stone weapons began to form one after another around Al. Bracing herself at the fact that Al could essentially replicate her Ice Brand Arts with his Earth Magic, Emilia realized something.

With a stone-forged arm, Al wielded stone-forged armaments—but Roy, who was supposed to have been on his shoulder until a moment ago, was nowhere to be found.

Emilia: "Don't tell me…"

Al: "Ah, I let him get away in the turmoil just now… it would've been cool to say that, but I couldn't let it happen either. I just discarded him 'cause he was getting in the way. Over there."

Emilia's shoulders had been jolted, but Al just shrugged and jerked his chin. He motioned toward the pillar of earth that had risen earlier, to which Roy was affixed upside down in the center.

Covered in a quilt of earth, Roy was bound to the pillar, cackling upon receiving Emilia's gaze,

Roy: "Do your best, Onee-san. If Onee-san doesn't win here, we'll have no choice but to do whatever that uncle says~. Wait a sec~? But even if Onee-san wins, we'll still have to go right back into that Prison Tower… haha-, guess it doesn't even matter who wins, ri~ght?"

Emilia: "…If you can wake up and reflect on your actions, then do that."

Giving that answer to Roy, whose gaze fixedly clung to her, Emilia felt relieved for having not let him slip away, and she turned back to Al.

Roy, having been freed from the seal that had encased him in magic, was exceedingly dangerous, but with his time having been frozen as well, they had been unable to make him reflect. Thus, Emilia's compromise had been manifested: she was going to confine him in an environment from which he could not escape, and while his consciousness remained, he would be forced to reflect on everything he had done.

Emilia: “All that can come later, once everything here’s all sorted out.”

Al: “That’s all fine and dandy, but… what, you finally feel like talking to me now?”

Emilia: “Ah…! From here then. From here on out, I won’t say another word.”

Al: “How cold. Lil’ miss, I figured you’d understand if I just talked to—whoa!”

Al was eager to continue speaking, but towards him was hurled a stake of ice from Emilia; a proclamation of her intent. Al leapt sideways to evade it, and Emilia circled around to his side, thrusting a spear of frost into his flank.

The tip of the ice spear was caught by the blade of a rocky sword, shattering both simultaneously.

Instantly, the two forged their subsequent weapons, Emilia a rapier of ice, and Al a sword of stone, thus the clashing of their blades commenced; ‘twas a duel in which blades would be forged upon shattering, and blades would be shattered upon forging.

Roy: “How nice, so nice, quite nice, very nice, perhaps it’s nice, isn’t it nice, it’s probably nice, because it appears to be nice-! Gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-!”

The sound of Roy’s voice as he licked his lips could be heard as he watched over Emilia and Al engage in a sword fight of frost and stone.

Whilst deliberately ignoring him, Emilia unleashed a multitude of nimble attacks; attacks that she was certain would strike true, and yet, Al had precariously dodged each one, with each narrow evasion filling Emilia with a growing sensation that something was amiss.

Her attacks would not hit even when they seemed like they would. It felt akin to driving a kick into formless water.

Above all else—

Al: "—I don't wanna praise it too much, but that's a well refined technique. I envy your mutual love and understanding, Lil' Miss."

At that remark that had gone too far—Emilia was enraged.

She resolved to do whatever she must to rid the land of that evil and ruthless king. —Remembering that cliche stock phrase that Subaru had told her that people used when they got angry, Emilia was enraged.

She did not want Al to speak about herself and Subaru in such a manner.

But what had infuriated Emilia even more was the knowledge that Al did not genuinely believe his own words. He had been merely prodding her in a deliberate attempt to invoke her fury.

In addition—

Emilia: "I've been thinking about this for a while, but why do you look so lonely when you talk to me, Al?"

Al: "—. You said you wouldn't speak with me…"

Emilia: "Don't bring that up only when it's convenient for you! Also, one more thing!"

Raising her voice, Emilia lifted her greatsword of ice high aloft and swung it down, prompting Al to position his stone sword above his head to receive the strike—then suddenly, somebody latched onto Al's legs and waist.

Gasping, Al realized that what had latched onto his body was none other than the owner of a pair of icy arms—a soldier of ice.

At the presence of the ice soldier sculpted in the likeness of Subaru, on whom Emilia so deeply relied, Al grit his teeth with a "That's the worst…!”

Thereupon, Emilia raised her foot, clad in a slipper of ice, overhead—

Emilia: “—When you talk to me, look at me properly!!”

This time, her whole-hearted kick pierced through the rocky defenses, slamming directly into Al.

4

???: “…”

Yae’s reaction, slightly raising her eyebrow with a twitch, did not go unnoticed by Felt’s perceptiveness.

It was not as though she held conviction. Only, in a pathetic situation where she could not do a thing, she would attempt to cling to every last shred of hope, believing any further disgrace to be insignificant.

One such shred, whilst recalling a previous occasion on which she had “been instilled with the resolve to die”, was the hope that this conversation between herself and Yae was perhaps being eavesdropped on by an insignificant something,

Yae: “Be quiet.”

Opening one of her usually-narrowed eyes, Yae advanced towards the door of the room.

The pressure of that demand possessed enough power to convince Felt that if she took any careless actions, the thread fastened to her neck would enact her execution.

Ergo, leaving the immoble Felt there, Yae reached out her hand to open the door—that instant, the sharp point of a sword pierced the door with nary a sound, mercilessly surging towards Yae’s throat.

Felt: “—Hk.”

Felt's breath caught, and visible to her was the sight of Yae's white throat, sword piercing through—but it did not. The tip of the sword came to a halt just barely before it could slit Yae's throat.

It was not that her opponent had stopped. By binding a thread to the tip of the sword, Yae had narrowly averted the attack.

By a hair's breadth, she had narrowly snatched survival from the jaws of death, however, the crisis befalling Yae did not end there. —A sword distinct to the one that had been curbed erupted with a flash of light, cutting down the door as its shining steel ran amok.

Yae: "…"

Faced with the oncoming storm of swords, Yae leaped backward as she brandished her threads.

A sword for one, and a thread the other, nevertheless did the clash between the two weapons spark the clangour of steel on steel throughout the room, scorching the eyes of the onlooking Felt with the scintillation of swords.

With skillful control over her hands, Yae released a volley of thread attacks that blanked all sight, tearing apart the room's luxurious interior design. However, her opponent also put on an impressive display of swordplay with both hands, clearing away her ferocious onslaught head-on, and forcefully sweeping aside the threads that had entangled their own sword—

???: "GYAHHHHH!!"

Yae: "—Guh."

Unleashed was a front kick, landing squarely upon Yae's slender waist. Promptly twisting her body, Yae did a half-spin whilst being blown away; planting her feet on the wall before landing on the ground, her hands clutched her stomach.

Then, training her gaze upon the intruder who had performed those acts,

Yae: "To so suddenly deliver a kick to a lady's stomach, what a relentless guest you are~!”

???: “—Was such a thing necessary? Relent, for a shinobi such as yourself?”

Yae: “Isn’t that discrimination against shinobi? That’s not very gentlemanly behavior, now is it?”

???: “Unfortunately, I possess no recollections of ever deserving to be called a gentleman. No matter where the wind blows me, I cannot be anything more than a swordsman, with no talents save swinging the sword.”

With those words, the individual shook the threads off both their swords, turning their calm, blue eyes towards Yae— hearing that self-assessment, Felt softly muttered “Stop spewing that crap”.

To be sure, she did not know if he was a gentleman or not. Only, the evaluation of “swordsman” alone could not encompass his entirety. There were many who would not accept such as a description of this man on its own, this Felt knew.

After all, this man, styling himself as a swordsman, was the Sword Demon who had once surpassed the pinnacle of the sword—

???: “—Wilhelm Trias. Upon catching wind of the predicament driving the Kingdom into ruin, I came at once to offer what little help I could.”

Upon hearing that introduction, Felt retreated to a corner of the room, and sighed.

At the arrival of an unthinkable reinforcement, she was filled with terribly complicated emotions—

Felt: “…Zodda bug-niichan, you really do whatever it takes, don’t you…? What the hell is wrong with all these guys from Emilia-neechan’s place?”

With that, she muttered in equal parts exasperation and admiration.

Chapter 26:
Sword Demon VS Crimson Sakura

1

An intense aura of swordsmanship hung over the chamber, and it was no joke that goosebumps erupted all over her skin.

Her mind had been trained to remain unshaken by most situations, but even when considering circumstances in which the unexpected and unforeseen might occur in rapid succession, a scenario such as this would be considered an anomaly, demanding to be deemed as an exception.

Yae: “—Wilhelm Trias.”

Rolling the name that had been given around within her mouth, Yae Tenzen quietly sharpened her vigilance.

They had exchanged but a single clash, yet her opponent’s opening move had been slamming her with a kick, forcing Yae to find herself at a disadvantage.

Even after she leapt backward to dampen the impact, the damage from that kick had left a heavy impression on Yae’s slender frame. Had she not retreated, the force might have opened a shoe-sized hole in her stomach. He had delivered a kick to a woman without restraint; as he himself had claimed, he could not be called a gentleman.

There was a worthy title for this old swordsman, which had been readied by the nation for more than forty years.

Namely—

Yae: “—Sword Demon-san himself, gracing us with his presence here. To think I would meet such a legend myself, I’m so moved~. That episode in which you avenged your late wife, it must truly be an honor to be the Kingdom’s sword, huh~?”

Wilhelm: "…"

Yae: "Oh? But if I'm not mistaken, I heard you had an unexpected reunion with your wife afterward! Surely the events in the Watergate City must've been terribly painful for you, no? I can only imagine your anguish, boo hoo."

Wilhelm: "…"

Whilst observing her opponent's every move, Yae dabbed a finger at the corner of her eye in a pantomime of tears.

Beneath Yae's crimson gaze, the old swordsman—Wilhelm stood dignified and unwavering, the two swords in his grip radiating a sharp aura as he met her stare.

Within the calm light of those twin blue eyes, Yae understood that her attempts to unsettle her opponent by brazenly trampling on his heart had proven to be fruitless; she had merely succeeded in playing the role of a villainess.

Yae: "…The image I had from what I've heard of you led me to believe you were a more passionate person, but~…"

Apparently, that impression had been unreliable.

Given that the source of this information had been none other than Heinkel, if even details regarding his own biological father lacked credibility, then what exactly could she expect of him? Frankly, it would have been better to assign him to take care of Felt rather than the Dragon.

And, should Heinkel have allowed Felt to escape, then the pretext of eliminating her and cutting ties with Heinkel altogether would simultaneously hold ground.

As for Yae's reasoning as to why she thought such things—

Yae: "Aside from the old village chief, there shouldn't be many people who are able to notice my presence concealment—Felt-sama, might you have done something mischievous?"

Felt: “The hell kind of accusation is that? You know full well I’ve not been able to even lift a finger, you bastard.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Felt: “Besides talking to your sorry ass, I haven’t done anything. Right now, that’s taking up all my effort.”

With a hint of self-resentment in her voice, Felt spat thus as she retreated to a corner of the room.

When it came to feigning anger, she was not the type to be adept. If she truly possessed the refined acting skills to modulate even her vocal tremors, then such a masterful deception would truly be one worthy of awe.

Therefore, Yae, giving a subtle tug on the steel thread around Felt’s neck, just enough to make her aware of its presence,

Yae: “Please don’t even think about running away, okay? I’d hate to make Felt-sama’s adorable head bid a tearful farewell to her torso.”

Felt: “That’s another kick your ass is getting. And, it’s not for me to say, but…”

Yae: “What?”

Felt: “I don’t think you have the time to be looking away, now do you, you bastard?”

Felt stuck out her tongue with a blunt “bleh”, and the act’s lack of charm was itself cute. But, Yae did not need a reminder, as she had never once let her guard down against Wilhelm. —He remained rooted in his original position, unable to determine how to respond to Yae’s unfamiliar Steel Thread Technique. Such was only natural.

—Most shinobi techniques specialized in exploiting an opponent’s openings.

That was why, unlike the fighting techniques of warriors utilized in battle, the techniques of the shinobi utilized for killing were called jutsu. Yae’s Steel Thread Technique was a prime example of that distinction.

The more veteran the warrior, the more cautiously they would approach combat. Meanwhile, the true skill of a shinobi lay in setting trap upon trap, like the web of a spider, ten layers, then twenty, until—

Wilhelm: "—Four moves."

Yae: "—? What was that?"

Suddenly, Yae furrowed her brow, unable to comprehend the words born from Wilhelm's lips.

To Yae's query, Wilhelm offered no verbal reply. —But, there was a response. His eyes narrowed slightly, and a piercing aura of swordsmanship was released, cleaving through Yae's entire body as an answer.

Yae: "—Hk."

The moment she sensed the incoming attack, Yae mobilized all ten of her fingers without hesitation, but rather than attacking to subdue, she rained slaughter upon the Sword Demon with her steel threads. So long as Al's order not to kill was kept in the end, it would be fine. It would be preferable for her opponent to survive when the intention was to kill; but, if an attack was unleashed without the expectation to kill, would it work on this adversary?

Thus, from all directions, first subdividing into sixteen, and then further into thirty-two, was launched an overwhelming assault of steel threads, each new strand finer than the last; in response, the twin blades in Wilhelm's grip flashed—

Wilhelm: "OOOH—!!"

The whirlwind raised by the swing of the twin swords quite literally swept aside the approaching murderous steel threads of carnage.

The extreme speed of the swords' movement caused the collision between blade and thread to be heard in unison, generating sparks that gave Yae the illusion that her eyes were being seared. Though her initial strike had been neutralized by the overwhelming force of the sword, her Steel Thread Technique remained uninterrupted.

Slackening the steel threads emitted from her rings, she readied an assault of even further segmented threads—in that moment, the “floor” of the room was cleaved upward before Yae’s eyes.

—That which rose was a portion of the floor that had been slashed and stepped upon, lifting its face. The size of this “floor” rivaled that of a luxurious bed, blotting Wilhelm from Yae’s sight.

Wilhelm: “…”

With a thud and a forceful step, the “floor” was kicked, launching it straight toward Yae.

Within the confined space of the room, there were no gaps she could use to escape; therefore, using her left hand, Yae adjusted the angles of the steel threads she manipulated to combat the incoming “floor”. However, rather than slicing it, she instead bound it, deflecting it with a bounce.

The “floor” recoiled with the full momentum of the initial kick, returning along its trajectory with even greater speed and danger, barreling toward the Sword Demon with the aim to blast him away.

But then—

Yae: “Huh?”

A sharp, piercing sound resonated, and Yae’s eyes widened upon the sight of the “floor” being pinned midair.

Its momentum had accelerated, its force doubling in proportion to its weight. Yet, the Sword Demon’s blade struck the rebellion of the “floor” in the dead center of its mass, its tip aligned to the surface with surgical precision, voiding all of its power.

It was truly a divine feat that transcended what mortal hands could accomplish.

Yae, too, understood this, having spent a great deal of time being hailed as a child prodigy beyond the limits of ordinary humans. —Even in his old age the Sword Demon's swordsmanship was planted in the realm of the divine.

Wilhelm: "Three moves."

Within the vision of the breathless Yae, Wilhelm murmured so from beyond the "floor", which was still suspended in midair.

Hidden behind the "floor" of modest width and ample height, Wilhelm remained beyond Yae's sight. Yet, the true advantage of her steel threads lay in their capability to land strikes that would not otherwise land, in places she could not otherwise see.

She made her threads snake around the "floor", forcing the Sword Demon on the other side to move either to the left or right.

Yet, no matter which side he chose, left or right, the threads would be awaiting him—

—Immediately afterwards, piercing through the suspended "floor", the tip of his sword approached Yae's nose.

The timbre of steel striking steel resounded, and the sword launched at a velocity which rivaled even the most tightly drawn bow. The sword that had been thrust into the "floor" to stop it was struck from behind, causing the "floor" to be penetrated by the sword.

This far exceeded her expectations; faced now with a projectile that defied all norms, Yae abandoned any attempt to entangle the sword within her threads, and instead slightly deflected it as she tilted her slender neck just enough to avoid a fatal strike. The tip of the blade passed right by her throat before it was lodged into the wall beside Yae with a thunk.

She had dodged it. And, even in that fleeting moment, Yae never once averted her eyes from the Sword Demon.

And so, in that same breath, she recognized that she had made a tactical misstep.

The sword had been buried deeply, sticking out just to the right of Yae's neck. —Her only means of escape was to the left.

And thereupon—

Wilhelm: "RUAAHH—!!"

Using the "floor" as a springboard, the Sword Demon then kicked off the ceiling to accelerate, descending with a slashing strike.

The blade executed a seamless monk's robe cut, aiming for Yae's very life as his blade carved deeply into her left shoulder.

2

Wilhelm van Astrea. —No, Wilhelm Trias, had been sojourning in the Royal Capital, seeking a way to heal his master, Crusch Karsten.

In the midst of the battle against the Witch Cult that had unfolded throughout the Watergate City of Pristella, the Sin Archbishop of Lust had poured a wicked poison into Crusch, corroding her body and soul; she had continued to suffer through such accursed agony.

Even the Kingdom's greatest healer, the very one bearing the title Blue, Ferris, had been facing the hardship of his inability to alleviate her suffering, nor had any ray of hope emerged for some time.

There had been no dramatic improvements in Crusch's condition. Only, a means that opened up new possibilities—a path to the Pleiades Watchtower had been paved, tidings of such had arrived.

Were they to borrow the power of the Sage Shaula, one of the Three Great Heroes of the Kingdom of Lugunica, rumored to be omniscient and omnipotent, perhaps they might find a way to liberate Crusch from the malevolent poison afflicting her.

Ferris: "If it's to save Crusch-sama, then don't we have to do whatever it takes, no matter what that might be?"

As desperation drove Ferris to cling to that news, Wilhelm possessed no words to admonish him.

Having been robbed of her Memories at the hands of the Witch Cult a year prior, Crusch had been left as a largely changed person, and it was Ferris who had devotedly supported and assisted her. Ferris himself must have experienced hellish agony and confusion as he attempted to rebuild his relationship with Crusch from scratch.

After nearly a year of suffering, a bond of mutual trust had finally been formed between the two of them—a bond different to how it was before, but still unshakeable in spite of the difference; it happened right around when that bond had been formed.

That was when the Sin Archbishop of Lust, Capella Emerada Lugunica, utterly wrecked it.

The following suffering that Crusch went through was as had been described prior, but the pitifulness of Ferris as he nestled to her side, was an exceedingly painful sight to behold.

That was why, when they heard that Subaru's group, sights set on the Pleiades Watchtower, had succeeded in reaching it, a fire of hope was ignited within Wilhelm and the rest, more acutely than any of them had anticipated.

Although it was disconcerting that Subaru's group had not relayed that information directly, there was no way to dig deeper into the movements of the other Camps.

However, he had heard that a trial run was being conducted in order to ensure that visiting the Tower could be done reliably. Unable to sit idly by any longer, Wilhelm and Ferris made their way to the Royal Capital in order to ascertain the success or failure of that expedition, and, if possible, request to join the next group bound for the Tower.

Then, in a room inside the royal mansion, reserved only for dignitaries to stay—

???: "—There is a matter I wish to share with you, and something I would like to ask for your assistance with."

And so, the young man, bearing the role of Internal Affairs Minister within the Emilia Camp, delivered to Wilhelm a summation of the catastrophe poised to shake the Kingdom’s very foundations, along with the names of the two individuals who served as Wilhelm’s reasons to take up the sword.

Wilhelm: “RAAAAAGH—!!!”

Blasting off the ceiling, he delivered a devastating shoulder-to-hip arc to the red-haired girl—nay, to the masterful shinobi.

The impossibly fine, thread-like weapons proved to be lethally versatile; he scattered their oncoming threat through erratic trajectories. Such was the result of seeking a swift and decisive end to the bout, for every second the conflict raged on would only multiply the chances of being caught off guard.

With a single brutal motion, the blade bit into her left shoulder and carved diagonally across her torso, bisecting her very life with a monk’s robe cut—or so it should have.

Girl: “—Hk.”

In an instant, the girl’s body sank into the floor as she gritted her teeth—no, she had not sunk. Shredded to smithereens by her threads, the floor itself had come apart. Then, the girl’s body plunged into the basement ahead of Wilhelm, to which he gave pursuit.

Promptly extending his arm out, he wrenched out the sword that had immobilized the girl from the wall, securing his twin blades.

Though he had failed to sever the girl’s left shoulder, there was no mistaking that the wound was deep. What was truly formidable about shinobi was their vanishing act; the moment they would slip from sight, they would become five or even ten times as troublesome than they would have been visible.

All this to say—

Girl & Wilhelm: “—This is where I take you down.”

And, without prior rehearsal, Wilhelm and the girl's voices had overlapped.

As Wilhelm plunged into the gaping maw of darkness below, for but a moment he caught sight of glimmering filaments, reflected by the light shining through the darkness. —The pit leading underground bristled with murderous threads, spun like a spider's web.

3

As she fell backward toward the basement, Yae bound her left shoulder with her steel threads to stop the bleeding.

She admitted that the blade had penetrated deep into her maidenly soft skin, yet the chastity of her life remained intact, so she refused to accept her loss, and at the same time marveled at the terrifying swordsmanship of the Sword Demon.

The first move defended against Yae's steel thread, the second move kicked away the floor he had cut up, the third move seized the floor she had sent flying back, and the fourth move slashed at her with the sword that had pierced through it—just as he had declared at the outset, she was about to be killed in four moves.

Yae: "All these pesky old men…!"

The first elderly man that came to mind was the Vicious Old Man, who had the worst possible personality and was the closest to Yae, followed by the elderly giant who had tormented Al on the plains until he was on the verge of defeat, and finally, the Sword Demon, an elderly man who had reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship despite his age. —All of these elderly men were people who did not know how to grow old peacefully.

To begin with, it was the way of the world that one's life could be extinguished at any moment. Nevertheless, the fact that they were still alive at such an old age meant that they had survived natural selection.

???: "That's why old folks are so damn terrifyin'. If ya think old folks are weak and fragile, you'll end up dyin' before ya even get old yerself. Well, I'm kinda an exception to the exception, since I'm such a long-lived shinobi, but still…"

Her cheeks twitched as she was reminded of the loud laughter of the village chief, who had lived and survived a particularly harsh life.

The ultimate technique of a shinobi was to steal their opponent's attention, cloud their mind, immobilize them, and take their life. Yae was an excellent student in the art of clouding the mind, but she knew that she was no match for the village chief's years of experience.

Yae believed that she was probably not that twisted, nor did she anticipate living long enough to become so. In fact, Al nearly killed her once before.

She had no expectation that her good fortune would continue. — After all, the whims of a kind monster were nothing more than a miracle.

Yae: "…"

Wilhelm chased after Yae as she fell, pulled the sword from the wall, and dropped down into the hole as well.

As the Sword Demon moved with confidence that appeared to be born from actual combat experience against shinobi, presumably shinobi deployed by the Vollachian Empire in the past, she held unending resentment towards her shinobi predecessors who had failed to kill Wilhelm then.

Yae took in a single breath and exhaled. With that, a switch flipped inside her with a click—and her field of vision expanded, allowing her to see as clearly in the darkness of the basement as if she were standing in the brightness of daylight.

This was the result of training to become accustomed to the darkness of night, a type of physical manipulation that altered her blood flow around the eyeballs to adjust vision.

As the white figure of the Sword Demon emerged within her now gray field of vision, Yae spread her arms wide, as if finally bringing him into her own realm of expertise—

Yae & Wilhelm: "—This is where I take you down."

They both uttered the same words in unison, but there was neither a smile nor a feeling of surprise on either side.

They resolved to kill each other. Since mental attacks were deemed futile, they abandoned all techniques designed to disrupt the mind and focused solely on reaching the opponent's life with sincere determination.

This was the location Yae had prepared for that purpose, the Crimson Sakura's killing field.

—The underground passageway in the Barielle mansion was not something Priscilla had built when she had renovated the mansion, but rather a remnant left behind by the legacy of the original owner, Leip Barielle.

Priscilla's late husband was said to have been plagued with pathological distrust and paranoia, and had made preparations for any eventuality, not only in the mansion he built in the Royal Capital, but also in his other residences and hideouts within his own domain.

This hole that led to the basement was also one of those preparations. It had been originally intended as a secret escape route, but Yae had destroyed it beforehand because it could have been used as an entry point for enemies, leaving only the deep hole that continued underground.

Yae had never met Leip and felt nothing but disgust and contempt at him for forcibly marrying such a young and beautiful wife like Priscilla, and then trying to use her as a puppet to control the country's government. However, she sympathized with Leip's attitude of wanting to be prepared for any potential disaster and was grateful to take advantage of the opportunity he had inadvertently given to her.

A gallows for slaughter, where she could string up her steel threads and only Yae could move around as she pleased.

She had infiltrated the Royal Capital in order to, if such a time were to come, assist Al. She had kept Felt, brought along so that she would be under surveillance, in that room so that it would serve its purpose in such an emergency.

That was why—

Yae: "—From here on out, no more holding back."

Having said that, Yae bent her knees in order to smoothly slip off her shoes, extended her toes wrapped in black stockings, spread the toes of both feet—and shot steel threads from rings fitted to each of them.

Literally, without mercy or restraint, skillfully manipulating all twenty digits of her hands and feet, Yae Tenzen's masterful killing technique rampaged in the darkness—

Yae: "…"

Both sides sought a swift victory.

As she fell, Yae hooked her knee around one of the threads she had spun, stopping the momentum of her descent and reversing her direction; utilizing the tension of the thread within the large, well-like cylindrical pit, she sprung up and began her attack.

With the agility of an acrobat, Yae danced like petals twirling in the wind.

Yae's graceful dance was accompanied by silver threads that lured those entranced by their beauty to their deaths, and around her, the blood of those whom she had danced upon blossomed like flowers—hence the name Crimson Sakura.

These were beautiful, yet cruel, red cherry blossoms that bloomed in all their glory by feasting upon the blood flowing from those fallen corpses.

Wilhelm: “—Hk.”

The ferocity that earned itself its nickname was wielded without mercy, and Wilhelm’s entire body, left to free fall, was torn apart, his well-tailored clothes torn open, his flesh and blood scattering into the air.

As she fell, Yae’s hair was blown back by the wind created by his twin swords, and she was astonished by the intensity of the Sword Demon’s gaze.

Unlike her steel threads, the swords could only reach as far as the arm wielding it. Therefore, on the gallows she had set up, Wilhelm had no choice but to focus on defense.

Naturally, with Wilhelm pulled by gravity and thus restricted, Yae, who could move freely in the darkness with the help of her threads, would never approach him.

Maintaining a safe middle distance where his sword could not reach no matter what, she unilaterally continued her attacks with her steel threads. Before the dance was finished, before the Sword Demon reached the ground and regained his freedom.

Yae calmly raised her arm. —Blood sprouted forth.

Yae’s slender legs smoothly traced the wall in mid-air. —Blood sprouted forth.

Yae’s slender body twisted and contorted to its limit. —Blood sprouted forth.

As Yae’s dance approached completion, the Sword Demon was stained with his own blood, unable to completely defend against the relentless barrage of steel threads.

The sharp steel threads carved wounds into his legs, torso, shoulders, neck, cheeks, and forehead, and the Sword Demon was lured towards death as he bled.

However—

Yae: “—What un~pleasant eyes.”

His eyes, filled with a terrifyingly serene aura of swordsmanship, did not dull his will to fight one bit.

Yae: “…”

In addition to the steel threads wielded by both Yae’s hands and feet, there were also threads she had already spread throughout the basement.

It went without saying, but if one were to inadvertently touch a taut string with their arm or leg while being preoccupied with Yae’s actions, that limb would be lost, and if one’s neck or torso were to come into contact with it, one would simply lose their life.

For Wilhelm, this deep pit was now like the jaws of a Witchbeast he had jumped into without thinking, his flesh being torn by its teeth, its tongue lapping up his blood, and finally dropping into its stomach to dissolve his life. —Yet his eyes were not those of one who pointlessly resisted in despair.

Yae: “But, there’s not much you can do, is there?”

Even without that look in his eyes, Yae did not underestimate the Sword Demon enough to believe this was the end. She had long since dismissed Heinkel’s assessment of Wilhelm as unreliable and evaluated him based on what she had seen with her own eyes amid the struggle for life and death.

Therefore, as the Sword Demon fell helplessly, she was prepared for two attacks.

One was for him to kick off the wall of the pit and deliver a sword strike equivalent to the one that had knocked Yae underground. The other was for him to throw his sword at Yae’s vital points, just as he had done above ground.

Whichever of the two options was chosen, the decision had to be made in the blink of an eye.

Yae: “—Tsk.”

Immediately after her extended black-clad feet drew a circle and inflicted three wounds on Wilhelm's cheek, he swung his dual swords straight down and repelled the steel threads. The Sword Demon's strong legs moved back rhythmically, and he planted his soles against the wall.

With the Sword Demon's knees slightly bent, he gathered enough strength in his legs to launch himself through the air—and at the last moment, he swung his arms and launched his two swords, surging towards Yae's life.

Two silver streaks flashed through the air, but Yae dodged them with a series of dance-like movements.

Using the stretched threads as a foothold, she performed a somersault, the blade just barely passing between her thighs and the curve of her back, and emerged unscathed. Then, she struck the Sword Demon who flew after his blades with the steel threads attached to her feet.

With both of his swords gone and no way to defend himself against the steel threads, Wilhelm twisted his body and shielded his head, escaping the web of threads with minimal damage. However, Yae was already out of the way, and the unarmed Sword Demon could not reach her as she rebounded from the threads and escaped.

With that, both threats that she had been wary of were successfully averted—but it was still too early to breathe a sigh of relief.

Wilhelm: "—OOOH!"

Wilhelm had kicked the wall, missing Yae, and landed on the opposite side of the cylindrical pit. There, the twin swords he had thrown earlier were stuck in the wall, and Wilhelm grabbed them and kicked the wall again.

Wilhelm pursued Yae, who had escaped diagonally upward, and took a path upward with the speed of a bullet. —He leaped forward, kicked off the opposite wall, and flew toward the other wall. Repeating this over and over, he quickly caught up with Yae who was rising upwards in a dance-like motion.

Yae: “You’ve got to be kidding me… hk!”

Yae’s throat trembled in shock as Wilhelm pursued her with all his might.

He kicked the wall and ascended using a three-step jump. That was not surprising; Yae could do the same. What was unexpected was that Wilhelm was repeating this in a place where Yae’s hands had stretched out countless of her steel threads.

Naturally, if he flew without taking the time to check his surroundings carefully, there was a risk that he would hit a thread and be torn to pieces.

However, Wilhelm was not afraid. Why? —Because when he had fallen through that space once before, he had noticed where the threads were, and he jumped up so as not to hit them.

That was his terrifying way of fighting, possessed of both an exceptionally keen sense of combat and powers of observation, as well as the unwavering determination to risk his life based on what he saw with his own eyes.

As the Sword Demon fluttered and dived boldly into the storm of silver threads, Yae had no choice but to reach for her trump card—

Yae: “—Uu, ya.”

Building momentum with her threads, Yae sprang high up, and reversing her stance, she extended all her arms and legs. She let loose steel threads from all twenty digits, entwined them with the threads she had previously placed, and drew in all four limbs.

Yae’s masterful Steel Thread Technique utilized entwining threads and the surrounding objects, and was even capable of binding over a hundred ruffians at once in forest combat. Taking that into account, Yae exerted all of her strength, to the point that it felt like all of the muscles and bones within her body would be torn asunder, and simultaneously pulled all the steel threads tight.

That instant, within the cylindrical pit that led underground, the torn steel threads ran amok.

With a mechanism similar to that of cutting a sausage with a string, Yae utilized the tensile strength of the strained steel wires being torn to completely and utterly ravage the space, a thread-rending onslaught of trajectory and magnitude that not even Yae herself could read.

Furthermore, thereupon—

Yae: "—A capable maid always goes the extra mile!"

Witnessing the space below her being crushed by the innumerable thread attacks, Yae brought the rings on both her hands to her mouth, kissing them. —Immediately after, tongues of flames licked down the threads extending from the rings, and after a beat, the infernal flames exploded.

In addition to the berserking threads, a scorching hellfire that burned all to naught—playing two of her trump cards, Yae's merciless shinobi techniques engulfed the Sword Demon in a crimson radiance, scorching him to a crisp.

Yae: "As expected—"

Unable to uphold the policy of not killing anybody, Yae found the result of this combat rather vexing.

But, it was something she had thought the moment it began. This was not an opponent who could be defeated without going for the kill. Only by fighting with the intent to kill, would one have a choice between survival or demise, that was the sort of opponent this man was.

For that reason—

Yae: "Let's keep this a secret from Heinkel-sama—"

Wilhelm: "—That will be fine. He, too, had better know that I am coming."

That instant, the Sword Demon burst through the explosive inferno, the glint of his blade slashing through to caress Yae mid-air.

Yae: "—Uh."

Torso scythed by the flash of the honed sword, Yae spurred blood to helix in a manner different to her usual dance as she revolved through the air, having been unable to disperse the might of the blow; as her eyes widened, she groaned in confusion regarding what had just occurred.

That which had occurred was clear. The enemy had survived both the tempest of steel threads, and the explosive flames that had followed. The question was, how in the world had he done it?

Wilhelm's final leap had been straight upward, much unlike the trajectory of his previous leaps, where he kicked off the walls and flew diagonally. Thus, in order to achieve such a leap within the pit, he would have had no choice but to use the same method as Yae—using the steel threads as a foothold, and jumping.

Yae: "How did you, my threads…"

Wilhelm: "You demonstrated it many a time. —Your threads are terrifyingly sharp weapons, but with a specific angle and application of force, they can be used to bind without cutting."

Wilhelm's answer was accurate, having fully seen through the properties of Yae's steel threads.

What was strange was that he had seen through it in such a short time whilst amidst the heat of battle, and that he had not hesitated in his decision to risk his life on something for which he possessed no definite evidence.

Another baffling matter was—

Yae: "Then, the fire?"

Wilhelm: "I cut it."

Receiving a terribly blunt answer to which nothing could be argued, Yae breathed an exasperated sigh.

In all likelihood, he was telling no fib. The response had simply been that bold. While accepting that, Yae simultaneously suddenly recalled some words from a corner of her mind.

Words that Yae had once dismissed as useless and thrown away—

???: "—My father is strong. To an absurd degree. You and that Aldebaran guy might be pretty capable yourselves, but still, it's my father who scares me more. That's what's known as the Sword Demon."

It aggravated her to full-throttle, but Heinkel's assessment was accurate.

Yae could not recognize him as being stronger or scarier than Al, but he was at least more terrifying than she was.

—At this moment, Yae Tenzen made a miscalculation in her assessment.

That was the fact that she had estimated the credibility of the information to be around half accurate based on Heinkel's opinion. And above all, the fact that since the battle against the White Whale, the subjugation of Sloth, and the siege of the Watergate City, all of which Yae had investigated, Wilhelm's skills had only continued to be honed. This was something Yae had no means of knowing, but he was once again reaching the levels he had achieved during the prime of his active duty—the age in which he had defeated the Sword Saint.

Ergo, the battle that had commenced at the Barielle Villa, between the Crimson Sakura and the Sword Demon—

Wilhelm: "—Zuahhh!!"

Thwarting the completion of her dance with a flash of his blade, the Sword Demon, having stained the sakura of crimson with blood, was thus declared the victor.

Chapter 27:
Words of a Child

1

With a cross-shaped swing, the twin swords carved a decisive wound into their opponent.

Bleeding from countless shallow wounds that covered his entire body—Wilhelm was unable to hide his frustration at his own poor sword skills.

Wilhelm: "—Weak."

What poured out from behind his clenched teeth was disappointment and frustration toward his aging and worn-out self.

As time passed and he grew old, he felt so ashamed of his own inadequacy that he wanted to hide his face. If he had been a poet or an artist, the accumulated years would have become knowledge and skill, and his words and brushstrokes would have become more refined, reaching heights he could never have achieved in his youth.

However, that was not the case for a swordsman.

The passage of time had made him feel his age, and had only intensified his passion, leaving him with no excuses. His strength, skill, and speed were nothing compared to when he was at his peak.

—And, that was simply frustrating.

He had experienced the same frustration many times before.

Even when he decided to withdraw from the front lines and retire from active duty as the captain of the Royal Guard.

Even when his wife was lost to the White Whale and he spent fourteen years seeking revenge, only then did he realize that he had no choice but to face his sworn enemy with weakened sword skills.

The unbearable frustration that now consumed Wilhelm was unparalleled by anything he had yet experienced in his life—equal only to the moment he first learned that Theresia was the Sword Saint during the Demi-Human War, when he realized he was no match for her.

Weak. Far too weak.

In a world where strength was valued above all else, that weakness was an unforgivable sin.

In this world, petty excuses did not work. Being strong or weak, those were the only factors.

Talent, slothfulness, illness, old age; none held meaning once one stepped onto the stage where strength was pitted against strength.

After all, a sword cannot choose its wielder.

Then, it was only natural that those who wield swords had no excuse. —No, in this world, there was a sword that chose its wielders.

Hence why, the one chosen by that sword stood atop a world without excuses.

—That was precisely why Wilhelm Trias, who could not use his advancing age and declining condition as an excuse, had to defeat this opponent with his own hands at any cost.

Wilhelm: "…"

Regardless of Wilhelm's self-assessment, the battle where he demonstrated his most formidable swordsmanship in decades came to an end, and the formidable shinobi was defeated.

Among all the shinobi Wilhelm had faced, she was undoubtedly the most skilled.

It was impossible to imagine how much training the girl had undergone to reach such heights, but there were no consolation prizes in the world of combat. —That was the cruelest aspect of the way of the sword.

Even if one loved the sword above all else, whether or not the sword reciprocated that love had nothing to do with the depth or magnitude of their love.

Instead, the deeper and greater that love was, the more the heart would crack and break irreparably when that love was not reciprocated.

With that sentiment in the back of his mind, Wilhelm remained vigilant even though the outcome had already been decided.

In the distance, the body of the fallen girl caught his attention, hanging in midair upon a single thread. Blood dripped down her upturned body, but her thin torso was not severed. —That was the reason for his caution.

In such a life-or-death battle, there was no room for mercy.

Wilhelm gave no consideration whatsoever to his opponent's age, gender, or circumstances.

He had swung his sword with the intention of taking her life, of this there was no doubt. And yet, the fact that the girl's body was not sliced in two demonstrated not only Wilhelm's lack of skill with the sword, but also that the girl had somehow avoided a fatal blow.

The most likely reason being—

Wilhelm: "—Threads, is it?"

Using all of her fingers and toes, the girl had weaved threads that extended into the hole that led to the bottom of the underground chamber.

In order to wield them freely, one would need rare talent and painstaking training. This technique could be used as a blade to cut through opponents, or as chains to restrain enemy movements. When wrapped tightly around the body, it could even serve as armor to protect against sword strikes.

As the final blow was about to be delivered, the girl made a move to protect her neck and heart, and Wilhelm slashed at her exposed torso with all his might; such was her momentary evasive maneuver.

With her split-second judgment, the girl had managed to keep a glimmer of hope alive. He had nothing but respect for her.

Although he remained vigilant, Wilhelm also wanted the girl to survive. This was because it was the common opinion among his allies that it would be preferable to capture her alive if possible.

???: “—Uh.”

A faint moan escaped from the suspended girl’s thin throat.

Wilhelm was about to approach the girl by positioning himself, thrusting his sword into the wall. Sensing his presence, the girl’s trembling eyelids opened, and her red eyes reflected Wilhelm.

Wilhelm remained on guard in response. However, he was certain from the feeling of his sword that it was impossible to counterattack from that position.

He had wielded the sword for fifty years now, and during that time, he had danced with death in countless life-risking battles and reaped the lives of numerous opponents.

All the past experiences of bloodshed and taken lives were telling Wilhelm the exact depth of the wounds he had inflicted on his opponent.

Wilhelm: “…”

Therefore, no matter how much the girl tried to hint with her deceitful gaze at still having some kind of trump card up her sleeve, Wilhelm saw through it as the desperate bluff it was and did not stop his ceaseless approach.

Wilhelm: “I do not know the details of the situation either, but it would be best for you to stop resisting and us not to fight any longer. Soon, Al-dono shall be held in custody too.”

Seeing through her bluff, Wilhelm attempted to stop the girl from pointlessly resisting any further.

That girl was one of the individuals who had conspired with Priscilla Barielle's Knight, Al—or so Wilhelm had heard. He could only speculate that the tragic and unfortunate loss of Priscilla's life in the Vollachian Empire might have been the catalyst that had driven Al to commit these crimes.

Wilhelm understood all too well what Al, someone who had just lost a loved one, was currently feeling.

He must have felt like his body had been mutilated, his heart torn apart, and his soul feeling as if he was burning endlessly with an unfathomable sense of powerlessness.

However, the world could not be allowed to be destroyed purely because of those negative emotions. Moreover, it was impossible to overlook the fact that one of Wilhelm's benefactors was among the victims of this rampage.

—Al's plots must be averted.

This was tantamount to suppressing all who were complicit in the scheme and cooperating with Al for whatever reason. —The same applied to the other co-conspirators, no matter who or what they were.

This shinobi girl was merely one of the cogs that needed to be removed from the machine—

Yae: "…This… is the worst."

These words were uttered in the weak, faint breaths of someone barely clinging on to life.

The girl suspended in the air seemed to realize that her bluff had not worked on Wilhelm, and could not hide her immense disappointment in herself.

That was—

Yae: “I can’t believe… I’m dragging you down like this.”

If she had not been suspended in mid-air, her deep remorse might even have been accompanied by actual tears.

If that remorse had only been based on the outcome of the battle with Wilhelm, Wilhelm might have finally let down his last shred of caution.

However, he did not. Immediately after the girl’s muttering, a sound was heard. —Overhead, from outside the hole.

There was a heavy thud, like something falling to the floor. Following that—

???: “—Guh, eargh!”

Hearing a sudden cry of pain, and realizing it was Felt’s, whom he had left in the room above, Wilhelm kicked off the wall and jumped up, using the sword that he had stuck into its structure for support.

Wilhelm performed a triple jump and leaped out of the hole, his eyes wide open in a frantic hurry.

Felt: “~~Hk!”

Floating in the air was Felt, frantically kicking her legs, desperately clawing at her neck with her fingers.

She was hanging in midair from a thread around her neck. However, the girl who orchestrated this most likely did not have the energy left to do so. —Then, Wilhelm saw that part of the wall had collapsed in the corner of the room, and realized that it had been the source of the sound he had heard earlier and the mechanism that was now keeping Felt suspended.

A thread had been attached to Felt’s neck, and when the wall, which had been cut at an angle in advance, collapsed at the appointed time, the thread was pulled, leaving her hanging in mid-air. —This way, no matter how the battle progressed, regardless of whether the girl lived or died, the trap would have been activated and Felt would be dangling in the air.

Wilhelm: “I will—”

Help you now, Wilhelm was about to say, running over to Felt with sword in hand.

The thread was strong, but without its user, its strength could not surpass a sword strike. Rescuing Felt was simple. And, the girl who set the trap could not possibly escape.

Originally, her purpose in setting up the timed trap must have been to distract Wilhelm from herself in the event of a prolonged battle, and to catch him by surprise or to allow for a quick escape.

However, the battle had been decided before the trap ever had the chance to be set off, and the girl was too severely injured to make an escape.

The trap gave her no opportunity for a surprise attack, or time to escape. Either way, Felt, who had gotten the brunt of the surprise attack, was still being hanged. —Or so Wilhelm thought.

At this point, Wilhelm’s train of thought was natural, and no one could blame him.

After all, at that point, the only people who truly understood the significance of Felt’s hanging were those who were the source of the threat to the Kingdom.

It was just—

Yae: “I can’t believe… I’m dragging you down like this.”

If there had been time to fathom the true meaning behind the remorseful words of the girl hanging in mid-air, things might have been different. The girl’s regret was not in her defeat itself, but what came after.

What she regretted was not her defeat, but the “insurance” that followed.

Felt: “—n, away.”

Just before Wilhelm’s sword strike cut the thread, Felt, who was being hanged, was desperately trying to make some sort of appeal with a hoarse breath.

It was not a plea for help. —It was a plea for him to run away.

Wilhelm: “…”

Immediately after, Wilhelm’s eyes caught sight of it. —The giant arm of a Dragon effortlessly smashed through the wall of the Barielle manor, and mercilessly struck Wilhelm from the side.

2

—To infiltrate the Royal Capital of Lugunica and release the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, held captive in the Prison Tower.

When Aldebaran revealed that utterly preposterous, batshit insane course of action, before promptly entering the city on his own, Heinkel harbored some complex reservations.

The root of Aldebaran’s objective, this had not been shared with Heinkel.

He seemed to possess a similar amount of information as the obedient Yae, but unlike Heinkel, who sought recompense for assisting Aldebaran, the reason behind Yae’s participation in these plans seemed to stem from a distorted obsession regarding Aldebaran.

Heinkel: “A distorted obsession, huh…? How could anyone declare that so shamelessly?”

Neither love nor hatred, the emotions Yae bore for Aldebaran were enigmatic. When he measured himself against that, Heinkel derided himself in a terribly bleak manner.

To begin with, through what means could one even measure whether something was straight or distorted?

If Yae’s obsession was to be evaluated as distorted, then what about his? What about Heinkel’s obsession, which had reduced him to a traitor in pursuit of the means to awaken his ever-slumbering wife?

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

A soliloquy tinged with self-condemnation and derision, as it triggered the outbreak of a fissuring headache, Heinkel pressed a finger into his temple, attempting to mask the pain.

Normally, the best remedy for this pain, akin to a fog that gave no answers, was alcohol. Though it would not alleviate the pain, alcohol would numb him, allowing him to temporarily forget about it.

Though he knew it to be unhealthy, Heinkel could not so much as open his eyes to see things properly unless he was swimming amidst the intoxication of alcohol.

And yet, right now, he could not afford to drink, to seek that intoxication to mask the pain. —At long last, the time might finally be upon him.

After nearly twenty years of pursuit, the time for the dearest wish he had longed for, coveting to the point of fissuring his very soul, was upon him.

Heinkel: “—Louanna.”

On the backs of his closed eyelids, as his lips spun the name of a lovely woman, her visage emerged.

Just the same as the day he met her, the form of his youthful, sweet, lovely wife had not changed in the slightest since the year she began to slumber. That was not because of a lack of forming any new memories; her sleeping visage had truly disregarded all passage of time, continuing to be as it always had been.

He wished to see her open her eyes again. Spinning words with her lips, with nary an inhibition in contrast to her pretty appearance, unable to sit still for even a second; he wished to burn her lively way of being into his consciousness.

So long as that came true, Heinkel’s life could end without desiring anything further—

Heinkel: “I’m…”

???: “—Ah~, old man, you being negative again? You’re giving off that sorta vibe, you know?”

At the sudden voice from right under him, Heinkel’s breath caught. As Heinkel continued to bore into his temple, the Divine Dragon called out to him like so as it spread its wings.

Contrary to its grand and mighty presence, the Divine Dragon spoke in an exceedingly frivolous manner, and despite not even being able to see Heinkel riding upon its back, it still perceptively picked up on his subtleties.

At a question that could not be classified as concern from the Divine Dragon, Heinkel was at a loss for an answer.

That was a matter of course. —After all, for Heinkel, being left alone with just the Divine Dragon like this was something akin to a flying dragon or water dragon having their favourite food dangled before their snout.

In order to wake up the slumbering Louanna Astrea, Heinkel had searched through all sorts of methods; magic and Curse Arts, Meteors and Magicreation Tools, he had tried everything. With each and every one of those hopes severed, Heinkel’s final ray of hope was the Dragon’s Blood.

With that great treasure, said to cure every disease and bring about bountiful harvests to even the most barren of lands, he would awaken Louanna. —And right now, the heart fueled by that very treasure was asserting its presence, beating in a place so close that Heinkel could draw his sword and reach it.

But then again—

Heinkel: “…Leave it be. Don’t concern yourself with me.”

Divine Dragon: “I said to stop having such sulky reactions. Old man, I get that you want to hurry, and how frustrating it must be for you to be alone with me. That’s why, I intended to properly put on the brakes for you, old man, as my own sorta consideration.”

Heinkel: “Consideration, you say? Don’t tell me that’s what you think this was supposed to be.”

Divine Dragon: “I did intend on telling you that’s what I thought this was, but I guess saying it’d be no-good?”

Without a hint of ill-will, what the Divine Dragon’s seemingly puzzled words were referring to, it was none other than the current location of itself and Heinkel—that being far from the land, high above the clouds.

Riding on the Divine Dragon’s back, Heinkel was present in high altitudes of the aether. Perhaps because the Divine Dragon was controlling the wind, he was exposed to no shaking or strong gales, and excluding the stiffness of the scales, it was a comfortable environment. But, the consideration that the Divine Dragon was speaking of, it likely had nothing to do with this comfort.

Rather, for the unlikely chance that Heinkel drew blade, it was regarding the maintenance of this high altitude permitting no salvation.

Divine Dragon: “Even if you were able to gouge out my heart and obtain my heart’s blood, it’d be meaningless since we’d both plummet to our deaths. Hence, even if we’re left alone, you can’t lay a hand on me here, old man. How about it? Not too shabby an idea, yeah?”

Heinkel: “I don’t want to hear that from you. First of all, that sort of thing shouldn’t even be called concern or a calculating move. What if your planning was off, there’s a possibility that I just draw my sword without thinking of the consequences…”

Divine Dragon: “Nah, you’d never do that. Old man, you’re too decent for that.”

Heinkel: “Wha…”

Divine Dragon: “Decent guys, they always consider fear. I’ve come to know many various people with a screw loose until now, and you'd never be like 'em, old man."

Saying all it had to say, everything it pleased, the Divine Dragon's oracle caused Heinkel's mouth to gape open and closed, unable to form an immediate refutation.

Only, the reason for his ears flushing a bright red, was it anger, or embarrassment?

In the case of the former, then the fact that he did not begin shouting curses without thinking about the consequences was in accordance with the Divine Dragon's expectations. In the case of the latter, then the fact that he had an idea of what he was being chided about was in accordance with the Divine Dragon's expectations.

In other words, the moment his ears flushed red, Heinkel's defeat was set in stone.

Heinkel: "Me, decent, you say…"

Pressing his finger into his head with greater strength, Heinkel's voice rasped at the Divine Dragon's evaluation.

Decent; considering Heinkel's current position, it was far too ironic of an appraisal. What the hell was the Divine Dragon thinking? Would a decent person fall to the extremities of self-centeredness, turning traitor against their country?

Heinkel was neither decent, nor honest. He was not worthy of an appraisal that expressed such virtue, ubiquitously earned by many townspeople.

Heinkel: "That's why, when Miss Priscilla passed away, I went along with Aldebaran's proposal."

Intervening in the national crisis befalling the Vollachian Empire, Priscilla Barielle had lost her life.

Heinkel was in a position such that, no matter what, he would never say that he had pledged loyalty to her. His relationship with her had been a cooperative one, borne of shared interest—even that, with how things were now, Heinkel would never know just how much value Priscilla saw in him.

Only, though Heinkel had not pledged his loyalty to Priscilla, neither did he doubt her capacity as a ruler to win the throne, guiding the people of the Kingdom as their new Monarch.

With outstanding capabilities, the wisdom to see ahead, and a beautiful appearance, all fine attributes befitting a queen.

Priscilla possessed the qualifications to become the queen of the Kingdom of Lugunica. —Upon the dawn of her ascendance to the throne, he was supposed to have received a licence to the Dragon's Blood as his reward.

That hope had wilted in the Empire, alongside Priscilla's life.

From the bottom of his heart, he found it unfortunate. —The fact that he had been unable to secure the Dragon's Blood, and the fact that Priscilla's rule over the Kingdom of Lugunica never came to fruition.

Thus having lost all hope, the stricken Heinkel was proffered a hand by Aldebaran.

In exchange for assisting him, and becoming an enemy of the world, he could obtain the Dragon's Blood. —To Heinkel's ears, that proposal rang far too sweetly.

The hope that he was supposed to have obtained, seeing it ripped away right before his eyes was harsh. —Moreover, this was the second time for Heinkel, the second time that the light of hope was extinguished right when he was but a step away.

The first time, he had missed his chance due to a foolish mistake, and the accompanying feeling of helplessness was difficult to forget.

Hence, this time, Heinkel would absolutely cling to any wretched possibility.

For him to be "decent", was extremely off-base from the Divine

Dragon.

Divine Dragon: “Has your husk been filled with displeasure again? This may be coming from me, but there’s nobody who’d love a difficult middle-aged man, yeah?”

Heinkel: “…It’s too late, for that sort of thing.”

Divine Dragon: “You sure complicate things, don’t you now…? Well, it’s seriously like a boomerang, so I won’t say anything more.”

Even with just the simple gesture of shrugging its shoulders, the Divine Dragon’s body was far too exaggerated.

In that eerily human gesture, Heinkel found a certain commonality with Aldebaran, and ignored the increasing pain of his headache at the inscrutability.

To not be loved by anyone. That was exactly what Heinkel desired.

That he had not been loved even once, he was not such a fool to make any such warped, careless remarks. Heinkel had been loved from birth, and there was no shortage of people who had loved him since.

And, not only did he fail to repay the affection that had been directed towards him, he betrayed it, marching through the rain.

Divine Dragon: “—. Come to think of it, we never really get this sorta one-on-one time, and I remembered that there were some things I wanted to check with you, old man.”

Heinkel: “Can’t you just be quiet and wait?”

Divine Dragon: “I’m the type who can’t bear silence. Might be ‘cause I was always with someone who would never stop talking.”

He was completely ignorant regarding how the Divine Dragon operated, but the other party had not spoken much about it, and Heinkel was not eager to know. Either way, once this was all over, this was an individual whom he would have die in order to procure its heart’s blood. There was no need to go out of his way to add any reasons to feel guilty for doing so.

Besides, though consideration might have been the reason, he was grateful for the flow of the conversation to shift from what it had been to that point.

Were they to discuss another topic, then perhaps this headache might fade a bit.

Heinkel: “So, most esteemed Divine Dragon-sama, what was it that you wanted to ask me?”

Divine Dragon: “Ahh, it’s nothing too important, but you’re excessively sturdy, right old man? So, I was wondering if you had any idea of why you’re so sturdy?”

Heinkel: “…”

Divine Dragon: “Huh? Did I do something?”

At the Divine Dragon’s innocent words, Heinkel ground his teeth in annoyance.

The pain in his head intensifying, this served as proof that Heinkel’s plans from a moment ago had failed. —He had hoped for the focus of the conversation to change, but this was evidence that it had not.

Heinkel: “…”

Hushed in silence, Heinkel looked down at his open palm, and sighed.

The Divine Dragon’s query had been in regards to Heinkel’s body. Of course, that was his own body. He was aware of its abnormality, and was also properly aware of the reasons for it. —Among the many sins Heinkel had committed, this was punishment for an especially grave one.

Louanna Astrea’s unwakeable slumber. —Including Heinkel, that was undoubtedly the beginning of the Astrea Family’s division, but more decisive had been the events of fifteen years prior.

In the midst of Theresia van Astrea's deployment to the subjugation of the White Whale, the transfer of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint had resulted in the change of Sword Saint, and Theresia's death. —Serving as the impetus to all that, was the abduction of Royal Prince Ford Lugunica's esteemed daughter.

The night of the incident, Heinkel had perpetrated an unforgivable betrayal, and the worst possible mistake that had made his betrayal meaningless. —The divine punishment bequeathed, was the current Heinkel.

Heinkel: "I've got no reason to deliberately reveal that to you…"

Divine Dragon: "Oh, you're really saying that? In that case, if you don't tell me, I'll report to the other me that you were being uncooperative, old man, annulling that promise you guys had, what if I threaten you like that?"

Heinkel: "YOU…!!"

Divine Dragon: "I'm kidding, just kidding. There's probably fifty or a hundred things that you don't wanna say. You and me both, old man."

Heinkel: "…A hundred things, that's a lot."

As the Divine Dragon made small talk that could not be perceived as anything small, Heinkel feebly responded with just that.

It had said fifty or a hundred things, but the things Heinkel harbored could be counted on a single hand. And, that single hand was already heavy enough to crush his fragile self.

Even so, connecting that which had been fractured, dragging along that which had been tensed, just a little bit more, if he just continued a little longer, then finally—

Divine Dragon: "…"

Heinkel: "—? Ah, um… what is it?"

Perceiving a slight change in the atmosphere, Heinkel questioned the Divine Dragon. For a moment, hesitating on whether to regularly call it Volcanica or not, he ultimately settled with an innocuous phrasing. But, paying no heed to Heinkel's indecision, the Divine Dragon took a nosedive—facing downwards, below the clouds, towards the Royal Capital.

And then—

Divine Dragon: "—Hold on tight, old man!"

Heinkel: "Gwoah-?!"

The next moment, as a windstorm seemed to push down on him from above, it slammed Heinkel down onto the Divine Dragon's back as if he were prostrating himself. Without even the time to catch his breath from the sudden impact, the Divine Dragon descended in one fell swoop with Heinkel affixed to its back, piercing into the Royal Capital's skies.

Their act of lurking above the clouds to conceal themselves while Aldebaran was raiding the Prison Tower, came to naught. —That was to say, the need to reveal themselves had been born.

In such a manner, the Divine Dragon arrived at their destination with such speed that Heinkel had not even been able to lift his head. With a swing of its unruly Dragon forearm, a hole was perforated through the wall of the building alongside an intense sound of destruction.

The reason and the target of that exceedingly sudden violent outburst, were entirely unknown to him.

Only, the building on the receiving end of the Divine Dragon's calamitous strike was ruthlessly demolished, the dragonclaws thoroughly crushing everything inside—

Divine Dragon: "—You've gotta be kidding me!"

That was a voice of absolute shock, spilling from the mouth of the Divine Dragon who had perpetrated that merciless act of destruction.

Sharpening its golden eyes, the Divine Dragon surveyed the interior of the building it had thrown its arm into, and faced with the result of its relentless demolishment, it expressed its astonishment.

That was only natural. —The Divine Dragon’s claws, tougher and sharper than most of the blades in this world, had been severed, torn off, and reduced to dust.

And, as for the one who had done that—

Heinkel: “—Esteemed Father.”

Taking a stance with their twin swords in the half-destroyed building, was the being who had just fended off the Divine Dragon’s claws.

The Sword Demon, Wilhelm van Astrea.

3

???: “—My thanks.”

Parrying the dragonclaws, barely managing to repel them as both his arms went numb, Wilhelm proclaimed his gratitude to Felt, who had informed him of the looming threat.

A thread bound to her neck, Felt had been hung up in the air. —Whilst in a situation in which her own life had been in danger, she had nevertheless commanded Wilhelm to ready himself, rather than seek his help.

Thanks to her, he had managed to take a defensive stance by the skin of his teeth.

???: “Nah, normally, that ain’t something you can stop even if you react in time!”

And, in regards to Wilhelm’s deep emotions, the one to raise their voice was the enormous body standing outside the manor—a presence so fearsome and mystical that many would prostrate themselves upon merely laying eyes on them, an individual harboring absolute power.

The imposing form of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, had been peering into the mansion from outside.

Felt: “Cough, cough… I’m in agreement with that Dragon. I told you to run away, yeah? Not, to get ‘em… eough…”

Of all the things for Felt to have said in her violent coughing fit, she expressed agreement with Volcanica’s opinion.

Taking advantage of the chaos of the dragonclaws, she had been released from her midair suspension—no, Wilhelm’s eyes had grasped the events that had come to pass in even more accurate fashion.

It was no coincidence that Felt had been saved without a hand from Wilhelm.

Wilhelm: “It cannot be, you came to save Felt-sama?”

Volcanica: “It’s tough to say yes or no given our positions, but if I went and said yes here, would Felt-chan then be publicly considered to be a member of our team of traitors?”

Felt: “They aren’t, my allies. But, there’s no doubt that it came flying in to save me…”

With a faint lingering sensation of having been hanged, Felt responded so as she rubbed her neck. No refutation came from Volcanica’s end, either. It seemed that through some means, the Dragon had sensed Felt’s predicament, and had flown to this place in order to rescue her.

In other words, the shinobi girl had aimed that far ahead in attaching a thread to Felt’s neck.

Be that as it may—

Wilhelm: “It appears to be a sore spot for the person in question. After all, the fact that you have come here would mean…”

Volcanica: “I can’t go to backup the me over there.”

Wilhelm: “Indeed. —Incidentally, your manner of speech has altered quite a bit. Compared to forty years ago, when I merely captured a glimpse of you, you are almost a completely different person… no, a different Dragon.”

Volcanica: “There’s a saying that goes “If you don’t see a man for three days”. Forty years is a hell of a long time. A summer can work real magic on girls, grandpa.”

Wilhelm: “I see.”

Though those words had been given in response, it was not an answer that provided him with an understanding of Volcanica’s change. Only, Wilhelm had not the time to investigate that change in demeanor here.

There were things to prioritize over that. —In its intrusion, Volcanica had not been by its lonesome. It seemed that the Dragon was carrying another upon its back. For their mouth to have remained without use up till this point, concealing their presence, had not been with the intent of catching Wilhelm off-guard, but rather—

Wilhelm: “—Are you unable to even show your face before me, Heinkel?”

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

At Wilhelm’s call, the other party recoiling could be felt through the atmosphere.

Even if he lowered his head, stifled his voice, and endeavored to conceal his presence, Wilhelm had already been made aware that Heinkel was among those complicit with Al, who had become a traitor opposing the Kingdom.

Al’s actions were already more than enough of a threat to the survival of the Kingdom.

To not swing his sword amidst this critical situation was an impossibility for Wilhelm, former Commander of the Royal Guard as he was. Even without such underlying circumstances, the reason as to why Wilhelm had resolved himself to take initiative and take up the sword, was Heinkel's presence.

Wilhelm: "In rough terms, you have been told that you will be lent Dragon's Blood if you cooperate, yes? Through those means, you intend to awaken your wife… Louanna, correct? In that case, your discretion has been far too lacking."

Stored in the Royal Castle, Dragon's Blood certainly housed tremendous power.

With that power of the Kingdom's greatest treasure, even awakening Louanna Astrea, slumbering for reasons unknown, was entirely possible.

However—

Wilhelm: "You believe that Al-dono… no, that the turncoat known as Al will keep to his word? That individual betrayed those left behind by the master he served, Priscilla Barielle-sama, and is even attempting to cause a stir by deceiving those who had worried about him. Why in the world would he grant your, and your desires alone?"

Volcanica: "Nah, well, I get that it might be dubious? But, that's way too one-sided—"

Wilhelm: "Exalted Dragon of Lugunica, I am not speaking to you at the moment."

As Wilhelm displayed an attitude and words that left it no place to interject, Volcanica fell silent with a "Mh…". Towards the other side of the hushed Dragon, to the person hiding on its back, he resumed.

Wilhelm: "What is the matter, unable to say a word? Perhaps I have hit the nail on the head, or perhaps you had not even considered it? I suppose that is right. For a long time already, you would do nothing but avert your face, plug your ears, run away from anything you found unpleasant. That is why even now, you do not even attempt to look at anything other than what is convenient for you—”

Heinkel: “—Hk, SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!”

Wilhelm: “…”

Heinkel: “Anything you please… Hk, you just say anything you fucking please, don’t you…?! No matter what I may do for Louanna, YOU’VE GOT NO RIGHT TO SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IT, FATHER!!”

With a blood-curdling bellow, a silhouette rose up from Volcanica’s back.

A face he knew, a voice he recognized; at the temper of the trembling finger thrust towards him, Wilhelm deeply sighed. It was a sigh consisting of exasperation and disappointment, as well as a faint relief.

There were various reasons for that relief. One being whether he would still have any fighting spirit left to raise his face after being spoken to so insultingly, another being whether he would attempt to lay low as a coward whilst cooperating with a traitor.

But, what could be said on the whole—

Wilhelm: “…So, you have finally shown your face?”

Heinkel: “Uh…”

Wilhelm: “Well then? Have you no objections other than shouting noisily? Is your reason for supporting that man in accordance with my guesswork? If that is the case, can you think of why he would grant your desires alone? Have you worn yourself out by wishing, causing your eyes to cloud over?”

Heinkel: “I, am… hk.”

As Wilhelm piled on the questions, the silhouette on the Dragon’s back—Heinkel, hung his head.

Wherever that explosive temper of his from a moment prior might have gone, it was easy to tell that he was dejected. And, the act of Heinkel shrinking before Wilhelm, was not something that had only begun now.

Such had been the case for a long, long time already. —Ever since he had taken his vows to become a Knight, and had been granted Wilhelm's former beloved sword, Astrea.

Felt: “There's no doubt that pops is aiming for the Dragon's Blood with the objective of waking up his sleeping wife.”

In place of Heinkel, unable to form words with his eyes cast down, it was Felt who answered Wilhelm's question. Lowering her hand from rubbing her neck, Felt straightened her back. Despite being the most powerless person present, she wore an expression that gave no such impression whatsoever,

Felt: “I heard it straight from his mouth. Though I haven't heard all the details.”

Wilhelm: “—. No, I thank you for your answer in my incompetent son's stead. Furthermore, I am sorry that you had to go along with such a dialogue.”

Felt: “I don't need any backward apologies. I told this to pops as well, but it's simply a matter of his methods being different to mine. It's got nothing to do with them being good or bad.”

Despite having been embroiled, and having suffered damages herself, there was no anger in Felt's response. From that dignified way of looking at things, Wilhelm certainly saw the capacity to be Monarch within her.

Unmistakably, Felt, like Crusch, was one of the five individuals selected by the Dragon History Stone. —And despite that, for that very Divine Dragon to be obstructing the way like this.

Wilhelm: “There would have already been many bearing witness to the sight of you having descended to the surface, mercilessly swinging your claws. The foundations of the Dragon Kingdom are shaking. Have you awareness of that?”

Volcanica: “Yeah, I feel a bit bad. From the very bottom of my heart. But you see, even if the Dragon Kingdom reverts to being the Lion Kingdom, it’d still be way better than the complete destruction of the world.”

Wilhelm: “Although, I believe this rebellious spirit of yours is a matter of concern grave enough to be on par with the world’s destruction.”

At the very least, there was no doubt that violent tremors would run through the Kingdom of Lugunica in the near future.

Those tremors would likely cause the jeopardous foundations of the Kingdom to fissure, and those emergent cracks would likely swallow many. Even supposing the actions of Volcanica and the other traitors were for the purposes of opposing something that eclipsed even that—

Wilhelm: “Even if an anomalous Dragon is among them, that is not a situation for a mere few people to decide. Especially given that one of those few people is yet inexperienced, unable to see anything beyond their own feet, there is no salvation to be had for you lot.”

Volcanica: “When including this exalted Dragon, wouldn’t it be a miraculous oracle from the heavens?”

Wilhelm: “In that case, as you once did before, right now, at this moment, please save the many people who are struggling through the pain. And then, furthermore, given the greater amount of people it contains, you ought to save the entire world. If you are unable to do so—”

Volcanica: “If I’m unable?”

Wilhelm: “—Then I shall have no other choice but to consider you the same as my foolish son, puppeted by sweet words.”

Stating thus, Wilhelm held his twin swords at the ready, squaring off against the Divine Dragon Volcanica.

The numbness that had arisen from repelling the first strike had faded from his hands. But, if that was an example of a volley, merely three more exchanges would suffice in wresting his sword away from him. Either evasion, or parrying to a much higher degree.

Volcanica: “Don’t move, Lil’ Miss Felt. I’m not confident in being able to have a soft touch on this.”

Felt: “Maybe I shouldn’t listen to anything you say. Ever since Rom-jii tried to pull the wool over my eyes, I’ve had plenty of resentment built up.”

Wilhelm: “If that is the case, then I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you for the time being.”

Felt: “Stop acting like you’re on friendly terms with me!”

Shouting in anger, Felt scowled at Wilhelm and Volcanica in turn, sticking out her tongue.

Sparing a minimal amount of his focus upon her, Wilhelm observed every single action of Volcanica’s. Its position, likewise, was that of having rushed to the shinobi girl’s rescue. With their figure having been sighted already, before long the commotion would magnify, and their freedom to fight would be limited. —This, too, would be a short yet decisive bout.

Volcanica: “Technically, even if decayed, I’m a Dragon of legend, yeah? Shouldn’t you be looking into options other than fighting?”

Wilhelm: “Unfortunately, I was just thinking that now is the time in which I must once more surpass a legend. My deepest apologies for making use of this convenience, but please endure my company.”

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

Volcanica’s intimidation was met with Wilhelm’s response; it was apparent to the latter that Heinkel, having not spoken a word for a good while, had his breath hitch, had his cheeks stiffen.

Eyelids trembling unceasingly, Heinkel’s azure eyes regarded Wilhelm in bewilderment.

Heinkel: “Father, you don’t mean…”

Wilhelm: “…”

With Heinkel having seemingly realized something, Wilhelm shut both his eyes at once.

Before Volcanica, that was far too recklessly defenseless an act; yet, the trust that his opponent would not take advantage of that opportunity, was a sense mutually shared through their fighting spirits.

Surrendering his being to that sense, upon the back of his closed eyelids, Wilhelm’s remorses were envisioned.

An overcast sky, a headstone marking a vacant grave, bereft of any contents. A great multitude of attendees overcome with desolation, the words of His Majesty the King extolling that act of sacrifice for their duty.

The son not present where he ought to have been, and his weak self devoid of the willpower to bring him there.

And, at last—

???: “—It’s alright, honored grandfather. When she passed, honored grandmother wasn’t the Sword Saint. That’s why, the Sword Saint didn’t lose.”

???: “After all, the Sword Saint shouldn’t ever lose. Father said so.”

???: “So, don’t be so sad, the Astrea Family is safe and sound, honored grandfather.”

Wilhelm: “—Nothing, but the words of a child.”

Words lacking any malice, from a child who had just inherited the qualifications to unsheathe the Dragon Sword alongside the Divine Protection.

Recollecting in great detail the remorses of that day, Wilhelm batted his eyelids open, and gazed at the Dragon. —At the Divine

Dragon, its name writ in legend, once a savior of the Kingdom, as it had attested itself.

With the Kingdom facing an existential threat, with the hearts of many in turmoil, the imprudence was well within his awareness.

However, akin to the saving of the Kingdom, of the world, Wilhelm possessed an important duty he needed to fulfill through his sword. —An important duty, one impossible to fulfill with any means but the sword.

Naught else, did Wilhelm know. —Naught, but the way to return the Sword Saint to being human.

Henceforth, for this blade of his, he sought swordsmanship akin to that which he held in the past—nay, swordsmanship greater than even that, and challenged the Dragon. All for the sake of surpassing the legend that eclipsed legends, awaiting him beyond that point.

Wilhelm: "—Sword Demon, Wilhelm Trias."

Volcanica: "—Divine Dragon, Volcanica."

Simultaneous with their declarations, both sprung into action. —By sword's shimmer and dragon's claws, all notions of sound were consigned to oblivion.

Chapter 28:
A Stanza of Legend

1

—Indubitably, that had been a stanza of a battle that would go on to be told in legend.

???: “…”

The Sword Demon’s twin swords capered, and the Divine Dragon’s dragonclaws stirred up a gale whilst moving to intercept.

Reigning supreme over all other existences, Dragons were born as ultimate lifeforms; the Divine Dragon, possessing abilities outstanding even among that species, its talons, its fangs, its scales, all were artefacts that ought be considered sacred treasures of nature.

Upon each occasion the tremendous power it concealed was brandished, the wind would raise death throes, the heavens would be rent asunder, the world carrying a newfound heat would be perceivable. Even basking in a single direct hit, would make the continuation of combat unfeasible.

A method to prevent those dreadful sacred treasures from being wielded to the fullest, indeed resided within the Sword Demon.

The impetus for the Divine Dragon making an appearance before the Sword Demon, that had been the peril befalling the girl who bore the same features as the lineage of Lion Kings. That girl had been present within the room in which the bout had broken out, attentively watching over the battle without holding down her hair, flapping by the updraft of wind.

Maintaining that girl to the rear, the Sword Demon positioned himself such that she would get caught up in the destruction wrought by the Divine Dragon.

By doing so, the Divine Dragon, fearing harm may befall the dame for whatever reason, was made unable to display its full strength, thus alleviating the footsteps of death's dominion from encroaching upon the Sword Demon, to some extent.

Ergo—

Sword Demon: "…"

The Sword Demon abandoned his position of keeping the girl to his back, and personally closed his distance with death's dominion.

To a rampaging tempest of destruction and annihilation he exposed his own self, nary a lifeline save the dual implements of steel seized in both his hands, and threw himself towards the precipice of doom, with even the slightest of missteps meaning his life would be forfeit.

By using the battleground to one's favor, by taking advantage of the opponent's emotions, it was indeed possible to edge towards victory.

But, that was inelegant. And beyond being inelegant, it was extremely impertinent, unbeneficial, and futile. —A victory stolen through underhanded means, rather than skill, to make up for swordsmanship that was lacking, what value could such a thing possibly hold here and now?

—The Sword Demon was a man who had lived on the battlefield.

The existence of battles fought for the sake of survival, of history untold by any save the triumphant survivors, of defeats and deaths that could not be excused; of these he knew all, by virtue of the weight of his victims' blood clinging onto his soul.

However, the current time was different. —Nay, from this moment forward, in all the clashes the Sword Demon would grip his blades, doing battle against individuals through his steel, there would be no meaning in stolen victory.

Through his swordsmanship he would force the surrender of the one against whom he possessed the greatest need to emerge triumphant.

Along that journey, the Sword Demon had not the time to squander on detours. If he was going to forge this old, withering body into the steel it had once been, he could not squander his time on anything but steeping his soul in the most scorching of heats.

Sword Demon: “…”

At the raging blow of a swordlike wind, the dragon’s claw, peeled and sliced off, danced through the air. Cramped. In order to swing his swords, in order for the Divine Dragon to wield its tail and fangs to the fullest, this battleground was far too cramped. The Sword Demon’s heels exploding, his shimmering swords flashed at a speed that consigned all notions of sound and wind to oblivion, piercing into the chest of the Divine Dragon, and causing the space around them to burst asunder.

A Dragon’s scales, their hardness was greatly influenced by the aggregate amount of Mana possessed by the individual.

The mightier and longer-lived the Dragon, the more robust and tenacious they grew; henceforth, in regards to the Divine Dragon who reigned supreme over all others, its draconic scales were of a hardness that surpassed even diamond.

Against those diamond dragonscales, the Sword Demon relentlessly swung his steel, repeating attacks of the striking, slashing, and stabbing variety. Even after all that, the steel in his grip was in prime condition—specially prepared for the Sword Demon to accomplish his goal, the twin swords Trias were a masterpiece of the same swordsmith that had forged the renowned blade Astrea, with which he bore a deep connection.

Their handles fit comfortably in his hands, and integrating their weight with his body, the swords’ shimmer traded blows with diamond, still unchipped—

Sword Demon: “…”

In regards to the Sword Demon’s furious onslaught, the Divine Dragon was not one to allow itself to be ravaged unceasingly like such.

Even if the mind concealed within was not the original, there was no hesitation in exerting the abilities of what could be called the strongest dragonhusk in the world; thus the Divine Dragon manifested might on the level of a natural disaster as if elementary.

To transform the shape of the world, to append unto reality any conclusion in accordance to what it deigned, forcing its showing upon the stage, was the right bestowed upon the Divine Dragon by Od Lagna, unmistakably.

A roar shattered the sky, dragonclaws cleaved the earth. Dragonscales repelled the Sword Demon's fullest wrath a hundred times over, and the draconic aura emitted from the entirety of its body stained the Royal Capital's atmosphere in the hue of the Divine Dragon.

The tail slammed down, striking the aged Sword Demon true. —Nay, the Sword Demon had thrust the tip of his sword into the tail to evade the strike, before immediately dashing up its length, drawing near to the throat. An intercepting roar. Light torn to smithereens head-on, a decapitating glint flashed. With the dragonscales on its shoulders it deflected, instantly poising itself to go again—the clash began anew.

Sword Demon: "…"

Unfurled wings becoming as if blades, the Divine Dragon ushered in a gusty storm of swords that carved up the Royal Capital. As the Sword Demon slipped through that gale, the former drawing a band of blood, the tail slammed to align with his trajectory, carving with it death's dominion. At the echoing tremors of demise, the Sword Demon's body was furiously blown backwards. A direct hit—falsehood, as upon perceiving its unavoidable nature, the Sword Demon had aligned himself with the revolution of the tail, and from his fingertips, his ankles, his knees, his hips, his lumbar, his ribs, his shoulders, his neck, and the top of his head, he released all strength, allowing the lethal impact to pass through his entire body, as he flew, and flew, and flew.

Slamming through one, two, three buildings, the Sword Demon drove his sword into the ground, and lifted his visage. His fighting spirit was not shaken in the slightest. Thereupon, the Divine Dragon's breath took the form of a corona, and drew near.

Sword Demon: "…"

A flash of swordly shimmer, the Sword Demon cleaved through the breath's cusp, forcing his body through the meager gap that had only been formed, and reached salvation from the scorching light, waiting in the open air. Then did the Divine Dragon beat its wings, swooping down to mercilessly snap its maw at the Sword Demon.

Dragonfangs, boasting durability and sharpness that exceeded even that of draconic claws, moved to sink into the flesh of the Sword Demon. Perfectly aligning the tips of both his swords together, the Sword Demon created a support brace that prevented the jaws from snapping shut. Supposing he had instead aimed the tips of the swords towards the maxilla and mandible respectively, the jaw would have closed, crunching his life to naught.

It was his sense of smell that rejected Death—nay, his avariciousness to seize victory that had prevented that, thus prolonging his life.

With the Sword Demon captured in its unclosing maw, the Divine Dragon abandoned its efforts to plunder his life by means of its fangs—giving a powerful click of its tongue, the Dragon gave birth to an explosion within that space and struck the Sword Demon's body true.

Sword Demon: "…"

As blood spurt forth from ears left and right, his ruptured eardrums, and the semicircular canals within, each quivered. Gnashing his teeth, the Sword Demon stood his ground as the Dragon's tongue extended to strike him, launching him outside its maw—out towards the high skies of the Royal Capital, defenseless.

During his capture in the jaws, the Sword Demon had been carried off to the sky by the flapping wings of the Divine Dragon; jostled around by the wind, in free fall, bereft of the means with which to counter, his altitude high as to cause those faint of heart to swoon upon a mere downwards gaze, he faced straight towards the ground, descending in a swift, unceasing motion.

Were he to continue and descend in this manner, Sword Demon though he might be, he would not escape harm's way. Between a human who lived on the ground, and a Dragon permitted to lord over the skies with its large build, that was the definitive—

Sword Demon: "…"

But, even in a situation that appeared as a decisive blow, the Divine Dragon did not abandon the Sword Demon to chance.

The Dragon greatly inflated its lungs to ready a breath, the release of which would give rise to tremendous damage to the sprawling Royal Capital below, shattering the endeavor to abstain from killing —no, the Noble District directly below had been evacuated.

Somebody, having established this place as a battlefield beforehand, had evacuated every residence liable to being caught up in the damage, thus constructing this arena. He regarded that skillfulness with admiration, and gratitude.

Sword Demon: "…"

The breath unleashed was greater and more sweltering than before, blitzing towards the Sword Demon as infernal heat.

The Sword Demon, unable to even look straight at the white light as he was, and possessing not the wings or the methods with which to resist the force of gravity, would have no choice but receive the blast directly—that instant, below the Sword Demon as he revolved his body midair, a foothold hastened.

Sword Demon: "…"

One of the buildings the Sword Demon had slammed through, before ascending to the sky; the tall time tower intercepted the path of the plummeting old swordsman, functioning as a foothold for the Sword Demon. Bending his knees, the Sword Demon landed on the tower, held his twin swords tightly, and gazed to the sky. —Across the breath, the Sword Demon and Divine Dragon exchanged glances, and that instant, a beautiful flash of sword clashed head-on with the white light.

Sword Demon: “…”

A chain of sounds akin to water’s surface being flicked, to the shattering of fragile glass, and the corona was split asunder from within.

The Divine Dragon’s breath, it was. And in it dwelled both the power and the right to engulf the many things it collided with, flaying their outer layers, and stripping off the profound to lay them bare. Nevertheless, the Sword Demon had ignored all that to his heart’s content as it was thrust before him, cleaving through the light with a brandish of his blades.

—As something truly pure, allowing no interference from the wicked, the sword flash beautifully bisected all.

Sword Demon: “…”

As the breath, severed as it was, radiated across the surface, it demolished the Noble District of the Royal Capital, leveling it flat.

The tower stood on by the Sword Demon, which had become the epicenter of the explosion, and the crimson mansion under the protection of the Divine Dragon, were the only things to have escaped direct harm, but aught else had learned the tremendous degree of the Dragon’s power.

The aftershock of the white light had stained the Sword Demon with white soot, jumping off the crumbling tower, and the Divine Dragon flapped its wings, still continuing to exert its hostility from the heavens; between ground and sky, their gazes crossed.

And then—

Sword Demon: “…”

As swordly aura, surging forth rather than reaching its limit, and draconic pressure, compelling aught to surrender, clashed anew, all living things in the Royal Capital of Lugunica, organic or not, shuddered.

2

???: “Do you, like flowers?”

Amidst a world hazed in white, audible was the voice of a lovely woman, her back towards a bed of yellow flowers.

The world misshapen by the draconic aura, Wilhelm spun his body through the advance of a fatal zephyr, and as he brandished the gleaming swords carried in both his hands, a multitude of reminiscences flowed within himself.

???: “Have you come to like flowers?”

A lovely woman, she had been. Drawn to her at first sight, the foolish man had placed a lid over those sentiments unfamiliar.

Yet still, as their relationship went unsevered, Wilhelm had indulged in that environment, fearful of cutting too deep into it, immersing his body and soul in moments of laxness, of terrible, oh most terrible timidity, neglecting that time went by.

???: “To swing the sword to protect someone. I think that’s nice.”

His hometown enveloped in a blazing inferno, a sword flashing with beauty had delivered Wilhelm from the clutches of death.

The woman had harbored no desire to take up the sword, yet nonetheless was loved by the sword; the reality that he had conferred her with a reason to swing the sword filled Wilhelm with myriad anger, his soul a conflagration born of repudiation.

Towards weakness, towards the secrets, towards his own inadequate being, anger, anger, anger—.

Cleaving through the anger entire, overpowering it, by devoting his everything to the act of channeling that violent sentiment into his blade, at last, he attained the right to stand before her, and cross swords.

And thus, he had rescued the lovely woman from the abominable Sword God, making her his own.

???: “Are you, in love with me?”

—Nay, was it that he had made her his, or had he been made hers? He knew not the answer.

But, they had been happy. They had been fortunate. From the very moment he had met Theresia, to the very instant he had lost her, Wilhelm had continued to be blessed to the greatest possible extent.

—The Death of Theresia, was unmistakably a tragedy.

Unable to even exchange words of parting, failing to convey the words he ought to have imparted, Wilhelm had been dominated by grief and lamentation. Amidst his despair, by overlooking much, he had erred.

But, the days he had spent with Theresia, for Wilhelm, had been those of happiness.

That joyous time shared between the two, was it really something that could conclude with it all being ruined, fading as if its entirety had never even occurred, the moment it had come to an end with a single day of tragedy?

Even if its color had faded in transience, could he truly remain without ever desiring that it ripen with fresh color once more?

Decidedly, that could not be so.

So that Theresia’s Death, that her Life, would not come to an end alongside a tragedy, he sought vengeance.

Thus, if swinging his sword for Theresia had returned color to those days, then he desired to return color to a similarly dulled scene, unceasing in his struggle to do so.

A raging gale, the savage roar by the Divine Dragon unleashed.

Stabbing the tip of his sword into the Dragon’s ire as it immolated the world white, he sliced it apart; as ever, there, beyond the cleared vision, did he witness the bloodcurdling remorses into which he would need to cut.

—An overcast sky, a headstone marking a vacant grave, ceaseless weeping and desolate voices, words of prayer imploring serenity.

Present at the center of the many weeping individuals who had gathered for she who had been beloved, he could not recall what words he had chosen to speak, to impart, to deeply engrave Theresia's nature in them all.

What he recalled, were remorses. Immensely powerful, towering, and unerasable, were Wilhelm's remorses.

A child yet unaware of reason, a child who had not been with the mother and father with whom he ought to have been. The words the child had chosen as consideration and consolation his own foolhardy self had rejected, unable to accept them.

In that moment, dull had turned the sky, the ground, the faces of the people, his own self, the child—

???: "—It's alright, honored grandfather. When she passed, honored grandmother wasn't the Sword Saint. That's why, the Sword Saint didn't lose."

Wilhelm: "…Please stop."

???: "After all, the Sword Saint shouldn't ever lose. Father said so."

Wilhelm: "I am begging you, please stop."

???: "So, don't be so sad, the Astrea Family is safe and sound, honored grandfather."

Wilhelm: "Right now, right here… Please don't speak of that."

Again and again, words of rejection bereft of power.

Over and over, words of consolation from a child settled in that which he believed.

And then—

???: “I’m the next Sword Saint. —Just before honored grandmother passed away, I received it.”

Wilhelm: “—Stop already! What is it that you want me to say?! Do not make me say that it was your fault that Theresia… that your grandmother died!”

???: “…”

Wilhelm: “Do not, make me say it… Hk.”

Amidst the faded scene, erasing aught else, he and the child were made two. Through his immature, foolish self of that day, of that moment, Wilhelm thrusted sword, and pressed forth.

Words that remained forever unspoken, would never be imparted unto the other party. Even supposing a mutual understanding of feelings between both parties, the thousands, tens of thousands of words that ought to have been devoted, would never be delivered unto the other party.

And likewise, the words that had ended up being vocalized, no matter the manner in which they had formed, would always end up being imparted unto the other party.

How exactly that would be received, depended entirely on the capacity of the receiver.

But, to pour more water than could be deemed acceptable into a yet incomplete container, and blaming that container for overflowing, unable to take it on whole, how foolish of an act would that be?

The face of the child—of Reinhard, in the faded world of that day, he could not recall.

After all, once he had let slip words that he ought never have, he had not even been able to look upon his face. It was not that he could not recall it, he did not even know to begin with for he had failed to look upon it.

Thus, those who received the words he had ended up speaking, were not confined to that single person.

???: "…I heard that you were blaming the kid at Mom's funeral service. And yet, you still want to see Reinhard? You can't even make the distinction on what's not fine to say, Dad, and yet you think you've got the right to apologize to him?"

???: "That child, is mine and Louanna's child… To say he let Mom die, that he stole her Divine Protection! That's all some sort of misunderstanding! I'll… I'll prove it!"

???: "I'm not you, Dad. I'm me. —This is something, I have to do, no matter what."

Once words had been uttered, no longer could they be retracted.

Wilhelm's reckless remarks towards Reinhard had spread in the blink of an eye, even reaching the ears of Heinkel, who had not attended the funeral service, causing him to lose his chance to apologize and explain himself.

Concurrently, the foolish reprimand from grandfather to grandchild had been spread even to those outside the family, so as a result of that scandal, the truth of the succession of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint became widely known.

Heinkel, had absolutely not allowed Wilhelm to see Reinhard.

Reinhard, had avoided Wilhelm in accordance with what Heinkel had told him, severing all interaction.

Wilhelm, had kept his distance from Heinkel and Reinhard, devoting himself to vengeance by his lonesome.

The relationships between those three, in conflict as they were, once more came together due to crossing the corpse soldier Theresia at the Watergate City, and once more had definitive cracks been born. —Were that to be the finale, then it would indeed be a tragic ending.

But, for Wilhelm, who had opted not to permit Theresia's Death, her

Life, her Existence to end in tragedy, he too would chant objections to this relationship drawing to a close as a tragedy.

And, as for the way to exclaim objections towards that overpowering fate, he knew no method but to exclaim them through his sword.

—Reinhard was the Sword Saint.

So long as he continued to bear that as an unshakable duty, never would the chance come around to exchange sentiments with Reinhard, present behind the veil of Sword Saint, never would the chance come to restore color to that faded scene.

Henceforth, Wilhelm van Astrea—nay, the one who dispossessed Sword Saints of their swords, Wilhelm Trias, had no other choice but to bleed his very life into his sword's shimmer.

3

—Again. Indubitably, that had been a stanza of a battle that would go on to be told in legend.

The battle unfolding between Sword Demon and Divine Dragon amounted to a back and forth bout with a score of factors at its conception, pitting the tempered swordsmanship of steel against the power of an apex lifeform by birth.

In the Royal Capital, the area of the Noble District that had become a battleground had been leveled, the collapsed buildings and pulverized streets telling of how tremendous the clash between those individuals present in the same domain, unreachable to any ordinary person, was.

Even considering their body size, the presence or absence of footing, and the trading of their decisive blows, the sword's shimmer and the draconic presence were evenly matched.

A battle between Dragon and man, in the current world, was a fight to the death of such rarity that whether it would be possible to witness one such event in the span of a hundred months, or even years, was impossible to know; and yet, astonishingly, this made it twice the Sword Demon met a Dragon in battle.

The gist of that, was karma, karma that could not be explained by anything but the fact that he had continued to desire and tread foot upon the most dangerous battlefields in this world, and that the large something that governed fate had continued to provision the Sword Demon with worthy enemies.

Considering the preconditions, the Sword Demon had been at an overwhelming disadvantage going into this fight.

The slashes of the Sword Demon's twin swords could not pierce the tenacious scales of the Divine Dragon, whereas the Divine Dragon's claws and fangs would easily pluck the Sword Demon's life from his flesh with as much as the slightest graze.

The Sword Demon had continued to evade them with techniques employing the most strenuous of his efforts, but he would eventually reach his limit. —In theory, that would be so.

But, just who could possibly imagine the sight of the Sword Demon, stained in blood, covered in white soot, swinging his swords as his back was scorched, using up the last of his strength as he succumbed to the Divine Dragon's talon.

The bloodcurdling visage of the Sword Demon, the swordly aura so intense that merely being exposed to it from head to toe would cause one to feel as though the edge of a blade had been trained to their life, the swordsmanship hot on the heels of the prime in which he had once defeated the Sword Saint; all of them refuted the natural reality, instilling onlookers with the manifestation of irrational hope and expectation.

—The Sword Saint, was the sword of the Kingdom of Lugunica, the bearer of hope.

At the time that hope had been unseated by the Sword Demon, the people ought to have despaired, turning to the heavens. The Sword Saint had been defeated, so such a continuation would be logical. However, reality had differed.

Not a single person had lamented the fact that the Sword Saint had been defeated, setting aside their sword; rather, the masses had blessed it. That had been because a new hope had sprouted—they had begun to harbor new expectations, for the Sword Demon who had bested the Sword Saint.

Pursuing strength and strength alone, unable to do anything except hone his own self much like the steel he brandished, was the Sword Demon.

The Sword Demon's direct, unyielding way of being, had caused a great many people to raise their visages, instilling them with hope, giving them expectations for the future.

Now, in this moment, the impossibility of imagining a future in which the figure of the Sword Demon would be laid low by the Divine Dragon, was the same as that. —In witnessing the Sword Demon's way of being, people would end up finding hope.

So long as there remained a desired scenery for that sword to cut through to, it would instill the belief that it not being reached was not a possibility.

Ergo, the battle between Sword Demon and Divine Dragon was at a deadlock, with the two involved, each unable to discover a winning move, having been constantly ascertaining how they could excel their opponent in this life or death bout.

—That was why, the progression of the bout between individuals transcendent, was performed by neither Sword Saint nor Divine Dragon.

Sword Demon: "…"

Divine Dragon: "…"

At the nexus of the townscape transformed into a theater of war, Sword Demon and Divine Dragon crossed gazes, exchanging silence. However, albeit the result was mutual silence, the essence of that silence differed between the two.

To one, patience, the other, shock. Both were emotions meriting silence, but that which followed was different.

Sword Demon: “Guh.”

A faint groan, accompanied by great volumes of blood, spilled from the Sword Demon’s mouth.

But, with his twin swords yet clasped, the Sword Demon made no attempt to stifle the overflowing ichor, and looked down at his own body—he caught sight of a sword’s tip piercing through his abdomen, stained with blood.

The blade had entered from behind, perforating the Sword Demon’s torso, and causing blood to spill outward. The sword responsible for that act, was a sword the Sword Demon knew well. —It was none other than his own former beloved sword.

The sword inscribed Astrea, its current owner—

Sword Demon: “—Heinkel.”

Blurred by the frothing of blood at his mouth, he bore no confidence that his mutter had become a definite sound.

But, from the quivering of the sword thrust through his body, he understood the intentions that had charged the deed. If he turned around, it was possible that his torso would be torn asunder, hence the Sword Demon grit his molars, and stood his ground.

Behind him, while tightly clasping the hilt of the sword that had stabbed the Sword Demon—

Heinkel: “…With your way of doing things, I can’t get Louanna back.”

Sword Demon: “…”

Heinkel: “I’m not you… I’m not you, Dad. I’m me. —This is something, I have to do, no matter what.”

A wrung-out voice it had been, mixed with sobs that seemed to be tearing his chest apart.

As he listened to that, the stabbed Sword Demon took a long, deep exhale, and reminisced.

The figure of his own child, whose cries brought about by his own self in the midst of training had been cause for his wife to scold him, which in turn had led him to badger his child to bear through the tears.

As far back as those times, all odds of victory would be lost upon his child's cries.

—That had been the deciding blow interrupting the climactic bout between Dragon and man, driving the stanza of legend to its coda.

Vic.H2o

Chapter 29:
Foot of the Table

—Tempestuous wind and land, collisions of preeminent power, as if being composed was truly a new stanza of legend.

A blink after the bout between Sword Demon and Divine Dragon, transcending human comprehension, had commenced—in that meager of an instant, Heinkel had tumbled off the Dragon's back, ousted from the legend.

Heinkel: "…"

During their descent from above the clouds, the Divine Dragon had fastened him in place with wind, but as soon as it had begun combat with the Sword Demon, the Dragon had lost that consideration—no, that leeway, forcing him to fend for himself. And thus, bearing no fruit whatsoever, Heinkel had been promptly cast off-stage.

Incapable of even clinging to that back, he fell to the ground, and pitied himself as being a wretched, pathetic disgrace. —Even that excessive self-punishment was not permitted to Heinkel at the current moment.

Heinkel: "…"

The battle that had commenced at the Barielle Villa had already greatly expanded its stage to encompass the Noble District, and the extraordinary combat between man and Dragon unfolded alongside a fantastical sight, as if it were a daydream. —From that, Heinkel had been unable to remove his eyes.

Heinkel: "…"

In his heart, he wished to look away. Not only did he want to avert his gaze, he wished to turn his back and run away. If that would not come to fruition, then he wanted to hold his head, cower, plug his ears, and reject everything.

But, he could not. He could not do that. —As Wilhelm van Astrea swung his sword, how could Heinkel Astrea attempt to avert his gaze?

Heinkel: "…"

As the aged body of the Sword Demon flourished with vigorous motion, he challenged the Divine Dragon that towered over him with a build several tens of times his size; evading the borderline of death many times, he delivered innumerable sword strikes that seemed to chip away at the dragonscales.

Encroach, leap, brandish, parry, posture maintenance, bodyweight transfer, vision guidance, applied technique, utilization of obstacles; the ultimate swordsman who made use of everything to elevate his swordsmanship—beyond any shadow of a doubt, Wilhelm, wielding his swords against the Dragon, was the strongest swordsman Heinkel knew.

For not even an instant, could he take his eyes off that Sword Demon's exquisite performance.

Catching his breath, forgetting to blink, to the point that even the beating of his heart felt as if it were a hindrance, he was enchanted by the numerous sword flashes.

'Twas nothing so elegant or polished as the likes of a sword dance. The nature of the Sword Demon, who sought to cut deep into the lives of his opponents from whatever angle necessary, was more uncouth; violence akin to a beast's instincts.

The violence would be turned to drive, sublimated from drive to technique, finally arriving at the legend vying against the Divine Dragon.

Heinkel: "…"

—In Wilhelm's figure as he traded blows with the Divine Dragon, Heinkel caught glimpses of countless battlefields.

Of the Watergate City, of the figure crossing swords with the youthful form of Theresia van Astrea.

Of the Lifaus Plains, of the figure swinging its sword against the mighty foe known as the White Whale so that he could take revenge for his wife.

Of the Commercial City, of the figure lopping off a mighty head of the Three-Headed Blight Dragon, dominating the skies.

Of the same Commercial City, of the figure carving its name into history as it clashed with the Eight-Arms Kurgan, strongest of the Empire.

Of the Royal Castle Lugunica, of the figure dispossessing Sword Saint Theresia van Astrea of her sword.

Of the Demi-Human War, of the blood-stained figure sentencing numerous enemies to fodder for its blade, who would go on to be called the Sword Demon.

Of countless other battlefields, of the figure that had come to bring about victory through its sword as the greatest sword wielder; Heinkel perceived all in Wilhelm's current figure.

And concurrently, he understood. —As things were proceeding, the Divine Dragon would be defeated.

Heinkel: "It's no good."

Wringing those words out, Heinkel, who had fallen to his knees, stood up.

As he used his hand to ascertain the presence of the sword carried at his waist, Heinkel was provoked by that conviction.

The Divine Dragon would lose. After all, its opponent was the Sword Demon, who had decided on victory.

Heinkel: "…"

Alas, Heinkel's eyes could not perceive the upper limits of the Sword Demon's and Divine Dragon's strength.

Just as how those who stood upon the ground could not be sure of the scenery present above the clouds, even supposing there had unfolded a scenery beyond their wildest imaginations, they would never get to lay their eyes upon it.

Hence, there was no other choice but to put his shoddy imagination to work, and envision it. —Thus, in the world conjured by Heinkel Astrea's meager imagination, the Divine Dragon would succumb to the blade of the Sword Demon.

Considering the preconditions, the Divine Dragon had been at an overwhelming advantage going into this fight.

Even as Heinkel saw it, the Sword Demon's blades pierced not the Divine Dragon's scales, and even after many attempted assaults, a decisive blow had yet to be delivered. Conversely, each and every one of the Divine Dragon's attacks were lethal, such that even a graze a few millimeters deep would rob the Sword Demon of his life, scattering his corpse to the battlefield.

Heinkel understood those preconditions. —Even so, his vision of the Sword Demon winning went unshaken.

There was no logic to it. Logic and reason were not things that could surpass the Sword Saint. That was to say, the strength of the Sword Demon, who had once bested the Sword Saint, went beyond logic and reason.

The strength to deliver the tip of his sword to that beyond resided within the Sword Demon, and so—

Heinkel: "—It's no good."

That indisputable, worst-case scenario, was unacceptable for Heinkel's course.

Were he to triumph over the Divine Dragon here, the Sword Demon would likely move to challenge the Sword Saint next. Then, just as he had bested the previous-generation Sword Saint, he would triumph over the current-generation Sword Saint—over Reinhard.

That, was no good. That alone, was no good.

There were many obstacles in the way of realizing such a battle, such as the presence of the Witch of Envy that Aldebaran was utilizing through some method, but even without such elements, it was no good.

It was no good. No good at all. No good, so because it was no good, it was absolutely no good. As to why it was no good, the extent to which it was no good warranted no need for explanation, anyway, it was no good. No good was no good, and no good was all that it could be. No good. It was no good after all. That which was no good, was no good. No good would be no good, so it was no good at all. The perfectly pure blade of the Sword Demon, could not save Louanna Astrea. It could not save her, that was why—

???: "—Heinkel."

To his fore, present was the back of the Sword Demon, standing still.

A muffled voice from across the back, muffled by the froth of blood, that which sounded as if it was nearly drowning, erred not in conveying to Heinkel that his own name had been called.

Having perceived that, whilst exerting his fullest restraint to suppress the trembling of his arms, he gripped the sword's hilt tight.

Heinkel: "…With your way of doing things, I can't get Louanna back."

Struck in the forehead by a fragment of a collapsing building, blood had been flowing. Blown away many times by the blasting shockwaves, he had also found himself getting trapped under a collapsing pillar. With half his body also scorched by the aftermath of the Dragon's breath that had been sliced apart by a sword's flash, he forced himself through the agony of burning blood, bone, and flesh, still continuing to walk.

His body soiled to the utmost extent by dust clouds and shed blood, he walked, and walked, and walked—Heinkel stood behind Wilhelm. —Standing there, with Astrea drawn, he skewered his biological father from behind.

Wilhelm: “…”

Through the piercing sword, he felt Wilhelm attempting to turn around. In order to forestall that movement, he poured strength into his grip, the flaring of the deep wound thwarting all thought of turning around.

At that moment, he could not glimpse Wilhelm’s face. Were he to see his own self reflected in those eyes, the Heinkels of both past and present would be rendered incapable of speech. That was why, he would not let him turn around. No matter what.

He could not afford to let him turn around, to let him say it.

If the Sword Demon was permitted such, being allowed to say that he would carry it out, he would end up prying it open with his sword.

In that opened up future, perhaps all the dark clouds would be cleared away, and a patch of the long clouded blue sky would be glimpsed. —But, Louanna’s figure would not be present there.

Through the blade of the Sword Demon, Louanna could not be awakened.

And, if she was not present, then Heinkel—Heinkel and one other, would be beyond salvation.

Heinkel: “I’m not you… I’m not you, Dad. I’m me. —This is something, I have to do, no matter what.”

That which had been wrung out, he wished to curse the fact that it had been a feeble voice tinged with sobs.

Grit your teeth, good-for-nothing. Put strength in your voice, coward. Do you really have time to hang your head, craven?

Even with these hands, this sword, stained with Father’s blood, you can’t even stifle the roots of your teeth quivering, the sensation of heat in your eyes, the feeling of all your insides crawling like worms, making you want to just spill everything out, you parasite.

Bragging about how you've settled your resolve, since when have you ever been able to fool your wavering self, you pant wetter?

Wilhelm: "—You utter moron."

With unceasing curses, Heinkel negatively spurred himself onward.

To Heinkel's ears was delivered a reprimand not of his own, yet one that could only have been in agreement with him.

The voice had not been drowning in blood, and after his cheeks tensed at that fact, Heinkel gazed in amazement. —To his fore, he locked eyes with Wilhelm, whom he had been attempting to prevent from turning around.

Heinkel: "—Ah."

Looking at his hands, the sword was in the same position. Nevertheless, the reason Wilhelm had been able to turn around was because he had twisted his body, forcibly removing himself from the sword piercing his torso.

Naturally, blood would flow once a sword was removed from a wound. And if it had been forced out, the wound would have expanded.

But, the Sword Demon had removed the blade himself. After all, had he not done so, he would have been unable to turn around.

Wilhelm: "…Heinkel."

Leaving Heinkel speechless with that outrageous deed, Wilhelm called to him again.

His throat clogging up, Wilhelm gulped down the rising blood, ensuring his voice would be unclouded. However, he had sustained wounds across his body from his duels with Yae and the Divine Dragon, so having also received a deep wound from Heinkel, his body was already losing a fatal amount of blood.

Sure enough, having lost the support of the sword piercing his body, Wilhelm's knees collapsed.

Heinkel: “F-Fathe… Dad…”

In the spur of the moment, Heinkel reached out his hand to prop up that collapsing body. But, to the contrary, Heinkel’s outstretched hand was grasped, unexpectedly pulling him close.

As Heinkel’s cheeks stiffened at the physical strength unthinkable for one who had lost so much blood, on the verge of death, Wilhelm regarded him with eyes from which strength would by no means fade—

Wilhelm: “Enough, wake, up…”

Heinkel: “…”

At those words, a dusky heat was lit within the cowering Heinkel’s heart.

Was he really going to lecture him to “stop dreaming”? The pipe dream of awakening Louanna, if that were to come true, would Louanna be glad? —Even without needing to say it, he knew that there was no way Louanna would be glad.

Not a single one of the things Heinkel had done until today, would Louanna approve of.

She would scorn him, fall out of love with him, have her affection for him flip to loathing; Heinkel’s name would not avoid being engraved into Louanna as the most repulsive man in this world.

But, that would be fine. Anger, loathing, scorn, all of it was fine. If it meant that Louanna would awaken from her slumber, that her blue eyes would reflect the world once more, that her lips would celebrate life, that would be fine.

The likes of a convenient dream, he saw not.

In this reality that was so nightmarish, yet ultimately not a nightmare, Heinkel would live, and die.

For that purpose—

Wilhelm: “—Incorrect.”

His dusky resolve had returned alongside the pain in his head; however, Wilhelm had put the brakes on that.

There did Heinkel’s breath catch, staring at Wilhelm in bewilderment. Without averting his gaze from his incompetent son, Wilhelm moved his bloodstained lips.

The expression on his face, was one Heinkel recalled. An unpleasant memory of times past. —The sorrowful expression Wilhelm had worn when delivering the news that Theresia, that his mother, had not returned from the battle against the White Whale.

Wilhelm: “Wake up, Heinkel… You…”

With the face that, as far as Heinkel knew, the Sword Demon Wilhelm had only worn the time he had displayed his utmost weakness—

Wilhelm: “You… no matter whose hatred you incur… Reinhard will never abandon the seat… of Sword Saint… hk.”

—Just as it had been back then, the words uttered had wounded Heinkel’s heart to the utmost.

Chapter 30:
Plan B

1

???: “—When you talk to me, look at me properly!!”

The moment he was struck by the intense kick unleashed, an alarm blared inside Aldebaran’s mind. The cause of that alert had been the kick itself, alongside various factors surrounding it.

Firstly, the sheer force of the kick had incurred tremendous damage, leaving him astonished at the absurd length of the leg that had punted him, thinking “From here to there is all leg?!”. The tip of the icy slipper worn on the kicking leg bore into him, smashing past his stone chestplate and placing him in a serious bind; the ice had begun to freeze over his chest, causing his sternum to creak.

But, the greatest reason for that clamorous alarm was the fact that she had hit the bullseye on him with piercing words leaving him no room for excuses.

—Look at me properly, she had said. And priorly, you look lonely when you talk to me, as well.

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

Honestly, it was shocking that she had correctly guessed the complex emotions Aldebaran harbored.

He was not so conceited as to think he had done a good job of hiding it, but he had arbitrarily assumed that she was ignorant to these sorts of subtleties. But, on reflection, she was simply bad at harboring ill will towards others, though alert to such malice stemming from those others. —She had been born into this world a silver-haired half-elf, so that was only natural.

Aldebaran: “The tuition fee cost a damn fortune… hk.”

Just below where the frost had begun to erode the abdomen of Aldebaran, as he spat those words out in frustration, clinging was an ice-made man modeled after an odious individual.

The ice-man obstructed his movements, and so, grabbing its head with a stone left arm crafted through magic, Aldebaran mercilessly ripped cranium from torso. The cries of its sculpture audible as an "Ahhh!", the decapitated body of the ice-man shattered in a ruthless manner, its ice scattering to the ground.

Not only did they look the same, even the ease with which they died was spot on.

Aldebaran: "There, you take it!"

Emilia: "Kyaa! Geez, that's awful!"

Unlike the shattered body, the decapitated head was attempting to bite him, so he threw the ice man's head back towards the woman who had been chasing him—Emilia. After glancing back at Emilia, who caught the head before her body as if it were a dodgeball, Aldebaran looked down at his stomach.

The frost began to spread from where the kick had landed, and as things were, his entire body would end up being frozen in ice—

???: "If that happens, you'd be done for, uncle. You know what to do, don't you?"

Affixed to a pillar of earth, topside down, was the spectator feasting his eyes on the clash between Aldebaran and Emilia—Roy Alphard, grin stretching from one ear to the other, hinting at how Aldebaran ought to deal with the ice.

He had no need for advice from a Sin Archbishop. Without needing to be told, Aldebaran grit his teeth, gouging his own abdomen with the tip of his sword as it began to freeze over. Through feverish pain and spilling blood, he forcibly closed up the wound, an inch away from having been a seppuku, with stone, evading the bad ending of being encased in ice.

His vision flashed bright red in agony, and the heartfelt, jovial laughter of Roy grated on his eardrums with “Ah-haha~! That’s it!”.

Emilia: “—Hk, such a painful countermeasure.”

Aldebaran: “Oioi, you ain’t giving me any other choice. “If you don’t like pain, then yield and be frozen in ice.” You’ve gotta have some awareness that that’s the sorta attack you’re using, Lil’ Miss.”

Emilia: “—. Yes. I think the same thing. But, don’t get the wrong idea, Al.”

Aldebaran: “Wrong idea?”

Emilia: “You can’t withstand using the same method that you used for your stomach for your entire body, can you?”

That was a declaration of her intent to assail his body with the same blows she had delivered unto his abdomen.

As if to substantiate that, the heartrending grimace of Emilia’s beautiful face lost its harshness, and white fumes began to blow with a cool wind in the vicinity of the Prison Tower. As white powder snow fluttered down to encoat the war theater, in his chilly fingers did Aldebaran feel the gravity of Emilia’s seriousness.

Aldebaran: “This is the part where I’d wanna say that you’re cute even when you’re angry, but honestly, it’s just plain terrifying. Besides…”

As Aldebaran cracked a joke, the atmosphere creaked before him as the head of the ice-man clutched in Emilia’s arms began to regenerate its body. As if to say “Here’s a new body!” instead of “Here’s a new face!”, the ice-man completely recovered in just a few seconds, making an appeal of his good health by doing stretches.

That meaningless, incendiary liveliness was a faithful recreation of the original, and so truly annoying.

Aldebaran: “…You’ve got him down to even the finest details, it’s disgusting.”

Emilia: “Your way of complimenting’s the same as Ram’s. It has a reputation among everyone at the mansion, they all think it's reaaally just like him."

Aldebaran: "Heh. Though, he himself must have been the only one to react with an unpleasant face."

Emilia: "How did you know?"

Aldebaran: "I get it. It's the face he'd wanna not see the most."

At his reply to the simple question, Emilia's widened eyes tensed in anger. She may have thought he was speaking contemptuously, but it truly was Aldebaran's unreserved opinion.

In the first place, if she was going to make someone out of ice, it would have been better to use a more reliable, strong outer appearance—for example, someone like Garfiel, as a model, and yet she had chosen Natsuki Subaru, of all things.

Thanks to that, Aldebaran had been able to destroy the ice-man with zero reluctance.

Aldebaran: "If it's a soldier, shouldn't you have used the most reliable guy as a model?"

Emilia: "—? But that's why I used Subaru as the base?"

Aldebaran: "…I see. Shouldn't have asked."

Sticking his tongue out inside his helmet, Aldebaran felt as if he had eaten a bitter bug.

Even more so than the damage he had received from being kicked, the mental damage from speaking face-to-face with Emilia like this was incredibly draining.

For Aldebaran's Authority, for the maintenance of his Territory, a stable mind was indispensable. Despite that, Emilia was the very character that defined the meta of easily disturbing Aldebaran's mind.

Aldebaran: "Damn piece of shit."

In all honesty, encountering Emilia here had been outside his calculations.

After returning to the Kingdom from Vollachia, Aldebaran had controlled the party headed for the Pleiades Watchtower to his convenience. Of course, he had grasped that Emilia and Otto would head to the Royal Capital, but he had intended on quickly retrieving Roy and departing the Royal Capital safely before trouble could be encountered. —To think the rug would be pulled out from under him by a Zodda bug.

Aldebaran: "…I guess the one who started this string of bad luck, would've been Lil' Miss Felt."

In order to engage Reinhard in his worst possible condition, in the Augria Sand Dunes, Aldebaran had deliberately made use of Flam's Divine Protection at the Tower, having her inform her little sister of his betrayal. As a corollary of that, Reinhard had appeared at the Sand Dunes, and an ambush had been prepared by Felt's group—Felt had not kept that information to herself.

It was a state of emergency in which her allies at the Pleiades Watchtower had been wounded, and the Divine Dragon, which was supposed to be the protector of the Kingdom, had submitted to the enemy, so she had done well to display such a composed ability to make decisions. He had thought it might have been another suggestion from that Valga Cromwell, but to that notion he had to shake his head.

Felt was someone whom Priscilla had recognized as an adversary. Her caliber to be Monarch ought to have been praised with sincerity.

Either way, Felt had chosen the best course of action amidst high pressure circumstances, and so Emilia, having received the information from her, would not put it to waste.

Consequently, his escape from the Prison Tower had been obstructed, leaving him with the worst-possible present, facing off against Emilia.

Aldebaran: “…”

To his fore, Emilia slotted her hands into gloves of ice while standing beside the aggravating ice-man who had taken the Gear 2 pose, and she cast a gaze of vigilance over Aldebaran.

In her amethyst eyes could be felt a strong ardor, as if to say that she would not lose no matter what Aldebaran might do, but even without all her vigilance, there were not many things Aldebaran could do.

He had been fending her off with swords of rock that mimicked her Ice Brand Arts, calling it Earth Brand Arts, but the effectiveness of the weapons each of them made was a difference of day and night. Their respective staminas were not even worth comparing, and neither could Aldebaran create reliable soldiers of earth.

Moreover, it tormented his heart to bring harm unto Emilia, let alone wound her psyche. —This was the fatal flaw that the being known as himself had been furnished with since birth.

To make matters worse, Emilia’s techniques, specialized in capturing people alive, had the worst affinity for Aldebaran’s Authority.

Ergo, now that the ones considered to be the greatest obstacles to his plan, Natsuki Subaru and Reinhard, were out of the picture, Emilia would be the natural enemy of Aldebaran—excluding one other person, she was his worst “enemy”.

Aldebaran: “Regardless—”

No matter how he analyzed the situation, he could not find even a single good ingredient and wanted to cry, but not once had he experienced a precedent of his complaints breaking through such an impasse.

If he could not forge a decisive blow through his own merits against the opponent who was unconsciously countering him, he would have no choice but to rely on outside help to end this. —And then, it happened right when he was about to play his trump card.

—Piercing the cumulus, he bore witness to the Dragon descending upon the Noble District.

Aldebaran: “Are you serious?”

As it sliced down through his vision, Aldebaran unconsciously muttered.

Beyond the foggy white sky, currently drawing a line of pale blue light descending through the sky, was “Aldebaran”, planned to be Aldebaran’s trump card. If it was headed to the Noble District with such vigor— to where he had kept Yae and Felt on standby, then it was very likely its objective was to rescue them.

That was to say, a being that Yae could not deal with alone had been dispatched to the Barielle Villa.

Since “Aldebaran” had intervened immediately, Yae’s survival would have been fifty-fifty. —At the same time, it meant that Aldebaran would be unable to borrow a hand from “Aldebaran” in his predicament.

Aldebaran: “Are you serious…”

With the same words, Aldebaran became even more keenly aware of how much worse his situation had become.

He could try to redo with his Authority, and call “Aldebaran” to himself before Yae and Felt. But, if he did so, Yae, without any reinforcements, would likely succumb to the unidentified enemy.

Neither Yae, nor Felt, could be described as essential to Aldebaran’s objective.

They could not, but—

Aldebaran: “SHIT!”

Relinquishing his chance to swallow the poison in his mouth, Aldebaran cursed out.

Using “Aldebaran’s” draconic aura to dispel the cold wave Emilia had used to put the entire field under the control of her snow, thus allowing for a safe withdrawal from the battlefield, had been the trump card of Plan A. Now that he could no longer use that, he would have no choice but to urgently enact Plan B.

And, in order to execute Plan B, he would have to hurry and think of a Plan B.

In the meantime—

Aldebaran: “You see that, Lil’ Miss? At this rate, my partner’s gonna rampage through the Royal Capital—”

Emilia: “I was told that I’m not in charge of worrying about over there!”

Emilia resolutely charged at Aldebaran, the latter wishing to prolong his time to think.

While sensing beyond the wall the assault of “Aldebaran”—the Divine Dragon, Emilia’s courage to trust in her allies and ignore it was simply far too much. That alone was likely proof that she had faith in the person who had concocted this strategy, but this was not something a person could do just because they were told.

Thus, the fact that it was the best possible move against Aldebaran made it all the more unbearable.

Emilia: “Hiyah! Tei! Dudoh! Yah!”

Following her initial policy as if just having remembered, Emilia abandoned dialogue and unleashed a tumultuous chain of attacks.

The frost-clad fists fired off a volley of innumerable punches, smashing right through his hastily made boulder shield. Amidst the scattering debris, he caught the frozen spearhead with a prosthetic rock arm, only to discard it when the ice began to encase it, and he leaped backwards. —Thereupon, the ice-man had circled around, crashing into him with a Tie Shan Kao.

Aldebaran: “Goh, ahh—!!”

On the receiving end of the secret Bajiquan technique, learned through imitation, Aldebaran was launched forward. Waiting for him there, Emilia transformed the lance of ice into a glacial mallet, resolutely holding it aloft. Pulling down her slender, supple arms, she unleashed a full swing of inconceivable might.

The atmosphere was pummeled by the frigid blow, laden with drive, and as soon as Aldebaran accepted that he would be unable to dodge it, he encased his entire body in earthen armor, leaving nary a gap—the tremendous might struck him true.

Aldebaran: "—Hk!"

Unable to raise even cries of pain or screams, Aldebaran spun through the air.

He had defended against the ice eroding his earthen protections, but his defenses had provided no more comfort than if there had just been a handkerchief between himself and the weapon. His vision spinning wildly as he was blown away to a position unknown to him, he was caught by a strong impact, falling to the ground.

Roy: "Uhya~, that looked painful. Seems like the end of the road for you, uncle."

With his hand down on the snow-blanketed ground, hearing the delighted voice of an onlooker from above him, Aldebaran realized that he had crashed into the pillar of stone to which Roy had been affixed. He had been sent flying ten-odd meters, and there was a grating pain in all the bones in his body. He had not even had the time to clap back with abusive language.

Aldebaran: "Shit…"

It was not desirable for Aldebaran to waste any more time on this.

Plummeting the temperatures around her, Emilia's fighting style was a devilish method in which debuffs would accumulate over time in a manner akin to snow, and it was also possible that enemy reinforcements would begin to show up as he dawdled.

The more opponents that showed up, the level of difficulty in emerging triumphant would rise exponentially; he had become keenly aware of that in his battle against Felt's faction. —And, it was entirely possible that his "natural enemy" could be among them.

Roy: "Can't really see because of the snow, but it seems things are getting tough over at the town too, doesn't it~? Gonna try and call for help at the very top of your lungs or something? Uncle."

Aldebaran: "Shut… the hell up. You… just keep quiet and stay—"

Roy, upside down, conscientiously piqued Aldebaran's nerves as he was backed into a corner.

He felt his rage well forth, wondering if he should pointlessly die an additional death just to deck that grinning mug—and beyond his indignation, what Aldebaran saw was the fluorescent hope of a Plan B.

Aldebaran: "If he's me…"

Afar, from the sensation of the white haze being swayed, it transmitted "Aldebaran" being engaged in a raging battle.

Within the farthest extents of Aldebaran's knowledge, there were not that many candidates capable of engaging in a fight to the death against "Aldebaran", but he had no choice but to believe and entrust that victory to the Dragon.

And that which he had to believe in was not merely the Dragon's triumph, but that "Aldebaran" must have also been laying foundations for the unbeknown Plan B while knowing that it could not assist Aldebaran.

In order to realize that unascertained Plan B—

Aldebaran: "Roy! If you don't wanna die then lend me a hand!"

Emilia: "—Hk! Al!!"

As Aldebaran shouted, Emilia widened her eyes, her voice honed in rancor.

At the sense of disbelief resounding through her voice, Aldebaran was astonished that his stocks still had the margin to be devalued after he thought they had already hit rock bottom when he released Roy out of the Prison Tower—no, when he entrapped Natsuki Subaru.

Aldebaran: “But, if it’s necessary, then even the power of a Sin Archbishop is to be borrowed. Natsuki Subaru did the same thing in the Empire, yeah? What’s so bad?”

Emilia: “Even though you know it’s not that sort of problem!”

Aldebaran: “Guess so. I’m saying that while fully aware. Loathe me all you want.”

He was accustomed to being loathed by Emilia. —A falsehood.

In truth, his position was that of not even ever being noticed, let alone loathed.

Emilia: “You—hk!”

Upon Aldebaran’s response, ire flaring through her sorrow, Emilia created stakes of ice in the air.

Capable of magician-esque battling styles besides hand-to-hand combat utilising ice, Emilia pointed the floating ice stakes towards Aldebaran and Roy and avalanched them as though carpet bombing. Anyhow, though it was an expression of her intent to stop their wiles, Emilia’s rushed attack was intercepted by Aldebaran pulling off the ground like a carpet through magic, as though overturning tatami.

Roy: “Even if you ask for our cooperation, you see~.”

The ground rocked by the piercing impacts, this hurriedly constructed shelter of earth would not last much longer either.

Aldebaran’s concentration was torn in its maintenance, but despite being subject to the same predicament, Roy paid no attention to that whatsoever and crooked his lips in displeasure, Roy: “As you can see, our limbs are fractured, and we have been prohibited from eating. So then, what are you telling us to even do? Or perhaps… you’re giving permission to eat that onee-san, is that what it means?”

Aldebaran: “Wrong. Neither am I letting you eat her, nor am I letting you go on a rampage.”

Roy: “Then what even is there for us to—”

Aldebaran: “There is. —Spew it out.”

A low-toned edict, Aldebaran met gazes with Roy, who was upside down on the earthen spire shielded behind him, and connoted Gluttony a third choice besides eating or rampaging.

Roy rounded his eyes at the bid, then immediately smirked a broad grin,

Roy: “Geez, uncle, just how much do you know about us? It can’t be that you’re truly our real father, right~?”

Aldebaran: “If I’d brought up brats like y’all, I wouldn’t be able to live with all the apologies I’d have to give to society.”

Their relationship was one of forceful compulsion to listen, bound by a curse mark. Aldebaran’s attitude, in no manner intending to establish friendly relations, was yet welcomed by Roy with a licking of lips.

He was Roy Alphard, commanding the name of Gluttony, therewithal Bizarre Eating per his accord. How would a glutton whose mouth partook no matter what crude product, have evaluated Aldebaran? —A useless thought regardless, he did not have the leisure to enquire.

Emilia: “—Stop!”

That instant, what smashed through the mud shelter was an enormous ice boomerang—identical to the Flying Wing Blade used by the Empire’s Madelyn Eschart, it was thrown in, and through the opening of the piercing ice, Emilia charged towards them.

Aldebaran obstructed Emilia's path with an artificial rock arm created to be a size bigger. His palm was covered from above in a manner akin to a baseball glove, thwarting her path with tenderness and certainty.

However—

Aldebaran: "—Hk, a decoy?!"

Placing its hands on the glove of rock, the ice-man leapt over the obstruction through hand springs.

Acting as the vanguard and using herself as a decoy, Emilia let the ice-man proceed forward. He wanted to point out that normally between oneself and their creation, the role of being a decoy would be the other way around, but he had utterly fallen for it.

The ice-man vaulted over Aldebaran's head and approached the pillar of earth. Shards of rock did Aldebaran create, pincering the ice-man to the sides in an attempt to shatter it to fragments, but—

Aldebaran: "It's harder than before!"

With elevated bone density, nay, glacial density, the sturdy ice-man's new body repelled the shards.

Dismissing the obstruction, the ice-man stretched its arms towards the affixed Roy, drawing closer to hinder any action—at that split second, its head bid its torso a tearful farewell.

Emilia: "What?!"

Having witnessed first hand the ice-man's decapitation, Emilia shouted after slashing the rocky glove with a sword of ice.

She remained nescient of what had destroyed the ice-man, rebuilt in strengthened tenacity. —To think it had been begotten by a steel thread spun from the ring on Aldebaran's right ring finger.

The silver thread glistening in the icy haze perforated through the ice-man's defenses, decollating it. That which he mastered in the midst of his battle against Felt and the rest, a single finger's worth of the Steel Thread Technique.

Art would bring bread. An instant subsequent to embodying that idiom—

Roy: “—Given the choice, I guess this one would be the most amusing∼.”

As he heard a voice lacquered in dour glee, Aldebaran—nay, the world cried out.

2

Instantly, that which had assailed Aldebaran, was a vomiting sensation of the soul.

Roy: “Oergh.”

He believed he had understood the principle. He had even managed to conceive of what would occur.

But, once it actually transpired, comprehension and imagination had been of no use whatsoever.

Neither unto flesh nor unto spirit, that was an onslaught unto Memories intangible.

Roy: “Oergh.”

There existed a phenomenon known as déjà vu, where during the first time one laid eyes upon something, they would feel as if it could by no means be the first time they were seeing it; currently, Aldebaran was—no, every single person undergoing these effects, was experiencing something several tens of thousands of times more pronounced than déjà vu, a “regurgitation” that could not be ignored.

As evidence of that—

Emilia: “—Ah.”

Spilling a husky breath, from Emilia’s hand fell a javelin of ice.

Feebly dropping that which she had been ready to throw, its form unravelled, returning to Mana before it hit the ground.

Vehement turmoil flickering through her widened amethyst eyes, she fell to her knees on the spot. Gazing over her state of being, Aldebaran grit his molars, and leaped backwards.

Roy: “Oergh.”

A vociferous sense of disgust, there was. But, not enough to bring him to his knees.

The impact of “regurgitation” would vary from person to person. A matter of course. Emotional attachments were to each their own. Between Aldebaran and Emilia, the ardor they respectively harbored towards those Memories differed.

Odious though he might have been, Roy had made the appropriate selection. Accurately, he had selected Memories that had inflicted a great impact unto Emilia, while not going as far for Aldebaran.

Hence—

Roy: “Oergh.”

Bearing the nauseating sensation of emesis, Aldebaran raised his hand aloft to the heavens.

The whitish haze of ice yet shrouded the Royal Capital’s sky, obstructing him from regarding it with due reverence. However, there did Aldebaran believe that “Aldebaran” had laid the groundwork for Plan B.

—’Twas a boon of the combat experience they had acquired during their battle against Reinhard at the Augria Sand Dunes.

In that battle, Aldebaran and “Aldebaran”, fellows in whom dwelled the ego of the same man, had exercised magic through a shared magic signature—they had assumed a system in which Aldebaran borrowed the Mana of “Aldebaran” to invoke magic, but it was the reverse this time.

The Plan B that “Aldebaran” had prepared above the clouds—with a mechanism awaiting activation, it instead fell to Aldebaran to follow the magic signature, and pour in Mana to flip the switch.

A conception reached only because their egos were one and the same, the execution of a Plan B that had not existed prior—

Aldebaran: “—Oergh.”

Subsequent to the invocation, bearing witness to the entirety of what “Aldebaran” had prepared as a Plan B, Aldebaran spilled out a belch distinct in essence to those that had come before, yet it still fell in line with Roy’s “regurgitation”.

Plan B, the entire picture of that was—

Emilia: “No… hk.”

Sensing an intense torrent of Mana, Emilia’s lips quivered, still down on her knees.

She was not standing, however, with her visage raised, her amethyst eyes managed to grasp it. —Floating in the sky of the Royal Capital, was a rocky mass around a hundred meters in size.

It was a sense of scale that seemed as though some small hill had been unearthed in its entirety and raised up. Though Aldebaran had never encountered it, this might have been the same feeling that people had given accounts of experiencing when beholding the White Whale from nearby, overwhelmed by witnessing such a mighty thing skybound.

Either way, the intent of “Aldebaran” in elevating that rocky mass to the sky was obvious—

Roy: “Oergh.”

The next instant, there resounded a report of the sky shattering, stemming from numerous cracks fissuring through the rocky mass, as was apparent to all who had noticed the abnormality in the aether.

The hill-sized mass split into boulders numbering around ten or twenty, and at that rate would continue down towards—

Emilia: “NO…!!”

Foreseeing that outcome, Emilia reprimanded her trembling knees, and stood up.

She had surely understood. Even if it had fractured into pieces, if the heavy boulders, each bigger than ten meters, were to fall, there would be a great amount of damage to the city, leaving a large number of casualties.

Thus, the only way to avert that, was for people capable of preventing it to go put a stop to it.

Aldebaran: “Even now, I’m going at this with the intention of not letting a single person die. That’s why…”

Emilia: “—Hk, Al!”

Aldebaran: “I trust you to not let even a single one of those fall onto the city.”

Forcing a selfish, one-sided request upon her, Aldebaran disregarded Emilia’s voice, shrill with fervent emotion, and ran up the earthen pillar to secure Roy.

Akin to the foul odors emitted from the anal sacs of a frightened weasel, the ice-man, once again reduced to being merely a head, rolled over in one last ditch effort to impede him, but Aldebaran mercilessly crushed it underfoot, and removed the affixed Sin Archbishop from the spire.

Roy: “You’re quite the nasty guy, uncle.”

Responding not to Roy’s superfluous words, Aldebaran carried that small body on his shoulders, and ran.

With nary a glance back at Emilia with whom he had been doing combat until a moment prior, as fast as his legs would carry him.

Emilia: “Al! You can’t! Don’t run away… AL!!”

He could hear Emilia’s heartbroken appeal, but no attacks were issued to halt his steps. Naturally. All of her strength was now being fully diverted to the purposes of saving people.

Were she able to simply pursue Aldebaran at this point without thinking of the consequences, she would have had an easier time living her life. Undoubtedly, if she had been a person capable of that, it would have been a salvation for both Emilia and for Aldebaran.

But, Emilia did not give in to selfishness, and by wielding her magic to save people, she had ended up letting Aldebaran get away.

Emilia: “Don’t go! Return Subaru, return Beatrice—!”

In concert with the heights of those emotions, sounds of glaciation could be heard in the sky loud and clear.

Aldebaran invoked the protrusion of the ground beneath him, and with that as a foothold he surmounted the wall enclosing the Prison Tower, withdrawing from the white battlefield made manifest by Emilia. With legs still unhalting, he ran, and ran, and ran.

Roy: “She’s crying, you know~, that onee-san.”

A fact ignorable had it not been delineated, the detestable Sin Archbishop deliberately did delineate.

The tearful voice rending his heart, Aldebaran continued running, never halting his feet. At this moment in time, hoping only for all his accomplices to be present at the point of regroup, he continued to run.

The torrent of boulders meteoring down upon the Royal Capital was intercepted by towers of frost that sprang up one after another, preventing harm from befalling the city.

Neither to the enkindling perpetrator, nor to the stalwart savior, to nobody did it bring glee.

Merely—

Roy: “—Ah~, thank you for the treat-!”

Only Bizarre Eating, licking his lips to surfeit the acrimonious joy and saccharine sorrow, was smiling.

Chapter 31: One-Hundred Percent Effort

1

—Its visibility accompanied by a thundering clangor of the skies tearing apart, an enormous clod of rock fell.

Surely, a great margin of doubt existed whether simply “clod of rock” was enough of a descriptor for it.

After all, this clod of rock was at least a hundred meters in size with ease. It was no longer befitting to be called a clod of rock, but more so a rocky mountain levitating in the sky.

Fissures permeated through the rocky mountain, and the hundred meter clod crumbled to pieces, followed by countless small—yet still five to ten meter-sized boulders cascading upon the ground.

The boulders’ point of descent was the township of the Royal Capital, with estimated casualties of around five to ten thousand people.

To execute this massive of a massacre, the only ones of equitable kill rates in the present-day era would either be the Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt, or the Sin Archbishops of Greed and Sloth.

Above all—

???: “If we don’t limit it to just the present day, I suppose there were a good number of ’em in the past.”

Disgust dyed his fatigued voice, as Aldebaran viewed that atop a rampart.

Plan B—the tactic of dropping the aforementioned rocky mountain, had been a dirty tactic utilized by Aldebaran upon being cornered, to create an opening so that he could escape his predicament.

Considering the circumstances of him recoursing to this tactic, Aldebaran should have had no leisure to halt still, and rather instead resume his escape as soon as possible, darting away from the Royal Capital whilst ignoring the wails of agony.

However, Aldebaran was incapable of that. —Bearing the responsibility, he must see it through with his own eyes.

Aldebaran: "—As you'd expect."

To the spectacle reflected in the squinted black irises inside his helmet, Aldebaran murmured a husky commendation.

From the onset of the play where the rocky mountain thundered the rupturing of skies, an overwriting howl of the world no inferior to that had occurred, and a beautiful tower of ice stretching from the ground's surface intercepted the countless clods of rock from one side.

Inverse to its icy, congealed appearance, it was a warm hand of salvation bound in compassion and kind affection. On the other hand, the tower of ice glistening pale blue in light also seemed to reveal the deep sorrow of the user.

???: "To think of it in that way~ is a bit too poet-ey, don't you think, uncle?"

Saying so, Roy ridiculed Aldebaran as he viewed the spectacle, whilst being carried on the latter's shoulder.

Roy was immobilised due to his fractured limbs, but he skillfully used his dorsal muscles to upraise his torso, surveying the cataclysm that had assailed upon the Royal Capital atop of Aldebaran's shoulder.

The former, having healthy enough of a mouth to be babbling about everything despite being incapable of anything, made Aldebaran wince.

Aldebaran: "You too, your tongue's gone along with depicting my emotions so much that you're starting to sound poetic. Not that I know much, but that sense would've been much more fitting for your dead counterpart who personified Gourmet rather than you of

Bizarre Eating, no?”

Roy: “Haha-, taking a blow at a dead family member shows you had some pretty awful~ upbringing, no? Truth is, it wasn’t us, but Ley who went about evaluating what had been eaten one way or another. What a mystery~. In the end, for both we and us, that which was eaten would always end up in the same Stomach of Souls, and yet…”

Aldebaran: “This must be what they mean when they say that thieves; no, that food snitchers are shameless.”

Roy: “Don’t treat us like a thief~. We just want, to eat a teensy bit more than a full stomach… that’s just the kind of adorable gourmandiser we are, and yet…”

Always with a clapback. The unabating mouthed Bizarre Eating’s abundant lexicon and strength of debate stemmed from the efficacy of his Authority of Gluttony, and would be outstanding foremost among not only the Sin Archbishops, but the entire world.

It was easy to be deceived by his childish appearance and his manner of speech laying bare his rotten nature, but the being riding atop his shoulder was a monster of accumulated synthesis of wisdom, having indulgently devoured knowledge and experience beyond innumerable, and for that he must not forgo his vigilance.

That was precisely why he had abandoned persuasion through words, but opted to forcefully make him abide through violence and the Curse Mark.

Aldebaran: “…Anyhow, the job’s done. Let’s go.”

Roy: “There’s no longer any need for you to toss out a lifeline to that onee-san in case she missed any of the rocks, right~. Uncle, are you not often called weird or just plain abnormal?”

Aldebaran: “Thank you for your critical reviews of me for these coming two-to-three days.”

Correctly guessing Aldebaran’s reason for stopping with zero explanations, with a few unnecessary words appended at the end by

Roy, he replied, forgoing the will to compete with a kid.

Thus, with the Royal Capital having escaped harm’s way thanks to Emilia—Aldebaran ascertained a corner of its Noble District, which had been entirely flattened, and once again hastened his feet.

2

—With the culmination of his battle against Valga Cromwell, Aldebaran had revised his perception that his Authority, which he had assessed to be peerless, also had hazardous adversaries capable of sinking their teeth into it.

Even now, his conviction that none could defeat him wavered not.

However, in order to turn that conviction into firm assurance that he must not grow complacent concerning his Authority, that he must never stop thinking, he admonished his own self.

Therefore, in his plan for sneaking into the Royal Capital and breaking Gluttony out of jail, he had not opted for an easier redo, but challenged it with his utmost might, firmly and thoroughly using each and every one of Aldebaran’s lives with the assiduousness to squeeze out the tube of toothpaste till the very end, concluding with a count of six-thousand seven-hundred and twenty-four.

—To interpret that as too numerous or too few would depend on the person, but fundamentally, Aldebaran would think of each count as being “pertinent”.

No matter what the magnitude of a count might have been, he wasted not a single run, braving the necessary challenge to surmount the wall.

On extremely seldom occasions, he had also expended a single life of inaction in order to calm his heart, but those lives had been ones in which a breather for the heart had been indispensable.

Hence, no matter the count, if he attained the results he had sought, Aldebaran would insist that six-thousand seven-hundred and twenty-four had been the “optimal” number of attempts.

???: “—Yo, shitty helmet bastard.”

The rendezvous point had been agreed upon in advance—this place, sufficiently far from the Royal Capital, was a long-abandoned quarry, perfect for scoundrels hiding from the public eye to meet up.

In this quarry, the one to greet Aldebaran with a sharp accost was Felt, her back leaned upon a crumbling stone wall, red irises ablaze with rage and animosity.

Her fang visible between her distorted lips, she postured herself with arms crossed and evinced her scorn for Aldebaran. Her way of calling him had also downstepped from simply “helmet bastard” to “shitty helmet bastard”.

Felt jerked her slim chin, indicating the Royal Capital visible from afar,

Felt: “That large rock, if Emilia-neechan hadn’t stopped it, just how many people do you think it would’ve killed? What happened to your policy of not causing anyone’s deaths? Do you intend to flout everything you decided on each time you lose heart? “Lame” can’t even begin to describe you.”

Aldebaran: “…Guess so. I’m also relieved that you’re safe, Lil’ Miss Felt.”

Felt: “Huh?”

Aldebaran: “It’s a joke. Or rather, a quip. A gag that fell totally flat.”

As Felt’s prickliness compounded with his reply, Aldebaran powerlessly responded. Perhaps perceiving this attitude of Aldebaran’s as insincere, she pitched forward as if to snap at him when Roy enounced a “You know Felt-chan~” from atop his shoulder,

Roy: “Wanna tell you to keep it up, keep it up, but when it comes to naggingly pressing this uncle, we’ve completed the preliminary preparation of ingredients on our end. So, may as well try changing up the flavor with a different seasoning, how about it?”

Felt: “How about shit… So you’re the Gluttony who got caught. Are you the older brother? Or the younger one? Whichever way, you’ve got an irritating mug that resembles your sibling’s.”

Roy: “Ah~, you’re also acquainted with us? Well~, makes sense. We heard it from Louis too, you know~? That because of Felt-chan, Ley suffered food poisoning, you see~.”

Felt: “You mean back when they were blaming my name for something or the other? Served ’em right.”

The girl progressively sharpening her cussing, Felt had reputedly once encountered Gluttony—Ley Batenkaitos, in Pristella. Her speech made light of his sibling from back then, who had since died on top of that, but just like with Aldebaran’s instance, Roy only showed a smile alongside a “Haha-” in good humor.

Roy: “By the way, amongst us, it’s unknown who of us was the eldest son~. As for us, there were times we felt like being the eldest son, yet also felt at times like being the second son, maybe because of that~, is what we’re saying.”

Felt: “Don’t go yapping on with such stupid reasoning. The order of brothers and sisters isn’t something you can just decide by feeling. You gotta decide if you’ll yield it or accept it before it’s gone.”

Roy: “Haha~! Both uncle and Felt-chan, you think you can say anything if it’s to the hated Sin Archbishops? Very nice very nice, it’s what you call everyone’s shared consensus, right~?”

Felt: “Hey, shitty helmet bastard, I’ve got no intention of having a fun little chat with him. Hurry up and shut his fanged mouth, then answer my questions.”

Aldebaran: “I agree with you that he needs to shut up, but the time for the question-answer session will have to wait a bit. Before that…”

Obstructing Felt’s demand, Aldebaran turned his head on the spot. Apprehending the intent behind his act of surveying the insides of the quarry, Felt clicked her tongue with a “You” and jerked her chin. Deep within the quarry, a humble cabin barely maintaining its shape, Aldebaran guided his line of sight towards that, and—

???: “—Al-sama.”

Aldebaran: “…”

The very moment that Yae appeared from out of the cabin, her eyes met Aldebaran’s.

Accompanied by a faintly warm aroma, Yae had likely been preparing a meal inside the cabin. He was grateful for that consideration. And even though he was grateful—

Aldebaran: “From the looks of it, you had it pretty rough, yeah?”

With merely a glance, Aldebaran perceived a difference from her usual easygoing and elusive self.

Her characteristic waso maid outfit was torn all over, and her red hair, which she never failed to maintain even on the battlefield, was frayed. But above all else, was her expression.

An atmosphere of meekness, or rather, one bereft of naivete, was doing the greatest harm to her usual image.

And as proof of that—

Yae: “…Thank goodness.”

Softly placing a hand over her chest, Yae muttered at the convergence with Aldebaran.

Sensing the hue of emotion painting that voice, Aldebaran felt a bit daunted, though he would never admit to it, so he shrugged his shoulders with an “Oi oi”,

Aldebaran: “Isn’t that a degree of auspiciousness unbefitting Yae-san, the helpful all-purpose maid? To not even be able to back me up, what kinda surprise guest did you have an affair with?”

Yae: “—. To say that I had an affair would be bad for my reputation, Al-sama. You are well aware that you have complete control over Yae-chan’s heart, Al-sama.”

The hesitation that had accompanied her answer for a moment vanished, returning Yae’s demeanor to business as usual. Sliding her finger down her chest, she resumed “But, but”,

Yae: “I suppose it’s true that I spent some passionate time with a gentleman~. The one who graced the mansion with his presence was the Sword Demon, Wilhelm van Astrea… no, Wilhelm Trias-sama.”

Aldebaran: “The Sword Demon grandpa, huh? That’s…”

At the unforeseen assassin, Yae would have also likely been stupefied. But, it was difficult to label him the worst-possible enemy.

Of course, there was no doubt that he was one of the foremost powerful fighters in the Kingdom, but a swordsman would have been far more manageable than a magician for Yae. In addition, she had laid her traps all around the Barielle Villa, converting it into the perfected hunting ground of the Crimson Sakura, so to speak.

However, given that “Aldebaran” had ultimately hastened there to provide relief, the Sword Demon’s honed edge had exceeded that of Yae’s. And from her expression, it was clear that it had not even been a narrow defeat, but rather one of complete annihilation.

And likely, the reason behind that sharpness was—

Aldebaran: “The old man, sulking over there as he is, ain’t unrelated, now is he?”

Where Aldebaran had directed his attention, on a neglected stump of a wood-chopping block next to the cabin, was a red-haired man hugging one knee as he cast his eyes down—Heinkel.

With his head hanging limp, the blood soiling Heinkel’s entire body had yet to be cleaned off. From Aldebaran’s position, it was difficult to tell whether that blood was his own or someone else’s, however.

Aldebaran: "What happened?"

Yae: "…My consciousness was all fuzzy at the time, so I didn't catch it with my own eyes, but…"

Aldebaran: "But?"

Yae: "Supposedly, Heinkel-sama slew the Sword Demon-sama."

Aldebaran: "…"

Yae's response, lacking any conclusive evidence, caused Aldebaran's breath to catch, and he turned his gaze to Heinkel once more.

Naturally, Aldebaran was aware of the relationship between Heinkel and Wilhelm. It had become a story of confrontation between parent and child, ending with the son slaying the father.

He was aware of Heinkel's excessively fatal flaw as a swordsman, but—

Aldebaran: "Between his father and his son, the old man sure was stuck indefinitely between a rock and a hard place."

The discord within the Astrea Family, down to its core, Aldebaran knew not.

Only, he knew that the existence of the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint and the title of Sword Saint had given rise to friction across three generations of parent, child, and grandchild. And, that friction had amounted to something definite because of this occasion.

Aldebaran: "…"

Reinhard and Wilhelm, over these few days Heinkel had taken a position in complete opposition to both of them; Aldebaran and the rest had no right to worry about his feelings.

He was someone caught up in this for the sake of being used. It would have been nothing but shameless to call out to him and ask if he was okay. Hence, Aldebaran returned his gaze to Yae, asking "So then”,

Aldebaran: “What about the grandpa? If the old man slayed him, then all of that would be his blood, so…”

???: “—For the time being, only the most minimal of treatment’s been applied. We couldn’t stay there long at all, so it’s really just the bare minimum.”

Aldebaran: “Uoah?!”

The sudden voice jolting his shoulders, Aldebaran goggled at his surroundings. But, “Aldebaran”, who should have been the owner of that voice, was nowhere to be found. It was the Divine Dragon’s dragonhusk. It was not of a size that could have been overlooked—and, right when he thought that,

“Aldebaran”: “Sorry, sorry, for now, optical camouflage cancellation.”

No sooner than those words were uttered, in the space that ought to have been completely empty until then—resting its jaw on the rocky wall that Felt had been leaning against, there appeared the massive body of a limply reclined Dragon. Watching the way it appeared, as if the blurred atmosphere was gradually gaining color, Aldebaran widened his eyes with an “Ohh”,

Aldebaran: “Optical camouflage, is that bending light to make yourself transparent? So you can do that sorta thing?”

“Aldebaran”: “As you’d expect, correcting it while moving in real time’d be impossible, you know? But, when limited to just the times when I’m completely still, most of the demerits that come with this body quite literally disappear, yeah?”

Aldebaran: “Sounds about right. I think a Dragon that turns invisible’s pretty damn cool.”

It was possible to realize magic that bent light by combining Yang Magic and Wind Magic, but it would consume far too much fuel to have it continuously active. It required a very precise control of magic to blend into the surrounding environment, and it was a challenge that would very likely not reach the sought-after standard.

In reality, it had been difficult for even “Aldebaran” to perform, so instead it had kept it on standby, concealed above the clouds of the Royal Capital.

Aldebaran: “If you’ve become capable of doing it, then… must’ve been quite the hard-fought battle.”

“Aldebaran”: “Was neck and neck with the other side. To be honest, without the old man’s backstab, a bit of fear flashed through my head that I might’ve lost.”

Aldebaran: “A backstab, huh…”

Shaking his head, Aldebaran processed the two surprises.

First, was the thought of how fearsome the Sword Demon must have been to inspire visions of defeat within “Aldebaran”. Even if the currently loaded software was different, the hardware specs were undoubtedly that of the Divine Dragon, so to reach that sphere immediately following a battle with Yae, one would have had to have been an unthinkable monster.

Thus, the second surprise was naturally the manner in which Heinkel had intervened with the battle—

Aldebaran: “It likely wouldn’t have been easy to have settled things fair and square, but ending things with a backstab’s probably wrecking the old man’s mental.”

Yae: “Well, I think there’s no doubt about that~. Ultimately, ever since we fled the Royal Capital, he hasn’t spoken to us even once.”

Aldebaran: “Is that so…”

Receiving an affirmation from Yae that Heinkel’s affliction was just as he had imagined, Aldebaran took a deep breath, and looked over those present once more.

Yae was dejected by her defeat, and “Aldebaran” had been overwhelmed by the Sword Demon. Heinkel was cowering with the shock of stabbing his father, and Felt was not even trying to hide her enmity to the rest of them. Finally, atop his shoulders, Roy was in merry spirits, and Aldebaran himself was an atrocious villain going full speed down the path to being a coward.

On top of being a lineup of good-for-nothings, they were in quite a tattered state.

Aldebaran: "—Even so, everyone's alive."

Upon reuniting face to face with everyone at the quarry, ascertaining their survival, Aldebaran released the tension from his shoulders, silently rescinded his Territory, and reopened a new matrix.

With his restart point updated, the events that took place at the Royal Capital were set in stone for this world's history.

In other words, he would no longer be able to take back the tears that had flowed from her amethyst eyes.

Aldebaran: "But, that's fine. The moment I decided to betray everything, there'd be no such convenience as making an exception for any one person."

He would not compromise. Wavering of his heart was forbidden. Were he to falter, all would come to naught.

In order to conclude that there had been meaning in all the pain he had suffered with his body, with his heart, Aldebaran's party could not afford to fail, let alone halt their legs.

Aldebaran: "Yae, if you've prepared food, then give it here. I'm starving."

Yae: "I couldn't take any of the ingredients from the mansion with me, so I stole from stores along the way. I noted down what I took from which stores, so please pay for it all later."

Aldebaran: "How shrewd of you… got it. Also, this guy here…"

Yae: “You want me to tie and hang him up? In that case, I’ve already done so.”

As she spoke, Yae made a fluid motion with her upraised finger, and Aldebaran’s shoulder suddenly felt lighter. Roy’s body was tied up by a steel thread, suspended on the stone wall of the quarry.

Roy: “What’s this what’s this, this treatment again? Well~, maybe it’s better than hanging upside down, but still~.”

Aldebaran: “Stay put like that for a bit. Once I decide on how to discipline you, I’ll heal your arms and legs. However…”

Roy: “Don’t forget the Curse Mark, right~? Isn’t it fine? There’s no way we’d ever say that we won’t plot anything, but for the time being we’ll hold off and evaluate for you~.”

Aldebaran: “Evaluate, eh.”

Roy: “Because Ley died, perhaps~? We have no intention whatsoever of succeeding Gourmet or anything like that, but let’s try taking a bit more of an interest in things before serving atop the platter, is what we’re saying!”

With both arms and legs bound, hung up rigidly like a shrimp, Roy swung his body. Shrugging his shoulders at that eeriness, Aldebaran crossed gazes with “Aldebaran”.

Possessing the same ego as himself, it drew back its large jaw, a firm promise that it would not avert its eyes.

Aldebaran: “That reminds me, Plan B was a huge help. Thanks to that, we got away.”

“Aldebaran”: “Ahh, so that’s what you went with, Origin. I’d thought of it as a “second plan”. Well, it’s a good thing that we landed on the same idea.”

Aldebaran: “Origin?”

“Aldebaran”: “It’s getting a bit tiresome to keep calling you “the other me”, yeah? And so, I was thinking, how about Origin, as in progenitor. How’s “descendent” for me?”

Aldebaran: “Progenitor and descendent, sorta like iekei ramen.”

At “Aldebaran’s” proposal, Aldebaran lazily dodged it with an “I’ll think about it”. Then, he finally turned to face the angry expression on Felt’s face, which he had been putting off.

With her arms crossed, Felt’s eyes had been ablaze with an unaltered indignation, but—

Aldebaran: “You figured out that it was Lil’ Miss Emilia who stopped that massive boulder, yeah?”

Felt: “Ah? Are you making fun of me? Nobody else but Emilia-neechan would perform such an idiotic feat.”

Aldebaran: “The way you said that makes me wonder which one of us is making fun of who… but yeah, you’re right. I dropped the boulder knowing full well that Lil’ Miss Emilia would stop it all.”

Felt: “…You’re gonna be getting much more than just an ass-kicking.”

The despicable trick Aldebaran had pulled in order to get away, Felt had understood it true, and her lips contorted more and more as she threatened him. Her threat stunk of the undercity, and he sensed that it represented her utmost rage; however, Aldebaran harbored another emotion simultaneously.

Aldebaran’s method of doing things, and Emilia, who had been ensnared by it. Including the jailbreak of Gluttony, it was a lineup that would naturally incur Felt’s ire.

But, it seemed like there had also been other reasons behind the overflowing of Felt’s anger—.

Aldebaran: “…The thing with the old man and the Sword Demon grandpa, it ain’t your fault, Felt-chan.”

Felt: “I never once thought it was my fault. Without a doubt, it’s you… you guys, Reinhard’s father, and his grandfather, who are at fault. But still, I’m angry, and just thinking about what sorta face that idiot’ll make when he finds out about this makes me even more angry.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Felt: “The moment I made him my Knight, it wouldn’t make sense for me to be uninvolved with the things involving him, no matter what they might be. Remember this, you shitty helmet bastard.”

Aldebaran: “…What?”

Felt: “Even if you do stuff with the intention of taking responsibility for it yourself, there’s no way it’ll ever be talked about in isolation from that princess. All you’re doing is kicking her corpse.”

Felt’s sharp tongue and glint in her eyes gnawed at Aldebaran more so than any other poison until now.

The relationship between Knight and master was something that would not disappear even if one of them were to die. If Aldebaran gained notoriety, that would also become notoriety for Priscilla Barielle.

With that thrust before him anew, he experienced fresh pain and bitterness. But—

Aldebaran: “The Princess, is no longer among us. Didn’t even leave a corpse behind.”

Felt: “—Hk, it’s not that sorta…!”

Aldebaran: “It is that sorta thing. To me, that’s what lives are.”

As Felt laid her anger bare, she was silenced by a dry answer.

Postmortem renown and notoriety held no meaning whatsoever to the deceased. Everything hinged on being alive. The feelings of joy and sorrow regarding the reputations of the dead were entirely formed from the sentimentality of those who lived.

Aldebaran: “You gotta do your best while both you and your partner are still alive. That’s all I have to say.”

Felt: “—. You shitty helmet bastard, what the hell even are you really?”

Aldebaran: “…I’m a following star.”

Felt: “Following star…?”

Aldebaran: “A failure of the star that shines brightest in the night sky.”

On that note, Aldebaran turned his back on Felt, and resigned from the exchange. Then, Aldebaran strode up to the chopping block, over to Heinkel.

Heinkel: “…”

Eyes downcast without raising his visage, Heinkel ignored Aldebaran. But, he ought to have noticed him. His breathing, and the flinch of his body had perceived his presence.

It was easy to imagine that he would feel on edge. It was a bit troubling to decide on what to say, but,

Aldebaran: “I’ll keep my promise. When this is all over, the Dragon’s Blood will be yours no matter what.”

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

Right now, what Heinkel necessitated was neither consolation nor apology, but a firm, definite promise.

At Aldebaran’s words, formed by his thinking, Heinkel’s breath caught, followed by his outstretched hand grabbing the hem of Aldebaran’s tunic, pulling him closer by sheer force. Suddenly down on one knee, Aldebaran felt the cold edge of a blade fastened to his nape, and his eyes met Heinkel’s.

With blood splattered on his face, Heinkel’s blue eyes were bloodshot,

Heinkel: “No matter what…!”

Aldebaran: “…”

Heinkel: “No matter what, keep your promise. The Dragon’s Blood, whatever it takes… the Witch of Envy too…!”

Aldebaran: “I know. I’ve got no intention of letting the world end. That’s the purpose of Gluttony.”

Feeling the sharp pain on his nape, Aldebaran composed himself and responded so. He softly raised his arm as well, forcing Yae to back off as she was about to respond to Heinkel’s rash action.

Then, after Aldebaran and Heinkel stared at each other up close for a while,

Heinkel: “SHIT!”

Spitting that word out, Heinkel shoved Aldebaran back. Getting his body back up after falling on his backside, Aldebaran looked to his fore, and saw that Heinkel had returned to hanging his head, shutting himself away like before.

Witnessing that, Aldebaran fiddled with the metal fixture of his helmet, and sighed.

For the time being, he had grasped the state of each party member.

He would not deny that as a result of entering the Royal Capital, everyone had been exhausted for better or for worse, but the fact that nobody had been lost, and the fact that he had secured Roy made up for that; thus, he could proceed.

Frankly, he was well aware that he was not cut out for this, but he had no choice but to lead them.

Aldebaran: “For the time being, we should be able to settle down here. We’ll eat Yae’s food, and resume movement after a bit of a rest. The chaos from the Royal Capital’s only gonna continue—”

Snapping his fingers as a substitute for clapping his hands, Aldebaran gathered everyone’s attention.

Until this point, Yae and Heinkel, who had been accompanying him from the start, had been marching on nearly three days without rest or sleep. He had intended on taking some time to let them rest.

—That was, if a giant boulder had not been dropped from high in the sky, almost as if to interrupt Aldebaran’s words.

Aldebaran: “Wha.”

With that, right after mistaking it for a thin cloud’s shadow, Aldebaran was crushed by the extreme weight.

Merely, far in the distance, he felt as if he could hear the buzzing of insects.

3

—Otto Suwen was enraged.

He resolved to do whatever he must to rid the land of that evil and ruthless king. —To the point that that nonsensical, cliche stock phrase that Subaru had told him that people used when they got angry flashed through his mind, Otto was enraged.

There was no need to disclose who the direct cause, and target, of that rage was.

The great sinner, Al—nay, Aldebaran had committed an unforgivable transgression. That was not only due to his betrayal of the hearts of those who were concerned for his mental and physical well-being, but also due to the fact that he had broken nearly a hundred of the most important laws prescribed by the Kingdom.

However, what enraged Otto the most was the fact that he had antagonized Otto’s very own family.

Otto considered himself a pacifist.

He fundamentally disliked conflict, and believed in avoiding any trouble that he could. In fact, even during the time he traveled together with Frufoo as a merchant, he seldomly stuck his nose into the disputes of others or chose the usage of violence unless he was given no other option.

However, his situation changed upon joining the Emilia Camp and taking on the position of its Internal Affairs Minister.

He did not appreciate Subaru's teasing of him being a militant Internal Affairs Minister—but, pacifism and mild-mannered diplomacy were not top priorities in his current position.

The caliber and intensity of the malice he had to face was far greater than anything he had experienced as a traveling merchant, and if he continued to respond in a half-hearted, passive manner, he would fail to protect those whom he wished to protect the most.

Likewise, he exercised both self-awareness of his status as someone entrusted by a Royal Selection Candidate, and self-control that he warned himself must never slip.

As the Camp's Internal Affairs Minister and a key administrator of the Mathers Domain's management, Otto held a status and power of his position that he could have never dreamed of before. So that he would never be swallowed up by that and lose sight of his place, Otto admonished himself daily.

Those efforts Otto made to admonish himself, however, were forgotten the moment someone laid their hands on his family.

Otto: "Everyone has their own circumstances. But, I will not tolerate someone who is unwilling to find a solution at the negotiating table."

If they desired mercy, he would show them mercy. If they desired generosity, he would show them generosity.

That kind of consideration and goodwill was present within everyone in the Camp, led by Emilia. Therefore, Otto also did his utmost to respect the integrity of that spirit of theirs.

Even so, if the other party continued to trample over and take advantage of them, he would be left with no choice.

If they desired his blessings, he would give them his blessings. If they desired his support, he would offer them his support.

And, if they desired to be hostile, then he would show them his utmost hostility.

Otto: “Thanks to Emilia-sama, the city came out unscathed. The evacuation of the Noble District was also completed in advance. The Knights of the Royal Capital have proven quite capable.”

Tightly clenching his fist, Otto processed the damage caused by the events that had just taken place.

Since he needed to dedicate his mind to getting a grasp on the situation and understanding how things had progressed, he could not allow himself to give in to indignation. Truly, he felt mortified deep within his heart. —Mortified, at his own pathetic disgrace.

When the initial weight of the situation that had begun to move struck him over the head, Otto shamefully lamented his powerlessness, and was consoled by Emilia of all people. It should have been the opposite. That should never have occurred. The purpose of Otto’s position was to ease Emilia’s concerns.

And yet, the reality was that Otto had been on the verge of tears as he was comforted by Emilia, and had his head raised back up by the words of one whom he ought to have been supporting, before being given a push to his back.

He had jokingly told Emilia that Subaru would kill him, but in his heart of hearts, Otto truly wanted to strangle himself to death.

However, the dead would never get a chance to redeem themselves. So instead of foolishly wrapping his hands around his own neck, Otto would use his head with all his resolve. Fortunately, half-crying like that helped him clear his head out a little. —Though the thunder was still rumbling in his mind, the lightning allowed him to peer into the darkness.

He thought back to a time long ago, when it was just him and Frufoo; they were hurrying through a thunderstorm when a bolt of lightning struck the carriage bed, resulting in their entire load of cargo being reduced to ashes.

As Otto lamented his great misfortune, his beloved dragon said to him “Let’s be glad that neither of us was hurt, alright?”, and he could not deny the truth in her words.

If one traveled through a thunderstorm, they had to be prepared to get struck by lightning. —In that moment, however, it was up to the individual’s luck whether they could avoid being burned to death by said lightning.

By shaving away as many elements that luck could sway as possible, he forged ahead through that thunderstorm.

That was the essence of the enraged Otto Suwen’s no-holds-barred fighting style—for that singular purpose, he would even play cards in his hand that were branded as ruthless without hesitation.

The manifestation of that was—

Otto: “While we are staying in the Royal Capital, we cannot prepare a military force surpassing Reinhard-san, nor combat strength that exceeds Felt-sama’s group. As it is, when the turn to act comes back around to us, sheer force and numbers can no longer serve as absolute measures to stop them.”

By some artifice, Aldebaran had slipped past the Sword Saint Reinhard. Then, with the Divine Dragon Volcanica in his wake, he had pushed through Felt and her forces before reaching the Royal Capital.

Otto and his group, having only just returned from the Vollachian Empire and having gone separate ways from their allies, had no means to oppose the baffling ability of Aldebaran.

Thus, neither Emilia, who was dispatched with orders to capture him alive, nor the summons to Wilhelm’s group, who coincidentally were staying at the royal residence, were conceived as decisive strokes.

Naturally, were Emilia and Wilhelm’s group to reign victorious, it would have been ideal, but Otto had anticipated that such an outcome was likely unattainable. As matters stood, Otto's group had possessed no means of aggression beyond deploying the entirety of their available forces.

—Otto Suwen possessed neither Reinhard van Astrea's combat ability nor Valga Cromwell's strategic ingenuity. He did not presume himself blessed to rival such talent, for he harbored no such inflated assessment of himself.

Otto did not expect himself to transcend his mortal limits. —At best, he could only muster one-hundred percent of his own ability.

With that one-hundred percent, what Otto Suwen could do was—

Otto: "—An abandoned quarry, west of the Royal Capital."

The tidings were borne with the sound of fluttering wings; Otto narrowed his eyes as he marked the map. With one hand pressing a bloodied handkerchief to his nose, he tapped his hazy head.

Divine Protection overheating—when Subaru had thus dubbed the exhaustion born from overuse, Garfiel's eyes had shined at the wondrous sound of it. Remembering that, Otto's lips relaxed.

Otto: "Overheating, that sounds quite nice. Even if my head splits open, I will not stop, I…"

Blood still trickled from his nose as Otto grumbled thus under the gathering whir of wings—Zodda bugs, at whom he snapped his fingers, instructing them to their next course of action in the continuation of their surveillance.

The Zodda bugs possessed an amiable disposition with a faint sense of individual awareness. They shared directives as one being, and to persuade but a single insect would demonstrate results equivalent to persuading the entire swarm. For their service, they demanded but a single reward: a peaceful life.

By virtue of his position as the Internal Affairs Minister, Otto had intended to secure their compensation. In return, the swarm must pledge obedience unto tasks of mortal peril whilst performing reckless endeavors that surpassed human capability.

—They had clung to the fleeing Divine Dragon to pinpoint its rendezvous point, mobilized swarms of a hundred thousand strong to drop boulders upon their foes, gathered every message left by the captured Felt; such deeds they wrought.

Otto: “…The Grand Mogolade Geyser.”

It was a missive Felt had left in her captivity amidst Aldebaran’s gang, cast forth in hope of reaching allies which would later be salvaged within the ruins of the Barielle estate. The very manner of this delivery, evading surveillance to entrust her message to the Zodda bugs, spoke volumes of Felt’s unshakeable courage.

In truth, the missive contained naught but a toponym from the Kararagi City-States. It was likely Aldebaran and his group’s next target, or possibly their ultimate destination. If that was where they were headed, then by all means, let them go freely. —Otto’s watchful gaze would never leave them.

Wherever they went, however they concealed themselves, Otto would endure ceaseless ringing in his ears and crimson streaks from his nose to track every last movement of Aldebaran’s faction.

Otto: “Please do not delude yourself into thinking you can sleep again. —The entire world is your enemy now.”

He had nothing like the strength to claim victory. Naught remained but to continue to whittle away at his enemy’s might.

Thus did Otto Suwen fight, not as the Sword Saint or the Great Strategist, but as Emilia’s Internal Affairs Minister, one who exerted one-hundred percent of his strength.

V!c.1120

Chapter 32: The Man Named Clind

1

—While Aldebaran’s party was being relentlessly pursued by powerful adversaries, there were two other places in the Kingdom where gruelling and fierce battles of equal intensity were being fought.

One battle was between the Sword Saint, who continuously sought to prevent the destruction of the world, and the Witch of Envy, who persistently sought to swallow up the Augria Sand Dunes after manifesting a part of herself from the sealed shrine.

Both the Witch of Envy and the Sword Saint possessed the power to instantly end any battle if they were facing any other opponent, but exactly because they were facing each other in battle, the fight remained evenly matched, and the outcome continued to be left undecided.

The battle would continue for a full seven days and seven nights. —Bringing the grave cost of the world’s destruction with it.

The other battle, as opposed to Aldebaran’s party and the Sword Saint’s, did not involve physical conflict, yet had the potential to influence the outcome of the other two battles greatly.

In other words, it was the struggle of those who were pursuing the “Following Star”, with Petra Leyte as the key.

—Petra knew very little about the man named Clind.

He was on her side. That, there was absolutely no doubt.

Annerose Miload, his master, was a shrewd little girl who, despite her young age and the unfortunate blemish of being related to Roswaal, remained unfazed through and through. She was one of the Emilia Camp’s strongest supporters and, even from Petra’s perspective, was undoubtedly charmed by Emilia.

Clind, who dedicated himself to supporting Annerose and was trusted as a versatile all-purpose butler, had also given Petra lessons in etiquette and manners when she first started working as a maid.

Clind had not only educated Petra, but almost everyone associated with the Mathers household, even Frederica and Ram were taught the fundamentals of being a servant by him.

Therefore, Clind could be considered the point of origin for the servants of the Mathers household, and Petra should therefore have regarded him as a teacher or mentor.

However, it was none other than the person in question who had corrected Petra's perception.

Clind: "I never intended to take on such a noble role as teaching and mentoring. Misinterpretation. I am merely conveying what I have heard from my predecessors. It is only because I have remained in this position for many years that I have had many opportunities to do so. Declination."

Clind's way of thinking could have been interpreted as a sign of humility and modesty.

However, Petra intuitively sensed that these were Clind's true, albeit rarely expressed feelings.

???: "In the end, that man undervalues himself. Because he has such low self-esteem, he thinks his work is not worthy of any praise… He is being so condescending!"

This was Frederica's unusually harsh critique directed solely at Clind. Still, while Petra believed she was absolutely correct and the most wonderful person in the world, she was also in partial disagreement with her.

At first glance, Clind's attitude indeed appeared to be that of a person with low self-esteem. However, Clind lacked the apparent hesitation or indecision when communicating with younger people or his junior colleagues, whereas a person with low self-esteem would tend to show more hesitation and indecision.

Clind's attitude displayed no such simple and mundane hesitation.
—Just like Petra.

Petra: "If I put my mind to it, I can do anything."

Most people would probably dismiss such a statement as mere arrogance, but Petra did not care about most people; she only cared about those closest to her. And she believed that the people closest to her believed in her confidence and potential.

Petra was aware that she was full of potential and had the talent to bring it to fruition.

Not only was she cute, but she also possessed the talent necessary to walk her desired path and the determination to believe in that talent and continue striving toward her goals without ever stopping. She was fully aware that she had been blessed with numerous gifts worthy of heaven.

As someone who was blessed with such talent, she would have said that Clind's attitude was not that of someone with low self-esteem, but rather the opposite.

Clind was well aware of his exceptional talents. However, he did not consider them something to be proud of. This made him appear modest and reserved at first glance.

Petra: "But, I really don't like that."

—Petra knew very little about the man named Clind.

However, Petra honestly did not like Clind, the man she knew so little about.

It was not unrelated to the fact that Frederica, who was always so polite and kind to everyone like a loving mother, showed a particularly special attitude and uncharacteristic expressiveness only toward Clind, and that she was able to discern his underlying emotions. Of course, it was also a factor that Clind had been acquainted with Roswaal for a very long time and appeared to be on very good terms with him.

But, the biggest reason was derived from Clind's own nature, which differed from his relationships with Frederica and Roswaal.

—The main reason was that the way he conducted himself, which seemed as if he had already given up, was completely contrary to Petra's principles.

Petra: "—We're back, so lend us a hand! I know you're listening, Clind-niisama!"

As the dragon carriage passed through the gate at the entrance to Mirula, the town closest to the sand dunes, Petra raised her voice and called out to the familiar man.

It was all thanks to Patrasche, who had ceaselessly raced fiercely across the Sand Sea for a day and night from the Pleiades Watchtower, that Petra and the others were able to return in the shortest possible time and route. Even so, they were still lagging far behind Al, who had borrowed the wings of the Divine Dragon.

His strength was indispensable to catch up with that increasingly distant target.

Petra: "Clind-niisama!"

Petra pulled on the reins to stop the dragon carriage and raised her voice once more in the town square.

Petra's desperate plea was met with silence from the man she had just called out to. But, she was convinced that her voice had reached him, and she started glancing around herself.

???: "Huh? Where is everyone?"

As if echoing Petra's gaze, the Imaginary Subaru spoke.

Just as the Imaginary Subaru had said, even though it was midday, there was not a single soul to be seen in the square. —No, it was not just the square. There was no sign of life in the entire town.

Mirula gave off the impression of a deserted roadside town, but even so, there should have been at least one or two hundred residents living there. It was very much odd that there was not a single person to be seen anywhere.

???: "…Maybe helmet-ojisan wiped everyone o~ut?"

"Subaru": "That's a scary thing to say! Don't act like Elsa!"

Petra: "Don't say such scary things, Meili-chan. —As for you, Subaru, Meili-chan isn't like that anymore. It's just the result of her upbringing."

The first half of her remark was for Meili; the second half, for the Imaginary Subaru.

To say that Meili's worst-case scenario did not briefly cross her mind would have been a lie, but the possibility was able to be ruled out because the town was deserted but not damaged.

If Al had wreaked havoc with Volcanica, the town would have been completely wiped off the earth, and irreparable devastation would have ensued.

The appearance of the town was not so much a scene of devastation as much as it was—

Petra: "It looks like they ran away in the night."

"Subaru": "It's like they ran away in the night."

Then, the impressions of Petra and the Imaginary Subaru unexpectedly overlapped.

Since the Imaginary Subaru resided within Petra's mind, it was only natural that this would occur. However, as a young woman in love, she was secretly a little bit delighted that her thoughts were mirrored by her beloved.

Besides, there were other reasons why she was able to stay positive.

???: "—Although that may be a slight generalization, that assessment seems to be correct. Perspicacity."

With that, a man stepped forward into the now completely deserted town square.

Amidst the bleak and desolate townscape, this person maintained a refined aura that stood out. Their mysterious presence was like a single drop of deep blue paint on a blank sheet of paper, exuding a subtle, unobtrusive, yet powerful strength.

That man had something so innate about himself that would make one believe that even if this were not a deserted roadside town but the bustling Royal Capital or even a noisy, crowded summer fireworks festival, no one would be able to overlook the man's presence.

"Subaru": "Wait a second. I'm now loading Petra's knowledge real quick."

Petra: "—Clind-niisama."

"Subaru": "Aww, you beat me to it!"

When the unfamiliar figure appeared, the Imaginary Subaru from the past looked a bit disappointed at being beaten to the punch, while Petra quickly jumped down from the driver's seat and looked directly at the newcomer.

The versatile butler, and the man who held the key to overturning this situation—Clind.

Clind: "—. Considering the state of Mirula and the turbulence in the Sand Sea, it appears that it was the correct decision to abandon the return journey. Fortuitous."

Adjusting the position of the monocle on his left eye with his hand, Clind narrowed his eyes at the scene of the empty town and what lay behind Petra and the others—the murky sky that had caused all of this.

And then—

Clind: “Petra, it appears we need to talk. Urgency.”

2

Clind: “—I understand. Deliberation.”

Upon hearing a rough explanation, Clind touched his narrow jaw with his finger and closed one eye.

The sharp beauty of a man, lost in thought, was in itself as majestic as a painting, but unfortunately, Petra had no time to admire it, as her sensibilities lay elsewhere.

If she simply wanted to see a beautiful face, the quickest way would have been to look in a mirror or at Emilia.

Clind: “What is the condition of Garfiel and the one called Ezzo? Verification.”

Meili: “I don’t think you need to fear for the lives of either fanged onii-san or Sensei-san. Fanged onii-san is really tou~gh, so I’m worried since he hasn’t woken up yet, bu~t…”

Petra: “Yeah, I think Garf-san was probably protecting Ezzo-san.”

Picking up the second half of Meili’s answer, Petra considered the two individuals who had been laid in the dragon carriage.

Garfiel, whose durability was one of his strengths, had suffered as much damage as Ezzo, a dwarf and magician, perhaps because he had shielded Ezzo by standing in front of him when they were attacked by the Divine Dragon.

Without those heroic actions, Ezzo might not have survived.

“Subaru”: “So, Garfiel took a direct hit from the Dragon, huh…? I still can’t quite wrap my head around the fact that he’s willing to risk his life like that, even though he’s only fourteen with a major case of chuunibyou.”

Petra: “Just so you know, Garf-san is fifteen now. By the way, I’m turning fourteen soon.”

“Subaru”: “Time just flies by. No wonder Petra’s gone from being a pretty girl to a beautiful woman.”

Petra: “…”

Again, Petra had to keep in mind that this was just the Imaginary Subaru in her mind, and not what the real Subaru would say. However, even if it were the real Subaru, he would have said something along those lines, and she remembered hearing him say something similar before.

Even though she knew it was not flattery, but rather sincere words, the fact that he could say it so casually to anyone other than Emilia was somewhat troubling.

Regardless—

Petra: “While I’m also worried about Garf-san and Sensei-san, my biggest concern is Al-san. Clind-niisama, you waited for us because you feel the same way too, right?”

Clind: “The feeling is not quite the same. The reason I chose to remain in this place was because of a slight sense of unease I felt when I saw Petra and the others off. Misgivings.”

Petra: “A slight sense, of unease?”

Clind: “Yes. In fact, I informed both Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama about it. Retrospective.”

Clind cast his eyes down gloomily upon relaying the information that Petra and Meili had not known. In actuality, since the two who had been informed had both been taken by Al’s hand, Clind’s self-reproach must have been considerable.

Even the Imaginary Subaru, who was unfamiliar with Clind, felt a twinge of sympathy for this unfortunate situation,

“Subaru”: “Well, the more I hear about what happened, the more I think Beatrice and I were in the wrong. I mean, Clind-san communicated everything properly, right? But, we didn’t say anything, did we? So, this is the result; it’s only natural…”

Petra: “Subaru and Beatrice-chan aren’t to blame. Subaru, quiet down.”

“Subaru”: “My intentions aren’t reflected in my written apology!”

Subaru lamented as if he had struck upon something unreasonable, but Petra would not tolerate any careless disparagement of Subaru, even if it came from Subaru himself. Moreover, Beatrice would also be implicated with that remark. Beatrice was cute and kind, so she could not be at fault.

Without hesitation, she would dispense harsh justice that would make anyone tremble upon hearing it. These were the rules of Petra Leyte’s court, and the verdicts of Judge Petra.

Meili: “So? What was it that was bugging you, Butler-sa~n?”

Clind: “At that time, I was unable to identify it specifically. Inadequacy. However, now that the situation has developed this way… I feel that I have doubts about the establishment of the situation. Concern.”

Prompted by Meili, Clind kept his eyes downcast and put his thoughts into words.

The “establishment of the situation” that Clind found troubling likely referred to when he saw Petra and the others off at Mirula.

Clind: “It did not seem unnatural. Upon hearing the explanation, the choice of personnel seemed reasonable. —However, it also felt like a combination that would require two or three difficult justifications to make sense. Intentional.”

Petra: “Intentional…”

As Clind gave his explanation, Petra chewed on those words.

To be honest, the fact that Clind was vague and avoided making a clear statement about the mistake in the selection of members to travel to the Pleiades Watchtower—this fact nagged at Petra’s conscience in the form of guilt-ridden speculation.

If Emilia, Ram, or Otto had gone with Subaru instead of Petra, things might not have turned out this way. Indeed, if Frederica had been there instead of Petra as initially planned, Al's terrible actions might have been prevented.

Meili was irreplaceable in breaking through the Augria Sand Dunes, and Garfiel was the camp's most dependable fighter as an escort. These two were essential members of the expedition.

It was only Petra. Petra was the only member who was replaceable.

Petra: "…"

Perhaps she should have been more assertive. Whether it was postponing the trip to the Tower or everyone taking action together.

Of course, it was imperative to report immediately upon their return from Vollachia on the events that had transpired there, and it was also true that Schult, who had lost his only support, needed emotional care. Given the necessity of making such sound judgments, there was no doubt that the current members were chosen for the right reasons.

However, Petra was not confident that her subjective, arbitrary wishes had not influenced these decisions.

Having been separated from Subaru for so long, Petra did not want to be apart from him even for a moment, and she was driven by a selfish desire to be useful to him. In a place where Emilia and Rem were not present, Petra hoped that her strength and presence would be able to support Subaru.

As a result, she did not even recognize the uneasiness that Clind had sensed—.

"Subaru": "—Petra, you're definitely overthinking this."

Petra tightly gripped the hem of her skirt, and the intangible hand of the Imaginary Subaru overlapped hers, gently whispering in her ear.

However, Petra was not easily comforted by Subaru's words.

"Subaru": "Well, I know it's not my place to say this, but it's not impossible that you had some non-zero amount of ulterior motives, like wanting to be with me. But that's not a bad thing. And even if you did feel that way, it was only a single percent. I know that the other ninety-nine percent was Petra's kindness that I know so well."

Petra: "No… I'm just making the Subaru in my head say that…"

"Subaru": "If you say that, isn't there nothing I can say?! That's like playing a banned card!"

It must have been embarrassing for him to say that he wanted to be with her, but Petra let out a long breath at the sight of the Imaginary Subaru, blushing slightly as he pleaded with her.

To be honest, Petra hated herself for being so easily taken in by his kindness. She thought perhaps she was not a cheap girl; it was just that Subaru's words were too powerful.

"Subaru": "Besides, I suspect that your suffering isn't really your fault, Petra."

Petra: "Does… that have anything to do with Al-san being so strong?"

"Subaru": "Well, I've never actually seen Al fight with a sword, so I might be talking nonsense… but I do know Reinhard."

Even though Al's abilities were unknown, he knew the abilities of Reinhard—the pinnacle of this world.

Both Garfiel and Ezzo were incredibly skilled fighters who were out of Petra's class. Since Al defeated them, assuming that he was even stronger would be natural.

However, no matter how strong Al was, he was no match for Reinhard.

"Subaru": "When I first saw him in the loot house, I didn't really have an understanding of the norms of this world, so I was confused… But even by the standards of this world, he's still a monster."

Petra: "Yeah. But Al-san also did something about Reinhard-san. There's no doubt that Flam-chan used her Divine Protection to summon him, so…"

"Subaru": "At the very least, he wasn't instantly killed by Reinhard. Even with an assist character like the Divine Dragon, it's common knowledge that that's not something anyone can do easily, right?"

Petra: "Is that related to how we were grouped up?"

"Subaru": "Maybe. But I really feel like strength alone doesn't explain everything."

Petra also carefully considered the implications of what the Imaginary Subaru had said.

Indeed, no amount of strength mattered when facing Reinhard. With strength alone, it would be impossible to overcome Reinhard and achieve one's goal.

In other words, besides his strength, there were other reasons for Al's frightening nature.

"Subaru": "Honestly, things have been going too well for Al until now."

Petra: "But, people who always seem to be lucky have other reasons besides luck, right?"

"Subaru": "Right."

Although the heart of the matter remained unclear, Petra believed that it was worth remembering that point.

By exploring other possibilities, her feelings of guilt with nowhere to go were somewhat alleviated. Perhaps this had been what Subaru really wanted all along.

Meili: "Petra-chan? Are you okay? You're looking kind of spaced o~ut.”

Petra: “—. Sorry, Meili-chan, I’m fine. Anyway, Clind-niisama.”

Clind: “What is it? Confirmation.”

Petra: “I think your sense of unease is correct, Clind-niisama. I’m not exactly sure why, but if we don’t understand that unease, no one will be able to stop Al-san.”

Clind: “…”

Petra: “It’s just us. We’re the only ones who can stop Al-san. —We have to stop him, then get Subaru and Beatrice-chan back.”

With her hand placed on her chest, Petra pleaded with Clind.

Building it up, building it up, and then finally exhaling that breath, it had taken considerable courage for Petra to do so.

“Subaru”: “…”

The Imaginary Subaru stood with his arms crossed and stared at Petra’s profile with a complicated expression. Without looking in his direction, Petra remained steadfast in her conclusion. She believed it with all her heart.

—Petra had read Subaru’s Book of the Dead. In the worst-case scenario, Al might have killed Subaru and Beatrice and erased them from the world. It would be natural to think so, given that Natsuki Subaru’s Book of the Dead existed.

Petra: “But, my Subaru isn’t normal.”

The “my” slipped out subconsciously, but it was true. The “isn’t normal” part of it was true.

Natsuki Subaru had a power called Return by Death, an incredibly cruel and agonizing power that only a kind person could make use of properly. Petra surmised that the Book she had read had been but one of the volumes containing Subaru’s experiences of dying up until now.

That was because—

Petra: “After what I saw in that Book, did Subaru really manage to survive without dying even once?”

“Subaru”: “It feels like you have negative trust in me, huh. But, then again, with my impression of what Petra knows… all of the Sin Archbishops coming up to bat at once, the adventure at the Pleiades Watchtower, and the hell of the Vollachian Empire… for me to overcome all of that without a single mistake is, well, unbelievable even for me, wouldn’t you say?”

Petra: “…Yeah.”

When Petra realized that Subaru’s glorious achievements, which had already been considered remarkable given the hardships he had overcome, were, in fact, a collection of hellish trials far worse than she could have imagined, she was far from feeling disappointed in Subaru, but rather, she felt heartbroken by that self-sacrifice.

And at the same time, she was aware of it. —Of the depth of Subaru’s psychological scars, caused by Priscilla’s death.

Subaru was so deeply, deeply hurt, more deeply than anyone could possibly imagine. For precisely that reason, he had taken the blame upon himself and resolved to do anything for Al’s sake.

Not only was it those feelings of Subaru, but moreover his unparalleled resolve to “save everyone even if it means dying”, Al had betrayed all of it. If he had killed Subaru and Beatrice, then even if Petra tore apart Al’s body, mind, and soul, she would be unable to fulfill her revenge.

Meili: “Petra-chan, Onii-san and Beatrice-chan a~re…”

Petra: “They are alive. Absolutely.”

Meili: “…Yea~h. Both of them, especially Onii-san, are really tena~cious.”

Meili said so quietly and gently rested her head on Petra’s shoulder.

Even Meili, who was never so straightforward with her feelings, was genuinely concerned for Subaru and Beatrice. The fact that those around her felt the same way was a testament to Subaru's achievements thus far.

"Subaru": "Whether it comes to Beatrice or Meili, what the hell did the me I don't know do?"

Even though they concerned himself, the Imaginary Subaru muttered in a bewildered tone regarding those unknown actions. Seeing the Imaginary Subaru's expression, Petra relaxed her lips into a smile and turned back to Clind.

Petra had already conveyed her intentions and objectives. All that remained was to wait for his response.

Facing Petra's gaze directly, Clind quietly let out a sigh from his thin lips,

Clind: "Only you can do it, you say. What a bold statement. However, your resolve is a sight to behold. Admiration."

Petra: "…"

Clind: "Frankly speaking, when the Witch emerged at the end of the world, bringing about a situation that only the Sword Saint could possibly thwart, I had already half resigned myself to the fact that it was irreversible. Regret. However, if you are determined to fight on, then—"

Petra: "Hold on, Clind-niisama."

Clind had begun to speak, only to be met with Petra interrupting him mid-sentence.

It was not because she was concerned that the conversation would have become lengthy or gone off on a tangent. —To put it in Clind's words, it was an unease that she could not clearly articulate. However, it was precisely because he regretted overlooking that previous unease that Petra could not overlook this one.

What caught Petra's attention was the way Clind said it.

Petra: “I said “we”. That includes you, Clind-niisama. Don’t talk as if you’re not one of us.”

Clind: “That is… Hesitation.”

Petra: “Even if this might not be the right time, I will say it. Clind-niisama, you’ve always acted like you’re an outsider when you’re with us. I don’t like that.”

If he was dealing with Petra and the rest of the Emilia Camp as adults, as people in positions where it was necessary to take a step back, then she could still understand it.

But Clind was different. He treated everyone the same.

Annerose, whom Clind adored most; Roswaal, who had a relationship like partners-in-crime with Clind; Frederica, who could not bring herself to cut Clind out of her life; the same was true for all of them.

Petra: “That kind of lifestyle would never be tolerated in Emilia-neesama’s ideal Kingdom.”

Clind: “…”

Petra: “This isn’t someone else’s problem. If you’re alive, meeting people, talking to them, and spending time with them, then the good and bad things that happen are all part of it. You shouldn’t just pick out only a few bits, or only the good parts, because you can’t cheat like that.”

Meili: “Petra-chan…”

Petra: “If you keep doing that, eventually everyone important to you will turn their backs on you!”

Having felt Meili’s presence brush against her sleeve, Petra spoke with such force that she was out of breath.

Halfway through, she was no longer able to tell if she was expressing herself clearly, or if her message had gotten through at all. She had surely been influenced by the “Subaru” from the Book of the Dead.

“Subaru”: “Oioi, aren’t I part of the cheating you were just talking about?”

The Imaginary Subaru spoke thus with a frown, but she consciously ignored him for now. What was more important was Clind’s reaction—

Clind: “Everyone important to me turning their back on me, is it…? Keen realization.”

At Clind’s muttered remark, Petra gasped softly.

This was partly because the horribly poignant emotions contained within Clind’s low voice resonated tragically deep within her heart. But more than that, it was Clind’s expression that caused her to feel this way.

Petra: “…”

Clind rarely showed his emotions on his face. Petra could not think of any instances where he smiled, became angry, or appeared sad; Clind simply conveyed everything with a blank expression.

There was a change in Clind’s expression. —One of deep sorrow.

A poignant voice and a sorrowful expression. When both overlapped, one could describe it as ephemeral.

At that moment, Clind had an ephemeral and painful expression, as if reminiscing about the past.

Clind: “That… has already happened. Nostalgia.”

Petra: “Clind-niisama…”

Clind: “I have already had everyone turn away from me before, Petra. Self-deprecation.”

When she heard those words, Petra felt ashamed, remembering what she had said just before.

With arrogance, she spoke grandly about feelings she had only just begun to grasp, as if she knew everything. Clind already knew those feelings, and yet he acted the way he did.

However, despite feeling ashamed, Petra still wanted to say something.

Petra: “Even so…”

Clind: “—Yes, even so. Admiration.”

Petra: “Huh?”

Clind: “Once before, I relinquished everything. Even though it is true that I was left empty by that, there were things I gained and accumulated along the path I walked afterwards. Reflection. —Petra, my relationship with you and everyone else has been one of those things. Revelation.”

After he said that, Clind closed his eyes and gazed into the sky.

What did he see in that sky, where scattered clouds were being torn apart, as if barely holding back the end of the world on the other side?

Clind: “Why did I stay here, even though I was not ordered to, just because of some slight feeling of unease? I suppose it was because I, too, found it unbearable to let things continue like this. Unclouded mind.”

Petra: “Um… Clind-san, would that mean…?”

Meili: “That would mean it is like Petra-chan said, and you are apologizi~ng?”

Petra: “Meili-chan!”

“Subaru”: “Whoa, Meili-paisen said it.”

Confusing Petra, Meili’s clear response brought surprise. Next to Petra, who was staring wide-eyed, Subaru called Meili “Paisen” in an admiring tone of voice, and even though she had no memory of him doing that, she thought it was a typical reaction for Subaru.

Unconcerned by Petra's confusion, Clind let out a small laugh,

Clind: "Forgive me for causing you anxiety due to my lack of awareness. Sincerest apologies. That said, Petra, I am deeply appreciative of you. Debt of gratitude. —I, too, would like to contribute positively."

Petra: "Clind-niisama…"

Declaring thus, Clind bowed respectfully, to which Petra's eyes lit up.

However, as if to dampen Petra's excitement, Meili interjected with "I mean,"

Meili: "I don't think Butler-san had any intention of standing in our way or refusing to help, ri~ght? Petra-chan, aren't you just overthinking thi~ngs?"

Petra: "Th-that may be true, but…"

Clind: "No, that is incorrect, Meili. Rectification. Perceiving a situation as one's own means that I will also take initiative in proposing plans toward the solution. A great difference from an onlooking bystander. Different people."

"Subaru": "That's a bit of an exaggeration to say it's different people!"

Petra: "But, we can expect that much, right? Then! Clind-niisama, use your mysterious power and take us to where everyone is…"

Eagerly leaning forward, Petra was determined to make full use of Clind's power.

In fact, what Petra was counting on most in this situation was Clind's ability to Teleport. His teleportation, which instantly removed the distance that separated them from their destination, was an indispensable power for chasing after Al, who was headed somewhere with the Divine Dragon in tow.

Al’s destination was unknown, but the very conspicuous Divine Dragon accompanied him.

With the cooperation of Emilia, Ram and the others, and even the odious Roswaal, it should have been sufficiently possible to determine their destination and catch up with them.

So proclaimed Petra’s enthusiasm as she exhaled a rough breath from her nose, but—

Clind: “Unfortunately, my teleportation is not something that can be utilised without restriction. Rather, in terms of restrictions, it is a fairly inversatile power. Regrettable.”

Petra: “Clind-niisama, you liar! You traitor!”

“Subaru”: “That’s no fair after getting our hopes up! Clind-niisama, you killjoy!”

Meili: “P-Petra-chan, you’re being too ha~rsh. I don’t think Butler-san meant any ha~rm.”

The glimmer of hope was abruptly extinguished, and Petra seethed with the Imaginary Subaru in tow. Only half of their anger reached Clind and Meili, but him being a killjoy was the truth.

In the first place, it was a power of unknown mechanism, but when it was established that they could not use the Teleport which they had been counting on, the conversation just came down to a handsome man proactively accompanying them.

Clind: “It is not precisely Teleportation, but the Compression of space and time. Elucidation. It Compresses the distance one would originally have to travel and the time originally requisite for it. However, in order to avoid it having a substantial effect on the world’s way, it requires Od Lagna’s oversight. Expedience.”

“Subaru”: “Od Lagna? The hell’s that s’pposed t’mean?”

Petra: “The root of Mana and such, and according to Subaru’s knowledge, something like a god with no consciousness… probably.”

Clind uttered a term that struck them like a sucker punch, as Petra explained it to the Imaginary Subaru whilst he tilted his head in confusion, and she herself was not entirely sure she understood either.

While studying magic under Roswaal, Petra had received a general explanation of Od Lagna, but she was not sure if she understood it properly. Even Roswaal had said it would be hard for him to claim that he fully understood Od Lagna.

However, Od Lagna was an incredibly large concentration of power, and in a sense, it was said to be something that rested in a special place even from the pinnacles of powerful beings like the Sword Saint, the Divine Dragon, and the Witch of Envy.

Meili: “So, what happens if you can’t foo~l this Od Lagna?”

Clind: “That is unknown. The fact that it is unknown is terrifying. Shudder.”

In response to Meili’s question, Clind slowly shook his head.

His answer did not seem deceptive or evasive. In other words, despite seeming to know everything, Clind shared Roswaal’s perspective.

But, if that was the case—

Petra: “Clind-niisama, haven’t you done it several times before? That means you were able to deceive Od Lagna… what should we do?”

Clind: “Petra…”

Petra: “You were able to use your power because there was a method to it. What do you need, Clind-niisama? For example… Mana is needed to use magic. A Contract is necessary to control spirits. So, do you need to compensate Od Lagna in order to use it?”

Clind: “—. You are truly such a surprising child. Admiration.”

Clind’s reaction served to confirm Petra’s suspicions.

In other words, by offering compensation to Od Lagna, they could obtain permission to use Clind's extraordinary power. Or, as Clind himself put it, to turn a blind eye.

"Subaru": "So like bribes and kickbacks… What a corrupt materialist, despite being a god."

The sour-faced Imaginary Subaru's remark was something Petra wholeheartedly agreed with. But on the other hand, she felt that a god who demanded something in return was more trustworthy than a god who gave freely without asking for anything in return.

Most importantly, Petra knew all too well that the world was not set on easy mode where one could just get what they wanted without making any sacrifices.

That was why—

Petra: "Please tell me what you need, Clind-niisama. I will arrange for it without fail, no matter what it is. For Subaru, Beatrice-chan, and everyone else."

Meili: "O~h, Petra-chan, you're being si~lly. You just said it yourself, but it's not "I," it's "we.""

Petra: "—. Sorry, sorry. But, thank you."

Meili directed a miniscule smile at Petra and held her arm, who had resolved her determination.

Looking back, she never imagined that she would have this kind of a relationship with Meili. When Meili was imprisoned in the mansion, Petra often visited her because she wanted to move her through compassion and keep her from becoming dangerous.

Petra never imagined that she would nestle close to her at her moment of solitary decision.

Clind: "—It is possibility. Response."

Following a pause, Clind stated so before Petra and Meili.

Nothing so pessimistic as irresolution or incertitude, nor the hesitation or woe to apprise such youthful children of this.

Clind accepted the present circumstance as his own, and deemed Petra and Meili to be certain allies faced before the same problem. Henceforth, he resumed.

Clind: “It is possibility, the influence to be exerted upon the world, upon Od Lagna, that shall be forfeit as compensation. That is the condition for the utilization of the Authority belonging to the Witch Factor of Tristitia in my possession. —Divulgence.”

Vic.ll20

Chapter 33:
The Girl Named Petra Leyte

Petra: "—Possibility, as compensation."

Ascertaining what she had been informed of by repeating it, Petra furrowed her well-shaped eyebrows.

Possibility, that was the article necessary in exchange for using the mysterious power of Teleport that Clind was endowed with. She had been envisaging the requirement to be something simpler to comprehend, like vast amounts of Mana or a rare Magic Crystal—

"Subaru": "Possibility as compensation, the hell's that s'pposed ta mean."

Faced with the same question as Petra, the Imaginary Subaru greatly wrenched his neck. Making proper use of his nature as a substanceless phantom, he rotated horizontally in the air, ardently appealing his lack of understanding for Clind's elucidation.

But then again, that cute appeal of his was only visible to Petra.

"Subaru": "First of all, did this guy just say "Witch Factor of Tristitia"? He did, right? Witch Factor was one of those useless-sounding keywords Echidna mentioned!"

Petra: "…I don't really think too fondly of that Witch of Greed, so I don't know how much I can trust her."

"Subaru": "Well, I guess, she's one of those types who easily cause misunderstandings. I don't trust her at heart, but if you consider it to be a show of her lack of personability, I do think it puts things in a different light. She's unquestionably ill-natured. Ill-natured, but."

Petra: "Yeah. With my handkerchief… Never mind."

Attention turning to something outside the topic of compensation, the voice of the Imaginary Subaru trembled, and Petra averted her eyes from him.

The disconsolate spectacle she had witnessed via the Book of the Dead, the method Subaru had adopted in order to bring it to an end, one prepared by that Witch, was not something Petra ever wanted to vocalize. Something she wished to not look upon directly it was, yet it also was something she was unable to turn a blind eye to; troublesome just the right amount.

Anyhow—

Meili: “Witch Factor would mea~n, that Butler-san was also a Sin Archbisho~p?”

Meili, who was in a sense a natural airhead, cut right into the details difficult to ask.

‘Twas a term that Petra would have had no recollection of prior to reading the Book of the Dead, but it seemed Meili had gotten an opportunity to learn about Witch Factors. The relationship between not only the Witch Factors and the Witches—but also the Sin Archbishops, was something Petra also considered she must necessarily enquire about.

In all honesty—

“Subaru”: “If this Clind-san’s a Sin Archbishop like Petelgeuse was, then I don’t know how much I can trust the harmonious conversation till now…”

Petra: “Can you really say that, Subaru, after having forgiven Spica-chan, who used to be the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony?”

“Subaru”: “The hell are you saying?! There’s no way I’d forgive Gluttony after all that they made Rem go through?!”

Petra: “…It may be better to take a moment and show you my recent memories.”

Like his relationship with Beatrice, chronologically, the Subaru Petra saw in the Book of the Dead had many discrepancies in knowledge and relationships with the present Subaru. Thinking back to it, she remembered Subaru speaking ill of Echidna every once in a while, hence much had to have happened between Subaru and Echidna in an extent unbeknownst to Petra, she conjectured.

She was, unmistakably, a bad woman, therefore Petra's instincts were right. —And, in addition to conducting this mental conference, Petra kept a close eye on Clind alongside Meili.

She had faith that Clind was no villain, and there was also the precedent of the former Sin Archbishop Spica, but her being able to trust the other party without reservations the way Emilia could was a wholly different matter. Although, that simplicity of Emilia's was adorable and charming, so she wished to quickly grow up the same way.

Clind: "Albeit Meili's misgivings are a matter of course, I am not a Sin Archbishop. Refutation. To begin with, the Witch Factor of Tristitia is an article of an exceptional kind. Unenumerated. Even were I one compatible with this Factor, I would not be enlisted among the ranks of Witches or Sin Archbishops. Outcast."

Petra: "…"

Clind: "The erstwhile owner… the one compatible with the Witch Factor of Tristitia, named himself as the Warlock of Tristitia. Self-named… no, named by another. That individual had no fixations towards any manner of address, but his wife simply deemed it would be suitable to call him as such and named him. Pet name."

Petra: "Warlock…"

Subaru: "Not a Witch but a Warlock! I totally get it. Would've been worried had he said "man-witch" or something like that."

As if it had conformed to his sensibilities, the Imaginary Subaru displayed his admiration with a snap of his fingers. On the other hand, Petra looked at Clind as she whispered the word.

If this explanation were to also apply to Clind himself,

Petra: "Then, does that mean you're also a Warlock of Tristitia, Clind-niisama?"

Clind: “No. Refutation. I am not compatible with the Witch Factor of Tristitia. Consequently, I necessitate compensation in order to draw out the Authority of Tristitia. Inadequate. By nature, those compatible with a Witch Factor do not require compensation in order to exercise the Authority. It is the right to rewrite the world, as recognized by Od Lagna. Official.”

Meili: “A right to rewrite the world, hu~h. I often hear about i~t, but I wish this Od Lagna person was a bit more selective about who that is given to~.”

“Subaru”: “Agreed with Meili.”

Meili tapered her lips in displeasure as the Imaginary Subaru’s intangible hand patted her head, whilst Petra put a finger on her lips and processed the information.

She wished to believe Clind’s repudiation of being a Sin Archbishop, of being a Warlock. Following that, regarding the special power seemingly brought forth by the Witch Factor—she digested the rule that for a person incompatible, compensation was required to utilize that which a compatible party could employ to their heart’s content.

If that was the payment to use Clind’s Teleport, no, Compression, then,

Petra: “Let’s say, if the Witch Factor in Clind-niisama’s possession was used by someone else… by me, then can your Teleport be used as much as I want without paying the compensation?”

“Subaru”: “Petra! That’s totally one of those things that won’t end well so stop it!”

Petra: “Why? Subaru, you know it too, right…? That your Return by Death is without a doubt the same as those Witch Factors Clind-niisama is talking about.”

“Subaru”: “That’s…”

The moment it hit him, the Imaginary Subaru sank to silence with a bitter expression.

At the tea party with Echidna, Subaru had learned the truth of having taken in a Witch Factor—back then, the topic had been about that which had belonged to the Sin Archbishop of Sloth whom he had defeated just prior, but upon considering everything including the reason for the Witch of Envy's fixation to Subaru, then there was probably more to it.

Return by Death, was neither Magic nor Curse Arts nor honed technique, it was a clearly disparate power—in other words, there was a high chance that it was an Authority. If so, Natsuki Subaru was a Warlock all the same.

Petra: "In that case, I don't mind becoming a Witch. I'm not afraid if I'm with Subaru, after all."

"Subaru": "…You may be jumping to the wrong conclusion. Regardless of whether my Return by Death is an Authority or whatever, you know, there's an unavoidable pattern in "another world" stories of receiving a gift from a god who won't even show their face yet."

Petra: "Subaru, you keep a lot of secrets, but you're a bad liar."

That was perhaps why he must have kept things hidden, always avoiding conversation to stop himself from revealing any of his secrets.

Cherishing the kindness of her beloved with affection, Petra closed her eyes, then once again looked back at Clind. Clind slightly widened his eyes, his expression suggesting awe at her gaze and strength of will—

Clind: "Regrettably, that method cannot be adopted. Rejection."

Petra: "—Hk, why?"

Clind: "To begin with, it is inconceivable that you, Petra, would be compatible with the Witch Factor of Tristitia. This Factor and one other, the Factor of Vanagloria, are both unenumerated… no, supernumerary is the right word. They are exceptional Factors, with each having been fine-tuned to their respectively singular and uniquely compatible persons—the Valiant and the Saintess. Tailored. They shan't ever be compatible with any other, and besides."

Petra: "…Besides?"

Clind: "Even they who were compatible, were unable to escape the corruption of their minds. Disgrace."

Casting his eyes down, Clind pursed his lips. From his response, Petra was able to intuit that the aforementioned compatible individuals—the Valiant and the Saintess, were two people with whom he had been acquainted. Furthermore, the person singularly compatible with the Witch Factor of Tristitia, the very Warlock of Tristitia whose mind had fallen into corruption, was that Valiant.

Moreover, the fact that Clind possessed the Witch Factor of that Warlock, signified that said Valiant no longer existed in this world —

Meili: "Yea~h, yea~h, I know you're talking about something really impo~rtant, but since Petra-chan's dangerous determination won't wo~rk, let's get back to the main topic, o~kay?"

Petra: "Mph, dangerous, you say…"

Meili: "It was totally dangero~us. Even if Petra-chan takes a liking to something like a Witch Factor, I'm definitely against it. You can't rely on that kind of powe~r."

Petra: "Meili-chan…"

She could tell they were words of genuine concern for Petra, devoid of malice.

Meili knew about Witch Factors without having attended the Witch's tea party. Judging from her phrasing, she might have encountered a being in possession of a Witch Factor—a Sin Archbishop. Her advice was, yet, ironic.

"Subaru": "…"

Lowering his brows, the Imaginary Subaru gazed at Meili with an expression that was too gentle to be one borne of mixed feelings.

The incident surrounding the Sanctuary and the Roswaal mansion, and having been captured in the midst of it all, Meili had also been involved in the matter—in the deaths of Petra and Frederica, that she herself had witnessed in the Book of the Dead.

That Petra and Meili's relationship did not end as merely that of victim and aggressor of Death, was thanks to none other than Subaru's Return by Death.

Because of that, Petra could not help but think that a power depended upon how it was used—

Petra: "…Yeah, I understand."

Meili: "That's ri~ght. You're a good gi~rl."

Meili was visibly relieved by Petra's reply. Holding the former's hand, Petra nodded.

Either way, if the Witch Factor of Tristitia was not compatible with Petra, then the strategy of becoming the Factor's holder in Clind's stead and ignoring the compensation would not work.

Petra being the Witch to Subaru's Warlock was solely a charming scenario, but an alternative that ought to have been abandoned if it had no merit.

Clind: "Per Meili's words, let us return to the main topic. Restatement. Anyhow, as I explained, payment of the compensation will be required. And, that compensation is the potential to exert influence upon the world. Possibility."

Petra: "—. Could you please explain it in more detail?"

Clind: "For example, let us say there is a magic spell that can start a fire with a single incantation. Its convenience goes without saying, and contingent upon this spell a great number of futures may open up. Prospects. Cooking, medicine, metalwork, smithing, warfare… there is no time to list them all. Extensive. This is potential influence, ergo, possibility. Thus—”

Petra: “…If that spell were to be offered as compensation, everything that would have happened due to that spell would disappear?”

Clind: “In its place, there will remain a vacancy where the possibility would have originally been used in the world. In the place of that vacancy, that margin, the incompatible Authority of Tristitia can be exercised. Conclusion.”

With that finale, Petra understood that Clind had finished the necessary explanation.

What he was saying, she understood. —In short, it was a matter of resources. There was a limit to the resources for operating the world which Od Lagna was managing.

The condition for using Clind’s Authority was to sacrifice something to create a leftover of resources that were originally being exhausted to their limit, and then surreptitiously make use of that surplus.

Having come to that realization, the clever and lovely Petra noticed one more thing.

Petra: “…Clind-niisama, we used your Authority a lot to get to the Empire. What about the compensation for that?”

Clind: “—. From the Master. Confidential.”

Petra: “…Seriously, ew.”

With vexation and abhorrence, the pits of Petra’s stomach churned.

Everyone from the Camp had mustered the entirety of their strengths to save Subaru and the others from that situation. Beatrice had remained asleep, believing that she would be reunited with Subaru, and Otto had even compromised his principles to seek help from his hometown. Emilia had desperately indicated her decision, and Petra had also intended to do everything possible.

And yet, the fact that the one to pay the most compensation for it, withholding from even divulging this truth, had been Roswaal, was an unbearable humiliation for Petra.

"Subaru": "What could it be, something like the desire for atonement? Like, an apology for the Sanctuary or the mansion?"

Petra: "I don't think it would be an easily understandable sentiment like that. That's why I hate the Master…!"

"Subaru": "Yeah, you're right to be angry, Petra…"

The Imaginary Subaru had still not read Petra's memories of the Empire, so he was unable to empathize with her emotions, which was frustrating. However, Petra did not want him to understand even this ugly, grimy enviousness of hers, so she cast that grime into the well of her heart, closed the lid, and nailed it shut, never to peek inside.

Her dissatisfaction with Roswaal was nothing new. Furthermore, it made sense that Roswaal was the most suitable person to fulfill the conditions for using Clind's Authority.

Petra: "The Master has many things that seem like they could be given as compensation, like his magic or Magicreation Tools."

Of course, it was not a matter of lightly relinquishing those things however much just because of their abundance.

It remained unclear whether Od Lagna would consider the degree of emotional attachment in its evaluation, but what had been mentioned was a "possibility" that would have exerted influence upon the world had it not been relinquished. Whatever that might have been Petra did not believe that something lacking emotional attachment could move the world.

—"Possibility", necessitated passion and emotional attachment.

To offer something bereft of that to try and obtain inexpensive salvation was tawdry, and there was no way such wretched reasoning would ever succeed in regaining something truly important.

That was why Petra—

Meili: "—I'm willing to offer somethi~ng."

"Subaru": "Oi, oi."

Having reached the same idea as Petra, Meili quietly murmured. While the Imaginary Subaru blinked in astonishment, Meili continued with an "After a~ll",

Meili: "Going back to it, the fact that I'm alive is all thanks to onii-san and the others letting me off the hoo~k. I'm not trying to repay that favor or anythi~ng, but it's pretty straightforward logic I suppo~se."

"Subaru": "Petra, stop this girl… Stop Meili! I don't know what went on between the me of the present and her, but I would've never saved her with that intention!"

Petra: "Mhm, you're right."

What the Imaginary Subaru was saying, his expression shifting, she could readily accept.

Subaru saving Meili had not been something so calculated as to make her exert herself or compel her to repay the favor at some point, it had been simply because he had wanted to save her.

Subaru would surely never let Meili close the door on her possibilities.

Petra: "You can't, Meili-chan. The most valuable among everything that you can offer is your Divine Protection that controls Witchbeasts, and without that, you're worthless."

Meili: "He~y! Petra-chan, you're being so mea~n!"

Petra: "Sorry. Worthless is a bit too far. Meili-chan, you'd be reduced to just being cute."

Truth be told, Subaru, Emilia and everyone else would likely say that was still fine. However, Meili, of all people, could not accept becoming just a cute girl.

Petra was painfully aware of this. —Cute girls could not remain just as cute girls, as much as everyone around them would think.

???: "—Petra-sama, Meili-sama."

Suddenly, a voice startled them, and Petra and the others turned around toward the dragon carriage. There, jumping down the carriage and rushing towards them, was a girl's—Flam's figure.

During their travel across the Augria Sand Dunes, she had spontaneously lost her consciousness, but had now woken up. The circumstances behind Flam losing her consciousness had been tied to her Divine Protection—

Petra: "Flam-chan, thank goodness you're awake—"

Flam: "The conditions for using the Divine Protection of Mindspeak have been met. I can contact my sister… Grassis. Communication should be possible with Felt-sama and Rachins-sama as well."

Petra: "…"

Rather than ascertaining safety and well-being, prioritizing quickly relaying her own situation was Flam.

That she must have wanted to establish contact with her people in regards to Reinhard and the Witch of Envy clashing immediately after waking up, yet withstood the urge to was something only to be grateful for.

Unquestionably, after receiving communication from Flam and learning of the frenzy that Al had enkindled, the Felt Camp would also be in the position to move the situation towards its resolution.

"Subaru“: "With Reinhard unable to move, there's no telling how much we could rely on Felt or Rom-jii…"

Petra: "—. No. We shouldn't be stubborn about doing this on our own."

“Subaru“: “Petra…”

Petra: “After all, this is no longer just our problem, it’s a problem for everyone in the Kingdom.”

Al was on a rampage, having captured the persons of Natsuki Subaru and Beatrice—the situation was no longer a miniscule problem of that kind, but rather had escalated to a national, even a global crisis intertwining the Sword Saint, the Divine Dragon, and the Witch of Envy.

That was why it was important for Petra and the others, who knew the situation best, to spare no expense in conveying information.

Petra: “Flam-chan, find out where Felt-sama and the others are right away. As long as we know where they are, we can join them with Clind-niisama here.”

Flam: “—Hk, understood.”

With Petra arranging the procedure and giving her this instruction, Flam glanced at Clind for a moment, but resisted the urge to ask for more details and immediately agreed.

Instead, Meili tugged at Petra’s sleeves and asked, “Petra-chan?”.

Meili: “We still haven’t finished discussing the compensation to give to Butler-sa~n.”

Petra: “—No, I’ve already made up my mind about that.”

Meili: “Eh~h?”

Meili’s eyes widening at Petra’s answer, the latter gently unfastened Meili’s grip on her sleeve and quickly approached Clind, then glanced at the Imaginary Subaru from the corner of her eye.

Despite knowing that he, who was staring at her actions with incredulity, was simply a convenient illusion for her to see,

Petra: “Cover your ears for a moment.”

In response to Petra's request, the Imaginary Subaru paused momentarily and meekly obeyed. Once he did plug his ears, Petra stood on her tiptoes and pronounced a "Clind-niisama". Subsequently, she brought her mouth close to Clind's ear and softly whispered.

That was—

Clind: "…"

Petra: "—So, would that work as compensation?"

As Petra lowered her heels and asked the question in a hushed voice, Clind froze and widened his eyes. Petra tilted her head slightly, making a gesture that pushed on the uppermost bounds of her cuteness, to which Clind let out an exhale.

With a long, deep sigh, he removed his monocle and, with face bared, regarded Petra once more.

Clind: "It ought to be possible. Estimation. However, Petra, that is —"

Petra: "Thank goodness."

Clind: "…"

Petra: "I always knew it, though. —That I had the "possibility" to move the world."

Puffing out her chest in pride, Petra disallowed Clind from speaking any further.

She had received the answer to a question she could have only posed to Clind. Regardless of what it was, Petra held pride in that answer—Clind was Clind. His assessment might not have necessarily coincided with Od Lagna's, but at the very least, Clind had recognized the value of that "possibility".

Petra: "I'll offer the compensation, Clind-niisama. Together, we can save the world… No, something like the world doesn't really matter to me. It's just, I want to save the people who are precious to me."

Clind: “—Understood, Petra. Amongst all the girls I have met, you are the bravest. Admiration.”

Clind gave a deep bow, one akin to those he gave to Annerose or Roswaal, or perhaps to people whom he thought to be splendid from the bottom of his heart.

In response, Petra returned a smile and noticed Meili staring at her. Seeing somewhat of an uneasiness in her round eyes, Petra gently embraced her.

Meili: “I don’t really kno~w, but, I’m pretty sure Petra-chan is a huge idio~t.”

Petra: “Hehe, that’s so mean. I’m smart, cute, and cool.”

Petra retorted to Meili’s rude remark and hugged her. Then she looked over her shoulder at the Imaginary Subaru standing there, looking utterly lost.

Finally, the Imaginary Subaru lowered his hands from his ears, his face being so endlessly dear for her to gaze upon; Petra broke past her personal record for maximum cuteness, and declared.

Petra: “Subaru, I love you.”

Chapter 34:
Attraction

1

Clind’s Teleportation—which he described as Compression, was something Petra had last experienced about a month ago, and Meili a few days prior.

Petra: “It might be surprising the first time, but there’s no need to be afraid.”

With that, Petra, drawing on her experience, offered the inexperienced Flam some advice.

She worried that without proper warning of what was to come, Flam might panic, but she simply shook her head with a “No,”

Flam: “There is no need to worry, as most surprises cannot surpass those of the young master.”

???: “That guy, even his own Camp treats him like a complete shocker of a human? How crazy is that?!”

Even “Subaru” was astonished by that overly straightforward comment.

However, Petra also knew from Subaru’s memories shared via the Book of the Dead that Reinhard had blown up a building with a single swing of his sword and sent Meili’s sister flying, so she understood Flam’s unusually calm attitude towards the abnormal.

???: “Even if Flam-chan is o~kay, I hope the sleeping Sensei-san doesn’t wake u~p. Little Crimson Scorpion-chan was really panicked the first time Butler-san transported u~s.”

Petra: “That reminds me, is there such a thing as teleportation sickness? When we were in Vollachia, some people were fine with Spica-chan’s Teleportation, but others weren’t.”

Her hair rustling, Meili shrugged, and the little Crimson Scorpion peeked out from inside, raising its pincers as if to imitate its master.

The previous comment reminded Petra of the Teleportation ability of Spica, who had been left behind in the Empire—whether due to physical constitution, individual strength, or weakness, those who were unable to handle it simply could not. While Petra was on the side of those who could handle it, Garfiel was on the side of those who could not, and would curl up and sulk afterward.

Then, in response to Petra's question, Clind raised a finger with a "That is interesting. Consideration,"

Clind: "Although the number of times it has been used and the number of people who have tried it are not that many, no one has fallen ill. Reassurance. Strictly speaking, the Authority of Tristitia is not Teleportation, but rather the result of the Compression of the time and distance that would normally be traveled. Abridgment."

Meili: "I have no idea what that means, no matter how many times I hear i~t."

"Subaru": "So, does that mean it's okay to think of it like King Crimson? No, it's unclear whether it erases even the effects in between, so maybe it's different from King Crimson…"

Petra: "There's no need to worry about getting sick, and it gives us the power to create the precious time we need. Knowing that is good enough for now."

Petra came to that conclusion, Meili gave a look of bewilderment, and "Subaru" mused over it in his own way.

She could have understood what "Subaru" meant, but she felt it would have been a waste of time and thought to dwell on the contents of his speech. If she had the time, she would like to confirm all the memories and knowledge that had been poured into her mind and become someone who knew everything about Subaru, but—.

Petra: "Clind-niisama, can I ask you something?"

Far from fulfilling that desire, the time spent on it would have been a waste, and so Petra prompted Clind.

The lens of his monocle glistened, and Clind nodded, “Yes. Timely.” Considering the phenomenon he was preparing to bring about, his attitude was reassuringly calm.

Then, while Petra was admiring that, Meili tugged on her sleeve with a “Hey,”

Meili: “Petra-chan, about the compensation we were talking about earlie~r…”

Petra: “—. It’s okay, Clind-niisama said it was good.”

Meili: “That’s not what I mea~nt… I don’t know the reason myself, but if you have to lose something, Petra-chan, then I don’t like i~t.”

Petra: “Lose something…”

Meili seemed overwhelmed by her emotions, and Petra blinked in surprise at her words.

Her friend’s frank concern along with Clind’s assessment of the compensation she had offered—the emotions that flooded Petra’s heart at that moment were intensely complex and profound.

With that, Petra smiled at Meili and,

Petra: “Thank you, Meili-chan. But really, I’ll be fine.”

Meili: “…If that’s a lie, then you’re terri~ble.”

Petra smiled and nodded at the poorly thought-out threat that had been mustered up after some deliberation.

She gently let go of her sleeve and held her hand close to her chest, then looked for “Subaru”. Petra knew his illusory form would not leave her behind, but it was a matter of principle.

When she spotted his translucent form, “Subaru” was gazing out in the distance at the Sand Sea.

"Subaru": "If I had been a bit more careful, I wouldn't have caused you so much trouble."

In the eastern sky—where the very air cried out in agony, the sky turned a sickening hue, and the sound of the earth being gouged away roared, there the battle between the Sword Saint and the Witch of Envy raged on.

It was a clash between two immensely powerful entities that would determine the fate of the world. Seeing "Subaru's" frustrated expression, watching as he lamented his own inadequacy, Petra was overcome with sadness.

Worried about his friend, Subaru did not mention the recent exchange between Petra and Clind, showing respect for Petra's wishes.

In essence, Petra could not hide anything from him, as he existed within her mind; if he wanted to, he could easily reveal all the information she had kept from him.

However, the Imaginary Subaru did not do so. —Whether this was due to "Subaru's" decency and thoughtfulness, or his intention to do as she said, or perhaps because Petra's self-consciousness, affection, and memories were all muddled together, she could not tell.

However, regardless of which it was, this was what Petra thought.

Whether it was out of consideration or because it was what Petra desired, the way "Subaru" behaved was based on how Petra Leyte saw the real Natsuki Subaru.

With that in mind—

Petra: "Clind-niisama, if you would be so kind."

Clind: "—Understood. Commendation."

Still embracing her love for "Subaru", Petra gave the signal to Clind.

Petra, Meili, and Flam. With Patrasche pulling the dragon carriage, plus the unconscious Garfiel and Ezzo, there were six people and one dragon in total. —Adding to that "Subaru" and the little Crimson Scorpion, the group, with the help of Clind, began their journey.

To that end, Petra offered the "compensation" to Od Lagna—

Petra: "…"

In an instant, in the literal blink of an eye, the world shifted, and the Compression was finished.

When she closed her eyes and opened them again, the scenery had completely changed. The taste of the air on her tongue and skin and the scent of the world that touched her sense of smell had changed dramatically, and Petra realized the Authority had been used.

Petra: "…"

For a moment, Petra closed her eyes and thought about the reality of running away.

However, she set aside her sentimentality with a momentary prayer, then focused her attention on the task at hand. From this point on, Petra and her companions could not afford even a single misstep.

Indeed, Petra gathered her resolve and—

???: "Woah?! Wh-what's going on?! A dragon carriage just appeared out of nowhere?!"

???: "Is, is it Reinhard?! Only he could do something so ridiculous!"

???: "Am I dreaming? Toto! Totooo! Lend me your soft lap!"

???: "Oh, be quiet! What's all the commotion… Wh-where did you come from?!"

Petra's enthusiasm was dampened by the noisy and unruly welcome they received at the destination of the Compression.

"Subaru": "What?! Rom-jii is one thing, but Tonchinkan too?!

Tonchinkan! Why are they with him?! How and why?!”

And, the final note to add was that Subaru was the first to respond to the warm welcome, loudly expressing his surprise at such an unexpected turn of events.

2

???: “Petra-chan! Meili! Are you both okay?!”

Petra: “—Hk.”

“Subaru”: “Emilia-tan…!”

As soon as Petra saw that change in expression and Emilia rushing towards them, Petra experienced sweet feelings erupting from within her heart.

Warm, fuzzy, and sentimental feelings filled her chest to the point it tingled, and her head was overflowing with flowery words praising her beauty and cuteness. Those powerful emotions were not just limited to her appearance, but extended to her mannerisms, her way of speaking, and even the sound of her footsteps.

Petra: “Too blatant… hk.”

Petra’s head reeled from the wave of easy-to-understand, intense emotions that washed over her.

Up until now, the biggest influence of the Book of the Dead was undoubtedly the existence of the Imaginary Subaru, but the shock caused by seeing Emilia was just as great.

Frankly speaking, an overdose of Emiliase might have been life-threatening—

Petra: “Why am I saying such stupid things? I…!”

Suddenly feeling as if half her consciousness were being taken away, Petra frantically grabbed at her collar, nearly losing sight of what was real, and managed to stay grounded in reality.

As expected, the love for Emilia was overflowing in an excessively bold manner.

That in itself made her feel a little jealous, but more than that, although Petra was happy to see Emilia again, it bothered her that her own precious feelings toward Emilia were being pushed aside, and she found that difficult to accept.

That was why, when Emilia found them and ran up to them with tears in her eyes, her face so beautiful it took Petra's breath away, Petra resisted the urge to think she was EMT and spread her arms wide.

And then—

Petra: "Emilia-neetama…!"

Emilia: "Nee-tama?!"

With a grand slip of the tongue, she startled Emilia just as they were about to have their emotional reunion.

She narrowly avoided calling her "Emilia-tan" and tried to correct herself, but missed the mark. It was a blunder very uncharacteristic of Petra.

Regardless—

Emilia: "But, thank goodness… Both of you actually came."

Petra: "Yes. I am relieved that you are safe, Emilia-neesama."

Overcome with emotion, Emilia embraced Petra, who replied and returned her embrace.

In contrast to Petra, Meili, who was also being hugged, reacted awkwardly, gasping, "I can't brea~the…" and timidly wrapped her arms around Emilia's back.

"Subaru": "Woah! It's such a relief to see Emilia-tan safe and sound! Huh? Has she gotten even cuter since I last saw her? She's got so much potential!"

While he observed Emilia embracing Petra and Meili from various angles, the floating “Subaru” was overwhelmed with emotion. He was getting a bit too excited. But that was understandable.

After all, given the chronology of the Book of the Dead, the last time “Subaru” had seen Emilia was when she was at her lowest point in the Sanctuary.

Back then, Petra had not been as close to Emilia as she was now, so she would not have been able to help her. If even Petra felt regretful about that, then the frustration that “Subaru” experienced up close back then must have been incomparable.

“Subaru”: “Oh! My goodness, Petra! Look! Emilia-tan is walking so energetically!”

Petra: “Yeah, she’s walking with long strides. That’s great.”

“Subaru”: “I’m relieved…! I’m so relieved…!”

Because of that, Petra hesitated to pour cold water on Subaru’s excitement. While responding appropriately to Subaru’s enthusiasm, Petra quietly savored a sense of relief.

Her relief was due to one thing—upon seeing Emilia, she was no longer afraid.

Petra: “The last thing I saw in the Book of the Dead…”

Trapped in the endless, obsessive shadows that surrounded them in the Sanctuary, Natsuki Subaru was caught in a web of inescapable torment, and in order to escape the Witch, he had resorted to the method of suicide prepared as a form of harassment.

In that final moment, Subaru = Petra saw it. —The terrifying Witch of Envy had the same face as the person he greatly cherished.

Petra: “…”

When she tried to think more thoroughly about the reason, it felt like she was trying to grasp something shrouded in mist, and nothing coherent came to mind. Still, the vivid emotions remained seared into her mind.

That was why she was apprehensive about seeing Emilia again. —No, that was not quite right. To be precise, she was apprehensive that she might not be able to see Emilia in the same way as before.

Petra: "But I'm glad it didn't end up that way… Although I'm excited in a different way than before."

Emilia: "Huh? Petra-chan, are you okay?"

Petra: "I'm fine. I'm just happy to see you, Emilia-neesama."

Petra hid her inner conflict and was genuinely happy to be reunited with Emilia, who smiled with wide eyes. In place of Meili, who continued to be stubborn, the little Crimson Scorpion on her head snapped its pincers, expressing happiness on its master's behalf.

And then, there was—

???: "—Just when I thought it was gettin' lively, you're here, lass."

There, a low, husky voice interrupted, and Emilia let out a gasp of surprise.

Emilia had left the door open when she rushed in, and a prominent figure standing there knocked on the door and peered inside.

That figure was—

Emilia: "Felt-chan's grandfather!"

Emilia's eyes widened at the sight of the old man, Rom-jii, who squeezed himself through the doorway. Hearing Emilia's voice, Rom-jii gave an amused smile and stroked his bald head,

Rom: "The way ya say that makes it sound like ya really think we're related… Everyone here calls me Rom-jii. But, this is the first chance we've had ta talk properly."

Emilia: "Um, well, I couldn't talk to you in the castle on the day the Royal Selection began, and when Felt-chan stole my insignia, there was no time to calm down and talk…”

Meili: “…You don’t have to worry so much. I understand the circumstances, so it’s oka~y.”

Emilia greeted Rom-jii, and as she responded to his greeting, she seemed to be worried about Meili in her arms. Meili responded with an attitude that was half annoyed and half appreciative of the concern.

The current exchange between the two of them was regarding Emilia’s connections with Rom-jii. —She was concerned about the fact that Meili’s older sister, Elsa, was involved in the previous incident where Felt had stolen an insignia that qualified Emilia to participate in the Royal Selection from her.

When thinking about it, these three people had quite a strange connection. If “Subaru” were to be included, it would be four people with a strange connection. If Reinhard were to also be included, there would be no end to it.

Rom: “…Callin’ ya “lass” seems inappropriate, given yer current position. May I call ya Emilia?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s fine. Nice to see you again, Rom-jii.”

“Subaru”: “Wow… It feels like a historic moment, these two actually introducing themselves properly.”

Petra: “Don’t be so dramatic.”

As Emilia and Rom-jii shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, Petra found it funny that Subaru would use such a grand word like “historic”.

While there was undoubtedly a sense of poignancy, the way he put it made it sound like he had witnessed the reunion of two people who had not seen each other in over ten years.

But, putting “Subaru’s” excitement aside for now—

Emilia: “I’ve heard about Felt-chan, too. It must have been quite a difficult time for you and the others, right, Rom-jii?”

Rom: “Hmm, that’s right. We should talk ’bout that. Petra.”

Petra: “Yes. It will probably take a little while for Clind-niisama to return, so I think we can start without him… It is a race against time after all.”

Petra added the last part, and Emilia and Rom-jii nodded deeply at the same time.

Yes, this was a race against time. That was why Petra and the others resorted to using unfair tactics.

—Currently, Petra and the others were gathered at the Royal Residence in the Royal Capital of Lugunica.

Among the Emilia Camp, whose members were scattered and acting independently, Emilia’s position was clear, and if anyone were to become the central rallying point, it could only be her.

With that in mind, Petra hurried to the Royal Capital after meeting up with Rom-jii and the others using Clind’s Compression, but—

Rom: “It’s shockin’ ta see the state of destruction in the Royal Capital.”

Meili: “It’s been a while since I’ve been to the Royal Capital, but when I last saw it, it wasn’t so ruined, and I don’t think there were any works of art like tha~t.”

Rom-jii spoke with his arms crossed, and Meili, who was looking out the window, joined in.

Unlike the two with prior experience, this was Petra’s first time in the Royal Capital. Fortunately, the memory she had just recalled of the loot house was located in the slums of the Royal Capital, so she was able to compare it with her memories of the Royal Capital from the past, when it was still intact.

Certainly, the Royal Capital in her memory did not have many flashy ice towers, and the Noble District, with its rows of stately houses, was not in such disarray.

Rom: “I never liked that awful place, but I never thought the Noble District’d be completely destroyed like that. I heard that everyone was evacuated, but still, this is outrageous.”

Petra: “Meili-chan also said that Emilia-neesama made those ice towers, right?”

Emilia: “Ah, um, well, there was a reason I did that! Everyone was reaaally in danger, and I couldn’t afford to hold back…!”

Emilia frantically tried to explain the drastic changes to the Royal Capital that could be seen from the Royal Residence, which had barely escaped damage.

Petra found her frantic movements endearing, and worked with Rom-jii to sort out what had happened one thing at a time—

Petra: “—So, as expected, Al-san did it.”

Emilia: “…That’s right. The city was thrown into chaos, all because I couldn’t stop Al.”

Petra: “It’s not your fault, Emilia-neesama. Had you not created those ice towers, the people of the Royal Capital would’ve been in big trouble… that’s why you are E.M.G. (Emilia-tan is seriously a Guardian Angel)!”

Emilia: “Yeah, Petra-chan, thank you… huh? Wait, what did you just say?”

When Emilia blamed herself, Petra shook her head vigorously to deny that she was responsible.

Having heard that Al and Volcanica were involved, if anything, Petra felt responsible herself for the devastation that struck the Royal Capital of Lugunica. She could not help but think that if Al’s schemes had been stopped at their source in the Pleiades Watchtower, none of this would have happened.

Meili: “If you start talking like that, there will be no end to i~t.

Each of us got outsmarted by Helmet-san at every ste~p. It’s Helmet-san and his group who were at fault, don’t you thi~nk?”

Rom: “That’s right. It’s good ta reflect on yer shortcomin’s in order ta make up for ’em, but regrettin’ yer lack of ability ain’t productive. It’s an old man’s rule of thumb.”

Emilia: “—. Yeah, you’re both right. Al did something bad, and he’s the one who has to take responsibility for it. We don’t have time to feel sorry for ourselves!”

Emilia’s cheeks tightened at Meili and Rom-jii’s words, and she regained her composure. Seeing Emilia’s reaction, Petra let out a small sigh and braced herself.

Just as everyone had said, weakness disguised as reflection was a bad habit. There was always a path forward.

“Subaru”: “Al must think the same way… Otherwise, he wouldn’t have crossed the line to break a Sin Archbishop out of prison. What in the world was he thinking?”

“Subaru” picked up on Petra’s feelings and grimaced at Al’s outrageous behavior in the Royal Capital.

In fact, it was an outrageous act of terrorism to use Volcanica to cause massive damage to the Royal Capital, but that paled in comparison to his real objective—breaking Gluttony out of prison.

The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, who held a deep connection to Petra and the others, had been allowed to escape.

Rom: “Just listin’ all the things that man has done is mind-bogglin’. He attacked those connected ta the Royal Candidates ‘n kidnapped one of their Knights. He turned Volcanica, the Divine Dragon ‘n protector of the Kingdom, against ‘em ‘n used the Witch of Envy ta prevent the Sword Saint from takin’ action. Furthermore, he took one of the Royal Candidates hostage ‘n invaded the Royal Capital, where he destroyed half of the Noble District ‘n freed an imprisoned Sin Archbishop.”

“Subaru”: “Damn, isn’t that something? How many years in prison would that get him?"

Petra: "He'd probably get the death penalty a hundred times over…"

Once again, the number and severity of Al's—no, of Al and his accomplices' crimes were extraordinary.

It seemed as if he was determined to commit every evil deed in the world, but Petra believed that this was done not out of sheer recklessness, but rather something premeditated.

Yes, Al had a proper plan, and he was taking the necessary steps to achieve it, which just happened to be a series of crimes that were each close to being the crime of the century.

Meili: "Maybe it would have been better to reconsider a plan that required the involvement of a Sin Archbishop in the first pla~ce?"

Emilia: "There's also the Witch of Envy, so there's no excuse…"

To begin with, Petra had no reason to make excuses on his behalf.

Based on the impression given by the Book of the Dead, Subaru considered Al to be someone from his hometown—someone he did not necessarily dislike, but he clearly went way beyond what was forgivable.

In that regard, it would have been fair to say that this was the shared opinion of everyone gathered here—no, everyone involved, including those who were not here.

Petra: "Right now, Clind-niisama is going around to gather everyone else and bring Frederica-neesama and the others here. Emilia-neesama, where is Otto-san?"

Emilia: "—Ah! Um, well, about Otto-kun."

Petra: "That reaction tells me everything. He's being reckless again."

Emilia: "Ugh… yeah, that's right. I'm sorry I couldn't stop him."

Slumping herself down, Emilia cast her eyes downward, ashamed of herself. But, Emilia was not the one at fault. If anyone were to be blamed, it would be Otto, and in this case, he was not entirely at fault either.

Among the members of the camp, Otto regularly acted recklessly; Petra, Frederica, and the others always told him he ought to take a break, but this time, that advice was not applicable.

In fact, Otto, who wielded the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, was far too reliable in this situation.

Petra: “Using insects and birds for reconnaissance and espionage, huh? That Divine Protection sure has a lot of devious uses… but, that means undertaking a lot of labor in return.”

Meili: “Ara~, that’s exactly right. You can tell Hat-oniisan is a worri~er just by looking at him.”

Rom: “I’ve been around for a while, but I ain’t never heard of the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language. The fact that I’ve never heard of such a useful Divine Protection’s gotta be because no one who’s had it has lived long enough for people ta hear ’bout it.”

Meili chuckled, but Petra could not help but agree with Rom-jii’s grim speculation.

It was true that overusing the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language was dangerous to one’s health, and Petra had also witnessed Otto suffering from nosebleeds after using his Divine Protection excessively in the Empire.

That, too, was out of necessity due to the demands of war, where there was no room for half measures.

Emilia: “He was worried about Subaru and the others, but he was especially concerned about Garfiel… he was reaaally determined to do something about it.”

Petra: ““Ottobro asked my amazin’ self to do this, ‘n I messed it up…”. Those two are so much alike.”

Meili: “Petra-chan, that was a surprisingly good impersona~tion!”

Regardless of Emilia and Meili’s surprised reactions, it was easy to imagine Otto and Garfiel wanting to do something reckless in such a situation.

Still in a comatose state, Garfiel had been left in the care of the Royal Capital’s Medical Center, but caution had to be taken to ensure that he would not blame or hurt himself once he regained consciousness.

Petra: “I hope Frufoo-chan will be able to keep Otto-san calm.”

With that, Petra worried about the well-being of the absent Otto.

No matter what sort of insect or animal he attempted to communicate with, Otto himself had to be present to interpret the information gathered. For this reason, Otto was tracking Al’s gang on his own—or rather, with his long-time partner and beloved dragon, Frufoo.

“Subaru”: “Otto… I’m afraid he’ll mess up at a crucial moment, and I don’t know how much I’ll be able to rely on him.”

Petra: “If Otto-san were to hear that, he’d probably have the angriest face ever.”

Subaru had a tendency to take everything on by himself. Not just Otto, but anyone in the camp would be angry if they were told that; but, Petra thought Otto would be the most frightening.

Nevertheless, it was true that Otto should not bear this burden alone. If Clind could have brought Ram along, they could have shared the burden with the help of her Clairvoyance.

And then, just as she thought that, Petra suddenly remembered.

Petra: “Hey, Emilia-neesama, there’s something I wanted to ask you”

Emilia: “Hm? What is it, Petra-chan?”

Petra: “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Emilia-neesama, but on the way here, Meili-chan and I suddenly started feeling sick…”

The question Petra had asked related to the events which occurred just after Flam had used the Divine Protection of Mindspeak with her sister Grassis in order to locate Rom-jii and the others, and as they were discussing rushing to the Royal Capital. —Suddenly, Petra’s entire body broke out in goosebumps, and she was struck by an unsettling feeling within her heart.

Petra was so shocked, she had wondered if it was a side effect of the Book of the Dead, or if Reinhard had lost and the Witch of Envy was coming for her; but, Meili was experiencing the same sensation, so they concluded that it was neither.

Petra: “But, given the situation, right? Flam-chan and Rom-ojiisan weren’t affected, but Meili-chan, Clind-niisama, and I all felt it. In this case, I thought it might not be entirely unrelated to Al-san… Emilia-neesama?”

It was an unusual situation, and even after discussing it with Meili and Clind, they had arrived at no conclusion.

Upon seeing Emilia’s reaction, Petra stopped sharing this potentially sensitive information. Emilia was staring intently with her beautiful amethyst eyes, her cheeks stiffening.

It was clear from her reaction that she understood what was said.

Emilia: “…That reaaally creepy feeling, it’s probably the work of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.”

“Subaru”: “…Did she say… Gluttony?”

Meili: “U~gh, it felt aw~ful.”

Subaru frowned at the mention of a Sin Archbishop, one of their most hated enemies, and Meili stuck out her tongue. Petra also put her hand on her chest, motioning with her eyes, prompting Emilia to continue.

Emilia: “I’m not exactly sure what happened. But Al made

Gluttony… Roy, do something, and then I suddenly felt sick and while my vision was spinning…”

Petra: “Al-san and Gluttony both got away?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right.”

Emilia’s shoulders slumped dejectedly, as she weakly nodded.

In response to Emilia’s reply, Petra glanced at Rom-jii, and the wise old man in charge of the Felt Camp stroked his head with his large hand and said,

Rom: “When this was just ‘bout Petra ‘n Meili, I was thinkin’ it was just some kinda misunderstandin’, but with Emilia feelin’ the same way on top of that, ‘n Gluttony bein’ involved, I don’t have a good feelin’ ’bout this.”

Petra: “What do we have in common…? We’re all Emilia-neesama’s allies, maybe?”

Meili: “It would be easier to figure out if Fang-oniisan was awake, or if Hat-oniisan wasn’t keeping quiet over there, or if Subaru-oniisan hadn’t been captu~red.”

“Subaru”: “Including the current me, we’re three idiots with bad timing…”

As Petra had predicted, Al was involved, but the fact that Gluttony was also involved made the uncertainty surrounding the unknown attack even more dire. —Leaving Spica behind in the Empire had begun to feel like a mistake.

Spica, too, despite her many trials and tribulations, was one of the Sin Archbishops of Gluttony—

Petra: “No, no, I shouldn’t think like that. I’m not the Master.”

What could be done and what could not be done, what would be useful and what would not.

If she were to start to determine a person’s value from that perspective, she would quickly become like Roswaal. Insight could be honed as much as one liked, but it was essential to be cautious to avoid losing one's humanity.

Rom: "For now, let's just be aware of Gluttony's actions. So, accordin' ta yer Internal Affairs Minister, their destination is…"

Emilia: "—Kararagi, the Grand Mogolade Geyser."

Rom-jii attempted to change the direction of the conversation to move away from the inconclusive discussion, and Emilia picked up on his words.

That was the final destination of Al and his accomplices, and the circumstances that led to this discovery were—

Rom: "They took Felt, 'n she left behind a message for ya guys. I trust Felt completely, but I'm unsure 'bout ya."

Emilia: "You mean Otto-kun? I believe in him not just a hundred times, but a million times over."

Petra: "Emilia-neesama, you're talking about quantity, but it's supposed to be a percentage. Still, it sounds cool."

Emilia's answer, which was not bound by the concept of percentages, warmed Petra's heart, while Rom-jii and Meili looked on with wry smiles.

But Emilia answered Rom-jii's questions thoroughly, which was typical of her.

"Subaru": "…You're not just cute, you've gotten incredibly strong, Emilia-tan."

Subaru stared at Emilia with a look of wonder.

The fact that this "Subaru“ was from the middle of solving the issues in the Sanctuary made it difficult for him to understand how Emilia had managed to grow and become so amazing.

She wanted to tell him. —That the Emilia of today had been forged in a three-legged race together with Subaru.

Petra: “No, there’s Beatrice-chan too, so it’s a four-legged race… if that’s the logic, then I want to join too, and Garf-san will get sulky if you don’t include him. Meili-chan, what about you?”

Meili: “What are you talking abou~t? It’s kind of scary when you suddenly start talking like Subaru-oniisa~n.”

“Subaru”: “That’s definitely something I would say, but Meili seems to understand it a bit too well, don’t you think?”

With a touch of lingering deep emotion, “Subaru” gave a wry smile at Petra and Meili’s conversation.

Regardless, Rom-jii seemed to be satisfied with Emilia’s answer, and it was shared that Al and his companions’ final destination was indeed the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

To be honest, she did not know what was in that place, but—

Emilia: “Since we know where they are going, we should be able to get there first with Clind-san’s help.”

Petra: “—. Right. Rom-ojiisan, Tonchinkan-san and the others are…”

Rom: “At present, everyone except the seriously injured shoulda entered the nearby town as instructed. That Clind boy… we can’t overuse his power, ain’t that right? We’ll plan accordingly.”

Rom-jii shrugged his broad shoulders, showing his understanding of Clind’s Authority without asking for further explanation.

Thanks to the “compensation” offered by Petra, the restrictions binding Clind’s Authority, Compression, were lifted. However, depending on the number of times it was to be used and the number of people involved, even that would become unable to completely cover the cost. First, they would need to prepare the field with the fewest number of people, then they would deploy as many people as possible once they had finished assessing the situation.

Thanks to the reckless actions of Otto, a ray of hope appeared in the midst of the preparations.

Furthermore, the more information they gathered about what sort of lineup Al and his party planned to arrive with before reaching their final destination, the better.

That was when—

???: “—The means to accomplish those goals are already in our hands. Opportunity.”

Hearing that voice, Petra and the others turned around in unison, seeing the person whom they had been waiting for. Clind bowed, taking in their full attention. It was exactly the person they had wanted to talk to.

Emilia’s expression brightened up as she exclaimed, “Clind-san!”, as if he had been waiting for the perfect moment,

Emilia: “Thank you for bringing Petra-chan and the others. Thanks to you, we were able to reunite properly.”

Clind: “I require no thanks. I returned to Mirula on my own accord, and it was Petra’s support that enabled me to meet your expectations. Encouragement. More importantly, my apologies for returning late. Remorse.”

Petra: “I don’t think you are particularly late, but did something happen? Clind-niisama?”

Clind slowly shook his head in apology, and Petra tilted her head in confusion.

Certainly, considering the nature of Compression, it could be said that Clind took some time to arrive at the Royal Residence. However, there must have been a need to explain the situation to the other parties at the pick-up location, so it did not seem like something that would warrant an apology for being late.

Perhaps it was a manifestation of his perfectionism, a trait of someone who was good at his job. Clind looked at Petra while she was thinking this, and said, “No. Negative,”

Clind: “As for the reason for the delay, rather than explaining it in words, it would be best for you all to experience it firsthand, as this would be the quickest and most reliable way to understand. Personal experience.”

“Subaru”: “Firsthand?”

Petra: “Experience?”

Petra and “Subaru” tilted their heads at the unnatural choice of words used to explain his tardiness.

Emilia and Meili seemed to have the same question, and Rom-jii, who was in the most objective position, crossed his arms and watched with interest to see what would happen.

Then, as everyone watched, Clind moved to the side of the room’s entrance,

???: “Ha. Kept you waiting, huh?”

With a dignified presence, a maid with pink hair strode boldly into the room, her brashly arrogant behavior perfectly suited to her—it was none other than Ram.

The woman Clind had retrieved and rejoined with was wearing a maid outfit for the first time in a while, and Petra, who was also a maid, felt quite nostalgic for the uniform, since it had been a long time since she had been able to wear one.

However—

Emilia: “Ram, you came, ah…?”

Emilia was about to run up and greet Ram in her maid uniform with a smile, but her words were cut off. She stopped in her tracks, and the hand that had been reaching out to take Ram’s hand was pressed against her own forehead.

Emilia: “Uh, um.”

Emilia let out a confused-sounding voice.

Although she should have been worried about what had suddenly happened, Petra was unable to do so. This was because Petra, like Meili and Emilia, was racked by the same indescribable feeling.

Petra: “This, is—”

The moment Petra saw Ram, she was overcome by a massive, inexplicable, indescribable feeling of turmoil welling up from inside.

Petra felt an unbridled enigmatic feeling similar to the nausea she had described earlier, which had been attributed to Gluttony. However, while she had felt strong malice in that previous instance of discomfort, she did not feel anything of the sort this time.

This was not like that, but rather a different, stronger, more powerful attraction—seeing Ram in a maid uniform brought out something intense from within.

And the answer to that attraction appeared immediately behind Ram.

It was—

???: “—Apologies for being late to join you, Emilia-sama.”

With that, a blue-haired maid dressed in the same maid uniform as Ram stood beside her and performed a graceful curtsy.

Of course, it was a familiar face. However, as far as Petra knew, she was not in a position to perform with such perfect manners and wear a maid’s uniform. —No, that was not right either.

Once again, and again, and again, her perception changed.

No. That was not right. It was absurd to think that she lacked the knowledge and manners of a maid. After all, she was the first person in this world to show Natsuki Subaru and Petra, who still had been a village girl at that time, what it meant to be a proper maid.

That attraction reminded Petra Leyte of this.

Namely, the one who stood there was—

???: “To get back that person… no, Subaru-kun, Rem will use any means necessary.”

Yes, the Roswaal mansion’s original versatile helpful maid, known for her polite but sharp tongue, Rem, looked straight ahead with her pale-blue eyes as she declared so.

Chapter 35:
The Awakening Star

1

—When Rem returned to the Roswaal Manor, she was unable to regain any sensation of “coming back home” whatsoever.

???: “Rem, do you see it? That is the mansion belonging to Roswaal-sama, the place where Ram and the others are employed.”

Rem: “Our… workplace…”

As Ram indicated the picturesque scenery endued by rays of the sun falling bright, a sight visible from the window of the dragon carriage, Rem’s pale-blue pupils blinked and her eyelids quivered at Ram’s words.

They had shared a dragon carriage and headed towards the Industrial City of Costuul, and it had been a while since they boarded the dragon carriage prepared there for their return journey to drop them off—what entered her sight was her Home, absent in recollection.

A towering gate, and beyond it, a splendid mansion. The Roswaal mansion, with greater extravagance than even the Berstetz residence she had sojourned in with Katya in the Vollachian Imperial Capital, was a building with elegance incapable of being forgotten after a single glimpse.

Yet—

Ram: “Well?”

Rem: “…I apologize, Nee-sama.”

Rem, spiritless, shook her head and apologized for failing to respond to her elder sister’s hopes.

Rem had made the journey thus far apart from Subaru or Emilia and the others who had to move separately towards separate goals, and had made her way back to the mansion with Ram. Having anticipated witnessing many things that would stimulate her memories, yet none so far had managed to bestow truth to that anticipation.

And it seemed that the mansion was no exception, the same mansion so valuable to Rem and Ram.

Ram: “I see. But, it can’t be helped. After all, it was quite a while ago that Ram and Rem worked in this mansion, and the mansion deeply memorable to Rem is not in this place.”

Rem: “Huh?!”

Ram: “Incidentally, the previous mansion was lit aflame by a vexed Otto and therefore is no longer extant. Would’ve thought of taking a detour to visit it had it remained not ashen to the ground.”

Rem: “Otto-san did… yet he didn’t seem to be a person of such kind.”

Rem’s eyes gyrated at the appended report, with further bewilderment at the information about Otto that Ram had recited.

The Internal Affairs Minister of the camp, Otto was a mild-mannered person, an inseparable friend and ally to Subaru, and a completely sleepless individual according to Petra and Frederica. The information of him furthermore setting the mansion ablaze in vexation, detracted from his character.

It might have been, as they say, that people do not match their appearances, and it might have been a good thing to accept that now.

Rem: “Including that person, are Emilia-san’s allies all a gathering of such people? Like Garfiel, and Roswaal-san too…”

Ram: “It’s, Roswaal-sama.”

Rem: “…Roswaal-sama too.”

Ram: “Good girl. But, to group Roswaal-sama together with those three, bad girl, Rem. Roswaal-sama is wise and proficient, the person said to be the most excelling magician in this world. Compared to him, those three, they’re the worth of one person when you put all three of them together… no, about the worth of half a person.”

Rem: “Half a person as three people together…”

Imagining Otto, Garfiel, and finally Subaru riding atop each other’s shoulders, Rem then arranged Roswaal, capable of flying via magic, beside the three in her mind. And upon lining them up, albeit Rem was ignorant of what difference would lie between them, it seemed Ram’s say was not mistaken.

Even now with null prospects of her memories returning, for Rem, the faith and endearment she felt coming from the familiarity she could feel from Ram, her twin elder sister, that alone was indubitably genuine.

—For that was the definitive nexus, which connected the Rem of the past with the present.

Rem: “…That manner of thinking, will purchase a scolding from Priscilla-san.”

Bitter sentiments surfacing in her mind, Rem recollected the gaze of a woman, fiery scarlet in hue.

She, who had engraved a marked impact onto Rem’s way of thinking and progressing, would never bless a bearing of fixating and clinging onto the past. In the same way, she would never favor a Rem flattered by Ram, entrusting herself to the nectar of faith.

Rem did not wish to be disliked by Priscilla, nor did she wish to walk an ashamed path of life.

Hence, she reprimanded her heart verging on pessimism, slapped her cheeks, and lifted her visage.

Rem: “But Nee-sama, going by this, then wouldn’t that mean there won’t be many paths to my memories’ return, even upon returning to that mansion?”

Ram: “Huhu, swift grasp. An astute little sister makes Ram proud as well.”

Rem: “No, not at all… I do not think that is anything deserving of such praise from you, Nee-sama…”

Ram: “However, just whose elder sister do you think the Ram standing here is? Do you think Ram, Rem’s Nee-sama, would make such an oversight?”

With her hand on her chest, Ram declared so with a visage brimming in confidence.

Rem earnestly shamed her own misapproximated worries at Ram’s bold utterance. Ram had foreseen it without needing to be told by Rem.

What roused curiosity, then, were Ram’s ideas—

Rem: “If we are returning to the mansion, yet that itself is not the goal, then… is the goal, a person?”

Ram: “Who knows. Whether your answer is correct… you will be able to ascertain soon.”

Ram smiled at Rem’s estimation, as the dragon carriage stopped at roughly the same time.

Feeling the jolting long kept at bay by the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, Rem was shaken as Ram stood up and gallantly proffered her hand to her.

Ram: “Well then, we’ve arrived. Let’s go.”

Rem: “—Yes, Nee-sama.”

Taking Ram’s hand, Rem restrained her chest, faintly jouncing in anxiety, and dismounted from the dragon carriage.

As Ram spoke to the driver who had carried them thus far, Rem took a step forward from the dragon carriage and captured in her view the mansion and the serene front garden beyond the bars of the iron gate.

Rem: “This place is…”

As Rem narrowed her pale-blue eyes, the mansion reflected within her pupils, indeed, she possessed no recollection of.

Nevertheless, apprehending the attentive management that reached the building and flower beds, the hedges, and every nook and cranny that shaped the mansion, she inadvertently straightened her posture.

Regardless of the presence or absence of her memories, if Rem were to abide in this mansion hereon, then her position would surely be that of a servant like Ram and Frederica.

???: “Rem, you should just live a healthy and carefree life every day.”

For a moment, the impression of Subaru vocalizing this came to mind, but Rem forcibly repelled this over-indulging phantom.

Subaru, for certain, would likely say something along those lines, but he was toiling at something else at this moment.

Incomparable to Rem, right now, in order to console the one who sustained lacerations on his heart from losing Priscilla, he was—

???: “—Oh? Oh, oooh, ooooh!”

Hearing a sudden bellow, Rem drew back with an “Eek!”.

She could tell the voice came from beyond the bars, that was to say, from the grounds of the mansion. —Present there was the form of a young girl, her miniature hands gripping the bars, eyes wide and frozen steady.

Adorable features, adorned with long, pink hair. Height seeming to indicate about eleven or twelve years of age and a black garb enveloping her entire body save for her head, the young girl widened her spherical eyes and fixed her gaze upon Rem.

Rem had recollections, of this girl. —From the vortex of the cataclysm within the Empire.

Rem: “Y-You are… the Witch who brought on the Great Disaster!”

Ram: “Ah, Ryuzu-sama, thank you for the welcoming.”

She shuddered in fear, as the bearer of the Great Disaster extended a finger towards her.

Beside Rem’s horror at the sudden, implausible reunion with the disaster, Ram swiftly stepped forward and spoke to the girl. Rem turned towards Ram with a “Huh?” at her prosaic behavior, and the Witch also scowled at her in a snap,

Ryuzu: “Ram! You’re home. You’re home but… you’re a quick one!”

Ram: “…Are you asking Ram to pick you up the way Garf and Frederica do, Ryuzu-sama?”

Ryuzu: “That ain’t what I’m sayin’! Puttin’ that ‘side, that girl…”

Rem: “Nee-sama, who is this person…”

The Witch who had plotted the ruin of the Empire, her name being Sphinx.

However, Ram referred to the girl before her eyes with a disparate name—Ryuzu. Ryuzu’s line of sight once again on her, Rem perplexedly glanced at Ram.

At the reaction of the two, Ram gently placed her hand atop Rem’s shoulder,

Ram: “Kindly give your name to her.”

Rem: “…”

Despite the absence of even a minimal explanation, Ram’s calm timbre marvelously soothed Rem’s roiled heart. Her disarray naturally coming undone, Rem turned towards Ryuzu.

Stabilizing her breath, and steadily gazing into her opponent's eyes,

Rem: "—I'm Rem. Am I right to assume that you are… Ryuzu-san?"

Ryuzu: "…I, see. Yeah. Hm, yeah. I'm Ryuzu, Rem."

Rem gave her name and enquired hers, to which Ryuzu momentarily had a distant glint in her eye, then softly nodded.

From her response, Ram's attitude, and the fact that she was on the premises of Roswaal's mansion, Rem was at last able to harbor conviction that the girl before her and the Witch of the Empire were separate persons.

Rem: "Even so, the resemblance is exceeding…"

Ram: "Yes. There's a saying that there's at least three people in the world with a face that resembles yours, but in Ryuzu-sama's case, there are about ten times that. Hence, also ten times her crudity."

Ryuzu: "What a detestable thin' ta say at a moment the elderly'd be gettin' all emotional."

Rem alluded to the misleading nature of her appearance, as Ryuzu scolded Ram for her reply.

It was tellable from their exchanges as well, but the two had a fairly relaxed relationship. Judging from Ryuzu's attitude, she must have also been someone who had a deep relationship with the Rem of the past.

Rem: "Forgive me. But, I don't remember anything."

Ryuzu: "No matter no matter, ain't nothin' ta be apologizin' fer. I am—"

Ram: "—Ram's little sister. She has the same hair color as Ram, after all."

Rem: "Th-that's true…! Huh, but if she is Nee-sama's little sister, then that means…”

Ram interrupted Ryuzu and divulged a shocking truth. Her breath taken away by stupefaction, Rem compared Ram and Ryuzu, deeming a convincibility in their hair colors.

However, Ram and Rem were supposed to be twins, so inevitably, Rem and Ryuzu’s relation would come down to being—

Rem: “Also my… little sister…?”

Ryuzu: “Cut th’ cackle, Ram! This’s what ‘m sayin’! ‘S the bad influence of Lil’ Ros ‘n Lil’ Su!”

Ram: “To enumerate them as equals? Even you, Ryuzu-sama, have things you are and aren’t allowed to do.”

Ryuzu: “Ain’t somethin’ ya should be sayin’ with that tone!”

The brows of her cute face upraised, Ryuzu yelled aloud, to which Ram furrowed her eyebrows. Watching the quarrel between the two, Rem finally gauged that Ram had spoken in jest.

Rem: “Now that I think of it, it would certainly be strange for Nee-sama to address Ryuzu-san with ‘-sama’ if she were mine or Nee-sama’s little sister.”

Ryuzu: “In that case, ya could mistake ’em fer a father or mother, dependin’ on the situation, leavin’ the possibility of them bein’ a blood sister ta an important someone. Can’t say that’s some kinda perfect rebuttal.”

Rem: “That is also true… Then, you really are mine and Nee-sama’s…?”

Ryuzu: “Nah. Don’t’cha mistake it fer anythin’ but a bad joke of Ram’s. Seriously, what a headache.”

Ryuzu heaved a heavy sigh, to which Ram had her tongue slightly peeking out.

She had been played like a fiddle it seemed, but thinking back to it even along their journey to this place, Ram had quite often stumped Rem in her playfulness, and in doing so granted her salvation.

For Rem, quick to drown for the slightest of reasons, Ram's way, abounding in conviction and humor, was truly akin to the warmth of the sun.

Rem: "I believe Nee-sama is a wonderful person. Including this playfulness."

Ryuzu: "From what was informed in the birdmail, ain't been too many days since ya reunited, yet ta 've tamed her this much…"

Ram: ""Tame her" is a boorish way to put it. It was simply devoted sincerity and love."

Ryuzu: "Fer that, you're frolicin' too much ta an uncharacteristic level, Ram. Though I do understand yer happiness for bein' able ta live with yer lil' sis' after her finally wakin' up from her neverendin' sleep."

Ram: "—. How cheeky for a mere Ryuzu-sama."

Ryuzu: "Ya get in attack mode when you're hidin' yer embarrassment, so nevermind me, but I wish ya'd have some consideration with Lil' Gar. Now then…"

Ram faintly frowned. Rem was struck with admiration at the rare state of her elder sister being cornered, when Ryuzu stepped away from the bars after having been leaning upon the iron gate,

Ryuzu: "'S weird ta keep talkin' at the gate. I also wanna give a big hug to my granddaughters fer comin' back safe 'n sound."

Rem: "Granddaughters…?"

Ram: "That's the best joke she could come up with. Kindly laugh for her."

Ryuzu: "It means that's how much I think of ya!"

As Ryuzu tapered her lips, Rem's own lips loosened even through her perplexment. Not because Ram had told her to, it just spontaneously happened in response to Ryuzu's thoughtfulness.

Above all, for Ryuzu to treat Rem and Ram as granddaughters despite looking younger than them was a truly apocryphal element, even taking her thoughtfulness into account.

Rem: "Beatrice-chan was the same way, but is it the tendency of young children to act older than they are…?"

Ram: "It would seem so. Beatrice-sama's true self appears when she is atop Barusu's lap."

Rem: "Considering her cuteness, I would have to agree."

Spica was the same way, but it befitted children best to be like children, laughing to their fullest. Not just Beatrice, but if Ryuzu also stopped trying to act older and smiled suitably for her age, just how adorable she would be.

Immersed in these introspections, Rem's cognizance momentarily paused at what immediately followed.

Ryuzu: "Now then everybody, let's open the gates."

Upon apprehending what Ryuzu had vocalized, the iron gate to the mansion slowly began to open.

That, by itself, was good. Without issue. The issue lay beyond the gate's opening.

???: "…"
???: "…"

The gate's latches unfastened, the gateway opening to the inside—moving it were several persons abiding by Ryuzu's calling, each with hair and ornaments that adorned them differing per the respective liking of each, yet all of them wore the same face as Ryuzu.

Namely, those girls possessed an identical visage as the Witch Sphinx—

Rem: “—eek!!”

Expectably overwhelmed, without curtail, Rem screeched to her limit.

2

???: “That scream baffled me, but I understand. Most certainly anyone would be astonished after seeing Ryuzu-sama and her sisters, Pico-sama and the rest.”

Rem: “For you to say that, gives me some relief…”

Rem hung her head in shame before the blonde-haired maid who indicated her sympathy.

The greeting with Ryuzu at the gate, and the frightening affairs that followed—the entrance of more than ten girls bearing the same face as Ryuzu’s, made her feel incredibly embarrassed for her delirious response to it.

Rem: “Even though Nee-sama had apprised me that the amount of people who had a face identical to Ryuzu-san was three times ten, yet I reckoned she was only joking…”

Ryuzu: “‘S the way Ram spoke, but ya also can’t fault yerself fer thinkin’ that way, Rem. Fer ya ta not think of it as a joke’d be blind belief, ‘n I can’t say I approve of that.”

???: “You speak of it quite nonchalantly, but would it not be good for you to take a look in the mirror yourself as well, Ryuzu-sama? If you continue to cause problems so frequently that it will be impossible to discount them despite your adorable appearance, then it will be about time I took matters in my own hands.”

Ryuzu: “Y-You’re scarin’ me…”

Glowered by those somewhat tranquil eyes, Ryuzu curled up in reflection. This made Rem loosen her lips at last as she corrected her hunched posture.

She had never predicted such a commotion would be stirred up even before she had entered the mansion's premises, but now that she had been permitted to pass inside, she could not keep moping this way forever.

Although—

Rem: "I caused you trouble by making a ruckus. Um…"

Sylphy: "—I am Sylphy Elmart. Previously Corneas, but I divorced. I have been entrusted to attend to the mansion during everyone's absence."

Rem: "The mansion. Then, were you also a coworker of mine and Nee-sama's, Sylphy-san?"

Rem inquired of the maid—Sylphy, who gently lowered her back and bowed.

Albeit a matter of course, it was likely that all of the women who worked at Roswaal's mansion were acquaintances of Rem. Surely, she must have troubled them owing to her slumber.

However, Sylphy shook her head and denied Rem's concern with a "No",

Sylphy: "I am still a newcomer, so I have never worked with Rem-sama and the others. In addition, I have been employed not by the Margrave, but by Miload-sama. Furthermore."

Rem: "Furthermore?"

Sylphy: "My master is myself alone. And my heart's master is nobody but Emilia-sama."

Overawed by Sylphy's gaze, perfused with potent willpower, Rem's head unwittingly inclined backward.

The unordinary allegiance Sylphy had attested for Emilia. It could also be discerned from the flawless maintenance of the entry hall, the passageways, and the parlor she was presently in, all of which she had seen on her way around the mansion under Sylphy's guidance. In accordance with her impression of the mansion from the outside, the professionalism was remarkable.

This work incontrovertibly emanated from the emotions which exalted Emilia as even the master of her heart.

Rem: “Sylphy-san, have you known Emilia-san for a long time?”

Sylphy: “No, it has only been a few months since we met. And that, too, was an exceedingly limited timeframe in which I was able to be in her company personally.”

Rem: “And yet, you devote such emotion?”

Sylphy: “It is what that person did for you, rather than the length of time you spent with them, that determines to what extent that person will comprise your heart, is it not?”

Rem: “That’s…”

Taken aback by the unexpected reply, Rem cast her gaze downward at Sylphy’s subsisting words.

What crossed Rem’s mind in this moment were the figures of people she cherished, Spica and Katya. However, taking also into account that they were relationships Rem had fostered anew without her memories, the time Rem had spent with them was not a great number of days by any measure.

Nevertheless, still, Rem resolutely felt them to be irreplaceable.

What Sylphy had said was correct. —And, as Rem neared this conviction, a clear image of Subaru’s visage emerged within her mind, making her purse her lips shut.

Sylphy: “Rem-sama?”

Ryuzu: “She must be befuddled. Sylphy, I’m sure I told ya ’bout Rem’s circumstance.”

Sylphy: “You are… correct. My apologies. I lacked forethought.”

Rem: “No, this is not something you need to apologize for. —It’s simply… my circumstance.”

Ryuzu and Sylphy exchanged glances upon hearing Rem’s reply. Albeit to the heartache of the cordial two, Rem did not wish to speak of her present conflict.

As expressed, it was Rem’s own distress, her own anguish to the very end.

Ram: “—You look downhearted, Rem. Did Sylphy tease you or such?”

Rem: “…”

Upon the voice abruptly calling for her, Rem raised her face and gazed at the parlor’s entrance. Standing there was Ram, having momentarily parted from her in the middle of guiding her towards the parlor to see to certain business.

As Ram belatedly enjoined them, Rem gulped an inhale with eyes wide at her appearance. —For Ram stood there in an unfamiliar maid guise.

Rem: “Nee-sama, that attire…”

Ram: “Were you not told so multiple times? Ram is the mansion’s, Roswaal-sama’s maid.”

Rem was inadvertently captivated by Ram, who combed down her pink hair and replied in exuberance. Looking at Ram all the same as Rem, Ryuzu exhaled a jaunty “Ahh”,

Ryuzu: “Been a minute since we seen Ram in this kinda attire, ain’t that so.”

Ram: “Indeed. Ram had been wearing her travel clothing for some time, so it feels refreshing.”

Sylphy: “So refreshing that it would seem some parts of the uniform are disordered in the manner they have been worn. May I fix them?”

Ram: “Is that so? Then you are requested to.”

Beside the mesmerized Rem, Ryuzu was enthralled as Sylphy attentively began assisting with Ram’s dressing. Whilst Sylphy’s hands adjusted her uniform, Ram met Rem’s gaze by closing one eye and winking at her,

Ram: “This is the maid uniform that Ram and Rem wear whilst working in the mansion.”

Rem: “…I think it is, wonderful. But…”

Ram: “But?”

Rem: “Doesn’t it expose a bit more skin compared to Sylphy-san’s uniform? Just what difference… could it be, that person was behind it?”

Comparing the maid outfits of Ram and Sylphy, Rem bore this misgiving whilst hugging her own shoulders.

It was a lovely outfit, to be sure, but the discrepancy was much too clear and its intent, unknown. And when she thought back to it, in the Empire, Subaru would often vest convoluted sentiments within her by alluding to Rem’s attire, telling her what would be cuter, what would make her more alluring, et cetera. The memories of those times were resurrected by the uniforms before her eyes.

Rem: “I did think he had an abnormal obsession in even the attire of others, but for it to show up even here…”

Sylphy: “…It would seem a misunderstanding has occurred, Ram-sama?”

Ram: “Indeed. Ram personally is not concerned whatsoever by how much Barusu’s repute falls to the gutter in Rem’s mind, but it is unamusing to have credit stolen.”

Rem: “Credit, you say?”

Ram: “Yes. This maid uniform’s alteration was something Ram personally proposed and adjusted. All of it was because… Ram wished to wear a uniform with better mobility? Is what… it was supposed to be?"

Ryuzu: "Where'd that confidence of yers go all of a sudden?"

As Ram's confidence uncharacteristically wilted by the end of her utterance, Ryuzu tilted her head. Upon Ryuzu's delineation, Ram muttered "Quite incomprehensible",

Ram: "To be skeptical of one's own opinion, how unpleasant. The reason why Ram proposed the uniform's alteration was, probably, not supposed to be something so randomly offhanded like that."

Sylphy: "Y-You say that for your own opinion?!"

Ram: "It feels to be a scheme of the uniforms' provider… It is irksome for being a thought akin to Barusu's, but if they wanted to make Rem wear a cute uniform, that would be much more convincing."

Sylphy: "I see, most certainly. I am persuaded."

One finger on her lips, Sylphy for some reason endorsed Ram's inference. Judging from the flow of this conversation, Sylphy probably had the urge to dress someone in cute clothes as well.

In reality, in a world where the plural majority of memories surrounding Rem had disappeared, the true nature of Ram's malaise and the correct answer to it would likely never be known.

Ram: "If so, then Ram will believe what she wishes to believe. Unafraid of what anyone else may ever think, you see."

Rem: "…I'm sure Nee-sama would've found Priscilla-sama agreeable as well."

Albeit confined and small companionships of Rem's, but as noble and powerful women, Priscilla and Ram had radiant and suspired commonalities. Had Priscilla been alive and well, there would have been a future in which the two would have come to good terms with one another through Rem. Or, they would have collided against one another as natural enemies.

Anyhow, her suspicions towards Subaru concerning the maid uniforms seemed misplaced.

Rem: “But, it’s all because that person is constantly doing such misleading things.”

Ryuzu: “If you’re talkin’ ‘bout Lil’ Su, it’s a pity ya give flak to him.”

Rem: “Ryuzu-san, you’re able to say this because you haven’t witnessed that person say all sorts of nonsense and crossdress as a woman.”

Ryuzu: “To think! Lil’ Su was crossdressin’ even in the Empire! He oughta be learnin’ some manners.”

Sylphy: “Crossdress as a woman? Despite the presence of Emilia-sama’s person? With what purpose? Depending on that answer…”

Ryuzu’s reaction evinced that Subaru truly was a repeat offender. Sylphy expressed a stern displeasure upon hearing this, and Rem was determined to grill him about this once again in her mind.

During this exchange, Sylphy completed her dressing of Ram. Ram swiftly twirled, the hem of her skirt overturning, as she exuberantly stroked her hair upward,

Ram: “Nothing uncomfortable. Good work, Sylphy.”

Sylphy: “…Your compliment is an honor, is what I will state for the record.”

Ram: “It’s Ram’s commendation, so kindly accept it without feeling shy. That’s not all. From a cursory glance, you’ve attended to the mansion quite meticulously as well.”

Sylphy: “I did live days of subservience beneath an unsalvageable Husband-sama. Should even a speck of dirt be fallen onto the floor, each wife would bear the corollary of being worthless. Infuriates me to even remember. Although recently, he reaped what he had sown.”

Having corrected Ram’s uniform in an instant, Sylphy spoke of her previous place of employment—no, her environment, perhaps. It could be glimpsed through her words and conduct how debilitating that place was, to which Rem also felt a great sympathy.

And, before this Rem, with her shift into a flawless maid, Ram gently set a cup of tea.

Ram: “Here, you must be parched after all of Ryuzu-sama and Sylphy’s enquiries.”

Ryuzu: “Paintin’ us as villains even when you’re just handin’ a cup of tea, eh.”

Ram: “Hah.”

Scoffing an exhale at the sour-lipped Ryuzu, Ram laid out tea for her and Sylphy as well.

Seemingly having brought the serving stand to the corridor, Ram adeptly poured the two’s tea and, with her gaze, urged Rem to take a sip. Heeding her direction, Rem no longer constrained herself from enjoying the tea’s aroma any further and placed the cup to her mouth—her eyes reflexively dilating.

Rem: “Delicious…”

Ram: “Isn’t it. Brewing tea is Ram’s sole specialty as a maid, after all.”

Sylphy: “You carry yourself with contrasts of seriousness to a nearly enchanting degree… Not that I can say much, since truthfully, I have never had the opportunity to enjoy tea of such quality.”

Ryuzu: “Even Frederica’s always happy ta say this one’s peerless.”

Sylphy and Ryuzu also yielded in defeat to the triumphant Ram and sipped their tea.

Savoring the aroma entering her nostrils and the flavor atop her tongue, whilst nodding to the two’s voicing, Rem took a sudden notice to Ram’s gentle gaze, affection and a somber hope sojourned within.

Rem: "—Ah."

Ram would never aver. But, surely, she must have conferred her hopes onto even the flavor of this tea.

It was not arduous to imagine that before losing her memories, Rem also surfeited the flavor of this esteem, of this tea which only Ram could make. In reality, her serving of the tea, artful enough to bedew one's tear ducts in captivation, seemed to imbue every fragment of Rem's body with affection.

It did not, however, stimulate Rem's memories, and forge the outcome longed for.

Rem: "It is very, truly very delicious. But—."

Placing the cup she had finished sipping from upon the table, and with eyes closed, Rem spoke so evasively. However, to Rem's conduct, Ram smiled with a "Stupid",

Ram: "This was simply brewing some tea. Nowhere near any necessity for cute Rem to apologize."

Sylphy: "Ram-sama, you may have made her apologize due to your stabbing gaze. My former Husband-sama was an inordinately temperamental person, but he kept in good spirits if he were to just receive apologies in the meanwhile."

Ryuzu: "…Oh dear Ram, would ya pour 'nother cuppa tea for Sylphy? I feel so awful, so awful fer this girl."

Sylphy: "Why would you feel so? Contrary to feeling pity, I am rejoicing in the freedom which I never had before."

Slightly furrowing her eyebrows, Sylphy informed Ryuzu, eyes sorrowful, of her incredulity. Complying with Ryuzu's entreaty, Ram began preparing a second cup for Sylphy.

Whilst glimpsing Ram's back, once again did Rem ardently, fervently resolve.

…I want to respond, to the people who are so good to me.

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3

After leaving the parlor, Rem followed her curiosity and ambled around parts of the mansion.

Every point at which she would stop, Ram, chaperoning her, would retell memories of those places, “That’s the flower bed where Barusu got his head covered in manure” or “This pillar has gnaw marks from Garf on it, doesn’t it? He shall be chided later” or “Ah, the portrait of the Great Spirit-sama that Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama drew on the ground, it’s still here”, endowing her not even the time to relish her forlorn.

However, contrary to this embrace and consideration of Ram’s, Rem was unable to convene with a fortuitous feeling that pressed her back.

Rem: “Ah, more children resembling Ryuzu-sama…”

Ram: “Pico and the rest. After being taken out of the Sanctuary, they’ve been in the midst of learning many things from square one.”

Rem: “…I’m also in a similar circumstance to those girls, or Sylphy-san and the others, aren’t I?”

Unlike the awfully matured Ryuzu, these young girls appeared as innocent as their appearance suggested—these girls, with the child addressed as Pico as the first, were noticeable at every corner of the spacious Roswaal mansion, running about assisting maids wearing the same uniform as Sylphy.

The pronouncedly diligent girls apparently bore a destiny differing from that of most people by their birth, and now liberated from it, were currently purportedly in the midst of walking a different pathway of life.

On one hand were these ladies, maids whose beauty and elegance allured the eyes of many, but from what she had heard, these were women situated in plightful circumstances identical to Sylphy, and all of them had been able to escape with Emilia’s aid.

In the sense of Ryuzu's sisters as well as these maid girls having their ways of life trifled by destiny, playthings of fate, what crossed Rem's mind was that they were the same as her.

However, Rem's thought was appended by Ram's words, starting with an "Indeed",

Ram: "Regardless of the presence or absence of memories, upon resolving to start walking a new path, usually there is no choice but to start collecting from the beginning. Rem is not special."

Rem: "Nee-sama…"

Ram: "No, made a mistake. Rem is special. She is much too beloved to Ram, after all."

That revision stated, Rem turned her face away in bashfulness from the magnitude of love bestowed to her.

Of course Rem also felt a powerful kinship and overflooding love towards Ram, but the sense that what Ram gave to her was ten times, a hundred times of what Rem gave, left her disconcerted.

Bearing this vexation, Rem and Ram's tour of the Roswaal mansion resumed.

And before long—

Ram: "—Rem, this is your room."

Ram's hand opened the door, her hand gestured toward the room, into which Rem stepped inside.

Compared to places inside the mansion she had surveyed, like the reception or the dining halls, the large bath or the secret special training grounds, the lounge, the gardens and the balcony, there were not many points of interest here much like the parlor.

Considering the mansion's size, the room given to a mere servantile Rem was quite proper, but not much else.

Rem: "…"

A large bed, a bookshelf teeming with poetry collections and illustrated storybooks. A carefully tidied writing desk, placed upon it a vase adorned with vivid flowers.

Ram: “There was once a time these belongings had been put away without notice, but Barusu brought all of them out and put them all back where they were, saying this was how Rem kept everything.”

Rem: “That person…”

As Rem stood before the bookshelf, Ram conveyed to her Subaru’s toil.

Ram’s scathing remarks towards Subaru were primarily conspicuous, many of which Rem found agreeable, but the solitude of sincerity in the words she just appended struck Rem’s chest.

Pulling out a collection of poetry, she flipped through its pages. The written verses were all things she had no remembrance of, but these bindings were of literature that the Rem of before must have liked, must have loved. Many of them somehow seemed to recite love or romance, giving her both a sense of peculiarity and embarrassment towards her past self.

Rem: “For over a year, I was asleep, right.”

After placing the poetry collection back in the bookshelf, Rem sat on the bed and caressed it with her hand, narrowing her eyes.

In Rem’s stead once she had plunged into her unawakening slumber, unable to fulfill her duties as a maid, Ram, Frederica, Petra, and the others must have performed the mansion’s maintenance, and attended to the asleep Rem. Even now, the bed’s cushions and sheets had been maintained cleanly, the careful and conscientious work discernible.

Next to the bed were faint traces of sun-bleached discolorations on the floor, bearing witness that a chair had been set there for long. An image came to her mind, of those visiting Rem talking to her from there.

That surely must have been Ram, Emilia, and the rest, and finally—

Rem: "…"

Ram also wordlessly seated herself beside Rem on top of the bed. A tender gaze of light-crimson watching her profile, Rem closed her eyes, and shook her head.

She had not been asked. But, she must have made her want to ask.

Of everything in this mansion, of everything in this room, naught inspired Rem's memories. All that was here was a wealth of affections and love, things that made her feel so, things that illuminated to the unremembering Rem that she used to be happy.

She could ardently, fervently feel this, enough to mist her eyes with tears.

That was precisely why—

Rem: "…Nee-sama, that makes me really curious, what is that?"

The room was luminescent with sunlight filtering through the trees, a tender and gentle atmosphere permeated by compassion, and placed in one corner was a mysterious object—the strangeness of an iron ball, covered in spikes, attached to a chain, lured her eyes.

Upon Rem's enquiry, Ram murmured an "Ah" as though just taking notice,

Ram: "That's a "Morningstar"."

Rem: "…Moarning, stahr?"

Ram: "Yes. That's what Barusu started calling it, and before long it stuck… apparently, that is also something Rem treasured."

Rem: "Me, that thing?!"

Apprised of something exceedingly different from her reminiscences so far, Rem could not help but look back and forth at Ram and the spiked iron ball—the morningstar.

Afterwards, she nearly convinced herself this was another one of

Ram's mischievous jokes.

Ram: "Ram also understands your doubt. But after looking at Barusu, especially preparing a dedicated cloth and oil, and polishing it every day, Ram thinks it's lasted for too long to be simply some worthless joke."

Rem: "B-but, doesn't it seem like that person would do something foolish like this?"

Ram: "Indeed. It's undeniable."

Perhaps a dispute already settled, Ram had a sympathetic response to Rem's objection. Ram's demeanor made Rem rise from the bed, and she walked towards that Morningstar.

Rem: "I don't understand…"

Upon closer examination, she noticed a handmade iron ball holder had been made for it so that the iron ball's spikes did not splinter the floor, a palpable sense of the smallest of considerations. The cloth and container of oil left at the same spot corroborated Ram's testimony of Subaru polishing it every day.

However, so what; that was all there was to it.

Rem: "I'm sure this, too, was one of that person's antic—"

Like with his crossdressing, simply expressed in truly limited words, it was unquestionably only some vile thing that reflected Subaru's tastes.

Bearing this notion, Rem stooped and touched the iron ball with her fingers. —It was at that moment.

Rem: "—Huh."

Without warning, Rem's vision warped and distorted as she unwittingly fell to the floor on her back. Disgraceful conduct, but in this moment in time, Rem had no composure to feel ashamed of it or be mindful.

Rem: “Ug…”

Fallen onto her rear, her swirling dizziness spiralled the world.

Despite her person’s position in this place, the floor and the ceiling became indifferentiable, the white and black of the world inverted, the things she could see and the sounds she could hear and the scents she could smell and the air’s taste and the sensation of touch, these five senses became nebulous and melded together, seeing the air, smelling the sounds, touching the scents, tasting the colors, she heard.

Rem: “—Ah, ug.”

All that she could sense coalesced, convulsing, and even Rem’s past, present, and future melded together.

A village in the mountains, a flag emblazoned with a wolf impaled by swords, creaking notes of a wheelchair, a weyr of flying dragons covering the sky, an abominable whale of white gliding through the night sky, a broken horn soaring into a twilight radiated by flames, and a young boy who pleaded with an earnest look, a young boy who raged, a young boy who shed tears, a young boy who laughed —.

Rem: “…”

Before long, the impact akin to the recreation of the world, burst open like a bubble popping.

Rem: “…”

Her sight, her hearing, her olfaction, her taste, her touch, each was able to see, hear, smell, taste, feel, informing her of the way to live in their correct forms.

The nigh-scorchingly severe sensation, feeling its received pulsation diffusing blood to every corner of her body, Rem blinked once, twice, thrice.

She did not know, what in the world had occurred.

Merely—

Rem: “I-… Rem, is…”

Still fallen to the floor, she touched her cheek with her trembling hand, ascertaining her existence.

The sensation of her fingers’ touch faded not. Fleeting, fallible, fearing to crumble like a castle made of soft sand, Rem did not pour any more strength in her fingers.

Feeling that she, if at all, coveted anything further, then all would vanish—

Rem: “…”

As Rem was engulfed in this unrejectable dismay and fear, a warm sensation enveloped her from behind.

She inhaled, too petrified to even turn around. Hugged tightly by arms wrapping around her from her back, as Rem’s mind and heart were inundated about herself, she gained a desire to focus on someone else.

And the first one on whom she focused, was the presence embracing her from her back—

Rem: “Nee-sa—”

Ram: “—Wait.”

Rem: “…”

Ram: “Don’t turn around, yet. Right now, for the first time in her life, Ram is feeling disappointed in herself.”

All of her attempts to voice, to turn around stifled by that person, Rem stiffened her body.

Ram, whose visage was concealed, her hugging arms, her professing voice, were all trembling. This was exceedingly antithetical, far removed from the image of Ram that Rem knew.

At all times, Ram was dignified and gallant, never showing Rem of anything but her majestic form.

That held true when they had reunited in the Empire, when they undertook the journey back to the Roswaal mansion just by the two of them, when she used to be overburdened by recoil when they first began working in the mansion just after her horn had been broken, when she grappled with Witch Cultist enemies in the blazing village to protect the foolish Rem.

Whenever had been captured by Rem's eyes, Ram was evermore venerable—.

Ram: "So, so sorry, Rem. Myself is deplorable."

Rem: "Nee-sama… what are you…"

Ram: "Even after…"

Rem: "…"

Ram: "Even after loving you, cherishing you so much, Rem, to have forgotten you and kept on living till this day, just how heartless was Ram as your Nee-sama."

Rem's eyes dilated at Ram's voice, possessor of love far too immense, and therefore in lament. Shaking off all restraints, Rem turned around and faced Ram as she hugged her.

Ram: "—hk."

Faintly widening her tearful, light-crimson eyes, Ram looked at her in astonishment. —Rem's chest warmed at the sight of the visage she had gazed upon the most, for the longest time, in her life.

She gained certainty. Of what a happy person she was, surrounded by that which she loved.

Rem: "Nee-sama, you are not heartless or anything such. Rem also wants to apologize. Always, always making you nothing but worried, betraying the piety of a sister."

Ram: “Rem.”

Rem: “Rem understands, everything. How much Nee-sama shattered her heart for Rem, and how many terrible sacrifices you made, to have been together with me to this day. And…”

Ram: “Rem.”

Rem: “About what the weak and deplorable Rem, who only ever receives, needs to do hereon.”

Ram: “—Hk.”

As Rem focused her eyes on the countenance before her, Ram’s cheeks were embellished with streams of tears, wiped by Rem’s fingers who then gave her a smile. She then stretched her arm to draw her elder sister’s head close, and embraced her into her chest.

Remaining seated on the floor, the two sisters gently nestled with one another, reciprocating affection. —No, it was Ram who had always been doing so. Rem was the one who lacked it.

Rem: “Nee-sama, I love you.”

Bringing close her lips to her ear whilst holding her close, Rem conveyed her brimming and overflowing emotions to Ram. Drip by drip, feeling warm droplets of tears wetting her chest, Rem maintained silence and continued to embrace Ram, weeping with tears.

Accepting in her heart, at long last the fulfillment of their true reunion, Rem conveyed her love with her past self, her present self, and all that she could wield.

To her mind’s satisfaction, to her heart’s content, at this moment, she wanted to be with Ram this way.

And after the unfilled time of the sisters was duly reclaimed, Rem had things she must do—too many people, to whom she must convey her gratitude and love.

Above all, the first person to surface in her mind, was a mean-eyed, black-haired boy—

Rem: “—Subaru-kun.”

To convey her love, she must stand up.

For what a happy reason am I allowed to live. —So spoke, Rem’s mind.

4

???: “…”

Giving a deep and silent bow, the girl in the maid uniform then looked up, drawing a gasp from Petra.

With wide eyes, their petrified bodies were frozen in place. Not just Petra, but Meili and Emilia were also similarly struck speechless at her appearance.

Amidst such involuntary silence, the first to speak was—

???: “—Rem.”

The intangible Imaginary Subaru stood motionless, staring at the same person as Petra.

His stupefied voice only reached Petra’s ears. Sadly, the girl, the one who called to herself all attention, could not see his transparent self. Even for Petra, she had not the time to help that unnoticed “Subaru”.

However, she could guarantee that which “Subaru” had called out, was correct. —The one who stood there, without mistake, was the girl so beloved and dear to him named Rem.

Petra: “—Ah.”

At that moment, sparks darted through Petra’s mind, and the fog in her field of consciousness successively cleared.

The presence of that which exerted such force of attraction right before her eyes made the images of memories, that had been unconsciously pushed into the corner of her mind and covered by a shroud of forgetfulness, start to reappear within her hall of cognizance.

And so, she was struck by an impact akin to scattering sparks, of all the vivid images that displayed.

—The time that Petra had spent in contact with her as "Petra" was not very long.

The young girl was a maid who frequently came from Roswaal's mansion to the village to do some shopping. Though they hardly interacted and had never exchanged a word, she became more expressive once Subaru had started to visit the village. More importantly, she was also the benefactor who had saved the lives of Petra and her friends. —The culprit behind endangering their lives had been Meili, in command of Witchbeasts, which was another tale of fate. Actually, Meili and her elder sister targeted those connected to herself at the most important moments far too much.

Anyhow, Petra's connection with this girl was thin.

Thereafter, just as the Royal Selection marked its beginning, she was met by the tragedy of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, victimized, and Petra was employed to fill her place, joining the Emilia Camp as a maid.

In other words, without the tragedy that had befallen her, Petra would not be in the position she was today, which in itself made for terribly complicated feelings—

???: "Rem… Rem, is that you?"

As though a face-down card flipped over, akin to confirming the patterns and text on it, one by Petra's misunderstandings about her were replaced with comprehension.

Beside her, in a faltering voice, Emilia called her name as she blinked her eyes.

Emilia stepped forward and hesitated, opening and closing her lips several times as if searching for the right words,

Emilia: “Umm, I’m sorry, that was a weird thing to say. I’ve always properly known that Rem is Rem… but, that’s not what I was trying to say.”

Rem: “No need to worry, Emilia-sama. Please calm down, and take your time. Rem, too, understands that this is all very sudden.”

Emilia: “—. Yes, thank you. There’s so much I want to say, but…”

Rem: “But?”

Emilia: “…That look suits you reaaally well. It makes me reaaally feel like you’re Rem.”

Emilia placed her hand firmly on her chest and smiled at Rem, her amethyst eyes moist with tears. In response to Emilia’s words, Rem raised her eyebrows slightly, and nodded.

She proudly puffed out her chest in her maid uniform and,

Rem: “It’s the uniform Nee-sama tailored to suit Rem, after all.”

Upon hearing Rem’s answer, Ram, her arms crossed, nodded in satisfaction.

???: “…What is this, all of a sudde~n?”

Beside this exchange between Emilia and Rem, Meili frowned and muttered.

As a little Crimson Scorpion emerged from her hair, clicking its pincers as if anxious about its master’s reaction, Meili closed one eye, and placing her hand to her forehead,

Meili: “The moment I saw Ram-oneesan’s sister, I was reminded of how she crushed the whole pack of Ulgarm-cha~ns. If it isn’t the reason that caused the job to fai~l…”

Ram: “In that case, you should be grateful to Rem. Thanks to Rem making your job fail, there were no victims other than Barusu, which is why you're able to be here at this moment."

Meili: "I've got mixed feelings about it, finding it difficult to express my gratitu~de…"

Ram pointed this out while clutching her elbows, to which Meili made a displeased face and stuck out her tongue.

While Ram's words were indeed harsh, they also held truth. In fact, it was unmistakable that Meili, at one time their enemy, was accepted into the Emilia Camp because the damage her deeds had caused to the camp were minimal. —Ram's point that there had been no victims other than Subaru, ironically enough, was also correct from the perspective of Return by Death.

???: "As per your understanding, the moment those who have hitherto known Rem lay their sight upon her, within them their memories of her are revived. Restoration. Neither Ryuzu-sama nor I were able to contain ourselves. Resultantly, we were delayed in rejoining everyone. Confession."

Ram: "Clind's reaction was meager and unamusing, but Ryuzu-sama's outburst was over the top and quite the sight to see. That is a privilege for those who were present to witness it."

Clind: "I see, a sight to see you say. Certainly, we did get to behold something unusual. Agreement."

Ram: "—. Hah."

The rebirth of her Memories, that befell those who surrounded Rem. —No, in view of the conditions of the Authority of Gluttony thus far, this phenomenon should be called the rebirth of her Name.

Touching upon that fact, Clind cast a meaningful look to Ram, to which she averted her eyes in obvious displeasure and snorted.

Upon a much closer inspection, the faint redness around Ram's eyes and Clind's remark about a sight to behold might have been related.

However, Petra did not allude to that either. —Not out of chivalrous sympathy, but because she was unable to.

Rem: "—Petra-san?"

Suddenly, Rem, who had been basking in everyone's attention, widened her eyes upon looking at the silent Petra. Emilia and the others also turned to see Petra at her reaction, and were startled by her state.

Their response was a matter of course. Petra, who had uttered not a word up until that point, had a flood of tears streaming from her round eyes and was desperately trying to suppress her throat, as it verged on convulsing in heaving sobs.

Emilia: "Petra-chan?! Oh no, she's crying so uncontrollably—"

Petra: "—Hk."

The moment her tear-strewn face was noticed, Petra kicked the ground and broke into a run.

Dodging the arms of Emilia, who, taken aback by Petra's tears, she tried to embrace her; avoiding Meili, who attempted to grab her sleeve; slipping under Rom-jii's legs, who was caught off guard by the situation; with agile movements, Petra jumped forward—into the bosom of Rem, who was staring at her with eyes dilated.

And—

Petra: "Rem—!"

Rem: "Kyaa!"

Caught in the arms of Rem, who had shown the kindness to not dodge her, Petra embraced her slender body tightly. Rem blinked her eyes as she reciprocated Petra's hug, who clung to her, reluctant to let go.

Petra: "Rem… Remm, Remmm…!"

Petra crumbled at Rem's reaction, unable to stop the tears from flowing; she found herself indulging in something she had resolved herself never to do, sniveling in front of others, yet she was unable to tear herself away.

Thus, while supporting that tearful Petra, Rem looked around for assistance,

Rem: “Um, do I just not remember, but were Rem and Petra-san this close for you to cry so much for me…?”

And so, failing to conceal the hue of her loss of bearings, she continued to gently caress Petra’s head.

Chapter 36:
Problem

1

???: “I’m sorry, I’ve caused you so much trouble…”

???: “No, Rem is the one who ought to be happy that you cried with joy. It was just like when Nee-sama did the same… ah.”

Petra bowed her head repeatedly, apologizing for her flustered and disgraceful behavior. Rem, who had tried to comfort Petra, realized she had said something awkward and stiffened her cheeks, looking toward Ram.

In response to Rem’s gaze, Ram smiled gently and said, “It’s okay”,

Ram: “After all, Ram is a pathetic older sister who is unable to even keep her composure during an emotional reunion. It’s no wonder Rem would call her sister a crybaby.”

Rem: “Th-that’s not what I meant! It’s a misunderstanding that you’re a crybaby, Nee-sama! Besides, I was happy that you cried for me, Nee-sama!”

???: “That’s right, Ram. You’re finally able to remember Rem. Even if you did cry, no one would think you’re a crybaby. Cheer up!”

Ram: “Rem, Emilia-sama… wah, wah, wah…”

Following Rem’s lead, Emilia joined in comforting her, to which Ram covered her eyes with her hands and turned away. The two remained concerned, but from Petra’s perspective, it was all just a farce.

Of course, there was no doubt that this situation brought tears of joy to Ram’s eyes.

Petra: “…Ram-neesama, I get that you’re happy, but you shouldn’t tease them so much.”

Emilia: “Huh?!”

Rem: “Tease…?”

Petra managed to compose herself and admonished Ram, causing Emilia and Rem to widen their eyes. Ram, who had deceived the two innocent girls, ceased her fake crying, shrugged her shoulders, and said,

Ram: “Well, now that memories have been restored, it’s natural to want to see all of Rem’s different expressions, so there was some teasing involved. Will you forgive such a mean older sister?”

Rem: “Nee-sama… well, it seems it can’t be helped. Just this once, okay?”

Ram: “Yes, thank you. Are you okay with that, Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “Rem forgave you, so I can’t stay angry forever. Good grief.”

???: “Amazi~ng. Instead of showing any humility, all you did was act cute and you got away with i~t.”

Despite showing not a single shred of remorse, Rem and Emilia easily forgave Ram’s overbearing behavior, while Meili watched in astonishment and muttered in disbelief. Petra agreed with Meili’s disbelief. This was typical of Ram, but she was getting a little too carried away.

Petra: “I would like to hold a victory party for Rem… Rem-neesama, but this is a very difficult time, so could you please refrain from doing so, Ram-neesama?”

Ram: “Self-restraint, you say. That sounds reasonable at first, but what about you, Petra?”

Petra: “—? What do you mean? I’ve been reflecting on what happened earlier as well.”

Ram: “Not that you should feel bad about getting all worked up. It’s just something else that has been concerning. —Ever since a little while ago, it seems you have naturally positioned yourself between

Rem and Emilia-sama."

Ram pointed this out with one eye closed, and Petra widened her eyes with a "Huh?". Then, she looked to her left and right, and saw the profiles of Emilia and Rem beside her.

The three of them were now sitting side by side on a long sofa, with Petra in the middle. Petra had her arms firmly wrapped around the two of them, as if she never wanted to let go.

Petra: "Huh?!"

Meili: "Don't just "huh" u~s. After you hugged Rem-oneesan, you ve~ry naturally pulled her along with yo~u. Even Emilia-oneesan was pulled along to~o."

Petra: "S-sorry. It seems like my love for both of you overflowed…"

Petra reflected on her actions in light of Meili's continued exasperation. However, her excuse was precisely the same as Ram's earlier, causing Ram to let out a "Ha!"

Rem: "It's okay, there's no need to worry, Petra-san. Rem also wants to fill in the gaps in her memory piece by piece."

Petra: "Rem-neesama…"

Rem: "Besides, Rem didn't think Petra-san and the others in the village got along with her very well, so it's a pleasant surprise to find that they cared so much."

With Petra's arm wrapped around her, Rem blushed slightly and gave a shy smile.

From Rem's perspective, her relationship with Petra and the others was at its peak around the time the Royal Selection began—during the month when Subaru was taken in at the mansion. Before that, they had been merely passing acquaintances at best.

That was why Rem's perception was not wrong. The reason Petra held such strong feelings for Rem was not so much because of her own emotions, but because of the extent of "Subaru's" influence.

However, despite that, she still felt them.

Petra: “Rem-neesama, smiling and looking shy, how precious…”

Emilia: “Petra-chan, your ears are reaaally red. Are you okay?”

Petra: “Ah, that’s not true. This isn’t two-timing… Emilia-neesama is number one!”

Emilia: “Huh? Um, that’s right. I’m the most important person in the camp, so I have to do my duties properly.”

Petra, torn between her impatience and happiness, blurted out something she should not have said, but Emilia, like the angel or goddess that she was, or perhaps because it simply went over her head, reacted to it like a dense protagonist.

With that in mind, Petra suppressed her racing heartbeat and stood up, telling herself, “Subaru is my number one…”

If she remained sandwiched between Emilia and Rem, her heart would surely be pulled apart.

Vic.ll2o

???: “Way to go, Petra! You hung in there!”

Petra: “Subaru, you better be ready for me to give you a piece of my mind later. You two-timer.”

“Subaru”: “That’s not fair! I can’t even touch Emilia-tan or Rem!”

Petra managed to cut off her lingering sentimentality and directed her pent-up anger toward the Imaginary Subaru. Holding a handkerchief to stifle her tears, she sighed as she watched “Subaru” dance around the reception room, exploding with emotions toward Rem, whose memories had returned.

That was when—

Rem: “Rem knows that she’s causing quite a disturbance, but it would be helpful if we could calm down for now. —Let’s talk about that person.”

Petra: “…”

Rem’s quiet voice caused the air in the room to become noticeably tense.

Although it had not completely relaxed, the atmosphere had started to warm up despite the urgency of the current situation, yet Rem herself wiped that away. That was very admirable and impressive.

Emilia: “Ram, Rem, did Clind-san already explain everything to you?”

Ram: “More or less. Besides, we also saw the devastation in the Royal Capital. Who would have thought it would come to this… Barusu really messed up.”

Petra: “Ram-neesama, that’s quite a way of putting it…”

Ram: “Sorry, let’s rephrase that. —Everyone, including Ram, really messed up.”

Petra: "…"

Ram's assessment weighed heavily and resonated deeply with everyone.

As previously confirmed before Ram and Rem had rejoined them, the severity of Al's actions was beyond one's ability to bear.

???: "That bein' said, there's nothin' ta be gained from blamin' ourselves excessively. Ultimately, the responsibility for what happened oughta lie with the person who caused it. That's what we've concluded."

Ram: "That's how Ram and the others feel, no doubt. But things aren't that simple. Wouldn't you agree?"

???: "…You're quite an impressive girl. What was all that foolin' around earlier?"

With that, Rom-jii stroked his bald head and gave Ram a stern look. Seeing the understanding between the two, Rem tilted her head and said "Nee-sama",

Rem: "When you say "things aren't that simple," are you talking about where the responsibility lies?"

Ram: "Yes, that's right. Rom-sama wants to discuss the details. Please go ahead."

Rom: "Throwin' us a load of trouble… well, fine. As the girl said, regardless of our resolve, the current situation ain't good for us or for all of ya."

Rom-jii, who had been entrusted with explaining the situation by Ram, pointed at himself and Emilia with his thick fingers. Staring at his large fingertips, Emilia blinked her amethyst eyes and,

Emilia: "That's true for us, but, Rom-jii, what about you, the others… and Felt-chan?"

Rom: "Ezzo was also at the Tower. He was given the task of managin' the Tower until an official investigation team could be dispatched by the Kingdom, but he was unable ta fulfill his duty. Even Reinhard wasn't able ta stop the helmet bastard nor the Divine Dragon, 'n damage was caused ta the Royal Capital."

Meili: "Bu~t, thanks to Emilia-oneesan, no big rocks fell on the city, ri~ght? So why are we still being scol~ded?"

Rom: "If ya could gain popularity just by smashin' stones thrown at ya, then Reinhard could just keep doin' that forever. Meili, it's not just the results that need ta be judged fairly, but the process as well."

Meili pouted at Rom-jii, who shook his big head slowly with a serious expression.

Hidden beneath Meili's dissatisfied attitude lay her frustration that Emilia's critical role was not being properly appreciated. Realizing this, Emilia smiled at Meili and said, "Thank you," causing the pouting girl to turn away even further.

Rom: "At the bare minimum, we gotta talk 'bout what we absolutely must do. First, we gotta stop that helmet bastard… the man who calls himself Aldebaran, with our own hands. We can't leave it ta anyone else or the Kingdom. We can only talk 'bout recoupin' our losses after we've done that."

Emilia: "Why does it have to be us? Of course, it would be natural for us to try our best, but if Al is stopped before he does something terrible…"

Rom: "Emilia, ya don't understand. It's no longer just 'bout Aldebaran. He's got the Divine Dragon on his side. This is a serious matter that could shake the foundations of the Royal Selection… the only way ta reverse that is for the Dragon Priestess, a Royal Candidate, ta recall the Divine Dragon. If that can't be done…"

Emilia: "—Would that mean the Royal Selection itself would be null and void?"

Emilia spoke of a definitive possibility, and Rom-jii drew back his chin with a serious expression. Upon hearing this, Petra belatedly comprehended the gravity of the situation.

In the first place, the Royal Selection to determine the next monarch of the Kingdom of Lugunica was based upon the prophecy of the Dragon History Stone that was necessary in order to maintain the Covenant with the Dragon. In other words, it was a ceremony which relied upon the mighty power of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, and without the Divine Dragon, the Royal Selection would not be viable.

Rom: "For that reason, we must. The only solution's ta stop Aldebaran, the one who's bewitched the Divine Dragon, by the hands of a Royal Candidate."

This was a fundamental prerequisite for settling this crucial situation, and for the continuation of the Royal Selection.

The words of the old giant, the wise man from the Felt Camp, who had long seen the world, possessed conviction which none could refute.

The destruction of the world by Al's hand must be averted. However, that did not mean that so long as the world was spared, nothing else mattered.

After the battle ended, there was the matter of—

Rem: "We need to ensure there is a proper place for Subaru-kun's return."

Emilia: "Rem…"

After listening to Rom-jii's words, Emilia looked at Rem as she muttered so. Rem met her gaze, her pale-blue eyes filled with resolve, responding with "That's how it should be, is it not?",

Rem: "That person, he did the same for me. Rem's room in the mansion remained exactly as it was before… because Subaru-kun thought so highly of her, Rem was able to remember the things she had forgotten. It's all thanks to the Morningstar that Subaru-kun polished every day…!"

Indeed, Rem emphasized that forcefully, with an iron ball attached to a chain in her hands—the Morningstar. Overwhelmed by the chain's rousing resonation and Rem's vigor, Emilia tilted her head.

Emilia: "…Thanks to the Morningstar?"

Rem: "Yes. It may surprise you, but it was in the moment upon touching the Morningstar. Every memory up to that point came flooding back… thinking that it was all just that person's obsession was a misunderstanding… There are so many things to apologize for."

Lowering her eyes as if ashamed of herself, Rem recounted how her memories had returned to her. Troubled by Rem's impassioned plea, a wide-eyed Emilia waved her hands about.

Perhaps, it was a matter of timing. —That which Gluttony, whom Al had released from the Prison Tower, had done was likely related to the rebirth of Rem's Memories and Name. And that had happened at the same time Rem had touched the Morningstar in the mansion.

That was why Rem was convinced that the Morningstar had awakened her.

Emilia: "You know, Rem, can you calm yourself for a moment to listen…"

Rem: "Rest assured, Emilia-sama. With this Morningstar, Rem will surely be of help in getting Subaru-kun back. After that is done, let us discuss what happened in the Empire and the future…"

Emilia continued to look troubled as Rem clenched her fists with an attitude of determination. Next to her, Meili looked at Ram and asked, "Aren't you going to stop he~r?", to which she replied,

Ram: "It can't be helped. This is something Ram didn't expect either. —Who would have thought that Barusu's ridiculous ramblings about polishing it every day would actually prove useful?"

Meili: "…It's really bad that I'm the one with the most common sense he~re.”

Meili lamented the situation, in which even Ram had placed too much faith in the power of the Morningstar.

In any case, it was necessary to share everything they knew concerning Gluttony with Rem and the others, including their speculations. Petra decided to leave that to Emilia, and turned back to Rom-jii, keeping the dream-like interplay between Emilia and Rem in the corner of her eye.

And then—

Petra: “Clind-niisama still hasn’t returned with the Master and the others… but we don’t have much time. We’ll be cooperating with Rom-ojiisan, right?”

Rom: “—. Yeah, that’s right. It’s our consensus that the Royal Selection’s gotta continue.”

Petra: “Then, please tell us all about it. Rom-ojiisan, what have you noticed about Al-san?”

Rom-jii had joined up with them in the plains and had accompanied them as they rushed to the Royal Capital. For the sake of Clind’s Compression, he had opted to act separately from Tonchinkan and the rest, but he had been laying the groundwork for fighting alongside Emilia and the others, saying that he had critical information concerning Al that he had obtained during their previous clash.

From the discussions up to this point, the Emilia and Felt Camps were of one mind. It was time for both sides to open up to each other; thus, Petra urged Rom-jii.

In response to Petra’s request, Rom-jii patted his bald head and said,

Rom: “What I’m gonna tell ya is gonna sound pretty outlandish ‘n insane. I didn’t keep it a secret ’cause I wanted ta seem important or nothin’, but ’cause it’s so unbelievable.”

Petra: "It's okay. I'll believe you, Rom-ojiisan. I'm sure Rom-ojiisan would be surprised if he knew, seriously."

Rom: "…You're also quite the peculiar girl, ain't'cha, Petra."

Perhaps mistaking it for lip service, Rom-jii lowered his eyebrows and muttered in exasperation.

But, there were no lies in Petra's words. Petra trusted Rom-jii. She knew that he cared deeply for Felt, who had been taken hostage by Al and his accomplices, and that he was a man of fatherly love who would show no hesitation to sacrifice his life for Felt.

For that reason, the hurdle of trust about which Rom-jii was concerned was cleared at the onset.

Unaware of Petra's various circumstances, while paying heed to Emilia and Rem, who even now were still reconciling their perceptions of each other, Rom-jii said,

Rom: "This is somethin' I'll tell Emilia 'n the others later, but… this Aldebaran guy, he's likely usin' some kinda cheat technique called an Authority."

"Subaru": "—An Authority."

"Subaru" reacted to Rom-jii's carefully chosen words before Petra could.

"Subaru" ceased his twirling in midair and his face stiffened, his gaze fixed intently upon Rom-jii. The Imaginary Subaru's reaction was understandable. They had just heard it from Clind's mouth, but both Petra and "Subaru" were familiar with the word "Authority" and its more sinister significance.

It was a word that had been uttered by the Sin Archbishop of Sloth, and by the Witch of Greed who slumbered in her tomb.

The manifestation of a formidable right which allowed one to interfere with the nature of this world, to overturn concepts, to selfishly paint over those laws.

The reason Rom-jii concluded that Al utilized one was because—

Rom: “—This guy, it seems like he’s able ta go back ta time gone by. But, it don’t seem ta go very far back, though.”

2

—In the end, just what was it that she absolutely needed to do?

That “problem”, which had accompanied her endlessly since the days she had been small and weak, continued to familiarly haunt Felt even now that she had been taken by the Aldebaran Crew.

Felt: “Geez, it’s so damn irritating.”

Scratching her head at that frustration, Felt spat out the bitterness that had been festering in her stomach.

Feelings of powerlessness and resignation, albeit definite, were of no use; this Felt knew. Despite that, despite neither quenching her throat nor filling her belly, they would seek to fill up people’s bodies, welling up by every means just to get in the way.

Felt: “—Tsk.”

With a click of her tongue, Felt sunk her teeth into the dried meat served to her for dinner, chewing it apart. Finding herself clearly unsatisfied with the overly salty flavor, she was disgusted with how spoiled she had become.

It had been a mere two and a half days since they had been parted, yet she longed for the cooking of Flam and Grassis.

Even the heavily seasoned, manly meals that Ezzo, Rachins, and the rest would sometimes bring to the table were far preferable to these portable dishes. Flam and Grassis would get mad at her if she made Reinhard cook, as it was a task below his station, so she did not make him do so, but when Felt had him make sweets in secret, he was not bad at all.

Unfortunately, Felt and Rom-jii’s culinary skills were so horrendous that she was amazed she had not died of food poisoning in the over ten years she had spent at the loot house. That was likely the source of Felt's meager growth when compared to others of the same age.

Regardless of the culinary circumstances of her Camp—

Felt: "I can't cook or nothing. So then, what can I do?"

Licking a grain of salt off her fingertip, Felt narrowed her red eyes, her thoughts returning to the initial "problem".

—At present, the Aldebaran Crew was moving from place to place, with Aldebaran and the Divine Dragon endeavoring to recover from their exhaustion incurred from the Royal Capital. Initially, Felt assumed that Aldebaran and his accomplices would make straight for their objective, the Grand Mogolade Geyser, after fleeing the Royal Capital, but it seemed as if it was not simply a matter of reaching the destination; an element of grasping the right time was involved as well.

However, those breaths of respite while waiting for that time were far from ideal—they had been met with the relentless sabotage of a callous pursuer, Otto Suwen.

Felt: "It's not just talking with bugs, it's an outrageously terrifying Divine Protection… Or rather, what's terrifying is probably not the Divine Protection, but Zodda bug-niichan himself."

Otto possessed a quiet and ignorant face, but his true nature seemed to be that of an individual warranting extreme caution.

Ultimately, every Divine Protection served as nothing more than just another tool. No matter how fine a sword one held, if they were not equipped with the strength to swing it, the ambition and opportunity to learn how to wield it, and the courage to brandish blade when the time came, then the sword would merely be a fine decoration.

Otto had the strength, the opportunity, the ambition, and the courage. —Thus, Felt would have no choice but to prove that she too possessed those things, swordless as she was.

Felt: "That nii-chan's going all out on the offensive… plotting some damn nasty stuff.”

With the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, Otto had allied with bugs, birds, and fish; without allowing the Aldebaran Crew even a moment of tranquility, he was constantly forcing them to counter.

The buzzing of insects and the distant howling of beasts, the pollution of water and contamination of food supplies, his methods of attack were diverse; since they were unable to secure any sleeping hours, Felt, being dragged along with them, was also experiencing a headache.

But, getting caught in the crossfire like this was something Felt could discount as trivial damage. If possible, Felt would make use of her position accompanying the enemy to mercilessly contribute to Otto’s tactics.

Felt: “I thought there’d have been plenty enough meaning in serving to suppress the Divine Dragon, but…”

That alone would not suffice; she had understood that through the battle between Divine Dragon and Sword Demon at the Royal Capital.

Even if Felt’s presence curtailed the Divine Dragon’s power by ten percent, the remaining ninety percent was still enough to display catastrophic power; that was the true worth of the Divine Dragon Volcanica—considering the possibility that from here forward, Rom-jii would seek a rematch against Aldebaran’s party after his initial defeat, her current state was lacking.

At present, that was the “problem” that the captured Felt ought to face.

Felt: “No, I guess there’s also one more.”

Muttering so, Felt turned her eyes toward the other “problem”, visible from her position.

???: “…”

To her fore, across the crackling bonfire, a man sat facing Felt. — No, he could not be described as facing her. After all, his face was downcast, with nary a glance in her direction.

Clutching a sheathed sword to his chest, silently cowering as if he were deceased, the red-haired man radiated a sense of vexation in every direction—Heinkel.

Left alone at the entrance of a cave naturally formed in a rocky wall, Felt and Heinkel were spending a dismal time together, waiting for the ones who had gone to ascertain the safety of the surroundings and remove obstacles.

For the time being, Heinkel was supposed to be in charge of supervising Felt, but based on the ratio of who was looking at who, it would not have been possible to tell exactly who the supervisor was. That manner of rejecting the outside world, to the point of neither touching his dinner of dried meat nor putting water to his lips, thoroughly rubbed Felt the wrong way.

Felt: "…"

Felt had declared that she had no ruler of good or bad with which to measure Heinkel's actions. There was no falsehood in that, and she would not alter her view, but—she did have a ruler of liking and disliking to measure with.

At the very least, his demeanor befitting a Hollow despite yet living, was something she absolutely hated.

Felt: "Oi, if you aren't gonna eat, pass me that dried meat."

Heinkel: "…"

Felt: "You can hear me, yeah? Don't ignore… woah there."

Albeit her initial belligerence, the dried meat she had used to broach conversation was thrown at her as if to shut her up. She hastened to pick it up, but Heinkel cast nary a glance in her direction.

In that instant, thinking it foolish to unclench her fists, Felt called out “Oi” once more,

Felt: “So, why the hell did you interfere back there?”

Straight to the point, Felt boldly cut straight to the source of Heinkel’s cowering.

Heinkel: “…”

Heinkel kept his silence; however, given that he had flung the dried meat at her, he had not completely cut himself off from the outside world. Seizing on that, Felt lightly exhaled,

Felt: “Your old man… how should I call him. The fight between Reinhard’s grandfather and the Divine Dragon. I’m not really a warrior or anything like that, so I dunno the specifics of who was superior in that battle and stuff. But, you’re supposed to be the Divine Dragon’s ally, yeah?”

Heinkel: “…”

Felt: “For you to have interfered there meant that things were looking bad for the Divine Dragon. That’s an outrageous prospect, but there’s also something strange about it. —If your objective is the Dragon’s Blood, then that grandpa being on the verge of victory ought to have been the perfect opportunity.”

Heinkel: “…”

Felt: “Even though you might have gotten your hands on the Blood if the Dragon died, you got in the way. Why’s that?”

Using the other party’s lack of objections to make her point, Felt bluntly lined up her words.

As she had said, Heinkel’s interference with the battle between Divine Dragon and Sword Demon was exceedingly unnatural when considering his goal. There was also a possibility that he had acted on impulses of a strong grudge towards his father, but before flying off with the Divine Dragon, Heinkel had requested the Dragon to apply healing on Wilhelm, whom he had stabbed.

In other words, Heinkel had wished for neither Divine Dragon, nor Sword Demon, to die during that battle.

Felt: “It’s way too incoherent. Just what exactly are you—”

Thinking; it had been the moment she was about to continue her words. —Immediately pinned down to the hard ground, an unsheathed blade was fastened to Felt’s neck.

Heinkel: “You talk too much, brat.”

Right before her eyes, the bloodshot blue eyes of Heinkel were present. Perhaps because he had bitten the inside of his mouth, his breaths doused her in a reek of blood, causing Felt to grimace. While she did so, Heinkel continued to slide the blade as if to intimidate Felt,

Heinkel: “If you don’t want to feel the pain, then don’t say such unnecessary—goaghh?!”

Through an opening in that threat, Felt drove her fist forward without hesitation, straight into Heinkel’s nose.

Heinkel exclaimed “Uh, ah?”; rather than pain, it was the reality of having been hit that surprised him. As he stood up with the momentum, a kick to the chest sent him crashing onto his backside, and Felt looked down upon him.

Felt: “There’s no way I’d be scared of you at this point.”

Saying that, Felt picked up Heinkel’s sword which had fallen beside her. For a moment, Heinkel’s body tensed, but Felt heaved a sigh and tossed the sword back to him. Heinkel snatched up the sword, eyes widening, but Felt just shrugged her shoulders in response.

It might have seemed a mystery why she had returned the sword, but from Felt’s perspective, it was the natural decision.

Even if Felt went ballistic here, she could not beat Heinkel, and on the off chance that Heinkel thoughtlessly tried to cut Felt down, it was clear that Yae would be overjoyed. To begin with, the moment Felt and Heinkel had been left alone here, Yae’s aims were made obvious.

If possible, Yae wished to discard both Felt and Heinkel. Resorting to violence here was unideal, as it would only have been playing right into her hands. —Even without such reasoning, there was also the fact that it was not Felt's role to beat up Heinkel.

Felt: "Then you'd think it'd be Reinhard's role, but I think that also doesn't seem right."

Heinkel: "—Hk."

As Reinhard's name came up, Heinkel was once again greatly perturbed.

For a man over double Felt's age to be cowering in fear over her every word and action was absurdly unsightly. However, Felt wanted to uncover the reason behind that unsightliness.

Even if that would deliver a terribly bitter flavor to Felt, she wished to know.

Felt: "Same as before, you don't gotta answer anything. I'll speak on my own, and infer on my own."

Wiping the hem of her clothes, dirtied from being pinned down, Felt waited not for the other party's response, and looked to the sky. Within the night sky, visible through a fissure in the rocky wall, countless stars shone aglow with a brightness that did not belong.

Glaring at the ironic beauty in that sky, Felt broached with "As a matter of fact",

Felt: "What bothered me about the battle between the Divine Dragon and that grandpa was everything I said before. Even though you want that Dragon's Blood, the actions you took don't seem to add up. And so, there's one other thing with you that doesn't seem to add up either. —It's Gluttony."

Heinkel: "…"

Felt: "Let's ignore the fact that that bastard's got the absolute worst personality, and that he never ever stops talking. Even without that, he's a good-for-nothing Sin Archbishop, and there's no way he'd ever be welcomed, but… when it comes to reasons to hate that bastard, you ought to have way more than I do, yeah?"

Hushed, Heinkel gave no answer, but his breath caught upon hearing the question. Even if he did not respond with words, Heinkel's reaction was far too easy to read, and thus Felt narrowed her eyes.

Released from the Prison Tower, Roy Alphard was being made to accompany them by Aldebaran as a necessity for his plan—there were endless reasons to hate, to detest the Sin Archbishops who brought forth many a tragedy, but Heinkel ought to have had a more precise, definite reason for enmity.

After all, the woman who was Reinhard's mother, who was Heinkel's wife—the affliction of the ever-slumbering Louanna Astrea bore a striking resemblance to that of the victims of Gluttony.

Felt: "I said it once before, but I know about your… about Reinhard's family circumstances. That your wife's been sleeping for over ten years, and that you can't find a way to wake her up. Well, that might be resolved once you've received the Dragon's Blood, but… how are you gonna settle the score?"

Heinkel: "…"

Felt: "How are you gonna settle the score with the fuckface who put your wife to sleep for over ten years?"

Through the assault on Duchess Crusch Karsten and the battle at the Watergate City Pristella, the damage incurred by the Authority of Gluttony had been made clear; Sleeping Beauties—tragic beings whose ties had all been severed, discovered in a state of unawakening sleep, with nobody around aware of their existence. It was uncovered that such individuals were none other than victims of the Witch Cult.

Of course, that also ought to have reached the ears of Heinkel.

Nevertheless, not once had Heinkel displayed any interest in Gluttony, who could have been the cause of his wife's slumber.

—Was it because his utmost priority was to acquire the Dragon's Blood and awaken his wife?

—Was the impact of stabbing his own father, bathing in his blood, simply all too much?

Or perhaps—

Felt: "If you seriously are just completely disregarding the bastard, then why?"

Heinkel: "W-wait… what are…"

Felt: "You don't need to respond. I told you, didn't I? I'll speak on my own, and infer on my own."

His grip on the sword quivering, with an expression deathly pale Heinkel did look at Felt. The gaze of eyes Astrea-blue clashed with that of her own red, and Felt was convinced.

Deep within Heinkel's eyes were terribly indefinite, yet ultimately unperishing embers. —Likely, they were heat of the same ilk as that which dwelled in the eyes of Rom-jii whenever he gazed upon Felt.

Heinkel: "…"

Appearing to be a despicable man, self-centered, selfish, self-destructive, of wavering heart whilst being ignorant of his own capabilities, and beyond all help, was Heinkel Astrea. —If concealed deep within, visible through only the slightest of gaps, was a heat ever-present in this man's every action, that would mean.

Felt: "The reason you don't even bother to look at Gluttony, is because you know there's no connection between your wife falling asleep and Gluttony. You know it's incorrect, so you don't turn your sword on him. But…"

—Louanna Astrea's affliction of Sleeping Beauty, was definitively different to that of the other Sleeping Beauties.

Unlike the Sleeping Beauties whose every tie in the world was severed, Louanna was remembered by Reinhard, by Heinkel, by all who were acquainted with her, and her slumber they all did lament.

In other words, it was different. Louanna Astrea was no victim of Gluttony. Then, while Heinkel knew the truth of the matter, he had not shared it with anyone else.

Why was that? Because he could not afford for any to know. —The cause, of Louanna's slumber.

That cause was—

Felt: "—Reinhard."

Heinkel: "…"

A pair of motionless, widened eyes, a voiceless countenance, a husky breath void of vitality, all of which became an answer more eloquent than words, lending credence to Felt's conviction.

That which she absolutely needed to do. —Finding that out, was Felt's current "problem".

By her resolve and conviction to face that "problem", she arrived at the terribly bitter truth, and that was—

Felt: "—So the one who put Reinhard's mother to sleep, was Reinhard himself?"

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Nascent Wolves:
Undead Busters III

1

—Harline the Iron-Arms was a weaponkin whose brutality cemented his name in the history of the Empire.

The weaponkin, born with the capacity to wield parts of their bodies as armaments, spanned many variations, such as fashioning one's arms into sharp blades, growing a steel lash in a manner akin to a tail, or morphing one's back into a greatshield.

Among those weaponkin, Harline's speciality was exactly as described by his alias, Iron-Arms— swinging his arms wrought of steel, he was a monster notorious for having slaughtered countless people.

However, to brand his nature as brutal, and his existence as a monster, would be a bit hasty.

If you asked Harline himself, there was another side to the unfavorable manner in which the story painted him. —His manner of crushing the heads of those he deemed opponents may have been called brutal, but that was the fault of the construction of their heads being weaker than that of Harline's arms. It may have been said that he mercilessly killed women and children, but that was just to sever off any worries of anxiety or revenge. Above all, the one who truly ought to have been called a monster was not Harline, but his younger brother "Excuse me. It seems like that would end up being a rather long story but the more you speak the more it seems like it's an episode that piques nobody's interest so why don't we change things up to a scene depicting stuff like the leading actor's preferences and trivial daily life that the fans truly want to see!"

A carefree voice seemed to blot over the introduction, and in an instant, the arms raised aloft were severed at the elbows, and the Iron Arms from which he derived his alias spun around as they flew through the air.

There was no pain. If his body had been reconstructed in such a manner, then he might just be able to reconnect the arms by pressing the cross sections back together—

???: “In the way.”

That meager hope of Harline’s was extinguished by the hellfire that engulfed his airborne arms.

As he bore witness to the arms as they met a terminus of ash and dust, anger swelled in Harline, having lost his Iron Arms, and he would attempt to pounce at the enemy who had enacted that—

Harline: “—Ah?”

A tiny palm squarely touched his chest. Right in front of Harline was a young girl of short stature, and he met her blue eyes.

Then—

???: “—Aaine.”

Having been resurrected from death, Harline the Iron-Arms was once again plunged into the depths of Od Lagna.

2

Cecilus: “Man~, that really was an opponent with absolutely no pushback or challenge or sense of accomplishment whatsoever! He bluffed with a name like Iron-Arms so I thought he’d surely make for a fine bout but the script might have been a lot tidier if that whole scene was just dropped!”

Spica: “Uu~, eieved.”

Cecilus: “Right?! I thought that you would feel the same way, Spica-san! Well I suppose that since Star Eating succeeded with no issues it’s good that your hopes have been met, right, Anya? You think so too, right Anya?”

Arakiya: “Cecilus, you’re noisy.”

Cecilus: “Hahahaha, what would I be if not loud? We’re in a place detached from human settlements. Our stories won’t reach anyone unless we raise our voices!”

He was shot down by a curt comment from his fellow traveller, however, Cecilus still laughed loudly in good humour. Sandwiched between those two, Spica shrugged her shoulders with an “Uu~au”.

—The Star Eating pilgrimage for which Spica had stayed behind in the Empire, an attempt to reduce the number of undead resurrected by the Great Disaster to zero, had commenced with the permission of the Vollachian Emperor, Vincent.

The existence of the undead was something of a headache for Vollachia— in the sense that they were the embers of the Great Disaster which had caused so much damage, their elimination was desirable both for practical reasons as well as for the sentiments of the populace, which aligned with Spica’s desire to amass positive contributions.

Spica bore the unerasable sin of having been the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony in times past.

Without memories of the past identity known as Louis Arneb, it was a sin Spica had no recollection of enacting, but as long as the world continued to see it as a wrongdoing that could not be so easily forgiven, nobody would lend Spica an ear even if she cried and wailed and pleaded. —No, there were people who would lend her an ear, so Spica had no choice but to work as hard as she could to rinse away that poor reputation in order to be together with those people.

On this journey of atonement, Spica’s ability to properly dispose of the undead with Star Eating was perfect, and furthermore, her companions on this quest were the two people who were evaluated to possess the greatest strength throughout the entire Empire— and yet.

Cecilus: “To begin with, aren’t your selections kinda bad, Anya?

Even though I desire to find a more spectacular and picturesque villain why is it that I only continue to have my hopes dashed? Could it be that you keep leaving me hanging on purpose? Nobody desires that sort of thing so even if out of personal desire or spite such methods are incredibly petty, behhh!”

Arakiya: “I don’t think about you to that extent, Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “So you mean that you keep crashing us into the end of the road without thinking causing us to draw one losing ticket after another? So that would make Anya the type of heroine whose archetype is that of not having anything but would that not then be quite humiliating?”

Arakiya: “Die.”

Making statements that many would see as being provocative, Cecilus caused the eyepatch-clad woman to avert her gaze— Spica’s other companion, Arakiya, could not hide her irritation.

When it came to these two, from start to finish and from dawn to dusk, they would bicker in such a manner, causing Spica’s head to spin as she was caught up in the middle of it all. —But, these two, unable to get along, matched each other’s pace to an unbelievable extent, and were indispensable for Spica’s journey.

As a matter of fact, the undead known as Harline the Iron-Arms who had just been sent away through Star Eating, was an enemy so formidable that Spica would not have been able to do a thing without these two. As expected from the immovable First and Second of the Vollachian Empire, which Subaru had referred to as a nation of complete carnage.

The Iron-Arms seemed to have been someone who had been known for his strength during his life, but the pair had easily evicted Harline from the mountain cavern he had burrowed away in and finished the job while the sun was yet high in the sky.

Hence, she had no dissatisfaction whatsoever with the strength of the pair. She merely wished that they would get along a bit better.

Cecilus: “Ah! You still only fry the eggs on one side, Anya! No matter how many multitudes of thousands of times I ask you, why don’t you just do it?! The half-fried eggs are all crying out!”

Arakiya: “Eggs don’t cry. Cecilus, are you stupid?”

Cecilus: “Mghkk! In that case I’m crying! The tears shed by the leading actor will cause a mere lunchtime scene to go down as a classic that will be discussed for many years to come!”

Whilst doing this and that, Cecilus and Arakiya had at some point started to make preparations for a meal, which led to the beginning of a dispute regarding the manner in which the food was prepared.

Having taken in a tremendously powerful Spirit, Arakiya was preeminent at wielding the forces of earth, water, fire, and wind; instantly creating a steel plate by compressing earth, she heated it with fire to prepare the tools for cooking. Onto it, Cecilus cracked an egg which he had procured from the nest of a wild bird, and thus, they began frying the egg.

Spica: “Aaiya.”

The two of them displayed good communication, even in this situation, and with a sidelong glance to Cecilus, who was deftly preparing the wild bird which he had also strangled, Spica called out to Arakiya as the latter fried the egg.

Receiving Spica’s call, Arakiya looked towards her,

Arakiya: “…It wasn’t on purpose.”

Spica: “Uu~?”

Arakiya: “It wasn’t to annoy Cecilus. We must, keep searching for undead.”

As Arakiya falteringly selected her words, Spica widened her eyes, and then loosened her lips.

What Arakiya was explaining was in regards to Cecilus’s prior comment— the suspicion that she had purposely chosen an opponent in opposition to the group's desires.

That which could have been called the very land of Vollachia itself, the Great Spirit Muspel, the Stone— having merged with that entity, Arakiya could sense the whereabouts of the undead, who had been resurrected using Muspel's power. However, it had still only been a short time since she had merged with the Great Spirit, so Arakiya had yet to fully master its power, and thus could not tell apart the strength of the undead she perceived, which caused her anguish. This also brought with it several complaints from Cecilus.

Due to that reality, Arakiya expressed her apologies to Spica in her own way. Understanding that to be the reason behind her explanation, Spica sat down next to Arakiya and leaned her head on her shoulder.

Arakiya: "…You're heavy, and in the way."

Spica: "Aau-."

Without meeting eyes, Arakiya displayed a cold attitude, however made no effort to remove Spica's head. Spica felt good about that, and together they watched over the egg she was frying at hand.

Cecilus: "Huh? What's this what's this with you two sitting all nicely together in a picturesque scene? Please keep all developments of unknown events off-screen while I'm doing my best to prepare this bird!"

Arakiya: "Cecilus, you're the one who's off-screen."

Cecilus: "There are things that are fine to say and things that aren't fine to say, Anya!"

Spica: "Eius, aa's igt."

Having reached his boiling point unusually fast, Cecilus puffed his chest out with a "Naturally!" at Spica's comment,

Cecilus: "Alright? Of course even those who are not actors deserve their time in the spotlight and on those occasions the camera should be turned to them. But but when it's not that type of scene the shot should always be angled with the leading actor right at the center. That—”

As Cecilus began speaking tediously yet at such a high pace that it bore no feeling of tediousness, Spica feared that another fight would break out with Arakiya. Thus, Spica looked towards Arakiya in trepidation, but—

Arakiya: “…”

She was not looking towards Cecilus. Not towards the steel plate frying the egg by her hands, either. Her beautiful features, still with a trace of youthfulness behind the immense power they concealed, were facing upwards, and her thin lips quivered.

Arakiya: “—It’s coming.”

It happened at the next moment. —A roar thundered across the campground, and a part of the mountain was blown away.

3

—Breznon the Iron-Legs was a weaponkin whose brutality cemented his name in the history of the Empire.

Born as a weaponkin with both legs wrought of steel, Breznon was a monster known for having used his titular Iron Legs to kick countless people to death.

But, if you asked Breznon himself, the one who truly ought to be called a monster was not Breznon, but his older brother, Harline the Iron-Arms “—GRAOAAA!!”

???: “ORAHHHHHHH!!”

Alongside a mighty roar, struck by the oncoming blow of a black bracchium, Breznon was sent flying into the air, spinning his body around to unsheathe and aim a kick at his opponent’s face.

The steel-wrought Iron Legs were concealed by pants and shoes, unperceivable by an opponent upon first encounter. His older brother, the Iron-Arms, would always strongly assert himself, but since Breznon did no such thing, there was no end to those who misread his kicks.

This opponent would likewise choose to catch the blow without dodging, and would have his face smashed in by Breznon's Iron Legs— that instant, Breznon's leg was caught in his opponent's jaws, and shattered.

Breznon: "Ah?"

Widening his eyes at the impossible situation of having lost out in hardness, Breznon froze as the joint of his other leg was met by a flash of claws, severing the fixture between flesh and steel as his left leg was torn from its root.

Right leg crunched, and left leg severed by claws, Breznon had been disarmed in an instant.

And then—

Breznon: "Wh-What the hell, are you—"

???: "—Luck hath pissed upon thee. I be naught but a fordeemed wretch."

The gaping jaw sunk its teeth into Breznon's windpipe, nowhere left to run. That biting force, capable of even crushing legs of steel, was something that Breznon's slender throat had no way of resisting.

???: "…"

Fangs gnashed, and the yoke which tethered the empty life was lost; the undead known as Breznon shattered like ceramic, crumbling to smithereens.

Ascertaining that, the one who had enacted that by his own hand— nay, by his own fangs, looking down the slope of the mountain that crumbled due to the tremors of battle, slowly turned around,

???: "—It's exceedingly wonderful to say that you're nothing but a fordeemed wretch. To not say much and give a sense of mystery in such a scene produces a brilliant performance. Dear me I might have to watch and learn.”

There stood a blue-haired, waso young man, bearing a smile upon his soft features.

???: “…Thou’rt, whom?”

Young Man: “The leading actor of this world, the one who stands at the center of the stage anticipated by all. In addition, one who bears the duty of hunting you, resurrected as an undead as you are, my name is Cecilus Segmunt.”

Eloquently, the young man gave his introduction as if having rehearsed it many times before— at the sight of Cecilus, his bestial fur stood on end.

Without even needing to look at the two katanas holstered at his waist, Cecilus was visibly a fighter from his posture alone. The fact that Cecilus was so accustomed to giving his introduction, was proof of the extent to which he had traversed the front lines of death.

Warriors who staked themselves in duels had a habit of giving their name, and he was one who had experienced that opportunity several hundreds of times.

And, whether or not he realized the heightened tension within him, Cecilus tilted his head saying “By the way”,

Cecilus: “Might I ask your name?”

???: “…Volcas.”

Cecilus: “Ho! Volcas-san! That’s quite a nice name. A black-furred wolfman gives the impression of an outstanding fighter but for your name to be Volcas on top of that is quite exquisite! It reminds me of one of the characters starring in “Iris and the King of Thorns” who was a preeminent warrior talked about through the history of the Empire, the Doomwolf General!”

Volcas: “…”

Cecilus: “I said it reminds me but could it be that you are that very person in the flesh?”

With a sudden sparkle in his eyes, Cecilus sought to ascertain that without a hint of malice, and the jet-black wolfman— Volcas, while scratching his own neck, scrunched up his snout.

He had been asked about a name and title he had not wished to hear. Naturally, it caused him to scowl.

Cecilus: “With that look on your face the answer’s clear even if you don’t say anything. As long as I haven’t misread your expression which could possibly be displeasure at being mistaken for a famous person…”

Volcas: “As long as that, then what?”

Cecilus: “I’ll have to apologize to Anya! Truly and certainly beyond a shadow of a doubt! You are the very symbol of the grand climax I’ve desired!”

As Cecilus smiled from ear to ear, Volcas experienced the greatest dread he had ever known, and readied himself. Seeing that response, Cecilus widened his stance, and,

Cecilus: “—Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt.”

Volcas: “—Doomwolf General, Volcas.”

Showing that he too was one well accustomed to giving introductions, Volcas’s claws and fangs closed in on his opponent.

However, the strength of those bearing the title of General in the current era was—

Cecilus: “Please don’t take it too hard. —I’m simply far too dazzling.”

A flash of lightning and a triumphant proclamation colored the conclusion of the momentary combat between fellow Generals emblematic of their respective eras.

Cecilus: “I don’t wanna do that though? I’m completely against having Spica-san eat Volcas-san here! This place is absolutely Chaosflame! It can only possibly be Yorna-san’s place!”

Arakiya: “You’re not making sense. I won’t play along with your games, Cecilus.”

Cecilus: “These aren’t games it’s romance! Why can’t you just understand this Anya? If this wish and prayer came true then Anya’s precious little sister princess would have surely been greatly pleased!”

Arakiya: “—Hk! Unbelievable…! Just go die! Die! Cecilus!”

Cecilus: “Ah! Anya’s mad! Though just now it was my choice of words that was poor!”

Too loud to just be called lively, the tempestuous conversation reached the ears of Volcas, causing him to slowly open his eyelids. And then—

???: “Aau?”

Right before his eyes, peering into his face, collapsed as he was, a young girl met his eyes.

Volcas: “…”

Behind her was unfolding a duel so fierce it made Volcas’s clash with the Iron-Legs seem like child’s play, but Volcas averted his focus from that.

Either way, he had already lost. If his second shot at life had been shattered and come to an end, then so be it.

However—

Girl: “Ood ohning.”

Feeling that the young girl, patting his head as she said that, would do no such thing, he closed his eyes.

Merely, the young girl’s hand caused him to silently recall when a gentle woman had once done the same for him, and thus silently, ever so silently, Volcas,

Volcas: “—Iris.”

Indeed, calling the name of the woman pictured on the back of his eyelids, so excessively did that voice quiver with love.

To be continued

Kararagi Reaper Incident III

1

Upon arriving at their destination of Banan, Anastasia's group was aghast at the disastrous sight.

Originally, they had come here due to the reports of large-scale wind damage, but—

???: "I would have never imagined the city to be damaged to this extent…"

Laying eyes upon the same scene, Julius muttered so as he received that selfsame shock.

In accordance with his words, the major city in western Kararagi, Banan, had had its buildings destroyed, its trees felled by a great wind; it had been transformed into a wasteland where all conceptions of city districts had vanished.

???: "This here won't do. Even my place seems ta have vanished. Tho', it'd be fine if everyone I know's alright."

Anastasia: "Halibel's place; were ya livin' in Banan now? If ya'd told us that…"

Halibel: "Not like the wind woulda stopped if I'd said anythin'. Woulda only made lil' Ana's face cloud over, so I didn't say nothin'. I ain't someone with lotsa possessions ta begin with, so even if I lost my house it's 'bout the same amount of trouble as a bit of rain."

Halibel played the fool with a wave of his hand, causing Anastasia to feel discontent.

Rather than stemming from the fact that he had not told her, it was more so discontent at how his reason for not doing so felt like he was treating her like a child; but, pointing that out would also be extremely childish, so she would do no such thing.

Regardless, the level of damage from the wind made it clear as to why it had been so difficult to obtain information.

From what could be observed, even though it was the strong people of Kararagi, there had yet to be anyone proactively engaging in its restoration. There was a need for someone to raise their voice, and to take charge of the command.

Normally, that was a task that would have been undertaken by the Mayor or someone beneath them, but—

???: "—Ah!! Miss! It's the Miss! As expected, I was right because it smelled like Miss!"

Then, as a loud voice tore through the ravaged cityscape, Anastasia lifted her face right away. When she looked, she saw a small figure waving its hands and running towards her from the other side of the street.

Anastasia: "Mimi! Ya had me worryin', are ya alright?"

Mimi: "I'm doing super good! The wind blew me into the air really strong, but thanks to the captain pretty much everyone is safe!"

At the entrance of the kittengirl who had rushed towards her—Mimi, Anastasia and the rest patted their chests in relief.

While she did believe that she could more easily rest assured when there had been no news from Ricardo based on her prior experiences, that was not to say she did not feel at all worried upon bearing witness to the extent of the wind damage. But, seeing Mimi's energetic figure and hearing her report, she could now rest assured.

Anastasia: "By the way, when ya say that "pretty much everyone's" safe, ya mean that Ricardo's the only one who's been hurt?"

Mimi: "Ohh, as expected of the Miss! Right answer on the first guess! Bullseye! Your prize is a hug from Mimi!"

Anastasia: "Yes, yes. Though I'm grateful, I'll be passin' it over to Julius 'cause I'm feelin' a bit wobbly."

Julius: “Received. Come, Mimi.”

As Julius smiled and welcomed her with open arms, Mimi leaped at him with an “Uryahhh!!”. With a sidelong glance to that heartwarming embrace, Anastasia contemplated the terrible state of the city, and Ricardo who had likely pushed himself too far.

It was a matter which made her wish to say that he never changed no matter where he went, but this was his motherland of Kararagi, so the locations in which he pushed himself too far were actually more concentrated to this region.

Halibel: “So, Mi-chan, ya mind if we ask where the Ricardo of the essence might be? We kinda wanna know a bit more ‘bout what the damages ta the city actually were.”

Mimi: “Captain? Captain’s over with Tia! He’s keeping watch so that she doesn’t go berserk!”

Bobbing the kiseru he had begun puffing up and down with his mouth, Halibel asked that to Mimi, to which she responded in high spirits. However, included in her response was an unknown name, and a troubling phrase.

So that she did not go berserk, suggested that she was not peaceful.

Anastasia: “Mimi? Who’s that Tia you’re speakin’ of? Sounds like someone we don’t know.”

At that question, Mimi began to speak, “So, umm”,

Mimi: “Tia’s that! She made the wind blow a lot, and sent the town and Mimi and everyone else flying up into the sky; she’s a really strong woman! Right now, she’s imprisoned in a holding cell!”

Thus, she had declared so.

2

—The unprecedented great cataclysm of wind that had occurred in the Kararagi City-State’s Second-City, Banan.

With Banan at the epicenter, the large-scale wind storm had done a severe amount of damage even to the surrounding towns and villages, but even after the few days that had passed since the event, the lack of accurate information regarding the damages had led to confusion across the various areas.

With the scale of the damage being the only thing ascertainable from the meager information available, various relief efforts had been sent into the affected area; enlisted among them was the name of Anastasia's private beastperson mercenary group, the Iron Fang.

Considering the duties usually sought from a mercenary group, it might have seemed unsuitable to dispatch them into a disaster zone, but the one who had arranged that, the Mayor of the Third-City Ivada, Orgo Hayata, with a sharp mind that belied his eccentric appearance, was the first to recognize the possibility that the wind cataclysm might have been the work of man.

That behind the curtain of this great wind storm, was interposed the will of one who concealed extraordinary power.

Thus—

???: "—What is it, human? There shouldn't be anything so funny to look at here. Or perhaps, have you come to laugh at me in this state? Is that really so funny, I wonder… It isn't funny!"

Anastasia: "Even tho' I ain't said nothin', what a darn strange girly."

With those words, Anastasia gave a wry smile to that possessor of dreadful power— the white-haired girl who proclaimed herself as such, who still had yet found herself locked up in a holding cell.

Almond-shaped eyes, and a projecting voice that seemed to linger in the ears; with both elements seeming to be strikingly combative, she was a person who left an impression of beauty and sharpness. She appeared to be either younger than or around the same age as Anastasia, so it was hard to believe that she was the origin of the dreadful wind disaster that has caused the disastrous scene of Banan.

Echidna: “I was also dubious, but it seems there is no doubt about it being this girl, correct, Ricardo?”

Ricardo: “That’s right. I also traded blows with her… or rather, we had a contest of endurance. ‘N in the midst of all that, she sent a stupid number of buildin’s up into the sky.”

Mimi: “I flew around a ton in the crazy wind! Wanna do it again sometime!”

Ricardo: “Gimme a break, will ya? My body’s been seriously roughed up.”

Ricardo responded to Echidna’s question, worn out by Mimi’s uninhibited comment.

Bandages were wrapped all around Ricardo’s body, and his right half had sustained particularly serious injuries. He had just lost one of his arms in the battle against the Witch Cult a few months prior, so upon seeing him so beaten up once again, Anastasia had a mountain of things she was itching to lecture him on, but she would have to contain herself for now.

Ricardo: “This here’s someone’s mansion… I believe the owner’s named Riften Magorge. He’s famous for holdin’ the position of the Fierce Merchant.”

Echidna: “On top of being a great merchant of Banan, he also ought to have taken on the duties of Mayor. He has had no acquaintance with Ana before, but it sounds like he is quite the important person. If he were here, one would think that the post-disaster operations would be going a bit smoother, but…”

Ricardo: “Seems like nobody’s able ta contact Riften-san. There’s also talk that he got caught up in the wind storm while in transit.”

Anastasia: “I see. Tho’, it’d’ve been better if he was alright.”

Unexpectedly, the cause for the heightened chaos in Banan after the disaster was the absence of the Mayor, so Anastasia made a mental note that the utmost priority was the need to put forth a representative.

Then, she suddenly felt concern for Julius and Halibel, both of whom had been keeping silent until now. Ever since the two of them had entered the holding cell— a room within Riften's mansion, the Magorge Palace, and laid their eyes upon Tia, the one being held captive there, their mouths had remained closed.

Thus, Anastasia voiced "Julius?" to her personal Knight, and,

Anastasia: "What's the matter? Yer eyes are stuck lookin' at that girl. She's a beauty, so have ya maybe been enchanted?"

Julius: "—No, my apologies. No matter how beautiful someone might be, to think I would ever set Anastasia-sama aside and become enchanted. Only, she is… this personage, is a different matter."

Anastasia: "…"

Julius had responded in earnest to the persiflage she had appended, and hearing him deliberately revise the way in which he referred to Tia, Anastasia narrowed her pale turquoise eyes.

It was not apprehension about her Knight having a change of heart. It was precisely because she was aware of her Knight's nature.

Thus, before Anastasia's eyes, Julius kneeled down before Tia, who was sitting on her folded legs atop the tatami, and with slight sentiments of reverence upon his gentle facial features,

Julius: "In such a place, in such a manner, I did not think I would be able to meet a Great Spirit as esteemed as yourself. For the rudeness of my delayed greeting, I deeply apologize."

Tia: "Huh? You can tell what I am? Impressive. Not that I'm praising you, though."

Julius: "It is an honor to receive your praise. After all, I am but a man who has been granted the lowest seat of Spirit Knights."

Tia: "Didn't I just say I'm not praising you…!"

As Julius politely revered her, Tia shouted at him with a stern glare.

Setting aside Tia's anger for now, learning that her identity was that of a Great Spirit, Anastasia successfully connected the dots between Banan's destruction and her presence as the origin of it. If it was a powerful Great Spirit, then it would have easily been possible to generate gusts strong enough to level a city.

However, beside Anastasia as she thought this, Halibel inclined his head with a "Hmmm?",

Halibel: "I'd thought she was a girl with a curious air 'bout her, but it all just clicked now that ya mention she's a Spirit. Tho', what's botherin' me is somethin' different ta Julius."

Ricardo: "Golly, Halibel. Are ya tryna badmouth one of our own? If ya do things half-hearted, playin' as a lone-wolf, we'll teach ya just how scary the pack can be."

Mimi: "Yep yep! We'll teach you, and take all your money!"

Halibel: "Ohh, scary, scary. Haven't paid my tuition fees in a gosh darn while, and ya won't be findin' no loose change in my pockets. But, even so…"

Tia: "—?"

Giving a wry smile to Ricardo and Mimi's interjection, Halibel sent a sharp sidelong glance over to Tia. Noticing his gaze, Tia wore a suspicious expression, and Halibel spoke.

Halibel: "Yer body's structured in an awfully unnatural manner. There're tons of deadspots both big 'n small, 'n they move 'n disappear 'n just don't seem ta settle down at all."

Tia: "I don't know what you're trying to say, but are you picking a fight? If that's the case—"

Halibel: "What's this now, ain't ya seemin' ta be missin' somethin'? The Mana's flowin' in that sorta way."

Tia: "—Hk!"

That instant, a gale began to rise within the holding cell, causing

Anastasia’s long hair to blow wildly.

With eyes sharpened, and teeth bared, the fact that it was a wind that had sprung forth from Tia, was instantly apparent from how all warriors present immediately stood to guard Anastasia.

Julius, Ricardo, Mimi and Halibel, all stood on guard for Anastasia. Tia cast an intense glare upon Halibel, who stood calmly among them,

Tia: “You, do you know the whereabouts of my Light Sphere?”

Halibel: “Hmm? Nah, ain’t got a clue. Why’d ya think that?”

Tia: “You just said! Didn’t you just say how I was missing something?! The rest of you heard it as well, didn’t you?! It’s this guy! This guy has my Light Sphere…!”

Halibel: “Zoinks, seems like I stirred the hornet’s nest. What’s goin’ on here, Ricardo?”

Ricardo: “She was sayin’ somethin’ ‘bout lookin’ for an object called a Light Sphere. Tho’, we couldn’t really grasp the gist of what the Tia lassie was sayin’, so we decided to just put her here ‘til someone capable of conversin’ with her came.”

Before Tia, who brimmed with enmity as she bared her teeth, Halibel and Ricardo exchanged those words.

No details had been revealed, but Tia was searching for something, and had mistakenly thought that it was in Halibel’s possession. Then, the reason why Tia had ravaged the city likely also laid therein.

Anastasia: “In other words, someone ran off with somethin’ important to Tia… the Light Sphere. While searchin’ for that thief, ya went on a wind rampage absolutely everywhere, ain’t that ’bout right?”

Tia: “…That turn of phrase, “ran off with”, I don’t like it. Doesn’t it make me sound like a fool? Whoever stole it did so by a cowardly method. It seems like they knew they could not win in a contest of strength, so they got sly. Humans are experts at that, after all… Like they could ever be an expert, damn coward!”

Anastasia: “I see… By the way, ya sure ya didn’t take it, Halibel?”

Halibel: “Well, I’ve done been in the Empire this whole gosh darn time right ‘longside y’all, lil’ Ana. Don’t’cha think it’d be impossible for me ta steal that thing from Tia-chan, even if I used a clone?”

Anastasia: “…”

Halibel nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders, but since Anastasia knew what he was capable of utilizing his clones, things might have gotten a little complicated, so she would withhold that information. Nevertheless, she knew that Halibel was not a suspect. His statement just now had been purely to inform Tia.

Anastasia: “At any rate, we’ve got Tia-san’s goal, but to destroy one town after another ‘cause of that’s intolerable. Even if she’s a Spirit as Julius says, that ain’t somethin’ we can overlook.”

For Anastasia and the other humans to make a Spirit abide by the laws of the Kararagi City-States felt a bit strict, but there was no other way to measure something like this. If she was going to enact outrageous deeds that crossed the line drawn by the law, then they would have to respond appropriately.

Julius: “Anastasia-sama, to manifest herself in such a detailed human form means that even among Great Spirits, Tia-sama possesses extraordinary power.”

Anastasia: “‘N for that reason, ya wanna overlook this as a Spiritual-Arts User?”

Julius: “No. Only, to make an enemy of such a Great Spirit, also comes with a high possibility of making an enemy out of the very nature that she is at essence. If it was a wind cataclysm that had assailed Banan, then…”

Anastasia: “Ya need the resolve to make an enemy of the wind itself. I see, that’s quite the tough foe.”

As Julius's voice resonated within her ears, Anastasia closed a single eye at his warning.

She had not had many points of contact with Great Spirits— strictly speaking, Echidna, who disguised herself as Anastasia's scarf, counted as a Great Spirit while also being artificial, so she could not say that she had never had a point of contact, but that was a troublesome quality.

But, at the composure of Anastasia's group, none other than Tia spoke out, "Wait",

Tia: "I'm saying this because you're noisy, but stop revering me because I'm a Great Spirit or whatever. I hate it. I don't like it. I'll start wanting to kill you."

Halibel: "Ya better quit sayin' stuff that's too overly violent. Yer current position's that of a captive."

Tia: "The thing that should be stopped is your misunderstanding. I'm simply here doing what I want. Also, I have something to say to the female woman looking all high and mighty there in the middle."

Anastasia: "I think that "female" 'n "woman" mean the same thing, but what'cha got for me?"

Tia: "One town after another, you said it as if I've destroyed multiple cities, but this is the only place I've rampaged, so it was just the one time when that wolf cub stopped me."

Anastasia: "—What'd ya say?"

As Tia confessed with her arms crossed, Anastasia raised her eyebrows, letting out a gasp.

For a moment, the possibility that it was just a ruse by Tia flashed through her mind, but she could not see any meaning in admitting that she had devastated Banan, but not that she was responsible for the other cases. Judging from her personality thus far, there did not seem to be a human element of telling worthless lies.

There was no falsehood in Tia's words. —That was to say, there was another cause for the several wind cataclysms that were popping up.

Then, it happened right after that thought crossed her mind.

Fighters: "—!"

The atmosphere in the holding cell suddenly tensed, and Anastasia felt a chill crawl down her spine.

Much like before, instead of Anastasia, who was unable to fight, those who could reacted to something before her. However, this time, they were joined by one other person. —Tia.

The five of them simultaneously directed their attention outside of the Magorge Palace, strung high with tension.

And then—

Tia: "—Tsk, they're coming with human power."

Declaring so in an irritated manner, Tia turned around and held her hand aloft, pointed at the wall of the holding cell. The next instant, the wind that gust forth from that hand sliced the wall apart, forcibly creating a new egress. That instant action gave no time for anyone to interfere, but there was no time to challenge her on it.

Halibel: "This ain't good."

Halibel spoke in a manner bereft of seriousness and urgency; however, that was a great deal removed from reality.

Through the hole that had been opened, far in the distance from the devastated townscape of Banan, slowly approaching was an enormous vortex of wind— a tornado engulfing everything was en route.

Anastasia: "…"

For a moment, widening her eyes at that sight, Anastasia's thoughts came to a halt.

What flashed through her mind in that instant was the scale of damage and lives that would be lost were the tornado to reach the city, a premature pessimistic and pragmatic violence of numbers.

But—

Julius: "—Anastasia-sama."

As soon as her Knight called her name, the threat of those violent numbers was lost. —No, with the notion that they had no choice but to make that threat be lost, it set her resolve alight.

Anastasia: "Mimi! Gather the Iron Fang! Julius, Halibel! Halt the tornado's progress, I'll leave ya to figure out how! Ricardo, I'll be needin' ya to push yerself again. Come with me!"

As Anastasia issued commands with the clap of her hands, everyone receiving them blinked their eyes, and immediately responded appropriately, leaping to follow the duties to which they had been ordered.

Without the time to spare to see them off politely, Anastasia stepped forward, and,

Anastasia: "Tia-san, ya mind if we rely on yer strength? Ya want us to cooperate, don't'cha?"

Tia: "—. Are you testing me? You've got some nerve. I'll praise you for that… Once we're finished!"

Tia was taken aback, but ferociously smiled at Anastasia's request. As Anastasia nodded at her valiance, the completely bandaged Ricardo stood up next to her,

Ricardo: "Miss, now ain't ya lookin' pretty darn cool."

Anastasia: "'Course. I'd know even if ya didn't tell me."

Indeed, gaining strength from the unbelievably laid back interaction as a hopeless natural disaster made its approach before them, Anastasia stepped outside through the gaping opening that Tia had made in order to protect the major city of Banan.

To be continued

No Stella No Life III

???: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

With that proclamation as an impetus, the rules of the world were rewritten around Aldebaran.

Ordinarily, the world would not permit any usage that did not abide by its fixed rules.

Objects fell from up to down, sound could be heard but not seen, hot things felt hot, cold things felt cold, the color of blood was red most of the time, and a life once lost could never return. —These were defined as unshakeable rules for the stable operation of the world.

???: “However, Witch Factors take those established laws, and bend them to the will of their possessor. Truly, a refutation of the world desiring stability… to be frank, it is fruit borne of pestering.”

Aldebaran: “Pestering…”

???: “From the perspective of Od Lagna, it must be quite unbearable, yes? Having poured in time and intent to forge those laws, only for them to be blotted over by an extremely small number of mutational variations on the whims of distorted human nature. Supposing I were to go through that same hardship, then…”

Aldebaran: “Then what?”

???: “I would end up wanting to investigate just what sort of intentions brought about such actions; the reasons and objectives behind it all… Hm, if I may say so myself, perhaps my personality is not suited to this example.”

Thus acknowledging her own curiosity as a minority viewpoint, the Witch spoke calmly, causing Aldebaran to shrug his shoulders in exasperation.

Conversations with the Witch, with how eager she was to chat and learn, would often derail in such a manner.

He would occasionally get some useful anecdotes from her, but even in those cases, it would never cut straight to the point. The conversation would twist and turn, lose sight of the original focus, and as Aldebaran listened to the Witch's explanations, she would ask for his thoughts and impressions, then speak of those instead. — It was lamentable, but Aldebaran absolutely did not hate that time spent in futility.

Aldebaran: "Getting all carried away 'cause of that, it must be that sorta thing…"

Witch: "Hm? What is it? Did you say something just now?"

Aldebaran: "Nah, I was just thinking that despite knowing that the Authorities of Witch Factors are equivalent to pestering, for you to still create this sorta space means that there's something wrong with you, Teacher. I feel bad for Od Lagna-san."

Witch: "Ultimately, Od Lagna is nothing more than a concept. We can presume that it has nothing in the vein of emotions, nor fixations directed towards specific individuals. Well, I suppose it was my blunder for using the term "pestering", an expression which prescribes Od Lagna with a notion of personhood."

Placing a finger to her lips, the Witch sighed in a manner unbefitting of self-reflection.

Despite having listened to her words, the image of a pitiful Od Lagna crying as it glared over a space with which it could not interfere did not fade from within Aldebaran.

In reality, the act of producing another world within the world was something that could only be performed by an extraordinary being like a Witch, and the thing that made a Witch a Witch was an Authority— no, it was the key by which an Authority was manifested, a Witch Factor. For the Witch in question, without showing any diffidence, to not recognize humanity within Od Lagna, regardless of whether or not it was a conceptual entity, made him want to at least hold out a handkerchief for it to wipe its tears with. Be that as it may—

Aldebaran: “Just like Teacher, I’m part of the side doing the pestering…”

Thinking of the Authority in his possession, Aldebaran sighed as he scratched the back of his neck.

From Od Lagna’s perspective, while it went without saying for the Witch who ran counter to the rules it had laid out, the one being tutored by that Witch, Aldebaran, would have also been considered an indisputable anarchist. No matter what Aldebaran could have said to it, it would have only ever seemed like he was trying to deceive it.

For Aldebaran, acquiring his Authority had been a matter he had no say in, so he wished to be given a break from being glared at by Od Lagna, the very will of the world itself.

Witch: “But, if you are going to use that line of logic, the same goes for the rest of us. It does not happen very often that someone takes in a Witch Factor of their own volition. The only ones who fit that description would be the Valiant and the Saintess, who attempted to obtain power that defied reality.”

Aldebaran: “Don’t come out all of a sudden using keywords that catch my interest. What’s this now, Valiant? Saintess? There are people with such archetypal jobs in this world?”

Witch: “Oya, is it really so surprising? It shouldn’t be so strange for there to be a Saintess given the existence of a Witch, correct?”

Aldebaran: “In that case, there should be a Demon King given the existence of a Valiant, yet is there?”

Witch: “Hahaha, no matter how you look at it, a Demon King would be a bit too far-fetched, no?”

Aldebaran: “This doesn’t make a lick of sense…”

If a Saintess corresponded to a Witch, it should have been a Demon King that corresponded to a Valiant, but the theory of such a

Demon King existing was scoffed at, so Aldebaran's lips zipped into a frown in a grand expression of his discontent. Her smile deepening at Aldebaran's reaction, the Witch resumed with "However",

Witch: "Demon King, Demon King, hm? With how it is written, it would be a King of Evil… it would make sense for such a figure to be one who rules over Witches. If you can bend me and the other Witches into submission, it does not seem like it would be such a bad idea to proclaim yourself the Demon King."

Aldebaran: "Well, to make Teacher and the others serve me would certainly be a pretty picture straight out of a man's dreams. As long as I just close my eyes to the impossibility of such a thing~!"

Witch: "Hm, impossible, is it? —I believe otherwise."

The moment her quiet voice spoke those words, Aldebaran froze still.

With eyes framed by long lashes cast down, the Witch brought a finger to her lips in rumination, and as the unfathomably deep pool of knowledge revealed itself upon her beautiful face,

Witch: "The Witch Factors that manifest Authorities have no greater or lesser power than one another. Pride, Greed, Envy, Wrath, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth; there is no inherent superiority or inferiority among them, which holds true even for the abilities of any given Authority. Though, there are some that become obstreperous when tied to the strength of the user, like in the case of Sekhmet's Authority."

Aldebaran: "Ah, yeah, she was like the strongest Witch in generations, right?"

Witch: "There is no doubt about that evaluation. But then again, Sekhmet had major shortcomings outside of her strength which could be taken advantage of. Perhaps because of her lineage as a Giant, she was sloppy in many things."

Aldebaran: "That summarization of yours was just as sloppy… By the way, about your Authority, Teacher…?”

Witch: “It is an uninteresting Authority. —Through “Past”, “Present”, and “Future”, I can view any event I wish to. It is truly monotonous. I spoke of Witch Factors as pestering Od Lagna, but this cannot be perceived as anything but clear pestering towards myself.”

Shrugging her shoulders in lamentation, the Witch sought Aldebaran’s sympathy. But unfortunately, Aldebaran did not quite understand the Witch’s dissatisfaction.

The Witch before his eyes was a monster of curiosity, and for that reason had attained the title of the Witch of Greed. The explanation of her Authority just now could only have been seen as fitting for the Witch who was chosen by the Witch Factor of Greed due to her intense thirst for knowledge.

Witch: “Well, the matter of my boorish Authority is fine for now. More importantly, about your Authority— I believe it to be an absolute, something capable of attaining victory against all sorts of opponents, including Sekhmet.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Witch: “Oya, the look on your face appears to not believe me in the slightest. How strange.”

Aldebaran: “It’s not strange or anything of the like. In truth, I don’t believe a shred of that. Unfortunately, I don’t think you and the other Witches are such tiny hills that I could surmount them with a couple of retries, Teacher.”

To speak ill of oneself was not healthy, but he could not help saying that.

It was not as though he did not understand the Witch’s logic, but it was something akin to taking a chance that was ultimately not zero, but practically zero in essence, and deceitfully boasting that it was possible.

As two fellow living beings, if an ant fought an elephant, the chances that the ant would win were not zero, but anyone could understand that it was a chance that would not come to fruition even if given a million, no, not even ten billion attempts. Not to mention, in this case, the ant Aldebaran's opponent was not an elephant, but a dragon.

Against a dragon that could breathe fire, and soar through the skies, just how could the ant emerge victorious?

Witch: "An ant would not win, certainly. I am not saying that I have disregarded reality to that extent."

Aldebaran: "That so? Though, this space we're in, I heard it was a failed attempt at a plan to create another world, one stretched out to be the same size as the real world…"

Witch: "I am not saying that I have disregarded reality to that extent. Hence, it would be impossible for an ant."

The Witch resumed her words whilst ignoring the inconvenient criticism, causing Aldebaran to make a bitter face at her selfishness, as she continued with "but",

Witch: "What about if it was not an ant, but a dog? Do you not think it stands a better chance than the ant?"

Aldebaran: "…Well, compared to an ant…"

Witch: "Right? Or if you prefer, do you not get the feeling that the ant would have a shot of winning against a dog? That is to say, there is merely a gap between the ant and the dog that can be overturned depending on the conditions and the methods employed. Thus, if the ant can pose a threat to the dog, then it is also possible for the dog to pose a threat to the elephant."

Aldebaran: "…I'm understanding bit by bit. Teacher, what do you want to tell me?"

Placing a hand on his chin, Aldebaran responded so, and the Witch flashed a wicked smile as if to hint that he had already gotten it. — It was a gentle, pretty smile, which was precisely why its nature was something that could only be described as wicked and vile.

At the very least, whenever Aldebaran managed to draw out that smile, he would end up feeling happy.

Aldebaran: “Those methods and conditions for an ant to pose a threat to a dog, and a dog to an elephant, are what you’re teaching me, Teacher. Of course, even with those at the ready, things won’t suddenly become even between the ant and dog, or between the dog and elephant. But…”

Witch: “If the chance nearing zero can be made into one, you possess the method of turning that one into the very first one after accumulating numerous defeats.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Witch: “That is why, I shall deliberately bestow these words upon you. —There is nobody who can beat you.”

Indeed, with the Witch’s black eyes looking squarely at him, the words imparted sent a shiver through Aldebaran’s body.

The Witch’s point was layers of sophism, cobbled together from conceivable possibilities and made to sound logical; merely a sand castle of ideals constructed atop a crumbling foundation.

Under rain or wind, or perhaps the malintent of another, it would easily come crashing down, nothing more than a flash so brittle that it would seem like it had never been anything at all. Despite all that, through Aldebaran’s body, through his heart, ran a shiver.

A shiver because he wished to believe those words of the Witch—no, because he had no choice but to make those words come true.

Witch: “Judging from your demeanor, it would seem that my words have mostly resonated with you, yes?”

Aldebaran: “—. Eh, who’s to say? As a man, it’s not like I didn’t think anything of it; I guess it’s to that extent?”

Witch: “Is that so? Hm, I thought that the words I had chosen were not too shabby, but it would seem I require more diligence… Fufu, oh how luscious it is when you do not procure the results you had desired.”

Licking her thin lips, the Witch vocalized quite a sinful joy, and he averted his eyes from her. He had a reluctance to the Witch, bereft of a human heart, who could know what he was truly thinking at a mere touch.

Hence, Aldebaran would deliberately alter the direction of the conversation from what it had been a moment prior.

Aldebaran: “By the way, this is completely unrelated, but why are they called Witch Factors? From what you said, Teacher, it’s not as though Authorities can only emerge in women, yeah? There are other guys like me.”

Witch: “Ah, has that piqued your interest? Previously, I had also wondered about it and decided to investigate, but the reason was nothing too major. When Witch Factors were first perceived in this world… that is, when the first Witch was identified, all those in possession of a Factor just happened to be women.”

Aldebaran: “Just happened, by chance…”

Witch: “Supposing it was not just women, and there were also men in the mix, then they might not have been called Witch Factors, but rather Demon Factors or Evil Factors, and if it was instead only men, then they might have even been called Man-Witch Factors.”

Aldebaran: “Man-Witch Factor… that sounds so lame…!”

Were it to come to that, it would be far cooler to call them Demon King Factors. Only, in the case of Demon King Factors, there would instead be the problem of having seven of them despite being Kings.

Aldebaran: “Well, the “Demon King of Greed” or the “Demon King of Wrath” do sound a lot better. In that case I guess it wouldn’t really be weird no matter how many Kings there are…”

Witch: “Oya oya, your resolve has weakened. For you, the title of Demon King ought to have been the manifestation of a man’s dream to defeat the current Witches and bind them to his servitude, was it not?”

Aldebaran: “Don’t treat what I said in the flow of the conversation as an established fact! First of all, I could never manage dealing with the seven Witches! I’m—”

Witch: “—? You are…?”

Though it was not a tit-for-tat, Aldebaran’s words came to a halt as he lost his cool. As for what laid ahead of those halted words, the Witch enquired with an unmalicious gaze.

At the Witch’s defenceless demeanor, Aldebaran trembled—

Aldebaran: “IDIOOOT!!”

Witch: “Gyah-! O-Oww! That hurt! Why did you do that?!”

Applying pressure to her forehead, to which she had received a flick unguarded, the Witch cried out on the verge of tears. Turning his face away at the Witch’s appeal, Aldebaran firmly placed his fist to his own forehead and entered deep reflection.

Was it not that he was truly overflowing with a longing for company? This Witch, who was likely withholding a plethora of things in her heart of hearts, was causing his own heart to waver far too much. Even if it had been out of necessity, staying in the Witch’s castle for so long might have caused him to develop something in the vein of Stockholm syndrome. Or rather, there was no doubt that was the case.

Aldebaran: “Phew, got carried away there. Close call.”

Witch: “I do not think it is good when you leave me behind to produce those sorts of conclusions from time to time! When you are troubled on how to respond, you try to improve the situation by making extreme contact, and that is a bad habit! I have no memory of teaching you in such a manner!”

Aldebaran: “That’s also some extreme pride to believe your pupil would grow up exactly as you desired. Since when did you change positions from the Witch of Greed to the Witch of Pride? Though, it’d also suit you.”

Witch: “That sarcastic part of you would not be suitable for any of the Witch Factors! If it had to be one, then it seems like Tristitia would be the most fitting! How about that, do you feel displeasure?”

Aldebaran: “Rather than displeasure, I’m just surprised that you mentioned a Witch Factor I had no idea about. Huh? Aren’t there only seven Witch Factors? The evil thoughts are also included?”

Hearing the reverberation of “Tristitia” that the Witch had played as a trump card, Aldebaran received the shock that the Witch Factors he believed to be based on the seven deadly sins, were actually modelled after the original eight evil thoughts.

That instant, the Witch blinked her eyes and muttered a faint “Oops”,

Witch: “Well then, let us once again delve into the details of your Authority’s ability. The phenomenon which occurred in the midst of the trial the other day, where the subjectivity of your Territory was reversed… I would like to propose that we define those as the Victim and Aggressor of the Territory, but—”

Aldebaran: “Wait wait wait, don’t pull the wool over my eyes like that.”

Witch: “But, it is exceedingly important to thoroughly analyze events that have transpired and give names so that things can be easily classified. You must not neglect these things.”

Aldebaran: “Sure then, we can call it the Victim and Aggressor of the Territory. More importantly, the evil thoughts.”

Unexpectedly, she was zooming through an aspect of his Authority so fast that she would leave behind a trail, but Aldebaran halted the Witch, and pressed her for details.

Ultimately, Aldebaran’s objective lay in Envy, but since he had no idea what sort of irregularities might occur, he wished to avoid lacking knowledge for anything pertaining to Witch Factors.

Aldebaran: “Answer. If there’s Tristitia, then is there also

Vanagloria?”

Witch: “There is, but you have no particular reason to worry. It is not our responsibility to do anything about them, and I do not wish to get involved. They are both good-for-nothings.”

Aldebaran: “That oughta be a given since nobody who’s taken in a Witch Factor is a decent person!”

Witch: “They are especially good-for-nothing. We were all discovered by our Witch Factors to become Witches. Whereas those two are different. They took in Factors of their own volition, pure aberrants reduced to Witch and Warlock.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Witch: “Whoops, allow me to amend that. Those two were not the only ones to willingly take in a Witch Factor. There is one more. — That is none other than the foe you and I share in common.”

The Witch’s utterance was quiet, however, in it Aldebaran perceived powerful emotions the opposite of silence: dark, murky hostility and hatred, anger and sorrow, likely every conceivable negative sentiment.

The simple, unacceptable aversion regarding the two evaluated as good-for-nothings was easy to understand. That she truly hated them, was clear.

However, the negative emotions directed towards the final person added on, were exceedingly complex.

Undoubtedly, it was to the extent of convincing one that love and hatred were two sides of the same coin. —And, those emotions were by no means a stranger’s affair to Aldebaran.

Witch: “Indeed. You and I are no strangers. Though we are not related by blood, we are strongly bound together. Not only because we have spent a long time together, but more fundamentally… I suppose it’s something like this. To me, you are something like a little brother.”

Aldebaran: "…"

Witch: "Hm? That expression, what is the matter?"

Aldebaran: "Nah, I was just considering the age gap. Older sister? You'd be lucky to be my great grandma, no?"

Witch: "On top of that extremely unpleasant sense of age, you have gone and instantly made us feel like strangers!"

As the Witch exploded with discontent, Aldebaran made no effort to listen.

Only, when the Witch had likened herself to an older sister, he had also felt displeasure at being treated like a younger brother.

A terribly unhealthy relationship, one in which they would never be equal, yet bound by necessity to collaborate toward a shared goal; they were by no means in a relationship as warm as that between a brother and sister.

Thinking that whilst ignoring the Witch's objections, Aldebaran pondered.

He was awfully loathe to admit it, but—

Aldebaran: "If the current mood is anything to go by, then certainly, Tristitia might have also been just perfect for me."

So he spoke.

To be continued

Volume 42

Chapters 37-49

Prologue:
A Witch's Blessing

1

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, who I created."

The smile of the Witch as she voiced those words appeared to be tinged with the hue of blood to Aldebaran.

As if clinging to him, as if cherishing him, as if lamenting him, as if pleading with him, as if revealing to him, as if despairing of him, the Witch gazed at Aldebaran at a proximity so close that he could feel her breathing upon him.

Her white facial features, her black irises, were things Aldebaran thought quite beautiful.

—Likely, amongst those whom Aldebaran knew, she was a contender for the first or second most beautiful.

—The combination of silver and amethyst, and the combination of white and black.

For Aldebaran, who admittedly knew nothing more than a narrow world, those were the utmost beautiful combinations of colors, and the apex of what ought to be revered the most.

2

When the shell he had challenged many times finally cracked, it felt surprisingly hollow. Aldebaran: "..."

With a clang, a black orb fell onto the tea party table. While keeping his eyes on it as it rolled, Aldebaran widened his eyes in surprise. He had seen examples of what its success was meant to look like many times, and it was something he had even been made to experience himself, but he had felt like the road to actually succeeding at it himself was long and far, as if it was a never ending series of swings and misses.

Of course, it was none other than her who had told him. He would get it eventually; he had also thought so, but—

Aldebaran: “To think when I finally got it right, it would feel this underwhelming…”

While unmistakably voicing his true feelings, Aldebaran picked up the black orb rolling on the table, and toyed with the strange sensation which felt neither cold nor warm in his palm.

He might have appeared underwhelmed, but this black orb was the apotheosis of Yin Magic—nay, this was not something that took the righteous path, rather, taking the pinnacle of heresy, it was the forbidden art, Ol Shamak. By limiting the targets for its efficacy to those possessing Witch Factors, its effectiveness was heightened to the utmost extreme; ‘twas the sole anti-Witch trump card in this world.

With Aldebaran’s acquisition of it having been prescribed as an absolute condition, it was the hyper magic he had been endeavouring towards until today.

???: “—I know that you are immersing yourself right now, but I would like for you to turn your attention back to me already.”

Aldebaran: “Woawahhh?!”

Taken aback by the sudden voice, the black orb slipped out of Aldebaran’s hand. And, as that black orb protested “Wait, wait!” it tumbled down onto the verdant grass.

Aldebaran: “Ahh, whoops. Don’t mind.”

Witch: “Your manner of speech does not seem concerned in the slightest. Come on, hurry up and pick me up.”

While answering with a “Yeah yeah”, Aldebaran hastened towards the fallen black orb. Fortunately, the grass of the plain had been trimmed quite short, so there was no worry of losing sight of the orb.

Aldebaran: “Anyway, it rolls around much more than I expected… maybe it’ll be easier for you to move around now that you’re an orb, Teacher. You wanna stay like that?”

Witch: “Do not say such frightening things. Albeit it is a forbidden art of my own development, it is far too effective against those possessing Witch Factors, so it is truly impossible to exert one’s own strength. If you have seriously lost your mind to the point of wishing to seal me away, I would have no means of resisting.”

Aldebaran: “Teacher in this state, eh?”

Witch: “Huh? Why are you muttering in a way that seems like it is even slightly possible? Scary, scary. Are you making a joke in order to drive me into a corner?”

Even though she was supposed to be a Witch who did not comprehend emotions, the fact that she was so good at acting afraid grated on his nerves.

Ignoring those sentiments of his, Aldebaran spotted the black orb that had finally come to a halt, and nimbly picking it up, he rolled it around in his hand again. —For a moment, he began to feel like he ought to keep the Witch sealed away in such a manner.

Witch: “Aldebaran?”

But, that momentary delusion was succinctly erased by a single one of the Witch’s calls.

Instead, what remained in his heart was a sense of reality that finally surged up, and the unease that accompanied it. The grand conclusion that he had always been told about, and the courage needed to grapple with that.

Aldebaran: “If you get out of here, Teacher…”

Witch: “—? What is it?”

Aldebaran: “For the most part, the preparations are in order. My Authority, the magic that was necessary, and…”

Witch: “Your growth. Indeed. —The time for that, is nigh.”

Whether she understood Aldebaran’s feelings or not, the Witch’s voice was calm.

Since she would occasionally appear childish or strangely playful, it would be easy to form a misunderstanding. She was a Witch, and her relationship with Aldebaran was naught more than sharing in a certain objective.

By no means would their hearts ever understand each other, nor would they ever treasure the other dearly, and yet.

Witch: “It would seem like you have just a bit of a misunderstanding.”

Aldebaran: “Huh?”

Caught off guard just as he was about to settle his thoughts, he let out a foolish grunt. Within Aldebaran’s hand, the black orb, having gained the will to shatter, cracked like lightning.

That which could not be shattered by any means other than Authority or Dragon Sword, was shattered by efforts not belonging to the caster—

Aldebaran: “…”

The next moment, Aldebaran looked up at the Witch who had been liberated from the black orb.

With Aldebaran sprawled out on the grassy plain, the Witch gazed at him after pushing him down. Restrained by the Witch’s black eyes from up close, Aldebaran could not muster any words.

To Aldebaran, who had fallen silent, the Witch continued.

Witch: “You have no need to feel unease. I have provided you with as much knowledge as I could, and you have managed to deal with all the challenges I had presented you with. Without even seeking insight from the words of the other Witches, yes?”

Aldebaran: “Teacher, I’m…”

Witch: “You do not need to say anything.”

A finger pressed against his trembling lips, Aldebaran was silenced by the Witch, whose facial expression shifted. The Witch’s thin lips curved into a gentle half-moon, and she displayed a smile which she had never shown him before.

As if to captivate Aldebaran’s eyes, his breath, his heart, it was a smile tinged with the hue of blood.

The Witch who ought to have possessed no colors other than white and black, now displayed the hue of blood—

Witch: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, who I created.”

The words slipped through Aldebaran’s eardrums, permeating his brain, and were seared into his soul.

Never forget, never forget, never forget; deeply engraving itself into his being was the Witch’s blessing unto Aldebaran, who had always been chasing that star until this very day.

The Witch would never speak any falsehoods. —Ergo, that was the truth. Aldebaran: “…Nobody, can defeat me.”

Witch: “Yes, that is so. I wish for you to prove that. Certainly, there is nobody who will ever attempt to extol you, but… I alone, solemnly vow to bless you from the bottom of my heart when you succeed.”

For Aldebaran, that oath was the irresistible temptation of the Witch.

There existed in this world only two people who Aldebaran wished would acknowledge his existence. Since that was something that could never be expected from one of them, he could only pray that the other one would.

Aldebaran: “I’ll win, Teacher. —So that I may be myself.”

Witch: "…"

In accordance with the Witch's expectations, Aldebaran replied so, a flame alight in his heart.

And hearing his reply, an entirely different emotion flashed through the Witch's eyes, ever smiling. As for which of the Witch's wounds that had originated from was, Aldebaran knew not.

Only, in the Witch's words, her teachings, her blessing, he believed.

Before his eyes, stood the beautiful Witch of white and black. When he closed his eyes, envisioned was the beautiful Witch of silver and amethyst.

While chasing a glaring, odiously twinkling star, Aldebaran awaited that moment.

Finally, that would be rewarded. That it would be rewarded, he believed. As if to give shape to her blessing upon Aldebaran and his courageousness, the Witch's lips fell upon Aldebaran's forehead.

Feeling within the sensation of those lips a wish that seemed as if the Witch was clinging to it, the Following Star whispered.

Aldebaran: "—I, no matter what, will definitely kill you."

Vic.ll20

Chapter 37: Mindset

1

???: “—Subaru-sama and Beatrice-sama have fallen into the hands of the man calling himself Aldebaran. Bitter regret. Currently, countermeasures are being taken to deal with that person, with Emilia-sama taking charge. Report.”

Indeed, after receiving Clind’s report, which arrived using the Authority of Tristitia, Roswaal found himself shaken by the gap between his rational acceptance of what had happened and the difficulty of accepting it emotionally.

Their location was the Barielle mansion—the estate that Priscilla Barielle inherited from her late husband, Leip Barielle, and which had become masterless once more after her death. Currently, Roswaal, accompanied by Priscilla’s servant Schult, was visiting this place after being separated from Emilia and the others.

Clind appeared and brought the report to a room in the mansion.

—Frankly speaking, Roswaal was not at all delighted with Subaru’s suggestion to take the grieving Al to the Pleiades Watchtower.

It required a protracted amount of time to find and secure Subaru, who had been transported to the Vollachian Empire. —Rem had also been transported there, but Roswaal did not indulge in self-deception. Roswaal’s goal was to bring Subaru back, and Rem’s safety was secondary.

Of course, everyone in the camp was happy that Rem had returned, but they could not be optimistic considering the time that had been squandered. They had to start working immediately to make up for the delay in the necessary measures to be taken for the Royal Selection. —It was just then that Subaru came to consult with them about going to the Pleiades Watchtower.

What should be given top priority? Roswaal tried to persuade Subaru from such a perspective, but he was unable to change his mind, and in the end, Subaru's proposal was approved.

Nonetheless, Subaru's decision was not entirely without merit.

???: "Please, please, I humbly request, you handle Al-sama…"

And the one who said that, bowing their slightly curly pink crown of hair, was Schult, Priscilla Barielle's servant and loyal vassal who had been carefully protected by her.

Though still a child, Schult was astute and determined to be strong. Despite the enormous shock of Priscilla's death, he desperately tried to support himself with his own delicate legs, determined not to dishonor the name of his late master. Schult was also close to Al and had been deeply concerned about his trauma.

Subaru's consideration for Al went a long way in winning Schult's trust.

Making a favorable impression on Schult and earning the gratitude of the Emilia Camp would be a huge advantage in the upcoming Royal Selection—particularly in dealing with the now vacant Barielle Domain.

When the Royal Selection began, Emilia and Priscilla became rivals, but they came to respect each other through mutual acceptance and became close friends. When Priscilla passed away, Emilia took on her legacy and supported the people of the Barielle Domain who had been under her protection. —Schult, who was deeply loved by Priscilla, was essential to this.

Emilia also promised that she "wanted to be friends with Priscilla after the Royal Selection," so some embellishment was just artistic license.

Hence, Roswaal reluctantly sent Subaru and the others to the Pleiades Watchtower and chose to accompany Schult back to the Barielle Domain. —However, that had been a mistake.

???: "Subaru-sama and the others… Then, what about Garf? What happened to Garf? Garf went with them to protect Subaru-sama and the others!"

Clind: "Unfortunately, Garfiel was defeated by Aldebaran's schemes and suffered serious injuries. He fainted. We had hoped that the effects of the Divine Protection of Earth Spirits would take effect, but… the fact that he was injured in the Augria Sand Dunes, a region filled with miasma, proved harmful, and its effects were less than expected. Weak."

???: "Garf…"

As Roswaal pondered, Frederica, who had accompanied him to the Barielle Domain, overheard Clind talking about Garfiel's condition while he was with Subaru and the others, and looked down in regret.

Her expression did not show disappointment or dismay at Garfiel's failure to fulfill his expected role, but rather a deep sense of relief at being alive and concern for what hardships he faced.

Roswaal was also relieved that Garfiel was alive, but—

Roswaal: "…I don't understaaand~. Al-dono's strength is nowhere near Garfiel's. Of course, Garfiel's mind still has a lot of room for improvement, so it's possible that he was attacked mentally and his opponent took advantage of that weakneeess~."

Frederica: "…With Garf, that is the most likely explanation. He is so gentle-hearted."

Clind: "Kindness is not something to be condemned for. Even if it is for disciplining oneself, there is no need to choose harsh words deliberately. Highlight."

Frederica: "You are always like this whenever this sort of thing comes up…"

In response to Clind's thoughtful words, Frederica gritted her fangs with a complicated expression.

Their relationship began more than ten years ago, when Frederica left the Sanctuary and began working for Roswaal, but the rift that opened up between them was difficult to reconcile.

At first, Frederica looked up to Clind like an older brother and followed him around, calling him “Nii-sama, Nii-sama” at all times. However, when Frederica started to grow taller, their relationship changed completely.

Roswaal, who knew the circumstances, showed understanding toward Clind in what caused the issue, but Frederica, who was suddenly pushed away, was not convinced. Because of that, she had continued to harbor an intense disdain for him like a poisonous snake or a scorpion, and it was hard to express anything about it.

In any case—

Roswaal: “Clind, judging from your attitude, I guess there was a situation where Garfiel could not be blamed… What haaappened~?”

Clind: “—. The husk of the Divine Dragon Volcanica has joined Aldebaran. In response, the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea-sama, has already set out to subdue it. Expedient.”

Frederica: “—Hk. Sword Saint-sama? But if that is the case…”

Roswaal: “Unbelievable, Al-dono defeated even Reinhard-kun?”

Clind: “To be precise, it would be more accurate to say that they have been constrained. Correction. In addition, various problems are repeatedly emerging in the Royal Capital. Master, we urgently request your assistance. Proposal.”

At Clind’s words, Roswaal narrowed his eyes and sank deep into thought.

Frederica’s emerald-green eyes were wide open with shock, staring, unable to process the overwhelming torrent of information, and Roswaal shared the same thoughts, more or less. The difference between her and him was that while she was understandably dumbfounded by the deluge of information, even though he was feeling the same, Roswaal still had a choice to make.

In other words, would this not be the appropriate time to fulfill his promise with Subaru?

Roswaal: "…"

Before Subaru was officially knighted, after the situation surrounding the Sanctuary had settled, Roswaal told Subaru his thoughts and stance.

If Natsuki Subaru vowed to continue picking up all the pieces, Roswaal would resolve to take measures to make him start over if he ever were to lose anything in the future. That meant burning everything he did not wish to lose and the subsequent abandoning of the world in which his subjective self currently lived.

Roswaal: "With Priscilla-sama, it was a tricky decision."

It was difficult to decide whether or not to include Priscilla in what Subaru considered to be "everything".

However, Roswaal decided that the death of Priscilla, a preeminent political rival, would be a tailwind for Emilia, who wanted to win the Royal Selection, and therefore decided that her death was not covered by the Contract. —Furthermore, he did not think that Priscilla's death, based on what he knew, should be overturned.

Priscilla Barielle's death was the result of her own choices.

Unless the individual was indispensable to Roswaal's objectives, he would not deny that choice.

—But Subaru's current situation appeared to be dire.

According to Clind, it would seem that there had been no severe casualties, but considering Al's situation, it was only a matter of time before something happened. If something was going to happen sooner or later, then Subaru should be made to start anew, given how things were progressing.

If it were required to do so, Roswaal would do it.

However—

Roswaal: "—Beatrice."

Roswaal held a glimmer of hope for Beatrice, who had been taken captive alongside Subaru.

It was not because Beatrice was a Great Spirit who had mastered the Yin attribute, nor because she was an unparalleled being created by Echidna, the Witch of Greed, the greatest magician of the world, nor because she would protect Subaru with her strong feelings of determination and resolve as his Contracted Spirit.

For Roswaal, it was an extremely perplexing and difficult emotion to process, but there was no basis for it.

Roswaal wanted to believe in Beatrice, he could not help but feel that way.

???: "—Margrave-sama, I most graciously ask for your help."

It was not Frederica or Clind who spoke.

Schult, who had been present in the mansion's reception room at the meeting to discuss the future of the Barielle Domain, interjected.

When Clind appeared after using Compression to teleport, Schult repeatedly exclaimed, "Huh?" and "Ah!" in surprise at his report. But now, the child who had just spoken to Roswaal appeared to have lost much of his previous weakness—no, it had been completely hidden.

People would call that hidden, untouchable mask either courage or determination.

Schult: "I apologize on behalf of Al-sama for what he has done. Furthermore, I implore you not to allow Al-sama to do any further harmful behavior."

Frederica: "Schult-sama…"

Schult: "I will be fine. Everyone at the mansion will help for Priscilla-sama's sake… so please, I beg you!"

Schult bowed his head deeply, and Frederica looked at Schult's trembling shoulders, then turned her gaze to Roswaal. In her eyes, there was a plea for him to accept Schult's wish, and a desire to help him, but—

Roswaal: "If I'm to act upon Schult-kun's wishes to the fullest, we can't leave Frederica behind. Especially if Al-dono has the Divine Dragon with hiiim~."

Frederica: "Master, what do you mean by that…?"

Clind: "—I will tend to that. Volunteer."

Frederica frowned, perplexed about her connection to the Divine Dragon, but before she could ask for an answer to her doubts, Clind spoke up.

Frederica found herself confused by what he meant, but Roswaal was not. Clind's words had a meaning beyond their surface meaning.

Clind thought that no matter how many words he used, Roswaal would not change his decision. Seeing Roswaal's gaze, Clind slightly relaxed his lips and spoke.

Clind: "I was captivated by a soul so dazzling that I was moved to no longer be a bystander. Jealousy."

So he spoke.

2

???: "—This guy, it seems like he's able ta go back ta time gone by. But, it don't seem ta go very far back, though."

???: "…"

As soon as those words left Rom-jii's mouth, the room was swept over by a silence that contained all the various conceived thoughts in that moment.

Emilia's beautiful, gem-like eyes opened wide, while Rem's eyes, sparkling like the surface of a clear lake, blinked rapidly.

Meanwhile, it was not hard to tell that Ram was clearly puzzled, as Meili tilted her head while playing with her braids,

Meili: “I don’t really get what you’re saying at all~.”

She muttered an impression similar to Emilia’s.

If Clind had been there, someone might have been able to react more calmly to Rom-jii’s report, but Clind, who had just brought Rem and Ram, had been requested to meet Roswaal and the others, so they could not see his response.

Still, not having to hear that topic whilst Roswaal was present alongside the others might have been a blessing in disguise.

???: “Turning back time, that’s…”

“Subaru”: “—Return by Death.”

“Subaru” muttered those words, folding his arms, as Petra’s voice faintly trembled beside him.

Petra looked up at him at those words, and had no room left within to let her heart flutter at her beloved for having reached the same conclusion she had.

After one clash with him, Rom-jii surmised that Al was utilizing an Authority outside of the norm.

He had managed to hold off Garfiel and Ezzo at the Pleiades Watchtower, fought bravely against Reinhard at the Augria Sand Dunes, albeit with the help of the Divine Dragon, and with just three people broke through the five-hundred man Felt Camp led by Rom-jii, and finally took Roy Alphard of Gluttony from the Royal Capital, even evading an unrestrained, enraged Emilia in the process.

That was, as for all the misdeeds and grave sins Al perpetrated, the dots finally began to connect as it all started coming together.

It was possible. —That Al, the same as Subaru, could wield Return by Death.

"Subaru": "Al's a guy from another world just like me. So there's a considerable chance he awakened to a similar pattern as me. I mean, in isekai stories that type of pattern's a given. Why didn't I think of this, I'm beyond stupid…!"

Petra: "Then, as expected, Al-san is the same as Subaru?"

"Subaru": "Yeah, there's a high chance of that. No, maybe it's a leap ability similar to mine, just a type that's more user-friendly; there's a possibility. That is to say, the real pleasure and fun often comes from seeing the differences between isekai powers and figuring out that they aren't exactly the same as one another."

Petra: "You're betting your life, so who cares about cliches or the real pleasure? The important thing is we've discovered one of Al-san's secrets, so what are we going to do about it?"

"Subaru": "Yeah, yes, that's exactly right… But I've unraveled a bunch of things. If that's really the case, then maybe he could sneak past Reinhard and set traps for him and stuff… Could he? Like actually? Is Return by Death enough to do something about Reinhard? Wouldn't you need to die like a hundred times?"

Now that Al was suspected to be the user of some other sort of time leap ability, "Subaru" held his head in frustration.

Honestly, Petra did not hold the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea as utterly high up in opinion as her surrounders did. Maybe it was because she had not met him in person, but if he truly was as strong as she had heard he was, then carrying out feats to match that did not seem astonishing.

Rather, the person that took on enemies stronger than themself, produced results that surpassed expectations, and the one who took on those who held power greater than theirs with all they could muster was Subaru; Petra thought he was very cool.

That was why Petra was very disheartened to see "Subaru" estimate himself below Reinhard, she wanted him to puff out his chest and say how cool he was. That said, if too many people became aware of Subaru's greatness, that could result in another potential problem.

Petra: "Well, with me, Emilia-neesama, and Rem-neesama, along with Beatrice-chan and Patrasche-chan, I think we've got a flawless lineup for now."

Even if someone were to realize Subaru's charm a bit late and tried to cut in, they had already formed an impregnable enclosure that simply could not be penetrated; that gave Petra confidence.

Presently, her concern was Subaru's overkindliness, and the possibility that he might have shown some bias to the other side, but even so, she trusted Emilia would remain in his number one spot. —Although, that was also the thing that gave Petra considerable worries.

In any case—

???: "If Rom-sama is sane and doesn't have tunnel vision, then this is troublesome indeed."

Rom: "I care a lot 'bout that lass's case, so yer understandin' helps. That's how Aldebaran managed ta break through even our encirclement. And Emilia bein' bested in the Royal Capital was also likely thanks ta that guy's Authority."

Emilia: "Umm, I apologize. I still don't really understand…"

As for Ram and Rom-jii, these particularly sharp two, they seemed ready to progress the conversation swiftly; Emilia put a stop to that. At Emilia's side, Rem cutely nodded,

Rem: "I feel the same as Emilia-sama. Turning back time, was it? Nee-sama, what does that mean…"

Ram: "That's right, Rom-sama didn't sufficiently explain matters to you, Rem, who have just woken up and aren't yourself yet. Take a look at this."

Rem: “That’s… a gold coin?”

Ram stepped forward softly, showing Emilia and Rem the gold coin placed in her hand.

The gold coin was engraved with the image of the famed Divine Dragon Volcanica, and gripping that coin tightly, after she had flaunted it to Emilia and the others, Ram flipped her hand, and let the gold coin fall.

Watching the arc it drew as it fell to the floor, Petra understood Ram’s intent. The gold coin hitting the floor would serve as a metaphor of the advantages of time leaping.

Emilia: “Watch out! Honestly, Ram, you can be such a clumsy scatterbrain.”

Rem: “Nee-sama is sometimes unexpectedly careless. That’s also part of her charm.”

But, before the gold coin hit the floor, Emilia, moving swiftly, picked it up. She returned the coin to Ram, as Rem said something somewhere in the midpoint between comforting and encouraging.

The expression on Ram’s face after she retrieved the gold coin was full of meaning.

“Subaru”: “Hey, wasn’t Ram trying to show that it falls if you didn’t know it would, but if you had known it was going to fall you could stop it?”

Petra: “Probably. But this works out, let’s leave the explaining to Ram-neesama. There’s no time to be all content chatting with Emilia-neesama and Ram-neesama.”

She felt a bit bad for leaving it to Ram, but while Emilia and Rem were still catching up, Petra shifted to the next issue—she racked her brain on how to really deal with Al.

She wanted a bit more details on whatever Al’s Authority was. If, just if, it turned out they could refute Subaru’s earlier speculation—

Meili: “—Petra-chan, are you okay~?”

Petra: “Meili-chan…”

While Ram and Rom-jii were focused on explaining things to Emilia and Rem, it was Meili who rather unexpectedly called out to Petra.

Meili, too, was on the meager side of understanding the concept of a time leap, but she prioritized Petra’s wellbeing rather than knowing Al’s Authority.

Reaching her hand out gently, she touched Petra’s cheek, and murmured “so warm”.

Meili: “We’ve been running in a rush around nonstop~ since leaving the Tower, so I haven’t brought it up yet, but I know you read a Book in the Tower, Petra-chan, okay~?”

Petra: “Yeah, that’s true. —I would appreciate it if you’d keep quiet about it to Emilia-neesama and the others.”

Meili: “…You’re keeping quiet because you don’t want to worry the others, right~?”

Petra: “Yes, of course.”

Petra firmly clasped Meili’s hand, that had been on her forehead, with both of her hands.

Just as Meili had said, Petra probably did have a bit of a fever. Although, rather than poor physical shape, she thought it was a fever from her brain overthinking.

As it was, she already had a lot on her mind, and now it felt like her little brain was now also in charge of dealing with “Subaru’s” thoughts and emotions as well.

Maybe it was because of how deeply she cared, but just reading the Book of the Dead of that sole person, of Subaru, had left her like this. Ezzo, who had read more than ten of them, had to be completely off the rails, and as for the one who had built the grand library, Flugel, who had probably designed and built it so that only such lunatics could handle it, he had to be completely out of his mind.

He was surely the type to assume if he could do it then anyone could, the kind of thinking that truly irritated Petra like nothing else for better or worse.

But at the same time, Petra also thought this.

If not for that great library, there were so many things she would have gone her whole life without ever knowing.

And among the things she had come to know, there were definitely things she wanted to know. So long as that flame within her heart continued to burn, Petra did not want to stop.

Even when all was said and done, her mind was still seething.

Petra: “And also, I’ve been thinking.”

Meili: “…Thinking… what about~?”

Petra: “If what Rom-jii said is right, and Al-san’s Authority is what I think it is, then…”

“Subaru”: “Petra?”

As Petra lowered her eyes and pressed a finger to her pale lips, Meili and “Subaru” leaned in toward her. The two of them could not see nor recognize each other, yet their puzzled reactions were so matching that Petra almost laughed at the comicality; then she spoke.

What she said was—

Petra: “—I think I might know Al-san’s weak point.”

3

Felt: “—So the one who put Reinhard’s mother to sleep, was Reinhard himself?”

Having hesitated to put that to words, something quite unusual for her, Felt thought bitterly of herself.

And that was not because it was a matter concerning Reinhard. No, in a sense, it was.

Since their initial meeting, Felt was constantly being thrown off balance by Reinhard, and regarding incidents involving him, there were many times where she could not pass judgment or make decisions typical of herself. That was influenced by him continuing to forcibly prevent the results of her decisions, and to take it a step further, was influenced by the fact that he had seen her with a teary face near the loot house at the very beginning.

But, likely the greatest factor, was that Reinhard had given up on many things.

That was what made Felt hesitate to fully accept Reinhard. Simultaneously, it was the reason why Reinhard would never entrust anything to Felt from the bottom of his heart.

There was a philosophy of the slums that resided within Felt, a wise saying that went “live strong”.

No matter where one was born, no matter who one was, the saying believed that a person’s spirit could survive no matter what might befall them. When taking that philosophy into consideration, Reinhard was not living strong.

Be it as a lion, as a Dragon, or as a human being, Reinhard was half-hearted.

But, if part of the reason for that was the truth that Felt had just come to realize—

Felt: “—Nah, if that’s so, it doesn’t add up.”

However, Felt immediately refuted the hypothesis she had just come up with.

With a certain conviction, Felt carefully examined the relationship between Reinhard and his slumbering mother—Louanna Astrea, but supposing that Reinhard was aware of the truth, his actions and conduct up to this point would not make coherent sense.

Of course, it was not impossible that Reinhard was concealing that truth from Felt, calmly covering up the fact that he was involved with the cause of his mother's inability to wake up.

Felt: "Not a chance. That klutz could never pull off something so shrewd."

Was there anybody else in the world besides Felt who could have described Reinhard like this?

Well, those who foisted their ideals and dreams upon the Sword Saint would surely harbor objections, but the garbage treatment of Reinhard within the Felt Camp had been relatively normalized.

The sisters Flam and Grassis had known him for a long time, and took advantage of their familiarity to embarrass Reinhard with their cute sarcasm, and the stray dogs divorced from notions of respect, Gaston, Rachins, and Camberley, incessantly bombarded Reinhard with a well-grounded stream of bad-mouthing.

Ezzo, who frequently interfered with the management of the Astrea Family's territories, was often greatly troubled, saying "How have they managed up until now…", and Rom-jii, who seemed to not harbor a favorable impression of the Sword Saint, never changed his blunt demeanor towards Reinhard since the beginning.

And of course, the one who lambasted and insulted Reinhard the most in the world, besmirching his title of the supposed ideal, greatest Knight, was none other than Felt.

The various words and actions from the Camp's individuals, Reinhard had taken it all.

And when taking it, what did he do? —He smiled.

In a truly joyful manner, he smiled.

In those moments alone, it was as if he had not given up on anything at all.

Felt: “Even if that fuckface hides his true feelings, that sorta smile can’t be faked.”

That was Felt’s conclusion, and unlike the people who placed their excessive hopes in Reinhard, it was an idea that could only be produced by someone who saw Reinhard in such a manner.

Hence, besides Felt, the only ones who could talk about Reinhard in this way were the members of her Camp, the Knights who were Reinhard’s close friends, and—

Felt: “I’m tempted to add the fact that he’s your kid to the reasons why I think he’s incapable of hiding things.”

Before Felt as she scratched her head, having been socked in his mug, Heinkel was down on one knee gripping the sword that had been tossed back to him with a face as pale as could be.

Pouring too much strength into his hand gripping the sword, the fingers and hand had turned white, trembling in a rattle.

The emotions behind that were neither anger, nor fear, nor sorrow, but they were clearly communicated to Felt by Heinkel’s quivering blue eyes regardless.

If those emotions were to be expressed in a single word, despair would likely be the most apt.

A truth that he could not afford for anyone to discover had been discovered; such was his unavoidable, inescapable despair. That deeply etched despair bound Heinkel in his entirety, and had driven him into a corner.

His figure was so exceedingly wretched that it gave Felt the illusion that Heinkel’s very life had been plucked away by despair.

But, in all likelihood, Heinkel would not die so easily. If his life was one capable of being stolen by a despair that swathed him entirely, it would have happened a long time ago.

Heinkel: “—Ah, kuh, uh, no, uh.”

Repeatedly opening and closing his mouth, Heinkel continued to mutter in a voice that formed no words.

Narrowing her red eyes at Heinkel's reaction, Felt contemplated the relationship between Reinhard and the man before her eyes as the starry sky looked down on them through the gap in the rocks.

—With her decision to take part in the Royal Selection, Felt had made Reinhard her Knight.

From Felt's perspective, Reinhard was the strongest Knight in the world, known as the Sword Saint, but at the same time, he was the person responsible for separating Felt and Rom-jii, and who furthermore was a loathsome individual who annoyed Felt by trying to refine her and make her wear dresses and shoes with high-heels.

Since that impression existed within Felt, she had never made any effort to pry into Reinhard's circumstances, but—she came to hear about them whether she liked it or not.

About how Reinhard was treated by the Astrea Family, and how he was perceived by society.

What arose especially frequently in conversation were rumors surrounding the death of the previous generation's Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea, and the circumstances leading to the official recognition of Reinhard as the Sword Saint after inheriting the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint—those being the incident when he was eight years old, where he stopped the invasion of the Kingdom plotted by a machiavellian of the three countries, and the unerasable stain of his complete obedience to Heinkel Astrea in the years that followed, persisting until around the time he joined the Guard.

Reinhard did not speak much on any of these events, and Felt had not questioned him about them either, but it now gave her a strong feeling of unease.

The most extreme idea being that Reinhard was at one point completely obedient to Heinkel.

If that was the truth, then what exactly was Heinkel fighting so hard for?

Felt had not investigated Reinhard, but in order to grasp the circumstances regarding the power held by the head of the Astrea Family, she had investigated Heinkel.

Heinkel had quite a poor reputation, but most of it was about his failures as a Knight and as a father, and everything Heinkel had tried to forcibly accomplish using the name of the Astrea Family was entirely in an attempt to gain the means to awaken the slumbering Louanna.

She would not describe him as living humbly, but he was far removed from the common luxuries of nobility, and had made curtailments in most facets of his lifestyle so that he could devote everything to waking his wife; that was the impression of him that she got from the numerical figures.

But—

Felt: “If you really had Reinhard’s complete obedience, you could’ve done anything you wanted.”

In both fame and might, there existed nobody in the Kingdom who exceeded Reinhard.

He might have had the integrity to deem it unacceptable to ever use Reinhard for his own purposes, but not if Heinkel was anything like the rumors suggested.

If the rumors about Heinkel were true, he could have used Reinhard’s fame, might, or whatever else was required to entirely skip the process of going out to locations by himself, negotiating directly with the other side, and resorting to forcing his way through swordsmanship if that proved insufficient.

Instead, he did his best to avoid involvement with Reinhard, and persisted with a hangup to awaken his slumbering wife through his own efforts, but why?

If his wife was more important to him than anything else, then the scales would not tip no matter what was placed on the other side. —That was, only so long as something equally weighty was not placed there.

In that case—

Felt: “Your fucking… your approach to what’s important to you, is way too damn twisted.”

Heinkel: “—Hk.”

That instant, the cowering Heinkel grit his teeth, and a light dashed.

Feeling the upsurge of swordly aura as a gust of wind, Felt understood that what had appeared as a flash was an attack of Heinkel’s sword, unsheathed in the blink of an eye, whose chilly point was now fastened to her neck.

Heinkel: “Stop… going on and on… about what’s none of your damn business.”

Felt: “Oi, I’ll say this now, but…”

Heinkel: “DON’T MOVE A FUCKING MUSCLE!”

With eyes bloodshot and spittle foaming at the corners of his mouth, Heinkel’s shout caused Felt to bite the inside of her cheek, lamenting her own blunder of excessively pressing him.

Unlike earlier when she had hit him back, when it was clearly just a threat, the current aura being emitted from Heinkel was charged with a definite intent to kill.

She understood that the source of that intent was neither hatred nor indignation, but rather a certain kind of defensive instinct, but that was exactly why she realized she had drawn out far too troublesome emotions from him.

As tension ran through Felt’s entire body, Heinkel’s blue eyes violently trembled before her,

Heinkel: “This, is my problem. I can’t stand it when outsiders delve into it without a shred of reserve. Much less when it's a brat like you, I won't let you learn about any more of this—"

Felt: "—More? So you're saying there's still something else?"

Heinkel: "—Hk, SHUT THE FUCK UUUUUUUP!"

Catching on to something at the end of Heinkel's words, Felt unconsciously blurted that out. Right after she thought she had once again triggered a violent tremor in Heinkel's expression, he erupted.

Then, the tip of his sword was drawn back for but a moment before accelerating, and it thrust forward a step further—it happened the instant before that could come to pass.

???: "I'm begging you, please don't do anything to provoke the old man."

Heinkel: "Gah?!"

A figure swooped down, and in its hand was a stone sword—with a stone dao, it had mercilessly struck the temporal region of the kneeling Heinkel, causing the latter to fall flat onto the ground.

As Heinkel fell over, his eyes rolled into the back of his head. Standing beside him and shrugging his shoulders in exasperation was Aldebaran, who had intervened when the situation grew perilous.

And in response to Aldebaran's entrance, Felt softly snorted her nose,

Felt: "Bastard, you were just watching until I was in serious danger, weren't you?"

Aldebaran: "Though, you were also just talking to the old man with a hunch that I was keeping an eye out to make sure you didn't carelessly get yourself killed, Felt-chan. That ain't a cute way of conducting yourself."

Felt: "After all, I absolutely hate being called cute."

Sticking out her tongue with a “Behhh”, Felt gave Aldebaran no thanks whatsoever for being saved.

Only, checking to see that the collapsed Heinkel had not died, she sighed. —From Heinkel’s last few words there, it seemed like there was still something else with Reinhard.

He was the Sword Saint, seemingly the reason behind his mother’s slumber, and something else on top of that which Heinkel was hiding—.

Felt: “Feels like it’d be irresponsible to say I won’t ask anything until he speaks up.”

Aldebaran: “Well, that’s a fine declaration of your intent. Do you understand the situation?”

Felt: “From what you say, you’ve got no intention of harming me, and once you’ve finished everything for your objective, you’ll let the Royal Selection resume, yeah? I think it’d be best if you were defeated, but for now, whether you win or lose, the things I’ve gotta do from here on out are the same.”

Aldebaran: “Can’t argue with that.”

As Aldebaran lightheartedly waved his right hand, Felt snorted once more; taking the sword still clutched tight in Heinkel’s grip, she aligned its tip with the scabbard, and sheathed it.

The moment before it fully returned to its sheath, the blade of the sword inscribed “Astrea” shimmered in a manner that appeared excessively merciless and cold to Felt’s eyes, irritating her all the more.

Chapter 38:
Scorched by the Sun

1

???: "—In other words, if this was not a gold coin, but a full-powered attack by Garf, Emilia-sama, who would already know what Garf was going to do, could easily avoid his very obvious attack, then counterattack, and leave him crying and groaning."

Emilia: "I see, so that's what you mean… but wait! It would be bad to make Garfiel cry. I would rather find a way to befriend Garfiel instead."

???: "If so, you would not have to fight back, because if Emilia-sama can just keep a cool facade and effortlessly avoid Garf's attacks, eventually Garf's mind would break and the matter would be settled amicably."

Emilia: "Then that is reassuring… reassuring? Really? Even though it would break his mind?"

Emilia said that with a big question mark over her head as Rem handed her back the gold coin.

At the moment, in her mind, Garfiel was too busy crying like a child, or collapsing to his knees in despair. Rem, who had taken over the role of explaining Aldebaran's Authority from Ram, was relieved to hear that she had managed to give a brief explanatory overview of Aldebaran's Authority—"Turning Back Time".

Ram: "You're amazing, Rem. You did a great job of getting Emilia-sama to understand."

Rem: "Happy to be able to help, Nee-sama. Even though Garf had to be sacrificed."

Ram: "If all it takes is for him to cry and be depressed to keep things going, Garf would happily endure it. It sounds like he's sleeping peacefully, so Ram will have to go and visit him later."

Rem: "Yes, that's right. Garf would be delighted to have Nee-sama visit him…"

Seeing Ram shrug her thin shoulders dismissively in exasperation, a complicated, bitter feeling ran through Rem's heart.

Now that Rem had regained her memory, she remembered that she and Garfiel were originally at odds over Ram. From childhood, Rem had disliked Garfiel for the way he dared to nurture feelings for Ram without knowing his place, such that it had resulted in them arguing with each other many times.

However, when she thought back on Garfiel's efforts in the Empire and the conversations they had on the way home, she felt extremely guilty about the way she had treated and viewed him as she had in the past.

More importantly, Garfiel was unable to fulfill his role of protecting Subaru, Beatrice, and the others. When he finally woke up from his slumber, he would surely be extremely depressed and most likely blame himself.

Rem: "It's sad to hound Garf like that… but I understand. Rem will have to let it go. Now we need Garf to recover as soon as possible and become a part of our fighting force to help rescue that person."

Ram: "Right. But there's nothing wrong with being bound by your possessiveness, Rem. If you don't want to do it, we can put Garf's matter off for later, okay?"

Rem: "But, you know full well that I will not ask you not to go, right, Nee-sama?"

Ram: "No clue."

Rem sighed at the dazzle of Ram, who smiled thinly and responded in a dignified manner.

How much of Ram's compassion and concern had been idly wasted in the two periods of time she was asleep and without memories?

Of course, Ram was not the only person Rem worried about.

It caused trouble for everyone within the Camp and even those outside of it as well. —Fortunately, Rem originally did not have any friendships with anyone other than those involved, so the possible damage in that sense was minimal.

Rem: “Rather, it seems that before my memory returned, I was able to interact better with Katya-san, Mizelda-san, and others than I did when I regained it…”

Looking back on the recollection of her life story, Rem had those impressions.

Even though she was transported to the Vollachian Empire by chance and had to survive, it was not surprising that Rem had been more open to establish relationships with people when she had no other choice.

To top it all off, Rem had been entirely unkind to Subaru, always pushing him away when he only was trying to stay close and devoted to her and so on, over and over again; it made her want to strangle herself.

Rem: “If only Subaru-kun had looked Rem in the eye and talked to me directly… ah, but Rem was the one who refused to do so, ugh…”

Some part of Rem wanted to defend herself, saying that it could not be helped because she had no memory, and some part wanted to convince herself that she could have conveyed her sincere feelings if she had managed to face Subaru directly.

Regardless, the fact remained that Rem had caused a great deal of inconvenience to those around her, especially Subaru, so she had to do everything in her power to make up for it.

Rem: “First, Rem will resolve this situation successfully. After that, to show Subaru-kun my gratitude, Rem’s own fingers must be broken… that’s what I have to do.”

???: “…If you do that, Subaru won’t be happy, and he might even die from shock, so please don't do it."

Rem: "Oh, Petra-san…"

When Rem turned around after her secret resolution was heard, she saw Petra with a troubled brow. Thinking that she should not have let her hear that, Rem pointed the palm of her hand at her and said, "No,"

Rem: "Please don't try to stop me. Rem owes Subaru-kun many apologies. If my unworthiness is not punished, I won't be able to face Subaru-kun…"

Petra: "So, you're punishing yourself because you want to feel better, not because you want to apologize to Subaru, Rem-neesama?"

Rem: "That's not what I mean…"

Petra: "Even if you don't mean it like that, I'm just saying that's how it's going to end up. Okay? What Subaru wants you to do is not to punish yourself for it, but to accept the happiness that you have been missing out on while you were asleep, Rem-neesama."

Rem: "…"

As Petra softly lowered the corners of her eyes, Rem's breath involuntarily caught at the former's words.

It was a gentle and sweet admonition that sounded similar to the words Subaru had said to Rem when she blamed herself on the morning that the Witchbeast incident had been solved in Arlam Village, the first day that Rem had felt special feelings for Subaru.

For some reason, the Petra before her eyes seemed to overlap with the Subaru from that time, just a little.

Rem: "…Surely, that is all the more proof of the influence that person has had on everyone, isn't it?"

Petra: "Huh? What do you mean, Rem-neesama?"

Rem: “Nothing. Petra-san, your words brought back some very fond and cherished memories of mine. Do you remember when the Witchbeasts attacked Arlam Village?”

Petra: “…Um, yeah, yes. I remember.”

At Rem’s question, Petra’s cheeks slightly tensed up. Then, Petra’s gaze flickered towards the girl standing in the corner of the room, Meili.

She apparently had joined the Camp while Rem was asleep and had been serving a role in the Kingdom while Emilia and the others had struggled in the Empire. She seemed vaguely familiar, but why was Petra paying attention to her now?

Petra: “Ahem. Anyway, please don’t do anything that could cause harm to yourself, Rem-neesama. The world would fall into darkness if your precious white and delicate fingers were to get hurt.”

Rem: “Petra-san…”

Petra: “If you absolutely insist on doing it, I’ll take responsibility and break my fingers too!”

Rem: “Petra-san?!”

When Petra suddenly clenched her small hands into fists, Rem’s voice involuntarily pierced a shrill note. Petra smiled mischievously at Rem’s reaction, and she continued, “That’s why”,

Petra: “You mustn’t do such a thing, yes?”

Rem: “—. Yes… understood.”

With that reminder from Petra, Rem nervously gave her a nod.

This was partly because she had succumbed to Petra’s enthusiasm, but it would be more correct to say that the Subaru-like impression she was getting from Petra blocked any room for a counterargument.

She also seemed to have overlapped with Subaru just earlier, but the way she held back Rem now—the way she had offset Rem's hastiness by crashing directly into her with her own extremes was very much like him.

Rem: "…"

Getting a keen sense for the magnitude of Subaru's influence through Petra, Rem fell silent.

In a way, Petra's current state seemed to indicate that she understood Subaru better than Rem did, and it would not have been strange for her to harbor jealousy or feelings of envy. But oddly enough, Rem did not feel any such emotions towards Petra whatsoever.

She did not know why that was, but thinking of Subaru just now, another splinter caught in Rem's heart.

That was—

Rem: "—Aldebaran-san's, Authority."

That which she had just finished explaining to Emilia by using a gold coin, the Authority of "Turning Back Time".

Thanks to Ram's very patient explanation, Rem had comprehended just how terrifying such a thing was, but as she thought about it more in order to explain it to Emilia, some suspicions began to simmer within herself.

An Authority to observe the future that laid ahead, and avoid that which was undesirable by turning back the clock—

Rem: "—That person, as well?"

That spark of suspicion that had faintly sprouted grew quickly within Rem, spreading like an inferno as it burned through the fields of her thoughts. Then, amidst the scorched ashes that remained, there laid a number of embers that had ignited, feeding the flame even more.

For instance, how there was always a thick fragrance of Miasma that hung over Subaru.

For instance, how Miasma would often grow deeper and more intense, as if it was enveloping Subaru.

For instance, how Subaru would read into situations with inexplicable insight, and find a path through to the solution.

For instance, how a multitude of deaths had been averted thanks to Subaru's presence, with Rem having been one amongst them.

When taken individually, these elements would seem like nothing more than nitpicking, but when taken with that single rule-breaking factor at its core, an Authority, everything fit together surprisingly well.

But, in the one in ten-thousand chance that Rem's intuition was correct, the boy known as Natsuki Subaru, despite possessing a nearly unparalleled power—

Rem: "He only ever uses it for the sake of others… What a selfless person he is."

If one could start over at any time and revise things to suit their own convenience, nothing would stop them from behaving selfishly, and reshaping the world as they pleased.

However, Subaru did no such thing, nor would he ever employ such methods. —That was best understood by Rem, who represented someone who had not bent to Subaru's will.

If Subaru had been utilizing his power to bend people's minds to his wishes, then Rem would never have managed to break Subaru's fingers.

In other words, the fact that Subaru's fingers had been broken was proof of his sincerity.

Rem: "Maybe Rem should also break her fingers to match Subaru-kun's after all…!"

Petra: "Even though I just got you to give up on doing that?!"

Rem: “You’re mistaken, Petra-san. This time is not for some backwards, negative reason like being unable to face him, but a forwards-facing, positive one like wanting to share the same pain as Subaru-kun…”

Petra: “Whether it’s forward, backward, upward, or downward, that’s a BIG FAT NO!”

With nobody willing to listen to her, Rem’s enthusiasm fell flat.

Anyhow, putting aside the matter of finger-breaking, Rem’s idea that Subaru possessed an Authority of the same type as Aldebaran’s was one that she was only growing more confident in. But, even after hearing the details of “Turning Back Time,” it seemed like Ram, Emilia and the rest had not arrived at the same conclusion that Rem had.

Perhaps it was because Rem harbored a deeper understanding of Subaru—that was not the case.

Rem: “…Rather, it’s the opposite.”

Unlike Rem, the reason why Emilia and the others had not arrived at this notion was because they, continuing to live whilst Rem slumbered, knew just how hard Subaru had been working each day until now.

From what she had been told, during the time Rem had been asleep that lasted greater than a year, Subaru made a Contract with Beatrice, and had worked tirelessly to become a Knight worthy of Emilia. Because they knew of Subaru’s efforts, they would not have harbored any suspicions that any other elements had contributed to his successes.

And though it was so vexing that it felt as if her heart was on the verge of being torn asunder, Rem knew nothing of those efforts. —That was why there was such a massive gap between her and those who had surrounded him in their perception of what Subaru was capable of.

But, that in no way diminished Subaru’s heroism.

Above all, the fact that Subaru had now fallen into this situation meant that even if he possessed an Authority, it was not omnipotent, and therefore the reality that Subaru had mustered up all of his wisdom and courage to take the hands of others and move forward remained unshakeable.

So even now, there still remained plenty of opportunity for Rem to become Subaru's strength.

Rem: "Knowing that… Nee-sama!"

The captive Subaru needed their help. —With that certainty in her own thinking, Rem hastened to share her thoughts with Ram and everyone else, hoping to increase the fuel for their discussion.

It was a theory based on intuition and the Oni's ability to smell Miasma, so it would be difficult to convince them, but she was sure that Ram, who was very intelligent, and Emilia, who was very accepting, would listen to what she had to say in earnest.

With that thought in mind, Rem was about to speak out to Ram and the rest, the former of whom had turned towards her and asked, "What's the matter?"—

???: "—We have now returned. Tardiness."

It happened at that moment.

In the hall of the Royal Residence, where Rem and the others had gathered, two men appeared as if in the blink of an eye. One was Clind, a handsome man wearing a monocle that gave off an impression of intelligence. And the person Clind had brought alongside him was Rem's master, whom she had known for a long time, and owed a great debt of gratitude to—

Emilia: "Roswaal! You came!"

Roswaal: "Yesss~, Clind has informed me of the situation. I've now heard about Subaru-kun and Beatrice's predicament, and of the circumstances that could possibly shake the very foundation of the Royal Selection, but I'm simply too exhausted from our travels to the Empire… I could never affooord~ to say such a thiiing~."

Emilia: “Hmm, that’s reaaally reassuring. We’ll fill you in on all our discussions right away… but, before that…”

Roswaal: “—?”

Emilia greeted the tall figure that was Roswaal, who had just appeared, and gestured with her hand towards Rem, who had been standing just behind him.

Roswaal turned his head at Emilia’s gesture, and his heterochromatic eyes focused in on Rem. In response, Rem pinched her skirt and performed the proper curtsey,

Rem: “Roswaal-sama, it has been a terribly long leave of absence. Allow for thanks to once again be bestowed for venturing to retrieve us from the Empire. —Rem has returned to service.”

Roswaal: “…”

Roswaal’s throat rumbled slightly upon witnessing Rem’s gratitude and return to service. The next moment, his tall body began to stagger as if he were dizzy.

Ram: “Roswaal-sama!”

Roswaal: “Ah, no, I’m fine, I’m fine… It was just so sudden, as if I was about to drown in informaaation~.”

Standing by his side, Ram quickly steadied his body, to which Roswaal responded with a wry smile.

It seemed that because Rem’s Name had been regurgitated, it had caused a resurgence of Memories.

It was disappointing that it had not been through the power of her bond with Subaru, who had zealously polished her iron ball—the Morningstar, but seeing the place she occupied within others being filled again after such a long vacancy was not a bad feeling. Though, there were some who might have called it tactless.

Either way—

Roswaal: “—Welcome back, Rem. Once this situation has settled down, why don’t we discuss what has been happening with the mansion in the time you were absent… about Ram, in particulaaar~?”

Rem: “Yes. I look forward to it from the bottom of my heart.”

With great comprehension, Roswaal was able to quickly move on from the shock of remembering Rem. Impressed by the strength of her master’s spirit, Rem tried again to reopen the conversation anew.

However, Rem’s sleeve was tugged firmly from behind—

Petra: “Master, wasn’t Frederica-neesama with you?”

Roswaal: “Yes, I had Frederica stay in the Barielle Domain. I already agreed to give my help there after all. I also couldn’t bear to leave Schult-kun alone, furthermore, Clind said he would fulfill Frederica’s expected rooole~.”

Petra: “Fulfilling Frederica-neesama’s role? Can Clind-niisama really do that?”

Clind: “Harsh. I must endeavor to dispel those doubts. Strenuous Effort.”

Petra frowned as she confirmed Frederica’s whereabouts, seeing that she did not return with Roswaal and the others, while Clind calmly vowed to make up for her absence.

During this exchange, Rem had turned her head to look at Petra’s profile as she tugged on her sleeve and asked, “Petra-san?”.

Petra had just now clearly interrupted Rem and changed the subject, bringing up a different topic. Of course, the whereabouts of Frederica was another area of concern, but her actions had another meaning of significance.

While Rem pondered this, Emilia introduced Rom-jii to Roswaal and began to talk about which countermeasures they would need to take across Camp boundaries. Seeing this, Petra turned to Rem and gave her a small beckoning gesture.

That was when—

Petra: "…Perhaps you also noticed something about Subaru, Rem-neesama?"

Rem: "—! The way you said that, Petra-san, have you also noticed Subaru-kun has an Authority…?"

Petra: "Don't say anything more than that… The Witch might hear you."

Rem: "…"

Rem could not help but keep silent when Petra put her finger to her own lips in a shushing gesture.

Petra did not explicitly say so, but her words indicated exactly what was on Rem's mind—it was evidence enough to prove that Petra also thought that Subaru also had the Authority of "Turning Back Time." From the words that followed, Rem could guess that Petra had been privy to more information than she was.

It was a bit of a stretch to say that the Witch would hear them, but —

Rem: "As I already heard that Reinhard-sama is holding back the Witch of Envy at the Augria Sand Dunes, this is not something that I can laugh off as an exaggeration."

Petra: "Yes, it has to do with that. I'm not absolutely sure that is the case, but I think it's best if we don't talk about this subject. —I don't want to ever experience that feeling again."

Petra's mutterings were filled with an almost frightening level of earnest realism that they carried a weight as if she had personally experienced the consequences from uttering those taboo words.

Naturally, Petra's quiet appeal made Rem stop speaking and swallow those words into the back of her throat. But that meant missing the opportunity to reveal Subaru's true accomplishments so far—

Rem: “…That’s not what he would be concerned about, would it?”

Before and after losing her memory, Rem had two opportunities to get to know Subaru.

What she had learned through those two occasions was that Subaru possessed an earnest sincerity, which struck deep into her heart, and that honestly and openly evaluating everything that was revealed to him was secondary.

Wishing Subaru to be praised and rewarded for all of his actions and intentions was merely a reflection of Rem’s own values.

Petra: “Rem-neesama, there is one thing I want to ask you.”

Petra asked Rem, who swallowed her own prayers and the aftertaste of her lingering sentimentality.

It was not a particularly hushed voice, but to Rem, it seemed as if Petra had asked her question with great care, so that only she could hear it.

When Rem nodded her head slightly, she felt the seriousness of the situation, a feeling which reminded her of Subaru’s earnestness, then,

Petra: “Rem-neesama, would you do anything to help Subaru?”

Behind this question, Rem sensed that Petra was expressing her belief that she could, and would do it.

There was no sense of rivalry with it. But, her deliberation lasted less than a second.

Rem: “Yes, of course. —I am Subaru-kun’s Rem, after all.”

That was an answer that required no hesitation on Rem’s part.

2

—His exhaustion continued to accumulate with every passing moment, something Aldebaran felt keenly.

Aldebaran: “I’m fine with procuring food locally, same with getting water by freezing the atmosphere and licking the ice, but… the fact that our sleeping hours are being curtailed is seriously draining.”

They continued to face relentless sabotage, an endless torment for the Aldebaran Party.

The majority of the damage inflicted by those disturbances was nothing so major that left them wounded or pressed them to retreat from the war front, but rather, nasty tricks that just kept them in a state of exhaustion. And whenever he would think along such lines, they would be hit with an attack of the same class as the falling boulder that had been the first maneuver used against them at the quarry, highlighting the underhandedness of the techniques which did not allow them to relax their vigilance whatsoever.

The greatest problem at hand, was that they possessed no means to perfectly defend against this.

Aldebaran: “Military-Grade Internal Affairs Minister… Military-Grade Internal Affairs Minister, huh? The violent way it sounds ain’t just for show, eh?”

The Internal Affairs Minister of the Emilia Camp, Otto Suwen, was a man who often appeared meek and feeble.

His role within the Camp was that of cushioning, someone often reduced to the butt of a joke, and while his position might have been necessary for their everyday operations, he was not an individual who necessitated vigilance during the most crucial of moments. —That perception had been completely mistaken.

The fact that he could converse with any living thing was something Aldebaran had underestimated, overwhelmingly so. The price for that, was something he was paying with an unbelievable amount of vigor and resources.

Aldebaran: “Moreover, the problems don’t end with just that devious Internal Affairs Minister… there's also trouble stirring between the old man and Felt-chan."

In addition to the ongoing sabotage, what troubled Aldebaran's mind even further was the friction that had arisen between his own party members; the budding of a seed of trouble he could not overlook.

Aldebaran had not originally planned on Felt being among them, but having needed to bring her along to maintain his relationship with "Aldebaran", her presence had been a huge blow.

That, was the matter of Felt having touched upon the crux of that which stirred up Heinkel's emotions.

It seemed as if Felt had touched upon almost everything that Heinkel did not wish to be touched upon.

While his son, Reinhard, was containing the Witch of Envy at the Augria Sand Dunes, with his own hands had Heinkel stabbed his father, Wilhelm, for getting in the way. The price for carelessly disrupting his mental state on the verge of collapse, was something Felt had almost ended up paying with her life. —No, in reality, she had ended up paying with her life many times.

If Aldebaran had not reset things with his Territory, Felt's death would have been set in stone.

That would have then invoked "Aldebaran's" ire, and Heinkel would have been driven into a corner. As it stood, the Divine Dragon's consciousness was in the unnatural state of being overwritten by Aldebaran. If something that considerably roused the Dragon's instincts were to be brought upon it, it was quite possible that the magic of the Book of the Dead would come undone.

Hence, Aldebaran had forcibly cut off the conversation between Heinkel and Felt, but—

Aldebaran: "It's nothing but a bandaid fix. If I ever carelessly leave the old man alone with Felt-chan, I can easily see things getting bloody again. Having said that, it'd be impossible to leave anybody but Yae to handle restraining that Roy bastard… shit, I'm not doing a quiz about getting a wolf and a goat to the other side of a river on a boat. I ain't good at those any which way."

Though it was one of those so-called logic puzzles, he had been placed in a somewhat similar situation.

The current circumstances of allocating his mental resources to a futile battle of wits was undesirable, but with that said—

???: "—If you just cast away Heinkel-sama or Felt-sama as you please, it'll become much easier, y'know?"

Aldebaran: "—. How many times do I have to tell you, I ain't gonna do that."

As a lighthearted voice suddenly interjected with that proposal, Aldebaran clicked his tongue before responding.

With hands joined behind her back, Yae walked towards him with a spring in her step, as if performing a dance. Seeing her by herself, Aldebaran narrowed his eyes within his helmet.

Aldebaran: "Oi, why are you alone? You oughta be with someone…"

Yae: "Felt-sama is with Vol-sama, the Sin Archbishop is strung up, and Heinkel-sama is bound tight. For the time being, things have settled down."

Aldebaran: "…Even so, that doesn't mean we don't have any holes."

Yae: "That would be correct. But but, it currently seems like Al-sama has the potential to become our biggest hole, y'know~?"

As she spoke, Yae hugged one of her knees as she crouched down before Aldebaran. As her cat-like red eyes peered into him, Aldebaran experienced a taste of discomfort.

No matter how bluntly he answered, her judgement was correct. —Without a doubt, the one most clearly exhausted among their members was none other than Aldebaran.

Aldebaran: “But, that’s a matter of course. The goals I’m aiming to accomplish are the biggest and most numerous. Hence, it’s natural that I have to shoulder the difficulties…”

Yae: “As a result, if Al-sama were to be crushed halfway through, wouldn’t it be unbearable to watch?”

Aldebaran: “…What is it you wanna say?”

Yae: “Like~ I’ve~ been~ saying, that which Yae-chan wants to say is the same as it’s always been. Before you get crushed like a bug, Al-sama, you should reign in your conditions for victory.”

Aldebaran: “I told you already, that’s…!”

Yae: “—Why is it that you must cling to such clean methods, Al-sama?”

Resting her chin in the arm upon her folded knee, Yae posed a sharp question.

Yae’s eyes, narrowed to a thread’s breadth, faintly opened, and sensing that the playfulness of her voice had vanished, Aldebaran was unable to muster any immediate response.

And taking advantage of that silence of Aldebaran’s, Yae resumed.

Yae: “Our opponents will come at you with reckless abandon. It’s only natural. After all, Al-sama, you robbed them of their companions, wounded them, and at the end of it all, put the fate of the world on the line. After all that, of course they’re going to be willing to risk their lives~. They won’t hesitate to use methods that go against the righteous road, fair and square.”

Aldebaran: “…I know that I’m causing you a lot of trouble. Not only are you being endlessly harassed, but you even ended up clashing with the Sword Demon in the Royal Capital.”

Yae: “You’re mistaken. It’s not that I want to complain… No, in a sense, this might just very well undoubtedly be a complaint though~.”

Aldebaran: “What are—”

You trying to say; he had been unable to finish his words.

Without dodging Yae’s hand as it suddenly reached out, it pushed down on Aldebaran’s forehead, causing him to fall backwards. Then, as Aldebaran blinked his eyes, Yae glided on top of him after pushing him down.

Aldebaran: “…”

At that close proximity, Aldebaran and Yae crossed gazes.

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That instant, Aldebaran immediately poked the drug package prepared behind his molar with his tongue, intending to commit suicide so that he could redo this moment—

Yae: "—The Madam has passed away, Al-sama."

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

Yae: "She passed away. Haven't you said it yourself many times now?"

Just before Aldebaran could swallow the poison, Yae spoke thus to him at such a close distance that he could feel her breath on him, causing his throat to seize up.

He need not be told. Priscilla Barielle had died. That was the basis for everything. The reason why Aldebaran had taken the leap for this decision, the genesis, and the final shackle.

Because she was no longer among them, Aldebaran was released from all the chains that had bound him; and so, while fully aware that it would make him the enemy of all beings, that it would plunge the world into chaos, he had started this.

Yae: "Is that true?"

Aldebaran: "Ah…?"

Yae: "Is that truly the case? The Madam is no longer among us. That's why nothing matters to you anymore. No matter who you betray, what you destroy, or how you might be perceived, you're completely fine with it. —Is that true?"

At the repeated question, Aldebaran froze.

Even now, he could make it so this moment never happened with a single movement of his tongue. With that as insurance—no, even if he lacked that insurance, Aldebaran would likely not have moved.

Yae's words and gaze harbored a power to bind him far greater than that of any steel thread.

Is that true; so she had asked. Just what answer did she want from him?

Is that true; so she had asked. Of course it’s true. What else could he possibly say?

Is that true; so she had asked. Of the certainty of Aldebaran’s resolve, she inquired.

Yae: “The results might be questionable. The damages brought about might even be outrageous. But, here’s what I also think. — Your way of doing things is way, way too clean.”

Aldebaran: “Clean…?”

Yae: “You confront your opponents head-on, surpassing and surmounting their strategies, and you take advantage of their weaknesses when your military prospects are lacking, but you don’t allow there to be any casualties. Your resolve is clean, Al-sama. That’s why, you’ve ended up being so terribly cornered like this.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Yae: “—Al-sama, how about you quit yearning for the sun?”

As Yae smoothly reached out her arms, she grabbed both sides of Aldebaran’s helmet. Her hands made no attempt to remove the helmet, but rather, they locked his line of sight onto herself, refusing to let him look away.

That gesture combined with the whispering of her words fettered Aldebaran’s soul, preventing any and all movement.

—To stop yearning, for the sun.

Yae: “Crawl on the ground, cover yourself in mud, stop looking up to the sky, and bathe in the blood. It’s alright. I’m already covered in filth, so I won’t balk at basking in the blood and the mud alongside you.”

Aldebaran: “—. No matter what you say, I’m…”

Yae: “You’ve no need to give up that which you aren’t willing to. But, if that’s what you wish, then please don’t try to be clean. If you would just give up on being clean, then—”

Pausing there, Yae’s lips curved into a gentle half-moon.

That smile of Yae’s, tinged with the hue of blood, was terribly transient, overlapping with the smile of someone else.

Yae: “—Nobody, would be able to defeat my Al-sama.”

—That was the smile of someone engraved into his soul, the one who had molded Aldebaran.

Aldebaran: “…”

With a bloody smile, as Yae spoke in a manner as if clinging to him, as if cherishing him, as if lamenting him, as if pleading with him, as if threatening him, as if despairing of him, Aldebaran heaved a long sigh.

Then—

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

In order to not relinquish that which was truly difficult to let go of, he thought that just maybe, he ought to cover himself in mud and blood.

3

???: “—Urgh.”

A strong, throbbing pain gouged into his brain, causing Otto to let out a small groan.

Already, twenty hours had passed since he threw open his Divine Protection of the Soul of Language. During that time, he had not been continuously checking the opened channels, but even if he did not speak through them at all times, he did not fail to collect every single scrap of incoming information.

Consequently, maintaining his Divine Protection in a half-open state, Otto ate and slept sparingly as he continued his endless solitary battle.

Otto: “Emilia-sama, I see that you have joined up with the Margrave and the others.”

Although he did not exercise as much power as he did tracking Aldebaran’s group, he managed to confirm the movements of his allies as Otto sent out animals in both directions as scouts.

He had not been in active contact with Emilia and the others, as he did not want his concentration to break, but beyond that the main reason was that Otto did not want his recklessness to be constrained.

No matter how one looked at it, if they knew that Otto’s nose had bled enough to fill up a cup, Emilia and the others would undoubtedly stop him.

Otto: “However, it is necessary.”

Soon, Aldebaran’s group would arrive at the Kararagi City-States’ Grand Mogolade Geyser, where they would attempt to fulfill their goal. Most likely, that would be the time limit.

In the end, these were just Otto’s instincts, but he was convinced that not stopping their foes here would be their losing condition; this was surely their last chance to retrieve Natsuki Subaru and Beatrice.

Therefore, it must be prevented. But, the deciding factor did not lie with Otto.

Always, the one that held the decisive factor, was someone other than Otto.

All that Otto Suwen could do, was support someone else. —And so, in that support, he would wring out every drop of blood and energy in his body.

???: “Laddie, please don’t die.”

Otto: “…At least, you are not telling me to not be reckless.”

???: “Laddie, doesn’t it seem like being reckless is a hobby for you? I know it’s something you wouldn’t stop doing even if I told you to, so I won’t waste my breath. Hence, please don’t die.”

And at the supportive expression of his loving dragon Frufoo, Otto bitterly chuckled.

Fundamentally, Otto was moving separately from the rest of the Camp, and his means of transportation was the being with whom he would speak to whenever push came to shove—in case his Divine Protection of the Soul of Language steeped him too deeply in the thoughts of other living creatures and he had to avoid becoming unable to return, he made sure to always travel with at least Frufoo by his side.

As expected, since Frufoo had known him since childhood, she seemed to be able to read Otto’s mind, and had often saved him with her dependability.

This was especially true when they were alone in the mountains, far from human habitation.

Frufoo: “I don’t know if this will help, but why don’t you get some sleep? As you said earlier, that group is currently resting… Now you don’t have to worry about losing sight of them, why don’t you take a break?”

Otto: “What are you talking about? If he is resting, then he is not being hindered. Instead, right now is the greatest time for profit.”

Frufoo: “Treating this situation as a time for reaping profits, your bad habit is slipping out, laddie.”

Frufoo shook her large head in exasperation, her tone and demeanour carefree; considering the current situation, one would think she was too easygoing, but Otto knew that this easygoingness was intentional so that he did not become anxious, so that he could not get irritated.

Actually, while talking to Frufoo, his willpower had steadily recovered. —Thanks to this, it seemed he would be able to hold out a little longer.

Frufoo: “That’s not what I was trying to do, you know?”

Otto: “Even if you did not mean to, you are helping me. My Frufoo is really the best partner.”

Frufoo: “You really have a way with words laddie!”

A low groan of dissatisfaction rumbled from Frufoo as she smiled, while Otto took a deep breath. Then, once again he drew his consciousness to his channels, towards the birds, insects, and schools of fish that he had entrusted with tracking Aldebaran’s group trying to figure out as much of the enemy’s movements as possible.

Of course, since he needed to exchange information with the animals, Otto’s pursuit of Aldebaran was just slightly delayed, and there was some amount of lag.

Still, that he had not lost sight of Aldebaran’s group, and he had been able to continue chasing them without loosening his grip, was due to the great power of the Zodda bugs. Most animals were frightened by the presence of the Divine Dragon that accompanied them, and no matter how earnestly he begged them, they refused to go beyond a certain point.

However, Zodda bugs were different. Rather than the individual, they were more concerned with the survival of the swarm, and so they could fearlessly draw close to the Divine Dragon, making them terrific for reconnaissance. Once this was over, including the peaceful place that he had promised to them, they needed to be treated as kindly as possible.

Frufoo: “If you’re too supportive of the Zodda bugs, Miss Frederica, Miss Petra, and the others will be even more grossed out.”

Otto: “I know that for some reason, a lot of women hate Zodda bugs. But, if they become aware of their contributions this time, maybe that will change their perception."

Though, Otto understood that there was very little hope of that.

It was not just the women's side; after Otto's battle in the Sanctuary, Garfiel had also seemed to develop some reluctance towards them. Subaru and Beatrice, too; once they were safely broken free and heard about the work the Zodda bugs had put in, what kind of face would they make—?

Otto: "At the very least, they should convey their gratitude to the head of the swarm directly—"

???: "Well, that will be a little difficult don't you think~?"

Otto: "…"

Just then, caressing Otto's ear, was a voice that did not belong to the insects, nor the small animals, nor Frufoo. Immediately after he gasped, Otto's body suddenly shot into the air.

Frufoo: "Laddie!!"

There was no dragon carriage, so as Otto's weight which had been straddling her back suddenly disappeared, Frufoo let out a desperate cry.

Frufoo's cries were in vain, as Otto was hanging from one of the trees on the mountain, kicking his legs as his hands and neck were constricted by something that felt thin.

Just barely, he had managed to get his fingers in front of his neck and escaped being asphyxiated—

Otto: "Ku, ugh…"

???: "You don't seem like a fighter, but it was amazing that you reacted immediately. Is this what they call always being prepared for battle? Onii-san, you would be a great shinobi, you know?"

As Otto was hanging, dangling and shaking, a slender shadow appeared from beneath his feet. A girl with crimson hair and a maid dress with wasou elements—all the features matched.

She was one of the people in Aldebaran’s group, an enemy that Otto must eliminate—

???: “See, didn’t I tell you, Al-sama? —There’s nobody, who can defeat you.”

—The crimson shinobi, Yae Tenzen, as her cheeks blushed red, looked up at the hanging Otto.

Chapter 39:
The Final Line

1

Yae: "—Al-sama, how about you quit yearning for the sun?"

When she had spoken those words, he did not know what sort of emotions or expectations she had harbored.

His own position was that of controlling her through fear, binding her with hatred, and utilizing the guarantee of her desires for revenge. From her perspective, it ought to have been satisfying to see him so cornered.

Only, the fact of the matter was that she had given many reactions that were not coherent with that line of thought.

In that case, just what were the true motivations hidden behind her contradictory attitude?

He had given up searching for that answer. —Only one thing, was certain.

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

The advice given by Yae Tenzen had removed a single shackle that had been present within Aldebaran.

Though not deliberately self-imposed, it had been an subconsciously placed shackle, inhibitor, hurdle—psychological chains that had slammed the brakes on the overpowering quality of Aldebaran's Authority.

Now that he was free from those chains, the options available to Aldebaran expanded to an infinite domain—.

Aldebaran: "Target, twelve o'clock to three o'clock. —Fire, Alter."

"Aldebaran": "Alright, Origin."

Responding to the order without hesitation, “Aldebaran”, who had been waiting in the background, stretched out its wings.

Alter, it had expressed no confusion in regards to that alias. By way of the Book of the Dead, the update in his intentions had already been communicated. The alias Origin was also an easily understandable, but trivial matter.

Without the room to put his opinions on that alias into words, a white light—the Dragon’s breath was unleashed.

Aldebaran: “…”

The Divine Dragon’s dragonhusk, the tremendous might of its breath demonstrated the maximum capabilities of its specs, and proved to be a fine article that even the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, had just barely managed to neutralize.

And on the current battlefield, with the Sword Saint absent—nay, on the area that could not even be described as a battlefield, the breath was unleashed, razing it to the ground; everything natural, everything man-made, and most notably, all life consisting of not just plants and animals, but humans too, was erased.

The range output of the Dragon’s fully-powered breath reached out to several kilometers, and anyone unfortunate enough to be engulfed by the light of ruin that arrived without giving any warning would cease to exist, lacking even the time to register pain.

—And now, passing the order to “Aldebaran”, Aldebaran had performed that deed.

Aldebaran: “…”

As commanded, twelve o’clock to three o’clock—scorching down the area signified by directions corresponding to the positions on a clock, it reduced all who stood in its path to naught.

In all likelihood, the lives lost could not have been counted in just the hundreds or the thousands, but numbered well in the realm of the tens of thousands.

???: “Ha-ha-haa~, well done~!”

Laying his eyes upon that which could only be described as tyranny, the act of brutally trampling all in one’s path, the suspended Roy Alphard snickered in amusement. Strung up with his arms bound, Roy placed the soles of his free feet together, thus cheering as he clapped not his hands, but his feet.

But, while nobody aside from Roy contributed to that noisy applause, none of the members present there appeared to criticize Aldebaran’s actions.

Present instead, was delight, understanding, subordinance, and fear —all were his henchmen, even the ones who had no say in the matter.

Thus, basking in their gazes, Aldebaran looked up to the sky.

Aldebaran: “…”

With the Dragon’s breath unleashed, not only was the land scorched, but signs of its influence appeared in the sky and surrounding atmosphere as well.

With the clouds torn asunder, and the rain and wind that were supposed to have occurred banished from the land, the traces of the Dragon had been deeply engraved; ravages of the Dragon’s rage, so to speak.

Naturally, there existed no living beings that did not fear the ire of the overwhelming existence that was the Dragon.

Because there existed no beings that could fight back against a rampaging Dragon mad with rage, it was an ironclad rule that when faced with the Dragon’s fury, all forms of life would keep their heads held low, attempting to conceal their presence, and waiting for the storm to pass.

—Therefore, the likes of birds and bugs promptly approaching the ravages of that rage, was far beyond unnatural.

Aldebaran: “Looks like a miss.”

Seeing a flock of birds assembling around the area scorched by the breath to ascertain the damages, Aldebaran muttered words that would fade away in the confines of his mouth.

The vast majority of animals were straightforward, and faithful to their instincts. If that was being distorted, and they were acting in a manner dishonest to their instincts, it was proof of some sort of unnatural interference.

That was to say, it was proof that the existence enacting that unnatural interference had survived.

Ascertaining that, Aldebaran would—

Aldebaran: “—Next.”

Muttering that, he unwrapped the poisonous drug package within his mouth, and gulped down the deadly bane.

And then—

× × ×

Aldebaran: “Target, three o’clock to six o’clock. —Fire, Alter.”

Subsequently, upon returning to his restart point, he oriented himself towards the next area, and instructed the Dragon to trample it down.

2

Aldebaran: “Target, six o’clock to nine o’clock. —Fire, Alter.”

Aldebaran: “Target, six o’clock to eight o’clock. Slight adjustment.”

Aldebaran: “Target, six o’clock to seven o’clock.”

Aldebaran: “Target, lock to seven o’clock. Adjust range output, breath to eighty percent.”

Aldebaran: “Seventy percent.”

Aldebaran: “Sixty percent.”

Aldebaran: “Sixty-five percent.”

Aldebaran: “Sixty-five point five percent.”

Aldebaran: “—Sixty-five point five percent, confirmed.”

3

—Seven-hundred and fourteen.

Having been told that his way of doing things was too clean by Yae, Aldebaran revised his thoughts.

Gaining awareness of the pride he had been blind to, he earnestly examined what was truly necessary in order to accomplish his objective, and arrived at an answer.

—The no-killing restriction.

From the moment Aldebaran had decided on the removal of Natsuki Subaru, and resolved himself to abide by his own purpose of creation, he had established that as the minimum obligation he would need to uphold.

From this world, where many had already been lost, with even she who had embodied the sun having disappeared, he would not cause anything more to be lost; so he had decided.

But, by overly adhering to that vow, Aldebaran had subconsciously placed a shackle on his own Authority.

In order to uphold his vow that he would not take the life of anyone, he had ended up imposing the same binding to the journey itself.

With Aldebaran’s Authority—with his Territory, the events that transpired in the repeating world would endlessly be made to have never happened until that Matrix was finally marked with a full-stop.

In that case, so long as the records balanced out to “no-killing” by the end, he would not need to worry about deaths during the process.

By keeping that conclusion outside of his conscious awareness, Aldebaran had unwittingly levied that shackle upon himself. In order to finally remove it, Aldebaran had continued to waste time in futility. —No, without Yae's words, he might have still been none the wiser.

Aldebaran: "I knew that the nii-san was trying to use his Divine Protection to whittle us down. The problem lies in his meticulousness and the unlimited hand of cards; it really seemed like there was no way to avert that, but…"

No longer bound by that shackle, Aldebaran surmounted that challenge with brute force.

Nothing about it was difficult. His pursuer was borrowing the eyes and agency of insects, fish, and other small animals in order to get a grasp on the movements of Aldebaran's group and enact various forms of sabotage upon them. But, considering what he conjectured to be the extent of effectiveness of his opponent's Divine Protection, even if his directions to the animals had an immediate response akin to telepathy, it was not as absolute as something like brainwashing.

Every single time, their pursuer would have needed to directly issue a command.

And in order to enact that, the commanding pursuer himself would have needed to be stalking Aldebaran's group while maintaining a reasonable distance. —Through the brute force of the Dragon's breath, he had deduced the position of their pursuer.

Aldebaran: "Narrowing down the area using clock positions, and measuring the distance with the depth of the breath. Given that we're doing something erratic, he can't afford to withhold his hand in order to get a grasp of what happened. Then, the act of playing his hand is proof that the nii-san made it out unharmed. But, what about when he doesn't play his hand?"

His hand—without the leeway to mobilize the troops he had allied with his Divine Protection, it would have served as proof that he had vanished from the world.

With that ascertained, Aldebaran had regressed his Territory, closed in on the direction of his pursuer's presence, measured the distance, and finally managed to identify the opponent's position with utmost precision. Of course, during that process, in the mountains, forest, and even some towns, a great number of lives had been sacrificed, but—absolutely all of that, had been made to have never happened.

By balancing the records in the end using his Territory, the casualties outside of Aldebaran numbered zero. —No, Aldebaran's Death was not counted, so the casualties numbered zero total.

Aldebaran: "Combined with when I was selecting the members for the Tower, one-thousand three-hundred and forty-seven… he really gave me one hell of a time."

There was nothing more exhausting than someone thought to have already been dealt with pulling the carpet out from under him yet again.

In that sense, it would have been no exaggeration to say that the pursuer—Otto Suwen, had given Aldebaran more trouble than either the Sword Saint or the Sword Demon had. If it had been his suggestion to send Emilia to Aldebaran and Wilhelm to Yae at the Royal Capital, then the damages he had caused this group amounted to far more than just Aldebaran's one-thousand three-hundred and forty-seven Deaths.

Of course, it was precisely because he had judged him to be such a large threat, that Aldebaran had spared no cards in his hand, thus succeeding in stringing up that formidable enemy.

Yae: "Al-sama, over here, over here~."

Waving her hand, Yae beckoned to Aldebaran and the rest from below. In accordance with Yae's call, "Aldebaran" perched down on the ground, and Aldebaran hopped off of its back.

Halfway up the mountainside, behind Yae, who had arrived first at the target point, was a green Internal Affairs Minister strung up to a tree and a ground dragon lying on its side with its limbs tied up.

Perhaps because the ground dragon had so fervently struggled against the steel thread bindings, its pale-blue dragonhide was stained with blood, and even now it continued to desperately writhe while panting in exasperation.

Aldebaran: “As expected, the loyalty of a ground dragon’s quite something. Thinking back, the current generation’s Patrasche was also like that.”

Yae: “The idea to make an example out of it flashed through my head, but it seems like he’s the type to just become even more stubborn instead of breaking, so I decided not to. How was Yae-chan’s judgement?”

Aldebaran: “I think you got the right answer. Besides, there’s no point in a warning if he can’t even see it.”

As Yae greeted him while tilting her head, Aldebaran scowled within his helmet. In his vision, present above the writhing ground dragon, the strung up Internal Affairs Minister—Otto, was cocooned in steel threads from his head down to the tips of his toes, which of course included his eyes and mouth; it was a state in which he could not do a single thing.

By nature, a single steel thread was so thin that one would need to strain their eyes to even ascertain its presence. Since they now appeared as an opaque tool of restraint, he could not imagine just how many had been wrapped around.

Yae: “Unable to get a glimpse of any light. Unable to even make a peep. It’d be possible to form communication with the outside through even just breathing, let alone whispers. And so, I’ve wrapped his entire body up with no gaps, save for a single airway connecting to his ankle. With this, he’ll be too busy focusing his breaths on clinging to survival to have any leeway to fill them with intent.”

Aldebaran: “…I know this isn’t about you getting revenge, and is instead just proof that you're taking precautions. After all, this nii-san would actually be capable of plotting something against us if we gave him any room to speak."

Yae: "I'd never operate on my personal grudges~. Yae-chan isn't that bad of a shinobi, y'know?"

Placing a finger to her cheek, Yae was in quite a good mood as she made a cutesy smile.

Given how much complete and utter hardship Otto, the harassment-specialist, had put them through until now, she would have likely had a substantial amount of resentment built up even if she said she bore no personal grudges. To begin with, the industry leaders of carrying out harassment and conducting wars of attrition against enemies were none other than the shinobi.

Aldebaran: "So now that you've finally dealt with that, I guess you'd be in a good mood, yeah?"

Yae: "Urghh~, you really are a gentleman who can't understand a woman's heart, Al-sama. It feels good to pin down an opponent who persistently made attacks of the nastiest kind in a sly, exhaustive, relentless manner, y'know?"

Aldebaran: "Isn't that pretty much exactly what I said?"

Yae: "But, the number one thing is that you're finally acting as the monster you truly are, Al-sama. Without a shred of concern for your trivial humanity, you've fully embraced the monster within."

Aldebaran: "…"

Yae: "For that reason, even something like having Vol-sama fling me at full strength was nothing so outlandish."

Aldebaran: "Seems like you've got your fair share of complaints with that strategy…"

As Yae was correcting Aldebaran's mistaken impression, she added that bit onto the end.

With the modification to how he utilized the Territory, he had located their pursuer's whereabouts. After completing that, they had needed the quickest means to reach their opponent before he could discern their intentions—that had resulted in having the airborne "Aldebaran" hurl Yae to the target position.

On top of being crude, it was a plan that had greatly imperiled Yae's life, but because the opponent was located in the mountains, which provided a great amount of buffering material, Yae, with her ability to create cushioning with her Steel Thread Technique, was deemed to be the most suitable candidate for it.

Yae: "Even though this duty was most suited to someone who won't die no matter how far they're hurled away, there was no way we could entrust it to Heinkel-sama in his current state."

Aldebaran: "An old man-shaped hole might have bored through the mountain while the old man remained alive and well, but you're right about entrusting any important duties to him with his condition right now."

Between Heinkel and Felt, a considerably deadly rift had formed. In response to that issue, he had worked out a countermeasure to stabilize it for the time being, but that had incurred "Aldebaran's" displeasure, and was nothing more than a temporary bandaid solution.

Because it was the type of problem that could resurge for whatever reason, Aldebaran and Yae had decided that it would be best to not touch on it for the time being.

Anyhow—

Aldebaran: "—Finally, it's checkmate."

With Otto's movements and resistance sealed, Aldebaran looked up at the opponent whose current state ought to be dubbed a silver chrysalis, and keenly felt the victory he had attained in this round of the game, which had gone on now for a long, long time.

However, the opponent Aldebaran was playing against was not just

Otto, it was a multifaceted bout against many challengers on a Kingdom-wide, even world-wide scale. Just because he had managed to make it through a single round successfully, did not mean he could continue to carry that around as a source of satisfaction.

Above all, in order to ensure that they would never make a comeback as a challenger, he would need to be thorough with their elimination.

Yae: “Though y’know, even if I cut away his eyes, ears, tongue, and limbs, I’d still technically be obeying your orders, Al-sama~.”

Aldebaran: “—Yae.”

Yae: “Fi~ne, Al-sama’s so sca~ry.”

To inflict wounds beyond any hope of recovery, thereby forcing withdrawal from the front lines with only their lives intact; doing so would be naught but a hollow pretense.

For Aldebaran, the no-killing restriction was not something so flexible that he could say he kept it so long as nobody died, and it would be troubling if it was. That sort of thing was tantamount to declaring that world peace could be achieved by cutting off the arms and legs of everyone in the world.

Hence, Aldebaran would not rob Otto Suwen of his eyes, tongue, arms, or legs. Instead, that which he would take from him—was his reason for fighting.

Aldebaran: “—Roy, I’m relaxing the curse mark’s functionality. It’s your time to take the stage.”

2

Aldebaran: “—Roy, I’m relaxing the curse mark’s functionality. It’s your time to take the stage.”

Every inch of his body constrained, Otto Suwen, with certitude, heard the pronounced voice of the opponent looking up towards him. —On merely one point, Aldebaran and the rest were mistaken about the efficacy of Otto's Divine Protection of the Soul of Language.

The Soul of Language, namely that which was called voice, was the reverberation of sound. Those reverberations would always touch Otto's body should he be within range of its reach, even if his ears were plugged. The Divine Protection of the Soul of Language did not translate sounds that entered the ear. It sensed and picked up the reverberations of intent that touched the entity named Otto.

Therefore—

Roy: "What a roundabout, strange coincidence, isn't it, Onii-san? Even though both Ley and Louis missed out on eating Onii-san despite desiring to in Pristella, in the end you've been set on the dining table before us like this, so it would seem-."

The voice of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony licking his lips, Roy Alphard, was also detected by Otto as a thing of certainty.

Otto: "…"

However, to much frustration from the depths of his heart, there was no longer anything Otto could do.

He had still been detecting the voices in his environs through the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, but with his mouth obstructed, his limbs restrained, and now obturated from even transmitting his will, Otto was helplessly powerless.

Frufoo: "What are you doing, to laddie… stop, please stop…!"

He heard the painful beseeching of an agonizing Frufoo immediately below his hanging feet.

For the moment, it seemed Aldebaran and his group did not intend to inflict any further harm onto Frufoo or much less, take her life. Hence, he wished for Frufoo to quietly wait for the storm drifting through to pass. That was his utmost desire at that moment.

The rest—

Otto: “—Hk.”

With a voice that fell short of being voiced, Otto’s heart consternated in trepidation for his comrades not present here.

Emilia and Ram, Petra and Meili, Rem, Clind, and Roswaal, he had heard that even people of the Felt Camp were cooperating. They would surely come up with an ingenious plan. Had it been possible, Otto wished to give a serious blow to the opponent with his own hands even on Garfiel’s behalf.

Moreover, for the captured duo of Subaru and Beatrice—.

Roy: “How sad, Onii-san. How painful, Onii-san. But-, we’ll treat those cries of agony alternating in joys and sorrows altogether and give them love-! After all, this world is gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-!”

In lento, he sensed the polluted, violated appetite of Gluttony drawing near him, creeping close to him. Without any means to resist, Otto accepted it; there was nothing he could do besides be chewed and digested.

Thus, for however long, Otto Suwen continued to pray. Continued to wish. Continued to dream.

For his own final stratagem, to fall into place—.

Roy: “—Well then, let’s eat-!”

3

Roy: “Thank you for the treat-.”

With the efficacy of the Authority of Gluttony invoked, the hanging Otto Suwen was devoured.

The deed was unaccompanied by any befitting effects generated, no shining visual effects; nothing so flashy or gaudy occurred. In only quiet and solemnity, the feast dished up onto the platter settled into the stomach of an ill-mannered diner. —What had transpired was merely this commonplace meal.

Yae: “Although I barely saw anything just now, it truly feels like foul play. The feeling of tension in the threads vanished in an instant, after all.”

Her voice laden with unhiding repugnance, Yae whispered whilst touching the rings that sent forth the steel threads.

What her words suggested, was that the opponent in bind—Otto Suwen, his resistance in order to escape from the constraints of the steel threads had disappeared.

That was evidence of the efficacy of Roy Alphard’s Eclipsing manifesting. “1”

Aldebaran: “On top of that, we still remember that nii-san. —As promised, you only ate the Memories; seems like you really held yourself back.”

Roy: “Ah-hahaa~, what’s with that, so short on gratitude and wonderment~?! Just so you know, separating just the Name or just the Memories and chewing it is pretty tough, you know? It’s trouble like sifting through the grilled ingredients in between a sandwich without opening up the bread, you see~.”

Aldebaran: “Don’t care. Don’t do it and you die, that’s the end of that. Separate and eat quickly and cleanly.”

Aldebaran snorted at Roy as he spoke of his Authority’s hardships in front of Otto Suwen, limp and motionless whilst entangled in the steel threads.

In reality, Aldebaran had no intention of hearing out Roy’s advocation of what a high deed it was. —Should he blunder, he would simply die; his soul scorched by the effects of the curse mark engraved on his body, bound by an Oath with Aldebaran.

Of course, it would be a problem for Aldebaran were Roy to die at this time, so he did intend to redo at every instance of failure and search for a way to ensure Roy did well.

Yae: “Al-sama~, as for that Sin Archbishop, isn’t he getting a bit cocky? If you’re going to restrain his actions with the effects of the curse mark, then rather than appeasing, persuading, and winning over his heart, wouldn't you have had ways to make him abide more suitably with lesser strings attached?"

Aldebaran: "Engraving a curse mark isn't as light a job as you're thinking it to be. To begin with, in curse marks bound by Oaths, there's a risk for the engraving party as well. The opportunity for engraving a curse mark is limited to exactly one time in someone's entire life. It's a trump card to make the kinds of people who won't ever listen seriously obey."

Yae whispered into Aldebaran's ear, who pressed her forehead whilst answering.

As the name suggested, the engraving of a curse mark, a kind of Curse Art, was a deed that had existed before magic and Curse Arts branched into separate sects; the nature of it was rather close to the origin of magic. Speaking further of the impression given by the curse mark based on its impression, the one who taught Aldebaran how to engrave a curse mark and the nature of them, would likely bestow the plight of a half-day long tedious lecture about it.

Roy: "For you to be so kind and use that valuable opportunity for us…! Very nice, so nice, quite nice, how very nice, really nice, isn't it nice, as we can believe it to be nice, gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-! By this point, that is love, isn't i~t…?"

Yae: "Wha?! Are you saying over this adorable, sexy, and devoted maid that is Yae-chan, you prefer the nasty-teethed Sin Archbishop?! Al-sama, you infidel!"

Aldebaran: "Right back at you, stop matching paces and linking up with the Sin Archbishop…"

Aldebaran winced at the combo of the blabbering Roy and the yabbering Yae.

On Yae's end, she likely had had no intention of getting along with Roy there, or ever getting along with him for that matter, but the way she utilized anything to sway Aldebaran's heart was truly befitting of a shinobi. On the other hand, Roy bore the attitude of being conversible and comprehending for a Sin Archbishop, and had almost bestowed him with that misunderstanding.

However, he mustn't misunderstand. For Aldebaran, both Yae and Roy were equivalent; used for his goals, and targets of fear for potentially backstabbing him depending on the situation.

And that was—

Aldebaran: "Roy, don't get too cocky. Start talking, what was the nii-san you just ate scheming? That's what I fed him to you for."

A chilly warning was issued by Aldebaran, who kept Roy contained well within attack range.

His restraints unfastened, Roy had gotten his fractured limbs restored by the healing magic of "Aldebaran", but neither had he gained trust in the slightest nor was he permitted freedom of action. However, in the direction the plan would now head towards for the endgame, it was not realistic to carry a tied up Roy along.

As an example, should he ever seek to rely on Roy's Authority as Gluttony like he just had, to keep him turned face-down as a card that could not be used immediately would be some excessively maladroit handling. Not in the slightest loosening his vigilance towards Roy, what was necessary were further arrangements for a policy to subdue Roy.

Fortunately, the curse mark was sufficiently fulfilling that duty.

Yae: "Though, it would be nice if he could tell us something useful~."

As she spoke, the vigilant Yae tugged on her slender finger, tightening the invisible steel thread to keep Roy in check.

It had been none other than Yae who had disapproved of utilizing Roy's Authority until the very end, and while she did welcome Aldebaran's declaration that he would unshackle himself based on her advice, she still fervently insisted that he free himself from the chains that were the "no-killing" restriction itself.

In reality, if Aldebaran did actually call off the "no-killing" restriction as she had insisted, and freely made use of the life-or-death power he had over all his opponents, his objective in and of itself would be accomplished rather quickly. To do that, all he would need to do is have "Aldebaran" shoot out its breath in all directions, never allowing any enemy to draw near.

However, Aldebaran refused to do that, and instead—he insisted on adding new options, that of permitting Death as part of the process, and making use of Roy Alphard's Authority.

As a matter of fact, this was the implementation of a forbidden technique: that of proactively utilizing a Sin Archbishop's Authority.

It was an act that could not be compared to Aldebaran exercising his own Authority, which occupied an unenumerated position, so to speak. Those inherited evils, the Authorities that had given rise to a great number of tragedies and sacrifices until now; to make use of them for one's own purposes, simply because it proved convenient.

Likely, outside of Aldebaran, that was a trespass that only a single other individual had perpetrated since the dawn of Witch Factors in this world.

Ultimately, that was the extent to which such conduct crossed the line.

If he could not attain results proportional to the misdeed he had committed, there would have been no meaning in his decision to go against the sun—.

Aldebaran: "So, let's hear it. We deliberately ruined our opponent's life. You're not gonna tell me that there's nothing…"

Roy: "Ahh~, hold on hold on. Wish you'd not rush us like that~. It seems you're misunderstanding, but even we can't all of a sudden comprehend absolutely everything about the one ju~st eaten. Things that have been known since the beginning, don't really spring to mind unless the scenario deems it necessary, you know? Same as that…"

Aldebaran: “—I ain’t gonna tell you twice.”

Roy: “…Yes yes, we’re saying we understand. Let’s see, let’s see, hu~h. This onii-san was more abound in life experience than expected, so even we are a bit surprised—”

After making a plethora of excuses, Roy concentrated on recalling the Memories of the freshly eaten Otto. Roy was probably commenting on a mix of the many ups and downs in the life of Otto, who possessed the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, and the extraordinary quantity of voices he had come to hear.

However, there was a sudden pause in Roy’s tasteless words, incurring Aldebaran’s suspicion.

Unmistakably, that was proof that he had struck a Memory that caught his attention—

Aldebaran: “What is it, what’d you find?”

Roy: “Haha-, it seems we were more careful than expected. —There is a foolproof for the scenario in which he was compromised.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Foolproof—a safety measure to defend against any foolish mistakes.

As soon as Roy’s lips formed those words, a terrible chill ran down Aldebaran’s spine.

Not a countermeasure for an oncoming assault, but a countermeasure for after he was compromised.

If Otto Suwen had prepared such a thing, then it would be happening at any moment now.

Aldebaran: “Yae! We need to hurry up and—”

A withdrawal from the premises, or a regression of the situation via suicide.

As two possible options came to his mind, Aldebaran mobilized before deciding on his counterplay. In a sense, it was successful, and in another sense, it had led to failure.

That was—

???: “—It is a pleasure to meet you, Aldebaran-sama.”

The sweet voice of a girl struck Aldebaran’s earlobes as if it were a surprise attack.

The interloper had appeared in quite literally the blink of an eye, and by making an entrance without having given any preface, his instincts did not even have the time to sound the alarm bells.

That blue-haired girl, having altered her appearance and garment since her time in the Vollachian Empire, was not something he could bear the sight of. —That was something he only realized right after he had caught sight of her waving the skirt of her maid outfit.

That instant, his mind was rapidly threatened by the name, existence, and nature of the maid girl.

Aldebaran: "…"

With her Name and Memories having been eaten by the Authority of Gluttony, the girl's name had been erased from the register of Od Lagna, where the names of all life were engraved; with that having been regurgitated due to the malicious intentions of Bizarre Eating, that which Aldebaran had disregarded as something that would manifest no meaningful damages, now ruptured through his mind.

Forcibly overwhelmed by an impact that compelled him to recall her existence, Aldebaran, who was supposed to have shouldered a fate that would not permit his thoughts to ever come to a halt, had said thoughts left behind in the dust—

Yae: "—Al-sama!!"

As Yae promptly raised her voice, she reached her slender arm out towards Aldebaran. Whilst glimpsing those white fingers in the corner of his vision, Aldebaran found himself unable to move.

And in that immobile state, during the single second for which he had been dispossessed of his thoughts, the situation progressed.

—That instant, Aldebaran's body was detached from the space it had occupied up until a moment prior, and thrown out into the sky, basking in a ferocious wind.

Aldebaran: "…"

The sun for which he had ceased yearning cast its glaring radiance, searing Aldebaran's black eyes as he fluttered through the air. —This was now do-or-die for the Aldebaran Party; a critical juncture that had commenced without any forewarning.

—Thus, on the struggle for the Grand Mogolade Geyser, on the battle to decide the fate of the world here to come, the curtains now rose.

Chapter 40:
Flash Remnade

1

—Having fallen victim to Roy Alphard of Gluttony, Otto Suwen was forcefully removed from the battlefield.

As one blessed with the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, the man who had accumulated its highest level of mastery in history had done exactly as he had proclaimed; humiliating Aldebaran's group, the enemies of the world, and inflicting great suffering upon them.

That was why the conclusion of his lonesome battle was brought about by a ruthless imprisonment that left no opening for counterattacks, leaving him completely helpless.

His words were sealed, his actions were sealed, his tricks were sealed, his wits were sealed; every weapon in his arsenal was sealed away, and finally, even the Memories that defined who he was were stolen away, thus was how Otto Suwen was utterly defeated.

When Aldebaran's group resolved to seal him away with such overwhelming force that gave no time to plan a countermeasure, even Otto found himself powerless, unable to resist.

Because it was impossible to predict exactly when and where his opponents would launch a counterattack, he was unable to construct a trap zone using his signature Divine Protection.

And so, there was absolutely nothing Otto Suwen could have done upon being attacked—his last resort merely being a "desperate struggle" in the event of an assault.

—He had simply left instructions for the Zodda bugs to fly off en masse so that his location would have been revealed in the event he was defeated.

???: “Al knew Rem before they met in the Empire… before Gluttony even ate her Memories. There’s no doubt about it.”

That was when the Imaginary Subaru voiced his opinion, while they were in the midst of planning a surprise attack.

With his arms and legs crossed as he sat in midair, Subaru’s stern face caused Petra to recall the events inside Subaru’s memories, in the Royal Capital where Al and Rem had crossed paths.

That was when Subaru made a major blunder at the castle and was desperately trying to make up for it.

Although Petra did feel that Subaru’s reckless behavior back then was quite bad, she did not feel completely disillusioned towards him. However, Subaru himself remembered it as an utterly humiliating experience that made him squirm just thinking about it. In fact, everyone who was there must have looked down on Subaru’s reckless behavior, so the only person who would not feel disillusioned by his actions, if Petra were excluded, would be Rem, who had been blindly devoted to him as far back as then.

Be that as it may, Subaru, unable to escape the cycle of negative emotions, had visited Priscilla’s mansion in search of a way to save Emilia, who was being attacked by the Witch Cult.

There, Subaru received an incredibly harsh and cold response from Priscilla, but the crucial connection between Al and Rem was revealed right there as he was being expelled from the mansion.

He did not know the specific reason, however—

“Subaru”: “Al mistakenly called Rem by Ram’s name and was extremely shocked by that fact. When I asked Rem about it, she said she had never met him before.”

Petra: “So Al-san knew about the two of them beforehand? Perhaps he researched the rival camps for the Royal Selection… or something like that?”

“Subaru”: “So you’re saying Al could have been in charge of the Priscilla Camp’s countermeasures against the other Royal Selection camps? I don’t think that’s impossible, but it doesn’t really matter. The important thing is that Al knew Rem. In other words—”

Petra: “Just like with all of us, when Al-san sees Rem-neesama, his Memories should get all mixed up.”

“Subaru”: “Exactly. —I would call it a Flash Remnade.”“

With a silent snap of his fingers, Subaru winked, and Petra gave him a thumbs up.

To be honest, Petra was reluctant to treat Rem like a flash grenade, but she and the others had already confirmed that there was no way to counteract the effects of Memories returning.

As seen with Petra and the Subaru within her, or Ram, the deeper the relationship and attachment, the greater the impact, but even the slightest opening was still an opening.

All that was left was to take advantage of that opening—

Petra: “Let’s show Al-san. —Just how angry we are.”

3

—Let us here give an explanation for the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard.

His nature bearing the disposition of Bizarre Eating, wielding the birther of myriads of tragedies, the Authority of Gluttony, Roy had completely incapacitated Otto Suwen, tormentor of the Aldebaran Party. His Eclipsing had not only incapacitated Otto, but chewed and digested his twenty-two-year-old walk of life, assimilating his joys, his angers, his sorrows, the culmination of all that which was his, into a heterogeneous blend, which was eaten up in one breath from atop the platter.

Ringing his throat, upon finishing the incorporeal meal, Roy tasted the life of Otto Suwen, commanding a greater precision and degree of freshness than a deep read of a Book of the Dead, tasting an adequate breadth of alternating joys and sorrows for it, having overcome so-so trials and tribulations, with somewhat rich seasoning and flavor, he bestowed to it an evaluation of two stars.

By evaluating what was eaten this way, it felt as though he had fallen heir to the spirit of Gourmet belonging to his sibling who had already lost his life, Ley Batenkaitos, but setting that aside, to eat one's Memories meant it was possible to know that being's way of thinking and philosophy, and to its extreme, while in the midst of battle, even learn the orders of things that were planned, what had been schemed and plotted.

Therefore, originally, despite the aftertaste of triumph and sense of accomplishments felt after Otto's defeat, sensing the ambush planned for the subsequent instant should have been a simple and spontaneous task to accomplish.

However, it did not transpire so. —Because Otto had not shared plans with his comrades about what tangible actions they would take after he had been incapacitated.

Merely, Otto Suwen had solemnly believed.

Should he just extend a signal for the moment he would comprehensibly be incapacitated, his comrades would not let it go to waste.

Because he, devoid of plans or anything such, bet everything on just powerful bonds—

???: "—It is a pleasure to meet you, Aldebaran-sama."

Unmistakably, it had happened in the blink of an eye.

A closing, and opening of the eyes. At the presence of the blue-haired girl who had interloped in that instant, while a matter of course for Aldebaran, neither Yae, nor Roy, nor even "Aldebaran" could react.

An outsider who was not supposed to be there, had suddenly appeared without warning.

That alone was enough to pry an instant from veteran soldiers, but in this scene, the one onto which that had been most lethal, was Aldebaran, for whom it did not end with a mere instant.

Aldebaran: “…”

Yae naturally had no acquaintance with her, Roy was exempt due to it being his own Authority, and “Aldebaran”, while sharing in his Memories, possessed a fundamentally different soul; thus it was a phenomenon that did not occur for any of them.

Stimulating the black-stained Memories etched into his soul, alongside the sensation of something that had been removed being forced back into his brain, Aldebaran’s consciousness went white.

Regardless of who had defined it as such, it was a flash grenade of Memories.

???: “—Al-sama!”

A shrill, frantic voice called to him, and hands that reached out from beyond his white-stained vision grabbed hold of him. However, that did not save Aldebaran from his predicament.

Aldebaran: “…”

The legs that ought to have been firmly planted on the ground hurtled through the air, and as Aldebaran basked in a ferocious wind, he lost his sense of up, down, left, and right, and realized his body had begun revolving.

Unable to control his body, still lording overhead was the blue sky wherein shone the glaring sun—as that radiance scorched his black eyes, Aldebaran realized something.

—Through some means, he had been teleported straight into the sky, thrown outside of his Territory.

Aldebaran: “—Hk! Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

Reestablishing the Territory that had been forcibly severed, Aldebaran grit his teeth.

Forced to go along with the opponent's plans, he had been driven to update his Matrix. —No longer could he return to before the surprise attack a moment prior.

But, if he lagged behind in his decision to update it, Aldebaran would have been defeated with nothing he could do in return.

Aldebaran's Authority was invincible, but that was entirely within the set bounds of his established Territory. Were he to perish outside of those bounds, he would be the same as the many lives who were not afforded any second chances.

Aldebaran: "…"

Digesting the circumstances he had been placed in, Aldebaran's consciousness concentrated on reality.

Given that he had been forced to update his Matrix, to Aldebaran, everything from here on out would be both a treasure and a calamity, a tailwind and a headwind, a virtue and an evil.

Aldebaran: "Sky…!!"

The roaring hum of the wind, the violent sense of suspension that seemed to strike his body; the fact that he was falling from such a high altitude despite having no memory of being sent up there, meant that the due procedures had been omitted.

For a moment, what flashed through Aldebaran's mind was the Authority of the strongest Witch, but that could not be it. —If the opponent had truly been that Witch, the phenomenon that occurred would have differed. He would not have been thrown out into open air like this, and above all, Aldebaran would have been killed a hundred times over before he could even blink.

Hence, he could eliminate that possibility from the multitude of worst-case scenarios.

As he narrowed down the possibilities, he gathered his surrounding situation in parallel. At present, if there were any irregularities nearby Aldebaran as he was being jostled by the wind, that would be—

???: “—Al-sama.”

Tightly grabbing onto Aldebaran’s single arm and clinging on, was Yae.

Just before he had been thrown out into the sky, she had pounced on Aldebaran just as he had frozen up from having eaten the flashbang of Memories, and thus had been sent up from the forest to the sky along with him.

Whether he ought to count that as a blessing or a curse, Aldebaran mentally separated the things he could and could not do now that Yae was here, and decided on the first action to take.

That was—

Yae: “I’ll steady our posture! Al-sama, don’t part from me—”

Aldebaran: “Obugh.”

Simultaneous to Yae embracing him and attempting to form some sort of countermeasure against falling, Aldebaran unwrapped the drug package within his mouth, and gulped down the poison.

He could tell that Yae had widened her crimson eyes, and was looking at him with an expression of surprise. But, given that he had already ended up taking a lethal dose, there was no helping it.

Yae: “I’ll ask later.”

Blood frothed at the corners of his mouth, and tasting rusted iron as that mercilessly defiled the inside of his helmet, Aldebaran’s consciousness was crushed by the wind—

× × ×

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

It was something he had known would happen, but reality seemed to follow up by greeting him with the howling wind.

When he opened his shut eyelids, ever present there was the odious radiance of the sun—as it glared down at him intently, Aldebaran grasped that he was surrounded by several hundreds of meters of sky.

Aldebaran: “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

Warping, instantaneous travel, teleport. —No matter how one chose to express it, the result was the same; in the sense of manipulating physical space, that which fell in the realm of Yin Magic was a hyper spell that necessitated all sorts of conditions be met.

If one carefully constructed the technique and erected a field wherein it was etched, it would be possible to create a limited warp connected by two doors through that field. Or probably even without advanced preparations, if a caster could simply visualize the coordinates of a destination, and constructed the technique to send their target there with the preparedness to fully expend their own Gate, they might have been able to issue just a one-way ticket.

× × ×

Ultimately, the phenomenon that had sent Aldebaran and Yae into the sky was at an impossible level of difficulty even if technically achievable through magic, which meant that some other form of foul play was involved.

Not once had he gotten word of a Divine Protection that could physically interfere with others to such an extent.

Of course, like in the case of Reinhard, Divine Protections thought to be trivial could be implemented in an unusual way, and there were also those who would end up tailoring them into dreadful weapons of war, but—

Aldebaran: “—This is different. But, if it’s an Authority…”

As far as Aldebaran knew, the existing Authorities of Wrath, Gluttony, and Lust belonged to the Sin Archbishops, while Sloth and Greed were both in the possession of Natsuki Subaru.

Excluding Aldebaran’s Authority, which ought to be classified as all manners of unenumerated, supernumerary, and appropriated, the leftover possibilities were Pride, as well as Vanagloria and Tristitia. —The last two were supposed to be unusable by anyone, so the only candidate remaining was Pride.

× × ×

Aldebaran: “Pride has come? Sprung up? Gotten involved? —Nah, that ain’t what matters here.”

Be it someone Aldebaran knew who had been chosen as Pride, or be it someone he did not know who had gotten involved as Pride, that which he ought to focus on was the possibility that he had made an enemy of an Authority holder.

Save for Natsuki Subaru and Reinhard, the only variables that could pose a threat to Aldebaran were unmistakably those who held Authorities—none other than those destroyers of concepts, permitted to bend the very rules of the world, trampling upon them as they pleased.

× × ×

Aldebaran: “—Alright, settled down.”

Are you finally done panicking after being forced to go along with your enemy’s plans? Feeling as if he heard those words voiced by the roaring wind, Aldebaran gave his reply.

In order to be able to do so, Aldebaran had sorted out the situation in his head.

Of course, the actual circumstances of being thrown out into the sky, the regret he had about Yae having come along with him, and the sensation of his consciousness being whited-out by the resurgence of Memories, in reality, none of that had changed.

But, that was a cheap price to pay if he did not die for real. Such was Aldebaran’s life.

In exchange for that dirt-cheap price, he could easily afford to let his head, body, and mind take a breather.

???: “—Al-sama.”

Yae grabbed onto Aldebaran’s single arm, and seeing her tied-up hair violently fluttering like a dog’s tail in good spirits, Aldebaran advanced his thoughts onto the next phase.

With both himself and Yae alive, they would need to land on the ground.

For that purpose—

Yae: “I’ll steady our posture! Al-sama, don’t part from me—”

Aldebaran: “Nah, that’s my line.”

As Yae enthusiastically tried to initiate her own measures after being thrown high into the sky, Aldebaran hindered her by forcibly pulling her into his own chest. Because he had used his right arm to do so, he rapidly forged the usual stone prosthetic arm, and rose it aloft—that instant, a vehement impact struck his prosthetic arm from above, adding speed to their free fall.

Heavily reverberating across the artificial arm, was a blow from a dreadful and fiendish lump of iron. Mixing in with the tremendous voice of the wind, it was a threat present at the end of the clangoring chains, dancing like a writhing snake.

Contrary to its name, it was a spiked iron ball with a form molded to send people into an eternal sleep—

???: “—Prepare yourselves!”

On the opposite side of the iron ball that had smashed into him, descending was a blue-haired girl who appeared to carry the sun on her back. Having greatly diminished Aldebaran’s advantage, the opponent who had shot up the signal for the commencement of the battle—Rem bellowed.

Slowly protruding from her forehead was a single horn. It was a sign that she was of the Oni Clan, proof that she was a member of the race created to decisively purge this world of all traces of the Witch.

But even more than that, now that he had recalled her existence, it took on a different significance to Aldebaran.

That was—

Aldebaran: “To begin with, you’re not even supposed to be alive, Lil’ Miss Rem!!”

4

Leaping into the air with hardened resolve, the hem of her maid uniform fluttering behind her, Rem gripped the handle of the Morningstar tightly in her hand as she glared down at Al and his maid below.

—Up until this point, the surprise attack had gone perfectly according to plan.

By exposing Al to the sight of Rem, they robbed him of his ability to make decisions, rendering him frozen, and in that instant they utilized Compression in order to abduct him. This not only separated Al from his allies, but also trapped him in a position where he was prevented from moving right away—allowing for him to be successfully dragged out into the sky, a matter on which everyone had readily agreed.

When it came to the crucial timing of the aforementioned attack, Otto, who had been pursuing the Al Troupe while engaging them in guerilla warfare, had prepared a message to be delivered in the event that he was defeated; a precaution that proved invaluable.

That signal marked the defeat of the formidable Otto at the hands of the Al Troupe, and thus was tantamount to the moment in which their tension would ease, even if only slightly.

Rem: “Priscilla-san was one who showed me utmost kindness. As someone who cared deeply for that Priscilla-san, I cannot stand by and overlook Al-san’s outrageous actions any longer.”

When objections had been raised about Rem going to confront Al directly, Rem had chosen those words in order to express her own wishes.

Ultimately, while that was merely a matter of the mindset that formed the foundation of her resolve, it was also undoubtedly a display of Rem's true feelings, and the core of her unwavering motivation in facing this battle.

Of course, right beside that core was the presence of Subaru, who had been captured by Al. Rather, he might have actually been the core. —No, Priscilla-san was also the core after all, so there would just need to be two cores. She would have to apologize to Beatrice-sama later.

In any case, that determination of hers settled the matter of Rem's participation in the unit that would confront Al head-on.

Strategically speaking, there was no particular vision of Rem being particularly useful on any other battlefronts, but even aside from the initial disruption of Memories, there was more than enough of a possibility for Rem to be super effective against Al.

The specifics of that possibility were precisely—

Aldebaran: "To begin with, you're not even supposed to be alive, Lil' Miss Rem!!"

The moment the iron ball smashed down from the high skies, Al blocked the firm impact with a prosthetic arm forged of rock, shouting angrily as he caught sight of Rem.

Despite being buffeted by the roaring winds, Rem heard those words with clarity, thus convincing her of that which Petra had told her about the possible relationship between Rem and Al that she was not aware of.

Rem: "Although, Rem can't remember any such interactions between Al-san and her incompetent self…"

She had also checked with Ram, but it seemed that her only contact with Al was limited to one time in the Royal Capital before the Royal Selection officially began. It seemed they had not had a conversation memorable enough to leave an impression, and even what they had talked about remained ambiguous.

Likely, the point of contact between the sisters and Al was one-sided, perceived only by the other party.

But—

Rem: “That manner of speaking is truly hurtful! When we were attacked by Arakiya-san in Guaral, the ones who had saved us were you, Al-san, and—”

Pausing there, however, Rem firmly swallowed all her hesitations, and,

Rem: “—Priscilla-san, is that not right?!”

Deliberately bringing up Priscilla’s name, Rem had attempted to agitate Al.

For resorting to the worst, most underhanded tactics she could think of, Rem despised herself. However, thinking it necessary in order to put a stop to Al’s outrageous behavior, she steeled her body and heart as an Oni and fixed her stern gaze on him.

Aldebaran: “…”

In response to Rem’s provocation, Al did not raise his voice, instead choosing to maintain silence.

Within his jet-black iron helmet, Al’s expression remained hidden behind his visor, the light dwelling in his eyes was unknown. Even the amount of pain Rem’s words just now had inflicted upon him, everything remained unknown to her.

Rem: “—Here it comes!”

However, Rem did not wait for Al’s reaction, resuming her onslaught without granting him any time to rest.

Rem had already set her priorities. From the beginning, when compared to Ram, who displayed talent and genius a cut above the rest of all other beings in this world, Rem was clumsy, mediocre, and inferior in every way.

If Rem desired something beyond the reach of the average person, then she would just have to carefully select the best possible means for that end.

For the time being, Rem excelled at ignoring lower priorities in order to focus on her higher ones.

Rem: “Huma!”

Alongside the incantation, Mana interfered with the world, invoking the unreal phenomenon known as magic.

Unlike Emilia’s Huma, which manipulated heat and condensed moisture in the atmosphere to create ice, Rem specialized in the type of Huma that created water from nothing using magic, outputting that water as materialized ice from the outset.

Neither Huma was necessarily superior to the other, but the Emilia-type Huma, which utilized the moisture in the air, required less Mana and possessed the advantage of remaining in place after serving its purpose, allowing for it to be reused. On the other hand, the Rem-type Huma required more Mana because it created water from nothing, and after being used, it would return to Mana and leave no trace.

Based on that explanation alone, the Emilia-type Huma might seem to have the overwhelming superiority. However, the Rem-type Huma had its own powerful advantages.

This was due to the fact that it could create ice at any desired location and in any desired shape, regardless of the amount of moisture in the air or the quality of the water—

Rem: “—HAAAHHHH!!”

Kicking off the ice platform she had created in midair, Rem ferociously lunged toward Al and his companion.

By manifesting a Huma that was anchored in place, Rem created an impromptu platform capable of withstanding even her full-powered kicks. The power of the Morningstar, unleashed after gaining a momentary boost from the platform, was beyond comparison to that which only utilized the force generated by gyrating her body.

The iron ball spun violently as it hurtled toward Al, sparing no quarter.

Capable of easily crushing a human body upon direct impact, it was as if it was responding to the affection Subaru had shown by polishing it every day, closing in toward Al from Rem's hand with delight, closer, and closer, and closer—

???: "As if I'd let you."

At the moment of impact, the loving iron ball was halted by countless threads.

Upon closer inspection, that was the work of the crimson shinobi held in Al's arm, twisting her body to glare at Rem—she was a thread user without peer, subservient to Al.

The shinobi, embraced from behind by Al, weaved the threads she had extended from both hands into a net to softly catch the iron ball like a cushion.

Her skills were impressive, but that was not what caught Rem's attention.

In the first place, the plan behind this surprise attack was to completely isolate Al from his allies by throwing him out into the sky. For her to have intervened there, something was wrong with her. —No, it was mistaken to think that there was something wrong with her. Rem was well aware of why she had been able to do it.

Despite everyone else having been completely stunned by Rem's sudden appearance, the shinobi retained enough leeway for herself to reach her hands out, and channel it into practical action.

As for what had allowed her to do so—

Rem: "—That would be, love!"

Aldebaran: "Wrong!!"

Shinobi: “You’re wrong!!”

In response to Rem’s confident outcry, Al and the shinobi shouted back almost simultaneously.

Taking advantage of that opening, Rem forcefully pulled back the Morningstar that was about to be taken from her and retrieved the iron ball from the shinobi, who was reluctant to lose her balance. In preparation for her next attack, Rem created multiple new footholds, shot herself off them, and rapidly descended in pursuit of the two.

However—

Shinobi: “It’s scary when someone catches up to you, but when stretched too far, even a lead can become a shortcoming, y’know?”

As composure returned to the previously tense expression of the shinobi, she flashed a sweet smile as she shot out a thread. And the target of that thread, had been the foothold of ice that Rem had created midair.

Having been suddenly thrown out into the sky, Al and his shinobi had had no choice but to enter a freefall, but by anchoring onto the footholds created by Rem, they would be able to stabilize themselves.

From what she had heard, the shinobi’s skills far exceeded Rem’s own. If the opponent were able to compensate for the disadvantage she had been given, the gap in strength that ought to have been somewhat closed would be reopened in no time.

Rem: “Indeed, of this I am aware. I am full of shortcomings, after all.”

That was why Rem would not allow her opponents to compensate for their disadvantages.

Shinobi: “—Hk!”

Hearing Rem’s reply—no, feeling the sensation she had just grasped vanishing like mist, the shinobi’s expression once again lost its

composure.

The foothold of ice she had attempted to use as an anchor point vanished as if it were a dream or an illusion. Of course, neither was it a dream, nor an illusion. It was Mana. Rem had simply returned it to being Mana at will.

Despite both being Huma, this was the main difference between the Emilia-type, which once frozen, stayed frozen, and the Rem-type, which froze only when desired and was easy to tidy up.

Rem: “Simply put, Rem’s version is more offensive.”

Right before Rem’s eyes, the shinobi lost the target upon which she was exerting strength, thus breaking her stance.

Holding onto the shinobi, Al was caught up in that as well, almost losing his balance, but he managed to reinforce the exterior of his cracked prosthetic arm, consecutively blocking a flurry of iron ball attacks unleashed by Rem, two, three times.

Thereupon—

???: “—Hiyah!!”

—Rising obliquely upwards from below, Emilia’s long leg mercilessly slammed into Al’s defenseless back with toes armored in a boot of ice.

5

—The division of the Aldebaran Troupe.

Against a group rebelling against the world to an extent that rivalled the Witch Cult, even surpassing it in terms of instantaneous velocity, that was a prerequisite that they absolutely could not afford to mess up.

The surprise tactic performed in order to meet that condition, had gone about ninety percent as planned. The ten percent miscalculation—how the presence of the shinobi who had chosen to go along with them would come into play, was something that wounded the plan as an uncertain variable, but overly worrying about it would just be all the more harmful.

Each of them would fulfill their own part to the utmost.

After all, without that sort of faith and resolve, the stratagem to stop the Aldebaran Troupe would not bear any fruit.

???: “—Tru~ly, everyone’s got the sort of look in their eyes that one can’t help but tremble, you kno~w.”

Pronouncing so whilst dangling his languidly hanging arms to and fro, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, exhibited a sadistic smile as he surveyed his surroundings.

In his environs were shadows that appeared in succession as though substituting Aldebaran and the others immediately after they were hurled—astood there were warriors assembled to defeat the Aldebaran Troupe.

All of them cast gazes that stood their ground against the Sin Archbishop, to which Roy unwittingly licked his lips.

Roy: “How nice, so nice, perhaps it is nice. But you know, to gather in such large numbers, the combat power required for taking care of us might get rounded up altogether in one fell swoop, isn’t it?”

???: “—Hah. Likewise for you, how about showing some lovableness by cowering in fright a bit more? That is, if you do not wish to meet death the same way as your sibling, who perished at the Tower of sand.”

???: “On top of tha~t, do you people even have Witchbeast-chans in your strike zone, hmm~? If not the~n… you can think of me, as you people’s natural enemy~.”

Amidst the warriors, the shadow clutching her own elbows and the shadow combing down her three-strand braid responded so. Even in the face of their unmistakable hostility, Roy was unable to conceal a smile trembling in premonition of a banquet.

???: “Th-this isn’t a joke… can’t you all see the Divine Dragon here?! You know how much damage it did to the Royal Capital… there's no chance that you can win this!"

Contrary to the elated Roy, Heinkel's voice trembled with a face deathly pale.

As per his words, he stood right by the feet of the Divine Dragon while relying on its intimidation, and in response to the hostility that stared him down, he fervently raised his voice with a loathsome expression.

That figure ought to have been called "a man who borrowed the might of Dragons", but Heinkel's point was in fact not mistaken. The Divine Dragon possessed absolute power; if one were to stand in its way without a plan, what awaited them was a curtain's close of merciless annihilation.

???: "Tho', that's only if ya ain't got a plan."

Heinkel: "—Hk, the old giant."

???: "This old giant's seen the Demi-Human War. Never again will I give mercy ta those barin' their fangs against me. —I'll be havin' ya return Felt."

Before Heinkel as his breathing choked up and he averted his gaze, the giant stroked his bald head and declared such. At the giant's proclamation, Heinkel's cheeks tensed up, but, there was another figure that began to stir.

And that, was none other than the Dragon he had singled out earlier.

Dragon: "I dunno if I should be saying this, but it makes me damn nervous that we've been pushed to this extent. I'm keenly feeling what it means to make an enemy of the world."

Despite being a Dragon of such dignified appearance, it placed its hand on its head in a strangely human-like gesture.

While giving off a sense of presence such that the majority of those who lived in the Dragon Kingdom would prostrate themselves just by laying eyes upon it, the way it conducted itself made it seem like an entirely different thing.

At the very least, in the eyes of those who knew the real Divine Dragon, the sense of something being amiss was palpable.

???: “But then again, unlike the dignitaries of the Kingdom, I’m in no such panic about the image of the Divine Dragon crumbling, or of its brand value pluuumetting~. —Onlyyy~, I wonder about the one next to me? Wouldn’t you have quite a few reservaaations~?”

???: “No, Master, you needn’t worry. Groundless fear. It would be laughable for me to pile words onto a past that I have already shed. Feeble.”

Looking down on those who showed no fear before the dragonhusk that did not align with its own mind or stature, “Aldebaran” narrowed its golden eyes.

Among those standing in their way, attention began to converge on a small silhouette slowly stepping forward. Naturally, Roy and Heinkel also shifted their attention to that silhouette.

It was unclear how that individual had come to stand in that position, but strangely enough, they understood without the need for words to tell them. —That girl represented the will of everyone present.

At the center of everyone’s attention, the girl—Petra Leyte thrust her finger up towards the heavens, and spoke.

Petra: “—It’s all-out war. Be dolls and let yourselves get thoroughly defeated, alright?”

So she declared.

Chapter 41:
Apprise the Usurper

1

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never imbibe.

2

Petra: "—It's all-out war. Be dolls and let yourselves get thoroughly defeated, alright?"

Indeed, the moment Petra issued her declaration in the mountains from which Al had disappeared, palpable tension immediately began to swell, and then burst asunder.

That instant, the residual members of the Al Troupe who had been on guard from the sudden appearance of Petra and the rest—the Divine Dragon Volcanica, Roy Alphard of Gluttony, and Heinkel, all sprang into motion.

However, there existed not a shred of coordination between the three, with each of them acting independently.

Petra: "…"

Upon witnessing them all begin to move, Petra's first stratagem—nay, the first stratagem had been the Flash Remnade, prying away Aldebaran's consciousness using the presence of Rem, so this stratagem would serve as the second arrow.

It was a stratagem to cause the Al Troupe, composed of individuals who were each formidable opponents, to break apart into a disorderly crowd.

Petra: "Taking Al-san out of the picture right at the onset, and then utterly disorienting the remaining combatants. With that—"

???: "With a "ready, go!", everyone will start acting on their own!"

As the Imaginary Subaru's voice completed Petra's sentence, the Dragon, the Sin Archbishop, and Heinkel all conformed to their own individual senses of judgment.

In order to disarray their options as much as possible, they mobilized the bulk of their forces right at the outset.

Of course, this stratagem also came with a large risk that the Divine Dragon would dispose of all of them in one fell swoop, but—

Petra: "—Likely, the method Al-san used to enlist the Divine Dragon, was the same one used for me."

Such was Petra's conjecture on the betrayal of the highly esteemed Divine Dragon Volcanica.

Regarding the state of the Volcanica perched at the top of the Watchtower, from what Petra had heard from Emilia, she understood that the Dragon had grown senile after many long years. —The method of forcibly cramming "something" into the void of that consciousness, was something Petra understood better than anyone from her own experience.

Just as Petra housed Natsuki Subaru in part of her consciousness upon reading the Book of the Dead, there was a high chance that Volcanica now housed an existence cooperative to Al. And, that existence shared quite firmly in Al's objective, deciding to make an enemy of the world alongside him.

There did Petra stake her gamble. —On a vow of "no-killing", shared between Al and Volcanica.

Volcanica: "—Haahraan!!"

At the outset, the one to execute the first strike was the Divine Dragon, maneuvering its enormous body with agility.

The Dragon's mighty maw gaped wide open, and it unleashed a breath that shone with a light of destruction, reducing all to naught —such was not the case; instead, unleashed was a mist of fresh water manifested from the Dragon's vast Mana. Starting with Petra, it engulfed the Royal Selection Combined Forces, the "Aldebusters", in one fell swoop, moistening all of their bodies.

For a moment, confusion stirred due to uncertainty of the Divine Dragon's aim, but those doubts were quickly dispelled.

Petra: "…"

The sound of the atmosphere creaking struck upon their eardrums, and they were hindered from readying themselves immediately. Upon looking, Petra and the rest glimpsed that their moistened bodies had begun to glitter with frost, and that they were about to be flash-frozen—

???: "—Ul Goa."

Within an instant, the forest, upon which a white fog was adrift, was overturned by a blazing red conflagration.

The freezing via dense mist that the Divine Dragon had aimed for was suppressed by the power of a swelling flame that seemed to enshroud the entirety of the visible surroundings, instantly thawing the glaciation and even drying the moistened bodies in the blink of an eye.

The one who accomplished that feat stood at the center of the formation with a finger raised, having obstructed the Divine Dragon's aim with a single incantation; and while his personality was just the worst, his skills were that of the greatest Magician in the Kingdom—Roswaal L. Mathers.

Needless to say, the higher the level of magic, the more delicate control it required.

On top of having immediately responded with magic of the Ul-tier, which by no means was easily usable by anyone, the glaciation of all present had been utterly annulled, even going so far as to dry their clothes whilst leaving not a single burn; it truly was a divine feat.

That Roswaal achieved such feats within a single breath left even the Divine Dragon, having lived since times of yore, utterly aghast.

Thereupon—

???: “That which you ought to focus on is this. Concentration.”

The quiet and courteous voice was accompanied by an unimaginable impact.

With a light step forward, Clind had soared up, delivering with his long leg a tremendous kick to the side of the Dragon’s maw, as the latter had come to a standstill. As for the might of that kick, it was something that could hold its own against even Garfiel’s kicks, which carried might akin to a cannonball; with its stance broken, the Dragon’s arms hit the ground, causing a cloud of dust to rise.

The Divine Dragon’s first move was thus directly inhibited by the Roswaal-Clind combo.

On the other side, bolting out as if to tear through that cloud of dust was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, fangs bared—

Roy: “Hahaa~! For you to line up such a delicious looking assortment of heads, at this point, this is just love-!”

Plunging towards the front lines with vigor that spilled his drool, Roy, unlike the Divine Dragon who had attempted to stop all of the Aldebusters, swiftly pounced at a singular, clearly-defined target.

Complying to the ferine instinct known as appetite, Roy closed in on his prey with bizarrely refined precision. And the one set as the target for Gluttony’s foul tongue, was the pink-haired maid standing amidst the formation—

Roy: “—Ram.”

Touching upon something undetectable to the eyes, the outreached hand set the table for the meal.

Calling out that name, Roy grinned from ear to ear, and called out by that name, Ram’s congealed expression crossed gazes with him; the subsequent instant, the Sin Archbishop gave an ostentatious lick to the palm that had touched her.

The Authority of Gluttony was invoked, and there did a new tragedy burgeon—naught.

Roy: “Blergh.”

Eyes wide open, Roy clutched his mouth at the recoil from his misfired Eclipsing, a nauseating sensation akin to vomiting. Before Roy, as his steps began to falter, Ram twirled her body in splendor,

Ram: “Truly a fool.”

Ram’s knee shot upwards, casting a vivid strike up into the Sin Archbishop’s jaw.

Heinkel: “Shit shit shit! After coming this far…!”

The Divine Dragon and Gluttony; compared to those two, who, while differing in their respective aims, had chosen to fight, Heinkel, as the last man standing, selected an alternate path.

Having opted for a path unique to that of the Dragon’s chilly breath or the Sin Archbishop’s Bizarre Eating, Heinkel wielded his unsheathed sword to keep everything in front of him at bay, leaping not forwards, but backwards. Gaining distance in such a manner, he was most likely hoping for someone other than himself to change the tide of the battle.

However—

???: “Nothing so convenient will come to pass, Honorable Family Head.”

???: “Honorable Family Head, in truth, I have always wanted to do this.”

Thereupon descended the twin sisters, having waited in ambush atop the trees since directly after the activation of Compression.

Flam and Grassis—they were twins who served the Astrea Family, but ironically, the one whose torso they slammed their kicks into from both the front and behind happened to be the man who was the very family head of the House that they served.

Heinkel: “Goeghh… hk.”

The kicks from the sisters who had mastered the Flow Method gave rise to an explosive roar unthinkable for girls of such petite build.

At the impact that seemed like it would crush his organs, deathly cries of pain arose from Heinkel’s throat as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. —With these three avenues of impacts all occurring almost simultaneously, their strong start had unfolded exactly as planned.

And, in addition to that—

“Subaru”: “—Now here’s the game changer.”

The Imaginary Subaru snapped his fingers, and though only Petra was able to hear it, it rang out loudly. With that as a cue, an alteration was birthed in the battle situation.

—Another division by way of Compression, fractured the Al Troupe even more.

3

—Petra Leyte was more keenly aware of the Al Troupe’s terrifying nature than the results would suggest.

After his betrayal at the Pleiades Watchtower, Al had enlisted the Divine Dragon as an ally, evaded Reinhard and Felt’s forces, and successfully broke the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony out of prison in the Royal Capital.

While Al’s accomplices had played significant roles in the events that had unfolded so far, the greatest threat remained Al himself.

Upon learning the true nature of Al’s extraordinary power over fate—the power to bring about the results he desired, Petra felt a sense of understanding that was beyond words.

That was because she had learned the truth about Natsuki Subaru from reading his Book of the Dead.

“Subaru”: “Al also has the ability to leap… If that’s the case, then I know better than anyone how dangerous he is. What’s more, unlike me, with my pathetic fighting skills, Al is the type who can hold his own in a fight, so simply put, it’s like fighting a better version of myself.”

Petra: “…Subaru, you’re really dependable when you’re with Beatrice-chan, too. And when it comes to tricks and cunning, you’re every bit as good as Otto-san.”

“Subaru”: “But the original me was captured alongside Beatrice, as for tricks and cunning, they really aren’t the kind of skills that strong people brag about…”

The Imaginary Subaru spoke with a lack of confidence, but even putting aside her feelings of love or bias, Petra did not think that Subaru was inferior to Al, let alone a lesser version of him.

Regarding that, she had also heard some interesting speculation from Rom-jii, who had deduced that Al’s Authority was most likely a time leap.

—The suggestion was that Al’s time leap was more likely something that went back a short amount of time.

Petra: “If he really possessed the same power as Subaru, he could have avoided encountering Felt-sama and Rom-san before they had a chance to confront him.”

“Subaru”: “But don’t be too confident about that. It’s entirely possible that his restart point just happened to be a spot where he couldn’t avoid Felt and the others. Even I wasn’t able to completely stop Petelgeuse from attacking Emilia and the others.”

Petra: “I think that was pretty much a shutout—”

Just as she was about to say more, Petra considered “Subaru’s“ feelings and stopped herself.

Petra was going to say that if Subaru had perfectly defeated the Sin Archbishop of Sloth, who attacked the Roswaal Mansion and Arlam Village, the tragedies that befell Rem and Crusch would have been avoided.

Subaru did everything in his power. Petra recognized this, but Subaru himself felt differently.

Sadly, this led to Natsuki Subaru's low self-evaluation, which Petra found extremely frustrating, but—

Petra: "Setting that aside for now… It's not just the ridiculous Al-san, but also the Divine Dragon, that shinobi maid, a Sin Archbishop, and even Heinkel-san, all working with him."

"Subaru": "What an unbelievable members list. The Dragon, a ninja, a Sin Archbishop, Reinhard's dad, that's right, that Reinhard's dad. This isn't going to be easy."

Petra: "As for Heinkel-san, no comment."

When "Subaru" made a concerned expression, Petra crossed her fingers over her lips in the shape of an X to indicate that she would not provide an answer.

Heinkel had briefly joined forces with them in the Vollachian Empire, but he deliberately kept his distance from others, so Petra had virtually no contact with him.

The only person who cared about Heinkel, even if only a little, was Garfiel, but if he knew what had happened to Heinkel now, he would be devastated. Thinking about how devastated Garfiel would be, Petra could feel her anger toward Heinkel welling up inside her.

The Emilia Camp was united in their anger toward anyone who hurt their loved ones.

Petra: "Phew… I need to stay calm. It doesn't matter what Garf-san feels unless he resolves it himself, and we need to make sure that the path is open for him."

"Subaru": "You say path, but where do we start…"

Petra: "Yeah, you're right. It's not an easy decision. But—"

Seeing “Subaru” at a loss, Petra smiled mischievously and turned around. Following Petra’s movement, “Subaru” also looked in that direction.

There stood the figures of everyone here, demonstrating the results that had been achieved by Natsuki Subaru, a man who often took everything upon himself, stumbling over and over through repeated failures.

“Subaru”: “…”

Petra: “Sure, I think Al-san and his group are really tough, and if we tried to fight them normally, we wouldn’t stand a chance. —But we’re not exactly normal either, are we?”

Winking, Petra made one of the cutest faces she had ever made and smiled at the striking figure of Imaginary Subaru as she spoke.

And so, together with these not-so-normal but reliable companions, they devised a plan—

—At Otto Suwen’s signal, the battle began.

4

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never pen a missive.

5

—The Authority brought about by the Witch Factor of Tristitia, Compression, was by no means all-powerful.

The phenomenon induced by Compression was ultimately just the compaction of events that could be feasibly achieved—condensing the traversal time within a traversable range; such a thing served as a good example.

To put it another way, events that were impossible to achieve regardless of the time spent could not be realized through Compression.

Henceforth, even when it came to the division of the Aldebaran Troupe, after first throwing Aldebaran out from the battlefield, further dividing the group that remained had been no easy feat.

If the opponent was cautious of Compression, then the difficulty of applying the Authority's effects would rapidly increase. Not to mention, against such foes as the Divine Dragon and a Sin Archbishop, even just taking them away was a herculean undertaking.

Unless it was used on a person who consented to its effects, or a person who was caught off guard, the possible applications of Compression were extremely narrow; such was its weakness.

That weakness was surmounted by the rapid fire of outlandish stratagems devised by the Royal Selection Combined Forces, the "Aldebusters".

Overwhelming Heinkel with numbers, taking advantage of Volcanica's mindset that adhered to "no-killing", and refusing service to Roy Alphard's Gluttony as he was in delirium over a feast.

All of which, before their execution, had been outlandish stratagems of uncertain success. —But, the likes of stratagems guaranteeing one-hundred percent certainty, existed not in this world.

What did exist, however, were the efforts necessary to approach that one-hundred percent, and the hearts that believed in them to the utmost.

Those who watered the sprouting seedlings of such possibilities, their spirits were—

???: "Ah, how delightful. Admiration."

Nodding so, Clind landed on the dirt, training his gaze upon the Divine Dragon Volcanica to his fore.

Its stance broken, Volcanica supported itself with a single arm, receiving Clind's gaze head on. Within the narrowed golden eyes of the Dragon, the bud of a clearly defined will could indeed be perceived.

As Petra had surmised, a separate consciousness was being housed in the Divine Dragon's dragonhusk.

Volcanica: "…"

Naturally, as Volcanica glared at Clind, his attack from a moment prior had been ineffective for the most part. It had been enough to succeed in catching it off guard, but it was a far cry from driving the opponent into a corner.

Even so, the objective of the initial surprise attack had been achieved. —In the theater of war where the dragonhusk of the Divine Dragon was being confronted, those facing off against the usurper numbered a mere two members of the Aldebusters.

The only ones remaining were Clind, and Roswaal L. Mathers.

Volcanica: "…I guess it's the same technique that sent Origin away."

Lifting its body with a hand planted on the ground, the Divine Dragon muttered in a low, solemn voice.

As the Dragon surveyed its surroundings with its golden eyes, it ascertained that they were removed from the mountains in which they had just previously occupied, having been moved to a far away open plain.

With a teleportation invoked via Compression, it was proof the troublesome opponent had been successfully isolated.

However—

Volcanica: "Clind, was it? I'd thought there was no way, but… it seems like there's no doubt that you're the one who holds the Witch Factor of Tristitia."

Clind: "—. Where did you obtain that information? Inquiry."

Volcanica: “I’m acquainted with an all-knowing great deity who taught me. Regardless, it was only something slipped in amidst all their blabbering, so I couldn’t even remember it until just now.”

As the Divine Dragon shrugged its shoulders in an extremely human-like gesture, from its mouth came the term “Tristitia”, and an identification of the Witch Factor’s holder; faced with that, Clind pondered its words.

If the usurper was capable of extracting information from the dragonhusk, then there would have been no doubt about it knowing such a thing. But, if that were truly the case, then its conduct until this point would have been a tad incoherent.

In order for it to make logical sense on both fronts, it would mean that while the usurper had yet to attain full mastery over handling the dragonhusk, it had somehow heard about Clind’s circumstances from someone else, but—

Roswaal: “When it’s just the two of you coming to a mutual understanding, I end up feeling quite left ouuut~.”

Clind: “Master…”

Roswaal: “You are a talented individual capable of performing meticulous work, but if you go too far, you will be considered highly strung. How they obtained this knowledge isn’t the proooblem~. In fact, the stratagem has come together, after all.”

Volcanica: “Stratagem, huh?”

As Roswaal remonished Clind, the usurper grandly unfurled the wings upon its back. The mere act of that kicking up a gust, Clind and Roswaal basked in the wind as it swept through their hair.

Volcanica: “Might not be my place to say this, but regardless of my allies like Roy and the old man, isn’t it a blunder for you guys to have separated from your own comrades back there?”

Roswaal: “Hoh? Well isn’t that a rather fascinating vieeewpoint~. May I ask you to elaborate?”

Volcanica: “You should already know. When there are more people in my line of fire, there’d be a higher chance of easily getting me to curl up. With this body and overflowing power, it ain’t easy to hold back.”

Roswaal: “I see, I can understand that line of thought. If we had wished to aim for a situation in which you were unable to demonstrate your capabilities at full performance, then that’s exactly what we ought to have done, buuut~…”

Clind: “—Unfortunately, that is a condition that applies to us as well. Equivalent.”

Volcanica: “What?”

The usurper of the dragonhusk had implied that they should not have prepared an environment in which it could run amok, but at Clind’s comment, it narrowed its eyes, and then proceeded to immediately widen its eyes.

As if to encircle the Divine Dragon, multicolored lights were afloat with no gaps between them.

At a glance, they appeared faint and colorful like a gathering of Micro Spirits, materializing in a pool of Mana, but anyone with a certain extent of magic knowledge would be able to tell that each and every one of these pale lights was a cluster of immense Mana—flickers of great magic, housing dreadful power.

Of course, their origin went without saying, the strongest Magician without peer throughout history—

Roswaal: “Please don’t praise me like that, yes? For you to evaluate myself as such despite knowing Teacher, is an indiscretion that terribly pains my heart, aaafter~ all.”

Seemingly having read his innermost thoughts at a glance, if Roswaal were to demonstrate his true ability at maximum firepower, any surrounding allies would serve only as a hindrance.

And thus—

Clind: “—The same goes for me. Assent.”

As he spoke, Clind raised up his hand, removing the monocle over his left eye.

That instant, the atmosphere faintly tremored, that which was faint gradually magnifying, little by little, until it crackled through the space, and the earth began to roar.

A special monocle, it was not.

What was necessary was a shift in mindset, a step of resolve to return to the self he had sealed away in the past. —By never taking that step, Clind had forced himself to remain as a bystander.

With that melancholy and despondency called out by the girl who harbored a shining soul, Clind felt ashamed of himself.

Having received that one final push, no longer could he remain halted in his tracks.

Ergo—

Volcanica: “…Oi oi.”

With a sound of bones creaking, protruding from Clind’s cranium, crowned by blue hair, were two black horns. Neither were those horns proof of belonging to the Oni Clan, nor were they the horns possessed by Witchbeasts. —Not being either of those things, instead a race that grew horns of such deep blackness, in this world, there existed only one.

Existences reduced to so few in number that they were thought to have been extinct—the dragonkin.

As the neon genesis of the almighty Dragons, they were a new race that had elected to shed their dragonhusks in favor of assuming the form of man. Clind, too, was one such dragonkin, but also a being who bore a special meaning to this world.

That was because—

Volcanica: “Finally, I’ve identified the source of this strange feeling. —So you’re, this body’s…”

Clind: “Any further words would be tactless. Superfluous.”

The usurper still attempted to exhaust further words, so Clind cut it off directly.

No matter who it might have been, there existed nobody who held a greater right to silence the usurper than Clind. None were more worthy than the original owner of that dragonhusk, now purloined by the usurper.

Roswaal: “—The Witch’s Disciple, Roswaal L. Mathers.”

Volcanica: “—Divine Dragon, Volcanica.”

Sending powerful magic adrift, Roswaal gave his name with his feet planted on the ground. Meeting that with due procedure, the usurper shamelessly proclaimed itself as such.

Just how long had it been since he had followed that courtesy, and placed himself atop the stage? —With such thoughts in mind, as purple lightning surged around his body, Clind too gave his introduction.

Clind: “—Dragonkin of the Divine Dragon, Clind.”

That instant, the two who bore ties to the Divine Dragon leaped into action, and the magic that had been deployed unleashed its true might.

Thus, with a crash and destruction reminiscent of a natural cataclysm serving as the impetus, the battle between those who knew four-hundred years, commenced.

Chapter 42:
What Effort Doth Shatter the Heart

1

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never clutch a stuffed toy.

2

Roy: “…”

The moment the knee shot up into his jaw, Roy Alphard’s cognizance bolted around like a flash of lightning.

Peculiar, inexplicable, strange oddity, whirling misgivings, apprehension, dubiety, something’s wrong, immense abnormality, error, mystifying, accident, incorrect, irregularity, chaos, doubt doubt, doubtdoubtdoubtdoubtdoubtdoubtdoubt—

Ram: “—Kindly die.”

Governed by such misgivings, Roy would not be overlooked by Ram after she knocked the wind out of his sails by some means.

Her outstretched white fingers fired a jab into Roy’s throat whilst he faced upward. His welling nausea and respiration intercepted, ache and suffocation assaulted Roy’s small frame.

However, Ram’s terrifying essence lay in the lack of charm of not slackening her hand here.

Ram: “Fula.”

The blade of wind generated in the space of her hand seizing his windpipe, the honed sharpness arrested Roy’s slim throat straight-on, and with nowhere for him to run, Roy’s throat was mercilessly slashed away from his body—

Roy: “—This~, won’t go!”

In that instant, the wind slash cleaved through, and Roy's head spurted blood as though having burst open.

However, reach Roy's life it would not, for he had reconstructed the Carnivorous Beast, Beli Heinelga, proprietor of sturdy skin, to whom not a single sword pierced from the thousand lunged into him by the garrison in order to seize the brutal criminal.

Ram: "…"

Ram dilated her eyes at the unforeseen outcome, and in that juncture, whilst she remained stanced to aim at his throat, Roy forced her along with him as he instantly shifted to the skies above the battlefield—'twas the power of warp movement belonging to the Leaper, Dorkell.

One certain day, having attained a supernatural power by connecting via Od Lagna as though an abrupt divine oracle, the Leaper became a destroyer of order, utilizing that power to assassinate a great number of influential individuals of power. That warp movement indicated no signs in advance, and as Ram stiffened upon being transpierced by the unforeseen astonish, he held her down with brute force and used that interlude to conduct an evaluation of her as prey of the battlefield—

Ram: "El Fula!"

Roy: "—Uhyi-, seriously?!"

Devoid of hesitation, she fired a gutsy spell of wind magic, to which Roy unwittingly clamored a voice of admiration.

The warp movement, without question, must have been beyond Ram's anticipation. But she, in merely a moment, digested the shock of failing to slash Roy's throat and the surprise from the warp movement, and instantaneously counterattacked. Such courage! Such fortitude!

Roy: "You're doing it~!"

That blade of wind had also failed to pierce through the Carnivorous Beast's sturdy skin. And yet, he wished to extol that prompt judgment and mobility of action. Hence, infused with the sentiment to extol it, he returned the favor with a fist strike from the Fist King, Neiji Rockhardt.

The hit from the Fist King who had smashed the heads of all kinds of warriors on the Gladiator Island, upon being inundated by it, Ram's slender body would be turned to a pulpy squash—vanished.

Ram: "Did you lose sight of Ram? What a useless pair of eyes you have."

With that unpredicted voice, the supposedly vanished Ram's presence had emerged behind him; Roy reflexively hurled a blow of the Fist King without looking, but the attack missed. As if magic, her presence had shifted to his overhead, showering him with an enzuigiri kick, and headlong towards the ground did he fall, fall, fall—.

Roy: "A~h, so beautiful~."

In the midst of falling to the ground back-first, Roy did not even take a defensive stance, wholeheartedly enchanted by that which was overhead—the hem of her skirt waving, the form of a young girl with pink-hued hair fluttered in resplendence. Roy then went on to defenselessly crash into the ground, and as the impact sustained upon his back spread to his abdomen, pain pervaded the entirety of his body, yet he did not mind.

—Carnivorous Beast × Leaper × Fist King.

Suprarational individuals who had surfaced to the top even amongst all that Gluttony had eaten, but Ram's might, technique, and clarity of heart had splendidly disposed of them, inducing Roy to feel deeply moved with emotion in sincerity and without plot.

Here, Roy had to also show something good from his side, and with this notion, he swung his legs and stood up, bent his knees, and amassed power in them to pounce at Ram.

After all—

Roy: "Unless all strength, all capacity, all of everything is totally invested to offer up as hospitality, it can’t be called love, can it now~!”

???: “—That way of thinking, it’s identical to something I’ve heard somewhere, and I really hate i~t.”

However, faster than Roy could leap to return to the skies, a ferocious, outraged voice rushed on from the side. The roar was accompanied by sharp, beastly claws and an explosive charge.

Curved horns and an enormous build that commanded eyes upward, frame supported by limbs that seemed slender, and flexibly racing on the ground was the being called the Jet-Black King of the Forest, synonymous for ferocity and atrociousness—

???: “—AROOOO!!”

Roy: “Hyaa~, Guiltilaw!!”

Facing Roy as he cheered in delight, a claw swipe swung down. Roy instantaneously countered it with the power of the Snow Vallum, Tislow. The body exceeding norms, regarded in legend for having intercepted and restrained an avalanche unaided, interdicted the plunging robust limbs of the Witchbeast straight-on, latching a grapple in successive order from the right foreleg, then the left foreleg.

Then, giving it his all, he sought to twist off both of the Guiltilaw’s legs—when in an instant, his eyes met with pale crimson pupils wielding a wand that had slipped below the Witchbeast’s length of legs.

Roy: “Truly, the greatest—”

Ram: “Fula.”

His forehead showered with bullets of wind disallowing him from even speaking, he was blown away by a tail whip from the Guiltilaw. Repelled a great distance, whilst skiing the ground with his tiptoes, Roy lifted his countenance.

Behind Ram wielding her wand, the young girl clinging atop the

Guiltilaw’s back, Meili, used her slender fingers to point towards Roy—no, towards Roy’s rear, and cried.

Meili: “Sick hiii~m, Witch Blackdog-cha~ns!!”

Blackdogs: “—Gugyaaagogugu!”

Conforming with Meili’s shrill call, countless dots of red swooped onto Roy with ferocity.

Those were eyes saturated red belonging to black dogs wolfing down their prey, fangs bared in truculence—conceived with the power of magic and a profusion of curses teeming in their bodies, a pack of Ulgarm.

The pack of demon dogs mercilessly impaled the body of Gluttony with their fangs and tore it apart. Much to irony, the end of Roy Alphard, who commanded the name of Bizarre Eating per his pleasure, was as feed for inclement Witchbeasts—

Roy: “Aa~AA~aa~AA~a~—”

The Witchbeasts’ movements came to a petrified halt from the sudden voice of song emanating from Roy’s throat.

The pack of savage dogs stood motionless, and Roy gently caressed the head of one that was biting at his neck—the subsequent instant, the blood spouting from the mouth of his wounds writhed out, taking the form of blades, slashing the Witchbeasts incapable of escaping, julienning them to skewers, and creating a choir of death wails.

Roy: “There we go~.”

Awakening his body lento, Roy stood up, unveiling his body in an ostentatious debut.

Bite wounds from the demon dogs engraved throughout his body, the blood gushing from them turned to blades with a gleaming sheen, suspending the pack of black dogs as if they were fruit growing on the branch of a fruit tree, and reduced them to carcasses.

A co-starring of dreams between the curse ballad of the Blightlove Troubadour, Notah, who travelled and chanted anti-nationalist songs across landscapes, and the magician who had been unable to manipulate anything save for his own sanguine ichor, the Bloodweeping Oni, Advan. Furthermore, he materialized the magic technique of the Lord of Phantasmal Rainbows, Matclyma Jordan, who had plotted to overthrow the Holy Kingdom by utilizing the residual Mana from the remains of perished Witchbeasts; with the carcasses serving as their chrysalis, butterflies hued in a spectrum of rainbow emerged and started to flutter about as they danced in Roy's perimeter.

The butterflies, eclosing as many as the number of corpses, flitted, fluttered, and flittered—

Roy: "Ta~dah."

—Snow Vallum × Blightlove Troubadour × Bloodweeping Oni × Lord of Phantasmal Rainbows.

Raising an innumerable count of prismatic butterflies to serve him, Roy pigmented the stage of spotlight, laden with token commendation towards Ram and the others who had attended to him with truly, truly sweet and luscious hospitality.

However, Ram and Meili rigidified their gazes and bearings, laying bare their animosity.

Roy: "Now now, that was amazing~. That perfectly synced-up coordination just now! It's tantalizing~. When did the two of you become such close pals? Indeed, you must've gotten closer in the time of the journey through the Sand Sea that we don't know of, correct~? Both Ram-san and Meili-san, how mean and sneaky of you~."

Ram: "Kindly stop trying to calmly initiate a conversation with that bloodstained form that is painful to even look at. Exchanging words with a deviant has Ram's small songbird heart close to bursting with anxiety."

Roy: "A songbird's heart-! A~h, to proclaim it yourself actually makes it pretty respectable, you know~. What kind of preliminary preparation of ingredients will fan the flames next, the excitement doesn't stop~."

Clapping his hands in applause, Roy swiftly retracted the sanguine blades into his body. Whilst the carcasses of Witchbeasts fell to thuds, Roy coagulated the blood of his bite wounds, rapidly ceasing his bleeding as he exhaled a breath, entranced.

His sentiments of sincerity seemed to not have been transmitted, but his emotion of commendation was genuine. Feelings unrequited were painful. But, Ram and the others had kindly labored to an extent much greater than Roy had anticipated, so he wished to cherish that mark.

Roy: "Now, setting that aside."

Setting aside his affection towards Ram and the others, Roy conjectured the truth behind the inexplicable phenomenon that had transpired in the midst of the several dozen seconds of offensive and defensive combat earlier—that it was intimately associated with the disappeared Divine Dragon.

It had been truly, truly astonishing. The Divine Dragon, with that ginormous build, had become nowhere to be seen on the battlefield in all but an unnoticeable interval.

Roy: "Probably, it's the same trick behind the disappearance of helmet uncle and the shinobi onee-san, as well as Ram-san and gang showing up… huh, seems like it's Clind-san, but it's very much like an Authority, isn't i~t."

The vanished Aldebaran, Yae, and the Divine Dragon. Moreover, the increasing count of adversaries, and Ram's presence oscillating between appearing and vanishing as well, all of it together aligned with the special ability belonging to Clind within the Memories.

However, concording to Roy's own knowledge, relying not on Memories, it was a possibility that what made that all possible was neither the odd talents of an individual nor a Divine Protection of disparate nature, but an Authority.

Though, in that case, Clind would end up being the individual corresponding to the sole vacant seat that was Pride.

Roy: “Well~, guess the people who’ve disappeared don’t matter right now~.”

Not only the Divine Dragon, but the figures of Clind and Roswaal were absent from the battlefield as well.

The bounds of Clind’s strength were uncertain, but if he were a possessor of an Authority, then at minimum, he would likely count as combat power. The tag team of Roswaal and Clind engaged in a large-scale battle against the Divine Dragon—to ensure that its destruction did not extend to their environs, they had changed their battlefield. That was likely the context of what had occurred in the background.

Anyhow, if he had disappeared from the battlefield, then that ploy of appearing and vanishing would have no more chances to be used.

Thus, what he must prioritise were not the cruel ones who had vanished, but surfeiting the hospitality of those who stood ready before his eyes.

Roy: “How nice, how nice, humans are how nice~.”

The trick behind averting Eclipsing, as well as the arrangement of Witchbeasts with no name to be eaten, or perhaps even the entirety of every element that concocted this battlefield, was an agglomeration of artifices designed to entrap and kill Roy and the others.

The prior groundwork for confrontation, it could be designated the preliminary preparation of ingredients, the very spirit of hospitality. Exhausting oneself of all strength to make welcome. —For that meant, effort what shattered heart.

Roy: “If so, then this side must also respond by offering up a suitable dress code~, or it’d be a discourtesy to that consideration bri~mming with love, after all~.”

Ram: “—. What do you intend?”

Taking acute notice of the change in the warmly-received Roy, Ram grimaced her finely-shaped brows. The beautiful maid laid bare her vigilance, but Roy pronounced “No no~”, and shook his head side to side.

All-out war—yes, this was a battle befitting of being benamed so, truly the final conclusion.

The Royal Selection Combined Forces, the enemy camp whom Natsuki Subaru would have labeled something like the “Aldebusters” had he been here, had prepared all arrangements for hospitality; all of its members wrung out their wisdom and latent strength in order to demonstrate their true worth, brandishing eyes resolved to labor to death till the very end.

That went for not just Ram and the others, but all who had been deployed into being war potential without stint, so to Roy Alphard, everyone earned a perfect hundred score, amounting to the very apex of those to whom he wished to grant gold stars.

The singular blemish unworthy of a gold star, was not amid his opponents. —It laid on his side.

Roy: “…”

Glancing in his vicinity, present there was a red-haired man left behind on the same battlefield as Roy, cowering in an unsightly squat as blood dripped down his nose—the form of Heinkel.

Though shameful coming from the vantage of Gluttony, Roy’s evaluation of Heinkel was surprisingly not bad.

Noosed with getting caught in his own traps, and a way of life saddled with somber anguishes seemingly never to be divulged, it seemed to have an impure bitterness only it could yield, hence he induced interest in it as a delicacy.

However, that too, operated on the major premise that it would not intrude upon the main dish with its aroma or appearance, so presently Heinkel had nothing going for him even where Gluttony was concerned.

Roy: “No matter how concentrated in extravagance a dinner banquet is, if a platter atop with uncooked flavors gets mixed in, it’s just a waste~.”

A solitary individual, on a battlefield where everyone came together as one and clashed lives against lives, for there to be a singular element capable of putting it all to waste was unbearable, even for Bizarre Eating.

Thus—

Roy: “You know~, uncle, you shouldn’t stay moping around forever, so how about you get energetic and lively~!”

Heinkel: “Wha… S-Sin Archbishop…!”

Roy howled suddenly, to which the nosebleeding Heinkel upraised his face. Meeting his eyes, witnessing the unnatural sway in those blue irises, made Roy go crazy.

A gaze that looked as if it was clinging to something. If he possessed even a fragment of camaraderie or desire to depend on Roy, to seek such a thing from a Sin Archbishop went beyond the limits of imprudent heedlessness. That boundless disgracefulness was, in a certain sense, something irreplaceable, but now it was nothing but purely, a hindrance.

Roy: “—Shall we just go ahead and free you from your~ burden, uncle~?”

He would not save him. Neither would he abandon him.

With simply a smile, Roy presented a third alternative to Heinkel.

Heinkel: “…”

Heinkel dilated his eyes, frozen, yet even to him that proposition was transmitted with certainty.

The things expressed as “burden”, just how valuable they were to

Heinkel, Roy was unbeknownst to the details. However, they were surely more valuable than his own life or death. The fact that Roy did possess a means to take them away, Heinkel knew from looking into his eyes.

What Roy stated was not a threat or anything such in the slightest, but an alternative possibility that could be realized.

Therefore—

Roy: “Tha~t’s the spirit~.”

Roy’s chest palpitated in delight budding from his heart at the change in expression of the man gritting his teeth. In such a way to respond to Roy’s vivified emotions, the butterflies of rainbow-hue began a whirling dance akin to courting as they fluttered.

In the midst of prismatic scales glistening the skies, Roy let out his languid tongue and smiled. —Now in its truest sense, the all-out war could commence.

Roy: “Want to be satisfied, yet don’t want to be satisfied. —Life, is so flavorful, it’s astonishing~.”

3

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never put needle to thread.

4

Heinkel: “Goeghh… hk.”

Strikes pincering his chest and back, Heinkel collapsed, unable to do a thing.

Carol and Grimm—they were the servant couple that had long served the Astrea Family, and the kicks delivered by their twin granddaughters, who had received an initiation into the Flow Method, were lethal weapons that completely disregarded their youth.

Heinkel: “Ouegh-, eughff-, blerghh-.”

Ever since the curtain had fallen on the war in the Vollachian Empire, he had hardly been able to eat a sufficient amount. As gastric juices were wrung from his empty stomach, Heinkel pathetically fell to his knees.

Twins: “…”

As Flam and Grassis coldly looked down on Heinkel, his cheeks contorted in self-scorn.

Despite appearances, Heinkel was still the present head of the Astrea Family. Faced with Heinkel in such a state, the daughters of House Remendis were supposed to have pledged their loyalty to him; but oh, what an irreverent look they held in their eyes.

Flam: “Our fealty is devoted to the young master.”

Grassis: “Esteemed Family Head, you deeply stabbed the Honorable Predecessor.”

At the sharpness of the twins’ replies, Heinkel fell silent without uttering even a single bitter remark.

Each gave undeniably valid arguments, and provided far more than enough persuasive reasons for why the girls despised Heinkel, and regarded him with hostility. The former was something that had always tormented Heinkel, and the latter was an offense that had ended up causing him new suffering, applying pressure to his entire body like a stone weight.

Even so—

Heinkel: “I can’t die…”

The voice dissipating through his molars, could be interpreted in two ways. —The first, was that he could not afford to die, even when cornered to such an extent; and the second, was that even after being cornered to such an extent, he still was unable to die.

Even Heinkel himself was unsure of which way he had meant those words as they had escaped his lips.

Heinkel: “Gh, ughhh-!”

As Heinkel stood upon such an unstable foundation, the twins showed him no mercy. No hesitation.

Circulating the Flow Method through their bodies, the arms and legs of the girls had become as strong as steel, and so receiving a flurry of their strikes, it was akin to being out under a downpour of a rain of iron.

Above and below, left and right, ahead and behind, met with the incessant onslaught of Flam and Grassis’s perfectly coordinated opposition, Heinkel protected his vital points with his sword, and could not do anything save for keeping up the defensive as he was showered with blows.

—The Flow Method, come to think of it, Heinkel had failed to properly master that too.

Even though he was given well-reasoned and thorough instruction on the many combat techniques that first-rate swordsmen and warriors were always subconsciously performing, Heinkel had been unable to perfect them for the purposes of actual battle.

Were Flam and Grassis really still just twelve years old? Even though he had spent more than twice their age in time, Heinkel’s Flow Method was nowhere near the level of those two girls.

If Heinkel resigned himself to it being a matter of natural talent, would the hundred things that anguished him perhaps decrease by one?

Heinkel: “Fucking, shit…!”

Swinging his sword in a show of force, the twins, coordinating through a mere exchange of gazes, swiftly evaded it. His imprecise swordsmanship accurately read, he was struck in all the weak points on his elbows, sides, and neck.

His bones creaked, and the mouth that had only coughed up gastric juices until now, now flowed with droplets of blood. As soon as he unintentionally looked downwards, the twins executed a somersault as if they had been waiting for him, their kicks launching right up into his mug.

Heinkel: “Gah—!”

Sent reeling, Heinkel toppled backwards, the back of his head slamming onto the ground. With his vision flickering, and a distant ringing in his ears, Heinkel forcibly restored his consciousness from its momentarily befuddled state, and hastening to rise to his feet, he readied his sword as he glared to the fore.

Before him, the twins stuck the landing of their somersault next to each other, gently brushing the hems of their clothes as they looked up. —As their gazes crossed, Heinkel detected a faint hue of bewilderment from the pair.

Heinkel: “…”

Likely, the cause of the sisters’ confusion was the fact that Heinkel was still standing.

In a matter of a dozen seconds, Heinkel had been thoroughly beaten up. His clothes were covered in mud, and his unkempt face was lavishly soiled by a dripping nosebleed.

However, Heinkel had not been defeated. Consciousness unceasing, his eyes remained open. Based on their reactions, this was unbelievable to Flam and Grassis.

Heinkel: “Haah, haa… hk.”

But alas, the endurance that had astonished those twins, was of no pride to him whatsoever.

The tip of his sword shaking as it pointed at the twins, Heinkel’s bluff was obvious to the eyes of all. His defeat was already all but decided—nay, it had not even amounted to a battle in the first place. Since it was not a battle, there was no such victor to be decided. They were not on the stage, of vying for victory.

Heinkel: “Even, so… hk.”

He could not afford to be defeated here. He had no choice but to endure.

Were he to be taken down here, then for what reason had he even come all this way? For what reason had he stabbed his father, Wilhelm van Astrea; he would lose sight of the answer.

But if he managed to pull through, then by the skin of his neck, there would still be a glimmer of hope. The light at the end of the tunnel would surely be visible.

Aldebaran, or the Divine Dragon, or even Yae. In the worst case scenario, even the Sin Archbishop would be fine. If someone would just wrench open the tide of this battle, then Heinkel’s hopes—it happened then.

Roy: “You know~, uncle, you shouldn’t stay moping around forever, so how about you get energetic and lively~!”

Suddenly, a voice seemed to rend the battlefield, causing Heinkel to raise his face in surprise.

He consciously realized it for the first time. The large figure of the Divine Dragon was nowhere to be found on the battlefield. On the battlefield where not only Aldebaran and Yae had disappeared, but the Divine Dragon too, the only ones remaining here were Heinkel, and,

Heinkel: “Wha… S-Sin Archbishop…!”

Also confronting an enemy of his own, the only other one left here was Roy Alphard.

Wondering when the situation had become like this, Heinkel felt disappointment in his profound inability to heed his surroundings, and attempted to surmise the intentions of Roy, who had called out to him.

Something like cooperating with a Sin Archbishop, honestly, even he thought it to be deranged. But, it seemed like in the Vollachian

Empire, Natsuki Subaru, the Knight of Emilia, had seized control over Gluttony. Thinking about it like that, he forcibly swallowed his intense feelings of reluctance.

They had already gone out of their way to free him from the Prison Tower. Even a Sin Archbishop would surely not want to die. Even if they were despicable, if their objectives aligned, then there would be room for them to join hands—

Roy: "—Shall we just go ahead and free you from your~ burden, uncle~?"

However, the words that followed were ones that directly betrayed Heinkel's hopes.

Heinkel: "…"

Neither was it a proposal of, nor was it a request for, aid. Merely a terribly inappropriate, selfish remark.

Just what the hell was he thinking? Did he understand the current situation? Neither Aldebaran, with his incomprehensible power to wrest open a path forward, nor the Divine Dragon, with its status as the strongest lifeform, nor Yae, with her expertise in intricate techniques and harassment, none of them were present. Even though the only ones present here were the weak, fragile, powerless Heinkel, and the great sinner of a nature most defiled, Roy, what could possibly be accomplished by making a rift between them? —No, it was not that a rift had been made. There had always been a rift. An unfillable gulf, an unsurmountable precipice, an absolute, isolating pit; he had only now just clearly understood that such things did indeed exist. And knowing that, what would come of it? What would come of the things this guy was saying? Having understood the significance of what this guy was saying, what would he do? —Freeing Heinkel from his burden? This burden, that was already so firmly infused into Heinkel's soul?

—Such a thing would never be allowed of him, and he would never allow it.

Roy: "Tha~t's the spirit~."

That voice of delight stemming from the depths of Roy's heart, reached not the ears of Heinkel.

Confronting Heinkel as he rose, swaying side to side like a revenant, Flam and Grassis tensed their cheeks, and exchanging wordless glances, they nodded to each other.

And then—

Flam: "Esteemed Family Head, prepare yourself."

Grassis: "I will hit you with everything that I have."

Perhaps seeing it as their perfunctory strikes having backfired, it was evident that the twins' resolve was being sharpened.

In accordance with their declaration, a blow utilizing all of their bodies' might was likely imminent. And after he conjectured so, Flam and Grassis kicked off the ground, speeding directly towards Heinkel. —No, not directly.

Flam & Grassis: "Ryahh!!"

Voice and movements overlapping, the twins dug into the ground with their legs, and kicked it up in front of him. Shrouding his entire field of vision, the excavated earth made its approach.

With a swing of his sword, Heinkel cleaved it in twain. Neither was it a person, nor a life. If it was merely an object, Heinkel would not think twice about cutting it down.

However, beyond the bisected earth, the sight cleaved open was bereft of the figures of Flam and Grassis.

Instead, the twins pincered Heinkel from left and right, and with the greatest amount of acceleration thus far, mercilessly thrust into both Heinkel's flanks.

Heinkel: "—Goh."

Without exaggeration, there had been enough might to bury the fists of the twins up to the wrists into Heinkel.

Shattering Heinkel's ribs, the blows landed a direct strike on the organs contained within. As copious amounts of blood spurted from his mouth with tremendous force, Heinkel was on the verge of fainting.

But, faint he did not. He held his ground. He held his ground, and not only that—gritting his teeth and swivelling his body, he seized the arms of the sisters that had thrust into him.

Flam: "—Ah."

Grassis: "This is bad."

At the pain of their wrists being tightly squeezed, Flam and Grassis grimaced.

Then, the two of them used their arms opposite the ones that Heinkel had seized, as well their free legs, to barrage Heinkel with attacks, striking him like a tempest of steel, but Heinkel did not release their arms.

It was not something he had desired. Even so, the one and only thing in which Heinkel assuredly surpassed most other people was this towering sturdiness, and the best way to make use of it, was probably this.

Even while being showered in blows, he grabbed his opponents. —As a disgrace to swordsmen, it was an unrefined, uncouth counterattack, one most fitting for Heinkel Astrea.

Heinkel: "—AAHHHHHH!!"

Sullied by a nosebleed, his face was swollen from all of the beating it had endured; Heinkel swung both his arms overhead, and vigorously moved to pummel the twins in his grasp down into the ground.

That instant, Heinkel forgot the fact that his opponents were children, that they were people who served his family, and that they were the granddaughters of Carol and Grimm, whom he had known ever since his own birth. —No, it was not that he had forgotten; he had merely shut his eyes to it, and so staking it all, he slammed the two of them down to the ground—

5

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never sing.

6

With corpses as chrysalides, their metamorphosis fueled by life’s last embers, butterflies of rainbow eclosed—the spell devised by the Lord of Phantasmal Rainbows, was by no means something that constructed new life.

These butterflies had merely been shaped in such a form, and contrary to being a construction of life, their essence was that of death made manifest.

Roy: “This was also Nii-sama’s trump card, wasn’t it~? Magic of rainbow spectra.”

Amidst the devoured Memories, a throbbing sensation arose as he delightfully recollected a sword clad in a rainbow aurora—fundamentally, the special technique deployed by the Finest of Knights was of the same ilk as the rainbow butterflies.

That which the Finest made manifest through his talents and the powers of his contracted Spirits, the Lord of Phantasmal Rainbows conjured in exchange for the dried up dregs of life, such was the entirety of the matter.

Roy: “But its might stands unchanged, you see~.”

Butterflies of death that would entirely obliterate anything they made contact with; Roy’s smile giving the cue, around twenty of them surged towards Ram and Meili in unison.

Faced with the oncoming threat, Ram and Meili instantly moved in perfect sync.

Meili: “Ram-oneesan!”

Ram: “That is not how you are to address me.”

Meili: “I go~t it, Madam!”

Following a moderately serious exchange, Meili, sat astride the Guiltilaw, advanced. Then, patting the back of the jet-black Witchbeast, she prompted it to wield its mighty arms, forcing nearby trees to come crashing down.

As destructive roars sounded from the falling trees, Ram dashed to their now-vacant position and crouched, her wand extended straight ahead—

Ram: “El Fula.”

The surging gale savagely blew the severed trees, hurling them crashing into the kaleidoscope. Striking true, they smashed through the butterflies scattering scales of death, triggering an aurora of prismatic explosions that lit up the sky.

Roy: “Kuu~~ hk!”

The optimum solution, cognizing it as such, Roy repeatedly stomped his feet, unable to bear his shuddering.

The rainbow-hued butterflies riddled with devastating might capable of unraveling the very structure of almost anything could have been designated as Fire Magic Stones that would spell the end upon a single touch. In exchange for their extensive destructive power, they were limited to just one shot before being used up—detonating and dismantling them through application of obstacles was the strategy guaranteeing the utmost safety.

Yet, for them to counter it whilst witnessing it for the very first time left Roy astonished.

Roy: “Ho~we~ve~r!!”

For the butterflies to have been exterminated in such a manner would have only left the Lord of Phantasmal Rainbows sobbing in his grave.

The butterflies he had sent into a direct charge vanished in a rainbow-hued explosion, but detouring around the dazzling explosion, the surviving five butterflies swiveled wide and aimed for Ram and the others.

What was more was that it was not just the butterflies this time, but Roy as well used the power of the Leaper to charge in their direction. Thereupon, with the burly arms of the Snow Vallum, he aimed to pound the Guiltilaw to death first.

—Lord of Phantasmal Rainbows × Leaper × Snow Vallum.

An inescapable three-pronged assault mercilessly detonated upon Ram's group; a flashing aurora smokescreen blocking their front, the surviving rainbow butterflies flanking both sides, and Roy warping into position at their rear—that instant, the sound of a crying child slashed Roy's eardrums.

???: "—GAGYAGYA-GAGYAAAH."

The piercing shrill unbecoming of a battlefield momentarily pilfered Roy of his thoughts, and before his eyes, baying the cries of an infant was a blasphemously molded Witchbeast that ought to have been deigned a failed creation of god—it brandished two spears ablaze forged of bone, incinerating the encircling rainbow-hued butterflies in one fiery sweep altogether.

An explosion of aurora blossomed yet again, and with hair waving due to the shockwave, Roy laid eyes upon the grotesque being who had advented before him, the Hungry Horse King, only supposed to be present in the below-ground of the sand sea.

Meili: "It was a lot of trouble, bringing it alo~ng."

Cranium constructed with an enormous horn, and a torso akin to a human trunk accoutred with a gigantic mouth, holding them up was an inordinately large build of a horse, far too distorted and repellent to be called a chimera of human and horse. —This Hungry Horse King had now become Meili's mount, having exchanged places with the Guiltilaw.

Roy: “…”

Roy’s thoughts fragmented into disarray at that reality, and a great conference of Memories foraged for an answer.

Raised as the agendas were: the truth behind the happening before his eyes, a precise counter to the imminent crisis at hand, and an apposite reaction to the astonishing reality, such was jumbled together by the pressing urgency of the situation.

Right before he selected the agenda to utmost prioritize—

???: “—What, looking dumb as a pig, you.”

The proprietor of the voice who had appeared right behind him, his giant knuckles punched right through Roy’s petite frame.

Roy: “—Hk-.”

His back pounded, Roy’s body was shot into flight above the heads of the Hungry Horse King and Meili. Outdistancing even the erupting aurora, Roy skidded across the ground, halted his momentum with one hand piercing the ground, and stuck the landing whilst twisting his body, his acrobatic movements to reposition himself forcing the enemy to abandon pursuit.

In his field of view, Roy captured Meili, astraddle the Hungry Horse King, a giant pigman garbed in a black suit who had appeared beside them, and finally, Ram, who was now positioned in a definitively separate locus from before. —The arrival of a new enemy, and the tactic of inexplicably instantaneous positional substitution; these were resurfacing a possibility which was supposed to have been relinquished.

Roy: “Noo~, that wasn’t it.”

It had, unwisely, slipped past him due to extraneous preconceptions influenced by the Memories he possessed.

That since this instantaneous substitution had to have been brought forth by an Authority, it would have been a power belonging to Clind. Thus he had reckoned he need not keep an eye out for it on the battlefield after Clind had disappeared alongside the Divine Dragon.

However—

???: "—If you're also a father, then don't go laying your hands on kids!!"

Audible there was a thick, anger-blazed voice, and sounds of the vehement impact that followed—at the edge of his vision, he could see Heinkel, grasping the twin girls with both his arms, basking in a fist square to the face.

Delivering that fervent blow was a large man, present within the Memories belonging to Roy—as expected, it was someone who was not supposed to have been here the moment the battle broke out, Gaston.

Heinkel: "…"

Walloped right in the face, Heinkel toppled over backwards, allowing the twins to just barely escape peril.

Whether Roy's provocation had proved effective or not, Heinkel appeared to have been on the verge of success, but his counterattack was abruptly crushed at its inception.

However, Roy would not laugh at Heinkel. After all, he had also been thwarted by the same opponent, with the same technique.

And, as for the identity of that opponent, it had not been Clind.

Roy: "Ehh~? Could it be~? Such a thing is possible~?"

Unable to conceive of any other possibility, even Roy found himself doubting that exceedingly unexpected reality.

Carried within that voice was nothing but genuine astonishment, bereft of any and all denial or disdain for that fact. Bereft though it was, even supposing that was the truth, it was preposterously unexpected.

From across every Memory that contained her presence, only one conclusion could be drawn: “No way.”

It was not Clind. In both Roy’s clash against Ram and Meili, and the battle where Heinkel was being pummeled by the twins, someone had intervened with perfect timing.

Whilst overlooking this all-out war, they had continuously employed an Authority to reconstruct the situation.

That was—

Roy: “—Petra-chan, since when did you become a Sin Archbishop?”

???: “Now that’s just extremely slanderous. If you’re going to call me something disreputable, then call me this.”

With those words, having dominated the battlefield through an Authority, the playmaker harboring a Witch Factor—Petra Leyte placed her hand over her chest, and stuck her tongue out with a “behhhh”.

Then, she declared—

Petra: “—The Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte.”

Vic.1120

Chapter 43:
True Name

1

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never play with children.

2

Petra: “For instance, if someone else were to use the Witch Factor held by Clind-niisama… if I were to use it, could I use Teleport as much as I wanted even without paying the compensation?”

When she had first been informed by Clind about the existence of the Witch Factor of Tristitia, and its Authority of Compression, the first thing that had popped into Petra’s mind was that method of abusing it.

Clind was not compatible with the Witch Factor, and as a result, compensation—payment was required to exercise the Authority of Compression, so he had told her. At the same time, the Witch Factor of Tristitia was a one-off Factor created to be used by a specific person, so by no means would Petra have been compatible, either.

Hence, the special tag team consisting of the Warlock who possessed the Authority that was Return by Death, Natsuki Subaru, and the Witch who supported him, Petra Leyte, was disbanded before it was even formed; while that was a relief, it was also true that she had felt regretful about it.

Hence, the matter of the Witch Factor of Tristitia was placed outside the topic of agenda, with them having decided on utilizing Clind’s Compression to reconvene with their allies and to plunge into the final battle against the enemy, but—with Al’s Authority of “Turning Back Time” having come to light, the spotlight had once again been placed on the Authority of Tristitia while they were working out a plan to decisively stop the Al Troupe.

Clind had informed Petra and the others that, due to incompatibility with the Witch Factor, it was impossible to exercise his Authority without compensation. However, the meaning hidden behind that was—

Petra: "—As long as the compensation is paid, then even people who aren't Clind-niisama can use Compression, right?"

At Petra's verification, Clind's expression did not shift.

However, that only served to convince Petra of the validity of her own conjecture. If he had truly wanted to hide it, Clind ought to have acted more surprised, saying "I had never even thought of that".

Petra: "In order to do something about Al-san and his group, it's absolutely essential that we split them all apart. Outside of Al-san himself, the most troublesome opponent would be the Divine Dragon-sama, but… Clind-niisama will do something about that, right?"

Roswaal: "On that point, I can also provide assurance. Clind is a key person to serve as a trump card against the Divine Dragon Volcanica, indeeed~. Did I use that right?"

Petra: "—. Yes, that's correct."

During the strategy meeting, the one who had boasted of being able to subdue the Divine Dragon was Clind.

Honestly, including the matter of the Witch Factor of Tristitia, it made her exasperated to think about how many secrets he was hiding along with Roswaal, but there was nothing better than his reliability. However, just because Clind was reliable did not mean she could take advantage of him for everything.

Petra: "But, if Clind-niisama is going to be busy dealing with the Divine Dragon-sama, he won't be able to take people in and out with Compression, correct?"

Clind: "I do not deny it. Affirmation. Of course, exhausting all of the power in my possession, I will deliver all personnel to the battle front without fail, but…”

Petra: “No. If you do it like that, I think Compression will lose its strengths. The best point about Compression is that, like a teleport, it can take our fighting strength in and out and switch things around.”

There was likely no falsehood in the words Clind had sworn with a quiet expression, however in them a certain heat did dwell.

Their greatest fighting strength would securely be sent to the enemy lines. That alone was already an extraordinary feat. But, this was also a battle such that, if they could afford to hope for more, then they ought to hope for as much as they could.

Rom: “‘N so, we shift ta the matter of transferrin’ the Authority. Tho’, before we start ta consider it, I’d like ta verify if that plan’s actually even possible.”

Clind: “—. About that. Hesitation.”

Petra: “Clind-niisama, please lay all the ingredients out on the table.”

Clind: “…”

Petra: “I think that right now is the time to discuss what cards everyone has in their hand, and the extent to which we might be able to use them. So, don’t hide anything.”

As Clind hesitated to speak out, Petra plainly requested him to.

She understood his reasons for being uneager to share, his reasons for worrying over keeping the information hidden. She understood, but this discussion was a meeting dedicated to saving the Kingdom, saving the world—saving Natsuki Subaru and Beatrice.

It was rather charming how Meili had been glaring at Petra as she had told him to not hide anything.

Clind: “…If you wish to know whether it is possible or impossible, then it would be possible. Approval. The Witch Factor of Tristitia fails to be compatible with myself, and it is merely within my possession. Responsibility."

Ram: "In that case, it is simply a matter of shifting ownership? Hah! That should be quite easy to handle then. It would be a disaster if Clind were to leave it behind."

Rem: "This also goes for if it were to be left behind, but it would also be quite scary if it were to be stolen or confiscated by someone else… In that sense, it's understandable that Clind was the one holding on to it."

Unexpectedly, the Witch Factor of Tristitia seemed to have been managed in a precarious state.

The notion that it was understandable that Clind had been the one entrusted with its management, with that Petra agreed. Clind, who always handled everything in a brisk and tactful manner, would have made for an ideal custodian.

However—

Petra: "It might be better to give up that duty to someone else this time."

Emilia: "Someone else… but, Witch Factors are reaaally dangerous. It's something I saw before at the Sanctuary. They aren't things you can handle safely at all."

Petra: "…There is definitely a risk. But, if it's used well…"

Meili: "—Hk, Petra-chan, I'm against it, you kno~w."

At the sharpened voice opposing her with the most emotion, Petra lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

Petra knew that Meili had constantly been worrying about her; it made her happy. After all, when Petra had just met Meili, she was always attempting to get the latter to like her. She had thought that affection would be the best weapon to dull any murderous impulses. And, she had hit the nail on the head.

Petra: “Though, it might have been a bit too effective.”

“Subaru”: “I’ll say this now, but I’m of the same opinion as Meili. You haven’t told me what it was, but you’ve already paid Clind-san with something, Petra. You can’t compromise anything further than this.”

The voice of a phantom inaudible to anyone else, it instilled Petra with the feeling that she was truly being held dear.

Let it be declared. Imaginary Subaru might have been a convenient delusion of Petra’s, but the quality of the recreation should have been high enough such that, beyond any doubt, if it had been the real Subaru, he would have said the same thing.

Petra: “I’m glad that neither Frederica-neesama nor Beatrice-chan are here.”

Even just Meili had caused Petra’s heart to waver a fair amount.

If Frederica and Beatrice had supplemented that with a one-two punch, Petra might have been knocked out. What about if Garfiel and Otto had been here? Garfiel would have likely shouted angrily, but she felt like Otto would have understood.

After all, Otto was the one currently overexerting himself by far the most out of the Camp, so Petra did not think he would have had any right to complain to her.

Harboring the self-awareness that she truly was such a blessed and beloved girl, Petra spoke—

Petra: “—Let’s divide up the roles properly. That way, everyone can do their job to the best of their abilities.”

3

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never visit that nostalgic place.

4

Tightly ascertaining the sensation of the rectangular box stored in her breast pocket, Petra focused her attention on the Witch Factor of Tristitia, which she had successfully received by manipulating her words, cajoling the people around her.

Petra: "—I have, to concentrate."

By putting that to words, Petra firmly cautioned herself so as to preserve her own sanity. —In honesty, until today, Petra had thought of herself as someone possessing a tenacious mental fortitude.

She had not lost her mind even after reading a Book of the Dead, and even if her beloved was not swayed by her in the slightest, she had never once thought about giving up on getting him to turn to face her. She was aware that she had been through many difficulties and gambles for someone of her age.

And despite all that, the destructive sense of omnipotence brought on by the Witch Factor made Petra's head spin.

Petra: "No, that's no good, for me… Subaru, cheer me on!"

"Subaru": "Petra, do your best! Don't lose! If you lose after staking everything on a gamble I told you not to do, you know what that'll mean! I'll end up hating you!"

Petra: "In that case, I definitely won't lose…"

Cheered on by her beloved within her mind, it felt like a bit of a last resort to revitalize her state of mind, but it did happen to be actually effective, showing how magnificent the power of love could be.

A Witch Factor, just what could such a thing do in the face of love?

The struggle against a Witch Factor was ultimately just a mental problem, so it was only natural that the power of love would serve as a wonder drug. —The efficacy of that remedy, which had made it impossible for Petra to remain as a mere village girl, was something she understood better than anybody else.

Therefore—

Rom: "—Noble ta Fire Eight! Then hit 'em with a Soldier ta Flowers Three!"

At the firm voice striking her eardrums with vigor, Petra opened her eyes wide, and grit her teeth.

With the activation of Compression, Petra deployed those designated personnel to those designated positions on the battlefield that had been divided up into an eight × eight grid within her mind—the same configuration as a Shatranj board.

Sure enough, two individuals aligning with the Felt Camp had been delivered to the battlefield in the blink of an eye—one of Felt's followers, Gaston, and a fierce-looking pigman known as the King Pig, Doltero; swinging their mighty arms, they wallopped Heinkel and Gluttony respectively, each of whom had been attempting to launch their own offensives, and sent them flying.

???: "Ehh~? Could it be~? Such a thing is possible~?"

Having sidestepped the punch with acrobatic maneuvers, Roy raised his irksome visage, and tearing his gaze off of Ram, whom he had been fixated on until then, he looked at Petra.

At Petra, who, maintaining a distance from the duos of Ram and Meili, Flam and Grassis, who were all engaged in direct combat, was positioned so as to grasp the entirety of the battlefield, sat atop the shoulders of Rom-jii.

Roy: "—Petra-chan, since when did you become a Sin Archbishop?"

Perhaps as ought to have been expected from a Sin Archbishop, he perceived the whereabouts of the Witch Factor—nay, were that the case, then he would have noticed their trick much sooner. Likely, it was the result of having correctly fathomed that Compression was the work of an Authority, and thinking about who was in the position to use it the most pertinently. Nothing impressive at all for a Sin Archbishop.

Petra: "Now that's just extremely slanderous. If you're going to call me something disreputable, then call me this.”

Without revealing her caution towards that insight of Roy’s, Petra placed a hand over her chest, and while ascertaining the sensation of the small black box she had received from Clind, she stuck out her tongue with a “behhhh”, declaring thus.

Petra: “—The Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte.”

In most cases, introducing oneself with such a title would have been received with no warm welcomes.

While calling oneself by that was already bad enough, being called that by somebody else was absolutely out of the question. Regardless of whether one was steeled in their resolve or not, that was a title akin to a curse, that of being abhorred by every person throughout the world.

However, Petra had boldly declared herself as such, as if it was something to take pride in.

After all, the master whom Petra served was the Witch of Glaciation, and her beloved was a kind, admirable Knight whose heart was smitten with that Witch.

5

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never hold beautiful flowers.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never partake of my favorite food.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never return to my hometown.

6

—The Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte.

Upon Petra declaring herself so, Roy Alphard felt a sense of apotheosis. —Owing to the surprise that she was capable of going so far, and the delight that she had indeed gone that far.

To take in a Witch Factor, and by one's own volition become a possessor of an Authority—a being who would be called the likes of Witch or Warlock or even Sin Archbishop, was an act seeming utterly devoid of sanity. The point upon which they had passed such an aberrant decision, was when their scrupulousness to spare no measure—that was to say, their love and affection that was the very spirit of hospitality, was something Roy felt potently, profoundly, vastly, and warmly.

Roy: "The- greatest…! So glad you turned up~!"

Spreading his arms wide, Roy stifled his ecstacy and proffered his gratitude to their hospitality and rendezvous.

Seeing that she named herself the Witch of Tristitia, Roy's inference that the opponent's Authority was derived from Pride had been off the mark. However, Roy had once been told by a monster who entitled itself his mother that the Witch Factor of Tristitia was a special, defective article with which nobody would prove to be compatible. The Witch Factor of Tristitia was one of the things that his mother had desired, so upon hearing of its hideaway, his mother would certainly be delighted.

Naturally, he did not feel like giving up even a single bite of such a special feast to his mother.

Roy: "It's a cute, selfish request of her hungry child after all, so she'll surely overlook it, won't she~."

This was a matter of his mother, the personification of the desire for acknowledgement, who loved nothing more than to be revered.

Roy could imagine how he would trigger her temper upon her learning that he had given priority to himself over his mother.

Once, Roy used to find this egotistic selfishness of his mother's to be unhelpably bothersome, but his current sentiment was slightly different from before. —The sentiment that even such egotistic selfishness and conceitedly diseased self-love, were irreplaceable attributes to be cherished.

Rom: “Queen ta Earth Six! Hunter ta Yang Six! Noble ta Yin Five!”

Concording to the aged Giant’s instruction, a dim glow sojourned in Petra’s eyes.

It was not as though they were actually shining. As a consequence of her devoting her consciousness to utilizing an Authority that was impossible to get accustomed to using, the moments in which she was exerting herself could be pinpointed. Normally, it was a trivial habit not worth paying attention to, but in the midst of battle where an instant’s difference demarcated the line between victory or defeat, even that became information coupled to life or death.

From Roy’s field of vision, the forms of Ram and the pigman, and Meili astraddle atop the Hungry Horse King disappeared. —And concurrent to their disappearance, they appeared as though surrounding Roy from three directions and waged their offensive.

The timing of which, he could quite clearly grasp due to the glow in Petra’s eyes.

Roy: “Yes yes, excuse us for a bit-.”

On the brink of their offensive making contact, Roy joined his hands before his chest. —When, in that instant, the ground rose as though sand dunes were swelling from force applied from left and right, cutting off Ram and the pigman’s line of sight from Roy. Entrusting the two to that, Roy focused his concentration on the utmost loud and annoying crying voice of an infant.

The field of vision from the back of his head that came to him even without needing to turn, therein were the bone spears of the Hungry Horse King that Meili was riding on—and alongside that, launched in tandem, the Guiltilaw’s monstrously proficient arm swung.

Bending his body a great deal back, Roy accreted dodge after dodge after dodge, then licked his lips.

The Compactor, Figdour, was a hitman who had specialized in burying alive, wielding a strange ability to squash everything from both ends of his field of vision into its middle; and the Priestess of a Thousand Visages, Iyerna, was the proprietor of an expansive heart and outlook, all three hundred and sixty degrees top to bottom and left to right, never to miss bearing witness to the tears of the lamenting, grieving weak. —However, the ability of the Queen of Witchbeasts, Meili, did not fall short of them either.

Hungry Horse King: "—GAGYAGYA-GAGYAAAH."

Guiltilaw: "—AROOOOOO."

The pack of Ulgarm, the Hungry Horse King of the sand sea, and the Guiltilaw renowned as the Jet-Black King of the Forest; Meili's ability of sallying forth Witchbeasts in succession granted Roy nary a breather for emotional impression. Meili's stratagem of manipulating Witchbeasts with unbroken horns was something he had been prepared for through his Memories, but since he had been deferred from experiencing its true worth at the Pleiades Watchtower, it was a great excitement to witness it in all of its glory.

Roy: "Having been born possessing such a Divine Protection, your life mu~st have been full of ups and downs, hasn't it? The way of life have you walked till now, teach us~, Meili!"

Meili: "…Teach us what way of life have you walked, that was something Subaru-oniisan and Emilia-oneechan said to me once before, to~o."

Roy: "Really? And then and then?"

The bone spears of the Hungry Horse King and the honed claws of the Guiltilaw; nimbly and agilely evading them, Roy slurped on his drool, while Meili, glaring at him, with her face harboring animosity and repugnance, pulled her eyelid downward and stuck out her tongue,

Meili: "The same as what you said about love being whatever befo~re, but in the end, what matters even more than what you say, is who says i~t!"

At the truth which left him with no place to grapple, Roy could only muster a “Taha~!” with no words to give in retort.

At Roy’s rear, the pigman smashed through the ground wall barrier, and from overhead Ram dropped, disappearing and appearing yet again. Front, rear, and above, enclosed from three dimensions, Roy distorted the space between the length of both of his legs, invoking the magical technique of the Magia Manus Magister, Yardray, who had been submerged in the shadows of history and finally eaten—spears of flame, ice, and earth were brought forth by magic, and immediately locked on to their targets.

Their aims were Meili, the pigman, and Ram—but, she was not there.

Ram: “To lose sight of Ram again and again. Why don’t you just throw those away? That set of eyes.”

—There she was. At a distance close enough for a hug, Ram’s slender frame came into sight.

7

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never shed a tear in the company of others.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never wipe the tears of another.

8

Roy: “Witch of Tristitiaaa-…!”

—The Compactor × Priestess of a Thousand Visages × Magia Manus Magister.

Surpassing even the combined power of these new suprarational individuals, the trio closed in from all multifarious directions, and knowing the identity of the one who had orchestrated this, Roy’s throat roared the name out.

What had made his throat quake was not rage. It was delight.

Throbbing lively, his heart's thrumming pulsations would not cease.

Entrusting himself to those thrumming pulsations, Roy re-aimed the spears of three attributes from their initial targets, bringing them crashing into one another; by way of the blast and vapor generated, Ram and the others would inevitably be forced to reposition—

Roy: "—Wha…"

Ram: "Did you think we would Teleport to avoid sustaining injuries?"

With his line of sight obscured, the scorching vapor, which ought to have coerced a Teleport via the Authority of Tristitia, was rent asunder through pure strength, and from the other side came flying the proprietor of pale crimson eyes.

Plunging head-first into the inescapable scalding heat, she had caught Roy off guard, the latter having erased the possibility that they might deliberately choose to sustain injury from his head. Forthwith, born was the option for Roy to take the initiative, employing the Teleport of the Leaper to forcibly reset things to square one. —However,

Roy: "—THE- GREATEST-!"

The instant he recognized his opponent's brilliance, Roy Alphard's Bizarre Eating awakened.

With an outcry of jubilation screeching through his mind, Roy's brain sparkled with branches of countless choices.

Flinging the doors open on the plentiful treasure house of Memories, he sought that which sparkled amidst the countless miscellaneous treasures tossed aside, the articles what had been lying dormant, impatiently awaiting the chance to raise their first cries and rise to the stage at last.

—At present, the foremost point of focus was the truth of the hospitality that had rendered Eclipsing a failure.

Roy: "…"

Having reached his hand out towards his opponent in an attempt to eat their Memories, Roy's Eclipsing towards Ram had failed.

But, she was unmistakably Ram. That was evident from the freshly devoured Memories; the originator of the Memories called her by the name Ram, and those in the environs beyond that also called her Ram, if anything, even her own first person pronoun was Ram; she was Ram through and through.

Regardless, he could not meet the requirements for invoking Eclipsing on the name Ram. In that case, the most probable reason behind the failure of Eclipsing was—

Roy: "—An alteration, of the true name-." "1"

Required for Eclipsing, were the provisions to plunder the target from the name registry of souls managed by Od Lagna. Hence, the target's name would need to match exactly what Od Lagna had recorded it to be.

In most cases, it was the vow averred during the naming ritual at the time of one's birth—the moment those prayers arrived, the true name would be recorded in the vast empty mind benamed Od Lagna.

Primarily, once the true name was defined, it would not be altered, regardless of however an individual might opt to acknowledge themself. The alterations which Od Lagna did recognize, one of those few exceptions—

Roy: "—Ram Mathers."

Ram: "—Hk."

Piercing through the vapor, as Ram attempted to have her blow connect, Roy forestalled by touching her.

The predominant reason for alterations of the true name were those brought about by Marriage. —In addition, Ram had compelled Meili to refer to her as "Madam". Even from just the Memories, there laid no room for doubt pertaining to whom Ram harbored affection.

Fostering conviction, Roy invoked Eclipsing upon the soul of Ram—no, upon Ram Mathers; her pale crimson eyes dilated wide as he sought to devour her Memories, to understand her through and through, not sparing a single portion,

Roy: “Let’s ea—blergh.”

In that instant, Roy split his eyes wide open at the sensation akin to muck being crammed into his open mouth.

That was the proof of Eclipsing’s failure, his entire body quaking with a vehement sense of rejection; Roy’s heart, supposed to have graciously received a treat, now tore apart from within, an absurd dubiety governing his mind.

Why, how, understanding, marriage, Ram, true name, doting to her younger sister, awful tastes, the Margrave, earnest, ill-natured, superiority, dependable, merely awful tastes, her nature also ill, marriage, passion—

Ram: “—Did you peer into Otto’s Memories? Truly a fool.”

Roy: “Ah—?”

Ram: “Did you really think Ram would use this emergency as a pretext to position herself as Roswaal-sama’s spouse? —If you truly knew Ram, that was a misunderstanding you would never have made.”

As Ram sneered, her lips twisting into a slim smile, Roy understood.

To have herself be called “Madam” was yet another misdirect, a ploy to draw him to a false conclusion exploiting the Memories of someone close—in truth, Roy had dismissed the low-risk choice of using the Leaper’s technique, opting instead for the high-reward of reaching Ram’s soul with his tongue with the conviction that he would be able to eat her.

A decision he would have never made had he not eaten those Memories, had he not eaten Otto Suwen.

Ram: “For the most part, this is for Otto.”

Ram apprised him so; then, her wind-clad fist, the pigman's rock-like knuckles, and to top it all off the fiery bone spears clad in blasting burn and the stout arms of a fiendish beast, all impaled Roy Alphard in perfect synchrony.

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Chapter 44:
Collusion Beneath the Water's Surface

1

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never speak of fond reminiscences.

2

???: "—If you're also a father, then don't go laying your hands on kids!!"

Compared to the fist plowing straight into the opponent's mug, those words must have been far more scathing. —Laying eyes upon that sight, Rom-jii fathomed such a guess regarding the pain Heinkel had received.

With a counterattack strategy that fully relied on his ability to take hits, Heinkel endeavored to strike back against Flam and Grassis, but just before that could take form, he was superbly thwarted by Gaston—or to be precise, by the intervention of the young girl who had inserted Gaston there via Compression.

Rom: "Geez, really is quite somethin'…"

After verifying the safety of the twin sisters who had been released from the opponent's grasp, what Rom-jii turned his attentive gaze towards was the young girl riding on his shoulders—the side profile of Petra.

Petra: "…"

With her large, round eyes narrowed, and the lovely features of her cheeks strained, Petra diligently cast a serious gaze towards the two battlefronts.

Those being the bouts of combat clashing against Roy Alphard of Gluttony, and the swordsman who had betrayed the Kingdom—the

Backstabber, Heinkel. Originally, present there had also been the principal offender, Aldebaran, alongside his obedient shinobi, and the Divine Dragon which had bowed down before him.

There had been discussions on splitting up that dangerous ensemble, creating theaters of war such that each enemy could be dealt crushing blows individually, but it would have been no exaggeration to say that it was Petra who held the key to that stratagem's success.

The plan had been constructed around the opinions of Clind, a man intimately familiar with the Authority of Tristitia, and while all personnel were united in their efforts to bring about the success of this stratagem, the one ultimately contributing the most was Petra.

Without her, nary would this battle have even commenced. —And that had now culminated, in this very moment.

Petra: "—Hk."

Tightly biting down on her lip, Petra's nails firmly dug into the shoulders of Rom-jii as she sat on him. He felt no pain from the likes of a young girl's nails, but the state of her mind as she subconsciously did so was unimaginable.

The Witch Factors that reduced people to Witches and Sin Archbishops; the burden of handling one was something that could only have been understood by those who had actually done so. Furthermore, the duty that Petra now shouldered, was one for which Rom-jii's own name had also been raised as a candidate.

Albeit lacking in direct combat ability, his quick wits and ability to make decisions made him desirable to have on the field of battle.

That was precisely the role of Rom-jii and Petra, and while the difference in their Camps had ultimately been the deciding factor, Petra's duty was one that Rom-jii could very well have ended up shouldering.

Hence, while Rom-jii's ultimate priority in this battle was to take back Felt, he had decided in his heart that his secondary priority was to do everything in his power to support Petra. If it meant that Petra's burden could become even just a bit lighter, he would devote his entire soul to ensuring that no blunders or oversights occurred in his judgments and instructions regarding the war situation.

Rom: "Queen ta Flowers Three. Noble ta Lightning Two. Hunter ta Flowers Five."

Overlooking the battlefield, Rom-jii issued commands such that Petra could hear from atop his shoulders. Each time Petra received his instructions, and exercised the Authority, the scratches on his shoulders would deepen, becoming all the more more numerous.

Primarily, it was the battle against Gluttony in which Compression could be utilized. Roy seemed to be aware that Rom-jii and Petra were making contributions to the combat, but the way Ram conducted herself was exceptionally skillful. She continued to dexterously draw the opponent's attention, ensuring that he could not lay a hand on those in the position of command.

The fact that the combat continued to ebb and flow with a paper thin difference, even when including Compression, stemmed from the abundance of moves and cards in Gluttony's hand, but this stood in stark contrast to the other front, where the moves and cards in hand were desperately few.

Heinkel: "—Kuh."

With even his screams getting lost amidst the sounds of pummeling, Heinkel continued to be showered in blow after blow.

Joining the twins Flam and Grassis, Gaston supplemented their speedy flurry with the might of his arm, causing a one-sided beatdown that ought to already have been labeled punishment without fair trial to unfold. But, since the other party had still yet to bend the knee, Flam and the rest could not afford ease off, either.

On both fronts, a nudge would be required for things to progress. — It happened right after he had reached that thought.

Petra called out "—Rom-ojiisan", and with Rom-jii her eyes met.

Petra: "…"

By the mere crossing of their gazes, Rom-jii understood that Petra had arrived at the same conclusion he had. Without even sparing the time to nod in agreement, Rom-jii kept a keen eye out for a golden opportunity.

And then—

Rom: "Queen ta Yang Five—!"

As Rom-jii let the command fly, Petra exerted strength into the hands on his shoulders, into her round eyes, and activated Compression—in a manner most magnificent, the fruit of cooperation between Ram and two others vehemently surged towards Roy.

Petra: "—Alright!"

Roy's petite frame engulfed in wind, he basked in the attacks of the King Pig alongside two Witchbeasts, and was blown away. Spraying blood as he was shot up into the air, Roy had unmistakably been dealt a serious blow.

Just before that decisive blow was made, Roy had attempted to invoke the Authority of Gluttony on Ram, but with that ending in a misfire, he had given birth to a significantly fatal opening. —Once again, he was deeply impressed by the courage of Ram in laying that trap and having it actually succeed, as well as Petra's ingenuity for having proposed it.

—Formerly Ram, now Ram Leyte.

Taking advantage of the system, an unnatural proceeding to become adopted children had been performed for all personnel on the front lines whom Gluttony had a chance of targeting; 'twas an outlandish stratagem that betrayed the expectations of the Sin Archbishop.

Rom: "But with this…"

The situation had shifted. At the certain materialization of the move that had been desired to break the deadlock, Rom-jii tightly clenched his fist.

And then, maintaining that momentum, he shifted his sights in an attempt to progress the other situation—

Heinkel: "…Nobody, fucking move a muscle. If this brat's… if this personage's life is valuable to you."

—With the variation that had been birthed on that front, he was confronted with the worst predicament possible, that of Heinkel pressing his sword against Felt, pinioning her hands behind her back.

3

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never retell my favorite stories.

4

Aldebaran: "Sorry for everything up 'till now. In a lot of ways, I've put way too much burden on your shoulders, old man."

Giving that apology, it was right after Aldebaran had mercilessly beat down Heinkel by sheer force, just when the latter had been about to take an overly hasty action while conversing with Felt.

To be frank, Heinkel was aware that he had been about to carry out a deed that could never be undone, and thus reflected that he had no right to complain about having been beaten down. He had no choice but to accept the apology.

However, the reality that Felt had caught wind of—that alone, he absolutely could not afford to leave unchecked.

Heinkel's ever-slumbering wife, Louanna Astrea.

'Twas the fact that the slumber of the woman Heinkel held most dear was caused by his son, Reinhard.

Aldebaran: “Well, hold on a sec. I ain’t gonna ask about what happened between you and Lil’ Miss Felt, old man. But, didn’t I tell you? Old man, it was my fault for making you shoulder all that burden, yeah?”

Heinkel: “…Where are you going with this? What good will apologizing do?”

Aldebaran: “Of course, I won’t say something like “I apologized, so just keep hanging in there.” For now, I’ll deal with the matter of Lil’ Miss Felt.”

Heinkel: “Even if you say you’ll deal with it…”

Aldebaran: “I ain’t gonna do anything dangerous. Though, it might be a little crude.”

As Aldebaran spoke those words with a shrug of his shoulders, Heinkel’s cheeks tensed.

Regarding what he was thinking, he was a man with many inscrutable aspects to him. Even so, what Heinkel did understand was that, driven by the sorrow of having lost Priscilla, he had begun to turn the world against him.

That at the very foundation of Aldebaran, certainly present was a love towards that blazing Sun Princess.

However, Aldebaran had retained just enough good conscience to not go as far as sacrificing everything just for that purpose. —It felt as if such a thing no longer bound him; that he had broken free from his shackles.

Heinkel: “What… what are you planning to do?”

Aldebaran: “I won’t do anything bad to you, old man. Only, there’s just one thing I’d like to confirm.”

As he unwittingly gulped aloud, Heinkel felt a strong sense of thirst from his throat. It was a certain kind of premonition that only cowards were endowed with, that of wanting to hear what words came next, but with a simultaneous desire to not hear them.

Ignoring those feelings of Heinkel, Aldebaran vocalized his question.

That was—

Aldebaran: “Fifteen years ago, about the name of the royal who was abducted from the castle—”

For Heinkel—nay, for anyone in the Kingdom of Lugunica, speaking that name had gained a perception of being something of a taboo.

Fifteen years ago, the daughter of the King’s younger brother was abducted from the Royal Castle of Lugunica, and ever since then, her whereabouts had been unknown.

In the long and storied history of the Kingdom, it was not as though there had been an absence of royals who had led lives of misfortune. However, despite having been blessed by birth, she was the only one whose growth and conclusion were never spoken of.

???: “—Filóre Lugunica.” “1”

The forty-first King of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Randohal Lugunica; the daughter of his younger brother, Ford Lugunica, was the royal whom Heinkel had been suspected of abducting fifteen years prior.

Albeit, the suspicions of abduction were false accusations—after circulating from one place to the next, Heinkel had, unto the Royal Family to whom he ought to have sworn his fealty, and unto Ford whom he owed a great debt of gratitude, committed a blasphemy which he could never retract.

Far beyond simply betraying the Kingdom, that was a clear breach of faith on his friendship with the Royal Family.

???: “—Let’s eat.”

An abominable ritual of unspeakable sin, effectuated before his eyes.

From Aldebaran's question, that was something Heinkel had foreseen, and likely even hoped for. Despite being fully aware that the ritual had served as the impetus for many a tragedy, he still had hoped so.

After all, if that was enacted, Heinkel would not end up needing to kill her.

???: "Thank you for the treat-."

Placing two hands together, Roy announced the completion of the ritual, and with eyes upon that small figure's back, Heinkel came to his senses. He had been so eager to avert his gaze that, submerged in his thoughts, he had quite literally overlooked the deed taking place before his eyes.

Though he found it absurd that his heart still ached with each new unknightly deed he enacted, Heinkel stepped forth to change places with Roy, the latter cackling in delight.

And then—

Heinkel: "—Filóre-sama."

Getting down on one knee, Heinkel called out to the girl in such a manner.

Just what sort of answer had he been expecting? If she replied acknowledging that it referred to herself, then it would signify the failure of the ritual. If she replied that she did not know what that meant, it would still likely end up causing Heinkel anguish.

Sure enough, not even holding the answer within himself, the answer Heinkel received was—

Filóre: "Who, might that be referring to? No, in the first place…"

Heinkel: "…"

Filóre: "—Who, am I exactly?"

Ultimately, the reply signifying the ritual's success wounded Heinkel, causing him anguish.

Filóre: "Filóre, that is my name… something about it does not feel quite right."

With her Memories devoured, Filóre's attitude truly felt as though she were a different person entirely.

Her mannerisms, conduct, and way of speaking had all previously given the impression of crudeness and having been poorly raised, but as if that had all been a lie, she now carried herself with a grace and gentleness befitting royalty, greatly surprising Heinkel.

If not for the tragedy fifteen years prior, she would have likely been a member of royalty beloved by all.

Aldebaran: "But in exchange for that, she would've probably ended up dying of the same illness as the rest of the Royal Family."

As Heinkel was stricken with such deep emotions, Aldebaran made a rather tasteless comment.

But, that was likely the truth. The epidemic of unknown origin that seemed to have only targeted royalty; if Filóre had been in the castle, she would have likely not escaped harm. —Heinkel had been about to realize something about what that signified, but he shut his eyes, refusing to confront it directly.

By this point, Heinkel's mind and body were already filled to the brim. With the fulfillment of his dearest wish just ahead, his heart could not bear the shocking facts that kept being added on one after another.

Filóre: "Is there perhaps something troubling you?"

As Heinkel subconsciously placed his hands over his face, Filóre inquired so of him.

Even though she had been the one in a far more uncertain situation, being without her Memories, for her to still display concern for others was an act in which Heinkel certainly glimpsed the blood of the Lugunican Royal Family.

At the same time, convinced he was of a cruel reality—substantiated the moment the Authority of Gluttony was activated, of the fact that she was undoubtedly Filóre Lugunica.

And yet—

Heinkel: "…With this, I guess the Royal Selection's over."

Aldebaran: "Why'd you think that, old man?"

Heinkel: "Is there anything at all left? The reason why the Royal Selection is being held is to find a "successor" worthy of the throne. If it has to be said, it's a backup plan because the Royal Family perished… now that we know that they didn't die out, it's a given that everyone will go back on it."

As irony would have it, it was a truth that had only come to light because following Priscilla's death, Aldebaran had gone rogue and broken Gluttony out of prison, and because she had gotten to the crux of Heinkel's heart before losing her Memories.

It almost seemed as if the world itself had exerted its control in order to install Filóre on the throne.

Of course, Heinkel did not suggest anything so insensitive as saying that even Priscilla's death had been for that purpose, but ultimately, Filóre taking the throne would have been the most desirable outcome.

He would awaken Louanna. So long as that was fulfilled, it was in Heinkel's best interests for all matters to be settled without any problems.

Hence, the Witch of Envy would withdraw, and Filóre would take the throne. Such did he desire.

Aldebaran: “Alter, this is the most peaceful way to settle things. Got any problems with that?”

???: “…Just barely, because I was able to compromise on this, the lil’ miss avoided getting hurt. I think it’s a brilliant solution, Origin. It’s just—”

Aldebaran: “It’s just?”

???: “Did you really think of this plan by yourself, Origin? It doesn’t really seem like something you’d come up with.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Next to Heinkel as he came to terms with things, Aldebaran and the Divine Dragon debated over the treatment of Filóre in such a manner. Be that as it may, at least the problem Heinkel had been carrying was shelved for now. But then again, there was no doubt that bringing Filóre around without her Memories would only sow the seeds for new problems—

???: “In that case, it won’t become a problem or anything of the sort~. Right, Al-sama?”

As Yae stealthily peered at his face from right next to him, Heinkel’s breath caught.

As if she had seen straight through Heinkel’s inner apprehensions, she sent a sidelong glance his way as if mocking him, before proceeding to encourage Aldebaran as if presuming upon him.

From Yae’s disparaging attitude, he felt no sense of unease. What did give him a sense of unease, was the demeanor Aldebaran displayed towards her.

Aldebaran: “…Yeah. I did promise the old man, after all.”

Heinkel: “Ah? Promise?”

Aldebaran: “That I’ll be the one who deals with the matter of Lil’

Miss Felt… no, Lil’ Miss Filóre.”

Declaring so with an aloof, yet evidently callous attitude, Aldebaran ignored Heinkel’s bewilderment and “dealt with it”.

At that decisive—nay, that uncompromising attitude, for better or worse, Heinkel was dismayed.

The shift in the relationship between Aldebaran and Yae, the emotions the Divine Dragon harbored towards Filóre, the expansion of the scope of actions permitted to Gluttony, and the truth about Filóre that had come to light. —By no means were they a group with a unified relationship, but Heinkel could feel the strains and discrepancies gradually growing larger.

Amidst such a group, Heinkel resolved himself to at least remain as one who maintained his sanity.

No matter how suffocating a difficult situation he was placed in, Heinkel would be troubled were this group to fall apart before his goal was fulfilled.

Hence—

Heinkel: “—Even if it’s just me, I’ll act decently.”

Indeed, receiving the result of Filóre having been “dealt with”—the black orb around the size of a beanbag in which she had been sealed, thus did Heinkel vow.

Indeed, he had vowed.

Heinkel: “If you don’t want Filóre-sama to get hurt, then stand down…!”

—He had vowed, and yet.

Faced with a predicament, Heinkel had done an about face on that resolve of his; binding the arms of the grown-up Filóre behind her back, he pressed his sword against her slender neck.

???: “Felt… hk!”

Upon witnessing Heinkel’s act of violence, a man of solid physique called out to Filóre by a different name in frustration.

Flam and Grassis, who had been pummeling him without having ceased their movements, faced off against Heinkel, their gazes filled with anger and disdain, likely mixed in with a bit of anxiety and bewilderment.

From their perspective, there would have likely been two strands of surprise.

Similar to how they had been repeatedly appearing and disappearing, Filóre seemed to have appeared in Heinkel’s hands without any forewarning, and furthermore, Heinkel had called her by a different name than the one they knew.

There was no avoiding the perplexity and unease surging up in their eyes.

Heinkel: “I’m deeply sorry, but I do not wish to be rough. Please bear with me.”

As Heinkel pinioned the arms of Filóre and spoke those words to her, he was disgusted at his own chicanery.

He had endeavored. In this battle that had commenced all too suddenly, Heinkel had endeavored to the utmost to avoid getting Filóre involved. But, he had given up. As always, his efforts had borne no fruit.

And so, shattering the black orb with which Aldebaran had entrusted him, he released the sealed Filóre to the outside, and holding her hostage, he threatened the enemies who had appeared.

Heinkel: “Don’t move, you don’t want this personage to get hurt, yeah?”

Even as he stained his hands with such an atrocity, his secret courtesy towards Filóre proved some fragment of conscience still lingered within Heinkel.

Before he had gained conviction that she was Filóre, he had been able to disregard the beautiful golden hair and blazing red eyes that were proof of royalty as being naught more than a mere accidental resemblance. But, now that he had been convinced of her identity as Filóre, Heinkel was unable to interact with her the same way that he had up until that point.

Were he asked if it was a matter of changing his attitude based on the identity of the other party, the answer would have been yes. — To devote fealty towards those of the Lugunican Royal Family, 'twas a tenet entrenched in Heinkel by his parents.

Filóre: "—Hk."

Serving as a belated trump card, Filóre's throat rumbled as she was made to raise her visage.

Freshly liberated from that black orb, Filóre complied with Heinkel's will, perhaps because of the lingering disorientation of her consciousness, or perhaps because the sudden change in situation had caused her to lose her bearings.

While that irritated him to no end, the threat had been effective, with the opponents' movements having dulled. Seizing that opportunity, albeit he was still worried about Aldebaran and the others, Heinkel chose to prioritize rescuing Roy, who had fallen into a trap on the same battlefield—

???: "—Felt!!"

Unlike that which had been wrung out by the man of solid physique earlier, this was a voice carrying strength.

Across the battlefield thundered a shout woven from joy upon reuniting with a person held dear, faint ire beneath deep affection, together mixed in with a fear for her safety, and the ironclad determination to bring her home no matter what.

Filóre: “…”

At that voice, Filóre stirred within Heinkel’s arms.

Even if she was in a state lacking Memories, in a position unsure of friend or foe, any strong emotions directed towards herself would likely be conveyed. Slowly, she blinked open those signature red eyes of royalty, and met eyes with the old giant who had called out to her from afar.

Then, opening her lips, she began to spin words. Those were—

Filóre: “—Rom-jii! Take Gaston and everyone else and fall back! That is coming!”

With all the royal grace up until a moment prior cast aside, a voice laden with a gruff strength—as if lost Memories had been forcibly reclaimed at the call of someone treasured, ‘twas the roaring cry of the regal and valorous Golden Lion.

5

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never call others by terms of endearment.

6

—Of course, the reason why Felt had been able to warn her comrades of the oncoming peril stemmed not from any fairy-tale convenience like the miracle of love that Heinkel had thought it to be.

The ruthlessness of the Authority of Gluttony was extended far past the likes of Felt, evident in the tragedies of the people who had fallen prey to it and those who surrounded them. There existed nothing so absurd like the hotbed of those countless tragedies being resolved merely by the emotions that surrounded Felt.

Hence, the reason why Felt had returned from being “Filóre” to “Felt” here was plain and simple—to begin with, Roy had never even eaten Felt’s Memories.

Roy: “About after this, Felt-chan, seems we’ve got no choice bu~t to eat your Memories~. —Felt-chan, how about cooperating with us?”

The words left Roy’s lips soon after Aldebaran had resolved to “deal with” Felt, who had become a liability that threatened to fracture their group’s cohesion after discovering an unnecessary truth.

The unnecessary truth Felt had surmised would be devoured entirely by Roy along with her Memories, and it seemed like this opportunity was also being taken to get rid of Felt’s personality of impertinently prying into things one by one.

The idea was that so long as her life was not taken, it would be fine, but if Felt were to be asked, the moment she lost her Memories and stopped being her current self, it would be tantamount to killing her, so she did not approve of Aldebaran’s methods.

Felt: “But, that doesn’t mean that I’ll suddenly approve of yours. To begin with, by cooperating with the likes of you, what the hell are you trying to get me to do? “

Roy: “Hahaa~, that attitude is tantalizing you know~. But no need to worry, Felt-chan. After all, drafting scrupulous stratagems or having a perfect plan, that kinda stuff isn’t our creed~. What we want to ask you to do, Felt-chan, is decidedly, for you to pretend your Memories were eaten.”

Felt: “…Go on.”

Closing a single eye, Felt detected a possible value in hearing Roy out. Viewing her reaction, Roy chortled “Tha~t’s the spirit~!” in delight from the bottom of his heart.

Roy: “It’s not bad to keep going along with helmet uncle and the others like this~, but if we don’t take any action, the best we can hope for is being used up and tossed aside when the ideal time comes… see, we’re engraved with a curse mark, and it’s quite the unfavorable situation we’re in. That’s why, you see…”

Felt: “That’s why?”

Roy: “While you’re pretending to have lost your Memories, Felt-chan, just keep aiming and watching out for a chance to retaliate like you’ve always been. We’ll take advantage of the opportunity you might create, Felt-chan, and attempt to slip out from our position as captive Sin Archbishop, after all.”

Felt: “—. If I were to tell that to the helmet bastard, causing a falling out between you guys, you’d easily be eliminated; that line of thought also exists, you know?”

Roy: “Yes yes, that’s exactly it! Keep laying those sorts of traps~.”

Roy clapped his hands in great ecstacy, and trying to probe deeper into his true intentions, Felt quickly dismissed it. If he did happen to be concealing his true feelings, she did not think she could see through them, and it seemed to Felt that Roy was speaking sincerely.

And in reality, given Felt’s position, it was also the best proposal she could ask for. —Felt’s position, at this rate, would be that of being robbed of her Memories, with not a thing she could do about it.

Felt: “However, you’d need to have my name in order to even eat me in the first place. Your sibling didn’t know it, and that caused him to throw up.”

Roy: “Well~, that’s true. But, even you know it somewhere deep in your heart, don’t you, Felt-chan? That your real name might very well be the same as that of the princess renowned from the Kingdom’s tra~gedy?”

Felt: “…”

Roy: “A~h, or perhaps you would like to confirm? Though if Eclipsing succeeds using that name, we’d end up acquiring your Memories, but we’ll be able to verify. How about it?”

Felt: “Hah, now there’s a cheap provocation. —Fine, I’m in.”

As Roy languidly hung out his long tongue and peered at her face, Felt scoffed at him.

Just who actually was she? —Such a worthless question did not matter in the slightest to Felt. She knew that there were those to whom it might have mattered, but it was the same logic as before, that having her Memories stolen would have been the same as being killed.

Felt had already accumulated all her life experience as a person named “Felt”. Sorry, but regardless of how it started, any life in which she was not “Felt” had ended before even starting.

Such things were unnecessary. Hence, she would take advantage of the repulsive Gluttony’s machinations.

Felt: “I’ll be the only one victorious.”

Roy: “Kuku-, ah-hahaa~! We thought you’d say that! We believed it! But, even we will do our utmost by placing insurance to make sure that Felt-chan isn’t the only one who wins, you know?”

Felt: “Insurance, eh? Don’t say such lame things. Wager everything on a single shot.”

Roy: “Such gallantry is cool and whatnot~, but what’s important to us isn’t the likes of such pri~de. —Eat or be eaten, that’s all.”

With those words, Roy gnashed his teeth as if to celebrate the establishment of the collusion.

And thereafter, as promised, Roy had pretended to eat Felt’s Memories, leaving her as she was. Felt too abided by the collusion with Roy which she had half-doubted, and acted as though she had no Memories—she performed the role of the royal whom she did not even know, Filóre Lugunica.

Felt: “Sorry, but the only person I could think to mimic was Crusch-neechan.”

In the sense that she was a victim whose Memories had been eaten by Gluttony, the first thing that came to Felt’s mind was Crusch. Having used the sudden changes in her demeanor and manner of speech as a reference, it seemed like Filóre had somehow satisfied Aldebaran and the rest, and above all, Heinkel.

Fortunately, the times she needed to play Filóre were neither long nor many, as Felt had soon ended up being sealed in a peculiar black sphere through Aldebaran's magic. The sensations within that orb were exceedingly suffocating, and it was nothing nice, but—there were aspects that had helped her.

By reducing the amount of time she had needed to play Filóre, she had managed to avoid revealing their subterfuge. Had Felt unwittingly revealed it, Roy's "insurance" would have been invoked. With such she had been threatened.

Supposing Felt did not go along with the proposal, it had been prepared to ensure she had no choice but to go along with it, and to prevent her betrayal after she agreed, proving to serve as "insurance" in quite the literal sense of the word.

That was—

Felt: "—It's coming out from my shadow!!"

While Heinkel pinioned her arms, holding his sword fastened against her neck, she shouted.

Deceiving Aldebaran and his henchmen, the face down trap card prepared by the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, in order to flee from their grasp; listed alongside the White Whale and the Great Rabbit, it was the last of the Three Great Witchbeasts—

Felt: "—The Black Serpent!!"

—So it was that in response to the breach of the agreed upon collusion, brought forth to this theater of all-out war between the two factions was the Black Serpent, the Witchbeast of Pestilence responsible for having massacred the most living creatures in this world since its birth. "2"

Chapter 45:
Clash of the Suprarational

1

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never invite another into my home.

2

—In her defense, Felt had not initially accepted Roy's conditions with the intention of immediately reneging on them.

The "insurance" he had imposed on her had certainly been "insurance".

That threat was known to Felt, and if she were to act carelessly in any way, it was very likely that she would bring enormous harm to not only her own life as a matter of course, but also to her surroundings.

Therefore, despite how annoying it was, she intended to go along with Roy's plan, playing the part of Filóre Lugunica and waiting for as large of an opening as possible from Aldebaran and the others. Of course, she intended on further outmaneuvering Roy as he tried to outmaneuver them.

However, that determination within Felt was soon forced to change course.

???: "—Felt!!"

Released from the sealed space, while feeling the frigidity of steel against the skin of her neck, Felt poured everything into getting a grasp on the situation. The first thing was the "insurance" that she would act as Filóre—to prevent that which had a risk of being invoked, regardless of if Roy was watching or not. On top of that, she was seeking an opportunity to give any members of Aldebaran's group a taste of their own medicine.

Such various determinations cracked the moment that familiar voice had called out to her.

Felt: "…"

Pinned in a nelson hold, Felt raised her head slightly and looked.

At the edge of the battlefield, the loud voice that had called out for Felt was Rom-jii, whom she was already missing after only two or three days. She was overjoyed, but at the same time, she understood that she was a hostage for this purpose, and she forcefully fastened the mask of Filóre that was beginning to slip—then, their eyes met.

With Rom-jii, it was not. Rather, it was with the pale blue eyes of the girl perched atop those shoulders with his.

—In that instant, information flooded into Felt's head with a terrifying ferocity.

Felt: "—Ugh."

Within the blinking red eyes of Felt, the muddy torrent raged like there was no time that could be spared.

Apparently the middle of a battle, Aldebaran and Yae and the Divine Dragon absent, all-out war with only Roy and Heinkel remaining, divide and conquer plus ambush tactics, my Rom-jii in command as expected, Reinhard continuing to engage the Witch, on top of that, on top of, on top, on—

Felt: "—Rom-jii! Take Gaston and everyone else and fall back! That is coming!"

After wading through the unrelenting muddy torrent of information, Felt raised her voice with the belief that this was the optimal choice.

Even should she continue to act as Filóre for fear of the "insurance", there was a high probability that Roy, who was caught in a predicament on the battlefield, would break his promise in order to overturn the situation. To begin with, he was a Sin Archbishop. It would be a mistake to place such faith in matters such as them keeping their promises.

After all, Roy had been lying from the start. —Conspiring with Felt to escape after exploiting an opening made by Aldebaran and the others was an outright lie. From the onset, Roy had only ever thought of devouring everyone: Felt, Aldebaran, Yae, Volcanica, and Heinkel included.

As such—

Felt: "—It's coming out from my shadow!!"

In this act of forestalling Roy, she had harbored no hesitation or indecision whatsoever.

If there was but one thing, it was solely the fear that they would be unable to handle the "insurance", but that fear had been dispelled by the presence of those here, and in particular, by Rom-jii.

—If Rom-jii was present, there was nothing that could not be accomplished.

The hope that many throughout the world held in the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, was something that Felt harbored in this elderly giant.

Therefore—

Felt: "—The Black Serpent!!"

Even though a dreadful torrent of Death poured out from her own shadow, in Felt's eyes, in her heart, there existed not a single shred of fear whatsoever.

3

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never nurse the deathbed of another.

4

—One of the Three Great Witchbeasts: the Witchbeast of Pestilence, the Black Serpent.

While blighting humanity was in the core nature of the species known as Witchbeasts, the reason why the Three Great Witchbeasts were considered to stand in a league of their own even among that genus, was simply because, in addition to embodying that base ecology of Witchbeasts, the scale of destruction they wrought was far too catastrophically vast.

—Surrounded many a time by the military campaigns of every nation, and enshrouded by a mist that entirely erased the majority of those forces: the White Whale.

—Leaving no scraps behind as it devoured countless livelihoods with a calamitous appetite, the ravenous bane that stripped even tragedy bare as it cleaned its plate: the Great Rabbit.

Enrolled alongside the Black Serpent, the dreadfulness of those extolled as the Three Great Witchbeasts went without saying. Yet, even beside the White Whale and Great Rabbit, the Black Serpent stood apart, an anomalous existence that defied all regularity.

As stated previously, the Three Great Witchbeasts were beings that wrought frighteningly more harm than any other Witchbeasts. —If that condition were to have been strictly obeyed, then the Black Serpent, rather than having been listed among the Three Great Witchbeasts, would have instead been worthy of reigning as the Great Witchbeast, singular.

After all, the Black Serpent had bereaved a number of lives astronomically greater than that of either the White Whale or the Great Rabbit, what with it having delivered ruination unto a great country that had formerly existed, reducing what were once the Five Great Countries to the Four Great Countries.

Rom: “Nwahh—?!”

Apprised of the arrival of the Black Serpent, Rom-jii’s voice subsequently erupted in surprise.

That instant, burgeoning from the shadow at Felt's feet was a dense conglomeration of Miasma so dark that its true state could be ascertained on sight—appearing just as though the shadow itself had poked its head up, it was an utmost malefic menace made manifest, unparalleled in its ability to remind all living creatures of their instinctive aversion to Death.

And yet—

Rom: "Hey, what in tarnation's with them eyes…!"

Despite the fact that she would have been acutely feeling the dreadful aura of the Witchbeast up close, the fact that Felt's eyes housed no fear as she looked at him, instead carrying only an unwavering faith, brought Rom-jii's heart to a boil.

Suppressing the instincts of self-preservation that were all too superfluous for the elderly, a desire to meet her expectations was blazed within him.

Rom: "Petraaa!"

Petra: "Understood-!"

Forthwith, the young girl who had responded hopped down from Rom-jii's shoulders. Drawing his chin back at the clever girl's decision, Rom-jii fixed his gaze afore—Compression was invoked.

Rom: "…"

A sharp sensation, as if consigning his surroundings to oblivion, tremored through Rom-jii's soul.

Supposing this power had been at play in the many battles that Rom-jii—that Valga Cromwell had come to be involved with, then the tactics utilized, the outcomes begotten, even history itself would have likely undergone a massive upheaval.

By merely laying eyes upon the power of an Authority, by the mere sensation of a Witch Factor in close proximity, he could not help but conceive of such "what if" scenarios. Likely, that was the unmistakable genesis of what captivated those chosen by Witch

Factors with prospects of power, leading them astray as they drowned in delusions of omnipotence, invariably degrading them into repulsive abominations.

Wielding such a thing—

Petra: “—Hk!”

Firmly clenching her molars, it was with a brave heart that Petra endured.

A brief while though it might have been, there was no doubt that the Witch Factor was saddling her with a correspondent burden. Despite wishing to liberate her from it as soon as possible, reality betrayed his wishes, forcing her to exercise that power. The fact that Rom-jii too was naught more than a part of that odious reality, irritated him to no end.

It was precisely for that reason, precisely because it was being forced on her, that he would at least return home with the greatest results possible.

Rom: “Warrior ta Lightnin’ Eight. Soldier ta Flowers Eight.”

Concurrent to that vocalization from his thick lips, was the sensation of thoughts bursting asunder.

In accordance with Rom-jii’s commands, Petra passed brisk judgement, retrieving the trio of Flam, Grassis, and Gaston through Compression, and dropping them towards the rear of the battlefield.

Rom-jii, having advanced an equivalent distance forward to take their place, ripped Felt free from Heinkel’s continued hold, and planned to withdraw once again.

However—

???: “How cruel~, didn’t we say that we’d run away toge~ther?”

For a moment, a voice lacquered with slimy unpleasantness overlaid the nasty resonance of flesh forcibly being pierced.

A scorching pain flashed belatedly, causing Rom-jii to let out a groan as he locked eyes with the owner of the spear hand that had impaled his right flank, with the bloodstained smile of Roy.

Roy, who ought to have sustained a fatal wound at the coordinated onslaught by Ram and the others a moment ago, continued to bare his fangs while his petite, wound-riddled body was stained red with blood.

Felt: “Bastard, doing that to Rom-jii is… hk.”

Roy: “We did warn you, no? These guys won’t even properly listen to what we have to say is what we’re saying!”

Gnashing his teeth as Felt flared up in anger, Roy gestured behind him with a jerk of his chin.

A befouling spire of black sprouted up on a grand scale, unveiling a genuine threat to gnaw away at one’s life, to eclipse it entirely were they to merely catch a glimpse, let alone lay hands upon it; a peril instinctually perceived by any and all that lived.

This was no empty threat or bluff, present there was indeed the baleful legend known as the Black Serpent.

Rom: “—Nhh.”

Enduring the pain of his flank being impaled, Rom-jii’s thoughts flared to the point of incandescence.

Attempting to do something about it here would be a bad idea even among the pantheon of piss poor plans. But, given that Roy would naturally interfere with their plans, escaping with Compression would be difficult. Did Roy possess a means of avoiding the Black Serpent’s cataclysmic malevolence, or was this perhaps a suicide tactic resolved to take them down along with himself? To devise the best possible course of action in order to prevent that, thinkthinkthinkthinkthinkthink—

Rom: “—Protect the daughter of Ford!”

As for why his ardent thoughts had terminated upon such a conclusion, not even Rom-jii himself was aware. Only, with his thought process to arrive there condensed to the utmost extremity, he exclaimed.

And receiving that bloodcurdling outcry from Rom-jii, a lone man concorded.

???: “UGH, GAHHHHHHH—!”

The owner of that fearful, quavering voice reflexively brandished his sword, obliquely slashing at Roy, who was attempting to cling to Rom-jii’s giant body, blowing him away.

The mastery in that silver flash was something that astonished even the very man who had performed it, and thus, having been rescued by that, it delivered a shock onto Felt as if the heavens had come crashing down.

Felt: “You…”

Heinkel: “—Hk!”

Motionlessly looking back at Felt, whose eyes were opened wide, Heinkel grit his teeth and reached out his hand. Reaching straight ahead, not towards Felt, but towards the large body of Rom-jii who had pulled her close, he pushed. On the receiving end of that unimaginably vehement shove, Rom-jii’s body was sent flying by its vigor.

And then, in front of Rom-jii and Felt as they watched, having been thrust away—

Heinkel: “Filóre-sama, I’m—”

That countenance, an amalgam of turmoil and regret and love and hate; just how could anyone have described it? The words spun by those lips, enigmatic and labyrinthine to the utmost, just what sort of sentiments had they been attempting to convey?

All was unknown. —Before those words could take form, Heinkel Astrea was swallowed by the downpour of befoulment known as the Black Serpent, vanishing altogether.

Rom: “…”

As befoulment cascaded like a waterfall, the land, steeped in baleful black, drew its final breath.

Arboreal watchers of wood and bark withered, flora festered in rot, and waters seethed with blight. Nary a hue of life was left behind by the Black Serpent’s foul tongue following its tarnish; instead, it engulfed aught in its path, extinguishing all embers of life without discrimination.

And of course, with that befoulment spilled all over his head, Heinkel was no exception.

Felt: “—Goddamn idiot!”
Roy: “A~h, what a waste-!”

Bearing witness to that sight, the bitter reactions of Felt and Roy ironically coincided.

But, as the other relevant party, Rom-jii possessed no right to lament that. After all, he was at least aware that it was his outcry just now that had spurred Heinkel to enact that deed with his life on the line.

But regardless of whether he was self-aware or not, his determination was immediately renewed by Roy's appetite.

Roy: "Filóre Lugu—Rom: "Hunter ta Wind Two!""

Whilst befouling lethality gushed forth like spring water, the voice of Roy, prioritizing his appetite, was drowned out by Rom-jii's.

As the small figure pounced at them, Rom-jii twisted his body to keep Felt at a distance; and to his clever companion, he issued an order, not to have them withdraw, but to break the deadlock.

???: "—AROOOOOO!!"

???: "This child, not even I have confidence in stopping i~t!"

Summoned by those commands, surfacing there were Meili and the sinister beast of large build to which she clung.

As a roar overlapped with the self-deprecating remark, and the beast's claws seized Roy head-on, the Witchbeast Master pointed at the potpourri of befoulment, and yelled with all her might.

Meili: "SIT DOWN-!!"

The thunderclap that was Meili's command struck the Witchbeast with an inexorable impulse.

Forthwith, as the befoulment had been attempting to bifurcate whilst slithering across the ground, within shadow, borne in its movements was a disturbance; and having shifted places with the sinister beast, Rom-jii and the others escaped the Black Serpent's immediate range. Having fled, he resumed breathing, and turning only his neck, he finally caught sight of the befoulment in its entirety—and failed to muster even a single word.

Rom: "…"

This was no lifeform so cute as a Witchbeast, this was Death incarnate.

The befoulment that had overflowed from the forest's shadows coalesced, taking form as a serpentine contour. However, that contour was not of flesh or scale, instead, ‘twas naught more than a festering den of pathology, pestilence, and plague innumerable, an endless helix of lesions, disease, and blight, brought together by malign coincidence to assume such a shape.

Its ulcerations, akin to the scales that clad a snake’s body, would swell and burst, releasing droplets of deep black to scatter like pus; a mere touch from a single drop enough to make anything rot and wither away with nary a sound. The tip of the contour, barely acceptable to even be called a head, began to bloom like a flower, and from within writhed countless slender, filamentous protuberances, akin to tongues or tentacles, or perhaps more aptly, an infestation of parasites.

Worthy of being crowned the Vilest of All Witchbeasts beyond any shadow of a doubt, that was a being whose very existence tolled the warning bells of life.

If the White Whale devoured history from the aether, and the Great Rabbit gorged on livelihoods upon the ground, then the Black Serpent was none other than the very calamity of ruin that diseased the world itself, blighting it with rot.

Roy: “That perception’s RIGHT- ON- THE- MONEY-—!”

Within Rom-jii’s vision as he shuddered, the loud voice of Roy cheered in jubilation upon the land befouled by the Black Serpent.

At the same time, the Witchbeast of large build was launched skyward by a palm strike from directly below, its blood arcing through the air like a crimson trail.

Meili: “Shadow Lion-chan—hk!!”

An exclamation, Meili’s hand outstretched to no avail.

The Witchbeast that had been shot upwards, the Guiltilaw, plummeted to the ground that had been befouled by the Black Serpent in an unavoidable crash; its gargantuan build was licked by that foul tongue, violating it with terrible vigor. With the roar of its agonizing death screech as his backdrop, Roy too stood at the heart of the befoulment. —Even so, manipulating the blood pouring from his gashed wounds, Roy had fashioned for himself legs akin to those of a crustacean, concocting a stance with his feet hovering above the ground.

Roy: “A~h, you don’t have to cry, Meili. That child will be reborn, just like this.”

Roy pronounced so and clicked his fingers, and that which used to be the Guiltilaw, tarnished to a clump of black matter after being swallowed by the befoulment, now began to distend, and the Witchbeast’s massive build metamorphosed into countless kaleidoscopic butterflies.

Butterflies of myriad proportions, hued in the spectra of rainbow, fluttered into a whirling dance whilst Roy wickedly gave an iniquitous smile within the enshrouding Miasma of the Black Serpent.

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Rom: “The Black Serpent… Felt, you…”

Felt: “He did say he couldn’t steer it well by himself, but he was able to pull off something like concealing it in my shadow with some conditions attached. I don’t have any reason to honestly believe him.”

Roy: “How sad~! You couldn’t trust us and for that reason betrayed us or something, is that what it means? To do something so crooked as deceiving a Sin Archbishop, won’t your Royal-born blood cry and weep over thi~s?”

Felt: “Sorry, but my blood’s made of the water and bread from the slums. No matter who or what my parents are, I don’t need any meekness that’d have me crying over betraying a bastard like you.”

As Felt gallantly retorted Roy’s mockery, her gaze shifted towards the coiling befoulment known as the Black Serpent—towards the location Heinkel had occupied, as he was engulfed by the torrent of black. Having witnessed the fate of the Guiltilaw a moment prior, it was not difficult to imagine the end Heinkel had met.

He was a man whom neither Rom-jii, nor anyone else in the Camp, would have harbored a good impression of. But, he was Reinhard’s father. With Felt as a hostage, they likely would have also had some conversations.

For him to meet his end as the Black Serpent’s prey, was far too cruel to be called recompense.

???: “—UL GOA!!”

That sentimentality of his was blazed to naught by a coarse voice.

Passing over Rom-jii’s head, hellfire brilliantly lit up the forest as it closed in on the Black Serpent. Plowing into it, the infernal explosion tempestuously perturbed the befoulment, and the hot, putrid malodor immediately asserted a sense of reality for the scene before them.

And, the one who had launched such a merciless offensive upon the Black Serpent, was an individual who had newly joined the fray—

???: "Oi, Felt! If you're back safe, then start giving us orders! Isn't that your damn job?!"

Having fired off a flashy attack in place of a proper greeting, Rachins sparked a fire of determination within her.

Seemingly having exerted himself quite a bit, Rachins was already out of breath despite only just arriving at the battle. However, that determination went into effect immediately. Right after widening her eyes slightly, Felt valiantly braced her cheeks—

Felt: "Rom-jii, let me win this."

Rom: "…Don't'cha go bein' rash now."

Felt: "I wouldn't be asking if there was no shot."

Rom: "Didn't say that there ain't no shot. I'd said, don't be rash."

He was wounded on his flank, and it did not seem like he would be able to move with any haste. He ought to devote himself to the work he could perform, so with the blood that had rushed to his head coming back down, he cooled off to think rationally.

Supposing Gluttony were to lay his hand upon Felt, what might occur if the name Filóre Lugunica were used? —Knowing the answer to that question, Rom-jii quelled his sentimentality, and began to work his thoughts.

And as if having found that demeanor of Rom-jii's reliable, Felt smacked her cheeks with both her hands,

Felt: "Alright, time for orders, as requested. —Let's do this, you bastards!!"

Everyone: "YEAHHHHHH—!!"

Receiving Felt's invigorating command, voices began to rise, with those of Rachins and Gaston being the first.

Facing a Sin Archbishop and the Black Serpent, foes truly worthy of being called threats to the world, whilst feeling proud of his comrades who roused their spirits instead of faltering, Rom-jii also smacked his cheeks with his hands.

Roy: “A~h—”

Indeed, basking in the gazes of hostility directed towards him, Roy embraced his own body,

Roy: “—It’s irresisti~ble. —Everyone, all of you, to the greatest-level- possible-, love you-!”

5

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never hold the hand of another.

6

Harboring the aegis of delight, want to eat.

Harboring the aegis of gratitude, want to eat.

Harboring the aegis of affection, want to eat.

Bearing not rage, not sorrow, not fear, not animus, not diffidence, not repugnance, not hatred, not begrudgement, not grief, not scorn, not disdain, not malediction, not acrimony, want to eat.

—From the deepest depths of his heart, all of those present here did Roy Alphard of Bizarre Eating want to eat.

Roy: “But, there’s many obstacles to tha~t.”

Discarding his clothes, torn to shreds as they were, Roy bared his skin marred in wounds to the wind, licking his lips.

Requisitioning advantage on the misfire of Eclipsing, Ram and company’s hospitality had dealt him enormous damage, so the equanimity Roy was purporting to show was, in reality, equanimity of which he was bereft. He was reutilizing his copious volumes of blood through the magic of the Bloodweeping Oni, and the Witchbeasts and creatures of the forest that had perished due to the Black Serpent's befoulment as rainbow-hued butterflies with the power of the Lord of Phantasmal Rainbows, but from Roy bearing the effects of Aldebaran's curse mark, even the freedom to abscond from the battlefield was lost.

But then again, even should that not hold true, in the face of those treating him to such a feast, the option to run did not so much as even pass through the mind of Roy of Bizarre Eating.

Roy: "We're different from Ley of Gourmet after a~ll."

With myriads of likes and dislikes, Ley, who would be fastidious about the persons to be eaten, tended to be particular about the situation as well.

Befittingly, he would utilize desertion or postponement if necessary as a substitution for spice, but Roy was different. To not be fastidious, meant his appetite craved all persons equivalently.

Videlicet, Roy Alphard wanted to devour every last person in this world.

Thus, to abscond would be outrageous. Should he ever become unable to meet somebody again after meeting them once, no number of aprons doused in drools of vexing regret would likely ever suffice.

Roy: "For us who are like that~, this preliminary preparation of ingredients is a bi~t troublesome you see~."

Through both "Ram" and "Ram Mathers", he had foundered on eating Ram .

The alteration of the true name was unmistakable. However, for no cues to match even in the newest Memories of someone close to her meant that there were an interminable number of candidates for the true name post-alteration—and likely, it was possible that not just Ram, but everyone in the vanguard had arranged the same preliminary preparation of ingredients.

Roy: “Even the name of the Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte, who knows for how much can that be truste~d.”

Even her act of having pronounced it as her name loud and clear, now this appeared to be an extensive trap.

Bearing that in mind, in the present situation, that which was in scope for Roy to outstretch his hand and reach for was only to the extent of Felt, who was almost certainly Filóre Lugunica, but even that was not fully definite.

In the one in ten-thousand chance that attempting such on Felt were to end with a swinging and a miss, triggering the vomiting recoil of Eclipsing with a “Blergh-”, then the opening Roy caused for himself would be taken advantage of and this time, with certitude, it would be the terminus.

Thus, with emotion of heartbreak, Roy made a determination verboten to Gluttony—

Roy: “—Let’s put off eating, for now.”

At this very present moment, ascertaining the true names of these tasty treats in order to wolf every last one of them down would be impossible.

In order to clean them off the plate without leaving any scraps, what must be given foremost priority in this place was the stocking up of preserved foods. Providentially, the Black Serpent obeying Roy was the one head with that as its forte. —To that end, he had idealized to manifest the Black Serpent at a spot with a greater multitude of people, but with that included, Felt’s decision to turn traitor was of an exquisitely unfavorable timing for Roy.

Roy: “But that’s precisely what-! Makes-! Eating-! Worth-! It-!”

The precipice of exsanguination, enormously damaged, hunger amongst hunger, the utmost sensation of starvation—full force Bizarre Eating.

Joining his hands before his chest, he bulldozed the world from both ends of his field of vision to a convergence at its center.

Trees with roots entrenched deep were smashed, even the grounded earth trodden down in immense natural spontaneity got exhumed in the crossfire by the might of the Compactor, seeking to block the escape routes of the prey retreating back to safe turf.

Felt: “Gaston! Doltero!”

The two colossi sought to cease the fabrication of that firm wall of earth through brute force. The struggle only lasted for but a moment, the resistance towards the compaction rebounding to Roy’s closed hands, and forcing them to spread apart as fire billowed before his eyes.

Felt: “Rachins! Maid-neechan!”

The fireball of the sanpaku eyes coalesced with the wind brought forth by Ram, thus birthing a tornado of fire. Roy expended three of the whirl-dancing butterflies against it and countered it with a water spear of the Magia Manus Magister.

The butterflies that emerged from Mana leftover in carcasses exhibited destructive might despite being of simple chemical construct, but they were also capable of sequestrating magic as external tanks of Mana. For Roy, who wished to subsist the Flow Method in his dying body with his own Mana expense, they were automated reinforcements who would only be supplemented the more the Black Serpent slaughtered.

Felt: “Flam! Grassis!”

The tornado of fire and the iceberg collided, with his vision being engulfed by the consequent steam eruption.

Piercing through the world where the waxen white of the skies and the sable black of the grounds were repainted, the merciless sortie of the twins befell Roy, discounting his desire to take a breath.

Willfully devouring it with the sturdy skin of the Carnivorous Beast, he reciprocated the favor with a combined offensive onslaught, taking in his right hand the Fist King, and the Snow Vallum in his left, knocking off the twins together into the ground besmirched with befoulment.

But on the escarpment of the virulent foul tongue of blight swallowing the twins, a bone spear of the lunging Hungry Horse King collected the two, retrieving them from the span of lethality. Pulverizing the other bone spear, which had been thrust forth, alongside its arm through the song of the Blightlove Troubadour, the destitute fruits of battle made Roy's stomach squirm with peristalses of starvation.

There—

Roy: "BIIIIG WAAAAAVE!"

In Roy's immediate rear, the Black Serpent stretched its body high up into the sky and slowly, like a felled tree, flopped down ahead—where all of its prey had assembled.

A single touch being the harbinger of end; the clod of impulses far too ruinous to be construed with a classification as tepid as murder, the Black Serpent conducted its hunt in a manner that, whilst admittedly lacking in creativity, could be crudely connoted as cursory, a congenital conqueror. By just scattering its mass would its opponents perish, thus it did not requisite greater astuteness.

That was what callously descended upon Felt and the others head-on—

Felt: "—Live!"
Everyone: "Strong—!!"

The roars that became one transfigured into strength, and the Black Serpent's befoulment that would sleet down onto the ground was barged back.

The ones charged with physical labor exhumed the ground, the ones charged with magic reinforced that ground to act as a bulwark, the ones charged with techniques mortared it such that the Black Serpent would receive the blow, earning the singular second of the bulwark's dissolution for them to retreat.

Every one of everyone, mobilized to the utmost with unfathomable harmony—

Roy: "…"

Resolute, intrepid, what gallantry.

Entering the visual percept of the Black Serpent scattering the menace of lethality, whilst combating Roy who transmutated the existences of formidable enemies (friends) fought so far into power, they who marched forward absent of dither possessed might that was inexplicable.

Roy: "Normally, you'd panic or be astonished or be shuddering or something, you kno~w!"

Chaos, fright, trepidation; their conduct elided over these appropriate impacts at which Roy vociferated.

Harmony greater than that between family or lovers, blended with resolution and grit resembling the apotheosis of aberrants. Unmistakable. They were finessed to completion. —All of them together, were a singular, excessively extravagant platter.

The moment he contemplated so, before the lineup rich in variety and the abounding assortment of hues, his heart capered that none were the appetizer, the side dish, or the main course. All of them were equivalent, invaluable, deeply flavorful uniques.

As Roy's eyes sparkled in such elation, Felt rolled through the plume of smoke and hoisted a middle finger at him. She flaunted her sharpened high canines,

Felt: "Don't stand around drooling over yourself, you manic bastard!"

Roy: "You all are so exceedingly beloved that it's impossible not to-!"

Towards Felt, who was acting as the nucleus and instructed directions of mobilization to her comrades, the affection exacerbated.

In the beginning he was indignant with rage for his plans being betrayed, but now he was thankful for her betrayal. To be served with hospitality so wonderful, this side must also return the favor or it would bring dishonor to the name Sin Archbishop.

Roy: "…"

Upon glancing, he perceived the Black Serpent's movements to be sluggish.

The Black Serpent was intrinsically a Witchbeast of ploddingly laggard movement that corroded the area, proliferating blight by befouling the ground leaving naught a crevice behind. As a hunter, its efficiency was by no means high. Being just one of its heads, it was unquestionably not operating at its normal condition, but even so, its movements being yet duller was due to—

???: "Sit down, no~w… hk."

Clinging to the Hungry Horse King with slender arms, Meili inhibited the Black Serpent's movements with her quavering timbre.

Eyes bloodshot, she overexerted the Divine Protection she had been blessed with, and its recoil must have been bestowing upon her a sensation of her soul being seared, of her blood being smouldered.

Yet, her Divine Protection of Fiend Manipulation was interfering with even the Black Serpent, one of the Three Great Witchbeasts. —Though in truth, the Black Serpent's responses seemed slow even when taking that into account.

Roy: "After having gone so far-! Let us-! Compensate for that-! On this end~!"

Harboring the emotion to extol not the beleaguered Black Serpent but the beleaguering Meili, Roy joined his hands and jutted the ground upward, off of which the rainbow-hued butterflies blasted, scattering shrapnel of the befouling variety.

Befoulment of death that would eliminate upon touch. If the movements of the Black Serpent itself were slow, then all he must do was to take up charge for the task of spattering. Accruing two, three successive eruptions, a wide acreage was spritzed in black.

Roy: “Haha~, hahaha~, hahahaha~-!”

Naturally, being at the epicenter of the eruption, Roy’s life would also be in peril should he bathe in the befoul. Hence Roy coated himself in an armor of blood, braced to perfectly avoid basking in the spattering daub of befoulment.

Besides a select few exceptions, there was nobody capable of dodging rain. Furthermore, it was improbable for all members of the plates of treats to be such exceptions, thus the bombardment of the Black Serpent’s befoulment would ruthlessly lacquer the battlefield in black. There were limits to how much the prey could protect one another. Incapacitating Meili would be ideal, but—

Roy: “Huh?”

A vacuous, doltish voice escaped Roy’s throat as he removed his faceguard of blood.

Before his sight, amidst the thickets felled to necrosis by the spattered daub of befoulment, was a gaping space that had eluded the blight—therein were the forms of the treats assembled together, backs joined together, successfully safeguarding from the bombardment of death.

Roy: “Just no way.”

The insuperable scales of the kaleidoscope of rainbow-hued butterflies, were intercepted by the boisterous dance of the ground’s bombardment.

Roy: “There’s no way.”

The compaction which squashed his field of vision from edges to center, was curbed at its inception, thus thwarting its invocation.

Roy: “We’re saying there’s no way.”

His impediment, aiming to transpierce their eardrums through a strident song, was drowned out by the clangorous detonation kindled by gale and flame.

Roy: “There’s just no way, we’re telling you there’s no way, because there is no way-.”

Turning the Stomach of Souls inside out, wielding all within his grasp without restraint, using the might of the suprarational, with even the truth of their existences fostering terror having vanished, he had begotten successive cataclysms.

The Aldebusters, however, with Felt at the helm, responded to counter all of it with precision and optimum conduct, synchronously coordinating as though all of them together formed a singular organism.

—This was odd.

Roy: “…”

Whilst repeating onslaughts which whittled the world and its common sense, without pause and unremitting, Roy was posed with a doubt.

No matter what, this was odd. It was certain that they were gallant. They placed trust in one another. Their purpose was one. They were superlative and adroit. They were strong.

—Even so, this was odd.

Humans were incapable of conduct optimized to this magnitude.

Yet notwithstanding, Felt and the others continued to play the utmost effective cards in their hand with the best possible timings against every possible kind of offensive.

Roy was acquainted with this sensation. Aldebaran, when he had fought him at the Prison Tower.

Upon unfastening the captive Roy’s seal, Aldebaran had battered Roy to demonstrate the difference in their strength. The inexplicability that had disabled his arms and legs alike, this was the same—close, but different. That had ultimately only been the abnormal essence of Aldebaran standalone. However, this was an abnormal essence dwelling in every single enemy present.

—Something, was clearly wrong.

Roy: “—A~h, misjudged, haven’t we~?”

The unordinary that paralyzed common sense, the suprarational inexplicable through reason, the inscrutable that precluded debate.

These abnormal straits induced, his hungry stomach glutted with doubt, Roy arrived at an inordinately obvious truth and cursed himself.

Based on her authoritative commands, he had been set under the impression that the enemy’s nucleus had been Felt.

This guided direction of Roy’s rationale was also a part of their plan. The true person at the nucleus was not Felt, but the string-puller concealed behind her; with this conjecture, Roy shot a leer in that direction.

Just then, the string-puller blinked their eyes with an “Ah”—

7

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never desire reconciliation with another.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never rage on the behalf of another.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never divulge secrets to another.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never to display weakness to another.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never watch the morning sun in the company of another.

8

???: “—Perhaps, you finally noticed?”

As she responded so, having Compressed all the thought processes of her allies present there, in addition to all the processes of discussion in order to share that information amongst themselves, the Witch of Tristitia closed a single eye and winked.

Chapter 46:
The Witch of Tristitia

1

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never be picky about anything.

2

—The Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte.

To begin with, how had Petra ended up in a position to receive the Witch Factor of Tristitia?

The reason why the original proprietor, Clind, had been unable to take on the role, was because he had a duty that only he could fulfill—because he was the one who had to subdue the Divine Dragon Volcanica.

And ultimately, anybody other than him could have served the role of proprietor just fine.

Naturally, there were some who would be less suited to utilizing the Authority of Tristitia than others, as well as those such as Emilia and Meili, who would serve as capable fighters even without it, and Rem, who had her own role to play, and thus were quickly excluded from candidacy. However, even after leaving out those girls, there were still plenty of candidates.

Hence, the greatest reason why the other final remaining candidates, Ram and Rom-jii, were set aside in favor of selecting Petra to hold the Witch Factor, was due to decisions based on more than just comprehensive fighting strength.

—Simply put, Petra had the topmost ability to wield the Authority.

Felt: "—About the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony… that Roy bastard, given that he insists on devouring everything he can get his hands on, the amount of moves he's got to play can't be anything ordinary. What are we gonna do?" / Flam: "Close-quarter, mid-range, and long-distance combat will all be troublesome to perform." / Grassis: "Foul play. Like the young master." / Rachins & Gaston: "If he's the same as Reinhard then how the hell's anyone supposed to win?!" / Rom: "Don't'cha be kickin' up such a loud racket! Grassis, don't'cha be sayin' such thoughtless things. It'll only serve ta overwhelm 'em." / Ram: "Hah! You all are quite close. If you already feel like you've won, care to share that feeling with Ram?" / Rom: "This girl's got quite the sharp tongue…" / Felt: "Though, I get what this maid-neechan is trying to say. What do we got?" / Rom: "We'll keep up the fundamentals like this. The opponent indeed's got cards ta play no matter the distance, but…" / Rachins & Gaston: "But?" / Rom: "No matter how many cards he's got in his hand, he's only got one head ta chose which of 'em ta play. If we continue attackin' in waves, he'll inevitably end up playin' the wrong card." / Ram: "Even without that, the opponent's wounds are deep. Once he gets impatient he will end up wanting to force a progression of the situation. Quite brilliant, Rom-sama." / Felt: "Heh, my Rom-jii's amazing, isn't he?" / Flam: "Indeed, we will be counting on Rom-sama." / Grassis: "Clap clap, Rom-sama." / Rom: "We're in the midst of puttin' our lives on the line, for cryin' out loud!" / Meili: "Sorry to interrupt while you're all having fu~n, but there's a lot I have to say to Hungry Horse King-chan and the o~thers, so it sort of feels like my head is about to split apa~rt, you know?" / Rachins & Gaston: "—Sorry!!"

With that, the contents of a war council, equivalent to if they had gathered face to face and had discussed earnestly, were Compressed to have happened in a single instant by Petra, exercising the Authority of Tristitia.

Having also accreted Compressions on the thought processes for all of them to conceive their best ideas, she had done so.

???: "If we can compress the distance and time for traversal, like Clind-san's been doing, then it should also be possible to compress things like thinking time and discussion time… an essential component of such conceptual-type abilities, is that type of paradigm shift!"

Petra: “Since Clind-niisama had always continued to use it the same way, I guess he’s just way too blockheaded.”

While concentrating on the intricacies of operating the Authority, Petra bantered with the translucent Imaginary Subaru.

They were amidst combat. Ordinarily, one might be tempted to complain how distracting it was, but in the particular case of the current Petra, her exchanges with “Subaru” were proving to be a source of great relief.

The small box in which the Witch Factor of Tristitia was preserved—concealing that which she had inherited from Clind in her breast pocket, Petra continued to experience first-hand the dreadful force of attraction brought about by this power.

Petra: “I probably shouldn’t be saying this, but the term “attraction” just fits way too perfectly.”

Likening the sensation to that of being irresistibly drawn in by “attraction”, Petra scolded herself.

Were she to let her mind relax for even a second, the Witch Factor would immediately tempt Petra with thoughts such as “You could try this” and “You could even try that”, attempting to remove an important shackle binding one to their humanity.

Without that or anything to hold onto, she felt like she would surrender to the sensation of being swallowed up as she shakily stared down over the edge of a great cliff, but—

Petra: “But, that’s a no-go.”

The sensations of omnipotence, a sweet nectar intoxicating to the likes of man.

Witch Factors were prone to exploiting those weak hearts of humans. And yet, their way of going about it took the form of offering “Well how about this?” as a means to grant that which one desired most.

The more one treasured something, the more they harbored a wish they could not relinquish, that harder it would become to resist its allure.

Certainly, neither the Witch of Greed, nor the former Sin Archbishop of Sloth, Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti, had been exceptions.

Even Petra did not know what might have happened to her if she had lacked a means to sustain her sense of self.

However—

"Subaru": "Petra! Tonchin need a follow-up!"

Petra: "Kan-san's on break, after all-! Leave it to me-!"

As that gallant, boyish voice struck the eardrums of her heart, Petra exercised her Authority—as Rachins and Gaston agonized over how they ought to handle the onslaught of the brandishment of the blood scythes and the befouling downpour, she Compressed their processes of thought and communication, having them select the best course of action.

The pair immediately made a switch to dealing with the approaching assault; Gaston caught the sanguine scythe with his Flow Method, and Rachins unloaded a gatling volley of fireballs into the befoulment, magnificently tiding them over.

Seeing that, "Subaru" gave a thumbs up, and Petra also returned the gesture.

"Subaru": "That's it, Petra! Just like that! You're so cool!"

Even if it was just an illusion and naught more, the way her beloved was smiling for her cheered her heart to high spirits.

This was it. Thanks to this, Petra could transcend her limits whilst remaining as Petra. —Unlike the many who had been enthralled by Witch Factors throughout history, Petra was not alone.

That was what kept Petra from falling into corruption as the Witch of Tristitia.

After all—

Petra: “I don’t want Subaru to hate me.”

If there were any who would laugh at that vanity, then laugh. Fingers ought to be pointed, and ridicule ought to be cast upon Petra.

If necessary, she could make as many excuses as she liked. This was a battle to save the world. She would rescue the many people who lived in the Kingdom from their unease. She had no choice but to protect the grand stage that was the Royal Selection. She was carrying everyone’s hopes upon herself, after all.

I have far more reasons than simply the excuses I’m making. Ram-neesama’s always eager to slack off on everything, but she’s fighting her hardest. Frederica-neesama’s staying back to attend to things, but she’s praying for me. Otto-san’s always acting way too recklessly. The fact that I’m moving in accordance with the Master’s expectations is truly unpleasant. I want to show off to Emilia-neesama and Rem-neesama. I’ll roar out like a tiger on Garf-san’s behalf too. Meili-chan, don’t make such a worried expression. Beatrice-chan, I’ll definitely save you so you mustn’t cry.

All of those were precious to her, and no doubt reasons why Petra was giving it her all, but the number one thing was different.

My number one, is you.

To you, I don’t want to show any part of me that’s uncool. I don’t want to show any part of me that’s pathetic. After all, when I find myself reflected in those eyes of yours, I don’t want your attention to drift away for even a second.

With your heart taken by a person who’s always glistening so brilliantly, if I need to present myself with a form that’s always so glisteningly radiant in order to get you to turn to me, then so be it.

That attraction has long since pulled me in.

Don’t call it anything like a Witch Factor. —The entirety of my being, is made up of love and affection.

Petra: “That’s why, this is nothing.”

No matter how tempting the Witch Factor might be, Petra would never succumb.

So long as these feelings of love resided within her, then neither Gluttony nor the Black Serpent were dreadful in the slightest.

3

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never cry for another.

4

The latent might of the Aldebusters—no, of the assemblage apt of being named as the Witch of Tristitia and her apostles, was something that far surpassed Roy’s anticipations and postulations.

Roy: “How nice, perhaps it is nice, very nice, surely it is nice, certainly it is nice, nothing but nice, as it is nice, because it can be called nice, because it can be praised as nice-! Gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-!”

Penultimately, what the Witch of Tristitia was carrying out was unbeknownst to Roy.

He simply comprehended, with lucid precision, that she was countering the Authority of Gluttony, enacting the Authority which she possessed to its utmost and bestowing the means to survive upon the entire troupe of Felt and the rest.

Pertaining to the battle, Felt and the others had failed to bear fruits greater than their own abilities as well.

The maximum of their ability was constantly being drawn, poured into the best cup and being utilized, that was all. And what made this possible was the efficacy of the Authority of Tristitia.

However—

Roy: “It’s not supposed to be something so~ convenient that it can be used as much as pleased, you see."

As aforementioned, Roy had hearkened from his mother's mouth the flaw present within the Witch Factor of Tristitia.

Witch Factors that could not be compatible with anyone, were supposed to be defective articles that, on one hand, granted the possessor tremendous might that interfered with the rules of the world, but demanded compensation to that end on the other.

Roy: "We know we do kno~w, Petra-chan absolutely loves Natsuki-san after all."

The Stomach of Souls—upon following the newest Memories settled within the treasure house of all that Roy had eaten, he could earnestly feel the valorous sentiments of the Witch, newly born into this world, to be stabbing at his chest.

A young, immature girl, but a girl who shan't hold her own life dear for the sake of her flaring love.

Upon being told of the necessity to use anything but life itself for firewood in order to regain something valuable that had been robbed, she would perhaps devote anything as fuel without falter.

And, in reality, that was what she was doing. —However, the stockpile was not endless.

Roy: "The rest, is about which side gets consumed to exhaustion first."

Just as the Witch of Tristitia had limits, Roy too possessed an allotted time of life.

The reason as to why he willfully did not heal his wounds, blood gushing profusely from them, was because he reworked even his flux of blood into an armament for fulfilling his own objective, employing it as a means to fight.

That sizable forfeiture of sanguine ichor, continued to keep alight the fuse of Roy Alphard's life.

Indeed, this battle at present, had mounted upon the frontier of whether to eat, or to be eaten.

Roy: “Haha~.”

Exhaling a hot, feverish breath, Roy expressed gratitude to the hunger enlivening his soul.

Until now, as Bizarre Eating, Roy had messily eaten all kinds of articles haphazardly and indiscriminately. Eating them, licking them, coveting and indulging and devouring them, Eclipsing to spoil eleventy lives, Roy Alphard had done so in order to seek an article that would appease the hunger that he had borne since birth.

For that purpose, until he discovered the flavor of his wish, Roy scoured for a match all throughout the world—resuming to subsist his eathos with this bearing of heart, he ate and felt dispiritedness, he ate and felt despondency, he ate and felt disappointment, no matter how much Eclipsing and Eclipsing to spoil he partook in, he was forevermore tyrannized by the sensation of starvation ever unappeased. “1”

In this heretofore eathos, was born a change.

Its progenitor—

???: “Here, try it out n’ see. To eat me up, dependin’ on that ya live or ya die. C’mon, ya prick.”

Largely responsible was, within the Tower piercing the heavens in the midst of that sand sea, the proprietor of an overwhelming soul that drove him to distortion, nearly filling to bursting the vessel called Roy Alphard.

—Reid Astrea.

Coming into contact with the soul of the man christened as the first generation Sword Saint, enkindled a drastic reformation in Roy.

Naming himself Bizarre Eating, conscientiously and indefatigably devoting himself to his eathos through multitudes, Roy had been mourning in lament. —That the hunger borne by the existence known as his self, would never come to be fulfilled, perhaps.

???: “That’s not really unique to you or anything such, though? This lovely lady as well as all the other rabble, everyone everyone every~one, is seeking love that won’t be appeased. How about this lovely lady assists you in finding that nameless something you want. In exchange, what this lovely lady wants is… you get it, right?”

Vocalizing so whilst laughing with a beguiling, sadistic smile, the monster stated itself to become Roy’s mother.

Neither did he trust to open his heart to her, nor did he depend upon her being, in avarice for a possibility Roy could not find by his self, he used his mother. It was probably likewise.

However, no matter how much he ate, no matter how he took a hand blemished with love, he failed to acquire that article which he wanted.

Ley searched for means to appease hunger by finding and picking out worth in each and every singular meal, Louis meanwhile had a definite, tangible prospect of the article she wanted in order to appease hunger, apparently.

Only Roy. Roy alone, did not have that. —Which now, at last, had been discovered.

Reid: “It ain’t odd, ya prick. Eat or be eaten, that’s how life works, ain’t that so.”

Yes, that’s right. That’s precisely right.

What was wanted, was the real feeling of living. Just the reason to be able to say with a smile from the bottom of the heart, that he was alive.

Mother: “To pour this lovely lady’s entirety for the sake of something wanted, isn’t something like that plainly obvious?”

Yes, that’s right. That’s precisely right.

Even without affection, esteem, or anything at all, only that teaching of his mother's was helplessly correct.

That was why—

Roy: "Unless all possible moves all in their entirety, without hesitation and wholly altogether are sunk into i~t, it's not called love, isn't i~t!"

Because the opponents were kindly transcending their limits, his side must also respond in kind.

Should he humbly not finish eating the treats that had gone out of their way to be prepared, it would make the name of Gluttony weep.

Roy: "No~w no~w no~w, welcome yourselves to eating welcome yourselves to tasting-!"

Contrary to his limbs, benumbed to cold by the efflux of blood, the voltage of his heart had risen to a crescendo.

Transforming his exuding blood into thorned legs made in the image of those belonging to insects, Roy pulsated thrummingly, and in his backdrop, in concert, the Black Serpent speared into the heavens, becoming a pillar of befoulment, recommencing its hunt comprised of flopping onward with wholly one side.

Black Serpent: "…"

Rumbling the wind as if thunder, the contagion relentlessly descended upon the flora.

Birthed thereupon was a seemingly undeflectable billow of toxicity, terribly blasphemous. It quite literally swallowed the battlefield in black, pressing to kill all things with murrain pestilence.

But—

Felt: "Live—!"

Everyone: "—Strong!!"

The command and response akin to a fool's single bit of knowledge, became an arrow of counterattack baled with composite strength.

Ram's rend of wind tore the tidal waves of black, and a brigade of beasts with the Hungry Horse King obeying Meili at its vanguard breached an opening. Following up, the well-physiqued men including those newly summoned, lumped themselves together to convene—the hammer swinging forth vehemently shattered the ground, successfully erecting a bulwark that protected against the blighting toxicity.

That was the stalwart might consequent of the convening of ones who would fail to compare by their individual strengths, a battle of a potpourri of raw effort that retaliated against the advancing fruition of surging death.

Roy: "Judging from the looks of things, Petra-chan's Authority, is around the shortening of events ri~ght?"

Petra: "Blehh. Won't tell."

Roy: "That unfriendly reply is so tempti~ng!"

Amidst the Black Serpent's befoulment downpouring like rain, ceasing not his onslaught, Roy bolted like a flash of lightning whilst clad in his armor of blood, switching between the odd talents, techniques, and deviances of different suprarational individuals in succession, and the force fist, the Magic, and the curse ballad layered atop one another to torrent upon the herd of prey.

But on every instance, they all immediately rearranged their formation, knit the physical with magical attacks and weaved together resistance—who guarded what was unintelligible now. Merely the truth that all of them accepted the offense, and all of them countered it would keep on rewriting the battlefield.

—Even in midst of this battle's escalations, Roy darted his eyes about in inspection of the prey.

The Witch of Tristitia's Authority being Shortening more or less was unmistaken. It thus reduced the time and distance for movement and was probably also dealing with the time for thought process and judgment.

Its evidence was how the apostles of the Witch of Tristitia, consecutively accreting appearances and disappearances in the battlefield, would grapple with sudden situations without any perplexity, including those participating in the war for the first time—no, by Shortening the perplexity part of it, they were prepared to be capable of immediately participating in the confronting situation.

Roy: “But how much longer will even that la~st!”

Their grappling resilience and sprightly morale purchased admiration, but both sides were likewise close to limit. Although if Roy were to have one step of an advantage, it was the menace of the Black Serpent he had kept in reserve behind him—even should the Witch of Tristitia and company vanquish Roy, they then must grapple with this atrocious, fiendish Witchbeast.

That was to say, they could not exhaust all of their strength against Roy as their opponent. And to their circumstance of expending not the entirety of their might, lest it deplete, adding a further pinch of seasoning to the platter—

Roy: “—Now’s the time to not shoot for the stars, but to shoot for the Eclipse, you see~-!!”

The Black Serpent’s ginormous frame once again speared the heavens, the befoulment on standby to torrentially downpour. Preparing for it, the Witch of Tristitia and company simultaneously stood guard, towards which he disgorged the Memories.

This was—

Roy: “—『Eclipse Binaries』.”

Neither Solar Eclipse nor Lunar Eclipse, Roy Alphard’s novel and original table manners did he let cascade.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never wish upon a star with another.

6

In that moment, what surged onto the battlefield was merely one part of the horde of Memories, multitudes that were apt to be called simple food, that Roy Alphard had eaten until now but failed to find and pick out worth in them to remember.

Following his experience at the Pleiades Watchtower, Bizarre Eating had revised oneself's own cognizance of eathos.

Gratitude unto all ingredients, reverence unto all trysts of fate. — There was no such thing as a foul ingredient in this world. It simply meant that his self was the proprietor of a foolish tongue that failed to recognize their goodness.

Take a venomous fish for example. Should the fish's organs which store venom be adequately disposed of, it would become possible to surfeit a delicacy superior to consuming venom.

The same applied to the prey from Gluttony's vantage. In this universe, there was no such ingredient, from the head to the rear, that was entirely useless, that lacked all worth of being tasted.

Any and every kind of ingredient had portions that were usable. — Thus, he used such.

Roy: "—Memories of Agony."

Over the course of an ordinary life, plausibly everyone would possess a memory or two of having suffered unbearable pain.

These multitudes of Memories of Agony, Roy extracted them from the Stomach of Souls he had stockpiled, blended them together, and hurled them toward the battlefield before his eyes. —This was not something visible to the eye. Consequently, there were no ways to evade it, either. Its identity: a blasphemous deed of forcing an abstract concept onto the opponents.

Most of all, pelting opponents with Memories of Agony would not produce immediate results. They were literal Memories that the body bore no recollection of, so even upon being pelted by them, there lay no margin for the herd of prey to taste those agonies.

Then, what would transpire? —It would merely incite a chain of remembrance of Memories in close proximity.

???: “—ah.”

At first, a faint voice leaked from inside the troupe.

They had until now roared with voices of intrepidity, worn valor and resolution on their visages, and anchored in themselves the mettle to confront every obstacle head-on, truly worthy of being called heroic warriors.

From those lips leaked a timbre, neither a warcry nor a call of each other’s names, but a shrill note.

???: “AA, aa, AA, aaAaA— hk!!”

And upon its onset, the leak persisted ceaselessly.

They dilated their eyes, opened their mouths wide, and placed their hands on parts that became the unsought founts of screaming, screeching helplessly as though spouting blood.

Moreover, this was not one lone individual. Everyone present in that locus began to scream.

Everyone: “—Hk!!”

The synthesis of Memories of Agony that Roy had hurled impelled the bodies to remember agony within proximity that had been tasted before, for those who were within range of that abstract concept, as though it was a thing of the present moment.

Agony that had been tasted once in the past could be endured. —Nay, this rationale was erroneous. Agony that was unbearable in the past was unbearable yet in the present, and yet so in the future.

Everyone: “Gagh—”

It was a voice unbecoming to be voiced, a cacophony uproared in succession by Felt, by Ram, by Old Man Rom, by Meili, by Flam, by Grassis, by Gaston, by Rachins, by Doltero, by the apostles summoned to the battlefield by the might of the Authority of Tristitia.

Nobody could brave it. And the one to screech the shrillest wail, above and beyond—

???: “—Petra!!”

Was none other than Petra Leyte, her eyebrows spasming upward, compelled to taste and even relish the concourse of agonies that had chaperoned Natsuki Subaru to Death.

7

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never rendezvous with another.

8

“Subaru”: “—Petra!!”

Hearing the frantic outcry of the Imaginary Subaru, the fact that it seemed like he did not have to experience any of this pain, given that he was a phantom watching her, served as a relief to Petra—’twas not so.

It had been unable to serve as such. Any possible leeway for that existed not within Petra Leyte, tasting in the torment of Death.

Petra: “—agh.”

A hoarse breath, spilled forth. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurts. It hurts it hurts—.

Petra: “—igh.”

Lacerated abdomen hurts. Crushed eyeball hurts. Stabbed chest hurts. Misfortune wrought by passing malice hurts. Finger cut by poor knife skills hurts. Skin fissures from kitchen work hurts. Head caved in without warning hurts. Body tortured alongside sound of chains hurts. Throat gouged by wind hurts. Jumping off and crashing onto pointy rocks hurts. Body and mind after vicious beating hurts. Hands and legs after putting on airs and being taken easy on when disciplined hurts. Frozen and shattered fingers, ankles hurts. Licked eyeball feels disgusting and hurts. Wrists freed from handcuffs frozen and broken hurts. Falling to knees on ground completely congealed, everything creaked and hurts. Body shoved away by a perturbed Otto hurts. Unsightliness trying to escape the White Whale after that hurts. Soul amidst being frozen in zenith cold hurts. Thread of life running amok to convince an assisted suicide hurts. Chest assailed for the sake of assisted suicide hurts. Heart grabbed upon confessing Return by Death hurts. Being grabbed by tenacious pursuit of the Authority of Sloth hurts. Stabbing own throat for fear of losing Rem hurts. Abdomen disemboweled for the first time in months hurts. Entire body struck by debris, arms mangled up, finally body being devoured from inside hurts. Toyed with by ferocious beast, entire body bitten to shreds again hurts. Finally, stabbing own throat again, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts it hurts it hurts.

Petra: “—ugh.”

“Subaru”: “Petra! Petra! That’s no good, don’t give in, Petra!!”

The entirety of the mind was dominated by pain. Even though the inside of the body, the inside of the mind, the inside of the heart, were all supposed to be filled to the brim with ■■■, the pain eclipsed everything entirely.

From the top of the head to the tips of the toes, there was no place within the body that was not feeling pain. All throughout this being, the entirety of what shaped the self transformed into pain, in order to make the self experience pain, by constructing the pain, the pain pained, and the paining painpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpaininininin—.

Petra: "—egh."

Vision stained bright red, their own incredibly noisy voice seemed to ring like tinnitus, a sharp scent of blood deep in the nose, drool spilling from within the mouth with the taste of death, the shock causing an unbearable level of goosebumps on all the skin of the body.

Once again, the torment of ■■■□■■■ that had failed to truly be understood by merely having read the Book of the Dead, was clearly steeped into ■■■□■■■ as well. Through that pain, ■■■□■■■ gained a painful understanding of ■■■□■■■, in the truest, most literal sense.

As the pain blotted over both the inside and outside of ■■■□■■■ entirely, deep down, a painful understanding.

Petra: "—ogh."

A painful understanding, that the entirety of pain endured, was linked to ■■■□■■■'s, to Na■■□■ba■'s, to Na■ki□Suba■'s—to Natsuki Subaru's memories of repentance accompanied by sublime feelings of loss.

Petra: "…"

It had hurt. Letting Emilia die. It had hurt. Letting Felt die. It had hurt. Letting Rom-jii die. It had hurt. Letting Rem die. It had hurt. Letting everyone in Arlam Village die. It had hurt. Letting Ram die. It had hurt. Letting Frederica die. It had hurt. Letting Petra die. It had hurt. Letting Beatrice die. It had hurt. Letting Otto die. It had hurt. Letting Roswaal die. It had hurt. Letting Ryuzu die. It had hurt. Letting Garfiel die. It had hurt. It had hurt. It had hurt. —Utmost vexation.

Petra: “Vexing.”

It hurts. It hurts it hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts. —Why was that?

Petra: “Don’t want to lose.”

Even if it hurt, even if it was painful, it was far better than sorrow and vexation.

Love everyone, so will not give up on anyone. Love you, who loving everyone, would not give up on anyone, so will not give up on you.

Hence—

Petra: “—Just who, do you think I am?”

■■■□■■■ was, ■■ra□■y■ was, Pe■ra□■yte was—Petra Leyte was a bundle of potential, rich with talent and quick to learn, harboring great promise, with a bright future ahead of her.

That person, those people, all believed that about Petra. —Then, she would do so.

Petra: “Can do it.”

It ought to be possible for you, Petra Leyte.

I won’t let everyone who told me that I could do it become liars, after all.

Or perhaps, were they all just liars who believed in a weak, pitiful Petra who could not do anything?

Petra: “There’s no way, it could be that.”

It’s possible. It ought to be possible. If it’s possible, then stop being all talk and do it. Do it. Just do it. You can do it. Do it now. Do it right this instant. NOW! Come on, do it, do it—JUST DO IT!!

Petra: “Compression… no.”

By means of the power of the Authority of Tristitia, Compression would be invoked.

Just as distance, traversal time, thinking time, and discussion time had all been Compressed, right now, on the dreadful instant that had befallen Petra and the rest, Compression would be invoked.

Pain, oh what a dreadful thing it was.

Even a slight amount of pain would cause one to get teary-eyed; when it turned to a matter of pain that was a bit sharper, one would become unable to sleep at night; when it came to having an abundance of dull pains, it might very well have sway over the rest of one's life to follow.

Be it slight, sharp, or dull, the time in which pain was experienced, would always feel long and drawn out.

On the time that would make a second feel like ten, an hour feel like twelve, and a day feel like an eternity, Compression would be invoked.

Petra: "Everyone, get ready to grit your teeth."

"Subaru": "Hk, it'll be over in a second, but it'll hurt a hundred times more—!!"

That it might be ten-thousand times more, he did not tell her.

Regardless if he did, regardless if her heart was ready for it, the fact of her doing it would not have changed, after all.

Petra: "—『Compress Agony』."

The power of the Witch of Tristitia, ascended to a brand new stage, was unveiled.

9

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never lament parting with another.

10

Roy: "…"

The new art he had debuted erupted unerringly, fissuring the flawless coordination of the herd of prey.

Whilst his ears hearkened the wind's rumble as the Black Serpent's body flopped forward, contrived with befoulment abound with toxic blight, a varicolored pandemonium of screams, screeches, and wails reached him from the other side.

All of it seemed so aching, so agonizing that if Roy had been conferred the time, he would have wept through the whole night thinking of them the utmost, then inscribed those feelings into verses of poetry, and set them adrift atop a river.

Time for that he had not, however. Neither did he have the erudition to compose poetry, so it would not have been of any decent makings.

But, it was the truth that he thought of them with compassion. He bore no begrudgement toward them. Nothing akin to hatred either. Not even an intermixed blend of love and hate, all he felt was nothing but, simply, love.

Who would ever want to see anything such as the figures of their loved articles wailing in agony? That would be nothing more than spice for when their lives were surfeited. Spice was not staple food. To set it as the main dish was the deed of an aberrant.

Roy: "We… will not commit such a terrible act, you know."

In the wake of Eclipse Binaries, which sparked a chain reaction of Memories of Agony, the herd of prey's ability to mobilize had been ruptured. "2"

All that remained was the downpour of the Black Serpent's befoulment—this particular head was charged with representing Elder's Blight, so it would not go so far as to rob them of their lives. It would occlude their thinking and mobility, restraining them on the precipice of mortality in perpetuum. Should that happen, the rest would be like a wine cellar. Until the time of drinking when their true names were brought to light arrived, he shall await their time of ripening and fermentation.

He had heard that the precipice where they would be restrained offered no refuge, anguish and darkness lasted unceasing, but in the end, the pain and affliction they shall taste would settle within Roy and vanish, so it was fine. Tasting such bitterness, licking it to finish, and surfeiting himself with it too was yet eathos.

Roy: “A~h, even though they can’t be eaten immediately, looking at ripened fruits is so—”

Painful, as he about uttered so, Roy’s words were interrupted.

There was no counterattack. If anything, it was the opposite. The herd of prey bellowed a bitter, chest-stabbing screech on a higher order of magnitude in both intensity and volume. They held a sonorousness that could understandably be perceived as death wails.

Roy widened his eyes for a moment, but it progressively indicated the success of his plan—

Felt: “—LiiAAARGH! LIVEEE!!”

Everyone: “STROOooNG—!!”

The subsequent instant, fathomless response and unity defied the inevitable demise that should have swallowed the herd of prey.

11

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never walk into the sunset with another.

12

That instant, a sensation as if all the skin on her body being peeled off, followed by Reinhard scrubbing her flayed body with a metal brush steeped in ample amounts of salt water, assailed Felt as a hellish pain.

Felt: “eeUGHh…”

For the first time in her life, the pain she experienced was so intense that it felt like her insides were twisting themselves inside out. A paralysis crept through the corner of her mind, and she even hallucinated a sensation of her blood flowing backwards in her veins.

Exactly what had just happened, she did not know. —No, she understood. Petra had done something.

Felt: “That pipsqueak’s quite impressive…”

And so, Felt quietly praised the strenuous efforts of the girl, who was nearly the same height as her.

From the discussions that had been squeezed tight with absurd momentum up until this point, she knew that Petra had coordinated brilliantly with Rom-jii to establish the Combined Forces. This was an incredible feat. After all, Rom-jii was the wisest and most reliable man in the world, so Petra must have been nothing short of a genius.

And, that genius had done something beyond imagination, in order to land a crushing blow on the something that the opponent had done.

Felt: “Even still, you’ve really got some damn terrible luck, you know that?”

Cheeks contorting as she spoke, Felt caught sight of a small shadow in the corner of her eye—Camberley.

Unlike Gaston, who had been in the fight since the beginning, or Rachins, who had joined the fray midway through, Camberley had made his grand entrance at the most critical moment. —But at that exact instant, the unimaginable pain had been unleashed upon them, so calling it terrible luck would have been a gross understatement.

However—

Felt: “—You’ve got terrible luck, but you’re the best.”

With tears streaming from the corners of his eyes, that which Camberley had carried here in his hands, was now snatched away by Felt. —Something of a trump card of their Camp: the Star Staff.

She would fire it. With every fiber of her being, every ounce of strength she could scrape together, Felt would give it everything she had.

All that remained—

Felt: “Is finding an opening to fire it!”

13

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never tread upon the shadow of one who walks beside me.

14

Felt: “—LiiAAARGH! LIVEEE!!”

Everyone: “STROOooNG—!!”

An exclamation that rendered imperceivable which exactly was the warcry of a Witchbeast, the roar pulsated, and the Black Serpent’s body, analogous to a thousand calamities baled together, was jostled backward by the shock wave immediately below it.

Raging across the battlefield with a vehement torrent of light and dark, the heaven-rending impact broiled Roy’s entire body with astonishment.

What had occurred? What did they do? —All of it, he questioned not.

Roy: “Petra-cha~n-!”

With only the identity of who did it certain, Roy Alphard reached zenith.

It was an amazing thing to accomplish. Ovation and a round of applause. Becoming one with the multitudes of the crowds of Memories within Roy, he must bid them thunderous applause.

Just how much sacrifice of oneself would it take, to make the Witch Factor of Tristitia do that.

By any measure of imagination or surmise, the ordinary, average kind of happiness in all of its forms would have to be parted with, or it would not be possible to materialize this battlefield, this close of a skirmish, this extent of outrageous insolence, would it.

—Want to become happy.

That was bound to be the unconditionally imperishable, fixed and indivisible wish, as a human being.

It was bound to be an unconditionally absolute prayer, no different even for Roy—no, even for Ley and even for Louis, even for the Sin Archbishops, even for evildoers and even for criminals.

Living and continue to live, for that purpose. But, lest it be parted with, this battlefield shall not—.

Roy: "…"

Pupils bedewed with delight, drying them with a single blink of his eyelids, Roy looked upon Felt who had snatched a white staff from the hands of her comrade.

Since the dwarf, who did not seem to be any war potential for the most part, had gone out of his way to bring it here at this eleventh hour, unmistakably meant that it was a special, secret weapon.

In other words—

Roy: "If that won't do then will you start cry~ing?!"

Rainbow-hued butterflies danced, spears of fire and ice rained, titanic scythes of blood from multifarious directions were fired, a pressure that crushed everything not from left to right but from the rear to the front precipitated, and a soprano befitting of a young boy cursedly resonated in song.

Rom: “Protect Felt!!”

Wind sundered the butterflies altogether, magic bullets of ice and fire shattered the spears of fire and ice, burly muscles intercepted the titanic scythe of blood through lacerations received, a momentary twin impact perforated the ground, surging from the rear to the front, and the enormous builds of the aged man and the pigman shielded against the curse ballad that disintegrated flesh and blood.

Roy: “Magnifice~nt! Bu~t—”

His wavelike onslaught blocked by the bastion of coordination, Roy however did not lose heart.

Invoking the Teleport he had restrained from utilizing until now, Roy’s silhouette appeared at the heart of Felt’s troupe in the blink of an eye, his aim being Felt—naught, instead,

Roy: “The two over here are also pivotal, ri~ght?”

Within the personnel braced to intercept, he aimed for the spines of the two bereft of energy to stand up.

The Witch of Tristitia and Witchbeast Master, both of them war potential essential for the opposing contingent to rival Gluttony and the Black Serpent in battle, and nobody’s hand shall timely reach Roy who stood right behind them.

Licking his lips, Roy hosted the Fist King in his right hand and the Snow Vallum in his left, and with tender kindness—

—That moment, Meili’s hair wriggled and crawled, and a corona was shot through Roy’s left eye.

Roy: “Kyau-?!”

Impaled by a sensation of scorching heat, the left side of Roy’s perception vanished. Just what was this, Roy bared his remnant eye and in his vision entered the virtuoso that had crushed his left eye

—a little scorpion lurking in concealment within Meili's hair was reflected therein.

A being unknown to him. A trump card absent in Memories, a face down card, viva fight to the finish.

Roy: "Even a tiny ally like that—"

Is gallantly devoting its might, was how he was to resume, but did not.

Hastier than that, the ground upon which Roy's legs were braced double-crossed him, rocketing him into the sky without omen.

Roy: "…"

Magic, it was not. Nowhere could the wavelength of Mana be perceived.

Then, was it the Witch of Tristitia once more? —Nay, not even she fostered eyes on the back of her head.

What had transpired was an eminence protruding from the ground. With nary an omen or prior signal, did that burgeon.

???: "—Good grief, my amazin' self's comrades're way too damn reliable."

That which had beat upon his eardrums all too suddenly was a sharp voice, an exceedingly common recollection in his Memories.

By the soles of their feet did they achieve concert with the earth, such that during the intervals whilst they were planted firm upon the ground, steeled that person would become as though an iron keep, unfellable to all who sought its conquest; precisely because of being so dependable, the bark of their timbre ought not to have been heard.

Whirling up into the air, stretched out amidst Roy's vision upside-down was the earthy landscape where the Witchbeast of Pestilence writhed, and thereupon would he set it to wreak havoc.

Unlike before, a distance had now emerged between it and Roy. Albeit his armor of blood was beginning to shed, were the befoulment to be spattered out like a shower of rain, the herd of prey would have to divert their efforts towards countering that.

???: “Sit down!!”

For but a moment, the Black Serpent’s movements were thrown into disarray by the weeping outcry.

But, the duration of its stoppage amounted not to even the blink of an eye. Even if it had been deprived of that interval, that would never amount to Roy’s machinations falling out of—that instant, the serpentine form of the Witchbeast, whilst seeking to reach skyward as though a spire piercing the heavens, ruptured.

Rupturing, its befoulment spilled out from within, and onto that besmirched ground did a lone silhouette tumble down.

???: “Pwahhk-, ghehough, gahoggahhk-…”

Roy: “You’re kiddi~ng.”

Violently coughing, the red-haired man who had fallen into a pool of the most abhorrent befoulment in this world, delivered unto Roy an impact that could not be explained by simple tenacity or a pathetic adhesion to life, leaving him lost for words.

For what reason, was he alive? The question, and the appetite welling up, made Roy’s stomach growl unwittingly.

???: “Yo, look th’ fuck over here.”

With an effortless leap, the golden-haired boy caught up to the airborne Roy, and gnashing his sharp fangs, he raised aloft one of his fists clad in silver gauntlets in a grandiose hoist.

Should those smite him, the half-killed status Roy would be left in would strip him of standing any chance.

Despite knowing it would only amount to stalling for a few moments and naught more, from his choices of withdrawing to refuge, Roy sought to follow suit of the odd talent of the Leaper and invoked Lunar Eclipse,

Roy: “Bgh.”

—Zodda bugs cannoned into him from the blind spot on his left, disrupting his focus.

Roy: “…”

Upon allowing his line of sight to be lured by the irksome buzz and abhorrent texture, laying ahead, tens of meters distant were trees onto which a light blue ground dragon had been latched, and with his body entrusted to it, was the silhouette of a man supposed to be hollowed empty.

The man pointed his finger in this direction, and upon noticing their gazes cross, smiled. Transmitting to him, “You have been bested”.

The subsequent juncture, the wind howled, and a fist bedizened with wind pressure blitzed straight towards Roy.

It was awfully slow, seeming like it would take some time before it reached—when he noticed.

Roy: “This, is Petra-chan’s doing, is that what it means?”

Petra: “Yes. Thought I’d properly say it at the end. That it serves you right.”

Feet stationed atop the ground, the Witch of Tristitia proclaimed triumph to Roy in the time that she protracted.

There no longer seemed to be anything that Roy could do, pertaining to that. Also, the fist strike of the ravenous, raging tiger had drawn imminent to about a distance the size of five coins away from him.

In the time until that direct hit, what was there that he could do? He ruminated, and it occurred to him.

Roy: “It’s an amazingly, amazingly big deal, Petra-chan. But you kno~w, weren’t the sacrifices you made to win just too big?”

Petra: “Making excuses like a sore loser? Nobody’s been taken down on our side. Just so pathetic for a Sin Archbishop.”

Roy: “With the Witch of Tristitia as the opponent, would lose face. But, what’s called a sacrifice doesn’t apply to lives alone. The future, the hopes, the possibilities, it’s those kinds of things. We are worried from the bottom of our heart that Petra-chan’s long, long life hereon out will become so lonely, you see~.”

Four coins away.

At the very least, to dredge out the compensations albeit her wish to hide them, and engrave oneself into her through that agony.

Such was Roy’s unscrupulous eathos, to which Petra fluttered her eyes and put on a puzzled face. It couldn’t be, surely she had not paid them without realizing, whilst these thoughts dwelled, this reaction was—

Petra: “—Could it be, you’re misunderstanding?”

Roy: “Misunderstanding?”

Petra: “That’s strange. I’d thought Otto-san would likely say something like it. —That this time, the entire world is your enemy, that sorta thing.”

Roy: “…”

Three coins away.

He had not been told so, firsthand. However, such ardor was extant in Memories.

Considering Aldebaran’s deeds and the devastation he perpetrated, this cognizance could be called just and legitimate. However, that ought to be something with no greater or lesser purport.

Roy: “It can’t be…”

Petra: “It is.”

Two coins away.

Within the confines of the sensation of protraction, it was impracticable to commit an act so extravagant as gulping a breath, but in the throat of his heart Roy gulped a breath of his heart, and looked at she who smiled as it befit a Witch, tenderly.

The young girl supposed to be incompatible with the Witch Factor, however, was beyond question the Witch of Tristitia.

After all—

Petra: “The Witch Factor of Tristitia, can be used by anyone should they pay compensation, and if the compensations are properly harmonized, anyone can act as the agent. —So, it’s being paid together with everyone in the Royal Capital.”

Roy: “…”

Petra: “Well then, I’ll say it one more time. —Serves you right.”

One coin away.

After all, unbeknownst to Roy was any being who had abused the Witch Factor of Tristitia to this degree.

If this were not the Witch of Tristitia, then what could it possibly be.

Roy: “—A~h, thank you for the treat-.”

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Zero coins away. —Gorgeous Tiger’s thunderbolt exploded.

Roy: “…”

It mercilessly shattered into Roy’s countenance, knocking it down toward the ground where the Black Serpent writhed. His petite frame plunged right towards the core of the befoulment—just before that.

Felt: “—Fire!!”

Felt roared, and the staff scintillating in her grip fired a corona that washed the world with its paint of alabaster white.

It altered into a smite of judgment, without err and escape forbidden, swallowing ones who were auxiliaries of malefaction and atrocity.

—So was the denouement, of the eathos of Bizarre Eating.

Chapter 47:
“Voice”

1

—When I opened my eyes, I realized I had no idea who I was whatsoever.

???: “…”

Where this place is; when the present time is; who I am; what is happening; I do not have the slightest idea.

I cannot see. I cannot hear. I cannot move my hands, or my legs. My feet are not on the ground. I cannot breathe properly either, and I am in extraordinary discomfort—and yet, I can sense “Voices”.

???: “…”

Even though my senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, and, most of all, sound, are blocked off, there are “Voices”.

Many, plentiful, innumerable “Voices” showering down upon me, unable to do a thing, as if I am a powerless baby thrown into the cradle of hell.

???: “…”

Ceaselessly, bereft of intent, the tempest of “Voices” continue to pummel me.

Just as a baby would be defenselessly struck by the rain, I am being drowned in “Voices”. At this rate, I think I would prefer to just drown and die like this—

???: “—Laddie! Laddie, are you alright?! You’re going to be rescued now!”

—. —. A loud “Voice”, it rang in my head.

Amidst the numerous, countless “Voices”, it is a voice that feels clearly directed towards me. I cannot do anything. But still, I can understand. —The powerful “Voice”, directed towards myself.

Hence—

???: “—Ottobro, grit yer teeth now.”

Hearing that “Voice”, a feeling of suspension arrived along with a terribly violent sound—a sound that was not a “Voice” vibrated my eardrums and restored the means for my tightly sealed eyes to take in light; and so, I was finally able to face the owners of the “Voices”, those who had directed their “Voices” towards me.

???: “Really fuckin’ sorry that it took me so long to get here. Everythin’, it’s my amazin’ self’s fault.”
???: “Really fuckin’ sorry that it took me so long to get here. Everythin’, it’s my amazin’ self’s fault.”

???: “What are you saying, Garf-san! If Garf-san and everyone else hadn’t come, Laddie would still be strung up even now… Ah, Laddie, Laddie! Do you understand what I’m saying?!”
???: “What are you saying, Garf-san! If Garf-san and everyone else hadn’t come, Laddie would still be strung up even now… Ah, Laddie, Laddie! Do you understand what I’m saying?!”

Present there is a golden-haired boy, alongside a large ground dragon with a pale blue hide. The “Voices” that I feel are overlapping with the voices that I hear, but there is no doubt about it.

The ground dragon is nestling close to me as I sit on the ground, and the boy is forcefully grabbing at my shoulders.

Boy: “Ya don’t understand anythin’ right now, aye? But, that’s aight. We’ll get it back with everyone else. Everythin’ my amazin’ self’s lackin’ for, everyone’s gonna lend their hands…!!”
Boy: “Ya don’t understand anythin’ right now, aye? But, that’s aight. We’ll get it back with everyone else. Everythin’ my amazin’ self’s lackin’ for, everyone’s gonna lend their hands…!!”

???: “…”

Boy: “‘N so, Ottobro, ya just sit tight here ‘n…”
Boy: “‘N so, Ottobro, ya just sit tight here ‘n…”

Rest assured; I think he wanted to say that.

It seems like the boy before my eyes knows my empty self, and is trying to do something about it. In all likelihood, he knows the reason why I am empty.

I want to know, I want to ask him about it. Naturally, I feel inclined to do so.

I do, but—

???: “—Might there be anything, that I could possibly do?”
???: “—Might there be anything, that I could possibly do?”

The “Voice” that spilled from my mouth, I do not know whether or not it actually formed as a proper voice. Only, seeing that both the boy and the ground dragon were widening their eyes, I could tell that my words had been conveyed.

To be honest, I do not understand anything. I do not, but, there is just one thing I can say. —I am grateful that they rescued me from that cradle of hell.

Above all—

???: “—When you guys speak to me with such earnest voices, of course I will want to respond accordingly.”
???: “—When you guys speak to me with such earnest voices, of course I will want to respond accordingly.”

Boy & Ground Dragon: “Ah, that’s…”
Boy & Ground Dragon: “Ah, that’s…”

Hearing my words, the boy and the ground dragon opened their eyes wide, and as their breaths and “Voices” synced up, they spoke.

Ground Dragon: “—Just like you, Laddie.”

Ground Dragon: “—Just like you, Laddie.”

Boy: “Just like ya, Ottobro.”
Boy: “Just like ya, Ottobro.”

At those “Voices”, I began thinking of myself before I became empty, a smile coming over my face.

—Directed towards whoever did this to me, it was a smile as if to say “you have been bested”.

2

???: “—Hiyah!!”

Delivered alongside the loud carillon of a silver bell, was a powerful kick in contrast to its lightness.

Gripping the handle of her Morningstar, Rem bore witness to that satisfactory outcome of her efforts.

Using magically crafted footholds of ice as practical disturbances, she had drawn the attention of the opponents upwards, successfully supporting Emilia.

Of course, if it had been possible, she would have preferred victory to have been decided through the affectionate iron ball that Subaru had continued to polish, but she must not be too greedy. Subaru had also taken things step by step with Rem in the Empire. If Subaru had been impatient, and instead had pressed Rem with everything being about “Me, me, me”—

Rem: “Back then, it might not have just been his fingers, but his arms and legs that would have gotten broken as well.”

Now that her Memories had returned, even just the thought that she would ever enact such violence unto Subaru was enough to make her faint, but Rem herself recognized that it was entirely possible for her to have done so, given her state of mind at the time.

Hence, it was important to do everything step by step, in the proper order. It was the same with cooking. Even though she was relatively proficient at cooking, Rem had a bad habit of disregarding that principle when it came to anything else.

And, when it came to bad habits, she had another—

Rem: "—Must not jump to conclusions!"

The reason why she would quickly always be convinced that something was settled, and thus relax her efforts, was due to a lack of imagination.

The one who had preached to Rem that ceasing one's thoughts was wrong had also taught her, when she had been bereft of Memories, how to determine her heart: Priscilla. —Even if she was gone, her teachings yet lived on. And so long as those teachings kept Rem alive, they would remain so.

That was why—

Emilia: "—Hk, you're joking?!"

When Emilia raised a voice of astonishment, Rem had not ceased her thoughts.

Directly below, Emilia rose up to deliver a kick within the blind spot of Al and his shinobi, and her ice-clad foot ought to have struck him with spine-shattering force.

But, Al had protected against that. —Covering himself and his partner with a box of stone, he had done so.

Rem: "That's what Rom-sama was talking about—"

The efficacy of "Turning Back Time", Rem had judged it to be so.

For a split-second defensive maneuver, that which covered his entire body had been far too flawless. In order to use magic, what was required was a mental image of the effects, and the construction of the technique. If either was lacking, magic would not take form, and the more complex the endeavor being attempted, the longer it would take to conceive a mental image of its effect.

That which Al had performed, was borne of a mental image far too certain in regards to a surprise attack from his blind spot.

Rem: "…"

Even though she understood the principle behind it in her head, Rem once again bit down on the inside of her cheek upon witnessing that cheat technique.

To begin with, Al's Authority had already proved it was capable of sidestepping even Reinhard. Even if they continued to attack like this, would he not just continue to evade everything? Such negative thoughts were—

Emilia: "—Rem!!"

Just as she began spiraling into negative thoughts, Emilia's holler snapped her out of it.

Across the rocky box that had emerged mid-air, Emilia and Rem crossed gazes. Unlike Rem, who was overwhelmed by the threat of the Authority, a powerful glint was housed within Emilia's amethyst eyes. That gave her heart.

Rem: "…"

As strength flaringly returned to her own eyes, the invigoration of her horn by way of her Oni form swelled Rem's entire body with vitality.

Plummeting through the sky, thirty seconds had already elapsed since the battle had commenced—what allowed for that to be accurately measured, were the marks engraved into the large rock visible far to their rear.

An enormous fissure in the land that existed within the Kararagi City-States, the Agzadd Canyon, had a difference in elevation of five thousand meters from the surface to the deepest part of the valley, and the time it took to descend all the way was around a hundred seconds. Markings had been engraved beforehand along the rock face for intervals of every ten seconds, and they were currently passing the third—seventy seconds remained until they hit the bottom.

Emilia: “We’re still—!!”
Rem: “—Just getting started!!”

Emilia and Rem’s voices overlapping, they resumed combat with renewed morale and an upsurge of strength.

Rem greatly bent her body, and Emilia, spinning around, produced mallets of ice in both her hands. In that moment, the Morningstar was fired like a cannonball, and the ice hammers were unleashed on both sides whilst clad in a powerful wind, pulverizing the stone box that Al and his accomplice had enclosed themselves in—fragments of stone scattered alongside a thunderous crash, and the enemies, split up between the top and bottom, fiercely commenced their attacks unto Rem and Emilia.

Al headed for Emilia, and for Rem, came the red-haired shinobi—

Rem: “—No, you’re also…”

Shinobi: “Indeed, I’m Al-sama’s helpful all-purpose maid, Yae-chan.”

Rem: “That’s Rem’s designation in regards to Subaru-kun!”

Putting a halt on the statement of the not-shinobi red-haired maid—no, of the woman who called herself Yae, Rem pulled back her iron ball with her right hand, and moved to slam her mighty left arm into Yae as she flew towards her.

But, Yae stopped mid-air through some unnatural braking mechanism, and evaded it.

At a glance, she sent a thread from her backhand to connect to Al, using exquisite tension and flexibility to halt her movement, before a shimmer shot from her other hand towards Rem’s neck.

Rem: “—Huma.”

Intuiting the incoming threat, Rem’s spinal reflex guarded her vitals by forming a collar of ice. As soon as the thread attached itself to the collar, she removed her head from it, avoiding decapitation. — Just as Rem survived through quick judgment, she veered the rising iron ball towards targeting Yae's back, the latter having raised her eyebrows slightly.

However, as the iron ball approached Yae from behind, she evaded precisely as if she had eyes on the back of her head; as Rem expressed astonishment whilst catching the iron ball that had barely missed on its return path, Yae stuck out her tongue,

Yae: "It's reflected in your eyes, y'know?"

Momentarily enraged by that provocation, Rem accepted a scolding from the Katya in her heart. Nodding in agreement with the imaginary Katya as she clamored like a cat "Idiot, that's exactly what your opponent wants!", Rem praised the talents of an enemy capable of utilizing what was reflected in their opponent's eyes,

Rem: "In that case, kindly strain those eyes well!"

With those words, she took the retrieved iron ball of her Morningstar, and covered it in layers, and layers, and layers of ice, doubling, and doubling, and doubling its mass, and hurled down a lump of ice around ten meters in diameter.

Yae: "Maybe my provocation was a little too effective?!"

The roaring iceberg slayed all wind in its approach, and as Yae, her voice quavering, furiously waved her hands around, she chiseled, notched, and carved away at the Morning-iceblock-star, fragmenting its mass over, and over, and over again to stop it.

Ultimately, stripped naked from the ice, all that remained was the bare iron ball, and as it hurtled right at her chest, she caught it with a web of threads, dispersing the impact as it forcefully shot her downwards.

What awaited her down there—

Emilia: "This time! Unlike the Royal Capital! I won't let you! Get away!"
Al: "Though normally! If you! Do that! I'd just end up! Running off

with the win!”

As Emilia and Al clashed against each other, they traded blows in the form of both weapons and words. In their vicinities, each had floating armaments of ice and stone respectively, and they both continued to promptly grab any of the weapons next to them, wielding them with no concern for their surroundings as they bashed them against each other.

Emilia: “Yah! Terya! Hiyah! Uya! Torya! Tei-tei-tei-tei-tei!”

Contrary to her cute war cries, Emilia’s offense did not leave any room for breathers. However, for all the swords, spears, and axes that rained down upon Al, he parried with his own axes, spears, and swords, and continued to pull through.

As Emilia utilized acrobatic movements to enact her incessant offensive, Al met her every blow with weapons at the shortest distance possible, successfully defending against it. Likely, that was also the effect of “Turning Back Time”. Once an attack landed, he would return to before it landed, and then place his weapon over the spot it had landed. —Rinse and repeat.

Yae: “—Al-sama!”

After being spiked down by Rem, Yae arrived at the scene of that back-and-forth combat. Realizing that she had blundered by temporarily creating a two-on-one situation, Rem too attempted to increase her falling speed by using a foothold—nay,

Rem: “Emilia-sama!”

Instead of catching up herself, Rem passed instantaneous judgment and tinkered with the angle of the iron ball she had sent down there.

Although Yae had dispersed its impact, the iron ball still plummeted with her at a constant speed, and as if carrying Subaru’s spirit, who had polished it, it flew towards Emilia to aid her in her predicament. Then, just before a joint attack from Al and Yae could strike her, Emilia was caught by the chains.

Rem: “UrrrrYAHHHHhhhh!!”

Using the foothold she had made a moment prior, not to launch herself off of, but to brace herself, she fished Emilia up with the chains that had caught her—as Emilia was lifted up between Al and Yae just as they were about to reconvene, the two factions regrouped into divisions of upper sky and lower sky.

Emila: “Thank you! You’re reaaally strong!”

Rem: “You’re welcome! The feeling is mutual!”

Grabbing the hand of Emilia, who had been elevated to the same position, Rem was impressed by the enemy’s strength.

Originally, Rem and Emilia were supposed to be responsible solely for Al, so Yae’s participation here was incredibly troublesome. Not only did she divide their forces, she was also incredibly skilled herself. Moreover, being together with Al was not just an addition to her strength, it served as multiplication.

Rem: “Indeed, just like myself and that person…”

Emilia: “Eh? Just now, did you say something about Subaru?”

Rem: “Apologies, that is a matter for after this is finished!”

Responding so to the wide-eyed Emilia, Rem ascertained that they were passing another marking on the rock face—that sixty seconds remained until they landed at the bottom, and firmly grit her teeth.

Her thoughts from just earlier were correct. Yae was formidable, and made even stronger when Al was with her. In order to do something about that—

Rem: “Split them up. Emilia-sama!”

Emilia: “Yes! Do it with me!”

Holding hands, they raised up their opposite hands, Emilia’s empty and Rem’s with a weapon, directing them towards the pair directly below,

Emilia: “Al—”
Rem: “—Huma!!”

As the two types of Huma intermingled, ice began to appear in the air whilst a creaking sound perforated the atmosphere—of course, were they to simply attack by hurling pebbles, it would only be a repeat of failures up to this point. So, to prevent that from happening, rather than focusing on how the ice came out, they plotted where it would emerge.

Yae: “—Hk.”

Al: “Tch.”

Obstructed by the expanding ice, the sound of tongue-clicking within that helmet was inaudible. Yet, judging from the results alone, there was no doubt that he had indeed clicked his tongue.

The mass of ice produced by Rem and Emilia—a thin, level sheet of ice was wedged between Al and Yae, one below, the other above, thus preventing their reconvergence. While maintaining the sturdiness of the ice sheet, it had been stretched to a disk of around thirty meters in diameter; it would have been a herculean task for them to get through it and reunite while falling, and furthermore, since it had been made flat, the threads could not carve through it either.

Yae: “Al-sa—”

Al: “—Yae, hold out for a bit.”

Facing each other across the ice sheet, Al ordered Yae from below. What sort of state of mind Yae had arrived at after receiving that was something Rem understood quite distinctly.

Rem was participating in this battle for the sake of Subaru, and so, for the same reason Yae was—

Rem: “When someone precious puts their hopes in you, it sets you alight with motivation.”

Yae: “You’re wrong.”

With a curt response to Rem’s understanding, Yae folded her knees and spun her body, going barefoot.

The enormity of the ice sheet resulted in significantly more air resistance, bringing their falling speed to a limit. As Yae landed atop that ice, Rem and Emilia were perched to her front and back, as if pincering her.

Barefoot as she was, each of Yae’s ten white toes were equipped with a ring—

Yae: “—Once again, magic is quite troublesome~. I’m grateful to the teachings of the village elder.”

Rem: “Thank you so very much for the praise. My mentor was quite an outstanding personage, after all.”

Emilia: “Same for me. I was always being told “You’re learning so quickly, Lia”.”

Yae: “That’s the same way they raised me at the village, so you must also be quite the genius, Emilia-sama.”

With a bitter smile and a shrug, Yae glanced between Emilia and Rem before prefacing with “So, you see”,

Yae: “The fact that I’m even here means that y’all’s plans have failed… Vol-sama will come rushing over here before long, so why don’t we omit the futile exchanges and just have you two surrender?”

Emilia: “Mm-mm, we can’t do that. Sure, it was quite the surprise that you were together with him, but…”

Rem: “Rem and Emilia-sama aren’t playing around either. Besides, if you are counting on the Divine Dragon-sama, it won’t be coming. —Our lord is the one serving as its opponent, after all.”

Yae: “…This is against the Divine Dragon, y’know? Aren’t you expecting a bit too much?”

Emilia: “So, are you not expecting anything from Al?”

As Yae inclined her head, it seemed as if Emilia's question had pierced her directly. Holding her breath with a "Mph", Yae then released it, straining her white fingers and toes as she readied herself.

Rem retracted her iron ball to her hands, and Emilia gripped beautiful twin blades of ice. Glancing down at the sheet of ice, the distance with Al, subject to lesser air resistance as he was, continued to widen rapidly.

After all, Al was having Yae buy time for him.

Rem: "Emilia-sama, Al-san is…"

Emilia: "Yes, I know. We reaaally have to hurry."

Reaching an understanding in just a short exchange, Rem harbored an out-of-place sentimentality.

She had never conceived of being so in sync with Emilia like this before. —Such was her sentimentality.

Setting aside Rem's inner feelings, the trio atop the ice silently roused their fighting spirits—

Yae: "—Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen."

Emilia: "—The Witch of Glaciation, Emilia."
Rem: "—The Hero's Confidant, Rem."

Finishing their introductions, Rem and Emilia immediately charged toward Yae across the ice.

As Yae bent her knees and ducked down, twenty dancing threads shot from her appendages, and while those clashed against chains and magic, Rem, in order to reach Al below the ice, challenged the one blocking the path, the Crimson Sakura.

Rem: "Yahhhhh!!"

Howling a battlecry, Rem was not bluffing or putting up a strong front; she wholeheartedly believed.

That Ram and their allies, who were taking on Gluttony and other foes, as well as Roswaal and Clind, who were dealing with the ultimate threat of the Divine Dragon, would all fulfill their respective duties.

For that purpose, right now, she would defeat Yae, who stood before her, and reach Al. Passing another marking, there now remained fifty seconds until they reached the floor of the Agzadd Canyon—

—As he plummeted below, Al trained his gaze upon that beautifully tempestuous clash atop the ice,

Al: "I don't think you'll lose, but… don't forget, Alter. After all, there's something I need you to do no matter what."

That voice, whispered only within his own mouth, never reached those atop the ice.

3

—Aldebaran, who had betrayed the sun, and his henchmen.

The battle against the scoundrels who were fully capable of pulling the trigger on the world's collapse, the bouts against Gluttony in the mountains and Aldebaran at the Agzadd Canyon, both transitioned to their next stages.

Naturally, the same applied to the third bout, forecasted to be the most rigorous.

By the Authority of Witch of Tristitia, newly born into this world, the battlefield had shifted to a rocky region where collateral damage was of no concern; there, the one extolled as the guardian of the Kingdom, the Divine Dragon Volcanica—the usurper who had bent that almighty dragonhusk to their will, now faced confrontation by its rightful dragonkin.

It was a battle in which all fighters were concealing tremendous power, further ravaging the rocky wasteland that was already naught more than sand and stone, into a place where nobody would ever dare set foot.

Unmistakably, those had been the scars of war forecasted for such a battle against the Divine Dragon.

However—

???: "—Ugh."

Vision blurred, consciousness hazy, ringing in the ears transcending noisiness to end up as silence. Limbs bereft of strength, unsure if both were properly still attached to the body.

Each frail breath brought pain akin to being struck by a flash of lightning from head to toe; likely a sign that fractured bones were tearing up the insides of the body all throughout.

Thinking to that extent, they realized that they had collapsed face down on the hard rocky ground.

???: "—!"

Upon realizing one thing about their current state, other realizations quickly followed.

Evidenced by the ground's violent tremors, the sensation of the sky bursting asunder, and the faint shift in the scent of the atmosphere, the environment had undergone a tremendous upheaval, so not long had passed since they had collapsed to the ground. A minute? Thirty seconds?

???: "Five seconds, Master. Report."

They were bestowed with an exact answer to their question, however, they lacked the leeway to even curve their lips into a wry smile..

The other party had not expected a response, either—nay, it was simply that they were not in a position where they could afford to be placing expectations. The tremors of the ground, the bursting of the sky, and the upheaval of the atmosphere; all were caused by that tactful other party and their opponent.

The battle between Dragon and dragonkin ravaged the world as though it were a natural cataclysm, reshaping it through feats of strength. —Off to the side of that battle, not merely half-dead, but rather nine-tenths dead, they laid collapsed.

???: “…”

No longer, could they even hear voices properly.

—The life of Roswaal L. Mathers, flickered like a candle flame before the wind.

Chapter 48:
The Ultimate Lifeform

1

???: “—Roswaal and Clind-san say they can do it. So, why not let them handle it?”

At the tactical briefing, whilst the Aldebusters were deliberating over who should confront the Divine Dragon Volcanica, it was Emilia’s remark that ultimately served as the decisive blow.

Emilia’s decision to entrust the battlefield to them without demanding a detailed explanation was not reckless impulsiveness, it was rooted in genuine trust; and for that, Roswaal felt both admiration and gratitude toward her.

The situation was what it was. Even if his long-planned schemes were to be somewhat derailed, Roswaal was at least half-prepared for the moment he would have to reveal Clind’s origins. —That was, the identity of the Divine Dragon’s dragonkin.

Roswaal: “But if we’re going to talk about that, it would inevitably involve touching upon the matter of our Contract as well.”

Naturally, Roswaal knew very well whose dragonkin Clind really was, welcoming him into the Mathers household as a servant regardless. Of course, this was not due to his exceptional abilities as a steward, but rather, because he believed his presence would prove to be useful.

The long cherished desire that Roswaal must fulfill no matter what —he believed Clind to be indispensable to that purpose.

Clind: “Even if you were to reveal it, I doubt it would change any of their stances. Advice.”

As Roswaal kept trying to remain quiet on this matter, Clind, as one in the know, made such a proposal.

There was no reason to stubbornly deny him. In fact, Roswaal shared his view. Even if Roswaal's circumstances were to be revealed it would likely not change the attitudes of Emilia or the rest of the Camp.

Still, Roswaal's inability to reveal any details was simply in his nature.

Roswaal could not face others without placing himself in a superior position. He had to grasp their intentions, seize their weaknesses, and if necessary, he even wished to take hostages to secure his advantage.

The numerous years in which he could not afford failure had molded Roswaal into a cautious, even cowardly, villain.

That was why, even though Roswaal knew that Subaru, Emilia, and the others were terribly kind-hearted, he simply could not bring himself to reveal his true intentions to them.

Roswaal: "I don't believe that will be a hindrance, thooough~."

The key was not to reveal everything, but to prove oneself capable where it counts.

In this regard, Roswaal was proud to say that he did not lag behind his comrades. In fact, precisely because he carried the guilt of hiding his true intentions, he felt compelled to deliver results.

Roswaal: "…Feeling guilt? Me, the Witch's disciple of all people?"

Though he recognized such doubts within himself, Roswaal shelved them for later.

In any case, without revealing Clind's circumstances, Roswaal found himself headed toward the same battlefield as him—and toward a fight against the enemy who had stolen the dragonhusk of the Divine Dragon.

And so—

Roswaal: "Let's take this opportunity to put it to the test. —That is, all my diligent studies, in order to slay the Dragon.”

2

—In that battle, there had been no such trial runs.

Removing his monocle, Clind arrayed himself in surging bolts of violet lightning—from his cranium protruded two black horns, and casting off the long-worn mask of the versatile steward, he became naught but a lone dragonkin.

As soon as he took a single step forward, flashes of lightning were birthed at the soles of his feet, and the initial velocity of his explosive leap emitted a cacophony that tore through the air.

Clind: “…”

Rupturing the atmosphere, each step upon the ground quaked the world as if it were cannonfire.

Propelled by fulminations of violet lightning, Clind charged directly towards the majestic figure hovering in the aether. —The Divine Dragon Volcanica spread its valiant dragonwings whilst carrying the sun upon its back, thrusting forth its gaping jaw.

Volcanica: “—Haahraan!”

In that instant, a ray of white heat coalesced from the unleashed breath, seizing Clind head-on.

The Dragon’s breath was a torrent of pure Mana, raw power that had not been bestowed with directionality through magic. Even so, just as drops of water, harmless on their own, could amass into a flood capable of washing away nations, Mana charged with overwhelming vigor could easily tear apart the realm of reality—

Clind: “—Your address at curtain’s rise is bereft of all artistry. Crude.”

Swinging his hand down like a blade performing a bamboo-splitting strike, Clind severed the white light that had been fired with might capable of leveling a city. “1”

The breath was split clean down the middle, and passed straight behind him as if it was trying to avoid a direct hit. In exchange, the scorched ground was upheaved, rock fragments were pulverized until they turned to sand, before being melted all down into viscous streams of red lava.

Leaving all of that in his wake, Clind pressed forward, his body leaping high up as he drew ever closer to the Dragon amidst heavenly skies.

Volcanica: “Tch, you impudent little shit!”

The roaring Dragon gyrated its body, delivering a swing of its thick, tenacious tail. Striking the wind dead, the tail whip revolved relentlessly, and leaving no place to run, it seized Clind head-on—roaring thunder crackled.

Purple lightning of a noticeably stronger degree illuminated the sky, and a moment later, it was the Dragon’s tail that had found itself repelled.

The principle mirrored his earlier ground-kick acceleration: a shock wave generated by the eruption of the violet bolts surging around his body. Whilst airborne, Clind had triggered that phenomenon at his feet, using the impact as a foothold; then, by fulminating lightning through his shoulder, elbow, and down to his fist, he repelled the Dragon’s tail with an unbelievably powerful punch.

And frighteningly, that purple lightning was—

Clind: “Bear with me for a little while longer. Inexhaustible.”

As if ignoring the fine weather of those cloudless, clear skies, those surging flashes of lightning were discharged ad nauseam.

Volcanica: “OHHHHHHHHHH—!!!”

Raising its voice in anger, the Dragon beat its wings and swiveled through the air. In the surroundings of that Dragon, Clind dashed about freely, accelerating with each eruption of indigo lightning.

As before, eruptions of purple lightning at the soles of his feet kept

Clind airborne, bestowing the wingless dragonkin the right to maneuver through the sky as he pleased. Of course, the diligent dragonkin was not merely enjoying a leisurely stroll through the air, and he did not forget to unleash ferocious offensives against the Dragon.

Clind: "…"

Evading the dragonclaws by a hair's breadth as they swung at him, he drove lightning-clad strike into the face of the opponent with whom he harbored far too great a difference in both stature and reach, and thereupon did he unleash the apotheosis of all thunderbolts. This assault, layered with the twofold preparations of strike and fulmination, was not performed merely once or twice; in the blink of an eye, it repeated ten, twenty times.

Volcanica: "Shit—hk!"

Its dominance of the air space robbed by the overlapping eruptions of purple voltage, the Dragon spat that out and ascended to a higher altitude.

Possessing wings, it was the special right of the Divine Dragon to choose its battlefield not merely on the ground, where the wasteland stretched out as far as the eye could see, but even in the sky, covering three-hundred and sixty degrees in three-dimensional space.

However—

???: "—Al Duet."

—Ascending to a high altitude, the Divine Dragon's head plunged right into an enormous mass of water, losing all sense of up and down.

Volcanica: "—Hk?!"

Exhaling a large air bubble out of astonishment, the Divine Dragon's colossal body was swallowed by a sphere of water spanning over several dozen meters in diameter, created by focusing the moisture in the surroundings and the streams of water on the surface together at a single point.

As the water pressure began to creak, the Divine Dragon, held captive in its aquatic gaol, widened its golden eyes.

???: “To think you would forget about me and become so invigorated, how cooold~.”

Beneath the Dragon, Roswaal, who had imprisoned the Dragon in the water sphere, flashed a smile.

Licked by the tongues of the heat wave from the breath that Clind had initially severed, the surface of the ground had been transformed into glass of black luster, and standing atop it, Roswaal pointed to the sphere of water in the heavenly skies, and folded it in on itself.

“Duet” signified an instrumental duo, and so, this magic did not end at merely entrapping the opponent in the sphere of water. —Immediately after, the water sphere in which the Dragon had been sealed began to froth with a scintillating heat, reaching a boiling point.

Thereupon, violet voltage flashed a degree yet stronger—

Clind: “I shall now get a bit flashy. Roaring thunder.”

The thunderclap unleashed by Clind’s fist harmonized as it thrust into the water sphere. —That instant, the voltage surged through the entirety of the mass of water, frying the water sphere itself, along with the Dragon, purple lightning scurrying through all its insides.

In the following moment, the heat and pressure both reached their limits—the water sphere burst asunder in a thunderous overture.

The purple lightning, with nowhere else to go, cracked through the battlefield; the tempest of steam, capable of rivaling an eruption of flames, blew radially outward as a devastating blast; the water that had lasted through the incandescent heat poured down onto the land incessantly as if rain from clear skies.

Clind: "…"

The vehement detonation that was induced harbored the power to wipe out a small village entirely, leaving nary a trace behind.

While it might have been assisted by a dragonkin, it was a level of destructive force impermissible for a lone magician to exhibit; and receiving the full brunt of it without restraint, even the Dragon would surely—

Volcanica: "—Ahh, shit, I've cooled my head now."

Tearing through the white steam with its dragonwings, the Divine Dragon grumbled those words amidst the locus of the epicenter in the sky. —Indeed, it grumbled. If it had sustained any extent of injury, the grumble would have likely been a viler curse instead.

That was to say, the airborne Dragon was going strong. —Nay, it was completely unscathed.

Roswaal: "…Even though it was something we had known, it's quite disheartening to bear witness to it firsthand, iiisn't~ it?"

Gazing up at that feat of having survived unscathed from the ground, Roswaal closed a single eye whilst leaving the blue one open.

Even when subjected to such an extent of firepower, the Divine Dragon had not sustained even a sliver of damage. This was neither because Roswaal's magic was trivial, nor was it because the Dragon had spontaneously devised the most optimal defensive maneuver. —Though the latter was closer to the truth, reality was far more despairing and overwhelmingly unreasonable.

Clind: "Master, do not be dispirited. Encouragement."

Beside Roswaal landed Clind, who had escaped the blast radius and dropped down.

Using purple lightning to dry off after soaking in the water sphere, Clind spoke with an unchanged tone and expression, but conveyed therein was a faint consideration founded in the long time they had known each other. —During their long acquaintance, Clind had told him much about the Divine Dragon's unreasonable absurdity.

Roswaal: "—As expected, the dragonscales and dragonhalo protecting the Heartstone are quite troooublesome~."

At Clind's failed attempt at an encouraging response, Roswaal vocalized proof that he had not lost his fighting spirit. —The dragonscales and dragonhalo, those were the greatest reasons why the Divine Dragon Volcanica had come to be known as the most powerful existence in the world; the unreasonable absurdities that would need to be surmounted, no matter the cost.

Roswaal: "…"

—The Cloud Dragon Mezoreia and the Blight Dragon Valgren; if one questioned where the differences between those two Dragons and the Divine Dragon Volcanica lay, the answer would be in the dragonscales and dragonhalo.

Mezoreia, still young, was yet underdeveloped as a Dragon; and Valgren, having lost the equilibrium of its mind following the death of its birthed dragonkin, had thus forfeited its future. Each of them had proved lacking in the cultivation of their dragonhusks, failing to forge the same two types of armor possessed by the Divine Dragon.

That was—

Roswaal: "Dragonscales impervious to any physical attacks, and a dragonhalo that wards off all magical attacks."

Clind: "Without conquering those two armors, the Heartstone of the Dragon will remain unreachable. Reaffirmation."

Inducing a sense of despair, Clind's words presented the greatest obstacle in conquering the Divine Dragon.

The overwhelming physical defense of the dragonscales, and the absurd magical defense of the dragonhalo; unless they stripped it of those two powerful safeguards, none of their attacks would be able to reach its weak point, the Heartstone.

It was not a matter of which, both were required. Unless they stripped it of both armors, neither would they be able to surpass the astounding regeneration of the Dragon's Mana body, nor would they be able to render it incapable of combat.

Ergo, in order to defeat the Divine Dragon, experts in both hand-to-hand and magical combat were necessary.

But then again—

Roswaal: "Even if its dragonhalo is still intact, it's impressive how even that much firepower resulted in no damage, riiiight~?"

Clind: "It is not known as the most powerful Dragon in the world just for show. Sigh."

Roswaal: "Was that not a bit of a proud sigh juuust~ now? However things may have ended up now, this opponent was originally yourself. If there are any weaknesses that only you are aware of, it's fine for you to secretly tell me, you know?"

Clind: "There is. The Dragon Sword. Immediate response."

Roswaal: "Rather to the point…"

The Dragon Sword, having been immediately given in response, was an enchanted sword that made it possible to cut things that could not be cut.

With the ability of the Dragon Sword, it would have certainly been possible to disregard the dragonscales and dragonhalo and launch an attack straight for the Heartstone. If the wielder felt so inclined, then even just hitting the Divine Dragon with the Dragon Sword might have dealt a notable amount of damage.

Of course, it was fruitless to discuss a weapon they did not have at hand, and it would not change the situation for the better.

Clind: "As a point of reference for the dragonscales, I will target the reverse scale on its neck. Old wound. As for the dragonhalo… I suppose it will depend on your strenuous efforts, Master. Expectation."

Roswaal: “Aren’t you speaking to me a little too casually after my first trump card proved completely ineffective juuust~ now?”

Clind: “Is that so? —Though, Echidna-sama would have been able to do it. Soliloquy.”

Roswaal: “…”

As expected, the duration of their acquaintance went both ways.

Hearing that shameless extra comment from Clind, despite knowing that he was playing right into the former’s intentions, a flame was verily set alight in Roswaal’s heart.

Of course, even now Roswaal was not so conceited as to believe that he had reached the level of his mentor, but—

Roswaal: “A disciple must never cast shame upon their Teacher, aaafter~ all.”

The karma of past lives that he needed to fulfill no matter what, and the deepest, most cherished wish he desired to fulfill; these breathed life into Roswaal’s scarred soul, granting strength to his eyes as they grappled with the challenge presented before them.

The history of magic was a helix of trial and error, and the same was true for the span of Roswaal’s lives.

Once one problem was solved, the subsequent problem would immediately stand in the way, and he would continue to struggle onward in order to find a solution. But, it was by solving all of those problems, that he had arrived at where he was today.

Just as he had done ever since he had lost his mentor, all by his lonesome.

Roswaal: “To begin with, there exists nobody who stands a greater chance than I.”

He would intentionally proclaim it himself. Without a doubt, Roswaal was the strongest magician of the present era.

There existed none who had a greater potential of overcoming the dragonhalo of the Divine Dragon Volcanica than Roswaal. —No, even that infinitesimal possibility was something he had cultivated over these four hundred years.

In the field of magic, if there was a wall that needed to be surmounted no matter what, Roswaal, without fail, would find a way to surmount it. Anything less was an impossibility.

That was the vow Roswaal L. Mathers had taken, the path of thorns he had resolved to walk all by his lonesome.

That was why—

Roswaal: "—With the entirety of my being, I shall vanquish this plight."

Alongside his declaration of resolve, in order to break through to the untrodden domain of surmounting a dragonhalo, Roswaal once again began formulating techniques in the sky of a complexity that would scorch any ordinary mind to naught.

3

—The position of "dragonkin" was one which Clind actually found to be quite troublesome.

In the first place, dragonkin were ultimately the forms taken by the next generation of Dragons and, strictly speaking, were not identical existences to their Dragon progenitors. Nevertheless, they inherited many of the memories, experiences, and emotions of their Dragons, harboring an amalgam within their minds that made it difficult to classify them as separate beings entirely.

Clind was no exception to that, and the influence from the days of Volcanica was markedly reflected in his current self's way of being. —To give an example, this could be seen in his strong envy towards unrealized potential.

Born as a member of the absolute race known as Dragons, Volcanica innately esteemed the unripeness within humans as radiant, as it meant they needed to grow and develop whilst they headed towards their goals, thus validating its own absolute way of being. That disposition was carried forth into the present with him as a dragonkin, and now, unrealized beings who concealed within themselves great potential—children, were something that Clind could not help but greatly revere, respect, esteem, love, and cherish.

That nature of Clind's, carried over from his past life, so to speak, was something that Frederica and the like harbored an enormous misunderstanding about. Only, there was another matter concerning dragonkin that he wished to keep concealed from Frederica, so he deliberately refrained from clarifying that misunderstanding with her and those around her.

Clind: "While that may be the case, it is a tad vexing to be kept at a distance from Annerose-sama, Petra, Beatrice-sama, Meili, and Emilia-sama. Discontent."

In any case, not limited solely to Clind, there existed an inextricable bond between Dragons and their dragonkin.

Given that a dragonkin's development would spur on the growth of their Dragon, and that a dragonkin's death would destroy the mind of their Dragon, that bond was evident—in fact, if the need ever arose, a dragonkin could even house their own mind within the empty dragonhusk, wielding their rightful strength as a Dragon to their heart's content.

Clind: "I have heard that in the Empire, Mezoreia and its dragonkin had done so. Interest."

Though a long time had passed since Clind had become a dragonkin, his points of contact with other dragonkin were essentially nonexistent, so he thought it might be nice if he could one day exchange words with one who had newly been born into Vollachia, Madelyn.

That which she was said to have performed, the housing of one's own soul into their dragonhusk, was an act which Clind had also performed many times in the past, returning to the Divine Dragon Volcanica in order to abide by the Covenant with the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Clind: “Albeit at present, governance of the dragonhusk has been seized through some unknown means. Foul play.”

In essence, all that was required for a dragonkin to house their soul within their Dragon, was the act of touching their dragonhusk. But for Clind, his soul’s first homecoming in approximately forty years had ended in failure, his dragonhusk remaining in the palm of the usurper.

Clind: “It is not as though I was without concerns, but… Regrettable.”

However mighty an existence the race known as Dragons was, the means to commandeer an empty vessel did not amount to zero.

In particular, an Evil Spirit whom Clind knew harbored the power to possess the bodies of others, and he had also discussed the possibility of such a power being capable of seizing a dragonhusk in private with his allies. —Juice, it had been an awfully long time since he had seen the Evil Spirit who went by that name.

Clind: “There is no helping it now. Sentimentality.”

Regardless, Clind knew that it was possible for a Dragon to have its dragonhusk hijacked, and that in order to recover said dragonhusk, there was a need to strike its Heartstone. —The problem was, it was the Divine Dragon’s dragonhusk that had been annexed, so its dragonscales and dragonhalo were obstructing the way to its Heartstone.

Clind: “I will deal with the dragonscales by piercing the reverse scale, so the Master must surmount the dragonhalo. Devotion.”

By way of the absolute defense belonging to the Divine Dragon, the Heartstone was protected behind its dragonscales and dragonhalo—the feat of striking that, was the victory condition for this battlefield levied upon Clind and Roswaal.

Fortunately, there stood a prospect for breaking through those dragonscales. —The old white scar carved into its neck at the culmination of its deadly clash against the Sword Saint, Reid Astrea, was the one and only opening in that absolute defense.

Clind: “The fact that in the end, that which has become our means of grasping victory is a blow dealt by that insolent fellow, how truly aggravating. Infuriation.”

That Dragon-meat-eating freak was always going “Gimme yer damn tail”, or “Lemme eat yer damn guts” and so forth, before ultimately staking his attempt to carve out its heart. Just what in the world had he thought of his traveling companion on their journey?

At the end of it all, they had clashed in an attempt to sever the other from the thread of life—irrespective of the circumstances of the wound’s origin, there already existed a breach in the dragonscales.

Ergo, the path that would lead them to triumph, depended on whether or not Roswaal could surmount the palisade that was the dragonhalo.

Clind: “It is my duty to buy time for that purpose. Concentration.”

For four-hundred years, Roswaal had devoted himself to diligent studies. And now, he would be put to the test. —Standing witness to that ordeal extreme to the utmost, Clind once again reproached his troublesome position of “dragonkin”.

After all, Clind could not help but find the dazzling blaze that was Roswaal’s life, having commenced as but a seedling of unripeness, as something that ought to be esteemed, beloved, and cherished.

Volcanica: “—HAAHRAAN!!”

Harrowing the heavens, affrighting the lands, and imperiling the world, the roar of the Divine Dragon thundered far and wide.

The mighty voice incited quakes all throughout heaven and earth, rending the sky as its resonance took shape as a torrent that deluged Clind in his entirety. The bellow ravaged aught in its path, and swallowed by it, Clind’s body was also sundered, rupturing—before that could transpire, a voluminous cloud of mist emerged, and plunging right into it whilst clad in violaceous teravolts, the roar of the heavens quite literally dispersed into the mist.

Fine particles of water created passageways for the sound, immensely dampening the ruinous shockwave.

Roswaal: “—Al Trio.”

Above Clind’s head as he bolted through the mist, honing in upon the Dragon were tricolored radiances.

Red, blue, and green; the triadic varieties of light achieved a brilliant harmony, and in that instant, the swelling of illumination scorched the sky. —Wind and flame erupted on a scale of nigh a hundred meters, and the glacial inferno berserking through the storm enveloped the Dragon; hues and spectacle befitting the world’s end, painting the clear skies of the battlefield with the spitting image of hell.

Clind: “Sh—hk!”

Into that hellscape, Clind thrust himself forth, galloping through the air with lightning by his side.

The world’s demise, the degradation of the battlefield’s sky to hell—to survive even if it was a realm of such absolute death, was the mark of a powerful being who had lived in the age of the Witches that wielded their power as if to assert their very existences.

Volcanica: “—Welcome!!”

Reigning over the sky, woven with a chaotic, incoherent blend of colors as it was, the Divine Dragon bellowed sonorously as it demonstrated its pristine condition.

Behind the Dragon whilst it spread its wings, suspended in the air were colossal arms of crag construction, numbering twelve in total; the sturdy firsts ferociously burred as if a joyous gesture of welcoming, meeting Clind head-on.

Clind: “—Sealing Shackle: Unleash Second Stage.”

The moment before he crashed into the monolithic arms, Clind intensified the light emitted from the black horns on his head a stage further.

Purple lightning surging around his body, Clind temporarily attained a protection equivalent to that of the Dragon. Weaponizing that sturdiness, Clind wielded the entirety of his body as an indestructible armament capable of combatting the Divine Dragon's onslaught.

A flash of roaring thunder, a detonation of purple voltage that caused the heavens to cry out, pulverized the rocky arms forged by the Dragon, actualizing a volley of blows between the two who possessed far too great a difference in stature.

Clind: "You fight with reckless abandon. Exceedingly unthinkable for a Dragon. Creative ingenuity."

Volcanica: "We're both far past the stage of choosing a clean way of winning, yeah? The recent trend of all my adversaries, is that they're all damn strong guys who don't hesitate to come at me with unfair methods, you know?!"

As he shattered, one, two, three colossal arms, Clind nodded in affirmation to that response.

He was not fond of self-praise, but as one might expect, the one most proficient, most capable of wielding the dragonhusk of the Divine Dragon Volcanica to its fullest strength, was undoubtedly Clind. No matter how powerful the receptacle was, if the contents did not match, its true potential would not be fully exhibited.

To make up for that which was lacking, the usurper did not draw forth the true value of the dragonhusk, but rather, explored many varieties of delicate tricks and techniques that the actual Dragon would have never attempted.

And the scope of those delicate tricks, arriving at a domain bereft of all charm, began to drive Clind into a corner.

Volcanica: "—Aghh."

Unleashing a tempest of the twelve monolithic arms, its dragonclaws, and its tail, the Divine Dragon began to thunderously churn a maelstrom of light within the depths of its throat.

Kneaded in synchrony to that, was a torrent of flame and water being compressed in the Dragon’s oral cavity. Contrary to what common sense might dictate, the flame and water did not simply cancel each other out. Encasing a terrifying amount of heat and volume of water, with no place left for it to go, seeking an outlet to direct its power, erupting outward—that instant, Clind induced a shockwave of purple lightning to his fore, launching himself backwards to extract himself from the Divine Dragon’s line of fire.

Clind: “—Kuhh!”

That was prevented by the colossal arms of stone that had stretched out to surround him. As the bouldering palms moved to clasp him, even as he attempted to blow them away through a boisterous dance of thundering bombardments—

Volcanica: “—Get blasted away!”

—Following that, alongside the ear-piercing bellow, detonations began to erupt all across the battlefield, as if it was being hailed with strikes.

A wave of heat to scorch away aught that had been birthed, a wave of shock to rend away what was the very world, the onslaught of each granted Clind no method of escape, merely passing a surplus of divine punishment unto the fool who had dared to challenge the Dragon.

Clind: “…Hk.”

Clenching down on his molars firmly, Clind rescinded the bulwark of purple lightning that had clad his entire body. Instead, he promptly discharged voltage through his black horns, generating the maximum output of purple lightning as a vallum that rivalled the dragonhalo. Even still, supposing the attack were to have been taken directly, not even Clind would have been able to escape a fatal wound.

Indeed, if he had taken the attack directly—.

Roswaal: "—Al Quartet."

Vocalizing such, the one present to Clind's rear, past the scorched, colossal arms of stone that had crumbled beyond recognition, was Roswaal, performing an incantation of great magic.

Having taken flight into the sky by means of aviation magic, Roswaal had joined the fray of aerial combat between Clind and the Divine Dragon, invoking four attributes simultaneously against those tremendous detonations, a feat that cancelled them out entirely.

Volcanica: "Oi oi, you've gotta be kidding me…"

Faced with that reality, it was no wonder that even the Divine Dragon spilled a voice of astonishment.

The attack from the usurper just now harbored a destructive power mighty enough to wipe an entire city off the map, leaving no trace behind. For that to have been offset by the measure of man, having fully protected Clind on top of that, was a level of precision light-years beyond anything that could have been considered ordinary.

If there had been even just a single, slight miscalculation, it would have instead bolstered the Divine Dragon's attack, and quite possibly scorched both of them to ashes. It truly was a feat befitting divinity, threading the eye of a needle from a kilometer away.

Only, this could not be called a perfect victory.

Roswaal: "…I'm, beeeat~."

As such words feebly spilled out from Roswaal's lips, in a state of delirium, he lost control and began to fall head-first.

Clind: "Master! Haste."

Kicking off the air to catch up to the plummeting Roswaal, Clind gazed in wonder.

The mere aftershock of the offset detonation had torn Roswaal's body to shreds, and his right arm in particular had sustained tremendous damage; hideously charred to a red and black chunk of flesh, it was too painful to even look at.

Albeit Roswaal had mastered all manners of magic, the one and only thing he could not employ was healing magic. As for whether he could continue to fight whilst bearing such a wound, would be far too—

Volcanica: "Don't take this the wrong way, but Origin's waiting on me!"

Clind: "Kuh—hk!"

Clind embraced the severely wounded Roswaal in his arms, however, the Divine Dragon did not relax its onslaught.

Furling the wind in their wake, dragonwings became blades of light in fearsome approach, and violently discharging purple voltage, Clind bolted through the sky as though lightning, continuing to evade, evade, and evade. Whilst basking in the shame of having allowed Roswaal to sustain a wound, he pulverized the blades of wind with kicks, and catching the scything dragonwings with his body, thereupon did lightning fulminate—by the force of that impact, they were sent flying backwards.

Forcibly distancing himself, he restored his posture—that instant, the Dragon's tail came crashing down.

Clind: "—Hk."

Converting the impact of the discharge into rotational force, the Divine Dragon's tail struck down in a direct hit.

Even though he used his arm to protect their heads from the fatal blow, the force sent them hurtling straight towards the ground at full speed. Falling to the ground as they were, the inertia would be vigorous enough to dig their own graves for them, but—

Volcanica: "—And just to make sure of things…"

As Clind and Roswaal plummeted, the Divine Dragon spoke those words and inhaled a deep breath.

Amidst the combat where offense and defense alternated rapidly, any action that required charging time could prove fatal. Ergo, the full force of the Dragon's breath, a move kept sealed away save for the opening hand, was now unleashed.

Against the destruction inescapable by even his lightning dash, naught could be done. —By Clind.

Roswaal: "—Al Quintet."

With all of the strength having faded from his body, having entrusted Clind with all of the offensive and defensive combat, Roswaal invoked the greatest firepower that he had ever charged up.

—The activation of the perfected technique, manifested an enormous magic circle baling together five lights in the heavens above.

Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, and finally, Yang—that which coalesced these conflicting principles by means of overlapping rationality that surpassed human understanding, was a power of overwhelming destruction not permitted to exist anywhere but the outside of order. It clashed directly against the unleashed breath of the Divine Dragon—in that moment, all notions of sound and color were bereaved from the world.

Roswaal: "…"

The two unbridled powers contested, vividly tearing asunder the very boundary between heaven and earth.

Infernos raged ferociously, the sky froze over, the wind swirled into a vortex, the earth was vehemently exhumed, and all of it was amplified by light; five contradictory powers took the shape of great spires of illumination as the battlefield crumbled in a chain reaction.

The region that had been merely a craggy wasteland before the battle's commencement was now filled with the thunderous dance of light and sound, to the point that up could not be discerned from down; aught was consumed in a crucible of chaos.

Roswaal: "…"

In the sense of destroying the equilibrium of the world, that technique was already on a level which rivaled the numerous forbidden arts whose existences had been erased by Od Lagna. The reason why this had never had its existence extinguished as a forbidden art, was none other than because there had been nobody capable of using it to make it worth prohibiting.

Prior to this, the only ones who had ever materialized great magic—nay, hyper magic to this degree, were the Witch of Greed, Echidna, and the Original Magician, Myonmyon.

The hyper magic bordering on taboo was fired not as an arrow of "destruction", but as one of "negation".

Clind: "Master, truly you are… Hats off."

Just who could have ever believed that the spectacle of this cataclysmic upheaval was the proof of a lone man's devotion to his diligent studies?

The journey and footprints trodden by that personage, many would likely loathe and vilify its details as immoral, repudiating his way of being.

But, Clind would not repudiate him. Nor would he scorn him. He may have deserved scorn, but the impact that would stir in the heart upon witnessing something that surpassed all measure, was no different for humans or Dragons.

Only, Clind had been overcome with emotion. To think that a human could build something up to this extent.

—Clind dearly loved the potential of humans.

Born as weak, fragile, and imperfect beings, the question of what they might pursue, what they might desire, fascinated him to no end. From that perspective, Roswaal had nearly achieved the maximum score.

As far as Clind was aware, there existed nobody else who had continued to pathetically cling to such a distant possibility, ever struggling towards it, to the extent that Roswaal had.

—If one did not harbor any talent, they would have given up far sooner.

—If he had been a chosen existence like the Sword Saint, he would have reached this point without suffering to this extent.

Having been neither of those, the only quality Roswaal possessed was a tenacity beyond all normality.

For that reason, Clind had revered his way of being, affirmed his path, and lent him his strength.

Clind: “That prayer, yet remains shining brightly within me. —Vow.”

Speaking of his vow in such a manner, Clind gently laid Roswaal onto the ground.

Shedding tears of blood, the matchless magician convulsed throughout his entire body as a result of overusing his powerful Gate; the reward for his meritorious deed was an all-too-dreary bed of sand, but he would just have to bear with it for the time being.

—After all, having basked in the magician’s apotheosis, the Divine Dragon was ever unscathed, thriving up in the heavenly skies.

4

—And thus, reality had caught up with Roswaal, whose life was teetering on the brink.

???: “Five seconds, Master. Report.”

That which greeted the return of his scattered consciousness was an exceptionally calm voice.

However, he did not seem to blame Clind for that. If he had five seconds, the Divine Dragon should have been able to kill Roswaal fifty times over. —There was word of them having a "no-killing" rule, so he supposed that they would crush his limbs and freeze his wounds for later in order to render him incapable of fighting, or something like that.

Because if it were Roswaal, he would have gone that far in order to render someone incapable of fighting.

Clind had protected Roswaal from that damage, splendidly fulfilling his role as the vanguard.

The issue was—

Roswaal: "My poor display, huh?"

It was the pathetic feeling of having jumped into the battle between Dragon and dragonkin, and arriving on the verge of death so quickly. It was not that he had underestimated the situation, but he had thought he could accomplish more.

Roswaal: "…"

Thanks to Petra's struggle to assume custody of the Witch Factor herself, Roswaal's preparation was spread across the battlefield which the Divine Dragon was drawn into, and he had performed in what was probably the greatest magical battle of his lifetime.

He could say that he had not fought a battle like this since he had faced the Warlock of Tristitia alongside Clind. Simply looking at the results alone, it was not purely a matter of the Divine Dragon being stronger than the Warlock of Tristitia.

Either way—

Roswaal: "…We need… to change… our conditions for victory."

Even now, Clind might still be fighting, believing that Roswaal would recover, but he knew his own limits better than anyone. His strength was depleted, his body was a complete mess, and even his life force had been largely whittled away by his intense consumption of Mana.

Even the numerous great magics he had prepared were not enough to pierce the dragonhalo of the Divine Dragon. It had been impossible even with the simultaneous activation of five different types of Al-class magic. If any possibility existed, it was in the simultaneous activation of Al-class magic of all six attributes, but given that such magic had never been successful even under perfect conditions, there was no way it would be successful under the current circumstances.

A sensation like his brain was boiling, and pain as if all the blood in his body was flowing backwards were indications that the greatest Gate of his family, selected for across Roswaal's four-hundred years, was on the verge of breaking.

It was pointless for him to continue any further. If what he had prepared could not do the trick, he would lower the hurdle for what he aimed to achieve and accomplish at least the minimum required of him.

Originally, the goal of this battle had been to prevent Aldebaran's plans, which they could achieve if they could just continue to keep the Divine Dragon pinned down here.

Thus, he would be clever and adaptable while devoting himself to supporting Clind as he continued to resist here.

However—

???: "Roswaal, you shouldn't push yourself too hard, but it's a reeeally important role. So, good luck!"

???: "Roswaal-sama, I apologize for the inconvenience until now. Finally, we can repay your kindness to us. Together, we can help that person… Subaru-kun!"

???: "It's what the Master said he would do, so please don't change your mind… I hate the Master, but I really believe he wouldn't lose to anyone else."

???: “Roswaal-sama, may fortune in battle be upon you. —And please, do enjoy yourself.”

Roswaal: “…Oya?”

Being clever and adaptable while devoting himself to supporting Clind—that was what he ought to have done.

But the next thing he knew, Roswaal was standing on unsteady feet, cradling his right arm that had been reduced to a horrible state.

Roswaal: “…”

It was strange. He had intended to fight sneakily, not in the manner of the grand magicians Roswaal had admired, but rather by using the underhanded means of a mediocre magician hungry for victory, and yet.

Why, for what reason, had he risen to his feet?

Surely he did not mean to say that he had not given up? Even though that which he had prepared had been ineffective? Even though he had never once achieved results beyond his ability?

???: “—What, you stood back up? I had intended to take on the role, however…”

Roswaal was so surprised by his own actions that the unexpected voice did not surprise him whatsoever.

Roswaal: “…”

The owner of that voice slowly stepped upon the desolate earth, as if depicting the demise of the world, and stood next to the unsteady and wavering Roswaal.

However—

Roswaal: “Sorry, but I don’t even have the strength to move my head… You’re too short, so I can’t tell who you are, but this is faaar~ from a role for a child.”

???: “Who exactly are you calling a child?! You knave, you are truly an infuriating man…!”

The other person raised his voice in full earnestness at Roswaal’s half joking, half serious words, and his unseen form gradually lifted up and entered the edge of Roswaal’s field of view. It was not that the other party had grown taller. He had made the ground swell with magic, using it as an improvised step-stool to match their eye levels.

It was truly a silly waste of magic, yet he did not hate it.

Indifferent to Roswaal’s inner thoughts, the black-robed, green-haired dwarf who had done so crossed his arms, and—

???: “I shall engrave who I am anew, so that you shall not forget, you knave. —The Gray, Ezzo Cadner, shall conquer the Divine Dragon before you!”

Vic.1128

Chapter 49:
Magician

1

—Fulminations of purple lightning cavorted, and amidst the sky of the battlefield, Clind dashed around through a full range of motion in every conceivable direction, free from any and all obstructions.

Volcanica: "—Haahraan!!"

As if to chase the light of that thunderous blast, dragonclaws stirred the air as if a storm, ripping the empty airspace asunder each time they did so, and the resultant vacuous waves shut off the dragonkin's escape routes.

His options dwindling by the moment, Clind restrained the Dragon's aim to himself, and exercising caution such to ensure that its shockwaves did not reach the surface below, he maneuvered through the heavens with both prudence and boldness.

Clind: "You have managed to exceed my expectations? Wonder."

Whilst evading, sidestepping, and cancelling out the Dragon's tyranny head on, each and every one of its blows capable of reshaping the terrain, Clind could not help but admire the usurper's handling of the dragonhusk.

As mentioned previously, the usurper had failed to achieve a perfect control over the Divine Dragon's dragonhusk. —It was something akin to granting a newborn baby the body of the Sword Saint. To begin with, it was an unreasonable matter.

Ergo, the avaricious approach taken by the usurper, electing to use even the dragonhusk as a means to seize victory rather than drawing out its true merits as the Divine Dragon, was something that impressed Clind, further increasing his reverence for the strength possessed by weak humans.

However, when the battle began to surpass his expectations and drag on, he realized. —Far exceeding Clind's expectations, the usurper had adapted to the dragonhusk, all while still continuing to grow.

Clind: "I heard that you had also contended with the Sword Saint and Sword Demon to reach this point. Understanding."

Even while possessing the Divine Dragon's dragonhusk, the usurper had accreted battles against powerful individuals who could not be so easily defeated, and had thus drawn out a rather powerful degree of its potential as a dragon. From the brilliance of the dragonscales and dragonhalo that defended its Heartstone, that could be perceived overwhelmingly.

Clind: "The potential of humans… Heartfelt devotion."

To boast as if they were perfected existences, just how comical was the way of being of Dragons?

For what reason had the Dragons, as the strongest of lifeforms, lorded over the surface as if they owned the place? —The answer to that lay in their massive, unapologetic footsteps, so Clind believed. They asserted themselves with might, such that nobody would be able to avert their attention from them. Such that they could not be ignored. That was what had made it look as if the Dragons were the most important beings who resided on the surface.

Hence, when they lost their place upon these lands, the Dragons had disappeared beyond the Great Waterfall.

Clind: "…"

Although he knew it to be an inappropriate sentimentality, glimpses of the past flashed through the dragonkin's mind.

Heavenly skies were rent asunder into numerous rifts, amidst gigantic crags and lumps of ice that heaved up roaring winds as they flew past each other, slipping through the accumulation of shockwaves numbering ten, twenty, Clind's mind went to four-hundred years ago—he envisioned the figures of his brethren, flying away as they were ousted from these lands.

That day, those who had remained in these lands were either ones who had strayed from their weyrs or who were eccentrics; the Dragons that had fled beyond the Great Waterfall were considered to be in possession of sound thinking and judgment, but if Clind were to be asked, he would give the opposite answer.

The reason why Dragons were the ultimate lifeforms, was because their lives had been designed to be the most strong. In that case, a Dragon must always keep learning in order to never relinquish that seat, and must always continue to grow.

Was the fact that dragonkin had been conceived not proof in itself of that way of being belonging to the Dragons?

Clind: “Above all, are they truly not aware of it? —Snicker.”

Channelling the purple electricity surging around him into thunderous discharge, Clind pulverized the clods of rock and ice tessellating the sky in the realm of hundreds, and concentrated the Dragon’s attention upon himself, before looking down at the ground.

And present there—

Ezzo: “—The dragonscales and the dragonhalo, so those were the Divine Dragon’s contrivances to render your trump cards powerless, knave?”

Roswaal: “Rendered powerless, that is a bit of an upsetting way to put it. I would rather you described it as having been rendered ineffective, or rendered harmless, you knooow~.”

Ezzo: “Is this really the time to be finicky over such worthless things…?! The simultaneous invocation of differing attributes, was that an application of the “Two Attribute Intersection Theorem”? But, if you mix in a third variety, then how do you keep the convergence pressure of fire and wind under control?”

Roswaal: “It is rather elementary. Simply affix that convergence pressure as the nucleus. It is possible to correct for the imbalance birthed in the technique from the mutual interference by applying fire if the third element is water, and applying wind if it is earth.”

Ezzo: “You’re saying to make use of the helical interference of attributes?! Absurd, if attributes of inverse phases were to clash, the technique would cancel itself out, and it would easily exceed the critical deviation of the Gate… extreme compression, is it?!”

Roswaal: “Ho, I did not expect that you would be able to arrive at that conclusion on your own merits. From how it appears, you have formulated a rather novel technique, even though you seem to be self-taught… no, upon closer inspection, is it not founded upon a technique left behind by my House two generations prior?”

Ezzo: “Ngh…!!”

Roswaal: “By now, “Equilibrious Circulation”, which views the Mana flowing through one’s body as a torus, already ought to have been discarded as worthless in the mainstream… the materials on that subject were lost quite a long time ago, but, do not tell me, you…?”

Ezzo: “I-it takes a good amount of resolve in order to pursue the path of magic! To begin with, the book was covered in dust at a street stall! I discovered “Synthesis Circulation” from there, dramatically improving the efficiency of Mana usage in the invocation of spells!”

Roswaal: “A little audacious after stealing someone’s theory, areeen’t~ you?”

Ezzo: “I’ll admit that it served as the impetus for my ideas, but improvements and revisions are a constant for advancement! In that case, are you trying to say that you’ve never received any training or education from anyone, knave?!”

Roswaal: “…”

Ezzo: “Don’t fall silent all of a sudden! In the first place, even if I concede some ground here for the sake of argument, it was not even you, knave, it was the accomplishment of your forebearer, the

Madam Roswaal J. Mathers!”

Roswaal: “Though, she was not too dissimilar from myself, or something like that. —Let us get back on topic. I had never thought of “Synthesis Circulation”. If you understand the main issue with the “Two Attribute Intersection Theorem”, then I suppose I have no need to explain why “Tripedal Centroid Control” is ill-suited to “Multi-Attribute Intersection Theorem”?”

Ezzo: “Are you trying to make a fool of me? Each attribute added to a simultaneous invocation multiplies the disturbance of helical interference. Even if “Tripedal Centroid Control” can reach a simultaneous invocation of three attributes, any more than that would be… no, just earlier you demonstrated control over five attributes at once, knave. How in the world did you perform that?”

Roswaal: “I see. So you want to hear the answer. Very well, I shall tell you. I believe the true pleasure of magic lies in exploring one’s own curiosity and the essence of abyssal enigmas, but since your passion is too shallow for that—”

Ezzo: “Wait wait wait wait, be quiet…! Five attributes, helical interference, extreme compression… no, that technique was using “Equilibrious Circulation”… that’s it! It’s “Tripedal Centroid Control” superimposed in parallel!”

Roswaal: “—!”

Ezzo: “In other words, you performed the simultaneous invocation of three attributes through “Tripedal Centroid Control” twice at the same time, and superimposed them before deployment! Among the second set of three attributes, you utilized the invoked Yang attribute to support your own Gate, and by fixing the nucleus as the convergence pressure yielded from the helical interference, you formulated the extreme compression between the three and two attributes remaining, resulting in that culmination…”

Roswaal: “Yes, yes that’s exactly right! That was the breakthrough that proved the existence of the “Fivefold Resonance Point”!”

Ezzo: “Are you stupid?! It only takes a single thousandth of a single instant of a single maneuver! If anything even so slightly shifts out of place in any part of the process, it would trigger a helical breakdown and spell the end of everything! Knave, that would cause a second Agzadd Canyon to form with you as its center, you know?!”

Roswaal: “But, such a thing did not happen. —That is the towering, distant summit of this blasphemous path.”

Ezzo: “…”

Roswaal: “Does it scare you? Ezzo Cadner-kun?”

Ezzo: “Yeah, it’s terrifying. That my own heart desires such a thing, Roswaal L. Mathers.”

—Indeed, the two magicians on the surface clashed with their diligent studies, sharpening one another.

Clind: “What remarkably lively faces. Beyond expectation.”

There was a role he had been entrusted with from the start. Hence, Clind gladly undertook the frontline in the battle against the Dragon, cladding himself in purple voltage as they violently clashed.

But, even if he had not been entrusted with that role, Clind, following his own convictions, would have likely chosen to wield purple lightning against his own former dragonhusk like this.

The way that humans sharpened and polished each other, would inevitably give rise to a brand new “something”.

Unmistakably, that was the desire of Clind—the dragonkin of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, who had elected to be left behind in these lands, thus being deemed a heretic by its brethren who did not recognize its new sense of values.

After all, that was the stoutest pillar of the mentality that would never accept the Witch Factor of Tristitia, which demanded the stifling of potential as compensation.

Roswaal did not know much about the one who was standing alongside him, Ezzo Cadner.

He had heard the name. As personnel who had recently joined the Felt Camp, his capabilities quickly gained him a key position within the Camp responsible for internal affairs; such was Roswaal's understanding.

For the most part, there had also been some information saying that he was a magician, but with it having been unknown who he apprenticed and studied under, he was commonly seen as a mock magician operating privately, and since he was in fact self-taught, that perception was not very far off the mark.

However, that perception of him as a mock magician was overturned upon coming face to face with the real Ezzo, and laying eyes upon the theories that his magic were formulated upon. —He was the real deal.

Thus, mutually understanding each other as the real deal, there was no need to exchange many words.

Ezzo: "Rest for a bit to catch your breath. I will be needing you to push yourself once more."

As Ezzo spoke those words, he hopped down from the foothold he had made for himself to stand at eye level with Roswaal, before taking a step forth towards the battlefield and gazing up towards the sky.

Ezzo: "…"

With the successive firings of great magic and hyper magic, further layered with the clash between Dragon and dragonkin, the stagnated Mana was dramatically perturbed, and the sky where blue had stretched out overhead was transformed into abnormal weather conditions of rainbow-hued flickerings. Amidst that scene, yet chaining were the innumerable fulminations of purple lightning as the dragonkin dashed through the sky, ever engaged in solo combat.

Even after Roswaal had fallen, unable to accomplish anything, Clind remained performing his role to the fullest—

Ezzo: “For what reason is he fighting alone? You seem to have the wrong idea, knave.”

Roswaal: “…What did you say?”

Ezzo: “You mean to suggest that a magician ought never consort with others? Nay, it is in harmony where their true worth lies!”

As Roswaal widened his eyes, before him Ezzo spoke those words, countless spheres of water floating in his vicinity.

Contained within each of those water spheres were numerous fragments of the boulders that had fallen down; at once, they all ascended up in one swift motion—sent towards the battlefield where Clind was vehemently clashing against the Divine Dragon.

Roswaal: “That is—”

Excessive, or rather, meaningless; in such a manner did Roswaal grasp Ezzo’s intent.

It was a simple defense of the water attribute, nevertheless, he was impressed by that ability to easily control a number nigh on a hundred; however, that degree of water spheres would fail to even draw the attention of the Dragon, even if they smashed an entire boulder into it.

Rather, they could even spoil the tactics of Clind as he contended against the Divine Dragon by himself.

Ezzo: “I’ll say it once more, Roswaal. —You have the wrong idea, knave.”

Ezzo’s declaration, and the spectacle that ensued, took Roswaal’s breath away.

The countless spheres of water he had elevated, had not been for the purposes of attacking the Divine Dragon directly. —The water spheres and rocky fragments burst asunder from the fulminations of purple lightning, and having thus gained a foothold as he revolved through the skies, Clind accelerated a degree further.

As Clind accelerated, the water spheres guiding his path were deployed across a vast area, granting the dragonkin launchpads to make his attacks sharper, weightier, and more vehement as they bore into the Divine Dragon's dragonscales.

The thunderous crackles and shockwaves were delivered back down to the surface, and Ezzo continued speaking to Roswaal as they basked in the wind.

Ezzo: "Certainly, that individual has the ability to engage in aerial combat by himself. But per my judgement, the original usage of that magical light is not suited to such purposes, and rather, is meant to be an astonishing defensive ability. Since he is a powerful individual of such mastery, he is utilizing it in a different way in order to fight, but if the dissipation of that power is set aside, it might be incomparable to its intrinsic might."

Roswaal: "—. But, if you create footholds within the sky, it would instead make it more difficult to scatter its aim. Would the advantage of Clind being able to freely kick off the sky not then perish?"

Ezzo: "Do you take him for a novice incapable of switching between them as necessary? In that case, knave, it is not just consideration in which you are lacking, but an eye for people as well."

Roswaal: "…"

Ezzo: "Roswaal, to fight alongside someone does not mean to neglect considering all matters, and merely have faith in the other person. You entrust what you can entrust, and compensate what you can compensate. With your way of doing things, knave, even if you can achieve two-hundred by having a hundred and a hundred that do not get in each other's way, you will never achieve a hundred and a hundred that elevate each other into a thousand."

As he spoke of his opinion, Ezzo did not slacken from providing backup to the battle overhead.

This was a rocky wasteland with plenty of boulders to send up. The water spheres multiplied with enough vigor to permeate the sky, so even if Clind expended them as footholds faster than the eye could see, the quantity of that multiplication far overpowered it.

Volcanica: “Tch-, just when I thought things were getting too clever, turns out it’s Sensei-san?!”

Having located Ezzo as the source of the footholds being utilized, the Divine Dragon roared in anger. Crushing a hundred of the water spheres in one fell swoop of its dragonclaws, it took aim at the magicians upon the ground, and unleashed its breath—

Clind: “I do not advise looking away, have a look at this. Demonstration.”

Shooting straight up into the Dragon’s jaw from directly below were the two legs of Clind after soaring upwards. The unreleased breath was thus detonated within the Dragon’s oral cavity, and some of its fangs could be seen flying out from the impact.

Volcanica: “You, little…hk!”

Reeling back from its own explosion, the atmosphere surrounding the Divine Dragon was rapidly filled with a distorted, warped, unstable yet mighty and authentic magical light; the Dragon was attempting to invoke the great magic it had learned through observation.

Even if Clind, who could use purple lightning as a barrier, and the Divine Dragon, who could entrust its defenses to its dragonhalo, could withstand it, if it reached the surface, Roswaal and Ezzo would not stand a chance.

Roswaal: “—In that case, the only option is to have it detonate in the sky.”

Fortunately, in addition to the Mana that had been discharged at random, there happened to be countless water spheres of magic founded upon “Synthesis Circulation” that he had been carefully observing next to him. —Interrupting the formulation of that magic, he overwrote its efficacy.

Ezzo: “You knave, that’s my magic you know?!”

Roswaal: “Magic does not belong to anyone. Paths forwards are constantly being opened. —A teaching of my mentor.”

That instant, Ezzo’s control over the water spheres was stolen, and they were bundled together whilst taking in the surrounding Mana to achieve extreme compression—the great magic that the Divine Dragon had attempted to construct had been injected with self-interpretation, deliberately thwarting its completion.

Induced was the helical breakdown that Ezzo had feared—the sky that had fractured several times during this battle, once more underwent a grand explosion of collapsing aurora.

Waves of scorching heat and zenith cold blew past them in turns, and the crags present in the sky melted, then froze, then shattered. Amidst the catastrophe, lightning scorched all of those remnants to naught, and the wind pressure blew the ashes and dust particles several kilometers away.

Ezzo: “Are you out of your mind, knave?! Your ally there would have disintegrated along with it?!”

Roswaal: “But, you protected him. —This is the harmony you were speaking of, riiight~?”

Closing his yellow eye in a wink, Roswaal silenced the angered Ezzo.

In truth, as Clind was engulfed in the enormous explosion at high altitude, it had been Ezzo’s skills that enclosed him in innumerable layers of water, bestowing him the maximum defense from that destructive firepower.

Roswaal thought that if it was Ezzo, the latter would have correctly guessed his intentions, and performed that act. If the roles had been reversed, due to the differences in their talents and consideration, such a thing would absolutely not have taken shape; truly, it was the right man in the right place.

As expected, Roswaal was an inhuman villain. —Only, he was merely one who still had room to improve, to revise, and to advance.

Clind: “Nevertheless, this deed makes me question the Master’s sanity. Brute.”

With that, Roswaal felt like he could hear Clind voicing complaints after having averted a crash thanks to Ezzo’s quick-wittedness, but being reproached whilst confronted with that ice-cold face, and all other such matters, would need to wait until this battle was concluded.

Thus—

Roswaal: “Ezzo Cadner-kun.”

Ezzo: “—. What, Roswaal L. Mathers?”

Called out by his name, it was amusing how Ezzo called back to him as if in opposition. Concealing those sentiments of his beneath the makeup that had been ruined by blood and sweat, Roswaal sighed.

Then, once again training his gaze upon the Gray, Ezzo Cadner—

Roswaal: “—I wish to have you assist me. For something that has not once transpired in this world, the genesis of a brand new magic.”

Recognizing it as a cowardly thing for even himself to say, Roswaal took the offensive. —After all, those who gave themselves to the path of magic, could never even hope to resist such an allure.

3

—In the midst of constructing a technique, Ezzo Cadner was on the verge of shedding tears in spite of himself.

Ezzo: “Stupid stupid stupid, these foolish lacrimal glands. Cease your operation now, just slack off.”

Reprimanding the functions of his own body, he stiffened his cheeks to hold back the tears.

Ezzo despised slacking off. This was because the dwarf race was not endowed with outstanding physical abilities or Gates, and many of his brethren were required to put in much more strenuous effort than other races in order to accomplish their goals. The sole grace of the dwarf race was that they had a tendency to be bestowed Divine Protections, but unlike his fellow member of the Felt Camp, Camberley, Ezzo had also lost out on that lottery, and was easily identifiable as a have-not.

Ezzo despised slacking off. This was because he was forced to live under stricter conditions than most others—it was not. To use his dwarven ancestry as an excuse, and hold it in contempt saying “Ah, it can’t be helped”, was quite frankly unbearable to him.

If Ezzo failed to reach the goals he set for himself, it would not be because he was a dwarf.

If one allowed themself to make an excuse even once in their life, they would fall into the trap of sloth and neglect in the blink of an eye, setting themselves up to live in a slackened and unproductive spoiled manner; Ezzo knew this well.

Rather, that had been the case for his elder brothers and sisters. Ezzo was the youngest child of ten siblings, and all of his other siblings had received Divine Protections, rejoicing in the lives they lived fully dependent upon them.

He would not say it was a bad thing. Those were the lives of his elder brothers and sisters. He wanted to say it was bad, but he would not. He could bear it.

Merely, he could not bear to allow that for his own life.

Hence, when Ezzo Cadner discovered a book of magic covered in dust stored deep within a box at a street vendor, he vowed to dedicate his life to the deep inspiration it gave him, and to never make excuses no matter what.

Ezzo: “You’re the same, Roswaal… I can tell by looking at you.”

While he occupied the seat of the Kingdom’s Magician of the Court, and had multiple “colored” titles under his belt for having mastered certain magical attributes to their extremes, Roswaal did not provide guidance, nor did he ever consort with others. Even if he was skilled as a Margrave, his position as a magician had been something bought through his parentage and political strength. —Having doubted Roswaal in such a manner, thus seeking to challenge him, was the unforgettable dark past of Ezzo.

But, in reality, upon witnessing the efficiency of construction in the magic Roswaal was deploying, and the beauty of the techniques he was materializing, Ezzo felt ashamed from the bottom of his heart.

Ezzo and Roswaal were of the same generation.

And, Ezzo had conceitedly believed that among those in similar age to him, there were none who had endeavored as much as he had. Having devoted the entirety of the time he had lived, he had believed he had touched upon part of just what magic exactly was. But that was not the case at all. —Between Roswaal and Ezzo, in both their research and devotion to their studies of magic, it almost seemed as if there existed a difference of over one-hundred years.

A difference in talents, a difference in race, a difference in births, he would not credit it to any such thing, it was an absolute truth—hence, Ezzo Cadner was on the verge of spilling tears of joy.

Ezzo: “—Hk.”

That there was someone who had endeavored even more than him, standing in the realm he longed for, he was glad.

Understanding, reverence, and gratitude all pounded through Ezzo’s heart, causing him, who hated slacking off more than anything, to command his lacrimal glands to slacken for the first time in his life.

With such sentiments in his chest, Ezzo once more focused his attention on demonstrating all the studies he had accreted.

When it came to magic, it was required to firmly envision the result that would occur. Thus, it was tantamount to an act that would lay everything bare about a person: what they thought, what they desired, and what they wished for.

Hence, there were no lies in magic. —By witnessing someone's magic, everything about that person could be understood.

Ezzo: "—Hey, you understand, right, Roswaal?"

Had those words actually been produced as a sound? Or perhaps, was it merely a deception produced by abusing his Gate more than ever before, concentrating to the point of his life eroding away?

Roswaal: "…Ahh, I do understand, Ezzo Cadner-kun."

However, contrary to his heart that doubted if it had actually been an illusion or auditory hallucination, there was indeed a reply.

The extreme heightening of Mana shifted the scenery to white, and despite being unable to hear even the purple lightning vehemently booming in order to protect them, their presences were so close to each other that it felt as though even their heartbeats could be heard.

Through a pathway of magic being weaved, the two magicians laid themselves bare, and their consciousnesses intertwined.

The days Roswaal had accreted, the fruits of his wholehearted research, and the time in which he had continued to walk by his lonesome, aiming for the summit with none ever managing to catch up to him, was imparted.

As a result of taking things too far, people would end up being isolated, regardless of their wishes. Roswaal, too, had remained by his lonesome.

But, swearing on the tears he had not allowed to fall, Ezzo had something he needed to say to Roswaal.

Ezzo: “Knave, as for how far you intend to venture all by yourself, my current self knows not. But, no matter how many people you attempt to distance yourself from, I alone shall remain different.”

If it was a combination of effort and diligent study that had delivered him to where he was, then Ezzo was the same—nay, he could go even further,

Ezzo: “No matter how much you like being isolated, even if you elect to die by your lonesome, even if you decide to venture to a place where nobody else can ever reach, I alone will come to sink my teeth into you, knave.”

While he might not have understood the feeling of wanting to give up, Ezzo did understand the feeling of wanting to lament.

Simply doing everything he could to the fullest, before he knew it, there no longer remained anyone in his vicinity. —There was nobody who would wish to believe such a thing was their own fault, after all.

Ezzo: “The titles of those who have mastered certain attributes to the extremes: Red and Green, as well as Yellow, are all appointed to you. Since the seat of Blue has been bestowed to Mr. Felix Argyle, only the seats of White and Black still remain vacant. —Do you understand what that means?”

Roswaal: “…”

Ezzo: “Do you know what it is that they call me? The Gray, Ezzo Cadner. And just what colors do you think gray is made of? —Roswaal, I am the one who will reach you.”

Hence, the same gratitude that Ezzo Cadner had experienced, was now offered to the great magician.

Ezzo: “—This path you walk, knave, is not one you walk alone.”

4

Color had perished from the sky a while ago now.

Blue had vanished from the clear azure above, leaving only a faded curtain of ash-white, and the merit of the atmosphere itself had waned, ephemeral in nature as it slowly vanished.

By a streak of light was that faded sky rent asunder. As Clind bolted forth with a belt of purple lightning trailing behind him, no longer could it be described as “jumping”, it was a force akin to kicking the fabric of the sky open.

In opposition was the colossus protected by dragonscales and dragonhalo, the dragonhusk soaring through the air with a faint glow—each time the dragonclaws flashed, the empty sky was cleaved open, the empty rifts inundating the dragonkin alongside thunderous crackling.

Clind: “…”

There was not even the leeway to utter a voice. Merely, purple lightning roared out.

Following that, with a beat of dragonwings, unleashed into the resultant gust of wind were countless orbs of light, gleaming in the sky. They studded the gray sky as if stardust, carving out ferocious paths as they closed in on Clind, nearer, and nearer. —With a flash of roaring thunder, the downpour of several hundreds of light rays were impaled, and innumerable shimmers bestowed color to the desolate sky. The shockwaves from the explosions were all diffused upwards, not allowing even a single star fragment to reach the two magicians on the ground.

Volcanica: “…”

The subsequent instant, in the truest sense possible, all present bore witness to the radiance of a star up in the heavens above.

From far beyond the faded sky, falling at the behest of a tremendous force of attraction, starlight plummeted down towards the ground in a straight line—hesitation did not last for even the blink of an eye.

Clind: “—Hk!”

Violet voltage surged all the more vehemently, and the chaining of thunderous fulminations elevated the dragonkin to the sky in which a star was falling.

Volcanica: “—HAAHRAAN!!”

The Divine Dragon’s breath was unleashed as a torrent of white heat that scorched the sky, however, the brunt of it was not directed at either the dragonkin in the heavens above, nor at the magicians down on the ground; rather, it soared towards a land over yonder.

The rupturing purple lightning and the Dragon’s breath intermingled with the star that had been shattered across the edges of the sky, intensely illuminating the dulled hues of heaven and earth—

???: “—Al Sextet.”

An incantation quaked the horizon, and the heavenly skies baited their breath.

The Mana that gave this world form was bestowed with roles of six varying colors, and the power let loose began to intermingle, blending together. The interference that would have normally caused an instantaneous breakdown instead birthed a unique rhythm, utilizing the colorless world itself as an intermediary, a beautiful torus was brought to fruition.

Before long, the torrent of six colors coalesced as one, becoming a pillar that severed the boundary between heaven and earth.

The pillar of six hues did not incline to any one color in particular, rather the very principle known as “magic” merely elected its own color for the aurora of its manifestation, a light pillar that returned everything to a power engulfing all.

—Captured at the heart of that light pillar, was the colossal form of the Divine Dragon.

The resisting claws, wings, and breath, all were engulfed by nihil, and as the Dragon’s power was converted into fuel for the magic, the light pillar grew wider, emboldening it to shine even more radiantly.

The light stretched to reach the heavens, perforating the sky bereft of clouds, illuminating far beyond the highest layer of the atmosphere, casting its brilliant light even further beyond the horizon. For a moment, the laws of reality, of heaven and earth, were written anew.

—That was something that neither the Original Magician, nor the Witch of Greed, had managed to accomplish ever since the systemization known as magic had first commenced, an absolute miracle made manifest.

Volcanica: "—Ah."

In a world from which sound had vanished, that which had resounded all too unreliably, was meager praise when compared to the events that had transpired.

But, it was enough to arrive at conviction. —Here, the Divine Dragon's dragonhalo had shattered.

Thus—

Clind: "—Sealing Shackle: Unleash Third Stage."

Sundering the aether and scorching the land, the six attributes maintained equilibrium to form a pillar, the beacon at the center of the world. And the sole thing to pierce that maelstrom of aurora, was the lightning teeming with purple hues that came crashing down from the heavens.

As if an iron meteorite that had broken off from the star, it bolted down from across the sky whilst lightning surged around its body. Legs explosively kicking off the air, it acted as a supreme arrow seeking to pierce a single target.

Its aim was the reverse scale. —The sole weak point carved into the Divine Dragon's neck, the ant-sized hole in the armor that boasted an absolute defense. Engulfed by the pillar of light and stripped of its dragonhalo, that was the final barrier that stood on the path to reaching the Dragon’s Heartstone.

Clind: “You have my gratitude. —Gratitude.”

As if a comet with purple lightning trailing behind it, he firmly drove his fist forward, shattering both the sound barrier, and the protection of the dragonscales.

The brilliance of the pillar and the torrent of purple lightning overlapped, and as the impact quaked the empty sky, the sound of shattering was accompanied by a strip of light that dashed through the Dragon’s entire body.

The resolute strike entwined with the zenith miracle of magic never before seen throughout history, and bored down to the deepest depths housed within the Divine Dragon’s dragonhusk, finally striking the Heartstone that slumbered therein.

V!c.H2o

Volcanica: “…”

Perforated by the definite blow, the Divine Dragon spread its wings mid-air and slowly looked down at the surface. Acknowledging those tiny existences that barely clung to life present there, the Dragon slashed the air as it brought its claws up to its own head. —As if out of habit, reaching its fingers towards the metal fixtures on the helmet it expected to be wearing.

Volcanica: “Tch-, how pathetic… To end up like this even while having such a leg up, I can’t even… blame… the stars…”

Indeed, in annoyance, divorced from all the solemness befitting the Divine Dragon, cursing out in such an excessively banal manner, the absolute being that had dominated the heavenly skies was pulled by gravity, plummeting towards the ground.

Tearing through the empty sky whilst dragging the flickering vestiges of light with it, alongside thunderous noise, it came crashing down.

—That marked the conclusion against the usurper, who had stolen the dragonhusk of the Divine Dragon Volcanica.

Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Nascent Wolves:
Undead Busters IV
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Flop: “—In short, dear sister! To embody how the Vollachian Empire ought to be from here on out, your work is going to be hugely important! This is a job that’ll go down in history!”

Medium: “I dunno what you’re sayin’, but that sounds awesome, big bro!”

The back-and-forth of booming voices resounding through that imperial chamber hardly seemed fitting for the Crystal Palace of the Imperial Capital of Lupugana, the very axis of the Land of the Sword Wolf that was the Vollachian Empire.

The Crystal Palace, famed for its brilliance and hailed as the most beautiful castle in the world, had always been said to owe that splendor to the chill, sharp air, and to the unrelenting tension that never slackened—a discipline that extended to even the lowliest private.

Precisely because of that, for someone to fill the Crystal Palace with such restless clamor—other than Cecilus Segmunt, the Blue Lightning—was quite unexpected.

And on top of that, it was the Empress whom Vincent Vollachia, the “Wise Emperor,” had welcomed.

Eight years had passed since his ascension to the throne. Lauded throughout his reign as an exceptional ruler with remarkable ability, Vincent had until now never taken a consort. With the Empire still bearing deep wounds from the recent Great Disaster and the people’s hearts unsettled, their attention was fixed on the presence of this new Empress—

Flop: “Which is to say, let me repeat myself: right now you’re in a place where everyone around you is really watching you! With that in mind, tell your big brother one more time what you were doing just now!"

Medium: "Sure thing! Sittin' still in some frilly dress just ain't my style, so I did training and mock battles with all the soldiers at the castle! I won a whole bunch!"

Letting out a drawn-out "Hmmm~!", Flop O'Connell faced his sister, Medium O'Connell—the Empress—who had answered with a vigorous grin and a crisp thumbs-up.

Flop: "Medium!"

Flop: "Pass! Right now His Excellency the Emperor-kun is laying the groundwork to change all sorts of things, but the faith in the Empire's iron-blooded precepts is still deeply rooted!"

Medium: "Ehehe~ So, whaddaya mean by that?"

Flop: "It means it's really admirable for you to show that you've actually got the skills to back it up!"

Medium: "Woooh, heck yeah, big bro! I'm gonna hone my skills even more!"

Beaming as he returned her thumbs-up, Flop heard her vow aloud to redouble her efforts.

Incidentally, during the drill Medium had joined, the soldiers had received a direct imperial decree—"Do not go easy on the Empress"—so the results she'd achieved were by no means the product of favoritism.

Flop: "In truth, with His Excellency the Emperor-kun rushing about dealing with the aftermath of the Great Disaster, it would hardly be strange if there were those who took aim at his position and plotted to usurp the throne. The Empress, too, needs at least the strength to protect herself."

Medium: "Hm? Big bro, you say somethin'?"

Flop: “Nothing at all, dear sister! Just keep on as you are—bright and brisk—and make His Excellency the Emperor-kun fall head over heels for you!”

Medium: “…Ah—yeah, right, big bro.”

All at once, Medium, who had been so full of momentum, seemed to lose steam. In front of her suspicious older brother, she pressed the tips of her fingers together in front of her chest and fidgeted.

Medium: “U-Uhm, big bro, I wanna ask you something.”

Flop: “Mm? What is it, what is it. If it’s something this brother can answer, fire away.”

Medium: “—If I’m gonna make Abel-chin all melty, what should I even do?”

With her cheeks faintly flushed and her words coming a touch faster than usual, his sister posed her question. Flop brought a hand to his narrow chin and said, “I see.”

And then—

Flop: “—This calls for an emergency meeting!”

2

Yorna: “—So, is that why you summoned me, then?”

In the invited imperial chamber, Yorna Mishigure heard the Empress’s reason for calling her, and at the adorably wholesome nature of the consultation, she let her lacquered lips relax while she gently twirled the *kiseru* in her hand.

There had been many summons to the castle for Yorna, one of the Nine Divine Generals, but circumstances being what they were, she had never once obeyed them. This time, however, with the Great Disaster concluded and the situation changed—and with the summons coming not from the Emperor or the Prime Minister–led council but from Medium, now the Empress—she decided to answer.

After all, Yorna, in former lives as Iris and as Sandra Benedict, had several times been chosen to sit as a consort to the Vollachian Emperor. She felt more confident than anyone that she could understand the feelings of Medium, who had been plucked up from an ordinary Imperial subject and named Empress in one stroke.

Even so, she hardly imagined the consultation would be not about the mindset of an empress, but of a good wife.

Medium: "Me 'n big bro were both abandoned kids, so I dunno what kinda person makes a good wife or a good mom. So I figured, if I'm gonna ask anyone, it's gotta be you, Yorna-chan."

Yorna: "My, my, being chosen honors me, sugar. That said, the way I love and the way I like to be loved are rather my own… If that can serve as a reference, I shall be delighted."

Medium: "It will! Totally will! Sorry, Yorna-chan, you're busy rebuilding Chaosflame and all."

Beaming, hands pressed together over her chest, Medium's sunny words made Yorna lift a hand to her lips and slowly shake her head.

At present, the Demon City of Chaosflame where Yorna lived had been razed in the battle that heralded the Great Disaster, and she was hounded by the work of its restoration. Even so, the citizens of the demon city were brave and stalwart; instead of sinking into gloom over the ruined streets, her beloved children were all spurring themselves on to make a city even better than before.

If Yorna stayed there, she would only make those beloved children fuss over her too much, so in a way, this timing suited her just fine.

Yorna: "Besides, I needed to speak with His Excellency about the matter of Tanza anyway."

Medium: "Gotcha. Then I'm glad~"

Serena: "—Good grief, Middy. Are you relying only on General First-Class Yorna? If so, there is nothing quite so lonely for me, your foster parent."

Medium: “Eh—? But I’ve never thought of you as my foster parent, Seri-nee. You’re the one who told me to think of you as my big sis, remember?”

The one who creased her brow at the ever-innocent Medium was another person present for this parlor talk—a fierce beauty with a sword scar on her face: Serena Dracroy, High Countess.

She, too, was someone Medium had summoned for counsel—and—

Yorna: “Well then, darling, how about you? Do not just sit there quiet; say a little something.”

Madelyn: “…I, the dragon, have friggin’ no interest in the petty troubles of humans. I only keep an eye on Medium because she’s Balleroy’s friggin’ little sister.”

Medium: “Madelyn-chan’s my snack buddy! When I feel lonely eating snacks by myself and Abel-chin’s busy, she keeps me company.”

As if to back up Medium’s words, Madelyn did not join the discussion; she simply reached single-mindedly for the tea sweets on the table, crunching away. Quite adorable for someone of the outrageous dragonkin race, almost like a small animal. Yorna very much wanted to pat her head and pull her in for a cuddle, but she imagined she would be scolded like a blaze from hell if she tried, so she restrained herself.

Be that as it may—

Yorna: “To make His Excellency all melty, is it…? Sounds fun.”

Serena: “I agree. Not to be rude, but both I and General First-Class Yorna had more than enough qualifications to be candidates for His Excellency’s consort. He cast us aside, and of all people chose Middy? It is absurdly entertaining.”

Yorna: “If we speak only of designs, Prime Minister Berstetz—so vexed by the succession—must surely have thought to make Madelyn, too, a candidate to be His Excellency’s consort.”

Madelyn: “Pff— *cough, cough*”

Medium: “Waa, waa—Madelyn-chan, you okay?! You were a candidate to be Abel-chin’s bride?!”

Madelyn: “Th-The dragon knows friggin’ nothing about that… I shall friggin’ wring the old codger later.”

At Madelyn’s tear-eyed vow of revenge, Yorna made a note to herself to go protect Berstetz later so the girl did not misjudge her strength.

And in truth, Serena was not wrong. The Demon City of Chaosflame served as a refuge for beloved children who had nowhere to go; seeking that protection, Yorna had indeed worked hard to win Vincent’s favor.

Yorna: “I had thought for sure His Excellency fancied a more challenging kind of woman…”

Until the Great Disaster was weathered, he would welcome no one as a consort. That was Vincent’s true conviction, and, shameful though it was to admit, Yorna’s provocations had been for naught.
—That said, considering Vincent’s ties to Priscilla, she could only be glad she had failed.

If it had been Priscilla, she might have laughed such a thing off as well.

Thinking of her late daughter, Yorna lowered her eyes in quiet sorrow.

Serena: “…Hmph. Still, asking for advice is a commendably modest attitude, Middy. In anything, you tend to play it by ear and leave success to momentum… That is who you are, is it not?”

Medium: “Mmm, as expected of you, Seri-nee—you know me so well~! But that’s fine for other stuff; for Abel-chin, that won’t cut it~”

Madelyn: "—? And what is friggin' different when it is Vincent?"

Serena intentionally—and Madelyn unconsciously—shifted the topic away from Yorna's melancholy and started digging into the true heart of Medium's consultation. Yorna straightened her posture as well and waited for Medium's words, the focus of three women upon her.

Under those three gazes, Medium hesitated for a while, choosing her words—and then—

Medium: "…I just don't wanna fail."

Serena: "You fear failure? That is unlike you."

Medium: "Usually, yeah! Even if I mess up, I think, "Welp, it couldn'ta been helped," 'cause I gave it my all! But…"

Yorna: "But what, sugar?"

Medium: "…When it's about Abel-chin, I don't wanna fail. Is that weird?"

At Medium's question, asked with her brows drooping, Yorna felt something catch in her chest.

In anything, it was only natural to not want to fail. All the more so in human relationships—so Yorna believed—but for Medium, that was not how it had been. —Not until she began to worry like this over Vincent.

Before Yorna could say, What about that is strange—

Madelyn: "—It is not friggin' strange."

Madelyn denied Medium's anxiety in a small voice.

Madelyn: "When it is with your man, wanting not to mess up is friggin' natural. Even the dragon, when speaking with Balleroy, friggin' felt half happy and half anxious."

Medium: "Did you ever say something weird, or make him upset?"

Madelyn: “I friggin’ did. …When I told him that, Balleroy friggin’ laughed.”

Madelyn spoke with her eyes downcast, telling of a wound not yet healed, but she met Medium sincerely.

Yorna had not had many points of contact with Balleroy Temeglyph, a former member of the Nine Divine Generals. Even so, she remembered him as a good man who cherished his flying dragons and held no prejudice. She also knew that, to the three others here, he had been irreplaceable.

Medium: “Sounds like Big Bro Bal.”

Serena: “Not a bad answer. Well, naturally. I raised him. I could not scour out his lousy taste, though.”

Madelyn: “…You friggin’ raised Balleroy?”

Serena: “I did. Consider it, and I am quite something, am I not? One became a Divine General chosen by the Dragon, and one is the Empress of the Empire. I may as well call myself the Mother of the Nation.”

Yorna: “That does seem a touch too dismissive of His Excellency’s wishes.”

Serena: “Oh my, to hear that from none other than Yorna Mishigure, the Empire’s premier rebel—the Flamboyant.”

At Serena’s raised hands and mock surprise, Yorna could not help but let a soft “kuh-fu” slip from her lips, and it spread to Medium—and, shockingly, even to Madelyn. Seeing Madelyn’s lips faintly loosen, Yorna had a thought.

Yorna: “How about this, then. I cannot promise it will soothe Her Majesty the Empress’s worries, but we could set up a little club, just us, and meet like this from time to time.”

Medium: “Eh, really? But everyone’s busy, right? Seri-nee, you can’t, can you?”

Serena: “Do not go making me the odd one out from a fun gathering. First of all, I am the Empress’s mother. What reason would I have not to fly to you when you need me? I shall send as many dragon ships as it takes.”

Yorna: “And I expect that, hereafter, I can come and go in the Imperial Capital without being glared at by His Excellency or by General First-Class Goz, so do ring me any time, sugar.”

Medium: “~~! Seri-nee, Yorna-chan, thank you!”

Overcome with emotion, Medium sprang to her feet, squeezing Yorna’s and Serena’s hands in turn as she expressed her gratitude. Seeing how delighted she was, Yorna felt her proposal had been worth making.

Then, at Medium’s momentum, Madelyn narrowed her eyes while toying with her hair—

Madelyn: “…So you are not friggin’ going to ask the dragon?”

Medium: “—? Well, Madelyn-chan, you always come to me anyway, so I kinda thought it was just normal for you to be there. Eh, you won’t come?!”

Madelyn: “I did not friggin’ say I would not! …Hopeless girl, friggin’ honestly.”

Told as if it were obvious by the wide-eyed Medium, Madelyn bared her fangs and shouted, then let out a great sigh, looking not entirely displeased. At that uncandid reaction, Yorna met Serena’s eyes, and the elder pair traded a shrug.

Medium: “All right—now that I’ve got tons of stalwart allies, I’m invincible! Riding this wave, I’m gonna make Abel-chin all melty… ahem, I’m gonna work hard to make him melty!”

Serena: “Indeed. His Excellency must see no one but our Middy.”

Madelyn: “They may as friggin’ well tremble and wait.”

Yorna: “Goodness, this is starting to feel like a rather dangerous powwow.”

Be that as it may, Medium’s pure feelings for Vincent—the feelings she voiced so boldly—were something Yorna desperately wanted to support. No; all three of them felt as one.

Because watching that iron mask of Vincent’s finally crack would, surely, be deliciously satisfying.

3

Flop: “And so, that’s how it is right now—an excessive amount of firepower is piling up around my little sister!”

Cecilus: “Aha, so that’s how it is! My, my, what a deployment to my taste, Mister Adviser! I was wondering what exactly the post that sprouted up to replace Ubilk the Stargazer was supposed to do, but this is just the talent I wanted right now!”

Flop: “Thank you, Lightning-kun! Hearing you say that makes all my efforts worth it!”

Out in front of the Crystal Palace, the two met, hit it off, and exchanged a firm handshake. They were Flop and Cecilus—two of the top five loudest voices in the Imperial Capital. For the record, the other “fingers” were Medium and Goz Ralfon, with the last one being a rotating seat.

Even for a loudmouth like Flop, running into the likewise loud Cecilus here was a surprise.

After all, Cecilus and company were currently carrying an important duty entrusted to them directly by Vincent.

Namely, hunting down the remnants of the undead scattered and lurking throughout Vollachia.

Cecilus: “I’m thrilled we got to see each other again so soon, niece-kun… no, Miss Spica, but did something go wrong, perhaps? The very idea of a problem that even Lightning-kun and Lady Arakia couldn’t handle is scary to contemplate!”

Spica: “Uooou, a—u.”

As he patted Spica’s head—she’d taken a shine to him and clung to him—Flop cocked his head, wondering why they had cut their journey short.

Picking up on that, Cecilus cheerily began, “Well, you see,” and—

Cecilus: “It isn’t a problem so much as the kind of stylish happenstance that made me reevaluate the heavens’ guidance! I’d like to ask His Excellency for a judgment on how to handle a certain person we picked up along the way. I personally think we don’t even need to ask!”

Arakia: “…Cut it out. Not funny. We’re going to have His Excellency hear us properly.”

Compared to the riding-high, all-jazzed Cecilus, Arakia’s sour reluctance was plain as day. That said, this was, in its way, the two of them as usual.

So then, just what was it they wanted Vincent to decide?

Flop: “Well, even if it’s only a progress report, I’m sure His Excellency the Emperor-kun will be pleased to see your faces. And my sister will welcome you with open arms regardless. Besides, High Countess Dracroy and General First-Class Yorna are both here now—you’d make their day if you met them.”

Arakia: “Eh.”

Cecilus: “Ho!”

Spica: “Au.”

Flop watched the three show three different reactions to his words.

Spica rounded her eyes and glanced at the fourth member of their party behind them; Arakia pressed her palm over her eyepatched eye. Cecilus alone grew ever more delighted—and—

Cecilus: “See? The heavens’ guidance, just like that. Everything converges toward a heart-thumping romantic drama! Ahahahaha!”

Throwing his head back, he laughed aloud.

To be continued

Kararagi Reaper Incident IV
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—The Kararagi City-States' Second City, Banan.

A few days earlier, the metropolis had been struck by an unprecedented wind disaster, and the sting of that great damage had yet to subside when, as if to pile calamity upon calamity, the next disaster—a gigantic black tornado—was drawing near.

Julius: "To dismiss this as coincidence stretches credulity."

Murmuring thus, Julius ran against the tide of the masses fleeing the tornado, cutting through a cityscape where restoration work was still sporadic, toward the heart of the calamity.

Fortunately, the city had many hands gathered from across Kararagi for the sake of reconstruction—mercenaries for maintaining public order, workers for clearing rubble and rebuilding structures—so the evacuation of the residents could likely be left to them.

Halibel: "But that means the more hands there are, the more folks are gonna get caught up in it, y'know."

Running abreast with Halibel, who harbored the same impression, the same concern, Julius nodded with a "Indeed," and summoned Aro, the Spirit who obeyed him.

There was something he wished to confirm with her, a wind Spirit—but…

Julius: "—From the look of it, it seems I need not even ask."

The faintly green-glimmering Spirit who had answered his call tried to carry herself stoutly before her contractor, yet she could not suppress the subtle tremor in her Od.

There was no reason for a Spirit to fear abnormal weather. Which meant that that was—

Halibel: “A Spirit-related magical calamity, then? In that case, we talkin’ ’bout Tia-chan bein’ involved?”

At the question, a white-haired woman confined in a *zashiki* cell flashed across Julius’s mind. Arrested as the cause of the previous wind disaster, she had proved to be a very high-ranking Great Spirit.

It was hard to imagine that Tia, the name she had given, and this wind disaster before them were unconnected.

Julius: “That it is a magical calamity is certain. That it is related to her as well. Yet I do not believe it is her own malice.”

Halibel: “That yer hunch as a handsome fella ’n a Spiritual Arts User talkin’?”

Julius: “I affirm it, and shall take it as praise. —I engage.”

Once they had reached the outskirts where no evacuating figures remained and several broken buildings lay untouched, Julius leveled his blade’s tip at the tornado visible in the distance and came to a halt.

Of course, one could not expect an honorable match against a tornado. He dispensed with preamble—

Julius: “—El Fula!!”

A pale radiance dwelt upon the blade’s tip, and the power of six Spirits, with Aro at their center, converged; what he loosed was a counter-rotating gale aimed at annihilating the tornado through cancellation. It thrust straight in, surging toward the tornado that was closing on the city as it swept up sand and stone from the plain—

Halibel: “This ain’t good. I ain’t seein’ a killin’ spot.”

Almost at the same moment as Halibel’s breath, his hand raised as a visor, the gale was helplessly swallowed by the tornado and became but one more part of the wind disaster.

Feeling no purchase and seeing it taken in an instant, Julius immediately shifted his awareness: that tornado was not a mere extension of a wind disaster, but an attack suffused with a very strong intent.

Julius: “If we continue to oppose it as we just did, we shall only make that tornado still larger.”

Halibel: “Then what do we do? Scoop everybody up ’n make a run for it?”

Julius: “No. Lady Anastasia ordered us to hold that thing up. Had it been within our power, I would have wished for us to erase it ourselves—but let us return to our initial objective. We shall slacken the tornado’s advance.”

Given the speed at which the gigantic black tornado was advancing, a full evacuation of the city’s residents was not realistic. What was more, if that tornado possessed intent, its harm might not stop with the city alone.

Therefore, as a Knight who protected the innocent populace, Julius could not yield to that wind disaster.

Julius: “Aro, I would borrow your strength once more. To fight a wind disaster, you are indispensable. Halibel, I shall ask for your aid as well. Will that be acceptable?”

Halibel: “Reckon as things stand, ’bout all I can do is poke ’n prod while huntin’ for a weak point. So let me see ya show yer stuff.”

Julius returned a nod to Halibel—and to Aro, who burned for a chance at restoring her honor—and looked to the tornado.

Here and now, the best move available to Julius was a tactic of delaying the tornado, and—

Julius: “—To place my faith in you, Anastasia-sama.”

Tia: “Huh? What are they even doing? We’ve gotta stop that tornado, so why are they attacking nothing but totally off-base spots?”

At her side, Anastasia, having grasped what Julius and the others who had gone on ahead were aiming for, snapped her fingers.

She had ordered them to hobble the tornado, and left the concrete methods to them—but—

Ricardo: “I get what Miss Tia’s sayin’, too. They’re freezin’ the ground, and even lightin’ fires near the twister… I ain’t got a clue what Julius’s up to.”

Anastasia: “What’re you talkin’ about? He’s just bein’ proper and followin’ my orders. Look.”

At Anastasia’s words, Ricardo, who had been grimacing much like Tia, narrowed his eyes. For a short while he puzzled over what he was supposed to be seeing, but soon went, “Huh?” and realized—

Ricardo: “The tornado’s slowin’ down, ain’t it!”

Tia: “Hah? Eh? Really? Why? They aren’t doing anything to the tornado!”

Confronted with the immovable fact, Ricardo and Tia raised their voices in surprise.

But the two of them were not mistaken. The tornado was certainly slackening, easing its momentum.

Eridna: “I see. Rather than attacking the tornado directly, they went for the meteorological environment. Even if it’s wind raised by magic, it still obeys the bare minimum of natural laws.”

Anastasia: “Big winds come from hot ’n’ cold winds gettin’ into a fight, right? Julius is deliberately knockin’ that balance outta whack. Smart boy—just what I’d expect from my Knight.”

Tilting her chin at the understanding voiced by Echidna at her throat, Anastasia praised Julius's judgment.

He had executed Anastasia's orders magnificently. Halibel, alongside him, was apparently pitching ruined buildings and needless boulders into the tornado to help slow it as well. Whether the more it swallowed, the fatter—and thus slower—a tornado would get was anyone's guess.

Anastasia: "Those two bought us time. Next is you, Ms. Tia!"

Tia: "—What?"

Anastasia: "You talked a big game, didn't ya? You went 'n' tore up our Ricardo, too, so is it fair for me to figure you're skilled enough to scrap with that tornado?"

At Anastasia's question, Tia's golden eyes narrowed to slits.

From what they'd heard, Tia, being a Great Spirit, had whipped up a massive wind with magic and floated Banan's residents and buildings whole into the sky. In terms of sheer scale, she should be a good match for the oncoming tornado.

Yet, faced with that expectation, Tia averted her gaze and groaned, "Aah—" "Uugh—".

Ricardo: "What, so it's a no-go? Seein' you act like that before we've even started is the last thing I wanted, Tia-chan."

Tia: "You've got a mouth on you—wanna die?! Can't be helped, okay? If that were just a draft or some petty Spirits' prank, I'd have blown it away! But—"

Anastasia: "But what is it?"

Tia: "…Because that's the handiwork of the one usin' my Light Orb, the odds are stacked against me."

At Tia's halting answer, Anastasia and Ricardo traded looks.

Ricardo: "That again! So what the hell is this Light Orb, anyway!"

Tia: “A Light Orb’s a Light Orb! It’s my precious thing that got stolen, and it’s why I’m mad!”

Eridna: “…Judging from Ms. Tia’s attitude and our exchanges so far, I surmise it’s something like the source of her power. She had it taken from her. And that tornado was raised by the one who stole it. Hence, the odds don’t favor her.”

Anastasia: “If that’s so, how bad are the odds for you, Ms. Tia?”

At Anastasia’s question, given in accord with Echidna’s reading, Tia made a guttural sound in her throat.

Even if she herself had said it, she likely didn’t want to acknowledge the fact that the odds were against her. Wavering, she greatly contorted those keen, blade-like good looks and—

Tia: “…Fifty-Fifty.”

Ricardo: “That ain’t a fifty-fifty face! Looks more like ninety–ten to me!”

Tia: “You trying to get yourself killed?! It’s not that far apart! At worst it’s seventy–thirty!”

Anastasia: “Seventy–thirty—yeah, that’s definitely bad odds.”

Realizing her slip, Tia groaned, “Uooh—”. Thinking what a groany Spirit she was, Anastasia mouthed, very softly, “Seventy–thirty”.

Tia was a Great Spirit as well. If what she had just said wasn’t mere bravado, then if one set that tornado as a seven, she could muster a three on the wind scale.

If that was the case—

Mimi: “—Ojou! Everybody, assemble! What’re we doin’?”

Right then, with Mimi charging in at their head, the Iron Fang who’d come to Banan ran up. Welcoming them, Anastasia softened her cheeks, having gotten exactly what she wanted.

Anastasia: “Now ain’t that sweet of y’all—really knowin’ how to make me happy.”

Ricardo: “Talkin’ like that means you thought of somethin’, Ana.”

Anastasia: “’Course I did. C’mon now, hop to it, everyone. —Ms. Tia, you’re followin’ my lead too.”

At Anastasia’s brisk clapping, Iron Fang answered as one. Seeing Ricardo raise the hooked claws of his right hand in reply as well, Tia shut one eye and—

Tia: “I’ll just say this: if you make me pull any stupid stunts, I’ll kill you.”

—then waited for the instructions, with an attitude not one bit meek.

3

Julius: “—Hk, Halibel, even just one more move.”

Halibel: “No, no, ya can’t be pushin’ it. Any more ’n we’ll get swallowed up ourselves.”

Halibel, who had been yanking out the pillars of ruined buildings and feeding them to the tornado, recommended retreat as the funnel cloud drew to within several hundred meters of the city.

Chagrined by those words, Julius nevertheless obeyed Halibel and lowered his blade.

Surveying the situation from above, Halibel possessed a broader field of view than Julius, and his judgment was on the mark for now. More than Julius, an outsider, Halibel’s frustration burned hotter, for it was his own familiar ground being menaced. It was precisely those feelings of Halibel’s that Julius ought to honor.

Halibel: “I ain’t the hot-blooded type, y’know. ’Sides, I ain’t feelin’ frustrated.”

Julius: “That is…”

Halibel: "'Cause Ana and the others're gonna handle that twister, ain't they? Right?"

Shrugging as the gale-like wind washed over him, Halibel spoke, and Julius's eyes widened a fraction. He answered with a firm nod and, "Indeed."

It was pitiable to have Halibel say it first, but indeed, as he said, Julius and company had carried out Anastasia's orders. All that remained was to see, with the time purchased by their delaying action, what Anastasia had managed to ready. —The answer revealed itself at once.

A black tornado, racing upon the city with ferocious speed—and, rising to oppose it, a white tornado.

Ricardo: "C'mon, c'mon, if ya don't put yer backs into it, Ojou's gonna gripe later!!"

Mimi & Iron Fang: "Wah—!"

Mimi & Iron Fang: "Haa—!"

Before Ricardo, who was rallying them by clanging his great machete and hook-claws overhead, Mimi and the Iron Fang howled, blasting out shockwaves of their roars. The kittenfolk's adorable unity was not enough to stop that black tornado even when braided together. That said, even cute cries had their uses.

They lacked the power to halt a tornado, but they did have the power to nurture one—apparently.

Ricardo: "All right, we set the table for ya, Tia-chan! Now really put yer spirit into it!"

Tia: "I know! After all that talk, like I'd be the one to botch it! And anyway, you're the only one not even do—"

Ricardo: "Haa—!!"

Talking over whatever Tia had been saying, Ricardo joined the child-rearing of the great wind with a roar of his own. After making very sure everyone saw him do it, he clanged his weapons again to goad Tia.

Ricardo: “A’right then, be my guest!”

Tia: “Nnnn— fine, fine, I’ll do it!—Watch me.”

No sooner had she declared it than Tia shut both eyes and focused. —The great, great seed of wind that had already been stirred up swallowed the cheering of the Iron Fang, then began to spiral, stronger still.

At the feel of that wind, the fur all over Ricardo’s body stood on end, recalling the wind disaster from the other day.

The wind disaster Tia had unleashed—that had been outrageous enough, but their foe this time was a tornado wrought by someone with more than twice Tia’s power. As for the rival tornado spawned and reared to oppose it, its scale was enough to make one almost laugh.

And then—

Tivey: “Big brother, more! More, more! It is not enough, desu-yo!”

Hetaro: “Uwaaah! I’m gonna get tons of head pats from big sis later for sure—!”

Saying so, Tivey and Hetaro leveled their staves at the newborn wind’s feet; in contrast to Julius, who had been freezing the ground, they set the ground ablaze, raised the wind, and stoked the flames’ force.

Ricardo did not understand the principle of it, but apparently that, too, was necessary for raising a great wind. In fact, the white tornado swelled rapidly, and soon—

Tia: “—Who do you think I am? I’ll kill you, you know?”

Without a doubt, she was the leading architect behind the white tornado’s creation, but it sat ill with Tia to be crowing as if it were solely her own strength. As her snarled boast came to its end, tornado met tornado.

Black and white, two tornados clashed on Banan’s outskirts, and gusts battered the four directions. The collision of those raging winds seemed to portend the spread of yet more harm, yet one thing was certain.

Ricardo: “Put ’em together and it might be bigger than when there was just one, but the oomph it had as a single twister’s gone down.”

And with slackening and weakening now visible—

Halibel: “—Ahh, I can finally see the killin’ spot.”

The Death God of Kararagi who flew toward the tornado had nothing that he could not slay.

4

The black tornado’s whole form wavered greatly and, in the next instant, unraveled as if coming apart.

Watching that from a position set a ways back from the battlefield, Anastasia pressed a hand to her chest, relieved.

Eridna: “Looks like everyone pulled it off.”

Anastasia: “Sure does. We got Julius to come up with a plan that’d work right from the start. If you can weaken the wind by working the environment, you can do the reverse and beef it up, too.”

Eridna: “Though the Tia-kun who got helped along might look a little dissatisfied about it.”

Lifting her head so that her white beast-fur tickled Anastasia’s nape, Echidna drew a murmured, “That’s so,” from her as Anastasia stroked her partner’s coat in return.

That said, Anastasia didn’t think Tia would actually bristle as much as all that. Her words and deeds were certainly thorny, but beneath them you could glimpse a basic, irrepressible niceness. She was soft when pressed. For a merchant looking to pitch a product, a perfect mark.

Anastasia: “Whoops—nah, nah. Cleaning Ms. Tia out comes later. First, we gotta thank everybody and… figure out what the other side was aiming for.”

Eridna: “Their aim, huh. Besides the city’s destruction?”

Anastasia: “Easiest read is they were after Ms. Tia. If that wind was the work of whoever stole her precious thing, then stubborn Ms. Tia would’ve been in their way.”

Even so, if they’d gone as far as launching an attack on this scale for that, then the other party lacked both good sense and restraint.

It was, to be sure, a commercial harm Kararagi ought to address as a whole. For Anastasia, who kept the Hoshin Company’s main office in Kararagi, it wasn’t a problem she could call somebody else’s concern.

This might also mean getting back to Lugunica would be delayed for a while—and then—

???: “—Die.”

Eridna: “—! Ana!”

Struck in the eardrums by Echidna’s cry at the sudden presence and abrupt declaration, Anastasia whirled around, and there she saw Tia—or no, someone else who looked very much like Tia.

In the next moment she was swallowed by the sound of the wind, and realization came a beat late. The tornado’s target hadn’t been Tia. The tornado’s true target was—

No sooner had the tornado that attacked the city vanished than the group under Anastasia’s lead was thrown into fresh chaos.

The charming, dependable company head whose safety they were to welcome was nowhere to be seen, and before long, everyone understood.

—That Anastasia and her companions, whisked away by the passing wind, had fallen into the Death God’s hands.

To be continued

No Stella No Life IV

???: “—Teacher, you ever had a lover or something?”

???: “…There you go with yet another sudden question.”

Constructed within a dream was the Witch’s domain, and while sitting with his legs crossed on the grassy plain of that unwithering illusion, Aldebaran tilted his head, causing the Witch to frown her well-shaped eyebrows.

Fundamentally, the Witch would welcome any question with open arms, so that reaction was rather fresh and unusual. Today, as always, Aldebaran had been made to experience a hellish time, tormented by the Trials bestowed upon him by the Witch; subconsciously, he let out an “Oh?” as his eyes sparkled.

Aldebaran: “What’s this now? Did I hit a sore spot for you, Teacher?”

Witch: “It is in poor taste to become so proactive when it comes to that. I am the Witch of Greed… a being who avariciously covets all kinds of knowledge, so I have answered all of your questions until now as sincerely as possible. If I have allowed you to misunderstand that attitude of mine, it would be my own insufficiencies that I would need to painfully reflect on.”

Aldebaran: “Starting to talk fast just makes it even more suspicious. This Witch is way too easy to read.”

Witch: “You are quite a bit lacking in relent! I think it would do you better to show some more consideration!”

As Aldebaran seized the moment and jumped on the topic, the Witch raised her voice in such a manner.

Given that he was normally in the position where many things were done to him, he had desired to savor this situation in which he held such an advantage for as long as he could, but first, he wished to prioritize delving deeper into this topic.

That was to say—

Aldebaran: “Love talk! Love talk!”

Witch: “What a lowbrow curiosity… I have no recollection of raising you in such a manner.”

Aldebaran: “Even if you don’t remember, students are cultivated by watching the backs of their predecessors. Frankly, if we’re gonna talk about who I got this lowbrow curiosity from, then you’ve got no chance of winning, Teacher!”

Witch: “I see, this is a defeat in education… regardless of learning on one’s own, it is quite the great task to make another person learn. Good grief, there is much to learn.”

Aldebaran: “Oi oi, it’s no use trying to get out of this by playing such a sentimental grown-up move like that. Even if you say something that seems profound, my current spirits won’t be crushed.”

Witch: “Fine, fine.”

As Aldebaran, with lowbrow curiosity in his heart, proactively refused to let her off the hook, the Witch cast a wry smile.

Witch: “Regardless, it is difficult to say if it will meet your expectations. As you can see, given that I possess an extraordinarily excellent appearance from an objective perspective, there was no shortage of people who attempted to court me. But then again, none of those individuals ever became a close companion of mine.”

Aldebaran: “As expected, even if a flower is beautiful, it’s no good if it has a deadly poison.”

Witch: “From the fact that you strongly assume poison as a factor to begin with, I can tell just how much you understand me, which makes me glad. Well, that perception is mostly correct. In the first place, Witches place a heavy burden on others by merely existing in the same vicinity. There exists no means to avoid this.

Additionally…”

Aldebaran: “Additionally?”

Witch: “Unlike the other girls who became Witches along the way, I was a Witch by birth. To put it another way, I do not know any way of life that does not place a burden on others. —As one who is so thirsty for knowledge, I think it to be quite the irony.”

Placing a hand over her chest, the Witch reminisced, and witnessing that, Aldebaran’s throat closed up.

He had brought it up thoughtlessly as payback for everything that she was always doing to him, but he had ended up closing in on an unthinkable darkness of the Witch.

Aldebaran: “Is that… so. Sorry, that was a bit thoughtless. To think that by birth, you were a natural born loner who had no way to associate with others… wait a second?”

Then, as he attempted to reflect on it aloud, he suddenly realized.

Aldebaran: “Nah, if you really couldn’t associate with anyone, it contradicts me even being here in the first place! It also contradicts the reminiscences you occasionally tell me about, Teacher!”

Witch: “Tch-.”

Aldebaran: “You just clicked your tongue! This was a premeditated crime, you ill-natured Witch!”

Half-closing her eyes, the Witch averted her gaze, and Aldebaran cast aside his reflection from a moment ago. Her approach of trying to throw up a smokescreen on any inconvenient topics like this was truly a tactic befitting a Witch, but now that her technique had been seen through, she would no longer be able to escape.

Aldebaran: “In fact, there’ve also been times when you’ve uttered the names of men, Teacher! That’s a front that these lowbrow ears of mine won’t let slide!”

Witch: “Holding a grudge are we… only, sorry to say since you’ve taken such an interest, but my answer is that nothing really happened. In particular, that which you speak of, the notion that anything happened between myself and the members of the opposite sex that I have brought up in conversation, such a thought—”

Aldebaran: “Such a thought?”

Witch: “—Just by imagining it, I feel a sensation of my soul rejecting envisioning anything further along those lines. I have never attempted such a thing, but it is surprising how vivid of a sensation it is. To think that I could be made to experience such dread.”

Aldebaran: “Setting aside their humanity, was it something like them being horrible as members of the opposite sex?”

Witch: “No, they were not a lot praised for their humanity either. It is a miracle that the group did not fall apart along the way… or rather, they did a few times, but the girls managed to mend things back together.”

Perhaps it hurt her head to think back, because as the Witch searched through the shelves of her memories, and the people present in those recollections came to mind, she was pressing her hand on her forehead the entire time.

If even this ill-natured Witch was speaking of them so harshly, Aldebaran assumed they must have been quite the formidable lot, but at the same time, he also noticed something.

He noticed that as the Witch spoke, her lips were by no means pursed in displeasure.

Witch: “Speaking of the opposite sex, the majority of my companions at the time belonged to it. Though as I have said, it would have been quite problematic to have such a perception of them. Reid was out of the question, Farsale was married, and Alec and he both had people they were in love with. Volcanica was not a target for such a thing, and Reid was out of the question.”

Aldebaran: “There was someone marked as out of the question twice, but I see, if any such developments happened, it would have turned into a quagmire for the party.”

Witch: “It was sort of like a mud boat founded on balance rather than trust, so the journey could have very well ended up as a mud boat sailing through a quagmire. Given that there was no leeway for such things, are you satisfied?”

Aldebaran: “Well, when you put it like that… no! I won’t give up so easily! Even if you didn’t choose anyone close at hand, you ought to have had a summer romantic adventure or something with someone you met during your journey!”

Witch: “Why are you so fixated on this that you would make such leaps like that? I would have been glad if you displayed this much initiative during the Trials I had prepared for you.”

Seeing Aldebaran’s enthusiasm when it came to this topic, the Witch pouted her lips in a bit of a dejected manner.

But unfortunately, there was no way for her wish to be granted. To begin with, the impetus for this conversation topic had been a retreat to reality from the harsh and merciless Trial she had given him. For just a bit longer, until Aldebaran’s heart regained some leeway, this topic would not be dropped.

Regardless, the conversation had already delved into a rather interesting zone.

Aldebaran: “See, there was something you had boasted about earlier, Teacher. Something like, that it became the point of many scuffles to seek out your knowledge as the Witch of Greed, Teacher. At the time I thought you were just joking, but just for now, I’ll believe it in order to broaden the current conversation!”

Witch: “I would prefer if you did not use such a disappointing method of broadening the conversation. I’ll speak if you make me, so I would like it if you could make it enjoyable for me to do so.”

Aldebaran: “Yo, sexy lady! Beautiful courtesan Witch! With a smile that can make all royalty and nobility weak in the knees.”

Witch: “How smooth… Well, I have experienced an episode quite similar to that.”

It was an obvious encouragement, but it seemed like it had cheered the Witch up, and she began speaking of the past.

If there was a similar episode, would it be stuff like courtesans and weak-kneed royalty? Whichever happened to be more applicable, it was sure to be an episode that packed quite a punch.

Witch: “At the time, Magrizza was still at the height of its prosperity. We were basically a group of fugitive problem children, so we were trying to hide our identities as much as we could, but… Farsale ended up getting found out by a noble of that nation. Though, that was also because when someone came to return something that he had dropped, he boldly declared in the middle of the road “My venerable self shan’t forget this gratitude. Should you encounter any hardship, do visit the Kingdom! I, Farsale Lugunica, shall grant you my aid.”

Aldebaran: “Was that companion an idiot?”

Witch: “Indeed, he was a fool. Foolishly earnest and honest to a fault… well, he was the type who was applicable with everything that could be attributed to being a fool. And so, our identities were revealed because of Farsale, and we ended up being invited to a banquet of nobles. That is where they saw me for the first time.”

Aldebaran: “Heh, so you caught the eye of some nobleman?”

Placing his hand on his chin, Aldebaran pretended to be impressed, though he was not particularly surprised.

To the point that even Aldebaran, who was already well accustomed to her face, would end up slipping a “What a beauty” if he let his mind lose focus, the Witch harbored a truly beautiful appearance. Earlier, he had likened her to a beautiful flower, but it truly was the case. As if her allure and toxicity were proportional, she was a poisonous beauty.

Witch: “No, the one whose eye I had caught was not merely some nobleman, it was the crown prince of Magrizza.”

But, it seemed like Aldebaran had still underestimated the toxicity of that deadly bane.

Witch: “At that time, we had just split up from the ones with capable fighting strength, which was quite the hard blow. In fear of causing any larger ruckus, we had intended on following the other party’s demands for the time being, but before I knew it, preparations for the wedding ceremony were already commencing. I almost became a queen.”

Aldebaran: “You could say that was dangerous in two different ways. What happened then?”

Witch: “Naturally, the wedding of the crown prince would have been a large-scale event involving the entire nation. Of course, as most people might expect, that wedding was completely and utterly spoiled. Ultimately it was the result of Reid and Volcanica going on a rampage, but the trigger for that was—”

Aldebaran: “…Teacher?”

Her loquacity in speaking of those resuscitated memories suddenly paused, and in response to Aldebaran’s suspicion, the Witch gave a curt “It’s nothing” before eliminating the hesitation in her words.

Witch: “Anyway, that was how my wedding with the crown prince was cancelled. We were chased out of Magrizza, but not too long afterwards, the Black Serpent began wreaking havoc in that nation. It thus met its demise, and we had naught the time to concern ourselves with it. And that was that.”

Aldebaran: “You can’t just end on “that was that”! That was a great tragedy! Teacher, I can’t believe that you and the rest were even involved with the Black Serpent…”

Witch: “Still, I think Daphne bears more of a responsibility than I do when it comes to the Witchbeast’s damages… Well, I won’t deny the possibility that the Black Serpent had been pursuing us.”

The Witch shamelessly shrugged her shoulders, and Aldebaran was at his wits' end because of her attitude.

If Magrizza was unable to gain the protection of the Witch and her allies against the damages of the Black Serpent due to having incurred their displeasure with an unwanted wedding, could that have been called a blunder of their royal family?

Witch: "It was nothing so simple."

Before he knew it, a white table and tea set had manifested there, and the Witch responded to Aldebaran's internal thoughts as she pleased, bringing a cup to her lips. He wanted to delve into those details a bit more, but Aldebaran knew from experience that her current demeanor, holding her long-lashed eyes closed, meant that she would refuse going any further on this topic.

Even though it was a topic she had chosen, he found the Witch's whims to be quite troublesome.

Aldebaran: "But with how it stands, there are way too many ups and downs, so it surely can't be called a romantic story."

Witch: "Is that so? Well, when it comes to entanglements with the opposite sex, it's always the same old story. As I had said, I was unsure of whether it was a predicament that would live up to your expectations."

As a matter of fact, the Witch was an individual possessing outstanding talents, and an appearance so beautiful that the prince of a nation fell for her at first sight. Assisted by her own thirst for knowledge, she could likely make anybody fall in love with her if she so desired it.

Witch: "A waste, is it…? The reason why I am unable to grasp an accurate measure in the realm of love, is likely due to the poor examples I had in my vicinity."

The Witch, who can always read ahead in the happenings of Aldebaran's mind, gave a rather sad self-analysis after reading his feelings.

Nearby examples regarding love, what matched that description was—

Witch: “I have hinted at it many times now, but my parents were good-for-nothings. I learned many negative emotions, such as contempt and ridicule, from my parents. Though from their perspective, my very existence would have been a failed imitation, a result that they had not desired.”

Aldebaran: “Teacher…”

Witch: “Ah, but it is quite ironic how I, who despise my parents in such a manner, am now doing the same thing that they did. I suppose this could be called self-deprication or self-reproach?

Haha, even though a long time has passed since we parted ways, I still find myself learning new things from those two.”

Holding the cup, the Witch’s fingers trembled, and she cast her face down towards the table. Her bangs hung before her eyes, and no longer able to see her expression, unease burgeoned within Aldebaran.

Beyond that unseen expression, was the Witch angry? Was she saddened? She was probably not smiling, but whichever thing it might have been, it was not something he could ascertain.

Even so, Aldebaran did not do anything so tactless as to peer at it.

Aldebaran: “…”

Instead, Aldebaran gently hugged the Witch’s slender body from behind.

Witch: “…Even though, you do not fully grasp the situation?”

At Aldebaran’s deed, the Witch expressed her bewilderment while being embraced.

Hearing the Witch’s perplexed voice, Aldebaran began to regret what he had done, but that was overcome by the lone fact that she had not shaken him off, allowing him to continue hugging her, Aldebaran: “How should I say this, Teacher, anyone who says that you’re doing the same thing as your parents is way off the mark, so it’d be better if you don’t dwell on it too much, that’s what I think, therefore I am, or something.”

Witch: “That is a complexity unique to disorganized opinions. But, there are many holes in that logic. You claim I am off the mark, but my parents produced the existence known as myself for a purpose, and I produced the existence known as yourself for a purpose… in that case, you could say that I, who perpetuated the chain, am more malicious.”

Aldebaran: “That’s if you believe that me and you are the same, Teacher, and that the perpetrators of such an act are good-for-nothing. You have a nasty personality, you don’t understand people’s hearts, and if you add it all up, you’ve killed me around a million times, Teacher.”

Witch: “Simply put, I’m a heinous villain.”

Aldebaran: “But, I don’t hate you, Teacher. —With just that, these two cases are completely separate matters.”

The Witch had spoken of her parents as good-for-nothings, revealed that she despised them, and though she had not said it explicitly, she would have likely harbored resentment and grudges towards them. But, if she was reproaching herself for doing the same thing as them, then why did those same sentiments not exist within Aldebaran?

That was evidence that the Witch’s actions were completely different to those of her parents.

Witch: “Though, I also think it is entirely possible that you are simply a much better person than I am.”

Aldebaran: “Stop trying to tear down the premise we’ve established so far. Just accept your salvation.”

Witch: “Haha, very well.”

As the Witch scrambled to nitpick, she gently caressed the hands of

Aldebaran who was embracing her from behind, and without shaking him off, she silently closed her eyes.

The Witch could run wild through his inner thoughts as much as she pleased, and yet he was completely unable to get a read on her feelings whatsoever, so it was quite an unbalanced relationship.

Even so—

Aldebaran: “I like you, Teacher, I really do. In this world, there might not be a single man who would fall in love with you for any reason other than your looks, but there is at least one right here, so rest assured.”

Witch: “…Though, I think there is no way that no members of the opposite sex has ever taken an interest in me for reasons outside of my appearance, but I suppose this is where I say thank you?”

Aldebaran: “Who’s to say? But normally, when someone confesses that they like you, you would respond with how you feel.”

Although he played it off as a joke, those words had taken quite a bit of courage from Aldebaran.

In response, the Witch placed a finger over her lips with a “Hm”. Right now, he could not see the Witch’s face as she leaned the back of her head against his chest, and the time spent in contemplation felt extremely long.

And then—

Witch: “I am a woman who does not know love. Hence, I will not say that I love you.”

Aldebaran: “…Ngh, well, yeah.”

Witch: “It is just—”

Receiving the words at the end of the Witch’s contemplation, Aldebaran attempted to quickly accept the result. But, speaking over Aldebaran’s evasive response, the Witch continued.

Witch: “If the sentiments I feel towards you can be classified as love, I think that would be nice.”

Aldebaran: “…”

With an unseen expression and a relaxed voice, just what sort of feelings the Witch had spoken those words with, was not something Aldebaran could tell in the slightest.

His days spent with the Witch were filled with such things. The Witch, faithful to her curiosity of wanting to know and understand, would not allow him to step into the deepest parts of what he wished to know and understand

Even so—

Aldebaran: “…I’m well aware that it’s no use even if I badger you with love talk, Teacher.”

Witch: “Good grief, what a thing to say to me after I have answered all of your whims. I wonder who it is you take after. I would love to see your parent’s faces.”

Aldebaran: “Even though you know it damn well…”

While cursing at her in such a manner, Aldebaran suddenly realized something that troubled him. —His arms were still embracing the Witch from behind, and he did not know at what time he ought to let go.

When it came to being unable to speak of any romantic stories involving lovers, it seemed like they were in the same boat.

To be continued

Comic Alive Collection 13

Royal Selection:
First Contact
(CA)
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—This had truly turned into a serious matter.

While she was at a loss amid a throng where she could not tell right from left, the girl's head was filled with unease.

Everything she cast her eyes upon was brand new, and no matter where she turned her face, her head swam. After all, having her field of vision filled to the brim with so many people was a first for her. Naturally, being wrapped in that many overlapping voices was also a first, and her ears, a little longer than a human's, twitched.

Voice: "—Lia, hey Lia, are you alright?"

At that moment, into her head already full of anxiety, a gentle, familiar voice resonated.

Understanding that it was the voice from the Crystal Stone hanging at her chest, the girl could not help but let out a breath.

Only then did she realized what a serious thing it was that she had even forgotten to breathe.

Had the voice not made her notice just now, she might have collapsed here in the very middle of the city from shortness of breath.

Girl: "That was reaaally close…"

Voice: "Mm-hmm, you cleared one hurdle. But it still seems too soon to let your guard down. Lia's hardships look like they'll continue a little longer."

Girl: “Mm, yeah. I can’t let my guard down. Because…”

With the hand that had softly patted her chest in relief, the girl drew close the collar of the robe she wore over her head.

As if believing that the robe could, even just a little, ease the prickle of anxiety stirred by the many things she could see, the many voices she could hear, and the many presences she could feel.

Even relying on that sensation, the girl was in the very center of a whirlpool of unease.

Because—

Girl: “I’ve completely gotten separated from Frederica… what should I do?”

As the girl, in the Royal Capital for the first time, murmured weakly, a large dragon carriage swept across her field of view at speed.

2

Emilia was a half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes, born and raised in the Elior Great Forest.

Having spent so long in a closed-off, isolated forest and knowing full well she was a naïve girl from the sticks, Emilia had steeled herself with a strong sense of tension for her first time in the big city. And yet, here she was with this result.

Emilia: “I was sure I was being careful, and yet I ended up getting lost…”

Puck: “Were you reaaally being careful? To me, you looked like you were wobbling over here, wobbling over there—your eyes were wandering to everything, and it seemed reaaally risky.”

Emilia: “But everything here is full of things I don’t know!”

Answering that exasperated voice, Emilia reflected on how fickle she had been. But as she did, she sharpened her tone just a little

and—

Emilia: “If you thought I looked risky, Puck, you should have told me.”

Puck: “No, I did tell you. You just wouldn’t lend me an ear. Like when you were absorbed in that street performer’s act earlier, I was saying the maid girl isn’t here, remember?”

Emilia: “No way? Is that true? I got totally absorbed, so…”

She had tried to make him reflect, but the reply flipped it back on her, leaving Emilia at a total loss.

What he brought up were the traveling performers who had shown a little act earlier on a street of the Royal Capital: a lizardman who swallowed a dagger whole, a rabbitman with unbelievable flexibility, and a huge tigerman who juggled an old dwarven grandpa like a ball—each very interesting.

Emilia had even stopped in her tracks to watch their act from start to finish, and she had handed over the allowance she’d been given as a tip.

Puck: “Looking back, if you hadn’t handed over that tip, we might’ve had a few more options.”

Emilia: “Options?”

Puck: “If you’d had some allowance left, it might’ve helped with looking for someone or avoiding trouble, you know?”

Emilia: “I get what you mean, Puck, but…”

She had already given the tip to the traveling performers, so there was no taking it back now no matter what she said. And they had been very happy with the tip she’d given them. If possible, she would have liked to convey in more detail how impressed she was with each of their tricks, but since Emilia was poor at talking, she couldn’t express it well, and that was very unfortunate.

Besides, the allowance was something she had received from none other than Roswaal, Frederica's master—the very person who'd gotten separated from them. For a lost Emilia to use that money to look for Roswaal and the others felt kind of silly.

Emilia: "Mm-Mm, instead of dithering, moving sounds better. I think Frederica is looking for us too, so let's try retracing the way we came."

Puck: "My daughter is proactive and that's reaaally good. But, are you okay? Do you really remember which path you took?"

Emilia: "Oh, Puck, you're worrying way too much. I originally lived in a forest with no landmarks at all. Compared to that, the Royal Capital is full of things that stand out."

Smiling faintly at the worry coming from the Crystal Stone, Emilia felt her heart grow a little lighter.

To properly go back the way they came. Obvious as that was, it felt like a brilliant idea. Surely, they would find the separated Frederica in no time.

—And thinking that way had been terribly naïve.

Emilia: "…I've wandered onto a street I don't recognize at all again."

Puck: "Right? Where even is this? They really should write the names of the streets somewhere."

Leaning her back against the wall at the corner of the street, Emilia drooped her shoulders and answered weakly, Emilia: "Yeah."

She said "yeah," but "we got lost because the streets had no names" was not an acceptable excuse to Emilia.

After all, there was no direct connection between her losing track of the way she came and not knowing the name of the street.

In the same bustling cityscape as ever, while trying and trying to retrace the paths she must have taken, Emilia had probably chosen the wrong way at most of the forks. She thought she should at least have remembered how many turns she'd made, but it was too late for all of it.

By the time she noticed, not only did she not know where the first street was, she couldn't even find the street she'd just decided to backtrack to—checkmated.

Emilia: "If we were in the forest, I could get home even with my eyes closed."

Puck: "Well, there's no point comparing a forest you lived in for years to a Royal Capital you just came to for the first time. And a shop you remembered as a landmark closing up or moving isn't Lia's fault."

Emilia: "If it's a roadside stall, that sort of thing can happen, huh. Consider me taught."

Among the so-called street vendors, there were a few that made their stalls flashy to get people to stop, or decorated with weird eye-catching ornaments. Since those were so striking, Emilia had been using them as landmarks—but street vendors close up at certain times or change their decorations, so they were ill-suited as landmarks.

By the time she realized that, it was too late, and Emilia's lost-child status had reached its peak.

Emilia: "…I wish you'd come outside too and helped me memorize the way, Puck."

Puck: "Huh? Passing the blame to me here isn't like you, Lia. So getting lost hit you harder than you thought, huh?"

Emilia: "I don't mean to take it out on you. I don't, but…"

As she answered, her words trailed off bit by bit. She'd reflexively snapped back like that, but Emilia herself knew best this was taking it out on him.

As she lowered her eyes, a small laugh sounded by her ear—

Puck: “Good grief, what a handful you are, Lia. Don’t get so down.”

It wasn’t a voice that sounded directly in her head, but a whisper properly heard by her ears. There was the faintest weight on her shoulder, and the feel of soft fur tickling her cheek made Emilia narrow her eyes.

In a blink, perched on Emilia’s shoulder was an adorable little kitten, small enough to fit in her hand—no, the spirit in the form of a kitten: Puck.

At Puck’s appearance, Emilia’s amethyst eyes went round, and she immediately ducked into a nearby alley.

And—

Emilia: “Puck, you mustn’t come out. If people see you, everyone will be reaaally surprised, remember we were told that.”

Puck: “Of course, but if it’s to cheer you up, it can’t be helped. The surprised everyone are nowhere near as important to me as you are, Lia.”

Emilia: “Puck…”

Puck: “Plus, I don’t want you taking it out on me anymore.”

Emilia: “Puck!”

As he joked, swishing his long tail, Emilia’s mood started to recover.

Her gloom that had been about to settle in lifted thanks to Puck; no matter how lost she was, she wasn’t alone. That reassurance was very big.

Keeping that up, Emilia hid Puck, who was tickling her neck, with her own silver hair, and was about to head back out toward the street—

Man: “Hey, miss, you were throwing money around pretty generously back there.”

A big man said that as he blocked the entrance to the alley, and Emilia came to a halt.

Blinking rapidly, Emilia looked up at the man, huge both vertically and horizontally, who peered down at her with a nasty grin. She didn't know him.

—But she knew that face.

Back when Emilia lived in the forest, people who did bad things in the forest smiled with that same face.

Emilia: "So in other words, you're someone thinking bad thoughts?"

Man: "Hah! You said it. And you ain't wrong. Only, whether I end as just a guy thinking bad thoughts or become a guy doing bad things depends on you, miss."

As he said that, the man crooked his open hand, beckoning Emilia.

Man: "Come on, stepping into this alley was the end of your luck. Leave every bit of coin you got."

Emilia: "By "every bit of coin," you mean money? Why would you do that…"

Man: "Don't play dumb! I saw you, yeah? You handed over a nice chunk of coin to those traveling performers."

Emilia: "Ah, so that's why… but, I'm sorry. I gave all the allowance I had to them. So I can't share any with you."

Man: "Don't feed me a cheap lie! Who in the world hands every last coin to some roadside performers!"

Puck: "This Lia here… really did hand over the whole thing…"

Then, quietly, Puck called, Puck: "Lia."

Puck: "You know this already, but guys like this don't get convinced by words. If you can't drive him off, I'll do it for you, okay?"

Emilia: “No, I’m fine, I’ll do my best myself. Besides, the ones I know are people who do bad things in the forest; the ones who do bad things in the Royal Capital might understand if we talk…”

Man: “Hey! Quit muttering to yourself. It’s fine by me, y’know? You come from a house that gives that much allowance. If you ain’t gonna pay, then I’ll make your family pay.”

Puck: “I don’t think that’s the line—or the face—of someone you can reason with, Lia.”

With Puck sighing, Emilia too thought maybe her idea was naïve.

Even so, she wanted to save making someone feel pain as the very last resort. Of course, if she borrowed Puck’s power, or even without borrowing it, with Emilia’s own power, she might be able to do something easily—but she didn’t think that should be the first resort.

Emilia: “As for that proposal just now, I’m sorry, but no. I’m already always in Roswaal’s debt, so I can’t trouble him any further.”

Man: “—! That wasn’t a proposal. I was just kindly telling you what I’m gonna do!”

As his eyes flared and his face reddened, the man reached a hand toward Emilia. In that instant, Emilia braced herself, thinking she might already have to rely on her last resort.

However, that didn’t happen.

???: “That will be as far as you go.”

Hearing that voice, Emilia had the illusion it was wreathed in flame.

Her ear that heard it, the brain that understood it, the heart that became aware of it—she felt as if they were seared by a flame too hot to touch, and a sound almost escaped her throat.

Man: “N—gh…!”

Before Emilia, who barely held back that sound, the man who couldn't hold it back let out a small groan. The right arm he had stretched out to grab Emilia was being gently restrained. The one who did that was a slender young man who had somehow appeared at the man's side.

With hair red like blazing flames and eyes as blue as a cloudless sky, a calm, dignified profile fixed straight on the man, the young man, before she knew it, was shielding Emilia behind him.

???: "If you say you'll continue to bother this lady any further, then I will be your opponent."

Man: "…"

???: "If you back down here, I'll let this go. The choice is yours."

His words were gentle, and she could believe without argument that there was no lie in them. At the same time, there was an undeniable force that brooked no refusal, and Emilia could understand why the man gulped.

Presently, the man, sweat breaking out across his face, pulled his arm back and retreated a step.

???: "Thanks for doing that; that helps."

To the man backing down, the young man spoke in a tone that also rang true.

Unable to say anything to the young man, the man left the alley just like that. Right before he did—

Emilia: "Listen, don't do things like this anymore, okay? It's reaaally dangerous."

At this, which she felt she had to say, Emilia raised her voice. The face the man showed her at the last was bitter in a way hard to describe.

Puck: "He might reaaally turn over a new leaf."

Emilia: “…If so, that’d be good.”

Once the fleeing man’s back disappeared, Emilia murmured that in reply to Puck. Then she quickly turned to the young man before her—the one who had helped her.

Emilia: “Thank you for saving me. Thanks to you, you reaaally helped me out.”

???: “Not at all, I’m just glad you’re safe. I happened to see him heading into the alley and got a bad feeling. I’m not particularly sharp, but I’m glad I hit the mark today.”

Emilia: “Really? Then I must’ve been lucky too.”

Puck: “The guy earlier said your luck ran out, and you’re also currently very much lost, though.”

Smiling at the kind young man, Emilia pursed her lips at Puck, who just had to add one extra line. However, she held back from addressing Puck here so as not to surprise the young man.

???: “By the way, would I be correct in saying the one you’re with is a spirit?”

Emilia: “Eh?!”

Her restraint lasted only a moment—startled by what the young man said. With his blue eyes, he looked straight at Emilia—no, at Puck, hidden in Emilia’s hair. For some reason, he could plainly see Puck. If he spread the word, everyone around would be shocked and chaos would ensue.

Thinking that, Emilia considered somehow fobbing him off, but—

Puck: “Don’t force it, Lia. A lie like that doesn’t seem to work on this kid.”

Emilia: “Puck…”

Rustling aside her silver hair, Puck poked his face out onto Emilia’s shoulder as he spoke. At his forthrightness, the young man opened his eyes slightly.

???: “I’m surprised. You are… no, you are a high-ranking spirit.”

Puck: “The ones surprised are me and Lia. As you can see, I’m small and cute. I meant to go unnoticed… and appearing in front of you is pretty hard, too.”

???: “For that, I apologize for the trouble I cause.”

Puck: “It’s fine~, you seem to have a troublesome constitution yourself.”

With his long tail swaying, Puck washed his face with a paw, and the young man gave a faint wry smile. Not understanding the meaning of their exchange, Emilia tilted her head, Emilia: “What do you mean?”

Puck: “Roughly put, he’s got a body that easily draws in the Mana around him. A proper spirit like me isn’t that affected, but Micro Spirits would probably be all smitten just by getting close.”

Emilia: “Smitten…”

???: “I don’t know how I appear to the other side, but I do often get treated kindly by spirits. Though it’s odd to say this in front of a bona fide Spirit Arts User.”

Emilia: “Smitten…”

Rolling the unfamiliar word on her tongue, Emilia looked the young man up and down. It was rude to stare, so only briefly, but the fiery impression she’d received upon hearing his voice and seeing him remained; now he wore a gentle air.

Kind and a very good person. —But she also thought he was someone with incredible power.

Emilia: “Ah, sorry. Come to think of it, I haven’t even asked your name yet, have I? I’m Emilia, and this child is Puck.”

Puck: “Nice to meet you~”

Reinhard: “Emilia, and Puck. I’m Reinhard. One of the Kingdom’s knights.”

Emilia: “A knight! You’re a knight, huh. Now that you say it, that makes reaaally perfect sense.”

Looking at the white outfit of the young man—Reinhard—and the fine-crafted sword at his waist, Emilia nodded again and again at his word that he was a knight.

She wasn’t very knowledgeable, but Emilia had learned that a knight was someone who bore a sword to protect their country or lord. Reinhard’s actions were exactly that, she thought.

Puck: “Right, Lia. Since it’s perfect timing, why not ask Reinhard?”

Reinhard: “—? Is there something I can help with?”

Emilia: “R-Right. Um, the truth is, we got separated from the girl we were with… It’s our first day in the Royal Capital, so when it comes to looking for her, the streets are just a complete jumble to me.”

Reinhard: “I see. By the way, what are the features of the person you got separated from?”

Emilia: “She’s tall, a maid with beautiful long blonde hair. Her name is Frederica.”

He was very likely walking the Royal Capital right now searching for them—Emilia conveyed Frederica’s features and looked to Reinhard’s reaction with hope.

However, after murmuring “Frederica…” to himself, Reinhard slowly shook his head.

Reinhard: “I’m afraid no one comes to mind. But if you got separated in the Royal Capital, if you go to a guard post, you might be able to hear something.”

Puck: “A guard post, huh—like a lost-child information desk?”

Reinhard: “It serves that role as well. If you like, could I guide you there?”

Emilia: “It’d help me reaaally a lot, but… are you sure?”

Disappointed to hear he didn’t know, Emilia widened her eyes at Reinhard offering to guide them. Was it really okay to accept so much from Reinhard—once for the man who had tried to do wrong, and a second time for guiding them? She couldn’t help feeling uneasy.

At Emilia’s reaction, Reinhard’s gallant face softened into a gentle smile.

Reinhard: “A knight’s duty is also to aid the townsfolk. In other words, this too is my job.”

And with that answer, he indelibly impressed upon Emilia just how admirable a knight was.

3

Emilia: “And then, while I was watching those traveling performers’ acts, we got separated…”

Reinhard: “If it’s them, I think I saw them as well while patrolling the city. However, the street they were on was, I believe, quite far from the alley you were in, Emilia…”

Emilia: “That’s right. I tried to get back to the original route somehow, but it seems I took the wrong streets.”

Puck: “That guy targeted you because he saw how generously you tipped, and after that you were wandering all over the city, so you must’ve looked like an easy mark~”

Reinhard: “It pains me to say this as someone charged with protecting public order in the Royal Capital, but it’s difficult to keep eyes on every last corner of the city. This isn’t limited to you, Emilia, but at the very least, keeping a sense of danger yourself is the trick to not getting caught up in it.”

Puck: “Hear that, Lia? No more aimless wandering.”

Emilia: “Oh, Puck, you say that like it’s someone else’s problem.”

Irritated, Emilia rubbed her fingertip in small circles against Puck’s brow atop her shoulder.

On the way as they followed the route Reinhard had offered to guide them along, Emilia felt entirely at ease, noticed his gaze, and let out a small “Ah,” before—

Emilia: “Right, um, Reinhard, it’s about Puck, actually…”

Reinhard: “It’s better not to mention him to others, yes. I think so too. It’s almost unheard of for a Great Spirit to appear in the middle of a city, and there’s no reason to stir up a racket needlessly.”

Emilia: “I hadn’t even said anything yet—that’s amazing. But I’d really appreciate it if you’d do that.”

Reinhard: “Think nothing of it.”

At Reinhard’s relaxed smile, Emilia patted her chest in relief and nodded back.

His strength was one thing, but Emilia could not help being impressed by his attentiveness as well. Was this thanks to his work as a knight, or was Reinhard simply someone who was especially considerate?

It felt more like the latter to Emilia, since whenever the townspeople of the Royal Capital noticed Reinhard as they passed, they would call out cheerful greetings to him.

Men and women alike, adults and children without distinction—everyone was favorable toward him.

Emilia: “Reinhard, you know an awful lot of people. Everyone calls out to you.”

Reinhard: “I often patrol the city like this, so that might be part of it. There are also… other reasons why everyone knows me, but…”

As Reinhard spoke, he glanced over at her, and Emilia tilted her head. In response to her reaction, Reinhard continued with, “No,” and—

Reinhard: “It seems that has nothing to do with you, Emilia.”

Emilia: “Really? In that case, I won’t pry any deeper…”

Thinking he probably did not want to get into anything too involved, Emilia answered like that. She wanted, even if not to the extent of Reinhard, to have feelings of consideration and thoughtfulness too.

Just then, as the corners of Reinhard’s eyes softened at her answer —

Puck: “Could that be the guard post? The atmosphere’s different from the other buildings.”

At those words, Emilia looked up, and just as Puck said, she caught sight of a large stone building whose atmosphere was a stark change from the commoners’ district they had been walking through. Unlike the storefront buildings, this one had a somewhat rough-hewn impression, and there were armored guards at its entrance.

And then—

Frederica: “—Lady Emilia!”

Calling Emilia’s name in a high voice was the tall, slender, blonde maid—the very Frederica whose whereabouts they had been searching for ever since they were separated.

Catching the sight of Frederica as she came trotting over with a pinch to her skirt hem, Emilia’s eyes went round, and from the bottom of her heart she felt relief: “You really were here.”

Reinhard: “She is your companion, then, Emilia?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. To meet her again so soon… Thank you, Reinhard.”

To Emilia’s words of gratitude, Reinhard returned a smile and a, “You’re welcome.” Just then, Frederica reached Emilia’s side and bowed deeply.

Frederica: “My deepest apologies, Lady Emilia. Though I was by your side, to have left you alone in the Royal Capital…”

Emilia: “No, do not apologize, Frederica. I’m the one who was careless at the roadside. And since Puck was with me, I did not end up all alone.”

Puck: “We also happened to run into a kind person along the way~”

To the abashed Frederica, Emilia and Puck spoke in turn. Straightening her back, Frederica then bowed her head to Reinhard as well, who stood at Emilia’s side.

Frederica: “You have looked after Lady Emilia most graciously. Despite my blunder, you safely escorted her here. No matter how many words I expend, they cannot suffice to express my gratitude.”

Reinhard: “It’s quite alright. As you can see, this is part of my job.”

Frederica: “Then you are a knight, sir. Forgive me, may I have your name—”

???: “—Huh? Isn’t that Reinhard, nya? Wasn’t today your day off, nya?”

Cutting into Frederica and Reinhard’s exchange came a third party’s voice.

The speaker was one of a pair coming leisurely from the direction of the guard post Frederica had run from—a lovely girl with flaxen cat ears and fair skin in an adorable outfit. Fixed by the girl’s big round yellow eyes, Reinhard lifted his brows slightly.

Reinhard: “Ferris, what about you?”

Ferris: “As you can see, I was out strolling all lovey-dovey with Lady Crusch~… buuut—”

Crusch: “On the way, we happened to see this lady looking troubled. I could not leave her be, and so we spoke to her.”

Picking up where the one called Ferris left off was the woman standing beside her, dignified in bearing; in contrast to Ferris, she wore a crisp outfit with a base of deep navy. Just looking at her made one’s spine straighten; coupled with the sharpness of her amber, narrow eyes, to Emilia she seemed like a well-tempered, slender sword.

Frederica: “Lady Crusch, Lady Ferris, thanks to you, I was able to reunite safely with the one I sought. I am sincerely grateful for your kindness.”

Crusch: “It was the result of your earnest efforts. What Ferris and I did was trifling.”

Ferris: “Nyaa~ Lady Crusch says that, but ordinarily someone as exalted as Lady Crusch wouldn’t just casually help with lost-people cases, so don’t forget it, ’kay?”

Frederica: “But of course, there is no way I would forget. —For it is not someone else’s concern.”

Apparently, while searching for the lost Emilia, Frederica had become quite friendly with those women—Crusch and Ferris. Since Emilia herself had caused them worry, she ought to offer thanks as well.

Emilia: “Um, may I thank you too? It looks like, because of me, the two of you took great care of Frederica.”

Crusch: “As I said earlier, we did nothing of import. In her desperate state searching for her companion, Frederica was in too much of a rush. Therefore I merely made the practical suggestion that she should gather information at the guard post.”

Frederica: “I am ashamed to say it had not occurred to me until Lady Crusch graciously said so…”

Emilia: “Then I definitely want to say thank you. Thanks to you, Frederica didn’t stay stuck in trouble the whole time. Thank you for speaking to her. Is “Crusch-san” okay?”

Crusch: “Ah, I do not mind.”

Ferris: “It does ma~t~ter!”

Thrusting herself forward from Crusch’s side, Ferris pointed sharply at Emilia.

Ferris: “Lis-ten up, okay? I told Frederica-chan this too, but normally, someone of Lady Crusch’s station isn’t the sort you can just chat up all willy-nilly, nya. Calling her “Crusch-san” is out of the question! Properly call her Lady Crusch, or else Duchess Karsten!”

Emilia: “Duchess Karsten… A duchess is a suuuper high rank?”

Crusch: “The title is accurate. That said, I do not require, as Ferris says, such stiffness. So long as you mind yourself to the extent of not being discourteous, there is no problem…”

Ferris: “La~dy~ Cru~sch!”

Crusch: “Good grief. My first knight is severe.”

Crusch gave a faint wry smile, shoulders slightly raised. Even so, Emilia glimpsed between her and Ferris a solid bond—something like what existed between Emilia and Puck.

They were surely nearly like family, or bound by a trust even stronger.

Reinhard: “Even so, what a coincidence. That I would bring Emilia here to the guard post, and Ferris would bring her companion Frederica as well. It makes me a little happy.”

Ferris: “Well, it’s one thing for Reinhard to be helping people all year round, but it’s rare for it to just happen to line up on the same day Ferri-chan went out chatting folks up. If Julius heard this, he’d be sooo jealous~”

Reinhard: “If it were Julius, I think he’d be impressed we each helped someone in trouble on the same day.”

Ferris: “Buuut, he’d still get all mopey that we met up without him on his day off.”

Reinhard: “It really was just a coincidence, though.”

Next, Reinhard and Ferris chatted like close friends.

Indeed, just as they said, in a city this large, for two friends to happen to help bring together the separated Emilia and Frederica at the guard post was quite the coincidence.

Because of that, Emilia had the slightly under-reflective thought that maybe getting lost hadn’t been so bad after all—but—

Frederica: “Lady Emilia, there is one matter I must inform you of.”

Addressed in a lowered voice by Frederica, Emilia gasped softly, “Eh”. Frederica’s serious voice and expression tightened the face and thoughts that had been on the verge of relaxing.

However, before Frederica could say it—

Crusch: “—By the way, you were Emilia, yes? Frederica disclosed her station to me, and I heard she is associated with Roswaal L. Mathers, the Margrave. Are you the same?”

Emilia’s cheek tightened slightly at the question Crusch cast her way.

It was startling to have Roswaal’s name suddenly brought up, but more than that, the way Frederica’s expression went taut beside her made Emilia tense up as well. —She probably had wanted to tell this before this topic came up.

But she could not. Therefore Emilia had to answer Crusch herself.

Puck: “Lia, if you’re worried—”

Emilia: “I’m fine.”

Sensing the atmosphere and meaning to show concern for Emilia, Puck began to speak, but Emilia shook her head to that kindness and faced Crusch squarely.

Emilia: “Yes. I am also currently under Roswaal’s care. …Crusch, are you acquainted with Roswaal?”

Crusch: “We aren’t close, but we are both high-ranking nobles of the kingdom. We sometimes see one another at assemblies. —No, you are more stout-hearted than I expected.”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Crusch: “It means I am not fond of roundabout talk either. —Ferris.”

Nodding as if satisfied with something, Crusch called to Ferris at her side. At that, Ferris straightened her back, took something from her bosom, and presenting it with due reverence, placed it in Crusch’s hand, which Crusch then showed to Emilia.

In the next instant, Emilia’s amethyst eyes widened—“Ah.” —Upon Crusch’s palm, the insignia worked with a dragon’s motif, its red jewel, shone.

More than beautiful or mysterious, Emilia knew exactly what that meant.

Emilia: “The insignia is shining… Then, could it be you too—”

Crusch: “As I thought, you too, eh. —I am Crusch Karsten, head of House Karsten, and one of the kingdom’s Royal Candidates for the next monarch. In other words, one who will vie with you for the throne.”

Emilia blinked her eyes several times at that clear declaration.

With her gaze, Crusch prompted Emilia to take the insignia shining upon her palm.

Led by Crusch, Emilia received the insignia from her hand. —Sure enough, the red gleam of the Dragon Stone continued to shine just the same upon Emilia’s palm.

Ferris: “This lady is the same… as Lady Crusch…”

Seeing the Dragon Stone’s glow, Ferris’s lips trembled as she spoke. Whatever complicated shades of emotion were in her voice, the red light of the Dragon Stone overruled them without question.

No matter what she might feel about Emilia, it was none other than the Dragon Stone that had chosen Emilia, and caused her name to be entered into the life-or-death matter of the kingdom’s Royal Selection—

Reinhard: “—I must beg your pardon for my great discourtesy, Lady Emilia.”

Emilia, who had, without thinking, clenched the insignia and hidden its red radiance, looked up with wide eyes. There before her, bowing deeply, was none other than her great benefactor, Reinhard. He had changed from the familiarity he had shown up to now, and directed toward Emilia a sincere gaze, but one filled with respect.

The change in that gaze felt very large to Emilia.

Reinhard: “Even if I did not know, my attitude toward a Royal Candidate was far too familiar…”

Emilia: “No, it’s fine, really. I was the one who didn’t tell you anything, Reinhard. And—”

Crusch: “Strictly speaking, Emilia is not yet a Royal Candidate. Correct?”

Answering Reinhard, who had grown formal, Emilia nodded at Crusch’s words and re-stated her present position.

Indeed, Emilia was one of those who could shine the Dragon Stone of the insignia—that is, one of those qualified to participate in the Royal Selection to decide the next ruler of the Kingdom of Lugunica, which was without a Royal Family. However, that qualification had not yet been officially recognized.

She would enter the Royal Castle, shine the Dragon Stone before those of proper station in the kingdom, and have Emilia's position rightfully acknowledged. —That was the purpose of Emilia's visit to the Royal Capital this time.

Ferris: "And at such a suuuper important time, the person herself getting lost in the city, nya."

Emilia: "Uu… How embarrassing…"

Crusch: "Ferris, do not say such mean-spirited things. If it is one's first time in the Royal Capital, it is entirely possible to struggle with its cityscape and winding streets and take a wrong turn."

Frederica: "Regarding that, it is my failure, and Lady Emilia bears no blame."

Ferris: "Aww, now both Lady Crusch and Frederica-chan are taking Lady Emilia's side. Reinhard? You're on Ferri-chan's side, right~?"

Reinhard: "I wonder. However, in a first visit to the Royal Capital, I can understand why Lady Emilia might have found it difficult to ask those around her for help when she lost her way. That's what I think."

No matter what anyone said, it was Emilia herself who had gotten lost. With that burden of guilt, even if Crusch or Frederica defended her, Emilia could not say anything back to Ferris. —Or so she thought, but then, at the last, Reinhard's addition made Emilia knit her brows.

It wasn't enough to call it "nagging at her." It might have been nothing more than that on her first time in the capital, everyone had looked busily in a hurry, making it hard to call out to them.

However—

Puck: "I wonder just how much he's seeing."

At Puck's words, who seemed to have been snagged by the same remark, Emilia let out a small breath.

Somehow, she could not shake the feeling that from the start Reinhard had seen through her secret—not the fact of being a Royal Candidate, but the other one—completely.

Emilia: “You said you weren’t very perceptive, but was that a complete lie?”

Reinhard: “If that’s how I made you feel, I apologize.”

At Emilia’s slightly narrowed eyes and probing, Reinhard gave a faint, wry smile. His reaction made Emilia decide that this was the moment to steel herself.

And so—

Emilia: “I can’t keep it covered forever anyway.”

So saying, Emilia removed the hood of the robe she had kept on up to now—the one woven with a *cognitive disruption* spell—and bared her true face to everyone there.

Her silver hair flowed down her shoulders; the slightly long ears that felt the wind twitched. Blinking her amethyst eyes as they caught the light, Emilia accepted the surrounding gazes head-on.

At Emilia’s action, everyone around her showed a different reaction.

Puck and Reinhard, who knew what she would do, remained composed; Frederica brought a hand to her mouth in surprise; Crusch’s eyes went slightly wide and her cheek tightened. The one who reacted the most—whose emotions were very expressive—was Ferris—

Ferris: “Nya, nya, nya—what do you think you’re doing…?”

Emilia: “Um, I’m thinking of being a Royal Candidate.”

Ferris: “No, that’s not… I mean, that is not what I am saying. The one I’m asking “what are you thinking” is not you—it’s the Margrave of Mathers!”

Ferris: “Even if you can make the Dragon Stone shine, there’s no way an elf can become monarch!”

She put into words what surely everyone first thought. Only, there was one point in her words that had to be corrected.

Emilia, who bore the qualifications of a Royal Candidate and had come to the Royal Capital intending to officially declare herself a candidate for the era’s monarch, was not an elf. —She was a half-elf.

A half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes—the kind everyone in this world made an unpleasant face at.

4

Frederica: “Lady Emilia, not in a place like this.”

Of those present, the first to return to her senses from Emilia’s action was Frederica.

Sidling close, she set the just-removed hood back over Emilia’s head. For an instant, Emilia felt the urge to stop her with a “why,” but—

Puck: “Lia, that cat-eared kid’s voice is drawing attention. The maid’s judgment to keep this from turning into a weird commotion is the right one.”

Emilia: “You’re right. Thank you, Frederica.”

Frederica: “No, I’m the one who was presumptuous.”

As Frederica bowed and offered a soft apology, Emilia’s brows drooped. Then she turned anew to face the three who were staring fixedly at her—Crusch, Ferris, and Reinhard.

Perhaps it was the exchange just now and the fact that Emilia had put the hood back up, but the flustered Ferris had calmed somewhat and was hugging her own arms, looking awkward.

Before Emilia could say anything to Ferris—

Crusch: “…I must say, I was quite taken aback. Emilia, that robe—does it have some special power at work? Or is it your own power?”

Emilia: “Ah, that I look hazy? That’s thanks to this robe. Roswaal had it prepared—it’s a special make, he said.”

Crusch: “I see. If it’s the Margrave Mathers, that follows. However, Knight Reinhard, it seems even that effect did not work on you…”

Reinhard: “That was due to the Divine Protection of Discernment. Illusions and blinding tricks do not mislead me.”

Crusch: “So it outstripped the Margrave’s sorcery. I’ve learned something. You have my thanks.”

Reinhard answered the arms-folded Crusch with a brief, “Not at all.”

Emilia too had wondered how he’d broken through the *cognitive disruption*, so hearing “Divine Protection” satisfied her. Once that exchange wrapped up—

Ferris: “…I apologize for raising my voice earlier.”

Ferris, who had apparently been waiting for a chance to speak, bowed to Emilia as she said this. But Ferris had no reason to apologize. If anything, the one who should apologize was Emilia.

Emilia: “No, I should be the one— I startled you, right. It was like that in the forest where I lived, too. When I take off my hood, everyone gets reaaally surprised…”

Puck: “It hasn’t just stopped at surprise—we’ve had some pretty awful things said to us, and yet you can say that here; I think you’re admirable, Lia. My girl is cute and tough.”

To Emilia, who fluttered her hand, Puck—who at some point had dissolved his materialization and withdrawn into the Crystal Stone—said that.

He was likely being considerate in his own way so that, with Emilia shocking everyone by taking off her hood, he himself wouldn't be seen and make them even more surprised.

Be that as it may—

Crusch: "Certainly, I would be lying if I said I wasn't surprised. Emilia, those features of your hair and eyes are…"

Emilia: "By birth. So I've had a lot said about me, and I know people will keep saying things, but even so, I—"

Clenching a small fist, Emilia put voice to her resolve.

She well understood by now how much people grimaced at a half-elf—especially one with silver hair and amethyst eyes. Surely many would dislike an Emilia intent on becoming monarch and say harsh things to her.

Even so, Emilia had left the forest in pursuit of a possibility that was not zero—because there truly was a way there to save everyone frozen in ice in the forest.

Crusch: "So it's with resolve. It seems you have circumstances, but I understand your thinking."

Emilia: "Crusch sa… *sama*."

Crusch: ""-san" or without honorific is fine. Apart from titles and ranks, we are equals. You have no objections, Ferris?"

Ferris: "If Lady Crusch puts it that way, Ferri-chan can't say a thing, nyaaa."

Relaxing her lips as if to confirm it, Crusch got that answer from Ferris with the severity gone from her face. At Ferris's response, Crusch dipped her chin, and Emilia instantly brightened.

Emilia: "Then I'll call you Crusch-san."

Crusch: "Very well. But I would have you never forget this, Emilia."

Emilia: “Never forget… what?”

Crusch: “That just as you have a reason to seek the throne, so do I. Being chosen by the Dragon Stone was chance, but I’ve decided to make full use of that opportunity.”

Confronted with Crusch’s forthright declaration, Emilia involuntarily held her breath.

Sensing in Crusch a resolve no weaker than her own from moments earlier, Emilia truly realized anew that she was a rival for the throne.

Whoever the opponent, there was only one throne Emilia had to obtain. Seeing the one she would contend with, she felt, for the first time clearly and close, the cruelty of that fact.

Crusch: “Meeting you by chance today makes it worth having come all the way to the capital.”

Emilia: “Crusch, you don’t usually live in the Royal Capital?”

Crusch: “I normally reside in the Karsten Duchy. However, a rumor reached my ears: that the Margrave Mathers would bring a new Royal Candidate to the capital.”

Ferris: “So it’s a reaaally big coincidence, nya. To meet not at the castle, but as a lost child at a guard post, nya~”

She’d been surprised enough already, but that answer surprised Emilia yet again.

Crusch and her companion had, in fact, come to the capital expressly to meet Emilia—to learn as soon as possible what manner of person a fellow contender in the Royal Selection was.

Emilia: “I’m reaaally glad I met you today, Crusch.”

Crusch: “Likewise.”

Smiling, Emilia and Crusch nodded to one another. Emilia was curious, and anxious, about what kind of people the Royal

Candidates besides herself were.

But with Crusch as the first of them, she felt her heart considerably relieved.

Ferris: “Once again, I apologize for my discourtesy, Lady Emilia.”

Once her exchange with Crusch had wound down, Ferris again offered an apology. Emilia, however, didn’t think Ferris’s words and deeds had amounted to rudeness. So she answered, “I don’t mind at all,” but—

Ferris: “That won’t satisfy Ferri-chan, nya. So…”

Taking a step as she spoke, Ferris closed the distance to Emilia, and suddenly brought her lips near Emilia’s ear. Surprised by the unexpected tallness of the girl leaning in, Emilia’s eyes went round—

Ferris: “—The truth is, I’m not a girl; I’m a boy, nya.”

Emilia: “Eh?!”

Ferris: “Consider it an apology for making you take off your hood. I don’t usually tell people on a first meeting.”

With a tiny tongue-out and a mischievous smile, Ferris gave Emilia her biggest surprise of the day.

Perhaps even more than the traveling performers’ amazing acts or Crusch’s Dragon Stone shining.

Emilia: “I had no idea.”

Ferris: “Naturally. Experience and resolve, you see.”

So saying, Ferris puffed his chest out with a hint of pride. What struck Emilia was that behind Ferris, Crusch wore just as proud an expression.

Crusch: “My apologies, but I have an appointment after this. Emilia, let us make another opportunity.”

Ferris: “Thanks for having us~. Frederica-chan, see you later~”

After seeing Crusch and Ferris off, Emilia let the tension leave her shoulders with a “phew.”

A sudden meeting with a Royal Candidate had, naturally, made her nervous. Even so, the unexpected encounter had surprised her, but it was by no means a bad one.

Puck: “She had a dignified air. She’ll be a formidable foe for you, Lia.”

Emilia: “Yeah. Crusch felt like a reaaally proper person. I’ve got to pull myself together so I won’t lose.”

Puck: “If it’s a contest of “properness,” you don’t seem to have much of a shot, so let’s hope the criteria for becoming monarch isn’t about degrees of properness. It’d be nice if they judged Lia’s good points.”

Puck’s opinion was severe even before any proper comparison, but Emilia herself admitted that if they competed right now, she’d be at a disadvantage.

Be that as it may—

Reinhard: “Lady Emilia, it was an honor to be present at such a valuable occasion. However, I must return to my patrol soon.”

Emilia: “Right, of course. I’ve wound up relying on you for absolutely everything, Reinhard…”

Reinhard: “I told you, didn’t I? It’s my job. I’m glad I could be of help today, unexpectedly. I’m also rooting for you in the Royal Selection.”

Emilia: “—! Thank you.”

Buoyed by Reinhard’s words, Emilia found a natural smile rising to her face.

Parting from him as he returned to city patrol, she waved until his back was out of sight, deeply impressed by his conscientious attitude.

Puck: “In the blink of an eye, everyone’s gone, huh.”

Emilia: “Yeah. But I’ve got Frederica with me. I’m reaaally glad.”

Frederica: “I am truly sorry… It is the greatest blunder of my life. Had anything at all happened to you, Lady Emilia, I would not have been able to face the master.”

Emilia: “I made you worry a reaaally lot, didn’t I. But don’t worry—it’s okay. Puck and I were lost, but it only went as far as a bad person talking to me in an alley.”

Frederica: “A bad person in an alley?!”

At Frederica’s emerald-green eyes widening, Emilia hurried to dispel the hasty misunderstanding.

Emilia: “Reinhard stepped in there, and it was truly fine.”

Puck: “If anything, you might even feel bad for the guy who tried to do wrong, right?”

Frederica: “…With a Great Spirit present, no run-of-the-mill villain could do anything improper to Lady Emilia. That makes sense. Even so—”

Nodding at Emilia and Puck’s words, Frederica briefly gazed off into the distance. Her eyes turned toward the direction of the street where they had just seen Reinhard off.

Emilia: “Frederica? Is there something about Reinhard?”

Frederica: “You may not know, Lady Emilia, but that gentleman is famous not only in the Royal Capital… no, in the entire kingdom. That red hair and the sword at his hip—there is no mistaking the “Sword Saint.”“

Puck: “Ahh—Reinhard. I see, I see, that explains it~”

Emilia: “Hey, no fair, the two of you understanding each other like that without me. What’s a Sword Saint?”

Frederica: “To put it extremely simply… he is said to be the strongest not only in the kingdom, but in the world.”

Emilia: “…The strongest in the world? You mean, stronger than Puck?”

Puck: “If I’m brought up here, I can’t be so timid as to say I’d lose, can I.”

From within the Crystal Stone, Puck answered in a tone like he was washing his face with a paw.

—To Emilia, the strongest being in the world was Puck. When Puck had come to the forest to fetch her, Roswaal, who had traded magic with Puck on equal terms, had seemed to her like he might be the second strongest in the world.

Emilia: “But for you, who knows Roswaal so reaaally well, to say that about Reinhard… he must be truly amazing.”

Frederica: “It was also my first time meeting him in person, so I’ve only heard the rumors. But to happen to cross paths with such a person by chance…”

Puck: “It means my Lia’s a lucky girl.”

Emilia: “Lucky? …I’m empty-handed right now, though.”

There was nothing in her hands, and she had handed over her allowance in full to the traveling performers.

Strange as it was, despite Puck not being materialized, Emilia felt as if he and Frederica exchanged a glance and a wry smile at her reply.

Frederica: “At any rate, let us return to the inn. What was meant to ease your nerves before tomorrow’s audience at the castle has turned into quite the unintended interlude.”

Emilia: “Right. …If I tell Roswaal I got lost, will he be disappointed?”

Frederica: “With the master, I can already picture him laughing it off merrily… I don’t think he’d be disappointed, but if you’d rather not worry him, we could keep quiet.”

Emilia: “Mm, okay. Ah, but I might want to tell him we met Crusch and Reinhard. Especially Crusch—she’s a fellow Royal Candidate.”

Puck: “Hmm, I predict the slip-up’ll come out around the point where Reinhard enters the story.”

Emilia: “Don’t say weird things.”

Talking like that, they finally set off on the return leg of their first stroll through the Royal Capital.

Even on the way back to the inn, things didn’t go smoothly: Emilia nearly got sidetracked again by eye-catching sights, and having failed once, Frederica’s overprotective solicitude exploded at the street vendors calling out to Emilia.

As a final note: after Roswaal, who had been out on business, rejoined them at the inn, in the course of recounting the day, Emilia carelessly mentioned that she had gotten lost—making all the effort of coordinating stories with Frederica come to absolutely nothing.

5

The next day, granted the promised chance to enter the castle, Emilia passed beneath its gate.

In the Royal Capital, the ground rises the closer you get to the city’s center, and in the very middle of that round terrain a splendid castle towers. Because of that, even yesterday, as Emilia wandered lost through the commoners’ streets, the castle’s imposing figure was always within her view.

To be invited straight in through the front of such a splendid castle felt very strange indeed.

Roswaal: “That won’t do at a—all; you simply must get used to it. A—after all, when Lady Emilia becomes queen, this castle will be Lady Emilia’s ho—ome.”

Roswaal said this lightly as he led the fidgety, glance-darting Emilia toward the castle as her guide.

But Roswaal was right. It was only natural for the monarch to reside in the capital’s castle, and Emilia had chosen to leave the forest to seize that position.

And today, she was setting foot in the castle to be recognized as a Royal Candidate.

Emilia: “—I think I’ll get along just fine with Crusch, though.”

Clutching the crystal stone at her chest tight, Emilia thought of Crusch, whom she had met yesterday.

Though they were in the same position, vying against one another for the throne, from what Emilia had heard there were three more Royal Candidates besides herself and Crusch who could make the Dragon Stone of the insignia shine. Naturally, those three yet unmet would be Emilia’s rivals just like Crusch.

Even so, the encounters with Crusch, and with Reinhard, were hopeful ones for Emilia—because they had not been excessively afraid of her.

Emilia: “A half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes… just that is enough to make a reaaally large number of people scared.”

But Crusch and the others had not reacted that way. Of course, as Crusch herself had said, they had been surprised—somewhat. Even Ferris, the only one to react the way Emilia knew all too well, calmed down quickly after that first fluster.

So she allowed herself to hope—maybe. Maybe the people she would meet in this Royal Capital, the other Royal Candidates she would strive with from now on, would, when it came to Emilia—

That faint hope of Emilia’s—

Anastasia: "—Hmm? I'd heard a snippet and thought, "Is that really so?" but for the fourth candidate to truly be a half-elf… what a letdown."

Priscilla: "—Galling though it is, this vixen and I are of one mind. At long last, I heard a new candidate had emerged—one to wrest the throne from me—and I came, only to find it a wasted trip."

Those were the words and gazes that greeted Emilia as she entered the antechamber—gazes and words devoid of kindness in every sense, brimming with merciless hostility.

—Anastasia Hoshin and Priscilla Barielle.

Following Crusch Karsten, upon meeting these two other Royal Candidates in the capital, Emilia had her momentum truly cut out from under her, and could only stand there at a loss.

6

—It was at the very same time that the "Sword Saint" Reinhard rescued Emilia, who had gotten separated from her retainer Frederica and was wandering about the Royal Capital.

Russell: "—I always considered you a curious sort, an oddball, but I must admit I did not expect you to be such a thoroughgoing eccentric."

Roswaal: "O—oh my, oh my. To have someone I've known for over ten years say that about me means I'm not entirely washed u—up yet, does it no—ot?"

Russell: "How does anything in my present assessment lead you to such a twisted conclusion?"

Roswaal: "As far as I kno—ow, there's no one who prepares in all directions as thoroughly as yo—ou. To surpass even your expectations and imaginations is quite an accomplishment, wo—ouldn't you sa—ay?"

Smiling like that as he tipped his cup, Roswaal drew a faint wry smile from Russell Fellow.

The place was a run-down tavern in the Royal Capital's commercial district, one that had stood there since olden times; for generations it had been secretly owned by House Mathers. In normal times it was rented out and run by others, but when Roswaal needed it, he could have the place cleared out like this at will, which made it very handy.

Accordingly, there were only two people in the empty shop: Roswaal and Russell.

Roswaal: "Of cou—urse, that would be if you had truly come alone, ho—owever."

Russell: "A dull feint. We both get more than our fill of probing each other's bellies elsewhere. At least while sharing cups with a friend, I'd like to be free of the occupational disease."

Roswaal: "In—indeed. That's quite true as we—ell."

When Russell lifted the cup on the counter, Roswaal clinked his own against it.

As Russell said, their stations were what they were. Living in a world where schemes and stratagems swirled, backroom struggles and clandestine feelers were everyday affairs; it was only natural to want a breather now and then.

That said, Roswaal's image of Russell Fellow was of a man who, in practice, would bring subordinates with him—several of them, not just one. It was the sort of thing Roswaal found agreeable in a friend, and he had not the slightest complaint about it.

Russell: "So? What exactly are you playing at?"

Roswaal: "Wh—whatever could you mean?"

Russell: "Spare me the pointless dodging. I refer, needless to say, to the new Royal Candidate you've sponsored… the half-elf girl."

Faced with that straightforward cut, Roswaal narrowed his eyes in high spirits.

Naturally, he had not been trumpeting Emilia's existence. He had brought her to the capital to prove her eligibility to participate in the Royal Selection, but that too was a matter handled in utmost secrecy. Nevertheless, Russell had already grasped even her origins. Truly, there were no chinks in his armor.

Which was exactly why it had been worth the trouble to summon him like this.

Russell: "If I may be frank, I am surprised you were interested in the Royal Selection at all. Despite holding the station of Margrave of the western marches, you have until now shown no eagerness to involve yourself deeply in national politics. And yet, here you are, having on your own found a new candidate…"

Roswaal: "It simply mea—ans the kingdom's governance was stable. Even if I, who am fully occupied with the administration of my own domain, did not poke my no—ose in, the Royal Family and the Council of Wise Men kept the country running quite we—ell."

Russell: "And because that premise collapsed, you grudgingly bestirred your heavy hips? If so, the speed from rising to results is too fast. The search for the "Dragon Priestess," while not publicized, is a matter of national urgency. You accomplished that alone. Which leaves me little choice but to think this."

On his stool, Russell turned to face Roswaal head on.

With his intelligent, keen features tightening slightly at the cheek, he said:

Russell: "You knew in advance that the Royal Selection would begin—in other words, that the Royal Family would be severed."

Roswaal: "…"

To that suspicion, Roswaal answered with silence.

If, hypothetically, that suspicion were fact, it would be a grave matter. Needless to say, a Margrave was among the great nobles of the kingdom. For one to overlook a colossal crisis about to befall the Royal Family, and to fail to stem the root of the present turmoil, would be a betrayal beyond argument, deserving of just that brand.

On the surface, Russell was said to be the representative of the Royal Capital's merchants' guild, but given his true standing, such a thing was a great crime that could not be overlooked. Not even a decade-long association would be an indulgence; it was mistake enough to lead to a parting of ways.

However—

Roswaal: "That I foresaw beforehand the calamity that would befall Their Majesties, and secured a person in advance to sponsor for the Royal Selection to come; that I would rule the kingdom from the shadows and wield authority to my he—eart's content—all for that, you say?"

Russell: "Yes. From a bird's-eye view, that is the most convincing scenario."

Roswaal: "…"

Russell: "…But only if the one you sponsored were not a half-elf."

Before Roswaal's testing gaze, Russell let out a long, deep sigh.

He could feel the taut tension ruling the room slowly unravel. Roswaal's lips naturally loosened at that reaction.

Russell: "A natural line of reasoning—thrown out of joint by the final condition. There is no such thing as putting a half-elf on the throne."

Roswaal: "Is that so? Perhaps I, dazzled by power, dirtied my hands with folly without caring about appearances?"

Russell: "You're clearly objective enough to call it folly. …Indeed, if that were your aim, it would be folly. Which is why this baffles me."

Roswaal: "It is, certainly, an enigma—atic situation."

Russell: "Don't speak as if it were someone else's affair. You are the source of that enigma."

With a hand to his brow, Russell slowly shook his head; the menace had already left him.

From his perspective, Roswaal's moves were surely nothing if not baffling.

In the present kingdom, being a leading supporter of a Royal Candidate carried tremendous weight—but only if that candidate had a real chance of properly ascending the throne.

In the Kingdom of Lugunica, where fear of the "Witch of Envy" was deeply etched, no one would believe, much less accept, that a girl of the same origins—and even the same physical traits—as that "Witch" would become monarch.

Yet Roswaal had, despite that, deliberately sponsored that girl, Emilia.

Roswaal: "So, in you—our eyes, I am a gambler who, in the wake of the Royal Family's severance, was first to declare for the Royal Selection shown by the Dragon History Stone, only to flaunt a hand so tattered it has no chance of winning."

Russell: "Gambler? More like a jester. Your makeup backs that up."

Roswaal: "Ha—ha—ha, how se—evere you a—are."

Clapping his knee at the sting in that remark, Roswaal nodded magnanimously.

Even without being told, Emilia's present value was nothing more than making up the numbers in the Royal Selection. And for now, that appraisal was not a problem—indeed, it was desirable.

Roswaal: "People's hearts burn far more for a story of a weakling clawing up from rock bo—ottom than for a sure thing racking up victories by sheer competence, after a—all."

Russell: "Roswaal?"

Roswaal: “No—no, it’s nothing at a—all. Your worries are unfounded. I am a commendable Margrave who strove to steady the kingdom’s shaking foundations as swiftly as possible… let’s leave it at tha—at.”

Russell: “…”

Roswaal: “What a doubting look that i—is. Well then, not as proof, but there is one thing I’d like you to do.”

Meeting Russell’s suspicious gaze, Roswaal slowly raised one finger. Staring at the finger—and at Roswaal past it—Russell closed one eye.

Russell: “…I’ll say this first: the merchants’ guild intends to remain neutral regarding the Royal Selection. I do not plan to choose whom to support based on the length of our acquaintance, either. Don’t expect me to take sides.”

Roswaal: “But of co—ourse. I’ve always respected your fairne—ess. Taking sides? Perish the thought. If anything, what I’m asking is the opposite.”

Russell: “The opposite?”

Roswaal: “Spread a rumor. That the next, new Royal Candidate is a half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes.”

At Roswaal’s request, Russell’s puzzlement deepened further.

He rated Roswaal as not a man who did things without purpose. Yet both this request and his moves toward the Royal Selection were hardly what one would call orthodox; to Russell, it seemed there was nothing down that road but collapse.

Being able to keep upending this clever friend’s expectations was immensely delightful, but of course Roswaal was not playing a prank merely for a moment’s amusement.

He would not betray a friend’s expectations—Roswaal was a man who did not do anything meaningless.

Roswaal: “I’ll leave the method of spreading it to you; for now, it need not permeate the public. Keep it to the depth where it reaches only the ears of the keen, so to spe—eak.”

Russell: “…Ultimately, what is your aim, Roswaal?”

Roswaal: “N—nothing too difficult. Let’s call it this level of hope: that the one I want to hear the rumor will catch wind of it and be prompted to come to the castle to take a peek; that would make various matters progre—ess nicely.”

Russell: “…I knew it—understanding you is a hard task.”

Saying that, Russell knocked back his cup in one go and let out a long breath.

There had been many chances before to break off relations with Roswaal, saying he did not understand him. And yet, here Russell was, still keeping company with Roswaal like this.

Finding that strangely endearing, Roswaal generously poured the next cup into Russell’s empty one, to honor that friendship.

7

—And this was the day after Roswaal and his scoundrel friend’s little scheme.

Anastasia: “—Hmm? I’d heard a snippet and thought “Is that for real?”, but for the fourth candidate to actually be a half-elf… what a letdown.”

Priscilla: “—Galling though it is, this vixen and I are of one mind. I heard at long last a new candidate had appeared—one to vie with me for the throne—and came, only to find it a wasted trip.”

In the antechamber of Lugunica’s Royal Castle where she had come to present herself, Emilia was on a bed of nails.

Today, before the kingdom’s dignitaries, Emilia would make the Dragon Stone shine and thereby prove that she was a candidate in the Royal Selection to decide Lugunica’s next monarch.

Roswaal had left, saying preparations were needed, and Emilia had been left in the antechamber with her attendant Frederica, intent on somehow steadying her pounding heart—when she received an unexpected visit from the other Royal Candidates.

Emilia: "…"

Fixing their gazes on Emilia, who stood in the middle of the antechamber, were two girls whose impressions could not have been more different, yet who were both radiantly self-possessed.

One was a girl with pale-violet hair wrapped in a fluffy, warm-looking white outfit; the other, a girl whose orange hair was adorned with jewels, dressed in a luxurious crimson gown as red as blood.

Though they had yet to formally give their names, their earlier remarks as they looked upon the startled Emilia made it plain: these two were also Royal Candidates, the same as Emilia—

Puck: "Never thought we'd get two at once—color me surprised. Add in that dignified girl from yesterday, and that makes all the candidates we know about now, yeah?"

In stark contrast to Emilia turning stiff as a board, Puck inside the crystal at her breast was carefree.

Even so, prompted by Puck, Emilia nodded inwardly at once. "You're right."

Yesterday, during her stroll through the capital—she had gotten lost along the way, but—she had met Crusch Karsten, who was likewise one of the Royal Candidates.

At present there were four Royal Candidates found within the kingdom, Emilia among them. Which meant Emilia had now faced every candidate currently known.

She was not ready for it, but that was a little moving in its way.

Frederica: "If I may be so bold, ladies, just a moment of your time."

Stepping in for Emilia, who was still reeling from the unexpected encounter, was Frederica.

Tall and willowy, she straightened her back and, with graceful poise, took her place at Emilia's side. With emerald eyes she met the intruding candidates' gazes.

Frederica: "This antechamber was prepared for Lady Emilia here. To force your way into her room without so much as prior notice—what are we to make of that?"

Anastasia: "Oh my, ya got me there."

Priscilla: "And is an attendant maid, of all people, planning to address me as an equal here?"

Frederica: "I have no intention of pleading equality of station on the question of etiquette. I simply believe that those gifted with excellence of ability and rank ought to conduct themselves with the dignity that befits it."

Even Emilia, who was poor at reading between the lines, grasped that Frederica's answer to the two candidates was unfailingly courteous yet yielded not a single step.

And Emilia understood as well that this strength was something Frederica brought forth for Emilia's sake.

Therefore, if they took grave offense at Frederica's words, Emilia would have to stand in the breach and take it on herself—

Or so she resolved inwardly, but—

Priscilla: "Hmph. You are a maid with an impudent tongue. And yet, that you did not avert your eyes and lodged your protest for your mistress's sake is not bad. I shall forgive you for that spirit."

Anastasia: "Goodness, ain't the princess roundabout with her words. Me, I'll just say it plain: what the maid said hit home. We did get a li'l ahead of ourselves."

Priscilla: "Vixen."

Anastasia: “What? Glare all ya like, ya won’t get a single coin outta me.”

In an instant, the two girls stopped snapping at Frederica and began glaring at each other instead.

Relieved that Frederica was not being chastised, Emilia still very much wanted to avoid having either of them make a scene here, so she hurriedly interposed herself.

Emilia: “Um—wait, you two. Please don’t fight.”

Anastasia: “Fightin’? This ain’t even close to a fight. Right?”

Priscilla: “Indeed. If one would cross blades of words with me, one must be of fitting stature. A half-devil and a foreign vixen do not suffice.”

Emilia: “…”

Called a half-devil so baldly, Emilia’s throat tightened slightly.

Even Ferris, who had been surprised to learn Emilia’s origins yesterday, had not spoken that word aloud. It conveyed an even greater sense of rift between Emilia and others than “silver-haired half-elf.” It was a pain she had been on the verge of forgetting, living away from the forest among Roswaal’s people.

Anastasia: “I got my issues with how the princess said it too, but… what’s with yer reaction? Don’t tell me ya thought nobody’d ever say it to yer face?”

Emilia: “That’s not what I…”

Anastasia: “Had the crafty Margrave Mathers as yer backer, and with all the rumor-mongerin’ I was kinda expectin’ a certain sort of person… Feels like I got the rug pulled from under me.”

Narrowing her round, asagi-blue eyes, the girl in white turned a face that had already lost interest in Emilia.

That reaction stabbed Emilia’s heart worse than being called a half-devil.

So, on reflex, Emilia said, “Wait,” trying to make her turn back.

She had called out, but had not decided what to say.

Anastasia: “What? If ya got somethin’ to say, spit it out plain—”

Emilia: “—Your name!”

Anastasia: “…”

Emilia: “You still haven’t told me your names. Frederica’s… ah, I mean the girl next to her—you accepted what she said, didn’t you? Exchanging names is basic courtesy, right?”

She had blurted out the thought as it came, but Emilia felt like she had managed something not bad to say.

At her appeal, the girl in white blinked her round eyes and said:

Anastasia: “—Anastasia Hoshin. That’s my name.”

Then Anastasia turned to the other girl in the gown, who had been silently watching the exchange.

Anastasia: “Princess, how ’bout you at least givin’ yer name, too?”

Priscilla: “Are you about to preach that I ought to hold hands and match strides? Do you truly think your name and mine are of equal worth…?”

Anastasia: “If the princess ain’t gonna say it, I’ll just go ’n tell her myself. That fine by you?”

Priscilla: “Hah. You are a slippery merchant.”

Prodded by Anastasia’s lifted chin, the girl in the gown stepped forward.

Feeling heat even from the pressure of the confidence that poured off her, Emilia nearly shrank back.

But she bit that feeling down—she could not afford to lose—and raised her face.

Priscilla: “I am Priscilla Barielle, and without error I shall be Lugunica’s next queen.”

Emilia: “…The Royal Selection hasn’t even started yet.”

Priscilla: “To take time and have candidates compete is a foolish spectacle. Which among us is fit for the throne ought to be known at a glance. People will always insist on inserting roundabout, needless rites to decide who stands at the summit. I cannot comprehend such common thinking.”

Her manner—Priscilla, as she named herself—looked less exasperated than downright weary. As if she had experienced the same tiresomeness elsewhere, not only in the Royal Selection.

Emilia: “Have you been doing the same sort of thing somewhere else, too?”

Priscilla: “—You seem to mistake me for a child who expects any question to be answered if she but asks. Do you also forget what prompted the vixen and me to give our names in the first place?”

Emilia: “Ah—”

Priscilla: “You demand courtesy of others while neglecting it yourself? That shameless brass face must have served you well in life as a half-devil.”

Priscilla censured Emilia, who had spoken her thoughts and then forgotten to return her own name in turn. Color rose in Emilia’s cheeks; she opened and closed her mouth.

She had to give her name back even one second sooner, but her mind had gone blank.

Seeing Emilia’s hesitation, Priscilla narrowed her crimson eyes still further, about to say something—

Puck: “—I would like you to stop bullying Lia any more than this.”

—when a small cat-shaped spirit floated up before Emilia, along with a faint light, and cut in.

Leaving the crystal at Emilia's breast, Puck drifted up to eye level, softly bobbing; his appearance made all three—Emilia, Priscilla, and Anastasia—open their eyes wide.

Soaking up their gazes, Puck casually washed his face with a paw.

Puck: "Staring that much is embarrassing. I mean, sure, I'm cute enough to sing and dance."

Emilia: "Puck! All of a sudden like that… you'll scare everyone reaaally badly!"

Puck: "That was exactly the point. The flow had gotten a bit bad, so I went, "Okay, time to boldly, forcibly change the wind right here," y'know."

Emilia did not know what to say to Puck's twitching ears and wink. She did understand that her own demeanor had worried him, and that he had deliberately made himself the bad guy to break the mood for her sake.

In fact, while staring at Puck, Priscilla and Anastasia each said—

Priscilla: "A spirit… no, not a mere spirit. A Great Spirit in the form of a small cat."

Anastasia: "I heard there're all kinds of spirits, but one that can manifest this solid and talk this clear ain't exactly common. Color me surprised."

Puck: "Sorry for the scare. It is just a father's heart, popping out when his daughter is in a pinch."

Anastasia: "Hmmm? Is that so?"

Puck struck a jokey pose, rubbing his chin, and Anastasia's interest sharpened. Drawing out that reaction, Puck laughed and flicked a glance Emilia's way.

Even Emilia caught the cue in that glance—time to pick up the thread.

So she leaned on Puck this once and began, “That’s right.”

Emilia: “Puck is my precious family. Sorry for him leaping out. Also—”

She laid a hand over her breast and looked straight at Anastasia and Priscilla. She drew breath into her belly so she would not lose to the gazes aimed back at her.

And—

Emilia: “Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Emilia—just Emilia. One of the candidates in the Royal Selection. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

She bobbed her head and at last managed the self-introduction she had failed to do earlier.

Arms crossed, Puck nodded and nodded; one step behind, Frederica patted her chest in relief. Anastasia brought a hand softly to her cheek and answered, “Well then, nice to meet ya.”

Emilia was relieved. But the other, Priscilla, snorted faintly.

Priscilla: “Even if you give your name with the help of your housecat, my estimation of you does not change. The one possessed of excellence is that spirit, not you.”

Puck: “Oh? But if I’m this super-duper strong and I am with Lia, does that not prove Lia is a pretty incredible girl too?”

Anastasia: “Whether a spirit stays with someone has less to do with strength and more to do with whether they like ’em… or so I heard somewhere, y’know?”

Puck: “Oof. Tough crowd.”

Puck’s long tail swayed as he winced at what each of them said.

To be fair, they were not wrong. It would not do for Emilia to stand behind amazing Puck and delude herself into thinking she was amazing too.

Emilia: “If I gave you the wrong impression, I apologize. Puck is my reaaally precious family, but I am the one who will challenge the Royal Selection. He is not the one competing.”

Puck: “Lia.”

Emilia: “It’s fine. Thank you, Puck. So, if you still cannot bring yourself to call me by name, Priscilla, I will accept that. But someday—”

Priscilla: ““Someday, that we may call each other by name,” is it? A half-devil wishing to make cozy with others is beneath contempt.”

Cutting Emilia off, Priscilla turned her back. She drew a fan from the valley of her ample bosom and hid her lips behind it.

Priscilla: “The mood is spoiled. I had not expected much to begin with… and indeed, I can only think that going through some grand rite called the Royal Selection is of no use to me.”

Anastasia: “My, how stubborn. With me and the Duchess Karsten both standin’ opposite ya, do ya won’t regret talkin’ big like that?”

Priscilla: “But of course not. —For the world is made to be convenient for me.”

Leaving those words behind, Priscilla walked out of the antechamber without looking back.

The closing door cut off the sight of her back, and Emilia had no words with which to call her to a halt.

Emilia: “…”

Once the door clicked shut, what Emilia felt was an overwhelming sense of isolation—and a sliver of relief. Relief that she would no longer have to face Priscilla in the same space. Which is to say, she had been overpowered by Priscilla.

Puck: “Do not let it get to you too much. That one—her self is very strong.”

Emilia: “But if I had done better, maybe we could have talked more.”

Anastasia: “Dunno ’bout that. I’m with the spirit on this one. That princess’s iron will ain’t the kind that softens easily.”

Emilia: “And you are…?”

Anastasia: “Ah, but that don’t mean I’m gonna go easy on ya, either. Whatever ya were born as, whatever hand of cards ya were dealt, yer the one who chose to play. So don’t expect any coddlin’.”

Told, in other words, not to rely on others’ kindness, Emilia found even Anastasia leaving her at a loss for words. And right then—there came a knock at the door that had only just closed.

Julius: “—Lady Anastasia, are you within?”

Anastasia: “Mm, that’s my man. Mind if I let him in?”

Tilting her head, she asked, and Emilia nodded. “Yes.”

Frederica, taking that, went to the door and admitted the new arrival to the antechamber.

He was a tall, slender knightly youth with beautiful yellow eyes.

Anastasia: “Julius, ya sure took yer time. Where’d ya stop off?”

Julius: ““Stopped off” is uncalled for. I was walking all over the castle looking for you when you were not in your room, Lady Anastasia.”

Anastasia: “That so? I told Mimi to leave ya a message, y’know.”

Julius: “…And it seems Mimi is not with you, either.”

At the youth’s faint wry smile—he was called Julius—Anastasia raised a hand to her brow.

They both seemed to be a little put out, but—

Julius: "I beg your pardon. I have not even given my name yet."

Emilia: "Ah, no, it's fine. It looks like you were in the middle of something important…"

Anastasia: "We can put it off—well, it ain't that casual a matter, but not introducin' ya'd be rude. Julius, this is the new Royal Candidate, Miss Emilia."

Julius: "—I see."

At Anastasia's introduction, Julius's long eyes narrowed. His expression tightened just a little; Emilia straightened her back without thinking. Sensing her tension, Julius added a brief apology.

Julius: "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Julius Juukulius, a knight of the Kingdom of Lugunica's Royal Guard, presently serving as Lady Anastasia Hoshin's first knight."

Emilia: "First knight…"

Julius: "Among the knights who serve a lord, it is the one who stands closest to that lord and has sworn to bear the sword for them."

At Julius's crisp answer, Emilia was duly impressed; Anastasia, for her part, seemed a tad proud.

By Emilia, Julius lifted his face and, with a serious look in his eyes, continued.

Julius: "Lady Emilia, might I have a moment?"

Emilia: "…Yes, what is it?"

Julius: "—Is that not a Great Spirit there with you?"

Puck: "Ah, me?"

Emilia, bracing for who-knew-what, was thrown for a loop by the question. When the one addressed—Puck—tapped his tail against himself, Julius bowed deeply.

Julius: “I must apologize again for the delay in my greetings. I did not expect to be so fortunate as to meet a Great Spirit of so high a station.”

Puck: “Oh, I see. I thought I was gettin’ that vibe—you have the sort of body that draws spirits, then.”

Julius: “I do. If this is disagreeable to you—”

Puck: “Nope, do not worry about it. I am head-over-heels for Lia, so even near you I just think, “Mm, smells nice in here,” is all.”

Julius: “You have my thanks for your consideration.”

Puck fluttered a paw; Julius was exceedingly abashed. Emilia did not follow what they meant, nor did Julius’s demeanor sit right with her.

Seeing Emilia’s profile, Anastasia called to her knight.

Anastasia: “Julius, she’s lookin’ left behind. Why don’t ya explain, huh?”

Julius: “Indeed. Lady Emilia, allow me to show you my buds.”

Emilia: “Buds—oh.”

Suddenly, pale lights rose around the smiling Julius—six distinct lights circling him in an affectionate orbit. Their irregular motions were those of beings with will; even without words, Emilia could feel that they were spirits.

Not as powerful as Puck; not as fleeting as Micro Spirits—Quasi Spirits.

Julius: “I style myself a Spirit Knight, a knight contracted with spirits. You, too, seem to be a practitioner of the Spirit Arts contracted with a Great Spirit, Lady Emilia. I ask that you remember me.”

Emilia: “Yes. It makes me reaaally happy to know there are others who are friends with spirits.”

Moved, Emilia clasped her hands before her chest at the self-styled Spirit Knight.

Emilia herself was a practitioner contracted with Puck, but much of her ability was self-taught, and she had never met another spirit user. There was one person who might just barely have counted, but they had been enemies—and in the end, he had been swallowed as he merged with a Great Spirit of flame, disappearing entirely.

So this was her first time meeting someone besides herself who truly communed with spirits.

Emilia: “I have things I have to do after this, so we cannot talk long now, but let’s talk again somewhere, Julius-san.”

Julius: “Please, call me Julius. You are a Royal Candidate, Lady Emilia; I am no more than a humble knight.”

Emilia: “Julius… All right. I will.”

Julius: “Thank you. As for your kind invitation—by all means, let us make the opportunity.”

Having politely corrected how she addressed him, Julius replied so, and Emilia smiled.

Since the moment Priscilla and Anastasia had entered the antechamber, it was the first time Emilia had felt even a moment’s rest. It lasted only until Anastasia cleared her throat with an “Ahem”.

Anastasia: “Okay, that’s enough. Julius, ya know she’s a Royal Candidate. Don’t cozy up too much. Don’t forget where ya stand, ’kay?”

Julius: “Forget? Never. I am Lady Anastasia’s first knight. In all situations, putting Lady Anastasia first is my duty.”

Anastasia: “Good. Then we’re fine.”

Anastasia shrugged at Julius's earnest answer and, stroking the fox stole around her neck, continued with a "Well then".

Anastasia: "We stayed longer than I thought. Emilia's got the next thing to get to, and I'm worried Mimi'll start tearin' up the castle, so how 'bout we take our leave."

Emilia: "Ah, you are going? Um, I could not even offer you anything…"

Anastasia: "Oh? So ya can worry 'bout that part proper-like. But we barged in on our own today, so don't ya fret. We did get our souvenir nice 'n proper."

Emilia: "Souvenir?"

Tilting her head, Emilia saw Anastasia wave with a vaguely mischievous smile. She took Julius along toward the door.

Anastasia: "See ya 'round, Miss Emilia."

Julius: "Please excuse us. —Until we next meet, may you be in good health."

The master casual, the knight solemn—leaving those farewells behind, the two departed the antechamber. After seeing them out, Frederica closed the door.

Emilia: "Haaah…"

And Emilia let out a very, very big sigh.

Puck: "Lia, I always tell you—if you sigh, happiness will run away."

Emilia: "…Mm, but you also always say you'll go catch the happiness that ran away and bring it back, right, Puck?"

Puck: "Oof—past me just stabbed me. That is a grievous wound."

Emilia: "Oh, stop saying such silly things."

Puck poked his own tummy and back with his long tail, clowning, and Emilia could not help but laugh. Letting Puck distract her, she looked at the closed door.

The two who had come—Priscilla and Anastasia—and the one she had met yesterday, Crusch—those were the ones who, like Emilia, would vie for Lugunica's throne.

Puck: "Each one of them looks like she will be no simple matter. But my daughter is the cutest. You should be confident; hold your head high."

Emilia: "Does cuteness have anything to do with whether you can become the monarch?"

Puck: "I would not say it does not, but if cuteness scores too highly as a criterion, that would make one uneasy about the selection process in its own way, so perhaps not."

Even though Puck had just said it himself, it did not feel very helpful as something to take confidence from. And Emilia could not quite bring herself to believe the talk of her being cute.

With anyone, what they felt upon seeing Emilia was fear, unease, and dread.

Frederica: "Lady Emilia, you handled those sudden visitors very well."

Emilia: "Ah, and you—thank you for staying with me, Frederica. I felt reaaally reassured."

Frederica: "No, forgive me. There were parts where I could not judge how far I ought to speak, and I fear I made you anxious in many respects."

Emilia: "No, it is fine. …I think that was the right way."

Shaking her head at Frederica's bow, Emilia thought Frederica's judgment had been correct.

Overawed by Priscilla and Anastasia, Emilia had barely been able to answer at all. That was her present standing, and simply the measure of the gap between them.

Feeling as if she had closed that gap by relying on Frederica's strength was a delusion.

Emilia: "It is no different whether I hide behind Puck or behind Frederica, after all."

Puck: "True enough. If you are going to hide behind one of us, though, you might fit better behind this girl than behind me."

Frederica: "Great Spirit, I am a little sensitive about being tall, you know."

Puck: "I think a svelte, model-like figure is great. And if I put my mind to it, I can be bigger than a cute, palm-sized kitty, so I shall not lose there."

Frederica: "To say I would compete against a Great Spirit—that would be dreadfully presumptuous."

Emilia: "Hee hee, you two…"

It felt like they had strayed from the main point, but thanks to Puck and Frederica's joking exchange, the tension that had been in the room seemed to have eased considerably.

Still, she could not let it all drain away—because Emilia had come to the castle for a purpose, and the main event of that purpose was just about to begin.

Emilia: "…Mm. I have to pull myself together."

Pressing a hand over her breast, Emilia firmed her resolve and murmured so.

8

—To cut to the conclusion, the resolve Emilia had steeled and the determination she had firmed up did not help.

It wasn't that she wound herself too tight and spun her wheels.

More plainly, she never even got the chance to voice that resolve or determination.

Roswaal: “Lady Emilia, you must be ti—ired after to—oday.”

Emilia: “Ah, Roswaal…”

Addressed from behind, Emilia turned to face Roswaal.

They were at the Royal Guest House—a residence opened for nobles visiting the capital from various regions—and Emilia was on its balcony, gazing out at the city at night.

Holding down her silver hair as the tepid breeze stirred it, Emilia was awash in a vague, hard-to-name feeling; she couldn’t bear to look at Roswaal’s face and dropped her gaze. At this, Roswaal lifted a brow with an “Oh?”

Roswaal: “What’s the ma—atter? This doesn’t look quite like ti—ired to me.”

Emilia: “…I’m sorry. I couldn’t do anything right at all.”

Roswaal: “You mean your statement of participation in the Royal Se—lection? As I said then and the—ere as well, to—oday’s rite was purely a formality. As per the Dragon History Stone’s inscription, once the fifth priestess—once the last one is found, the Royal Selection will truly begin. Tha—at will be the real thing.”

Emilia: “…”

Roswaal: “Or is it your exchange with the other candidates who visited your antechamber that lingers on your mi—ind?”

Emilia: “…I think… it’s both.”

Winking one eye, Roswaal fixed the yellow one of his mismatched eyes on Emilia. Feeling as if that eye saw right through everything, Emilia resigned herself.

—Emilia’s declaration of participation in the Royal Selection had ended smoothly, quietly, without incident.

After receiving the visit from Priscilla and Anastasia in the antechamber, Emilia had been summoned to a large conference room in the castle, asked there to make the Dragon Stone in her insignia shine, and she did so. Thus her qualification to participate in the Royal Selection—that she was a Dragon Priestess—was recognized… and that was all.

No more and no less; Emilia was given no chance to speak.

She did not know if, as Roswaal said, that was because it was purely a formality—but she felt it plainly: the indifference to, and avoidance of, Emilia as an individual by those who were there.

Roswaal: "My apologies. If you were fired up to speak, I should have told you in advance tha—at you likely would not get the chance to share your resolve to—oday."

Emilia: "…You're right. If you knew, I might have liked you to tell me."

Roswaal: "It was not abs—solutely certain. Had either Lord Miklotov or Lord Bordeaux attended—both were absent to—oday—you might have had the chance to speak your mind."

Emilia: "Really? That's…"

She wanted to go on with "a shame," but she hesitated.

It had been a long time, yet being subjected to that vortex of indifference brought it back.

—What those around her had thought of her and how they had treated her back when she lived in the forest with Puck. And that it was a cold wind Emilia, who would now challenge the Royal Selection, would have to endure constantly from here on.

Roswaal: "Leaving the conference room aside—how were the other candidates? I hear you met Crusch Karsten yesterday as we—ell."

Emilia: "All three of them were… how should I put it… they felt reaaally strong."

Roswaal: “Strong?”

Emilia: “Ah—by “strong” I don’t mean in the sense of fighting. I mean in heart, as people—they felt strong to me. I have to work hard, too.”

Clasping her hands before her chest, Emilia tried to psyche herself up.

Leaning on the balcony rail, Roswaal peered into her face and—

Roswaal: “And? Do you think you can defeat the—em?”

Emilia: “…”

The question was so guilelessly direct that Emilia blinked wide.

To win, to lose—she would now have to vie in just such contests with Crusch, with Priscilla, with Anastasia, and with the as-yet unmet one more.

And when that unavoidable winning and losing came to the test—could Emilia, against them—

Emilia: “I have to win.”

Roswaal: “Tha—at is closer to zeal… or rather, to a wish. “I want to win. I want to obtain it. I want to be happy.” Those are wishes, not winning cha—ances.”

Emilia: “Winning chances…”

Roswaal: ““I have this; therefore I can excel over the others.” Piling up and bundling those winning chances—that is the iron rule for bringing victory clo—oser.”

At his explanation, Emilia mouthed “winning chances” once more.

The difference in those winning chances was showing itself in how she and they stood and comported themselves.

From here on Emilia would have to study a great deal and spend her days filling what she lacked; if she stacked that up, would it become winning chances?

Even as they, in the same span of time as Emilia, would be stacking up different chances of their own.

Roswaal: “The—ere is also another way to earn those chances in large amou—ounts.”

Emilia: “Eh, there’s a way like that?”

Roswaal: “Yes. A way you can use only once—but if it works, the effect is la—arge.”

Emilia: “A-Amazing… Roswaal, you really do know everything.”

The anxiety and worry filling her chest were all at once drawn toward Roswaal’s words.

A way for Emilia, who could find no winning chances at all right now, to close in on the other candidates all at once. And that was—

Roswaal: “In a word—to have a good kni—ight.”

Emilia: “…A knight?”

Roswaal: “Yes. Well, it need not be a knight strictly speaking, but in a struggle over something as big as a kingdom, having powerful allies is an essential conditi—ion.”

Emilia: “…”

Roswaal: “Among them, a knight’s role is especially large. One who stands nearest the lord, swears loyalty, and, at times, does not hesitate to lay down their very life—an office that demands absolute tru—ust.”

Raising his hand toward the night sky, Roswaal spoke with a theatrical air. Emilia paid the theatricality no mind; her amethyst eyes blinked as she nodded in understanding.

To become the monarch at the kingdom’s summit meant being trusted by all one's people. And the one who knew best what kind of person that monarch was would be the one closest at hand.

For Emilia as she was now, that meant Puck. How Puck behaved and how great he was would often connect directly to Emilia's reputation.

Surely it would be the same with a knight—so thought Emilia, and then it occurred to her.

Emilia: "Could that be what a "first knight" is?"

Roswaal: "You've heard of it. Ye—es, just so. If you spoke with the other candidates yesterday and to—oday, their knights should have been at their si—ides."

Emilia: "They were. Ferris was with Crusch, Julius was with Anastasia… Priscilla came alone, so I didn't see anyone for her."

What Ferris and Julius had in common was that they trusted and cherished their lords—Crusch and Anastasia—very much. The strength of those bonds was something even Emilia, meeting them for the first time, could feel—those two would never, no matter what happened, betray their lords.

And Emilia felt as well that Crusch and Anastasia each had solid reasons—reassuring qualities—by which their knights could offer them such loyalty.

Emilia: "…But it's strange."

It was something Emilia had just been called on—and made to realize—by Priscilla that very day.

Even if she was contracted with Puck, a great spirit, that did not make Emilia herself a great person. She must not hide behind Puck and delude herself into thinking she had become eminent.

And yet, though a first knight should be something similar, neither Crusch nor Anastasia seemed to be hiding behind Ferris or Julius.

Roswaal: "That's because it is a relation of mu—utual support."

Emilia: “A relationship… of mutual support?”

Roswaal: “Not leaning on them too much, not seeming to lean on them too much, but supporting each other properly—becoming aids to each other’s progress. Somet—hing like that.”

It was odd phrasing—like hearsay—even though he himself was the one saying it; Emilia turned Roswaal’s words over and over in her mind.

They were the very best expression of the relationship she had seen between the candidates and their first knights.

Emilia: “Then I…”

If she had a first knight, could she catch up to them? She was about to think that too simply when Emilia stopped short.

It probably wasn’t that simple. First off, if it were anyone and anytime, that relationship would already exist between Emilia and Puck.

Emilia: “…Then, if Puck became my first knight, would that be good?”

Roswaal: “A Great Spirit as the first kni—ight would be, well, striking—but how much it would contribute to the Royal Selection is questiona—able.”

Emilia: “I see… that’s a shame.”

Even without Roswaal saying so, simply announcing “Puck is my first knight” would do nothing to change people’s impressions of Emilia, and above all, it would do nothing for Emilia’s own state of mind—so it would be no good.

What was needed was a relationship of mutual support. It was not enough that the first knight be a great person; Emilia herself had to strive to stand alongside that great person, or it would be meaningless.

Roswaal: “I’m gla—ad you understand.”

As if seeing right through her inner struggle, Roswaal smiled.

Roswaal: “No need to rush; there is still ti—ime before the Selection begins. You can take appropriate time choosing a knight. Depending on that—”

Emilia: “Ah—what about Reinhard? The knight I met yesterday—could we ask him?”

Roswaal: “—!”

Emilia: “Huh? What’s wrong, Roswaal? Your face just got suuuper bitter…”

Roswaal: “No, I was merely taken aback by an unexpected proposal. I see—the “Sword Saint,” Reinhard van Astrea…”

Blurting out Reinhard’s name drew from Roswaal a reaction Emilia had never seen from him before; she wondered if she’d said something wrong.

Thinking it over calmly, Reinhard was said to be the strongest in the world, and yesterday he had been patrolling the capital—he might be in a very busy position. To suddenly ask such a person to become her knight might well have been thoughtless.

Emilia: “It’s just… he seemed reaaally reliable.”

Roswaal: “You’re not wrong the—ere. In terms of strength, Knight Reinhard is undeniably the most reliable of presences… Even if we cannot make him an ally, he is one we would not want to make an ene—emy.”

Emilia: “—? “Even if not an ally”—isn’t that backwards?”

Roswaal: “Ha—ha—ha, perhaps so. I—it's just that where he sets his standard for things is a little ha—ard for others to gra—asp.”

With a rare bitter smile, Roswaal averted his eyes; it seemed he was not pleased with the idea of Reinhard becoming Emilia’s knight.

Perhaps the two did not get along very well.

If so, whether or not she would ask Reinhard to be her first knight, Emilia wanted them to get along.

Emilia: “They’re both my benefactors, after all.”

Roswaal had shown Emilia hope when she’d been alone with Puck in the Elior Forest; Reinhard had helped her when she was in trouble in the capital. The scale of the deeds differed, but both were dear benefactors to Emilia.

Royal Selection or no, it was better if they got along.

Roswaal: “There’s no need to hurry; let’s make our preparations step by ste—ep. Really, do not wo—orry. If Lady Emilia strives in earnest, you will without fail obtain what you nee—ed.”

Emilia: “—Mm. Got it. Thank you, Roswaal.”

Wanting to reassure her, Roswaal spoke; Emilia lowered her chin quietly.

She felt impatience, even fretfulness. Holding all of it dear, Emilia had to move forward—for those who expected things of her, and for her friends in the forest.

Emilia: “Someday, I’ll have everything I need.”

Roswaal: “Yes, indeed. —Otherwise I would be in tro—ouble.”

In too small a voice for Emilia to truly hear; yet the taut line of Roswaal’s profile as he spoke seemed terribly striking.

9

Emilia: “Frederica, if you were to have a knight of your own, what kind of person would you want?”

Frederica: “Eh—me?”

Having finished setting up the bedchamber and just about to leave the room when Emilia stopped her, Frederica covered her mouth with a hand, surprised by the unexpected question.

Looking up at the taller woman, Emilia nodded a simple “Mm, yes,” and waited for Frederica’s answer to the question she had thrown out. Perhaps seeing the seriousness in Emilia’s manner, Frederica thought for a moment, then said:

Frederica: “If it were me, I would wish for a knight who is sincere and who spares no words.”

Emilia: “Sincere means earnest and kind, right? But what do you mean by “spares no words”?”

Frederica: “That he would not conceal or omit his own thoughts or what he wishes to convey to the other party, but would speak in a way one can truly understand. Merely being treated so, I believe, naturally lets a relationship of trust sprout between you and that person.”

Emilia: “Then the opposite sort of person would be…”

Frederica: “Quite impossible to get along with. Especially one who presses on brusquely with “understand without me saying it,” and even if you somehow struggle through, not a single word of praise… There is simply no way I could ever be friendly with such a person. Indeed. Not at all.”

As Frederica spoke, something seemed to bubble up in her, and her gaze grew stern; Emilia thought she seemed to have a particular someone in mind, but she could not tell who.

Be that as it may—

Frederica: “Lady Emilia, please do not worry yourself too much. I expect I will have very few opportunities to accompany you from here on, but you have my heartfelt support.”

Emilia: “…Mm. Thank you.”

Seeing Frederica out after her parting for-the-night greeting and deep bow, Emilia was left alone.

Just as she had said, once this trip to the Royal Capital was complete, Frederica was to go on to another mansion at Roswaal’s direction. During the Selection, Emilia and the rest would live at a mansion closer to the Royal Capital, and the sisters Ram and Rem would be in charge there.

Emilia had known Frederica since those first few days after leaving the Great Forest of Elior—when, due to a small mix-up, she had imposed on the mansion of Roswaal's kinswoman, Annerose. So the thought of being truly apart felt a little lonely.

Emilia: "But I mustn't mope. Everything starts from here."

Puck: "Yep, yep, that's the spirit, Lia."

Emilia: "—! Puck, you're still up, even this late?"

Staying behind in the bedchamber, stiffening her resolve, Emilia widened her eyes at Puck's voice from within the crystal.

Because Puck was a very powerful spirit, he consumed a great deal of mana simply by living normally, so he generally kept as quiet as he could and, as a rule, went to sleep early at night. That Puck was up late into the night truly startled Emilia.

Emilia: "If you stay up too late, tomorrow will be hard, you know? What a naughty boy."

Puck: "Well, it was a big day for you, so I'll stay up late at least today. Don't you have all sorts of gripes and things you want to say?"

Emilia: "Gripes…?"

Puck: "Didn't even cross your mind? That'd just mean you'll bottle it up, which isn't good for you. C'mon—if you've got something to say, go on and lay it on me."

Though he was inside the crystal, she could almost see Puck thumping his own chest.

At Puck's words, Emilia touched a finger to her lips with a "You're right," and thought a bit. If it was "gripes," she figured she would have to let out unpleasant things and worries.

Emilia: “But, when you say such things out loud too much, I feel like it calls in an ill wind instead, so I’d rather not.”

Puck: “Oh dear, is my counseling office going out of business already?”

Emilia: “I mean—you’re the one who taught me that too many sighs and too much griping make happiness run away.”

Puck: “Ah, so I’m the one who put my own counseling office out of business…”

Though he was inside the crystal, she could almost see Puck washing his face with a paw.

Even with Puck’s offhandedness and light tone, he could properly stir up the murky feelings in Emilia—truly quite a family.

In any case—

Emilia: “What do you think about that thing we were just talking about, Puck?”

Puck: “About Lia and knights and whatever? Let’s see—if someone shows up who wants to be Lia’s knight, first they’ll have to pass my strict screening.”

Emilia: “Screening—what kind of screening?”

Puck: “Since I’d be entrusting my precious Lia to them, I’ll screen whether they’re stronger than me, whether they can treasure Lia more than I do, and whether their fur is fluffier than mine.”

Emilia: “Those all sound hard to clear, don’t they?”

Puck: “That’s why it’s a strict, proper, rigorous screening.”

Puck answered without a hint of shame, but if she believed him wholesale, Emilia’s search for a knight certainly looked like it would be rough going.

However—

Emilia: “Do you think I’ll really be able to find a knight like the others—one with that kind of relationship?”

Puck: “Are you anxious, Lia?”

Emilia: “More than anxious… it’s like—I just can’t picture it at all.”

She had asked Roswaal whether Reinhard might be a candidate, but when it came to picturing Reinhard as her knight actually acting on her behalf, she could not imagine it.

Other knights like Ferris or Julius—she might be able to get along with them, but it was hard to conjure up the shape of her as the mistress and them as the knight. To begin with, she had only just gotten used to being looked after by Frederica.

In the first place, Emilia was not at all familiar with having someone serve her.

Emilia: “But a knight—no, my knight is supposed to be a relationship of mutual support, so it’s surely different.”

Puck: “Heh heh, even if you don’t really get it yet, your head is full of knights, huh, Lia?”

Emilia: “Um… is that strange?”

Puck: “Nope, I think it’s adorable. What sort of child would make a good knight, I wonder? I already told you my criteria—but what are yours, Lia?”

Emilia: “My criteria? Let me think…”

Prompted by Puck, Emilia seriously tried to give hazy shape to her ideal knight—what sort of person would be reassuring, someone she could become close to.

There were conditions like strength and rank, like what Puck and Roswaal sought in a knight, but the first thing Emilia thought was—

Emilia: “…Someone who won’t be afraid of me.”

Puck: "…"

Emilia: "And I'd want them to get along with Puck, and I'd be happy if they could also hit it off with everyone in Roswaal's mansion. I haven't really talked to her much yet, but Beatrice, who hides in the mansion—she's like your little sister, right? I think someone who could chat easily with Beatrice, too, would be good."

Puck: "My my, once you started, they came out one after another. Could Lia be a bit greedy?"

Emilia: "Hmph, it's fine—I'm going to say every single thing that comes to mind right now."

Pouting at Puck's teasing, Emilia began counting her wishes off on her fingers.

Still imagining a knight whose face and name and very existence she did not yet know.

Emilia: "I think someone who laughs a lot would be nice. Also, someone who finds everything tasty. I have to work hard at my studies, too, so if they aren't lazy but a hard worker, it'll feel like we can work hard together. And also, reaaally fast on their feet…"

Puck: "I like that "fast on their feet" made the list."

As the things she counted on her fingers grew, Emilia surprised herself.

Today she hadn't managed anything right at all; she'd been disheartened by the gap between herself and the other candidates she had just met—and yet here she was, able to laugh like this and look forward to tomorrow.

Partly, that was thanks to Puck. But not only that. There was also the support of the people who stood with Emilia—Roswaal and Frederica.

And even that was not all.

Emilia: "My knight is amazing."

Just thinking like this about a knight she had never met made her heart feel so much brighter.

Without fretting that looking forward to “someday” was a luxury for her, Emilia kept excitedly talking about the topic until Puck, staying up late, let out a huge yawn.

—Afterward, shortly before the Selection actually began, Emilia, having returned once more to the Royal Capital, would meet a black-haired boy and be tossed about by countless happenings.

But that boy laughed a lot, found everything tasty, was a hard worker, could get along with Beatrice and everyone at the mansion, was friendly with Puck, and—

And he was a strange, lively child who wasn’t afraid of Emilia.

END

Once Upon a Time in Astrea (CA)

1

???: “—Pant wetter.”

With that, feeling as if he had heard a voice disparaging him, a tremor ran through the shoulders of Heinkel Astrea.

His eyes downcast, he looked over the state of his surroundings in the dressing room. Those perceiving him, and secretly gossiping about him— were none. Nobody was doing anything like talking behind his back.

That was only natural. The only ones present here were those whose qualification to enroll in the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Guard had been recognized; true Knights who had resolved themselves to not tarnish that honor.

In that case, whose disparaging voice had that been? —Nobody met those conditions, save for himself.

???: “Heinkel, we’re all headed to the Silver Shield after this, got any plans?”

Heinkel: “Huh? Ah, ahh, sorry. Tonight doesn’t work for me. The shopkeep… nevermind, it’s nothing.”

Invited by a colleague after having finished training, Heinkel forced a smile and vaguely ended the conversation. The colleague gave a brief response of “I see” before leaving the dressing room with his comrades.

Watching those backs depart, Heinkel let out a deep sigh.

Heinkel: “The Silver Shield… how could I possibly show my face before Conwood-san?”

That which appeared in his mind was the face of the shopkeeper of the Silver Shield, a bar of preference for those in the Guard— he was a person with whom the Astrea Family was long acquainted, and thus someone Heinkel had known since the days of his childhood.

With his current frame of mind, he did not want to encounter such a person, and he would not know what to say. Hence, despite not having anything to do, Heinkel declined his colleague's invitation, and began to head home by his lonesome.

As he avoided the gazes of others and left the training ground, the neighborhood had already grown quite dark.

The training ground of the Guard, adjacent to the Royal Castle Lugunica, was a place where Knights without any other duties which needed attending would gather every day to strengthen their bodies and mind by swinging their swords. Heinkel was no exception. Today, he had swung his sword to the point that the blisters on his hands had burst, and had lost so much sweat that his body felt light.

Through all of that accumulated effort, all of that sweat, he would mold his mind and body into those of a Knight. And once his body and mind had reached a sufficient state, the long-awaited moment would arrive— or it should have.

Heinkel: "…That would only be if I had the right."

Looking down at the blood-stained bandage wrapped around his palm, Heinkel muttered in a hoarse voice.

Feeling the sword inscribed "Astrea" weighing heavily on his waist, Heinkel's steps proceeded terribly slowly on his way back home. There was no mistaking that the white moon aloft in the night sky also found Heinkel's pace to be irritating.

Those steps of his, as if a snail's crawl, suddenly came to a screeching halt. —It was not that his weak-minded nature had reached its pinnacle. The cause was a peculiar voice that struck upon Heinkel's eardrums.

???: “At~, last~”

With a faint liveliness to it, it sounded like a woman’s breathing.

On a street quite deserted in the night, Heinkel turned his head at the strangely enthusiastic voice of a woman, widening his blue eyes in surprise. —After all, the woman was on top of a wall.

On the same street as Heinkel, she was taking dangerous steps atop a wall that was not very wide.

Heinkel: “Be caref-!”

Woman: “Eh? Au-!”

The moment he raised his voice, Heinkel flustered to shut his own mouth. But, it was too late. Her attention captured by Heinkel’s voice, the woman missed her next step in a grand spectacle.

Seeing the woman’s body tilting towards the other side of the wall, Heinkel momentarily forgot about his responsibility and regret, and immediately placed his foot on the wall, forcibly pulling the woman into an embrace as she was about to fall.

And then—

Heinkel: “…”

Catching a glimpse of golden hair gleaming in the moonlight, and wide, circular blue eyes up close, he was captivated by their beauty, and his breath involuntarily caught.

As a result—

Heinkel: “Shi—!”

He ought to have held his ground atop the wall, but the excess momentum from the woman carried over as he held onto her, and they both fell down the other side. —The other side of the wall, into the stream running through the Noble District, an inappropriate splash resounding through the silence of night.

—That was the first meeting between Heinkel Astrea, who had just formally become a Knight, and Louanna Hartley, his future wife.

2

Woman: “I’m truly sorry about all this~.”

Heinkel: “No, it was because of my inadequacy. To fall down from such a height, it’s shameful.”

Woman: “You aren’t shameful or anything of the sort~. You’re spoolio~!”

Heinkel: “Sp-Spoolio?”

Woman: “It means “super duper coolio”~!”

At the vigor of the woman, who clenched her fists as she emphasised that, Heinkel’s eyes widened, his appearance resembling a drenched rat.

The time was right after he had jumped out to save the woman as she was about to fall from the wall, and had messed it up. He had just barely managed to fall into the stream first, and thus had successfully lifted the woman to prevent her from breaching the water’s surface, but that conduct was far too shameful to be appraised as “spoolio” or anything of the sort.

Sitting on a stone curb by the side of the stream, Heinkel wrung out his tunic whilst thinking such things. And as Heinkel reflected on himself in such a manner, the woman dried his head with her own hand towel,

Woman: “Even though it was all because of my carelessness, you went ahead and got so soaked in my place…”

Heinkel: “Don’t worry about that. To be honest, it could’ve ended with neither of us getting soaked. It was me who messed that up, so me getting soaked was just my punishment for that.”

Woman: “—? Punishment is meant to be retribution for sins, y’know? You helped me out just now, so what could be the sin in that? This sort of thing is a misunderstanding on the part of the one delivering the punishment. A mistake of someone in the heavens… for example, the Divine Dragon-sama or something like that~.”

Heinkel: “That’s way too presumptuous, so I’d rather conclude that it’s my mistake…”

The hastiness of her words seemed as if it could lead to a direct confrontation with the Divine Dragon if left unchecked, prompting Heinkel to faintly strain a smile. Overwhelmed by the novel exchange with the woman, he realized he had forgotten to ask the things he ought to have asked.

Heinkel: “Let’s put off the matter of me being drenched for now. More importantly, there’s something I want to ask you.”

Woman: “Yes? Yes. —Ah! Nevermind~, I understand even if you don’t say it~.”

Heinkel: “Huh?”

Woman: “—I’m Louanna Hartley~.”

Placing a hand over her chest, the woman declared so with a somewhat confident expression. Understanding that to be the woman’s— Louanna’s name, Heinkel scratched his red hair.

Likely, she had intended to predict Heinkel’s question in her own way.

Heinkel: “Although, the thing I wanted to ask was the reason why you were up on that wall.”

Louanna: “…Ah~! I-Is that so? Of course. That makes sense. Actually that might’ve just been the most natural thing to ask, um, y’know. This is quite embarrassing.”

Heinkel: “No! I was also thinking of asking you for your name! After all, it would be inconvenient to talk to you without knowing your name!”

As he spoke, he felt pathetic, wondering if he could not have perhaps come up with a better cover, but at Heinkel's words, Louanna blinked her wide eyes, and then smiled.

Heinkel thought that smile would have surely perceived him as looking ridiculous, but.

Louanna: "You're quite the clumsy person. It's spoolio."

Heinkel: "…Those two things don't exactly go together, right?"

Louanna: "No, they do go together~. In society, there's also weirdos who like spicy food, isn't that so? In truth, it's sweet things that go together with yummy, right? But, for those people, spicy things are what go together with yummy. It's the same thing as that~."

Heinkel: "…I don't think it's that rare for someone to like spicy food."

Louanna: "Don't tell me, are you also someone who prefers spicy food~?."

Heinkel: "Nah, I wouldn't go that far. I prefer sweet things."

The exchange and dialogue being far too childish, even he himself was astounded. Or rather, he had allowed Louanna to seize far too much initiative. Perhaps it was so that Louanna did not wish to disclose her reason for being atop the wall to Heinkel. Normally, people did not walk on top of walls. That was, so long as this seemingly harmless Louanna was not involved with some sort of crime.

In that case, there was no way that Heinkel, being a Knight, could shut his eyes to it for the time being—

Louanna: "Ah, this won't do~. The reason why I was on the wall, right? I haven't answered that yet."

Heinkel: "Will you tell me?! That's… a relief."

Louanna: "Yes, I'll help out~… To tell you the truth, I'm being chased by someone."

He had thought it might be something she wished to hide, but Louanna immediately spoke out.

But, at her soft spoken explanation, Heinkel spoke “What?” as his cheeks tensed.

So it was a matter of being pursued by someone, and climbing on top of the wall in order to get away? In that case, it was a rather reckless action, but since there was context behind that recklessness, he could understand it.

As he thought so, Heinkel looked over Louanna before him.

Likely, she was either the same age as Heinkel, or one to two years older. Her beautiful hair, akin to golden threads of the finest craftsmanship, stretched down to her waist, and her blue eyes, shimmering as if inlaid with jewels, left quite the impression. Her facial features were soft and lovely, and there was a certain ephemeral nature to her such that it seemed like her white skin would melt into the night.

Only, contrary to her shapely appearance, the clothes she wore was a common civilian garb.

Considering that they were in the Noble District, there was a slight yet undeniable feeling of out-of-placeness.

Perhaps he could presume her to be the mistress of some noble, but —

Louanna: “I probably saw something that I wasn’t supposed to see. On the street, I saw a person being attacked~.”

Heinkel: “Wait, isn’t that an extremely important detail!”

Louanna: “Indeed~. A gentleman had collapsed, and the person who caused it looked in my direction, then, I ran as fast as I could to get away… I’ll reenact it now~.”

Heinkel: “You don’t need to do that. Please don’t lay on the ground. I already did my best to ensure you didn’t fall in the water.”

His unfounded suspicion completely demolished, Heinkel pulled Louanna upright as she attempted to lie down on the ground.

The matter was far removed from the likes of a quarrel between man and woman, and rapidly became tinged with crime. While that began to capture his attention, on the other hand, considering Louanna's conduct until this point, he also thought this.

Heinkel: "…By the way, how much of that story are you certain about?"

Louanna: "Of course, everything from start to finish~. Eh~, are you perhaps doubting me?"

Heinkel: "I don't think you have any ill intentions, but even with the best of intentions, it's possible to mistake things…"

Louanna: "Mm, I suppose so~. If you want to be that thorough, I can bring you directly to the… I'm sorry. I've realized that doing so would be dangerous so it's best if we don't."

Heinkel: "It's remarkable that you realized that on your own, I think. Yeah, remarkable."

He gave earnest praise to her self-restraint as she desisted right before getting too impulsive.

That being said, he could not just blindly accept Louanna's comments without any evidence.

At present, the only thing that could be said for certain was that Louanna was acting suspiciously on top of a wall in the Noble District in the middle of the night.

Hence, Heinkel was greatly troubled, and once he drained his woes, he said "Understood",

Heinkel: "We're in the same dragon carriage here. Let's go check to see if your story's true."

Louanna: "Eh~. But, you just said that it was remarkable that I realized it was dangerous by myself…"

Heinkel: “I wouldn’t let you go by yourself, but I’m, y’know, see?”

As he spoke, Heinkel tapped the Knight’s sword on his waist.

As for how persuasive that was, he had more doubts than anybody else, but it was far too deceitful.

However, upon seeing that, Louanna hummed “Mm-hmm”, and after humming a few more “Mm-Mm”’s,

Louanna: “Understood~, let’s do that. I was also worried about the person who got attacked.”

Heinkel: “Yeah, we’ve gotta check on him. Could you lead the way?”

Louanna: “Of course~. Let’s get going, Spoolio-san~!”

Heinkel: “…Spoolio’s something that you just said on your own, it’s not my name.”

Louanna: “Huh~, was that so? In that case, umm, I’m sorry. Would it be alright if I asked your name one more time?”

Heinkel: “Rather than one more time, I haven’t even given it to begin with. I’m… Heinkel.”

To the hurried Louanna, Heinkel hesitated to give his family name, and ended up not saying it. It was not because the other person was Louanna. No matter who the other person was, he simply did not want to say it.

Unaware as to his inner feelings, Louanna toyed with the name “Heinkel, Heinkel…” on her tongue over and over,

Louanna: “It’s a spoolio name~, Heinkel-san~.”

Faced with her smile, Heinkel could not bring himself to tell her that the name was not one that overlapped with the nuances of “super duper coolio”.

The place Louanna guided him to was a street that could be reached even without climbing over the wall.

It was part of the Noble District, but a block that did not get much pedestrian traffic. The row of houses was mostly composed of villas belonging to individuals with their own domains, and so when the owners were not staying only their custodians would be living on the premises. Hence, it was often used by women in positions or vocations that did not wish to draw attention, and was often referred to as the “Rendezvous Avenue”.

When it came to walking on that road in the middle of the night, Louanna’s objective was also—

Louanna: “So, I work at a flower shop in the Commercial District, but on my way back after delivering a flower order, I completely lost my bearings and ended up in this neighborhood.”

Heinkel: “Flower girl…”

Louanna: “Yes~, I sell flowers. Do you like flowers?”

Heinkel: “Eh, hmm. Relatively, I do like them, I guess?”

For a moment, Heinkel harbored a vulgar impression regarding the term “flower girl”, but the pure gaze of Louanna that followed pained his chest, and he responded.

In truth, he had never thought about whether he liked or disliked flowers. Only, Heinkel’s mother had a hobby of growing flowers, so flowers had been familiar to him ever since he was born. In that sense, it was natural to have flowers around as a decoration in daily life for Heinkel.

Louanna: “How spunderful~.”

Heinkel: “…Super duper wonderful?”

Louanna: “Yes~. As expected, you’re quick to catch on, Heinkel-san~.”

They did not know each other well enough for her to have such expectations of him, but Heinkel had correctly guessed what spunderful meant, so anything he said from here would be a futile resistance.

Regardless, it seemed like the had finally arrived at the street in question, but—

Heinkel: "—There's nothing."

On the street where Louanna had testified to somebody having been attacked, there was nothing.

Laying eyes upon that, Heinkel frowned, and beside him, Louanna panicked. She jogged up towards the street, and as she waved her arms and legs around,

Louanna: "This is it~, this is where it happened~. There's no doubt it was here, where a gentleman whose name I don't know, was attacked with a sharp blade by a gentleman or a lady whose face I didn't see."

Heinkel: "The assaultee was a man, and you don't know if the assailant was a man or a woman?"

Louanna: "Yes. The attack also happened in an instant, and there was no big scuffle, rather it was a schwabahhhh and a zhabaawam like the wind~! "

Louanna used large gestures to accompany her explanations, but for the time being it seemed like there was no doubt it all happened in an instant. Only, based on her way of speaking and her lifelike expressions, Heinkel did not think that she was speaking without giving it much thought.

That being the case, he contemplated the possibilities of her having mistaken what she had seen, or having gotten the street in question mixed up. Thinking that there might have also been some other possibilities, Heinkel surveyed the surroundings, and realized something.

Heinkel: "…No matter how you look at this, isn't this street just way too clean?"

There was routine cleaning to maintain the scenery of the Noble District, but on a street like this that saw little pedestrian traffic, it was difficult to imagine that so much effort had but put into the cleaning such that not even a single pebble was lying anywhere around.

That was to say, there was a certain credibility to Louanna's testimony.

Heinkel: "—Louanna-san."

Louanna: "Please wait, Heinkel-san~. At this rate, I think you'll end up seeing me as a liar. But you'd be wrong. The gentleman had collapsed over here… I'll reenact it now~."

Heinkel: "You don't need to do that. Please don't lay on the ground. I believe you."

Louanna: "Really~?!"

Pulling Louanna upright as she was about to lay down on the ground, Heinkel gave her a nod. Then, turning his back on the eerily tidy street, he tugged on her arm.

Heinkel: "I'll escort you back to your home tonight. For further details, you can report them to the Guard tomorrow."

Louanna: "The Guard… but, would they really listen to me?"

Heinkel: "They shouldn't flat out refuse you. Plus, I'll put in a good word for you."

Giving that response to the uneasy Louanna, in his mind Heinkel asked him "Really?".

Could he really make it so the Guard would not disregard her? Was it not possible that Heinkel's good word would end up backfiring, causing the credibility of Louanna's testimony to be lowered?

How much faith could be placed in the words of Heinkel Astrea?

Louanna: "Thank goodness…"

Heinkel: “Eh?”

Louanna: “I can rest easy knowing that Heinkel-san will be accompanying me. What a relief~.”

Heinkel: “—. Let’s get going.”

As she placed her hand over her chest in an exaggerated gesture of relief, he could not bear to look Louanna in the face as she said that.

She was unaware of Heinkel’s identity. Therefore, he knew that those words were not spoken out of any overabundant consideration or flattery. And knowing that, he could not bear it in the slightest.

If Louanna were to hear some of the rumors about Heinkel, there was no doubt that she would immediately realize that the sense of security she felt was nothing more than a papier mâché.

—When they arrived at Louanna’s home, it was a regular housing complex located within the Commoner District.

The ground floor was a kitchen for communal use, and the floors above were comprised of rooms where the residents lived; it was not anything that particularly stood out for a dwelling in the Royal Capital.

Only, Louanna’s room stood out so much that anybody outside would be able to guess her room on their first try.

Heinkel: “Um, is your room the one with all those flowers decorating the windowsill, Louanna?”

Louanna: “Waah, amazing~. How did you know?”

Heinkel: “…Just a hunch.”

Louanna: “A hunch~. Spamazing~.”

Among the row of rather plain stone-built residences, being able to guess the room covered with flowers that asserted themselves vividly did not seem like something worthy of being treated as "super duper amazing".

Nevertheless, it was decorated with enough flowers to be sold, so it seemed like it was true that she was an actual flower girl who sold real flowers. —Feeling the slightest bit of relief, Heinkel cleared the vulgar thought from his mind.

At any rate, he had safely escorted Louanna back to her home—

Heinkel: "Well, this is it for me. I'll come pick you up tomorrow."

Louanna: "Eh~, aren't you going to come in?"

Heinkel: "…You ought to be a bit more cautious around people. I'm a man, and we just met."

Louanna: "But, Heinkel-san, you're dripping wet… besides, I have a good eye for people."

As Louanna firmly pounded her chest and declared so, Heinkel frowned.

On this instance, he wished to disregard the objective contradiction that such a thing depended entirely on Heinkel, but even if he disregarded it, that was a statement that lacked any grounds for believability. They had only known each other for a short time, but Louanna was exceedingly defenseless. If she had somehow managed to avoid going through any bitter experiences with her appearance and good nature, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Heinkel: "Firstly, it'd be rude to your lover, or your family."

Louanna: "Anyone who would make an unpleasant face to you after you helped me out, Heinkel-san, are not the kinds of people I would accept as a lover or as family~."

Heinkel: "—. Setting lovers aside, family's not something you get to choose."

Louanna: "I guess that's true~. But, I don't have either of them, so c'mon, don't be shy."

Louanna vigorously tugged on his sleeve, and after hesitating for a moment, Heinkel shook off her slender fingers. Shoving his palm towards the dissatisfied-looking Louanna as she let out an “Ahh~”, he stopped her.

Heinkel: “It’s all the more if you don’t have either of them. I understand your philosophy, so please also understand mine.”

Louanna: “…Understood. It would’ve been rude to Heinkel-san’s lover and family~.”

Heinkel: “While I do have a family, I don’t have a lover. I’m sorry.”

Trying to soothe Louanna as she averted her gaze in a sulkish manner, Heinkel more or less turned down her invitation.

Then, he more or less ushered the reluctant Louanna into the building, and ascertaining that she had safely returned to her room by the light in the window— Heinkel hid himself away in a corner of the street.

Heinkel: “I don’t exactly know how useful my sense of unease might be, but…”

If his sense of unease regarding the unnaturally clean street where Louanna had witnessed an attack was on the mark, there was more than enough possibility that Louanna was really being pursued by someone.

He did not mention anything due to not wanting to frighten her, but thinking of the hypothetical, Heinkel had decided to keep watch.

Though it was now after he had finished drilling at the training grounds, Heinkel was fortunately confident in physical strength.

Were he to serve as the night watch for a night, there was no need to worry about his body’s response.

Only, he thought he might have ended up worrying the members of his household by not communicating and not returning home, but it was for the safety of the public. —If he made that excuse to himself, he could somewhat forget about his feelings of guilt for not wanting to return home.

Heinkel: “There’s no place for me at home, nor anywhere outside. What the hell am I doing here?”

As his damp body was chilled by the evening breeze, Heinkel slowly shook his head.

The discomfort of feeling like he had no place, was caused by a guilt that Heinkel was remembering of his own volition. Neither his colleagues at the training ground, nor the household members who had seen him off this morning, not a single person had done anything like reproach, ridicule, or scorn Heinkel for his weakness and fragility.

The one who did those things more than anyone else was Heinkel himself. That was exactly why, there was no escape for him.

No matter how desperately he fled, it would continue to follow him like his shadow.

In that sense, his meeting tonight had been rather convenient. If he could make an excuse by doing something for someone like this, the self-harm enacted by Heinkel’s mind would subside a bit.

The only problem was—

Louanna: “—Um, will you come in after all? I can serve some warm beverages~.”

The woman known as Louanna Hartley would not so readily neglect the solitary Heinkel Astrea.

4

Louanna: “I was surprised. When I looked outside the window, I saw Heinkel-san hiding in a corner of the street… I understood it right away. You were keeping a watch over me~.”

Heinkel: “…It’s not really like I was keeping watch over you, I guess it would be more accurate to say I was standing guard.”

Forcibly dragging Heinkel along to her room in spite of his resistance, he decided to nitpick one the phrasing in Louanna's language as she made tea. That said, given that he had been abruptly discovered by her while he was keeping a stealthy lookout, how much persuasiveness did Heinkel's words really hold?

Heinkel: "I know it might not be my specialty, but to think I would be discovered so quickly…"

Louanna: "No, not at all, didn't I tell you earlier? I have quite a good eye for people~."

Heinkel: "That expression isn't supposed to be for when you find someone who's been hiding…"

Or perhaps she meant it as saying that she was skilled at discerning people who were unskilled at hiding? Either way, Heinkel's loss of confidence remained unchanged.

Ultimately, that also went for how easily he went along with being brought into Louanna's room.

Louanna's room was on the third floor of the housing complex, and arranged with modest furniture and bedding, there was plenty of color from the flowers decorated all around. —This was Heinkel's first time in the home of a woman who lived by herself, his first time in the home of anyone living as a commoner for that matter, so he did not know if this sort of thing was typical.

And not knowing that, Heinkel's impression as he looked around the interior of the room was—

Heinkel: "It feels pretty cramped. Can you really live in a place like this?"

Louanna: "Ah, you might be asking that sort of thing, but this is actually on the tidier side… or rather, I just don't own a lot of things, but I pride myself on being good with space."

Heinkel: "…Being good with space, by that you mean…"

Louanna: "Like, people who make good use of all the space in their room. See, this area here or that corner, don't you think I've done it quite skillfully?"

Guiding his gaze towards the edge of the room where she had stored things away, Louanna asserted her talents of space usage, but, Heinkel's eyes were unable to evaluate the usage of space or how skilled it was, so he could not meet her desires for praise.

At his reaction, Louanna smiled with a "Did I put you on the spot there?", and placed a cup of tea in front of Heinkel, who had quietly curled himself up like a cat in unfamiliar territory.

At the faintly warm fragrance, Heinkel remembered that his body was freezing cold, so he picked up the cup.

Given the location, he did not have many expectations for the flavor of the tea, but—

Heinkel: "—Are these… Valneau tea leaves?"

Louanna: "Amazing~, you can tell? How spoolio!"

Heinkel: "I don't really think it's particularly cool, no?"

Louanna: "Ah, the spoolio just now, was a spoolio with the meaning of "super duper smart and not a foolio"."

The difference between the two spoolios was not something he could make out from Louanna's pronunciation.

Regardless, he was surprised that she had served tea brewed with Valneau leaves.

After all, Valneau tea leaves were quite the luxury item, and ought to have been somewhat out of reach for the masses.

Louanna: "Those are some valuable tea leaves, so please be sure to savor them. I also only drink it sparingly. Like when I have a guest over… so, this felt like the perfect occasion."

Heinkel: "…Whether you're frugal or not, I can't really tell at all, you know?"

Louanna: “A woman who makes no compromises when it comes to hospitali-tea, I’d be pleased if you took it as that. Despite how things may appear, I was originally a child of nobility much like Heinkel-san, after all~.”

Heinkel: “Coughk, gahgk!”

Louanna: “Wahh, H-Handkerchief~! Did something startle you?! Was it me?! Was it the tea?!”

Heinkel: “Just you… coughk, how do you know I’m a noble?”

Taking the handkerchief presented to him, Heinkel inquired as he held down on his choking throat. At his question, Louanna appeared to look at him in puzzlement, and,

Louanna: “I mean, the way you sit in that chair and the way you sip your tea, it was just way too perfect. So I just thought that you were someone who went through a lot of rigorous etiquette training.”

Being told so, Heinkel paid attention to how he was sitting, and how he was holding his cup.

Pinching the handle of the teacup, he had his other hand placed on the bottom to support the porcelain, and he was sitting deep in the chair with his spine straight. —He did not find there to be anything special about that.

Heinkel: “…Isn’t this just how everybody does it?”

Louanna: “Is that the case for your friends and colleagues as well? In that case, since you’re only ever together with those sorts of people, Heinkel-san must not just be a run-of-the-mill noble, but from one of the leading noble houses~.”

As the smiling Louanna repeated that, Heinkel tried to recall the hands of his colleagues, but he just could not remember the mannerisms of those around him when sitting for meals or on breaks. He did not have the time to focus on such details— no, it was not time he lacked, but capacity.

Regardless of whether their etiquette was the same or different, Heinkel did not possess the foundations to recognize it as such.

Understanding that, Heinkel slowly shook his head, and then,

Heinkel: “Nevermind about me. More importantly, you said you were formerly a noble?”

Louanna: “Yep~. Though it might have been small, there used to be a House Hartley. But, when I was still small, I lost my parents, causing the House to dissolve. We had debts to some other Houses too, so right now, I’m working myself to the bone, trying to live each day in a way I can be proud of.”

Heinkel: “That’s… I don’t know what to say.”

Louanna: “You could say “do your best!” to support me~.”

Heinkel: “D-Do your best.”

Louanna: “Yes~, I’ll do my best, Heinkel-san~.”

For someone who had just divulged some rather heavy personal circumstances, Louanna shone brighter than ever.

It seemed like she had already overcome all of those problems, but the death of one’s family, or the dissolving of one’s House, even the troubles of having debts to pay, were hardships of which Heinkel knew not.

Even though it would have probably been an experience more dreadful than Heinkel could ever imagine, Louanna’s undeterred energy overwhelmed him.

Heinkel: “So then, these tea leaves were from before your House dissolved?”

Louanna: “Yep~. I exchanged as much of the family assets for money as possible, but I set aside the tea leaves as well as a few pieces of tableware as mementos, and to actually use. It would be extremely difficult to afford something like Valneau leaves, after all.”

To her, the leaves she had offered to warm Heinkel, were the taste of precious memories with her family. Now that he knew that, he began to feel incredibly guilty for letting her brew it for him.

Louanna: “Didn’t I say earlier, the type of family who would make an unpleasant face if I served tea to Heinkel-san, is not something I have, nor would accept~.”

Heinkel: “…That wasn’t about tea, it was when we were talking about me entering your home.”

Louanna: “Huh~, was that so?”

As Louanna tilted her head and spoke with innocence, Heinkel suddenly cracked a smile. How to put it, he had finally realized how foolish it was to be nervous about putting on a bold front.

Seeing him do so, Louanna brought her own cup to her lips, and,

Louanna: “When you smile, you’re spadorable.”

Heinkel: “…That’s probably not something you should be saying to guys.”

Louanna: “Maybe. Sorry. It’s just that I’m honest to a fault.”

With that, seeing Louanna sticking her tongue out as she apologized, Heinkel could not help but let out another smile.

5

Louanna: “—Heinkel-san? What would you like for breakfast?”

Heinkel: “…”

Lifting his head after the sudden awakening, Heinkel stared at Louanna in front of him, dumbfounded.

Louanna. It was Louanna Hartley. Last night, after having witnessed a strange sight, she had climbed up onto a wall thinking that she might be getting chased, and had caused Heinkel to fall in the stream, and then—

Heinkel: "—Hk, Did I fall asleep?!"

Louanna: "And you slept so soundly at that. You must have been tired. But, you shouldn't have sat on the floor since you'd just wake up feeling as tired as ever~."

As Heinkel touched his own cheeks in disbelief, Louanna cautioned him about his mistake. To the extent that he could not even put together a response to her words, Heinkel was shaken to his core.

Last evening, Heinkel had unexpectedly entered Louanna's room, but he still endeavored to keep guard without sleeping, and thus having refused Louanna's proposal to use the sofa, he had readied himself to take on the night. And yet, in reality, he had been unable to accomplish even that to a satisfactory level as the morning arrived.

Heinkel: "Even after entering the home of a woman who lives by herself, to think I'd just fall asleep without fulfilling my duties…"

Louanna: "Um, I have both warm and cold beverages, which would you prefer?"

Heinkel: "I'm not the kind of man who deserves such charity from you, I'm just not…!"

Louanna: "Ehh~, but wouldn't it be hard to get the food down if you don't have a beverage~?"

As Heinkel listed out his own failures in condemnation, Louanna, who had finished setting the table for breakfast, groaned "hmm" at him,

Louanna: "I suppose that from Heinkel-san's perspective, you would certainly have some reservations about having slept until morning, but… I was also able to sleep soundly with full peace of mind. How's that?"

Heinkel: "How, what do you mean…"

Louanna: "I was thinking that maybe it could serve as a reason for you to stop chiding yourself and feel better, Heinkel-san. It seems like it wasn’t enough so I’ll move onto the next one now~. Heinkel-san also slept soundly! How’s that?”

Heinkel: “…”

Louanna: “I guess the problem was that you ended up sleeping in the first place, so this won’t do~. I’ve failed~.”

Placing a hand to her forehead, Louanna reflected with a “Gosh”, but her comment caused Heinkel’s eyes to widen, and as he placed his hand over his mouth, he chewed through the shock.

Indeed, he had slept until morning. It was difficult to deny that it had been a failure on his part, but to have slept until morning like this without seeing any dreams, when was the last time he had experienced that? No matter if he was at home or outside, living in reality or submerged in a dream, Heinkel always continued to be tormented.

Despite that, the nightmare he was forced to watch every single night, did not befall his rest on this night alone.

Louanna: “W-Well, nothing bad happened to either me or Heinkel-san, so it’s actually a rather good thing that we were able to sleep and recharge our spirits… would, that suffice?”

Heinkel: “Recharge, our spirits…?”

Louanna: “Yep~. It’s quite important to recharge your spirits, y’know? If your spirits are down, then you can’t do the things you normally can, and the things you normally can’t do will of course be impossible as well~.”

Perhaps taking Aldebaran’s reaction as an opening, Louanna vigorously encouraged him with lively words, pulling him to stand up by his arm with a “Come on now~”.

On the table were two portions of a modest, yet colorful breakfast.

Louanna: “Meals are also a good way to recharge. Well then, what would you like to drink?”

Heinkel: “…From yesterday, the Valneau.”

Louanna: “Uh. U-Understood. I’m a woman who prides herself on cutting no corners when it comes to hospitali-tea, so to back down now would be…”

Heinkel: “If you’re worried about the tea leaves, I’ll bring you some more next time.”

Louanna: “Though I didn’t have any intention of demanding more, your kindness makes me very happy~.”

Spinning her body around as if in a dance, Louanna made an attempt to meet Heinkel’s request. Feeling as if he could watch her all day long, Heinkel sat down in the chair that had been offered to him.

House Astrea employed servants who took care of chores, and his mother was someone who enjoyed preparing meals, so while home cooking was quite familiar to him, that of commoners was a different matter entirely. Considering Louanna’s circumstances, she might not fit the description of a full on commoner, but—

Louanna: “I’ll be glad if it suits your tastes~.”

As Louanna sat down opposite him after brewing some tea, while enjoying the scent of the fragrant tea leaves to the fullest, he began smacking his lips on her homemade breakfast.

The meal the morning after he had spared from any nightmares, even without taking his superb sleep into account, it more than satisfied Heinkel’s tastes.

Heinkel: “It might not be my place to be asking this, but were you able to rest well last night?”

Louanna: “Eh? Of course, Heinkel-sama was here with me after all~.”

Heinkel: “I see. Well, I’m sorry about that, for two separate reasons…”

Louanna: “Even though I can’t think of even one, how could there be two~?”

After finishing eating breakfast and tidying up, as they headed for the guard station as promised, Louanna was surprised by Heinkel, who wore a bit of a complex expression.

If it did not bother her much, there was no point in bringing it back up, but the first reason was because of the circumstances that had led to Louanna and Heinkel meeting in the first place. —Having witnessed a crime scene of someone being assaulted, such a thing was a scene so impactful that it would not be strange if it were to be seen again in a dream.

The other reason was simply because he wondered if she really had no apprehensions about letting a man she had just met into her home, but.

Louanna: “As I said, it was thanks to you being there that I felt safe, Heinkel-san, you know…?”

Heinkel: “Nevermind, it’s fine. I’m glad that you were able to sleep peacefully, Louanna-san.”

He could not deny the feeling that he had been forced to nod in agreement, but Heinkel’s complex reservations about being treated far too much like a man were just his own personal feelings, so there was no need to make Louanna understand them. In reality, it was extremely fortunate that Louanna had not been tormented by any nightmares. Heinkel too, for that matter.

Louanna: “Ah, Heinkel-san, we’re almost there.”

With that, Louanna tugged on his sleeve, and the consciousness of Heinkel focused back on reality.

Visible before the two of them, was the station of the Guard— not that, but the scene of yesterday evening’s crime. If they could find some evidence while the sun was shining before they went up to the Guard to give a report, things would be settled more quickly. When Heinkel proposed that, Louanna cheerfully expressed her agreement.

Heinkel: “The assailed man collapsed on the ground, and the perpetrator was standing close to him… is that correct?”

Louanna: “Yes~, I’ll reenact it now~.”

Heinkel: “You don’t need to do that. It would spoil the cute outfit you picked out.”

Pulling Louanna back as she attempted to show her acting chops by resolutely challenging the ground, Heinkel surveyed its surface.

He had felt it last evening as well, but this street had indeed undergone cleaning to the point that it was far too tidy. Even so, if there happened to be something like a bloodstain that was not visible last night due to the darkness, it would increase their credibility. —Confronted with the currently empty street, it was far more unreliable than even Heinkel’s offer to put in a good word.

Louanna: “Huh~?”

Next to Heinkel as he continued to look down by his feet, Louanna suddenly raised her voice.

When he looked in her direction, thinking she might have found something, she was gazing to the other side of the street. Using her hand as a visor, her blue eyes were carefully locating something from a distance. —The dull shimmer of light rapidly approaching her eyes, was caught by the reflexes of Heinkel’s sight.

Louanna: “…”

Immediately reaching out his hand, he intercepted the interval between Louanna and the oncoming light. That instant, a scorching heat ran through Heinkel’s right arm, and blood dripped from the dagger that had pierced him deep.

As irony would have it, that blood now soaked the ground with the credibility that Heinkel had desired.

???: “—We have him cornered! Don’t let him get away, Heinkel!”

The moment the sharp voice struck him, he felt a tension run through his entire body.

He felt the firm feeling of soil beneath his feet, the scent of the forest tickling his nostrils, the noisy heartbeat that sounded as if his heart had been pressed right against his ear, the heat of the blood flowing through his veins.

The hilt of the sword in his grip was cold, and his body had stiffened to a rock-like extent, motionless. But, it did not end at being motionless. The patter of footsteps, the sounds of breathing, were closing in on him.

That, was something Heinkel Astrea needed to intercept, no matter what.

And even though he needed to intercept it,

???: “—Heinkel-san~!”

His perception white from pain, a fervently unpleasant memory flashed through Heinkel’s mind.

That which had flashed through, was the nightmare he had just managed to miss seeing this morning— a recollection of an unforgettable disgrace. With that coming to a close in a fragmented state, Heinkel was currently crouched down on the street.

Feeling the sharp, burning pain in his right arm, Heinkel’s throat seemed like it would drown in screams. And yet, the reason he had avoided that death by drowning, was because of the warmth nestled close to his body.

Supporting Heinkel’s body after he sustained the attack, Louanna desperately called out to him. Her expression wrought with tension, she had been desperately calling to Heinkel.

Heinkel: “Nghh, RAHHH!”

Gritting his teeth, he drew the sword on his waist with his left hand, and cut down the subsequent silver light that was speeding towards her.

Parrying the second dagger with his sword, while feeling another surge of pain from the impact, Heinkel's head was filled with complaints that he ought to have done the same thing for the initial surprise attack.

If he had cut down the first dagger with his sword as well, Heinkel would not have sustained a wound to his dominant arm, and would not have ended up needing to swing the sword with his left hand. —Neither, would Louanna have had to see the blood.

Heinkel: "Stay behind me…!"

Louanna: "B-But… that individual, seems to be targeting me~."

Heinkel: "That's exactly why! If you leave my side, I won't be able to protect you…!"

Keeping Louanna behind him, Heinkel mustered all the Knightlyness within himself. Then, biting his lip to the point that it drew blood, he glared at the perpetrator across the street. —Standing there, was a being clad in a ridiculous outfit, black from head to toe, and decorated by a white mask.

For a moment, he thought that enigmatic appearance bore a close resemblance to the assembly of dangerous individuals known as the Witch Cult.

But—

Masked Figure: "—Heinkel Astrea-dono."

Heinkel: "—Hk."

Masked Figure: "On our behalf, we have no intention of harming you."

Called by his full name, Heinkel's mouth flapped open and closed as those words were spoken.

Naturally, it was a proclamation worthy of no belief. Even Heinkel, aware that the pain was dulling his thoughts, understood that it was not worth lending an ear to such convenient words. Despite that understanding, he had no idea what the hell the other party was plotting. Why voice in jest a matter of zero credibility? Was it merely to ridicule, and toy with him? He sensed no such haughty attitude from the other party.

The masked individual conveyed only a cold sense of reality, to the point of exhaustiveness.

Thus, that sense of reality spoke thus to Heinkel. —If there was no falsehood in the other party's words, then their aim was unmistakably Louanna.

Louanna: "…You're the person from yesterday evening."

Having reached the same conclusion, Louanna called out to the masked individual.

Thinking about the reason why Louanna had been forced up onto a perilous stage, naturally, it could have only been the events that transpired yesterday evening. That was to say, for the masked individual before them, Louanna having witnessed those events had been extremely inconvenient.

Masked Figure: "…"

As if to say he had no words to exchange, the masked individual gave no response to Louanna. On the other hand, the fact that they had not commenced any further attacks, perhaps was out of an intent to show good faith by waiting for Heinkel's response.

Heinkel: "In that case, my answer is, stop fucking with us… No matter what your intentions might have been, I've already been attacked, and I won't be allowing you to hurt Louanna-san. Not to mention, I'm a Knight."

Bearing the obligation of protecting others, an existence who would fulfill that duty with honed swordsmanship and heightened resolve. That was what Heinkel believed to be a Knight, and the manner in which he himself aspired to live.

At a juncture where he ought to fulfill that dearest wish of his, the likes of the other party's absurd demands—

Masked Figure: "—You are a Knight? Truly?"

At the interjection of a chilly query, Heinkel's breath slightly caught.

With his eyes widened as he had been trying to find words to say, he had ended up allowing the masked individual to continue. As a result, the fighting spirit Heinkel had mustered would end up being broken.

That was because—

Masked Figure: "Do you, unable to even swing your sword during your first deployment, truly have the right to declare yourself as such?"

Heinkel: "—Ah."

Masked Figure: "Having left your comrades to clean up your mess, unable to make any contribution whatsoever to the victory served to you on a silver platter, do you truly have the right to call yourself a Knight?"

Heinkel: "How, how do you know that, you… hk."

Masked Figure: "Moreover, with a heart so frail that you ended up soiling yourself before the enemy, do you truly have the right to call yourself a Knight?"

Heinkel: "SToOoOooOP!!"

Frozen, eyes wide open, Heinkel forgot the pain in his arm as his voice broke into falsetto.

The masked individual's matter-of-fact cadence, unmistakably exposing realities that Heinkel Astrea did not wish to be known, assailed him in broad daylight. —Heinkel's humiliating first deployment.

Heinkel: “Please, stop… hk.”

—As of right now, Heinkel’s first deployment would have taken place around two months prior.

A group of bandits who kept targeting a highway near the Royal Capital, with the forest they had been operating out of identified, the Guard had surrounded it and carried out a search-and-destroy operation. That had been Heinkel’s first deployment, and cooperating with veteran Knights, they had closed in on the bandits, defeating them one person at a time, and apprehending them.

It happened in the midst of that operation. When a bandit that was being chased by one of his allies, came heading in Heinkel’s direction.

He had fully intended on calmly swinging his sword, just as he had practiced. —But, Heinkel could not move a muscle, as if his blood had frozen over, unable to even unsheathe his sword.

Ultimately, it had been a different Knight who brought down that bandit— also on his first deployment, Marcos Gildark had defeated the most enemies out of all the Knights who had participated that day, an overwhelming contrast to Heinkel.

Having failed to even swing his sword on his first deployment, Heinkel had returned home in despondency, and realizing that he had soiled himself out of fear for the first time, he had cried bitter tears. —Ever since then, he would hear it.

Having incurred a great deal of despair and dejection, Heinkel would hear a voice that cursed him as “pant wetter”.

Masked Figure: “Stand down. Regardless of your opposition, the situation shall not change.”

As Heinkel’s voice quavered in a manner most pitiful, the masked individual who had shattered his spirit advised him so.

To stand down, to make way, just like how Marcos had moved him out of the way in that forest. Because there was nothing of use he could accomplish here, he had no such right to call himself a Knight; so he was being told.

It was none other than Heinkel who exposed his own contradictions, unable to fool himself—

Louanna: "—Heinkel-san, is a Knight."

Thus, the one retort could not have possibly been Heinkel, having fallen to his knees.

Retorting so as she gently supported Heinkel's body, was the hushed Louanna. With her own life being targeted, she had been given a thorough explanation about how Heinkel, her final ray of hope, was completely useless. Despite that, Louanna's assertion had been bereft of hesitation, of doubt, and of uncertainty.

How was it that Louanna could remain in this situation without falling to despair, without losing her optimism?

Louanna: "Didn't I tell you? I have quite a good eye for people~."

Heinkel: "That's… but, right now, how is that use…"

Louanna: "It is useful~. Heinkel-san is a Knight, and you promised that you would buy me new Valneau tea leaves, and after this, I'm sure I'll think of some other good ideas."

Heinkel: "…"

With her lips tightly pursed, Louanna placed her hand over Heinkel's wounded arm. Feeling a slight tremble in those fingertips, once more did Heinkel curse his own foolishness.

There was no way that she did not harbor any fear. There was no way she could remain without feeling despair or pessimism. Even so, Louanna wielded the only weapon in her powerless self's arsenal to the utmost, and had decided to fight back.

Unable to do battle, her weapon was that of hope, that of faith, and that of anticipation. Entrusted with that weapon, what would

Heinkel do? What, would Heinkel Astrea do?

Heinkel: “I’m…”

In this moment, somewhat driving the pain away, he forgot all about his humiliation, and would use his everything for the sake of Louanna.

Heinkel had screamed earlier. And yet nobody else had come, likely because the masked individual was not operating alone, but was working with several accomplices. He could not move his dominant arm. He had also been trained in swinging the sword with his left hand, but he could not rely on it against a skilled opponent. He was worried that the battle would continue if nothing happened. —For what reason, had the other party attempted to get Heinkel to stand down? Precaution. That could not be it. They did not wish to cause any meaningless deaths. But they were hunting down Louanna, a mere eye-witness. In that case, the only possible reason he could think of—

Heinkel: “I… am a man of House Astrea…!”

Masked Figure: “…”

Heinkel: “Mothered by Theresia van Astrea! Fathered by Wilhelm van Astrea! Of the lineage of Sword Saints! The Sword of Lugunica! Hear me!”

As Heinkel raised his voice, he could tell that the demeanor of the masked individual had slightly shifted. Heinkel had no means of ascertaining whether that was for better or for worse, but he still decided to reel it in.

The reason why the other party was loath to harm Heinkel, was because of the name of House Astrea.

In that case—

Heinkel: “—She’s… Louanna’s the woman I’m to take as my wife. She’s my fiancée… in other words, she’s part of the Astrea Family! That being the case, can you really still target her?!”

Louanna: “Ehhh~?!”

Mustering all of his strength, Heinkel embraced Louanna, and asserted so to the masked individual. Of course, Louanna was also surprised by that declaration, but he did not have the time to get the story straight with her beforehand.

Clutching her slender waist, he held her tight so as to not let her go, and glared at the masked individual.

Masked Figure: “…”

A brief silence fell between the masked individual and Heinkel as he held Louanna.

If Heinkel’s judgement had been off, and the name of House Astrea did not work, then this would be it. Heinkel If Heinkel’s bluff was called, and the power of his family name did not extend to Louanna, then this would be it.

However, as Heinkel clung to that prayer—

Masked Figure: “I see, so you were a Knight after all.”

The masked individual spoke those words, and slowly began walking towards them.

Then, before Heinkel as he stood on guard, the other party picked up one of the daggers that had fallen to the ground, and slipped it back inside his garment. Then, he turned back towards them, and presented his empty hand. —The one, in Heinkel’s right arm.

They did not leave behind any evidence, nor would they. If that was the compromise the other party was offering.

Heinkel: “Louanna-sa… Louanna, could you pull it out for me.”

Louanna: “You want me to do it~?”

Heinkel: “It’s preferable to pulling it out myself. If it’s too difficult, I don’t want to force you, but…”

Louanna: “—. No, I’ll do it~. Please allow me to handle it~. Whether it’s one or two or however many~.”

Heinkel: “…One is fine.”

Louanna psyched herself up as she accepted that duty, and gripped the hilt of the dagger that was stabbed into Heinkel’s arm. Then, as they looked into each others faces, she extracted the dagger with a “One, two aaand three~”.

Gritting his teeth through the intense pain and bleeding, Heinkel pressed a cloth over the wound. As he did so, the masked individual received the dagger from Louanna, and proceeded to turn their back on the pair.

Leaving no further words, it was a silent withdrawal. Judging from their demeanour, it did not seem like they were just pretending to let them go. Then—

Louanna: “Heinkel-san, give me your arm~.”

As Heinkel had been directing his attention to the masked individual, Louanna took the cloth from his hand, rushing to tie it around the wound on his arm, and the blood began to stop.

Despite not knowing if they had fully escaped danger yet, Louanna’s concern was no longer on that, but rather was directed towards Heinkel’s arm.

Ultimately, his use of the sword had only amounted to cutting down the opponent’s weapon, so he did not have the opportunity to show off his honed skills, and in the end he had uncouthly relied on his family name to force his way to victory— no, it ought to be called a draw. No matter how he struggled, there was likely nobody who could call this a victory.

Heinkel: “Man, I really can’t act cool in the slightest.”

At the very least, his act of having protected Louanna served as Heinkel’s one and only achievement.

Indeed, Heinkel had derided his disgraceful self for being pathetic, but.

Louanna: “You’re spoolio.”

Heinkel: “Eh?”

Louanna: “No matter what anyone says, Heinkel-san is spoolio~.”

As she spoke, Louanna lifted her face and met Heinkel’s eyes, causing his breath to catch.

Her blue eyes, akin to jewels, were filled with tears, flickering with a pale radiance. With a blush on her white cheeks, she incoherently repeated “Spoolio, spoolio” over and over, using her utmost effort to withstand the tears, emotions, and various other things that were on the verge of overflowing.

Not knowing how to comfort or calm her, Heinkel was left flustered. And flustered as he was, he suddenly found the woman before his eyes to be lovely.

—Having been able to protect something as a Knight for the very first time, Heinkel Astrea had found the woman, Louanna Hartley, to be lovely.

7

Louanna: “—Heinkel-san, about what happened then…”

Indeed, as Louanna presented him with a plate of peeled appas, Heinkel tensed up.

Though he knew it would be unavoidable, he felt strong emotions when the expected moment did arrive.

They were in a treatment center; given the injury and blood loss from Heinkel’s right arm, he had needed to be hospitalized for a few days. He had ended up causing his mother and the servants a great deal of worry because of that, but in an interval when those aggressive visitations of his family began to die down, Heinkel finally got the time to talk to Louanna.

Incidentally, when Heinkel and Louanna went to report about the incident on the street to the Guard, an individual claiming to be the culprit turned themself in before long, and testified that what Louanna had witnessed had been a silencing related to a human trafficking organization. They claimed that because they had failed to also silence Louanna, and understood that there was no longer anywhere for them to escape due to having gotten Heinkel involved, and thus had turned themself in.

Based on that culprit's testimony, it seemed like the Guard had succeeded in uncovering an actual human trafficking organization. Unfortunately, the wounded Heinkel had been unable to participate in that, and had missed the opportunity to secure meritorious achievements.

Moreover—

Heinkel: "Were those guys really just something like a human trafficking organization?"

That was what his colleagues, who were worried and came to visit Heinkel at the treatment center, had said, but something about it did not feel quite right to him. It sounded plausible, but for mere human traffickers, the cleaning of the crime scene yesterday evening gave a strong impression of being far too well organized.

Above all, the dreadfulness of the masked individual who he had actually confronted was unthinkable for a trivial criminal. That person carried with them a certain sense of duty, no less inferior to that of a Knight—.

Louanna: "Heinkel-san~, are you listening?"

Heinkel: "Eh, ah, eh, sorry, what did you say?"

Louanna: "Like I said, about what happened then. At that time, in order to get that masked gentleman to withdraw, Heinkel-san went… I'll reenact it now~."

Heinkel: "No, you don't need to do that. It's alright. I remember, and I understand."

Louanna's actress soul was admirable, but to an even greater extent than he trying to lay down on the ground, he wanted to avoid letting her act out what had happened this time. Only, he had no intention whatsoever of making it so that had never happened.

Heinkel was descended from a House of Knights, a man of the Kingdom who ought to be honest and sincere.

Ergo—

Heinkel: "Louanna, I don't intend on letting what I said there conclude as a means to an end. I don't ever want to do anything that would embarrass you like that."

Louanna: "Heinkel-san…"

Heinkel: "The organization might have been crushed, but there's a worry that remnants might still target you. In order to extinguish that, it would be best for you to stay with us. So…"

Louanna: "…"

Heinkel: "So, won't you marry me for real?"

Louanna: "Let me see~, I refuse~."

An instant rejection.

At the cheerfulness and lightheartedness of that response, for a moment, Heinkel almost pat his chest in relief. As if the marriage proposal he had summoned all his courage into had gone well.

But, that was not the case.

Louanna had said it clearly. She refused.

Heinkel: "Wh-Wh-Wh-Why?"

Louanna: "Didn't I tell you? I still have to pay off my House's debts. With those circumstances remaining, I can't allow myself to get married, much less to Heinkel-san of House Astrea."

Heinkel: “Those debts, I’ll pay them on your behalf…”

Louanna: “But would that really be your own money, Heinkel-san? Not your family’s money.”

Heinkel: “No, that’s…”

Louanna: “If that’s the case, then it’s a no~. Or rather, even supposing it was actually Heinkel-san’s money, I could never allow you to pay it on my behalf~. This is my own problem, after all.”

Placing a hand over her chest, Louanna firmly declared so, leaving Heinkel at a loss for words. It was excessively upright and sound reasoning from a moral standpoint.

But, when it came to an undaunted sound argument, Heinkel also had one.

Heinkel: “But, the matter of the remnants could still very well be dangerous. In order to protect against that as well…”

Louanna: “…As well?”

Heinkel: “…Won’t you at least make the part about being my fiancée true?”

If he might say so himself, when he put it to words, he was astounded from the bottom of his heart at how ungallant of a confession it must have been.

If only he could have done it more smoothly, a flawless marriage proposal that would be blessed by everyone universally, akin to that of his parents that continued to be sung about in the Sword Demon Love Song; that would have been Heinkel’s ideal. Even now, Heinkel found himself unable to follow in the example of his parents.

Louanna: “Might I ask, why?”

Heinkel: “Eh?”

Louanna: “Why, are you willing to go so far for me, Heinkel-san?

Even if you say it's because you're a Knight, we're talking about the person you're going to be spending the rest of your life with."

Heinkel: "That's…"

At Louanna's earnest question, Heinkel gulped down his breath, and fell into deep contemplation.

What came to mind were reasons like, because he would not go back on his word, or because it was a man's duty to take responsibility. But, probably, it was neither of those things. Those words were borrowed, words that did not belong to Heinkel.

The reason why Heinkel Astrea had asked Louanna Hartley to marry him, that was—

Heinkel: "—Because, you're special. We still barely know each other, but I want to know you more, I want to speak with you more. I wanna be by your side. That's my reason."

Falteringly, yet with words that were not borrowed, Heinkel conveyed how he truly felt. Receiving that, Louanna placed a hand to her own cheek, and gazed at Heinkel.

Her blue eyes were moist, her white cheeks were blushing, and with a slight quiver in her voice, she spun her next words.

Louanna: "…Spoyous."

Heinkel: "Sp-Spoyous?"

Louanna: "Super duper, joyous~."

Hearing her response, Heinkel blinked his eyes, and this time, he did pat his chest in relief.

If it was in front of her, Heinkel Astrea could hold his head high as a Knight. —Without any evidence save for the warm feelings budding in his heart, Heinkel thought so.

—Heinkel Astrea, and Louanna Hartley who was now his fiancée. The passionate love between the two who would go on to be wed, would lead to a future that shook the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, one that shook the very world.

However, in this very moment, unaware as to what their future held in store, the young man who had displayed his bravery, and the young woman who harbored a faint affection for him, simply shared a heartwarming moment, and that was all.

END

Short Story Collection 13

Royal Selection: First Contact (Translation Pending)

Royal Selection: First Contact After

1

Emilia: “—Victory!”

In the early morning, what rang out loud in the mansion’s yard was the shout that had become part of her daily routine.

Raising both hands energetically above her head, she called out from the pit of her stomach, full of spirit. That way, vitality would fill every corner of her body, all the way to the tips of her hands and feet, and her drowsiness would vanish far away.

She wasn’t very good at getting up early, so this effect of pushing her sleepiness away was a huge help. Given her position, going out in front of everyone with sleepy eyes was really not good.

Emilia: “Mm, it’s completely become a habit.”

Stretching her back with the sense of achievement and satisfaction at having finished, Emilia murmured that, her silver hair, gathered loosely today, letting the sunlight shine through it.

The radio calisthenics that had become their morning habit were a fun ritual for starting the day feeling good, thought up by the black-haired boy who worked as a servant at the mansion—Natsuki Subaru.

At first, Emilia had been the only one joining Subaru, but before she knew it, everyone working at the mansion, and even the villagers living nearby, had started taking part, and the number of participants was steadily growing.

Of course, they couldn’t manage to gather in a big group for radio calisthenics every single day, but even so, Emilia had heard a delightful report from Petra, who was reliably growing as a new maid, that even when Subaru wasn’t around, everyone in the village was voluntarily doing them.

Emilia: “I’ve completely gotten to where I can go all the way through even without Subaru’s calls now.”

Emilia’s eyes softened in contentment, but beside her there were none of the usual figures of Subaru, who should have been doing radio calisthenics together with her, nor of his partner, Beatrice. At the moment, the two of them were out on a job as a spirit arts user and his contracted spirit, calming the Micro Spirits in the region who were causing trouble.

Because of that, Subaru and the others had been away from the mansion for about two days, and for those two days, Emilia had been doing radio calisthenics by herself. To be honest, she felt a little lonely.

But she had heard that they would safely finish the job and be back today, so that lonely feeling was about to come to a pause—and right then, she went “Ah,” realizing something.

A moment ago, Emilia had thought of Subaru in her heart as the boy who worked as a servant at the mansion, but that wasn’t right.

Right now, Natsuki Subaru was—

Emilia: “—My knight, after all.”

Every time, feeling her own cheeks grow warm as she said that out loud made Emilia think that was something very, very happy.

2

It had been about a month since Natsuki Subaru’s investiture as a Knight, and the ceremony in which he had also been granted the position of first Knight to Emilia, a Royal Candidate.

In the uproar right before the investiture ceremony, their base of operations, the mansion, had burned down, and they had been kept busy dealing with those who wished to relocate from the now-opened Sanctuary, so this past month had been hectic to say the least. But that too had finally begun to settle down, and Emilia had just started to slowly feel the day-to-day changes—the differences between how things had been and how things would be from now on.

First and foremost, the biggest change for Emilia was—

Petra: "—Lady Emilia, you look really happy."

Being told that, Emilia involuntarily blinked in confusion, her eyes going round.

The one who had stopped her in the corridor and smiled at her like that was Petra, whose brand-new maid uniform still looked as if it sparkled.

Tilting her head at that "happy-looking" description, which she herself had not noticed, Emilia said,

Emilia: "Was I really looking that happy? I was just walking down the hallway, though."

Petra: "But the way you were walking was all bouncy, and you were humming… It was a song I have never heard before, but you were humming, right?"

Emilia: "You have never heard it? I heard "Sword Demon Love Song" is suuper famous though…"

Petra: "Ah, that was "Sword Demon Love Song"… Umm, now that you mention it, I think it might have been."

As Petra pressed her hands together in front of her chest, saying she remembered now, Emilia also nodded with a "That's right." Even so, she still had no sense at all that she had been that cheerful.

But if she had looked that buoyant even through Petra's eyes…

Petra: "You are happy that Subaru and Beatrice-chan are coming back too, Lady Emilia."

Emilia: "Yeah, I am. Because Subaru said that once this job is over, he'll bring back some reaaally interesting stories as a souvenir. A promise… I figured Subaru's more likely to really do it if we don't make it a promise, so I did not make him promise, but."

Petra: "Mmm, I understand. Even I cannot really take Subaru's side on that one."

The fact that Subaru was a habitual promise-breaker was already common knowledge within Emilia's camp.

It was not as if Emilia had gone out of her way to spread that around, but the fact that even Petra knew it probably meant Subaru's broken promises were not limited to just his dealings with Emilia.

Emilia: "That is something someone has to scold him for, right."

Petra: "Yes, that is right. But if anyone is going to scold him, it has to be you, Lady Emilia. Because Subaru is Lady Emilia's Knight."

Emilia: "…"

Petra: "Lady Emilia?"

Emilia: "Eh, ah, no, it's fine. I'm totally okay, really. Yeah, you're right. Subaru is my Knight, so if he does something bad, I have to be the one to scold him. Yeah, yeah… leave it to me!"

Petra: "That is so powerful…"

Thumping a fist against her own chest, Emilia accepted that role with great vigor in front of Petra.

After that, she parted ways with Petra as the girl went back to work, and Emilia also went on with the rest of her morning routine—chatting with the Micro Spirits she was contracted with, and taking care of her hair and skin every day as she had promised Puck. By the time she was finished with those, it was time for breakfast, and everyone gathered in the dining hall to eat together.

Garfiel: "Ooh, Lady Emilia, that's amazin'. Ya can eat peppir today, huh."

Emilia: “Eh? I was eating peppir? No way, it’s the green devil…”

Ram: “Garf, kindly do not say unnecessary things. Lady Emilia had just absentmindedly gotten rid of the peppir… the green devil.”

Otto: “Why are you looking at me while saying “green devil”! My clothes being green have nothing at all to do with the bitterness of peppir!”

With things going like that, the lively meal went on, and even as she trembled at the fact that she had eaten peppir, Emilia very much enjoyed the dining table she shared with everyone in the camp.

Originally, Roswaal Manor had a custom of everyone gathering to eat together, but it was only after Subaru joined them that things had become this boisterous. Back when she had lived in the forest with just Puck, Puck’s skillful talk had often made her laugh, but even then she would not have called it lively.

Now, there was not a moment without laughter, even during meals.

Frederica: “—Lady Emilia, you were very focused today.”

Drawing the results of the morning’s studies closer at hand and checking over the contents, Frederica offered those words of praise. Hearing them, Emilia patted her chest in relief with a “Thank goodness.”

Unless she had duties as a Royal Candidate or some special business, Emilia spent most of her day at her desk facing books and documents, devoting herself to learning the knowledge she lacked. The Wind Hour in the morning was for studying politics, the legal system, and history, and she had just had that work graded by Frederica.

The reason Emilia had felt so relieved at the grading results was, of course, that she was happy to have her efforts acknowledged, but beyond that—

Frederica: “Now you can go to greet Subaru-sama and the others when they return at the Fire Hour.”

Emilia: “Yeah. Making sure I don’t neglect my studies was the condition Roswaal gave me, after all.”

Frederica: “The Master really does think up such spiteful things as well… is what I would like to say, but.”

Emilia: “No, it’s important. Just because I am all fidgety doesn’t mean it’s okay to put important things off.”

At Frederica’s words, her brows slightly drooping, Emilia shook her head and answered like that.

Roswaal certainly was mean-spirited, and he had actually done mean things, but even when his phrasing was mean, he was often saying things that were correct. This condition was one of those cases as well.

Going out to greet Subaru and the others without doing what she was supposed to do would have been kind of strange.

Frederica: “You seem to be enjoying yourself, Lady Emilia.”

Emilia: “…Frederica said the same thing Petra-chan told me this morning. And at breakfast Ram also said I was spacing out. What kind of face am I making?”

Frederica: “Let me see… A face that is eagerly waiting for very happy news, perhaps.”

Emilia: “And that still looks happy?”

Frederica: “Waiting can also be a joyful time, after all.”

Seeing Frederica’s smile as she brought a hand to her mouth, Emilia somehow felt convinced.

Now that she thought about it, back when she had been living in the forest, if she got her hands on a fruit they could rarely obtain, waiting for it to ripen fully and sweetly had been fun. Maybe this was the same thing.

Emilia: “Mm, I think I get that. Subaru seems to reaaally like appa too.”

Frederica: “I feel as though your conclusion may be a little off, but… even so, once again, I am very happy that you were able to welcome Subaru-sama as your Knight.”

Emilia: “—? Frederica, you also wanted Subaru to become a Knight?”

Frederica: “Rather than that, I am happy that you were able to welcome a Knight, Lady Emilia. Previously, you consulted me once about your own Knight, did you not?”

Emilia: “—Right… You’re right, I remember. Frederica, you said you wanted someone who was kind and would properly talk about their feelings.”

Frederica: “Y-Yes, that is what I said. You remember it in such detail… Ahem, but you do not need to worry about me. I am not someone who stands in a position to have a Knight.”

Her cheeks faintly flushed, Frederica diverted the flow of the conversation away from herself. The face she made as she did so felt a little similar to how she looked when she was dealing with Clind, who had been coming and going more often since the mansion had been moved, but there was no opening to bring that up.

Instead, Frederica gently touched her own chest and continued,

Frederica: “At that time, I was the one who accompanied you to the Royal Capital, but when you met the other Candidates and their Knights, you looked very uneasy, Lady Emilia. I regretted that I could not properly stay by your side in that uneasiness.”

Emilia: “I do not think you “could not do it properly” or anything like that, though…”

Frederica: “It is what I thought, myself. That there were more things I could have done. So I am grateful that Subaru-sama became your Knight, and more than that…”

Emilia: “More than that?”

Frederica: “—I wanted to tell you, Lady Emilia, that you did very well.”

Hearing Frederica continue like that, Emilia caught a small breath and lowered her gaze.

The slow heat that welled up at the back of her eyes was proof that Frederica’s feelings had pierced her heart. It was not as if she had been holding onto feelings of pain or sadness or anything like that. But it was true that Emilia had been uneasy, and more than that, she had not really been able to grasp it at all.

The idea that she could have an absolute ally of her own, a first Knight of her own, not at all.

Emilia: “But you know, it’s amazing, Frederica.”

Taking a deep breath in and out, Emilia raised her face and began like that.

Emilia: “I was talking with Puck about what kind of Knight would make me happy… and everything I was thinking of back then, Subaru fits all of it.”

Frederica: “My, is that so… Would you tell me those conditions as well?”

Emilia: “Sure. —First, someone who laughs a lot, who can enjoy eating anything, who is hardworking, and who gets along with Beatrice and everyone in the mansion… See? That’s all exactly Subaru, right?”

Frederica: “Yes, truly. Subaru-sama is exactly like that…”

Emilia: “And I wanted someone who would not be afraid of me… Fufu, I never imagined he would even be someone who would say he likes me.”

Frederica: “…”

Unthinkingly, as her cheeks warmed at that fact, Emilia's lips relaxed into a smile.

Even those conditions she had just listed, when she had talked them over with Puck, she had thought she was being terribly greedy. At first she had not really known what she wanted, but once she started thinking about it, the conditions had come out one after another, and Puck had laughed and called her a greedy girl.

And yet Subaru had fulfilled all those conditions—even that very greatest wish of Emilia's, though in a slightly different form.

Emilia: "I am happy to have him say he likes me, but it makes me feel reaaally restless somehow. Frederica, what do you do at times like that?"

Frederica: "Eh?! W-Well… It is the same as between a Knight and their lord."

Emilia: "—? What do you mean?"

Frederica: "There are different ways of relating to each other in every case, so there is no single correct answer… Something like that."

Emilia: "I see, so that is how it is."

At Frederica's answer, Emilia nodded in agreement.

The relationship between Emilia and Subaru was different from that of Crusch and Ferris, from Anastasia and Julius, from Priscilla and Al, and from Felt and Reinhard as well.

There was no one correct form there. Frederica's opinion was right on the mark.

There was just one thing that she had, only now, started to feel uneasy about, and that was—

Emilia: "The truth is, my Knight was supposed to undergo Puck's strict screening, but since Puck is asleep, that part is not properly done yet."

Frederica: “—In that case, when the Great Spirit wakes, I shall put in a word from me as well. I will tell him Subaru-sama is absolutely perfect.”

Emilia: “Fufu, I am counting on you.”

With that promise from Frederica, such a reassuring ally, Emilia smiled back at her.

3

Before lunchtime, Emilia left the new Roswaal Manor and headed for the Industrial City of Costuul, the nearest town, to pick up Subaru and the others.

Her only companions on this deliberately a-little-bit-lonely adventure were Beatrice and Patrasche. Subaru had said he was thinking that chances for outings like this would increase from now on, and that was why they were doing it this way, but she remembered feeling just a little sad at the idea that there would be more times when they were apart.

At any rate, when she went to their agreed meeting place at the appointed time he had given in his message, she spotted a dragon carriage bearing the crest of the House of Mathers on the busy main street, lined with stalls and crowded with people. In front of that dragon carriage stood a ground dragon with jet-black scales, and beside it—

Subaru: “So here’s the thing, old man. We just got back from a job. Long trip, and it was our very first job to boot, so we’ve gotta celebrate with the very best appa you’ve got! Right?”

Beatrice: “Betty heard the appa from your stall are the best in town, in fact. Now, we shall see whether you can live up to Betty’s expectations, I suppose.”

Fruit Seller: “Good grief… You two sure know how to fire a guy up, kid and missy!”

Even amid the bustle of the street, Emilia could pick out the backs of Subaru and Beatrice, standing out as they bantered like that.

Subaru seemed to be negotiating with the owner of a fruit shop about something. When his profile came into her violet eyes, Emilia involuntarily blinked in surprise and pressed a hand to her chest. She could feel warmth soaking through her whole body from her heart, which was softly beating, just a little more lively than usual.

She understood it. She understood it, and it was far too much for her to bear all by herself.

Emilia: “Um, excuse me, can I just say something?”

Passerby: “Hm? What is it?”

Holding that feeling inside, Emilia stopped a passerby who just happened to be walking past beside her. To the man, who was not anyone she knew at all, Emilia pointed across the street.

Then, indicating Subaru standing over there—

Emilia: “—That over there, that’s my Knight.”

Passerby: “Huh? Ah, I… see. …In that case, um, I wish you both happiness?”

Emilia: “—Yes, thank you reaaally much.”

The passerby looked confused for a moment, but Emilia smiled at his words of blessing and then broke into a run. She did feel a little bad about leaving him standing there gaping, but Emilia’s heart was bright and clear.

Emilia: “My Knight is amazing.”

Saying that, just as she had once thought long ago when she imagined her ideal Knight, Emilia ran with a spring in her step toward her very first Knight, waiting for her on the far side of the street.

END

The Golden Lion and the Sword Saint:
The Lion’s Ferocity
(Translation Pending)

Lady Priscilla's Cheers for Me!
The Crimson Flame's Homecoming Part

(Translation Pending)

Provisional Rem's Paranoia: Night Parade of One Hundred Oni (Translation Pending)

Once Upon a Time in Astrea (Translation Pending)

Once Upon a Time in Astrea After

1

???: "—Young Master, is there not something you ought to say to me?"

Stopped like that at the entrance of the manor, Heinkel Astrea felt a chill run down his spine.

First, there was the fact that he had been surprised because he had not sensed her presence. However, that was something everyone else in the household besides him could do, and it had been startling him since long ago, so as a reason it was weak.

So the main reason lay in the other thing, the guilt he was feeling.

Heinkel: "Ah—uh, well, that is…"

???: "Please stop giving such halting answers. Conduct yourself with confidence."

Heinkel: "Ugh… sor—no, my bad."

He faltered, but his stalling for time with an obvious excuse was seen through at once. Before Heinkel could even turn around, a blonde woman with perfectly straight posture had stepped around to face him head on.

The woman with the long, narrow eyes who had aged with such grace was someone Heinkel had known since the day he was born, and in other words, for twenty years now their balance of power had not changed.

She was one half of the married pair of servants who served House Astrea, and she was also Heinkel's wet nurse.

???: "…"

Under that wet nurse's sharp gaze, Heinkel felt as though she could see straight through his heart. In fact, not once up to now had he ever succeeded in hiding anything from her.

Part of it was that Heinkel had no talent for keeping secrets, but above all it was due to the keenness of his nurse's eye.

So this time as well, Heinkel promptly gave up and took a paper bag from his breast.

The contents of that paper bag were exactly what he felt guilty about.

Carol: "Valnau tea leaves? It is the brand Young Master likes, but… why are you going so far as to sneak it out in secret? Are you dissatisfied with the way I brew it?"

Heinkel: "Of course not. I got to like tea because your tea is good, Carol. I was thinking of giving this to somebody."

Carol: "To somebody? —Do not tell me you are trying to show charity to someone again? You should have learned your lesson when the beggars in the Slums stripped you of every coin last time."

Heinkel: "D-Don't bring up something from that long ago. Besides, Louanna's not like that…"

Carol: "—Louanna. That is a woman's name, is it not?"

At his nurse, who was quick not to overlook his slip of the tongue, Heinkel let out an "Ah" and realized his mistake. However, that one word after his slip of the tongue was not good either.

As if to say that she needed no further verbal confirmation, his nurse lifted her slender shoulders in a shrug, and—

Carol: "I more or less understand the circumstances. If the reason you were trying to sneak tea leaves out behind my back has to do with a woman, then it makes sense."

Heinkel: "Well, yeah, that's… that's true, but…"

Carol: "Only, please remember, Young Master. You are the firstborn of House Astrea, the heir to this home. With some lighthearted feeling—”

Heinkel: “—It’s not lighthearted.”

Carol: “…”

Haltingly, his nurse had begun a lecture meant to make him more self-aware, and just as she was about to continue her last words, Heinkel hastily spoke over her and cut her off.

Catching the faint way his nurse’s blue eyes widened, Heinkel let out a breath and—

Heinkel: “It’s not lighthearted. …It’s not like that. Really.”

As he spoke, without realizing it, Heinkel touched his right hand—his upper arm wrapped in bandages—and thought of the woman who had been the cause of that wound and was seared so deeply into his heart.

What his nurse thought of that reply and the look on Heinkel’s face afterward, he could not know.

Only, after letting out a small sigh, she said—

Carol: “Very well. It seems my words no longer reach you, Young Master…”

Heinkel: “Don’t put it like that…”

Carol: “I am joking. Do you not have an appointed time to keep? You had best hurry.”

After pretending to cry, then smiling as she said that, his nurse made even Heinkel, who checked the magic crystal timepiece, genuinely panic that he was running out of time.

He stuffed the paper bag back into his breast and hurried to dash out—but before he did, he turned to his nurse.

Heinkel: “I’ll introduce her properly next time, so watch over me for a while.”

Carol: “—Yes. Please go and come back safely, Young Master.”

To the Heinkel who had said that, his nurse made a perfectly neat, beautiful bow. —The fact that he had been praised for learning from that refined motion was, in a way, one facet of the relationship between who he was now and her, and somehow he felt proud of it.

2

Louanna: “Ah, Heinkel, over here, over here, over heeere!”

Since he had left the manor later than planned, Heinkel had been a little worried about whether he would make it in time, but that worry was easily shattered and scattered away by her lively, bright smile and wave.

The commercial district in the royal capital, a flower shop set up in one corner of it—that was the place Heinkel jogged over to, and the workplace of Louanna Hartley, who was waving at him.

In front of the storefront, which carried with it a gentle waft of flowers’ fragrance, Louanna, who had already finished getting ready to go home, greeted the approaching Heinkel and ran over to him.

Seeing her like that, Heinkel felt relieved, and a warm feeling welled up inside him as he said,

Heinkel: “Sorry to keep you waiting. I thought you might have already gone home.”

Louanna: “Goodness, Heinkel, do you really think I am that impatient? If I know you are coming, there is no way I would go home.”

Heinkel: “…But the whole picking you up and seeing you off thing is something I am doing on my own.”

Louanna: “It is. It has completely become a habit.”

At Heinkel's awkward expression, Louanna stuck out her lips in a sulky pout for a moment, only to immediately break into a grin and show him a smile just like a flower blooming.

He was perfectly aware he was taking advantage of the fact that she never clearly refused. —Heinkel had used the excuse that the lingering grudge of the remnants of the human trafficking organization, and the possibility that their hatred might be turned on Louanna, meant someone had to escort her to and from her workplace, and had volunteered for the job himself.

Of course, that organization in question had already been dismantled by the knights, and the main people involved had either been cut down or put in chains, so the odds of there being any remnants left who would threaten Louanna were almost zero. Even so, the reason Heinkel wanted to guard Louanna was not because he was extremely overprotective. —That was not it.

In the end, Heinkel just wanted to spend even a little longer with Louanna.

Louanna: "…? Heinkel, there is kind of a metteki smell on you, is there not?"

Heinkel: "—Sharp… no, sharp nose, maybe? But you are right. Look."

Louanna: "Oh, could this be Valnau tea leaves?!"

Sniff sniff, Louanna twitched her nose, and with her exceptional sense of smell noticed the gift he had brought. Since she had noticed, there was no reason to hide it, so Heinkel took the paper bag from his breast and handed it to her.

Lightly opening the mouth of the bag, Louanna drew the wholesome aroma of the tea leaves deep into her chest.

Louanna: "Haa… I cannot get enough of this. Why is it that when tea is delicious, even the scent of the leaves is delicious…? Heinkel, can you solve this mystery?"

Heinkel: "Uh… I, I am gonna need some time."

Louanna: “Understood, I will look forward to your answer tomorrow.”

Just like that, she had arbitrarily made it into homework on pure momentum. However, since it seemed he was allowed to come see her again tomorrow, Heinkel made up his mind to show up tomorrow with an answer that would make her happy.

While he was forming that resolve, Louanna, beside him, pursed her lips and said, “But,”

Louanna: “Even if we promised, these are high-grade tea leaves, so just taking them and not giving anything in return feels wrong… so, in exchange, I would like to give you a flower, Heinkel.”

Heinkel: “Huh, that is a quick conclusion. What about my opinion that you do not have to thank me or give me anything back?”

Louanna: “I am all ears for that opinion… not. Now then, which flower would suit you, Heinkel?”

As if to say that her overflowing desire to reciprocate simply would not stop, Louanna leaned in to peer into the flower shop. Heinkel stared wide-eyed for a while, then soon let the tension slip from his shoulders.

He had never disliked flowers to begin with. As he had told Louanna, Heinkel’s mother had loved flowers, and the manor’s garden had been filled to overflowing with seasonal blossoms. Because of that, for Heinkel, flowers were always something close at hand in his daily life.

And among them, the ones Heinkel felt a particular attachment to were—

Heinkel & Louanna: “—Diana flowers.”

That was what Heinkel said at the exact same moment Louanna said it.

Heinkel involuntarily held his breath, and Louanna, with a puzzled look on her face, blinked her eyes a few times, then gently gathered up some of the Diana—the yellow flowers at the storefront—into a bouquet.

Louanna: “Hehe, that was pretty in sync just now. meggoi, was it not?”

Heinkel: “Yeah, I was meggoi surprised… Is this really for me?”

Louanna: “It is. Please think of it as a small token from me. Ah! If you like, I can also make you a flower crown. I am sure it would look good on you.”

Heinkel: “…Sorry, but I will pass on that.”

He appreciated the enthusiasm, but at his age he wanted to avoid wearing a flower crown if he could help it.

If Louanna actually gave him one, there would probably be no way for him to refuse to put it on, so the best move Heinkel could make was to avoid that outcome before it happened. Fortunately, Louanna did not suddenly pull out a “I have already made one” flower crown and offer it to him, so he felt relieved.

At any rate—

Louanna: “We have safely traded tea leaves for a bouquet, so shall we get going?”

Heinkel: “Yeah. I do not really want weird rumors starting up at your workplace.”

Louanna: “Weird rumors? For example, what kind?”

Heinkel: “…Like, that there was some big guy with a yellow flower crown on his head.”

Louanna: “That did not even happen. …Ah, I understand. Please look forward to tomorrow.”

Heinkel: “I do not think you understand, so wait a second.”

Thinking that he had said something unnecessary, Heinkel scrambled to use every word he could to explain himself to Louanna, who was suddenly fired up.

What he had wanted to say was that he did not want to cause trouble for Louanna, and that with some man picking her up and dropping her off every day, people might resent her for it—those were the kinds of worries he had, but—

Louanna: "Since everyone has it that you are my fiancé, Heinkel, I do not think anyone is looking at it that way."

Heinkel: "…"

Louanna: "On the contrary, because I get picked up and dropped off every day, my coworkers shower me with high-pitched cheers. Even I, before I know it, kind of end up walking around with my chest puffed out."

Heinkel: "Your chest, huh."

Louanna: "Exactly, like "hm-hm!" you know."

Louanna put her hands on her hips and boasted, and from that, Heinkel was able to feel relieved that it did not seem like his offer had become a burden to her.

As for the engagement she mentioned, that was nothing more than a verbal promise made between Heinkel and her—and even that had been another thing he had one-sidedly proposed, borrowing the power of that human trafficking organization's affair.

Of course, Heinkel was serious, and he felt that Louanna did not particularly dislike him either, but it was also true that she possessed a mysterious charm that made it easy to imagine her saying the next day, "Did I ever say something like that?"

Because of that, Heinkel had not been able to carelessly dig deeper into that topic. —And yet, Louanna went and said things like this so easily.

Heinkel: "…I am over here hesitating even to ask you out somewhere or something."

The stated pretext was that he was her guard, and he had even equipped himself with the noble cause that their engagement was in order to protect Louanna, so Heinkel had ended up binding himself hand and foot.

He was taking her to and from work “because it was dangerous,” and if he then took her out for meals or to the theater, those actions would run headlong into that premise, and the thought made Heinkel clutch his head.

Then, as he was struggling in that self-spun web, Louanna peered at his profile and said,

Louanna: “Heinkel, there is somewhere I would like to stop by on the way. Is that all right?”

Heinkel: “A detour? I do not mind, but… again?”

Louanna: “Yes. Come on now, it is a different place from yesterday.”

At Louanna’s smiling suggestion, Heinkel nodded back with an “All right.”

It had been several days now since he started picking her up and seeing her off like this, but Louanna very often did not go straight home from work, instead wandering off here and there to make little detours.

Of course, sometimes she would be picking up foodstuffs or daily necessities, but Louanna’s detours were not limited to those sorts of essentials—

Louanna: “Look, Heinkel. It is a doggy family.”

Following the sharp point of Louanna’s finger to the edge of the street, he saw three dogs with fluffy white fur, two puppies clinging to their large mother and snuggling up to her.

It was indeed an adorable sight, and he could understand why Louanna’s voice was so bright.

Heinkel: “Louanna, that is what you wanted to detour for?”

Louanna: “It is. I heard from a customer today. They told me that right at the corner of Sixth Street, there is a secret little spot for cuteness… They are mekkawa, are they not?”

Heinkel: “…They are mekkawa.”

Louanna adored the dog family, calling them cute, and while he found Louanna herself adorable, Heinkel echoed her and said as much.

—At that rate, Heinkel had a wild time: helping Louanna feed the dogs, giving his thoughts on a plan to find them new homes, getting chased all over by the dogs that took a huge liking to him, and then, for some reason, having to soothe Louanna when she sulked and called it unfair.

After they said goodbye to the dogs like that and left them, the sun, which had still been quite high when they left the flower shop, had dipped, and as the presence of night drew close to the royal capital, Heinkel finally saw Louanna safely home.

Louanna: “All right, we are here. Thank you very much for today as well.”

Heinkel: “Yeah, right, that is true.”

Louanna: “—? What is wrong? Did you forget something?”

In front of the apartment building where Louanna’s room was, Heinkel gave a halting reply, and she tilted her head at him. Heinkel shook his head and said, “No, that is not it,”

Heinkel: “It is just… with how hectic things were today too, I feel like I did not really fulfill the main duty of escorting you.”

Louanna: “What are you saying? You properly escorted me all the way home like this, and you kept me thoroughly entertained with our detours along the way. Playing with the doggies like that… I will reenact it, all right?”

Heinkel: “You do not have to. That would just be reenacting me getting chased around by the dogs, right.”

He did think he would like to see a reenactment of her playing with the dogs, but he tossed that hope aside.

In any case, as far as Heinkel was concerned, he wanted to first carry out his guarding duties cleanly and properly, just as stated in name, and then connect that to his next hopes. —Unfortunately, for that, he was getting a failing grade today as well.

Louanna: “If you are that dissatisfied, then… let me see… could you give me that bouquet?”

Heinkel: “Huh? This? But you are the one who gave this to me, Louanna. Are you sure?”

Louanna: “Yes, please, with all your might.”

It was not the sort of thing one needed to get fired up about, so Heinkel was a bit bewildered, but even so, the bouquet that he had been given by no one other than her at the flower shop, he went down on one knee and gently offered to her.

Louanna softly received that bouquet in both hands and hugged it to her chest.

Louanna: “Thank you very much. Heinkel, you are mekkoi again today.”

Heinkel: “…Yeah? If that is how it is, I am starting to feel like this was just fine, then.”

Louanna: “It is. Well then, see you tomorrow… Ah, would you like to come in?”

Heinkel: “No, I did not bring the courage for that today… maybe next time.”

He thought it was a terribly cowardly answer, but Louanna neither laughed nor looked disappointed. Instead, she smiled and said, “Understood,” and saw him off, waving her hand big and wide.

Seeing her wave him off like that and heading home, Heinkel found himself thinking once again. —Next time for sure, he would invite Louanna out somewhere himself.

—Of course, Heinkel had no idea, but these daily trips picking Louanna up and seeing her home, and the little detours that came with them, were recognized by the people around them as intimate rendezvous time between an engaged couple.

The only ones who did not know were the very people involved. —No, to be precise, the only one who did not know was one half of the pairing.

In addition, what awaited Heinkel when he returned home that day, full of resolve, was his wet nurse and, having heard the story from her, his biological mother, who both subjected him to a persistent round of questioning about how things were progressing with the one he had given the tea leaves to. Since he could only give flustered answers to that, he gravely disappointed both of his mothers—and that, too, should be added here.

END

Volume 43

Chapters 50-Curtains Close

Prologue:
End of the Dream

—Harbored by Aldebaran upon his homecoming to the Castle of Dreams, were emotions beyond any description.

A sight he knew, an aroma he knew, a soundscape he knew, a warmth he knew.

Welcomed by the familiar everblue sky and verdant plains, by the familiar sound of wind that carried with it the fragrance of grass, and by the familiar warmth of the rays of sunlight, Aldebaran stood frozen amidst a scenery of which he knew every last detail. —That instant, color was vibrantly breathed into the faded and clouded picture within his mind, shining with a brand new radiance.

Aldebaran: "…"

Unmistakably, this was the Castle of Dreams of which Aldebaran had dreamed.

Through the months an years long passed, he had doubted the veracity of its existence. At the sensation of it slipping away, he had even doubted his own sanity. Even so, permeated through every last bit of the flesh and blood that made up Aldebaran, as the school of his soul that he could by no means ever forget, that Castle of Dreams had continued to persist beyond.

—Spanning across years numbered both ten and four-hundred, Aldebaran had arrived home to that place.

???: "…"

Atop the hill, underneath a white parasol, he could see a slender, supple silhouette standing still. Black and white, the beautiful woman made up of naught but those two colors, was looking down upon Aldebaran at the foot of the hill.

Meeting her black eyes, the moment her beauty, evident even at a distance, scorched his retinas, Aldebaran was convinced that this was the Witch who had scorched him to the point of believing in his own irrationality.

For Aldebaran, this was a being who gave rise to countless indescribable emotions within him.

Aldebaran: "—Teacher."

Real. She was real. Here. She was really here. Existed. She had certainly existed here.

The Witch, the Castle of Dreams, Aldebaran's past: none of them were delusions made up by Aldebaran, unable to find a place in the world of the sane.

Aldebaran: "Teacher… hk."

There were so many things he wished to say to her. There were countless things he wished to tell her.

The words he wished to exchange with her, numbered far greater than the stars in the night sky.

Only, above all else, Aldebaran had wished to share his feelings with the Witch, his feelings of having survived, and finally reuniting with her after many, many long years.

With those impatient feelings in his chest, Aldebaran hastened towards the Witch atop the hill—

Witch: "—Aldebaran."

The leg with which he was about to step forth, was halted by that call.

The voice of the Witch he had continued to desire, to long for, to year for, was one filled to the brim with emotion—such was not the case. Aldebaran's leg had ceased for a different reason entirely.

The coldness of that voice, of Witch's gaze as it fell upon him, its sharpness, had caused him to freeze.

Aldebaran: “T-Teacher?”

Dominated by unease, Aldebaran halted his step as the Witch gazed upon him in silence.

She was ever eager to learn, a bundle of curiosity, the very incarnation of a thirst for knowledge. But, that which currently dwelled in the Witch’s black gaze, was decidedly different from that of the Witch whom Aldebaran had known.

With a form Aldebaran knew, with a voice Aldebaran knew, she ought to have been the Witch Aldebaran knew, and yet, her very nature was decidedly different.

The reason for that, that cause, the truth was—

Witch: “—The Witch of Greed.”

In response to the misgivings and anxieties Aldebaran held, that was the Witch’s answer.

Aldebaran: “—Ah.”

As the Witch spoke that and not a word more, her black eyes emotionlessly gazed over Aldebaran as if testing to see how he might respond, just as though he were some sort of lab rat.

He understood. He intuitively felt it. —He was convinced.

The woman before his eyes, was certainly the very Witch who had spent the same time alongside Aldebaran. And in a sense, that Witch had ended up being lost to eternity.

She had become compatible. The Witch had become compatible.

It required selfishness, yet no matter how much she yearned for it, she had never been able to make it her own, the qualification to become complete as a Witch in the truest sense—she had become compatible with the Witch Factor.

The Witch had been reduced. —Reduced from the one who guided Aldebaran, to the Witch of Greed.

Aldebaran had been defeated in the battle he could not afford to lose, and as compensation for that, the Witch had been placed on the verge of death.

On that boundary of death, after parting ways with Aldebaran, the Witch had been chosen.

—In exchange for her sincere love, she had been chosen by the qualification to become inhuman, thereby gaining the power needed to grant her wishes.

Witch of Greed: "—Why, must love fade?"

He did not know. The answer to the question that the Witch of Greed had voiced, Aldebaran did not know.

Only, there was one thing that he knew for certain.

Aldebaran: "Teacher… no, Witch of Greed, Echidna."

Witch of Greed: "…"

Aldebaran: "I, no matter what—will definitely kill you."

—Aldebaran had lost everything. Everything, save for his life.

Vic.ll20

Chapter 50:
Decisive Battle on the Ice

1

The hexacolor radiance that had pierced heaven and earth, gradually unraveled and faded away.

The sky that had faded to a dull gray slowly regained its natural color, and before long, as if having recalled why it was called blue, the azure sky began to clear.

Roswaal: “…”

With such scenery before him, Roswaal saw tears falling from the eyes of Ezzo beside him.

Whether they were of joy or vexation, it was clear that he had been overcome with emotion. Although it had taken two people to perform, Roswaal and Ezzo had nevertheless accomplished a great feat engraved for the first time in the history of magic.

The utmost extremity of magical control allocated into groupings of four and two colors, perfect formulation of a technique that did not permit any gaps whatsoever, and the ultimate harmony that could not have been manifested were there to have been a lag of even an instant—that, had surmounted the Divine Dragon’s dragonhalo.

Roswaal’s diligent studies and Ezzo’s research: if either were to have been missing, this hyper magic would have never been realized.

However—

Ezzo: “One day I’ll… I’ll even manage to manifest this technique by myself…!”

Even as Ezzo bombasted while shedding ceaseless tears, Roswaal smiled at his demeanor.

Neither was it out of exasperation, nor was it in sarcasm. —Indeed, that was the very essence of a magician.

Visualization was important in magic. If it could be visualized, then anything could be accomplished: that was magic.

Roswaal: “Isn’t that right, Teacher?”

As Roswaal muttered those words, his body began to tip over, and was about to collapse onto the ground. Ezzo immediately reached out to try to support him, but alas, given how immensely exhausted he was, he collapsed first.

Then, as the falling Roswaal seemed like he was about to crush Ezzo under him—

Clind: “—Made it in time. Good news.”

At a precarious juncture, that calm voice and those strong arms successfully saved Roswaal from falling down, and Ezzo from being squashed.

Roswaal: “…”

Glancing at Clind as he was supported by him, Roswaal let out a breath.

Having soared through the skies during the battle, it was the versatile steward who had gone so far as to shatter a star before returning to them. At some point he had put his monocle back on and retracted his black horns. However, it appeared as though he had not managed to entirely restore his perfect, everyday appearance, and thus was a rather unusual form with disheveled clothing.

Roswaal: “Even so, outside of your butler uniform, you are mostly unharmed, dragonkin truly are overpooowered~.”

Clind: “Master, if I may be so bold as to correct you. It is not because I am a dragonkin, but because I, as the dragonkin of the Divine Dragon, am simply special. Assertion.”

Roswaal: "…So you really are quite proud after all? It was your receptacle's fault that we've ended up like this, you know?"

Ezzo: "Don't point at me when saying that! It is merely that I cannot stand up because my back… no, because my entire body has gone limp!"

Having fallen face-first, Ezzo was unable to stand up, and yet did not admit defeat. As if to express sentiments of lament, Clind shrugged his shoulders at that demeanour, but truly, it was a wonderful quality.

Roswaal: "You've changed. You used to be more of a transcendent, detached type."

Clind: "In that case, I could say the exact same words to you. Return. —Were you not the one who was supposed to be clever and underhanded, content to remain a mere mediocre magician? Confirmation."

Clind narrowed his eye across his monocle, having perfectly guessed Roswaal's thinking.

Certainly, he had intended on that. And yet, Roswaal had not done so.

Getting back up after having failed, he had enacted a recklessness he never imagined he ever would.

But, that was—

Roswaal: "It's simply that I realized something… That all these days, I haaadn't~ been walking alone after all."

Clind & Ezzo: "…"

At Roswaal's answer, Clind fell silent. For some reason, Ezzo did too.

Roswaal: "Though perhaps that reason is a bit too obviooous~."

While only natural for Clind, with whom he had been acquainted a long time, when hyper magic had been invoked a moment ago, his consciousness had been on the verge of blending together with Ezzo's.

There, Roswaal had failed to fully conceal his own sentiments and prayers, after all.

Roswaal: "Speaking of that, I am quite accustomed to phenomena such as intermingling of the consciousness, but how did you manage to remain fine, Ezzo-kun? Normally, you would end up going insaaane~."

Ezzo: "Don't speak of such frightening matters so casually…! Likely, it is a boon of the Books of the Dead."

Roswaal: "The Books of the Dead, of the Pleiades Watchtower?"

Ezzo: "Indeed. While I was on standby at the Watchtower, I read over a dozen volumes of the Books of the Dead, but in order to do so I had to learn the necessary technique of closing off my heart…"

Clind: "I see. This is a magician. Understanding."

He somewhat felt like Clind had settled on a bit of a rude conclusion, but he would not touch upon it here. After all, Roswaal did not think Ezzo had done anything particularly strange.

Regardless, that which they ought to prioritize right now—

Clind: "Master, we have certainly fulfilled the duty with which we have been entrusted. Completion. However…"

Roswaal: "Ah, I'm awaaare~."

As Clind left his words half-finished, Roswaal silently breathed out and looked into the distance. The same direction as both Clind, and the grounded Ezzo—he cast his gaze beyond that horizon.

During the battle against the Divine Dragon, the rocky wasteland that had been completely terraformed from before, further beyond even that, the final destination of the Aldebaran Troupe—

Roswaal: “—The Grand Mogolade Geyser.”

Flashing through Roswaal’s mind as he muttered, was the final offensive of magic and Dragon that had sundered heaven and earth.

As the Divine Dragon had sent the dragonkin up to rise and intercept the star crashing down from the heavens, placed on the scales were two options: that of eliminating the two magicians who were weaving hyper magic, and that of fulfilling its own role.

It would assuredly win, such arrogance did not even slightly exist within the Divine Dragon at that moment.

Hence, the Dragon followed the conviction of the personality dwelling within its dragonhusk, and selected one of the two options—through its unleashed breath, it fired at an enormous opening in land far removed from the battlefield.

It was unclear why the Aldebaran Troupe was headed towards that location.

But, there was no chance that the Divine Dragon’s deed was unconnected to the Troupe’s objective, and even knowing that it would be defeated if it did so, the Divine Dragon prioritized firing its breath at that opening.

The meaning brought about by that action, would surely be verified from this point forward.

All that remained—

Roswaal: “—Is whether or not those you have cultivated will be able to surpass the opponent, Subaru-kun.”

2

—Irregular.

Rem recognized that this was the role expected of her, and the duty she ought to fulfill.

By utilizing the extraordinary Authority of “Turning Back Time”, Al had surmounted every single obstacle that stood in his way—in order to stop him, what was necessary were irregulars.

???: “Indeed, that helmet bastard’s Authority’s a fearsome thing. Frankly, even in all my years, I’ve rarely come across such an utterly irrational power. —But, no matter how powerful the ability, the one who’s gotta wield it ain’t nothin’ more than a human.”

???: “Hit that helmet bastard with countless things that he’d never expect, and keep on gettin’ ‘im ta use his Authority. The time he can turn back only goes so far. Overwhelm ‘im, overwhelm ‘im, ‘n overwhelm ‘im till ya take ‘im down.”

???: “If ya whittle away his remaining strength, even the helmet bastard’ll make an irreparable slipup. —That’ll be how ya snatch victory against that helmet bastard.”

Those were some words of advice from Rom-jii, who had once nearly driven Al into a corner.

In response to Rom-jii’s suggestion, those who were well-versed in tactics—Ram, Roswaal, and Clind—did not object. Therefore, Rem had full faith in that advice.

What they needed to do was bombard Al with enough unexpected situations until he broke. And if a contest of endurance was required, then Rem was not someone to be underestimated either.

After all—

Rem: “—After all, I’ve gotten to watch that person up close.”

If one were to ask what Rem’s best shot at seizing victory was, it would have been that.

Perhaps it was fortunate that Rem had been forgotten by everyone until very recently. During that interval bereft of Memories, the interactions she’d had with Al in the Empire could hardly be described as extensive. And if she was going to delve into her points of contact with him before that, in regards to the Royal Selection, it was even less so.

But, that was precisely the reason why Rem's actions had the potential to betray his expectations.

However—

Rem: "YAHHHHH!!"

Roaring, Rem swung her arm out with her full strength, and following closely behind, the unleashed iron ball ferociously streaked through the air.

The spiked iron ball spun around as it aimed directly for its target: the red-haired shinobi, Yae Tenzen—with the stage set as the five-thousand meter tall Agzadd Canyon, the battle raged on as they plummeted through the air, transitioning to the next phase with this prodigious shinobi as the opponent.

A discus of ice had been created in the air, serving as a platform for their contest of strength.

This was the result of Rem and Emilia working together to impose an irregular situation, but the very fact that they had been forced into such a scenario was frustrating.

It wasn't just Al's group that encountered an irregular. They had as well.

Rem: "…"

With a roar, a sharp, heavy strike cut through the wind.

The menace of that spiked iron mass, no matter how sharp the opposing blade, was not something that could be repelled even by something like bundling fine threads together. It surged forth in one swift motion towards the irregular Yae.

Yae: "—Hk."

Letting out a small noise at the approaching threat, Yae abandoned any attempts at interception and evaded with a cartwheel. Passing right by her as she rolled across the ice disk, the iron ball flew through the air in futility—

Emilia: “Eiyah!”

A sharp, almost carefree shout, met the iron ball with a resounding bang.

It was the pleasant sound of Emilia, standing on the other side of Yae, kicking the iron ball hurtling toward her with her feet clad in boots of ice. Emilia’s long, slender leg swiveled, and the iron ball was forcibly bounced back—chasing after Yae’s slender figure as she fled with a cartwheel.

Just like that, the iron ball mercilessly sunk its fangs into Yae’s side —

Yae: “Not gonna happen.”

Immediately after saying that, Yae pressed her hands against the ice disc while performing her cartwheel, and peeling up its surface using her steel threads to cover herself, it became a shield that intercepted the iron ball hurtling toward her body.

Of course, it was too thin a shield to completely stop a single blow. It would crack in half a second, snap after another quarter, and the spikes would pierce the other side after another eighth, so when exactly one second had passed, it would have fully broken through.

But, that single second was more than enough for the agile shinobi to make her next move.

Emilia: “No way?!”

And, it was Emilia who let out a cry of surprise. However, Rem was of the same frame of mind.

In their line of sight, after having evaded the pursuit with an impromptu ice shield, Yae set her bare foot on the fully extended chain of the Morningstar with a light leap, dashing across it in one fluid motion.

Emilia was stunned by the acrobatics and balance, while Rem was equally amazed by the footwork over the chains that conveyed no sense of weight whatsoever and yet the surprises kept coming. —

Together with a swing of Yae's arm, blades of ice and stone rained down one after another from above, targeting the two of them.

Emilia: "These are—"

Twenty seconds prior, Emilia and Al had forged these armaments of ice and stone in the air during their battle, leaving them suspended there. Yae had shot her steel threads up towards the heavens to bring them down, repurposing them as a perilous rain.

Emilia: "It's because I didn't clean up properly!"

Rem: "Failing to clean up properly goes for Al-san as well!"

Yae: "Let's just say that we both share the hardship of having masters who are bad at cleaning up after themselves, alright?"

Reflection, follow-up, and provocation all piled up, leaving Rem and Emilia scrambling to deal with the falling daggers. Emilia fended them off with her twin ice blades, but Rem was in trouble.

Her right hand was occupied by the Morningstar, which was currently being used as Yae's foothold, so she could not carelessly withdraw it. She had no choice but to defend with her unarmed left hand alone.

Rem: "Won't—"

Make it in time; it happened the moment she had resolved herself to tank the bombardment. —Someone gave a push to Rem's shoulders, and that same someone was impaled through the chest by a falling stone sword.

???: "…"

Rem's eyes widened at that sacrifice, furthermore her surprise deepened when she saw who had done it. The gallant figure, pierced through the chest, yet still bravely giving Rem a thumbs-up —

Rem: "—Subaru-kun!"

Before Rem’s eyes as she unwittingly let out a cry, it was Natsuki Subaru—or rather, an ice puppet bearing his likeness, that had been pierced through the chest. The exquisitely crafted ice Natsuki Subaru shielded Rem, flashing a brave smile as if he were the real thing, before collapsing.

Yae: “Uwehh~? That just now, don’t tell me that was Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. —And not only that, Subaru isn’t alone either!”

Immediately after she responded to the frowning Yae, six figures leapt out from behind Emilia. Each was an ice statue identical in appearance to the Natsuki Subaru who had just collapsed.

All of them so filled with individuality that it seemed as if they each possessed their own will, pulled a weapon from the ice disk where they had been lodged and leapt simultaneously towards Yae, who was running along the chain. If even one of those icy fingertips could reach her, it could serve as a stepping stone to corner the nimble Yae—

Yae: “Unfortunately, fighting a large number of people is what I’m best at.”

In an instant, twenty steel threads leapt forth, binding the ice Natsuki Subarus. The threads tightened around their necks, torsos, arms, and legs, mercilessly tearing the six bodies apart.

Emilia: “Subaru—!!”

Rem: “Subaru-kun!!”

The cries of Rem and Emilia overlapped as the ice Natsuki Subarus were reduced to pitiful wreckage.

Beyond the scattered fragments of the shattered ice statues, Yae continued running along the chain, heading straight for Rem below. In a split second decision, Rem released the Morningstar’s handle, robbing Yae of support from her foothold. As the shinobi would surely flail about in the air, Rem twisted her body and attempted to deliver a powerful back kick—

Yae: “As expected, I’d rather not get hit directly by an Oni’s kick.”

As Yae spoke, she released the tension in her knees to compensate for the bend in the chain; a movement that Rem glimpsed in the corner of her eye.

Yae dropped her hips downlow, maintaining perfect balance midair as the lethal thread released from her fingertips looped around Rem’s neck. Her head would be sent flying off, or she would be strangled to death—just before that could happen, under Yae’s feet, the chain snapped taut, defying her expectations.

Yae: “Wha…”

Yae’s eyes opened wide, and she instinctively flicked the chain with her toes and leaped away; nothing less could be expected from her. Her gaze caught sight of what had pulled the Morningstar’s chain in Rem’s stead.

Having been the first one to fall after being pierced through the chest with a sword, it was an ice Natsuki Subaru. —The ice Natsuki Subaru, who had never given up on the fight even after collapsing, had saved Rem.

Truly, this person was always doing reckless things for the sake of someone else—.

Yae: “It’s not even the real thing, you know!”

Rem: “Even if it’s not!”

As Yae curled her lips, Rem’s full-force back kick drove straight into the center of her chest.

3

—Irregular.

Yae recognized that obstructing this was the role expected of her, and the duty she ought to fulfill.

Within Yae, the assessment of Al as a dreadful, capricious monster would not be overturned. —But, there were irregulars piling up that would serve to exhaust and burden him.

???: “That’s the thing, yeah? Even I’ve ended up on the verge of death many times quarrellin’ wit’ those above myself, ya see? I’m sick ‘n tired of the fact that this world’s fulla nothin’ but monsters. —But, I’m the one who’s still kickin’ when all’s said ‘n done, so it means there ain’t nobody who can’t be killed.”

???: “When both sides’re performin’ their best, there ends up bein’ a gap that’cha can’t do nothin’ about. ‘N so, in order ta bridge that gap bit by bit, we’ve got our underhanded techniques untiringly refined ta perfection.”

???: “If ya can rob yer opponent of their ability ta perform flawlessly, the opportunity ta chop off the heads of those above ya will come around. —That’s the blood-reekin’ secret ta our success in life.”

That was the advice of the Vicious Old Man, the village chief who had instilled Yae with the way of life and techniques of the shinobi.

In regards to those ideas of the village chief, Yae had no objections. But, she had surprisingly few opportunities to test them. After all, most of Yae’s opponents were weaker than her. She would not lose to them, let alone ever engage them in a head-on fight.

The first defeat she had ever suffered was against Al, and it fundamentally distorted Yae’s way of being. Even now, merely being near him would cause her entire body to be filled with dread, and she wished for him to disappear even a second quicker. For that purpose, there was no other option but to have Al accomplish that which he desired, that which he wished for.

That was why—

Yae: “—I don’t wanna let anyone who can corner that person get near him.”

Distorted, twisted, full of contradictions. Yae was well aware that those things applied to her.

But there was no helping it. Yae liked spicy things and did not really care for sweet things. But, those were dispositions she was born with, and a predetermination that she could not alter herself.

Because she had been born into such a self, she would continue to live whilst staying true to that self.

Yae had her own ideal way to end her relationship with Al.

In order to accomplish that, Yae's contradictory way of doing things was to eliminate the irregulars.

However—

Yae: "—Hk."

Receiving a direct kick from the horned girl named Rem, Yae stifled the cries from deep within her creaking body, maneuvering her body to disperse the impact through her arms and legs. The shinobi techniques that transmitted one's will down even to their muscles and internal organs allowed for a means of survival.

But, even when that was applied, it did not equate to a complete negation of damage. The tips of her hands and feet went numb.

It was not as though she had underestimated the power of the Oni. However, for Yae, who could discern the capabilities of an opponent by observing their posture and the way they utilized their arms and legs, the Oni clan's trait of dramatically increasing their physical abilities by absorbing the surrounding Mana with their horn far surpassed her expectations.

In addition—

Yae: "Emilia-sama's adlibs really are quite troublesome, aren't they~?"

Bearing those bitter sentiments, Yae muttered with an expression still harboring some leeway.

In truth, they had been quite effective, but she could not afford to relay that. Shinobi would never relinquish information to their opponents. If they did, it would have been fabricated information for the purpose of manipulation.

With that level of kickback, not only Rem, but even Emilia would have been able to see that Yae had been dealt a considerable amount of damage. If Yae were to still act calm in spite of that, it would be in human nature to hesitate in pursuit.

Rem: “Emilia-sama!”

Emilia: “Yes! We continue!”

However, that was only if the opponent was proficiently adept in the ways of combat.

After delivering a blow, the duo paid no mind to Yae’s composed expression, and instead pursued hot on her tail after she was blasted away.

She would not call it thoughtless. It was desperate, and it was fervent. At present, that was the most troublesome thing.

Yae: “In that case, I’ll answer with my own nasty hand and footwork…!”

Counter; Yae greatly spread out her toes on both her right and left sides, and together with her hands, she controlled twenty steel threads.

The numerous swords that had pierced the glacial discus that was serving as the platform: snaring those constructs of ice and stone with her threads and flinging them up, she directly intercepted Emilia and Rem, poised for pursuit as they were.

Guided by the deftness of her digits, the daggers sliced through the wind as they whirled around, combining with the invisible, soundless steel threads to form a twofold assault of heavy and light, rampaging atop the ice as a rending gale that would confound any attempts to respond.

If one were to trace the path of the daggers with their eyes, the steel threads would entangle their limbs and rob them of their combat potential. Al had ordered her to abide by the “no-killing” rule, but even if she had to sever a finger or two, or even all four limbs, those requirements could be met as long as they retained their lives. With those thoughts in mind, Yae surged with a severing intent.

However—

Rem: “HAAAHHHH!!”

Emilia: “Yah! Tei! Tah!”

The defense of the howling Rem and fierce Emilia repelled Yae’s assault entirely.

A display of teamwork with Rem handling the daggers, and Emilia countering the steel threads. Rem coiled the chain of her favored iron ball around her arm and wielded it as an impromptu gauntlet while Emilia transformed her twin swords into a gigantic halberd; the pair perfectly defended against Yae’s attack with a certain coordination despite not having exchanged any words.

Yae: “How…?”

Their abilities were certainly enough to handle the visible daggers, but there needed to be an explanation to how they had managed to defend against the invisible steel threads.

Questioning that reason, Yae caught sight of a faintly white cloud of air as she muttered, and noticed. —A coldness biting at her skin, to an extent greater than that of being atop a great mass of ice whilst plummeting from an immensely high altitude.

Yae: “—Hk, ice fog.”

Miniscule ice particles fluttered down through her vision, twinkling to highlight the contours of the steel threads.

At the technique Emilia had employed to detect the invisible steel threads, and the sense needed to come up with it, Yae was struck with wonder. Then, even moreso by the possibility of things taking an even worse turn.

Emilia: “—Icicle Line.”

That instant, in accordance with the formulated incantation, the atmosphere began to let out a shrill screech.

The particles of ice that had made up the ice fog linked together with the particles adjacent to them, and the chill that had painted the world white bared its fangs with even greater ferocity. The first to fall prey to it, would be the steel threads that were lacking in mass.

The advantage granted by the steel threads’ greatest characteristics, weightlessness and thinness, would be crushed in a freezing world. Even if steel threads could slice through the winds, they could not slice through a blizzard. —Hence, her decision followed immediately afterward.

Yae brought the rings on her fingers to her lips, and at that instant, flames dashed across the steel threads, birthing an infernal explosion atop the ice.

A heat wave that jostled back even the icy gale, in exchange for relinquishing the steel threads’ strength of being “unseen”, clad them in the power to not succumb to the cold even amidst the icy fog.

Yae: “Please accompany me in this flaming dance!”

Letting her steel threads dressed in flame wreak havoc, the Crimson Sakura began to perform a dance whilst unleashing her scintillating thread attack. In contrast to that brilliant, fiery dance illuminating the canyon, the two who were bringing about the frigid ice and snow—no, counting the seven ice-sculpted bodies, nine silhouettes leaped forth.

Rem: “Invitation accepted!”

Emilia: “Sorry if I step on your feet!”

On the ice and armed with twin blades of frost, Emilia slid into

Yae's range as the latter manifested a maelstrom of infernal flame. She skated across the ice discus with boots of ice affixed with blades, and tracing a circular orbit, she moved in rhythm with the waltz of flames, commencing a gently curved, yet sharp and relentless onslaught.

Comparing favourably to the extreme tempo of Emilia's offense, Rem's decision to plunge forth whilst engaged in a scrum formation with the ice sculptures was more directly stunning to witness—

Rem: "AaahhHHHAAAAAAAA—!!"

Roaring out like a beast, Rem launched her bare white fists forward in a pummel.

Worthy of being described as a bombardment, what rained down seemed as though a storm of numerous fists; twisting, crouching, bending back, side stepping, and leaping over repeatedly, Yae evaded it as if merely flitting through the movements of her dance.

Yae: "If you're only using your bare fists, you'll spend eternity trying to catch up to me."

Even with the physical abilities of an Oni, if there were four limbs extending out of a torso, the flow of strength through the muscles was plain to see, and Yae's eyes would not fail to glimpse it. Rem's Oni strength was astounding, but it did not outpace Yae's reaction speed like the Sword Demon had.

With that logic, the irregulars that were actually betraying Yae's imagination were rather the seven ice sculptures of humanoid shape, reining things in with inscrutable movements during the intervals between Emilia and Rem's attacks.

At this rate, just as she had declared, Yae would end up spending an eternity engaging these two in combat—

Yae: "—No."

When Yae was on the verge of opting for the easy option, she put the brakes on herself.

This battlefield had been selected by her opponents. If she were to allow her opponents to have things their way, she would be playing right into their hands. In order to obstruct these irregulars, she would have no choice but to become the irregular to her opponents.

For the time being—

Yae: “This platform—”

A discus of ice that had been constructed in collaboration by Emilia and Rem, employed to split up Yae and Al. With its transparency harmed in proportion to the wind hitting it, Al’s figure on the other side of the cloudy white ice disk grew foggy.

Deeming this platform unideal, Yae dealt with Rem’s volley of punches, slipping under Emilia’s attack from behind, and used one of the ice sculptures trying to tackle her as a stool to leap into the air. Then, sending all the steel threads on her hands and feet in every direction of the discus, she exerted all of her might, and began to spin her body around.

As a result—

Yae: “I’m changing the situation. Is this also within your calculations?”

Guided by Yae’s might, the arena known as the ice discus was altered—as that disk began to spin like a top, a tremendous centrifugal force was applied to everyone on the ice.

With that, the battle transitioned to its next stage.

4

—“Irregewluhr”.

That had the meaning of something unexpected, and understanding that piling them up was their current greatest weapon, Emilia hyped herself up.

Whenever she got abruptly startled, Emilia would be unable to immediately think of the next action to take. The same thing could be said about Al. Al would have probably thought about a lot of things in order to plan what he was doing now, but he could not read all the way into the minds of Emilia and the others. That was the purpose of the “irregewluhrs”.

???: “Lia, whenever you’re in a pinch, you immediately try to use whatever strength you can to force your way through to some sort of solution, right? Though when that doesn’t work, you end up worrying over what you should have done to begin with… but, it wouldn’t be like you to come to a halt there, Lia, nor do I think it would suit you.”

???: “My adorable daughter has the power to smash through any problem with a bam. So, don’t just give up after the first go, how about you pile up a bunch of tries and do your best with that?”

???: “Don’t worry Lia, when the time comes, your body will naturally teach you whatever you might need in that moment. After all, you’re the daughter I’m so proud of, so you’ll inherit the most powerful genetics.”

Indeed, words that Puck had once spoken to Emilia were now affectionately resuscitated in her head.

These days, it was always Subaru’s words that she found to be reliable, but now that she knew Subaru was in danger, the first one to encourage Emilia was the teachings of Puck, as always.

Her joint offensive with Rem against Al was now in the midst of hard fought struggle due to the intervention of Yae—they had already passed two more engravings in the cliff, meaning they only had around thirty seconds left before they reached the bottom.

She felt extremely fretful. However, she could not afford to let it overwhelm her. This was not something she was particularly skilled at, but she needed to foist these feelings onto Al and Yae.

In order to stop Al—no, in order to properly talk things out with Al, this time for sure.

After all—

Emilia: "—Priscilla would have never desired this sort of thing."

The fact that voicing such a thing would be cruel to Al, Emilia knew.

Even now, thinking of Priscilla, it made Emilia's heart ache to voice her name, and she would feel a sensation of moisture in the corners of her eyes. She wanted to allow Al to vent those feelings.

In the past, Emilia had once been rescued by Al. Even without that, Emilia wished to become a source of strength for Al. Not just because they shared the same pain, it was not that, but as a more instinctual feeling, Emilia wished to save him.

That was why—

Emilia: "—Hk, Subaru!"

The heat-filled wind ferociously stirred the maelstrom, and the disk of ice revolved with Yae at its center.

Atop the disk of ice that had begun to revolve as vigorously as a spinning plate, the ice soldiers modeled after Subaru were unable to hold their ground after bearing the additional centrifugal force for a bit, and were subsequently blown away.

They would be unable to do a thing about being thrown off the face of the disk, and at worst would meet a fate of crashing and shattering against the cliff face of the canyon. But before that could happen, Emilia would not forget how one of them caught her hand just as she was about to stumble from the spinning, preventing her fall and saving her.

Emilia: "Rem is—"

Sliding across the revolving ice disk with skates of ice, Emilia tried to locate Rem in her vision, as she ought to have been cornered into a similar situation as her. No, what if she had been thrown off like the ice soldiers—then, before the worried Emilia erupted a thundering boom, and an even more enormous inferno.

The collision had occurred at the center of the disk, where Rem and

Yae violently crashed into each other, and flared into a fiery blaze.

Once again wielding the iron ball that she had cast into the sky earlier, Rem swung it down, and Yae skillfully warded off that downward strike by utilizing the tensile strength of threads bundled together. As a result, Rem's large, sweeping movement was halted, and there did Yae thrust her toes squarely at her.

Rem: "Kah."

Letting out a cry of pain, Rem was repelled back and tumbled down onto the ice disk, slipping towards the outer circumference.

With the rotation of the disk and Yae's leg strength, there were no means to stop Rem's sliding body. Unwilling to allow that to happen, Emilia tried to devise a way to reach her, but—

Yae: "—Looking away is forbidden."

As soon as she kicked off the ice, Yae's counterattack closed in as if thrusting towards her.

An attack with the stone dao that had been snatched up by a flaming steel thread, and the second-stage follow up of the thread slicing not far behind it; at the two-stage assault that spanned a large range and necessitated evasion, Emilia began to ruminate—she tried to, but recalling the words of the reliable Subaru and Puck, she abandoned that endeavor.

Relying on her senses more than her thinking, Emilia soared towards Rem, who had been flicked away. —Quite literally, she had caught wind in her wings and flown towards Rem.

Yae: "Wha…"

Staring in amazement, Yae was taken aback by that shocking display.

It was the first time she had left herself completely open, but unfortunately, Emilia did not have the leeway to focus her attention there right now. Only, flying directly towards Rem, she scooped her up right as she was about to fall off the edge of the disk, and soared up.

—Emilia did, with wings forged of ice upon her back.

Rem: "Th-Thank you, Emilia-sama… these wings are?"

Emilia: "Subaru drew a picture of them before. Beings that grow wings on their back, they're called angels. Subaru would talk about them every once in a while, but I tried my best and I did it!"

Answering Rem's question after carrying her up, Emilia softened her cheeks.

But then again, these were fake wings that only resembled them in shape. They could not be flapped like a real bird's wings, and at best could glide on the wind.

Moreover, it was something that could only be realized in this particular situation, an instance of success for an extremely rare magic. Subaru would probably be delighted if she were to show it to him, but for that they would also need to fall together from five thousand meters up in the sky.

For that reason as well—

Rem: "Emilia-sama! Let's retaliate!"

Emilia: "Yeah!"

Emilia spread her glacial wings as Rem gave a valiant utterance within her arms, and nodded in agreement.

Retaliate, the first thing that flashed through her mind upon hearing that word. Intuitively believing it to be the same thing that Rem was thinking of, Emilia lowered their altitude directly above the ice.

Detaching her wings there, Emilia and Rem entered freefall, and began to spin themselves—striking their heels down in unison, the horizontally rotating disk of ice was forced into a vertical gyration with all of their might.

Emilia: "…"

As payback for the ice disk having been made to spin horizontally, they made the ice disk spin vertically.

It was very simple, but it was an incredible payback that neither of them would have been able to accomplish on their own, and so having remained on top of the disk, Yae ought to have been stupefied. As the platform turned over from up to down, and then back to how it was before, and then immediately upside down again, to normal, to upside down and to normal over and over and over, she was jostled about.

To make matters worse—

Emilia: "There's also still the horizontal spin!"

As a result, the ice disk spinning on both axes became a random battlefield that did not trace any expected trajectory. It was just like the wobbly and shaky "atrakshon" of the training ground that Subaru and Garfiel had made behind the Roswaal Mansion.

And precisely due to thinking of that, Emilia speedily dashed across the ice disk "atrakshon".

Emilia: "Yah! Tah! Toh… soyah!"

While altering the direction of the vehement force within a single second, Emilia relied only on the sensations from the bottom of her feet to receive that momentum, and use it to propel herself forwards.

She was somewhat relieved that she had been able to run on it. On the other hand, she was worried about whether Rem was alright or not, but.

Rem: "There is no need to worry!"

As Rem responded so, she thrust her iron ball into the ice disk, and with that as the fulcrum she pulled herself forward with her chain in one go, aiming for the center. Though falling a bit short of Emilia's momentum, it offered a far more reliable sense of stability.

Contrary to that, Emilia had to ensure that her own footing did not slip.

Emilia: “That girl…”

Either atop the ice disk that had been disrupted both vertically and horizontally, or possibly below, desperately clinging on in order to not be shaken off, Emilia searched for the figure of Yae in order to pursue her, and then blinked her amethyst eyes.

There she was. Unmoved, Yae was right in the middle, the spot on the disk with the weakest centrifugal force. Even so, that would not change the fact that she had been jostled about, and as she seemed like she was about to stretch out her legs, Emilia realized.

Emilia: “…”

Having folded her knees and leaned into the ice disk, Yae had not been affected by the gyration of the platform.

The reason was clear—she had excavated the center of the ice disk with her steel threads, creating a unique safety zone immune to the effects of the rotation as she lay ready in wait for Emilia and Rem.

—That instant, steel threads alight with flame bundled together, and a blazing flash of weighty silver engulfed her vision.

5

—A blazing, silver flash of crimson.

If one were to have had a bird’s eyes view of that, and if they possessed knowledge of that technique, they would have likely realized that what Yae Tenzen had unleashed was a steel thread iaido, the art of swiftly drawing a katana and unleashing a lethal strike before immediately returning it to its sheath.

Nobody would have imagined that something so thin, lacking any consistent form, could take the shape of iaido.

Not to mention, even amidst the long and storied history of the shinobi, the Steel Thread Technique was a legendary art that none save the most gifted of geniuses could even grasp the fundamentals of, let alone master.

The fact that Crimson Sakura, the most gifted shinobi throughout all of history, had polished that deadly technique to even greater heights, was something that not a single person, not even Aldebaran, had been aware of.

Therefore—

Rem: "…"

—Therefore, the fact that Rem had managed to defend against the silver flash of flames, could not be described as anything short of a miracle.

Rem: "—Priscilla-san."

Spun by her lips was the name of the woman bearing one of the reasons that had guided Rem to this point, and had gotten her standing back on her feet.

And now, she was the benefactor who had left behind signs so that Rem could continue clinging on to life.

—She had felt it. Something she had not been allowed to detect a single time up to this point, Yae's definite murderous intent.

The emotions of humans dwelled within Mana.

Those who excelled at perceiving such Mana could easily guess the emotions of others. The reason why Spirits could vaguely sense the thoughts of other people, was thought to be corollary to this sensation.

Thus, absorbing the surrounding Mana with her horn via her Oni transformation, Rem felt sensations that she normally could not grasp with an acuity several times greater than usual.

Rem: "Until now—"

She had not felt it. —No, it was a sensation she would not have noticed even if she had felt it.

There were various factors that played into her gaining the ability to sense this. The fact that she had restored herself, as well as the sense of duty she carried to take back Subaru. But, the number one reason lay elsewhere.

The number one factor was the influence of the days she had spent together with Priscilla in the Fortified City of Guaral.

Amidst the time that was by no means long, Priscilla would often present Rem with words that seemed like riddles, granting her an impetus to deeply come face to face with her own self. At the time, due to frustrations with her inadequate healing magic and uselessness, she had merely attempted to superficially follow Priscilla's words, but.

Rem: "Now, I feel like I finally understand it just a bit."

Even now, she would not say that she knew all the answers to the words from back then. She would think of it as an assignment that would last for her whole lifetime. And, she would never be able to check her answers anymore, either.

That was sorrowful. Lonely. Pained her heart.

Rem: "—Right now, I wish I could speak with you. Priscilla-san."

Muttering, she closed her eyes. Then, when she reopened them, Rem's gifts as an Oni awakened in those eyes.

What she keenly perceived mixed in with the Mana was a faint enmity, murderous intent, will to attack—to the place where that seemed to be tinged with color, Rem sent forth her iron ball with pinpoint precision.

The silver flash of flames that had drawn near in an attempt to bisect both herself and Emilia; slamming her Morningstar into a position that could clear it away in a single swing, the certain death unleashed was transformed into non-lethality.

The shrill clangor of steel on steel rang out, and as a vehement recoil was delivered to her grip, Rem’s counterattack met Yae’s brandish head-on.

Yae: “…”

Slightly aghast at that reality, Yae nevertheless stooped down and prepared for her next move.

Countless rampaging silver flashes; perceiving the murderous intent surging through the air before they could be unleashed, Rem preempted them, firing her iron ball, chains, and magic forth as if to trace the lines.

In a series of moments that almost seemed to overlap into a single instant, Yae's onslaught was thwarted by Rem.

Ahh, a breath spilled from her heart.

Ahh, this is it, this is the true scenery that the Oni Clan had gandered. —A mere sliver of the domain Ram had reached by birth, now, at this moment over a decade later, the tips of Rem's fingers had finally caught on.

Emilia: "—Rem!!"

Springing up her iron ball, Rem continued to fend off the tempest of blazing threads of steel, and Emilia called out to her.

The sense of urgency loaded in that voice was not out of gratitude for having been protected, but rather a cry to inform her of a change in the situation, and one for the worse at that.

She caught Emilia in the corner of her eye, stretching out her long legs as she clung to the surface of the ice discus, darting her eyes around the revolving view.

Emilia: "Al's gone! I can't find him anywhere!"

Rem: "—Hk."

At her wit's end, Emilia's voice caused Rem to finally realize that Al had disappeared from her own sights as well.

Below the discus of ice, Al was supposed to be in a position where he could do nothing but spectate the battle above, but he was nowhere to be found in the sky made perceivable from the disk's rotation having eliminated all obstructions to vision.

As soon as Rem thought about where he could be, realization struck her like lightning. —She strained her eyes to the distant sky.

As they plummeted down the Agzadd Canyon, beyond that long, massive fissure in the ground, far in the distance from Rem and the others, a silhouette could be seen receding into the distance.

Similar to what Emilia had done earlier, with wings on his back—catching the wind with wings forged of stone, Al was gliding away at ferocious speeds.

That instant, what flashed through Rem's mind was her joint attack with Emilia onto the ice disk. That had made the platform spin vertically, and had advanced the battle against Yae into the next dimension, but—that had been used against them.

Rem: "When Emilia-sama and I linked up in order to kick the platform—"

At that time, Al had clung to the bottom side of the ice disk, and using the momentum of the rotation from Rem and Emilia's kick, he gained a propulsion to launch him straight up into the distant sky.

Rem: "…"

If Al were to escape like this, the entire operation would come crumbling down.

By piling on the irregulars, they had been whittling away at Al's reserves, but if things proceeded this way, they would be unable to arrive at the trump card they needed to play. That must not happen; making a split-second decision—Rem and Emilia exchanged gazes.

Emilia: "—Rem."

And, the will of Emilia which she ought not have been able to hear, was delivered to Rem through Mana.

The things that the Oni horn perceived were not limited to just omens of hostility. By also taking in unshakeable trust and expectation, Rem was bestowed with unlimited power. It was to the extent that, rather than simply taking in Mana, she might end up believing that bearing those emotions was actually the source of the power.

Indeed, she had certainly been granted strength, and so—

Emilia: “—I’m headed off!”

Rem: “Take care!!”

Raising herself up, and then swinging down on the ice disk with all her might, the vertical rotation of the discus began to rapidly accelerate, and receiving that momentum, Emilia was launched straight up into the sky.

Clad in the glimmer of ice, Emilia once again caught the wind with wings of ice stretching out from her back, soaring above the Agzadd Canyon towards the distant sky in pursuit of Al, she soared, and soared away.

Then, entrusting Emilia with the pursuit of Al—

Rem: “—I won’t let you go after them.”

Yae: “That’s my line~.”

—Passing by yet another marking in the cliff face of the Agzadd Canyon, there remained twenty seconds until they reached the floor.

The two maids left standing on the plummeting ice platform—Rem and Yae faced off; the final clash between Oni and shinobi, between the Hero’s Confidant and the Crimson Sakura, commenced.

Chapter 51:
Yae Tenzen

1

—A shinobi must never give their heart to anything.

In the shinobi village of the Vollachian Empire, that was an absolute teaching imparted upon those forbidden to lead any way of life other than that of a shinobi; it was an ironclad rule that demanded absolute obedience even more so than the law of iron and blood rooted in the vast lands of the Empire.

If they were to yield their heart to something, the honed blade known as shinobi would easily come to rust.

Therefore, any and all who took on the mantle of shinobi, without exception, etched that ironclad rule into their soul, abiding by it no matter the cost.

And despite that—

???: “Hey, yer that, ain’t’cha? Same like me, ya can do just about anythin’ without so much as a second thought, ‘n so life kinda loses its spark, dun’it? Wouldn’t it be fine ta keep at least a single somethin’ in yer heart then?”

When the village chief had spoken those words, grinning with a tidy set of teeth left in spite of his old age, Yae recalled wondering to herself where exactly the ironclad law of the shinobi had disappeared to, and experienced some intense feelings of irritation.

—Included among them, was a firm belief that she would never be able to live her life in such a way.

2

—The Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen, was an unparalleled genius of a shinobi.

That was an unshakeable fact, and something that even Yae herself was humbly willing to admit.

Those around her had lauded her as possessing the greatest talents the shinobi village had seen since its founding, loudly voicing their admiration that her potential might even rival that of the Admirer of the Kararagi City-States.

To tell the truth, Yae herself had earnestly wished for them to stop comparing her to such an outrageous individual, but setting aside those feelings of the person in question, Yae's talents drew out a frenzy from the people of the village.

In practice, if the thing known as talent was something that allowed for an almost prideful extent of shortcuts to be taken past the many hardships within a given field, then Yae unmistakably possessed the innate talents of a shinobi.

However, contrary to that evaluation harbored by those around her, Yae fiercely hated the "special" treatment she received.

That was akin to a physiological sense of rejection, a resistance towards the idea of being "special", so perhaps it was a phenomenon that ought to be labeled as a "Special Allergy".

It did not bother her when others were given special treatment, but the moment she experienced "special" treatment for herself, she was assailed by an unbearable sensation, and began wanting to abandon anything and everything. It was that sort of visceral rejection.

For Yae, who possessed this violent allergy towards "specialness", the ironclad law of the shinobi that the village chief had personally denied in the introduction, was something she had exceedingly high compatibility with.

To give one's heart to something, was to create a kind of "specialness" within oneself.

Since she had an allergy towards such "specialness", Yae could obey the ironclad rule of the shinobi without very much effort. Certainly, it could be said that she was a woman who had been born to be a shinobi.

But then again, that was one of the reasons why those around Yae were giving her “special” treatment, so it was truly quite a quandary.

—Now then, to begin with, the path walked by the shinobi was a steep one, and it was not something that could be easily accustomed to.

Only one of a thousand trainees would become a genin, only one out of a thousand genin would become a chunin, and only one out of a thousand chunin would finally become a jonin—such sentiments were commonly repeated due to how high the hurdles were. To this day, whenever Yae heard that example, she would think about how it would require a billion shinobi candidates.

Well, it was a good thing that the senior shinobi had such awareness of just how grueling the path was, to the extent that it made them want to use such ridiculous expressions. No matter the torture, it was in human nature to want to undergo it whilst knowing “this is meant to target this part” rather than suffering through it whilst wondering “what is the point of this?”.

And in practice, the process to complete a shinobi was undoubtedly the harshness known as torture.

Yae believed that the shinobi training, which commenced around the age a child first gained awareness of their surroundings, was more aptly described as child-abuse than it was torture, but the immorality that went into the makings of shinobi was a list that went on endlessly, so stumbling at the entryway would prevent this digression from progressing.

First of all, the candidates for shinobi trainees were mostly children who had been abducted from other places.

As mentioned previously, shinobi training began during the early stages of childhood, but the drills levied upon them were so inhumane and unreasonable that an abundance of them would end up dying in cold blood. For the sake of efficiency, instead of babies, they abducted toddlers who were at a suitable age to commence training right away. Here, the fact that the shinobi skipped straight past the most laborious infant stage revealed just how truly nasty their inhumanity was.

And so, the first thing that the abducted children were subjected to, above all else, was the disposal of memories.

It was said that the methods consisted of drugs, signals, and techniques that had direct influence over memory, but it was not entirely clear. Only, through these methods, the abducted children were wiped to clean slates, completely forgetting about their families and hometowns. Yae did not remember her parents' faces either, nor did she even know her own real name. "Yae", it was a name that she had only received later on, and until then she had simply been called "Red No. 8" in accordance with her hair color.

Those without aptitude would fail first at this memory disposal. For some, the memory erasure would not function effectively enough, and conversely for others, it would function too effectively, leaving them as useless husks; it was a mess right from the start.

And so, Yae, to the extent that she even thought herself heartless, completely forgot her past in an instant.

It had slipped away so effortlessly that even the one in charge of her memory disposal, Fujirou Tenzen, was left speechless, so much so that he told her about it afterwards. —Incidentally, this Fujirou would later go on to be Yae's namegiver, and was the previous Tenzen whose family name she inherited.

But even if he had the title of her namegiver, their relationship was an emotionless, obligatory one of instructor and pupil, familial only in name. From Yae's perspective, her impression of Fujirou more or less amounted to someone in the village with whom she had a high frequency of contact, who had also happened to bestow her with a name.

Regardless, forcibly robbed of their heart's foundations, they would become a white canvas to be painted at the mercy of the black brush known as the shinobi—once the children stripped of their past were prepared, the true essence of the inhuman training facility that was the shinobi village would begin: not merely strengthening of the flesh and muscles, but the very restructuring of the human body.

Destruction and correction of the bones in order to achieve mastery over a soft body and acrobatics surpassing human understanding; training to build up a resistance to poison by gradually advancing from small doses to lethal ones; daily routines comprised of learning the dangers of martial arts and shinobi tools by the pain they inflicted upon the body; and being tasked with meeting a quota of broken bones, torn-up flesh, and shed blood.

Peers who had grown cold, unable to see the next morning, were scattered all about; since that too was a teaching material for their training to grow accustomed to death, it was forbidden to bury them, and instead the putrid odor of those corpses rotting day after day was drilled into their minds, causing some to end up losing their sanity.

All those so-called dreadful drills were easily completed by Yae. — No, even for her, calling it easy would be a lie. Yae had faced adversity in her own way. But, it seemed to Yae that the adversity she had faced did not even amount to a single ten-thousandth of that which her peers had experienced.

If that could be called talent, then she certainly had talent.

The destruction and correction of her bones flipped the switches for pain perception within her, and the agony of the poison that seemed to melt and scramble her entrails was kept to a minimum along with her bloody urine and stool; just by laying fingers upon a shinobi tool, she acquired a mastery as if she had been exclusively wielding it for ten years, and after experiencing a martial art just once, she could use it to take down an opponent larger than herself, and would never be hit by it ever again. Only the smell of the dead bodies was tiring, but she got used to that in the end as well.

So after such happenings, the very young Yae had become the first one of a thousand at an unprecedented speed.

Fujirou: “—From this day onward, you are to call yourself Yae Tenzen.”

The day Fujirou gave her that name, was the day she had qualified to be a genin.

Unfortunately, she harbored no particularly strong feelings on the matter. After all, she had been treated differently from her other peers since the point she had been called “Red No. 8”, so whether she had a name or not did not have any particular influence on Yae’s self-perception. Only, receiving such “special” treatment made her feel itchy, and she had thought it bothersome.

—For what reason Fujirou had named her Yae, she knew not even to this day.

She had missed her chance to ask. By now, she had taken somewhat of a liking to it, and the Tenzen part also had a nice ring to it. It was far better than ending up with something like Yae Dunkelkenn through some sort of mistake.

Upon hearing that sarcastic sentiment from Yae, the village chief had burst out laughing “Kakakakka! Yer startin’ ta say some cheeky things, ain’t’cha?!”. Speaking of which, there was not a single person in the shinobi village who bore the same family name as the village chief, but whether that was because the village chief was a poor teacher or because he had abandoned his duties, was unclear.

The former seemed more plausible, so that was what Yae suspected.

Either way, even if she had gone from being called “Red No. 8” to Yae Tenzen, Yae’s path as a shinobi, as well as the very way the world felt to her touch, stood unchanged. —That which had changed was not Yae, but rather the environment that surrounded her.

—Unmistakably, that was the prime reason why Yae had come to detest “specialness” so much.

3

—Now then, the fact that Yae possessed a “Special Allergy” has already been mentioned, but for her, the youngest and fastest-promoted genin in history, a certain situation arose that caused this allergy to accelerate.

Ultimately, everyone in the village ended up recognizing Yae's talents and abilities, but upon qualifying to be a genin, there was one who grew enchanted by her promising future. —Fujirou Tenzen.

As her namegiver, and as the senior who provided her with guidance, Fujirou was completely enthralled by Yae's ability to take the first piece that he taught her, and extrapolate the next hundred or thousand pieces, let alone ten.

Namely, that was an act that ran counter to the ironclad rule of the shinobi to never give their heart to anything.

He was left with no choice but to forge the unparalleled genius, Yae Tenzen, into an extraordinary shinobi with his own hands. —Fujirou had ended up blindly obsessed with that sense of duty.

Fujirou: "You have more than enough talent for it. Why can't you understand that?!"

As Fujirou exclaimed so with bloodshot eyes, he harbored a fanatical belief in Yae's talents.

Day by day, she felt the eyes with which he looked at her tinged with more and more ardor, but the damage brought about by their eruption was far greater than what Yae could have imagined.

With Yae's "specialness" seared into his mind, Fujirou had arranged the "Crawling Bane"—a rite structured in the same manner as the Imperial Selection Ceremony that was used to decide the next Emperor of the Vollachian Empire; dragging in thirty genin who were the same rank as Yae at the time, it was a reckless folly capable of spelling the demise of the village.

The genin were taken out to a forest far removed from the village, and there they were ordered to fight to the death until only one last person remained standing; without questioning those directions from their superiors, lives were expended in futility.

Just as Fujirou had hoped when he devised the rite, the only one still standing in the end was Yae Tenzen.

However, she never once took up the offensive against the others, instead using the tactic of turning the tables on any opponent who came after her, and in the end, when she let her final peer get away when he pleaded for his life, Fujirou had gotten exceedingly incensed.

—No, to be precise, it was not just him, it was all of them.

Enthralled by the talents of Yae Tenzen, Fujirou was not the only one who had gone astray.

Inspired by his words, or perhaps by directly witnessing Yae's growth, there were a great number of people who wished to have Yae shoulder their distorted expectations by holding the ritual they had named the "Crawling Bane".

Yae had betrayed the expectations of those who blindly believed in her; however, rather than causing their ardor to subside, their fervor only intensified, explosively flaring up.

If they had simply dealt with Yae after she betrayed their expectations, and then took their own lives, it would have still been somewhat endearing.

But, for those who had steeled their mistaken resolve to repeat the "Crawling Bane" as many times as necessary until Yae was established as the model of the ideal shinobi they desired, there no longer existed any remedy.

Fujirou: "You are, the one who shall overturn the very way a shinobi ought to be…!"

Collapsing as he spoke those words, Fujirou had died, believing in Yae's potential until the bitter end.

The throat repeating that grating assertion was gouged out, and ironically enough, the beautiful blossom of snow white sakura petals began to flutter down upon the corpses of her namegiver and his foolish comrades, face-down in a pool of their own blood.

Yae recalled those blood-stained cherry blossoms alongside an indescribable sense of futility.

???: "—Ohoh, now this here's quite the big deal, eh? Has a lass whose rump's still as pale as snow really gone 'n taken down all of 'em even tho' there were even jonin in their midst?"

Having hastened to the scene a bit later, the village chief gazed over Yae and the corpses of the young men surrounding her, and then let out those carefree remarks. It seemed like the secret operations of Fujirou and his allies had been grasped by the higher-ups of the village, so regardless of the outcome of the "Crawling Bane", there likely would have been no future for them.

She did not want to entertain the idea that the reason for this delayed response despite having such a grasp on the situation was because they had decided on leaving it entirely up to Yae to deal with the disruptive elements to the village.

Village Chief: "So, all of 'em ended up dyin'?"

And although that suspicion was not the reason, Yae lied in response to the village chief's question.

The reason why Fujirou and the others had been displeased, was the fellow genin whom Yae had turned a blind eye towards when he had pleaded for his life. —She concealed the fact that not only had she allowed him to flee the "Crawling Bane", but to run away from the shinobi village entirely.

That peer had suggested "Ahh, in that case, you also gonna flee with me?" to her, but Yae firmly refused his offer. It was not that she had wished to remain in the village, but that she simply had not wished to stand alongside him.

In terms of both skills and talent, Yae was vastly superior. And yet, her instincts were alarming her. —If death were to ever come for Yae, it would be when she stood by his side.

Genin: "—My bad, my bad."

And so, when that peer of hers took his leave and gave those parting words, she sensed his desire to eliminate every person who knew of his existence, but thanks to him being rational enough to abandon that goal, Yae and that fellow genin made it out of this "Crawling Bane" as the final survivors.

Because it ended without her being the sole survivor, Yae wondered if her own status as "special" might erode even if just a little bit, and as she thought such things.

Village Chief: "Well then, let's start headin' back now. —Crimson Sakura."

Turning his back towards her, the village chief called Yae by that alias for the first time.

Until the bitter end, Yae had not known why Fujirou had named her Yae. But, the reason why the village chief had called Yae by that alias was clear even without needing to say it.

—After all, on the night brimming with excessive shinobi deaths, the full bloom of the snow white sakura was lavishly dyed in blood.

4

—The Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen, was an unparalleled genius of a shinobi.

As the youngest to ever be promoted to jonin, that perception of her had become widely known as something unshakeable, so Yae's "Special Allergy" had worsened to a point beyond any help.

To Yae, being treated as "special" by others was something of a curse, a menace, an abhorrent interference that brought nothing but negative influences onto her life.

Things like expectations or hopes often had a strong positive impression, so there were far too many people in this world who would wave them around while blind to the fact that they could become blades gouging deep into others. Moreover, blades wielded blind made it difficult for both aggressor and victim to notice the wounds, truly a nasty characteristic.

Such things had held a great deal of sway over her life thus far, and Yae was completely sick and tired of it.

???: “Hey, yer that, ain’t’cha? Same like me, ya can do just about anythin’ without so much as a second thought, ‘n so life kinda loses its spark, dun’it? Wouldn’t it be fine ta keep at least a single somethin’ in yer heart then?”

And so, when the village chief said those things to Yae, despite being fully aware of the blades, he seemed truly odious.

The village chief was personally advising her to do something like break the ironclad law of the shinobi. She could not think him sane. To begin with, Yae did not seek anything like a spark in life. Such a thing would be a superfluous accessory.

A spark: namely, that was the act of harboring expectations for one’s own abilities, or placing hope in one’s own future. —It was none other than believing in one’s own “specialness”, that was undeniably Yae’s landmine.

Hence, Yae deliberately distanced herself from the image of the ideal shinobi that everyone seemed to be placing their hopes and expectations in.

That was the exact opposite of the ideal shinobi image that Fujirou Tenzen had staked his life attempting to complete—a frivolous attitude, speech and conduct that left nowhere to grip onto, and a friendly demeanor that would absolutely never get along with anyone.

Bearing such a facetious humanity, Yae Tenzen’s personality took shape.

She did not wish to be misinterpreted, so she would assert it here: this was the natural consequence of Yae spurning the notion of “specialness”, and was by no means something inspired by the village chief’s own nature.

Without getting deeply involved with anyone's life, without ever confronting anyone head-on, and without being held dear by anyone.

That was the very worldly wisdom that the Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen had arrived at, her life philosophy—

???: "—Surely you do not misconstrue that disgraceful way of being for your own nature, do you?"

Addressed in such a manner when the two of them were all alone, Yae held her breath before the crimson beauty.

Yae, with her "Special Allergy" having worsened, hated being treated as "special" by others, and at the same time, had developed a keen sense of smell for specialness within other people. In that regard, the woman with whom Yae was now in close contact was an individual who seemed to be the embodiment of nothing but "specialness", both inside and out.

But then again, her specialness was so glaringly obvious to anyone that having a keen nose was hardly necessary to ascertain it.

—The Bloody Bride, Priscilla Barielle.

For Yae, who had completed all sorts of missions as a shinobi, the days spent together with that woman who was fondly called the Sun Princess by the local population were quite striking, and profoundly memorable.

Originally, Yae's infiltration as a maid in Priscilla's vicinity had been something set into motion by Chisha Gold, one of the Empire's Nine Divine Generals.

Just what sort of significance a woman participating in the Royal Selection of the far away Kingdom of Lugunica had to the Empire, was not something Yae had been informed of, nor was it something she had even thought to question.

The essence of the shinobi was to obey commands without asking too much, and Yae considered that a preferable trait. The only one who would brazenly disobey was the village chief, and since Yae was not the same as him, she remained obedient.

That said, it was a bit of an illogical and enigmatic mission.

Fundamentally, her job was to monitor the target and report on her actions; she had not received any particular instructions for disruption or sabotage, nor was it simply a matter of a quick assassination. Since Yae had been designated to this task, there was no doubt that they were counting on her befitting skills and ability to return alive, but while she was undercover at the mansion, her days as a simple maid went on monotonously. —She was loath to say it, but this felt like a bit of a waste of the genius shinobi that was the Crimson Sakura.

In practice, the innate talents Yae had been bestowed were not just that of a shinobi, there was an all-purpose nature to her that allowed her to easily master most other things. And so, flawlessly mastering all the duties of a maid, Yae's infiltration of the Barielle Mansion was a job just as easy as all her other missions up to this point.

However, only when she interacted directly with Priscilla, did she need to pay extra careful attention.

Throughout her career, Yae had gotten all sorts of opportunities to glimpse important figures.

Counted among those were the White Spider who had ordered Yae on this mission, and for the most part, her village chief known as the Vicious Old Man was also an important figure in the Empire. She had also seen His Excellency the Emperor from a distance—back then, the Blue Lightning standing next to the Emperor had locked eyes with her and given a wave of his hand, leaving her with the trepidation that there would always be somebody on a higher level than her.

And so even from Yae's perspective, having encountered those sorts of first-rate individuals, Priscilla's insight had a somewhat unfathomable quality to it, making it impossible to anticipate just how much she had actually seen through.

Even though it should not have been possible, she had questioned many times if even her own identity as an assassin sent from the Empire had been seen through.

Only, if that suspicion were true, there would have been no reason to keep turning a blind eye to Yae, so her identity should have still been a secret. —But was that really so? Priscilla was so difficult to read that it was entirely possible that she would turn a blind eye even if she became privy to Yae's identity.

That could be called a disposition towards favouring danger without valuing her own life, or perhaps it could just be outright classified as the delusion she fully believed in without caring what anyone might think, repeating on a daily basis how the world would unfold however she wished it to.

Either way—considering it a misfortune, Yae pitied the "special" Priscilla.

Priscilla possessed exceptional beauty, of course, but she also harbored a bewitching allure that charmed others with her mannerisms, words, and even the manner in which she breathed; whether she desired it or not, that "specialness" would catch the eyes of all sorts of people, leave marks upon their lives, and stir their emotions.

A great number of people would likely place their hopes and expectations on her, only to be consumed by foul desires and emotions. —After all, even this pity that Yae felt, was something that had been brought about by the "specialness" possessed by that woman.

And as if reading right into Yae's heart, she had spoken the words mentioned prior.

Eyes cast down upon the book in her hands whilst sitting in her private room, just as Yae was serving tea, noticing how she did not pass even a single glance in her direction, Priscilla had suddenly spoken those words without any forewarning.

Regardless, as had been mentioned previously, Yae was always on guard when interacting directly with Priscilla. So even at this juncture, though she had received a bit of a surprise, she had managed to respond with her usual frivolity.

Mixing in a light playfulness, and acting as if she had no mind to earnestly grasp the meaning, she forged a smile.

And seeing Yae's unchanged attitude, Priscilla closed a single eye—

Priscilla: "—Someday, you too shall have no choice but to expend everything you have to offer. Be diligent, and keep mine words close at heart. Your preparations must be "perrfekt", yes?"

Yae never asked about the true meaning of those words.

Her shinobi instincts warned her that asking again might arouse suspicion. But, probably more so than that, Yae was loath to do so.

From the lips of the "special" Priscilla, she did not want such inconvenient words to be hurled at her.

For that reason, Yae did not grasp the true intent behind Priscilla's words.

Neither did she know the reason Fujirou had named her Yae, nor did she know the village chief's intentions in endlessly trying to get her to break the ironclad law of the shinobi to the point it felt like harassment; she knew nothing.

In order to avoid being treated as "special" by others, she continued to plug her ears and avert her eyes from all of that.

—After all, that was Yae Tenzen's life philosophy, not desiring to be "special", in order to not be desired as "special".

5

In the end, Yae's thinking turned out to be correct.

Having shone so radiantly, captivating great numbers of people with her flame-like, "special" way of being, even Priscilla had ended up laying down her life in those cruel and merciless lands of the Empire.

Thus, while fiery emotions with no place left to turn to scorched his soul, the one who had yearned for that “special” woman who was no longer among them, even now still wishing to repay her, was burning his life to naught in order to do so.

Yae Tenzen did not wish to live her life at the mercy of such “specialness”.

That was why, that was precisely why.

That was why, as soon as possible, she would rid this world of the “specialness” that had burdened her with such an undesirable fixation.

Unmistakably, that was the sole reason why Yae was willing to risk her life to assist the man abandoned by the “specialness” his heart had yearned for—

Yae: “—Hk.”

The discus of ice rapidly revolved on all axes without consideration for its surroundings, yet still using it as a platform whilst constructing the battlefield, Yae intercepted the incoming Oni girl—Rem.

A steel thread reeling out from her right hand dashed up vertically, and a steel thread from her left hand snagged a dagger to perform a horizontal sweep; the two varieties of precise, and difficult-to-avoid severing flashes pincered Rem from the front and behind.

—Due to the cooperation of her opponents, Yae had failed to stop Emilia from fleeing the battlefield.

Having grown wings of ice upon her back, Emilia received the momentum of the ice discus that had been forced into a spin, and caught the wind; chasing Al as he soared far off to a distant sky, she was rapidly gaining speed. As she got further from the two who could do nothing but plummet straight downwards head-first, she at last escaped the range at which a steel thread could still reach her.

It was not impossible to still use a thread to launch some projectile like a stone fragment or sword at her, but—

Rem: “Looking away is forbidden!”

With that, after countering the double layered attack from a moment prior by meeting the dagger with her chains, and bending down to evade the steel thread, Rem obstructed Yae, causing the chance to take such an action to slip through Yae’s fingers.

While gritting her teeth at that failure, Yae pivoted to getting away from Rem as she rushed her down, and using the steel thread she had sent out as a grip, she executed a wide turn, circling around to the other side of the ice discus,

Yae: “Isn’t it a bit unfair to become so formidable all of a sudden? For what reason—”

Rem: “—It’s love!”

Yae: “…Shouldn’t have asked!”

Chasing after Yae as she went over to the other side of the ice disk, Rem smashed through the ice by sheer force. Distancing herself at an apt medium range from the barbarity of the Oni girl whose vitality surged along with the brightness of the horn on her head, Yae’s footwork managed to sidestep the iron ball wielded by the stout arm, and sticking to the revolving platform, she spun around behind Rem.

It was a high velocity, but although there was a certain randomness to the direction of the ice disk’s rotation around its origin, the speed of rotation itself had a fixed rhythm to it. As long as she kept to that, there was no risk of losing the platform, and so Yae freely danced across the ice, leaping and bounding as if in flight.

And contrary to Yae’s magnificent mastery over the ice disk, Rem’s movements were plain and simple—

Rem: “Won’t let you do that…!”

As Rem firmly declared so, she struck the ice with a pointed hand, with the tips of her toes, and with the iron ball held close in her grip; using them as wedges to secure herself, she ferociously pursued Yae with beast-like movements.

Far removed from refinement or grace, the hunting style was like that of a savage carnivorous beast—and yet, she was fast. As Yae fled in a dance, the distance between the two of them was shortening in the blink of an eye.

Yae: “Aren’t you way too unconcerned with appearances, and isn’t that totally improper conduct for a maid?”

Rem: “Unfortunately, there is only one quality our master requires from his maids—utmost effort!”

Raising her face, Rem twisted her body with three of her limbs as anchors, utilizing the rotation of the ice disk to launch an attack of her iron ball with minimal movement. Its might was dispersed through the mobilization of the steel threads, but as she had needed to fire them directly to her side, Yae internally clicked her tongue.

A battle to decide on the best maid between the two factions—Yae did not have the leeway to joke about such things.

Superior in skill, Yae could even assert that she was three stages higher in terms of strength, but against Rem, Yae simply had a poor affinity. The Morningstar wielded by Rem was a weighty weapon, and those kinds of heavyweight attacks that aimed to guarantee a kill with a single blow were the most troublesome to defend against using steel threads.

The strength of steel threads was that they had the potential to defend against any attack so long as they were bundled and intertwined together, but that necessitated an adequate amount of time as well as a suitable number of threads. For Yae to defend against Rem’s blows, she needed to use at least seven fingers to guarantee safety.

If she was unwilling to do that, then she also had the option of dodging, but—

Yae: “The aim is way too accurate…!”

Despite how unstable this platform was, Rem was able to launch her iron ball in a way that came biting at Yae as if it were a great serpent.

Each throw followed a trajectory straight towards the exact middle of Yae’s body, and although she would not fail to defend against it even if she held her eyes closed, the rhythm of her own attacks was collapsing.

And to top it all off, the fearsome combat capabilities of the Oni Clan would now be thrown into the mix.

Rem: “RAHHHhhhhh!!”

With all four of her limbs planted in the ice discus, Rem’s entire body discharged red steam as she roared.

That was the result of the low temperature from falling thousands of meters from a high altitude, the Oni Clan trait of invigorating all the Mana surging through her body, and finally, rapidly regenerating from the lacerations given to her from Yae’s steel threads.

Until now, while Yae was evading Rem’s lethal blows, she had carved her with many wounds that aimed to render her incapable of fighting. But, none of them could outstrip the Oni’s regeneration.

And, above all—

Yae: “Sh—!”

Bringing her rings to her lips in a kiss, the steel threads were once again swallowed by tongues of flame.

That instant, after Yae had blanketed Rem’s vision in flame, she aimed for the neck of the enemy on the other side of this heat wave, and with a flick of her arm—with a speed nearing that of sound, the steel thread flashed as it aimed to perform a decapitation.

That was one of Yae’s original techniques that could not be found written down anywhere in a book of secrets, and was the fastest brandish possible amidst the Steel Thread Technique employed by Yae; something that Al might have called an “ultimate move”. She had confidence that this invisible thread attack of undiscernible range, a flash of absolute death, could vanquish any opponent. —And yet, Rem had avoided it.

And that was not just once, but twice.

Yae: “—Hk.”

In its initial reveal, it had been an attack that aimed to take out both Rem and Emilia at once.

Since that had been averted, this time, she aimed not just for the neck, but for the chest, unleashing the single flash so that it could not be dodged by the retraction of the head. It sliced through the wind as if to proclaim that it would not allow any fluke evasions—hence, the fact that Rem managed to avoid it was no miracle or fortuity. It was inevitable.

Rem had fully seen through Yae’s Steel Thread Technique.

The ice fog had already vanished from their surroundings, so this was a different method to how Emilia had perceived the steel threads based on how the ice particles were being sliced. Though, she had no way to confirm the exact principle behind it.

Yae: “Won’t let you do that.”

No longer keeping up the appearances that were meaningless to keep up, Yae muttered as she tensed the corners of her mouth.

Won’t let them do that. Won’t let them go. Won’t let them stop him. —Yae would thwart both Emilia and Rem.

Yae: “…”

Stretching out his wings of stone, Al had fled to the sky without waiting on the outcome of this battle.

Even if he had left her behind, Yae would not take that as him abandoning her. It was not impossible that he had abandoned her, but Al had a tendency to be frugal. He would not easily give up on the pawns and cards in his arsenal.

And so, Yae would take Al's breakaway as him entrusting it to her. She would interpret it as an order to stop the two who were chasing after him, no matter what it took.

Hence, Al had granted it to Yae. —A license to kill.

Yae: "—Even if it means killing you, I'll stop you."

I'll stop them, I'll stop them, no matter what it takes, I will stop them.

She would see to it that Al accomplished his objective. Anything that might get in the way of that would be removed. Everything was so that she could have Al, floundering after having lost Priscilla, who was his own "specialness", disappear from the world as soon as possible.

After all, if she did not do so, Yae Tenzen would be unable to return to the self who obeyed the ironclad law of the shinobi, to the self who would never give her heart to anything, and to the self who loathed being "special", who distanced herself from it at all costs.

6

???: "—Your stars were bad."

Indeed, the monster who had taught Yae Tenzen the meaning of dread, uttered those same words over and over again.

Her days at the Barielle Mansion, sent there as an undercover operative, abruptly came to an end.

Performing her daily maid duties, teasing the adorable butler apprentice, and joking around with the clownish Knight who did not receive any Knightly treatment; working for the tremendously dazzling Sun Princess had been not so bad.

But, Yae's own emotions would not matter in the slightest once she received the order. She would fulfill her duty and disappear without leaving a trace.

Thus, in order to carry out the assassination directive that had been passed so suddenly, Yae attempted to sneak up on Priscilla in her bedroom, but in a dark corridor of the mansion, she was stopped by that man.

Leaving no room for excuses, obstructing her as though he had known all along, the man—Al, battled Yae in a death ballet.

Even if she called it a death ballet, the difference in their abilities was evident. Although he was the Knight of a Royal Candidate, Al's strength was far inferior to Yae's, so the outcome was decided in an instant—or so it ought to have been.

Al: "—Your stars were bad."

The man whose heart she had certainly gouged out hurled those words at her in the same tone. Even when faced with that abnormal situation, Yae's body acted without delay, stripping him of his life for a second time.

Someone who would not die even when killed; this was not her first encounter against such an individual. There were a great number of bizarre and astonishing people in this world, and she had even fought against someone who had not just two, but three hearts. All she had needed to do was crush all three hearts for that person to properly die. The important thing was to just keep killing them until they died.

She lopped off his head. Bisected his torso. Burned his whole body. Plucked off all his limbs. Tore out his throat. Smashed his skull. Gouged out his eyeballs. Peeled all the skin off his back. Shattered all of his bones. Crushed his organs. Fed him poison. Plunged him into the ground. Plunged him into water. Wrung his neck. Wrung everything other than his neck. Testing out all manner of shinobi techniques on him, she robbed him of the life benamed life, enacting every conceivable manner of slaughter as she drove the act of killing to its absolute limit.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

But, no matter how many times she killed him, Al would get back up, hurling those same words at her.

Wielding the entirety of the shinobi techniques in her arsenal, and attempting every countermeasure that came into her mind, Yae finally abandoned rationale and tried yielding herself to her instincts, but she still could not kill him. She had failed to fully kill him.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

She attempted to put him through torture that would make him regret being born. It was all for naught. She attempted to abandon her mission and get away. It was all for naught. She attempted to drag other people into the fray. It was all for naught.

After finally having enough, she even attempted to put a thread around her own neck and end it all.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

Even that, was all for naught.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

The repetitions of the same dialogue, an unending helix loitering in the interval between death and death; conferred with those same things for a time that seemed to stretch on forever and ever, for the first time in her life—Yae Tenzen knew dread.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

If it meant she could be saved, she was willing to do anything. She vowed to do anything.

If it meant she could put an end to this, she was willing to do anything. She vowed to do anything.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

Even with dread newly awakened in her heart, she won no pardon from Al, from the man, from the monster.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

Even after her heart was exhaustively shattered beyond repair, the monster’s indifferent cruelty showed no signs of stopping.

She was unable to even keep count anymore. There existed none in this world whom Yae had fought to the death as much as this monster.

A countless number of times, Yae had killed him, and a number of times she wished not even to count, Yae had been killed by him.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

This kind of individual, there was nobody else like him. Such a thing was not needed. She did not want to even consider the chance of there being another.

Even now that she had been released from that endless torment on the monster’s whim, even now that she had pledged obedience to him and was devoting her entire being to his objective, it had been engraved into the depths of her soul.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

There was no choice but to have the monster, to have the man, to have Al, disappear as soon as possible.

After all, no matter the trigger, no matter the reason, no matter the relationship, Yae Tenzen’s heart must never be shackled to anything.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

—After all, her heart must never, be shackled, to anything.

7

Yae: “—Your stars were bad.”

As Yae's lips spun those words, an invisible light of decapitation surged forth, aiming for Rem's slender neck.

Perceiving that alongside the sensation of goosebumps on her skin, Rem reflexively swung her arm gripping the Morningstar, swatting away the flash by wedging the chain into its trajectory.

The boundary of death, unmistakably, they were standing on the boundary of death.

It was the type of high risk situation that Rem had not encountered when she had lost her memories and fighting strength in the Vollachian Empire, and at present, Rem was in a state that she had never managed to reach before having lost her memories, even in the battles against the Sin Archbishops and the White Whale.

Rem: "—Subaru-kun."

Amidst sensations that seemed as if her organs were quaking and her blood was boiling, the greatest heat was stored within the horn sprouting from her head—vividly experiencing the strength, emotions, and pulsations of the world pouring in from there, Rem roused her soul by calling out the name of that darling boy.

Synergizing the advice she had received from the dazzling Sun Princess with the swell of feelings towards her beloved, the Oni Clan blood flowing through Rem's veins was finally able to exhibit its original specs.

Even so, the gap in abilities between Rem and Yae was vast, so the fact that she was able to persist so much against someone ranked among the foremost powerful individuals Rem had witnessed until this point, was not solely thanks to her own strength.

In order to stop Yae—to stop Al and his group, this was the culmination of the many forces who had endlessly refused to back down.

Starting at the Pleiades Watchtower, a clash with the Felt Camp and then a battle at the Royal Capital, followed by Otto's relentless pursuit, by using this divide and conquer tactic and steadily piling on the irregulars, Al's group was bound hand and foot by the inescapable chains of attrition.

What had allowed the gap in strength between Rem and Yae to be temporarily bridged, was the weight of those chains. In addition to that, an ironic twist of fate had become a tailwind for Rem.

That was—

Yae: "—Hk."

Yae grit her teeth as one of her fingers sprung up, sending a thread reeling out as it sliced through the air in an onslaught towards Rem.

As countless severing flashes rained down upon her, Rem keenly sensed them through her horn; chaining together perfect evasion after perfect evasion, she made it out with the life that ought to have been cut short, ferociously clinging to the battlefield.

The secret to that evasion, seemingly brushed by the hand of the divine—no, by the hand of an Oni, lay in but one thing.

Rem: "—Bloodlust."

She could see it. She felt it. It was coming through to her. —Through the horn of the Oni Clan, her opponent's intent was transmitted.

That vividly colored boundary of death, evading it, tracing it, and bouncing it back, Rem closed in on Yae.

Just before Emilia had set off, and just after Al had fled the battlefield, Yae's attacks had started to be tinged with a definite bloodlust. A boisterous dance of bloodlust, showing no hesitation in Yae's will to decapitate her or slice off all four of her limbs, vehemently stimulated her Oni Clan instincts, ironically yielding a state of hyper-reactivity within Rem.

If Yae had kept to the initial policy of "no-killing" and faced off against Rem, she would have likely rendered Rem powerless much sooner. —As the result of starting to go all-out with her true abilities as a shinobi, Yae's attacks had lost their ability to reach

Rem.

If not an ironic tailwind, just what could this be called?

Rem: "…"

Digging her toes into the revolving ice disk as she supported her body, Rem grasped Yae within the field of vision glistening with ice shards flying about, the smile gone from her face as she stared at her.

The figure of Yae sharpening her almond-shaped eyes was so captivatingly beautiful as she regulated her heart; as for what was sustaining her supply-tempered body, Rem understood perfectly.

What had filled Yae's slender body to the brim, was a sense of duty.

A wish that she needed to fulfill at all costs, and a prayer that she wished to accomplish no matter what it took; those were the things that granted Yae extraordinary power, giving her the resolve to not even care about making an enemy of the world.

Thus, as for where that sense of duty originated from, Rem was well aware.

Rem: "After all, I'm… Rem is, the same way."

With a horn growing out of her forehead, her entire body littered in wounds, while plummeting down head first from five-thousand meters up high, the reason why Rem was standing here now was also because of a sense of duty.

A wish that she needed to fulfill at all costs, and a prayer that she wished to accomplish no matter what it took; those were the things that granted Rem extraordinary power, giving her the resolve to throw everything away in order to save a single person.

Thus, as for where this sense of duty originated from, Rem had no reason to keep it hidden.

That was—

Rem: “—Love!!”

Yae: “One who knows little often repeats it… hk!”

As Rem howled, Yae’s voice filled with irritation in response.

The expression of the shinobi, of congealed or perhaps fabricated emotions, that would by no means ever reveal her true feelings, slowly began to unravel. However, Rem would not interpret that as conceit, carelessness, or lack of experience.

Gritting one’s teeth was only natural. —That is, if one was to devote their everything for the sake of another.

Rem: “…”

In the corner of her eye, amidst the fierce battle, a line engraved into the cliff face grazed Rem’s attention.

The Agzadd Canyon, five-thousand meters, the final stretch, all that remained until they reached the bottom was—

Rem: “—Ten seconds!!”

Yae: “—Hk.”

While fighting off the thread storm that seemed as if a tidal wave closing in, Rem deliberately called that out.

She would give her information. Increase the factors for decision making. Disrupting her thinking, and causing hesitation in just one or two of those twenty digits on her hands and feet. She would irritate her, strip her emotions down bare, and make Yae hate her. Making her overflow with malice, enmity, and murderous intent, she would slip past it, slip past, slip past slip past slip past slip slip slip—.

And then—

Rem: “Here!”

Just as Rem and Emilia had planned—five seconds after the final ten seconds commenced, an impact from directly below would mercilessly perforate the ice discus.

8

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

Indeed, the monster residing in Yae’s heart would often mutter those words.

Even now, the man’s voice that Yae felt like she had heard however many thousands and tens of thousands of times, still haunted her dreams.

At first, she had found that catchphrase of Al’s to be rather odious. After all, even the stars would eventually get tired of being blamed for anything and everything, and would end up wanting to object.

Even though it was not the stars’ fault that Yae’s heart had been chipped and shattered, and was rather unmistakably the monster’s fault, how could he dare to shift the blame like that?

Only, she gradually came to realize that she had been mistaken, that this was not the man shifting blame.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

Whenever he spoke those words, Al was by no means celebrating his triumph.

Present there was nothing like contempt or scorn, but rather, things akin to pity and compassion.

As proof of that, the monster, the man, Al, had refrained from saying it.

Following the death of Priscilla Barielle, he did not resort to saying the stars had failed him.

When his own worthless self had failed to save her life, he did not resort to saying the stars had failed him.

Al: “—Your stars were bad.”

Whenever the monster, whenever the man, whenever Al spoke those words, it was always on the occasion that his own outrageous power thwarted the desires or goals of an opponent. Those words, spun out of pity, compassion, and feelings of guilt, were always to impart this sentiment unto the other party.

—It isn’t your fault; such was its significance.

Ahh, how unpleasant.

How unpleasant, how unpleasant. How truly unpleasant.

She had not wanted to realize such a thing.

Al’s words, the man’s gaze, the monster’s heart, she had not wanted to realize any of those things.

Yae did not want to discover any motivation other than dread from Al. She did not want to embrace it. She did not want to feel it.

Therefore, as soon as possible, she wanted to put an end to it.

—Upon this “specialness”, she did not wish to bestow any name other than dread.

9

Yae: “Everything… is the fault… of the stars…”

Hearing those sounds spill from her own lips, Yae snapped back to reality after her consciousness trailed off for just a moment.

At that moment, she could tell that her body had been blown into the air, and that her field of vision was spinning around.

A crash, yes, there had been a crash.

Something had struck the ice discus from below, and the impact that shattered the ice had also run through Yae.

When she glanced down at the edge of her consciousness to see what had shattered the ice discus, there was the summit of an enormous mountain of ice that had been erected at the bottom of the canyon in which they had fallen down thousands of meters—freezing the great river that ran through the ravine floor, it had been shaped into a dreadfully colossal mass of ice, lying in wait for the falling ice disk.

Factoring in the momentum of their descent, the air resistance, and the number of seconds they had been falling, she estimated that the distance of the fall was roughly five thousand meters—the only geography matching those specifications that she could think of was the Agzadd Canyon, the largest canyon in the world; witnessing the great feat that was freezing the river that ran along its bottom, Yae realized just how extraordinary Emilia's magic truly was.

But, what had struck her the most deeply was—

Yae: "…You're quite the tough woman, aren't you."

Amidst her revolving vision, fragments of the shattered ice disk sparkled like diamond dust within the breathtaking scenery, and therein did Yae catch sight of Rem, crowned by her shining horn.

At the moment of the crash, Rem had fled to the sky in order to avoid the impact, and using the scattered ice blocks as platforms to accelerate, she was about to come charging at Yae, who also still remained in the sky.

She had been tricked into thinking that there were ten seconds left until impact, when in reality, there had only remained five.

To lose one's composure, was a blunder unbecoming of a shinobi. To lag behind, was a folly unbecoming of a maid. And to go against the duty entrusted to her, was a deed unbecoming of the Crimson Sakura—

Yae: "—Your stars… were bad."

Neither was that directed towards the Oni girl drawing near before her eyes, nor towards herself as she put on such a disgraceful display, but rather, towards the one no longer present here, towards the monster who had soared far, far into the distance, Yae spoke.

With the same nuance that the monster would always attach whenever he hurled those words at another, she spoke those words to the monster.

Yae: “—Ah.”

The impact Yae had been struck by had caused her entire body to creak, and she was even unsure if all her limbs were still properly attached. But, this numbness was nothing. She had already overcome numbness back during her poison resistance training. This sensation in her hands and feet was nothing. All the bones in her body had already been broken back during her torture drills. This cloudiness of mind was nothing. She had already surmounted the training to fight in a near-death state, with vast amounts of blood drained from her body. The fact that every single one of those things was now useful to her made her feel like she could hear the village chief’s wily laughter, which aggravated her.

It aggravated her, but—

Yae: “—Ahhh.”

Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, tens of millions of times, she had repeated the same movements.

The steel threads that had seen no wielder in several hundreds of years, that which demanded the delicate skill to move one’s fingertips by millimeters at the utmost precision, in a state of numbness, low on blood, and with a clouded mind, Yae operated them.

Even if seventy percent of her lifeforce poured out of her body, the digits pulling those steel threads would not err.

Yae: “—AHHHHHHHhh!”

She pulled tight on her extended arms and legs, and in that moment, the chunks of ice bound by those steel threads ferociously bolted through the sky.

The fragments of the shattered ice discus, ensnaring them with her threads, Yae had them whirl violently through the air to match her body's rhythm, slamming them right into the side of Rem as she charged towards her.

Rem: "…"

A thunderous crash rang out, and Rem was sent flying away by an ice chunk with vehement vigor.

And as if to kick Rem when she was down, the ice chunks caught by the steel threads crashed into her one after another, after another, and after another; the barrage of powerful blows rained down upon her as she slammed into the summit of the ice mountain.

A white spray of snow was blown up into the air, and with blood mixing into the enshrouding ice fog, the ice mountain would be made into the Oni's gravestone. —That instant, the gravestone was perforated, and the iron ball shooting straight out of it thrust directly into Yae.

Yae: "—Uh."

The spikes accompanying that heinous lump of iron gouged into Yae's torso, deeply penetrating the side of her abdomen.

But, she had avoided damage to her vital organs by shifting them aside. Through the inhumane shinobi modifications to her flesh, Yae could shift the positioning of her internal organs. The spikes pierced a cavity with nothing in it, scattering blood from her back.

However, this was a blow she had deliberately taken.

Tightening her muscles, she trapped the spiked iron ball in her own body.

Subsequently, emerging out of the enshrouding white fog of snow was the blood-stained Oni, ferociously leaping upwards as she followed the chain of the iron ball that had stuck into Yae.

Her trajectory was perfectly straight, bereft of any twist or artifice, a straight line following her heart—awaiting in her path as she soared up, was a deployment of steel threads laid out in a web.

Rem: "…"

Voluntarily diving into the steel thread birdcage that would tear her body to shreds, it birthed countless lacerations upon Rem's white skin as it attempted to cut her body up into hundreds of little chunks of meat.

But, just before that could come to fruition, Rem's lips spun an incantation,

Rem: "Huma."

It was a spell that created ice, one that she had thoroughly borne witness to throughout the course of this battle.

For Rem to opt for that in this eleventh hour, Yae's entire body was on guard for where the ice would be created, exercising her senses in the three-hundred and sixty degrees of every direction around her, she readied herself to defend against any kind of surprise attack.

However, that had been unnecessary. There was no surprise attack. The ice took shape right before Yae's eyes.

The stream of feedback from the steel threads that ought to have carved Rem's body to shreds came to a halt. Taking a look, the steel threads that had dug into her flesh had been stopped by red ice—by her own frozen blood.

As soon as Yae comprehended that, her kiss set the steel threads alight with flame, and the explosive heat melted the frozen blood, and attempted to recommence the lethal thread attack. But, it was too late.

Rem: "YAHHHHH—!!"

Without overlooking the momentary bending of the threads, Rem howled as she raised her fist against Yae.

A blow imbued with the resolve to settle this battle, alongside the power to make that happen; the fact that Rem's bloodstained white fist held such might, was something that Yae perceived from her measurements.

Hence, she would not take this blow. She could not afford to take this blow. After all, she still had Emilia to take care of.

In order to reach that point, she drew her trump card.

Yae: "…"

The mobilization of steel threads utilizing all twenty of the digits between her hands and feet, had been evaded by the enemy.

But, it was not over. It was not over yet. The trump card of Yae Tenzen's Steel Thread Technique, sticking out her red tongue as if to provoke her opponent—

Yae: "Behhh."

Out from a ring placed on the tip of her tongue, her final flash of severance was unleashed.

True to its aim, it struck the slender neck of Rem as she ferociously approached, rending her life in a single brandish.

10

—The Crimson Sakura, Yae Tenzen, was an unparalleled genius of a shinobi.

The Vicious Old Man, Olbart Dunkelkenn, held her talents and capabilities in a very high regard.

The person in question very much hated being praised so highly, but that averse reaction seemed only to fuel Olbart's sadistic delight, and so he had never let her hear the end of it.

Given his years of experience, he was likely stronger than her overall.

But, her raw talent far exceeded his own, so with enough years of experience, she would easily transform into the strongest shinobi, untouchable by anyone. Hence, he could somewhat understand why some might have had big dreams for Yae.

Be that as it may, he was his own person, and other people were other people.

There was no point in dreams that were fulfilled by somebody else. Hence, still harboring big dreams of his own, the only thing Olbart could do for that genius girl was offer her some heartfelt advice—no, a warning.

Olbart: “Ya don’t wanna? Listen, I’ve been there myself. Remarkable folk like the two of us end up livin’ longer than most ordinary shinobi ‘thout even realizin’ it, ‘n we end up seein’ tons’a things. So occasionally, there’ll be times. Times when you’ll hafta end up breakin’ the ironclad law of the shinobi.”

Olbart: “Hm? Ya think it’s a matter of people who don’t hold anythin’ dear ta ‘em bein’ weak? Nah, nah, y’ain’t gettin’ what I’m sayin’. It’d be somethin’ more like, ya can’t deal with a poison that’cha don’t know, yeah?”

Olbart: “Ya make brats drink poison when they’re young so they won’t die from it later. ‘N so, tellin’ ya that it’d be fine ta keep at least a single somethin’ in yer heart, was just some advice ta keep ya from dyin’.”

Olbart: “After all, never’ve I loved, nor ever been loved. Makes ya end up incredibly weak, that sorta thing. —I’m tellin’ ya, the first time a shinobi goes ‘n starts holdin’ someone dear… Kakakakka!”

11

With the brandish of her trump card, a steel thread bolted out from the ring placed over her tongue, and without err, it reaped the slender neck of the Oni girl leaping towards her, severing the connection between head and torso.

Annulling the “no-killing” restriction, she had succeeded in the elimination of one of the obstacles standing in the way of Al’s objective.

Thinking of that fact, and anticipating Al's reaction when he learned of this, Yae felt a grating sensation in the depths of her chest—

Yae: "—Hah?"

Just before she could digest that heartache, Yae widened her eyes, doubting the sight before her eyes.

Beyond any shadow of a doubt, Yae's steel thread had severed Rem's slender neck. She had distinctly felt the sensation that accompanied cutting away a prey's life, and she had certainly heard the rasp of the wind that blew upon severing the blood and flesh and bone that made up a life.

And despite all that—

Rem: "—I wasn't exactly playing fair either."

Yae's crimson eyes intersected Rem's pale blue ones. And, there was still light to be found in those eyes.

Then, the red line emblematic of her reaped life, one that certainly ought to have been left as a mark on her neck, slowly faded away. —Neither had she protected against it, nor had she evaded it; the blow that by all means was supposed to have taken her life, had been cancelled.

That was not something that could simply be explained by the regeneration possessed by the Oni Clan; a miracle that should have never happened. Even in this vast world, the likes of someone capable of wielding that level of healing magic was—

Yae: "—Al-sama."

The monster who, even when making an enemy of the world, seemed like he would absolutely never lose; she had wanted to assist him.

She had hoped that by doing so, she would be able to erase the “specialness” living within her own heart.

And yet—

???: “—Your stars were bad.”

Shutting her eyes, she once again heard the dreadful words that seemed to make all her hairs stand on end.

Though oddly enough, right now, in this moment alone, the feeling they inspired within Yae was not dread, but instead.

Yae: “The cause of my defeat…”

Rem: “—Is love.”

The powerful arm unleashed alongside that answer, smashed into the iron ball stuck within Yae’s torso.

Far more lethal than the fall from five-thousand meters, the Oni’s thunderbolt exploded—atop the icy crown of the mountain amidst crags of the Agzadd Canyon, cherry blossoms fluttered down as though in requiem.

—Before the Blue Oni, the Crimson Sakura known as Yae Tenzen, ephemeral as her namesake’s petals, was scattered to the wind in violent splendor.

Chapter 52:
Aldebaran I

1

Witch: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

Aldebaran recalled the Witch imparting those words upon him as if it were yesterday.

In real time, it would have been close to twenty years ago, but in terms of perceived time, it was a completely different order of magnitude.

Even if he remembered the number of attempts he had needed for individual deadlocks, he had not memorized the total number of attempts he had taken across everything; not to mention, the amount of time that had passed throughout all of that would have been so outrageous that he did not want to even think about it. Only, it was an absolute truth that he was expending far more time than a single lifetime would usually allow.

Be that as it may, even after going through all that time, it would be incorrect to assume that Aldebaran had reached the same mental state as the elves who lived for hundreds of years in perennial youth.

If the human mind was something that started out as immature before eventually maturing enough to reach a state of aged wisdom, that was because the passage of time would allow one to experience both the sweet and the sour, granting the mind ample room to grow.

But, all the time Aldebaran spent outside the passage of actual time was, so to speak, a series of stagnant moments used to break through whatever difficulty was laid before his eyes. In practice, those would range from a few seconds to a few minutes at most, and just by repeating those small intervals countless times, a human could not hope to grow.

Ergo, Aldebaran believed that the accumulation of time repeated by his Authority was time spent in futility, something that only ever served to abrade his heart, and never to foster its growth.

Even if it was time spent in such futility, when it got to the point of repeating several hundreds, tens of thousands, hundreds of millions of times, the brain would automatically begin filtering memories, attempting to rob Aldebaran of his genuine recollections.

Nevertheless, there certainly existed memories that did not fade; recollections that, rather than his brain, seemed to be etched into his very soul, and the aforementioned words were undoubtedly among them.

But then again, if in addition to already lacking memories of all the time he had lived, Aldebaran were to also say that he did not even wish to remember all of it, he could picture that Witch, the very incarnation of a curiosity who eagerly wanted to know everything, quietly muttering to herself “I see, what a shame”.

Although she boasted that she could not understand emotions, the Witch was an expert at putting on an act to bend others to her will. And despite knowing that, Aldebaran could not defy the Witch’s words or attitude.

That was the manner in which he had been disciplined, in which he had been reshaped—were he to phrase it in such a way, it might have been a fair matchup against the inhumanity of the shinobi village that he had happened to hear bits and pieces about from Yae.

In this case, it was tossup between whether it was the shinobi village, treated as equal to the Witch, who were the crazy ones, or if it was actually the Witch, single-handedly contending against the entire history of the shinobi village, who was truly insane.

—Either way, the current Aldebaran was a product of the Witch’s creation.

Witch: “Even if you say that, you do have the right to live your own life. That alone is a domain that even a creator must not one-sidedly intrude upon. Hence, supposing you sincerely believe that you cannot follow me from the bottom of your heart, you may withdraw from the plan at any time. That is your freedom.”

On occasion, the Witch would say such things as though to question Aldebaran’s resolve.

It was an unusual concern for a Witch to bear. Fundamentally, once she had secured the other party’s consent, the Witch’s usual strategy was to always maneuver in such a way that the promises she had coerced could not be taken back.

In fact, among the lessons and assignments that the Witch had levied upon Aldebaran, there had been plenty with contents nightmarish enough to have made him hesitate had he not agreed to not giving up in advance. Whenever the Witch made him do such things, she would never ask him if he wished to stop once she had gotten him to agree.

And yet, when it came to the root of it all, his initial, and most foundational resolve, she would often press him about it.

Aldebaran interpreted that as potentially being Witch’s own way of expressing her sense of guilt or inner turmoil, but was that really so?

The Witch proclaimed herself as unable to comprehend emotion, however, there was no way that she did not know the likes of rage, joy, and sorrow. If she was capable of expressing those sorts of human emotions, then would it not also be possible for her to harbor a sense of guilt or apprehension toward the future?

At the very least, throughout the time Aldebaran had spent with the Witch, even if there were times when he had thought her a Witch incapable of comprehending the human heart, he had never once thought her a Witch bereft of a human heart.

In the interval between “not having” and “not understanding”, there lay a completely different landscape.

Could it be that this simply manifested in the form of the Witch's questions? If that were the case, then for each time she had voiced that question, had the Witch perhaps felt lost?

Lamenting the harsh path that she would eventually have Aldebaran walk, and desiring to respect Aldebaran's own will, letting him choose his own life; had such a turmoil existed within her?

Maybe, just maybe, on the one in a million chance, on the one in a billion chance that the Witch did have such feelings—ironically enough, that became the exact reason why Aldebaran would not go back on his resolve.

Therefore—

Witch: "—I see."

Hearing the same answer Aldebaran always gave, the Witch's reaction had also been the same as ever.

Perhaps he was being played.

Perhaps from the very moment Aldebaran had been created until that day, the Witch had been pouring ample amounts of time into brainwashing him. Perhaps the Witch harbored none of the feelings of guilt or hesitation that Aldebaran had anticipated.

Perhaps, she truly was such a wicked Witch.

But, even if he were to pose that question directly to her, the Witch, putting on that beautiful smile of white and black,

Witch: "Naturally. —I am a wicked magician, after all."

In such a manner, voicing answers that gave no clue as to their sincerity or deception, she toyed with Aldebaran.

2

Basking in the roaring winds, Aldebaran glided through the air at furious speeds.

He thought the sight of him spreading wings of stone on his back, catching the wind as he soared, would have looked terribly ridiculous, but he had no need to concern himself with appearances.

As Yae held back their opponents, he would need to gain as much distance as possible, as well as eliminate the difference in elevation.

Aldebaran: “Though, I can’t imagine that they were targeting my Territory.”

Even as those words spilled from Aldebaran, he concentrated the majority of his attention on the formulation and operation of the stone wings on his back.

The construction of the stone wings demanded an extremely delicate balance, with the size and hardness also requiring very fine adjustment. If they were too big, they would be tossed around too much by the wind, but if they were too small, the objective could not even be realized in the first place. Hardness and density were also tied to weight, so tuning them too much or too little would inevitably lead to a crash.

Aldebaran: “Gotta hand it to Icarus for getting it right on his first try…!”

Speaking of taking to the skies with man-made wings, the one who came to mind was Icarus, the great predecessor who had fashioned wings of wax; setting aside the fate he met, the fact that his wings had not only been able to glide, but had been able to flap and carry him up close to the sun quite honestly filled Aldebaran with wonder.

Just how many times had Aldebaran crashed on account of poorly constructed wings? —That would have been exactly what the opponent wanted, so after tackling the problem again countless times, he had finally managed to fashion his current wings of stone.

Even that was an intense feat that could not have been realized without utmost concentration and scrupulous caution, but—

Aldebaran: “I couldn’t afford to continue falling like that.”

That reality and his impatience: they were the greatest reasons behind Aldebaran's ability to level up his Level 1 stone wings with great haste, getting them to a level capable of flight for the time being—although Aldebaran had confidence in himself as the user of an invincible Authority, it was not as though his Territory had no shortcomings whatsoever.

The enemy's ambush on this occasion was something that had inadvertently struck two of those weaknesses simultaneously. Strictly speaking, it could perhaps be better described as an attack on the same weak point from two different angles.

For Aldebaran's Authority, "Territory", there existed a valid range of effectiveness.

The teleport brought about as a result of the ambush had thrown Aldebaran outside of the established area of his Territory. On top of that, factoring in that the destination of the teleport was a free fall from an extremely high elevation, it served as an attack against Aldebaran that would cause the destruction of the second Territory.

As a result, amidst his descent at furious speeds, Aldebaran had made sure to commit suicide before he fell outside the bounds of his Territory, restarting from the middle of the fall many times over. Amidst those repetitions, he deemed that it would be impossible to break out of this high altitude situation as he fell with his freedom of movement so severely restricted; after testing a variety of different plans, he arrived at attempting to escape on stone wings.

At the very least, this slowed his descending change in elevation, allowing him to maintain his Territory with relative ease. And just as Aldebaran had finished untying that troublesome knot—

???: "—Al!!"

Indeed, sharply calling out to Aldebaran as he exerted all his efforts to maintain balance, was the voice of a silver bell.

Turning his head to glance back, from a considerably lower altitude than Aldebaran, he could clearly see the figure of an angel—no, of Emilia, flying in the same direction as he.

Bearing wings forged of ice upon her slender back, she was rapidly closing the distance; despite using the same method as Aldebaran, hers established an overwhelming lead in terms of its striking visual appeal.

Aldebaran: “Unbelievable.”

He hoped it would be clear that there was no helping the dumbfounded, nearly admiring groan that had escaped him.

The amount of hardship Aldebaran had endured to complete these stone wings, unshapely as they were, had already been described. Precisely because he had gone through all that effort, he felt respect towards Icarus and his wax wings.

But, just like the Icarus of myth, Emilia’s senses had succeeded in crafting artificial wings on her first try, achieving the same result as Aldebaran despite his innumerable failures; rather than feeling respect towards that, he merely felt the definitive gap between them, furthering his sense of defeat.

Aldebaran: “Even if the idea that I’m just being a bumbling idiot who crashed over six hundred times is slightly better than the idea that the lil’ miss is a genius, it’s not any solace whatsoever.”

The strength of Aldebaran’s Territory lay within its war of endurance, allowing him to persist over the course of an unlimited number of attempts until even the slightest chance of victory arrived. His greatest advantage was his ability to continue playing the cards in his hand until his opponent blundered, giving rise to a situation in which Aldebaran could gain the upper hand.

However, while this also applied to his battle against Reinhard, there existed rare individuals in this world capable of consistently arriving at the correct answers. Those right answers would vary from person to person based on their individual abilities and their objectives for victory, but what they had in common was that unlike Aldebaran, they were all loved by fate.

—Aldebaran was hated by fate itself.

It was no longer clear whether Aldebaran had come to despise fate first, or if fate had been the one to initially hate Aldebaran, but that alone was an unshakable truth. Regardless of whether he was loved or abhorred by other things, fate was Aldebaran's absolute enemy.

Therefore, he had no choice but to slay it. —Even if it meant making an enemy of the world, he would slay fate, no matter what.

But since it did not wish to be killed, fate had been sending its own favored pawns after him one after another in the form of assassins. Here and now, it had selected Emilia and Rem to act as its implements.

Aldebaran: "—. Just my luck."

Just who had it been to suggest that Rem should be chosen as the first surprise attacker?

Regardless of who had proposed it, she was by far the most suitable candidate in terms of creating a momentary void within Aldebaran's mind. When she had been a victim to the Authority of Gluttony, Aldebaran had failed to notice the abnormality of her existence as a result of that influence, unwittingly forming a proper relationship with her.

Hence, after the death of Priscilla, the moment he had been hit by that flash grenade of memories and discovered that Rem had been released from the yoke of Gluttony, his mind had been consumed by a much greater void than the others.

—After all, he had come across a being who should not have been present here, one who by all means should have been dead.

Aldebaran: "…"

As for how that outcome had been achieved, there was no room for debate.

Doubtlessly, he had pulled it off. In his struggle against fate, Natsuki Subaru had managed to conquer it. The power to do so dwelled within Natsuki Subaru. Rem's very existence was proof of that.

But, regardless, despite all that—he did not save Priscilla Barielle.

Aldebaran: "—If that's how you're gonna play it, I'm not showing any mercy either."

The tears he had shed, the fists that had punished him, the consideration he had attempted to offer; meaningless, all of it.

After all, that which Aldebaran desired was neither tears, nor wounds, nor consolation. It was simply the life, of a single person.

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

Within his helmet, clenching his teeth to the point that he could taste blood, Aldebaran looked to his rear. As he simultaneously modified the angle and thickness of his wings, all the while keeping the drop in speed and maneuverability to a minimum, in mid-air he crossed gazes with Emilia amidst her pursuit of him.

The beautiful wings of ice truly suited Emilia, but no matter how cute of an angel she was, she could not flap those artificial wings to gain speed or elevation. She had gained her initial velocity from the recoil of Rem bashing the ice discus, but after that, there would have been no other method for her to gain on him—

Emilia: "Yah! Tah! Tei!"

Similar to whenever she would launch an attack, Emilia raised those lackluster battlecries, and with each shout, her altitude and speed would increase by a step, and then another step higher. The methodology was plain and clear—using her magic to create an icicle as a foothold in the air, she kicked off of it in order to gain acceleration and vigor.

After a moment of stillness, the created icicle was kicked down towards the ground by the strength of Emilia's legs; however, it immediately dispersed into Mana and returned to the atmosphere before being born anew as yet another foothold. Once again, she kicked off from it to boost her momentum. By repeating this process, she had been able to relentlessly close the distance on Aldebaran.

Aldebaran: “That’s fucking ridiculous…!”

Having an extraordinary sense for magic, it was a brute-force solution made possible by her ability to get the most out of a vast supply of Mana.

Thanks to the path which linked him to “Aldebaran”, Aldebaran could draw from the power of the external Mana tank known as the Divine Dragon, but even if he was asked to perform the same feat as Emilia, he simply would not be able to do it.

It was not a question of Mana capacity; there was just far too great of a gulf in their sensibilities and physical abilities. —Even if he could bridge the gap in sensibilities through a limitless number of attempts, the gap in their physical abilities could not be spanned.

The canyon stretched on for a great, long distance, and the cliff faces which flanked both sides of the two aviators stretched just as far. So long as they both continued in the same direction, Emilia’s pursuit would never cease.

As Aldebaran grasped that reality, Emilia kicked off a newly created icicle, and while there still existed some distance between them, her elevation finally matched his. Then, while keeping the balance of her ice wings—

Emilia: “—Al! I’m begging you, let’s talk this out! I’ll properly listen to what you have to say!”

Aldebaran: “That’s rich coming from you. Weren’t you all “ask questions later”, coming at me and trying to freeze me with no mercy. If I had continued to fall all the way to the bottom like that, you were planning on freezing me along with the entire river, weren’t you?”

Emilia: “But! That plan already failed!”

Aldebaran: “You should be careful about being too upfront, Royal Candidate!”

The route of looking on passively and descending to the bottom was a surefire pattern of completely falling right into the opponent’s trap.

In order to escape that, he had gone all or nothing on choosing a path that veered away from the ice disk's falling trajectory; even if he had failed to lose both of them at once, should he perhaps count the fact that he had managed to split up Emilia and Rem as a win?

The answer to that—

Aldebaran: "It's time to find out. —My attitude from the Royal Capital still hasn't changed!"

Deciding to take measures to shake free from Emilia's pursuit, Aldebaran raised his hand aloft and created stones mid-air, assailing her with a barrage of such projectiles.

Unexpectedly, that scene unfolded as if something right out of a shooting game had been brought into real life, and greeted by that barrage of stones, Emilia, with a flash of her wings,

Emilia: "I'll say it as many times as it takes. I don't want to cry believing that there was nothing that could have been done about someone's passing anymore!!"

Proclaiming so in a loud voice, Emilia plunged into the barrage, and the shrieks of the shattering and the freezing atmosphere, resounded across the Agzadd Canyon as a shrill melody.

3

—The reason for his existence as the Following Star was not something that Aldebaran had ever worried about too much.

After all, it seemed that at least once during adolescence, just about everyone would wonder why they had been born, wonder where life came from and where it faded off to, and experience something like a rebellious spirit against their parents for no reason, but for Aldebaran, these were all notions that felt quite alien to him.

In Aldebaran's case, it was a bit difficult to establish exactly who the parent he ought to rebel against would be, and due to the nature of his Authority, he never truly got the sense of his life fading off whenever it was lost. When it came to the purpose of his birth, he had been provided with a precise answer, and as for why he had been born, he supposed that, perhaps, the answer was "love".

And so, Aldebaran had never grappled with the notions that ought to have been entertained during one's adolescence.

Neither did he consider that as some failure on his part, nor as something that he had missed out on.

In society, it seemed like there was the idea that people should challenge themselves with hardship while young, but experiences that would just end up becoming an embarrassing dark past upon entering adulthood held no actual value. It was fine to miss out on experiences that were not worth going through. —Just as how it was fine for death to be something that everyone only experienced once at the very end of their life.

Witch: "I see, so you have no desire for any of the emotions or impulses typical of adolescence. That is a bit of a shame. I had even been considering various ways in which I might deal with your rebellious phase depending on how it might have manifested."

That was the lamentation of the Witch, and though he did not consider her to be lacking a heart, she often made such heartless comments toward Aldebaran, who had seen a quick upbringing without causing much trouble.

For Aldebaran, the Witch was the person with whom he had spent the most time with since his birth, but she had a bad habit of wanting to bear witness to every single choice and emotion of humans, every last possibility.

Furthermore, in the majority of cases, the inability to hold back such desires was in the nature of a Witch.

Aldebaran had been acquainted with Witches other than her, yet, while it was to varying degrees, the fact that not a single one of them could defy that nature struck him as horribly blasphemous.

Hence, the Witch's attitude, awaiting Aldebaran's adolescence with an air of dissatisfaction, was something brought about by a nature that could not be defied, and when he thought about it like that, he could see that there was no helping it. Nevertheless, he saw no point in pretending to go through adolescence just to make the Witch happy. —In a sense, that almost felt like the very rebellious spirit indicative of adolescent emotions.

Witch: "As expected, maybe it is too convenient for me, someone who is not even a parent, to attempt superficially initiating such parental experiences…? If that one created Beatrice, were they perhaps able to experience it?"

As the Witch began to pose such questions to herself, Aldebaran was certain that this sense of loneliness he felt was completely unrelated to adolescence, and instead was something else entirely. Only, it was difficult to seek a concrete answer as to why he felt that way, and their relationship was a bit too complex for him to ask.

And so, just how the Witch had established, the relationship between Aldebaran and herself was—

Aldebaran: "—Teacher."

And, when he called out to her, the Witch in the midst of enjoying a stroll through the labyrinth of her own thoughts lifted her face.

Whenever Aldebaran found himself reflected in those black irises, seeing her hair of pure white cascading down her shoulders as she tilted her head in a "What is it?", he could not help but think about what an unfair Witch she was.

Even though she was always immersed in her own affairs, staying true to her desires without ever so much as trying to show consideration to the hearts of others, whenever Aldebaran called out to her, she would meet his eyes without fail.

The fact that he had never felt any sort of adolescent rebellious spirit against that Witch was but a matter of course.

To begin with, the incentive to do so was shallow, and both his body and mind had long yielded to the futility of defying the Witch. Purporting it as performance testing to help him master the use of his Authority, the Witch had subjected Aldebaran to Death over a million times, and had already concluded her assessment of him.

But then again, no matter how much he brought that up, the Witch in question gave no meaningful reply, only responding “I do not recall even a single one of those times, so even if you tell me to feel some responsibility, I am at a bit of a loss”.

Regardless, he could understand why the Witch would go to such lengths.

After all, at present, the only Witch who still remained alive, not counting the one before his eyes, was the individual who either directly or indirectly caused the deaths of all the other Witches. The point of contact Aldebaran had shared with those Witches was not something that had taken place during their time amongst the living.

He could not meet with them anywhere outside of the finite space that had been prepared by the Witch. By the time he had gotten the chance to meet them there, they were already long dead, their existences naught but gathered souls.

Thus, as for the one who had done that to them; under the Witch’s instruction, Aldebaran would need to—

Witch: “—You must kill her no matter what.”

That was the reason for existence that Aldebaran, the Following Star, had been granted before even experiencing adolescence, the benchmark of his life that he would need to fulfill even if it meant dying a million times.

In order to make Aldebaran this way, the Witch had been reproached by the other Witches, having severed ties even with her companions, so her resolve would have needed to be absolute.

Witch: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

Her act of speaking those words to him was something Aldebaran took pride in, and it served as the very foundation of his being.

In all honesty, he thought the Witch had a horrible personality, and he had many reservations about her teaching methods and her way of giving instruction, but even so, he had no doubt that he would be able to live up to the Witch’s expectations.

He had believed that he would be able to do it.

Back in those days, when Aldebaran still had his left arm, he had still been able to believe so. After all, even if he knew Death, he had not yet known true defeat.

He had never experienced adolescence, but—unmistakably, that was the foolish dark past of his that could never be erased.

4

Aldebaran: “Tch—!”

As Emilia plunged head-first into the incessant barrage of stones, Aldebaran stifled all the hesitation within his heart, mustering up his full, unrestrained firepower.

As was also the case for their clash in the Royal Capital, Aldebaran had an instinctive weakness when it came to Emilia.

At this point, it was clear that this was an example of a weakness inherent to all life, and due to that, he had been unable to bring himself to take the sort of drastic measures he might have otherwise taken had it been a different opponent, even in the Royal Capital.

Back then, he had borrowed the strength of “Aldebaran” to hurl down a colossal boulder, preventing Emilia’s pursuit of him by occupying her with the protection of the Royal Capital; but here, there was nobody else he could drag into the fray.

In that sense, the decision to drop him in the middle of a massive canyon showed that she had clearly reflected on their previous encounter.

Aldebaran: “Though, you’re not exactly giving me enough leeway to appreciate your growth right now!”

Unfortunately, Aldebaran’s heart was not currently relaxed enough to rejoice in the growth of himself or his enemies. For a moment, he felt reluctant to define Emilia as an enemy, but he forcefully shut his eyes to that.

That resolve was something he had settled a long time ago, long before he had even met Priscilla.

Even if, strictly speaking, the target of Aldebaran’s resolve was not the Emilia before his eyes—

Aldebaran: “Even if it’s recycled resolve, it’ll still be about as useful as papier-mâché.”

Holding aloft that resolve despite fully knowing it was but papier-mâché, he moved to sever Emilia’s pursuit.

Diving straight into the storm of rocks the size of fists, Emilia’s ice wings boldly shimmered.

The attack had been intended to delay her movements, even if only slightly, by forcing her to evade or to take a defensive stance, but just as his unpleasant hunch had suspected, Emilia adopted the straightforward approach by taking the shortest path—icy wings adorning back, icicles for footholds, and now, firing stakes of ice to counter the barrage, fending off any that made it through that interception by parrying with the twin swords of ice in her grasp.

The Witch had taught him that the simultaneous activation of magic was difficult, even for a proficient magician.

Even if it was magic of the same attribute, the talent it required was akin to an unreasonable task such as taking a pen in each hand, and trying to write an essay with the right hand while attempting to draw an illustration with the left. When it came to different attributes, it seemed to require the drastic measure of adding an extra brain for each additional attribute, and Aldebaran had even seen the Witch wielding five of the attributes at once. Honestly, it was to the point that he had seriously questioned whether the Witch's smaller-than-average head could truly house five small brains.

Even setting aside that extraordinary digression, and even if they were all under the same attribute of fire, with the wings, icicles, ice stakes, and twin swords, the simultaneous activation of four varieties of magic was a sufficient feat in its own right.

And adding on to that, in order to implement her absurd manner of chase, she had to put on a display of athleticism greater than that of an Olympic athlete, giving him the feeling that he had already exhausted his daily quota of surprise points.

Aldebaran: "That's why, I've gotta meet her with minimal discomposure!"

Emilia had opted to overcome the storm of rocks and stones solely through courage and brute strength. But, setting that courage aside, what would she do if faced with a threat that could not be surmounted by physical might?

Emilia: "…"

Emilia was determined to close the distance, but in the face of the next threat, her cheeks tensed.

Unfolding before her all at once, providing her no path of escape, were objects even tinier than the stone projectiles, an encirclement of gravel whose potential damage could be easily overlooked. Similar to leaping into a torrential rain, so long as she did not possess the absurd ability to dodge the rain while mid-air, it would be impossible for there to be zero hits.

Of course, it was not as though the only objective of that deployed sand was to obstruct her vision, rather—

Emilia: "—Hk, it's heavy?!"

Upon attempting to wipe off the sand that clung to her, Emilia raised a voice of astonishment as she flailed her arms about.

The grains of sand that had made contact with her arms, legs, and white clothes began to consolidate with the surrounding grains of sand, obstructing her movements through their heft and hardness. It was a debuff attack he had also launched against Reinhard at the sand sea—Reinhard had torn free from it by breaking the sound barrier, but not even Emilia would be able to replicate that method.

Moreover—

Emilia: “My wings—”

The gravel’s primary aim had been to hinder the wings of ice that sustained Emilia’s flight.

Having plunged into the sandstorm, the grit had eroded her frozen wings, stripping them of their intrinsic ability to catch the wind. Then, Emilia’s balance crumbled, and she immediately started to plummet headlong towards the ground—to prevent that from happening, Emilia promptly discarded her impaired wings, and by returning from being an angel to simply being an angel-like girl, she evaded the hardship.

Aldebaran: “—Purged!”

But, that was precisely what Aldebaran had aimed to accomplish.

Even though she cast away her ice wings, it was possible for Emilia to deploy another pair of wings right away, allowing her to restart without losing any of her previous momentum or altitude. However, when it came to her physical abilities, no matter how unorthodox they might be, they would not allow her to catch up to an impromptu hang glider exceeding a hundred kilometers per hour.

Henceforth, in order to prevent Emilia from deploying another pair of wings, Aldebaran doubled down.

Jutting out of the cliff face accompanied by a rumbling roar, a colossal arm of stone attempted to snatch Emilia out of the canyon’s sky. If that could hamper her momentum, then even if Emilia succeeded in forming another set of wings, she would lose the ability to catch up to Aldebaran's unceasing speed.

Not to mention, the colossal arms obstructing Emilia did not end at just one or two. —Utilizing the raw materials of the cliff faces, the rocky arms protruding out totaled a count of several hundreds.

Aldebaran: "Respect to Thousand-Armed Kannon… or rather, it feels more like the backstage of a haunted house."[14]

As a staple of haunted houses, a bunch of hands would suddenly pop out all at once from behind sliding paper doors; it had a similar impression to that. However, unlike the empty threat that those frights posed, these colossal arms were serious in their attempt to seize Emilia.

If even one could just grab her by the leg, this chase sequence would be completely finished, and this do-or-die situation would conclude with Aldebaran's successful escape—

Aldebaran: "Think you can—Emilia: "—I'll do my best!!""

Get past this; as he had attempted to finish those words, they were drowned out by her high spirits.

He had not intended for it to be something that she could do anything about simply by doing her best, but Emilia's ability to do her best and somehow wind up pushing through was one of the most fearsome aspects about her.

Having lost her wings, Emilia put that fearsomeness on full display—swinging a glacial sword in her grasp, she hewed the fingers off of the first giant arm to approach her, and having neutralized it, she used it as a platform to perform her next leap.

Her momentum had yet to perish. Her elevation, too, was recovering significantly.

However, even if the behemoth arms did not quite reach the count of a thousand, there still numbered over a hundred awaiting her—

Emilia: "—Soldiers, lend me your strength!"

Following Emilia's call, the ice soldiers with their repugnant appearance made their entrance once more.

The soldiers of ice, who ought to have been shattered to naught during the fall of the ice discus, admirably stood up against the giant earthen arms swarming Emilia; some used their entire bodies to stop them, some delivered punches to knock them off course, and some were crushed while striking a pose after being overpowered; they performed a diverse array of contributions.

What irritated Aldebaran above all else, was the individual who had taken Emilia by the hand, guiding her away from the evil clutches of the colossal arms, and flinging her forward to aid her in her advance.

The Natsuki Subarus of ice, seven in total, would shatter whenever their duty was fulfilled, only to be born anew to serve Emilia; repeating a cycle of destruction and rebirth, they never exceeded a maximum of seven at once, and protecting Emilia from the hundreds of evil stone hands closing in, they continued to assist her.

—Magic was something that gave form to feelings and desires; the Witch had said as much.

He had thought that it had been a surprisingly romantic sentiment for that Witch to have said, but considering how wind could take the form of a blade if one wished to slice up their opponent, and how flames akin to a crimson lotus could be birthed to scorch everything in a rage, there was likely no room for debate that it was but a manifestation of feelings and desires.

In that case, at this moment, the sight of Natsuki Subaru-shaped ice soldiers aiding Emilia before Aldebaran's eyes, just what sort of desire could it possibly be the manifestation of?

It made his stomach churn. That was not in the figurative sense, but rather, with the unmistakable, true meaning.

As those negative emotions boiled within him, Aldebaran linked together the next attack.

That was—

Aldebaran: "—Sorry for rehashing the same punchline, but it's the return of my trump card."

Upon speaking those words, in the air above Aldebaran, Emilia, and the ice soldiers—filling the breadth of the Agzadd Canyon to its fullest, an enormous, mighty boulder began to hurtle straight down.

An inescapable crushing force by a tremendous mass—it was the second coming of the trap he had set back in the Royal Capital.

5

What had been desired—nay, what had been required, was but a singular victory in his life.

It would be no exaggeration to say Aldebaran's life existed solely for the sake of that victory.

Since the very moment of his creation, every gift bestowed upon Aldebaran, every lesson poured into his vessel, every blessing graced upon him: all had been ordained for the sake of guiding him toward that victory, to ensure that he would rise, claim it for his own, and stand exalted in triumph.

The weight and significance of it all were things Aldebaran had fully understood—or, so he had thought.

However, when the hour came for his conviction to be tested, that tempered resolve, those carefully wrought plans, his very soul, refined to perfection as it ought to have been; all of it was rendered meaningless.

Witch: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Those words, bestowed upon him by the Witch, had been the benchmark of Aldebaran's life.

So long as he heeded those words, no obstacle placed before him could ever hope to halt his advance. And so, the thought that he might one day lose faith in the Witch—he would never utter it aloud, nor ever wish her to hear it, but that notion had always seemed utterly impossible to him.

Thus, in accordance with the Witch's words, he had convinced himself that he would never be defeated by anyone.

—The day that faith was shattered, in a sense, was the day Aldebaran had truly died.

"Death"; that was something he had experienced so many times that even keeping a count seemed a fool's errand.

And though he had always considered keeping count to be a fool's errand, he did so anyway, simply because he had been told to. Yet even as he kept track of the actual number, the absurdity of it all never faded in the slightest.

Even so, he believed that on that day, at that moment, he had tasted Death in its truest form.

Having gone so far as to build up Aldebaran for the sake of her dearest wish, the Witch had prepared for him the sole battle in his lifetime that he absolutely could not afford to lose.

And yet—

Witch: "—At the juncture where you could not afford to lose, you were defeated."

A familiar plain of lush, verdant grass, and the form of the Witch, sat by the white table of the tea party, enjoying the aroma of tea; upon seeing her, Aldebaran was immediately stricken with despair, crushed by the depth of his own sin.

Employing only black and white, the highest pinnacle of beauty that could be achieved was the Witch. And now, the fact that there existed not a single wound upon that odiously attractive figure of hers, was proof that this was indeed a world of dreams.

After all, when Aldebaran had failed to win the battle he had needed to win no matter what, the Witch had sacrificed all four of her limbs to shield him, leaving her a wretched figure able to do nothing but await death.

As he had stared at her in shock, Aldebaran had found himself vaguely thinking the painfully obvious: even the Witch had red blood coursing through her veins.

The heat, the odor, the feel; that blood could not have possibly been a lie.

In that case, this world, where all of that had been lost, where make-believe had painted over the reality that should have been, was naught more than a blatant bundle of lies.

Witch: ""Make-believe"; I am rather unfond of that expression. While, strictly speaking, it is not the same word, I cannot help but be reminded of an unpleasant individual."[15]

Whether that was the Witch's own way of joking, or if she had just wished to express how she felt regardless of whether it was an appropriate time to say it, Aldebaran had been unable to grasp the Witch's true feelings, even at the very end.

Only, he was convinced she hated him. Or perhaps in despair, he thought she might have completely forsaken him.

However—

Witch: "Your arm, it seems unlikely that there is any way for you to get it back."

The Witch's gaze fell upon Aldebaran's left arm, taken by shadow from the shoulder down.

There was no pain. That only served as more proof that this place was the Witch's Castle of Dreams—were he to return to reality, his brain would likely be scorched by unimaginable pain. And, that was something that could no longer be overturned by means of Death, a true injury that would never fade.

Witch: "Robbed of your arm, you lost the battle you could not afford to lose. It appears as though my plan has ended in failure. I can just picture my friends saying all sorts of things. —Ultimately, it shall be left up to those who seek to carry on Flugel's will. How frustrating."

The thought that his defeat would take everything from the Witch, was unbearably painful.

Without seeking anyone else's understanding, she had parted ways with her fellow Witches and the companions who had journeyed alongside her, all so she could attempt to fulfill her wish; but, Aldebaran had ruined all of that.

The cruelest part of it all was that, even though he understood that much, the passion and determination he had carried before his defeat would not return to Aldebaran's hollow soul.

Having lost a battle he could not afford to lose, Aldebaran's heart had been shattered.

The sole battle in his lifetime where defeat was not permitted, had ground Aldebaran's heart to tiny little pieces.

That was, by witnessing the inevitable death of the person closest to him in this world, the Witch, Aldebaran would likely suffer a wound beyond recovery in the truest sense.

Witch: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Hence, Aldebaran did not understand the meaning of those words, spoken to him once more.

Witch: "Now that it has come to this, we need not concern ourselves with appearances any longer. Let us change the victory conditions. We shall leave them to deal with her… meanwhile, we shall focus on preventing secondary damages."

The Witch was both wise and selfish.

Disregarding Aldebaran, who was still left at a loss, his mind unable to think straight due to his immense feelings of guilt, she came to a conclusion all on her own, leaving no room for objection as she forced the conversation along.

The altered conditions for victory, the newly presented objective of preventing secondary damages—regardless, he did not even believe that was something he could accomplish. After all, Aldebaran had already failed.

He had failed, and yet—

Witch: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Aldebaran could not fathom what had caused the Witch to say that.

Without saying much to Aldebaran, still stunned as he stood fixed in place, the Witch rose and began slowly walking towards him, before coming to stand face to face with him.

The Witch's face, the one he had gazed upon more than any other in his lifetime—on it, there emerged an expression he had never before witnessed.

Witch: "—Your stars were bad."

It was not Aldebaran's fault; he could tell that was the meaning underpinning those words.

Before he could come to terms with the emotions welling up inside of him, the Castle of Dreams abruptly came to an end.

Akin to tearing up the very paper stage of kamishibai, it was a terribly violent manner of conclusion; that which awaited him on the other side was a grim reality. That instant, his brain was dominated by pain and feelings of loss, fresh blood and the din in the air undermining his comprehension. Heaven and earth had been stained with a black so somber that there no longer existed any semblance of time, and Aldebaran's wails were drowned out by the screeches of the world crumbling, unable to even reach his own ears.

Merely, in a world where just about everything had fallen apart, despite being in the midst of a cacophony so loud he could not even hear his own voice, he somehow managed to properly hear that blurred, frail, gasping sound.

A voice he wished not to let slip, the Witch's final incantation—

Witch: "—Ol Shamak."

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The next time Aldebaran's consciousness returned, was after everything had ended—or rather, when that which had ended began anew, and that new beginning came to a new end, before beginning and ending all over again. It seemed like after that had repeated many times, over, and over, and over again, the world had been left without any traces of the Witch.

Whether it was due to a difference in preconditions, or simply because it had been performed by the tremendous power of the Witch, the shock he felt at how the spell's efficacy differed from when he himself had wielded it lasted for only a moment—

???: "—Hey you, where'd you come from? Who are you?"

That question, was delivered by the voice of a person completely unknown to him.

The man, dressed in attire that was every bit as shabby as Aldebaran's disheveled appearance, stared at Aldebaran with trepidation and caution tinging his eyes.

The words, he could understand. His experience with human interaction was scarce, but in a sense, that was not a problem either.

What mattered was figuring out where he was, and when.

???: "Ginunhive… it's the Gladiator Island. Witch? That's the thing from like hundreds of years ago, right?"

The man seemed puzzled, as if he had been asked something strange, and receiving his words, Aldebaran let out an exhale. Gazing over that, the man's expression shifted from puzzled to startled.

After all, as his exhale morphed into sobbing, Aldebaran crumbled to the ground, a flood of tears streaming down his face.

Witch: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

The words of the Witch whom he had left hundreds of years behind in the past, still clung to his soul, refusing to let go.

For the sin of having turned that person into a liar, Aldebaran had wished to die.

But die he could not.

Chapter 53: Aldebaran II

1

Aldebaran: “—Sorry for rehashing the same punchline, but it’s the return of my trump card.”

Upon declaring so, a boulder of immense mass came hurtling down from straight above.

His plan resigned to be naught more than an unoriginal rehash, Aldebaran watched as Emilia’s expression shifted mid-flight, evading the colossal stone arms reaching out toward her from the cliffsides.

Emilia: “…”

First widening her eyes at the sight of the massive boulder, then as the regret of having completely allowed Aldebaran to escape at the Royal Capital emerged on her cheeks and her canthi, she firmly held her eyes shut to ensure her heart would not be claimed by the same sense of defeat; after a momentary feeling of weakness spent wondering “Can I really do it…”, the giant boulder was reflected in her reopened sights, and she fired herself up as if to say “I have no choice but to do it!”, facing forward with even more strength in her gaze than there had been before that moment of doubt. —These many shifts in her expression had transpired over the course of a single second, so it was incredible just how quickly she had regained her composure.

Aldebaran: “But, motivation alone ain’t gonna cut it.”

Scraping and chipping away at the craggy cliffs of the canyon, the giant boulder plummeted.

The first maneuver Emilia attempted with her renewed motivation, was to conjure a massive ice cap in the trajectory of the falling boulder in order to catch its weight. —However, Aldebaran countered by firing a stone cannonball with his magic, blasting through the canyon wall to nullify her gambit.

With the jagged walls demolished, the ice cap could no longer fit perfectly across the canyon's breadth, merely becoming another falling obstacle alongside the massive boulder.

Emilia: "In that case—!"

As soon as she saw that the ice cap had failed to catch the boulder, Emilia immediately moved to the next countermeasure.

Once again carrying wings of ice upon her back after they had been purged, she enacted the rebirth of an angel while bending her long legs. Then, positioning the soles of her feet on top of the legs of the ice soldiers kicking up from directly below—receiving leg strength that the original Natsuki Subaru could never have mustered, she soared through the air.

Emilia: "…"

Caught off guard by Emilia's ferocious acceleration, the hundreds of arms emerging from the cliffs all failed to catch her, allowing the angel to escape—no, allowing her to charge Aldebaran.

While Aldebaran had been diverting his focus to intercepting her, his momentum had fallen, allowing for Emilia's rush forward to rapidly close the distance.

Yae had been left behind to buy him time, but he had completely forfeited the advantage she had created for him, so he could hear her bitter voice saying "Trying to support you truly is pointless, Al-sama~."

Aldebaran: "Though, that's only if I get caught here!"

Retorting to the imaginary words of Yae, Aldebaran met Emilia's charge with a barrage of stone bullets. But, Emilia sublimely twisted her body through air to avoid the next rehash following the falling boulder.

Aldebaran: "Seriously?!"

The fact that she had accomplished that with artificial wings that by no means should have allowed such freedom of movement, left Aldebaran aghast.

Naturally, the angel wings made of ice could not be flapped. The true origin of Emilia's three-dimensional maneuver just now, were smaller ice wings that had been added on below the main ice wings —by overlapping several wings of ice, she had yielded a change in how they sliced the wind, providing functionality that allowed her to apply edge control by tilting her body.

Even that aerodynamic solution was undoubtedly accomplished by her natural senses.

Emilia: "I'll catch up—!"

Even if she veered side-to-side in order to evade, Emilia kept her loss of speed to a minimum.

As she exclaimed, the distance between the two of them vanished. At that speed, Emilia would likely make it out of the falling boulder's blast radius in time. With the blow he had intended as a trump card so easily sidestepped, Aldebaran's situation was truly dire—or, that was what should have been the mutual perception of the two parties involved.

Emilia: "—Hk."

Emilia's large, amethyst eyes opened wide, painted in a color of shock.

From her point of view, Aldebaran had not taken any exceptional action. While he still continued firing a volley of stones that failed to hit her, neither had he deployed any new magic, nor had he performed any extreme maneuvers to evade her.

The same went for his response to Emilia's flight, momentum bolstered by borrowing the strength of the ice soldiers; at this rate, she would catch up to him, and he would no longer be able to avoid her freezing fingertips.

That was to say, Emilia had met her victory conditions in this situation. —Nevertheless, there was no delight or satisfaction to be found in Emilia's eyes.

That was because—

Aldebaran: "—Didn't I tell you? Same punchline."

A colossal boulder plummeting down; in exchange for the prevention of the damage it would bring about, Aldebaran had been allowed to escape his battle against Emilia in the Royal Capital.

Hence, even if it was uninspired, he carried out a plan that had already proved successful once. However, this time, there were no innocent people here who could get caught up in this. —Indeed, no innocent people.

Emilia: "—AL!!"

As she shouted, Emilia recklessly reached her hand out toward Aldebaran. —Toward the sole being other than Emilia who would be caught up in the wrath of the falling stone.

2

???: "—That settles it! You've done well to survive Sparka! From this point forward, you can count yourself among the gladiators of this Gladiator Island! Welcome him aboard, you damn good-for-nothings!"

The raucous welcome and cheering were indistinguishable from the sound of angry jeers.

Following that reception, Aldebaran fell to his knees and leaned against the massive corpse as coarse and vulgar cheers engulfed the arena.

He was languidly resting against the remains of a Witchbeast, the Guiltilaw that had died from the sword deeply piercing its thick neck. Having lost its right foreleg along with both of its rear legs, the Guiltilaw had died with an expression that conveyed bewilderment and confusion more so than it did agony.

Beholding that pitiful, deathly visage, Aldebaran was taken by a deep sorrow as his shoulders heaved with ragged breaths. —Though, he was immediately disgusted with himself for how terribly deceitful that sympathy was.

???: “You managed to survive, huh? Color me surprised.”

Greeting the tattered Aldebaran, was a man of shabby appearance—he was a gladiator of the Gladiator Island, the very one who had found Aldebaran when he had initially woken up.

The man’s expression was complex, likely because he found it utterly incomprehensible that Aldebaran had managed to survive the rite of passage for newcomers—Sparka. From his perspective, having been ordered to tend to Aldebaran’s needs as the unlucky person who had first discovered him, he might have felt that Aldebaran dying in this Sparka would have prevented those troubles from dragging on for too long.

Regardless, Aldebaran’s survival had been a shock to the man, but he was not the only one who had been surprised.

Aldebaran, too, could not hide his astonishment at his own survival.

—Having suffered defeat in a battle he could not afford to lose, Aldebaran had been left deserted in these foreign surroundings.

An unknown environment, unfamiliar people, and rules lacking sufficient explanation; to Aldebaran, this was certainly an uncivilized land, as if he had been cast into a brand new world.

The only thing of which he could be certain was that he had likely lost all value in his own existence, and that he had probably even lost the only one who would have mourned his loss in worth.

That was why—

Gladiator: “Even tho’ you said you wanted to die, I guess that was all talk.”

Equal parts sarcasm and spite, the man’s words carved deeply into Aldebaran’s heart.

With the defeat of his first battle, upon realizing that he had survived the end that surely ought to have awaited him, Aldebaran was consumed by unceasing feelings of loss and remorse, yearning for death from the depths of his heart. That was why Sparka, the trial by which newcomers were tested on the Gladiator Island, seemed all too convenient for Aldebaran at the time.

The blunt, offhand explanation had been mercilessly unkind, but in short, they were being forced to put their lives on the line through trial by combat, where for any who failed to prove themselves as gladiators, death alone would await.

For Aldebaran, who could not help but wish to die, it was all far too convenient.

In fact, when Aldebaran was taken to the arena along with four other newcomers in the same circumstances, and thereupon forced to face off against a Guiltilaw, he had fully intended on being killed without offering up any resistance.

But, despite all that, Aldebaran had survived.

The other men fought back, ran away, or pleaded for their lives, only to be slaughtered all the same, leaving Aldebaran as the last man standing. The Witchbeast's claws tore into him, shattering his ribs as it trampled him underfoot, and he was supposed to have met his death there, blood frothing at the mouth.

And yet—

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

In the instant those words had flashed through his mind, Aldebaran had expanded his Territory.

Compared to the opponent he had challenged hundreds of millions of times, yet still could not overcome, this Sparka, which had only managed to kill him three-hundred and four times, was no agony to Aldebaran whatsoever.

After all, the true agony only came after, in the self-questioning that haunted him for having survived.

—Why? What for? For what reason… had he not died?

Gladiator: “Hm? You wanna hear about the outside? Even if you ask me, it’s been a long time since I arrived here…”

Recognized as a gladiator, Aldebaran had gained the right to live on this island.

Within the island cut off from the outside world, he had learned that this was a part of the Vollachian Empire, that the gladiators imprisoned here were forced to fight in deathmatches for spectacle, and that public order on the island had collapsed. But, there was still much more he wished to know.

As a result, the one subjected to Aldebaran’s persistent questioning, was the gladiator responsible for taking care of him.

Gladiator: “If you say it’s not about anything recent, but history that you wanna learn about… I don’t know all too much about it either, yeah? Well, if it’s about a Witch… I at least know about the Witch of Envy, but…”

When he had asked just to be sure, he was first surprised that the gladiator had even known about a Witch. And recited as if it were too terrifying to speak aloud, the Witch’s legend as it was known today—it delivered unto him an even greater shock, for the tale had come to refer to only one: the Witch of Envy.

The Witch of Envy, who, threatening to plunge the world into ruin, had been sealed away at the hands of the Three Heroes.

This world possessed no legends of any other Witch, and records pertaining to the Witches of Sin were nowhere to be found. Moreover, hearing that it had been nearly four-hundred years since those events had transpired, Aldebaran fell into despair.

Four-hundred years; that long, long passage of time had erased any trace of the Witches of Sin from this world, but to think that it would go so far as to even forget the existence of the Witch, the very Witch who had attempted to fulfill her promise even if it meant giving up everything.

But, what was even more cruel—

Gladiator: "—The Witch of Greed? The hell's that? Some kinda delusion of yours?"

Aldebaran had no words with which to respond to the man's suspicions.

There was no way it was a delusion. The days Aldebaran had spent alongside the Witch were certainly present within him; her teachings, the touch of her fingertips, the words she had spoken to him, he remembered all of it.

In this world, against the Witch who concealed dreadful power, there had certainly been another Witch who had attempted to fight back. —Aldebaran was her student, and he was the Witch's trump card.

Gladiator: "Shit! The fuck's wrong with you?! Even tho' all I did was answer everything you asked me, you start swinging at me outta the blue!"

So spat the man who had been struck by Aldebaran, the latter enraged upon being denied the existence of the Witch.

Having been tossed into this environment—no, into this brand new world, that was how his relationship ended with the benefactor who had first shown him kindness. With the other gladiators as well, things broke down in a similar fashion, isolating Aldebaran from his fellows.

—A deviant enthralled by the Witch; many times he had heard such rumors about himself. It seemed that his benefactor had taken the initiative to spread them around, but in a sense, it was a valid assessment. He had no intention of correcting it.

However, it aggravated him to be likened to some incomprehensible group known as the Witch Cult.

Upon asking, it seemed like they were a group who heralded the revival of the Witch, going around and committing acts of terrorism all over. Once more, he flew into a rage, demanding them to not lump him in with such individuals, but this only caused his reputation to be tarnished even further.

Gladiator: "…A Witch-crazed nut like you… you'll never die a decent death."

During the deathmatch arranged at the discretion of the then-Governor of the Gladiator Island, those were the dying words of the first benefactor to show him kindness, slain by the barbarian sword in Aldebaran's hand.

Wiping the blood of his benefactor off of him, Aldebaran took a moment to ponder those final words of spite, "you'll never die a decent death", before nodding deeply in agreement that there was no doubt about those words.

With his Territory going strong, Aldebaran had continued to survive his deathmatches on the Gladiator Island.

Those who had called Aldebaran a Witch-crazed nut were all eventually pitted against him in deathmatches, and without fail, they all fell before his barbarian sword.

He did not care about enacting revenge. Nor did he have any desire to clear the Witch's dishonor. To begin with, rather than being dishonored, the fate that had befallen the Witches was that of having their very existence erased.

Hence, Aldebaran did not seek a reason for his continued survival from the Witch. —Only, he wished to learn why he had been allowed to live.

In order to ascertain that reason, he could not afford to die.

Surviving the initial Sparka, and continuing to survive the deathmatches thereafter, it was all for that purpose.

And so, using his Territory, while suffering hundreds of deaths each time he crossed blades with an opponent, he trampled the lives of all sorts of gladiators underfoot, and lived. He lived. And he kept on living.

And then—

Governor: "—You've done well to survive. I take my hat off to the devilish luck that allowed you to best even one so far above yourself."

Indeed, upon witnessing the triumph of Aldebaran, who had grasped even the most infinitesimal chance of victory in order to slay an opponent who had utterly outclassed him, the Governor voiced words of praise that were not quite discernible as either astonishment or admiration.

Casting aside his broken barbarian sword, Aldebaran turned his back to the arena, scarce on cheer as it was.

—From the moment of his awakening, his first decade on the Gladiator Island went by in a flash.

3

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Those ten years were long, relentlessly scraping away at Aldebaran's humanity.

The face, voice, and warmth that he ought to have vividly recalled whenever he closed his eyes were instead being painted over by the deathly visages, death throes, and cold blood of those he had killed with his own hands.

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

That was correct. Those words were correct. Certainly, nobody could kill Aldebaran.

Over his past ten years on the Gladiator Island, he had been summoned to Sparka on many occasions, faced countless brushes with death in the arena matches, and had come to kill many of the experts and inhuman beings who utterly outmatched him.

In response to Aldebaran's repeated upsets, it was not merely once or twice that deathmatches were arranged to try to kill him, and since there was always a promising gladiator killed on those occasions, Aldebaran had begun to acquire somewhat of an untouchable status.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

After a decade, the faces on the Gladiator Island were completely different than when he had first arrived.

Aldebaran had long since become one of its oldest members, and there no longer remained a single person aware of the rumors that he was a deviant enthralled by the Witch. Ever since Aldebaran had learned of the taboo regarding the subject of the Witch, and the fact that most people did not know anything beyond the surface of the legend, he had completely stopped bringing the topic up.

However, that was not a change brought about by things such as disappointment or resignation from not getting any of the answers he desired; rather, it was something far more serious.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

For ten years, forced to fight to the death while stranded on the Gladiator Island, in that place where transactions of life and death were repeated ad nauseum, what had consumed Aldebaran was a sense of immense despair.

Had the Witch truly existed? It was a despair that called her very existence into question.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

If he closed his eyes, he could certainly hear that voice. He remembered it being spoken to him.

But, even so, was that truly something that had happened?

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

The Witch’s face, he could no longer recall.

The Witch’s voice, he could no longer recall.

The Witch's warmth, he could no longer recall.

For ten years, his recollections wore thin, like a videotape he would watch back whenever he had a moment to spare. Even if he tried to splice the torn tape back together, playback remained impossible, with even the tape itself eventually turning to dust.

When the memories themselves scattered away in such a manner, and the dust completely fell through the gaps between his fingers, Aldebaran was no longer able to tell.

—Had the Witch truly existed?

—Were Aldebaran's memories events that had actually happened?

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

At times, he would feel an overwhelming urge to destroy his own existence.

Whenever that happened, Aldebaran would enter a deathmatch whilst deliberately undoing his Territory, and by allowing himself to be thoroughly beaten up with his life truly at stake, he would attempt to gaze into the abyss of death. —No, not only did he gaze, he would even think about just letting himself fall in.

However, only on such occasions, the Territory would save Aldebaran by taking on an unexpected form.

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

As if to validate the words of the Witch who possibly did not exist, there were several times when an opponent on the verge of killing Aldebaran abruptly succumbed to mental collapse right before his eyes.

Each time an opponent's eyes went white, having lost both sanity and fighting spirit alike, Aldebaran would feel as if there were some invisible force keeping him alive, and overcome with frustration, he would lop off the opponent's head.

Even after a decade, Aldebaran still did not understand the purpose for which he had been kept alive.

On the contrary, he was not even sure if there really was anything that had tried to keep him alive.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

Only, he was terrified.

That everything that had shaped him was a lie, that the Witch’s efforts and words had never truly existed, that Aldebaran truly was just a lunatic enthralled by the Witch; with such self-doubt gnawing at his heart, he endured many years of sleepless nights.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

Those words once served as Aldebaran’s lifeline, the very foundation upon which his being had been shaped, but now, they were terrifying beyond recognition.

That this was all just a product of his delusions, that the duty Aldebaran had carried, the encounters and partings he ought to have had, might never have existed at all; such doubts only continued to haunt him.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

An unending spiral of self-questioning.

A sensation as if he were mired in a swamp of unanswerable, bottomless despair, sunk up to his chest and unable to move.

And so, that time in which only the manner of his death remained unsettled seemed as though it would stretch on forever. —However, on a certain day, Aldebaran’s long days of stagnation quite suddenly arrived at a turning point.

That turning point being—

???: “—Hear me, rabble scattered across Gladiator Island!”

—Booming through the speaking tubes across the island was the voice of a young girl, tinged with heat as fierce as flame.

4

—The simultaneous revolt of the gladiators, and the plot to assassinate the new Emperor by using that revolt as a diversion.

That seemed to have been the reality of the turning point that had befallen Aldebaran.

Be that as it may, there was no way all the details would have been granted to a mere gladiator of the Gladiator Island, nor did Aldebaran even want to know any further details. For the time being, since there had been no change in the management of the island, he simply assumed that the administration had not been overthrown either.

At the very least, a change of Emperor at this point in time was not something Aldebaran had known about.

But if there was just one thing during this incident that had caused Aldebaran to truly feel a profound transformation within himself, it was obvious—he had rescued a silver-haired girl who had fallen into dire straits.

Of course, that incident had nothing to do with Aldebaran’s original objective.

The silver-haired girl was a young dogperson whom he had happened across, and she had no connection whatsoever to the silver-haired individual with whom Aldebaran had been involved. However, the fact that he had saved that girl, and the voice of the flame-like girl amidst the revolt that had demonstrated an attitude of selfishly following one’s own path, had allowed Aldebaran to make up his mind.

—He would venture beyond this closed off world, in order to verify the existence of the Witch.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

After being killed over and over again by the aquatic Witchbeasts let loose in the lake, Aldebaran finally escaped the island which had held him captive for over ten years, and disembarked on a land that was not surrounded by water. —Strictly speaking, the world as a whole was encircled by the Great Waterfall, so it could be said that there was actually no land that was not surrounded by water; the fact that he could come up with a quip like that showed that he was still able to at least fake some cheer.

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

To Aldebaran, those words were a malediction, a consolation, a binding, and a forgiveness.

In order to discern the color, the heat, the uncertain certainty of that ambiguous and directionless wellspring of such overwhelming emotion, Aldebaran had decided to pursue the traces of the Witch.

There was not much time to spare. During the decade he had spent on the closed off island, the world Aldebaran walked had unexpectedly been drawing closer to the world Aldebaran remembered.

All that remained, was to ascertain whether the things within Aldebaran were genuine or not. And so, what was required to ascertain that, was evidence of the Witch—

???: "—For what reason, does the Gospel hold no account of your existence?"

Speaking those words was a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult who tilted his head far more than was necessary; although Aldebaran had a rough idea as to the reason why, he fiddled with the metal fixtures of his helmet and gave an evasive comment.

The jet-black steel helmet he had begun to wear in those days was a parting gift he had taken with him from the Gladiator Island, and he found that its sturdiness and full-face cover often came in handy.

It seemed like this profusely loud and animated Sin Archbishop did not take kindly to the fact that there was not a single account of such a conspicuous person in his oh-so-precious Gospel.

Sin Archbishop: "—You are truly Slothful, aren't you?"

In all honesty, the battle against this Sin Archbishop was among the most challenging encounters of Aldebaran's life.

To begin with, winning without dying a single time was something he lacked experience in, but even so, this was a formidable enemy who made it difficult to seize any chance of victory. In the end, while he might have satisfied the conditions for victory, he did not win.

Even when compared to the Witches of Sin—to the women who, just like the Witch, potentially did not exist, his viciousness seemed to stack up favorably.

Anyhow—

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

With his honor preserved by those words, and having secured the information he desired, Aldebaran had pondered. —In order to ascertain the existence of the Witch, the ones most likely to possess the information he sought were the members of the heretical organization he had often heard about even on the Gladiator Island, the Witch Cult.

They seemed to be a group who hid themselves away in places completely unknown, but that was only if one was attempting to track them down, as luring them out was not particularly difficult. —Certainly, if rumors were to be spread about the Witch of Envy so worshipped by the Witch Cult, there were some who would come rushing to the scene.

But then again, if one could not handle whatever came rushing their way, they would simply suffer through the world's most foolish way to die, being mercilessly robbed of their life.

Sin Archbishop: "You must cease at ONCE! That is BLASPHEMY! Satella! Any other than Satella! To speak of any Witch other than the Witch of Envy! It is the height of SACRILEGE! As the one who graces me with the favor of her love, she is the only one worthy of once more descending upon this world, HER ALONE!!"

He knew not just how much credence he could give to the utterances of the Sin Archbishop whose aberrant demeanor and conduct bereft of sanity had accumulated to an extremely vast amount.

But, even if that madman's ramblings held no meaning to anybody else, they held meaning to Aldebaran.

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Tenaciously retrying his encounter with the Sin Archbishop, he would draw out the words, engage in the necessary back and forth, and give up his life each time he triggered a fit of rage, then back to the beginning—by single-mindedly accreting that process, Aldebaran obtained the information he desired from the Sin Archbishop.

Then, passing right by the Sin Archbishop who had come rushing to the scene, he had made it so that their encounter had never happened.

Sin Archbishop: "Ahh! Ahhhh! AHHHHHH! SLOTH SLOTH SLOTH SLOTH SLOOOOOOOOOTH—!!"

As Aldebaran evaded the Witch Cult's encirclement and absconded, he pictured the Sin Archbishop letting out a bloodcurdling shriek after failing to catch him, but that no longer mattered to him.

At this moment, there existed but one desire within Aldebaran—the confirmation of the Witch's existence.

Of how the lives of the Witches of Sin had been extinguished, he was aware.

The Witch of Wrath had perished in madness after being caught in a trap, the Witch of Lust had been immolated in a great fire, the Witch of Gluttony had withered to death in the sea of sand, the Witch of Pride had drowned in a great flood, and the Witch of Sloth had fallen into the Great Waterfall as she massacred the Dragon.

Then, the Witch of Envy had been sealed away at the edge of the world, and the final Witch—

???: “—I see. The ability to enter this place from outside the tomb is quite the structural flaw indeed. Just like the mechanisms of the Sanctuary, the finishing touches are rather lacking. Though, I suppose some aspects of that were unavoidable.”

A plain of lush, verdant grass beneath an unrealistic blue sky, stretching out as far as the eye could see. As a cool breeze blew across, a white table and parasol were placed atop a small hill.

Unmistakably, that was the scene of the memories which had been on the verge of fading from within Aldebaran.

Present right at the heart of it all, was a beautiful being who could be described with just the colors of white and black—

???: “—Why, must love fade?”

After many twists and turns, he had finally made his homecoming to the Castle of Dreams.

Doubting his own sanity, Aldebaran had almost believed that it might have even been an illusion.

A reunion which spanned over a decade for the student, and across four centuries for the other party; with her existence verified, the Witch—nay, the Witch of Greed, wearing a smile bereft of blood, voiced that celebratory remark.

5

Aldebaran: “…”

Aldebaran had lived life with one arm longer than he ever had with two.

Hence, he hardly ever felt much of a handicap for only having his right arm, but regardless, he still found it to be an inconvenience on extremely rare occasions.

For instance, the times when he had no choice but to carry an unconscious person.

Aldebaran: “Please bear with the ruggedness.”

Carried in Aldebaran’s arm as he uttered so—held together with the magic stone-forged prosthesis, was the limp, unconscious body of Emilia.

Emilia’s aerial chase of Aldebaran that had commenced in the vast canyon had come to a conclusion with Emilia collapsing due to Aldebaran’s use of foul play.

It was nothing substantial. The trump card was the same one that he had played in order to escape Emilia’s clutches back in the Royal Capital.

Emilia, kindhearted as she was, could not allow anybody to be lost in the midst of battle. —She too was one who, with the passing of Priscilla during the Empire’s Great Disaster, had sustained a deep wound to her heart.

Therefore, in order to protect Aldebaran, who had remained in the trajectory on course to receive a direct hit from the falling boulder, she did not hesitate to throw herself in harm’s way.

Aldebaran: “Even though there wasn’t any other way to reliably land an attack on her, it’s a scummy strategy even for me.”

Of course, that was Aldebaran’s conclusion after having attempted various other stratagems in trial and error.

He had tried adjusting the positioning of the boulder’s fall, smashing the boulder to create a rock avalanche, setting its trajectory with a barrage of stone projectiles, and incorporating all sorts of different magic, but outside the stratagem of using himself as a hostage, Emilia always managed to find a flash of inspiration and intuitive judgement for the circumstance, admirably surmounting all of them.

None of the foolish Aldebarans who had enacted those other stratagems had managed to avoid a future of being frozen by

Emilia's fingertips, so it could be said that he had no other means but to rely on such a desperate measure.

Aldebaran: "Though, that doesn't make the guilt go away, nor does it mean I'll be forgiven."

An excuse for no ears save his own, so childish that not even Emilia would forgive it.

Shielding Aldebaran, Emilia defenselessly brushed the mass of the huge crag, and as the powerful impact ran through her entire body, even she would let go of her consciousness. From what he could tell from appearances, it did not seem like she had sustained any lasting injuries, just a strong concussion at worst. —To ensure that was the case, many careful adjustments had been made.

Aldebaran: "Seems like I've been put on quite the detour… Waiting on Yae wouldn't exactly be the smartest move, now would it?"

Now that the fall from high-altitude and chase sequence with Emilia had ended, he finally had enough leeway to ascertain his surroundings. What he had gleaned by doing so, was that this place was likely the Agzadd Canyon, the largest canyon in the entire world, and the fact that he had been placed at a significantly different elevation from his destination of the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

They were already past the national border with the Kingdom of Lugunica, and were well into the Kararagi City-States, but it would take a considerable amount of time to climb back up the thousands of meters he had fallen so that he could return to his original route.

Besides—

Aldebaran: "Setting Alter aside, is it even possible to reconvene with Roy and the old man…?"

Amongst the henchmen he had pulled ahead from, he had no anxiety regarding "Aldebaran's" strength, but he was greatly concerned about the abilities and humanity of Roy Alphard and Heinkel. Of course, Roy's actions were restricted by the curse mark, so he would not break the rules if he valued his own life.

Aldebaran: “Either way, the best I can do is expect everyone to gather at the meeting spot.”

The maximum priority for Aldebaran was reaching the Grand Mogolade Geyser, and accomplishing his objective.

He would need to borrow “Aldebaran’s” strength for that objective, but in the worst case, it was not as though he had no means by which to do something about it even without “Aldebaran”. In addition, the power of Roy’s Authority of Gluttony was indispensable to dealing with the aftermath of the calamity he had employed for the sake of this plan.

Hence, he would need to find a way to reconvene after he fulfilled his objective, and somehow get them to follow his instructions.

Aldebaran: “Trying to avert secondary damages only to cause tertiary and quaternary damages, some help I am.”

Spilling those words, Aldebaran inclined the wings of stone on his back, and while maintaining his speed he slowly descended towards the bottom of the canyon, and by the bank of the great river running through, he somehow managed to make a smooth landing.
—That was a lie. He had crashed and burned six times while carrying Emilia, and on the seventh attempt he finally succeeded in landing.

Aldebaran: “It’d be a laughing matter if I became unable to get back on my feet here.”

One time, he had been incapacitated not only in his legs, but from the waist down, which brought him dangerously close to total paralysis and made him incapable of gulping down his poison. He had managed to roll himself into the river and drown to death, but he did not wish to repeat the same failure.

In any case—

Aldebaran: “I’m sorry, Emilia… lil’ miss.”

To ensure she would not drown if the water in the great river rose for some reason, Aldebaran laid Emilia down not on the ground, but in a cavity of the cliff face that was a bit higher up.

And in his final comment before leaving her there, he slightly hesitated on how to call her. Hesitating, he ultimately settled on referring to her as he usually did, as Aldebaran. —Now that their relationship had lost its rightful form, he did not have the courage to address her in any way that pertained to the true relationship between the two of them.

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

Right after cursing his cowardly self, Aldebaran was struck by a dizzying headache, clenching his teeth.

Having overcome a difficult situation, the moment he let his mind relax, the debts he had accumulated began threatening to erupt. Doing his best to hold that back, he gave himself ten seconds to take deep breaths before gulping down his poison—repeating that over and over, he stabilized his mind.

Albeit, even if he could give his heart a breather through this method, it was unable to grant a rest to his body—and in particular, to his brain.

In real time, he had already kept his brain constantly running for nearly a hundred hours.

Along their journey, "Aldebaran" had used its healing magic on him to conceal that reality from his mind, but until his body and mind completely shut down, this overheating would likely not subside.

Be that as it may, he persuaded himself to just hold out for a little bit longer.

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Aldebaran: "Ahh, that's right, Teacher. —Nobody, can defeat me. That's right. That's precisely right."

When he closed his eyes, those words were resurrected within

Aldebaran's mind.

Using that as support, Aldebaran would—

???: "—Look at that, it is…"

Aldebaran: "…"

???: "It is mine—"

Aldebaran: "…"

???: "Mine—"

Fragmented and indistinct, a voice sounded within him.

To whom it had belonged, when those words had been spoken, and just how deeply they would scorch his soul; since he knew the answers to all of those questions, Aldebaran closed off the ears of his heart.

He would not halt his tracks. So he had decided. His mind was made up.

After all, he could not afford to halt his tracks, so he had decided.

His mind was made up, and so—

6

—The moment was just after Aldebaran, having closed his heart's ears, had at last managed to climb out of the canyon, resuming his hurried march towards the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

Aldebaran: "Wha…"

And thus, what had escaped from Aldebaran's lips, was a husky exhale.

It was only natural that he had let such a voice spill. After all, it was an accident that had flown in from outside his consciousness, an unforeseen event he had dismissed as impossible in the back of his mind. —In Aldebaran's path, around two meters ahead of him, a behemoth of an icicle had been pierced.

Aldebaran: "…"

Swallowing his saliva, Aldebaran looked back down at the bottom of the canyon—he understood that Emilia, the one left down there, had been the one to plunge this extremity of ice here.

But, the damage she had taken was severe. It would still be a few hours before Emilia regained consciousness, so in other words, this was a hail mary she had delivered whilst unconscious.

Aldebaran: "That's some outrageous persistence…"

Regardless, considering that, if Aldebaran had climbed up only five seconds faster, he would have been crushed under this ice pillar just now, it could be said that he had evaded tragedy in two senses.

Of course, even if he suffered a direct hit, Aldebaran would redo it with his Authority, and draw out the result of not getting hit, but for both Emilia's sake, and for Aldebaran's peace of mind, it would be best if she did not have the chance to intervene from here on out.

Even so—

Aldebaran: "In battles, it's something that'll crop up every so often, but it's damn frightening."

Even in the Sparkas of the Gladiator Island, in the midst of life-or-death battles, there were times when an opponent who had sustained a fatal wound would muster all of the life force left within them, unleashing an attack that aimed to bring him down with them. Among Aldebaran's experiences, there was even someone who had tried to kill him after having their head sliced off.

Actions with the resolve to accomplish what they set out to do, such that even if one's consciousness or life were lost, the vestiges of their feelings left behind in their limbs would attempt to carry out their will.

Emilia's hail mary just now, was the form taken by her feelings of wishing to stop Aldebaran no matter what, and so—

Aldebaran: "—Wait."

As he attempted to praise her force of will, Aldebaran held his breath.

Before his eyes, the ice pillar had barely missed Aldebaran to thrust itself into the ground—that was a colossal spear of ice, one that seemed like it might be wielded by a giant from legend. But, for that to have been fired with the objective of killing Aldebaran, was far too much of an exaggeration, no matter how one might see it.

Something this massive, it was just as if—

Aldebaran: "—An anchor."

Indeed, it happened right after he let that mutter slip. —With the ice spear Emilia had fired as a landmark, new assassins were dispatched to Aldebaran as he attempted to push on towards the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

That was—

???: "—Yo, helmet bastard, looks like you got roughed up pretty badly while I wasn't looking."

Aldebaran: "…I could say the same for you, and it also seems like you've wound up with quite the foul-mouth, haven't you, Filóre-chan?"

Having each surmounted their preliminary battlefields, they were fellows who had risen to the next stage.

The Combined Forces headed by Filóre Lugunica—no, by Felt; just like when they had hit him with a flash grenade of Memories, they now stood in his way once more.

Chapter 54:
Warlock VS Witch

1

???: "—Just like you, I am a complete failure of a girl."

Aldebaran would never forget the somber expression upon the Witch's visage as she spoke those words.

And so, he had thought.

Did even the Witch, with a face that seemed to know just about anything and everything concerning this world's providence, with demeanor that seemed to disseminate the roots of knowledge through every nook and cranny of this world, who conducted herself with an air of understanding every aspect of the universe, did she too have moments in which she grieved her own powerlessness?

Witch: "Of course I do. If you would like an example, then your very existence… the very fact that you are currently like this, is proof that I was lacking, after all."

Hearing that, Aldebaran's feelings were complicated.

Within Aldebaran, this Witch was a great existence, and though he was loath to admit it, she was even a tremendous one. Although there were few to whom he could compare her, she was someone who always felt greater than any comparison.

For that Witch to consider herself a complete failure, was of no joy to him whatsoever.

Only, if the Witch had been bereft of such self-acknowledgement, her current relationship with Aldebaran would not exist. If the Witch had been in any position to not deem herself a complete failure—

Witch: “Then, you and I would have simply remained in our rightful places. You are free to daydream about a future that did not unfold in such a manner, but unfortunately, you ended up being dealt the worst fate of all. Though I am sorry to say, it was rather fortuitous for myself.”

That deliberately wicked phrasing seemed to be an equal blend of the Witch’s humor and the Witch’s sincerity. As for which one it actually was, he could not tell.

After all, always boasting of her inability to comprehend the human heart, the Witch’s true feelings were unclear to even Aldebaran, who had been in her company for so long, leaving him with nothing to latch onto.

But, supposing the Witch’s words were correct, it was rather strange.

After all, even though the alignment of the stars was at its absolute worst for Aldebaran in his current circumstances, he did not consider his days with the Witch to be a misfortune.

Though certainly, with her putting him through the experience of being killed a million times under the guise of being a trial, calling him by a name he disliked even after objecting to it in disagreement, there was no doubt that these circumstances were far removed from any ordinary notion of happiness.

Witch: “To think you could find value in living alongside a complete failure of a Witch, you are truly a pitiful child.”

This was a complex muttering, containing both self-deprecation alongside a firm deprecation of the other party.

However, Aldebaran would not fail to hear the gentle timbre that could not be fully concealed therein.

Even if they were meager, even if they were easily lost in the mix, even if they were difficult to understand, earnest emotions did dwell within the Witch. Searching for evidence as a basis to believe that, was a pastime of Aldebaran’s.

In truth, he did not really know for sure. It might have just been a misunderstanding or a misconception.

What mattered was how Aldebaran felt; the Witch's true intentions were her own to keep. —What was the truth for Aldebaran, was for Aldebaran alone.

Witch: "The way you separate those things is remarkably reminiscent. As expected, the thing known as influence is not to be trifled with."

Narrowing her black eyes, fiddling with her white bangs, thus spoke the Witch.

While simultaneously looking past Aldebaran to somebody else, and at herself reflected within Aldebaran's irises, the Witch muttered those words reminiscently.

Influence, it was only natural for such a thing to exist. In birth, and in upbringing.

In Aldebaran, and in the Witch.

Failure, inadequacy, imperfection. —Was that past of hers really so shameful for the Witch?

Was it a curse for him to think that thanks to it having turned out that way, his days with the Witch were able to continue?

If only one thing could be said, it was—

Witch: "—Aldebaran."

A reunion spanning a decade for Aldebaran, and stretching across four centuries for the other party, when the figure of the Witch—nay, of the Witch of Greed, present amidst familiar scenery, was one that contradicted the complete failure she had spoken about back on that day, Aldebaran was overcome with unbearable feelings of loss and despair.

—Fiddling with the metal fixtures of his black helmet, Aldebaran surveyed the situation.

Before his eyes, having used the almost divine colossal anchor of ice as a landmark, the lineup of personnel boldly squared off against Aldebaran.

The group opposing him was one centered around Filóre—no, around Felt, so Aldebaran made no effort to question the meaning of them having assembled here.

Even without needing to ask, he understood. —Roy and Heinkel had been defeated.

He could not imagine that even "Aldebaran" had been defeated, but since the Dragon had not hastened here, it seemed that it was being contained through some means.

On top of defeating the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, even if he may have been restricted with his Authority and with the "no-killing" rule, the fact that they had even devised a countermeasure for the Divine Dragon was quite honestly beyond Aldebaran's imagination.

Just what sort of stratagem had they prepared; he would likely not get an answer even if he asked, but—

× × ×

—Two-hundred and forty-six.

Aldebaran: "—No matter how you slice it, a Witch Factor's just way too far for your resolve, Lil' Miss Petra."

???: "—Hk."

At Aldebaran's straightforward remark, an air of tension ran through Felt's group.

The one whose cheeks had stiffened the most was naturally Petra, given that her name had been called out. From their perspective, Petra's Authority was their trump card, something that was supposed to have been top secret.

In fact, that policy had been firmly shared by all their personnel.

Yet, even the most iron of hearts could not remain unfazed before an unforeseen stab.

In response to Aldebaran's questions, everyone had kept up appearances, but through even the slightest shifts in gaze or attention, he would just keep testing over and over again, relentlessly probing in those directions. As a result, by pursuing the minute differences in their reactions, Aldebaran had arrived at the answer he desired, standing steadfast before him. —Though, he had been considerably shocked when it turned out to be Petra, who had taken in a Witch Factor.

Aldebaran: "In the first place, I predicted that when either Lil' Miss Petra or Lil' Miss Meili read that, they'd be completely incapable of returning to the front lines."

Having sealed Natsuki Subaru and Beatrice away at the Pleiades Watchtower, and after getting Garfiel and Ezzo out of the way, Aldebaran had let Petra and Meili go without any harm.

Not only was that because there had been no need to eliminate them, it was a stratagem in anticipation of what was to follow.

In order to keep Reinhard contained, it had been absolutely necessary to manifest the Witch of Envy.

As the trigger for that, Aldebaran had selected Petra and Meili as the candidates to read Natsuki Subaru's Book of the Dead. In reality, the intrusion of the Witch of Envy had granted Aldebaran a way out from his prolonged fight against Reinhard, successfully eliminating the greatest obstacle to his plan.

However—

Aldebaran: "…Even though reading anyone's book usually has a high chance of causing a mental breakdown, to think she was able to endure reading Natsuki Subaru's Book of the Dead."

A precedent, did exist. —Aldebaran happened to know that all too well, but even so, the reason he did not believe that anyone could accomplish that same feat was due to the absolute nature of Death.

The Book of the Dead belonging to Natsuki Subaru was a special-grade cursed object that, depending on the situation, could be used as a trump card to defeat a higher-level opponent. It was highly unlikely that there were many who could face it without having their hearts shattered.

Aldebaran: "…Or rather, I've got a bad habit of underestimating others."

Regardless of what Aldebaran thought, it was a matter of fact that Petra was now standing here.

Not only had she avoided having her heart shattered by the impact of reading the Book of the Dead, she had even gone so far as to perform the outrageous act of housing a Witch Factor within herself. In all likelihood, the experience of reading the Book of the Dead had led Petra to doing so.

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Flashing through the back of his mind, those words of the Witch were intended to rouse Aldebaran's spirits, never to fill him with arrogance or cause him to stumble.

If he got that mixed up, Aldebaran would lose the Witch for good this time. —This time for good, he would lose the Witch who, reduced to the Witch of Greed, had lost the heart she had certainly once possessed.

Aldebaran: "—In the end, I guess I just can't leave fate in the hands of others."

Suppressing the sentimentality gripping his heart with deep breaths, Aldebaran faced forward.

The enemy was strong, the obstacles many, he was bereft of allies, with nothing to be proud of—even so, he decided to proceed.

That instant—

???: “—ORAHHHHH!!”

—Ablaze with rage, the stout fist of the golden tiger furiously drove into Aldebaran’s head.

3

—God, Buddah, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never partake in celebrations.

4

—Sixty-one people in total.

After the conclusion against Roy Alphard of Gluttony, that was what composed the Aldebusters—the combined strength of the Emilia Camp and the Felt Camp, reorganized for the final battle against Al.

Right after that fierce battle had ended, when the team was reorganized without taking a moment to breathe, Petra could not help but feel gratitude and admiration that so many still chose to remain. However, that was by no means condemning those who did not accompany the reorganized team.

???: “After all, neither Otto nor Meili can be pushed any further than that.”

Just as the Imaginary Subaru said, for Otto and Meili—both individuals who had served as deciding factors in the clash against Gluttony, withdrawing from the front lines was necessary; it was only natural for Otto, whose Memories had been eaten, and Meili, who had vehemently exhausted herself by overworking her Divine Protection to detain the Black Serpent.

And it was not just them. Roy’s trump card, unveiled in the eleventh hour, using the Authority of Gluttony to force them to relive pains of the past, had abraded some of their minds to the limit. Unlike wounds to the body, abrasions to the heart could not be easily restored even with Petra’s Compression. But then again, Meili had still continued to insist that her recovery time be Compressed so that she could return to the front lines, but—

Petra: “If you took out an advance payment on your life, Subaru wouldn’t be too happy, you know?”

And so, persuaded by Petra, Meili had reluctantly, truly so very reluctantly, accepted her withdrawal from the battlefield.

To be honest, Petra’s maiden circuitry felt a subtle discomfort upon witnessing Meili’s attitude in response to a persuasion that cited Subaru, but since it was the result of her own actions, she did not speak much of it.

Moreover, she also had the duty of keeping an eye out for the Black Serpent that had been summoned by Gluttony, having vanished after combat had concluded. Petra felt apologetic that she was unable to grant her a complete rest.

“Subaru”: “We’ve got no choice but to have the capable ones to fill in where they can. With that said, there’re still some crazy guys who’ll rush into the most high-risk situations even without their memories.”

Petra: “It’s incredible, isn’t it? You can’t help but think that Otto-san’s that way, even without his memories.”

“Subaru”: “I guess it’s just his innate disposition? He might be a risk junkie.”

If the person in question were to hear that remark, whether he had memories or not, he would likely retort in a deeply emotional tone, “Could you please refrain from saying such disreputable things about me?!”; but, there was no avoiding him being thought of in such a manner.

Either way, Gluttony had firmly weakened their precious fighting strength, limiting the cards in their hand for the climax. She was glad for Garfiel’s return, but the fact that they could not devote the entirety of their forces to Emilia and Rem was regrettable for both Petra and “Subaru”.

But, even so—

Petra: “—We’re going to win, Subaru.”

“Subaru”: “Yeah, let’s go and win. After all, we can’t let everything we’ve built up to this point be for nothing.”

5

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never speak of my dreams to another.

6

Aldebaran: “—In the end, I guess I just can’t leave fate in the hands of others.”

An offhanded remark, yet with a tone carrying resolve, that which was spoken by Al had served as the signal.

Garfiel: “—ORAHHHHH!!”

With the raging Garfiel at the vanguard, the Aldebusters simultaneously sprung into action.

Keeping her eyes trained over those movements, Petra grasped her hands tightly over her chest.

—With the ice anchor Emilia had fired as a landmark, Petra had Compressed the distance to the current location with the Aldebusters in tow, barring Al’s path once more.

In all honesty, the fact that Emilia and Rem were not present, and the fact that the kunoichi assigned to accompany Al, who had unexpectedly been carried off with him, was nowhere to be found was certainly a cause for concern, but,

“Subaru”: “—Al’s side has no reason to lift their no-killing restriction.”

Using that as reassurance, perhaps that was placing a bit too much hope in their opponent’s abilities and convictions.

But, when considering Al’s fighting style with his Authority of “Turning Back Time” until this point, that was the foundation. Since his Authority was far too strong, in a sense, Al had gotten away with being underestimated by his opponents up until now.

And that premise, even now that his allies had been stripped away from him, ultimately would not change.

Garfiel: “Gahguh-!”

Having rushed straight ahead without any preparatory movements, Garfiel raised his voice in pain.

The reason for this was his collision into a stone slab that had suddenly appeared along his trajectory. Having slammed his face into the stone slab that had preempted his initial strike, Garfiel’s body rolled over mid-air. And slipping past from underneath Garfiel, Al moved to intercept the fighting strength which followed after the golden tiger.

Coming after him was the trio of Ram, Flam, and Grassis.

“Subaru”: “Oddly enough, it’s the pink-haired sisters! Well then, how’s it gonna go?!”

7

—Thirty-seven.

Intercepting Garfiel’s rush with a stone slab, he slipped underneath as the former reeled backwards.

The timing had been unexpectedly tight. If the stone slab was deployed too early, it would have been easily pulverized, and deploying it too late would allow Garfiel to pass right by it. Perfecting the necessary timing to strike him in the face, he put it into practice.

Garfiel: “Gahguh-!”

Hearing the cry of pain behind him, Aldebaran charged forward as three shadows swooped down upon him.

He was flanked on his left and right by Flam and her sister, in sync with Ram who came at him from an upward diagonal. He could expect that sort of high precision coordination between twins, but Ram's ability to match them on first sight highlighted the abnormality of this teamup.

Thereupon—

Aldebaran: "Lil' Miss Rem was crushed flat at those cliffs back there."

Ram: "She wasn't. Do not underestimate Ram and Rem's sisterly love."

Neutralized by the sisters' synesthesia, the venom in his words failed to exhibit any effectiveness.

Given her lack of discomposure, there was likely no falsehood in Ram's statement. Inferring how that signified Rem's safety, as well as the unknown fate of Yae, it merely ended up serving as venom against himself.

However—

Aldebaran: "—Earth Brand Arts."

Using the Mana coming to him via his pathway with the Dragon, Aldebaran surrounded himself with swords of stone. In order to avoid the tips of the swords shooting up from the ground one after another, the twins deftly maneuvered their bodies to perform evasions, yielding a momentary delay that shifted their three-way coordination into a solo-attack from Ram.

With Ram singled out, he grabbed one of his stone daos and thrust it toward her head-on—

Ram: "That's fine. I'll be borrowing it."

Having scooped up his sword with wind magic, Ram slammed it right into the side of his jaw.

× × ×

—Ninety-one.

Ram: “That’s fine. I’ll—not be borrowing it.”

Declaring so, Ram allowed the stone sword she had pulled toward her with wind to pass by, brittly crumbling as it flew past her; as she had failed to take the sword, Aldebaran delivered a blow unto her.

Ram parried that blow with wind from her wand, skillfully controlling the wind currents to build air pressure and push past the clash of blades. Grabbing her leg with a stone prosthetic, he hurled her behind him while being bombarded by an onslaught of wind blades.

Ram: “—Hk.”

Leaving Ram gritting her teeth behind him, Aldebaran pressed onward, and the delayed sisters of Flam and Grassis swooped down on him once more.

Readying himself for their approaching agility that could not be underestimated on account of their youth, Aldebaran spread out his real right arm and artificial left arm, and roused a surging wave of sand to clear away everything in the one-hundred and eighty degree field of view in front of him.

The girls were engulfed by the billowing sand, becoming encaged within the ground—

???: “—Warrior ta Yin Six! Magician ta Wind Five! King ta Flowers Eight!”

A surging force abruptly slammed into him from the front, plunging him into the sea of swords he had forged behind himself.

× × ×

—One-hundred and twelve.

???: “—Warrior ta Yin Six! Magician ta Wind Five! King ta Flowers Eight!”

As soon heard it, he forcibly closed in his outstretched arms, fixing the muzzle of the wave of sand directly in front of him—the large bearded man who appeared there a beat later basked in the billowing wave, ending up in the same predicament as Flam and Grassis.

Thereby averting that misfortune, Aldebaran would attempt to overcome the enemies as he jumped out diagonally—

???: “UL GOA!!”

Still in his mid-air leap, he was struck by an unavoidable fastball of flame, scorching his insides.

× × ×

—One-hundred and forty-six.

???: “UL GOA!!”

After trapping the twins and the large man in sand, he deliberately delayed his advance in response to the approaching fireball. Instead, what ended up basking in the inferno was a poorly made clay doll that Aldebaran had manifested in the spur of the moment —a poor knockoff of the magic Emilia had used to recreate Natsuki Subaru with ice.

The fireball aimed to strike Aldebaran’s head as he leaped forward, so amidst a combat requiring split-second decisions, it was easily baited by the poorly made earthen doll.

???: “Wha?!”

The skinny man who had casted the spell, with his mean-looking eyes and tongue piercing, gasped at Aldebaran’s countermeasure.

So long as he was not an expert magician, he would not be able to unleash Ul-tier magic in rapid succession. Flipping up his artificial middle finger to that expression of shock, Aldebaran moved to advance even further this time—

???: “—Fire!!”

From an oblique trajectory behind him, a light was fired as a shock wave that speared through Aldebaran's back; the luminosity of the corona that seemed to scorch the world painted even his consciousness white.

× × ×

—One-hundred and forty-seven.

???: "—Fire!!"

Turning to face the direction of the gallant war cry, Aldebaran recognized the identity of the perpetrator as Felt, baring her high canines in a valiant expression, in her grasp the magic staff that sourced the beam of light.

That was the Meteor known as the Star Staff, something the Witch had once used during her lifetime to make even the Divine Dragon cry; in other words, it was one of his mentor's loose ends.

Aldebaran: "For Teacher to be getting in my way here, what kinda damn bug is this?"

At the untiring challenge that would stretch endlessly on ahead, at the wall he would have no choice but surmount at all costs, and at the fact that it was something originating from none other than the very Witch who had guided Aldebaran's path, a tinge of melancholy burgeoned in his heart.

As Aldebaran contemplated, the white light mercilessly engulfed him once again.

Well then—

× × ×

—One-hundred and forty-eight.

Felt: "—Fire!!"

—The approach of this white light, just how on earth could it be conquered?

8

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never bestow a gift upon another.

× × ×

Aldebaran: "—The Authority of Tristitia, just what exactly is that power capable of?"

9

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never wave at anyone.

× × ×

Aldebaran: "—It can't just be a simple warp. There's no way it's just that, it's an Authority."

10

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never pray before going to sleep.

× × ×

Aldebaran: "—It ought to be manifesting some sort of concept. Right? Tristitia, Tristitia, huh?"

11

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never comfort the wounds of another.

× × ×

Aldebaran: "—Feeling blue, a downer, cloudy skies, depression, feeling crushed… Crushed?"

12

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never find joy in a clear sky.

× × ×

Aldebaran: "—Is it crushing? Things like intervals and distances? No, it's not just those things being crushed, is it?"

13

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never lament a rainy day.

× × ×

Aldebaran: "—It's crushing and filling in the insufficient time for thinking, isn't it? But, Witch Factors aren't…"

14

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never gaze upon a rainbow in the company of another.

15

Aldebaran: "—Witch Factors aren't anything so convenient, now are they?"

That instant, hearing Al's words as he broke through the encirclement of the Aldebusters to finally stand right before her, a chill ran down Petra's spine.

She was unable to actually see Al's eyes, concealed by his steel helmet.. —Yet, their eyes did meet. That sensation made Petra feel as if her innermost thoughts had been laid bare, a sense of urgency gripping her heart.

It seemed to be exclaiming that somehow, Al possessed a deeper knowledge of the Witch Factor than even Petra.

"Subaru": "Petra!!"

???: "—Witch ta Flowers Eight!!"

Petra: "—Hk."

As the command of the cornered husky voice overlapped with the cry of her beloved within her mind, Petra performed Compression on the hesitation that had sprouted within herself, before distancing herself from Al to escape his clutch—that entire process was Compressed, separating them in an instant.

Aldebaran: "Oi oi, so you can even crush space for yourself…!"

Petra turned to look back, having vanished from right before Al's eyes, and watched as he clicked his tongue at his failure to catch her.

As Al's shoulders heaved up and down, his distance from Petra had been set back to square one. Between the two of them as they glared at each other, the Aldebusters, whom Al had exhausted all his efforts to overcome, rose to their feet. In order to reach Petra once again, he would have no choice but to surmount the same hurdles.

However, Petra did not feel as though she had bested him in the slightest.

"Subaru": "Petra, what Al just said a minute ago…"

Petra: "I know… He really is resetting."

Hearing the words of the Imaginary Subaru as he floated beside her, Petra narrowed her eyes and gave a nod.

It was not as if she had really been doubting it up to this point, but after witnessing Al's "Turning Back Time" firsthand, she could not help but feel astonished by how extraordinary it was.

Garfiel's preemptive strike; the coordinated onslaught of Ram, Flam, and Grassis; the three-pronged enclosure by way of Compression consisting of Gaston, Rachins, and Felt; the obstruction of fifty people mobilized in accordance with Rom-jii's orders: Al had flawlessly dealt with it all.

He had surmounted all of that with nothing but the most optimal of solutions.

“Subaru”: “Though, our compression of thoughts should be able to produce similar results…”

Petra: “That’s just thinking as hard as possible in order to come up with the right answer. As expected, it’s a bit different from the powers that Subaru and Al-san hold.”

“Subaru”: “…If that’s true, I guess I should be this strong, too.”

Scratching his head, “Subaru” lamented his worthlessness. But, Petra did not see it the same way.

Subaru, in his own Subaru way, had confronted his own Authority head-on, and holding tight to the many that ought to have been lost, he had saved Petra and the others. There was not a single shred of worthlessness about him.

And on the other hand to that line of thought—

Petra: “…How many times did you need to restart before you got the chance to reach your hand out towards me?”

As far as Petra was aware, Al’s strength as a warrior was modest—that was to say, it fell far short of the likes of Ram and Garfiel, on a level that could not even contend with Heinkel. Nevertheless, Al had made sport of the Aldebusters all by himself, and was on the verge of putting them into checkmate.

“Subaru”: “Not even just ten, he might already be on his twentieth try.”

Petra: “…I think it might be a bit more.”

Hearing “Subaru’s” naive estimation, Petra anticipated the possibility that it would have actually been ten or twenty times that.

In fact, supposing it was Petra in the position of needing to outmaneuver the Aldebusters, even if she had an Authority that allowed her knowledge of upcoming developments, she was not confident that she would be able to clear it in even a hundred attempts. Not to mention, Al had also managed to sidestep Reinhard, even if he had also needed to borrow the Dragon's strength to do so.

In order to accomplish such a feat, just how much of one's heart would one need to kill?

If Al's "Turning Back Time" was truly what Petra and "Subaru" envisioned, if it was truly a power that came at the cost of Death like Natsuki Subaru's, then standing there was a dreadful Warlock, masquerading in frivolity.

Al had already conquered the fear and loss of Death—no, there existed no human capable of conquering that. If it had to be said, it was not conquest, but numbness.

A being who had gone numb to even the instinct of all living things to fear and distance oneself from Death—that was the secret behind Al's strength, and what was tied to his absolute nature as a Warlock.

In order to surpass that absoluteness, she too would have no choice but to pay a worthy compensation.

"Subaru": "—Petra."

Petra: "It's alright, Subaru… I'll be alright."

He was a being who existed only within her mind.

Only to the Imaginary Subaru, and him alone, had Petra's secret been revealed; one that had neither been disclosed to any of the Aldebusters, nor to any members of the Emilia Camp.

It was something that the Warlock before her, deeply knowledgeable about Witch Factors as he was, had said to her.

—Upon the one who styled herself the Witch of Tristitia, the likes of a convenient fate smiled not.

Petra: "Even so, something like that isn't any reason for me to stop."

Deceiving even herself in such a manner, Petra Leyte—the Witch of Tristitia, exercised her Authority.

In exchange for interfering with the rules of the world, the existence known as herself was relinquishing its future; no matter how precious and irreplaceable that future was, the newly-birthed Witch did not hesitate whatsoever.

16

—Seven-thousand and eleven.

Petra: “Even so, something like that isn’t any reason for me to stop.”

Seeing Petra’s lips spin those words from afar, Aldebaran could not help but take his hat off. He did not go so far as to actually remove his helmet, but it was to the point that he wanted to do so.

After all, was that not so?

Aldebaran: “…Truly, Natsuki Subaru’s one unforgivable guy.”

Grinding his teeth, Aldebaran, in his clash against the Combined Forces—it seemed like they called themselves the “Aldebusters”. He liked the flair. Though, he did not wish to consider its origin.

Anyway, in his clash against the Aldebusters until this point, he had uncovered that Petra had taken in the Witch Factor of Tristitia, along with the majority of specifics of how its Authority functioned.

As with any battle, it was essential to gather as much accurate information about the opponent as possible.

This was especially true in battles against Sin Archbishops or Witches, and it was often the case that if one confronted such an opponent without a grasp what sort of Authority they were up against, it tended to end in a one-sided killing. —The ability to overcome being killed in the first encounter was an advantage possessed by both Aldebaran and Natsuki Subaru.

Putting that advantage on full display, Aldebaran had grasped the Authority of Tristitia; it was quite the ridiculous ability. The power to crush—to Compress space and time, was utterly unrivaled in its adaptability and irksome nature.

To top it all off, it seemed like this Authority was also capable of performing Compression on thoughts, so even within a single second of combat, they were able to think things through thoroughly, and pounce at him one after another with conclusions honed to a razor's edge. Even with Aldebaran's Territory, it was a difficult problem that could not be easily solved.

In fact, in order for him to just slip past a mere eleven seconds of combat, he had needed seven-thousand retries.

And yet, even after enduring all that, he had failed to catch ever-important Petra. —Now that the same amount of distance had been opened between them, it would likely take the same, or an even greater number of attempts to reach her again.

Aldebaran: "Be that as it may, Valga's affinity with the Authority of Tristitia is just the worst…"

Among the members of the Aldebusters, the figure of Valga Cromwell, who had given him a thorough amount of torment, was present.

While not making any use of the large build he had been blessed with, the resourceful monster had been granted an unlimited amount of time to think freely, allowing him to overwhelm Aldebaran by finding the most optimal solutions.

It was a nightmarish combination, one akin to arming a gorilla with a machine gun.[16]

If Aldebaran were to dance in the palm of Valga's hand, there was a risk that he could suffer a complete defeat once again. Hence, even if he managed to rob them of their time for thinking, he would not be granted many opportunities for trial and error.

Not to mention, it was not Aldebaran's intention to keep allowing them to use the Authority of Tristitia.

That was because—

???: “—The Witch Factor of Tristitia is a defective article. It is a one-of-a-kind Factor that was prepared for the Valiant, so it is not capable of compatibility with any other. From a different angle, however, it could be said that it is compatible with anyone who is willing to pay the compensation, but humans are creatures who can sell off far too much in exchange for their resolve.”

Information about the Witch Factor of Tristitia, told to him by the Witch in the past.

Perhaps because she had many reservations on the topic, the Witch had not been very eager to divulge much concerning the two Witch Factors that ought to be classified as supernumerary, but after running out of patience, her explanations had been surprisingly loquacious.

To make a mostly-irrelevant long story short, the main points were as follows:

—The Witch Factor of Tristitia, would invoke its Authority in exchange for the holder’s will.

—The compensation used by the Witch Factor of Tristitia, could only be paid by the holder.

Aldebaran: “—Natsuki Subaru.”

When his thoughts arrived at that point, Aldebaran once again felt his indignation surge towards Natsuki Subaru.

Of course, Aldebaran did not blind himself to the fact that his own plan of having Petra read the Book of the Dead had played a role in the events that led her to take in the Witch Factor of Tristitia. But, if it was Aldebaran who had created the impetus, then it was Natsuki Subaru who carried a significant portion of the responsibility.

Considering the relationship between Aldebaran and Natsuki Subaru, saying that much was only natural.

The large shadow that hung over Petra’s life was something that had originated from Natsuki Subaru. Aldebaran would not say that he had harbored malicious intent, nor did he believe that to be the case, but the influence he had over her went without saying. And not limited to just Petra, it could be said that he had exhibited a certain fateful power over even the Aldebusters—no, over many scenarios even preceding this battle. “—Co” Regardless, it was a bit ironic to call it a fateful power. After all, even though it was none other than Natsuki Subaru and Aldebaran who despised fate the most, “—m” it would have been no exaggeration to say that their actions were what decided fate. “—p” Upon thinking that, what flashed through Aldebaran’s mind were the words of the woman of such brilliant crimson. Back then, “—re” the words of praise she had spoken to him in their final time together, were attempting to scorch Aldebaran’s heart. Deliberately, he averted his gaze, and plugged his ears. “—ss” At this stage, it was far too late for him to reflect on his own actions. That which now sustained Aldebaran was not she whom he had lost, but the Oath he had sworn to his Teacher. “—A” The purpose for which Aldebaran had been born, that which he had been made into Aldebaran to accomplish, the culmination of all that was now being put to the test. For that reason, he had not the time to halt his tracks and think—wait, wait wait wait. Isn’t this too long? Just a moment’s pause, a chance to take a deep breath before the battle resumed. “—go” That’s what it ought to have been. His opponents did not wish to allow him any breathers. He also did not want to grant his opponents much time. “—n” Even though they should have been at such a consensus, how could Aldebaran be engaging in such deep thought— “—y”.

Shit. This is strange. What is this? What did she say? Far in the distance, he could tell that Petra had moved her lips. One syllable at a time, he would pick up the sound those lips had weaved. Everything that had been thrown in while he was thinking, he picked it all up, and collected it together. Slow. Sluggish. Far too laggard. Collect the meaning, collect the significance, collect the intent. —. —. —. It was no use. He could not silence his thoughts. He would just have to think. “Compress”? Crushing, huh? Crushing, what exactly? “Agony”? Pain? Anguish? Suffering… suffering? Concerns, thoughts, unraveling. Fuck, she got me. They’ve been Compressed.

—My thoughts, they’ve been Compressed!!

17

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never divulge this important secret.

18

Petra: "—Compress Agony."

A Compression of thoughts by way of the Authority of Tristitia—a powerful buff effect consisting of speeding up her allies' thoughts, omitting any need for discussion, and allowing them to take the most optimal measures after thorough consideration from everyone; conferring that unto Al was one of the countermeasures Petra had prepared against him.

Petra: "When you have too many things to think about, your head will get punctured."

While it might have been presumptuous, Petra prided herself on being the third most knowledgeable in the world about the "Turning Back Time" of Return by Death, just behind Subaru and Al.

Petra had acquired that scholarship from the vicarious experience of the Death tasted by Subaru, so she had discovered a way to nullify—no, to overheat the seemingly invincible Authority of Al.

That being, to overload his mind with accelerated thoughts.

In the past, when the Royal Selection had first commenced, Subaru had gotten into a fight and parted with Emilia in the Royal Capital, and the large amount of stress and mental burden that came as a result had worn down his heart.

Inadvertently, Rem's devotion and his anger toward the Sin Archbishop had given him the chance to get back on his feet, but it was a fact that he had lost his will to fight, ending up as an empty husk, even if only temporarily. —She would recreate that effect.

Since Al had already gone numb to the fear of Death, it was likely that he would not lose heart no matter how many Deaths he accreted.

Nonetheless, even if he had decided to make an enemy of the world, Al was still human.

Rifts would form in his mind, and he would be unable to avoid having it come apart at the seams. She would make it so.

For that purpose, no matter what she needed to give up in exchange—

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

While tormented by the acceleration of thoughts, Al could be heard silently voicing those words.

His mind might have been under a high burden, but this situation was still a double-edged sword. The odds were even; either Al's heart would give out from extreme exhaustion, or he would make full use of the Compression of his mind like the Aldebusters to fend off Petra and the others.

Hence, the battle from this point onward was do-or-die for the Aldebusters in the truest sense—

Petra: "—Everyone! It's only just getting started! Don't lose focus!"

Everyone: "—YEAHH!!"

At Petra's encouragement, her allies whose interactions had been Compressed cheered in response.

Finding that to be reliable, she was about to look out over the decisive battle against Al starting from square one—then she noticed.

Among those who had just given her that reassuring response, there was someone whose voice she had not heard.

It was possible that they had just missed the timing. But, feeling a peculiar sense of discomfort in that, Petra glanced over in that direction, searching for the figure of the person who had given no response.

And then, she found him.

Petra: “—Rom-ojiisan?”

She found the figure of the Great Strategist who had given no response, the old giant who bore the duty of observing the battlefield and giving timely and accurate commands, his eyes having gone white as he slowly collapsed onto the ground.

19

—Let us rewind the clock to mere moments prior.

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

Indeed, upon hearing Aldebaran declare those words, a tremor ran through Rom-jii’s large shoulders.

Upon bearing witness to the sight of Aldebaran standing still before the Combined Forces, Rom-jii felt an unnatural discomposure settle within him, causing him to stiffen as he motionlessly widened his eyes.

Rom-jii was well aware of Petra’s stratagem that applied the Authority of Tristitia.

Her strategy revolved around accelerating Aldebaran’s thoughts, placing a burden on his mind to fully exhaust him in one fell swoop. Rom-jii had also deemed it a necessary step in order to take down Aldebaran, given his ability to perform something akin to “Turning Back Time”, and thus he had promised to cooperate with it.

He had harbored some apprehensions towards speeding up Aldebaran’s thoughts, but since they were also Compressing their own thoughts to arrive at the best possible answers, he accepted that it would just boil down to their overall strength. If that was their course of action, Rom-jii also felt like he could lend his own strength.

And as it so happened, the battle against Aldebaran had gone just about exactly how Rom-jii had expected it to.

His comrades mobilized quickly, and successfully managed to drive Aldebaran into a corner. —But, much to the shock of Rom-jii, his discomposure would commence from that moment onward.

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

Indeed, as Aldebaran declared so, Rom-jii's position shifted in an instant. —No, it was not only Rom-jii whose position had shifted; the positions of Aldebaran, Felt, and everyone else participating in the battle returned to where they had stood a mere ten-odd seconds prior, and recommenced from there.

And, Rom-jii had already experienced that same phenomenon five times now—

Rom: "—What in tarnation, is this situation?"

Craning his neck all around, Rom-jii gathered that he was amidst the same scenery he had witnessed five times now, and wrung those words out in a solemn tone.

Nobody other than Rom-jii had noticed the abnormality of this situation.

Petra: "—Everyone! It's only just getting started! Don't lose focus!"

Everyone: "—YEAHH!!"

As proof of that, everyone other than Rom-jii responded to Petra's rousing voice of leadership.

Then, they all faced Aldebaran, and sprung at him in unison.

Felt: "Rom-jii! Give us orders!"

Failing to notice his discomposure, Felt searched for a position to attack from with Star Staff in hand. The allies other than Felt who also possessed techniques that could serve as the deciding factor were also running while awaiting Rom-jii's commands.

Watching their backs, Rom-jii gulped down his bitter saliva, and shouted out commands differing to the ones from just before—

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

—Now for the sixth time, the final battle against Aldebaran commenced.

Chapter 55:
Aggressor of the Territory

1

—Aldebaran's Territory was an Authority linked to a Witch Factor.

However, Aldebaran was not the holder of a Witch Factor.

The Witch had called this "supernumerary" or "a special case", but Aldebaran believed that instead of such sweet-sounding words, it ought to be declared as "appropriated" or "unenumerated".

This phenomenon had a precedent; for instance, having once possessed Authorities, the Witches of Sin still retained the same powers even after being reduced to souls post-mortem.

On this matter, the Witch had likened Witch Factors to keys with the capacity to open the door that granted one the right to interfere with the world; she had conjectured that once the door was open, it would perhaps remain open even if the key was lost.

Albeit, in that case, even if it could explain the Witches of Sin, it would be unable to explain Aldebaran or even the Witch herself, so in conformance with this, she had proposed the theory of inheritance.

That possibly, a profound connection to a being who was compatible with a Witch Factor would innately open the door to the right to interfere with the world, to an Authority.

However—

Witch: "Just as how a being with wings might find it difficult to explain the sensation of moving their wings to someone bereft of them, it is difficult to explain our Authorities, as they were not appended post-haste. You could say that our doors were half-open by birth."

The reason why the Witch had worn a smug grin as she said that, was likely because it was her best attempt at humor. Unfortunately, Aldebaran did not laugh in the slightest, but he could at least assent to the point she was making.

Certainly, if the door had been fully open, the airflow would have likely been much better.

He was merely peeking through a gap in the door with poor airflow, trying to reach his hand through to the other side. Hence, the door would obstruct him, trapping his hand, and causing unforeseen consequences.

If, like the Witch, he could be satisfied without opening the door, perhaps it would have been better for him. However, Aldebaran was far too banal, and far too helpless for that.

If he did not keep the door open, Aldebaran would have had no chance of fulfilling the duty the Witch expected of him.

In that case, Aldebaran had no choice but to keep the door open, even if it was only ajar.

Ergo, just like a half-opened door, there were many opaque aspects to Aldebaran's Authority.

From his hands-on experience with using it, as well as the Witch's own inferences, he had a grasp on around eighty percent of the complete picture. Even so, Aldebaran faced no impediments to the use of his Authority, nor did he ever hesitate to use it.

That might be perceived as dangerous, but it was the same as how using a cellphone without fully knowing how a cellphone worked would not pose any threat to one's life. But then again, Aldebaran's Authority was intimately tied to life, so the circumstances might differ slightly to those of a cellphone.

In any case, although his Authority had accompanied him through a perceived time that spanned the length of over ten lifetimes, the Territory was largely a black box. —The bug that would sometimes occur, was the utmost extremity of that.

The bug that would occur within the Territory was the phenomenon whereby the holder of initiative within the established Matrix would be transferred from Aldebaran unto a different target.

Normally, by creating a Territory of his own volition, Aldebaran would be permitted an unlimited number of attempts only within that defined space and time. During that interval, it was a given that Aldebaran would maintain his own continuity of memories, carrying out different approaches with each attempt as he searched for a breakthrough.

However, whenever some discrepancy in the starting parameters caused this bug to occur, the right to redo events within the Territory would transfer to another person within the Matrix, and until the Territory was lifted, they would be stuck repeating in an unending Matrix in perpetuity.

This bug, which had never manifested back during his days with the Witch, was something Aldebaran suspected had developed as a result of having lost faith in his Authority following his defeat in his first battle.

In fact, the bug invariably occurred at points when Aldebaran doubted his own Authority.

One such example was long ago on the Gladiator Island, when he had been pitted against a formidable enemy in a deathmatch he had nary a chance in a million of winning. Thereafter as well, when Aldebaran had wavered on his position in a clash against Leip Barielle, or when he had fought Yae after she was sent to assassinate Priscilla, this bug had occurred.

Above all—

???: "—How fascinating. Transferring the initiative of an Authority unto another party, I have never heard of anything like it."

When Aldebaran challenged the Witch of Greed who greeted him at the Castle of Dreams, that had occurred.

Witch of Greed: "It was quite the uncommon experience. I see, so that is the world you behold. Certainly, if you are unable to decipher what might be causing it, it would likely be a rather maddening phenomenon.”

He had slashed at the completely altered Witch of Greed, demanding that she return the Witch he knew.

Having launched attacks on her from every conceivable direction, when his creativity and trial and error had proven completely ineffective, what sprouted within Aldebaran was a skepticism towards his Authority, and as if to prove that, the bug surfaced.

Witch of Greed: “An alteration yielded from uncertainty towards the absolute nature of your Authority… that is to say, a power derived from your weakness. A pity that it seems to be completely ineffective against those already lost to madness. That goes for her, and for me.”

As Aldebaran stood baffled, the Witch of Greed spoke in depth of the hell she had tasted.

Certainly, that was the world of the Territory Aldebaran knew, while also something decidedly different at the same time; just how on earth the Witch of Greed had managed to endure it, he knew not.

As the Witch of Greed had said herself, was it because she was not sane?

Witch of Greed: “In the majority of cases when you exercise your Authority, you are the weaker party. You cling to the Territory in order to locate an infinitesimal chance of victory, wrench it open, and at last grasp onto it; the Victim, so to speak. Thus, if we declare the party who forces your use of the Territory as being the Aggressor, this would be an exchange of initiative between Victim and Aggressor.”

Watching as the Witch of Greed gleefully divulged the reality of hell, Aldebaran felt all the blood throughout his body grow cold, understanding that it was none other than a nightmare of his own creation.

The Castle of Dreams having been turned into a nightmare, the bug that had been yielded in the Territory, it was all the result of Aldebaran's weakness—it was a punishment born by the unforgivable sin known as weakness.

Witch of Greed: "The plan is still underway. The primary objective may be stuck at an impasse, but the secondary objective remains intact. The best we can accomplish with what little we have… that is the purpose for which both you and I are currently here. Is that not so?"

That sin was his cross to bear, yet as it weighed too heavy on his shoulders to carry it on his own, he had nearly abandoned it. And so, the Witch of Greed sneered at him, agreeing to drag it forward alongside him.

Indeed, at that smile, one he had longed to see, yet one he had not wished to see, Aldebaran resolved himself.

Aldebaran: "I, no matter what—will definitely kill you."

—The Territory's bug: even that power derived from his own weakness, even that branding of his defeat, by putting it to use, Aldebaran would carry out his duty as the Following Star.

Witch of Greed: "—Why, must love fade?"

The Witch of Greed whispered such a musing, but the answer to it, Aldebaran did not know.

He had lost the Witch who sought love, lost the Sun Princess he had loved, and yet, still, he did not know.

—Neither did he wish to know.

2

His thoughts, were accelerating.

Amidst the thoughts that had likely been condensed by the Authority held by Petra, Aldebaran was unable to establish a priority order for the flood of thoughts ceaselessly inundating him, pushing his mind to the verge of bursting.

Aldebaran: “—Shit.”

It was a fearsome Authority.

Unlike Divine Protections that could be a hit-or-miss in their effectiveness, most Authorities would invoke supernatural powers far transcending the norm, and Petra’s “Compression” was no exception. Authorities tended to be as powerful as the Witch Factor holder’s mind was flexible, but in that regard, her adaptability was far too high.

It was either the result of unnaturally strong convictions, or flexibility born out of weakness. —The talent to draw out a powerful ability from a Witch Factor was greatly tied to one’s mentality. The Witches of Sin and the Sin Archbishops would have been the former, while Aldebaran and Petra would likely fall into the latter category.

Thus, whether it was people blessed with Divine Protections, people compatible with a Witch Factor, or even people with no abilities whatsoever, the ones who perceived Aldebaran to be formidable always fell into the latter category.

In fact, the attack that had aimed to Compress Aldebaran’s thoughts had been as immediately effective as his opponent had hoped. For Aldebaran, who wished to avoid mental exhaustion, it scored full marks on nastiness as it whittled away at his remaining strength.

Disregarding his Authority, Aldebaran was also on the weaker side. In a battle that necessitated moment to moment decision making, he fully understood the usefulness of a power that always allowed one to find the best course of action. But usually, no matter how much one endeavored during a battle, they could never hope for perfection. Ergo, it was necessary to eventually make a decision, cease one’s thoughts, and take the leap into action. Petra’s Compression forced the blank spaces in thoughts that would have originally been discarded to be filled, imposing over double the amount of exhaustion just to even reach the same conclusion.

Hence, in exchange for that enormous waste of his mental capacity, Aldebaran had to keep up the utmost extremity in responses, akin to threading a needle as he formulated the most optimal maneuver against the highly-motivated Aldebusters.

And then, right in the middle of that exhaustion—

???: "—Rom-jii!!"

Just after tiding over the offensive of the Aldebusters, what struck his ears was a voice akin to a scream.

With that exclamation, Felt stood wide-eyed, watching as the large man of advanced age collapsed in the distance. That instant, not only Felt, but other members of the Aldebusters too, experienced a sense of unease tremor through their hearts.

Before they even knew what had transpired, Valga Cromwell had fallen.

Aldebaran: "…"

Naturally, even if they did not know the method, there was only one person who could have been responsible. As a result, excluding the ones who went rushing to Valga's side, the hostility of everyone else was concentrated on Aldebaran. While receiving their animosity, Aldebaran, unseen to them from within his helmet, was motionlessly widening his eyes with the same shock that the Aldebusters had received.

Aldebaran: "—He became the Aggressor of the Territory, didn't he?"

It was not as though he had aimed to activate it. But, since he was the cause, he knew exactly what had transpired.

The Territory's bug had occurred, causing Valga, one of the Aggressors, to be handed the initiative. Then, it was likely that the old giant had repeated these brief few moments enough times for his heart to be crushed.

Aldebaran: "Tch."

At the arrival of a chance that could have been described as being rescued from the brink of death, or as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Aldebaran did not welcome it.

As mentioned previously, the occurrence of the bug was unrelated to Aldebaran's volition—at the very least, it was not something he actively invoked. Thus, the activation of the bug was something Aldebaran took no joy in.

After all, in the majority of cases, the bug would destroy the hearts of whomever it targeted.

Aldebaran: "On Gladiator Island, with Sir Leip, even with Yae…"

Facing off against Aldebaran, those who were engulfed by the Territory's bug, caught in an inescapable loop of Death, had all ended up suffering some mental abnormality.

The gladiators whose hearts were shattered proceeded to have their heads chopped off by Aldebaran; Leip Barielle lost his sanity, entirely forgetting about his long-held ambition; and Yae Tenzen succumbed to dread, and was thus transformed into his loyal servant.

Having levied the condition of "no-killing" upon the execution of his plan, the way Aldebaran saw things, the Territory's bug, distorting the hearts of its victims beyond recognition, could only bring about an end synonymous with Death.

Hence, Aldebaran took no joy in this conclusion. —Was that really true?

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

The voice of the Witch he had once betrayed, her expectations, her ideals, now sounded within him.

Faced with the tenacity, strategy, and unity of his opponents, he exercised fear toward the one-in-a-million, uncertainty toward the one-in-a-billion, and doubt toward the one-in-a-trillion; in doing so, the conditions to invoke the Territory's bug were met. —Those were, so to speak, because Aldebaran had questioned his Authority, himself, and the Witch.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

Once again, he heard the Witch’s voice.

—Then, he watched as the subsequent Aggressor collapsed to the ground, their eyes having gone white.

3

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never cherish silence.

4

Petra: “—Rom-ojiisan?”

The situation shifted. —And in an unfavourable direction for Petra’s side, at that.

Watching as Rom-jii’s large body suddenly began to sway, collapsing to the ground, Petra greatly widened her eyes. Surging forth within her chest was a multitude of emotions, composed of shock, bafflement, incomprehensibility, and discomposure; they seemed as if they were about to overwhelm her entire body, but—

“Subaru”: “—Petra!!”

Petra: “—Hk.”

A loud bark from the Imaginary Subaru was just barely able to keep Petra’s consciousness from going over the edge.

It was fine to be surprised by unforeseen circumstances. There existed not a single person who could remain unshaken after receiving a hit from outside their consciousness. However, as the Witch of Tristitia, there was something Petra needed to do before being surprised.

In response to the events that had unfolded, she needed to Compress every last reaction.

Felt: “This isn’t a joke, something’s happening! Someone get Rom-jii back up!” / Gaston: “Don’t be unreasonable, his eyes just went white all of a sudden! What the hell, what happened to him?!” / Camberley: “Oi, what’re we gonna do! Without the old man, who’s gonna…” / Garfiel: “Shit! It’s Ram! S’gotta be Ram!” / Ram: “—I suppose it can’t be helped. The queen will be leaving the board. Do keep that in mind.” / Doltero: “If we don’t move right away, we’ll be no better than pigs waiting for scraps. I’ll make the first move.” / Rachins: “Goddammit! We can’t lose after coming this far!” / Flam & Grassis: “Naturally!!”

Compressing the unrest that had spread around all into a single instant, Petra fulfilled her duty as the Witch of Tristitia.

The cause had yet to be identified. However, they immediately decided on how to respond, with everyone beginning to search for the best course of action in unison. —Naturally, Petra was no exception.

Leaving the situation to Ram, who had taken on the role of commander from the collapsed Rom-jii, Petra invoked the Authority of Tristitia to Compress the traversal distance between herself and Rom-jii.

Petra: “Rom-ojiisan… hk.”

Having fallen flat on his face, Rom-jii’s large body could not be lifted by Petra’s slender arms. But, peering into the side-turned countenance of the old giant, Petra choked up at the evident abnormality. —Rom-jii’s visage appeared lifeless, giving off a sense of fatigue as if he had aged a hundred years in an instant.

“Subaru”: “Though, he never really looked like he was bursting with lively energy to begin with…”

Petra: “He wasn’t like this up until a moment ago, that’s for sure. Besides, if he thought there was something strange with his physical condition, Rom-ojiisan would have surely done the proper reporting, contact, and discussion.”

Rom-jii was well aware that if he carelessly concealed the abnormality in his condition, it would only serve to benefit the enemy.

If the Authority of Tristitia had been placing an abundance of burden on him, and there had been signs he would faint like this, he absolutely would have informed them himself.

“Subaru”: “What about the unfunny theory that Rom-jii used up all his remaining lifespan due to the rapid firing of the Authority?”

Petra: “That’s really not funny, so theory rejected… still, I don’t think it was my Authority. Al-san had to have done something to Rom-ojiisan.”

“Subaru”: “But, what exactly?”

Ending up at the same dead-end question, Petra and “Subaru” puzzled for an answer.

Even now, since the Aldebusters were operating under Ram’s commands, fighting on in an effort to corner Al, Petra could not afford to divert all of her attention to figuring out Rom-jii’s collapse.

With that in mind, Petra was about to stand back up—

Felt: “—You goddamn idiot! That’s the priority!”

Petra: “…”

Indeed, with her back facing this direction, Felt corrected the order of priority without hesitation.

As Petra stared in wonder, Felt, with the Star Staff in hand as she flashed her sharp high canines,

Felt: “If you can’t somehow figure out what just happened, we’ll all be taken down with the same method.”

As if to prove Felt’s words as she grit her teeth in frustration, the members of the Aldebusters who ought to have been driving Al into a corner were decreasing. At a glance, several people had fallen to the ground, left behind by the fierce battle unfolding.

From how Felt had put it, the reason they had collapsed would have been the same as Rom-jii—

Felt: “Rom-jii wouldn’t go down without a fight! Keep searching! There’s gotta be something!”

Having expended a few seconds in her interaction with Felt, Petra looked at Rom-jii’s large body. She also considered Rom-jii to be someone who, without any oversights, would live up to Felt’s expectations. Hence, if Felt believed that there had to be something, then there was undoubtedly something.

“Subaru”: “I mean, if you suddenly get hit with an Authority, there’s no way you’d be able to leave any clues behind…!”

Petra: “…You think, it’s an Authority?”

“Subaru”: “It’d be strange if it wasn’t! Nee-sama would’ve realized if it was magic!”

Petra: “Right.”

Felt’s insistence × faith in Ram’s insight.

The multiplication of those two factors lent credence to the idea that it was Al’s Authority that had toppled Rom-jii. And so, if Rom-jii had truly left something behind—

Petra: “—! Here!”

Upon thoroughly investigating Rom-jii’s body, which was lying languidly sprawled on the ground, Petra noticed that the old giant’s finger was covered in dirt. And what had caused it to be dirtied, was the mark he had scratched into the ground with his finger.

Falling, and using that impact to shift the giant’s body, Petra tumbled down and discovered the message that Rom-jii had left on the ground.

That was—

“Subaru”: “A mark? Kanji… nah, some sort of map symbol…?”

Petra: “Not that, it’s more simple!”

At “Subaru’s” speculation upon witnessing the same thing, Petra put the brakes on his theorizing in a loud voice.

The mark that Rom-jii had inscribed on the ground—it was a thick horizontal line, with four small vertical lines layered over it. It was not kanji or a map symbol, it was “tally markers” that counted up the number five in a single unit.

In other words, just before Rom-jii had lost his consciousness—

Petra: “—He was… counting something?”

5

—The Territory’s bug had begun to encroach upon Aldebaran’s plan.

Aldebaran: “Shit…”

Faced with that aggravating reality, a curse escaped through the gaps between Aldebaran’s clenched teeth.

The first one to fall had been the strategist of the Aldebusters, Valga Cromwell. Despite the loss of their commander, was it Petra’s Authority that had allowed them to recover so quickly? But, if its effect was just crushing the interval, then it meant that everybody had managed to collect their emotions through their own individual strength.

Each time he keenly felt the strength in each and every one of their hearts, Aldebaran’s own weakness was brought into focus.

Aldebaran: “Shit…!”

In that instant as he thought about his own immaturity, the Aldebusters suffered yet another dropout. A thug brandishing a large machete fell to his knees, fainting as he spewed yellow gastric juices.

Aldebaran made no counterattacks of his own. He could not. As a fundamental tactic, he was being repelled by Garfiel, whose base stats were on a much higher level, leaving him unable to mount a counteroffensive. Even so, his opponents had gradually been bleeding strength as the result of Aldebaran's unintended bug.

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Once again, he heard the Witch's voice.

As soon as he did, the subsequent bug was activated, and another body hit the ground.

That was difficult for Aldebaran. It was painful. Unbearable. —The mental abrasion produced by the Territory's bug, the fact that it sometimes would beget an outcome more repulsive than Death of the body, was something Aldebaran had come to learn in his days since waking up on the Gladiator Island.

Hence, Aldebaran did not desire any such unintended conclusions to be brought about by the Territory's bug—

???: "—The hell are you doing blaming others for?"

Aldebaran: "—Ah?"

???: "It's obvious even without needing to see your face. It also pisses me off when people like Reinhard wear a face that seems to say that everything's their own fault, but… yours is way worse than his could ever be."

Shaping a gap and forcing his way through the breach, Aldebaran found Felt glaring at him from across the human wall of the Aldebusters. Dwelling within her sharp crimson gaze was a stern, scornful ire directed towards Aldebaran, bereft of lie or falsehood.

This was an ardent fury, one that she had not even displayed when he had taken her hostage, nor when he had ordered Roy to eat her Memories, so he could not fathom what he had done in this moment to truly incur her wrath.

Neither the fall of the giant who was like family to her, nor the near robbery of the path she had forged until this point, the source of this ire that Felt now directed towards Aldebaran was—

Felt: “When that princess was around you’d do whatever she told you, so now that she’s no longer among us, you’re just gonna do whatever a totally different person says like a puppet? Even though you’ve got the nerve to talk all big and declare yourself the enemy of the entire world, do you really have no personhood to call your own?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Spoken with an expression of anger from the very depths of her soul, Felt’s words caused Aldebaran’s cheeks to stiffen ever so slightly, and following that, his rage began to well up at the jabs of this utterly ignorant teenage girl.

To say he had no personhood; even thoughtless declarations had their limits. Without even knowing the reason why Aldebaran could never call himself anything but Aldebaran, how dare she claim that Aldebaran had no personhood.

Indignation scorched his entrails, and he sensed a nostalgic pain in his arm bereft of its forearm.

This kind of useless rage ought to be cast aside. It was supposed to be his strong suit. To dismiss things, to scorn them, to ridicule them as being naught but obstacles in his way, and to cast them aside. Getting entangled with such things and losing sight of his objective would just be putting the carriage before the ground dragon; after all, avoidance of confronting his raw, genuine emotions was Aldebaran’s special skill—no, it was a certain kind of worldly wisdom that he had acquired during the eighteen years since he had been released from that black orb.

And so this time, he would do the same—

Garfiel: “‘S exactly as th’ amazin’ Felt told ya!” / Rachins: “Pay for what you’ve done, bastard!” / Gaston: “Drop dead, you moron!” / Camberley: “Nobody’s got your back anymore, bastard!” / Flam: “Al-sama, prepare yourself.” / Grassis: “The hour of judgment.” /

Doltero: “Go ahead and cry like a pig.” / Ram: “—Truly a fool.”

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

With the force of a surging wave, a torrent of abuse crashed into Aldebaran like a tempest of disdain. He attempted to ignore them like he usually—with his thoughts Compressed, he was forced to confront them all. With his processing circuits shortened to speeds far beyond normal, he was left being made to process every last superfluous thought and emotion.

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / ”—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.” / “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

As Aldebaran felt an urgency to not allow such a progression, a voice drowned out everything within his mind. Loath to surrender himself to that, Aldebaran searched for the girl at the root of the situation.

To the Witch of Tristitia who had forced Aldebaran to deliberate over every last thing, he would—

???: “—He was… counting something?”

Aldebaran: “…”

Having spotted the Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte, in the distance, he could make out that she had muttered those words upon discovering some sort of message left by the collapsed Valga Cromwell.

That instant, a thick, blackish, ardent impulse began to brim over from within Aldebaran, taking on the form of words.

Aldebaran: "—Your stars, were bad."

Felt: "Yeah, there you go. You're nobody's puppet. Now your true feelings are finally showing."

Hearing Aldebaran's words, woven by a voice tinged with torrid fury, Felt flashed her teeth.

Even though no part of that should have resembled her in the slightest, not whatsoever, not a single millimeter nor a single shred nor a single iota, it appeared to him as a smile of the same nature as the one Priscilla Barielle would often display.

A nightmare. —As such, he must extinguish it.

Thus, for the first time in his life, Aldebaran willfully invoked the bug of the Territory.

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

6

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never wish for kindness from anyone.

7

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

As Al's voice spoke those words, Petra turned around whilst sensing a certain alteration.

She had already heard that battlecry several times over the duration of this battle, and likely, it was some sort of activation requirement for Al's Authority. In a Territory, with a Matrix; as Rom-jii had surmised beforehand, in exchange for the limitations on Al's "Turning Back Time", it seemed to be quite a powerful ability.

Its time frame was far shorter than Natsuki Subaru's Return by Death, yet it was consciously activated.

"Subaru": "If it was possible to manually save in a baseball game, then you'd be able to save and load for each ball in the batter's box, remember what type of pitch it is, and then keep hitting homeruns every time."

Petra: "I get it, but it's tricky to understand. Can you really do that sort of thing?"

"Subaru": "It's a bit difficult to explain to a girl who only knows the concept of the game on a surface level…"

For having read Natsuki Subaru's Book of the Dead, she had intended on understanding it past the surface level, but in the sense that they were Memories that did not come alongside firsthand experience, what the Imaginary Subaru was saying was correct.

Although she was peering into Subaru's Memories, Petra's sensibilities remained entirely her own. Though of course, as with her feelings toward Emilia and Rem, what mattered most in that regard was how large a portion those emotions occupied within Subaru.

In any case—

"Subaru": "—You can't let him out of sight."

Petra: "I know."

With the change in his voice and demeanor, the battle against Al was likely advancing to the next stage.

All the while, he had been whittling down their combat strength using the same method he had used on Rom-jii, yet miraculously, the Aldebusters' main force, centered around Ram, Garfiel, and Felt, still held strong. There was no doubt that the Compressed thinking and communications were proving to be a great help, so Petra found it worthwhile to extract the absolute most value out of utilizing the Authority of Tristitia, shutting her eyes to its many demerits.

Felt: "Let's get him, you bastards!!"

Everyone: "—YEAHHH!!"

As if to substantiate Petra's determination, the overall morale of the group erupted with Felt's rousing cry.

The pressure being applied by the Aldebusters was certainly chipping away at Al's reserves, abrading his mind as it drove his heart and body to a lethal point of exhaustion.

It would all come down to whoever's willpower ran out first, a test of endurance until one side could no longer remain standing—indeed, it had happened at the moment Petra clenched her teeth, with her body and mind roused to high spirits.

Petra: "Huh?"

In spite of herself, her tightly clenched jaw dropped agape, leaving Petra dumbfounded.

That was only natural. After all, it was only just a moment ago that the Aldebusters had fired themselves up, brimming with motivation as they triumphantly launched their all-out assault on Al. —Those members of the Aldebusters, without any warning, suddenly began toppling down where they stood like dominoes, unable to do a thing about it.

Petra: "…"

That included Ram, and Garfiel too. It of course included the members of the main force, Felt, Flam and Grassis, Rachins, Gaston, Camberley, Doltero, and even the rest of the members of the Aldebusters all lost their strength; not a single person was left standing. Some fainted, some had their eyes lose focus as a result of extreme exhaustion, and some were petrified like dolls, becoming unable to move.

Everyone, it was all of them. —No, there was still one person who remained standing.

Aldebaran: "—It's the stars."

Climbing over the wall of collapsed Aldebusters, the person who had stepped forth, while fiddling with the metal fixtures of the black steel helmet on his head, spilled those words.

As they reached her ears, Petra felt as if a part of her brain had gone numb, unable to put her head to good use. She could not afford to cease thinking. Even if Compression could fill in the intervals between events that happened, it would serve no use in filling an expanse of void.

Aldebaran: “Your stars, were bad.”

Declaring so as he approached her, Al removed his hand from his helmet and reached out to Petra, standing motionless as she was.

Right this instant, she needed a way to deal with it, a response, a countermeasure—

“Subaru”: “—PETRA! FALL BACK WITH COMPRESSION!!”

Petra: “—Hk.”

Reflexively following the angry-sounding plea, Petra Compressed space, retreating a great distance backwards. Having created a much greater distance between them than simply jumping backwards would have, Petra’s knee trembled as she gazed at Al across the rocky terrain.

Receiving her gaze, Al repeatedly opened and closed the hand that had failed to grab Petra and breathed a long sigh. Then, with that distance opened between himself and Petra, he glared directly right back at her—

Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”

× × ×

Al: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

It was the moment she thought she had heard Al say the catchphrase that was typically used to declare the start of a ball game.

As if to overlap with that expression, a different declaration of Al's followed just after. At that phenomenon of simultaneous utterances from the same person, Petra's brain momentarily came to a halt as it attempted to grasp the situation.

But, as that stagnation would have been fatal, she immediately attempted to pull herself together—

???: "Let's get him, you bastards!!"

???: "—YEAHHH!!"

Petra: "Eh?!"

The very next moment, a courageous cheer and response shook the air, and she was stupefied.

Spread out before her, alive and well, were the figures of the Aldebusters, who were supposed to have been plunged into a catastrophic state mere moments ago. In a battle formation with Ram as the commander, Garfiel as the vanguard, and Felt readied with the Star Staff as the finisher, they were about to clash with Al.

But—

"Subaru": "Oi, oi oi oi, oi, this is…"

Astonished, the Imaginary Subaru floating beside her voiced his bewilderment. Even if she knew that bewilderment was the same sensation she was feeling, no peace of mind came upon Petra's heart.

Only, receiving a tremendous discomposure, the situation moved faster than she could speak any words to stop it.

Petra: "—Uh."

Undoubtedly, that was a replay of the scene that had unfolded just earlier.

The members of the Aldebusters all collapsed in unison, causing the exceedingly reliable group to crumble. As the powerful and brave

Ram, Garfiel, and Felt keeled over, Petra once again crossed gazes with the last person remaining, Al.

Aldebaran: “—It’s the stars.”

Petra: “…”

Aldebaran: “Your stars, were bad.”

That too was the exact same proclamation, followed by the exact same movements, so without needing to be prompted, Petra relied on the emotions in her heart, and leaped backwards through Compression.

Once again, glaring at Al across the distance opened between them, she heard his voice breathe out a sigh.

That was—

Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”

—That marked the beginning of Petra Leyte’s unending hell.

Chapter 56:
Petra Leyte

1

—Petra Leyte was a country girl born in Arlam Village, a village in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

She had been born with a remarkable appearance and a natural shrewdness, but other than that, there was nothing particularly noteworthy about her. Originally, there would have been no room for her to become involved with events that would be engraved into history, and she would have likely lived out her entire life as a mere villager, with any prospect of visiting a city being nothing more than a dream.

Ergo, having veered off her “original” route, becoming involved with several larger-than-life incidents that would go on to be etched into history, Petra’s current state of existence was a result that had been warped through interference.

The fact that her fate had been distorted, was something that even Petra herself was aware of.

“Originally”, Petra was a cringeworthy girl who prided herself on her cuteness, under the mistaken impression that she could lead all the nearby adults and children around by their noses. Surely, the “original” Petra would have never corrected that misunderstanding, instead spending her days selfishly acting like the ruler of her own miniature world.

She did not think that would have been a particularly bad life. She believed such a life would have been happy and enjoyable in its own way.

Only, now that she had strayed from the “original”, Petra’s values simply did not allow her to view that as happiness.

Petra: “After all, none of the people I currently love would be there, would they?”

Subaru would not be there. Frederica would not be there. Emilia would not be there. Beatrice would not be there. Meili would not be there. Ram would not be there. Rem would not be there. Ryuzu would not be there. Annerose would not be there. Garfiel would not be there. Otto would not be there. Clind would not be there. Roswaal, well, that could wait for now. —But, everyone would not be there.

Petra: “That sort of thing, it’s horrifying.”

If her “original” self was the one who had never met the people she loved, and herself that was standing here now was the result of some collision of fate, then she was truly glad she had strayed off from it.

As the result of taking a route that was not the “original”, one after another, she had been subjected to difficult experiences, painful experiences, sorrowful experiences, bitter experiences, experiences that made her think she was going to die, and experiences that almost made death seem like the preferable outcome.

But, beyond even those tough experiences she had been put through, there were things she had been given, things she had managed to grasp for her own.

Hence, Petra Leyte believed this from the bottom of her heart.

Petra: “Even if I could redo my life over and over, I’d still choose to stray from the “original”.”

Then, I’d meet you again and again, just so I could tell you this.

That person who knows the same suffering as you, despite looking so pained and so anguished, is still wishing upon the stars, after all.

Petra Leyte would—

2

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never see off another's departure.

3

Petra: "—Hk."

With a sharp exhale, she kicked off the rocky ground, running with reckless abandon.

Correcting her form, leaning forward, getting off to a start so ideal that it even amazed herself, she ran faster than she ever had in her entire life, and ran, and ran, and ran.

The sound of blood pumping roared through her body, her heart pounding out of her chest as if it would burst, and, leaving her own ragged breaths far behind her, she ran.

But even when she ran that hard—

Aldebaran: "—Play ball."

The moment that cold declaration reached her from behind, her vision completely shifted.

Before she knew it, the fastest sprint her legs had ever run in her life had come to a halt, leaving her standing frozen in astonishment upon the rocky terrain. Laid out in front of her was the familiar scenery to which she had assuredly turned her back, and within it, the man clad in steel helm muttered.

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

That was the signal that the man, with his face concealed behind the helmet of jet-black, had commenced some undertaking by use of his Authority.

This span of time would always commence with that declaration of his, followed by her allies within her field of vision, knowing nothing of that man's undertaking, fiercely raising voices that shook the air.

Felt: "Let's get him, you bastards!!"

Everyone: “—YEAHHH!!”

Centered around the battlecry of the courageous young girl, the group’s morale swelled to a zenith, and exploded. Spurred forth by that momentum, they all charged at the steel-helmed man in unison. —But, it was no use.

The result was plain to see. Their outstretched hands could not reach the other party no matter what they did.

Petra: “…”

As though a thread had snapped, all thirty-seven individuals collapsed on the spot.

It appeared as though they had all collapsed at once. But, by carefully observing the manner in which each and every one of them collapsed, she had long since figured out that the way they fell actually had a very precise order to it. But, then again, there was only a difference of around two seconds between the first and the thirty-seventh person to fall.

There was no room to interrupt in those brief few seconds, and any attempt to do so had ended in futility.

???: “It’s not like it was futile. Learning that a method isn’t going to work, isn’t futile.”

Harboring such a bleak sentiment, her eardrums were thus struck by a voice—no, it was not her eardrums. This voice was not one delivered by vibrations in the air, so it was not her eardrums that had resonated.

If it was not her eardrums that had resonated, then, just what in the world had it been?

???: “That’s a given, isn’t it? It’s the heart.”

The heart. —Yes, that’s it. That’s right. It was because her heart had resonated, that she had been able to hear it.

Her heart still had enough leeway to resonate. As proof of that, he was there.

And so, mustering forth that name of his—

Petra: "—Subaru."

"Subaru": "Yeah, I'm right here, Petra."

Petra; as those lips of his called out her name, she breathed a sigh of relief.

That was right. She was Petra Leyte, she still clutched onto that, refusing to let go.

After all, if that was the case, then, therefore, that was why, it would mean.

Aldebaran: "—Play ball."

—Petra Leyte had no choice but to continue on this tour of hell.

4

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never accept the charity of another.

5

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

Aldebaran: "—Play ball."

An interval, commencing with that declaration, and concluding with that proclamation.

Just how much time had Petra spent trapped in this loop exceeding not even a single minute?

Petra: "…Though, not even a single second has passed."

With such a riposte to the whisperings of her own heart, Petra exhaled a raspy "hah".

Even she found it to be a terribly cynical mutter, one of self-ridicule that seemed to despair over the world. To think that she could utter a voice clouded by such deeply blackened emotions, it was a shock to even herself.

But, it was certainly neither some sort of mistake, nor a matter of having misheard the voice of another.

After all, in this place—

Petra: “The only voices present are mine, those people’s, that man’s, and Subaru’s.”

Flopping down on her backside, Petra pressed her forehead against her knees and grumbled so.

Before her eyes, the group of thirty-seven people attempted to charge at the lone helmeted man, and once again did the moment unfold in which they were all dispatched with nary a sound.

Truly, they were all out of their minds. Why couldn’t they just understand?

Petra: “Are they all just slow in the head? Why do they keep charging straight ahead without any strategy, even when it’s clear they’ll be taken down…”

See, there it happened again. Everyone was falling down, one after another.

An all-too-familiar sight, one far more absurd than the figures of villains that would be defeated incessantly by champions of justice on the morning Hero Time on TV.

Over, and over, and over and over and over, and over again —.

Petra: “—How stupid.”

There ought to have been clever individuals in their ranks, yet, why, for what reason, did they have no strategy? Even though they had been defeated time and time again, why did they not consider trying out any different approaches?

She knew. Those people were unaware that they had already been defeated countless times. They had no idea that they were being defeated over and over again, nor did they understand that they would only continue to be taken down over and over again.

If one knew not what lay ahead, then there was no avoiding being engulfed by that predetermined progression. She was just venting her anger toward them. It was unreasonable. It was illogical. She knew that. She knew, but.

Petra: “Even so, you’re all grown-ups, so just do something about it already…!”

Upon her folded knees, again and again and again, she slammed her forehead.

It hurts. It doesn’t hurt. It hurts. It doesn’t hurt. It hurts. It doesn’t hurt. It hurts. It doesn’t hurt. It hurts. It hurts.

Petra:
“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

× × ×

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Across both the terminus and commencement of the loop, she had succeeded in raising her voice. So what?

At the eccentricity of Petra suddenly raising that strange cacophony, a shift was born in everyone who had been about to charge at the man helmed in steel. They all turned their eyes towards her, aghast at the sight of Petra scratching at her head and clamoring out.

Felt: “Oi, what’s wrong?!”

Garfiel: “Petra! Th’ fuck’s happenin’, did he do somethin’ to ya?!”

Ram: “Fall back, Petra! You are the cornerstone for Ram and the others!”

Voices hurtled towards her. Worrying for Petra, who had raised a strange cry upon being subjected to some abnormality, everyone in that moment produced fresh voices and words, trying to comfort Petra.

That made her glad. Thank you. I love you all. Really. Truthfully. But, I’m sick of it.

Petra: “…I already know all that, you know?”

What manner of voices everyone would raise if Petra broke down like this, she knew.

That they would all do their best to rack their brains if Petra earnestly tried to explain the loop to them, she knew.

The fact that everyone would lend an ear if Petra proposed that they all run away and scatter through Compression, she knew.

She knew. She knew all of it. She had seen it, heard it, referenced it, divulged it, imparted it, discussed it, pondered it, challenged it, strategized against it, tried to defy it, tried to abandon it, picked it back up, then cast it aside again.

Petra: “Say something different already. Show me something different already. Be different already. Different from just now, different from before, different from what’s next, different from this time, just do something different already…!!”

With a crumpled up face, the very visage of ugliness, Petra’s voice fractured with unseemly cracks, raising an incomprehensible string of words as she scratched at the ground to the point that her nails were starting to peel off. Beholding that, everyone was rendered speechless, but immediately pinpointing the cause to be the man in the steel helmet, they directed the brunt of their rage towards him, baring their fangs.

Ram: “Petra, stand up. Ram will lend you her shoulder.”

As the group charged towards the man in the steel helmet, one person had broken away from the crowd and extended her hand out to Petra.

How kind. Even in this situation, even with her sharp voice and steely expression, her hand was kind. I love you.

Petra: “But you see…”

Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”

× × ×

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

Indeed, her disheveled face, her peeled-off nails, her worn-out voice: all were restored.

The concern they had shown her, their uproar of righteous indignation, that distress towards one’s protegee, all of it had been reset. —Having been reset, they would savor the unspoiled beginning and end with brand new feelings.

Felt: “Let’s get him, you bastards!!”

Everyone: “—YEAHHH!!”

How nice it must have been for everyone. With feelings so fresh, they could still cry out in such high spirits.

But she could not. She couldn’t. She had tried to do her best with them, and had done her best with them over a hundred times. But, that would change nothing, everyone would still collapse so selfishly before her with their eyes gone white; it was truly unfair.

Petra: “Maybe I should also get a bit unfair.”

With a pout upon her lips, she blurted out such words.

As she did so, everyone had already gone beddy-bye, so before Petra, the man approached with disorderly steps as he fiddled with the metal fixtures of his helmet.

Petra: "…"

Then, leisurely, the man reached the very hand that had been fiddling with those fixtures towards Petra.

This was just a passing thought, but did he properly take care of that helmet? He would need to make sure to oil it, wipe it with a dry cloth, and do all the proper maintenance, wouldn't he? Realizing that this person had been fighting constantly without even the chance to bathe, she felt a bit of resistance towards the hand that was extending towards her. But, she would endure it. Enduring it and enduring it, she waited for the outstretched hand to reach her. It might be harder if she kept staring at him. In that case, she'd shut her eyes so that he could catch her while she did so. Alright, oooone, twooooo, threeeee…

× × ×

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

Right. Thought so. Even getting caught is no good. Ahahaha, just die already.

6

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never speak of my failures.

7

Aldebaran: "—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition."

When she initially realized that she had been caught in a loop that commenced upon that signal, Petra had managed to maintain her composure without being greatly perturbed, even in the face of such an aberrant situation.

She had naturally been a bit shaken, but it was far less than one might have expected.

That was because—

“Subaru”: “Petra! We’re looping through a short timespan! It’s Al’s next trick!”

Shouting that out in lieu of Petra, was the sole entity who was sharing in the loop that Petra had been caught in, the only one who had experience with the flow of repeating time: the Imaginary Subaru.

The presence of “Subaru”, and the message left by Rom-jii that she had seen just before being trapped—the marks etched into the ground as if tabulating something, had suppressed Petra’s discomposure.

Petra: “Rom-ojiisan was also put through what I’m experiencing now.”

One horizontal line overlapping four vertical ones; that was a method of keeping count known as “tally marks”, which, when using kanji, would typically be done by drawing the “正” character.

By leaving that engraved upon the ground, Rom-jii had conveyed the situation he had been placed in to Petra.

It was difficult to imagine that Rom-jii had ended up in that state after only the five times he had marked, so what he had intended to convey was not the actual number of times he had looped, but rather the fact that he was looping in itself—having already fallen into the same predicament, the information might have seemed too late for Petra, but that was not so.

The message Rom-jii had left behind, was a clear warning to Petra.

In other words, that which Rom-jii had wished to say was this:

Petra: “If I keep on repeating this forever, I’ll end up like Rom-ojiisan.”

The collapsed Rom-jii had sustained no external injuries, and it was not as though he had ended up like this due to being tormented by wounds accumulated through the repetitions. —No, in a sense, there was no doubt that it was a result of that which had been accumulated.

In other words, across the time that Rom-jii had repeated, his mind had been completely whittled away.

Without a doubt, that was precisely the same tactic that Petra and the Aldebusters had attempted to use against Al, so it could be said that he had turned it around on them as an act of revenge.

She did not think that Al had been aiming for such a revenge, but either way, if she had been caught in this situation without any preparation, Petra might have suffered the same fate as Rom-jii.

“Subaru”: “Nah, it’s not just Rom-jii. From the looks of it, the same thing happened to Ram and the others.”

Petra: “…Right. Al-san is using his Authority on everyone who’s charging at him in the same way… but, the timing of when the loop starts, is when everyone is still conscious, isn’t it?”

“Subaru”: “Sure seems that way… It may be a repeating situation, but maybe it’s something like, it also reflects the real-time events outside the loop? So after someone gets taken down, it exits and moves onto the next, or something? In that case…”

Petra: “—I’m already the only one left.”

The meaning concealed within “Subaru’s” words was far too hopeless, causing Petra’s cheeks to stiffen.

Supposing that by the time Petra’s turn in this loop arrived, the fates of her allies in the Aldebusters could no longer be altered,

Petra: “Even if this loop were to come to an end…”

“Subaru”: “Wait wait wait wait, don’t be so pessimistic. Even… even if, even if that turns out to be the case, you know? We’ve got the Authority of Tristitia. With that, we could Compress their cooldown time or something…”

Petra: “…Compressing the time that they’re fainted, so they can suddenly get back up?”

“Subaru”: “Yeah! It’s never been done before, but wouldn’t it be amazing if we did it?”

As Subaru snapped his fingers and proposed his idea, Petra’s breath caught slightly.

In truth, she could imagine that such a feat would be rather difficult. It was possible to use her Authority to Compress time for discussion or the interval it took to acquire a new skill, but it required a comparable amount of energy.

In a nutshell, if Petra were to Compress a single day for herself, it would consume a day’s worth of energy. For three days, it would be three days’ worth, for seven days, seven days’ worth, and so on. If it required a month, or even somewhere in the denomination of years, to recover a heart worn thin, then there would be no way to supply the energy necessary for Compression.

Compression was by no means omnipotent. —But, even if that was the case,

Petra: “—Yeah, I think it would be really amazing. We might be able to do it.”

“Subaru”: “Right? That’s why, you’ve first gotta drill it into your head. Once you escape the loop, the first thing you need to do is get everybody back up on their feet. If you don’t, you’ll be overwhelmed in one fell swoop.”

As “Subaru” constructively planned for the events that would transpire upon the loop’s nullification, she nodded in agreement with him.

Then, looking back, she believed that Rom-jii had probably thought the same thing. Likely, even if it wore out his heart, the wise old giant had prioritized inscribing a message into the ground unconsciously; by accreting that motion over and over and over again, he had managed to lock in that action for when the loop had come to an end.

In that case, she ought to accept “Subaru’s” plan of deciding on the actions to take immediately after the loop concluded.

Only—

Petra: “…How many times did Rom-ojiisan need to reset to ingrain that into his body?”

Even with his mind worn thin, fallen into a state where he could not preserve even his sense of self, Rom-jii had successfully managed to scratch the ground right after his loop had ended. To memorize that action, engraving it into his soul so that he would be able to perform it even if his heart was shattered, just how much had he accreted?

Petra: “…”

“Subaru”: “Petra, let’s do some testing. In the past, Beako devised a looping hallway that went on forever. If the rules are the same as that, then there’s gotta be a condition to end the loop.”

Petra swallowed hard, and “Subaru” informed her of their next course of action. Smiling back a “Yeah!” with a nod, Petra once again faced forward.

Felt: “Let’s get him, you bastards!!”

Everyone: “—YEAHHH!!”

Even during the conversation Petra and “Subaru” were having just now, the sequence of her fellow Aldebusters challenging Al, before toppling down before him, had been repeating.

In all honesty, as she had gleaned from his Book of the Dead, the way Subaru would cherish each and every loop, carefully storing the details of all the events within himself, was something she respected and thought of as cool; but, it would be difficult to pull off the same thing in this loop that exceeded not even a single minute.

“Subaru”: “I gotta say, even I think it’s unreasonable to expect you to properly mourn each time they all get taken out in a situation like this. But, there’s something you gotta make sure you remember.”

Petra: “The number of times it repeats?”

“Subaru”: “Well, that too, but for each of those times, Petra, you need to remember the anger you felt, the regret you felt, and the sorrow you felt. Remember that, no matter what.”

Petra: “—Mm, that’s right.”

In this world of repetitions, amidst the loop that only continued to go on and on and on, she was the only one who could carry these feelings forward, so just as “Subaru” said, she had to ensure that she remembered.

After she exited the loop, even if Al had no idea of what Petra and the rest had endured, she would never forgive him. No matter what, she would hammer into him exactly how much they had suffered.

With that vow in her heart, Petra nodded at “Subaru”, and faced to the fore.

Aldebaran: “It’s the stars. —Your stars, were bad.”

Then, facing off squarely against the approaching Al—

Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”

Petra: “—Play ball.”

“Subaru”: “—Play ball.”

Indeed, they bravely declared their intent to embark on this tour of hell.

8

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never let anyone tie up my hair.

9

—And so, her resolve having been steeled, Petra continued to wander the depths of hell into which she had plunged herself.

Petra: “…What should I do?”

Grasping her knees, slamming her forehead against those knees, again and again, she questioned herself.

What should she do? What was it that she ought to do? How could she put an end to this loop?

Petra: “What’s the condition?”

There was a condition for this loop to terminate. —That person had said as much to Petra.

And Petra was of the same opinion. It was standard practice for these types of situations, the kind where the same events would play out repeatedly without end, to have some sort of end condition that would serve as the trigger. A formula. A foregone conclusion. A rule, and since it was a rule it had to be kept. It just had to. Surely it was being kept. Because it was kept, there would certainly be a way to put an end to it. Yes, that’s all. This argument is over. Since it’s over, it’s time to think about the condition. The trigger to end it, what could it be?

Petra: “I tried all sorts of things, you know?”

Employing Compression to the fullest, she had surely attempted an array of methods much more vast than any ordinary person would have.

She had worked with her allies to defeat this man in the steel helmet, and when it was clear that taking him down was not a viable option, she had attempted to let everyone flee by means of Compression. Of course, Petra had also tried getting herself as far away as possible, tried deliberately letting herself get caught by the outstretched hand of the steel-helmed man at the end, and she had even tried leaping straight into the arm of the man in the steel helm on her own accord. It had all been for naught.

Considering the possibility that one of her allies might have possessed some method of breaking the deadlock, she had even tried discussing with each and every person, deeply probing all of their individual circumstances, laying bare their secrets, hearing all about their family situations, upbringings, and hometowns, and finally sharing the sorts of things that people would typically not even disclose to close friends of over ten years. It had all been useless.

Wondering if the correct answer was perhaps to approach the steel-helmed man, she had tried speaking to him, tried giving him the cold shoulder, tried winning and losing against him in a one-on-one fight with none of her allies, tried winning and losing against him in a fight without using Compression, tried running away, tried mocking him, tried lauding him, and had tried singing. It had all been meaningless.

Petra: “So then, what the hell should I even do?!”

She had done it all. She had, hadn’t she? She had done just about every last thing she could possibly think of, hadn’t she? Even though she did, had it not all been for naught? Even though she did, had it not all been useless? Even though she did, had it not all been meaningless?

Felt: “Let’s get him, you bastards!!”

Everyone: “—YEAHHH!!”

Petra: “SHUT UUUUP!!”

Even though they were unable to do anything at all, those spirited shouts pissed her off. If they weren’t going to help, the least they could do was to not get in the way of her thinking. Ahh, I’m just venting my anger on them. I hate this, I hate this, I hate myself. I don’t want to have these kinds of thoughts. What the hell’s that about, trying to act all goody-goody? This is the real me, isn’t it? Everyone there, I don’t even like them or anything of the sort. I just like the version of myself who seems so unprejudiced and tender and compassionate and big-hearted to be saying that I love all those people so so so so much, isn’t that right?

Petra: “SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP…!”

Right and left and up and down and front and back and past and future and present and today and tomorrow and yesterday and the day after tomorrow and the day before yesterday and last year and this year and next year and past life and current life and next life absolutely all of it everything everywhere all at once and all of everything just shut up.

Aldebaran: “—How many times has it been now?”

Shut up. Just die already. Or maybe, I should just kill you?

Aldebaran: “It continues.”

Thought so.

× × ×

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

Back to the same place. Now wasn’t that a surprise? Sometimes he’ll even say something other than play ball.

During this loop, since all the others present here aren’t simply puppets, they’ll react if something is said to them, and they’ll respond accordingly if something is done to them. And that wasn’t just limited to them, it went for the man in the steel helmet too.

Maybe it was obvious, but it seemed the man helmed in steel could tell what she was going through.

Petra: “So what?”

Even if he knew, this world would end, and when the next one starts not even he as the instigator would follow her there.

Petra was always alone, constantly restarting in the same world without cease. Nobody could understand Petra’s struggle and suffering. She was all by herself, all by her lonesome. Completely alone. Was I completely alone?

Petra: "—Hk, Subaru! Subaru?! Where?! Where are you?!"

"Subaru": "PETRA!"

The moment she remembered him, as if a flash of lightning, his figure suddenly appeared right before Petra's eyes. Seeing that, Petra immediately knew that he was Subaru, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Everything had seemed to be on the verge of blurring and fading away, slipping from her grasp, but even so, it was not as if she had forgotten everything, nor had she been abandoned.

Petra: "Subahrhuu… hk!"

As tears immediately began to overflow and sully her disheveled face, she rushed over to him. She leapt towards him. He promptly held both of his arms out, and attempted to embrace Petra. —He could not.

She passed right through him. Upon the desolate ground, she tumbled down without any attempt to catch her fall. It hurt. She fell flat on her face. Subaru—no, "Subaru" did not catch Petra. Of course. It was always that way. After all, "Subaru's" hands were always occupied with somebody else.

Petra: "In that case, don't even bother reaching your hand out to me!!"

"Subaru": "Petra…"

Petra: "Back then… back then, wouldn't it have been better if you'd just left me there to die?! If in the village, if you had done nothing, if you had just left me to die to those Witchbeasts, wouldn't it have been better…?!"

She knew. If Natsuki Subaru had not interfered, Petra would have died long ago.

Even though she had died, she was still alive. She had ended up living. Because she had ended up living, she was now going through such suffering, with such painful thoughts, and none of it would come to an end.

“Subaru”: “I’m sorry, Petra… I’m sorry! But please hang on! Don’t talk like that…”

Petra: “Hah, hahhh?! What’s that?! Even though I’m going through such a hard time, you’re scolding me?! Even though I’ve been hurting all this time, over and over and over again, crying like this… y-you’re s-s-scolding?? You’re scolding me? Hah, ahah, ahahah, JUST STOP IT ALREADY!!!!”

“Subaru”: “…”

She exploded. She had done it. —She had really gone and done it now.

There was “Subaru”, a look of sorrow and concern painted on his face, and Petra began wanting to vomit blood. Began wanting to gouge her own heart out. Began wanting to blow her own head off. Actually, why not?

Petra: “The most straightforward trigger, to end the loop…”

With those words, she formed a finger gun, and pressed her index finger against her temple. Concentrating Mana in that fingertip, a dim, white light began to illuminate.

Beholding this sight, “Subaru”, petrified, reached his hand out towards Petra. Even though he couldn’t touch her at all, see, it went right through.

“Subaru”: “Petra, wait! Don’t be so hasty! I get it, I really do, but please hold off on that sorta method! If the opponent’s aim is to make you do that, then…”

Petra: “Then, marry me already!!”

“Subaru”: “—Hk.”

Petra: “Make me your bride already! Become my Subaru already! Make me your number one! You saved me so marry me! Embrace me for the rest of my days! Claim my life for yourself already! If you do, then fine. But you won’t do that, now will you? In that case, my life is my own, isn’t it? If it’s my own life, then just let me use it as I please!”

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Even she herself did not understand what she was trying to say.

Anyhow, everything was making her angry. Not a single thing was turning out how she wanted it to. She was angry at all the people who were not doing anything about the situation, and at the man in the steel helmet who had caused the situation. She hated it. Hated it, hate it. But I love Subaru. Hah. I don’t get it. He’s not doing anything for me, is he? But, he’s always been doing stuff for me, and even now he’s still trying his best to do something for me, isn’t he? He won’t marry me, though.

Petra: “What’s the deal with that, how stupid.”

“Subaru”: “Pet—”

Ah, I didn’t mean it that way, you know? I wasn’t saying that to Subaru, you know? I’m the one who’s stupid, after all.

Ah~hh, a head like this, I guess I don’t need it anymore. Bye bye.

With that thought, a white light shot out of the finger gun with a “bang”—

× × ×

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

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————.

—————Right. Thought so.

Ahahahaha. Ahahahahahaha. Ahahahahahahahahahahahahaha.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never hope for fortune’s favor.

11

—The Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte, had confronted the battle with an unshakable resolve.

The Witch Factor she had received from Clind, and the possibilities of the Authority of Tristitia it invoked, were so extraordinary that it made her believe no power in this world could match this Authority’s efficacy in rigging the game in one’s favor.

So naturally, in order to wield such power, worthy compensation was required. —As the saying went, with great power comes great responsibility. Maybe it was a bit different.

Either way, since she was deliberately taking on those enormous drawbacks, she had to make sure that the benefits would play their part to the fullest. If she could not manage that much, then Petra, having resolved to keep lying even to her loved ones, would never find peace.

Petra: “I’m glad Frederica-neesama isn’t here.”

If Frederica had joined the Aldebusters, Petra was not sure if she would have been able to keep up the lie. Rather than it being a matter of Frederica’s insight, Petra was simply weak to Frederica.

In Frederica’s presence, Petra’s heart lay bare; she owed her too much love and respect to be able to hide anything. Surely, she would have ended up pouring out everything she felt in her heart, crying, depending, and clinging onto Frederica.

If it were just a matter of keeping things hidden, the same thing could have been said about Ram and Otto when they were in top shape. Only, Ram was in a merry mood thanks to the restoration of Rem, and Otto without his Memories could not fully exhibit his natural insight, so neither of them had noticed Petra’s lie.

Petra: “I wonder exactly how much Clind-niisama knew about, and still chose to overlook?”

Age unknown and motives unclear, yet still believed to be an ally at the very least, it would not have been strange if Clind had entirely seen through all of Petra's intentions, but on the other hand, perhaps it would not have been so strange for him to be completely blind to the subtleties of the human heart, given how close he was with Roswaal.

Either way, right at the beginning of all this, Clind knew that Petra had made an enormous sacrifice.

His position was thus one in which either outcome was conceivable: that she would offer up nothing else, having already paid such a huge price, or that she would easily offer up more, having already paid once.

In that case, it worked best for Petra to interpret it as a silent push of encouragement for her resolve.

Regardless of Clind's true intentions, Petra had already rolled the dice.

Petra: "By now, how many have I done…?"

To never imbibe. To never pen a missive. To never clutch a stuffed toy. To never put needle to thread. To never sing. To never play with children. To never visit places of fond memories. To never hold beautiful flowers. To never partake of her favourite food. To never return to her hometown. To never shed a tear in the company of others. To never wipe the tears of another. To never speak of fond reminiscences. To never retell her favourite stories. To never call others by terms of endearment. To never invite another into her home. To never nurse the deathbed of another. To never hold the hand of another. To never desire reconciliation with another. To never display weakness to another. To never watch the morning sun in the company of another. To never be picky about anything. To never cry for another. To never wish upon the stars. To never rendezvous with another. To never walk in the sunset with another. To never tread upon the shadow of one who walks beside her. To never speak of her dreams to another. To never partake in celebrations. To never bestow a gift upon another. To never wave at anyone. To never pray before going to sleep. To never comfort the wounds of another. To never find joy in a clear sky. To never lament a rainy day. To never gaze upon a rainbow in the company of another. To never cherish silence. To never divulge this important secret. To never wish for kindness. To never see off another's departure. To never accept charity. To never speak of her failures. To never let anyone tie up her hair. To never hope for fortune's favor. —There were a lot.

There would be no end to it if she began to count everything she had offered as compensation, and it could even be said that Petra had a very bleak life ahead of her.

Petra: "Even so, this is still quite a bit better than it could be."

The trick to telling a good lie was to mix in a grain of the truth. —That was a well-known maxim, and Petra's lie had ended up taking on a similar nuance.

—The price for the Authority of Tristitia was being paid not just by its holder, Petra, but also by a great number of other people.

This was the condition Petra had proposed to gain everyone's consent for her to take on the Witch Factor; however, this method could only compensate for Compressions focused on the Authority's effective target.

If Emilia desired a Compression to move herself, it was possible for it to be invoked with compensation from Emilia, but if Petra thought Emilia was in danger and used Compression to move her, it would have been Petra who paid the compensation. —This was something that only the holder could have been aware of.

Every little conference between the Aldebusters; when she tossed Al to the Agzadd Canyon together with Emilia and Rem; whenever she promptly withdrew her allies out of sticky situations; when she had Compressed everyone's vehement pain into a single instant: Petra had been the one to pay the compensation for all of that.

She believed that the more precious a sacrifice was, the greater the capacity would be for the effects of the Authority of Tristitia.

Whenever it influenced the world, it also weakened Petra's own ability to interfere with that world. If Petra were to ever simply offer up her entire life, the Witch Factor of Tristitia would likely bring about an even greater power.

Petra: “But, I won't do that.”

Even if the Authority encroached on Petra Leyte, making her sell off her life bit by bit, diminishing her hopes for the future, and making her relinquish a great deal of happiness, Petra would never do anything like throwing her life away in despair or resorting to other such extreme options.

Petra: “That sort of thing, it's uncool.”

She did not want to show him any part of herself that was uncool. She did not want to do anything that was uncool.

During her fight against the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, it was the same. —So long as those feelings continued to sustain her, Petra would never compromise her sense of self.

After all, to the stars, Petra would, Petra Leyte would—

12

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never hold up the back of another.

13

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

Why must I go through this sort of thing?

Did I do something bad? I've been a good girl, haven't I? I tried to be a good girl, you know?

So why, and how, did things end up like this? Someone just explain it already.

???: “Let's get him, you bastards!!”

???: “—YEAHHH!!”

What should I do? I’ve tried just about everything, you know? I’ve done it all countless times, you know?

I’ve tried every last thing that I could manage to come up with. I fought and won, you know? I fought and lost, you know? I fought and let him die, you know? I fought and died, you know? I died without fighting, you know? I ran away, you know? I shed tears, you know?

Aldebaran: “It’s the stars. —Your stars, were bad.”

I tried dying so many times. I tried finishing him off so many times. I tried running away so many times.

I apologized to him so many times. I raged at him so many times. I cried to him so many times.

It was all so, so scary. It was all so, so painful. It was all so, so agonizing.

Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”

Thought so. It never ends, does it? He won’t let it end, will he? Even now, in this moment as he listens to my weeping, he refuses to show me any concern, and he’ll just end up forgetting after ten seconds anyway. Mm-mm, it’s not that he’ll forget. He’ll just cease to know. He’ll leave me behind. He’ll leave me, and only me, behind.

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

I’m sick and tired of it. I hate everyone. I hate them, I hate them, I absolutely loathe them.

Why won’t they try to help me? Even though I’m crying out as hard as I can like this, why won’t they?

It never ends. It won’t end. He won’t let it end. And he won’t let me end it. Even now, I’m still…

???: “Let’s get him, you bastards!!”

???: “—YEAHHH!!”

Even if I weep, even if I scream, even if I clamor, even if I curse, the same events will just endlessly repeat.

Amazing. I was mistaken. I was so conceited to think that I might be able to do something about this. My reliable… reliable? Even though they won’t do anything for me? Well, whatever. My reliable allies, just who were they again? That woman and the like, they’re all supposed to be amazing, so then why couldn’t they overcome this?

Aldebaran: “It’s the stars. —Your stars, were bad.”

But here’s the thing, I know. I’ve known all along. After all, it can’t be helped. More and more and more and more, I’m becoming unable to think straight. I’m losing all interest in the things happening before my eyes. That’s not it. It’s not that I’m losing interest, I’m just trying to distance myself from it all. I even know the reason why.

Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”

After all, I don’t want to hate everyone or anything like that. But, whenever I think about everyone else, I just end up hating them all for not doing anything for me. So, I’ll stop. I won’t think. To make sure that I don’t end up hating them, I’ll stop thinking. I just won’t think about anyone. I don’t care about those people at all. Ah, that’s wrong. Sorry sorry, that’s a big fat lie, I love them all. Yes, loooove them.

Aldebaran: “—Expand Territory, Matrix Redefinition.”

Well, it can’t be helped, can it? I’m still a child after all. I can’t just grow up and become an adult all of a sudden. If I just stay here forever like this, repeating the same moment again and again, will I eventually become a grown up? Well, sorry to say, but I won’t. After all, it’s just the same moment in time that’s repeating. No matter how hard I try, it’s always the same. If it’s always the same no matter how hard I try, wouldn’t it be fine to just stop trying?

???: “Let’s get him, you bastards!!”

???: “—YEAHHH!!”

Yes, that’s right, trying my best had been meaningless. It was always the same. Haah, trying my hardest was all for nothing. Let’s just stop thinking about such difficult things. Haah, trying my hardest was all for nothing. It was all completely meaningless. I’ve been doing things for no reason this whole time. Right. That’s right. Thought so.

Aldebaran: “It’s the stars. —Your stars, were bad.”

I tried my hardest from the start, so it can’t be helped, can it? Even if I try my best, it’s not like I can become king. It’s not like I’ll be cherished. It’s not even like I could get married to that person. So, it can’t be helped anymore. It simply can’t be helped.

Aldebaran: “—Play ball.”

It can’t be helped, so, let’s just end it already.

???: “—There’s nothing, that can’t be helped.”

Why?

???: “Giving up isn’t easy, is it…? But, it can be easy.”

Why? What for?

???: “When your heart folds, or even when you die, those are nothing but scratches.”

Why? What for? You’re really still saying all that?

???: “That’s why…”

Why? What for? You’re really still saying all that? What then?

???: “That’s why—”

Why? What for? You’re really still saying all that? What then? Then —?

???: “—We… can still do this. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

—.

——.

———.

————.

—————Really, he is such a bad liar.

Thought so.

14

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never give up.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never bend the knee.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never regret my choices.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never cry bitter tears.

—God, Buddha, Od Lagna. For as long as I live, I hereby vow to never forget that which I have loved.

15

—Petra Leyte was a country girl born in Arlam Village, a village in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

The “original” Petra was not a girl who would have ever participated in a battle to decide the fate of the world.

As a mere village girl, she would have either lived a somewhat good life with her cuteness and shrewd nature, or been engulfed in one of the world's great billows, ruthlessly scattering her life to the waves. That was all she had been.

But, straying off the "original" route, and getting to know her current self, Petra had a thought.

Petra: "Even if I could redo my life over and over, I'd still choose to stray from the "original"."

Yes, that was right. Straying from the "original", Petra would always end up arriving here.

And so, Petra wished to say this. To you, the one who saved me, and steered me off my "original" path.

And, to you, the one who's trying your best to lead me by the hand with those lousy lies and anguished expression; I have this to say:

Petra: "—It's thanks to the stars, that I can be here today."

"Subaru": "…"

Aldebaran: "…"

With those words, Petra wiped her lips with the back of her hand, leaving both Al and "Subaru" at a complete loss for words.

Setting Al aside, she knew the reason for "Subaru's" speechlessness. He must have thought that his own lousy lie and attempts at encouragement had gotten Petra so depressed that she would have not even been able to speak.

Certainly, it had been a lousy lie. The trick to a good lie was to mix in at least a little bit of the truth, she had even just mentioned it; this lie, however, had failed to mix in any fragment of the truth whatsoever, truly a lousy lie of the highest degree.

Petra: "But, I don't want to let the person I love become a liar, after all."

And so, she got back on her feet through her own efforts. He could rely on neither comfort nor encouragement, so he had kept watching over her with such worry, trying to pat her head and support her back, though he knew he could not touch her; and seeing his admirable, desperate appearance, she finally thought to herself that there was no helping it. Falling in love was her weakness.

Petra: “The person I love, isn’t a liar.”

After all, she had stood up like this. Petra had stood, so Subaru was not a liar.

The repeating world had been an agony. Revitalizing a heart that had come so close to dying was no easy feat. In fact, it was the most difficult thing she had ever done in her entire life up to this point. But, she stood. She had gotten back up. Because right by her side, there was a person who always believed in the weak, pathetic, and clumsy Petra.

Petra: “There’s not a single thing bad about my stars.”

Amazing. The fact that I have to try my hardest no matter what, is tough. Even though I’m usually pretty clever, even though I can usually succeed at anything right away, living up to this person’s expectations, is really tough. But, even when she found herself in a hell so terrible that it would have crushed the hearts of anyone else and left them unable to stand, a hell that made her go through the same moment however many hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of times, this person continued believing in her for no good reason whatsoever, saying “Petra won’t lose!”, so she had no choice but to push forward.

If Natsuki Subaru believed that Petra Leyte was a girl so tough that her heart would not break even after looping tens of thousands of times, then, she would make it so.

Petra: “You see, isekai girls need to at least be able to make miracles happen on their own, or else they won’t be able to get by.”

After all, if she had never strayed off the “original” rails of fate, she would have never even met the person she now adored from the bottom of her heart.

Petra: "—Al-san, no matter how many times this repeats, I think it's pointless."

Having interrupted his signature phrase about blaming the stars or whatever, Petra declared thus toward the silent Al.

This was no bluff or brave front, but rather Petra's true beliefs—even if this interval repeated far beyond the realm of tens of thousands of times, and entered the realm of billions or even trillions, it would not be able to wear Petra down.

After all, a girl's love was infinite—it was no fairy-tale solution like that either.

Petra: "This is a loop that repeats until your enemy's heart is fully expended, right, Al-san?"

Even when she triumphed against Al, even when she killed him, even when she sent him far, far away, it did not end.

Even when she was defeated by Al, even when she was caught by him, even when she ran far, far away, it did not end.

Even when she killed herself, even when she was killed, even when she tried to abandon everything in despair, it did not end.

Simply put, even though it had repeated over ten thousand times, it did not end.

Petra: "But you know, the point that it's cut off ought to be decided by you, right, Al-san?"

The way to put an end to an endless loop; she could not imagine it being anything other than Al undoing the Territory.

The loop was likely nothing so convenient that it would end on its own once the target's heart was shattered. The timing to end it would always need to be consciously executed by the Al inside the loop.

Ultimately, if she got Al to throw in the towel, then this loop could have been ended on the very first go around without even needing to reach ten thousand tries. —All that was needed was to make the cautious and cowardly Al of the initial loop decide to do so.

Petra: “So, I’d like for you to cut it off here. Other than me, everyone else has already collapsed, so your fruits of battle should be sufficient, Al-san. Even if you continue this, it’ll just be meaningless.”

Let it be said once more: this was no bluff or brave front from Petra.

Even if this loop repeated for the rest of eternity, Petra’s heart would not break.

After all, Petra had made her choice.

Petra: “You see, I’m no longer able to give up, I can’t have regrets either, nor can I cry tears of frustration, and I’ll never be able to forget all the people who I love so much. —That’s the sort of Witch I’ve become.”

—After all, Petra Leyte had chosen to become the Witch of Tristitia.

Witch of Tristitia: “Hey, Al-san. —How many more times are we going to have this conversation?”

Indeed, at the Witch of Tristitia’s question, a faint hum rumbled in Al’s throat.

It was apparent that his eyes, hidden under the veil of steel helm, had begun to smolder with emotions of dusky black upon discovering something inscrutable deep within the Witch of Tristitia’s own round eyes. By some chance, perhaps that might have been related to an unfading scar rooted in the very depths of Al’s heart.

Perhaps, in some time long past, he had peered deep into the eyes of a Witch, only to be wounded in the process.

On that trauma, she would—

Witch of Tristitia: “—Compress Agony.”

Compressing the trauma Al carried, she forced it into him.

Boiling his brain, reversing the flow of his blood, then peeling the scabs off all his unhealed wounds of joy, lamentation, happiness, and sorrow, she rubbed it in: not salt, but trauma.

A stimulus of trauma so potent that he would go on to shed tears several dozens, hundreds, and thousands of times whenever he recalled it in his life here to come, in that instant, she made him taste it with a concentration of a thousandfold.

Aldebaran: “—Ah.”

That moment, with the dread he harbored towards the Witch of Tristitia, and the Compression of his stimulated trauma, Al reacted not with his body, but with his soul, reaching out for the relief most familiar and accessible to him.

That was to say—

Witch of Tristitia: “—Game set!”

—The way to put an end to an endless loop, was to force the start of the next loop.

Arriving at that conviction, the Witch of Tristitia entwined her hand with the intangible hand of her beloved, smiling as their fingers overlapped.

Witch of Tristitia: “How uncool. —If it was Subaru, he would have put up a brave front and said that a fractured heart’s nothing but a scratch.”

“Subaru”: “You, are just way too cool, Petra.”

With a sense of powerlessness, yet brimming with pride, her beloved spoke those words to her.

As those words filled the Witch of Tristitia’s heart, she continued to face forward.

—Now then, this was it, the final showdown.

Her wounded heart, the weakness that had made her wish to end it all, and the tears she had shed in regret; because she had offered all of those as compensation—the Witch of Tristitia would not relent until victory was secured in the form she desired.

16

—Undoing the Territory, and tying it up anew, he reconstructed his Matrix.

That was an admission of certain defeat for the imposition of the Territory that ought to have guaranteed a certain victory.

But, it could not be helped. There was a precedent. The Territory could not kill a Witch put in the position of Aggressor.

Of course, the term “kill” was not being used literally here, as the target was purely restricted to the heart, but—

Aldebaran: “…”

Having boldly proclaimed that she could endure Territory, was Petra—no, he could no longer merely call her Petra. Without any exaggeration, she had undergone a complete transformation.

Aldebaran: “—The Witch of Tristitia.”

In the past, the one who had broken through Aldebaran’s Aggressor of the Territory, was the Witch of Greed.

Thinking back, regardless of whether it was the Victim or the Aggressor who took initiative over the Territory, a bad omen always lingered over Aldebaran’s Authority as a trace of his defeat in his first battle.

Regardless, even now that the Territory had been brushed off, Aldebaran still held the advantage in this battle.

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

Aside from the Witch of Tristitia, the Aldebusters who heralded the subjugation of Aldebaran had been wiped out; unfortunately for them, the abrasions to the heart that came with using the Territory were absolute. It was not as though Aldebaran had decided to impose the Territory on them with a resolve so tepid as to allow them to escape it by acting or playing dead.

That was precisely why he would have been severing one or two of the target's limbs as verification before he decided to transfer the Territory onto the next target. Since that continuity did not exist within himself, he had no way of knowing exactly how he had ascertained that, but if his current self could think of it, then the him inside the loop would have also drawn the same idea.

Hence, he could say it with certainty. —Aside from the Witch of Tristitia, nobody would be able to stand.

Aldebaran: "But, that's something she'd also be aware of."

If she had stood up, then her other allies would also get back up; Aldebaran could not afford to underestimate the Witch of Tristitia standing before him as one who would commence action on such a naive assumption.

In that case, there had to be something. The Witch of Tristitia had a plan to still turn the tables on him.

—The girl, boasting of how the stars had allowed her to be here today even when transformed into a Witch, had a trump card.

Aldebaran: "…"

With the Territory undone, Aldebaran and the Witch of Tristitia were in a momentary state of release, and while there was a distance of five meters between them, it was tantamount to nothing given the opponent's Authority—or rather, with an Authority like Compression, there was no peace of mind to be found at any distance whatsoever.

But, it was an Authority.

She was undoubtedly bound to make a move, playing the card in her hand known as the Authority of Tristitia.

Naturally, the most likely possibility, given the effect of her Authority, was to summon others forth using Compression.

The probable candidates were—

Aldebaran: "—Lil' Miss Rem, and Lil' Miss Meili? Or maybe, her Margrave master?"

When he considered the potential personnel whom the Witch of Tristitia could assemble, and were not present here, the first ones to come to mind were those three. Rem ought to have been clashing against the highly admirable Yae, but since he had not glimpsed any discomposure in Ram, there was no taste of defeat that had been transmitted via their Synesthesia. It was difficult to imagine that Yae had been defeated, but he had now reached a stage where he had no choice but to consider it.

Meili was accompanied by numerous Witchbeasts, and Roswaal possessed monster-tier firepower that he had even let loose back in the Empire, so Aldebaran believed they were both highly possible.

But, none of them would provide anything more than being strong and formidable.

The fact that Aldebaran could not be driven into a corner with mere numbers or strength had been made very apparent up to this point. If that had been her aim, it could only be described as short-sighted —

Aldebaran: "No—"

It was not any one of them, Aldebaran could intuit as much from the Witch of Tristitia's eyes.

From the outset, this opponent had been Compressing her thought processes, giving her the ability to deduce conclusions while completely dismissing the concept of time. Any idea that Aldebaran devised and discarded, would have long been abandoned by the Witch of Tristitia during her preliminary review. —In other words, it was something different.

He would need to alter his way of thinking at its very core in order to catch up.

If the Witch of Tristitia were to call someone here, it would be an entity capable of breaking this deadlock—

Aldebaran: “—Don’t tell me!”

Gritting his teeth, his eyes widened. And in that moment, as if having waited to ascertain that spark in Aldebaran’s synapses, the Witch of Tristitia raised her hand overhead, and brought it down.
—Instantly, Compression took place.

Thereupon, the one who appeared between Aldebaran and the Witch of Tristitia, it was.

???: “—Wow. This is way more carnage than we thought∼.”

—Clasped in handcuffs, his mobility constrained, it was Roy Alphard of Gluttony.

17

The moment he saw Roy dropped there, Aldebaran was convinced of his opponent’s intentions.

He had estimated the probability of Roy not being dead to be around eighty percent.

To begin with, if they were attempting to save the victims of Gluttony, Roy’s survival was indispensable. With Rem’s Name having actually been regurgitated, the Aldebusters ought to have been all the more convinced of that fact.

Regardless of how they would get him to cooperate, they would have realized that no negotiations could take place if they took his life. —The remaining twenty percent chance of him dying stemmed from two possibilities: the prospect of a situation in which they could not devise a solution in which they could let him live; and the worry of Roy tending to instigate far too excessively, angering his opponents to the point where being killed would have been unavoidable.

Either way, Roy's survival was fortuitous—but, his opponent's aim was a problem.

Rather than counterintuitively acting to serve the interests of her enemy, the Witch of Tristitia would have naturally had a reason to go out of her way to summon Roy here. She would have had an objective. She would have had a secret agreement or something akin for Roy to work to her advantage.

And so, having made an inconceivable comeback after having read the Book of the Dead, she would have pieced together from Natsuki Subaru's knowledge the reason as to why the Witch of Envy had taken action. If she could figure that out, then there was a chain of possible actions she would have unlocked.

That was—

Aldebaran: "—Getting Reinhard!"

Supposing the Witch of Tristitia had colluded with Roy to have him use his Authority, if it was the Witch of Tristitia who had shattered her own heart to the point where even the Territory had no effect on her, it would not have been strange for her to opt for the ultimate self-sacrifice in order to recover Natsuki Subaru.

That was an idea Aldebaran himself had also come to, the world's salvation via the Authority of Gluttony—to take an individual who had read Natsuki Subaru's Book of the Dead, and strip them of those Memories.

Then, the Witch of Envy would withdraw, and the deterring force of the world, who had been stuck keeping her at bay, would come.

The Sword Saint, whom he had successfully surmounted through numerous attempts and traps, would come.

—If the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, were to arrive here, that would be the end.

His plan would come crumbling down. Hence, Aldebaran poured the entirety of his soul into preventing that outcome.

To Roy Alphard of Gluttony, summoned to the scene via the Authority of Tristitia, he would—

Aldebaran: "—You're forbidden from devouring Memories! You'll be scorched by the curse mark!"

Once again, he tightened the conditions that had previously been slackened.

Being the one who had applied the curse mark, the repeated modifications to the conditions also caused serious damage to Aldebaran's soul, and he could feel his Od fissuring deep within his body. That was not a feeling of pain, but rather, a profound sense of loss; the sensation of one's very core being undermined, something that Natsuki Subaru was also said to have experienced.

But with this, he averted the crisis of Roy eating the Witch of Tristitia's Memories.

So long as the Witch of Envy did not withdraw, the Sword Saint would be hindered from—

Witch of Tristitia: "—Al-san."

Reaching this place; in that moment, as he subconsciously clenched his fist, before he could even finish that thought, it occurred.

The Witch of Tristitia had called to Aldebaran. Her plans derailed, he thought she surely ought to have been making a bitter face, and certainly, a painful expression adorned her countenance.

But, that was not a visage lamenting her own future. —It was one that looked at him in pity.

Aldebaran: "What are—"

As a shudder ran down his body, Aldebaran contemplated the meaning of the Witch of Tristitia's expression.

But, that had been a mistake. Thinking had been a mistake. Rather than thinking, he ought to have killed himself immediately. If he died now, then no matter what it was, he would have still managed to make it through somehow.

But once again, when it mattered most for Aldebaran, die he could not.

Just like when he had failed to keep the sun of this world from setting, once again, he could not.

Witch of Tristitia: “—Play ball.”

It transpired in that moment, as the Witch of Tristitia spoke the line that Aldebaran had intended to say, but had failed to get the chance.

—The natural enemy of Aldebaran, was now standing right behind him.

18

Petra: “—I think I might know Al-san’s weak point.”

Before the Aldebusters had officially formed, during the strategy meeting held to approach the defeat of the Al Troupe, that was a realization that Petra, who would go on to become the Witch of Tristitia, had come to.

When she learned from Rom-jii’s testimony that Al’s Authority was a looping ability similar to Natsuki Subaru’s own Return by Death, Petra had reasoned that if its activation condition was also the same as Subaru’s, then there ought to be a way to thwart it.

But then again, it was not as though she could tell for certain at that point.

As for whether or not the method would be viable, there was a need to verify it with the person in question, but aside from a one-sided acquaintance through the Book of the Dead, Petra had essentially zero points of contact with her—no, with him.

But, thinking that it might be possible, she had gotten in contact with him before the Aldebusters commenced their operation, and had promised that she would only call him to the pitching mound as the ultimate trump card when they had truly pushed Al to the absolute limit.

Thus—

Witch of Tristitia: "—Play ball."

While getting revenge with the declaration that had been spoken to her over and over again, the Witch of Tristitia looked at Al, lying beyond Roy Alphard, who she had situated between them as a decoy.

Alas, Al had acted exactly as the Witch of Tristitia had intended, in exact accordance with her wishes.

She imagined that if he saw Roy, he would presume that she was aiming to have him employ his Authority. —This was Roy, who had cut a secret deal with Felt, harboring a rebellious spirit against Al. If he had come by the opportunity to learn of that fact amidst his "Turning Back Time", then she predicted that he would foster doubt towards Roy's intentions.

Sure enough, Al had acted just as she hoped, choosing to seal off Roy's betrayal.

The fact that, at the same time as Roy, the Witch of Tristitia's trump card had appeared right behind him, would have likely completely transcended the realm of his consideration. He had likely failed to even imagine that this person might have been here.

The sixty-one Aldebusters who had fought in this battle represented the total strength that the Emilia Camp and Felt Camp had managed to assemble; there was no falsehood in those words. —Indeed, that was the total number of participants from the Emilia Camp and Felt Camp.

Hence—

???: "You're completely worn out, aren't you nyow? —Let's heal it for you, kay?"

Even if one scoured the entire world, they would never find any greater healer—that instant, the highest tier of healing magic belonging to the Blue, Ferris, wrested Death out from Al’s grasp.

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19

—The Blue, Felix Argyle. Better known as Ferris.

The one and only Knight of Royal Candidate Crusch Karsten, and the greatest practitioner of healing magic in the Kingdom—nay, the greatest in the world. Thus, he was the last of Aldebaran's three natural enemies.

He was the final barrier whom Aldebaran could not afford to encounter, having already set aside Natsuki Subaru and the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, for the sake of his plan.

And so, upon Aldebaran, he applied magic that was tender and merciful, yet undoubtedly cruel.

Aldebaran: "Ah, GAHHHHHHH—!!"

The moment all of the hairs on his body stood on edge, Aldebaran resolutely spun around, and, shoving the person who stood behind him—Ferris, to the ground, he undid the package of poison within his mouth.

Instantly dissolving on the membranes of his tongue, it elicited a tremendous threat to Aldebaran's facilities of life, and would deliver him unto death in a mere few seconds—no longer. The tissue that ought to have been crumbling apart was thoroughly restored, and even the nosebleed that had begun to gush forth beneath his helmet had ceased within a single second.

Aldebaran: "FUCK—"

On account of this, he created an impromptu stone dao and, placing it against his own neck, he slashed with all his strength.

Having severed a thick artery, blood gushed out with terrific force, and with that, Aldebaran's life was—under no threat whatsoever. The wound healed instantly, and he felt no more pain than about the prick of a needle.

Aldebaran: “FUCK, FUCK, FUUUCK…!”

He had been played. As far as he knew, this was the most terrifying, most effective way to seal Aldebaran.

The method to seal Return by Death was nothing special. —It was simply to prevent them from dying. That was all it took.

The very means by which to “kill” Aldebaran and Natsuki Subaru, lay in the gentlest hands this world had ever seen.

Witch of Tristitia: “This is the end, Al-san.”

Indeed, the Witch of Tristitia calmly apprised Aldebaran as he lost his composure in such an unseemly manner.

He could not die. He could not redo. Seeing Ferris on the ground beside him, he considered dispelling the healing magic, but—

Ferris: “It’s nyot happening. Or do you really wanna try having a pointless contest of endurance with Ferri-chan?”

Ferris, whose expression did not budge even with sword thrust before him, was likewise an individual who had steeled his resolve to take on this challenge.

If Ferris was applying the same healing magic upon himself that he was currently using on Aldebaran, then no matter how he struggled, he had no chance of dispelling Ferris’s magic here.

In other words, right here and now, Aldebaran needed to decide on what to—

???: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

Aldebaran: “…”

Once again, he heard the Witch’s voice. —Just then, it happened.

A ruinous shockwave was birthed from afar, and with terrific vigor, it swallowed Aldebaran, the Witch of Tristitia, and all others present at this final stage in one momentous swoop.

—That assist was by no means something the Divine Dragon had intended to bring about.

With the battlefield having shifted, a clash against the rightful owner of the dragonhusk unfolded, and upon the perforation of its dragonhalo by the hyper magic of miracles manifested by the two magicians, the Divine Dragon had made a momentous choice.

Rather than pursuing its own immediate victory in that moment, it had opted instead to prioritize the purpose, the wish, and the long-cherished desire it had set out to fulfill together with its original self.

Divine Dragon: "—HAAHRAAN!!"

The final breath unleashed by the Dragon aimed for neither the dragonkin nor the magicians, dashing straight towards a land far in the distance—true to its aim, it landed a direct hit upon the ultimate destination that ought to be reached, the colossal hole that penetrated the land, said to be the deepest and darkest in all the world, tunneling down to its very bottom; the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

The cataclysmic devastation it had wrought, alongside the astonishment it had caused throughout the world, went beyond all description. Even upon this battlefield, it came surging forth as a great wave of earth.

Towards the battlefield of Aldebaran and the Witch of Tristitia, in the precise moment of their conclusion, the tremendous undulation surged forth.

Aldebaran: "…"

Completely oblivious to those circumstances, Aldebaran was engulfed in a fierce torrent of water and plumes of dust billowing forth, widening his eyes at this arrival of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—in the truest sense of the phrase, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

There was no doubting that this was an opportunity beyond anything Aldebaran could have hoped for, his ultimate chance.

This was no scheme devised by the Witch of Tristitia, but rather a rare stroke of luck that had worked in his favor, something that ought to have seldom occurred in Aldebaran's life—a resource he ought to have fully expended when he had met Priscilla.

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

His shock lasted for but a moment, yet as Aldebaran was buffeted by the wind and rain, he strained his eyes across the battlefield shrouded in fog, searching for that which he needed.

His target was neither the Witch of Tristitia, nor Ferris, nor the fallen Aldebusters.

Here on this battlefield, there existed the sole, final measure that Aldebaran could still take.

With Death obstructed, and all his allies lost, it was the final method by which Aldebaran could still fulfill the long-cherished desire he had strived towards alongside the Witch, someone who no longer existed anywhere but within himself.

That was—

Aldebaran: "—Roy!! If you're there, then come out! Come and… come and eat my Name!!"

Updating the conditions of the curse mark with reckless abandon, he once again tasted in the sensation of his Od fissuring under the enormous burden, and with the resolve to make his very soul spew forth blood, Aldebaran screamed.

To return this situation to zero, that was the one and only stratagem Aldebaran could still take with his Authority having been sealed.

By having his Name eaten, and vanishing from everyone's memories, he would turn it all back around.

For that purpose, Aldebaran searched for the revolting form of

Gluttony amidst the dense veil of dust, and screamed.

Aldebaran: “Eat me! My… my Name is—”

Christened Aldebaran, the one condemned to carry the fate of the Following Star.

By ridding the world of Natsuki Subaru, he would grant the Witch her wish long-prayed. Despite bearing such a destiny, he scorched with yearning for the sun, and as a result, he had lost everything, left as naught but a worthless wretch.

That person, his Name was—

Aldebaran: “Rigel. —Natsuki Rigel!!”

The foolish star who had betrayed the Witch’s expectations, and had plunged the sun into a neverending night; that was his Name.

Chapter 57:
Final Act of Servitude

1

—The reason why Ferris assisted the Aldebusters was, of course, none other than for the sake of his master, Crusch Karsten.

Originally, Ferris and Wilhelm had visited the Royal Capital with the intention of negotiating directly at the Royal Castle, hoping to join the survey team en route to the Pleiades Watchtower that had been cleared for entry.

It was during this time that the Aldebaran Troupe attacked the Royal Capital—a raid that unleashed a battle between the Sword Demon and the Divine Dragon, and saw the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony break loose from his prison.

???: "—There is a matter I wish to share with you, and something I would like to ask for your assistance with."

It was Otto, the Internal Affairs Minister of the Emilia Camp, who gave Ferris and Wilhelm the rundown, requesting their cooperation. When the details of Al's—of Aldebaran's atrocities, as well as the fact of Reinhard's participation in the conflict, had reached Ferris's ears, he was not as willing as Wilhelm was to offer their complete cooperation.

Of course, as a member of the Royal Guard, he felt indignance towards any who dared to disturb the Kingdom's peace. However, he was powerless in combat, and even his healing arts, which ought to have been his lone strong suit, were insufficient to save his master, the one whom he held dear above all else, so what more could he do?

In fact, in the battle that immediately followed, Wilhelm was defeated by the Divine Dragon, suffering serious injuries that left him unconscious, which only served to further reinforce Ferris's sentiments.

However, a situation arose that forbade Ferris from keeping his gaze downcast any longer.

???: “It has been some time, Felix-sama.”

Face-to-face with the maid—Rem, as she bowed out of courtesy towards him, Ferris recalled the events of the conversations they had shared, the battles they fought together, and realized that she was one from whom the Authority of Gluttony had been rescinded.

In other words, she was a living testament to the prospect of breaking one of Crusch’s two curses, those being of her Memories and of the Dragon’s Blood.

Ferris: “…In that case, I’ve got nyo other choice, do I?”

There was also the fact that Wilhelm, who had been a continued source of encouragement for Ferris at times when he felt worthless at Crusch’s side during her torment, had been taken down.

Accepting that request, he lent his strength to the Aldebusters in an attempt to stop the Aldebaran Troupe, who were determined to accomplish an unknown goal, even if it meant making an enemy of the world. To that end, he resolved himself to do whatever it might take.

But then again—

Ferris: “—Of all things, I never thought I’d be used as the trump card like this.”

As he was hit by the tremendous eruption of smoke, violent wind, and pouring rain, Ferris covered his mouth with his hand to block the dust as he reflected on the unexpected role that had been levied upon him.

With Petra’s power of Compression, it was possible to move objects swiftly or complete discussions in the blink of an eye—using this, the Aldebusters repeatedly employed the unfair tactic of transporting their wounded to Ferris to be healed before being sent back to the battlefield, progressively sinking their teeth into their formidable opponents.

That alone was already quite the major duty, but to be entrusted with delivering the decisive blow to Aldebaran, someone who possessed an outrageous ability, was something he could have never imagined.

—Upon Aldebaran, he cast perpetually active healing magic. That was the duty entrusted to Ferris, the trump card to be used against Aldebaran, a role that permitted no failure.

Ultimately, even now, Ferris did not fully grasp the meaning behind his role.

Taking into account the words of Petra and Rom-jii, whenever Aldebaran “sustained a mortal wound”, time would turn back to before he received that injury—such was his interpretation. By exploiting this, Aldebaran had been able to continue tiding over many a tight spot, allowing him to sidestep even Reinhard.

Frankly, Ferris found himself perplexed over what everyone was seriously considering as a possibility. Supposing that were really true, it would be far too invincible. Nobody could defeat that sort of thing, could they?

All the more so if they were saying that Ferris’s healing magic was the only way to overcome that invincible power.

He thought it would be far, far too big a gamble.

That just maybe, it might have been a foolish act to fully restore the enemy that everyone had worked so hard to corner.

Still, what if, by some chance, Ferris actually could deal the decisive blow to this battle?

???: “Don’t lament, Ferris. Your heart is precious. Be proud of your talents… You have the kindest power in all the world.”

Ferris: “—Your Highness…”

In the past, there was someone who spoke of Ferris’s power that way, taking pride in it.

Both back then, and even now, Ferris's power still fell short of the title of Blue. Even so, he wished to believe that there had been meaning in the fact that he had continued to polish it, not viewing it a curse.

To that end—

???: "—Roy!! If you're there, then come out! Come and… come and eat my Name!!"

Unseen within the cloud of dust, mixed with the roaring wind and the screams of the land, a voice could be heard.

It seemed that Ferris's healing magic had certainly proved effective as a trump card. This was evidenced by Aldebaran's violent discomposure, and his desperate cries through the wind.

But, the opponent had not given up just yet. —As Ferris also stretched out his slender knees to stand up, he began to ponder.

Ferris: "What else can I still do for the people I hold dear?"

So he spoke.

2

Aldebaran: "Rigel. —Natsuki Rigel!!"

Raising his voice amidst the dense enshroudment of dust, Aldebaran assiduously strained his vision.

The pouring rain, gusting winds, and rumbling earth roared, rendering him unable to discern the sounds in his surroundings. Even while bearing those unreliable senses of sight and sound, he still raised his voice as if to tear his throat apart.

The abominable power of healing that had been cast made it so that instead of spewing forth blood, his shrieking throat was instantly being repaired. While being bestowed such an ironic boon, he continued to scream with all his might.

Aldebaran: "ROY! ROOOY!! FIND ME! IT'S RIGEL! NATSUKI!

RIGEL!!”

Each time he said it aloud, he felt a heartache as if sandpaper filing away at his soul unseen, yet amidst it all, Aldebaran continued to cry out that name; time after time, he cried it out.

Natsuki Rigel. —Before he wore the mantle of the Following Star, that was the true name belonging to Aldebaran.

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

Nothing about it felt real. Only, it caused a sense of irksomeness to cling to a corner of his mind.

For Aldebaran, rather than the name given to him by his parents that none had ever called him directly, it was the name that the Witch had called him by countless times, “Aldebaran”, that was far more familiar to his ears. Even that name had been transformed into a wound when the Witch had been reduced to the Witch of Greed.

As for who he “originally” was, he no longer knew. —But, self-recognition had no bearing upon it. The only thing that mattered was how Od Lagna had recorded this pathetic life.

That was why—

Aldebaran: “—I’m… Natsuki Rigel.”

That which he deemed only an abhorrence to give as his name, Aldebaran recognized it as part of himself.

Even if one rejected, shunned, or hated them, nobody could choose their parents in life.

Aldebaran: “…”

Continuing to scream even now, Aldebaran frantically searched for Roy amidst the fog.

Swept up in the devastating windstorm from a moment ago, all present on the battlefield had been scattered. Aldebaran had also been thoroughly tossed around, and the Witch of Tristitia, Ferris, and Roy were of no exception either.

At present, there ought to have been nobody else capable of mobilizing here. But, his opponent had preserved their trump card, Ferris, until the very last minute. It would not have been strange at all if they still had some cards left concealed. —Now that Aldebaran's Territory had been sealed, such a thing could serve as the deciding factor.

Aldebaran: "FUCK…!"

He thought that he might have been able to at least force the Territory's imposition upon Ferris, but it was no use. Upon being sidestepped by the Witch of Tristitia, the sensation of freedom he had grasped over the bug had once again receded into the distance. Even if that was not the case, there was a strong randomness to the target selection. He could not bear to witness the Witch of Tristitia be chosen again. On top of that, Ferris's healing magic—that which persistently sustained Aldebaran's recovery, was sourcing the Mana necessary for its operation from Aldebaran himself.

And now, because of his connection with "Aldebaran", that was practically inexhaustible.

Aldebaran: "If I can't rely on the Territory…!"

Intending to exhaust the entirety of the very Mana that was impeding him, he would clear away the obstacles with great magic. Formulating such an idea, Aldebaran visualized many techniques within his mind.

They were all things he had learned from the Witch, knowledge that had been shelved on account of lacking the requisite resources for activation, but now with his connection to "Aldebaran", he possessed the ability to employ them.

As was the case against Reinhard, he would wield them to the utmost, and break this deadlock without use of the Territory—

Aldebaran: "Blergh… hk."

—The moment he thought that, a nauseating sensation of vomiting filled Aldebaran's mouth.

At the vehement dizziness and tinnitus in his ears, Aldebaran nearly fell to his knees with an "Ah?". Under the impression someone had attacked him, he scanned his surroundings in a panic, yet no one could be found. —Then, he made the realization.

Right now, the true culprit behind Aldebaran's disorientation, was an unfathomable sense of pressure.

The pressure of being unable to make the wrong choices, was crushing Aldebaran's heart.

Aldebaran: "…You've gotta, be kidding me."

Staring down at his trembling right hand, Aldebaran was struck speechless.

In this high-risk situation, at this critical juncture where everything he had worked towards could be rendered meaningless, in peak physical condition thanks to that horrendous healing magic, in a scenario that demanded optimal and expedited decision making, to think he would lose his ability to think straight due a lack of nerve; what a terrible joke.

But, in truth, it was not a joke or anything of the sort. Even if it seemed as though a nightmare, it was reality.

—After all, Aldebaran had never definitively decided upon anything without the use of his Authority.

Prior to the commencement of this battle, in the Vollachian Empire, in the Royal Selection, on the Gladiator Island, and even before all that during his days with the Witch, every choice of Aldebaran's had always been the optimal decision, safeguarded by his Authority.

No matter how he might have failed, he would always redo, choose a different option, and nullify his mistakes. Living his life through those accretions was Aldebaran's very nature. And right now, that would not apply.

Aldebaran: “…”

He did not know what extent of wind he needed to generate in order to wipe away the dust without resulting in anyone’s death. The heat to evaporate the rainfall, the impact to offset the rumbling earth, whether it would be best to step into these plumes of dust leading with his right leg or left; everything was an unknown variable.

The fact that he could not verify anything, was terrifying.

To walk down a path without the guarantee of the right answer, was an act tantamount to fumbling around in pure darkness.

Such a path, with no certainty of reward, was one Aldebaran could not tread. —After all, with his Authority rendered ineffective, Aldebaran was nothing more than a helpless, wooden doll.

Neither the two Witches, nor the beloved woman, had that wooden doll been able to save.

Aldebaran: “—Hk.”

Once he began to think, nothing but undesirable notions flashed through his head.

Was feeding his Name to Roy truly the most optimal stratagem? Were there no other measures he could take? Should he use the curse mark as a shield and let Roy wreak havoc to capitalize on the chaos? What about discovering an unprecedented manner of death to slip through a gap in the perfect healing magic? Would it not be better to flee through the clouds of dust? Et cetera, et cetera, with his emotions racing ahead—.

???: “—Look at that, it is…”

Aldebaran: “…”

Those impatient emotions of his came to a halt at a sensation akin to being dashed in cold water.

Hesitation and fear, all of Aldebaran’s negative emotions that boiled over upon the sealing of his Authority: as if being dragged out by those, the greatest regret he had kept submerged down at the very depths of his being became tinged with heat.

A heat so intense that it would sear with a mere touch, enough to warm one's skin just by drawing near to it; yet contrary to that, feeling a chill that seemed to penetrate down to every last drop of blood in his body, Aldebaran sighed.

???: "It is mine—"

Aldebaran: "…Stop."

???: "Mine—"

Aldebaran: "STOOOOOOOOOP—!!"

Plugging his ears, averting his eyes, and nearly forced to confront something he had buried at the very bottom of his heart to avoid facing, Aldebaran screamed.

Rejecting the voice that sounded within him, rejecting the smile that flashed across his vision, rejecting the warmth that tried to enter his being, he bared his teeth. —That instant, he forced his eyes open, and caught a glimpse of a faint silhouette beyond the fog.

In an instant, the figure was lost amidst the veil of dust, but not a shred of doubt existed within him. It was Roy. It was Gluttony.

To pull Aldebaran away from these surging regrets—no, from this worst-possible situation that he was currently wrapped up in, there existed a sole ray of hope, and he had glimpsed it. That instant, he broke into a dash.

Aldebaran: "—Roy! I'm right here! Eat me! Come eat my Name!!"

The hesitation of which leg to step forth with, the cowardice of seeking a way to die, the weakness of trying to escape to enact a different stratagem, the carelessness of questioning his own choice; all of it was shattered in an instant with the impact of his foot kicking off the ground.

That moment, Aldebaran gained the composure to seize the choice fluttering before his eyes, deciding to flee from the most terrifying outcome.

—Up until this point, Aldebaran had always relied upon the power of his Authority to avoid ever locking in the “choice” he made on the first go. Ergo, he did not know.

That, when making a “choice” regarding a single thing, a decision motivated by a single-minded desire to escape a situation, would never affirmatively change the course of one’s own fate.

As if to prove that—

???: “—Al-sama.”

As Aldebaran attempted to rush towards the figure eclipsed by the fog in an effort to escape, his body was restrained by a being that had appeared right before him—the actions of Yae Tenzen, who was supposed to be his ally, served as proof of that.

3

—Upon her defeat in the battle against Rem, Yae’s “next” battle commenced.

Blown away, she rolled down the side of the ice mountain that had been made by freezing the great river, and abandoning all the blood-stopping methods she originally could have performed, she put all her efforts into playing the role of the defeated on the verge of death.

Her objective in doing so was—

Rem: “—I do not intend to take your life. It would sadden that person, after all.”

When the Oni girl spoke those words and applied her healing magic, Yae won her initial wager.

In all honesty, considering her lack of relent during combat, it was difficult to believe that she had no intent of taking her life, but since Yae had actually made it out with her life, she could not complain. —Above all else, if she dared to complain here, her only chance would fizzle away like a bubble on water's surface.

Unfortunately for Yae, she had no chance of turning the situation around on Rem here.

So long as she could not solve the contrivance that Rem had used to nullify Yae's attack in their final skirmish, then even supposing she succeeded in launching a surprise attack, she would likely fail to take Rem down. Thus, it would be none other than an act that wasted any chance at a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Ergo, Yae's aim lay elsewhere. —It lay in one final act of servitude, devoting the entirety of her soul with what little she had left to offer.

As expected, Rem was also wary of a counterattack, and so the effects of the healing magic were kept to a minimum, leaving her condition at just closing up her bleeding wounds and stopping the countdown towards death. On top of that, she chained up Yae's hands and feet without any pushback, a thoroughness refusing to grant her any role above that of a hostage or prisoner. —But, with that alone, her perception of how to deal with a shinobi could only be called naive.

So long as they did not experience an instant death, it was in a shinobi's nature to get the job done, even if it meant letting their head fly.

She could dislocate all of her joints to escape the chains, and ignore her mortal wounds by burning her lower abdomen.

By doing so, Yae believed that she would still be able to do something for Al at the very end of the end, having failed to accomplish a single one of the duties entrusted to her.

Thus—

Yae: "…"

—The once-in-a-liftetime opportunity Yae had aimed for, materialized quicker than she ever could have imagined.

A tremendous impact vehemently engulfed the Agzadd Canyon and the entire surrounding area, so while the corollary cataclysm of aftershocks, wind storms, and flooding quaked the earth as an assault on the land, Yae sprung into action.

Fleeing from Rem, who had attempted to protect Yae from the impact, she broke away from the canyon, and arrived at the clifftops—it was then that Yae painfully realized the inadequacy of Al's henchmen, herself included.

Amidst the dust storm that seemed to be covering the entirety of the vast canyon, she saw that Al, far from reaching the Grand Mogolede Geyser, had been kept occupied by the enemy immediately after climbing up.

If Yae, if "Aldebaran", if Roy Alphard, if Heinkel, if the henchmen whom Al had gathered had been able to fulfill their roles, this ordeal would have never transpired.

That was precisely why—

Yae: "…"

Her vision disrupted by dust, her hearing disrupted by rumbling, and her sense of smell disrupted by surging billows of the wind, Yae consolidated what little information she could from her five senses, and accurately pinpointed the person she needed to find there.

Likely, there was nobody who could make the best of this situation like a shinobi could. Feeling grateful for her abduction into the shinobi village for the first time in her life, Yae gallantly hastened to that person.

This time for sure, no matter what, in order to become his strength —

???: "—Roy! I'm right here! Eat me! Come eat my Name!!"

—She had no choice but to be useful to Al. That was what she had believed, and yet.

Yae: “—Al-sama.”

Piercing through the enshroudment of dust, she caught the man’s rushing body head-on. Feeling the warmth, weight, and the pulsations of life from the touch of his skin, Yae hesitated from the bottom of her heart over what she ought to do.

Aldebaran: “—Ya, eh?”

Al, pitching forward from forcibly being stopped, immediately peered into Yae’s side-profile, and muttered those words as if witnessing something utterly unbelievable.

His trembling voice was filled with equal parts wonder and turmoil; however, the same could be said for Yae. —No, considering her resolve from a moment ago, it could be said that Yae was even more troubled than Al.

Yae: “I…”

She more or less had a grasp of the situation Al was currently in.

He had been cornered by some means, and was now attempting to maneuver out of these chaotic circumstances. Gluttony possessed the means to that end, so in order to help Al accomplish his objective, hastening toward the Sin Archbishop amidst the dust would have been the best thing Yae could have done for her final act of servitude.

Despite understanding that, Yae obstructed Al’s path. Slamming her entire body into his, she held him back.

Why had she done so? Shocked at her own actions, she scrutinized herself. —Yae feared Al, and she had wished for him to die, so she was trying to help him accomplish his objective in order to let him die. But, with Al as cornered as he currently was, Yae might have been able to kill him with her own hands. Was that why? Was that why she had stopped Al? Was she attempting to repay the dread he had made her feel?

Yae: “I…”

???: “—Is love.”

At the budding doubt, the figure of Rem declaring so without hesitation flashed through her mind, and Yae’s breath caught.

It was different; there was undoubtedly a difference. They may have both been maids trying to fulfill the objectives of their masters, but Yae and Rem’s motivations differed at a fundamental level. They could not be compared.

Only, recalling the Oni who pursued her single-minded devotion driven by her absurdly immense passion, Yae suddenly became privy to certain feelings of her own.

Yae: “I—”

Yae had wished for Al to die. After all, the monster known as Al was terrifying, so there was no helping it.

However—

Yae: “—I… it seems like I just can’t bear the thought of forgetting you, Al-sama.”

—From now to eternity, I could never wish to lose you.

4

Aldebaran: “…”

As Yae restrained his movement, and voiced the reason for doing so, a momentary lapse was born in Aldebaran’s mind.

He did not understand. He did not understand. Far too many things, he did not understand. —With Aldebaran’s Territory having shattered Yae’s heart, she ought to have become an absolute collaborator on the condition of his death.

The selfish confidence he had placed in Yae, had now betrayed him in this ultimate climax.

Had she always been waiting for the perfect moment to enact her betrayal?

He did not understand. He did not understand. Only, with his steps halted, it finally caught up to Aldebaran. —He had plugged his ears to it, averted his eyes from it, and even buried it at the very bottom of his heart; the voice he had wished to run away from the most.

???: “—Look at that, it is mine victory again.”

Aldebaran: “…Priscilla.”

In this moment where he needed to exert every effort towards pulling the possibility right before his eyes even a little bit closer, the mutter that spilled from Aldebaran’s lips was neither the name of Gluttony, nor that of the woman restraining him, nor even that which belonged to himself.

In this moment where he needed to do so, in this moment where he needed to carry that out, even now that his regrets for having failed to accomplish anything were piling up like ash, once again, Aldebaran wished upon that very mountain of ash.

Aldebaran: “What…”

Do you mean it was your victory, Priscilla?

You died. You died, didn’t you? The fact that you died, means that you lost. The fact that you died, means that your desires can’t be fulfilled anymore. The only ones in this world who get to continue on after death, are me and Natsuki Subaru. That’s why, it’s not the same for you.

And yet, what the hell do you mean it was your victory? Even though you’re the least suited to being a poor loser out of any woman in this world, at the very end, why didn’t you admit defeat?

In the end, why did you smile, Priscilla?

Yae: “Your stars—”

Aldebaran: “—Ah?”

Yae: “Your stars were bad, Al-sama…!”

As Aldebaran devoted his attention to those unanswerable questions, Yae stared up at him from within his chest.

Hearing her voice so bereft of composure, the words contained within caused Aldebaran’s breath to catch. Blaming the stars; it was a phrase that Aldebaran would sometimes vocalize, and something Yae had also heard him say.

So, was this an act of revenge? Now that she had halted Aldebaran, she would say those words out of retaliation—no, Yae’s crimson eyes were telling him that such was not the case.

The sincere radiance alight within those eyes, it was of the same quality as what had once illuminated the eyes of the Witch; they spoke to him:

It isn’t your fault, Aldebaran.

Aldebaran: “—Hk, there’s no way that…”

Could be true; such violent emotions immediately welled up within him.

The situations leading up to this point, the circumstances up until now, the merits and demerits of things having turned out the way they had, the fault for absolutely all of that lay with Aldebaran, and with Natsuki Subaru; it being any other way was an impossibility.

Thereupon—

???: “—Al!!”

Unobstructed by even the maelstrom of dust, a voice of silver bells tore through his momentary ardor in the blink of an eye.

5

Jumping to her feet before scurrying to hop out of the canyon, Emilia was shocked by that sight.

Emilia: “Just when I thought I felt a reaaally big tremor…”

As dust filled her vision to the brim, the voice of the wind would not cease its roaring. Furthermore, with the tremors of the land that seemed only to be getting bigger, things had visibly gotten quite bad during the time she was unconscious.

But, that would not discourage her. She would not lose heart. Emilia did not have the time to feel disheartened.

Emilia: “I have to hurry to Al…”

The reason why their allies had entrusted Emilia and Rem with stopping Al, was because everyone believed that the two of them were the most suited to the task. And then, the reason why Rem had sent Emilia off to go chase Al as he flew away, was because Rem placed her faith in Emilia to do so.

Carrying all of that upon her back, and since she fired herself up in order to save Subaru and Beatrice, she could not allow Al to get away—

Emilia: “—Found him! Al and… eh?! That girl?!”

Emilia plunged through the dust with determination, and beyond it she found the figures of Al and Yae embracing, causing her all the more surprise.

Rem ought to have been keeping Yae at bay. The fact that Yae was now here caused her to worry about Rem—Ferris had placed powerful healing magic over her saying it was a good luck charm, but even so, Emilia was still concerned for her safety.

Emilia: “I have to—”

Catch up to them and find out right away; it happened the moment she firmly kicked off the ground. —Within Emilia’s vision, from beyond the embracing Al and Yae, a great shift sweeping aside the dust was approaching.

That was the true source of the tremors that refused to subside below her feet, the origin of the ceaseless screaming of the land.

Drawing ever closer, as it violently quaked the earth, was a flash flood of tremendous volume.

Bearing witness as it attempted to mercilessly wash away everything on the battlefield, Emilia picked up the pace of her steps without even thinking,

Emilia: "—Al!!"

As he raised his visage in surprise at her call, she crossed gazes with the eyes veiled behind his helmet; leaping over the embracing pair, Emilia faced off directly against the flash flood surging forth.

And then—

Emilia: "—Icicle Line!"

6

Aldebaran: "…"

The atmosphere raised a high-pitched shriek, and an unbelievable scope of glaciation was enacted against the flood.

They were inundated by a deluge of mythical proportion, as if a great lake had been upended like a bucket. To combat it, the beautiful girl with her silver hair fluttering behind her rapidly froze all of the water pouring in, fashioning it into a glacier.

Emilia: "YAHHHHH—!!"

However, that was an unfavourable game of cat and mouse between glaciation and flash flood.

Even if the cold air Emilia produced froze part of the flood, the next wave would just crash over the ice, forcing her to freeze that too. This cycle, repeating again and again, created an ice umbrella, a glacier that constantly expanded as water flowed over it.

Emilia: "UYAHHHHHH—!!"

With Emilia as the origin, the ice umbrella expanded radially as she emitted cold air in parallel with the flow of the flood water, arching over Aldebaran's head before it continued past him.

The larger that structure grew, the heavier it became, and as cracks began to form in the umbrella, it was only a matter of time before it came crashing down with immense weight—

Emilia: "…"

For a moment, Emilia glanced back, locking eyes with Aldebaran.

Perhaps thinking something of that, Emilia tightly pressed her lips together—

Emilia: "URYAHHHHHHH—!!"

She reinforced the umbrella of ice as it loudly creaked and fissured, and continued the construction of the great glacier that had been on the verge of collapse. To keep the umbrella from falling, pillars of ice shot out from the ground one after another as support beams; however, Aldebaran focused his attention elsewhere.

Emilia styled herself the Witch of Glaciation, and in fact, she exhibited enough power to back that title up. But, now, at this very moment, if the reason why Emilia was exhibiting power that surpassed her limits was because of the look they had exchanged a moment ago…

If it was the same as when she had protected Aldebaran in the canyon after he had deployed the massive boulder as a trap, if Emilia was manifesting her strength in order to protect Aldebaran…

With those thoughts, he now realized. —Emilia had properly been looking at Aldebaran, and had also been trying to talk to him.

Aldebaran: "I'm—"

A raspy voice escaped his throat, but no further did it continue.

Merely, he felt that there had been some vast, irreparable discrepancy. —A discrepancy from even before his Authority had been sealed, one he could no longer redo, one he could no longer reverse.

???: “—Look at that, it is mine victory again.”

What do you mean it was your victory? Ultimately, he never knew.

But, Priscilla, when you said those words, when you smiled with that triumphant look strewn upon your face, you were so truly—

???: “—That will be as far as you go.”

—That instant, the absurd iron hammer mowed down nearly everything in the vicinity, piercing the battlefield as a streak of light.

Chapter 58:
The Sound of Chains

1

???: “Rigel. —Natsuki Rigel!!”

—This howling furore of the soul, was being hearkened with certainty by Roy Alphard.

Earnest and frantic, it was an implore suffused with emotion as though smiting the chests of all listeners such that, had it been Gourmet, Ley Batenkaitos, who loved the violent, impassioned emotions of harrowing ghast of humans, and the wistful yearnings of desire oscillating in joys and sorrows, he would have lent his ears to that wish with delight and, whilst licking his lips, fulfilled that humble request without question.

Roy: “But, it wasn’t Ley who’s here, it’s us, isn’t i~t.”

Ley of Gourmet and Roy of Bizarre Eating, twins who shared in the same Witch Factor of Gluttony—to be precise, they were triplets with Louis, who had died inside their mother’s womb, but contrary to expectations, they were siblings who had not been on the same wavelength with each other.

Despite being siblings made of the same flesh and blood, what they regarded with importance as it pertained to meals, was as though entirely different between them.

However, they had never lamented the divergence in their eating habits. Rather, that they lived without having to scramble for the same prey between siblings was something to take delight in. Although Louis, unable to freely select prey of her own accord, with no choice but to pilfer food from the Stomach of Souls, seemed to find that vexing—

Roy: “Can’t be helped, can’t be helped. Little sister is dear and cute even to us, you know. But, but, you see? Eating is something that is done for oneself, so an act so adroit as satisfying the stomach of someone else simply can't be done, you know."

So, even if he took pity on his younger sister's implorations for her famishment, it was but the hunger of a close someone else.

Even upon learning that Ley, ephemerally, had fallen in the tower of sand, that too was but the failed meal of a close someone else.

Above all, he would neither think of it as something that deservingly served him right, nor would he lament and grieve that manner of finishing the meal. His thought was singular—the powerful emotion of it being wasteful.

Roy: "A~h, from Ley's viewpoint of Gourmet, someone like us, constantly starving as we were, would probably be a disqualified failure hooligan or thereabouts, but… we of Bizarre Eating, would have gladly eaten Ley, hu~h."

Strangely noticing that he had been keeping Ley and Louis outside of the targets for his meals, Roy had the amusing, unbecoming thought that his familial love was surprisingly unabandoned. To think the Bizarre Eating who haphazardly and indiscriminately guzzled anything that caught his eye in entirety, had been, of all things, choosing his platters.

Roy: "A~h, did something truly regrettable, didn't we~."

It was unfortunate, but Ley had died. In addition, the presence of Louis, ever since the time spent in that tower of sand, could not be sensed within the Stomach of Souls, and it was unknown what became of her. —It was truly, truly unfortunate. The next time he came into contact with his younger sister, he would surely chew her soul, and yet.

Roy: "After all, we are Bizarre Eating, you know."

No matter how unsightly and repulsive a thing may be, once he thought of eating it, he could not help but stretch his tongue.

Even if Gourmet did not so much as even turn to look towards it, even if it was atop a platter that Satiation had pushed aside, he shall eat it, sparing naught.

—Above all, he could not bear to even think of giving up on an article he had once avariced in desire to eat.

???: “—!!”

Outcrying from beyond the dust, was an Aldebaran whose life had been cornered to a dead end—no, the predicament he was spiraling down into seemed to somehow be the result of having been placed into a situation that was the exact opposite of that. To thereupon recall Roy’s existence, attempting to have his Name eaten so that he could turn the board around, was an act that invited considerable pique and admiration.

Galvanizing the curse mark he had engraved to turn him into a yes-man and drag him along, Aldebaran was frantically calling Roy. Inexplicable pain as though scorching the intangible soul assaulted Roy, his body quivering as it bounded upon the ground. An abuse of the soul, making the threat through agony to convey that, if he wished to elude this pain, he must obey.

Roy: “We get it, we do get it, we very much get it, we’re saying we get it, as we get it, even though we get it, there’s no choice but to get it, you know-! Because we’re saying we get it-! Gluttonous drinking-! Gluttony-!”

He got what he wanted to say. He got what he wanted to make him do. He even got, that he was cornered.

In all honesty, even on the verge of his soul being scorched this way, Roy was grateful to Aldebaran. —Thanks to being taken out from the Prison Tower, he arrived at the opportunity of a meal that may have never reoccurred. The yes-man had few occasions for meals, but since Roy’s merit was that he did not choose what he ate, that must have been convenient for Aldebaran as well.

Roy: “But you know, it’d be troublesome to have this misunderstanding, wouldn’t i~t.”

Because he was grateful, he agreed to become a yes-man for him. —

But that only went so far as the extent Roy was willing to yield; beyond that, Roy would do as he pleased.

One such example being—

Roy: "—Fou~nd you."

As per his eating habits, an opponent whom he desired to eat even in exchange for his life, was one he would eat without fail.

2

???: "Rigel. —Natsuki Rigel!!"

As if spewing out blood, that scream resounded within the ears of the Witch of Tristitia as well.

It happened right when she somehow managed to raise her body after being jostled about by a shockwave that seemed to level the ground, amidst a blast and vehement pressure that had surged forth from beyond the realm of her consciousness, inflicting severe damages upon the battlefield.

"Subaru": "—Petra! Are you alright?! Shit, what happened all of a sudden?! Is everyone safe?!"

Even if her mind was dominated by the loud ringing in her ears, the voice of the Imaginary Subaru as he worried over her was unconnected to her eardrums, so she could hear him clearly. What had reached her amidst that turmoil and anxiety of "Subaru's" as he worried for their fallen comrades, was Al's scream from the start.

Witch of Tristitia: "…"

Within the dense haze of dust, the Witch of Tristitia coughed up the particles she had inhaled, receiving two distinct shocks from Al's scream, mixed in amongst the fierce winds.

The first, was how Al was planning to use the Authority of Gluttony to break this deadlock. And the other, was the name that Al had shouted to be his true name.

Natsuki Rigel. —The sound of that name was clearly not unrelated to Natsuki Subaru.

Petra: “Given that he’s from another world like Subaru, I’d figured that Aldebaran was a pseudonym, but…”

The name that had emerged, Natsuki Rigel, was far too strange a coincidence.

Rigel was the name of a star, and the family name Natsuki was the very same as Subaru’s own. —Surely, the requirements for being summoned to another world could not simply have been to bear the Natsuki surname in addition to a star name.

“Subaru”: “That guy’s…”

Naturally, “Subaru” also knit his eyebrows with the same suspicions as the Witch of Tristitia.

Al was full of enigmas, so although the Witch of Tristitia and her allies were confronting him and his resolve to make an enemy of the world, they did not have any idea about the true nature of his feelings or intentions. This too, was just more proof of that.

However—

Witch of Tristitia: “—Sorry. I’ve already made up my mind.”

The Witch of Tristitia was not enough of a child to prioritize focus on an unsolvable mystery here.

What she needed to prioritize right here, right now, was not some new mystery that Al had raised to the surface, but a countermeasure against Al, who possessed a means to completely upend the game board even now that he had expended nearly all of the cards in his hand.

If Al were allowed to carry out his course of action, that of having his own Name eaten, there would no longer be anything she could do to stop him. —Remembering what it had been like to forget Rem, the effectiveness of that had long since been proven.

Witch of Tristitia: “That’s why, I have to do this, Subaru.”

When the Witch of Tristitia murmured those words, “Subaru” stood not by her side, but directly in front of her. Not floating, but with both of his legs planted on the ground, he stood face-to-face with her.

“Subaru”: “…”

Staring true into his black eyes, the Witch of Tristitia felt a strangely deep emotion.

The version of him present here, no matter how he strived, was nothing more than an illusion that showed her what she wanted to see, by no means the real Natsuki Subaru. From an outside perspective, it surely would have been an absurd delusion, merely a deception that was most convenient for the Witch of Tristitia.

Witch of Tristitia: “And yet, you still won’t marry me.”

“Subaru”: “Petra, I’m…”

Witch of Tristitia: “I’m kidding. It was just a Witch’s joke meant to tease you a bit.”

Poking her tongue out, the Witch of Tristitia apologized for troubling “Subaru”.

The Witch of Tristitia proudly interpreted the fact that “Subaru” would not simply do as she said as a testament to her own noble feelings.

For the person she loved to become exactly what she wished for would make her happy, yet it would leave her conflicted.

Witch of Tristitia: “After all, I fell in love with the Subaru who told me that I’m an idiot.”

“Subaru”: “…Now that’s a real honor. After all, I’m a goddamn idiot who’s outrageously happy.”

Witch of Tristitia: “—That couldn’t be more true.”

As “Subaru” responded to her confession in such a manner, the Witch of Tristitia pursed her lips. Then, the Witch of Tristitia spun around, turning her back toward “Subaru”.

And then, after a moment of perhaps either rumination or hesitation, “Subaru” embraced the Witch of Tristitia from behind.

This was a perfect score for her hopes and desires. Moreover, since the real, non-illusion Subaru would have done the same for her, it did not influence the Witch of Tristitia’s final grade.

And so, embraced by those arms—

Roy: “—Fou~nd you.”

So too did a tenacious voice resound in close proximity, the threat drawing closer from the other side of the plumes of smoke.

The Witch of Tristitia’s fingertip pointed skyward—the corona fired from it being his signal; rushing to make haste to her was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard.

Fangs bared, Roy crossed gazes with the Witch of Tristitia.

And—

Witch of Tristitia: “—It’s Petra Baumann.”

Her finger thrust up toward the heavens, the Witch of Tristitia gave her name.

The shuffle of names carried out amongst the Aldebusters as a countermeasure against Gluttony—with the cooperation of the lord, Roswaal, it was the result of the name changing ceremony that had been accepted as something with official validity. As each of them selected a name as they pleased, the Witch of Tristitia received the surname of the person she loved and respected the most.

But, revealing the newly-changed name she had kept hidden until now could have been for nothing else. —Nothing other than the ace up her sleeve.

“Subaru”: “—Petra…”

With intangible arms, yet still tightening his embrace, “Subaru” called out her name. Hearing that voice, and placing her hands over his arms, intangible though they were, the Witch of Tristitia smiled.

Smiling, the young girl who had offered up everything as compensation, and had become the Witch of Tristitia, spoke.

Witch of Tristitia: “—Subaru, I love you.”

3

Placing it atop his tongue, invoking Eclipsing, a titillating numbness that perfused on the moment of eating rushed through his entire body.

Roy: “~~-!”

This precise climax of Eclipsing was the true flavorful pleasure of Gluttony, for which no substitute came to mind, even for Roy, who had eaten multitudes of Names and Memories until now and covetingly indulged in lives.

Starvation of a hunger, hunger, hunger far too inordinate was the raison d’etre of Gluttony. —In a moment wherein he could hallucinate even a fragment of its fulfillment, he could feel raw, fresh sufficiency.

That was certainly—

Roy: “—The finest-!”

The flavor of the Witch who had kept her word intoxicated Roy with maximal love as he licked his lips at the aftertaste.

Taken captive by emotions that surpassed his anticipations, severity that surpassed apprehensions, and purity that surpassed aspirations, Roy surfeited what a true Eclipsing was as a sense of fullness in his stomach permeated throughout his body.

Certainly, certainly, certainlycertainlycertainly, he had been living for this singular flavor.

—Even should his soul be scorched as indemnity for violating the curse mark, he harbored no regrets for this Eclipsing.

Upon these Memories pouring in, Louis's reason for craving became explicitly clear. However, unfortunately, unlike Louis, what Roy's taste buds found to be the utmost sweet were the young girl's prayers.

The Witch who loved a singular platter to this breadth, splendidly transcended the anticipations he had borne prior to tasting.

Thus, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, smiled.

Whilst being scorched by the blue flare emblematic of the curse mark's violation, he smiled.

Roy: "—Thank you for the treat-."

And, in the juncture he would be scorched by the blue flare together with his soul—

???: "—That will be as far as you go."

A deep crimson blaze suddenly emanated upon the battlefield, and mercilessly flashed through the blue flare.

4

—If one was asked to come up with something synonymous with the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint would likely be the first thing they would say.

However, if it were someone deeply aware of just how absurd Reinhard truly was, they would also know that one of the many factors behind his status as the strongest Sword Saint in history was the sheer number of Divine Protections he possessed.

In the past, when Reinhard had done battle against one of history's strongest existences, the Sin Archbishop of Greed, Regulus Corneas, the one who had been present there fighting alongside him, Natsuki

Subaru, had appraised the Divine Protection of the Phoenix to be particularly extraordinary amongst the arsenal of his many Divine Protections.

The power of the Divine Protection of the Phoenix, allowing him to resurrect even if he died, regardless of the fact that he was already nearly impossible to kill on account of his overwhelming strength, was truly an unfair ability.

But, if Natsuki Subaru were to learn just how extraordinary the Divine Protection of the Phoenix truly was, his previous astonished evaluation of it being a cheat ability would have been eclipsed further yet.

Reinhard: "—Divine Protection of the Phoenix."

Strictly speaking, since it had already been used in the battle against the Sin Archbishop of Greed, this was the next Divine Protection of the Phoenix that he had received, but since the phenomenon they induced was the same, there was no point in making a distinction.

The important thing was that through the activation of this Divine Protection, Reinhard van Astrea, as its holder, would be resurrected from his lost life, and when that occurred, all of his injuries, fatal or not, would undergo a complete recovery.

Hence, at this moment, all the wounds Reinhard had sustained during his battle against the shadow of the Witch of Envy, spanning three days and three nights as he fought to avert ruination of everything at world's edge, were undone.

That also included the wounds that Aldebaran and the Divine Dragon had inflicted upon Reinhard's arms, rendering them unusable. It even blazed his exhaustion from continuously fighting with no sleep to naught.

That alone would have been enough to prove the extraordinary power of the Divine Protection of the Phoenix, but the true value for which Reinhard had turned to this Divine Protection was still yet to come.

Through some plot devised by Aldebaran, the menace of the Witch of Envy had been revived in the modern day. The moment it had suddenly vanished as abruptly as when it had first appeared, Reinhard deemed it the end of the battle—instantly, he decided to inflict a mortal wound upon himself.

If this had simply been for the purpose of healing his wounds, Reinhard would not have gone out of his way to inflict self-harm, and likely would have waited for his injuries to naturally heal.

In other words, what he sought from the Divine Protection of the Phoenix was not the healing of his wounds, but the other effect that the Divine Protection induced, that was—

Reinhard: "…"

—That moment, clad in flames of deep crimson, Reinhard was resurrected in the midst of a battlefield.

That was the other extraordinary effect carried by the Divine Protection of the Phoenix, the flames of rebirth that allowed the deceased holder to resurrect at any location they desired.

In his battle against Regulus Corneas, the power had raised him from the ashes right before Natsuki Subaru's eyes, but in the current moment, the place where Reinhard resurrected went without saying.

It was by the side of one who ought to have been fighting against Aldebaran, cleaning up after Reinhard's failure: his master.

Reinhard: "…"

Appearing from the flames that billowed in the winds, Reinhard stepped out onto the battlefield, his instincts immediately branding it an unnatural space in the throes of cataclysm.

Even Reinhard could not help but be surprised at the sight, but—

???: "Reinhard!"

Turning around at the sudden call, Reinhard spotted his lovely friend who had an air of seriousness about them, and held in their arms was his master—Felt.

Perceiving it to be an urgent situation, Reinhard immediately hastened to his master. Held in his friend's, in Ferris's arms, Felt's head hung limp, bereft of strength. Nobody was more suited to that task than Ferris, but he would at least try to say something to—

???: "—Oi."

Reinhard: "…"

Quicker than Reinhard could address her, that frail rasp of a voice was spun.

Amidst the dust, Felt was enveloped by a faint glow cast by Ferris—receiving the light of healing focused on her head, she slowly lifted her face, and while her vision blurred in and out of focus, those red eyes of hers captured her one and only Knight.

Then, mustering all the strength left in her body, she put together a single sentence.

That was—

Felt: "—I leave the rest… to you."

Those words spoke to Reinhard, telling him that what he currently needed to do, was not to worry about his master.

Reinhard's master was strong. Far stronger than Reinhard could ever hope to be.

Therefore—

Reinhard: "—That will be as far as you go."

Entrusting his master, who had fulfilled her duty, to his friend, and spurred onward, Reinhard advanced onto the battlefield.

In that instant, he pinpointed all the presences that dotted the region, headed towards the enemy among them who needed to be dealt with, and in a solitary flash, reduced Roy Alphard of Gluttony, engulfed in blue flare, to nihil, erasing him from the world of the living.

Roy: “—Thank you for the treat-.”

That which was scorching the smiling Roy Alphard, was a blue flare set ablaze upon the firewood of his soul, never to dissipate. Thus, Reinhard assisted his suicide as to not allow him to suffer for long.

And then—

Reinhard: “—Al-dono, this time, I shall stop you for certain.”

Kicking off the ground, Reinhard soared toward Aldebaran, standing amidst the dust storm. Even without needing to borrow the power of Compression, it was a movement of such speed that it appeared to have crushed space.

Between Reinhard and Aldebaran, a girl promptly stretched out her arms. The red-haired girl had moved as fast as possible in an attempt to protect Aldebaran. Brushing her aside, Reinhard delivered a karate chop to her neck without permitting any reaction, reaping her consciousness to the beyond in the blink of an eye.

Then, toward the defenseless Aldebaran, Reinhard once again pulled his arm back—

Reinhard: “—This, is my duty.”

—Instantly, an unrelenting blow from the Sword Saint struck Aldebaran’s torso.

5

Far in the distance, an azure inferno dispersed beyond the dust, and in the very next moment after beholding that, he watched as the slender back of Yae crumbled before his eyes.

He had been about to reach his hand towards her as she abruptly fell, but which parts of his mind had been at work to cause that?

Either way, Aldebaran's hand had failed to reach her. Same as it ever was.

Then, without so much as a moment to blink, a white flash scythed across Aldebaran's torso—

Aldebaran: "—Oh."

Two. Without a doubt, as the strike of the hand flashed across his waist, Aldebaran was cleaved right in two.

But, regeneration commenced the very moment he was split apart, and Aldebaran's flesh was restored with a vigor as if a video played back in reverse, instantly mending the halves of his bisected body.

That was the transcendent potency of the healing magic cast upon Aldebaran by the Blue, and the "magic trick" of severing the human body accomplished by the Sword Saint's hand slash, far sharper than any run-of-the-mill treasured sword.

But—

Aldebaran: "Can't die…!"

An affirmation, or a refutation: just how had that appeal resonated?

A blow from Reinhard; yes, from Reinhard. He, who ought to have been neutralized by the summoning of the Witch of Envy, had appeared, and although Aldebaran had basked in his unrelenting karate chop, he did not die.

Given that he had bisected his torso, Reinhard had surely launched that attack with the goal of slaying Aldebaran. But, the healing arts of the Blue surpassed even the murderous intent of the Sword Saint, impeding the activation of his Authority.

Aldebaran: "…"

For a moment, ignoring the pain that he was not sure even existed or not, Aldebaran pondered.

Reinhard was present. Problem. Trouble. All his calculations were set back to square one. Moreover, if the reason for his presence was not simply because he had forsaken the world, it meant that the Witch of Envy must have withdrawn.

And if the Witch of Envy had withdrawn, it would have been because that which she had needed to silence had been lost. —In other words, it was proof that Roy had broken the Oath of his curse mark, and had used his Authority on the Witch of Tristitia. And, he had done so fully aware that he would pay that penalty with his life.

As an act of retribution for having been forced into submission, had the Sin Archbishop thrown away even his own life? Only one thing was certain—any chance of Aldebaran breaking through this situation with his own efforts had been severed.

Aldebaran: "—Hk."

The possibility of Gluttony had slipped through his fingers.

Recognizing that fact, Aldebaran sparked his thoughts as he grit his teeth, resolving himself to use every last one of his actions from this point forth to break through this deadlock.

Every breath, every pulse, every drop of sweat from his fingers; to none would he permit any futility.

With that firm warning to his own soul, Aldebaran embraced the falling Yae. —He, embraced Yae?

Aldebaran: "—Ah?"

This was right after Aldebaran had decided on what he must do.

Fully utilizing every fraction of every instant from that moment forth, he would overcome this accident, that was what he had resolved in his heart; and yet, why had he reached towards Yae, and embraced her?

She had lost consciousness, and the odds that she was just masterfully playing dead were zero. Even if he were to hold Yae up, he would not be able to break through the situation.

And yet, for what reason, had Aldebaran—

Reinhard: “You know it deep down, too. —This will be as far as you go.”

As Aldebaran stood dumbfounded, failing to understand the meaning of even his own actions, Reinhard’s voice, unimaginably healthy for one who had been engaged in a death ballet against the Witch of Envy, struck his ears.

Reinhard was simply telling him: to give up, this would be as far as he went.

He, was telling him.

Aldebaran: “Well, you’re also surely carrying a lot upon your back, Sword Saint, but… it’s not as if I started this with a resolve so cheap that I’d relinquish it at the drop of a hat.”

Reinhard: “…”

Aldebaran: “It’s not over, not yet. This… this is nothing! Don’t you go thinking that I’d give up so easily!”

Putting up a brave front, Aldebaran glared at Reinhard.

By surpassing his opponent in sheer intensity, he wished for at least one thing that his fingers could grasp onto. But, in response to Aldebaran’s vigor, Reinhard raised the hand he had used to slash him aloft, and responded.

The karate chop that the Sword Saint had performed to split Aldebaran in twain, that very hand was clutching something.

—Something that could not have possibly been there, a black orb woven by magic.

Reinhard: “Even with this?”

Left speechless as he stared motionlessly with eyes wide open, Aldebaran realized that the Sword Saint’s flash from earlier had not aimed for his life, but specifically for the bisection of his torso.

With that as his target, Reinhard had done it. —Believing in the power of the Blue, he quite literally split his stomach open.

And, splitting Aldebaran's stomach, he had retrieved it.

That which ought to have been discarded at the Grand Mogolade Geyser, into the hole which led beyond this world—

Aldebaran: "But even so, it can't be broken!!"

The shock had not worn off. Even so, he still possessed the initiative.

Devised by the Witch, it was a forbidden art that reliably sealed any who had been granted power by a Witch Factor. Even with Reinhard's absurd levels of power, even with the world-rending breath of a Dragon, it could not be broken.

Thus, no matter what happened, Aldebaran would not lift that seal—

Reinhard: "No, it's Subaru who's sealed in here, isn't it? —In that case, it can be drawn."

Instantly, a torrent of power surpassing all normalcy quaked the atmosphere, and a shudder certainly ran through the world.

That was simply how tremendously significant the drawing of this sword was, to the point that even the world was unable to ignore it.

That was—

Reinhard: "—Dragon Sword, Reid."

With that flash of impossible radiance, the small magic orb in the Sword Saint's hand was rent asunder.

6

???: "—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created."

Those were the words of the Witch, who had taught Aldebaran everything that he knew, and had bestowed upon him the name of the Following Star.

???: "—Look at that, it is mine victory again."

Those were the words of the Sun Princess, who had given meaning to Aldebaran's life outside of being a Following Star.

Aldebaran: "…"

The foolish, powerless Aldebaran had lost both of them, so despite being one who possessed an Authority that was supposed to rectify erred choices, ultimately, he had continued to choose the most half-hearted path.

Only, he would not allow the birth of the Witch who would end the world. —Everything had been for that purpose.

Receiving the Witch's teachings, and acting in accordance with her wishes, he had attempted to kill the Witch. —He had failed.

Meeting Priscilla, and acting to make her the Monarch, he had attempted to kill the Witch. —He had failed.

Falling back on his initial resolve, and acting to remove Natsuki Subaru, he had attempted to kill the Witch. —He had failed.

Aldebaran: "—Ah."

As a blinding light spilled forth, feeling his eyes being scorched even from behind his steel helmet, Aldebaran bore witness to the marvel of brute force taking place right before his eyes, and the result of that rule-defying power.

The phenomenon brought about by one suprarational power was severed at the hands of another suprarational power, so when that which had been sealed was released, the only thing Aldebaran could do was to tighten his arm around the slender body in his embrace, as if having a tantrum.

And then—

???: “—Hk.”

A faint respiration, one he by no means should have been able to hear, scratched at Aldebaran’s consciousness.

That was something which belonged to the silver-haired girl behind him, who had been wielding her strength to fend off the inundating flood, emitting a tremendously cold air to prevent the battlefield from being swallowed by the muddy stream.

If that had been a lament for being unable to completely dam the rush of water, he could have endured it.

If that had been a sigh of relief at Reinhard’s arrival, he could have endured it.

If that had been satisfaction for the abhorrent Aldebaran having been cornered, he could have endured it.

But, it was none of those things. —That which her amethyst eyes had trained their gaze upon, was but a single person.

After all, no matter the time, Aldebaran would never be reflected in those eyes of hers.

Aldebaran: “—NATSUKI SUBARUUUUUUU!!”

He shouted. He screamed. He roared.

With a hoarse voice that quite literally seemed to spew forth blood, Aldebaran cried out that name.

Emerging from within that light, was a black-haired boy embracing a dress-clad Great Spirit—that unmistakable individual, with the vigor of having been liberated from the black orb, dropped to one knee upon the ground.

Then, as his lips opened, the very first thing to exit his mouth was a yell.

???: “—Rem!!”

As if in response to that call, the sound of chains grated upon Aldebaran's eardrums.

7

—Rem loved Natsuki Subaru.

This was an unshakeable truth, one that Rem, even before fully regaining her Memories, would have had to admit with reluctance.

Or rather, whether she had Memories or not, it was an inevitability that Rem would be attracted to Subaru, so frankly, what exactly had she been holding back for?

Rem: "No, that isn't right. That would be taking things a little too far, or rather… First of all, that would make it sound like I'd fall for that person even if he never did anything for me, right?"

Rem believed that her own feelings were nothing so convenient.

Rather, Rem viewed herself as a fastidious, distrusting woman who would not easily open her heart. Even if she said so herself, she shuddered at how unapproachable of a girl she must have been.

She was vastly different to the honest and compassionate Ram, or the cute Katya, whose true feelings were painfully obvious despite her abrasive attitude.

Indeed, the "original" Rem had been an unapproachable girl with a poor attitude and ugly personality.

Her perspective had been narrow, her world small, too preoccupied with guarding her own self-imposed sanctuary to spare a thought for others. —And yet, Natsuki Subaru had stepped inside.

Stepping in, trampling over it, taking her by the hand, and leading her out from there, Rem had fallen head over heels for him.

Thus, those who had done so, and those who would go on to do so, would only continue to grow with time.

Rem: "Still, among all of them, the fact that Rem was the very first one will never change.”

Rem had been the first one to recognize the greatness of Natsuki Subaru.

Emilia may have been a worthy contender for that, but in terms of depth and weight, Rem would insist she was first. That too, was something unshakeable. —Something precious, tied to Natsuki Subaru.

Rem: “The mansion, the Royal Capital, and Flugel’s Great Tree.”

The path that Rem, who loved Natsuki Subaru, had walked alongside him before she had lost her Memories.

Rem: “The jungle, the Fortress City, the Imperial Capital, and the coupled dragon carriages.”

The path that Rem, who had begun to love Natsuki Subaru, had walked alongside him after she had lost her Memories.

Rem: “The past, present, and future.”

The path that Rem, who had fallen in love with Natsuki Subaru again, would walk alongside him now that she had regained her Memories.

Even without needing to be told by Yae so many times, Rem understood that it was too simplistic to lump all of that under the single word of “love”.

Nevertheless, if asked the name of that which impelled her, the driving force of the hope that declared that, no matter what happened, she would have no regrets, then she could think of naught else but “love”.

Because of love, Rem was able to believe in Natsuki Subaru.

Because of love, Rem was able to devote herself to Natsuki Subaru.

Because of love, Rem was able to yearn for the same future as Natsuki Subaru.

???: "—Rem-neesama, there is one thing I want to ask you."

That was a conversation Rem had had before they went off to battle with a girl, who, just like herself, was in love with Natsuki Subaru.

Rem understood that she, too, was one who had met Natsuki Subaru and deviated from her "original" self. She was one who had found happiness in that fact, and decided to walk alongside him on his thorny path.

She was also one who knew of those eyes which were fixed straight ahead, looking at someone other than herself, the gaze of her beloved that she could not help but wish would turn toward her.

???: "Rem-neesama, would you do anything to help Subaru?"

Afterward, Rem pondered over it.

Just how much courage had it required to ask that question?

Just how much deliberation did it take to convey the words she had prepared for that moment?

And hypothetically, if Rem were to give an answer that failed to meet her expectations, just how much resolve, how many ideals, would she have to bear, as she walked that path alone?

Rem: "Yes, of course. —I am Subaru-kun's Rem, after all."

That was why being able to respond to that without hesitation was something Rem was proud of beyond measure.

In a way, it was a contest of whose feelings for Natsuki Subaru were stronger. And it was a hidden vow that she could never entrust to Emilia, the one he fell in love with.

What would happen if that vow were to be fulfilled? The truth was, Rem had no clue.

The only thing she knew was that it would help Natsuki Subaru—no, to the contrary. That it would allow her to be the first among the many feelings Natsuki Subaru, that kind-hearted boy, would bear.

To wish for more would be extravagant. Yet, now that her Memories had returned, she had become greedy, and even knowing it was extravagant, she yearned just a smidgen for what lay beyond.

For example, once that boy was pushed forward by Rem and the others onto the path he walked, then she wished that he would feel the devotion of Rem and that girl, not just as a mere ripple on the surface of his heart, but as much more, a great wave.

That alone was Rem's—

???: "—Rem!!"

The moment his figure appeared beyond that white light, Rem's endearing sentiments shattered.

In that moment, swept away by a torrent of unceasing emotions that surged from within, Rem felt an irresistible urge to cast everything aside and rush into his arms. She endured it.

Immediately after, the earth beneath her feet exploded upwards, and the rising wall of rock threatened to engulf her entire field of view—only to be swept aside in a single flash by the Sword Saint, leaving the lingering afterglow of flames upon his form and clearing the path.

Directly ahead, straight in front of her, Rem and the eyes of the boy she loved met.

Rem: "…"

Prepared to die, yet unable to be rid of the kindness at his core, the young boy's black eyes met her gaze.

A thousand words she longed to convey, ten thousand feelings she desired to express, a hundred million prayers she wished to offer; swallowing them all, Rem said,

Rem: "Once more, please make my current self… please make Rem fall in love with you again."

That instant, she swung her arm with all her might. —The iron ball flew true, streaking straight through the sky.

8

—The sound of chains, ringing out.

In that instant, his own bloodcurdling scream, the protrusions of the ground caused by the utmost extent of magic he had unleashed in a trance, the negation of that cataclysm by the supreme flash of the Sword Saint severing even the glaciated atmosphere, the fact that it seemed like the man who had appeared while hugging the Spirit had been utilizing the Authority of Greed to keep a grasp over the situation, the fact that he was subconsciously tightening his embrace on the warmth of the woman in his arm; absolutely all of it, did not matter to Aldebaran in the slightest.

Merely, with reckless abandon, he reached out his hands. —No, he only attempted to reach them out. He had failed to do so.

His right arm was embracing the woman who had betrayed him, and his left arm had been abandoned all that time ago alongside the Witch's expectations, so Aldebaran had failed to reach out his hands.

Instead—

Man: "—Al…"

The man, having gathered the attention of all present there, trained his gaze upon him, and called out.

The emotions dwelling in those black eyes, the fact that it seemed like he wished to save even Aldebaran if he could, that color of Natsuki Subaru was, above all else, more than anything, eclipsing aught in his heart—

Aldebaran: "I ABSOLUTELY FUCKING HATE YOU, YOU SHITTY O—"

—The sound of chains, rang out.

9

—I love you.

Chapter 59:
—No.

1

—I love you.

2

—With a deep exhale, he pulled taut the bowstring of resolve deep within his heart.

???: “…”

His exchange with those girls a moment prior, especially the consideration of Petra, caused an ache in his chest. Even Meili, with her insincere devilish attitude, and Flam, with her businesslike demeanor, seemed to worry about him in their own ways, and so with Beatrice at the forefront, this was a lineup of superb young ladies.

???: “As expected of the Lolimancer, I guess. Though, it seems like a dishonor for both sides.”

Regardless of how it had been when he had first been bestowed that title, Petra and the others would not stay young forever. So long as he was accompanied by the eternally youthful Beatrice, however, the day would never come that the person in question would be stripped of that alias. Of course, it would be a different story if he ever parted ways with Beatrice, but—

???: “If only he could do such a thing, eh?”

In all likelihood, it would have made this plan considerably easier to execute.

In fact, with the exception of Beatrice, he had never encountered a Great Spirit of the Yin Attribute that was amicable to humans. He considered that to also be part of her design, but he could not speak for certain on the intentions of the Witch's links, separate from the Witch whom he had known.

At any rate, as a specialist of the Yin Attribute, and considering her origins, there was a fear that Beatrice would be able to decipher an essential factor to the plan. And so, the timing was critical.

Beatrice was soul-bound to the target through a Contract, so he would have no choice but ensnare her in the forbidden art as well.

???: "…"

As the sound of tension creaked, he could tell that the bowstring was being stretched tight.

Thus, he entered the Library of Taygeta, the vast floor packed full with bookshelves housing a tremendous quantity of books, a sight that would always overwhelm him no matter how many times he saw it—and there did he witness.

???: "Murak."

Receiving the full support of the Great Spirit, that man obtained the maximum effect of that brief incancation, and hopping on top of the tall bookshelf, he stealthily concealed a single volume.

???: "…"

Even if he could tell it was a book from a distance, he could not discern just whose name was written upon its spine.

The Books of the Dead in that Library, aside from the titles, were all of the same appearance, with nary a distinction in their thickness. Upon consideration, it was a bit of a strange matter; there was no way that a child who succumbed to illness at the tender age of five, and someone who died peacefully at the age of one hundred after having lived a life full of ups and downs, would have books of the same thickness.

There was no doubt that this Library was a place that took advantage of Od Lagna's properties, but it ought to have been the Witch who had made them manifest in the form of books.

In that case, why had the Witch gone out of her way to create a Library that was so difficult to comprehend?

???: “When you finally find that which you seek, you would not desire any excess noise, now would you?”

Vocalizing an utterance that the Witch herself seemed like she might have said, it sounded like it might have really been the right answer, filling him with unpleasant feelings.

To begin with, he wished to avoid recalling the Witch as much as he could. —Ever since she died, he found himself recalling the Witch as if recoil from everything that occurred up to that point.

Witch: “—There is nobody who can defeat you, you whom I created.”

For a moment, he pondered. If this was a Library containing books that chronicled the lives of the deceased, then naturally, it stood to reason that the Witch’s book would also be somewhere around here.

Thus—

???: “—Look at that, it is mine victory again.”

The voice to which he had plugged his ears, averted his eyes, and kept at a distance in rejection from his soul; the Book of the Dead of the voice’s owner, would also be located here.

???: “…What do you mean it was your victory, Priscilla?”

In those unforgettable last moments, in those final minutes he had shared with her, she had worn that triumphant smile. The declaration of victory that had accompanied that smile, even now, he did not understand its meaning.

Even if he understood, it would not change a thing. After all, she was no longer among them. After one passed away, it would no longer be possible to exchange words or feelings with them.

But, even if it was purely a one-sided affair, this Great Library Pleiades made understanding possible.

???: “…Am I an idiot? No, I’m definitely an idiot. Even though that sorta thing’s nothing more than a pretext.”

Everything was for the sake of the plan, a cover story to get that man and the others to console his heartbroken self, laying the groundwork for him to carry out what he had set out to do alongside the Witch, the plan he had once abandoned.

To think his heart would actually be swayed by that, it would be a tale far worse than going out for wool and coming home shorn.

Above all else—

???: “Please, don’t save me.”

If he were to read her book, if he were to once again be scorched by the radiance of the sun he had failed to keep from setting, then just like the day he gave up on being a Following Star, he might waver once more.

The foolish star who did not deserve to be saved, would waver once more.

That was why—

???: “—Your stars, were bad.”

Resigning himself to those words, he resumed his halted steps, and proceeded through the Library.

The singular book that had been stealthily hidden atop the bookshelf, although he had not seen the title of that book, he knew what name had been inscribed on its spine without even needing to see it.

If it was a Book of the Dead that man had hidden due to finding it inconvenient, there was only one title that it could have borne. — And, finding one of those same books had been an essential puzzle piece for the enactment of this plan.

The two volumes he had wished to track down, those being the Books of the Dead belonging to himself, and to that man, had been found.

So, all that remained was the time for action—

Man: “Good grief. It’s like I’m a mischievous kid who’s getting up to no good in the library…”

He slowly walked up behind the man who spoke these words as he scratched his head. The other party seemed unaware of his approach, and parting from the bookshelf where he had just hidden the book,

Man: “It’d be a problem if Ezzo-san, the very embodiment of a curious mind, were to find it… I mean, there’s also the possibility that a bunch of people come marching in here, so maybe I gotta dispose of them all? How many volumes in total would there—”

???: “—Dispose of what, bro?”

Man: “—Hk.”

As soon as he called out to the grumbling back, the other party’s shoulders jumped up in an exaggerated motion. Slowly, the man turned to face him, a faint stiffness strewn upon his countenance, making it obvious that he was feeling guilty about what he had done.

At the reaction of the other party, doing a clumsy job of hiding things, he deliberately made a grand motion of shrugging his shoulders,

???: “Oioi, you’re getting way too startled. I was just trying to make small talk.”

Man: “…Yeah, sorry, sorry. Someone hearing you when you’re talking to yourself is actually pretty embarrassing, you know?”

???: “I get where you’re coming from with that, but I find it troubling that you’re making me out to be the bad guy ‘cause of that, yeah?”

Man: “The bad guy…”

Drawing back his chin as the other party inclined their head, he directed his attention to behind himself. Then, waddling over from that direction with lovely footsteps, approached Beatrice.

She wedged her small body in between him and the other party, and while puffing up her cheeks,

Beatrice: “Hey, you, don’t startle Subaru all of a sudden like that, in fact. Whenever Betty isn’t watching, Subaru has what’s known as a flea’s heart, I suppose.”

???: “A flea’s heart… really, bro does? I didn’t take him for that sorta guy, though.”

Man: “If that evaluation’s based on my boldness and audacity, I’ll gladly take it in stride, but what the hell did you see in me to make you think that way?”

???: “—Let’s see. Well, bro, I might actually know a lot more about you than you think, you know?”

Responding to the words of the man, who patted the head of Beatrice as she came to his defense, he took a moment to think before keeping it to a relatively harmless answer.

If he mentioned any further information than what he had brought up just now—that was, the fact that he even knew about his inferiority complex and complicated crossroads with his parents before coming to this world, just what would he think?

Of course, he would never do anything so foolish. He had been urged by those impulsive feelings many times, but on those occasions, he would endure it by fiddling with the metal fixtures on his helmet.

A routine for when he went into deep thought, the metallic clank that warned him against forgetting about the plan.

Beatrice: “That is rather interesting, in fact. It is quite shameless to claim such knowledge about Subaru before Betty, I suppose. You are making light of the sweet relationship between Spirit and Contractor, in fact.”

???: “It’s precisely because it’s sweet. Good grief, sorry for getting in the way of your passionate honeymoon.”

As he clicked and clacked the joints of his helmet, Beatrice stood with her arms crossed, thoroughly offended. Shrugging his shoulders in an effort to not upset her, the other party awkwardly scratched his cheek,

Man: “Nah, don’t worry about it. Beako and I get all lovey-dovey whenever time allows it, and right now, well, see? We’ve gotta prioritize the Library, don’t we?”

???: “Thank you for accommodating me on everything, yeah? No, seriously, no joke, lemme thank you again. Even if it’s just three days, it must have been troublesome to set aside this time for me. Beako-chan, I’m sorry for bringing bro along with me. Thanks for coming with us.”

Beatrice: “Betty and Subaru are one, so it is a matter of course that we are together, I suppose. —Also, Betty is not so benevolent as to repeat the same warning many times, I suppose. Correct it by yourself, in fact.”

???: “Gotcha, gotcha. —She’s very kind, your kid.”

Man: “Ngh, yeah.”

The man gave a wry smile, struggling to get his words out, and Beatrice gently clasped his hand.

For some reason, the conversation was not quite bouncing along. Though it brought him no joy, he and the other party had good, responsive chemistry, and the tempo of their back-and-forth ball game of a conversation ought to have flowed smoothly. For it to have become this stilted, was perhaps because he had thought something inconvenient had been spotted. —Perhaps, it was because he had concealed a book different from the one he had expected.

For instance, could it have been one of the two volumes he had envisioned just earlier?

Man: “Al… um, how are you feeling?”

???: “—. What kind of question is that, it’s like you’re the parent of an adolescent who’s struggling to get a grasp on a sense of distance… As you can see, no results just yet. I thought that it might be possible in three days, but man, I’m really at a loss with this number of books. It’s really on the level of finding a single needle dropped in a desert, isn’t it?”

Man: “—Hk, but, don’t give up man. Let’s search properly! I’ll also do my best to help!”

???: “Oioi, bro?”

Just when he thought that, the other party suddenly adopted a proactive position, taking him aback.

Time and time again, the other party had vowed unwavering sincerity towards him, proclaiming that he would be of help. Neither did he think that was a lie, nor did he find that aggravating in itself. —After all, he had no expectations.

That which he had hoped for the most, that which he had wished the man to do, he had not done.

That was why—

???: “Knock it off with the sentiments that muddy up exactly which one of us had wanted to come here in the first place. It wouldn’t make any sense if I’m not getting as enthusiastic as you, bro.”

Man: “Then do it. Let’s do it, as if it were a matter of life and death. For three days, we’ll give it everything we’ve got. Then…”

A tremble ran through that voice. —Not his own, he heard the voice of the other party trembling.

He had far too much empathy, or perhaps, a wave that already ought to have passed had come crashing back in, stirring those emotions anew. The feelings of regret and lamentation, were things that man felt far more than the ordinary person. He knew that well.

Between himself and this man, they were the only two people throughout the entire world to possess it: the curse of their Authorities.

Merely, there was the man who could use it to save those whom he loved, and then there was his own self, unable to do the same.

Thus, so long as the man’s love was allowed to persist, it would eventually be born. —The being that would bring about the world’s end.

In order to prevent that, at the very least, he would need to fulfill the duty of the Following Star—

Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

Holding hands with the man who had cast his head down, his voice trembling, Beatrice quietly called his name.

The emotions filling that call were tranquil, and contrary to her cute appearance, there was a mystical solemnity that seemed to prove that she, too, was a Great Spirit who had lived for quite a long time.

Man: “…”

At the address of the Great Spirit, the person in question held his breath, giving no response.

Witnessing that reaction, he fiddled again with the fixtures on his helmet, and decided. —After another comment or two, finishing the verbal rally, he would begin.

As the other party had stated, they would be searching the Library in this Tower for a period of three days. The more of that time limit he depleted, the more his head would start to wander elsewhere. Ergo, he would take action before that could happen.

Man: “—Three days, is that not good enough?”

The man’s words, spoken as if wringing them out, sounded a bit desperate; was that perhaps a reflection that he was also getting a bit nervous? —It made him think for a bit.

If he did find the Book of the Dead across a three-day search, and could fully glean the emotions that woman who was no longer among them had left behind in her final moments, what might happen?

He could say it with certainty. —It would not change a thing.

These wounds would never be healed, and this pain would never fade. To begin with, he desired no such thing.

And so, in response to the question the other party had hurled his way, despite knowing that it would be a complete divergence from what he had actually been asked, he deliberately answered with the following:

???: "—Your stars, were bad."

Even for himself, it was unclear whether he viewed those stars through a positive or negative gaze.

Present in this place were two stars, the Pleiades and Aldebaran—nay, Subaru and Rigel, and as they faced off, it was unclear who was being condemned as at fault, and who was being consoled as having done nothing wrong, even for himself.

Aldebaran: "…"

He had gotten far too emotional. He had also done a poor job in keeping the conversational rally going this time.

If he kept going like that, he would quite likely get drawn in and find himself uttering something that could be perceived as suspicious. He had already decided. He would do it on the next one, he had decided.

The other party who had fallen silent, the man who had been named for the stars, and bestowed the names of the stars, after he finished his next remark, it would commence. —Passing Mana through his Gate, formulating the technique, he opened up the entryway for the forbidden art.

Then—

Subaru: “—Al…”

Then, his eyes met with Natsuki Subaru’s, a face on the verge of tears.

Subaru: “—Ol Shamak.”

An incantation, one not of his own. —He understood.

Once again, in the battle he had needed to win no matter what, Aldebaran had been defeated.

???: “—Look at that, it is mine victory again.”

Alongside the triumphant smile of the lovely woman he could never get back, he heard her voice. —The next instant, the world of Aldebaran cut to black.

3

???: “—Natsuki-dono, while it may not serve as any comfort, your fears were not misplaced. He had been kneading Mana, formulating a technique. A single slip up, and you likely would have found yourselves in completely opposite positions. I fully support your judgement as having been the best course of action.”

Having stood witness over the entire affair, the words of the dwarf—of Ezzo Cadner, served as no consolation to Subaru’s heart whatsoever, just as he had said.

Was there really no other way to settle things without anyone getting hurt?

???: “Captain, my amazin’ self doesn’t really get it. ‘S just, ‘s just…! Even tho’ I don’t understand anythin’, my amazin’ self can just say this…! I’m so happy you’re safe, Captain!”

Just like Ezzo, tasked with monitoring the situation, the one who was like a younger brother to him expressed his feelings of frustration as he embraced Subaru’s shoulders with his burly arms and straightforward words.

And, he was not the only one nestling close to Subaru,

Beatrice: “Subaru, you made a decision, I suppose… Even though Betty could have taken it all on for you, you still got yourself hurt like a fool, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “But, Betty and Subaru performed that forbidden art together, I suppose. Subaru prepared the technique, Betty formulated the spell, Subaru performed the incantation, and Betty passed the Mana through. Hence, Betty will take on half, in fact. It would be unfair for you to carry too much on your back, I suppose.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

With his teeth clenched firmly, what Subaru tightly clutched in his right hand, so tight that his fingers did not seem like they would ever open up, was a black orb that his own inadequacy had left him with no choice but to enact.

—With no other means to stop him, it was the magic orb in which he had imprisoned Al.

Subaru: "—Sorry. There's somewhere… I need to go."

Deep within his chest, feeling a sensation as if all the organs in his body were trembling, Subaru got up from his knees, and slowly exited the Library of Taygeta.

Holding hands with Beatrice, and accompanied by the worried Garfiel and Ezzo, Subaru reprimanded his legs that were on the verge of collapsing, proceeding down the corridor until he reached the room he had set out for.

Then—

???: "O~h? Onii-san, what's the ma~tter? How's the search in the library~?"

Seeing Subaru as he appeared in the entrance, both Meili, resting on a barrel in a corner of the room, and the small crimson scorpion, seated on her hair, inclined their heads in unison.

The sight of her safe and sound, acting in her usual cheeky manner, was something that struck his heart, but more than that—

???: "—Subaru, what's the matter? Did you forget something?"

Hearing Meili's voice, the girl who had been facing the other way turned to his direction. Using a cooking utensil with a magic stone to stir the pot, she blinked her round eyes as they reflected Subaru.

Subaru: "—Ah."

Laying his eyes upon that girl, Subaru's body and soul reflexively tensed up.

After seeming a bit puzzled for a moment, she immediately stretched out her folded legs and asked “Subaru?”. Then, facing Subaru directly as he walked forward with unsteady, tottering steps,

Girl: “Beatrice-chan, did something happen? For some reason, Subaru is…”

Beatrice: “Something did happen, I suppose. But, Betty shall not say what, in fact… Merely, it seems like he had an overwhelming urge to see Petra right now, I suppose.”

Girl: “Me?”

Confused, the girl—Petra, wore a look of surprise at Beatrice’s answer. Seeing those abundant changes in facial expression up close, the tension in Subaru’s cheeks slowly dissipated.

As Meili sighed a meaningful “Hm∼mm?” behind him, Subaru gazed at Petra head-on, and after a moment of hesitation,

Subaru: “Petra, this is gonna sound strange, but… can I hug you?”

Petra: “—. Well, you can hug me without even needing to ask. Ah, actually, you shouldn’t do that. Just thinking about it makes my heart pound and seem like it’s going to bur—st .”

As Petra smiled mischievously, before she could finish giving her gentle reply, Subaru reached his arms out and pulled her body close, embracing her within his chest.

Petra: “Um, uhh…”

At the sudden embrace, Petra could not hide her confusion. For a girl who, before he had even realized, was rapidly gaining nerves of steel, becoming better and better at not being shaken by anything, this was a clear discomposure to the point of being unusual.

But, there was not a single person here who would make fun of that fact.

After all—

Petra: “Hey, Subaru, are you okay?”

A hand reached out from within his chest, softly caressing Subaru’s cheek.

At the question of the girl right before his eyes, so close that they could feel each other’s breaths, a distance where even the beating of their hearts collided, Subaru swallowed his breath, and forced a smile.

Subaru: “Of course—”

I’m okay. After all, he had to have been. After all, Petra was here, doing so well like this.

And it was not just Petra. Beatrice, Garfiel, Meili, Ezzo, and Flam; they were all unharmed. Everyone in the Tower, everyone who did not come to the Tower; they were all safe.

Everything bad that had transpired, all of it had been made to have never happened.

Of course, it was not as though he knew everything that had occurred, and he also knew that not all of it had been bad.

There had been confrontation and reconciliation, there had been betrayal and fellowship, there had been curses and vows, there had been hatred and love—there had been Aldebaran and Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “—Maybe, I’m not okay.”

While embracing Petra, he caught a glimpse of the magic orb still clenched in his hand, spilling that murmur.

Then, the feeble sound that had escaped his lips as a murmur, did not end as merely a stilted voice. Little by little, his feelings morphed into tears, flowing out from the corners of his eyes.

Subaru: “—No.”

By puffing out his chest and declaring that he was okay, he had wished to repay Petra and the others, who had deemed it acceptable to force Subaru's Return by Death, undoing many irreversible things in exchange for a world left behind.

He could not bring himself to do it. In sorrow and lament, with his own pathetic inadequacy, he could not puff out his chest.

Subaru: "I'm not, okay… hk."

To Petra, who had offered up so much as compensation; to Rem, who ought to have regained everything; to Emilia, who never gave up on trying to converse with Al up to the bitter end; to Beatrice, who had deciphered the mechanisms of the forbidden art while sealed together with him, giving Subaru a trump card when he Returned by Death; to all the people who had participated in that battle, both those who Subaru knew and those who he did not; to absolutely everyone.

And finally, to Al, whom he had failed to get the chance to properly talk to—

Subaru: "I'm sor—"

Petra: "—Subaru!!"

Suddenly, a sharp, loud voice cut off the apology he had been on the cusp of vocalizing.

It was the voice of Petra, looking up at Subaru from within his chest after having held her tongue. When he noticed that her round eyes were flickering with a storm of emotion, tears began to stream down Subaru's face, and as she caressed it with her hands,

Petra: "You finally said it. You finally said that you aren't okay."

Subaru: "—Ah."

Petra: "There's no need to be so afraid. You don't have to carry everything on your own. Right, Beatrice-chan?"

Beatrice: "…A matter of course, in fact. Betty is Subaru's partner, I suppose."

Encouraged by Petra, Beatrice tightly hugged Subaru's body. As Subaru was bewildered by the warmth of the two girls, Petra continued to smile,

Petra: "Meili-chan."

Meili: "Ehh? I'd rather no~t. Petra-chan and Beatrice-chan should be enough…"

Petra: "Meili-chan."

Meili: "…Fi~ne."

Hopping down from the barrel, Meili walked up next to Subaru with a sulky face while emitting an air of half-heartedness, lightly tugging on the hem of his clothes. As if in place of its master, the small crimson scorpion leapt off of her hair and onto Subaru's shoulder, nestling its body close to his cheek.

Petra: "Garf-san."

Garfiel: "Yeah! Captain!"

Subaru: "Gwohh?!"

A huge amount of force crashed into his back as if it had been waiting, causing him to reflexively raise a cry of pain. Desperately holding his ground to avoid tipping over and crushing Petra, he endured it. He had endured it, but—

Petra: "Ezzo-san, Flam-chan, will you join us as well?"

Ezzo: "I am an outsider, so I shall refrain. Still, I stand by Natsuki-dono."

Flam: "I only just arrived here, and have yet to fully process the situation, but… understood."

The presence that only arrived later, without hesitation, nestled close near his right hip.

Now, in every direction, he was being completely embraced without any escape—swarmed by such warmth, Subaru unwittingly exhaled a “Hah”.

Subaru: “What’s up with this?”

From an outside perspective—in reality, Ezzo was looking on as a bystander, so from his perspective, just how foolish must Subaru and the others have looked in their current state?

With everyone all clumped together like this, it must have looked stupid.

Petra: “It’s fine. After all, the one who told me that I’m an idiot was none other than Subaru.”

Subaru: “Did I really say such a thing?”

Petra: “You did.”

Subaru: “…Among all the people I know, there’s probably not a single person smarter than you, Petra.”

He truly believed that. Surely, that was the case. And so, it was obvious to her, clever as she was. Amazing. This was what it truly meant to be wise. There was a big difference from someone like Abel, who was just a clever idiot.

Subaru: “I’ve decided.”

His face was still covered in tears, he was still stuck in place being embraced by everyone’s kindness from all directions, and he had just admitted that he was not okay in the slightest, but he had made up his mind.

Subaru: “Al, it seems like you hated me so much that you could never forgive me, but…”

He did not know the true reason behind that. Only, he would not let things end without finding out.

So much had been on the verge of ending, but thanks to the determination of many people, unwilling to allow that ending, it had been averted; hence, although he was not okay whatsoever, Natsuki Subaru had decided.

That was—

Subaru: "—I, no matter what, will definitely save you too."

Even if he had committed abhorrent deeds that would have made him the enemy of the world, everything, both the good and the bad, had been made to have never happened by means of Return by Death; thus, that was Natsuki Subaru's vow.

And, hearing that vow of Natsuki Subaru's, Petra Leyte gave a satisfied nod,

Petra: "That's my Subaru."

—Indeed, the girl, who had not become the Witch of Tristitia, smiled.

Interlude: Cheer

—Right from the very beginning, there was only ever one ending that the Witch of Tristitia, Petra Leyte, had needed to aim for, strive towards, and ultimately arrive at.

That was from before she had ever become the Witch of Tristitia, from back when Petra Leyte, a mere village girl, had ended up reading the outrageous artifact that was Natsuki Subaru's Book of the Dead.

From back when she had first learned that Natsuki Subaru, in exchange for his own Death, had been fighting in a constant struggle in order to alter the fates of countless people.

From back when she had fallen in love with Natsuki Subaru through their ordinary, quiet days together, discovering what brought him joy, what made him grieve, and what caused him to feel happiness and sorrow.

—Taking all those varied reasons, gathering them together, bundling them up, and collecting them all into one, she had made her decision.

Petra: "Because no matter what, Subaru still wants to do something about Al-san, right?"

Honestly, from Petra's point of view, it was an unthinkable idea.

If one were to count up all the things Al had done on their fingers, not even all the digits on their hands and feet would be enough to list everything, so they would need to go as far as using the Unseen Hand to enumerate the rest of what the hands and feet had been unable to.

To that extent, Al had done enough irreversible things to fill a mountain. —But even so, she did not believe that at heart, Al was a heinous villain who had done all of that while scorning everything.

Petra: “I wonder, is this the influence of being corrupted by Subaru’s book…?”

It might not be her place to say it, but Petra was a realist, and the extent of what she could handle was limited. Rather than just limited, it was more accurate to say she deliberately kept it limited.

After all, if she were to use her abilities to their fullest extent, her vessel would have been capable of carrying an extraordinary amount of things, a fact which Petra took great pride in. She would not feel ashamed of that.

However, using her vessel to its limits, she did not believe that she would be able to treasure everything that she could cram into it.

And yet—

Petra: “Subaru’s greediness…”

But, that’s what I like about him. —That’s wrong. It’s part of what I like about him.

And so, because that Natsuki Subaru could not be changed, Petra Leyte would do it.

It was a painful decision, one that seemed to cut deep into her, as if mercilessly ripping her heart to shreds.

—By making Natsuki Subaru Return By Death, she would reset everything that had happened.

From the moment she made the decision to leave the Pleiades Watchtower and journey alongside the Imaginary Subaru, Petra Leyte had been forging ahead towards that ending.

She had firmly insisted on becoming the holder of the Witch Factor of Tristitia, taking it upon herself to pay most of the compensation, save a small few exceptions, that came with wielding the Authority. She had not spared any card she could play in the negotiations, and provided all of the information she could share, thereby plotting the course for the Aldebusters.

Petra: “If me reading the book is what caused the Witch of Envy to go on a rampage—then, I’ll be able to use that too, right?”

Ever since the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, was released from the prison tower, and the effects of his Authority became clear to her, a certain suspicion had sprouted within Petra. —Having read the Book of the Dead, if Petra were to be dispossessed of her Memories, just what verdict might the Witch of Envy pass?

Then, she also wondered if this was perhaps the very strategy Al had aimed to use in order to make the Witch of Envy withdraw, since he had claimed to have no intention of destroying the world.

Hence, when Roy Alphard was defeated by the combined might of the Aldebusters, while he was tied up and barely clinging onto life, she had made a promise with him.

Petra: “If you want to eat me, I’ll give you a chance.”

Of course, this was a promise she intended to break without remorse if he had not been willing to keep it.

Corrupted by Natsuki Subaru, Petra had become an outlaw who bore no reservations whatsoever about breaking the promises she had made with people she disliked.

Moreover, in preparation for when that unlikely event came to pass, she had secured a reliable ally.

Petra: “Rem-neesama, is truly amazing.”

With sincerity, even when setting aside the tremendous bias from Natsuki Subaru’s influence, she believed this.

Rem had uncovered Subaru’s Return by Death—back then it was “Turning Back Time”, but even if the impetus for that was Rom-jii explaining the true nature of Al’s Authority, she had pieced it together on her own.

On her own, Rem had come to the realization that Natsuki Subaru was a person who had always continued to fight by sacrificing his own life. —Though the thought of that had made her happy, she also felt devastated.

Petra: “But, that’s why I can entrust it to Rem-neesama… No, I can’t entrust it to anybody but Rem-neesama.”

No matter how many wonderful things happened along the way, no matter how many unrelinquishable feelings she gained, Petra Leyte had resolved herself to overturn everything, and make it so that none of it had ever happened.

And true to that, even Rem, who had at long last regained her Name and Memories, and had thus truly returned home to them all, would be erased and disappear.

Knowing that full well and still determined to go through with it, Petra had an obligation to get Rem involved.

They were kindred souls that knew they were going to be erased, who in spite of that, were fellow women who, from the bottom of their hearts, wished for the person they loved most to not lose even a single thing.

She could have only ever entrusted this to someone who truly believed that there was no other way, one who was willing to give up everything for love.

Such a terrible thing could have never been entrusted to someone who, if they believed a better solution might exist somewhere, would relentlessly search for it until the very last moment.

That was why Petra and Rem were the ones who would carry this through.

Petra: “Subaru, Emilia-neesama, I know you must be so tired. I’m sorry. But I’m going to wind up being a burden too. I’m sorry. All the thanks I’d wanted to say could never be enough…”

Thank you, thank you in the truest sense of the word: that is what she had wished to convey.

Knowing everything that she did from having read the Book of the

Dead, Petra Leyte had wished to assist both Emilia, who was walking down a thorny path, and Natsuki Subaru, who had chosen to work himself to the bone in order to support her.

That would not come true. No matter how hard she tried, Petra Leyte would always be a mere village girl who knew absolutely nothing at all.

That would be frustrating, it would be miserable, and no matter how many thank you's and sorry's she said, it would never be enough.

Even so—

Petra: "…I wonder, did I really do everything I could?"

Given the constraints in her situation, had she not done the absolute extent of what she was capable of?

Al had prepared an all-star lineup to ensure he would not lose, and yet she had only been granted a single chance of trial and error in order to overcome him; there were limits to how unfair it could be.

But she had done it. She had pulled it off. Though she had been a little taken aback when Otto, stripped of his memories, had joined the fray midway, but everything, every single bit, had been thanks to everyone joining together.

Petra: "Hehe, I'm pretty amazing, aren't I? Think you're going to fall for me now?"

???: "—. Yeah. Seems like I might."

Slightly inclining her head, she greeted him with the cutest face she could put on.

At Petra's adorable gesture and question, the Imaginary Subaru blushed in a shy manner. Was this just a deception that Petra had wanted him to say? Or, was it genuine enough that even the real him would actually say it?

Petra: "Well, since I'm about to disappear, I might as well interpret it in the way that's most convenient for me."

She gently reached out, placing her hand over his intangible one, entwining their fingers. A phantasmal perk to this degree, could surely be allowed. She had worked so hard, after all.

"Subaru": "By the way, can I ask you something? I mean, it's kind of weird for me to be asking, considering my position."

Petra: "Hmm~? What is it?"

"Subaru": "Even before Clind-san passed the Witch Factor down to you, just one time, Petra, you paid some compensation for the traversal… but you never told me what it was, did you? I've just been wondering what it could have been."

Petra: "Since I didn't tell you, why not just leave it at that?"

"Subaru": "Don't be so cruel!"

Even his pathetic expression looked cute, so Petra let out a small chuckle.

But as expected, imaginary or not, Subaru was still Subaru. Even if he was a resident of her mind, he would not take liberties with what Petra had kept hidden from him, those things which she did not wish for him to see or know.

Relieved by that, Petra stuck out her tongue in a playful manner and,

Petra: "It's~a~secret!"

That made the Imaginary Subaru put on a sullen look, but Petra wanted to keep it a secret.

It should be fine to have at least one maiden's secret that she would not show even to the Imaginary Subaru. And besides, this particular maiden's secret had just a touch of girlish cunning.

Back then, to Clind, Petra had offered a certain possibility of hers as compensation.

That was—

Petra: "—The possibility of me becoming Subaru's bride."

The surprise on Clind's face when he learned of Petra's resolve had been truly remarkable.

Bearing a weighty history as a dragonkin, the eyes with which Clind had looked upon Petra as she sacrificed that potentiality of hers, contained a reaction overcome with such deep emotion that she would never be able to forget it.

That was precisely why she had felt so apologetic. —After all, it was that compensation that had convinced Petra.

Petra: "If I could offer that as compensation, then the possibility of that future truly does exist for me."

Considering the abilities of the Witch Factor of Tristitia, it would be more accurate to say that Petra had offered up part of her ability to exert influence over the world, specifically, "the various efforts she would have needed to make in order to secure a future in which she married Subaru". But, such details meant nothing to Petra at that moment.

What mattered was to believe in a future in which Petra Leyte would become Natsuki Subaru's bride.

And that had been proven by none other than a Witch Factor, something that made contact with the very core of the world.

Because she had that evidence, she had resolved herself to see it through, and had thus been able to make it all the way to the end.

That was why—

Petra: "Do your best, me. —Whether or not I seize this chance, depends entirely on how hard I try!"

From the village girl who had become the Witch of Tristitia, utilizing even a Witch Factor for the sake of her own happiness, that was an earnest cheer directed toward her future self, one who would never become the Witch of Tristitia.

—It was the heavy-hearted cheer of love from a tough and determined girl from another world.

Curtains Close: Reweave

1

While looking at the servants of the Barielle Residence work from afar, Frederica felt a sense of restlessness beyond her control.

Frederica: “I am used to being treated as a guest when traveling with the Master, but… it is a bit unusual with how things are in this mansion, especially with the current state of things.”

Reflected within the gaze of Frederica’s emerald eyes as she said this, was the hectic atmosphere of the mansion.

Swift and well-led, it was clear to see that the staff were a team of extremely capable people, managed by efficient leadership. Even when they became aware of the terrible news brought by Frederica and the others, they did not fall into dysfunction. —That alone was worthy of admiration.

Frederica: “Priscilla-sama, it seems she was truly adored by everyone here.”

The tragic news the servants were informed of—the notice that the head of this mansion, their mistress, Priscilla Barielle, had lost her life in the Vollachian Empire.

Frederica: “…”

Letting out a heavy sigh, Frederica cast her hazy eyes downwards, as she observed the garden from the balcony.

Frederica, due to her position, knew how it must have felt to have those she served, such as Roswaal and Emilia, to leave her behind at the mansion and to have no other option to pray for their safe return. If she found out at that time that her prayers had not been delivered, just how devastating a blow to her heart would that be?

In truth, many of the servants were grief-stricken, and many of them were shedding tears. When they became aware of her death, not a single person had left the duty in the mansion, which could only be seen as a testament of their relationship with Priscilla.

But, it was not just due to Priscilla being loved by everyone—

Frederica: "—I believe that Schult-sama's resolute demeanor touched everyone's heart, too."

Frederica was deeply moved by the young servant, who had accompanied Priscilla to the Empire, and with her death, had to bear the responsibility of conveying her dying will, a task that he had accomplished splendidly.

Schult looked as undependable and skinny as a small animal, however, he did not entrust the unenviable duty to Frederica and Roswaal, and instead used his own mouth and words to accomplish this great task.

Though the servants had not left the mansion and chose to stay in their current jobs due to their adoration for Priscilla, there was no doubt that their faith in Schult had been another large contributor. Whilst being an outsider, Frederica wholeheartedly agreed and could not bear the heat that prickled at the corner of her eyes.

Then—

???: "—Oya, here you are, Frederica. I've been searchiiing~ for you."

Frederica: "Master…"

Raising his hand slightly, the tall figure stepped onto the balcony—Roswaal greeted her, as Frederica bent her knees and gave a small curtsy.

Frederica: "For making you search for me, I humbly apologize. What business do you need me to attend to?"

Roswaal: "Business, I wouldn't go so far as to call it something like that buuut~. The preparations are nearly completed, so I just wanted to speak with you for a moment.”

Frederica: “Preparations…”

Roswaal: “Yes, the preparaaations~”

Roswaal smiled faintly, leaving one eye closed —his yellow eye, a mismatch to his right eye, was left open, as he stood beside Frederica on the balcony and leaned against the railing.

Roswaal: “There’s quite a lot of land that’s worth the effort. I don’t have many acquaintances in the South. Priscilla-sama’s late husband Lord Leip Barielle was nooot~ a man that left behind a good reputation.”

Frederica: “For the Master to say that, he certainly must have been quite an unpleasant person.”

Roswaal: “Oya, how harsh. Has Petra-kun also poisoned you and made you lose your obedience to meee~? Or maybe—”

Roswaal tilted his head, and as he looked into the eyes of Frederica beside him,

Roswaal: “—You don’t like my plan to use Schult-kun, do you?”

Frederica: “…I do not think that what you are doing is wrong, Master. Also that it is for the Royal Selection… and by extension, ultimately for the sake of Emilia-sama and her Camp.”

Roswaal: “Though easy in theory, it’s not easy to convince the heart is iiit~?”

Understanding this yet still saying it, Roswaal’s crooked personality was unassailable. If Emilia were here to speak, she would probably say that it was just a sign of his mischievous side and that he deserved a proper scolding for it.

Frederica: “With my relationship with the Master, it is very difficult, Emilia-sama…”

If Emilia or Petra were here they would attack using a straightforward approach, if Ram were here she would use unorthodox methods to make Roswaal reflect, but perhaps because he had anticipated this, Frederica was here by her lonesome.

Frederica, even omitting the debt of gratitude she bore which could not be repaid, knew that when it came to Roswaal's actions, despite his evil ways, he worked for the sake of the camp.

—The goal that unified the Emilia Camp was ultimately that of the Royal Selection.

In the Royal Selection, the time they spent in the Vollachian Empire had made them fall behind. Even without this Emilia had been lagging behind since the start. If they wanted to catch up, if they wanted to gain some momentum, then they could not rely solely on conventional means.

Towards that end goal, to gain the support of the Barielle Domain which had lost its absolute pillar that was Priscilla Barielle, Roswaal moved forward with devoted and dispassionate maneuvers behind the scenes.

Roswaal: "Since Priscilla-sama has died, and the next fief's lord has yet to be elected, an acting provisional governor will be appointed. Fortunately, I can produce a candidate from my associates. I would just have to appoint one of the Ryuzu-dono's —someone from the Meyers as a liaison."

Frederica: "Grandma's, is it not premature to get them involved?"

Roswaal: "Spare the rod and spoil the child, isn't that what they say? If you continue to gallantly keep them locked away in a birdcage, they will never have the chance to learn to spread their wings. I also agree with youuu~ though."

As Roswaal steadily and dispassionately filled in the holes in his plan, Frederica doubted if Emilia's criticisms of Roswaal were true, if his evil actions were just a pretense or if he truly was as much of a villain as he appeared to be.

Perhaps, since he could flawlessly devote himself to being the villain, he was not able to properly open up his heart to his fellow Camp members. He was too diligent.

Frederica: “Master, at least show a bit more consideration—”

And, just as she was about to point this out, and not let this misunderstanding sow great doubts in not just the Camp, but also the Barielle Domain, and in Schult’s heart, a voice interrupted her.

???: “—Th-Th-Th-Thi-Thi-Thi-This is very much terrible! Margrave-sama, where might you very much be?!”

Frederica: “What is it, Schult-sama?”

Abruptly, Schult’s panicked voice could clearly be heard from below, causing Frederica and Roswaal to exchange glances with each other. Roswaal raised his eyebrows as he also seemed to have no idea what was happening, so the Master pushed away from the railing and looked down, raising his voice to yell out “Schult-kun” as Schult ran into the garden down below.

Then, once Schult had been called, he opened his eyes wide and raised his voice,

Schult: “Margrave-sama! You very much must come down immediately! Someone claims they very much need to see you, that they have to report something to you!”

2

???: “—That which you are now viewing, is the will left behind by the late Madam.”

Saying this, the contents of the sealed letter were revealed by a girl of crimson hair—a maid who introduced herself as Yae Tenzen, whose words caused Roswaal to widen his eyes in shock, motionless.

Roswaal: “…”

Up until this point it had been unusual to see her master display his discomposure so openly, but that reaction was only natural. Having ascertained the same contents, Frederica, and all other parties present were struck with astonishment.

Above everyone else, as the central figure addressed by the written contents of that letter, Schult experienced the greatest shock.

The contents of the letter were—

Yae: "—The head of House Barielle, Priscilla Barielle, hereby declares that when it comes time for her official successor to be determined, the following personage, Schult, is to have his name altered to Schult Barielle, and he is to be ushered in as the legitimate son, and rightful heir to House Barielle."

Schult: "Priscilla-sama, me…?"

Schult blinked at the unforeseen event, his face seemingly unsure if this was a dream or reality.

However, placing her hands on Schult's shoulders from behind, Yae, who had revealed the location of the letter, smiled and said "You're getting way too surprised." as she rubbed her cheeks against his.

Yae: "Considering how much the Madam doted on Schult-chan, doesn't this totally make sense? —Though in truth, I think she had intended to keep it hidden during the Royal Selection."

Schult: "Yae-sama… Yae-sama, how long have you known about this? You left the mansion so many months ago, and I am very much glad you are finally home, but…"

Yae: "—. I found out just before Schult-chan and the Madam left for the Empire. After all, it was around that time when she had prepared the letter."

At Yae's quiet answer, large tears began to well up in Schult's eyes.

If one were to ask, they would discover that Yae was a maid who had previously worked at the mansion and had been on leave for quite a while, but upon receiving news of Priscilla's passing, she had come rushing here.

As one could see, Yae seemed to be quite close with Schult, and it also appeared that Priscilla had held great confidence in her, entrusting her to guard the important letter she had left behind.

The revelations that came forth as a result of all that were a great disruption to Roswaal's plans—

Frederica: "—However, thinking of Schult-sama, it might be for the best."

Roswaal: "…Frederica?"

Frederica: "It might be a bit different from what you had in mind, Master, but… For Schult-sama, and the spirits of everyone in the mansion, it will surely be a salvation. —Truly, she was an incredible individual."

Despite having been Royal Candidate and an adversary of Emilia, Frederica had had little contact with Priscilla, however she could only describe her as an incredible person.

After all—

Frederica: "To derail your schemes to such an extent, Master, without a doubt, she must have been a worthy adversary to Emilia-sama, correct?"

3

Yae: "…"

Embracing Schult from behind as his small body trembled, looking over the letter that had been left behind once again, Yae breathed a sigh in response to her own decision to return to the Barielle Mansion.

—All of her judgments had been for the sake of helping Al accomplish the objective he was aiming for.

Yae: "The fact that he didn't give the signal, means that his plan at the Tower must've failed~."

Originally, Yae was supposed to converge with Al at the nearest town as he set course for the Pleiades Watchtower, and by helping him accomplish some duty that he had no choice but to fulfill, the promise had been that she would then ascertain his last moments as his life came to naught.

However, without any signal given at the established time, Yae judged that Al's plan had failed, and withdrew from the nearby town—straight from there, she made her return to the Barielle Mansion.

Yae: "For me to be openly returning to the mansion like this, is it the first time since Al-sama prevented me from assassinating the Madam?"

But then again, in the cases when it was not out in the open, she had visited the mansion rather frequently in order to maintain communications with Al. —The letter she had used as a pretext to return to the mansion, too, was information she had obtained on one of those non-overt occasions, while she had concealed herself in the roof.

Though, to Schult, and to the nasty aristocrat—Roswaal L. Mathers, who had attempted to prey on him alongside his maid, she had pretended it was a letter entrusted to her by Priscilla.

Yae: "In reality, I just caught a glimpse as the Madam prepared and stored it away in a secret safe."

Thanks to the fact that the letter had been stored within a secret safe, its whereabouts had been revealed to her without anybody else learning of its existence, lending credence to the notion that Yae had simply been entrusted with the secret. For that reason, she felt a little guilty capitalizing on Priscilla's death, but—

Yae: "—But, Madam, were you truly not aware that I had been watching?"

In all honesty, even Yae could not find a clear answer to that mystery.

Priscilla had prepared the letter to officially adopt Schult just before venturing to the Empire, storing it in the safe at around the same time, but regardless of having been Yae's master for a period of time, her perception was not to be made light of. That fierce woman of character, possessing eyes that seemed to peer into the hearts of others, had she truly believed that Yae had not been present?

???: "—Utilize this letter skillfully, and have it serve your own interests. Take the opportunity to save Schult as well."

Perhaps it was with such an arrangement in mind that Priscilla had hidden that letter in a secret safe, one that nobody, save for Yae, having concealed herself in the roof, would have been capable of finding without turning the mansion inside out.

Either way—

Yae: "I shall do so, Madam. —I must wait for Al-sama, after all."

Choosing to take advantage of Priscilla's kindness, Yae had returned to the mansion for that purpose.

As mentioned previously, Al had not given the signal to go ahead with the plan; likely, he had failed at the Watchtower, and the plan had fallen into a state where it would be difficult to carry out. But, Al would not die. He was alive.

Yae: "After all, Al-sama is a monster."

Al would not die, he could not be killed. Because he was such a monster, Yae obeyed him.

It was all in order to ascertain that he fulfilled his objective, and died in satisfaction; to ascertain the disappearance of the being who had taught her dread. —For that purpose, she would keep Schult at a distance from the Emilia Camp.

If something had happened to Al, the Emilia Camp, who had accompanied him to the Watchtower, would have been involved. She had no choice but to prepare for when he broke free, remaining in a location where mobilization was possible at any time.

Hence—

Yae: “Schult-chan, let’s carry on the Madam’s wishes together. It’s alright. After all, from now on, I’ll also return to the mansion, and help you however I can, Schult-chan.”

Schult: “Yae-sama… yes. Yes, of course…! I will very much try to live up to Priscilla-sama’s expectations! I very much wish for Yae-sama to help me with that!”

At the determination of the upfront and adorable Schult—no, of the boy who had become Schult Barielle, Yae showed an exaggerated look of delight in her eyes, and the other servants were deeply moved to the point of tears. The maid accompanying Roswaal also wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, touched by his courageousness.

The Margrave was making an indistinct expression, as if his expectations had been off the mark, but taking that as proof that Priscilla had still managed to exceed someone’s expectations post-mortem, it was quite satisfying.

Indeed, Priscilla had been a worthwhile master to serve. —That alone, was the truth.

Schult: “I’ll very much do my best! After all, when Al-sama and Heinkel-sama finally return, I very much wish to present them with an admirable appearance!”

But, as Schult got red in the face with such enthusiasm, Yae hesitated on how to respond.

Al’s return was something that Yae was also awaiting.

But, when it came to Heinkel—

Yae: “…For Heinkel-sama to return, it might be a little bit difficult~.”

4

Heinkel: “—Gwoaahhh-!!”

Crashing to the ground following a feeling of suspension, Heinkel raised a deep shout.

After groaning for a bit, he slowly moved his limbs around, undoing his restraints. Gaining freedom from the fine threads that had bound his wrists and ankles, he grasped a sense of liberty for the first time in a while—

Heinkel: “Piece of shit…!”

In a manner most loathsome, he spat out words as if to curse the misfortune that had befallen him.

—The one who had tied Heinkel up, leaving him in a small hut in a forest that nobody would visit, was a girl named Yae who had declared herself to be one of Aldebaran’s accomplices.

There was some incomprehensible history about her being a former maid who served Priscilla while simultaneously being an assassin sent to kill her, and she had tempted Heinkel, saying that if he helped Aldebaran, he would get the chance to obtain that which he desired most—the Dragon’s Blood. She had tempted him, and yet.

Heinkel: “Gotta be fucking kidding me, saying the plan failed the moment there was no contact from that Aldebaran guy…”

In the end, as Heinkel sought explanations and the continuance of the plan, she mercilessly kicked in his knees and elbowed him, tying him up as he bled from the nose, before promptly disappearing on her own.

From Heinkel’s perspective, he had done nothing to deserve being left hanging like this.

Heinkel: “Each, and every, one of them… hk.”

Upon the death of Priscilla, whom he had been counting on, he turned to Emilia as his next recourse, only to be rejected, and when he reached out to grasp the hand Aldebaran had offered him, the hand shook him off, casting him down into Hell.

As a result, Heinkel’s prospects had circled back to the dead end they had been at before the start of the Royal Selection.

Heinkel: “But, even so…”

He could not give up. He could not bring himself to give up. Not once had he ever been able to give up.

Heinkel: “—SHIT!!”

Shakily standing back up, he wiped his dried nosebleed on his sleeve, and began to walk. He knew not where those legs would take him, but even without a destination, he could not bear to halt his tracks.

—After all, Heinkel Astrea was a husband, and a father.

Heinkel: “Just you wait, Louanna, Reinhard. I’m… I’ll…”

Falteringly dragging his feet along, with his hand placed on the hilt of the sword hanging by his waist, Heinkel pressed forth.

He had no destination. —All he had were his prayers, worn out and rusted over after many long years of endurance.

5

Subaru: “—In the end, I’m sorry about all this commotion, Ezzo-san.”

Ezzo: “No, it was unavoidable. I also understand that your circumstances have changed. For now, I shall remain here until other personnel arrive as a replacement, but if necessary, I can always provide a testimony.”

Subaru: “That’d be a huge help… Truly.”

Speaking these words softly, Subaru bowed his head to Ezzo’s gentlemanly reception.

The location was the fifth floor of the Pleiades Watchtower, the expansive area just before the grand gate. There, Subaru—no, Subaru’s group had completed their preparations to disembark once again, seeking to depart from the Tower as soon as possible.

After a meager half-day sojourn, it was an early morning departure awaiting the dawn outside the Tower.

Meili: “It seems a little like you guys are always in such a ru~sh, Onii-san. I wonder, couldn’t we return from the Tower a bit more qui~etly?”

Beatrice: “You can say that again, I suppose. Last time, he was sent to the Empire, and this time, it’s such an abrupt roundtrip, in fact.”

Petra: “That isn’t Subaru’s fault. The one who’s to blame for everything is Al-san… geez, what are we even going to say to Schult-kun… Stupid Al-san.”

Quietly exchanging those final comments, were the girls of the returning group.

Naturally, each of them had their own reservations about things having turned out like this. About this mere half-day sojourn, about the situation of them needing to hastily depart, and about the one who had caused those circumstances.

Only, for Subaru, it was painful that the person who had caused it kept receiving blame.

Garfiel: “Captain, I’ve gone ‘n loaded all the luggage into th’ dragon carriage. We can get goin’ whenever.”

Thereupon, slightly opening the grand gate, Garfiel returned from outside and called out. Having gone a step ahead by loading up the dragon carriage with all of their belongings, he knitted his brow at Subaru, who had raised his hand.

Garfiel: “Yer mug is lookin’ real stingy, Captain. Tho’, I get that you’re frettin’, same like “Rauraji’s Deep-Cut Nail”.”

Subaru: “Mm, I know that you’re trying to encourage me, but I don’t really get it. Deep-cut nail? Rauraji?”

Garfiel: “It don’t really matter! Ya can’t change somethin’ once it’s happened. ‘N so, it’s a matter of what ya can do from here on out, yeah? My amazin’ self’ll help ya in any way I can.”

Flashing his fangs, Garfiel vigorously clapped Subaru on the shoulder.

Under that force, Subaru thought his frail shoulders might shatter, but those sentiments filled him with joy a hundred times greater. Besides, it was as Garfiel had said—what mattered was what he had decided to do from this point forward.

Subaru: “—I’m going to find out. Just what exactly it is that I’ve decided to carry.”

With those words, Subaru placed his hand over his chest—touching the magic orb hanging around his neck, he declared his resolve.

—When Subaru and Beatrice had been sealed in a magic sphere similar to this one, it was not as though he had clear knowledge of all the details concerning the massive, colossal battle that Al had incited.

Subaru: “…”

The interior of the magic orb had been dark, difficult to maneuver inside, and kept him in a dream-like state of mind that made it unclear whether he was conscious or not, as if he had returned to being a fetus submerged in the amniotic fluid of his mother’s womb.

Inside, Subaru’s sense of what was reality or dream was hazy, leaving him unable to say anything for certain. As expected of the adorable Beatrice, she had admirably devoted herself to reverse-engineering the technique behind the forbidden art that had sealed them, but the only thing Subaru could do when he found himself in a state of being consciously aware, was to invoke the Authority of Greed—Cor Leonis, to gather the presences of his nearby allies, and perceive the intense changes in their emotions.

Even so, thanks to the reiteration of longing, desperation, and violent fluctuations in the powerful emotions of his allies, he had been able to perceive the shifts in the extraordinary circumstances through his soul.

Particularly distinctive were the intense hues of resolve and determination within Petra, and the monolithic swell of emotions that Rem harbored towards Subaru. —Due to having received those, Subaru expressed his intent to depart the Tower in the early hours of the morning with utmost conviction.

Originally, their purpose for visiting the Pleiades Watchtower had been for the sake of Al, so upon finding out that it had just been a pretext from him, any reason to remain there was lost; but, not only that—

Petra: "—There's a way for the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony to properly throw up the things he's eaten, right?"

Subaru: "Yeah. And present within, are the people who've been devoured until now… including Rem's Name and Memories."

In response to the words of Petra, who had likely gotten the best use out of the Authority of Gluttony in her strategy during the loop before he had Returned by Death, Subaru gave a deep nod.

In that moment, without even the chance for words to be exchanged, Rem, with eyes which seemed to comprehend it all, had driven her Morningstar into Subaru. —Splendidly wielding the spiked iron ball that Subaru had kept polished every day, she had certainly regained her sense of self. Beyond any shadow of a doubt, that was the result of Gluttony's involvement.

That was the conviction he held, and furthermore, Gluttony had already been apprehended. There existed no reason to not thoroughly pressure him, and force him to vomit up everything that had been eaten.

And so, for the sake of those direct negotiations as well—

Subaru: "—Let's get going, off to the nostalgic Royal Capital! We'll confront Gluttony, and make him hurl everything up! And besides, it seems like I can't keep remaining indifferent to the history of the Kingdom, and to the history of this world, for any longer."

Clutching the magic orb in his fingers, and thinking of Al sealed within, Subaru admonished himself.

In response to Subaru's declaration of resolve, Beatrice held his hand as she stood by his side, Garfiel stroked his fang with his finger, and Meili shrugged her shoulders with the small crimson scorpion sitting atop them.

Then, as Petra donned a dignified and resolute smile, Subaru received her gaze.

For the sake of Aldebaran, the one who called himself the "Following Star of the Pleiades", an opposing force who wielded the same power as Subaru, yet still one whom he had resolved to definitely save no matter what, Natsuki Subaru pressed forth to the Royal Capital.

He would find out. After all, he knew that remaining in ignorance would be insincere, and he would never be able to forgive himself for doing so.

Hence—

Subaru: "—Bring it on, oh inevitable fate!"

Carrying those feelings upon his back, Natsuki Subaru declared his intent to surmount any accursed shackles that might stand in his way.

6

—It coincided with Natsuki Subaru's declaration of resolve.

At the current moment, in a far distant land, the very destination Natsuki Subaru had announced his departure for—in the Royal Capital of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, a certain incident was unfolding.

???: "…"

In this early hour of morn, the majority of the Royal Capital's citizens were still asleep, letting the break of dawn go by from within their dreams, the Royal Castle Lugunica, which ordinarily ought to have been enveloped by an extraordinary tranquility, was enshrouded in a peculiar atmosphere.

The source of that atmosphere, was the very heart of the Royal Castle—the throne room.

The impetus for the Royal Selection, had been the extinction of the Royal Family at the hands of a disease. And so, in the absence of a sovereign, the throne room of the Royal Castle was firmly closed off, with the exception of holding monumental ceremonies.

However, on this day, on this morning, the doors to the throne room were flung wide open, and there, the leaders of the Kingdom—the Council of Wise Men, the faithful vassals who had won the trust of the deceased King, as well as even the royal soldiers, emanating a solemn air of tension, were all gathered.

???: "…"

In this Kingdom bereft of a Monarch, each and every one of them bore a heavy responsibility in their individual positions.

Despite being an early morning summons, nobody had arrived tardy, and there was not a single person present who displayed drowsiness in their eyes, nor any miscreants who dared to exhibit an attitude lacking in concentration.

Ergo, no matter the time, the weight of the attention poured into this place was no less than that of the Kingdom itself.

—Taking all of that in by her lonesome, a woman maintained an air of silence.

Woman: "…"

Kneeling down on one leg atop the blazing red carpet laid out across the marble floor, was an individual clad in robes of indigo blue, bowing her head with her hands clasped before her chest. That posture of prayer was so polished, it caused the military officers to recall their martial training, and the civil officers to recall their etiquette training, spurring them all to reflexively heave sighs.

That was the extent to which the woman, with a mere gesture of offering a prayer, had completely overwhelmed her surroundings.

???: "—Hrrrmm. Could you please raise your visage?"

Only one man amongst the crowd did not find himself captivated by the woman's prayer, letting his voice reverberate through the chamber.

Calm and intellectual, it was the kind of voice that would naturally lend that impression to any who heard it, and its owner was one of the people involved with the castle as it received the kneeling girl—no, his position could even be described as their representative.

Miklotov McMahon. —In the Kingdom of Lugunica, bereft of a Monarch, he was the central personage of the Council of Wise Men who steered the nation's politics, and even in this situation that had been prepared in great haste, he was the utmost important individual whose voice held the greatest influence and sway.

A sagacious individual known for his outstanding ingenuity, and his extraordinary faith and devotion towards the Kingdom, he possessed so great a presence that none other than the King himself had joked, "The nation shall not waver even if the Lugunican King dies, but if he were to die, the Kingdom would fall into ruin".

His gentle appearance and mild manner of speech may have been deceiving, but in reality, the King of Lugunica was a remarkable man, the most reliable to make an ally of, and the most fearsome to make an enemy of. —Miklotov was an individual who, over many long years, had exploited that reputation to the fullest.

Woman: "—Yes."

Receiving Miklotov's words, the woman slowly lifted her downcast visage. Then, when she opened the eyelids that she had kept shut, Miklotov's breath caught slightly upon meeting her gaze.

That reaction Miklotov gave had not been solely limited to him. Present in this chamber as another member of the Council of Wise

Men, Bordeaux Zergev; standing here as the representative of the military officers, the Commander of the Royal Guard, Marcos Gildark; the central figure of the civil officers, Rickert Hoffman; and all others standing in attendance in the throne room at this very moment, all reacted.

This was a woman whose mere presence had harbored enough allure to naturally draw the attention of everyone present. But, in this moment, everyone's shared reaction was not merely caused by the way she conducted herself. —It was her appearance.

Long, elegant golden hair, and crimson eyes blazing with dignified intent; possessing a meaning far more significant than simply being beautiful, they were striking to all those present here—nay, to all who lived in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Thus—

Woman: "—To begin with, allow me to express my thanks for your graceful reception of my sudden visit. Considering our positions, this was likely far from ideal."

As if she was accustomed to all those gazes, the woman, still down on one knee, gazed over all the wise and important individuals that had congregated here, and uttered those words.

Receiving her words, which had neither excessively abased herself, nor had failed to bear her position in mind, those present there suppressed their momentary surprise and turmoil, entrusting their response to their representative, Miklotov.

Taking in their intent, Miklotov, sitting in his chair as he caressed his long, long beard, he interposed a "Hrrrmm" as a sigh,

Miklotov: "My my, you seem to be one willing to say things where most others would hold their tongues. Be that as it may, I suppose there is no meaning in pretending otherwise. After all, you have spoken nothing but the truth."

Woman: "When you phrase that in such a frank manner, it does place a burden upon my shoulders, too. As you can see, I am quite young and lacking in experience, so I had been fearful that I may not be able to muster words in front of you all like this."

Miklotov: "Hrrrmm, though you might say that, you seem rather dignified. It is as if you are well accustomed to all eyes falling upon yourself. As for why that is so… I can come up with quite a few ideas."

Woman: "Indeed. I shall not deny it."

The pair had a difference in age enough to be grandfather and grandchild, but there existed nary a falter in the exchange between Miklotov and the woman, nor did it seem like things would devolve into a one-sided probing on account of one actor falling short of the other.

As both of them grasped that neither would be the case, they simultaneously smiled as if letting out a breath,

Woman: "In this early morning, I could not possibly waste everyone's precious time, given how busy you all must be. Without further ado… may I begin the main subject?"

Miklotov: "Hrrrmm, very well, you may do so. At this age, getting up early is of no issue to me, but when it comes to important matters, I find it painful to defer them no matter how old I get. — That is especially so when it is a subject broached by the Divine Dragon Church, which has placed itself at such a distance from the Royal Castle."

Everyone: "…"

He had generously prompted her to continue, but Miklotov's words caused the atmosphere in the room to instantly grow tense. That response was immediately slackened, recognizing it as a discourtesy to the woman who had visited the Royal Castle all by her lonesome, but the reason behind it was something that nobody present could have done anything about.

—The name Miklotov had raised, the Divine Dragon Church, was, as the name implied, a religious group that worshipped the Divine

Dragon Volcanica, founding their faith in the grace of its power and the protection of the Covenant.

As the Kingdom of Lugunica christened itself the Dragon Kingdom, the exceptional depth of its ties to the Dragon was well known, and to a greater or lesser extent, the citizens of the Kingdom considered themselves to be receiving the favor of the Divine Dragon.

Due to that self-awareness, even if they were not officially part of the Church, the majority of Lugunica's populace harbored feelings of reverence concerning the Divine Dragon. Within that sort of environment, the potency of faith that those who officially adhered to the Church harbored towards the Divine Dragon went without saying.

In order to avoid shaking the nation with that immense influence, the Divine Dragon Church refrained from drawing near the Royal Castle, which bore responsibility for the nation's politics, and they each contributed to the well-being of the citizens within their own domains. —That was the unspoken agreement.

That was how unprecedented an event it was for a nun of the Divine Dragon Church to visit the Royal Castle, attempting to speak on a matter before a group that included the Council of Wise Men.

Only—

Woman: "—There is value in doing so."

Precisely because there was an understanding of how unprecedented it was, there existed a reason substantial enough to break that unwritten rule.

The woman's declaration, proclaiming that, indeed, this was meaningful enough to gather Miklotov and the others in the throne room, and have them hear what she had to say, succeeded in its purpose of filling them with expectations.

Hence, following the silent encouragement from the wise men, the woman spoke. —Of the reason, for her visit.

Woman: "All adherents of the Divine Dragon Church mourn the recent perils of the Kingdom from the bottom of our hearts. As per the unspoken agreement, we have remained at a distance from national affairs concerning the battle for the throne… the Royal Selection, but ever since news of the catastrophe at the Watergate City reached our ears, we could no longer remain still.”

Miklotov: “The Watergate City… Pristella, and the incident with the Witch Cult. We too are pained regarding the damages to that city, but surely the Divine Dragon Church does not intend to admonish the Royal Candidates involved with the incident?”

Woman: “Under that assumption, the significance of hastening to break the unspoken agreement, and the fact that I said prior there would be value in hearing what I had to say’d be contradicted… It would be contradicted.”

Revealing her true colors with the sudden counterpoint, the woman’s youthfulness showed itself as she corrected her speech. As if to cover up the awkwardness of it, the woman cleared her throat with a small cough,

Woman: “At any rate, I have no complaints to present regarding the Royal Candidates. It is not as though I harbor no reservations towards any of them, but that would be a matter of my own opinion, and not the consensus of the Divine Dragon Church.”

Miklotov: “If it is not the opinion of the Church, that would be your modest view as a citizen of the Kingdom. In fact, I believe we ought to proactively lend our ears to it, but… hrrrmm, that would likely veer this discussion off course.”

Woman: “Indeed. I shall bear in mind that you are a talkative personage, Miklotov-sama, but, let us proceed to the main topic. —That which we wish to discuss, is not the attribution of responsibility, but on the matter of the damages.”

Miklotov: “—. Let us hear it.”

Woman: “In the Watergate City of Pristella, those who fell upon harm at the hands of the Witch Cult… it seems like several cases have been identified, but the Divine Dragon Church can offer a means to provide aid."

—That instant, at the meaning contained in those words, the atmosphere in the throne room underwent a great tremor.

However, as the source of that tremor, the woman's dignified posture remained undisturbed, continuing to stand up straight while basking in the gazes of the wise men. She had not exhibited any wavering in her gaze or demeanor, and there was an assurance in herself that would not permit her to speak without thorough conviction.

Miklotov: "—Hrrrmm."

With that single interjection, Miklotov cut through the stirring atmosphere.

Nevertheless, even Miklotov, a man of preeminent wisdom within the Kingdom, could not help but be surprised by the woman's proposal. And so, as the wise man caressed his beard with a slight amount of restlessness,

Miklotov: "Supposing that is indeed true, we could not hope to ask for anything more. Bringing the matter up with the Royal Castle was…"

Woman: "If we had gone ahead and proceeded to act without permission, it would not have been received all too well, correct? Moreover…"

Miklotov: "The ones who would not receive it well would not just be limited to us at the castle, but the Witch Cult, too, after all."

To the fact that went without saying, the woman drew back her slender chin in agreement with Miklotov.

Naturally, if they were able to neutralize the harm that the Witch Cult had dealt, it would certainly be an undesirable event for the Witch Cult. Ergo, the Divine Dragon Church wished for something.

Miklotov: "—The Kingdom's certain protection. Due to the distance between we who govern national politics, and the Divine Dragon

Church that governs religion, something of this nature has never truly taken shape over the many years.”

Woman: “Yes, indeed. On this occasion, we wish to actualize that. That is the collective will of the Divine Dragon Church. —In order to push in favor of that decision, I have a proposal.”

Miklotov: “Hrrrmm, a proposal, is it? And that would be?”

Woman: “First of all, allow me to present to you. A demonstration of the relief we are capable of providing.”

Placing a hand over her chest, the woman declared so, causing Miklotov to raise his eyebrows.

That was a welcome request. As she said, it was a proposal to provide a basis for their decision, so they could not object to it. Merely, to bring a victim from the Watergate City all the way to the Royal Capital would be—

Woman: “There ought to be someone you have in mind. Let us make that person the first.”

Miklotov: “—. Very well. First, I grant you the permission to propose this matter. —Commander Marcos.”

Marcos: “Yes sir!”

His name called out by Miklotov, that titan of a man clad in armor from head-to-toe, the Commander of the Royal Guard, Marcos, responded with a booming voice and stepped forth, bowing before the seats of the Council of Wise Men.

Miklotov: “Could you please escort her? This shall be regarded as a matter of great importance to the Kingdom. Be prudent.”

Marcos: “Understood. —I shall be accompanying you.”

Woman: “Yes, your face is… no, your whole body is rather large. I look forward to working with you.”

With a small bow of her head, a degree of gentleness dwelled in the woman’s expression. Perhaps that was because the discussion proceeded in accordance with her wishes, and the purpose of the Divine Dragon Church’s visit seemed like it would be fulfilled.

Understanding that it would thus catch her a bit off guard, Miklotov decided to ask her a certain question.

Calling herself a messenger from the Divine Dragon Church, the woman had gathered Miklotov and the other leaders of the Kingdom at the castle in the early morning; and so, he asked about the aspect of her that had attracted even more attention than simply her involvement with the Divine Dragon Church.

That was—

Miklotov: “Excuse my terrible impoliteness, but may I ask to hear your name, Miss Nun?”

7

Woman: “—I am a nun sent by the Divine Dragon Church.”

Brought there directly by Marcos, the woman paid a visit to the Royal Residence—faced with the person who called herself a nun, Ferris could not hide his puzzlement.

The reason why Ferris and Wilhelm were staying in the Royal Capital, was to make a direct request to the Royal Castle—to enlist in the survey team en route to the Pleiades Watchtower now that it was cleared for entry, and by using the wisdom of the Sage, extolled as being all-knowing, to learn of a means to save Crusch, who was still suffering even now.

Of course, from the letter sent by Emilia and the others, who had already returned from the Pleiades Watchtower, it was made clear that the Sage’s existence and wisdom were nothing so convenient. But, even so, it was a greater possibility than the stagnated developments in healing magic.

Ferris: “Really, how stupid. No matter how much I improve on any preexisting healing magic, all it does is make it so I can’t die, while doing absolutely nothing to relieve Crusch-sama’s suffering.”

Amidst his feelings of desperation, the research of the Blue had elevated the field of healing magic existing in the Kingdom of Lugunica by not one, but three whole levels in this short period, but at this time, that did not make Ferris feel anything other than worthless.

At present, he was unable to save the person he wanted to save the most. That fact pressed Ferris into a corner, plunging him into darkness.

And so, even though he had wished to try relying on the Sage's wisdom at the Pleiades Watchtower—

Ferris: "…Save, Crusch-sama? The Divine Dragon Church can? R-Really?"

Woman: "My faith forbids me from speaking falsehoods, and I am not interested in further tormenting those who are already astray. Even if you do not believe me, it seems like your Commander does."

Responding to Ferris's trembling voice, the nun gestured to Marcos, who had accompanied her. As Ferris raised his voice, exclaiming "Commander!" to Marcos, he nodded with his boulder-like expression,

Marcos: "I've heard that the Divine Dragon Church possesses magic and techniques that haven't been unveiled to the public. Starting with Miklotov-sama, the rest of the Council of Wise Men also believes that there is value in lending her credence."

Ferris: "…B-But, if anything else were to happen to Crusch-sama…"

Woman: "…"None can lift the Quain Stone alone"."

Ferris: "—Hk."

Silently, as the nun spoke those words, Ferris's breath caught reflexively.

As Ferris's eyes welled with tears from turbulent emotions gushing forth within him, the nun gently reached her hand out towards his, and with her slender fingers, she softly undid the firm clench of

Ferris’s own.

With her doing so as she pleased with him, Ferris suddenly took notice of her beautiful golden hair, as well as the earnest illumination filling her crimson eyes, and widened his own eyes in surprise.

That realization spurred on by confusion, he failed to understand its significance—

Woman: “I beg of you. Please, allow me to aid the one you hold ever so dear. The Divine Dragon Church prays night and day for the well-being of the Kingdom’s citizens. No matter the doctrine they embrace, there are no exceptions to that.”

Ferris: “Wh-Who… who, are you?”

Woman: “…”

She held her breath at Ferris’s question; however, keeping that brief hesitation contained to the blink of an eye, she gently held his hands in her own, and replied.

That was—

Woman: “—Filóre. That is my name.”

—Fifteen years ago, the daughter of the King’s younger brother had been abducted, her whereabouts unknown ever since. With the same name as that vanished princess, and bearing the golden hair and crimson eyes emblematic of the Royal Family, the nun introduced herself.

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Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Nascent Wolves:
Undead Busters V
(LQ MTL Translation)

1

—Old legends tell a tale.

It is the story of a solitary King and a young girl. A story of how a King who was once alone met a girl and was alone no longer. As a long time passed, those involved lost their lives one after another; through that time, the truth was obscured and embellished, yet it remains a story that leaves a profound emotional impact on the heart. Though there are many theories on how the story is told, every version speaks of the existence of a foolish wolf who harbored wicked ambitions and tore apart the feelings of the King and the girl. The black-furred werewolf set his claws and fangs upon the girl, touching the imperial wrath of the King who loved her. His body and even his soul were scorched by the "Sun Sword," and finally, as an abominable and cursed existence—

—he was carved into the Iron-Blooded Laws, an edict to exterminate his kind so that even his fellow wolves would be wiped out. Therefore, the old legends say:

—Even the girl who loved all people was destined to never be able to love this wolf.

"…or something like that is what's being said, so I was wondering how things would turn out."

"You were wondering… what?"

"Well, it was a much more radical reunion greeting than I expected, so even for me, it's like, 'I pulled it off!' or 'Are they both just idiots?'—I'm torn on which reaction to give! However, it goes without saying that flashy is better than plain for dramatic effect, and in its own way, this isn't a bad epilogue for an old tale. What do you think, Arakiya?"

“I don’t care…”

“Oh my, really? Really? This is like an unreleased episode of ‘Iris and the King of Thorns,’ which the sister princess cherished so much, you know? If that doesn’t interest you, saying you ‘don’t care’ makes you quite the cold-hearted one, Arakiya…”

“Cecilus, die.”

“—Whoa-ho!!”

Cecilus chattered incessantly, while Arakiya grew furious, provoked by him. Between the two of them, the heat was rising—though it was only Arakiya truly heating up. Listening from the side, it was entirely Cecilus’s fault, so one could say the heat between them was rising.

In any case, Spica stepped between the two and scolded them loudly. This petty bickering was a regular occurrence, but it would be troublesome if they started a “Great Empire Decisive Battle” here without regard for their surroundings.

Because, right now, one such battle was already unfolding.

And—

“Oua, ouau.”

Both participants were people Spica knew: Yorna Mishigure, one of the Empire’s First Generals, and Volcas, the werewolf brought to the Imperial Capital under complicated circumstances.

2

“—!!”

Struck by a tremendous explosive pressure, Volcas pulsed all the muscles in his body, letting the impact escape through the tips of his limbs while violently spitting out surging bloody phlegm.

Bloody phlegm—what a ridiculous notion. This body was a mere imitation made of earth, a temporary vessel where a lingering soul barely managed to hang on. It was strange that being punched and kicked would result in torn flesh, broken bones, or especially spitting blood.

"I don't think it's strange at all. A vessel of flesh is, after all, influenced by the heat and radiance of the soul housed within. A vessel where that radiance smolders and emits cold heat is inferior to a lump of earth, even if blood and flesh flow through it. For you, who have blood flowing despite being a lump of earth, the Heavens have decreed… or rather, I should say, it makes for a delicious role for a named actor!"

The one who said this to the bleeding and bone-broken Volcas was Cecilus Segmunt—less of an instruction and more of a delusion—after he had easily defeated Volcas in their initial encounter.

To summarize, if the soul is lively, blood will flow. If that were the case, it was even more unwelcome. There shouldn't be any vitality in Volcas's soul.

Yet, there were regrets. Effeminate, despicable wishes. Because of them, Volcas had followed Cecilus and the others who had spared his life, bowing his head and allowing himself to be taken to the Imperial Capital.

All of it was so that he could have his soul scorched by the "Sun Sword" by the Emperor who ruled this city—no, the Empire.

However—

"Is that all there is to it?"

Looking down at Volcas, who had his limbs pressed against the earth, was a tall Fox-woman dressed in a loosely worn, lightly dyed kimono. Her movements were extraordinary; she was a warrior of more than average caliber.

As soon as she laid eyes on Volcas, who had been brought to the Crystal Palace by Cecilus and the others, this Fox-woman had dragged him to the wasteland behind the palace—and struck him mercilessly.

To be honest, it was a blow he had expected. After all, from the moment this Fox-woman saw Volcas, her scent carried a complex color that was neither pure anger nor pure grief. So, he had a premonition she would attack. What was strange was Volcas himself, who failed to dodge it.

He didn't feel like dodging the Fox-woman's kick and took it head-on. After that, he endured a rain of her punches and kicks, ending up crawling on the ground.

The Fox-woman's blows were heavy, unthinkable for a woman's slender arms. But in the land of the Empire, it wasn't rare for someone's combat prowess to defy their appearance. Arakiya was the same.

Therefore, the reason Volcas couldn't compete with this woman was something else—

"For someone who was once the 'Wolf General of Hell,' are you really being beaten senseless by a single woman like me?"

"…"

Volcas didn't even show signs of standing up, let alone fighting back. The woman questioned him.

He had no words to answer her. No—the words were there. If he opened his mouth, words seemed ready to spill out, swirling in the depths of his throat where his fangs were retracted. He questioned himself for not wanting to fight back despite being beaten and kicked, and a suspicion arose.

But that was a delusion born from a foolishness even greater than the disgrace of visiting the Imperial Capital out of effeminate, lingering regret.

"So you say you have no claws, fangs, or even words to exchange with me. If that is the case, I am no ogre. —This is the end."

Suddenly, the Fox-woman lowered her hands, dropped the ember from her pipe onto the ground, and slowly turned her back to Volcas. As she walked away, one step, then two, an impulse surged through Volcas, and strength returned to his limbs.

A heat that hadn’t stirred when he was being beaten and made to spit blood now boiled up at the sight of the woman’s retreating back. Before he knew it, Volcas reached out both hands toward her.

And, covering the Fox-woman from behind with both arms—

“—Iris… is that you?”

It was impossible. With impossible regret and sentimentality, Volcas uttered that question.

Iris. The girl who was noticed by the “King of Thorns,” caught in a war that shook the Empire, and the tragic woman whose heart was pierced by Volcas’s fangs.

Her appearance, her voice, her very way of being—everything was different.

And yet—

“—The scent of Iris is drifting off of you.”

Cecilus had said it. The radiance and heat of a soul are never lost, whether the vessel is flesh or earth. It was annoying, but it was the truth.

Because—

“How is it, Volcas? —I’ve become quite strong, haven’t I?”

Though her way of speaking and her expressions were different, her way of laughing remained exactly as it was that day. Yorna Mishigure—the Iris loved by the “King of Thorns” and the others—laughed mischievously.

3

“—I thought it was noisy, and I hear the cause lies with those I had so conveniently sent away. To bring back such trouble in less than a month… he is a man who truly knows how to complicate things. I can only imagine the hardships Arakiya and Spica face."

"Ah—er, maybe so! But Arakiya-chan looked more energetic than when she was shut up in the castle, and Spica-chan too! Cessie was… his usual self, I guess?"

"Hmph, his usual self, then."

"Ye-yeah, usual, usual… haha."

Vincent Vollachia, resting his clasped hands on his desk, narrowed his dark eyes at Medium's somewhat weak smile.

Lately, Medium had been acting strangely.

Originally, he hadn't chosen her as his Empress because of her scholarship or competence beyond her station. The primary reason for welcoming her as his bride was to represent an innovation in the way the Empire had been governed, showing both internally and externally that status was no longer determined solely by lineage or bloodline.

Therefore, as far as Vincent was concerned, he intended to require nothing more from her as Empress than to give birth to a robust and healthy heir. Of course, that role couldn't be filled by just anyone; they had to lack the ambition or rebellious intent that would plunge the nation into chaos, and they had to be someone Vincent could trust—though "trust" was a relative term. Those conditions were essential.

Naturally, Medium satisfied many of the conditions Vincent sought. And if she was fit for that role, he felt no need for any other consorts for the time being.

For those logical reasons, Vincent was quite satisfied with Medium's presence as Empress, but—

"…If something is weighing on your mind, speak. I cannot bear to see such a frown on your brow."

"Weight on my mind… oh, you mean worries? Eh?! Worries?! Abel-chin, how did you know I was worried?!"

“…My time is limited. Tell me the source of your worry.”

“Ehh~, but it’s hard to talk to Abel-chin about something concerning Abel-chin. Can I talk about the other one instead?”

“…Speak quickly.”

Apparently, there were two worries, and one of them was related to Vincent himself. Medium, who had been wearing an uncharacteristic expression, began to speak, saying, “Well, you see…”

The content of it was—

“—In short, opinions are divided on how to handle that undead werewolf, Volcas.”

“That’s right~. See, Abel-chin gave the order to kill all the undead, right? And Vol-chi thinks he should be executed by Abel-chin because of the bad things he did in the past, but Yorna-chan is super against it, and at this rate…”

“Say it. What will happen?”

“Yorna-chan might start another rebellion for Vol-chi’s sake!”

“Even with the ‘Great Disaster’ settled, she still hasn’t learned her lesson about opposing me, that ‘Topographical Artist’…”

Vincent grew bitter at Medium’s plea, which was accompanied by exaggerated gestures.

Ever since her time as the ruler of Chaosflame, Yorna had frequently rebelled against Vincent over the treatment of demi-humans, leading large-scale insurrections. He had expected their relationship to improve somewhat after they had opened up to each other during the “Great Disaster,” but it seemed that was a premature assumption.

“Perhaps I should simply order Cecilus to replace the seat of the ‘Seventh’ once and for all.”

"Ah—Abel-chin's bad habit again. You don't actually mean to do it, so stop saying mean things with that mean face! No more mean glares either!"

"My expression is natural. Do not talk nonsense. Hmph."

Medium pulled up the corners of her soft eyes with her fingers, and Vincent, snorting at her remark, leaned back in his creaking chair and thought for a moment.

It was galling to admit Medium was right, but in reality, the Empire's military strength had taken a massive hit during the "Great Disaster," and strategically, he couldn't afford to lose Yorna now. However, if the undead Volcas was indeed that "Wolf General of Hell," it was a complicated matter for the Emperor.

"To have two of the direct actors of 'Iris and the King of Thorns' in this era… if you include the late Emperor Eugard from the other day, that makes three. Priscilla would have been thrilled."

"—Um, hey, Abel-chin. Can I… make a proposal?"

"You? A proposal?"

Thinking of his dead sister and her hobby during her life, Vincent felt a slight pang in his chest, but he blinked in surprise as Medium timidly raised her hand.

This was the first time Medium had offered an opinion on a situation requiring political maneuvering. He had valued her as an Empress specifically because she did not overstep in such ways.

"—Fine. However, if the Empress remains too indifferent to politics, the nation's future is bleak. Very well. Let me hear it. What do you have to say?"

"Well, like Yorna-chan said, I want you to spare Vol-chi's life. And then, maybe you could put Vol-chi into one of the vacant 'Nine Divine Generals' seats?"

"—What?"

“Ah! Vol-chi is definitely strong! I’m no match for him, and Jamal-chin got beaten soundly! Even Cessie said his skills are top-notch!”

Vincent closed one eye at Medium’s frantic explanation.

Unexpectedly, it was an opinion worth considering. If she just wanted to save Volcas, it would be a foolish sentiment born of her sweetness, but there was a foresight and wisdom in the proposal.

If Volcas joined the “Nine Divine Generals,” the vacancy among the generals would be filled. Furthermore, if his true identity was the “Wolf General of Hell,” then—

“In ‘Iris and the King of Thorns,’ Eugard-kun gave the order never to forgive the werewolves and the mole-people, right? And you tried to put a stop to that order, Abel-chin. So, to make everyone understand your sincerity…”

“Forgiving Volcas, the direct cause, and bringing him under my banner is the best course of action. If I show that I will employ even Volcas—who is both a werewolf and an undead—provided there is reason to do so, it will be the greatest proof to the people that this Empire has been reborn since the ‘Great Disaster.’“

“That! That’s what Big Bro said! …I mean, that’s what I said!”

“You didn’t say it. I see, so it was Flop’s… no, their suggestion.”

Medium, who had let it slip, clutched her head dramatically, crying “Ahh~!” Her attempt at unaccustomed political maneuvering or playing the strategist had collapsed halfway through.

Nevertheless, the proposal itself was worth considering, and it didn’t seem like something the Empress would need to use her clumsy words to convince the Emperor of.

“Why did you use such a roundabout method? Did you think I was such a fool that I would reject a worthy suggestion based on who said it?”

“Well, I wanted to look good for Abel-chin…”

"…What?"

"I—said—! I wanted to look good for Abel-chin! You know, talk about smart-sounding things and have Abel-chin think better of me. …It's true that I'm worried about Yorna-chan and Vol-chi, though! Everyone gave me lots of good ideas."

Medium poked her fingers together in front of her chest, looking dejected. Vincent was at a loss for words at her blatant honesty and the shallowness of her scheme.

To think the goal of her plot was merely to win his favor. Even if she harbored ambitions, in her current position as Medium, there was no higher status than the Emperor's throne itself.

"Do you intend to plot against me and stand at the pinnacle of the Empire?"

"—? The place I want to be 'Number One' is inside Abel-chin. Abel-chin is already the 'Number One' of the Empire, right?"

"Ha."

At her single-mindedness, which made serious consideration seem foolish, Vincent let out a long sigh.

Then he slowly stood up and straightened the collar of his coat.

And then—

"Lead the way. To consider that proposal, I must first meet this Volcas directly."

"—! Yes, yes! This way, this way! Everyone will be so happy~. As expected of Abel-chan! You're so kind!"

"You are likely the only one who would describe me as such."

Medium's face brightened instantly, and she held out her hand with a cheerful voice as she led the way. Vincent looked down at her hand and sighed.

He had never heard of an Emperor and Empress walking through the palace holding hands. —And so, Vincent took her outstretched hand, drew it to his arm for her to hold, and began to walk.

The Emperor and Empress of the Vollachia Empire walked through the Crystal Palace arm-in-arm, in perfect harmony.

END

Kararagi Reaper Incident V
(LQ MTL Translation)

Anastasia regained consciousness in the darkness and let out a small sigh.

"—Haa."

A blunder. This was undeniably a blunder.

Drawing the surroundings' attention with a major event while making a move to pluck the real prize in the meantime—that was a basic of basics even in commercial strategy, and a tactic she often used herself in the trading company.

"And yet, I went and fell right into the trap… for someone like me, I've got a lot of reflecting to do."

Placing a hand to her forehead, Anastasia reflected on her actions while feeling the sensation of sand grains against her fingertips.

—A wind disaster in the form of a giant tornado had attacked Kararagi's second city, Banan. To protect the city from the damage, Anastasia and the others had used their wisdom and strength to repel it.

With Julius on horseback, the "Iron Fang," her old acquaintance Halibel, and the cooperation of the Great Spirit Tia, Anastasia had been proud of the magnificent results, but—

"…I wonder how many times I've been kidnapped now."

Moments after striking down the tornado, Anastasia was hit by a sudden surprise attack and lost consciousness. It seemed she had been abducted; when she woke up, she was in this pitch-black darkness.

Thinking about it made her start to dislike herself, but being kidnapped was not a first for Anastasia. Her first kidnapping was when she was a child who had just met Ricardo, and the scene of that kidnapping incident was the catalyst for her interaction with Mimi and the others. —And that wasn't all.

"—Echidna, you too—"

As she said this, Anastasia stroked her neck, which felt cooler than usual, confirming that the fox muffler—Echidna, who disguised herself as one—was not there as she usually was.

It was Anastasia's habit to check for abnormalities in her surroundings the moment she woke up. This was not just out of caution, but related to Anastasia's physical defects.

Born with a malfunctioning "Gate" that regulates mana, Anastasia's body was prone to many glitches, made worse by her contract with the special spirit Echidna. She was poor at regulating her body temperature, tired easily, and had several other points to worry about.

Because of this, the habit of checking her physical condition and surroundings particularly upon waking had become instinctive.

"I've been kidnapped, but it doesn't look like I've been treated poorly."

She wouldn't say she had been transported with care, but it seemed the opponent had no intention of needlessly harming her. The fact that her hands and feet were not bound was proof that she was being looked down upon as someone who couldn't do anything even if she could move. —In fact, Anastasia without Echidna had no combat power, so it was frustrating that the assessment wasn't wrong.

Remaining a captive was the same as idly watching a business opportunity pass before her eyes. If she were to accept that, she wouldn't be fit to be a merchant of Kararagi.

While thinking of such things that wouldn't earn her a single coin, Anastasia placed her hand on the cold wall and, relying on it, began to walk one step, then another, through the darkness.

"If something were to happen to me following the Princess, Miss

Emilia—who says she wants to be friends—would be terribly sad, wouldn't she?"

Thinking this way wasn't like her at all.

"I'm alive. As long as I'm alive, I can reflect and apply it to the next time. I'd be constantly worrying Julius and the others, and besides…"

Pausing there for a moment, Anastasia shrugged her shoulders with a sigh.

Even so—

Emilia, who wielded swords of water, and Priscilla, who fought as if dancing with a flaming sword. Compared to those two royal candidates who acted with particular decisiveness even among those Anastasia knew, Anastasia's physical ability was not just the difference between an adult and a child, but perhaps that of a dragon and a puppy.

As she stood up while brushing off her knees, she pictured them in her mind.

"I wish I could move vigorously like Miss Emilia or the Princess, too."

Normally, moving around while in the position of a kidnap victim would be considered an act that might provoke the opponent, and she would surely be advised never to do it.

However, Anastasia believed that this time was an exception for two reasons.

First, the kidnapped Anastasia had neither been killed nor restrained. —Naturally, kidnapping has a purpose and a reason for keeping the target alive. The opponent went to the trouble of causing a tornado to gather attention just to carry out the kidnapping. It was unlikely they would harm Anastasia until that purpose was fulfilled.

The other reason was the existence of the unseen Echidna. The spirit who had spent over ten years with Anastasia would not leave her side unless something significant happened. Furthermore, her mimicry of a muffler was master-class, a special skill that was almost impossible to see through. Despite this, the reason Echidna had left Anastasia's side and her whereabouts were unknown was clear.

"Your target isn't me, but Echidna, right?"

The view opened up into a large cave of rock where moonlight poured in, and in that place where the wind whistled with a sound like it was tearing skin, she appeared and stared intently at Anastasia.

With white hair, long and narrow golden eyes, and a violent beauty like a sharp blade, her appearance was far too similar to an acquaintance Anastasia had recently met.

More than just similar, they were identical. Even triplets like Mimi and her siblings didn't look this much alike. She couldn't speak of it. In that case, the theory that they were the same person was more natural, but—

"I take it you aren't Miss Tia, right?"

"—Die."

"…That's quite direct."

At the extreme sharpness of the response to her question, Anastasia felt a chilling sensation for the first time in a while.

Her body only felt heat and cold moderately, but the heart's reaction to such fear or hostility remained as it was; she hated the lack of flexibility in not being able to take only the good parts.

However, although the reply was aggressive, she did not move to carry it out. Nonetheless, remaining vigilant, Anastasia observed the opponent's state closely.

The woman there looked almost identical to Tia. The prickly beauty and the voice she heard were the same, but the only slight difference was the design of the clothing she wore. Based on the amount of white and black in the kimono pattern, Anastasia mentally dubbed the friendly one “White Tia” and the kidnapper before her “Black Tia.”

It seemed Anastasia had been brought by this Black Tia to a limestone cave of considerable scale, a natural fortress where nothing with artificial warmth could be seen. Anastasia had apparently been left in one of the side holes, so it was hard to think she was being treated as a person of great importance.

And now, this place where she confronted Black Tia was a great hollow at the deepest part of the cave, where the ceiling and floor were punctured and connected to the outside—

“—This is ‘Zarestia’s Bed,’ isn’t it?”

Saying this as the realization hit her, Anastasia felt a different kind of chill.

“Zarestia’s Bed” was a forbidden land at the western edge of the Kararagi city-states. It was the home of the Great Spirit Zarestia, known as the “Most Beautiful Death God,” who was said to hate the lives of all living things and was known to slash anyone who approached her bed without any mercy.

In the world at large, the “Witch of Envy” was often spoken of with more dread, but for Anastasia, who was from Kararagi, the local and more familiar Zarestia held a stronger sense of fear. In fact, Ricardo often threatened her as a child, saying, “If you don’t behave, Zarestia will come for you!” Conversely, after becoming an adult, Anastasia used it as a convenient way to discipline Mimi and the others: “If you aren’t a good child, Zarestia will end up coming!”

In any case—

“To be brought to a place like this, isn’t it a double blunder?”

The reason “Zarestia’s Bed” was treated as forbidden land was not just because of rumors or legends, but was based on Kararagi’s national regulations. Even if Julius and the others could grasp Anastasia's whereabouts, they would need to go through various procedures to send an official rescue team.

Between being kidnapped and the location she was taken to, it was a flaw for Anastasia in two senses.

"Well then, I've got to make a comeback from here."

Slapping her own cheeks with both hands, she rolled up the sleeves of her kimono. Seeing Anastasia's determined face, Black Tia, standing at the edge of the large hole, turned a suspicious eye toward her.

From the opponent's perspective, this distance was as good as nothing, and Anastasia's movements were like those of a baby to her. That was why there was an opening for words.

"Since you didn't answer, I'm just confirming, but your target isn't me, but Echidna… the cute muffler I had wrapped around my neck, right?"

"—! Die."

"I'll take that 'die' as an affirmation. To add to that, Echidna got away, and you're currently in the middle of searching for her… is that also correct?"

"—Tch, die!"

Seeing the opponent's reaction as her face stiffened while still wishing for death, Anastasia was relieved that her guess was correct and Echidna seemed to have escaped safely. However, given the character of that dutiful spirit, it was hard to imagine she was running away and leaving Anastasia completely behind.

Most likely, she was still in this great hollow. And not very far away.

"Until I got here, I thought about a lot of things while walking through the pitch black. Like why I was kidnapped, or if Echidna was the target, what the purpose was, and come to think of it, there was that thing about the light orb Miss Tia mentioned. I thought it would feel good if all of that connected."

"For someone who keeps saying 'die, die,' you're a bit soft in your methods, aren't you?"

Placing a hand to her cheek, Anastasia said this, and Black Tia's eyes widened.

However, the more she thought about it, the more poorly organized Black Tia's inferred purpose and process seemed. Given the outcome of the two attacks on Banan, if the goal was to secure Echidna and get some information from her, she should have used Anastasia more.

"Miss Tia's light orb… the source of her power. Is that form of yours the result of obtaining it? Miss Tia also had a rough way of speaking, but is the 'die, die' thing also an influence of that? Even though you might stop being yourself soon, you still won't let go of that power?"

"Die…"

"I see, you won't let go of the power. On top of that, because you have a reason other than just rampaging, you haven't killed me and you're looking for Echidna. Right?"

"Die…!"

"If you went to the trouble of keeping me alive, you could have just nicked a finger or an ear and made me let out a scream. If you did that, Echidna might have come flying out in a panic. Is the reason you don't do that because you don't want to cut off all negotiations? Or did the option just not occur to you?"

"D-die…"

"Even with such great power, you're just a child throwing a tantrum. That's why—"

"—Dieeee!"

Unable to find words to return to each of Anastasia's points, Black Tia had only been trembling—that reached its limit, and she shouted at Anastasia in open rage.

Immediately after, she became the wind itself, reaching her hand straight out toward Anastasia—

"—That's why, I'll help you."

—Suddenly, Black Tia's finger stopped just inches from Anastasia's throat.

"…"

Anastasia, whose neck had almost been hewn in a split second, did not let her inner sigh show on her face. Instead, she looked Black Tia—who was staring with wide eyes—directly in the face and nodded deeply.

"There's something you want to do, right? But you can't think of a way to satisfactorily accomplish it. In that case, I can just help you. There's no need to fight pointlessly."

"…Die."

"I'm a merchant of Kararagi. I understand very well the feeling of wanting to doubt a merchant. But the best result of a trade is when everyone involved profits. That's what I aim for."

"…"

"At worst, if things stay as they are, a lot of people will come chasing after you soon to rescue me. Among them will be Ricardo, Julius, and Halibel. You definitely won't be able to get away. Of course, you—"

"—seem strong, so you might be able to take down a few of them… but that's as far as it goes."

"Die…"

"You'll die, I'll die, and many of my comrades will die, and nobody will profit. Even someone who isn't a merchant would know that's a big loss. —What will you do?"

Tilting her head, Anastasia left the judgment to Black Tia, who held the right to decide.

The predicted future she had spoken of in a flurry of words was mostly her honest opinion, though with some embellishment. After that, it was just a matter of whether Black Tia could digest it and properly balance the scales.

It depended on how that hand, which was barely touching her neck, moved—

"—Die."

Eventually, Black Tia, who had said that, slowly lowered her hand and exhaled.

At that verbal abuse, which made it hard to tell if her persuasion had succeeded or failed, Anastasia let out the sigh she had been holding back.

Then, a white shadow slid up from Anastasia's feet and onto her shoulder—

"Oh, aren't you the heartless one who left me and ran away."

"—That's a harsh way to put it. In my own way, I was desperately running around to make sure no harm came to Ana."

The fox-shaped spirit, Echidna, wrapped herself around her neck as she said this, and a smile involuntarily escaped Anastasia at her excuse.

In fact, that was likely true. Once Echidna realized she was Black Tia's target, she immediately left Anastasia's side and continued to draw the opponent's attention for her safety. For her, who cared deeply for Anastasia—

—the previous exchange must have been very nerve-wracking.

Even so—

"As expected of Ana, to cut through it so boldly. However, from next time, I'd like to ask you to handle things in a way that's better for my heart."

"You say that even though you don't have a heart. And besides… you were great for being patient, too."

She stroked Echidna's head with her finger as she tickled her neck, and then Anastasia turned her attention to Black Tia, who had endured the urge to move at the appearance of the vanished Echidna.

What had made her hold back was likely Anastasia's earlier proposal. While it could be taken as a mere plea for life or a way to buy time, it had firmly suppressed Black Tia's impulse.

"The light orb, was it?"

If that, which seemed to be the source of White Tia's power, was making Black Tia's appearance identical to White Tia's, then perhaps her true form was much younger.

Thinking about it that way made several of her momentum-driven actions, and the way she listened to Anastasia's appeal and innocently believed it, seem more understandable.

"My sensitivity tells me there are various things about this troublesome child that pique my interest."

"Ana, don't let your guard down too much. She attacked Banan with wind twice. That crime is not cheap."

Even if there was some room to talk, she—

"I know. But you can't say much, can you, Echidna?"

Echidna, who had warned her in a low voice, fell silent at Anastasia's counterattack.

It was no mystery why this spirit became unable to speak. None other than Echidna herself was one of those who was here now because of Anastasia's meddling.

Of course, she didn't think this would end with her taking Black Tia under her wing like she had with Echidna, Ricardo, Mimi, and the many members of the "Iron Fang," but—

"In any case, I'm a person who intends to have my own country and pack as much as possible into it. If that's the case, I have to be able to manage at least one rowdy person."

"—Good grief, Julius and the others have a difficult road ahead."

"Don't say it like it's someone else's business. Now then—"

Pressing Echidna's nose with her finger and pulling herself together, Anastasia turned back to Black Tia.

Black Tia, standing there awkwardly, had a modest cuteness like a demure White Tia.

Her lips softening at the sight, Anastasia first looked up at the ceiling of the cave.

They had to get out of this dangerous place called "Zarestia's Bed," where moonlight shone into the great hollow, and rejoin Julius and the others.

"—After that, I'll have you let me hear your story too. Don't rush; one thing at a time is fine."

A contract made is to be strictly fulfilled. —That, too, was the pride of a Kararagi merchant.

END

No Stella No Life V
(LQ MTL Translation)

“Sensei, do you actually have friends?”

“…That is a rather rude question, following up on our last conversation.”

Inside the dream castle created by the Witch—an unnatural space that could never exist in reality—the Witch who spent all her time there furrowed her brow at Aldebaran’s inquiry. It was a reaction typical of a human being asked something unpleasant or inconvenient. The Witch frequently claimed she was different from humans or that she had no heart. However, to Aldebaran, scowling at a disadvantageous point seemed very human; it felt less like she lacked a heart and more like she only said so because having one would be inconvenient. In short—

“Hit the mark, did I? Alright, my bad. I shouldn’t have been so cruel as to ask Sensei about friends. Sorry, sorry, let’s end the talk here!”

“Wait. If you make a face like you understand everything, it makes it seem as though the dishonorable rumor of me having no friends is actually a fact. Besides, what about you, saying such things to me? Do you have friends?”

“Do you think I do? Stuck here forever with no chance to go outside, suffering under Sensei’s relentless abuse?”

“…That was an inappropriate counterargument. I apologize sincerely. I am sorry.”

Aldebaran shrugged his shoulders at the ‘Witch,’ who apologized meekly with a downcast face. In truth, he wasn’t hurt or irritated by her remark. He simply knew that reacting this way would make her reflect on her behavior. And if the Witch felt indebted to him, it was a success. The ‘Witch,’ who usually lacked any mercy or hidden agenda, might loosen the trials, allowing for a brief moment of mental rest. However—

“Though I apologize for my excessive words, the talk regarding the dishonorable suspicion cast upon me is not over. After all, you know all of my friends… the other five ‘Witches,’ don’t you? It’s what you call Q.E.D.”

“Hmm, I mean, that’s true, but were those people really real? Isn’t there a possibility they were just ‘Imaginary Witches’—not imaginary friends—that you cooked up to prove you aren’t a loner…”

“Now you are insulting more than just me!”

Hearing the Witch raise her voice, Aldebaran reflected that he might have gone a bit too far with his verbal abuse. The five ‘Witches of Sin’ he had been made to face in this dream castle were all eccentric and abnormal, but they certainly possessed a presence that felt real.

“If those were products of Sensei’s delusions, you’d need counseling… no, I’d feel bad for the counselor or therapist. Truly pity them.”

“It seems the defamation against me is continuing, but what about that clarification from before?”

“Eh? Oh, my bad, my bad. I definitely doubted the ‘Imaginary Witch’ theory too much. My bad-dy.”

“Your apology is too light! What kind of attitude is that toward a Witch!”

“Wasn’t the point of the trials to not lose performance by flinching or being scared of a Witch every single time? Exactly as intended; you should praise your prize pupil.”

“Hmm, somehow I am not convinced…”

Setting aside the twisted Witch who couldn’t honestly rejoice in her student’s growth, Aldebaran, who just wanted to slack off on the trials, became a bit curious about this topic. It was true that the ‘Witches of Sin’ could be called her friends.

"But that's largely because you were all in the same situation, right? Since all 'Witches' are social misfits, don't you have any friends who actually fit into society? If not, then we'll just settle this argument with the conclusion that birds of a feather flock together."

"I am amazed by both the audacity to label a Witch a social misfit and the courage to say it to my face. …However, friends other than 'Witches,' you say?"

"Are there any? Even if there aren't, you don't have to make any up."

"There is no need to fabricate anything. I have friends other than them. Or rather, 'had' would be more accurate. They are people I have already parted ways with and am now estranged from."

"…"

As the Witch lowered her long eyelashes and spoke in a dropped tone, Aldebaran caught his breath. The conversation had become heavier than he expected. He had an inkling of the reason for that estrangement, and since it wasn't unrelated to Aldebaran himself, it was all the more awkward. However, contrary to Aldebaran's uneasy feelings, the Witch let her lips curl slightly, as if reminiscing about the past.

"Though, I rarely recognized them as friends. They were people who caused me nothing but trouble, and I have no decent, normal memories with them. However…"

"However?"

"A friend who was with me said that the six of us were a group of close friends."

"A group of friends… well, that's certainly a lighthearted way of putting it."

"I suppose it is. Now that I think about it, it was a rather carefree expression to use, considering they were a group of people who could have easily split the world apart if they'd had the mind to."

The Witch spoke in a slow, calm tone, her voice thick with kindness and affection. Aldebaran felt a flicker of irritation alongside a strong sense of curiosity at this change—one she was likely unaware of herself. He prompted her to continue.

“What kind of crowd were they? You mean the members you’ve been dropping hints about, the ones you supposedly traveled with?”

“Dropping hints? I don’t think I was being quite that’s unpleasant about it.”

“Hey, are you seriously not aware? Whenever you talk about that, you pull this move like you’re some blatantly mysterious woman with a dark past. I’ve only held back from asking until now out of consideration for you.”

“Mysterious and dark… I see. Having it put that way is a little—actually, it’s quite embarrassing.”

The Witch, who apparently hadn’t been trying to create an atmosphere on purpose, placed a hand against her slightly flushed cheek and began to deeply reflect on her own behavior.

At any rate, now that things had been revealed this far, Aldebaran was intent on hearing whatever could be told. Within the scope of what he could remember, if he had to pick a name he heard often…

“…Reid. Yes, that was the name. Among the members you occasionally mention, I thought that was a name I heard fairly often. Who was that person?”

“—. Heh.”

At that declaration, Aldebaran felt a flicker of annoyance, catching a glimpse of the Witch’s trust in the absolute, unshakable strength of the man named Reid—a man whose personality was impossible to love. —Even if he hadn’t reached it yet, one day he surely would.

“Well, whatever, forget about that piece of human trash. What about the others?”

“The others… well, for example, Alec is friendly and has the virtue of getting along with anyone immediately, but he is the greatest liar of the age. I know no other being who uses words so skillfully to lead the hearts of men astray. How he manages to achieve such results against Authorities with such a difficult Divine Protection is a mystery. He is a monster beyond my understanding."

"Trash and monsters coming out one after another! Are they Witches?! Oh, they were Witches!"

"No, there are things to praise. Alec is an old acquaintance of Reid's; he's like a beast tamer who is the only one who can properly handle Reid, who listens to no one. If Alec hadn't mediated while Reid was rampaging, the number of towns reduced to empty lots would have been on a different scale."

"I feel bad for the towns that became empty lots because the owner couldn't train his pet. Also, I suspect Alec only looks better relatively because Reid is so bottom-tier."

"Fufu, he showed a scheming side occasionally, but fundamentally he was a gentleman to both me and her, and there's no doubt he was a likable person. Unlike Reid, the fact that there was no worry of him looking at us with *those* eyes also bolsters his evaluation."

The Witch used many words to defend the man named Alec, the beast tamer. This also somehow set off Aldebaran's annoyance sensor. Aldebaran's feelings for the Witch were complex; it couldn't be called love, but he had a sense that he wanted to be seen as a significant existence. He wondered if the Witch would use so many words for *his* sake when talking about him to someone else.

"The other person, Farsale, was truly frank, always bright, and had a personality that was never intimidated by any opponent. Yes, to put it bluntly…"

"You look like you're having a hard time saying it, but to put it bluntly?"

"To put it bluntly… yes, he was an idiot."

The 'Witch,' unable to find the right words, declared it clearly.

Since the Witch—who hadn't even called Reid 'trash' explicitly despite clearly thinking it—had raised the white flag, it must have been quite something.

"The surprising thing about Farsale is that his actions were not without thought. No matter how foolish an act appeared to onlookers, there was a calculated logic behind it. It was just that the process of reaching that answer was hard for others to see, leaving them only to gape at the outputted result."

"Ah, like the kind of person who lives the 'thin line between genius and idiot'…"

"Yes, exactly that. Rashness and recklessness at the end of genius-level deliberation. If necessary, he would create the spark for Reid's violence or laughingly help with Alec's scams. And he wouldn't hesitate to side with the 'Dragon' and make an enemy of a great nation just to protect a 'Witch.' Such an idiot. Despite being the prince of a nation, I'm impressed he could behave that way."

The Witch slowly shook her head, but she couldn't hide the smile on her lips. It was certainly clear they weren't a normal traveling party. However, considering they were beings who could influence the fate of the world, such strong characters were actually appreciated. Aldebaran wasn't the type of person who could maintain motivation through steady effort by aiming for goals that were thin and lacked substance. If they were going to be legendary existences, he wanted them to have strength and personality to match.

"In that case, a lineup of the strongest trash, a scammer, an idiot, and a nasty witch isn't a bad lineup at all."

"Somehow, that sounds like a list of terrible insults. At any rate, those are the members you wanted to hear about. Depending on where we stopped, there were some who joined only then or those who left as others arrived… yes, this was our party."

"…"

At the Witch's nodding words, Aldebaran scratched his head and swallowed his words. A close group of six—she started the story with that, but only three people besides the Witch were talked about, with zero mention of the remaining two. However, there was no need to speak of them. He knew those two well, and not saying it was an implicit understanding with the ‘Witch.’

Aldebaran, as someone closer to the Witch than anyone else, believed he understood that this wasn’t about neglecting the unmentioned person. In any case—

“So you *did* have them, Sensei—friends.”

“…I find it hard to understand why you look so disappointed. It’s as if you think a heartless Witch like me shouldn’t be able to make friends.”

“It’s not ‘as if,’ that’s exactly what I think. Don’t you think it’s weird yourself? Would anyone want to be friends with a heartless Witch? If not, there are only two possibilities.”

“I see, two. I’ll take both.”

She answered like she was being offered a drink, but for the curiosity-driven ‘Witch,’ unknown information was equal to fine wine. So, he presented it.

“First, the premise that you’re a heartless Witch is wrong. The pattern where you have friends because you have a heart and aren’t even a ‘Witch.’ But I, having been killed by Sensei a million times, can declare: Sensei really is heartless, and even though you’re a dropout rejected by ‘Witch-hood,’ you are a ‘Witch,’ so the premise is correct.”

“For your information, the matter of the Witch Factor is a wound that remains large in my life, so I’d prefer you didn’t handle it so lightly.”

“It’s fine, let’s just get along as fellow dropouts. Anyway, the other possibility is—”

Ignoring the somewhat dissatisfied complaint of the ‘Witch,’ Aldebaran held up another finger.

Pointing that finger directly at her, Aldebaran prefaced it with "Exactly," and said:

"—The pattern where those guys are just such good people that they'd even become friends with a heartless Witch."

"…"

"…Uh, Sensei? Hello, Sensei."

At the response of the 'Witch,' who had fallen silent, Aldebaran waved his hand. Did he say something strange and make her angry? If so, the hard-won break from the trials might actually backfire—or so he thought.

"Fu,"

The Witch laughed, as if letting out a breath. Once a smile broke through, the impulse couldn't be contained, and the Witch continued to laugh. Covering her mouth, she laughed with an "Ahaha." Aldebaran was stunned by this unexpected reaction. He had fully expected more disparaging remarks about her companions, but—

"Certainly, there is some truth in what you say. They were problematic and hardly to be praised as human beings in every regard… but my friends were indeed virtuous."

"—Except for Reid, though?"

"Indeed."

Aldebaran, trying to act as though he understood her, asked for confirmation, and the Witch nodded.

It was irritating, but he wanted to thank Reid for being human trash. Thanks to his existence, Aldebaran could end up being more than just jealous of the Witch's old companions—her friends. He realized after saying it that among those he labeled "good people," there was someone Aldebaran himself found hard to evaluate. He had never clearly heard how the Witch evaluated that person.

"—But even if I have to part ways with such friends, there is something I must do."

Beside the pensive Aldebaran, the Witch spoke quietly. The smile vanished from her expression, and her eyes were filled with a quiet resolve; there stood the black and white Witch who would cast everything aside to achieve her goal. Witnessing that, Aldebaran pressed his hand over his heart from above his chest. It was a trivial, pathetic jealousy. In this moment, there was no one else before the Witch but him, and he was the only one the Witch truly relied on. Unable to wish for more, Aldebaran was the Witch's trump card.

"—No one can defeat the 'you' that I created."

As if reading Aldebaran's mind, the Witch said so and smiled. Looking at that fleeting yet dear smile, Aldebaran clenched his fist. —To fulfill the Witch's wish and to no longer be a 'Following Star.' Aiming for such a future.

END

Arc 10:
The Land of the Lion Kings

Volume 44

Chapters 1-12

Prologue:
The Fateful Night

—’Twas a night that derailed the fates of many.

???: “—aAHGhgGHHAAAGHA!”

Despite his efforts to stifle it, he could not fully hold back the scream, a low roar of desperation echoing through the twilight as if to curse every last thing in this world.

His body contorting, froth spilling from the corners of his mouth, rivers of blood streaming from his eyes, his muscle fibers snapped apart, his bones cracked and shattered, and the heat scorching his blood vessels mercilessly ripped into his soul without a shred of compassion.

A sin, he had committed. An unforgivable sin. To that he would admit. To that, he repented from the bottom of his heart.

Then, at the very least, let my sin and this punishment be compensated with an equal reward

???: “AHGhghAAGHHHHAAAGHA!”

Empty. His hands were empty.

That which should have been grasped within his hands, had spilled through the gaps in his fingers, towards a place that could never be reached for the rest of eternity. Though it would have been better had it just vanished, the reality of it was even more helpless, and difficult to accept.

That now, it was here. Within the vessel of the most foolish life to ever walk this world, it certainly resided, and yet.

???: “…”

As he suffered, cried out, grit his teeth, and continued to struggle through it all, a small ‘something’ was watching his body. —No, that was impossible. It was nothing more than paranoia induced by his own guilty conscience over his sin.

After all, he had already tucked him in. Promising that it would be the end of a long nightmare, and telling him that the next morning to come would surely be a dazzling one brimming with hope, he had caressed the red hair on his head until he was sound asleep.

Hence, there could not have been anyone watching him. —He had failed to put an end to this nightmarish night. The promise that a hope-filled dawn would arrive the next day, he had failed to fulfill.

—Something like wanting to die sooner, was not a desire he could allow himself to have.

The nightmare had yet to conclude. His hopes had yet to be satisfied. His promise had yet to be fulfilled.

In order to deliver his beloved family into the future, giving up was the one thing he could not afford to do.

???: “—aAHGhgghhAAagha!”

Gritting his teeth to the point of fissuring, he endured the suffering. He endured the pain.

Receiving torment which had no end in sight, he had no other option but to endure, endure, endure, and make it through.

???: “…”

—The small ‘something’ watching over him was nothing more than illusion made manifest by his feelings of guilt.

Firmly treading upon the damp floor with his large, barefoot soles, he checked back over his shoulder countless times.

Nobody was pursuing him. There was no possibility of any pursuers being sent after him, either. After all, it was none other than one who passed such orders to those beneath him, who had been pulling all the strings behind the curtains of this night.

Nevertheless, nothing could make him call that a complete sense of security.

???: “Damnit, this sorta ridiculous affair…!”

As his voice quaked with irritation, he glared through the dim lighting with a bitter expression dashed upon the face of his giant body.

It was a dark space, underground. —Since its very existence was only known to a few people, nobody was even patrolling it; it was the type of passageway that would get an outsider killed just for knowing about it.

For him to be passing through it, as a person who was undoubtedly an outsider, just who even was he anymore?

???: “—Shit.”

Grinding his teeth in a violent swell of emotion, he used all his strength to withstand his urge to slam his massive fists into the walls around him. That was not because he wished to make any noise. It was because there was something unnecessary being carried within his arms.

The weight of that unnecessary something only served to enrage him more and more, irritating him, exacerbating—

???: “—Aa.”

Suddenly, his eyes met with those of the thing in his arms, causing a ‘Ngh’ to spill from his throat.

Those were the extremely repulsive, aggravating, crimson eyes that he despised more than anything in this world. —Even amidst this darkness, they had managed to catch hold of his face, and it was apparent that their pupils were constricting.

If only he could raise his voice to a piercing note, and have this hidden passage completely destroyed alongside his own self, who had so obediently acquiesced to taking it.

Such a ruinous, intropunitive, self-destructive wish was —

???: “—Uu.”

Tiny outstretched hands pattered upon his face, followed by the sight of a smile, causing that wish of his to fizzle out.

It made him think that all those self-destructive, intropunitive, and ruinous desires were completely worthless.

???: “Ta the bitter end, ya humans are utterly revoltin’.”

Regardless of whether they understood his feelings or not, those crimson eyes did not err in their judgment till the very end.

Even though he had countless chances to cast them aside, to abandon them, to give up, and to put an end to all this, they had avoided them entirely, guiding these legs all the way to the end of this passageway.

Finally making it out of the passage, what awaited thereforth was a boundless night. —This was the final chance he would ever receive to renounce the Covenant he had formed, and relinquish the future lying ahead with no end in sight.

???: “If you’re gonna regret somethin’, then ya oughta regret it in the grandest way possible.”

However, staking his aged beliefs and whatever little dignity he had left, he rejected that final chance.

???: “Don’t be so conceited as ta think ya can tie me down with a Covenant. Have a look at me now. I’ll eradicate humankind, and throw all their corpses together into the Great Waterfall.”

Harboring his long held hatred, ripened to the point of boiling, the giant figured proceeded forth. —All the while, admonishing himself to not allow the deterrent power of those innocent eyes to become a reason for him to halt his legs in the slightest.

—And, those were the events of the night that went on to derail the fates of many.

Chapter 1:
Friends

1

???: “—Well ain’t that just like that princess? She stuck to doing things her own way until the very end.”

Emilia’s eyes softened toward Felt, who uttered so as she sipped her cup of black tea.

On a sofa used for receiving guests, with one knee tucked under her arm, Felt sat across from Emilia, listening to her story in its entirety without interruption, before paying her respects for Priscilla in her own way.

Emilia did not think it heartless that great grief or loss had not flashed across Felt’s eyes, being only a slightly different shade of red from Priscilla’s. However, she did think it was strong of her.

This included the fact that she had visited this place of her own volition, in order to glean the details of Priscilla’s death.

Right now, Emilia and Felt were facing each other in a room of the Royal Residence in the Royal Capital of Lugunica. In a reception room of the residence where those of great importance were assigned to stay, Emilia greeted Felt.

It was not something that they had pre-arranged. Felt, who had happened to be staying in the Royal Capital, had heard that Emilia had brought news to the Royal Castle, and thus had come to see her.

In all honesty, she was awfully delighted that Felt had paid her a visit like this.

To begin with, the Emilia Camp owed Felt a great deal—she had taken great care of Meili while they had been absent from the Kingdom; so Emilia heard from Annerose.

Annerose, a relative of Roswaal and a supporter of Emilia, had been tasked with handling the discussions regarding the various matters surrounding the Pleiades Watchtower and Meili. Apparently, Felt and those aligned with her had greatly assisted in reaching an arrangement in those talks.

For that reason, Emilia had planned to make time to convey her gratitude to Felt herself, so she was really grateful for the chance to see her like this.

However, if anything, she wished she could have brought back a more pleasant tale, and yet—

Felt: "—That's what the look on your face seems to be saying, Emilia-neechan."

Emilia: "Eh, w-was I making such an obvious face?"

Felt: "Pretty much. If you keep frowning and looking down like that, anyone could pick up on it, y'know?"

Imitating Felt's motion of tapping her brow with her finger, Emilia also rubbed between her eyebrows.

People often said she tended to show what she was thinking upon her face, but she amazed herself at how much had been unintentionally shown. And it also worried her. —She had completely regained her footing already, and thus was unflappable now. No one needed to worry about her; she was fine: these were the feelings she had tried to portray.

Emilia: "Despite all of that, I'm still no good. Subaru and the others would be angry with me."

Felt: "It'd make that guy upset with you, Emilia-neechan? I can't imagine that happening though."

Emilia: "Of course it would. Even Subaru would be annoyed if I couldn't be strong. That's why he diligently tells me where I'm lacking."

Felt: "Heh, that so?"

With a smile, Felt rested her chin on her raised knee as her fang peeked out.

Pouting at Felt's vaguely mischievous and teasing smile, Emilia continued with a "However,"

Emilia: "Seems like you could see right through my thoughts, but… Felt-chan, you don't agree?"

Felt: "It's a bit complicated, but if I'm getting you right, you're thinking something like how it's been a while since we've met like this, and you're sorry that the topic's the princess's death, or something along those lines?"

Emilia: "Umm, yeah… that's right. Yep, that's it."

Felt: "Regarding that, I'm actually glad I heard it from you, Emilia-neechan."

Emilia: "From me?"

Having said something unexpected, Felt nodded back to Emilia's question with a "Yeah." While scratching her head in front of the surprised Emilia, she continued,

Felt: "Honestly, when I heard that the princess had died, I thought it must've been a joke. She was the embodiment of a woman who would never die even if you killed her. If things had continued as-is, I would've been filled with nothing but pointless doubts, and the truth of the matter would've been buried."

Emilia: "…"

Felt: "So when I heard the story from you, Emilia-neechan, I was able to make up my mind since you were actually there… No, I was able to prepare to make up my mind? Tch, my wording's also become complicated. My bad."

Emilia: "—. No, I feel like I understand what you're saying, Felt-chan."

Being unable to explain it well, Felt made a bitter face, but those feelings were able to be conveyed to Emilia.

If the situation were reversed, and Emilia were to hear that someone she knew had lost their life somewhere far away without her knowledge, she would probably overthink the circumstances surrounding that death.

With those various imaginings, regardless of their validity, her head would become filled with things that could not be verified, and she would become unable to grasp the truth.

That's why, even if it was incredibly painful, having that room for doubt erased, could be salvation.

Emilia: "If it's someone you trust confirming it, that's even better, I think."

Felt: "…I guess that means I trust you, Emilia-neechan?"

Emilia: "Yeah, I also believe in you, Felt-chan, and… aren't you the same? Isn't that why you came to see me like this?"

Felt: "Technically, we're both rival candidates, so it'd be weird if I said yes!"

Having lowered her foot from the seat, Felt had a dumbfounded look upon her face as she rested it on her knee. Still, since Felt did not disagree, Emilia smiled with a sense of relief.

Thinking of Priscilla still made Emilia's heart weep in pain. However, she was glad that she had not left Felt's murky answers buried.

???: "…"

Then, a faint exhalation interrupted the exchange between them. As soon as Felt's sharp ears picked up on it, she let out an "Oi," with a sullen voice, and then,

Felt: "Hey you, what the hell are you laughing about?"

???: "—Nothing, my apologies. Just now, it was simply quite unusual to see Emilia-sama so thoroughly get the better of you, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Better of me, my ass. What kind of Knight smirks and watches as his master is defeated?”

???: “I beg your forgiveness. I hesitated to interject into the conversation between the two of you.”

Saying this, while placing his hand on his chest and bowing, was Felt’s Knight, with his distinctive red hair and blue eyes: Reinhard.

Naturally, Felt would not have come to visit Emilia alone, so he had been listening to their conversation up until that point alongside them. At the chummy exchange between Reinhard and Felt, Emilia prefaced her proceeding comment with a “Geez,”

Emilia: “You don’t need to be so considerate. Even our Otto-kun has been chatting with us since earlier… huh? He hasn’t?”

Otto: “That is right. Thank you for noticing. Even I have common sense enough to not cut into a conversation between two of such exalted status, as a matter of fact.”

Next to Emilia, who had raised her eyebrows in surprise, was Otto, wearing a wry smile typical of him.

Since Otto was the only one who had accompanied Emilia to the Royal Capital, inevitably, he was the one attending her wherever she went, be it by giving her report at the Royal Castle or meeting at the Royal Residence. Since Otto was someone who made her feel at ease just by being there, she had been unintentionally put at ease with nary a word from him.

Emilia: “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize. You love to chat, Otto-kun, so it must have been reaaally hard to keep quiet.”

Otto: “Let me just say, I only chat about what is necessary, when it is necessary; it really is not the case that I love chatting, okay?!”

Felt: “Yeah yeah, that ain’t very convincing. I don’t think you can say that a guy who can chat with bugs, water dragons, and so on in addition to humans isn't a talkative guy."

Otto: "I would appreciate it if you did not confuse the subject of Divine Protections with human nature."

Pressing down on the green hat upon his head, Otto gave a casual response to Felt.

Given that Otto was able to speak with all sorts of creatures with the power of his Divine Protection of the Soul of Language, Emilia thought that Felt's point just now was spot-on. She suddenly realized: everywhere they went, whether it was with animals or bugs, Otto was talking to every living thing around and expanding his circle of friends.

Emilia: "Otto-kun, you reaaally do have so many friends. I don't have too many friends, so I admire that you can get along with anyone."

Otto: "I would not exactly call them friends, truth be told. From time to time, what I offer to others is something like a negotiation or transaction, which requires a bit of a different know-how than making friends. Now that I think about it, I suppose I cannot say I am someone who has a lot of friends either."

Felt: "The definition of a pal isn't something you should just keep pondering over. If anything, why don't you become friends with our Reinhard? He's also the kinda guy who doesn't have many friends."

Emilia: "Eh, is that so? That's reaaally unexpected."

As Felt shut one eye and pointed towards Reinhard, who was standing behind the sofa, her words made Emilia instinctively look up at the red-haired Knight.

Reinhard had a good personality, was very famous, would surely be known by anyone in the Kingdom if asked, and was someone who could be relied upon. For Emilia too, since the first time they had met, he had been so consistently considerate of her that she thought that he was more or less friends with everyone in the Kingdom.

Seeing the astonishment in Emilia's eyes, Reinhard said, "It is unfortunate,” before continuing to speak,

Reinhard: “Putting aside my own views, it seems I often intimidate others. For that reason, outside of the Knights and my companions from our camp… excluding Subaru and Ferris, perhaps I have quite few friends.”

Emilia: “Is that so? Even you have those sorts of worries too, huh Reinhard…? Hey, Otto-kun, if you’d like, would you become friends with Reinhard?”

Otto: “I am being asked to do something incredibly outrageous here, but would it not be a disgrace as far as Reinhard-san is concerned?!”

Reinhard: “Of course not. In fact, I would greatly welcome it. Would you be my friend?”

Otto: “Is this some kind of pincer attack or ambush?”

Caught between Emilia’s gaze and Reinhard’s smile, Otto grumbled in frustration.

Only Felt looked on with a smirk, but after agonizing over it for a long moment, Otto took a long, deep breath, and said,

Otto: “As Felt-sama brought up earlier, right now, we are affiliated with opposing camps. Until the Royal Selection is over, we should avoid becoming excessively close to one another.”

Reinhard: “I see. A shame, but if that is your intention, I shall respect it. Not that we are friends, though.”

Otto: “Yes, please do. Since we are not friends.”

With such sad words, Otto’s shoulders slumped, and towards that, Reinhard gave a smile that oddly enough seemed neither hurt nor disappointed. Unfortunately, the two of them did not become friends, but in Emilia’s eyes, they somehow gave off the air of proper friends.

In addition—

Otto: “Good grief, the tea has grown completely cold. I will go brew a new pot. Emilia-sama, you and the rest keep having a pleasant chat. I will—”

Reinhard: “—. In that case, I shall accompany you. We may not have become friends, but how about I show you the power of the Divine Protection of Tea Ceremonies?”

Otto: “It might surprise you to know that I am someone who holds grudges, but having the Sword Saint hold a grudge against me is truly unsettling.”

While carrying on such a conversation, the two of them left the room.

Emilia watched as their backs were obstructed by the closed door, and then turned back toward Felt.

Emilia: “For some reason, it feels like they are reaaally good friends, you know?”

Felt: “Heh heh, yeah, I thought so too. I’m always so pissed off at the attitude of that damn Reinhard, but when it’s someone else on the receiving end, it’s super funny.”

Emilia: “Ah, that’s a naughty face. But to make Otto hold off on being Reinhard’s friend until after our Royal Selection, that’s…”

Felt: “Hmm, that dude just used what I said as a convenient excuse, right? Can’t say I know why he did, but… don’t take what he said about not being able to get along ‘cause of the Royal Selection so seriously.”

Emilia: “I don’t need to, take it so seriously…?”

It seemed like Felt was quite satisfied, and she was in such a good mood to the point she was almost humming. After thinking for a moment, Emilia let out an “Okay,” and stood up.

Thinking of the Royal Selection, Otto had given up on becoming friends with Reinhard. She felt guilty over that decision and consideration on Otto’s part, but Emilia had made up her mind.

After what had happened with Priscilla, she did not want to have any more regrets.

Emilia: “Hey, Felt-chan, can I say something?”

Felt: “Oh? What’s up?”

Briskly walking up to Felt, who had looked up at her, Emilia sat herself next to her. At a distance where their shoulders brushed against each other, Emilia turned to face her directly. Felt’s red eyes blinked as Emilia readily approached her with such momentum.

Looking back on it, Emilia had first met Felt when she had stolen the insignia that qualified Emilia to join the Royal Selection. At the time, she had panicked and had wanted to take her anger out on Puck, who had not been flustered in the least by such a situation. In any case, her encounter with Felt had definitely not been off to a great start.

Even so, right now, regarding Felt, who was likewise a candidate for the Royal Selection, Emilia felt thus.

Emilia: “I want to be friends with you, Felt-chan. And not just ordinary friends, like reaaally good friends.”

Felt: “…Huh?”

Emilia: “Actually, I promised Anastasia-san that when the Royal Selection ends, we will be friends. We talked a lot as we traveled together… well, it wasn’t entirely Anastasia-san the whole time, but we talked a bunch and then we made that promise.”

Emilia promptly pressed Felt, whose wide eyes were flashing with confusion.

The promise she had exchanged with Anastasia was one she would surely keep, as part of her strong identity as a merchant. It was not like with Subaru, so she could be assured that the promise would be kept.

Emilia: “I worry when it comes to Subaru, since he breaks his promises so easily, but when it comes to Anastasia-san, I feel assured. But even besides promises, I feel like I couldn't be Subaru's friend, and I don't feel like I would want to be friends with Subaru… huh? What was I saying again?"

Felt: "That you and Subaru-niichan can't be friends, Emilia-neechan?"

Emilia: "Yeah, that's right… No it's not, I was talking about you and myself, Felt-chan!"

Emilia felt a tinge of anxiety over having nearly lost sight of her main point. In front of Emilia, who had narrowly avoided that perilous situation, Felt suddenly looked up. Following that movement, Emilia also looked toward the ceiling. She did not see anything in particular.

Emilia: "Felt-chan?"

Felt: "I ain't looking at the ceiling. I was just wondering what the hell I should do."

Emilia: "Umm, yeah. Subaru and Petra-chan often tell me that they feel reaaally invigorated when they see my face. How about that?"

Felt: "Would you happen to be trying to show off your good points?"

Emilia: "That's right, because I want to be friends with you, Felt-chan."

Over the past year or so, Emilia had been getting used to seeing herself in mirrors.

Subaru, Petra, and sometimes even Ram would compliment Emilia's face, so if there was perhaps a chance it would also have an effect on Felt, she figured there was no harm in suggesting it.

Felt kept looking upwards in response to that desperate approach of Emilia's, and then,

Felt: "Why do you wanna be friends with me so badly? It's fine the way it is now…"

Emilia: “You see, I had wanted to become friends with Priscilla.”

Felt: “…”

Emilia: “But, I put off telling her that. I’m… no good. I should have known I might have to suddenly say goodbye to someone important to me who was fine just the day before, and yet…”

Emilia murmured as she placed her hand on her aching chest and touched the Magic Crystal hanging from her neck.

The same had happened with Puck, who continued to slumber, as well as Emilia’s cherished family who had been frozen in ice in the Great Forest of Elior. Farewells could be sudden, and could come for even the most precious people in one’s life.

Her farewell with Priscilla had reminded the forgetful Emilia of such a sorrowful truth.

Emilia: “I don’t want to forget that anymore. So, I decided I won’t hold back. Tell those you like that you like them, and tell those you want to be friends with that too.”

Felt: “—Shit, that princess, she really went all the way ‘til the very end, didn’t she?”

Emilia: “—?”

Emilia had put her feelings into words as honestly as she could. While still looking up and listening, Felt slowly lowered her gaze.

The expression on Felt’s face was a smile that was neither frustrated nor bitter.

Felt: “Gotcha, no problem. I’ll be friends with you, Emilia-neechan.”

Emilia: “Really?! You mean, after the Royal Selection is over…”

Felt: “It doesn’t have to be. If I’m gonna do it either way, Emilia-neechan, I’ll become friends with you before Anastasia-neechan and make her regret it.”

Emilia: “Oh, don’t say that. Anastasia-san is going to be my friend too.”

Felt: “Aren’t I, someone who is already your friend, more important to you, Emilia-neechan, than someone who isn’t your friend yet like Anastasia-neechan?”

Emilia: “Geez, don’t put me on the spot!”

Felt laughed gleefully, her fang on display, with Emilia also instinctively breaking out into a smile.

Felt had given a delightful response to her offer. At the experience of becoming friends with Felt, Emilia’s heart slowly filled with warmth.

Then, whilst smiling together with Felt, Emilia thought to herself. —She thought about Al, still unable to fully accept Priscilla’s death, and of Subaru and the others, who were all accompanying him.

Emilia: “With Al too—”

One day. It did not need to be right away, but one day.

From the very bottom of her heart, she wanted to pray for the coming day upon which she would be able to discuss Priscilla, someone with whom she had wished to become friends, without tears flooding her eyes.

Indeed, while nestling shoulders together with her friend, Emilia thought so.

2

Reinhard: “—Well then, you went so far as signaling me with a glance. You have something to tell me, do you not?”

Having left Emilia and Felt behind in the reception room, upon walking down the hall for a bit, Reinhard deliberately broke the ice.

Carrying the silver tray with the tea set in his hands, Otto, without looking back, nodded an “Indeed”.

Otto: “Your understanding is much appreciated. It appears that Felt-sama’s visit has allowed Emilia-sama to finally smile naturally again, so I did not wish to tear down that atmosphere.”

Reinhard: “As expected, the matter of Priscilla-sama seems to have affected her quite a bit.”

Otto: “In all honesty, there was likely nobody participating in that battle who remained unaffected. Even I, who lacked much of any contact with her, felt a sense of helplessness.”

Of course, the impact it had borne on Otto was nothing compared to that of Emilia, who had harbored affection for Priscilla, nor to that of Subaru and Al, who had watched her fade away before their very eyes.

Even so, as Otto had been working to ensure that as many of the allies fighting alongside him against the Great Disaster would make it out alive, the death of an individual involved with the Kingdom—of a Royal Candidate, was something that deeply affected him. On the other hand, there was also a part of himself calmly analyzing the dropout of a rival candidate who possessed an irrational charisma.

Reinhard: “…How surprising.”

As if having listened in on Otto’s inner thoughts, Reinhard muttered those words. And glancing back at him, Reinhard’s eyebrows were, in line with his words, raised in surprise.

Having garnered such a reaction, Otto slightly loosened the corners of his mouth with a hint of self-deprecation,

Otto: “That reaction, were you surprised that I was pained by the death of Priscilla-sama? Certainly, I would be lying if I said I did not welcome the dropping out of a rival candidate…”

Reinhard: “No, I found it surprising that you admitted to your weakness so openly. You do not need to go out of your way to feign such callousness, no?”

Otto: “…”

Reinhard: “Or maybe expressing your true feelings was a sign that you had let your guard down… perhaps even a sign that we could become friends?”

Otto: “It seems as though I have chosen my words poorly.”

Being teased in such a manner, Otto squared his shoulders, putting his feelings in check as he resumed his steps.

It appeared as though he was in a worse mental state than he had realized. And having picked up on that, Reinhard had allowed that blunder to slide as a moment of levity.

Otto: “Get a hold of yourself, Otto Suwen.”

This will not do; he reigned himself back in.

Regardless of how little Felt regarded Emilia with enmity, they were unmistakably rival candidates. The best course of action was always to abstain from displaying weakness to one’s opponents. A situation in which one had lost the balance of their mental state was among the highest tier of appearances that must never be shown.

Reaffirming that in his mind, Otto would fulfill the purpose for which he had brought Reinhard out.

That was—

Otto: “—I shall now divulge information pertaining to Heinkel Astrea.”

Reinhard: “…”

At the raising of the topic, it was apparent that the atmosphere in the corridor had distinctly shifted.

Drier or damper, the humidity had changed. Higher or lower, the temperature had changed. The only thing that could be said for certain, was that the one who had brought about those changes was the very Sword Saint walking right by his side.

Otto: “Heinkel-san participated in the battle in the Empire as a member of Priscilla-sama’s Camp, and he did survive. However, in the wake of Priscilla-sama’s death, after being sighted in a state of extreme discomposure, his whereabouts became unknown.”

Reinhard: “…Was he taken captive in the Empire?”

Otto: “No, likely not. While it is a country that can be exceedingly ruthless in order to benefit itself, in its current state of exhaustion following that battle, they are not individuals who fail to grasp the situation to such an extent that they would make an enemy of the Kingdom—of the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea.”

Reinhard: “So then, he disappeared of his own volition, did he?”

With his eyes slightly downcast, Reinhard feebly muttered those words for Otto to hear.

He had not intended on getting revenge, but the result ended up being a situation much like Otto’s earlier blunder, in which the other party had lost the balance of his mental state. Be that as it may, he was not currently in the mood to take advantage of the situation and probe into the other party’s weakness.

In all honesty, he thought himself ill-suited to it, but—

Otto: “Heinkel-san… your father, are you worried about him?”

That was a question voiced out of genuine concern for the other party.

In reality, it would have likely been a difficult question for Reinhard to answer. Otto was not deeply familiar with the relationship between Reinhard and Heinkel, but it was already common knowledge that this was a parent-child relationship that had fractured and broken down.

Not to mention, in Pristella, Otto had happened upon a scene of Heinkel raising his sword against Felt in an attempt to prevent Reinhard’s movements.

On that note, the very fact that the three generations of this family were all backing different Royal Candidates spoke volumes about the dysfunctionality of House Astrea.

In any case—

Otto: “Regardless of whether it serves any consolation, according to Garfiel, your father seems to have managed to withstand even a Dragon’s blow. Hence, I surmise that there is little fear of his life being in danger even if assailed.”

While relaying that information, Otto intentionally concealed the possibility of Heinkel committing suicide.

From what he had heard, Heinkel had lost his composure after Priscilla’s death, to the point that he had tried to shift his allegiance over to Emilia, begging her to take him on as a subordinate. With Emilia turning him down, it could not be definitively stated that there was no possibility of him, whereabouts unknown, finding himself at a loss for what to—

Reinhard: “—That will not happen, Otto. My father would never do anything akin to ending his own life.”

Otto: “…Did I show it on my face like Emilia-sama?”

With his inner thoughts completely seen through, Otto massaged his brow with one of his hands. Upon doing so, Reinhard forced a smile and said “No”,

Reinhard: “You purposely refrained from mentioning the worst possibility, so I presumed it was out of consideration. Only, it is a needless worry. My father has a goal he wishes to fulfill no matter what. Something like him choosing death whilst leaving it unfulfilled, is an impossibility.”

Otto: “On the one hand, that is a relief, but on the other, it does bolster my apprehensions. With his back up against the wall, just what might that person do… would he not then attempt to make contact with Felt-sama next?”

To begin with, from Heinkel’s perspective, it would be a choice with much more merit than pleading to Emilia.

Of course, that choice would eliminate the sole and absolute advantage in Heinkel's possession—his ability to exert some sort of coercion upon Reinhard, the Sword Saint. But, setting that aside, it was a highly probable option for him to be recruited there.

Now that he had lost Priscilla and had been rejected by Emilia, it seemed entirely possible to Otto that Heinkel would choose Felt as the next target for his parasitism.

However—

Reinhard: "—Likely not."

With an even greater conviction than before, Reinhard shut down Otto's follow up.

Otto: "…"

Those eyes that captured the essence of a perfectly clear blue sky were entwined with a hue resembling nightfall. Reinhard, the glimpse of a smile that had been previously strewn upon his lips having faded, walked alongside Otto as the latter fell silent.

Two steps, three steps; with not a word said, the pair gradually closed the distance to the kitchen. And just like that, Otto assumed that the conversation had met its end amidst the silence; however,

Reinhard: "My father wishes to have me resign from being the Sword Saint. Hence, within the Royal Selection which he must win no matter the cost, it is unthinkable that he would assist Felt-sama, who holds my endorsement."

Otto: "…He wants to win the Royal Selection. However, he does not wish to let you win, Reinhard-san?"

Reinhard: "That would be so. On that point, my father and I are incompatible. Regardless of my father's wishes, I am the Sword Saint. —I have to be… the Sword Saint."

Everyone had their own unique circumstances.

Because he fully understood that, Otto would not attempt to interject this and that about another household's situation. Without a doubt, while it seemed like a distorted relationship between father and son, that final comment sounded as if he was reinforcing it to himself.

Ergo, the only thing Otto could do was to make his own stance clear.

Otto: "—. Good grief, this has been quite the outrageous scene. I never thought that my life would include a moment of engaging the Sword Saint in small talk like this."

Shrugging his shoulders, Otto displayed an unwillingness to pry into Reinhard's circumstances.

It was some of his worldly wisdom as a peddler who had encountered people in a wide variety of positions across many different regions. No matter what circumstances might reach his ears, he would show his harmlessness by exaggerating about how he would not exploit them.

In the majority of cases, he would be able to leave the post town without incident.

Otto: "Though, sometimes the flow of alcohol would cause me to blurt out information that I absolutely should not, and there were some outrageous people who would then hear that and try to silence me…"

Hence, even at the most optimal taverns for gathering information while traveling, it was necessary for him to have measures in place to avoid accidentally acquiring any more serious information than necessary. The fact that his peddler's knowledge was proving to be so useful now that he was involved with the Royal Selection was a testament to how one never knew just what life had in store for them.

In any case—

Reinhard: "Thank you for sharing this information about my father. I will keep it in mind."

Once again, Reinhard nodded upon receiving Otto's intent. And ascertaining that, Otto shrugged his shoulders and continued with a "Pardon me".

Otto: "Perhaps I have needlessly added to your troubles? With a position like the Sword Saint, you must always have many things troubling you."

Reinhard: "It was of my own will that I acquired this position and Divine Protection. I suppose it ought to be called my responsibility."

Divine Protections were endowed articles.

It seemed a bit strange to phrase it as if something acquired through one's volition, but Otto immediately recalled that the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint alone was something inherited by a worthy successor a posteriori.

As such, following the death of the previous Sword Saint, Reinhard was in the position to inherit it.

Reinhard: "For people with Divine Protections, there are unending troubles that come with dealing with them. From what I can see, Otto, you have quite the mastery over your own, is that not so?"

Otto: "It is outrageous to say that I have mastered it. Ever since I was born, this Divine Protection has always been far too much for me to handle. If I could give it away to someone else, I would gladly do so."

Reinhard: "Haha, you mustn't say such thoughtless things. There is no shortage of people who envy those bearing Divine Protections. Of course, I think that goes without saying for you."

Otto: "In reality, I do not think it is anything worth being envied for."

As Reinhard had said, the troubles that came alongside Divine Protections were unending.

Not only could they not be shared with people who lacked any Divine Protection, they could not even be shared with people who possessed differing Divine Protections; it was something akin to continuing to answer a difficult problem with no example solution.

Unmistakably, Otto's response to Reinhard's flattery was his true feelings. —Not once had he ever been so conceited to think that he had achieved mastery over the Divine Protection of the Soul of Language. Likely, he never would.

Otto: "Unlike your Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, Reinhard-san, mine is not something that would leave its name down in history."

Reinhard: "Sword Saint this, Sword Saint that; I wish you would not put so much emphasis on that title. After all, I still find myself inexperienced for this position, under the weight of such a title. I do not intend to act any more important because of it."

Otto: "It is said that the position makes the person. It could just be that you are not aware of it, Reinhard-san, and your Sword Saint-ness actually overpowers those in your surroundings."

Reinhard: "Overpowering with my Sword Saint-ness… maybe you could tell me more about it? Perhaps it is the cause of why Felt-sama, Rachins, and the others are always telling me all sorts of things."

Otto: "Though, it is troubling how eagerly you are responding to what was just a joke!"

Unexpectedly finding his remark latched onto, Otto cried out at Reinhard's assertive questions.

As their exchange shifted to a lighter tone, Otto slightly cut back on his wariness towards Reinhard, granting his own heart some leeway.

At the very least, Otto currently did not have any reason to damage his reputation by hastening into political strife against Felt and Reinhard. He was by no means in the best condition, either.

Above all, Subaru was right in the middle of exerting every effort for the sake of Al in far-distant lands.

Otto: “Even I would feel guilty about scheming behind the scenes while Natsuki-san and the others are off trying to save someone’s heart. —The same cannot be said for the Margrave Mathers.”

Unlike Subaru and the rest, who had set off for the Pleiades Watchtower alongside Al, Roswaal had taken Schult, formerly a servant of Priscilla, back to her territory of the Barielle Domain. Beneath that concern and consideration, there was no doubt that his objective lay in taking the opportunity to meddle with the Barielle Domain.

As one involved with the Royal Selection, such conduct was correct, diligent, and worthy of contempt. —At the same time, even if it meant he was naive for not stooping to such cold-heartedness, Otto felt like it was better this way.

Reinhard: “Well then, shall we brew some tea? Allow me to show you what I am capable of.”

Otto: “By all means, let me see what you can do.”

Upon arriving at the kitchen, Reinhard took the tray with the tea set, and began making preparations. Watching over him, Otto took a small breather as he considered the developments yet to come.

Only, he had a premonition. Soon, there would be some sort of movement in the situation: that sort of premonition.

Otto: “…Going so far as postponing Emilia-sama and Felt-sama’s audience, some discussion is being given priority at the castle. What in the world might it be about?”

Beside Otto as he muttered, a tiny silhouette lurked in the shadows of a pillar. —It was the Zodda bug he had made a deal with, to make a report if there were any developments in the castle.

—In two ways, Otto’s premonition had been right on the mark.

The first was the report from the Zodda bug, informing him that the discussion in the castle which had gone out of its way to keep the Royal Candidates away had come to some sort of conclusion, and the second was the report from a girl of the Felt Camp during their visit to the Royal Residence—Grassis.

That was a complicated, turbulent report, news of some trouble having occurred with Subaru’s side over at the Pleiades Watchtower, and the tidings that upon having taken Al captive, Subaru and the others would be heading for the Royal Capital.

Chapter 2:
Sacrament of the Church

1

—There once was a wonderful young man by the name of Fourier Lugunica.

When they had first met, he was still just a boy, and with the personable impression he gave off since those days remaining largely unchanged, he was a childish person.

He was cheerful, innocent, and naive, with a side to him such that one would never know what he might do or say even just one second later, always keeping those around him in suspense.

But, no matter how much he troubled them with his antics, he had such a charm that they would never particularly mind.

Theirs was a relationship spanning a decade.

Ten years of accumulated seconds, with each making it impossible to know what might happen in the next; there were so many things that happened.

Certainly, there were countless times where they could not simply laugh things off.

And yet, when reminiscing, even those events were ones that they looked back on with a smile.

And right in the heart of those memories recited with that smile, was always that smile of his, bright as the sun.

Allow this confession without any pretenses. —I loved Fourier Lugunica.

From the day they met, up until this very day, not once had those feelings ever wavered.

No matter what words Fourier spoke to them, no matter what thoughts he vented, no matter what tribulations they shared together, no matter what time they spent together, no matter what future he dreamed of, no matter what bitterly painful betrayals they faced, no matter what tragedy tore their heart to shreds, not once had their affection for him wavered in the slightest. —Not once.

Certainly, if it were him, he could brave any situation without that smile of his fading. He would never lose hope.

In fact, until his very last moment, he never ceased to remain noble, pure of heart, and earnest.

They esteemed that from the bottom of their heart. They dearly respected it. They found it lovely.

That was why—

???: “—Your Highness, I beg of you, please forgive me.”

This decision, this resignation, is by no means the result of my love for you fading.

2

—The Church of the Divine Dragon was, as its name suggested, a religious organization that held faith in the Divine Dragon Volcanica, who had established a Covenant with the Kingdom, and dedicated themselves to its power and grace.

Its establishment unmistakably dated back four hundred years, to the era of the Covenant that earned the Kingdom of Lugunica the moniker of Dragon Kingdom; thus, there could be no objection to calling it a group with an ancient and distinguished history.

In fact, the Church of the Divine Dragon had remonstrated itself against the expansion of its own influence, and had maintained a certain distance from that which lay at the heart of the Kingdom, such as the Royal Family and the Royal Castle. That is to say, this was proof that the Church of the Divine Dragon had not sought out more power than was necessary, merely choosing instead to define itself as a foundation of faith.

Consequently, even when the Royal Family of Lugunica was eradicated by an epidemic, and the Royal Selection to decide the next to sit upon the throne had begun, the Church of the Divine Dragon did not actively intervene in the Kingdom's affairs.

???: "But, we're no longer in a position where we can be saying things like that so calmly. Ever since I heard of the Witch Cult's violence in the Watergate City, my patience has been approaching its limit by the day."

???: "…"

???: "Of course, this anger should be directed toward the Witch Cult who have treated the common people so cruelly. But it'd be a nearly impossible task to uncover and punish them thoroughly… or rather, even if we punished them, it would not save those who have already suffered. All things have an order of priority."

???: "…"

???: "Punishment must not take precedence over salvation. This too, is in the scriptures. "Punishment absent salvation is idle lightning; the Dragon first spreads its wings and embraces even the smallest of lives with affection." This is precisely what I believe; the optimal solution for humanity…!"

Emphatically arguing so, the woman forcefully shut the thick scriptures she held to her chest.

The amount of force put into that action was such that the man listening worried the pages of the bound tome might fall out. Fortunately, the book that was slammed shut with such force did not fall apart, and a catastrophe that could have caused the persuasiveness of that forceful speech from just before to fall to the ground was also averted.

Woman: "Ahem, ahem. I'm sorry. It seems I got a tad too impassioned. It's a habit of mine. Whether it is a good or bad habit, that shall depend on my deeds from this point on."

And as her listener was worrying about such trifling things as the book, the woman who had made that speech cleared her throat with a tinge of embarrassment before saying so.

Despite reflecting on her own conduct, that way of thinking was striking in how it came across as strangely forward-thinking.

The man was impressed by the strength to declare that whether it was good or bad would depend upon one's own attitude going forward; it was a way of thinking that he held a favorable impression towards. —Though favorable, it was still an extremely complicated impression.

???: "…"

He examined her with a glance: a beautiful woman clad in a nun's habit.

The woman, who had introduced herself as a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon, had visited the Karsten Family's mansion in the Royal Capital after having held a discussion with the Council of Wise Men earlier in the Royal Castle.

The purpose of her visit was astonishing, and even now he had yet to fully recover from that shock. But the impact she had brought with her did not stop at merely the purpose of her visit.

A nun with long golden hair and crimson eyes that housed the light of her determination. Those physical characteristics of hers, and above all else, her name—Filóre, that was how she had introduced herself, but it brought with it a shock within his old bones that rivaled the purpose of her visit.

Filóre: "…I feel awkward and self-conscious saying something like this, but when you stare at me like that, I'm bewildered… I am bewildered. Quite a bit."

???: "—. I beg your forgiveness. It appears I have been rather impolite."

Filóre: "No, it's not like I'm blaming you. It's just that as a young person, the overwhelming look in your eyes, from the one called the Sword Demon… felt scary… life-threatening? Well, anyways, I just can't help but feel that there is some other expression that sounds better."

Indeed, toward Filóre, who was willing to overlook the boorishness of his gaze, the one who had been referred to by his epithet—Wilhelm, quietly bowed in apology.

The intention behind his apology was twofold: both for the intimidating gaze, and for how long she had been made to wait. After all, over an hour had already passed since Filóre had arrived at the mansion.

In the meantime, Wilhelm had been unable to think of a subject to pass the time, and Filóre, who abhorred the silence, had been searching for topics to discuss since the start. She kept asking for refills of her tea to avoid the awkwardness, and she was already breaking ground on her sixth cup.

Nevertheless, the truth was that the lack of discussion was not solely due to Wilhelm's clumsiness when it came to speaking. The greatest reason was the dual impact caused by her visit that had shaken Wilhelm to his very core, ripping away any composure he had previously possessed.

In truth, he wondered how he should treat Filóre. Wilhelm looked to the individual standing along the wall behind her, as if seeking an answer there.

He was a tall, strong man who had accompanied Filóre to the mansion—

Wilhelm: "—Commander of the Royal Guard, Marcos Gildark."

Marcos: "Sir."

When Wilhelm called that name, the large man clad in silver armor who had remained silent, Marcos, straightened his already straight back even further, and responded.

His reply had been naught but a single word, but one could feel a sense of upheaval like a giant boulder being stirred, as well as a definite reverence within that solemn voice.

Wilhelm, slowly shaking his head at the consideration imbued into that tone of the man's voice,

Wilhelm: "There is no need for you to be so formal. It has been over a decade since I was the Commander of the Royal Guard. I am just an old fool, who cannot be compared to the likes of you, the current leader of the Royal Guard."

Marcos: "An old fool? Surely you jest."

Commenting on Wilhelm's remark, a faint smile rose to the surface of Marcos's stony countenance.

He may have thought it mere modesty, but by Wilhelm's own admission, it was no lie. He had been endeavoring to regain his former skill with the sword, but the results he had hoped for were not readily being realized with his aging body.

This explained the reason why the old veteran could never relinquish the sword, and yet, he was still so far from reaching it.

Wilhelm: "At the very least, I have recovered to the point where I can make the active Commander of the Royal Guard pass it off as a joke. I suppose I can say it is fortuitous in that respect."

Naturally, someone appointed as Commander of the Royal Guard would be among the preeminent powerhouses of the Kingdom.

Wilhelm believed that Marcos, like himself, possessed the talent worthy of that position, though he did not intend that as self-praise—and beyond that, he was one of the most distinguished fighters throughout history. He had been overshadowed by Wilhelm, whose deeds had always been wide-spread, and Reinhard, the strongest Sword Saint in history; but, the current strength of the Knights owed itself to the merit of the man leading them.

It was also for this reason that Wilhelm appraised Marcos as the most qualified individual out of all the prior Commanders of the Knights. But then, any evaluation of Wilhelm, who had put personal grudges ahead of loyalty and left behind his duties, may have been worthless drivel from his own point of view.

In any case, the subject Wilhelm wanted to broach here and now was not talk of the troubles of fellow Commanders of the Royal Guard separated by a generation. It was a much more serious and dire topic.

And that was—

Wilhelm: "—Am I to conclude that the Council of Wise Men grasp the current state of affairs?"

Marcos: "Of course. They are taking this to be an extraordinary turn of events."

Wilhelm: "That is… inevitable, I suppose."

Omitting the subject, Wilhelm confirmed this, and Marcos did not feign ignorance nor ask what he was talking about.

It was unclear whether the answer was based more on his personality or position, but as for Wilhelm, he could confirm that the Council of Wise Men must have experienced the same shock as he had, and he let out a sigh.

Wilhelm: "To think that she has the same name as Filóre Lugunica-sama, daughter of Prince Ford Lugunica-sama."

It had overflowed from his sigh, and as he listened to his own murmur, pregnant with an emotion that was neither relief nor grief, Wilhelm could not sort out his own feelings. And as previously mentioned, that sentiment was not solely confined to Wilhelm, but it also applied to the Council of Wise Men and everyone else who participated in the discussion at the Royal Castle.

Filóre Lugunica had disappeared fifteen years ago—and a girl with the same physical characteristics of the Royal Family of Lugunica, even bearing the same name as her, had suddenly appeared.

Wilhelm: "…"

Glancing at Filore, who was now drinking from her seventh cup of tea in order to avoid boredom, Wilhelm searched for a glimpse of the Royal Family of his memories in her profile.

If he were to say that there was, then there was, and if he were to say that there was not, he would accept that too; there was only that kind of vague sensation.

To begin with, the princess had disappeared when she was but an infant, so it was impossible to escape the realm of conjecture regarding how she may have grown up had she survived. — However, supposing her lineage was as Wilhelm and the others suspected, it was a serious problem that would shake the foundations of the Kingdom.

This could put the continuation of the Royal Selection itself into a precarious state, and depending on the intentions of the Church of the Divine Dragon, one could even call it the seed of a disaster that could well lead to the division of the Kingdom.

What would sprout from that seed, and what kind of flowers might bloom, were things none could possibly imagine.

Be that as it may, there were things he could declare with certainty at this point in time.

There were two Royal Selection camps who would suffer the greatest impact from Filóre's existence and her proposal as a representative of the Church of the Divine Dragon. —Needless to say, one would be the Crusch Camp, to which Wilhelm also belonged.

Wilhelm: "—Crusch-sama."

Closing his eyes, Wilhelm thought of his master, who had extended a helping hand to him.

One of the Royal Selection Candidates, a preeminent woman of talent in the Kingdom, and heir to Duke Karsten: for Wilhelm, who had continued to pursue the White Whale to avenge his wife, she was his irreplaceable benefactor. But the reason he still firmly believed that she herself was worthy of the throne, even now, was not simply out of gratitude.

Crusch's attitude, character, and way of being—that heroic sense of values and bearing like a polished sword were the reasons why Wilhelm desired her to ascend to the throne with all his heart.

Even after falling into the clutches of Gluttony and losing her Memories, that was unable to take away the earnest nobility and sincerity that permeated the core of her being.

In other words, he believed that it was the innate brilliance of her soul itself.

Consequently, for that master to suffer further disasters brought Wilhelm great sorrow, and he was assailed by his own helplessness that threatened to tear him apart; such was this bitter experience of his.

However, it could be said that it was preferable to at least be able to regret and lament one's own errors, inadequacy, and mistakes in judgment.

Wilhelm: "—Ferris."

The name that he subsequently voiced was that of her admirable one and only Knight, who, as far as Wilhelm knew, was likely the individual most harrowed by his deepest regrets and sense of powerlessness in the days since the Royal Selection had begun.

Wilhelm: "…"

The reason Wilhelm was currently making their visitors, Filóre and Marcos, wait, was due to none other than Ferris. As Wilhelm and the others passed the time away in stagnation at the parlor, Ferris was spending time with Crusch in her bedroom, just the two of them.

Wilhelm gritted his teeth; just how heartbreaking, how agonizing must that time be?

It was the kind of suffering that made him want to pray that if he could take Ferris's place and grant some relief, he would.

However, Wilhelm could not serve as a substitute. —No, it was not only Wilhelm; no one else could replace Ferris in his current role.

It was a decision that none but Ferris could make, a choice that none but Ferris could be permitted to make; that was what lay before him.

Wilhelm, Filóre, Marcos; all of them could only continue to patiently wait for that decision and choice to be made, and nothing else.

There was no need to be impatient. Everyone had a hunch that it would not take long.

And in fact, it did not.

???: "—I'm sorry I've kept you waiting."

Saying so in a miserable voice, Ferris stepped into the parlor.

He was sure he had done his best. However, there were traces of tears on Ferris's pale cheeks, and his wavering amber eyes were even now still colored by a fragment of the conflict within that could not be erased.

Wilhelm hesitated to say anything, Ferris's thin shoulders drooping, and his cat ears and tail, which made his demi-human ancestry apparent, were worn out and exhausted.

He could not ask such a transparent question as "What happened?". "It is not your fault," perhaps? How in the world could he dare to say such a thing? Not to mention, if he were to say "Nothing could be done", he would want to cut off his own head.

There were no words to be said. Any conceivable words would just be a blade cutting through Ferris at the moment. Amongst everything he could choose, it was silence that would be the shortest and least horrible blade to stab him with.

Filóre: "How long it took is no problem for me. I'm aware of the weight of responsibility you shoulder… That's probably nothing more than mere consolation though."

Ferris: "…Yeah. But, mere consolation helps. Because, I'm completely overwhelmed right now."

Rather than to Wilhelm, who remained silent, Ferris instead responded to Filóre, who had spoken up.

His usual mischievous childishness mixed with frivolity had faded away, and his feeble smile seemed like it would crumble at a single touch; brittle, like it was made of candy.

Likely aware of that to a keen extent, Filóre continued her words.

Ferris seemed to be on the verge of falling apart, and as if to postpone that moment from arriving,

Filóre: "Please, let me hear the answer. —Your answer."

Gently extending her hand, Filóre fixed her crimson eyes upon Ferris and asked thus. Meeting that gaze head-on, Ferris's thin lips trembled.

The hesitation that arose, however, had no power to restrain the devotion of the Blue—

Ferris: "—Please. I'm… not enough. Please, save Crusch-sama."

To the outstretched hand of Filóre from the Church of the Divine Dragon, that was the answer of the one and only Knight of Crusch Karsten, the Blue, Felix Argyle—of Ferris.

3

???: "—Is that true?"

Right in the middle of a moment of peace, having just exchanged a promise of friendship with Felt who had come to visit the Royal Residence, was when it was heard that at the Karsten Villa in the Royal Capital, where Crusch had been transported, treatment would be administered to counter the accursed poison tormenting her body.

Otto: "My knowledge in the matter is lacking, but it seems that a discussion involving the Church of the Divine Dragon has taken place at the Royal Castle. Apparently, the Church has a countermeasure to combat the suffering that the Sin Archbishop of

Lust has inflicted upon Duchess Karsten's body."

Emilia: "A countermeasure… as in, you mean they can heal Crusch-san's body? Is it a different way than what made Subaru's hand turn black?"

Otto: "Unfortunately, for more details…"

Felt: "Well, there ain't any point in dawdling about. —Reinhard, head over to the Castle for a bit and figure out what they were talking about."

Reinhard: "Understood."

Amidst Emilia's confusion over the report from Otto, who had just returned from brewing tea, Reinhard immediately soared to the Castle upon receiving an order following Felt's swift judgment.

Watching the ever-diminishing figure of Reinhard as he jumped out of the window, Emilia muttered to herself, "The Church of the Divine Dragon…",

Emilia: "Those are the people that reaaally believe in Volcanica. But, didn't they say that, so they wouldn't get involved with the Kingdom's politics, they weren't going to approach the Castle?"

Felt: "Regardless, those bastards broke the mutual agreement and showed their faces in the Castle… It'd be great if those guys can do something about Crusch-neechan's body, but if that's the case, they should've said some damn thing sooner."

Otto: "I am unable to discern the Church of the Divine Dragon's motives. At the moment, all of the information we have is unconfirmed. It is just—"

During this conversation which grew ever more markedly perplexing, Otto closed his mouth, seemingly deep in thought. Seeing this, Emilia tilted her head and asked "Otto-kun?", and with a shake of his head,

Otto: "No, while the situation remains uncertain, I should refrain from saying anything. For now, let us wait for Reinhard-san's return.”

Emilia: “…Okay? I understand. When you want to talk about it, let me know properly.”

Felt: “Regardless of whether or not green-niichan wants to talk about it, that bastard Reinhard isn’t gonna make us wait all that long. Jeez, he’s so irritating.”

With her arms folded, Felt tapped her toe and grumbled in impatience.

As Felt gazed out of the window, gently drawing her head close, Emilia faced not towards the Castle for which Reinhard had departed, but rather searched for the Crusch Residence within the Noble District.

Since they had parted ways in Pristella, they had not been able to ascertain Crusch’s condition. Her heart panged with guilt at not being able to return with an immediately useful report from the Pleiades Watchtower. If, as Otto had overheard, the Church of the Divine Dragon was able to save Crusch, then—

Emilia: “Even if it’s not because of us, that’s totally fine. So…”

Felt: “—He’s back!”

As Emilia was about to mutter a prayer, Felt painted it over with her assertive voice.

Just as when he had departed for the Castle, Reinhard returned to the Royal Residence in a single bound. He rushed towards the window before Emilia and the others, landing softly so as to not disturb the garden lawn.

And then—

Reinhard: “Felt-sama, the situation is urgent. Would you please accompany me to the Castle?”

Felt: “Ahh? Why the Castle? More importantly, about our conversation from a moment ago…”

Reinhard: “—Felt-sama.”

Interrupting Felt, Reinhard called her name tersely. Felt narrowed her crimson eyes at his sharp demeanor, and with a “Tch” as she clicked her tongue,

Felt: “Got it. Me, to the Castle. What about Emilia-neechan and her companion?”

Reinhard: “The information from Otto’s report has been corroborated. Indeed, it seems that the Church of the Divine Dragon is heading towards Crusch-sama’s residence. There—”

Emilia: “We’ll go. I can’t sit still any longer!”

Hearing that Otto’s report was correct, Emilia gave her chest a powerful thump.

She must have been very worried about Crusch, but if Felt had no choice but to go to the Castle, then Emilia intended to bear part of her anxieties and make the visit.

Of course, there was a high possibility that they would be turned away amidst the confusion, but,

Otto: “A visit should be fine, at least. Leave it to us… It looks like we, too, might have to head to the Castle afterwards.”

Reinhard: “Agreed. It would be better for you to think that way. Felt-sama.”

Felt: “I know, no need for you to call me over and over again.”

Snorting at Reinhard as he extended his hand, Felt hopped lightly onto the window sill, and turning around to say “Emilia-neechan” as she jumped into his arms,

Felt: “The night before the devastation in Pristella, I promised Crusch-neechan that we would talk more. So…”

Emilia: “—! Yes, leave it to me! That Felt-chan is reaaally worried, I’ll be sure to let Crusch-san know!”

Felt: “Hah. I still don’t think it’s a good idea to be surrounded by friends in the Royal Selection.”

Shrugging her shoulders in response to Emilia’s strong resolve, Felt jumped into Reinhard’s arms. As he caught her with reverence, adjusting her position within his arms, Reinhard briefly glanced at Emilia and Otto—immediately after, with another single leap, he flew back towards the Castle.

Otto: “Oh dear, he really is abnormal. Us humans will have to hurry on our own feet.”

Emilia: “If I try my best, I might be able to hold Otto-kun in my arms and hop over with a “pyon”…”

Otto: “That has some pros and cons, but please do that for Natsuki-san, not me. —Let us hurry.”

Emilia: “Got it!”

Nodding at Otto’s urging, Emilia too quickly hurried off, rushing into the streets of the Royal Capital.

Their destination was the Karsten residence—previously, when Crusch and company had been injured in an attack following the Subjugation of the White Whale, they had hastened down this same route out of concern; their impatience now carried them much faster than before.

And then—

4

???: “—Ferris!”

Gasping for breath from her dash there, when Emilia witnessed the figure of Ferris kneeling as if in prayer, she called out to him with a voice bordering on a shriek.

Her voice making his flaxen cat ears tremble, Ferris timidly turned his head.

Ferris: “…Emilia… sama?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right. I haven’t heard all of it, but I know the gist. Sorry it took so long to get here.”

Ferris’s feeble voice was acutely agonizing for Emilia, and it ached deep within her heart.

He had always given off an air of adorableness and liveliness, and yet when they met again like this after such a long time, Ferris felt so pitiful and ephemeral, it seemed like he would just fade away.

As if to prevent that from happening, Emilia embraced that slender figure without any hesitation.

Ferris: “—Y-You’ll get tears and snot on you.”

Emilia: “That’s nothing to worry about. It doesn’t bother me. Leaving you like this would be way, way more painful, Ferris.”

Ferris: “—Hk.”

Taking care not to squeeze too tightly with her arms, Emilia hoped that the heat of her own body, as well as her concern for Ferris, who was right before her eyes, as well as for Crusch, would be conveyed.

Behind Emilia and Ferris, treading across the carpet was Wilhelm, who had received them. Emilia and Otto had arrived at the estate in a panic, and rather than turning them away, Wilhelm had let them in.

Having arrived late after Emilia, Otto stole a quick glance at Wilhelm,

Otto: “I know we are the ones paying you a visit, but is it okay? In this situation…”

Wilhelm: “It is my own judgement, but it was precisely because of the current situation that I did so. Even if it is but a single person, it is reassuring to know that someone is sincerely praying for Crusch-sama’s well-being right now.”

Otto: “…It is certainly true that in that regard, Emilia-sama’s power is indeed great.”

Otto and Wilhelm were having some sort of exchange behind her, but Emilia could not hear their words. Right then, she wanted to devote her heart and soul to Ferris, who was in her arms. Holding his feebly, pitifully trembling body, Emilia tenderly stroked his back.

Emilia: “Ferris, is Crusch-san…?”

Ferris: “—She’s… inside. Inside that room, right now, they’re treating…”

Emilia: “…”

Firmly within her embrace, Ferris indicated the door he had been kneeling and praying before with his gaze—within Emilia’s memories, she recalled it was a bedroom.

Without a doubt, it was the room where Crusch had been brought to rest and where the treatment was taking place.

And yet, that Ferris was outside the room like this—

???: “It is a Sacrament of the Church of the Divine Dragon, esoteric and not to be shown to outsiders.”

Emilia was taken aback when the large figure standing as still as a statue in the hallway replied with that answer. Now that she got a good look at him, she recognized him as the Commander of the Royal Guard, whom she had seen several times at the Royal Castle.

She wondered if the Commander of the Royal Guard had also been worried about Crusch and rushed over. Or perhaps he was good friends with Ferris, and that was the reason why he was present.

In any case—

Emilia: “A Sacrament… so can it be used to save Crusch-san?”

Ferris: “I d-don’t know… b-but, there’s no other way… I-I, I-I’m u-useless… hk.”

Emilia: “That’s not… hk!”

…True, is what she had wanted to say aloud. In fact, had this been the Emilia from not too long ago, she certainly would have said so without thinking anything of it.

However, she now realized that simply saying that on impulse, without any thought, would not encourage or console Ferris in any true sense.

Ferris was amazing. He possessed a truly, immensely special and incredibly kind power.

However, Ferris was unable to use this power that Emilia respected from the bottom of her heart for the sake of Crusch, the most important person in the world to him. He was crying and trembling like this, facing such a truly arduous and excruciating reality that he could do nothing about; there was no way she could say that without any thought.

Emilia: “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

Therefore, Emilia swallowed back down the words she had begun to say, and tenderly embraced Ferris. She continued to embrace him. Continued to embrace him, and continued to hold him close.

When Emilia had felt frozen by her own powerlessness, that was what had made her happiest; so, she did the same for him.

Emilia: “—Hang in there, Crusch-san.”

Supporting the weeping and trembling Ferris, Emilia prayed.

Emilia knew that Otto and Wilhelm, along with the Commander of the Royal Guard, were also praying for her, right behind where she and Ferris held each other close in prayer for Crusch’s well-being.

Behind that door, someone whose face she did not know, from the Church of the Divine Dragon, was struggling.

Struggling to save Crusch, who sustained a horrific injury fighting for the people.

Wishing for that tenacity to bear fruit, she prayed, and prayed, and prayed, and then eventually—

???: "—You can enter now."

Suddenly, a voice was heard from the other side of the door, and Emilia snapped her head up.

It was a completely exhausted female voice, its message causing Ferris to flinch within Emilia's arms as he stared at her face in disbelief.

His wholehearted prayers brought to an abrupt halt, Ferris's mind was unable to catch up with reality.

Emilia: "Can you stand?"

Ferris: "Y-Yes, I can s-stand…"

Standing up before Ferris, Emilia lent him her arm to help him up. His slender knees shook unreliably, but Ferris turned his round eyes toward the door and exhaled, walking one step at a time.

Supporting Ferris's shoulder as he did so, Emilia also headed for the door as well. Then, she turned the door handle for him, as his whole body continued to shake.

The door made a sound as it opened, and on the other side was the bedroom. There was a bed placed in the center of the room, and a woman had been laid upon it. That figure was—

Ferris: "—Ah."

Letting out a hoarse sigh, Ferris stepped forward as if he were in a trance. His legs of no particular reliability seemed like they would immediately become tangled and pull him down.

However, that did not happen. Ferris unconsciously shook off Emilia's supporting hand and headed for the bed where Crusch lay with enough momentum that it seemed like he would collapse onto it.

Ferris: “Crusch-sama… Crusch… sama… Crusch-samaaa… hk.”

Hearing that choked, tearful voice repeatedly calling out for his beloved, Emilia stepped forward towards the middle of the room as well, gazing upon Crusch, whom Ferris was fixed on.

Having spent so long bedridden, Crusch’s beauty had become emaciated, and her skin pale like that of an invalid, even despite the daily care she had received. —However, the evil poison that had taken root, stretching across her face, neck, and body, was nowhere to be found upon her visible skin.

???: “Prayers… can be answered.”

Emilia: “—You are?”

Emilia, who stood beside Ferris as he clung to the bed, looked around, noticing the form of a blonde woman across the bed, stretching out her legs as she sat on the floor.

She was a member of the Church of the Divine Dragon who had been testing a method to save Crusch. Her breathing was markedly fatigued, and despite the amount of sweat covering her forehead, the woman broke out in a smile,

Blonde Woman: “This too, is in the scriptures. “The salvation of but one, is according to the prayers of the many. For it is only in communion that the grace of the Dragon shall reign supreme.”“

Emilia: “—Hk, thank you.”

Blonde Woman: “This much is a piece of cake… I mean, of course.”

The expression of the woman with a brave smile upon her face stiffened, and she immediately corrected her speech. While feeling sincere gratitude for her efforts, Emilia crouched and put her arms around Ferris’s shoulders.

As she supported Ferris in the midst of his shaking and weeping, she rejoiced with all her heart in knowing that their prayers had been answered.

Emilia: “Crusch-san, when you wake up, there reaaally is so much that I want to talk with you about. I have a message from Felt-chan, and a lot more I want to say.”

With all traces of that gruesome and vile poison wiped from her face, Crusch slept, her eyes still closed. Wishing dearly for the time that sleeping face would wake, Emilia spoke to her.

When she woke, there would be much that Emilia wanted to talk about. Among them were her own selfish desires, spurred on by Anastasia and Felt.

Therefore—

Emilia: “Reaaally, reaaally, thank you so much for hanging in there.”

Indeed, Emilia’s eyes softened as she expressed her gratitude for each and every person there.

5

Otto: “…”

Laying his eyes upon the results displayed by the Sacrament of the Church of the Divine Dragon, Otto gazed at Ferris, who was clinging to his bed-ridden master, and Emilia, who was supporting him.

Wilhelm: “Crusch-sama, how truly… how truly…”

Likewise, bearing witness to the same sight, Wilhelm was overcome with emotion, his voice trembling.

It was proof that even he, famous for his legendary swordsmanship under the name of the Sword Demon, had continued to have his heart worn down by his inability to be of use to his master during her time of anguish.

Though incomparable to the devotion of her one and only Knight, Ferris, who had devoted himself to her for many long years, it was still clear that Wilhelm's chest had been filled with relief and gratitude.

And in no small amount, Otto felt the same.

Just before this, as he had recollected alongside Reinhard, Otto too had been shaken by the death of Priscilla. Hence, the fact that Crusch had been saved after sustaining a tremendous wound during the battle at the Watergate City caused him to feel a definite relief.

That made him glad. Truly, he was glad.

But at the same time, he became convinced of the possibility of which he had refrained from informing Emilia.

That was—

Otto: "—The Royal Selection of Duchess Crusch Karsten, ends here."

At the very least, it was a conviction that did not need to be shared with anyone present here at the current moment, in this place shedding tears of joy at Crusch's safe recovery, whispered soundlessly in the confines of his mouth.

Chapter 3:
An Omen of Light

1

—Whenever Felt set foot into the Royal Castle, she would always endure a sensation akin to breaching a resistance, one as thin as a single layer of skin.

To Felt, who had been raised in the Slums of the Royal Capital before the commencement of the Royal Selection, the Royal Castle of Lugunica was but a symbol of absolute disconnect, one that lingered at the corner of her vision, but bore no relation whatsoever to her own life.

A place that whilst there, she would have no involvement whatsoever. Hazy and irreal, like a mirage whose existence held no perceptible worth; it left such an impression.

And that was why, even now, whenever she had the opportunity to visit the Castle as a Royal Candidate, she felt as if she were stepping into a dream or an illusion.

And as such—

???: "—Felt-sama?"

Having had her name called, Felt stopped in her tracks and raised her head.

Her crimson gaze returned the stare of the blue eyes of her Knight as he turned back to her, his hands upon the door; with a brief snort, she replied shortly, "It's nothing".

Yes, it was nothing. No one could stop their stride now.

Felt: "Let's go."

Standing atop the resolution this declaration gave them, Felt tore through that skin-thin resistance, and proceeded forth.

When the Knight—Reinhard gave a nod and opened the door, on the other side was a place that, as always, was bustling with the presence of many people, a place filled with a bizarre tension.

It was a space where individual agendas intermingled chaotically, exchanged in the form of gazes and words. However, the moment Felt set foot inside, those scattered intentions were unexpectedly unified.

That was to say, unified into a single unreserved will to appraise Felt for the sake of the Kingdom's future.

Felt: "Well, it ain't like I care. When facing up with someone, I've got plenty of those same feelings myself."

Setting aside the Royal Selection, this worldly wisdom was Felt's method of survival in the Slums, or perhaps something akin to life experience. Whether the other party was useful to oneself or not, what they might be thinking deep down, she had made a habit of ascertaining such things.

In truth, even since becoming a Royal Candidate, this ingrained habit had come to her aid.

After all, she was meeting with far more people now than she ever did in the Slums, and she was swamped with opportunities where she had to discern their true motives. If she had been forced to rebuild that sense of judgment from scratch, there was no telling how much she would have struggled.

That being said—

Felt: "Though, there are folks like Emilia-neechan who have nothing to do with that sort of thing."

Emilia who, despite being a fellow Candidate for the Royal Selection, maintained a defenselessness that bordered on the miraculous.

Felt suspected that behind Emilia's ability to retain that demeanor lay the extraordinary efforts of her Knight, Natsuki Subaru, and others like Otto who accompanied her all this time.

However, on the other hand, Felt's assessment was that neither the Royal Selection nor the environment which surrounded it was simple enough for someone to survive solely by unconditional protection. For all that, Emilia possessed a solid eye for people and the intuition to sense their ulterior motives.

Since she acted that way despite having those instincts, it made things rather difficult for Felt to deal with.

Felt: "In the end, she went and made me her friend, too."

Reflecting on the decision she herself had just made, Felt heaved a deep sigh.

She had no regrets accepting Emilia's offer, but she felt that the path ahead had become unclear yet again. She had no intention of resorting to dirty tricks or schemes, but there was no doubt it would have been easier to make decisions without holding back if they were just rival camps clashing fiercely against each other.

If it was just the other side that held a one-sided affection for her, then the opponent would be the only one at a disadvantage.

Felt assumed that this must have been Anastasia's true aim in inviting the other camps to Pristella, her basic strategy. —Unfortunately, that scheme was seemingly crushed by a flow of events which led to her becoming friends with Emilia after the Royal Selection.

Be that as it may—

Felt: "Fine by me, I don't hate it. It's been a while since I've had those appraising gazes directed at me instead."

This was no bravado, but full acceptance of the scrutiny directed towards herself, as Felt twisted the corners of her mouth into a smile.

Within the throne room into which she stepped—the very place where the start of the Royal Selection had been declared, numerous officials of the Royal Castle of Lugunica were gathered; among them was the Council of Wise Men, who bore the weight of the nation's administration.

The other day, Felt had reported on the incident at the Augria Sand Dunes and the Pleiades Watchtower—of the achievements of Meili Portroute, who had sold herself as being capable of guiding the group to the Sage's Tower; the atmosphere at present was distinctly different from when she had exchanged those words with them.

It was a gaze which was usually directed at Felt, almost as if looking upon a heretic or a foreigner—in the beginning, at the point where she had joined the Royal Selection, Felt had picked a fight with every single person there.

It was close to the tone of bewilderment and confusion they had directed at that stray child from the Slums back then.

And so—

Felt: "You guys with the "Who, me?" faces might be the reason for this."

Stomping heavily across the red carpet, Felt walked directly to the center of the throne room. Closing one eye, she glared at the man and woman who were already standing there.

???: "…"

The pair that turned to face Felt were both young, barely twenty years of age.

A gentle-looking man with bright-green colored hair, and a beautiful woman with short purple hair, reminiscent of flowers blooming in the rainy season. Despite the circumstances, the two of them stood dignified, not at all overwhelmed by their surroundings.

In fact, even at Felt's opening, deliberately made as an attempt to seize the initiative, the two of them remained unshaken. The gentle-looking man gave a wry smile, while the woman waved her hand softly and fluttered, with an "Oh my, oh myyy",

Purple-haired Woman: "Hehehe, aren't you awfully sudden? Even though this is the first time we've met in this way, Felt-chan really is just as prickly as the rumors saaay.”

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Felt: “Rumors, huh. What kind of rumors are those exactly?”

Purple-haired Woman: “Small and adorable, yet majestic and dignified; strong-willed and unyielding to anyone, putting even men to shame… the reputation is that the gap in charm is enough to make one diiizzy.”

Felt: “Now those are a bunch of unwanted rumors out there…”

As Felt expressed her dejection with that answer, the woman giggled with a glossy allure.

Clothes coated in deep crimson like a ripened fruit, a hat of similar hue tilted upon her head, the woman boasted an appearance and atmosphere that resembled that of a scribe, or perhaps a maid serving someone of high status. However, the way she unreservedly closed the distance with others, and her sleepy, drowsy red eyes, made it difficult to pin her down.

If said bluntly, she gave the impression of being someone not easily dealt with. However—

Green-haired Man: “—Sakura, the person before you is a Candidate in the Royal Selection. Please stop speaking so smoothly in your usual tone. We wouldn’t have enough lives to spare.”

And, standing next to the woman, the gentle-looking man chided his companion’s attitude. That said, his rebuke was thick with the tone of a jest, offering no guarantee of his own seriousness or sincerity.

In fact, at the man pointing this out, the woman by the name of Sakura simply smiled, going “Huuuh?”,

Sakura: “Are you trying to make me the bad guy too, Tiga-chan? I’m already in bad standing thanks to that child’s selfishness, so to be told that by my only ally is such a letdooown.”

Tiga: “Then all the more reason not to increase our enemies. First impressions tend to linger, you know. Especially since right now, we are in a position where we aren't exactly welcome… right?"

Sakura: "Yeees, yeees, Tiga-chan's reasoning is sound, I suppooose."

Tiga: "I am glad you understand."

As Sakura stuck out her tongue in a sulky gesture, the man named Tiga nodded theatrically.

Then, turning himself towards Felt and Reinhard, he removed the wide-brimmed hat that had been pulled low over his head, and placing it against the chest of his dark purple cloak,

Tiga: "And so, my companion has been terribly rude, Felt-sama. I am Tiga Rauleon, and this is Sakura Element. We look forward to making your acquaintance."

As he spoke, the gentle-looking man—Tiga bowed with a distinct style, and, closing one of those yellow eyes he had turned toward Felt, he was a handsome man whose affected gestures truly suited.

Taking in the sight of Tiga and Sakura, Felt was convinced. Without a doubt, these two, who appeared to carry an atmosphere so distinct from the rest of the Royal Castle, were the reason Reinhard had taken her from the Royal Residence in a hurry—

Felt: "Reinhard, these two…"

Reinhard: "Yes. —They are the two envoys from the Church of the Divine Dragon."

Standing beside Felt where she had halted her step, Reinhard faced the two in question.

Inadvertently, Felt and Reinhard, along with the duo from the Church of the Divine Dragon, faced off with each other in the middle of the throne room, drawing the attention of those present therein the Royal Castle.

Paying no heed to such attention, Felt crossed her arms, and glaring at Tiga, Felt: “As far as I know, the Church of the Divine Dragon wasn’t supposed to involve itself in the country’s politics. So, why are you in a place like this?”

Tiga: “I am unsure of whether you will believe me, but in reality, this contact has been involuntary on our part as well. As you said, the Church has been trying to distance itself from national politics. Although of course, I won’t say that is because we lack a sense of belonging towards the Kingdom.”

Felt: “Involuntary contact, huh? You say that, while knowing that you might be able to do something for the body of Crusch Karsten, who’s a Royal Candidate herself?”

Tiga: “—. That is…”

In response to Felt’s words, Tiga faltered slightly. Next to him, Sakura covered her mouth with her hand and giggled once more.

Hearing that laugh, Felt growled with a “Huuh?” in her throat, and as Sakura tilted her head to the side,

Sakura: “No, no, Felt-chan really does have very sharp eaaars. Even though that topic you mentioned just now was supposed to be a secret kept only within this Caaastle.”

Felt: “Heh, you shouldn’t underestimate the hellish ears of this guy standing next to me. He’ll even listen to my footsteps when I get out of bed at night to go use the toilet.”

Reinhard: “While I will not deny it, that is a misleading way of phrasing that might invite misunderstanding, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Shut up, quit forcing a smile like that and just look brazen! That’ll scare them way more, right?”

The origin of the information, that the discussion being held with the Church of the Divine Dragon at the Castle involved Crusch, had actually been Otto, so Felt concealed that fact out of obligation. At this point, adding on a few more rumors about Reinhard having hellish ears, or a habit of eavesdropping, would not hurt him much anyway. It was a fact that he could likely distinguish the sound of a needle being dropped a kilometer away, too.

Be that as it may—

Felt: "—The problem's in the "Church of the Divine Dragon" bit."

Sakura: "Oh my, does Felt-chan hate the Church as weeell? I do think our activities in, say, the Slums, have had a positive impact thooough."

Felt: "Sorry, but I hate taking charity. I've never lined up for the bread the Church hands out. And, it's not like I'm saying that those activities are useless, or that I hate them. What I'm talking about right now is the part where your bunch can save Duchess Karsten."

Sakura: "Does that mean that you want to leave a rival camp alone to suuuffer?"

Felt: "You tryna make me say "no" specifically? Sorry, but I ain't got that much free time."

Felt stuck out her tongue at Sakura, who, despite her sweet manner of speaking, laced her attacks with poison.

Indeed, Crusch belonged to a rival camp, but the reason she had fallen into her current state could not be helped. Everyone who had been present at that event bore a guilt regarding it, and if she was heading towards recovery, it was only human to try and take whatever helping hands were available. —However, those of the Church of the Divine Dragon alone, were for Crusch a terrible mismatch.

After all—

???: "—Duchess Crusch Karsten declared at the start of the Royal Selection: that she would annul the Covenant exchanged with the Dragon, and break away from the peace protected by it."

Everyone: "…"

Speaking thus, interrupting the conversation of Felt and the others, was an old man with a long beard who sat in a chair in the row of the Council of Wise Men—Miklotov McMahon. Felt, sighing slightly at the words of one of the Sages who had finally decided to talk,

Felt: "…The very person who made the declaration that the whole country relying on the Dragon was pathetic, she's now borrowing the power of the Church of the Divine Dragon that worships said Dragon? It must look kinda lame…"

???: "Be careful of what you say, Felt-sama. This is not a matter of appearances…"

Miklotov: "No, it is as Felt-sama says. Appearances… in summary, it is a matter of optics. In that regard, Crusch-sama will receive an irreparable blow. Though, that is only if she chooses to take the hand offered to her."

One of the civil officials present tried to interject in the exchange between Felt and Miklotov, but he was chided by none other than Miklotov himself.

The Sage's interjection implied that the final right to make the decision regarding the proposal from the Church of the Divine Dragon lay with Crusch and her Camp.

However—

Reinhard: "—Ferris."

Holder of the title of the Blue, he who was the one and only Knight of Crusch, who now lingered in the utmost torment, was also the friend Reinhard thought of as he lowered his eyes slightly and uttered that name from his lips.

Felt had witnessed with her own eyes when she had visited how his beauty, usually mistakable for that of a lovely woman, had withered away from exhaustion, and how much he agonized and gasped beside Crusch. She had not heard of Crusch's condition improving since then. If that was the case, his state of mind would be the same.

His precious master, continuing to burn in the flames of a deadly poison in a living hell. If a means to save her was offered, no one could blame her one and only Knight, no matter what decision he made.

Miklotov: “Of course, even for us, there was a debate regarding this proposal from the Church of the Divine Dragon. First, we had to ascertain whether the content of the proposal was factual or not. Depending on the result…”

Felt: “Maybe the guys who got affected in Pristella could be saved too. If ya think about that, the things we’re hung up on are pretty small potatoes, I guess.”

Miklotov: “Hmm. Are you convinced, then…”

Felt: “You really think I can be?”

She understood the logic, and she understood the reasoning. However, emotional acceptance was a different matter altogether.

Having joined the Royal Selection, Felt intended to keep moving in order to win. But, with Priscilla having died in the recent events in the Empire, if Crusch were to drop out because of this, it would be a completely different outcome from the way Felt wanted to settle things.

If it were to end in that manner, would it be all that different from Reinhard just going on a rampage and rendering all the other Royal Candidates into invalids?

Miklotov: “It is not as if anyone is to blame. If one must point fingers, every bit of fault lies with the Witch Cult.”

Felt: “I know it’s too late now, but I really should’ve roughed up that Wrath bastard a bit more before throwing her in prison. If I’d done that, maybe my gut would’ve settled down a little.”

Of course, she knew perfectly well that doing so would not solve anything, and it probably would not have made her feel any better, either. In the first place, most of the damage in Pristella had been caused by Gluttony and Lust; the aftereffects left by Wrath were extremely minor.

Reinhard understood this as well, so no one took that hateful grumbling of Felt's seriously.

In any case—

Felt: "I get what's going on. The Church brought a treatment method, and the Duchess… ah, whatever. Whether Crusch-neechan will be saved or not depends on whether her Knight accepts that treatment… We don't have the right to butt in there."

Even if she had her own thoughts on the matter, only the people involved could choose what to do.

Having admitted that, Felt asked "So?", directing her question to Reinhard beside her, and then to everyone present in the room.

Felt: "I understand the flow of things up to this point, but why was it necessary to drag me here in such a rush? I appreciate the explanation, sure, but you know Emilia-neechan is in the Royal Capital right now, too, it's not just me. If it's just this explanation, it shouldn't have made a difference if you told us all together."

This matter had the ability to significantly affect the Royal Selection. That was all the more reason why this information should have been shared urgently not just with Felt, but with Emilia as well. In a situation such as this, it was unlikely that Reinhard would try to outwit Emilia by bringing along only Felt. It was doubtful Reinhard even possessed the concept of outwitting others.

Despite that, there had to have been a reason why Felt, and only Felt, was brought to this place.

Felt: "If there is a reason, is it you guys from the Church? But, as of right now, I don't have anything I wanna discuss with the Church… Though, I guess we could talk about the Divine Dragon."

Her words became somewhat muddy and her tone dropped in the second half—Felt's perception of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, whom the Church of the Divine Dragon worshipped so grandly, had just recently changed.

Felt: "After all, when I went along with Meili to the Pleiades

Watchtower, I ended up having to watch Reinhard fight that empty-headed Dragon up close and personal…”

The battle between the Sword Saint and the Divine Dragon had not taken place in an environment where either could exert their full power, but it had still been a fierce, apocalyptic clash. Through that battle, Felt had learned that the Divine Dragon was in a state far removed from the majesty spoken of in legends, but if she had been asked to explain the details, she would have been at a loss for words.

However, Tiga, in response to Felt’s concerns, shrugging his shoulders,

Tiga: “No, summoning you, Felt-sama, wasn’t our intention. Or rather, regarding the discussion just now, the Church is actually in a delicate position.”

Felt: “Just now, you mean the stuff involving Crusch-neechan? And what do you mean, delicate?”

Tiga: “Well, simply put… the Church hasn’t actually given a clear answer yet on whether we would act to save Duchess Crusch Karsten.”

Felt: “Haaah…?”

Felt involuntarily groaned in a low voice at the reply given by Tiga, who frowned with a troubled expression.

It was a statement that made no sense. She had understood the situation to be that the Church of the Divine Dragon possessed a means to heal those afflicted by the Witch Cult, had declared they would save Crusch with it, and had contacted the Royal Castle. But, what Tiga just said completely undermined that premise.

Felt: “But, that treatment is supposed to be administered to Crusch-neechan right now. If the Church hasn’t given an answer, then why is that…”

Sakura: “That is becaaause… one of our impatient girls went running ahead on her ooown.”

Felt: “…Running ahead?”

Sakura: “Yeees. That is whyyy we also rushed to the Castle in a great paaanic to hear the situation from everyone. It really is quite the biiind.”

It was hard to tell just how much of it to believe, given Sakura’s lack of seriousness. However, Tiga, who seemed far more capable of normal conversation compared to Sakura, did not stop nor deny her statement, but instead placed a hand on his forehead as if embarrassed by his own kin.

If it was true, then the Church of the Divine Dragon had some reckless personnel of its own.

But, even so—

Felt: “That still doesn’t explain why I was called here.”

Miklotov: “Hrm. Regarding that point, we too find it exceedingly troubling. Since Knight Reinhard happened to be present, we asked that you attend as well, Felt-sama. After all, in the dilemma we now face, Felt-sama is a concerned party.”

Felt: “…”

Having been told that it was a problem related to her, Felt narrowed her crimson eyes and licked her lips.

Even if it had taken quite the detour, it seemed as though they were finally arriving at the main topic.

The movement of the Church of the Divine Dragon regarding Crusch’s fate, the fact that this was unexpected even for the part of the Church, and the reason why Felt was called to this place where their envoys were present.

That was—

Miklotov: “The person I mentioned earlier, who contacted us on their own from the Church of the Divine Dragon… is a woman with beautiful golden hair, and crimson red eyes. Furthermore…”

Felt did not interject as Miklotov spoke these words.

The characteristics of this person were being told to her as if they were significant; Felt was not dull enough to miss what that implied.

While watching Felt's reaction, Miklotov voiced the continuation of his explanation.

Miklotov: "That person gave her name as Filóre—claiming to be the same name as the daughter of Ford Lugunica-sama, the younger brother of the King, the very girl who went missing fifteen years ago."

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—Filóre Lugunica, daughter of Prince Ford Lugunica.

While the significance carried by that name and existence was massively important for the Kingdom, it was of even greater significance to Felt above all else.

After all, Felt's participation in the Royal Selection had not been solely decided due to her causing the Dragon Gem embedded in the insignia to shine, the act that qualified one for the Royal Selection; there was an even greater reason: the suspicion that Felt might have in fact been the missing Filóre.

As fate would have it, it had been fifteen years since Filóre had vanished as a baby.

That lined up with Felt in terms of age, and her hair and eye color were also consistent with the characteristic traits of the Royal Family of Lugunica. Of course, Felt had never thought of herself as a member of the Royal Family, and she had never attempted to take advantage of it. —However, she was not so self-centered that she could completely disregard the possibility those around her might have been expecting.

There were many in the Kingdom of Lugunica who saw in Felt the possibility that she was of the lost Royal Family.

No matter how Felt saw herself, she could not change the expectations and envy of others; such was human nature. And even without speaking of the greater picture encompassing the subjects of the Kingdom, to those who happened to be present there during the commencement of the Royal Selection—and to even Reinhard as well, it was a glimpse of hope that they cherished.

Without a doubt, it was true that the possibility of the Royal Family's survival had bestowed Felt, who originated from the Slums, with an initial blade to wield in the fight upon the stage of the Royal Selection.

And then—

Felt: "—The real Filóre who disappeared, huh?"

Felt muttered this under her breath, the situation suddenly sinking into her chest.

Indeed, no wonder such a great uproar had spread through the Royal Castle. Perhaps the possibility that Crusch had been saved by the Church of the Divine Dragon, raising real concerns about her possible withdrawal from the Royal Selection, was itself being treated as a trifling matter in the wake of that fact.

That was just how astounding the existence of the nun from the Church of the Divine Dragon who called herself Filóre was.

???: "—Felt-sama."

Suddenly, she was addressed by Reinhard, standing next to her, causing Felt's breath to catch slightly.

That appeal certainly had not caught her off-guard, but nevertheless, Felt had failed to pick up on what emotions had been contained within that voice. —No, she must admit it.

The clear turmoil stirring within Felt prevented her from picking up on Reinhard's emotions.

Felt: "…"

In the beginning, when she had been brought to the commencement of the Royal Selection by Reinhard, she held naught but strong feelings of rebellion and hostility, partly due to her life of forced confinement in the mansion after being taken there from the loot house. Ultimately, she had decided to participate in the Royal Selection due to the course of events that transpired there, including Rom-jii's intrusion. However, the reason Reinhard had brought her there in the first place, endorsing her as a candidate, must have been due to his suspicions of the survival of the Royal Family, the foundations of which had now been shaken to their very core.

They had been repudiated. —No, it was not a repudiation, they stubbornly remained as uncertainties. In addition, Felt had so far scoffed at that possibility and walked all over it.

And yet, when it was repudiated once and for all before her own eyes, a clear turmoil churned within her soul. It was not due to some desire to attain royalty.

Those who had hoped Felt was a member of the Royal Family found their expectations betrayed, a disappointment caused by circumstances beyond her control.

Felt: "…How pathetic."

Discerning the true nature of that budding turmoil, Felt was disgusted with herself.

She hated herself for always being so bold and brazen, pretending to be unshakable no matter what might happen; yet as soon as she realized that something unforeseen might have been lost, something she thought she could be free of without it bothering her at all, she panicked so disgracefully.

Gritting her teeth at how pathetic she was being, Felt forced her heavy, stiff neck to turn, somehow managing to look in the direction of Reinhard, who stood beside her.

No matter what kind of face Reinhard was making there—

Felt: “…”

Having braced herself, Felt looked up, and within her vision was a pair of eyes looking straight back at her, the azure skies captured within them, not a single bit of worry or turmoil lay there whatsoever. Even disappointment, to say nothing of dejection, was absent.

There was truly only one thing present there: the utmost trust in Felt, that was all.

Felt: “…What the hell sort of eyes are you making, huh?”

Reinhard: “In my own way, I believe they contain my unwavering loyalty to you, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “—. Hah, shut it.”

Whether he intended it in jest or in complete seriousness, Felt replied to Reinhard’s response by poking her elbow into his side as he gave a slight smile. She had no choice but to do so. What was particularly aggravating was that Reinhard’s bearing just then had made the emotions weighing on her suddenly feel so much lighter.

Felt: “No matter what, I’m me. Can’t do anything ‘cept fight back like that.”

She had needed an impetus to openly fight back against that which was obvious. By chance, that was provided by Reinhard, and despite wanting to object to that, Felt refrained from any complaint.

She had objections, but they were not bad objections. Although, she would never admit that to Reinhard.

And just like that, a definite and clear decision had immediately been made within Felt.

???: “—Knight Marcos Gildark has returned.”

Indeed, as a guard brought the news to the throne room, the expressions of all those there abruptly became tense. As Felt became alarmed by such a reaction, Reinhard leaned in to whisper in her ear, saying,

Reinhard: “It appears Commander Marcos brought the woman in question to Crusch-sama. Regardless of the right or wrong of such a remedy…”

Felt: “We’re coming face-to-face then. What a relief that it’s after I made up my mind.”

Responding to Reinhard’s whisper, Felt took a long, deep breath. Then, having Reinhard remain where he was standing next to her, she waited for a moment.

Then—

???: “—So many people have been waiting for me. The circumstances are what they are, so perhaps it’s only natural.”

Felt heard such notions from an individual as they stepped through the door of the throne room and peered inside.

Felt: “So that’s…”

Was she the one calling herself Filóre, the nun from the Church of the Divine Dragon who had marched into the Royal Castle?

Just as she had heard prior, the woman was a nun with long golden hair and crimson eyes filled with determination. Though she was boldly standing tall, she seemed uncomfortable receiving the attention of the entire room all at once. However, due to the presence of the large armored figure just behind her, she could hardly step back.

In the end, she shook her head as if in resignation, and stepping straight into the room—

???: “—Filóre-chan?”

Filóre: “Gehgeh.”

Upon taking her first step, she recognized the figure of Sakura turning and waving, and her carefully prepared expression stiffened dramatically, the color immediately draining from her face.

As it was, she had shifted her weight onto her front leg and then halted her movement, but after a brief pause, she attempted to turn around.

???: “Filóre, everyone already knows, so please behave yourself and come over here.”

Filóre: “Guh, not just Sakura, but even you, Tiga…”

Tiga: “Of course we were going to show up. Seriously, you’re just being selfish.”

Though the half-turned Filóre appeared distressed at Tiga’s appeal as he shrugged in exasperation, she also appeared resigned.

Abandoning the option of turning tail and fleeing, the girl plodded over dejectedly, her shoulders hunched, and before Tiga and Sakura, who were naturally acquaintances of hers, she took a deep breath, and—

Filóre: “Devoting ourselves in prayer for the people of the Kingdom is the true purpose of the Church of the Divine Dragon, and I merely followed that doctrine. How about that?”

Tiga: “No matter how you put it…”

Sakura: “I don’t think you’re escaping a scolding and a lectuuure.”

Filóre: “But I’m not in the wrong!”

Immediately after puffing out her chest and making a grand declaration, her bluff was shattered. Toward the nun at her wits end who raised her voice to nearly that of a shriek—toward Filóre, Felt instinctively raised an eyebrow.

The girl had a considerably different air about her compared to the first impression she gave off at a glance.

Moreover—

Felt: “You’re quite a bit taller than me. Does the difference come from the luxury you lived in as a kid?”

Filóre: “Hold up, luxury? By luxury, are you referring to me? If that’s the case, that’s a big mistake. The Church of the Divine Dragon’s motto is the spirit of charity! Most of the Church’s spirit of compassion and charity is directed outward, not inward. In other words…”

Felt: “In other words?”

Filóre: “We’re famished almost all the time!”

With her hand on her stomach, Filóre loudly complained about the Church’s righteous poverty. Felt scratched her cheek in response to the vigor and volume of her voice, and upon finishing her declaration, Filóre was smacked on the back of the head. As she turned around with an “Ouch,” standing there behind her was Tiga, who had struck her head.

Directing his eyes in Filóre’s direction, looking at her like a troublesome little sister,

Tiga: “Don’t go around flaunting our shame. It’s a secret we’d taken great pains to keep from the heart of the nation until now. You’re not planning to expose anything and everything like that, are you?”

Filóre: “Th-There’s no way I would. If I were that loose-lipped, you two…”

Sakura: “In that caaase, what about the Sacrameeent?”

Filóre: “…”

The sound of Filóre gulping in response to the questioning echoed with remarkable forte throughout the throne room.

As Tiga and Sakura both examined her face from either side, Filóre opened and closed her mouth for a moment, and then,

Filóre: “…I m-made everyone leave.”

Tiga & Sakura: “Haaah…”

Filóre: “What grand sighs! Is this… is this the thanks I get for helping others? This too, is in the scriptures! ‘Even evils perpetrated under the cover of dusk are as a bonfire at midday in the eyes of the Dragon. The conceit of being able to keep it concealed is the very darkness of delusion thou dost construct for thyself!’”

Hoisting up the thick scriptures she had hastily produced with both hands, Filóre gave her excuse.

Felt was not very familiar with it, but she took the substance of what she had said just now to be something along the lines of, “Secrets always come out in the end, so do not become overconfident in them.”

That aside, there would most likely be some complaints about the scriptures of the Church of the Divine Dragon being used as a dictionary of excuses.

???: “Knight Marcos, did all go well?”

Ignoring the representatives of the Church of the Divine Dragon arguing amongst themselves, Miklotov fished for information from the Commander of the Royal Guard who had entered the throne room alongside Filóre.

His name called and a question asked of him, Marcos responded “Sir,” with a stern look still on his face.

Marcos: “I personally accompanied her and bore witness to the power of Miss Filóre’s Sacrament.”

Felt: “Bore witness, meaning…”

Marcos: “—The wicked flames that dwelt within Duchess Crusch Karsten have entirely lost their vitality, and their influence has vanished.”

Marcos’s report caused Felt’s cheeks to stiffen with emotions she had no answer to.

Crusch had been saved; that was indeed joyous news. Yet Felt could not fully call the fact that she had been saved by the Church of the Divine Dragon joyous news.

However, just as she had prepared herself a moment ago, only those involved could have made that choice.

Miklotov: "—Hmmm, is that so?"

With the wisdom of his years, Miklotov accepted something akin to the complicated emotions Felt had experienced, then assessed Filóre's state of affairs with a single glance. Filóre raised her head to meet his gaze, and as Miklotov stroked his long beard, he continued with a "Well then,"

Miklotov: "There is much for us to discuss. Of course, there is also the matter of the Sacrament Miss Filóre has provided us proof of, but above all else…"

Filóre: "—? Was there something else?"

Puzzled, Filóre frowned as if she were completely clueless as to what Miklotov had left unspoken.

Aside from that reaction of Filóre's, Miklotov's hesitation to put it into words earlier was most likely out of consideration for Felt, who happened to be in attendance.

However—

Felt: "I don't need that sort of consideration. —Reinhard."

Reinhard: "Of course."

At Felt's command, Reinhard gently placed something in her outstretched palm as if he had known to do so.

For a moment, Felt examined the feeling of the object in her hand, and then flicked it with her finger in front of her—toward Filóre.

Filóre: "Wah, wh-wh-what? What's this?"

Quickly putting out both her hands, Filóre caught the object flying right at her. She blinked at that sudden action, to which Felt softly snorted.

Then, turning to face everyone there who had gone wide-eyed at that action of Felt's, making a show of shrugging her shoulders—

Felt: "This is what everyone here all wanted to see, right?"

Felt pointed with her thumb, and just beyond it stood the figure of Filóre, both hands enveloping that which she had received—within her hands, the insignia she received shone.

It was undoubtedly proof that she had been chosen as a Dragon Priestess by the Dragon Gem. —It was the sixth brilliant omen of light that blessed the existence of a Dragon Priestess recognized by the Dragon Gem.

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Chapter 4:
You’re Welcome

1

???: “The invention of a Magic Stone engine, as opposed to a steam engine, couldn’t come sooner.”

Said Subaru, his eyes focused ahead as he sat at the coachman’s seat, reins gripped. Snugly seated atop Subaru’s knees, Beatrice knitted her eyebrows at his words.

Beatrice: “…There’s another curiously odd thing you blurted out, in fact. What is a Magic Stone “engin“, I suppose?”

Subaru: “A technology that isn’t in this world yet. See, if we could use the energy from Magic Stones to create a system close to a steam engine, then maybe we’d be able to make a locomotive.”

Beatrice: ““Lowkomowtiv“?”

Subaru: “It’s kind of like an iron dragon carriage that doesn’t need a ground dragon, that can keep on running till its supply of Magic Stones run out. It can only travel across places where there’s railway tracks, so it has less liberty, but on the other hand it would make it possible to come and go from places at a substantially good pace wherever there’s rail connectivity. What do you think?”

Beatrice: “No matter what one may think, it seems to be convenient, in fact. That is, if you can close your eyes to the absurdly nonsensical parts, I suppose.”

Subaru tapered his lips in apparent displeasure at Beatrice, her reply failing to conceal her dismay.

He did think it was a fairly considerable idea, but it truly would be quite difficult to transmit the image in his head to those who had not seen the real thing. Above all, in terms of knowledge pertaining to working locomotives, Subaru was nearly just as lacking as

Beatrice. If only he had been more informed about the construction of steam engines, he could have said something with more of a sense of reality.

???: "—Dodogyuuun."

Subaru: "Uh-oh, my bad my bad, Patrasche. I didn't mean any offense, especially not after you came all the way to the Empire to receive me. It was only a right-person-at-the-right-place kinda talk…"

Patrasche: "—Dodogyuuun!"

Beatrice: "Unfortunately, it seems that won't suffice to swindle her, in fact. The more you upset Patrasche, the less likely she will be to return, I suppose."

Subaru: "Now that's a situation I'd like to avoid no matter what… please don't be maaad."

Having failed to share the exact image of a locomotive, he must have transmitted that the role it would perform would intrude upon hers. Scratching his head at the objections of his beloved dragon Patrasche, Subaru adjusted his clutch on the reins once again and narrowed his eyes at the unchanging, unrelenting scenery of sand.

—After shutting down Al's attempt at the Pleiades Watchtower, Subaru set his course straight for the Royal Capital along with his group, determined to uncover the things he needed to learn no matter what, while carrying the truths that had been brought to light during the loop that had been undone.

The shock of Al's betrayal was weighty, and in order to digest that as well, the group departed from the Tower with enthusiasm crossing into the realm of bravado—however, the road to the ever-important Royal Capital was long.

After all, the journey spanned from the eastern edge to the western edge of the Kingdom of Lugunica, a distance crossing across almost the entire Kingdom.

Even borrowing the power of the energetic and exceptional

Patrasche, it appeared to take a substantial number of days, so even though on one hand a part of him braced himself, his vexation amplified on the other.

In this agonizing state of mind, even if Subaru could escape into his mind to explore ideas for new means of travel, he would probably concede them as unsalvageable halfway through.

Subaru: "If a locomotive or train did become a practical reality, I wonder how much travel time would be shortened… it should undoubtedly be able to move faster than a ground dragon without rest."

He did not have the leisure for it now, but once things calmed down, he would consider discussing it with Roswaal or Otto in a more serious caliber.

As a concept, it was similar to the coupled dragon carriages invented in the Empire, but those were based on ground dragons and relied upon the running capacity of each creature, so a Magic Stone-powered device should have a higher level of convenience.

Subaru: "If we could make it happen, I bet it would knock Abel's socks off. Just imagining him frustratedly asking me to teach him how we did it makes it start to feel more and more worthwhile."

Beatrice: "If it involves Magic Stones, then Betty may also be able to offer advice, but won't cooperate if it's for some worthless objective like getting the better of that Abel, in fact."

Subaru: "Right. Seeing Abel's sniveling mug was a worthless motive. Forget it, forget it."

Erasing away the image of the grimacing mug of Abel that surfaced in his mind with his hand, Subaru set his chin on Beatrice's temple and let out a short sigh. Beatrice registered the sigh above her head, and the solid sensation at the back of her head—the black orb hanging from Subaru's neck.

Beatrice: "Subaru, that forbidden technique—"

Subaru: "It's something that you brought to light… I'm sorry, but that's all the explanation I can give."

Beatrice: "You won't be reproached or anything, I suppose. What Betty is concerned about is the composition of that magic, and the anomalous precision of its method of target selection… it felt like a glimpse of Mother, in fact."

Subaru: "Mother… Echidna, huh."

Beatrice: "I suppose."

Beatrice nodded as Subaru recalled the Witch of Greed he had encountered in the Sanctuary.

Speaking of her detestable face, in the midst of the Great Disaster of the Vollachian Empire, he had even seen her face-to-face when Sphinx took on her appearance. In light of the depth and expanse of the scars that Witch of Greed had bequeathed, the credence of their exchanges in the Tomb was lost on Subaru by this point.

Moreover, the existence of the Witch of Greed, in contrast to the scars she had left behind all throughout the world, had been far too inordinately meticulously suppressed.

Not fading away due to the passage of time, it would have been more natural to deem it a purposeful erasure from history. —That raised a question: who was responsible?

Subaru: "It is true that Echidna ended up dying, so it's not like she did it herself. But, considering she continued perpetrating evil deeds even after death by entering and exiting people's dreams, that too becomes dubious."

Beatrice: "At least that should expectably be impossible, in fact. To freely visit people's dreams even after death should be unfeasible for even Dream Arts Users who are masters of the Dream Method, I suppose."

Subaru: "D-Dream Arts Users? Dream Method?"

Beatrice: "Magic that uses dreams as intermediary to meddle with the opponent's mind, in fact. On top of that, it is a kind of forbidden art, and its users were almost entirely eradicated, I suppose."

Subaru: "That kinda thing's definitely still out there somewhere! Interfering with the mind? Maybe the users just planted some convenient memory in people's minds that they had been eradicated and let themselves slip away."

Beatrice: "Th-That's way too pessimistic, in fact…! Ahem, anyhow, I suppose. The approach of Mother, whom you and Emilia encountered in the Tomb, may seem to apply the principles of the Dream Method, but strictly speaking, it is something entirely different, so invading the consciousnesses of living beings, like invading dreams should be undoable, in fact."

Subaru assented to Beatrice's adorable explanation, her upraised finger waving.

He was unaware of the detailed principles, but the Castle of Dreams that Echidna inhabited exclusively used the special ground known as the Tomb as its nucleus, so it did not stretch to the outside—or so it seemed.

If that were the case, then the fear of Echidna having done everything by her own power would disappear.

Subaru: "But in that scenario, it'd mean that there would be someone who acceded to Echidna's will and carried out the concealment, with the most likely candidate being Roswaal…"

Beatrice: "If it is the crime of someone close, there's no choice but to choke back tears and push him out, I suppose."

Subaru: "Like I said, we can't push him out till the Royal Selection ends, and even after the Royal Selection ends I'd like not to, if possible. Also, the one who plays the part of a pretty girl in front of me, Beatrice, actually making some secret moves in the shadows as Echidna's apostle is a development that's convention for entertainment, you know?"

Beatrice: "Betty being the final boss is a plotline that's been discarded long before, in fact. It doesn't have a fragment of convincingness or cohesiveness, a trashy idea that's just fishing for shock value, I suppose."

Subaru: "I think so too, but you're really tellin' em…"

She had no intent to entertain even the idea of her becoming Subaru's enemy even in jest. That too was evidence of the extent to which she cherished Subaru, nothing more.

All that said, assuming it was neither Roswaal nor Beatrice who went around erasing any traces of Echidna, then—

Subaru: "—The Witch Cult."

Beatrice: "…"

Beatrice faintly twitched and halted her breath. This nervous reaction by Beatrice was proof of her internal agreement with Subaru's muttering.

The Witch of Greed—no, not confined to information about only Echidna, but all of the Witches affixed with the deadly sins other than the Witch of Envy, were on the verge of having their entire existence erased down to the last traces.

And when the Sin Archbishops had all simultaneously appeared in the Watergate City of Pristella, they had shoved their respective egotistical demands onto the city for things that they wanted in exchange for the lives of the city's inhabitants. Back then, there were those like Regulus who were simply seeking to fulfill their own desires, but there were also objects of demand in the mix that would have been difficult to imagine as what the individuals personally desired.

Subaru: "On top of that, I've also heard from Otto before. No matter what part of the world, if there's something that's happened to be found with a connection to the Witch, then the Witch Cult would come to rob it… that sorta thing."

In reality, the Fortified City of Garkla, which Subaru and the others had visited in Vollachia, was said to have collapsed into annihilation in the wake of that same Regulus's sizeable rampage.

Forced to reminisce about an enemy he did not wish to recall, he felt a deep sense of revulsion.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “I feel that the destructive rampage at Pristella does support the rumors Otto had spoken about. If that’s the case, then the group’s rampages aren’t just simple terrorism by a cult group, there’s an entirely separate strategy—and that’s exactly what’s attempting to erase the Witches from this world, isn’t it?”

The Witch Cult espoused the Witch of Envy, and assented to the offer of worship to that being.

Because this cursory information had been spread as common sense, the fact that they sought to erase all traces of Witches other than the Witch of Envy might have been getting concealed.

Subaru: “Not “If you want to hide a tree, put it in a forest”, but if you want to hide a Witch then put it in the Witch of Envy episode, huh…? But, if that’s the case, then the one who created the Witch Cult would be…”

Beatrice: “—It cannot have been… Mother, in fact.”

Following the same train of thought as Subaru’s, Beatrice anticipated this conclusion and negated it.

Lips sealed shut, Beatrice’s visage as she looked onward was out of Subaru’s sight. However, imbued in her words was something far too brittle to be labelled conviction, a feeble orison.

She must have known that rationally, Subaru’s idea did conform to reason.

But what evermore forbade Beatrice from acknowledging it was the truth of the person in question being Beatrice’s creator, and family whom she had spent an invaluable spell of time with.

Subaru understood that to an aching extent, and simultaneously, it became a source of ire toward Echidna.

Subaru: “To make my adorable Beako go through something so gruelling…”

The Witch who had left Beatrice behind for four hundred years in the Forbidden Library, after commanding her to wait for That Person.

That Echidna’s true intent behind her instruction was the desire to know whom Beatrice would choose as That Person, the reason being a fearsomely wicked curiosity, was something Subaru knew. Naturally, he could not possibly reveal that to Beatrice. Nor did he intend to convey it.

To repudiate the emotions with which Beatrice cherished Echidna and then overwrite them with himself was a vulgar, pathetic thought. Beatrice could continue to cherish Echidna; all Subaru had to do was become something greater than that for her.

Subaru: “Beako, I love you.”

Beatrice: “—?! The flow of conversation changed, I suppose?!”

Love and purpose brimming over, Subaru hugged Beatrice tightly from behind. Upon his embrace, Beatrice’s solemn face turned red. This was it, exactly this.

Not to dismiss this discussion with vague undecidedness—

Subaru: “We won’t find an answer at this time or place. We need to go to the Royal Capital and… wait, this is where the conversation ends up again? Goddammit, can’t wait for the invention of the Magic Stone engine…!”

Clutching the black orb hanging by his breast, Subaru vented in annoyance.

The itinerary was yet long, the set destination of the Royal Capital yet far away—

And Subaru’s impatience would be dissolved through rather unanticipated means.

That being—

???: "—Good grief, got tired of waitin'. You're finally back."

Awaiting Subaru and the others in the post town of Mirula that they reached after crossing the sand sea was a bald giant with crossed arms as thick as logs—Rom-jii's reception, and the surprise they received from it, was where it began.

2

Beatrice: "—It is surprising that there is still a surviving member of the giants, I suppose. I had thought that just about all of them would have already died out in a similar vein to the Oni Clan, in fact."

Rom: "Unfortunately, never've I happened ta meet another giant 'side from myself. It's possible that I'm the last of the giants still kickin' in this world."

Subaru: "Seriously? Isn't that way more severe than simply being on a countdown to extinction?"

As Beatrice stared up at his huge body, the giant in question, Rom-jii, replied to her. And hearing that, Subaru furrowed his brow at the hopeless situation of the giants.

After all, if the only survivor still remaining was the ultra-elderly Rom-jii, there was no longer any hope for posterity, with extinction an inevitability. If the final survivor of the race had been younger, they might have been able to leave more threads of possibility, but,

Rom: "What, it stands ta reason that a race done servin' it's purpose would die out. The giants 'n the Oni Clan, there's no further reason ta keep 'em alive in the world here ta come. It's up ta the individuals ta live 'n perish as they please… that's just how it goes."

Subaru: "You know, I really don't like that sorta fatalistic outlook. Though, even if I say all that now, I guess it's too late to do anything about it."

Rom: "Those are some laudable things you're sayin'. Seems like you've also gone 'n learned a bit of prudence."

As Subaru poked his tongue against the interior of his cheek in frustration, Rom-jii's own cheeks bent into a smile and he clapped the former on the shoulder with his large palm.

In fact, this was the first time Subaru was getting to properly talk to Rom-jii since the day upon which the start of the Royal Selection was declared, when both of them had taken measures to sneak into the Castle.

He had heard that Rom-jii served as the brain of Felt's operation, but only upon exchanging a few words with him here after a long while did it finally begin to sink in.

Subaru: "Looking back on it, before even Beako, Rom-jii and Felt were some of the first people I met in this world, so it's somewhat deeply emotional… Though going deeper on that line of thought, I met that unc at the fruit stand before ever meeting Emilia-tan, which is a bit…"

To begin with, if he was going to start talking about the pace of his encounters, he would also have to include Tonchinkan, causing his head to act up.

Either way, sharing a reunion with an old acquaintance was something of great joy to Subaru. All the more when it came to somebody whom he had gotten to know on the very first day of his summoning to another world.

Hence—

Subaru: "—You're one of those people too, Reinhard."

???: "Thank goodness. Your conversation with Rom-jii was so lively, I thought that I had been completely forgotten about."

Subaru: "Being forgotten? You of all people? You ever experienced that sorta thing?"

Reinhard had such a sense of presence that even if his Name were to be devoured by the Authority of Gluttony, it seemed like it would be impossible to forget him. And in all likelihood, he would never find himself in the situation of having his Name eaten to begin with.

As Subaru pointed that out, Reinhard gave a wry smile as he shrugged his shoulders,

Reinhard: “Fortunately, I have not had the opportunity as of yet. And so, it is not as though I feel no burden. After all, my own actions can never be undone.”

As he spoke, Reinhard’s eyes glanced behind Subaru—towards Garfiel, standing there with an imposing air about him.

Off to the side from their reunion, Garfiel was silently casting his sharp, emerald-green eyes towards Reinhard. Basking in his gaze, Reinhard softly narrowed his own blue eyes, and,

Reinhard: “You have gotten quite a bit stronger since the last time we met. In such a short time at that, it is an incredible feat.”

Garfiel: “Tch, you’re sayin’ that so lightly. Even tho’ for me, it was a matter of levelin’ up after bein’ thrust to the brink of dyin’ countless times, the depth of yer strength keeps gettin’ more ‘n more unfathomable.”

Reinhard: “I wonder, are you not going to challenge me like you did in Pristella anymore?”

Garfiel: “Even if I tried now, there’d be no winnin’. Besides, if my amazin’ self went ‘n lost against ya on my own, that classification’d just end up causin’ trouble for Emilia-sama.”

Turning away as he clicked his tongue, Garfiel firmly held back his own combative spirit.

He was not overthinking it. In reality, since her Knight’s strength was of no match, the one who would be compared to Reinhard was the military officer of the Emilia Camp, Garfiel. If it became known that Garfiel was defeated in a head-on fight against Reinhard, even if that classification was already fully understood by society, it was entirely possible that the Camp would gain an impression of lacking strength.

Thus, Garfiel had considered all of that by himself, and held back.

Subaru: “Garfiel… you’ve grown up so much…!”

Garfiel: “Ahh?! Th’ fuck, Captain, don’t pat my head! I just said some pathetic shit ‘bout how I can’t win right now! There ain’t no reason to be praisin’ me!”

Subaru: “There is, there is, there is, there is, one thousand percent yes there is. Oi, everyone, let’s all praise Garfiel!”

Garfiel: “R-Roar!”

As Garfiel’s face shyly flushed red in embarrassment, he was surrounded by Subaru, Beatrice, Petra, and Meili as they commended him “Good, good”.

It was a reverse pattern to when they had comforted Subaru in the Pleiades Watchtower just a short while ago.

And after they finished thoroughly doting on Garfiel in such a manner—

Petra: “—So then, what business might two members belonging to Felt-sama’s Camp have with us?”

Indeed, the one to properly broach the matter at hand, was the most reliable member of their group, Petra.

With her hands on her hips, Petra’s small form was eager to play the negotiator of the Camp, giving Subaru an unanticipated sense of reliability, and filling his heart with ardent emotion.

Unexpectedly, he felt as if he sensed a glimpse of the loop that had been lost, in which she had endeavored to an unknowable extent in order to take back Subaru in the battle against Al.

Beatrice: “Wh-What’s with that heartrending expression, in fact, Subaru?”

Subaru: “It’s nothing, I’m just easily moved to tears lately. Beako, could you give me a hug?”

Beatrice: “Th-There’s no helping it, I suppose, you require much attention, in fact.”

With a reluctant face, Beatrice switched from holding Subaru’s hand to a stance of clinging to his waist. With that, Subaru refocused on the conversation playing out before his eyes.

The reason why Reinhard and Rom had come all the way out here to wait for Subaru and the others—

Reinhard: “Of course, we came to pick you up. —There are urgent circumstances transpiring in the Royal Capital. Emilia-sama was feeling rather uneasy, so Felt-sama ordered that I come here.”

Petra: “Emilia-neesama? But then why would Felt-sama…”

Reinhard: “The two of them became friends. And so, she said she would lend a hand to help her friend out.”

Meili: “O~h my, Felt-chan was played by Emilia-oneesan, wa~sn’t she now. I know the fee~ling. I might also be able to get along with Felt-cha~n.”

Hearing Reinhard’s reply to Petra’s suspicion, Meili smiled mischievously. But, from the way she spoke, it was an admission that she too had been moved by Emilia’s kindness, but it was unclear if Meili herself was aware of that. Subaru kept his mouth shut.

Moreover, Subaru was also surprised. Of course, he did not have any impression that Emilia and Felt had a poor relationship, but to think that Felt would take action for the sake of Emilia.

Subaru: “It would’ve been unimaginable back when she had first stolen her insignia…”

Rom: “I’ll tell ya this now, young’un, but spillin’ that story ta the public’d be a real trouble. If y’all were ta go spreadin’ that poor reputation, we’d also be forced ta make some plays.”

Subaru: "It'd be one thing if I had no memory of it, but that would just be suffering the consequences of my actions… though, you guys wouldn't be the only ones in trouble if the details of that incident were to come to light…"

As Rom-jii gave that warning just as a precaution, Subaru shrugged his shoulders.

The disruption of the insignia robbery in the Royal Capital was actually linked to the schemes of Roswaal who commissioned Elsa behind the scenes. Furthermore, Elsa was also entangled with Meili, so all those things falling under greater scrutiny would be more of a pain for the Emilia Camp.

To begin with, it was unthinkable that Emilia would bring up the fact that Felt had stolen her insignia at this stage. All the more if they had become friends.

Subaru: "If anything, there's also a chance that Emilia-tan has forgotten the fact that Felt previously stole her insignia… though I doubt she would've, right?"

Reinhard: "From my perspective, Emilia-sama has overcome that past to seek friendship with Felt-sama. That is what I believe."

Subaru: "Right. I also prefer Emilia-tan that way. But…"

The problem was the fact that Emilia had been driven into a situation of feeling uneasy.

As he thought about just what might have happened in the Royal Capital, Subaru suddenly realized that the cause of Emilia's current feelings might lie within himself.

That maybe, it was the effect of the "report" he had entrusted to Flam before departing the Pleiades Watchtower—

Reinhard: "No, I have also heard about Priscilla-sama, and the matter concerning Al-dono. It had caused Emilia-sama great heartache, but it was rather you all that she was worried about, Subaru. Hence, that was not the immediate cause."

Subaru: “Is that, so? That’s a reli… well it isn’t a relief, but I understand. But, if it’s not that, then what else happened?”

Rom: “—Circumstances that’re shakin’ the very bedrock of the Royal Selection, one could say.”

Everyone: “—!”

Hearing Rom-jii’s grave tone, Subaru and the others all shifted their expressions.

Circumstances that shook the foundation of the Royal Selection: to hear of such a thing was a great emergency, and the fact that Reinhard did not deny it, was proof that there was no mistake in that perception.

It was unclear whether that was because of the dropping out of a Royal Candidate as the result of Priscilla’s death, or whether there was some other factor at play, but—

Reinhard: “Concerning this issue, it is necessary for all Camps to come together to discuss. Hence, I went to pick up Rom-dono who was residing in our domain, and from there came here to pick up all of you, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Then, you must be wanting to go reconvene with Felt back in the Royal Capital as soon as possible…”

Reinhard: “Rachins and the others are also in the Royal Capital. In this situation, it was more pertinent for me to follow Felt-sama’s orders. In truth, I had wished to go pick you up at the Tower, but I wished to avoid heading into the Augria Sand Dunes without Meili’s abilities, and risk passing you by.”

Rom: “‘N so, we decided ta wait for y’all’s arrival in this town.”

And hearing Rom-jii bring it to a finish, the questions that had arisen within Subaru’s mind were settled.

Under such circumstances, Reinhard and Rom-jii were waiting for the arrival of Subaru and the others in Mirula. While he was grateful for that, he also grew frightened of what sort of issue had driven them to go to such lengths.

However—

Subaru: “I can’t afford not to ask, but time is of the essence. Let’s talk as we move.”

Reinhard: “Indeed, let us do so. There are also many things I wish to ask you, Subaru. After we parted in Pristella, the events that transpired in the Empire, to the extent of what you can say.”

Subaru: “There isn’t really anything I can’t tell you about. I’ll spill it all. I’ve also got plenty of things I wanna ask the guy with as huge a reputation as the Sword Saint.”

Reinhard: “—. So long as they are things I can answer, then by all means.”

Nodding to each other, a consensus was reached between Subaru and Reinhard.

For Subaru, who had yearned for a non-existent locomotive due to how tantalizing transportation felt, being able to borrow Reinhard’s power here was no mere lifeboat; it was nothing short of the Millenium Falcon itself.

And then, before they reembarked for the Royal Capital—

Subaru: “Oh yeah, Reinhard.”

Reinhard: “Hm? What is it?”

Subaru: “I think you probably won’t understand what I mean, but hear me out. —Thank you.”

At Subaru’s words of gratitude, as had been prefaced, Reinhard seemingly did not understand what he meant, and raised his eyebrows in surprise. And while Subaru’s lips curved into a smile at the fact that he had taken the Sword Saint by surprise,

Subaru: “I don’t really know all the details either, but I’m at least convinced that you had to go through extreme toil. So, thank you.”

Reinhard: “Nothing really comes to mind, so I wonder how I should respond.”

Subaru: “In that case, you can just say you’re welcome.”

Reinhard: “Understood. —You’re welcome.”

Subaru: “That pronunciation’s way too good.”

As Reinhard responded so to such unexpected gratitude, Subaru thanked him again and pat Beatrice on the head as she clung to his waist before commencing the preparations for their trip.

Since Reinhard would be hastening them in one go across a distance that would normally take several days, it would likely be some absolutely outrageous transport method. He had to brace his heart.

Reinhard: “…”

As he proceeded with preparations to depart with his allies, Subaru did not notice that watching over his back, as if to evaluate him, were Reinhard’s two eyes, hand placed over the hilt of the sword at his waist.

Chapter 5:
The Details of a Detour

1

—During the time Reinhard served as their method of transport, Subaru's mental preparedness had been doubly ineffective.

Reinhard: "It may feel a bit uncomfortable, but you should get used to it soon."

And, with this preface from Reinhard, he suddenly hoisted up the dragon carriage that Subaru's group was riding along with Patrasche, swiftly running into the sky—no, launching himself into it.

Subaru: "Ababababababa…!"

The scenery outside the windows rapidly passing by, and the inside of the dragon carriage which, like a visual bug, felt almost completely still in spite of that, made Subaru and Beatrice embrace each other as they shook.

Theoretically, this was not hard to understand. In short, it was the same as when a ground dragon applied its Divine Protection of Wind Evasion. The problem was that the one responsible for this display was Reinhard, a human who ran at a speed so ridiculous that it defied common sense.

???: "I've already been through this o~nce. Hopefully you guys all savor it too~."

???: "S-Still, is it really possible to get used to this?"

Quietly, Meili sat with her chin resting on her knees. With Petra fearfully clinging onto the cloak of the girl already experienced in this, Meili chuckled with a "fufu~,"

Meili: "I didn't know Petra-chan could even get sca~red, how surprisi~ng.”

Petra: “Rather than being scared, I’d say it’s more about being shocked by the occurrence of something unimaginable. The Sword Saint-sama is a lot crazier than I’d heard.”

???: “…True, haven’t heard of the previous Sword Saints bein’ this outlandish. Guess ya could say Reinhard’s special.”

Near the end of the conversation with Meili, seeing that Petra cued him to weigh in, Rom-jii replied while rubbing his head.

Even Rom-jii, whose body was crammed into the narrow seats of the dragon carriage, seemed unfamiliar with this running style of Reinhard’s, as he placed a hand on the wall for peace of mind.

Seemingly, this method of transport was not usually employed by the Felt Camp. However, this was also something that could have been considered a staggering advantage.

Rom: “If we got around this way outside of emergencies, we’d lose popularity for usin’ the power of the Sword Saint in vain. To an extent, a wanin’ of the Sword Saint’s influence is a problem for the Kingdom… if we’re careless, then forget leavin’ the country, this way of travellin’ might get banned too.”

Subaru: “Right, that joke of a Reinhard Law…”

To Rom-jii’s curled lips, Subaru spoke on the absurdity of a parallel world’s international laws.

As implied by its name, the Reinhard Law concerned only the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea, the purpose of which was to decisively forbid him from leaving the Kingdom of Lugunica. When spoken about, it seemed like a joke, but in reality, when one realized just how out of the ordinary he was, it was hard to frame as overdoing it.

Although—

Subaru: “I mean, Reinhard’s power is absurd, almost stupidly so, but I just wish the other nations would see that he doesn’t have the personality to cause needless harm.”

Rom: “Hoh, even though you’re from another camp, ya seem to value Reinhard pretty highly, no?”

Subaru: “We’re friends after all, and when everyone’s on a trip outside the country, it’s sad being the only one left at home. Something like a trip to Vollachia… nah, there’s nothing fun in Vollachia. Flop-san and Medium-san should use their influence to build at least one amusement park.”

Hopefully, by either sneaking around Abel’s gaze, or winning him over, they could somehow squander some of the Empire’s money on entertainment; he hoped that they could make a big amusement park.

Beatrice: “Garfiel, what are you looking at, I suppose?”

Garfiel: “Nuthin’, was just thinkin’ that if my amazin’ self could do somethin’ like this, I could make stuff way easier for the Captain ‘n the rest of ya. Like how “Gibnevra’s suited for different jobs,” it feels like my amazin’ self wouldn’t be able to do it no matter what.”

While Subaru was imagining his construction plans for Vollachia Land, Beatrice struck up a conversation with Garfiel, who expressed his vexation by the gnashing of his fangs.

Certainly, he could do something similar to Reinhard with pure brute strength, but without a functioning Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, the comfort level of the trip would have been hellish. In the first place, treating his sworn little brother like a work horse, even in an emergency, would have made Subaru feel bad.

Subaru: “Ah, so that’s why we haven’t put Reinhard’s running style to use. This gives a bad feeling for sure.”

Reinhard: “I am happy you understand. I would also feel awkward about this if it were not an emergency.”

Subaru: “You’ve joined the conversation like it’s perfectly natural…”

As if it were natural, Reinhard's voice rang out; it was the effect of his Divine Protection of Telepathy, which Subaru had once experienced in Pristella.

Apparently, people aside from Subaru were hearing his voice this time, so Petra and the others were unable to conceal their surprise at Reinhard's voice suddenly resounding in their brains. Though, Meili seemed to have gained a tolerance for the Divine Protection of Telepathy, and so continued to look smug.

At any rate—

Subaru: "For now, my surprise at Reinhard's running style has dissipated, but I still have to process the other shocking revelation. Is it true? —About the entry of this Filóre girl?"

Reinhard: "Yes, there is no falsehood in that fact."

Though he could not see it with his eyes, Subaru could practically feel Reinhard's nod of affirmation, was shocked by the truth that had been revealed, and once again took a deep breath, then swallowed.

While Subaru and the others had been in the Pleiades Watchtower, there had been an astonishing development in the Royal Capital—the Church of the Divine Dragon had made contact, and a woman who could make the insignia glow, known as Filóre, had made her entrance on the stage.

The organization that, up until now, had been keeping a low profile had come forward with a fact that could not be ignored in the Royal Selection. Naturally, as the Knight of the Royal Selection Candidate Emilia, Subaru was greatly troubled.

However—

Subaru: "—That Crusch-san was saved is great news."

The great tremor that ran through the Royal Selection was an incident that he could not escape hearing about, but among the topics that had been brought to his ears, the one that mattered most to Subaru was the recovery of Crusch.

In Pristella, within the Sin Archbishop of Lust's malignant clutches, Crusch's body had been burdened with a curse that brought incurable pain. For a long time, he had deeply lamented that he had not been able to protect Crusch while fighting on the same battlefield as her; a persistent thorn in his side.

Subaru: "Seriously, if I could've taken all that stuff off Crusch's shoulders, then I would've been happy to do so even if my entire body turned completely black."

Lust's blood had been poured into her, and Crusch had been saddled with a blight too terrible to even cast a glance at. Having been baptized in that same woman's blood, however, Subaru suffered a very different amount of damage than Crusch.

Of course, the effects were felt over the entire body, but unlike Crusch, who continued to suffer in pain, the worst he experienced was his arm and leg being covered in what could only have been considered a creepy, deformed tattoo. That, and the fact it was completely gone after that time his arm was blown off, in addition to the feeling of surprise he felt whenever he remembered the effect on his leg when he was on the toilet or in the bath.

Somehow, Subaru was able to alleviate Crusch's suffering in exchange for his own suffering. So, saving Crusch that way had been one possibility—

Subaru: "Crusch-san… didn't agree to that."

After the battle in Pristella, ever since she refused his proposal to take on her curse, stating that she could not burden Subaru further as he would soon be travelling to the Pleiades Watchtower, her physical condition had always been at the back of his mind.

That she was healed was undoubtedly good news as far as Subaru was concerned.

However—

Rom: "What's hard to stomach is that the very people it matters to the most can't just celebrate her recovery."

As Rom-jii's grave words indicated, Crusch's recovery—that it was carried out at the hands of the Church of the Divine Dragon, would have been a great regret for her and her companions.

Subaru understood that much. And because he understood, he could not say anything recklessly. It would have been frivolous to say something like "Even if it came at the cost of a major disadvantage in the Royal Selection, what matters most is that she is still alive."

Subaru: "But now this Filóre person has appeared, and she was able to prove her qualification as a Priestess by making the insignia glow. That can't be good, right?"

Meili: "That's ri~ght. Even though the number of Royal Selection Candidates finally dropped by one and a spot opened up, the fact that it was immediately filled will set us right back to the beginni~ng."

Petra: "…Meili-chan, if you don't pick your words properly, then I'll also get angry. It's for that reason we went to the Tower in the first place."

Meili: "Well, the helmet guy messed all that up… Ahh, don't get angry. Yeah yea~h, I'm so~rry."

Remembering her role as a little devil, Meili voiced her insensitive jokes, giving an insincere apology to the scathing gaze of Petra. After a small sigh at Meili's behavior, Petra continued with an "Anyways,"

Petra: "Meili-chan's cheeky tongue aside… what's concerning isn't the issue of the open spot. It's just, this Filóre lady has golden hair and crimson eyes, right?"

Subaru: "That's… what they're saying. It's…"

Petra: "—Those are the characteristics of the Lugunican Royal Family, aren't they? Also, I'm sure that was the name of the princess who was kidnapped fifteen years ago."

Rom: "—Filóre."

With a finger on her lips, Petra stated what knowledge she had. After Petra finished speaking, in the pause for the crucial word that was born, a different person took over. —Rom-jii.

Rom-jii attracted the gazes of everyone in the carriage; however, he dropped his gaze to his knees,

Rom: "Fifteen years ago, the Crown Prince's daughter who disappeared was called Filóre. That's the same name as the nun from the Church of the Divine Dragon currently in the Castle."

Beatrice: "And, they are saying that this nun made the insignia glow in front of everyone in the Castle, in fact. If that's true, then it makes sense that the trouble it creates could shake the Royal Selection, I suppose."

It was a truth which sent deep tremors throughout the Lugunican Royal Castle; after sharing the context for such an event, the dragon carriage was enveloped in a quiet air.

However, Subaru remained firm in continuing to not read the room and asserted himself with a "Listen."

Subaru: "I'm not really convinced by all that."

Reinhard: "—What do you mean by "convinced"?"

Subaru: "I'm finally starting to get used to talking with your voice in my head, but anyways, this is what everyone is concerned about, right? This person named Filóre from the Church of the Divine Dragon, she could possibly be the lost Lugunican royal. The fact that the insignia shone seemed like proof of that royalty."

Petra: "Yeah, that's right. You aren't convinced by that?"

Subaru: "Nah, after all, wasn't it the same for Felt?"

Unfortunately, even though it followed his mortifying memories of the day the Royal Selection commenced, Subaru had not heard Felt's declaration of her beliefs. Before that, he had been expelled from the throne room for his great blunder.

However, even though he had not been present, everything that happened there and what Felt had said were all shared with him later.

Originally, the existence of a fifteen-year-old royal being revealed in that place should have caused questions to surface.

Subaru: “So, the same was the case with Felt. Well, in my opinion, the existence of a princess who was secretly taken away and grew up among the common people in the streets is a more exciting twist, so I’d like it if it ends up as Felt being the royal.”

Rom: “Hm, I see. —But, if it’s as ya imagine ‘n Felt is the Kingdom of Lugunica’s princess, then the Royal Selection will be settled with her win. Are ya okay with that?”

Subaru: “Eh?”

Toward Rom-jii’s single closed eye, Subaru’s gaze widened.

He thought it might have been a bad joke, but it was not taken back. Further, other than Subaru, everyone seemed to agree with Rom-jii’s thoughts.

Unexpectedly, he was in the minority—no, having become entirely isolated, Subaru became upset.

Subaru: “No no no, why?”

Garfiel: “‘Course it’s like that, what do ya mean “Why?”. In the first place, the reason we’re doin’ this Royal Selection is ’cause of the Royal Family dyin’ out, right? But, if that ends up not bein’ true, then shouldn’t the only survivin’ royal become King?”

Subaru: “I-It’s a hereditary thing?”

Reinhard: “I wish you would choose your words more tactfully, but that is what is being said.”

The two martial artists of the group, Garfiel and Reinhard, rebuked him, and Subaru realized the difference in perception between him and the people of this world as he let out a sigh.

For Natsuki Subaru, who was born and raised in Japan, the representative of a country was decided not by lineage, but was naturally elected based on other criteria. The circumstances of the Royal Selection were another factor that influenced him, as it was similar to the system of elections that Subaru was familiar with.

Instead, for the people of this other world, the prince would have naturally been next in line after the present King, and the child of that prince-made-King would come after him.

So, if Felt was confirmed to be a royal, then the natural progression was that Felt would have been next in line to the throne and the Royal Selection would lose its very purpose—.

Subaru: “So that means it would’ve been really bad if Felt was confirmed as royalty!”

Rom: “Since it stopped at the point of bein’ just a suspicion, the Royal Selection was given the go-ahead. With that said, can ya still diligently serve as the young lady’s Knight while holdin’ your head high?”

Subaru: “Stop! I was just a little unfamiliar with common sense here! We have Beako, Petra, and Garfiel who are all growing up to be smart kids!”

Beatrice: “Allow yourself to be corrected, the pretty and charming Betty is the most grown up one here, in fact.”

Embraced on Subaru’s lap, Beatrice puffed out her chest. As he watched Subaru pat her head, Rom-jii patted his own head with a staggered look on his face.

He understood, it had certainly just been a discrepancy in perception, and he had shown some shameful behavior. However, in spite of that, Subaru’s doubts were still not cleared.

Subaru: “I stumbled a little, but my doubts are still unresolved. In the case that their royalty is confirmed, I understand that the Royal Selection would become meaningless, but ultimately, there will be the same doubts as to whether Filóre-chan-san is the real deal, just as there was for Felt. And if that's the case…"

Reinhard: "—Whichever one is true royalty must be verified."

Subaru: "…"

Perhaps those words were intended to have been as devoid of emotion as possible. Because of that, what Reinhard left unspoken cut as sharp as a blade.

Subaru exhaled, letting the meaning of those words seep into his brain. —Felt and Filóre; it needed to be verified which one was real.

Rom: "There're only suspicions with no conclusive evidence, but the Royal Selection's still continued up 'till now. But, since two Candidates have appeared who may be part of the Royal Family, then naturally, they can't be left as-is. As for those who are holdin' malicious intent, I'm also afraid of the possibility that they might've infiltrated the Royal Selection."

Subaru: "Malicious intent… whichever one ends up being true royalty doesn't automatically mean that the other one is evil. Maybe they just coincidentally had golden hair and crimson eyes…"

Beatrice: "It can't have been a coincidence, those are traits unique to the Royal Family, I suppose."

Subaru: "But! Didn't the insignia shine for both of them?!"

As both Rom-jii and Beatrice gave logical explanations, Subaru grew fervid. He was only able to argue from an emotional point of view.

In the first place, Subaru could not explain why he became so passionate.

Simply, if meeting Reinhard and Rom-jii when he was first summoned factored into his fondness for them, then the same was true for Felt. As for Felt's current position and efforts, he did not want them to be for nothing just because she was not of the Royal Family.

Furthermore, this Filóre that he had not even met yet was being made out as a bad person, and he did not want to accuse her of being a schemer and blindly curse her.

Above all—

Subaru: “If they really wanted a member of the Royal Family to take over so badly, then when Felt appeared, regardless of the circumstances behind the Royal Selection or the Royal Family, why didn’t they do a DNA test or something to check? By starting the Royal Selection without doing that, Emilia, and so many others…”

Beatrice: “Subaru…”

As Subaru bit his lip and suppressed his voice, Beatrice, who sat on his lap, grew anxious. At the feeling of a hand gently holding onto his, Subaru tightly closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Nevertheless, the violent emotions in his beating heart refused to calm down.

Emilia, Felt, Crusch, Anastasia, and Priscilla; they had all put their beliefs, and even lives on the line in order to compete in the Royal Selection.

That an unexpected interruption would butt in was an unacceptable twisting of the premises.

Subaru: “If that happens…”

Beatrice: “If that happens, what will you do, in fact?”

Subaru: “With Reinhard’s help, maybe we could make an appeal for the Royal Selection to go on, or something…”

Reinhard: “I see.”

Rom: “No, ya don’t see! Don’t go ‘round sayin’ such terrible things! You as well, impulsively rilin’ up the Sword Saint, what would ya do if he actually followed through with that?!”

Garfiel: “If that happens, then my amazin’ self will also jump on board!”

Petra: “Garf-san, things are getting complicated now, so could you calm down? Please?”

Subaru’s bitter words as he was at a loss on what to do were met with vehement opposition by Rom-jii and Petra. A battle of protest between being active and remaining passive burst forth, as Petra glared at Garfiel, who withered away with a “Gawr…”.

But, by no means was it all entirely a joke. —No, Subaru was actually quite serious. If he had that level of resolve, then he would show his spirit as a Knight to the Royal Selection Candidate he was dedicated to.

Subaru: “There’s so much to do when we get to the Royal Capital…! Geez, I feel like I’ve just been restlessly moving around for the past six months now…”

Beatrice: “That is nothing, I suppose. Betty feels like she’s been moving nonstop for eleven and a half years now, in fact.”

Subaru: “Don’t say weird stuff like that, it’s messing with my head…”

Subaru’s banter was met by even more outrageous banter from Beatrice. Horrified by her words, Subaru lamented the scale and number of problems waiting for them at the Royal Capital.

He was worried about Emilia, who had personally encountered the cause for their concerns firsthand, and he wanted to visit Crusch, whose body had recovered. He had to pay his respects to this Filóre and personally interrogate the traumatized higher-ups about the status of the Royal Selection. Then there was the matter of the Al-orb that hung around his neck; he needed to investigate the various reasons that led to his sudden outburst.

But, for the time being, what needed to be dealt with—

Reinhard: “Subaru, we’re arriving.”

Subaru: “Seriously, that was crazy. Sorry for making you take the scenic route.”

As he was shifting his focus, Reinhard's report came in with great timing.

As one would have imagined from the scenery passing by at high speeds, he had been moving extraordinarily fast. Cecilus moved faster if one were purely speaking in terms of speed, but unfortunately, he most likely did not possess the strength to carry a dragon carriage, so it seemed that the Cecilus running style would not bear any fruit.

If it was just one person, then maybe he could imitate it by carrying them on his back—while he was thinking such, he was taken aback as the reality of the scenery outside the window had truly set in.

With the high-speed run coming to a halt, the dragon carriage slowly lowered to the ground. That was to say, they had arrived at their destination. And as if to prove it—

???: "—What… in the world is this?!"

Subaru: "…"

Suddenly, the moment he heard that voice, Subaru quickly rose to his feet and jumped out of the dragon carriage whilst carrying a surprised Beatrice, who let out a "Nkyaa!"

Before him was Reinhard, who had run whilst carrying the dragon carriage without breaking a sweat, and Patrasche who appeared full of tension after being carried by said Reinhard.

With the ridiculous appearance of the dragon carriage in her eyes, standing in front of the door of the nostalgic Roswaal manor was a blue-haired—

Subaru: "Uh!"

Beatrice: "Subaru?! Wh-wh-wh-what's wrong, I suppose?!"

Without thinking, Subaru knelt down and clutched his chest, bringing down a shocked Beatrice with him. In a panicked flurry, Beatrice whacked his head and shoulders while she was at his mercy, but Subaru's heart cried out at the wonderful sight before

him.

Because, standing in front of the Roswaal manor, greeting Subaru and the others was—

Subaru: “That oh-so-familiar look of yours, I just realized how precious it truly was…”

???: “…That’s just how you are, no matter when or where we meet, huh?”

Saying this, with an elegant face, simultaneously disgusted and relieved, and in a maid uniform—indeed, Rem, in a maid uniform, sighed.

2

Capitalizing upon Reinhard’s travel method, Subaru had requested to drop by the Roswaal manor in the midst of their journey to the Royal Capital.

The purpose went without saying: to have Rem present when reacquiring the Memories from the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, which was one of the reasons why they were en route for the Royal Capital.

Subaru: “I don’t expect the discussion with Gluttony to go so harmoniously, but that Al must’ve drawn it out one way or another. Then there’s no reason to think that we can’t do it. On top of that, I’ve already missed the scene of Ram and Rem’s reunion. If I let the return of Rem’s Memories slide this time, then I’ll be beyond recovery…!”

To this powerful beseechment of Subaru’s akin to shedding tears of blood, Reinhard awarded his approval with not a second of displeasure hinting on his face, despite surely wanting to return to Felt as quickly as possible.

There was nothing to say but that he was truly a good friend. Subaru would also like to take up any request coming from Reinhard, but it was certainly dubious whether he would readily nod in assent to a request of taking a roundabout detour of hundreds of kilometers with a dragon carriage on his shoulders.

However, Reinhard had in reality just pulled that off.

Furthermore, that was not all that Reinhard had taken upon himself—

Subaru: "—Sorry for making you come along for all this."

Reinhard: "No, I don't mind. Moreover, even though it escapes my realization, I have also sustained the devastation begotten by the Authority of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. I was made to forget one friend, at the very least."

Subaru: "Ah… Which reminds me, he apparently said that he'd turn being forgotten around into a good opportunity to challenge you, Reinhard. He can win now that you don't know the skills up his sleeve, kinda thing."

Reinhard: "That is… something to look forward to, in all honesty."

His brows slightly upraised, Reinhard then smiled in true delight as Subaru watched with a sideward gaze, internally apologizing to Julius for having started a fire by saying things that were unnecessary.

Perhaps, he may have just crushed the possibility of winning that might have existed. But, he could also envisage the possibility of Julius finding it unfair that he would be the only one who had knowledge of skills up the opponent's sleeve, and rather progressively reveal his hand. So, any apology besides internally was deferred.

—To make such piddling thoughts rush, was how heavy the atmosphere of this place was.

Subaru: "…As you'd expect, the Prison Tower lives up to its name."

A strangely chilly sweat began to trickle down Subaru's forehead as he murmured.

He was not panicking, nor had he come running. Yet, the perspiring and dripping icy sweat was Subaru's body responding with rejection to this space.

In the uppermost strata of the Royal Capital of Lugunica, this stone spire constructed in the vicinity of the Royal Castle functioned as a prison where the premier criminals of the Kingdom were incarcerated. Naturally, in order to ensure none of the captives could easily meet with anyone, all isolation cells were sealed shut with an iron door.

It was not in the style of jails one would see in manga where prisoners would be behind steel bars; as Subaru stepped inside, he tasted a 7:3 ratio of relief and evasion.

Subaru: "The folks over at the Gladiator Island were criminals just like criminals would be, but they were more clear-cut scoundrels…"

It would not be an apt portrayal of the characteristics of the nation, but the crimes committed by Hiain, Weitz, Idra, or the others who had been his comrades on the Gladiator Island Ginunhive were based upon violence without malice. There were occasionally those in the mix who had been thrown into slavery without pardon or mercy like Hiain, but even those who were deemed to be so-called serious offenders were only differentiated by the extent of their violence, minor or major.

On the other hand, the aura of the Prison Tower that incarcerated the criminals of Lugunica had a malodor of blood that Subaru could trace on his skin, entirely unlike the Gladiator Island with which he was familiar.

Subaru: "Does this place have a high proportion of captured Witch Cultists, after all?"

Reinhard: "That's right. Based on the fact that a principally large number of their activities happen in Lugunica, that summation is correct. In fact, Wrath is also imprisoned in the underground of this place."

Subaru: "The underground… I hope Gluttony is kept at a good distance apart."

Reinhard: “You can be doubly as sure. There’s also the difference in the circumstances of their capture, but none can heedlessly come close to Wrath. Including the other prisoners as well, you see.”

The Authority of the Sin Archbishop of Wrath, Sirius Romanée-Conti, was something like mind contamination through engulfment in her words or moods, crescively infecting the atmosphere. Considering its influence, it would be impossible to say her hazardousness had been ridden of, even after forbidding her movement.

In fact, it seemed as though part of the repugnant presence wafting inside this Prison Tower was conceivably coming from the Sin Archbishop of Wrath.

Subaru: “I’ve got a physiological revulsion inside me, but before long, I may need to speak with her as well.”

Reinhard: “When that happens, do reach out to me. I will accompany you the same way as this time.”

Subaru: “That’s reassuring. Counting on you, for real.”

Oh, such reassurance from Reinhard as he knocked his chest and bore it upon himself. However, Sirius’s Authority was also something that might invert the results of Reinhard’s strength. Careful handling was requisite.

Anyhow, she was not the reason for Subaru and company’s call onto the Prison Tower. Unfortunately, Sirius shall feast on the chilling air of the underground for now.

In lieu—

???: “—This way.”

So said the Prison Tower guard who was leading their way, as he pointed to one of the doors. A man with potent nervousness and professionalism reflected upon his face in equal part, to whom Subaru nodded before locking his eyes onto the door.

A door depressing to even look at, transmitting a sensation of brumal gloom. —Beyond this door lay the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, imprisoned.

Subaru: “Even so, he’s in a state identical to the Al-orb, so it’s dubious whether he himself is conscious of the situation or not.”

Shedding light on his own experience of when he had been sealed within the black orb, all he felt was an indescribable sensation akin to being submersed in lukewarm water, unable to move.

In an environs where even maintaining a clear consciousness was insoluble, Beatrice’s diligent constitution and industrious gallantry in elucidating the forbidden technique’s construct for Subaru was something for which he wished to confer onto her the Annual Subaru Award, but it seemed as though the list of nominees alone would fill his hands, so he would rather keep deliberating his deliberations.

Beatrice: “Subaru? Why are you squeezing Betty’s cheeks, I suppose?”

Subaru: “Well, I can’t give you the Annual Subaru Award right away, so I thought I’d give you an expression of affection instead…”

Beatrice: “After this business is finished, you can do as you like, so focus on what is in front of your eyes right now, in fact.”

His forlorn skinship pierced through, Subaru tapered his lips at Beatrice’s sober reprimand, and with a “That’s right”, swallowed his breath.

Beatrice at the front gate, Reinhard at the rear gate—that was the best formation Subaru had come up with for paying Gluttony a visit at the Prison Tower. Truthfully, he would have liked to have the affiliated Rem also stationed in presence here, but he did not consider it feasible in any fashion until the first attempt at discussion had gone over well.

His assumption was that persuading, or coercing, Gluttony would require a tenacious attempt.

Subaru: “After all, he’s been fastened with Yin Magic, so Beako is especially indispensable.”

Beatrice: “You can entrust it to Betty, I suppose. And, if upon being unfastened the opponent immediately gets frenzied, Sword Saint, you will have to clobber him down, in fact.”

Reinhard: “Yes, I accept. I will not let him lay a finger on you or Subaru. Please rest assured.”

Subaru: “That does assure me a lot, for real. And with that…”

Setting his hopes on the strength of his far-too-dependable reinforcements, Subaru nodded to the guard and bid him open the door’s lock. As the guard steadily opened the door, Subaru matched its progression with tightened fists.

—Inside the Tower, imbued in scant light, in the reaches of an isolation cell that felt particularly dusky, imprisoned was Roy Alphard, fastened with Yin Magic in a form akin to a monolith. They shall awaken Roy, and force him to vomit forth Rem’s Memories, along with the Names and Memories of all the countless victims.

To exchange words with Sin Archbishops would surely be a battle that would scrape off one’s own sanity, but if a definite reward lay ahead of it, then Subaru shall steadfastly—.

Subaru: “—ah?”

After holding his breath in resolution, a gasp now unwittingly escaped from Subaru.

His eyes adjusting to the caliginous, dim light, the spectacle within the isolation cell was not what Subaru had prevised. What was supposed to await them was Roy Alphard, embedded in a monolith shaped like a dark slate, his condition akin to a preserved specimen.

However, ahead was an entirely unforeseen spectacle.

Everybody: “…”

Subaru and the others froze, oblivious to its import, but it was

Reinhard who gently shifted him aside by his shoulders and stepped into the cell. Beatrice was right beside him, her entire body reclined onto Subaru as they huddled close—no, she was the one propping Subaru up.

For all strength absconded Subaru's legs, verging upon collapse even now.

With Subaru nearing collapse, and Beatrice supporting him as his backdrop, Reinhard entered the interior of the cell and observed that which had been scattered about the chilly prison floor, shaking his head side to side.

He turned around, to say.

Reinhard: "—It is unfortunate, but he is dead."

By Reinhard's feet as he imparted this, was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony—Bizarre Eating, Roy Alphard, his heinously cruel corpse, limbs torn off, his body cleaved apart and severed into fragments, turned over; unraveled there was this terrible spectacle.

Chapter 6:
Instantaneous Water Heater

1

Pandemonium arose within the Prison Tower for a moment, people with altered expressions restlessly circling about from left to right.

Watching this scene from afar, Subaru rested his spine onto a rampart slightly distant from it all, hugging his knees.

Subaru: "…"

Setting his forehead onto his curled knees, Subaru released a deep sigh.

Far too many shocking things had happened. That naturally applied to sighting a gruesome corpse without any prior preparedness of his heart, but to think that this cadaver could possibly have been—

???: "—Are you alright?"

Subaru's face was buried in his knees when that voice addressed him, making him slowly uplift his head. There, he saw Rem, her expression bedimmed by anxiety.

The girl crouched right beside him, peering at Subaru's face, and used the handkerchief in her grasp to wipe his dispirited visage. The faintly moist handkerchief felt cool, and a sigh escaped Subaru with a "My bad", chaperoned by a sense of salvation.

Rem: "There's no need to apologize… It would seem, you saw something quite terrible inside."

Subaru: "That's… right. I also didn't want you to see him, so there's that, but I'm glad we kept you waiting outside just in case, Rem. You didn't need to see something like that, Rem."

Rem: "Please don't be so overly protective. I witnessed many casualties in the Vollachian Empire. A few more at this point wouldn't…"

Subaru: "I get it. But if you don't absolutely have to come into contact with it then I'd like you to not. If you're trying to save someone and end up letting them die because of your insufficient strength or something, those kinds of situations can't be helped… but this kinda stuff, it's the type of death that absolutely nothing good can come out of coming into contact with."

Even Subaru would not repudiate the existence of deaths that were meaningful and significant, or deaths as consequence of persisting in one's convictions.

Would he repudiate even that, then he would not have silently seen off Priscilla.

However, the death in the watchtower that he had witnessed just before—the gruesome, appalling death plight of Gluttony Roy Alphard, was far removed from any such ilk of nobility; an unsightly and repulsive thing.

There was no decent meaning in plundering the life of another, and furthermore desecrating a corpse to such a degree.

It could have been part of a malevolent scheme, or perhaps a vehement rage that eluded satisfaction unless it tormented even the cadaver bereft of a soul—he was a Sin Archbishop who would have purchased hatred as a matter of course, but nobody deserved this cruel a manner of death.

Subaru: "Shit… hk."

Nausea scourging the pit of his stomach, Subaru clicked his tongue in frustration.

It was rage directed toward the one who had ripped Roy's limbs and torn him apart, and at the same time, chagrin at once again losing the key to the resolution of the Authority of Gluttony, whose solution had finally seemed to be within his grasp.

Quite honestly, he did not wish to ponder it. —That perhaps if Subaru and Reinhard had not taken a detour after meeting up, and had instead hastened directly to the Royal Capital, they may have found Roy still alive.

And ultimately, Subaru had the power to verify that for certain. In fact, if it had been the Subaru from the Empire, with his mentality from when his body had been shrunken, he surely would have enacted that without any hesitation.

But—

Subaru: "—Al…"

Clutching the Al-orb which dangled from his neck, Subaru bit down on the inside of his cheek.

Hypothetically, even if Subaru were to lose his life now and Return by Death, his most recent restart point was in the Pleiades Watchtower, just before sealing Al away with Ol Shamak. There was also the possibility that his restart point had shifted forward, but based on his current experience, that was the latest update.

—And, to return once more to that time frame, and to repeat the moment in which it was necessary to preemptively shut down Al before he could set his plan into motion, was not something Natsuki Subaru was capable of.

Subaru: "…"

It was not that it was not a viable option. Nor was it a restriction on the part of Ol Shamak.

Simply, Natsuki Subaru lacked the courage to return to that scene and face Al once more. If he were to fail in stopping Al, all the while hoping that it might be possible to change his mind through conversation, it might be Subaru who ended up getting sealed all over again.

Were that to happen, Subaru's failed resolution would end up being entrusted to his allies once more. In order to prevent that, Subaru refrained from manifesting a short-tempered Return by Death.

However, that would mean that Rem, that the victims of Gluttony would—it happened just when he began to think that.

Rem: "…Once again, you're trying to shoulder all the responsibility on yourself."

Suddenly, upon Subaru's hand which clutched the Al-orb, Rem placed her own.

Fixing her gaze straight ahead at Subaru's face as his breath caught in surprise, Rem narrowed her pale-blue eyes, and,

Rem: "I'll tell you this now. —Please, don't make it your own responsibility to recover my Memories. The matter of my Memories is my own problem… it's troubling that you take every last thing without exception, and carry it upon your back as if it's your own problem."

Subaru: "—Hk, no, that's not it. You've got it all wrong. I have to get your Memories back, no matter what…"

Rem: "Like I said, that's all wrong. Why is it that for a problem that's mine, you're the one who's going through the most headache? That's something for me to worry about. It doesn't belong solely to you."

Subaru: "That's…"

Eyes darting about, Subaru lost the ability to say anything before Rem's gaze.

What flashed through his mind were the chills of that moment in which he had thought his life was over, back when Rem had spoken the words "You are not a hero" to him in the Fortress City. Just like that time, he thought he might end up being deprived of his privilege to struggle for the sake of Rem—

Rem: "…Please, don't give me that wet puppy dog look."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Rem: "No, that was too much of an overstatement. A drenched puppy dog would still be cute, so you look more like a wet… a wet flying dragon, or something."

Subaru: "…Though, I'm way more open to being treated as cool rather than something cute."

Rem: "It was not a compliment. Also, please do not misunderstand."

With Subaru confused as to what said misunderstanding was, Rem began to collect her words after the passing of a moment. Then, she prefaced with "Alright?",

Rem: "I have a general grasp on the situation. The person who was being held in this Tower… somebody who had some sort of connection to Spica-chan, would have been the first step to regaining my Memories. But, that person died, causing you to be immensely frustrated… All the while, you are leaving me, the person most affected, off to the side."

Subaru: "—. When you put it like that, it makes me sound like an incredibly selfish guy."

Rem: "It seems like you have finally gained awareness of your current position."

Rem plainly and gently guided Subaru along towards comprehension. As he heeded her words, some leeway returned to Subaru's respiration, after he had felt backed up against the wall all on his own.

And perhaps having perceived that change in his expression, Rem's eyes smiled in relief,

Rem: "Even I am in low spirits. Right on the brink of my Memories possibly returning… but, witnessing you there in a state of frustration greater than even my own, I did not have any time to be feeling down."

Subaru: "Umm, I'm glad that you didn't have to feel down, Rem."

Rem: "Hah? Even though you were feeling down instead, and making the rest of us worry?"

Subaru: “I’m terribly sorry~!”

Basking in Rem’s stern gaze, Subaru clutched his head and apologized.

He never would have thought that he would be treated as a thief who stole her right to feel saddened. But, that was also what Subaru truly wished at heart. Subaru believed it would be best if Rem, Emilia, and everyone else never had the time to be in low spirits for the rest of their lives.

Rem: “The fact that it seems like you’re thinking that it would be fine if you were the only one who ever felt down, is unpleasant.”

Subaru: “Rem…”

Rem: “I think you have a bad habit of believing that everything is always only your fault whenever something goes awry. So, you’re also trying to find solutions all by yourself… would you stop it already?”

Subaru: “…So what you’re saying is, that I shouldn’t worry about things all by myself?”

Rem: “That is what I have been saying from the start.”

Subaru: “Have you?! Well, I guess you might have. Yeah, you have. You have been saying it. What an idiot I am for not noticing the things you’ve been saying! Stupid, stupid!”

Before Rem, who abruptly averted her gaze, Subaru smacked his own head repeatedly. As he hit himself, he felt a separate sense of guilt welling up in his mind.

After all, Rem had called out to Subaru like this out of pure concern for him. And yet, because Subaru did not face her properly, and failed to receive Rem’s thoughtfulness head-on, he had ended up making her say things that did not need to be said.

Subaru: “I’m sorry. Even though I brought you out here with such enthusiasm, I ended up causing you premature joy.”

Rem: “I don’t find that to be your responsibility. Only…”

Subaru: “Only?”

Rem: “Spica-chan will be forced to carry an unnecessary burden.”

The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, ones who named themselves so, Ley Batenkaitos and Roy Alphard—Gourmet and Bizarre Eating, with the demise of this duo, there was only one individual yet subsisting who was endowed with the right over their Authority, that being Spica.

That was to say, the expectation to safely regain the Names and Memories eaten by Gluttony that shall not return all the more at this juncture, was set onto Spica’s shoulders.

Rem seemed uneasy about exerting that kind of pressure onto Spica, but—

Subaru: “I don’t think Spica will find it to be an unnecessary burden… But, let’s contact Abel and ensure that there’s proper security around Spica. Tell Ceci to be vigilant as well. Putting aside whether Ceci will be able to.”

Rem: “—Yes.”

It was a tragedy that had befallen the body of Gluttony. There was no certainty whether or not the same threat would advance toward Spica; Subaru shared the worry and anxiety that Rem harbored and decided to direct this exhort towards Vollachia. He did not wish for any intrusion to impede upon Spica, who remained in Vollachia, having determined what she ought to do.

He must use any means possible to that end, no matter how overly protective he was called.

???: “—Sorry to keep you waiting.”

As Subaru and Rem’s conversation arrived at a brief terminus, approaching them with one hand lightly upraised was Reinhard, exiting the Prison Tower's interior. Receiving the duo of Reinhard with Beatrice at his side, Subaru hastily stood up as he dusted off his behind.

Subaru: "Reinhard, how's the inside? That Sirius…"

Reinhard: "Fortunately, if that is the correct thing to say. I was nearly fully certain, but she who is imprisoned in the underground is unharmed. The isolation cells of the Prison Tower are all respectively independent, so it seems she was unaware that Gluttony had even been apprehended in the same tower. And it is not just her. No other prisoners were harmed."

Subaru: "Sirius is unharmed, and so are the other prisoners… it's definitely dubious to call it good news, but one thing is clear."

Upon Reinhard's report of having completed his check of the interior of the Tower, Subaru nodded with a loathsome facial expression.

This was to say, the aim of the perpetrator of this crime within the Prison Tower was solely—

Subaru & Reinhard: "—The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony."

Their answers overlapping, Subaru and Reinhard intersected gazes and nodded.

Based on the situation at the crime scene, that was the only conclusion this circumstance accorded. However, that was not to say this conviction was not shadowed by questions.

Rem: "…Based on what Beatrice-chan told me, even that is not something so simple, is it?"

Beatrice: "The inspection is done, I suppose. That perception is unmistaken, in fact."

Drawing in her jaw toward Rem as she peered at her, Beatrice lined herself up beside Subaru. As she proceeded to gently hold Subaru's hand, Beatrice enquired about his state, Beatrice: “Are you feeling a tad fine now, I suppose?”

Subaru: “Not quite fine, but better. Sorry for shoving the whole crime scene inspection onto you.”

Beatrice: “Betty said so herself, in fact. Besides, there is not much that even Betty can do for a corpse, I suppose. What Betty can do is only provide insight from the perspective of a Great Spirit, in fact.”

Reinhard: “Please tell us your view. You see, I am unfamiliar with that regard.”

The gazes of the trio assembled upon Beatrice, as she closed her eyes at Reinhard’s urging. She cleared her throat with a tiny “Ahem” and surveyed the three as though about to give a lecture,

Beatrice: “To begin with, that Gluttony’s body was secured with Yin Magic, I suppose. Betty and Julius had worked together to do it, so it was rigid and solid security, impervious to any meager, measly attempts on it, in fact… That Betty couldn’t develop that advanced form by herself is mortifying, I suppose.”

Reinhard: “I have received confirmation on that end from those in charge of the Prison Tower. That the apprehended Gluttony was completely… suspended, like he had become a slate.”

Beatrice: “A thing impossible to meddle with, of course for the captive person, but also from those on the outside, in fact. Unfastening it would require suitable mastery of Yin Magic, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That’s not all. Even after getting him out of the monolith, you’d then have to go at it against the Roy who’d rush out. Go at it and—”

Rem: “—Take his life. In other words, it would be necessary to overcome these two stages.”

Upon Rem’s concluding remarks, Subaru and the rest were submerged in silence, their expressions troubled.

Understood insofar, in order to kill the monolith-status Roy, it necessitated skill in Yin Magic sufficient to rescind that monolith, and thereafter, the strength capable of killing Roy. Neither of these two things would be achievable in a brief period, nor capable for a person simply idling about without association.

Reinhard: “And that is to say nothing of their success in slipping through the network of vigilance to trespass into the Prison Tower. Yin Magic, mighty strength, covertness; to fulfill these three conditions is not something so simple.”

Subaru: “Taking into account all of my various grudges, I’d want to cling to the conclusion that Olbart-san is the perpetrator…”

Regrettably, even the Vicious Old Man would fail to meet the condition of being a Yin Magic user.

Although he would almost not be surprised to learn that among the shinobi techniques, there was something that exhibited similar strength, and that Olbart had been stealthily wielding it.

Reinhard: “It is without doubt that Vollachia is a belligerent nation, but they would not go so far as to choose impetuously risking diplomatic relations, given the country’s present situation. To begin with, I have heard that the arrival of Emilia-sama and the others at the Royal Capital is not unrelated to the matter of Vollachia.”

Subaru: “…You’re right. I’d like to trust the flow that the wolves of that country have become a bit more sorted, rather than suspect Vollachia’s desire for suicide. But, I’m sorry for the whole mess, Reinhard.”

Reinhard: “Sorry? What ever happened for you to apologize?”

Subaru: “I had you take a detour just to have Rem tag along, and on top of that, you must’ve brokered our entry into the Prison Tower. And yet, in the end, this is how it turns out… ah.”

Rem: “—Stare.”

As Subaru was about to apologize for the pointless errand, he noticed Rem’s frigid gaze fixed onto him.

So, this was another link in Subaru's vice of thinking everything was his fault.

However, that this thought had come to him was a fact, and withdrawing it would not sit right with him.

Beatrice: "It is unfortunate that the result was unfavorable, in fact. But, thank you for exhausting your efforts, I suppose."

Subaru: "That's it! As expected of my Beako! R-Right, Rem-san?"

Rem: "Sigh…"

Subaru: "A sigh!"

Rem's glacial gaze was replaced by her sigh, to which Subaru covered his face with his hands. Observing these affairs, Reinhard's lips cleft into a tiny smile.

Subsequently, with his smile brimming, he declared.

Reinhard: "Come now, it was nothing. —You're welcome."

He said.

2

???: "…I see, Gluttony was… It's kind of frustrating when things didn't quite go right."

Within a room of the Royal Residence, having received the report on the happenings at the Prison Tower, Emilia slanted her well-shaped eyebrows, muttering so with a conspicuously pallid complexion upon her face.

Her current state, bleared by fatigue, was a seldom sight for the ever-cheerful Emilia. Regardless, bearing the self-consciousness that one fragment of her fatigue came from his own weight, Subaru knew this was a disappointing show from him.

—Having parted ways with Reinhard, who had returned for Felt, Subaru was accompanied by Rem and Beatrice as they headed toward Emilia's sojourn, the Royal Residence. There, he rendezvoused with everyone who had arrived before him.

Apart from Roswaal and Frederica, who were making for the Barielle Domain with Schult in tow, roughly everyone from the Emilia Camp was present at the Royal Residence.

In other words—

???: "In spite of whipping these tired bodies to come running to the Royal Capital, it was a pointless errand, it would seem. How dare you spur such premature joy, Barusu."

Subaru: "Just so you know, everyone aside from nee-sama is also disappointed, and even within that, my dismay is of the top class. I might just start crying tears of blood."

Ram: "Hah! Tears of blood? That would just be the bursted blood vessels around your eyeballs. Ram can assist you in crying right this instant, in fact."

Subaru: "Scary! Just because it was a shock, your márociousness is showing a bit too much!"

Even Ram, albeit more aggressive than usual, was thus present as well.

Naturally, when Subaru had explained why he was bringing Rem to the Royal Capital, Ram had insisted in no uncertain terms that she would be coming too. Subaru understood her sisterly conviction that there was no way she could fail to be present when Rem's Memories returned, and since he himself had wanted Ram there, he had agreed.

Still, the burden of the past several months, from their challenge of the Pleiades Watchtower to their forcible incursion into the Empire, must have been tremendous. Ram had managed to hold herself together through sheer force of will, but now that this whole affair had ended in a complete miss, the strings which held her taut had finally snapped. Even as she kept flinging barbed remarks, she had basically gone groggy.

In the end, just after delivering that final jab to Subaru, she was escorted off by Rem and Petra straight to a bedroom, and it looked like she would be nursed there for a while.

Otto: “Though, to be fair, Ram-san is not the only one barely hanging on. All of us are. There was the trouble involving Natsuki-san and the others, then the murder in the Prison Tower, and now the appearance of the Church of the Divine Dragon, plus the upheaval in the Royal Selection caused by the individual at the center of it all.”

As they watched Ram leave the room, Otto muttered that with his brows drooping.

He had accompanied the party that had gone ahead to the Royal Capital with Emilia, and he was supposed to deliver a full report at the Royal Castle on the Great Disaster in the Vollachian Empire, including the news of Priscilla’s death. Amongst the matters on the agenda was also the question of the future accord between the Empire and the Kingdom that Abel had entrusted them with, an important duty both for their camp and for the Kingdom itself, or so he had surely believed.

And then, out of nowhere, they got blindsided from a completely unexpected angle, thrown into a situation no amount of preparation could have readied them for. Even Subaru could not bring himself to tease Otto over it.

In the middle of all that, just as Subaru was agonizing over where they should even begin—

Emilia: “—Will you talk to us about Al?”

As if she had seen straight through Subaru’s hesitation, Emilia chose that topic as the first item on the agenda.

Flam, Felt’s attendant, possessed a Divine Protection that allowed information to be transmitted between the twin sisters regardless of distance. Borrowing that power, they had already sent Emilia’s group a rough outline of what had happened to Subaru and the others at the Pleiades Watchtower. But, that had only been a simple summary. The details were another matter.

Having understood how anxious Emilia and the others must have been, Subaru explained everything as thoroughly as he could.

How they had gone to the Pleiades Watchtower in search of a Book of the Dead. How, that night, Al had betrayed them and attempted to do them harm, only for them to get the drop on him and contain him first. How he had not been granted any leeway to talk through the root of the reason that had driven Al to such violence.

And finally, that Subaru had no intention of letting his relationship with Al end there, without knowing any of those reasons.

Emilia: "—Yes, I feel the same way Subaru does… I think that's the best thing to do."

After hearing him out and spending some time thinking it over, Emilia gave her approval to Subaru's conclusion, delighting him. Her amethyst eyes swayed with complicated emotions, but even so, she quietly gazed at the Al-orb hanging from Subaru's neck and nodded.

He had already told Beatrice and Petra his thoughts while they were on the way back. So among those present, the ones forming a new opinion based on Subaru's explanation were Emilia, who had just answered him that way; Otto, who looked like he had just bitten into an unripe persimmon; as well as—

Rem: "—Al-san loved Priscilla-san. I cannot speak more on the matter."

It was Rem, who had laid Ram down in the bedroom, and had now returned to the sitting room with Petra.

And so, for the time being, the Emilia Camp's stance toward Al's actions was decided. Perhaps because he did not want to spoil the atmosphere, Otto kept his thoughts to himself, for now. Subaru figured he could make him vent those thoughts later, together with Garfiel. With that in mind, Subaru slapped both cheeks with his hands.

Whether it was about Al, or about the Prison Tower, there was nothing they could do for either of those matters right now. Which meant that if there was anything they could discuss at present, the remaining topic was—

Subaru: "—Let's talk about this Filóre, from the Church of the Divine Dragon."

About Filóre, whose existence could shake the very foundations of the Royal Selection.

Everyone: "…"

The moment that subject came up, the air in the sitting room changed completely. But rather than becoming taut with tension or strain, it was filled with a much broader sense of bewilderment and confusion.

In truth, Subaru included, every last one of them was at a considerable loss over the situation.

Subaru: "To begin with, what kind of discussion is even happening at the Castle right now? The whole premise was that the Church of the Divine Dragon wouldn't involve itself in the political core of things, right? And then suddenly, there's talk of a sixth person who can make the insignia shine, and on top of that, she's using the same name as the princess who vanished fifteen years ago? All of that came totally out of nowhere for everyone, didn't it?"

Emilia: "Well, it sounds like they're in the middle of discussing all of that right now. But, the Church broke its own rules this time because they wanted to save the people who were hurt in Pristella, right? Nobody can really say that's wrong, and actually…"

Subaru: "—They healed Crusch-san's body. Emilia-tan, you and Otto saw it too, right?"

Emilia: "Yes, we did see it. Right, Otto-kun?"

Otto: "I could not exactly stare a lady down so blatantly, but at the very least, the convulsive-looking black marks that had been visible have disappeared."

Beside the nodding Emilia, Otto answered in such a way, his gaze flicking for a moment toward Subaru's leg.

Was he implying that if the same conditions were met, Subaru's leg could be healed too? To be honest, it did not inconvenience him that much, but every time they all bathed together, Otto and Garfiel might have felt awkward about it, so if it could be healed, he would not mind getting that taken care of.

Subaru: "But, it's kind of terrifying, becoming indebted to the Church of the Divine Dragon for that… ah!"

Meili: "Ee~w, Onii-san, what are you getting all scaredy like that fo~r?"

Subaru: "No, I was just thinking that this might be another one of those "you put yourself last" situations I'll get scolded for…"

Rem: "If you are aware of that, then please carry yourself with a little more dignity."

Meili poked at him, and Rem sounded exasperated too. Still, if he had spoken out loud that this was a case with no actual harm involved, and that he did not want to make a disadvantageous position for the camp over it, he would probably get chewed out, so Subaru could only try to fumble past the issue with a fake little "ahem-ahem".

Not that he was trying to bail Subaru out, but the one who spoke up then with a coarse "Hey" was Garfiel, seated on the window frame of the room.

Scratching his head roughly, he hesitated for a moment before saying,

Garfiel: "There's prolly all sortsa complicated crap tied up to this. So, what my amazin' self's 'bout ta say, that's just how my amazin' self feels, got it?"

Emilia: "Garfiel… hm, tell us. What is it?"

Garfiel: "—. If they can heal the folks in Pristella, then my amazin' self wants 'em to be healed right away, 'n to get those guys to do the healin'. Between the black dragon 'n the flies 'n all the rest, ain't there already been nothin' but drainin' crap?"

Curled up with one knee hugged close, half of his body exposed to the sunlight, Garfiel's plea was earnest.

There was a family in Pristella Garfiel had grown close to. During that battle, the father of that family had fallen into the clutches of Lust, and was turned into a black dragon, having even been used once as a decoy. Even now, that transformed black dragon body remained unchanged, and by Emilia's hand, he was being kept frozen, like the other victims, slumbering in a corner of the city.

If people in such a position could be cured, Garfiel was saying, then whom one had to rely on should be secondary.

Subaru: "And, I agree with him. There are people suffering, people in pain, and if there's a way to save them, then it doesn't matter who does it. That's what I think."

Petra: "Hmm, so Subaru gets to say that sort of thing? Even though you were the one insisting that it had to be you to wake up Rem-neesama, throwing yourself into danger over it?"

Subaru: "Now that you mention it, maybe I did say something like that, but man, you really remembered that well, Petra!"

Petra: "That's not something I can forget. It kind of shocked me, after all. Part of me thought Rem-neesama was unfair, and part of me thought, wow, even after hearing that, I'm still the kind of girl who won't give up."

At Petra, who puckered her lips mischievously, Subaru could only scratch his head in total surrender.

In truth, before Rem woke up, while he had said that it would be fine no matter who awakened her, so long as she woke, he had absolutely also declared that he wanted to be the one to do it. In truth, he was a little too scared to look over and see what kind of face Rem was making upon hearing that.

Be that as it may—

Subaru: "Putting aside what I've said in the past, let's look to the future… No matter how the discussion at the Castle gets wrapped up, now that it's been proven that the Church of the Divine Dragon has a way to heal them, the people of Pristella are going to be treated… right?"

Otto: "Yes. No matter which way the heated debate turns, I do not think there will be any hesitation on that point. The real issue will be whether it is treated as merely a debt owed to the Church of the Divine Dragon, or as something more than that."

Subaru: "The sixth qualified candidate for Dragon Priestess, huh…"

Ultimately, how that individual's standing would be handled was not something Subaru and the others had any control over.

Depending on how the people at the Royal Castle, or more precisely, the Council of Wise Men, chose to define those matters, this camp centered around Emilia would decide its own stance as well.

But when Subaru thought about it that way, the one still weighing on his mind was Filóre herself.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, you actually met her in person, right? What kind of person was she?"

Emilia: "Let's see… I thought she was a reaaally earnest girl. A good girl."

Subaru: "I see. And what do you think of Meili?"

Emilia: "Huh? Meili? I think Meili is a reaaally hard-working girl who cares about her friends. A good girl."

Meili: "I get what Subaru-oniisan is trying to sa~y, but don't use me as your prop, oka~y?"

It was not that Subaru doubted Emilia's eye for people, but when filtered through Emilia, there was always the danger that anyone at all might be judged as a serious, sincere, hard-working, good person. That said, Subaru's own assessment of Meili was not all that different, so it would be wrong to question Emilia's discernment based on that alone.

At this rate, it might have actually been more useful to ask Abel what he thought.

Subaru: "What about you, Otto? Even if you only caught a glimpse of her for a moment, what did you think?"

Otto: "I did not exchange many words with her, but my impression was that she was a devout believer of the Church of the Divine Dragon. Someone sincere, who believed that serving others was the highest good, and…"

Subaru: "And?"

Otto: "She seems to have a somewhat reckless streak. From what I have heard, this whole affair was Filóre-san acting on her own, disregarding the Church's intentions."

Subaru: "On her own? You mean healing Crusch-san, and making the insignia shine?"

Otto: "The former, yes. The latter was apparently the result of how events unfolded. But given the circumstances, I can not help thinking the Church of the Divine Dragon wanted to keep her existence hidden."

Subaru: "Well, that's…"

As for Subaru's question of why, no one there had an answer.

Was Filóre truly the princess who had disappeared fifteen years ago, or not? What was with her appearance, bearing the traits said to belong to Lugunica's Royal Family; and what was the truth behind that name? Why had the Church of the Divine Dragon kept her hidden, allowing the Royal Selection to begin and continue in ignorance of her existence?

The mysteries were simply too many. And because they were—

Subaru: “Hey, Emilia-tan—”

Emilia: “Look, Subaru—”

Subaru, lifting his face to voice an idea, and Emilia, overlapping with him, spoke. Startled, the two looked at each other with rounded eyes. Then, feeling as though they could read the same thought in each other’s gaze, they laughed together.

Apparently, Emilia had arrived at the very same conclusion.

That was to say—

Subaru: “—Don’t you think we should try meeting this Filóre person and talking to her directly?”

3

—If he were to think back on it, Subaru did not possess a particularly strong grasp on the overall picture of the Royal Capital of Lugunica.

Near the fountain in the Commoner District where he had been so grandly summoned to another world, the Commercial District with its fruit stand, whose shop owner he had met several times, the headquarters of each Candidate from whom he had received a series of blows following his terrible fight and parting with Emilia, and finally the loot house in the Slums: although he held emotional attachments regarding each of those places, they were merely a small portion of the Royal Capital’s vastness.

Consequently, to Subaru, the place of worship for the Church of the Divine Dragon, which was inconspicuously nestled in a corner of the Royal Capital’s Commoner District, seemed to be a case of it being the darkest at the foot of the lighthouse, as if it had been built right on the edge of his awareness.[17]

Subaru: “I had no clue there was such an obvious church…”

Emilia: “It’s reaaally surprising. But, if we’re talking about a church… didn’t you know, you even saw one in Pristella, where the wedding between Regulus and me was about to happen.”

Subaru: “You mean where I busted down that door! Now that you mention it, was that also one of the Church of the Divine Dragon’s?”

Due to that ironclad association of churches and weddings, his sense of duty to rescue Emilia no matter what had taken over, allowing him no leeway to even consider the setting. But, in retrospect, it had indeed been a church, and if it was a church within the Kingdom, which possessed no custom of belief in gods, it was inevitable that it would be connected to the Church of the Divine Dragon.

Subaru: “In that case, while wedding Emilia-tan was a sight for sore eyes, that incident itself is a detestable memory for me, so my impression of the Church of the Divine Dragon is off to a negative start.”

???: “Betty wasn’t there, but as expected, a Sin Archbishop would hardly do something respectable, I suppose. But, tarnishing your impression of the Church of the Divine Dragon over that would be a false accusation, in fact.”

???: “Well, this wouldn’t be the first time this guy said something so frivolously.”

Subaru: “Beako and Rem are both booing at me… do girls really still yearn for wedding dresses? So, does my bad-mouthing of the Church give me a bad image?”

In response to Subaru’s timid question, Beatrice and Rem looked at each other, then shrugged their shoulders in unison. Subaru’s own shoulders fell in dejection at their response, and putting her hand over her mouth with a giggle, Emilia smiled, putting him at ease.

While casting a glance upon that smile, Subaru took that rare opportunity to regain his composure.

Subaru: “At any rate, although there’s a lot of circumstances that led up to our outing, having Emilia-tan and me, plus Beako and Rem… going in this combination is like, a dream party in a sense, isn’t it?”

Beatrice: “Whether it’s dreamy is uncertain, but it’s certainly quite unusual, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Yeah, now that you mention it. Until Subaru brought you out of the Forbidden Library, you wouldn’t really join us on outings, Beatrice. I’m sure it was the same for Rem, before she fell asleep.”

Rem: “I have no recollection of such things, but I’m sure you’re right. I’m also having fun walking around with Emilia-san and Beatrice-chan.”

Subaru: “Heeey, you left me out on purpose just now. I’m so looonely, I’m so miiiserable.”

Even saying that, this was an unusual yet delightful combination, so Subaru remained unbothered.

For the time being, these members comprised the team that was going to visit Filóre of the Church of the Divine Dragon, the lineup tasked with the mission of scouting out the enemy.

Presently, they were at last approaching the place of worship where the involved party from the aforementioned Church of the Divine Dragon was, but under what pretext could they summon Filóre—then, it happened at that moment.

???: “—Ehhh, you can’t keep on branding others as liars! Alright, allow me to show you. This is the proof that I went up to the Castle!”

And then, an energetic voice could be heard from the premises of a large building enclosed by stone walls—judging from its roof and the ambiance of its structure, it was most likely a church, the steeple of which was in view.

As soon as they blinked their eyes in confusion, Subaru and the others saw it. —On the other side of the stone wall, a red light faintly swelled, asserting its existence.

Subaru: “That… could it be…”

???: “Wah! Amazing, amazing!”

???: “It really glowed! What did you do? What did you do?”

???: “You finally stole something! You thief!”

???: “First you call me a liar, and now you say I’m a thief?! You, just who do you think I am?! I am a nun! One who bears the Sacraments! On the verge of becoming a Saintess!”

It was the boisterously merry voices of children, and the voice of a girl who seemed to be playing with them. Subaru and the others looked at each other in response to what they had heard, before hurriedly navigating around the stone wall.

And then, upon reaching a break in the stone wall, the front entrance to the church grounds—

???: “Now, behold. This is the brilliance of our Divine Dragon, who reduces those with wicked hearts to ashes! This too, is in the scriptures. “Man is born of the earth, and the Dragon descendeth from the heavens. He that forgets to revere the heavens and foolishly trusts that he hath wings upon his own back shall not realize his sin before his fall”!”

???: “Kyaaa!”

???: “Waaah!”

???: “Ugyaaah!”

They bore witness to the figure of a nun brazenly declaring such things, with red light glistening from within her hand held aloft—the Dragon Gem on the insignia radiating, she chased after the squealing children who ran around erratically.

She had not noticed her visitors, and pursuing the fleeing children with an “Ooh hoh hoh hoh!” while the insignia glowed behind them,

Nun: “Now, who will repent amidst the blinding light of the high and exalted Dragon… huh?”

Subaru & Company: “…”

Stopping dead in her tracks, the nun swiveled around as if making a creaking noise. There, she discovered Subaru and the rest observing the scene, and her mouth fell agape.

Upon seeing the reaction of the golden-haired, crimson-eyed nun, Subaru was at a loss for words. However, at Subaru's side, Emilia rustled around in her pocket,

Emilia: "Look, look, I can do the same thing!"

And, as the produced insignia glowed red, just like the nun's—just like Filóre's had, with angelic innocence, lacking any ill intent, Emilia followed up by saying she was also the same.

Immediately afterwards, Subaru saw with his own eyes as Filóre's pale skin, from her neck to her face to her ears, all turned red with shame in a single instant, and Subaru faintly thought that she seemed like an instantaneous water heater.[18]

Chapter 7:
My Friend

1

???: “Are you okay? Do you think you can handle it?”

???: “Onee-chan, watch what you’re doing! Uh-oh, uh-oh!”

???: “Is that the silver-haired half-elf everyone’s been talking about? Splash it on her head!”

???: “Don’t just say such nonsense off to the side! Also, don’t incite such blatant malice! This too, is in the scriptures. “Thou shalt not touch the scales of the Dragon with an impure mind. The defiled shall not be permitted to pass through the Golden Gates ere they have been struck by silver rain and the filth of their hearts hath been ground away.”“

???: “…Which means?”

???: “…Which means?”

???: “…Which means?”

???: “It means if you even think about doing naughty things, I’ll be just as mad as if you actually did them! Now look, I have guests to attend to! Run along and play outside!”

A resonant voice gently shooed the innocent children outside. At that scolding, the children squealed as they noisily fled outside the building.

There were two boys and one girl, with the girl being the one with the nastiest comments. As all of them were clad in habits dyed indigo, nearly as dark as black itself, they were most likely members of the Church.

In any case, Subaru took it in stride, thinking it was good for them to be so energetic.

???: “I apologize for our children being so noisy. I admonish them daily, and yet it doesn’t quite seem to be sinking in, or rather, perhaps they just look down on me… hoh.”

Watching the backs of those children, the golden-haired, crimson-eyed nun leisurely shrugged her shoulders—it was Filóre. In the midst of preparing to entertain her guests, she lamented that the children had continued to bother her, and in truth, it seemed that their behavior was an equal mix of fondness and ridicule.

In any case, rather than offering any consolation on that matter, the attention of Subaru and the others was seized by the tea set being carried upon a silver tray along with the girl’s unsteady gait as she approached them.

Rattling and clattering, everything upon the tray was indicating imminent disaster.

Watching the state of the tea set’s precarious journey to the table in the common room they had been shown to, Subaru and the others gulped.

???: “…Um, do you need a hand?”

Filóre: “Please wait, don’t touch me! Right now, I’m maintaining a perfect balance on the tray, and even a single wrong step would spell the end. Slowly, slowly…”

???: “R-Reaaally do your best…!”

Weaving between Rem, who offered to help, and Emilia, who earnestly cheered her on, somehow Filóre gingerly managed an emergency landing with the tray onto the table without spilling a drop.

As they reflexively applauded her with an “Ooooh”, whilst wiping her forehead, she said,

Filóre: “Ahem, sorry to keep you waiting. My apologies for making you anxious and on edge all of a sudden. Normally, I would leave it up to someone else to welcome guests in this way, but there is no one else here aside from me at present.”

Emilia: “No, it’s fine. Thanks for welcoming us. If anything, we’re the ones who dropped by while you’re so short on hands.”

Filóre: “No, it’s no trouble. The doors of the Church should always be open. This too, is in the scriptures. “Fearing and revering the power of the Dragon is itself a sign of love. Love without reverence is conceit, reverence without love is servility, and righteous love is to be found in the nobility of standing tall in the presence of the Dragon.”“

Emilia: “Umm, and that means?”

Filóre: “In other words, it means you should always be at your finest so that you never have to worry about when someone important might be watching you.”

Raising her index finger, Filóre answered Emilia’s question in that way.

That quotation was likely a verse from the scriptures of the Church of the Divine Dragon, but she had an excellent sense at how to simplify and convey the ideas to make them easier to understand. Moreover, the way her explanation made the ceremonious language easy to comprehend was welcomed by Subaru, whose understanding of religious beliefs was superficial.

Subaru: “That said, the way you were shouting at those kids with spit flying everywhere was you at your finest?”

Filóre: “Guh-”

Beatrice: “And after that, the way her face turned bright red after noticing Betty and everyone else was quite the spectacle, I suppose.”

Filóre: “Urgh-”

As Subaru and Beatrice pointed this out, Filóre clutched her chest and groaned after each point. While feeling quite pleased with that reaction, suddenly Rem, next to Subaru, and Emilia, next to Beatrice, each pinched their ears.

Rem: “That was an unnecessary comment just now.”

Emilia: “Geez, don’t bully her.”

Subaru & Beatrice: “Ouch, ouch, ouch!”

And so, Subaru and Beatrice were each made to pay the price for their mischief, leaving them with some damage. In the end, simply bringing out the tea had resulted in a tally of three casualties.

But, that was enough of such nonsense—

Filóre: “Once again, I thank you for visiting me. I am Filóre… a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon who just caused quite the commotion at the Royal Castle.”

Everyone: “…”

Subaru and the others stared in total silence as Filóre introduced herself with her hand upon her chest. Then, her expression quickly clouding over,

Filóre: “Hey, please say something. Otherwise, I’ll get anxious…”

Subaru: “Nah, it’s just that I was thinking, “Oh, so she is aware that she caused a commotion, huh.”“

Filóre: “Well of course I am… I mean, I am indeed. If everyone in the Castle was looking at you with such indescribable eyes, anyone would think “Huh? Did I do something wrong?”.”

Subaru: “Well, we weren’t there for that, but I do in fact understand that unbearable sensation of feeling out of place like that preeetty well.”

Filóre: “Really?! That hellish sensation?!”

Emilia: “Oh, Subaru, could you be talking about the time when you went off and declared yourself my Knight in front of everybody, and then I was embarrassed so I said you weren’t?”

Subaru: “Guh, that’s pretty much it!”

With Filóre jumping up, and Emilia clasping her hands together in front of her chest, Subaru was bombarded by innocent exclamations from both sides, and this time it was his old wounds that began to sting anew.

Or rather, from Emilia's perspective, her rejection of him on that occasion was simply due to her embarrassment. Of course, he had not conducted a survey on her feelings about that time, but contrary to her cute reason, the damage Subaru had suffered was horrific.

Rem: "…I can't even bear to hear what was said just now, but is it true?"

Beatrice: "Unfortunately, Betty had yet to form a Contract with Subaru at the time, so she doesn't know the details, in fact. However, it wouldn't have been strange for Subaru to make such a mistake back then, I suppose."

Subaru: "It's super depressing hearing Rem and Beako saying all sorts of things about that day after so long! Just so you know, before you lost your Memories, you understood the situation Rem, and you were rather sympathetic toward me."

Rem: "Are you sure about that? Perhaps my previous self was so dumbfounded that I simply refrained from commenting?"

Subaru: "Stop it, now I'm kinda starting to feel like you could be right!"

Truthfully, regardless of Subaru's feelings at that time, his way of doing things, his methods, the way he spoke to others, the way he presented himself; he had no doubt that he had persisted in making poor choices in all aspects. Still, he had already reflected on that, so he hoped he would be let off the hook already, even though he had been the one to initially bring it up.

However, as Subaru found himself being crushed by his own actions in the past—

Filóre: "—I understand those feelings."

Both of her hands unflinchingly reached over the table to firmly grasp Subaru's right hand. As he looked, he saw Filóre leaning forward directly in front of him, nodding toward Subaru.

Meeting the wide-eyed Subaru, those crimson eyes of hers blazing,

Filóre: "The icy stares of everyone around you, glaring at you, who appeared out of nowhere, and clearly don't belong."

Subaru: "—!"

Filóre: "Your tongue, which had started speaking with such enthusiasm, is unable to turn back now."

Subaru: "Yeah, yeah. That's exactly right!"

Filóre: "After you've more or less finished speaking, there's a long silence that feels like an eternity before someone says something!"

Subaru: "Those few seconds are endlessly long…!"

Filóre: "I realized that I really overdid it… That I might have made a mistake, or something."

Subaru: "Filóre…!"

The shudder of fear she had experienced coursing through her, he felt every bit of it as if it were his own—no, in truth, it was his own. Realizing this, Subaru also grasped Filóre's hands in return.

Hands clasped together atop the table, Subaru and Filóre nodded to each other.

Indeed, Subaru and Filóre were comrades who had both gotten carried away and made a mess of things at the Castle—

Rem: "However, aren't your positions quite different between the likes of Filóre-san, who immediately produced results, and you, who postponed the opportunity to make amends?"

Subaru: "St-Stooop… we were totally having a moment just nooow."

Filóre: “Indeed, indeed. This too, is in the scriptures. “Sharpen not thy claws that tear at thy neighbor whilst sheltered beneath the shade of the same wing. Brothers who quarrel under the same sky are those who err in abandoning the benevolence of the Dragon by their own hand”.”

Emilia: “Umm, and that means?”

Filóre: “We are all comrades who have suffered the same taste of shame, so get along instead of arguing.”

Subaru: “I totally get it! Maybe I’ll join the Church of the Divine Dragon!”

Beatrice: “That would be a delicate matter, so don’t treat it so carelessly, in fact!”

Taken in by the overly kind treatment, and on the verge of joining a new religion, Subaru was stopped by Beatrice’s loving open palm. If love for the object of one’s faith was a major driving force, then Subaru was surely already an adherent of Beatrice-ism, as well as Emilia-ism and Rem-ism.

Subaru: “No, by that logic, that’s a whole lot of religions I’m joining. Up to now, I’ve been pretending to be non-religious as typical of a Japanese person, but perhaps in the eyes of God, I’m actually an unfaithful person…?”

Rem: “—. Well, isn’t that right?”

Subaru: “Those are simply unbelievably cold eyes!”

As soon as he muttered something nervously, he was stabbed to death by Rem’s pale-blue eyes. With Emilia and Beatrice also offering wry smiles beside Rem, Subaru stopped investigating the topic further.

Having made his tactical retreat, Subaru and the others turned their gaze to Filóre once again. Frankly, she already was very easy to get along with at this point, but there was something he needed to tell her.

And that was—

Subaru: “I heard you helped Crusch-san. This might sound odd for me to say, but… thank you. Seriously, thank you.”

Filóre: “…”

Saying this, Subaru bowed so deeply that he nearly cracked his forehead against the table. In response to those words of gratitude from Subaru, Filóre’s eyes widened, looking toward Emilia and the others.

Though he had prefaced it as odd, it apparently did not dispel the reason for her astonishment. However, Emilia also bowed her head toward Filóre.

Emilia: “Allow me to give my thanks as well. We all wanted to do something to help Crusch-san. And you were the one who actually managed to make it happen.”

Beatrice: “Actually, a solution was just being looked into on our end, I suppose. You’ve performed a great achievement, in fact.”

Rem: “I’ve only heard about it, but I think it’s truly admirable.”

Just like that, not only Emilia, but Beatrice and Rem as well all conveyed their gratitude in succession, leaving Filóre’s jaw hanging agape for a time. And then, somehow absorbing that shock she had been struck by, she slowly shook her head.

Then, before them all, calmly showing a smile filled with benevolent love,

Filóre: “—Think nothing of it. I merely did what I had to do. If someone should be saved by that, then that itself is my greatest wish.”

It was a response truly fitting for the nun of benevolent love that Subaru had embraced. —To the extent that he could have said it was beyond reproach, if only her nostrils had not twitched in delight.

Of course, out of both his appreciation and a samurai’s mercy, Subaru refrained from commenting on it.

2

Filóre: “—I was found abandoned in front of a church when I was an infant. That was a little over fifteen years ago now.”

Upon the conclusion of their initial exchange that had started with greetings, Filóre began to recount for them the position she had been placed in, the circumstances which surrounded her, and the story of her own life related to it all.

Subaru and the others reflexively exchanged looks in response to the comment about an abandoned child that initiated the conversation. —Because when it came to the suspicions that “Filóre was the missing princess”, it was truly not a topic that could be avoided.

Emilia: “You were abandoned… so then, you don’t remember your parents?”

Filóre: “Correct, I don’t know their faces or their names. But, everyone in the Church is my family. So I’ve never felt lonely… well, I’ve occasionally been perturbed when some heartless individual would mock me, but I’ve basically been fine. Because someone has always been there for me.”

Subaru: “I see. But you know, did you ever think it was weird or something? After all, golden hair, crimson eyes, and “Filóre” are like a royal flush, or a critical hit, or something…”

Filóre: “This is the Church of the Divine Dragon, remember? It is only natural for the Church to distance itself from the Royal Family and the Royal Castle, so I never received such information… No, looking back on it now, they probably kept it a secret from me on purpose. You jeeerks…”

Her fists trembling upon the table, Filóre lamented her situation.

As one might surmise from their considerably startling first encounter with her, as well as their brief conversation up to this point, Filóre appeared to be the fairly impulsive type, or rather, someone easily swayed by her own emotions.

Her negotiations at the Royal Castle, which united Subaru with her in a bond of powerful empathy, seemed to have also been a consequence of an outburst of these emotions.

Filóre: “From the start, I have thought that the Witch Cult’s debauchery has been unpardonable as of late. Then came the incident in Pristella… I had already run out of patience.”

Subaru: “So you ignored those around you who were trying to stop you, and raised an uproar in the Castle?”

Filóre: “You could have phrased that with a bit more consideration… I know, how about saying I did so in a dignified and ladylike manner?”

Subaru: “Alright then, you raised an uproar in a dignified and ladylike manner.”

Filóre: “…I feel like my commendable qualities aren’t quite coming across as well as I had thought they would.”

Be that as it may, for Subaru, who had obeyed her instructions, it was not on him to take responsibility for the extent of their effectiveness.

At any rate, it was clear to him that Filóre had acted out of a sense of duty and fierce indignation. However, the interest of Subaru and the others lay in the part concerning what had led her to take such an action.

That was—

Emilia: “—A Sacrament, that’s what you mentioned, right Filóre?”

The atmosphere in the common room became slightly tense as Emilia’s words broached the subject.

A Sacrament, that was the “something” that Filóre was said to have used to cure Crusch’s body, going so far as to march into the Royal

Castle to demonstrate it; this was the possibility of overturning an Authority.

And for some reason, the Church of the Divine Dragon had concealed its existence, and she had attempted to expose it to the public; it was a means by which they could save the victims of the Witch Cult.

Subaru: "…"

Wetting his lips with his tongue, Subaru tried to contain his faint sense of urgency.

As it was declared to be a Sacrament, it was only natural that it would be quite a significant secret of the Church of the Divine Dragon. Depending on the circumstances, mere knowledge of its existence might have been enough for the Church to treat them as an enemy.

If they were to dig deeper into it, even Filóre would shut her mouth —

Filóre: "The Sacrament? Yes, indeed. It is a secret art handed down from antiquity only within the Church, and there are very few individuals who can use it. The Church calls such individuals Saintesses, and I myself am qualified as well, hence why I can employ that power."[19]

Subaru: "You told us way too readily, is that allowed?!"

Filóre: "Whether it's allowed or not, though the Church has tried to hide it, it has already been discussed extensively at the Castle. It's pointless to try and conceal it at this point… This too, is in the scriptures. "Thou shalt not defile the earth the Dragon hath purified with the poison of selfish desire. It requires a thousand years of prayer, and the tears of sinners, to fill a spring that hath dried up but once.""

Emilia: "Umm, and that means?"

Filóre: "In other words, if you try to profit only yourself, it's incredibly challenging to recover if something were to happen. —

And I thought that right now was the time when something had happened.”

Therefore, contrary to the intentions of the Church of the Divine Dragon, who wished to conceal the Sacrament’s very existence, Filóre had chosen to wield that power publicly, in accordance with the doctrines to which she adhered.

Naturally, the Church of the Divine Dragon was in a state of considerable disorder after she had done such a thing on her own accord, and the Royal Castle, which had incurred a huge debt, was likewise surely in a state of mayhem.

However, setting aside the chaotic consequences, Subaru was certain that her motive was born of good intentions.

Filóre: “Right now, they are discussing how to handle me at the Royal Castle… higher-ups from the Church and my long-standing family are both participating, but…”

Emilia: “Even though it’s about you, Filóre, you aren’t a part of the discussion?”

Filóre: “Even though I wanted to join them, they chased me away! It’s about me, and yet if I were to be present, they said things might get complicated… but there’s at least a slight chance it wouldn’t, so don’t you find that heartless?!”

Beatrice: “It’s lamentable that you estimate the chance of it not happening to be low, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Don’t tell her that, Beako.”

Red-faced, Filóre complained about her unjust treatment, but looking at the impulsive and straightforward girl, he could not help but admit that the judgment of those involved was apt.

Filóre claimed to be fifteen years of age, and contrary to her mature appearance, she was most certainly fifteen years old on the inside—or perhaps, even more childish. This might have also been influenced by her upbringing as a sheltered child, isolated from the rest of the world.

To be honest, Subaru could not comprehend the intention of the Church of the Divine Dragon who had raised her in such a way.

Rem: “Then, those concerned are at the Castle? And so, Filóre-san was left alone in this church?”

Filóre: “It’s as you say. Well, I don’t feel lonely because those kids from before are here for me, but I’ve been instructed not to go off on my own. I want to go and spread the power of the Sacrament as quickly as I can, even a single second quicker, and yet…”

Subaru: “I’ve never heard of this Saintess of Motivation.”

He supposed that was just how much she desired to deliver salvation, but there were also Saintesses that lacked such a saintly affectation.

Nevertheless, it was also as Garfiel had discussed at the Royal Residence: when he thought of the victims in Pristella who were waiting for such a time as this, he could do nothing but agree with Filóre’s sentiments.

If anything, as far as Subaru was concerned, he felt like giving Filóre some encouragement.

Subaru: “I totally get how you feel. Maybe I’ll beg Reinhard, and he can carry Filóre to Pristella in a single leap…”

Filóre: “Guh… hk, what a fascinating proposal…! However, I was told to wait patiently.”

Subaru: “You didn’t make a promise, did you? Besides, even if you promised, if it saves someone in the end, then breaking it just a little bit…”

Emilia: “Subaru? Are you perhaps not only breaking your own promises, but making others break them as well? That’s reaaally not good, you know…?”

Beatrice: “Even a habitual promise breaker has reached his limit, in fact.”

Subaru: “Guhhh…!”

Reprimanded with the nuance of “I understand your feelings, but…”, Subaru could only respond with that gurgling noise. Together with Filóre, who made a similar sound herself, they bent the knee before that promise.

At the moment, all they could do was pray that the discussions at the Castle would come to a swift and constructive resolution.

Rem: “—At any rate, I heard that Filóre-san is a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon.”

Subaru: “Rem?”

Rem: “Even with such a position, you included Emilia-san so readily.”

Subaru, who had been offering up a prayer in the direction of the Castle, frowned quizzically when Rem suddenly broached this different topic.

However, that subject was not entirely off the mark, as made apparent from the reactions of Emilia, who frowned, and Filóre, who lowered her hands that had been raised in prayer, the same as Subaru.

Rem had pointed it out: when it came to the relationship between the Church of the Divine Dragon and Emilia, her true point was that —

Rem: “The Church of the Divine Dragon reveres the power and grace of the Divine Dragon Volcanica, and the Covenant with it. And, the grandest achievement of the Divine Dragon within the Kingdom of Lugunica is the sealing of the Witch of Envy, isn’t that right?”

Subaru: “Oi, that can’t mean…”

Rem: “The more devout adherents of the Church of the Divine Dragon may feel conflicted concerning Emilia-san… that’s what I’m saying.”

Subaru rose to his feet in spite of himself, but Rem did not turn toward his countenance, nor attempt to meet his eyes. Her lips pursed tight, Rem knew her remarks had been callous, and could very well end up demolishing the heretofore relatively amicable atmosphere of the meeting.And yet, Rem still spoke out. She would not simply avert her eyes from that unnatural situation and allow it to remain unnatural.

Truthfully, Subaru had not perceived that peculiarity until Rem had pointed it out.

There was also the fact that the Church of the Divine Dragon's existence was entirely foreign to him, but what was more significant for Subaru was this: although he felt novel amazement each day at Emilia being an ultra-beautiful girl, from their first encounter until today, she had never once been an object of dread or awe to him.

But, he must not forget. —Due to her lineage and the characteristics of her appearance, Emilia constantly had her resemblance to the most dreaded Witch in this world thrust upon her.

Subaru: "…"

And, that resemblance to the Witch of Envy was certainly an affair that could never be ignored, nor openly approved of by the Church of the Divine Dragon, who dedicated themselves to the Divine Dragon itself, one of the Three Great Heroes who, four hundred years prior, had put a stop to the atrocities of the Witch.

Moreover, Filóre was a bearer of the Sacrament that was a secret of the Church, and a presence placed in a position akin to that of a Saintess. Having been raised under the doctrines of the Church of the Divine Dragon, it would not be strange if she bore such an impression of Emilia.

Subaru: "Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot."

This sort of thing was something Subaru should have taken notice of, not Rem.

Despite his position as Emilia's one and only Knight, he was far too lacking in knowledge of and vigilance towards places where she might be harmed unjustly. Would he try to make up for it by cursing himself and saying it was his own fault, even if Emilia's face clouded over as a result?

He regretted his own lack of knowledge, and that had been one of the reasons he had hastened back to the Royal Capital, and yet—

Emilia: "Rem, just when have you been studying? You reaaally surprised me."

However, as Subaru felt such regrets, Emilia herself spoke, neither to rebuke her good-for-nothing one and only Knight, nor to express surprise upon realizing Rem's remarks.

She simply smiled, thanking Rem for her decision to bring up that topic.

Rem: "…Something like studying isn't really that big of a deal. It's just, I am also in a position where I have been given a place for myself to belong, so I simply listened to what Nee-sama had to say."

Emilia: "Still, it makes me happy. Even though I made you worry… how weird."

Rem: "—. No, it's not that I don't understand. I often feel pathetic for worrying others, but it also makes me feel cared for."

Emilia: "Fufu, is that so? In that case, Rem, please take good care of me, too."

Rem: "…I think Emilia-san has done so for me already."

Casting her eyes down, Rem directed that retort back towards Emilia, who stared straight ahead at her. However, to Subaru's eyes, that attitude of Rem's was just her way of hiding her embarrassment.

Emilia's pure, honest gaze could strip away any contemplated motives. Subaru understood exactly how Rem was feeling, as he too was frequently made to face himself because of it.

Subaru: “Beako, cheek!”

Beatrice: “Good grief, I sup, pose!”

Immediately following the exchange between those two, Subaru called out in such a manner to Beatrice. As soon as he did, Beatrice slapped Subaru’s face with her tiny palm as if she had been preparing to do so—numbness racing from her lovely hand with a smack, Subaru’s shoulders trembled.

Emilia: “Kya?! Why’d you do that so suddenly?”

Taken aback by that unexpected action, Emilia gently touched Subaru’s cheek. As the coolness of those fair fingertips soothed his stinging cheek, Subaru shrugged his shoulders with a “Nah”,

Subaru: “I just got a little fired up. It’s mentalism by Beako to stand back up… perhaps I’ll call it Bea-ntalism. Or maybe Bea-therapy? Which one do you prefer?”

Emilia: “Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

Emilia responded in her usual tone to Subaru, who had spouted out such pointless words.

From that response alone, he recognized that Emilia appeared unafraid of the circumstances which were worrying Subaru, nor did she appear disheartened over Subaru’s shameful display.

Subaru: “Of course, I can’t just rely on that. It’s also a problem that my judgment regarding circumstances that should worry our camp is worse than the amnesiac Rem.”

Rem: “Reflect properly on that.”

Subaru: “You’re telling me that because you think I can do it, right? All right, leave it to me.”

Rem: “—. Well, that’s fine.”

Subaru had begun to lose heart, but with that encouragement from Rem, his motivation was restored. After doing so, Subaru once again turned sharply toward Filóre.

She was a nun and Saintess of the Church of the Divine Dragon. However, that was precisely why—

Subaru: “There is significance in freeing such people from prejudice, I think. So, how about it, Filóre? For a start, how about forming a friendly relationship with Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “A friendly relationship? Hey, Subaru, do you mean…?”

Subaru: “Yeah, in other words—the two of you becoming friends!”

Firmly clenching his fist, Subaru made that vehement proclamation. And, in response to that, with her amethyst eyes sparkling, Emilia clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

It went without saying that Emilia craved companionship. She possessed the accomplishment of directly making a proposal to Felt and becoming friends with her.

And, it was not only that friend monster, Emilia—

Filóre: “—Friends… with me? Seriously?!”

Making an ostentatious noise, Filóre placed both hands on the table with a thud, jumping at the offer.

Her large crimson eyes trembling violently, looking back and forth between Subaru and Emilia,

Filóre: “No, my apologies. There must have been some sort of mistake. Perhaps I misheard you. You didn’t say friends, you must have said… ah, “friendless”. You meant I have no friends.”

Subaru: “Yikes, this Saintess is far too much of a loner.”

Emilia: “B-But, I might know just how you feel. I was also reaaally anxious when Subaru tried to be friends with me, since I didn’t understand what he might be thinking.”

Subaru: “I’m sorry for making you anxious! My feelings haven’t changed since the start, and have only grown even stronger with the passage of time… ouch! Rem, did you just step on my foot?!”

Rem: “Incorrect. I simply dropped this iron ball.”

Subaru: “You brought the Morningstar with you?!”

Cheerfully, Rem concealed the Morningstar, which she had dropped on top of Subaru’s foot, behind her back. He trembled in fear after she had nearly crushed his foot, but the sight of Rem in a maid uniform, carrying around that spiked iron ball that Subaru had so diligently polished while at the mansion, was heartwarming to see.

Emilia: “Hey, Filóre.”

Ignoring Subaru and Rem, Emilia approached Filóre, who was escaping reality.

Then, when Emilia touched her hands upon the table, Filóre’s shoulders jumped with a start, and she stared at Emilia in astonishment.

Emilia: “Subaru’s the one who suggested it, so by just going along with it, I’m just being reaaally lackadaisical, but how about it, Filóre?”

Filóre: “H-h-how a-about it, you say? I’m, not really sure what you mean… if you don’t say it more clearly, I’ll misunderstand you. Or rather, am I not doing so right now? Is this a dream…?”

Emilia: “No, this isn’t a dream. Besides, let me be clear so you don’t misunderstand me. If you’d like, we… no, let’s be friends together!”

Filóre: “—Yes, of course, very well, I’d be happy to!!”

In an instant, her delicateness and meekness up to that point did an about-face, and Filóre, her face brightening in a flash, clasped Emilia’s hands in return, and the two of them nurtured a new friendship in close quarters.

Despite being overwhelmed by such a speedy development, Subaru sensed that the wind was unmistakably blowing in a favorable direction, and he nodded deeply.

Subaru: “I’m glad we were able to progress the conversation without it turning sour somehow. However, that momentum… it reminds me of when Beako listened to my persuasion.”

Beatrice: “When it came to Betty, it was more romantic and dramatic, in fact! She wasn’t so ravenously starved like this girl, I suppose!”

Subaru: “It hurts, it hurts, it’s cute, it’s cute.”

Upset, with no other outlet for her irritation, Beatrice stamped on the foot opposite the one Rem had nearly crushed, but the weight of it and the way she pouted were adorable.

Furthermore, when he took a glance, Rem was patting her chest as if in relief that Emilia and Filóre were kindling a relationship.

Although it had been something that had to be touched upon, it was a relationship that could have been severed by her. He could surmise what Rem was feeling.

Subaru: “Are you also satisfied, Rem? When it comes to friends?”

Rem: “I don’t believe it is something so simple. Besides, I have Katya-san.”

Subaru: “You don’t really care about how many friends you have? I, for one, consider pretty much everyone I met on the Gladiator Island to be my friend.”

Rem: “I have Katya-san.”

It was quite an obstinate answer. Well, how one categorized their own friends was up to them, so it would be tactless to say much on the matter one way or another.

At the very least, an amicable relationship had been forged between Emilia and Filóre. Could this not be called a historic achievement for both the Emilia Camp and the Church of the Divine Dragon?

Emilia: “I was also able to become friends with Felt-chan, and I’ve promised to become friends with Anastasia-san too, so perhaps I’m good at making friends.”

Emilia was Emilia, and she had gained self-confidence by making multiple friends in a short span of time. At this rate, her momentum might well cause her to end up greeting passersby on the street, one after another, and increase her number of friends that way.

That might not be a bad idea, but while he could not say either way, he felt it might be disgraceful in a different sense, so he would have to put a stop to Emilia’s craving for friends for the time being.

Filóre: “Hey, wait, Emilia… you’ll allow me to call you Emilia, right? We’re friends now, aren’t we? Still, isn’t it a bit cruel to mention the names of friends other than me? It doesn’t really matter, though? It’s fine, but if you could just pay a little more attention to me since we only just became friends…”

Vic.ll20

Filóre was Filóre, and had perhaps been without friends for too long. Her speech had a slight yandere quality to it, as if she was expecting a bit much from her friend.[20]

This was probably due to her desire for friends being overly directed at a single person, so it might be dangerous if she did not make more friends and successfully distribute that desire amongst them. If Rem could not be forced to do so, then it seemed like Subaru, or perhaps Beatrice, would have to take on that role.

Subaru: “But actually, would that be okay from Filóre’s perspective? Of course, the only thing my Emilia-tan has in common with the Witch of Envy is her looks.”

Filóre: “—? Do you have some sort of problem with my Emilia?”

Subaru: “Yikes, this Saintess, it’s no wonder she can’t make friends!”

At this attitude of Filóre’s, who had pulled on the arm of Emilia’s she had grasped, and settled down into her chest, Subaru pressed on his forehead as he thought that this friendship might end up being more troublesome than he anticipated.

Laughing at the exchange between Subaru and Filóre, Emilia hugged her from behind, and,

Emilia: “Geez, settle down. I’m sorry, my friend.”

Subaru: “What the? Why am I having dominance asserted over me right now? Emilia-tan, what am I to you?!”

Emilia: “Huh, Subaru is my Knight, right?”

Subaru: “Right! Phew, that was close. That satisfied my self-esteem.”

The rift between the silver-haired half-elf and the Church of the Divine Dragon that could have arisen had not, but instead, a rift began to arise between Emilia’s one and only Knight and her friend.

—It was on the verge of becoming something much more substantial.

???: "—Filóre, did you kick out Lucien and the others? Didn't you promise to be watched over as proof that you were properly reflecting on your actions?"

Suddenly, the door to the common room was pushed open, and the figure of a young man appeared there.

With a wide-brimmed black hat, clad in attire of deep violet, and with a handsome slender face—once he noticed Filóre, along with Subaru and the others aside from her, within the room, his yellow eyes widening with an "Oya,"

???: "Visitors have arrived, huh? Goodness, those kids, they abandoned their post and didn't even tell me. I'll have to give them a proper scolding later."

Filóre: "Oh, welcome back, Tiga. Hey, look, this girl is Emilia, my friend. Isn't that great? My friend… hehe, friend, hehehe."

With the brim of his hat lowered, the young man's eyes were obscured. Delight overflowing, Filóre introduced Emilia to the young man while still cuddling with her.

She was a beautiful girl, so it was just barely within the acceptable limits, but her face made it appear that she was on the brink of friend addiction.

At Filóre's words, the young man by the name of Tiga said, "Emilia?", and raising an eyebrow, and looking between the aforementioned Emilia, Subaru, and the rest,

Tiga: "I see. I'm also glad you were able to make a friend. However, the way you're making a triumphant face at me is unacceptable. For instance… say, would you be my friend?"

Subaru: "Huh, me?"

Tiga: "Yes, I'm Tiga Rauleon. And you are…?"

Subaru: “Natsuki Subaru. Treat me well, my friend.”

Tiga: “—Ah, likewise, my friend.”

Tiga leisurely walked over and extended his hand, which Subaru shook without any hesitation. He responded effortlessly to the foreign words thrown his way, and he even threw in a wink perfectly. While doing so, he repeated the words “My friend, my friend” over in his mouth a few times, quickly acclimating himself to them.

Meanwhile, Filóre, who had long suffered a friendship deficiency disease, could not hide her shock at the lightning-fast friendship between Subaru and Tiga.

Her eyes widened in astonishment, and pointing at Subaru, then Tiga,

Filóre: “A-Aren’t you scared? What if you get rejected, or something?”

Subaru: “Oi, what’s up with the upbringing where you’re from? She has such a fearless personality, and yet she’s so cowardly only when it comes to making friends, what a strange balance.”

Tiga: “I have no excuse for it. After all, since she has been so strictly sheltered, she craves contact with the outside world. We may have a long association from here on out, so gradually help me tame her. She’s not going to bite you.”

Filóre: “That was an unnecessary comment! There’s no way I would bite! Just who do you think I am?! Aren’t I Emilia’s friend?! And nigh a Saintess!”

Rem: “Is it okay to treat the position of Saintess so lightly…?”

Rem’s murmurs were quite reasonable, as their impressions of Filóre were being tossed all about in a short time.

Be that as it may, the return of Tiga, who appeared to be someone from the Church involved in the matter, probably meant that the discussions at the Castle mentioned previously by Filóre had come to some sort of conclusion.

Tiga: “Indeed, it is so. That said, there’s much we must talk about amongst ourselves. Apologies, but I would like to ask you to leave for today.”

Subaru: “Are you serious, my friend? Isn’t it so distant to have things such as secrets between us?”

Tiga: “Is laying everything bare a requirement for friendship? I’d rather be friends that are considerate about the essential points, and put in an effort together to maintain the relationship between them; how about you?”

Subaru: “It’s no good, I was cleverly rebuffed. Beako, be a sore loser.”

Beatrice: “Unlike with you, there are no such things as trivial secrets between Betty and Subaru, in fact.”

Rem: “That really was just being a sore loser.”

He had not seriously considered what defined a friend, but Tiga’s description had a certain level of persuasiveness, so he was at a disadvantage in continuing to persist.

Therefore, it seemed like they had no choice but to go along with Beatrice being a sore loser, who had understood Subaru’s intentions, and to obediently remove themselves.

Subaru: “Well, we learned a lot. I wasn’t sure until I met her, but for now it seems like Filóre had no intentions of throwing the Royal Selection into chaos.”

Emilia: “Yeah, Filóre is a good girl.”

Filóre: “Hear that, Tiga? That’s my friend.”

Tiga: “I get it, I get it. Thank you for being friends with our Filóre.”

He had wondered what they would do if she refused to detach herself and continued to cling to Emilia forever, but Filóre obediently released Emilia, and so they successfully extracted her without any incidents.

And then, standing next to Filóre in place of Emilia, as she returned to Subaru and the others, removing his hat and bowing elegantly, Tiga,

Tiga: “Thank you, and by the way, it’s not like I’m just chasing off Filóre’s friend and my friend. I have a piece of good news for you as well.”

Subaru: “Good news, for us? What?”

Tiga: “—The word is, that the slumbering Duchess Karsten has awakened.”

Subaru: “—Hk, Crusch-san has…?”

Naturally, Subaru leaned forward, asking for confirmation, and Tiga made a show of giving a fashionable nod. He felt like he had been tricked into giving the reaction that was anticipated of him.

However, he did not mind being tricked. Crusch’s awakening was certainly welcome news.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, after this…”

Emilia: “Yes, of course. Let’s go visit her. I want to speak with Crusch-san, too.”

Filóre: “Well then, I’ll also tag along with Emilia and the others and —”

Tiga: “Filóre, you’re staying here. You’ll wait with me for Sakura and the rest to return.”

Tiga seized Filóre’s shoulder as she tried to slickly line up with them. Glaring resentfully at that hand of Tiga’s resting on her shoulder,

Filóre: “…Isn’t it strange? After all, this is about Duchess Karsten, right? I have a duty to ascertain the results of the Sacrament.

Indeed, a duty. How about it?”

Tiga: “In that case, it wouldn’t make sense if you didn’t also fulfill your duties as a bearer of the Sacrament. Of course, we shall go confirm Duchess Karsten’s condition. But later, as members of the Church.”

Filóre: “Ah, Emilia…”

Emilia: “No, it’s fine, Filóre. I’ll make sure to visit on your behalf, too.”

Filóre: “I’m not getting through?! Even though you’re my friend?!”

She had estimated her friend too highly.

In any case, although he felt bad for Filóre, his desire to verify Crusch’s safety weighed quite heavily on Subaru. That was exactly why he wished to leave right away.

Subaru: “Let’s talk again at another time. I’m glad I got to speak with you today. So, that’s it.”

Filóre: “How perfunctory! I’m not okay with… Mmhmmm mmhmmm-”

Tiga: “Allow me to handle this, and go on ahead!”

Restraining Filóre, who was still brimming with lingering attachments, Tiga assumed the role of a villain and saw them off with an excessively reassuring statement.

And so, despite their feelings of reluctance, Subaru and the others slipped away from the church.

Boy 1: “Aww, leaving already?”

Boy 2: “How was Onee-chan? How was she?”

Girl: “It didn’t go anywhere after all, huh? Good grief, she’s hopeless without us.”

And, as they left the church, the children who had been playing with Filóre saw them off. It was a rather scathing assessment, but it was accurate nonetheless.

In any case—

Subaru: "—Wait for us, Crusch-san. There's so much we want to talk to you about."

Indeed, unable to contain his restless feelings, Subaru's pace only quickened.

3

—And so, after seeing off the fleeing Emilia Camp who had turned up there, Tiga released his restraint on Filóre.

Freed, Filóre staggered and placed both hands on the table, following the lingering vestiges of Emilia and the others, as she turned to scowl at Tiga.

Tiga: "What a look your eyes have. Is there something you want to say to me?"

Filóre: "Hate you…"

Tiga: "Don't just say nasty words! It couldn't be helped. There are things we must discuss, and the fact remains that Duchess Karsten has awakened."

Filóre: "Hmph. The outstandingly sociable Tiga Rauleon-san wouldn't understaaand."

Turning away while pouting, Filóre then picked up her own untouched cup of tea from the table and took a sip.

The course of the conversation had unfolded so tumultuously that she truly did not have a single moment to drink her tea until now.

Tiga's yellow eyes narrowed as he observed Filóre's profile, but—

Tiga: "Even so, of all people, it had to be Emilia-sama."

Filóre: “…What about her? No way, even you with the silver-haired half-elf stuff?”

Tiga: “There’s that too. However, it’s more than that. —Filóre, the insignia?”

Asked this by Tiga, Filóre produced the insignia from her pocket after looking a bit embarrassed. When she opened her clasped hand, the crimson Dragon Gem’s light blossomed.

While gazing at that—nay, while gazing at that light and the girl who had made it gleam, Filóre, he muttered.

That was—

Tiga: “—We’re going to be busy from here on out. After all, we are a year and a half behind, huh.”

Interlude:
“—Why?”

1

—When I discovered that flower bud, yet to blossom, in that courtyard, I unwittingly halted my feet.

It was a courtyard with blossoming flowers of all kinds and hues.

Regrettably, I was not very well-versed in the names or varieties of flowers, but I had heard that these were precious blossoms that had budded from seeds brought from all over the country.

That was how expansive and ornate this flower garden was. The gardeners entrusted with its care must have found their labor’s fruit worthwhile. The refinement of this flower garden was truly proof of such.

In all honesty, when I had first entered the courtyard, I did not harbor many expectations for its flower garden, brimming with color.

I was already deficient in the sensitivity to admire flowers, and did not bear much interest in the courtyard at my parents’ home. Even though I had been spoiled by my sympathetic father and allowed onto this land—the Royal Castle of the Royal Capital Lugunica, I did not estimate myself so highly as to expect my inclusion in the discussions between responsible adults.

Thus, with no other choice, to kill time until the business of my father and the others had concluded, I stepped into the courtyard and was unwittingly bewitched by that flower bud.

???: “…”

What lay before my amber gaze was a large bud with its head drooping.

Enclosed within it were petals with a faint tinge of red, and the reason for my captivation by the bud, yet to blossom, was because my own self, sojourned with an unescaping frustration, seemed to overlap with that flower bud—was a rather poetic thought, and far too excess of an intoxication with myself.

But, it was true that I empathized with the flower bud, yet to bloom its marvel in the midst of a flowerbed blossoming with outsize flowers, their florescence proclaiming their enchanting allure till the very horizons.

—Just what is it that I am capable of, and what is it that is desired of me?

???: “I am…”

Blessed in my birth, blessed in my pedigree, blessed in talent: this conceit I did possess.

I also possessed something akin to a purpose that I must live up to fruits of outcome even greater than those that would correspond to my birth, my pedigree, my talent.

And finally, I possessed the self-awareness that this conceit and this purpose were fatally incompatible with my own desire.

???: “…”

If I were to say it, then amidst the blossoms of flower seeds planted in that flower garden, I was the sole immature seed that remained a flower bud, fostering doubts for how to bloom.

The other seeds bore no doubt, no indecision, and discerned their domains, comprehended them, and implemented themselves fulfillingly.

And yet, I was—

???: “…Just, what kind of a flower will you blossom?”

I inquired so of the flower bud and sealed my breathing, met with silence incapable of responding. Enveloped in the sweet scent of the fragrant blooms, I failed to understand or be understood by even the flower bud with whom I had felt a camaraderie.

After all, what my insolent self wished for was not to blossom into a grand, enrapturing, and vivid flower, but rather to become a gigantic tree that would protect those flowers from wind and rain.

Yes, I found myself who bore this doomed desire to be a futile, comical existence—

???: "Fuwagh?!"

—That moment, something fell onto the flowerbed of swaying buds, in the company of a terribly unseemly shriek.

???: "—Hk."

I widened my eyes upon the abrupt happening, rendered immobile as though my feet were stitched to the ground.

Within my blank white mind, all thoughts suspended, resounded the delayed echo of an alarm bell warning of danger, and the plentitudes of mental preparation and first responses in such a circumstance.

But, before I could haul them out of the depths of my mind, the personage who had fallen onto the flowerbed before my eyes, nearly face-first, sprung himself upright,

???: "Koff kaff! Koffack! Ptui! Wh-What is that, mud? Mud?!"

Vocalizing so, whilst disheveling his beautiful, golden hair and blinking his eyes that were red as glimmering jewels, the young boy who had grandiosely smeared himself with soil crawled, crawled, and crawled himself out of the flowerbed.

That was—

???: "Oh~, as expected of my eminent self… despite imagining it to be the end of the line by falling onto a paving stone head-first, it would seem my eminent self can shrug off even such predicaments with my natural fortune…"

—That was, my first reminiscence with the last Lion King.

2

???: “—Ah.”

A hoarse breath escapes me, and my consciousness returns to life.

My five senses begin to awaken, and a myriad of information is successively dispatched into my brain. —In that moment, the most powerful beseechment to my mind and body is that of inescapable, vehement thirst.

???: “…”

Thirst, yet it is not simply the mere thirst of the throat. Not enough. Not enough. Not enough. In every single conceivable place inside my body, there is not enough water. They are craving moisture, starving for hydration.

My nasal cavity that is the passageway for air and my throat are both thirsty, my gastric lining that digests food is thirsty, even upon blinking my eyeballs become thirsty, the veins that should be circulating blood throughout my whole body are thirsty, and my soul that beseeched this deficiency is thirsty.

Thirst. It is thirst. Thirst is eating to rot my lifeline.

???: “—Aegh, ah.”

My mouth is so thirsty, that my numb tongue is unable to enunciate a proper sound.

Wanting to do something about this thirst, I tried to call for someone. I can’t vocalize any voice. Rather than calling for someone, moving myself will be faster. —No, I cannot even conceive of it. Like how someone who is drowning ends up drowning their rescuer by clinging to them, my mind has turned into a blank slate from the thirst.

My body, thirsted to its utmost, I beseech it from the top of my head to the ends of my feet and scrape together the meager strength that is left in my body and somehow try to upraise myself. I upraise myself. I try to stand up. I stand up. I try to walk. I start walking. I try to search. I search.

???: “—Ah.”

Desperate. I am desperate.

In my mind that is tyrannized by thirst, I admonish myself that this is my last chance.

If I halt my feet, if I slip and fall, if I make even a single error, I won’t be able to do the same thing again. I won’t be able to search. I won’t be able to walk. I won’t be able to stand up. I won’t be able to upraise myself.

I will sink in the deluge of this aimless, barren thirst, and never again, never again, never again—

???: “…”

With every fragment of strength in my frail body, I somehow push open the heavy door and exit outside. As I curse this thirst of my body that would verge on defeat by even the faintest of breezes, I compel my gaze to swivel.

My vision is bleary, difficult to see. Narrow. I immediately discern it is due to one of my eyes being covered. But, even before my vision is secured, a faint, fragrant aroma carried upon the breeze wafts to me.

Lured by it, I tilt my head to discover. —A vase with amber and pink flowers arranged therein.

???: “—Hk.”

No time to think. I pounce at the vase, as though flopping onto it.

As though tearing at it, I extirpate the adorned flowers and tilt the vase in my grasp with both of my arms. And, as though showering in the water that was arranged for the flowers, I drink, drink, drink.

The spilled water traces the edges of my lips and my cheeks, dousing my nape, drenching even my black nightgown. I don’t mind. In a violent fit of coughing, I discard the vase, and the sound of shattering porcelain reverberates.

???: “Eough, eough…”

I violently wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, and turn around. Vases are set in the corridor at even intervals. I approach one with greater strength regained in my feet, throw the flowers aside, and gulp down the water. Toss away the vase. And again I make for the next vase.

Repeating this twice, thrice, pouring water onto my parched body, whilst retrieving my own existence from the thirst, I once again make for the next vase—

???: “—You musn’t!”

Accompanied by a piercing call, my wrist is seized and I turn backward.

The one gripping my wrist, frozen in place with eyes dilated, restraining me is an aged, white-haired butler—before I could haul out the memories of who he was, submerged in thirst as they were, a mired, violent emotion overspills from me.

???: “Let me go!”

My right arm apprehended, I swing my left hand and clobber the opponent’s body with all my might.

I literally hold nothing back. I attack to smash his bones or cleave his flesh, but the aged butler effortlessly parries this with another hand and brings it to a close with both sides unscathed.

Physique, ability, experience, I could discern a sprawling plethora of reasons for it. —But, I won’t stop.

???: “Let me go! Let me go~! Let me go this instant…!”

A strike for each word; for each swing of the arm I am reminded of how to swing, my precision augmenting.

However, no matter how sharp my fingertips are as they rend through the wind, the aged butler defends against them without a modicum of trouble. I can gradually feel the creeping shivers of thirst seeming to crawl up from beneath my feet.

???: “I’m begging you, please let me go! My throat… is parched… I’m thirsty… so thirsty, so thirsty, so thirsty so thirsty so thirsty, I can’t tolerate it… hk.”

???: “Please calm down and compose yourself. I will provide you with water right away. To add to that, you mustn’t walk barefoot. You must receive treatment.”

???: “Water… rea… lly? You have… water…?”

???: “I do. I shall bring it immediately. But before that, please receive treatment.”

The vigor that wrings my body in desperation steadily dissipates at the aged butler’s entreaty.

The thirst yet subsists. The thirst is marginally better than what I had experienced right upon waking up. If he has the water to cure that thirst, then I am glad. It’s a huge help. I’m very grateful.

???: “Treatment…”

As my body gradually relaxes its strength, I incidentally cast my gaze downward upon that incongruous word.

I look to discover that by the aged butler’s and my own feet, are bestrewed red vestiges left on the carpet lying on the corridor. They start midway through the corridor and terminate below my feet. — It’s blood. I didn’t take notice, but I must have stepped upon the broken shards of the smashed vases, and drenched the corridor with bloodstains, it would seem.

What I had trampled underfoot was not just the shards, but also the flowers I had thrown aside from those vases. The trampled, scattered petals meld with the efflux of blood, painting dreadfully foul, mottled patterns.

Dreadfully, foul, mottled patterns. —In that moment, ominous black mottled patches flash through my mind.

???: “—Aa, AAA, AAAAA!!”

My slender throat howls a screech, writhing in agony.

He must have let his guard down, as I was seeming to calm down for a moment. The aged butler’s restraint unfastens in reaction, and I flail my liberated arms to rend my drenched nightgown, to inspect my body.

Coiling bandages, and pallid, wearied skin bereft of color—the parts those bandages are concealing, repulsive black patches drape over my entire frame, cursing this body with toxic venom.

???: “NOOO, FERRIS! FERRIS!! WHERE?! WHERE ARE YOU?!”

The wailing screams escape from me, as my own body seems to me something so unsalvageably defiled.

I don’t want to rip off the bandages and witness what lies underneath. The ugly black patches concealed beneath the dressings, I don’t want them on my body for even a second longer.

I don’t want to look at them.

I don’t want to touch them.

I don’t want to come close to them.

I don’t want to be defiled.

I would rather, just die—

???: “—Crusch-sama!”

This ugly, repulsive body of mine is captured by two slender arms from behind.

They do not pinion me. They have not come attempting to stop me with any such physical technique. I am only being embraced by those arms wrapping around me from my back, purely by force and impulse.

If I wanted to shake free from them, I could. But, not an iota of such intent surfaces within my mind.

My body is simply, as I entrust it, faintly enveloped in a fleeting, radiating blue light.

???: "It's alright, I am right here. I am here, right next to Crusch-sama…"

???: "Ferr… is…"

Ferris: "Yes, yes, hk. That's right. It's Ferris."

The arms coiled around my body tighten their embrace, yet I feel neither ache nor fear.

When I take notice, I have already collapsed at that spot, sitting slumped upon the floor. Naturally, the person hugging me—Ferris, has also sunk to the floor of the corridor with me.

I incline my head to peer, and right there is the lovable boy's face, close enough for our breaths to intertwine. His round pupils quivering in tears, as he is earnestly endeavoring to not let his facial expression collapse, he appears so very beloved and gallant.

In natural spontaneity, the sense of rejection toward all things which brims inside my body dispels.

???: "…But, I am scared. I am still scared. My… body… those black mottled patches… are still…"

???: "Crusch-sama, if you are concerned about that matter, then that has already been—"

Ferris: "—Wil-jii."

As the aged butler is about to say something, Ferris calls him so and cuts him off. Upon sustaining Ferris's glance, Wilhelm—yes, Wilhelm. He's Wilhelm. The aged butler is Wilhelm, is the Sword Demon, is a preeminent swordsman, is a dependable person.

Wilhelm at my front, Ferris at my back; I am interposed between them.

???: "I… am…"

Ferris: "Please listen, Crusch-sama. You need not worry about your body. —Please excuse me."

???: "—Ah."

As he embraces my trembling, racking body, soothing my faltering gaze, Ferris's hand slowly begins to unravel the wrapped bandages. I can only gasp at his tender yet terrifying action, unable to do anything but view as those dressings slowly come undone.

The frayed nightgown that I had rended from the neck to the breast with my own hands, the skin peeking from its gaps comes bare and unconcealed—absent from there are the patches I had feared, as my eyes begin to widen.

???: "Eh…"

Ferris: "It is not only here. From your arms, your shoulders, your legs… the patches have been removed."

Whilst pronouncing so, Ferris unwraps the bandaging on my collar as well, and elevates my arm as I stand stunned. While it does seem parched, desolate from the thirst, all traces of those black mottled patches have disappeared from my arm.

And at last, I notice. —That torment, as though cauterizing my body, as though boiling, scalding water torrenting throughout my entire body, has come to cease without my awareness.

The thirst, persists. Its remnants are yet there.

However, that is the thirst which craves for life that my body is seeking after having broken free from that torment.

???: “Ferris… that curse… did you? From my body…”

Ferris: “…”

The leeway to reflect upon myself is birthed in my heart, as my mind finally arrives at it.

Whilst I continued to rot in that torment, every morning, every evening, every day, Ferris had devoted his power to exhaustion in order to heal it, in full intrepidity and sincerity.

His wish has borne fruit, and he has rescued me from that prison of anguish—

Ferris: “—No, that’s incorrect. I was… unable to do anything.”

However, those questions and anticipations are repudiated by none other than Ferris himself.

Shaking his head, disappointment sojourning in his yellow pupils—imbued with a deep dye of dejection and despondency toward himself, he gently touches my arm from which those patches have vanished as I swallow my breath, watching his lips quiver in trepidation.

He wavers to voice what he must, resolves himself, then wavers yet again, repeating this cycle a number of times, before Ferris finally commits to his determination and vocalizes it.

That being—

Ferris: “In order to heal your body, Crusch-sama, we turned to the cooperation of the Church of the Divine Dragon.”

???: “…Huh.”

Ferris: “A girl who named herself as a Saintess of the Church lent us her strength. I was… unable to aid you, Crusch-sama… I’m truly, very sorry.”

With enough tears to fill a cup in his eyes, Ferris speaks with a quavering voice, to which I am rendered voiceless.

Steadily, my brain, released from the agony, progressively being liberated from the mighty thirst, comprehends the significance of the words he has spoken.

The Church of the Divine Dragon—it is an organization that harbors deep, profound faith in the existence and grace of the Divine Dragon who has protected the Kingdom of Lugunica since antiquity, and lends assistance in maintaining peace and calm for the citizens of the Kingdom.

Forbidden from involving itself in the body politic for the purpose of prohibiting their actions from carrying too much influence, the Church of the Divine Dragon's faith and fidelity, whilst agreeable as a legitimate and splendid thing, to the contrary is something we couldn't easily recognize—for the being that the Church of the Divine Dragon esteems to the utmost, and our way of being, are fully irreconcilable with one another.

???: "—The Dragon."

The Church of the Divine Dragon follows and proffers gratitude toward the Covenant formed between the Kingdom and the Divine Dragon. —That is to say, the preservation of the Covenant is the first priority for the Kingdom's prosperity above all else for them, and the members of the Royal Family who were lost to an inordinately unmerciful blight have been regarded as cogs for the Covenant, the same philosophy as the Kingdom.

—With the same values that disposed his death, the death of Fourier Lugunica, as merely an act of nature.

???: "—Hk."

A chill creeps up through me, the surge of formless emotions bayonet my chest, I feel nauseous.

The thoughts, images, sentiments surfacing in my mind all give a chaotic stimulus to my five senses, light kindles my hearing, odor kindles my vision, ache kindles my taste, voice kindles my touch, taste kindles my smell, things that ought not originally have connection join forces and crusade upon me.

—Why, did that name come forth?

—Why, did that smile emerge in my mind?

—Why, did his voice resound in my ears?

—Why, did I feel that face from those reminiscences?

—Why, did I remember the taste of the blood and tears that grieved his death?

—Why, did Crusch Karsten, remember Fourier Lugunica?

Crusch: "—Ah."

A sensation of revival.

The loss and purpose, the loving affection and sorrow, the rage and joy, the warmth and glacial cold. —That person, eternally estranged and forever distant, the pleasant recollections and unpleasant attachments of him coalesce together, meld together.

But… I am… lethally aware… of one thing.

Crusch: "—The Royal Selection."

A note spills from my trembling lips, to which Ferris's shoulders shudder, and even Wilhelm, whose face I can't see, I can tell firmly stiffens his body.

We are irreconcilable with the Church of the Divine Dragon. Never, could we reconcile with one another.

It is nobody but ourselves who chose, determined, and declared that we could never keep pace, or view the same sights together with them.

And yet, if you're saying I was saved by one whose power we absolutely must never borrow.

Crusch: "Ferris—"

Ferris: "—Yes."

When I call his name, Ferris's voice bears no tremors.

Giving a short bow, his gaze straightforward, forging a resilient expression, he does not avert his eyes. His yellow eyes tell that, regardless of what he may be told now, he has made this choice and has resolved himself for it.

Crusch: "…"

I must say it to him.

I know his reasons. For why he had no other choice but to select that option.

I know it was to save nobody else, but myself.

Just what days of anguish must he have endured as he remained by my side as I continued to rot, every morning, every evening, every day.

Unable to save what he wished to save, with how much powerlessness of his healing hands had he been forced to contend; I had seen it up close, from the closest of distances, with my own eyes, and that's why.

That's why, I must say it to him.

"I'm so sorry for making you worry. I understand what you must be feeling."

Crusch: "…"

That's why, I must say it to him.

"I forced you to take a bitter decision. But, its responsibility rests upon me."

Crusch: "…"

That's why, I must say it to him.

"Please don't lament. It is thanks to you that I am in this condition at this moment.”

Crusch: “…”

I must say it.

I must say it. I must say it. I must say it. I must say it. I must say it. I must say it I must say it I must say it I must say it I must say it I must say it I must say it I must say it I must say it say it say it say it say it say it say it say it say it say it say it say it say it say it—

Crusch: “—Why?”

As though cascading forth, this spills out. This.

This, completely dissimilar in warmth and texture from the words I thought I must say.

Crusch: “Shouldn’t you, have known?”

Stop it, stop it right this instant. Shut your mouth, close your eyes, and lacquer your consciousness.

The things before your eyes, everything that has transpired, the choices that were made, avert your eyes from all of them, forget all of them, defy all of them.

Crusch: “Ferris, you alone, were supposed to be the same as me, and yet.”

I must not say it. I must not let him hear it. I must not let him learn it.

After all, he tried to save me. After all, he devoted his prayers for me. After all, all he did was wish to remove the suffering of what he loves.

That’s why, I must not say it.

Crusch: “—Why?”

I must not.

Crusch: “Why, did you betray our vow to Prince Fourier?”

—That I would have rather died, than betray that person.

Chapter 8:
The Consequences of a Choice

1

???: “—We cannot thank you enough for your continued concern for our household.”

???: “No, it’s only natural. It’s not something you should be thanking us for.”

Saying so, with feelings of great embarrassment from the hospitality shown by the individual who had served him tea—in response to these words of Wilhelm’s, Subaru hurriedly shook both of Beatrice’s arms, who sat upon his lap.

As she stared intently at that behavior of Subaru’s, his state of anxiety was probably conveyed to Beatrice through his heartbeat against her back. She sighed as if she had no other choice, continuing to act as Subaru’s puppet.

—Presently, having concluded their meeting with Filóre, who had thrown the Royal Selection into a maelstrom of chaos, upon hearing the news of Crusch’s awakening from the Church of the Divine Dragon, Subaru and company had been unable to contain themselves, and thus headed directly for the Karsten residence in the Noble District.

Of course, if they were to conform to proper etiquette, it would have been necessary to schedule an appointment before visiting. However, despite forgetting even that and their visit not receiving a single mark in regards to high society’s standards, they still were warmly received.

Wilhelm had ushered them into a parlor, and the four of them sat side-by-side on a couch (with Beatrice on Subaru’s lap) as they impatiently waited for the arrival of that moment.

Likely noticing Subaru’s air of restlessness, Wilhelm, bowing deeply, Wilhelm: “It shall take just a bit more time for Crusch-sama to be ready. My heartfelt apologies.”

Subaru: “No, no, we’re the ones who came here so suddenly. If anything, I’m just grateful we weren’t turned away.”

Wilhelm: “As if we could turn you away. Crusch-sama, too, was most pleased to have you and Emilia-sama come to visit, Subaru-dono.”

Subaru: “No, no, no, when it comes to that it’s the other way around, or perhaps I should say it might be the other way around. I might even cry when I see Crusch-san awake…”

As pathetic as it sounded, there was a very real possibility that such would come to pass, so he hoped that Wilhelm, Emilia, and the rest would be able to prepare themselves in advance for that.

At present, all he could do to endure his restless thoughts was shake Beatrice’s arms back and forth coinciding with each “No” he would give in response to Wilhelm.

Beatrice: “But, no matter how you look at it, you’re swinging Betty’s arms around way too much, in fact! That’s enough, these arms and shoulders are getting sore, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Guh… sorry, my bad, excuse me, I just can’t calm myself down. After all…”

Beatrice, who had been acting as Subaru’s calming doll, finally reached the limits of her patience and barked at him. Poking at Beatrice’s cheek, Subaru paused there for a moment.

Vexing, restless feelings filled his mind. However, it was worth bearing with them.

Subaru: “After all, Crusch-san is…”

Wilhelm: “—Indeed. Regarding that, there is no doubt.”

Filled with a torrent of emotions, Subaru sighed, to which Wilhelm assented with equally profound sentiments. —No, to call them equal would be far too impudent.

Wilhelm's relief must have been many times, many dozens of times, greater than Subaru's. The recovery of the one to whom he had sworn to devote his fealty: that alone would be a colossal occurrence.

Emilia: "I've said it many times already, Wilhelm-san, but I'm truly grateful."

Indeed, it was Emilia, seated next to Subaru, who once again showed her appreciation for the efforts of Wilhelm.

Emilia, who had been present when Filóre had administered the Sacrament of the Church to treat Crusch, had also shown her appreciation for Wilhelm and Ferris that same day. In spite of that, since Crusch's consciousness had not returned after that, now having the opportunity to speak with the awakened Crusch, Emilia's amethyst eyes shone with anticipation yet again.

Beatrice: "Good grief, at this point, what careless blunders you two might make are frightening, in fact. Rem, if you and Betty don't stay on guard here, this may well end up as a disaster, I suppose."

Rem: "I agree. Leave it to me when things go too far. I'm slowly getting used to the handling and weight of this iron ball, bit by bit."

Amidst Subaru's and Emilia's inability to calm down, Beatrice and Rem kept their composure as visitors of one in recovery; it was exceedingly reassuring to know that the two of them were prepared for when it would matter most, but the slight movements of Rem, combined with the sound of chains, were also frightening and exciting.

It seemed like Subaru would also need to wield considerable resolve when asking Rem for support.

Subaru: "Oh yeah, speaking of supporting, what about Ferris? Is he helping Crusch-san with her change of clothes? There are a number of things I want to talk to him about, too."

Suddenly realizing that the visage of one who ought to have been present could not be found, Subaru had such suspicions.

Subaru, Wilhelm, and the rest had the unanticipated joy of Crusch's recovery. However, the one who must have been experiencing that the strongest of all would have been none other than Crusch's one and only Knight.

Of course, it surely was also a terribly bitter feeling for him, that despite being a healer, Crusch's salvation came via the Church of the Divine Dragon, but Subaru held no doubt that Ferris was the sort of person who would rejoice in the well-being of Crusch more than wallow in his own reproachful feelings, born of his sense of powerlessness.

However—

Wilhelm: "…"

Subaru: "—? Wilhelm-san?"

For but an instant, Wilhelm's face stiffened, and in response, Subaru raised an eyebrow in confusion. Yet, Wilhelm swiftly rebuffed that tension with a "Pardon me", saying,

Wilhelm: "Ferris, well… in truth, he is feeling a bit unwell. It would seem that, immediately following that which transpired regarding Crusch-sama's health, every bit of the anxiety he had been bearing until that point erupted all at once."

Emilia: "Oh no, did something happen after that…? I'm worried for Ferris. Even though Crusch-san was finally able to wake up, Ferris might blame himself for falling ill."

Subaru: "Yeah, that's true. Wilhelm-san, is Ferris in bad shape?"

Wilhelm: "…No, things should improve with some rest. Nevertheless, I would ask that you refrain from visiting him for now. I believe that he himself would not wish to interfere with the feelings of everyone who has come to visit Crusch-sama."

Emilia: "I don't think it would be interfering, but… yes, I understand. We'll do it next time."

If it was not one thing, it was another, but if it was truly as Wilhelm had said, then Emilia would nod in assent with his suggestion, and Subaru would also be in agreement with that.

They also planned to sojourn in the Royal Capital a while longer. Even if they were to miss him today, there would be another opportunity to thank Ferris. For now, his wishes ought to be respected. —And, it was just as they caught their breath in that moment.

???: "—I am terribly sorry to have kept you waiting."

Witnessing the individual who had opened the parlor door and spoken so, Subaru rose to his feet in spite of himself.

Appearing there, at the entrance to the room, was a beautiful woman clad in a dark nightgown and pink shawl, with a well-proportioned and slender build, and her distinctive green hair—that person was Crusch Karsten.

Subaru: "…"

The last time he had seen her, Crusch had been gasping in agony, in a state where it was excruciating to even lift herself out of her bed. He was overflowing with profound emotion and joy beyond all expectations that she was standing on her own two feet, appearing before Subaru and everyone else in this manner.

However, as she looked at Subaru with an ephemeral smile upon her lips, half of her face was still wrapped in a bandage that covered her left eye, and that was what invariably caught his attention initially—

Crusch: "Please rest assured. This bandage is only here as I still am having a bit of difficulty seeing out of one eye, but the majority of the abnormality… no, the abnormality has been eliminated."

Subaru: "Ah…"

Crusch: "Thus, please do not look so forlorn."

Upon being told this, Subaru, the one who ought to have come to visit her, had instead regretted making her worry over him.

He had been taken aback that the bandages covering her face still remained, but even more remarkable than that was the fact that Crusch had come to see Subaru and the others, standing on her own accord.

Crusch's condition had been so grave, that it had seemed an absurd tribulation.

Subaru: "…"

Crusch: "—Subaru-sama?"

Suddenly, seeing Subaru sink into silence, Crusch, who had been smiling, narrowed her amber eye. Being stared at by only one of the pair, Subaru chose his words with caution.

After all, if he erred in even a single word or breath, it felt like all of his self-restraint would spill over, as if drops of water, then and there.

Subaru: "…Say, Crusch-san. I had a lot of things, truly a lot, that I wanted to say, and most of them were things like "I'm sorry", or "It was my fault", just those sorts of words of apology alone."

Crusch: "—. Yes."

Subaru: "But, seeing you in person like this, Crusch-san, all that will come up is stuff like "Thank goodness", or "I'm so relieved", just those sorts of things. I'm so, so relieved…"

As a visitor to a sickbed, he should have prepared the perfect things to say in advance.

While on the way to visit the mansion in this situation, and during the period of time in which he had waited, he had been frantically simulating the best words of sympathy he could think of in his mind, and he had thought he had narrowed it down to the best option.

And yet, all of that had vanished the moment he had encountered the real Crusch, and what came to him was naught but a sense of relief, like that of a child, infantile and incoherent.

Crusch: "…"

In response to the words of Subaru's pathetic self-admission being wrung out, Crusch's eye widened for a split second, before she immediately regained the gentle smile upon her lips once more.

Crusch: "I am also relieved to hear you say so. I have shown my unsightly side to you so often, Subaru-sama, that I wondered whether I might soon exhaust all fondness you may have for me."

Subaru: "Of course not! Never, never, there is no way that ever would happen! I mean, I shouldn't keep someone who's in recovery standing as we talk. Umm, please take a seat."

Crusch: "Hehe, then allow me to do so."

Despite his panicked pace being thrown off, Subaru offered her the chair before her, and giggling with a hand covering her mouth, Crusch followed her escort. Somehow, Subaru had ended up making the arrangements, but since it was the other person's abode, it was only natural that it made her laugh.

Subaru, whose speech had become hopelessly awkward, while watching as Crusch sat down with Wilhelm's assistance, gazing reproachfully at Emilia and the others right next to him,

Subaru: "Hey, isn't it unfair that I'm the only one scurrying around? Why am I being made to do all this, huh?"

Emilia: "That's because Subaru was the one worried the most about Crusch-san, right? That's why I thought you might want to be the first to talk."

Rem: "As for me, I'm not in a position to intrude presently. Besides, there is the matter of what happened to Beatrice-chan as well."

Subaru: "What happened to Beako… huh? Why is Beako on Rem's lap? Weren't you sitting on my lap?"

Beatrice: “That was the case, but getting blown away was the result of Subaru’s force when he stood up, in fact! If Rem hadn’t caught her so adeptly, being sprawled out in the middle of the room right now would be probable, I suppose!”

Subaru: “I-Is that so? My bad. You were, quite literally, out of sight…”

Beatrice: “What an awful way of putting it, in fact!”

Puffing out her cheeks, Beatrice obstinately hugged Rem. Leaving it to Rem, who readily accepted that embrace, Subaru also reflected on how he had been too oblivious to his surroundings.

And, hearing that exchange between Subaru and the others, Crusch’s smile further deepened with a “Hehe”. To that reaction of Crusch’s, Emilia, narrowing her amethyst eyes,

Emilia: “I apologize for everyone being so lively when we came here to visit you.”

Crusch: “No, I cannot say I mind such liveliness. Besides, the fact that you came to visit me as soon as you heard the news… it made me happy.”

Emilia: “In that case, it’s no problem… Ah, but, I’ll make sure they don’t frolic too much.”

Concerned about Crusch’s health, Emilia appended a comment very typical of her at the end.

One could perceive the consideration there, and the intent to carefully choose her words. In spite of the setting, Emilia’s clear growth was apparent.

Of course, it would not be a good idea to take Crusch’s words too much at face value, but—

Subaru: “How is your body feeling?”

Crusch: “Indeed. It is much better. It will likely take a while longer to recover my strength, but I do not foresee any major problems.”

Replying like that, Crusch readjusted the position of the shawl draped upon her shoulders. Her complexion was still a bit pale, as one would expect from someone recovering from illness, but her responses were natural, and her sagacity had not dimmed.

From what he could see, the manner in which she walked and such was normal, and aside from the bandage covering her left eye, there seemed to be no vestiges of that day remaining upon her. For the time being, he could breathe a sigh of relief.

Although—

Crusch: “I have been informed of what has happened while I was bedridden… Including the news that Priscilla-sama has passed away.”

If that sagacity was still alive and well, then Crusch surely comprehended that this was also not a situation where she could simply unreservedly rejoice in the rehabilitation of her own health.

Subaru & Company: “…”

Despite knowing it was an unavoidable topic, it had seemed inappropriate to broach it so soon. When none other than Crusch herself brought it up, the faces of Subaru’s group tensed.

On this occasion, he wished to congratulate Crusch on her recovery, and if possible, table the in-depth discussions regarding the Royal Selection for another time—it appeared she desired no such consolation.

Crusch: “As far as I can recollect, I hardly exchanged a single word with Priscilla-sama. However, that she held her own convictions, and that she participated in the battle for Pristella… and by extension, the Royal Selection, of this there can be no doubt. It is for that very reason, that we must continue the Royal Selection for her, as well.”

Emilia: “—. Yes, I thought the same. For Priscilla’s sake, we can’t stay discouraged forever. That’s what I think.”

Crusch: “That is right. Good. You also think so too, Emilia-sama.”

Breathing a sigh of relief before the nodding Emilia, Crusch took a sip from her cup of black tea. Wetting her lips and tongue with it, she stared at her with the amber radiance of only her right eye, and continuing her words with “In that case”,

Crusch: “I believe you would assent to the fact that, presently, that which should be of most consequence is the stability of the Kingdom. The deeds of the Witch Cult are certainly a matter of great regret with respect to the Royal Selection, but to spare too much time dealing with such countermeasures would be misguided, considering the original notion of the Royal Selection.”

Emilia: “Mmm, I get that too. The Royal Selection is to decide the future of the Kingdom, not to do something about the Witch Cult. That’s what you mean, right?”

Crusch: “Yes, that is correct. Certainly, handling such things is indeed a matter that ought to be dealt with by those who govern, but us putting it foremost is precisely what they desire. We all must remember this. Our duty in the Royal Selection itself.”

Emilia: “In that case, Felt-chan is also in the Royal Capital. It doesn’t seem like Anastasia-san has been able to return yet, but if you would like to discuss it all together, I’d be happy to—”

Interrupting Emilia mid-sentence with “—In addition”, Crusch leaned forward slightly. For an instant, Emilia felt as if the blade of a drawn sword had been trained upon her, and her eyes widened.

Ignoring that reaction from Emilia, as the light in Crusch’s amber eye grew all the more intense,

Crusch: “I have heard. The Tower of the Sage… the path to the Pleiades Watchtower has been cleared. I am impressed with the results you have achieved. If that Tower holds a hidden power as rumored, it will surely serve as a deterrent to the other countries. We, alongside the Council of Wise Men, must carefully discuss how to deal with this.”

Emilia: “Crusch-san…”

Crusch: “The crucial Dragonkindling Ceremony… the deadline for elections to decide the next Monarch is less than a year and a half away. From this point forward, the merits of each camp’s contentions will be questioned even more. Now, more than ever, we must observe the faces of those around us, and lend an ear to their voices.”

Emilia: “Wait a minute, Crusch-san, I want to talk with you. Don’t be in such a hurry. Right now—”

Crusch: “—I!”

Emilia: “—Hk.”

Crusch’s words overflowed incessantly without pause, and the instant Emilia tried to constrain that torrent with her own feelings, a powerful voice tore through the parlor.

The cup of black tea in Crusch’s grasp was violently returned to its saucer, tea spilling alongside a shrill sound. Wilhelm took Crusch’s hand at once, put a handkerchief over the hand of his lord that had been doused in tea, and then immediately cleared away the cup.

Meanwhile, Crusch, who simply allowed that to happen, never took her eye off of Subaru and the others, not even for a single instant.

Without averting her gaze, her thin lips trembling,

Crusch: “I… am I wrong…?”

Emilia: “…”

Her tone, which had been imbued with a resolute intelligence until just a moment prior, fell into disarray, her question drenched in tears.

In reality, there were no tears welling up in Crusch’s eye. However, her voice was crying. The vastness of that discrepancy between logic and emotion brutally hewed Subaru’s heart to pieces.

She understood. Crusch understood.

She was sagacious, possessed great knowledge, and diligently worked to continually confront numerous duties and challenges, so it hardly mattered whether Subaru or the others chose their words carefully or not.

That the way she had been saved, had not befitted the Monarch she yearned to be; she understood.

Subaru: "…That's… such a stupid thing to say."

Gritting his molars, Subaru reflected on the conviction that had been born within himself, by himself.

Absurd; he could not help but consider it a truly absurd thing to say. To say that the way she had been saved was wrong, was as if to say that it would have been better for Crusch to continue suffering under the malice of Lust, even now.

What a stupid thing to say. Why would one as admirable as Crusch relinquish their dreams and ambitions on account of the actions of a gang of clowns such as the Witch Cult?

It had been irrational suffering. It had been an absurdity for which there was no reason to experience.

Just what should be said if one were to be rescued from such a place by the warmth of another? Thank you for saving me. I will remember this gratitude and will endeavor to the utmost from here on. —Was that not enough?

Subaru: "—There's nothing wrong with it."

Emotions, alongside a futile fury, boiled up within his heart.

As if given a push by this, Subaru once again found himself on his feet, firmly gripping Crusch's hands across the low table.

Those unseemly black mottled patches no longer existed upon

Crusch's pale fingers from which the handkerchief had fallen. This was Crusch's original hand, which none had the right to defile.

Crusch: "Subaru… sama."

Subaru: "There is nothing wrong with it. Like hell it's wrong. Let's do the Royal Selection properly. Let's talk properly, let's think properly, and let's all compete properly. I'll do whatever it takes."

It was a statement he made knowing full well he would be scolded and cursed at for once again making a promise without thinking it through.

They were an opposing camp. Anyone would likely think it to be a massive boon for Emilia if a powerful rival such as Crusch were to just drop out of the Royal Selection like this.

Subaru: "But that's wrong. It's not true. We all want to make our own person the Monarch, but that's not how the Royal Selection we all wanted to hold should be settled."

Crusch: "…"

Subaru: "So, Crusch-san, there's nothing wrong with it."

As to whether or not he had properly connected those sentences with "so", he lacked the self-confidence in himself to know for sure.

However, even though Crusch was slightly daunted by the vigor of that uncertain Subaru, she let out a sigh, as if some tension somewhere had loosened.

Emilia: "Geez, Subaru, you just let it all out, so you said pretty much everything I wanted to say before I even could. That's not fair."

And, perhaps perceiving a shift in Crusch's mood, Emilia, still sitting on the sofa, pouted as she chided Subaru's behavior.

Instantly, just as he had become heated all on his own, Subaru's ears began to heat up as well.

And then, scolding himself as hopeless, Subaru hurriedly tried to return to his original position—

Crusch: "—. Subaru-sama, your hand is…"

Subaru: "Huh? My hand?"

With that pointed out, Subaru peered down at his hand which had grasped Crusch's own a moment ago.

Now that she mentioned it, he wondered if perhaps she was warning him about his staggering audacity, but that was not it. Crusch's amber eye, paying no heed to that audacity of Subaru's, was,

Crusch: "Subaru-sama, your hand. It was just like my body… it cannot be, did Subaru-sama's hand also receive the power of the Church of the Divine Dragon?"

Subaru: "Ah, no, it was more violent, or rather, the result of it going "bam", but I don't know the exact details of how it happened, so it's quite the scary story."

In truth, Subaru's hand had now returned to its original skin tone, but the particulars of how that came to be were quite violent, something no one could be allowed to imitate.

To put it plainly, it was burned, blown off, and regenerated. — Currently, his leg was in the same state, but he did not feel like trying to test burning and blowing it off to regenerate it.

Crusch: "—ir."

Subaru: "…"

Reflecting on that radical treatment while opening and closing his hand, Subaru suddenly thought that he heard a faint murmur, and unconsciously caught his breath.

He blinked his eyes, looking at Crusch before him. He possessed a feeling of "Impossible, there's no way".

Emilia: “Crusch-san, first take some time to let your body rest. After that, just like Subaru said, I will do whatever I can.”

Crusch: “…Thank you very much. You might regret that, you know?”

Emilia: “The me of today, intends to be better than the me of the past at distinguishing between regrets I should have, and those I should not.”

And yet, the unease and misgivings that had poured into Subaru were brushed aside by the conversation typical of fellow Royal Selection Candidates, exchanged between Emilia and Crusch as they brushed him off.

In reality, Subaru and Emilia’s proposal was nothing more than sending salt to the enemy, but even if they were to ignore it and win against Crusch, they could never be sincerely happy about it.[21]

Therefore, this proposal and determination were consistent with the wishes of the Emilia Camp.

Crusch: “—Fuah”

Following that exchange, Crusch let out a sigh oozing with fatigue.

She was recovering from her ailment, her strength had not yet returned, and some moments had become emotional. It could be said that this had been more than enough of a marathon for Crusch’s stamina.

Rem: “It is time for us to take our leave. Emilia-san.”

Emilia: “Right. Thank you for seeing us, even though you’re reaaally tired and you’ve been having a rough time.”

Crusch: “No, for my part, I apologize for not being able to provide further hospitality. Wilhelm, would you please see everyone out?”

At Rem’s urging, Emilia brought the meeting to a close, and in front of her, the smiling Crusch asked that of Wilhelm. Bowing, Wilhelm accepted, and as Subaru and the others prepared to leave, Crusch also rose to see them off.

And then—

Crusch: “Thank you very much for today. It was a pleasure to be able to meet with you.”

Subaru: “…”

While apologizing for her rudeness in seeing them off then and there, Crusch addressed Subaru and the rest as such.

For a moment, Subaru hesitated, wondering what words to say—

Wilhelm: “—Subaru-dono, allow me to see you off.”

As if perceiving that sensation, Wilhelm interrupted it.

Wilhelm: “My deepest apologies for earlier.”

Having left the parlor, en route to the entrance of the mansion, Wilhelm began to speak as he led the way. At those words, Subaru, holding Beatrice’s hand, widening his eyes as he said “I knew it”,

Subaru: “I noticed you stopped me at the end there… But, I didn’t even know what I was going to say there myself.”

Wilhelm: “Even so, I went too far in cutting off the words of a guest. It was wholly out of concern for Crusch-sama, but I apologize for my rudeness.”

Subaru: “…So you’ve noticed it too, Wilhelm-san. Crusch-san, that state she’s in…”

Wilhelm: “Certainly, she is far from her normal condition, and she will need to rest for a while longer. However, even if both her body and mind are restored…”

Casting down his eyes, Wilhelm put nothing further into words. However, Subaru could roughly surmise what would have followed, that which he did not utter.

No one dared to clearly state it then. But, it was none other than Crusch who felt it most acutely, and for that reason had such fervent emotions spilled out.

Besides—

Emilia: “Ferris must be frustrated, too. I’m sure he wants to be by Crusch-san’s side and support her more than anything right now, and yet his body won’t obey him.”

While peering back toward the parlor she had just left, Emilia also let some of her concern spill out. At Emilia’s words, Wilhelm, walking ahead of her, faintly cleared his throat.

Then, without stopping, calling out “Emilia-sama” in a feeble tone,

Wilhelm: “Earlier, I told you a lie.”

Emilia: “Huh? A lie?”

Wilhelm: “Indeed. —Regarding Ferris.”

Subaru and the others exchanged glances with each other when they heard the name and words conveyed to them.

A lie regarding Ferris, that was what Wilhelm had uttered. He had explained that Ferris had fallen ill, and was in the midst of recovering, but—

Subaru: “Hold up, that’s odd. In the first place, Ferris’s health can’t deteriorate, can it?”

Rem: “No matter how you put it… this isn’t that Reinhard-san we are talking about.”

Subaru: “Of course, Reinhard is exceptional as well, but Ferris is also someone exceptional in this sense.”

Setting aside Reinhard, the most surprising human in all the land, who could fly through the sky while carrying a dragon carriage, Ferris was a healer—moreover, he was the holder of the title of the Blue, professing to be at the highest level within the Kingdom.

Subaru had previously witnessed Ferris be engulfed in a suicide attack by a Witch Cultist, and he had calmly returned from that which had reduced a dragon carriage to splinters.

A so-called super healer, like those from manga and anime: that was what Ferris was.

Of course, even now, he could not say unconditionally that occasions such as running out of Mana or pouring everything into Crusch could not apply.

Wilhelm: “As Subaru-dono has realized, Ferris is not resting. Presently, he is not at the mansion.”

Subaru: “He’s not at the mansion? You mean…”

Wilhelm: “—Please, go to the Royal Cemetery.”

Without answering the question that had unexpectedly surfaced, Wilhelm provided that place name in but a few words, and guided Subaru and the others to the entrance of the mansion.

The Royal Cemetery—from simply hearing that, it seemed to be a place with an evident purpose.

However, just what did Wilhelm intend by informing them of such a place—

Wilhelm: “No matter how shameful I must be, right now, I am one who serves Crusch-sama. I must not take action that defies the will of my master. —Please, lend an ear to what I have to say.”

With that deep, deep bow, Wilhelm sent them on their way.

For the Sword Demon, there existed a problem that could not be resolved with his blade, but even after such anguish, he still desired resolution: with that tinge of grief carved upon his deeply wrinkled face, such a prayer could be felt there.

2

—The Royal Cemetery was situated deep in the heart of the Noble District of the Royal Capital Lugunica.

As could be inferred from its enunciation and subsequent indication, that land was a cemetery—with arrays of gravestones for mourning those who had passed on, a crib for those whose soul's rest was prayed for.

Rem: "There was the Subjugation of the White Whale, correct? The graves of those who participated in that battle and lost their lives therein are also here, so I have been told."

Subaru: "I see. Then, it was way too heartless of me to not have come before. We didn't bring flowers with us today, so I gotta come well-prepared next time."

Emilia: "You're right. We must properly convey our gratitude and appreciation for their toil."

Crossing the black iron gate devoid of any rust, spread out before them was a stone pathway laid in a geometric design, and columns of gravestones along both of its sides—none of the rowed gravestones were simple enough to be called mere stone structures.

Some were crowned with sculptures of Knights displaying the triumphs of their lifetimes, whilst some were like small shrines embellished with delicate caricatures that retold the history of their families. The engraved emblems of family crests basked in the breeze, and the varicolored flowers offered by the mourners bestowed solitary hue in the universe of ashen-grey stones.

Subaru: "As expected, nobles are ostentatious, even with their gravestones… If you remove the gaudiness, this seems closer to the impression of cemeteries I got from western films or foreign dramas, I guess."

Sprawling here was a prudently maintained lawn, and a stone pathway around a moderate hill. The Japanese-style tombstones, grave tablets, or buildings such as shrines or monasteries with which Subaru was familiar were nowhere to be seen in this environ, as a rejuvenating, forlorn zephyr breezed through this space.

Subaru: “Which reminds me, I never thought about it… but are those who have passed on cremated here as well? Or are they given burials?”

Beatrice: “Cremation is the standard, I suppose. Once a living creature loses its life, the soul… the Od from its body falls out. It is unbearable to watch a body, bereft of its Od, slowly crumbling and losing its form, in fact. So it is done before that can happen, signifying to the body, the same as the Od, that it has fulfilled its duty, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I see, so it’s done on account of a being’s structure, not as a countermeasure to the spread of disease or anything like that.”

Thanks to Beatrice’s instantaneous reply to his doubt, he was able to harmonize with this arrangement as well.

That explained why, during the Great Disaster that had transpired in Vollachia, the legions of resurrected zombies were not in incomplete conditions, with rotten bodies and disjoined limbs. In their case, the shapes of their souls utilized to resurrect them were used as the basis, and their bodies were molded into form with clods of earth.

Which was why those zombies had been resurrected in the present age, with their forms intact as they were during their lifetime.

Subaru: “If that’s the case, then the destination of the soul… the cradle of Od Lagna or so, was a significantly valuable place. Like the Sanzu River, the farthest end of time, akin to that.”

Beatrice: “Don’t just grumble such frightening stuff out of nowhere, in fact. The cradle of Od Lagna, don’t even say such a thing as a joke, I suppose. There’s purely a rumor that should one inadvertently witness it eye-to-eye, they would be plundered of their sanity, in fact.”

Subaru: “No, it’s not a joke or anything like that, but truly…

though, that was something Louis just said arbitrarily, so I guess its level of credence is doubtable?"

Cautioned by the grimacing Beatrice, Subaru reminisced of that pure white space, wherein he could say he had spent a rich amount of time, for better or worse.

The Hall of Memories, or so, was the name invoked by Louis Arneb, who personated being the gatekeeper of that place, but in reality, even as this bearing held true, it was unknown what that place tangibly was. Now that Louis's consciousness had vanished to someplace and she had been reincarnated as Spica, there were no means to ascertain it either.

Subaru: "If it really comes down to it, I could find Reid's Book once again and peek inside, resolving to face something unthinkable…"

Rem: "—Um, I apologize for cutting into the conversation, but could you pay attention to this as well?"

Subaru: "Hm?"

Rem: "We've come here looking for somebody, right? Ferris-san, was it?"

With a tug of his sleeve, Subaru turned around to Rem's enquiry.

Her eyes conceived with a deep hue of doubt, Rem was, of course, unaware of Ferris's personage. So it was natural that she would be rather bored, even if she had been brought along to the cemetery.

Subaru: "Aah, sorry sorry! Let's see, the person we'll be looking for now is someone with cat ears and a cutesy vibe. Also has a tail, and is fairly adorable, so I think you'll know it the moment you see."

Rem: "…I was hoping for slightly more useful information."

Subaru: "Well, I thought I gave you plenty of hints… ah, when I say adorable, I don't mean the Beako kind of adorable, but more like the Petra or Meili kind of adorable. About as tall as me."

Rem: "I see, there certainly is a difference in adorableness."

Subaru touted Beatrice's face ahead as he held her up, to which Rem, intently gazing, nodded, as though assenting to his explanation. The Beatrice in question seemed to harbor an expression of deepening dubiety toward that assent, but her unmindfulness of the particulars of her own adorableness could be called one of her charm points.

In reality, there existed an infinite spectrum of adorableness, like beauty closer to adorableness and adorableness closer to beauty, all kinds. Anyhow, with Ferris's characteristics now shared amongst themselves—

Emilia: "That demeanor of Wilhelm-san's, I wonder what it was all about. It's worrying."

Subaru: "—The way he told us to go talk to him, despite also knowing where he was, huh."

Emilia: "Hm, you're right. It's nice to be consulted with and relied upon, but I feel that neither Crusch-san nor Wilhelm-san really show that side of themselves much."

Subaru could in part agree with Emilia's sensibility.

He could tell some sort of dilemma had risen within the Crusch Camp, and that Wilhelm could not move by himself toward its resolution.

Naturally, something did come to Subaru's mind that could have been the impetus for this problem. However, even so, the bonds of the Crusch Camp were strong. Even compared with the other Royal Candidates, they were the two whose bond had been forged for the longest time, the tightest tether.

The depth of those emotions shall not vanish, even should Crusch lose her Memories—was, at the very least, what Subaru felt and believed.

However—

Subaru: "…"

Looking downward upon his right hand, Subaru glared at its vitality. That which crossed his mind was when he had insolently clutched Crusch's hand, and she had stared back at his own hand.

Upon seeing Subaru's hand, and learning of its emancipation from those black patches, hearing that it was not owed to the power of the Sacrament which belonged to the Church of the Divine Dragon, she—

Crusch: "—Unfair."

Said this in a scant voice, verging onto extinguishment.

Subaru: "It was not just me, mishearing things…"

He wished from the bottom of his heart for that to be the case, but Subaru possessed not such convenient ears or cognizance. Those were the true, dusky sentiments that had undeniably spilled from Crusch's lips.

In all honesty, it definitely was shocking. But, for him to desire to not forgive or permit Crusch from even uttering so, that would be sheer pride. Above all, Subaru was painfully sympathetic to the reason why Crusch had blurted that out.

Subaru: "…I could never, talk to Crusch-san about that."

Crusch was the vortex of this maelstrom, just as her body recovered, now encumbered with the possibility of bearing an infinite number of wounds on her heart. What he could not inquire from her directly, would he then ask of her Knight, Ferris; that too was something uncertain.

But, he knew even if he simply returned to his comrades in brazen resignation, he would only continue to harbor ceaseless, unanswered worries.

Emilia: "Hmm, can't see Ferris anywhere."

Lost in thought, upon having taken notice, Subaru and the others had lapped around the cemetery.

Though this site was by no means small, befitting of a cemetery situated in the Noble District, most of the deceased who slept here seemed to be those who shouldered weighty responsibilities of the Kingdom, and were serviced with treatment more than apt, even after death. Farther into the cemetery, each and every gravestone's structure and care was extremely meticulous, and synchronously, the faces of the scant few mourners became more easy to distinguish, so it was difficult to imagine that they had missed Ferris.

It would have been a different story if they just knew whom he was visiting in this cemetery.

Rem: "We looked along the whole pathway, but I couldn't sight any woman with the characteristics mentioned."

Subaru: "To be precise, not a girl, but… well, it's got nothing to do with the appearance, so I guess that's fine."

Rem: "—? Speaking of any more things that stand out, that building over there I would suppose."

As Subaru cut short the detailed explanation, Rem remained suspect of him as she gestured towards a chalky white building, sitting atop the hill in the middle of this grand site, with the lined arrays of stone structures in its backdrop—a mausoleum, as it was called.

Garbed in a solemn and sacred ambiance, making it seem as though the gravestones speckled about its circumference were those who had pledged their allegiance to their lord in servitude, was evidence of it being the resting ground of chosen ones.

This was the Royal Cemetery, and if there was a bed for the deceased who were furnished special treatment, then—

Subaru: "—The mausoleum where the members of the Royal Family sleep, is what it seems."

Emilia: "Then, the royals who have passed away are in there…"

The impetus for the Royal Selection's beginning, the royals who had accomplished an inordinately ephemeral demise, and a gargantuan duty, continuing their lineage of proper pedigree into the modern day in the enduring lifespan of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Before the mausoleum of those people entombed within, Subaru reached a delayed comprehension. —The austere presence in this place, this was in a certain sense, a microcosm of the Royal Capital. If the Royal Castle was a symbol of authority for the living, then the mausoleum was the same for the dead—

Subaru: "…I'm sure we can't just casually visit the graves of Kings, right?"

Beatrice: "Considering it ordinarily, the mausoleum of royalty would be strictly guarded, I suppose. Those who wish to do evil with the ashes of the powerful are not few, in fact. How wretched, I suppose."

Emilia: "But, we could just ask if somebody was inside… ah, someone's right there."

Although the mausoleum was the only place they had not checked, regardless, it was not a place they could enter with ease.

The chances of Ferris being there became synchronously low, but since they had been entrusted by Wilhelm, they did not wish to return without putting in adequate effort.

With these thoughts, Emilia pointed sharply toward the mausoleum's entrance. There, just as she had stated, a figure was emerging from the mausoleum.

A character garbed in a slender, navy blue tailcoat. The elegance of their conduct as visible from their back potently transmitted their esteem and labor toward the mausoleum.

Subaru followed the hastening Emilia, thinking that since they were visiting the Royal Family's mausoleum, they must be the overseer of the cemetery or the mausoleum, or someone in the same vein.

Emilia: "Um, could you excuse me for a second? I wanted to ask if the young person we're searching for was inside the building you just left."

Rushing over to that character, Emilia spoke to them with no hint of timidness. Her audaciousness would purchase vigilance from the other person, but there were Knights standing at the entrance of the cemetery, and they did vet the social standing of all who passed through the main gate, so it was safe to assume that there were no suspicious figures within the premises.

Subaru wished for their intent to be transmitted to that person by all means—

???: "—Emilia-sama?"

Replying with a voice laced with astonishment, the figure in the tailcoat turned around and set their eyes upon Emilia. Observing them from the front, Emilia halted her feet with a confounded "Huh?".

Subaru, and the others as well, bore witness to the person standing before Emilia as she stood still.

Standing there was—

???: "…Well, you've seen me at a weird spot. It was Wil-jii, wasn't it?"

Vocalizing so, expressing a smile with poignancy not to be reached by such descriptors as astoundedness or self-derision, was Ferris—as he shrugged his shoulders at Subaru and the others, his slender frame adorned with a sonorously masculine tailcoat.

Subaru: "…"

Subaru unwittingly found himself at a loss for words at Ferris's form, his back towards the mausoleum's entrance.

Until now, there had certainly been times when Ferris would don such a guise—concisely, when he dressed as a man within the sleeves of the Knight uniform of the Royal Guard. However, that instance had the pretext of being the official uniform of the Knights, and even that had designed aspects, showing his charm as it befitted him.

However, his tailcoat guise before their eyes was bereft of any such design or craftiness.

What that meant, was—

Subaru: “…Ferris… what… happened?”

Ferris: “Quit it with that expression and voice like it’s the end of the world. It’s not anything important for Subaru-kun and the others, I’m telling you. I just—”

Retaining his poignant smile with the edges of his eyebrows brought low, Ferris tilted his head—and stopped himself. That seemed as though a parting of ways from such gestures.

Without turning traitor to that impression, Ferris continued.

It was—

Ferris: “—It’s just, I was dismissed from my position as Crusch-sama’s Knight. So, I called it a wrap on Ferri-chan, and returned to Felix Argyle.”

Chapter 9:
Crybaby

1

—Felix Argyle.

He knew that to be the legal name of the person standing before him.

He had heard it before from the mouths of others, and above all, it was what the man himself had just introduced himself as. Contrary to the man's cute and dainty appearance, he had thought the name had quite the masculine ring to it.

However, even when the man himself used that name in front of him, Subaru was not able to properly reconcile this fact and phenomenon within himself.

That was the extent to which the man had built his way of life around the image of the nickname "Ferris".

Subaru: "Dismissed, as her Knight…? That means…"

Ferris: "It means I've resigned. Well, it can't be helped. With the Church of the Divine Dragon, Crusch-sama could be saved… ever since the moment I decided to accept their help, I'd been prepared for things to turn out this way. —Ah, Emilia-sama, please don't go feeling responsible or anything."

Emilia: "Ferris…"

Ferris: "When you came to see us back then, it was truly reassuring. Aside from Crusch-sama's allies like me and Wil-jii, there were also other people who were happy to see her safe, it made me think that… what I'd done wasn't wrong."

With the cat ears on his head flattening, Ferris lowered the corners of eyes into a soft smile as he replied.

In the midst of hastening towards him, Emilia skidded to a halt at those words, and her hands started fluttering about aimlessly, as if she were desperately searching for a response that would not come.

Emilia's bewilderment and perplexity were only natural. — However, at the sight of Ferris now donning a tailcoat, reciting his resignation from his post as Knight, Subaru had a different response.

Ferris: "Wait! Subaru-kun, where do you think you're going?"

Subaru: "—Hk, isn't it obvious, I'm going to Crusch-san's place. This sorta thing, it's going too far!"

With clenched teeth, he was already turning to leave when a voice stopped him from behind, to which Subaru growled with a low, jagged response.

He could imagine what the circumstances had been. The Dragon's Blood which had ravaged Crusch's body, to free her of that suffering had required accepting help from the Church of the Divine Dragon, and as a corollary of that, the Crusch Camp's position in the Royal Selection had been teetering.

And, in place of the delirious Crusch, that had been a decision made by Ferris.

Ferris's decision had saved her life, however, this had caused their victory in the Royal Selection to become very difficult. For she, who was fiercely motivated to become the Monarch, it was a decision that Crusch likely would never have desired.

Subaru: "But, didn't you do all of that for the sake of Crusch-san? Despite that, for her to still fire you… that just isn't right!"

Beatrice: "Subaru!"

Due to his unbearable indignation, Subaru shook Beatrice's hand off of his, causing her to shout.

But Subaru did not stop. He was determined to keep going and run all the way back to the Karsten residence, and even if he needed to firmly press Crusch for it, he would make her retract her mistreatment of Ferris.

However, before he could even take a single step to enact that, Subaru was blocked by someone with their arms spread out wide—by Rem, he was halted.

Subaru: “Rem, don’t stop me. I’m about to go off on an excessively emotional outburst, and I don’t want any of you guys to see it.”

Rem: “If you’re aware of how you are getting far too emotional, then please stop there. Besides, before you cause any uproar, how about you properly take a look at the other person’s face?”

Subaru: “Other person’s… face?”

Having silenced Subaru’s impulsive fit, Rem nodded before gesturing with her chin. As Subaru turned to follow her motion, Emilia and Beatrice, who had anxiously been watching over him, entered his field of view, and further beyond them was Ferris, looking down at Subaru from the entrance of the mausoleum.

Ferris, who had been the main driving force behind Subaru’s rage, with a look of exasperation at the sight of his outburst, turned his gaze first towards Rem,

Ferris: “Thank you, Rem-chan… though this is the first time I’ve seen you walking around like this, you’re a much better girl than I could have ever imagined. Maybe your only shortcoming is your taste in boys?”

Rem: “…While I was asleep, I heard that Ferris-san also took great care of me. Out of respect to you as my benefactor, I’ll keep my response graceful… but that just now was a terrible misunderstanding.”

Ferris: “I see. If that’s how Rem-chan views it, that’s fine by me. But, I’m glad you’ve woken up.”

Rem and Ferris exchanged words right over Subaru’s head while he was pincered in between them. With that done, Rem pursed her lips in a complicated manner, and Ferris switched gears with a “That said”.

And, narrowing his eyes as he looked down at Subaru,

Ferris: “You know, Subaru-kun, you really are prideful.”

Subaru: “Prid… hk.”

Ferris: “I think it’s a different nuance from just being self-centered, so even if it’s this word, it’s the one I find fits best, okay? Even though you say you’re not doing it for yourself, and that it’s all for the sake of someone else, you just end up frantically going around in circles, and it just ends up being uncalled-for concern.”

Subaru: “You, phrasing it like that…”

Ferris: “—And so I thought, if Subaru-kun is prideful, then maybe I’m prideful too.”

At that moment, seeing his smile, Subaru felt as if he had been doused by cold water.

Subaru: “…”

Gulping down his breath, he looked at Ferris who, just as he thoroughly criticized Subaru, turned that same vitriol on himself. The atmosphere around Ferris had not changed since they first encountered each other at the mausoleum, seeming to Subaru as if he showed no openings to latch onto, or rather, as if he was almost too composed.

He was a sea of tranquility, so-to-speak. —However, that could not be the case. Thinking about what had happened to Ferris, contrary to a calm sea, he should be in the right in midst of a ferocious storm.

Subaru stared closely at Ferris’s facial expression, searching for any signs of the storm. But, with Ferris himself seeming to not concern himself with that, he closed one eye, letting out an “Ah”,

Ferris: “That’s right. If it’s fine with you, Emilia-sama, won’t you all come in to pay respects?”

Subaru: “Pay respects… do you mean in the mausoleum behind you? Are we allowed in?”

Ferris: “Yes, the administrator entrusted me with the key, and besides, I’m qualified to act as an intercessor, so I come here pretty often.”

Subaru: “Intercessor…?”

Ferris: “Wow, Subaru-kun really is clueless. If you’re trying to be her one and only Knight while being this ignorant, you’re only going to end up embarrassing Emilia-sama, you know?”

Ferris gave a small laugh and stuck out his tongue, leaving Subaru to hold his own.

Rather than it being because of his ignorance being pointed out, it was that the phrase “one and only Knight” coming out of Ferris’s mouth seemed like it would be a delicate topic right now.

Of course, given the mischievous look in his eyes, Ferris had likely said it on purpose.

Whilst toying with Subaru and the others with his tone, Ferris softly caught the closing door of the mausoleum that he had just left.

Ferris: “Let’s go inside to talk about all the various things that have been piling up. —I was just thinking that if I were the only one here to pay respects, His Highness might start feeling lonely.”

2

Located within the Royal Cemetery, the presence exuded by that mausoleum clearly set it apart from the rest.

The building was constructed from the finest white marble selected from across the Kingdom, and was decorated throughout with ornamentations of dragons, the very symbol of the Dragon Kingdom, giving it the capacity to overwhelm any visitor who laid eyes upon it. The exterior walls, shining in the sunlight, exuded a divine aura that seemed to ward off evil, and the dragon sculpture carved across each of the closed doors completed it as a single work of art, seemingly continuing to protect the dignity of the deceased Royal Family.

After stepping inside, what laid in various places throughout the white chalk corridor to follow were the grave markers of the sleeping royalty. The orderly arranged sarcophagi were decorated with carvings and ornaments associated with each Royal Family member, and just looking at them seemed to bring to mind the deceased's life before death.

In particular, the state of the fourth prince's tombstone, which was their objective, especially inspired this feeling.

Ferris: "This is His Highness's… Fourier Lugunica-sama's grave."

Ferris led Subaru's group across the well-polished floor, his boots clacking upon the stone, then stopped in his tracks and gestured toward an especially conspicuous grave marker—the sarcophagus of Fourier Lugunica.

Within the mausoleum, where strict, solemn order was maintained, that principle seemed to waver slightly here.

After all, the fourth prince's gravestone was too colorful for a resting place of the dead.

Subaru: "Are these, offerings? Letters, knitted things, as well as carved wooden animals…"

Ferris: "None of them feel like offerings to royalty, right? In truth, the people who said they wished to offer such things were children who had no conception of such upper-class etiquette, so it can't be helped."

Subaru: "People with no such concept, no way, you mean they're gifts from the general public? Wouldn't those sorta things be censored or confiscated when they're brought in?"

Ferris: "Of course, if it was a prank or something, it wouldn't be allowed to go through. But, the fact that they are not, was something I verified when I accepted the offerings in my role of intercessor."

Crouching in front of the sarcophagus, Ferris answered while squinting at the various items placed on the table.

The items offered there must have been prepared by those who adored the fourth prince laid to rest here, regardless of their status, and would have contained each person's thoughts and feelings.

Intercessors were those who, as a special exception, had the right to bring such offerings with the permission of the cemetery's administrator, on behalf of those who could not visit this place in person.

Essentially, Ferris had been entrusted with the thoughts and feelings of the people as the intercessor for the fourth prince.

Ferris: "By nature, many members of the Lugunican Royal Family had good personalities, who were gentle and well-liked by others, but His Highness Fourier was an individual of exceptionally cheerful and pleasant personality. So he would frequently sneak out of the Castle, and make merry with the people of the Royal Capital."

Subaru: "…Amazing. It's like an episode you'd often hear about in manga and such. But, if he actually did that, it probably ended up becoming a huge problem, right?"

Ferris: "Well, it did turn out like that. The Royal Guard was mobilized to search for His Highness in the wake of his disappearance. In the end, His Highness was at a soup kitchen in the Slums, that turned out to be run by the Church of the Divine Dragon, which almost caused friction between the Castle and the Church, and a big fuss ensued."

Beatrice: "It's hard to laugh that off as a joke these days, in fact."

Over the arched back of Ferris, they looked upon the headstone of the much-beloved Fourier.

As Ferris reminisced with a smile, his words were filled with an undeniable affection for the central figure of those tales, Fourier, and even from this fragment of that episode, it was clear that he was a person who was loved by everyone.

Ferris: "…Did I ever say anything about His Highness to Subaru-kun before?"

Subaru: "…Yeah, I heard that there was someone like that, and that he got along well with you and Crusch-san. Didn't she say that he and I kind of resemble each other?"

Ferris: "Hah? How are His Highness and Subaru-kun the same? I'll kill you, you know?"

Subaru: "I'm pretty sure you said the same thing to me back then!!"

Ferris's voice had taken on a rather serious tone devoid of jokes, so Subaru hastened to defend himself.

In reality, that was about all that Subaru had been told about Fourier. Of course, even Subaru, who was not very perceptive, could tell that this person's death was not unrelated to the reason why Crusch had aspired to participate in the Royal Selection.

Emilia: "So, Crusch-san joined the Royal Selection for the sake of Prince Fourier?"

Ferris: "…As expected of Emilia-sama. You always dive straight in to asking the difficult questions."

Emilia: "Ah, I'm sorry. But, Ferris invited us to pay respects because he wanted to tell us that story, right? After hearing that, I was just thinking that I should try to decide what I'm going to do next."

Ferris: "What you're doing next, huh? And that would be?"

Emilia: "Yes, Subaru stole the show earlier, but I think I'll also go to tell Crusch-san to reconsider. Subaru and I will go talk to her with our utmost effort. How about it?"

Subaru: "I think that's a good idea… Ow, ow, ow!"

Rem: "Please don't speak impulsively. Just where do you think we are?"

As soon as he agreed with Emilia, Subaru writhed in agony as Rem pinched him on the side. Gazing over those antics of Subaru and the others, Ferris strained a smile and stood up,

Ferris: “As I said before, I’d like you to refrain from going over to Crusch-sama and saying all sorts of things. From the beginning, I was prepared for this to happen.”

Emilia: “But…”

Ferris: “I’ve accepted it. I said that I had been dismissed, but it was me who first declared that I no longer had any right to stay by her side. Moreover…”

Holding a finger to his lips, Ferris paused for a beat. Then, pointing that raised finger towards Emilia, and then to Subaru in order,

Ferris: “What would you do, Emilia-sama, if I, or the Council of Wise Men, or whoever, asked you to reconsider your master-servant relationship with Subaru-kun?”

Emilia: “Eh? My relationship with Subaru is something I decided after giving it a lot of thought. So, if someone said something like that to me, I would feel reaaally uneasy and wonder what the heck… ah.”

Ferris: “That’s what I mean. That’s what Emilia-sama is trying to do right now.”

Extraneous and immense meddling from an outsider. With Ferris explaining it so clearly, Emilia’s shoulders visibly slumped. As expected, there was little joy in Emilia’s response, as she did not want anyone to interfere with her relationship with Subaru.

Above all, the current persuasion was effective not only for Emilia, but for Subaru as well.

Ferris, who must have known this, looked past the dejected Emilia, and while shrugging his shoulders at Subaru,

Ferris: “To answer your earlier question, Crusch-sama is not so narrow-minded. Hence, His Highness Fourier is but one of the reasons why she decided to participate in the Royal Selection.”

Subaru: “…But, his part of the reason isn’t so small that it can be ignored, right?”

Ferris: “Oh, you’re quite the nitpicker. You’ve completely lost your cuteness, Subaru-kun.”

However, as if that had not even struck a nerve for him, Ferris continued.

Ferris: “I won’t deny it. The passing of His Highness was a truly significant event for Crusch-sama… and for me as well. I was deeply hurt, and cried so much that it felt I had used up my entire lifetime’s supply of tears. Well, I’m a bit of a crybaby, so I cried a lot after that as well.”

Everyone: “…”

Ferris: “Though she didn’t show it, it also caused Crusch-sama so, so much hurt and suffering. —But, the thing that hurt Crusch-sama the most was after His Highness had passed away.”

Subaru: “Eh…”

Ferris: “His Highness, and the rest of the Royal Family all passed away one after the other, causing great turmoil for everyone. The Duchess Karsten, Crusch-sama, was attending a meeting at the Castle as one of the upper nobles… and there, she came to a realization. Everyone participating in the meeting was more concerned about the possibility that the Covenant with the Divine Dragon might be severed, than about the loss of His Highness and the other royals.”

He spoke quietly, as carefully as possible to avoid getting carried away with emotion. However, this effort only highlighted the grotesqueness of the facts as told by Ferris.

The personalities of the Lugunican Royal Family, the way they were loved, and how warm their hearts were, all could be seen by taking a look at this mausoleum: at all of the tombstones even beyond Fourier Lugunica’s, there were offerings made to pray for the peace of the deceased without exception.

Even the deaths of those so loved were thought insignificant in the face of the Covenant with the Dragon.

Emilia: “So, that’s why she did it.”

It came out like a sigh, a murmur from Emilia, who had come to the same understanding as Subaru. She placed her hands on her chest, and as her amethyst eyes narrowed with a pained look,

Emilia: “That’s why Crusch-san decided that when she became the Monarch, she would have no choice but to make her country stronger, not one that solely relied upon the Covenant with the Dragon.”

Ferris: “—It’s not only that, but, yes.”

Emilia: “It’s not only that, which would mean…”

Ferris: “Crusch-sama really hated the prospect of it… That if she hadn’t been so close to His Highness Fourier, she was sure that she would have thought the same way as everyone else.”

That sort of alternate reality was not something that could be known unless it had actually happened, and since there was no way for such a thing to actually happen, there was no reason for Crusch to be blaming herself in that way.

No matter how she tried to go against it, Crusch would have met Fourier, and arrived at the same idea. Even if she detested the version of herself who had never met him, a version of herself who did not exist, it would only bring her suffering.

Only, on another line of thinking, Subaru also realized that Crusch’s situation was not simply that of a choice in contradiction to her claims in the Royal Selection.

Crusch, who had declared that she would end the Covenant with the Dragon, was saved by the power of the Sacrament of the Church of the Divine Dragon, a group that worshipped none other than that very Dragon. —And that was not all.

Subaru: “Crusch-san vowed to restore an environment in which the Lugunican Royal Family… that Prince Fourier could truly be mourned, and even though she was determined to achieve that, she no longer has the ability to do so.”

Ferris: “…Moreover, the Church of the Divine Dragon did not save His Highness. Even though they saved Crusch-sama.”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

Ferris’s hoarsely spoken words struck a chord with Subaru and the others in the truest sense.

Just a moment ago, he had been fully intent on going to complain to Crusch about Ferris’s dismissal as her Knight, saying that it was going too far, even when taking her poor physical and mental condition into account.

Now that he knew all about the resolve and determination Crusch had carried, about the ideals and vows she had heralded, and about how they had all been shattered in the worst way possible, what could Subaru possibly say to her?

If only Subaru had offered up an arm or a leg, and taken on Crusch’s curse—

Ferris: “That’s why, Subaru-kun is prideful.”

Subaru: “Wha…”

Ferris: “Anyone can see it on your face. It’s no wonder Beatrice-chan refuses to let go of your hand. You may have gotten a bit better, but surely you ought to know when there’s nothing you could have done?”

With his head tilted, Ferris spoke as if admonishing a child, rebuking Subaru for the shallowness of his thinking without getting emotional.

Deep down, he understood. Subaru’s current idea existed only in the realm of theory, impossible to act on; as Ferris had said, it was meaningless.

Even if Crusch's salvation had been carried out by Emilia's Knight, Natsuki Subaru, instead of the Church of the Divine Dragon, it would not absolve her of the fault of relying on an opposing camp to solve her problems. And, that would be too large of a disadvantage in the Royal Selection, which was now past its midpoint.

Subaru: "If one delegates the solving of all their problems to other parties, is that person really fit to be the Monarch, is that what it's about…?"

Ferris: "—. How harsh. But, that's right."

Subaru: "…I'm just parroting what I've heard."

That was something he had heard directly from none other than Crusch herself.

Once, when the Witch Cult had targeted Emilia, Subaru had asked Crusch for help without any bargaining chips, but Crusch had imposingly rejected Subaru's ugly pleas.

That was a lesson Subaru had needed to learn. Hence, he did not begrudge Crusch for that. It was far too ironic that, even though he had no grudge against her, the situation had reversed as it were.

Emilia: "Hey, Ferris, I'm not sure if this is okay to ask, but…"

In place of Subaru, whose head hung low as he found himself at a loss for words, Emilia spoke to Ferris.

Stepping out next to Ferris, she stood in front of the gravestone of Fourier Lugunica, looked at the offerings placed there, then, clutching the magic crystal on her chest, she closed her eyes.

Behind Emilia, Beatrice and Rem could each be seen offering their own prayers for the dead.

After that, Emilia gazed at the particularly gorgeous bouquet—the one that Ferris had adjusted the position of while he had been crouched down, that had been brought here by none other than himself, and she asked the following.

Emilia: “Crusch-san and Prince Fourier, were they lovers?”

Ferris: “…”

At the question, Ferris’s eyes widened slightly, then he gave a small laugh.

And then—

Ferris: “That’s not something for me to say. —It would be far too tactless.”

3

The double doors to the mausoleum gave rise to a weighty sound as they closed, and he met eyes with the dragon sculpted across their surfaces as a single image.

He could tell it was likely the same depiction modeled after the Divine Dragon Volcanica that was also engraved onto the face of coins, but now that he had heard about the blighted love surrounding Crusch and Prince Fourier, his feelings towards that Divine Dragon had grown more complicated compared to before.

Subaru: “I got to encounter the real thing on top of the Tower, but with its empty state of mind, even if it’s supposedly the object of worship for the Church of the Divine Dragon, bound by its Covenant to the Kingdom, it’s just not very convincing…”

Beatrice: “Its style might be to just switch on at times when it is necessary, I suppose. At times when it is not, it might be operating on something like an energy-saving mode, or like Otto when he doesn’t have any work to do, in fact.”

Subaru: “Even if it’s Otto when he has no work to do, treating him as empty-headed is going too far… Wait, if the target of comparison is the Divine Dragon, then wouldn’t that actually be an honor for a citizen of the Kingdom?”

Hearing Beatrice’s hypothesis, Subaru also tried to simulate treating the Otto within his brain as the Divine Dragon, but when Otto did not have any work to do, he became an idiot as a result of the sense of freedom he would gain from finishing all his work, so Subaru was unable to get any useful comments out of him. Heavy drinking in moderation, indeed.

Regardless—

Emilia: “Ferris, what do you plan on doing after this?”

Ferris: “After this, you ask?”

Emilia: “Yes. After all, you can’t return to… it would be difficult for you to return to Crusch-san’s place right now, right? You were always in that same mansion together, so do you have any destination in mind?”

On the way to return the mausoleum key to the cemetery’s administrator, Emilia inquired so, and Ferris scratched his cheek as he hesitated in giving his response with a troubled look upon his eyebrows.

Judging by his reaction, Emilia’s comment had borne a critical impact on Ferris.

There was no doubt that Wilhelm’s decision to inform Subaru’s group of Ferris’s whereabouts must have been an anguished one, founded in worry for the young man’s near future.

Regardless of the circumstances behind it, the master-servant relationship between Crusch and Ferris had been terminated. Under such a situation, Wilhelm, as a follower of Crusch, could not take actions that opposed his master’s will.

Back there, the maximum consideration Wilhelm could offer was to have reliable individuals go to verify Ferris’s thereafter.

Thus, if they were going to respond to that consideration of Wilhelm’s to the fullest—

Subaru: “What Emilia-tan is trying to say is this: For the time being, won’t you come stay with us for a bit?”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right! How about it? Of course, I’m not saying you need to stay forever. I just think that you're probably sad from parting like this, and that you just need some time. For me as well, it took around a hundred years to accept the fact that I froze all the people in my hometown."

Rem: "I have to say, I think that would be far too long of a wait."

Beatrice: "By the way, it also took Betty four-hundred years to accept Subaru's love, I suppose."

Rem: "I have to say, I think that even for this person, that would be far too miserable."

Due to those misleading statements from the long lifespan duo, Emilia and Beatrice, Rem began to look at Subaru with a bit of pity in her eyes. He would make sure to properly clear up that misunderstanding later on, but at the very least, their proposition to Ferris just now had been made in earnest.

However, receiving those words, Ferris placed his hand over his forehead with a "Tahah~",

Ferris: "For some reason, I had the feeling you'd ask me that, but you really went ahead and did it. I'm a talented master of the healing arts, so I get why there'd be a scramble to secure a claim on me."

Emilia: "Mph, I… wasn't saying it as a joke…"

Ferris: "Indeed, yes, of course, I'm aware that Emilia-sama is always earnest, no matter the time. I'm also glad that you invited me like that. It's the truth, you know?"

Emilia: "…But, the way you answered…"

Ferris: "—Right. Although you invited me especially, I just can't agree to it."

Slowly shaking his head from side to side, Ferris turned down Emilia's proposal with a wry smile. She very much wanted to be persistent against that attitude of his, but she also understood his feelings of not being able to accept.

After all—

Ferris: “Even if we’re separated, I will always treasure Crusch-sama. Even if it was my decision that caused the Royal Selection to become hopeless for her, I just won’t break away to support somebody other than Crusch-sama.”

Emilia: “I-It’s even okay if you hate me. Only, if Ferris could just help us to be sure that you won’t wander off somewhere unsteadily, and that you’ll be alright.”

Ferris: “I wouldn’t hate you or anything. —Ah, that’s a lie. I actually do hate you. Emilia-sama, all the way back from the very beginning, this entire time, I’ve hated you.”

Emilia: “Eh! Really?!”

Having gone so far as to bring out an uncharacteristic bargaining chip, the persistent Emilia was shocked. Nodding “yes” to that Emilia, Ferris gestured to Subaru and the rest with the key to the mausoleum,

Ferris: “It isn’t just Emilia-sama. All of the Royal Candidates other than Crusch-sama, I’ve hated them too, and the same goes for all their Knights. I also hate Beatrice-chan, and although this is pretty much my first time meeting Rem-chan, I hate her too. And I really hate Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “When you phrase it like that, it sounds like you hate me for real…”

Ferris: “What makes you think I don’t hate you for real?”

Receiving that retort, Subaru was unable to say anything anymore.

Emilia: “…You really won’t change your mind?”

Even Emilia, of all people, could discern that Ferris’s “hate” just now was not how he truly felt. In order to refuse Emilia’s proposal, Ferris had given his likes and hates as a reason. And then, no matter what he was told, no matter how he was treated, he declared that his feelings of backing Crusch would never change.

Ferris: “Please don’t worry so much like that. The Royal Guard… I’m not sure if I can continue there or not, so I’ll go discuss it with the Commander, but regardless, I’m sure there’ll be a high demand for me at healing clinics or wherever else.”

Subaru: “…You aren’t going to give into despair, are you?”

Ferris: “Despair? You mean, to end my own life in lamentation over the world… or something like that? Me? The person who despises casualties the most in this world?”

Subaru: “—. My bad.”

With zero hints of a joke there, Subaru apologized in the face of Ferris’s clear assertion.

Even if he no longer resided by Crusch’s side, Ferris was still the Blue, and he would do nothing that distorted his way of being as a healer. He would have faith in that.

Subaru: “Ahh, but you know! How frustrating! If I can’t go and say anything to Crusch-san, and Ferris also refused the idea of staying with us for a time, then there’s nothing I can do…!”

Rem: “Did Ferris-san not chide you about how prideful that is?”

Ferris: “Oh, yeah, just as Rem-chan says.”

Subaru: “But, Rem…”

Rem: “—. Whatever the case, there are problems that can only be resolved by the parties directly concerned.”

Although they were observing a passing tragedy, they bore no right to rectify it themselves.

As Subaru complained about how frustrating that felt, Rem cast her eyes down, and exhaled a shallow breath.

Rem: “Just as how an outside party cannot meddle with the master-servant relationship between you and Emilia-san, or with the Contractual relationship between you and Beatrice-chan. Between you and myself…”

Subaru: “Rem?”

Rem: “…Between you and myself, what sort of relationship is there exactly? What are you to me?”

Subaru: “Don’t turn it over to me all of a sudden! Me, you, precious!”

Emilia: “The same goes for us! Us, Rem, reaaally, precious!”

Rem: “—. Thank you to Emilia-san.”

Subaru: “What about me?!”

With the entirety of his existence having been completely disregarded, Subaru’s voice cracked as Rem ignored him in a graceful manner.

Behind that exchange between Subaru and the others, Beatrice called out “Wait” to Ferris. Then, as Beatrice lightly pinched the hem of Subaru’s clothes,

Beatrice: “Betty is not as concerned about your near future as Subaru and the others, in fact. However, Betty owes you an enormous debt, I suppose.”

Ferris: “Beatrice-chan-sama, owes me? Did I ever do a favor or something for the Great Spirit?”

Beatrice: “You saved Subaru when he was far too reckless and nearly destroyed his Gate, in fact. Unfortunately, Subaru ignored your warnings and destroyed his Gate, but you served to buy him some time, I suppose. If not for your help, Betty and Subaru would have no Contract, in fact.”

Ferris: “Umm… that gladdens me more than I expected.”

Beatrice: “Enjoying it to the fullest, I suppose. Thus, Betty is of the nature that always repays her debts, in fact. So, if anything ever happens to you, you can count on Betty to come to your aid whenever needed, I suppose.”

Ferris: “Even if Subaru-kun is about to fall off a cliff?”

Beatrice: “After picking Subaru back up first, Betty would come rushing towards you in a great hurry, in fact.”

Hearing Beatrice’s answer as she snorted her nose and placed her hands on her hips, Ferris’s eyes widened slightly, and he placed his hand over his mouth and smiled with an “Aha”.

The impulse behind that smile grew more intense, and eventually, teardrops began to well up in the corners of his eyes.

Ferris: “Ah, how unpleasant. Don’t make me cry, Beatrice-chan-sama.”

Beatrice: “As you have proclaimed yourself, you are quite the crybaby, I suppose.”

Receiving those words from Beatrice, Ferris’s smile broadened ever so slightly.

4

Emilia: “If you change your mind, you can always visit us, okay? I’ll talk to everyone to make sure someone will definitely respond. Can you promise that? Can you keep a promise, Ferris?”

Subaru: “A stray bullet just hit me!”

Rem: “It’s quite justified.”

And so, right up until the very moment of their parting, Emilia and the others did their best to invite him.

It was evident that they showed no signs of malice or artifice, and though he felt more and more guilty over making Emilia’s face cloud over as he rejected her over and over again, there was nothing he could do about it.

Ferris: “It’s not like I feel conflicted about Emilia-sama and the rest, you know?”

Even if he had ceded that qualification of his own volition, Ferris had been Crusch’s Knight.

It was impermissible for him, no matter how temporary, to shelter himself under the umbrella of any Royal Selection Candidate aside from Crusch. He was afraid that it would not look good for Crusch, and above all, he feared what Crusch would think of it.

Ferris: “…On that point, Your Highness was incredible. Were you ever scared?”

At the mausoleum, he had intended to repent before the gravestone and sarcophagus, to the extent that time would allow. And yet, after but a mere moment had passed, a lingering desire to ask that once more had already arisen in him.

Whining and whining; even when he switched to dressing as a man, that effeminacy at his core would not be completely wiped away. Truly, he was disgusted by himself.

Such a person as himself seemed to have been able to make only a single correct decision—

Ferris: “I’m glad that I was the one who suggested it.”

Just as he had told Emilia and the rest, his dismissal as a Knight had been suggested by Ferris.

When the Church of the Divine Dragon had extended their hand to him, and he had decided to borrow the power of Filóre’s Sacrament, he was prepared to lose the qualifications to stand beside Crusch. Merely, Ferris’s soul could not sit there and wait for it to come out of Crusch’s own mouth.

So he brought it up before that, and avoided having Crusch cut off Ferris of her own accord. —What the hell, even though he had been trying to extol the right decision, it was yet another manifestation of that effeminacy that disgusted him.

Ferris: “I’ve been doing nothing but lying…”

He thought he had made the right decision. It was a lie.

He had enquired as to whether Fourier felt no fear. It was a lie.

He had said that he did not feel conflicted about Emilia and the others. It was a lie.

His dismissal as a Knight had been to protect his own fragile heart, and he knew that even Fourier himself had mustered up all his courage when he had asked Crusch to go out somewhere.

And, there was no way he felt nothing toward the ready advance of Emilia and the others, who had achieved many great deeds despite her overwhelmingly disadvantageous position at the start and had greatly inconvenienced the high-ranking nobility with her lineage as a half-elf—and above all, toward the efforts of Subaru, who held the same position as a Knight.

As a matter of fact, Ferris had not asked Subaru about the circumstances surrounding his ungloved right hand.

That Subaru had not broached the subject likely meant that it would have been a troublesome method to be utilized as a cure for Crusch. However, imagination was imagination. He had not confirmed it. The reason for that was obvious: he had fled from the possibility that there was any answer other than relying upon the Church of the Divine Dragon.

It seemed as if just about every action he took was done to prioritize escaping his own pain.

Ferris: “Do I truly consider anyone else precious to me…?”

If he had seriously cared for that person, would he have not cherished that person’s unyielding convictions? If he was aware of the prayers Crusch had sworn before Fourier’s grave, should he have not sought out a path that kept that wish alive, even if it continued to inflict unceasing suffering upon her?

Was it not that very anger at facing this difficult to fathom reality that had allowed Crusch to recall Fourier, and made none other than her realize the cruelty of Ferris’s actions?

What if the confusion of Crusch's Memories that had recalled Fourier Lugunica had been evoked by her wrath at Ferris's action that trampled upon that oath?

Ferris might be detested by not only Crusch, but also by Fourier.

Ferris: "—Hk, quit it, quit it, there's no point to this."

Once again, he realized he was pretending to have a guilty conscience, and was searching for words to console himself.

He did not have time to waste on such trivialities, and so as to not worry Emilia and the rest, as well as Wilhelm, who had been caught between him and Crusch, he needed to determine his position from here on out.

In truth, there was no reason for him to continue as a Knight. Since the title of the Blue was still alive and well, he could turn to the Treatment Center or the Magic Research Institute and receive quite the warm welcome. It would be easy to secure employment, but there was no point in just living his life aimlessly.

Even apart from the certainty that these healing hands would continue to save others, there was hope.

Even if Ferris—no, Felix Argyle had cast away the qualifications to wish for it.

???: "—Oh, what a relief. I was worried we might miss each other."

Suddenly, the ears of Ferris, who had been scowling at the pavestones of the Noble District on the way back from the cemetery, shivered in response to the voice that had begun to speak, which had been directed at him.

He stopped walking, and looked ahead. In front of him, in the middle of the street, stood a lone figure. —The figure there was a familiar one.

It was a man with dull blond hair and deep blue eyes. His tall, slender figure was clad in a well-tailored suit, and his hair and goatee were carefully tidied, giving him a refined air. Given his profession, that was nothing strange.

After all, that person was—

Ferris: “—Russell Fellow, was it? You’re from the Commerce Guild.”

Russell: “Yes, that is correct. I am greatly honored you remember me. Would it be permissible for me to call you Ferris-sama? Or perhaps, Felix-sama?”

Ferris: “…Whichever one you prefer is fine.”

Russell: “Well then, I shall take you up on your kind offer, Felix-sama. Due to my line of work, it is usually less expedient, in a manner of speaking, to call another by a nickname rather than their formal name.”

Ferris: “Hmmm.”

Toward the man who bowed his head in a polite gesture—toward Russell Fellow, Ferris closed one eye.

The other party was a shrewd man who served as the representative of the Commerce Guild of the Royal Capital, an individual famed for being preeminently brilliant even amongst the battle-hardened merchants of the Royal Capital. In fact, he had been enlisted to aid with the Subjugation of the White Whale through the supply and transportation of goods, so he was not an unfamiliar party to the Crusch Camp.

Ferris: “That being said, currently I can’t go along with any get-rich-quick schemes, you know? It’s a shame, but…”

Russell: “Your Contract with Duchess Karsten as master and servant has been annulled. Indeed, I am quite aware.”

Ferris: “…Your ears catch wind so quick, it’s scary.”

Having said that, Ferris regretted that he himself had turned to such a foolish topic.

After all, Russell had clearly been lying in wait for Ferris. If he had never made any such move even once before now, and yet he took such a step on this day in particular, it could only be because a reason to take such action had appeared.

And then, there was one more thing in addition to that, yet another foolish thing that he further realized too late.

Ferris: "…It's still only early in the evening, so why is this road so empty?"

Russell: "…"

Russell stood in the middle of the road, about ten meters from Ferris. No indication of anyone on the streets of the Noble District drew near to Russell and Ferris's surroundings.

If this were late at night or early in the morning, it would make more sense, but it was incomprehensible at a time when the sun had yet to set. And when something impossible occurred, there was always a reason.

On this occasion, the reason why this had been brought about was —

Russell: "Felix-sama, I have something I am greatly interested in discussing with you, and if you do not mind, I would like to offer you an invitation to join me for a meal at my home. If you are still uncertain as to where to go…"

Ferris: "Do you intend to solicit me as soon as I am off my leash? I'm sorry, but such a conversation is—"

Russell: "—No, I am not soliciting you. In truth, this conversation is compulsory."

As if he was lamenting something, Russell slowly shook his head. — In that instant, someone appeared right behind Ferris and pressed a cold blade against his slender neck.

Ferris: "—Hk."

Breath caught within his throat, Ferris's movements were sealed. It was so sudden, there had been nothing he could have done. What he could discern was that the blade pressed against him was slender with a significant curvature, and that the person standing behind Ferris was considerably taller than him. —No, there was that as well.

Ferris: "…It doesn't seem like you are an ordinary merchant, huh?"

Russell: "Who knows? I believe it is certainly a possibility."

As Russell continued to close the distance step-by-step, while the blade remained against his neck and he was unable to act in response, Ferris at least tried to avert his eyes, feeling disgusted at himself yet again.

Why did he assume that someone capable of bearing such cold eyes would be a normal person?

Firmly biting his lip, he resisted letting any whimper or groan escape him. Ferris cautioned himself that such was the maximum extent of what he could do at the moment.

While examining Ferris from up close, still with those cold eyes, Russell informed him.

Russell: "Now that you are no longer the Knight of the Duchess, I shall not hesitate to interrogate you. —Regarding the Sacrament of the Immortal King passed down through House Argyle."

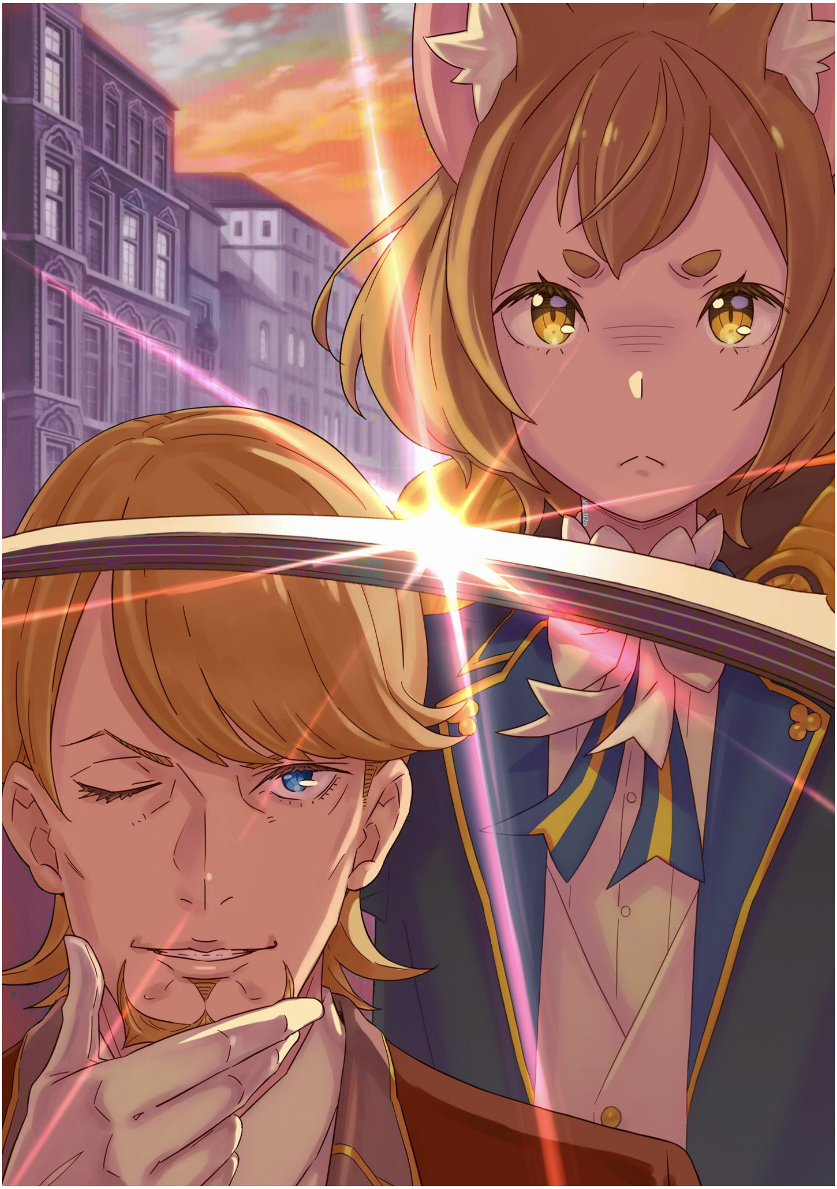

Chapter 10:
Faith Embedded

1

???: “So in the end, Captain, you’re tellin’ me that even when lookin’ at it with yer own eyes, ya couldn’t tell whether that Filóre Saintess is the real missin’ royal, or if it’s Felt-sama? Hoi…”

???: “But, you saw afterwards that Duchess Karsten’s health had recovered, right? Whether she is royalty or not, it’s at least clear that the power of the Sacrament is real, isn’t it? Hai…”

Subaru: “Yeah. I think that’s something Beako and Rem can also attest to after we went there together. What Emilia-tan and Otto saw wasn’t mistaken… Moreover, her description of Filóre being a reaaally good girl, wasn’t something that I could reasonably deny either. She seemed like an Emilia-tan type of girl without any malicious intentions. Hui…”

Letting out a deep sigh, Subaru recalled the rumored Saintess he had encountered directly earlier on this day at the Church, and with an indescribable mood, he tucked away the plate in his hands on the shelf.

The cupboard provided for the Royal Residence was filled with both wooden and ceramic tableware, and having used those for their meal, Subaru and the others were now in the midst of washing, drying, and putting everything away. Garfiel would wash the dishes at the washbasin, Petra would then wipe them dry, and then Subaru would store them away where they belonged.

Since the Royal Residence was a guesthouse for upper nobles who had business in the Royal Capital, there was fundamentally no aspect of it that left anything to be desired, and provisions to ensure the guests had no inconveniences were constantly being carried out. If necessary, there were housekeepers that could be dispatched to take care of things like cooking, cleaning, and one’s daily necessities, but the majority of nobles tended to bring along their own trusted servants, so it did not seem like they had many opportunities to work.

The Emilia Camp had also developed a style whereby the meal preparations for the day had been tasked to Petra, and the tidying up was being assisted by Subaru and Garfiel, who had lost in rock-paper-scissors.

So as the three of them were coordinating to tidy up together, they had ended up plunging into the current topic.

Garfiel: "…But ya see, Captain, if you're sayin' that'cha guys ain't mistakin' it even wit' yer own eyes, then my amazin' self's true feelin's're of wantin' to do somethin' to help out wit' the problem in Pristella."

Petra: "But, what if that leads to it being discovered that Filóre-san is real royalty? If that happens, Emilia-neesama's run in the Royal Selection might come to an end, you know?"

Garfiel: "That'd be a whole 'nother story, tho'. The Saintness called Filóre's already gone 'n risen to center stage. 'S just that nobody 'cept the big shots in the inner circles know 'bout her yet."

Stirring around the water in the bucket to form soapsuds, Garfiel responded to Petra's words as he washed the dishes. His emerald-green eyes narrowed as he engaged in combat against the stubborn stains clinging to the dishes using a scrap of linen in place of a sponge,

Garfiel: "Not that I've seen her for my amazin' self, but if she's causin' that much of an uproar wit' just her looks, there ain't gonna be no keepin' her hidden even if ya tried. Much less if she's plannin' to go off 'n heal Pristella same like she did the Duchess's body."

Petra: "—Yeah, I think you'd get a perfect score with that understanding of yours, Garf-san. You're now able to properly read the social climate. Good boy, good boy."

Garfiel: "Don't be talkin' bout it like ya were givin' me some sorta test! I'll say this now, but my amazin' self's Petra's senior, yeah?!"

Even when being patted on the head by Petra, who wore an expression most fitting for a teacher, Garfiel could not show any resistance with both of his hands deep in the washbucket, so all he could do was roar like a tiger. Pleasantly watching over their interaction with a faint smile, Subaru could not help but feel that the tides of the state of the world were shifting in an undesirable direction.

Subaru: “At the current moment, it really feels like there’s a yellow light on the progress of the Royal Selection, but…”

From here on out, if it ended up shifting into a red light, would it ever turn back to a green light once more, so that Emilia could honestly continue to fulfill her role as a Royal Candidate?

Subaru: “…”

In all honesty, Subaru feared now that the possibilities for the surviving princess were narrowed down to the two options of Felt and Filóre, the Royal Selection would shift into something that simply sought the answer of “which one of them is the true heir”.

Naturally, as Emilia’s one and only Knight, that was not something he could accept, but even disregarding that point of view, there was something about it that just did not sit right with him.

That was something that had also been raised as a topic while they were en route to the Royal Capital via the “Reinhard sprint” method.

Subaru: “To begin with, before Filóre ever showed up, why was there no development of Felt being decided as the next Monarch the moment she was suspected of being the princess?”

Of course, this world doubtlessly did not keep track of highly reliable evidence that would be useful for identifying individuals, such as DNA tests, fingerprint records, and dental care records.

However, even the reasons why Felt was suspected of being the princess were quite the ambiguous things, such as the rare physical features of her outward appearance and how her age lined up with that of the missing princess.

If that were enough to serve as proof of one's lineage in this world, then it would not have been strange in the slightest for the Royal Selection to have ended on that day, moments before Subaru made a fool of himself in the Royal Castle.

Subaru: "But, that didn't happen. The greatest reason for that was —"

Petra: "—The Dragon History Stone."

As Subaru raised his eyebrows at having been beaten to the punch, Petra stared at him as she handed him the plate she had just finished drying upon receiving it from Garfiel.

Subaru nodded "Exactly", and accepted both the plate and conclusion from her.

Subaru: "Throughout history, it's been a prophetic slab that's assisted the Kingdom in various times of crisis… though, it seems like the Dragon History Stone was what gave the instruction to hold the Royal Selection…"

Garfiel: "What's the matter? When ya say it like that, it kinda sounds like there's somethin' 'bout it that's eatin' at ya, Captain."

Subaru: "No, when I first heard about it, I didn't think much of it, you know? It's a fantasy world, so the thought of there being those kinds of marvelous items actually raised my excitement, but…"

Petra: "But, it's different now?"

Subaru: "Yeah. After all, I've now got various inklings concerning an item that can inform about things that have yet to happen… moreover, those are frequently bad inklings."

As Subaru made a face that appeared as if he had eaten a bitter bug, Petra and Garfiel exchanged glances.

It had been nearly two years since Subaru had started life in another world, and to be frank, there was an excessive amount of things in this world that posed as future sight or the guidance of fate, but were actually just trying to put ideas into people's heads.

In Vollachia, Abel had regarded the Stargazers with open hostility, and the Witch of Greed he had met in the tomb had given Beatrice a book of blank pages to dictate how she lived her life. And above all, he had even heard that the Gospels believed to be delivered into the hands of Witch Cultists would twist their very manner of being into something sinister.

How was the Dragon History Stone any different from those interferences that distorted fate from the sidelines?

Subaru: "I get why someone would get into the habit of relying on something if they were told it predicted the future. All the more so if it has a track record to back it up. But, the age-old trick of a conman is to let you win a little at the start, before crookedly taking a whole lot more from you later on."

In order to drag someone into a convenient decision in the future, they would give them small, inconsequential victories within their sphere of influence.

So long as one was not aware of what they would be made to do for that utmost vital decision, there would be a risk that they might grow far too confident that whatever "fate" was telling them would be something positive for themself.

With those thoughts in mind, Subaru felt a sense of danger within the very prophecy of the Dragon History Stone, but—

Garfiel & Petra: "…"

Subaru: "Huh? Why are you two making faces like that?"

When Subaru conveyed the apprehensions he harbored, Garfiel and Petra stared with their eyes widened.

Though young, they were both reliable confidants when it came to intuition and reasoning respectively, so it was strange for them to have the exact same reaction to a single premise. Even if one of them were to tilt their head in confusion, the other one would be able to provide a beneficial answer. That was what he had anticipated, and yet.

Then, as Subaru marvelled at that, the two of them began to speak in succession,

Garfiel: “How should I be puttin’ this—”

Petra: “—The idea of doubting the prophecies of the Dragon History Stone, it’s so unheard of, it took me by surprise.”

Subaru: “Eh, the idea is unheard of?”

Garfiel: “Uh-huh.” / Petra: “Mm-hmm.”

As the two of them simultaneously nodded in agreement, Subaru wondered if it was some sort of joke. But, their eyes were completely earnest, with a strong hue of genuine perplexity in their expressions, causing Subaru to blink his eyes in response.

Their reaction felt like they had come into contact with something truly unforeseen, as if a question in a quiz was revealed to be solved by some logic they had never even imagined. It had been a while since he had felt this level of culture shock—no, he had only just recently experienced it again through hearing about the hereditary succession of the throne.

Subaru: “To be honest, I think that was just a disaster of me being way too unaccustomed to a monarchy, with the King as the absolute authority… but could this be like a more deep-rooted, religious view kinda thing?”

Different climate and topography would lead to differing manners and customs, so while it was only natural for aspects of common sense to vary, he had actually come quite a long way without any major friction as a result of fundamental differences in values. He had thought he had led a relatively difficult life in another world thus far, but it seemed like he had yet to see the worst of it.

Once again, he grew to understand the weight behind this nation being called the Dragon Kingdom.

Subaru: “Petra is a sweet, beautiful girl that bloomed in a village in the sticks, and Garfiel is a golden rookie who grew up in a hidden village cut off from the rest of the world.”

Positions that, when compared to those born and raised in the big cities, would not receive the same benefits and education as citizens of the Kingdom—even for two such individuals, the fact that they had no concept of doubting the Dragon History Stone, was proof of just how embedded faith towards the Dragon was in the collective subconscious.

If that was so for two of such origins, then those who firmly placed their identity within the Kingdom would be even less likely to arrive at the idea of disregarding the Dragon History Stone. —That was precisely why, under the circumstances of royal absence, this nation had the foundations necessary to carry out something like the Royal Selection without any hesitation.

In that case—

Subaru: “—The thing Crusch-san was attempting to accomplish, was truly something incredible.”

Setting aside whether that ideal was correct or not, in this world so entrenched in its faith towards said Dragon, Crusch’s advocacy to free themselves from the Covenant with said Dragon was an outrageous, humongous decision that Subaru was only now coming to comprehend.

In fact, based on public sentiment from before it started, Crusch had been the prime candidate in the Royal Selection by an overwhelming margin.

The moment the Royal Selection did not end up entirely steeped in the singular color of Crusch, it would have been clear just how difficult to accept her campaign policies were for the current Kingdom. —At the same time, Subaru could also fathom a guess as to her aim in the White Whale Subjugation that had occurred right after the commencement of the Royal Selection.

Of course, regarding the White Whale Subjugation, Crusch would have also had feelings of wanting to allow Wilhelm, a member of her own Camp, to carry out his vengeance. However, the White Whale was one of the Three Great Witchbeasts that had tormented people for hundreds of years, so was she not trying to make a point by bringing it down through their own efforts?

To convey her own resolve and ideals, to say that even without relying on the Dragon's Covenant, she could firmly lead the Kingdom forward.

—Ultimately, through Subaru's interference, the Subjugation of the White Whale was also assisted by the Emilia and Anastasia Camps, and was known throughout the world as an achievement of a united military campaign between the three camps.

Even so, Crusch had not seemed to mind. After all, Wilhelm had managed to carry out his vengeance, and even while exposed to adverse winds from her surroundings, Crusch had managed to take the first step towards realizing her ideal.

And yet, Crusch's ideal had ended up being crushed in an unexpected way—

Subaru: "Am I an idiot? No, I am definitely an idiot."

With his understanding reaching that point, Subaru finally became painfully aware of his own thoughtlessness.

Without truly understanding the significance of the ideal that was on the verge of being plucked away from Crusch, he had visited her and tried to provide comfort by saying he would stand by her out of shallow sympathy and compassion. Pairing that with the tale of blighted love between Crusch and the fourth prince he had heard from Ferris later at the mausoleum, just thinking about how insensitive and superficial his words had been made him want to die in a fit of anger.

But—

Garfiel: "Ya know, Captain. I dunno 'bout sayin' this sorta thing, but when ya let yer emotions take over 'n go off sayin' this 'n that, it's somethin' like "Garagockle's Lovesickness", but—"

Petra: "We've all been saved by Subaru's rashness and recklessness, so we'd appreciate you not speaking so negatively about it…"

Garifel: "Ahh?! Ain't that what my amazin' self was just 'bouta say?!"

Petra: "Sorry, I just wanted to score some points with Subaru."

Poking her tongue out, Petra gave a playful apology, to which Garfiel heaved a crestfallen "Roar…".

Receiving their words, Subaru subconsciously bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. That was because at first he had been surprised, then he had immediately become uncertain of what face he ought to make.

He had regrets about his choice of words towards Crusch, but he did not want to remain grimacing in light of Petra and Garfiel's consideration. As a result, with his expression a half-baked, incoherent one,

Subaru: "…Don't pamper me like that. If I start presuming on it, I'll never stop."

Petra: "Is that so? In that case, I want to start pampering Subaru even more. Right, Garf-san?"

Garfiel: "Dunno if pamperin's the right wordin' here, but both Captain 'n Ottobro don't really tend to look after yerselves even tho' you're always takin' care of others. Every once in a while, it's fine for my amazin' self to raise ya up high in the air for a bit."

Subaru: "Last time you did that, you sent Otto right through the ceiling…"

If he remembered it right, that was a disaster that had played out when Otto had gotten drunk after finishing up a mountain of work, and drawn in by the high spirits, Garfiel had attempted to show his appreciation for him with all his might. Otto had no lasting injuries, and his memory of the incident had vanished with the alcohol, so it was quite the laugh tale now.

Regardless—

Subaru: “I’d thought that there were already tons of things I need to do and things I want to do, but… seems like there’s now one more thing I wanna make sure of.”

With a heart full of gratitude, Subaru reached out and rested a hand on both Garfiel and Petra’s heads. As they leaned into the ticklish head pat, Subaru narrowed his eyes at the soapsuds bubbling to the surface of the washbucket, and foaming apart.

There were countless others who were wiser and more knowledgeable than him. But if, even among such people, the significance of Subaru’s presence could be found within these actions and ideas, then—

Subaru: “First things first, I wanna get to the bottom of what the Dragon History Stone really is.”

What sort of power it was employing, what its intent was in trying to guide them toward a particular future; he wanted to believe that, as a person from another world, casting doubt upon that was Natsuki Subaru’s advantage.

First, he would start with what he already knew. —If he truly wished to be there for Crusch and Ferris in a way they actually desired, after they had left him feeling increasingly frustrated at his own inability to do anything.

Be that as it may—

Subaru: “…If I asked Ferris, he’d probably say that this way of thinking is prideful.”

2

Unexpectedly finding herself listening in on the conversation taking place in the kitchen, she was earnestly wavering on whether or not to reach her hand out to the door.

???: "—Seems kinda like they're in the middle of a conversation that's a bit awkward to ba~rge into."

???: "—Hk."

???: "Ara~? Looks like I took you by surpri~se. If so, I apologi~ze."

At the words of Meili as she popped up from behind to peer at her, Rem shook her head with a "No" as she readjusted her grip on the water pitcher in her hand.

She had paid a visit to the kitchen to refill the half-empty pitcher. Inside, Subaru, Petra, and Garfiel, responsible for cleaning up after dinner, were washing the dishes in coordination, and having a discussion regarding the Royal Selection. Reluctant to interrupt their conversation, Rem had vaguely decided she would just wait until they moved on to the next topic, and had been listening to the exchange from outside the kitchen, but—

Meili: "Don't you think that Subaru-oniisan has a really difficult natu~re? Why's he always trying to shoulder everything by himself, it just makes everyone wo~rried."

As the topic of conversation in the kitchen veered toward Subaru's disposition—to the part of him that would always feel excessive self-reproach, Petra and Garfiel immediately jumped in with corrections and observations, and it was clear that Subaru was starting to get flustered.

Standing behind Rem, it seemed like Meili had pictured the state of things inside, and touching upon it with her own way of phrasing, she widened her eyes and looked to Rem as if seeking her agreement.

Meili: "I wonder… Rem-oneesan, aren't you pretty an~gry?"

Rem: "…I am not angry, but my feelings are rather complicated. After all, I had only just told that person something similar to what Petra-chan and Garf told him now."

Meili: "Ah, that sure would explain why you'd make a face like tha~t.”

Whatever the face she was making, Meili’s manner of speech seemed as if she was walking on eggshells.

Only, recalling when she had told him something similar—when Subaru seemed like he was trying to carry the responsibility even for the death of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony who had been murdered in the Prison Tower, Rem remembered that she had hesitated to declare it purely a problem of Subaru’s disposition.

After all, she understood that the reason for Subaru thinking that way also dwelled within her own attitude.

Meili: “To begin with, the way Subaru-oniisan only ever seems to be counting his failures isn’t goo~d. Honestly, it’s so insu~lting.”

In front of Rem as she cast her eyes down from the sentimentality, and strengthened her grip on the pitcher, Meili crossed her arms and glared at the kitchen door as she spoke those words.

Rem: “It’s… insulting?”

Meili: “I mean, am I wrong? Despite appearances, even I believe that I’ve been saved by Subaru-oniisan, after a~ll. Same goes for Petra-chan and fanged onii-san, which is why they’re in there encouraging him as they are… yet for him to still be like that, isn’t it anno~ying?”

With a finger over her lips, Meili puffed out her cheeks. Seeing her pout so childishly, Rem blinked several times before bursting out into a sudden chuckle.

Meili: “Ara~, did you laugh at me just no~w?”

Rem: “I apologize. It was a tad unexpected. From my perspective, you and Petra-chan both just seemed like quite mature children for your age, and so…”

Meili: “You mean to say we’re cheeky, I wo~nder? But, although mine is just parroting what I’ve heard, Petra-chan’s is the result of actually growing up, so for both Emilia-oneesan and Rem-oneesan, if you're careless, you might just get overtaken and end up regre~tting it."

Rem: "…I have no idea what you are talking about."

Meili: "Really? Fufufu, rea~lly?"

That instant, Meili giggled with her hand over her mouth, elatedly smiling as if she had gotten revenge for being treated as a child.

Heaving a sigh at Meili's response, Rem turned her gaze back toward the kitchen door,

Rem: "It seems like everyone who's a part of this camp has been saved by that person."

Meili: "See~ms like it. Maybe that's exactly why it's so hard to tell Subaru-oniisan "no" when he's about to do something reckle~ss. — But, I think you don't need to wo~rry about it."

Rem: "—?"

Meili: "After a~ll, I don't think there's anyone who is more shamelessly out-of-place here than I a~m."

Holding her braid of hair in her fingers, Meili shrugged her shoulders. Catching the flicker of complex emotions that colored Meili's voice, Rem narrowed her own pale-blue eyes.

Rem: "…Though it is a bit late now, it is bitter that I do not have my Memories."

Evidently, Meili carried circumstances that were by no means light.

Unlike Emilia and everyone else she had interacted with in the Vollachian Empire, she had only met Meili for the first time in the Kingdom of Lugunica, inside the dragon carriage that Reinhard had carried over.

From a rough explanation, she had heard that Meili was once somebody who was hostile to Subaru and the others, but not wanting to unnecessarily strain the relationship, Subaru's explanation had been far too vague, and ultimately, she never learned exactly what sort of friction had existed between them and Meili.

Only, the intricate emotions that had emerged on her youthful face, appeared to be evidence of hesitation founded in those circumstances.

That was why—

Rem: “Please, do not blame yourself too much either.”

Meili: “…”

Holding her breath at Rem’s words, Meili stared at her intently. As she received that gaze head-on without averting her eyes, Meili parted her thin lips,

Meili: “Is it fine for you to say such a thi~ng? Even though I once tried to kill Rem-onee~san?”

Rem: “—. That… is quite the shock, but it is not something I remember, so…”

Meili: “Well, guess I’m lu~cky… For me to be lucky, I wonder if that’s fine?”

Rather than whispering, Meili muttered those words with a voice that seemed like it would vanish.

Still toying with her braid, her gaze fell from Rem down to the floor,

Meili: “To be honest, sometimes I think it’s too good to be tru~e… The things I’ve done being overlooked, being forgiven by the Kingdom just because of my Divine Protection… even now, I can’t help but wonder if I’m not due for some terrible retribution before lo~ng.”

Rem: “Retribution…”

Meili: “Just like how you’re praised when you do something good, you're scolded when you do something bad, ri~ght? I've ended up escaping from that all this time, you kno~w?"

Perhaps feeling guilty for having been pardoned, Meili's words were pessimistic, and pitiful.

Her deeds that had caused her to think in such a way, Rem knew not. Was her declaration that she had once tried to kill Rem to be taken as serious, or as a joke?

Perhaps, if Rem knew all the details, her thoughts might change. —But, right now, she did not know anything.

And since she did not know, she would never get another opportunity to say the things that she could only say now; so did she believe.

Rem: "I do not mean to make it a competition, but I carry a similar anguish."

Meili: "…Rem-oneesan has something similar… to m~e?"

Rem: "Yes… After all, I do not intend to be a person so naive as to presume it is only natural when someone does a lot for me."

What she thought back on were her own actions when she had awakened in a state bereft of Memories; in an environment with nobody she could count on, she had been terribly cold to him—to Subaru, and repeatedly rejected his hand.

No matter how dire Rem's circumstances had been at the time, there was a limit to how much she could justify her behavior. After all, the gifts bestowed by Subaru were by no means unlimited.

Rem: "I have no choice but to pay the compensation for that pridefulness within myself. Until that debt is settled, I believe I do not even have the right to face him."

Meili: "—. You're really hard on yourself, aren't yo~u?"

Rem: "I wonder, am I really? If I consider it as a recompense for being harsh to another… to a person who cherished me, I believe it is only natural. But, that is just how it is for myself, so…”

Meili: “—?”

Taking a step to close the distance on Meili as she spoke, Rem, after a moment’s hesitation, plopped her hand on the head of the girl looking up at her curiously.

Then—

Rem: “I don’t believe it is healthy for a child like you to live in such fear of some looming retribution, so… I will certainly fight against it for you.”

Meili: “—Ah.”

As Rem falteringly selected her words, Meili expelled a soft sigh. Then, with her eyes downcast, and Rem’s hand on her head,

Meili: “—. Even without your Memories, Rem-oneesan, I think you’re every bit a member of this ca~mp.”

Rem: “…That’s, in what sense are…”

You saying that? Rem knit her brows at Meili’s down-turned head. —It happened then.

Rem: “Kya-?!”

Suddenly, a strange sensation brushed against her hand placed upon Meili’s head, and she reflexively let out a scream.

Taking a look, a small creature had suddenly appeared on the girl’s head, making its way through her dark blue hair. At the same time as she recognized it as a scorpion of a deep crimson luster, her arms promptly jerked back into a fold, water pitcher still in hand—the remaining half-pitcher’s worth of water, drenched Meili from the head down.

Rem & Meili: “Ah.”

Witnessing that disaster, both Rem, the aggressor, and Meili, the victim, stood frozen in shock. Atop Meili's sodden hair, the little scorpion that had also been caught in the downpour was clacking its pincers in protest.

Even though it was the one who had brought about the fright, the scorpion itself had the audacity to still be upset about the whole affair. Furthermore, before Rem could even finish processing that shock, the door to the kitchen vigorously swung open—

???: "Just now, didn't I hear Rem scream?!"

Rem: "…What poor timing."

???: "Huh?! That's the reaction I get for worrying about you?! Also what sort of situation is this?!"

Having heard her scream, Subaru had come rushing out only to be aghast upon setting foot at the scene. At Subaru's usual liveliness, Rem momentarily hesitated on where to start explaining from.

But, faster than she could do so, a voice of laughter puffed out an "Aha-". —It was Meili. Having been drenched in water, she giggled, soaking together with the scorpion perched on her head,

Meili: "Ha~h, how funny. There's not even the time to be feeling do~wn."

Subaru: "What's got you so refreshed? Oi, Petra! Towel! Fetch a towel!"

Petra: "Wah, Meili-chan is dripping wet! We've got to get you into some dry clothes right away!"

Petra came pitter-pattering over with a towel in hand, and wiped Meili's head dry along with the scorpion. As Meili stood there allowing that to be done to her, Rem bowed her head to her, still with the empty pitcher in hand.

Even though Rem had meant to offer Meili a comforting hand, the actual result had been a complete washout. However, as Rem reflected on that, Meili waved her hand saying "Don't worry abou~t it", Meili: “Instea~d, I’ll take what you told me earlier to hea~rt.”

Rem: “…”

Catching a glimpse of Meili’s eyes through a gap in the towel, Rem slightly widened her own in surprise. Even during that brief interaction, Petra had gone around behind Meili and, nudging her shoulders,

Petra: “Alright, let’s go get you changed. Subaru, Garf-san, there’s still tidying up left to do, but…”

Subaru: “Don’t worry, we can handle the rest. Make sure Meili doesn’t catch a cold.”

Meili: “Don’t treat me like a chi~ld.”

With that sulky mutter, Meili was led away by Petra. Right until she vanished around the corner, Meili had kept on waving her hand back at Rem.

After seeing those charming girls off, Subaru turned to Rem with an “Umm”,

Subaru: “Ah, is that Nee-sama’s water? Then, let’s just get that refilled for you first thing…”

Rem: “—. No, it is my fault that Petra-chan had to leave, so I will help.”

Subaru: “Oh? In that case, we’ll do it together?”

Evading the hand that reached for the pitcher, Rem offered her assistance instead. Upon doing so, Subaru looked a little surprised before immediately accepting, and as Rem gave him a bit of a flat stare,

Rem: “…When it comes to this sort of proposal, you agree to it right away.”

Subaru: “Eh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Rem: “It is nothing. Garf, I will be assisting as well, so please move back a bit.”

Garfiel: “That’d be a huge help, but why’s my amazin’ self the only one ya call in such a rough way?”

Rem: “Because that’s what Nee-sama called you, and for some reason, it feels right.”

With his hands in the bucket at the washbasin, Garfiel furrowed his nose. Sensing Subaru smile wryly at that, Rem reflexively was about to say something—but she let it go.

Had she not reflected on herself just now with Meili?

Subaru: “What’s the matter, Rem, you’ve got this adorable look on your face, did something happen?”

Rem: “Hah?”

Subaru: “Sorry, I got carried away! A-Alright, look, let’s get this all tidied up and then bring that water to Nee-sama!”

Subaru tried to cover up his verbal gaffe with vigor, and making a gesture of rolling up his sleeves, he ran to Garfiel’s side like the wind.

Following along with a sigh, Rem cautioned herself as strongly as she could.

Until she had settled the debts of her past actions, she would never gain the right to face this frustration.

Rem: “The road ahead still has many difficulties in store. Katya-san, Priscilla-san.”

When the day finally came that she possessed that right, just what sort of face would she show to him?

Having yet to find an answer for that, Rem whispered to those she held in deepest affection and reverence within her own heart, before joining the coordinated dish-washing, seamlessly filling the gap that Petra had left behind.

3

—Questions rising anew, matters being posed anew; he had just decided to progress the situation, yet things did not go quite as expected.

From time to time, it would not be uncommon for one's pace on their journey toward achieving a goal to be disrupted by a delay due to one's environment or some unexpected turmoil.

In this case, it was the latter that had dampened Natsuki Subaru's departure.

???: "—Fuah."

With a soft sigh, placing their hand over their wide-open mouth, they concealed that yawn.

Although, aside from it being obvious that they had yawned, he could even see the teardrops that slowly welled up at the corners of their eyes. He had often pondered whether it would be better manners to just openly yawn, or to stifle a yawn to the point of tears. If yawning in itself was considered a breach of etiquette, then what more could be said?

???: "—Your tea."

As he gazed at the other party with such thoughts running through his mind, gently placed upon the table was black tea brewed by Petra, demonstrating the tea-serving techniques taught to her by Ram.

As that warm aroma of fragrant tea leaves wafted through the air, the other party interrupting their own yawn with an "Oh myyy",

???: "What a lovely fraaagrance. I feel a little ashamed, being treated so hospitably despite dropping by so suuuddenly, ehehe."

???: "No, it's fine. We were all just about to have tea together, so I think your "taiming" was actually good. Umm…"

???: “—Sakura Element, that’s my naaame, Emilia-chan.”

Saying so with a faint smile, the woman—introducing herself as Sakura Element, one of the individuals connected to the Church of the Divine Dragon, freely sipped from the cup of black tea offered to her.

It had been on the periphery between early and late morning when Sakura had paid a visit to the Emilia Camp staying at the Royal Residence, right around the time when their minds were just beginning to wake up. It was not something they could say aloud, but the sudden visit without a prior appointment seemed a bit like a surprise attack—

???: “We would have liked to greet you as well, but Emilia-sama is in quite the busy situation with much she must attend to. If you could have, we would have preferred you notified us in advance.”

It seemed that Otto had taken quite a bit of offense at how their pace had been thrown off by her.

His wording was courteous, but a hint of his objection was unmistakable in Otto’s remarks, giving Subaru the feeling that the situation had set Otto’s nerves on edge.

Subaru: “I guess letting off steam yesterday wasn’t enough… You seem to think that if you talk to them in a polite tone, you are being courteous.”

Otto: “I can hear you, you know. That is problematic, Natsuki-san.”[22]

Subaru: “Scary, it’s not even courtesy anymore, it’s a threat…”

Even if Subaru was his ally, Otto was merciless in snapping back at him; but, his preparedness for war was not a manner of scolding Subaru and the others of course, but was a result of receiving an opponent he must be wary of.

Coming right after yesterday, the Church of the Divine Dragon at the center of the controversy had arrived expressly to visit them: there was no way it was not associated with the Royal Selection.

Naturally, Sakura, who had been let into the parlor, must have possessed some cunning reason, but—

Sakura: "—Subaru-chan, riiight? I feel a bit shy when you stare at me so inteeently."

Subaru: "Oh, sorry. You are a beautiful woman, Sakura-san, but was that a bit impolite of me?"

Sakura: "Weeell, what a naughty boy, trying to hit on me while apologizing. I didn't think you would be such a smooth operaaator. I've heard a lot of rumors about you, Subaru-chan, you knooow?"

Subaru: "Rumors? About me?"

Toward that unexpected retaliation, Subaru gestured toward himself, and Sakura smiled with a "Yes".

Stirring her tea like that with a teaspoon, upon taking a sip from that cup once more, she exhaled in a vaguely seductive manner.

Then, tilting her head at the vague silence that had arisen,

Sakura: "…Were you perhaps expecting something from meee?"

Subaru: "No, well, with the way things were going, wouldn't I expect to hear what rumors you've heard about me, Sakura-san?"

Sakura: "Really? Howeeever, I'm sure Emilia-chan and the members of your camp know you much better than I dooo. At this point, does it really matter what kind of rumors are being spread about youuu, Subaru-chan?"

Beatrice: "Indeed, you say such nice things, I suppose. Truly, Betty and the others know Subaru the best, in fact. There is nothing to worry about, I suppose."

Emilia: "Yeah. I'm reaaally proud to have such a splendid Knight."

Beatrice on his lap, and Emilia sitting to his right, gave their stamps of approval, and while he was overjoyed, the gossip concerning Subaru was swept away in an unsatisfying manner.

In any case, the situation was that Subaru, Emilia, Beatrice, and Otto, along with Petra, who stood back along the wall, were all dealing with Sakura, who had hoisted this assault upon them without an appointment.

Currently, the impression he had of Sakura was that of a terribly elusive woman, but,

Emilia: “Sakura-san, are you a good friend of Filóre’s? I just became friends with her.”

Sakura: “Yes, I’ve heard that so much from Filóre-chan that I’m sick of iiit. She just keeps going around saying “My Emilia” this, “My Emilia” that… weeell, I’m a peer of Filóre-chan’s at the Church, so I suppose I’m something like a stand-in big sister to heeer.”

Emilia: “Filóre’s big sister!”

Subaru: “Of course, there’s quite the difference in that lovely liveliness between you sisters.”

Sakura: “I’m merely a stand-in for a big sister, you knooow. That girl grew up as a most cherished child of the Church, kept carefully hidden away, so perhaps you could say she is like the younger sister of everyone in the Church. Ehehe.”

Looking pleased, Sakura said so, the warmth of her smile remaining constant. Hence, it was an enigma as to how much of her explanation concerning Filóre they should earnestly believe.

However, the description of Filóre being raised as a cherished child of the Church that was hidden away weighed on him.

Otto: “Well then, is it correct to believe the reason that Filóre-san never appeared in public was due to the policy of the Church of the Divine Dragon?”

Sakura: “That is correeect. Weeell, that also became pointless as a result of Filóre-chan rushing out on her own with a baaang.”

Subaru: “So Filóre’s rampage was truly beyond the Church’s expectations…”

Without knowing the individual in question, it was a story that would be tremendously difficult to believe, but to Subaru, who had actually spoken with Filóre, it was an outcome completely lacking in incongruity.

Yesterday as well, she had been forcibly put in detention at the church, but at that rate, it felt like she would soon reach the limits of her patience and rush out on her own.

Sakura: "I mean, she actually did rush out. Which is why I visited the lodging of Emilia-chan and the rest of you todaaay."

Subaru: "…Eh?! Rushing out, you're talking about today?!"

Sakura: "Yes, it was this morning. Even though I advised her yesterday about the tasks we had to complete today, she's really such a troublemaker…"

Subaru: "Wait, wait, wait, is it really fine to just treat her as a little miss troublemaker and then go about drinking tea?!"

Though it had not been broadly announced, there could be no doubt that Filóre had quickly climbed the ladder into becoming an important figure for the Kingdom. How was it that the one appointed to be her overseer could relax here so leisurely while such a girl was acting on her own?

Sakura, laughing with an "Ehehe" to Subaru and the others, flustered as they were, as if it were someone else's problem,

Sakura: "Please rest assured when it comes to that. Believe it or nooot, I know where Filóre-chan is headed. To be precise, it's where her friend Emilia-chan iiis."

Emilia: "Ah, is that what it is. She's coming to where I am… she hasn't come though?!"

Subaru: "She didn't come yet, did she?!"

She had seemed to think that it would be grounds for relief, but instead, that information had failed to serve that role, and they had resumed their panic.

From Sakura's confident-sounding wording, it would seem she had something like a note from Filóre that indicated her destination, but no one in the camp had caught sight of the girl in question. Naturally, neither Petra nor Otto knew of her whereabouts either.

Subaru: "Beako obviously doesn't know either. She's been with me all day today since I woke up."

Beatrice: "In fact. Betty went to bed and got up early together with Subaru, brushed her teeth together with Subaru, and had breakfast together with Subaru after doing radio calisthenics together with Subaru, I suppose. During all of that, she didn't see that noisy girl at all, in fact."

Emilia: "Wh-What should we do? What if something were to happen to Filóre…?"

Coming face to face with this, Subaru and the others were incredibly worried over the whereabouts of the missing Filóre.

When she had suddenly appeared, they were surprised by her existence, but now that she had abruptly vanished, she had caused an entirely different shock. It was as if Filóre was a tempest in human form.

And, next to the flustered Subaru and Emilia, Otto let out a soft sigh.

Subaru: "Hey, what's that about, Otto… ah! No way, were you thinking that since it's the source of our worries, you would rather she just vanished so it would cause less problems in the future…?"

Beatrice: "Otto, that's seriously a bit too much like Roswaal, I suppose…"

Otto: "Please stop causing damage to my reputation. You too, Beatrice-chan, do not look at me with those eyes… Just to confirm, is Filóre-san wearing the habit of the Church of the Divine Dragon?"

His veins bulging in response to the knowing glance Subaru and Beatrice shared, Otto then verified Filóre's attire with Sakura.

Upon Sakura's response to that question of an "Of cooourse" and a nod,

Otto: "Then I would not worry about it. Unless something extraordinary were to occur, a woman dressed as a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon should not get wrapped up in any trouble on the street."

Emilia: "Really? Petra-chan, is that true?"

Petra: "Indeed, I believe it's as Otto-san says. If someone from the Church were to get in trouble, I believe someone around them would certainly offer to help."

Upon hearing Otto and Petra's conviction on the matter, as if it was only natural, Subaru and Emilia could only say "Is that so?", as if seeing a new perspective.[23]

Subaru: "But, that's only if she gets in trouble on the street, right? If there's a development like… like falling into the wicked, evil clutches of some malicious individual, even that wouldn't be foolproof, right?"

Otto: "What are you talking about? A person riddled with wickedness, evil, malice… based on that attitude of Sakura-san's, it seems such worries are unnecessary. The reason she is here in the first place is—"

Sakura: "—Otto-chan, you're quite quick-witted, aren't youuu? Exactly, I am here in anticipaaation."

Right as Otto was convinced of the conclusion he had attempted to state, Sakura snatched it away from him and spoke of the reason for her visit to the Royal Residence herself.

The way she had put it was subtly lacking in its explanation, but its substance, together with the recklessness of the real Filóre, provided Subaru in particular with an answer, a step behind Otto.

Subaru: "In other words, Filóre left to go to where Emilia-tan is, but because she doesn't know the exact location, she'll have to gather information here and there while on her way…"

Beatrice: “Stand-in for a big sister, you anticipated the eventual arrival of Filóre here, which is why you are drinking tea with Betty and everyone else, in fact.”

Sakura: “Clap clap clap, you’re spot on. The children here at Emilia-chan’s place are awfully briiilliant.”

Sakura praised her with gentle applause, but Subaru and the others were not so naive as to take her compliments at face value. Besides, even combining the kindness of the Church of the Divine Dragon towards humanity with the initiative of Filóre, he could not be certain as to whether this woman was definitively safe.

He wondered if Emilia had the same concerns, and as she furrowed her shapely eyebrows,

Emilia: “Sakura-san, you’re so confident, but I’m worried about Filóre. I’ll just go take a little look around here—”

Rem: “—Emilia-san, if I may. A guest has arrived.”

Those worries of Emilia’s were perfectly interrupted by the sound of Rem knocking on the door of the parlor. Everyone’s gaze instinctively swiveled toward the door, and repeating “A guest?”, Emilia tilted her head.

Immediately after, the door was blown open from the other side with such force and a bam—

???: “—It’s terrible, Emilia! Please save your friend!”

Emilia: “Filóre?!”

Before Emilia’s eyes, widened in astonishment, the one who rushed into the parlor in a tizzy was none other than Filóre, the very one who had been the topic of conversation.

Those crimson eyes of hers wet with tears, she dashed over to Emilia, who was staring at her, and dove headfirst into her chest without slowing her momentum at all. The force of it had been nearly that of a headbutt, but Emilia easily withstood that attack of Filóre’s and caught her.

Emilia: “Wah, you surprised me. Are you okay, Filóre? Are you hurt?”

Filóre: “Yeah, yeah, I’m okay… no, I’m not! I’m falling apart! Look, it’s not my body, but my mind that’s falling apart!”

Emilia: “Oh no, that’s terrible… where should I look?”

Filóre: “I don’t know either, so just squeeze me!”

Emilia: “Okay! Squeeze!”

Immediately upon her entrance, Filóre dyed the space in her own hue with tremendous momentum. Emilia’s manliness shone as she went with the flow, responding without hesitation.

As he watched the two of them embrace like that, Petra came up next to him, and lightly pulling on the sleeve of Subaru’s tracksuit,

Petra: “…Is that the rumored Saintess-sama?”

Subaru: “That is the rumored Saintess-sama indeed. What do you think? How different is she from the image you had?”

Petra: “Perhaps it’s quite a bit different… ah, but I think that’s fine. What constitutes a Saintess likely varies from person to person.”

Subaru: “An age of diversity even when it comes to Saintesses, huh… can’t say that really speaks to me.”

Even though Petra was both a good listener and a good speaker, she struggled to put into words how overwhelmed she was.

In any case, the worst-case scenario of Filóre roaming alone throughout the Royal Capital, never to arrive at the Royal Residence, had been averted for now.

Subaru: “And then, there is the objective of Filóre, who’s going so far as to ask us for help, but…”

Beatrice: “For the time being, it doesn’t give off a good feeling, I suppose.”

Subaru completely agreed with Beatrice’s anticipation. Ignoring them, Emilia spoke in a hushed voice to Filóre, who was calming down little by little within her arms, and while soothing her,

Emilia: “So, can you tell me what happened? What do you mean by “save you”?”

Filóre: “That, the thing is… things have become quite disastrous, Emilia.”

Emilia: “Disastrous… gulp.”

At that pompous wording of Filóre’s, Emilia swallowed with a loud gulping noise. Looking at Emilia from up close, Filóre continued.

It was—

Filóre: “—It seems I must participate as a Candidate in the Royal Selection!”

Her voice quavering tearfully, Filóre lamented that undue fate that had befallen her.

Hearing this, Emilia’s amethyst eyes widened, Otto put his hand to his forehead, Petra bit a lip upon her cute face, and Subaru and Beatrice looked at each other, and then,

Subaru: “As expected…”

Beatrice: “That bad feeling was proven right, in fact.”

Filóre: “What in the world am I ever to do… geh! Sakura?!”

At the same time the unpleasant foresight of Subaru and Beatrice came true, Sakura, whose presence had been unnoticed by Filóre due to having her back to the parlor’s entrance, waved at her.

Upon this unexpected encounter with her family, Filóre, the one who had brought such an uproar with her, opened her mouth so very, very wide, that it seemed like her jaw would fall off. —The beautiful girl had been reduced to naught.

Chapter 11:
The Reason the Dragon Gem Shines

1

???: “Don’t you think that Sakura and Tiga are just heartless? If I’d known things would turn out like this, even I… even I…!”

???: “Have you ever thought of saving someone with the Sacrament out of self-preservation befooore?”

???: “I probably would have done it anyway, but the way I’d feel about it would be completely different depending on whether I knew or not!”

Wailing with teary eyes, Filóre glared at Sakura, who sat directly in front of her, and she apparently seemed earnestly aware of her own impulsivity, having completed some proper self-analysis.

Sakura, who had styled herself as a stand-in for her older sister, frowning at that outburst of Filóre’s,

Sakura: “Even if you put it like that, the ones inconvenienced would be us all the saaame. Subaru-chan, Beatrice-chan, you two understand me, riiight?”

Subaru: “I don’t get why you’re dragging me and Beako into this, but I more or less get that the situation was inevitable.”

Beatrice: “Regardless of where responsibility lies, one can imagine from your exchange that Filóre was the one who created such an impetus, I suppose.”

Saying so, Subaru and Beatrice shook their heads incredulously in perfect sync, expressing their opinions on the query from Sakura, who was sitting right beside them.

Incidentally, the seating arrangement on the sofas, which faced each other in the parlor, was currently Emilia and Otto on the host side, with Filóre clinging onto Emilia's arm, and Sakura on the guest side, along with Subaru and Beatrice sitting side-by-side, having changed seats.

In addition to Petra, who had stood by the wall since the beginning, Rem, who had shown Filóre in, joined her, adding to the evergrowing liveliness of the parlor.

Subaru: "That said, the source of the increase in volume is mostly Filóre's fault anyway. To begin with, why are we even sitting on this side? It's a strange pairing."

Filóre: "My goodness! Emilia, did you hear that? That Subaru, he's trying to tear apart two incomparable friends, myself and Emilia. Don't tell me, are you a spy for the Church…?"

Beatrice: "No matter how you look at it, the only one who is a spy for the Church is you, in fact."

Beatrice gave a sigh of lament at Filóre, who wore a countenance as if to say she was filled with dread. Emilia, whose arm was still clutched in Filóre's grip, patted her friend's head despite her wry smile,

Emilia: "Geez, don't look at Subaru like that, Filóre. Subaru is reaaally sweet, and he'd never come between us. To begin with, my relationship with Subaru is completely different from my relationship with you, okay?"

Filóre: "O-Of course, I agree… By the way, which one is more important to you?"

Emilia: "Eh? Well…"

Filóre: "Actually, it's fine! Don't say it! This too, is in the scriptures! "The Dragon bestows ordeals upon us, out of love. Just as gold scorched by flames shall gain further purity, so too shall the soul, through adversity born of that love, emanate a brilliance worthy of the Dragon's will"!"

With her head bowed and clinging to her scriptures, Filóre no longer seemed like a devout adherent of the Church of the Divine

Dragon, but rather was simply covering up that which was inconvenient with the doctrines of the scriptures.

Due to her having cut Emilia off, Subaru's chance to hear where he stood in Emilia's heart from her own mouth was snatched away, leaving him feeling unsettled.

That aside—

Emilia: "About what we were talking about earlier… you said Filóre will be participating in the Royal Selection, so is she taking Priscilla's place after all?"

Ignoring Filóre, whose face was now cycling between red and blue all by itself, Emilia's question was aimed at Sakura, sitting across from her.

Sakura's drowsy, drooping eyes narrowing slightly,

Sakura: "…At the very least, there's no doubt Priscilla-chan's death is part of the reaaason. Otherwise, it would contradict the account of the Dragon History Stooone."

Otto: "After all, there are to be five Dragon Priestesses, those who qualify as Royal Selection Candidates as recorded upon the Dragon History Stone… according to the policy of the Church of the Divine Dragon, you cannot go against that, can you?"

Sakura: "Of course, since that premise had collapsed, we took it as our chance and brazenly strolled into the Castle… please don't think of it as something like thaaat. Even if, by chance, Priscilla-chan's absence allows a vacancy for the position of Dragon Priestess, the Church's policy is to maintain our distaaance."

Otto: "However, that did not occur. The reason for that is…"

Otto deliberately left his conclusion unspoken, but the gazes of everyone present gathered upon Filóre, who had given rise to the first ripple that had led to this situation.

Her throat tightened at the discomfort of having those eyes upon her, and then, clinging to Emilia, Filóre: “Th-That’s wrong, Emilia! I never had even the slightest intention of becoming your enemy! It was just a stroke of bad luck! F-f-f-for the most part!”

As her face turned pale, Filóre’s eyes snapping wide as she whipped around to glare at Sakura,

Filóre: “For the most part, I would complain that the Church’s predisposition to covering things up is suspicious! All of this, it was wrong to have raised me so sheltered until now! I mean, it’s not that I didn’t think it was easy-peasy being exempt from the studies the other children had to take, but to think that it would tear me and Emilia apart… it’s not my fault!”

Emilia: “There, there, don’t cry, Filóre. I’m not angry at all, and I’ve never thought of the other Royal Selection Candidates as my enemies.”

Filóre: “E-Emiliaaa… hk.”

The way Emilia gently stroked her head soothed Filóre’s unruly heart.

Seeing this exchange, Sakura let out an “Oh myyy”, and brought her hand to her mouth with an astonished face,

Sakura: “Usually, she’d be rambling on and on from here, but Emilia-chan, you’re so good at dealing with Filóre-chan… is there some kind of trick to it, or somethiiing?”

Subaru: “Putting aside the quips about every Filóre being rendered powerless before Emilia-tan’s tender tolerance… ultimately, what exactly is Filóre doing here?”

Based on her behavior so far, he knew this was not a proclamation of war against the Royal Selection. He thought there was no way she had seriously run through the Royal Capital just to whine and make excuses.

Beatrice: “Really, I suppose? It would hardly be a surprise if that were the case, in fact.”

Subaru: “I’m with you there, but since that won’t advance the conversation…”

Filóre: “Wait just a minute. Do you think I am that witless? Certainly, I often act without thinking, but today is different. I have a proper strategy.”

Subaru: “A strategy?”

Filóre: “Yes, a strategy! I don’t wish to partake in the Royal Selection. However, I wish to use the Sacrament and fulfill my duty as a Saintess. Therefore, I’ll have my friend Emilia shelter me, and save the people of Pristella in secret! How about it?!”

Subaru: “Is this an evil plan cooked up by a criminal organization from a Sunday morning cartoon?”

It was a plan so sloppy that even a child could poke holes in it. Since her goal was helping others, it was not even an evil plan in the first place, but the most glaring issue was that Sakura had already found out about it.

Ultimately, it was a scheme where she had tripped over her own feet before even reaching the starting line.

Subaru: “Besides, it would look terrible if we were to do something like abducting a Saintess of the Church of the Divine Dragon.”

Petra: “Emilia-neesama has that sort of side too, but having no self-awareness about being a bomb is quite dangerous, isn’t it?”

Filóre: “Huh, does that mean Emilia and I are a good match…?”

Beatrice: “That isn’t something to be bashful about, I suppose.”

Where was the basis for that confidence, with Filóre’s plan having been so tragically rejected?

Moreover, Subaru thought Filóre was taking the whole situation a bit too lightly. For a while now, she had been trying to steer the conversation in the direction of her declining to participate in the Royal Selection, but—

Emilia: “Qualification as a Royal Selection Candidate isn’t something you can just abandon on a whim. Isn’t that right?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan…”

Emilia: “I also study hard everyday. I’m sure I understand the Kingdom much better than I did at the beginning… and also the binding power of what is written upon the Dragon History Stone. I had my reasons for wanting to participate in the Royal Selection, but I’m sure that even without them, I don’t think I could have refused.”

Staring at Filóre, who was clinging onto her arm, Emilia’s words spilled out earnestly.

It was understandable that the Royal Selection Candidates had no right to refuse. He had spoken with Garfiel and Petra the night before, but the Covenant with the Dragon was solidly and deeply rooted within the Dragon Kingdom.

Actually, Felt had once tried to refuse participation in the Royal Selection. However, she had been forced to participate in exchange for the safety of Rom-jii, who had tried to steal her away.

That meant there was a certain compulsion for the Kingdom to stop at nothing in order to induce the participation of the Dragon Priestesses described by the Dragon History Stone.

Emilia was declaring that the same now applied to Filóre.

Filóre: “But… but, that’s not what I wanted, you know?”

Emilia: “Right, I’m sure you didn’t. I also think that if you hadn’t been able to make the insignia shine, Filóre, then we wouldn’t be having this conversation… However, the Dragon Gem shone, and you were selected, Filóre. I’m sure you understand the significance of that better than anyone.”

Filóre: “Uuugh…”

As Emilia spoke to her with a tone that almost felt motherly, Filóre hung her head weakly.

Filóre was a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon. Needless to say, as one who held such faith, love, and reverence for the Dragon, it put her in the position where she truly felt the binding power of the Dragon History Stone's account stronger than anyone else.

It could even be said that her behavior up to this point had been a childish escape from reality.

However—

Filóre: "In that case… indeed, in that case, how about this? Emilia and I will form an alliance of friendship. And then, I'll do everything in my power to help Emilia become the Monarch. If we do so, then the Royal Selection…"

Emilia: "Thank you, Filóre. —But, I would reaaally hate that."

Quietly, but with unwavering firmness, Emilia clearly made that declaration.

Filóre's throat echoed delicately with a "Hiu" before the nobility of that voice like a silver bell. To make her point clear, Emilia felt around in her pocket, and opened her palm to reveal the insignia she had grabbed.

As soon as she did, the overflowing crimson radiance of the Dragon Gem shone across the parlor of the Royal Residence with a dazzling light.

Emilia: "I said so before, but I had reasons I wanted to participate in the Royal Selection from the very beginning."

While demonstrating the brilliance of the Dragon Gem, Emilia spoke so that Filóre would listen.

Emilia's initial motivation to join the Royal Selection had been to use the power of the Dragon's Blood kept in the Royal Castle to save her hometown, which had been frozen in ice. But as time went on, as she met others, and as she learned more, Emilia's sentiments regarding the Royal Selection were now beginning to change.

However, that initial desire would neither change nor vanish.

And—

Emilia: “It’s the same for the others as well. Crusch-san had her own, Anastasia-san had her own, Felt-chan had her own… and Priscilla had her own. We all have our own things we wanted to achieve, and so we all joined the Royal Selection. No, that’s wrong.”

Filóre: “Wrong? What’s wrong about it?”

Emilia: “I’m sure that those who can make the Dragon Gem shine, have reasons to participate in the Royal Selection… they all have something that they can only achieve if they are part of it. If so, what is it for you?”

Filóre: “For… me…?”

Emilia gave Filóre, who was blinking in dumbfounded amazement, a valiant and lovely smile.

She had suggested supporting her friend Emilia’s desires should she become a Royal Selection Candidate, but Emilia could not quite accept that was Filóre’s own desire.

Emilia would not recognize her inclusion into the Royal Selection of the Kingdom of Lugunica for such a reason.

Emilia: “Please, don’t say that you don’t want to as soon as it is asked of you, due to feeling overwhelmed. Think about it reaaally carefully. I’m sure you won’t be able to refuse joining the Royal Selection anyway. However, I don’t want someone who joins just because they feel they have no choice but to take Priscilla’s seat.”

—It was a resolute statement, a wish, and also a prayer.

Filóre: “…”

Filóre blinked at Emilia, who had directly expressed everything within her heart. No one said a thing regarding the tension swelling between the two of them, coming in contact with each other with zero distance between them.

Neither Subaru, nor anyone else, wanted to insert their presence into the silence born between them. —So as not to introduce any needless impurities into the decision to come.

Filóre: “—Yes.”

It was Emilia, watching Filóre closer than anyone, who created ripples upon the surface of that silence. She narrowed her eyes, framed by her long lashes, and gave the insignia in her hand to Filóre.

Filóre reflexively accepted that which was offered to her. —Even if it was due to its lack of awareness, the insignia’s Dragon Gem chose not when to shine.

Filóre: “—If… if I were to… participate in the Royal Selection…”

As Filóre muttered this, the Dragon Gem illuminated within her hand, just as it had in Emilia’s. As it glistened with a light the same color as her own eyes, Filóre made a declaration.

In the face of that unescapable destiny known as the Royal Selection that had been thrust upon her, what sort of principles would she proclaim?

Filóre: “I wish to reform the relationship between the Church and the state that has existed up till now. So that those within the Castle and those of the Church will no longer hesitate to extend a hand to the other due to some strange, stubborn formality.”

Emilia: “…”

Filóre: “If I were to become the Monarch, I would make this a country where none would hesitate to help others in need.”

It was nothing more than idealism that had been instilled in her, the full details of which were currently quite lacking.

Yet, in Filóre’s own way, she wished to break the fetters and frustrations that she had experienced growing up and living as a member of the Church of the Divine Dragon, and make the world a better place.

And, now that she was able to tout such principles, there were none who could laugh at Filóre, deride her as someone elevated to her high position against her own will by those around her, or call her begrudging participation in the Royal Selection merely a means to fill a vacancy.

Otto: “…As I thought, I ought to have turned away all visits without an appointment.”

Subaru heard Otto mutter that under his breath, in response to the conclusion Filóre had reached.

Dressed lightly without his hat or mantle, as he ran his fingers through his wavy, gray hair absent-mindedly, he appraised the occurrence happening there.

In truth, Subaru could understand why Otto felt like saying that.

Subaru: “After all, a super strong rival has made an appearance just now.”

Otto: “I think this is a laughably self-destructive move on our part, however… the fact that it was none other than our own leader that encouraged it is what is troublesome.”

Subaru: “Relax. The stronger the opponent, the stronger Emilia-tan becomes, so something like this gives me a good feeling.”

Otto: “If you are trying to cheer me up, could you not tell me something less objectionable than that?!”

Beatrice: “Naturally, Betty would like to feel sorry for Otto right now, in fact. However…”

Beatrice trailed off and narrowed her eyes, and gazing toward what shone radiantly before them—toward Emilia and Filóre, Subaru concurred with that opinion.

Certainly, if one were to limit themselves to only the event that had occurred, it probably ought to have been labeled as a foolish act. An amusing image of Roswaal falling to his knees upon hearing that news afterwards came to mind.

Nevertheless, it was worth it. In exchange for the appearance of a super strong rival, one thing was certain—

Emilia: "—I absolutely will not lose to Filóre."

—Because without a doubt, Emilia, who aspired to be the Monarch, had been able to show her true colors.

2

???: "—And so, I respectfully accept your request for my participation in the Royal Selection."

With one hand placed on her chest, and the other causing the insignia to shine with a sparkle, Filóre made that proclamation with majesty, with boldness, and without hesitation.

This was the Royal Castle, but rather than the throne room where they would be summoned if something significant were to occur, it was a conference room that appeared to be used for slightly more compact discussions. In a space about the size of a school classroom, a round table capable of accommodating approximately twenty people around its circumference had been placed there, and traditionally, briefings between the Council of Wise Men and civil officials of the Castle had often been held here.

Emilia: "See, on the day the Royal Selection started, after Subaru was kicked out of the chamber, we all moved to this conference room to discuss things."

Subaru: "Ah, offstage from me getting thrashed by Julius."

Emilia: "I still can't remember, but… Subaru, you had a fight with Julius? You must have… made up properly. That's why the two of you are reaaally good friends."

Subaru: "Setting aside whether he and I are reaaally good friends, it was a necessary event for Emilia-tan and I to become reaaally good friends."

Subaru responded to Emilia's whispered description with a crooked smile.

In a world where Julius's Name was yet lost, Subaru did not feel like delving deeply into how those involved recollected his disgrace upon that day, even as a form of admonishment.

Fortunately, the conference room had a noticeable amount of empty seats on this occasion, and there were few people here who were involved on that day. —After all, this was a so-called top-secret meeting, with only a minimum number of those involved from each camp, and for the Emilia Camp, that was limited to only Emilia and Subaru, as well as his partner Beatrice.

Although, one of these extremely limited participants, an elderly man with a distinctive long beard who greeted them, was indeed one of the individuals involved with that day.

That elderly man—Miklotov McMahon, member of the Council of Wise Men, while watching Filóre reach a rather preferable change of heart,

Miklotov: "Hrrrmm. We are immensely grateful for that response, even though we were the ones to make such demands, but… could you please inform me once more? I did give my permission, but for what reason did you have Emilia-sama and Natsuki-dono join us here?"

Filóre: "I received advice from their counsel this morning before coming to the Castle. Emilia is an irreplaceable friend of mine, and Subaru is her Knight… to be honest, I wanted to bring along everyone from the Emilia Camp who helped support me in declaring my resolve."

???: "As you can imagine, if you were to do that, the Church, as well as myself, would be in a rather awkward positiiion."

When Filóre responded to Miklotov's inquiry, the sole individual to accompany her from the Church, Sakura, made a troubled face whilst uttering those words.

Filóre seemed dissatisfied with that answer, but since it would be odd for all the members of the Emilia Camp to be gathered en masse for such a ceremonious event, Sakura's view was likely the appropriate one.

However, compared to the impressions left upon Subaru, Miklotov, stroking his long beard, seemed to have been struck by a different portion of what Filóre had said.

The wise elder's astute eyes narrowed, and as he let out his habitual sigh with a "Hrrrmm"—

Miklotov: "A friend, you say. Miss Filóre from the Church of the Divine Dragon, and Emilia-sama."

Subaru: "…Is that it? Emilia-tan is a silver-haired half-elf, and Filóre is a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon, is that what you are trying to get at?"

Emilia: "Hold on, Subaru…"

Picking up on his muttering, Emilia chided Subaru as he instinctively began to act hastily.

Still, there were no dependable comrades from their camp present outside of Subaru and Beatrice. Thus, Subaru must speak to Miklotov impactfully on everyone's behalf.

As the one and only Knight entrusted with Emilia, he must adamantly contend with such absurdity.

Subaru: "Miklotov-san, you must be aware of Emilia's achievements over the past year and a half. We all know of and have taken account of such things, and yet, I wish the higher-ups of this country would stop continuously taking such a prejudiced view of her. Speaking of her as a half-elf, is it not enough already?"

Miklotov: "Saying, "Is it not enough", seems to show a bit of a disregard for public sentiment. From the start, it was obvious that Emilia and the Witch had nothing further in common beyond appearance and race… however, that alone is momentous. You must understand, do you not?"

Subaru: "Ngh…"

Using his experienced artistry when it came to rhetoric, Miklotov caused Subaru, who had been berating him rather assuredly, to waver. The problem here, once more, was the common sense rooted within the inhabitants of this world, that which would never well up from within Subaru as his own true feelings.

And that was not confined to the silver-haired half-elf, Emilia.

Miklotov: “Inevitably, the fact that you, a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon, will become a Candidate for the Royal Selection will surely come as a great surprise for many people. It will also be a major departure from convention. This was an exceedingly thorny decision to make.”

Filóre: “…Yes, I am well aware of that fact. And yet…”

Miklotov: “Hrrrmm. “And yet”… what is it that you wish to ask?”

Filóre: “—. And yet, if that is indeed the case, then just why did you go to such lengths for me to enter the Royal Selection?”

That doubt, weaved from Filóre’s lips, was indeed a natural question to ask.

Miklotov’s wording just then gave a glimpse into the state of affairs: that the Royal Castle, for its part, was not in any way readily accepting of a Royal Selection Candidate from the Church of the Divine Dragon.

Filóre: “I’m also a nun of the Church of the Divine Dragon… and although I naturally understand rigid adherence to the record of the Dragon History Stone, the fact remains that even with Priscilla Barielle… that even with her passing, five individuals with the qualifications of a Dragon Priestess had been gathered, and the Royal Selection had begun. The record shouldn’t have been distorted.”

Beatrice: “Or perhaps, has the account of the Dragon History Stone been updated, I suppose? Are you saying that, when lacking five Priestesses, a replacement Priestess was found and it was rewritten as if to promote her, in fact?”

Miklotov: “No, we have received no such report that the record of the Dragon History Stone has changed. Merely, rather than our intentions regarding this matter, it is more a question of national sentiment.”

Subaru: “National…”

Emilia: “Sentiment?”

Subaru and Emilia tilted their heads, as if question marks were floating above them regarding Miklotov’s answer. And then, lowering his voice slightly,

Miklotov: “It shall become public knowledge in due course, but for now, this is confidential. In truth, it appears that rumors are already circulating through the streets. —That Duchess Karsten was granted salvation by a Saintess of the Church of the Divine Dragon.”

Subaru & Emilia: “—!”

Miklotov: “A gag order was imposed within the Royal Castle regarding this matter. Of course, even if you keep information locked up, it will still seep out like raindrops… however, even rumors that the Saintess in question possesses the same characteristics as the long-since vanished princess of Lugunica have spread substantially.”

Subaru: “Isn’t that basically all the information in its entirety being leaked?!”

Miklotov’s face clouded over with bitterness, but if it was indeed true, then it meant that the Royal Castle’s attempt at information control had ended in a completely ill-prepared failure.

Subaru: “I think there’s no way, but Filóre… were you so delighted to have saved Crusch-san that, in your good mood, you spread your own achievement around?”

Beatrice: “Betty has been convinced, I suppose.”

Filóre: “Please don’t be! Also, I didn’t do any such thing! Even I have common sense! Well, I may have told some people close to me, wanting to use them to persuade the people of the Church. But, they shouldn't have spread it around town!"

Subaru: "Hmmm, Beako?"

Beatrice: "Let's say that it's gray as close to black as it can get, in fact."

Subaru more or less agreed with Beatrice's scathing evaluation.

He pitied Filóre, stomping her feet in vexation, but no matter how much she insisted that she had not done so, the feeling that she had indeed could not be erased; such was the impression he had of the girl up to now.

In any case, no matter whoever might have been responsible for the dissemination of such rumors—

Beatrice: "Then, perhaps there might be rumors that Filóre made the insignia shine as well, I suppose? Thus, everyone crowns Filóre, saying that it would be strange should she not be included as a Royal Selection Candidate, in fact?"

Miklotov: "Talk has yet to go that far. However, news of Priscilla-sama's death will soon be announced to the public. If Miss Filóre's existence has become known by that time, naturally the streets will overflow with voices calling for her participation in the Royal Selection."

Subaru: "So before that happens, you want to finish laying all the groundwork in advance, huh…"

If Filóre's participation was a matter of course anyway, it would keep things more transparent for everyone to quickly advance the conversation. While on one hand, he could understand such arrangements by the adults, but sure enough, he was somewhat bothered by Filóre's lack of a veto.

Had she not been able to discuss this with Emilia beforehand, Filóre would have joined in the worst possible frame of mind, completely lacking the necessary mettle of a Royal Selection Candidate.

Sakura: “Now, now, don’t frown like thaaat, Subaru-chan. We successfully came to a conclusion somehow or another, so that means we’re fine, riiight?”

Subaru: “…Is this fine with you, Sakura-san? Initially, Filóre wasn’t supposed to have left the Church, or rather, her participation in the Royal Selection was unforeseen, right?”

Sakura: “—Whether they want it or not, the leaves of the trees are nothing but at the whim of the wind and water.”

Subaru: “…”

As Sakura’s tone of voice suddenly fell, Subaru could not help but look embarrassed.

Those few words were filled with a poignant sense of emptiness—loaded with vacuous resignation, almost as if it were that of an old tree, agape with a large hollow, withering to naught.

It nearly even felt like, rather than speaking about Filóre, those words were rather about Sakura herself, about her own resignation.

Sakura: “Weeell, that which will happen, will haaappen. To begin with, even if she has the drive to do so, she is a year and a half behind the other children, so she might not be able to compeeete.”

Filóre: “Excuse me, Sakura! Why do you have to put a damper on my enthusiasm like that! If I’m going to do it, I’m going to win… my tenacity is truly that of the Dragon’s!”

Subaru: “I’ve been curious, what does the Church of the Divine Dragon think of the way Filóre carelessly makes light of the Dragon?”

Sakura: “Blasphemy, or something along those liiines.”

Filóre: “Blasphemy!!”

It was more scathing than he had anticipated, but as expected, it seemed that they deemed it as behavior not to be endorsed. Filóre maintained a stance utterly distant from the typical image of a

Saintess.

At any rate, with most of his questions answered, Subaru now had a general grasp on the purpose of this top-secret meeting and the rationale behind why the participants had been so tightly restricted. That was to say, this was an informal notice, confirming the intentions and plans of the parties involved, before the proper public announcement.

And, when he thought about it that far, suddenly, Subaru's anxiety spiked.

That was—

Subaru: "Say, Filóre, if you are also going to become a Royal Selection Candidate, does that mean you will also appoint a Knight like the other Candidates, like Emilia-tan did with me?"

Emilia: "Ah, Subaru, you might have a misunderstanding about that."

Subaru: "A misunderstanding?"

Emilia: "Umm, it just so happens that all of us Royal Selection Candidates are attended by Knights, but that's not an absolute rule. After all, Anastasia-san and I didn't form a Knight Contract with Julius and you from the start, right?"

Subaru: "That's true for me, but Julius was Anastasia's Knight from the beginning."

Emilia: "Ah, that's right. I'll have to remember that properly, for Julius's sake."

While Emilia made a minor correction due to the influence of the missing Name, Subaru, however, was convinced by that explanation. Indeed, at the outset, Roswaal had accompanied Emilia as her backer, but Subaru had been absent as a Knight—or rather, he had not yet won that trust.

Therefore, perhaps being a Royal Selection Candidate did not necessitate having a Knight.

Subaru: "But, I do think going through the hassle of finding one would bring you more prestige. What are you going to do? The only one close to Filóre that could fulfill the requirements would be… maybe my friend?"

Emilia: ""Mai fhriend"… that's Tiga, right? Still, that might be nice. Filóre also seems to be reaaally close with Tiga…"

Filóre: "Ehhh, my Knight being Tiga? That doesn't feel the least bit special."

Clasping her hands together in front of her chest, Emilia was in complete agreement with Subaru's nomination, and yet Filóre booed that choice with incredible vigor.

Filóre: "Well, Tiga is skillful, so if appointed as a Knight, he would probably do well and not make any mistakes, but he scolds me a lot and is quick to doubt me whenever something happens, so I suppose he lacks the necessary respect and loyalty for a Knight. Besides, even though he's not a Knight, it won't change that he still accompanies me here and there even now, so there's no point in going out of my way to name him as my Knight. Rejected! I do reject it!"

Subaru: "Well, it is your Knight, so I think you should do as you like… huh? In the first place, how would one usually even go about appointing a Knight?"

For example, in Subaru's case, he was conferred his Knighthood by Emilia, and was immediately installed as her Knight, which was how he acquired his current position; but, what of Reinhard or Julius?

Receiving a Knight should not have been something restricted solely to Royal Selection Candidates, but Subaru only now felt shame at his own ignorance of what such Contracts were like in those sorts of situations.

Miklotov: "Hrrrmm, indeed. In many cases, it is typical for a Knight to seek out a lord and swear fealty in order to be appointed. However, for a Knight of great renown, it is not uncommon for some lords to promise a high salary and favorable treatment, extending an invitation to them and requesting that they serve them."

Subaru: "Oh, I wasn't expecting Miklotov-san to explain it to me… By the way, do you employ any Knights, Miklotov-san?"

Miklotov: "There have been many, who have long since come and gone, that have placed their trust in our household. The prevailing view is that, as you might expect, those who have had an outstanding Knight dedicate their sword to them command a certain amount of respect."

Subaru: "That's… well, it's understandable."

Indeed, the status of having the Sword Saint or the Finest of Knights as their foremost Knights ought to have attached quite a great deal of prestige to the names of Felt and Anastasia.

The notoriety of the foremost Knights was an important barometer for the Royal Selection. —Sure enough, Subaru wondered if he had actually become Emilia's strength as a Knight. In addition, he wondered if Crusch, who had dismissed Ferris from the role of her one and only Knight, might now acquire a new Knight.

Subaru: "…"

He did not want that. Indeed, as the individual involved would put it, thinking those thoughts as if clinging to them was a result of Subaru's pridefulness, his desire for everything to go the way he wished.

They might find a different answer to the unavoidable rift that had formed between the two of them, if they took some time to recollect themselves. So, until then, he prayed that she would leave that seat vacant.

Yes, with prideful resolve, Subaru began feeling sentimental.

Filóre: "…Just now, Miklotov-sama said this. That for an outstanding Knight to approach me, I should raise my voice and appeal earnestly."

Beatrice: "—? The passion seems to differ quite a bit from what Betty heard, I suppose."

Subaru: "…Me too, I also felt like the nuance was a bit different, but…"

Clenching her fists tightly and stifling her emotions, Filóre muttered. Beatrice's response to that pulled Subaru back from his sentimentality into reality.

Perhaps having ears that only heard what was convenient for herself, Filóre interpreted Miklotov's statement in her own way, and on top of that, her cheeks were becoming slightly flushed. For some reason, it seemed like something had gotten her emotions riled up to the point of making her cheeks burn, but—

Emilia: "Maybe you already have an idea of who you want to appoint as your Knight, Filóre?"

Filóre: "—! How did you… was it because of our close friendship?"

Emilia: "Mhm, I think so. So, what sort of person are they?"

Subaru: "Just to get it out of the way, Reinhard's already all sold out."

Beatrice: "And naturally, Subaru and Betty are under a sales contract in perpetuity to Emilia, in fact."

With the attention of Subaru, Emilia, Beatrice, Sakura, and Miklotov centered upon herself, Filóre smiled with a somewhat meaningful "Fufufu"; she met all of their gazes, vigorously opening the thick book of scriptures before her.

Filóre: "Please have a listen. This too, is in the scriptures. "The arm of man doth swing the sword, but it be the Dragon's will that deals in life. Under the footprints of a Knight chosen, even the most bloodied of ruts turn to roads of silver"!"

Emilia: "Ummm, that means…?"

Filóre: "Basically, the one most suitable to be my Knight is someone who has been recognized by the Dragon!”

Though it felt a bit like an arbitrary interpretation, ultimately, when it came to a Knight great enough to be recognized by the Dragon, the only person meeting such qualifications whom Subaru could think of was Reinhard.

Taking a more broad interpretation, it was also technically true that Emilia, having cleared the Trial of the first layer at the Pleiades Watchtower, was also someone who fulfilled those conditions.

Subaru: “Though a development where a Royal Candidate ends up becoming another Royal Candidate’s Knight would be quite amusing with how it breaks the system, Emilia-tan has me, so that development gets rejected.”

Filóre: “Emilia being my Knight… th-that is certainly an idea that tempts my heart. However, my hopes and aspirations differ from hers. Please do not lead me any further astray.”

Getting the feeling that he could neither say “Don’t be shaken over something so trivial” nor “Emilia’s the target of comparison, so it can’t be helped that you feel shaken”, Subaru ultimately said nothing to Filóre.

Taking no notice of Subaru’s consideration, Filóre briefly cleared her throat,

Filóre: “Alright? Is it alright? As I have said, if I, a Saintess of the Church of the Divine Dragon, am to stand as a Royal Candidate, then it must be that my Knight is one that has been recognized by the Dragon. And so, as far as I am aware, there is but one personage who meets that criteria—”

When such a prestigious requirement was raised to the forefront, there was just a single person who came to mind, whether one liked it or not.

As irony would have it, he was an opponent who was destined to contend against Filóre, not only in the battle for the throne, but over the question of who was the true survivor of the Lugunican

Royal Family.

None other than the one and only Knight in service to Felt: the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea—

Filóre: “—Heinkel Astrea-sama.”

——.

————.

——————.

Subaru: “Ngh?!”

Feeling as though he had heard a mixed-up reply, Subaru’s throat unwittingly let out a horrendous squeal. However, Filóre wore a smug look on her face upon making her declaration; beside her, Emilia and Beatrice were visibly as shocked as Subaru, their eyes wide open in surprise.

Even if an Astrea was an Astrea, it was a different Astrea than the one he had envisioned.

Subaru: “…Umm, Filóre?”

Filóre: “Wh-What is the matter? Or rather, aren’t everybody’s reactions somewhat strange?”

Subaru: “Yeah, they’re strange alright. Could I please just ask you to tell us one more time? The one most fit to be the Knight of a Saintess of the Church of the Divine Dragon, is who exactly?”

Filóre: “Like I said, I would prefer if you did not make me repeat myself however many times, but… Heinkel Astrea-sama.”

However many times he heard it, the name did not take on a different sound, and as she voiced it, Filóre inclined her head.

From her perspective, it seemed like the reactions of Subaru and the rest were far more difficult to understand. That was only natural. After all, in her eyes, the person known as Heinkel Astrea was—

Filóre: “—One from the lineage of Sword Saints who, upon conquering the Dragon’s Blood that washed over his body, was reforged into an immortal knight, Heinkel Astrea-sama: I wish to name him as my Knight.”

Indeed, having risen to the stage as the sixth Royal Candidate, Filóre boasted that in her position as the sixth, the individual most fit to be her one and only Knight was none other than the Backstabber, Heinkel Astrea.

Vic.112o

Chapter 12:
Groan

1

—Clear skies graced the day since the early morning, as if it were blessing the triumphant future to come.

Subaru: “Or, is it a bit too optimistic of me to be thinking something like that?”

Beatrice: “Betty does not think so, in fact. In all actuality, if Filóre’s Sacrament proves capable of exhibiting the anticipated results, then Subaru’s cheerful mood would be nothing more than an advance celebration, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…If it’s just me celebrating in advance all on my own, then I get the feeling that it really was a bit too cheerful.”

Hearing Beatrice’s follow-up as they walked together, hand in hand, Subaru scratched his cheek with his unoccupied fingers.

Given the situation, a part of him did want to stick up for those feelings of unavoidable cheerfulness, but considering how little he himself had actually contributed to that, he could not deny that his spirits were too high.

In reality, for their upcoming itinerary—making for the Watergate City of Pristella, and using the Sacrament of the Church of the Divine Dragon to provide aid to the victims of the Witch Cult, there would arrive no moment in which Subaru would be of any particular use.

Only, as the Knight of Emilia, who would be performing a distinguished role there, and above all, as an individual who had experienced the fierce battle that raged in the city, he wanted to be present to witness the moment in which the abhorrent scars left behind by that struggle were healed once and for all.

Subaru: “So that’s why, we’ll rely on Reinhard to keep up the hard work for this part, and have him take us along to Pristella as a member of the expedition.”

Beatrice: “Naturally, Betty will be coming with you, in fact. Together with Emilia, who will thaw the residents she had encased in ice, and with Garfiel and Otto, who still have unresolved matters in that town, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Garfiel said something about the father of a family he got along with there being a victim of Lust, and Otto… is going to collect the book he had entrusted to that restorer, huh?”

Beatrice: “Seems like it, in fact… Good grief, what a cunning man, I suppose.”

Puffing out her cheeks, Beatrice grumbled so, and Subaru pondered her complex feelings on the matter.

The book, which Otto had entrusted to the restorer in Pristella, was one of the Tomes of Wisdom considered to have been left behind by the Witch of Greed, Echidna—however, it was the volume that had been inherited by Roswaal. With the single-minded wish to verify its contents, Otto had retrieved the book after it had been mostly reduced to cinders, and while that persistence of his went without saying, it was also difficult to believe the skill of the restorer who claimed he would be able to reconstruct it.

But, for Beatrice, who had lost her own Tome of Wisdom in a fire, it must have put her in an extremely delicate state of mind.

Beatrice: “Do not worry, in fact, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “If it’s the matter of Betty’s guide for the future, Subaru now fills that role, I suppose. It is shocking to witness Otto’s destitute disposition as he attempts to recycle burnt cinders, in fact. But, if he can get the better of Roswaal, it is not a bad feeling, I suppose.”

Subaru: “…I see.”

Indifferent to Subaru's worries, Beatrice powerfully puffed out her chest, and finding her to be incredibly lovely, Subaru caressed the head of his adorable Contracted Spirit to his heart's content.

As mentioned previously, the ones travelling to Pristella on the Reinhard Express were, strangely enough, the same members who had gone to Pristella the previous time. If it were possible, Subaru would have liked to mobilize all members of the camp, but he could not put too much strain on Ram, who was currently down on account of overworking.

As for the personnel accompanying them from other camps, there would be Reinhard, tasked with the duty of carrying the dragon carriage, and Felt, who seemed to be responsible for supervising him. —Then, there would be the central figure of this expedition, Filóre, as a key person, and Sakura, serving as her chaperone.

Subaru: "To be honest, given the congestion of things that need to be done now, it's not like I don't get the feeling that it might be way too dangerous to bring Felt and Filóre together in the same dragon carriage so suddenly."

Beatrice: "However, as per what is being said, the two of them have already encountered each other face to face, in fact."

Subaru: "Yeah, it was the day when Filóre first showed up at the Castle, and when she treated Crusch-san. On that day, the two of them met for the first time… it also seems like it was Felt who gave Filóre an insignia, and verified if she held the qualifications to be a Royal Candidate."

Beatrice: "That girl is far too reckless, I suppose. Usually, the idea of placing one's own position into jeopardy, is something one would think twice about, in fact."

Subaru: "To begin with, she isn't the type of person who depends on her ancestry. That unwavering part about her really gives off a cool impression."

Felt's resolute way of living harbored a charisma capable of attracting many people.

In actuality, those who wished to have Felt take the throne were those who had been enchanted by her words, actions, and way of being, perceiving their ideals upon those small shoulders of hers, and choosing to follow her.

If those were the results brought forth by the radiance of Felt's soul, bereft of any other factors, then the current situation was tantamount to an unnecessary plot being thrust upon her.

Subaru: "Felt and Filóre, which one is the real princess, and which is the fake, I wonder?"

Beatrice: "It is a strange premise to begin with, I suppose. Regardless of which of the two is the real one, if they intend on leveraging the possibility, they ought to be proclaiming it more assertively or so it doesn't go to waste, in fact. Get the masses to believe, get the masses to harbor suspicions, that would be the route with the greatest utility, I suppose."

The more he thought about it, the more unreasonable it seemed to leverage the surviving-princess theory.

As Beatrice said, not only were they failing to capitalize on a rare, powerful advantage, but if it turned out that either Felt or Filóre was indeed the real deal, it could even be said that one of them would incur a negative image as the definite fake.

When it came to that, the first thing that weighed on his mind was —

Subaru: "—In the end, what in the world was the Church thinking when they decided to keep Filóre's existence a secret."

According to Filóre, she was abandoned at the doorstep of the Church fifteen years prior, and from there was taken in and raised as an orphan within the children's house of the Church of the Divine Dragon. There, she received a considerably sheltered upbringing, without much knowledge about the outside world, forming her as a monster of ignorant initiative.

Regardless of the fact that her initiative was what gave rise to today's disorder, the Church of the Divine Dragon would have been fully aware of her distinct outward appearance, her age, and her name.

There was absolutely no possibility that they had failed to draw the connection with the Lugunican Royal Family.

Not to mention, if the Sacrament that Filóre wielded had the power to combat the Authorities of the Sin Archbishops of Lust and Gluttony, would it not have been capable of exhibiting its power against the illness that befell the Royal Family?

In that case, why had the Church of the Divine Dragon abandoned the Lugunican Royal Family to perish?

Subaru: "So long as that mystery remains unclear, nobody's going to be satisfied."

With the holding of the Royal Selection known far and wide all across the Kingdom, the citizens of the nation were all paying attention to who would take the throne in this epoch. In both a positive and negative sense, the people would not turn a blind eye to any conspicuous deeds of the Royal Candidates, nor would they forget them.

Hence, he wanted to know what the Church of the Divine Dragon was thinking, no matter what.

For that purpose—

Subaru: "—Miklotov-san's invitation was really a godsend."

Beatrice: "In fact."

Beside the nodding, taciturn Beatrice, Subaru recalled the matter from the previous day—when they had accompanied Filóre as she went to assent to participation in the Royal Selection, and, together with Emilia, they had held an exchange with Miklotov in one of the conference rooms of the Castle.

Filóre's bombshell announcement when it came to the selection of her Knight: he had been sent into a great spur of befuddlement when that had been dropped, and the scene had ultimately concluded rather chaotically, but Subaru had also managed to secure a benefit.

An important member of the Council of Wise Men, and likely one of the foremost intellects in the Kingdom of Lugunica, that Miklotov, had agreed to set aside some time to chat with Subaru.

While the clamorous Filóre Theater raged on in the background, given that there was no harm in asking, Subaru had told Miklotov that he wished to speak with him, to which the latter graciously agreed.

Miklotov: “Hrrmmmm. In that case, I shall fit you into my schedule, Natsuki-dono. It just so happens there is a matter about which I would like to speak with you in private as well, Natsuki-dono.”

Subaru: “I’m extremely grateful, but… there’s something you wanna speak to me about?”

Miklotov: “Indeed. There is a matter I wish to ascertain, a matter about which I wish to inform you, and a matter on which I wish to consult you… I beg your pardon, but it would be a blessing if you could join this old man for a long chat.”

With those words, Miklotov flashed a smile that gave the impression of a good-natured old man, informed Subaru of the location of his residence, and scheduled an appointment for their agreed upon private discussion.

That appointment was today, where he was scheduled to depart for Pristella after the passing of Fire Time.

Before that matter of great importance, as Subaru had promised to Miklotov, he was en route to the specified location by himself—no, having received permission beforehand, he also brought Beatrice along with him, as their two hearts beat together as one.

Subaru: “As per what Miklotov-san said… setting aside whatever he wanted to ask and tell me, it’s kinda scary that he said he wants to consult me on something, though I’ve also got a whole bunch of questions to unload on him. Ideally, I'd like to get him to show us the actual Dragon History Stone, but…"

Beatrice: "The Dragon History Stone is said to be managed as strictly as the Dragon's Blood, I suppose. However, if Betty were to get a glimpse of it, it should be possible to formulate a hypothesis of what its mechanisms resemble, in fact."

Subaru: "It's not like I really think the Dragon History Stone is suspicious in and of itself, but the fact that it completely overlooked the annihilation of the Royal Family, and instead completely described the following Royal Selection is, well…"

It made him begin to suspect that there might have been some sort of malice or contrivance behind that. He did not wish to believe that even the deaths of the Royal Family had been orchestrated.

Subaru: "…"

In the mausoleum, he had laid eyes upon the sarcophagi belonging to those departed members of the Lugunican Royal Family. — Considering the impact the deaths of the widely beloved Royal Family had borne, especially that which the death of the fourth prince had borne on Crusch and Ferris with whom Subaru was well-aquanted, if there had been somebody's will interfering with that, Subaru would never forgive that person, no matter what.

Then, it happened just when Subaru thought so, and firmly clenched the hand opposite to the one holding Beatrice's.

???: "—Seems like you're thinking of some awfully unsettling things again, my friend."

As a witty voice suddenly called out to him from the side, Subaru swiveled his head around in surprise. Upon doing so, his eyes caught sight of a stylish young man waving at him from the vertex of a T-junction in the road.

At that friendly greeting, Subaru broke into a broad grin, and,

Subaru: "My friend? You're acting pretty over-familiar all of a sudden…"

???: “Oi oi oi, you were the one who called me that first! Don’t leave me out to dry!”

Subaru: “Just kidding. I’m happy to see you again, Tiga.”

A look of shock upon his face, the young man—Tiga, glared at Subaru’s face with squinting eyes as the latter extended his hand with good graces, and after a shrug of his shoulders, he shook the proffered hand.

With the successful exchange of the handshake, the revalidation of their friendship was completed, though,

Tiga: “It seems that you too are in lovely spirits, Miss Beatrice. It is an honor to meet you again.”

Beatrice: “There are no objections from Betty either, I suppose… However, why are you here, in fact?”

Tiga: “Well then, allow me to return the very same question to the two of you. Albeit it is not as though I was sneaking around, but just in case, this was supposed to be a confidential summons.”

Subaru: “Confidential… no way, don’t tell me you were also invited by Miklotov-san?”

Tiga: “—. So that would mean, you as well?”

Subaru and Tiga’s eyes widened as they pointed fingers at each other, and Beatrice, standing between them, stood up on her tippy toes to reach up and pull both of their arms down.

Seeing her help out with that cute gesture, Tiga exhaled a soft “Ha”, and,

Tiga: “Wow, and I got myself panicked thinking that I was being tailed. No matter how you look at it, you wouldn’t bring a child along with you if you were on someone’s tail, that’s what I thought, but… nevermind, I’ll leave it be.”

Subaru: “What, don’t call it quits midway through. I won’t get mad so spit it out.”

Tiga: “Really? I guess I’ll say it then, but, I thought that if it was the famous Lolimancer, Natsuki Subaru, then it might be a piece of cake for you to bring a child along while actively tailing someone…”

Subaru: “Asshole, who’re you calling a Lolimancer, you bastard!”

Tiga: “I only said it because you said you wouldn’t get mad!”

At the shameful pseudonym that had resurfaced for the first time in a while, the indignant Subaru attempted to lunge at the other party. But, Tiga skillfully evaded both of Subaru’s hands before quickly hiding behind Beatrice.

Watching over that refreshing, futile struggle, Beatrice faced Subaru and shrugged her shoulders,

Beatrice: “This matter will not proceed otherwise, so you must reconcile right here, I suppose. Subaru needs to act as an adult, in fact.”

Subaru: “Tsk, fine. I’m an adult, so I don’t want to be told this and that by you when you’re made to imitate a child. After all, I’m an adult.”

Tiga: “I don’t think an adult would need to make such a huge display about how adult-like they’re being, for Dragon’s sake.”

Springing his crouched body back up, Tiga readjusted his hat as he gestured his chin in the direction of their shared destination, at the intersection where they had come to a halt.

Tiga: “We are headed for the same destination. And likely, the appointed time is also the same. Let’s go together.”

Subaru: “I’m fine either way, but in that case, he shouldn’t have had to make that odd specification about me coming alone. Wouldn’t it’ve been fine if Emilia-tan or Rem came along with me?”

Tiga: “Setting Rem aside, Emilia-sama is your master, correct? Would you truly drag her along for your own errands?”

Subaru: “It wouldn’t be dragging her along, I just don’t want to leave her side for even a moment if I can help it.”

Tiga: “That’s—”

To meet banter with banter. Although Subaru had merely intended to retaliate in the back-and-forth, Tiga’s mouth closed as if he was at a loss for words, and for a moment, he avoided eye contact.

Seeing that reaction, Subaru exchanged glances with Beatrice, and tilted his head in confusion.

Subaru: “What’s wrong? Did I scare you with my big love towards Emilia-tan and the rest?”

Tiga: “It’s not that your big love or whatever you call it was frightening. Merely, that weighty affection of yours, Subaru, it struck a chord in my heart that even I do not fully understand… something like that.”

Subaru: “—. I appreciate the sentiment, but I’ve already got lots of people whom I’ve set my heart on, so…”

Tiga: “Pretending to be all devoted, you then go with the declaration of a scumbag?!”

Feeling like their usual rapport had returned, Subaru smiled at Tiga’s sentimental riposte. From the beginning, he had thought him to be a person on similar wavelengths to himself, and sure enough, my friend was not just for show.

Tiga was also taken in by Subaru’s grin, smiling as he cast aside the unease from a moment prior.

Beatrice: “That is enough merrymaking from both of you, I suppose. It has come into view, in fact.”

At some point, Beatrice had started to walk a bit further ahead of Subaru and Tiga, and now standing at the corner bend in the street, she beckoned them with her hand. With long, fast strides, Subaru and Tiga hurried as quickly as they could without breaking into a sprint, and both arrived at Beatrice’s side at roughly the same time.

Then, at the outskirts of the Noble District, finding the designated address and a large mansion with the matching roof color he had been told, he fathomed a guess that this must be Miklotov's residence.

Subaru: "Tiga, what did you have to discuss with Miklotov-san?"

Tiga: "Consulting him about something I'm searching for, I guess. What about you two, Subaru?"

Subaru: "Beako and I are pursuing a grand quest of history, we wanted to ask about various things regarding the dark aspects of the Kingdom, and we also were going to see if we could maybe get just a single glimpse at the Dragon History Stone."

Tiga: "I see. So that ties back to those unsettling things you were saying earlier. I offer this warning out of consideration, but it would be best if you did not speak of your plans regarding the Dragon History Stone so casually out on the—"

Roadside; right as he attempted to conclude his sentence, Tiga cut off his words there.

Subaru and Beatrice turned around, wondering what the matter was, and as they were about to proceed through the front gate of Miklotov's mansion, Tiga halted in his tracks, glaring at the surrounding stone walls.

Then, with a definite vigilance in his graceful side profile, he muttered.

That was—

Tiga: "—This is bad, the smell of blood is in the air."

2

Beatrice in his left hand, Guiltywhip in his right. —With those two reliable partners firmly equipped in his hands, Subaru stifled his breath and proceeded into the premises thick with the scent of blood.

???: "—Subaru, don't stray from me. We'll cover each other's blind spots."

The one addressing him in such a hushed voice was Tiga, keeping guard at the front of their formation.

Keeping low to the ground and erasing the sound of his footsteps as he walked, within Tiga's hand was a sword he had drawn in one smooth, soundless motion—a silver crescent that carved deep, sharp arcs: that which he grasped was a shamshir.

From the air of his demeanor, Subaru could presume he was a ready master of that curved blade, and bore an ill-timed thought that Filóre had quite the poor eye for Knights.

Subaru: "…"

Through their clasped hands, Beatrice and Subaru's anxieties were transmitted to each other.

Fortunately, thanks to Beatrice, who was far and away more composed than Subaru, they managed to avoid falling down a vicious spiral of their anxieties being reciprocally elevated by the other's, akin to a self-inflicted Authority of Wrath.

—Miklotov's mansion had been transformed into such a hideous scene that it made him want to avert his eyes.

Having entered the mansion from the rear, they had already discovered over ten people, but every last one of them had already breathed their last, hideously slaughtered corpses each slain with but a single stroke.

Whether those blows that had not inflicted suffering ought to have been branded mercy, or the utter dominance that did not permit any show of strength ought to have been appraised as ruthless, he could not think of any parting words to adorn those who had perished.

Merely, with the fresh, vibrant breath of death so close at hand, Subaru's heart pounded as if it was about to burst.

Subaru: "…"

The situation had already eclipsed Subaru's capacity. Having reached such a judgment, he was convinced that the best course of action would be to immediately leave the mansion and seek aid and reinforcements elsewhere.

But at the same time, there was certainly a chance they could still save lives by proceeding onward now.

That was because—

Subaru: "All of them were only just killed."

Beatrice: "…We are in agreement, in fact. If there was even just one person still breathing, I suppose…"

They discovered the mark of a slash carved into the corridor's wall, and the remains of yet another person collapsed directly underneath. A large, sweeping stroke had been unleashed, and had obliquely sliced through that person together with the wall behind him.

Sliced open by a diagonal slash, the blood of the regrettable dead body had yet to dry, and the bloody stench tinged with heat possessed the characteristic cloying scent of a corpse, peculiar in how the vitality of that which had been alive but moments ago mingled with death.

Subaru: "It pisses me off that my experiences in the Empire are coming into play at a time like this…"

In the life of Natsuki Subaru, there existed one most atrocious, most hellish sight—though it troubled him greatly, it was the gruesome massacre upon the Gladiator Island, where a mountain of corpses had been erected from the faces he knew well. The calamity wrought by the accursed Todd Fang, had scorched Subaru's world to ashes across innumerable deaths.

There, he had seen much death. That was why he could recognize it. Approximately how long ago the living had been made into the dead, and approximately how much suffering they had experienced before they passed on.

Subaru: “They… didn’t suffer.”

This now brought the number of corpses they had found within the mansion to thirteen, but not a single one of them had suffered. However, he was unable to make out whether that was the result of mercy or skill.

The fact that they had died without suffering would likely only serve as consolation to the hearts of those who were able to ascertain it, such as himself. Prideful; even at a time like this, that malediction from Ferris flashed through his mind.

Why was that? Perhaps it was because he thought the one who had said he hated death more than anything else in this world would be able to understand Subaru, who currently felt utterly helpless in the face of this tragedy.

Subaru: “Shit.”

While burdened with the sense of nausea and loss that he still could not grow accustomed to, despite having borne witness to an incalculable number of deaths, Subaru closed the eyelids of the dead, and moved onward.

The reason he refused to withdraw was because the possibility remained that someone still survived in the midst of this tragedy that had only just begun.

He did not wish to withdraw and allow that possibility of life to be destroyed.

In addition—

Subaru: “—Miklotov-san, is someone this country still needs.”

Certainly, Subaru had by no means exchanged many words with Miklotov.

The Council of Wise Men: he did not possess a single good memory of those men who stood at the zenith of those possessing acumen within the Kingdom.

Merely, amidst the few points of contact and recollections smeared with negative thoughts that he would rather forget, there was certainly something Subaru remembered.

Miklotov: “At the very least, he has shown that you are not the sort of half-elf so feared by the world. —You have a fine attendant.”

When Subaru’s shameful conduct was laid bare before a great many people by his egotistical outburst, and he was driven from the throne room without a single ally remaining, those were the words that had been spoken.

Until now, this moment, this very instant, he had not recalled it. —However, that day, in that place, there had been someone who had viewed Subaru’s actions through a different perspective to everyone else.

He had failed to realize that. But, why had that been? Whatever the case, Subaru was grateful.

Subaru would repay Miklotov with fortune surpassing this feeling of salvation.

Tiga: “—Subaru, Miss Beatrice.”

Steeling himself with firm resolve and determination, Subaru used that as motivation to keep himself from running away. Calling out to Subaru and Beatrice was Tiga, who had reached a set of enormous doors.

He could not claim to have examined every corner of the mansion, but he had finished checking all of the large chambers. Insofar as the layout of the mansion was concerned, the very room now before his eyes was the one that would serve as a place of refuge in an emergency.

Therefore, this room was the mostly likely location for the master of the mansion to be—

Subaru: “—Hk!”

With nary a word of warning, immediately following a nod to each other, they plunged in through the opened door with Tiga as the vanguard.

As soon as they entered, the first thing his eyes landed upon was a great and enormous flag of the Kingdom of Lugunica spread out over the white wall within the modest room—that which depicted a single sword at its center, and two dragons facing each other on either side, had been cleaved in twain diagonally, with one of the halves falling to the floor.

And there, he could see, with the national flag that had slumped down to the floor seeming to wrap around their body, a single individual who seemed to have suffered the same slash, dead with their back against the wall in a pool of their own blood.

Subaru: "—Aah."

A groan had involuntarily escaped the back of his throat.

A figure was reclined against the wall, their head hung low and their face not clearly visible. And yet, he knew exactly who it was. Even the distinctive white beard that made it impossible to mistake them for another had been soaked in the vast quantity of blood that had gushed forth, staining it a bright crimson.

Subaru: "…"

It was Miklotov McMahon, never to rise again—a merciless end that came all too suddenly for the great wise man who had sustained the Kingdom of Lugunica for so long.

However, nevertheless, even that death, even that end, served not as the reason for Subaru's groan.

The reason Subaru had groaned was not because Miklotov had been the victim. —It was due to the assailant.

In the center of the room, directly in front of the corpse of the departed Miklotov that was seemingly wrapped in the diagonally bisected banner, stood the figure of the assailant, their back turned.

Upon a slender, well-proportioned back, there swayed beautifully captivating long, dark-green hair. The curves of her body, abundant in femininity, could not be fully concealed by her dark blue attire, painting an aesthetic of fallen virtue upon this terrible scene.

And, not a single drop of gore clung to the long, sharp, straight sword clutched by her hand. —That was only natural. For the strokes of her sword hewed through her opponents not with steel, but with wind.

Subaru: “…”

Aghast, Subaru and the others stood motionless as she slowly turned her head toward them. With one eye covered by an eyepatch, the beauty in men’s clothing captured them in her remaining eye of amber hue—

Woman: “—Ah, Natsuki Subaru, is it? —Pray tell, are you truly the “real one” I know?”

—At that query from Crusch Karsten, amidst the horrid spectacle of rampant blood and death, what escaped from the throat of Natsuki Subaru, was naught more than a pathetic groan.

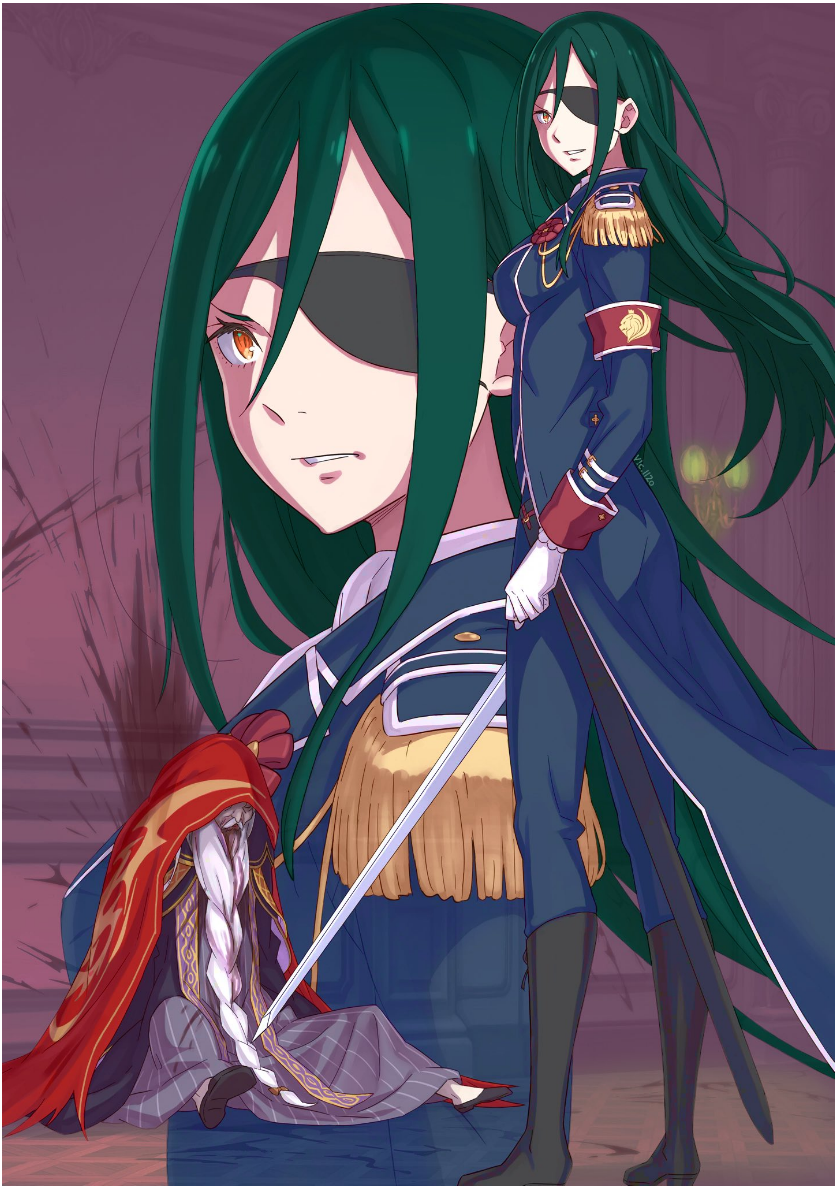
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Bonus Short Stories

The Land of Nascent Wolves:
The Magnificence of the Eminent Emperor of Vollachia
(LQ MTL Translation)

“The Prison Wolf General,” Volcas.

The news that a person by that name had filled a vacancy in the “Nine Divine Generals” resonated across the lands of the Vollachia Empire with a massive impact.

It was common knowledge that the “Great Disaster” had caused casualties among the Nine Divine Generals—the Empire’s strongest warriors—and that there had been shifts in their rankings. However, the Empire could not afford to let anyone, inside or outside its borders, think for a moment that its power had diminished.

Therefore, reforming the “Nine Divine Generals” was an urgent task for the Empire. However, in the pursuit of haste, they could not select someone unsuitable. Aside from the promotion of General Kafma Irulux, who had shown his presence during the disaster, the selection of other capable individuals had been postponed.

In the midst of this came the long-awaited birth of a new First General—but the choice was perceived as a radical departure even among all the legendary members of the Nine Divine Generals selected in the past.

The reason being—

“—The new First General, Volcas-kun, is both a Zombie and a Wolfman. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say he’s treated as a taboo existence in both the old and new eras of the Vollachia Empire. It’s certainly going to attract a lot of attention”.

“…You certainly have a way of speaking as if this were someone else’s business. After all, it was you who suggested to the Empress that I should do so”.

"Not at all! That was a proposal Medium racked her brain to come up with for your sake! What I did was merely add a bit of seasoning, perhaps. Unfortunately, my sister can't cook much beyond grilling and sprinkling salt!"

Showing his open hands, the slender man—Flop O'Connell—expressed the height of being "offended" with a gentle face. At his empty words, Vincent Vollachia gave a small snort.

Inside the Crystal Palace, in the Emperor's office, Flop appeared before Vincent at his desk with a loose, smiling face. In this Vollachia Empire, taking such an attitude toward the Emperor would have previously meant a charge of recklessness or a severe, life-threatening punishment.

"But now that we've repelled the 'Great Disaster,' such harsh punishments aren't necessary. The rumors of excessive blood purges were likely just to tighten discipline for the coming battle, weren't they?"

"Do not speak so wisely based on mere hearsay, you who do not know the reality of the court. You make me want to recreate the tense Crystal Palace of old".

"But you won't. Right, Your Majesty!"

As Flop pointed a finger at him, Vincent glared at the fingertip with the intent of "disrespect". Flop hurriedly withdrew his finger, and Vincent sighed. He was an utterly detestable man, but in his face, Vincent saw glimpses of the Empress with whom he had been most intimate lately, and he felt foolish for glaring.

"Taritta, see to it that you keep a firm grip on his reins. My tolerance has limits. If you do not wish to be beheaded by association, adapt quickly to the ways of the Imperial Capital".

"M-Me? No, um, I am in the middle of making an earnest effort…"

The one who spoke while looking down was a tall woman with dark skin and hair partially dyed blue—one of the "People of Shudrak" and currently Flop's companion, Taritta. Contrary to her dignified appearance, she shrunk her shoulders. Vincent looked at her and said, “Listen well”.

“Do not speak of efforts that yield no results. Until effort bears fruit, it is nothing more than a path with nothing on it. Do you intend to show me a path and stand proud?”

“Now, now, now, stop that, Your Majesty! Lady Taritta is doing well despite jumping into an unknown world. At the very least, I want to praise her!”

“Flop…”

Taritta turned an entranced gaze toward the back of the man who stood before her as if to protect her. However, since Flop was the one who gave Vincent a reason to poke at her in the first place, it was nothing but a poor self-staged performance. It seemed to work on Taritta, though.

“No matter how much you use that tongue of yours, the required ability does not change. If it is lacking, I will have you step down to a suitable place. That is the promise I made to Mizelda”.

“—With my sister?”

For a moment, Taritta’s vacant expression tightened at the mention of her sister’s name. That was natural. Taritta was with Flop because of her sister’s push. She had once inherited the position of Chief of the Shudrak, but her sister Mizelda had reclaimed it and expelled her—which was a convenient excuse to send her off with Flop on behalf of the entire tribe.

‘Even if she is my sister, there is no need for reserve in your judgment. If her ability is lacking, treat her accordingly. Not just Taritta, but her husband Flop as well. One chance is enough, but you must give them at least one. —With that, I will consider the reward for our former chief to be settled.’

Those were the words of Mizelda, who had entrusted Taritta to Flop and led the remaining Shudrak back to their village in the Buddheim Jungle. During the chaos of the “Great Disaster,” the proud Shudrak, who kept the ancient pact and lent Vincent a hand early on, sought neither status nor honor after the war. They only wished for the bright future of a daughter leaving them.

However—

‘Oh, and show your face once a year, Abel. And if you send an envoy to our village, don’t forget to pick someone with a good face.’

Vincent couldn’t help but be impressed by her, a woman who didn’t forget to demand things for her own selfish desires even then.

“If she hadn’t lost one of her legs, I might have considered appointing her to the Nine Divine Generals”.

“My sister-in-law? Haha, that would have been delightful. Surprisingly, she might have met your expectations. If that had happened, the problem of the Nine Divine Generals would have been solved at once! Or perhaps—”

“…”

Vincent closed one eye as Flop paused. This somewhat pretentious, theatrical way of speaking was something Flop shared with Cecilus, whom Vincent knew well. Both that fool and the man before him understood the power of words and the decoration needed to maximize them.

In short, a statement worthy of the deliberate pause was about to come out—

“—It would also be effective to welcome my sister-in-law as one of your consorts. It would reward her work and widely communicate to the citizens the firm maintenance of the pact with the Shudrak”.

“I wondered what you were going to say…”

“—?! M-My sister, as Abel’s wife?!”

Before Vincent could say anything to Flop’s proposal, Taritta’s voice, turning inside out with shock, drowned him out. As Taritta turned pale enough to see through her dark skin, Flop raised an index finger.

“Listen. Your Majesty’s goal is to rebuild the Empire as quickly as possible. Hiring the ‘Prison Wolf General’ was part of that… but if the goal is to publicly announce the stability of the Empire, the method I just mentioned is also useful. It’s already been proven effective when it was announced that Medium became the Empress”.

“B-But, wouldn’t a second attempt be less effective?”

“If we’re talking about effectiveness, it’s much scarier to be forced into choosing the Nine Divine Generals in a rush. The ‘Prison Wolf General’ is a rare find in terms of both strength and buzz. If someone unsuitable is chosen for the First seat, the ‘Iron Blood Laws’ will collapse. And wouldn’t my sister-in-law feel good about being the Emperor’s wife?”

“T-True, my sister likes Abel’s face, so she might respond if asked…”

Taritta was easily swayed by the quick-witted and smooth-talking Flop. In fact, perhaps gradually warming up to the idea, Taritta began to peek at Vincent with a face that was starting to accept the possibility of a marriage between her sister and the Emperor.

Before Taritta could finish her mental preparations, Vincent opened his mouth to correct the mistaken thought—

“You two, listen well. I—”

“—THAT’S NO GOOD!!”

However, once again, Vincent’s words were drowned out by a louder voice. Standing at the doorway, which had been flung open with great force, was the tall beauty Medium, standing still with her hands thrust out. She looked surprised by her own actions, her blue eyes wide.

“A-Ah? That’s weird. I just tried to open it normally, but it opened with such force. This is a strange door. You should buy a new one!”

“Haha, sister, look closely. You pushed it so hard that the hinges snapped and the door is leaning. Either way, a replacement is a must!”

“Ah! You’re right! Amazing, big brother! You notice the small details!”

“Stop the farce upon farce. I see no point in this. Flop, this is your fault; take responsibility and put the door back. Taritta, help him”.

Scolding the siblings who had started a noisy, poor play, Vincent stood up. As Flop and Taritta struggled to fix the door with its unfortunate hinges, Vincent walked up to the idly standing Medium.

She looked at Vincent and seemed to make up her mind.

“U-Um, Abel-chin, I…”

“It seems your hands are not injured. If you had suffered even a single wound performing such a foolish stunt, I would have had no way to defend you”.

Interrupting her, Vincent took Medium’s hands to confirm they were unhurt. Perhaps thinking she had done something stupid, Medium’s face turned red as she groaned. Looking at the blushing face of the Empress who was taller than him, Vincent thought of why she had rushed in.

“Did you think that if I welcomed Mizelda as a consort, you would become useless?”

“E-Eh, ah, u-um, well, that is…”

“If so, it is a needless anxiety. —Including the two of you over there, what I say next is forbidden from being leaked”.

Holding the hand of the stammering Medium, Vincent gave that disclaimer to her and the two struggling with the door. It wasn’t officially codified or formally processed yet, but—

“First, rest easy. I have no intention of taking Mizelda as a wife. As that man said, there is significant political value in it, but even estimating that value as not being low, I will not do it”.

“I-Is that so…? Why? Do you dislike Mizelda-chan?”

“It is not a matter of like or dislike, nor satisfaction or dissatisfaction. —If anything, this is my declaration of intent”.

“…”

Medium’s large eyes rounded as she questioned his answer. Taritta had the same reaction, but Flop alone had a different expression. As expected, his previous remark was intentional; Vincent cursed his shrewdness inwardly and continued.

“Having settled matters with the ‘Great Disaster,’ I have determined what I must do as the current Emperor. I will renew the state of the Vollachia Empire and reborn this land of the sword wolf. The renewal of the Nine Divine Generals is part of that, and I will similarly change the way of the Emperor. For now—”

“For now?”

“—I will abolish the ‘Selection Ceremony’ where I would take consorts from multiple Vollachian nobles, have children, and make them compete. To that end, I intend to limit my consorts to a single Empress”.

Medium gasped at Vincent’s assertion. It was natural. The abolition of the “Selection Ceremony” denied the long history of the Sacred Vollachia Empire and its “Iron Blood Laws” which demanded the citizens be strong.

Of course, the fact that such a cruel ritual had continued for generations among the Vollachian royalty had a meaning beyond poor taste. It was to maintain the absolute power of the “Sun Sword” Vollachia, which the Emperor inherited—a purpose of sacrificing blood and life.

“Forged by shed blood and echoing cries, the flame of the ‘Sun Sword’ continues to increase its brilliance. I will end that… foolish doctrine”.

“That is an act that might dim the sword that is the symbol of Vollachia. Perhaps Your Majesty will leave his name in history as a foolish ruler?”

“I told you. Talk of the process before results are achieved is not valuable. No matter how my path is spoken of by later generations, I will simply walk until I arrive”.

“…So, can I walk beside Abel-chin?”

Following Flop’s question, which tested the strength of Vincent’s resolve, a question with a sudden drop in tone was layered on. Knitting his brows, Vincent looked back at Medium, his only Empress, with a dubious look.

“At what stage are you stumbling? Do you understand what I… what I was just discussing with your brother?”

“I understand! But Abel-chin is the one who doesn’t understand! Because everything was so sudden! Whether Mizelda-chan becomes a wife or not, and whether no one but me becomes a wife or not!”

“Are you talking about the weight of responsibility? If you truly cannot bear it, I can replace you with someone—”

“—NO! I’M Abel-chin’s wife!”

“…”

Vincent was speechless as his hand was gripped back with a powerful shout. Before him, Medium’s eyes were moist, her white cheeks flushed, and she was out of breath. Feeling a ringing pain in his ears from the sound, Vincent let out a breath.

“If you have no objection, I have nothing to correct. Instead,”

“Yes, yes, yes, what?!”

“No one can take your role. Be very mindful of—”

“That’s obvious! I am me, Abel-chin is Abel-chin, big brother is big brother, and Taritta-chan is Taritta-chan!”

Medium declared this fiercely while still holding Vincent’s hand. The true meaning of her words was slightly different from Vincent’s. However, hearing her say it, Vincent was silent for a while and then let out a soft breath. It became silly to talk so seriously and cautiously. He felt his shoulders become lighter.

“Still, it was unexpected”.

“U-Unexpected? What is?”

“That you were so fixated on the position of Empress. You are given no significant authority, yet are expected to fulfill responsibilities befitting the title. It is a disadvantageous role with little reward”.

“—? Why? Abel-chin is here. Far from a disadvantage, it’s a great deal!”

“…”

“I used to be a traveling merchant with my brother, so I know a good deal when I see one~”

Medium waved her hand with a red face. At her frank answer, Vincent’s shoulders dropped heavily.

“—You fool”.

Behind the exchange between the Emperor and his sole Empress, Taritta, who was helping Flop fix the leaning door hinges, asked him a question.

“…Flop, did you provoke Abel on purpose?”

“Well, I wonder? I do want to apologize for using my sister-in-law as bait, though. But I’m sure she’ll understand. After all, she has a precious sister of her own!”

Enchanted by the smile of the unapologetically grinning Flop, Taritta shook her head. She realized once again that both her sister and the man before her were opponents she couldn’t match. She held a faint doubt about whether not feeling frustrated by that made her a failure as a warrior.

END

Kararagi Reaper Incident VI
(LQ MTL Translation)

1

The moment he felt the air shudder, Julius instinctively relaxed his knees.

A horizontal strike roared through the air, “killing” the space where his head had been a split second before. With a few stray hairs drifting in the breeze, Julius spun his knight’s sword and unleashed a series of thrusts as he rose. One, two, three times—sharp strikes delivered in a single breath, piercing the center of the dark shadow.

Yet, there was no resistance. It was a false afterimage, a decoy he had been lured into striking.

How does he do it? Julius wondered. It was a footwork technique that separated the physical body from the presence, deceiving the opponent’s perception. The moment he realized this, a blast of heated wind erupted around him.

“Ia, Aro!”

Julius called upon two of his six contracted spirits—Fire and Wind. Their combined power scorched the surroundings with a hot gale, forcibly resetting the battlefield. Even an opponent as formidable as his would surely have to retreat—

“—No, that’s wrong.”

It is a rule of battle among the strong that they do not do what is “common sense.” Common sense dictated fleeing the heatwave. Therefore, a truly unconventional opponent would find a way to deal with it without retreating.

“Kua!”

Acting on that possibility, Julius commanded another spirit. The ground beneath him surged upward, and using that momentum, he leaped into the air. At the exact moment his feet kicked the rising earth, a set of fingertips reached out from the soil to grab him, missing by a hair's breadth. The opponent had submerged into the ground to evade the spirits' pincer attack and immediately transitioned into an ambush.

Julius had narrowly escaped into the air, but he knew he was playing right into his opponent's hands. In the sky, there is no convenient place to hide.

"—In, Nes."

Calling the names of his spirits of Light and Shadow, Julius's resolve hardened in the empty air. If his options were dwindling, he would simply put his faith in the possibilities that remained. He cast a Light spell to vitalize himself and a Shadow spell to place a burden on his foe.

Furthermore—

"Kua!"

Tucking his knees and twisting his body, Julius kicked off a platform that shouldn't have been there—a block of ice created by his Water spirit. By kicking it, he caught the opponent (who expected him to be stranded in the air) off guard, accelerating and diving back to the ground in a single burst.

He unleashed a flash of steel aimed at the figure emerging from the earth. He targeted the shoulder, intending to crush the bone and disable the arm to sap the opponent's fighting strength. Once again, the sensation of impact vanished.

Julius landed, his grip tightening on his beloved sword. He had been certain he caught him. A quiet sigh of admiration mixed with disappointment escaped his lips.

"Once again, my reading was shallow…"

"Nah, I reckon that was pretty grand. It was only a mock battle, but I almost got serious there for a sec and nearly wiped ya out by mistake."

The opponent, who had placed a hand-sword against the back of Julius's neck, laughed off Julius's "immaturity" with soft praise. This was Halibel, the "Celebrated One"—a wolfman shinobi of the Kararagi City-States and a living legend counted among the strongest on the planet.

Clearly, the peak was still far away. Though he felt the sting of defeat, Julius gracefully accepted it and sheathed his sword.

2

"To start with, Julius, I reckon you've got a bad match-up with someone like me—someone who has a lot of tricks and doesn't care much for 'fair play' or 'standard tactics.' You're a knight to your core, so maybe you're just not fond of underhanded stuff?"

"Being called 'knight-like' is hard to take as a compliment when I've just been beaten soundly," Julius replied with a tilt of his head. "Unfortunately, my inability to even touch you is my current reality."

"I wasn't exactly complimenting ya, ya know?"

To Julius, being called a "knight to the core" was the highest form of praise. He hadn't been born a knight; he had aspired to become one. It was only natural to be happy when treated as the very thing one admired.

"Ah, perhaps that is a Lugunican cultural thing? In Kararagi, is it more common to admire merchants or shinobi?"

"I can tell you take real pride in being a knight," Halibel said, puffing on his golden pipe and purring with amusement. "In fact, I think it's impressive. Not many people could say it—asking me to train 'em, I mean."

With a golden pipe clenched between his large lips, Halibel chuckled cheerfully. Just as his words suggested, it seemed to be a genuine expression of admiration for Julius. Indeed, the Julius of the past would likely have found various excuses to pass up an opportunity like this.

However—

“I have a goal I must fulfill,” Julius said, turning his gaze toward the town of Banan. “I don’t feel I have the luxury in life to stand still when I know my goal is so high and far away.”

“You’re burnin’ bright without stoppin’… you’re just like the Young Lad. Guess you’re a master and servant who take after each other.”

“—If I am to call her my Master, then I must be so all the more.”

Julius looked toward a specific row house in the recovering town. There, Anastasia Hoshin was resting, her body exhausted and feverish. It had been a harrowing ordeal for Julius; Anastasia had been abducted by the mastermind behind the “Great Gale” incidents across Kararagi and had been missing for a full day. The shock had shaken Julius to his very foundations.

Yet, she had returned on her own—or rather, she had convinced the culprit to carry her back on their back.

“To not only persuade the opponent to release her but to make them carry her as well…”

“She’s got quite the personality,” Halibel agreed.

Julius had requested this mock battle because he couldn’t forgive his own immaturity for letting her be taken. He wanted to absorb every bit of strength he could. All so that he, Julius Juukulius, could place his master, Anastasia Hoshin, on the throne of the Kingdom without any interference or worry.

“By the way, Julius, shouldn’t you be by her side nursin’ her?”

“Ricardo, Mimi, and even Echidna… there’s no end to those who want to care for her. Pushing them aside to stay by her side would be nothing more than my own selfishness.”

Julius had provided magical treatment with his spirits, but Anastasia’s fever was caused by physical exhaustion that magic couldn’t easily fix. Halibel peeked at Julius with his squinted eyes.

“Well, I think it’s fine to stay there just ‘cause you want to, regardless of whether you’re ‘useful’ or not.”

“—? Did you say something?”

“Nothin’, just talkin’ to myself. But if that’s the case, my plan to end training by sendin’ you to her failed, didn’t it?”

“Indeed. So, I would like to continue. Without holding back, as long as time allows.”

I still lack the strength to approach the summit I’ve resolved to conquer, let alone stand alongside it.

Having experienced a defeat more valuable than victory at the Pleiades Watchtower, Julius was convinced that there was much to learn and steal from even this carefree, strongest of Shinobi.

In response to Julius’s determination, Halibel scratched his neck with his large hand and said,

“That reckless ambition is the privilege of youth… though I don’t think you need to put so much pressure on yourself, you know. It’s just that the situation has repeatedly favored me because I have more cards in my hand… Even in terms of pure skill, there probably aren’t five people in the kingdom who could beat Julius.”

As he spoke, Halibel’s gaze fell to the ground nearby—to the mock battle score sheet Julius had drawn there. In these practice sessions, which followed a best-of-ten format, Halibel had consistently won every match so far by reaching ten points before Julius.

However, the number of points Julius was scoring was definitely increasing as well.

“Once I decide to do something, I do it. Once I set a goal, I charge straight ahead with single-minded determination… We really are two peas in a pod, aren’t we, Ana-boy?”

Halibel’s muttered words vanished inside the werewolf’s mouth. Instead, Julius finished smoothing out the rough ground from their earlier mock battle and spun around to face Halibel.

“—Let’s resume, Halibel. There is still time before dark.”

“Right, right. Though night is usually when I’m at my best.”

“Then please, continue through the night as well.”

“Ah, I walked right into that one,” Halibel chuckled. They took their stances once more.

“—Knight of Anastasia Hoshin, Julius Juukulius.”

“—‘The Celebrated One,’ Halibel.”

They clashed again, the shockwaves ringing through the air. Julius believed that every swing brought him closer to his ideal.

3

—In the distance, the sound of clashing blades stirred Anastasia’s consciousness.

The sound of steel striking steel was, in most cases, something that carried an ominous air of violence. This was no exception for Anastasia, and given her creed that conflict brought a hundred harms and not a single profit, it should have been impossible for her to listen to the sound of swordplay with any pleasure.

However, that was a story from a little while ago, before the Royal Selection had begun. Before she knew it, it had become a habit; through the morning practice of the “Iron Fang” members and other such occasions, the instances where she heard the pleasant ring of steel were no longer few.

Therefore, being stirred awake by the sound of a sword clash was, unexpectedly, not a bad feeling at all.

“—Are you awake?”

However, the person the voice belonged to upon her waking was unexpected, leading to Anastasia’s surprise.

Lying on a futon spread directly on the floor over tatami mats woven from igusa, Anastasia tilted her head to the side and turned her eyes toward the direction the voice had come from. There, sitting on the frame of a low-positioned window with one knee drawn up, was the displeased face of a beautiful woman with white hair—Tia.

"…Well now, what an unexpected person to be lookin' after me. To think it's Tia-san instead of one of my own children, I'm truly surprised".

"Don't worry, the puppies and kittens were coming by incessantly. Right now just happened to be a moment when everyone was away. …Well, in the sense that I've been waiting for you to wake up, it's only natural for me to be here".

"Heh, is that so?"

As she spoke, Anastasia slowly sat up and lightly checked her physical condition.

To have caught a fever and become unable to move was a blunder. What had happened? After being taken away and returning by her own power, Anastasia had collapsed almost before she could offer an explanation. She remembered now. Of course, Echidna, who had been with her, surely would have explained things, but—

"That person who looks just like Tia-san… how is 'Black Tia' doing?"

"What's with that unpleasant way of calling her… do you want to be killed? If you mean her, she's staying quietly in a barred room for the time being… I mean, that's not it! This! I've been waiting for you to wake up exactly because I wanted to talk to you about that".

Descending from the window frame where she had been settled, Tia thrust her face close to Anastasia's. Even seen from up close, she was a woman of outstanding, sharp beauty. It was a loveliness that could rival even Emilia's, though Anastasia thought that Emilia, whose gentleness of expression made her more approachable than her features alone, was easier to deal with.

Leaving Anastasia’s inner thoughts aside, Tia prefaced with “Listen,” and continued:

“I heard it from the scarf. It seems you went and made some kind of promise with the thief who stole my Light Jewel. Do you understand? She’s a thief who robbed me of the source of my power”.

“I didn’t quite understand the finer details, but is that how it is? See, that Black Tia person wouldn’t say anythin’ to me except to go die”.

“Of course she would, if she took in my Light Jewel, she’d naturally be swallowed by my emotions! It’s not something a human can handle! It’s the same for an oni! Practically the same thing!”

“I see now”.

Driven by her momentum, one piece of unconfirmed, shocking information after another flew out of Tia’s mouth.

So she wouldn’t notice that she was surprised by the content, Anastasia moistened her lips with her tongue and steeled herself for the razor-thin negotiation that was necessary right after waking up —just as she had done with a different person with the same face before going to sleep.

“By the way, why was it that Tia-san was waitin’ for me to wake up? If you knew the other person was a thief, you could’ve just left me alone and fulfilled your objective”.

“If I did that, I’d be making you break your promise. Besides, if I interfere with you, the people around you will get in my way. Dealing with that knight, or the big puppy and the black puppy, is a pain. That’s why”.

While she sounded like the latter was the main reason, the fact that the first reason came out first suggested she was a person who was hard to hate and honest at her core. She was straightforward in the movements of her heart and emotions, which meant there was room for negotiation.

“To be honest, there shouldn’t be any reason for me to go that far, but…”

The person had taken her away without a word, put Echidna—her family of many years—in danger, and to begin with, had stolen Tia’s precious possession. She had also caused the great winds that destroyed the town; thinking normally, she was someone who should simply be kept in a barred room.

“But, I ended up makin’ a promise. Me, as a merchant”.

She would not bend her way of life. If Anastasia, who was physically weak and possessed no power to fight, started lying even to her own heart, she would truly become a woman weak in both body and mind.

That, she could not do. So as not to deceive all the people who had appraised Anastasia as strong.

“Regarding the treatment of Black Tia, I have to talk with Tia-san and the City Executives, and the things to think about are piled as high as a mountain. Taking them one by one to settle them… Tia-san”.

“What is it?”

To Tia, who was crossly folding her arms, Anastasia slowly placed a hand to her own cheek and created a refined, soft smile—one that looked gentle to those around her, but for herself, was intended for the purpose of attack.

And then—

“I’m sorry to ask, but could you go and call all my children for me? First, I have to tell ‘em I’ve woken up properly and put ‘em at ease, right?”

“Do you think I’m some convenient errand girl? Let me tell you, I’m not the kind of existence you humans can just order around with a snap of your fingers! Honestly!”

Fuming with anger, Tia stormed out of the row house. Watching her back as she left, Anastasia listened intently to the window—to the sound of clashing blades that could still be heard.

Strangely, the ring of that steel seemed elegant to her, and naturally, her heart began to settle.

END

Yae Tenzen’s Crimson Sakura State of Affairs

1

???: “—Excuse me~, could you spare a moment?”

With that, they caught the attention of the retreating figure; turning around, the person in question tilted their head slightly and looked up to meet their gaze. The tall woman stared back at them, a faint hint of consideration flickering within her emerald-green eyes,

???: “Um, you are…”

???: “I’m Yae Tenzen, a maid here at this mansion. I’ve only just recently been reinstated, though~.”

Yae responded with a subtle protrusion of her tongue, and the woman facing her briefly looked up in surprise before a smile formed upon her lips, gently lifting the hem of her skirt thereafter.

With movements so graceful that they inspired admiration within even Yae herself, she offered a curtsy on the spot.

???: “Why, how courteous of you. I am Frederica Baumann, serving as the head maid of the mansion of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers.”

Yae: “I’m told that Schult-chan received a great deal of kindness from Margrave Mathers, as well as from Emilia-sama, who was a fellow Royal Candidate alongside the Madam, so I would like to express my gratitude once again.”

Frederica: “No, it is nothing. Setting aside the Master’s contributions, I have done little of note myself. And, concerning the matter involving Priscilla-sama… I fear Schult-sama will face many hardships going forward. I am sure Yae-sama and the others in the mansion will offer their support—”

Yae: “—Yae-san, or perhaps Yae-chan.”

Frederica: “Huh?”

The conversation which followed was an exchange befitting maids in the service of a proper, genteel noble; however, Yae interjected with a few words, putting a stop to it.

At Frederica’s expression of surprise, Yae grinned and said, “No, no”,

Yae: “Even though we serve different people, as fellow maids… I was thinking that “Yae-sama” sounded a bit too formal. Would you mind if I suggested “Yae-san” or “Yae-chan” instead? Would it be alright if I called you “Frederica-san”? Or maybe “Freddie-chan” would work too?”

Frederica: “…Those feel, just a little too overfamiliar, so please call me Frederica-san. In return, I will take the liberty of calling you Yae-san.”

Yae: “Roger. Whether or not we maintain this distance will depend on how our relationship develops from here on out∼.”

Frederica: “—. So, Yae-san, was there something you wished to discuss with me?”

Thrown off her pace by Yae’s unexpected behavior, Frederica asked this with a hint of uncertainty.

It did not seem that she thought it had been mere small talk; in response to her question, which could not quite hide the nuance of skepticism, Yae narrowed her eyes like a cat and smiled.

With that—

Yae: “If you don’t mind, would you like to be friends with me, Frederica-san?”

2

—Following the failure of Al’s plan, a swift change in strategy followed.

Yae returned to the Barielle mansion, now bereft of its mistress, Priscilla, whereupon she announced the last will and testament

Priscilla had left behind— which had named Schult as Priscilla's adopted son, and declared the ascension of Schult Barielle, all of which had been done to prepare for the arrival of Al, who was destined to return in due time.

Yae: "—Al-sama, is a monster, after all."

That was why Yae, though anticipating the failure of Al's schemes, refused to believe in his death or his defeat.

Sadly, it was Al who had thrown Yae's spirit off balance, and yet in this twisted situation, it was also Al's presence that just barely kept her from completely falling apart.

Although the exact date and time remained unknown, Al would surely return and resume his mission to fulfill his purpose. When that time came, Yae would have to become the cog that would bring the plan to fruition at last.

That said, if there was anyone capable of defeating Al, however briefly, it would be against Yae's principles to ignore that threat. —As Yae, hailed as a "genius shinobi," would say, the true measure of a shinobi's strength lay not in their power, but in their ability to survive.

So long as one lived, the chance to achieve one's goals was always within reach. While the image most had of shinobi was of those willing to sacrifice their lives, doing so was truly nothing short of throwing their talents down the drain.

So long as she remained alive. In other words, so long as she drew breath, Yae would never abandon her purpose.

That was why—

Frederica: "Well, this is quite the unusual tea. A flavor I have never tasted before."

Having said that, Frederica was successfully lured into Yae's private quarters and was taking a sip from the teacup Yae had offered her. As she smiled at Frederica, Yae continued to hone her blade in her mind.

She was supposed to have received word from the Pleiades Watchtower from Al, who had been accompanied by members of the Emilia Camp, to which Frederica, currently right before her, belonged. Although they did not seem to be composed of their full members, if those people had thwarted Al, she intended to obtain information about them.

Ultimately, if Yae could fully expose the information of all those involved, it would make her thoroughly satisfied.

Yae: “Actually, it’s tea from my homeland~. It comes from Kararagi, among other places, but since it’s hard to come by here in Lugunica, it’s something I use sparingly.”

Frederica: “If that is the case, was it truly all right to bring it out now? Perhaps it should have been saved for a more important occasion…”

Yae: “What better timing than when inviting a new friend over to your room? I don’t think there is, except maybe spending time with a lover, so now would be the best occasion.”

Upon hearing Yae’s reply, Frederica’s expression softened slightly, causing a hint of a smile to appear at the corners of her eyes.

She was an honest, endearing person who reacted in such an innocent way. Even when Yae told her the reason was “to be friends,” she showed no suspicion or wariness; she was simply surprised, and then accepted the proposal. Yet, this did not lead to carelessness or recklessness, perhaps because of her strong sense of duty as a servant.

From her mannerisms alone, it was clear that her aptitude as a maid was exceptional, leaving Yae with a twinge of regret. —If she had not possessed ulterior motives, they might have actually become friends.

Yae: “Well, I guess I’ve never really interacted with anyone lacking some kind of ulterior motive, though.”

From the very beginning, when she had infiltrated the mansion of

Priscilla Barielle as a maid, and throughout her subsequent days of being subjugated by Al, right up to the current situation, Yae harbored ulterior motives behind it all. No one had ever told her to speak honestly, but then again, what did that honesty even mean?

As a shinobi, Yae was a being who had forgotten her own face beneath the mask she wore.

Yae: “Even so, as for Schult-chan and the others…”

Accompanied by a sigh, Yae looked around and found herself in her private quarters, where she had invited Frederica— it was not a newly prepared room, but the very same one Yae herself had used when she had been employed there.

Even though Yae had supposedly resigned, it seemed that Schult had never tidied up the room, but had kept it well-maintained by coming in regularly to clean it. While Priscilla and the others were in the Empire, the other maids who had remained at the mansion had taken over those duties.

As if there had never been any doubt, for even a moment, that she would return someday—

Frederica: “Having a place to belong is wonderful, is it not?”

Yae: “—. Did my face somehow give away what I’m really feeling?”

Suddenly, upon hearing Frederica say that, Yae ran her fingers over her face to verify. However, Frederica shook her head and replied, “No,”

Frederica: “While only a few details, I had heard about some of the circumstances surrounding your departure from the mansion, Yae-san. But, Schult-sama and everyone at the mansion… and above all, Priscilla-sama had reserved a place for you to return to. Since I, too, have experienced returning to a place I had once left, I could not help thinking that.”

Yae: “A place to return to, you said? Does that have anything to do with your family?”

Frederica: “—Yes, that is right.”

When pressed a little further, Frederica replied with a smile. Seeing the calm composure concealed within that smile, Yae’s opinion of Frederica was elevated one level.

It would seem that their opponent was not so easy to deal with as first thought.

Frederica: “Do you know about my family?”

Yae: “I wouldn’t exactly claim to know that much about it~. Seeing as I was technically a part of the Madam’s camp myself, I suppose the extent of my knowledge is that Frederica-san and her sibling joined your camp together?”

Frederica: “So that is the case… It is quite the relief to know that Garf’s reckless behavior is not widely known.”

Yae: “I hear that he’s quite strong, right?”

Frederica: “Not everything in this world revolves around that. Regarding that matter, not just myself, but my camp has been discussing various aspects of that as of late.”

Yae: “Heh~, everyone in the camp. So, you all get along quite well, would you say~?”

Frederica: “That is correct. Rather than just fellow camp members, I suppose you could say that we are more like family.”

Yae: “—Family.”

And, as Frederica said that, her gaze lowered to her teacup, and Yae muttered the same word.

To Yae, the concept of a family was something she had no connection with, a word which rang hollow. She had lost her family the moment she was abducted to the shinobi village, and she had never formed any bonds with anyone afterward. While she might have used her feminine wiles as a cover, her ironclad rule was to never let anyone near her heart, even if she did let them near her body.

Because Yae possessed such exceptional ability, she never needed to exploit women as a shinobi. Yet, perhaps conversely, because she had become emotionally involved, she had ended up in this state of affairs. Despite having mocked the village's ironclad rule countless times, there was a clear purpose to it, to the point where the village chief's laughter seemed to echo in her mind.

That was why—

Frederica: "Is it not true for Yae-san and Schult-sama as well? To me, the trust Schult-sama has placed in you, Yae-san, felt like something more than just a simple master-servant relationship… or rather, something more than just coworkers."

Yae: "…"

Caught off guard by these unexpected words, Yae could not help but wrinkle her brow.

Frederica's reevaluation of their relationship was prompted by Schult's sudden change of position.

Merely half a day ago, Schult had just been a common servant, but now he had become the heir to the Barielle Domain.

Yae's position would also no longer be that of Schult's coworker, but rather, one in which she would need to regard him as her master. Though but a minor detail, it was a necessary shift in mindset.

That said, that was a different matter altogether.

Yae: "Saying that Schult-chan and I are family is a bit of a stretch, isn't it? From Schult-chan's perspective, the Madam has just passed away, and he is going through a difficult time. It's just that I happened to come back, and I'm someone he can easily lean on."

Frederica: "Truly, when one experiences profound suffering, the person with whom one can confide and share that pain without hesitation, even if they are not family, is someone truly precious.

That would be called a friend or a lover. Yae-san, which one are you to Schult-sama?”

Yae: “…Well, well, it looks like you’ve managed to best me this time.”

Yae was neither Schult’s friend, nor his lover, of course. That said, even with both of those options off the table, it would not leave family as the only remaining possibility, yet the argument that she was one to whom he could entrust his deepest emotions was something she could not refute.

In reality, Yae intended to leverage those feelings, which was why she had returned to the Barielle mansion. Yet, despite being aware of this, she resented having it pointed out by someone else.

Frederica: “Hehe.”

Yae: “—. What’s so funny?”

Yae narrowed her eyes at Frederica, who had suddenly burst out laughing, her hand covering her mouth.

Frederica: “Nothing… Actually, when Yae-san first invited me to her room, I was a bit nervous. I was unsure what Yae-san was thinking.”

Yae: “So you thought I was lying when I said I wanted to be friends? If that’s the case, that makes Yae-chan feel pretty lonely.”

Frederica: “I would not go so far as to call it a lie, however, I am also a member of Emilia-sama’s camp… I am always on my guard to ensure that my words and actions do not give anyone an opening to exploit. That is why…”

Yae: “That is why?”

Frederica: “Why not start with something a little more straightforward? After all, I still hardly know enough about you, Yae-san, to refer to you as a friend.”

Frederica tilted her head slightly, her long, golden hair cascading down her slender shoulders. The gleam in her jewel-like emerald eyes was certainly not the look of someone plotting something. Nor, however, did she appear to be a frail creature merely waiting to be devoured.

Faced with that gaze, Yae lifted her teacup and said, “For example…”,

Yae: “Could it be something like, how this tea is something I actually brewed myself?”

Frederica: “Yes, exactly… That said, this tea you brewed, Yae-san. It has a distinct flavor, yet the way the aroma lingers in the nose is quite addictive…”

Yae: “Since there weren’t many ingredients to work with, I have come to value things that can be savored with a little creativity.”

Frederica: “Oh, I quite understand. Believe it or not, I am quite the expert at foraging for wild plants when out in the mountains and forests.”

Thumping her chest proudly, Frederica ostentatiously declared her credentials. But, to Yae, who had been abandoned in the woods during survival training, it was a rather presumptuous remark.

Yae: “When it comes to foraging for wild mountain plants, I’m pretty good at it as well~. After all, the ingredients you find in the mountains are not something you can just eat without a second thought, unless you know how to tell which ones are poisonous~.”

Frederica: “Hmm, I can distinguish them by scent, so I will not be outdone.”

Yae: “Well, I don’t intend for this to turn into a contest or anything, though.”

Seeing Frederica, who looked as if she might roll up the sleeves of her maid uniform and dash off into the woods at any moment, Yae opted to back down from the challenge in order to curb her enthusiasm.

Of course, those sorts of worries were completely unfounded.

Frederica: “I hope that by sharing more conversations like this, we can gradually become friends.”

Yae: “I see, I see. So, Frederica-san is the type who starts with relatively low hurdles, but then really puts you to the test with the number and placement of the hurdles later on~.”

Frederica: “For some reason, it feels like my intentions are being misunderstood… besides…”

Yae: “—?”

Frederica closed one eye and appeared ready to say something, prompting Yae to raise a questioning look. Then, Frederica brought her hand to her mouth, exposing the faintest hint of her fangs, and said,

Frederica: “I know this is a bit of an afterthought, but regarding your choice of words… “timing” and “type”, where did you pick up those expressions, Yae-san?”

Yae: “Ahh…”

Now that she understood the intent behind Frederica’s question, Yae felt a sense of realization.

Al’s vocabulary and actions had significantly influenced Yae’s choice of words. Setting aside the way Al carried himself, which had led Priscilla to deem him as a “jester”, his peculiar way with words had influenced everyone present at the Barielle mansion in some manner.

Yae was among them— she had initially adopted them to harass Al, but before she knew it, she had mastered them on a subconscious level, and they had become an ingrained habit.

And from time to time, Frederica and Roswaal also used expressions that bore a similar nuance to the words which Al employed.

It would seem that there were some similarities between Al and the

Lolimancer from the Emilia Camp.

Frederica: “—Yae-san?”

Yae: “That’s top-secret— as in, where and when it’ll be revealed will remain a mystery for now. I’ll tell you once I can finally call you Freddie-chan.”

Frederica: “…This time, it would seem it is my turn to be countered…”

Frederica wore an expression that straddled the line between displeasure and pouting as Yae replied with a finger to her lips.

It would seem, in both the maid showdown and the friendship showdown, a stalemate was brewing. Faced with Frederica, who proved to be a tougher opponent than anticipated, Yae felt not only frustration and impatience, but also a sense of intrigue. Thinking back on it, she recalled that she had initiated the encounter.

Yae: “It is such a rare opportunity to discuss things like this with people my age, so this has been quite enjoyable.”

Even if behind it all lay an ulterior motive, such as gathering intelligence for Al. —After all, Yae had truly enjoyed herself. Despite her objective to assassinate Priscilla, or her attempts to simply survive being killed by Al, or even her exploitation of the will to deceive Schult, the fond memories of those happy days spent at the Barielle mansion made this a cherished place, one dear to Yae’s heart.

That was why, even if there had been an ulterior motive, she could still enjoy talking to Frederica.

Frederica: “Perhaps, it might be a good idea to hold some sort of social gathering for the maids. We could limit it to those houses involved in the Royal Selection, or we could leave it open to anyone.”

Yae: “So, we get to vent about our Masters and gossip about them, things we usually don’t dare say. Kyaa~, Freddie-chan, are you daring or what?”

Frederica: “I would never say anything of the sort! Besides, is it not a bit early to be calling me Freddie-chan?”

Yae: “Putting aside the nickname for now, I had plenty of complaints about the Madam, you know~. For example…”

The recollection of that beautiful woman of crimson flashing through her mind, the words she had spoken to Yae, that striking figure seen from behind, and the dazzling presence she had exuded: she recounted all of this to Frederica.

Watching Frederica’s reactions of surprise, admiration, and sometimes utter bewilderment, Yae secretly grinned at the smooth progress of her plan to win Frederica over, and the tangible progress she was making in building their relationship.

With a stifling smirk of satisfaction, the plan of the Crimson Sakura continued in secret while she awaited Al. —Far from monotonous, the Shinobi’s covert operations continued, intertwined with the pleasures of conversing with a friend.

END

Unadapted Comic Alives

Visual Complete Vol. 1: Emilia (Translation Pending)

Visual Complete Vol. 2: Ram (Edited Machine Translation)

Character – Ram

The older of the twin maids who work at the Roswaal mansion, where the injured Subaru was brought.

She is an arrogant and abrasive person with a sharp tongue. Compared to her younger sister, she is lacking in all areas, including cooking, washing, sewing, and cleaning.

She has a sharp gaze, harsh with her words and actions, is a teacher with a no-nonsense approach to education, and has an unbearable personality to match.

She is devoted to her master, Roswaal, and in general, she does not open her heart to anyone except Roswaal and her younger sister, Rem.

She is in charge of Subaru's education while working at the mansion, and she continues to bully the incompetent protagonist with her venomous tongue.

Comments

"Of course, ability and loyalty are necessary to work at the Mathers family's mansion, but the two who stood out in those two senses are —Ram and Rem."

"The older sister, Ram? Hmm, yes… I am a little worried about Ram's ability as a servant."

"Although it would sound better to say she is good at getting their work done, she has a terrible habit of cutting corners to get things done efficiently, and to begin with, she already had a rather arrogant way of speaking… it is difficult to say if she is particularly suitable to be a servant.”

“However, there is no doubt about her ability in other areas and, above all, her loyalty to the master of the house… Roswaal L. Mathers-sama.”

“It would be safe to say that half of Ram is made up of her feelings for Roswaal-sama, and the other half is her feelings for her younger sister, Rem. No, that is no joke.”

“I believe her feelings are different from that of obsession. Ultimately, it is a type of deep affection.”

“She is very devoted to who she confides in. And when that is combined with her excellence, the results are simply bountiful.”

“That girl fully believes in Roswaal-sama and fully believes in herself who fully believes in him. She does not waver or hesitate in that, and if anything stands in her way, she will not hesitate before taking on a challenge… I think that is simultaneously both a strength and a worry.”

“The only person who can truly be said to be Roswaal-sama’s confidant is Ram… I think that Ram is the only one who knows Roswaal-sama’s true thoughts and intentions.”

“What is the Master thinking, and why does he keep Ram by his side?”

“Whenever needed by the Master, Ram responds without hesitation.”

“I am both a little afraid and a little envious.”

“…Garfiel would assuredly be angry if he heard me say something like that.”

Comments on Ram, from a scary-faced colleague

Character – Reinhard

A handsome young man with blazing red hair and eyes as blue as the clear sky.

A perfect superhuman with refined manners whose every word and action is full of consideration for others.

Heralded as the Sword Saint and the Knight Amongst Knights, he is a celebrity who is well known throughout the Royal Capital.

He usually serves as a member of the royal guard in the Royal Castle, but on his days off, he can be found strolling around the Royal Capital.

What did this young man, who always does his best for the city's people, see on his day off?

Comments

"If asked who my most respected friend is, I would not hesitate to give his name."

"He is a member of the Kingdom of Lugunica's Royal Guard, the Knight Amongst Knights, and the Sword Saint."

"Indeed, this generation's Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea's name."

"Although we are both part of the Royal Guard now, I have known him for a long time."

"I believe the first time I saw him was when my father took me to the Royal Castle."

"I was only about ten years old, so he must have been around seven or eight."

"To my embarrassment, I was a child who lacked awareness of my position at the time."

"Of course, I had learned proper etiquette and how to behave at the royal palace, so I was not disrespectful."

"However, looking at him then, I was reminded that I had no understanding of the true nature of any of those actions.”

“Even at such a young age, Reinhard had already been vividly aware of his position and strength.”

“He was never prideful of the immense power he bore, nor did he ever neglect to use it to help others.”

“When I first witnessed him at the Royal Castle and viewed the sincerity in his eyes, I felt quite ashamed of myself.”

“It is because of that encounter with him that I became the person I am today, someone who diligently works to improve myself to the point of being deemed the Finest of Knights. I would like to thank my friend for that.”

“My motivation behind diligently striving to better myself to the point I have been deemed the Finest of Knights is my encounter with him on that day. I would like to thank my friend for that.”

“…However, I sometimes find myself thinking.”

“I wonder if he, if Reinhard, ever feels any discomfort from standing tall like that all the time. I have never asked him about it personally, but the environment he is in is not exactly an ideal one.”

“Even though he must have had times when he suffered and wanted to give up… he has never demonstrated it. That is what gave me my opinion of him.”

“I hope my friend can find someone he can confide in and distribute his burdens with.”

“I cannot help but loathe my immaturity, which prevents me from being in a position to be relied upon.”

Comments on Reinhard, from the Finest of Knights

Character – Elsa

A beautiful woman with long, black hair, a rare sight in this world, who exudes a seductive aura.

She flaunts her glamorous figure in a provocative outfit, and does not hold back in showing off her seductive charm to those around her.

However, despite her demure appearance and gentle tone, there is a darkness lurking in the depths of her eyes that sets her apart from other working women.

It seems she had some business at the loot house, and made an appointment to meet Felt there.

Comments

???: “Oi! Have you found the woman on the wanted poster?!”

???: “Nah, she ain’t here. Her appearance stands out, so there’s no way she could’ve been overlooked…”

???: “Do you suppose she’s hiding somewhere? She clashed with Reinhard-sama, didn’t she? A bunch of people saw the light of his sword strike the sky. I don’t think she could survive that…”

???: “The fact that Reinhard-sama couldn’t finish her off is probably the cause of all this fuss!! She’s a menace who escaped from the Sword Saint’s blade. How can you call yourself a knight if you’re just gonna let her run wild in the Royal Capital?”

???: “Don’t yell at me, sorry… But, what kind of person is the woman on the wanted poster?”

???: “You didn’t even know…! Oh, shit! That woman is Elsa Granhiert, but she’s also known as the Bowel Hunter.”

???: “Huh, the Bowel Hunter…?! Who’s that…?”

???: “She’s a savage killer who loves to slash open her victims’ bellies with an absurdly huge knife and watch their guts pour out.”

???: “Apparently, she calls herself a mercenary. However, she’s considered a menace and was accordingly placed on a wanted list.

If you find her, report to the guards or the knights. If she makes any suspicious moves, arrest her immediately… so they say.”

???: “If she’s earned that kind of reputation, she must’ve committed some terrible atrocities…”

???: “Her most notorious deed is the Red Snowfall on the Orcos Domain, which took place in the northern country of Gusteko.”

???: “There was a noble lord named Orcos who ruled a domain along the border between Lugunica and Gusteko. When he had a dispute with another noble lord from a neighboring domain, Elsa was apparently among the mercenaries hired by the rival side.”

???: “No way, the one who killed that lord was Elsa…”

???: “No, it wasn’t just that. The Bowel Hunter had the initiative to kill everyone associated with the domain. Not just the people connected to the Orcos Domain, but the entirety of the faction of the lord she was employed by.”

???: “Wh-Why would she do that…?”

???: “Who knows? Anyway, after that incident, she became wanted by Gustekan authorities for being a menace. And because of that, in Lugunica, if you see her, you’re supposed to contact the authorities immediately.”

???: “Now that you know how dangerous they are…”

???: “Uh, hey… that woman, she had black hair, black eyes, and a big knife, right?”

???: “—? Yeah, that’s right.”

???: “Co-Could that possibly be her right there?”

The final conversation between guards searching the Royal Capital for the Bowel Hunter

Glossary

☆Out Off (The Convenience store)

Subaru: “Kicking off our explanation of terms, we have a convenience store from my old world.”

Emilia: “Convinyence stoar… huh, what does that mean?”

Subaru: “A convenience store is a type of store where you can buy just about everything you need for daily life. Out Off is a major nationwide convenience store chain. There were two of them within two hundred meters of my house, and it felt like they were eating into each other’s business areas. I understand the strategy of dominating a certain area, but isn’t that taking it too far?”

Emilia: “Um, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about, Subaru, but you’re probably right.”

☆Demi-Humans, Demi-human Species, and Demi-Human Tribes

Subaru: “My image of them is that they are humanoid races other than humans, but is that correct?”

Emilia: “Well, that’s mostly true. The most well-known demi-human races are the elves and dwarves. There are also the Giant Tribe and the Dwarf Tribe. The beastman types are divided into the Beastman tribe and the Half-beast tribe. If you include those who are half-human, there’s a reaaally large number of them.”

Subaru: “From what I saw when I was in the Royal Capital, it looked like there were a lot of humans. It seems like demi-humans and humans live together, but do they ever have any conflicts with each other?”

Emilia: “I heard that the relationship between demi-humans and humans varies from country to country. In Lugunica, they coexist now, but a while ago, there was a civil war between demi-humans and humans. It’s a problem everyone has to deal with, but I hope we can reduce these misunderstandings… even if only a little.”

☆The Royal Selection (The Pick for the Throne)

Subaru: “The fact that the royal bloodline has ended smells of a fishy conspiracy.”

Roswaal: “It has been thorooooughly~ investigated, so there’s no doubt. The decision was made after considering the possibility of them… feigning illness. Everyone in the royal family has passed away with nothing to hide.”

Subaru: “That’s a pretty irreverent guarantee… Anyway, that’s why the opportunity has come to Emilia-tan. Since it’s a selection, after all.”

Roswaal: “Of cooourse~, there are other candidates as well. All of them are people who are very motivated to take the throne for themselves. Ahaaa~, this is getting intereeesting~, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “At the very least, Emilia-tan and I are feeling uneasy about the smile you’re wearing right now.”

☆The Royal Capital of Lugunica

Subaru: “The Kingdom of Lugunica’s capital… Its biggest city and the place I was initially summoned to.”

Reinhard: “The population of the Royal Capital is around three hundred thousand. However, that is just the number of permanent residents, and it is difficult to accurately measure the number of people who are coming and going to and from it at any given time.”

Subaru: “By the way, what’s the population of the Kingdom of Lugunica as a whole?”

Reinhard: “It is said that the entire Kingdom’s population is around fifty million. However, this is not an accurate figure that has been gathered by traveling around the various regions. It is a sum of figures that have been collected from regional lords. Still, there is a possibility that the numbers of their subjects have been inflated in order to collect taxes, so I do not consider it a very reliable figure.”

Subaru: “How unexpected to hear an illicit story about the Royal Capital…”

☆Kadomon’s Fruit Stall

Subaru: “This is Mr. Save Point’s shop. For some reason, whenever I Returned by Death, I ended up back here, so I was scared that maybe it was being caused by the old man.”

Kadomon: “Stop making a racket. If you’re not gonna buy an appa, then get lost.”

☆Insignia

Subaru: “It’s a sort of badge in the shape of a winged dragon with a red jewel in its mouth.”

Felt: “I was hired to steal it from the silver-haired nee-chan, and if I hadn’t messed up after that, I woulda gotten paid a holy gold coin for it… shit, I screwed up.”

Subaru: “But if you’d succeeded, you would’ve become a national criminal. Since it was a qualification for participating in the Royal Selection, the guards throughout the Royal Capital would’ve been desperately searching for you.”

Felt: “…Either way, it didn’t turn out well, dammit!”

☆The Forbidden Library

Subaru: “There’s a nasty rumor that the reclusive loli in the Roswaal mansion calls her room that…”

Beatrice: “Do you wish to be blasted away, I suppose? With Betty’s Door Crossing, this is a place that is separated from the rest of the world—that’s the Forbidden Library, in fact. It is connected to only one door in the mansion at a time and is always changing, I suppose.”

Subaru: “For all that, it’s pretty easy to find.”

Beatrice: “You’re just an anomaly, in fact! Normally, it shouldn’t easily… ah, Now Betty is angry, I suppose!”

☆Contracts

Subaru: “I can write it down if you don’t believe me. It can be used as evidence in court later.”

Beatrice: “Binding oneself with the soul, rather than with paper. In this world, that’s the idea behind making Contracts, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Binding someone with your soul sounds cool. They must feel like they’ve made a commitment, right?”

Beatrice: “Even if you disregard them and move on, demi-humans and those involved with magic emphasize a great deal of importance on Contracts, in fact. Especially with the older races and spirits, you can be sure that the topic will invariably come up if you talk about them, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I heard that a Contract also binds Emilia-tan and Puck.”

Beatrice: “How regrettable, in fact. If there were no contract between Bubby and that girl, Betty would forcibly tear them apart and keep Bubby by Betty’s side, I suppose…”

Subaru: “What are you raving about, you loli? Scary.”

☆Gates

Subaru: “So, it’s okay to think of it as an organ that’s necessary for a magician to use magic, right?”

Rem: “It’s not something you can physically see, so it’s a bit of a stretch to call it an organ, but it’s what allows you to take mana from the air, convert it into magic, and release it back into the world. That’s what it does.”

Subaru: “The better the magician, the bigger and more numerous the Gates they tend to have. Roswaal’s probably an anomaly, though.”

Rem: “The world has blessed Roswaal-sama as a magician. Rem, Nee-sama, and Emilia-sama are above average, and Subaru-kun is below average. No, well below average.”

Subaru: “You didn’t need to say “well”, did you?! I already knew without you telling me!”

☆The Sword Saint

Subaru: “With such a bombastic title, it really resonates with my chuuni mind.”

Reinhard: “I am honored that you like it, but I personally feel that I am still too inexperienced to carry the title. The title of Sword Saint has been passed down through the generations.”

Subaru: “I seem to remember that building and the sky being cleaved in half; is that not enough? Are all the previous Sword Saints monsters like that?”

Reinhard: “The first Sword Saint is said to have clashed with a dragon using only a sword. That sword has been passed down to me, but the dilemma is that my own will cannot draw it. It would be presumptuous of me to call myself a Sword Saint when the sword itself has not even recognized me, would it not?”

Subaru: “From my point of view, it seems like the sword is a bit too extravagant.”

☆Satella

Subaru: “Well, if I remember correctly, she’s called the Witch of Envy or something like that…”

Emilia: “I’m sorry, I don’t want to talk about this.”

Beatrice: “Even saying the name of that abominable Witch you should hesitate to utter, I suppose.”

Rem: “Please don’t say anything rash and upset Rem.”

Ram: “It’s no use expecting such subtlety from Barusu.”

Subaru: “What’s with this ganging up on me…”

☆Return by Death

Subaru: “It’s the power to literally rewind time and restart the world by dying.”

Ram: “Well, it seems like Barusu’s hopelessness has finally spread to his whole body.”

Subaru: “Can you stop patting me on the shoulder as if you were comforting me with that sad look on your face? I can talk about it because we’re in a meta place, but I don’t know why I have this ability, either! I wish I could’ve been given a cheat that would have just made me super strong!”

Ram: “That’s what makes Barusu Barusu because he can only see such a bleak future due to his rash decisions. I guess you could say Return by Death is cause for celebration.”

Subaru: “Damn, I can’t deny that… Remember this. My future prospects will show you one day…!”

☆The Great Waterfall

Subaru: “When I say even further east than the easternmost point, people laugh at me and say that’s nonsense.”

Puck: “The Great Waterfall is a waterfall that runs off the world’s edge. At the edge of the continent, at the end of the world, the sea ends, and there is a waterfall that goes on forever. Where does it disappear to when it falls? Not even Spirits know what lies beyond the end of the world.”

Subaru: “That’s pretty scary. I see. No wonder why they laugh when they hear I’m from beyond the Great Waterfall. That damned Reinhard, he was probably making fun of me…”

Puck: “It is said that only Dragons know what lies beyond the Great Waterfall. Although they certainly exist, they have no place to live, and it is said that they have their own paradisebeyond the Great Waterfall and that they spread their wings and fly over to this continent from time to time.”

Subaru: “You’re not fooling anyone with that line about literally spreading your wings and taking a vacation, so don’t laugh!”

☆The Loot House

Subaru: “It’s a den of thieves where the unscrupulous criminals of the Royal Capital amass their ill-gotten gains.”

Rom: “Don’t make it sound so foul. This is the headquarters for ne’er-do-wells.”

Subaru: “Even if you change the wording, the meaning doesn’t change! Since when have you been in that kind of business?”

Rom: “It’s been ‘bout fourteen or fifteen years since I settled in the Royal Capital… I’ve been doin’ this for a long time… but I guess I’ll be hangin’ around for a little bit longer.”

Subaru: “Use this opportunity to find a proper job. Maybe it’ll help put a stop to Felt’s bad habits.”

Rom: “You’re just a nobody who doesn’t know anythin’, sayin’ whatever ya want…”

☆The Natsuki Family

Subaru: “I’m from a family of three, consisting of my father, mother, and me. Since I, the eldest son, was teleported, the family line will end with me.”

Emilia: “Do-Don’t say such sad things. After all, there’s a chance that Subaru might get a new younger brother or sister.”

Subaru: “That’s not something to joke about. I’m afraid that if they find out I’m gone, they’ll have no qualms about making more children. I don’t wanna imagine my parents doing something like that!”

Emilia: “But I’m sure they’re worried… I hope they can find peace of mind soon.”

Subaru: “…I don’t know. Maybe they’re better off without me.”

Emilia: “Subaru…”

Subaru: “I know that’s not true. I’m the one who should know better than anyone.”

The second half of the glossary continues in Volume Three.

Extra Episode “Ram”

1

The faint sound of a pen nib skimming across a paper was the only echo in the silent room.

A girl with short, pink hair sat at a desk, holding a quill pen.

Her face was more cute than beautiful, and her strong-willed, light-crimson eyes were distinctive. She was wearing a maid outfit that exposed her shoulders and back, and even though it was the middle of the night in her own room, she was still donning a white headpiece on her head.

—Even though this was her private room, it served as proof of her steadfast attitude towards her duties. On the desk in front of the girl were a number of papers, and as she looked through them, she sometimes wrote her signature, sometimes wrote responses on blank sheets of paper, and left scribbles one after another on the notepad at the edge of the desk.

Her concentration was so intense that the cup of tea she had on the desk had completely cooled down and had been left untouched.

???: “—Whew.”

Suddenly, she exhaled and ceased moving the quill pen. The girl cast aside the last of the documents she had been looking through, and, touching her eyelids with her free hand, she looked towards the window,

???: “…Feeling exhausted, and it’s already this late?”

The girl muttered this when she saw the morning sun rising faintly from beyond the mountains in the distance.

???: “There won’t be much time left now.”

As she said that, the girl quickly gathered up the papers on the desk, put away the quill pen, among other things, and then looked at the now completely cooled cup of tea. She took a sip, lightly moistening her tongue and lips, and then stood up. She made her way to her bed, removed the white headpiece and ribbon from her head, untied her shoulder straps to shed her maid uniform, revealing her white-naked body.

???: “It’s cold.”

The girl, now in her underwear, put on a thin nightgown-like negligee and crawled into the covers.

She placed a pillow under her head and closed her eyes, and her tired consciousness drifted quickly into sleep. It was almost sunrise—there were probably less than three hours until she had to commence work.

For spending that brief time sleeping was simply a part of the girl’s—of Ram’s daily routine.

2

???: “Nee-sama, Nee-sama. It’s morning. Time to wake up.”

For this girl, her day always began with the voice of her beloved other half.

She felt the sensation of someone shaking her shoulders from above the bed, and her consciousness slowly returning to reality. She opened her eyes in response, and her gaze met with the light-blue eyes of the person looking in at her.

???: “Good morning, Nee-sama. Today is another beautiful day.”

When their eyes met, and the other person realized that she was conscious, her lips parted in a thin smile. It was a fleeting smile that seemed to disappear, a smile that only those who were close to each other could understand.

She thought to herself that if she smiled more clearly, she would have a smile as lovely as a flower.

The same could be said of the other girl. After all, the person who woke her up was her twin sister, who had the same appearance as her.

???: “Nee-sama, are you awake yet?”

Ram: “…Mmm, just four more hours of sleep.”

???: “Sometimes Rem would like to let Nee-sama sleep a bit longer… but that would set a bad example for Subaru-kun. He never oversleeps, no matter what.”

Ram: “Hmm… It’s quite a pain when Barusu laughs over oversleeping.”

The words of her younger sister—Rem, reminded her of the boy with black hair. He had joined them as an apprentice servant at the mansion just a few days prior. The boy’s abilities were so poor that he was practically useless as a servant in a nobleman’s mansion, but for that very reason, she wanted to avoid showing any weakness.

Reluctantly, she rubbed her eyelids and sat up, and Rem supported her unsteady upper body with an outstretched hand. Leaning on Rem’s support, she slid her hips down, sat on the bed with her feet on the floor, and,

Ram: “Rem. —As usual, please help Ram get ready.”

Rem: “Yes, Nee-sama. As usual.”

In response to her haughty older sister’s orders, the younger sister did not disobey but nodded with a look of delight in her eyes.

Having gone behind the bed, Rem slowly combed Ram’s pink hair with a comb in hand.

Feeling the careful touch of fingers on her nape, as if handling jewels, Ram glanced out of the window and estimated that it had been around three hours since she fell asleep.

Rem: “Nee-sama, are you tired? Your workload has increased, as you’re also looking after Subaru-kun’s studies.”

So asked Rem, who was busy preparing her older sister. Usually, they would be having a conversation, but today, they were both silent, lost in their own thoughts. Ram shrugged and said, “No, that’s not it,” sensing the concern in her sister’s sigh.

Ram: “Teaching Barusu is no different from training a dog. It’s not exhausting, and yesterday we finished early, around midnight.”

Rem: “If that’s what Nee-sama says, then that’s fine… but if you’re tired, please let Rem do your work for you. Please don’t overdo it.”

Rem’s voice resonated pleadingly as she combed Ram’s hair. However, she could not afford to rely on Rem’s kindness. Rem was already undertaking more than eighty percent of the general household chores in the mansion by herself. Ram and Subaru were in charge of the remaining twenty percent, and even that was not being satisfactorily completed.

Ram, of course, and even Subaru, did not want to put any additional burden on Rem.

Ram: “If anyone should be taking a break, it should be you, Rem… Ram knows exactly what Ram can handle, so to say that is unreasonable.”

Rem: “With those feelings alone, Rem can work for ten or even a hundred years without needing a break.”

Ram: “We’ll see about that.”

It was an exaggeration, but her attitude was certainly not a lie. Rem, who idolized Ram, seemed to be trying to confirm her own sense of worth by devoting herself to her. Ram, who sensed that this was a distortion, was unable to say anything because she was similar to Rem.

—Rem's words, "ten or even a hundred years" pierced deeply into her heart. If nothing changed, Rem would continue to spend her days relying on Ram as she had said. Although that was not necessarily a bad thing, she did not think it was right either.

Ram: "That's why, just for a little while Ram will…"

Rem: "—? Nee-sama, did you say something just now?"

Ram: "It was that no matter how much sleep Ram receives, it would never be enough. Why is it that sleepiness never seems to dry up but just keeps on flowing? Is it because dreams quench your heart just like spring water quenches your thirst?"

Rem: "Quite the poet… Nee-sama is so wonderful…"

Rem finished combing Ram's hair, muttering absentmindedly. Then, Rem decorated her sister's hair with a ribbon that matched her own, placing it in a position that was symmetrical to her own, and then,

Rem: "Nee-sama, it's time to change into your uniform…"

Ram: "Yes, hurrah!"

In response to Ram saying that in a casual manner and raising both her arms, Rem remarked, "Excuse me", then proceeded to slip off Ram's nightgown. The morning air was chilly against her naked body, and while Ram's eyes narrowed from the cold, Rem brought out a change of uniform from the closet—the same type of maid uniform she had worn the previous night, and dressed her older sister.

She slipped her head through the opening at the neck and shook her head lightly, and finally, Rem put a white headpiece on her head,

Rem: "Yes, Nee-sama. You look wonderful today."

Rem carried a full-length mirror to the bed and Ram observed herself while sitting down. While she adjusted the slightly wrinkled chest area and the angle of her ribbon—Rem diligently put on Ram's white stockings, which reached past her knees, and her preparations were complete.

Ram: “Haah… Well then, shall we get back to work today?”

Rem: “Yes, of course. By the way, Nee-sama, what’s that stack of papers on your desk…?”

Ram, who was yawning with her hand over her mouth, was called out to by Rem, who had verified her sister’s personal appearance. At these words, Ram glanced at the paperwork she had been working on until the early hours of the morning—the documents she had completed were on Roswaal’s behalf. They were related to the internal affairs of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers’ domain. Ram had not told Rem about the fact that she was helping out in a way that went beyond the duties of a mere servant. She had no intention of telling her sister about it in the future, either, making her feel guilty.

Ram: “It’s nothing important. Barusu was studying his letters, so Ram was looking around for something that might be useful for children learning how to write.”

Rem: “For Subaru-kun… as expected of Nee-sama. Would you like Rem to help too?”

Ram: “No, it’s okay. Rem is much busier than Ram, so you should prioritize your work. Although Ram was the one being worried about, so it seems like Rem is the one who has not been sleeping enough. Your eyes look tired.”

Rem: “Nothing can be hidden from Nee-sama. It seems that Rem stayed up a little late.”

The younger sister, wearing a forced smile, showed no sign that she knew her older sister had stayed awake even later than that. Ram pushed Rem’s back towards the door as they headed outside, and,

Ram: “If you’re in trouble, just say so. Ram is here for you to rely on in times of need.”

Rem: “…Yes, if that happens, would you please do that, Nee-sama?”

When Rem gave a weak smile, Ram patted her shoulder to reassure her. Then, as they were about to leave the room and venture downstairs.

???: “Haah… Ah, good morning, Mesdames-senpai.”

Subaru appeared at the end of the corridor, putting a hand to his mouth and yawning with a carefree expression. He was wearing a strange gray outfit—and seemed to be on his way to interrupt Emilia’s morning routine.

Ram: “How can you be so brazen as to do it morning after morning?”

Subaru: “Don’t make it sound like I’m doing something bad. I’m just going to obtain some motivation for the day.”

Subaru, with his lips pouted, argued with Ram, and then he raised his hand in surrender to the two of them,

Subaru: “I’ll join you for work after my morning routine, so thanks for your efforts today.”

Dangling his hands with a nonchalant demeanor, Subaru turned and walked down to the opposite side of the hallway. Noticing how Rem emitted a wordless exhale as she watched him pass by, Ram, thinking about her sister’s unusual reaction, declared,

Ram: “That’s why Ram has a little… hope for you, Barusu.”

Rem: “—? Nee-sama, just now, did you say something?”

Ram: “No, it’s nothing.”

Upon hearing her sister’s mutterings, Rem, with a furrowed brow, asked her a question, but Ram simply shook her head to dismiss it. Then, taking her sister’s hand, she led her towards the stairs leading downstairs, and as they set foot on the first step,

Ram: “Well then, today is another busy day for everyone except for Ram.”

And so, she pompously declared that she would skimp on her work.

Continued in Volume Two of Re: Starting Life in Another World from Zero

Visual Complete Vol. 3: Rem (LQ AI Translation)

Rem

At the mansion where Subaru, who had sustained an honorable wound, was carried in, she is the younger of the twin maids who single-handedly takes on all general chores. She is the one in charge of the politely insolent, sharp tongue. It is no exaggeration to say that the mansion's functions are maintained entirely thanks to her competence.

Her gaze is gentle, she teases kindly, and she hardly ever shows even her business smile to anyone other than the older sister she reveres.

She wakes her sister, gets her dressed, tends to her hair, nails, and skin, and feels happiness in the environment where she can work together with her sister. Her recent worries are the noisiness of the new servant, and the fact that her breasts have started to grow so that her clothing size no longer matches her sister's.

COMMENT

For Ram, she is the cutest little sister in the world, Ram's precious other half. Naturally, is that not so?

She is the other half who was born as Ram's twin, she adores Ram more than anything, and ever since she was small she would trail after her saying, "Onee-chan, Onee-chan"… there is no way Ram would not dote on someone like that.

However, Ram was the only one that child could open her heart to and interact with like that.

She has been shy around others since she was small… and that personality has not changed very much even now.

I have no intention of shifting responsibility by saying that those around her were at fault.

Neither their parents nor the rest of the clan meant any harm, and Rem herself probably does not think of it that way either.

That is why Ram ought to have noticed both that that child was suffering, and that the people around her were doing that to her without any malice.

—If the current Ram is the result of continuously overlooking that, then that is probably her punishment.

It is not as though Ram wishes to offer some confession.

Let us get back to the point. That child who, when she was little, used to call Ram “Onee-chan” like that, before Ram knew it started addressing her as “Nee-sama,” and she stopped hiding behind Ram’s back…

Rem is surely trying to act as Ram’s replacement.

If she were doing it to satisfy her own pride, that would be fine, but she is surely only being driven on by her guilt.

I wonder hen will Rem finally be able to realize it.

That she has long since outstripped the back she used to hide behind.

That Ram has already decided on the path she will walk as Ram, so Rem is free to do as she likes as well.

If Ram is the one who tells her this, that child will only think of it as mere consolation.

So there is no meaning in having Ram be the one to tell her.

Unless someone, someone that child can think of as precious, says it to her, it will be meaningless.

—I wonder if someday little sister who is the most precious in Ram's world will be able to obtain that.

On her younger sister, the elder lets this slip with a serene expression

From "The Sound of Chains"

Unable to resist the sudden urge that welled up, Subaru opened his mouth wide and let out a yawn.

He roughly wiped away the drowsiness that had collected as tears at the corners of his eyes with his sleeve, then stretched his back with a sharp motion. The evening sky was dyed orange as a parting gift from the setting sun, and the flowing clouds seemed to be gently praising the end of the day.

Seeing the clouds off, Subaru rolled his arms, legs, and neck to check how his body was doing. The effects of the hard labor were still there, but he did not feel as exhausted as he had on the first night.

Subaru: "It's not like my body's gotten any stronger, so I guess I've learned to move it in a way that makes me tire out a bit less."

It was probably not his body getting used to it, but rather his getting used to the work and improving his efficiency that had led to his fatigue lessening.

Since Return by Death did not lead to any strengthening of his body, getting accustomed to the experience he gained was an essential element.

Rem: "Subaru-kun, sorry to have kept you waiting.—Are you all right?"

Subaru: “Mm. Yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine. Rem-rin, you done with the shopping too?”

Rem: “Yes, without any problems. Subaru-kun was very popular, was he not.”

Carrying a tote bag with their purchases in it and offering words of appreciation to Subaru was the blue-haired girl—Rem.

Rem, looking good in her maid outfit, held down her hair as it fluttered in the wind and, with a faintly softened expression, looked at Subaru. At Subaru, whose butler outfit had been dirtied by mud and dust, and then snot and tears on top of that.

Subaru: “For some reason I’ve always been the type that little brats really take a shine to, y’know. I guess it’s that uncontrollable motherly something inside me that just irresistibly draws in their inner child or whatever.”

Rem: “Children, like animals, rank people by their character. They instinctively know whether someone is an opponent they are allowed to make light of.”

Subaru: “That’s not a compliment, right?”

At Rem’s biting comment, he found himself convinced that in that respect she really was Ram’s sister.

Blunt Ram and roundabout Rem. Dealing with the two of them required mental toughness. Of course, if he was not tough physically as well, the work itself would never get done in the first place.

At present, Subaru and Rem were in a settlement named Arlam, the village closest to the mansion.

Roswaal, who despite appearances held the position of Margrave, was a proper noble who owned several tracts of land as his domain. Arlam Village, right next to the mansion, was no exception, and the residents, upon recognizing Subaru and the others as a matter of course, would call out to them in a friendly manner.

The twin maids, who often had opportunities for contact with them on shopping trips and the like, were of course well known, and even Subaru seemed to have his existence at least widely recognized. Surprised at the speed with which rumors spread in the countryside, he nevertheless felt embarrassed yet happy to be so warmly welcomed.

Subaru: “That said, what is with how overly friendly those brats are…? Do they just not get the kind of hard-boiled aura I’ve got going on here, where if you touch it carelessly you’re liable to get burned?”

Rem: “First you talk about your motherly side, then you try to act like an adult; Subaru-kun is very busy all on his own, is he not.”

Subaru: “I kinda feel a prickly edge to that “all on your own” part, but honestly, when I was busy I think things were actually more peaceful because nobody bothered me. I should’ve just tagged along on your shopping from the start, Rem-rin.”

Since Subaru was useless, unable even to tell different ingredients apart, he had been entrusted with killing time in the village while Rem did the shopping. During that opening, the children had discovered him and effectively abducted him.

Subaru: “They just don’t have enough respect, that’s the problem. That’s why I can’t bring myself to like little brats.”

Rem: “Did Subaru-kun properly show the children anything that would be worth respecting?”

Subaru: “Can’t argue with that flawless logic! Still, I kinda feel like getting treated like a pushover right from the start isn’t quite right either… Ram would probably handle that sort of thing way better.”

Rem: “Nee-sama is wonderful.”

The conversation was slightly talking past each other. Seeing the way Rem boasted about her sister, her nose practically in the air, and yet with no hint of any hidden sarcasm in her attitude, Subaru guessed that this was her honest opinion.

Subaru: “Honestly, with Ram’s personality, it feels like she’d be causing friction pretty often, though.”

Rem: “Nee-sama’s fearlessness is one of her charms as well. It would be far too impossible for Rem.”

The words she added sounded somehow forlorn, and Subaru furrowed his brows but could not press the issue.

Rem: “Come to think of it, how is Subaru-kun’s studying coming along?”

With Subaru suddenly at a loss for words, Rem changed the topic as if to shake it off.

Subaru: “I wanna say “steadily”… but it’s not going quite that smoothly. Just like with anything, you gotta take your time and let it grow nice and slow. Same as love!”

Rem: “It would be nice if it did not wither partway through.”

Subaru: “The love in that comment just now from you, Rem-rin, is already totally withered!”

He shouted, and when he saw a faint smile appear on Rem’s face, Subaru also smiled in relief.

—It had already been four days since Ram had proposed private lessons at night. The idea had been that they would take turns being responsible for Subaru’s education, but Rem’s turn as instructor had still not come around.

This simply meant that Rem had been that busy, but for Rem herself, it seemed to have become something she felt guilty about instead.

At Rem, who was showing the rare sign of hesitating, Subaru waved his hand while keeping his smile.

Subaru: “Don’t worry about it. It’s not like I’m being neglected or anything, and I’ve got no complaints about Ram either. Well, I would like her to stop just casually climbing into bed and falling asleep right in the middle of teaching me, because that really kills my motivation.”

Rem: “Nee-sama is only behaving that way on purpose, to stir up Subaru-kun’s motivation.”

Subaru: “What’s with that absolute worship of your sister, that’s on a whole other level. She’s seriously oni-believable.”

Rem: “Oni… believable…?”

Rem tilted her head at the coined word, which had lately been one of Subaru’s personal buzzwords.

Subaru: “It’s the Oni version of “godly,” y’know. Oni-believable—pretty catchy, right?”

Rem: “You like Oni?”

Subaru: “Maybe I like them more than gods. I mean, the gods basically never do anything for you, but I heard that if you talk about your future plans with an Oni, they’ll laugh along with you.”

Apparently they especially got fired up when you talked about the next year. As Subaru pictured himself throwing his arm around a red Oni and a blue Oni and roaring with laughter together, he suddenly noticed that a definite smile had etched itself onto Rem’s face.

Subaru: “Oh…”

He had seen her give the occasional small smile before, but this was the first time she had shown him a proper smile like this. He did not know what had unbound Rem’s heart, but Subaru snapped his fingers and said,

Subaru: “That smile of yours could rival a million volts of night scenery.”

Rem: “I’ll tell Lady Emilia.”

Subaru: “That wasn’t me hitting on you, okay?!”

Straightening his posture, Subaru solemnly begged for forgiveness. Then Rem slightly raised her brows at the sight of him.

Rem: “What happened to that hand?”

Subaru: “Hm? Oh, I got super chomped on by the mutt those brats were leading around.”

His left hand, with a clear bite mark imprinted on it, had stopped bleeding, but a little blood was still seeping out. Incidentally, the back of his butler outfit was stained with snot, but he would not notice that until after he returned to the mansion.

Rem: “Shall I heal the wound?”

Subaru: “Eh? Wait, Rem-rin, you can use recovery magic and stuff too?”

Rem: “Only simple things, but enough for first aid. Would you prefer Lady Emilia instead?”

Subaru: “Mm, that’s a very tempting offer I can’t really turn down. But… I’ll pass on both.”

Looking at the marks left by the canine teeth on the back of his left hand, Subaru refused the offer.

For one thing, he judged the wound to be a perfect marker. What had made Subaru aware of the start of this loop had largely been the disappearance of the wounds he had obtained up to the previous loops.

Whether he had wounds or not served as an effective basis for judging Return by Death. Had he not happened to be bitten by a dog, he would have had to resort to self-injury with some convenient blade or feather pen.

Subaru: “Well, you could call it an honorable wound. Nobody gets to go on living their whole life in the same pristine state they were born in.”

Rem: “They say scars are a man’s badge of honor. In reality, it just means he slipped up on the battlefield, though."

Subaru: "That might be one side of the truth, but could you not make it sound so dry?!"

Rem was casually sharp-tongued, but seeing the way she tilted her head, she apparently had no awareness of it. That was scary in its own way.

Subaru: "Even so, I feel like there've been plenty of times before when I cut my hand and stuff right in front of you, Rem-rin, so how come you suddenly offered to heal it just now? Or rather, why didn't you ever offer up till now?"

Rem: "If it does not hurt, you do not remember it, and I think it is better for the warning to remain."

Subaru: "That's some casually Spartan educational policy there… So, what was the reason for the offer just now?"

Putting aside why it had been overlooked until now, he wanted to know why she had not overlooked it this time.

At Subaru's question, Rem kept silent for a while.

Looking at her profile as she clammed up, Subaru wondered if it had something to do with that smile from earlier.

Therefore,

Subaru: "The scarecrow was outstanding in his field. The calendar's days were numbered. Who's the one spouting all these lame puns?!"

Rem: "Did you suddenly lose your mind?"

Subaru: "You're jumping to conclusions way too fast. That's not it, I was just trying to check the reason behind that smile of yours earlier, Rem-rin."

He had thought she seemed to react to "oni-believable," so he had wondered if maybe that was it.

Subaru: “Thought there might be grounds for suspecting you’re secretly a top-class dad-joke lover. And then you’d get in a good mood over it and start being nicer to me, y’know.”

Rem: “Please assume that Rem will never again have an opportunity to heal Subaru-kun’s wounds.”

Subaru: “You’re that mad about it?!”

Rem: “The last time Rem was this angry was when Subaru-kun secretly spoke ill of nee-sama.”

Subaru: “That was actually pretty recent and happens pretty often!”

Because of that unnecessary extra remark, the sharpness in Rem’s gaze at Subaru increased.

Trembling, Subaru gave up on defending himself, closed his mouth, and looked up at the sky. Beyond the evening gloom, night was slowly approaching. At that fact, he felt his hands and feet stiffen with tension.

—After all, today marked exactly the fourth day in this second world as well.

Subaru: “The real game is whether I can make it safely to tomorrow morning.—But before that,”

Whether he would be able to make a date promise with Emilia in the first place was also an important battle.

Excerpt from “Re:Zero -Starting Life in Another World- Volume Two”

COMMENT

What kind of understanding do you have of the existence known as spirits, I wonder?

Most people treat spirits with reverence as supernatural beings.

As for my own personal view, I have no doubt that they are natural beings.

A being in which the Mana filling the air transforms, and with that Mana as its core, Od and self-awareness sprout—

If I were to line it up in needlessly complicated terms, that is what a spirit is.

That said, a spirit that has just been born has almost no firm sense of self or power to interfere with its surroundings.

Those kinds of power and awareness bloom over the years, as it stores up Mana in its core and thickens its Od.

Since Mana is something that exists anywhere so long as it is within the air, spirits are, in principle, removed from death simply by existing…

When you think about it like that, don't you find them to be quite fascinating, and hard-to-come-by beings?

I've let the preface run long, haven't I. It's a bad habit of mine… but it was a necessary explanation as well.

As I just said, spirits are natural beings, and their birth has to rely on accidental miracles.

Of course, since spirits, which have little need to worry about perishing, only ever increase in number, even if their birth is rare, their total count is something you could call innumerable all across the world. Most of them are lesser spirits, poor in self-awareness and power, though.

An individual with power—for a being that can truly be called a spirit to come into its own is that difficult a thing.

But you know… don't you think that giving up just because you can't rely on accidental, natural occurrences is far too timid a way of thinking?

As I explained a moment ago, the existence of a spirit is a transformed Mana as its core—

made into Od, and by having that absorb Mana, it sustains its own life.

If the definition of a “spirit” is fulfilled by meeting these conditions…

then might it not be possible to artificially alter Mana and create life with it as the core?

There was quite a bit of trial and error involved, you know. Under the very first set of conditions, I couldn’t accomplish this. But I managed to find a way to relax the conditions somewhat, and thanks to that, you could say this attempt succeeded.

There are only three successful examples. As for where those successes are now, and what they are doing

—ah, now that is a very, very fascinating story.

A Witch’s Lecture

Beatrice

A young girl who serves as the librarian of the Forbidden Library, the room hidden within Roswaal Manor by means of “Door Crossing.”

Her adorable looks and gorgeous dress give those who see her the impression of a fairy.

However, she is fundamentally sullen, arrogant, and a misanthrope. She adores Puck, a spirit, and calls him “Nii-cha.”

Ever since their first meeting, she and Subaru have had the worst possible impression of each other, and yet they somehow get along, making for an unfortunate relationship. She usually shuts herself away in the Forbidden Library and sits alone on a stepstool in the room, as if waiting for someone.

Roswaal

A noble of the Kingdom of Lugunica, and a powerful man holding the position of Margrave.

One of the foremost magic users in the Kingdom, he is also known in the Royal Castle as the Head Magician of the Court.

A peculiar man who ruins those grand titles and his overflowing talent with eccentric behavior, strange remarks, and clownish makeup.

An oddball who likes to paint his face white, put on a clown's makeup, and stir things up with words and deeds that make fun of others.

Just what kind of relationship could Emilia possibly have with this man, whose given nickname is the Demi-Human Lover.

COMMENT

Hah? Makes my guts churn. Don't ya go carelessly tossin' that bastard's name around in front of my amazin' self.

Granny 'n the rest keep runnin' their mouths 'bout how he's some guy we owe a huge debt to…

As if that bastard's the type ta help people out without some kinda scheme or payback in mind.

…Sure, it ain't wrong that our amazin' selves are relyin' on that bastard's strength for how we live.

We're not clueless 'bout bein' under his protection, either. I can see he’s movin’ so trouble doesn’t spill over onto us.

But listen up! Bein’ grateful for that kinda stuff, and actually likin’ what kinda person he is, are totally different damn stories!

The only reason that bastard hasn’t asked our amazin’ selves for anythin’ yet is ‘cause it ain’t “that time” yet.

To begin with, if he really were some desireless bastard, there’s no way he’d be snaggin’ himself titles like Margrave or Head Magician of the Court…

…snatchin’ up those fancy titles one after another, takin’ the whole lot for himself, no way in hell that’s happenin’ if he’s really got no desires.

And ya can see clear as day that if ya grilled the man himself on it, he’d just dodge ‘n weave with some slippery answer.

Seriously… I’ve got no damn clue what part of a bastard like that Ram even likes…

Every last one of ’em’s missin’ any real sense of danger, ya know.

At this rate, our amazin’ selves are gonna get dragged into some huge mess someday.

What that bastard’s calmly gettin’ ready for is that kinda problem, and Granny ‘n the others don’t get that at all.

That’s why my amazin’ self’s the only one who can move.

No matter what impossible demands that bastard brings, my amazin’ self’s gonna have ta brute-force every last one of ‘em.

Sharpen my claws ‘n fangs, and have my amazin’ self face that bastard head-on—that's the only way.

…Under that clown makeup, I've never once seen that bastard's eyes really smilin'.

How're ya supposed ta truly trust a bastard who's never once shown a real smile.

It's like they say, "Balincron's bonds are in smiles where ya can see yer teeth," right.

Hah? Oi, quit messin' with me!

The fact my amazin' self hates that bastard Roswaal's got nothin' ta do with Ram!!

《Testimony about Roswaal from a person with a nasty glare and worse attitude》

Glossary

☆ Nii-cha

Beatrice: "Nii-cha, you are wonderful… Nii-cha's fluffy fur always seizes Betty's heart and never lets go, I suppose. Such sinful fuzziness, in fact…"

Puck: "Hehe, my fur never goes a day without being brushed by Lia's own hands, you know. Whenever I appear in front of people, I want to be the best me I can be—that's what this is a sign of, nya."

Beatrice: "Nii-cha really is just too amazing, I suppose… Betty is completely lovestruck, in fact."

Puck: "Honestly, Betty is such a spoiled little girl that there is just no helping her.”

Subaru: “Who the hell is this even for, with all this flirting right from the opening?! This is supposed to be the start of the second half of the glossary, you know?!”

☆ Half-Elf

Subaru: “A mix of Elf and human blood… that’s what it means, right? I was thinking, but do there even exist half-breeds between Elves and races other than humans?”

Emilia: “Mm, well… I wonder. I don’t really know, but normally when you say “half,” you mean a child born between a human and an Elf. And even those, there are almost none of.”

Subaru: “From the circumstances, I kinda get the feeling there’s probably a lot of complicated stuff involved though.”

Emilia: “We’re not thought of very well. That’s why people who treat me the way you do, Subaru, are reaaally precious to me… Yeah, it saves me.”

Subaru: “If my ignorance is actually useful off-screen, then that’s more than enough for me.”

☆ Bowel Hunter

Subaru: “…Do we really have to dig this topic that deep?”

Elsa: “You don’t particularly have to worry about it. It’s not like I expect to be understood, or even want to be.”

Subaru: “Right now, it’s the title of the person who’s sitting proudly at number one in my personal kill count. Even speaking on a meta level, just hearing it makes the belly she sliced open feel like it’s aching again.”

Elsa: “Since I’d very much like to have another chance to peek at your bowels someday, do take good care of your stomach, won’t you.”

Subaru: “This is the first time in my life anyone’s shown me “concern” that does absolutely nothing to get my heart going.”

☆ Hikikomori

Subaru: “It is the term for warriors who sacrifice their own future and keep fighting to protect the peace of the family who come home tired day and night. The only comfort their hearts get is the time they spend with the lover waiting for them on the other side of the screen.”

Emilia: “That sounds like a reaaally tough job… Subaru, are you a hikikomori too?”

Subaru: “Geh.”

Emilia: “—? Huh? Did I say something wrong?”

☆ Magic Ore

Subaru: “Stones that store mana and have a bit of magic-ish power imbued in them… right. I heard they get used here and there for things like heating bathwater or in kitchen appliances.”

Ram: “They are something closely tied to the very foundation of everyday life. Magic ore itself is a pure, colorless lump of mana, but by giving it direction from the outside, you can make it serve all sorts of roles. There are many situations where it sees heavy use, like the magic lamps that light up the royal capital at night. It is just that…”

Subaru: “That kind of wide deployment has not spread all the way out to the countryside or every last corner of the kingdom yet, even if it has in the royal capital and other big cities, huh. Well, I never saw that sort of thing even in the slums, so it is easy enough to imagine there being that kind of dilemma.”

Reinhard: “It is frustrating—that is all I can say, and that is what pains me. I am always thinking that I wish I could do more, devote more of my strength, for the common people. —I even find myself resenting how lacking I am.”

☆ Witchbeast

Subaru: “Ah, so they really do exist. Creatures that get treated like that… basically, monstery things.”

Roswaal: “I do not quiiite get what you mean by “monster,” buuut the common understanding is that witchbeasts are artificial lifeforms whose instincts are set to harm humankind~.”

Subaru: “Artificial lifeforms… so this world actually has the tech to make living creatures?!”

Roswaal: “Maaaybe that was a baaadd choice of words. Artificial or not, they were not created by humans. Witchbeasts were born from the Witch herself. Lifeforms brought forth by the Witch’s hand, made to harm humankind, are what we call witchbeasts. Their appearance is close to that of existing animals, buuut every witchbeast has a horn growing from it, so they are easy to recognize. With a few exceptions, tha~t is.”

Subaru: “The Witch… huh, the Witch. And you are not gonna give me a detailed explanation, anyway, right?”

Roswaal: “Now, is that not the sort of thing we should sa~ve for the next glossary entry?”

☆ Witch

Subaru: “Last time, I really got chewed out over that whole “Witch of Envy” thing, though.”

Puck: “If I had to put it into words, witches are more like humanity’s external enemies, the kind that go down in history, I guess. Generally, when people say “the Witch,” they mean the Witch of Envy, but for someone like me who knows the world as it used to be, there were six other witches as well. As for whether I knew them… well, it is more like I did not, really.”

Subaru: “I sorta read the Witch of Envy’s story in a loose, fairy-tale kind of way too. She is like the shared image of “scary things” in this world, yeah? Seems like people are still pretty damn afraid of her even now.”

Puck: “That is because she has not been completely destroyed. Even now, the Witch of Envy is sealed away in a shrine near the great waterfall to the east of Lugunica. So the time when everyone can truly sleep in peace is still a long way off.”

Subaru: “That’s one… crazy long-lived witch, I gotta say.”

☆ Witch Cult

Subaru: “That is the word that came tagged onto a baseless false accusation. As for what it means… I can sorta guess.”

Rem: “Is that so? Then please, try saying it.”

Subaru: “You people have been badmouthing witches and witchbeasts to me nonstop up to this point. So the Witch Cult is a group that worships that witch or whatever, right. Just from how over the top your reaction was, Rem, I can tell they are a nasty bunch everyone knows about.”

Rem: “For you to understand that much… then as I thought, Subaru-kun, you are also connected to them…”

Subaru: “Any way this conversation goes that ends with that conclusion is a BAD END, so we are not doing that! It is a conclusion anyone could come to!”

☆ Mana

Subaru: “It is that stock name you always hear in games and stuff for some invisible, mysterious particles.”

Beatrice: “I have no idea what you are suddenly talking about, but Betty will just ignore it and move on, I suppose. Mana is, so to speak, the raw magical power mixed into the air… that is what it is, in fact. It is indispensable for using magic, for spirits to maintain their existence, and for living beings to lead their lives, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I kinda get that spirits need mana, but do humans and so on also, like, die without it?”

Beatrice: “If food and sleep are the sources of power needed to maintain the body, then mana is the source of power needed to satisfy the soul, I suppose. If either one runs dry, life cannot be maintained, in fact. That said, it is not as if mana gets lost to the extent that a single human wastes away and dies all that often, you know.”

Subaru: “I just felt a death flag go up super hard right now!”

☆ Magic

Subaru: “At last, we’ve got actual fantasy! You really can’t do without this, y’know!”

Rem: “It is fine for you to be so very excited about it, but Subaru-kun does not have any talent for being a magic user. Precisely because you cannot reach it, it might be something you long for, something a little painful, though.”

Ram: “You take the mana that fills the atmosphere into your body through the Gate. Then, by means of a chant, you give the mana you have taken in change and direction, and release it outside again through the Gate to activate it—that is about the extent of the principles of magic in this world.”

Subaru: “There are six attributes in all: fire, water, wind, earth, Yin, and Yang, right. No matter what kind of effect a spell has, basically it can be broadly divided into one of those six, or so I heard.”

Rem: “Rem is water, Nee-sama is wind. Just as Subaru-kun is Yin, the attribute each person excels at changes from person to person. When it comes to someone like Lord Roswaal, he possesses the highest aptitude for all of the attributes. Lady Emilia is fire, but the conditions are a little different for spirit users.”

Ram: “And that was a simple explanation of magic that even Barusu and a dog could understand.”

Subaru: “Do you sisters have some kind of disease where you will die if you do not use me as the punchline?”

☆ Meteor

Subaru: “Who’d have thought we’d get a triple bombardment of magic-related topics! Last up, we have Meteor.”

Felt: “That thing you used in your negotiations with me, with the pitch that it’d sell for a stupidly high price, right. Going by what Old Man Rom said, it’s crazy rare or something.”

Rom: “In practice, talent and training on the part of the person are what matter for magic. Precisely because they ignore that whole area yet can produce effects similar to magic, Meteors are highly valued. It is even said that, aside from the ones whose method of manufacture is known, creating new ones is impossible.”

Subaru: “So in this world’s setting, they’re treated like ancient weapons… or something like that. The kind of super rare thing that sometimes gets dug up in ruins, I guess.”

Rom: “It is true that most Meteors are found as excavated relics. Apparently, the original meaning of “Meteor” is something like “a gift that comes falling out of nowhere.” Owing to how useful and how rare they are, the reality is that they fetch a high price wherever they are traded.”

Felt: “Well, whatever the story behind ‘em is, the fact they sell for a lot is more than enough for me. I just wanna somehow sniff out another one and have it warm up my wallet.”

Subaru: “What a brat with no sense of romance…”

☆ Appa

Subaru: “The fruit of wisdom that Adam and Eve bit into, which became the cause of their expulsion from paradise. It gave the two of them, who had known nothing, the ability to think, and incurred God’s displeasure… That proof of sin is the apple. This is the name of a fruit that closely resembles it. Come to think of it, I still haven’t achieved my goal of getting my hands on one of these.”

Kadomon: “You sure yap on and on, don’t you, kid. If you’re not buying, then hurry up and get lost.”

Subaru: “Yeah, yeah. …Next time, I’ll definitely buy an appa from you, old man.”

☆ Loop

Subaru: “I use this as a blanket term for the time regression surrounding my situation, including Return by Death.”

Emilia: “We still do not know why you can go back in time, do we.”

Subaru: “For now, the only thing we have figured out is the conditions for a loop to occur. Who is doing it, what their objective is, what they want me to do… all of that is still completely missing.”

Emilia: “Just hearing that you can come back even if you die, it sounds like a good thing, but…”

Subaru: “The pain still hurts just as much, and the memories from that time only remain inside me, and dying itself comes with a pretty huge sense of loss… but, well, it’s not all bad.”

Emilia: “…Subaru.”

Subaru: “There are times when, rather than being given some half-baked power, the possibility of maybe being able to take back something irreversible is the more precious thing. I am sure what I have is that kind of power.”

Emilia: “Yeah… I can’t say this in the main story, but I reaaally rely on you.”

Subaru: “Yeah, lean on me. —Even if you forget, I won’t forget that.”

Re:Zero Interlude 3

1

Before the morning sun could peek out from between the mountains, right around when the little birds began to chirp, that girl shrugged off her nightclothes and wrapped her bare white skin up in a maid outfit with plenty of exposure.

She was a girl with short blue hair and pale-blue eyes that carried a gentle radiance. Her features still retained a youth that made cuteness come before beauty, and in contrast to that face, the server's uniform that bared so much of her skin gave rise to a sinful allure.

She carefully folded her nightclothes and set them on the bed, smoothed out the wrinkles in the uniform she had put on, then placed a white prim headdress atop her head and adorned her blue hair with a blue-violet ribbon. When she stretched her white socks tight up to mid-thigh and straightened her back, the result was the girl called Rem, head of the staff of the Roswaal Manor.

Rem: "Mm… All set. Perfectly prepared."

She reflected her outfit in the full-length mirror, meticulously checking to make sure there was nothing unsightly. Up until now as well, Rem had paid attention to her appearance so as not to bring shame upon her master, Roswaal, but since the other day, she had begun to be especially concerned about that area.

Rem herself understood the cause very clearly.—It was for the sake of one boy.

Rem: "…Rem absolutely cannot let Subaru-kun see the soft, mushy face she has right now."

Just picturing the black-haired boy in her mind, and then seeing in the mirror a face of hers she had never seen before, Rem faintly colored her cheeks and averted her gaze.

The magic stone above the door indicated that there was still plenty of time before work began, but taking into account that she was already awake and her thoughts were so relaxed right now and such, Rem turned her steps toward the outside of the room.

Rem: "Because Rem has to do something about this face before going to wake Nee-sama."

Leaving that excuse behind in the room even though no one was there to hear it, Rem left her own room.

2

Over these past few days, there had been a witchbeast disturbance that had tormented the Roswaal Manor and the nearest part of its domain, Arlam Village.

Roughly a week had passed since that incident was resolved, and both the village and the mansion had already regained their usual everyday routine.

In the absence of their master, the wounds that Rem, who had been running all over to resolve the incident, and her older sister Ram had sustained were already healed, and there were no physical issues that would interfere with their daily work.

Only, if there was a problem, it would be an issue not of the body but of the mind.

Rem: “Nee-sama, it is morning. Please wake up, Nee-sama.”

Shaking the shoulder of her identical older sister, Ram, who was curled up in bed, Rem kept calling out to her.

It was part of the daily routine for Rem, who always woke up first, to come and wake Ram before their work hours began.

And it was also routine for Ram, eyes half-open at the sound of that call, to stubbornly mutter something like, “Five more minutes…”.

Rem: “That will not do, Nee-sama, please wake up. If our preparations are not finished before work begins, Subaru-kun will get up. Letting them be slower than Subaru-kun’s preparations, when he has only just recovered from being ill, would be unthinkable. Are you trying to make Subaru-kun overexert himself, Nee-sama?”

Ram: “Lately, Rem has been paying more attention to Barusu than to Ram, and Ram does not like that, so Ram is not getting up.”

Rem: “Nee-sama, do not say things like that… But if you did, then today Rem could work alone with Subaru-kun… Nee-sama, please, take your time and res…”

Ram: “Ram is going to get up after all. Now then, Rem, help Ram get changed.”

At the sight of Ram snapping her upper body upright and throwing her hands up right there as she demanded to be changed, Rem let a small smile slip.

Then, moving around behind her impatient older sister,

Rem: “Rem is glad you got up, Nee-sama, but let us comb your hair before getting you changed. Nee-sama, your bedhead is especially bad today.”

Ram: “Lately, Rem has not been coming to sleep next to Ram, so Ram has been having bad dreams. That is the reason, obviously.”

Rem: “The only time Rem slept next to Nee-sama like that was back when we first came under Master Roswaal’s care.”

As those nostalgic memories resurfaced, Rem ran the comb she had taken out through Ram’s short, pink hair.

It had exactly the same texture as her own, and she had been tending to it like this for over six years now, had she not?

Then, suddenly realizing that, if not for the color of her hair, her sister’s back looked exactly like her own, Rem murmured quietly,

Rem: “Should Rem try growing her hair out…?”

—The reason Rem kept her hair short was none other than because she had wanted to have the same hairstyle as her sister.

She had thought that if she matched her sister’s hairstyle, her clothes, and, on top of their identical looks, even those little details, she might be able to draw at least a little closer to that sister she could never reach.

But now, she was starting to think that it might be all right to change that somewhat childish way of thinking just a little.

Rem: “Nee-sama, if Rem were to grow out her hair, would it not seem strange?”

Ram: “…Are you asking whether Ram would think it is strange? Or are you asking whether someone else would not think it strange? Ram’s answer changes depending on that.”

Rem: “Would Subaru-kun think it… strange…?”

When she timidly voiced the source of her unease, Ram, whose hair was being combed, let out an exaggerated sigh.

Dropping her shoulders, Ram left her hair in the hands of her anxious-looking little sister and said,

Ram: “Did Barusu say something to you or something?”

Rem: “No, that is not it. It is just… um, Subaru-kun seems to have feelings for Emilia-sama… so…”

Ram: “Emilia-sama does have long, beautiful hair. So, you are trying to get even a little closer to Barusu’s tastes… I see. How admirable of you, Rem. You are so admirable it makes Ram want to tear Barusu apart.”

Ram’s tone growing harsher stirred both anxiety and relief in Rem at the same time: the joy of being worried over by her sister, and the anxiety that perhaps her sister and Subaru did not get along.

Rem: “Nee-sama, do you dislike Subaru-kun?”

Ram: “Not disliking him and refusing to recognize him as Ram’s little sister’s sweetheart are separate issues.”

At Ram’s curtly cutting words, Rem could not help widening her eyes.

For, in other words, what Ram had just said could only mean that she did not hate Subaru.

Rem: “Nee-sama, thank you very much.”

Ram: “This is not a situation where Rem should be thanking Ram.

Rem reacting like that only gives Ram more reason to pile up complaints against Barusu."

Ram kept grumbling and complaining, but at her core she must have been acknowledging Subaru as well.

Feeling happy to be worried over by her older sister, who had trouble being honest, Rem continued slowly running the comb through Ram's pink hair.

3

After changing Ram into a matching maid outfit and stepping out of the room, the two of them split up to deal with the miscellaneous chores around the mansion in time for the start of their shift.

By the time Rem, who went around each room opening the windows and airing them out, finished making a full circuit of the building, Ram, who had been getting the cleaning tools ready, would arrive so they could begin cleaning—such was the routine.

Ram: "Well then, shall we go wake Barusu soon?"

Rem: "Yes, that's right, Nee-sama. Oh, right. Since Nee-sama is bringing the cleaning tools and must be tired, Rem will go by herself. Let's do that."

At Rem, who clapped her hands and let her eyes sparkle as if she had just had a brilliant idea, Ram let out a small sigh and sent her off.

With a mood that made it feel like she might start skipping at any moment and with steps that seemed to glide along the floor, Rem made her way to the front of Subaru's room, and with a knock so faint it felt like it might disappear altogether, she tapped on the door.

Rem: "Rem has knocked. Excuse me."

Saying that, making sure at least to put up that one preemptive excuse, she slipped into the room without a sound, like a shadow.

At the back of the room, in the bed, there slept a boy breathing quietly—Subaru.

Unaware of Rem's intrusion and still deep in his dreams, Subaru was, contrary to the noisiness he showed when awake, unexpectedly neat in his sleeping posture and quiet in his breathing.

Even his sleeping face, when those sharp, sanpaku eyes of his were closed and entrusted to slumber, seemed, to her, to look his age or even younger.

Rem: "…"

Realizing she was wordlessly staring, entranced, at that sleeping face, Rem's cheeks flushed at her own shamelessness.

That she was an Oni whose heart could be swayed this much by such flighty emotions—she had never imagined it.

From before, Rem had never truly been able to agree in her heart with how her older sister Ram was so deeply intoxicated with Roswaal that she would gladly offer up both body and soul to him.

There was a difference between the feeling of gratitude Rem held toward Roswaal and the feeling of yearning Ram held toward him, but Rem had been unable to understand that large difference, and had thought she would never be able to feel for someone the way her sister did.

However, now that she had come this far, the existence of Natsuki Subaru had grown far too large inside her.

The feelings with which her sister adored Roswaal that much—Rem could now clearly understand them as they were.

And she also understood that such ardor was something that could be this impossible to put the brakes on.

Rem: "Is it really all right to be this defenseless in front of Rem, Subaru-kun…?"

Bringing her face close to the sleeping Subaru, Rem whispered that at a distance where her breath might reach him.

Those lips, moving as he breathed, would be within reach if she only leaned in a little more.

Even though she knew that the one he held in his heart was someone other than herself, the fact that she could still think such things made her feel terribly base.

Rem: “…This will not do. At this rate, Rem feels she won’t be able to hold back. Quickly—”

It was just when she thought she would wake Subaru up and shake off these wicked thoughts.

Suddenly, an arm伸ed out and went around Rem’s upper body, and with her body going rigid in surprise, a man’s arm strength abruptly pulled her close.

Rem: “—!”

With her head gathered in and held to him, Rem was drawn into Subaru’s chest. Her mind went into a panic, and her heart pounded so wildly it felt like it might explode.

Not knowing what had just happened because of this sudden action, Rem, her face still pressed to Subaru’s chest, looked up.

Subaru: “Munya…”

With a troublesome sleeping habit, Subaru’s expression loosened as he gained a hugging pillow, his sleeping face relaxing in contentment.

On one hand, she felt relieved that this had not been something Subaru had done while awake, but on the other, she could not help feeling disappointed.

So, as a sort of compensation for the nuisance, she decided to fully savor his body heat and scent with her whole body.

Rem: “Rem came to wake you up, but has ended up being pinned down. Like this, there is no way to wake you. So, regrettably, Rem will continue to resist like this until Subaru-kun wakes up.”

Leaving behind those words, which were only a pretense, Rem rubbed her nose and forehead against Subaru’s chest and continued to luxuriate in the warmth and feel of it.

Once in a while, a morning like this was all right, too.

—Until Ram, who had come to call for the Rem who was not returning, visited the room, and, seeing her little sister’s figure dragged into the bed, raised her staff and stirred up the wind—until Subaru’s scream echoed through the dawn sky, that embrace continued on and on for a very, very long time.

To be Continued in Volume Four of Re: Starting Life in Another World from Zero.

Red Snowfall on the Orcos Domain (Edited Machine Translation)

1

…As far as the eye could see, the land was engulfed by white snow falling from the heavens.

???: "…"

Thick clouds of snow obscured the light, and the snowfield was covered in darkness despite it being midday.

The snow that had been falling since last night showed no signs of letting up, the delicate ice crystals concealing everything beneath them. There were countless footprints that clung to the snowfield, scattered swords and shields here and there… and also the corpses, bathed in red blood, lacking their hands and legs.

???: "…"

The expressions of the corpses were filled with anguish, proof they struggled for life until the end. However, the icy wind that blew over them drowned out their despair, and their lamentations failed to reach anyone's ears.

…Except for one person. Only one person was standing amongst the corpses lying on the snowfield.

Woman: "… Nothing has changed here, has it?"

Whispering there was a black-dressed woman, standing in the middle of the blizzard.

Her long, lustrous, braided black hair swayed in the cold wind, and her black eyes, rare to this world, gazed over the field. Those dark, slightly euphoric eyes were drenched in excitement.

In her vision lay countless corpses that would never move again.

Despite the scene, so horrific that any ordinary person would turn away, the aura of the woman seemed all the more radiant.

If every flower had its own most alluring arrangement, then it was in this very scenery, brimming with the aroma of death and blood, that this woman’s charm was at its most spectacular.

Such was the impression her menacing and mysterious allure evoked, in the midst of the gloomy, drifting, thick snow.

???: “…”

Rushing to the battlefield late was a group of fully armed men, gasping and speechless at the sight before them.

The warriors, clad in fur armor and helmets, armed with swords and axes, were thoroughly petrified at the sight of the woman standing alive on the blood-stained snowfield.

Woman: “…Oh, my.”

The woman slowly turned to the speechless men.

She slackened her scarlet lips and graciously raised her hand towards the men.

In the woman’s hand was a curved knife responsible for the countless corpses.

Woman: “…I apologize. I couldn’t wait, so I went ahead and took care of them.”

With a flirtatious smirk, the woman delivered an apology to the men, clearly only as a mere formality.

However, not a single man raised his voice in response to her apology in protest about her stealing their work.

2

…The Holy Kingdom of Gusteko was known for having the harshest natural environment out of the four major countries.

White snow that never stopped falling, and never-melting permafrost. In this world of extreme cold, where growing crops and raising livestock were fatally unsuitable occupations, there was an endless series of challenges to survive through every day.

Rooted in that harsh environment, the doctrine of the Holy Church of Gusteko was born.

According to the doctrine, the frozen earth and the cold wind were all trials given to the people by a greater being; the only way to give peace to one's soul in the afterlife was to endure those trials.

It was hard for those born in wealthy countries to comprehend, but the doctrine had spread throughout Gusteko, and most people didn't doubt its teachings. The streets were saturated with people who wanted salvation, and all were desperate to cling to a hopeless dream.

This was the reality of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, and it's cold history that had continued for hundreds of years.

Red-faced man: "…And so, those guys got completely routed! Because of that, they said we could take as much as we wanted from the buffet!"

The man, clearly intoxicated, spat and slammed his glass down on the counter.

He was a huge, ruddy man with a crooked nose reddened by drunkenness. Although his vulgar gesture splashed alcohol, he received no admonishment… rather, the man's shouts were accompanied by cheers, and the surrounding drunks began to clink their glasses together in unison.

At the moment, the inside of the bar was occupied by a group of men drinking heavily. The men were in a good mood and paid well, and there were no other customers to be disturbed. And so, the now-lawless bar's owner said nothing to the group.

Red-faced man: "Oh, the joy of labor! The water of life! We give thanks to the Holy King and the Merciful Mother of the Holy

Church of Gusteko that we have survived to this day! Cheers!”

Mercenaries: “Cheers…!!”

The empty glasses were filled, and the others raised their glasses in response to the toast given by the red-faced man.

He was clearly mocking the teachings of the Holy Church, but none here would accuse him of that. The doctrines of the Holy Church were known to all of Gusteko, and these men were no exception; however, whether or not they actually followed the teachings was a different story.

The doctrine didn’t fill your stomach, and it didn’t save your life. … At least, that was the way they saw it.

???: “…”

The owner of the bar, the only outsider, was reluctant to face the men.

As a man fifty years old, who had been running a tavern in this country until his age, Gusteko’s teachings had been familiar to him since he was born. Of course, he was well aware that there was no salvation in the world like the doctrine described, but it still felt unpleasant for the teachings to be ridiculed.

Of course, he wasn’t experienced enough in customer service to be able to say that to a mercenary corp full of brutes.

Red-faced man: “Even so, they were attacked to such an extent. The lot at Orcos Domain must be looking pale right about now… oh.”

Suddenly, the expression on the red face that had been in good spirits and smelled of alcohol shifted.

A bell had sounded at the entrance of the tavern, announcing the arrival of a new customer. Tonight, the tavern was reserved for the men, and not a single person in the village was unaware of that. So who was the uninvited guest?

Red-faced man: “…Fweet.”

The red-faced man whistled as a figure leisurely crossed the bar and headed for the counter. The reaction of the people around him was more or less the same, the drunken gazes welcoming the newcomer with an ulterior motive.

Of course. …It was a woman with beauty that would set any man's lust ablaze.

Woman: "Some milk, please."

Sitting at the counter, the woman placed her order, and for a moment the shopkeeper admired her appearance. She had dark, slightly droopy black eyes, and long, glossy black hair that wasn't something one saw often around the Gustekan town. Her red lips had been moistened with her tongue, and a thin nightgown wrapped around her entire body.

The woman raised a shapely eyebrow at the quiet owner, propped one elbow on the counter, and repeated,

Woman: "Milk, that's what I'm ordering."

Shopkeeper: "…Oh, yeah. Right, I'm sorry."

The shopkeeper shook his head lightly at the affirmed order before reaching for the milk.

In the frigid cold of Gusteko, milk was a precious commodity, far more valuable than alcohol. Even if he disregarded that, it was rare for a customer to order milk instead of alcohol in a bar.

Naturally, the order could easily be used to start a quarrel or conversation…

Red-faced man: "…Hey, hey, you can't come to a bar and order milk, can you?"

Sitting next to the woman without asking, the red-faced giant took advantage of the opportunity. The man placed the empty glass on the counter and held up two fingers to the owner.

Red-faced man: "Drinks. One for me and one for my sister here."

Woman: “You’ll buy me a drink?”

Red-faced man: “Oh, yeah. We can buy a whole keg and still have change with the money we made today. I’ll let you get as drunk as you want, okay?”

In response to the woman’s flirtatious glance, the red-face smacked his chest and replied with authority. The shop-owner glanced at the listening woman, whose face broke into a thin smile, nodding at the giant’s offer.

The shopkeeper, relieved to see the situation hadn’t turned violent, presented a glass of alcohol to both of them. Accepting the glasses, the woman and the red-faced man bumped them together in a toast.

Red-faced man: “…To the Holy King and the Merciful Mother.”

Woman: “Oh, that’s unexpected. You’re a follower of the Holy Church of Gusteko?”

Red-faced man: “Well… I’m not a sincere believer. I was baptized when I was a kid, but now, I’m in this line of work… I’ve long since lost my appreciation for the doctrine, and my right to cling to the pity of the Merciful Mother, too.”

Woman: “Indeed… I know how you feel. I’m from this country, after all.”

She expressed her agreement with the red-face while sipping her drink.

Regardless of the chilling emotion in her voice, the red-faced man’s eyes were glued to the woman’s beautiful profile. The man’s throat gulped in slight arousal at even the way she seductively swallowed her liquor.

Red-faced man: “What brings you to this bar? Didn’t you know we had the whole place to ourselves today?”

Woman: “…? Does that mean I have to leave?”

Red-faced man: “No, no, it’s the other way around. I’m all for having a nice lady like you around, but even the villagers are avoiding the stores tonight. What are you doing here on such a day…?”

Woman: “…Igor Kenash.”

Interrupting the man’s words, the woman said just one phrase. When the red-faced giant rolled his eyes at the name, the woman narrowed her black eyes and licked her lips.

Woman: “I’m here on his orders. Do you know Baron Kenash?”

Red-faced man: “…You might know this, but it’s Baron Kenash who’s footing the bill for our drinks today. I see… that husband of yours is very kind!”

Woman: “Oh, dear.”

The giant man’s ruddy face broke into a broad smile as he roughly hugged the woman’s thin shoulders.

The woman’s small surprise at the behavior brought a booze-soaked grin to the man’s face.

Red-faced man: “It was very generous of him, not only in paying for the drinks, but also to include such an excellent woman. The Baron truly knows how to deal with people like us!”

There had only been scrawny girls in the village to satisfy the lust of the mercenaries; the only town with a decent brothel was distant, and the woman in front of them was the perfect reward for the men who had deceived their desires with alcohol thus far.

The man, deeply moved by his employer’s consideration, was about to put his hands on his gift when…

Unknown: “…Logres! Is there a Logres Hyatt?”

Red-faced man: “…Ah?”

Suddenly, someone rushed into the tavern. The men in the tavern looked back sullenly at the call that followed. Among them, the one most irritated was the red-faced Logres, the very one called by name.

Having his fun interrupted, Logres glared at the newcomer with scowling eyes.

Logres: “So you’re the Baron’s errand boy, huh? What do you want?”

Igor’s Subordinate: “Master Igor wants to see you. The leader of the Crimson Hunting Squad must come to the residence immediately.”

Logres: “…Immediately? Right now?”

Igor’s Subordinate: “What other interpretation is there?”

In response to the younger man’s sarcasm, Logres rubbed his crooked nose in visible annoyance. It was a call from his employer. He couldn’t say that he wouldn’t comply, but…

Logres: “…”

If he merely turned his head, he would find a beautiful woman with an alluring aura right beside him.

If he left this place, he would have to leave his reward behind. And, he would have to give it to his subordinates around him.

Logres: “…Tomorrow isn’t good enough?”

Igor’s Subordinate: : “Master Igor says it’s urgent. You’ll have to comply with his request, Butcher!”

Logres sighed at the still inflexible reply.

He couldn’t give priority to his desires in the present and lose his source of food for tomorrow, and beyond. It wasn’t possible to survive in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko with such a careless attitude.

Logres: “Sorry, sis. I’ve been summoned by the boss. It would be a shame to leave a beauty like you here…”

Woman: “It’s alright. But don’t worry. …You’re not the only one who’s getting called out.”

Logres: “Oh?”

As Logres wracked his brain in confusion, the woman who was still in his arms asked, "Right?" to the young errand man. His expression instantly stiffened at the question.

The young man, who had been unconcerned even when surrounded by rogues, had begun to sweat on his forehead.

Igor’s Subordinate: “…Yes. Master Igor has called for you. Can you please come, too?”

Woman: “Yes, of course. So I hope you won’t be too frightened.”

Igor’s Subordinate: “I’m not frightened…”

Woman: “I’m sensitive to smell. Those frightened have a frightened scent, and those angered smell of anger… you know?”

The young messenger was dumbstruck at the rejection of his immediate rebuttal. The woman licked her lips and looked over at Logres.

Woman: “We’ve both been called to the same person. …Can you escort me there?”

Logres: “That’s fine, but… sister, what’s your name?”

Unwrapping his arm from around her shoulders, Logres kept an eye on the woman’s movements.

The woman’s grin deepened at the soldier’s drunken gaze, now weakening in intoxication, her smile deepening to the utmost amount, and with an arousing allure that seemed to hang in the air, she gave him her name.

Woman: “…I’m Elsa. Elsa Granhiert.”

Mercenaries: “…”

At the mention of her name, a hush spread through the tavern at once. The drunk but battle-hardened mercenaries all fell speechless and exchanged glances.

Logres covered his face with his palm, marvelling at the absurd significance of just one simple name.

Logres: “Oh, shit. I thought you were just a nice lady, but you’re… the Bowel Hunter.”

The best proof of her infamy was the fact that his voice was fully devoid of lust.

3

Man: “You sure took your time, didn’t you? I was beginning to worry that you might not come.”

Logres: “…Well, I’m sorry about that.”

Man: “You’ll have to be careful next time. I do not have a very big heart.”

At the greeting he received as soon as he entered the room, Logres scratched his head in helplessness. Unaware of the subtle sarcasm in Logres’s reply, the man nodded magnanimously and welcomed him and Elsa into the room.

In an ornate room with a long, wooly carpet, facing Elsa and her companion across an unnecessarily expensive desk was Baron Igor Kenash, the man who had called them here.

The hair on his head was thinning, and his face was greasy and glistening. With a belly flab from alcohol and luxury, and a dialect that grated the nerves, Igor was not a person to be liked. No matter how many times they came in contact with him, that impression would not fade, but instead only grow stronger.

However, that was just a generalization. Elsa didn’t care very much, but…

Igor: “Oh, Elsa! My subordinates report that your work was truly magnificent! Beautiful and skillful… What a wonderful woman. Just as I had hoped!”

Elsa: “Thank you for the compliment. I, too, enjoyed the work.”

Igor: “Mm-hmm. So, what do you think? Have you made up your mind to become my property yet? Hmm?”

Igor’s eyes practically licked her, the baron not even bothering to hide his lecherous stare and ulterior motives.

She was dressed in a black evening gown, and although the amount of skin exposed was minimal, the way the cloth revealed the lines of her body, made men’s imaginations run wild. Igor, too, was captivated by her sensuality.

However, Elsa shook her head at Igor’s emotionless pick-up line.

Elsa: “I’m sorry, but I have to decline. I don’t find men with unhealthy lifestyles attractive.”

Igor: “How honest you are! You’re the only one who’s ever turned down my advances so firmly!”

Igor laughed in amusement at Elsa’s dauntless reply. It wasn’t an easy task to go against the will of the baron, the most powerful man in the area.

In the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, the disparity in status was absolute. It was a reality that cannot be overcome.

Logres: “So, the Baron is free to make passes on the lady… what can I do for you?”

Igor: “You’re very direct, aren’t you?”

Logres: “Well, I’m not so handsome that someone would want to spend time with me outside of business. Also, if I return too late, the fools will empty out all the expensive liquor. Which is quite worrisome.”

Although Logres had contemplated Elsa’s boldness, he himself was also quite direct in his remarks. Igor laughed at their attitudes and ran his hand through his head of scanty hair.

His lustful face changed into something more ugly, as his eyes began to harbor a cruel tint.

Igor: “You two have done well so far. I’d like to reward you for your achievements and make you my full-fledged protégés. On top of that, I want you to begin an operation to purify the Orcos Domain.”

Logres: “Purifying Orcos Domain, huh?”

Igor: “Yes, purification. Our neighboring domain ruled by Viktor Orcos has now become a breeding ground for abhorrent human trafficking. His Highness will be terribly distressed by this fact. We must bury this incident in the snow as soon as possible, secretly.”

With clenched fists, Igor authoritatively explained the sordid affairs of the Orcos Domain, which was right next to the Kenash Domain he ruled. Viktor Orcos, the Baron of Orcos Domain, was suspected of complicity in the human trafficking of his own people, who were secretly captured and sold as slaves to other countries.

Naturally, Viktor was asked to give an explanation by the Holy Church of Gusteko, which ran the Holy Kingdom. However, he refused the request and prepared to fight a full-scale war with the private army he had gathered in his domain.

Igor: “This is nothing but a betrayal of the Holy Church and proof that the Baron has committed treason. We must get the situation under control as soon as possible…”

Logres: “A church with the power to appoint Barons in various regions can’t afford to lose its influence with its followers …if the Holy Church’s power is weakened, the effects on the other countries will be immeasurable.”

At the Baron’s explanation, Logres pointed out an issue. Igor, with his flabby face, drew his chin back at the mercenary’s point and added, "That’s not all."

Igor: “If the Merciful Mother from the Holy Church, the… Spirit

Beast Odglass, finds out about such a thing, the country will be destroyed.”

Igor’s quivering voice was filled with a mixture of uncontrollable fear and awe.

It was fear and reverence for Odglass, the Spirit Beast who was considered the Mother of the country..

Odglass was a great spirit with outstanding power even among spirits, and counted within the Four Great Spirits. Normally, spirits didn’t interfere with the way of the world, but Odglass was an exception among them, and she continued to take a friendly position toward humans.

The Great Spirit called all the lives in the harsh land of Gusteko as her own children, yet spared little mercy for them. The simple fact that humans were able to live in Gusteko, which was covered by permafrost, was primarily due to the help of the myriad of spirits and micro-spirits under the control of Odglass.

Due to this, Odglass and the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko had a long and profound friendship.

The authority to decide the head of the Holy Kingdom and the Holy Church, the Holy King, had been delegated to Odglass, and this tradition had been passed down from the beginning of the history of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

That format was unbreakable. Odglass had always been, and would always be, the Merciful Mother of the Holy Church. …With the Holy King as their puppet, the Church would continue to rule the country.

Igor: “We must prevent the collapse of tradition. ……This is the mission that we have been tasked with at this time.”

Logres: “I’ve roughly grasped the situation… if it’s so urgent, wouldn’t it be better to mobilize the Holy Church’s Acolyte Knights? Honestly, it would be a great help if you simply don’t assign the work to us.”

From the standpoint of a hired hand, Logres scratched his bulbous nose and made a proposal.

The Acolyte Knights that Logres mentioned were the holy warriors of the Holy Church of Gusteko. It was rumored both in and out of the country that they were a select group of elites who had received the blessing of the Holy King and wielded superhuman strength, some said they rivaled the Nine Divine Generals of the Vollachia Empire.

If the rumors were true, the power of the Acolyte Knights should easily seize Orcos Domain.

Igor: "Unfortunately, we need the approval of His Highness to move the Acolyte Knights. If His Highness finds about this incident, it's only a matter of time before the Spirit Beast finds out."

Elsa: "Oh. Won't the Holy King be heartbroken by the scandals in Orcos Domain, too?"

Elsa, who had been silent so far, asked a question to which Igor crossed his short, stocky arms.

Igor: "Of course, His Highness will be troubled if he learns of this incident. We have to take the initiative to solve the problem before that happens. As long as the problem is solved, there's no need to go to the trouble of reporting something that will only cloud His Highness's mind. …Do you understand?"

Elsa: "You guys will have to work hard too to keep your warm beds and meals."

Igor appeared slightly apprehensive at Elsa's unfocused thoughts.

However, the Baron quickly straightened his grimy face and ordered both Elsa and Logres once again.

Igor: "From tomorrow onwards, you will be the key players in the purification operation. My soldiers are lacking in experience on the battlefield, but they are more experienced in military tactics. Let's see what the Butcher and the Bowel Hunter are capable of."

Logres: “This is the first time I’ve ever had someone expect me to use my head as well as my strength… Well, I’ll be the Baron’s faithful hands and feet as long as the money is paid. Please use me as you see fit.”

Elsa: “I feel the same as the one on my right, although I’m not really that interested in compensation.”

Following the mercenary-like remark of Logres, Elsa moistened her lips and smiled.

Taking the positive reactions of the two mercenaries as an affirmation, Igor nodded and reached his hand to his flabby chin.

Igor: “…So, let’s bury Viktor Orcos’ sins in the snow, and cleanse him away.”

Contrary to his terribly lazy appearance, his eyes gave off the impression that he was both shrewd and sharp.

4

…The next day, the full-scale Purification Operation of Orcos Domain was put into action.

Baron Igor Kenash’s plan for the Purification Operation was very simple.

Igor’s private army, led by the Crimson Hunting Squad, spearheaded by the Butcher Logres Hyatt, would attack the garrison of Orcos Domain one after another. As a diversion, the Bowel Hunter, a lone force, would infiltrate the enemy territory, assassinate commanders and reserve troops, and defeat them one by one.

Once the chain of command was broken, all that was left was for the Crimson Hunting Squad to wear down the guards.

It was a simple strategy, but the results were plain to see. Due to both the strength of the Crimson Hunting Squad, and the skill of Igor, who properly utlized Elsa, an assassination specialist.

Logres: “Surprisingly, our employer has quite astute judgment.”

Logres muttered to himself as he hid behind a shield, escaping the rain of arrows falling on him.

The temperature was low, and he could see his white breath as he exhaled. He felt his body temperature climbing and steam rising up from his neck and forehead.

Hearing Logres’s murmurs, his subordinates, who were also hiding, turned to look at him. Waving his hand lightly at their gaze, Logres picked up some snow and smeared it on his face.

Logres: “ So far, we’ve won many battles in a row, and to top it off, we’ve lost hardly any of our allies… in fact, the only losses have been coming from hired hands like us. Considering that his forces haven’t really reduced in number shows the wealth he gained by sucking the sweet juice out of the Church. It was beyond Elsa’s expectations, too.”

Mercenary: “That lady? It’s a shame that such a beautiful woman is so crazy. “

Logres: “She would be great if she weren’t so crazy… her fetishes are completely perverse.”

Mercenary: “Fetishes… not in an erotic way?”

Logres’s face contorted into a wry smile at his subordinate’s absurd question. He raised his hatchet and used its tip to indicate the target of the attack, the fort defended by the garrison.

His men followed his gesture with their eyes, tilting their heads… and the next moment…

Mercenary: “Oh, geez…”

Logres: “See that… if you can honestly see that woman erotically even now, you have my respect.”

Logres’ lips curved at the reaction of his subordinates, whose eyes had widened and faces had paled. They all looked up at the upper level of the fort - where they witnessed countless flowers of blood bloom.

And the dark figure of a woman running through the blooming field of scarlet flowers, a deranged grin on her face.

5

…Energizing. Enchanting. Endearing, exhilarating, exciting.

Elsa: “My, my, how wonderful. …What a thrill.”

She spun her precious knife in her palm and mercilessly slammed it into the figure standing in her way.

Elsa’s beloved blade was bent in the reverse direction from the original shape of the knife. That ensured just the right amount of weight was placed at the very edge of the special blade, and enabled the power to cut anything apart with a single blow.

Indeed, the blade struck the guard’s helmet, ripping into his skull through the headgear. Grey matter spilled out of his brain, and the blank-eyed guard, on the verge of collapsing, swung the greatsword in his hand.

Elsa: “Incredible. So irresistible.”

Elsa marvelled at his will to fight, even with half of his head cut off.

The man unleashed a two-handed strike with his blade powerful enough to cut through a large frozen tree. To deal with the blow, Elsa cleaved off the attacker’s wrist.

Guard: “…”

The guard spoke no words in his last moments. She slammed a kick into his chest, blowing him away with approval. More enemies still appeared from the corner of the corridor, stifling their furious, screaming hearts at the sight of their companions’ corpses.

There were already more than a dozen bodies piled up in the passage beneath Elsa’s feet. All of them were warriors who had confronted Elsa and fallen prey to her savagery.

Respecting their mortal struggle, admiring the new advancing opponents… then, ripping their bellies open.

Elsa: “Hah, ahahahaha!”

Elsa retaliated to the precious lives striving to resist with the utmost level of affection. She put her adoration into the end of her blade and her feelings into each strike… and her heart was moved to tears by all the life pouring out.

In blood, in flesh, in bone, in life, in bowels… this moment was all that Elsa wanted.

???: “…”

Elsa: “… it’s here.”

She kicked open the iron door at the upper layer of the stronghold, at the back end of the passage, and burst into the room.

Elsa, carrying a bloodstained knife, was greeted calmly by the master of the room, an old soldier. The elderly warrior was clad in aged armor and held a steel mace in his hand.

His surging, powerful fighting spirit was plain to see. It was visible in his body; this old soldier was the very best of all the guards in the fortress.

Old Soldier: “I didn’t expect to be facing a woman.”

Elsa: “Oh, you don’t like female opponents? I’d be disappointed if that diminished your determination.”

Old Soldier: “That’s a useless concern. …No matter who I’m dealing with, I’ll not show mercy to my enemies.”

Elsa tilted her head as she asked her question, and the old warrior’s words brimmed with his entire, evident fighting spirit. The sensation warmed her skin, and Elsa leaned forward, shivering.

Elsa: “I’m the Bowel Hunter, Elsa Granhiert.”

Old Soldier: “There is no name to call a villain. …I will conquer you, demon.”

At the refusal to impart his name, Elsa smiled thinly at the old soldier, who closed their distance in a single bound.

His weapon, a massive lump of steel, was swung from above his armor and flashed downwards with speed and power that was unbelievable for an older man. The blow shattered and pierced through the floor of the stone fort.

It was a strike so powerful that the entire fort seemed to shake from the impact, a cloud of smoke billowed into the room, and when the smoke cleared…

Elsa: “… Ah, I knew it.”

Elsa’s loud footsteps rang as she used a powerful swing to clear the smokescreen, peering down at the floor. The aged soldier had been hit by Elsa’s blow and fallen, his limbs splayed out.

At the view of the dying old soldier, Elsa’s eyes quivered, entranced, as she let out a hot, intense sigh.

Elsa: “…Considering your intestines have an exceptionally lovely color.”

Such was the end of the battle that determined the fall of the fort that day.

6

The visitor who stepped into the room stiffened, his face showing surprise at the sight. A huge, red-faced man, his eyes had widened and cheeks tightened. Elsa tilted her head curiously at his reaction.

Elsa: “…What’s wrong?”

Logres: “What’s wrong with… well, what are you doing?”

Elsa: “Can’t you see?”

Logres pointed with his thick fingers, and Elsa held it up for him to see. But the giant man’s confusion redoubled, and Elsa frowned with her shapely eyebrows.

Elsa: “I’m knitting yarn, and we’re in a cold country. This should be nothing unusual, I believe?”

Logres: “Knitting itself isn’t unusual, but the one who was knitting was surprising… to think that even a woman like you knits.”

Elsa: “Oh my, how heartless. Regardless of your doubts, I’m pretty confident in my knitting skills.”

With that, Elsa spread out her knitting project in plain sight and showed it to Logres.

It was an unfinished doll, just beginning to look vaguely complete. The design looked like it was for a child, and the cuteness and delicate construction of the doll demonstrated a great deal of skill even to the untrained eye.

To be honest, it didn’t overlap with his impression of it’s creator, Elsa.

Logres: “I never imagined that doll-making was your hobby. How long have you been doing it?”

Elsa: “Since last night, if the question is when I started making this doll. If it’s about doll making itself, then it’s been over a decade.”

Logres: “Hmm… the replies are a surprise for both questions.”

Scratching his nose at Elsa’s answer, Logres chose a bunk to sit on.

The room assigned to Elsa was one of the rooms in the fort they had just conquered that day. The owner of the room seemed to be a man who didn’t like extravagance. Elsa was also a carefree and self-assured person, so she would likely get along with the owner of the room.

Elsa probably killed that person herself, though.

Elsa: "…"

Without any particular sentimentality, Elsa silently moved her hands and continued to work on making the woolen doll. Woven dolls didn't really require any difficult tools or thinking. She used a crochet hook to make the head, body, limbs, and other parts, and finally joined them together to create a single form.

Elsa's favorite part of the process was filling the woven parts with cotton.

Elsa: "When I put cotton inside the doll like this… I feel kind of fulfilled."

Logres: "Oh, I see… that does sound like a hobby of the Bowel Hunter."

Elsa: "I'll take that as a compliment."

Instead of her handicraft skills, somehow her motives were being praised… she found it hard to understand.

In any case, Logres watched with an incomprehensible look on his face as the doll was magically completed in Elsa's hands. Although she was skeptical of his behavior, Elsa didn't say anything about it.

It was the other party who had come all the way to visit her. If he wanted to talk, he would do it on his own.

Logres: "…"

For a while, the only noise in the room came from the sound of Elsa silently working on her doll.

And just when the doll was almost finished…

Logres: "…Elsa. Don't you think this Purification Operation smells fishy?"

Elsa: "Fishy?"

Logres: “It’s just my intuition, but… I don’t like the way the situation meshes together. I was just wondering if you also had smelled something off around you.”

Finally, Logres began to explain the reason for his visit. At his question, Elsa paused and re-crossed her legs in her chair, thinking.

The Purification Operation… regardless of the merits of the name, the plan itself had been executed flawlessly so far. The garrisons in the various regions of Orcos Domain, which were the objective of the operation, had been conquered one after another, and the inner citadel was just before their eyes.

Elsa herself was satisfied that she had fulfilled most of the objectives that Igor had hired her for.

Elsa: “We should be happy that the operation is going well, right? The damage is minimal and the winning streak continues… isn’t that what you want, too?”

Logres: “If it weren’t for the fact that my employer has some sort of ulterior motive, I could get drunk in a bar every night if I wanted to… I can tell that the Baron is a really shady fellow. Well, that’s how it’s always been with the Gusteko Church.”

Elsa: “…When we first met, you were angry with the Holy Church.”

At Logres’s abject response, Elsa recalled the first time she met him at the tavern.

She had a faint memory of the conversation she had with him when present at the Crimson Hunting Squad’s rented bar, before the Purification Operation to overcome the hostile forces began.

Elsa: “…Yes, that must have been you. Though I don’t remember much.”

Logres: “You say that with a lot of confidence for someone who has a bad memory.

Elsa: “I may not remember events very well, but I’m confident in my ability to remember smells. I can recall the smell of your anger.

Do you have bad memories of the Gusteko Holy Church?”

Logres: “… It’s not interesting to listen to my personal story, and you’re not interested in it in the first place. You don’t want to talk about your old life too much, do you?”

Logres sniffed unhappily and glared at Elsa, as if she had hit a sore spot. At the look in his eyes, she touched her black hair and twisted her fingers in the braid.

Elsa: “…I was originally sold by my parents as a slave.”

Logres: “…”

Elsa: “See, black hair and black eyes are rare, aren’t they? I think my parents didn’t have my colors, but I found out much later that it was due to an old bloodline.”

Logres was taken aback as Elsa began to talk about her past with indifference. As he watched in astonishment, Elsa continued to speak.

What came back to her mind were the chilling memories of being sold by her parents and thrown out into the cold world.

Elsa: “But I escaped with the other children before the slavers could turn me into a true commodity. If I had failed, I’d probably be in a whorehouse by now, or long dead. Compared to the girls who were caught on the way to escape or the ones who fell off the cliff and died, I guess I was lucky.”

If one was caught by slavers, they would be forced into a terrible environment and made an example of by other slaves. If isolated in a blizzard, they would die a slow death, their limbs rotting away from frostbite. Others would have been attacked by the beasts of the snowy fields and eaten alive.

She knew that she was lucky that she didn’t suffer any of those consequences and lasted as long as she did.

Elsa: “The rest of the time, as a random orphan, I got into all sorts of wrong things. In the process, I learned how to use a blade, and here I am. …I guess that’s about it?”

She had omitted a lot on the way, but it was a frivolous time in which she couldn’t find anything to talk about.

In any case, that was the end of Elsa’s personal story. Looking back, she could honestly say that her life’s history was so empty that she could tell all of its contents in a short time.

Contrary to Elsa’s dull feelings, Logres looked uneasy. He scratched his nose, his coarse-looking face reddened, muttering "Ah…" and "Er…", trying to choose a word.

Logres: “……why are you talking to me about that?”

Elsa: “…?”

Logres: “If you look at me with that expression, I’m going to think I’m weird.”

Elsa: “I won’t tell you something I don’t want to tell you. I didn’t hide it because it wasn’t something to hide. That’s all you’re asking?”

Logres: “Your values are too strange… I’m realizing that the hard way.”

Sighing in resignation, Logres propped himself up on one elbow on his knee, turning his gaze away from Elsa.

Logres: “… My family used to be in a good position in the Church. We had a lot of money when I was a kid. But when I was fifteen, my parents lost a power struggle, and we fell into ruin. Their property was confiscated, my father was executed, and my mother was taken away by a religious cult. So, as a fifteen-year-old kid, I was thrown out into the snow alone, scrambled to get by, and now I’m a respectable drunk.”

Rubbing his red face, Logres wore a thin smile and spoke with an alcohol-induced hoarse, raspy voice.

At his words, Elsa closed one eye, fiddling with the doll in her hand.

Elsa: “See, it’s not like that’s the kind of life to frantically hide, right?”

Logres: “That’s not it. The issue is that it’s a boring story that would put its listeners to sleep. …Now, although it’s the kind of personal story where even I would doze off telling it, it does have a purpose. It’s simply that the fishy smell reminds me a lot of that tragic life experience.”

Elsa: “…The power struggle in the Holy Order that your father lost?”

Logres: “There isn’t a single Gustekan citizen with power who isn’t involved in the affairs of the Holy Church of Gusteko. Our employer, the Baron, and his opponent, Viktor Orcos, definitely have something in common. And it’s undoubtedly a big deal.”

In a somewhat condescending manner, Logres urged Elsa to be cautious. Rising from his bunk, the giant man continued in a slightly hushed voice.

Logres: “If Viktor Orcos is as bad as his reputation says he is, treating his people like slaves and selling them off, then the high morale of the… Orcos Domain’s garrison doesn’t add up.”

Elsa: “…”

Logres: “Why would they risk their lives to the last soldier to fight for a prick? There’s no way.”

Viktor’s private army continued to resist to this point, and Logres remarked upon the motive for their strenuous struggle. His words also reminded Elsa of the old commander she had killed half a day ago.

That will and attitude certainly couldn’t have been half-hearted, but…

Elsa: “To be honest, I don’t really think I care.”

Logres: “…That’s your conclusion after all this talk?”

Elsa: “I’m not good at thinking. I like to do things the way I feel… like this.”

Elsa showed the exhausted Logres the woolen doll she had completed during the conversation. She pinched the limbs of the human-shaped yarn doll and shook its soft body from side to side.

Elsa: “It’s quite well done for amusing oneself, isn’t it?”

Logres: “Ah, yes. Well done. I don’t know if I can make anything like that.”

Elsa: “The only thing you need to carry around is a crochet hook and yarn. I’ve already made more than a dozen of these during this mission. After seeing good bowel remains in particular, I make a lot of progress.”

Logres: “I didn’t ask.”

As Elsa’s cheeks flushed with excitement, Logres felt more of a wall of incomprehension than a man’s lust for her. With that, he waved his hand, compressed his huge frame, and headed for the exit of the room.

Logres: “It doesn’t mean much, but put what I said in the corner of your mind. Use your intuition.”

Elsa: “What were you talking about just now……?”

Logres: “Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey.”

Elsa: “I’m kidding.”

Seeing Logres’s panic at the elusive response, Elsa put her hand over her mouth, wearing a slight smile. Shrugging his shoulders at the smirk, the giant man turned to leave the room this time.

And just before he went through the door, he suddenly looked back at the room and…

Logres: “Well, even though you made ten dolls, you… didn’t put any in the room.”

She looked at the doll held to her chest and tilted her head at the fact that its siblings weren’t in the room. Thinking about Logres’ words, Elsa narrowed her dark eyes.

She spoke after she licked her red lips.

Elsa: “…In that case, I guess I won’t tell you where the dolls are.”

And, in a bewitching and mischievous manner, she brushed off Logres’ question and sent him away.

7

Regardless of Logres’ suspicions, the Purification Operation continued without a hitch.

With the fall of the fort due to the efforts of the Bowel Hunter and the Crimson Hunting Squad, the war situation in Orcos Domain quickly turned in favor of Baron Igor Kenash.

Even disregarding Elsa and Logres, the Baron’s private army also won a number of victories on other fronts, boosting the morale of the entire Igor camp.

Igor’s Subordinate: “I didn’t know that war could be so bloody… haha, I can see why history is full of battles.”

These were the words of the young man who was in command of the private army in place of Igor, the Baron’s protégé and who came to call Elsa and Logres at the tavern before.

Igor seemed to value him, and all the instructions of the baron who remained in his mansion were conveyed through him. Elsa and the Crimson Hunting Squad also operated with the Baron through him.

Logres: “Consecutive victories in a row, that’s certainly good news… although carelessness should be avoided.”

Elsa: “‘A midway victory is like drinking sake in front of the enemy'… that's the quote from Hoshin, isn't it."

Logres and Elsa both dismissed the feelings of the young man, who was ecstatic over his side's victories and expected them to feel the same. Elsa aside, Logres was probably just trying to offer friendly advice.

The young man, however, was very unhappy with their opinion.

Igor's Subordinate: "Hmm. I know that without being told. However, the morale of the allies is high, and even though the situation is favorable, you're being timid, Butcher.

Logres: "We've proceeded with the war like a slaughterhouse, carefully chopping off the heads of the enemies like they're livestock. That's why they call us pig killers. Since there's no way that my approach can be called cowardice or weakness, I can't say that either I or my Crimson Hunting Squad is weak."

The young man blushed as he was belittled for getting carried away with the incomplete victory. It was difficult to leave the argument like that due to his frustration, and he wouldn't have been able to back down if he didn't let it go.

In the end, there was no stopping the excitement of the young man overcome by his belief in their victory.

Igor's Subordinate: "…As per Igor-sama's instructions, we'll push up the battle line. After the garrison retreats, leave it to us to deal with the soldiers. The Crimson Hunting Squad and Bowel Hunter are ordered to attack."

Logres: "…We've been drawing the short straw lately, haven't we?"

Elsa: "Ah, really? I've been enjoying it in my own way."

The corners of Elsa's lips lifted at Logres' grumbles about the impending torment of marching through the middle of a blizzard.

At the elated young man's command, Elsa and the Crimson Hunting Squad had commenced moving their forces to raid a defensive encampment of Orcos Domain. An opportunity to bring it down at this time period had opened up. It was normally a well-lit time of day, but the blizzard and thick clouds had made the environment so dim it was as if it was midnight.

Elsa: “It just occurred to me…”

The snowfall was so heavy that the footprints they had made would soon disappear. Elsa, the only one moving smoothly, tilted her head as the others struggled along the knee-deep snow-covered path.

Elsa: “You guys are called the Crimson Hunting Squad, but you wear white furs for work?”

As Elsa voiced her question, she had noticed the group of people stirring in her vision were all clad in white fur.

It was the fur of the White Wolf that inhabited the northern part of Gusteko. Despite its beautiful white appearance, the fur was extremely tough and had high insulation properties. It truly was equipment for working in the snow.

Logres bristled when she pointed out the inconsistency between the beautiful fur and the name of the mercenary group.

Logres: “I’m just bluffing, you know. If you call yourself the Crimson Hunting Squad, everyone will assume that you’re the ones in red. We profit if even one person falls for it.”

Elsa: “I see, you’re quite underhanded.”

Logres: “At least make it sound like I’m wickedly cunning or something. I mean, don’t I have the aura of the Butcher?”

Elsa: “Indeed. By the way, does anyone know why I’m nicknamed the Bowel Hunter?”

Logres: “The scariest part is that you seem like you’re serious about that name.”

He interpreted her serious riddle as a quip, and she wound up unsuccessful in her goal of distraction. The members of the Crimson Hunting Squad still seemed to have regained a bit of their composure, though, and Elsa fiddled with her braids at their reaction.

Before long, a building came into view at the end of their vision, clouded by the snowstorm. It was probably the defensive position they were aiming for, and their presence had likely become visible from the other side.

Elsa: “The procedure will be the same as before.”

Logres: “Flashy diversion, and Elsa will sneak in. Alright. Don’t mess up.”

The exchange before the offensive was brief. Elsa would go behind the building, and the Crimson Hunting Squad would draw the enemy’s attention to the front.

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 1: “Elsa-san, be careful.”

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 2: “Don’t get too bloody!”

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 3: “I’ll see you in my dreams!”

Logres’s men also called out to Elsa as she set out alone on her dangerous journey.

Having fought together more than ten times, there was no doubt in their minds about Elsa’s abilities. Elsa also had a certain amount of trust in the fighting style of the Crimson Hunting Squad.

Elsa: “I can’t tell them apart, though.”

Muttering inaudibly, Elsa left the group and went off on her own.

Leaving no tracks on the snowy path, Elsa looked up at the approaching buildings.

The building concealed within the blizzard was completely visible from the outside by the illumination of a crystal lamp.

This level of carelessness was extremely rare. Considering their looming defeat, they were awfully easygoing…

Elsa: "…"

Was it possible that the enemy was lacking in intelligence and had a poor understanding of the situation?

As soon as she began to have doubts, she heard the faint sound of battle from the direction where she left the Crimson Hunting Squad. It was the signal the guards of the stronghold and Logres had begun battle.

Elsa's role was to use the battle as a cover to infiltrate the building and take down the key parts of the enemy. However…

Elsa: "Oh, my."

While Elsa scaled the back wall and searched for a passage to sneak in through, the rear entrance of the building opened and a dragon carriage rushed out right beneath her eyes.

A white dragon with a white canopy to disappear into the snow, just like the equipment of the Crimson Hunting Squad. The dragon carriage's speed didn't let up, instead accelerating to full speed away from the battlefield.

Elsa: "…"

Igor's forces weren't particularly deployed in the direction of the dragon carriage's escape. Logres, clashing with the enemy in front, wouldn't be able to notice the carriage's existence. If Elsa missed it, the dragon carriage would be able to escape without any hindrances.

The question was whether or not the dragon carriage was worth postponing the capture of the enemy territory.

Elsa: "…Well, I can think about it after I catch it."

Even if gaining control of the battlefront was delayed a bit, Logres and the others would be able to hold out.

Elsa chose to follow her intuition rather than thinking. And her intuition ordered her to chase the dragon carriage.

Elsa: "…"

Normally, it would be nearly impossible for humans to catch up with a fleeing earth dragon on their own.

The dragon pulling the fleeing carriage was of the Aires species, which among ground dragons were the most suited for cold climates. They had scales the same color as their white fur, and they raced across the snow with their huge bodies, driving their claws into the snow in order to anchor themselves.

Humans who would get their feet stuck in the snow could never catch up. Elsa, despite rushing and running through the snow, was no exception. Therefore, Elsa followed a simple plan.

…If she couldn't catch up with the fleeing earth dragon, then she wouldn't allow it to escape.

Elsa: "…"

She held the blade aloft and threw it like a discus, swiftly sending it spinning at the fleeing ground dragon, cutting its thick neck in two from behind. Splattering scarlet blood onto the snow, the earth dragon failed to notice its own death as its head fell off. Immediately, the large frame of the earth dragon toppled over and the dragon carriage shook violently as it came to a halt.

Elsa: "Objective accomplished. As for what's inside… ah."

Elsa walked up to the halted carriage, but just before she attempted to open the door, she was forced to jump back as a slash from inside broke open the door of the carriage.

Elsa: "…"

Slowly stepping out from within the dragon carriage, there stood a robust man in his prime with close-cropped grey hair. Despite an old, vertical scar that broke into his left eye, his face, adorned simply with a suitable white moustache, remained austere and refined. Regardless, Elsa's didn't use outward appearance as a standard when evaluating men. …Rather than on the outside, what was truly precious was within the body.

Elsa: “In that respect… I think you’re very much to my tastes.”

Swordsman: “…It’s an honor for a man to be told so by a beautiful maiden.”

Elsa blushed, receiving a low sigh as a response from the matured man.

With his emerald eyes, the man gave the deceased earth dragon a sidelong glance, and placed his hand upon his silvery breastplate, praying for his steed’s soul to find peace.

Narrowing her eyes at the elegant gesture, Elsa licked her lips.

Elsa: “That prayer, and armor engraved with the mark of the Holy Church… an Acolyte Knight, I presume?”

Swordsman: “A former Acolyte Knight. I’ve already forsaken my devotion to the Holy Church. At present, I am only a simple swordsman.”

While he spoke, the man relaxedly placed his hands around his waist. Each side of the man’s waist bore one slim sword. He grasped the hilts of both of his blades and stood ready without withdrawing them from their sheaths.

At first glance, it was quite a strange stance, but there was no doubt it was how the man fought.

Elsa: “Acolyte Knight… an Acolyte Knight… how wonderful.”

Swordsman: “Formerly. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Elsa: “Perhaps you quit, but you’re an Acolyte Knight regardless. Hey, you received the Blessing, right?”

Swordsman: “Do you think I would tell you?

Elsa: “I was just asking… I’ll let your flesh and blood answer the rest of my questions.”

The sickly sweet, blood-red grin on her face indicated the battle’s start.

Elsa's silhouette darted through the blizzard and over the snow, kicking the snow aside as she moved. Her footwork so brisk the snowfall underfoot remained uncrushed, Elsa sprung at the man with her bizarre yet stunning stride.

Elsa: "…"

Wielding her blade, she scraped at the man's neck, lightly scratching his windpipe with the tip of the knife. His human throat would transform into a musical instrument, the blade producing the lovely, desperate sound of one's last moments. Both the sound of the escaping air, and the warped, anguished expression of the Acolyte Knight should have been entertaining.

The Acolyte Knight remained unmoving. Elsa was still near, and her strike had already been delivered; however, his deep green eyes stayed motionless, as if they were the surface of a rippleless lake.

Elsa: "…Ah!"

In a flash, two blades streaked towards Elsa, grazing her forehead as she twisted her body.

The scarlet and azure blades belonged to the katanas carried on the man's waist. Katanas were single-edged swords that originated in the western region of Kararagi, and were valuable weapons of war known for their dreadful sharpness. However, what surprised Elsa was not the existence of the katanas, but the clear skillfulness in the strikes. The katanas were certainly inside their sheaths,

Elsa: "When did you pull those out? You startled me!"

Swordsman: "I'm also surprised, I didn't think you could avoid it."

The man clicked his tongue as his first attack was evaded, his strike missing the mark. Elsa, licking the blood dripping down from her slashed temple, somersaulted backwards to regain her balance.

Elsa: "…"

Acolyte Knights were quite fearsome. Or rather, perhaps, former Acolyte Knights were fearsome.

The swords' wind blew violently, and what Elsa saw over, and over, and over, in the snow, was death.

The scarlet and azure flashes of the blade were intertwined, and what was created around the man was a realm of death that would cut down anyone who touched it. The range of his swords were long, more than twice the length of Elsa's knife. Unable to approach him carelessly, Elsa rapidly flew around the man, utilizing her combat instincts to search for a way to win.

Elsa: "Pull out, put in, pull out, put in, pull out, put in…"

She concentrated on watching the speed of the sword strikes, in awe, enchanted with the man's skill with the sword.

Although she didn't know why, the man maneuvered his swords back to their scabbards after each strike and slashed as he drew them out again. The left and right sides flowed together in a sequence, and the execution of the sword extraction and insertion was remarkably fast. The two strikes could be fired simultaneously or separately, and she couldn't find any gaps in his movements.

Elsa: "If I take my time, I'll have the advantage…"

In the background, at the original target, at that building, the Crimson Hunting Squad and the Orcos Domain garrison were still fighting.

Judging from their skill, Logres and the others would be able to overpower them eventually. In that case, reinforcements would rush to this battle, and Elsa would gain the advantage.

…But that would be a supremely boring ending.

Elsa: "Before that, I should stay true to the nature of the Bowel Hunter."

Swordsman: "…Reckless!"

Elsa, determined to avoid a final scene that fell flat, forcibly plunged right into the sword flash. The man, however, raised his voice at her for her decisive yet barbaric action.

In the man’s eyes, Elsa’s charge was an rash suicide attack lacking the means to succeed.

In truth, there was no clear-cut solution to this struggle in Elsa’s mind. What there was, though, was a sense of ecstasy that boiled her blood in excitement.

Swordsman: “…A blow!”

With a high-pitched sound that echoed throughout the snowfield, the impact ripped the knife from Elsa’s hand. However, she succeeded in blocking the magnificent scarlet slash the man had unleashed. Rushing forward with a single bound, he closed much of the distance, then… the azure sword strike.

Swordsman: “Here we go, a second blow.”

Elsa: “Ah…”

She undid the bottom hem of her evening dress and flipped the second knife strapped to her pale thigh into her hand. Slashing at the azure blade from directly underneath, her knife scattered sparks and released a scraping sound as it flicked off the blade.

In exchange for blocking the man’s two blows, Elsa also had lost her two weapons. She took two steps forward to close in, his breath becoming visible.

Elsa: “…”

In the next moment, the man’s swords launched forward - scarlet and azure blades fired at the empty-handed Elsa.

Blood splattered, and the sword strikes split her flesh open deep. The impact pierced through her bones, a sharp sound like hitting a frozen rock throbbed around them, and finally, someone let out an exhale.

It was a sigh of disappointment, despite the man's lips quivering as he gazed in wonder at the figure before him.

Swordsman: "You're an idiot…"

Elsa: "Ah, it hurts, it hurts. I thought I was going to die. …Well, that's a sign that I'm still alive."

As Elsa spoke and smiled at him, the swordsman was at a loss for words. His reaction was natural.

The sword blows that the man fired were no different, both hitting Elsa directly in the flesh. How did Elsa respond to being so heavily outclassed? She simply stood still, with her arms outstretched.

Entering through Elsa's palms, the blades passed through her slender wrists, forearms, elbows, and upper arms; they were only stopped by the bones around her shoulders. He was unable to cut completely through due to Elsa's approach, seizing the swords at their hilts.

It was an insane decision, to lose so much blood and surely both arms. Yet—

Elsa: "It's my win. …I'll let you meet an angel."

Swordsman: "What the hell is this…?!"

As Elsa ignored the intense pain, the swordsman tried to pull his blades back.

However, Elsa leaned forward faster than the man could move.

Swordsman: "But…"

Elsa's lips parted, and her white teeth sunk into the man's neck.

Spewing blood as her teeth found their way through the gaps in his armor, Elsa fatally gouged into the man's neck. Bathed in that fresh blood and with crimson splotches covering her face, Elsa spat out the flesh in her mouth.

Elsa: “Oh… I really felt that just now.”

With that, she let out an exhilarated white breath onto the snowfield, bathing in the relief of, at last, the man’s demise.

8

Her arms, struck by the swords, were unable to be moved, and Elsa kept walking over the snow, blood continuing to drip down. Leaving a trail of blood on the snow behind her, she peered into the dragon carriage that the older man had been trying to protect.

Inside the cut door, shivering in the cold wind at the back of the dragon carriage was…

Igor’s Subordinate: “…This seems to be quite the spectacular scene.”

At the voice from behind her, Elsa slowly turned around. The person approaching her, standing by the dragon carriage, was a young man in warm clothes with a thin smile on his face… Igor’s protégé.

Elsa’s dark eyes narrowed at the young man who had appeared alone on the front lines without an escort.

Elsa: “You’re not to move from the command base. That’s what I thought, at least…”

Igor’s Subordinate: “I was planning to do that. But if Viktor Orcos moves, that’s a different story. I’ve been deployed here for that purpose. Although…”

Cutting his words off, the young man smiled scornfully at the corpse of the robust man lying on the snow.

Igor’s Subordinate: “I guess I didn’t even have a role to play. Bowel Hunter, you’re even better than they say.”

Elsa: “I’m not sure I can honestly accept your praise in my current situation. Why do you need to come out when he… Viktor Orcos moves, I wonder?”

Igor's Subordinate: "…Why do you think that is?"

Maintaining a smile on his face, the young man kept a distance of about ten meters from Elsa. Oddly enough, the snowfall had temporarily ceased, and there was nothing between them to obstruct their eyesight or voices. Her arms were unmovable, and her weapons were not at hand… her heart was beating awfully noisily in her chest.

Elsa: "…"

The prone man… according to the young man's words, he was Viktor Orcos himself. He was the source of this incident, and a traitor who treated his people like slaves.

Although, if that was the case…

Elsa: "…It's very odd that the children in the dragon carriage are dressed so warmly."

Behind Elsa, inclining her neck in puzzlement, there were no less than fifteen children squeezed into the dragon carriage. All of them were around ten years old, and their clothes were warm furs and other heavy outfits for the cold…

Elsa: "That's not the kind of clothing slaves are dressed in."

Igor's Subordinate: "What makes you say that…?"

Elsa: "Personal experience. Tattered rags and beaten wounds, filthy skin, and dirty hair. It's unnatural to have none of that."

The young man's face stiffened slightly as Elsa dug up a memory and answered plainly. With a fake smile, the annoyed subordinate scratched his head and spoke.

Igor's Subordinate: "You're Igor-sama's favorite, so I don't want to harm you…"

Elsa: "Don't worry. I have no interest in Baron-sama. He's too fat."

Igor's Subordinate: "I see. …Then, I won't hesitate!"

In response to Elsa’s reply, the young man unfolded his palm at her. From that palm, a dazzling, shining white light shot out. …That is, a hidden life form of light with supernatural power.

Elsa: “…An Acolyte Knight contracted with a spirit.”

Immediately following Elsa’s mention of the young man’s identity, several rays of destructive power unleashed from that white light.

Then the light swallowed the motionless Elsa, and yet still it continued on, the bright blast bathing the snowfield in white.

9

Upon awakening, Elsa observed her surroundings with her usual state of mind.

Whether she woke up in a tranquil bed, in the midst of an enemy encampment, or even from a nap in a disastrous scene of blood and guts, that never changed. It was a habit that had been deeply ingrained into her body.

Ever since she had taken that devil’s hand over ten years ago, that had been so—.

Elsa: “…Where am I?”

???: “Looks like you noticed.”

It was a modest room made out of stone, one she had no recollection of. As she looked around the room inquisitively, a voice called to her from the side. Shifting her attention to that direction, she was a little surprised. She had already sensed the presence, but its identity was the cause for her shock.

Sat cross-legged on the floor, with their brawny arms crossed and eyes closed was a grey haired swordsman, and—

Elsa: “I’m sure I had bitten off your throat, though.”

???: “So that’s the first thing you check after waking up? What an utterly horrid woman you are.”

Elsa: “Apologies. It’s in my nature. So, would it be correct to assume that you are Viktor Orcos?”

Viktor: “—Indeed.”

As Elsa posed a question with her head tilted in doubt, the swordsman— the one who Elsa faced off against, and ought to have died a noble death, Viktor Orcos deeply nodded his head in response.

Viktor was draped in light white clothing, having removed the holy armor of an Acolyte Knight. The scar that ought to have been left on his exposed neck was nowhere to be found. The fatal wound that had been thrust into him by Elsa’s fangs, was nowhere to be found.

Elsa: “—The power of your Blessing, correct?”

Viktor: “Blessings and the like, are not as pure as the impression one would get from that word. The gospels used by the Witch Cult are of a similar nature, albeit to a different degree.”

Elsa: “Even though you’re an Acolyte Knight, you do not have faith. Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

With a response as indifferent as she had stated, Elsa loosened her vigilance towards Viktor. For the time being, it seemed that there was no need to worry about the situation suddenly developing into a fight to the death.

That could also be extrapolated from her current appearance. After all—

Elsa: “Why did you go to the trouble of letting me live when we ought to have fought to the death? You even went as far as to treat my wounds.”

Licking her lips, Elsa raised up both of her arms. They were wrapped in white bandages from her elbows to the fingertips, and she could also sense that healing magic had been applied.

But, it was the bout against Viktor that had caused these injuries in the first place.

Having fought to the death, she had certainly taken his life once. It was difficult to imagine that he would have given medical treatment to Elsa

And, at the moment when Victor gave a complex frown to Elsa’s question.

???: “Ah! Onee-san is awake! Viktor-sama, you lied to me again!”

As the door of the room was opened. a high-pitched voice pierced the interior. When Elsa looked over to see what was going on, she saw a red-haired girl pointing at the bed from the entrance.

She was a girl in her mid-teens with freckles and a sense of youthfulness on her face. As she glanced at Viktor,

Red-Haired Girl: “Even though I politely asked you to call for me as soon as she woke up. Viktor-sama you are always like this!”

Viktor: “Nora, you’re speaking too loud. Sorry for the delay in notifying you, but she just woke up. In other words, the promise was just about to be fulfilled. You were overeager with your denunciation.”

Nora: “You can’t fool me by saying complicated words! If you feel bad, then reflect on it! Go on!”

Viktor: “…I’m sorry.”

As Victor lowered his head, the girl called Nora exhaled in satisfaction. Seeing that, Elsa wore a rare expression of slight surprise.

The warrior’s presence gave a fierce indication that as a "former" Acolyte Knight, Viktor’s strength was incomparable to that of an ordinary person. There was an indescribable pathos in the sight of such a person being rebuked by a single girl.

At the same time, Elsa noticed that she had a recollection of seeing Nora.

Elsa: “You… were the girl from that dragon carriage. I remember you. After all, you were in the front trying to protect the other children."

Nora: "…"

Nora's cheeks stiffened when Elsa identified her. Still, she stoutly refused to avert her eyes from Elsa. That was admirable.

The dragon carriage in question— that had been the cause of the battle between Elsa and Viktor, so she must have witnessed their fight.

Of course, she also would have seen Elsa bite out Viktor's throat. And even though that ought to have been the case,

Elsa: "And yet, you went as far as to treat my wounds. These bandages were also applied by you, correct?"

Nora: "H-How…?"

Elsa: "A faint hint of your scent remains on these bandages. I have a good sense of smell."

Elsa lightly snorted her nose, and Nora could not help but be at a loss for words. That reaction convinced Elsa that her guess was correct.

In addition, it was likely the girl who had suggested that Elsa be treated and protected. Viktor was coerced to comply, that seemed to be the rough gist of things.

The question was, why had such a thing occurred?

Elsa: "So, can I ask you what exactly happened?"

Viktor: "…I was also dead for a period of time. Hence, I can only talk about what happened after I revived."

Elsa: "Yes. I don't mind. I also remember being attacked by a new Acolyte Knight."

Right after she bit off Viktor's throat— when she was assailed by the young man who was Igor's retainer and had rushed to the scene, her memories came to a halt. While being an Acolyte Knight with phenomenal powers, the young man had cunningly concealed his abilities.

With both her arms wounded, she should have suffered an utterly one-sided defeat by that young man.

Viktor: "I was able to revive in time before my core shattered. Thanks to that, I was able to fight off the Acolyte Knight. Then, I pulled the dragon carriage in place of the dead earth dragon and retreated."

Elsa: "Pulling a dragon carriage in place of an earth dragon… Oh, I kind of wish I could have seen that."

Viktor: "…"

Elsa: "—? Is something wrong?"

Elsa tilted her head at Viktor when he balked at her honest opinion. However, ignoring that question of Elsa's,

Viktor: "After that, I brought you back, gave you medical treatment, and monitored you until you awakened. That is all."

Elsa: "I see… Even so, you seem to have a very different personality from what I've heard."

According to her employer, Baron Igor Kenash, Viktor Orcos was a despicable individual who betrayed the Holy Kingdom and preyed on the population of his domain for human trafficking purposes. However, there was not even the slightest hint of a small man's vulgarity in the actual Viktor. Their stand-off was also a fair and honest one.

Of course, such vulgarity did not always align with one's human nature, but—.

Viktor: "And, what exactly have you heard?"

Elsa: "That you are a slave trader who sells the subjects of your domain to other countries as slaves. A traitor who, the moment news of his business leaked out, secluded himself to his domain in order to hold down the fort while persisting in a rebellion that had no chance for victory…or something like that.”

Viktor: “I see. I guess it’d be something around that.”

Nora: “That’s…not even close! For what kind of reason would they be calling Viktor-sama like that?!”

Viktor and Nora each took a different extreme in their response to Elsa, who conveyed the facts without paying an ounce of consideration. Viktor scornfully smirked with a sense of resignation and Nora’s face was red with indignation.

Elsa nodded her head with an “Indeed” in agreement with Nora’s anger

Elsa: “The slave trade is just another business. It does a wonderful job of providing value to those who have none, and selling them. To disparagingly show contempt for that act, is quite a cruel thing to do.”

Nora: “Th-That’s not what I was mad about…”

Elsa: “—?”

Nora: “What I’m angry about is the lie that Viktor-sama is enslaving everyone in town!”

With a heart filled with rage, Nora drew closer to Elsa with that momentum. Her advance was stopped by Viktor, who extended his arm, but her words reached Elsa firmly.

And so did the fact that the contents of those words differed to the circumstances Elsa was aware of.

Viktor: “I don’t expect you to believe me, but what you have been told was falsified information. There is not a single shameful deed being carried out in the Orcos Domain. Everything was Igor’s schemes, false accusations.”

Elsa: "…"

Viktor: "The slave trade in question, it's ringleader is none other than Igor himself. Proceeding with my investigation to try and prosecute that, I was fine with transporting those girls as slaves until I could secure them, but…"

Giving a sidelong glance to the girl beside him, Viktor cast his eyes down in lament. When she looked at Nora who watched over Viktor anxiously, Elsa could imagine the unspoken tale that lay beyond those words.

And, the words he spoke were likely true. The "merchandise" present within the dragon carriage were wearing decent clothing, and Igor's retainer had turned on Elsa the moment she pointed that out.

Elsa: "In essence, you're trying to say I was set up."

Viktor: "…Precisely. Igor's crafty scheme was thorough, wasn't it? That guy's good at currying favor with those in power. My explanations will no longer reach anyone in the Holy Church. I thought I knew all there was to know about the corruption in this country, but I was… naive. Right now, I just feel deeply sorry to all the citizens who got caught up in it."

The brunt of his feelings of helplessness was not for his own future, but for his sense of responsibility regarding the population of his domain.

The imagination she had wrung out was correct. Viktor had been treated as a rebel on such a large scale. At this point, it was difficult to believe that the Holy Kingdom would abandon this course of action.

Elsa: "So then? Just what might be your objective in telling me such a story?"

Viktor: "…"

Elsa: "To be honest, I'm not really interested in whether what you just told me is true or not. I'm not saying that it doesn't matter, but the truth is painted over in the face of the outcome. Just like how earth is covered by snow. That's how it is in this country, isn't it? Neither you nor I can escape that rule."

Viktor: "That's quite harsh. Nevertheless, it's correct."

Rather than cold-hearted, it was more appropriate to call Elsa's answer indifferent, even while being informed on the situation. In response, Viktor sarcastically contorted the corner of his mouth and tapped Nora on the shoulder beside him.

Viktor: "I desire nothing from you. I'll just say this, don't go on a rampage… Moreover, it was on Nora's request that you were saved. I was going to leave you in the snow."

Elsa: "I see. In that case, why did you?"

With Viktor's hand still on her shoulder, Nora faced Elsa. Nora's gray eyes and Elsa's black eyes were reflected in the other's.

Then, as the girl cleared her throat,

Nora: "…Because I just didn't want you to die. Is that not good enough?"

Elsa: "…"

Nora: "The Holy Church, the Holy King, and the Benevolent Mother teach us to treat all forms of life with compassion. I, too, was saved by Viktor-sama right before I was really about to die… that's why."

Elsa: "But that Gustekan Holy Church is now trying to destroy the Orcos Domain. Yet you still do so?"

Nora: "I was saved by the teachings. I will never forget that, even if the teachings turn their back on me."

Elsa's eyes narrowed at Nora as she declared that so resolutely. The girl's eyes were filled with tears, which even now were on the verge of streaming down her stiffened cheeks. Still, she did not avert her eyes, she did not hang her head, and she spoke her mind.

That was an extremely sweet stimulation that made Elsa's heart throb.

Elsa: "—I'm sure, your insides must be very beautiful."

Nora: "Huh?"

Viktor: "Don't make too many imprudent remarks. If I see you as a danger, I'll chop your head off immediately."

With a lustrous smile, Viktor gave a warning to Elsa's methods of giving high praise. He sheltered Nora behind him, who wore a look on her face that suggested she did not understand, and he had his hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist.

To that excess of caution, Elsa showed off her bandage-covered arms, and,

Elsa: "I was joking. Look at this. I'm unable to do anything very dangerous."

Nora: "Viktor-sama! You're talking to a wounded person!"

Viktor: "…Fine."

With Elsa and Nora having rebuked him, Viktor had no choice but to put away his hostilities.

Viktor: "It's Nora's request. We'll treat you as our guest for a while, but… once you're able to move, you have to leave here as soon as possible. Eventually, Igor's forces will close in."

Elsa: "Oh yes. I may have failed to die, but they already consider me to be an enemy."

Was her survival a miracle of the Benevolent Mother, or was it perhaps on the whims of the devil? Either way, Viktor's opinion that she should not stay here too long was valid.

Elsa: "Then I'll stay without reservation, I'll be in your care until I can move."

Viktor: “Rest up well during your stay. We’re scarce, but if there’s anything you need, you can ask Nora.”

Elsa: “Is that so? Well in that case, I have a favor to ask her right away.”

When Elsa bit at the generous offer, Viktor and Nora both widened their eyes. Elsa gave a slight smile to the two.

Elsa: “—A crochet hook and some yarn, could I have some? It’s a hobby I use to pass the time.”

As the two of them were told that, they were quite surprised.

10

Nora: “Onee-san, I don’t know what to make of you….”

With a dismayed sigh, Nora was lying down on her bed as she gave such an evaluation of Elsa. Elsa herself tilted her head at the girl’s comment with a confused look on her face.

Elsa: “Is that so? Though I am merely spending my time in my own way, just as I would have thought myself to do.”

Nora: “In your own way? How exactly?”

Elsa: “Following my intuition, I guess. It’s my nature to follow my instincts when it comes to thinking about things after all.”

Nora: “And the result of those instincts, is knitting to pass the time when you’re badly hurt? Even going as far as to borrow the hands of another?”

With bitter feelings harborted in her youthful face, Nora concentrated on the task at hand. In the girl’s small hands were a crochet hook and a skein of yarn, and she knitted with restless, poor movements.

And all of this was in place of Elsa, who had injured both her arms.

Elsa: “You’re quite good at this. It’s worth my while to teach you.”

Nora: “Not that I’m not happy to receive compliments, but even if my knitting improves now…”

Elsa: “The things you learn will not be in vain. All the more if you don’t become a slave.”

Having extolled Nora with praise, Elsa was in good enough of a mood to let the girl continue her knitting. But, Nora’s hand stopped at those words, and Elsa let out a "What?" with raised eyebrows.

Nora: “Onee-san, um… have you ever been a slave?”

Elsa: “Was there the brand of slavery on my body, I wonder?”

Nora: “There… weren’t any, but…”

Responding to Nora’s question in a roundabout way, Elsa chuckled “Then there’s your answer”.

Generally— though this was common knowledge in the slave trade, it was common practice for slaves to be branded on their backs. It was a ritual to show ownership and to painfully remind the slave themself that their body was no longer their own.

A slave did not need a sense of self. They would be stripped of that right at the beginning. Branding was a rite of passage in that regard.

Elsa: “But slavery is a slave’s only way of life. I have no intention to deny that.

As long as you give up your own way of living, you will at least remain tied to life. And in this country, that’s a luxury.”

Nora: “Onee-san, you think it wouldn’t be so bad to become a slave?”

Elsa: “I don’t want to be one. That’s why I ran away. —There, turn that over.”

Nora widened her eyes at the assertion that seems to overturn her previous view. Not caring about the reaction, Elsa nonchalantly gave the next instruction and turned her attention out of the room.

In response to the earlier conversation, Nora was absorbed in knitting and thinking. She had not noticed, but there have been frequent signs of people coming and going in front of the room since a few minutes ago.

Elsa: "…"

With every nerve in her body on edge, Elsa focused her attention on those signs of people coming and going.

The sound of footsteps and breathing could be heard. Multiple signs caused her skin to tingle with wariness. The echoes of footsteps and the number of people milling about gave her an idea of the approximate size of the building.

It was a big building in its own right. Although not quite as grand as Igor's mansion, the architectural style of the atmosphere was quite close. Perhaps it was Viktor's mansion.

If he opened up his mansion to the fiefdom and used it as a base of operations, it made sense given his character. The robustness of the building could not be compared to that of an ordinary house. — Though it would be all the same if they were forced into a corner.

Elsa: "But, you seem to be cherished by everyone."

Nora: "—?"

Elsa's whispered tone of voice made Nora, who was concentrating on the task at hand, look at her curiously.

Nora could never understand. The signs of coming and going outside the room— they were Viktor's men, who were worried about Nora, who had been left in the room with Elsa. Given Elsa's position and title, their concern was justified.

On the other hand, Nora's presence was also a deterrent to their response to Elsa. One would think that Elsa, held as a prisoner of war in enemy territory, would be an outlet for their anger. The fact that this had not been the case was largely due to Nora's presence beside Elsa.

As a result, Nora contributed to her surroundings in a way that did not create unnecessary conflict.

Elsa didn’t know the extent to which Viktor had intended for that to happen.

Nora: “Here, and then like this… I did it, I think.”

Elsa: “Let me see.”

The doll that had been presented to her without much confidence had followed Elsa’s instructions carefully, so it was quite well made. If this was her debut work, it went far above the grade needed to pass; Nora was suited to knitting.

Elsa: “A wonderful job. Your fingers are quite dexterous, so you can do more than just be a slave.”

Nora: “…Onee-san, you’re not very good at complimenting people.”

Elsa: “Is that so? I guess so. I get told that quite often.”

With the doll placed in her bandaged, crippled hand, Elsa responded without much of a care. Nora sighed deeply in response and continued, "But…"

Nora: “I’m glad to hear you say I’m good with my hands. I don’t want to be a slave either.”

Elsa: “I see.”

The more one could do, the more paths opened up for them to live by other than being a slave.

Having understood Elsa’s words of wisdom, Nora digested them as she spoke. Elsa responded indifferently to the answer, yet pulled the doll to her chest.

As a matter of fact, no matter how much Nora thought about the future, there was no future for the Orcos Domain.

The Gustekan Church was using Igor, working with the intention of formally covering up any scandal.

That was why—

Elsa: “If you have something you want to say, you might as well say it.”

Nora: “—Hk.”

Elsa: “I’m not very good at understanding people’s feelings. So if you don’t tell me, I won’t know. And I owe you a debt of gratitude for saving me. Lending and borrowing is the principle of settling debts.”

Nora, who had been looking at Elsa holding the doll with mystified eyes, choked up. It was a casual remark, but Elsa did not tell unnecessary lies. Her words came from the heart.

—The act of lending and borrowing to clear debts. As the Bowl Hunter, it was one of Elsa’s few beliefs.

Elsa: “Naturally, there is a limit to what I can do.”

Nora: “…”

As if in thought, Nora turned over and fell silent. Elsa quietly waited for the girl to speak as the blood drained from her face and her exhalations quickened.

Frankly, if nothing else, that was fine. She’d like to settle the debt, but if the other party didn’t want to, that would be their decision. She would respect that. Though Elsa felt a little bad about it.

Nora: “S-Save…”

Elsa: “…”

Therefore, Elsa, who was prepared for nothing to be proposed, was only momentarily slow to react.

She looked up to see Nora, fists clenched in her lap, staring at Elsa as if she were gritting her teeth. The girl then repeated the words of her wish in a trembling voice.

Nora: “Please, save me… Viktor-sama, and everyone else, they say we have no choice but to fight. But even if we fight…”

They had no chance of winning. Nora also understood the tragic resolution that the adults had set in place. With that understanding, perhaps the girl was prepared to do the same.

However, if there was any hope to be found, the likes of any young resolve would easily be shattered.

At the girl’s wish, Elsa looked down at the doll, which was housed in her bountiful bosom. Elsa exhaled a small sigh as she looked into the eyes of the amateurish doll, and,

Elsa: “I guess I have to pay back what I owe, right?”

Without looking at the teary-eyed girl, she simply muttered that.

11

Even at night, which served as a symbol of serenity, the Kingdom of Gusteko was disconnected from the concept of stillness.

Outside the building, heavy snow blew violently in a storm, and thick, fast clouds overlooked the land endlessly. With both visibility and sound so hectic, it was possible to have the silence submit.

—Hence, it was easy for Elsa to slip out of the building, even if it had a watchman standing guard.

The likes of impaired arms were no problem whatsoever for an agent like herself.

Elsa opened the door to her assigned room and majestically slipped through the corridor in which the guard was standing. If she lurked in the gaps between consciousnesses and slipped past the watchful eye at a quick pace, she would not be caught.

Without making a sound, even leaving her shadow behind, she easily left the building; as expected, the building standing amidst the snow was the mansion of Viktor Orcos, located in the innermost place of the Orcos Domain.

Bonfires burned in the surroundings of the building, and lights for the guards could be seen here and there in the distance. The scent of excitement and caution that pervaded the surrounding area was probably evidence that Igor’s forces had invaded quite deep into the Orcos Domain.

Just before Elsa deserted the warfront, a joint operation with the "Crimson Hunting Squad" was in its final stages. Even if Elsa was missing, it would not cause Logres and the rest to change their strategy.

If that was the case, it would not be long before this place became a battlefield—

Elsa: “—Since you’re the main force, I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to be staying up so late.”

???: “This body, though abominable, bears the qualifications of a Saint. It is needless to worry.”

Elsa looked back at the house, and Viktor, clad in a fighting spirit that could melt the snow, answered her question.

He wore a white cloak and had two katanas at his waist, ready for battle. Oddly enough, this situation bore a close resemblance to the battlefield where the two had initially met.

The problem was Elsa’s arms, and her lack of weaponry. Against an Acolyte Knight on a blizzard night, the situation was suddenly unfavorable.

Elsa: “What a thrill.”

Despite knowing that the situation was against her, Elsa’s cheeks flushed with excitement and she exhaled. She was in a state of euphoria, and her thinly-clad body was beginning to radiate heat from within.

In a world of extreme cold where even one's life would be in danger, the dense smell of death and the woman's lust overflowed, coloring the very essence of life and death.

However, when Elsa was unable to control her excitement, Viktor spoke,

Viktor: "Don't misunderstand. I have no intention of getting into a fight with you here."

Elsa: "…Is that so?"

Viktor: "I cannot agree to the reason for your disheartenment, but yes. —You're just leaving, right?"

Elsa felt disappointed by the peace offer as Viktor closed one eye in restraint. At these words, Elsa pulled back her chin and turned her gaze toward Viktor's mansion,

Elsa: "Indeed. I'm indebted to you, and I didn't kill anyone. So now you're going to let me do as I please."

Viktor: "I don't think you would do this, but I have no intention of letting you rejoin Igor's forces. If that's what you intend to do, I would need to stop just that."

Elsa: "Before I answer your question, could you tell me what the results would be depending on my choice?"

Viktor: "I would like to take Nora's wishes into consideration to the maximum extent possible. Nora tried to save you. If possible, I don't want to have to bury that corpse of yours under the snow."

Because of the girl's wish, Viktor gave his sharpened fighting spirit a slight reprieve.

Once someone was buried in snow, they would never be found unless that snow melted. And in Gusteko, there was no such thing as snow that melted naturally. Hence, that sleep would be eternal.

Burying someone in the snow was the most ruthless burial in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

Elsa: "…"

Confronted with such a choice, Elsa silently pondered.

In this situation, Viktor's attitude was seemingly lenient. The options he presented implicitly showed Elsa a way to survive. If he was truly concerned for the good of his domain and was willing to suppress any anxiety, he should cut down Elsa without hesitation.

However, if that were to be mentioned, then the very act of taking Elsa into his dragon carriage was strange in the first place. And if therein lay an aim of Viktor's outside of lenience, then—

Elsa: "—I'll kindly do as I please. That will not change."

Exhaling a white breath, Elsa left the final conclusion of her pondering to intuition.

Viktor, who had been touching the hilt of his katana, paused for a moment in silent contemplation as Elsa's answer was given. But eventually, he slowly released his hand from the sword and straightened his half-slung posture.

Viktor: "Go now."

Elsa: "…If we get the chance, let's fight to the death once more, shall we?"

To that farewell, Viktor exhaled, and Elsa walked away with a smile on her face. With Viktor's gaze on her back, Elsa waved her bandaged hand.

While holding the doll Nora had made in that hand, Elsa disappeared in the falling snow.

Viktor: "—Will she amount to being a stray arrow? No, this will just be a vain struggle in the end, won't it?"

As she disappeared, Viktor Orcos muttered one last time without being heard—.

Igor: “Oh! Elsa, you’ve returned!”

In the warm hall, Elsa received a warm welcome from an obese man— Igor Kenash.

He was Elsa’s employer, and the leader of the Purification Operation of the Orcos Domain, stroked his ample belly and smiled fondly at her upon her return.

The smirk on his face twisted into a quizzical look when he noticed the bandages on Elsa’s arms,

Igor: “Hmm? What happened to your arms? Your beautiful fingers are ruined!”

Elsa: “There was a battle. When trying to take the lives of others, it is inevitable that injuries will be sustained.”

Igor: “If so, is that why you returned wounded? Makarista, damn useless bastard…!”

Biting his nails in frustration, Igor revealed his discontent with the ineptitude of his retainer— the Acolyte Knight called Makarista, rather than Elsa, who had returned.

Apparently, the clash between Elsa and Makarista had not been communicated to him. It was possible that there was a lapse in communication, alternatively, there was a chance that Makarista had been killed by Viktor

If that was the case, Elsa was a little disappointed. —She had yet to see the bowls of a Spirit user.

Elsa: “Well, that’s fine… who are those two?”

Putting aside her disappointment, Elsa pointed behind Igor— to the two young individuals standing there. They were young men, around twenty years old, like two peas in a pod. Were they perhaps twins? At least, they were not faces she had seen in the mansion before the Purification Operation, and they stuck to Igor tightly.

With a powerful ambiance, they bore shining holy armor that had been engraved with the Holy Seal. Without a doubt, they must have been members of the Acolyte Knights.

Elsa: “While I was away, you’ve acquired new guards… I presume?”

Igor: “They were dispatched from the higher ups. These right here are proof that my role is considered important by the Church. If anything happens to me, the attack on the Orcos Domain will fall apart. The only way for Viktor Orcos to break out of this situation is to target that, no matter how desperate it would be. Even a fool could make such predictions”

Elsa: “And for that purpose you have been granted Acolyte Knights. Quite the lavish hospitality.”

At Elsa’s words, which could be taken either as admiration or sarcasm, the faces of the young Acolyte Knights stiffened. But, Igor raised his hand to them and shook his head, "No, no."

Igor: “Don’t stimulate them too much, Elsa. For these Acolyte Knights, onto whom celibacy is imposed, your allure is too strong a poison. We cannot allow the sweet scent of debauchery to cause them to make a mistake.”

Elsa: “Your phrasing is a tad abstruse. I’m not very good at understanding such things.”

Igor: “That shall do fine. If a woman is beautiful, it is best for her to not be wise. A wise woman goes further than necessary. A woman does not need to do such speculation. If she can just be loved as a wallflower, that’s all that matters.”

It was quite irrational, but Elsa did not feel particularly strongly about his words.

They to whom only bad ideas come might as well be asleep. Dimwittedness was a waste of time to bother with, Elsa agreed on that. Therefore, Elsa followed her instincts. And as a result of following them—

Igor: “In any case, you have done well to return, Elsa. I am overjoyed for your return. Worry not about your wounded arms. It’s more important that you don't have any on that face and body of yours."

Elsa: "Is that so? Why's that?"

Igor: "After all, you will no longer need those limbs of yours."

With a vile smile, Igor spoke gruesomely. Elsa frowned at his significant comment. —Even faster than that, the two Acolyte Knights behind him sprung into action.

Elsa: "…"

A moment later, Elsa's vision was broken diagonally by a flash of tremendous sharpness that cleaved the wind.

The only reason it barely missed was because she had anticipated a surprise attack. A blow quicker than the speed of sound, if unanticipated, would be nearly impossible to avoid.

The two knights still continued with their method of attack, the sound of slicing wind circling overhead.

Elsa: "Twin whips… Truly, it's one interesting fighting style after the other with you Acolyte Knights, isn't it?"

Viktor used katanas, Makarista used a spirit, and the two in front of her used a dual-wielding style with whips— The twin knights freely wielded twin whips, in other words, four lines at the speed of sound, raged and dominated the room.

Elsa: "Though I thought there had been no report of the breakdown between your retainer and I?"

As Elsa moistened her lips with fighting spirit and posed a question, Igor smiled as he took a wide step back and detached himself from the battlefield.

Igor: "Mm. That's the first I've heard of that. I merely punish those whom I'm suspicious of. —I was just going to eliminate all elements that were not in the prior plan. In your case, I was planning to cut off your arms and legs and make you my beloved concubine once matters were settled. Till then I kept up my act."

Elsa: "Is that so? —Now, for the first time, I have grown fond of you. Quite a nice hobby you have."

When Igor revealed his cruel nature to her, Elsa responded with a beaming smile. Igor's nose puffed out in excitement at the beauty which could send shivers down one's spine,

Igor: "Then, will you be my favorite mistress by offering your arms and legs to me? It won't hurt."

Elsa: "It's hard to decline that offer…but I'm sorry. I put my hobbies first."

She didn't mind pain. It was true there was an exciting aspect to Igor's proposal. —But more than that, Elsa prioritized her own pleasure.

That was to say,

Elsa: "I'm going to give love to the insides of your bellies."

Immediately following that declaration of the Bowel Hunter's desires, the twin whips of the Acolyte Knights engulfed the Great Hall.

Marble walls and expensive carpets were mercilessly destroyed as dust filled the space. The tip of the whips manipulated by knights' had countless fine thorns, which made for a brutal contraption that ripped the flesh of its prey from its bones.

Even a mere graze would leave one with a serious injury. In a battlefield where they closed in like snakes moving at the speed of sound, Elsa, her arms dangling, swept through them with a gliding, dancing gait.

The concept of floors, walls, and ceilings became meaningless in Elsa's gait through space. Up and down, left and right, Elsa leapt around the hall, tracing the gaps of the whip attacks.

Igor: "What, what the hell are you doing, you Acolyte Knights?! The blessing granted to you by His Eminence is weeping!”

With the expectation that it would be an instant victory betrayed, Igor’s spittle flew as he rebuked the Acolyte Knights. The expressions of the twins remained unchanged at those words, however the speed and sharpness of each of the twin whips increased all the more.

Faster than sound, faster than wind, the whiplashes accelerated. However—

Elsa: “—Very good. But, it’s not enough.”

As the whips grazed her toes and glided across her black braid, Elsa smiled in ecstasy.

The coordination of the twin Acolyte Knights was superb. Their dual-wielded whips compensated for each other’s blind spots and never allowed the enemy to breach their high-speed attack range. Once the whip caught the enemy, a barrage of lashes would rush toward the stationary opponent, uprooting them.

If it landed, it was a tactic that guaranteed certain victory— hence, it was lacking in minute maneuvers.

Elsa: “For example, what if I do this?”

Elsa leapt directly above the hall as whip shots exploded beneath her feet. The twins followed the shadow and chose to pursue it with their whips, but that was an error in judgment.

Directly above the great hall, Elsa’s kick shattered an enormous crystal chandelier, and the massive mass fell to the ground in one fell swoop. Even a lash that was effective against the human body would not be powerful enough against such a large inorganic object.

Acolyte Knights: “—Hk!”

Jumping quickly to the left and right, the twin Acolyte Knights avoided being crushed by the crystal chandelier. A thick plume of smoke rose, and the whips of the counterattack cracked loudly as they aimed at the shadow standing in the middle of the plume,

Elsa: “—Yes, Got you.”

Elsa grabbed the whip strikes that came at her from each side with her raised left and right arms. Sharp thorns dug into her hands through the bandage, but Elsa didn’t let the pain bother her. Then, faster than the gasping Acolyte Knights, she turned the tip of the whip in her hands to the fittings of the fallen crystal chandelier,

Elsa: “Will your judgment continue to overlap now that you two are separated?”

Tying the whip to the damaged crystal chandelier, Elsa kicked it vigorously away. The super-heavy illumination spun and blew away, and the Acolyte Knight connected by the whip was swept up by its momentum.

Of course, if he let go of the whip, he would be freed from this violent storm. But even if they were twins, their thoughts are not linked. Due to the unforeseen circumstances, a momentary separation in their time was yielded.

Elsa: “How was that? Do you feel it?”

Sliding over to the twin whose judgment had lapsed, Elsa grabbed him by the face as she posed a question.

The other person’s throat tightened at her smile, and eyes darkened with fear. Immediately after, Elsa switched her position with the person she had grabbed and used him as a shield against whip lashes from behind her.

Having wounded his other half with sharp thorns, the unscathed twin’s throat clogged up. He must not cease his movements there. He had failed. Upon that discomposed face, Elsa cracked a whip that had fallen.

Acolyte Knight: “—Hk!”

Elsa: “Since you get along so well with your brother, I’ll give you the same wound. You can share in each other’s pain.”

With their faces gouged by whip lashes, Elsa pulled them both back with her whip in one fell swoop. Unable to resist her power, the twin Acolyte Knights collided head-on and collapsed to their knees in an embrace.

—Lined up torsos, overlapping bellies. Elsa removed the bandages from both arms and pulled out a kukri.

Elsa: "You were born with a blessing, weren't you? I'll give you two a blessing as well."

She smiled, stepped forward, and swung her blade with force.

With a single flash, the blessed holy armor was slashed in half across the twins' torsos. Divided by the upper and lower halves, the twin Acolyte Knights collapsed in a sea of fresh blood and guts.

Unable to even raise a cry of despair, the Acolyte Knights die before the madness of the Bowel Hunter.

Elsa: "…"

In the face of their dead corpses, Elsa folded her knees lightly and checked them carefully. Naturally, it was a fatal wound, no sign of life. Perhaps it was because they were not yet too familiar with their blessing, but they died in a single blow without reviving.

But, Elsa was more interested in what was inside the twins, who had worked so hard together—.

Elsa: "Ahh, how lovely. …Even though they are twins, their insides are still completely different."

She compared the color and shape of the scattered entrails with the tip of her kukri. Watching such a crazed Elsa, Igor, whose escorts were killed, opened and closed his mouth as if panting,

Igor: "A-Acolyte Knights, even them… And, ugh, your arms, were wounded…"

Elsa: "Oh, you mean these bandages? Though I was already fully healed from the beginning… I just didn't know when to unwind the bandages after all the trouble that had been taken to have them wrapped.”

In response to the weeping questioning, Elsa gracefully removed the nearly undone bandages.

Underneath, the skin was white without a scratch— not a single scar from Viktor’s sword or the thorn from the whip lashes she received from the recent battle.

Elsa: “Now then, time to deal with you…”

Igor: “W-Wait! What do you think…what do you think will happen to you if you kill me?”

Igor, whose face was drenched in greasy sweat, turned his voice inside out as Elsa enjoyed the twins’ intestines.

Igor: “I am now under the command of the Gustekan Church! If you kill me, you will become an enemy of the Holy Church… In other words, a great enemy of the Holy Kingdom…!”

Elsa: “A great enemy of the Holy Kingdom.”

At the sound of that, Elsa quietly closed her eyes. Igor gulped heavily at Elsa’s response, and he pinned his hopes on the words that followed. And then—

Elsa: “—That sounds very, very lovely.”

Her black eyes narrowed with a smile, they lit wet with murderous intent, and Igor screamed, "Eep". Then he backed away, and the man rushed off in a great hurry to the back of the hall— fleeing deeper into the mansion.

Igor: “A-Anyone! Anyone out there! Save me!!”

With a cracked voice calling for help, Igor ran deeper and deeper into the mansion.

The office at the far end of the mansion had a hidden passageway to escape outside.

If he could escape that far, if he could buy enough time, he wouldn't be caught by this horror—.

Igor: "Anyone! Save me… any, one…"

Igor ran frantically down the hallway and gasped for breath. There he finally realized the uncanniness of the situation.

More than twenty of Igor's mercenaries were waiting in the mansion. The reason why only two Acolyte Knights were brought to the hall was because he thought it would be enough to seize Elsa.

And yet, there was no sign of the mercenaries who should be there. He had shouted and not a single one showed themselves.

???: "—As expecteeed, Elsa is sooo picky."

The voice abruptly shook Igor's eardrums as he leaned against the wall and shrank back in eeriness.

It sounded to Igor like the voice of a young maiden. But the strange luster in her voice was not commensurate with her age, and the sound stirred panic.

Then he turned to the voice, and this time, Igor's mind reached its limit.

Igor: "Ah…"

???: "The people in this maaansion are all fatties so I don't like this. If Shadow Lion-chan gets fat, I'll make Elsa take the blame!"

The voice came from above. But Igor had no time to deal with that voice.

Igor's attention was riveted to the presence in front of him, the oral cavity lined with countless sharp fangs— a huge, mighty witchbeast with a wide-open mouth.

Even as his thoughts stopped, at the last moment Igor understood.

Slimy red wet fangs, he knew that this was the answer to why the mercenaries had not responded.

???: “Goodnight.”

That was the last voice Igor Kenash heard after all his debauchery and plotting.

13

After being thrusted by countless blades, Viktor Orcos finally stopped moving.

Logres of the Crimson Hunting Squad sighed as he looked down on Viktor, the target of Purification Operation, who bled profusely and had lost his right leg, and whose will to fight remained undiminished in the face of death.

Logres: “This isn’t a matter of him just being tough. It’s a miracle we survived…”

Crimson Hunter Squad Member 1: “Ditto.”

Crimson Hunter Squad Member 2: “I mean, I feel like half of me is dead.”

Crimson Hunter Squad Member 3: “My blood won’t stop either, though.”

The surviving members of the troupe verbally agreed with Logres, who was deflated with fatigue. Not a single one of them was unharmed. The number of members of the group were reduced by half, and it was truly a fight to the death.

Their location was the final stronghold of the Orcos Domain, the destroyed mansion of Viktor Orcos.

The Purification Operation, as Igor called it, had reached its conclusion, and after having pushed the rebels into their stronghold, Logres and his team magnificently overthrew Viktor and ended the battle.

Logres: “There were some huge casualties though. Shit. It would have been a lot easier with Elsa."

Four days earlier, the Bowel Hunter Elsa had gone missing during the operation— her absence had thrown a wrench in Logres' plans. Nevertheless, the reduced strength was compensated for by the entry of Makarista, who had revealed himself to be an Acolyte Knight.

Logres: "When it comes to an enemy that can kill Elsa, we had to prepare accordingly. That said, we incurred a net loss by setting up a precious magic stone to detonate, I thought we were done for when he endured with just one leg remaining."

True to his title of former Acolyte Knight, Viktor was indeed a monster.

Half of the Crimson Hunting Squad was cut down by Viktor, who was half-dead after one of his legs was blown off by an explosive mine. In the end, they were prepared to make sacrifices in order to earn a victory that was won by sheer numbers.

Logres: "Well, a win is a win. I'm not really in the mood for a mourning contest, but… have you got any last words?"

Viktor: "So the stray arrow, didn't make it in time, huh…?"

Logres: "Ahh?"

Languidly dropping his arms, Viktor muttered something regretful on the verge of death. The half-dead man dripped blood from his mouth to Logres, who was about to hear his last words,

Viktor: "To a whimsical stray arrow… I left the future of my domain…"

Logres: "—. That's a bit too much reliance on others. When you, the lord of the domain, went and did all that, this place was doomed. It was only natural for it to be destroyed.."

At the interrupted words, Logres clicked his tongue with disdain.

Logres himself was aware of what was behind the Purification

Operation. As he told Elsa, the unity of the Orcos Domain was disproportionate to the corrupt feudal lords. The Gustekan Church's practice of covering up dirty affairs was not uncommon.

—There was a ninety percent chance, Viktor had been set up.

But he had no means to reveal it, no way to uncover it, and no opportunity to do so. Because in this country, it is not the rightful truth, but the absurdly powerful that prevailed.

Makarista: "As that mercenary said, this is a situation created by your incompetence, that it is!"

Logres: "…You've come out, Makarista."

A high-pitched voice echoed, and a nervous-looking young man appeared in the collapsed hall. Makarista Perkin, Igor's confidant and acting commander of the operation.

Half of the slender young man's face was bandaged, and his bare eyeballs were bloodshot with anger. All of that pain and anger was directed at the dying Viktor.

Makarista: "I was going to repay you ten thousand times over for this wound, but here you are! You are truly an inferior person that I don't even have to deal with!"

Logres: "Who was the one who made a racket because they got their face cut off by that inferior someone…"

Logres muttered this only in his mouth so that Makarista, who spat out, did not hear.

In the meantime, the young man continued to curse at his enemy, but eventually he ran out of words,

Makarista: "Now then, let's shatter your very core, damned sinner. It is nauseating to think that an apostate like you was treated as a saint, even for a moment. You are a disgrace to the Acolyte Knights."

Sputtering, Makarista pointed his fingertips at Viktor's chest. As it was, an invisible force would destroy Viktor's body. —It was at that moment.

???: "—Oh dear, it seems I'm a little late."

The familiar glamorous voice blocked everyone present from moving.

With light footsteps, a lone woman landed in the devastation of the large hall. The woman, dressed in black and sporting a long black braid, gave the men, who stiffened, a terrifying look,

???: "Too bad. Seems like we didn't get the chance. Even though I had gone through so many troubles to prepare for this."

Logres: "…I had thought her a woman who wouldn't die even if killed, but this ain't the mood of a happy reunion."

Logres felt a sense of foreboding when he reunited with Elsa, a woman who tilted her head and whispered languidly.

All the while, Elsa's gaze passed by Logres and Makarista, staring at the dying Viktor. At her gaze, Logres also looked back at Elsa.

Viktor: "So the stray arrow has returned, huh…?"

Elsa: "—? No, I am the Bowel Hunter. I came back because I brought something that you wanted. In truth, if you wanted me to pass it over, I would've had us fight over it… At least that was what I was hoping for."

With that, Elsa held up a strange package that she was clasped in her right hand. It was a round, black package that was around an armful. —Its shape and size gave off an unpleasant premonition.

From Elsa's amused side-profile, he could imagine it wasn't anything good that had been wrapped up.

Elsa: "But it looks like both you and your domain are finished. This is a wasted souvenir, too bad."

Makarista: "…Ignoring everyone, that's as far as your carefree talk goes."

As Elsa shrugged her shoulders, Makarista interrupted her conversation.

The young man clawed at his blood-soaked bandage and stared at Elsa with hatred in his wide-open eyes.

Makarista: "How dare you, how dare you show your face in front of me like that? My face! My eyes! Gouged out! If we were to meet again, it'd be a fight to the death, even though you should have understood that!"

Elsa: "—? Indeed, that's exactly how it is."

At Makarista's blood-curdling exclamations, Elsa continued to be as nonchalant as ever. However, the current exchange made Logres understand the feud between them.

The scars on Makarista's face were things that had been carved by Elsa. And that was probably why Elsa had gone missing during the mission—.

Makarista: "Did you join this man and think you could win? This man's enemy was the Gustekan Church! The Holy Kingdom of Gusteko! His Eminence the Holy King himself…!"

Elsa: "You really are making the exact same mistake as your master."

At Makarista's bravado, Elsa untied the knot of the package in her hand. Instantly, the black package spread wide and it fell wildly to the ground, bouncing miserably.

—Having died with eyes and mouth wide open in horror, it was the head of Igor Kenash.

Logres: "…She went and did it."

Logres had an idea of what was inside, but when he saw the real thing, he covered his face and looked up to the sky. The members of the Crimson Hunting Squad reacted similarly, but Makarista was the only one who was utterly speechless.

The murder of Igor, who had become the general of the operation in accordance with the Holy Church's orders— it was nothing but an act of hostility against the Holy Church, as Makarista loudly claimed.

Elsa Granhiert had already nonchalantly made enemies of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

Makarista: "Do you, understand what, you have done…"

Elsa: "I wish you'd stop with all that tedious talk."

At that moment, the dense smell of death and the demonic atmosphere overflowed, and transfigured the woman in front of him into the Bowel Hunter.

Elsa: "I do as I please. It doesn't matter if that enemy is the Church or the Holy Kingdom. In my not-so-smart way, I've put a lot of thought into this one."

Logres: "You put thought into it…? This can't be seen as anything other than a thoughtless result though."

Elsa: "Viktor Orcos. The Crimson Hunting Squad. And you, the Spirit-using Acolyte Knight."

Drawing her kukri, Elsa used its tip to indicate one man after another who was present there. Then she licked her tongue and soaked her black eyes in dark, wet lust,

Elsa: "I wonder how I'm going to get around to cutting open all of your bellies"

Logres: "Even us?"

Elsa: "Yes. I'm sure I'll have a lot of fun dancing with you guys."

Elsa responded with a wry smile to Logres's dismay. Logres was unnerved by the smile, which had no remorse whatsoever, and almost seemed childish.

But unlike Logres, Makarista seemed to think it was a load of nonsense..

Makarista: “It’s futile talking… Very well. In that case, I will enforce the death penalty as an Acolyte Knight!”

Elsa: “Does that mean you’re going to serve as my opponent?”

Makarista: “I’ll make you forget about being lucky enough to survive, and regret not having escaped!”

Makarista was enraged, and a pale light appeared around him. The light eventually transformed into a serpent with blue scales, and the Spirit manifested itself, exercising power outside of the ordinary.

Acolyte Knight Makarista Parkin— the most elite of the elite, sent by the Gustekan Church as a key figure in the Purification Operation at such a young age. He was a brilliant man who would have been expected to hold one of the most prominent positions in the Holy Church in the future.

—And therefore, he was pitiful.

To get involved with Elsa Granhiert, being targeted by her fetishes, whilst being unaware of her nature, which was more hideous than her strength, he spent the last two minutes of his life with the Bowel Hunter.

For those one hundred and twenty seconds of pain, fear, and despair, was the curtain close on his days of faith.

14

Elsa: “Oh my, if the Spirit-user dies first, their Spirit disappears as well.”

That was Elsa’s simple and succinct impression as she destroyed Makarista’s heart, causing him to let out the last shriek of his life.

The fallen Makarista had been cut repeatedly all over his body, especially in the abdomen, and he died. The horror of the battle was such that even Logres and his mercenaries, who were battle-hardened, wanted to avert their eyes.

Acolyte Knights, bestowed with a blessing, had a resilience and vitality that was unmatched compared to regular mortals. Although there are individual differences, Makarista's vitality was also not comparable to that of an ordinary person, and as a result, he was toyed with.

Elsa: “Next time I fight to the death with a Spirit-user, I'll have to open the Spirit's belly first. Until then, I'll just have to postpone the fun.”

Logres: “I really hate how you say such scary things, though…”

Logres called out timidly to Elsa, who whipped the blood stain from her kukri. Elsa turned around at the sound of his voice, "I guess so," she said, as she pulled her chin back,

Elsa: “You guys are still here. So, what are you going to do?”

Logres: “There's not anything for us to do… officially we're supposed to fight you to the death, but we're really not in the mood”

The details were unclear, but Elsa had turned on Makarista and Igor.

The Crimson Hunting Squad were an adversary, but the people who could order them to do so were collectively dead.

Logres: “You've thought it through to that extent, and then killed the master… I guess that's not the case though? Probably just took the opportunity to do it.”

Elsa: “Oh, my. How did you know?”

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 1: “Nah, ‘course we'd know.”

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 2: “As if we wouldn't know.”

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 3: “Ah, but now you can't take the opportunity to do so for us.”

Elsa widened her eyes at the words of mercenaries who understood her behavior. Then, as if understanding that it was not possible to fight in this atmosphere, her overflowing killing spirit disappeared. Regretfully.

Logres: "…And yet, how could you do all this in just four days? It's not easy to travel back and forth between Igor's mansion and the Orcos Domain."

Elsa: "Oh, that's easy. I borrowed legs from my sister."

Logres: "Sister…?"

Just as he frowned in question, Logres saw a huge shadow spring up behind Elsa. It truly was a foreign object that had suddenly crept into his purview, as if it had emerged from the shadows.

The beastly face, four legs, black fur, and terrifying demonic spirit — he knew it was a Witchbeast at first glance. As he recalled, that type of Witchbeast was nicknamed Shadow Lion. He couldn't come up with the exact name, though.

???: "—Viktor-sama!"

But, what was surprising was not the figure of the Witchbeast. What came as the next surprise was the red-haired girl who rolled off the back of that Witchbeast. A young girl with abrasions, who lacked the means to fight back, clung to the dying Viktor. At the sound of the girl's voice, Viktor turned his empty eyes. His life was right on the verge of ending.

Girl: "Viktor-sama! Viktor-sama! Don't, don't die…!"

Viktor: "—u."

Girl: "Eh?"

As the girl clutched at him, Viktor moved his lips and whispered something to her. Logres could not pick up what he had said. No one could hear it but the girl.

And with that breathless whisper as his last, the traitor Viktor Orcos died.

Logres: “Igor is dead, Viktor is also dead… man, just what kinda ending is this?”

The reunion with Elsa, the appearance of the strange Witchbeast, and the bereavement of the mysterious girl and Viktor— these events happened all at once before Logres’ eyes, and he groaned as he held his head in his hands.

A strange silence took over the place. But, it was the girl who broke the silence. She looked back at Elsa, whose thirsty eyes were opened wide,

Girl: “Why, why…?”

Elsa: “—?”

Girl: “Why, didn’t you save Viktor-sama, and everyone else… why?”

It was a terribly unrealistic question. Looking around at the devastation, it was easy to see the irrationality that has struck the Orcos Domain. As a young girl, albeit very young, born and raised in Gusteko, she fully understood the absurdity of the situation.

The situation was not something Elsa could have done anything about.

But, as Elsa tilted her head curiously at the question—

Elsa: “—Ah. When you said that, did you not mean only to save your life?”

Girl: “…Eh?”

Elsa: “To be precise, I thought you had only wanted for yourself to be saved, so I only saved your life, after that, I put my amusement first. I’m sorry.”

With a light bow and an evil look on her face, Elsa answered the girl’s question sincerely. There is not the slightest hint of a lie or hesitation in her voice. Therefore, everyone who heard her could believe her.

Those were the true thoughts of Elsa Granhiert, without exaggeration.

Girl: “Ah, AHHHHHHHH—!!”

The next moment, the girl grabbed Viktor’s broken katana and tried to lunge at Elsa. The girl’s screams were filled with murderous intent, and her hatred was focused on Elsa alone.

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 1: “Little miss!”

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 2: “There’s no use!”

Crimson Hunting Squad Member 3: “She’ll slice your belly open and kill you!”

However, the outburst was stopped by the men of the Crimson Hunting Squad. The strong men held her down, and the girl was unable to resist, yet she continued to raise her voice.

Girl: “Why…why! Die! I’ll get revenge for Viktor-sama! For everyone!”

Elsa: “That’s quite a terrible thing to say to the person who saved your life.”

Elsa shrugged her shoulders in frustration as the girl stared at her with bloodshot eyes and a wrathful look on her face.

Seeing her, Logres indeed felt sorry for the girl. He did not know the relationship between Elsa and the girl. But the girl had some kind of admiration and expectation of Elsa.

And that fleeting hope was incomprehensible to the monster known as Elsa.

Logres: “Elsa, leave already. It’s okay that we’re the only ones here, but if Igor’s other underlings find out, it’s going to be a mess. It’ll turn into another fight to the death.”

Elsa: “I wouldn’t mind that, though…”

Logres: “We would mind that! We survived, but we don’t want to have to fight out allies!”

Strictly speaking, there was some hesitation to call them allies, but Logres dared to say so. Elsa reluctantly sheathed her kukri.

She then turned to Witchbeast behind him and climbed up upon its back,

Elsa: “Oh yeah. About the girl, she doesn’t want to be a slave. So take her to a proper town. If you like, you could have her work at your place as well. She’s a girl, and her hands are dexterous, so you should have a use for her.”

Logres: “…This girl is definitely going to resent you.”

Elsa: “—Yes, that’s lovely. That girl and I will be bound together by hatred. She is going to keep that hatred bottled up in her body for a long, long time, and one day when we meet again.”

Removing her gaze from Logres, Elsa looked at the girl. The girl was still screaming with hatred as the men seized her—

Girl: “DIEEEEEEEEEEEE—!!”

Elsa: “—That is very, very lovely.”

With a countenance of a maiden in love, Elsa spoke thus with an ardent breath.

15

???: “As expecteeed, Elsa is a very stupid girl.”

The owner of that young voice said this with a great deal of dismay in her voice and demeanor.

The voice belonged to the girl in front of Elsa— straddling the back of the Witchbeast as it ran through the snow, being held against Elsa’s chest amidst the sensation of the breeze and tremors.

A girl with dark blue hair in a braid rested her head on Elsa whom just behind her,

Girl: “In the end, not only did you not get paid for being a mercenary, but now you are even wanted for killing a lot of important people. And on top of that, that girl resents you now, doesn’t she?”

Elsa: “Oh my, that’s terrible. But, it doesn’t really bother me. I have no lingering attachment to the Holy Kingdom… and thanks to that, I now have plenty of opponents to fight to the death.”

Girl: “You’ve made it difficult to operate in Gusteko, Mama will be fuuurious.”

Elsa smiled thinly and didn’t argue with the girl’s languidly elongated sentences. Instead, Elsa reached into her pocket and pulled out a woolen doll from it,

Elsa: “Yes, Meili. A new doll.”

Meili: “Geez, please don’t think I’m going to let this fool meee.”

The girl accepted the offered doll and patted the Witchbeast’s back, her cheeks puffed out in frustration. But the hands that held the doll were gentle, and she doubted if her true feelings were as good as her words.

Even that did not bring much emotion to Elsa.

Meili: “So, yeah, what’s next? Since it’s become difficult to do stuff in Gusteko, will we move away from the cold?”

Elsa: “I guess so. I yearn for demi-human guts soon. In Gusteko, you don’t see them anywhere but in slavery, after all.”

Meili: “There are only a few types of Witchbeast-chans. So then, shall we go Kararagi next?”

Elsa: “—How about Lugunica?”

Rejecting the option presented to her, Elsa followed her instincts and mentioned the name of that Kingdom.

The Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica— it was a fertile but somewhat distorted place, protected by the Dragon.

Meili: “Is that alsooo just based on a vague feeling?”

Elsa: “Yes, it is. —Lovely isn’t it?”

Elsa simply responded to the girl’s exhale of exasperation with an amused smile.

Forced to leave her birthplace, Elsa Granhiert traveled to the Dragon Kingdom. The fateful encounter that awaited her there was the beginning of a lovely destiny for her.

—But the Bowel Hunter, overflowing with lust at this very moment as she was, had no way of knowing that fact.

END

The Witch’s After Tea Party: Omega in Wonderland (LQ AI Translation)

1

With each step, and then another, pressing down deep, their body sank into the white snow.

Even under a clear sky without a blizzard, a snowy landscape was trouble. Piled high upon the earth, the white snow glittered a stark white, and one could not know what it hid beneath those crystals.

Would there be ground directly under the next step? Or perhaps the path would break off, and a natural trap would be complete, luring one toward a cliff concealed by a cornice.

Omega: “Thinking of it that way, doesn’t it make the next step hard to firmly take, Colette?”

Colette: “Uu… that’s right, it makes things difficult. Which leg should I put forward next, I wonder?”

Palmyra: “Omega! Don’t go planting unnecessary ideas! Colette, ignore her, ignore her!”

Noelle: “Palmyra-sama, lively chatter is all well and good, but you have come to a stop.”

What echoed across the snowfield, noisy as it was, were girls’ voices, each in their own way.

Of the four shadows advancing along the snowy path, two were in the lead, and two were falling behind. The energetic pair kept looking back again and again, concerned for the two lagging behind.

At that considerate remark, when the larger of the two lagging shadows faltered for words, the small shadow walking beside her—Omega narrowed her eyes,

Omega: “There is no need to let it weigh on you, Palmyra. Whatever about me, you are a girl who spent her days wanting for nothing in a well-off household; it would not be strange if you lacked stamina.”

Palmyra: “Are you… trying to encourage me with that? First off, even if that’s fine for me, what’s with your lack of stamina?”

Omega: “I can explain the logic. In this world, the vessel is influenced by the soul—that is the rule. In other words, I am clumsy at exercise from the soul up, lacking training.”

Palmyra: “Don’t say things that make me sad just hearing them!”

At Omega’s words, she shrugged her shoulders, and the flushed-faced Palmyra shouted, planting her hands on her knees.

Their feet, somehow pressing through the snow, came to a stop, and she desperately tried to steady her ragged breath that had turned white. At that sight, Omega snorted through her nose, and the two who had gone on ahead hurried back.

Omega: “What is this, you two, it’s a shame to waste the progress we made.”

Colette: “My! Omega-chan, how mean! Palmyra is this worn-out, and yet we could never go on ahead by ourselves. Right, Noelle-san!”

Noelle: “Indeed. From my perspective as far as Colette-sama is concerned, it is but a retreat within the margin of error.”

Omega: “A margin of error, is it. How much trouble do you think Palmyra and I will have to go through to make up for that margin?”

Palmyra: “D-Don’t… lump… me together… with you… haah.”

Palmyra, still unable to catch her breath, brushed aside the dark-navy hair hanging over her shoulder, and the one supporting her at her side was the youthful-faced Colette. The braided, chestnut-haired girl wore a concerned look of worry, anxious for her childhood friend who had left their home village together with her.

Omega: “Now, now, I would like you not to dote on Palmyra alone. You may not have noticed, but I’m on the verge of collapsing too, you know?”

Noelle: “It is not something to be proclaimed with such dignity… Nevertheless, compared to Omega-sama and Palmyra-sama, Colette-sama appears to be exceptional.”

Colette: “Eh? Me?”

At being singled out unexpectedly, Colette pointed at herself, eyes round.

Nodding at Colette’s reaction, Noelle was an Itinerant Preacher of the Gusteko Holy Church, worshipped in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko—one of those who had undergone special training, and she excelled in stamina as well as combat ability.

Compared to someone like herself, Colette, who did not pale in terms of stamina, was worthy of surprise.

Omega: “However, things do have proper reasons. For example, Colette’s stamina, mismatched to her slender appearance, largely owes to the effect of the bracelet she carries.”

Noelle: “A bracelet, you say?”

Omega: “It is called the Beast Protection Bracelet. It is a memento left by her parents. Even if their flesh remains no longer, even now it protects Colette like that.”

At Omega’s chin-jerking indication, Colette lowered her brows and stroked the austere metal bracelet fitted to her right arm. Then, she went “Ah,” her eyes flying wide,

Colette: “That’s right! If this is the source of my energy, how about Palmyra trying it on too? Wouldn’t Palmyra get energetic as well? Waa, what a great idea!”

Palmyra: “Me? That bracelet of yours?”

Colette: “Yes, nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? Here you go, Palmyra.”

Smiling, Colette removed the bracelet and held it out to Palmyra. Palmyra looked back and forth between the bracelet and Colette’s face, then turned her eyes to Omega and Noelle as well.

Noelle tilted her head expressionlessly, and Omega gestured “By all means” with her hand. Following that, Palmyra slid her slender hand through the bracelet she had received—

Palmyra: “Urk.”

Colette: “Palmyra?!”

Her face instantly drained of color, she clapped a hand over her mouth and collapsed to her knees on the snow. With a cry, Colette rubbed Palmyra’s back. Unable to endure the nausea, Palmyra retched over and over, then, “Wh-What is… this…” she pushed the bracelet away from herself.

At the sight of the two, Omega picked up the bracelet that had fallen onto the snow,

Omega: “As expected, it seems the bracelet is already registered as Colette’s. If someone else tries to use it, it will pour Mana optimized to the registrant into them, and their Gate could well be destroyed. That area appears to be per the specification document.”

Noelle: “To hear you put it so… had you anticipated this outcome?”

Omega: “Yes. The result was largely as I predicted.”

Palmyra: “Drop dead, Omega…!”

Having verified the exactness of the specs, a most objectionable protest came from the retching Palmyra. At that remark, Omega tilted her head with the bracelet hooked on her fingertips.

Omega: “It is not good to use such bad words too much. What exactly are you dissatisfied about?”

Palmyra: “Don’t make me step into a pitfall when you know I’ll fall… you have awful taste, you…!”

Omega: “But the face you make when you fall into that pitfall can only be seen at that moment, can it not?”

Palmyra: “You have awful taste, you…!”

Repeating her complaint, Palmyra’s complexion was even paler than usual. Her stamina had bottomed out, and on top of that she had taken the counterattack from the Beast Protection Bracelet’s defense mechanism.

Omega: “Any further overexertion would endanger your life. We either leave Palmyra behind, or someone carries her; it is one of the two.”

Colette: “There’s no way we can leave her! The bracelet, give it back, Omega-chan! I’ll carry Palmyra on my back and go…!”

Omega: “Hold it, it is too soon to decide that.”

From Colette’s reaching hand, Omega deliberately kept the Beast Protection Bracelet out of reach. She could not keep it away. Colette took it back with ease, and the raised hand had nowhere to go down.

Even so, Colette did ask, “Why?” and properly played along with the conversation.

Colette: “What’s too soon? Palmyra looks really in trouble, you know?”

Omega: “She does. But is Palmyra the only dead weight you are bringing along?”

Colette: “Eh?”

Noelle: “In other words, you would like to be carried as well because you are about to collapse, Omega-sama?”

Omega: “Exactly.”

Perceptive Noelle made the inference, and Omega snapped her fingers and nodded deeply. Even without wearing the Beast Protection Bracelet, Omega’s degree of worn-outness was the same as, if not worse than, Palmyra’s. A body composed of Mana, depleted to the point that, if she was careless, it might start vanishing from her fingertips.

Omega: “Therefore, in terms of build, I think it wise for Colette to carry me, and for Noelle to carry Palmyra. What do you two think?”

Noelle: “I have no objection, but what of you, Colette-sama…?”

Colette: “I’m totally fine! Omega-chan is as light as a feather! More importantly, Noelle-san, are you sure you can be entrusted with Palmyra?”

Noelle: “Palmyra-sama, too, is as light as the remains of a bone-in cut, so there is no problem.”

Palmyra: “Wh-What is that… that simile that makes me feel pointlessly bad…”

Even Palmyra’s muttered abuse lacked its usual vigor entirely.

Thus, with the hearty assent of the two brimming with stamina, it was decided that Omega, like a feather, and Palmyra, like the remains of a bone-in cut of meat, would be carried on their backs.

2

The peculiar journey of four girls in cold-weather gear began with Omega’s solo journey.

After her soul had been sealed for a long time and she left the land that could be called the birthplace of her vessel, Omega set her sights westward to broaden her knowledge of the world—and magnificently went the wrong way.

On that mistaken road, along the way she met Colette and Palmyra, and without correcting the mistake they pushed straight on; there, after a bit of a dust-up with Noelle, they linked up—and that brings us to the present.

It was quite a varied lineup, and Omega rather liked it.

Omega: “An infamous me settled into a provisional vessel, a young girl who showed unprecedented aptitude for the “Beast Protection Bracelet,” and an Itinerant Preacher of the Gusteko Holy Church… hmm.”

“…”

Omega: “Palmyra, how would you like to be described? A runaway girl who abandoned life in a wealthy home, perhaps?”

Palmyra: “You really are an awful woman…”

Omega: “Ridiculous. That was perfect consideration on my part, thinking you’d hate something off the mark…”

Palmyra turned her grim face away from her, and Omega’s eyes widened in astonishment.

As Omega and Palmyra traded words, they were being carried according to the earlier proposal—Omega on Colette’s back, and Palmyra on Noelle’s. Though there were four of them, their footfalls on the snowy path sounded like two; ironically, the steps were brisker and crunchier than when all four had been sharing the burden.

Omega: “Look at how the scenery changes… Even visually, you can see just how much deadweight we were, so very clearly… Ah, I see.”

Palmyra: “…What is it.”

Omega: “I’ve figured out why you’re in a bad mood, and I get the feeling as well. It’s the footprints, isn’t it? It feels good to be the first to leave tracks on fresh snow where no one has stepped.”

Palmyra: “Shut up, you witch…!”

Insulted with a hateful look, Omega fell silent.

To Omega it was a simple fact, but to some people, calling someone a witch is a truly outrageous slur. If Palmyra is going to casually call someone a witch from now on, she will need to be admonished as an elder.

Omega: “Good grief, this must be the kind of trouble you don’t have to shoulder on a solo trip. One can feel the hardships he endured back in those days, surrounded only by problem children who were nothing but work.”

Colette: “Ah! Hey, Omega-chan, I see something over by that mountain!”

Gently shaking her head and sighing, Omega heard Colette’s voice brighten from directly beneath her.

The wide-eyed girl supported Omega’s rear with one hand while pointing across the snowfield with the other. She couldn’t see it. Not the something on the mountain—she couldn’t even see the mountain itself.

Noelle: “—It is there indeed. Well spotted, Colette-sama.”

Colette: “Ehehe, I have really good eyes. I’m sure it’s a town. Omega-chan, can we head there? Our water and food are almost empty.”

Omega: “Oh? After the limits of our stamina, now the limits of our water and provisions have come. Our journey is cutting it close in all sorts of ways, haha.”

Palmyra: “Is this the time to laugh? —Right now I just want to see faces other than yours. Straight there, straight there!”

Palmyra slapped Noelle’s shoulder to hurry her along, and Omega and Colette followed suit. The two sets of footsteps trudging through the snow, heave-ho, picked up pace more than when they’d had no destination.

Keeping that up, they aimed for the mountain that Omega still couldn’t see, but—

Colette: “—Huh?”

All at once, her previously steady steps slowed, and Colette let out a puzzled sound.

At her faltering tread, after she had been cheerfully pressing on across the snowfield, Noelle and Palmyra, coming from diagonally behind, also looked puzzled.

Palmyra: “What’s wrong, Colette? Did something happen?”

Colette: “Um, um, I don’t know either. Just that, somehow, I suddenly feel a really strong dislike for going any farther ahead, and so…”

Brow tails drooping, Colette herself was bewildered by the inexplicable discomfort. But her unhelpful explanation only left Palmyra confused as well.

Seeing her suffer from that unknowable resistance, Omega let out a small sigh and—

Omega: “Can’t be helped. —There.”

Colette: “Ah! The bad feeling is gone! Omega-chan, amazing!”

Omega: “Right? Then let’s move forward without worries—”

Palmyra: “Wait wait wait, hold it right there!”

With a light flick of her fingers, Omega had removed the cause of Colette’s distress. But now Palmyra had something to say, and they couldn’t get moving again.

Omega: “Palmyra, you and I are deadweight. It’s better to be aware of it.”

Palmyra: “I’m painfully aware of it! That’s not it—what did you just do?”

Omega: “Nothing much. I only removed the cause of Colette’s distress. Isn’t that right?”

Colette: “Yes, that’s right. Sorry for making us stop. I’m fine now!”

At Colette’s answer, chest puffed out, Omega shrugged upon her back. At their reactions, Palmyra opened and closed her mouth for a while, but—

Noelle: “Palmyra-sama, could this perhaps wait until we have moved to a warm place?”

Palmyra: “— I’m not wrong…!”

Noelle: “Yes, yes. I shall remember Palmyra-sama’s distress for you.”

It was unclear what they meant, but it seemed some feeling had been shared between Palmyra and Noelle. Noelle, who had only recently joined the three, and Palmyra, as wary as a cat—those two had taken a long time to warm up to each other, so it was good that something had finally given them a chance.

Colette: “Could it be, Omega-chan, that you climbed onto my back for that?”

Omega: “Hmm, I see. —Ah, yes.”

Colette: “Waa, amazing! You really can figure out anything!”

At Colette’s eyes sparkling bright, Omega said nothing, her gaze cool.

At any rate, there was no longer any trifling matter to stop Colette’s feet, Palmyra kept her nagging to herself, and with Noelle steadily pressing on, there was nothing to hinder their path.

Fortunately, once even Omega could make out the mountain she hadn’t been able to see, they could clearly see that there was a town of decent size at the mountain’s foot as it drew nearer.

The overt relief from the younger pair—Colette and Palmyra—

spread, and even Noelle felt reassured to see the artificial townscape approaching.

Omega, too, felt somewhat relieved that her journey did not end here—but—

Omega: “—Hmm, how curious.”

That relief did not last very long.

As Omega murmured, accepting that fact with interest, Colette—who was carrying her—blinked and, with a bunny-like look so very her, said:

Colette: “Oh? Oh my? Where did Palmyra and Noelle go?”

3

Passing out of the snowy scenery, what lay around them changed from natural things to artificial things. With light-falling snow thinly accumulating on the ground underfoot on the streets, Colette wore a dazed expression.

Still carried on her back, Omega knit her thin brows as if suspicious.

Their water and food were spent; as for Omega and Palmyra in particular, their stamina had hit bottom as well—at last they had arrived at a town—judging by the sign at the entrance, its name seemed to be “Sylphoa”—but the very moment they stepped into Sylphoa’s streets, the two who should have been there vanished.

Colette: “Strange, it’s strange, Omega-chan. Where did the two of them go?”

Omega: “Indeed. The road up to here was a single straight path; it’s hard to say we got separated. And I wasn’t staring without blinking either, but up until five minutes ago, they should have been with us.”

Colette: “Even if not that long ago, we were together up to ten seconds ago! That’s why it’s mysterious!”

Searching for the two, Colette briskly darted her eyes about, looking all around. Being jostled so much on her back that her feet almost lifted off, Omega dropped to the ground before she could get tossed.

Steadying herself on legs that wobbled less than she'd thought, Omega also scanned the surroundings.

Omega: "Hmm, I thought they were a little behind us, but there's neither hide nor hair of them. Noelle is an Itinerant Preacher , so it wouldn't be strange if she moved at a speed too fast for the eye to follow, but…"

Colette: "But but, if she moved that fast, Palmyra would definitely let out a scream. Palmyra's a feisty one, but she has a jumpy side…"

At "jumpy side," a turn of phrase so very Colette-like, Omega's cheeks loosened.

For a moment, that gentle, laid-back choice of words overlapped in feeling with someone Omega knew, but—

Colette: "Eeeeh?!"

Before she could draw that feeling closer, Colette's astonished voice rang high.

When she turned to see what had happened, what Colette was staring fixedly at was Omega—no, Omega herself.

She wondered if perhaps Omega was so light that she hadn't felt putting her down—but that wasn't it. With fingers trembling, Colette pointed at Omega and—

Colette: "O-Omega-chan… Omega-chan with white hair!"

Omega: "White hair?"

At Colette's voice, unable to hide her surprise, Omega tilted her head in puzzlement.

Omega's current appearance was not her original one, but that of a provisional vessel—a girl with pink hair and slightly long ears.

Calling that white-haired would have to be Colette's mistake—.

Omega: "—No, that's not it. It really is white."

Gently drawing the hair that hung over her shoulder toward her, Omega confirmed her own white hair. But the change was not only in her hair. Looking closely, her line of sight was a little higher than usual. She had recently grown used to the eye level of this girl's body; her gaze now sat higher than that.

Namely—Omega patted her own face all over and was convinced.

Omega: "I see, so this is my original form."

In front of Omega, who murmured softly, Colette hastily nodded up and down. Cupping Colette's face in both hands, Omega yanked her in close.

In the eyes of the startled girl who squeaked "Euh," reflected there was a witch with white hair and well-formed features—without a doubt, it was the face of the "Witch of Greed," Echidna.

Colette: "Omega-chan, Omega-chan, if you suddenly grab my face in that form, it's very scary."

Omega: "Sorry. My desire to confirm got ahead of me. Even so, it's strange."

Colette: "Strange—as in, something's wrong? What is it?"

With her face still held in Omega's hands, her cheeks squashed, Colette asked.

Omega: "As I showed you and Palmyra before, I can manifest in my original form for a short time. However, right now I shouldn't be doing that. And furthermore—"

Colette: "Furthermore?"

Omega: "Even with me holding your face like this, it's unnatural that "Beast Protection Bracelet" isn't functioning."

On that point, Colette's eyes wavered with no apparent idea.

As for the Beast Protection Bracelet's function of launching an attack on a hostile to protect its owner—and moreover, regarding the matter of the user's consciousness being forcibly cut off during that—this had been kept from Colette.

However, regardless of whether the user was aware or unaware, Omega's sudden action should have met the conditions for activating the Beast Protection Bracelet. Unless, as with Palmyra, Colette had deeply opened her heart to Omega.

In any case, between the change in Omega's form and the Beast Protection Bracelet's failure to trigger—and in addition, the disappearance of Palmyra and Noelle—there were not many possibilities that came to Omega's mind from those three points.

If she were to examine them in order of likelihood—

Omega: "Colette, I want you to listen without being surprised."

Colette: "I'll try as hard as I can, but can I really not be surprised? I'm anxious."

Omega: "Then keep the surprise to a minimum, please. —Most likely, Palmyra and Noelle are safe. Rather, the ones in danger are you and me."

Colette: "Eeh."

Honoring Omega's request to keep the surprise to a minimum, Colette hurriedly clapped a hand over her mouth. Nodding at her honest attitude, Omega laid a hand on her own chest and looked around at the surrounding townscape.

And then, she said:

Omega: "It seems we're trapped in a world of dreams."

4

Palmyra: "H-Hey?! Colette! Omega! What happened to you two?!"

Startled by the sudden turn, Palmyra's voice flipped.

With her face drained and her profile taut with confusion and tension, the girl's field of view took in Colette and Omega collapsed on the street, where snow had piled up to the knees.

The very moment they passed through the town gate, the two of them suddenly dropped like puppets whose strings had been cut.

Jumping down from Noelle, who had been carrying her, Palmyra flipped over Colette and Omega, who had pitched forward into the snow. Both had their lids closed, as if they were asleep.

Palmyra: "But if you just suddenly fall asleep like that, that's some scary illness…!"

In a panic, Palmyra shook Colette's shoulder and slapped Omega's cheek to try to wake them. But the two had no reaction, as if dead; she was about to strike Omega with a harder open-handed slap when Noelle seized her hand.

Palmyra: "Noelle! Let go! I have to wake them up—"

Noelle: "I understand how you feel, but I believe slapping and shaking will only render Omega-sama pitiable."

Palmyra: "Then! …Then what are we supposed to do?"

Even when she tried to wrench free, Noelle's hand didn't budge. Sapped by that arm strength, Palmyra faltered and asked what Noelle thought. What on earth had happened to the two who wouldn't wake no matter how she called or hit them?

But instead of answering Palmyra's words, Noelle quietly looked around and—

Noelle: "It is too quiet."

Palmyra: "Hah? What are you even—"

Noelle: "Even if it is in the middle of falling snow, to enter a town and not hear a single human voice is—"

At Noelle’s words, with one finger raised, Palmyra held her breath and looked around.

Palmyra: “…”

Indeed, just as Noelle said, there wasn’t a single human voice or sound of life to be heard from the surroundings.

Setting aside the outlier that was sleeping Colette, Noelle should also excel in sight and hearing. If even Noelle couldn’t notice anything, then of course Palmyra had no chance of noticing either.

Palmyra: “But what does that even matter? More importantly, right now Colette and the others are—”

Noelle: “Palmyra-sama. It is possible that the townsfolk are in the same state.”

Palmyra: “The same… eh?! Don’t tell me, you—”

Startled rigid, Palmyra looked from Colette in her arms and Omega half-buried in the snow to the town where not a single soul was in sight, then—

Palmyra: “You mean everyone in town is asleep like Colette and the others?!”

Noelle: “We have no proof, but there is that risk.”

When Noelle slowly shook her head, her long braided golden hair swayed with the motion. Drawn by that gleam, Palmyra involuntarily swallowed.

An unfathomable situation—if it extended not only to Colette and the others, but to the entire town.

Palmyra: “That would be way beyond us to handle… No, I mean, what about us? Why aren’t we like those two? Isn’t that strange?”

Noelle: “I believe it is most likely due to my constitution.”

Palmyra: “Your constitution…?”

Noelle: “Yes. I am an Itinerant Preacher —one who has undergone the special training necessary to travel various lands to spread the teachings of the Gusteko Holy Church. Among that is also the engraving of formulae that repel sorceries and hexes from outside.”

Pressing down the swell of her ample chest beneath her cold-weather gear and the garb of a teacher, Noelle answered.

Her explanation spoke of a world Palmyra could not even imagine, and yet Palmyra could not accept it at face value.

Palmyra: “But that only explains why you could block it, right? It has nothing to do with me.”

Noelle: “Since I was carrying you, Palmyra-sama, I believe whatever interference Omega-sama and Colette-sama received was repelled together with me.”

Palmyra: “S-Such a coincidence…”

In other words, their fates diverged depending on whether one was on Colette’s back or Noelle’s. Drawing the unlucky option out of two choices sounded very much like Omega—if one wanted to put it that way—but—

Palmyra: “…”

A completely different, unpleasant feeling tightened around Palmyra’s chest.

Noelle: “Palmyra-sama?”

Palmyra: “…It’s nothing. More importantly, I’ve calmed down a little. …Hey, you’re an Itinerant Preacher , and you were taught methods for solving problems when terrible things happen, right? Then do you also know what to do when your traveling companions suddenly fall asleep and won’t wake up?”

Noelle: “Even the Holy Church’s teachings do not anticipate situations in such concrete terms. However, it is not as though we cannot meet your wishes at all, Palmyra-sama.”

Palmyra: “What does that… mean?”

Just as Palmyra was about to ask what she meant, it came—sooner than anything from Palmyra or Noelle, or from the two sleeping girls, there was an overture from another direction to move the situation along.

Man: “—To think that just when someone enters the town, there’d be two girls not asleep. What a surprise.”

Palmyra: “—!”

Suddenly, a man’s voice came from outside the town, and Palmyra stifled a scream as she turned around. In her view stood a tall, short-haired man with refined features.

A young man in his mid-twenties with dark-brown hair and lightly tanned skin raised a hand to Palmyra and Noelle, showing a somewhat friendly smile.

He hadn’t rushed them at once to attack; speaking up could be taken as a sign of goodwill—but—

Palmyra: “I don’t buy it. I’ve heard men can lie with a straight face if it’s to get a woman to like them. Noelle, tie him up.”

Man: “Hey, hey, hey! That’s a pretty extreme household creed! You there, miss—could you tell your companion something about this?!”

Noelle: “I find this level of caution desirable. When a journey is undertaken by women alone, one can never be too careful.”

Man: “I’ve got no allies! Cut me some slack here. —You there, miss, you’re in the same line of work, aren’t you?”

Finding one raised hand insufficient for greeting, the young man raised his other hand as well to show he meant no fight, then slightly lowered his tone and winked at Noelle.

Palmyra grew all the more wary of the young man, thinking it the gesture a man uses to chat up a woman in a tavern—but it wasn’t the gesture so much as the words that piqued her interest.

Noelle: “The same line of work, you say? Then you are…?”

Man: “Gusteko Holy Church. I serve as a Temple Knight, sister.”

As he spoke, the young man opened the front of the cloak covering his body with his raised right hand, showing the silver gleam beneath—the beautiful armor he wore—to establish his identity.

At Noelle’s reaction—eyes widening slightly—even Palmyra, who knew little of the Church, understood the young man was not lying.

Man: “—Zank Metley. A Temple Knight dispatched under the Holy Church’s authority to hunt the heresy lurking in this town of Sylphoa. Pleased to meet you, yeah?”

And with that, the young man—the Temple Knight, Zank Metley—winked again.

5

Zank: “Honestly, at first I was thrown for a loop. I mean, I thought the Blessing of Crowd-Warding was airtight, and then it gets broken.”

Palmyra: “Crowd-Drawing? Crowd-Warding?”

Noelle: “Blessing of Crowd-Warding… Just before entering the town, Colette-sama came to a stop, did she not. That unpleasant feeling Colette-sama felt then was precisely that.”

With question marks practically floating over her head, Palmyra heard Noelle bring up what had happened before they entered the town.

Hearing it, Palmyra went, “So that was…,” then cocked her head.

Palmyra: “Wait. Noelle, how can you tell that right away just from being told?”

Noelle: “Because I saw with my own eyes that Omega-sama broke the Blessing.”

Palmyra: “So that incomprehensible stunt Omega pulled back then was that…!”

While on Colette’s back after her steps had halted, Omega had severed the “Blessing” with nothing more than a flick of her finger.

As an Itinerant Preacher and one who knew how formidable the Gusteko Holy Church’s “Blessings” were, even Noelle—who was not easily perturbed—had to be impressed.

That said, it seemed to be an easy matter for Omega, who serenely calls herself a witch.

Zank: “Man~, having it get broken by a little miss like that does knock your confidence… Even so, back in training I was one of the ones praised as having a knack for receiving Blessings.”

With his shoulders slumping, Zank hung his head as he looked at Omega, who had been moved off the snow.

Palmyra regarded the sight with suspicion, but Noelle thought his claim was likely true.

Blessing of Crowd-Warding is, in other words, a barrier to keep outsiders from entering.

Omega broke the Blessing at a spot a fair distance from the town, and Sylphoa was not small in scale. Being able to lay a Blessing that could encompass it whole would mark one out as the upper crust even among Temple Knights.

At the very least, it was beyond comparison with Noelle, who was poor in the talent for receiving “Blessings.”

Palmyra: “But still… you said you were hunting heresy, right?”

Setting Noelle’s musings aside, Palmyra addressed Zank thus.

Palmyra, unexpectedly a girl with steady nerves, also wasn’t from the Holy Kingdom, which helped her feel no diffidence toward Zank. In principle, to the common folk of Gusteko, Temple Knights were beings up in the clouds, with scant chances to encounter them.

Zank answered the unusual girl's attitude in an easy tone, "Hm?"

Zank: "Yeah, that's right. It's under the Holy King's Holy Will. Ideally, I'd have wrapped it up before you ladies dropped by the town, but—"

Noelle: "—And the result of failing to do so is the plight of this town, is it?"

Zank: "I've got no comeback. Truth is, we're in a situation where the other side is a step ahead."

Palmyra: "The other side… the heretic who put Colette and Omega to sleep…"

With a hand to her mouth, Palmyra murmured with a severe look.

In Palmyra's head, she was surely picturing a dreadful "heretic" that threatened the entire town.

Noelle: "However—just because a Temple Knight is dispatched does not mean the opponent is always a mighty entity. Natural disasters and lifesaving—Temple Knights have various roles."

Palmyra: "Ah, really? No wonder…"

Zank: "Hey, hey, hey, are you maybe looking at me and feeling convinced? Sure, compared to "Blessings" my practical skills are so-so, but I'm still a Temple Knight. I've got confidence in my arm!"

Palmyra: "But you haven't defeated the town's heretic, have you."

Zank: "Sis! This little miss is ruthless!"

Noelle: "Palmyra-sama is like this with everyone. More importantly…"

Fixing her gaze on Zank, who was being taken lightly by a younger girl, Noelle paused once, white breath puffing. Drawing their attention thus, she went on to ask:

Noelle: "Crucially, what sort of party is this heretic lurking in the town?"

Zank: "…"

Noelle: "To plunge a whole town into sleep is no easy feat. Enveloping the town with the "Blessing" you laid is extraordinary as well, Zank-sama, but…"

Zank: "A trick beyond even that. I get it—I'm of the same opinion. To say something even scarier: in fact, I wasn't the first Temple Knight dispatched for this heretic hunt."

Zank's shrug and light tone nearly made Noelle misjudge the gravity for a moment.

Indeed, Palmyra, not versed in the Holy Kingdom's affairs, looked as if she didn't grasp the gravity, but Noelle was different. Even within the Gusteko Holy Church, only a very few are permitted to bear the title of Temple Knight, and she knew that every last one possessed exceptional might.

If Zank was the follow-up, then the Temple Knight dispatched earlier had fallen into the heretic's hands as well.

Zank: "You get that this is a dicey case now? So, while we were buying time with a Blessing of Crowd-Warding until the heretic-hunt plan was ready—"

Palmyra: "We just waltzed in and broke it, and showed up…"

At last understanding, Palmyra sighed, and Zank nodded, "That's how it is." With the general facts grasped, Noelle and her three companions were pure outsiders.

Barging into a Temple Knight's operational area could be called a blood-drainingly rash act.

Zank: "That's how it is. Sorry, but I'd like you ladies to leave the town. Once the heretic-hunt is finished, the little misses who were put to sleep should wake up. So—"

Palmyra: "Sure, we'll leave it to you… Like I'd ever say that. The ones asleep are our own, you know? Telling us to just leave them —”

Arms folded, Palmyra started to show a bold expression of refusal. But she couldn’t get the words of refusal out to the end. Before she could finish, she had peered into Zank’s eyes.

Zank: “Hey, hey, hey, that’s not right, little miss. —I went and carefully, politely, laid out our side of things. I said it, didn’t I? The Holy Will.”

Zank’s words flowed smoothly, as if scolding—tsk-tsk, without a hitch. While the look on his face carried an affable smile, the light in his eyes deepened. Not just his expression but his tone, too, took on a certain pressure, changing into something that smothered rebuttal.

Peered at by those eyes, a squeak of “hi” slipped from Palmyra’s throat before she knew it. But heedless of her frightened reaction, Zank brought his face even closer and—

Zank: “It’s the Holy Will. To go against it—are you a heretic, little miss?”

Noelle: “—Zank-sama, she is not a follower of the Holy Church.”

Zank: “Then it’s all the more strange. With an Itinerant Preacher right there, why hasn’t she become a believer? Miss, you’re not fulfilling your duty, are you.”

Unable to stand it, Noelle stepped in front of Palmyra, and Zank’s aim turned toward her.

To be frank, it was a painful topic for Noelle. The Itinerant Preacher ’s role is to preach the Gusteko Holy Church’s teachings across the land and increase the number of believers by even one more. Yet Noelle had never taught the Church’s teachings to Omega, Colette, or Palmyra. If she were called unfit as an Itinerant Preacher , she had a string of conduct she could not rebut.

Aware of that, Noelle couldn’t retort; Zank furrowed his brows and turned his gaze elsewhere. Leaving Noelle and Palmyra, he turned his steps toward Omega and the others.

The two who had been put to sleep and were about to be buried in snow had been moved under an eave with a roof, and Zank now stepped toward them.

And—

Zank: “I get you’re worried about your little companions, but leave the rest to us—”

Palmyra: “Hey! Don’t touch Colette and the others!”

As Zank reached his hand toward the two lying there, Palmyra came to her senses and rushed to stop him.

Forgetting her earlier fear, Palmyra leapt out from behind Noelle to protect Omega and Colette and clung to Zank’s arm. At that, Zank’s profile hardened.

In that instant, Noelle thought, This is bad, but did not take further action—because what followed was not by Noelle, but by the sleeping Colette.

Zank: “—Gah?!”

In the same instant, a thudding impact like flesh being punctured rang out, and Zank’s body was hurled far across the snow.

His heel skidded along the street; shaking the arm that had taken the blow, Zank grimaced in pain. What had sent the Temple Knight flying was the unbelievable leg strength of a delicate girl—still asleep, Colette had struck Zank to protect Palmyra.

As Colette sprang nimbly to her feet, the austere bracelet on her right arm flashed.

Colette: “—rrrrrrr.”

Letting out a beastlike growl, Colette shielded Palmyra and Omega behind her. At Colette’s actions and transformation, Zank’s eyes went wide, and then—with his face suddenly emptied of agitation—

Zank: “That power, it isn’t something granted by the Holy King. — It’s heresy.”

In a quiet voice with frozen emotion he said as much; the very moment he did, Palmyra moved at once. She slapped the shoulder of the growling Colette, then hugged the body of the nearby dozing Omega and—

Palmyra: “Colette! Pick me up and run!”

At once, Colette whirled and hoisted Palmyra, who was embracing Omega. With strength unthinkable for a slender girl she carried the two, leaping into the snowy townscape. With outlandish leg power she kicked off the building walls, vaulted to the rooftops, and sped away in one go.

Zank: “Tch, I can’t let them—”

Noelle: “You should not go any further!”

Sliding in front of Zank as he moved to give chase, Noelle spread both arms to stop him. At Noelle’s act he clicked his tongue, and Zank’s baleful gaze pierced her.

Zank: “Why obstruct me? Is an Itinerant Preacher siding with a heretic?”

Noelle: “That is not the case. If you pursue recklessly, you will be in danger. Further, your objective is the heretic who put the town to sleep… they are a separate matter.”

Zank: “—Heresy is heresy. If you’re telling me to let it go, I can’t listen to that, you know?”

Noelle: “I am not telling you to overlook it. I am saying there is an order of priorities.”

Meeting Zank’s sharp gaze looking down at her, Noelle straightened her back and faced him. By feel alone, the presence of Palmyra and the others flying away was already beyond a distance she could track. Noelle did not have it completely figured out either, but the performance of the “Beast Protection Bracelet” on Colette’s arm was high, certainly something fitting for the Gusteko Holy Church to designate “heretical.”

For the Church does not tolerate guardians or strange abilities whose logic cannot be explained by “Blessings.”

Noelle: “Let me say this: whether they belong to heresy has not yet been determined. I am in the midst of ascertaining it. If you—”

Zank: “Ascertaining, huh. That also sounds like the excuse of a lapsed sister.”

Noelle: “In that case, shall we cross blades here? There is also the possibility you will be unable to fulfill the Holy Will—but is that what you want?”

With blue eyes narrowed, Noelle showed a stance that would not yield a step. Zank did not relax his pursuit, but at that rebuttal he knit his brows and, after being silent for only a few seconds—

Zank: “If you’re going to go that far, fine, I get it. Surely mutual ruin is the outcome that most betrays the Holy Will. But in that case, you’ll be helping with the town’s heretic-hunt too, miss.”

Saying so, he raised both hands, and the menace vanished from Zank’s manner in a flash.

Seeing Zank switch back to the air of a good-natured young man, Noelle also relaxed her shoulders and nodded, “I accept.”

On the matter of priorities, she had for the moment shifted Zank’s focus away from Omega and the others. It was only putting things off, but it should have been right to buy time to think.

—If it’s Omega, even if she has been put to sleep, she should bring about some kind of change.

Noelle: “—And so, concretely, just who or what is this heretic?”

With faith in the sleeping pink-haired witch in her heart, Noelle showed Zank an actively cooperative stance.

At that question, Zank went “Yeah,” a dark emotion again mixing in his eyes; but he turned it not on Noelle but toward the townscape of Sylphoa, and—

Zank: “What’s lurking is a wretched heretic who wields an art that interferes with peaceful sleep.”

6

Omega: “It’s only speculation, but you and I were probably put to sleep. The reason Palmyra and Noelle aren’t here is because they managed to avoid being put to sleep.”

Colette: “B-But, it’s strange. Why would it be like that? Is it because Omega-chan and I are a bit more sleepyheads than Palmyra and the others?”

Omega: “Well, roughly speaking, that’s fine.”

Releasing the hands that had been cupping Colette’s face, Omega stroked her own white hair. Flustered by a form she’d seen before but wasn’t used to seeing, Colette glanced restlessly around.

According to Omega, this was inside a dream seen while sleeping, but—

Colette: “Ah, wait, Omega-chan. But even if you and I fell asleep together, isn’t it very strange that we’d see the same dream together?”

Colette had thought before that, when she had a pleasant dream, it would be nice if she could see the same dream together with a close friend—but she’d never heard of it actually being possible.

Dreams seen while sleeping should, whatever they are, belong only to oneself.

Omega: “You’re right, Colette. Which means this world is an exception to that common sense about dreams, and the one who set this up is an out-of-the-ordinary practitioner.”

Colette: “Auu… an exception, an exception. I see.”

Omega: “Most likely, by now in the reality outside the dream, Palmyra and the others are desperately carrying our bodies that have fallen asleep. I hope they’re not forcing themselves in an attempt to wake us.”

Colette: “I’m sure it’ll be fine. Palmyra and Noelle-san are kind. But still, making the two of them worry worries me a lot. My chest is starting to ache and ache.”

Omega: “Hmm, that’s a grave situation. —Oh.”

In front of Colette, who was pressing a hand to her chest, the thinking Omega lifted her face. Colette immediately understood what Omega had reacted to.

They were standing at the entrance to a town called Sylphoa—and in the townscape visible from there, more and more people going to and fro began to appear one after another.

Colette: “Waa, waa, Omega-chan! So many people! Who are they?”

Omega: “I see. Those are probably the original residents of this town… but if they aren’t “reproductions,” then this becomes quite the story.”

Colette: “—?”

Omega: “It might be that all those many people are in the same situation as we are.”

Not understanding Omega’s murmur, Colette tilted her head, then made her eyes round at that easy-to-grasp explanation. Even to Colette’s eyes, there were far more than a hundred or two hundred people in the town. If all of them were the same as Colette and Omega, then outside the dream this would be a town where everyone had fallen asleep.

Colette: “Ah, but if it’s nighttime, maybe it wouldn’t be that different?”

Omega: “We reached the town in broad daylight, so it wouldn’t be something as simple as day–night reversal. It’s fascinating that in the present day there remains a practitioner of dream arts of this caliber.”

Colette: “Dream arts…?”

Omega: “The set of laws that interfere with dreams. You could call it a category a bit different from magic or sorcery. Arts that manipulate such laws existed even four hundred years ago, when I was alive.”

Saying so, Omega slowly stepped into the town. Hurrying after that taller-than-usual back, Colette asked:

Colette: “Omega-chan, is it safe to go inside? If we’re going to get outside the dream, wouldn’t it be better to head out of the town?”

Omega: “I don’t know how strong a dream world the caster constructed, but if there are as many entrances as residents, then the origin point is the town. In this dream world, nothing besides this town likely exists.”

Colette: “I don’t understand at all, I don’t understand. Honestly, Omega-chan!”

Even if she wanted to stop her and have a talk, Omega wouldn’t halt her steps. When Colette peered at her face from the side, Omega’s black eyes were sparkling, and her pace was quick.

Omega herself called herself a know-it-all who wanted to know everything. It was a situation so full of mystery that Colette’s head was spinning, but to Omega it seemed nothing but fun.

Riding that momentum, Omega spoke to one of the passersby—a middle-aged man.

Omega: “Hey, could you spare us a moment? We’re folks who came from outside the town.”

Man: “…Huh? Sorry, but I’m working. If you want to talk, ask someone else.”

Omega: “Come now, don’t say that. By the way, what’s your job? Is there anything I can help with?”

Man: “Don’t say strange things. My job is… my job is… huh? My job is…”

The man with his hat pulled low paused to think in the middle of answering Omega’s question. Narrowing her eyes at the man as he began muttering to himself like that, Omega addressed someone else.

But the woman she spoke to next, and then the boy after her, and even the elderly person after that—all thought hard at Omega’s question, and the conversation couldn’t continue.

Colette: “Omega-chan, these people are…?”

Omega: “Aptitude likely plays a part, but it seems more a problem of how the power’s been poured in. The depth at which they’re held in the dream world differs between those important to the caster and those who aren’t. That said, it’s hard to think the sole aim is to lull everyone only lightly… let’s see.”

While Colette fretted beside her, Omega’s interest did not flag in the least. Since it had come to this, Colette decided to keep quiet and watch until Omega finished doing what she wanted to do—only for that to develop into something outrageous.

Looking around at the townspeople, Omega apparently didn’t find anyone promising, and suddenly she raised her slender arms toward the sky.

As Colette blinked at the sight of Omega with both hands lifted to the sky—

Omega: “—Al Shario.”

It was right after Omega murmured that in a quiet, beautiful voice.

Colette: “—Eh?”

Feeling a tingling sensation at the nape of her neck, Colette pressed the back of her neck. But the reason her nape tingled wasn’t because something had been done to it directly—it was something much bigger.

Her nape tingled first to tell her that something outrageous was happening. And that outrageous thing soon became visible to Colette's eyes too.

—Overhead, from the lightly snowing sky, a light far, far larger than snow was falling.

Back when she'd been driven from the forest near her home village and living alone before she met Omega, she had seen shooting stars several times in the starry night sky. For some reason, the scene from that time flashed across Colette's mind.

She thought it: perhaps the onrushing light was that shooting star.

Colette: "Omega-cha—"

Omega: "There's no need to be afraid."

Squinting at the glare of the white light, Colette felt Omega quietly take her hand. The sudden feel of that hand made her body tense for a moment, but she immediately relaxed when she realized Omega had moved close to her.

Recalling Omega's words—there's no need to be afraid—Colette nodded.

Above the two, their hands linked, above the heads of the townsfolk, the white light drew nearer and nearer and—

Omega: "—I told you, Colette. This is a dream world—a place created by a caster who wields arts that interfere with dreams. Which is to say, the initiative in this place lies with the user of dream arts. I myself prepared a similar dream world under the pretext of a tea party… but this scale is the difference in talent, I suppose."

Omega's smoothly flowing words sounded far away. With her ears ringing, Colette forced down a swallow into her dry throat and accepted what had happened right before her eyes—that the large shooting star that had been bearing down on them only seconds earlier had vanished with a pop.

And—

Omega: “I’m deeply impressed. This is precisely the true display of one who manipulates the laws of dreams. I wonder if this title still remains today—“Dream Illusionist,”-kun.”

Still holding Colette’s hand, an amused Omega turned to look behind them. Naturally, Colette, made to toddle along in a semicircle to match Omega’s movement, looked that way as well.

Among the townspeople, who were indifferent to the falling star and moved right and left past one another, there stood a single person rooted in the bustle.

It was a beautiful woman. Her dark purple hair reached down to her back, and the eyes of the same color were striking—but her gaze was very severe. And there was one feature that drew the eye.

Her ears were a little pointed and long.

Omega: “I see. You’re an elven Dream Illusionist.”

Woman: “—And what are you?”

Noticing the same point as Colette and murmuring thus, Omega was answered by the woman. With a voice as harsh as her gaze, Colette flusteredly looked between Omega and the woman.

At Colette’s manner, Omega faintly smiled, lifted their joined hands, and—

Omega: “There’s no need to worry, Colette. Certainly, to face a Dream Illusionist this powerful is a rare thing, and it seems my magic has also been forbidden in this dream world, but…”

Colette: “Eh?”

Omega: “But it’s fine. I too have found myself in dire straits many times before…”

Saying that, Omega kept smiling as she looked at the woman she had called a “Dream Illusionist,” and said:

Omega: “—I’ve only died once.”

Colette: “I don’t really get it, but even once is plenty too many, Omega-chan!”

7

Palmyra: “Stop! Stop, Colette!”

Buffeted all over by the cold wind, clinging on for dear life, Palmyra pleaded.

Fortunately, her plea seemed to reach her, and Colette, who had been holding Palmyra tightly, stopped springing off rooftops and came to a halt. Set down there, Palmyra dropped Omega from her arms onto the piled snow, and—

Palmyra: “U-Ugh, I feel sick…”

Colette: “Grrrrr—”

Palmyra: “I-It’s fine. It’s not your fault, so behave yourself.”

After being tossed around to no end, Palmyra pressed her woozy head. Colette, growling low beside her, had no consciousness, but since she seemed to be worried, Palmyra spoke to her.

In this state, Colette rampaged as a beast to protect Colette herself by the power of the bracelet called the “Beast Protection Bracelet.” Still, if it looked a little different from that premise—perhaps that was just the partiality of a friend.

At the very least, for now, Colette had helped by carrying Palmyra and Omega in their escape.

Palmyra: “Maybe you’re growing too. …If so, then what about me—”

Self-reproach welled up belatedly after the relief. However, it dissipated as she went “Wah” and caught Colette the moment the strength left her body.

Just as if the previous moment had been a lie, Colette now wore a calm sleeping face. The bracelet must have judged that they had escaped the critical situation, and entrusted her body to sleep.

Even so, Palmyra understood that did not mean the situation had improved.

Palmyra: “Colette and the others are still asleep, and we got separated from Noelle.”

Given the situation, it couldn’t be helped, but leaving Noelle there was also Palmyra’s failing.

Noelle was, after all, a person of the Gusteko Holy Church, and Palmyra thought she should be in a position to speak with Zank of the same Church. Even so, since Palmyra had withdrawn out of fear of Zank’s precarious air, she couldn’t deny the impression that, in the end, she had abandoned Noelle.

Palmyra: “Why was it me who stayed… If not me—Omega, if it had been you—”

Noelle had said that the difference in whose back one was on had decided who slept and who stayed awake.

If their positions had been reversed, it would have been Omega who was awake; she would have handled the so-called Temple Knight, and might even have thought up countermeasures against the “heretic” who makes people sleep.

And yet, it was useless me who remained—what am I supposed to—

Unknown Voice: “Uh—excuse meee. If you like, would you like to use a handkerchief?”

Palmyra: “—!”

At the very moment her swelling helplessness was about to become tears and wet her cheeks. Suddenly addressed from the side, Palmyra started and stepped back while holding Colette—only to step on Omega lying there and topple over with a grand “Kyaa.”

On the snow-laden rooftop of a building, three girl-shaped holes opened in the white. The one who had watched Palmyra’s disgrace from head to rump appeared upside-down in the skyward view.

Girl: “Um, sorry for startling you. I was trying to find the right timing to speak, but… I thought I’d just go ba-baan and do it.”

Palmyra: “…”

Girl: “Umm?”

She was upside down, but in a sense the cheeriness of her voice was out of place; the one calling out was so distinctive that the details fixed themselves in Palmyra’s senses.

She was a beautiful girl with bright green hair gathered up to her back and round orange eyes. But the sense of incongruity her beauty couldn’t hide lay in her pointed, long ears.

As for the demihuman race with that trait—

Palmyra: “—An elf.”

Elf Girl: “Ah… you noticed after all, huh. But I weighed whether to hide it and get friendly then reveal it, versus showing the bare me from the start, and this is the result, okay?”

Palmyra: “…”

Elf Girl: “I-I get how you feel! No, I don’t, but I can imagine! It’s just that me being an elf and me talking to you like this are a bit different as topics, so if you could separate those in your mind…”

Palmyra: “—You.”

The elf girl prattled rapidly like that; when Palmyra cut in with a low voice midstream, the other straightened her back with a crisp:

Elf Girl: “Yes!”

She certainly was an elf, and running into one in the circumstances of this snowy town was suspicious to the utmost, but—

Palmyra: “Can we take it that you don’t bear hostility toward us?”

Elf Girl: “Yes, none! No hostility at all! Not a bit! If anything, I even feel like we could get along!”

Palmyra: “Hah?”

Elf Girl: “Sorry! I got carried away! Just leaving it at “it holds that potential” is more than enough!”

Even with that concession to “enough,” the reply still faintly felt greedy. Feeling a slight loss of strength at that, Palmyra raised her snow-buried body right there.

Then she faced the other—formerly upside down—with the up and down the right way. Looking anew, the features of the girl bundled up in cold-weather gear were pure elf.

That said, in terms of unknowability, Omega, buried in the snow, was far above.

Therefore—

Palmyra: “Are you someone of this town? Don’t tell me you’re a Temple Knight or anything.”

Elf Girl: “No, no, not at all! I’m not, but… um, are you okay?”

Palmyra: “With what?”

Elf Girl: “It’s odd to say it myself, but it’s rare to meet people who, even after realizing I’m an elf, will still talk with me like this.”

Despite leaving her most distinctive ears out, the elf girl said such a thing. Finding detailed explanations a hassle, Palmyra only shrugged at her question.

At once, the elf girl’s eyes went round, and her face lit up.

Elf Girl: “Amazing! I’m so happy! Um, may I ask your name?”

Palmyra: “…Palmyra.”

Elf Girl: “Palmyra-san! That’s a lovely name. I’m Shion! The two with you—they’re your friends, right?”

Palmyra: “Whether you’d call them friends or not— they’re family.”

As for Colette that’s one thing, but even Palmyra herself wasn’t clear on what she was with Omega. “Traveling companion” was probably the most apt expression.

As Palmyra thought that, the elf—Shion—kept her bright smile and clapped her hands strongly before her chest with a “I knew it!”

With that dry sound ringing in Sylphoa’s cold sky, Shion, grinning in a way that made it unclear what she was so delighted about, approached Palmyra and continued.

It was—

Shion: “Then by all means, will you cooperate with me, Palmyra-san? —So that we can somehow take back your sleeping friends and the people of this town of Sylphoa from Lilac!”

And so, to Palmyra, who had just been crushed by helplessness, she blithely made a request far too enormous, without ill intent.

8

«Sylphoa». That was the name of a town within the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko where the snow fell.

In peacetime, Sylphoa had been nothing more than an ordinary, unremarkable country town in the snow.

Now, however, it had become a demonic land that lulled the town’s residents and outside visitors into slumber, and centered on that place, all sorts of parties with all sorts of designs were mingling in a vortex of chaos.

Honestly, as someone who came to the town without a purpose and got caught up in the situation, this was a colossal nuisance and then some.

But—

Palmyra: “I’ve never heard of a case where whining and grumbling made the situation any better…”

Shion: “Yes! I think being positive is a very good thing. It really helps me a lot to have someone listen to me, too, so it’s a real win-win, isn’t it?”

Palmyra: “W…in…?”

Shion: “Ah, it apparently means both sides are happy. Am I using it right?”

Palmyra: “I wouldn’t know. It’s the first time I’ve heard the word.”

At the words of the girl—Shion—who asked her with a blank look, Palmyra knit her brows.

She gave off a decidedly airheaded impression, but there was no mistaking that this girl held the key to the situation. After all, she seemed to have an idea why Colette and Omega had fallen asleep.

No sooner had they arrived in Sylphoa than the two had dozed off, and no matter how much they called or shook them, they would not wake. Noelle, who had been with them, had said it was caused by some kind of interference, but…

Palmyra: “So, is it fair to say that you know the answer?”

Shion: “The answer… yes. I know why your friends, Palmyra-san, and everyone in town have fallen asleep.”

Palmyra: “Then tell me. Who is putting Colette and the others to sleep, and for what purpose?”

Shion: “Naturally, I’d love to go ba-baaan and make a big announcement~ but…”

Bringing the tips of both index fingers together in front of her chest, Shion suddenly grew evasive. Seeing that, Palmyra drew her brows together and prompted her, “What?”

Palmyra: “You came out here planning to talk, didn’t you. Why are you suddenly getting all fidgety?”

Shion: “No, um… right! It’s no good to be all suggestive, so I’ll be blunt. This situation was engineered by Lilac, and the objective is for my sake!”

Palmyra: “…Hah?”

Shion: “It was engineered by Lilac, and the objective is for my sake!”

To Palmyra, who let out a dumbfounded sound, Shion repeated the same thing twice with a crisp look.

Palmyra: “…”

Putting a hand to her own forehead, Palmyra weighed Shion’s statement.

Smart people tended to skip the process and jump straight to the conclusion, but unlike the thing Omega did all the time, Shion’s story simply felt poorly explained and lacking in gist.

From the way she kept glancing over here, her anxiety and earnestness did come through, but…

Palmyra: “Let me ask one thing: who is this Lilac?”

Shion: “Yes, Lilac is another me who resides inside me… my other personality. She’s the type to speak up, blunt and to the point, and while she comes off sharp with people, she is not a villain. Right now, using the power of the “Dream Illusionist,” she is holding the townsfolk and your friends, Palmyra-san, as hostages.”

Palmyra: “A-A second Shion? Another personality?”

Rather than resolving the mountain of questions, Shion’s added explanation only made it grow taller.

Another self, another personality—Palmyra had not the slightest clue what she was talking about. For a moment, she even suspected the possibility of a joke or a prank, but Shion's expression as she spoke was dead serious.

It was an outlandish tale, but at the very least, on the face of it she believed it—the same sort of face as Colette's when Colette believed something.

What was certain was that Shion's being bad at explaining had moved from suspicion to conviction, and as a result, the information they needed to verify had unexpectedly multiplied.

Palmyra: "Let me try to sort this out and say it back… So, your other personality, Lilac, is using some kind of technique to put Colette and the townsfolk to sleep. And it's for your sake, and the people who are asleep are being held as hostages, but Lilac isn't a villain… Is that right?"

Shion: "Ooh~, amazing comprehension, Palmyra-san! Exactly right, clap clap clap~"

Palmyra: "She's definitely a villain! Is there any world where someone other than a villain takes hostages?!"

Shion: "Hyah?!"

Shion started clapping in a carefree way, and at Palmyra's raised-voice retort, she let out a little shriek. Ignoring that reaction, Palmyra brought her face so close to Shion's that their breaths almost mingled, and—

Palmyra: "And what do you mean it's for your sake? Tell Lilac this from you! Say, "I don't want anyone taking hostages!"“

Shion: "Y-You're absolutely right to be angry, Palmyra-san, but the truth is, I'm in a no-contact situation with Lilac; she won't listen to me at all right now…"

Palmyra: "Even so—"

Shion: "—Also, I'm not completely opposed to everything Lilac did."

At that sudden reply from Shion, Palmyra's movement stopped dead.

Right in front of her, Shion's eyes, set in a face framed by long lashes, fixed on her, and Palmyra, in a split second, was made to realize the difference in years between herself and the girl—no, the elf—she was facing.

Shion had seen a world too different from the one Palmyra had seen; the depth in Shion's eyes, having borne witness to that world, overwhelmed Palmyra, and the banner of her anger fluttered weakly, thinly.

Palmyra: "…"

Shion: "As I said a moment ago, Lilac did something outrageous for my sake. Of course, if my life were to be in danger, Lilac would be in the same danger as well, so it was also to protect herself."

With an apologetic, faint bitter smile, Shion said as much, and Palmyra faltered. And hearing her out that far, she belatedly remembered.

The man with the dangerous air who had been the reason they split up from Noelle—Zank.

Calling himself a Temple Knight of the Gusteko Holy Church, Zank had said he had been dispatched to Sylphoa to hunt «heresy».

Palmyra: "So basically, you and Lilac are the heresy being chased by the Church?"

Shion: "Yes, that is correct."

Palmyra: "…Is it because you're an elf?"

Seeing Shion's pointed ears as she nodded, Palmyra, feeling abashed, asked that.

The discrimination and prejudice visited upon the elf race was common knowledge even to Palmyra, who had had no occasion to actually deal with an elf. Prejudices that had seeped even into a corner of the Kingdom of Lugunica might well have spread across the border onto the Holy Kingdom's white land.

However, to Palmyra's concern, Shion tilted her head and said, "Who can say."

Shion: "At most, that's one of the reasons for being disliked. I suspect the real cause that makes the Church folks shun us is the type of arts we can use."

Palmyra: "Arts… Is that what's putting Colette and the others to sleep?"

Shion: "Yes.—Lilac put the townsfolk to sleep and delayed the Gusteko Holy Church believers chasing us. That is the true meaning of what I said earlier."

Shion's smooth answers did not contradict what Zank had said. It made sense that Shion and the others, who were being antagonized and pursued by a Temple Knight, had had no choice but to rely on their power.

Even so, it was hard to accept that they had taken the townspeople as hostages.

Shion: "May I at least offer an excuse? The reason Lilac resorted to hardline measures."

Apparently her feelings had shown on her face; seeing Palmyra fall silent, Shion gestured toward the townscape of Sylphoa and said, "That."

Looking that way, Palmyra noticed an anomaly within the town.

The Time Tower in the center of Sylphoa that told the flow of time—that white tower had been sliced diagonally and collapsed, strewing debris around it.

Palmyra: "That's…"

Shion: “Branded heresy by the Church’s believers, we fled into Sylphoa. We thought that in a crowded place, they would not carelessly make a move… but we were naive.”

Palmyra: “Then that was done by the Church’s people? If they run amok in town like that…”

Shion: “Yes. Which is why Lilac put the woman chasing us to sleep. We had no margin to narrow the target, so townsfolk who were within range were drawn into the dream as well… so your friends, Palmyra-san, are complete collateral damage. I am sorry…”

With a grave face, Shion apologized; her explanation was consistent.

It was hard to believe that people of the Gusteko Holy Church would rampage in a town where believers lived, but Palmyra had actually spoken with Zank, a Temple Knight. Thinking of his hardline stance and overreaction toward «heresy», it would not be strange if he ran wild in town under cover of doctrine.

In fact, the reason Zank was not recklessly barging into the town was that he was wary of the situation Shion and Lilac had created, and a standoff had arisen.

Shion: “Well… what do you think? I tried to be as honest as I could…”

Timidly, Shion peered into Palmyra’s face.

Gone was the air of a tragic woman who had overcome much hardship that had just made Palmyra flinch; in its place was a single girl, anxious whether her sincerity had reached the other person.

And Palmyra was weak to the gaze of a girl in whom anxiety and a faint hope were intermingled.

Palmyra: “…So then, what do you want me to do?”

Shion: “—! Th-That, does that perhaps, perhaps mean…”

Palmyra: “Don’t make me say it. …I’ll believe you this far, so tell me what you have in mind going forward. Just so you know, I don't have any skills that would be useful. The only thing I could boast about was the size of my house, and I even left behind my hometown where that house was."

Shion: "No! Just having you be you, Palmyra-san, has tremendous meaning! A special citation, a giant-killing, a super-important, super-important key person! Ah, am I using key person right?"

Palmyra: "…I told you I don't know."

Having her hand clasped by a bright-eyed Shion, Palmyra began to regret that she might have jumped the gun. But paying no mind to Palmyra's frame of mind, Shion raised her right index finger straight and, with a cheerful face, declared:

It was—

Shion: "No need to worry! I won't ask anything difficult. As I said earlier, Lilac and I are in a no-contact situation right now, and I can't even meet her face-to-face because she won't let me into the dream. So—"

Palmyra: "So?"

Shion: "—I was hoping, Palmyra-san, that you would be my messenger!"

9

—And at the same time that Palmyra and Shion were going back and forth in the real Sylphoa.

Omega: "I meant to help you relax, but… it is not going very well."

Shrugging her slender shoulders, Omega's long white hair swayed, and Colette was at a loss.

All of a sudden, Omega had taken on a form different from usual—according to her, this was actually her true form—and just when Colette thought that, they were told they were inside a dream.

Certainly, there was no sign of Palmyra or Noelle, and everyone they saw in the snow-laden town was responding in a spaced-out, dream-dazed way.

But if that was true, then what were they supposed to do?

The one who seemed to have the answer to Colette's anxiety was a beautiful woman who appeared before them.

However—

Woman: "Answer me. What are you? New Temple Knights?"

With her long, narrow eyes sharpened, the woman glared their way, looking very, very displeased.

Stepping smoothly in front of Colette as if to shield her from the woman's gaze, Omega moved forward.

Omega: "We bear you no ill will. Could you not make such a scary face?"

Woman: "After trying to drop a star on my head? For your information, if I had not intervened, many minds would have been torn apart. You do have knowledge of dream arts, do you not?"

Omega: "More than that—I can even use them in practice. Of course, I lack your level of talent, so it is no more than the tiniest of tea parties."

Woman: "If you had the knowledge and still did that, I can only take it as malicious intent."

Omega: "Hm."

Colette could do nothing but watch nervously as Omega and the woman exchanged words.

Right in front of Colette, Omega touched a hand to her own chin and smiled faintly.

Omega: "No good. It seems our first meeting went poorly."

Colette: “Eeh, you are giving up that easily? No, that will not do, Omega-chan.”

Omega: “In my experience, relationships that stumble at the start almost never go well thereafter. If you insist regardless, would you like to try speaking?”

Colette: “Me? …Okay, got it. I will try talking.”

Being relied on by Omega, Colette was a little surprised, but she accepted.

She had no idea whether she could be of use where the clever Omega had failed. But simply hiding behind someone without doing anything felt no different than before she left her hometown.

Thinking that, Colette stepped forward with a resolute expression, and the woman’s shoulders tensed with nervousness. Seeing that, Colette stopped her feet and called out from a little distance.

Colette: “Um, sorry for startling you. I am sure Omega-chan did not mean any harm at all. But trying to drop a star—that was overdoing it. I was scared, too.”

Woman: “…And you are?”

Colette: “Ah, right! I am Colette, and that girl is Omega-chan. We are also with Palmyra and Noelle-san, but it seems the two of them are not here. Omega-chan and I are sleepyheads… How about you, big sis? Are you a sleepyhead?”

Woman: “…Hearing that, what do you want to do?”

Colette: “Eh? Oh my… right… Omega-chan, what was it again?”

Omega: “Talk it out. A discussion.”

So eager to make a conversation happen that she let every other objective slip, Colette had dropped the ball; Omega backed her up from behind in a small voice.

Yes—talk it out. They had to make the woman understand that they were not enemies.

Colette: “See, we are in the middle of a journey. It is not a journey we are in a hurry for, but we cannot stay asleep for too long. So—”

Woman: ““Release you.” That is what you mean?”

Colette: “Um, us too, but… if possible, everyone else as well?”

Pressing a hand to her chest, Colette tried making a slightly bold request. At once, the woman’s expression, which had been tilting toward leniency, regained its harshness, and her gaze grew all the more severe.

As if to show her intent to refuse, she hugged her own arms and glared at Colette.

Woman: “Why do you want to free the other people as well? That has nothing to do with travelers.”

Colette: “Th-That is true, they are people whose faces and names I do not even know. But, you know, leaving them with those vacant expressions might be dangerous, and… they just look so pitiful.”

Woman: “Pitiful? Do not tell me that is your reason?”

Colette: “Hmm? Is it strange if that is my reason?”

Tilting her head, Colette drew a look from the woman like she was seeing something hard to believe.

Thinking she had spoken as honestly as she could, Colette drooped her shoulders at the woman’s reaction. She had always been bad at getting people to grant her requests. Aside from her parents, she had no memory of being able to rely on anyone other than Palmyra—and even that was not Colette’s merit, but because Palmyra was kind.

Now she had Omega and Noelle with her, but it was still far from her area of strength.

—

While Colette was hanging her head and reflecting, the woman seemed to be hesitating over what to say next. But before that hesitation could clear, a voice cut in with a “Now then.”

Omega: “Thanks to Colette, it is about the right time for our mutual wariness to have loosened, would you not say?”

Naturally, the one who cut in was Omega, who had been quietly observing the situation. Though Colette had been entrusted with the role of negotiator, she was dejected over producing no results; Omega patted her shoulder gently.

Omega: “No worries. I am sure your sincerity has gotten across sufficiently. Look at her face. That is the face peculiar to humans who cannot cut themselves free of sentiment. I saw the same sort many times four hundred years ago.”

Colette: “Um, even if you think that, maybe do not say it out loud…”

Omega: “Oh? My aim was to strongly appeal to her that I am your understanding ally.”

It was very Omega-like, and also the kind of thing that often soured relations with the other party; Colette added her own two cents to that effect.

That said, she had spoken loudly enough for the woman to hear, so it was already too late—

Woman: “…appeal”

Omega: “Hm?”

Woman: “Where did you hear that word? No… where did you learn that word?”

Narrowing her eyes, the question the woman voiced was a puzzle Colette did not understand.

What the woman had picked up on was one of those words Omega sometimes used that Colette did not know. Since Omega was very clever, Colette assumed it was knowledge from books or lands she did not know, but for some reason it really bothered the woman.

Omega, too, let her black eyes ripple at the woman's question.

Omega: "An interesting question. Unlike Palmyra, who would dismiss it as meaningless, or Colette, who would smile and let it pass, your attitude is different… However, the answer to that question is relatively important to me as well. It is not something I can divulge so easily—"

Woman: "I can release every man in town whom I drew into the dream."

Omega: "That would make me want to answer—so I would like to say, but human society stalls if only the men return. No, I have never tested it, but functionally speaking, so long as the men retain consciousness, even if the women do not, is the community's reproduction still possible? If so—"

Colette: "Omega-chan! I feel like you are saying something you should not!"

Omega was more expressive in this larger body than in her smaller one. So, even as she spoke, the smirking grin on her face was plain to see.

Colette did not really understand the content, but she felt that letting Omega keep talking with that face was wrong, so she scolded her in place of Palmyra and Noelle. At that warning, Omega hunched her slender shoulders with a "Sorry, sorry," then faced the woman anew.

The woman had grown sullen again from that last exchange; Omega smiled into those eyes.

Omega: "Fortunately, we have gleaned some information by this point. From the look of it, you are not the aura of a simple evil "Dream Illusionist." There are circumstances behind putting the townsfolk to sleep. Those circumstances involve your pointed elven ears and your dream-arts power, and the fact that this is the Holy

Kingdom of Gusteko. My basis for this supposition is the barrier that surrounded the city… that is a kind of "Blessing" of the Holy Kingdom, yes? Only certain roles within the Holy Church can use it, and they are your pursuers. You are quite fixated on the terms I have used, it seems, but the reason for that does not go beyond conjecture. Even so, you wanted information so badly you decided without hesitation to let the men go from the dream. The ones you wish to hold back are the women. —How about it?"

Woman: "…Ah."

At the close of Omega's long discourse, the woman fell silent—no, she was struck dumb.

Her large eyes went wide, her lips trembled, and no voice came out. Listening at her side, Colette, too, was drowning in the wave of information Omega had strung together, left floundering.

Without waiting for either of their reactions or interjections, Omega went on.

Omega: "I surmise you are an elven "Dream Illusionist" branded heresy and pursued by Temple Knights of the Gusteko Holy Church. The pursuer is a woman, whom you have put to sleep and drawn into this dream. The townspeople in the same predicament are collateral damage—or hostages to deter further pursuers."

Woman: "W… What are you… why do you rattle on like that…?"

Omega: "Oh? Not exactly wrong, then? In that case, I shall answer thus: "Elementary, my dear (a basic matter, my friend).""

Placing a hand to her chest, Omega made an elegant bow. In contrast to her smug demeanor, the shaken woman blanched and it was clear she was afraid of Omega.

Colette understood the feeling. That just now had been very creepy Omega.

Colette: "Hey, we do not want to fight with you, big sis. If we can talk, let us talk, okay? I do not even know your name yet."

Standing in for the off-putting Omega, Colette addressed the silent woman. Timidly, the woman's gaze turned back toward Colette.

In the depths of those eyes, Colette could see the color of anxiety that her displeasure had concealed, and she let out a white puff of breath.

Colette: "If we can get along, then maybe Omega-chan will feel like talking about the thing you wanted to know. Right, Omega-chan?"

Omega: "Well? Even so, there are things that cannot be revealed so easily, no matter what I am told—"

Colette: "Omega-chan."

Omega: "I suppose I might change my mind."

Fixed by Colette's gaze, Omega softened her stance ever so slightly. At Omega's reply, Colette smiled and nodded, and the woman blinked at their exchange.

After thinking for a while, she slowly averted her eyes.

Woman: "Lilac."

Bluntly stating her own name, she took a step forward in her relationship with Colette and the others.

10

Zank: "The one we've gotta take down is the elf "Dream Illusionist." Sis, how much do you know about "Dream Illusionists"?"

Noelle: "…I have heard a little of them, but this would be my first time facing one in person."

Zank: "Hah. Same here on that count. An elf who's a "Dream Illusionist" is like a bundle of elements that betray the Holy Will—a mass of "heresy." The sinfulness makes my spine run cold."

At Zank, who actually shivered as if seized by fear, Noelle narrowed her eyes quietly.

After Colette had unleashed the power of the Beast Protection Bracelet and carried off Palmyra and the sleeping Omega, Noelle had chosen to act together with Zank, whose objective was hunting down “heresy.”

By the nature of her position as an Itinerant Preacher, she could not refuse a Temple Knight’s request to subjugate heretics. That obligation as a person of the Holy Church was one factor, but the main reason was another.

Namely—

Zank: “This is the sort of “heresy” we absolutely cannot let slip away. In the worst case, we have to consider wiping out the whole town of Sylphoa along with it.”

Noelle: “…”

As if it were only natural, Zank voiced the idea of abandoning the town along with its residents.

A Temple Knight’s primary role was to follow the Holy Will issued by the Holy King and subjugate “heresy”—and the survival of a single “heretic” was deemed a graver defect than the death of a thousand believers.

Thus Noelle was accompanying Zank to prevent him from taking such hard-line measures.

If he tried to rush into rash methods in obedience to the Holy Will, she would gently propose a change of course, and if he still refused, then by force if need be—

Noelle: “…What am I even thinking.”

Finding herself naturally entertaining the idea of overpowering Zank, Noelle felt a pang of bewilderment at her own heart.

Noelle had entered the Holy Church for the sake of revenge and had been granted the power she needed. Though that objective had been half-crushed along the way, she still owed a great debt—and a small measure of faith—to the Holy Church of Gusteko. In spite of that, to be laying plans that would harm Zank was nothing less than a betrayal of the Holy Will.

Besides, to make an enemy of a Temple Knight here in Gusteko, the Holy King's very domain, would be to throw mud at the Holy Church of Gusteko, which nine tenths of the Holy Kingdom's people revere. No matter how reckless one might be, no one could carry out such a foolish thought.

—Even Omega, who exuded that bottomless presence, should be no exception. Or so it should be.

Zank: "Hey, sis? You listening?"

Noelle: "…But of course."

Peered at while she was lost in thought, Noelle drew in a faint breath.

Fortunately, thanks to a constitution that did not easily show agitation on her face, her attempt at composure did not seem to be seen through at once. Just then, beyond her field of vision, she noticed a simple snow-shelter tent erected on the snowy plain.

They were supposed to have been led out of town and told they'd be taken to a base, but—

Zank: "Ah? That look—you're scoffing that it's a shabby tent, aren't you."

Following Noelle's gaze, Zank made a sour face and scratched at his short hair. Most likely, what Noelle had missed just before was a conversation to do with that tent.

With a disgruntled mutter of "Couldn't be helped," Zank went on:

Zank: "Never thought we wouldn't be able to get into the town. We had to set up a Blessing of People-Warding. Staying light on our feet was the smartest play all around."

Noelle: "I have not said anything. Though I suppose it truly is a little unsightly… Are you alone, Zank-sama?"

As Zank offered what sounded like excuse-tinged grumbling, Noelle answered him while casting her gaze this way and that, tilting her head.

It was fine if this lone tent was the base, but the absence of any other Holy Church believers struck her as odd. Of course, it was rare for multiple Temple Knights to be dispatched; if there were others, they would be attendants assigned to Zank's rear support.

But neither to Noelle's eyes nor to her other senses did any such presence make itself felt—

Zank: "Ah. If you mean attendants, I turned them down. When the "heretic" we're up against is that skilled, tagalongs just mean the number of precious believers goes down. Pointless, right?"

Noelle: "If I recall, I was requested to make up for a shortage, was I not…?"

Zank: "Sis, you're an Itinerant Preacher—same rank as a Temple Knight aside from the Blessing! Treating you the same as an attendant would be way stranger!"

Noelle: "…That is true as well."

At Zank's raised-voice assertion, Noelle nodded sedately in agreement.

His point was fair. In practice, there was a gulf between an Itinerant Preacher and an attendant that could not be bridged. That said, there was a similar gulf between an Itinerant Preacher and a Temple Knight—no, if anything, precisely because both could be called strong, the effect of that hard-to-bridge gap was all the more blatant.

For that reason, Zank's thinking came as a mild surprise to Noelle.

Noelle: "I am surprised."

Zank: "Hm? By what?"

Noelle: "Not to speak of ordinary believers of the Holy Church, but you yourself, Zank-sama, as one who holds the office of Temple Knight, expressed that we Itinerant Preachers are of the same rank.”

The difference between a Temple Knight and an Itinerant Preacher was not merely in role and duties. More fundamentally, how the two were distinguished lay in whether one was granted a “Blessing.”

Those who were granted a “Blessing” by the Holy King—who was both the head of the Holy Church of Gusteko and the pinnacle of the Holy Kingdom—were the few who could become Temple Knights, and thus Temple Knights strongly tended toward elitism.

Noelle knew Temple Knights in a number fewer than she had fingers on both hands, and all of them, when compared with Noelle the Itinerant Preacher, never let go of the recognition that they outranked her. Even to call them equal in form could be taken as an insult to the Holy King, who bestowed the Blessing.

Noelle: “Thus Zank-sama’s attitude struck me as unusual.”

Zank: “Ahh, I might be like that. Not something I can say too loudly, though. I hate “heretics” and heathens. But believers are different. We’re all under the same Holy Church umbrella.”

Noelle: “…”

Zank: “Hey, as a Temple Knight, heretic-hunting is top priority, yeah? If it looks like the best way, I won’t balk at an annihilation plan. But that’s a last resort, for the time being.”

As he said that, Zank lifted his hand lightly, and red light leaked from his fingertips.

That light wavered eerily, as if it had a will of its own—or rather, not “as if.” It did have a will. A definite will, a “Blessing” that obeyed Zank.

To survive a harsh environment, a faith had naturally taken root within the Holy Church of Gusteko—reverence and awe toward spirits—and the “Blessing” that Temple Knights received from the Holy King was precisely that.

Those who were granted a spirit by the Holy King, who formed a contract with it and gained a power beyond the ordinary—those were Temple Knights.

Noelle: “All the same, I do think Zank-sama’s way of thinking is unusual.”

Zank: “Could be. But it’s not my idea; I picked it up from someone. An old friend of mine’s also a devout believer in the Holy Church of Gusteko. I’m here thanks to that person.”

Zank’s lips softened just a touch, and his attitude grew gentler. No doubt, as he spoke, the person in question—this old friend—rose up in his mind, called forth by memory.

If he had someone like that to speak of, perhaps the worst possibility Noelle feared was needless worry. Perhaps Zank would not approve of doing something as extreme as destroying Sylphoa.

Noelle: “Then, for the Holy King’s Holy Will and for the sake of that friend, let us secure the best resolution.”

To subdue the “heretic” without involving the residents of Sylphoa. A conclusion that kept damage to a minimum—that was the ideal, and Noelle sought to share that course with Zank.

However—

Zank: “…Yeah. We will take down the “heretic,” no question.”

Noelle: “…”

In that instant, the gentle air of a moment before vanished, and a cruel hue dyed Zank’s expression.

At that sudden transformation, Noelle could not help but feel disconcerted. The way the color in his eyes changed swelled a fear of the worst that she could not wipe away.

Ignoring Noelle’s inner turmoil, Zank lifted the flap of the narrow tent’s entrance with his hand.

Zank: “Come in. I want to share what we’ve got on the “heretic.” It ain’t much, but we’ll squash our uncertainties one by one and make it solid.”

Jutting his chin, Zank beckoned Noelle into the tent.

Holding both his unstable way of speaking and her own indelible anxiety within her ample chest, Noelle nonetheless did not let any of it show on her face; she followed quietly and stepped inside the tent.

Feeling keenly that this matter of subjugating a “heretic” would not be the end of it.

11

Omega: “Huh, a split personality! So you divide the roles between reality and the dream realm, and while the body stays awake you slip into the dream! I see, I see… truly fascinating!”

Eyes widening at the first real example she had ever heard, Omega voiced heartfelt admiration.

Lilac, the “Dream Illusionist” they had encountered in the dream realm—having yielded to the carrot-and-stick negotiating tactic Omega and Colette used in tandem—began to pop-pop and speak to them about her own circumstances.

What especially piqued Omega’s interest among that was the separate personality that shared a body with Lilac—a personality named Shion—and the “Dream Illusionist” advantage of employing multiple personalities.

Colette: “Hey hey, Omega-chan, I don’t feel “wow” about that at all. Um, what does it even mean to have another you inside yourself?”

Omega: “It is literal, but if that is hard to picture, forget the “another you” part and just think of it as someone else in your head. Suppose you share your body with Palmyra. How do you think your life would change?”

Colette: “Eh? Umm, umm… I guess it would be fun, since I could always be together with Palmyra…?”

Lilac: “—It is not so nice a thing.”

Blinking and thinking hard, Colette had arrived at an endearingly innocent conclusion. But it seemed that answer did not please Lilac, who actually was a split personality.

Lilac went right on, saying:

Lilac: “I do not know this Palmyra girl, but imagine the one who moved into your head was not her—imagine it was that Omega girl over there.”

Colette: “Eeh, Omega-chan inside my head…?”

Omega: “Hm. Though I may look this way, I am poor at gauging the feelings of others, but I can tell from Colette’s reaction just now that she is not happy.”

Lilac: ““Though you may look this way”? You are exactly as I imagined, are you not.”

Harsh as it sounded, Lilac’s sharp words were largely sincere.

Colette’s answer was endearing. But in truth, whether the other personality that is born is truly someone you like is another matter. Considering the backgrounds that lead to a split personality, it is entirely possible one ends up sharing a body with a personality one does not get along with.

All the more so for a “Dream Illusionist” of elven origin—whatever circumstances she grew up in, if you packed every imaginable malice into a box, that would be the days she had lived.

Omega: “And yet, if the result of that was a split personality and a dramatic growth as a “Dream Illusionist,” it is an ironic tale. However, it greatly affirms my view in life that every time a human overcomes a “trial,” they undergo dramatic growth.”

Lilac: “It sounds rather like you are welcoming the splitting of one’s personality, does it not?”

Omega: “It is an exceedingly rare case, after all. If there is someone who dealt the decisive blow to crack your personalities, I would very much like to offer them my thanks—”

At that point—

Lilac’s hand, her expression gone taut, walloped Omega hard across the face.

Her white cheek struck, Omega plopped down on her rear where she was. It was the dream realm, but the cold of the piled snow chilled her backside all the same, while heat rose in the cheek that had been slapped, in contrast.

Lilac: “Do not say such things… without permission.”

Looking down at Omega, Lilac let those words spill out, her eyes severe and her lips pressed tight.

The trembling voice and her gaze, like a lament, looked like proof that Lilac felt a pain even greater than that of the slapped Omega.

In fact—

Colette: “I think Omega-chan was in the wrong just now, too.”

Omega: “…Good grief. If even Colette says so, it must be quite bad. It is a bad habit of mine. I am sorry for making you feel unpleasant.”

If even the kindhearted Colette would not take Omega’s side, then there was no excusing it. Though she did not grasp the essence of what she had done, Omega apologized to Lilac.

Some might say there is no meaning in an apology when you do not know what you are apologizing for.

Omega: “In my case, if I start saying that, the very raison d’être of the words of apology disappears.”

Lilac: “…It is not something to say so loftily.”

Averting her eyes, Lilac gave that short mutter as her response to Omega’s apology.

She neither said she forgave, nor that she had forgiven, but taking no clean break could be taken as her own form of sincerity.

At any rate, if she spoke the rest aloud, it was plain she would incur anger yet again, so Omega decided to keep her amazement at the great miracle of this coincidence to herself.

—A “Dream Illusionist” who manipulates dream arts is a tremendously powerful being. Entering another’s dream is tantamount to touching the target’s unguarded heart and soul directly. If they choose, they are a practitioner who can easily shatter another’s heart—however, that does not mean they have no weaknesses.

Omega: “The foremost is that while they are employing dream arts, the practitioner themselves is asleep.”

Since they are entering a dream, it is only natural that the “Dream Illusionist” themselves must also be sleeping. At such times the practitioner is just as defenseless—and Lilac had completely compensated for that weakness.

One personality handles the dream, and the other handles reality. By doing that, what you get is a “Dream Illusionist” who can dive into dreams while awake. An outrageous thing.

Omega: “And you are an elf… able to continue honing yourself near-permanently in an unaging body… Much as it may be odd for me to say, you have enough potential to be called a “Witch”—oh?”

Lilac: “Let go, Colette. I am going to slap the other cheek of that woman, too.”

Colette: “Wait, wait, wait, Lilac-san! I think Omega-chan does not even mean to be saying it out loud. She has no ill will. Omega-chan is empty inside!”

By the time Omega noticed, her robust imagination having heated up, Colette was desperately pinning Lilac from behind right in front of her.

Looking between Lilac, her face reddening with anger again, and Colette doing her utmost, Omega put a hand to her own mouth.

Omega: “I apologize again for my unseemly conduct. As Colette says, I meant no ill will.”

Lilac: “…At least, I beg you, be of use to us.”

Omega: “I shall strive earnestly. So then, is the problem the Temple Knight inside? Or the Temple Knight outside?”

Lilac: “…”

At Omega’s question, Lilac opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

Such an overreaction was something to see, but it was not anything to be impressed by every time.

Omega: “You and your other personality, Shion, have fallen into a standoff in this town. The basis for my surmise that the opponent is a Temple Knight is as I said a moment ago. Considering the reason for developing the dream realm, it is clear you find the Temple Knights troublesome in both dream and waking.”

Lilac: “…For now, the one I want to prioritize is the Temple Knight inside.”

Omega: “I see—inside.”

To Lilac’s low-voiced reply, Omega looked around at the Sylphoa in the dream. Pulled by her, Colette also glanced about here and there, trying to spot an anomaly.

However, she could not find anything that seemed like one. There were only the people of the town passing by.

Colette: “Hmm, I do not get it… What kind of people are these Temple Knights?”

Omega: “They are the version of Noelle that is contracted with a spirit. The only visible commonality, if any, would probably be the Holy Church of Gusteko’s vestments. I have not seen a modern Temple Knight with my own eyes, so that is only if the customs from four hundred years ago have continued.”

Colette: “V-Version…”

Omega: “The townsfolk you have drawn in have hazy selves; that is a question of how you are allocating resources, is it not? So long as they are held in the dream, they suffice. In other words, where the leftover power is being poured is—”

Lilac: “—That Time Tower.”

Cutting off Omega’s words, Lilac jerked her chin toward the center of town. Looking, amid the otherwise featureless townscape there was a slightly conspicuous tower. That, too, was a tower whose entrance had been blocked by an unnatural statue—a strange creature that looked neither like a cat nor a dog.

Colette: “Wow, it is very cute. I wonder what animal it is.”

Omega: “Beauty and ugliness are matters that vary by person, but it is certainly an unnatural article. Are you the one blocking the tower entrance?”

Lilac: “Not blocked physically. It only appears that way conceptually. I am devoting most of the power—the resources—to sealing the Temple Knight.”

Omega: “I see. Sounds like a formidable foe.”

That Lilac had gone out of her way to restate the word was probably to show that she knew the meaning of the terms Omega used and could command them. On Omega’s side, she was deliberately increasing her use of foreign terms in a provocative way, so it was all the better that Lilac was being stimulated.

As for how Lilac had picked up these foreign-to-this-world words, that did interest her.

Omega: “For us to talk with our hearts on our sleeves, progress in our relationship is indispensable. So I will help remove your worries. How about it?”

Lilac: “…If I lift the ban on arts, can you guarantee you will not target me?”

Colette: “Lilac-san, that is too cruel, no matter what…”

At Omega’s proposal, Lilac asked that from a natural caution. When Colette’s eyes moistened at that, even Lilac’s cheeks grew slightly stiff before the gaze of the good-hearted girl.

Even so, she did not fold at once and retract what she had said.

Weighing that stance and the requirements being asked for, Omega shrugged.

Omega: “It is fine—keep the arts sealed. If I silence the Temple Knight like that, surely even you will have no choice but to change your attitude toward me, will you?”

Lilac: “Even if so, the way you say it makes me not want to change… What are you going to do?”

Omega: “A secret.”

Pressing an index finger to her lips and winking one eye, Omega answered.

While Lilac pursed her lips in dissatisfaction at the evasiveness, Omega smiled at Colette beside her.

Omega: “Colette, this will be a little dangerous, so…”

Colette: “Umm, should I step back?”

Omega: “No—when it is no good, it is no good even if you step back. Do not let go of the “Beast Protection Bracelet.”“

The “Meteia” that had been brought even into the dream realm—whether it would become a mere flimsy sham, or prove effective even here, was unknown, but it would serve as a comfort for Colette.

Then, as if to shield that Colette, Lilac shifted where she stood and set her expression.

If the “Dream Illusionist” who constructed this world was there, Colette should be safe for the time being.

Omega: “All right, whenever you are ready. Open the lid of the Time Tower.”

Lilac: “…If it looks bad, say so at once.”

Colette: “O-Omega-chan! Do your best!”

Buoyed by the encouragement from Lilac and from Colette respectively, Omega stepped forward.

In the next instant, in time with Lilac’s single breath, the stillness of the Time Tower was shattered.

The statue of the strange animal at the tower entrance—the one Colette had praised—blew to pieces, and at the same time the tower’s entrance exploded—no, it was not the entrance that exploded, but the entire tower.

As if someone had pumped more water than its capacity into a living thing, cracks ran across the whole structure, unable to withstand the internal pressure, and just after water gushed from the cracks, the whole thing burst apart at once.

And—

Woman: “—I was caught off guard.”

Riding the surging torrent as she flew out was a tall woman with sky-colored hair flowing down to her waist. Pale skin and a slender frame, clad in silver armor and pure white vestments—the uniform of a Temple Knight, permitted only to the chosen.

Woman: “But you underestimated me, heretic. As with the other believers in town, you could have finished it if you had made me like an empty husk of a soul.”

Omega: “No, that is difficult. As it is, Temple Knights carve and implant various things into their bodies in what you call “Blessings,” do they not? It is a struggle both to keep them under the dream’s control and to maintain a being of power in an ambiguous state. Rather, they might flee outside the dream. That would defeat the purpose.”

Woman: “…And you are?”

Dropping from a height of more than ten meters together with the muddy flood, the woman landed on the street and drew her brows together.

While she had been shut in inside the tower, it seemed she had been cut off from outside information. Omega’s thoughts drifted down a bypath, thinking there was yet another use for Lilac’s dream arts there, but she reined them in.

Facing a Temple Knight was not an experience one could easily have even if one tried.

Omega: “In short, you are yourself squarely an object of my curiosity.”

Woman: “—!”

Omega: “Oh? You grew wary of me at first sight. For the record, Lilac holds the initiative in this dream realm, so any ominous aura and the like should be being suppressed to the utmost… but very well.”

Staring straight at Omega, the woman instantly took a battle stance.

For all that she had a fair bit of experience trading blows four hundred years ago, Omega was unfortunately far removed from the keen eye of a strong one who could gauge an opponent’s ability at a glance. If someone held a weapon and struck a crisp pose, anyone looked strong.

Omega: “Therefore, I will not pull my punches. Right—may I ask your name, Temple Knight?”

Woman: “A name to announce to “heretics” is—”

Omega: “But you are the agents of the Holy King’s Holy Will, are you not? Is it a name you would be ashamed to speak? That would be the same as shaming the Holy King’s name.”

Woman: “—Mikli Yulitô.”

Swept along by Omega’s one-eyed wink of a provocation, the Temple Knight—who gave her name as Mikli—gritted her teeth and leveled two slim rapiers, one in each hand.

She then went still, holding her posture, and Omega thought a moment before nodding with an “Ah.”

Omega: “I am Omega. Following where my curiosity leads, I will kill your soul.”

Mikli: “—How abominable!”

With the introduction and the declaration, Mikli’s cool beauty was dyed in anger.

In the next moment, Mikli’s body sped across the snow at high speed—no, she was not running; she was launched. It was high-speed movement using water pressure, the same as what had pulverized the tower.

Apparently, the true nature of the “Blessing” granted to her as a Temple Knight was a water spirit.

Mikli’s skill, trained to a considerable degree, made full use of the “Blessing” for both attack and movement. It could be called a solid ability befitting her earnest appearance.

Without toying with her prey, Mikli seemed to have decided to pierce Omega’s forehead head-on.

An unerring, single thrust, and an instant before it churned Omega’s skull—

Omega: “Unfortunately, my arts have been sealed. So I will send out a proxy.”

—In that split second, Mikli, who had been upon Omega, was smashed down by an impact from overhead.

12

A tremendous impact boomed out, and a too-realistic shaking and rumble assaulted the dreamland.

Shielding Colette—who involuntarily let out a “Kyaa!”—behind her, Lilac went cold with fear that the damage from that shock might shatter the dream realm.

Fortunately, the formation of Sylphoa in the dream was sturdy in proportion to the large number of townsfolk drawn into it.

Lilac was the type who preferred to craft the dream realm by quality over quantity, but driven into a corner in an unfamiliar town, this time she had exceptionally chosen to make up in numbers for quality.

That choice paid off, and the collapse of the dream Sylphoa was averted—however,

Lilac: “…What did you do?”

Lilac could not perceive the true nature of what had just happened.

She was sure she herself was the one sealing Omega’s arts. If Omega tried to force the seal open, it would be broken—but Lilac felt no such sensation on her end.

In other words, it was not arts. Yet it was not as if Omega had suddenly moved nimbly, either.

Colette: “Huh…? It looked to me like that woman got smacked from above all of a sudden.”

Letting her bewilderment bleed into her voice, Colette spoke, and Lilac agreed with her impression.

The Temple Knight who gave her name as Mikli had ridden the water and rushed Omega. But she had been shot down. With Omega standing there stock-still, it remained unknown what she had done.

Mikli: "—N-Not yet!"

Even while confused by the bizarre development, Mikli, who had slammed into the ground, sprang to her feet at once. She had probably used a cushion of water at the moment of impact to keep the damage to a minimum.

Exerting her excellent combat technique to the full, the great water swirling at Mikli's back rose up.

Taking on the aspect of a giant serpent made of water, it turned the vast quantity of water that made it up into a weapon and fiercely unleashed tremendous destruction all around.

Its aim was not Omega alone. Its force would sweep up Lilac, Colette, and the townsfolk as well—

Lilac: "You are not choosing your means…!"

Grinding her teeth, Lilac labored to interfere with the dream realm and keep the damage to the town in check. But between maintaining the world and binding Mikli in the dream, she had little power to spare.

If the townsfolk she had drawn in collapsed within the dream realm, their minds in reality would suffer grave wounds.

Seeing that could not be avoided, Lilac's eyes went wide.

Then—

Green-haired girl: "Sin can't get past my judgment."

The instant a quiet, childish voice rang out, a chain of sounds like shattering glass echoed.

It was the sound of Mikli's water strike—which should have rained down on Omega, on Lilac, on Colette—on the whole town—suddenly crystallizing and then, frail as glass, breaking apart.

Mikli: "Why… has my "Blessing"…?"

Struck dumb, Mikli saw her blow, which should have crushed the "heretic," itself be crushed—and then the way her eyes flew wide in astonishment ultimately became the complete cause of her defeat.

Mikli: "—Ah."

Unable to accept what had happened to her, Mikli started to glare at Omega—only for her eyes to catch, not Omega, but another being that had appeared without anyone noticing. Lilac and, apparently, Colette as well traced the same line of sight and beheld the same being—a pale-skinned girl with pink hair.

At once, the scenery around Lilac, her sense of urgency, all manner of idle thoughts vanished from her head.

All she could do was desperately tilt everything—even the last fiber of her optic nerves and brain cells—toward the girl. The strength left her legs and she crumpled to the spot. Even so, her gaze went to the girl, and only to the girl—

Omega: "Sorry—the effect was too strong."

Lilac: "Ah."

A tap on her shoulder, and a white-haired woman stepped in to block Lilac's view. Omega. At Omega's arrival, a violent anger welled up at having her appreciation interrupted.

But that was immediately drowned out by a suffocating shortness of breath rising within her.

Lilac: "Cough, cough."

She had forgotten to breathe. Literally, she had been so enthralled she had forgotten to breathe.

By what? By the girl who had appeared out of nowhere—of course. She could not forget how in that instant, it felt like everything inside her head was being sucked up, and beyond that fear, an even greater euphoria seized her brain.

Lilac: “Th… that…”

Omega: “Keep calm and steady your breathing for now. It is already settled.”

Lilac: ““Settled,” you say?”

Gathering up her thoughts, scattered in a thousand directions, Lilac let her gaze roam.

Then, the great water serpent that had risen in the town center—the pitiful monster whose unleashed attack had been turned into shards of glass—was meeting an even more pitiful end.

Gray-haired girl: “After all that, the meal has no flavor. How disappointing~.”

Squirming bashfully and letting out a somewhat feverish sigh was a gray-haired girl.

With both eyes covered by eyepatches, her whole body wrapped in a straitjacket, she had—some sort of joke—fixed her body into a moving coffin. And despite being fixed in that coffin, literally unable to move her hands or feet, she had devoured whole the spirit called a “Blessing” that Mikli commanded.

And so, Mikli, whose “Blessing” was also her proof of being a Temple Knight—

Blonde woman: “—Don’t you go dying on your own!!”

Right after that shout rang out, an unbelievable crash struck the dream Sylphoa once more.

It was the force of a punch brought down onto the chest of Mikli, who was lying flat on the ground. That one great blow, thrown with her whole body, was a heartfelt strike delivered by a blonde, blue-eyed woman.

For Mikli—who had fallen for likely the same reason as Lilac—that would, without doubt, have been the final shove that shattered her life. Or so it seemed, but—

Mikli: “Gahh.”

A feeble cough sounded, and Mikli, sprawled out like a big letter X, resumed a thin, fragile breathing.

Lilac could do nothing but stand in a daze, wondering what was happening—when,

Colette: “O-Omega-chan… the girls around us, are they all your friends?”

Timidly, Colette posed to Omega the same question Lilac harbored.

Unlike Lilac, it seemed Colette had not forgotten how to breathe, but even so she could not hide her agitation and confusion. To that question from her ally, Omega nodded casually with an “Mm.”

Omega: “I cannot use arts. So I made use of my popularity.”

Purple-haired woman: “You, popular? Hah. Do not say things that do not suit you, sigh.”

Lilac: “…”

At the sound of a woman’s voice she did not recognize, Lilac’s throat hitched and she hastily looked that way. There, by a building a little apart from Lilac and the others, she found a purple-haired woman lying on the ground.

Green-haired girl: “Ooh, haha, found you—. Isn’t it cold, sleeping on the snow—?”

Purple-haired woman: “’Course it’s cold, hah. But the feeling that getting up is more trouble than being cold wins out, phew.”

Green-haired girl: “Then Typhon’ll drag you, okay—? Mila, wanna help—?”

Pink-haired girl: “Euh… i-it’s f-fine. B-Because it’s Typhon-chan’s… request…”

A small green-haired girl and the pink-haired girl from earlier walked up to the sprawled woman. On impulse, Lilac managed to wrench her eyes away from that sight.

Besides those girls, there was also the girl in the coffin, and the blonde, blue-eyed woman—

Lilac: “You… just what did you bring here?”

Omega: “That is the wrong way to see it. From the beginning, you were the one who brought us into the dream.”

So said, Omega stretched her lips sideways in a spine-chilling smile.

At Omega’s answer, Lilac realized, late though it was— not only the women around them who had overwhelmed Mikli, but Omega right before her was a monster beyond the norm as well.

She had dragged in an unexpectedly mighty existence and turned the dream realm into a nightmare—

Lilac: “—What is this, what on earth is going on.”

Just then, yet another unfamiliar voice sounded, and Lilac’s heart was on the verge of bursting its banks.

However, when Lilac turned, what entered her vision was a slender girl with deep navy hair—and at a glance, she shared no visible traits with Omega and her fearsome companions.

Colette: “Palmyra!”

Palmyra: “Ukyaa!”

The instant she thought so, Colette’s face lit up and she leapt at the girl. Unable to arrest her momentum, the girls clung to each other and toppled onto the snow as they were.

Even so, Colette did not care, and clung to the other girl's chest as she said,

Colette: "Thank goodness, thank goodness, Palmyra. I was so uneasy with just Omega-chan and me. No, it is not that Omega-chan is bad— it is only that I am a scaredy-cat."

Palmyra: "Hey, get off first— …and there is no way you are a scaredy-cat."

Raising her body on the snow, the girl—called Palmyra—petted Colette's hair. At once, relief spread across Colette's face, and the confusion from just before seemed to leave her.

While stroking Colette's head, Palmyra cast a severe gaze around her.

And then—

Palmyra: "There are, like, an awful lot of people here… Which one of you is Lilac? I brought a message from your other half, Shion."

Thus she declared the reason she had boldly dived into the dream.

13

Training as a Dream Illusionist was truly, truly harsh.

First of all, if you do not have talent, you cannot master the dream arts essential to a Dream Illusionist.

Second, even if you do have talent, the mastery of the dream arts comes paired with extremely, extremely painful and grueling training, which makes it unbelievably hard.

A Dream Illusionist is a specialist who dives into another person's deep psyche—their "dream." To dive into someone's dream, you must be able to synchronize with that person's core, their Od.

To do that, you stand at the pillow of someone you have put to sleep with a drug or poison, and without sleeping or resting you search out the feel of their Od—that is the first stage of training. If you can synchronize before the person weakens to death in their sleep, good. If you are too late, you change to the next practice partner and repeat the same training.

The synchronization is, after all, something sensory, but if, not wanting to let the other person die, you lie that you have done it when you have not, you will be found out at once. The supervising instructor is also a Dream Illusionist, and by synchronizing with the liar on this side, they see through it.

If you do not wish to let people die because of your own inadequacy, you have no choice but to improve your dream arts.

And once you stop botching the synchronization with the other party, next comes shortening the time it takes to synchronize, and pressing on toward the very depths of dream arts that actually let you board the dream—and—

Shion: “Ultimately, what you end up with is a Dream Illusionist who’s become an expert in the dream arts—whose sense of self is vague, but who properly carries out what they’re told. Amazing, isn’t it!”

Palmyra: “I feel like I’m being made to listen to an insanely scary story, though…”

Shion: “Yes. I tried telling an insanely scary story.”

Even if she talked in as bright a tone as possible, her life was still one of heavy hardship—or so; Shion gave a wry smile as she smiled at Palmyra before her.

In the middle of the grave matter surrounding Sylphoa, this was the girl who had been dragged along into her and Lilac’s escape. The girl with strong-willed eyes listened even to Shion’s story, which might be thought fairly far-fetched, and did not flatly deny it.

Honestly, she was a very hard-to-come-by person. Perhaps Shion’s luck had improved.

Shion: “Perhaps the reason I’ve had nothing but misfortune in my life until now was so that I could meet, here, the helping hand called Palmyra-san.”

Palmyra: “Don’t dump that heavy an expectation on a mere passerby… To begin with, if that “making of a Dream Illusionist” is true—”

Shion: “If it’s true?”

Palmyra: “In what way is your sense of self blurry? Your strength of self is no less than that “Witch” sleeping over there.”

With a dubious look, Palmyra pointed at the pink-haired girl laid down on the snow. At Palmyra’s remark, Shion blinked, then raised her index finger and said,

Shion: “You mustn’t—no matter how close you are, you mustn’t rashly say “Witch” like that. It’s quite an insult. It’ll sour relationships, like with me and Lilac.”

Palmyra: “It’s fine; that’s what she calls herself. More importantly, answer me.”

Shion: “I’m not aware of being strong-willed, but Lilac and I are a little special. The fact there were two of us inside one self was probably a big factor. The downside of that is showing right now!”

Palmyra: “How is that funny!”

Palmyra’s way of reacting—like a bell that rang when struck—was pleasant to Shion. Even so, this somehow heart-warming back-and-forth should not have continued long, considering the urgency of the situation.

The reason Shion had given Palmyra a light explanation of Dream Illusionists was not to have her shed tears listening to Shion’s sad reflections.

Shion: “Anyway, I’ve received that kind of professional training and have long served as a Dream Illusionist; I’m a veteran and a professional. So please, relax and take on the challenge!”

Palmyra: “Are you actually trying to reassure me? If you just line up a bunch of technical terms I don’t know, I only get more confused!”

Shion: “They aren’t technical terms. —Though, that is our problem…”

Shion gave a faint, bitter smile; she kept the latter half of that to a murmur in her mouth. Then she took Palmyra by the hand and sat her down between the two little girls drawn into the dream—Omega and Colette, as she had heard their names.

Shion: “As I said a moment ago, from here I’d like you, Palmyra-san, to act as a messenger to Lilac, who’s inside the dream. Put simply, a relay for messages.”

Palmyra: “You should have said that from the start…”

Shion: “Yes, but this is also a matter of stylized form… something like a stock pattern.”

Palmyra: “…”

Not understanding what she meant—so Palmyra seemed about to say; Shion put on a serious face and nodded back. She had no particular words of persuasion, but she intended to make her face alone carry some persuasive power.

At any rate, Palmyra seemed to give up and exhaled deeply,

Palmyra: “Being the go-between is fine, but will your other half actually listen to me?”

Shion: “Yes! Of course! Probably! I think it will be fine! De-finitely!”

Palmyra: “Stop losing confidence little by little!”

At Palmyra’s loudly raised shout, Shion stuck her tongue out just a little and fobbed it off.

Lilac had resorted to hardline measures to drive off the pursuing Temple Knights, but even so, surely she would not do anything outrageous to a messenger sent into the dream. So Shion believed.

Shion: “Well then, Palmyra-san, I’m counting on you. —Please look at the very tip of the finger I’m holding up. It will sway left and right, and your consciousness will gradually grow distant.”

Not wanting to undermine Palmyra’s trust any further, Shion swung the finger she had raised left and right. When Palmyra began seriously following that finger with her eyes, with her other hand she cast the dream arts upon her.

It was a hypnotic spell Dream Illusionists excelled at: dam up, for an instant, the Mana flowing toward the target’s Od, and sever the consciousness from reality. Against someone who could use magic to some extent it was a childish trick, but if you diverted their attention, it was also a technique that worked on anyone.

Shion: “Ah—oh dear, I used it again. It just kind of slips off my tongue, you know.”

Swiftly supporting Palmyra’s shoulders as her consciousness receded and laying her down the same way as her friends, Shion knit her brows at the word she had just used in her heart.

By their nature, Dream Illusionists who synchronize with others are easily affected by the other party’s Memories. Unwittingly their verbal tics can be transferred, and mistaken recollections can arise as well.

However—

Shion: “—This one… I wonder who I picked it up from. It’s a mystery.”

Letting the ends of her brows droop, as if groping for a piece of knowledge inside her with no firm place to stand, Shion murmured that in a thin voice.

14

Palmyra: “So that’s how it is—I was asked by Shion outside the dream to come deliver a message.”

Omega: “I see. It seems the situation on the surface is roughly as we had expected here. I'm concerned we don't know Noelle's safety, but well, if she puts her mind to it, she can overpower most opponents, so I'm not that worried… What's wrong, Palmyra?"

Palmyra: "It's your look—I never wanted to see you like that again, it's scary…"

With a hand to her brow and a heavy voice, Palmyra said this; Omega looked down at herself with a blank face and went "ah," grasping what she meant.

In this dream world, Omega's appearance has reverted to the original form closer to the essence of her soul.

Colette had been taken aback by it too, but her interest in Lilac's dream arts came first, and she'd ended up forgetting.

Omega: "That said, as things stand, the way my body is isn't very important. If this were the road of our travels, the clone body's childlike look would tickle people's protective urges, but this original body too will, if the other party is the opposite sex, generally be treated favorably. Pros and cons."

Palmyra: "I'm not talking about usefulness—I'm saying you, looking like that, are scary, okay?"

Colette: "No, Palmyra! If you say it that bluntly you'll hurt Omega-chan!"

Face flushed, Colette grabbed Palmyra from behind in a full nelson as Palmyra bit out her words. Nodding at that routine exchange between the two, Omega shifted her gaze and then—

Omega: "Now then, thanks to the recklessness of Palmyra, who doesn't know how scary Dream Illusionists are, your other half's words have been delivered from outside. What are you going to do, Lilac?"

Lilac: "…"

Addressed by Omega, Lilac fell silent, wearing a difficult expression.

As the creator of this dream world and the Dream Illusionist who holds the fates of the people of Sylphoa, including Omega and the others, in her hands, she was intent on examining the message Palmyra had brought.

At length, she let out a small breath and—

Lilac: “May I hear what you think? Your opinion.”

Omega: “My, that’s unexpected. You, who won’t even lend an ear to your other half’s words, asking me for an opinion here… I suppose proving my strength loomed large?”

Lilac: “I’m just placing hope in a way of thinking different from my own. First off, “proving strength” is… “

Clicking her tongue bitterly, Lilac turned her gaze around the surroundings.

This dream world that reproduces real Sylphoa—the townscape wrapped in white snow—was laid bare in a state of tremendous ruin, destroyed in a way hard to believe as the result of a mere dozen-odd seconds.

The collapsed tower and the multiple craters gouged into the ground told of the ferocity of the fight, giving Lilac a shock that would not allow her to dismiss it as just something inside a dream.

If that made the negotiation go smoothly, it would be exactly the development Omega had hoped for—but—

Lilac: “The fact you’re an unfathomable monster may serve as material for threats, but it won’t be what wins you trust.”

Omega: “Nonsense.”

Palmyra: “Why are you surprised! How many times do you have to go through this before you learn, you!”

Colette: “Omega-chan, I have to admit, I feel the same way about that one.”

Not only Lilac; Colette, their companion on the journey, and Palmyra also took sides against Omega.

Bewildered by this unexpected turn, Omega looked over the surrounding devastation—at the work of the five “witches” she had summoned with a great flourish, since it was a dream world.

Typhon, Carmilla, Daphne, Sekhmet, and Minerva—each had done their job and helped defeat the Temple Knights whom Lilac had shut in. After that, only Omega, who alone had not lifted a hand, remained there, thereby staging a contrast between herself and those who had run wild as they pleased; she had anticipated that would become the trigger to remove the walls in the hearts of Lilac and the others.

Omega: “Nonsense.”

Lilac: “Feels like we went full circle back to the same conclusion… Our impression of you hasn’t changed either. More than that, answer the question from earlier.”

Omega: “The earlier… ah, your other half Shion’s message. Right. If the Temple Knights put their minds to it, they’ll carry out an annihilation operation to wipe out the heretics along with the sleeping residents.”

Lilac: “—!”

Omega: “Granted the premise that what I know of the era and the way of the Temple Knights hasn’t changed—but judging from the air about the woman who called herself Mikli, it doesn’t seem to have changed much. Therefore, what you’re doing is very interesting as a Dream Illusionist, but it doesn’t mean much.”

When she submitted the opinion asked of her, Lilac stiffened her cheek in dismay.

She had seen this sort of reaction many times even in life. People ask the more knowledgeable for their views, but when the answer they wanted doesn’t come back, they immediately make this face.

—If you’re serious about your wish, you ought to have another fallback plan ready to switch to at once.

Palmyra: “It’s not just Omega—Shion’s thinking the same thing. That, “annihilation operation,” was it? We don’t even know if that’s going to happen—so hurry up and release us.”

Lilac: “That’s… “

Colette: “We understand that things have been hard for you, Lilac-san. But but, how about this? —We’ll help you escape from the people chasing you. If we do that, it’ll be okay to wake up the townspeople, right?”

Right in front of the hesitating Lilac, Palmyra and Colette pressed her, each in different words, to lift the dream arts and set themselves and the residents free.

But Lilac lowered her head after clenching her teeth hard and—

Lilac: “That wouldn’t guarantee anything. We’ll just keep… holding the Temple Knights hostage, and—”

Palmyra: ““You want to say ‘continue the barricade,’ but even for those holed up there are limits. Even if you endure until the residents die of weakness, the other side won’t give up.”“

Lilac: “…What is the meaning of this?”

With a glare, Lilac looked at Palmyra, who had cut her off. Under that sharp gaze, Palmyra flinched a little, saying,

Palmyra: “I told you, I’m the messenger. That Shion brat told me Lilac would talk back like this. She told me to say it exactly as is, so I did…”

Lilac: “Tch… What are you saying? That I’m so simple Shion can read me that easily?”

Palmyra: ““Glaring in anger won’t move the situation forward. We have very little time. We have to use the limited cards we have to break through the situation.”“

Lilac: “Stop that!”

Palmyra: ““Getting mad at Palmyra-san is a waste too,” —see? Up to here it’s all spot-on!”

Growing severe in tone, Lilac was countered by Palmyra with the entrusted words.

As one would expect of someone sharing the same body, the yet-unseen Shion whom Omega had not met seemed to know Lilac’s character through and through.

At Palmyra’s handling of the entrusted words to keep the conversation properly going, Colette blinked wide-eyed, as if impressed.

Colette: “W-Wow, it’s amazing. Talking with someone you haven’t seen like that—I’m very impressed.”

Omega: “The one who’s reading her other half’s thoughts in advance is something, and Palmyra, who remembers it properly and can put it into practice, is something as well. Her self-evaluation is low, but she’s got a good head. Her decisiveness that doesn’t let us take useless detours is also a virtue… but let’s set that aside for the moment.”

Colette: “Omega-chan?”

With a slender finger at her chin, Omega had one eye closed in thought; Colette asked her.

This girl had good intuition, and instantly sensed that a thought had begun to move inside Omega. Thinking that both Colette and Palmyra had discernible virtues—

Omega: “Could you pause that barren discussion for a bit?”

Lilac & Palmyra: “The way you say that—”

As Omega lifted a hand and cut in, Lilac and Palmyra shouted in unison. Right after, leaving the two looking sour-faced and Colette wide-eyed, Omega raised one finger on her lifted hand.

Omega: “As for breaking through the situation, I have two ideas from me. One makes maximum use of the Dream Illusionist’s ability, so personally I’d like to proceed with that one.”

Palmyra: “Your preference… I’ve got a bad feeling.”

Lilac: “…For now, let’s hear it.”

Omega: “It’s not that complicated. Look, there’s Mikli Yulitô—lying there. She is at present the greatest obstacle to dissolving the dream world. In other words, if we can neutralize her, there won’t be any major hindrance to breaking the dream. So—how about this. Using the dream arts, we plant the false idea that she’s on our side and have her dispose of the Holy Church pursuers—”

Colette: “Omega-chan!”

A proposal that would make full use of the potential of the dream arts—before she could speak it through to the conclusion, Omega was thwarted by Colette hugging her arm.

With her round eyes brimming with tears, Colette pleaded moistly, and Omega sighed.

Omega: “I had a feeling you’d say that, but… as expected, no good, huh.”

Palmyra: “If you thought we’d oppose it, don’t say it!”

Palmyra spat angry words at the dejected, slumped-shouldered Omega (even if Omega did understand that Palmyra and Colette hated this kind of stratagem)—

Omega: “Even leaving aside my interests and concerns, I’m confident it’s the best plan. To accept or reject something just because it does or doesn’t suit your tastes—doesn’t that strike you as a bit unfaithful to life?”

Colette: “Unfaithful… but but, the way you said to do it is far crueler, Omega-chan.”

Omega: “Isn’t it unfaithful to “your own life”?”

Colette, still holding Omega's arm, looked up from close by and clammed up.

If she was going to stick to being tolerant toward others—that too was, in its way, one choice. But being unaware that she was endangering her own life on grounds of like or dislike—that wouldn't do.

What's more, there was a fear that both Colette and Palmyra were under a misapprehension.

Omega: "Even if I'm with you, that doesn't mean your safety and your lives are guaranteed. The world won't grant anyone a promise that they won't die."

Colette & Palmyra: "…"

As Colette and Palmyra fell silent, Omega narrowed her black eyes.

It was a fact. Even she, before she began calling herself Omega, had, once, certainly lost her life. Her witch friends, who possessed overwhelming power, each met a gruesome end in the last.

You can't obtain a guarantee that no one will die. —With just one exception: that boy.

Lilac: "—And the other one."

Omega: "Hm?"

Lilac: "You have another idea, right?"

In place of the two who had shut their mouths at Omega's words, Lilac asked that question.

To her question, Omega closed one eye and said, "Hmm," and—

Omega: "I could guess these two's opinions, but I didn't think you would pass on the first idea as well. I said up front—this is the best move that makes use of a Dream Illusionist's potential. With skill like yours—I won't hear you say you've never warped a person's heart, will I?"

Lilac: “…I won’t. As you say, this is my… mine and Shion’s very best field.”

Omega: “Then—”

Lilac: “—But I’ve stopped.”

Clearly cutting Omega off, Lilac spoke in a strong tone.

It wasn’t that her voice was loud, nor that she put anger or sorrow into it.

It wasn’t, like Colette and Palmyra, a boldly spoken line using their own goodness as a shield; it had backbone.

It was a strong line she had bolstered with backbone in her heart many times: we won’t do that.

Having spoken it, Lilac looked at Omega, her eyes trembling, and continued.

Lilac: “I’ve already stopped. I used to do that. But I don’t want to anymore. So we will never break a person’s heart again…”

Omega: “I see. Understood. Then this idea is scrapped. A pity, but so be it.”

Lilac: “…Eh?”

Her voice trembling, Lilac’s face went blank at Omega’s answer. At that reaction, Omega, too, tilted her head in puzzlement with a “hm?”

Omega: “You said you didn’t like it and gave your reason, so I withdrew the plan. I don’t see why that reaction…”

Lilac: “Y-You give up rather easily, don’t you?”

Omega: “I don’t dislike clinging to a non-starter plan and continuing to persuade—but time is the scarcer thing right now. I’d like us both to remain faithful to life, you know?”

Lilac: "…"

Flexibly accepting the other side's opinion, Omega made a show of having good sense. Even so, for some reason, Lilac's expression still looked somewhat dissatisfied.

Perhaps the final bit of wit, tying back to what they'd just been talking about, had misfired.

Colette: "Um, um, Omega-chan doesn't mean any harm, and…"

Lilac: "—It's fine. You don't have to say it so many times; I'm finally starting to get it."

Still holding Omega's arm, Colette spoke; at her words, Lilac shook her head. Then, fixing a strangely forceful gaze on Omega, she said,

Lilac: "All right then—tell me. That second "idea" of yours."

Omega: "Ah, I don't mind. That said, this one is less an idea and more something I'd like to expand on because it's been catching on my mind…"

Saying this, Omega quietly raised the fingers of the hand opposite the one Colette was clinging to.

Omega: "Right now, Sylphoa is surrounded by the Holy Church led by the Temple Knights, on the brink of whether the annihilation operation will be carried out. What's holding it back should be that you, Lilac, have put the townspeople to sleep with dream arts—but… don't you think it's odd?"

Lilac: "…What's odd?"

Omega: "For the Temple Knights, obeying Holy Will and hunting heresy takes precedence over protecting the lives of the faithful, does it not? Why haven't they gone ahead and carried out the annihilation operation already?"

Palmyra: "…You know, with you, the reason is obvious."

With a voice mixing exasperation and fatigue, Palmyra answered

Omega, who had tilted her head.

She, who along with Colette had fallen silent at Omega's earlier words, pointed toward Mikli, who was lying a little way off.

Palmyra: "They have a comrade there; they can't attack recklessly. If they did something like that and got her caught up in it…"

Omega: "—Yes. That's what's strange."

Palmyra: "Hah?"

Cutting off Palmyra's words, which seemed like she was about to give a patient explanation, Omega said that. As Palmyra looked remorseful at being interrupted—no, to them, Omega smiled wryly.

It might be a sensibility those who aren't devout believers of the Gusteko Holy Church wouldn't understand, but—

Omega: "Originally, hostages don't work on them. And yet—how did this span of time we should call a grace period come about? I think the key to a breakthrough lies there."

15

An heretical "Dream Illusionist" entered the town of Sylphoa and took all the residents hostage.

That was the information Noelle had heard from Zank, and that in itself seemed not to contradict the situation that was unfolding. The out-of-spec danger posed by the dream arts a Dream Illusionist possesses was also shared, and she grasped how bad the position Omega and Colette had been put in was.

She felt a sense of mission that she had to find the heretical magus as quickly as possible.

Therefore, Noelle herself took the lead in offering to help search for the heretic and proposed a cordon operation combined with Zank's specialty, barrier arts.

Noelle: "The method is almost the same as driving fish in a river."

Drive fishing is done by setting nets in a river or lake and making a racket to herd the fish so they flee toward the nets. In this case, the "net" would be Zank's barriers, and the one loudly advertising her presence as the drive hand would be Noelle.

If Zank could wrap the whole area around Sylphoa in a crowd-warding barrier, it should likewise be easy for him to, while maintaining that state, lay a barrier in the town that detected any presence it touched.

Noelle: "If only you had not refused attendants, Zank-sama, I believe this is a measure we could have taken earlier."

Zank: "That's not fair, sis. You don't know what you'll need till you're actually on the scene. Second-guessing with after-the-fact blah blah is a bit much, ain't it?"

Noelle: "Quite so. In any case, what matters is what can be put into practice."

After such an exchange, Noelle began the drive-fishing plan in cooperation with Zank.

Naturally, it was also to prevent Zank—who had decided there were no effective means—from applying to the Holy Church for authorization for an annihilation operation.

For that reason, Noelle intended to leave no gaps and throw herself fully into the search for the heretic—but—

Noelle: "…Frankly, this is a letdown."

Sorceress: "Um, I understand how you feel, but I actually have circumstances that keep me from moving as I please right now…"

Having bravely entered the town to fight for the fates of the girls with her, Noelle narrowed her blue eyes, perplexed at encountering her target not even ten minutes after she'd begun searching.

Sheltering from the snowfall beneath the eaves of a building amid the snow was a beautiful girl with her green hair gathered up—her slightly pointed ears marked her as the heretical magus.

She was under those eaves, beside the unconscious Omega, Colette, and Palmyra.

Staring fixedly at the magus standing in the middle of the girls, Noelle heightened the tension in her heart.

If Noelle made any suspicious move, the girl was within one breath of laying hands on any one of the three. That Palmyra and the others would be caught by the magus after parting from Noelle was something she had anticipated—but it was also the worst-case scenario.

As it was, Omega and the others were trapped in a dream and their minds taken hostage. If their bodies were also taken hostage on top of that, it would be doubly difficult to take action.

Noelle: "I should like to confirm… If I crush your head in an instant, will the spells upon everyone be safely undone?"

Sorceress: "That's a really scary thing to say! Um, I don't really recommend that. If I die, the "Recollection Realm" I made will break and the people inside will go into a huge panic!"

Noelle: "As I thought… it would be a gamble."

Sorceress: "Yes, it would be a gamble! …Are you perhaps a gambler?"

Watching Noelle re-clench her fist, the magus girl wore an anxious face.

In this case, the object of Noelle's gamble would be Omega. If it was that girl with the strange force of presence and brilliance, even if trapped in a dream, there was a high possibility she'd contrive some countermeasure.

She only hoped that possibility would not clash with slaying the magus here and now.

Sorceress: "W-Wait, stop stop! Please wait! Give me just a little more time—!"

Noelle: "If I were to grant it, what would happen? I prioritize those who've been put to sleep over you, a passerby."

Sorceress: "Right! I think so too. But there is actually a chance for a dramatic reversal, a miracle!"

Noelle: "—Ten, nine, eight, seven."

Sorceress: "Eh? Eh? Eh? What is this countdown?!"

At the magus thrusting both hands out toward her and speaking, Noelle announced the seconds remaining until her strike.

If the girl could say words that would persuade her, good. If this was only stalling to try to drag Noelle into the dream as well, she had unilaterally set the time limit on this side.

Therefore—

Noelle: "Six, five, four…"

Sorceress: "Right now, inside the dream, these kids here are negotiating with the other me, and they might be able to wake the entire town—that's what I'm saying, and also…"

Noelle: "Three, two, one…"

Sorceress: "If you're together with a short-haired, brown-haired man, he's a friendly-killer, so be careful—"

Noelle: "…"

She said everything on her mind. At those words fired off with that resolve, Noelle's hand-spear stopped as it was about to pierce the girl's chest.

Noelle halted her hand just a few centimeters from the magus's chest; the girl went ashen in a rush and plopped down weakly on the spot.

Looking down at the magus who had just escaped death, Noelle lifted her chin slightly.

Noelle: “I understand that Omega-sama and the others are in negotiations to be released… but what is that business afterward, about something so violent?”

Sorceress: “Y-Yes yes… Eh? Wh-What was it again?”

Noelle: “The matter of a man with short brown hair being a comrade-killer.”

Digging into the magus’s statement that could not be ignored as she rolled her eyes in confusion, the girl took a few breaths to steady herself, then gently placed a hand on her chest.

Sorceress: “It’s a fact. A Temple Knight appeared in pursuit of us, and putting the townsfolk to sleep in a way that involved him, we… And then, the ones who came as reinforcement for that Temple Knight were a team headed by the short-haired man I mentioned…”

Noelle: ““Team”—meaning?”

Sorceress: “A group. I think there were about five of them…”

After answering, the magus tightened what had been a timid expression and stared at Noelle.

Sorceress: “I synced wavelengths with one of them and was trying to lead them into the dream. That suddenly got cut off, and the others too… The only one left was him alone.”

Of course, Noelle had the option of laughing it off as something made up on the spot.

However, Zank’s laying a crowd-warding barrier and keeping others away, his decision to refuse attendants, the empty tent—various things that had snagged at her were also present within Noelle.

Those doubtful points made it hard for Noelle to dismiss the magus’s words out of hand.

If there was an issue, it was whether Zank would go so far as to kill other Church personnel he had brought with him, just to cling to this holy duty and his own way of doing things—but—

Noelle: “It seems the fastest way to get that answer is to ask the person himself.”

Sorceress: “Fueh?”

At once, Noelle grabbed the magus by the scruff of the neck, then scooped up the fallen girls together and, with one bound, sprang back from that spot.

In the next instant, down upon the point where Noelle and the others had been, an invisible attack—an unseen boxlike thing—fell from overhead, and that space, snow-covered ground and all, was magnificently crushed.

Sorceress: “Pugyah!”

In the face of that outrageous destruction, the magus thrown to the ground by Noelle screamed. Without even the leeway to glance that way, Noelle calmly fixed her gaze upon the one responsible for the destruction.

Naturally, there was only one user who would intervene here.

Noelle: “Zank-sama, that was an attack that could have killed even me.”

Zank: “…For the realization of Holy Will, isn’t it the model of a believer to spare not even one’s own life?”

Noelle: “If that truly accorded with Holy Will, I would gladly do the same myself.”

Wearing a bitter expression at Noelle’s words was the short-haired man in question—Zank Metley.

A Temple Knight bearing the role of, in cooperation with Noelle, subjugating the heretical Dream Illusionist—and for some reason, the man who had tried to make the magus and Noelle both into dead men.

An appointed enforcer clad in silver armor—yet his deed was nothing if not utterly baffling.

Noelle: “At this point, I cannot help but take her words as fact.”

Zank: “Incidentally, what did that heretic say?”

Noelle: “That Zank-sama was involved in the killing of the attendants you yourself brought.”

Zank: “…”

At Noelle’s accusation, Zank fell silent. The air about him clearly changed.

That change alone was tantamount to acknowledging the suspicion on this side. In other words, the magus girl’s statement was fact, and Zank was—one should say—a traitor to the Church.

His purpose, however, was far too unclear.

Noelle: “Whether my deed accords with Holy Will or not, leaving you loose here is out of the question.”

Zank: “You going to fight? You really think an Itinerant Preacher can beat a Temple Knight who’s received a “Blessing”?”

Noelle: “…On my own, I think it would be difficult.”

So saying, Noelle flicked her gaze for just an instant toward the magus at her side.

She couldn’t be sure the stunned girl had noticed that glance, but in this situation she, too, should realize Zank was a common enemy.

All that remained was for Noelle not to die before the girl did something.

Noelle: “Here I go.”

Reaching to the small of her back, Noelle fitted on the steel gauntlets kept there, then kicked off with force that made the snow explode and, with one bound, rushed Zank.

Most of the strength of Temple Knights endowed with “Blessings” is displayed at either mid- or long range.

It’s not something to be assumed often, but if you have to fight a Temple Knight, close combat is preferable. And that range was also Noelle’s specialty.

Drawing her arm back, Noelle drove a thrusting punch into Zank, who stood there motionless.

Perhaps striking first paid off; his reaction was slow—so slow that her fist, aimed for his face—

Zank: “That won’t do.”

—didn’t land.

Blocked by a hard barrier, Noelle’s iron arm was stopped before it could reach Zank.

Between Zank and her fist, there existed an invisible wall only a few centimeters thick—a barrier.

At the same time, Noelle understood that this was what it meant for him to truly be good at barrier arts.

Zank: “I can wrap a whole town in a barrier like a thin film. If you gathered that in one place—how thick and heavy d’you think it’d get?”

Noelle: “Even thin paper, layered and layered, can stop the cut of a famed blade… correct?”

Zank: “That’s right!”

The trick that had stopped Noelle’s punch was revealed, and next it was turned into an attack.

With a roar, the thick barrier that had stopped Noelle’s fist shoved forward right in front of Zank, and Noelle, who was there, was blown away by a fierce strike. She flew as if struck by a wall itself, tumbled violently across the snow, and let out a pained groan.

Earlier, what had targeted Noelle and the others from directly above—that had been the impact of this thing dropping.

Naturally, assuming Zank would use the same technique for the coup de grâce, Noelle, still lying down, kicked both legs up toward the sky. —The weight came an instant later.

Noelle: “Ghh—uuuuuh…!”

With the sound of all the bones in her body creaking, Noelle was nearly crushed beneath the tremendous weight.

Supporting a weight like an entire house had been dropped on her, Noelle flushed red as she desperately endured it.

Of course, merely enduring was not enough. Zank’s follow-up would come immediately.

Before that came—

Noelle: “—Colette! Do it!”

Colette: “Urrrrrrrrgh!!”

At the same moment as the brave girl’s voice rang out, a deep, valiant growl crawled through the snowy town.

At the edge of Noelle’s vision as she strained to withstand the crushing, a figure kicking up snow leaped at Zank—hands and feet on the ground, the ferocious Colette.

Zank: “Tch!”

Clicking his tongue at that fierce assault, Zank pulled part of the barrier back to his hands for defense. Instantly the pressure lightened, and Noelle quickly rolled free of the weight and sprang to her feet.

She saw the magus girl had hauled Palmyra up; by the shaking girl’s side she gave Noelle a nod.

On the spur of the moment, she had gotten Palmyra up, activated

Colette's "Beast Protection Bracelet," and thrown in her support. Not to waste that aid, Noelle also lunged at Zank and drove in a punch.

From front, back, and sides, the attacks of Noelle and the beast-state Colette savagely assaulted Zank. But with him turning his barriers back to defense, the two's strikes did not reach.

Zank: "Pointless! No matter how long you two hang on, your blows will never reach me!"

Palmyra: "—They aren't pointless."

The one who said that was neither Noelle nor Colette nor the magus, but the girl who had awakened.

Palmyra, pressing a hand to her brow, fixed her gaze on Zank shut up in his barrier; though only a powerless girl, she glared at the Temple Knight and did not retreat a single step.

Then, gripping the magus's shoulder by her side—

Palmyra: "I'll rattle that guy's heart—do it right."

Sorceress: "Eh?"

Palmyra: "—Mikli Yulitô is alive!"

Drawing in a big breath, Palmyra said that and pointed toward the center of town.

Noelle did not understand the meaning of that shout—but Zank did.

His eyes went wide; involuntarily, he turned his attention in the direction Palmyra pointed.

In the midst of this battle, his focus strayed for a moment. —She did not miss it.

Sorceress: "Ta-daa—welcome to the Recollection Realm!"

Right beside Palmyra, the magus thrust her finger at Zank and shouted with gusto. Noelle could not see what sort of rule-defying working took place then.

However, right after she felt powerful mana turbulence arise, the change was obvious.

Zank’s consciousness wavered, and the barrier protecting his body vanished.

Catching sight of that, Noelle managed to halt her own strike at once—but—

Colette: “Rurururuaagh!”

Noelle: “Ah—indeed.”

Colette’s double-legs, which could not be stopped, blasted the dazed Zank violently away and slammed him into a nearby house with tremendous force.

He was a Temple Knight. That alone likely wouldn’t kill him, but she hadn’t pulled her punches.

At any rate—

Palmyra: “The rest, that Omega brat will handle from inside just fine, I bet…”

Zank fallen and Colette flopping down onto the spot with a plop, Palmyra murmured so behind the panting Noelle—while supporting the unconscious magus girl in her arms.

16

Zank Metley and Mikli Yulitô were engaged.

Far away, in their long-ago childhood, the two had spent their time in the same hometown. Together they passed through the gateway of the Holy Church of Gusteko and, overcoming harsh training and ordeals, won their places as Temple Knights.

The fact that they were from the same hometown, were of the same intake, and at the same time had become Temple Knights spread widely both as a great achievement and as a heartwarming tale, and within the Church, hopes were placed upon the relationship between Zank and Mikli.

People wished for a future in which devout, excellent believers were joined and gave birth to the next generation of the faithful.

Even if, at that point, Zank and Mikli had hardly any points of contact, and even if there was neither the kind of mutually improving relationship nor the beautiful exchange of hearts that those around them wished for, it did not matter.

That the two were from the same hometown, had become believers in the same period, and had passed the Temple Knight selection—none of it was the result of any particular arrangement. —But neither was it entirely unrelated.

Zank had liked Mikli since long ago.

A beautiful and brilliant girl—so outstanding as to be out of place in a snow-heavy rural backwater. Everyone in the village whispered that she would one day become valuable personnel for the Holy Church of Gusteko, without a doubt.

Mikli herself did not doubt that future and worked hard; when the time came, she knocked at the Church's gate. Zank, too, aimed for that same moment and knocked at the gate.

Of course, things begun from base motives would not last long. Zank thought that himself—but by fortune or fate, Zank had talent, and the feelings he had for Mikli were greater than he had imagined.

The days he strove so as not to be left behind by her became real strength, and though Mikli's rank rose at a pace rarely seen even in the Church, Zank managed to keep up.

When they became Temple Knights, the rumor spread that the two were of the same intake and hometown; when that reached the Holy King's ears, the result was a proposal of marriage with Mikli—

a literal miracle.

Mikli, being a devout believer of the Holy Church, had no objection to a decree from the Holy King, and accepted the proposal with Zank. Zank, too, kept up appearances by obeying the Church, and accepted it.

He felt as if he could soar to the heavens. He was so moved that he counted the days to the wedding on his fingers.

—On a holy duty of hunting heresy, Mikli cut off contact right before the ceremony.

As a matter of course, Zank volunteered as reinforcements to rescue Mikli, took multiple attendants with him, and headed for Sylphoa—and there he learned the actual nature of a “Dream Illusionist”’s power.

Mikli was trapped in a dream, and the heretical magus was holed up with the people of the town taken hostage wholesale.

At once, from among the attendants came a proposed operation to annihilate the heretics together with every last resident of Sylphoa, including Mikli; an atmosphere of “this is the right thing to do” spread.

That heretic-hunting was Holy Will, and that there was no reason to hesitate to put it first.

Despite knowing Zank and Mikli were engaged, Zank’s attendants made the proposal without a shred of consideration, and Zank decided. —He would save Mikli, no matter what.

To do so, he would kill the attendants to the last, silence the mouth of every reinforcement sent in, and do the same to anyone approaching Sylphoa.

All of it was to rescue Mikli and arrive at the day of their marriage.

White-haired woman: “—With you drawn into the dream, the piece I wanted has fallen into place.”

Zank had steeled himself to trade anything—and everything—for that.

As if to mock Zank's resolve and determination, the white-haired woman standing before him disrupted his heart into a thousand shreds with nothing but a smile, and tried to paint it over.

The place was a mimicry of the town of Sylphoa, but though its shape was the same, it was hell.

Behind the white-haired woman stood five more women— a green-haired little child; a beautiful girl with pink hair; a gray-haired girl bound and restrained; a purple-haired beauty lying upon the snow; and a blonde girl with her arms crossed, eyes wet with tears as she glared his way.

Each and every one of them crushed Zank's heart with the truth that appearances were no guide at all—they were monsters.

White-haired woman: "What do you say? It would be easy for us to crush your heart to pieces just like this, but doing that could be called an act without thought for what comes after. Even if we were to kill you here, the next assassin would be sent, and we might lose a valuable user of dream arts. Therefore—"

Zank: "Ah—"

White-haired woman: "Report it to the Church, from your own mouth. That you succeeded in eliminating the heresy in question. That there is no need to send any more pursuers. And then—you should resign as a Temple Knight."

With her hands joined before her chest, the white-haired woman, in an even tone, led Zank's heart along.

Had he been calm, he could have raised his voice and refuted how foolish a proposal that was. But facing these women, Zank could not do it.

White-haired woman: "Of course, I am not saying it would be for free."

Smiling at Zank as she said so, the white-haired woman gently turned a hand toward a spot a little ways away. Naturally drawn in, his eyes followed that motion—and Zank's pupils froze.

Laid there sleeping was the one he had searched for—Mikli.

White-haired woman: "Take her back with you. Sadly, the "Blessing" she was granted was eaten by a friend of mine, so I cannot return it—but would that not rather be convenient for you?"

Zank: "…"

White-haired woman: "Go—just the two of you and your beloved—leave the Church and return to your homeland. It will mean deceiving the Holy King's Holy Will, but it would be better to prioritize the one person you love over the many millions of the Church's faithful."

So saying, the white-haired woman brought her lips to Zank's ear and whispered.

That was—

White-haired woman: "You cannot choose it all. To protect your beloved's convictions, her work, even her life, and also fulfill your role and pride as a Temple Knight of the Holy Church—that path cannot be chosen. —You are not a man who can do so."

It was a single line from a Witch, more than sufficient to shatter and make him give up the small faith in the Holy Church of Gusteko that Zank Metley, Temple Knight, knew he possessed.

17

That day, the people of Sylphoa who woke with the glow of dawn tasted something uncanny.

First, there was an unusual sense of hunger and thirst. They suffered greatly from the feeling as if they had gone without water and meals for days, and then they were pressed to shovel the town's snow that had piled and piled up.

The timekeeping tower in the middle of town was, for some reason, terribly damaged; people said it was a miracle that no one had been injured, and they each said:

"—It was as if they'd been having a bad dream for days."

Shion: "Calling it a "bad dream" is a terrible way to put it, you know. To curb even a little of the Temple Knights' high-handedness—do you know how much we struggled?"

Colette: "That's right, that's right. Shion-san really did her best."

Arms folded, Shion puffed and protested; Colette, eyebrows lowered, nodded along.

Colette had been the first trapped in the dream, and after that she had been in the dream the whole time, together with Lilac; when she finally got to meet Lilac's sister, she was a very bright, energetic, easy-to-talk-to woman.

Even now, Colette didn't really understand the constitution Shion and Lilac had where "two people" were within one person—but there were things she did understand.

Colette: "I think both Shion-san and Lilac-san are hard workers and admirable."

Shion: "M-Ms. Colette…! I'm so happy to hear you say that~!"

Colette: "Mugyu!"

Wrapped up in that embrace, Colette stroked her chest in relief that the series of incidents had been settled.

The town of Sylphoa was safely released from sleep, and it seemed the scary people who had been chasing Shion and the others agreed—after talking with Omega—to back off.

Colette hadn't been able to attend the crucial discussion, having been told not to get in the way.

Palmyra: "You and your friends ganged up to threaten him, right?

Honestly, I feel sorry for that man they call a Temple Knight. No wonder he withered like that.”

Omega: “I think it was the most peaceable means. It takes courage to face a Temple Knight alone, and they say it’s a girls’ rule to bring a friend along when conversing with a man.”

Palmyra: “What rule is that supposed to be…?”

Palmyra drooped her shoulders at Omega’s shrug and muttered that. It was the same interaction as always between the two, but somehow awkward. There was no change on Omega’s side, so the reason for the awkwardness lay with Palmyra.

And Colette understood well the reason Palmyra was awkward.

Palmyra was thinking about it, too—about what Omega had said to her in the dream.

Noelle (quietly): “…What will become of those two, I wonder.”

Suddenly, Noelle, walking at the very back of the group, voiced that question.

The “two” she spoke of were probably the pursuers of Shion and the others who had let them go. Since the two were engaged, Colette thought it was good that things had been settled by discussion.

Omega: “Roughly speaking, I suppose they’ll proceed according to what we discussed here. Since Lilac opposed it, I haven’t changed that woman’s thinking, but… losing the “Blessing” is reason enough to have one’s Temple Knight qualifications revoked. My plan should go through.”

Noelle: “If they leave the Church, will the engagement be nullified?”

Omega: “Who knows?”

Omega’s answer to Noelle’s follow-up question was far too offhand.

Not only Noelle, but Colette and Palmyra too ended up staring in surprise.

Laila: “That’s a rather cold way to talk.”

Colette: “Huh, Lilac-san?”

In a puff, the mood of the person hugging her changed, and Colette was startled. Looking, the woman just in front of her changed in the blink of an eye from green hair to purple hair, and her atmosphere altered completely.

In one breath, her outward appearance had changed from Shion to Lilac. That said, her clothes and tied-up hairstyle did not change the way they had in the dream.

Just like that, Lilac glared sidelong at Omega’s profile.

Lilac: “If your ties with someone are cut, you don’t care what happens to them after that—is that what you’re saying?”

Omega: “I’m not thinking in a way that cruel. Or rather, I’m very interested in the fate of those two as well. I’m interested in every kind of thing in the whole world. Only—”

Cutting off her words once there, Omega looked at Lilac not in profile but head on.

Omega: “—Only the nature and whereabouts of love—I don’t understand them at all.”

Therefore, regarding the love of the two who had gone off, she could say nothing—so Omega said.

The attitude with which Omega said that seemed to Colette to be, in some way, different from her usual—there was a mixture of something earnest, not her usual breezy tone.

Omega was someone who didn’t hide her curiosity, wanting to see and know anything and everything—but if there were priorities even within that curiosity, then perhaps this lay in a very important place.

Therefore—

Colette: “I’ll go together with you, Omega-chan.”

Palmyra: “Colette?”

At that declaration that slipped out before she knew it, Palmyra’s eyes went wide in surprise.

But the others were taken aback by those words as well. In particular, Omega, who had stopped in her tracks, looked at Colette with interest, closed one eye, and—

Omega: “Is that an answer to what I said in the dream world?”

Colette: “…Yeah, I guess so. It is. Just as you said, Omega-chan, maybe this is a very dangerous journey. But—but, I thought of something.”

Palmyra: “Wh-What did you think of?”

Colette, urged on by the flustered Palmyra, put the feelings that had sprouted into words.

Colette: “—That I want to help find what you’re searching for, Omega-chan.”

This had come up before, but now it had taken a clearer shape within her—a goal: to help along the path to obtaining the answer Omega most wanted—the answer for the one who always wanted to know everything.

And when that could be achieved—

Colette: “I want to see together what kind of face you’ll make, Omega-chan.”

Omega: “—I see. If “curiosity” is your reason, then I can’t say anything to that.”

Relaxing her lips with a soft smile, Omega answered so.

At that, Colette let out a sigh of relief and then looked Palmyra's way.

Colette: "Um, Palmyra. I decided on my own, but I'd be so happy if you came along with us. Um, um, what do you think?"

Palmyra: "…Even after I had terrible things happen to me not just while awake but even while sleeping, still this?"

Colette: "I-Is that… no good?"

Palmyra: "—. —. With just you two, I'd be worried."

Turning her face away with a huff as she said that, Palmyra made Colette's eyes fly open; Colette leaped at her with a smile. Catching Colette, Palmyra shouted, "Heavy!" the same as always.

Even after passing through the town of Sylphoa, she would still be able to continue the journey with Omega and Palmyra.

Noelle: "Though it's not particularly worthy of mention, I shall accompany you as well."

Omega: "There may be times, like this time, when we'll come into conflict with the Church, you know?"

Noelle: "I understand. It is only—this surprises even me a little—but while I was acting together with Zank-sama, I found myself terribly worried about you all."

Even though Noelle spoke evenly, without mixing emotion into her tone, the content was full of warmth. Narrowing her blue eyes, she pinched a strand of her own braided blonde hair between her fingers.

Noelle: "It seems you are all more important to me than I thought."

Palmyra: "H-How embarrassing…!"

Omega: "Is it? Isn't it a general way of thinking that it's important to tell important people that they're important?"

Noelle: “When Omega-sama says it, it starts to feel like it’s wrong.”

Omega: “Nonsense.”

Not just Palmyra, but even Noelle said such a thing, and Omega was aghast.

At that exchange, Colette laughed while clinging to Palmyra’s arm—and with the same gentle chuckle, there was a laugh; she realized that Lilac’s figure had changed back to Shion.

Then Shion, laughing with a hand over her mouth, took a breath with a “phew,” and—

Shion: “You really are all such good friends—I’m jealous. We’ll also close the distance step by step so we can fit in quickly, so please look forward to good communication! Ah, am I using communication right?”

Palmyra: “I don’t know… I mean, what? You two are coming with us?”

Shion: “Eh?! We’re comrades who’ve passed through the valley of death together, aren’t we! And—”

Taking over the end of Shion’s words, her figure changed to Lilac; changing her expression and tone of voice, she looked Omega’s way.

Though her gaze could even be called stern, as far as Colette could tell, that was Lilac’s true self. With those frankly stern eyes, Lilac fixed Omega in her sights.

Lilac: “You seem to know what we want to know.”

Omega: “Good grief, I have no idea what you could be talking about.”

Lilac: “Don’t play dumb…!”

When Omega said that and shrugged, Lilac sharpened her tone and curled her lips.

Colette didn’t know what it was that Lilac and Shion wanted to know—but she could tell at a glance who was the one lying.

Colette: “Omega-chan, if you play mean, I think Lilac-san and Shion-san will be pitiful.”

Omega: “My, that’s an unfounded accusation. To call it “mean” is outrageous. My glass heart will get hurt.”

Lilac: “That fake-innocent act!”

Clenching her teeth, Lilac leaned forward and looked down at Omega.

Removed from the dream and back to her familiar girlish form, Omega was brazenly playing dumb—“That?”

Lilac: “Shion and I have something we’re searching for. That thing you’re ostentatiously talking about—that’s a hint to finding it. So—”

Omega: “You want me to tell you. —Hm. What you two are searching for, is it.”

Noelle: “Omega-sama?”

With a hand to her mouth, Noelle addressed the thinking Omega. But Omega did not answer, and after a short silence—

Omega: “I’ll be frank. I don’t know what it is you’re searching for, but I do have an idea about a fairly decisive clue to it.”

Shion: “—! Then—”

Omega: “However, I have various complicated debits and credits concerning that lead. It’s not something I can simply disclose —“here you go”—to people I just met.”

Shion: “What… then what are we supposed to do?”

Palmyra: “These two are awfully busy…!”

At Omega’s headshake, Lilac’s figure, flustered, changed to Shion.

At Shion's troubled face, however, Omega raised a finger and said, "Simple."

Gathering Shion's gaze on the upraised finger and making her cross-eyed, she told her—

Omega: "The answer is in my head. Use you Dream Illusionists' specialty to lay it bare. If you do that, I won't be able to resist."

Shion: "…But, those friends of yours are inside you, aren't they, Omega-san?"

Omega: "That's right. If you can slip past them, no objections. Take whatever you like."

In this much, she was surely being mean—Omega said so with a smile on her lips.

At that, Shion went "mm-hmm," then—

Shion: "Understood! A fight that's been picked—we buy it at the asking price. That's mine and Lilac's pride, so let's go ba-baan and buy it here!"

Lilac: "Don't say whatever you like! That's the first I've heard of that pride!"

Palmyra: "Sh-She's finally started arguing with herself."

Lilac bit into Shion's resolve—but to a bystander's eye, Shion's figure switched to Lilac in an instant, and it was an absurdly bizarre sight of her yelling at someone who had disappeared.

Still, Colette, though overwhelmed by the flow of the conversation —

Colette: "So then, Shion-san and Lilac-san will come with us too?"

Shion: "Yes! We'll be in your care!"

Lilac: "…Can't be helped—so for a while, we'll come along."

At Shion and Lilac’s answer, Colette clapped her hands with shining eyes. Palmyra looked complicated, and Noelle, expressionless, had the corners of her eyes lowered just a little.

And at gaining new companions, Omega, a mass of curiosity, also smiled—

Omega: “It seems certain these two traced his Recollection Realm, but it should also be true that doing so can be fatal. Now then—why, and how, did things end up with this present we have? The fruit of curiosity never runs out of sweetness.”

—saying things Colette didn’t really understand while looking satisfied.

In any case, there were five sets of footprints of girls treading white snow—but it was the beginning of a new journey for six.

END

The Three Idiots Set Out!
The Great Manhunt for the Missing Child Battalion Episode
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Subaru: “Heeey, where are you—? Answer meee!!”

Pushing through the forest undergrowth with a rustle, Subaru raised his voice and kept his eyes peeled around him.

Even when he shouted himself hoarse, only the echo of his own voice came back, hollow and futile. In fact, he had been yelling for more than an hour already, and not once had the reply he wanted come.

Even so, he kept calling out because there was no other way—at least, not for Subaru.

Subaru: “Playing a dead-serious game of hide-and-seek with someone who won’t even give a hint is this rough, huh…? At this rate, I’m gonna end up with a complex about hide-and-seek and tag.”

Otto: “I can somewhat understand “hide-and-seek,” but why “tag”? If Ram-san were to overhear you by accident, she would be terribly displeased.”

Subaru: “I didn’t coin the term, and I ain’t making fun of Ram! Sure, if it turned into a whole chasing-and-being-chased thing with Ram, it’d be crazy rough… It actually was rough! I was already being chased!”

Wiping the sweat running down his jaw with his sleeve, Subaru grimaced as a memory from before surfaced.

Among memories painful even to recall, what came back to him with striking clarity was Ram's enraged expression as she cornered Subaru, trying to learn the reason Rem had lost her life. Of all his many experiences with Return by Death, that had been one of the roughest.

Subaru: "If that's what you'd call a true game of tag, then yeah, you're right—this doesn't even come close. Good grief, never thought I'd be the one getting lectured by you."

Otto: "I was not saying anything so grand! I merely pointed it out because, when it involves Ram-san, it feels like the fallout would unjustly reach me as well…"

Shaking his head loosely, Otto, who was likewise parting the brush, grumbled. Then, cutting into that grumbling with a rough "Oi," a voice barged in.

Garfiel: "If you two're gonna keep jawin' on 'n on, ya ain't showin' near 'nough seriousness, are ya? Compared ta the Captain who's actually hollerin', that side… Ottobro in particular, ya hear?"

The one who clicked his fangs together in ill humor was Garfiel, eyes keen as, if not keener than, Subaru's. Wrinkling his nose and wearing a scowl born of anger and irritation, he drove the emerald gleam of his gaze past Subaru and straight into Otto across from him.

At Garfiel's glare and words, Otto shut one eye and said,

Otto: "If I appeared unserious, then I apologize. However, asserting that the one raising his voice is the more serious is a somewhat rash opinion. After all, it is a foregone conclusion that the other party will not respond."

Garfiel: "Hah? Ya mockin' the Captain who's callin' out even though there ain't gonna be a reply? Don't go gettin' cocky just 'cause yer Shatranj board's a lil' hazy, ya got that?"

Subaru: "Hey, knock it off, you two! Also, I object to being stuck in the relatively dumbest position here!"

Pinned between Otto and Garfiel sniping across him with a prickly mood, Subaru pushed both of them apart with his hands as if to separate their faces. Feeling the two of them simultaneously turn their faces away in response to his mediation, he couldn’t help but sigh.

Subaru: “We’re already scrambling as it is, so spare me the extra hassle of you two getting all tangled up…”

With Subaru in the middle, there was an air of discord flowing between Garfiel and Otto. Though “discord” was how it looked, that was not, in essence, correct.

After all—

Casting glances at Otto off and on, Garfiel’s true feelings—Subaru knew he wanted to stop snapping with that bad attitude and start meeting Otto halfway already. As far as Subaru was concerned, all he could do was hope he mustered the courage sooner rather than later.

And just as Subaru was thinking that—

???: “…”

Subaru: “Ah?! There she is?!”

Between gaps in the forest trees, he locked eyes with a shadow peeking their way, and Subaru shouted. The instant he did, he saw the other party whip around and take off running, and he hurried to give chase.

Garfiel: “We’re boxin’ ’em in! Captain, ’n O— Ottobro, ya two come in from that side!”

Otto: “Ottobro?! Why did you suddenly address me that way?!”

Garfiel: “Shaddup!”

Subaru: “Argh! This is no time to bicker—don’t let her get away, don’t let her get away, don’t let her get away!”

Leaving behind the two who were fumbling with needless back-and-forth, Subaru dashed after the figure darting nimbly through the forest. It was a girl with pink hair in twin tails—

Subaru: “Twin tails, so it’s Ipsy! Wait, Ipsy!”

Even as Subaru called out desperately, the girl he called Ipsy did not stop. If anything, he felt like she sped up.

While playing out this merciless game of chase with the girl, Subaru looked up at the sky.

How had things ended up like this?—To tell that story, one needed to roll the clock back a few hours, to when Subaru, Otto, and Garfiel had started searching for a “lost child.”

2

Garfiel: “—Y’know, I been thinkin’ it might be ’bout time I sorta, kinda start recognizin’ that bro a little, ya know?”

It was when Subaru opened the window to air out the room that Garfiel, putting on a brazen act, came to “consult” him.

He tried to make it look like he’d just happened to bring it up in passing at a random moment, but he’d been hanging from a tree branch outside the window waiting for him; there was no way to play it off as a coincidence.

Starting from that entrance full of things to retort to, Subaru corralled Garfiel into the room like herding in a stray cat, saying—

Subaru: “For now, get in.”

Subaru: “So? This “bro” you’re talking about—do you mean Otto?”

Garfiel: “Aahh, guess that was his name, Otto, huh. That’s it. It’s such a common kinda name I can’t rightly remember it, but maybe that’s right? Dunno?”

Subaru: “I get that you feel awkward and end up saying stuff like that this late in the game, but it’s way too forced; you’re just turning it into a dark chapter in your history, so cut it out, cut it out.”

Garfiel: “Gao…!”

Trying hard to play dumb, Garfiel slumped his shoulders at Subaru’s advice.

This sort of adolescent behavior was exactly the kind of thing chuunibyou across the country would do at least once. Garfiel was a textbook chuunibyou, and Subaru had plenty of similar experiences himself, so for the sake of both their wounds, it was best left unsaid.

Subaru: “I’ve walked that road too. I’d like to avoid tripping over the same stone as much as possible… Wait, hang on? People repeat their mistakes, so maybe it’s better for Garfiel himself if he trips the same way? I mean, leaving me as the only one stuck carrying a cringey past is kinda unfair, isn’t it…?”

Garfiel: “Yer makin’ a real nasty face there, Captain! Like “Benzo right before he betrays” kinda face!”

Subaru: “Dammit! Endure, me! I’m not gonna become Benzo! Whoever that even is!”

To stop the chain of mistakes, Subaru sealed the Benzo in his heart away. Then, leading the war between good and evil within to a cease-fire, he turned back to Garfiel with a fresh, “So?”

Subaru: “Putting my inner struggle aside, it’s good news you finally made up your mind. Honestly, it was frustrating to watch—you had me and everyone else all fidgety.”

Garfiel: ““Everyone”? Not just you, Captain?”

Subaru: “’Course! I’m sick of the faction being all prickly on the inside. We should band together as one and keep Roswaal in check, then throw everything we’ve got into the Royal Selection.”

Garfiel: “Feels like that bastard Roswaal’s got all sorts o’ stray thoughts mixed in… Ahh, but I legit don’t care about that bastard. You’re right, Captain!”

For a moment, Garfiel was about to stumble over the stone named Roswaal, but in the end he agreed with Subaru's thinking. In truth, most of the faction's internal squabbles had been caused by Roswaal, so uniting to prevent a repeat performance was the consensus among Subaru and the others.

And at present, the biggest obstacle to that was the relationship between Garfiel and Otto.

Subaru: "Well, since the whole earth-spider incident, I do think things have visibly improved, though."

What Subaru recalled as he muttered was the "Earth Spider Uproar," in which he and Garfiel had accompanied Otto on a homecoming and gone through hell. Alarmingly, in his hometown, it seemed assassins were after Otto's life. The trip had been to inform his family back home that he'd joined Emilia's camp. In the end, Otto didn't return home; they stopped by the village where his younger brother worked as a vet and asked him to pass along the message. At the heart of the trouble there was that very earth spider.

Subaru: "Back then, I was basically captured most of the time, but that just meant you two worked together all the harder, right? After that, you two often play on the Shatranj board together, don't you?"

Garfiel: ""Playin'" ain't the right word—I'm the one gettin' played with. Even though he only humors me in between work, that bastard is crazy strong…"

Subaru: "But you're the type who gets pissed when someone goes easy on you, right?"

Garfiel: "'Course I am! We're havin' a match—gettin' sandbagged is a friggin' joke!"

Subaru: "…What a handful you are. I get it, though."

Clenching his fist, Garfiel showed a competitive streak Subaru could sympathize with, and Subaru gave a wry smile.

Losing in competition is naturally frustrating, but getting someone to hold back so you can win feels even worse. Truly, it's a troublesome disposition.

Still, the fact that Otto didn't treat him with that kind of superficial kindness seemed to be part of why Garfiel rated him highly.

Subaru: "So after stacking up those days, you've finally gotten to where you want to acknowledge Otto, huh. …Looks like you beat me to the punch."

Garfiel: "Oi, oi—don't tell me you ain't acknowledged him yet, Captain?"

Subaru: "On one hand, I do think Otto's a reliable guy, but… a very important part of my heart just won't quite accept admitting it… Even now, the debate among the different me's is raging on."

In the conference hall inside Subaru's head, various Subarus debated passionately, and the discussion about how to handle Otto was one of those that refused to reach a conclusion. There were several other hotly debated chambers too, like future approaches to Emilia and educational policy for Beatrice.

Be that as it may, setting Subaru aside, Garfiel swallowing his feelings and choosing to acknowledge Otto was truly admirable. One had to applaud that honesty and flexibility—ah, youth.

Subaru: "But if you've come that far, there's no need for me or any little schemes anymore, right? Just say, "Sorry I've had a bad attitude—let's get along from here on," and make up?"

Garfiel: "Like hell I'm doin' somethin' that pathetic! 'Sides, even if I apologized like that, it wouldn't put him in a good mood either, would it?"

Subaru: "…You think so?"

Mumbling and hemming, Garfiel made Subaru cock his head hard. Basically, the reason Garfiel and Otto's relationship was strained was largely because Garfiel kept up a pointless stubborn front. Subaru, at least for now, didn't get the impression Otto harbored any particular aversion or "never forgive him" mindset toward

Garfiel.

Which is why, if Garfiel stuck out his hand, Otto would probably take it.

Subaru: “I wanna help however I can too, but what do you want to do?”

Garfiel: “Lemme see… If possible, I wanna just naturally hit it off without it feelin’ forced or fake. So like, how ’bout I save the bastard when he’s gettin’ jumped by some dangerous thug or somethin’?”

Subaru: “That proposal actually got shot down by Ram a little while ago…”

Impatient with the state of Garfiel and Otto, Subaru on the sidelines had suggested a plan to move things along, but it had been unpopular not just with Ram; Emilia and the others also disapproved, and it was scrapped.

Ram had cut it down with, “Leave things between the two to the two. Also, it’s simply distasteful.”

Garfiel: “Tch. If Ram says no, then it’s no, huh…”

Subaru: “I gave up for the same reason—our lady’s word carries weight.”

Clicking his tongue at the backstory, Garfiel reminded Subaru how formidable her accumulated influence was. Still, given Garfiel’s spirit, both in Subaru’s view and the faction’s, this was the time to ride the big wave.

Thinking that, Subaru smiled at Garfiel and tapped his own head with a fingertip.

Subaru: “Don’t worry—consider yourself in good hands. I’ve got a mountain of ideas sleeping up here to mend tangled relationships. Gotta be ready for the coming day with Emilia-tan—for romance.”

Garfiel: “Oooh, awesome! So are ya confident about yer relationship with Emilia-sama or not—I ain't got the foggiest—but you're reliable, Captain!"

Subaru: "Hahaha, right? Right?—Oh, crap, the window!"

His voice had gotten louder without him realizing, and if that carried outside it'd be a catastrophe. Subaru hurried to close the window he'd left open—and then something in the courtyard caught his eye.

There—

Emilia: "Ah, Subaru, you were in your room?"

Waving up at Subaru standing by the window was Emilia, who was down in the garden.

Even from this downward-looking angle, Emilia's flawless beauty showed; but she was not alone at the moment—far from "not alone," in fact.

Subaru: "And you, Emilia-tan—you're with Picos?"

Emilia: "Yeah, that's right. We all came to look at the flowers in the flower bed. Right?"

Girls: "…"

At Emilia's call, came a chorus of replies—nods and breaths all different from one another.

Answering were more than twenty—more precisely, twenty-four—little girls lined up in a row around Emilia.

They were all identical in appearance, those little girls; as you could see, they weren't twenty-four-tuplets, but rather the clones of Ryuzu Meyer, born under unique circumstances.

Though they had a firm sense of self and, like the Ryuzu who was adored as a grandmother by Garfiel and Frederica, shared her looks, these ones here were blank like newborns; right now, their self-establishment and emotional education were being pushed ahead at a rapid pace.

“Pico” was what Subaru called one of the twenty-four, the one with a braid matching Emilia’s woven into her hair so she could be told apart from the others.

They were in the middle of giving the other girls “individuality” with hairstyles and accessories too, but tangible results were still hard to come by.

Subaru: “You can’t just imitate the personality and relationships Ryuzu-san built up over four hundred years. …But it’s especially spectacular today. I didn’t know Picos liked flowers.”

Emilia: “Do they like flowers, I wonder? At first it was just Pico-chan, but while I was walking her around, everyone gathered up.”

Subaru: “I see. The phenomenon where the ducklings and grand-ducklings follow behind the mother duck.”

In fact, whenever Emilia moved, the Picos scurried along the same way. To an onlooker, it was a heartwarming sight, but handling twenty-four of them looked rough on Emilia. If possible, Subaru wanted to switch roles or at least take half of them off her hands.

Subaru: “Thanks to Echidna’s spite, the Picos won’t listen to me, though.”

Emilia: “That’s right. Of course I don’t mind spending time with Pico-chan and the others at all, but it makes me super busy.”

With her brows drooping, it was clear Emilia was overwhelmed by the Picos’ offensive.

The parent of the Pico clones was Echidna, the Witch of Greed who created the Sanctuary. Echidna had conditioned the Picos to obey the orders of her own Apostles. The only ones qualified to be Apostles were those recognized by Echidna in the Tomb or those who overcame the “Trials.”

The former was Garfiel, the latter was Emilia—there were only two.

Subaru: “They’ll listen to Ryuzu-san too, I guess, since she’s treated like the coordinator… maybe, but…”

Garfiel: “Huh? I was wonderin’ what kinda mumblin’ you were doin’—Emilia-sama, huh.”

From beside Subaru—who still hadn’t closed the window—Garfiel stuck his face out, looked down at Emilia and the others in the garden, and scratched his head vigorously.

Garfiel: “Keep handlin’ ’em like that and the sun’ll set on ya, Emilia-sama. Make sure you do it right so you don’t end up like “Busybody Mitte is always all about other people,” yeah?”

Emilia: “Do it right—like, for example, what should I do?”

Garfiel: “Tell ’em to behave themselves over there, or to go take a nap in their room—somethin’ like that’s fine.”

At Garfiel’s rough suggestion, Emilia blinked round-eyed. Sighing at how he put it, Subaru called out, “Emilia-tan,” and—

Subaru: “For now, how about you just ask them to step back a bit?”

Emilia: “Really? Okay—everyone, could you move away a little?”

Right after Emilia obediently followed the advice Subaru had chewed up for her—

Girls: “…”

The Picos exchanged silent glances at Emilia’s instruction, then all at once whooshed away from around her. At the instant resolution, Emilia let out a little “Wow,” and Subaru, impressed, whistled and looked at Garfiel.

Subaru: “As expected—chalk it up to your long history of handling the Picos at will.”

Garfiel: “Don’t say it in a way that sounds so lousy. I was just havin’ ’em take turns doin’ forest watchin’, that’s all.”

Emilia: “Even so, thank you. You really helped me out, Garfiel. Because I was looking after those girls, my morning studies actually haven’t progressed at all.”

Subaru: “That’s a big problem. If only the Picos would listen to people other than you two a bit more.”

At the major disruption to Emilia’s schedule, Subaru touched his chin and pondered.

It was time he’d sadly lost to “Return by Death,” but there had been a point when Subaru, temporarily an Apostle of Greed, had interacted with the Picos. It wouldn’t be the same as that, but at least he wanted to improve things so the burden didn’t fall solely on Emilia and Garfiel.

Emilia: “Huh? Hey, Subaru.”

Mulling this over, Subaru was suddenly called by Emilia and brought his awareness back to reality. When he looked to see what it was, Emilia’s violet eyes wavered as she said—

Emilia: “…Do you know how far Pico-chan and the others went off to?”

Subaru: “Eh?” Garfiel: “Huh?”

At Emilia’s question, Subaru and Garfiel’s dumbfounded voices overlapped. Then they hastily strained their eyes, searching the garden scenery for the twenty-four girls.

—Without exception, the girls had vanished from sight in order to “move a little away” from Emilia.

3

Ram: “Is this mess the result of your careless advice? Die.”

Subaru: “I have nothing to say in my defense…!”

After hearing the sequence of events, Ram thus scolded him, and Subaru could do nothing but apologize profusely.

The place was the entrance hall of the New Roswaal Manor. Everyone in the mansion had been gathered there, they had just finished sharing what had happened, and then gotten an earful.

It was the height of carelessness and there was no excuse to be made, so he could only bow his head low—

Garfiel: “Don’t go chewin’ out the Captain like that, Ram. Couldn’t be helped, yeah? Ain’t nobody coulda known it’d turn out like that, ya hear.”

Ram: “Indeed. Even Garf, who had for years been using the Picos as he pleased, failed to foresee this development. It cannot be helped that Barusu blundered. That is what you are saying, yes?”

Garfiel: “Scary scary scary— yer eyes’re scary!”

Sliced up by her merciless light-crimson gaze, Garfiel withdrew in meekness.

In truth, Emilia’s instruction had not been anything special. If there had been a problem in the instruction itself, Garfiel would have pointed it out. Nevertheless, there was a reason why the Picos had so excessively obeyed Emilia’s command.

Beatrice: “It is probably the difference in standing as those qualified to command the copies, I suppose. Emilia cleared the Tomb’s “Trials”, and Garfiel did not, in fact. Betty sees it as that difference having shown itself, in fact.”

Petra: “So that means Emilia-nee-sama is above Garf-san? That much is true, but…”

Garfiel: “Even if it’s true, the way ya put it sticks in my craw!”

Otto: “Now, now, making a commotion helps nothing. Let us, first of all, discuss matters calmly.”

When Garfiel bit at Beatrice and Petra’s analysis, Otto admonished him. However, at Otto, Garfiel reflexively bared his fangs with an “Hah?”

Garfiel: “Yer lookin’ awfully relaxed for someone in this, ain’t ya. Is it somebody else’s problem to ya?”

Otto: ““Somebody else’s problem” and “an objective view” are similar yet different. If everyone is depressed like Emilia-sama and Natsuki-san, or angry like Ram-san and Garfiel, we shall make no progress. A perspective like Beatrice-chan’s, Petra-chan’s, and mine is necessary as well.”

Beatrice: “Betty agrees with Otto, I suppose. It is frankly a grave situation, in fact.”

Emilia: “That’s right. …If we do not find them quickly, it will turn into something reaaally bad.”

With a dejected face, Emilia looked so fidgety she might dash out this instant.

He understood how she felt, fretting that it was her fault, but making a blind search would only heighten the possibility of a secondary missing incident. That said, they could not spend time at leisure on a strategy meeting either.

Even now, the Picos’ great escape in obedience to Emilia’s order was ongoing, and the twenty-four little girls had, each and every one, scattered in different directions.

Subaru: “If you tell them to return, Emilia-tan, they’ll probably come back, but—”

Ram: “That would likely be limited to the range your voice reaches. Unlike the coordinator, Ryuzu-sama, it is also troublesome that the Picos can all move nimbly.”

Subaru: “Practically speaking, how does that work, though? Not to be rude, but Ryuzu-sama and the Picos are built exactly the same physically, besides humanity and human relationships, right?”

Beatrice: “…That humanity has likely influenced the qualities of their souls, I suppose. That Ryuzu continued to perform the role of Garfiel and Frederica’s grandmother, and to stand as the representative of the “Sanctuary”. Imprinting her own qualities into her soul in that set shape over and over, the result is that she has grown frail and elderly, in fact.”

Subaru: “In short, she got a little too deep into the role…?”

At Beatrice’s lecture, Subaru settled on an understanding in terms of an overdone method-acting approach.

While she had taken on the role of the Sanctuary’s eldest, her body and heart had settled into an age befitting that—that was apparently how Ryuzu’s body worked. In other words, the ones manifesting the original Ryuzu’s physical potential were the Picos.

Otto: “And, making full use of that capability, they are currently in flight. We have, in fact, ended up with a troublesome situation. The instruction Emilia-sama gave them was: you would like them to step away a little, correct?”

Emilia: “Yes. I asked, “Could you move away a little?” If the Pico-chans had only moved away a little for real, that would’ve been fine, but…”

Otto: “We do not know whether they stopped after separating from Emilia-sama to some extent, or whether they are continuing to separate endlessly. …It would have been desirable to borrow the Margrave’s power.”

Saying that, Otto’s gaze went to the ceiling of the hall—to Roswaal’s office beyond it. But unfortunately, the master of that room was not presently in the manor, and there was no hope of the role Otto had counted on, covering the surroundings from the air.

Those absent from the manor now were Roswaal and Frederica, who was accompanying him—

Subaru: “Given her sense of smell and her range of movement, Frederica being away hurts too. Besides, she dotes on the Picos quite a bit; if this gets found out, that’s super scary.”

Garfiel: “D-don’t go freakin’ me out. Long as we get it done ’fore Sis comes back, it’ll be fine.”

Ram: “Leaving aside how much of a scaredy-cat Garf is, I concur with that line of thought. We shall resolve this disgrace before Roswaal-sama returns.”

Petra: “Mm, that’s right. Just like Ram-nee-sama says, if we do not do something before the Master comes back, we’ll make Frederica-nee-sama worry, and the Master will laugh at us…!”

Subaru: “Mm, three different people, three different ways of brimming with motivation.”

Garfiel, Ram, and Petra were all fired up to search for the Picos. Of course, in terms of motivation, Subaru and Emilia were not a step behind those three.

As for the remainder, Beatrice and Otto, now left behind from the “calm team” by Petra—

Beatrice: “For the moment, we should halt all our current work and throw ourselves fully into searching for the Picos, I suppose. As for giving orders to the copies, it shall be limited to Emilia and Garfiel, the two of them, in fact.”

Otto: “Then one of the two should be distributed to a separate group. For searching, I believe my Divine Protection will be of use as well… May I factor in Ram-san’s “Clairvoyance”?”

Ram: “You are impudent for an Otto. Very well. Factor it in.”

Otto: “My apologies for being impudent, but I shall do so. Now then, in that case—”

With everyone’s strengths laid out, Otto glanced over at Subaru. The rough analysis was finished; it was likely an order to divide up the teams.

Receiving that, Subaru looked over everyone’s faces.—First, Emilia and Garfiel being separate was a certainty, and Ram and Otto, who had searching abilities, should each be separated. The question was how to place Subaru, Beatrice, and Petra.

Subaru: “Alright, here’s how we’ll do it. We split into two groups: a boys’ team and a girls’ team, and we search.”

Beatrice: “Wha?! B-Betty and Subaru will be torn apart, I suppose?! What is the meaning of this, in fact?”

Subaru: “Calm down, be reasonable, Beako. It tears me up inside to act separately from you too, but this is the best division with the current situation.”

He told the wide-eyed, earth-shattering Beatrice thus.

As Subaru, he wanted to hold Beatrice’s hand and support the flustered Emilia. But putting that personal wish aside and distributing each person’s unique skills and abilities evenly, this division was the self-evident conclusion.

Subaru: “To keep execution ability from dropping, splitting by boys and girls is the wise move. While we’re searching, the only ones who can mediate between Otto and Garfiel are either me or Petra, and in that case, since I’m the one who understands the problem, I think I’m the right person. In exchange, I want you girls to look after Emilia-tan.”

Petra: “Emilia-nee-sama is feeling responsible and flapping around, after all. …Mm, leave it to me.”

Beatrice: “Uu~, Betty demands a refill of Subarium once this is over, in fact…!”

At Beatrice’s half-teary plea, Petra also turned a covetous look toward Subaru with a “Subarium…”. Naturally, since he was entrusting them with a hard task, Subaru felt he ought to provide a reward commensurate with it.

Petra: “Then, one date, okay!”

Subaru: “Got it. I’ll plan an escort that won’t bore you or make you tired. So I’m counting on you.”

Petra: “You got it. Right, Beatrice-chan?”

Beatrice: “Rogered, I suppose. But remember, Betty is far from convinced, in fact.”

Patting Beatrice’s adorably pouting head, Subaru looked to Emilia. Meeting his gaze, Emilia clenched her small fist in front of her chest and said,

Emilia: “Understood. Since it’s the pairing Subaru thinks is best, right? I’ll strive amain—so you do the same.”

Subaru: ““Amain” is something I don’t hear these days. …Anyway, that settles it. Let’s go with that!”

When Subaru clapped his hands, he received words of assent all around, and the team formation was complete.

While they were doing this, there remained the suspicion that the Picos were speeding toward the edge of the world. As soon as preparations were complete, they ought to begin the search immediately.

And so—

Subaru: “It’s the first team split since Otto’s homecoming, but let’s get fired up!”

Otto: “It is a familiar combination, but I would prefer no trouble. First, let us head for the forest, where I seem to have more reliable contacts…”

Garfiel: “Hah? The proper tactic’d be to rely on my nose first, yeah. I’m the one who knows those runts the longest. Don’t you go buttin’ in.”

Otto: “Gyafun.”

At the very first step out of the manor, Garfiel chomped down on Otto.

Subaru put a hand to his forehead at the all-too-swift arrival of the dreaded development, but it seemed Garfiel felt he had messed up as well, his face already looking awkward.

If he was going to make that face, he ought not do it in the first place—that kind of sound logic could only be cast by those who had never once, in a fleeting moment, snapped off a snide remark.

Naturally, Subaru's follow-up seemed needed quickly—

Otto: "I see, very well. Since Garfiel is the main force necessary for bringing the Pico-san group back this time, let us go with your plan."

Garfiel: "Ha—h?!"

Otto: "Hm? What is the matter?"

Garfiel: "N-nothin'! Oi, let's get movin' already— keep up, ya hear!"

Having the wind taken out of his sails, Garfiel ground down his nowhere-to-go gratitude and stomped ahead. Following that back, Otto tilted his head, "What was that?"

Subaru: "Garfiel, that way looks like the forest, though."

Garfiel: "We gotta search a different direction from Emilia-sama's group or it's pointless— it just happened ta be the forest, that's all! Ain't doin' it for yer sake!"

Otto: "Haa."

Watching the two, so out of sync, from behind, Subaru let out a long, deep sigh.

The main issue was, after all, searching for the missing Picos. So, while he hoped for improvement in Otto and Garfiel's relationship, at the very least, he begged they would spare him any further souring of it.

4

And so, with all that, the search for the "lost ones" began—

Subaru: "Uoooooh! Touchdown!!"

Ipsy: "—!"

From the front, Subaru dove at the waist of the girl running away, trying to stop her.

But the small girl—Ipsy—twisted her body with Subaru clinging to her waist, and with unbelievable power she swung him around.

Subaru: "Uo—waaah?!"

At this rate he was either going to be flung off or smashed into a nearby tree and sent straight to the infirmary—that was the very moment—

Otto: "Little bird, if you please!"

With a cue like a fairy-tale princess, a small bird flew in through the gaps between the trees. The bird had a yellow fruit clutched in its feet, and a moment later a spray of juice struck both the girl and Subaru.

Subaru: "Gyaaaaah! My eyyyyes!!"

Catching the misted juice full in the eyes, Subaru screamed as both eyes burned. And it wasn't just the noisy Subaru; Ipsy seemed to have taken the same hit.

Covering her face with her hands, Ipsy started to rub at the juice-scorched eyes—

Garfiel: "Quit it. Rubbin' it'll only make it worse."

At Garfiel's words as he caught her hand, Ipsy stiffened. Even so, looking down at the girl with tears spilling down, Garfiel clicked his tongue and—

Garfiel: "There's a river right nearby. Wash yer face there 'n it'll be a bit better. C'mon, follow me."

He set a hand with a little pat on Ipsy's head and, to get the tearful girl to wash her face, led the way toward the river.

Subaru: “Curse you, Otto… I won’t forget this grudge even after a hundred years…!”

Otto: “Yes yes, hold a grudge if you like. Here, gimme your face. I’ll wipe it.”

Subaru: “Ugo-go-go-go…!”

Groaning like an old-school final boss, Subaru had his face wiped with a wet handkerchief, and his vision, fouled by the juice, began to come back.

As it did, Otto’s face swam into the blurry view—

Subaru: “Don’t you grin while I’m suffering! Are you a demon?!”

Otto: “If it were Ram-san, she’d squeeze the juice and then leave you as-is. Besides, we went over the plan—why did you run into the juice’s range? You brought that on yourself.”

Subaru: “How am I supposed to know the juice’s effective range in meters! And I was too focused on stopping Ipsy and the plan flew right outta my head—my bad, I’m sorrrry!”

Snatching the handkerchief from Otto’s wicked grin, Subaru carefully wiped the face he’d rubbed and did his best to get rid of the juice’s effects.

It still stung a little, but once he’d calmed down quite a bit—

Garfiel: “Yo, Captain, ya back on yer feet? Things’re settled over here.”

Saying that, Garfiel came back from the river with Ipsy in tow.

The twin-tailed girl had water dripping from her damp bangs, but like Subaru, she seemed to have escaped the worst of the juice’s onslaught.

Subaru: “She got her face washed, great, but take one more half-step toward being a gentleman. Her hair’s all wet.”

Garfiel: “Hah? Leave it be ’n it’ll dry, yeah?”

Subaru: “Try saying that same thing to Ram and she’ll give you the cold shoulder for a while.”

Saying so, Subaru used his own handkerchief to wipe Ipsy’s wet hair. While he was at it, he tidied up the hair mussed from all the running around, then gave her slender shoulder a pat.

Subaru: “You’re okay now. Garfiel, take her back to the manor.”

Garfiel: “’Kay. Like I said, head back ’n behave yerself at the manor. We’re meetin’ up in the garden.”

Ipsy: “…”

At Garfiel’s instruction, Ipsy gave a small nod and, light on her feet, headed out of the forest. Quite something, finding her way back toward the manor without even a compass.

Otto: “For safety, I’ll have the earlier little bird accompany her, so if she tries to detour we’ll know.”

Subaru: “Got it, that helps. How’d you get the cooperation, anyway?”

Otto: “For the cold season—they gather more nuts than they can eat. Collecting them is hard, but I get the forest animals to help gather them. Next, I owe those animals a favor in return, though…”

Subaru: “Kinda feels like laundering gratitude…”

The exchange, which brought to mind a system where debts spiral till you’re underwater, made Subaru earnestly hope there wasn’t a future where Otto got mobbed by angry animals.

Then Garfiel cut in on Subaru and Otto with a “hey”—

Garfiel: “Thanks, Captain. Sorry for makin’ ya pull a risky stunt.”

Subaru: “If it’s just that much, it’s no big—well, can’t quite say that. Getting swung around by a kid the Picos’ age took it outta me.

Maybe I should bulk up? Weight is power.”

Otto: “I won’t stop you if you do, but then it wouldn’t square with being swung around by Ipsy-chan, would it? Compared to her, Natsuki-san is heavier, after all.”

Garfiel: “No doubt. …Ah—’n, uh, that.”

As Otto shrugged at the pondering Subaru, Garfiel fumbled and stumbled over his words, drawing a suspicious, “What is it?” from Otto.

Under that look, Garfiel ground his fangs together and—

Garfiel: “Ain’t sayin’ ya did bad, but if ya moved faster, the Captain wouldn’t’ve got his eyes done in. Keep a sharper watch, yeah.”

Otto: “…Right. I’ll try to do so next time.”

Once again Garfiel spoke on impulse, and once again Otto handled it calmly. As Otto smoothly turned his back, behind him Garfiel clutched his head and drooped.

As Subaru, he couldn’t help but go “ahhh,” but in Buddha’s rulebook, three swings and you’re out. Would Buddha give him a fourth-chance at-bat…?

Subaru: “Buddha’s rules aside… hey, Otto, got a sec?”

Falling in step beside Otto as he briskly resumed walking through the woods, Subaru called out.

Frankly, it was plain as day that Garfiel was in the wrong, but at this rate Subaru’s secondhand embarrassment was about to break the limit. He’d boasted to Beatrice and Petra about mediating well—embarrassing, but better a moment’s shame than a lifetime’s.

Subaru: “It’s about Garfiel. Uh, y’know, in his own way he’s… well…”

Otto: “—Roughly, that he’s all tied up in knots over his relationship with me, right?”

Unsure how to broach it, Subaru found his hesitation sliced clean through by that one line and lost his breath. When he goggled at Otto, the latter gave a wry smile.

Otto: “Don’t ask “how,” please. Looking at Garfiel’s behavior lately—well, today—it’s obvious he’s got thoughts about me.”

Subaru: “That… yeah, fair. Then no point hiding it—the truth is, he wants to make up with you. But, as you can see, he’s clumsy about it.”

Otto: “It’s painful to watch.”

Garfiel had been moping and reflecting just out of Otto’s line of sight, but to Otto Suwen, the man who converses with all things, it was all obvious.

Still, if Otto understood the situation, that made things fast.

Subaru: “In that case, uh, could you take the lead and say something to him? That’ll solve the problem…”

Otto: “Ah, I don’t like that, so I decline.”

Subaru: “Eh?!”

Raising a hand smoothly as he refused the request, Otto left Subaru stunned. To Subaru’s shocked face, Otto held up one finger and continued, “Here’s the thing.”

Otto: “Sure, if I reach out here, the problem would be solved, I think. But is that really the way we want to solve it?”

Subaru: ““Really the way” meaning…?”

Otto: “Meaning, is it fine to keep leaving solutions to others all the time? Going forward, Garfiel will have more chances to deal with outsiders as a member of our camp. We can’t have him causing fender-benders in human relations every time, and neither I nor Natsuki-san can keep cleaning up after him forever.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “If you rub outsiders the wrong way, you don’t get many chances to recover. Wanting help only when you can fail as much as you like because it’s with family—what a spoiled child.”

From head to tail, Subaru couldn’t get a peep out against the perfect, gapless argument.

True, limited to just the two of them, Otto reaching out would solve it quickly. But Otto’s eyes were on what came after—on Garfiel’s future.

Otto: “Also, since we started playing on the Shatranj board, I’ve come to see this… If I’m the one to reach out, he’ll feel relieved in the moment, but later on, not having solved it under his own power will eat at Garfiel something awful.”

Subaru: “Honestly… I get that.”

Otto: “Well, I got roughed up plenty in the “Sanctuary,” and I can’t say I have no feelings about how hard he’s been on me up to today, so there’s a bit of payback in it too.”

Subaru: “Mm… yeah, even I can’t call you childish over that.”

Normally he’d nitpick from any angle and try to catch him out, but in this matter the problem lay with Garfiel, and there was no medicine Subaru could apply.

Still, there was some good news he could be sure of from Otto’s tone.

Subaru: “So, if Garfiel’s the one who reaches out, you’re willing to make up, right?”

Otto: “Make up or not, I don’t recognize that we’ve had a falling out. If someone says they want to get along, there’s nothing better than getting along with all parties you can communicate with.”

Subaru: “When you say “all parties you can communicate with,” the scope’s so stupidly wide I can’t tell if you’re serious.”

As Otto gave him a wink with one eye closed, Subaru heaved a big sigh.

Be that as it may, it was good to confirm Otto’s stance. In truth, he’d already confirmed Garfiel’s stance as well, so you could say a truly fruitless standoff had arisen.

Subaru could go tell Garfiel what they’d just discussed and end that fruitless standoff—but there was merit in Otto’s opinion that it was better not to.

At least, he wanted to guide things so Garfiel would find it easy to make the first move—

Otto: “—Natsuki-san, Garfiel.”

Subaru: “—! You got something?”

Called by Otto, whose mood had suddenly shifted, Subaru asked back. With Garfiel coming over at the call as well, Otto set a small animal like a squirrel on his shoulder, nodded “Yes” as the little creature whispered in his ear, and said—

Otto: “They say they found another one downstream from that river just now. However—”

Garfiel: “That’s right under our noses, but what is it?”

Otto: “…Seems it’s a bit of a bad situation.”

5

—And that wasn’t just a “bit of a bad situation.”

Subaru: “Ohhhhhh, you gotta be kidding me—!”

Led by the squirrel-like creature cooperating with Otto, Subaru, having reached the river in question, couldn’t help but shout when he saw the sight before him.

Downstream, where the river widened, the force of the water had increased, creating a sort of rapids. In those rapids were a few stepping stones, and on one of those stones lay the girl they were after—except the girl was sprawled out on the stone, limp and unmoving.

Subaru: “No way, is she sleeping? Up to here, there was Jita running away at full tilt, Omi up in a tree, and Ipsy pushing back against us—but sleeping is way too new. And in a place where you could never settle down like that!”

Garfiel: “She ain’t doin’ that on purpose! She ain’t sleepin’, she’s passed out. The problem’s why she’s passed out…”

Otto: “The cause is in the river.”

At Otto’s words, Subaru and Garfiel both dropped their eyes to the torrent with a “the river?”

It was a fast flow, the gravel and mud constantly stirred so it looked murky, but if you stared hard, you could finally make out what Otto meant.

—Fish-shapes, several of them, gliding through the water.

Subaru: “Big fish? Looks like there’s quite a few, but it’s not like she got scared of fish…”

Garfiel: “She didn’t get scared. She got bzzzt’d. Tch, lightningfish, huh.”

Subaru: “Lightningfish?”

Otto: “Water-dwelling witchbeasts. They’re charged, and they electrocute birds and small animals that come to drink from the river, then eat them. Most likely, that child got shocked by them.”

Subaru: “That’s insanely bad! We gotta save her right away!”

With the threat to life far closer than he’d imagined, Subaru immediately proposed a rescue. But once again Otto held him back.

Otto: “I’m dying to do that, but lightningfish are troublesome witchbeasts by nature. Like that, they knock her out and leave her there to make the friends who come to save her their next prey. If we approach carelessly, we’ll end up just like her.”

Subaru: “A sniper’s M.O.…!”

Garfiel: “’N on top o’ that, they’re ridiculously cautious ’n timid. The second they think it’s bad, they snatch the decoy prey ’n dive under the water. …What do we do?”

Garfiel’s estimate was: spring out with a burst, grab the girl, and instantly retreat—but that would put a lot on luck. Of course, Subaru and Otto couldn’t endure a shock; the role of the one to charge in was best left to Garfiel.

Subaru: “We should raise the certainty. —They’re fish but witchbeasts, right? Then I’ll draw their attention.”

Otto: “To be honest, that’s what I was banking on. A situation to make use of Natsuki-san’s incomprehensible constitution.”

Subaru: “Alright, you jerk, I’ll remember that, damn it.”

Glaring at Otto, who nodded without a beat to the proposal, Subaru volunteered to be the decoy. Hearing the plan, Garfiel nodded with an “’kay.”

Garfiel: “Sorry, but I’m handin’ that role to the Captain. In that gap I’ll—”

Otto: “No, Garfiel, please stick with Natsuki-san. I’ll—”

Garfiel: “Hah? Why’s that. I can move better.”

Otto: “Exactly. We don’t know how fast the witchbeasts in the river will launch at Natsuki-san. I’m asking you to guard him.”

At Otto’s peremptory instruction, Garfiel, taken aback, ground his fangs. Subaru worried that would stir up Garfiel’s bad habit again, but—

Garfiel: “…F-fine. I’ll go with that.”

At the very edge, Garfiel held himself back, and the hair-trigger was avoided.

And then—

Subaru: “No telling when the fish’ll lose patience. Otto, don’t mess this up.”

Otto: “No need to tell me. Garfiel, I’m counting on you.”

Garfiel: “Yeah. You two… get yer heads in the game.”

Returning a nod to Garfiel, who couldn’t just bull through, Otto looked to Subaru. Meeting that gaze with a set jaw, Subaru moved to the riverbank.

The lightningfish, which sent the water roiling with splash-splash, were about the size of big koi, and there were twenty, thirty of them—a hideously creepy sight. Aiming straight at that—

Subaru: “I—Return by Death—”

A confession to the fish so that Otto and Garfiel behind him wouldn’t hear. The instant it was about to be made, a fresh and infuriating penalty aimed straight at Subaru’s heart.

Subaru: “—gh!”

He tasted the stilling of time and pain; an instant that felt eternal passed, and he was released. He resumed the breath he’d halted and lifted his face—did it work? —Right before him, a fish with its reason gone had its all-fanged maw open, lunging in.

Subaru: “Uwoooooaah?!”

Garfiel: “Close one!”

Seizing Subaru by the scruff, Garfiel narrowly made the witchbeast’s fangs miss. But, just as Otto had feared, the school of lightningfish kept right on after Subaru and even heaved themselves up onto land.

With the crackle-crackle of bursting air, violet lightning streaked out and chased after Subaru and the others.

Garfiel: “Don’t bite yer tongue—!”

Subaru: “Too late! I bit it—agh!”

To escape the violet bolts snapping at their heels, Garfiel carried Subaru and pulled away. Knowing that a careless leap would make it impossible to evade the lightning, Garfiel, still gripping Subaru, kicked right and left, moving to draw the witchbeasts downstream, stacking evasive maneuvers.

And when they’d opened up enough distance—

Garfiel: “—Do it!”

Otto: “No need to say it!”

At Garfiel’s cue, Otto, one hand on his hat, skipped across the stepping stones to the girl. He lifted the collapsed girl up; from the hairstyle, they could tell it was Pico.

Holding Pico in his arms, Otto turned to go back along the stones he’d come. —In that moment.

Subaru: “Otto!”

Forgetting even the pain in his bitten tongue, Subaru shouted—just as, right beside Otto carrying Pico across the stones, something appeared that was on a whole different scale from the lightningfish thus far.

The thing one might call a giant lightningfish had its great maw open, lunging to swallow Otto and Pico whole—

Garfiel: “—Ottobro!!”

At the instant the two were about to be swallowed, Garfiel shouted and stomped the ground hard. Force ran through the soles of his feet, and the next moment the earth heaved with tremendous force. The stepping stone Otto and Pico were on was kicked straight up from beneath, slamming into the giant lightningfish’s gut.

Lightningfish: "—ッッ"

Writhing under unbearable force, the witchbeast spewed out the almost-swallowed Otto and Pico.

Thrown riverward for a moment, Otto—who had, however briefly, experienced the inside of the lightningfish's mouth—was flung toward the bank. But it didn't end there. The giant lightningfish crackled with discharge; violet lightning ran back up to turn Otto and Pico, who had fled its maw, into grilled morsels.

Just before that bolt of wrath was unleashed—an hourglass-red magic stone struck the lightningfish's snout.

Otto: "Just in case, I make a habit of carrying them."

Otto bared his teeth, pointing finger-guns at the stone he'd thrown. In the blink of an eye, before the violet lightning could be loosed, the magic stone ignited, and an explosion blew apart the face of the lightningfish, lord of the river.

Lightningfish: "Gyan!"

Tossed by the blast wind, Otto tumbled and rolled along the riverbank with momentum. After rolling for a bit, he checked the limp Pico he held and let out a sigh of relief.

Garfiel hurried over to where Otto lay on his back on the ground.

Garfiel: "Ottobro! Ya in one piece?!"

Otto: "…Yes. I'm fine. Fortunately, Pico-chan seems to be only unconscious."

Garfiel: "That ain't the point! Well, it is, but it ain't just that—what the hell was that crazy stunt…!"

Otto: "Ahh, it was certainly pretty dangerous. If we hadn't gotten that one hit in first and made it spit us out, I would've had to settle for a mutual kill… man, we got lucky."

Garfiel: "Listen here…!"

As Otto sat up with a dopey grin, Garfiel shouted, veins bulging.

Even though he'd snatched life from the jaws of death by the slimmest of margins, he had this attitude. No one could deny now why Otto was called the "Military Internal Affairs Officer" both inside and outside the camp.

Be that as it may—

Garfiel: "If we ain't got enough time to set up a plan, the crazy stuff's on me—"

Otto: "—Ottobro."

Garfiel: "Huh?"

Otto: "Yes, you called me. You've gotten awfully casual, haven't you. A change of heart?"

At Otto's sly grin and question, Garfiel's eyes widened with an "ah." It seemed completely unconscious; he opened and shut his mouth, then flushed red to his neck and ears.

Garfiel: "Wh-What's it to ya. I, uh, I—!"

Otto: "No, nothing wrong with it. I just wanted to get a little more friendly with you, Garfiel. "Friends and lifespan can't be bought with money," as Hoshin says."

Garfiel: "…Tch. That so. Then Ottobro it is."

Otto: "I said, that's fine."

At Garfiel's averted-eyes murmur, Otto went on with a wry smile. Garfiel rubbed the tip of his nose and gave a bashful "heh."

It was a really good vibe. That was delightful. Delightful, but—

Subaru: "Aaand, you two, sorry to butt in when you're wrapping things up nicely, but—"

Thinking it rude to interrupt, Subaru nonetheless called out to Otto and Garfiel. The two turned to his voice, looked Subaru's way, and their mouths opened with an "ah."

Because—

Subaru: "The fishies whose boss you took out are comiiing…"

With a wall of violet lightning-charged water surging up onto the land as the school of lightningfish gathered downstream reversed the flow all at once, Subaru ran full tilt toward the two.

Told not to come, he ran flat out anyway. Because it was a problem the three of them had to overcome together.

6

Emilia: "I see. So that's how Otto-kun and Garfiel became friendly."

Beatrice: "Honestly, those two are such handfuls, I suppose. And Subaru also splendidly fulfilled his role—how admirable, in fact. Betty and Emilia shall praise you, I suppose."

Emilia: "That's right. Subaru, thank you for working so hard. You did great."

Subaru: "Ohhh, your kindness really sinks in…—"

Getting his head patted on both sides by Emilia and Beatrice, Subaru felt something well up warm in his chest and finally had the sense that the whole messy faction problem had been resolved without incident.

There had, after all, been the payoff of being chased by a school of lightningfish and nearly dying of electrocution in the forest.

Subaru: "Well, in the end, both of them wanted to make up. All they needed was a trigger, so Otto almost dying ended up being all right in the end."

Emilia: "Ah, don't get carried away. Say things like that and the three of you will do something reckless again."

Subaru: “Kyann—ow ow, don’t pull my ear! I repent!”

With Emilia puffing her cheeks and tugging his ear, Subaru raised the white flag at once and surrendered. Admittedly, the way he said it was bad. That said, given the situation they’d had no choice but to be reckless. If Subaru and the others hadn’t fought there, who knows what would have happened to Pico.

Beatrice: “But it is good that everyone came back safe, in fact. … Though, if there is anything humiliating, it is only that in the end we borrowed Roswaal’s power, I suppose.”

Emilia: “Beatrice, you’re so huffy.”

Subaru: ““Huffy”—that’s not something you hear these days.”

Beatrice, adorably disgruntled, was right: when it came to the search for the missing Picos—or rather, the most effective way to bring them home—the one who proposed it, after returning from his trip, was Roswaal.

Split into two groups, a boys’ team and a girls’ team, they had managed to bring back eleven—about half—but Roswaal got the remaining half to return in no time at all.

Beatrice: “Riding Emilia’s voice on the wind and scattering it across the whole area—that never occurred to Betty…!”

Subaru: “Before, Otto used a spell to send just footsteps to another spot; it’s the same sort of application. Given the scale, it’s only natural Beako and Otto didn’t think of it.”

Beatrice: “There is nothing “only natural” about it, I suppose! For Roswaal to think of something and Betty not to—that is an intolerable disgrace, in fact…!”

Emilia: “Fufu, Beatrice, you’re really stubborn when it comes to Roswaal.”

Beatrice: “It is that smug face of his that is unforgivable, I suppose!”

At Beatrice’s puffed-up, indignant pout, Subaru and Emilia exchanged looks and laughed. Then Subaru glanced at the magical time crystal on the wall and went, “Whoops,” rising from his chair.

As tempting as it was to just have a little tea party right here in Emilia’s room with Beatrice—

Subaru: “I happen to have an appointment with the two in question. So, though it pains me, and though I’m sure Emilia-tan will be lonely too, I’m off.”

Emilia: “Ah, I’m totally fine. And Subaru, you look super excited.”

Subaru: ““Totally fine” stings a little, but yeah. I’m in the middle of a pretty interesting bit of scheming. I’ll borrow the open spot in the woods behind the manor—look forward to it.”

Emilia: “Okay, got it. I’ll look forward to it.”

Subaru: “I’ll leave Beako with you instead, so you two get along.”

Seeing him off with little waves, Emilia and Beatrice watched as Subaru departed the tea party room. He then set off toward Otto’s office, when—

Garfiel: “Yo, Captain. Just came t’ fetch ya.”

Otto: “Good thing we didn’t miss each other. Would’ve been double the trouble.”

By chance in the corridor he ran into the two in question, Garfiel and Otto. Narrowing his eyes at how naturally they were walking side by side, Subaru made the two cock their heads.

Subaru: “Nah, it’s nothing. Let’s talk on the way, then—about the construction plan for my grand, secret training ground!”

Garfiel: “S-secret training ground…! Awesome! No matter how many times I hear it, I can’t stop gettin’ pumped!”

Otto: “You can keep it secret at the planning stage, but once we break ground it’ll be found out right away.”

Subaru: “That’s fine! With this sort of thing, the proposer ought to be the one having the most fun first!”

Garfiel: “That’s right, Ottobro! Don’t be sayin’ such killjoy stuff!”

Nipped at by Subaru and Garfiel, Otto brushed it off with a “yes yes.”

At that unflappable attitude, Garfiel pressed in further, but there was neither anger nor reserve there. Which is why Subaru, without holding back either, slipped between the two and slung an arm over each of their shoulders.

Subaru: “Man, it’s nice—being able to shoot the breeze like this with three guys.”

Otto: “Natsuki-san, you said something similar during my homecoming.”

Subaru: “Back then we were kinda prickly! Now that’s cleared up and I’m feeling good!”

Garfiel: “Uoooo… the me back then was real damn unpleasant, yeah.”

Hand to his head, Garfiel looked back on his past behavior and deeply reflected. That was precisely the awareness of a dark history, the first step toward graduating from his green, immature self.

Even after getting past some of that, the walls called adolescence were many and high.

Subaru: “Well, we’ll stumble and fall, and then we’ll all overcome it together again like this.”

At Subaru’s laugh and words, Otto and Garfiel exchanged looks and laughed.

That too was one of the countless ordinary scenes to come for the boys’ team of Emilia’s camp.

END

The Witch's After Tea Party: Witch Trials (LQ AI Translation)

1

—That night, the town blanketed in a light fall of snow was enveloped in a strange atmosphere.

The square at the town's center seethed with a wave of people, and yet it was filled with a baffling silence, with no voices heard from anywhere. Those gathered furtively watched one another with bulging eyes, and when their gazes met, they turned away, their presences pregnant with loathing and fear. —Such was the situation.

Crowd: "…"

This silent crowd of several hundred was proof that almost all of the town's residents had gathered; it was proof of just how much the townsfolk's attention was fixed upon this.

Presently, as if parting the human tide, a single person was brought out before the crowd. —It was an old woman, with skin mapped by wrinkles, thin, frizzy hair, and a gaunt frame.

At a glance she seemed feeble, a lone old woman who gave off little sense of vitality—and yet the looks the crowd leveled at her, as her bound hands were hauled by a rope, were terribly cruel and steeped in hostility.

Anger, disgust, rejection—in the end, all those negative feelings could be summed up in a single word: hatred. That was everything directed at the old woman, and it could be said to be what made her hang her head.

Head bowed, the old woman, with dragging steps, was brought to the very center of those assembled at the town's heart, raised up onto the showpiece dais prepared there—the scaffold.

Crowd: “…”

The moment someone in the crowd lit the fuse with a vile curse, abuse and invective were hurled at the old woman one after another.

Those words brimming with malice so pummeled the gaunt old woman that, if words could take a life, it was plain that they would have been lethal weapons.

However, curses and slurs do not in themselves take a person’s life. No matter how cruel, no matter how sharp-edged the words that could make one bleed, they never directly steal a life.

—Therefore, what took the life of the old woman upon the scaffold was not any blade of words.

Woman: “—hk!”

A tremendous, hellish blaze rose up, and it swathed the old woman in fire, scaffold and all.

A heat with no concept of moderation leapt to every part of her body; as her skin, her flesh, her organs, and above all her life were burned, the old woman’s scream rose higher and higher, longer and longer, trailing a tail across the sky of the snowy town.

At that scream, that death rattle, the surrounding crowd went into a frenzy and raised their voices. Yet it was by no means a cry brought forth by a tasteless desire to make a spectacle of an execution.

What was in those voices was a small measure of relief, and the joy of being freed from something that bound them.

Amid those voiceless cries of joy, someone murmured,

???: “—Witch.”

Yes—spurred by that single word, those around began to speak it one after another.

The words repeated—“Witch, Witch, Witch”—told of the indelible sin of a being swallowed by the flames, her life purified by scorching heat. On this night, in the town of thin snow, one “Witch” was burned to death. —That it was the true beginning of Witch Trials, on which the town’s very survival hinged, was something no one had any room to realize at the time.

—On this night, a single witch burned to death in the snowy town.

2

Watching as flakes of snow fluttered down across her field of view, Omega pulled her half-buried feet free from the fresh snow and advanced with steady steps—one, then another.

That surefooted tread could truly be called a remarkable leap forward.

At first, back when she knew the terrors of snowy lands as nothing more than knowledge, Omega’s way of walking snowy paths had been far too clumsy. Yet now, it was no exaggeration to say she was so well-versed in snow that she could pass for someone born in a snowy country.

Omega: “If it were before, even I wouldn’t have believed this leap forward of mine. When it came to moving my body, there was some part of me that gave up, thinking it was impossible. However, accumulation surprisingly doesn’t lie. You can’t get by on reckless fieldwork alone, nor on knowledge without practice. What you need is an environment where you can actually try out the knowledge—in other words.”

Looking back to check the footprints she had left in the snow path, Omega nodded in satisfaction.

The angle of the toes, the stride length, the way the snow sank underfoot—everything formed a beautiful set of prints just as calculated. If anything, she wanted to cut out the whole stretch of snowfield with the footprints, freeze it, store it away in a subspace created with Yin Magic so it wouldn’t be in the way, and rub it in the faces of those who had once mocked Omega’s athletic ability.

Omega: “Cut out the snowfield along with the ground, freeze it, store it in a subspace made with Yin Magic…? With how accustomed my Gate is right now, if I tried to handle that much mana, I might accidentally disappear myself, but… is it worth it…?”

Shion: “Um, Omega-san? You’re muttering something kinda horror-ish—are you tired?”

Omega: “Hm, Shion?”

Shion: “Yup, whoosh—Shion at your service! I turned around and you weren’t there, so I panicked and dash-dash-dashed back.”

Smiling, and striking a crisp salute-like pose, was the girl Shion, with bright green hair, well-formed features, round, inquisitive eyes, and ears just a little longer than a human’s.

Shion, one of Omega’s companions on the journey, tilted her head and said,

Shion: “Maybe our pace was a bit quick. Since the snowfall had lightened for the first time in a while, that “let’s stomp-stomp make progress while we can” feeling might’ve shown up in everyone’s stride.”

Omega: “And you’re saying I got left behind because of that? I appreciate your consideration, but the reason I stopped wasn’t a feeling of fatigue. Rather the opposite. A sense of accomplishment.”

Shion: “A sense of accomplishment?”

Omega: “That’s right. Feast your eyes.”

Before the head-tilting Shion, Omega indicated with her hand the footprints she had left in the snow path.

Omega: “How is it? Quite something, isn’t it?”

Shion: “Aha, I see! …I see? Um, I’m sorry, but could you tell me a teensy bit more about the reason for your smug face?”

Omega: “You can’t tell just by looking?”

Shion: “If I had to say… they’re teeny-tiny, cute little footprints!”

Staring intently at Shion, who had clenched her fist and answered thus, Omega realized she wasn’t playing dumb, much less teasing. Put simply—and regrettably—Shion genuinely didn’t understand the value of these magnificent footprints.

Omega: “No, that one’s on me.”

However, Omega immediately reflected that her disappointment in Shion had been immature.

It couldn’t be helped. After all, it had only been about two weeks since Shion had started traveling with Omega like this. The value of the footprints now left in the fresh snow could be called the very accumulation of the days since Omega had begun walking snowy paths. Telling Shion, who didn’t know those days, to grasp the value of these footprints was an unreasonable ask.

Those who could understand this value were—

Omega: “—only you all, who’ve kept traveling with me this far.”

Palmira: “…Got no clue what you’re on about again, but I do get that you once again ran ahead with the story in your head and then went and satisfied yourself somewhere that’s got nothing to do with us.”

Colette: “Now, that’s not how you should put it, Palmira. Omega-chan’s hoping we’ll understand—so we’ve got to live up to that, don’t we?”

Noelle: “I would very much like to live up to Omega-sama’s expectations, but whether we can be of help is making me a little nervous.”

Before Omega, who had spread her hands wide, the three girls lined up and each made a comment in her own way.

Those three—Palmira, Colette, and Noelle in the order they spoke—

were also oddballs traveling with Omega. She had spent several months together with Palmira and Colette, and nearly two months with Noelle—a trio who could be called Omega experts.

They were, indeed, living witnesses who knew how Omega had struggled on snowy paths, and at the same time, people who could correctly gauge the value of the now-improved Omega's footprints.

Therefore, just as she had done with Shion earlier, Omega gestured with her hand to the snow path for the three and—

Omega: "How is it? Quite something, isn't it?"

—posed exactly the same question she had to Shion, intending to share the emotion.

But the three did not offer moving comments about Omega's footprints. Before that could happen, the three widened their eyes and went "Ah," and a tremendous bellow reverberated across the snowfield.

Witchbeast: "—!!"

What echoed across the snowfield was the deep, rough war cry of a ferocious beast.

What shook the still, freezing air with its roar was a witchbeast whose whole body was covered in white fur like snow, yet whose snow could not conceal its savage, hulking frame, complete with horns—the "Snow Blight." This witchbeast, which resembled a giant ape in form, was, as its name suggested, a menace that lived only in snowy regions.

One such Snow Blight fixed upon the five girls standing in a row as its prey and, puffing out white breaths in excitement, came stomping toward them—

—trampling the fresh snow to bits.

And of course, that rampage dragged Omega's precious footprints into its wake as well.

Palmira: “J-Just—! A-A witchbeast! And it’s hu… huge! It’s coming this way!”

Colette: “Th-This is b-big trouble! Palmira, everyone, hide behind me!”

Shion: “Yeah, no, we’re not doing that! Colette-san, you’re tiny!”

Noelle: “Everyone, please be calm. I shall… Omega-sama?”

Before the rudely approaching Snow Blight, confusion spread among the girls, but Noelle, who was about to step forward to shield them, saw Omega step out even before her. Hearing Noelle call out, the other three likewise looked at Omega’s back.

—at the space around the small-bodied Omega, which had begun to distort unnaturally.

Omega: “I don’t bear ill will just because it’s a witchbeast. Moreover, we’re the ones who entered its living area, its territory—that’s our blunder. This is rather the sort of situation where we should apologize politely and leave.”

Snow Blight: “—!!”

Omega: “However, if you’re going to sully my pride, that’s another story. —Minya.”

To the Snow Blight that roared and paid no heed to her words, Omega likewise judged mercy unnecessary, and she let a deep-violet radiance burst forth from the spatial distortion.

It became a straight, glittering cone, and, without any contrivance, it met the charging witchbeast head-on, striking five points—both shoulders, the torso, and both ankles—and from those points, it began to crystallize.

With a sound like the air creaking, the witchbeast, invaded by the deep-violet shimmer, writhed and let out a pained cry. But it was too late to regret it. The crystallization steadily advanced, and when at last it covered the witchbeast’s entire body—there stood nothing but a statue of a Snow Blight clad in deep-violet radiance.

Omega: “Honestly, how boorish can you get.”

Narrowing her eyes at the statue, Omega shrugged with a weary air.

Sadly, the snowfield had been thoroughly churned by the witchbeast’s massive soles, and Omega’s footprints were unrecognizable. There was no way she could possibly expect thunderous applause from the girls now.

And as Omega turned back, dejected—

Everyone: “Wow—”

—the girls, sounding impressed with her handiwork, clapped for Omega.

Finding it different from what she’d thought and what she’d hoped for, Omega received that applause with a dissatisfied air.

3

—The lightly snowed town of ‘Limbus’ lay not far from the spot where they had encountered the Snow Blight.

Blanketed in perennial snow, a townscape washed in white is the universal sight of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, but Limbus leaves quite a different impression from other towns. The snowfall in the area is light, and one reason is that buildings and facilities designed against snow damage aren’t very noticeable.

Noelle: “It seems this area is surrounded by mountains on three sides and has long suffered little snow damage. It’s not quite the “Holy Land,” but I hear you can sometimes catch a glimpse of clear skies.”

Colette: “My! Clear skies sound lovely. Come to think of it, I feel like I haven’t properly basked in the sun’s rays for a while. The snow is very beautiful too, but I’m starting to miss the sun.”

As the party approached the town’s entrance, Noelle—who was carrying a large furoshiki bundle—shared a tidbit befitting a Itinerant Preacher of the Gusteko Holy Church, tailored to the locale. While Colette's eyes sparkled at the lecture, Palmira cast a sidelong glance at Omega with a "Heh," and said,

Palmira: "No wonder Omega managed to keep walking the snowy road without folding. Compared to before, there's way less snow. Makes sense, makes sense."

Omega: "My, my, you do have things to say, Palmira. Unfortunately for you, don't forget that realization and that sarcasm bounce right back at you as-is. When I fall on a harsh snowy road, the next to fall is none other than you."

Shion: "Time-out, time-out, you two! No poking each other like that! That's a red card! …Am I using "red card" right?"

Omega: "More or less correctly."

Omega shrugged and nodded back at Shion, who had halted the "weakest-war" with Palmira.

From time to time Shion tosses in "otherworld words"—knowledge whose source is unknown. Watching her scheme this way and that to probe where that knowledge comes from is endearing, yet also a cause for concern.

As the newest companion on their journey, Shion and her counterpart—who, thanks to a somewhat special origin and ability, have acquired knowledge that doesn't exist in this world—are irregularities of the world, for better or worse.

Shion and her other self don't seem aware that they've touched something beyond reason, but even speaking of that is careless. If they talked, Omega herself wouldn't know what backlash might descend upon the world.

However—

Omega: "The "I-want-to-teach" bug inside me is writhing, wanting to see what happens to the world as a result of my teaching…"

Lilac: "…Are you entertaining something frightening? Don't take what Shion says too literally. My wish is, first and foremost, ensuring safety."

Palmira: "Uwah, you scared me! Don't just switch all of a sudden!"

What startled Palmira was that someone different appeared where Shion should have been.

The person there wore the same outfit as Shion, but with different hair color and features: Lilac. A multiple-personality bearer, Shion and Lilac share a single body as two-in-one; depending on which personality is at the fore, their outward appearance switches drastically, like a dream or an illusion.

Omega: "In this world, the body is deeply influenced by the state of the soul. The body, as the vessel that contains the soul, changes its form to suit the soul however it may—but watching you two strongly corroborates the truth of that theory, and it's a great feast for the eyes."

Lilac: "Viewed like that, it feels like we're being looked at as lab animals, which doesn't feel great. Besides, you don't need to verify it with us—wouldn't it be more appropriate for you to look in a mirror?"

Omega: "A mirror… ah, you mean my hair and my eyes."

At Lilac's furrow-browed point, Omega ran her fingers through her own hair.

Omega's hair had originally been pink, but now that the pigment had drained, it was closer to gray. Where it would arrive was white—the soul of the Witch of Greed that had settled into this vessel; it should draw nearer to that. In fact, the color of her eyes was also shifting from blue to a blue-tinged black, and before long even her height and facial features—her appearance—would be remade to match the soul.

It was, precisely as Lilac said, a fine example of the body being pulled along by the soul.

Omega: "When that change fully progresses, I'm curious how you'll treat me. Given the relationships we've built so far, I'd like to hope you won't vomit on me."

Lilac: "What you're anxious about is whether we'll puke on you…? I'd like to say, "Really?" but in your case it might not be a baseless fear, so your concern is understandable."

Palmira: "Lilac's made "Recollection Realm"? It was a lot better when I saw it in that dream, but—"

Recalling the events in "Sylphoa" the other day, Palmira hugged her own shoulders.

Even if she put it delicately as "a lot better," the truth was that it had taken a toll. Not just Omega's soul—standing before a "Witch" puts that much strain on mind and body.

Omega: "Judging from Palmira's condition, though, it might be possible to gradually acclimate to the load?"

If so, Omega wouldn't be averse to regularly manifesting as the Witch of Greed, to build up Colette's and Palmira's tolerance for facing a "Witch."

Colette: "But but, if it's a town not troubled by snow, then we really should tell them about that witchbeast earlier, right? I think everyone would be terribly shocked."

Noelle: "Indeed, my lady. In heavy-snow regions, damage from witchbeasts is actually rarer, but with this degree of snowfall, the threat from beasts should be the greater fear. I believe they will be pleased to hear of the witchbeast Omega-sama felled."

While Omega and the others exchanged views about "Witches" and the nature of the soul, Colette and Noelle's conversation—minding the safety of people's lives—was grounded.

In fact, their opinions hit the mark. Even in Gusteko, in certain areas not threatened by snow damage, the harm from witchbeasts is taken far more seriously. All the more so since the Snow Blight's territory had been right around the town.

Sooner or later, it would have been inevitable that there be human casualties—and—

Omega: “Or perhaps there already have been. Behold.”

Palmira: “Behold what… ah.”

Prompted by the jerk of Omega’s chin, Palmira looked that way and widened her eyes.

At the base of the welcome gate bearing the town’s name, “Limbus,” several placards had been set up. On them were numerous cautions—“No going out after midnight,” “No going out alone,” “Observe the Oath of the Holy Church.” That in itself wasn’t unusual, but—

Omega: “There are rather a lot of placards. Many of the letters look scrawled, and they used plenty of red ink. To put it bluntly, isn’t it ghastly?”

Palmira: “F-For once, I agree with Omega. It’s kind of creepy—should we just skip stopping by…?”

Noelle: “Regrettably, our water and provisions are not reassuring.”

Sensing the town’s foreboding air, Palmira slumped at Noelle’s reply.

It was unfortunate for Palmira, but following the well-traveled Noelle’s opinion was best here.

Among the Four Great Nations, each has its own traits that make journeys difficult: Kararagi with its many deserts; the subtropical Vollachia with its changeable weather; Lugunica with its many witchbeasts. Covered in permafrost, Gusteko is particularly high in difficulty. Thorough preparations are essential.

Colette: “It’s okay, Palmira, don’t be disheartened! Maybe it’s just a lot of worrywarts. And, and, we took down such a rough-and-tumble witchbeast. When they hear that, I’m sure everyone will be happy!”

Palmira: “Y-Yeah, you’re right. There’s no way we’d just keep getting dragged into disaster everywhere we go! What kind of rotten luck would that be? We deserve something good once in a while!”

Colette: “Yes, yes! I think so too! That’s the spirit!”

Forced cheer is still cheer; hand in hand, Colette and Palmira spoke of a positive outlook. That said, Omega also nodded deeply, conceding there was reason in their words.

As a matter of fact, ever since Omega left the “Sanctuary,” there had been no end of trouble on the road.

Extremely speaking, meeting Colette and Palmira had itself been due to trouble, and Noelle’s joining them had begun with a certain murder case. As for Shion and Lilac, they were bona fide dream-terrorists with a history of trapping an entire town in a castle of dreams.

Even for Omega and company, beset by one trouble after another, it should be time for a peaceful spell.

Omega: “On that point, we’re even bringing a gift to show a friendly stance toward the town. And the sky—clear weather rare for Gusteko—surely that’s a good omen.”

4

—And then, only a dozen-odd minutes after speaking to the girls of a rosy outlook.

In the square at the town’s center, Omega and the others were surrounded by residents with bloodshot eyes, clutching farm tools.

Omega: “Good grief. Visit a town without incident, leave a town without incident… is that asking too much?”

Palmira: “When you say it, it really starts to feel like it is asking too much, so shut up!”

Colette: “Wait, wait, no making a scene, you two! You’ll scare everyone!”

Shaking her head loosely side to side, Omega was clung to from left and right by Palmira and Colette. Meanwhile, the older pair, Noelle and Lilac, took a stance facing the surroundings while shielding the three.

Biting her nail with a bitter look as she quietly swept her gaze around, Lilac said,

Lilac: “I missed my chance to switch with Shion… can’t you do something?”

Noelle: “If you mean by force, it is not impossible… but unless we can silence the townsfolk, there is a risk the Holy Church will brand us heretics. If that happens, the end of it would be flight abroad.”

Lilac: “Silencing the whole town… ugh, you’re so noisy! I’m not doing it! I only thought of it! Stop squealing in my head!”

She probably hadn’t seriously considered Noelle’s proposal, but it seemed a brain-internal meeting with Shion had started inside Lilac’s head. To onlookers it was an amusing one-person play, but at that rate there would be no hope of holding a grand memory-rewriting festival by means of large-scale dream arts.

For Omega, who was intensely interested in the potential of dream arts, that was very vexing.

Omega: “Well now, it doesn’t look like we’ve been surrounded by the town guard. Their weapons are farm tools, their stances are amateurish, and what’s foremost in them is fear and dread rather than a sense of duty. It’s a development I’m fairly used to, but what are they aiming for, I wonder?”

Noelle: “I can well imagine how much Omega-sama has suffered up to now, but please leave this to me. —If you would, we would like you to hear us out.”

Speaking gently to those around them, Noelle gave a mild, calm smile. Faced with Noelle’s smile, Omega could see the vigilance of the encircling townspeople ease a little.

As expected, among this group Noelle had the second-gentlest appearance after Colette. If it were Omega or Lilac, their long ears stood out; Palmira's distrust of the world gave her a hard look. Wanting to make a good first impression now, Noelle was the optimal choice.

In fact, the townspeople were, at heart, a gathering of non-aggressive commoners. Some form of mistrust and caution had given rise to a misunderstanding, but once that cleared, they would put down their weapons and, instead, offer handshakes.

Noelle: "We bear no hostility toward you. Rather, we would like to be on friendly terms. Allow us to show you proof of that."

Saying this, Noelle knelt on the spot and set down the large furoshiki bundle she had been carrying.

It was larger than an adult's arms could encircle and had a solid heft; among Omega's party, the only one able to carry this gift was Noelle.

While the townspeople watched, Noelle slowly untied the furoshiki and—

Crowd: "—?!"

Noelle: "It is a large, fearsome witchbeast that was right near your town."

What rolled out, asserting its presence to the fullest, was the head of a large witchbeast taken from the Snow Blight whose entire body had been crystallized.

Because the cause of death was crystallization, the severed head lacked the raw vividness of a corpse and had a made thing's feel to it, but a careful look would show that the expression at the end and the shaping of the fur were inhabited by the real thing.

Of course, they could have reported the subjugation without a corpse, but they had thought having the actual article would be more convincing, and since it happened to have come off cleanly, they had brought it along like this.

Noelle: “I trust this makes it clear. We are your allies who slew a witchbeast that threatened to harm the town, and—”

???: “—Witch.”

Suddenly, as if to cut off Noelle’s words, it struck Omega’s earlobes unerringly.

That word was unmistakable, a word in this world whispered from anyone’s lips with a sound mixed of fear and loathing, like a curse. All hesitate to utter it, and yet once it tumbles out, they cannot help but speak it, like a flood once a dam is breached—

Crowd: “Doing something that cruel to a witchbeast… a witch.” “Has to be a witch.” “Then they’re a coven of witches?” “Good grief, what do we do?” “If it’s a witch, there’s only one thing.” “Witches…” “Witch.” “Witch.” “Witch.”

Palmira: “H-Hey, Omega? This is, this is, you know, that, right?!”

Omega: “I don’t understand what they’re saying, but I do somehow get what they mean.”

As Palmira clung to her in a panic, squeezing her arms hard enough to creak, Omega divined the reason the air felt heavy and even murky in a town blessed with clear skies.

To be honest, this was not Omega’s first time in such an atmosphere. If anything, in the era when the soul within Omega—the Witch of Greed—lived, this had been a relatively common development.

The townspeople were excessively afraid of witches. —Conversely, that meant there was a reason.

Omega: “Colette, do not use the bracelet. Lilac, no switching with Shion for a while.”

Colette: “Huh? Okay, I got it, Omega-chan.”

Lilac: “…Even without being told, I wouldn’t switch in a place with this many eyes on us.”

With brief words, Colette and Lilac nodded to Omega's instructions. Pleased with their response, Omega pondered for a moment whether to leave things to Noelle as-is. There was a means to move the situation along quickly, but should she really do it—

Woman: "—Everyone, stand back. I have arrived."

Fortunately, for better or worse, that voice came from outside the circle before Omega did anything.

On a hair trigger, the townspeople opened a path to let the owner of the voice through.

What came out of the circle was a woman with dark-navy hair cut short. Baby-faced and short of stature, at first glance she looked about fourteen or fifteen, though she was surely older in years.

For—

Colette: "Look, look. Her outfit is the same uniform Noelle-san is wearing."

Just as wide-eyed Colette pointed out, the newcomer's attire was that of a formal believer of the Gusteko Holy Church, indicating, like Noelle's, the position of an Itinerant Preacher.

Moreover, the woman's relationship with Noelle was not merely that they were of the same order.

Noelle: "Nananna? Is that you, Nananna?"

Nananna: "Ah, as this one thought, that voice was Noelle's, it is."

Recognizing Noelle, who stood before her with a look of surprise, the Itinerant Preacher addressed as Nananna gave a quiet nod.

Then Nananna glanced at the Snow Blight's head lying at Noelle's feet and said,

Nananna: "—. This one has grasped the general course of events, it is."

With that, Nananna stepped to shield Omega and the others at her back and turned to face the townspeople.

And—

Nananna: “These people are not witches. This one has guaranteed it. In particular, this Noelle here is an Itinerant Preacher like this one… a believer who spreads the Holy Church’s teachings.”

???: “The same as Nananna-sama…! That was an outrageous discourtesy—”

At Nananna’s words, the townspeople hastily lowered their weapons and bowed their heads to them.

Seeing this, Palmira also finally released Omega’s arms, and Omega was relieved.

Nananna: “This one apologizes as well for frightening you, it is.”

Omega: “No, you stepping in helped. If things had gone on like that, in the worst case this town might have been erased from the map of Gusteko. Hahaha.”

Palmira: “Don’t say something so violent when things were finally coming together!”

Lilac: “That’s not a joke one can laugh at…”

It had been meant as a message not to take it too much to heart, but met with two rapid-fire rebukes from Palmira and Lilac, Omega made a note to herself that there was room to improve her thoughtfulness.

At any rate, that they were saved was a fact, and that things had been dangerous before that was also a fact.

Noelle: “Nananna, meeting like this was a very happy coincidence… but the reaction of everyone just now was not normal. It seemed they put more weight on something other than the witchbeast being slain…”

Nananna: “Perceptive, Noelle. …Right now, Limbus is facing a bit of a problem. This one was dispatched by the Holy Church’s instruction to deal with it, it is.”

Omega: “A problem, hm.”

A glance showed that the townspeople who had been holding farm tools and pokers were in a dispersing mood, though they wore an awkwardness toward Omega and the others. However, the expressions from which hostility had drained bore not relief, but something like an indelible anxiety or sense of crisis stuck upon them.

And that was not unrelated to the word they had all spoken a short while ago.

Lilac: “They said “witch,” didn’t they.”

Nananna: “Right now in Limbus, strange mysterious-death cases have been occurring one after another. And it is being whispered to everyone that the culprit behind those deaths is a witch, it is.”

5

Palmira: “Haah—somehow, somehow, I finally feel human again—!”

Saying so in an exaggerated voice, Palmira dove sprawled-out onto the bed. As she lay back without changing out of her traveling clothes, Noelle cautioned her, “You will soil it.”

At Noelle’s warning, Palmira shifted atop the bed and said,

Palmira: “I know, I know, but a little bit’s fine, isn’t it? I mean, I thought trouble was going to break out again the moment we entered town, and I could barely breathe.”

Noelle: “Indeed. Judging from Nananna’s demeanor, the townsfolk too seemed to be under much mental strain, so I understand what you are saying, Palmira-sama.”

Palmira: “Right? And if you’re going to talk about manners, it’s not just me…”

As she spoke, Palmira cast a glance at the bed next to the one she was sprawled on—at the figure who had flopped there before Palmira did: Shion.

She was clinging to the bed with her arms even more exuberantly than Palmira, and—

Shion: “Ahh, I blew it big time. Because I messed up the timing to switch with Lilac, I can’t come out to the front for a while. …I shouldn’t come out, right?”

Noelle: “Er, that would be, well…”

Omega: “Noelle, clumsy consolation would only be cruel. Better to say it plainly. Shion’s suspicion is correct. You should avoid being seen in this town.”

Shion: “Aw man, I figured as much. I really did it this time. So bummed.”

Hearing that and letting her head loll, Shion left Palmira with question marks over her head. She probably didn’t grasp the meaning of the exchange. Understandable, if you’re not from Gusteko.

Omega wasn’t from Gusteko either, but she knew the age of the witches instead.

Noelle: “Colette-sama? You don’t look well—are you all right?”

Noticing Colette standing by the entrance with her head lowered, Noelle—who had set down the luggage at the edge of the room and was taking off her coat—called out to her.

Normally, when they came to a new town, inn, or general store, Colette would take the lead in looking around everywhere, but this time there wasn’t a trace of that liveliness.

The reason was easy enough to guess—indeed, it was the same factor roiling this town.

Omega: “Colette was treated as a witch in her hometown. That’s weighing on her chest, I imagine.”

Colette: “Ah, Omega-chan…”

Omega: “Well, I figured it’d be hard to say from your own mouth. It’s better for someone who knows the circumstances to explain, to avoid misunderstandings. It’s my way of being considerate… Hm? You’re making a rather expressive face. What’s the matter?”

Palmira: “Your thoughtfulness isn’t considerate enough! Ugh, honestly!”

Scolding the head-tilting Omega, Palmira hopped down from the bed, pattered over to Colette, and squeezed her hand tight. Colette blinked at her friend’s concern, then let her lips soften.

Colette: “No, Omega-chan isn’t wrong. It’s true. I was called a witch in my village too, so what we heard just now made my heart feel heavy.”

Palmira: “You don’t need to apologize. If anything, I’m sorry for not noticing. I knew your circumstances—and I should have known what was in your heart.”

Omega: “—Somehow, the way that sounded makes it seem like I’m the one who doesn’t understand people’s hearts, doesn’t it?”

Noelle: “Omega-sama, this is an important moment for the two of them.”

Feeling somehow unconvinced, Omega nevertheless backed off obediently at Noelle’s words.

For the moment, leaving care of the younger ones’ hearts to the younger ones, Omega and the others in the older group decided to talk among themselves. The agenda, of course, was—

Noelle: “—The witch hunts, yes.”

Shion: “Mm, just hearing the words makes my back prickle. On that front, do you have any comments from the perspective of Omega-san, who has a whole lot to say about witches?”

Omega: “Well, witches being hounded is the same in any era. I don’t think it’s anything particularly rare. You and Lilac, as elves considered ill-omened because of the Witch of Envy, should be especially careful about your surroundings in this town.”

Shion: “Right. It’s a problem that, basically, Lilac has to be the one out front. She’s surprisingly clumsy at times so—waaah, don’t yell at me!”

Omega: “That in-head conference of yours is as amusing as ever.”

It seemed Lilac had lodged a vehement protest at Shion’s needless remark, though the details were unknown.

At any rate, what they knew was this: right now in the town of Limbus there were these so-called mysterious deaths; at present the culprit was considered to be a witch, and a witch-hunt was underway.

Omega: “And we’re a veritable treasure trove of people who, if someone wanted to force it, could easily be tied to “witches.” Myself goes without saying; Shion and Lilac are elves and heretical Dream Arts Users; Colette’s Beast Protection Bracelet is a “Meteor” detested by the Holy Church; and Palmira has an evil look in her eyes.”

Noelle: “Palmira-sama aside, I agree regarding Shion-sama, Lilac-sama, and Colette-sama. Please all mind your conduct in this town… including you as well, Omega-sama.”

Omega: “Ah, no need to worry. I’ve done plenty of hiding my identity and going to ground in the past.”

Of course, even if she was exposed as a witch and pursued, she had enough ability to cut down her pursuers; but there was no advantage in needless trouble, so as a rule she acted with her true identity concealed. The other witches as well—she would like to say—but for Carmilla, simply appearing in public was enough to trigger a calamity; Daphne and Typhon lacked that sort of consideration; and if you count the shut-in Sekhmet and the never-stopping Minerva as out of the question, that left only herself as the sensible one.

Shion: “Huh? Omega-san, it looks like your necklace is blinking?”

Omega: “It’s something like the Lilac in your head. Protests from my friends. Unfortunately, I can’t carelessly answer them in this town.”

After all, the whole populace was pouring their hearts into witch hunts in that frame of mind. Make any careless, suspicious move and you could be denounced as a “witch” and hauled before a trial.

Omega: “In that sense, is Nananna playing a role like a judge in the witch trials? Noelle, do you Itinerant Preachers ever take on such roles?”

Noelle: “…Given how unusual situations like witch hunts and witch trials are, I cannot readily say yes, but we are at times appointed to a role of offering opinions from a neutral stance to resolve disputes.”

At Noelle’s answer, delivered with a hand to her chin, Omega nodded, satisfied.

By position, an Itinerant Preacher does not stay long in any one municipality, but travels to preach the Holy Church’s teachings. In short, to the town they are fundamentally trustworthy outsiders, and are often entrusted with roles that tout fairness from a third-party standpoint. In that sense, a judge in a witch trial is indeed a good fit.

Omega: “What remains is whether Nananna herself is capable. What’s your impression?”

Noelle: “To the best of my knowledge, Nananna is an excellent Itinerant Preacher. She excels more in wisdom and stratagem than in force of arms, and as we were apprentices at the same time, she taught me reading and writing and we often spoke about interpretations of the holy scriptures.”

Shion: “I see—so “same-bloom stalwarts,” then. Isn’t that a fine relationship!”

Noelle: ““same-bloom stalwarts,” you say…?”

At Shion’s “otherworld word,” spoken with a clenched fist, Noelle wore a puzzled look. Omega deliberately refrained from commenting and set her thoughts to the state of the town.

If Noelle’s words were to be trusted, then as an excellent Itinerant Preacher Nananna was in a position to control the witch hunt in order to resolve the mysterious deaths occurring in the town. However, there was no outlook on solving the crucial cases, and the townspeople’s anxiety was only mounting.

Omega: “And then we sauntered in, carrying a witchbeast’s head. It’s only natural they’d think we provoked them as much as possible. I’m sorry for you, Noelle, after meeting an acquaintance for the first time in a while, but once we’ve made our preparations it seems best to depart quickly.”

Shion: “Right—super big yes from me! …Is what I’d like to say, but is that all right with you, Noelle-san?”

Noelle: “Me?”

Called on by name, Noelle pointed to herself in surprise. Shion answered “Yes” with a nod, and, from atop the bed, turned her gaze out the room’s window to the streets of Limbus.

The color of the sky, gradually nearing dusk—the town there was ruled by a heavy air at odds with that brightness.

Shion: “It’s just a feeling, but I kind of think Nananna-san is someone important to you, Noelle-san. Not just “same-bloom stalwarts,” but, like, a bestie…”

Omega: “Shion seems to suspect you’re especially close. How is it?”

Omega hadn’t thought of it at all, but was Shion’s intuition right? After a short silence, Noelle nodded. “Yes.”

Noelle: “I do not know if one could say “close,” but I owe Nananna a great debt… concerning my homeland.”

Shion: “Your homeland, Noelle-san?”

Omega: “…Ah, I see. I have a general idea.”

Shion tilted her head at Noelle’s troubled expression, but Omega nodded in understanding.

—Originally, behind Noelle becoming an Itinerant Preacher lay the loss of her home and family to an avalanche, and a goal of revenge against those who caused that avalanche.

However, her target for revenge spread money around to cover up the truth and ingratiated themselves with those in power. Though she had a will for revenge, Noelle should not have known where to point it.

In regard to that revenge, Nananna must have lent her strength in some form.

Omega: “Perhaps by procuring records, helping to parse the facts, or obtaining credible information… something along those lines.”

Noelle: “…Omega-sama, you truly see through everything, do you not.”

Omega: “Please don’t. It’s merely conjecture and inference. Being called all-seeing is, for someone who prides herself on her curiosity, the most frightening evaluation.”

Shion: “For the record, the thing I fear most is steamed buns! Followed by really hot tea!”

As if she had been waiting for her cue, Shion tossed out a joke that only Omega would understand, so Omega added, “Looks like that’s our cue,” as a tag.

While Shion rejoiced at that, Omega shrugged at Noelle’s troubled face and said, Omega: “As I said, my opinion is that we should leave town promptly. But if you wish to repay your debt to Nananna, I won’t press you.”

Noelle: “…Is that acceptable? Matters between Nananna and me are of no concern to you, Omega-sama and the others.”

Omega: “That is—”

Colette: “—Please don’t say something so sad, Noelle-san!”

It was Colette who cut in, saying so over Omega’s reply to the timidly inquiring Noelle.

Perhaps having settled the ragged feelings raised in her and Palmira by the word “witch,” Colette wore her usual meddlesomeness on her cute face and—

Colette: “You want to help your friend, don’t you, Noelle-san? Yes, yes—then we want to help too. If she’s your friend, she’s our friend!”

Palmira: “…Well, I, for one, think that’s not quite right.”

Colette: “She’s our friend! And not just that. If the townspeople are anxious about witches, I can’t help wanting to do something for them. Is that strange?”

Tilting her head, Colette looked around at those in the room and asked.

Probably, judged by common sense, Colette’s thinking was the opinion of an oddball. The world teaches that “witches,” real or fake, top the list of things one should not get involved with.

And yet, the reason Colette clenched her fist and tried to press on without avoiding it was—

Omega: “Hm, perhaps it’s her innate recklessness. Colette’s surprisingly fearless.”

Palmira: “No, it’s your influence! Don’t play dumb, “witch”!”

Omega: “…Palmira, have you forgotten the town’s situation? I’d prefer you not go calling me a “witch” so carelessly. You never know what might prove fatal.”

Palmira: “Grr—!”

Shion: “Now, now, now! Please calm down, Palmira-san! I think I’m on the side that understands what you want to say! Probably—maybe! Am I using “maybe” right?”

Omega: “Correct.”

Setting aside Palmira, who was stamping her feet with a red face, they had Colette’s opinion. Omega had already stated her own; that left Shion & Lilac and Palmira.

Shion: “I’m fine with whatever everyone decides, I guess. No matter how I try, this time the approach has to be left to Lilac, and I feel keenly that I’m in a position without much say.”

Omega: “I see. And Lilac?”

Lilac: “—It galls me, but I’m of the same opinion as Shion. For now, being with you all takes priority.”

After answering as Shion, she dutifully switched to Lilac and properly answered Omega’s question. She promptly switched back to Shion with a “That’s what she says”, but they had confirmed her intent.

Colette: “Um, um, and Palmira—how about you?”

Palmira: “…I don’t want anything to do with “witches.” Ugh, I don’t want to get any more involved! And stop giving me those meaningful looks every single time!”

Omega: “I’d like to plead not guilty, but never mind. Go on.”

Palmira: “Guh… Anyway, truthfully, I want to leave town right away. But I don’t want to drag Noelle along when her heart’s still here. If we’re going to help… then I’ll help.”

Noelle: “Palmira-sama…! Everyone…”

Noelle looked moved by the not-so-honest Palmira, who tried to put on a reluctant air.

From Omega’s perspective, once Colette was in favor it was mostly a foregone conclusion. Palmira couldn’t go against Colette, and Omega wanted to see the results of their choice. Shion and Lilac couldn’t leave Omega and the others, so the helm was in Colette’s hands.

Omega: “Well then, since that’s settled, we should hear the details from Nananna. The specifics of the cases and the profile of the wanted culprit… though as for the latter, given how they acted even toward us outsiders, I doubt they’ve narrowed it down.”

Noelle: “No, I am sure Nananna will also find you reassuring. I can proudly guarantee that you are all dependable people.”

Thumping her ample chest, Noelle nodded with a forward-looking face. Then she reached for the coat she had just taken off, and as she slipped her arms into it—

Noelle: “Then I shall go and fetch Nananna.”

Colette: “Mm-Mm, we can’t just leave it to you, Noelle-san. I think Nananna-san would be happier if we told her we all want to help.”

Palmira: “Eh? B-But I only just took off my boots that had gone cold at the inn… Fine, fine.”

Wilting under their looks mid-conversation, Palmira tearfully began putting back on the boots she’d taken off. In that vein, everyone moved to don once more the traveling clothes they had already shed.

Watching that, Omega gave a small “hm” of breath and looked out the window.

And then—

Omega: “Noelle, it seems we’ve been spared the trouble of going to look for Nananna.”

Noelle: “Eh…?”

Omega: “Because it looks like she’s come to visit us from the other side.”

At the spot Omega pointed to as she spoke—hurrying up to the inn’s entrance—was Nananna herself, whom they had only just parted from in the square.

6

—Because Limbus was not covered by thick snow clouds, even at night it was faintly lit by starlight, and they could make out one another’s faces without torches.

Omega: “That said, there’s no point in not carrying a torch or lagmite ore when walking around at night, so I suppose that was a rather pointlessly sentimental thought.”

Palmira: “…You really can keep running your mouth even at a time like this… ah, forget it. Saying it’s pointless, and saying it anyway just makes me feel like an idiot.”

Omega: “I don’t know if it’s any comfort, but by the standard of your age, you’re quite a clever girl.”

Palmira: “Yeah yeah yeah yeah.”

Brushed off despite the honest praise, Omega shrugged with a weary air. —Omega and the others were now moving as a group through Limbus’s night streets toward their destination.

The party numbered nearly fifty, a large group; the great majority were townsmen of Limbus, and the few women—Omega’s party aside—were limited to Nananna at the front.

Omega: “Me, on a witch hunt. How ironic.”

As that under-the-breath remark implied, the group’s objective was a witch hunt—ostensibly the apprehension and questioning of a townsman who had been denounced as a “witch.”

Right after hearing at the inn about Noelle’s relationship with Nananna and deciding to help resolve the “witch” problem menacing the town, Nananna came to visit and asked for cooperation on the witch hunt. Strictly speaking, only Noelle was asked—and that was because the strength behind the Snow Blight they had brought as a gift had been recognized. However—

Noelle: “It was not I who slew the witchbeast. This Omega-sama did it by herself, without any danger… She is not only powerful, but very quick-witted, and dependable!”

Nananna: “…This one is doubtful. Where would such an urchin have obtained such power and wisdom, it is?”

Omega: “An old skill I picked up back in the day, perhaps.”

—there had been some exchanges that walked a fine and dangerous line.

Fortunately, the trust between Noelle and Nananna was not one-way from Noelle; it seemed Nananna, too, placed considerable trust in her. Thanks to that, Nananna shelved her doubts about Omega for the time being and permitted them to accompany the witch hunt.

To be frank, Omega had thought Palmira and Colette—who was forbidden to use her “Meteor”—could stay behind, but they said they would be more uneasy being left, so everyone came.

Lilac: “Why do I have to do this…? A witch hunt is no joke.”

And so, naturally, Lilac—recognized by the townsfolk as one of Omega’s group—was with them as well. Perhaps out of habit, she was biting her nails; like Omega, she seemed to have mixed feelings. If you’re an elf, you’ve probably been treated as a “witch” once or twice.

Omega felt that, if she said “Then put that experience to use,” it would not be taken as advice, so she swallowed the urge to say it.

Nananna: “This time, the one denounced as a witch is a general store merchant named Piditz, it is.”

While Omega wrestled with that, the leading Nananna began her explanation.

It was only natural that the outsider Omega’s group had no idea who he was, but the other townsfolk participating in the witch hunt were not the same. Perhaps because everyone knew the named Piditz, whispers of anger, abuse, and grievances against him rose on all sides.

Colette: “Uu, everyone’s faces are so scary…”

Sensing the mood around them, Colette looked about anxiously.

For the gentle and guileless girl, it was a harsh situation, but considering the state of mind of townsfolk driven to carry out a witch hunt, one could say they were still quite composed.

Omega knew all too well, and up close, just how terrifying and frenzied people could become when they lost their wits over “witches.”

Most likely, what kept their hearts from reaching a decisive breaking point was Nananna’s presence—the trust that someone of the Gusteko Holy Church was striving to resolve the situation. That it seemed to be something won not simply by borrowing the name and prestige of the Gusteko Holy Church, but by Nananna’s actions and bearing, was proof of the excellence Noelle had spoken of.

Nananna: “Our goal is, after all, to secure Piditz’s person, it is. The questioning will be conducted by this one, it is. For that reason, refrain from reckless acts, it is.”

Reining the townsfolk in so they would not run wild, Nananna halted. The witch hunt party arrived before the general store—the building that combined shop and residence.

???: “…”

When Nananna quietly raised a hand and glanced around, the townsfolk began, without the need for words, to slowly surround the building. From the look of things, this was not most townsfolk's first witch hunt. They acted like people who knew the drill.

Omega: "Which also means they haven't drawn the correct answer."

If they had already conducted the witch hunt several times and the real "witch" had not been caught, then what had happened to those who weren't—and why had they been denounced?

There seemed to be no time now to dig deeply into those matters.

Omega: "Colette and Palmira, stay with Lilac. You've got quick eyes, don't you?"

Lilac: "…Noelle is up front, but your hands are free."

Omega: "You three are the ones who can't move carelessly. It's easier to handle things if you stick together. As for me, it seems I'm being counted on as fighting strength."

Since Noelle had explained to Nananna that Omega had slain the Snow Blight, offering to help and then doing no work could easily win them ill will.

Lilac sighed; taking that as consent, Omega fluttered her hand and started forward to link up with Noelle and Nananna—and just then—

Palmira: "—Huh, is that…?"

The faintly foolish-sounding voice came from Palmira, who had turned her eyes down a side street.

At the very rear of the group surrounding the general store, scanning the world on the bias as always, she had spotted a figure peering at them from the depths of an alley and spoke up.

At once, someone who had looked down the alley at her voice cried out.

???: "It's Piditz!!"

With the name of the man in question—the man denounced as a "witch"—shouted, agitation ran through the group in an instant. Had the man sensed the witch hunt's movements in advance and abandoned his workplace? Faced with a kind of trouble they had likely not encountered before, the townsfolk looked hurriedly at one another—but—

Nananna: "Chase at once, it is! Noelle, with this one, it is."

Noelle: "Of course!"

Kicking up snow, the first to move were the two Itinerant Preachers, veterans of rough affairs.

Roused by their shout that struck their eardrums, the townsfolk who had started to falter quickly pulled themselves together. Chasing after Noelle and the others at the lead, they surged into the alley with a roar.

Omega: "Wait. It's pointless for everyone to chase the same way. Better to head them off down the alleys. Prioritize cutting off the escape routes."

Before everyone plunged into the alley, Omega called out; about half the townsfolk agreed that made sense and scattered to get ahead.

Colette: "Omega-chan!"

Omega: "You stay right there. I'll be right back."

Answering Colette's call thus, Omega thought a moment and then hurried to join the heading-off team.

Even so, she likely would not have a turn to act. She knew nothing about this Piditz, but being chased by Noelle, a powerful Itinerant Preacher, and her colleague Nananna—there was no way he could get away. Nor could he slip past nearly fifty men's eyes. And Omega, slow as she was—by the time she arrived, it would all be over. She said it herself.

In fact, Omega lost sight not only of Noelle and those who had followed them, but even of the trailing group that had set out to get ahead and block the escape routes; she tr—walked alone down the dark street at night—no, she was running.

Omega: “Haa, haa… well, I’ll praise myself just for not slipping on the snow…”

She was not slacking. She had tried her utmost. Once she met up with Noelle, the plan was to have the sweat on her brow as proof and have her contribution recognized—and—

—immediately after, there was a tremendous sound of something falling, right behind Omega.

Omega: “…”

She halted and looked back, narrowing her eyes. In the dim street, she saw that “something” had appeared on the road she had just passed—something that had not been there a moment before. Keeping the motionless thing in her sight, Omega closed the distance step by step.

Then, the starlight made clear what that “something” was—it was the corpse of a man, limbs twisted into grotesque shapes, blood spattered everywhere.

And just as she confirmed that—

???: “—A-A witch appeared! A witch has appeared!!”

A townsman who had heard the same sound and rushed to the scene cried out.

Noticing that the man’s gaze was fixed on Omega, who was beside the corpse, she looked up at the sky.

Omega: “Good grief… I’ve already been caught once when I was alive; it’s an experience I’d rather not repeat.”

—Ironically, before being seized in a witch hunt as a “witch,” Omega had grumbled thus.

7

—The cold, damp air gives the lungs an unpleasant feeling.

Rusty iron bars, and a floor dirtied with dust on which old straw had been spread. The unsanitary air leaves a gritty sensation on the tongue, making it a place that evokes a physiological disgust that makes one hesitate to linger. All the same, considering the purpose of the place, it’s probably correct that it gives such an impression.

After all, it is a prison where those who have committed sins are confined.

Witch: “In my experience, a jail isn’t there to lock people up; it’s there for the peace of mind of the people outside. “The criminal’s already been caught, so it’s fine”… In this case, you could say it’s to make them think, “The ‘witch’ has already been caught, so we can relax.”“

In that dim space, the “witch’s” voice was spun out dispassionately, and yet fluently. From inside the iron bars, despite being the one confined, there was nothing in her tone that let one feel it.

What kept her from seeming weak was not just the “witch’s” manner of speaking, but perhaps her choice of topic as well. In the way she gave her impressions about cells, there was not a trace of pathos or a pessimistic hue.

Witch: “Incidentally, the reason straw is spread on a cell’s floor isn’t for warmth or for bedding; it’s to soak up blood, vomit, and excreta. So a cell that doesn’t get its straw replaced quickly turns into a sick ward, and the prisoners inside die off in droves.”

???: “…”

Witch: “Oh? Did that not strike your fancy? It’s far too out of the blue to bring up in everyday conversation, so I figured now that I’m in a cell is exactly when I ought to trot out this trivia.”

???: “…Trivia or whatever, I don’t know, but you really never change, do you.”

At that nonchalant “witch’s” manner of speaking, a response of exasperation slipped out through the bars.

Inside, there was a part of her that felt a bit saved by the “witch’s” business-as-usual, but Palmira decided she’d never say that aloud, not even over her dead body. In any case, the situation was far from reassuring. The fact that the “witch” wasn’t more dejected than expected was the lowest of the low even among good news.

Colette: “Omega-chan, it’s okay. It’s just a misunderstanding. I’m sure, I’m sure you’ll be out right away!”

Omega: ““Just a misunderstanding,” huh. I’m not sure you can state that so definitively. After all, what the townsfolk are searching for is a “witch.” It’s true that, in the sense of the “witch” who caused this uproar, it wouldn’t be accurate, but if you narrow it down to only the single point of being a “witch,” then I also…”

Palmira: “You don’t have to say any more than that. Ah, seriously, my head hurts…”

To Colette, clinging to the bars with worry, the pitiless “witch’s” reply was circuitous and off the mark. To prevent that extra fact from spreading, she shut her up before she could go on, and Palmira let out a deep sigh.

In truth, the “witch’s” concern lay there as a great worry, but an issue prior to that had been casting a deep shadow over their journey again and again.

Because—

Omega: “…”The witch” has been caught by a witch hunt. Now then, how shall we talk our way out of this? Should be quite a sight, no?”

Palmira: “Why are you, the very person in question, acting like it’s someone else’s problem!”

And there, in such a desperate predicament, the captive “witch”—Omega—was wearing a faint smile.

—The town of Limbus, where they stopped over in the midst of their journey.

That Omega and company were caught up in the swirl of serial mysterious-death cases occurring in that town is something that, by now, can only be explained by suspecting some kind of curse or conspiracy.

After all, despite being asked to help resolve the incidents, before they knew it Omega had been nabbed as the "witch," a candidate for the culprit. Unless it was someone's ill will, it doesn't add up.

Colette: "But we only came to this town by chance. And yet someone doing something nasty to Omega-chan is weird—just weird."

Lilac: "There's a saying in the world: "one's everyday conduct." She brazenly talks about her bad tastes all the time. Isn't it only natural that one or two bolts of divine punishment would strike her?"

Shion: "L-Lilac-san, saying it like that is… um, Omega-chan is, uh, um…"

Noelle: "Lilac-sama, please go a little easier… Colette-sama is on the verge of tears…"

At Lilac's opinion, merciless even toward one of their own, Colette tried to chide her and failed. Even Colette, it seems, can't fully defend Omega's usual words and deeds. Well, small wonder.

Be that as it may—

Palmira: "It's too late to harp on how bad Omega's everyday conduct is. But that doesn't mean Omega did it. We're all in agreement on that, right?"

At Palmira's confirmation, though the strength varied, all their companions nodded back.

Frankly, even among her own, Omega's character doesn't have favorable standing, but Palmira and the others have no intention of accepting that as a reason to let her be saddled with a false charge.

—Last night, a witch hunt to secure the person who had been informed upon as a “witch” was carried out in Limbus, and Omega and the others were roped in to help. In the midst of that, one of the hunters was found as a bizarre corpse killed by a power beyond human ken, and, as ill luck would have it, Omega was discovered right beside the body and came under suspicion as a “witch.”

Of course, as Colette said, since the witch uproar itself had been happening since before Omega and the others arrived in Limbus, the suspicion that Omega was the “witch” at the root of the chaos should have been cleared up immediately. —It should have been, but.

Secretary: “—Well then, regarding the “witch” apprehended last night, shall we proceed? Let us carry out the execution at the Hour of Fire tomorrow.”

At that outrageous proposition thrown out at the very start of the town council, Palmira gaped.

The place was Limbus’s assembly hall, the people gathered were the town’s leading figures, the purpose was a discussion, the topic was the mysterious-death cases disturbing the town—in more detail, the disposition of the “witch” captured last night, namely Omega in her cell.

Naturally, Palmira and the others, Omega’s companions, were also seated at the end of the hall, prepared to insist on Omega’s release and exoneration, but their start was grandly tripped up.

This was strange. It was supposed to begin as a discussion, and yet this was nothing but a notice of a decided matter.

???: “Yeah, well, right. From the sound of it she’s pretty? Suspicious? Or something? I think that’s fine. Everyone’s fine with that too, yeah?”

What’s more, as if to press them further, the person seated in the middle of the council addressed those around him like that. His way of speaking, while ostensibly seeking agreement, somehow brooked no dissent, and carried a coerciveness that forced others to follow his line.

She understood it intuitively: if they kept silent like this, it would be bad.

Palmira: “W-Wait, wait! Objection! Objection! No matter how you slice it, that’s pushing it way too hard!”

???: “Oh? “Pushing it”—you mean me? If so, I’m offended, yeah. It’s not “pushing”; it’s what responsibility demands. Uncle here is, after all, the council’s representative. Yeah?”

Palmira: “That doesn’t mean you get to spout nonsense! Don’t just say whatever you want!”

Leaping up on the momentum and glaring at the man who called himself the representative, Palmira fixed him with her eyes.

The man who called himself “uncle” was in his late thirties, a dandy with neatly groomed facial hair around his mouth, but he gave the impression of someone draped in a vaguely damp air.

Edmon Quail—that’s what he had introduced himself as at first, if she remembered right.

Secretary: ““Nonsense,” you say? I cannot let that pass. Would you enlighten us? About the “nonsense” this delightful uncle has supposedly uttered?”

Standing in for Edmon, the one who answered Palmira’s fury was a cool-headed-looking woman—the long blue-haired secretary who had first pronounced Omega’s execution.

Wilting a bit under her emotionless gaze, Palmira let out an “Uh,” and then Colette, seated beside her, gently took Palmira’s hand.

Colette: “It’s okay, it’s okay, Palmira. Don’t let them beat you.”

Encouraged thus, Palmira shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she opened them and, fixing the secretary, Edmon, and the others straight on, said, Palmira: “Explain it? You need me to spell it out? Listen. We’re travelers, okay? We just happened to stop by this town. And we only arrived yesterday, when the incidents here were already well underway… There’s no way we’re involved!”

Secretary: “There is some logic there, I see. And what say you, amusing uncle?”

Arguing logically—though with irritation mixed in—that Omega’s capture was unjust, Palmira made her case. The secretary, surprisingly reasonable, nodded, but Edmon did not.

With a sticky “Right, right,” he gave his preface and then said,

Edmon: ““Amusing” is a bit much, yeah? Besides, witches are a crafty breed. Just look at how they’ve kept Limbus in an uproar to this very day. Which means it wouldn’t be strange if they were scheming all sorts of things from outside the town, yeah?”

Palmira: “Wh—…”

Edmon: “And also, yeah? You say you came to Limbus yesterday, but that’s just your own claim. Maybe you’ve been lurking outside the town all along, snickering from afar at the chaos here. You can’t deny that possibility, can you? Yeah?”

Palmira: “If you’re going to start saying stuff like that, then anything goes!”

Rather than an outrageous argument, by this point it was already nothing but an accusation. But Edmon, at Palmira’s outburst, raised both hands and, as if brazening it out, cocked an eyebrow with a “Yeah?”

Edmon: ““Anything goes” is overstating it; I’m saying the possibility remains. And if the possibility doesn’t go away, then as someone important, uncle has to do what must be done. Which, in short, means an execution. You get it, yeah?”

Palmira: “We’re talking about our companion! Of course I don’t “get it”!”

Edmon: “So that’s a confession that you’re “witch” buddies too? One could take it that way, yeah?”

Palmira: “Ggh—!”

He kept to nothing but nitpicking, and Palmira’s face flushed scarlet as she gnashed her teeth. Omega often did the “if you say this, I’ll say that” to her, but Edmon’s way was even more infuriating than Omega’s.

That’s because Omega’s rhetoric had no malice, while Edmon’s had nothing but.

In this man’s attitude there was nothing but the evil of trying to smooth-talk an ignorant child.

Noelle: “—Nananna, will you truly remain silent and watch this?”

Nananna: “…”

Drawn into the spotlight, Nananna had been seated beside Edmon in the hall. That was proof she was recognized as having equal speaking power to the council’s representative. Like Palmira and the others, she was an outsider to the town, but the position of an Itinerant Preacher dispatched from the Holy Church of Gusteko was that strong.

Despite being in that position, she did not move proactively, so Noelle prodded her. One reason for that was surely that Noelle and Nananna had known each other from before.

Nananna: “…This one was dispatched with the aim of settling the situation. If the “witch” that threatens the town is gone, that is for the best… it is.”

Noelle: “I understand what you say, but is this truly “for the best”? Even to your eyes, is executing Omega-samaa a situation that accords with the Holy Church’s teachings?”

At Noelle, who would not accept it and pressed her, Nananna quietly averted her eyes.

Honestly, Palmira didn't know the nature of the two's relationship, but at the very least it seemed certain Nananna wasn't someone they could rely on here.

If so—

Palmira: "—Fine. All right."

Secretary: "You are satisfied, then? That means the half-lidded young lady is also in agreement?"

Palmira: "I don't like that way of addressing me, and I'm not "satisfied," either. That's not it."

Edmon: ""That's not it," huh? I'd like an explanation even us old men can understand. Yeah?"

With the secretary, Edmon, and the other councilors all watching her, Palmira held her breath. If she said what came next, there would be no turning back. The only choice would be to press on.

But if she was going to say it, Palmira and the others had long since had no retreat. —From the day they decided to leave their hometown together with a "witch."

Palmira: "—I demand that a Witch Trial be convened!"

Eyes flaring wide, Palmira shook off her hesitation and proclaimed it loud.

In an instant, silence ruled the hall, followed by a murmur of surprise. That murmur was not the doubt of those facing the unknown, but a disquiet born of knowing. It was the agitation of all Limbus at the ring of the words "Witch Trial" that Palmira demanded.

Nananna: "This one asks whether you understand what the convening of a Witch Trial means."

At Nananna's question, Palmira nodded deeply: "Of course."

A Witch Trial, as the characters suggest, is a trial to question the defendant’s witchhood—in other words, to contest whether Omega is a “witch” deserving of execution. That in itself is the same as Palmira and the others insisting on Omega’s innocence here. Then what makes it different from a normal trial? That its verdict, under the name of the Holy Church of Gusteko, can never be overturned, and—and—

Nananna: “—Those who defend a “witch,” that is to say, are themselves also “witches.” If you were to contest the trial and lose, this one says you too would be judged as a “witch.”“

Palmira: “…”

Nananna: “Even so, do you still wish for the trial to be convened? Yes—this one is questioning your resolve.”

Pressing her again on her resolve was, in a sense, Nananna’s compassion. Perhaps her preacher’s benevolent heart was advising them that they could still turn back now.

But to Palmira, whose resolve was already made, it was nothing but noisy.

Palmira: “Fine. If Omega is a “witch,” then in that case—…”

Pausing partway through words she was about to declare with her chest thrust out, she tilted her head once to the people in the hall and then said,

Palmira: “If Omega is the “witch” who caused this town’s uproar, then I’ll be burned at the stake with her or whatever else right alongside her!”

—A declaration that, to defend the “witch” among her own, clearly set out the conditions in writing.

9

Palmira: “Ahh~ I might’ve jumped the gun. In the end, it turned out just like Omega said…”

Flopping bonelessly onto the inn bed, Palmira clawed at her own

head.

It was right after she had cut loose at the assembly hall and demanded that a Witch Trial be convened. The moment they made it back to the inn for a strategy meeting, a fierce wave of regret crashed over Palmira.

Declaring she was ready to go down with Omega—where had she taken a wrong turn?

Colette: “But, but, you were so cool, Palmira! Sitting next to you, I was all on edge, and I squeezed your hand thinking, say more, say more—!”

Palmira: “Yeah, thanks to that I’ve lost all feeling in my right hand. You’ve gotten strong…”

Colette: “Ah, oh, s-sorry, I’m sorry! Palmira, is your hand okay?!”

Flustered, Colette took Palmira’s outstretched hand and gently kneaded it. Letting Colette have her way with her right hand, Palmira sat up.

Then she looked over at Noelle and Lilac, whom she’d dragged into sharing her resolve,

Palmira: “Sorry for speaking for everyone. I dragged the two of you into it as well.”

Noelle: “No, there is no need to apologize. I too would not have abided a situation where Omega-sama ended up being executed as things stood.”

Lilac: “Indeed. It feels odd to praise it, but your words were refreshing. —Shion says she’d also like you to pass along good job, good job.”

Palmira: “Hearing that takes a load off. I don’t know what good job is, though.”

At any rate, it was a blessing that they’d avoided fighting over the move to demand a trial—even counting Shion inside Lilac’s head.

Though all of it had the feel of being in the palm of Omega's hand.

After all, the demand for a trial had been the suggestion of Omega herself, from her cell.

Omega: "If we probably do nothing, I think my execution will be decided just like that. It's always been that way: once a witch hunt has certified you as a "witch," there's no escaping it. No matter how sound the argument, it can't be traded for the peace of the majority. Hahaha, absolutely hopeless."

So said the captive "witch," with not a shred of seriousness or urgency, but in fact the town council had nearly proceeded exactly as she said, and one could only tip one's hat at the accuracy of her assessment.

That said, the reason Palmira and the others could swallow Omega's reckless proposal lay in the fact that, for them, the worst-case scenario simply couldn't come to pass to begin with.

Palmira: "Because even if, say, it came to Omega being executed, there's no way that girl would meekly let herself be executed."

Colette: "Right, right. If it comes down to it, I'll go all out for Omega-chan too."

Clenching the hand opposite the one she was massaging, Colette had, for caution's sake, removed the "Beast Protection Bracelet," but if it came to it she would not hesitate to use its power.

Even without that, there was no way Omega would just sit there and be executed.

Palmira: "Unless the person herself says something like, "I wanted to try being executed once, purely out of curiosity," that is."

Colette: "That's not impossible, so don't say scary things… But that's really, truly the last resort. We have to assume last time with Lilac and Shion was a fluke."

Lilac: "…Right."

Lilac answered briefly—what she and her counterpart Shion had pulled off had been a fairly large-scale magical disaster that put an entire town to sleep and sent it into dysfunction. At the time, Omega had threatened the Itinerant Preacher who happened to be present and settled it by preventing the facts from being reported.

But that sort of method can't be repeated often. If Omega rampaged in this town, this time it would surely be impossible to avoid drawing the Holy Church of Gusteko's ire.

Colette: "If we become wanted by the Holy Church, living in Gusteko would be totally impossible, right?"

Noelle: "Indeed. Almost all citizens of the Holy Kingdom are believers of the Holy Church, so you would be hunted wherever you went… To go further, even if you fled to another nation, there is the possibility you would be found and handed over to the Holy Kingdom."

Palmira: "In other words, it's a battle we absolutely cannot lose…!"

Buoyed by the persuasiveness of Noelle—herself an Itinerant Preacher who knew the Holy Church of Gusteko inside and out—Palmira's determination toward the trial only hardened.

However, into Palmira's zeal Lilac interjected with, "But,"

Lilac: "In the end, it doesn't change that the odds are against us. A Witch Trial, whatever you call it, is an Inquisition by another name."

Colette: "Um, um? If it's an Inquisition, is there some problem?"

Lilac: "A big one. Because there isn't a single person who underwent an Inquisition and escaped suspicion."

Palmira & Colette: "Eh."

At Lilac's words, arms crossed and wearing a stern expression, Palmira and Colette's voices overlapped. At their reaction, Lilac turned to Noelle with a "Right?"

At Lilac’s prompt, Noelle let her brows droop weakly and said,

Noelle: “Yes, that is so. However, that is because in all those cases they were unquestionably judged heretical; in Nananna’s hands, with her fair eye, Omega-sama’s false charge will surely—”

Lilac: “Unfortunately, what I want isn’t reckless optimism but a realistic answer. There’s nothing so troublesome as hope shown irresponsibly.”

Noelle: “…”

At Lilac’s merciless words, delivered with a crisp snap, Noelle’s expression tightened in pain.

But the fact that a rebuttal didn’t come right away was proof that Noelle too had doubts or thoughts about Nananna’s attitude in the hall. Even to Palmira’s eyes, Lilac’s argument carried more weight.

Colette: “But if that’s the case, Omega will be found guilty, and Limbus will vanish from the map…”

Colette: “Then what we have to do is super, super simple.”

Palmira: “Colette…?”

Colette: “We absolutely, absolutely have to win tomorrow’s trial. Because otherwise neither Omega-chan nor the people of this town can be happy.”

Colette’s conclusion was terribly simple, yet easy to grasp. One could say it was obvious, but even so, Palmira nodded, “You’re right.”

She’d thought it in the hall from the start. Palmira and the others had no way out. Which meant that if the only paths were victory or defeat, they could choose only the path of victory.

Palmira: “We’ve got no choice. Tomorrow’s trial, no matter what… Tomorrow—tomorrow, right. Way too little time… Maybe it really is impossible…”

Colette: “C-Calm down, Palmira! Yes, that’s it, let’s take deep breaths together! And if we look back on our fun memories with Omega-chan, won’t that get you fired up?”

Palmira: “Fun memories with that one…? Did we? Did we, really? Calmly thinking about it, why am I even traveling with such a basket case…?”

Colette: “D-Deep breaths! Deep breaths! Here—inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale!”

Prompted by Colette, who clung to her desperately, Palmira went along with the deep breathing. Whether or not it calmed her feelings, oxygen reached her brain and her room to think and motivation returned.

Whether the suspicion was unjust or not aside, it was certain it was a false charge.

Palmira: “So, what we can do before tomorrow’s trial… First off, we should learn more detail about the incidents causing all the commotion.”

Colette: “Yes, yes, that’s right. Other than that there’s a “witch,” we hardly know anything.”

Noelle: “Aside from that, when it comes to helping Lady Omega, the most effective thing would be…”

Lilac: “—Securing the real “witch,” I’d say.”

At Lilac’s words, the three—Palmira and the others—nodded deeply.

In this case, “witch” did not mean a dyed-in-the-wool evil “witch” like Omega, but the “witch” in the sense of the prime mover causing the present turmoil in Limbus.

Since Omega was suspected of being that “witch,” if they simply caught that other “witch,” it would prove that Omega was a different kind of “witch.”

Palmira: “The person chased in yesterday’s witch hunt hasn’t been caught, right? And the one Omega is said to have killed was a townsman who took part in the witch hunt.”

Noelle: “Indeed. The witch hunt was originally to secure that man. The fact that there was an anonymous tip means there are points of suspicion.”

Palmira: “If we find him, this will go quickly. …Unrelated, but it’s odd that he’s treated as a “witch” even though he’s a man. Do they not call them “warlocks” or something?”

Colette: “If we’re not distinguishing, calling them “magic folk” sounds more natural. Omega-chan would probably know that kind of story in detail, right?”

Palmira: “Ah, that reminds me, we have to tell that Omega pest we’re holding a trial… Ugh, I can already see the smug face she’ll make about how it ended up just like she said…!”

Frustrating as it was, when it came to holding a Witch Trial, advice from Omega would be no bad thing. Not that she was worried Omega would be lonely in her cell, of course.

At any rate, they had their provisional plan.

Palmira: “Someone to gather information on the town, and someone to hunt the “witch” who’s been on the run since yesterday. I’ll stop by Omega’s place for the moment, but…”

Noelle: “Given stamina and all, I am the most suitable to search for the “witch.”“

Lilac: “…Then I’ll be the one to gather the town’s information.”

Palmira: “Right. Let’s go with that. What about you, Colette?”

Colette: “I… if it’s all right, could I go with Lilac-san?”

Lilac: “With us?”

Round-eyed, Lilac pointed to herself in surprise. At her reaction, Colette tilted her head: “Is that not okay?”

Colette: “Right now I just really want to learn anything I can about the town… It’s not that I’m not worried about Omega-chan, but I’m not all that worried about her being in a cell.”

Lilac: “Well, it’s Omega; she’s probably enjoying herself. I’m more worried about the jailer.”

There was a chance the jailer had been worn out by Omega’s long-windedness. Or, having reached the end of their patience, that a fatal rift had opened between them.

Palmira: “Uh, now I feel even less like we can leave it be. W-We’d better hurry.”

Colette: “Right? Um, um, how about it, Lilac-san?”

Lilac: “…I don’t particularly mind. Shion says she’s giving a big welcome—welcome, too.”

At Lilac, who dutifully spoke for the Shion in her head as well, Colette pressed her hands to her chest with a “Great!” and her eyes sparkled.

Softening at the corners of her eyes at the sight, Palmira turned to Noelle with a “Sorry,” and said,

Palmira: “One way or another, we always end up making you take the exhausting role.”

Noelle: “Not at all; this is division of roles. We always ask Palmira-sama and Colette-sama to take on roles I cannot, besides. And this time…”

Palmira: “This time?”

Noelle: “Lilac-sama and Shion-sama’s efforts will prove very important, I believe.”

Noelle cast a sidelong glance at Lilac. At that look, Lilac shrugged.

Lilac: “…I suppose so. Whether we can live up to expectations or not, we’ll do what we can.”

Noelle: “—Yes. I humbly ask it of you.”

Noelle bowed deeply, and the division of roles among the four—no, five—was complete. The trial was tomorrow; it was the crossroads of Limbus’s fate, entrusted to a “witch”—

Palmira: “Let’s do this so no one can say the town perished because of us!”

Colette: “Yeah!”

Noelle: “Yes, indeed.”

Lilac: “Right.”

And with their replies, preparations for the Witch Trial began.

10

Shion: “Well—the situation is what it is, but this kind of thing is nice, isn’t it? You know, like, One for all! All for one! Doesn’t it feel like that?”

Lilac: “Everyone for one. One for everyone?”

Shion: “Yes, yes! And—ba-bam—it looks like Lilac’s fired up too.”

Lilac: “Who knows.”

She did think that, if one had to say whether she was motivated or not, she fell on the “motivated” side.

Lilac: “Only, I wouldn’t call it forward-looking. When all’s said and done, I don’t much think we have a chance of winning a Witch Trial… the Gusteko Inquisition.”

Shion: “I wouldn’t call it backward-looking either. Given where we are.”

Dropping her tone just a little, Shion paused her reckless positivity.

Though the reaction threw her off-kilter, Lilac appreciated that she didn't offer empty comfort.

For all that, Lilac and Shion were elves and counted among the older members of the party—indeed, among the far older group—and they had been through all kinds of experiences. The sort of experiences they wouldn't want the younger ones, like Colette or Palmira, to hear.

As for the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, they had many thoughts where the Holy Church was concerned. The Inquisition, in which there was no escape once suspected—that was the prime example.

Shion: "All the more so because it's actually true that Omega-san is a "witch.""

Lilac: "That's the trickiest part."

There were no magics or magic tools that could measure whether someone was a "witch," which, paradoxically, meant there were no means to deny it either. In that case, any method of questioning the target's witchhood at trial could only be called a war of impressions devolving into a fruitless back-and-forth.

Lilac: "By the time you're put on trial, it's as good as having lost the battle of impressions."

Shion: "Of course, since it takes the form of a trial, I want to believe they won't do anything rude like "no questions asked," but with Limbus shaping the trial's atmosphere, the whole town is basically the enemy. They say Noelle-san's friend Nananna will strive for fairness, though."

Lilac: "I wonder how far we can trust someone whose very position is the Holy Church."

She was Noelle's acquaintance, perhaps even friend. Lilac didn't want to speak ill of her out of hand, but she wasn't someone you'd bend your principles to cover for.

Shion's wry smile at Lilac's stance was plain to see.

Colette: “—Have you finished lining up your opinions with Shion, Lilac-san?”

Right as their literal in-head conference reached a stopping point, Colette addressed her.

Colette had been considerate enough to wait before speaking to her. Appreciating the thoughtfulness, Lilac nodded with an “Yes.”

Lilac: “Sorry to keep you. Shion also heard the talk back at the inn, so I wasn’t re-explaining it from scratch.”

Colette: “No, it’s totally fine, really. Lilac-san and Shion-san are in each other’s heads, but talking still takes the same time as it does for us outside, right?”

Lilac: “Yes—though it’s inconvenient. I’m Shion’s alternate personality, but as a soul I’m already a separate being… our hearts aren’t shared. So we have to talk to understand each other.”

Shion: “Even if it’s inconvenient, I think this setup is the best for our relationship!”

At the vision of Shion giving a thumbs-up with a smile, Lilac only shrugged and didn’t answer.

Originally, Lilac and Shion’s relationship hadn’t been like this. They had been far more cutthroat: the main personality Shion and the alternate personality Lilac were in a relationship of wrestling for control over the body.

And then one day, it stopped being that way. —Neither Lilac nor Shion remembered the decisive reason. They only concluded that they had slipped into someone’s dream, and the experience there had changed them for good.

The many unknown words and bits of knowledge they possessed backed that up, and to fill the blank in their hearts that had been created before they knew it, they kept searching for an answer.

And—

Lilac: “—Omega has the answer we want.”

Shion: “Which is why if Omega-san disappeared on us, or got slammed with pinch after pinch with no time to breathe, we’d be in deep trouble.”

That was why Lilac and company would do their utmost to see Omega acquitted.

Lilac: “So, our role is to gather information on the town. For now, the details of the “witch” uproar.”

Colette: “Yes, yes, right—let’s do our best! …But it seems the townspeople aren’t very willing to talk with us. Because we came with Omega-chan.”

Lilac: “So they think the rest of us might be “witches” too. …Maybe we should use the last resort.”

Colette: “A-Already?! I’m super, super happy you’re reliable, Lilac-san, but is it okay to use it this soon?”

Lilac: “If we’re going for certainty, I don’t think it’s a question of soon or late.”

Shion: “If there’s any problem, it’s the guilt that we might leave Colette-san with nothing to do… no, maybe it’d be wiser to bring her along?”

If she went with Shion’s suggestion, they’d be steering toward exhausting even their last resort plus a workaround—but Lilac didn’t think it was a bad play. In that case, even though they’d gone to the trouble of leaving the inn, they would, for the sake of keeping out of sight, have to turn right back around—

Secretary: “—You two companions, are you? And who should it be but the witch suspect’s—”

Lilac: “You are…”

Colette: “The lady who tried to execute Omega-chan!”

Just as they were drafting plans to turn back, the one who addressed them was the woman who served as secretary to Edmon, the council's representative.

Narrowing her long eyes at Lilac and Colette, who were walking together, she said,

Secretary: "That is an unwarranted assessment. I do not think being described that way is appropriate."

Colette: "Ah… s-sorry. I'm sorry."

Lilac: "Yes, I'll apologize too. I just couldn't forget the impact of your opening."

Shion: "Ooh, nice one, Lilac! Clap clap! Clap clap!"

Lilac answered Shion without remorse: "They're the rude one." Lilac's policy toward first-time acquaintances was straightforward—if they were friendly, be gentle; if they were hostile, be stern and thorough.

Apparently catching the intent, the secretary stared back intently at Lilac and said,

Secretary: "Making arrangements? To flee before the enemy. You think the odds are against you, after all."

Shion: "Sh-She picked a fight! She's picked a fight with us!"

Lilac: "Indeed. Someone this easy to read makes it easy to pick a stance—how helpful."

Well then, if the other side was up for it, she'd just hit back—so Lilac, spurred on by Shion, was thinking aggressively when—

Colette: "Um! This might be presumptuous, but could we hear your account?"

Colette bowed deeply to the secretary as she said it. In the instant Lilac saw that, she was struck by a powerful shame and self-reproach, and chastised herself for her immaturity.

Shion: “…I’ve done it. Me, Shion—forgetting the battle in the middle of the battle.”

The same shock seemed to hit Shion; she drooped her head in dejection. While the older pair were reflecting, the secretary spent a moment gazing at the crown of Colette’s bowed head.

Secretary: “And what is it you wish to hear?”

Colette: “—! Um, um? About the incidents that are disturbing the town. Because that’s where it all started.”

Secretary: “Understood, yes. The incidents are the cause. It is why your companion came to be regarded as a “witch.”“

At the secretary’s response, Colette nodded vigorously to invite her to go on. For her part, Lilac, not wanting to apologize and admit fault, kept silent and maintained the bare minimum of pride.

At all events, the secretary began to speak.

Secretary: “—It began when a certain fever started spreading in the town. That was the origin.”

11

The first to contract the fever was a man, a notable of the town.

A member of the town council as well, he suffered long from a high fever; though he tried various medicines, his condition did not improve at all. It was thought that, as things were, even his life was in danger—but after that, his condition recovered dramatically. —The trigger was that he took a medicine compounded by an old apothecary woman who lived on the edge of town.

Originally known for disliking people, the old woman had been kept at a distance by the townsfolk, but that affair suddenly drew attention to her, and as the fever spread in town, her powers came to be greatly needed.

Day after day people thronged to the old woman for medicine, and she diligently kept compounding it; overturning her prior reputation, she even came to be rumored as a saint. —Yet that reputation was transformed all at once along with a rumor that the cause of the fever lay with the old woman, that the entire matter had been her own staging.

Rumors of unclear origin grew tangled; the old woman's standing plunged from saint who saved the town to arch-villain who spread the fever, and before long even to the label of "Witch."

And then, prompted by the discovery in the old woman's home of poisonous herbs that caused symptoms resembling the fever, anger and hatred toward the "Witch" exploded—

Omega: "—Alas, the old woman was executed. But, strangely, after the old woman's execution, a series of baffling incidents followed. The first to fall victim was the notable who had served as the introduction to the tale. From when he was found writhing in death at his home, a rumor spread in Limbus: that the executed old woman had been made a stand-in for the real "Witch.""

Palmira: "…"

Omega: "As if to corroborate that rumor, cursed-looking bizarre corpses continued to appear one after another in the town, and the victims already number thirteen. This is the detail of the serial mysterious-death cases occurring in Limbus, and the reason the townspeople are excessively afraid of the "Witch." Any questions?"

Palmira: "I do. …How are you so well informed when you were in a cell?"

Pressed up against the other side of the iron bars—in the cramped, unfree space where Omega was shut—Palmira, who had come to get an explanation of the situation and had just heard what Omega said now, curled her lip and asked so.

Omega shouldn't have left this cell; and even if she could have gone out, in this town where the talk of the "Witch" already captured had spread, there shouldn't have been a single person who would tell her what they told her now.

At Palmira's doubt, Omega, a little disappointed, said, "That's all you're curious about?"

Omega: "I simply engaged in close communications with the jailers who took turns visiting. I wanted conversation partners and information; they wanted to snatch even a few words from me, who would keep on talking alone forever. Our interests aligned."

Palmira: "That sounds one-sided just hearing it! I'll have to apologize to the jailers later."

Given the town's circumstances, the fewer people who held a bad impression of Omega, the better. It already felt too late, but goodwill you can buy just by lowering your head is goodwill worth buying.

Setting aside that harassment-like method of obtaining information, the content was useful.

Palmira: "Judging from how Omega's being treated, I figured the victims weren't just one or two, but "more than ten" is more than I imagined…"

Omega: "Indeed. Given the size of the town, thirteen victims is plenty. No wonder they wouldn't lend an ear to my words and crowded in with that ferocity."

Palmira: "You got grabbed by the townsfolk not because of crowd psychology, but because you rubbed against it the wrong way!"

When Omega put on a face as if to say she agreed with Palmira, Palmira shouted back, raising her voice. To begin with, Omega had been caught not only because she was standing right beside the latest victim, but also because of the foolish words and deeds she displayed at the time.

To the townsfolk, shaken by a comrade's death, she said this:

Omega (then): "You may not believe me, but this fellow here just now fell right in front of my eyes. As you can see, his body has been horribly destroyed. There's no way these slender arms of mine could accomplish such a deed… Well, then again, magic exists to make such impossibilities possible, and the fact that I'm good at it was already proven with the Snow Blight matter. Incidentally, at any moment I could have just as easily snuffed you all out, together, while we've been talking. Could you not take the fact that I didn't do so as proof of my innocence? No? Hard? I see. Hahaha, I'm at a loss."

Palmira: "Are you an idiot…?!"

Omega: "It isn't good to speak in terms of results after the fact, Palmira. Now that things have turned out like this, it certainly wasn't a clever excuse, but after the fact you can say anything."

Palmira: "This kind of excuse is a case where the result was obvious even before it came! Why would you needlessly stoke everyone's anxiety and get yourself caught? If you didn't do it, then say you didn't. If you didn't kill, then say you didn't kill. Instead you just meander and meander, saying extra things…!"

At the "Witch's" attitude, which showed neither remorse nor learning, Palmira felt so angry she wanted to throw Omega into a cell again, even though she was already there. If she had given the townsfolk the same anger and dissatisfaction that Palmira felt now, then their impression at tomorrow's trial would be the worst possible.

Omega: "Well, as for impressions, there's no point in worrying about them now. In the first place, at the point where we've managed to get a trial convened, I'm already more than sufficiently blessed."

Palmira: "Blessed—how? You're in a dark, cold cell, being made to lie on dirty straw."

Omega: "Blessed. —Compared to, oh, roughly more than twenty "Witches."“

Palmira: "Huh?"

At Omega, who spread both hands and said so, Palmira knit her brows: she didn't understand what that meant. Were the fingers she held up supposed to be the number of tales she was telling? If so, she was short at least ten.

As Palmira looked at her suspiciously, the “Witch” slightly lowered her voice: “Listen.”

Omega: “Earlier I said there were thirteen victims of the mysterious deaths… but most likely, the victims who were informed upon as “Witches” and executed number close to twice that.”

Palmira: “—What’s that supposed to mean? How do you know something like that? From the jailers too?”

Omega: “No, they were tight-lipped regarding that fact. But you can tell just by looking inside the cell. There are claw marks scratched here and there, and smears of blood at differing heights.”

At Omega’s answer, as if she’d had plenty of time to observe, a chill ran through Palmira and she couldn’t help but stare intently around the inside of the cell. Though it was dim and not clear, there did seem to be scratch marks and caked-on bloodstains.

However, those could not all necessarily be traces of those informed upon as “Witches.”

Omega: “I told you about a sick ward, didn’t I? That way of thinking—of bad things being contagious—isn’t limited to disease. People’s psychology takes curses and other kinds of ill causes to be the same. In other words, from the first time this cell confined a “Witch,” it became a cell dedicated to “Witches.”“

Palmira: “…And the “more than twenty ‘Witches’”? But even so, I can’t accept calling this “blessed.” Or rather—what about the other “Witches”? You mean there weren’t any trials?”

Omega’s words had force, and, as a matter of fact, more than twenty people who had come into this cell had probably been executed as “Witches” and lost their lives. But the thought of being “blessed” in comparison to those victims felt like searching for the least bad among bad things, and Palmira couldn’t accept it.

She hated that way of thinking. Because it had been how she thought back in her hometown, and it was a manifestation of the weakness and compromise built on Colette's sacrifice.

So she could not approve of Omega speaking of being blessed in this situation.

Omega: "You're stubborn and earnest in odd ways. But that very contrariness of yours is interesting to me. So I'll answer as sincerely as I can. —As for my predecessors, the captive "Witches," there were no trials. There was no point in holding them. After all, if you're confined in a cell, you can obtain neither the evidence nor the testimony to challenge a trial. They… ah, though they're called "Witches," it isn't limited to women, so let's say "Witches" in the plural. Compared to those "Witches," that is the point where I am clearly blessed."

Palmira: "S-So, in the end, what part of that is—"

Omega: "—To demand a trial, a captive like me needs someone who believes in my innocence. Someone who will raise their voice, prepared for implicated punishment, to prove I'm not a "Witch.""

Palmira: "…"

Omega: "By the number of existences like you and Colette, Noelle, and Shion and Lilac—I am fortunate."

At the faint smile that crossed Omega's face as she said it, Palmira tasted defeat.

Nothing could be more ill-omened before a trial, but this was a perfect refutation. Beaten down completely, Palmira had to admit that Omega did indeed seem fortunate.

Only, from the standpoint of her pride, she hesitated to put that into words, and so—

Palmira: "…Why is it still called "Witch" even when there are men?"

It was a pointless question that had come up before they split from Colette and the others. When Palmira voiced it, Omega, after looking a bit blank, said,

Omega: “That’s because when the existence first called “Witch” was born into this world, the seven who fit it were all women. If even one man had been mixed among them, they might have been called “magic folk” rather than “Witch.” Conversely, if all seven had been men, perhaps the name “warlock” would have taken hold. I wonder if there’s a world where I called myself “magic folk” or “warlock.” What do you think?”

Palmira: “I know I asked, but I don’t care.”

Be that as it may, she had achieved her purpose of informing Omega that the trial would be held tomorrow, and she had learned detailed information on the connection between the mysterious deaths surrounding Limbus and the “Witch.” —More than anything, infuriatingly, the fact that her zeal for facing the trial had grown far larger and stronger than at first—that felt terribly galling, as if things had gone exactly according to Omega’s design.

12

For Noelle, the past in which she became an Itinerant Preacher is tangled up with complicated feelings.

A large share of those complicated feelings is the contradiction between gratitude and guilt. Those stem from the fact that Noelle played the part of a devout believer of the Holy Church of Gusteko for the sake of her own revenge.

To obtain both the means to find the enemy who destroyed her homeland and the power to exact retribution, Noelle made use of the Holy Church and wrested for herself the position of Itinerant Preacher. But that was by no means the fruit of Noelle’s efforts alone; it was thanks to a friend who lent her strength.

That friend was none other than Nananna Pezza, her contemporary from their candidate days as preachers, with whom she had lived in the same room at the church.

Noelle: “I truly was helped by Nananna.”

Whether one can be granted the endowment called a “Blessing,” the aptitude for becoming a preacher, depends on talent, but to reach the standard by which that is judged, one’s own striving is indispensable. As an Itinerant Preacher, one must be well versed in the teachings of the scriptures; excellence in book learning is a prerequisite.

In that respect, Noelle was always helped by Nananna’s strength. In return, Noelle supported her in fields that required moving the body, but even then the ratio was, at best, seventy–thirty.

Even after both safely became Itinerant Preachers, Nananna often helped gather information on the one Noelle sought. Noelle never told her the particulars of that matter, but—

Nananna: “It is no matter. This one is very grateful to Noelle, it is.”

—she never tried to pry deeply.

Thanks in part to that, Noelle’s vengeance, while not perfect, achieved results enough to say she had made her best effort, and came to a close.

Now, having lost sight of a life’s goal, she was already in a state like having entered her twilight years early, but she did not want to live in a way that slighted others on the pretext that she had burnt out her reason for living. Though she had thrown herself into the Holy Church of Gusteko because it was necessary for revenge, its teachings were indeed alive within Noelle. Therefore—

Noelle: “There is Omega-sama’s matter as well, but if Nananna bears the office of preacher to settle this town’s disturbance, I must also exert myself.”

For that reason too, Noelle decided on the course by which she could be most useful—devoting herself to searching for the person suspected as a “witch” who had gone to ground since last night.

For the time being, even now that Omega had been captured, the townsfolk were continuing to search for the person who had vanished. Hearing the status of that search, Noelle intended to narrow down the search area in her own way.

For that purpose, she put in an appearance at the assembly hall once—but—

Edmon: "—So that's how it is, Holy Teacher, you listening? Yeah?"

At a voice that drifted to her ears, Noelle drew a small breath and halted outside the assembly hall.

Casting a glance into the room, she saw that in the place where the town council had just been held—where Palmira had delivered such a bracing tongue-lashing—two people were exchanging words. The owner of the characteristic delivery and the memorably viscous voice was Edmon, the council's representative.

And the one speaking with Edmon was Nananna, her expression deliberately frozen.

Edmon: "A Witch Trial—now that's the start of an unexpected bother. But apart from that, the other "witch" problem is big too. How's the progress on that one? Yeah?"

Nananna: "…As for that, volunteers are even now pursuing Piditz with all their might. After this, this one intends to take part in the search as time allows, it is."

Edmon: "Ah, is that so. I hope you find him, young Piditz. But that unimpressive Piditz with no particular strong points—being the real "witch," yeah?"

Nananna: "…"

To Edmon's loaded question, Nananna answered with silence. Only, she was the sort to answer "different" plainly if it were different. The fact that she did not do so meant that she, too, like Edmon, likely judged that the possibility that this vanished man, Piditz, was a "witch" was low.

To be frank, that was not a welcome thing for Noelle, who wanted to help Omega.

But more than that, what weighed on her was Nananna and Edmon's relationship. How Edmon dealt with her could be chalked up to his character, but the reverse could not be explained by character.

Edmon: "Well, I'll ask it of you in any case. We can't have the "witch" doing whatever they please any further. That's the same for uncle and for you, Holy Teacher, isn't it. Yeah?"

Leaving Noelle with that inexplicable sense of wrongness, the two's meaningful conversation ended. Edmon familiarly clapped Nananna's shoulder, then headed out of the assembly hall. On impulse, Noelle hid herself to let Edmon pass, and saw him off as he went.

Nananna: "…Noelle, this one knows you are there, it is."

Thus addressed by the solitary Nananna in the assembly hall after Edmon was gone, Noelle, feeling a peculiar awkwardness, bowed her head and then entered the room.

Nananna: "Eavesdropping is most ill-mannered, it is. If this one were to say "the Noelle that this one knows would never"… one would like to say so, but Noelle has always had such a side from long ago."

Noelle: "I shall take that as a reproach that my bad habit is as ever. …I had no intention of eavesdropping, but that is only an excuse."

Even if she hadn't meant to, if that was the result, there was no point in patching it over. Rather, if the other party knew she had been eavesdropping, she could turn it to her advantage.

Noelle: "Edmon-sama seemed to be saying something to you."

Nananna: "…While bearing the role of punishing the heretical "witch," this one received a scolding for lack of results born of inadequate strength, it is. This one, for her part, bitterly curses her own lack of ability, it is."

Noelle: "That is a stance unlike you, Nananna."

To Noelle's probing, Nananna's reply was a safe, contentless statement. At Noelle's crisp retort, Nananna tilted her head: "Unlike this one?"

Noelle: "The Nananna I know—if she received a damp, heavy scolding like Edmon-sama's, she would reply with ten or twenty times the drive and substance, calmly and logically. To sit so meekly with eyes downcast and make your small body seem even smaller—that is not like you."

Nananna: "This one's smallness is a manifestation of this one's lack of talent in matters of making her height grow; it is not something to speak of openly, it is. And… it is not the same as when this one was an apprentice."

Noelle: "Nananna…"

At Nananna, who dropped her gaze slightly and said so, Noelle felt a knot forming deep in her chest.

However, Nananna did not allow Noelle to press further; instead she switched the topic with, "And so," and said,

Nananna: "Noelle should be busy preparing for tomorrow's trial, it is. For what did you come?"

Noelle: "—. As to that, I believe the way I can be of most use in helping Omega-sama is to exercise the power granted to me as an Itinerant Preacher."

Nananna: "…Noelle, you must have been eavesdropping on the talk from earlier, it is."

Noelle: "Indeed. It is highly likely this is not unrelated. At the very least, rather than thrusting our hands blindly into an unfamiliar darkness when time is short, it is far better."

At Noelle, who stated her unwavering decision quietly, Nananna was silent for a time and let out a small breath.

She had known Nananna a long while, and Nananna was, above all, keen-witted. From what Noelle had said now and from her visit here, Nananna divined her purpose, and she walked over to the town map posted on the wall of the assembly hall.

Nananna: “Here and here, and then this area—those were last night. For now, after a shallow sweep of the same area, the search is extending to the west side of town, it is.”

Noelle: “From sunrise to sunset, you are chasing the sun?”

Nananna: “It is a method unique to this town with little snow, it is.”

Naturally, for a search, bright light is better, and the longer the time you can devote to it, the better. A search procedure that chases the sun reflects that soundly and is apt.

On that basis, Noelle judged that the fugitive, being a native of the town, would think the same thing, and considered the way to make the utmost use of the “Blessing” she had received.

And—

Noelle: “—I will head southeast.”

Nananna: “…This one would hear your reason, it is.”

Noelle: “If the other side tries to outflank us, I thought they might move opposite the sun… and it is a back-calculation from yesterday’s events.”

Nananna: “Yesterday’s—what, it is?”

Noelle: “Needless to say, our arrival.”

In Noelle’s breast, there was always the concern that it might be a wide-of-the-mark overreading. However, if the target were within the normal search range, hunters other than Noelle should find them. Being otherwise, Noelle wanted first of all to eliminate the possibility that had flashed through her mind.

Nananna: “Noelle—about tomorrow…”

Noelle: “I understand. Nananna will not show favor just because

Omega-sama is my companion. And that is as it should be.”

She had no intention of using her relationship with Nananna to win Omega’s release by foul means. She only asked that it be fair, so that an unjust judgment would not be passed on Omega.

Noelle: “If Nananna remains Nananna, that is sufficient.”

Nananna: “…”

Noelle: “Then I too will go to the search. I will strive not to be in anyone’s way.”

With a bow and no time to spare, Noelle turned her back on Nananna. Since yesterday the timing had been bad, and there was no time to leisurely warm old ties, but everything would be after they got through the trial before them.

Fixing that in her heart, Noelle dashed out of the assembly hall—,

13

Noelle: “—!”

Struck in the back of the head by the impact, Noelle, with the illusion of sparks scattering across her vision, pitched forward and, with no way to stop herself, fell into the hole before her.

What awaited Noelle at the bottom of the hole was not the welcome of hard, cold rock. Whether that should be called fortunate is debatable, however.

The soft, watery sound that greeted her came with a stench of rot that roused an instinctive aversion. And no wonder—the thing that caught Noelle was a human corpse that had been dropped to the bottom of the hole. Not just one or two, but a much larger heap of bodies.

That such an abnormal secret had been hidden in this place was, as expected. On the other hand, the secret that had been hidden itself betrayed Noelle’s expectations and was far more abhorrent.

And more than anything, what shocked Noelle was that the person who had struck her down from behind was—

Nananna: “—This one will not beg forgiveness, it is.”

—that it was Nananna Pezza, who should have been her benefactor and friend.

14

Shion: “—Th-Th-Th-This is bad, bad, bad! We’re in big trouble, Lilac!!”

Lilac: “—!”

At that sudden plea, Lilac nearly let out a scream, but swallowed it down at the last instant.

From the outside she’d look like a weirdo suddenly shouting at nothing, and in reality she’d still be a weirdo, genuinely startled by the voice in her own head.

Colette: “—? Lilac-san, is something wrong?”

Having narrowly avoided that ignominy, Lilac drew Colette’s tilted head. She hadn’t screamed, but since she’d suddenly stopped walking, it was only natural she’d arouse suspicion.

They had just been talking over how to untangle the “witch” grudge that, as they’d learned from the secretary, was rooted far more deeply than they’d thought—when Shion’s plea came in.

Lilac had assumed Shion had behaved herself during the secretary’s account, but—

Lilac: “What is it all of a sudden?”

Shion: “Uh, please listen while keeping “don’t be surprised and don’t get mad” firmly in mind, but I was actually, um, secretly diving into dreams on the side.”

Lilac: “—. I’ll set aside being surprised and being angry for the moment.”

Dream Arts was heretical in terms of the Holy Church of Gusteko, so the plan had been not to use it in Limbus; but since Lilac herself intended to use it later, she let it slide for now.

The problem was: Shion had used dream arts without consulting her—what had she panicked over?

Shion: “To help solve the mysterious-death case, I was trying to pick up that “basic stuff, my friend” kind of atmosphere—like maybe someone’s sheltering the “witch,” or the victims share some common point—and, well, I hit on a pretty shocking fact!”

Lilac: “So what is it. Don’t be coy—say it.”

Shion: “—About the “witch,” she’s there and she isn’t.”

Obeying Lilac’s request, Shion had avoided a roundabout answer—in her own way. But now it was so blunt that the point failed to get across.

What did it mean to be there and not there?

As Lilac’s thoughts twisted in frustration, Shion cleared her throat with an “ahem,” and—

Shion: “There is no “witch.” What exists is a wicked system that exploits the threat called “witch” to eliminate those hostile to oneself. It’s all a conspiracy of the town council.”

Which is to say—

Shion: “—Our odds look terrible!”

At last, with an explanation that was concise and easy to grasp, Lilac gaped. Peeking in from the side at Lilac, stunned in their in-head conference, Colette widened her eyes.

Then she gently drew close to the wide-eyed Lilac and said,

Colette: “The Shion in your head must be super, super worried about Omega-chan too, huh."

With that innocent concern—precisely because she still knew none of the circumstances—she lowered her brows.

15

Nananna: "—Then, this one hereby declares the opening of the Witch Trial, it is."

In the assembly hall of Limbus, the one who spoke those words from the rearmost seat was the small Itinerant Preacher with short dark-navy hair—Nananna Pezza.

Having taken on the role of judge presiding over this Witch Trial, Nananna looked down at the assembly hall from a seat raised one step to indicate her position, her drowsy eyes reflecting the faces that had gathered.

Spectators from all over town had assembled in the hall to witness this Witch Trial; those who could not fit inside pressed up against the windows, fixing their attention on the fate of the "witch."

And in the very midst of this highly watched trial, Palmira, appointed as defense for the "witch" whose witchhood was to be questioned, was beset by a feeling as if she might collapse at any moment. That, however, was not merely due to the mental pressure of the great responsibility about to fall upon her.

The gravity of the matter had grown beyond the fact that one of their own was being put to a Witch Trial.

Omega: "Palmira, calm yourself a little. Yes—how about taking a deep breath? Or I hear it's effective to write the character for "person" in your palm three times and swallow it. They say it means to "swallow people." Haha, I can't understand it and that makes me tingle with excitement, doesn't it?"

Palmira: "How about you show a little solemnity for once…! Rather than swallowing people, you've had a smug, people-eating attitude on and on and—"

Nananna: "—Defense counsel, this one has not permitted conversation with the "witch" suspect, it is. Refrain, it is."

With clenched fists and a trembling voice, Palmira was thus admonished by a frowning Nananna.

Though she felt it unreasonable to be made out the villain unilaterally, Palmira said, "Sorry," and instead fixed a hard glare on Omega's profile, bound at the center of the hall.

As described above, the room was laid out with Nananna at the very back, Omega in the center, and, with the "witch" between them, Palmira and the defense on one side and, facing them, the Limbus Town Council—its representative, Edmon Quail, and his secretary and others—lined up on the other. The spectators, so as to command a full view of the main figures in the trial, watched with bated breath from the rear of the hall and from the surrounding windows.

Feeling the pressure of those countless imploring eyes, Palmira nevertheless, from the bottom of her stomach, felt that they were the ones who ought to be helping them.

For—what this Witch Trial would come to was—

Lilac: "—What you'd call a rigged match."

Those were the first words Lilac flung out the moment everyone, who had gone out to seek information to save the imprisoned Omega with the trial opening the next day, had reconvened at the inn.

At those words, Palmira and Colette both tilted their heads: "Rigged match?"

Lilac: "A fix, cheating, a prearranged negotiation… meaning the outcome has been set up."

Palmira: "Wha—?!"

Colette: "But, but, why would they do something like that? If they can't find a proper "witch," the ones who'll be in trouble are the townspeople, aren't they?"

Lilac: "That premise is wrong to begin with."

With Palmira and Colette aghast, Lilac knit her brows in displeasure and said, "Listen, okay?"

Lilac: "This is information Shion dove into people's dreams to obtain with dream art… The true nature of the "witch" uproar in this town is an ugly power struggle engineered by the town council. The apothecary who quelled the fever that spread in town was the first victim of that scheme."

Colette: "Does that mean—there isn't any "witch"?"

Lilac: "…There are people for whom it's convenient if there is a "witch," and they keep getting rid of obstacles by calling them "witches." That's the truth of the witch uproar in this town."

Told that hopeless truth, Palmira did not know what to say. Hence, what followed was not something she thought out with her head, but Palmira's honest, heartfelt feeling.

Palmira: "—All the parties involved can just go and die."

Colette: "Palmira, you can't say that…"

Palmira: "I said it. And what if I did? Of course I'd want to say it! Over a story this damn ridiculous we've been tormented up and—!"

Even Colette's sorrowful tug on her sleeve did nothing to restrain Palmira.

From what Omega had said from her cell, more than twenty people had been executed as "witches"—and since there was no real "witch," they were victims labeled obstacles by the town council. And now they were about to add Omega to that number.

Palmira: "That's it, we're done. Holding a trial is a waste of time. If they're all in on it, there's no chance of winning, and Omega will go on a rampage, the town will be wiped off the map, and that's the end!"

Lilac: “And then we’ll be branded heretics by the Holy Church of Gusteko and be on the run… But yes. It would mean stopping by this town was the mistake in the first place.”

With both hands covering her face, Palmira lamented; with a sigh, Lilac concurred.

And that was only natural. There was simply nothing to be done. There was no “witch,” the true culprit to be accused, anywhere, and the town council would pull out all the stops to crush the fact from getting out. In a Witch Trial the other side ran, how were they supposed to properly prove not guilty?

However, between thoroughly dispirited Palmira and Lilac, there came a high voice—“No!”—as Colette took both their hands in hers.

Colette: “Lilac-san’s story and the story Shion-san found are very surprising, and I understand that they’re terrible things. I do. But, but, just like Palmira says, it’s not like the whole town’s in on it—there are people who are truly afraid too!”

Palmira: “That… might be so, but…”

Colette: “And the one who decides whether we win or lose the trial isn’t the townspeople, it’s Nananna-san. She’s Noelle-san’s friend. She won’t do anything underhanded; she’ll look properly.”

Colette’s earnest plea had a point.

But only a point. The fact remained that the greater part of Limbus was rotten; even if they weren’t party to the town council’s plot, it was also a fact that the townsfolk had let many executions of “witches” pass unchallenged.

Palmira: “Even so—do you want to save them?”

Colette: “—. Yes, yes, I do. And I’m sure you’ll regret it.”

Palmira: “If we don’t save them, you mean you’ll regret it?”

Colette: “No, no, not me. Palmira will—surely you will regret it.”

Breathing out a little “Hah,” Palmira looked up at the ceiling.

Annoyingly enough, just as Colette said, she could plainly see herself, later on, brooding over the decision made here, regretting it, and dragging it along.

The powerless, irresponsible people of Limbus who, in their passivity, abetted the persecution of “witches”—they were the same as the Palmira of old who had not saved Colette when she was treated as a “witch” in their hometown.

Even if they died, she could see all too well that it would not make her feel the least bit better.

Lilac: “…I don’t think we’re completely without a shot.”

So saying, Lilac abruptly interjected into Palmira and Colette’s exchange.

She glanced down, a touch awkward, at the hand Colette was holding.

Lilac: “As Colette says, it isn’t as if everyone in town is party to the plot. If the facts come to light, there will be those who turn their backs on the town council. If we fan those divisions in the town—”

Shion: “—Lilac says slightly extreme things sometimes, but I think that approach is on the table!”

Colette: “Kya! Lilac-san turned into Shion-san!”

Switching mid-sentence from Lilac to Shion, she squeezed Colette’s hand back; with a tiny yelp, Colette raised her voice. Displaying her human-wonder act, Shion gave a light cough: “Ahem.”

Shion: “Lilac’s mad, so she’ll be right back, but—the ringleader is the man in the middle of the town council… Edmon-san. He’s the one who set up the “witch” uproar.”

Palmira: “Ugh, a guy who did exactly what my bad impression predicted… Are you serious about the “division” thing?”

Shion: “I don’t want to parade Lilac’s extreme ideology, but… if the townspeople together demanded a recall, I don’t think Edmon-san could refuse.”

Palmira: “So in other words, we just need to make the townsfolk flip their palms. If that’s the case, then about that story we—”

Colette: “But, but, that story is something you pulled out of people’s dreams, right, Shion-san? Wouldn’t we be in trouble if they ask us where we heard it?”

At Colette’s reasonable doubt, Palmira faltered with an “Ugh.”

Indeed, since Shion and Lilac were dream illusionists, information obtained using dream art had to be handled with care. If, in trying to clear the “witch” suspicion, they only deepened it, it would be putting the cart before the horse.

In short—

Palmira: “We’ll blur the source while steering the focus of the “witch” suspicion away from Omega toward exposing the scheme of these rotten people in the town—yes, that’s the direction we take!”

Shion: “Ooh! Palmira-san’s all fired up with a “ba-bam”! That’s the spirit!”

Colette: “It sounds like it’s going to be very, very hard, but I’m sure Palmira can do it!”

Palmira: “Thanks for the support with no basis! All right, if that’s settled, once Noelle gets back, strategy meeting for tomorrow’s trial! I also need to ask about the strategy for dealing with that Itinerant Preacher.”

Lilac: “…Well, having motivation is a good thing.”

Driven into a corner, Palmira instead firmed her resolve; Shion and Colette cheered her on, and Lilac, having taken back the lead, let out an ambiguous sigh that was unclear whether it was encouragement or not.

At any rate, with their direction decided, they waited for Noelle to return—but—

Colette: "…I wonder what's happened to Noelle-san. I'm very, very worried."

So murmured Colette, standing beside Palmira, looking anxiously toward the hall's entrance. Just as her anxiety indicated, no matter how long they waited, Noelle did not return to the inn.

In the end, even after a night had passed, with Noelle still not back, they conducted a strategy meeting that could not be called perfect, and Palmira and the others found themselves facing the Witch Trial.

Lilac: "Noelle was pursuing the man who was supposedly informed upon as a "witch." He was only denounced to begin with—a victim—but if he saw something inconvenient, he may have been made to disappear."

Palmira: "Don't say something so terrifying! And if that's the case, it really is better to toss the whole trial out and let that "witch" run wild—!"

Clutching her elbows, Lilac voiced a prognosis that was less pessimistic than outright despair. When Palmira ground her teeth at her words and pointed, the "witch" at the center of the hall fluttered her hand back in a wave.

To be honest, in simple combat strength, among Palmira's group Noelle was the strongest. Omega could use magic, and Shion and Lilac's prowess in diving into dreams was, if one had to say, unknowns—but it was Noelle who could beat a large witchbeast to death bare-handed from the front. It was hard to imagine that Noelle had fallen into the enemy's hands easily, and as for losing her life, that was out of the question.

Therefore—

Palmira: "She didn't come back, but Noelle's alive. We proceed with the trial on that premise. …I've at least stayed up all night and put the story together, so I'll do this."

Clenching her fist tight, Palmira put into practice the iron rule she had learned for the first time on the journey with Omega—when something is beyond your own hands, leave it to the one who can handle it.

If Noelle faced an opponent whose strength she could not match, there was nothing Palmira could do.

Instead, in Noelle's place—who had neither prepared for nor appeared at the trial—Palmira would do this.

To that end, Palmira lifted her face and glared head-on at the bearded visage of the hateful ringleader of the witch uproar—Edmon Quail—

Palmira: "First, this is something I said yesterday as well, but we arrived in this town the day before yesterday at the Hour of Fire. The people who welcomed us and the inn register both attest to that. The mysterious-death case has nothing to do with us. —We assert that, categorically!"

—and thus she began to unfold an argument that directly denied the "witch" suspicion.

16

Colette watched with bated breath as Palmira, dashing and composed, spoke out at the Witch Trial.

To protect Omega, she would prove that the "witch" suspicion placed on her—strictly speaking, not a suspicion, for Omega truly was a "witch"—was of a different kind than the "witch" who had done evil in this town.

Honestly, Colette could barely keep up with the argument Palmira had assembled together with Shion and Lilac, who kept switching places—but—

Edmon: "We were outside the town. Therefore, we couldn't have been involved in the witch uproar happening here. …I heard that argument yesterday. So as for that, the discussion should already be over, yeah?"

Palmira: “No, we did not reach a conclusion. We demanded the opening of the Witch Trial and it ended in a haze. We’re not satisfied—no one is. Things like, ‘If she’s a “witch,” she might have been outside town the whole time,’ or, ‘She might have been stirring things up from outside’—we won’t accept such outrageous arguments.”

Nananna: “What shall be done, then, it is. Are we to ignore this town’s anxieties? Simply because you are travelers, it is?”

Palmira: “Ignore them? The ones ignoring the townsfolk’s anxieties aren’t us. It’s you.”

Arms folded, Palmira flung those words out with imposing dignity, and Colette felt her chest grow hot.

Palmira was clever and good with words, but there was a slight tendency for her to speak on momentum, and not rarely she would put up a brave front. Even so, she never ran away.

Even now, while turning the adults into her enemies, with a face like a villain she could still properly smile. Wearing that expression, Palmira spread her arms wide and said, “Listen, okay?”

Palmira: “This is a matter of lives. In that case, we ought to think properly without begrudging the effort. A traveler from outside, who looks like she happened to slip up, is the ‘witch’ who’s been troubling the town all along, so even though they themselves deny it, you’ll execute them without even hearing them out… What do you think will happen?”

Edmon: “This old man thinks the town’s anxieties will be removed, and there’ll be peace, yeah?”

Palmira: “Is that so? My feeling is the opposite. …Ah, ‘The town’s representatives are fools who only push immediate problems off and won’t try to arrive at a fundamental solution’—that makes me feel despair. They’re surely cruel to everyone. Without exception.”

Palmira spoke fluently, as if it had all been prepared in advance; opposite her, Edmon’s cheek stiffened faintly, and wariness etched itself into his eyes.

From the other side's perspective, it was proof that Palmira was not some young lady to be put off with platitudes, but a counterpart in this trial—meant to determine whether Omega was a "witch"—with whom to properly cross arguments.

Lilac: "They're noisy in my head, so I'll pass it along: 'Good job,' they say. Yesterday's acting coaching fit perfectly and they're proud… apparently."

Like Colette, Lilac—relaying Shion's impressions—was greatly impressed as well. Palmira herself, though, seemed to have not even the leeway to cast a glance their way. All Colette and the others could do was keep sending her their warmth so she would not be alone.

Colette: "Besides that, it sounds like Shion-san gave it her all too, but—"

Lilac: "…Yes. Perhaps she overdid it without restraint."

As Colette worried over the growing heat that filled the hall, Lilac quietly bit her nail.

Even before the start of the trial the hall had been packed, but with time both the degree of attention and the number of onlookers swelled further. And behind that was the hard work of Shion, a dream illusionist.

Lilac: "Dive into the other's dream and give a push to the option they're wavering on. As for whether to go to the hall, it's not that hard to strengthen the awareness of someone who's concerned about it. It's hard to make someone who isn't thinking anything become aware of it, though."

Colette: "That means you can help people who can't muster up courage, right? I think it's a very, very wonderful magic."

Lilac: "…Your way of thinking is rather unusual."

Lilac averted her gaze, and Colette tilted her head: "Is it?"

Certainly, there might be more dangerous ways to use it, but the ones using this dream art were either Shion or Lilac. Since both of them were kind, Colette felt it was only natural to think there was no need to worry about dangerous uses.

Meanwhile, leaving Colette’s thoughts aside, Palmira’s struggle continued.

Palmira: “In fact, I’ve heard there were people suspected as ‘witches’ and executed even before Omega. Yet even with those people being executed one after another, the uproar hasn’t settled at all. Does that mean the suspicion missed? Or is it that a great many ‘witches’ have infiltrated this town?”

Edmon: “Wait, wait. That’s a misunderstanding, yeah? This old man looked into it properly and knows, but the thing called a ‘witch’s’ power—when the ‘witch’ dies, it transfers to someone else. So it isn’t strange if, after an execution, another person becomes a ‘witch,’ yeah?”

Omega: “Heh, you’re well-informed. You sure know your stuff. That’s right.”

Palmira: “Do you actually understand which side you’re on?”

Edmon—and, of all people, Omega—had cut in to obstruct the development of Palmira’s argument. Receiving a stern look from Palmira, Omega pressed both hands over her own mouth in a “I’m keeping quiet” gesture.

However, when it was asserted that a “witch’s” power transferred to others, Colette felt at a loss—

Lilac: “If so, then the town council knows that killing won’t resolve it and still intends to execute Omega? That means continuing the witch hunts until the last townsman remains?”

At that very moment of being at a loss, Lilac’s sharp tongue cut in.

It was a remark that could be called hair-splitting, but a stir suddenly spread among the spectators. It was a confrontation with the difficult question which the townsfolk, while fearing it somewhere in their hearts, had continued to ignore.

How far would the town council's thoroughgoing stance toward "witches" be carried?

Frowning at that point, the one to talk back was the blue-haired secretary. She raised her hand and countered, "That's an objection. Somewhat off the mark."

Blue-Haired Secretary: "We desire resolution—this old man and the town council do. All our efforts to this day have been for the peace of Limbus."

Palmira: "Leaders don't get 'A for effort' awards. What leaders are asked is whether they achieved the manifesto they held aloft—nothing else. In that respect, how about you? Have you achieved your manifesto of removing the 'witch'?"

Blue-Haired Secretary: "It is the town council's view that it will be accomplished by her execution."

Colette: "—But, but, we know that won't work. Surely among the people who've been suspected as 'witches' until now, there were those who knew that too."

On impulse, Colette cut into Lilac and the secretary's exchange and went, "Ah." But with Palmira beside her nodding to her, Colette brought her words out to the end.

To that end, Colette faced not the town council, but the spectators—

Colette: "I don't think what Lilac-san says will happen. Because, because, before that, someone will properly notice that this is wrong. Once you notice, whether you can say it aloud is only a matter of courage. So, so—this is a request."

As she spoke, Colette looked firmly, one by one, at the faces of the spectators.

And—

Colette: “If you’re going to notice somewhere and find the courage, then surely, surely now is the earliest within what you can do now. If any of you have ever regretted something… please, remember it.”

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Colette’s deep bow and plea clearly changed the air in the assembly hall.

Shion: “If we’d known this beforehand, leaving a charm-like suggestion in everyone’s dreams to bring out their courage would’ve been an option too, but things have been pretty live up to this point, you know.”

Lilac: “Big words from the one who got all fired up and turned this into a live venue. Did you seriously dive into every last townsfolk’s dream? The body and the gate are supposed to be shared with me, remember?”

Shion: “Sorry for the after-the-fact notice. But, I figured the result would be the same whether I told you or not.”

Though she apologized, it was clearly only for form’s sake, and Lilac sighed inwardly at Shion’s pose. Most likely Shion’s assessment was correct, so Lilac preserved face by not talking back.

Anyway—Lilac gave a small nod at the glance Palmira sent their way.

It was time to ride the wave Colette had made and advance the argument to its next step.

From here on—

Palmira: “—Just as Colette said, if you think properly, you can notice it, and if you can make up your mind to say it, you can raise your voice. The town council is supposed to be the gathering for that.”

Lilac: “And yet the town council has continued with ad-hoc measures and let the damage spread. Is this proof of the town council’s incompetence? Or… was there some other design at work?”

When Palmira and Lilac’s words came one after another, Colette’s eyes went round with an “Eh?!” It must have been a statement with a very different intent from what she had just said. Knowing that, they guided the townspeople’s emotions Colette had nurtured.

Edmon: “Scary, scary. “Other design,” huh—you two conspiracists, are you? Yeah? This is a tiny snowswept town. Saying some terrifying great evil is advancing here—you can’t laugh at that, right?”

Lilac: “Even though a “witch” uproar is already happening? That sounds like you’re treating the “witch” as a small matter and leaves a bad impression. It feels like you don’t understand how serious this is.”

Edmon: “It’s all nitpicking and not a conversation. Preacher-sama, what do you think? Yeah.”

Having clearly begun to lose his composure, Edmon turned the discussion toward Nananna, the one serving as judge.

The Itinerant Preacher, who had stayed silent and watched the debate thus far, turned her eyes to Palmira.

Nananna: “The town councillor’s appeal is legitimate, it is. It sounds like fault-finding, it does, but what intent does the defense have in making such statements, it is?”

Palmira: “Of course, I’ve thought it through properly—so we can correct this town’s mistake.”

Responding thus to Nananna’s pressing, Palmira clenched her small fist tight.

From that choice of words, Lilac perceived that Palmira had decided to drop the main bomb. At the same time, a certain conclusion was reached between Lilac and the Shion inside her head.

Shion: “—Nananna-san is a plant for the town council.”

Lilac: “A plant… well, roughly speaking, yes. If it’s between Itinerant Preachers, there are times even Noelle will be outmaneuvered. The suspects were limited from the start.”

Shion: “Exactly… I hope Noelle-san is safe, though.”

The words of worry were surely sincere, but Shion had to know it was a slender hope.

Noelle was someone with the potential to crush this town’s conspiracy through sheer might. It was hard to imagine they would pass up the chance to neutralize that threat. If Nananna was one of them, it would not be difficult to trap Noelle, who trusted her.

Noelle’s survival was bleak—and precisely because of that—

Lilac: “We’ll teach them how terrifying it is to make enemies of dream illusionists.”

Why had Lilac and Shion been hunted by many and continued to be regarded as enemies of the world? They would prove, in this very trial, the magnitude of the reason beyond them being elves.

With Palmira about to light the fuse at this very moment—

Palmira: “—What I’m saying is that the town council may have taken advantage of the “witch” uproar to erase parties inconvenient to themselves.”

Nananna: “…Oh?”

At that point, a shock ran not only through Nananna, but through the town council including Edmon, and more than anything, through the townsfolk who were spectators at this Witch Trial. Amid that shock, the reaction of interest from Omega was as slight as a leaf stirred by the wind.

That was how much Palmira’s statement had stepped into the forbidden.

Edmon: “Baseless conjecture! This is too much, no matter what! Right, yeah?!”

He slammed the desk and sprang to his feet in fury. But that reaction was not unnatural for someone whose decisions as the town council were being questioned. Hence, what mattered was what came next. With his next behavior, it would be easy to know which way Edmon's true intent lay—no, it would become known.

Palmira: ""Baseless?" Is it? This is something I heard from one of the councillors, but the cause of the fever that first set off the uproar was apparently foodstuffs cheaply bought in from outside, wasn't it? The existence of a "witch" made a convenient scapegoat to hide that fact—didn't it?"

Edmon: "…"

At the instant Palmira's well-coached villainess face hit like a hammer, Edmon's expression twisted fiercely at the surprise attack, and his gaze swung toward the councillors on his own side.

It was a look for hunting down an informer in their midst, for harsh interrogation—but showing that here was without doubt a mistake.

Edmon Quail's agitation was laid bare to the gathered spectators.

Shion: "We expected this, but… it's not exactly exhilarating. As usual."

Lilac: "Then I'll think it in your stead while you play the good person: serves him right."

In her mind, to Shion's prim, well-behaved comment, Lilac boldly chose the cutting words as the bad girl and roundly abused the opposition.

—The true forte of dream illusionists lay in being able to affect others without their awareness.

By that, dream illusionists could pull information from a target or, conversely, slip information into their unconscious. Of course, resistance to dream art varied by individual, and it did not mean every lawless thing would fly free—but used well, the possibilities were endless.

Only, in this case, that very omnipotence of dream art was tantamount to proving the “witch,” so the information they had gone to the trouble of obtaining being unusable was a snag—

Shion: “—And not giving up at that point is exactly where a dream illusionist shows their chops.”

Ignoring Shion’s finger-snap gesture, Lilac beheld a sight that was practically a demonstration of why dream illusionists were persecuted.

Edmon and the town council—those who had shared a common goal and exploited the existence of the “witch” to suit themselves—had a seed of discord spread among them, and in an instant it grew into a flower of suspicion.

They began to doubt one another, calculating in their hearts who the informer was and to whom they should fawn to protect themselves—but it was pointless.

There was no informer among them. They were bound together by a firm sense of complicity—except that they themselves could not bring themselves to believe that fact.

At the town council’s blatant reaction, a murmur spread among the spectators. Apparently there were those among them who had begun to take Lilac and the others’ argument seriously.

Omega: “—Interesting.”

At the center of the hall where confusion was spreading, almost everyone easily missed the words with which the “witch” savored the chaos—so small was her voice.

Palmira: “How about it? Is this just my baseless conjecture? Or will you insist that I’m so familiar with this town’s internal affairs because I’m one of the “witch’s” cronies—and that that’s more credible than one of the people who did wrong in this town, unable to bear their guilty conscience, telling the truth?”

While Lilac made a wry face at the “witch’s” murmur, Palmira’s voice grew all the hotter.

She herself had lacked confidence all along, but she was quite the actress. Once she got going, she did not drop speed; she kept on speeding up and heating up unbroken.

Even if it was bravado, the assembly hall's air was swallowed by her speaking with full confidence. The spectators' doubts, demanding an explanation, eventually became voices, and the voices turned into a great outcry.

Nananna: "Silence! You will keep silence, it is! In a trial to question the right or wrong of a "witch," those without the right to speak will hold their tongues, it is! You will be removed, it is!"

In the hall that was on the verge of becoming unmanageable, Nananna's voice rang high as she struck the desk. Even so, the murmurs did not subside. Into that situation, still warm with residual mistrust, Palmira thrust further.

Palmira: "In the first place, you toss around "witch," "witch" so lightly, but do you even know what a "witch" is when you say it? Who was it—where did they come from—who first said that what happened in this town was the work of a "witch"? Why would a "witch" do this?"

Edmon: "That is! That's what "witches" do. No one knows the meaning or the reason—"

Palmira: "You don't know? Don't make me repeat myself! If you're going to give up on thinking because you don't know, then the town council lacks seriousness! All of you—you've long since started to realize it!"

They must have grown complacent, deciding that, once they had taken control of the town, somehow won over even an Itinerant Preacher, and let the fear of the "witch" pervade, the victory would not budge. Unlike Palmira, Edmon and the others, who had hardly prepared counterarguments, could not stop her words.

And Palmira declared, so that it roared in the hearts of everyone in the hall—

Palmira: "—There is no such thing as a "witch" in this town! That is this trial's verdict!"

It was a declaration so vivid it should be called a blade of words with a razor's edge.

The town councillors—Edmon and the rest—stared wide-eyed, the spectators voiced support for Palmira's view with something like frenzy, and even Nananna forgot to call for silence, drawing in a breath.

At that point, the verdict would not be overturned, even with the judge in their pocket—or so everyone thought.

Omega: "—No, a "witch" does exist. Here inside this very assembly hall, in fact."

There was a voice that contradicted Palmira's view head-on.

It was the outrageous outburst of the "witch" at the center of the hall, who had just been about to be saved.

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???: "…"

In an instant, the air in the assembly hall froze, and the time of the world came to a halt.

Omega nodded with deep feeling at the fact that her single word now held everyone present in thrall.

Omega: "As I thought, this is nice. An environment in which everyone is intrigued and lends an ear to my story."

Palmira: "O-O-O… OmegAAAAAA—!!"

Omega: "Oh my, Palmira, what's the matter? Is there something you wished to say to me?"

Palmira: "Y-You—! You—! Just now, just now, I—I—just now…!"

Palmira flushed scarlet and choked on her words; Colette, flustered, rubbed her back. From Palmira's state, even Omega could sense her fierce anger and confusion.

From Palmira's point of view, she must have felt as if the Omega she was trying to protect had stabbed her in the back, so that was only natural. Omega was grateful for her struggle, and she did think it was poor form to spoil it.

However—

Omega: "Letting a mistaken truth be believed would be a bit unpleasant for me."

Palmira: "A mistaken… truth? Are you going to claim there was no town council conspiracy?"

Omega: "No, there was a conspiracy. I can't imagine Lilac and the others would overlook that. —Only, there weren't one but two conspiracies."

Raising one finger on each hand, Omega—though in the position of being judged—said so. Smiling at the sight of her companions' mouths hanging open, she turned her back on them and, facing Nananna on the dais, called out, "Presiding Judge."

Omega: "May I address you so? And furthermore, I would be grateful if I could be given an opportunity to speak."

Nananna: "…The mode of address is as you please, it is. However, as the suspect, your opportunity to speak is—"

Omega: "Even if, by shutting my mouth, the chance to loose the chains that bind you were to be lost forever?"

At Omega's slight tilt of the head, Nananna's eyes flew wide and her cheeks stiffened.

Lilac and Shion had noticed as well, but Nananna was a collaborator of the town council—though Itinerant Preachers cannot be bought with money or position. There was another reason.

Taking into account that reason, and taking Nananna's inability to get a second word out as permission, Omega turned her back completely on Palmira and the others and faced the town council instead.

Edmon, who had risen and put his hands on the desk, looked bewildered at the way events were unfolding, but—

Omega: "You have a tendency to overreach here and there, but a thick skin is not a bad trait in a leader. After you made use of a "witch," what followed must have been one confusion after another for you."

Edmon: "Wh-What are you talking about? Yeah?"

Omega: "The expansion and the running out of control of the situation were outside your expectations, weren't they? Just as Palmira predicted, at first you scapegoated the apothecary to cover up the fever brought on by poor food management. After that, perhaps you continued it a few times, thinking, "This is usable"… but the mysterious-death cases were not at the town council's behest."

Edmon: "…"

Omega: "Among the victims of the mysterious-death cases were councillors and their relatives. In a dictatorship, sacrifices for a reign of terror can happen, but this town is governed by a council. The discretion of an individual is not respected to the extent that purging one's own kin would be allowed indefinitely."

In other words, the town council was not involved in selecting the victims of the mysterious-death cases. Rather, compared to the "witch" conjured up by people's anxiety and fear, the damage from the mysterious deaths was more hostile to the town council. And in those two kinds of sacrifices—the inquisitions and the mysterious deaths—Omega sensed a certain powerful intent.

That was—

Omega: "—A fierce hatred toward the town called Limbus."

A blade of hatred, directed equally at the town council weaving its plots and at the townsfolk who allowed its despotism. That was the true form of the poison flame that scorched Limbus and made neighbor suspect neighbor.

And the guide of that poison flame was the "witch" who presided over the fear of this snowswept town.

Omega: "Now then, this "witch," brimming with hatred toward the town, decided to make use of the town council's conspiracy. I said there were two conspiracies just now, but "front and back" might be more apt. The conspiracy on the front is the inquisitions by the town council, designating nuisances as "witches," and the one on the back is the mysterious-death cases among council-related persons… To carry this out for certain, two elements are required."

Colette: "…What are they, Omega-chan?"

In the hall, which had been swallowed by the atmosphere Omega made, Colette's question reached the back of her head.

Judging her, inwardly, to be a talent who would not be devoured by the "witch's" presence, Omega again raised one finger on each hand.

Omega: "It's simple. One role is to accelerate the town council's runaway use of the "witch," and one role is to smoothly conduct the inquisitions and pile up further sacrifices. —Ideally, those two would appear to have no connection on the surface."

Edmon: "The conductor… of the inquisitions… Don't tell me, yeah?"

At Omega's explanation, Edmon's mouth opened and closed like a fish, and his gaze, having grasped the meaning, shifted. He looked to Nananna on the dais—the Itinerant Preacher, supposedly the town council's collaborator who wished to keep power in hand—who lowered her eyes under Edmon's look.

At the very moment he saw that reaction, Edmon twisted his lips—

Edmon: "You…! We even called back the daughter of that mistress who was banished from the town, and this is what you— What on earth are you playing at?! I don't get it! Yeah?!"

Omega: "I see—that's the relationship. Thank you for the easy-to-understand explanation."

Edmon's furious abuse laid bare, in short order, the relationship between him and Nananna. —By conjecture, Nananna was the illegitimate child of Edmon's father. Having been driven from Limbus in the past because of her birth, Nananna, when the town council set about using the "witch," was in just the right position to be called back as the executioner of the inquisitions.

Given that background, it was no wonder that Nananna harbored a grudge against the town. —Except that, with that, only one of the raised fingers could be folded; it was a touch insufficient for the conclusion.

And therefore—

Noelle: "—The reason for the anger would be the late apothecary, would it not."

So saying, Noelle appeared in the doorway of the assembly hall—battered—and brought the last missing piece to the unfinished puzzle.

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Shion: "—Found you at last! Noelle-san, please wake up! No—elle—san!"

At that boisterous call, Noelle, whose consciousness had fallen into darkness, stirred awake. No—she did not awaken. Her body remained unconscious; only her awareness had been roused.

It was a vague, nebulous space, belonging to nowhere in this world, with a complex, uncanny air that could be called neither white nor black; and there, facing Noelle was—

Noelle: "…Shion-sama, is it?"

Shion: “It is, it is! I’m really relieved we could meet again! Sorry it took so long to find you. I was basically accessing every sleeping consciousness I could one after another, but I didn’t think you’d be this far out on the town’s outskirts.”

Noelle: “The outskirts of town… No, yes, that is so. I certainly—”

She had gone into the forest to search for the missing townsman who had been informed upon as a “witch,” ahead of the Witch Trial.

In the midst of that search, following a faint stench of rot, she was attacked and dropped into a cavern. And the one who had attacked Noelle was—

Noelle: “—Nananna.”

Shion: “Yes. Regrettably, Nananna-san is a collaborator of the town council. It wasn’t a “witch” who was here in this town, but dirty politicians who exploited the existence of one—”

At Shion’s grave-faced explanation, Noelle grasped the rough outline.

On top of that, what flashed through Noelle’s mind were the stories of her hometown she’d heard from Nananna—her roommate—while learning as a follower of the Holy Church of Gusteko, and the blessing she had received.

Noelle: “When I received my “Blessing,” my fever would not go down, and I thought I might die—but it was Nananna who decocted medicine for me.”

Using magic to help accept the sensation of one’s internal gate rampaging was taboo. For that reason, all Noelle could do was endure the suffering—so Nananna extended to her a decoction she had learned from the apothecary who had looked after her in her hometown.

Nananna: “I do not have many fond memories of my hometown. But the apothecary who lived on the outskirts was good to us strays. In the end, I was driven out of town… yet even now, my gratitude to the apothecary and what I was taught remain within me."

Yes—Nananna, usually spare of expression, had, uncharacteristically, smiled as she spoke of that memory. It was so unexpected, and coupled with having been helped, it was etched deeply into Noelle's memory.

If that hometown Nananna had spoken of was Limbus—

Noelle: "—I, at least, cannot deny Nananna's revenge."

Having crawled out of the pit into which she had fallen and raced back over snowy roads, Noelle now stood facing Nananna squarely upon the dais in the town's assembly hall and said so.

Noelle, too, was a revenger. She understood Nananna's feelings painfully well.

Hence, it was only natural that Nananna had wished to eliminate Noelle, who stood in the way of her plan.

If there were but one dissatisfaction Noelle had with Nananna's deed, it was—

Noelle: "You did not… involve me."

Nananna: "Noelle… this one, this one…"

Noelle: "It is all right. Nananna did not quite finish killing me. On that single point, I shall forgive Nananna. And there was, was there not? An accomplice."

Just before, she had heard what Omega said, and afterward, Edmon's furious voice as well.

This plan of vengeance required two roles: one to conduct the inquisitions, and one to handle the "steering" that manipulated the town council. And in those memories, Nananna had said:

"The apothecary who lived on the outskirts was good to us strays."

Us strays—not "me," but "us." If there was someone who had stayed by the side of Nananna, who had been oppressed for her birth, that someone could be none other than a person of the same circumstances.

In other words, besides Nananna, there was another illegitimate child sired by Edmon's father—

Noelle: "In the hole into which I fell, there lay the remains of Piditz-sama, who was on the run. Besides his, there were the remains of many others there as well. An administrative officer dispatched from the Holy Capital for the purpose of aiding the town's governance— the remains of the genuine administrative officer."

Palmira: "The genuine… which means—"

At Palmira's gasp, Noelle nodded deeply.

The remains bore tattoos indicating the officer's status, prepared so that even after death they would serve as proof of having come from the Holy Capital. For that reason, though he and his companions had all been cast into the cavern, his body alone had been spared decay and retained its original form.

And, in place of the genuine administrative officer—who stole that position wholesale was—

Noelle: "It was you, was it not—Secretary-sama, who kept close by the gentlemen of the town council."

Thus, Noelle quietly put the question to the long blue-haired secretary standing at Edmon's side.

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Nananna: "—Mireille."

Palmira heard the hoarse, feeble voice of Nananna on the dais call out to the blue-haired secretary whose very aura had changed in an instant.

To be honest, from the moment Omega's outrageous outburst flew, Palmira had been left almost completely behind by the situation, but she was just barely keeping up with the circumstances, or so she flattered herself. And Palmira's impression of the truth behind Limbus, as she so flattered herself, was—

Palmira: "—Everyone involved can just die."

—that the very conclusion she'd reached before the previous day's strategy meeting came out intact, exactly as it was.

Mireille: "…"

At the sound of her name, the secretary—Mireille—sharpened eyes that had been keeping her emotions restrained, and from her whole body she sent forth unmistakable hostility, hatred. The pressure of that intensity made even Edmon, at her side, cringe backward pathetically.

Still radiating that oppressive presence, Mireille brought her hands together before her chest and let them hear a clap.

Mireille: "I had a bad feeling. Back when I heard the story from Nananna."

Palmira: "…Because Noelle was with her?"

Mireille: "Because she flattered her. Noelle Tuérico did."

Mireille drove that keen gaze into Omega.

Omega, for her part, took the look with a cool face and shrugged.
Omega: "I get that a lot."

Omega: "So you tried to eliminate me before anyone started poking around? That was a bad move. Your best play would have been to overlook our departure."

Mireille: "It didn't turn out that way. As a result, we were about to clean up—the party who saw us kill Piditz. You happened to be there by chance."

Omega: "…Oh?"

At Mireille's bitter face, Omega tilted her head as if her guess had missed the mark.

Come to think of it, Palmira recalled how, on the night of the witch-hunt that led to Omega being imprisoned as a "witch," Omega had moved differently from the other participants. That was partly a matter of stamina, but it had also been the execution of her own idea for driving the fleeing party into a corner—and that had overlapped, badly, with Mireille and the others' designs.

As a result, right near where Mireille and company had silenced a witness, Omega showed up—

Palmira: "You really attract nothing but the nastiest kind of trouble…!"

Omega: "I'd like to say that's unfair, but at this point it's hard to make excuses. Haha, maybe it's the bill for what I did while alive."

At Omega's unrepentant response, Palmira's fist kept trembling with anger.

And then, undeterred, Edmon jabbed a finger at Mireille with a "You!"—

Edmon: "You switched with the administrative officer and deceived me—are you sane? Yeah? And you're another nuisance born of the old man's fooling around, same as Nananna…"

Mireille: "—Coward! Be silent!"

In an instant, blue flame swelled, and in a single breath it swallowed the arm Edmon was pointing with at Mireille.

With a scream of "Gyaaaaah!" Edmon shrieked as his arm burned. Seeing Edmon's scream and what had been done to him, the other councillors scrambled to their feet, and the spectators, thinking they could no longer remain here, panicked and tried to flee—but—

Mireille: "No one escapes. Not a single soul."

That declaration was accompanied by the reappearance of the blue flame that had burned Edmon's arm. Pillars of fire sprang up to encircle the assembly hall, keeping all the gathered townsfolk from escaping wholesale.

It was unmistakably the work of magic.

Lilac: "No—this isn't mere magic. It's spirit arts."

In the hall where fear and confusion had been forcibly condensed into one place, Lilac stepped forward to shield Palmira and Colette and said so. As Noelle ran over to them as well, Lilac stared at the faint blue radiance floating around Mireille, who stood facing them.

Told it was spirit arts, Palmira finally came to understand that Mireille had borrowed the power of spirits to carry out the kind of supernatural mysterious-death cases Omega had mentioned.

She understood—yet the problem was—

Palmira: "What are we supposed to do now—?!"

In Palmira's field of vision as she shouted, Nananna drew up beside Mireille, who was wreathed with spirits; the masterminds who had manipulated Limbus's "witch" uproar from the shadows were now arrayed together.

With his arm burned and everything from the elbow down charred to coal, Edmon foamed at the mouth and fainted, while both councillors and townsfolk, swallowed by confusion, cried out in despair at the blue flames that ringed them round.

It was a scene of utter pandemonium. In the midst of it, Omega, tilting her head with a "Hmm" at Palmira's shout, turned to face the other "witches" besides herself.

Omega: "My companion is shouting like that—what do you intend to do? Now that your identities are out, will you, just as you are, give yourselves to anger and burn Limbus—the town that tormented you—to cinders with flame?"

Nananna: "…This one will not shrink from that, it is."

Mireille: “I wanted to make them suffer. More. To this extent. That too…!”

Omega: “Incidentally, I don’t have any particular reason to interfere with your revenge. So if you don’t drag us into it, I think I can just withdraw. How about that?”

Nananna & Mireille: “—Huh?”

Hearing Omega’s offhand proposal as she raised one finger, everyone was dumbfounded. That went not only for Palmira and the others, but for Mireille and Nananna as well. Probably, even the townsfolk felt the same, though they didn’t voice it.

At the reactions around her, Omega rolled her neck with a “Come on, now.”

Omega: “Isn’t that how it is in fact? Ultimately, this uproar has nothing to do with us. And I find the motives of the principals convincing. Or do we fight for the town?”

Palmira: “No, that is—um… I also think this town is the worst, but…”

Omega: “Then that’s fine, isn’t it. Presiding Judge and Secretary, you two should think calmly as well. —If you square off with us here, your revenge won’t be able to kill anyone else.”

As a pure fact, Omega set to persuasion—no, to threats—of Nananna and the others.

But that was what Palmira had been thinking even before going into the trial. Even if they lost the trial, there was no way Omega would be executed. That was because they knew Omega had that much power, and that had not changed even now that the opponents were Nananna and the others.

This “witch” had the worst personality and was abandoned by luck, but she possessed absolute power.

With her power, Mireille and Nananna could be ground away without a trace. No matter what tragic resolve or determination they had made, it would all be irrelevant.

Then—

Colette: "—Omega-chan, um, um… I—I don't want that."

Omega: "Hmm. I see. You would say that, Colette."

Unable to look the other way, Colette, beside Palmira, made her plea. At Colette's words, Palmira wanted to say, "Stop," and could not.

From the bottom of her heart, Palmira could not care less about what became of Limbus. But, from that same heart, she also selfishly wanted Colette not to accept this.

At Colette's straightforward words, Omega thought for a moment, then—

Omega: "I'm sorry, but circumstances have changed a little. Since my companion says as much, I can't look the other way while you continue to lay hands on people directly."

Nananna: "—If that's so, this one will resist to the end, it is."

Omega: "I wouldn't recommend it. —And you ought to have more faith in your own deeds."

Nananna: "—? I do not understand. The meaning. What do you wish to say, you do?"

Nananna and Mireille turned eyes that saw something unknowable upon Omega. Palmira was in complete agreement with their question, but Omega had decided to respect Colette's will.

Having decided, she burned through the shackles that bound her wrists and ankles with light from her fingertips, and finally obtained the freedom she could have taken at any time—

Omega: "—This pandemonium will never be forgotten. A "witch" will guarantee that."

In the end, she brazenly claimed for herself the title of “witch” they had been supposed to deny, even to the point of fighting it in court, and Palmira let out a sigh of heartfelt futility.

21

Nananna: “—Noelle, cannot say I wish you to forgive me, it is. Only, this one—”

Noelle: “I believe I said it, did I not? That so long as this life remains, I will forgive you on that single point.”

Nananna: “…”

Noelle: “Please go in good health with your sister. May the Mother Snow’s blessing be upon you.”

Nananna: “—The Mother Snow’s blessing, it is.”

A little ways out from Limbus, Noelle and Nananna exchanged a farewell rite.

They were friends and both Itinerant Preachers of the Holy Church of Gusteko; from this point on, their lives would likely never cross again. It was a rite carried out with that knowledge on both sides.

Omega: “As for the spirit clinging to you—drawn forth by negative emotion, it is a wicked spirit. If you continue to borrow its power, it will eat away at you. So I’ll have you let me dispose of that, at least.”

Mireille: “…Do you believe us? That we won’t return to this path?”

Omega: “I don’t think you’re so foolish as that. Live your own lives—the two of you.”

Unlike with Nananna, there was no dampness to Mireille’s send-off.

They had threatened each other’s lives, and respected each other’s lives. That was the sort of relationship it was.

It was nothing to pine over in parting. That said, it was not something for cursing each other's futures, either.

Besides, though Omega had ended up becoming an obstacle to their revenge, she was, in fact, rather highly rating their "witch"-like conduct for what it was.

Omega: "In any case, your target of hatred, Edmon-kun, won't last long. Not because of the wound to his arm, but because he's lost the townspeople's trust. —There are no few among the councillors who wouldn't want him running his mouth any further, after all."

Mireille: "—. You'd foreseen that. You—"

Omega: "This is the part I rate highest about you two… You planted in this town a seed of unending suspicion and doubt. With that terrifying yet sweet-sounding word, "witch.""

Mireille: "…"

Omega: "My guarantee carries a fair bit of persuasive power, doesn't it?"

At Omega's wink with one eye closed, Mireille recoiled a step as if chilled. Finding that reaction a little offensive, Omega received just one sentence from her.

Mireille: "…I was mistaken—about the very thing. A genuine "witch" is—"

—And so, parting from the two, Mireille and Nananna, Omega and the others were free.

Shion: "And with that… ba-bam, it's my entrance!"

Unable to wait, Shion—whose switching had been forbidden in Limbus—raised her voice high. Having handed control of the body over to Lilac for a while, Shion at last could breathe outside air without restriction, and she filled her lungs to the brim with the cold air.

Palmira and Noelle both smiled wryly at the sight—but there was one girl who did not step into that circle—

Omega: "—Colette."

Colette: "Ah, Omega-chan…"

At the call, Colette turned around; what she had been gazing toward was the direction of the town of Limbus.

The thin-snow town that could only silently see off Omega and the others—who had declared they would overlook the masterminds of the uproar, Mireille and Nananna, and had even looked half complicit.

Was it anger at this conclusion that cast a lonely shadow over Colette's expression?

Colette: "No, no, that's not it. I'm not angry. If I were to be angry, it would be at myself. I couldn't do anything, and I couldn't do anything for them."

Omega: "At the opening of the trial, it was your appeal that gave those around you a posture for listening. It's terribly trite to say, but it was a victory that could not have been won if anyone had been missing."

Colette: "…You're very, very clever, Omega-chan, so I'm sure you can see so many things. No, I think everyone—everyone other than me—is like that."

As she murmured, Colette's hand touched her own wrist—there, the "Beast Protection Bracelet" she wore was a special something only Colette possessed, something no one else here had. But Colette was not satisfied with that specialness. She hadn't saved them. She hadn't protected them. She hadn't made her will prevail.

Omega understood well the feeling of wanting something. —That was the origin of a "witch."

A sense of lack, a hunger that cannot reach, an unyielding desire—those are what make a person into a "witch."

Just as it had for Nananna and Mireille—perhaps for Colette, in the same way—

Colette: “—I want to work harder and harder. So, Omega-chan, would it be all right if I asked you to teach me lots of things?”

Omega: “Me?”

Colette: “Yes, yes, that’s right. Up till now, I kind of thought it might be fine if it were whoever among us could do it—but I’m sure, I’m sure that isn’t it. That’s what I felt—very strongly.”

With a smile that, despite its loneliness, had a backbone of strength, Colette asked, “Is that no good?” At the girl’s question, Omega let out a small breath.

Omega: “No, it isn’t no good. As you know, I like to talk and I like to teach.”

At Omega’s answer, Colette’s face bloomed into a smile like a flower. Just like that, she happily took Omega’s hand, and, following after the backs of their companions ahead, she started walking.

Omega: “…”

Led by the hand, Omega felt a most pleasant sensation.

—Before long, the town of Limbus would meet its collapse.

The facts Palmira and the others had exposed would sap the town council’s power, and the townsfolk had already learned the seed of suspicion that Mireille and Nananna had planted—and how quickly to dispel it.

People are weak, fragile, and flow toward the easier side. —Surely, in that town, “witches” would continue to be made, and “witches” would continue to be killed. That would be repeated.

Those two, too, responded to Omega’s demand because they had that expectation and certainty. Having seen in Omega’s behavior and way of being the terror of a “witch,” Limbus would never dare defy her.

Unable to denounce Omega and the others—or the two—thin-snow town would, for reasons of unease and fear, continue killing "witches" who were not terrifying—who could never resist execution.

But—

Omega: "There's no need, is there, to go out of my way to tell her that."

From the hand she was holding came warmth, and ahead of it, there was the brave smile of the girl.

A curiosity did stir in Omega—one that wanted to tell this truth and witness the girl's face be stripped even of that smile. But, when that breaking point awaited afterward, it would likely close off the many opportunities that ought to lie ahead—and the possibilities for Omega to be sated.

Because she loathed that, Omega did not speak of the likely fate awaiting the thin-snow town.

—In the thin-snow town, a "witch" had indeed existed. And from here on as well, she would continue to exist.

For that was certain retribution upon those who, at the Witch Trial, could not properly judge the "witch."

END

Birthday Specials

Emilia’s Birthday Specials

Emilia’s Very Happy Birthday

1

“—Lia, did you know? I have a birthday party planned for today.”

“Oh, really? Who for?”

Surprised by the voice coming from inside her silver hair, Emilia widens her eyes.

Moving around in her hair, trying to pull his head through a gap, is an adorable spirit-cat named Pack. Grooming his face from his usual spot on Emilia’s shoulder, he continues:

“Well.”

“I’m not sure I can tell you. I’m not trying to be mean, but it’s a secret.”

“A secret… Why is that? Isn’t it weird?”

“It’s really not. Why, you ask? That’s because it’s a surprise.”

“Sarprize.”

After hearing Pack say that word with confidence, Emilia slightly furrows her eyebrows. Bringing a finger to her lips she mutters again, “sarprize.”

“Surprise” seems to be a word that means, “a secret preparation made to surprise someone.”

In the past, Emilia had heard it from the mouth of Subaru, who works at the mansion. Subaru’s hometown seems to have many peculiar expressions, “surprise,” being one of them.

“I understand that ‘sarprize’ thing, but…no matter how you slice it, isn’t not knowing who you are celebrating a bit too much? I think that’s bothersome.”

"Is that so? I think it's really interesting. It's not just the person who's being celebrated, the celebratory side doesn't know either. But the excitement of a celebration is what's important."

"Mm… it's like that, isn't it? Mh, I feel like I understand that a little."

Pack crosses his arms and nods, Emilia believes that's the right way to see it too.

Surely, no matter whose birthday it is, it is a special day that should be celebrated. Even if, for now, it's unclear who is being celebrated—the good wishes are not lost. Whoever's birthday it may be, to direct heartfelt good wishes to that person—that might be the intention behind a surprise.

"I see… that's it, it's great! Then I will help too."

"Mm? I guess I expected Lia to be in high spirits, but… Well, Lia's cute when she's in high spirits so I'll support you. That's the spirit! Lia!"

"Mm, leave it to me! I, whoever's birthday it is, will make this 'sarprize' a success!" Flames lighting up in her eyes, Emilia declares her resolve.

Following that, Puck rocked his tail swiftly and said,

"Best of lucks~"

2

"Say, Subaru. Let's say we were celebrating something, what is something you'd like to receive?"

"Me? Mmh, let's see, I don't need anything special. Emilia-tan's smile is fine."

"Oh, I don't want to hear something like that now right now."

"I was being very serious though?!"

Emilia swiftly dismisses that answer. For the surprise plan, Emilia's motivation is burning.

Although Emilia hasn't had many occasions to go to any, she surprisingly likes festivals. Everyone celebrates together, people chit-chat, and they all enjoy the moment from the bottom of their hearts.

Emilia is actually the second most appreciative of Subaru's various celebratory events, the first most appreciative person probably being Roswaal.

In these circumstances, Emilia wants to be able to celebrate whoever's birthday it is with all her might. To prepare for that, she's going to investigate on what everyone in the mansion would like, so that she can do the appropriate thing for a surprise.

She tried asking Subaru right off the bat, but…

"A smile… Mm, I do think that's great too, but that's not really what I meant."

"It's fine, because Emilia-tan's smile rivals the sparkling starry sky."

"Again with that? How about I promise to give a shoulder massage?"

"That totally gets through to me. In my hometown a shoulder-massage coupon would be a standard gift when you have no idea what to get."

"I see… I'd be happy to give one to Pack once in a while."

"Why did you suddenly start talking about celebrating? Did you perhaps want to thank me for my everyday services and the likes?"

"Of course, I'm thankful to you for everything, but…"

"It's embarrassing if you say it so boldly."

"But that's not what this is about. This is about the sarpr-"

She stops as she realizes what she's about to say. Subaru frowns. "Sarp?"

"Sarp, what is sarp? I didn't say anything like that."

"What a sloppy deception!!"

Looking away from Subaru's reaction, Emilia gently puts her hand to her chest.

The two were only talking nonchalantly, but if it was Subaru's birthday they were going to celebrate, Emilia was being too carefree with her choice of words. The essence of a surprise is that the target should not pick up on it. Just now, Emilia was going against this foundation. Trying to keep her intentions concealed, she slides her pale fingers on the nearby window frame.

"Ahum."

"Look,Subaru."

"Mh, what is it, what is it?"

"Here, that's reaaally dirty, you should clean it more properly, I swear…"

"Where did such a mother-sounding remark come from so suddenly?!"

Subaru laments as he reaches for the towel and starts cleaning up. Watching from behind, having just avoided a problem, Emilia caresses her forehead.

3

"Lady Emilia, there is some strange dust on your forehead."

"Mm? Oh, that's bad, is it perhaps from earlier?"

As she was walking, absorbed in her own thoughts, Emilia blushes upon hearing Ram's remark.

Walking towards Emilia across the mansion's hall, Ram takes out a handkerchief and wipes Emilia's forehead. That dust is probably from the window frame she's touched earlier.

"Done, you look beautiful now. Right behind me and Rem."

"Really? Hehe, thank you."

"…Say, Ram, will you hear out me for a second?"

Finishing to put her handkerchief back, Ram calmly nods.

"Please, go on."

Her consent voiced, Emilia ponders for a moment.

"Alright."

The question asked to Subaru earlier was a failure, so let's change the approach.

"What would you say you want to be treated to the most?"

"Rem's steamed potatoes. Their seasoning is perfect, after all."

That was an immediate reply. Hearing her make such an assertion without a second thought, Emilia stands puzzled.

"Lady Emilia, what has the great spirit told you?"

"Uh?! Nothing really?! Puck hasn't done anything like that, he just played around in my hair being cute as always, just that…"

"…I see. It seems I was mistaken then."

"Th-That's right. I think it was a misunderstanding. But that really doesn't mean you are to blame."

"…"

To Ram, who was narrowing her lightly-pink pupils, Emilia speaks up all the while feeling guilty. Gently sighing, Ram picks up the conversation.

“That being said, right now Rem is working in the kitchen.”

“She is? Umm, is she preparing the cooking-ware?”

Now gazing upon the time-crystal that’s installed at the top of the wall in the hallway, Emilia tilts her neck. It’s already too late for lunch and it’s still too early for supper, so whatever Rem is doing this early must be preparations for later.

“Speaking frankly… she’s preparing a special meal.”

“Special uh… Oh, that must be it!”

Emilia’s eyes suddenly start sparkling, as Ram softly brings her finger to her lips. Hearing these words, joined by that indicative gesture, Emilia hastily nods.

What this means is that this is Rem’s contribution to the surprise. Through Emilia’s behavior, Ram was able to understand what she was hiding and covertly advize her.

In short, Ram and Rem are preparing the surprise too. Meaning neither of them naturally cannot be the ones to have a celebration for. They are in the same position as Emilia.

“Well, I guess I’ll be headed to the kitchen now.”

“Rem will be receiving you. In this instance I believe your help might be very useful.”

“I understand! Thank you! Let’s do our best together!”

Now ahead is the kitchen, where Rem is waiting. There, the essence of what a surprise contains is streaming.

4

“I see, so then my sister sent you here. As expected, Rem’s sister is admirable.”

“That’s right, Ram really is great. I wonder how she found out what I was thinking…”

Greeting Emilia and having her enter the kitchen, Rem extensively praises her one and only big sister. With Rem’s compliments, Emilia agrees and nods many times over.

Then, even though they’re still facing each other in the kitchen, the atmosphere completely changes. It is an aura Emilia knows well. The most significant change being of course, the smell.

“It smells reaally sweet. Say, this couldn’t be…”

“Yes, a confection is cooking for the celebration. Actually, It is the first time I’ve attempted this confection, so I’ve had to go through a few attempts first.”

“Ooh, that’s amazing.”

“So, it seems Beatrice has been enduring all of it over there, huh.”

“Yes! That’s exactly right!”

“This… Don’t say that with such excitement, I suppose!”

In the middle of this kitchen, where a sweet aromas lingers, is a little girl with her characteristically extravagant curly hair—Beatrice.

Around her lies many plates and dishes, and on her cheeks there is some cream. All this can only be evidence that Beatrice strained her body in cooperating with Rem for her many trial and errors.

“Betty… Haven’t you heard what happens when you only eat sugar? This is…”

“But thanks to Miss Beatrice, I was able to quickly improve. By no means was Miss Beatrice’s noble sacrifice wasted!”

“This girl just said sacrifice, I suppose! She said it! You listen here too, I suppose!”

"You can't do that, Beatrice. If you get this angry just after eating, your stomach will start aching…"

"Hmp!"

With the two leading her by the nose, Beatrice stomps her foot!

But for Beatrice to team up with someone is very unusual. That's just evidence of how important this surprise is for everyone.

"So it's not Ram and Rem, and Beatrice is helping… So the only ones remaining are Subaru and Roswaal, right?"

"Rem and Beatrice are full of enthusiasm, so as I thought, it probably is Subaru."

"Wait, I suppose. Why would it matter that I am enthusiastic?

"Certainly, if it is for Subaru's sake it's a given that I would work inexhaustibly. However, I wish to return the many favors of Master Roswaal. So I would try my best too."

"Mm, this is tough. It's as if I'm the one being surprised."

"…"

As Emilia mutters to herself, Rem and Beatrice fall silent. Following that telling silence, Emilia utters—

"Uh?"

Beatrice clears her throat, "Uh, hum… This. You asked me earlier."

"That's right, it's as Miss Beatrice says. This is the result of our efforts, Lady Emilia, would you?"

"Oh, is that alright?"

Rem eagerly presents Emilia with a sample-slice of the confection.

"I want to eat it, but… isn't it wrong for me to eat this?"

"No, please eat up. Miss Beatrice's opinion alone isn't reliable enough…”

“What kind of comment is that?! That man’s bad influence is getting to you, I suppose!”

Rem tries to calm Beatrice who is exploding with anger. Turning their backs during their exchange, Emilia slowly reaches her hand for the sweet and hastily leaves.

5

“Anyhow, I’m still troubled. What should I do?”

“Mh? Lia, what is it?”

Pack, who was laying on the desk, goes to Emilia, who had walked back to her room with the plate in her hands. Seeing the carefree attitude portrayed by the cat-spirit, Emilia gives a sigh in resignation.

“You know, that ‘sarprize’ thing isn’t going too well.”

“I see, that’s bad. But how is the cake?”

“Well, Rem and Beatrice made it to share with everyone. Will you have some?”

“Mm, I’ll pass. After all, watching Lia eat is the best.”

Seeing Pack’s firm refusal upon presenting him with the plate, Emilia draws back the plate and speaks,

“Is that so?”

With a subtle expression of discomfort, Emilia cuts into her slice of dessert with a fork.

The cake softly crumbles and she’s blessed with the sweet fragrance of the cake. With just that, it feels like the surprise will be a huge success.

“Nom… Oh, that’s reaally good. As I thought, Rem really is amazing. That’s so good…”

“That’s a relief, right? Lia. Congratulations.”

“…? Hum, thank you. I guess?”

As she was bringing some cake to her mouth, Pack rises from behind Emilia’s head and stretches his limbs in all directions.

Receiving a congratulatory treatment while eating cake, a lot of question marks start appearing around Emilia’s head. But the lingering sweet taste in her mouth is delicious.

“Starting from now, today will be a very special day…because I’ve decided it as the closest person to you.”

“Sorry, but I don’t really get what you’re saying.”

“Hehee, you’ll get it soon enough.”

For Pack to use such an insinuative tone is unusual, thus Emilia obediently waits for a clarification on Pack’s words.

Finishing her last bite of cake, she hears knocking on the door of her room.

“Emilia-tan, can you come to the dining hall for a bit? There’s something important I want to tell you.”

“That’s exact, there’s something very important we need to discuss. It is of your concern and it’ll certainly be astounding.”

Subaru and Rem had come to meet her, calling her with an unusual tone of voice. As they arrive at the doors of the dining hall, Emilia tilts her head for a bit…

“…I swear, Pack is such an idiot! I swear! I’m really, really mad at you!”

As she finally understands who the surprise is for, Emilia’s voice echoes in the residents’ ears. This is a special day that occurs only once every year, a day that bestowed a blessing.

“Happy Birthday! Emilia!”

Lugunica Newspaper:
Volume 2

● Natsuki Subaru

Happy birthday, Emilia-tan!

I'm seriously grateful for the fact that you were born and met me.

Emilia-tan, you'll always be the brightest star to me!

E.M.T.!!

● Puck

Lia, happy birthday!

Lia, thanks to you I was given the blessing of being a father to the world's cutest girl.

Don't you ever stop being cute, all right?

But you'd better be careful of Subaru, you know?

● Rem

Lady Emilia, happy birthday.

Please excuse Sister's harsh words, deep down she's excited too.

Rem and Sister congratulate you from the bottom of our hearts.

Know that we'll be here supporting you along with Subaru.

● Ram

Happy birthday, Lady Emilia.

Be aware of how old you've become and act like it.

…Serving someone who is too clumsy is quite a pain.

● Beatrice

Why must Betty…?

Agh, I get it, in fact! I get it, I suppose!

I wish you a very happy birthday, is that what you want to hear?

I hope you spend one more year thinking about how lucky you are to have Bubby, I suppose.

● Roswaal

Happy birthday to you, Lady Emilia.

I know that your days have been veeery hectic lately, but I hope that, at least today, things go better.

Please never change, Lady Emilia, I am expecting a lot from you in regard to the Royal Selection.

…I am sure that the choices that you make will also be the best for me, after aaall.

● Felt

Huh, it's your birthday? Congrats then. A birthday is a once-in-a-year chance to do whatever you want, right?

C'mon, go wild, make that guy or your maids do whatever you feel like.

I always make that Reinhard bastard work himself into the ground when it's my birthday, you see!

● Reinhard

Lady Emilia, happy birthday.

Lady Emilia, I hope this new year turns out to be the best for you, and… Lady Felt? "Boring," you say?

Lady Felt, this is a birthday greeting. What matters isn't if it's boring or fun, but…

Where are you going? Lady Felt? Excuse me, I must take my leave. Lady Felt!

● Crusch

Your birthday? That is worth celebrating, indeed. Let me send you a greeting.

Even though we are in opposing positions in the Royal Selection, I do not intend, at all, to use that as an excuse to be boorish towards you on this day.

You are a rather pleasant opponent, and I would like things to continue like that from now on.

May our fight bring pride to our souls. …Farewell, until we meet again.

● Ferris

Lady Emilia, happy birthdaaay.

Ferri's greetings are probably going to sound dull after hearing Lady Crusch's meowrvelous words, but, well, it never hurts to congratulate someone anyway.

Keep doing your best for the Royal Selection.

Though we know Lady Crusch is going to win in the end. ♪

● Anastasia

Oh, Emilia, is it your birthday? We gotta celebrate then.

Don't think I'm not gonna congratulate you just because we're opponents in the Royal Selection, I ain't that shallow.

In fact, I feel obliged to congratulate you Kararagi-style.

Take these flowers and daisukiyaki from me, I'd be happy if you accepted them.

● Julius

Happy birthday to you, Lady Emilia.

Seeing that the events of this year have been making you bloom more sublime and beautiful each day, I am incapable of even beginning to imagine the heights that you will reach during the rest of it.

I humbly ask that you stay firm and keep being yourself, Lady Emilia.

I send my most sincere congratulations to you for this occasion.

● Priscilla

Oh, that half-demon's birthday? Such a laughable event.

I am uninterested. All that thing is useful for is to serve as my stepping stone.

However, I shall allow her, in my generosity, to enjoy that brief entertainment before that time comes.

May she relish her so-called birthday to her heart's content. Before falling to her knees before me, that is.

● Al

You heard the princess, but I'll give you a normal greeting. Congrats.

You see, birthdays don't feel special anymore when you're an old man like me, but, for some reason, seeing others' birthday parties gets me hyped up.

And judging by all that decoration, Bro is pretty hyped up!

You're really loved, aren't you, Miss. …Aaah, seriously. I'm so jealous.

● Old Man Rom

Hm, your birthday? I gotta congratulate you then.

I know things between you and Felt are complicated, but it'd be kinda insensitive to bring that up right now.

Since we'll keep in contact for a long while, I hope you can get along better with Felt.

● Ton, Chin, Kan

Hey, we don't even know her, wouldn't it be weird for us to send a greeting?!

First of all, she's a candidate going against Felt. I'd feel weird congratulating her too.

Who cares, it's her birthday, so I'll do it! I've no idea who you are, but congrats!

…Don't send greetings to someone we don't even know in our stead!

● Wilhelm

Allow me to congratulate you for your birthday.

I am aware that I am not in the most appropriate position to send a greeting to you, but I must take the chance.

My wife once said that I must always offer a sincere message in occasions like this one.

Therefore, I will keep it brief. I hope that you stay in good health.

That is what matters the most.

● Ricardo

Ah, that girl who's rivals with Missy? If it's her birthday, then we gotta celebrate!

Here in Kararagi, the act of celebrating itself brings us enough joy, the details are just a plus!

Missy said it, we ain’t gonna be so petty as to not congratulate you, all right?

Anyway, congratulations! C’mon, bring the alcohol! It’s all on Missy today!

● Mimi, Hetaro, Tivey

Yay! A birthday! Congratulations! A pretty important day! Like Missy said!

S-Sis, don’t raise such a ruckus…

C-Congratulations, Lady Emilia.

Sis, both you and Missy are way too excited over this.

You shouldn’t lower your guard too much before an enemy like… Waaah!

Take that! Tivey lowered his guard! Hahah, this celebration’s so fun!

Let me go, Sis! …Sis, you’re so cute.

Today isn’t my lucky day…

● Otto

I wish you a very happy birthday, Lady Emilia.

Mister Natsuki might be more excited about this than you, Lady Emilia, but if we can get you to enjoy it, then doing all this work will be worth it.

I do have my complaints about being included as a mere joker in the program, though!

● Frederica

Lady Emilia, let me wish you a happy birthday.

It has not been long since I started working for you, but doing so fills me with joy.

I am aware that your duties are too great for me to imagine, but I still want to ask that you please take this chance to give yourself some peace of mind.

● Petra

Hey, Sis… er, Lady Emilia, congratulations.

Lady Emilia, I helped a lot with the preparations for your birthday party, too.

So make sure to enjoy it, Sis… I mean, Lady Emilia. Hehe.

● Garfiel

Your birthday? Congrats then.

Honestly, I've still got a ton of things to tell ya, princess.

But y'know, "the Lion King keeps his silence with a smile." I won't say anything rude.

Ya better have a good time, 'cause this is one of tha few days ya can do that.

● Ryuzu

Lady Emilia, happy birthday.

Celebrating a birthday just doesn't feel the same at my age, but it's fine.

You, Lady Emilia, are still at a stage when growing one year older actually means something.

May you continue following the path you've chosen, for all the years to come, without forgetting this day.

● Kadomon

Uh, don't you think it's weird to include me in this?

Though, I haven't forgotten about the time she helped my Plum when she got lost.

…So, now what? Happy birthday. Keep up the hard work.

By the way, take this. Some delicious appas just for you!

● Liliana

…A flash. Hear me out, "Life is a Huge Seesaw."

…Just kidding! Happy birthday to you!

I really wasn't expecting you all to call me, Liliana, out of all people, for this, thus I can't hide these vivid emotions I'm having, but please ignore that!

So, my wish is that Lady Emilia sets out into every corner of the world, leaving a long, long trail of anecdotes that'll become the seed for my new songs, and also…

Woah, wait. What is it? Why are you taking me away?

Hey, wait! All right, I'll sing already! I'll sing, so please let me goooo!

Memory Snow Prequel: Liar Days

1

“Hmmm, hmmm, this is a real problem.”

“—What’s the matter all of a sudden, Puck?”

The sudden voice she heard from within her hair caused Emilia’s amethyst eyes to widen in surprise.

Emerging from her long, glistening silver hair and perching on her shoulder was a tiny cat spirit small enough to fit in a palm—Puck. Puck crossed his short arms and whispered into Emilia’s ear, “Hey,”

“Between you and me… It looks like my magical release period has arrived.”

“Magical release period… What’s that?”

“Oh dear, you’re a forgetful kid, aren’t you. A magical release period is when beings like myself who possess extremely powerful Ods end up in a pitiful state because we have nothing to use our accumulated mana on.”

“Accumulated mana… Is that like constipation?”

“Hmm, that’s a rather vexing way to put it, but I can’t exactly deny it…”

With a finger against her cheek, Emilia simplified it in her own way which caused Puck to smile wryly.

But even Emilia couldn’t just disregard something that would make Puck suffer.

Puck was always playing around and his pranks were innumerable, he was still a precious member of Emilia’s family. After all, the two of them had always been together back in that snowy land they lived in.

“Now that you mention it, back in the forest there were times when it seemed like you reeeeeally wanted to use magic, could that perhaps have had something to do with this?”

“Well, that’s the gist of it. Back in the forest I could let off some steam one way or another, like helping you hunt for instance, but this mansion hasn’t given me that sort of opportunity in quite a while.”

Puck used the tip of his long tail to indicate Emilia’s room—No, more generally, the whole mansion as he donned a human-like smile.

The two were presently speaking in Emilia’s room which was located in the Roswaal Manor. The room allotted to Emilia who was a royal selection candidate was so spacious and beautifully constructed that she felt it was too much for her.

To begin with, back in the forest she was originally living in she only ever stayed in a wooden house, so things like this stone construction and this massive mansion were completely foregin to her. When her lifestyle suddenly changed, she had her hands full trying to adapt to this change in her environment.

“But to think I never noticed you weren’t feeling well… Looks like I was only thinking about myself. I’ll have to reflect on that.”

“Well now, what a sincere kid my daughter is. While I certainly do feel a sense of accomplishment for having raised you right, let’s set that aside for now…”

“Puck?”

As Emilia regretted her lack of consideration, Puck separated from her shoulder and unsteadily descended to the bed. The gray cat then curled up there and,

“It kind of feels like it’s going to be a real tough one this time. Perhaps it’s because I’m getting on in years.”

“No way… Puck, will you be okay? Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Ehehe, you sure are kind. But now that it’s gotten to this point, there’s probably not much you can do. So… Right. For now, could you keep this secret between the two of us?”

“Secret, you mean the magical release period?”

Emilia tilted her head, not understanding the meaning of Puck’s request.

In response, Puck who was still on the bed started grooming his face with his paw as he smiled bashfully,

“Look, calling it constipation was kind of, y’know, but it really is embarrassing to have others find out about your magical release period. That goes for you too, doesn’t it?”

“Really? I mean, even if people found out I was constipated I wouldn’t really…”

“—It’s embarrassing. Lia, it’s embarrassing to have others learn that you’re constipated.”

“Y-Yeah… Got it…”

Even though Puck was supposed to be curled up on the bed, he emphasized this right in front of her causing Emilia to be taken aback as she nodded.

This was one of those moments when Puck would instruct her.

In this manner, Puck would often put significant effort into correcting various ideas Emilia had since due to her life in the forest she was not well versed in the ways of the world. He would most commonly work on amending this sort of everyday conduct in particular.

—According to Puck, it seemed like girls were supposed to be cute. Emilia didn’t really get it, though.

“Phew, I’m glad you understand. Lia, from now on, make sure you never mention anything like constipation in front of others again. It’s a promise.”

“Right. But it’s not like I’ve ever even had an upset stomach or anything, so…”

“But even so! Haa, looks like my work here is done.”

Nodding in satisfaction, Puck returned to the bed. When he once again curled up, Emilia quietly sat down next to him and gently stroked his small back.

He tried to hide it with his fatherly act, but Puck was extremely exhausted right now. It was certainly cute how he bravely tried to hide it, but Emilia couldn’t just leave him alone.

He had essentially told her there was nothing she could do, but then at the very least—

“Right, understood. I’ll definitely keep your constipation under wraps. It’s a promise.”

“Fufu, thank you, Lia. But it’s not constipation, it’s my magical release period.”

She used her finger to tickle his neck as he smiled, making him purr adorably.

2

And thus, Emilia was burning with the will to keep her promise to Puck.

Anyway, it seemed like Puck was trying to release his mana little by little so he could return to normal. Because of this, the temperature around the mansion had stealthily declined and the air felt just a little colder than before.

“Ah, Subaru! It’s a little cold today, but that’s definitely just your imagination, so you don’t need to think about it too much. Also, this is unrelated, but Puck’s going to be resting in my room today, not that that has anything to do with this, but… Sorry about that.”

In this manner, Emilia proactively tried to hide Puck’s secret as she endeavored to keep her promise.

In truth she could hardly bear to lie like this, but as Puck’s contractor fulfilling his request was the least she could do for him.

She was terribly apologetic towards everyone in the Roswaal Manor, but she wanted them to bear with the cold for just a little bit.

The chilly winds produced by the dropping temperatures avoided Emilia. This was one of the protections afforded to her as a spirit contractor, and as a result of this Emilia was the only one who was not besieged by the cold.

“Uuh, this is no good… Maybe I’m having a tummy ache for the first time or something…”

Emilia stroked her stomach which had a dull, persistent pain running through it, perhaps this was her punishment for trying to deceive others with her inexperienced lies.

If this was what happened when you lied, she could definitely understand why people said lying was bad. In her heart, Emilia resolutely decided that from now on she would avoid lying as much as possible.

As Emilia made this vow to herself—

“—Hold on a minute, girl.”

As Emilia walked through the mansion’s corridors, this voice from behind caused her to stop and turn around.

This call had no subject, but she had an idea as to who this voice belonged to. And she also understood that the owner of this voice wouldn’t simply refer to her by name.

“What’s the matter, Beatrice? It’s rather rare for you to have any business with me… Ah, it’s just a little chilly today, but Puck and I have nothing to do with that, so. Uuh…”

“You were just trying to get rid of me quickly, I suppose… What’s with that face?”

“No, don’t worry about it. My tummy just hurts a bit so…”

Sighing with dissatisfaction at Emilia’s attempt to put on a brave smile was a young girl in a dress—Beatrice. She calmly crossed her arms and glared at Emilia with her lovely eyes full of scorn.

“Wh-What? Um, Puck and I, this cold really…”

“If you want to say you have nothing to do with it, I understand, I suppose. Anyway, how is my brother? He must be suffering in your room, I suppose.”

“Yeah, that’s how it is. He’s all curled up like a real cat.”

As if even moving was too troublesome, Puck was as docile as a domesticated cat as he rested in her room.

Puck would very rarely enter a dormant state as a spirit in which his entire body would go completely still, but to Emilia this looked just as bad as that, or perhaps even worse.

“I’m reeeeally worried. Say, Beatrice, do you know anything about magical release…”

“Magical release?”

“Uhh, do you know of any method to deal with a reeeeally weird kind of constipation?”

“That man is without a doubt a supremely terrible influence on you, in fact!”

Emilia had almost ended up saying it out loud, but she managed to cover it up at the last second. As a bonus, she even managed to continue her question by putting it a different way, perhaps she had a real talent for lying.

As Emilia was surprised by this unexpected possibility, Beatrice angrily stamped her foot. She then placed her palm against her forehead, “Haa”

“This ‘problem’ is one even Betty cannot do anything about, I suppose. But I will hide the effects the solution is having on the surroundings, in fact.”

“Sorry, I don’t really understand what you’re talking about…”

“This is what happens when I go along with your absurd, roundabout way of putting it I suppose! How irritating, in fact!”

Unfortunately, Beatrice’s intentions failed to reach Emilia, leaving her at a loss.

However, when Emilia thought that Beatrice seemed to take offense to this reaction of hers,

“Aah, I don’t care anymore, I suppose. If that’s how you want to play it, Betty will just do things her own way, in fact. Don’t be so full of yourself just because you were the only one my brother revealed this to, I suppose. Hmph, in fact.”

Puffing her red cheeks, Beatrice turned her back on Emilia.

She didn’t really get it, but it seemed she had angered Beatrice somehow. This sort of thing happened rather frequently. Even though Emilia wanted to be friends with her.

But right now, her promise to Puck took priority over these feelings—

“Beatrice, tomorrow might be just as cold as today, but Puck and I have nothing to do with that, so!”

“You, stop running around telling that to everyone, seriously, I suppose!”

—For some reason, Beatrice got even angrier.

“Puck, this is bad… I might have a talent for lying.”

“Ehh, that’s pretty crazy. That’s a talent a ruler ought to have, perhaps this is a good omen.”

“Is that how it is? That somehow seems reeeally weird to me, though.”

Night had fallen, and Emilia reported the results of her all day operation to suppress the truth as she stroked Puck’s back while he lay on her lap. But unable to understand Puck’s appraisal, Emilia knit her brows.

It was true that by participating in the royal selection Emilia was aiming to become the next ruler of Lugunica, but what exactly was the connection between a ruler and lies?

“For now, I think it’s fine if you just stay as adorable as you are. By the way, you’ve been stroking your own stomach as much as you have my back for a while now. Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing. It’s just, my tummy starts hurting when I lie…”

“Then I don’t suppose you really have any sort of talent for lying…”

It didn’t seem like Puck was going to believe her, he didn’t know about the skillful lies she had crafted throughout the day.

Regardless, Emilia herself had sworn to avoid lying as much as possible, so perhaps it would be best if neither of them knew.

“By the way, did anything happen while I was resting?”

“It’s alright, it doesn’t look like anyone has noticed that you’re not around.”

“If that’s the case I’ll feel so lonely I could die. Well, the fact that no one has said anything might mean they’re all duller than expected. —Perhaps I could take things a little further.”

“—? Puck?”

Emilia didn’t quite catch the latter part of his statement, but Puck meowed like a cat when she called out to him. He seemed to have a habit of doing this sort of thing when he was trying to deceive her.

“Jeez, come on, Puck, I want you to properly tell me everything.”

“Well, I’ll do that bit by bit. But you really managed to hold out without saying anything, huh. That’s incredible.”

“Fufu, I did promise after all. It was only natural.”

But even those suspicions disappeared in a flash when he complimented her.

Honestly, at this rate it looked like they could get through this without anyone finding out about Puck’s magical release period.

If there were any cause for concern, it would probably be that for some reason, Ram made eye contact with her a lot more frequently than usual today, and her eyes seemed to be suggesting something.

That look of hers, and her silent attitude. Perhaps there was something she wanted to say to Emilia.

“Ram did look like she was pretty cold too, could it be… That she was jealous of my long hair or something? Because if you have long hair, it leaves your neck a little warmer.”

Ram and Rem, the two sisters both had short hair, so perhaps they couldn’t deal with the cold around there quite as well as Emilia. That hairstyle really did suit them, but Emilia ended up feeling somewhat apologetic towards them.

“If this goes okay, I’ll definitely have to repay Ram for this. But Ram’s a girl who can do anything, so I wonder if I’ll ever have the chance to do that…”

“The way you look at others is one of the 108 things about my beloved daughter that make me proud.”

Puck overheard her murmur and responded with these words, making her smile.

108 had to be an exaggeration no matter how she looked at it. Puck was definitely skilled at identifying her good points, but even so.

“So, what about your magical release period? Is it going well?”

“Yeah, thanks to you. But it looks like it’ll take just a little longer for me to return to normal, so… I guess it’s going to be a bother for you and Beatrice.”

“Gosh, Puck. Wouldn’t it be bothersome to everyone in the mansion? And Beatrice hasn’t noticed anything either. —The two of us will have to make this up to everyone later.”

Since they couldn’t tell anyone about his magical release period, it would probably end up being a partial apology, but they still had to apologize properly for the trouble they caused everyone.

After that, she would have to bet it all on her ability to form an excellent lie at the last second.

“Ahh… Somehow, just thinking about lying makes my stomach hurt…”

“Hmm, that’s definitely not what you’d call a talent for lying. How adorable you are, my daughter…”

Puck’s completely carefree words made Emilia pout. She then gently picked him up and placed him by her pillow on her bed.

“Is it really okay for you to not return to your crystal?

“The way I am right now, I’m not sure I wouldn’t just shatter that crystal. I don’t want to worry you by ending up homeless, and sleeping with you would make me happy.”

“Really? I see. But I’m reeeeally happy too when you’re with me.”

Smiling at him, Emilia slipped in next to Puck who was curled up and lay down on the bed.

It was soft, with unusually velvety bedsheets, even this bedding on its own was a kind of happiness she did not have back in the forest.

"That, and Rem's cooking. I was seriously shocked the first time I ate here."

"That's true, isn't it. But there's definitely a whole lot more coming your way that will surprise you."

"Is that so, I wonder?—Yeah, that would be nice."

Puck's words made her feel warm, and she started stroking his neck. Her cheeks relaxed as she watched him purr, and sleepiness slowly overcame her.

Tomorrow was yet another day she would have to give it her all for Puck's sake.

That was another reason she had to get a good night's sleep and build up her willpower.

"I can't just keep burdening you like this either. I'll try to return to my usual self as quickly as I possibly can."

"…Yeah, do your best, Puck. Fuwah."

"Good night, Lia."

From next to her pillow, Puck extended his tail and gently caressed her forehead with its thick fur.

She remembered that Puck used to do this a lot back in the forest. That was a long time ago, but this sensation she hadn't felt in a long time brought her a sense of security that was much greater than she expected.

Slowly, slowly—Emilia's mind, tired from all the lying, descended into the world of dreams so it could rest.

—We're getting a little ahead of ourselves, but Puck's problem with his magical release period ended up getting exposed to everyone in the mansion two days later.

To what extent did Emilia's actions contribute to the failure of their secret mission? Let us save the details for later, but there is one thing that can be said with certainty.

Emilia’s smile when she realized she no longer needed to lie completely captured the heart of the boy living with her in the mansion—That is all.

Bond of Ice Prequel:
Frozen Days

1

"—Lady Emilia, it seems you've been focusing on studying more than usual recently."

"Oh, really? Hehe, it does?"

"Yes. I think that's a very good thing." Rem gave her praise smiling as she poured tea for the now-delighted Emilia.

The place was inside Emilia's private quarters, within Roswaal's mansion.

Rem had been waiting for lunchbreak to bring refreshments to Emilia, who was studying in her room from morning up until dinner time.

After bringing the warm brew to her lips, Emilia murmured, "so good."

Seeing Rem gracefully stand up, she tilted her head. "Don't just disappear like a breeze, won't you have some tea too?"

"Well… As of now, I'm a maid."

"But Ram often drinks tea with me…"

"If my sister does, then there's no way I could refuse."

Emilia chuckles, hearing Rem talk about her sister: Ram.

The two sisters were very close, but Rem often tried to mimic Ram's behavior.

Smiling at the love Rem held for her sister, Emilia looked pleased.

"It seems like you reaally like Ram, Rem. I'm kind of jealous."

“Yes. There is only one Ram: to say she is my sun would be no exaggeration. Based on that, Subaru would probably have to be the whole world to me, I suppose…”

“Sorry, but I don’t really get what you just said…”

Emilia frowns at Rem, who was deeply concerned with the matter.

A black-haired boy who just recently had come to the mansion, by the name of Natsuki Subaru. It was common knowledge that Rem didn’t only hold Ram dear, but also that boy.

Emilia and Rem had only known each other for half a year at most, but that past month, Rem had been smiling a lot. Emilia thought it made her look cuter.

Subaru had been having a great influence on Rem’s behavior, and on the frequency of her smiles.

“Are you maybe, even just a bit, uneasy with Subaru?”

In half a year, Emilia had been unable to close the distance with Rem. Next to that, Subaru, who came later, was easily able to overtake her progress by bringing out Rem’s smile.

Emilia knew she wasn’t good at meeting new people, but that was fairly vexing for her.

“Lady Emilia? Is there something on your mind?”

“No, it’s nothing. It’s just… I was thinking I’d like to bring out your smile too.”

“M-My smile? That’s… Um… Thank you…”

Hearing Emilia’s quiet words, Rem’s voice slowly lowered as well.

That was the exact opposite of what Emilia was trying to achieve, her interpersonal skills really were lacking.

Even though she was still studying, she was aiming to become the Ruler of the Kingdom of Lugunica. Shouldn’t a ruler be able to make at least a single girl smile?

“Since you brought this up, you say you’re jealous of me and my sister… Lady Emilia, do you not have any siblings?”

“Me? No, I’m a single child. But Puck did come to meet me.”

As she poured herself a cup, Emilia invited Rem to sit on her bed.

Hesitant at first, Rem accepted and gracefully lowered herself onto the bed.

“Lady Emilia, you’re really close to the great spirit, aren’t you?”

“Hmhm, yes. Just like Ram is to you, Puck is family to me. Like you said, he surely is the sun to me.”

“The great spirit is your sun, is he? …What might Subaru be to you?”

“Uh? Subaru? Why so suddenly? Hum, to me, Subaru is… What is he? Subaru, Subaru… Ah! A cloud! He’s like a cloud! He takes on a new shape every day and is always so full of energy.”

A boy with a hectic personality who never knows what to say or do, and who you never get tired of watching.

As Emilia boasts her clever analogy, Rem mutters, “A cloud, you say…?”

“I see, understood. I will relay this to Subaru as is.”

“…? Yeah, please do. Now, what were we talking about?”

“About how close you are with the great spirit.”

“Ah, right right. Yes, well we’ve always been together so it’s a given.”

With a smile, Emilia drew her quill over the white-paper on her desk, picturing Puck’s shape as she did. As she brought her eyelids to a close, she could vividly recall the time they’d spent together as a family.

Looking at the finished drawing, Rem tilted her head.

“That is… what kind of curse is that?”

“A curse, hehe, what an odd joke. As you can see, that’s a drawing of Puck.”

“…As I can, see.”

Witnessing her confidence as Emilia proudly held the drawing, Rem’s expression got gloomier.

Prompting Emilia to furrow her brows.

“Hum…”

Rem averted her gaze from Emilia’s depiction of the great spirit.

“If I remember correctly, you stayed in your hometown in the forest with the great spirit didn’t you? That hometown was…”

“Elior Forest… Did you hear from Roswaal?”

“…Yes. I heard it was a forest covered in ice, where snow never stops falling. And that you left your hometown to participate in the election.”

“That is right. Because I want to release everyone from that ice.”

Emilia took another sip of tea and thought of its warmth… and of the people from her village—frozen in the forest.

These kinds of thoughts would sometimes drift into her mind.

Even though all of them were asleep, deep within that ice-cold forest, why was it she was able to smile?

It would often happen when she felt joy. So it had been happening much more that past month especially.

“Sometimes I think, ‘Is it really ok?’. Although I didn’t really think too much about it when I was living in the forest with Puck…”

“‘It’ being?”

“To laugh, to be happy, even though the others can’t… Isn’t it insensitive?

Wasn’t it cold-hearted? She doubted herself.

Herself, who smiled as she spent time with Subaru and the others at the mansion, forgetting about the forest, wholeheartedly enjoying herself.

“…I believe it is entirely legitimate.”

However, Rem looked straight into her eyes as she asserted this.

“…”

Hearing Rem’s unexpected answer, Emilia’s eyes opened wide.

Rem gently lowered her gaze towards her own cup of tea.

“Me and my sister too, we had a lot in our hometown. Now, spending time with her under Master Roswaal, I believe I am happy. But…”

“But?”

“I think about these things, too. About my hometown, about my family… about reuniting with my family.”

“…”

“That’s why, it is legitimate. And also why you can’t give up just yet.”

Having said that, Rem suddenly gulped down the remainder of her tea. She then stood up from the bed and, still holding her cup, lowered her head.

“I’m very sorry, Lady Emilia. For stepping out of bounds as a maid.”

“No, it’s all fine. Besides, besides… You reaally cheered me up.”

Shaking her head at Rem’s apology, Emilia was short on words. As she thought about how this one sentence had just rescued her, she smiled lightly.

Just then, she’d reflected on herself again. It was starting to become a frequent occurrence.

“Could it be that I’ve become a spoiled child…?”

“I wonder? I was thinking it would be fine to spoil you a little more.”

“More than this? Deep down, I’m a lazy person, so I’ll definitely end up being bothersome you know?”

Rem answered Emilia’s witty-smile with a similar one. Then suddenly, the both of them burst out laughing and, for a moment, the spurt of laughter between the two girls wouldn’t stop.

2

“Lady Emilia, I don’t hope Rem bothered you?”

“Ah, Ram? No, really nothing like that.”

Rem had left the room to be replaced by Ram. As Emilia responded to Ram’s inquiry, she tilted her head.

It wasn’t unusual for Ram to pay Emilia a visit, unless she had things to do. She didn’t think Rem had any particular reason to though.

“Ram, did something happen?”

“…Did you forget? If there’s anything you don’t understand in the reference books, I’d like you to tell me about it.”

“Oh. Right, that was the arrangement. Sorry, I’d completely forgotten.”

As her talk with Rem went, studying had completely left her head.

Originally, Rem was only supposed to bring her tea and Ram had taken a break from her work to make some time to help Emilia.

“I really lost my thoughts earlier.”

“How exasperating… is what I’d like to say, but it seems like Rem was in very good spirits, because of her smile I’ll forgive you.”

“Alright, thanks. Sorry. I’ll be more careful next time.”

Emilia accepted Ram’s insolent remark without issue, and apologized. Ram crossed her arms in front of Emilia, who was treating her as the master.

“That aside, what did you talk about with Rem? When I asked Rem, she just said I should ask you directly and wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“Is that so? Then Rem probably wanted us to have a quiet conversation. She’s always very considerate.”

A very thoughtful person, that was Emilia’s evaluation.

Ram puffed her chest and answered, “That’s a matter of course.”

Seeing how they both took pride in the achievements of the other, Emilia smiled lightly.

“It’s not only Rem—I also want to bring out your smile you know.”

“How sudden. For you to throw lines right out of a love story, what might have happened?”

“Right, It’s a declaration of my resolve, I guess? Of what kind of ruler I’d like to become, someone to whom you can talk to reliably, Roswaal taught me that too.”

“So you want to see mine and Rem’s smile? It doesn’t sound unlike you, but it’s a lot like Barusu’s way of thinking.”

"Subaru's?"

Emilia raised her eyebrows as Ram stiffened her cheeks for a moment, as if defeated, followed with a sigh.

"I spoke Barusu's name…"

"Ah, you say that… but, why? Is that a bad thing?"

"It's not a bad thing, but… It's just that I was afraid If he somehow heard this, Barusu, who is under the impression he matters at all, would get carried away."

"Wow, that phrasing was tough. But… I see, that's what this was about."

Putting her finger on her lips, Emilia widened her eyes in reaction to Ram's words.

"It hasn't been a month since Subaru got here. Even so, him being here feels very natural, it's reaally odd."

"You could also say we've had to put up with him for a month."

"I didn't say it like that. But, it's not false. …Ever since he came, Subaru has had no restraint, and he hasn't been very self-reliant which isn't good."

Somehow, it had become normal for him to be there. But the black-haired boy was originally only supposed to be a traveler stopping by the residence. He happened to work at the mansion for the time being but, some day, he wouldn't be there anymore.

"That will be sad, but there will also be things to rejoice about."

"You'd be happy if Barusu wasn't here? I see, that's what you really think."

"Uh? No no, that's not it… I meant going to other places, seeing other things and things like that. Like when I left the forest."

She hadn't heard much about Subaru's situation, but since he'd been traveling alone, she thought many things must have had happened. She wanted to hear about it someday.

Although deplorable, Emilia wasn't able to freely talk about her circumstances, although it most likely wasn't the same.

"You might think that, but I doubt Barusu gave it much thought at all."

"That's not right. Rem also praises Subaru for being a hard worker."

"When Rem says something, I would normally agree right away, but when it comes to Barusu I can't agree."

"There you go again saying things like that… Oh, I get it."

Hearing Ram's harsh answer, Emilia lowered her eyebrows and clasped her hands.

"Then, you're feeling left out right? Because Subaru gets along so well with Rem."

"That's… Wait, Lady Emilia. It's the other way around."

"The fact that Rem is attached to Barusu is what annoys me; I don't care about Barusu being attached to Rem. That's a cruel mistake."

"Is, is that so…?"

"Yes. Apologize right now."

"I'm sorry…"

Hanging her head in defeat, Emilia apologized to the upset Ram. Letting out a frustrated groan.

"Hmmm."

"You don't need to get that angry. In my case, Puck gets picked up by Beatrice a lot, but it doesn't bother me at all…"

"Isn't that just a consequence of the fact that the great spirit chose you?"

“…? You don’t think Rem can choose for herself?”

“…How cunning of you.”

Emilia gave a wry smile to Ram, who muttered this in a low voice as she averted her gaze. She didn’t think that Ram would admit to anything though.

“But as I thought, even for you it has become normal for Subaru to be here.”

“I’m supposed to be an instructor today, but it seems my student is being extremely impertinent. Is someone who aims to be a ruler unable to show respect to their superiors?”

“Uh, ah, that was a reaally mean thing to say you know.”

What superior would a ruler need to show respect to? If she’d use that provocative argument, it would only have worsened Ram’s mood, and would have been trouble for her, so she didn’t say anything.

Her chat with Ram ended then, and she lined her questions regarding the reference books on top of the desk. Chit-chat time was over. …And she got back to studying until dinner.

“A lot has changed, but this is still my work to do. …But, looking back, I really should have studied more when I lived in the forest.”

“With the great spirit as a teacher, I guess you must have had nice lessons.”

“Hehe, you think so? I guess you would but Puck is surprisingly strict.”

Mixing in some of that reminiscent talk, Emilia listened to Ram with one ear and remained immersed in her studies.

…The forest, it had been a while. For so long with Puck, in that white scenery. Leaving that place behind, she persevered, aiming for an absurdly high goal.

It felt strange, but she would still remain happy and gradually progress, while keeping the people that are frozen at Elior Forest inside the corners of her mind.

“…That’s all I can do for now.”

At dinner time, she would have to answer, “Emilia-tan, what do you think of clouds?”.

To which she would tilt her head and say, laughing, “Clouds? They’re white, fluffy and look like they’d taste good”, leaving the troubled boy perplexed.

But that’s another story.

Continued in Bond of Ice

Happy Diary

"—Then, Subaru! He didn't pay good enough attention to what was behind him, so he ended up tripping over Mr. Bucket. Everything around him got drenched in water. Hee-Hee."

While gently shutting her eyelids, Emilia couldn't help but let out a smile as she recalled the scene at the time.

It wasn't so good for Subaru, who got absolutely soaked, but he looked so clean with his hair stuck to his head, that even though he asked me to "Forget it," I don't think I'll be able to.

"And besides, this diary is here so that I don't forget."

With a mischievous smile, Emilia ran the tip of her quill over a white page.

It was her memories of the day that she wrote about without any hesitation. —What she remembered just now being Subaru getting completely soaked, and other events that happened today.

Garfiel getting told off by Ram for burying a gnawed-up knife in the yard, Otto getting scolded by Petra for working too much, Frederica being appalled by Roswaal's villainy, Subaru getting soaking wet and Beatrice getting dragged into it—

"Sooooo many things happened again today!"

Even for Emilia, who didn't have such a good memory, there were many unforgettable events. The situations of everyone in the manor were like a treasure chest of happiness that always surprised her.

Subaru might get sulky since he asked me to forget about it, but I just can't help but keep a diary of such fun and exciting memories. While muttering, "Cause Puck will definitely be happy to hear about it later," Emilia turned her attention to the crystal stone hanging from her neck down to her chest.

It was a crystal stone with a cracked surface, having lost its sparkle.

Inside, Puck, a dear part of Emilia's family, was in a deep sleep. There were many problems that needed to be overcome for him to be awakened, so his slumber should last for a while.

Meanwhile, this was Emilia's very first experience of being separated from Puck.

Along with the sound of knocking at her door, a familiar girl's voice came from the other side. "—Emilia, do you have a moment, I wonder?"

Hearing the voice, Emilia put down her quill, slightly widening her eyes.

"Beatrice?" she asked. "I hardly ever see you at this hour. Has something happened?"

"Betty has something she wants to discuss," replied Beatrice. "Do you mind if Betty come in, I wonder?"

"Sure, go ahead. Come in, come in."

It was the time of day when dinner had ended, and the sun had already set. The world was about to enter Earth Time now that Water Time was over, which was not a usual time for a visit.

Not only that, but it was not Subaru, nor Ram, nor Frederica, but Beatrice; for the first time.

"Then Betty shall impose on you for a while," said Beatrice. "This wasn't a very good time, I suppose."

"Yeah, it's totally fine, but what's wrong?"

Beatrice opened the door and timidly showed herself. She appeared not in her usual dress, but in her nightwear, which she wore after bathing.

In her fluffy princess-like nightwear, and with her ribbon undone and her long, wavy hair flowing down her back, Beatrice looked around Emilia's room.

Appearing somewhat restless, Beatrice turned her gaze to the desk, which held the quill Emilia had placed there, and her diary, which was still open.

“That… Have you been writing a diary?”

“Yeah, I have,” Emilia replied. “Well, Subaru also keeps a diary, right? So I’m just following suit and writing down all the things that have happened lately.”

Beatrice pouted and responded to Emilia, who now had the diary in her hands. “It seems a little odd to call Subaru’s a diary, I suppose…”

She’s probably embarrassed. Subaru says the diary he keeps every day, without fail, is called “Beako’s Growth Diary,” which describes the things that happen in Beatrice’s daily life.

He occasionally showed her what he was writing, which described, from his perspective, how much affection he had for Beatrice day after day.

“There’s always pictures of you drawn along with it, so I’m looking forward to seeing it.”

“It…it…doesn’t feel very good for Betty though, you know. Subaru reveals too much in whatever he writes down, I suppose. It lacks elegance.”

Emilia tilted her head at this unfamiliar word. “Elagan…” and Beatrice replied proudly with her chest pushed out. “It has a similar meaning to ‘grace’, I suppose.”

It appeared that was also a local word from where Subaru was from. It looked like Beatrice, who recently learned such words from him, was having fun using them.

—Has it been about three months since Subaru and Beatrice formed a contract?

Emilia was observing the way they were getting along better and better each day, and it filled her with joy.

“But it looks like you are happy using Subaru’s language,” Emilia commented. “It’s kind of like Roswaal.”

“What!” Beatrice exclaimed. “How can you say such a thing?! That’s the worst assessment Betty could think of, in fact!”

“Eh… I… I’m sorry. I didn’t think you would get so angry.”

“Hmpf, of course Betty would!”

She’d just said what came to mind, but she had made her angry without realizing it.

As usual, everyone in the manor was struggling a lot with how to interact with Roswaal. Neither Subaru nor Ram could interact with him like they used to, either.

However, Ram’s change from before seemed to be less from awkwardness and more because of some other reason.

“That’s something different, I suppose! Betty didn’t come to talk about such things. We should just put Roswaal aside, in fact.”

“Right… Yeah? Then put him in the corner of the room… What happened tonight?”

Beatrice threw the invisible Roswaal, and Emilia made a motion as though to catch him, and then put him in the corner of the room.

After that, Beatrice plonked herself down on top of the bed and finally got to the point. “There’s nothing particularly monumental Betty wants to talk about,” she began. “Betty just came to talk to you, I suppose.”

“To talk to me? Why, all of a sudden?”

“Betty just thought, ‘why not!’” It was just on a whim, I suppose… But, you know, Betty hasn’t had many chances to talk to you,” spilled out Beatrice while abruptly turning her face away and hugging the pillow. Upon hearing that, Emilia was both delighted and surprised at the unexpected offer.

Indeed, Emilia and Beatrice had never been able to just slowly settle down and talk.

The two first met at Roswaal's manor—which, moreover, was the one that had burned down—when Puck had been there between them. Beatrice had taken such a liking to Puck that she wanted to be alone with him whenever they spent time together.

So, Emilia had been treated as someone who was in the way, and they couldn't spend time together.

"But, Puck isn't here right now…"

"—. It's not that that is the only reason why, I suppose."

"Huh?"

Burying her face deeply into the pillow, Beatrice, in characteristic fashion, turned her eyes towards Emilia. "It's very lonely to not have Bubby here, but Betty trying to talk with you is not a case of replacing him, I suppose… It's rather that Betty just thought she should talk to you, and that's it, in fact."

Emilia received the greatest surprise of all today upon hearing Beatrice's words.

"Oh my gosh! I have to write what happened just now in my diary so that I don't forget it…"

"You don't have to write about it, I suppose! Do you also mean to write revealing things about Betty down like Subaru?!" Beatrice exclaimed.

"But I don't want to forget how incredibly happy I am… You know, it's also written that you and Subaru both got aaall wet."

"Subaru must have also said to not write about that and to forget it, I suppose!"

Beatrice, with a flushed face, tried to snatch away the diary, but Emilia raised it up above her head, saying, "I won't let you!" and kept it there where her little hands couldn't reach.

Beatrice stretched out her hands, hopping up and down for a while, but when she realized she wouldn't be able to take the diary away from Emilia, she dropped her shoulders, crestfallen.

"Uh, Bubby will find out about Betty's shameful past..."

"It's nothing that shameful at all. Now Puck is sleeping, and all I want to do is just tell him all the things that have happened when he wakes up."

"All the same, is it really necessary to tell him about even such trivial things as this, I wonder?"

"—Of course it is. Because Puck is an important part of my family."

Dejectedly, Beatrice got back on the bed, and behind her, Emilia held the diary to her chest.

Each of the events described here were like a bouquet of precious memories tied together that she wanted to tell Puck about, that she wanted him to know. Because—

"Puck told me something at the time I was to leave the forest I'd always lived in."

"...It was when Roswaal came to meet you, I suppose. What did Bubby say exactly?"

"Umm... He said that 'Down the road, all sorts of things are going to happen right in front of me, and that I want to see, feel, and remember all of those things together. That's why, every day, I look forward to the next.'"

"..."

"I was truly out of it when I lived in the forest. Though I was with Puck every day, I don't have many decent memories."

Emilia had spent many years alone together with Puck, while taking care of the white, snow-covered forests and all the elves frozen in ice.

Hardly anything changed. Day after day, it was as if time had stopped.

So, when Roswaal appeared to meet Emilia and she left the forest after being invited to join the royal selection, Emilia was worried about moving the time that had stopped. That's when Puck said it.

"He said, 'Everyday, I'm looking forward to the next.' Puck was looking forward to it."

"—. So, what you mean is that you are writing this down for Bubby?"

"Yeah, that's right. I also want to make Puck happy."

Each and every single bit of time I spent with Puck is irreplaceable.

However, after spending time in the manor away from the forest, she met lots of people day after day, including Beatrice, of course, who was right in front of her, but also Subaru, Ram, Frederica, Petra, Otto, Garfiel, and then Roswaal. For Emilia, that was also time that was irreplaceable.

She was laughing and having fun every day, and she wanted Puck to know about even the times they couldn't be together.

"So, is it okay if I also write about how you and Subaru got all wet?" she asked.

"…Ahh, you are an impossible girl, in fact," Beatrice replied. "When you reveal things about Bubby like that, Betty's resolve weakens, too."

"Right, well then, will you let me do it?"

"If, from now on, you let Betty check and edit out the things about her that she wants to, I suppose. Let Betty make sure there are nothing but facts."

"Sure, you got it. Well, you'll have a chance to check the diary every day, so…"

With her big round eyes wide open, Beatrice was astonished at the unexpected amount of work. "It's true for Subaru, too, but why do you write so much about Betty every day, I wonder?"

However, even just such a cute and flustered appearance provided enough material to write about for the diary. Emilia totally understood why Subaru kept recording things about Beatrice nonstop.

"Goodness, Betty's head hurts… Petra and the others will surely be upset when they hear about how what you write goes too far, I suppose."

"But Petra has complimented me on how easy to read it is…" Emilia revealed.

"This has already been inspected by Petra?!" lamented Beatrice as though the world had ended, after taking the diary that had been handed to her.

However, though the appearance of Beatrice holding a large book with her small body was something that Emilia had seen many times before, it looked somehow new to her now.

The Beatrice of the past had worn this very same appearance, but it had been tense, and she seemed like she couldn't relax. "I'm sure it's because she is having way more fun than she used to," she murmured to herself.

"…Are you talking about Betty, I wonder?"

"It's nothing. It's just that you are carrying a book like that, but the air about you is sooo different compared to before."

Appearing not in a dress but in her sleepwear, with her hair hanging down, ribbon undone, and a book in her arms—not desperately clinging to it. That's definitely what's different about her.

Upon hearing Emilia's words, Beatrice murmured, "It's strange."

"Strange?"

"It's strange because I don't feel guilty when told things like that, I suppose. Even when I burned the books…the precious books that Mother gave me."

"That's because…the entire Forbidden Library had burned down…"

As far as Emilia remembered, the Forbidden Library in the burnt manor held an enormous number of books. She could see why Beatrice was disappointed.

The way Subaru and Petra told it; it was due to Otto's carelessness that the manor burned down. However, Otto was probably always working late to make up for it.

"That's not the only reason," said Beatrice, "and if we accept that as so, it makes Otto look way too pitiful, I suppose…"

"You think so? But that's what I wrote in my diary…"

Beatrice shrugged her shoulders in resignation. "If that's the case, checking it over is going to take a considerable amount of time, I suppose."

Seeing her stroking the cover of the diary with her soft hands, Emilia struck upon a great idea. "That's it!" she exclaimed. "Hey, Beatrice. If you like, how about staying over in my room today? Then you can 'cheke' the contents of the diary? Yeah?"

"En…"

"I'm sure there are a lot of other weird things in it. As it's something I want to show to Puck, I'm sure he'd be pleased if you helped with it too."

Putting her hands together in front of her chest, Emilia brimmed with enthusiasm at her great idea.

She could picture the sight of Puck jumping up and down, rejoicing. No doubt Subaru, too, would be pleased to see Beatrice giving it her best. It was a wonderful idea that everyone would be happy about.

"What can I say. I guess I'm just soooo smart."

"If that's true, surely the contents of the diary are just too scary, in fact! …I was expecting that, I suppose."

Beatrice sprung out of bed and thrust the diary she was holding at Emilia. Emilia quickly took it, and tilted her head, baffled. "Beatrice?"

"Betty will go and tell Subaru that she is going to stay at your place tonight. If she doesn't, there is bound to be a lot of fuss about how Betty has run away from home, I suppose."

"—. Hee-Hee, I don't doubt it. Subaru loves you."

"Good grief, it's tough being born cute." While saying so, Beatrice left the room with pride in each step.

Beatrice is going to return with her own pillow this time. Emilia, her heart skipping with joy at spending the night together with her, looked at the diary. "Right."

Of course, she was going to write down all of this evening's happy events in her diary, but there was something else that occurred to her. —Giving my diary a name.

"Like the way Subaru writes things down about Beatrice, I, too…"

…want to give it an important name, since it's going to be read by Puck once he wakes up.

Every day from now on, Emilia wanted to cherish and share her days with others—the days Puck said he was looking forward to.

"Wake up soon, Puck. —Because I'm soooo happy every day."

With a smile on her face, Emilia hugged her dear diary tight—which would later be named, with Subaru's input, "Happy Diary."

Two Witches Tea Party

A teapot and cup clinked as they were placed upon a silver tray. The faint but sweet aroma of freshly baked teacakes previously brought to the table lingered in the air. It was the type of smell that would automatically make stomachs rumble, but she made an effort to endure. Today's Emilia was somewhat different than usual.

"It would be reaaally unladylike if my tummy were to make a noise, right?"

Teachings of Puck, who wasn't just a precious family member but also a father figure, still lived firmly inside her. If she closed her eyes, she could still see his soft fur and adorable face, casually scolding her with a "Hey!"

So, making sure to do it in a way that would make Puck proud, Emilia fulfilled her duties as the hostess.

That's right, Emilia was the hostess today, and she had to properly entertain her guest. And so… Placing the tray upon the table, she called out to them. "It's ready. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

On the opposite side of the round white table, the person waiting for her was sitting in a chair. There was to be a tea party today for just the two of them. Of course, just because there was only one guest did not mean she was at ease. On the contrary, entertaining this singular person had only increased her anxiety.

Whether or not the guest knew how Emilia was feeling, she drew her eyes, framed by long eyelashes, towards her and let out a sigh from between her thin lips, "May I ask you something?"

"Of course, ask away. I am the hostess today, after all."

"I'm glad you're so prepared. But be that as it may, I'm not sure you will be able to clarify my doubts…" While she spoke, her dark eyes passed slowly over their surroundings. In the area around Emilia, who was confident she could deal with any question, there was a round table and two chairs. And besides the parasol, nothing but a vast grass meadow.

And so… “Why did you wish to have a tea party with just the two of us?” asked Echidna, the Witch with long white hair and a long, black stretch dress, with a tilt of her head.

It was a known fact that the tea parties held by the Witch of Greed, Echidna, took place in an empty green meadow.

A white table and two chairs, a large parasol, and all the necessary objects were there. Hot tea, and the sweet smell of teacakes. There wasn’t the slightest bit of doubt. The one and only exception was the fact that the roles of the guest and the hostess had been switched.

“Look, it’s always you who prepares the tea and cakes, right? I just thought that sometimes you, too, should be able to be treated as a guest.”

“…So?”

“Huh? So, that’s the reason for today’s tea party. Is something wrong?” Emilia tilted her head. In front of her, Echidna sighed theatrically.

Thinking how strange her response was, Emilia did her duty as hostess and lifted the teapot to pour tea into the cups. In preparation for this day, she had done a lot of research on the brewing and steaming of tea.

“Ram takes these things reaaally seriously.”

Of course, since she was taking lessons, Emilia too took it seriously, so now she was trying to display the results of her studies in terms of providing hospitality to an important guest, but…

“Yaah!”

"Ack! It's hot! You spilled it. You spilled it on my hand!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I got a little carried away…"

The tea, having spilled all over the place, had made Echidna quite angry. "My thought was that it wasn't a sound that people make while pouring tea in the first place!"

A little too enthusiastic in her task, she had overpoured the tea. Emilia, now feeling down, poured the tea more carefully this time. "Phew, here. Dig in!"

"What a very inappropriate expression for offering tea… Well, though I may not like the one serving them, neither the tea nor cakes have committed any sins. I'll have some."

"Yes. Dig in!"

"…I want to ask you something first."

Leaning forward, Emilia waited for Echidna to take a teacake. Echidna narrowed her eyes and Emilia asked, "What is it?" before going on. "You should drink the tea before it cools off, plus it goes really well with the cake."

"Based on your confidence, could it be that you had a hand in making these cakes?"

"…Wow, how did you know? Yes, that's right. Petra and Frederica taught me, and we made them together…"

"Really? Then, no thank you."

"What?! Why?!"

"If you must know—I'm concerned about you having made them."

The plate of teacakes held by Emilia's outstretched hand was pushed back, and her shoulders slumped, dejected. But then she suddenly brightened up. "Wait," she said, pushing the plate back. "I understand why you'd behave that way. After all, you are mean. But I didn't make these all by myself, so…"

“I’d very much like to object to the dishonorable expression that defines me as “mean,” but I also can’t imagine wanting to eat them no matter how many others helped make them…”

“Beatrice helped make them too, you know.”

“…”

Beatrice helped make the dough, kneading with an unskilled hand. It was the first time they had stood together in the kitchen, enjoying themselves as they baked. The baking was fun, and everything turned out pretty well. Echidna wasn’t there when we made it, though. “So I’m sure we can share the good times we had with you. So eat it, alright?”

“…You’re not convincing me at all.”

“…No?”

“No, not one bit. But—” After pushing the plate back and forth several times, Echidna suddenly stopped and stared at the teacakes on the plate. Then, with her thin fingers, she slowly reached and picked up a single, flat cake. “Just because you’re quite persistent, okay,” she said, raising the cake to her mouth.

And…

“…Ugh.”

“How is it? Good?”

“Did my reaction make it seem like it tasted good? I can’t believe it betrayed my expectations like that!” exclaimed Echidna with a bitter face before shoving the remainder of her cake into Emilia’s mouth.

Having to eat it so suddenly, Emilia’s eyes widened as the taste hit her. She bit through it with a crunch, the texture being hard and gritty. “…Yep, sooo sweet.”

“The right answer is too sweet,” Echidna retorted. “Also, I don’t get how you can be so nonchalant about it. It has to taste good for that to make any sense."

"But it would be nice if you acknowledged the effort everyone put…"

"I may be a Witch who's able to enjoy the process, but when it comes to cooking I think most people are more concerned with the finished product. Though that's just what I've learned after studying this world for a long time." As Echidna finished saying such harsh words, she took a sip of tea to cleanse her palate. Gently placing the cup back on the table, she added, "The tea was decent, at least…" feeling relieved.

Despite the single passing grade she received from Echidna in the end, Emilia was not at all pleased. I won't be able to face everyone who helped me, she thought. "Ah, but Echidna. I don't think all the teacakes were hard and gritty. So how about I take a bite of each of them, and then you can eat the rest of the ones that taste okay?"

"Do I look like a baby bird?"

"No, you don't look like a baby bird, you look like Echidna…"

Although Emilia had thought it sounded like a good idea, Echidna rejected that proposal and sighed once more. Subaru told me that every time a guest sighs, it's counted as a negative point against the host. This is already the second or third time she's sighed, so things aren't going well. As a proper host, it's my job to think about the treatment of my guests and see things from their point of view. "Echidna, is there anything you'd like me to do? I'll do my best whatever it is."

"Really? Then, will you be quiet?"

"Okay! I can do that." While Echidna tilted her cup, Emilia sat in front of her quietly, both hands pressed over her mouth.

During that time, Echidna stroked her white hair, then, from the plate of baked goods, took a different kind of cake and closely examined it.

Emilia—her mouth firmly shut—watched Echidna as she cautiously tried to decide whether or not it was edible, and wondered to herself whether it was the right thing to do. It's true that I'm fulfilling her wishes by doing as she said… "But is this really very hospitable of me? I'm not sure… What do you think, Echidna?"

"First of all, I'm rather surprised by your inability to keep quiet for even a minute… Hmm, this one doesn't seem to be entirely hard, nor too sweet," said Echidna after biting into the cake, which gave a soft crunch. She had most likely managed to find one that Petra or Frederica made, since Emilia's and Beatrice's would be a hit-or-miss, and Ram had just watched.

"Subaru claimed half of what I made, so…"

"So the ones brought to me were those that managed to escape his scrutiny? Does the rather hard one I ate earlier fall into that category by any chance?"

"No, mine were the super sweet ones. The hard ones were made by Beatrice."

"…I see."

"Well, we shared them between us, so I think Beatrice will be pleased."

"You have a bad habit of looking only at the end result and twisting the process. I find that hard to accept."

Covering her mouth, Emilia let out a short giggle. Echidna snorted and turned away. Guess I made her angry again somehow. But it's true that I thought that Beatrice would be pleased, and it offends me that it is getting treated as a mistake too. "Seriously Echidna, all you do is say mean things. Even though you're drinking the tea, eating the cakes, and fully enjoying this tea party, you're such a goblin."

"Goblin? That's a disgraceful way to call someone. I'm a Witch. Whether you like it or not, that is something that will never change."

"Hmph, then you're just like me."

“…Like you?” Pulling her beautifully shaped eyebrows together, Echidna looked at Emilia doubtfully.

Emilia, however, merely nodded with a “Yes” as though the look she gave her wasn’t a big deal. I’ve been hurt a lot by people calling me a Witch, but… “I was called the Witch of Glaciation by many people in the village near where I grew up. Perhaps not to the extent you were, but I was quite famous.”

“That’s all in the past. Now there are none left who know my name or the names of the other five.”

“Ah, that’s right… So, does that make me the most famous now?”

“…How stupid of you to even think of such a comparison,” Echidna replied coldly, despite how timidly Emilia had asked.

Compared to when I first showed up, or when I scalded her with tea, or even when I was forced to chew the hard cakes, this rejection is the worst by far. “No, I’d say it’s probably equal to when I spilled the tea…”

“I don’t want you to make light of us Witches… It is offensive not only to me, but to the five others who have lived and died as Witches as well.”

“…” Emilia’s eyes widened slightly upon hearing the objection made by Echidna, who was usually very quiet.

Perhaps not expecting Emilia’s response, Echidna grumbled sullenly. “What is it? If you think just making a dumb face is a type of response, then you would be mistaken… That doesn’t get anything across.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that you’re sooooo thoughtful of your friends.”

“…I’m thoughtful of my friends?”

“Yes. After all, you don’t want anyone to have the wrong idea about your friends. That’s why you got mad at what I said, right? That’s what being thoughtful of others means.” From my experience, being called a Witch isn’t a good thing. But in Echidna’s time, it must have held some sort of special meaning to her and her friends, who were referred to as such.

To be prodded by Emilia, who knew very little of such things, surely wasn't pleasant. "…Even in our time, being called a Witch wasn't a compliment."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. But it didn't matter what anyone called us. We didn't need anyone to define us, we defined ourselves as Witches. That's all."

"…That sounds reaaally complicated." Even though she wanted to know more of Echidna's story, it was difficult to understand. But as it was a compromise coming from Echidna, Emilia couldn't simply disregard it as difficult to understand and leave it alone. "This won't do. As you're the guest, I should be doing all sorts of things for you, but instead, all I do is learn from you."

"I am well aware that I am someone who enjoys teaching, but I don't recall teaching you anything. Even throughout the tea party, all I did was complain. Cruelly, too."

"…? Isn't that the same as teaching me not to do something? It'd be far more cruel to just watch me coldly without saying anything."

The word 'cruel' gave her a very unpleasant feeling, but Emilia did not think Echidna's attitude matched that word in the slightest. Although it was true that she may come across as foul-mouthed and mean. However, to Emilia, the worst thing in the world would be being ignored and kept at a distance.

"You're nothing like that. So it doesn't matter what you say." As she spoke, Emilia grabbed a cake from the plate and took a bite. The crunchy texture and sweet flavor warmed her heart.

Hearing Emilia's answer, Echidna placed a hand upon her forehead and sighed.

Another sigh means more points deducted, but that sigh felt different from the others.

“I know whatever I say will be pointless. You’re a very detestable girl.” More directly than ever, Echidna threw her cruel words at Emilia. But even as she said them, she was reaching for another cake. A grinding sound was heard, and she frowned. Then came a crunching sound, and Emilia smiled.

“…Why is it that I always pick the wrong ones? How do you tell the difference?”

“Huh? There’s nothing to it really. I just kind of pick one… Ah, this is delicious.”

“…Ugh.”

“Was it hard again?”

Echidna looked down and placed a hand over her mouth, but gave no answer to Emilia, who tilted her head.

But that reaction alone told her enough, so Emilia put a finger to her lips, and said, “Ah, then shall we try it the other way around? I’ll choose yours, and you can choose mine. Maybe that will work.”

“Even if you do that, I have a strong feeling that I’ll end up with a hard one again… No need to do something so unnecessary, just pour the tea normally.”

“Okay! I can do that! Yaah!”

“Ow! That’s hot!!”

And so the tea party continued like that. Although of different generations, the two Witches sat opposite one another—one as a host, the other as a guest—with a white table between them.

Although to an outsider, it would look like nothing more than a pleasant tea party between two girls.

END

The Two Witches’ Eventful Journey

1

“Whoa! Look, look! We’re reaaally high up! I didn’t know such a beautiful view existed!” Emilia exclaimed, her eyes widening at the sight from the window she had her hands pressed against.

The brilliantly blue sky infinitely stretched out in front of her, with a sea of thick cloud clusters floating within it. The airplane carrying the sparkly-eyed Emilia flew as it let out a deep roaring sound, and was already traveling above the clouds.

What a luxurious experience I’m going through right now! Emilia thought, flustered and unable to stay composed. “Hey, come on, you. Come here and take a look. You’ve never seen anything like this before either, have you?”

“…”

Without receiving any response from her companion, Emilia started beckoning them over with her hand. “What’s wrong? Hey, Echidna! Echidna!”

“You don’t need to keep calling me. I hear you,” the white-haired Echidna, clad in a black dress, spat.

Even though they were on the same plane, Echidna didn’t pay attention to the scenery outside the window and kept her gaze on her lap. Her face was pale, and she looked gloomy.

Furrowing her brow at her companion’s disposition, Emilia tilted her head. “What’s wrong? Are you not feeling well? That’s not good! We should get you off…”

“Unfortunately, that negotiation already ended in failure as soon as I was dragged onto this airplane by Natsuki Subaru.”

“I had no idea. Jeez, what was Subaru thinking… Dragging you around even though you’re not feeling well.”

"It's not that I'm feeling unwell… I'm just having a hard time understanding something."

"—?"

"About why I have to be here of all places with you," Echidna spat, glaring at Emilia with her eyes framed in long white lashes.

Emilia looked confused at first, but then quickly showed a smile. "That's because it's my birthday, and you have to do whatever I ask. Have you forgotten, Echidna?"

"No, I haven't, even though I should have. And these things you want me to do are…"

Emilia nodded. "The items on the list of things I want to do that Subaru asked me to write!" she exclaimed, taking out a file.

Inside the file was a list of wishes she had written for this day. This was one of Subaru's ideas, and he had asked her to draw it up for her birthday.

"He said we probably wouldn't be able to get to them all, so he picked some at random and got everything set up, and this is the first one," Emilia explained as she let out a chuckle. "It's only the first one and I already feel like I'm being spoiled."

Even though some of my wishes on the list were fantastical, the dedication everyone put in for me is amazing. I can't believe I'm able to enjoy such a wonderful view.

Since Emilia couldn't use flying magic like Roswaal, it was her first time looking down from such a height.

"I can empathize with your desire to overlook the world from a high place," Echidna said.

"Then why are your brows furrowed like that?" Emilia asked. "Could it be that you're scared of heights?"

"Nothing of the sort. Didn't I tell you? I'm just having a hard time understanding something. You can enjoy the view from a high place all you want. But what is this thing we're shouldering?" Echidna asked, pointing at the bag-like item on her back.

Emilia turned her attention to the similar bag she was wearing.

"What do you mean what?" she replied. "These are parachutes."

"Why?!" exclaimed Echidna. "Why is it that your wish is to jump out of an airplane instead of just enjoying the view?! There's something wrong with you!"

Emilia was taken aback by the rare instance of Echidna raising her voice. However, she empathized with her outburst nonetheless. The idea of jumping out was also not something she came up with.

"At first, I just wanted to enjoy the view too," Emilia explained. "But then Subaru told me about an activity called skydiving and…"

"And…?"

"It sounded reaaally fun, so I wanted to try it with you, Echidna."

"And thus I ended up in this predicament…"

Emilia began to feel bad as she listened to Echidna's begrudging words. However, Subaru, being the great storyteller he was, made skydiving sound extremely fun. Due to this, Emilia had written, "I want to go skydiving with Echidna," before she even realized it.

"Ah, Echidna," Emilia called. "We're almost at the point. Let's make sure we don't fool around like we were told before the airplane took off!"

Echidna groaned. "Wait, on second thought, I think I'd rather return to solid ground with the airplane…"

"Jeez, it's also your first time doing this, isn't it? You're always curious about everything, so you should try this and find out how it feels."

"It's infuriating to hear you talk about the fate of the Witch of Greed as if you know anything… Ah, wait, wait, ah, ahhhhhhhh!!"

“Kyaahhh!!”

2

“Skydiving was reeeally fun!” Emilia exclaimed cheerfully. “Next up is baking a cake!”

“Do you not realize the great disparity in those two activities?”

Emilia looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind if you don’t get it,” said Echidna, letting out a sigh. She was wearing a headscarf and leaning on the kitchen table, exhausted. “Unfortunately, I don’t have the energy to explain it to you.”

Emilia thoroughly enjoyed skydiving. However, as someone who wasn’t used to screaming like Emilia was, Echidna was exhausted from the activity.

“Good thing we did that first, then,” said Emilia. “They say sweet things help you when you’re tired, right?”

“That only applies if the sweet things are within reach and ready to be consumed. That being said, how experienced are you in baking… in making sweets?”

Emilia smiled. “Glad you asked. Back in the forest, I used to make sweets using crushed berries. Puck always complimented them, saying they were reaaally good.”

She puffed out her chest to show that she was confident in her skill in making sweets by sharing a memory she had with Puck. Life in the forest was hard, and since there weren’t any sweet fruits, the pastries she made out of berries had a rough texture. However, it was an occasional delicacy she enjoyed nonetheless.

“But today we have sugar,” Emilia said. “We could eat sweet pastries.”

“I see where this is headed. Give me the sugar. I’ll directly consume it and rejuvenate myself.”

“No need to do that! Just wait a little. I’ll make it really fast! Let’s see, it says one scoop, so it must be a scoop from a large container. Should I use this bowl?”

“That’ll make it too sweet. Whatever happened to the education you’re supposed to have received from the great spirit? I refuse to be the victim of your educator not doing his job!”

Echidna jumped at the door, trying to make an escape from the kitchen. However, the door was made so that it wouldn’t unlock until they finished baking a cake. Whether Echidna could exit the kitchen depended on Emilia’s baking skills.

“That’s a lot of responsibilities,” Emilia said. “Echidna, you help me too if you want to get out of here!”

“Just remember, I’m doing this for my own sake and not to be friends with you.”

“Oh no, I put in too much sugar. I wonder if I can balance it out with salt…”

“Stop!”

3

And so they went down Emilia’s wishlist.

“It’s the earth dragon endurance race! Let’s go, Echidna!”

“Just throw me off during the race…”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to carry you till the end.”

“I wasn’t worried about being a dead weight.”

“It’s hard to score a hundred in Karaoke,” Emilia lamented during one of their activities.

“We’d have a better chance if I sang… Wait, I’m not allowed to sing? Only listening? Then why does it have to be me? It could be anyone else.”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best next song. I have a feeling it’ll go well.”

“Are you saying your score will increase fivefold just like that?”

“Everyone did so much for me,” said Emilia, “so I want to get them something in return. And I wanted you to help me choose what to get, Echidna.”

“Although I have a reputation of providing wisdom to those in need, it was based on the condition that the problems those people faced were so difficult that my knowledge was required. Your wish doesn’t satisfy that condition…”

“What do you think I should get Beatrice? I’m sure Subaru will get her something too, so I want to get her something that’s just as good or even better than what he will get her.”

Echidna paused for a moment. “She’s probably read most books available, but it should still be something related to that. Perhaps a nice bookmark will do.”

4

One by one, they crossed off the activities on the list. It was virtually impossible to go through them all in only one day, but they still managed to cross off a great deal of them. However, Emilia thought wrong to think she was becoming an expert at having fun.

“Echidna, I’m sorry,” she said. “Looks like I made a mistake. This is the south pole, so there aren’t any polar bears here.”

Echidna said nothing.

“They say they’re reaaally big white bears. Doesn’t that sound like the Sacred Beast Odglass of Gusteko? I wanted to see one so badly…” Emilia slumped her shoulders and sighed a white breath as she fixed her ear muffs.

The pair was at the freezing continent of the south pole to fulfill another one of Emilia's wishes. Their objective, as Emilia mentioned, was to see the polar bears that inhabited the freezing land, but they had failed to do so.

Subaru's warning resonated in Emilia's mind.

"Remember, Emilia-tan, they're called polar bears precisely because they live at the north pole. Don't mistake it with the south pole, otherwise it'll be tragic!"

However, the existence of the two poles confused Emilia and ended up with them in such a predicament.

"I'm so sorry, even though you came all the way to this freezing place with me," Emilia apologized.

Echidna said nothing.

Emilia groaned. "Are you mad? Surely you are. This is all my fault. Hey, I'm really sorry, so will you at least speak to me?" Even though Echidna often complained, she still obediently tagged along to all the activities. Emilia was anxious whether she made her truly angry this time. However, noticing Echidna's dull response, Emilia grabbed her by the shoulder and began shaking her. "Hey Echidna? Echidna?" It was at this moment she realized that Echidna was freezing. "Oh no! Echidna! Please, move your body! You can't freeze up!"

"Let…me just…say…one thing…" Echidna squeezed out.

"What is it? A way to defrost a frozen body?"

"I hate it when it's too hot…but, I also hate it when it's too cold."

"Everyone does! What's gotten into you, Echidna?!"

Even her voice sounds like it's iced up, Emilia thought, widening her eyes.

As a measure to warm Echidna's body, Emilia embraced her. I'm worried that she'll lower my body temperature and end up freezing both of us, though. Then, she remembered there was something they could do in a situation like this that Subaru had taught her.

"That's it!" Emilia exclaimed. "Oshikura Manju! We should try doing Oshikura Manju to resist the cold!"

"As irritating as it is to have to depend on you, could you stay still for a little while?" Echidna asked.

"S-Sure," responded Emilia. "Whatever you want, but I'm really bad at staying still."

As much as she wanted to respect Echidna's wishes, Emilia wasn't comfortable not doing anything. She couldn't help but think it was a better idea to move her body so that she could raise her body temperature and warm Echidna as well. Carefully, so Echidna wouldn't notice, she began doing small squats. However, Echidna immediately noticed.

"Stop it," she said.

Emilia let out a small groan. "Okay."

Emilia held onto her companion anxiously. As she stood on the icy continent that lacked polar bears, she looked up at the sky. She contemplated how she made a terrible mistake in her last wish, despite successfully crossing so many items off the list while dragging Echidna along the whole day. She was worried Echidna would be fed up with her by this and wouldn't celebrate her birthday again. As she was beginning to feel depressed, Emilia noticed a change begin to take place in the sky.

"Ah," she let out at the change.

A banner emanating colors took form in the night sky. Emilia didn't know what the array of colors projected in the sky before her was.

Then Echidna whispered from Emilia's arms. "It's an aurora."

"Aurora," Emilia repeated.

The banner of colors slowly wafted across the night sky. It was unbelievably large and beautiful, causing Emilia to question if she was dreaming. Next to her, Echidna gazed at the brightly lit colors with her dark black eyes.

“Aurorae appear only when all the conditions are properly met,” she said. “You could say it’s dependent on the sky’s mood on any given day. It’s not something you can see easily even if you want to.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“We’re witnessing something way more significant than polar bears.”

Emilia thought the last remark was rude to polar bears, but decided not to scold her. She understood that Echidna was trying to console her for having mistaken the north and south poles. Even though we couldn’t see any polar bears, you shouldn’t feel down. Such was how Emilia interpreted her words.

Emilia chuckled happily at her interpretation. Hearing that, Echidna threw a glare at her, but Emilia met it straight on, locking eyes with her until she averted her gaze. Emilia turned her attention back to the aurora. She decided to enjoy the rare sight. Even though she wasn’t able to see any polar bears, she was happy with how her birthday turned out. The moments were imbued with an ethereal quality, reminiscent of a dream, their magic heightened by the unlikely fusion of different elements. She was extremely happy.

She looked down at Echidna with a smile on her face. “Hey, Echidna,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“I wonder what happens if we skydive into an aurora. If I write that on my list, will you do it with me on my next birthday?”

“Absolutely not,” rejected Echidna, making a face expressing repulsion at Emilia’s request.

END

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

1

“Hey Beatrice, you’re reaaally knowledgeable, right? So, do you happen to know about the ‘constellations’ that were famous where Subaru used to live?”

“Constellations, in fact?”

“Yes, that’s right. You know, the stars in the sky? Connecting their lights like a picture, likening them to animals—that’s what constellations are, apparently,” Emilia explained, before pointing at the ceiling and drawing pictures in the air while swirling her finger around.

Following Emilia’s finger movements with her eyes, Beatrice, who was soaking in the bath together with her, her usually adorably curled hair now tied up, gently swayed her head from side to side. Although she was contracted with Subaru and got along very well with him, it went without saying that she couldn’t accompany him to the bath or toilet, so she often opted to take baths with Emilia, Petra, or the other women of the mansion. It was Emilia’s turn today, so she and Beatrice were bathing together. They had already taken turns washing each other’s hair and bodies and were leisurely soaking in the hot water when the topic of ‘constellations’ was brought up.

“It seems that the way stars appear is completely different between Subaru’s homeland and Lugunica, so he was saying it’s reaaally disappointing that he can’t teach us the constellations he knows…” Emilia lamented.

“So you thought you’d teach Subaru the constellations of Lugunica instead, I suppose?” Beatrice guessed.

“That’s right! So I thought you might know them. Do you?”

“…Sorry, but Betty can’t meet those expectant eyes,” Beatrice replied, shaking her head. “She knows some star names here and there, but even in Betty’s knowledge, there’s nothing about constellations.”

Emilia slumped her shoulders. “Oh, I see.”

From what Subaru had told her about his homeland, they drew an incredible number of pictures in the night sky stars, and there were a huge number of constellations. I got him to draw some of them for me, but I can’t see them as dogs, rabbits, scales, or water jars at all.

“But I was reaaally impressed, because I’d never thought of looking at stars not just as something that twinkles, but in that way.”

In any case, Beatrice also didn’t know about constellations, so her plan had failed. Just like Beatrice said, I wanted to teach Subaru some constellations he didn’t know to cheer him up since he was disappointed that he couldn’t find any of the ones he knew, Emilia thought.

“In the first place, the positions of stars are fickle, so Betty thinks it’s difficult for constellations to properly exist, in fact,” Beatrice said. “Yesterday’s night sky and today’s might be slightly different, I suppose.”

“Is that so?” Emilia asked.

“Yes, in fact. The stars in the night sky are considered to be huge masses of mana, I suppose. As far as Betty knows, there are even Spirits that became stars, in fact.”

“A mass of mana… So, stars are magic stones that are reaaally far away?”

“That’s one way to think about it, I suppose. Of course, Betty hasn’t flown directly to a star, so she hasn’t confirmed it, in fact.”

Emilia widened her eyes at the unfamiliar bit of trivia she had just learned about stars. While I was certainly aware that there are a ton of stars in the sky, I never really looked at each one individually. So it’s my first time hearing that their numbers decrease or their positions change, she thought. “But in that case, it seems like it’ll be difficult to teach Subaru about constellations…”

“…Was Subaru that depressed, I suppose?” Beatrice asked.

“He wasn’t exactly moping, but he looked a little lonely. And he said that his name ‘Subaru’ was also taken from a star…”

It wasn’t just that Subaru liked them; he and stars had a very strong connection. Emilia wanted to tell Subaru about stars he didn’t know so that even in the Kingdom, where he couldn’t find the constellations he knew, he wouldn’t feel lonely.

Having that plan fail, Emilia folded her arms in the bathtub and thought with a “Hmm.” If only there was something I could give to Subaru related to stars.

“…There’s one thing Betty can think of, in fact.”

“Really? That’s amazing! As expected of you, Beatrice!”

“I-It’s too early to praise Betty before you even hear the idea, I suppose! Besides, Betty’s not even sure if it can be properly realized, in fact. You’re so impatient, I suppose.”

“But it’s something you thought of for Subaru, right? I’m sure it’s something reaaally wonderful. Tell me, tell me. I’ll do anything.”

“Good grief, don’t get so worked up, in fact. But certainly, this idea can’t be successful without your cooperation, I suppose,” Beatrice reassured, though with a difficult expression.

Emilia’s eyes sparkled. “Yes, leave it to me!” she exclaimed energetically, patting her bare chest.

2

“Betty talked a bit with Emilia in the bath, but stars in the sky are huge masses of mana… Think of them as big versions of magic crystals, which are highly pure magic stones, in fact,” Beatrice explained.

"Big versions… But stars are very far away, right? How big are they?" Petra asked.

"They're not just any size, I suppose. At least as big as a mountain, in fact."

"A mountain! B-Bigger than I thought…!" Petra exclaimed with widened eyes at Beatrice's description of a size beyond her wildest imagination, trying to express it with outstretched hands.

Emilia understood Petra's surprise well, having been surprised in the same way.

Behind the surprised Petra, Ram and Frederica, who had also been summoned, exchanged glances.

"An unexpected lecture about stars… It's like Barusu's incoherent topics."

"Ram, do not talk like that. Is it not a very valuable story? No wonder the starry sky gives us such a mystical feeling…"

"Ha."

"Why did you laugh? You have not changed at all…"

"Sister Frederica, Sister Ram, please don't get into a silly fight!" Petra shouted, stepping between the two glaring at each other, meditating between her two elder sisters. She then turned back to Emilia and Beatrice and continued. "So… Um, the talk about stars is wonderful, but where exactly are you going with this?"

"Well, actually, I discussed this with Beatrice, and we're thinking about making a star for Subaru," Emilia answered without thinking too deeply. "So, I wanted the three of you to help."

Frederica and Petra blinked in confusion.

"…Lady Emilia, what did you just say?" Frederica asked.

"E-E-Eh, make a star…?" Petra sputtered.

Seeing their reactions, Emilia reflected that she might have skipped a few steps, and tried to re-explain, but—

“I see. If stars are masses of mana, then if we solidify a large mass of mana and make it float in the sky, it will become a new star that looks similar…is that it?” Ram offered.

“That’s right!” Emilia exclaimed. “Just like Ram said, that’s what we’re thinking…! Right?”

“That’s correct, I suppose. As always, Ram being quick on the uptake is quite helpful, in fact.”

“Thank you… But are you serious?” Ram asked Emilia, narrowing her light-crimson eyes.

At Ram’s gaze, Emilia puffed out her chest with an “Of course.” I know it’s not a simple thing, but I want to try. “I’m sure Subaru will be reaaally happy. And that would make you happy too, right, Ram?”

“No?”

“Eh?!”

“Lady Emilia! I-I think it’s really wonderful!” Petra shouted to overwrite Ram’s immediate answer, leaning forward.

Placing a hand on Petra’s shoulder from behind, Frederica nodded. “Indeed. Honestly, I am surprised at the talk of making a star…but if that is possible, I am sure Sir Subaru will be happy. I would love to see it myself.”

“Thank you! Petra, Frederica, Ram.”

“…Ram didn’t say she’d cooperate.”

“You won’t?”

“…Sigh. Ram didn’t say she wouldn’t, either,” Ram said, sighing, also coming on board after Petra and Frederica.

At the three's responses, Emilia clasped her hands in front of her chest and turned back to Beatrice, who nodded deeply at her gaze. "With the use of Emilia's unbelievably large gate, Petra's Yang magic, and Ram's Wind magic, we should be able to pull this off, I suppose."

"Ah, um, Lady Beatrice? What about my role?" Frederica inquired.

"Ha, seems like you're being declared unfit for the task. It's rare for you to be in such a position, Frederica," Ram commented with a shrug.

Frederica's shoulders shook with frustration. "Ugh, urgh…"

Watching the two's exchange from the corner of her eye, Petra looked worriedly at Emilia and Beatrice. "Um, is there something for Frederica to do…?" she asked.

"It's okay, there's definitely something I want Frederica to do," Emilia replied. "You see, this surprise plan takes a looot of time to prepare. So…"

"During that time, we need someone to distract Subaru so he doesn't find out, in fact," Beatrice finished.

"I see… So I have to prevent Sir Subaru from approaching Lady Emilia or Lady Beatrice while you all are getting things ready. Th-That is a surprisingly big role."

"That's right," Ram replied. "Given the chance, Barusu will try to get close to Her Ladyship or Lady Beatrice. How indecent."

I don't think it's indecent, but it's true that Subaru likes to be with me and Beatrice, so it's important to have Frederica prevent that.

"I was thinking of secretly telling Otto and Garfiel too…" Emilia said.

"Otto is fine, but is Garf okay? Won't it show on his face?" Petra asked.

"I also think it's better to avoid telling Garf, even if Mister Otto is okay," Frederica agreed.

"That's right. Otto is okay, but Garf is no good," Ram thirded.

Since everyone was on the same page, the plan was shared with Otto but kept secret from Garfiel. Also, just to confirm… "So, about Roswaal…" Emilia started.

"No!" Beatrice, Petra, Frederica, and Ram cried.

Thus, in that manner, they decided to carry out Operation: Subaru's Surprise Star.

3

For the important day of execution, we chose a day where the sky would be beautifully clear all day, Emilia thought. "Because even the special star would be ruined if clouds cover the sky and it can't be seen."

"But on a sunny day, there's a possibility that Subaru will be moving around a lot, so we have to be careful that our plan isn't discovered, in fact," Beatrice warned.

"He's quite energetic on sunny days… He's like a mutt," Ram added.

On that note, they started making preparations for the plan and then proceeded to carry it out. Although they had initially started with enthusiasm, making a star was no easy task, requiring a delicate touch, and Emilia failed over and over, producing many a star fragment.

"This is what you'd really call stardust… Next, let's try again! I'm sure it'll go well next time!" Petra cried, encouraging Emilia so she wouldn't be discouraged by continuous failures.

"That's right! I feel like I'm starting to get the hang of it little by little!" Emilia exclaimed, feeling motivated. "Next time…there!"

With the effect of Petra's Yang magic, Emilia somehow shaped the formless mass of mana, trying to maintain its form so that it would be okay to launch into the sky as a star. She would normally give directionality to the mana mass and shoot it out as ice, so this was a very difficult task.

“This is bad. Since Lady Beatrice and Lady Emilia have not been seen since morning, Sir Subaru is complaining of withdrawal symptoms. Mister Otto is holding him back for now, but…”

“…E-Even Betty wants to go to Subaru’s side, I suppose. But if Betty isn’t supervising, the mansion might get blown up by a star, in fact!”

While Emilia and the others were hard at work, Frederica, who had been saddled with the most important role, was working with Otto to somehow keep Subaru in check. In that way, as they gradually inched closer to the creation of a successful star, Emilia had a thought: “It’s only in times like this, but it’s reaaally nice to have everyone working hard on one thing together.”

“Indeed, it truly is only in times like this… Kindly do not lose your focus until you have completed it,” Ram scolded.

“Oh, you’re right. Thank you, Ram.”

Despite having said mean things at first, Ram ended up helping them out until the end. Being helped by that kindness, Emilia continued to focus, and then—

“And that’s why we prepared a star for you, Subaru! Have a look!” Emilia exclaimed.

“Prepared a star?!” Subaru cried.

It was nighttime at Roswaal Manor. Subaru had been called out to the courtyard, where Emilia and Beatrice, as well as their helpers, Petra, Frederica, and Ram, were finally unveiling the star.

Subaru, who had been obstructed by Frederica and Otto all day, was astonished as he looked up at the night sky, with Beatrice, who had leapt onto him upon seeing him, sitting on his shoulders. At the end of his gaze—there, Emilia and the others’ hard work was shining brilliantly.

“Emilia molded the mana, and Petra assisted with her Yang magic. To launch it into the sky, we borrowed Ram’s Wind magic power, with Petra assisting that. Once it reached the necessary height, Emilia fixed it in place, also with Petra’s assistance, I suppose,” Beatrice explained.

“Petra’s helper maid skills are amazing!” Subaru praised. “I mean, isn’t everyone incredible?!”

“Ehehe, we did our best,” Petra gushed, blushing shyly. Though as per Beatrice and Subaru’s evaluation, her efforts were a huge part of why the plan had succeeded. Emilia felt deeply grateful to her.

“I can’t believe you’d go so far for me, Sis… Ouch!” Subaru said.

“Don’t say unnecessary things,” Ram retorted. “Well, enjoy it to the fullest. It’s a special star that lasts only for a few hours.”

“There’s no need to step on my foot… But only for a few hours?”

Having been stepped on by Ram, Subaru hopped around with Beatrice still plopped on his shoulders. Her curls shaking up and down along with him, Beatrice nodded. “That’s right. Because it’s a hastily made star, it’s difficult to keep it floating in the sky like other stars, in fact. That is a special star just for tonight, I suppose.”

“Just for tonight… Th-That’s super luxurious! It’s an amazing special treatment!” Subaru cried, eyes shining, after hearing Beatrice’s explanation.

Emilia was relieved upon seeing that, then exchanged smiles with Petra and the others. I was a little anxious—that even if we made a star, if it disappeared shortly after, it might make Subaru disappointed instead. “But I’m glad you’re happy. I’m sooo relieved.”

“No, no, no, of course I’d be happy, maybe too happy! I never thought you guys would give me a star as a present… I’m really, super happy,” Subaru gushed, with Beatrice gently patting his head from her position on his shoulders as he became overcome with emotion.

Subaru’s straightforward and honest reaction brought a sense of satisfaction, and Emilia felt glad that they had done it. The star that she and the others launched was easily distinguishable among the myriad of other stars; emitting a faint bluish-white glow, it was exceptionally clear and beautiful.

“But Emilia-tan, why did you suddenly think of doing this?”

“Hehe, to return the favor for all the things you do for me.”

“Return the favor?” Subaru replied, tilting his head as if he had no clue, making Emilia smile.

Emilia, under the light of a star of their very own design, had always been receiving so much from the boy named after a star from a place she didn’t know, so…

“You’re always doing things for me, so I wanted to do something for you for a change, Subaru—I worked reaaally hard,” she said.

END

Two Witches' What Ifs
(LQ AI Translation)

Emilia: "—Hey, Echidna, have you ever thought about "what if"?"

Echidna: "…You are always so abrupt."

Across the tea table, Echidna, who had been lifting her cup to her lips, made a sour face.

Emilia had already lost count of how many times she and Echidna had gathered like this for a tea party. She felt completely used to seeing Echidna's face from this distance and angle, but if she dug too deeply into this strange tea party, it would only get weird, so she did not think about it too much.

What mattered was the simple fact that Echidna had agreed to keep her company again today.

Echidna: "Even so, "what if," hm…? Could that perhaps be your way of protesting the Trial I prepared in the Sanctuary? You had an awfully miserable time of it, so you will not be satisfied unless I suffer the same, is that it?"

Emilia: "Echidna, your eyelashes are reaaally long, aren't they? I feel like you could balance a sewing needle on them."

Echidna: "You are the one who began this topic, so is it not rather rude for you to be the one to abandon interest in it?!"

Emilia: "Ah, I'm sorry. I just got curious for a second."

Echidna's face, which she had been staring at intently, turned into an angry one, and Emilia hastily apologized like that.

True, it had been rude to Echidna, who had actually tried to think the matter through. That said, Emilia was also itching for the answer to her present question.

And so—

Emilia: “Echidna, I just made a sewing needle of ice. I think the weight and length are exactly like a real one. So with this, we could…”

Echidna: “Did you consider the danger of it sticking to my lashes? To begin with, why must I go along with your harebrained whims…?”

Emilia: “I made the surface slick, so it’ll be fine. Besides, you are the “Witch of Greed” who wants to know everything, right? In that case, wouldn’t this be one of those everythings?”

Echidna: “—. The number of sewing needles that will sit upon my eyelashes is three.”

Emilia: “Really? Then, if we could just check…”

Echidna: “You never display that inquisitiveness when it would be useful, so why are you so obstinate this time?? You just want to vent your grudge on me over the Trial after all, do you not!”

With her hands on the table, Echidna shouted in a loud voice, and since she clearly hated the idea, Emilia reflected on her proposal.

Emilia: “Ah, I know. I’ll do it too, so if we do it together…”

Echidna: “You would be wise to properly understand the meaning of the word ‘repentance.’”

Emilia: “Too bad…”

Having even her last proposal rejected, Emilia had no choice but to dispel the ice needle.

This was a failure for now. Even so, once something had caught her interest, she would surely want to confirm the answer someday.

Emilia: “Feeling like this might be because I started talking with you, Echidna.”

Echidna: “Do not shift the blame for your bad habit onto me. First of all, if you ask me, who saw you in your youth, you were born with a strange curiosity.”

Emilia: “Really? Maybe so. You’ve seen me from when I was reaaally tiny, so of course you’d see right through that.”

Echidna: “…”

Emilia: “—? What is it? You look like when the tea was reaaally bitter.”

Echidna: “By and large, that understanding is correct… No, changing the tea would be pointless. So do not stand up. In fact, do not try to help. You will only spill it all over again.”

When Emilia tried to replace the bitter tea, Echidna stopped her preemptively. Emilia was surprised that her actions had been anticipated, but soon after, her lips loosened into a smile.

It was not that she enjoyed being stopped—it made her happy to be understood.

Echidna: “That is a vaguely displeasing reaction. If I ask why, I suspect I shall feel even worse, so I will not ask.”

Emilia: “No, it’s fine. It just made me think how well you understand me, Echidna.”

Echidna: “I said I would not ask, and yet you answer anyway. Moreover, that evaluation is outrageous. You are only unusually easy to read; that does not make me your “understanding friend.”“

Emilia: “Is that so? But Subaru says I’m beyond what he could imagine, or that I leap over his expectations, and things like that…”

Echidna: “Your habit of bragging with such an innocent face is truly malicious!”

Seeing Echidna knit her brows sharply, Emilia once again reflected that she had angered her.

Because Emilia’s circle of acquaintances was not all that large, her talks with Echidna naturally included the names of those close to her camp. But when Subaru came up, things were always like this.

Emilia: “Subaru also makes a reaaally weird face when I bring up your name. …Ah, by weird I don’t mean it as an insult, okay? Subaru’s gaze is sharp, but I think he looks reaaally cute when he smiles with that look, and also…”

Echidna: “…”

Emilia: “—! I’m sorry, I did it again.”

Even though she had meant to be mindful, she had ended up talking about Subaru again.

As expected, having spent so much time together, his presence as Emilia’s knight took the words right off her tongue even when she was not consciously thinking about it. —That had once been Puck’s role, but the long hiatus had taken its toll, and now that position was under threat.

Bearing that mix of half-loneliness and half-affection, Emilia sighed —

Echidna: “So? Are you going to leave the first topic lying where it fell?”

Emilia: “Eh? The first topic…?”

Echidna: “You were talking about “what if,” were you not! It is not as if I am particular about it, but I pity a topic that is born only to be left untended… For me to say that is something indeed.”

Emilia: “Ah, right! The “what if” story. For some reason the conversation wandered all over, but that was what I wanted to talk about with you, Echidna.”

Echidna: “—. Very well. Before we go off track, proceed to the specifics.”

Emilia: “Yeah, okay. It was originally a story Subaru started, but—”

Saying so, Emilia began explaining the “what if” story to Echidna.

Since he had been the one to bring it up, she had no choice but to mention Subaru's name, but Echidna graciously endured that, and from there Emilia was able to tell the whole thing without a hitch.

Having finished listening, Echidna stroked her own chin with slender fingers as she murmured, "Hmm," and then,

Echidna: "—I see. A time that is not now, a place that is not here, a circumstance in which you are not yourself—changing such conditions as a thought experiment, in other words. As expected, it is similar to the Trial in the Sanctuary."

Emilia: "Mm, right. I think it's more like the second Trial than the first… But the way Subaru tells it, you're supposed to change things much more drastically. For example…"

Echidna: "For example?"

Emilia: "Let's see, like if you and I were sisters…"

Echidna: "What a frightening premise. The very thought sends a chill down my spine."

Emilia: "Come on, saying it like that. Do you hate being my little sister that much?"

Echidna: "Why are you defining yourself as the elder without any discussion at all? Whether elder sister or younger sister, I dislike both equally, but I stumbled over that part beforehand."

Though Echidna had accepted the "what if," she pushed back against the concrete content.

Apparently, it struck Echidna as strange for Emilia to be the elder sister of the two.

Emilia: "But even though I spent a long time frozen, I'm older than a hundred, you know? How old were you when you died, Echidna?"

Echidna: "Do you mean to freeze the count at the age of death? I shall inform you that it has been several centuries since the Witch of Greed's Tomb began functioning in the Sanctuary… Though the number of visitors has been trifling, I spent a very long time in the dream castle. That I would be younger than you…"

Emilia: "Then how old are you, Echidna?"

Echidna: "—. My age at death was nineteen, but I was born over four hundred years ago."

Emilia: "Ah, no fair."

By adding that on, Echidna tried to make herself older by date of birth instead of actual years, and when she pursed her lips and looked away, the gesture seemed childish, making Emilia think she really was better suited to being the elder sister.

Emilia: "Mm, all right. If you insist that much, you can be the older sister."

Echidna: "Wait. I said from the outset that being either sister would be unpleasant. Moreover, it makes the one who gave ground seem the bigger person. That sort of thing is…"

Emilia: "Then how about this? What if you were a boy…"

Echidna: "I would not be the "Witch of Greed," but the "Warlock of Greed"… Hey, do not move on to the next topic without asking!"

Emilia: "If you were a boy, your hair would surely be shorter. You always wear a dress, but I bet you'd wear clothes that seem easier to move around in."

With her hands clasped before her chest, Emilia carefully looked Echidna over as she imagined what she would be like as a man. Keeping the white hair, the distinctive lashes, and the well-proportioned features as they were, would she be a little taller, with a more valiant way of standing?

Emilia: "And you might run faster, too. See, you're reaaally slow at running, right?"

Echidna: "Mind your own business. Leave me be."

Emilia: “And! You refer to yourself as *boku*, right? That would be perfect.”

Echidna: “Such shallow points, one after another… I am sorry, but I refuse to be taken in by your patter. If you insist on continuing the “what if,” how about this: I am the master and you are the servant.”

Emilia: “A servant… Okay, sure. Then I’ll pour you some tea. — Here goes!”

Echidna: “Hot hot hot hot hot! It is splashing! It is splashing onto my hand!”

Hearing Echidna, standing close by, cry out like that after Emilia poured tea into the cup with great vigor, Emilia reflected hard that she had done it again.

Ram and Frederica had taught her, and she had been practicing, but she just could not get the knack of this sort of etiquette. If she let her guard down for a moment, strength went into her at once.

Emilia: “Ah, then how about this one? “What if” you and I swapped bodies for a day.”

Echidna: “How do you manage to line up topics I dislike so precisely? First of all, what would your aim be in swapping bodies with me? Taking on the burn’s pain in my place?”

Emilia: “I’d take responsibility and cool that down, but that’s not it. I often put too much strength into everything—just “heave-ho” and there it goes—so that wouldn’t happen if I had your body, right? Subaru says that you can’t lift anything heavier than a teacup.”

Echidna: “…On the contrary, if I took charge of your body, I fear I would end up destroying everything.”

Studying Emilia intently, Echidna said something along those lines.

Emilia, who put too much strength into things, and Echidna, who had far too little—ideally, they would both be able to manage a middle ground, and if their minds and bodies were exchanged, that seemed like it might be possible.

Emilia: “Ah, but getting tired easily would be a problem. Right now I have a lot I have to study, and I’ve been told it’s like an endurance match.”

Echidna: “If I could not carry out the process of gaining knowledge because of a lack of stamina, how, with this body, did I ever call myself the “Witch of Greed”? I am known as a wise one, you know?”

Emilia: “So if it’s studying, you don’t get tired, Echidna?”

Echidna: “There were times when I forgot sleep and meals for days at a stretch, immersed in it.”

At Echidna’s faintly proud tone, Emilia felt honestly impressed. “Amazing,” she said.

Emilia considered herself someone with stamina, but when it came to studying at a desk, it drained her terribly. She did not dislike studying, but using only her head was not her strong suit.

Emilia: “There are a lot of things you only realize if someone tells you. This “what if” way of thinking might be reaaally interesting.”

Echidna: “Was that not why you recommended it to me…? No, fine. Delving into this will only tire me.”

Emilia: “Other “what ifs” sound fun, too! Like, not just me, but if you were a Royal Candidate as well, or if you had a knight, what kind of person would they be, or if you were an animal, what animal would suit you…”

Echidna: “You want to make me do quite a lot! —If I am to play along, then how about this: “what if” neither you nor I were daughters of “witches.”“

With a faint smile, Echidna said so, and Emilia blinked in surprise. Then Emilia smiled back,

Emilia: “Then how about this? —“What if” you and I were friends.”

Echidna: “…”

Emilia: “Echidna?”

Echidna: “—. I see. So that was the theme of today’s tea party.”

With a look of having reached understanding, Echidna started to bring the cup to her lips, then stopped.

It was the tea Emilia had just poured to the very brim of the cup.

With hands that could not lift anything heavier than a teacup, Echidna gingerly grasped it, and with the cup trembling, she somehow managed to bring it to her lips without spilling.

Watching without thinking, Emilia herself tensed up and put strength into her hands.

Echidna: “This is “what if” we were close enough to casually share a tea party together… Time arising in accord with such a script of yours, is what it is.”

Emilia: “Good. I’m glad you could drink it without spilling. If you want more, just say so anytime. Ram taught me, and I’m a little confident about the taste.”

Echidna: “I would prefer you not excuse talking about yourself alone as a matter of narrow vision—one of your bad habits, I think!”

Angry as she was, Echidna still, so as not to spill the half-drunk tea, slowly and carefully returned the cup to the table. Hearing Echidna’s complaint, Emilia said, “I’m sorry,” lowered her brows, and quietly placed a hand over her own chest.

What Echidna said rang true to her.

Emilia: “There are still lots of things I’m lacking, so I think I’ve been relying on you to tell me them, strictly. It’s only natural for you to be angry.”

Echidna: “That is not chiefly the topic I wish to address… No, it is not fine. Put that way, it makes it sound as if I am offering harsh words because I expect improvement from you.”

Emilia: "—? Telling someone what you want them to fix is because you would like the "what if" version of them better than the way they are now, right? If you were not hoping for any "what if" from them, you would not say anything… No, rather, I do not think you would even find anything to say."

Echidna: "…"

Emilia: "Ah, that's a "what if" story, too. Maybe we have been saying the same thing all along."

Covering her mouth, Emilia smiled at Echidna. At Emilia's words, Echidna heaved a long, big, showy sigh.

Seeing that, Emilia let out a little breath and said, "Honestly," then,

Emilia: "You sigh a lot, Echidna, but doing that makes happiness run away. Puck taught me. I would feel sorry if happiness kept running away from you, so I want you to be a "what if" Echidna who does not let happiness escape."

Echidna: "In that case, what I shall wish from the "what if" you is that you stop angering me at every turn, stop doing things that get on my nerves, and can at least pour tea without tensing up."

Emilia: "Okay, I'll work on them one by one, so you have to come and check properly, all right?"

Echidna: "…Blast. That might have been a case of digging my own grave."

Muttering so, Echidna made a sour face again, and Emilia thought of her as a naughty child.

She did not dislike it when Echidna spoke bluntly, grew angry, or looked proud of herself, but if she could just reduce the sour faces a little, that would make Emilia happier.

Since they were comrades who could talk about "what ifs" that had yet to be realized—

Emilia: "As I thought, my knight is amazing. This was the kind of story I wanted to have with you, Echidna.”

Echidna: “There you go bragging again…”

Echidna’s face grew even more sour, and Emilia let her lips relax into a smile.

As she thought, she reaaally wanted to someday see the “what if” where that stubborn crease on Echidna’s brow disappeared.

END

Oni Sister Birthday Specials

Blessing Day Ex:
Rem's Birthday Party

1

Emilia: "Hey, Rem, aren't you hungry yet? I made a reeeeally big rice ball."

Puck: "Yeah, it's Lia's masterpiece. It's so big that it'll knock your socks off."

Rem: "Oh, ohh…thank you, Lady Emilia. But, just those feelings are enough."

Emilia: "Hey, Rem, aren't you tired yet? Want a lap pillow?"

Puck: "It can be from me or Lia. Today is a great feast."

Rem: "Oh, ohh…thank you, Lady Emilia. But, just those feelings are enough."

Emilia: "Hey, Rem, aren't your hands lonely yet? Puck, will you let her cuddle you?"

Puck: "Since it's Lia's request, okay. Today is a special case when the seal to my chest fluffiness has been unlocked."

Rem: "Oh, ohh…thank you, Lady Emilia. Then, just a little."

When Rem nervously reached out her hand, Puck accepted her fingertips with his chest. Emilia made a fist saying "Good" while she looked at that situation from the side.

All spots of Puck's fur felt outstanding to touch. However, Emilia knew about the three spots you should pay particular attention to, as she was someone who had always been with Puck.

His ears, tail, and chest hair—these three spots of Puck's fur were excellent in sense of color and touch. They were the three supreme, deluxe, and best places of his fur.

Nobody could resist their charm. Emilia couldn't, of course, and Rem also shouldn't be able to either.

Puck: "Hmmm? Why is even Lia joining in, playing with my tail?"

Emilia: "Eh? I got jealous just from watching, and your tail was open too…was it not okay?"

Puck: "Nothing was wrong with it. But when you do it suddenly, it'll surprise me."

Emilia continues to cuddle Puck while saying sorry to him as he floated in the air, folding his small arms. Rem also unconsciously sighed at that touching.

Rem: "Ahh, I can't get enough…Great Spirit, I can't believe you've been hiding something like this."

Puck: "It is my prized possession. It's a secret garden that nobody in the mansion has touched, besides Lia and Betty. Today is special, so don't tell people about it."

Rem: "Yes. I've been allowed to enjoy it thoroughly."

Rem also replied politely to Puck's jokes, being someone who had a very honest personality. Then, she reluctantly took her finger away from Puck's chest hair and said

Rem: "But, I'm a little…just a little, just a tiny bit regretful about this spot."

Emilia: "Eh?! Umm, Rem, you can play with Puck more, you know? This is a rare opportunity, so it'd be a waste."

Puck: "Putting it as playing with me is a little wrong, but it's true. It's a rare event that may or may not happen in 100 years. You can enjoy it."

Rem: "I appreciate the thought, but I still have work to do after this, and I'm also worried about not preparing dinner in time."

Emilia: "But wait! I am still full, you know?"

Rem: “Isn’t that because Lady Emilia ate her own big rice ball…”

Emilia responds to Rem’s point by saying “Yea”, feeling on her stomach.

There was no sign of Emilia eating too much on her slender, thin belly, but she personally felt her stomach swelling up quite a bit. Actually, the gigantic rice ball that she made Subaru hold before—she had to eat this armful of food herself, so you could say her having a full stomach was natural.

Puck: “Well, I helped with half. That was a tough opponent.”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s true. I thought it’d be perfect for confining Rem…”

Rem: “Confining me?”

Emilia: “Ah! Oops!”

Emilia carelessly lets out their objective, and she panics. Emilia became frantic trying to think of a way to trick Rem, who had a doubtful look.

Emilia: “No, Rem. Don’t misunderstand me. I said confine, but I don’t mean it in a dangerous way. I meant it in a more cute and kind…Puck, what should I call it?”

Puck: “Cute and kind confinement, right? Isn’t it just standing in the way?”

Emilia: “Yes, I just thought to stand in your way.”

Rem: “The way you put it sounds cute, but…”

Rem speaks as if the essence of it hadn’t changed, and Emilia hesitates. Afterwards, Emilia looked at Puck with a side glance to seek help.

Puck responds to Emilia’s look by slowly blinking his round eyes, and he said

Puck: “Lia, resignation is the great lesson of human life.”

Emilia: “Puck, you idiot! Also, in your case, it’s not human life!”

Puck: “Resignation is the great lesson of not only human life, but nyan life too.”

Emilia: “What in the world does nyan life mean…”

Puck lacked seriousness, acting carefree, and Emilia dropped her shoulders, seeing how she had no one on her side.

She thought to do her best, and to fulfill her role seriously—no, giving up here would surely be falling into the same trap as Puck.

Emilia: “I won’t lose.”

Emilia lifts her head courageously, saying”Alright”, and her motivation makes her bluish purple eyes burst into flames.

Then, she began to fight against Rem earnestly to do her best in one way or another.

2

Emilia lit up the fire in her eyes, and it was two minutes after she took the challenge with enough fighting spirit.

Rem: “—I see. And then Subaru made the request to Lady Emilia, and you tried your best to distract me.”

Emilia: “Yes…”

Emilia failed to trick Rem, and she suffered utter defeat from her.

She did her best in various ways, However, Rem’s questioning was too stern. Unfortunately, Emilia’s best efforts were in vain, and she fell a step short.

Puck: “Not sure if it was one step…even with 10 steps it’d still feel like rooting for the underdog.”

Emilia: “Jeez, Puck you be quiet! You’re the one to talk, not helping out at all at a crucial time!”

Puck: “With this result, I feel like me helping or not would only be a difference in the unofficial record.”

Puck makes an excuse, him being cold-hearted, and Emilia pouts at him as she showed an unhappy attitude. Puck being carefree was just the usual, but he had a very important role today.

—The many times Emilia got in the way of Rem’s work today were all diversion tactics to make the “Surprise” a success.

“Let’s celebrate”, is what Ram had said the other day, and it was fresh in her mind. Having said that, Emilia wasn’t there for it, and she heard it second hand using Subaru as an intermediary, but they were all for the celebration.

The celebration—it was for Ram and Rem’s birthday that was coming up.

It was a once a year commemoration of birth, and they worked their butts off especially for this year as they wanted to celebrate Rem.

Emilia got surprised too when Ram said that, but she also somehow understood Ram’s real intentions, who said that “This year is special for Rem.”

—It was because the major change Rem had this month was obvious to everyone.

Emilia also couldn’t say that she knew Rem for a long time. It was a relationship that started when she went out of the forest and got invited to the mansion. Even then, she could clearly feel Rem’s transformation.

She smiled more than before, talked more than before, and looked more brilliant than before.

That transformation definitely—she felt like it was a result of the worry in Rem’s heart disappearing in one way or another. Emilia felt jealous of that.

On top of that, she also felt like Rem was reeeaally cute now.

Emilia: “I’m saying that I want to make your guys’ birthday party a success at all costs!”

Rem: “Understood. Lady Emilia, thank you for telling me everything.”

Emilia: “No, it’s okay…wait what? I told you everything?”

Puck: “She induced you just like she wanted to. As a lone father with a beloved daughter thinking about the future royal election, I’ve gotten kinda worried.”

Anything and everything gets out of Emilia’s mouth, and she gets surprised by her own carelessness. As you’d expect, this was unacceptable, no matter how good of a listener Rem was.

Emilia: “But I kinda feel relieved now that I don’t have anything to hide…”

Rem: “I don’t think I should be saying this, being the one who listened, but if Lady Emilia can’t be a little more suspicious of others, I’ll be a little…just a little…just a tiny bit worried.”

Even Rem says something like that to Emilia, and so she hung her head in despondence. However, Rem sighed at Emilia’s situation in response and said

Rem: “I apologize for being a bother to Lady Emilia. For some sort of reason, I will make time for Sister, Subaru, and even Master Roswaal and…”

Emilia: “Ah, you can’t. Rem, don’t say it like that.”

Emilia puts a stop to Rem, who looked down as she muttered in a troubled way. That look, voice, and speaking were unacceptable. That was the look, voice, and speaking of the Rem from the past.

It was the Rem that had no self-confidence and was still fine with relying on serious worrying.

Emilia: “I reeeally understand the feeling of not having self-confidence. But, you can’t speak like you’re deprecating yourself. That’s kind of unfair.”

Rem: “Unfair, you say?”

Emilia: “I can’t put it in words well, but I feel like it’s a way of speaking that makes you leave things out. Also, I too don’t like Rem saying “for some sort of” and “things like”. Even Ram will get reeeeaally mad.”

Emilia puts her hands on hips, and she pictures the pink haired girl in her mind. Ram and Rem looked like two peas in a pod. She neither hid the doting love for her sister, nor was she embarrassed, always being full of confidence.

That was because it was her true feelings. The two of them also had the same trust Emilia had in Puck.

Emilia: “That’s why I’m really looking forward to this celebration. It is true that I want your guys’ birthday to be happy, but I also want to show my thanks.”

Rem: “For me, Lady Emilia?”

Emilia: “Yes, of course. Is it that surprising? Rem does the cooking, laundry, and cleaning for me. Also, you were nothing but a help to me during the witchbeast incident, even at the mansion’s festivity that happened afterwards.”

It wasn’t just Rem and Ram she should’ve expressed her thanks to. She had to tell tons of things to Puck, Subaru, Roswaal, and Beatrice, too.

And even then, the first time the opportunity of their birthday came around, she felt like she wanted to bless her first meeting with the two of them, and she wanted to show her thanks along with it.

Puck: “But Lia is clumsy with decorations, planning, and other things like that too. So she didn’t get that work. Instead, she was appointed to confine you.”

Emilia: “Don’t just butt in like that! Also, it’s not confinement!”

Puck: “You were appointed to stand in her way.”

Rem: “You were appointed, I see.”

Rem agrees with Puck’ joking, and Emilia gets shocked from seeing their smiles. Who would’ve thought that Rem and Puck would be mean to her?

On top of that, it was a scene that would’ve been impossible before. Now that she thought about it, she did let them off naturally.

Rem: “…In other words, whenever you saw me at the main wing or the west wing, you went ahead and did something like bother me.”

Emilia: “Not exactly. In Subaru’s words, it being a “Surprise” was important. So I had the role of casually distracting you so that Rem wouldn’t notice.”

Rem: “Casually…”

Puck: “I understand how you feel, but we’d appreciate it if you don’t say anything.”

Rem accepts Puck’s words, and she looked towards Emilia. Rem smiled wryly at her situation of being in dire stress from not knowing how she’d distract Rem from here on out.

Then, Rem changes her wry smile to just a smile as she said

Rem: “I understand. Lady Emilia, what you said is quite right. Always turning my back on celebrations is inexcusable to Sister and Subaru.”

Then, she pauses once, and continuing with a “Also”, Rem said

Rem: “I think it’s unfair to turn my back on Lady Emilia’s feelings.”

Emilia: “Rem…”

Rem: “How about it, Lady Emilia? Want to have tea together now?

You seem very thirsty…it'd kinda be like standing in my way."

Rem tilts her head with a smile, and she asks Emilia that question. Just from seeing Rem set up the table, Emilia also knew what she wanted to say.

It was her accepting the birthday celebration, as well as the thoughtfulness of letting Emilia also fulfill her duty. Although, she was also embarrassed due to her being spoiled from beginning to end.

Emilia: "Then I'll at least make the tea. You'll at least let me do that, right?"

Rem: "I don't mind it…but Lady Emilia, is tea your specialty?"

Puck: "It won't taste anything with the rice ball. That's how Lia's natural flavor works."

He saw an opportunity to come into the conversation, so Puck landed on Emilia's shoulder just when his role had ended.

He hides in her long, silver hair like that, and he withdrew as he said "My work here is done~"

Emilia: "Jeez, you really are a sloth."

Rem: "The great spirit's chest hair got me good. So, he did his job."

Rem soothes Emilia, her being angry, and she supports Puck. Rem was completely on Puck's side during this small interaction. People could not resist the fur's charm after all.

That trivial jealousy was put aside and—

Emilia: "It is a secret "Surprise", but I wonder what kind of preparations Subaru and the others have in store."

Rem: "I don't know. It must be things that are far beyond my imagination. But, I hope that Sister and Subaru don't get injured from being reckless."

Emilia: “Yeah. Subaru is a good boy, but he is reeeaally reckless.”

Rem: “Is he just a good boy? Subaru, to Lady Emilia.”

While walking side by side in the corridor, Rem said that as she suddenly looked at her with a side glance. In response to Rem’s words, Emilia blinked her big eyes, and she put a finger on her lips.

Rem’s question. What was Subaru to Emilia besides a “good boy”?

He was—

Emilia: “…A reeeaally good boy?”

Rem: “Lady Emilia is unfair.”

Emilia: “Eehh?! Why?! What’s this all of a sudden?!”

In a flash, Emilia lets out a sigh as well as a complaint, and she gets confused.

Rem leaves Emilia behind, and she walked forward briskly with quick steps.

Emilia: “Ah, hey wait, Rem! Jeez, what is this, and what’s up with you?”

Rem: “I don’t know.”

“…”

They both couldn’t handle the situation, and they both suddenly let out smiles.

Catching up while jogging, Emilia stood with Rem. Rem also slowed down her pace.

Slowly, they laughed for some reason, got surprised, and they started to walk in the corridor while chatting with excitement.

—It didn’t look like a relation between a master and a servant, they looked like fellow, young friends.

Blessing Day Ex: Rem-rin’s Day

1

Ram: “Let’s have a celebration.”

That was what Ram said a few days ago, just like that.

Ram’s sudden proposal was also fresh within Subaru’s memory, who was first to be surprised after hearing it.

As for what Ram’s suddenness was actually for at this time—he was convinced that it was for to celebrate the birthday of her beloved younger sister, Rem.

Subaru: “That also means she wants to put off her own…”

Ram and Rem were twin sisters. So, of course, their birthdays were on the same day.

If the younger sister’s birthday were to be celebrated, then naturally she as her older sister would be celebrating it as well.

That’s what people like Subaru thought, but Ram obstinately—not obstinately, but she did briefly deny that.

Which meant she was saying that she’d put in effort for everything, putting it in for Rem’s sake.

Prioritizing Rem no matter what really was like Ram, but—

Subaru: “—I feel bad for Sister, but what’s left is for me to watch the day.”

Subaru rubs the bottom of his nose, and he mutters like that. Subaru’s eyes, which people always called nasty, looked even more frightening, and he snickered quietly at the evil scheme in his chest.

Then, as for who was where Subaru was at when he made an evil brat-like face—

Subaru: “Oh.”

Subaru hears footsteps, leaning his fingers onto a pillar, being at an entrance hall of the Roswaal mansion. After he looked over, he saw a girl walking towards him quickly.

It was a person with rather short, blue swaying hair, and eyes that had the same type of light blue her hair had—it was one of the two people Subaru had pictured in his mind a moment ago, the youngest of the maid sisters, Rem.

Rem: “Sorry, Subaru. I made you wait a bit.”

Rem came over, and she lowered her head properly as she pinched her maid outfit apron. Subaru smiled at that situation, and he shook his head saying “No”.

Subaru: “Considering how you just got here, Rem must be busy with work. Hell, if that’s true, then people like Sister and I should help out more…”

Rem: “No, no way…I won’t be a bother to Sister and Subaru. Plus, it would be faster and more thorough if I did it instead of getting help from you two.”

Subaru: “You just declared to go solo with a big smile on your face, didn’t you?!”

Rem tilts her head at Subaru’s screaming, unaware of how she said something cruel.

Frankly speaking, Rem did not have a compromising attitude; in fact, it was uncompromising. Although her sense of resistance had disappeared, on very rare occasions, he’d catch a glimpse of one part of it that was her sharp tongue.

Maybe Ram throwing straight balls and Rem throwing curve balls were the source. They were the bits of knowledge that now allowed him to understand how he became friends with them.

Anyhow, he disregarded not being able to object in relation to the quality of his work with a wry smile, and Subaru said “My bad” to change the topic.

Subaru: “Rem should be busy, and yet I had you make time.”

Rem: “Well, I can’t do something like turn down Subaru’s requests…but what made you want to do this? You wanting to go to the Earlham Village with me. It shouldn’t have any particular necessary ingredients right now, so I can’t think of any reason to go shopping there.”

Subaru: “It has sugar, salt, and the ingredients to make mayonnaise…not. It’s not like you always need a reason to go out, you know?”

Rem: “So then what?”

Subaru: “It’s just going out. It’s for Rem’s…I mean, my break. So can I not take Rem along with me?”

For a second, it seemed he was about to say the wrong thing, and he corrected himself in panic.

If he were to carelessly say something like “Rem’s sake” here, he’d see Rem declining his offer firmly after being appreciative of it. That wouldn’t be good for the evil scheme that would happen after this.

Then, Subaru’s innermost thoughts were put aside. And when Rem sweetly smiled and went into deep thought, she said

Rem: “Going out, you say?”

Subaru: “Yes yes, let’s go out.”

Rem: “Isn’t that…basically…erm…a date?”

Subaru: “Yeah.”

In response to Rem’s questioning, Subaru faced towards the ceiling, and he let out a short “Yeah”. Everyone in the mansion had the same general idea of what a “Date” was because of the spreading of the story when he invited Emilia to a flower bed before.

If a man and a woman went out intimately, that was a date, so Subaru nodded at Rem’s question.

Subaru: “Yeah. It’s a date. Alright, Rem, let’s have a date together!”

Rem: “Yes! I’m happy! …But, if you told me earlier, I would’ve came with my maid outfit to go out on, Subaru, you meany.”

Subaru: “It’s a maid outfit even though it’s for going out?! You should have some discussions with Ros-chi about that!”

Of course, maid outfits certainly did fit her excellently, but Ram and Rem wearing things other than maid outfits would be cute, too. Come to think of it—

Subaru: “—I feel like I’ve talked about this in the first week of the mansion.”

Rem: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “Nah, it’s nothing. Okay, let’s go, Rem.”

He holds back just a small sentiment, and then Subaru and Rem’s date began.

2

And then, he brought Rem along, her being absolutely cheerful, and the “Date” began, but—

Rem: “—You know, Subaru is a meany. I was very mad.”

Rem pouts with her cheeks angrily, and she expressed her crankiness in a cute way.

In response to Rem’s situation, Subaru apologized to her complaints about being invited, holding onto his head because of his own clumsiness.

The “Date” itself was carried out well, and Rem was in an unusually good mood along the way. The conversations were lively, and Subaru was also confident that he successfully concealed the plan at the bottom of his stomach.

So, in regards to the existence of problems with the present situation, everything was perhaps going well beyond his expectations.

Rem’s good mood, Subaru’s secret, both of them were—.

Subaru: “I didn’t expect Rem longing for a date that much, even with my amazing eyes…”

Rem: “Subaru’s manly eyes are blind, so he wouldn’t expect it.”

Subaru: “Rem, you’re being unusually bitter! Sorry, it’s my fault, yes.”

Subaru gets seen with a side glance, and he takes only a meek attitude. Then, in response to that interaction between Subaru and Rem

Kid: “Subaru’s weak”

Kid: “Subaru’s pitiful”

Kid: “Subaru’s lame”

Kid: “Subaru’s pathetic”

is what they said in succession as a final blow. After that coordinated verbal attack made Subaru curl his lips, the people who watched him and laughed at him happily were the kids.

Their identity was called The Six Earlham Villagers—Subaru was the only one that called them that, but they were brats that got along with him. However, at this rate, there was a possibility of the relationship of trust that had been built up to this point everyday getting cracked. That was because

Subaru: “You guys, follow up on me a little more. Partners in crime share the same fate, right? Who do you think I'm working hard for?"

Petra: "For Rem-rin's sake, right? You won't do it for us."

Subaru: "*Gulp*, it's just like what you said…"

He gets easily defeated by Petra, the six people's leader, a girl known to be the most promising in the village.

—As of now, Subaru was conspiring with the six people for a certain goal.

The seven people had the same goal, and his "Date" with Rem was to cover it up. Rem was brought to the village so that the true goal wouldn't be suspected.

Subaru: "As a result, I made Rem really mad…"

Petra: "You need to think about a girl's feelings more.

Meina: "I think so too."

Petra and Meina, the two people that represented the village's girls, judged him in a very harsh way. That made Subaru hang his head, being heartbroken, and the remaining four evil brats tapped Subaru's shoulder in turns as if to comfort him.

Rem: "…Jeez, Subaru just can't be helped."

Subaru: "Rem?"

Rem: "Getting depressed like that makes me feel anxious too. I'll forgive you if you let me sneak attack you 10 times for that, so please lift your head."

Subaru: "Ohh, Rem, you're kind…10 times? Are you kind? Isn't that pretty strict?"

Rem: "What do you mean? It's a mass of mercy."

10 sneak attacks. What did that mean? Perhaps it meant something

like Rem tricking Subaru at every opportunity from now on. If that was the case, then Rem's overdoing also had to be considered, but Subaru felt like there was a chance of his life span shortening greatly.

Subaru: "Anyhow, let's get down to business while I show my gratitude for Rem being merciful. The truth is, I'm not the one who has business with you today, Rem. It's this gang of kids."

Rem: "Gang of kids…?"

Rem tilts her head upon hearing the unfamiliar words, and meanwhile, Subaru gave up his spot to the six group of people. The kids appear with Petra in the middle, and they face Rem from the front.

Rem also wasn't tall, but when compared to kids, she could look over them and see the other side. While being confused with the unfamiliar eye level, Rem stiffened up from wondering about what was going to happen.

Rem does that, and in response, when Petra and the others—when everyone looked at each other for just a second, they said

Everyone: "—Rem-rin, happy birthday!"

Then, their voices came together, and they each held out the presents they had concealed behind their backs.

Rem: "—Eh?"

In response to those children's gifts, Rem fell behind for a step, and she let her voice out, dumbfounded.

The unexpected situation, the bolt out of the blue, the shock freezes her thoughts—describing it would be something like that. Subaru taps Rem's shoulder softly and affectionately.

Subaru: "It's a surprise birthday plan. You weren't ready, huh, Rem."

Rem: "Th-That…but it's not Sister's and my birthday yet…"

Subaru: “In the birthday plan’s draft, Ram accepted having hers delayed. So, I attacked preemptively, not wanting to lose. —Well, that might be kind of an excuse.”

Rem: “Eh…?”

Subaru: “I talked with Petra and the others about Rem’s birthday. And then, these guys got hyped too saying “I wanna celebrateeee”… they wanted to do it for the witchbeast incident too.”

The forest’s witchbeast incident—that was treated as Subaru’s achievement for some reason, but as for Subaru, he felt like it would’ve been impossible without Ram and Rem’s help. Plus, if Roswaal wasn’t there, he would’ve died, and there was also him doing his best thanks to Emilia and Beatrice.

And yet, the reality was also that he was puzzled with him being treated like he was the only one to be rewarded. That also overlapped with this time’s discussion and the kids’ gratitude, and—

Subaru: “It’s a simultaneous implementation of thanks and celebration. If it starts to feel like one is lost from the two, then I’ll apologize.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “…Guess it seems like you’re not worried about that.”

Subaru gently gives a wry smile, and he scratched his head. Next to Subaru, Rem looked down, hanging her head, and she was holding onto the edge of her skirt without saying anything.

The people who reacted that silence, worried about what was wrong, were the kids.

Kids: What’s wrong?”

Kid: “Hungry?”

Kid: “Not what you wanted?”

Kid: “I knew I shouldn’t got a bug…”

Subaru: “Ahh, don’t crowd her like that. Don’t worry, your guys’ feelings got through. But, bugs are no good, Lucas. Go let it free. Petra, you stop them too.”

Subaru asked the kids pitter pattering restlessly around Rem to give her time. Each of their presents had not money put into it, but their feelings.

They were put into the bunch of flowers, a handkerchief, rice balls, vegetables, crappy pottery, forget about the bug, and the fruit.

He didn’t go as far as to talk to them about what they’d give. Subaru felt like it’d be insensitive to ask, so he left it as what they’d answer with when asked what they liked.

So, these were the gathered presents after all of the kids thought, worried, and ran around for what they they’d obtain, what they’d get to please Rem.

Subaru: “Well, I don’t know about the bug, but…”

Rem: “…I’m a lucky person.”

Subaru: “What about the bug?!”

Rem: “Even the bug. Well, actually the bug isn’t okay.”

Rem rebukes Lucas quickly for a second, who had reacted to the bug issue, and she slowly lifted her head.

That smile she had with her relaxed mouth was so brilliant that it even captivated Subaru, who got used to seeing Rem’s smiles often.

“…”

That’s why the children were also all dumbfounded by Rem’s reaction. However, kids were of course honest beings, so when they noticed they got accepted by Rem with her smile, they immediately started to get super excited.

Kid: “Rem-rin smiled!”

Kid: “Rem-rin’s cute!”

Kid: “Rem-rin’s an angel!”

Kid: “Seriously an angel!”

Petra: “Guys, HEY! The Subaru words are showing! Rem-rin is bothered, you know.”

Petra scatters her warnings at the boys that began to dance. To be honest, they were attracted to the “Subaru Words” language with their stupid curiosity, but Subaru kept his mouth shut, thinking that this wasn’t when he should cut in.

Rem: “Thank you all. I’m so happy.”

Rem accepts the held-out gifts while saying that. She exchanges looks one by one with each of them, along with words, and smiles.

That scene certainly had a radiance that Rem had never seen before.

Subaru: “Can’t shrug off all of Ram’s points, I guess.”

Then, Subaru grinned widely as he watched over the presents being handed over pleasantly.

—On the way back from the “Date”, Rem was in an even better mood than when they went, and she walked in a lively way.

She held onto the tons of presents from the kids with both her hands, and she said this to Subaru, him holding onto what was called half of it,

Rem: “I’ll hold onto this myself.” and he handed them over.

The way Rem would treat these unexpected gifts would tell just how much she was happy with them.

That day, she put her heart into her arms to make dinner with the consumable rice balls, vegetables, as well as the fruit as ingredients, and everyone at the mansion smacked their lips in satisfaction.

The handmade pottery that couldn't be complimented for its quality became a vase to hold up the flowers that came with it, and it was put pretty plainly in Rem's room.

Then, the handkerchief with lovely embroidery was carried by Rem by choice.

Rem would always remember this feeling of happiness.

Rem: "Subaru, thank you for inviting me on a date."

Subaru: "Oh, you're gonna count it as a date. I thought you were pretty mad."

Rem: "I am mad at Subaru. But, I'm thankful for those kids."

Subaru: "Rem is harsh, isn't she?!"

Subaru screams, and next to him, Rem smiled just like how she did when she received the gifts.

Rem also, once again, showed her thanks for the children's thanks. She felt happiness because of the gifts.

—Thus, if the kids ever needed something, Rem would do everything in her hands to pay them back with all her might.

Those thoughts and feelings of happiness continued to be in her chest throughout Rem's Blessing Day.

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: Welcome to the Evening Party

1

“Just as expected, Sister, you’re as pretty as a picture no matter what you wear.”

Having finished dressing her, Rem looked over her older sister standing before her, and let out a sigh of admiration.

Hearing those words, the older sister—Ram—ran her hands lightly over her peach-colored hair.

“Do you think so? If you say so, Rem, then it must be true.”

“Yes. There’s no doubt whatsoever. Rem is proud to have a sister like you, Sister.”

“Naturally. Even without meaning to be, Ram is the sort of older sister one would want to be proud of.”

Smiling, Ram twirled in place in response to her younger sister’s praise. She made the skirt of her brand new purple-red evening gown flutter, and Rem clapped her hands at such loveliness that one couldn’t help but think it exceeded any other beautiful maiden.

Ram’s pale red eyes, and the dignity infused into every part of every gesture, charmed Rem to the bottom of her heart.

She felt like she wanted to let the entire world know how wonderful her older twin was.

“But, it’s just the same for Ram, you know.”

“Huh?”

“Rem, too, is a cute little sister that Ram can’t help but want to boast about. Indeed, you’re wonderful.”

For a moment, her eyes went wide as she couldn't believe what she was being told, and then Rem's cheeks went red.

Even as she hung her head down, Rem's clothing, too, was a brand-new evening gown, the same as Ram's. It used colors that made it a matching pair with Ram's gown, and honestly, Rem felt very unworthy of it.

"Silly. We're always wearing the same style of maid outfits, aren't we?"

"But, those are nothing more than servant uniforms. I'm embarrassed to be wearing the same thing as my sister, but I can endure it. However, the situation this evening is different, and…"

As Ram crossed her arms and softened her expression in understanding, Rem lowered her gaze.

Forced to confront head-on the problem she'd avoided thinking about until the last minute by focusing on dressing Ram entirely too perfectly, Rem wrung her hands as her embarrassment returned.

Removing her maid uniform, and putting on the same evening gown as her sister, tonight the two of them would stand as part of society.

And the reason behind that was…

"…Are the two of you going to be ready soon, perha~ps?"

"Master Roswaal."

At the sound of knocking on the door, and the low voice that continued after it, Ram raised her head. A faint sparkle could be seen in her pale red eyes, and Rem broke into a little smile. At times like this, her older sister was cute.

Rem nodded in response to Ram's meaningful glance, and the older sister hurried to open the door. Upon doing so, a man set foot in the room, one with the white-painted face of a clown—Roswaal.

Wearing his formal outfit for the evening party (having said that, it was still in Roswaal's own particular eccentric style), he looked around the room, and upon seeing the sisters standing side by side, his lips gave in to a smile.

"Mhmm, mhmm. The two of you look lovely, do~n't you. Your use of color is such an amazing display I can't stand it."

"Thank you very much. Your outfit looks very good on you as well, Master Roswaal."

"It's a hue that will be quite tiring for the other guests' eyes, isn't it? I'm quite taken wi~th it."

Wearing a hat, and making the sleeves on his cloak flutter, Roswaal was in quite high spirits. Narrowing her eyes at her lord's appearance, Ram grasped the skirt of her own evening gown.

"Incidentally, is this clothing something that you chose, Master Roswaal?"

"Indeed, it would be a tempting and luxurious idea to worry over that choice, but I've been a bit busy recently, you see. I assigned the selection of your outfits for the evening to Clind."

"To Clind… No, I don't really mind, but it's a bit unfortunate. But I don't really mind."

"You really aren't fond of him, are you. Even I'll admit that he is the problem, thou~gh."

Seeing Ram's stiff-faced response, Roswaal gave a wry smile. Then, he turned to the wordless Rem and closed one eye, directing the gaze of his blue eye towards her.

"Oh my, Rem, why are you trying so hard to avoid drawing attention? You finally have a chance to wear lovely clothing. It would be a shame for it to go to waste."

"Ah, um, Rem's apologies, Master Roswaal. That wasn't her intention. It's just that Rem is very overwhelmed."

"Overwhelmed?"

“…Rem and my sister are servants. My sister is one thing, but Rem is entirely unable to leave behind that disposition. With things going like this, Rem is afraid that she will be an embarrassment to Master Roswaal or my sister…”

Falteringly, Rem revealed her fears about being in a position she was unsuited to. However, in response to her words, Roswaal replied with “That’s not true.” as he shrugged.

“There’s no need to worry. The one who ordered the two of you to participate in the evening party was myself. No matter what kind of inappropriate display you put on at the party, the responsibility is one that I should bear, and it’s not something you need to wo~rry about.”

“But still…”

“Or do you intend to take away my authority as a margrave, perha~ps?”

With Roswaal smiling at her mischievously, Rem could say nothing more. And, when she turned her troubled eyes to where Ram stood, Ram responded “Silly”, and laughed gently.

“Didn’t Ram tell you before? You are Ram’s pride and joy of a younger sister, Rem. There’s no need to worry that you’ll turn into a disadvantage for Master Roswaal. Ram will stay by your side, after all.”

“Ah…”

Having been told that by both her lord and her older sister, Rem’s pale blue eyes widened slightly. Then, nodding deeply, she smiled.

“Yes. I’ll put in my very best effort.”

Swaying the sleeves of her brand-new evening gown, she stood up straighter.

2

The two of Ram and Rem being ordered to participate in the evening party is something that goes back to only a few days earlier.

It was fairly common for Roswaal, the pair's lord, to suddenly come up with new ideas. He was in the habit of waiting until the very last moment to pass on something he had already decided to the party in question.

This time around, it was the sisters Ram and Rem who were caught up in their lord's whim. Having said that, Ram seemed to be enjoying it, and Rem was satisfied with being able to see her sister's evening gown.

Despite that, her position was that of a servant. Something overwhelming remained overwhelming, but still…

"…Oho. Just as I thought, the two of you do look good in those outfits."

Placing a hand on her abundant chest, and letting out a sigh of relief, was a woman with long, beautiful, blond hair. Both their senior as a maid, and the one who had trained them, she was Frederica.

With her clear green eyes, she looked over the two carefully, and seemed satisfied.

"The master gave instructions to hurry, so Clind and I prepared your outfits. Clind drew up the rough general design, and I took care of the accessories."

"If you had only said something, Rem would have gladly lent assistance…"

"Don't say such silly things. Making someone sew up their own clothing on the event of their grand debut; it's something that, as a maid to the Mathers family, I could never permit."

After Rem's nervous offer, Frederica displayed her sharp fangs while speaking of the philosophy of a maid.

"I'll accept the feeling behind that consideration. …It would be nice to see something of that from Ram as well."

"Oh? After stringing together so much high-minded thinking, you would treat only Ram as an exception?"

In response to Frederica's stare, Ram thrust out her thin chest, the very image of confidence. Her bold form made one question if this figure in an evening gown wasn't her true nature, and the maid uniform she normally wore only a temporary standing. She truly wore it well enough that one might fall prey to such an illusion.

"Honestly… that's not even a little bit adorable. Don't you agree, Rem?"

"Immovable and fearless. That calm and collected part of her is another bit of my sister's charm."

"Ha."

Rem giving her full approval, and Ram looking satisfied with the praise. Seeing the way the sisters were, Frederica placed a hand on her forehead and sighed "I was foolish to expect otherwise.". And then…

"Is this where you were? It will soon be time to be ready for the evening party. Imminent."

"Eep."

The voice that found its way into the waiting room was familiar, but nonetheless Rem's shoulders jumped at the suddenness of it. No matter how many times she heard it, it was something she could never get used to. Ram and Frederica calmly held their composure, and that led to Rem feeling that she was that much more inferior as a servant.

Completely unaware of Rem's inner feelings, a tall, thin man had appeared in the waiting room. Politely smoothing back his thick, blue hair, wearing a butler outfit and a monocle on his left eye—it was the steward, Clind.

"Just like always, the way you show up is bad for our hearts,

Clind.”

“Not changing is something we have in common. However, the outfits you are wearing differ from your usual attire, and suit you well. Beauteous.”

Although Ram’s tone was unfriendly, Clind’s face was composed as he gave a relaxed reply. However, after those words of praise, he continued on with a “However,”.

“A little while ago it would have been even better. At that time, your troubles would still have been childlike, as well. Anguish.”

“…”

“In that sense, Rem is still likable. Whether or not that is a good thing is another matter. Off course.”

“Rem is?”

With the flow of the conversation suddenly directed at her, Rem tilted her head in surprise and puzzlement. There was no change in his expression, and with his voice lacking in warmth, Rem couldn’t read Clind’s emotions. He would often add in a joke without pausing, and Rem’s poor head felt like it was going to spin.

To clear away Rem’s tribulations, Ram stood to block Clind’s line of sight.

“Don’t direct your filthy gaze towards Rem; that’s disgusting. Kindly pick someone better suited to your perversions… Focus on Lady Annerose.”

“That’s a problematic thing to say as well, you know?!”

Frederica’s face reacted drastically to Ram’s words, but then she coughed as though embarrassed at having raised her voice. Then, grasping the shoulder of the unwelcomed Clind, she turned him about and pushed him out of the doorway.

“Come now, you shouldn’t be spending so long in a lady’s room. We will be along to the meeting room right away. You should hurry, too, and…”

“Ah! Clind and Frederica, this is where you’ve been, then.”

As she opened the door, and attempted to drive the butler from the room, she encountered someone coming thumping down the hallway. It was a very young girl, dressed in a lovely gown.

Her thick indigo hair was braided and wrapped about her head. This was, under Roswaal’s guardianship, the child at the head of the Miload family, Annerose Miload.

Annerose (who was six years old), peeked into the waiting room. Seeing the four people inside, her eyes lit up upon seeing the sisters Ram and Rem specially dressed up.

“Oh my, the two of you look very wonderful! I’m sure that uncle must be proud, as well!”

“Ah, thank you, Lady Annerose. Your dress also suits you very well, Lady Annerose. It’s wonderful.”

With her hands clasped in front of her chest, and smiling with reddened cheeks, Annerose raised an approving voice. In response to the honest appraisal of a child, even Rem could not brush it off with a meaningless objection.

Hearing Rem’s words, she asked “Truly?”, and, grasping the sleeves of her dress, continued “If Rem says so, then maybe it’s alright to believe it. Clind praises me no matter what I wear, so I can’t rely on him at all. Do you think uncle will praise me too, perhaps?”

“Yes, I’m sure Master Roswaal will be overjoyed as well. Seeing Lady Annerose growing up in good health is something that both Ram and Rem feel proud of.

“Haha, thanks, Ram. But I still won’t give up my place at uncle’s side for you, you know?”

Displaying the rebellious heart of a little child, Annerose wore a fairly strong-willed smile, and Ram smiled in return.

This exchange between the two of them, with Roswaal caught in-between, was entirely expected by now. As both her guardian, and a friend to her deceased parents, Annerose was captivated by him. On the other hand, there was no need to explain Ram's feelings. It put Rem in a very complicated position.

On top of that, Rem was there to witness the moment of Annerose's birth. It would be audacious to say it, but she couldn't help but hold a familial feeling in regards to her growth. This, too, was overwhelming.

Regardless of that…

"It's almost time for the evening party. Shall we call a temporary truce, and head to the meeting room? Ram, and Rem, too, please take my hands."

"You do like to have things your way, Lady Annerose, don't you?"

"It's only natural for the privilege of escorting the guest of honor to belong to a noble!"

Countering Ram's teasing tone, Annerose raised her voice. However, Rem tilted her head at the content of what was said. 'Guest of honor' was an odd thing to be referred to as.

"Now that you mention it, Rem's mind was entirely focused on joining in the evening party… What on earth is the reason for the party being held tonight?"

"Oh goodness, Rem… Clind, Frederica! And Ram, too, didn't you speak to her about it?"

As Annerose was surprised by Rem's question, the three she looked to for confirmation all shook their heads in unison. However, their expressions were soft, and while Rem was surprised at being the only one who didn't know, she couldn't help but be worried about that.

Annerose's little hand gave Rem's hand a gentle squeeze. Then she smiled, and said, “Wearing those cute evening gowns, you two are the guests of honor, you see? It’s uncle’s …slightly pompous, lovely gift to his retainers, of course.”

3

“Those are Rem’s memories about this evening gown. Rem apologizes for bothering you with this silly story.”

“Nah, nah, nah, it wasn’t silly at all; it was a really good story, wasn’t it? In the end, that evening party was a roundabout way of throwing a birthday celebration for the two of you, wasn’t it?”

As the boy with black hair grinned cheerfully, and spoke that way to her, Rem nodded and replied “Yes” to Subaru.

The setting was the Roswaal manor, in Rem’s personal room. When Subaru dropped by to tell her good night, he had found her arranging her closet, and the evening gown caught his eye.

It was stored carefully, as a reminder of the blessing that had visited Rem and the others years earlier.

“Roswaal can be pretty sharp, too. If it’s like that, I can’t just sit back and lose, either.”

“You can’t lose, you say?”

“Oh, just talking to myself, just talking to myself. Anyways, it’s something to think about, and I’m glad I could hear about it. Thanks for telling me, Rem. I’m looking forward to someday meeting up with the weird people in the story, too.”

“Indeed. …Subaru, please at least be careful of Clind. He’s someone with, um, odd habits, so Rem would be worried about Subaru.”

“When you live around here, people without odd habits are pretty rare.”

With Subaru scratching his head, and smiling as though he thought she was exaggerating, Rem clenched her fist. She felt anew that she would need to be well-prepared for the time of trials that would someday come.

“So then, it’s gotten a bit late, what will you do? If it would be difficult for you to return to your room, Rem wouldn’t mind if you were to rest on her bed…”

“C’mon, you’d mind, right? I’ll go back to my room just like usual. Seriously, if I did that, what would you do, Rem?”

“Rem would rest on your bed in exchange, Subaru. …! This is even more of a forbidden temptation than Rem had thought… Let’s put a stop to it, Rem can’t believe herself.”

“What on earth kind of internal conflict did you have in that short time…”

Smiling wryly at Rem’s words as she struggled valiantly with her impulse, Subaru headed towards the room’s door. As she reluctantly watched him go, he suddenly turned around and pointed at the evening gown on the bed.

“It might be a little too small now, but I’d have liked to see you wearing it.”

“Indeed. Rem’s chest might not fit into it anymore.”

“That’s a reply that it’s difficult for a boy to respond to! But, if you don’t mind, please give it some thought. Maybe there’ll even be a chance for it at this year’s little celebration.”

Widening her eyes at Subaru’s words, Rem saw Subaru off with a “Yes, understood.”.

This year’s celebration—Rem was no longer so childish as to not understand what that referred to.

So, respectfully following Subaru’s instruction, she began making plans to re-tailor the evening gown.

Thinking that the evening gown that matched her sister’s, if it were worn now, would turn out like this, wouldn’t it.

END

Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 3

Lugunica Travel Plan (1)

“Circumstances of the Journey”

Rem: “Nee-sama, nee-sama, it’s terrible.”

Ram: “Oh my, what’s got you all worked up, Rem?”

Rem: “So, to tell the truth, it seems there’s some talk of having everyone in the mansion travel somewhere to celebrate Ram and Rem’s birthday.”

Ram: “Is that so, going on a trip… not a birthday party only, but going so far as to show that much consideration. Truly, one cannot express enough thanks to Roswaal-sama.”

Rem: “Ah, nee-sama… the one who suggested the trip was Subaru-kun…”

Ram: “Barusu did?”

Rem: “Yes. Of course, Roswaal-sama offered his support as well, but it was Subaru-kun who mentioned it first. Rem couldn’t help but be deeply impressed.”

Ram: “It can’t be helped, then. It’s a bit bothersome that it was Barusu’s idea, but if it makes Rem that happy, then Ram will go along with it.”

Rem: “Thank you, nee-sama. So the next matter to discuss, then, is that Subaru-kun asked if nee-sama and Rem would choose a place they’d like to travel to.”

Ram: “Indeed, given the rare opportunity to go on a trip, the thought of allowing Barusu to choose the destination doesn’t seem appealing. Ram and Rem should choose something together.”

Rem: “Yes! Nee-sama, what sort of place would you like to go and see?”

Ram: “Indeed, it would be…”

Rem: “It would be…”

Ram: “Looking at the available space, that should be something discussed not here, but in the next article.”

Rem: “Amazing, nee-sama… Rem is very impressed!”

Lugunica Travel Plan (2)

“Watergate City Priestella”

Rem: “So with that, Rem would like to think of a vacation destination, together with nee-sama.”

Ram: “You seem to be enjoying this quite a bit, Rem. It’s very cute.”

Rem: “Yes, it’s a rare opportunity, so Rem would like to turn it into wonderful memories with nee-sama and Subaru-kun. Hence, as the first candidate… how about Priestella?”

Ram: “Priestella… one of the Six Great Cities of Lugunica, the Watergate City, then.”

Rem: “With many waterways flowing through a large city, it seems one can move throughout the city on dragon boats pulled by water dragons.”

Ram: “Water dragons… similar to ground dragons, they’re water-dwelling dragons raised by humans. Unlike ground dragons, they have ferocious temperaments, but Ram has heard that the water dragons in that city have been raised from eggs by humans, so they’re quite well-trained.”

Rem: “Making one’s way around the town, with the clear water rippled by the dragon boats, would be quite elegant; Rem thinks it would be nice!”

Ram: “The origin of the name Watergate is the Tigracy river right next to the city, and the large flood gates that regulate the vast amount of water that flows from it into the city.”

Rem: “With the intermingling with the Kararagi city state just on the other side of the river, it looks like the Kararagi culture has established itself in some parts of the city. It seems like something that Subaru-kun would be very interested in… nee-sama, wouldn’t you like to choose Priestella as the vacation destination?”

Ram: “Sightseeing together with Rem in a pretty city of water sounds like fun. But, making Barusu happy doesn’t sit well with Ram. Let’s put that one on hold.”

Rem: “On hold… understood. Well then, Rem will suggest a place that will be more satisfying for nee-sama next time!”

Ram: “So full of motivation. Rem is cute, so let’s draw this out a bit longer.”

Lugunica Travel Plan (3)

“Flanders, the Ground Dragon Capital”

Rem: “The next candidate is the Ground Dragon Capital, ‘Flanders’!”

Ram: “And here is another of Lugunica’s Six Great Cities. A city in the eastern part of Lugunica, it’s point of interest is, just as its name suggests…”

Rem: “Yes, it’s a city with many ground dragons. Originally, ground dragons largely did not inhabit the wilds in other countries… It seems that it’s due to exports from Flanders that they spread explosively throughout the world.”

Ram: “Kararagi had their ‘Rygar’ Great Dogs, Vollachia had their ‘Faro’ Red Bulls, and Gusteko had their ‘Mafmaf’ Silver Bears, but it seems that ground dragons, being suited to any land, are prized in all countries.”

Rem: “No matter how you look at it, the highlight of Flanders is how the people coexist with the ground dragons. All throughout the town there are mechanisms that are powered by ground dragons; even outside the ground dragon industry, ground dragons fill valuable roles, and so on…”

Ram: “Even simply going on a long ride together with Rem, though the Haikrala Plateau that’s well-known for its scenery, seems like it would be delightful.”

Rem: “Yes, Rem, too, is looking forward to going on a long ride with nee-sama… Speaking of that, the time that Rem rode on a ground dragon together with Subaru was fun as well.”

Ram: “…Indeed.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun was surprised at first by the height and speed of ground dragons, but when he got used to it, he was excited right away… The way Subaru-kun gets ahead of himself is cute… Ah, nee-sama, what’s the matter?”

Ram: “Due to a matter of personal convenience, Flanders is out, then. Let’s move on to the next one.”

Rem: “Ah, yes, understood. Next time for certain, nee-sama will be enchanted!”

Lugunica Travel Plan (4)

“Picktat, City of Commerce”

Rem: “Rem’s apologies that it’s lacking in unexpectedness. The next candidate is…”

Ram: “The City of Commerce, ‘Picktat’, one of Lugunica’s Six Great Cities, then.”

Rem: “…! Nee-sama, how were you able to tell what Rem’s next thought was?”

Ram: “Silly. Something like this is easy. When it concerns Rem, the only thing Ram doesn’t understand is your taste in men.”

Rem: “Very impressive, nee-sama. And just as you’ve said, what Rem wanted to suggest next is Picktat. A city adjacent to the Vollachia Empire to the south, it’s the most thriving commercial center in the Kingdom of Lugunica.”

Ram: “Lugunica doesn’t have very good relations with Vollachia, but fortunately, thanks to the pact with the Divine Dragon, there are sufficient connections to allow for trade.”

Rem: “The ‘Dance of Silver Flowers’… Just like the “Sword Demon’s Love Song”, it’s one of the places that became a stage for the Sword Demon’s love story. Rem would certainly love to make a pilgrimage there.”

Ram: “A p… ‘pilgrimage’… What does that mean?”

Rem: “Oh, it’s something that Subaru-kun taught Rem. After learning about people and places through the songs of minstrels, and places one has learned of through reading legends, a ‘pilgrimage’ refers to when one travels around the actual locations, it seems.”

Ram: “Somehow, it seems like the term holy land has been cheapened.”

Rem: “But Rem is very interested… Going to place flowers at the famed stone bridge where the Sword Demon crossed blades with ‘Eight Arms’, or the spire where the black dragon appeared…”

Ram: “Here Ram was thinking that it would be more of a cute wish like wanting to go shopping, but that rascal Barusu has been giving strange ideas to Rem…”

Rem: “On that note, nee-sama, there are other stories about Picktat…”

Lugunica Travel Plan (5)

“A tour of famous locations”

Rem: “Rem’s apologies, nee-sama… she forgot herself in the excitement.”

Ram: “It’s alright. Please cause some trouble for your big sister now and then, like a little sister should.”

Rem: “Nee-sama, you’re so kind… but it’s all been suggestions from Rem from the start, and not very good ones at that. Nee-sama, isn’t there somewhere that you would like to go?”

Ram: “A place Ram would like to go… Mhmm. Now that you mention it, the tree so vast that it pierces the clouds, ‘Flugel’s Great Tree’ was something to see.”

Rem: “Ne, nee-sama, Flugel’s Great Tree was, um…”

Ram: “Barusu snapped it, didn’t he. Honestly… well in that case, how about the Gina mountain range, that legends say is where the ‘Divine Dragon’ Volcanica dwells?

Rem: “That would be wonderful. But… that place is a mining center for mana stones, so it’s impossible to enter without permission from the kingdom.”

Ram: “Ah, that’s right. It had completely slipped Ram’s mind. Next would be the Pleiades Observation Tower where the ‘sage’ lives, the Augria Sand Dunes…”

Rem: “Even the current ‘Sword Saint’ returned empty-handed, and that’s rumored to be a nest of witchbeasts.”

Ram: “It might be fun to go beyond those dunes and sprinkle some sand on the witch’s shrine, then.”

Rem: “…Nee-sama, would it be a mistake to guess that you’re joking?”

Ram: “Oh my, you noticed? You’re so cute when you’re enthused, Rem. Besides, even without bothering with a trip, Ram is sufficiently satisfied.”

Rem: “Nee-sama…”

Ram: “After all, everything that’s important to Ram is here in this place.”

Rem: “Nee-sama… Yes, Rem feels exactly the same way!”

Ram: “Also, going on an outing is tiring. The mansion really is the best.”

Rem: “Honestly, nee-sama… That part of you that’s a homebody is wonderful.”

Hectic Birthday Celebration Preparations (1)

Roasting a Hundred-Faced Bird

Subaru: “So with that, for Ram and Rem’s birthday party, we’re going to do our best to come up with a meal that will knock their socks off.”

Emilia: “Mhmm, I think that’s a rea~lly good idea. The two of them are always taking care of me, too, after all, and I haven’t been able to do anything for them. So we have to come up with some luxurious food that will delight them.”

Subaru: “That’s the spirit, that’s the spirit! So, what kinds of recipes do you know, Emilia-tan? Personally, I’m really curious about it!”

Emilia: “Leave it to me. I’ve got one that’s just right for celebrating… and it’s called ‘Hundred-Faced Bird Roast’!”

Subaru: “Just the sound of it makes it seem like a feast of impressive scale has jumped onto the stage, doesn’t it?! Not a seven-faced bird, but a hundred-faced bird?! Isn’t that too greedy?!” (note: ‘seven-faced bird’ would usually be translated as ‘turkey’)

Emilia: “Seven-faced bird? I’m sorry, I don’t really understand what you’re saying.”

Subaru: “Ah, well, let’s just accept that as a culture gap. So, what kind of meal is roasted hundred-faced bird… There’s not much room for the imagination!”

Emilia: “Hm, that’s not true at all. This is a rea~lly difficult meal to prepare. If you underestimate it, Subaru, even you could wind up in real trouble.”

Subaru: “O~h, really? Now I’m a little unsure if I should believe you or not… what’s it made of?”

Emilia: “The ingredients are a hundred-faced bird, garnic and solte, and then flower nectar!”

Subaru: “Ah, when you put it like that, it sounds like it’s actually a reasonable meal… Hmm, Emilia-tan? Why have you changed into an outfit that it’s easy to move around in?”

Emilia: “Hm? Well I have to go catch a hundred-faced bird first, don’t I? Leave it to me, I’ll be back by supper!”

Subaru: “Wha, Emilia-tan?! Emilia-ta~n! Oh, this is no good!”

Hectic Birthday Celebration Preparations (2)

Fluffyfluffy

Subaru: “Since Emilia’s up and run off, I can’t deny that it feels like our plan is already on the verge of running aground, but I’m not the kind of guy to give up at a time like this. Our next guest is this well-known person here!”

Beako: “Who on earth are you explaining to, I suppose? More importantly, why does Betty have to play along with this farce, you know?”

Subaru: “Don’t say things like that, Beako. Ram and Rem are always taking care of you, too, right? Honestly, with things going like this, I was thinking I’d picked the completely wrong person on this when I called you, but let’s just accept that and work together.”

Beako: “With the way you’ve been talking, there’s no way that things would go like that, I suppose! …Regardless, I understand what you are thinking, you know. Let’s get this over with quickly, so Betty can get back to spending dreamy time with Bubby, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Ah, ah, we can’t be thinking of ourselves at a time like this. Anyways, please help me out here, Beako. What kind of recipes do you know?”

Beako: “Right to the point then, I know how to make sweet, enchanting fruits, and fluffy frozen dessert, you know.”

Subaru: “Right after the hundred-faced bird, it’s already time for dessert?!”

Beako: “Even if there’s no bread, as long as I can eat sweets, I’ll be satisfied, I suppose.”

Subaru: “It’s kinda amazing ‘cause given your hairstyle, it doesn’t even sound odd when you say that. Umm, how do you make it and what’s the ingredients…”

Beako: “You gather the fruit you like, and the frozen dessert, you know. Then you throw them into the same bowl, boom! And then it’s ready, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I guess so!”

Beako: “O~h, it’s so sweet and chilly, I just can’t stand it, you know. I’d like to share some with Bubby too, I suppose…”

Subaru: “And you’re gonna go and eat it all up right here, too?!”

Hectic Birthday Celebration Preparations (3)

Nostalgic Meat Pie

Subaru: “I can’t believe this; there’s been so little progress with the situation it’s almost impressive. Emilia’s in the forest, Beako’s in the Forbidden Library, with things like this, what can I…”

Roswaal: “It see~ms you’re troubled, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Roswaal! Am I glad to see you… am I glad to see you? I’m deeply concerned, but right now, I’m kinda worried about what to do for the meal for Ram and Rem’s birthday celebration.”

Roswaal: “I see, I see, I understand the situa~tion. In other words, you’re seeking recipes for a meal to make for the two of the~m?”

Subaru: “Yeah! That’s where we are. So, Ros-chi, you got any ideas?”

Roswaal: “Leave it to me~. Passed down through the generations in our family, our special dish for celebrations is known as ‘Hundred-Faced Bird Roast’…”

Subaru: “And we’re already into repeats! Also, we already covered Fluffyfluffy made from fruit and frozen dessert, so you don’t have to bring that up, either!”

Roswaal: “Oh dear, how sad… In that case, perhaps there is something we could try. Ho~w does a meat pie sound?”

Subaru: “Sounds great! I’m shocked to suddenly hear something so normal, but it’s great!”

Roswaal: “You make it by putting minced meat and chopped anions into the pie dough, and adding mushrooms and tometo sauce will make the flavor stand out, wo~n’t it?”

Subaru: “And it’s really done so properly I’m amazed! Do you cook or something?”

Roswaal: “So~metimes. This is something that, a long time ago, a girl who took care of me a little while used to make o~ften. Such a nostalgic flavor. Do your best to make it deli~cious.”

Subaru: “For sure! You really are seriously useful now and then, aren’t ya! With things going like this, make sure you look forward to the main event!”

Roswaal: “I am indeed. …As much as if it was a competition for top spot in this mansion.”

Hectic Birthday Celebration Preparations (4)

Nee-sama’s Steamed Yams are the Best in the World

Subaru: “So, we’ve been dealing with this and that… It sorta feels like it’s going to turn out to be something with no sense of unity…”

Rem: “At times like that, please leave it to Rem, Subaru-kun!”

Subaru: “Rem! Ah, I really appreciate the thought, but this is something that you and Ram can’t be part of…”

Ram: “You intend to make Rem an outcast? It seems that you do not value your life.”

Subaru: “You’re saying that while you know exactly what I meant, aren’t you?! It’s a birthday party for you two, so you can’t help out with it! Comprende?!”

Rem: “‘Comprende’…? Never mind, setting that aside, you are underestimating Rem too much, Subaru-kun. Rem understands her role and is carrying it out as she should.”

Ram: “Therefore, helping with the cooking is out. Instead, Ram and Rem will teach you a recipe.”

Subaru: “Seriously?! That’s… just barely on the safe side! Great, what’s the recipe?”

Rem: “Yes! Right to the point, it’s nee-sama’s best-in-the-world steamed yams!”

Subaru: “I thought so! The method would be… put solte and yams into a pot, take it to a light boil, and when the skins start to come off, you’re good. It’s quite simple!”

Ram: “It’s not as simple as it sounds, you know. Go ahead and give it a try.”

Subaru: “Sure, I’ll give it a shot! Watch this, watch this…”

Ram: “…Ah.”

Subaru: “Would you quit making me feel like I’m doing it wrong?!

Rem: “Uh… Th, that’s not right… For this, Subaru-kun, you at least must do your best, Subaru-kun, or it was all for nothing… Uuh!”

Subaru: “It’s that bad even for you, Rem?! Darn it, just watch me until it’s time for the real thing! I’ll get better at it for real, just wait and see… see… see.. (fading into the distance)”

Ram: “Good grief, what a noisy man.”

Rem: “But, since that, too, is something he’s doing for nee-sama and Rem, Subaru-kun is wonderful.”

Ram: “Your smile is the best feast Ram could hope for, Rem.”

“A Greeting from Ram and Rem”

Rem: “Once again, everyone, thank you sincerely for coming to the store for nee-sama and Rem’s birthday event.”

Rem: “Speaking honestly, Rem is actually still a bit bewildered. She isn’t very fond of the thought of her own birthday, you see. It’s only natural to celebrate nee-sama’s birthday, but due to being twins, when Rem tries to let her own birthday pass unnoticed, nee-sama looks very lonely, so…”

Ram: “Oh, Rem, you really are such a troublesome girl.”

Rem: “Nee-sama…”

Ram: “There’s no need to take it so seriously. Ram is fine simply having you together with her at her side, and seeing that you are well. That alone is blessing enough.”

Rem: “…Yes, Rem feels the same. More than before, she’s now able to look at things just a bit more optimistically.”

Ram: “Is that thanks to Barusu as well?”

Rem: “Yes! That’s right! It’s thanks to Subaru-kun and nee-sama!”

Ram: “Ha! How annoying.”

Rem: “Nee-sama?”

Ram: “It’s nothing. However, in truth, it seems that Barusu was involved in the plan for this birthday event as well, and Ram wonders if a dose of Barusu isn’t mixed into the exhibition in this gorgeous event venue.”

Rem: “A dose of Subaru-kun… Somehow, Rem’s heart is starting to beat faster.”

Ram: “Rem.”

Rem: “Ah, Rem’s apologies, nee-sama. But, that’s true. Subaru-kun came up with so many different kinds of ideas… Rem, too, helped out with these decorations, and did all sorts of things to help with the preparations.”

Ram: “Is that so. …Is that so? Even though it’s Ram and Rem’s birthday celebration?”

Rem: “Yes. Subaru-kun was very cute when he was working so hard, and Rem thought it would be faster and cleaner, and turn out better if she did it herself, so she couldn’t help it…”

Ram: “…Is that so.”

Rem: “Ah, but Rem made sure it was all done very casually so Subaru-kun wouldn’t find out. Actually, Rem helped out with the cake and merchandise as well. Oh, and then, and then…”

Ram: “With the way things are going, it’s difficult to say how much of Barusu’s hard work was put to use.”

Rem: “Oh, and also! Please listen to this, nee-sama! The truth is, Subaru-kun…”

Ram: “Well anyways, Rem is cute when she’s like this, so Ram is satisfied.”

Rem: “So then, if you can believe it, Subaru-kun… Nee-sama, are you listening?”

Ram: “Yes, yes.”

END

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: A Happy Bad Dream

1

“—Nee-sama, what might be the matter?”

With those few words directed at her, Rem’s mind was visited with severe shock and blankness.

“Umm…?”

Placing a hand on her own cheek, Rem tilted her head while scrunching her eyebrows together in confusion.

Hadn’t there been something odd about that? She inquired to herself about it.

There shouldn’t be anything unusual about that. Just as normal, she had woken up, enjoyed looking at Subaru’s sleeping face in his room, and then made her way to her sister Ram’s room.

And then, she shook Ram by the shoulder (her sister was just a bit of a sleepyhead) to wake her, and was trying to help her get changed; that was when the afore-mentioned call to her had come…

“…nee-sama?”

“…”

In front of her, Ram narrowed her pale red eyes, and was staring at Rem skeptically. With her smooth hair, strong-willed eyes, and supple limbs, simply having her beside you was enough to draw out a sigh of admiration.

This was her twin sister. Though the molding of her facial features shouldn’t have been that different from Rem’s, that what was hidden inside it could alter the nature of its radiance this much, Rem could feel nothing but admiration.

Such an amazingly lovely and wonderful being was Ram, her… younger sister?

“…ah.”

“Something really is odd after all. Are you feeling unwell, nee-sama?”

“…No, it’s not like that.”

As her younger sister suddenly reached out a hand and touched her cheek, looking concerned, Rem shook her head.

Once she had arrived at the proper conclusion that this was her younger sister, the sense of strangeness in her chest faded quickly away. It was odd that it had occurred to begin with, of course.

“Perhaps Rem was a bit sleepy as well. It’s fine now, Rem is awake.”

“Is that so… then that’s fine, but you always work too hard, nee-sama, so Ram worries about that. If it really does get to be too much, you should just leave all of the work to Barusu. Ram will sleep by your side, too.”

“That’s a very tempting suggestion, but… let’s put it aside for now.”

Smiling at her concerned younger sister’s words, Rem confidently asserted that she was fine.

Taking it easy together with cute little Ram. It sounded very tempting, but if Rem were to slack off, it meant that much more of a burden on Subaru. And besides, she didn’t want to look bad in front of Ram.

“After all, Rem is cute little Ram’s nee-sama, after all.”

“Just as expected, nee-sama. You’re outstanding.”

“Indeed. So, let’s get you changed, Ram. Now then, please raise your arms.”

“It can’t be helped, then. But please comb my hair as well, nee-sama.”

Nodding obediently to Rem’s words, Ram raised both hands and entrusted herself to Rem. Softening her expression at Ram’s pampered attitude, Rem nodded cheerfully and replied “Alright.”.

2

“He~y, nee-sama. We didn’t need to clean the storage room out today, did we?”

“…”

“Huh? Nee-sama? C’mon, nee-sama! Wait, am I being ignored here?!”

“…Ah, were you speaking to Rem?”

Shrugging his shoulders with a ‘Hey, hey’ at Rem’s response, was a black-haired boy, Subaru, wearing a butler uniform. He narrowed his sharp eyes in concern.

“When you ask if I was speaking to Rem, there isn’t anyone else in this mansion that’s a nee-sama, is there? Or wait, does Emilia-tan actually have a younger sister or something? If she does, that would explain her overflowing gentle aura…”

“No, Rem doesn’t think that’s the case. Rem’s apologies. She was daydreaming.”

“…Are you really alright?”

As he hugged his mop, and sent his thoughts far away to Emilia, Subaru asked that of her. The way he would, now and then, show what was going on behind his normal, shallow facade was unfair, Rem thought.

When he looked intently at her like that with that gallant gaze…

“You’re making Rem blush… You’re a shameless person after all, Subaru-kun.”

"Hmm, I don't recall ever having committed a sin like that. Well anyways, if you don't seem to be feeling well, just speak up. Even I could shoulder some of your burden, nee-sama…"

"Some of Rem's work, you say?"

"Even if shouldering some of your burden is too difficult and harsh for me, I'll take on at least a teeny bit of it."

Indicating the vast Roswaal estate with his hand, Subaru's statement was too small to be thought of as a grand boast. In response to Subaru's honest declaration, Rem suppressed a cheerful laugh.

As she did, Subaru let out an 'oh' as his expression softened.

"That smile is worth a million night skies."

"Disgusting."

"Woa~~~~~~h?!"

After he'd snapped his fingers and winked, Subaru jumped in shock at the quiet voice. As he continued his retreat until his back was against the wall of the room, Ram sniffed with a 'Ha!'.

Holding her cleaning equipment in one hand, Ram had returned to where Rem and Subaru were. She moved to stand beside Rem.

"Barusu, please refrain from directing your beastly lusts towards nee-sama. It would seem to be more appropriate for you to direct such vile emotions towards Emilia-sama. Know your place."

"That's a totally inappropriate thing to say too, isn't it?! Seriously, don't be lumping my pure emotions together with beastly or vile stuff or that kind of thing! And the thing I was saying to nee-sama, too, had the nuance of meaning that her smile was cute and stuff…"

"Disgusting."

"Listen to what I'm saying!"

Uninterested in listening to Subaru howl, Ram took Rem's arm and rested against her. While feeling the weight of Ram leaning on her, Rem turned her gaze towards the side of Ram's face, and inquired "What's the matter?".

"You're such a cuddlebug. Go on, you can tell your nee-sama anything."

"It's nothing that important… It's just, Ram has grown tired of working at cleaning windows when she can't see it making any difference."

"Oh my…!"

"It really is nothing important, isn't it?!"

Rem's eyes went round, and on the opposite side of the room, Subaru stamped his foot and yelled.

"Ya gotta do it right, even if ya don't wanna! Even boring work is necessary! That's what work is! It's our job! It's an 'It's my life' kinda thing! Get it?!"

"Subaru-kun, please don't get so angry. See, take a look here at Ram's hands."

"Ram's hands…?"

"These white fingertips have darkened this much."

"That's 'cause she's cleaning! When ya touch the window frame, that kinda thing happens! Don't pamper her!"

"*cough cough*"

"What's that coughing about?! Some chronic condition?! It's just chronic slacking!"

Cradled in Rem's chest, Ram rested against her and coughed weakly. Seeing the smooth sisterly coordination, Subaru took a very deep breath.

“Honestly… No matter how cute your little sister is, ya gotta be strict when it’s time to be strict, ya know?”

“You think you’re in a position to say something like that, when nee-sama pampers you so much, Barusu? What a world.”

“How can you say that when you’re being clasped to her chest as we speak?!”

Ram’s arms, currently hugging her sister, squeezed tighter. Patting the head of her pampered little sister, Rem’s expression softened every so slightly, and she looked at Subaru.

“Subaru-kun, Rem is very happy that you’re concerned about her, but she’s just fine.”

“Well, I’m sure you’d say something like that, nee-sama, but…”

“… Subaru-kun, Rem is just fine.”

“Uh? Ah, yeah. You don’t need to tell me twice…”

“Subaru-kun! Rem is! Just fine!”

“Yes! That’s correct! Rem-san is an upstanding, wonderful nee-sama, after all!”

Standing straight, with a saluting hand at his forehead, Subaru responded with a sharp voice.

Hearing that, Rem was able to let go of the vague unease in her chest. But there was still a faint speck of something she couldn’t entirely erase. The truth behind that was…

“…Nee-sama, it makes you upset when Barusu doesn’t call you by name, then?”

“Uhh…”

“Is that what it is? Why is that happening all of a sudden?”

Speaking while still held to Rem’s chest, Ram, who had always been good at figuring things out, revealed the truth of Rem's feelings. As Rem fell silent at what had been pointed out, Subaru raised his eyebrows in surprise, tilted his head, and crossed his legs.

"But I've always called nee-sama 'nee-sama', right? Why would she get hung up on that…?"

"Rem, too, thinks that something seems odd about it. It's just… ever since she woke up this morning… No, ever since she woke Ram up this morning, she's somehow felt out of sorts."

As Subaru's words expressed his bewilderment, Rem, too, had difficulty grasping the true nature of what felt wrong to her.

Even now, the strange, cloudy sensation would not cease swirling within her chest. There shouldn't be anything that was out of the ordinary. And yet there was; why?

Subaru calling her nee-sama, and Ram being a little sister who was good at being pampered, and Rem taking the initiative and working (which was only natural as a nee-sama) were all normal, so why?

"Subaru-kun, would you please try calling Ram 'nee-sama'?"

"Say what?!"

"Rem is sorry. She's all jumbled up inside, too. What a silly thing to say…"

She'd suggested that feeling that somehow it would make everything clear, but thinking about it calmly, what a foolish thing it was to request that.

And, as Rem was keenly regretting her silly idea…

"…Fine."

"Ram?"

Suddenly, Ram, who was still clasped to Rem's chest, raised her head, and gently moved back from her sister. Then, heading towards the back of the room, she turned back towards Rem and

Subaru, and spread her arms.

With her pale red eyes alive with understanding, Ram smiled.

“I don’t understand your intention, but Ram will take nee-sama’s feelings into account… Go on then, call me ‘nee-sama’.”

“Why are you saying something like that when your eyes look like you’ve got it figured out?”

As Ram’s posture suggested she was ready for anything, Subaru scratched his cheek and looked amazed.

But, next to him, Rem clasped her hands softly in front of her chest, and took a little breath.

“…Nee-sama.”

“…”

Ram trembled in response to the sincere greeting directed at her.

And Rem, who had blurted that out, realized that her own heart had trembled… No, it was more than that. The cloud of unease that had suffused her chest had fallen apart.

Not only that, each time that Rem spoke those magic words, the effect grew stronger.

“Nee-sama… Nee-sama, nee-sama.”

“Hey, that’s…”

“Nee-sama! Nee-sama nee-sama nee-sama, nee-sama!”

With her eyes sparkling, Rem called to Ram again and again, and ran into her arms. Ram caught Rem’s body in a powerful hug, and smiled softly.

“Oho… so that’s what it was. Something you felt not with words, but with your soul.”

“That’s right, that’s just right… Rem is just, is just…”

“You don’t need to say anything, nee-sama…no, Rem.”

“…Yes.”

With Ram’s tone of voice saying that she understood everything, Rem needed do nothing more than quietly entrust her body and heart to her. With Rem like that, Ram gently patted her back.

With this beautiful sisterly love in front of his eyes, Subaru took a little breath and…

“What the heck is going on?!”,

he cried.

3

“And that’s the dream that Rem had this morning, it seems. It’s cute, isn’t it?”

“Nee-sama, nee-sama, nee-sama…”

“Well, I can kind of tell how things went, but…”

While saying that, Subaru frowned a little with a stern look. In the direction of his gaze was Ram, seated on a bed, and Rem, hugging Ram’s waist and doting on her.

When morning came to the Roswaal manor, Subaru was concerned about the sisters who hadn’t shown up for the usual meeting time, and when he visited their rooms, he encountered the scene of the two of them hugging.

What he was told of then was the story of Rem’s ‘nightmare’…

“So Rem was nee-sama, and nee-sama was the little sister, then…”

“Yes, it truly was a nightmare. But, even inside the dream, nee-sama saved Rem…”

With a smug look, Ram was gently caressing Rem’s head as she adored her.

One might want to poke fun at that, but the way Ram's hand caressed Rem's head was truly gentle, so to make fun of it would be thoughtless.

"But anyways, even with the sisters reversed, the content is pretty much unchanged, isn't it? Nee-sama became the little sister, and it just means she had even more justification to be spoiled by Rem, right…?"

"No, that isn't right! To begin with, Rem is always pampered by nee-sama every day… In the dream, that feeling was especially clear."

"You're saying you're being pampered every day, Rem…? Does this mean I'm having a nightmare?"

Doubting the reality of the world he was seeing, Subaru rubbed his eyes. Pinched his cheeks. The world didn't disappear, and his cheeks hurt. This was reality. Ram's smug face was annoying.

While still looking smug, Ram gazed intently and lovingly at Rem.

"There's no need for you to worry, Rem. No matter what happens, there will never be a world where Ram is not your nee-sama. Even when we emerged from our mother, Ram came out first for your sake."

"I'm impressed you can speak so confidently about things that happened not only before you were aware of the world, but even before your birth cries."

"It's natural, isn't it? Ram was Ram from the moment she was born, after all."

"Amazing. I can't deny that at all."

"And Rem was nee-sama's little sister from the moment she was born! Nee-sama!"

Rem clung to Ram even more strongly and tightly, and rubbed her head back and forth against her. Seeing Rem's earnestness, Subaru scratched his head, and then suddenly began to smile.

"What's this, Barusu? The end of your nose has reached all the way to the floor; disgusting."

"That'd make me a monster, wouldn't it…? Nah, I was just thinking that it's rare to see Rem acting seriously like a little sister and being pampered like that, and maybe a morning like this isn't so bad every now and then."

"…Indeed."

It was a rare thing for Ram to simply agree with Subaru's words. Taking that into account as well, Subaru felt that having a day like this now and then really wasn't bad.

"Perhaps for Rem, it's the morning when she saw a bad dream, but for Ram, it turned out to be a good morning."

"For Rem, too, it's a morning where she truly felt how much nee-sama means to her."

"Yes, yes, all this sisterly love has been a treat. Well then, I'm gonna get started on this morning's jobs. Take your time, and once Rem's had enough pampering, come join up with me."

Waving his hand, Subaru began to turn away and leave Ram and Rem behind.

"Subaru-kun."

As he did, Rem's voice landed on his back. Halting his stride, he turned only his head back towards her. His gaze fell on Rem, still resting her head on Ram's chest, smiling.

"Subaru-kun, too, please call Rem by her name more than usual today. Rem felt down to her bones, not only the importance of nee-sama, but also of having Subaru-kun call her name, after all!"

"Gotcha, I'll keep it in mind… Take it easy, Rem."

"Yes!"

As Rem replied with a smile that could only be called lively, Subaru left the room for real this time. And while he scratched his head, his expression softened.

For her to want him to call her by name as many times as he could, it was… yes, what a very cute request that was.

END

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~An Oni's Role~

1

"To tell the truth, Nee-sama, there is a matter of some importance."

When her beloved little sister arrived and said that with a serious look, Ram narrowed her pale red eyes.

The time was evening, and the place was Ram's personal room in the Roswaal manor. She had already finished her work as a maid for the day, and had bathed as well, and was about to take on one last task before sleeping.

Ram entrusted the bulk of the mansion's maid work to Rem, but secretly, she was assisting Roswaal with his tasks as he carried out his role as a margrave. While her master usually seemed to be aloof and rarely looked busy, his responsibilities included a wide variety of tasks, and his workload was far beyond normal.

As well, due to there being more than a few jobs that certainly could not be called cheerful, Ram deliberately avoided letting Rem see what she was doing as she assisted Roswaal.

"Understood. Ram will just tidy her room a bit, if you'll wait for a moment?"

"Yes, Rem will wait."

Hence, as part of allowing Rem into her room, she needed to begin by stashing the offending documents in a clothing rack. Shoving the roll of documents into the rack with a pop, she closed the door tightly. Then, so that the door could not accidentally open again, she used her wand in place of a latch. Now, there would be no problem.

"Rem, sorry to keep you waiting. Please come in. Now, what's the matter?"

“Yes. …Well, it’s about Subaru-kun.”

“…Of course.”

After she invited Rem into the newly-tidied room, Rem (wearing a light blue nightgown) responded to her question. Understanding the content of the matter she wanted to discuss, Ram (who had more or less guessed at it) nodded with a difficult feeling.

Lately, half of Rem’s life had been entirely concerned with the black-haired boy in question. Where previously Rem’s thoughts had been entirely focused on Ram, it felt like the boy had run away with half of them. To Ram, who had felt worried over Rem until only a short time ago, this was both something that she felt she should welcome, as well as something she might also be a bit envious over.

In short, as someone who doted on her little sister, to be thought of by her less often wasn’t fun.

“But Ram wouldn’t want you to hate her for saying it, so she won’t say that.”

“Nee-sama?”

“It’s nothing. So then, what’s the matter with Barusu? If you’re too sweet to him, he’ll take advantage of your generosity and become arrogant, so I think you need to hang him out to dry now and then, too.”

“No, if anything, Rem would like Subaru-kun to depend on her even more, and hanging him out to dry would just be cruel, but… there is that.”

“There is that?”

Ram tilted her head as she didn’t quite follow the meaning of Rem’s words.

As she did so, Rem said “Yes” as she nodded deeply, and gently took Ram’s hand, sitting next to her on the bed. Then, with her pale blue eyes moist, she continued.

“Nee-sama, have you ever heard of a game called ‘pretend oni’?”, she asked. (translation note: the Japanese term here would usually be translated ‘tag’, but the more literal ‘pretend oni’ may make more sense in this story.)

2

According to what Rem said, it was this sort of thing.

After lunch today, Subaru and Rem had set out to do some shopping in the nearby Arlam village. There, as usual, Subaru had lost track of time while playing with the village children, and skipped out on his work. It seems that he’d promised to play with the children. And the name of what he’d promised to play was…

“So it was ‘pretend oni, then.”

“Yes. It seems there are variations such as ‘frozen oni’ or ‘high oni’, and ‘color oni’ as well, and Subaru-kun was inviting Rem to play along too, but…”

“You couldn’t imagine what sort of game it was. With the example of what happened at the Snow Festival, this must have been a custom of Barusu’s backwards hometown. Honestly, how bothersome.”

While comforting Rem (who was drooping dejectedly), Ram inwardly cursed Subaru’s thoughtlessness.

Since it was Subaru, most likely there was no ill will behind it, and he was simply lacking in consideration for others. It was a result brought about by his unfounded sense of trust that everyone was familiar with everything that he was.

How much worry that would cause for gentle Rem was surely something he did not imagine.

“How infuriating. …But wouldn’t it have been good enough to simply go ahead and ask him directly?”

“That is true, but… Subaru-kun looked like he was enjoying himself greatly, so Rem hesitated to spoil his mood… Also…”

“Also?”

“Rem didn’t want Subaru-kun to think she is an ignorant girl… is that strange, perhaps?”

“No no, it’s just very cute. Also, Barusu is loathsome.”

The way Rem held herself so bravely was so adorable, Ram almost gobbled her up without thinking. It was an impulse that had attacked her now and then since she was little, and this time, too, she just barely managed to endure it.

Setting that aside,

“Even so, ‘pretend oni’, is it… What a deeply meaningful name this must be.”

“From the way that Subaru-kun was talking about it, Rem would guess it’s a game that uses the body. Do you know what kind of game it could be, nee-sama?”

“Sadly, Ram does not know of this game, either. However, if it’s something that children and even Barusu can play at, then the content of it can’t be all that complex. Let’s see…”

Tapping a thin finger on her chin, Ram turned her imagination around the unseen game of ‘pretend oni’.

It was a terribly simple name, but it’s meaning could be derived from ‘pretend’ and ‘oni’. Regardless of what ‘oni’ implied, ‘pretend’ should mean some sort of behavior or imitation.

“In other words, one should think of it as a game where one acts like an oni, or in some way imitates an oni.”

“That, that’s definitely true. When presented with an unknown phrase, Rem entirely failed to try and imagine what it might mean. Very impressive, nee-sama.”

“Don’t fret about it. No matter what, there’s a way to break through it. Well then… from here, what becomes most important is what oni they’re trying to imitate.”

“Rem sees! Well done, nee-sama, such keen insight!”

With her eyes sparkling, Rem cheered as she began to see the breakthrough.

Since Ram was the sort of older sister that would feel empowered by Rem gazing at her like that, and she could be thought of as a symbol of love for younger sisters, to put it plainly, she started getting full of herself.

In truth, she felt like she had a good lead in inferring the meaning of ‘pretend oni’ from its name. Naturally, there would be nothing to the sort of game that Barusu could think up. There could be no doubt that it would be as simple and obvious as it could possibly be.

“And so, the oni in question… He went to the trouble of bringing up such a topic as ‘pretend oni’ deliberately while speaking to Rem, after all. Certainly, he did so with some sort of intention.”

“Some sort of intention, is it? Subaru-kun’s deep thoughts are surely something that Rem could never imagine… Can you grasp them, nee-sama?”

“Hmm, well, just as an example… to you, Rem, what is an oni, perhaps?”

“It’s you, nee-sama!”

Raising her hand in a flash, Rem answered with a smile that reached every corner of her face. In response to that answer, Ram felt a sense of warmth, along with a bit of amusement, as she softened her expression.

“Correct. But it should mean you as well, Rem.”

“Oh… that’s right. However, we were speaking about what it means to Rem, so without thinking…”

Observing her younger sister as she looked down with an air of embarrassment, Ram could see that there was nothing forced in her expression, and a short sigh escaped her.

…Being a member of the oni race, the problem of whether one had horns or not was inescapable.

Even while understanding that, Ram had dared to push forward into that, wrapped in an air of unconcern. However, Rem's reply to her had been natural, and Ram carried a sense of relief over that fact.

"To Rem, speaking of an oni couldn't mean anyone other than nee-sama. So naturally, the oni being imitated in 'pretend oni', too, could only be nee-sama…"

With her chest held proudly, and speaking of her feeling of respect towards Ram, Rem's face carried a look of surprise. Bringing a hand to her own mouth, she whispered "Could it be…"

"Nee-sama, could it be that 'pretend oni' is…"

"Yes, that's right. Everyone will have a different 'oni' that they picture in their mind. In short, an imitation of what that person thinks of as an 'oni'. That's the essence of 'pretend oni'.

"That means that, to Rem, 'pretend oni' is imitating nee-sama…!"

"…"

Rem was stunned by the conclusion she had arrived at, and beside her, Ram was similarly shocked.

With a straightforward name like 'pretend oni', how could it require such ingenuity to understand the implications. Someone who didn't have an 'oni' in their vicinity would even be required to use their imagination to make up the difference.

Setting Subaru aside for the moment, it was difficult to think that the village children would have an 'oni' nearby, and there was no reason to think they were aware of Ram and Rem's nature, so they would need to be filling that in with their imagination.

"For Rem to do something like imitating nee-sama… she couldn't dream of it. It seems this was too heavy a burden for Rem. She should return to Subaru and quietly apologize…"

“No, wait, Rem. Regardless of anything else, that would be getting ahead of ourselves.”

“But, still…”

Ram was very glad for the high regard that Rem held her in. But taking that too far was also the true form of a curse that had tied Rem down for a long time.

“…”

Thinking of it that way, Subaru’s intention in inviting Rem to join in ‘pretend oni’ became clear bit by bit. There was no ill will, so she had thought at first, but this was outrageous.

Even if there was no ill intent, there was a plan. …Those were the wiles of Natsuki Subaru.

“He’s endlessly clever. No doubt the bottom of his heart is pitch black.”

Ram thought of it as a dangerous thing to test, much like walking on thin ice, but in truth, for all that she could tell from looking at Rem, it was clear that her fears were needless. Aiming for that kind of change in her feelings was skillful; that was the sort of evaluation that didn’t match up with the way he normally spoke and acted. Such a mismatched boy he was.

Regardless, discarding Subaru for the moment, she focused on Rem, who was right in front of her eyes.

“Ram hates to say it, but the change in you came after what happened between you and Barusu, Rem. You were cute from the very beginning, but you’ve softened. You could say he broke you out of your shell.”

“Nee-sama… Your thoughts on Rem are too kind.”

“Hence, that sort of Rem could do it. …A ‘pretend oni’ of Ram.”

“…!”

On the receiving end of Ram’s powerful declaration, Rem’s eyes opened wide.

However, her hesitation and uncertainty lasted only a moment. Rem closed her eyes as though digesting those words, and then made up her mind and opened them again.

“Nee-sama… Rem, too, thinks that she would like to try it.”

“That, indeed, is worthy of Ram’s little sister. It will be fine, don’t worry. You’ve been watching Ram for a long time, haven’t you, Rem? With that, a sense of what Ram is should have worked its way into you.”

“Yes!”

With her heart soaring, Rem nodded deeply in response to that affirmation. Gazing happily at her little sister’s powerful form, Ram moistened her lips and continued “Well then,”.

“Assuming that’s enough about simple ‘pretend oni’… you were saying there were variations?”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. ‘Frozen oni’ and ‘high oni’. There was something called ‘color oni’ as well…”

“It’s just a guess, but in this case, ‘oni’ is probably just ‘pretend oni’ shortened down. In other words, one might think that ‘frozen oni’ refers to ‘pretend frozen oni’.

“‘Pretend frozen oni’…! Amazing! The puzzles, they’re all coming unravelled!”

“Continuing like this, it would become ‘pretend high oni’ and ‘pretend color oni’, then.”

While listening to Rem’s praise, Ram closed one eye as she unravelled the puzzles one after another. She was fairly sure that she was grasping the terms correctly, but now the problem became understanding the different variations of ‘pretend oni’…

“Rem, what would ‘frozen oni’ be?”

“Something to do with ice, perhaps? If so, something that makes a very chilly impression…”

“If so, hmm. In other words, it’s ‘pretend cold oni’, then.”

“You are always warm like the rays of the sun, nee-sama!”

When Rem protested after arriving at the answer in a single leap of logic, Ram drew her agitated sister to her chest and patted her head while she sent her thoughts searching for the remaining two answers.

“‘Pretend high oni’ and ‘pretend color oni’… If high isn’t referring to monetary value, then surely it means pride. As for color…”

“As for color?”

“Filthy.”

“…?”

An unpleasant image passed through her mind, but the way Rem tilted her head showed that she was too innocent to grasp what Ram had thought.

“No, never mind. Forget about ‘color oni’. Start with ‘pretend oni’. As well, mastering ‘cold oni’ and ‘high oni’ takes priority. …Rem, can you keep up with me?”

“Ne, nee-sama… Oh but nee-sama, Rem couldn’t take up any more of your time.”

“Silly.”

The moment the situation showed signs of improving, Rem was once again aware of her surroundings. Perhaps due to at last thinking it wouldn’t do to be dropping in on her older sister just as she was about to sleep, Rem’s shoulder’s drooped, and Ram couldn’t help but smile at her.

Her words a few moments earlier, that Rem had changed, were no lie. However, just the same as before, the cuteness of how she would depend on her older sister, and come to softly grasp her clothing by the sleeve, was not lost.

So, feeling that her little sister was adorable, Ram patted her on the head.

“Trouble Ram as often as you can. Ram is Rem’s nee-sama, after all.”

As she said that, she smiled.

3

And, after that night of sisterly closeness had passed, the next day…

“Wha, wha, what happened, Rem?!”

Subaru stood with an astonished expression plastered on his face, his jaw dangling, and his eyes opened wide.

In front of Subaru as he gave that exaggerated reaction were Ram and Rem, who had gathered for the morning’s servant work. Subaru’s surprise was a result of hearing Rem’s first words.

Those first words were…

“Why are you speaking so loudly first thing in the morning? Think about the trouble you are causing for others, Barusu-kun.”

“Barusu-kun?! The way that sounds is way too unfamiliar! What on earth happened to you?”

Subaru could only wring his hands in confusion. Standing in front of him as he did so was Rem, with her hair parted on the opposite of the usual side, looking cross with an icy expression on her face.

With the sisters working together, this was the product of Ram and Rem’s efforts over an entire evening. Truly, this was a form that represented the completion of Rem’s ideal ‘pretend oni’.

“Rem is a hard worker, after all. Rejoice, Barusu.”

“Yes, rejoice, Barusu-kun.”

“How’m I supposed to rejoice about this?! Wha… what could Rem have been working hard at to make things end up like this? This has gotta be some kind of prank by nee-sama, right? Two nee-samas would be a nightmare for me… hey, ow ow ow!”

As Subaru continued running his mouth, the sisters pulled his ears from the left and right at the same time. Normally he’d get away with only Ram doing that, but this time Rem joined in disciplining him without a moment’s delay.

“I, I don’t get what’s going on…! Rem, what kind of bad influence was nee-sama being?!”

“Ha! To call it an evil influence is an outrageous misunderstanding. Rem is always receiving nothing but fresh, rare love from nee-sama. This is a perfect ‘pretend oni’ that embodies that.”

“Nah, when you say it embodies it, where are you seeing love in this kind of behaviour… huh? Pretend oni?”

In the middle of his sentence, a look of having realized something appeared on Subaru’s face.

While the ear-pulling discipline continued, Subaru mulled over something in his mind. Seeing him look like that, Ram released his ear with a pop.

“Rem, the rest is up to you. Ram feels like she’s short on sleep, so make sure to work Barusu to the bone. You can do that now, right?”

“Oh yes, leave it to Rem. Nee-sama, be sure to rest well.”

As Rem saw her off with a curtsey, Ram gave a little wave with her hand and headed off. Subaru called “Hey, nee-sama!” to her back as she went.

“Let me guess, you put this weird ‘pretend oni’ stuff in Rem’s head, didn’t you?! Even though you know exactly what it means! Darn it, nee-sama! Wait, c’mon, he~y!”

Subaru’s yells echoed through the mansion, but Ram didn’t pause as she walked away.

As the shouts washed over her back, she simply smiled as though they felt comfortable, and stretched her back well.

“…Silly boy.”

It looked like she’d have a truly wonderful mood to take her through her morning nap, was the feeling she carried in her slender chest.

END

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~Nocturnal Reverie Sisters~

1

“And it’s all set…now.” She smoothed out the wrinkles on the white bedsheets and nodded after checking the quality of her work.

It’s a task that I have become accustomed to doing, but it’s never a good thing to do things without focusing. No matter what the job is, getting used to it and becoming careless with it are two sides of the same coin. A bit of slackness can give birth to a minor mistake that eventually develops into a huge error.

If you think of it that way, you can be serious about the daily chores.

Besides… “—Rem doesn’t want her bad side to be seen by Subaru.”

She gently touched her cheeks, which felt slightly hot to the touch.

This heat on my cheeks is the sign of my feelings for the person I love, for the one who makes my heart flutter.

The black-haired boy that appears when I close my eyes, always keeps Rem warm. For example, even on days like today when Rem doesn’t happen to be around him.

“Rem wonders if Subaru is fine all alone… Even though Master Roswaal and Lady Emilia are with him, it hasn’t been long since he started working.”

Her hands still on her cheeks, a feeling of restlessness got mixed in with the heat her heart was sending.

The boy who was accompanying the lord of the manor and his important guest was full of determination, but nobody would ever have a hard time if their work ability was equal to their level of determination.

If the situation was the same as always, then either I or my sister could accompany him and help him out with his work. But—

“Well, weeell, it’s something caaalled experiencing things. Occasions like this might increase for Subaru in the future. He needs to become independent someday, so you neeeed to watch over him, alright?”

Her appeal was denied by the words of her master, and that’s how things happened.

The owner of the mansion’s—Roswaal’s—profound thoughts aren’t beyond the ability to comprehend. He must have thoroughly thought about the things I’m worried about a long time ago. In fact, accompanying him on that trip isn’t much of a difficult task, I think it’s an ideal task considering it’s meant to make Subaru independent. I guess…

“But even so, Subaru…”

“—Rem, can I take up some of your time for a bit?”

“Eeek!”

She widened her eyes at the voice that suddenly came from behind, and quickly turned around. She saw a perfect being standing at the entrance to the room. She was a beauty with pink hair and pink eyes, and her brows were slightly raised at Rem’s exaggerated reaction.

“…” With the assistance of her surprise from before, she got trapped in Ram’s beautiful eyes and was left temporarily speechless.

“Rem? Did something happen?”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry, Sister. Rem was surprised and…also enchanted by Sister.”

“I see, it can’t be helped then. Since Ram is Rem’s older sister. You can admire Ram as much as you like.”

Rem thought that her response didn’t make much sense, but the person responding to her—Ram—was kind.

She relaxed her lips into a gentle smile that was full of confidence, slightly puffing out her chest. And with the same kindness, said, “Since,” and then continued, “there’s no one in the mansion apart from Ram and Rem.”

2

Rem and Ram, who worked at Roswaal Manor, were sisters, but surprisingly, they didn’t have much time to spend alone together. To be more precise, they couldn’t get much time to spend alone together. Around 10 years had passed since they started working as maids at Roswaal Manor, but they were never able to get time off, no matter how good their work got due to getting used to it.

In the end, even if Ram and Rem were skilled maids, it was not easy to manage and maintain a large mansion with only a few servants.

Moreover—

“Since Ram is useless every day, when it comes to the work in the mansion,” Ram muttered while doing one tenth of the work Rem does.

If Subaru was here, he might have criticized Ram’s unapologetic attitude. But unfortunately, since he was away, no unnecessary comments were made. Ram felt grateful that she didn’t have to shut his meddlesome mouth because of that.

“This situation without Barusu is probably easier on Ram’s mental state.”

That noisy, loud, and restless boy was an oddity that had recently moved into Roswaal Manor—and he was Roswaal’s favorite for some reason, so she couldn’t be cold with him.

And while doing that, one more reason was added to the list of why she couldn’t be cold with him.

“Sister, is Subaru fine? Rem hopes that Subaru doesn’t make a grave mistake while accompanying Master Roswaal and Lady Emilia…”

"…"

"Rem made a guidebook about countermeasures of the problems that Rem could think of and gave it to Subaru, just in case. So, Subaru will definitely be fine, I think. But it doesn't mean that Subaru won't face problems that Rem can't think of. Maybe it's better for Rem to go after…"

"Rem, calm down," Ram said, looking up quickly and stopping her younger sister, who would've run right out of the mansion without a second thought, by grabbing her shoulder.

Rem opened her eyes wide at Ram's words and the sensation of her touch and looked down in shame. "M-My apologies. Sister, that was thoughtless of Rem."

"That's right. It's good that you were able to reconsider things on your own. Since it looked like you were about to run off."

"Yes, it was outrageous. Rem should make tomorrow's breakfast and lunch for Sister and leave without any regrets, is that right?"

"—It's unfortunate, but it seems like we need to talk a bit more."

Rem was getting pumped up with a cute face, but the direction of her enthusiasm wasn't what Ram had expected. The boy that Rem couldn't stop caring about like this—Natsuki Subaru—was the first person apart from her twin sister that Rem had been shy and reserved with and had strongly cared about. Ram, as a person who doted on her younger sister, couldn't bring herself to be cold against someone who Rem held such feelings for. And thus, Ram felt like she was being too soft on Subaru because of that.

Although, a suspicious newbie is someone worthy of being bullied to death, is what Ram thinks, Ram thought.

"But anyway, Barusu is becoming somewhat useful. That's why Master Roswaal took him along on this trip… It's not that Ram doesn't have anything to say about that, but it can't be helped."

"Sister has something to say about it too… Are you worried about Subaru?"

“Ram is worried that Barusu will get carried away when they get there and embarrass Master Roswaal. Also, Barusu disturbing Lady Emilia. Apart from that is frustration at Ram’s duty being taken away.”

Originally, it was often Ram who was assigned to accompany Roswaal on his outings. Consequently, Rem would stay behind in the mansion, separating the sisters. That’s how things usually were.

But this time, that role got stolen by Subaru. It was something that made Ram, who was extremely loyal to Roswaal, really angry.

But it isn’t like there isn’t anything good about it, Ram thought. “Since Ram and Rem can spend some quality time together like this.”

“Ah, Sister…”

Ram’s fingers gently parted Rem’s bangs and touched her forehead. The ticklish feeling made Rem lower her eyebrows, her cheeks turning slightly red as she lowered her face.

There was a bed behind Rem that she had made just a moment ago.

Ram and Rem had their own private rooms, but this was the guestroom that wasn’t usually used. The guest bed was huge, large enough for them to sleep together side-by-side. So, they were preparing to spend a rather luxurious night together.

“Ram would feel lonely if it got ruined with Rem worrying about Barusu.”

“You, are right. Since Lady Emilia and Subaru told us to enjoy our time together while it’s just the two of us …”

“Yes, it is one of the few favorable things that Barusu’s existence has created.”

“Okay… Rem will also hold back her tears and become an Oni…!”

Rem squeezed her hand into a fist in front of her chest and made up her mind. And at the sight of such a lovable younger sister, Ram held back from pointing out that they were Oni's to begin with.

Anyway, what's important is that—

"We should enjoy our time together while it's just the two of us like Barusu said, even though it's frustrating to admit."

3

And so, Ram and Rem were spending the night together with just the two of them. In fact, wishing to be all alone with Ram in the mansion wasn't something she could just wish for since Roswaal Manor typically only had two servants. Rem was really grateful for Subaru's existence in that regard, too.

"Actually, it isn't just the two of us since Miss Beatrice is also here," Rem said.

"…Oh, now that you mention it. I forgot about her since he rarely shows up."

"Ha-Ha, it's not nice to say it like that, Sister."

Rem smiled gently, looking at Ram's side profile in her nightwear as they laid side-by-side in the huge bed, since Ram was trying to make her laugh by saying things she didn't mean. Beatrice, who shut herself in the forbidden library of the mansion, didn't usually come out. But she was seen often outside the forbidden library nowadays, probably due to Subaru's influence.

"A long time ago, when Rem had just started working at the mansion, Rem thought that the existence of Miss Beatrice was a lie or a joke."

"That's because she doesn't show herself. Ram doesn't blame Rem for thinking that way."

"Since when did Sister start seeing Miss Beatrice?"

"—I don't know, but I do wonder. Ram thinks it was around the same time as Rem," Ram replied, tilting her head, and looking back at Rem.

Rem couldn't determine if Ram was being honest or just being considerate towards her. But Rem felt like she was being supported and helped by her beautiful and wise older sister.

And it has been like that since my birth to every moment of my life. Until just a little while ago, I often felt guilty about it, but—

"Rem?"

"No, it's nothing, Sister. It's just that Subaru is wonderful…"

"Ram doesn't know how the conversation about Miss Beatrice came to this. Barusu… Oh, is it because Barusu is friendly with Miss Beatrice? Well, that's quite the spectacle."

The reason why she was feeling less guilty towards Ram was due to Subaru. His words had opened up a new world for Rem. And she was extremely grateful for that. Leaving that aside, she could agree with Ram about Subaru's relationship with Beatrice.

As mentioned above, Beatrice had been confined to the Forbidden Library, so much so that her existence had been shrouded in doubt. It was only fairly recently that she started showing herself to Rem and the others.

"But now she always comes to dine."

"Ram thinks that the main reason was the great spirit that Lady Emilia has with her…"

"But the one that the great spirit cares about the most is Lady Emilia."

Puck, who had a contract with Emilia, and Beatrice had known each other for a long time. The two were as close as a brother and a sister, but Puck's priorities were clear, and it seemed like Beatrice had no intention of complaining about it.

It would be far too arrogant to interfere with it as an outsider, but…

"But Barusu doesn't seem to care."

It was as Ram had mentioned: Subaru had closed the distance between him and her without any regard or consent.

—No, it wasn't only the case with Beatrice. Rem was also one of the people whose boundaries had been breached. Ram, Roswaal, and even Emilia, were also definitely included in the list.

"A lot of things keep changing," Rem said.

"Yes, that's right. Ram doesn't think that it's a bad thing… The cause of that being Barusu is the only thing Ram doesn't like…"

"Sister…"

"But then, it's not like he doesn't have any achievements, so that and Ram's frustration cancel each other out in Ram's mind."

"Sister…!" Rem, her eyes lighting up after hearing her sister's benevolent judgment, grabbed Ram's hand.

The two sisters were laying on the bed side-by-side, facing each other. They were so close that they could feel each other's breaths as they held hands, gazing at the face in front of them they had seen every day for oh so long.

"…" She narrowed her pink eyes and gazed at Rem kindly and compassionately. Ram had been looking at Rem like this ever since they were born. So much so that Rem couldn't picture any of Ram's other expressions. Rem knew that this was how Ram expressed her love and how she herself received love.

But… "Rem also wants to love Sister back."

If the way she saw the world had changed, then the way she loved her loved one could change too.

I'd like to be able to give back what was given to me rather than just getting used to the luxury of being on the receiving end, so that I can become someone I can like, Rem thought while tightly holding her sister's hand.

It was because of that vivid moment that I can think about things like this, and I can hope for tomorrow.

“—Subaru is wonderful.”

4

“…” After Rem fell fast asleep while breathing softly, Ram reached out to her sleeping face. She gently brushed her bangs away from her forehead, and the faintly ticklish expression on Rem’s face made her feel even more love for her.

That made her feel like she had even more reason to complain about what she had said before she’d fallen asleep. “You aren’t even here…”

Unspoken anger started boiling up at the man who was still occupying Rem’s heart.

She told Rem that her frustration got canceled by his achievement. But the achievement was only a one-time thing, and the frustration was something that accumulated day-by-day, so even Ram didn’t know how long this offset would last.

Anyway… “If even Ram thinks about Barusu, it’d just be doing what he wants. Disgusting.”

If Subaru was here, he would have claimed that it was a false accusation, but the only people present here were the two sisters, who were close to each other. And on top of that, the only one awake was the elder sister. Ram banished the noisy boy from her mind and lowered her eyebrows at her sister’s peaceful sleeping face.

In the past, Rem used to have restless expressions even when she was asleep. Ram, who visited her sister’s bed from time to time, was pained by her sister blaming herself. She was now at ease, however, for the tenseness in her cheeks had melted away along with the cause of her frowning.

“Tomorrow…”

When she woke up, Rem would be next to her. Or Rem, who would wake up next to Ram, would end up seeing her sleeping face instead. The thought of it made her feel all fuzzy inside, which was no exaggeration.

She thought that it was such a shame to close her eyes, but she did anyway and got ready to fall asleep.

She wished to enjoy every minute and every second of today and looked forward to every moment of tomorrow. She wondered if Rem thought the same thing, and then she suddenly realized something. “Come to think of it, Ram didn’t serve dinner to Miss Beatrice.”

Beatrice almost always showed up in the dining room lately, but today, Ram was all alone with Rem, so they didn’t sit around the table with everyone like always.

Ram should get up and prepare dinner, but…

“That would wake Rem up. Ram thinks that Miss Beatrice will forgive her.”

Ram thought that if something happened, she could just send Beatrice’s complaints Subaru’s way. Thinking that before falling asleep, she cursed the fact that she ended up thinking about him again, then dreamed about tomorrow with her dearest sister as she slowly drifted off to sleep.

END

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~Before and After Pleiades~

1

—At a time before Natsuki Subaru arrived at Roswaal Manor.

“Sister, Rem regrets to say that another letter from Garf has arrived,” Rem said caustically as she placed the letter on top of the desk.

The white stationery had both the name of the addressee and the sender, the former being Ram, the latter being the name of a young man they knew. Both names were written with an unsteady hand and barely legible.

Although the young man would never be considered a prolific writer, he frequently sent letters such as this. The content was written in an arrogant manner that showed little consideration for the reader. And to make matters worse, his letters never became any more legible with the passage of time.

As a result of which, however, their deciphering abilities had simply improved.

“What a fool,” she muttered, releasing an involuntary sigh—something that seemed to become a habit when it came to him.

However, Rem seemed to take issue with the utterance. “It seems that Garf is bothering you again, Sister. Rem is sorry for not being attentive enough. Rem should have just thrown it away before showing it to you.”

“Garf really is pitiful. But, just in case, Ram will give it a quick look.”

“…Understood. But Rem thinks you are too gracious for your own good, Sister."

Ram gave a faint smile at her beloved younger sister's biting remark.

Rem and the author of this letter—Garfiel Tinzel—had a terrible relationship. The two sisters, Rem and Ram, had met Garfiel a year or two after they were taken in to work at Roswaal Manor, which meant they had known one another for nearly ten years. However, Rem's attitude towards Garfiel had only become more hostile as time went on, while Garfiel seemed equally displeased with Rem. The reason behind their discord was obvious.

"…Ram really is despicable," Ram muttered to herself.

"You're not despicable, Sister! Garf is the only one at fault here."

Much like a dog with its bone, Rem stubbornly refused to give up her opinion once she had it—which was utterly irrational, yet adorable—as Ram begrudgingly acknowledged with a sigh.

Normally, Rem was considered an outstanding maid who worked hard at everything and never embarrassed herself, no matter what she was asked to do. However, from her older sister's perspective, that appraisal might not be quite so glowing.

Namely, Rem's biggest weakness was her sister, Ram. When problems involving Ram arose, Rem immediately lost her composure. Even at times when Ram wasn't directly involved, around their long-time acquaintances like senior servants Frederica and Clind—with the notable exception of their Master, Roswaal—Rem would practically puff out her cheeks in childish anger.

For Ram, it was especially precious to view her expressions around Garfiel. Only then was the reality truly inescapable that she was indeed a child of the Oni, even though it most likely only emerged from a childish desire to keep her sister all to herself.

"Ram supposes that's Rem's love language, in a way."

Characteristics such as this, which she exposed only in front of her closest friends, could be considered a real sign of trust.

Ideally speaking, gaining Rem's trust was something to which her older sister, Ram, would like to devote herself wholeheartedly, but the reality was that it wasn't that easy. Unfortunate, but Ram was smart enough to understand that it was probably for the best.

"Sister?"

"…It's nothing. But just to clarify, if you want to blame everything on Garf and his tenacity, does that mean you doubt your sister's ability to charm and captivate him?"

"N-Not in the least! Of course, it's all thanks to how amazing you are that Garf keeps sending letters to you without getting discouraged."

"If that's true, then Ram really is despicable, isn't she?"

"Yes, you're very delightful, Sister… Huh?" Having been caught in a mean leading question, Rem tilted her head and blinked owlishly. When Ram smiled unconsciously at her sister's expression, Rem jutted out her bottom lip in a sulk. This face was also a rare expression that she only showed when she was acting childishly towards Ram.

"Sister, please don't tease Rem like that. Rem is not that smart, so she might easily become confused."

"Confused Rem is very cute too, so please stop putting yourself down like that. If you say you're not smart, then everyone else who's more foolish than you will simply lose the will to live."

"R-Rem thinks that's going a bit too far…" As she let out a sigh, Rem's countenance took on a hint of uncertainty. "Rem doesn't believe that everyone is as smart as you or Master Roswaal, but it would be troublesome if everyone were like Garf. It would be a complete nightmare."

"Everyone being like Garf… Yes, that's certainly a nightmare. It would be so noisy that no one would be able to sleep, even in the middle of a nightmare."

Briefly lost in the absurd prospect that Rem had conjured up, Ram raised her well-shaped eyebrows.

In response to Ram's reaction, Rem smiled and said, "Yes, That's right. Rather than a world full of Garfs, it would be much more wonderful to have a whole group of Rams instead. In fact, Rem actually thinks that's how it should be. Then, wherever Rem looked, Sister would be…"

"Rem, Rem. Calm down."

"Ah! S-Sorry, Sister… Rem had a wonderful dream just now."

"There's no need to apologize. It's actually Ram who should apologize for waking you up from your dream, but…" Pausing as she spoke, Ram placed a hand on her chest. Then, with a warmly bemused expression, she smiled at Rem's patiently waiting face. "Even if there are many Rams out there, there's only one unique Ram right here in front of you, Rem," Ram assured her.

"S-Sister…" Rem murmured meekly.

"You get to have the only Ram in the whole world all to yourself. What do you think? Is that still not enough for you?" Ram asked, brimming with confidence.

"Of course not! You're worth 10,000 other sisters!" Rem cried indignantly.

Of course, all sisters have their own special bond, but all Rem and Ram had was each other, and their bond was strong. So Ram decided it was worth indulging Rem in a bit of hyperbole. But either way, Ram's heart was satisfied and tickled by her sister's affection.

"To evoke such a pleasant feeling before Ram has even read the letter…perhaps she owes Garf a thank you."

"Even Garf's letters have their uses," Rem said with a smile, but it seemed as though she might go on to say that the only other use for Garfiel's letters would be as kindling. That really would be too cruel, however, so Ram finally opened the envelope and unfolded the letter inside. Unsurprisingly, just as the name and address on the envelope had been, the handwriting inside was equally sloppy.

“It would be nice if Ryuzu could somehow teach him to write neatly.”

“Or rather, maybe Garf should write a letter to Frederica instead of you, Sister… He always ignores her, and Rem feels sorry for her.”

“…That’s true too.”

“…?”

As she blithely allowed her sister’s intractable attitude to wash over her, Ram began to see the situation differently. Rem had been referring to the complicated sibling relationship between Garfiel and Frederica. Garfiel resented his older sister for leaving the village they had grown up in to become Roswaal’s maid. As a result, no matter how many letters Frederica sent to their village, Garfiel never responded.

So it seemed only natural that Rem did not think highly of him. For Rem, who loved and respected her older sister Ram, it was an act of someone violating the bonds of filial piety.

“Both Garf and Frederica most likely have their own side of the story, I suppose.”

But as far as the reason for their fraught relationship, Ram suspected that it concerned the fact that they had never talked deeply about the issue of their homeland, the Sanctuary—why Frederica had left it, and why Garfiel continued to fixate on it. Still…

“Even for the most determined busy-body, it’s never right to intrude upon other people’s relationships,” Ram remarked.

Even Ram had not disclosed all of her feelings in her heart to others, not even to Rem. In fact, there were many things she couldn’t say exactly because it was Rem.

Just as long as there is a separation between one human being and another, there are inevitable boundaries that can’t be crossed.

"That's why Rem doesn't approve of Garf, who has been so unfilial towards his own sister. He has no right to show his face before Rem's honorable sister."

"How harsh. Ram feels quite loved."

"Of course. Besides, this isn't something Rem understands."

"What isn't?"

Lowering her voice, Rem dropped her gaze ever so slightly as she let her feelings show. Seeing this expression in her, Ram softened her pale red eyes.

Rem offered her a lonely smile in return and said, "The way Sister cares for Master Roswaal. The way Garf cares for Sister. The preciousness of experiencing that emotion, of caring for another person. That is what Rem does not understand."

"…"

"The way you look when pining after Master Roswaal, Sister, to Rem, you seem to be almost shining. And yet Rem can offer no such praise for Garf as he pines for Sister. Thus, Rem does not understand."

Rem's words, so full of resignation and self-awareness, brought a painful tightness to Ram's chest. If the thing Rem didn't understand was the emotion of "longing," then she didn't understand something that, at times, could make one wise, and at times, into a simpering fool.

The letter she held from Garfiel described the fact that daily life in the Sanctuary rarely changed, as well as the current circumstances that he was curious about. The handwriting was a mess, but the letter was surprisingly readable, and if Rem were to read it, her impression of him might have changed.

This letter was written for Ram, so she doesn't think she can show it to Rem.

Each word was painstakingly spelled out line by line, and filled with affection, so she thought it would be incredibly inconsiderate to allow such a letter to be read by someone it wasn't addressed to.

And so, Ram couldn't provide the magic answer to Rem's concerns just yet. As the older sister, she thought that she couldn't recall a time she'd felt this powerless. But surely…

"The day will come when you, too, will understand."

"…Since Sister is the only one Rem cares for, she wonders about that," Rem answered without a hint of a smile, tilting her head to express her dubiousness towards Ram's sentiments. "You will be writing him a response, right, Sister? Rem will only get in the way of that, so Rem will excuse herself."

"It won't disturb Ram to have you here."

"No, Rem can't look at the letter. Rem also knows that much. Whether or not Garf is qualified to receive your kindness is another matter, Sister."

With that, and a single curtsey, Rem gracefully took her leave from Ram's room. For a moment, Ram almost called out to her retreating form, but, unable to find the right words, she simply let her go.

Despite a moment of regret over causing Rem to feel so alone, her eyes returned to the letter once again. "Fool."

No one could be sure whether that abuse was directed towards herself for being such a poor older sister, or to the letter's sender, who had spelled out their feelings.

2

—Subsequently, on an occasion after Natsuki Subaru arrived at Roswaal Manor.

"Sister, another letter from Garf has arrived," Rem said in a merciless tone, placing a letter atop the desk.

With both the name of the sender and addressee written in such a messy hand on a white envelope, it was clearly the usual letter from Garfiel. If anything at all was different, it was only Rem's attitude as she brought it over.

"Your attitude seems different, Rem."

"Oh…is that so?"

"You didn't realize? Normally, you'd have added something inventive to his name, like stubborn-Garf, or ungraceful-Garf, or ill-mannered-Garf, or that brat-Garf."

"Now that you mention it…"

As if Rem had genuinely been unaware, she placed a hand over her mouth in surprise when Ram pointed it out. But after a moment of reflection, she seemed to be able to apply some logic to her own behavior, and therefore dismissed it.

Letting her hand drop from her mouth, she addressed Ram. "Sister. Would it be okay if Rem shared a somewhat embarrassing story…?"

"Something embarrassing? From you, Rem?"

"Yes, if that's not okay—"

"Ram doesn't mind it at all. In fact, please tell her about this embarrassing thing."

"O-Okay. It's a little bit awkward, but…"

After hearing such an opening, Ram was naturally immensely curious and eagerly leaned forward to listen, which caused Rem to blush slightly.

Notwithstanding the fact she was her own little sister, it was incredibly cute, and Ram admired her appearance like a doting parent. But at the same time, a tinge of unease flashed across her chest.

This was because Rem's current expression had become all too frequent at Roswaal Manor lately. The one responsible for that was —

“Could this be about Barusu?”

“…Wow! Amazing, Sister! Rem is surprised that you figured it out before she could say anything.”

“…It was a fairly simple deduction.”

It was also rare for a correct deduction of hers to make her unhappy, but, nevertheless, Ram couldn’t hold back a sigh. Moments like this, of Rem praising her elder sister’s perception with such wide, innocent eyes, were more and more becoming the prerogative of someone else to appreciate.

The one Rem had become infatuated with was the new apprentice servant who had recently joined the mansion, Natsuki Subaru. He had been making every effort to solve various incidents around the mansion, and Rem had come to view him as someone special to her.

The problem was already quite dire.

“Sister, you told me this before, that someday Rem would also understand such feelings…and it’s just as you predicted!”

“…And exactly how is that related to the way you handled Garf’s letters?”

“Well, Rem’s chest feels a warm sensation when she thinks of Subaru…and Rem realized this is most likely what Garf feels towards you, Sister. Rem began to sympathize with him, and then she decided that at least it wouldn’t be so bad to allow him to send Sister letters,” Rem explained.

Rem clenched her fists to express her resolve, and she was clearly hopeful about the future, but it was unlikely that Garfiel would be so charitable toward her. Free from his concern of the letter being callously disposed of on its way to Ram, his new concern would surely be enduring the pity his attempts seemed to have evoked.

In any case…

“Rem has also learned from Garf’s example, and is wondering whether she should send a letter to Subaru… Subaru is still learning how to read and write though, would it trouble him?”

“There’s no way Ram would let Barusu be so foolish as to act bothered by a letter filled with your feelings… But if you’re going to do it…”

“Yes…?”

“Then Ram wants a letter from you, too. If you’re writing one anyway, kindly send one to Ram too.”

“Understood! Rem will write you a letter filled with her feelings, Sister!” Rem’s face lit up as she gladly accepted Ram’s request.

As she got to enjoy her sister’s loving response, Ram quietly gave the black-haired young man a mental slap across the face. Of course, it was merely a fantasy born of jealous anger. She would like him to feel grateful that she didn’t feel inclined to act on her impulses.

“Being unable to act on one’s irrepressible feelings… Rem wonders if Garf might also have felt this way. Rem has been cruel to him. Next time Rem sees Garf, she’ll apologize.”

“Ram imagines he’ll be quite disturbed to receive such a sudden apology from you. How amusing.”

To someone like Garfiel, Rem’s apology would certainly be a big event. Ram absolutely had to be there to see it with her own eyes.

Even so…

“It was Ram herself who had hoped that Rem would have this kind of change of heart.”

As long as she was offering a prayer for her own sake, she might as well do so in a way that her wishes regarding those she loved would come true as well.

With a faint pang of bittersweet feelings, Ram smiled at her innocent younger sister, who was hesitating on whether she should take the initiative to write on her own or seek advice on conveying her feelings.

“Fool,” she muttered.

END

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village: ~One Thousand Origami Cranes of Prayer~

1

—One day at the Roswaal estate, there was a moment of conversation between sisters.

"—Nee-sama, do you know what a folded crane is?"

"A folded crane?"

Hearing the unfamiliar vocabulary, Ram's hands stopped their scrubbing of silverware, and she narrowed her fine eyebrows.

This was the mansion's kitchen, where there was nobody else but Ram and her younger sister Rem, who were cleaning up after lunch.

The twin sisters, Rem and Ram were often described as looking exactly alike. However, were you to hear from Ram, she and Rem are nothing alike. They are both exceedingly dazzling, but just like there are different ways in which precious gems may gleam, these sisters each had their own charm.

Presently, Ram does not believe herself to be adorable, but believes Rem to be extremely adorable.

Being relied on and sought out for knowledge by that adorable Rem is also one of Ram's greatest desires. But, at the same time, being unable to live up to expectations when the time comes, is the double-sided sword that befalls her.

What's more—

"—Barusu."

With her brow furrowed, Ram reproachfully muttered such.

What she muttered was a person's name—their nickname to be precise, but one without any affection to it so it was a simple alias.

Regardless, it was meant for the one working in this mansion, Natsuki Subaru. And, this young man who became a servant and is still wet behind the ears, is the object of Ram's cute Rem's infatuation.

"…Then, are you unaware after all, Nee-sama?"

Like so, he was also a man that continuously forced Ram to be confronted by Rem's disappointment.

—Ever since Natsuki Subaru's appearance, this was not the first event of this type, nor will it be the last.

This time around, it appears he told Rem about a "Folded crane" or some such word that Ram had never heard about, however he continues to incessantly reveal this knowledge, bring up this culture, that even Ram and her sister—No, it was not known to even the master of this mansion, Roswaal himself.

From Ram's point of view they're all complete nonsense that don't deserve even a shred of attention, but Rem who lends enormous trust to Subaru, Emilia who is unbeaten in her childlike curiosity, and Roswaal who loves that unusual inventiveness and way of thinking of his to no end, are receptive to and continue to enable Subaru.

Only one, only Beatrice, shares Ram's opinion towards the rampaging Subaru—

"Since Beatrice-sama can't be relied on, it's no different from Ram being solo."

Such was this whisper, that would make the person in question go red in the face and stamp her feet if she heard it, Ram's opinion on Beatrice who interacted with Subaru.

Whatever the case—

"As humiliating as it is, I am not aware of this word. Where in the Barusu did you hear it?"

"Rem heard this word from her Subaru-kun but… I am told that if you gather a lot of those Folded cranes, it seems it could grant a wish “

“—Grant a wish?”

Hearing that complete hooey, Ram furrows her brow once more as Rem nods with a “Yes”. Those very straightforward Rem’s light blue eyes, this adorable sister of Ram’s would not tell a lie.

“In short, it means the one lying here is Barusu. Filling Rem’s head with boring nonsense, he really messed around too far. He will need punishment.”

“P-Please wait, Nee-sama! Subaru-kun is definitely not a liar! His gallant eyes and burly chest are simply filled with hopes and dreams!”

Saying that, Rem stopped Ram who was holding the silverware she picked up in reverse grip in her tracks.

Ram did not think she could push her way through Rem with force after all, but that said she also did not think she could believe such a suspicious story as a wish granting Folded Cranes

Inevitably, that righteous indignation over whether or not he’s lying after all wells up again.

“Please listen to the context, Nee-sama. Subaru-kun brought up the story of the Folded Cranes, for the sake of an Arlam Village girl.”

However, the fire of Ram’s righteous indignation was just barely extinguished, and instead she closed one eye in questioning. Seeing her older sister’s behavior, Rem intelligently and cutely sussed that she’s pressing her to continue her story.

“In the village Subaru-kun has these kids he’s close with, and it appears one of them has a soon to be born brother or sister. And for their birth to go through safely, what Subaru told the children about was the…”

“—Folded Cranes.”

"That's right."

As Ram takes care of the conclusion, Rem draws her head down in assent. With that she finally understood the commonality between Subaru's nonsense and what Rem was saying.

To put it all together, these wish granting "Folded Cranes" are a sort of charm that Subaru brought up to try and bring them peace of mind. From what Rem said about gathering up a lot of them, they must be about the size of a flower or rock, and while she could picture having to prepare a fairly sizable amount of them.

"Did Barusu ask you to gather those "Folded Cranes"?"

"…No, nee-sama. Quite the opposite."

"Opposite?"

"Subaru-kun told me, that he wants to gather the cranes together with the children, that he has no intention of troubling Rem with it."

Lowering her shoulders disparagingly, Rem sadly lowered her head.

That remark from Subaru that made Rem depressed, it was likely brought on from Subaru's care and concern for her, or so Ram conjectured. After all, it was a charm to dispel the children's worries, different from a proper magic or shamanic ritual.

So long as you prepare it superficially it would be enough with that, it would be foolish to busy the hands of the already busy as it is Rem, or so would the foolish Subaru have naturally thought.

"However, everything that made Rem look sad is Barusu's fault."

Even if it was a remark born out of care and concern, if Rem was made sad, then to Ram that makes him guilty. Therefore, she will not hear Subaru out on anything.

"What do you want to do, Rem?"

When asked that gently by Ram, Rem's eyes waver, and look at

Ram. Rem's lips tremble with hesitation towards those light pink eyes of her sister.

Then, Ram's hand slowly draws towards her little sister's cheek.

“Silly. Ram is your Nee-sama, Rem. You can tell me anything that comes to your mind.”

That sentence from Ram, served as a gentle push to Rem's back, after she had put a lid on her own desires.

2

“This is a Folded Crane…!”

Rem's voice quivered, and her eyes lit up at the “Crane” that was placed atop the table.

Rem seemed moved by it, seeing her reaction, Ram was relieved that her sister's expecations were able to be answered. That said, once she tried to see through the reality of the “Folded Crane” there was some disappointment.

“Cannot believe it, did not think it would just be a type of paper game.”

Before Ram's eyes as she says that, is a “Crane” made of folded white paper. According to the creator himself, this is something that seems to have been modeled after a bird from his hometown called a “crane”, and since it's a “crane” made of folded paper, it's called a “Folded Crane” or so he said. It seems he can shape it into things other than birds such as other animals and flowers, which is generally called “Origami”.

While she felt like that was a pretty simplistic name, it could be said this was the one strange cultural import from Subaru that managed to impress Ram the most so far.

“Nee-sama, thank you so much! Thanks to you, I could observe this “Folded Crane” with my very eyes.”

“I see. Satisfied?”

"Yes!"

Facing the results Ram brought home, Rem nodded as she smiled like a flower. Though, she quickly followed it up with an expression that pushed down that smile saying "However"

"Nee-sama, how did you make the 'Folded Crane'? Subaru-kun said that until he had completed them, he would keep it a secret from Rem…"

"Simple. —Barusu could never go against Ram could he?"

"N-Nee-sama…?"

"Joking. It was just a simple warning that he should show it to me if it wasn't anything that would make him guilty."

Rem who asked through a frontal attack, seemed unable to collapse Subaru's castle walls due to her virtues being taken advantage of. That's why, Ram did not take a frontal attack.

In the first place, Subaru was a hundred years too early to try and argue his way out of, or escape from Ram's pressuring.

"But, it's not like I don't fully understand why Barusu wouldn't want to show these to Rem yet. It might have just been a lie he came up with on the spot, but you seem to need a thousand of these 'Folded Cranes'."

"A- a thousand of them?! That many 'Folded Cranes'…?!"

Hearing that absurdity, the wide-eyed Rem stared fixatedly at the "Folded Crane".

Rem's surprise was only natural. Even Ram believed it to be a joke the first time she heard it, so much so she pulled on the sides of Subaru's face as she told him to stop saying things to mess with her.

However, once he showed her the "Folded Cranes" the village kids were actually in the process of making, Ram couldn't help but believe him that they really were aiming for a thousand.

"In that case, Rem just must help him out…"

"Because he thought you would come to that, must be the reason that Barusu did not want to show you."

"Ah…"

Rem's wide eyes blinked, and her shoulders dropped hearing that sentence from Ram.

"It's so frustrating. Just how can Rem be useful to Subaru…?"

"Rem."

"Nee-sama, sorry. Rem is the younger sister of such a wonderful Nee-sama, and yet Rem…"

"Listen, Rem. Then— make your choice."

Gently, she put her hands on her slim shoulders, and Ram looked at Rem's face as she let out an "Eh". And while Ram was reflected straight into Rem's light blue eyes,

"Why do you think that "Folded Crane" is here?"

"That's… because Nee-sama asked Subaru-kun to show it to…No, that's strange."

When she said that, Rem felt something strange about her own statement.

"Subaru-kun is trying to avoid Rem helping him… and yet, if he had given a real "Folded Crane" to her like this, Rem would also end up helping him."

"Indeed, that's right. Unlike Barusu, you're smart, Rem."

"But, in that case…In that case! Nee-sama, it couldn't be that this 'Folded crane'…"

"That's right. —When Barusu showed it to Ram, Ram was able to replicate it with her own hands."

Hearing Ram's reply, Rem was immediately drawn back to look towards the "Folded Crane" on the table.

These crisp folds on the "Folded Crane", are surely from a much more proper craftsmanship than the "Folded Crane" that Subaru let her peep as reference. The material needed is paper, and as long as one knows that the completed form must look like a "Crane" then it is quite simple to re-assemble that in one's head.

And therefore, the true form of this "Folded Crane" was one that was folded again by Ram's own efforts.

"Rem, make your choice."

At the surprised Rem, Ram once again tossed those words at her.

"…You said the same thing a moment ago, Nee-sama. What is it you want me to choose?"

"Will you do as Barusu says, and simply observe the situation sitting by obediently without touching a 'Folded Crane', or will you ignore what Barusu said and help in the making of these 'Folded Cranes'?"

"—Hic."

Ram narrowed her light red eyes at Rem whose response was a gasp.

It was likely that the "Folded Cranes" were a ritual of prayer. Each individual one had a prayer carefully, gently folded into it, giving shape to this prayer, and expressing the extent of this prayer by numbering to a thousand of them.

It wasn't just about getting fixated on the number of a thousand.

However—

"Even after a calm and careful explanation, they are still children whose hands will be held back by their clumsiness and lack of focus. Subaru, with a personality which can't stay away from wickedness, will help them out with it…in the most inefficient possible manner, to the point it's dubious whether or not they will make it in time for the birth of the baby."

"Nee-sama…"

"That these thousand cranes could possibly grant a wish, is something Ram just doesn't believe. But even then, I don't believe these "Folded Cranes" with wishes put in them are meaningless. If they are completed, that is."

Results appearing in the middle of a prayer ritual, such a letdown wouldn't happen.

Hearing Ram's words Rem, after a moment of silence, tightly grasped the hem of her Maid dress and lifted her face up.

"Nee-sama, I have a request."

"…"

Being looked at straight on by the eyes of such a serious Rem, Ram let out a sigh.

And then—

"How foolish. —Ram is Rem's Nee-sama. I already know what you want from me."

3

"Aaalright! Now then, for the sake of Meina's mom we'll speed through one thousand of these cranes! Yesterday we ended up a bit off track. But we'll give it our all from here on!"

""Yeah!""

Saying that while encouraging the children who are vigorously raising their fists up, Subaru was actually quite panicked.

It was quite a good idea to get the children together to make a thousand cranes, but he was quite pleased with the excited reactions of the kids due to the novelty of origami itself, so much so he ended up getting off track a bit too much.

But the due date—or anything like that is not quite clear as of yet, but he wanted to complete the thousand cranes while retaining quite a bit of leeway from the soon to happen birth of Meina's siblings. Or so he intended with the schedule he planned, but he's already quite late for the deadline.

"But I really don't wanna get in the way of Emilia-tan's or Rem's work…"

Emilia has her many preparations and studies regarding the incoming Royal Selection, and Rem has her very diverse numerous daily maid duties. For a moment he was struck by the temptation to involve Ram or Beatrice, but the severe difficulty and toil of that negotiation made it hard to see any returns coming from it.

Ram aside, as he saw it, Beatrice was all thumbs.

"Subaru, all ready here."

"Oh, my bad my bad. Thanks, Petra. Alright, over here we…"

Petra, who finished the preparations for doing the origami on the floor of Subaru's room, calls out towards where Subaru is as he rearranges his schedule in his head. Pushing away that feeling of tragedy at the energetic attitude from the children, Subaru goes to take the origami set for cranes, and as he opens the closet—

"—Woaaaah?!"

—In the next instant, he's swallowed and washed away by an enormous quantity of folded cranes that come bursting out of the closet.

"Subaru?!"

Seeing Subaru who had been flipped over, the surprised Petra rushed to his side. Petra began to dig out Subaru who had been buried, and once he was pulled out of there, he finally grasped the situation.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha-…"

“There’s so many!” “Tons of Folded Cranes!” “Subaru’s Grave!”

Listening to voices of those rowdy boys, Subaru was bewildered at the incredible quantity of folded cranes. But, soon enough did the suspect who had a hand in this come to his mind.

Then, as Subaru threw the window open, he looked down on the mansion’s courtyard.

“Hey, Rem! I told you not to—”

“—Thank you big sis!”

That voice of protest was drowned out by the voice of a girl who used her whole small body to muster it. Shoving her body past Subaru’s and raising her voice was Meina.

Having been herself the reason for the thousand cranes, and the one most desperately chasing after them, hers was a voice of gratitude—

“That’s awesome, there’s so many folded cranes” “Maids are awesomee.” “Awesomer than Subaru!”

In that moment, the children pushed Subaru aside and, all together, gave their thanks and sang praises towards the outside of the window.

Seeing that made his eyes go wide, and subsequently Subaru stood up scratching his head.

Let alone a thousand, these cranes looked to be approaching ten thousand, just how much time did they spend on this he wondered

““Big sisters, thank youuu!””

Hearing the gratitude from the innocent children, the oni sisters who had sneakily helped in that prayer ritual—the two of them who had brightly raised their faces looking up from the courtyard and at each other, then, as if to hide the proof of their staying up late, they covered their mouth with their hands and gave a small yawn in unison.

END

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village:
~The Maid's Nocturne~

1

—That, was an event from before Natsuki Subaru and Emilia had come to the Roswaal estate.

“Aah, Rem. perfect timing meeting you here.”

Having finished her inspection of the dragon carriage, Rem who was returning to the mansion from the stables, hears that call from an awfully familiar voice, and blinks her light blue eyes.

Standing in the mansion's front garden, waving their hand, the figure standing there as if welcoming her in was—

“Frederica, what brings you to this mansion?”

A tall, beautiful Maid with long, golden hair—Frederica, meeting face to face here with her was something Rem was not expecting and so she tilted her head at her, puzzled.

Currently, Frederica is tasked with working in the main Mathers family estate, and the separate residence—This mansion that is currently being prepared for when it's needed, is supposed to be the responsibility of Rem and her beloved and respected older sister.

Hearing Rem's question, Frederica smiles while covering her mouth with a hand as she says,

“No need to act so surprised, I merely had a matter I needed to consult with the master so I carried myself over here. I am quite relieved we did not end up missing each other.”

“Is that so? I suppose all is well then.”

“Yes, indeed. Though I am not sure if this was a particularly untimely moment for Ram since she gave me quite a few choice words. Geez, that girl always seems to lack any respect."

"Her unbendability no matter who the other party may be is Nee-sama's charm."

Frederica grumbled with a sigh, however Rem answered with her chest puffed out.

Yes, yes that is right. No matter what anyone may say, she never sways her core strong self and that is something for which Ram has her own Ram-like reasons—a way of being which is endlessly mesmerizing.

Regardless—

"If you had business with Roswaal-sama, then why would you be here? You should have made it to the mansion earlier than me…"

"You see…you are precisely right. Simply put, I had no wish to rush this work topic to our master who had just returned you see? It was not exactly a pressing matter either, we can make time for it after dinner perhaps."

"If it is not a pressing matter, why go out of your way for today when we had a scheduled inspection?"

"Eh?! That is, well, you see……"

"…Quite strange."

Rem narrows her eyes in suspicion as Frederica becomes perplexed.

This is almost as if having a matter she needs to address with Roswaal was merely an excuse, so she believes she must have a different reason for coming to this separate estate—or so she was thinking to that point, when she noticed.

The real reason why Frederica had come to this separate estate, and was waiting for Rem.

"Ehem. Rem, what may be the matter? Why are you staring so fixatedly at me…perhaps you finally feel like addressing me as Frederica nee-sam-…"

"No, Rem's Nee-sama is her one and only Nee-sama. I will not be calling you Nee-sama. I have told you so for many years now."

"You have indeed told me so for many years now, so I thought maybe you would have conceded at least a-…"

"—Frederica, you came here to ask about the Sanctuary, didn't you?"

"Guhck."

At Rem's sharp observation, Frederica was very transparently shaken.

Sanctuary —That is, a village hidden within the Mathers territory, and what was this time, the destination that Rem traveled to inspect together with Roswaal. While it is Frederica's hometown, it is also a Sanctuary for many demi-humans with reasons for being there, and living there were also the grandmother who raised Frederica, and also her younger brother by blood.

For several reasons, Frederica had decided she won't return to Sanctuary yet. Knowing that of her, anybody would be able to imagine what she would want to ask of Rem who had just returned from Sanctuary.

"No news from the village itself. Lewes-sama welcomed us without any significant issues arising. We received some confectionaries as well."

"I. See. I am sure that is just what Grandmother would do. In that case, that would just leave…"

"Yes. —No news from Garf, his attitude towards Roswaal remains dreadful, it was unbearable to look at."

"Oh my- Awawawa…"

Hearing Rem's report, Frederica completely lost her composure even forgetting to hide her fangs.

Having inherited the blood of a Leopard person, Frederica is very mindful of her sharp, pointed teeth, and hides her fangs with her hand whenever she laughs or gets angry so that they don't stand out. For her to be forgetting to do that, must mean this —Garfiel's unmanageable rowdiness, was too much to bear

"Geez, when it comes to Garf…"

On top of Frederica's reaction, Rem also breathed a sigh in lament at the figure of the golden-haired boy who popped up in the recesses of her brain.

Garfiel has had a relationship with Rem and her sister Ram from the beginning when Roswaal confiscated them, he would be someone who could qualify as a childhood friend for them. However, he'd been a mischievous little fiend from then, and has not grown since. And that had not changed even on this inspection.

"He is under Roswaal's patronage and yet all he does is snap at him… he was also incessantly voicing his displeasure for Nee-sama's absence. Unbelievable."

"Uurgh, the more I hear the worse it gets…"

"Yes, and I am still not done. He is utterly immature still and yet he is trying to vie for Nee-sama's affection, he really should know his place. This time, it was the correct choice for Rem to come with Roswaal-sama in Nee-sama's place."

It goes without saying, but Ram being an existence completely without parallel, it was rather natural for Garfiel to be blinded by such brightness, and hold feelings for her that will never bear any fruit. Though, If you were to ask if he should be allowed to act upon those feelings, then it was the younger sister Rem who felt she would not allow that.

In the first place, the object of Ram's affections is clear, and Rem respects that way of being of her's that won't bend to any one. —She wishes for all of Ram's desires to come true.

“That is why this time, I made sure to give Garf a good raking over the coals. This should have made him a little better behaved.”

“Is- is that so. Also if I may, how exactly did you rake him?”

“Yes, well I let him have it, with a flail.”

“With a flail, you say…?!”

With a thump, Rem’s favorite flail drops on the ground of the front garden. Seeing that, Frederica takes a gulp of air, as she trembles nervously, though she needn’t be so worried.

Garfiel is actually quite sturdy, so long as he’s not struck by the spiked parts, he should be sound.

“But well, this time he got hit by the spikes and some degree of blood was shed…”

“I-Is he all right?!”

“Rem’s healing magic was at hand, and Garf himself had his blessing as well. After some time, Garf was back to his hissy fits. At any rate…”

Rem swipes away the figure of the loudly complaining Garfiel that comes closer into her head and changes topic. The issue lies not just with Garfiel’s rowdiness, there are other points of equivalent importance.

“It appears Roswaal has some ideas for the future of Sanctuary as well. At that time, Garf will most definitely change his attitude, so you have no need to worry, Frederica.”

“…Do you truly, believe that Garf will change his attitude?”

“If he will not, then Rem will have to begin to escalate her use of her flail.”

Rem herself did not want to have to start seriously pummeling Garfiel with it. Garfiel who’s one merit was how sturdy he was, crushing that singular thing he considers his strong point would make her feel sorry for him

While she hates his attitude with how he tries to woo Ram, she doesn’t think bad of how he never gives up on Ram. —Rem’s attitude towards this childhood friend of her’s was quite the complicated thing after all.

“Thank you so much for always talking to me with such frankness, Rem.”

“I am not ever going to tell you any lies when it comes to Garf, Frederica. I also understand how anxious you are as a sister about Garf’s intolerable actions.”

“—. Indeed. He really is such a handful.”

“Yes. Garf is quite the trouble.”

While they were exchanging wry smiles over such, Rem tilts her head internally with an “Oh my.”. In spite of her grumbling, Frederica seemed to give an unreserved laugh with her mouth covered by a hand, as if the evil that had been possessing her had fallen out.

She had some questions about that, but for now Rem believes that the fact she’s laughing is a good thing.

She will not be calling her Nee-sama to her face, but to Rem, Frederica is no less a childhood friend with whom she’s shared some irreplaceable times.

2

“—Frederica, will you quit making Ram’s, my little sister act as some sort of spy for you.”

After dinner, aiming for the opportunity when Rem is busy cleaning up the kitchen, Ram called Frederica over to the garden where no one will interrupt them and demanded that of her.

Hearing Ram’s words, Frederica’s expression turns to an awkward look and she falls quiet. The fact that she cannot attempt any boring excuses, or try to argue it away like nothing happened is due to Frederica's innate goodness.

While that in itself was something she was fond of, it did nothing to blunt Ram's tongue.

"…Spy or some such, would you please not phrase it that way. Even I know it to be quite an improper manner."

"Both for Garf and for Sanctuary you should be going to check them yourself if you are so interested. Not returning to your hometown is not part of your agreement with Roswaal-sama. Things that you have decided for yourself… breaking those or making exceptions, is something you can let your own heart decide."

"Which is exactly why, if you do not draw a line and hold yourself to it, you would lose your limits now would you not?"

Dejectedly lowering her shoulders, Frederica responded with a rather infantile attitude

However, it couldn't be helped that for this point specifically, Frederica displayed a childishness that mismatched her real age. —After all, when Frederica had separated from her brother, she had not even reached 10 years of age. After which, they both have been awfully distant as siblings for a long time.

In short—

"Unlike Ram and Rem who have not been apart for even a moment, Frederica is ultimately a beginner at having a younger brother. You have not gained any experience as an older sister; therefore you remain unable to let go of your brother."

"When it comes to letting go of a sibling, you sure are one to speak!"

"Hah! Ram? Let go of her sibling? Have not felt the need to. Not now, not ever."

Internally, she did have some thoughts about Rem's dependance on her, but she keeps that quiet for now. Whatever the case, what is important now is Frederica's feelings.

"Ram's idea is as stated previously. Instead of having Rem sneaking around probing for you, you should boldly arrive at Sanctuary with your head held high."

"I already said, if I do that then my restraint…"

"Just set up some restraint to it then. Whether it be your birthday or Garf's birthday, or Lewes-sama's birthday, anything is fine. Decide on a date, and make that your exception."

"~~hk, you really, make it seem so simple."

"It is simple—Matters of your own heart, are something you can address with your own heart."

The things that Frederica wants no matter what, the things that she is stuck thinking she cannot overcome, all of those can be addressed depending on her own heart.

Ram's wants, the obstacle to them could be said to be a completely different height to someone else's heart.

"If you cannot decide then that's also fine. But, at the very least do explain your expectations to Rem. That way, Rem will also be able to spy with delight."

"The way you phrased that, about my feelings, you mean perchance that Rem is…?"

"Yes, adorably she has been completely unaware. From the beginning, Rem has been looking at Garf with quite the warped lenses so it just couldn't be helped. It's due to Ram, due to these charms of mine."

For many years, Ram has continued to turn a cold shoulder to Garfiel's passionate feelings, and Rem who had continuously seen that close hand, holds an intense enmity for Garfiel.

Due to that, Rem's evaluation of Garfiel is prone to being done through clouded lens

"Which is why, she believes that Frederica wanting to hear about Garf is, rather than your sisterly heart, due to your feelings of guilt from Garf's poor behavior."

"Aah, so it was that after all…"

"On the opposite hand, though it might not be as much as towards Ram, Frederica, she puts that much strength into her flail as she tries to beat Garf's character back into shape, due to how much she respects you."

Somehow, the impression given was that of a continuous chain of one-sided counterproductive feelings.

Luckily, thanks to Garfiel's toughness and, though many things have been said about him, his old-fashioned chivalrous heart that will not let him hit Rem back, this relationship had managed to come together.

Rem may not have noticed, but having been locked in the Sanctuary, Garfiel who had been recklessly trying to get stronger, had long since become stronger than Rem, and maybe, even Ram.

Only on that point, does even Ram have many things to be vexed about.

"…"

Towards Ram who thinks that way, Frederica can only remain silenced as she sports a frown.

This silence, similar to when Ram had initially questioned her about her attitude towards Rem, it was Frederica's virtue that would not allow her to lie or make excuses, and aside from that she felt the presence of something that would not allow her to do that.

If she could not speak of it either way, she would rather she try to fully hide it at least but—

"You and Garf both, are such a handful."

"…Somehow, it does not feel right to hear you say that to me."

"That so? For better or worse, you overthink this far too much, Frederica. You're such a—"

"—? What is it?"

Cutting off her words, Ram narrowed her pink eyes towards Frederica's puzzled-looking face.

Towards her, Ram held back on voicing that sentiment that arose from within. —This was what she had thought. That she was such a handful of an older sister.

Calling her Nee-sama, something that was apparently a tradition between junior servants towards senior servants, this being something which she had continued to ignore, meant she could most definitely not voice that sentiment.

"Nee-sama, thank you for waiting. So you were together with Frederica."

Saying so, there arrived Rem, who had finished cleaning up after dinner.

With that, the conversation so far has reached its end, is what Ram signals to Frederica with her eyes.

"Yes, I was bored waiting for Rem, so I was killing some time with Frederica."

"I am not particularly pleased about being called a time killing tool I will have you know?"

"You are something like that. More importantly, we haven't had any time to relax and talk, so I want to hear about Rem's inspection this time. —That's right, it's the perfect opportunity, so why not do it over a bath?"

Saying that, Ram looks at both Rem and Frederica's faces. Receiving that, Rem put her hands together in front of her chest and gladly said “Yes.”.

“Let’s do just that. It’s been quite a while since we had Frederica together with us.”

“When you put it like that, certainly….Though I cannot help feeling that I am being tricked in some way.”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff. Rem, make sure to give a good washing to Frederica’s back. I’ll grant you that honor especially this time.”

“Mmmmh, these girls are so difficult to give up on…”

“Fufu, if you would be fine with Rem, then please allow me to wash your back. Let’s go.”

Frederica, happy to be taken care of by her junior, and Rem, capitalizing on that part of her, while following after those two who went ahead, Ram let out a small sigh and looked up at the sky.

Under the white round moon, all of them were gathered in the Roswaal estate. All of them, Sanctuary, Lewes and Garfiel as well, part of Roswaal’s plans.

And, what is the foundation of those desires and plans, is being deemed acceptable due to Ram’s endless love.

“It’s not like that will make everything about this moment a trifle or falsehood, will it?”

Because to these nocturnal maids, pondering in the night, that could be said to be the inviolable value of time without pretension.

END

Event Specials

Another World / Reincarnation SS Paper

“Hey, Subaru, Subaru. We’re reaaally cutting it close! It seems like it’s time for us to start working.”

“What happened, Emilia-tan? You’re in such a rush. Your cute face’ll… ah, it really is cute.”

“Gosh, this isn’t the time to be talking like that. Look, this is our chance to introduce Re:Zero, so we need to do our darndest!”

“I don’t hear the word ‘darndest’ being used in this day and age… But alright! It’s a chance to have fun with Emilia-tan, so I’ll hop aboard! Time to introduce Re:Zero!”

“Umm, the official title for Re:Zero is ‘Re:Zero – Starting Life in Another World,’ and the main point of this introduction, the plot of this story, is… It’s a story where Subaru dies a lot in a world he isn’t familiar with.”

“That’s really vague, and is it just me, or does that make it sound like I’m just dying a lot without doing anything?!”

“It’s in the looping events genre, and Another World x Return by Death are the foundations of the plot; it’s the story of an ordinary boy that scrambles around to help the girl he likes. Hey, Subaru, who is this girl you like…”

“Aaah-aaah! That part’s kind of about a boy’s pure heart, okay?! Anyway, it’s a story about an ignorant, incompetent, reckless protagonist whose initial status is disappointing, and his only weapons are his ability to rewind time by dying and his unwillingness to give up! Isn’t this script terrible?!”

“The world gets rewound with his death, and the bonds and memories that had been formed there get lost and only remain within Subaru, who starts over from square one all by himself. That’s reaaally a cruel and sad thing.”

“But even so, I’ll do it over and over again. Even if no one remembers how kind they were to me and how we laughed together, it’ll always be in my heart.”

“A looping events fantasy in another world, ‘Re:Zero—Starting Life in Another World’. It’s a story of a very weak boy’s continuous perseverance.”

“—Even if you had forgotten me, I won’t forget you.”

“The fifth volume and the first collection of short stories have already been published! They are on sale with great reviews! Please support us at your local bookstore, too!”

“You’re super enthusiastic about your work all the way up until you complete it. You’re seriously an angel, Emilia-tan! E.M.T!”

Emilia’s Blog Practice Diary

Hello everyone, nice to meet you! I am from St. Lugunica… Eh? I can’t say the school’s name?

Wah, sorry! So, I’m a junior student in this country’s high school, and am also a magazine model. I’m Emilia.

I was persuaded by my friends to start using this so called “blog” thing, so I started practicing using this as a diary. As for whether or not I can write something interesting, I’m not really sure, but I will do my best to try and make it more interesting. Pleased to meet you all.

What should I start writing about… Ah, this is my classmate friend Rem, who is teaching me while I write. Since I’m technologically impaired, I don’t know how to use cell phones at all, and Rem has been the one always teaching me. I am proud to have such a reliable, good friend like Rem.

“Emilia, please get to the point. All the readers are getting bored.”

…I got reprimanded.

“It’s no time to be depressed. Hey, let’s start with the morning.”

Ooookay. I wake up everyday at 5:30. Although I don’t leave home until 7:30, because my hair is very long, it’s very difficult to manage it. Also, while it’s a bit embarrassing to say this, it’s very hard for me to leave from my blanket.

“I got my silver hair from my mother’s genes. The way I braid my hair also changes often. I envy Rem a bit because she has short hair.”

That’s right. My mother also has silver hair. I look quite like her, so I’m quite proud of it.

Combing my hair after I wake up is very troublesome. Bathing also takes a lot of effort. But because I've kept my hair long, I'm very reluctant to cut it. On Saturdays, because I have model work to do in the afternoon after class, I don't change my hairstyle.

"Emilia, do you wear pajamas when you sleep?"

Yep, I do. My favorite pajama is the pink one, with a cat pattern on it. I have a cat at home too, and the pattern is just like Puck. It's very cute!

After I get up in the morning, I comb my hair in front of the dresser and change to my school uniform. St. Lugunica… *cough cough* Our school's uniform is a sailor outfit! The summer uniform is cool and comfortable, but has a bit less of a floaty feeling to it compared to the winter uniform. As for school uniforms, I probably like the winter one more.

"Rather, I think Emilia likes winter more than summer. Although Rem also can endure the cold a bit… Emilia is extraordinary at it."

That's because, in the summer, even if I want to hug Puck, he'll run away. During the winter, even if we get in the quilt together, Puck won't mind.

"Putting Emilia's love for cats aside, after changing clothes, you go to school for class, right?"

Yes. Ah, hold on. Before going to school, I will go to the bakery. On Saturdays, I will go to the renovated bakery I discovered recently to buy lunch, and then go to school.

I recommend the clubhouse sandwich! The salesclerk secretly told me that they imitated it after the food reported in a special TV program.

"Emilia, if you advertise that on the blog, customers might flock to it."

Ah, I might not be able to buy it then. Is it better to keep it a secret? But if the bakery can become more popular, I would very happy… Yeah, write it in.

“I thought it was pretty good. Next is arriving at the school, and then…” Right, afternoon work. Finally, doing something fitting of a model!

After school, the lunch I buy is the same as the morning’s sandwich.

Although it’s nice to eat freshly baked bread on my days off, enduring it until your stomach is deflated before eating will make it very tasty. Ah, after you finish eating, you have to properly brush your teeth.

I was asked to pay attention to my diet, but I am weak to sweets. If I’m not careful, I’ll be swayed, so I have to pay extra attention!

After lunch, I have to go to the model office to work in the afternoon. Am I going to be late?

“Ah, you’re here Emilia.”

OOh, my Senior, Crusch was the first to arrive at the firm. She’s tall, slim, and has perfect facial features. She’s very cool!

Even though she has such beautiful long and green hair, she’s dashing. If I’m stared at by her, I would fall into a trance without realizing it.

“What’s that? A blog? Even though you’re technologically impaired? That’s strange.”

I was made fun of. By the way, even though Crusch is my senior in modeling, she is also my school’s mentor sister. She’s quite known for her academics and sports.

When Crusch is praised, I also secretly feel proud. For me… erm, I’m not that good at studying or exercising.

(TL Note: the school’s mentor sister is a system where a junior is paired with a senior to have an easier time at school. Basically teach the ropes.)

“If you have any questions about your homework, come ask me. In exchange…”

Crusch gave me some kind words while I was being dejected. And after that, she made a troubled expression, which I quickly understood.

I got it. It’s material collecting again. I’ll help!

“Sorry. It’s only when it comes to this that my desires are too overwhelming.”

Surprisingly, Crusch is very fond of games! But she’s not very good at them. This point makes her cute. Actually, even though I’m technologically impaired, when it comes to games, I can do alright. In the first place, we became close after hunting with Crusch during our break time.

“Hah… It’s finally over. Ah, it’s Emilia. Ya~ho!”

I was just chatting with Crusch when Priscilla came in. Priscilla and I are the same age, and we started modelling around the same time too. She’s my good friend! Twos peas in a pod!

“Priscilla, you and your inattentive and weary look. If you’re like that, you’ll ruin the dreams of the children who look up to you.”

Along with Priscilla came the stylist, Felix-sensei. Felix is very cute, and wears an outstanding dress… but Felix is actually a man! Anyway, you can talk to him about anything. He’s a very reliable big brother… Hm, rather, he’s more like a big sister.

“Listen to this, Emilia. About tomorrow’s clothes, Felix was really mean. He wouldn’t let me wear cute clothes…”

“That’s because Priscilla’s chest is a bit big. Just let tomorrow’s theme of cuteness be taken care of by Emilia. Priscilla’s will handle sexy. How about it?”

Even Felix-sensei is winking at me… Ahaha… guess I’ll answer it this way.

Although Priscilla is the same age as me, but… that, her chest is very big! Really big! After patting my chest, I look at Priscilla, and become depressed.

"Ah! No good. I was asked to go home early today. Then, I will take my leave. Emilia, see you tomorrow!"

Before I fell into sadness, Priscilla rushed out like a storm. Even though the conversation was not over yet, she packed her bag and quickly left.

"Priscilla sure is spirited. Felix-kyun is also shocked by her youthful vitality."

"It's too early for you to say such things, Felix. Now then, I also have some business to take care of… Felix, don't tease Emilia."

"Nyai won't. Really, Crusch is too ruthless."

Because they've known each other for a long time, Crusch and Felix-sensei's relationship is very tight.

After Crusch left, only Felix-sensei and I were there. Today's job is to discuss tomorrow's photography session, and trying out clothes…

"Well, go change. Nyahehe, I won't hurt you… ♪"

Although I trust him, I feel a bit uneasy after hearing him laugh while speaking.

The whole day tomorrow will be spent on modelling, so it'll be very busy starting from the morning. The entire morning will be in the studio, and most of the afternoon will be at an aquarium. Because Priscilla is also going, I won't feel particularly uneasy.

"Although it's a bit bold, we can't go feeling worried now."

Our manager, Ms. Anastasia, smiled as she recited tomorrow's schedule.

Ms. Anastasia is an outstanding manager, her responsibility in the office is to take care of the girls who are full of potential. I can understand if it's Crusch and

Priscilla, but to let her be responsible for me is simply a godsend.

"Reality is reality. Our job is to make dreams become reality. You'll be treated as a dressing doll today. Tomorrow will be the same, so you better be prepared, ok?"

Or so I was pressured.

After the discussion, Ms. Anastasia took a slight detour and drove me back home. Ms. Anastasia, who has a cute appearance, drives a very wild sports car, which shocked me. But that car really fits her. I wonder when I can become a mature adult like Ms. Anastasia… I thought to myself.

Driven home by Ms. Anastasia, I arrived before sunset.

Because daylight has been getting longer lately, I can see the sunset sometimes, which makes me feel happy. The orange sky. Don't you think it looks extremely sweet and delicious? Ah, anyone who sees it will be mesmerized!

"Big sis is saying something weird again."

I was startled in front of the front door. I came across my little sister, Beatrice, who just returned home after playing outside! Also, it seems my talking to myself was heard.

How embarrassing.

"Don't worry. The parts that would disappoint others won't show in the photographs. You can rest assured."

Ugh… how un-cute! Lately my little sister who matured early would tease me like so. Since she said that, then I won't go easy on her, and I won't shower with her.

"That's underhanded. Big sis, that's cheating!"

Once she had an expression of looking like she was about to cry, I could only relent. I made up with her, returned home together, and had a fashion show with Beatrice until dinner. After changing my cute little sister's clothes, I kind of understood Felix-sensei's feelings. No, I really understood it.

Tonight’s dinner is Japanese-style. Although there’s a saying that one should chew slowly, and eat 30 different types of food, leaving that all to mother makes me feel a bit uncomfortable. I would occasionally help out, and each time I wear the apron to clean up the table, Beatrice would also stand up to help.

After that is bathing with Beatrice, changing to my pajamas, and work on homework at my desk. My condition for working as a model is to not fall behind on learning. I have to work harder studying!

When I finished half of it, I lost to my exhaustion and snuggled into bed. No. It’s because I have to wake up early tomorrow, not because I lost.

Ah, Puck came into the room. That’s rare. Even though he’s afraid of the heat during the summer, he’s willing to sleep with me today? Good boy, let’s sleep together.

Just like this, my day has finished. I will continue working hard on writing my diary tomorrow… but this’ll be it for today. Yep, good night.

END

Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero

1

“It’s summer! It’s the sea! It’s sunshine!”

Seeing the superb vista spread out before him, Natsuki Subaru shouted that without thinking.

Right in front of his eyes, welcoming him with a flourish, was a vast quantity of clear blue water. Before this beautiful view that nature had brought forth, what a very small thing a person was, is what he couldn’t help but think as he was swept into a poetic state of mind.

“Say, Subaru.”

The one calling to Subaru as he waxed poetic was a silver-haired girl viewing the same scenery he was. With her beautiful amethyst eyes open wide, she tilted her head and asked:

“What’s ‘summer’?”

“Also, I don’t really get what ‘sea’ refers to, either…”

“Ah, well you see, that’s…”

The silver-haired girl’s inquiry was followed by an additional question from another girl. On hearing that, Subaru turned around with an excessively extravagant gesture, prepared to give a grand response, and came to a sudden stop.

The cause couldn’t be simpler, or easier to understand.

When Subaru turned around, what he entered his view was two girls whose attire was way too different from what they normally wore.

Shoulders and waists, backs and stomachs; white, bare skin that was normally hidden underneath lovely outfits was now shown without reservation… To put it in less shameful terms, they were wearing what could be called swimsuits.

Two beautiful girls—Emilia and Rem—had been standing behind Subaru wearing swimsuits.

“I’m so~ glad I was born on Earth!”

Taking a victory pose, Subaru thanked his good fortune. Strictly speaking, this was another world and not Earth, but that sort of thing was unimportant.

Regardless, while Subaru felt a firm resolve in his heart to burn this scene into his memory…

“You shouldn’t look at my daughter like that.”

“Don’t stare lewdly at Ram’s little sister. That’s filthy.”

“Burning summer?!”

There was a soft impact of a paw on his face, and as he tilted backwards, he was struck by a sudden wind and pushed away. Unable to support himself, Subaru’s body was blown backwards.

“Ah, Subaru!”

“Subaru?!”

Seen off at the end by the two girls’ voices, Subaru’s form was smashed into the surface of the water with a great splash.

2

The Roswaal manor project, “Getting-out-of-the-heat Tour of the Lakes in the Territory”, has begun!

That, indeed, was the tour name that directly expressed the content of this swimsuit event. Further, exactly as you’d grasp from the plan’s name, this tour was something made real by Subaru’s planning and suggestions.

Recently, there had been ongoing record high temperatures in Lugunica.

At this rate, there was a danger of a drop in morale in regards to the Royal Selection, and the unity of the camp could begin to crumble—would be an exaggeration, but as a result of letting off steam like that, the getting-out-of-the-heat tour at local lakes became a reality.

Not only was it a private beach, it was even a private lake, and it truly was a significant vacation.

“It really never hurts to try asking…”

Squatting at the water’s edge, Subaru looked back over what had happened.

Perhaps one should say that it was no surprise that mansion’s master Roswaal, who loved festivals, readily accepted Subaru’s appeal, and brought it to pass in an entirely unexpected form.

It was not summer, but fire season, and since there was no sea, they used a lake, but nevertheless, this was a perfectly good “Summertime Swim in the Sea”.

“And what matters most is that the part about girls in swimsuits playing on the beach in today’s perfect swimming weather really came true, after all.”

“Well he~llo, Subaru. Are you enjoying the lake swim, perha~ps?”

“Oh, Ros-chi. I was just thinking again about how I need to thank you…”

As he was speaking, Subaru looked up at the silhouette of the tall man standing next to him, and was left speechless. That was because Roswaal was standing there majestically with his hands on his hips, wearing a black, daringly cut boomerang swimsuit on his unexpectedly well-toned body.

“The first detailed portrayal of a swimsuit is Roswaal; who wanted that?!”

“Now, now, don’t be like that. A~lso, I’ll be quietly devoting myself to the role of pleasantly watching over you as all of you frolic in the wa~ter. Relax, and go have a goo~d time.”

“Well now, I’m glad to hear you say that, but…”

The unclouded smile made it all the more suspicious, but Subaru slid his view to the side in response to Roswaal’s words. Doing so, his sight was now directed at Ram, who was holding up an umbrella for protection from the sunlight. She was supporting a rather large parasol, creating shade for Roswaal and herself.

Naturally, Ram, too, was wearing a swimsuit—the peach-colored swimsuit offered little defense against viewing, and her long, slim arms and legs were extravagantly exposed. While certainly delicate, they gave an impression not of weakness, but of solidity. Her chest was only slightly filled out, but womanliness could not be measured by the shape of the body alone…

“Barusu!”

“Gaaah! My eyes! My e~yes!!”

“Do not direct your beastly eyes towards Ram. She’ll crush them.”

“Dundundundun… The, the same damage that happened in the story that my nickname’s from…”

Engaging with her head-on backfired, and the sand that Ram kicked up hit him right in the eyes. As Subaru rolled around on the ground in pain, Ram snorted a derisive ‘Ha’ at him.

“But Master Roswaal is enjoying himself, and Rem is cute when she’s having fun like this, so I’ll praise you for that.”

“With things going like this?! Couldn’t you have said that before wrecking my eyes?!”

“We don’t have the kind of relationship where I can look you in the eye and openly express thanks. Figure it out.”

“I can’t see, but I know you don’t have a serious look on your face! I know it!”

“If you rub at them too much, the sand will injure your eyes. Look, go wash them out with water. You’re so much trouble.”

“Yeah, thanks… wait, you did it in the first place! Stop that! Stay out of my heart!”

Just like the saying goes, Subaru rejected the kindness he couldn’t see, and rolled over towards the water.

Watching Subaru go as he fled at a furious pace, Ram sighed sadly.

“It would be alright for you to be kind to Subaru a little more openly, wou~ldn’t it?”

“…Master Roswaal, you’ll get sunburned. Let’s find a place to set up the umbrella.”

“Of course.”

Without responding to her master’s words, Ram began walking briskly, still carrying the parasol. Softening his smile at Ram’s bearing, Roswaal held his peace and followed her.

3

“Aw man, that was awful. I can’t believe, before I even got a good look at Emilia-tan’s swimsuit, I suddenly got saddled with a handicap like losing most of my vision…”

Splashing water on his eyes to wash them, Subaru had settled down and let out a long, deep sigh.

Fortunately, unlike seawater, the lake’s water wasn’t salty. There were no worries about further damaging his eyes by washing them, and he was able to safely reclaim his eyesight. Now, without further distractions…

“Swimsuit viewing… no, art appreciation.”

“…No matter where you go, you really are a noisy fellow, I suppose. If it was going to turn out like this, Betty would have been better off spending time quietly in the Forbidden Library, you know."

"Hm… that voice and abusive language; Beako, is it?"

Slicking back his dampened hair, Subaru's head turned right and left, searching for the owner of that voice. Then, he discovered a little girl's form bobbing on the surface of the water, comfortably relaxed into a swim tube. A little girl wearing a polka-dot swimsuit.

"Beako, you look like you're having a super-good time there… it makes what you just said entirely unconvincing."

"Betty has been dragged against her will under this burning sky, on a hot day like this, I suppose. If she doesn't take back at least a tiny bit of the peace of mind she should have been able to gain, it will have been a waste of time, you know."

"That way of thinking doesn't suit a little girl enjoying a swim tube at the beach, though."

When Subaru retorted with an astonished look, Beatrice's face, as she made waves in the water, suggested she hadn't a clue what he was talking about. Having said that, her expression was completely relaxed, so surely there was no need to take her statement at face value.

That was made all the more clear by the presence of the kitten atop her stomach that was playing with the water.

"You're having the time of your life there, in your own way. Where did we have a swimsuit in that size?"

When Subaru pointed him out, Puck murmured a 'Hmm?' as he floated in the water above Beatrice's stomach. His appearance wasn't what it normally was, clad instead in a swimsuit with red and white horizontal stripes.

"You see, this is the same as when I take on physical form. I'm making clothing from mana. Isn't it cute?"

“In other words, normally you’re completely naked on purpose, then. You see mascot characters like that now and then, but am I the only one that feels like it’s odd to see a character that never wears anything suddenly wearing just a swimsuit…?”

Hearing Subaru run out of steam, Puck let out a laughing ‘Hohoho” and winked deftly.

“It’s a rare shot that I hardly ever show. Doesn’t that make you feel fortunate?”

“It does, I suppose! Bubby in a swimsuit, playing in the water, it’s just too much, you know.”

“It’s not that hard to satisfy the demands of your core fanbase, though.”

“She’s not the core, you know. Lia saw my swimsuit too, and was happy with it.”

“Damn it! I can’t put up a fight when you’ve already captured the king!”

Puck’s attitude was ‘To the victor go the spoils’ as he placed his paws on his hips, proudly sticking out his chest as he stood atop Beatrice. To go along with that, Beatrice gloated as she rested on her swim tube.

It’s not like anything had actually been won or lost, but Subaru ended up feeling the misery of defeat. However, as though to save Subaru from that…

“Mya~!! Ee~k, I suppose!! Woah?!”

A round object flew in with incredible force, and scored an amazing clean hit on Beatrice as she floated on the water’s surface—the impact capsized the swim tube, and Beatrice and Puck were thrown into the water.

“I don’t believe it, is this… divine punishment?!”

“Wha, wha, what do you mean, divine punishment, you know?!

What on earth did Betty and Bubby do…"

Entirely soaked, and clinging to the swim tube, Beatrice snapped at him while looking aghast. Directly in front of her, the cause of the shipwreck—a round ball filled with air—bobbed merrily as it floated by.

Plainly put, it was a beach ball. It's construction was somewhat slipshod, but it was a decent approximation of the summertime beach friend that Subaru remembered—it had come flying in from a short distance away.

"Ah, I'm sorry, are you alright? It didn't hit anyone, did it?"

"Hey, hey, please be careful with that… Um, Emilia-tan?"

Running over while looking flustered, the one who had come to apologize was Emilia, with her silver hair dancing. Subaru blinked, and then took a good look at her outfit from top to bottom.

"…? What's the matter?"

Entirely uncaring about her own charms, Emilia looked mystified at Subaru's gaze.

Emilia's swimsuit look not only put her well-proportioned physical beauty on display, but also had a sense of style that lightly wrapped her bare skin in a shirt—some might feel it was a signal that she was reluctant to show more, but Emilia's charm, with the unpretentious impression it gave, was improved explosively.

"Professor Puck…!"

"Do you understand it now, Subaru? I'm not thoughtlessly keeping Lia's skin exposure low for nothing, you know. This is exactly what I was aiming for."

"I'm sorry, I'm not really sure what the two of you are saying."

Emilia herself was left behind by the hot-blooded handshake between Subaru and Puck over their shared understanding.

"…Lady Emilia, Rem's apologies! It would seem she put a little too much power into that."

Saying that, rushing in late to the scene was a beautiful girl with her blue hair bobbing, Rem. Slightly short of breath, she widened her eyes at the gathering.

"Ah, Subaru! Were you able to play as much as you wanted with my sister and Miss Beatrice?"

"Wait a minute I suppose, younger of the sisters! I have something to say about your idea of him having been able to play, you know! When are you trying to say that Betty was playing with this man, I suppose!"

"Yeah, we were having a great time. Hey, your swimsuit is cute too, Rem. It looks good on you."

"Oh that… makes me blush…"

"Don't ignore me, you know!"

Rem, acting bashful with her cheeks reddening, was wearing a simple, captivating blue bikini. Compared to her older sister, her body had more bountiful feminine curves, and her white skin was exposed to the rays of the fire season's sun. Healthy, and enchanting.

Ignored during the Subaru and Rem's exchange, Beatrice indignantly made her way to the beach. Gripped in the little girl's hands was the beach ball that had been the root cause of her shipwreck.

Seeing that, Emilia's face lit up immediately.

"Ah, Beatrice, you picked that up for us. Thank you. I was playing, um, 'beach volley?' with Rem, and we got really worked up."

"Ah, you were playing beach volleyball?! This isn't really a beach, but that's fine, that's fine! It's a summertime classic! I want to hustle with Emilia-tan, too!"

"Truly? Then you should join us at beach volleyball, Subaru. If they wouldn't mind, perhaps Miss Beatrice and the great spirit would join as well."

When Subaru got on board with what Emilia was saying, Rem cheerfully suggested that Beatrice and Puck join as well. Beatrice frowned at those words, and tried to decline reflexively, but…

"Hmf! Who would want to join in that kind of play, I suppose? Betty will be with Bubby…"

"Heh, that sounds like fun. It's been a while since I gave my body a proper workout."

"With Betty and Bubby working together, any contest is an easy victory, you know!"

"It's really cute the way you always do that…"

Beatrice easily reversed her opinion, and at last it was time to begin beach volleyball.

4

…At last it was time to begin beach volleyball, but it was also the beginning of a scene of carnage.

"Alright! Here we go~! Eiya!"

"Wha, wait… eek!"

Together with an adorable shout, Emilia used her open palm to strike at the ball she'd thrown overhead.

The next moment, the ball grazed Subaru's cheek, and stabbed into the corner of the hastily-created court. Just like it said, it stabbed into the court. It didn't bounce. It was stabbed in. It was spinning. Smoke was rising.

Stretching across any and all sports, the idea of a difference in physical ability—this was clear proof of it.

“Has there ever been a time where the term ‘one-sided game’ applied more correctly than this?”

“Don’t…don’t start feeling like we’ve lost already, I suppose. There’s still our turn to serve…”

“Right there!!”

Beatrice had sent off a relaxed serve well-suited to her appearance, but it was thwarted by a strong block by Rem that made it seem like a mountain had risen to halt it in its path. Rem leaped, brought her arms together, and smashed the ball (which was moving slow enough to be stopped by a fly) with a tremendous blow.

“Mya~o!!”

“B, Bubby~~~?!”

Struck head-on by the ball after it was knocked back, Puck let out a high-pitched wail and sank into the sand. Beatrice hurriedly crouched down, desperately working to retrieve Puck from where he was buried. Looking at that ruthless outcome out of the corner of his eye, Subaru watched Emilia and Rem modestly clap their hands together, celebrating the point they’d gained.

At the point they’d divided up into teams by playing rock-paper-scissors, the victors had already been decided.

The ‘rock’ team was Subaru, Beatrice, and Puck, and the ‘paper’ team was Emilia and Rem. There’s no need to even mention the difference in physical ability, but even beyond that, both Emilia and Rem were of the same mind in that when it came to winning and losing, the idea of easing up or holding back would never occur to them.

Basically, since the both of them always put in their full effort, Subaru’s group never had a chance of winning.

“Somehow, it seems like they’re not hitting the ball back that often. It was amazing when I was playing against you, Rem.”

“Indeed. Between Lady Emilia and Rem, neither side was able to score a point. When the exchange of shots wouldn't stop, the tension was incredible. But, it was fun."

"Mhmm, I rea~lly enjoyed it. I'm rea~lly having fun now, too."

Showered in the rays of the summer sun, girls in swimsuits with bursting smiles and beach volleyball—there's no doubt, this is none other than the scenery that Subaru had wished for from the bottom of his heart.

"Nah, I didn't want the kind of game where you have to desperately run away from the ball!"

"A~lright, here goes. Puck and Beatrice, you guys try and hit it back, too!"

"Subaru, Rem believes in you. You can stop any sort of ball for us!"

"That might be hoping for a little too much… degeberofu?!"

In the end, unable to fully avoid that expectation, the bullet-like serve struck him in the face. Subaru was thrown out to the water, throwing up a tremendous splash.

"They're having fun, a~ren't they?"

"Indeed."

Watching Subaru and the others from a distance, Roswaal and Ram whispered to each other and smiled faintly.

This, too, was the "Endless Summer Life in Another World" that Subaru wished for.

Lugunica Newspaper: Volume 1

PAGE 1

Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero

A fantastic event occurs where the residents of Roswaal Manor enjoy an everlasting summer?!

NEWS LINEUP

Shibuya Marui Shopping Center Event Space 8F

Long-awaited fans! This event will bring summer color to your life!

Based on the popular anime Re:Zero Starting Life in Another World with a summer twist, Shibuya Marui will be opening a pop-up store featuring illustrations of the women of Roswaal Manor, Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice playing by the seaside in their charming swimsuits. The store can be located on the 8th floor from August 10th (Thurs) 2012. This time-limited event will run from August 10th (Thurs) to September 3rd (Sun). Re:Zero merchandise featuring new illustrations from the anime will be available for purchase. Fans will receive a free copy of the short story Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero by the author, Tappei Nagatsuki for purchases of ¥3000 and over during the event. In addition, limited edition collectible cards from Bushiroad's trading card game "Weiß Schwarz" featuring original illustrations will also be given away! One card will be distributed per checkout on a first-come, first-served basis. Epos Card members will be able to take part in a raffle, making this an event that Re:Zero fans will not want to miss out on.

PAGE 2

Weiß Schwarz Limited Edition Trading Card Giveaway

At the Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero event, as a special offer, customers can receive a special collectible card from Bushiroad's trading card game "Weiß Schwarz" on a first-come, first-served basis. These invaluable collectible cards will depict summer illustrations of Emilia, Rem, Ram, and Beatrice.

Give Away! New Short Story by Tappei Nagatsuki, author of Re:Zero Starting Life in Another World

Customers will receive a booklet of Tappei Nagatsuki's new short story, Re: Starting Life in an Endless Summer from Zero in which the residents of Roswaal Manor visit the beach and enjoy many summer activities like beach volleyball. Apparently, the content of the short story will be quite different from the original. Although Roswaal doesn't appear on the front cover, you might catch a glimpse of him in a rare swimsuit scene!

We have received some comments from everyone at Roswaal Manor!

[Emilia] Um, my thoughts on samma? You mean summer, right? Well, it's been soooooooo hot these days, you know? I'm not great with hot weather, so it's been tough. But I've had so much fun coming here and playing in the water with everyone. Subaru told me about this game, "Beech Balleyball" which was really great. I had a lot of fun playing it, when it was just me and Rem it was hard to settle the score, but the match with Puck and the others was great and Subaru said, "I didn't stand a chaaaaance!" But I had a really great samma. Despite the hot weather, I hope that everyone can make precious samma memories.

[Beatrice] Why should Betty have to entertain all this idle chatter, I suppose? She's not kidding, in fact. It was baffling to her getting dragged outside in this heat, I suppose. In fact, it wasn't so bad floating in the water and, playing in the sand with Bubby. But beach volleyball was not for Betty, I suppose! Bubby got his head stuck in the sand because of that useless oaf! Betty hopes she doesn't lose so that she can avenge Bubby's defeat. Betty will definitely, definitely show you her stuff next year, in fact!

[Rem] Yes, Master Roswaal kindly allowed Rem to take a vacation together with all the people of the mansion. Rem hopes this was a good change of pace for Lady Emilia, who has been constantly worrying about the upcoming royal selection. Rem is feeling more and more excited about serving tomorrow. But, the most amazing thing about it all was how Subaru suggested this vacation to Master Roswaal and convinced him to do it. Subaru looked so adorable in his swimsuit that Rem could hardly take her eyes off him. It was a shame that we were on different teams for the beach volleyball game, but Rem just hit the ball left and right. Oh, Rem just remembered, on that day Subaru did this thing and… (on and on she goes)

[Ram] Every day has been so hot; Ram simply cannot stand it. The only thing that saved Ram is the fact that she was able to spend some quiet time by Master Roswaal's side, plus Rem looked super cute in her swimsuit. Ram doesn't know who's reading this article, but please take of yourselves whoever and wherever you are at the very least. Don't say anything too outlandish or you'll end up like Barusu who got a fever the following day and Ram won't be taking care of you.

PAGE 3

Emilia's Birthday Celebration is coming up!

Re: Zero Starting Emilia's Birthday Life 2017 in Shibuya Marui

Dates: September 15th (Friday)—October 2nd (Monday), 2017

Location: Shibuya Marui Shopping Mall

Emilia-tan Birthday Set

Let's Celebrate Together☆ Emilia-tan Birthday Set

B2 Hanging Scroll (Emilia)

B2 Hanging Scroll (Emilia, Ram, Rem)

EMT Powerbank

The Faces of Emilia Can Badge Collection

Keyrings

Large Towel

A4 Clear File (2 included)

EMT Denim Tote Bag

Emilia-tan B Poster

(???) iPhone Case

Re:Zero Ex:
I Can Hear the Festival Music

Rem: "…Would you like to go to the festival?"

Rem said this when the heat of the daytime started to cool down and there were faint signs of dusk approaching.

Subaru: "By festival, you mean that festival? The festival exists?"

Rem: "Yes. The event isn't that big, but it is on the day that's right in the middle of fire season. Apparently, it has little food stands too."

Subaru: "So the hot days will continue, but it's the kind of festival where you'll need to be fired up to get through the latter half too. And there'll be food stands…That sure sounds nice."

Subaru smiled and positively replied to Rem's invitation.

This goes without saying, but Subaru loves festivals.

Seeing the foods carts that are rather expensive and the tons of people gather at the event even though it's hot…kind of looks like something that requires toughness.

It's like, even if they don't have energy, they force themselves to. And when the fireworks go off in the end, it's awesome.

I probably shouldn't expect this world to even have fireworks regarding things that'd remind you of summer, though…

Subaru: "Guess I'll…go to the festival."

Rem: "…! Really?"

Subaru: "It's weird for you to be surprised when you're the one who invited me. I just happen to feel it today, and everyone's out too, so… Oh, I guess Beako's here."

When Subaru mentioned the girl that had said she was staying inside the forbidden archives to escape the summer heart,

Rem: “No, Miss Beatrice isn’t here today. Even if she was, I’d insist her not to be.”

Subaru: “Huh, she’s out too?”

Rem: “… …Yes, she is.”

Subaru: “Oh. Okay.”

It looked like she was really conflicted, but Subaru didn’t say anything to Rem, who looked like she had made a difficult decision.

For now, I’ll think of a suiting present to bring back home to Beatrice and…

Subaru: “…Alright, let’s go. To the festival.”

Rem: “Okay! Let’s do it!”

…And so, things ended up like this.

Rem: “H-How is it? Does it look weird?”

Subaru raised at an eyebrow at Rem in surprise, who said that and cast down her eyes in an embarrassed manner. They were going to go to the festival, but Rem had returned to her room, saying that she needed to get ready, and then they met at the mansion’s entranceway.

And then, when Rem appeared at the entranceway…

Subaru: “…Is that a yukata?”

Rem: “Erm, oh, yes, it’s a yukata. It’s not really popular in Lugunica, but I do recall you being well informed on them.”

Subaru: “Ahh, the dress in the dress code that is essential to the festivals back in my hometown… I can’t believe it.”

Standing in front of Subaru, who was shocked, was Rem in a white cloth yukata that had morning glory flower patterns designed on it. Upon seeing the large flower ornament on her head, the refreshing sandals on her feet, and the dress that was completely different from her usual maid outfit, Subaru nodded and said “Just as I thought” as if he had been convinced of something.

Rem: “Umm… Just as I thought… What do you mean by that?”

Subaru: “No, I just mean that I’ve known it for a long time. That it’s an utter shame that you and Ram only wear and have maid outfits.”

Subaru continued by saying “Because” and,

Subaru: “You’re this cute. It’s a loss for the world to not have you dress up. Beautiful, just beautiful. It looks great on you.”

Rem: “My…For you to say that I’m so cute that you want to have me all to yourself, I’m blushing…”

Subaru: “Having this amazing sight all to myself does seem like a sin.”

Hearing Subaru’s reply as he smiled wryly, Rem blushed. After that, she pouted a little bit and said,

Rem: “…Subaru, you’re a cruel person.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Rem: “Don’t worry, it’s nothing. Thank you very much for complimenting me on the yukata.”

Subaru: “But I’m complimenting you in your yukata, not the yukata itself…”

Subaru, who grumbled that with his head tilted, pulled himself together as he said, “Oh well.” After that, Subaru fully enjoyed seeing Rem in her yukata again.

Subaru: “But man, you wear a yukata perfectly. Just what you’d expect from a maid that can do everything.”

Rem: “Well, I’m actually used to wearing yukatas…wearing waso (Japanese clothing.) At my and my sister’s old home, it was normal to spend time in kimono waso.”

Subaru: “At this point, I wonder if maybe both Japanese and European clothes are acceptable… So many possibilities, huh, Rem?”

Rem: “I’m just honored to receive your praise.”

Rem started to do a curtsy like how she usually would, then shyly said “Ah” upon realizing that she wasn’t wearing a skirt. Seeing that, Subaru shrugged his shoulders awkwardly, and after that, to shrug it off he said,

Subaru: “This means it wouldn’t look right for me to be wearing casual clothing this time.”

Rem: “Actually, I’ve been trying to prepare a yukata like mine for you too, and I was this close to finishing, but I just couldn’t decide on the most important part…”

Subaru: “Decide…on the colors?”

Rem: “No, the patterns. I couldn’t decide between heart patterns and flower patterns. The gravest blunder of my whole life.”

Subaru: “Both of those would be so hard to wear! This is supposed to be my yukata, isn’t it?!”

He wasn’t proud of it, but Subaru didn’t believe in himself enough to think that he could wear Paris Collection and yukatas with heart patterns and flower patterns. Subaru was frightened by how difficult it would be to wear all that, although Rem persisted in saying “Subaru is wonderful in anything.”

Subaru: “If it were Ros-chi, he wouldn’t look weird in a yukata with heart patterns…”

Rem: “I’m sure you’d look cute in it too…”

Subaru: “About that, you see, I’m a passion kind of guy, not cuteness.”

Rem: “Passion, not cuteness…”

Rem tilted her head upon hearing Subaru’s reply. But anyway, this meant that Subaru’s yukata was a no go this time.

Subaru: “Well, let’s save talking about that for next time.”

Rem: “Next time, you say?”

Subaru: “Don’t know if it’ll be happening next week or next year, but this won’t be the only festival, right? This won’t be the last one, so let’s just go have fun today.”

Subaru gave a thumbs-up and nodded at Rem.

And so, he left talking with Rem about whether or not it’d be a yukata with heart patterns as something he’d take care of himself next year.

At Subaru’s words, Rem blinked several times and murmured, “Next time, again…”

After that, with a full smile as great as the morning glories on her yukata, Rem said,

Rem: “Yeah, you’re right! Let’s go to the festival again next year!”

Subaru: “Well said! Alright then, time to enjoy the festival this year! Let’s go, Rem!”

Rem: “Yes, let’s go together!”

Subaru gave an energetic command to leave, and Rem went with him as she raised her hand.

They could hear the festival music from the path that they were walking on side by side.

Even though this was another world, nobody hesitates to enjoy festivals. So, let’s do our best to go all out and enjoy this hot season as much as we can.

So that next year, we'll be able to talk about our memories of this day.

Subaru: "Anyway, our first goal is to conquer all of the food stands. Rem, what kind of place would you like to check out?"

Rem: "I don't know much about festivals, so is it okay if I leave that to you?"

Subaru: "Oh, fine by me. But, don't say I didn't offer. Also, I have to get Beako a present…Well, she'll probably be happy if I buy her a mask or something. Yeah, that'll do."

It was a pretty careless conclusion. Still, Rem didn't say anything to Subaru. Rem was just smiling as if to say that this time they were spending together and the atmosphere were enough for her.

When the festival music was finally near, they started to see the food stands' paper lanterns lighting up the evening scenery in the distance.

The people who noticed Subaru and Rem in the illuminating festival waved at them.

Subaru: "Hey look, everyone's full of enthusiasm. When it comes to enthusiasm, there's probably no one who could hold a candle to you in your yukata, though."

Rem: "Oh Subaru, you meanie."

Subaru: "My bad. But, this is a much bigger success than I expected it to be."

Rem: "Let's not get lost now. But even if I do get lost, I should be able to find you."

Subaru: "Oh, looks like I can count on you then. Like with a signal or something?"

Rem: "Nope, you're just really stinky."

Subaru: “There you go saying that again with an innocent look on your face!”

Even though it’s not about a specific body odor, it does hurt when you’re told about it over and over. So…

Rem: “…Ah, my hand.”

Subaru: “It’s a solution. Can’t go off getting lost now, after all.”

He took Rem’s free hand and held onto it so she’d never get lost. With this, all preparations were complete.

Rem: “…You really are a cruel person, Subaru.”

Subaru: “I thought it was a nice idea, though. So we shouldn’t do it after all?”

Rem: “No, let’s stay like this. Alright, the festival! Subaru, we’re going to conquer all the food stands, right?”

Subaru: “Y-Yeah, exactly! Still don’t really get it, but let’s go Rem!”

Rem: “Yeah!”

…After this, Subaru and Rem, being all fired up, went on to conquer the festival food carts one by one. Although, they did end up becoming known as “food cart robbers”.

…And that was a story for another night.

Subaru's Strange Tea Party

—It was a scene from a tea party that could have occurred.

"Well, the atmosphere seems completely different from usual, doesn't it? What's up with this?" asked Subaru.

"The atmosphere is different? I don't know what you are talking about. It's the same as usual: this is a Witch's Tea Party to welcome you, and my hospitality and everything else are the same," said the white-haired witch sitting on a white chair—Echidna—who then calmly picked up the cup on the table.

If I cut this part out, it would be the tea party I'm used to—though I never really wanted to get used to it—but I can't really object to what she's saying. However…

"It isn't the usual meadow but a dance hall that looks kinda stylish. What's up with that?! The décor is a bit modern, and it has a dazzling disco ball… How the hell can you say that it's the same as usual?!"

"Well, it's definitely a little different than usual, I guess? But is it really something to make a fuss about?"

"Put yourself in my shoes! You unsympathetic Witch!"

Echidna shrugged a little after Subaru got angry and started cussing her. He then let out a sigh at her lackadaisical response and looked around.

As I previously stated, a place in Echidna's dream known as the Witch's Tea Party has been completely transformed.

Naturally, this kind of décor wasn't found in this world, so it must have been created using Subaru's knowledge.

“But even so, you really must’ve dug deep to find interior décor like this in my mind. Even I’m not that familiar with disco-esque places like this.”

“Oh, is that so? But, in your mind, this kind of scene was associated with conviviality…”

“Yep, you just let the cat out of the bag! So it was your doing after all! And why is the theme of it conviviality… Wait.”

“Uh… Wha… What is it?”

“—You’re being influenced by the atmosphere outside, aren’t you?”

Echidna started averting her eyes upon hearing Subaru’s question.

The atmosphere outside… I can’t speak about it in detail, but currently, there’s a bit of a festival going on outside the castle of dreams. That was where I was until I got summoned here.

“You can’t go outside, so you decorated your usual space and made it shiny… You’re a loner, huh.”

“It can’t be helped, you know. I can’t get out of here. But you guys were really having fun. I’m just resisting in my own cute way. It’s the best I can do,” Echidna replied with a pout, then looked away from Subaru.

If you just look at how she’s acting, you could say it looks cute, but the person doing it is a battle-hardened Witch among Witches.

This was a place created using convenient information taken from Subaru’s memories to begin with, so…

“Hee-Hee, you have a cute side, Echidna.”

“…How can you be in a space that only he and I can be in?” asked Echidna.

“Huh? Didn’t you call me here? How else would I be here?” said the beautiful, young silver-haired girl—Emilia—as she put a finger to her cheek and tilted her head.

Echidna's expression turned gloomy at her appearance, but…
"Alright!" Subaru clenched his fist. "I've done it, I've summoned Emilia-tan! Wouldn't this be the first time Emilia-tan and I have been in Echidna's place together, then? This is a rare event!"

"So you've summoned her? How very boorish of you. Are you not satisfied with it being just the two of us?"

"I'm dissatisfied in every way imaginable! It's finally starting to feel good."

"Hey! Subaru, you shouldn't say it like that! It will hurt Echidna's feelings."

"…It's much more hurtful to be defended by you," Echidna, who'd gotten defended, grumbled at Emilia's back while she was glaring cutely at Subaru.

However, Emilia, not noticing that, spoke. "But I'm glad that I could meet you. It's reaaally lively outside, and it would be lonely if you're left alone."

"Right? I thought that Echidna and I wouldn't be able to hold a long conversation, so I had you come here, Emilia-tan. A nice decision by me! How truly DILIGENT I am, being considerate like THIS!"

"Sorry, but I don't know what you are talking about," Emilia replied, brushing Subaru off even though he was excited about it.

Echidna rested her cheek on her hand while looking at how they were acting.

This was Echidna's Castle of Dreams. She'd changed the meadow into a dance hall and could even create tea and sweets at will. She could do anything she wanted, and yet…

"There are two things here that I have no control over… Usually, it would have been something to be happy about though."

"Oh, Echidna, you are having tea. May I join you? I've always wanted to have tea with you," Emilia inquired after walking over to her.

Subaru panicked at Emilia's action and… "Wait, Emilia-tan! You're better off not drinking that tea! You shouldn't have the sweets either! I had a bad experience when I drank it before…"

"You drank it, but I'm not allowed to? Isn't that browbeating?"

"You don't hear people say 'browbeating' in this day and age…"

Subaru's well-intentioned appeal didn't go over well, and he slumped his shoulders.

"It feels outrageous to be on her side, but that's a terrible thing to say, Natsuki Subaru. Even though you so passionately drank all of my secretions twice like that."

"Be careful how you word it! Secretions? Are you a plant?!"

"Hey, it smells reaaally nice… It's fine right, Subaru? I'm hungry, too."

"No, no, no, it isn't good, Emilia-tan! Believe in me! Trust me!"

As Subaru and Emilia sat around the table and argued, Echidna tilted her cup silently, her beautiful eyebrows scrunched up, and muttered, "The festivities outside were interesting, but this place has its own merit. I'll be more careful next time."

The tea cooled down while the argument between Subaru and Emilia heated up above Echidna's head.

END

Isekai Quartet Special: Another World, Another Episode

1

…When I woke up, I found myself in the middle of a barren wasteland.

???: “Man, I really am in a fix. What’s this all about?”

I frantically looked around the room, trying to grasp the situation I was in the best I could.

I may not look it, but I’ve been through tons of hellish experiences; the likes of which ordinary people wouldn’t be able to go through. I’ve been chased by a Dragon, swallowed up by a flood, asked to siege a fort run by a tribe of savages alone without causing any bloodshed—quite unreasonably might I add—and I’ve even flitted between life and death for three days and nights due to some strange illness.

From all of these experiences I’ve had while travelling, I may have found one or two ways to deal with situations such as these…

???: “That’s what I thought, but nothing’s coming to mind. I’m sure there must have been signs back when Reid-kun and Farsale-kun took me to the Great Waterfall in the dead of night, or when Echidna-kun accidentally blew up a forest with her magic…”

Whenever I recall all the pleasant faces of the people I travelled with, comparing them with the experiences I’ve accumulated so far, the fact I’ve managed to make it this long without dying genuinely impresses me.

Of course, when it came to that, it had been those with some sense about them who would shoulder his hardships.

In any case…

???: “Last night was going to be the first time in a while where we’d have stayed at a town inn, rather than camp outdoors…”

It’s not unusual for us to camp outdoors while on long journeys. That said, I’ve got a bad leg and use a cane, so it’s always been a concern of mine that I’d end up putting too much of a burden on my fellow companions.

Well, some of these kids would come kick my back whenever I lagged behind, not showing me an ounce of mercy. The fact remained though; every part of my body was groaning in complaint, nevermind my mental state.

After all, compared to the other kids, who were full of youth, I’m a middle-aged geezer who’s been getting on in years.

That’s why it should have just been me calling it an early night after doing that “massawge” stuff I’d learnt from Flugel-kun; that way I’d be able to give my body a proper rest in preparation for the long journey.

And yet…

???: “Looks like I woke up to find myself alone in this strange place… In the past, Flugel-kun told me he went through something similar, and now I feel bad for not taking him seriously.”

Scratching my cheek, I looked around the area, attempting to gather information.

At the very least, it didn’t look like I was going to be woken up from this weirdly realistic dream. Thus, what I needed to do was discard the preconception that this was a dream or illusion, and instead, seriously come up with a plan for later.

I need to try and find a way to not die in this parched wasteland with nothing in it, I need to find a way to live.

???: “How did a mere hermit grow to be so bold. If not for Satella-kun finding me, I would have probably died like a wretch… Apparently, it looks like I don’t want to die.”

Luckily, when I was thrown right into the middle of this wasteland, I had all my provisions on hand.

I've got food, my water flask, and my jacket packed in my knapsack. What comes most handy is the fact that I've got my cane on me. Without it, I'd end up having difficulties walking properly; plus, who knows what Farsale-kun would yell if I told him I lost it.

If I were asked to reimburse it, my debt would start getting to the point where you wouldn't be able to document it.

???: "Still, at least with the debt I owe, I don't mind if the amount balloons up, so long as I can meet them again."

I'd probably get laughed at if I said something like "They're priceless to me", but before I even realised, they'd become something like that to me.

Going by the rules of thumb I'd built up so far, it probably wasn't just me stuck in a strange situation like this. Perhaps, all of my companions were going through the same experience too.

In that case, since I'm the second most likely to die among my circle, Satella-kun, earnest as she is, probably is searching for me with all her might. If she lost sight of Satella-kun, Echidna-kun would probably get frantic as well. As for Reid-kun; seeing him whenever he could, should be fine. He probably wasn't going to die anyways, also, with Farsale-kun, he too had the sort of disposition where he could get on with things regardless of where he was, so no worries there.

???: "Guess the issue is with Flugel-kun, he feels like he'd die more easily than me…"

Flugel-kun, strangely unreliable as he is, was more likely to drag himself into danger; even more so than myself with my bad leg. There have been many times where he's jumped into danger all on his own. In some aspects, he's been reaping what he's sown; yet even then, I was worried enough to think about his safeguarding.

Anyways, that's that. My goal now is to link back up with my companions, and then…

???: “I’ve gotta find out where I am, and what I need to do to get back to where I was.”

Just to put it out there, our journey is one of great importance to us.

I myself don’t really want to flaunt it everywhere and exaggerate it, but apparently this journey thing of ours is quite the grand undertaking.

…After all, it’s a journey to save the world.

2

I’m rather pessimistic, if I do say so myself.

Reid-kun just laughs me off as a worrier and coward, but unless I think about all the variables, I can’t act immediately when responding to situations.

I also think the fact I have a bad leg adds to my pessimistic nature.

Even when things are good, I’m not the quickest person in the world, so it’s not like I am going to survive if I’m slow whenever something happens.

Not to mention, there’s no way I’m going to drag my comrades into it.

Thus, even in this situation where I was thrown into a desolate wasteland, I quickly let go of any optimism and took my own measures to deal with the pessimistic circumstances I was put in.

I have no idea how many days it will take for me to meet back up with my lost companions.

Securing food and water is my top priority… The stuff I already have in my knapsack is by no means enough. It’ll get me through my first bouts of hunger, but I only have enough such that I’ll completely run out in no time.

Even so, I guess I should say I'm plenty fortunate.

If not for these provisions, it wouldn't take long before I'd be joining the tumbleweeds in this wasteland.

I may not be like Farsale-kun, who lives it posh, but I'd like to voice a few complaints as well □ Such as the fact that, being able to put off my destiny in becoming one with the tumbleweeds for a few days, isn't at all very joyful in taking pride in myself for being lucky.

???: "It's been two weeks already…"

I brushed my hand against my now unkempt beard, muttering those words in dejection.

It's been two weeks since I had been thrown into this wasteland and began walking, believing that I'd meet back up with my companions—And even now, I still haven't met a single soul, nevermind any of them; I was all alone.

I managed to find a source of water, and now I was looking for human habitation upstream by the river. Still, my search was being delayed by how unfamiliar I was with the environment and my loneliness, thus I hadn't made much distance.

I could stave off my hunger by eating the wild plants growing along the riverside. However, setting up base by the riverside, unable to ensure my personal safety, was dangerous, as there existed the possibility of coming across large animals.

???: "…Things are rough, huh."

I let some of my feelings slip as I felt my mental state slowly eroding away.

However, there was no one around to hear my lonely monologue, not to mention, it felt like the words I'd uttered remained at my feet, as if even the parched wind found it too bothersome to sweep them away.

I still didn't realise it, but apparently I had a nature of wanting to seek the company of others. Once upon a time, I'd acted like a hermit, so because of that, I had no idea how much I couldn't see about myself.

No, I knew I couldn't live by myself, and so, I tried to commit suicide once. But then, I was saved by a gentle hand.

Someone wanted me, I was pulled in by that hand. I suppose I was just trying to fulfil my duty, and as for how I originally was, well, I suppose I wasn't actively living, dying, or taking life seriously enough.

I could hear the footsteps of my original nature slowly creeping up on me.

???: "…Man, everyone would probably get mad at me if they knew I was thinking this stuff."

As I muttered, my parched lips broke into a slight smile.

I pictured Satella-kun, angry, with tears in her eyes, as well as Flugel-kun, red in the face, indignant. Reid-kun and Echidna-kun would probably act fed up and disinterested. As for Farsale-kun, he knows the least of what it feels like to be lonely, so I guess he wouldn't be able to empathise with how I am right now.

???: "Hah."

I was surprised, amazed at the fact that I could still laugh when I thought about everyone.

I miss everyone. It's only been two weeks, but I've become so weak.

I miss everyone.

I miss you all.

3

…Time passed slowly, ever so cruelly without stopping.

Before I knew it, I gave up keeping count of how many days I'd spent in this place.

I just, without thinking about things too deeply, accepted the situation for what it was, and kept my legs moving to schedule, going through each day while trying to stop my spirit from petering out.

???: “…”

I mustn’t think about this. I mustn’t think about this wasteland, nor of this world.

This isn’t the world I am acquainted with.

This isn’t the world I travelled through with my companions.

That’s why my companions will never be able to find me.

I mustn’t think about these things. I’m all alone. I haven’t talked to anyone for such a long time.

There’s no sign of human life, I can’t even see any animals; all this time, I’ve just been talking to the sky, water and flowers.

I was fine with it back when I was a hermit. I was dead sure that I’d abandon the world. But now I’ve been made to realise, that the one who was abandoned by the world, is me.

I wonder what Satella-kun, Flugel-kun, Reid-kun, Echidna-kun and Farsale-kun are doing. I wonder if they are worried about me.

I wonder if they’re looking for me.

I wonder if they are bothering to look for me.

I miss everyone.

I miss them. I miss them. I miss them.

I miss them. I miss them. I miss them. I miss them. I miss them. I miss them.

I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them I miss them—

???: “…Ah.”

Suddenly, something snapped in my head.

Trying not to think about it was no different from thinking about it when you are trying not to. I had no interest in these kinds of word games.

Nevertheless, the unwardable feelings of loneliness and desolation kept swirling around my chest before finally exploding.

???: “GHWWAAAAAAAAA—!!”

I clutched at my head, eyes wide open, and threw down my cane, sinking to my knees.

The azure sky, ever unperturbed, looked down at me as I continued to walk alone. I despised it, I loathed the sky, thinking why is it making me suffer like this.

I’d let my true nature show. So when it came to my calibre, in the end, I guess this is all I had in me.

By being by someone’s side, by fulfilling a duty that was wished of me, I’d been able to accept myself, I’d been able to find definite proof that I could be here.

People were mirrors for me, and mirrors served as indispensable signposts which shape the being that is myself.

But none of that was here. No mirrors, no one I could reflect myself in, no role for me to carry out…

???: “…Listen, Alec-san. Won’t you try to live for our sake, instead of dying?”

Back then, I’d thrown myself into freezing cold water. But there’d been a girl there who’d spoken those words to me after she pulled me out.

She was an audacious girl, she was pure and honest, and despite being burdened with a harsh fate, she didn’t let it show. Thus, I was moved by her kindness, feeling like I needed to help her.

All those good-hearted people who’d been made to feel that, were always by her side. As for me, well, I’m not a pure, good-hearted person, so I was just acting like this because that was what was wanted from me.

Then, I guess that’s it.

I never thought I’d be dropping out halfway through like this, but our journey was drawing to an end. Even without me, the journey should turn out well.

I guess they would be sad not having me around, and they’d miss me. Still, no matter how tough it will be, they will lift their heads up and begin to walk.

Indeed, I can place my trust in my most precious comrades.

That’s why…

???: “…”

No sooner had that sense of resignation took over my heart, did the sky, which up until now had been silent, respond.

To put it more accurately, a large shadow blocked out the repugnant sky that was looking down on me. This shadow now took over that role, coming into sight with a roar in its place.

—It was a massive humanoid creature, made entirely of solid rock.

I could intuitively comprehend it was a living thing. As for whether it was made by someone or not, that much I couldn't tell.

Alec: "…Huh, isn't this just what I needed right now?"

My cane had ended up somewhere far from me, and my weary legs were practically like sticks.

My scrawny body, which was practically skin and bones, didn't have the strength in it to let me run away, plus, it's not like I had a will to live.

I suddenly recalled something Flugel-kun had said. "Mark my words, when people are in desperate situations, what truly kills them isn't violence, but despair."

Then again, having said that, Flugel-kun himself was crushed by Reid's violence, with him only using his fingers—and that was despite him hearing the same thing too. That made him quickly take back what he'd said.

Alec: "Hah."

Memories of carefree days flashed across my mind. I unintentionally let out a laugh, despite the situation I was in.

My cheeks had grown rather stiff, making it so I couldn't laugh properly. How long had it been since I'd last laughed? Our journey had been so full of laughter, we're always, always be walking around laughing.

Oh, yeah, now I finally realise. Our journey was enjoyable.

And having it end like this, that's something I…

Alec: "…Cannot accept."

Those words I muttered came a bit late as I lifted my head up.

The colossal lump of rock before me—I guess I should call him Rock Dude—lifted its huge arm up.

I could clearly see what its goal was. It was going to crush the tiny living beings below.

I had no way to dodge it, so I was going to get crushed, and that would be the end of me.

I was helpless against anyone who wasn't open to conversation, and of course, I was helpless whenever my companions weren't there to help me. I'd truly felt that so many times during our travels, and that, I guess, was going to take my life.

Indeed that was the moment where I despised, from the very depths of my heart, this very reality.

???: “WAAAAAAAAAAIT A SEEEEEEEC—!!”

A really loud voice rang out, and with it, a small shadow wedged itself between myself and Rock Dude.

With how sudden it was, both me and Rock Dude stopped in our tracks. Or rather, it seemed more like the reason we stopped was different for each of us.

For Rock Dude, it was because it was told to “Wait”. For me, it was because I caught a glimpse of someone's back, someone I was unfamiliar with.

I'd been separated from my companions in this barren land, left all alone. And here, before me, there was someone's back.

???: “Heaven calls, Earth calls, Man calls. This unexpected encounter has gotten me awfully surprised, but the most important thing is that it looks like I made it here in time!”

The figure turned to look back at me, as I stood there gawking, doing so with an exaggerated motion.

Standing there was a small girl—But not an ordinary one. Some parts of her body were made up of bits that really couldn't be human, and she had a really sharp look to her.

The girl assessed me from top to bottom, as I stood there petrified, before then giving me a nod, hands at her waist.

The Girl: “Three months ago, I sensed a great energy coming from the East. I’ve been searching around looking for the cause of what happened… So it was you! Just who the heck are you?!”

Alec: “Uh…Errm…?”

The Girl: “Got it! You’re Errm-san! I’m Pantagruel! I was made as a human-type Golem, who roam this world, the one with ten thousand Golems at my command!”

I could barely keep up with all this suddenness. And in front of me, the girl stiffened up with her strange looking figure after having cleanly given her name. Her striking pose surprised me a bunch, but what surprised me even more, was the fact Rock Dude, who’d been about to crush me before, was now assuming the same pose as her.

I compared them by eye and recalled her earlier words.

Alec: “By Golem… Are you referring to the big Rock Dude behind you?”

Pantagruel: “Yep! He’s not the only Golem, there’s a heap more of them around! I may look fairly different in appearance, but I’m one of their fellow Golems too!”

Alec: “I see… Ah, wait, no, I’ve got some much I want to ask, but…”

Pantagruel: “Go on?”

Though I wanted to shower her with questions, I shook my head instead.

And then, I offered my hand out to the girl—Pantagruel—who had a mystified look on her face.

Pantagruel: “Um, what’s up with this?”

Alec: “It’s a token of friendship, a handshake. After all, it looks like

I was really helped out by you.”

Though I was just thinking this to myself, it was meant out of self-interest. However, my mental state, which had been all over the place, grew calm instantly just by the fact I’d seen Pantagruel.

Just how much have I been saved, having the circumstance now where I can talk to someone, where I have someone here with me.

Pantagruel: “Oh, a handshake! So this is a handshake! Whoa, this is the first time I’ve gotten one, Errm-san!”

Her eyes twinkling, Pantagruel grabbed my hand and hopped up and down. I let out a long, long sigh as I looked at this pleasantness.

I’d almost prepared myself to throw everything away and die alone in this place with no one in it. But…

Alec: “I’m so glad I met you, Pantagruel. Also, is it okay if I mention just one thing?”

Pantagruel: “Of course! What’s up Errm-san?”

Alec: “Yeah, speaking of that, I’m sorry, but allow me to correct something.”

I tried to relax my tensed up cheeks using my fingers, then gave an awkward smile as I continued to shake hands with Pantagruel, who wasn’t letting go.

Then, I finally gave my name to the peculiar girl—my peculiar friend—who’d taken away my loneliness while in this land.

Alec: “My name isn’t Errm. It’s Alec… Alec Hoshin.”

Pantagruel: “…! Alec Hoshin.”

Alec: “Well, I’m more used to just being called Alec, I guess.”

That was the name my companions called me, as well as the name that I defined myself with.

Having heard me, Pantagruel began to mutter “Alec, Alec” over and over again to herself, as if she were making sure. Unrelated, but behind Pantagruel, Rock Dude was mirroring her movements, so as he hopped up and down, I felt like my life was casually in danger.

Putting aside for a moment my small concern…

Pantagruel: “Very well, Alec-san! Now then, let’s go together to my house! It’s dangerous for you to be here alone, not to mention it’s also lonely!”

Alec: “—. Yeah, that’s right. That’s a huge help. I was lonely indeed.”

Pantagruel: “Mhm! Mr. Loner, got an invitation for one right here!”

Her expression was fairly questionable for a forty plus year old geezer like myself. However, I accepted it with a smile, otherwise it would be downright uncouth to point that out.

Pantagruel still hadn’t let go of my hand which was shaking hers, and it seemed like she was going to guide me to her house, or whatever, like that. I guess I’ll let myself indulge in that feeling.

Maybe if I go to her house, I’ll be able to see others from this world. If that happens, then I can find some means to meet up with my companions again.

Thus, to do that…

Alec: “I’m counting on you, Pantagruel.”

Pantagruel: “Mhm, alright, leave it to me Alec-san!”

Pantagruel answered me with a beam; I smiled seeing that.

And as I smiled, we set out walking. We set out with the colossal Rock Dude in tow.

Pantagruel: “Ne~ko♪ Ne~ko♪ Ne~ko nyan♪ Nyan-Nyan neko ne~ko nyan♪”

Alec: “What’s with that song?”

Pantagruel: “It’s the Nekonyan-san person’s theme song, the one who made me!”

Alec: “Nekonyan… What a strange name.”

Pantagruel: “Huuh?! You reckon so?! I think it’s cool!”

I cocked my head in thought when she said the word “cool”. I couldn’t pretend not to hear the echoes of the word “theme song” coming out of her mouth. Once before, Flugel-kun too had said something similar…

Alec: “Nevermind.”

Having thought about it this far, I chided myself to put it off as overthinking things.

She was singing it ever so happily. Guess it would all be so boorish of me.

Alec: “Ne~ko ne~ko nyan… huh.”

Pantagruel’s eyes sparkled when she saw me copying her.

I felt like her eyes had become my justification to say that it looked like everything was going well.

However, after I was told that no one other than Pantagruel lived in the settlement we arrived at afterwards, and that there weren’t any human beings in this world, my awful pessimism ended up rearing its head again.

Yet that was a tale in which time was not enough to tell.

Hansel and Gretel

“Nee-sama, Nee-sama, I hear there exists a mansion made out of candy in the forest.”

Looking happily at Rem who said that with gleaming eyes, Ram quietly replied with “I see” to her cute little sister.

“A candy house, how very unrealistic.”

“That may be the case… But, the one who told me that was Subaru-kun. I don’t believe Subaru-kun to be someone who would lie.”

“I see, Barusu said that. —What a nuisance.”

Remembering the black-haired boy’s idiotic face, Rem whispered that in annoyance.

Subaru lived in the vicinity of the two’s house, he was a Troublemaker who dealt out a number of tales he got from who knows where.

While Ram believes them all to be tall tales, Rem is very interested in Subaru; as such, she tries to believe his tales whenever she can.

Each time, Ram works hard to get Rem to reconsider, while trying to keep her innocence intact.

“What an annoying man. I wish he’d suffer a horrible experience and have nobody believe him thanks to his tall tales, right now.”

Still, let us leave aside whether Ram’s wish right now comes to pass, and whether or not several days later there is an episode where the aforementioned Subaru comes crying “A wolf is coming!” and nobody believes him.

In any case—

“Nee-sama, I want to find that Candy House for Subaru-kun’s sake. Otherwise, people will continue to treat poor little Subaru as a liar.”

“Ram believes that to be an appropriate treatment, though.”

“Not at all! Subaru-kun is amazing! He’s definitely going to become a fine person who will achieve great things in the future!”

“He has a criminal disposition. He’s dangerous.”

Ram’s internal stock of Subaru continues to lower the more Rem passionately defends him.

However, undeterred by Ram’s curt attitude, Rem adorably squeezes a fist and…

“In any case, Rem has decided. Tomorrow she will find that candy house, for Subaru-kun.”

“…Rem, I don’t really want to tell you this but—”

While sorry to the enthusiastic Rem, a candy house in the middle of the forest is just something too unnatural, a tall tale far too removed from reality to need verification.

And while she wants to gently dampen her spirits as much as she can without hurting her adorable little sister—

“Listen, ok? What Barusu said is…”

“Will you come as well, Nee-sama? Rem feels a bit uneasy going alone, so I’d be glad if Nee-sama could come as well.”

“Whatever will I do with you.”

Being told that by Rem with an uneasy look, Ram instantly retracted her opinion from just before.

As soon as she did, Rem looked overjoyed, which to Ram was satisfactory.

Of course, while they’re not going to be finding a candy house, if she thinks about it as going out with Rem on a picnic with a little lunchbox, it doesn’t sound too bad.

“Of course, I will give Barusu his just desserts at a later date.”

“Let’s do our best, Nee-sama! We’ll bring back that candy house for the sake of Subaru-kun!”

“A magnificent goal.”

A declaration of excitement from the little sister at the prospect of her older sister accompanying her, hearing that, Ram smiled, and was caught in the careful selection of the contents of tomorrow’s lunchbox.

—The next day, the two having now prepared their lunchboxes, split off from their worried eldest sister, and set out on their journey.

“Come back before it gets dark. Ram, make sure to look after Rem. Rem, please listen to what Ram tells you.”

So said the always anxious worrywart eldest sister. The youngest sister had much more guts, in comparison, as she saw them off with “Bring back a souvenir.”

Anyhow, they saw their sisters off in such a way, and Rem and Ram entered the forest.

For Ram, if they can end this at some fitting spot, and sate Rem’s adventurous spirit, then that’d be Best.

“But well, we’re not going to be finding a candy house, so we can just take this easy.”

And the adventure started with that intention—

“Nee-sama, look! A candy house!”

“…That it is.”

Ram answered with indignation at Rem, who pointed a finger at the house visible from between the trees, with an excitable voice.

What stood in a break in the tree line, with a roof made of chocolate, walls made of pastry, and windows made of candy, was a Candy House.

"…"

Not having expected to encounter an actual one, Ram's mind was at the edge of complicated confusion.

Rem, overjoyed over having found the candy house, was lovely. As a big sister, that made her very happy.

While on the other hand, she felt displeasure at the fact that since Subaru's tale was proven to be true, Rem will continue to indulge Subaru going forward, and there was also the bothersomeness of not being able to dismiss his statements as falsehoods anymore.

"Could it be that we should also believe his story about the rescued turtle taking you to a castle within the ocean?"

"I knew that what Subaru-kun said was true…! Let's bring this back to the village immediately! Errr, will one of those doors made of chocolate bars suffice?"

"…Sure will."

Cutting short her worthless thoughts for just a moment, Ram looked intently at the candy house.

They actually do have to bring back some evidence, or else Subaru's infamy will not be cleared. Though it's not the kind of infamy that will be cleared by finding a single candy house.

"But you'll get your hands filthy when the chocolate melts. You won't get filthy with the pastry. Go tear off a wall or two."

"Understood! Let's do just that!"

"Wait wait! Aren't you two a bit too extreme?!"

Following the instructions of Ram who was holding her elbows, Rem rolled up her sleeves and set out to pull off a wall. There, a panicked voice and a panicked figure broke in.

The one who jumped in front of the surprised duo was a white-haired woman in a black dress.

She spread her arms wide, and while protecting the candy house from both Ram and Rem…

“My oh my, unbelievable. Who would’ve thought they’d just look at a candy house and unquestioningly start dismantling it; are kids these days all like that?”

“I would not like to be lumped into “kids these days”. The wonderful Ram and adorable Rem, are incomparable to anybody else.”

“You see that black haired kid who came by recently nibbled on it soon as he laid eyes on it too.”

“Expected no less of Subaru-kun! Rem is just impressed!”

When they looked at the spot the woman pointed out, there indeed was a dent in the wall where it had been nibbled on.

There was no other possible suspect, so just like Rem had been so moved by, it must have been Subaru. Ram, however, thought of those marks as nothing more than vulgar.

“So then? I take it you’re the owner of this candy house?”

“Yes, that is indeed the case, I am the lord of this candy house, and the evil witch of the forest.”

“Witch, is it…?”

Smiling faintly, the woman proclaimed herself to be a witch.

Being overpowered by her aura, Rem gave a small gulp.

Standing as if to protect that Rem, Ram narrowed her light pink

eyes.

“I don’t like you.”

“What’s this, do you hate witches?”

“No, I don’t care about whatever it is you are, I just don’t like your face.”

“My face?!”

For some reason, when she looks at the face of the witch in front of her, a feeling wells up within her like she’s seeing her love rival of many, many years.

She thought it was quite unreasonable, but that’s just how it was.

Because—

“Nee-sama is wonderful.”

“Indeed, for Ram is Rem’s great older sister.”

“My face has presently just been spoken ill of, I wonder if I am allowed to be angry now…”

Her extended arm being held onto by Rem, Ram was in a good mood. The witch in front of those two sisters made a sulking face.

Indeed, she felt for the witch as they had been talking while ignoring her, so Ram reflected.

“You said you were a witch, right? What should we do? I take it then that we can take the house so long as we defeat you, then?”

“No you can’t?! Why are we now discussing such a violent thing like defeating me?”

“I see. Rem, seems we can’t.”

“Is- is that so? I jumped to conclusions.”

Hearing Ram’s conversation with the witch, Rem retracted the horn which had sprouted from her forehead.

The witch's cheeks stiffening for a moment while she was looking at the retracting horn, was quite striking.

"But, if that's the case, how could we obtain the candy house?"

"Isn't it quite strange that you're thinking about obtaining my house in the first place? I live here. I'll have you know. Me, and my daughter."

"You have a daughter?"

Hearing the wide eyed Rem's words, the witch replies, "That's right" with a strangely puffed out chest.

"She's a bit of a withdrawn girl, you see. Which is why I made her this candy house. Children like candy, right? With this, I'm sure she will get friends just gathering around it like ants."

"I see. So the true form of this candy house… Was a manifestation of your twisted parental love for your daughter."

"Hey you, that's quite the frightening ignorance! You should know I am usually a more frightful being!"

Whence Ram had let her pass as just a yapping annoying witch, her attention was piqued by the unexpectedly quiet Rem.

"Rem?"

"Ah, Nee-sama, look at that."

After being called out, Rem points towards the candy house. When she did, inside of the house, on the other side of the candy windows, she could see a small girl looking this way.

The girl, noticing their gazes, hurriedly closes the oblate curtains and hides.

"Why are the curtains oblates?"

"I couldn't come up with any curtain-like candy. It's edible, so I thought it'd be fine."

"More importantly, is that girl miss witch's daughter? Could I know her name?"

"—Beatrice."

When the witch answered with her daughter's name, Rem whispered it to herself, and turned towards the house.

Then—

"Miss Beatrice, would you not talk with me? My name is Rem. I would like us to be friends."

Ram, together with the witch, gazed at Rem's back as she called out to her.

"You won't join your little sister?"

"Rem is doing her best. Ram would not do such a tactless thing. Like a certain witch."

"I can feel the spite…"

Putting the witch's whispers aside, Ram truly wanted to see Rem's efforts through.

Previously, Rem used to be a more shy person, who closed herself off in her own little garden, scared of the outside world.

That that very same Rem is now trying to talk to a girl who locked herself up like that, made Ram very proud.

"The fact that Barusu was the one who made it happen, is Ram's utmost gripe."

"Nee-sama! She's not coming out at all! What should I do?"

"She came out when you ripped a wall, didn't she?"

"No she didn't?!"

Giving the waving Rem a very uncompromising means, the witch immediately rejected it.

Ram shook her head, as if to say geez, at the witch's complaint, and Rem's gaze full of expectation.

And though she didn't want to be relied on at all—

"Our worrywart eldest sister and our well put together youngest sister, we'll bring them and Barusu along too for good measure, and pry her out of there."

"We really do need Subaru-kun after all!"

"That man's worthless at all but this."

Smiling wryly at the gleamy eyed Rem, Ram met eyes with the girl inside the candy house, who peeped at the outside.

They've not even exchanged words, and yet she's decided to drag her outside, and make her Rem's friend.

"Well then, we'll be leaving for now. Keep your necks clean while you wait for us."

"That phrasing is scary. Will you be fine without a guide? It's easy to get lost in these woods…"

"Foolish question."

Shrugging her shoulders at the witch's questioning, Ram turned back towards the thick tree foliage of the forest.

Catching Rem next to her in her periphery…

"For Ram is Rem's great elder sister. There is no way she would ever do something as infantile as getting lost in the woods."

"Yes! Nee-sama is wonderful!"

Laughing at the cheerful Rem's words, she takes a bit of the candy window her little sister tore off; while nibbling on that, the two stepped into the forest.

Next time, when they bring a bigger crowd and pull out the girl who shut herself in the candy house, whatever will they make her do?

“Just when did they tear off a window?!”

Such was the shriek-like voice they heard from the witch. As they tasted the surprisingly wall-tasting candy, Ram’s lips loosened.

“Not that it’s because of the candy house, but Ram has mellowed out quite a bit, hasn’t she?”

—Though a digression, the sisters Ram and Rem headed straight back to the village, gathered up all the children there, and headed back once more for the woods.

Then, they splendidly brought out the daughter, and while she was looking at the candy house being torn to bits by the children, the witch whispered thus.

“See, told you they’d come crawling and nibble at it like ants, didn’t I?”

END

Re: Starting a Menu Life from Zero

—It was an event that took place in the Roswaal estate before the royal selection had yet to truly begin.

"By the way, Rem, how do you decide the menu every day?"

Speaking the question that came to her head in the moment, Emilia raised her head from the book spread atop the table, and looked at Rem who had poured her some tea.

The place was the Roswaal estate, Emilia's private room. The short period of time before the camps began activities in full, was when this question was asked during a small break from her studies.

At that question, Rem curved her well-shaped eyebrows down at the edges and said,

"How…? Do you mean the menu for dinner?"

"Hmm no, I'm not talking about just the one for dinner, there's one for breakfast and lunch too right? Occasionally Ram also steams yams but, doesn't Rem make them for the most part?"

"With all due respect, I do hope they are indeed to Emilia-sama and Subaru-kun's taste."

"Of course, they're always so yummy I end up with my cheeks all stuffed up. Subaru asks for seconds and thirds too, we're suuuper satisfied with Rem's cooking."

Putting her hands together in front of her chest, Emilia answers so while smiling widely.

The hardest worker in the mansion, Rem, was someone with her hands full with meals, cleaning and laundry. Emilia would also particularly look forward to every one of her meals, and anything

Rem made was delicious.

But, there was more to this ‘everything’ than it would seem.

“I also struggled a lot to think up a menu when I was living alone with Puck in the forest. You have to eat food everyday but Puck would always say “I’m fine with anything~”“

“Would that not be because great spirit-sama was satisfied with Emilia-sama’s cooked meals?”

“Hm, I get that, and it makes me suuuper happy. But it’s also true that I struggled to think up of a menu, and this and that are different things you know?”

“I understand your feelings. Just ‘everything’ would leave you troubled.”

Rem showed a faint wince, and Emilia leaned forward while saying, “Right?” then moving the edge of the desk away, sat atop the bed that was in the corner of the room.

Then, she patted the spot beside where she sat with a hand, as if asking Rem to sit as well.

“Heavens no, for Rem, that’d be too…”

“Nothing rude about it. Ram does this often too while taking breaks.”

“Then if Nee-sama does so as well.”

Her feelings of respect for Ram were so grand, that Rem sat next to Emilia upon hearing such persuasion. Both holding a cup of tea in hand, they sat together enjoying the aroma.

Somehow, they felt like friends close in age.

“That’s kinda weird right? Since I’m a suuuper old onee-san compared to Rem.”

“That makes me feel like when Beatrice-sama asks me to treat her like my elder.”

“Ah, that’s hard right? I mean Beatrice is so tiny and cute so… huh?”

Tilting her neck, Emilia somehow felt like she was talking about something strange.

This was about how Emilia was older so she had to act like it, so why did it become about Beatrice being small and cute?

She feels like that’s a strange connection to make.

“Ummmm…?”

“Emilia-sama, about your question of how Rem decides the Menu…”

“Eh? Ah, yeah, that’s right. It’s suuuuper hard right? Is there some trick to it?”

“Well you see, Generally, I decide based on that day’s food stocks and what is being sold in the village…”

While dropping her gace to the surface of the water of the tea in her hands, Rem tells her about her methods.

Emilia felt convinced by the contents of what she said, and when she put it like that she saw what she meant.

“In that case, I didn’t really do much shopping, so I see that I couldn’t decide the menu in that way.”

“—. I deeply apologize for making you remember such a painful memory.”

“Eh?! Not at all, it’s…not quite true to say it wasn’t painful.”

She was given a wide berth by people in the forest of her hometown no matter what she did, so it never really was an option for her was all she meant. Besides, there are ways other than trading with people to get ingredients.

For example—

“Mugging, is it?”

“Ah, you can’t do that, Rem. Don’t do something that dangerous… But occasionally, there were people who ran away from dangerous things in the forest, and left behind their belongings.”

“And that dangerous thing was…”

“Not me of course! And obviously, it wasn’t Puck either. Geez, I’m talking about hunting.”

Being teased by Rem who made a serious face, Emilia pouted. Seeing Emilia’s reaction, Rem apologized saying, “My deepest apologies,” with a small laugh then said:

“That said, hunting is it? How unexpected.”

“Is that so? Hunting while searching the forest for food?”

“No, not that…It’s that Rem also did the same when she was little. So it kind of, was unexpected that Emilia-sama and Rem would have something in common.”

“—? You mean in a good way?”

“If it would not displease Emilia-sama, then a good way.”

With rem having appended that on, Emilia nodded saying “Then, it’s fine.”

She would not think that a point in common with Rem would be a bad thing in the least. But, now suddenly, an interest in Rem’s stories of when she was little arose in her.

“I mean, Rem being little, means that Ram was also little right?”

“Yes. But, Nee-sama was perfect since she was young, thus nee-sama compared to now-…”

“Rem?”

“—Has not changed for the most part. Nee-sama, is Rem’s perfect Nee-sama.”

For a moment, she felt like she hesitated to continue but, as there was no hint of her forcing herself or lying when Rem continued on to boast about Ram, Emilia relaxed her lips too.

As they were indeed a pair of sisters that very much treasured each other.

“I suddenly remembered this while we were talking. —The first menu Rem thought up in her life, were powdered potatoes and Barbaro rabbit, with stir fried nuts”

“Wow, that seems suuuper yummy.”

“Unfortunately, I failed to make it. A great storm rained down.”

Rem answered so, her profile looking ever so slightly lonely, Emilia furrowed her brow. From how she said it just now, she got the feeling that after failing to make it when she was little, Rem had never completed that dish.

“That is suuuper regretful…”

“Emilia-sama?”

“Rem, if you’d like to, could we try making that menu you failed to do, together? Ah, I don’t actually know if there are Barbaro rabbits in the forest though…”

Suddenly standing up straight from the bed, Emilia proposed so to Rem. Hearing Emilia’s proposal, Rem said “Huh” as her eyes opened wide.

With the surprised Rem beside her, Emilia gulps up the remaining tea she was holding. While it was still a little hot, the warm fuzzy inside her chest was even hotter.

“Eh, Emilia-sama, this was a long time ago when we were children, you know? “

“Geez, I told you, right Rem? I am an onee-san much older than you, ok? So, from my point of view you’re still a child. That story of yours feels like it was just yesterday.”

Raising a finger, Emilia persuades Rem with some forced logic.

Of course, doing that won’t make the disappointment Rem felt as a child when the great storm rained down disappear. Emilia understood that—

“But it might make the reason for your sad face from just now go away. Besides, this is just my impression but… wouldn’t you have wanted Ram to eat that cooking?”

“—Why do that?”

“Hehe, I got it after thinking suuuper hard. And then, I thought of this too. That maybe that might have meant, that Ram also was looking forward to it.”

“Nee-sama, looked forward to it…”

Hanging her head at Emilia’s words, Rem reminisced about her childhood times.

Ram and Rem were surely the closest since forever. Emilia believes with no doubt that if you see how much Ram treasures Rem right now, then she also must have when they were younger.

In which case—

“If you fulfill your promise even now, Ram will also be suuuper glad!”

“…However, this evening’s dinner should be a vegetable filled cold soup that if I made Subaru will.”

“I’ll apologize to Subaru with you for that!”

Sorry to Subaru who was enthused about this evening’s menu, but her feelings for Ram took priority.

Rem’s light blue pupils begin to wander at Emilia’s persuasion, and she made a huge frown. However, after thinking it over a lot, she looked back at Emilia’s eyes and…

“Will Nee-sama, really be happy…?”

“Yes, for sure! Ram will be so happy she’ll definitely break into dance out of joy!”

“—Understood.”

Listening to Emilia’s response, the determined Rem completely drank her tea in one gulp.

“Unfortunately, there are no Barbaro rabbits. Let us procure another rabbit. Umm, it may be rude to ask this of Emilia-sama but…”

“Leave it to me! Of course, I’ll also be helping Rem”

Emilia was the first to say it, so it was only natural Emilia would be the one to help Rem.

Emilia stood up and flexed her arms, and Rem hearing her words raised her hips from the bed as well. Then bowed her head deeply and…

“Thank you very much. —I can finally fulfill my promise from that day to Nee-sama.”

“No it’s totally fine. I’m happy if Ram and Rem are getting along, and besides…”

“Besides?”

Emilia gently patted her own stomach towards Rem who had tilted her head.

It was likely because they’ve been talking about a menu the whole time.

“I suuuper wanna try that menu too now.”

—We will omit the tale of Emilia and Rem’s adventure as they headed for the forest after that.

However, the two of them, having managed to safely take down the unexpectedly tough rabbits and return, the two of them were able to feed Ram the menu she had desired so much that Rem had promised when they were young.

Ram who saw the menu seated at dinner, smiled very gently, and said:

“Powdered potatoes and Barbaro rabbit, with stir fried nuts…I’m so happy.”

She seemed so so very happy that her promise with her younger sister from those days of youth had finally been fulfilled.

Emilia and Rem laughed together as their efforts had bore fruit.

Then—

“Huh? Today we were going to have cold vegetable soup didn’t-…”

“Geez! Subaru, don’t be so selfish!”

“I’m the one getting scolded?!”

Such disappointed-seeming Subaru’s whines, were once again a story for another time.

END

Malice Before the Theater

1

Clangs of chains spiritedly resounded.

A clear sky overhead, the plashes of water tickling one's eardrums affirmed the hospitability brought by the waterways dispersed across this great city. Perhaps the very refreshness promulgated by the water's flow was the source of the clearness in the hearts of the people residing in this Watergate City.

“Yes, yes, surely that is also connected to this delightful song.”

Varnishing over the ambient notes of the chains' clangs and water's plashes, was a song echoing across the entire city—the broadcast enounced through the Meteor stationed at the City Hall, jolted the emotions of all hearers without choice.

The song inescapable even to plugged ears succored the days of the city's residents.

“I imagine the both of you also adore this song, yes?”

Whilst listening to the magnificent song, she turned her head around and addressed the two behind. Nestled there next to each other were a young boy and girl, their petite frames shuddering upon that enquiry.

Both of them teetered at about seven to eight years of age, the age of childhood. Their large, round eyes and florid cheeks were an incantation that spontaneously tickled instinctive protectiveness. Children should be adorable. The two who seemed considerably close with one another, hugged each other as to not be separated, a valiant sight—truly, wonderful.

“—A deed of Love, isn't it.”

The sweet bond made excitement bolt down her spine, she inadvertently charged her breath with heat.

She firmly reprimanded herself that this was wrong. When the two were already laded with worry after being taken to this unpopular alleyway, she'd frighten them further with that attitude.

The two huddling together were the main guests for an incredibly, incredibly important ceremony.

"Thank you, my apologies."

"—~hk."

"Ah, you need not be so afraid. I am not thinking of anything so terrible as wanting to torment the two of you. It's just that looking at you two, I was suddenly reminded of my past… the beginning of the love between my husband and I. Wow, I'm so embarrassed."

Palms on her cheeks, she shook her head, writhing from her bittersweet old memories. —Her and her husband's meeting had truly been an act of destiny.

The hand of that person proffered to her amidst the abyss of death, showed hope and despair to her self, for whom it was natural to be oppressed and trodden upon, appeased her lacerated body with blessedness and misfortune.

Life was both sour and sweet, and what her husband bestowed upon her was Life itself.

"What can I describe that as, if not Love? Both of you would agree, yes? My apologies, thank you."

When she apologized for making them listen to her loving recollections, the young boy and girl hugged each other harder. With tears sojourning their eyes, they peered at her as though praying upon every single one of her actions.

It resembled faith stemming from affection, coming across even as unconditional acceptance—.

"—One of you."

"Huh…?"

"One of you… yes, either one of you is fine. My program that will happen in the city's plaza after this, my act of affirmation of Love, could I ask for your cooperation in that?"

Smiling as to comfort them, she candidly communicated her intent. Using all words necessary to ensure there were no misunderstandings was incredibly important. The disparity between emotions or thoughts, was unmistakably the most lamentable tragedy of this world.

The connection between this young boy and young girl ought to be esteemed and treasured. —With just the most convenient physique to carry, and yet a loving couple was a fairly lucky draw.

No matter right or wrong, she wanted to choose one of these two to cooperate.

And—

"For the both of you to raise your hand, you must be truly close, yes. But, thank you, very sorry? The boy was just a very teensy bit faster, so I applaud your bravery~."

Clapping her hands, she indulged in the Love of the two who had volunteered at about the same time. Pronouncing a "Well then", she then offered her hand to the brave young boy.

As she smiled,

"Bearer of incredibly marvelous Love, what is your name? Ah, I am —"

2

"Huh? I thought it was just some decrepit building looking at it from the outside, but it's rather refined from the inside."

Enunciating so, with the hem of his long, white robes waving, a white haired man stridently surveyed the building's interiors.

Like the man had spoken, the stone structure's age exceeded a century, but by virtue of prudent care and maintenance it did not give an antediluvian impression. The building was structured to be a cathedral—a place only to bring prayer and blessing, boding an apprehensible air of solemnity.

Furthering that impression above all else was a beautiful engraving limned on one of the inner walls. Graved were perhaps the Three Heroes spoken of through generations in the Kingdom of Lugunica, the Divine Dragon, the Sage and the Sword Saint—

"But, it's just this artwork that's unacceptable. An identical one is also carved behind coins, but even if they get themselves some bigshot name like the Three Heroes I'm sure they're just a horde who'd be powerless before me. For this bunch to be venerated, ignorant individuals oblivious to what's genuine are pitiable."

Gazing up towards that engraving, the man grumbled his impressions devoid of any respect. Her ears unwittingly trembled for an instant, and she faintly held her breath.

"What? Judging from that reaction, do you mean to disagree with my thought?"

As usual, the man overlooking of not even the slightest of her reactions plunged into displeasure, and the diligent and composed woman calmly lowered her head, not letting any of her internal trepidation show on her visage.

"—My apologies. I merely thought that even those revered as legends in the kingdom would stand to be nothing before Husband-sama."

"Say, you don't need to be awestruck by each and every obvious thing. You knew that from the beginning. I possess all things needed. I am an unselfish and perfected being. Any lizard inflated in size or hubris in swordsmanship has no basis to be compared with me to begin with."

"…"

“Yet, to compare me to a horde of that sort, is to doubt my way of life that happens to be perfect and bearing no connection to any flaws. Actually, it’s much more so an act of looking down upon me. That blasphemes my very existence, and is an infringement of my rights. I don’t think I can quite turn a blind eye to that.”

Prattling on with his substanceless talk, the man continued to add to reasons he was giving himself to be angered about. As his irrational fury accrued, the woman made no unneeded rebuttals.

Rebuttals were futile. She shall do nothing but await the storm of ire to pass. —Just as ordinary people could do nothing but pray before genuine genius, the woman hung her head low, when the man’s hand about reached her as he pronounced a “Sa∼y”.

“—Husband-sama, there is something I wish to enquire about.”

Interposing her voice there was a different woman, discernible through the entrance of the church. Though immediately sensing the tense atmosphere inside the church, the woman stiffened her cheeks—

“I was speaking just now??!!”

“—. My apologies. But, there is something that necessitated your judgement, Husband-sama… regarding the choice of the bride’s dress.”

“…Dress. Ah, the dress. I see I see, that’s certainly right. The garb that the new bride shall wear. Even in spite of being my wives, that is not something I can make you choose.”

It was apparent that the emotions nearing eruption withered away upon hearing a reason enough to intercede his mouth. As the man fidgeted his bangs with his upraised hand, asked “Where’s the dress?”,

“I’d like to choose by looking at the real thing. Besides, I have to coordinate my attire with it as well, you know? To be honest, I don’t think weddings are something one does frequently, but I must attune to the bride’s sentiments as well.”

As the man started an alacritous walk with a self-indulgent spiel, the imperilled women beside him exchanged glances, intently congealing their expressions and cognized anew of each other's circumstance. That they and so many other women, were birds inside this white man's cage—.

"You all are truly fortunate. There's no knowing what you would've been put through had you been found by people other than myself. In that regard, the conditions I correspondingly seek from you are quite extraordinary, don't you think? After all, I am—"

3

"From what we heard, it seems like the Sin Archbishops besides us have also come to the town?"

"Huh, condolences to this town's people then. If it's just us then that's still something, but if guys like Regulus or Sirius, and even Mama on top of that have shown up then hell would be more preferable anywa~y."

"To begin with, us coming together only happened to be the direction of the Gospel by chance anyway, isn't it."

"That's right that's right. But, a large city's great ~tsu! How nice ~tsu! Old and young and men and women, human and demi-human, as far as the eye goes it's all up for plucking you know ~tsu!"

"Heyhey, it's totally pointless to interfere in our ways of eating so we won't do that bu~t… stop with the nonchalant all-you-can-eat oka~y? If not…"

"We know we do know. If we do it till we're full, then your side of ingredients will disappear is what you want to say, right? We know, we know. We know bu~t."

"—First come first served, don't say that up against us would you? Something like that is fruitless for us. Isn't that right? Surely that is right, certainly that is right, because that is right, because that needs to be right ~tsu! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu!"

“…That being said, you’re aware of who loses out the most when we eat competing together, ri~ght?”

“Yeah, we know. We sure do know. We know and so we won’t. On top of that, we also know who benefits the most when we eat competing together.”

“A~h, that’s true too. True true. Who will benefit the most other than us, it’s…”

““The other Sin Archbishops.””

“A~haha~, that’s absolutely intolerable, isn’t it. For that horde to be satisfied, that is one thing that just cannot be overlooked other than diet. That, belongs to us.”

“Won’t let even Mama impede on our meal. Meals are important. For we, for us, and for that child as well—”

“That’s right, that’s indeed right, that’s certainly right ~tsu! That is why we are—”

“We know, we do know, we indeed know ~tsu! That is why we are —”

4

“Hey hey, uncle, how do you reach the City Hall?”

“Oh, are you lost? Perfect. The City Hall happens to be my workplace. I’ll guide you to it if that’s fine with you.”

“Wow, really? Thank you, uncle. I’m glad you’re a kind person, uncle—”

“…Just kidding, I got you with that heartwarming exchange~!”

Upon that shrill proclamation of the petite girl capturing the attention of all those around, the eyes of Garek Thompson rounded as he walked to the City Hall alongside the young girl. He was aghast by the Transfiguration of the girl midway through their journey to the City Hall. It was not something in the realm of a changed attitude or person. The young girl had, verbatim, metamorphosed into Someone Else.

“Truly, this lovely lady was taken aback by your insanely deficient sense of danger! If it’s a cute little girl you’re gonna defend her no-questions-asked? Every single guy thinks they can do whatever they want with a small girl through brute force so they’re all too imprudent.”

Features that despite metamorphosing could still be labelled as cute, distorted with cruelty and spewed vituperation impossible to bear hearing, to which Garek remained lost for words.

He momentarily opened his mouth to refute her jeers, but was what he ought to do at this place to correct the young girl’s conduct, this impractical vexation restrained him.

Consequently—

“Little girl, this is everyone’s important workplace. So, making a scene like this is—”

“And, found one sense-of-danger-deficient fool as this lovely lady had mentioned!”

On one hand was the taciturn, frozen Garek, and in his stead one of the workers there approached the young girl to reprimand her words.

And thereafter, in the moment that followed, was assailed by a side-swiping impact, blown away.

The worker, blown away so effortlessly as though a weightless doll, swept into the work desks and ornamental plants and embroiled the other workers before collapsing onto the floor. That spectacle was an agonizing sight akin to the occasional crash of dragon carriages, but nobody could vocalize a scream.

That was because an impact greater than the one just earlier, clogged the throats of everyone with a baffling fright.

“Well well well? How heartlessly cold for nobody to go and help. Even if you are animals wonderstruck by this lovely lady and forcibly pressed back, you’re men? All the female creatures around, this is the perfect chance to rush over to that slumped fellow and show off your femininity. Go on, now, I’m telling you to go!”

Her temper flaring with her speech, the young girl swung both of her arms—two gigantic beast’s arms unbalanced on her petite frame, and began to wreak havoc on the City Hall’s parlour with the entirety of her might. The floor and walls smashed, and witnessing the chairs and desks about thrown into the air, Garek screeched a “Sto~p!”.

The engrossed Garek then vaulted onto the young girl with large, beastial arms,

“You must stop! All this… just what, are you?”

“Wow, so passionate. Are you feeling liable that you made a mistake by bringing this lovely lady here? If that’s the case, then this compassionate, merciful lovely lady shall award that guilt.”

“What, are… ararararararar.”

Even when grappled, the girl’s sadistic expression wavered naught. Instead, Garek who seized hold of her felt an abnormal heat in his body, and his voice trembled.

The unanticipated turn of events made his heart race—moreover, he felt his blood simmer.

“This lovely lady just happened to need at least one cool manservant for herself.”

Even the way he heard the voice of the girl whispered into his ears altered from the way it had been just a few moments ago, and he realised his perception of the world transform alongside the height of his vision.

Screeches and roars submerged the City Hall, and Garek discerned they were not directed at only the girl but also himself, whilst he flapped the Wings he was unacquainted with.

He had no clue, what was happening. But simply, only the faces of his wife, who saw him off to work per usual, and his two children surfaced in his mind.

“Just what, are, you… ~hk.”

“Amazing amazing, you can still chatter? If that’s so, you must be given one reward, that sort of thing. This lovely lady is—”

5

—Clangoring the reports of golden chains, before the shivering boy and girl the enigma in bandages smiled.

“Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Wrath, Sirius Romanée-Conti.”

—The hem of his long robes waving, with his wives bearing congealed expressions towed in company, the white-haired ruffian smiled.

“Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Greed, Regulus Corneas.”

—Avowing no hindrances in each other’s meal, the blasphemers of Gourmet and Bizarre Eating scorned each other and smiled.

“Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Ley Batenkaitos.”

“Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Gluttony, Roy Alphard.”

—Lusciously listening to the resonating roars and screeches ecstatically, with a bewitching glint in her eyes the monster smiled.

“Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Lust, Capella Emerada Lugunica.”

Bound to deliver a wretchedly disastrous spectacle to the Watergate City Priestella, were these atrocious villains.

Those who were originally never supposed to gather had gathered, and in order to fulfil their respective avarice, each would employ their own repulsive techniques and Authorities, and plunge the pristine city into a crucible of chaos.

Even within the long history of the Kingdom of Lugunica, the only precedent for such a dreadful situation harkened all the way back to the era of Witches—.

Within the city on track to be trampled by such an atrocious bunch, also were present those with an unceasing will to oppose them.

The good and the evil were clear, justice and villainy evident, no hesitation necessary to make the distinction between lux and nox, those two camps would clash against one another in a battle to determine the Watergate City’s tomorrow, and the rising of the curtain, was nigh—.

END

Others

Twitter Short Story

Emilia: “Hey, Subaru! Big news! The official Re:Zero Tweeter account has reached fifty thousand fowllowers! …Can you explain what it means?”

Subaru: “No way, that’s great! You know, this is a big deal, Emilia-tan!”

Emilia: “Oh really? This is a good thing?”

Subaru: “50,000 followers… In other words, this is the number of people who’ve fallen in love with you, Emilia-tan! This many followers would make an incredible reinforcement troupe for the upcoming royal selection! The influence of anime is amazing, huh? This means that our E.M.T circle is growing! The pen IS mightier than the sword!”

Emilia: “Sorry, but you’ve lost me…”

Felt: “…You two are makin’ quite the racket, what are you guys up to?”

Subaru: “Hey, Felt. You got here just on time. There’s something we want to tell you…”

Emilia: “Hee-Hee. The Re:Zero Tweeter account now has 50,000 fowllowers. We’re reaaally surprised by it all.”

Felt: “You sound just like a kid that wants to use a word she’s just learned. I don’t know what this Twitter thing is, but who is doing what, where, and how?”

Emilia: “Um…Where? Who? How?”

Subaru: “Stop that! You’re making Emilia-tan’s head spin with all your questions! Look, Twitter is a community tool that exists in a cyber world.”

Emilia: *spluttering*

Felt: “Look what you’ve done! You’ve overcomplicated this and now there’s smoke coming out of Emilia’s ears!”

Subaru: “Uh-oh… But you know, Twitter is a really great… Never mind! It’ll be faster if I show you instead! Here, take a look at this metia!”

Emilia: “Wow, there are so many moving pictures and words! How jaunty.”

Subaru: “Um, we don’t really use that word nowadays… Anyway, this metia can be connected to Twitter which can connect you to lots of other people.”

Felt: “Huh. Look, it sounds really great and all… But what’s the point of it?”

Subaru: “It’s important to connect with others, even for you, Felt. If you had to go looking for the whereabouts of Old Man Rom, wouldn’t it be easier for you if you could ask around at the press of your fingertips than to physically search for him?”

Felt: “What kind of analogy is that! Anyway, I’ve noticed that you’ve become pretty attentive to Emilia lately…”

Emilia: “Oh, I would like to say hi to all the people who have become my fowllowers. It’s reaaally amazing and a lot to take in with 50,000 fowllowers, but I’ll do my best on Tweeter!”

Subaru: “Look at that face! E.M.T! But that’s a big job, it’ll take you three days to say hi to everyone.”

Emilia: “I guess that means I should reaaally hurry and get to it. I’ll work hard at it!”

Subaru: “You’re so adorable! I want to cheer you on, but the metia’s battery is about to die! Argh! This is so annoying!”

Felt: “You’ve made a huge deal out of this, and in the end you just want to say hi to them? Good grief!”

Martyr’s Death

—It was a dark place, filled with a gloomy feeling.

It was full of frigid, stagnant air. The walls glowed a faint blue, and an strange wind blew that felt both damp and dry. That was most likely an atmosphere molded to the views of those that dwelt here.

“…”

In the area shown by thin, blue-white light, a sound endlessly resonated. A sound like something being pulled along the ground; a sound like fingernails grating on a solid wall, a sound that was dissonant and disturbing to hear. Sometimes, lost in that sound, the sound of water was mixed as well.

“…ku…Aah, Aah, AaaaaAh”

Listening carefully, the water noise could be discerned as the sound of drops striking a floor, and at the same time, the sound of someone rubbing their nose—the voice of someone crawling on the floor, sobbing, could be faintly heard.

“Why, why… why has this happened to youuuuu?”

The sobbing voice was painfully to hear and high-pitched, sounding like the wings of numberless insects. Along with the rising emotion, little by little the voice added color and grief to the cold space. The endless wailing, sobbing that seemed to be dragging one down to hell, and—

“Say, would you mind cutting that out, please? If you keep on weeping like that, it’s honestly going to get bothersome, you know?”

That voice, from an entirely different direction, and even a different gender, drifted down. The new voice made no attempt to conceal it’s disdain and contempt. It seemed less like a voice meant for a weeping, grieving companion, and more like jeers thrown without mercy.

“It’s not like I don’t understand that you’re in pain, you know? I didn’t have any fond memories of him, but it’s not like I feel happy that he died; someone like that ought to have at least one person who’s sad that he died, I think. Look, I’m as generous as anyone else. Even a guy who had the wrong idea about hands deserves the right to be recognized that much; I have enough sense to agree with that.”

“…”

“But, you know… For something that’s just… can we call it an obligation? Because of that, for a companion you once taught… to go on crying in my face like that, it’ll start to ruin my mood too, you see. Do you understand? Normally, that’s the sort of thing you should take into consideration. It’s just the bare minimum of consideration for the feelings of those around you, that’s how things ought to be. Carrying on crying in front of everyone, that might feel good for the one that’s crying, but it’s a real nuisance for everyone else. Even the one who died, it’s like you’re tarnishing their honor after they died, isn’t it? Not like I care, though.”

“…”

“Pushing your feelings onto me… look, that’s what it is, right? Others go ahead and cry or get angry, and suddenly you feel like you’ve woken up. I’d like to have that experience sometime. With you crying like that, isn’t it like you’ve robbed everyone else of their right to feel sad? Really, if I happened to somehow be in a position to feel sad that he died, did you think about that? You didn’t, did you? That sort of thing… it’s an intrusion into my personal right to feel as I wish, don’t you agree?”

Unwillingly at first, then indiscriminately, with gradually increasing liveliness, that voice arranged a long, long string of depressing words for it’s crying companion. The words at the end were angry, an inevitable explosion of gloomy feelings. Regardless—

“Indeed, if this wasn’t a conversation over mirrors, you would be in pieces by now. I really think you ought to be grateful to me that it didn’t turn out like that.”

“…”

“Aah, not that I need the thanks. I’m quite satisfied with the modest happiness I have from day to day. Even holding on to the things I wasn’t happy to receive, I have no intention of causing unnecessary trouble. I’m just living the simple life here, passing time with my beloved wives.”

The voice continued as it pleased, and then finally cut off the conversation there. Except, just before the conversation ended—

“Number 122. Just now, you looked frightened, didn’t you?” it said, showing it had completely shifted its focus from the conversation. Just after that, as a sound of incredible destruction rang out, the mirror signal cut off. What happened on the other side of the mirror was unknown. There was no need to know.

“…No one, no one no one no one, cares that you died. Why, why is it? Why is it so? You did so much, you did so much for me, you worked yourself to the bone, only for me, you shed so much blood.”

Scratching at the floor, the shadow ceased crying and stood up. Both arms hung limply, the nails were peeled off, and blood dripped from pitiful wounds. But, the shadow was unconcerned. Instead, it simply pressing a blood-stained finger to it’s cheek—the bandages wrapped around the cheek were vividly stained with blood.

“Everyone, everyone is forgetting you. Everyone is putting you in the past. It’s unforgivable. It’s absolutely unforgivable.”

With glittering, abnormally opened, bloodstained amethyst eyes, it stared straight ahead. There, an oddly colorful thing in this gloomy place—was an altar, of sorts.

Considering the situation of the shadow, the existence of the altar was certainly no surprise. Originally, the shadow’s position was that of worshipping a certain entity. But, what should have been on the altar was unrelated to that position, and at the same time, no less horrible.

The boxes decorating the strange altar all gave off a different impression.

“Your nails. Your hair. Your bones, flesh and blood, spirit and everything else.”

Walking to the altar, the shadow opened the lids of the boxes.

Simultaneously, a clear odor mixed into the strange air filling the space. A horrible smell, that someone with normal nerves would turn their head and immediately flee from—the shadow inhaled it with a desolate expression.

The boxes were greedily upended. The shadow licked everything that fell from them, and took everything into itself. Enduring beyond endurance, breaking the taboo it had resisted by willpower alone, mixing the contents of the boxes with itself.

“—thank you, I’m sorry. With this, you and I can be one.”

Entranced, without the outbursts from before, the shadow whispered only that.

The boxes were hurled away. Tumbled on the floor, they suddenly burst into flame. The flames caught on the altar as well, and the scenery in the cave that could not be seen in the dim light before, was vividly revealed.

—Countless bones were arranged on the altar.

There were dried corpses, wrapped in vestments, as well. There were more than any sane person would want to count. Things that a certain entity had inhabited, then discarded were, by and large, gathered here.

All of them were consumed in the flames, and suddenly vanished, along with the terrible scent. In the space lit by the swaying flames, the shadow—a phantom wrapped in bandages, swiftly began walking.

It turned its back to the altar, to the smoldering remains of its loved one, without any sign of concern. After all, there was no need. Such things are unnecessary.

It was going to reclaim that person, after all. Someday, as it was itself lifted up from hell, it would do the same.

“—Please wait for me. I will never say I’ve lost you.”

After all,

“Because you are my dear, dear, most beloved—Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti.”

Glossary

Out Of (convenience store)

Subaru: They said we'd be doing glossary explanations, and we start with a silly convenience store from my old world?

Emilia: What's a… convenience store?

Subaru: It's a handy little store with most things you need for everyday life lined up on the shelves. Out Of is a major chain with stores opened up all over the country. There were two of them within two hundred meters of my house, and it felt like they were eating into each other's business. I understand the strategy of trying to be dominant, but isn't that overdoing it?

Emilia: Um, I'm not really sure what you're talking about, but I'm sure you've got it just right.

Demi-humans – Demi-human Species – Demi-human Tribes

Subaru: From the mental image I have, I'd think of those as non-human humanoid races, but is that about right?

Emilia: Mhmm, that's more or less exactly it. Famous demi-human tribes include elves and dwarves. Giants and pygmies. The beastmen are divided into the beastmen tribes and the half-beastman tribes. When you include the half-blooded as well, there's rea~lly lots of them.

Subaru: From a quick look at the capital, I'd have to say it felt like the humans were the most common. It looked like the demi-humans and the humans were living together, but are there conflicts between the species now and then?

Emilia: There are different relations between the demi-humans and the humans depending on the country, is what I've heard. They're coexisting in Lugunica now, but it seems there was a civil war between the demi-humans and the humans a little while ago. It affects me too, but… I hope I can help reduce that sort of misunderstanding.

Royal Selection (Choosing the Throne)

Subaru: Having the royal family's bloodline wiped out really just stinks of a dangerous conspiracy or something.

Roswaal: They made sure to look into that ve~ry carefully, so there's no mistake. Making it look like an illness… is also a line of thought that was considered before coming to this conclusion. Everyone in the royal family truly passed away without any shady dealings behind it.

Subaru: That's an extremely polite way to say you're sure if it. … Regardless, it's thanks to that that Emilia-tan gets a try at it. And since it's called a selection…

Roswaal: Well of cou~rse, there are other candidates as well. Every one of them is filled to the brim with a drive to make the throne their own. Aha~, this is going to be fun, isn't it?

Subaru: At the very least, Emilia-tan and I feel nothing but unease over that smile on your face right now.

The Royal Capital Lugunica

Subaru: The most important city in the Kingdom of Lugunica… the largest city, and it also happens to be the place where I was first summoned.

Reinhard: The capital's population is roughly three hundred thousand people. However, that's only the number of permanent residents, and with the number of people entering and leaving the capital, taking a precise count is difficult.

Subaru: Incidentally, if you look at the entire Kingdom of Lugunica, around how many people live there?

Reinhard: The population of the entire country is said to be around five hundred thousand. However, this, too, is not a number that was accurately gathered by travelling to the different territories. It's the sum of the numbers drawn from the lords of the various lands; however, due to the possibility that in some areas it's been inflated for tax collection purposes, perhaps it's not reliable.

Subaru: I wasn't expecting to hear about the dark side of the capital here…

Kadomon's Fruit Store

Subaru: This store belongs to 'Mister Save Point'. Since I get pulled back here for some reason when I "Return by Death", when I think that maybe he was the starting point for "Return by Death", it freaks me out a little.

Kadomon: Quit yer mumblin'. If yer not gonna buy an appa, get lost already.

Emblem

Subaru: It's a badge-like thing in the shape of a winged dragon that has a red jewel in its mouth.

Felt: That's the one that I got asked to go steal, from the silver-haired girl. If things hadn't gone south afterwards I could have traded it for holy gold coins… Damn, I really messed up.

Subaru: But if you'd made that work, doing it would have been a crime against the royal family. It's the qualification to participate in the Royal Selection, so all the guards in the capital would have been in a frenzy searching for it.

Felt: …So that means it wasn't gonna work out either way, then? Damn it all!

The Forbidden Library

Subaru: There's a painful rumor that this is what the little girl who's a shut-in at the Roswaal mansion calls her room.

Beatrice: Do you want to be blown away, I suppose? Closed off from other spaces by Betty's "Door Crossing"; that's the Forbidden Library, you know. Connecting to only one of the doors in the mansion, the connected door is continually changing.

Subaru: And despite all that, I can find it pretty easily.

Beatrice: You’re just too odd, you know! Normally, it shouldn’t be that easy… Ah, it’s infuriating, I suppose!

Contracts

Subaru: If you don’t trust me, I don’t mind writing it down in a document. It can be used as evidence at the trial later.

Beatrice: Rather than putting it on paper, tie it with your soul. In this world, that’s how contracts are thought of, I suppose.

Subaru: Tying it with your soul sounds so cool. You tie yourself to it, is how you think of it, right?

Beatrice: Ignoring that and moving on, demi-humans and beings related to magic view them seriously. With older races and spirits in particular, you can think of it as something that’s sure to come up, I suppose.

Subaru: They were saying that Emilia-tan and Puck are bound together by a contract or something, too.

Beatrice: And what a regrettable thing that is, you know. If only there wasn’t a contract between Bubby and that girl, I’d peel him away from her by force, and never let him leave my side, I suppose…

Subaru: What are you talking about all dreamily, you loli? Scary.

Gate

Subaru: It’d be alright to think of this as an organ that magic users require to use magic, wouldn’t it?

Rem: Yes, although since it’s not something you can see with your eyes, perhaps the term ‘organ’ isn’t quite correct. It gathers in mana from the atmosphere, converts it into magic, and then releases it back out. That is its function.

Subaru: Superior magic users have more and larger gates. Roswaal is probably abnormal, though

Rem: As a magic user, Roswaal-sama has been blessed by the world. Nee-sama, Emilia-sama, and Rem are above average, and Subaru-kun is below average. No, well below average.

Subaru: We didn't really need that comment about 'well below', did we?! I get it already; you don't have to say it out loud!

Sword Saint

Subaru: From what I've heard, it's a really grandiose title, and it really resonates with my hyperactive imagination.

Reinhard: I'm honored that you've taken a liking to it, but for me personally, it feels like I'm still far too inexperienced to bear the title. The title of Master Swordsman that's been handed down from one generation to the next, that is.

Subaru: I remember you cutting a building and the sky in half, but that's still not enough? Were the Master Swordsmen of history nothing but monsters like that?

Reinhard: It's said that the first Master Swordsman used only a single sword when facing off with a dragon. That sword has been passed down to me as well, but frustratingly, I'm not able to draw it at will. When not even a sword will recognize me as such, isn't it presumptuous to call myself the Master Swordsman?

Subaru: Well, the way I see it, you can only think of it as the sword asking too much.

Satella

Subaru: Um, so I'm pretty sure they said she's the "Witch of Envy"…

Emilia: I'm sorry, I don't want to talk about this.

Beatrice: Even speaking the name of the abominable witch is offensive, I suppose.

Rem: Please don’t disappoint Rem by speaking of it so lightly.

Ram: It’s probably meaningless to expect that kind of delicacy from Barusu, though.

Subaru: What’s with everyone ganging up on me…

Return by Death

Subaru: Just like it says, it’s the power to rewind time by dying, returning to a specific point and redoing the world.

Ram: Indeed Barusu, your helplessness has finally spread through your entire body, hasn’t it.

Subaru: Will you quit patting me on the shoulder with a sad face like you’re trying to console me?! I can talk about it since this is sort of a meta discussion, but even I don’t know why I have this ability! It would have been so nice to get some kind of simple cheat that made me super-strong!

Ram: Be that as it may, the way that your hasty judgement won’t allow you to see anything but a dim future is really the thing that makes you a Barusu, Barusu. All hail “Return by Death”, indeed.

Subaru: Damn it, I can’t deny that… just you wait. One day, the promise of my future will triumph!

The Great Waterfall

Subaru: Further east beyond the furthest east; I was told that’s the sort of phrase that makes people snicker at you.

Puck: The Great Waterfall, you see, is the waterfall that falls from the edge of the world. At the end of the continent, when you go to the brink of the world, the sea is cut off and there’s a waterfall that never ends. It’s the end of this world, and if you were to fall in there, not even the spirits know where you would disappear to.

Subaru: That’s pretty scary. I get it. That’s why people laugh at you when you say you come from beyond the Great Waterfall. That Reinhard jerk, I guess he was actually making fun of me after all…

Puck: It's even said that only the dragons know what lies beyond the Great Waterfall, after all. Although they clearly exist, dragons don't have any lairs, and it's said that they have a paradise all to themselves on the other side of the waterfall, and occasionally, they come to this continent to stretch their wings.

Subaru: Just like it says, it's a vacation to spread your wings; I can't put it very well, don't laugh!

Loothouse

Subaru: It's where all the items gathered by the capital's light-fingered good-for-nothings are collected, in a good-for-nothing cave.

Rom: Don't put it like that; you're making it sound bad. It's a good-for-nothing central office.

Subaru: Changing what you call it doesn't change what it is! How long have you been involved in that kind of work?

Rom: It's been since I came to live at the capital, so… I guess it's been fourteen, fifteen years, then? It's been quite a while, even for me… I probably won't be able to wander around that area again for a while.

Subaru: Please take this opportunity to look for an honest job. It'd probably help get Felt's light-fingered habits under control.

Rom: You talk a lot for someone who knows nothing…

The Natsuki Family

Subaru: Pops and mom and me, a family of three. Since the eldest son, me, was transported here, I guess the family tree ends there.

Emilia: D… don't say such sad things. Come now, Subaru, maybe you'll have a new little brother or little sister born, right?

Subaru: That's not even a joke, and it scares me. Once they've realized I'm gone, it seems like they'd feel free to start producing siblings for me, and it scares me. I don't want to imagine my parents having that kind of plan!

Emilia: But I’m sure they’re worried about you. …I hope you’ll be able to set their minds at ease soon.

Subaru: …I don’t know about that. Maybe things are actually more comfortable for them without me around.

Emilia: Subaru…

Subaru: There’s no way that’s true. No one should know that better than I do.

Bubby

Beatrice: Bubby is wonderful… Bubby’s fluffy fur has Betty’s heart in a grip that will never let go, I suppose. He’s so furry it’s a sin, you know…

Puck: Hehe, that’s because my fur never misses being brushed daily by Lia’s own hand. I always want to look my best when I’m out in public; it’s expressing that, myep.

Beatrice: Oh Bubby, you’re just too much, I suppose… Betty is all aflutter, you know.

Puck: Honestly, Betty, you really are someone who enjoys being pampered.

Subaru: You’re getting off-track right from the start, you flirters! This is the start of the second half of the glossary, right?!

Half-elf

Subaru: A mixture of elf and human blood… that’s the right idea, isn’t it? I was wondering, are there any halves from species other than humans and elves?

Emilia: Um, hmm… I wonder. I’m not really sure, but normally when people say half, they’re talking about a child born from a human and an elf. And as for their numbers, there’s almost none of them.

Subaru: As far as the circumstances around that go, it feels like they're probably complicated in a lot of ways.

Emilia: They're not really… thought well of. That's why having someone treat me like you do, Subaru, is rea~lly precious and… mhmm, it saves me.

Subaru: If my ignorance can be useful to you off-screen, I couldn't hope for anything more.

Bowel Hunter

Subaru: …Is this a topic that we really need to dig into deeply?

Elsa: It's alright if you don't want to worry about it. I don't think that I'm well understood, or that I would want to be, after all.

Subaru: This is the nickname for the person who's standing proudly atop my kill counter. Even speaking about it from outside the story, it sort of feels like my sliced guts are aching.

Elsa: I'm certainly hoping to get a good look at them next time, so please take good care of your guts.

Subaru: This is the least happy I've been to have someone speak kindly to me in my entire life.

Shut-In

Subaru: Day and night, in order to defend the peace of mind of the family who comes home tired out, these warriors sacrifice their own futures and fight on. Their only solace comes from moments spent with their loves on the other side of the monitor.

Emilia: Somehow, it sounds like a re~ally difficult job… Were you a shut-in as well, Subaru?

Subaru: *Ahem*

Emilia: ? Hmm? Did I say something wrong?

Magic Stone

Subaru: This refers to rocks that accumulate mana, that contain a bit of magical power… I think. For heating water in the bathing room, and as tools in the kitchen, it seems they're used quite frequently.

Ram: They're closely tied into the foundations of life, indeed. Magic stones themselves are clumps of pure, colorless mana, but by adding properties to it from the outside, you can make it useful in various ways. Like the magic lights that illuminate the night in the capital, there are many settings where they are essential. It's just…

Subaru: It's fine for the capital and urban areas, but they're not able to be supplied to the countryside and the corners of the nation, I take it? Well, even in the slums, I didn't see anything along these lines; it's not hard to imagine that that sort of dilemma would come up.

Reinhard: It's unpleasant that the only thing I can say is I wish it was better. I'm always wishing that I was able to do more for the places that people live. …I'm ashamed of my inability to do enough.

Witchbeasts

Subaru: Ah, so you do have this sort of thing. Creatures that are treated this way, sort of like monsters.

Roswaal: When you say monsters… I'm no~t really su~re what you mean, but mabeasts are ge~nerally thought of as artificial life that is instinctively fixated on bringing harm to people.

Subaru: Artificial life… you mean the skills to create life and such exist in this world?!

Roswaal: Maybe I misspoke a li~ttle. I did say artificial, but they weren't brought forth by people. They were given birth by none other than the witch. Life that was created by the hand of the witch, to bring harm to people, is what we refer to as mabeasts. Their forms are close to beasts that already exist, bu~t every mabeast has a horn, so it's easy to be sure what you're looking at. That's setting aside a few exceptions, of cou~rse.

Subaru: The witch… the witch, huh. I guess you're not going to tell me the details of that?

Roswaal: That carries over into the next part of the glossary, doe~sn't it?

Witches

Subaru: I got beat up pretty good last time when we were talking about the "Witch of Envy".

Puck: I think you might say that the witch is the sort of enemy of humanity that goes down in the history books. Generally, when you say witch, it means the "Witch of Envy", but to someone familiar with the old world like me, there were six other witches as well. If you asked if I knew them… well, I guess it's sort of like I didn't.

Subaru: I read a little in passing about the "Witch of Envy" in a fairy tale. She's universally recognized as an object of fear by this world, isn't she. They're still really afraid of her, aren't they?

Puck: She didn't entirely perish, after all. In a shrine in eastern Lugunica, near the Great Waterfall, the "Witch of Envy" is sealed even now. So, the time when everyone can rest peacefully really hasn't come.

Subaru: Wow, that's… one long-lived witch.

The Witch Cult

Subaru: A word that's been applied to insane, baseless rumors. As for what it means… I think I can give a vague guess.

Rem: Is that so? Please explain.

Subaru: It's because just before this, everyone was saying all kinds of bad things about mabeasts and the witch. The witch cult has gotta be some kinda group that reveres the witch or something. From the way you overreacted, Rem, I can tell that they're a malicious, famous bunch.

Rem: For you to know that much… you really must be involved with them, Subaru-kun…

Subaru: That conclusion leads to a bad end no matter what I say, so cut it out! This is just the sort of thing anyone could figure out!

Mana

Subaru: You hear it a lot in games and such, the name that’s always used for a mysterious, invisible particle.

Beatrice: I’m not sure what you’re going on about all of a sudden, but I’ll ignore it and move ahead, I suppose. Mana is the basic element of magical power, that’s mixed into the atmosphere… more or less, you know. It’s indispensable for using magic, for spirits to maintain their existence, and for living things to survive, I suppose.

Subaru: I kind of get why spirits would need it, but even humans and the like would die without it?

Beatrice: If food and sleep are necessary power sources to maintain the body, then mana is a necessary power source to satisfy the soul, you know. If either of them is depleted, it’s impossible to maintain life, I suppose. Having said that, for a human to lose enough mana that they would die of weakness is not something you see at all often, you know.

Subaru: That totally felt like a flag being raised right there!

Magic

Subaru: Here it is, fantasy! It’s just not the same without it!

Rem: It’s good that you’re enthused about it, but you have no talent at using magic, Subaru-kun. Maybe it’s the sort of wistful thing where you long for something you can never have, though.

Ram: Through a gate, the mana that fills the atmosphere is pulled into one’s body. Then, by means of an incantation, the mana that was taken in is changed and given properties, and activated by expelling it back out of the gate – that summarizes the basics of magic in this world.

Subaru: There are six different affinities; they’re fire, water, wind, earth, shadow, and light, wasn’t it? No matter what kind of effect the magic produces, they can be generally classified into one of these six, I heard.

Rem: Rem is water, nee-sama is wind. Subaru-kun is shadow, and so on; each affinity has different things it’s particularly good at. When you reach the level of Roswaal-sama, you have things like being as suited as possible to all the affinities. Emilia-sama is fire, but the conditions for spirit arts users are a bit different.

Ram: That concludes our explanation of magic that’s simple enough for both Barusu and a dog to understand.

Subaru: Are the two of you suffering from some kind of disease where you’ll die if you don’t make me the butt of a joke?

Meteor

Subaru: And unexpectedly, it’s an explosive third magic-related item in a row! Here at the end, we present the metia.

Felt: And I’d like to lead off by saying that they can be sold for ridiculously high prices; the one you used to negotiate with me is like that, too. From what Old Man Rom says, it seems they’re super-rare.

Old Man Rom: Indeed, because an individual’s background and training are crucial to magic. A metia that allows you to ignore all that, and produce the same sort of effect as magic, is something that’s prized. It’s also said that, aside from the ones that they know how to produce, creating new ones is impossible.

Subaru: In the worldview here, they’re ancient weapons… or that’s how they’re treated, I guess. One might be miraculously unearthed now and then; that’s the sort of rarity we’re talking about.

Old Man Rom: Metia are generally discovered in excavations, that much is a fact. It seems that the original meaning of metia is “an impossible gift”. With their utility and rarity, it’s a fact that they’re exchanged for high values anywhere.

Felt: Well, setting aside the behind-the-scenes stuff, the way that they can be sold for a lot is enough for me. I'd love to somehow or other find another one, and warm up my wallet.

Subaru: You're an incurably romantic brat, aren't ya…

Appa

Subaru: The fruit of wisdom that Adam and Eve ate, and the reason they were driven from the garden of Eden. It gave the two of them, who knew nothing, the power to think, and brought down the displeasure of God upon them… the apple is the proof of that sin. This is the name of an exceedingly similar fruit. Now that I think about it, I never did realize my goal of obtaining one.

Kadomon: Yer a really noisy kid, ain'tcha. If yer not gonna buy one, get outta my face already.

Subaru: Alright, alright. …Next time for sure, I'll buy one of your appas, pops.

Loop

Subaru: So, this is how you refer to the collection of time-reversal concepts, including the Return by Death that's wrapped around my situation.

Emilia: You still don't know why you're able to return back through time, do you, Subaru?

Subaru: At this point, all that's been revealed is the condition for activating the loop. Who's doing it, what their goal is, what they want me to do… I know nothing more than when I first got dropped here.

Emilia: When you hear something like 'He can come back after he dies', it sounds like something you'd think was a good thing…

Subaru: The painful memories still hurt, and I'm the only one who remembers what happened in that length of time, not to mention that dying itself leaves you feeling a sense of loss… but, well, it wasn't all bad stuff.

Emilia: …Subaru.

Subaru: There's times when, rather than having some worthless power, it's more precious to maybe have a chance to take back something that you couldn't otherwise undo. That must be the kind of power that I have.

Emilia: Mhmm… I can't say it in the main story, but I rea~lly rely on you.

Subaru: Yeah, count on me. …Even if you do forget, I'll remember it, after all.

Give Blessings to the Beautiful Maid!

That day…

When I came back home, for some reason there was a maid.

She was a short, beautiful girl with blue hair, and she gave off somewhat of a quiet impression.

“Oh, welcome home, Kazuma. Jeez, you promised to come with me on my daily explosion, so where were you?”

When the maid caught my attention, Megumin, who sunk into the couch, started talking to me while pouting.

Daily explosions were a stupid daily thing that this loli wizard insisted she had to do or else she’d die.

It’s true that I was supposed to be the one to carry Megumin back home on my back today, but from what I’m seeing, I figure she’s already done with the daily routine.

“We were out of mayonnaise, so I went to go buy some more. I also bought some ingredients for dinner. I’ll take care of dinner tonight, so cut me some slack here will you?”

As I put the ingredients I bought onto the table, the blue haired maid muttered something.

“Mayonnaise…”

“Something wrong with mayonnaise? Actually, what’s a maid even doing here?”

When I asked the maid a question as she got lost in her thoughts, with a surprised look on her face she said,

“No, I was just thinking about someone who loves mayonnaise… So mayonnaise exists in this world, hm.”

“In this world”?

It almost sounded like she was saying that she came from a different world, so I felt like something was off here.

“Kazuma, allow me to this introduce her. This is Rem. She just happened to pass by when I was resting on the ground after casting explosion magic. When I listened to what she had to say, she sounded kind of troubled, so I thought to help her out and brought her here.”

“To me it just sounds like you were the one to be saved, unable to move and having trouble, can’t see it as anything else. Hell, what were you thinking, going to cast explosion magic all by yourself? What would you have done if that girl didn’t pass by?”

Once this girl casts explosion magic, she has no more magical power at all and she can’t move a muscle.

She may have a quick temper and all sorts of weird things about her, but I’d thought that she wasn’t stupid…

“I went to inspect targets for today’s explosion magic. I found a rock that looked like it’d be pretty good, and I was going to go home, but for some reason a suspicious, white mist started to form. I sensed danger, so I shot it without thinking what’d happen afterwards.”

“Then you were saved by this girl that happened to pass by. I’m sorry that our wizard bothered you.”

“It’s okay…I went out to buy some appas, but just when I felt like a white mist was wrapping me, I saw Megumin-sama passed out right in front of me.”

The maid named Rem says that and looked down in a troubled way.

I wonder what an appa is.

I could see some red fruits that looked like apples in the paper bag the maid was holding. Maybe those were it.

“Rem doesn’t know her way back home. She’d said that she was going back to a mansion, so I’d thought that she was someone from the town Axel, but apparently she doesn’t know the place…”

She said that she’s not familiar with Axel, but it’s the only town around here…

And you said that you were wrapped in white mist, were you being spirited away or something?

“Guess I’ll go to the Adventurer’s Guild and research magic like monsters that manipulate white mist. Rem, right? If you have nowhere you need to be, then you should stay here for a while. We have extra rooms, anyway. It’s to thank you for picking up our crappy wizard, so make yourself at home.”

All I’ve come across were beautiful but peculiar girls up to this point, but it must be fate or something for me to meet a genuine, beautiful maid like this.

“U-Umm, thank you. I’m not sure how useful I’ll be, but at least let me take care of stuff like the housework.”

As I tried to sound cool with some of my lines, Rem, the beautiful maid, let out a sigh of relief, perhaps because she’d been very worried.

And that’s how…

The beautiful maid and us—

“By the way, about the appas you’re carrying, they aren’t going to attack us, right?”

“Why would you think they’d attack? Appas are fruit, you know?”

…A life with Rem, a mysterious girl lacking just a little bit of common knowledge, began—

—The maid wakes up early in the morning.

She gets up in the dark before the sun's even up, and starts preparing breakfast before the landlord is awake.

"Good morning, Rem. You're up early again."

"Good morning, Satou-sama. Satou-sama is up early too. Sorry, breakfast isn't ready yet…"

Rem quickly bows her head, maybe because it was disgraceful for a maid to wake up after the landlord.

"Wait, I didn't wake up early, it's just that I stayed up all night. I'll be going to sleep after this, so I don't need breakfast either."

"Stayed up all night, you say… Um, were you perhaps doing research on that white mist?"

I suddenly look away, as I really didn't want to say that I was up playing games all night to a worried face like that.

"No, I was just playing stuff since I couldn't sleep. So you don't need to worry about anything, Rem."

"…Okay."

Rem looked at me with an apologetic look, I guess because she was reading too much into my attitude, and so I panicked and tried to smooth things over.

"No, sorry that's not quite right. I actually played games until morning! I'm really sorry for giving you the wrong idea! You know what, I'll have breakfast and I'll go to the Adventurer's Guild to do proper research on the fog!"

"O-Okay. But this isn't good for your health, so please make sure to eat breakfast and get some sleep properly."

…What is this refreshing feeling?

She's showing care for me seeing that I'd played games all night.

Since I met a heroine that doesn't classify as peculiar or crappy, once again I realized just how great my luck is.

I am living together with a beautiful maid that suddenly came to our home one day.

Isn't this the true life in a different world?

Yep, this is exactly what they call a 'beautiful girl flag'.

"I don't want to worry Subaru-kun any more than this, but I also feel bad for pushing you even though you're taking care of me…"

"Subaru-kun? Is that someone you like or something?"

When I saw Rem faced down with her ears slightly red, I understood that there was never any flag in the first place.

I knew it.

I knew there couldn't have been something so fortunate in this good-for-nothing world.

—The maid has a lot of work.

All kinds of shopping to prepare meals, taking care of the garden when cleaning the mansion…

And then there was stuff like…

"Today's black tea is splendid again. I give it a perfect score."

"Thank you, Aqua-sama."

Dealing with a worthless goddess that pretends to be a celebrity despite not even knowing what black tea tastes like.

I turn towards Aqua, who has been an attention whore ever since Rem came to this house and wants to poke her nose into other people's business.

"You're acting pretty high and mighty for someone who hasn't even helped out with the investigation whatsoever. Rem, she doesn't know what black tea tastes like, so next time just give her hot water."

"Rude. How could I not distinguish taste, I am the Goddess of Water, you know? You are annoying when it comes to the quality of drinks."

Aqua glared at me for a moment as she said that, but it's been confirmed that this girl doesn't even notice when high class sake is replaced with cheap sake.

It is currently in the afternoon.

I wonder if the relaxing time we spend after eating lunch in the hall will be different with the excellent maid.

Then, Darkness smiles at Rem, who was next to Aqua, as she drank the same black tea.

"Still, the black tea Rem makes is really good. Her cooking is also wonderful. Rem, you're always welcome to become a part of our group, so if you ever want to, just ask."

"Thank you very much, Dustiness-sama. But just those thoughts are enough."

Rem's whole reply was polite. She was too perfect as a maid.

"…Say, Rem, where are you from? You're kind of perfect as a human, so obviously you're not from this town full of oddballs, and such a good person being a resident of this country seems suspicious."

Rem answers my question with another question.

"Do you have any idea what names like Lugnica, Volcania, and Kararagi mean?"

“Well, I know a magical sword user named Katsuragi. Are those names of places? I don’t know them, but how about you guys?”

Aqua and Darkness, the two I asked the question to, also shook their heads.

While Rem pondered something, the entranceway door opened.

“I’m baaaack~ Why does Rem look so serious? Did Kazuma sexually harass you while I wasn’t keep an eye on him?”

“Oi, who do you think I am? I don’t remember ever doing anything weird myself. Mostly just unavoidable counterattacks against outrageous developments.”

Megumin, who’d went to the Adventurer’s Guild, came back and was saying rude things.

“No, apart from assaulting me by looking at me with indecent eyes once I get out of the bath, Satou-sama hasn’t done anything yet.”

“What the?! This girl has a surprisingly sharp tongue! O-Okay then. So, Megumin, how’d it go?”

Megumin had asked an Adventurer Guild member about the fog.

“I’m not sure if this has anything to do with the fog, but recently, never before seen monsters have been appearing near Axel. Apparently they speed up randomly, are pretty strong, and don’t like to go out of town.”

Never before seen monsters?

“Then Megumin, continue to get more information in town. Maybe Darkness will find out something with her connections with nobles? Meanwhile, Aqua and I will check out the monsters from afar.”

—The maid is really strong.

“Waaaaaa! Remmm!! Help me, Remmmmm!!!”

Aqua’s voice echoes throughout the vast plain outside of Axel.

"Hoo!"

As she let out a slight yell, an iron sphere with chains flies, and it smashed the head of the giant toad that was chasing Aqua.

Aqua, who had been chased by a frog, clings onto Rem as she had saved her.

"I'm never leaving this girl's side. I mean, we have the same hair color and eye color, and she doesn't even feel like a stranger. Please stay with me, even if it's just when we're outside of town."

"I don't mind…But is it common for frogs as giant as those ones to be around this area?"

"Axel is well known for its giant toads. They perceive most living things without metal armor as bait, and they're known as the weakest monsters around here. Not to mention, their bodies also are light and taste very good."

It was going to just be Aqua and I to go, but Rem said that guarding is also a part of a maid's job and came along with us.

At first, I was worried about if she'd be fine, but the results speak for themselves.

"By the way, where'd that iron sphere come from? You didn't have it when you left the mansion, right?"

"Satou-sama, it's insensitive to pry into a maid's secrets. Still, monsters, huh…they don't have the witch's stink, so they aren't mabeasts."

I wonder what's a 'witch's stink'.

I set aside the fact that Rem said something strange for now and looked around the area again.

"I haven't seen anything but toads. Where are the never before seen monsters?"

Megumin said that they're seen at this plain, but they were nowhere to be found.

“Since there’s nothing but toads in this plain, they probably moved to the forest or something. You know, toads smell like fish unless they’re cooked properly, right? I wanted to eat delicious things, not just monsters and toads. So how about we go back home? Let’s head back and eat Rem’s delicious cooking.”

When I thought about what to do with Aqua not showing one bit of motivation, Rem immediately sniffed.

And then…

“Is it just my imagination…?”

Rem, tilting her head slightly, muttered a few words.

—The maid makes people useless.

Yes.

“Megumin-sama, open wide.”

“Ahhhn”

Right now, in front of me I see Megumin unable to move from having used up all her magical power after her daily routine, making Rem feed her.

Darkness is out to investigate the mysterious monster and the fog, and the useless Goddess who hasn’t been helpful whatsoever is sleeping even now after making Rem play board games with her until it was late at night.

“Hey, Rem, don’t spoil her too much. Or rather, Megumin you become a useless human too quickly.”

While I have lunch, I give some advice to Megumin, who is lying down on the couch, and Rem, who is standing next to her. Lately, Rem has been working her hardest for Megumin, perhaps because she has a habit of spoiling people or something.

“Come on Kazuma, I know you’re jealous, but please don’t ruin this lovely life.”

Megumin, who wasn’t as dissatisfied with this life as I’d thought, gets along very well with Rem.

So well that Rem even goes with her on all of her her daily explosion walks.

“Sorry, it’s just that when I look at the color of Megumin-sama’s eyes, I remember Nee-sama…”

“Oh, so Rem has a big sister. What’s she like? I can imagine that she’s a very competent woman since she’s Rem’s sister.”

Rem looks sort of quiet, and she actually gives off this impression of being difficult to approach.

So her sister should be the same,

“She’s a lovely sister who likes steamed potatoes and naps.”

When I was having those thoughts on her, Rem started staring at me.

“What is it? I don’t dislike you looking at me with passionate eyes, but it does make me feel awkward.”

This is different from the crappy companions I’ve gotten completely used to. I’ll start to carelessly fall in love if a traditional beautiful girl stares at me like this.

“Sorry, Satou-sama’s clothes looked like the clothes Subaru has. Also, I’m just a little disgusted.”

“You really do have a sharp tongue sometimes! Anyway, you said clothes that look like what I have on? …Say, Rem, does ‘Subaru-kun’ have black hair and black eyes?”

What I have on is a Japanese jersey.

If his looks like that, then that means…

“Yes, that’s right. Subaru-kun has sanpaku eyes, is surprisingly fit, and is handsome.”

“Okay enough fawning over him, since I’ll start wanting to kill ‘Subaru-kun’. But I see. I get most of it… So I have to ask, does ‘Subaru-kun’ have some sort of amazing power? Like an unbelievable ability, or like a special move that turns everything upside down…”

Yeah, in most summonings into a different world, there are those sort of possibilities

“None. He’s just an ordinary boy that was a shut-in before and he has just a little bit of an aptitude for yin magic.”

“Huh?”

It’s not the pattern where you go to a different world with a cheat ability?

“In that case, he must go through the same trouble I go through. And the fact that he’s an ex-shut-in makes me sympathize with him even more. If me and him ever meet, I feel like we could be friends.”

In my case, I have Aqua, so I can come back to life as much as I want as long as I don’t get severely injured a lot.

So that in itself is kind of like a cheat ability.

I have crappy comrades as a handicap to balance it out, but he must be having a hard time, since if he dies, then that’s it for him.

When I considered that, I got over the fact that a beautiful maid likes him.

“Satou-sama, I won’t let you have Subaru-kun, you know?”

“Hold on there, I won’t tolerate those kind of jokes. I assure you that I’m not a homo.”

I faced Rem and gave her a wry smile as she started saying absurd things, but…

“Subaru-kun’s surprisingly popular with the ladies, be it Patrasche or Petra, so I just got worried.”

“Actually, I don’t think I could be friends with Subaru-kun.”

Petra sounds like a name of a beautiful person, though I’m not so sure what a girl named Patrasche would be like.

“Rem, if you’re lonely and want to see your sister, then how about you think of me as your sister and spoil me? I actually have a little sister myself. Leave it up to me to be your big sister.”

“But you’re the one that looks just like a little sister, and there’s something wrong with the older sister being spoiled by the younger one.”

Rem was diligently carrying the spoon to Megumin’s mouth, like how a parent bird would feed its chicks, and she smiled slightly at us.

It was the first smile Rem, who gave off a quiet, calm, cool, and collected impression, showed us ever since she came to this mansion, and it made it seem like she was watching a familiar nteraction—

—The maid…

“The bell peppors! Satou-sama, I was preparing meals, and then the bell peppors suddenly attacked me!”

Rem came rushing from the kitchen with a pale face while I was repairing equipment in the hall.

“Who the hell are the bell peppors? Red magical beings? …Wait, those are bell peppers. You didn’t kill them properly.”

Once I took a look, I saw Rem holding bell peppers tightly.

Bell peppers are tacticians in this world.

They play dead while being harvested. Afterwards, they still continue to do so, waiting patiently to get on a cutting board, and the moment the cook turns their back on them, they attack.

“Did you not learn that you should be careful to check if the bell peppers are dead when you cook them? It’s a good thing that they were bell peppers, because if they were matsutake mushrooms, you might’ve not been alive right around now.”

“Bell peppers are scary. So scary…”

…

“Hey, Rem, you aren’t actually someone from this world, huh? Aren’t you actually from a different world?”

Someone of this world and someone so good at cooking should be well aware of how dangerous bell peppers are.

Plus, she also didn’t know about Axel town, and she also brought up names of places I’ve never heard of before.

“Satou-sama, you aren’t surprised even after finding out that I came from a different world?”

Rem sighs with a worried look on her face.

I was going to tell her, “I probably came from the same different world as Subaru-kun, after all”, but I stopped myself.

Subaru-kun should be the one to come out with something important like this.

It would be against the rules for me to reveal it.

“There are a lot of people from different worlds in this world, after all. It’s nothing that surprises me now.”

As I said that, I placed the sword I was repairing back in its sheath.

“How are those people doing now? I promised to make Subaru-kun appa pie. Is there a way to go back…?”

This beautiful girl facing down with an anxious look probably came to this world through an irregular way.

In that case, forget about the useless Goddess that’s been spoiled by this girl everyday, we have to get the superior Goddess back.

“Don’t worry about it. I promise I’ll send you back. I may not look like it, but I have great luck. Soon enough, I’m sure that…”

Yes, I’m sure that someone will come barging into the mansion and —

…Then, it happened when I was having those thoughts.

“Kazuma, Rem! I found out what exactly the white mist is!”

Darkness came barging in as the entranceway door opened.

“Recently, there have been dog monsters frequently appearing near Axel, and when you see them, there will always be white mist that appears with them. I’m not sure if it has anything to do with Rem, but I accepted a quest to subjugate them.”

—When we were heading towards the vast forest near Axel, I saw Aqua and Megumin waiting.

“Kazuma, you’re late! The monsters are getting away! The forest seems to be their territory, so it’d be a pain if they got deep inside it. Let’s hurry up and kill them!”

Megumin, eyes shining red, was pointing at a group of gigantic dog monsters at the forest’s entrance.

I’d thought that there weren’t any monsters living around here that were this strong. Where the heck did they came from?

It happened then.

Rem, who had been standing still behind us up to this point, seemed completely different and it was as if she'd found her parent's enemy.

Once she brought out her iron sphere, she started running with it in silence.

“Wai!”

Rem rushed out before I could even stop her and she

“Al Huma!”

With a shout, she created several giant ice lances, and she shot them at the group of monsters.

“Hey, Kazuma, you know, that girl is pretty strong. Like so strong that I feel we could just leave.”

“Don't say that, Aqua. I've already declared that I will bring her back while showing off, and I've even repaired the equipment that usually doesn't work very well. What the hell am I supposed to do about this? She doesn't even need us.”

Rem killed a myriad of dog monsters by using brutal magic we didn't know about, and after that, she swung around her iron sphere and crushed them one after another.

The maid is strong. Super strong.

I seriously want her in my party.

Then it happened while we were watching her in amazement.

“?! Satou-sama, please run!”

A remarkably large animal with a horn on its forehead ran past Rem and dashed towards us.

Darkness went in front of us to protect us, and the arm she stuck out towards the dog was being bit on hard…!

"Damn! What a treat this is to have a dog reeking of beast on me! Kazuma, leave this up to me and cover Rem! Don't worry, I'll keep this guy busy like this! Come on now, leave it up to me to handle this and go on without me!"

I leave behind Darkness, who looked sort of fine, and backed up Rem with the bow I had in my hand…

"Satou-sama, please shoot it!"

I somehow reacted faster than Rem's frantic speaking.

The giant dog that was biting Darkness dodged it and disappeared into the forest.

"—Darkness-sama, please let me take a look at your injuries!"

Rem, who exterminated all of the dog monsters except for the one that ran away into the forest, came rushing over with a pale face.

"Don't worry, the wound is extremely minor. It's just a mere scratch. I wanted to be hit harder…"

"I'm sorry our weirdo acts like this even though you were worried."

"I'm already used to it because of Roswaal-sama, so it's okay! …Ahh…"

Rem gave an odd reply, though I don't know who Roswaal-sama is, and she moaned softly with a pale face as she looked at Darkness' wound.

"Rem, your face is pale. Do you know that monster? Does it keep poison or deadly viruses in its nails and fangs or something?"

"It's not poison, it's a curse! That mabeast casts a curse that weakens the person it bit! At the moment, the only way to release the curse…is to kill the mabeast that casted it."

Hearing those words, Aqua starts to feel Darkness' body.

Rem turns her back on Darkness, and she starts walking towards the forest the monster disappeared into.

“Darkness-sama, please relax. I will now pay you back for the kind hospitality you showed when I wandered into this world. I promise that I’ll save you!”

When Rem said that declaration vigorously, she looked towards the forest with the thirst for revenge in her eyes as I wondered, ‘What ever happened to the timidness she had when she first came to our mansion?’

What should I do?

I feel bad because she’s so fired up, but I’m familiar with these flow of events—or rather, I know what happens after this.

“Calm down, Rem. It’s alright, don’t worry about Darkness.”

“?! What are you saying, at this rate, she’ll…!”

Upon hearing those words, Rem suddenly turns around, and it happened just when she was about to lose control of herself.

“‘Sacred Break Spell’!”

Sure enough, or well, how should I put it…Aqua, being the dense one she is, chanted magic to release curses.

When white light rose from the magical circle that appeared at Darkness’ feet, something like a black haze appeared for a moment, and then it vanished.

“Rem, relax! Darkness is fine now! A curse like this is a piece of cake if you rely on me!”

“Oh…”

They turn towards Rem as she unconsciously dropped her iron sphere and looked at them in confusion.

“Thanks, Rem. Um…you tried to save me, and just those feelings are enough. I am very grateful.”

“Y-Yeah, stuff like risking your life and trying to dispel a curse aren’t things that people could do very easily! Yes, you were very cool!”

These two, as people who have memories of this same development, follow-up while considering Rem’s current feelings.

Rem was facing down, so her facial expression couldn’t be seen, but they were at least able to guess how she was feeling right now since her ears were red.

“Thank goodness, Rem, Darkness is saved! But that’s a relief. You usually don’t really show much facial expressions, but you’re actually really nice, huh!”

With another dense remark, Rem crouched down while covering her face.

“—This might just be my gamer’s intuition, but I feel like Rem will be able to go back if we exterminate the mabeast that ran into the forest.”

Hearing my words, Rem, who’d been crouched down up to this point, stood up as if nothing had happened.

“In that case, I’ll go into the forest now and chase it. But those mabeasts’ stink is very faint, I wonder if it’s because they came into this world where the witch isn’t strong enough… I’m not sure how many days it’ll take to hunt those mabeasts, but I hope that it’s okay for me to be under your care until then…”

I shake my head at Rem, who said that with an apologetic look.

“You can stay in the house for as long as you want, but I told you earlier, didn’t I? I promise to send you back.”

When Rem said that, I started using Enemy Detection with all the magical power I had in me.

It was that strong.

Just as I'd thought, the weak monsters around this area seemed to have ran away, and from inside the forest, I could only sense the presence of what seems to be the large dog from earlier.

“Oi, Megumin, are you ready? The target is in the direction I'm pointing in. If you cast magic with everything you have in you, the distance should be spot on. The town might get angry afterwards, but go ahead and hit the middle of the forest as hard as you want!”

“You can count on me! Allow me to blast away that mutt with my powers! Rem, your big sister's going to show you what she's really got. I, not Kazuma, will send you back home!”

Rem chuckles softly at Megumin, who went ahead and called herself her sister.

While Megumin was starting to chant magic resonantly, a remarkably loud cry was heard nearby.

“Nooooo! Nooo! Rem, be ours! Please, stay by my side forever and spoil me!”

“Aqua, don't be selfish! Everyone wants it, but why do you have to say things you shouldn't say out loud! Rem has a home, don't bother her anymore!”

Darkness frantically holds down Aqua, who was crying and trying to hold back Rem, as she probably anticipated what was going to happen.

Rem looks at the two of them, and in a bit of a troubled manner,

“Thank you all for taking good care of me. I felt a little confident in this world.”

She says that, bidding a shy farewell while sounding a little happy.

“Oh, Rem. Take this with you.”

While Megumin continued to chant magic, I said that and handed her large box closed tight.

“What’s this?”

I faced Rem who looked curious,

“You worked as a maid, but you weren’t even paid properly, right? Even if I gave you money from this world, you wouldn’t even be able to use it, so at least take this.”

And when I said that, with a slight smile, Rem said,

“Thank you very much. By the way, what’s in it?”

I also smile back and,

“Rem was in the middle of buying apples, right? I bought some high-class ones, so take them home with you and make some appa pie or whatever for ‘Subaru-kun’.”

When I said that and handed over the box to Rem, she blushed happily.

“—And well, I’m a little jealous, but I wish for happiness for you and Subaru-kun.”

To be honest, I’m not just a ‘little’ jealous, but it’s someone that such a great girl likes.

He must be someone I could never hope to compare to, liked by everyone, honest, sincere—

“Yes! Subaru-kun’s number one is Emilia-sama, but I’ll do my best to become number two!”

…

“Oi, what did you just say?”

“Do my best and become number two.”

“Oi, Megumin, stop the magic! We’re going to make this girl ours! That asshole Subaru is an awful two-timing bastard! …Ah, what are you doing, Darkness, stop it! Oi, let go of me. Megumin, you too, stop the mag…!”

The beautiful maid from a different world had a worried expression, but she had an amused smile on her face.

“‘Explosion’—!”

The forest was wrapped in white light while a thunderous noise resounded throughout it—

Give Blessings to This Wonderful EMT!

1

…This encounter was nothing but a miracle.

“Hey, is this place…”

In the white room, the stunned girl winked, tilted her head and asked herself.

That girl looked amazing.

With silver hair shining like the moonlight, purple pupils like gems, combined with that slender and perfect figure, just a glimpse of her beauty makes anyone’s heart burns.

She is simply the supreme beauty, a work of art made by God himself, and a manifestation of true beauty.

Afterwards…

“Welcome to the Great Beyond, Miss Emilia. Saying this suddenly might scare you, but you are already dead, not long ago.”

This girl in front of her is a beautiful goddess.

A girl with aqua-blue hair, eyes as clear as the sea, perfect body, a face blooming with a extremely lovely smile.

“…”

The two beautiful girls sitting in chairs and staring at each other across the table.

To be honest, the beautiful silver-haired girl Emilia couldn’t understand the situation as a whole.

Then the girl with aqua-blue hair nodded solemnly, and said “don’t worry”.

“I also know you are confused, but this is an indisputable fact… You’re already dead. Please try to accept this fact first.”

“Hey, hey…hmm, please wait a second. Um, am I really dead?”

“Right. You’re already dead. At a young age…it’s painful. I am also very sympathetic. Hey, according to the data, the cause of your death is…poof.”

…The girl with a mysterious face instantly giggled after reading the data on the table.

“Wait, wait a minute…Death, the cause of your death was ‘choking on mochi’. Actually, it turned out to be such a old people’s killing themselves method. You are so precious. Ahhhhhhh?! Actual age…”

The girl crying from laughing glanced at the information and then at Emilia, and gestured as she understood everything, pointed to Emilia’s ear and said.

“So that’s it, elves. I am generally in charge of Japan, so I have never hosted a child like you!”

“…I am not an elf, I’m a half-elf”.

“Is that so? But the ears are really long…Well, they are not that bad for me as a goddess. In other words, it turned out to be mochis, puff puff puff!”

“…”

Emilia’s eyes widened, staring incredulously at the belly laughing girl.

After seeing this reaction, the girl gently tilted her head and then said ‘Well, forget it’.

“In short, now we got it, let’s continue. I’m Aqua. I am the goddess who gives guidance to those who die young. Although it’s a little different now.”

“What did you just say now?”

“Don’t mind about details. More important. Well, it seems that you’re young and you currently have two choices! But because one of the choices is meaningless, just pretend that it does not exist. Then go straight to the one I recommend now.”

Although she was a mess at rhetoric, Emilia did not interrupt the girl named Aqua’s speech.

After seeing Emilia’s reaction, Aqua went back to the chair and said:

“That is, isekai: keeps the current memory and abilities, reincarnates in another world, and starts another brand new life!”

“Another world, rebirth…?”

“Well, as an Kazuma from Japan once said, my word is persuasion. It seems that the term is not very obvious for the child who originally lives in an isekai world. Hey, in other words…”

After all, Emilia had no idea about the word ‘isekai’ means, and Aqua suffered to explain ‘what a pleasant place the other world is’.

Then, after 30 minutes of explanation, Emilia nodded as if she was able to understand it.

“That’s it…Another world, where you can eat to and play with whatever your heart could wish every day, and there are many handsome men and beauties. It’s a very happy place.”

“That’s it! Having such an opportunity, you would be a fool if you didn’t take the opportunity. Don’t be a fool. You should make a decision as soon as possible!”

“Hmm, but…”

“Huh! But? What else?! Why are you still hesitating?! Is there any better than this?! Look, the welfare after reincarnation is also very luxe…”

While Aqua continue to pressure the hesitant Emilia, she hurriedly took out something from the drawer of the table.

That is, there is a “catalog” that contains a lot of information about the ‘isekai bonus’, including photos.

“Look, here you go! You can also freely choose these rebirth bonuses…even with photos? The office supplies are much more complete than previously. In other words, the chairs and tables seem to have being improved a bit. How dare Eris be so smug…”

The grudged Aqua knocked the “catalog” on the table and stamped in annoyance with an angry expression on her face. Then she gave the “catalog” to Emilia again.

“Okay, please have a look. Among the things here, you can pick one and take it.”

“But just now you put too muck on this book.”

“The book itself is not important, but it’s content is. Well, whether it is a legendary sword or super powerful magic, you are free to choose! With these, the crusade againt the Demon King can continue smoothly, and the possibility of me returning to the heaven is also…”

“The crusade againt Demon King? Heaven?”

“Don’t worry about these little detalhes! Now, p-l-e-a-s-e. Choose one and reincarnate in another world as soon as possible. Just do it for me, okay?”

Aqua continued to persuade Emilia to reincarnate in another world, but Emilia didn’t know what to do next.

To be honest, Emilia didn’t understand well Aqua’s explanation.

That’s because she treated Emilia as a dead person from Japan? Or is it simply because Aqua’s explanation is terrible? In short, Emilia still has a little knowledge about the situation.

“But…”

Emilia touched the emerald on her chest as a symbol of the contract with the spirits, and groaned.

Now she can't feel her connection with Puck anymore. This is, without a doubt, an unusual situation. In the past she would definitely panic, but…

"P-l-e-a-s-e."

The presence of that girl named the goddess in front of her gave her a wonderful peace of mind, so even in this state, she did not fall into a panic.

And, even if she is dead, isn't she still alive now?

"Now, please, can you decide quickly? I have to take advantage of Eris's absence and send as many people as possible to increase the chances of defeating the Demon King!"

"If I did that 'isekai', could I help you?"

"Yeah! That's right! How about it? Have you decided to do it?"

"…Oh, I see. Although I am still a little apprehensive, I will do my best."

"Ok! Ok! Yes, this is the job of a goddess!"

Seeing Emilia's consent, Aqua happily raised her hands in a gesture of joy, and finally showed a relieved expression on her face.

"Haha…It's good to meet a frank child, and I can also get the work done easily. Here is this. In retrospect, it was also strange to Kazuma at the beginning. Ah, did you decided which bonus you will get? Since you are the first person to work with this long-lost goddess, let me pick a good one for you."

Aqua, with a smiling face, flick through the 'catalog' on the table.

"The first ones are 'Sacred Sword of Destiny' and 'Masamura Demon Sword', forget it. At one hand they are very powerful when holding it. But on the other hand, as long as the sword is removed, you will completely become an ordinary person, so they are traps. There are also 'Weird Power' and 'Super Magic Power'. Although they look very powerful, they are also traps. If you are not careful, you will break the door, destroy the equipment, and even hinder any interpersonal relationship. Then there is 'Super Magic', which allows people to use very powerful magic. It's good for a goddess with such beauty and talent. If it is given to ordinary people, it is a completely overkill!"

"Hmm, I feel it'll very hard no matter what. I don't know how to use swords, and becoming a Hercules will bother me. Magic is… suck a thing."

"Hum, so what? Is there anything you want?"

Emilia, who looked confused, suddenly her eyes shone, she folded her hands, and nodded her head…

"…just Aqua is fine."

"Eh?!"

"Aqua seems to know many complicate things and is willing to teach me all kinds of stuff. She's really very reliable. Therefore, rather than choosing something, I still hope Aqua can be by my side…"

"Wait, wait, wait! Hey, is that a lie?! Wait, why?!"

Emilia held at her chest proudly as if she had offered a valuable suggestion, but Aqua fought herself desperate, with tears in her eyes. However, it was too late…at that very moment, the white magic circle on the floor released a strong light, surrounding they both.

Even Emilia was shocked by such amazing magic power. Aqua jumped from the chair instantly, panicky.

"Wait wait wait! That does not count! Invalid, invalid!! This is definitely not okay…Ahhh!"

"Ah, beware!"

Aqua, who was about to escape from the magic circle, was caught by the white light and hugged by Emilia. At the moment the two embraced, a dazzling white light was emitted on the ground…

“No way, ah ah ah ah ah! Why is this happening again?”

…With Aqua’s crying in sorrow, the two girls disappeared.

2

The two stood in the middle of the street, with a busy carriage in front of them.

As the light faded, the two had been teleported to a completely different place. Emilia was shocked by what happened in front of her, and she had to blink her eyes in amazement.

“Wow, that’s amazing. I went to another place out of the blue…like Beatrice’s Door Crossing.”

“Ah…ahh…ahhhh…”

“But, where is this place…Although the atmosphere is similar to that of Kingdom of Lugnica, it feels a little different…Heh, Aqua, what is this place?”

“Ahhhh…ahhhh…ahhh…”

“Aqua? Heh, Aqua, are you okay?”

Aqua ignored Emilia, who was talking about the place in front of her, and just crouching on the ground with her head in her arms. After seeing Aqua’s looks, Emilia shoke Aqua’s shoulder and said.

“Are you ok? Does the stomach hurt? Do you want to lie down and rest?”

“No! Do not confuse the great trouble of the goddess with a child’s stomachache!”

“Ah, really, you can’t speak in such a tone. I’m obviously worried about you, so if you say this, the other party will be very awkward. Honestly, Aqua is a naughty girl.”

“I just told you don’t treat me like this. And, and…ohhhh!!”

The crying Aqua stood up in frustration. After saw Aqua like that, Emilia crouched helplessly.

“Is there something bothering you? If you can, tell me about it…”

“Now! Just now! I’m in the middle of a trouble. Nah! Why are you doing this? Huh! What’s wrong with you? What do you have against me?”

“Hey…, hate or anything, not really…? “

Facing Aqua’s questioning, Emilia felt extremely confused. Why was Aqua so distressed, Emilia had no clue.

At that moment, the surrounding eyes instantly focused on the two people who were making a fuzz on the street. After all, as incomparable beauties, call attention for those two was inevitable.

“What…”

Although she usually calls attention, Emilia petrifies at being stared suddenly. By reflex, he stretched out his hand to put on the back hood, but felt empty because her current clothes did not have a hood.

Then…

“Ow, it’s broken. If this continues…Right! Come here!”

“Ugh, ah, uh.”

“Don’t waste my time. Ah…really. I thought I met a frank child, my mistake! Why is this happening to me?”

Aqua grumbled, grabbing Emilia’s arm and starting to walk. She just crossed the street and followed Aqua into a hidden alley.

In the dark alley, after confirming that there was no one around, Aqua casually said “OKAY” and turned round.

"There is nobody here for now. In any case, you did a really terrible thing. No one never brought the goddess into another world…no, you're the second person in history to commit such evil! Fortunately, I am a merciful and compassionate goddess, thank me very much!"

"…"

"Hey? Are you listening? Isn't this a warning from the goddess? Ignoring the commendable warning of Lady Aqua, are you as rude as Kazuma?"

"Ah, hey, it's not that. I'm listening…"

"So react. I'm in this situation because of you. Take responsability."

Aqua pouted and said, she untied the iconic knot with his hands, and after spreading the hair, she started form a long braid slowly.

"What are you doing?"

"Doesn't it look like you know it? Disguising. My current state would be very troublesome if I met any acquaintance. Although there is no way to be recognized no matter where, but if they found me, I would definitely be nagging a lot, so let's avoid it. Look, what about?"

After braiding her long hair, she put on glasses that she took out from nowhere. Her beauty with blue glasses frame is perfect, and the impression she gives had changed a lot in an instant.

But, although she looks nothing like Aqua, she is still Aqua…

"Amazing, it's like different people."

"Yeah? Isn't that right? Even myself am a little scared of being so almighty. You can call me Lady Aqua."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand what you are talking about."

"What?"

Emilia glanced at Aqua while twirling her silver hair.

“Would you like to say something?”

“… Hum, can I also change clothes like Aqua?”

“…? Why? It does not make any sense.”

“Because I’m a half-elf…If I show up on the street reckless, except for the people around, it will also gives Aqua a hard time.”

“Because you’re a half-elf…Ah…it seems you don’t know yet. Come here.”

“Ah, hey, ow.”

As before, Emilia was being dragged by the street by Aqua. When she heard the noisy voices in the street, she was about to break free from Aqua’s hands.

Aqua pointed her other finger forward and said ‘Take a look around’.

“The passerby over there, and the two people drinking tea there. Their ears are very long. They must be elves.”

“Oh…”

“Although I don’t know how your original world is, no one here cares if you are a half-elf or an elf…Compared to this, it would be even worse if my identity as goddess is revealed. So, try to call me Aqua…Hey, are you listening to me?”

“…”

“Hello, are you listening? Don’t ignore me.”

Emilia was so shocked by the sight that she was speechless. On the other hand, Aqua put on an expression of dissatisfaction, desperately emphasizing her existence.

“Excuse me, sorry?”

"Huh? What the hell is this…oh oh."

However, Emilia didn't pay attention to Aqua, but spoke to a fierce man who happened to be passing by there.

The man turned his head, with a pain expression at first, but when he realized that it was two beautiful girls who stopped him, his expression instantly changed.

"What, what's wrong, little girl? Are you looking for your family?"

"Puff! Man! This face looks too intense, it's cracks me up!"

"First, don't pay attention to those rude one over there, are you looking for someone?"

"Well, this may seems strange…Are you afraid of me?"

"…"

Hearing Emilia's question, the man was lost in thoughts.

After being hit on by two beautiful girls, he was expecting a romantic development. One of them pointed to his nose and laughed at him, and the other asked an inexplicable question.

"…Are you testing me? Or is it a prank?"

At that moment, the many bad endings that popped into the man's head stressed him out. If he was only being laughed at, it would be okay. If the worst comes to the worst, he might fell into a trap and will loose all his money. It was payday, and after finishing drinking, he would being ready to go to the dream shop…

Of course she came after the money, so the man immediately stayed turned.

"…"

However, the man hesitated for a brief moment. The reason is the look in the eyes of the girl in front of him, Emilia. This look is sincere, looking forward to the man's answer, as if she is seeking for something, and the man's answer will be its proof.

It's too much. This is not the look in the eyes of a passerby woman. Even in that man's not rich experience of interacting with women, there is no similar experience.

If the worst comes to the worst, you may be giving up on all his money and get poor. Eventually you will get full of debts and he will not be able to commit himself to the casinos and lose his dignity as a man.

"Ah, little girl. How could I be afraid? You are very beautiful."

After a great deal of though, the man answered the question.

After a great deal of though, the man decided to answer that way. If he deceived her, he would be that kind of man. Lost into the tears of that woman, he would just live as humble and lowly as a slave.

However, when Emilia heard the man's answer, her face immediately lighted up.

"Thank you! I'm so happy! Let's go, Lady Aqua!"

"Hey, ah, wait, wait?! Stop pulling me…too hard?! What's going on, this child is too strong! Like Darkness!"

After shook the man's hand and thanked him, Emilia took Aqua and walked across the street. Although Aqua wanted to resist, she was not as strong as her, so she complained and threw herself at Emilia's mercy.

"What, what happened, those two kids…"

The man stood there and watched the two leave.

Although he didn't know what was going on, the man was very happy deep down in his heart. The girl who held her hand to express her gratitude, and her gratitude wasn't fake. He didn't choose the wrong one, he really helped that girl.

"In that case…ah, that's great."

The man enjoyed a sense of satisfaction and walks in the opposite direction of the girls.

…Somehow, he feels very happy.

Therefore, the choice for that dream shop today is decided to be the ‘Arrogant Girl with Blue Hair and Glasses’. If he chooses the girl with pure silver hair, his conscience would be guilty.

3

Emilia took Aqua and walked upright on the street.

It was a pleasant surprise for Emilia to be able to walk in such an upright manner without wearing a hood or covering her ears.

“So it is a shop, and the people over there, everyone lives for granted…”

“Nah, it hurts! My hand…Easy! Please, can you be more careful with me as a goddess!”

“Look, Lady Aqua! This place… It’s great! It’s not like Lugnica at all!”

“It isn’t that different! Anyway, listen to what the others are saying!”

After struggling with all her strength, Aqua finally get rid of Emilia’s hand.

Aqua was blowing on her wrist while looking at Emilia who ignored her and continued to move forward.

“Listen! This is the starter town - Axel. Although I don’t know how you lived in your original world, since you get here now, forget everything about there!”

“Which means, without covering my ears and hair, can I walk upright on the street?”

“So are you wanted…? I don’t think so, this is such a terrible experience…”

Although there are subtle differences in understanding, the two have already begun to understand each other. In any case, Emilia no longer had to hide her identity, and little by little, she had stated to accept the fact that she reincarnated in another world…

“So, let me teach you about adventurers! Remember, and then go to defeat the Demon King as soon as possible, of course, the sooner the better!”

“Yes, Lady Aqua! But before that, there are so many things I want to do!”

“How dare you talk back to me. But as you called me ‘Lady Aqua’, I will spare you. Well, let’s hear it.”

“As expected of Lady Aqua! So gentle!”

“Hey, what? Say more, say more.”

Not knowing what was good or evil, Emilia has always been a very frank child, and soon the conversation proceeded according to what Aqua was pursuing.

After that, “Lady Aqua, so amazing!”, “Okay, comin”, “Lady Aqua, so cute!”, “Continue!”, “Lady Aqua, it’s so beautiful!”, “Heh heh heh heh!”, repeating the same conversations all the time.

“Ha, ha…I’m so exhausted…Although it is true, I haven’t been treated like this recently. It feels great.”

“Lady Aqua, are you okay? Take a break? I…Ah, I’m going to find some water.”

“No, it’s okay. About water, I can do it myself. I was originally the Goddess of the Water. Not to mention my own flesh water, even one month of domestic water here is a piece of cake for me.”

With that, Aqua activated Create Water, poured water into a cup that came out of nowhere, and drank it all in one go.

After seeing it, Emilia clapped in admiration.

“Amazing! Lady Aqua is really omnipotent!”

“Hey? Right? Did I accidentally let you see it again? Ahhh, that’s bad. I didn’t intend to show off at first…However, the strong ones show strenght in every move.”

“Lady Aqua, let us continue with what we’re just talking!”

“It’s really character decomposition, so.”

Emilia asked Aqua to go ahead with the topic just now, but Aqua sighed involuntarily.

“Well, if you want me to listen, I’ll listen. However, if there is any strange request, I will refuse it without hesitation. So, what’s the matter?”

“Yes! Am I here to defeat the Demon King? But before this, I want to go shopping on the street!”

“Okay, dismissed! Puff puff! No way! Did you hear me? There is no time for these nostalgia here. You have to become an adventurer as soon as possible, and then embark on a journey to defeat the Demon King. Otherwise, why did I drive away Eris so hard and secretly send reincarnated over…”

“Hey? Lady Aqua, what did you just say?”

“Okay, okay! In short, rejected! Absolutely not!”

Seeing Aqua rejecting her request, Emilia bowed her head and mumbled regretfully “Really”…

“…Oh, I see. Too bad, but Lady Aqua said so.”

“You see, looking at your regretful expression, I can’t bear it…But there is nothing special here. Even if you stroll around, it won’t be fun?”

“Is Lady Aqua from here?”

“I’m a goddess, I’m from heaven, of course. It’s just been here for a while, and it doesn’t seem to have changed at all.”

“I see. However, this is the first time for me. And…”

“And?”

“Don’t care about your half-elf identity, this is the first time I feel this way.”

Emilia gave a lonely smile, then turned her head away.

“Oh, I’m sorry, just say some willful words. Moreover, what Lady Aqua said…”

“And more. Like that, it will deepen my guilt. I know. I know. I’ll accompany you for a little stroll…”

“Really?”

Emilia’s face suddenly lighted up, and she took Aqua’s hand. Then there happily jumped with joy…

“Wow, I’m glad! Thank you, Lady Aqua! You don’t have worry about causing trouble to others, it’s still the first time I go to the streets without fear!”

“Wait, wait! The child’s past is heavier than I imagined! The atmosphere before her death was terrible!”

Emilia spoke cheerfully, leaving Aqua frozen.

At that time, Emilia looked at the shops on the roadside and the outer walls surrounding the town with relish, and was full of curiosity about everything in her reach.

Where should I start? Seeing Emilia’s looks, Aqua sighed deeply.

“Don’t worry, just go and see all the places you like.”

“Hey?! May I?”

“To this extent, you can still be accompanied. I’m not a devil…By the way, I’m a goddess…Besides, as a reincarnation bonus, I have to accompany you on the adventure. It would be too pitiful if I didn’t satisfy even this little wish.”

“…?”

Emilia didn’t listen well the latter words, and tilted her head.

Aqua waved her hands vigorously at Emilia.

“Let’s go! Although I agreed to go sightseeing in the city, it doesn’t mean I can just hang around. Also, when sightseeing, try not call me ‘Lady Aqua’, or ‘Lady Goddess’. Whatever one, it’s going to be a lot of troublesome if I was exposed.”

“Yes, Lady Aqua!”

“Didn’t I just say not to…! But it feels good, you can call me again.”

“Lady Aqua? Shall we go?”

“You’re taking my ground, please don’t.”

The impatient Emilia leaped forward into the streets, followed by Aqua.

Then, they set off on their trip to Axel.

4

Although, the humha group started a trip to Axel…

“It’s really a town with nothing extraordinary! Do you want to go to Alcanretia? It can be a famous tourist spot, and you can also try the missionary activities of the Axis Cult.”

“Axis Cult?”

“Hmmm, the Axis Cult is a group of followers who worship and believe in me, Aqua, the goddess of water! Unlike the Eris Church, although the number is small, they are all elites. They work tirelessly every day to let the world know about my greatness. They are a group of lovely children. Are Emilia attending school?”

“Sorry.”

“Why did you apologize? It hurts me to be rejected!”

Emilia couldn’t help but laugh when she saw Aqua’s expression.

Aqua stared at Emilia and then said “even so…”

“Emilia is strange, too. Where is the fun of this town without charm?”

“Yeah. But it’s really fun. It’s all scenery I haven’t seen…and…”

“And?”

“Lady Aqua is with me. I am not alone, it makes me feel at ease and happy.”

Seeing Emilia smiling with joy, Aqua held her arm proudly.

In fact, Aqua was confused.

Recently, Aqua has had little to do with such frank and sincere thanks.

Forcibly being taken to another world by Emilia, although it was a cursed fate at first, after getting used to it, she also started to feel that life was not that bad.

That being said, there is still a little discontent over whether or not to be treated as a goddess. These dissatisfaction and depression are now being eliminated little by little thanks to Emilia.

Continue to deepen feelings, by the time there is guilt, the trouble…

“Lady Aqua?”

“Nothing. Anyway, are you tired of shopping in the city, right? We are almost at the Adventurer’s Guild, so prepare to become a real adventurer.”

“Ah, however, what’s on that little stall…?”

“Let’s go to the Adventurer Guild while eating! I’ll pay you for that. Thank me very much. Very charitable of a goddess.”

“Wow, I’m glad. As expected of Lady Aqua. So gentle!”

“Hum hum, go on, say a little more.”

Then, led by Aqua, the two made their way towards the Adventurer Guild.

The Adventurer Guild is a super large building that merges a wine shop and a restaurant, and the aroma of cooking standing outside just come to your nose.

Emilia was in front of the building, looking with wide open eyes.

“Is this the Adventurer Guild that Lady Aqua mentioned?”

“Yes. After registering here, an adventurer card will be given to you, and then based on the above stats, select the corresponding occupation. After registration, you are a real adventurer! The long-awaited journey to defeat the Demon King’s has officially begun.”

“…? …?”

“Rather than talking nonsense here, it’s better to take action. Excuse me!”

“Come on. Excuse me.”

It was something that hadn’t been heard before, and Emilia was filled with questions. Aqua happily patted Emilia on the shoulder and pushed open the door of the Guild.

Emilia followed right behind, and then…

“Welcome! Please come to the counter if you are looking for work, and please sit down if you have a meal!”

As soon as he stepped into the Guild, the voice of a busy waiter was heard.

After hearing the sound, the men in armor in the store looked at them at the same time.

After feeling so many sharp eyes, Emilia couldn't help but grabbed the sleeve of Aqua's clothes.

"Lady Aqua, it feels like everyone is staring at us…"

"Hey, will people be attracted by my breath of god even disguised? That's terrible…But if I respond, I lose. Ignore it here, ignore them and go to the counter."

"Oh, sorry…"

Emilia followed Aqua timidly. Although people in the union were looking at them both, the reason was completely different from what she thought.

They were simply fell attracted to the two unaccompanied girls.

However, this is enough to prove that Aqua's disguise is still effective.

But…

"Do the adventurer register? Okay, the registration requires one thousand Eris…hey, credit first? So we are in trouble. Originally you…Ah, isn't you Miss Aqua? Hey, why is it exposed? Because the adventurer card cannot be forged. And if you don't show your identity, you won't be allowed to pay on credit."

Immediately after hearing the conversation at the counter, the men in the store suddenly felt bland and extremely depressed.

"What? What's Aqua?"

"Don't make such misunderstanding!"

"In other words, the child next to her is also a child with a brain problem! That was close, I was almost cheated!"

The men she thought she had deceived started mutter.

They said things like “sober up”, “no more appetite for drinking”, and left one after another.

Because of this unexpected development, the Guild became extremely quiet.

“Hey…”

The woman at the counter looked at Akya with sympathy.

“So, can the registration fee be charged to Miss Aqua’s account?”

“Hemp, I’m sorry…Boo hoo.”

This evil capitalism that cannibalize people without spitting out their bones.

Aqua’s sobbing echoed through in the silent Guild.

5

“Lady Aqua is really super famous.”

“Yes, of course. Anyway, I am the goddess Aqua, and I am also a arch-priest of a higher class. How could I be in this beginner town with my rank?”

In a corner of the adventurer’s guild, Emilia said it while holding the adventurer card she just got while looking at it with interest.

Unbelievably, the text recorded there should have been something Emilia had never seen before, but it was as if it had naturally penetrated into her mind and could fully understood her.

According to the card, Emilia’s profession is the ‘Arch-Wizard’.

According to women at the counter, this is a rare profession that can then manipulate many powerful magic attacks.

Although Emilia didn’t have any idea about this, she couldn’t be wrong by the look of the woman at the counter who was taken aback when she saw the card.

“Well, it’s a higher-level profession, and it’s a arch-wizard, which is a good sign. If it’s like Kazuma who was nothing more than an adventurer, you would be troubled, but you will become stronger soon…Don’t learn a magic like Megumin?”

“This doesn’t matter. However, as Lady Aqua said, is this okay? Is this a skill point? It seems that they are all pointed to the banquet skills…”

“That should do it. It is very necessary. As an rookie, there is no harm in learning more. Besides, doesn’t Emilia also have her own magic?”

“Hmm, but, I don’t use a lot of magic. And I can’t feel the breath of quasi spirits around here…”

Emilia frowned, very distressed that she couldn’t feel the quasi spirits.

Since she came there with Aqua, the quasi spirits seem to have vanished from her side, and she still can’t feel Puck’s connection, and there was a great deal of unease about the future.

Not feeling the connection with the spirits is very unfavorable for Emilia, who is a spirit user. Not only in combat, but also in spirit…

I stayed there for so long, and I don’t want Puck or Subaru to worry too much…

“There is no need to put on such an uneasy expression, it doesn’t matter. Judging by the stats on the card, the magic side is quite high, and you will surely be able to learn other magic soon after you increase your level. As long as you learn one, your development will snowball.”

Aqua was completely wrong about the reason for Emilia’s anxiety, and she continued to encourage her.

Hearing Aqua’s encouragement, Emilia smiled and nodded.

“Well, thank you, Lady Aqua. Then, what do we do next? Eat?”

“Indeed. The next development should be to eat and drink, and then end the day in general. However, this is not okay. Emilia had become an adventurer! So, there is only one thing that we should be doing next: adventure!”

While listening to Aqua’s explanation, Emilia looked at the countless quests posted on the wall. Indeed, there are all kinds of requests posted there…

“I always felt that there are a lot of warcraft to be commissioned…”

“Well, adventurer is a life-threatening job. On the other hand, if it is a job that is not life-threatening, isn’t it necessary for adventurers to show up? But don’t worry. I’m the high priest, healing magic and resurrection magic are a piece of cake! No matter what kind of battle there will be, let it go!”

“Wow, that’s amazing! As expected of Lady Aqua! She’s beautiful!”

“Hey hey, don’t stop, tell me more.”

“Lady Aqua, awesome! Lady Aqua, so cute!”

Aqua looked at the requests posted on the wall with great joy.

“Mm-hmm, that too, this too, it’s not a difficult work. There isn’t a job that can pay off a lot of money, otherwise, how can we make use of mine and Emilia’s excellent talents?”

“Rather, what kind of job?”

“Yep, like a former Demon King’s general or the Mobile Fortress Destroyer.”

The triumphant Aqua brags to Emilia about her past battles. Seeing Emilia’s eyes gleaming, Aqua became even more triumphant and repeating herself.

“Urgent! Urgent! All the adventurers, please equip your weapons and gather at the main gate.”

Not only in the Guild, but the entire town was blasted with the sound of broadcasting.

This sudden voice scared Emilia, but Aqua squeezed her face with a tight cry.

“What is wrong? What happened?”

“It is an urgent quest. If there is an emergency, they will inform all the adventurers like this. It’s obviously not the cabbage harvest…”

“What! Miss Aqua, Miss Emilia! Please go to the main gate as soon as possible you two, please!”

The lady receptionist of the Guild said after seeing Aqua and Emilia.

To explain the situation, she hurried to the front door, and the two also left the union shortly thereafter.

“Hey, what is the urgent quest?”

Hearing Aqua’s question, the gasping receptionist said, with an uneasy face.

“The Magnificent Toad appeared!”

6

Although the Giant Toads are just giant toad-shaped monsters, they should not be underestimated. It is even larger than a cow or a horse. In addition, incidents such as swallowing domestic animals and people during the breeding period sometimes happens.

However, for the well-equipped adventurer, there is no danger, and for rookie adventurers, there are good experience points sources…

“Indeed, the Magnificent Toad is different.”

Even Aqua said nervously after seeing that far away.

According to the urgent quest requirements, the adventurers gathered in front of the main gate of the town. Even the strong man who lives for fighting, after look in the same direction, their legs trembled involuntarily.

Right in front of the gate of Axel, a mountain was moving…No, it was not a mountain. That was a giant toad as big as a mountain.

The toad of toads, the hero of the toad, unlike any toads they have seen so far.

So that was the Magnificent Toad, commonly known as King Toad.

“It’s over…is a ten years-old King Toad.”

“It’s the biggest King Toad of the decade.”

“It’s the biggest King Toad of the decade, bigger than the one two years ago…”

The adventurers lowered their heads, all they felt was fear. Of course. There was no way. Although they are usually engaged in life-threatening jobs, the beginner villages there are still rookies after all.

Although there are experienced adventurers who are still there, their abilities are limited, after all.

However…

“No, wait! It’s too early to give up! Remember? So far, there have been many crises here. Haven’t all the dangers been eliminated in the end!”

Is was one man among the low morale adventurers who said. Someone was moved by what the man’s words and said “Yes”, “It is true”.

“And when it was the Dullahan, and when it was in the Mobile Fortress, we were all fighting!”

“Ah, there must be a way this time…”

The adventurers’ eyes gleamed with hope, and they looked at each other. Then their gazes were all focused on the high-handed Aqua. Although she is still in disguise, she has been exposed in the Guild, so the current disguise is meaningless.

So they all knew she was Aqua, and said it as if they were placing their hopes on her.

“Hello, Aqua! Where are your companions?! If Kazuma was here, with that little cleverness, there would be a way! Besides, that girl has a problem in his head!”

“Ah, Kazuma and the others are not at home. I’m acting alone because they three went away.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!! It’s over, It’s completely over.”

The first man who had just spoken, his hope was broken again. There he scratched his head wildly in chaos, and all the other adventurers were like him.

The hope was ignited for an instant, and morale sank at the bottom.

“This is the biggest King Toad in fifty years…”

“This is the biggest King Toad in fifty years, bigger than the one two years ago…”

The adventurers muttered emptily. When Aqua saw how they were, she said with complacency.

“How rude! Even if Kuzuma is not here, don’t you still have me?! Whether someone is injured or dead, you can be a resurrection without fail? Go and die with confidence!”

“Be shallowed and digested?”

“It will make you a Buddha.”

After the adventurers heard Aqua’s pronunciation, their morale that was low, suddenly fell into the abyss.

After seeing their reaction, Aqua swelled up her cheeks and said

“Why!!”. The situation has not changed so far.

The King Toad did not change the direction, approaching the town step by step.

“Lady Aqua, what should I do now? How about spell it out first?”

As the toad leapt forward, making a sound that shook the earth.

A battle meeting was held at this time, although only Aqua and Emilia were present. But because Emilia only gave a few hard suggestions, Aqua also became uneasy.

“This, cleverness ideas should be made by Kazuma. My job is magical support, It’s hard to be useful in this.”

“I’m not good at using my brain, do you want to start anyway?”

“Wait. Wait. Let me think about it, wait a moment!”

Aqua looked at Emilia with excitement, but now she was very confused because of the change in her role.

That time, truthful words are bound to take advantage of that little cleverness, but today they are not. And, let a level 1 arch-wizard go to a hand-to-hand fight, although she could be resurrected, but it’s not too good. The other adventurers were also unreliable.

“Those people like Kazuma are really useless the most critical times! After we go back, I must talk about him well!”

“Is this person named Kazuma a friend of Lady Aqua?”

“It’s a companion! He was essential to defeating the Demon King and returning me to the heaven. Especially the man who is responsible for making suggestions in this kind of crisis! For several times…”

When Aqua was venting her displeasure with her grievances, she suddenly turned her head. Emilia also turned her head and looked in the same direction.

Then Aqua said:

“Emilia, can you use ice magic?”

7

The warfare which Aqua came up with was very ordinary.

It seems that Kazuma has done something similar before.

“Well, I and Kazuma are not the same. Although the ideas are similar, the specifications are very different. Make no mistake about this.”

“Stop talking, hurry up!”

The impatient adventurers protested against Aqua’s opening statement.

Aqua pouted and looked aside.

Standing there was Emilia with clenched fists in front of her chest, and then she also looked at Aqua.

Unlike the adventurers around, Emilia’s eyes were full of trust.

It’s like a believer who trusts her goddess Aqua.

Therefore, the goddess Aqua must show off in front of her follower.

“My life in this world belong to Aqua, the goddess of water…”

At this time, a huge magical circle was rolled up in the sky, and countless small drops of water floated up. Each drop of water possessed amazing magical power. As the water drops slowly gathered together, they formed a powerful force.

“Sacred Create Water!!”

With the activation of the spell, a large amount of water gushed out from the sky. Because the gate of Axel city was closed, the flood did not reach the city in danger, but swept towards the King Toad with stormy waves.

"…"

Due to the magnitude of the flood, even the King Toad couldn't move on for a while. However, even if the size is different, the toad stills a toad, after all, it is impossible to be completely submerged by water, so it will continue to move after the water slowly recedes.

But before that…

"Emilia, it's your turn!"

"All right, Lady Aqua!"

Aqua yelled when it was over, and Emilia also responded loudly.

Then, Emilia stretched out her hands to face the King Toad caught in the flood, and casted the spell as she taught before.

"The lonely river that connects the underworld will eventually reach the abyss of life, and the soul will be frozen. I will be hostile and lead you to…"

It was a huge magic power that could match the magic that Aqua casted. The mist started to surround her, and it was concentrated in Emilia's hands. With a burst of strong light directed at the King Toad, the flood was instantly frozen.

"…I've heard about Kazuma doing something similar with basic magic before."

"Hum, this is different in scale. This is the magic combo of the goddess Aqua and her devout axis cultist."

Aqua stood in front of the frozen King Toad and spoke confidently.

Next to her, Emilia snapped her fingers and said her final words.

"Confess to the underworld? All right, Lady Aqua?"

With some trick closing words, the King Toad spread out into ice.

After the peaceful chilling of the King Toad, following by enjoying being hyped by everyone, triumph like heros.

After being praised, Aqua and Emilia walked together on the road at night.

“Hum. Satisfied, satisfied. Such a giant toad, it’s really delicious!”

“Yes. It’s the first time I ate toad. I didn’t expect it to be so delicious. It’s great that the rest of the city could share it with us.”

“Well. I originally wanted not be too conspicuous while Kazuma and the others were out. But it would not be good if the town was destroyed and for not showing the identity, the reward be reduced.”

Before that, the Guild gave priority to transport the King Toad into the street, afraid the toad meat had been distributed everywhere for everyone to eat.

“However, master Aqua was really amazing. Coming up with that kind of plan…”

“That was nothing. A level 1 using such a powerful magic, you will definitely become a top-class arch-wizard soon. Thus goddess can assure you.”

“Thank you, Lady Aqua.”

Just as they were bragging about each other while walking at night.

“…Finally, I finally found you, senior!”

“You!”

Aqua turned her head stiffly after hearing the sound.

Emilia turned her head too, but it’s completely unknown why.

There stood a beautiful young girl with silver hair and blue eyes, her cheeks flushed, and she stared at Aqua intensely.

“No, isn’t it obvious that you can’t do this without authorization!

When I was away, you tricked this child, who was entrusted to stay behind, using the opportunity to take away a job or whatever…”

“Huh? In the final analysis, I think it’s even more unforgivable for you to be lazy at work. Even ignoring your own fault and accusing seniors instead?”

“Uh…this, this…but…”

The demoralized girl lowered her head in front of Aqua. Seeing this, Emilia poked Aqua on the shoulder.

“Look, Lady Aqua. Is this child an acquaintance of Lady Aqua?”

“Yeah. It is my junior goddess - Eris. I have been taking care of her since the beginning.”

“Hum…in the past, it was me who took care of Miss Aqua, so…”

Was it because the gratitude was too strong, Eris was completely speechless. Emilia nodded and thought to herself “I see”.

“My name is Emilia, the name is Emilia. Tell me more, Eris.”

“But, please also advise…No! This is not the time to lose with senior! Senior!”

“All of a sudden, is there anything wrong? Look, even if you being so smug, I will not be afraid…”

“Miss Emilia is not dead yet. It’s all arbitrariness of the senior.”

“Huh?!”

Aqua was shocked when she heard what Eris said.

“The senior sneaked into my room and saw information about other worlds and got confused. The child I asked said that in that world the judgment of life and death is very complicated…so she messed up accidentally.”

“Don’t make excuses! So what do you mean? Is Emilia actually not dead yet?”

“Yes, she’s not dead. To be accurate, it should be near death, but the soul was forcibly hooked by the senior. So, if you don’t hurry back…”

Then Eris looked at Emilia with pity.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Emilia. Because of our mistakes, you suffered such…”

“…”

Eris hurriedly bowed her head to apologize to Emilia, while Aqua just watched quietly.

Emilia, as the person in question, closed her eyes.

“Hey, that, though I don’t know very well…what is going on?”

“In other words, Miss Emilia, you can go back to the original world.”

“You can go ho…”

According to Eris’s elaborate explanation, Emilia seemed to understand at least. Be able to return safely-back to her original place in Lugnica, back to Roswaal’ mansion, once again to see Puck and everyone.

It was a happy news. Emilia has a lot to do…

“…No, no, Emilia. Go back to such a place.”

“Ah?”

“Senior?”

Hearing Aqua’s speech, Eris and Emilia raised their heads at the same time.

Then Aqua went behind Emilia.

“Isn’t it all because of Eris’ mistakes? Although there may be a reason for me, isn’t Emilia already here? It must be an error, an error.”

“Lady Aqua…”

“Right after finally getting the Adventurer Card, is the adventure going to end as soon as it starts? So utterly…”

Aqua suddenly grabbed Emilia by the sleeve, preparing to escape.

“Senior, stop taking a stand. Whatever you do is useless.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s useless! Because, in this child’s world…she must cover her ears and hair to go out! She can’t walk freely, and worry about it everyday. It’s pitiful, isn’t it?”

“…”

Eris lowered his head in silence. This is the proof that Aqua cannot be refuted.

Then Aqua looked at Emilia.

“Emilia, just like that, don’t go back and stay here. Although I really want you to defeat the Demon King, let’s forget it. I will tell Kazuma to let Emilia join us.”

“Lady Aqua.”

“Although she can’t match me, Emilia is also very cute. Be careful and true. If there is anything, you can call on me any time, and Megumin and Darkness can tell about it! Surely you will become good friend with those two soon. Megumin may be awkward because there will be one more arch-wizard, but I think you will get along well. Although it’s just a feeling!”

“Lady Aqua.”

“Although Darkness may be a little weird at times, she is basically a serious person, so don’t worry. There are a lot to say about the room, although sometimes…something weird happens…”

“Lady Aqua…”

Emilia interrupted Aqua.

Aqua, who noticed Emilia’s tone, did not go, but waited for Emilia’s words.

“Lady Aqua, thank you very much…I’m sorry”

“If you dare to defy the goddess, you are not qualified. Off, fired, you are fired…”

“Ok. thank you very much.”

…This is the end of the brief encounter between those two.

9

“Miss Emilia has returned to her original world without incident. She should have woken up now.”

“Mm-hmm, right? Thank you.”

“…That one, senior, you know.”

“Since I said I knew it, just don’t keep talking.”

“…”

“Don’t keep talking. Yes, I got it! After that child goes back, if she still remembers what happened here, it might have some bad influence on her. After all, she is a kid who is not good at hiding.”

“…Yes, so, the memory of Miss Emilia.”

“No need to confirm it. So what? Is there anything else? Okay?”

“Well, I’ll try to hide it this time. Senior Aqua, please stop.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Senior, also.”

“Anything else?”

“…Please, don’t be too upset.”

“…”

“Humph! How could I be upset? There are so many lovely axis cultist in this world who are waiting for to be redeemed by me. It’s just a reduction of one believer, how can it be upset!”

“Senior…”

“Moreover, Eris is too naive. Just erase her memory will not stop the blessings I bestowed on that child.”

“Sorry, do…”

“Hey, don’t you know? Poop - poop. I don’t even know if you’re a goddess, that’s hilarious! What a shame, Eris!”

“Spot, spot it, senior! I’m really angry!”

10

Freed from the painful struggle, she finally start to regain conscience. After slowly opening her eye, there was a black-haired teenager in front of her.

“…Subaru?”

“Oh oh oh oh oh ah! Emilia! Emilia-tan?! Are you okay?? Can you breathe?!”

The boy who was called by the name Subaru talked to Emilia with tears in his eyes. Then, when he was about to hug Emilia…

“…Yahahah…”

“Puff…”

The kitten flying over magnificently from the side suddenly kicked Subaru, and after a cat kick his face, Subaru fell out of the bed.

It was a cat-type spirit at the size of a palm: Puck.

After Puck shrink, he slowly flew to Emilia's eyes.

"Are you okay, Lia? You almost died."

"Hey, what's wrong with me?"

"Oh, I made mochis because I wanted to reproduce the cuisine of my hometown. I wanted Emilia-tan to taste it. I didn't expect it… Sorry! I am so sorry!"

After seeing Subaru hurriedly apologizing, Emilia looked at Puck terrified, as if confirming whether it is true or not. Puck held his shoulder helplessly.

"It's true. What should I do if anything happened to Lia. Anyway, it seems that Subaru needs to be punished as well."

"Don't say such odd things. It was also because of my carelessness… I'm sorry, I worried you two. How long did I sleep?"

"Rather than being asleep, I was basically in a comatose state, and it didn't take long…"

"Is that so? However, I'm feeling that I have had a long, long dream…"

She didn't have the memory of the dream at all, but she had a strange feeling, so Emilia raised her hand and took a closer look.

After seeing Emilia's behavior, Subaru and Puck tilted their heads.

Then Emilia said to them:

"Can you take a look at my right hand?"

The two people who were full of doubts had no choice but to do what Emilia said.

Then, Emilia closed her eyes and said as they paid attention on her hands.

“…Nature’s Beauty!!”

So the screams of the two echoed through the Roswaal’s mansion.

…Also, Emilia’s cheerful laugh.

END

IF Stories (Web Novel)

The Butterfly Dream

The former location of the April Fool's Day EX.

—

Have you ever heard the story of the "Butterfly Dream"?

One day, a man found himself in a dream, in which he was a butterfly fluttering through the sky. The dream held no profound significance on its own, but upon waking from the dream, the man mused, "Hmm, did I just wake up from a dream in which I was a butterfly? Or perhaps, it is the very man that I am here and now, who is merely a dream that my butterfly self is dreaming!"

An intriguing notion, is it not?

This concept, however, is not limited to the butterfly. The crucial point lies in the way in which we define who we are in the present moment. When you find yourself in a world that feels as if it were someone else's "dream," do you question whether the person standing there is indeed yourself, or if perhaps it is the world of your ideals? When you encounter such a world, can you really resign to call it a dream? Alternatively, perhaps it is this kind of thinking that pulls one toward the dream world. That is to say, where one has lost sight of the line between dream and reality.

No no, this tendency of mine to beat around the bush is a regrettable habit. Allow me to summarize what I want to say with more clarity and brevity this time.

After all, although it may have lasted for but a moment, the landscape of the dream was certainly there. It was a world far removed from the natural passage of time. And although I am uncertain whether or not it truly did occur…in the end, it is one's own cognition, not that of one's surroundings, that determines whether or not it was indeed a world in which you danced as a butterfly or a reality that you only wish to label as a dream.

The world he observes presents him with different perspectives over and over again. It is his mission to select one of those worlds and navigate that reality for himself.

Then, what becomes of the worlds that he does not seize?

It is a blessing for me to contemplate these unanswerable questions. How will he eventually decide whether to embrace his dreams or discard them? Or whether the world in which he walks is a dream or reality? What a shame that I cannot be present to witness this unfolding. What a truly uncharacteristic failure.

—

As deleting one's work is an act that imposes on the site, only a void of vanished text remains.

Just like a dream.

Lust IF:
The Butterly Dream

1

Recently, it had become the norm for Subaru to be awoken by the blinding sunlight on his eyelids.

“Come on now! It’s morning~! Rise and shine, Your Majesty!”

He considered himself a morning person, but this sort of awakening made it all but impossible for him to be instantly awake and alert. The sunlight beckoned his mind from the world of sleep, albeit slowly.

He had been sleeping particularly deeply recently. Perhaps it was to be expected: after all, he had been pushing both his mind and body well beyond their limits during the day. Such deep slumber was proof that his days were fulfilling.

“You really, really need to wake up now! Wake! Up!”

“Shut up.”

“Gyah!”

The owner of that voice persisted in trying to wake Subaru, cruelly ignoring how comfortably he was curled up in the bed. She was close enough that they could share the same breath, close enough for him to take his revenge by grabbing her and holding her close. She let out a cry like a frog being stepped on as she was dragged into the bed with him.

It was still the time of year when the mornings were unpleasantly chilly, so another person’s body heat was just the thing to warm him up. “Ahh, I’ve been revived,” he said. “It would be nice to just drift back to sleep while we’re like this… Don’t you think so?”

“Mmph! Well, I… I’m not opposed…”

Her voice had been so full of purpose and vigor just seconds before, but she wavered, swayed by Subaru's sweet words. Though they had known one another for a long time, when he treated her sweetly, her softer, childish side peeked through her normally serious facade. That part of her was irresistibly lovely. He was bringing out such a side for selfish reasons, though.

"There's a good girl. It's time for a morning make-out session, don't you think?"

"But…the Duchess is in charge of making breakfast this morning. Won't she be angry…?"

"Ugh… I forgot about that." After being reminded, Subaru's enthusiasm sank. Surrendering to the siren call of sleep again will carry dire consequences. Resigning himself, he gave the girl in his arms one last tight squeeze before throwing the blankets off. "Guess we gotta get up now. Oh shit, it's a pretty nice morning!"

Subaru stretched, bouncing on the bed springs. He looked down at the girl, still sprawled on the bed he had pulled her into. "Hey hey, you're all disheveled… It's really sexy. Aren't you always saying that girls shouldn't be so immodest, Petra?"

Petra Leyte, now old enough that her maid uniform suited her quite nicely, stuck her tongue out and smiled sweetly as she whispered, "It's alright. I can let my guard down in front of you, my liege…you and you alone."

He reached out a hand, pulling her from the bed. "Well then, let's head to the dining room. Everyone is probably already there."

Petra smiled and nodded. She rose from the bed, still holding his hand.

"Yes, let's go," she said.

The two of them walked leisurely through the red-carpeted hallways of the royal castle of Lugunica, hand-in-hand.

"You're late."

Subaru was greeted by a dignified voice, cold with displeasure, the moment he entered the dining room. He felt a bead of cold sweat trickle down his back at its menacing undertone. He forced a smile and raised a hand in greeting, trying to conceal how nervous he truly was. "My bad. Man, I guess I'm more worn out than I realized. It's so hard to get out of bed in the morning."

"Spare me your weak excuses. Do not forget that I can discern easily what is truth and what is mere ceremony… I bet you and your would-be awakener of a maid were fooling around."

Subaru turned his head, whistling in what he hoped was a nonchalant way in response to the sharp glare aimed at him. They did fool around, no denying that. Well, whoever went to wake him would be the target of some flirting, no matter whose turn it was.

"The reality is that you neglected the promise you made to me… I suppose I should expect to be treated as such."

"No, I didn't mean to…"

"No need to console me. I am fully aware. Aware that…I'm no lovely young lady. Unlike the other women surrounding you, I put no effort into anything but my swordplay. I know little of proper dress or makeup. Of course, I am unable to satisfy you, sire…"

The uncharacteristically self-deprecating words just kept coming. Surely this feeling had been building, day by day, and this morning had finally overflown. Even a single drop was enough to cause the whole dam to burst when it came to this sort of thing.

Her insecurities had piled up one by one and now manifested as self-doubt. And it was a failure on the part of Subaru that he had not noticed her discontent thus far.

"—What are you planning?"

"If you can see inside my heart, don't you already know what I'm up to?"

"Don't tease me." Caught within Subaru's embrace, she turned her face away. She refused to look him in the eye, and her shoulders jerked, as though she was ashamed of being held. But her half-hearted resistance began and ended there. "All I can see is the mood of others. Though I can sense the general nature of the inner workings of the heart, I cannot see all of its contents… So I won't be able to understand your true intentions unless you state them plainly."

"That's an embarrassing thing to ask."

"Are Your Majesty's true intentions something to be embarrassed of…? Yet another thing I failed to see."

He felt her wry smile rather than seeing it, wrapped in his arms as she was. She glanced up at him, and her gaze caught inextricably with his. Their faces were close as they embraced, close enough that the distance could be closed in a moment. So Subaru decided to answer in a way much more efficient than words.

"—Mm."

He felt the silken touch of her tongue, extending hesitantly from where their lips overlapped. The hot brush of the breath that escaped from her lips, the way she pressed into the kiss, almost begging for more—he could feel the heat rising in him, all the way to the tips of his ears.

After a moment, they pulled away from one another, slightly out of breath. The normally dauntless young woman was disheveled, her eyes slightly wet and her expression open and lovely. Subaru felt a scorching heat at the sight. It grew hotter at the surety that he was the only one who got to see such an expression from her. He reached for her again, desiring to feel her touch once again—

"—That's enough for this morning."

But she interrupted him, blinking away the haze in her eyes as she blocked Subaru's outstretched arms. Having had his lustful momentum cut short, Subaru's rebuffed hands grasped for her, reluctant to change course. The young woman gave a familiar, dignified smile at the look of reproach on the other's face. "If we do not stop, it will disrupt many of today's plans. What is more, it is no longer appropriate for me to keep you all to myself, sire. And so we shall stop here."

"…It's cute to lose yourself in the moment every once in a while, I think."

"I believe I already said that I am a woman devoid of 'cuteness.' Although, the thought of forgetting everything and wasting the day away with you does appeal to me."

"—You only show your feminine side at times like these, it's so unfair."

Subaru stretched out his hand in his last hopeful attempt but was quickly slapped from above. Shaking his hand to dispel the impact, Subaru directed his eyes toward the woman who quickly and gracefully turned her heel.

"Now, let's eat. I'd stake my reputation on this morning's meal. I would of course never give any less than my utmost in serving Your Majesty, but I am particularly confident in this meal."

"You're much more romantic when you're not trying to be, you know that? Guess that's in character for you, Crusch."

Subaru slumped in defeat but was pulled from his dejection by the mouth-watering scent from the table.

The young woman gestured broadly to her work, confident in its quality. "I know you're busy, but when we're around the dining table, at least, I'd like to keep you all to myself—I'm sorry if that is selfish of me, my husband."

"If you think that makes you selfish, that's quite adorable, my wife."

He sat down at the wide dining table, Crusch immediately by his side, just like always. She snuck a glance at him, surreptitiously watching him as he began to eat.

As soon as the first bite passed his lips, Subaru exclaimed that it was delicious. The hint of unease in those dignified eyes faded away at his cry. As he crammed another bite into his mouth with his fork, praising its flavor once again, Subaru thought to himself that this side of his wife was ridiculously lovable.

3

Subaru sat at his desk, struggling in vain against the veritable mountain of official paperwork in front of him. “No matter how much I work, there’s no end in sight. Stuff like this happens in anime and manga all the time, but I guess it can happen in real life, too…”

“Here’s more work for someone who likes to mutter to himself, Barusu. No lengthy breaks. Get back to it, you dullard.”

“Dullard? No respect for the crown, huh?”

Having finally vanquished one of the mountains, only four heaps of documents remained—at least, until a whole additional mountain range was plopped cruelly onto the desk. With four fresh, snowy peaks looming over him, Subaru thrust his quill pen forward, declaring, “How long are you planning on looking down on me? Do you know how much power I hold in this country right now? It’s about time you stop treating me like your subordinate, capeesh?”

“Oh, and do you understand your position, Barusu? Don’t forget that you can’t stand on your own. If Ram abandons you now, who will help you defeat this army of documents?”

Immediately eating his words, Subaru threw his body and his pride at the other’s feet, begging for help. “I’m sorry, Sis! Please don’t abandon me! Save me!”

The pink-haired maid let out a snort of disgust. “No matter what title you hold, some things never change. Enough of this same old back-and-forth—at least come up with some better sweet talk.”

“I’m seriously at your mercy here, Sis! I’m literally on my knees! I mean, what if someone else saw this scene? It would be all over the front page: ‘King Wrapped Around His Maid’s Little Finger!’ Can you imagine the scandal?"

"They would only be printing the truth. Ram on top, and Barusu below. As it should be."

"You're right! As always, you're so right, Sis!

As Subaru's voice trembled at her usual arrogance, Ram let out an exasperated sigh. She pulled another chair up to the desk and a spare quill from the pen holder. "Whatever can be written for you, Ram will write for you. Ram will check the content with you, so be prepared to answer."

"Alright! You're always here to save me, Sis. This country couldn't run without you!"

"If you want to show gratitude, change your attitude."

"Any change in particular?"

"Calling Ram 'Lady Ram,' for a start."

"If anyone else heard me say that, it'd blow up in my face!"

In contrast to the way Subaru's hands paused as he prattled on, the speed of Ram's work was extraordinary. According to what he'd heard through the grapevine, she was also doing Roswaal's paperwork for him behind the scenes.

He'd never seen something like that personally, so he was initially surprised.

"I guess you weren't just for decoration at Roswaal's, huh?"

"Ram feels like she is being disrespected."

"Perish the thought! I'm complimenting you. I'm just saying that appearances can be deceiving, y'know?"

"Uh-huh. In revenge, this proposal by the radicalists is now approved."

“STOP!!”

Despite saying she would approve it, Ram processed the request properly—a fact that Subaru didn’t bother to point out. Though she talked a big game, the fact that Subaru didn’t feel the need to correct or reprimand her was a sign of his trust in her.

He glanced at Ram’s profile as she worked through the documents.

Her face was tense and expressionless, as it always was. Her features were soft and youthful, as they had been since the two had first met. She seemed to bloom like a flower when she smiled, but it was a blossoming that seemed to come only once a year.

“…Your hands have stopped again, Barusu.”

“Aah, sorry. I was just looking at you, Ram.”

“—Tch.”

“‘Tch?!’ Rem would get all flushed and adorable if I said that to her!”

“Didn’t Ram tell you to stop comparing her and Rem? Ram will cut you.”

“Cut my what?!”

“One can only wonder…”

The sideways glare she shot at him chilled his blood, a sudden feeling of dread rising from the depths of Subaru’s body. He hadn’t brought Rem up maliciously, but it seemed that he’d struck a nerve. It was a sore spot, as Ram often said bitterly that Rem should be prioritized over herself.

“It’s not a competition, but you know I’ve already fallen for you, Ram. After all, you’re super cute when you don’t talk or move, and if we ignore your personality.”

“So listening to someone, seeing the way they move, and learning more about their personality is not as important as how ‘cute’ someone is. Noted. Ram will tell Lady Emilia."

"Hey, I didn't say that! And I wasn't even hitting on you!"

She thought much of herself and little of Subaru, just as she always had. However, Subaru had finally come to understand by now that it was just a front: in reality, she had little self-esteem and acted superior in order to compensate.

So, he felt that he could forgive her very un-cute remarks if he thought of them as her way of hiding embarrassment.

"You've got that unpleasantly sentimental look in your eyes again, Barusu."

"Do I…? Sorry."

He dragged his gaze from Ram's profile and back onto the paperwork at hand. As much as he enjoyed little distractions like this, if he didn't get this done he wouldn't be able to follow through on any other plans.

Work is work, after all, and you gotta work before you can play.

Subaru, finally absorbed in his work, did not notice as Ram glanced at him and muttered to herself. "Ram…does not want you to compare her and Rem like that, Barusu. Because it's like you see Ram and Rem the same way."

They fell into silence, the sound of their quill pens scratching across the white parchment filling the office.

4

"I'm bored," declared a young woman as she violently threw the door open. Subaru gave her a weary look. He pretended to not have heard her, trying to return his attention to the items lined up on the table in front of him, but… "Mineself knows you heard me," she pressed. "Don't be so rude."

"Hey! I didn't throw anything of yours, bitch!" In revenge for being ignored, the intruder kicked the table Subaru had been working at over, scattering the objects atop it across the floor with a loud clatter. He scrambled to right the table and pick up the fallen items. Luckily, none of them were so fragile that they'd break by simply getting dropped on the floor, but this sort of thing was not good for his heart.

After confirming that everything was intact, Subaru let out a sigh of relief, and then leveled a glare at the culprit. Priscilla stood there, wearing her signature crimson dress and expression of self-assurance. "I have a lot of work to get through today, you know. Didn't I tell you to send word before you come and visit? That way I can tell you not to come."

"Don't be ridiculous. I never know when mineself may have free time, or when the mood may strike me to visit. So why must mineself bow to your arbitrary rules? Think about your position before you speak."

"Hey, you're one to talk! Why am I still treated like trash by all the egotistical women around me, no matter how much my standing changes? Am I only the honorary king or something?"

"Shut your mouth, rather than spout such drivel. With your manner and behavior, of course no one will accept you as king. Someone so lowly and pathetic usurped the throne from mineself… It makes me want to draw and quarter you."

"So gory!"

Priscilla turned her sadistic, crimson gaze toward the quavering Subaru, a look of boredom and disdain painting her features. The young woman was as fierce and egotistical as she had always been. It was exhausting to be in her company, but the most frustrating thing was that there was always a solid basis of truth to her arguments. Maybe that was why she acted so intolerably. Or perhaps it was because Subaru had obtained his current position by crushing her ambitions.

"Still, you have some strange tastes. What are all these toys on the table?"

“They’re not just toys. It’s a series of new technologies that are all the rage in villages and rural areas recently. They’re made of magic ore and other various ingredients. Seeing this sort of stuff piqued my interest in human innovation.”

“Oh? New technology, you say? What sort of function do they serve?”

“Hmm, well, for example…” Subaru selected a palm-sized metal box from the line of objects in front of him.

Priscilla’s eyes narrowed as if seeking an explanation of the function of the box. Subaru lightly tapped the bottom of the box, and with a small noise, a blue flame sprang from the top of it.

“Hoh? A portable ignition device?”

“We called this tool a lighter or chakaman, back in my original world. If these become common, then people could… I don’t know, light a barbecue or summon a little bit of light without using magic, I guess? Oh, and it would make starting a campfire easier, too.”

“It would also bring a wave of new arsonists, I suppose.”

“Ugh…”

She brought up a much more severe option. Priscilla was quite sharp, although her usual behavior and speech did not suggest as much.

She stared at the chakaman in Subaru’s hand. “There must be a small piece of magical fire ore inside. It is stimulated by the mechanism at the bottom into creating fire… However, any defect in it may cause it to overheat, and eventually explode. And magical ores that are used repeatedly are known to degrade in efficacy and speed of manifestation. If the ore requires frequent replacement, it will be quite a while before this device catches on with the general public.”

“Ugh…!” The flaws she listed were one-to-one with the concerns the developer had brought up. The way she was able to identify flaws at a glance mirrored her ability to pick up on a person’s weak points.

“In any case, you must be most confident in this one if it’s the first you chose to show. If this is the exemplar, then the rest must be truly pathetic.”

“Sh-Shut up! Tackling unknown new technology like this is proof of the great human spirit of adventure. It’s that spirit that pushes humanity forward, no matter the era. I believe in this chakaman! It’ll open up a bright new path for humanity one day!” Subaru clenched his fist at Priscilla’s lack of romanticism. He hit the bottom of the box again, looking to show off its blue flame once more, but… “Huh? Umm…? It’s, uh, not really working—”

“Hmph, a defect right out of the gate. I don’t know what this “spirit of adventure” you speak of is, but placing your hopes on this toy is beyond…foolish…!” Her bored expression suddenly tightened, her voice rising in pitch and volume. In the span of an instant, she pulled her fan from her chest and blew the chakaman from Subaru’s palm. The moment it left his hand it exploded.

Subaru gasped at the large flash of red flame it caused in the corner of the room.

“For its worst flaw to manifest at such a moment…the developer must be severely punished,” stated Priscilla. “You are the most important person in the kingdom, after all, and their contraption put you in grave danger.”

“I…don’t plan on going that far. Thank you, though.”

If Priscilla hadn’t made such a quick decision, Subaru may have suffered serious burns. Or even worse, the metal shrapnel from the explosion could have lodged in his face.

Subaru patted his miraculously intact face and said, “I’d really be in trouble if my face got any uglier,” before slumping back into his chair, exhausted.

Priscilla approached him. “It’s not all that ugly. It might even be charming, once one grows used to it,” she said. Subaru could only muster a weak “Oh, ok.” in response to her unusually supportive words. And then, without a moment of hesitation, Priscilla plopped down in his lap.

“Hey?”

“I believe mineself said I was bored. And I just saved your life, so I believe a bit of mutual touching is in order.”

“…I’m given permission to have time to myself only because this is considered a part of my official duties. “

“You were only resting under the guise of official business, clearly. And when you consider the finite amount of time we all have, living prudishly is wasteful. Spend your time with mineself instead.”

She swayed back and forth atop his lap, clinging to him with an uncharacteristically soft touch. Though they had touched one another in this manner countless times, Subaru still couldn’t get used to cuddling with Priscilla like this. The young woman had a strange heat about her, as though every time they did this was their first. It was one of her charming points.

“I must like being tricked by bad women, if I’m thinking like this.”

“Mineself might enjoy being known as the woman so beautiful as to lure the king to ruin… Don’t give me that look. I won’t be going that far, currently. Sit back and lose yourself, just for now.”

So saying, she wrapped her arms around Subaru’s neck.

The touch of her fingers dried Subaru’s throat, making him long for something to moisten his lips. He found an oasis in the other’s mouth.

5

“Oh? You’re lookin’ pretty tired. You been gettin’ enough sleep?”

“I’ve been sleeping enough, but also working non-stop from the moment I wake up. I’m crazy busy with work I’m not used to all the time, and my private life is exhausting, too… No, I chose this life.

This is no time to complain."

Anastasia, sitting on a couch opposite the one Subaru rested on, smiled sweetly as she said, "I think your work ethic is one of yer best points, Natsuki."

He gave her a listless smile before dropping his gaze to the table between them. Numerous documents were scattered across its surface, and Subaru was beyond sick of looking at them. Even so, the majority were part of his hobby rather than his official duties.

"Thanks to you, the Hoshin Company is now the greatest in all of Kararagi—I can walk into Lugunica with my head held high now. I know people call me shameless, but even I worry about how to present myself in a place like that."

"…I didn't really do much, Anastasia. You, on the other hand…"

Anastasia cut him off, still smiling. "Natsuki."

Her expression didn't change, even as she fiddled with the ends of her wavy hair. But something about her smile felt…different than usual, and Subaru felt his breath catch.

The silence stretched on until Subaru let out a sigh of defeat. "…It's thanks to your hard work, Anna."

"I swear, you're still not used to usin' that name, even after so much time… I wonder if I'm not trying hard enough. Or is it that you can't have a consort who is gone for weeks at a time?"

"That's not it. Crusch and I are still all formal with each other, when the occasion calls for it, even now."

"That's weird in and of itself. Crusch turns all lovey-dovey in front of you. If she thinks she's maintainin' her dignity while acting like that… She's got surprisingly little self-awareness."

Anastasia put a demure hand to her mouth, smiling deeply. It seemed that Subaru had managed to return her to a good mood by calling her by the correct name and changing the topic. He placed a relieved hand to his chest, having avoided disaster for the moment.

"You brought up another woman while here with me… I'm takin' points off for that."

"Whoah, harsh."

"It is considerate to set harsh, uncrossable boundaries in matters of business and of love. I haven't talked about another man since we began our relations, right Subaru?"

Faced with the severity of her gaze, Subaru could only mutely cross his arms in response. His eyes drifted upward as he recalled the time they had spent together. This was one of those times where he should just nod his head and agree. "You haven't, I guess… Damn, you're exacting and precise in everything you do, huh?"

"Hehehe. It's nice to do this sort of thing, every once in a while. Plus, it's been so long." She'd made her way around the table while Subaru was looking away and was now seated beside him. She smiled in an elegant, reserved way as she took his hand, a red blush rising to her cheeks.

Her blush soon spread all the way down to her neck, showing easily beneath her pale skin. He could tell how embarrassed she was, and how much courage it took for her to hold his hand—he fell even further for her in that moment. "…You mentioned that you'd bring my investment results with you today, right?"

"Yes, and it was successful. After all, it was a project involving my first and second most beloved things: money and Natsuki."

"I see that I'm still a lower priority than money is. No matter how much things change, Anna is still Anna."

"It's a close competition between first and second, though. There's a huge gap between second and third, if that makes ya feel better."

She only got that soft look in her eyes when talking about money or Subaru. He wasn't sure if he should be grateful to be considered a near-equal with money or not.

"—Somethin' wrong?"

“No, it’s nothing.” He stroked Anastasia’s fluffy hair with his free hand. It was unbelievably soft, almost like the down of a baby bird. Anastasia nearly purred at the sensation, narrowing her eyes and nuzzling up to Subaru’s chest like a cat.

They nestled together, basking in the feeling of holding someone so beloved close—

“Well, I guess being a close second to something so fundamental to your personality ain’t bad.”

For the moment he was satisfied with his position in her heart.

6

“You’re definitely going to hell for this someday, Bro.” Felt greeted Subaru with those harsh words from her position sprawled across the bed. He removed his jacket and tie, loosened his collar, and unbuttoned his shirt as he made his way toward her. She sat up on the bed, cross-legged. “Hey, are you listening to me?” she asked.

“I’m listening. Also, you shouldn’t lie like that while wearing a dress. Or sit cross-legged, either; your skirt’s so short, I can see everything.”

“So what? It’s nothing you haven’t seen before, at this point.”

“Idiot. It’s amazing to be able to see something like that when I want to, but getting a glimpse of it in unexpected moments is part of the magic. There’s no reward in seeing it on someone as careless as you, in fact, it just makes me a little sad.”

He laid down on the bed next to Felt, who clicked her tongue in annoyance at his comments. After a moment, she laid down next to him. They turned to face one another at the same moment, as if at some unseen signal.

“I know I just told you this, but… I’m warning you, if someone came in right now, they’d be able to see aaallll the way up your skirt.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let anyone see everything. Besides, how long are you planning on treating me like a child, Bro? It’s been so many years since we first met.”

“Hey, if you want to be treated like a woman, try acting or thinking like one even a little bit. You still talk like a little punk, calling me ‘Bro’ all the time.”

“Haah? You’re the one who told me to call you bro. When we were makin’ out that one time, you got all hot about it…”

“Stop stop! That was just the alcohol talking! Damn booze releases the beast within me and exposes my true feelings!”

“So it’s how you really feel.”

Felt cackled as Subaru covered his face with his hand in shame, and she gave him a playful punch to the chest. He wrapped his hand lightly around the offending fist, and Felt let out a small gasp.

As they held hands, he said, “ I know we’re having fun here, but I actually am worried. It’s not like I can watch out for you 24/7… And I worry that I’m doing stuff that makes you uncomfortable when we’re together like this.”

“I was way more uncomfortable in that first month after we met… I guess things were pretty rough for a while after that, too.”

“It wasn’t my place to help you out back then… I’m frustrated that I couldn’t do anything, but now that I can do something to help, you know I will.”

“…Ah.”

With a jerk, he wrapped his arm around Felt, rolling so that she rested on top of him and holding her close. She wore an off-the-shoulder dress that day, and he could feel the heat rising under her exposed skin.

Embarrassed, she lifted her flushed face. “I-It’s not even dark out yet…”

“The time of day doesn’t matter, as long as we want to do it… But that's not why I'm hugging you. I mean, if you want to though, I'm not against it or anything…"

"N-No! I'm good, thanks!! I mean, I'm not ready! Emotionally, I mean. And I need to eat a good meal first…!"

"Hey, do you prepare like that every time you pay me a nighttime visit?"

"W-Well…"

Subaru was surprised by this revelation. Felt, for her part, was as red as a lobster.

She tried her best to argue back, but all she could manage was to stutter and waffle a few weak objections.

"You have so many other partners, Bro… I only get my shot every few days, so I would hate to…underperform."

"…"

"You're surrounded by amazing women, so I probably can't be number one. I definitely lose against girls like Emilia or Rem, and Priscilla and Crusch have me beat in the, uh, ch-chest… department… I'm beating Anastasia though, I think." She placed a hand to her chest, which was somewhat more developed thanks to her growth spurt. Then she continued speaking faster and faster. "But, even if I can't always be your number one, I… I, um, want to be number one when we're alone like this, at least. So I want to put at least that much effort in."

"Felt."

"…What?! Wait, is it weird for me to think like this…?"

"You're so, so crazy cute!!"

"…Gyah!"

The way she kept making excuses was just so ridiculously adorable that Subaru couldn't help but squeeze her even tighter. He rained kisses down on her, covering her face, forehead, and neck.

Felt was completely and totally overwhelmed by Subaru's overreaction and the deluge of kisses. Her eyes rolled frantically in her skull, her face oscillating rapidly between pale and scarlet.

"Wh-Wh-Wha…!"

"I already knew you were cute, but damn! That was just so adorable! Wow!! Even the time you abandoned me in that alley seems so, so cute now!"

"I did that?!"

"Shh, just forget about it. It's dust in the wind, water under the bridge… I've been taking the bitterness from that time out on you in the bedroom, but tonight I'm going to be real gentle."

"So that's why… Well, it's not like I mind it a little rough… Ah, no! You didn't hear that!!"

Felt let slip that tidbit, maybe because the feeling of Subaru's hands on her made her let her guard down. Noticing her mistake and the smug smile on his face, she shoved him away, springing out of the bed. "Ah, shit! I really shouldn't have said that! You're never hearin' that again, got that?!"

"I see, I see. So you like it a little rough, huh? I'll keep that in mind, my wife!"

"Shut it!! You're going to hell, you know that?!"

She flipped him off and made to turn her back to him, but Subaru grabbed her hand, holding her back. "Wait, Felt. I know I said this earlier too, but don't show your defenseless or rough sides to anyone else, okay? I'm afraid something will happen while I'm not there to protect you."

"Worry not. I can be quite charming for strangers, you know," Felt demonstrated by slipping into an uncharacteristically honeyed tone, placing a delicate hand to her mouth, and giving Subaru an elegant smile. Subaru was disproportionately shaken, to which she slightly tilted her head. “What is the matter, sir? You’re looking ever so unweell.”

“Don’t do that in front of me. Be as defenseless as you want, just stop that.”

“Whatever you say, Bro. Yeah, putting on that schtick in front of you felt sort of horrifying. I’m not doing it again.” Felt chuckled and then pointed a finger at Subaru’s still-ashen face. “So you don’t have to worry.”

“Worry about what?”

“About me, like…laying down in a skirt in front of other people and stuff. I… I only do that kind of stuff in front of you, Bro.”

“…”

Trying to leave it at that, Felt spun around towards the door and made to walk out, but Subaru had no intention of letting her. He quickly grabbed her arm and tugged with all his might—

“Gyah-!”

“Felt, you’re SO CUTE! Adorable!! Amazing!!”

And the downpour of kisses began pouring once more.

7

“What happened to your left eye, Subaru?”

“I embarrassed Felt too much and she decided to kiss with her fist. She’s still cute, even when she does stuff like this… I think I got a little carried away.”

Rem gave him a gentle smile as she spoke. “Please be more careful. You’re not a bachelor anymore, after all.”

It was late at night, and Subaru had come to her room for a visit. He shrugged off his thoughts at her smile and moved to stand next to her. Just as she was about to surrender her seat to him, he stopped her by grabbing her hand. “You should be careful, too. It’s true enough that I need to look after myself for the sake of my family, but that applies to you even more.”

“Rem is sorry. You’re so busy, so she should be working hard to support you, but…”

“Don’t misunderstand me. All you should be doing is resting as much as possible, so you’re strong enough to show me your best smile when we’re together like this. That’s the best support I could ever ask for. After all…” He knelt in front of where she sat as he spoke, reaching for her. His hand landed gently on her previously slender abdomen, now slightly swollen with the beginnings of a new life. “The fruit of our love is growing here. Do you know just how much strength just knowing gives me?”

“Rem is happy that she can support you emotionally, but she wants to support you physically, too. She’s a little frustrated that Petra gets to take that role, hehe.”

She stuck her tongue out playfully, trying to mask her frustration at her current lack of mobility. Most of her maidly duties had been ceded to Petra, who took to the role of all-purpose maid magnificently. Meanwhile, Rem spent the majority of her time looking after the child growing inside of her. Maternity was taking more and more of her time recently.

“You’ve made a lot of socks, recently.”

“Rem didn’t think she was any good at knitting, at first, but it became more enjoyable the more she did it. And when she thought about how her child will grow, she couldn’t help but make larger and larger pairs. First, they were the size of a thumb, then a fist, an open hand, an abble, a melen…”

“Hey, why would our child ever need such giant socks?!”

“Well, Rem hopes they’ll grow up big and strong, so…”

“They’d have to be bigger than the biggest, bulkiest old man I’ve ever met! I don’t even want to imagine that!”

Subaru was sure he would love their child, no matter what, but this was too much, even for him. Rem chuckled at his straight-man routine, assuring him that it had all been a joke. “Rem realized halfway through that she made them too big. She’s going to unravel them and try again. The ones she made for you, too.”

“Oh, you made some for me? Thanks, that makes me super happy. I know you put love into every stitch… I’ll never take them off!”

“Please do. And have these gloves, and these socks, this haramaki, scarf, earmuffs, hat, underwear, jacket, shoes, shin guards…”

“Did you leave any yarn for our kid’s stuff?!”

She pulled knitted, colorful items out one after another. If he wore all these at once, he would become overheated in under ten minutes, even if he was just doing paperwork. He’d left such a skillful person alone with her hobby for such a long time, so perhaps this result was inevitable.

“It would be really hard to get any work done wearing all these at once… Mind if I rotate them out?”

“That’s fine. Rem is very happy that you accepted them at all. That makes all the time she spent knitting worth it.”

“Rem…”

“So you’re free to do whatever you wish with your gifts. Even if they gather dust in the back of your closet, or if you use them to clean up spilled milk, or if you use them to cover a dirty chair so you can sit on it… Rem would be fine with anything.”

“I’ll cherish and wear every one of them! Don’t even bother thinking up ways I could defile them!”

He demonstrated what he meant, putting on each and every item she’d given him. Rem clapped, delighted by the sight of him, unbearably warm as he was. “Look how kind your father is, little one. Rem wants to let you meet him soon, so you can show him how lively you are.”

“If they met me like this, they might not recognize me when I’m not covered in yarn. Dad’s a little worried about that.”

“Don’t worry. They’re Rem’s child, so they’ll love you just like she does. So of course they’ll recognize you, no matter what you’re wearing.”

“Yeah, but they’re half my child, too. I’m worried about recessive genes here!”

“You’re always so wonderful, Subaru. If they’re anything like you at all, our child will be wonderful, too.”

Subaru was pouting, but Rem spoke in the same gentle tone as always as she rubbed her belly. Her opinion of him was unrealistically positive, as it always had been. He felt a burst of motivation to keep working harder so that he could live up to her expectations one day. She inspired great strength in him.

“Hey, Subaru. Do you want a boy or a girl?”

“That’s a hard question… If they look like you, they’ll be super good-looking, regardless of gender. If they inherit these eyes of mine, though… Well, I’d feel too bad for a girl.”

Subaru had gotten his eyes from his mother, and those eyes had caused a lot of problems for her as a kid. Her eyes were so harsh, the girls in her class were terrified of her and used to give her candy as tribute. She was always full of sweets.

Knowing his mom, she’d probably never noticed how problematic her eyes were… But Subaru guessed his theoretical daughter wouldn’t be as oblivious as her grandmother.

“These mean-looking eyes of mine are highly heritable. My mom had them, and so did her dad and grandpa, apparently. So our kid will probably get them, too.”

“So you’d prefer a boy?”

“Well, on the other hand, we have this saying back in my original world: ‘Princess first, prince second’… it means that having a daughter and then a son makes both kids easier to raise, or something like that."

"Geez, which is it? Rem can't tell what you want!"

Rem's cheeks puffed up in annoyance at the way Subaru was going back and forth between the options. He grinned, poking her cheeks and sending air puffing out her mouth.

"I'm saying that it doesn't matter which it is. No, I'm saying that no matter which it is, I'll love them just as much."

"Subaru…"

"If it's a girl, I'll treat her like a princess. I'll spoil her absolutely rotten, give her whatever she wants whenever she wants it! I want her to be like 'Papa, I wanna marry you someday!' until she's in middle school. If I can have my daughter love me that much until middle school, I'm in the winning group among all the dads around the world. Well, I guess, I'm already a winner to have such an adorable wife." Rem turned red as he gushed. Seeing her flushed, lovely face, Subaru suddenly raised a finger. "But if it's a boy, I'll be his greatest obstacle, his most difficult rival, his partner in crime! Just like my dad did with me. I'll continue the tradition: I'll be merciless, like a lion throwing his cub into a bottomless ravine over and over again! Aahh, that sounds fun, too!"

"So that's why," he continued, "you don't need to worry about the gender. Just put all your strength towards delivering a healthy baby, Rem. Everything will be just fine, I promise. I love you, and you love me just as much. There's no way any kid of ours would be anything less than incredible."

"Yes, you're right."

Rem blessed him with a beautiful, content smile in response to his exaggerations. The itch under his skin became too much to bear at her loveliness.

"Rem."

"…"

All he had done was call her name and bring his face closer, but Rem knew what he wanted. She closed her eyes, and Subaru brought their lips together.

He felt the soft, hesitant brush of her tongue.

They held one another close, love filling their every movement.

8

"Phew, another rough day…!"

Subaru had finished tidying up his paperwork and returned to his room, rotating his stiff arms as he walked. There had been a delay at one of the related departments, so a bunch of paperwork that should've been delivered earlier in the day had been dumped on him all at once. What was more, they unreasonably wanted all of it done the same day.

"Man, I feel like they're taking advantage of me. The Japanese inability to say 'no' is really screwing me over here… I guess I should start refusing people outright, huh?"

But if he did that, he could delay things, and the inconvenienced parties would surely crawl out of the woodwork. When he imagined that, he doubted he had the courage to reject anyone. King or not, the timid lower-middle-class man inside him lived on.

Is it really ok for a king to be this helpless?

"Well, too late now. I'm king already. Even if I wanted to complain and cry my eyes out, no one would want to listen…"

"I can be your shoulder to cry on, Subaru."

Subaru was talking to himself, absorbed with thoughts of the exhausting day behind him and the challenges the next day would bring. A young woman sitting on the sill of the open window greeted him as he entered the room. Her silver hair swayed in the night breeze, glimmering like liquid silver in the moonlight. She turned toward Subaru with a smile. "Welcome back. You did some amazing work today."

Subaru momentarily forgot how to speak. Partially at his shock at her unexpected visit, and partially because her smile was such an instant balm on his overworked mind. But primarily, it was because—

“What… What am I…?”

Emotions suddenly welled up behind his eyes. Something hot spilled down his cheeks, and he brought a sleeve to his eyes, trying to withstand the sudden torrent of emotion.

He tried to hold back; It would probably upset Emilia if he burst into tears as soon as he saw her face, but he simply couldn’t help it.

“Ah, shit… Emilia-tan’s here, but I can’t stop…”

“Subaru.”

“I-I’m fine. Completely and totally fine. I’ll stop soon… I just have something in my eye…”

“…”

Subaru made every excuse he could think of and turned his face away. He didn’t want Emilia to see him ugly crying. No, he didn’t want anyone to see him like this. It was far, far too late in the game to show this sort of weakness. He had come so far to get here and pushed so many people aside. He couldn’t be so soft.

The women around him didn’t resent that he’d taken their goal for himself. On the contrary, they showered him with affection. Their forgiveness was enough to keep him going…or it usually was.

“I…I…”

“Geez. You’re as stubborn and childish as always, Subaru.”

“—Ah.”

Emilia stopped the bluster spilling from his lips with a finger to his mouth. Subaru’s eyes were wide as she leaned in, bringing her lips to his.

Her touch hit him like a bolt of lightning. A numbing sensation spread from the tip of his tongue to the rest of his body, wiping away the emotions that had been overwhelming him.

Their lips parted. Subaru's eyes still swam with emotion, and Emilia held his head to her chest. She began to rub his back slowly as if to comfort a child. "Is it too much?" she asked.

"…No, I can keep going."

"Do you want help?"

"I'll try to tough it out."

"You're not pushing yourself too far, right?"

"I might be, a little bit. But now is the time to push myself."

He'd been comforted by her like this once, long, long ago. He'd clung to her then, sobbing with mucus dripping down his face, spilling all his weaknesses and complaints. The memory of that time made his cheeks hot—but not just from embarrassment; there was a sense of pride, too. He was powerless back then, unable to do anything except curse his weakness. It was different now: he was mature enough to keep pushing himself forward.

"I was just a boy back then, really. But now I'm a proper man."

"…Were you thinking something strange, just now?"

"You smell amazing, Emilia-tan. Can we fool around?"

"What? No. I haven't bathed, and I just came in from outside…"

Emilia suddenly returned to her usual attitude, pulling away from Subaru's embrace. She combed her fingers through her hair and wrapped her free arm across her body, as though hiding it from his gaze. She was oblivious to the fact that such a gesture only served to excite her partner further. It was that naivete that made her so enchanting.

"Besides, it's not my turn tonight."

"It's not anyone's turn tonight. It's my night off—Ferris said that if I don't sleep alone every once in a while I'll definitely die young. Hence the night of rest."

"That's another reason for me not to stay," Emilia said reservedly.

"Well my heart is pounding, I'm wheezing and panting… But I'd be happy to endure all that and just snuggle up with you in the futon," Subaru suggested as he put up a finger.

Emilia looked at him, doubtfully. "Can you really hold yourself back, Subaru?"

"You wound me! I'm a man of my word. If I say I won't do anything, I won't… I can do it! I definitely won't do it!"

"Sorry, you've lost me."

"I've lost myself, too. But what I want to say is that you're safe from me. And what about you, Emilia-tan? Are you sure your affection won't explode if we sleep in the same bed?"

"Ah, you don't need to worry about that. It's completely and totally impossible."

"Ouch, what a strong denial…"

"That's not what I meant…" Emilia muttered, seemingly upset with herself at Subaru's hurt expression.

She never seemed to consider how much the things she said would affect him, a trait that hadn't changed from the time they met. He really wished she would think a little more before she spoke.

Of course, everyone has some faults that will never improve, no matter how many times they're talked to.

Well, no point in lecturing her tonight. Anyway…

"I think I'll hit the hay soon… How about it, Emilia-tan? Want to snuggle under the futon with me?"

“Eh? Well, I am tired, and it’s been so long since we could spend time together… Very well. I’ll sleep with you.”

“Alright then.”

Emilia took his outstretched hand elegantly. He guided her close, as though leading her in a dance. Her delicate body nestled against his, and for a moment they just held one another in silence.

The pair slowly, easily slipped into bed together.

“Goodnight then, Emilia-tan. I’m sure you’ll see me again in your dreams.”

“Yes, I’ll try my best to find you… Hey, Subaru?”

“Hmm?”

“…Love you,” she said, and then pressed her face into the pillow, hiding from him. He could barely see in the darkened room, relying on the moonlight for illumination—

“Emilia-taaan.”

“W-Wait…! Didn’t you just say you would hold yourself back?”

“I said that I would hold true to my word, but I never actually promised to control myself.”

“That’s just a technicality, and you know it…Nn!”

It was lucky that they were already sharing a bed. Subaru covered her lips with his own before she could object further, using his whole body to express his love for her. Emilia, though she objected at first, gradually lost the will to resist. “I swear, you’re so immature, Subaru…!” she cried, embarrassed even in the darkness of night.

END

※※※

This was an April Fool’s scenario. It’s a route that will never be realized in canon, a harem route. Petra, Crusch, Priscilla, Anastasia, Felt, Rem, and Emilia all worked together here. (Note: He forgot Ram!)

The idea was that all the candidates for the royal selection married Subaru as a reward for his good deeds, and he became king. This will definitely never, ever become canon though, sorry!

Greed IF:
Accumulating Life in Another World From Zero
(Web Novel)

1

A dream, I saw a dream.

A dream that wouldn't fade, a dream that kept repeating, a dream with no end, a dream that wouldn't end—

Over and over again, many many times over, repeating mistakes over and over, correcting them more and more. 1000 times, spinning. 10,000 times, connecting. 100 million times, overcoming them. And before knowing it, losing count.

Agony, terror, turbidity, ruin, hatred, madness.

Exhausted, shaken, twisted, corrupted, contorted, decayed, anguished; a heart smashed to pieces.

And yet, there was still a place I wanted to reach.

And yet, there was still a wish I wanted to protect.

Even if no one knew about the endless tragedies that repeated over and over, I will not forget. Even if no one notices, only I am unable to forget.

—Even if the people I want to save wept, I still want to save them.

So, even now, I don't regret having taken that hand. If there is something I regret, it would be that I was hesitant and indecisive in taking her hand, and the frustration towards my own weak, fragile heart that I couldn't steel.

2

—Waking up from the empty dream, the first thing he always felt was a throbbing headache.

Subaru: "…"

Opening his eyes, trying to stave off his sleepiness, he blinked rapidly in an attempt to wake himself up. Though his consciousness hung in a bleary haze, his sluggishness only lasted for a few seconds. Immediately after his consciousness came to from his sleep, his waking brought energy back into his body.

Subaru: "Ah, Aaah"

In contrast to his body being awake, all that escaped from his mouth was a dullish voice. At a glimpse, it seemed like he was still half-asleep, but this was one of the most important rituals he did in the morning. By lying on his back with his head up whilst he let out that voice in that manner, a lot of information could be conveyed through to him.

The tone of his voice, the establishment of consciousness, the safety of his limbs, sorting his thoughts out, what he'll do today, and the existence of his life—

He made sure to undertake each of these actions every morning.

This was the proof that Natsuki Subaru had reached the morning without making any grave mistakes.

Subaru: "*yawn*"

Taking off his blankets as he yawned, he lifted his body up, swiveling his feet down off of the bed. He roughly scratched his head as he looked around the room he was in. It was a room he had become used to seeing—it was luxuriously furnished, and included a canopy bed in the room in which he entered from. But, where Subaru had woken up was not the canopy bed, but rather a sofa placed further within the room. He passed the nights as of late there, wrapped up in a futon, curled up into a ball.

—Actually, no, this had been a bedtime habit of Natsuki Subaru's in these years.

Be as it may, there wasn't any big reason for him not to sleep in his bed. It was just that he'd end up laboring to try and prepare the environment so that it'd be as comfortable to sleep in as possible. As a result of trial and error, he had learnt that he felt more comfortable by lying down and sleeping on the sofa than sleeping in a bed. And ever since, he'd kept doing that. That's all there was to it.

Subaru: "…"

Rubbing his eyes, Subaru got off from the sofa that he had made into a bed and went to the bathroom so he could get dressed. As he washed his face in the bathroom that was adjacent to his bedroom, he deliberately looked at his soaked face reflected in the mirror. His face looked tired, and gave the impression that he was about to collapse. His face looked frayed with dejection. These three things sapped at his morale.

In an attempt to stiffen that expression, Subaru clapped his face with both hands using all of his strength. A dry sound accompanied the tears that welled up; in order to wash away them, Subaru poured cold water onto his face. Once again, he looked at his wet face in the mirror. And whilst carefully kneading his face, eyes and cheeks, he said,

Subaru: "Smile…you gotta smile, if you can't, then… die."

Chanting this incantation, Subaru bent his mouth into a terrible, crooked smile. He flashed his white teeth, his smile narrowing his eyes so the whites weren't visible all around anymore. His own countenance was like that of a villain's he had been friends with for a bit more than 18 years. He could camouflage his eyes, his facial expression, and his countenance with no issues.

Subaru: "Oookay, okay. Keep it like this."

After checking his smile, Subaru dried his face with a towel and hurriedly changed into his clothes. When he spent time at the Mansion, Subaru's appearance was not garbed in a servant's uniform… rather, he wore the formal attire of a noble. Even if he took off his jacket, he would keep snug in a casual white shirt with its sleeves rolled up. However, such appearances were now naturally required. They were quite stuffy, but he really couldn't do anything about it. He was obligated to have an appearance appropriate to his position, because it was the position Subaru himself wanted.

Subaru: "Soon it'll be the usual time."

Straight after he had changed into his clothes, he looked up to the Magic Hour Crystal that had been furnished above the room's door. It had a dark green hue, signifying that it was morning. It showed that his time for getting out of bed was soon. In some way, it seemed like this morning he had spent just a little bit too much time in practicing his smile. In a few minutes, a punctual girl would knock on his door as scheduled. Before that, he needed to finish everything he hadn't done yet.

Subaru: "…"

Shifting his attention, Subaru unbuttoned his shirt down. There, attached by a thin chain was a pendant fastened to the "Black Crystal" which he never removed, even when sleeping. A mysterious, sparkling black crystal. Squeezing it in the palm of his hand, Subaru closed his eyes. The crystal stone was cold and hard to the touch—when it tucked into the palm of Subaru's hand, its presence grew stronger as if firing up; it started to pulse as if it was a living thing.

Naturally, he started to unconsciously count its strange beat's rhythm and frequency as it rested in his palm.

With a stronger beat as it reached its full power, the crystal stone's beat grew stronger, and faster. Without even realizing it, its pulse perfectly overlapped with the pulse of Subaru's own heartbeat, until the beat of his heart and the beat of the crystal jewel became equal. When his mind realized that, Subaru's consciousness was released from the yoke of his body and was invited to another area which could not by any means be real.

And in that moment, there were no sounds or signs from the world; instead, a dazzling light enveloped his consciousness.

Subaru: “…”

His consciousness that was formed by the light was slowly guided to his awakening. Sunshine pierced into his eyes when he opened his closed eyelids. What he saw in front of him as he blinked his eyes was a beautiful grassy plain with the wind blowing through it.

It was a vast green plain which spread out as far as the eyes could see. The sea of grass stretched on and on further than his eyes could see. Short blades of grass gently swayed in the breeze. Up overheard, the sky was clear with not even a wisp of cloud present. The sunshine glistened like a gemstone. The blue of the sky and the green of the earth went on forevermore, up until they hazily intersected in the distant horizon. It was appropriate of a dreamworld that lacked any semblance of reality; there was a certain stillness there that seemed eternal.

Splendid, perfectly clear, empty space. —There was just one part that was different to that in this world.

Subaru: “…”

Right at the heart of the plain, when Subaru stood there and looked back, there was a gently sloping hill immediately behind which continued to form the shape of a slightly elevated hillock. Up on the hillock, there was a modest garden full of flowers. Right next to those beautiful flowers that were basking in the sun, was a parasol and a white table.

Without speaking even a word, Subaru climbed up the hill, and squeezed himself under the parasol. Steaming cups had been placed on the white table, their ceramic interiors filled with a warm, amber liquid. Two cups had been set upon the table, and a white chair had been left set next to the table.

Since she had prepared it for him, Subaru sat down on the chair without confirming it. Though the tea had just recently finished brewing, he held the cup to his mouth, wetting his throat with its amber goodness.

—As always, it was an unusual tea which tasted neither delicious nor unappetizing.

Nevertheless, without fail, he always drank this tea from the moment he sat down. It had been an agreement he'd made with the mistress of this place, the tea was a substitute for introductions in their strange relationship. Even so,

Subaru: "Ah, I drank it, I drank it, thanks for the drink. Alright, let's quickly move onto the main subject."

???: "Of course, I did say that the first sip worked as a greeting. However, I don't think that means that you shouldn't ever give me a simple hello, mhm?"

Finishing his tea, Subaru placed his cup back on the table with these few words. And to what he had said, the one who sat opposite to him at the table gave him a weak smile, whilst voicing out her complaint. Receiving her complaint, Subaru scratched the tip of his nose whilst saying:

Subaru: "…There's no real reason to greet you, is there? After all, since you're prying inside my head day and night, there's no meaning in saying hello or goodbye to you."

???: "This and that are different matters, you know? First of all, day and night, I'd like for you not to speak of it in such a scandalous manner. Even if it is true, even I am still a shy, young maiden girl, as delicate as a flower. Wouldn't my reputation become all the more worse if it became known that I am always staring into a boy's mind?"

Subaru: "A shy, young maiden girl as delicate as a flower… Did the meaning of those words change without me noticing?"

???: "How scathing of you. Well, maybe it is unreasonable at my age to insist on calling myself that."

Saying that, the girl relaxed her mouth into a smile; quite in contrast to the contents of her complaints. Completely used to these sorts of exchanges, the girl was quite tolerant towards Subaru's impolite behavior—or rather, it seemed as if she was enjoying herself exchanging these sorts of conversations with him.

Subaru's heart cannot help but feel the distorted feelings of guilt in his heart intensify when seeing that smile. In any case, he doesn't know which way of acting is the right one. Only with the person right in front of his eyes, can he find the optimal solution.

Subaru: "As I thought, you're such an unpleasant woman."

???: "That makes me glad. For you, who is kind and greedy. Rather than being kind towards everyone, rather than being someone so apathetic who doesn't find any value in having others help him, I always take great delight in becoming someone who cruelly wounds your heart, or the unpleasant someone who lodges an immovable thorn in your heart."

Neither sarcasm or irony worked against her. Before she had answered him, Subaru made quite an unpleasant face, but that only resulted in making her more pleased.

???: "Now then, any more of this and my heart will get pained for being hated and buying into your antipathy. Let's try and achieve what we set out to do for this morning's meeting now."

Subaru: "You weren't hoping to be hated?"

???: "It was a girl's cute bluff, you know? This is what I want you to see and accept."

Subaru: "Cute…?"

Subaru doubted this from the bottom of his heart. He leaned his head in doubt. As for his companion she merely gave a ironic smile. And then…,

???: "You're truly a man who never at all feels any bashfulness. As the "Witch of Greed", I'm pleased with that part of you. —Natsuki Subaru"

Suited to be a contractor, the "Witch of Greed", Echidna narrowed her eyes with a sweet smile, a smile that rose from the depths of her heart.

3

Subaru: “Today’s the 14th of Kisdam……right?”

Echidna: “You can rest assured. You fell asleep last night without any issues, and you woke up this morning without anything eventful happening. The worst case scenario didn’t happen whilst you were asleep overnight. So you don’t have to worry, everything is okay.”

Subaru: “Those are foolish words. If I went to sleep thinking nothing would eventful would happen, I’d end up waking up dead. I don’t know when and where I’ll die, or when it’ll stop.”

Clicking his tongue at the optimism of the witch, Subaru recalled the desperate feeling of loss of his “Deaths”.

Without aim or direction, he had no doubt it could visit him even tomorrow—When the fact is that he abruptly “Returns by Death”, deprived of it without any premonition. The fact is that the time he spends with people will be forgotten, the fear and despair that it had brung him would never be forgotten.

Echidna: “That’s correct. I was being rash right now. My apologies for that.”

Subaru: “…Aren’t you being terribly meek right now?”

Echidna: “I apologise if you thought of it as a bad thing. I am not that bad of a woman… even though I show myself like that.”

Seeing the discomfort in Subaru who had replied with hurt in his voice, the girl garbed in black gave him a wink as she said that. When talking to that girl, the first thing he noticed was how captivating her eyes are, and how her devilish beauty seems as if it would steal people’s hearts.

It’s amazing that just two colors express this beauty.

Long, beautiful white hair like snow cascaded down to her back, and her slender limbs are garbed in a black dress, typical of one seen when mourning. Sitting on her chair, her long legs were crossed together; a somewhat degenerate feeling floated around in that. On her thin lips that were drinking from her cup, there was a strangely arousing gloss to them.

She was a perverse, demonic figure that exuded a sensation of inescapable ruin and destruction were you to provoke her— Regardless of this, there are anecdotes of those who have tried to approach this Witch of Calamity that brings about the end.

That was the identity of the white haired girl, who was completely garbed in black, Echidna. She, who had forged a contract with Subaru.

Subaru: “Hmmmm…”

Echidna: “…? What’s the matter? You’re staring at my face. Do I have something on it?”

Subaru: “Aaah, just hair, and ears, and a mouth, and a nose, and eyes…”

Echidna: “…Hm why? Even if you’re saying something completely obvious, I feel rather insulted.”

Echidna frowned, furrowing her eyebrows at Subaru’s answer. Seeing that, Subaru lifted his hand up and said: “Waitwait,”

Subaru: “I didn’t really mean to insult you. I was just thinking, that for someone who has the reputation of being a witch, I don’t think you’re that scary.”

Even if up until a moment ago she had expressed all kinds of degeneracy and perversions, in reality, she did have a few bad habits, but she was still an ordinary girl who you could even go as far as calling good-natured.

Of course, this doesn’t deny that there were crooked, warped parts that were witch-like.

Echidna: “Hehe, that’s quite an unusual opinion huh?”

Saying that, Echidna relaxed her lips, and gave a little smile upon hearing Subaru's thoughts. Placing her cup on the table, she shifted her long legs and fiddled with her long white hair.

Echidna: "Even though I might look like this right now, I was one of the witches that left behind such stories, in various places 400 years ago. Were you to catch me, that version of me was unpardonable."

Subaru: "You're speaking like you're a middle schooler looking for special treatment."

Echidna: "If we were to add from you to that then we'd be getting a lot closer to how I feel, wouldn't we. But, it isn't just that. I should have talked about this stuff when we first met."

Subaru: "Ah… what was it you said…? Certainly, if you were a person without any tolerances, you would have vomited the first time you saw me…"

Echidna: "When you're cutting it down to just that, I feel that my nature is greatly misunderstood"

The majestic witch's appearance completely changed. Echidna looked annoyed hearing Subaru's answer. To that reply, Subaru replied suitably with N-Now now," to deal with the shift in topic. Nonetheless, what they had spoke was enough for the morning routine.

Subaru: "It's not like us to delve down into idle gossip. I'll be going back to reality soon."

Echidna: "Are you leaving already? Stay here a little more, no one will mind if you do so. As you know, the time you spend here does not affect reality. You can rest all the time you want… that's what I hope"

Echidna said this so to restrain Subaru who had stretched up and stood from his chair. Subaru cracked the bones of his necks at hearing the witch's cajolery.

Subaru: "That's right. To be honest, I know you're trying to help me in offering me to stay here, but…"

Cutting off his words there, Subaru turned his head to look down towards Echidna. The black irises of the witch and Subaru met each other. However—

Subaru: “It’s not my plan to depend on you all the time. You should know that it’s not that kind of contract.”

Echidna: “Good grief, you really aren’t being honest with yourself. Even when I am the only one in this world that can be your accomplice in helping you bear your anguish and sorrow.”

Subaru: “I don’t intend to entrust my anguish and sorrow to anyone. This is something that’s just for me; it’s how I overcome them. That’s the reason behind the contract between me and you. Isn’t that so?”

With a low tone of voice, Subaru declared this firmly to the still annoyed Echidna who was shrugging her shoulders. To that reply, Echidna cast her eyes down, drinking from her cup in silence.

When she stopped talking, it was a declaration of her intention that she had lost her reason to continue conversing. Making sure of this, Subaru turned his back to the woman, and started to walk down the hillock. But first, he stopped and turned his head back to look at the witch.

Subaru: “By the way, just a moment ago, you didn’t deny that you’re always spying on me day and night?”

Echidna: “… Hm? I thought I’d said ‘even if’?”

Subaru :…Even if that’s true, I think it’s in my capacity to recognize the context in that implicit way of speaking!”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “…”

Being hounded by Subaru, Echidna let out a small sigh. And then she put her cup to her mouth again. It was a declaration that there was no meaning in continuing their conversation—

Subaru: “I guess you thought I’d just leave it if you kept doing that, right? Are you going to ever stop doing such an unethical thing? Hmph, so are you?”

Echidna: “Is it not normal? I am not so vulgar to spy on you when you’re taking a bath or using the bathroom. It’s just that unless you’re convinced that nothing will happen in these vulnerable situations, I think that it’s impossible for me as your contractor to avert my eyes. In the end, it’s my obligation as the “Witch of Greed” to faithfully uphold the contract—”

Subaru: “From now on, I’m removing the pendant when I go to the bathroom or wash myself.”

Saying this to the witches rapid-fire excuses, Subaru went down the hill, all the whilst biting down his embarrassment. At the bottom of the hillock, in the place in which Subaru first entered the grassy plain, a door materialized without warning. A single door free of any support. It was the only door that allowed him to go in and out to the outside world.

Subaru: “…”

Arriving in front of the door, Subaru placed his hand on the doorknob, turning himself so he couldn’t see anything. Echidna was looking at Subaru’s back, her hair fluttering in the wind all the way on the hillock.

When seeing Subaru looking down away from her, with only a slight bit of hesitation, she gave him a small wave. And without giving anything back, Subaru went through the door, leaving behind just a sigh.

—And straight after, his consciousness that had been captured by the dream world was released and returned back to reality.

Subaru: “…”

When his consciousness came back to reality, Subaru was still standing in the middle of his own room, holding the black crystal. Breathing out a long sigh, he looked towards the Magic Hour

Crystal on top of the door. There was no change in its green hue. That was proof that the time he spent in the dream world was only a few seconds.

Subaru: “Still, I’ll never get used to it…”

It was routine every morning to go to the dream world to spend some time at Echidna’s tea party. But from there, when he’d come back to reality, he still hadn’t become familiar with the discomfort that was produced from the gap of these two worlds. It was a feeling that differed from Return by Death . Subaru sighed, and

Echidna: “What would you say to changing your mind and getting used to not getting used to it? Even if it’s no more than for your peace of mind, maybe it’ll make you feel a bit more at ease?”

As if it was a whisper in his ear, the voice of the witch he had said goodbye to a moment ago rung out. Well, in fact it wasn’t whispered into his ear. That voice came from his contractor; the thoughts of the witch flowed via the crystal stone which hung from his neck.

Both of their paths were entwined by the contract even when he wasn’t in the dream world. That made it possible for the witch to talk directly to Subaru from the dream world.

However—

Subaru: “I thought I told you not to speak to me without thinking when there’s nothing important. “

Echidna: “There’s no one around. I don’t think anyone is going to care you if you’re directing your attention to me when you’re alone in the room.”

Subaru: “What would you do, if you did the same thing in public without thinking, and people saw me speaking to someone who isn’t there and thought I was a weirdo?”

Echidna: “I feel like that’s a new evaluation. But, besides, it’s not unusual for spirits to converse their thoughts with their spirit-user. That isn’t really suspicious.”

Subaru: “With spirit-users, both use their thoughts to communicate. In my case, it’s just you and I’m stuck speaking aloud to myself. If you look at it from that way, it’s pretty annoying”

Echidna: “Yeah yeah, I get it. As you wish, I’ll be silent except for when necessary. You managed to make a witch obey… you’re a master at this.”

Subaru: “SHUT THE HELL UP”

Echidna: “My my. Please don’t hesitate to call me if you need me, contractor-dono.”

With both anger and mockery in her voice, Echidna slinked back leaving behind those theatrical words of farewell. Even so, the witch should still be peeping into this world via the pendant, however, for the moment, Subaru pushed the notion away from his head and he breathed out a long sigh. From now on, he would definitely shove the pendant into his back-pocket when taking a bath or going to the toilet…

???: “… Subaru-sama, are you awake?”

There was a knock on the door from outside, which informed him of his usual wake up time. Subaru cleared his throat as he heard the gentle voice that had asked him that. Then, clapping his hands to his face, and making sure he was smiling using the mirror, he gave a very dispirited reply of: “Coome in”,

Hearing that, the door slowly opened, and a young girl entered the room.

???: “Good morning, Subaru-sama. Today is once again a splendid morning y’know.”

Saying that while smiling, was the little girl in her maid uniform—Petra Leyte, Subaru’s personal maid.

When he had met her, she had still been a young bud yet to flower. But now she was entering the growing season, and was in the process of blooming beautifully. Her height, and arms, and legs had grown a lot compared to before, and she was increasingly becoming more and more suited to her pretty maid dress too.

That behavior and conduction was not lost against her cute dress. From the start, she was a good girl who was well-taught and quick-to-learn. And now, as a maid, Petra had reached top notch levels.

A 14 year old flower… Seeing Petra's matured smile, Subaru replied with a smile.

Subaru: "A good morning to you too, Petra. I agree, it's indeed a splendid morning. Today too, I was able to see Petra's cute face in the morning. I'm pretty satisfied too."

Petra: "Subaru's still saying such things. …Ah, but there are clouds hanging over the sky beyond the forest, it seems that the weather may get worse this afternoon. I have plans to go shopping this afternoon, I hope it'll stay sunnyyyyyy."

Inclining her head towards Subaru's greeting, Petra turned her eyes towards the window and muttered that out. In those words, there was a trace of her childish immaturity in them, and Subaru gave a small chuckle.

Petra: "Ah! No, Subaru-sama."

Subaru: "Nono, just now, the beautiful shell of a Maid was broken just a little. How very like you, Petra."

Petra: "Jeez, please stop treating me like a kid like that. I'm totally grown up. I've been a maid already for two years… cuz of that I've become an adult!"

Shaking her auburn hair, Petra's cheeks blushed and her lips tapered in embarrassment. In front of the figure of his cute little sister, Subaru stroked the smiling girl's head. Petra narrowed her eyes in happiness and let out a reluctant sigh as Subaru stroked her head.

Petra: "So, what will you be doing this morning? It's still early for breakfast, but…"

Subaru: "Ahh, for the time being I'll just finish my usual routine and then if it goes well, we can have breakfast with everyone. If it doesn't go well… then, the usual."

Petra: "…Okay"

Casting her eyes down slightly at Subaru's reply, Petra's face turned quite serious. Shedding silent tears at making such a young sweet girl make such a face, Subaru stroked the cute girl's head as she made this face,

Subaru: "Anyhow, thank you for today as well. Especially for coming to wake me up."

Petra: "…"

Subaru: "Petra?"

Petra: "Subaru-sama really is clumsy."

Saying that to Subaru, who was trying to awkwardly change topic, Petra gave an exasperated sigh. And then the girl shook her head, putting on a smile like a bloomed flower.

Petra: "No, even this is my job. Besides, it's far better because Subaru-sama won't sleep too much… Even if he shouldn't be so careless."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Petra: "It's nothing. Well then, I'll see you later. Excuse me."

Every morning, after acting as Subaru's alarm clock Petra would give him a curtsy with her skirt. And then, after seeing off Subaru, she'd leave the room. The door would close, and Subaru would nod his head in satisfaction seeing Petra's growth. .

Subaru: "Petra has become splendid as well. As a big brother, I am proud."

Echidna: "But from her side, she doesn't seem to think of you as a big brother."

Subaru: “Didn’t I tell you to be silent except for when I need you? Witch-sama sure is quick to break promises.”

In her monologue, Subaru was struck by the witch’s persistence and weakness to not be able to tolerate the silence. But, leaving behind a resigned sigh, he turned around to look at the door Petra had disappeared through.

Subaru: “I’m that girl’s big brother, you know? So, Petra’s my cute little sister. That’s why I will make that girl happy. —That much I will absolutely do.”

Echidna: “You’ll absolutely make her happy you say…? Those words might unexpectedly become terrible words.”

Hearing Subaru’s firm tone, Echidna said that without poking any fun at him. Ignoring the words of the witch, Subaru left the room, lightly stretching himself. The mansion’s corridor had become quite cold as a sign that it was early morning . Shivering, Subaru walked out.

—His everyday “routine” was about to start.

4

Since a few months ago, mornings in the Roswaal mansion had began with an intense “Slaughter.” Though, calling it “Slaughter” may have been quite surprising when it came to the people concerned.

Still, as far as Subaru was concerned, who witnessed it, the exchanges were violent enough to be called “Slaughter.” In fact, there was no doubt that one of the two who clashed together was challenging the other to the death. But unfortunately, the other person who was challenging them evaded that ferocious fighting spirit with ease.

The disparity of power between the two of them was completely evident in the eyes of anyone who cared to look. Of course, there was no doubt that they’d keep up this dangerous routine every morning because of this,

???: “RHHHHHAAAAARRRGH!!”

A fierce howl of rage, accompanied by an explosion at the feet that blew away the lawn on the courtyard. Digging his foot in deeply, with that tempestuous propulsion the golden silhouette charged forward, his beastly claws driving straight toward the figure of his opponent.

It was a blow that could rend thick steel plate, a blow which could turn a human body into mince meat—The claws of the beast delivered a myriad of violent attacks, assailing its prey in an attempt to forbid it from escaping. However,

???: “I am sorry, but the gap is too great.”

???: “GHHA—?!”

The other silhouette easily avoided the downpour of fatal attacks coming from the claws of the beast. And immediately after, the long legs which were jumping up gave out a loud yell, and the body of the beast was pierced from below.

The beast raised a cry in anguish at receiving that blow, and the side that was stuck arced upwards—

???: “GHHAGHK—?!”

—Or rather, that was what should have happened, but it didn’t happen like so.

The body that was launched skywards was intercepted by the opponent’s heel which swung downwards like he had waited in ambush, and sent him down crashing into the ground. The impact produced a circular crater upon the lawn’s surface, leaving the beast perfectly silent, spread-eagled on the floor unmoving.

???: “Do you want to continue?”

???: “Aurgh”

The victor asked him whether he wanted to continue as the loser let out a groan. There was neither sarcasm or cynicism when asking that; they were words spoken only towards the battle. That's why those words deeply wounded the loser's spirit. Thus,

Subaru: "You probably don't even realize it, but words like that are demeaning you know. Stop with the damn Samurai's pity."

Entering the scene in which victory and defeat had already been decided, Subaru said this as he scratched his head. Hearing those words, the young man who had been overlooking his spread-eagled opponent turned to look back at him with a smile appearing on his face.

The young man with hair of red flame raised his hand towards Subaru.

???: "'ello, good morning, Subaru. You're up early this morning, huh?"

Subaru: "Not as early as the two of you. Even so, don't you get bored or have enough of doing this everyday…… You don't have to always act so frank, Reinhard."

Reinhard: "There's nothing wrong with his ambition burning strong. Besides, it's also true that he's getting stronger and stronger each day. Before long, won't there come a time where he will catch up with me?"

Subaru: "Is that so? I'm having a bit of a hard time picturing that."

The red-haired youth—Reinhard's words didn't give off the feeling that they were either a joke or an act of humility. Closing one of his eyes at this estimation, Subaru looked down at the figure that was still lying down on the ground.

A boy with short golden hair was rolling in pain there. Wheezing in anguish, he was still not at a level in which he could wage battle, but still, the fighting spirit dwelling in his green eyes had not wavered at all.

Though his body could not obey his intentions, all he could do was grit his teeth in frustration. Grasping the feelings of bitterness he was feeling, Subaru extended his hand to that boy.

Subaru: “Hey, can you get up, Garfiel. Don’t give up just yet. You’re…”

Garfiel: “…Don’t touch me so casually. ‘ don’t need t’ stand by yer fuckin’ hand y’know.”

Not taking Subaru’s outstretched hand, the blonde haired boy, Garfiel, bared his fangs at him. However, it was obvious in anyone’s eyes that it was just a bravado. Pain was etched on his face, and his breathing was rough. Nevertheless, Subaru was not so childish as to point this out.

Slightly shaking the arm that had been brushed aside, Subaru sighed at the Garfiel who climbed to his feet.

Subaru: “Well, if you say so, do as you like. But, go take a bath before breakfast, and try to clean yourself of the sweat and mud. Otherwise, Ram will come to dislike you.”

Garfiel: “… ut yer trap. ‘ know wi’out you needin’ to tell me.”

Shaking his head at Subaru’s suggestion, Garfiel knitted his eyebrows into an angry scowl and stood up. His knees were still trembling, but it wasn’t to the extent where he couldn’t walk. Having recovered with his amazing resilience, Garfiel glared at Reinhard who was standing there as unperturbed as ever.

Garfiel: “Nex’ time, ‘m gonna fuckin’ beat ya.”

Reinhard: “I will be looking forward to it.”

Garfiel snorted at Reinhard’s reply which had no traces of a lie in it. And after that, the boy started to trudge away, and as he passed by Subaru, he gave a fleeting glance his way.

Garfiel: “—Hmph.”

Smacking his lips in irritation, he continued to trudge away from the courtyard to the mansion. With a wry smile on his face, Subaru watched him walk away like that; he shook his head.

He must be feeling quite hurt with his pride wounded. Still, his sour feelings should go away along with his sweat when he washed himself before breakfast. Really, he was at a troublesome age.

Subaru: “That guy, sorry for leaving him all to you. You must be tired too, feel free to go wash up… Speaking of which, running in to him in the bath would be troublesome.”

Reinhard: “That’s right, it’d be tough for him. Fortunately, I didn’t move enough to break out into a sweat, so I’ll refrain from doing that. It would be a shame to put Garfiel caked in mud in front of Ram-san.”

Having seen Garfiel walk off, Reinhard smiled at Subaru who had raised those words. Just as he had thought, the effects of the morning sparring couldn’t be seen on the Sword Saint . He was dealing with a child, Garfiel, who challenged him in ‘anger’; he was perfectly capable of killing him if he so desired. And to make matters worse, he was making a nonchalant face whilst pushing down his feet on the part of the lawn in which Garfiel had been knocked down on. And, by some way, the grass returned back to how it had been in its original, clean state.

Was this also one of the countless Divine Protections he possessed? —More and more, the thought of him as an enemy brought chills.

Therefore, doing as much as having made him leave his own camp was probably Subaru’s greatest achievement.

The Sword Saint Reinhard Van Astrea.

Where he now belonged, was the camp supporting Emilia as king candidate, backed by Roswaal. Shortly after the Royal Selection had started, the Sword Saint had become Felt’s knight. He had been the greatest adversary he would’ve had to contend with, and because of his distinguished prominence in the kingdom, he’d have been their greatest threat… but—

Subaru: “—All that said, but, if Felt were to return, we’d once against stand as friends who are enemies, the thought of it brings shudders.”

Reinhard: "…"

Subaru: "What's the matter?"

Reinhard: "No, nothing, I understand your concern, but I dare say I would be unable to go back to being Felt-Sama's knight. That lady judged me as unworthy. Were it not so, she wouldn't have tossed me aside to vanish to whereabouts unknown."

Reinhard shook his head, turning away from Subaru's words. Closing his eyes to that reply, Subaru concealed his innermost thoughts and let out a long sigh.

—Already, nearly a year had passed since Reinhard's master, one of the Royal Election Candidates, Felt, had disappeared from her knight.

The feline girl left the Astrea House, taking with her only the old man she regarded as family, and ran away from the Royal Selection. Thus, she cast aside the Sword Saint who had pledged himself to her.

Those were the rumors circulating around the country, and was almost identical to the truth.

In fact, Reinhard had heard nothing from Felt, before being driven from the Royal Election. The fact that the master he'd sworn his loyalty to had vanished without word, brought an immeasurable sense of helplessness to the Sword Saint .

Subaru had extended his arm out to this, and had dragged him over to this new camp. With his conscience sullied, and him feeling a great sense of responsibility, Reinhard had taken Subaru's desperate plea, and offered his sword to Emilia as his new king.

And since, the Sword Saint had become the sword of the Emilia camp. He was playing a big part in the Royal Selection. As the descendant of the Sword Saint who had sealed "The Witch of Envy"up, he joined to support the much despised Emilia, the Half-Witch. The implications of that was greater than he imagined.

Besides, Reinhard being around helped a lot in more things than just the Royal Selection. By belonging to the same camp, Reinhard helped out with the rebellious Garfiel.

Subaru: “I can’t raise my head to you and Ram. I can’t imagine how many times Garfiel would have crushed me by now.”

Reinhard: “There’s hardly any such thing. Indeed, on the surface Garfiel is harsh, which is in fact an indication that he recognizes your strength. But, your strength is not one he can understand, and this, no matter what, he cannot find himself able to accept.”

Subaru: “Well, no one would particularly enjoy being confused by so many cheap conjurer’s tricks. Though, there was no other way, so it’s not like I’ve dwelled upon or regretted it.”

Shrugging at Reinhard’s defense, Subaru recalled the events that had transpired in the Sanctuary. Back at the Sanctuary, the residents’ escape had been impossible due to the barrier connected to the graveyard. Then, there was the threat of the Sizeable Hare Witchbeast swarming there—to break through those issues, Subaru had used a lot of tricks.

It could be said that the one who feared the Sanctuary’s liberation the most was Garfiel, and that he was the one who did his utmost to stop Subaru. Whereas Emilia and the others were the ones who picked up the fruits of his Return by Death with all his soul.

That was precisely what originated the contract between Subaru and Echidna. Subaru had chosen to take the witch’s hand, and repeated his ‘Return by Death’ an unimaginable number of times, and went through all possible trial and error back at the “Sanctuary”.

And the result of that was Subaru had been able to take control of the actions of everyone staying in the Sanctuary and by placing Garfiel outside the mosquito net he prevented him from interfering with the events.

He overcame the Graveyard’s Trials and broke the barrier. Meanwhile, Roswaal made the necessary preparations concerning Ryuzu, and led the evacuation. The inhabitants were set free before the threat of the Sizeable Hare had assailed the Sanctuary. Meanwhile, Garfiel struggled to keep the time of release at bay, but his struggles were in vain.

After all, it was after everything had ended that Garfiel understood everything that happened. Even when he knew that it was too late to help, after the evacuation of the inhabitants of the Sanctuary had ended, Garfiel had still tried to resist leaving the Sanctuary.

However, the Sanctuary was attacked by The Sizeable Hare and the young man would have been driven to the verge of death if he hadn't been saved by the hands of Subaru and Roswaal.

Lacking strength and making misjudgments, the problems that had weighed stubbornly on his young heart for more than a decade had been solved by outsiders, excluding him entirely. Garfiel's willpower was greatly wounded.

After that, his feelings of depression became rage, and it was only natural that he come to bear hatred for Subaru. Without the persuasions of Ram and his big sister, Frederica, Garfiel may not have made the choice to join the Emilia camp. The newcomer Reinhard became an outlet of anger for Garfiel.

In the end, it was probably his own lack of strength which Garfiel couldn't forgive the most. By understanding the strength of the Sword Saint as his objective, little by little, signs of change were born in Garfiel, who continuously worked to become stronger.

Through this way, perhaps he would arrive at the answer that he couldn't acquire back at the "Sanctuary".

Subaru: "Well, I'd be quite happy if he were a little more open with me."

Reinhard: "One day he'll understand your feelings. There's no need to be impatient."

Reinhard shook his head in a gesture that looked like consolation at Subaru's half-hearted conclusion. And then, the red-haired knight turned his eyes towards the mansion.

Reinhard: “I want you to leave Garfiel to me for just a little while longer. …That’s if you still have any expectations from me, I, who was not even able to acquire Felt-sama’s trust.”

Subaru: “Don’t be so pitiful. I don’t think there’s anyone who doesn’t believe in you. Yeah, I have expectations of you.”

Reinhard: “Understood. Then, you too should do what is expected of you… That is the duty of a best knight.”

It was only in those last words, in which Reinhard had shown some kind of emotion in.

The “Best Knight”, that term was permitted only in master-servant relationships which were tied together by the strongest of bonds. Reinhard had not been able to become that for Felt.

He didn’t wish to become so to Subaru, that’s what he felt.

Reinhard: “Well, I’ll see you later.”

Without even revealing a bit of those emotions on his facial expression, Reinhard gave Subaru a clap on his shoulder and left the garden. As he walked, there were no signs of the fight which had taken place a few moments ago, on the lawn underneath his feet which should have been dented.

Whilst standing on lawn that had gone back to normal, Subaru made sure that Reinhard had completely left the garden and let out a long sigh.

Subaru: “I left Garfiel to… you, huh.”

Echidna: “My, what skilled acting. Your skin grows thicker by the day.”

Subaru: “…”

Once again, he heard the voice of the witch who kept breaking her promise. But, Subaru didn’t say anything back. Taking his silence as an acknowledgement, Echidna transmitted her thought-waves from her crystal stone, Echidna: “Pitying Garfiel is your prerogative. But let’s discuss the solution of “Sanctuary”. Repeating attempt after attempt, you found the optimum solution. Keeping anyone from hurting, from dying… and finally saving everyone’s life. Isn’t that so?”

Subaru: “I know. That’s why I didn’t say anything.”

Echidna: “Reinhard as well, absolve yourself from guilt. Originally, that girl—Felt wasn’t interested in the election in the slightest. So, you pointed out an escape path for her, so she would need not trouble herself. And now, she’s living peacefully with that old giant in Kararagi.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna carefully affirmed Natsuki Subaru’s choices, as if caressing old wounds.

Garfiel’s stagnation, Reinhard’s anguish—all of these were as a result of Subaru’s choices. Garfiel’s situation had been okay. It had been the necessary process for resolving the problems in the Sanctuary without having to sacrifice anyone. But, Reinhard’s situation was different.

It was a plot of Natsuki Subaru to completely separate him from his master. He wouldn’t be able to avoid blame and disdain if they knew the facts. It was that kind of a plan. But even so—

Echidna: “In order to drive away the malicious Witch Cult targeting Emilia, you need real power. Just charm isn’t enough. So in the end, you made the right choice.”

Subaru: “Enough!”

Echidna: “Successfully saving Priestella, was allowed only because of that choice. Dealing with the disaster that swept the Watergate City, how would your odds have been without Reinhard?”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Of course, if you’d concentrated your fighting power there, you may have found a way to repel them by some other means. However, to be able to defeat Sin Archbishops in the plural with no victims, was precisely because you had Reinhard available to you.”

Repeated and relentless were Echidna’s words, and yet that attempt to console was met with the opposite effect. An attempt to justify his deeds, falling hundreds upon thousands of times was that blade known as words. Using this method to cut his heart into jagged pieces was not her goal, but it certainly felt so. Using a blade of language, she condemned the deeds and deceits of Natsuki Subaru.

No matter how many times, no matter how many dozen times, no matter how much she repeated it, it was never enough.

His strength was overwhelmingly insufficient. And that power never compensated for the experiences of Subaru, who kept repeating Return by Death several times.

Memories and experiences of the future, in this world there was despair that could not be overcome with that alone. Still, maybe the difficulties could have been overcome if he had committed himself. But Subaru regretted that he could not be neither strong enough or weak enough to allow sacrifices.

It’d be meaningless if he closed his eyes to people falling victim, it’d be meaningless if he accepted condolences, it’d be meaningless if he allowed compromises. If he stopped putting his life on the line, he’d lose meaning in having taken the witch’s hand.

Therefore, he did everything he could to get the necessary power and the necessary fighting strength. As a result, he had caught the strongest sword, Reinhard van Astrea and made him into an ally.

When it came to Felt’s withdrawal from the Royal Selection—It was not possible to describe all of his tries, and all of his errors that he had repeated so that this would have been realized.

Under Reinhard’s enmity, under that sword, falling even ten or twenty times was insufficient. Still, finally he had accomplished it quite peacefully without sacrificing anyone. Only that outcome was salvation for Natsuki Subaru.

It didn't matter how many times his heart would be wounded, as long as he could save their lives—

Subaru: "There's life, if there's life, there's a future, if there's a future, there's hope, if there's hope, then there are possibilities. If there are possibilities, then—"

Echidna: "Then people will be saved. You're in the right. You aren't wrong. I promise so."

Subaru: "I don't particularly need your guarantees, you know…"

Subaru spoke out his innermost thoughts to both cheer himself up, and to caution himself. The witch affirmed, understood, shared and admired that.

While responding aggressively to his words, it was a fact that the witch's words helped him.

Life, was life.

If he was alive, he could start over. He had possibilities. It yielded hope.

Sacrifices were things that were different to Subaru's life. It was worth continuing to keep using Returning by Death all the time if it protected everyone except Subaru's own life, which was no longer included in his calculations.

—Even if those who I want to save weep, I still want to save them.

That was the salvation that Subaru had decided to receive by taking the witch's hand.

5

Having received the witch's cruel comfort, Subaru left the courtyard. Witnessing the morning exercises of Reinhard and Garfiel, had in fact nothing to do with Subaru's daily routine. He just happened to pass by the scene, and he had no choice but to call out to them. Subaru's proper daily routine started in the mansion's library.

Subaru: “—Heya, Beatrice. Sorry to intrude.”

Deep within the easternmost part of the mansion, stood a neat library. When you pushed open one of the heavy double-doors, the first thing that leaped out from the inside was the overwhelming scent of paper. In the dim light of a magic crystal, the narrow shelves were completely filled, drowned under thick stacks of heavy books

The amount of books could be said to be no inferior to what once existed in the “Forbidden Library.”

So, in that case.

Even while knowing that this place wasn’t the Forbidden Library that she should be guarding, the little girl remained here, able to see the fragments of her old home within the debris.

Beatrice: “…”

In the depths of the dark room, in a corner of the library rested the figure of a young girl who hugged her knees to her chest. As soon as he entered the room, he saw her sat on a wooden stepladder. This still vivid memory of her squatting posture, that sense of violation would not vanish, continuing to burn and erode through Subaru’s heart.

Beatrice had pressed her forehead into her knees, still wearing her same dress. Scrunched up like this, the little girl didn’t stir, react or even say anything to Subaru as he entered her room.

But she was not asleep, that much was clear from the fingers of her little body, which were clenched with so much force that they were whitened.

Back then, she had greeted Subaru with poor temperament, but at least when she had greeted him then, it had been with the dignity of a librarian. There were no traces remaining of that frigid expression which had been sustained by the pride of her responsibility.

Scrunching up his eyes at seeing the girl in such a sorry state, Subaru rapidly blinked his eyes to get rid of the emotions that had flitted there for just a moment. Then after putting on a ridiculously animated smile, he threw open the curtains of the library.

Unlike the forbidden library, the room had a physical existence. Naturally, since there was a window, the door couldn't act as a barrier to prevent trespass. Therefore—

Subaru: "Heyy, Beako. Today's a splendid morning. There's a pleasant wind blowing by. You should stop hiding in this musty old room; don't you feel like playing outside?"

Beatrice: "…"

Subaru: "If you don't want to muddy your dress up by playing outside, then at the very least let's eat together with everyone. Come to the dining hall like before. It's not too much to ask, right?"

Beatrice: "…"

The curtains of the library were torn wide open, and sunlight streamed into the room. Just like the streaming sunlight, Beatrice kept her silence, tilting down her head to Subaru's requests, who was still smiling quite openly. It felt to Subaru that her arms that were still clutching her knees were as if she was punishing herself.

Subaru: "Hey, Beako…"

Beatrice: "… just shut the hell up, in fact."

Subaru: "…"

Unable to bear looking at him, Beatrice spoke this out quite loudly as Subaru tried to approach her.

Her voice sank heavily, as it grew hoarse. But, after hearing her voice, Subaru felt relieved. Because recently, just hearing her voice was a rare occurrence.

When she was depressed, the days were quite many in which he couldn't exchange even a single word with her. Even words of rejection and denial pleased him.

Casting aside what Subaru was thinking, Beatrice continued without lifting up her face.

Beatrice: “Betty is tired. I’ve already given up, I suppose. I went against mother’s instructions… I broke the contract… and despite that, I’m still alive… why?”

Subaru: “Beatrice…”

Beatrice: “If only you just ditched me back then… Why did you come to help me? Clearly, you’re not… you’re not ‘They’!”

It’s a resentment that will never disappear, a resentment that can never fade, a penitence that she could never forgive—

In her four hundred years, Beatrice had bore those feelings alone, her heroic consciousness that had refused to relinquish such thoughts had been trampled upon, naturally bringing hatred.

Within the Forbidden Library, was a spirit who had given up her life for her mission, with no room in her heart for hope.

Her eternal life had stripped hope from her, and all she had been given was time to live a life devoid of meaning.

When the Forbidden Library burned down along with the mansion, the place in which she had been indicated to stay was lost forever.

But even so, Beatrice had never once forgotten her responsibility, the one that been abandoned. Her heart which had bore such a relentless sense of responsibility, had been scarred by permanent wounds, steeped in misery.

That is why ever since the night when the Forbidden Library had burnt to ashes, all she could do was crouch in a corner of the library, endlessly sobbing in helplessness.

But still—

Beatrice: “—hk! Go away! Let go of me, I suppose! Don’t you touch Betty… —tch!”

Unable to see her small figure, Subaru had wrapped her small body into a hug. Shouting at him when she felt his arm hugging her, Beatrice made no attempt to hide her disgust and rage, scoring Subaru's neck with her nails. Caught in her merciless attack, drops of blood oozed out of his wound. But still, he didn't let go.

He hugged her in an attempt to comfort her shivering body. But maybe it was actually Subaru who was looking for comfort by doing that.

Beatrice: "Why did you come to see me, I suppose…! You're so… you're so…!"

Subaru: "I'll be like this no matter how many times you vent your anger at me, it's fine. Even if the flames of regret don't seem like they're vanishing right now, if you keep pouring them out maybe they'll vanish someday."

Beatrice: "They're not… supposed to vanish…! Betty is!"

Subaru: "I'm so glad that you're alive. So, I'll always look forward to the day where you'll once again get sulky in front of me. —Because that hope still lives in me."

Beatrice: "—hk"

Quietly, after those sincere words were exhausted, Beatrice's resistance subsided. Making a surprised face, Beatrice started to sob, there in body but not in spirit. It was a sign that he couldn't continue this conversation anymore.

—Once every two weeks, Subaru and Beatrice would exchange anger and stillness like so.

After letting go of her, Beatrice once again buried her forehead into her knees. And after that Subaru couldn't say anything more to the girl who had retreated into her own shell. Subaru's words still weren't able to manage to open the door to her stubborn heart.

Nevertheless, if he beat relentlessly against those doors, maybe one day, they would open. —The mere possibility of this hope, was hope itself.

Subaru:… Back then, I wonder if I should have told her I was “They” even if it was a lie.”

Exiting the library and leaving Beatrice behind, whilst keeping his back to the door, Subaru recollected this.

Beatrice had been broken clinging to the hope that Subaru was the “They” in question back during the attack on the mansion. She had been prepared for the end of her long, long mission, but both her fragile hopes and her sorrowful acceptance were smashed to pieces.

Would Subaru have been able to lie to her who had longed for the visit of “They” for 400 years about being “They” just because he could? And in that case, could her heart have been protected without burning it along with the burning Forbidden Library?

Echidna: “The fact that the Forbidden Archive was lost can’t be undone. Accepting the irretrievable loss of all the knowledge without inheritance is quite painful for me, but it couldn’t be helped. Though for you, compared to that knowledge, that Beatrice’s life was saved is what matters most.”

Subaru: “It’s inappropriate that you’d say so. It should be that you alone, have no right to say this.”

Echidna, who was still in the dream world, protested to Subaru who had mentioned his regrets in passing.

But, hadn’t it been Echidna who had entrusted the Forbidden Library to Beatrice, and let her have such a lonely existence for 400 years?

As a result of Echidna setting this duty out to her, Beatrice’s heart had gradually crumbled to pieces. And despite that—

Subaru: “If you hadn’t told her to wait for “They”…!”

Echidna: “Wait a second. No matter how you look at it, isn’t that sidestepping logic? I had my own reasons, and there was a need for it to be done. Of course, responsibility for Beatrice’s long solitude does have to do with me. But, my intent was certainly not one of forcing misfortune upon that child. I do hope you understand.”

Subaru: “Ghg…”

Receiving Echidna’s objections, Subaru hesitated in bursting out in anger. The witch’s words were correct. In the end, when he blamed Echidna, he was just shifting the responsibility from what he couldn’t do himself.

Subaru: “…In the end, who was “They”?”

Echidna: “Regretfully, I can’t let that slip from my mouth. Since the Forbidden Archive is lost, discussing it would be meaningless. Even if we were to find out who it is, he wouldn’t know about that anymore.”

Subaru: “Him… so it’s a man?”

Echidna: “—Did my mouth slip? But, every way of finding him is gone now. In the first place, say you found them, what would you do? Let Beatrice see them? Or do you intend to impose a sanction on them? In that case, what crime would it be under. The party in concern would certainly be unaware of it, a crime that doesn’t exist can’t be sanctioned. Moreover, it’s not like you have the leisure.”

Irrefutable were Echidna’s conversational tactics, leading Subaru to click his tongue.

As a matter of fact, everything spoken from the Witch were probably correct. He couldn’t find any errors. He couldn’t judge them. Subaru didn’t have the time to do such a thing.

Echidna: “Beatrice truly did spend that time in pity. But, that isn’t to say the future would remain so, and there’s no indication we should think thus. How unexpected, it’s just as you said.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Even if devastated by regret right now, there will come a day where that child will be freed. At the time, someone will come to accept that child. Perhaps someone that is you, perhaps someone that isn’t. That is the possibility that living offers.”

It was sophistry.

It was merely a front of benevolence.

But, that doubtlessly was also hope.

It seemed like cajolery from Echidna, but if there was that possibility, Subaru had no choice but to believe them.

Thus, the witch he was contracted with, no matter how clearly he could see that she cajoled him, he could not deny what she was saying. He could only cling to her, rely on her. As his only accomplice, keeping Subaru from forgetting his sins, was her constant presence.

Subaru: “Just like parallel lines”

Echidna: “Ah, like parallel lines indeed”

In the end, finishing their conversation thus, were Subaru and Echidna’s manner of confronting their sins. They entrusted hope to the future, believing in the paths to possibility, awaiting the arrival of the ideal day.

It didn’t matter how many chances he had, Subaru would always find himself back in this place. He had dragged out the despairing Beatrice as she tried to stay in the burning mansion, even if she’d lost her Forbidden Library, even if her every day were to be met with relentless tears; he still had wanted her to live.

Even with repeated trial and error in many thousands repetitions of this world, Subaru hadn’t found a way of rescuing Beatrice without letting anyone to die.

Thus, clinging onto hope, he kept walking forward through thick and thin, through thick and thin.

I saved them, I saved them.

Today as well, he made these words his motivation for the future; he wanted hope to flourish.

???: “Oh myyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy! But if it isn’t Subaru-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Did you come from visiting Beatrice?”

Subaru: “………………”

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him as he walked through the corridor. Subaru reflexively stopped in his tracks. He immediately realized who it belonged to from the tone of his voice. It was because of that he regretted stopping, but he couldn’t ignore it because he had already stopped walking. Reluctantly turning around, the other figure stood leisurely, directly behind Subaru.

Subaru: “Is that you, Roswaal?”

Roswaal: “Mhhm. That’s me of course. Good morning. How was Beatrice today?”

Subaru: “…It had been a while since she’s treated me so haughtily. Well, anticipate some progress from now on.”

Roswaal: “I see. …Looks like you took quiiiiiite the beating, though?”

Roswaal narrowed his differently colored eyes as he received Subaru’s dispirited reply. He was looking at Subaru’s face and neck. On them, were the painful scratches Beatrice had given him with her nails a short while ago.

Roswaal: “Unfortunately, I’ve never been skilled at treating injuries, and I won’t be able to treat those wounds. The ones who can use Healing Magic are just… Beatrice, Garfiel and Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “It’d be a little difficult to ask it from the first two. I could ask Emilia… well I’ll think about it.”

Roswaal: “If you ask her, I am sure she’ll definitely heal you up. Or perhaps, could it be that maybe your aching wounds give you some comfort right now?”

Subaru: “…”

In place of the reticent Subaru, each of Roswaal’s discursive words were as painfully sharp as a razor. It was especially so when Roswaal spoke his last words; Subaru narrowed his eyes to it, and Roswaal shrugged his shoulders up in a clown-like gesture.

The clown's makeup and exotic attire, Roswaal's appearance and attitude had in no way changed, but he was also decisively different.

Behind the way he addressed Subaru and his attitude towards him there was a certain respect. That served as Roswaal's, toward the unpredictable existence of Natsuki Subaru, proof that he recognized his utility.

Roswaal: "But, please don't worry about it. If you make use of your time, I am sure you'll find a solution; no matter what the method, you will dedicate yourself in finding the optimal way. If your desire is to save Beatrice's heart, such a method will one day fall within your grasp. There's no need at all to feeeeeeel anxious."

Subaru: "It's hardly as easy done as said. There isn't anything so convenient."

Roswaal: "You're too modest. —Besides, I don't think that it's easy, yes? But, that mere fact doesn't cloud all of your achievements so far, that's all I was saying."

Respectfully giving a bow, Roswaal gave thorough praise for Subaru's achievements.

As a matter of fact, only Echidna who was contracted with Subaru knew about his ability of Return by Death. But, Roswaal had an understanding of his ability to be similar to "Redoing." Roswaal evaluated that fact and his achievements together.

As Echidna didn't have any realistic power in the real world, it it was no exaggeration to say that Roswaal that valued Subaru the most in the truest sense.

Roswaal: "At the Royal Capital, at my mansion, and once again at the Royal Capital. And then, at "Sanctuary", at Priestella. —You survived those without fail, without loss. Indisputable, are the feats of your achievement. There will come a day, when you will fulfill my long-cherished wish, and for that I will do my utmost to support you. Please make use of it.”

Subaru: “You sure are optimistic. …Don’t be so sure that you can grasp me in the palm of your hands.”

Roswaal: “But, you need the blood of the dragon. Without it, that girl—Rem will never awaken. Having reached that conclusion, you need Emilia-sama to become king. Isn’t that right?”

Subaru returned the stare with a sharp, cold look to Roswaal’s searching expression,.

It’s a relationship of mutual cooperation established on choppy waters, in which both of them knew each other’s critical points.

Roswaal would accomplish his goal by utilising Subaru’s Return by Death as he put Subaru in situations whereby he could achieve this. And though Subaru knew of those intentions, he didn’t have any choice but to advance by them for the sake of saving Rem, who was still sleeping.

Roswaal: “In no way is it a bad deal. You do you, I do me, and in any case we’ll both have our desires become reality. That’s why we make use of each other to that end. That’s all.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “My strength should be useful. I devoted about 400 years awaiting this time. And to me, your power is the same… isn’t that so?”

Subaru couldn’t give any objections to Roswaal’s conviction. That was the answer that came out from when he found out about Roswaal’s treachery way back at the “Sanctuary”. Whether for the sake of the Royal Election, or as a means of blocking against coming hindrances, being without Roswaal’s presence, was absolutely unallowable.

Even if he was just planning on using Subaru to make his own wishes come true.

Subaru: “If you were honest about your true intentions, and you told me what you wanted, I wouldn’t be so stubborn, I would maybe even be willing to help.”

Roswaal: “What a shame, I’m afraid that’s impossible. You’ve already lost that choice.”

Slightly easing the sense of urgency, to the approaching Subaru, Roswaal gave him his rejection. Roswaal gave a ostentatious smile towards the Subaru who heard that with widened eyes.

Roswaal: “Being conscious of it would be a disaster, you must always exalt your sole priority. Any obstructions, reasons for stumbling, everything will be judged, and no matter what can be discarded without second thought. And if done, that would be the end. This was all already decided, hence why you’ve become my trump card.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “Isn’t this wonderful? I’ll take care of my side, you’ll take care of yours, freely fulfilling our wishes. If it’s impossible even like this, that merely indicates the desire to reach the wish was insufficient.”

Subaru: “…Ah, is that so?”

Crazed dedication, was why Roswaal supported his, that much had already been clear. Then, where the root of it came from, his refusal to speak honestly about it was also thus. With this in mind, Subaru ended the conversation with Roswaal and finally started to walk away. With a posture that showed just how much Roswaal was detached from his heart, Roswaal stopped walking,

Roswaal: “Ahhh, yes. Right about now, Ram will be in Rem’s room. I’m letting you know, just in case.”

Subaru: “…”

Unable to respond, Subaru turned the corner and escaped from his gaze.

7

Ram: “Thank you very much for taking the trouble to visit my lonely sister, Natsuki Subaru-sama”

Ever since the agreement in “Sanctuary”, or perhaps, it might be more accurate to say ever since Natsuki Subaru decided to do things this way.

Ever since that, it was inevitable that numerous changes had occured in the mansion, and on the outside, but amongst them, the biggest change was perhaps hers.

The one who had greeted Subaru as he entered the room was a pink-haired maid who had given him a most profound bow. The one who had spoke this greeting was most certainly Ram.

Though she had been a girl with that had been the very picture of arrogance, after he had overcome the events of “Sanctuary”, she had a sudden shift in her attitude towards Subaru.

Subaru: “No matter how much time passes, I never get used to your attitude.”

Ram: “Again, I am really sorry for how rude I was in the past. Ram’s ignorance and discourtesies caused great inconveniences to Natsuki Subaru-sama. But since Roswaal-sama and Emilia-sama have ordered me to show Natsuki-sama the highest of respect, it won’t happen again; please rest assured”

Without changing her expression, Ram replied to Subaru in a manner dignified as any maid would be. There were no traces of familiarity or a sense of closeness which could be interpreted as friendliness in her behavior, as there had been once before. There was a wall—No, if there was a wall he’d be able to climb over it. Here, there was no way of overcoming it; more precisely, it was a distance between worlds than a wall.

Ram held Roswaal in high esteem and adored him. When Roswaal had changed the way he acted towards Subaru, Subaru’s value also greatly changed for Ram. The result was that she now regarded

Subaru as someone she showed respect to.

Turning his attention away from that Ram, Subaru walked towards the middle of the room—the reason why he had came to this room was the blue-haired girl who was sleeping in the bed.

She was lying on her back, her figure unchanged after 2 years—that girl, was Rem. He had vowed to wake her up, and now he still hadn't reached the conviction that he'd fulfill that vow. Just time was cruelly leaving the girl behind.

Subaru: "Are there any changes in Rem?"

Ram: "No I'm afraid. She still continues to sleep… There are a lot of problems on your mind, Ram doesn't have the time to give any attention to her little sister."

Subaru: "Don't say such things. There's absolutely… there's absolutely no futility in thinking about Rem. Never say that again."

Ram: "—Understood sir."

Ram responded curtly to Subaru's firm order. Neither dissatisfaction or complaints were there, and neither was relief or gratitude. In regards to her younger sister called Rem, Ram had no actual feelings or appreciation for her. She recognized formally that Rem was her sister, but in the depths of her heart she probably had no room for Rem.

Her heart was completely based on loyalty to Roswaal. Having involved her in Roswaal's plans, having decided to curb the wishes Ram clung onto, the effects of Subaru's actions were strong indeed.

Even if Rem were to awaken, would her heart once again have room for her little sister? Would those sisters go back to being the much loved big sister, and her cute little sister.

Subaru: "—Ukh. Ram, sorry, but let me be alone with Rem."

Ram: "…as you wish. Please call me if you need anything."

Grinding his teeth at the shuddering thought, Subaru felt terrified at being in the same room as Ram. Miraculously, before his trembling voice was let out, she had left the room. Fortunately, Ram had left gracefully, leaving him behind only an elegant curtsy without giving any objections to Subaru's words. And so, only the two of Subaru and Rem were left in the room.

Subaru: "…Rem."

"…"

Lying on the bed, the girl simply breathed over and over again in a manner which could not be mere sleep; she doesn't reply. The fact that her chest was gently rising and falling, and that the blood in her body was warm were the only signs of life within Rem.

All that Subaru could do for Rem when visiting this place was to take her hand and check her weak pulse. And that's all Subaru can find comfort in, in this moment.

Subaru: "…Echidna."

Echidna: "For you to call me, is truly a rarity."

Echidna replied to his call as he sat down by Rem's bedside, gently holding her hand. The witch who seemed to know all too well about how she would speak without necessarily being called, silently waited for Subaru's words to be submerged in the warm water of his emotions. The silence would end after ten or so minutes.

Subaru: "The way to wake up Rem is like you told me before, right?"

Echidna: "Yeah. You could question the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony that put her in this sleep. But, I have to say, the likelihood of that is quite low. Finding those guys is next to impossible, and even if you do catch them, finding a way to beat their secrets out of them… Even if you were to just able to find a way to talk to them, maybe it would be easy to find a way to make them open their mouth, if you had the power…"

Subaru: "Ah, that's right. That's right of course. If I manage to find them, and catch them, and beat their secrets out of them to reawaken Rem, I can challenge them ten thousands of times. Even so…”

They were nowhere to be found. The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, those despicable blasphemers never showed up anywhere. Even when the Sin Archbishops Wrath, Lust and Greed gathered in the Watergate City of Priestella, the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony did not show up.

Why, why, why, why, why, why, why—

Subaru: “If tracking down Gluttony is hopeless, what about the Sage’s tower? If the Sage, Shaula, knows everything, then…”

Echidna: “As a witch, I will say this. Even if you do go to the Pleiades Watchtower, you’ll just be going on a fool’s errand. The Sage will not correspond to your expectations. On the contrary, there’s even the possibility that the Sage will not allow your presence. Even you should not wish to drop in there to die in vain, right?”

He was denied once. He was denied twice. He was stuck. Getting help from the Sage was a no go. The Archbishops of Gluttony were nowhere to be found. Subaru’s wishes were denied politely by the “Witch of Greed”. Then, what on earth should he do—

Echidna: “So, you have no choice but to get the blood of the dragon”

Subaru: “With the blood of the dragon, we can wake up Rem.”

Echidna: “I refer to the Divine Dragon’s. Using its omnipotent power kept in its blood, I think you should be able to release the girl’s soul from her sleep.”

Echidna’s words were no more than a conjecture. But it was a convincing conjecture. Though she had said them with an air of avoiding them as being fact, the witch’s words were fairly encouraging. Thus for now, Subaru believed that this was the way to save Rem.

The blood of the dragon was considered one of the treasures which the Divine Dragon, Volcanica, granted to the Kingdom of Lugunica. It brought plentiful harvest to the lands, and kept away every disease, and had the possibility to grant miracles.

It could only be used by people with the highest pedigrees of social status in the kingdom. In other words, it was those who—

Subaru: "You get it if you ascend to the throne."

Echidna: "Of course. That's why you have to make her… You absolutely must make Emilia king."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Back Emilia, back her and make her king whilst you help the people you wish to save. And when you get ahold of the dragon's blood, you will be able to save Rem."

Echidna's words pour into Subaru's mind like poison. He has to make Emilia king in order to save Rem. Making Emilia king was one of Subaru's aims that he wanted to meet to fulfill Emilia's wishes.

It was of utmost importance. Supporting Emilia would lead to saving Rem.

To make Emilia king, to save Rem. As a result, Rem would be saved thanks to Subaru wanting to make Emilia king. Therefore—

Echidna: "Therefore…"

Subaru: "Stop, you idiot. …Don't try and swing my determination like that every time you can. Why are you trying to place Emilia under me like that?"

Echidna: "But that wasn't my intention?"

Subaru: "You're not very convincing. We've repeated this conversation many times, tens of times, hundreds of times."

The witch often times poured poison into his mind similar as if she was brainwashing him. In a way to change Subaru's aims, and lessen the value of Emilia. But that was something that Subaru could not let go. It they differed in this, Natsuki Subaru would lose his qualification to step on his own corpses that have been slaughtered so far.

Subaru: "You shouldn't jam us between your own selfishness. No matter what you harbour against Emilia."

Echidna: "You're misunderstanding me. Well, it doesn't matter how much I say, you won't believe it… just like parallel lines."

Subaru: "It's better to say that we never agree with each other, like parallel lines, even if it's a conversation that we repeat a lot."

There were things which could not be relinquished in his cooperative relationship with Echidna. The witch claimed to be Subaru's accomplice, and by lending Subaru her wisdom as a contribution, she planned to use not only Subaru's Return by Death, but also his way of life. Although, thanks to her ingenuous side, those poisonous fangs did not reach him, and thus they were in a state of stalemate.

Subaru: "I'll get my hands on the dragon's blood. By making Emilia king. —But it's not something I'm doing just while saving Rem. Making Emilia King is intrinsic with saving Rem, so my original intentions haven't changed. Make no mistakes there."

Echidna: "Mymy. As if I have any complaints dancing to your tune from time to time. You know, I need you to let your guard down a little, otherwise I won't be able to save face as a witch."

Subaru: "The way you execute your endgame is soft. Or rather, perhaps, when it comes to you, I'd say you're soft at the core. You're not suited to be a complete villain. That's how I am saved."

Echidna: "I see. I will try to keep that in mind."

Echidna admitted her defeat with no great objection. Even if she could made use of this lesson next time, she probably wouldn't be able to. To ask why, the answer would be that. Because it's not something that can be changed.

Natsuki Subaru was Natsuki Subaru no matter what befell him.

The Witch of Greed Echidna could only be the Witch of Greed Echidna.

Using the nature that they could never be capable of changing as weapons.

Because in life, victory or defeat could only be found in the cards they were dealt.

Subaru: “—Wait for me, Rem. For sure, I will wake you up. That’s why…”

—No matter how many times he dies.

His resolve was no exaggeration, the stakes he presented were quite trivial. Regardless of how many times he threw it away, he would continue giving his inextinguishable life away. If that eventually led to her waking up, he would feel no regrets.

Just that much, just that much, just that would be good enough.

8

—After returning from visiting Beatrice’s library, and Rem’s bedroom, he had now reached the end of his daily routine.

Subaru knocked on the room’s door with a rap-rap-rap. Then there was a knock from the inside that returned the knock. Without replying, they knocked. Replying to it, Subaru once again gave another knock. And that was met by the other person immediately knocking back. Knock knock knock knock knock—

???: “—Jeez, how long are you going to do that for! It’s making me reaaaaally anxious”

The one who had lost their patience just a few moments ago was the one in the room. The door opened from the inside, and the face of a beautiful girl with amethyst eyes and silver hair could be seen

—she was the embodiment of supreme beauty that forever continued to encaptivate everything.

Art Source

If she showed her face whilst puffing her rosy cheeks, she would give an impression of tenderness rather than of beauty. Suddenly, Subaru started to laugh.

Emilia: “Ah, what are you laughing for? Ugh, Subaru’s such a twit.”

Subaru: “Twit… no one says that word anymore these days. It was Emilia-tan that started to return the knocks just before. I just went with the flow.”

Emilia: “You say it like that. Hmph, whatever. Then if it’s like that, I just won’t let Subaru into my room.”

Emilia tried to close the door, her face etched with annoyance when she heard Subaru speaking through his laughter. Seeing that, Subaru became anxious and put his hand in between the door—

Subaru: “OWWW”

Emilia: “Ah! Subaru, are you okay?!”

Emilia jumped at Subaru’s over-exaggerated shriek of pain after having had his fingers jammed in the door. Quickly jumping out of the room, she hurriedly grabbed Subaru’s aching right hand, and,

Emilia: “*Nom nom nom*”

Subaru: “Ehh, Emilia-tan?! Isn’t that a little bold?!”

Emilia: “Mmphphnn, mmhmhhmhpphhnomnomnomnomnom”

Whatever he was saying was muffled by Emilia’s angered reaction, and by her sharp amethyst eyes. Emilia’s soft lips wrapped themselves around the sore fingers of Subaru’s right hand. In between her soft lips, he realised that Emilia’s warm tongue was gently tracing the numb pain which racked Subaru’s fingers.

A sensual shiver traveled up Subaru's spine.

Emilia: "Mhm…that should be fine I think. Subaru, it must've hurt… Hey, why is your face bright red?"

Subaru: "I can't help acting like a young teen, or how should I put it… it was such an unexpected development… uhh, well, I'm okay. Thank you very much. This should be good enough for me."

Emilia: "—? I'm not sure if I understood that, but I should start using my healing magic, right?"

Emilia's face broke out in confusion as Subaru bowed down his head, sticking up his fingers which had been licked. However, she immediately changed her awareness, and began to heal Subaru's fingers with a light blue surge of magic. She completely cured the pain that had been softened by Emilia's tongue.

After that…all that remained for Subaru was how he would clean up his fingers which were drenched in saliva.

Subaru: "I'll wipe them on my clothes… Wait no, that would be gross. Having said that, I'm not advanced enough to lick them so majestically…?! But, if I let this chance escape…"

Emilia: "Ah, sorry. I got them covered in my drool. Yep, all clean now."

Subaru: "Damnit—?! It was a choice with a time restriction—?!"

Not even taking note of the astonished Subaru, Emilia wiped Subaru's fingers with her handkerchief with great delight. And after that, she suddenly looked at Subaru's neck; her eyes blinked rapidly.

Beatrice's scratch marks had been left there without curing them. Emilia had noticed them with her sharp eyes, she gently placed her white fingers on those wounds,

Emilia: "Subaru, that looks painful. What happened here?"

Subaru: "Ah, Aaaah, This? I just got my neck caught on something on the way here…”

Emilia: “Liar.”

She interrupted Subaru’s words as he had been trying to smooth over the situation; Emilia spoke just that one word. She opened her eyes wide open and stroked Subaru’s wounds with her fingers over and over again. And then, she muttered just one thing.

Emilia: “It was Beatrice, wasn’t it?”

Suddenly saying that, Emilia’s voice was frozen of all emotion.

In an instant, a large quantity of pure white strength surged from Emilia’s body. It swept down the mansion’s hallway in one fell swoop and Subaru’s skin was caressed by a great burning cold.

The air froze, the chill caused the air to crackle, and Subaru said in a panic:

Subaru: “Emilia! Emilia, calm down! Everything is okay, everything is okay!”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “Emilia! Look at me!”

Emilia—Ah”

He forcibly stretched his arms out and hugged the girl’s trembling body as he called out to her. He called out Emilia’s name many many times to her ear. He was pressed up right next to her as he shouted with his own reflection visible in her amethyst eyes.

To his voice, Emilia’s eyes shifted out of focus and a small whimper leaked out of her voice.

In an instant, the cold air that was spreading out all around the mansion’s top floor vanished. And even the overwhelming pressure surrounding everything vanished. Things went back to as they were before.

Subaru: “Th-That was dangerous. A little more of that, and Reinhard would have come rushing in…”

Emilia I… I… n-now… eh…?”

Subaru: “It’s okay, it’s okay. Emilia-tan is a good girl, a good girl, everything is okay.”

Rolling his eyes, Subaru sat down to face Emilia who had sat down on the floor. As she clutched her head, unable to digest what had happened, Subaru patted her on the back many times in an attempt to calm her down.

Gradually, Emilia’s breathing regained its composure, and then she looked at Subaru’s face timidly and said: “

Emilia: “S-Sorry? I.. acted weird again…”

Subaru: “It’s alright. Because any troubles hoisted by Emilia-tan aren’t troubles at all. That’s the role I want to take. Don’t worry.”

Emilia: “Y-Yeah.”

Emilia nodded happily at Subaru’s words. Subaru would not let go of her body until her heart truly settled down.

—Emilia’s emotional instability was influenced by the fact that she couldn’t surmount the Trials of the “Sanctuary”.

In the end, he didn’t know what she saw in the First Trial which showed glimpses of one’s past. Nevertheless, whatever memories she saw broke Emilia’s heart into pieces and crushed her strength to stand up strong. And as she couldn’t overcome the trials, Subaru completed them himself.

Therefore, Emilia’s progress was probably still trapped in the graveyard even now.

But, no matter for how long she rejects everything, and no matter how long she mourns, time kept going on. And neither the world, nor her surroundings, nor anyone would let her off with her stagnation. That’s why Subaru continued to take Emilia by the hand, even when she'd halted to a stop.

Emilia: "Sorry, Subaru. I'm still causing Subaru trouble…"

Subaru: "It's okay, it's no problemo, no problem at all. Rather, it makes me feel welcome."

Emilia: "…hehe, aww, Subaru. Mhm, thank you. I'm okay, I've calmed down."

With a brief hug, Emilia lifted her face from Subaru's chest. The girl's warmth left his chest, and Subaru stiffened his lips with a regretful look.

Subaru: "Damnit. I wanted to enjoy Emilia-tan's softness just a little while more."

Emilia: "Huuh, would that be better? If Subaru says so, I will do so."

Subaru: "Nononono, it's fine. You see, this is a trick I use quite often to cope with dissatisfaction. Gorging yourself until full is for cattle. I think rather than a pig in its sty, I'm more like a wolf who is chasing after its prey."

Emilia: "That may be so. I also think Subaru is closer to a dog than a pig."

Subaru: "But, isn't it a whole different story when it comes to dogs and pigs?!"

Subaru calmed down Emilia with this absurd exchange. She now had a smile back on her face. Luckily, it seemed like she had forgotten the anger she had shown just a few moments ago at his wounds.

Echidna: "I can't bear to look at this."

Subaru: "Shut up."

Emilia: "—Huh?"

Subaru: “Ah, I wasn’t saying that to Emilia-tan. Sorry, I was talking to myself.”

Subaru instinctively replied to Echidna’s sudden thought waves, surprising Emilia. Naturally, the thoughts through the crystal stone reached only Subaru. Echidna’s contempt and disdain, who openly expressed her dislike for the state Emilia was in, also only reached Subaru.

Emilia: “W-Would it be better for me to shut up? If that’s what Subaru wants, I will do my best to stay quiet…”

Subaru: “It’s not like that! It’s fine, so let’s talk a lot, okay? It’s okay if you talk.”

Emilia: “…Really?”

Emilia’s amethyst eyes started to swell with tears. And when Subaru nodded, Emilia let out a sigh of relief, once again taking Subaru’s hand.

Emilia: “Well then, tell me Subaru. —What should I do today?”

Subaru: “…”

Emilia: “Yesterday, I finished studying in my room as you told me to do. If it’s something Subaru says, there’s no doubt I will do it. So, can you tell me what should I do today?”

—She does what Subaru says, if it’s Subaru she will make no mistakes, she believed in Subaru.

Subaru struggled to keep his fake smile from disappearing from his face when he heard those words slip out of Emilia’s mouth. The efficacy of his smile which he had practiced in front of the mirror was shown here. Thanks to that, Emilia didn’t harbor any distrust or suspicion; she was just waiting with her eyes shining brightly for Subaru’s response.

Emilia, who had been setback by the Trials of the Graveyard was trying to protect her heart by completely relying on Subaru.

It was quite natural.

By using the power of Return by Death, Subaru had completely eliminated all the obstacles that stood before Emilia. He had understood that Emilia had not contradicted how she had gained his trust—he had gotten this far doing that. Emilia's heart clung to Subaru, and having recognized that she was in such a terribly unstable state he had tried to Return by Death, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't return back to the "Sanctuary".

But still, Subaru didn't think this situation was the worst.

Subaru: "Well then, I'll please ask this of Emilia-tan. Today, just like yesterday, keep up your studies! If I do something important again, I'll let you know beforehand."

Emilia: "Like in Priestella?"

Subaru: "Yeah, like in Priestella. Until then, you need to keep learning. Preparing for an emergency, and boosting your own morale, those are assuredly the most important things Emilia-tan can do now."

Emilia: "Mhm, yup, understood Subaru-sensei. I will do as ordered. So could you—"

Emilia enthusiastically agreed with Subaru, who had put on this dramatic spiel. Emilia had accepted his command with something resembling a salute trailed off her words at the end…

Emilia: "So could you stroke my head, if I do that?"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia said this with embarrassment and a trace of anxiety in her eyes which were peeking at Subaru. Subaru gulped seeing her figure, and just for a moment he stood stock still. If that moment continued for any longer, it'd be easy to imagine the despair creeping into her eyes.

But, luckily Subaru had put on a smile before that could happen.

Subaru: “Of course? But what if I ask for permission to touch Emilia-tan’s silver hair?”

Emilia: “—? If Subaru wants to touch it, he can touch it any time he wants…”

Subaru: “S—i—n—c—e! Since it mustn’t come as a reward. When good things happen, then I can promise to. I will stroke Emilia-tan. Okay?”

Emilia: “Mhm, oookay”

Emilia awkwardly nodded to Subaru’s confirmation as he gave her a thumbs up and smiled showing his brilliant teeth. And then, still holding Subaru’s hand without wanting to let go—

Emilia: “Alright, I’ll go back to my room.”

Subaru: “Aaah, since Petra will bring the food up, let’s eat together.”

Emilia: “Yeah, I’ll be waiting. Well, I’ll see you later!”

Moving her hand away, Emilia went back into her room. —Seeing her silver hair which had now been cut short which moved as one, Subaru resisted the urge to let out a long sigh. When the door shut behind her, Subaru and Emilia’s connection was physically cut away.

Echidna: “Good grief, there are bounds even for ugliness.”

Subaru: “…”

As soon as Emilia’s figure disappeared, Echidna started her abuse. Subaru does not deign to reply to her words smeared in revulsion. He had learnt to never say anything about it from the time he had entered this relationship with Echidna, it was a way to cope with how Echidna treat her.

Don’t talk back, and she won’t talk back to you.

By maintaining that stubborn attitude, the witch would perceive it as a waste to open her mouth and would stay silent.

Only when it came to Emilia could Echidna absolutely not be counted on. And when it came to the relationship between Subaru and Echidna, though it didn't seem as if it had changed from before, it was still different, and right now he didn't have time to fix it.

Echidna: "It would be more convenient for you if she was a doll who would just do what you said, isn't that right?"

Subaru: "—hgh"

His throat clogged up at her cruel observation, Subaru regretted that he had shown a reaction to it. They were words he shouldn't give any reaction to; however, they were words that he wasn't able to deny.

Protecting their lives, protecting the future, protecting hope, and protecting the possibility.

That's why he was sacrificing Emilia's heart of "now." Because Subaru was aware that he would not stop at just Emilia.

9

He declined to join breakfast at the dining hall with the Emilia camp, Petra who had been on meal duty looked disappointed but, she carried the meals up to the room for Emilia and Subaru.

While they eat, Subaru followed up what the mentally unstable Emilia had been doing and when finally dinner came to an end, Emilia obediently headed to her desk as instructed by Subaru.

Emilia: "I need to do what Subaru says to become a good king."

Saying that, Emilia psyched herself up, and Subaru left her room. Having delegated some of Roswaal's Official Work to her, Emilia's knowledge for the Royal Selection was a lot better than the first time he had met her. The fruits of her effort were proven day by day.

However—

Echidna: “For anything that happens, in the end she’ll always come to seek your approval. An awfully interesting way to raise a king.”

Subaru: “Shut up”

Echidna: “You’re harboring unease for it, allowing her to sit on the throne in that state, you know it’ll always be turbulent. However, you have no other choice but to do so.”

Having left Emilia’s room, Echidna’s words dripped poison into Subaru’s ears as he walked down the mansion’s corridors. It was true that Emilia’s soul had become unstable, and the willpower she had at the start of the Royal Selection had been greatly shook. But still, she would definitely sit upon The Kingdom of Lugunica’s throne.

And Natsuki Subaru will make sure he does that.

Repeatedly Returning by Death and removing every hardship that crop up in front of her, he will be able to dismiss any kind of impediments in her way and make it so that Emilia’s ambitions are fulfilled.

And doing so is not just related to Emilia’s desires, but also to saving Rem. Supporting Emilia, saving Rem, keeping the people close to him away from pain. —Wasn’t this exactly the very future Natsuki Subaru wanted when he made the contract with the witch?

—I’m sorry, Natsuki-san. This is farewell.

Subaru …”

Suddenly, a voice rang out, not within his eardrums, but within his mind. Subaru stopped in his tracks. Turning his head back, he saw no one in his surroundings. He thought it may have been the bad tastes of the witch, but that couldn’t have been her thought waves. It was something far different, it was a call from his own memories.

The voice continued to speak.

—I uhm, Natsuki-san. Even though things are like this, I thought of you as my benefactor. I thought of you as a person I owed a great debt to which I wanted to pay as soon as possible.

The voice continued to speak.

—But, I saw your decision and I understand it. You don't want anyone's help, and on the contrary, you're going to try and somehow do everything by yourself, and you can do it.

The voice continued to speak.

—Therefore, this is my way of returning the favor. Since you probably will try to protect everyone who you are close to, I will take my leave.

The voice continued to speak.

—Well then, goodbye, Natsuki-san. Take care of yourself.

The voice continued to speak.

—I thought of you as my friend.

The voice continued to speak.

—You wouldn't have thought that though.

Subaru: "—HK!"

Just as the last of his words resounded in his mind, Subaru punched the wall next to him with all his might. A dull clunking sound resounded throughout the corridor, and Subaru's hand cracked pitifully. As blood spread down his fist, Subaru breathed out a ragged sigh and put his other hand to his head.

Those were the words that Otto Suwen left behind that he would never forget. Subaru made it through the Sanctuary, chased away the Sizeable Hare Witchbeast, took Beatrice out of the burning mansion and overcame all of these events. And then Otto said that to him and left the mansion.

And even if more than a year had passed since then, his back in the moment he left never disappeared from Subaru's mind. It seemed as if he'd condemned Subaru for choosing to save everyone.

Echidna: "But, you didn't stop him. The fact that there were fewer people to protect would have been a blessing for you."

Subaru: "No. Such a motive spurn from just calculation wasn't the reason why I didn't stop him. It was just because I respected the guy's intention. From the start, he was a guy who had no reason to stay here."

He was trying to repay him for purchasing his cargo and saving him from the Witch Cult. But, he had already repaid Subaru by having driven the Dragon Carriage to where Emilia was about to be blown up.

And when it came to the cargo, even when they had exchanged the right amount of money, it hadn't been a loan.

Otto Suwen had no reason to cooperate with the Emilia camp. If he had stayed here without reason, he wouldn't leave the place anymore, and would continue being a merchant only for himself here.

Therefore, he did not stop him when he decided to leave. Besides, even though Otto's "Divine Protection of Soul Language" was useful, it was not indispensable to win the Royal Selection.

In the first place, if he continued to be associated with the Emilia Camp, he'd still be in the danger from both the Witch Cult and the Royal Selection. It was better for Otto to have left here. After that, he didn't ever hear of him again. They had talked to each other only for two weeks, so it wasn't that that big of a deal.

Natsuki Subaru had others he had to protect by throwing away his life.

Subaru: "…"

Stepping on the blood that was dripping down his shoes, Subaru shook his head and started to walk. Recently, a number of thoughts had been perturbing his thoughts. It was frustrating. It was irritating. More than anything, Echidna was taking advantage of it.

There were countless things to think about. He had no time to remain shut within his own mind.

He must choose the best, the very best, the ideal, the optimum choice.

And despite that he—

Subaru: "…"

He came out of the corridor at a brisk pace, and found himself back at his own room. He couldn't let anyone see his face right now. Natsuki Subaru was calm, Natsuki Subaru was rational, Natsuki Subaru was optimistic, there was nothing different about him than usual. As things are, everyone in the mansion must believe these things. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to protect those he wanted to protect—

???: "Oh my, it seems like you came back in a hurry."

He went into the room, and closed the door behind him. Subaru lifted his head up towards the voice that was coming from within the room. Gazing at Subaru, the "Dark-haired Woman" was sitting on his bed smiling sweetly. She gently brushed her hand across her long, braided black hair.

Dark-haired Woman: "I should have been back on time, seeing you here, it seems I'm in quite the pickle."

Subaru: "—Elsa."

Elsa: "Yeah, that's right. The Bowel Hunter, Elsa Granhiert; I immediately came running, as Master ordered. —I wonder, is there trouble?"

Saying that, the beautiful woman clad in a rather revealing black garment that exposed her feminine body alluringly tilted her head towards him—It was Elsa, the alluring assassin whose figure emitted a poisonous aura.

Subaru easily accepted the woman who had entered the room without giving off any sounds or traces; he was not at all surprised.

And that's because it was…

It was natural. She was not an enemy. Even though she wasn't an ally he could relax his guard around, she was still an ally.

In any case—

Subaru: "I helped you out of the burning mansion. I give you work because of that."

Elsa: "I understand. I don't have any issues with you now that you're my employer. I request only that you chose things that don't go as far as being against my hobbies …but for now, I have no complaints."

Pulling out her Kukri Knife holstered at her waist, Elsa burst out laughing, emitting a rather dark radiance. She was currently collaborating to provide information for the camp by working behind the scenes.

Emilia who stood as the head of the camp, an incorruptible symbol.

Reinhard who was the Sword Saint, subject to unwavering public opinion.

And, Natsuki Subaru, who had surmounted and stopped many difficult situations with zero damage.

Unlike those three, who couldn't act freely lest they tarnish their reputation, Elsa had many opportunities to get her dirty hands dirty. Of course, although you could call it dirty work, the work she did wasn't necessarily evil—

Subaru: "So, how did it go?"

Elsa: "I'm sorry to report, but, it seems like Gluttony was nowhere to be seen at the place you sent me to. There was nothing but rabbles of ordinary Witch Cultists there… although, I did set them all free."

Subaru: "Aah. You can do as you like. …But… In the end, it was a dud?"

Subaru frowned, and sighed at Elsa's report who had delivered it whilst licking her red lips. Again, he hadn't been able to reach the limit. Even if he was trying to capture the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, he couldn't reach them no matter how much he tried.

Subaru: "In the end, only "Greed" has been killed."

Elsa: "That, and Wrath was captured. I think that was a success, but I guess it might not be for you."

Subaru: "…Anyway, I understood your report. For now, stay on standby until I need you again. I will get in touch with you from here once more when I want to request something of you again."

Elsa: "Okay. —Well, I suppose I'll have to wait."

Without further replying to Elsa's words, Subaru quickly gave her his instructions. Receiving his instructions, she stood up without any particular care to them, and walked towards the window.

Since Subaru's room was on the third floor of the mansion, she had probably came in through the window. Subaru felt no surprise at her acrobatics—

Subaru: "Ah, wait, Elsa. There's one more thing I want you to tell me."

Elsa: "—? What may that be, I don't really know anything of much importance."

Subaru: "This isn't anything too important. If you came from outside… how was the weather beyond the forest? Was it raining or was it clear?"

Elsa: "The weather? Eeh, there was no particular issue with it. Although there are clouds out, there's no need to worry about it getting worse. Is that all?"

Subaru: "No…"

Cocking his head to the side, Subaru gazed at the Magic Hour Crystal in his room. Right now, it was already the time of fire—It had already gone past 7 O'clock Solartime and was now way past noon.

To make sure of this, Subaru walked towards where Elsa was, her feet placed on the windowsill.

Subaru: "I want to ask you to do something. —Please lop off my head with that knife."

Elsa: "—Your head… I wonder… have you lost it already?"

Subaru: "Are you calling me insane? I'm just asking you to do something that has to be done."

Elsa curiously widened her eyes at Subaru's remarks, and then let out a ferocious presence. But, Subaru's attitude remained unflinching as the sun's rays bathed him. Seeing that, Elsa shrugged her shoulders.

Elsa: "As a rule of thumb, people who have their heads lopped off typically die you know."

Subaru: "I suppose I also apply to that rule. I don't know about you though."

Elsa: "I think I would also die if my head were to come off. …Are you sure about this?"

Subaru: "I should have said this when I helped you. —I will ask for a single unrelated thing, so listen to what I have to say then. Right now's the time."

All of a sudden, Elsa narrowed her eyes at Subaru repeating himself. And then, picking up her arme de guerre, she started to twirl the sharp blade of her Kukri Knife around the palm of her hand,

Elsa: "Any last words?"

Subaru: "Make it painless."

Elsa: "…"

Subaru: “Ah, also, after I die you can do whatever you want with my guts, but don’t lay a finger on anyone in the mansion. Well in any case, that’s why I have Reinhard arou—”

Before he could finish his words, Elsa’s arm cut through the wind. For a moment, Subaru’s field of vision was toppled over. As the view around the room spun around, he saw blood splashing in the familiar room, and

—Aah, cleaning the room is going to be hard on Petra.

As he thought that, Subaru’s life blinked out.

10

—When he woke up from his empty dream, Subaru always experienced a suffocating sensation.

However, his release from there was too early. Perhaps, it was because Natsuki Subaru was reconstructed in a different way when waking from his sleep.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru jerked up violently, placing his hand against his forehead which was drenched in sweat. It was colder than the sweat you get when sleeping, closer to the cold sweat he’d get when losing his life.

In any case, Subaru’s body was on top of the sofa in his own room, and the sunshine was streaming in from the window.

Subaru: “Is it… morning?”

Touching his neck which should have been cut, Subaru rose slowly. Cocking his head, he checked to make sure that his head wasn’t lolling about somewhere on the floor, he checked the time using the Magical Hour Crystal which was above his door.

The crystal was glowing a light green, showing that the time was early morning. Then the question that remained was “Which” morning was it?

Subaru: “…”

To find that out, Subaru touched the pendant he was wearing. The black crystal was fastened by a chain which connected Subaru’s reality with the Dream Castle.

A warm sensation and a pulse streamed through the crystal which he held in the palm of his hand. When Subaru’s pulse coincided with it, and when the white light appeared, it was proof that the world had completely changed.

Subaru: “………”

When he opened his eyes, Subaru once again was standing in the middle of the vast grassy plain. When he turned his head back, the hillock was there. Right besides the flower garden, underneath the parasol, on the other side of the white table, he could see the witch garbed in black clothes facing towards the white table sipping from her cup.

Going up the hill, he headed down towards where the witch was.

Subaru: “Hey, what day…”

Echidna: “…”

Placing his hands on the table, he snarled this at the witch who was gracefully continuing her tea-time. However, she didn’t say anything back, she simply silently pointed at the seat across from her. That chair was empty, and a cup of tea had been prepared for the visitor. That was the minimum condition for participating in her tea party presented to Subaru—

Subaru: “Damn it, I’ll drink it, I’ll drink it!”

Grabbing the cup whilst smacking his lips, Subaru gulped down all of his tea in one swig. And just when he opened his eyes wide open from the warmth of the freshly prepared tea,

Subaru: “Ghhhuaa—?!”

Echidna: “Whoaa—?! Just a second, just a second. You do know that you didn’t really have to do that?”

Subaru: “Shut up! Playing the part of a witch that’s difficult to please, this only happened because you insist on such problematic processes… —Ghha, ghhk gh”

Subaru was choking on his tea which had gone down his windpipe, even Echidna stood up from her seat in a rush. Then she put her hand on Subaru’s back and continued rubbing his back until his cough subsided. Whilst spluttering, Subaru said,

Subaru: “Eh, what about the tea?”

Echidna: “Hh, it’s fine this time. Also, the tea I worked so hard to brew, was puked out by you, I really can’t put anything past you. And the table too, letting it stay dirtied like this is a pity.”

Echidna shook her head at Subaru trying to correct his transgression whilst he wiped his mouth. The witch looked at the table that had been stained by the tea Subaru spat out and lightly clicked her fingers. And then, the table started to come apart as if it was melting, until it vanished into dust.

Echidna: “Come now, you even dirtied the chair a bit. A man who’d dare to make me stand while talking is rare indeed… truly, you’re a sinful man.”

Subaru: “Choking and spitting out the tea is no big deal!— Compared to that, we have more important things to discuss.”

Casting aside his banter with Echidna who teased him, Subaru pointed his finger up. What he had to confirm was just one thing.

Subaru: “What day is it today? It must be.. The 14th of Kisdam, right?”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru: “Echidna?”

Echidna: “I just wanted to make you a bit anxious. If you are too impatient, things will escape from you.”

Subaru: "—Echidna"

He had no time for the witch's games. Echidna responded to Subaru with a shrug of her shoulders and said,

Echidna: "That's correct. Don't worry. Your Death brought you back to the morning of this day. It looks like your latest starting point was affixed to the morning of this day. Were you sure of that?"

Answering Subaru's question, Echidna counterattacked it from her own side. On the other hand, Subaru was relieved that he had confirmed it was the same morning that he had Returned by Death to. And with that peace of mind, he shook his head at Echidna's question.

Subaru: "No, I wasn't particularly sure. At the worst, I thought I'd gone back to the previous save point."

Echidna: "Your previous one was set at two months ago. You did so many good things using your powers."

Subaru: "Maybe. Even Elsa is surprised every time, what an unfathomable feeling."

Nonetheless, even the assassin Elsa questioned the sanity of her employer, when he asked her to kill him. Even so, she immediately put aside her indecision and obeyed; she was an excellent means of using Return by Death in an emergency.

Subaru: "It's just that my Return by Death led back to this morning."

Echidna: "That's right. So it seems… If that's the case, it looks like problems may soon spring forth again."

Closing her eyes, Echidna agreed with the frowning Subaru's remarks. The starting point of his Return by Death, and the shift of his new save point. That was the harbinger of hardships ahead which couldn't be overcome without having Return by Death.

In other words, that meant—

Subaru: “I’ll still have to borrow your strength, right?”

Echidna: “It’s nothing, that’s our contract. Besides, to date, lending you my strength hasn’t done much. —At best, I can try and meddle for you from here with all of my might.”

Subaru: “With all your might… it’d be nice if you could help me with just that”

Echidna: “…A witch wouldn’t fall under someone’s palm. If I simply do as instructed, it’ll set a poor example for the other witches.”

Averting her gaze, Echidna let out her words in with something like embarrassment as she streamed her fingers through her long white hair. Although Subaru didn’t remember perceiving in her figure something like the ringing of her chest, he felt as if he had seen something nice before the eves of battle.

Subaru: “Anyhow, I will count on you, Witch of Greed.”

Echidna: “I am sure you will. I will wait here for you to affront the impending turmoil. If you are able to, being more cooperative in satisfying my endless curiosity would make me happy indeed…”

Subaru: “I refuse to do that. If I went along with satisfying your endless curiosity, it’d be just a matter of time until the human parts of me wither and die. Who would try to satisfy you in trying out infinite choices?”

Echidna: “Truly a pity.”

It seemed that, with Echidna’s light-hearted gesture, the tea break before the upcoming battle had ended. The point of Return by Death had changed unexpectedly, but in a sense, this meant he had gotten a chance to give the first strike.

Subaru: “If I use Return by Death to make the first strike, could I make a surprise attack?”

Musing about this, Subaru went down the hill and moved towards the door that would take him back to reality. Echidna softly raised her voice to him, behind his back.

Echidna: “Come to think of it…”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Echidna: “If you hadn’t grasped that the point of Return by Death changed, why did you expressly use Return by Death?”

Subaru: “Aah, that was because—”

Because—

11

Going through the dream world’s door, Natsuki Subaru consciousness spiraled back towards reality.

Subaru: “…”

Looking up at above the door, the time shown by the Magical Hour Crystal hadn’t changed since before. As always, Subaru headed towards the bathroom. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, took the trouble to put on his fake smile, and finally quickly changed his clothes. And, just as he finished…

???: “… Subaru-sama, are you awake?”

The sound of a knock from outside his room reached him, and Subaru got up from the sofa on-time. Then, putting his hand on the door, he opened the door.

???: “I—”

Subaru: “Hey, good morning, Petra. You look cute this morning too.”

The door opened abruptly and Petra stood on the other side, her eyes wide open. But, after realizing that Subaru was just teasing her, she laughed.

Petra: “Jeez, please don’t surprise me like that.”

Subaru: “I’m sorry I’m sorry. Well, Petra. Aren’t you going to greet

me?”

Petra: “Really, you can’t regret it even a little? Hmph… okay, good morning, Subaru-sama. Today is once again a splendid morning you know.”

Without mentioning Subaru’s frivolous attitude, Petra continued to give him her lovely smile. Her words were exactly the same as the morning before “Returning by Death”. That being so, the next things she would say be exactly the same.

Subaru: “I agree, it’s a splendid morning. Today too, Petra looks cute, I don’t even need to say it.”

Petra: “Subaru’s still saying such things… Ah, but there are clouds hanging over the sky beyond the forest, it seems that the weather may get worse this afternoon. I have plans to go shopping this afternoon, I hope it’ll stay sunnyyyyyy.”

He listened to the girl talk about what she wanted to do, speaking in a manner which befitted her age. Subaru started to laugh. Seeing that, Petra puffed out her cheeks, but Subaru hastily replied with a, I’m sorry, I’m sorry” and continued to speak,

Subaru: “But, rest assured Petra. Today will stay sunny. The clouds give off a false impression and won’t be a problem. I can say that for definite.”

Petra: “Huh? Really? That’s super helpful. …But, how do you know?”

Subaru: “Well, that’s because…”

Petra inclined her head in doubt and widened her eyes at Subaru’s assertion. Giving her a full-toothed smile, Subaru answered the girl’s query.

Subaru: “—Because I just returned for this, putting my life on the line for it.”

A meadow of green, a garden's fragrance drifting through the hillock, a white parasol and white table in fixed position, a black dress as if in mourning, a girl with white hair elegantly tilting her teacup.

As she relished the warm taste of the tea, the witch allowed an insouciant sigh to escape.

Echidna: "Using one's own life, to save them, to protect them, to keep someone from them, contributing it thus. How virtuous, how noble, surely deserving of everyone's exaltation. Furthermore, not just the once, but challenging an endless cycle of hardships, is the impression it can't help but give."

Pressing her hands to her chest, the witch considered the boy with whom she'd had a contract.

Desperately seeking his ideal, pressing onward despite being struck endlessly by reality. Possessing the most wretched power of Return by Death as his own, all in order to love someone.

Echidna: "—However, dedicating life to Return by Death, to protect one's surroundings, is a double-edged sword. Too disdainful of one's own life, too stubborn about the value of other lives. Because the value of one's own life can no longer be seen, the lives of those precious others become too desperately consequential. This time, anything that isn't the lives of those precious others "aside", is unseeable. That is, downright…"

No matter when, no matter where, that singular attitude of clinging to what could absolutely not be scoured, was downright foolish.

Echidna: "—You truly are, someone who can satisfy me."

Cheeks reddened as if a maiden in the throes of infatuation, the witch longed for the absent boy.

Through the crystal gemstone, he crossed the gate, bringing absolutely everything of the world into her palm. And when the afflictions and hardship shattered him, every time, he unconsciously came to rely on the witch.

To keep his spirit afloat, enduring the temptation of a witch, even if he became a marionette.

In order merely to check the weather, adapting a mentality which was unhesitating to use Return by Death, even that had gone unnoticed.

Echidna: “But, I want you to rest assured. The lives of those who you prize, I will also wholeheartedly gamble my very wisdom on protecting them. So, for this you too—”

—To satisfy this inexhaustible curiosity of a witch, I want to continue as your accomplice.

Suffering and unreasonable fate, from now forth would equally descend endlessly upon the boy.

Though the hardships be arduous, though the heights be insurmountable, the boy with the witch’s aid, lending one another strength and wisdom, found themselves able to cross.

Presented by the Witch of Greed was that love of scorching flame.

Echidna: “Ah, even so—”

The boy crossed the grand gate, the boy sprinted to offer protection, the boy’s guardianship bore fruit; feeling many scarred hearts resulting from the boy’s protection, the witch sighed.

A proposition that would remain sempiternally unsolved, and yet an enigma that would eternally enthrall her, even in death.

Ah, even so—

Echidna: “—Why does love, always fade?”

END

Pride IF: Life in Another World Erring From Zero

1

—What pervades his mind is the violent HEAT at his stomach.
“Ghhgg! Hot!”

With his face suffering the hard surface of the floor, Subaru knows that he has fallen prone. But his limbs won’t get him to his feet, and lie motionless.

It’s as if he’s no longer himself, as if his body has been stolen from him.

And still the inferno burns Subaru persistently. So nothing about the situation is fallacious.

—Hot, hot hot hothothothothothot.

He opens his mouth, and instead of a shriek out flows rivulets of blood.

In pain and in anguish, almost drowning in his own blood as he is subjected to the pinnacle of agony.

—What on earth did he do?

He pleads escapist pleas as means to flee from the suffering, the whiny complaint repeating through his head.

What on earth did he do?

He knew that his life was not one meriting unabashed praise. But that statement applied to more than just Subaru. Nobody could live a life so pure that they could brag about it to all of humanity. People felt guilt, people felt remorse, people feigned ignorance, and people made compromises.

So why did he alone have to suffer this?

Why was the fate that all other people could ignore forcing itself onto only him? “Ahh, fuck…”

Spills the whisper from between streams of blood.

It carries his remorse, his loathing for his powerlessness, his hatred for fate—

—and his exasperation with himself. “…”

Even with all this injury, even with all this agony, even with all this deathly suffering. Even if the fire scorches him, even if the pain breaks him, even if it threatens his life.

The girl ingrained in his mind will, smiling, face inexorable repeats of woesome death. So, “I,”

One again, he voices his resolve. Voices his resolution. Voices his rue, and his regret.

While seeking a future that, with innumerable attempts, innumerable scrambles, and innumerable wishes, he will regardless never reach.

The PAIN and the HEAT and totality all grow distant, and like the simpering dog he is, he howls.

“No matter what, I—”

The flourish of a blade looms heartlessly down on his last dying ember of life. But not even that blade enters his view. He has already reached his decision.

—Will save you.

The instant he renewed that wish, Natsuki Subaru lost his life.

2

—Witnessing the familiar scene makes Subaru feel strangely relieved, and exhausted. “You have safely made it back, there is no need to fear, I guess.”

While gazing at the traffic of the Royal Capital, Subaru draws multiple tallies of ‘||||’ in the ground with a stick. He continues doing this until he is satisfied, then erases them with his foot and sighs.

Natsuki Subaru hails from the Third Planet From The Sun What Is Earth, his station being a run-of- the-mill third-year high school truant.

Should anyone observe his casual getup of track suit and sneakers, and the plastic convenience store bag in his hand, surely they would not doubt the fact.

However, that principle only applies to those from regions familiar with such concepts as ‘track suits’ and ‘sneakers’ and ‘convenience stores’.

So, getting to what he was truly trying to say—

“—This whole ‘summoned to a parallel world’ thing’s rougher than I thought it’d be.” A carriage drawn by a horse-sized lizard kicks up dust as it zooms past Subaru.

Such a sight was of course impossible in the world Subaru knew. So you could suggest that it had been a horse dolled up in special cosmetics, like some kind of theme park character. But Subaru would not agree.

Because the lizards amounted to more than one—the city’s streets teemed with them—and the people commanding those lizards also presented a massive demographic of special cosmetics. Anthropomorphic animals—people wearing the trappings of so-called beast-men or demi-humans. Perhaps twenty or thirty of them were present Subaru’s visual field. Naturally, there were also many others around who shared Subaru’s make, but the mayhem inflicted on the ‘individual’ half of ‘individual appearance’ drowned them out and generally blocked them from Subaru’s attention.

But he can't stay here trying to escape from reality forever.

Neither the beast-men nor the lizards are any part of a movie shoot or production. This scene is an ordinary one in this place, and the alien here isn't them, it's Subaru.

—After the ten-or-so days Subaru has spent experiencing this, he understands that fact to a painful extent.

"…Time to go."

Done with his useless contemplations, Subaru pats his rear and stands up.

He keeps the stick in his right hand as he meanders down to the street—not the main street where he'll disappear into the crowd, but into the backstreets.

Unlike the bustling main street, the backstreet is unpopulated as it rests crammed between tall buildings. The place could aptly be called a back alley, simply a single lane isolated from the outside world with its silence.

Put short, something could happen here, and the screams would not reach the main road.

So if a blatant outsider like Subaru wandered into here, villains targeting him would naturally appear.

"Hey, buddy. You come play with us for a second."

Subaru turns toward the voice, to find three silhouettes blocking the alley.

They come in a neat all-purpose set of a big, medium, and little guy, and Subaru can sense their abilities of examination. No idea what they're examining though.

"…"

Subaru tilts his head to look at the path opposite the three. The alley hits a dead end behind Subaru, so the only exit from this backstreet means having the trio let him pass by.

And if we’re asking whether or not the trio have any intention to let Subaru back onto the main street—

“Hell’re you looking so spaced out for?”

“He don’t understand what’s goin’ on. Say we make ‘im find out.”

Subaru’s remiss behaviour prompts the three to smile obscenely, ideas for abusing him clicking into place in their heads. From their perspective, Subaru is an obvious rookie.

You can’t fault someone for licking their lips when faced with such easy pickings.

But they are absolutely and utterly wrong.

True, Subaru lacks any real experience with fighting, and he has no secret history where he learned martial arts. Rookie, was the part of their estimations where they weren’t wrong.

But if we’re talking in terms of fighting these three people specifically, then Subaru is already a veteran.

“—Huh?”

At the inattentive giant—Tom of the Tom Dick and Larry trio—Subaru thrusts out his arm.

In Subaru’s grasp remains the stick he picked up before, and although it lacks any sharp point, it wedges into a soft portion of Tom’s throat and with only minor resistance spears into his neck.

“Wha?”

Tom’s eyes shoot open at the instantaneous affair, while Dick and Larry freeze rigid. Tom can no longer fight. While the others are still petrified, Subaru’s free hand shoots for the medium one—Dick. He grasps him by the hair and the ear, swings him. Subaru allows no resistance. Riding the momentum, he smashes Dick’s head against the wall.

Something solid crunches, cracks, and Dick draws a trail of blood down the wall as he crumples.

Simultaneously, Subaru jabs his knee into the impaled Tom, whose eyes bulge open as he topples over. The direction he falls in is poor. He falls forward, and so the stick plunges into him deeper.

Now two of them can no longer fight. Only one left—"Eep."

The small one, Larry, pales as he watches the instantaneous defeat of his two allies.

If he proceeded to abandon the others and sprint for the streets, it'd turn into a contest of his leg strength against Subaru's and he might have a chance of surviving.

Instead he looks at the fallen duo and hesitates on whether to flee. Unaware that it is already too late for them, he wastes the single second of time he has.

Idiot. Imbecile. He'd get his reward for that moronic decision.
"Ghau, ghhg…"

Subaru closes his hands around Larry's skinny neck, squeezing down as he presses Larry's back against the wall. Larry struggles as he is lifted up against the wall, the force on his neck compounding as Subaru strangles him.

He is raised until he is on even eye level with Subaru. Larry's eyes bulge as he is choked, his mouth flapping open and shut in search of oxygen. But his windpipe has been forcibly blocked, and Larry will not be saved.

"Now do you realise how many times I've met you guys total?"
"Khhg, hgh…"

"Eighty-eight. Good for you how your share's always increasing. You're meant to laugh."

Says Subaru as he glares at Larry's face—growing bloodier, and running with spit and tears. Larry has no leeway to say anything, of course. Actually forget about leeway—having lost any capacity to resist, his body falls limp and Subaru dumps him to the ground.

After looking down at the defeated trio, Subaru starts stomping their necks just in case. Once he feels the crunch of something breaking beneath his sneaker's heel, he can relax.

Tom has such a big neck that it takes five good stomps to do it. Subaru just can't get the trick down for this guy. Though every so often his luck is good and he does get them all in one go.

"Wasn't smart to strangle him Feels gross too, won't do it again."

After having that moment of reflection, Subaru loots two knives from Dick. Then he drags their their corpses to the end of the alley, leaves them there, and exits the backstreets as if nothing happened.

Both entering the alley and encountering Tom Dick and Larry happened rather quickly. Taking care of the trio did take a little time, but still ultimately less than a minute.

Subaru hurriedly travels down the main street in pursuit of his destination. "…"

After observing the street, he puts his hand to his chest in relief. Made it in time.

This is a primary street called the Shopper's Lane, chaotic and bustling with people just as the rest, tasked with the job of demonstrating the Capital's health and prosperity.

You can just stand on this street doing nothing, and it'll be more than enough to earn your ears a flood of cacophonous noise.

But a shift comes to this bustling scene. "—Wait! Ah! Please wait!!"

It is the enchanting voice of a silver bell which shreds through the market's din.

Although teeming with desperation, the voice cannot conceal the kindness of its owner, its addressee being a small silhouette which dashes out of the crowd.

“Hehehee.”

Laughs the blonde girl as she weaves through the mob, grinning like a feline. In her hand she clutches something sparkling, and her demeanour clearly attests that she has completed her job. Aiming at that girl, a shimmering blue light—a spear of ice—soars down the street.

“—!!”

Surprised by the unanticipated attack, the girl hops and bounds to avoid the icicle.

That magic attack had been cast in a street teeming with people. The sudden happening creates chaos as the people of the Capital instantly open a path, raising their arms to show that they do not want to get involved in the fight.

It’s the predominant response. Getting caught up in tussles is an everyday thing in the Capital—would be one hell of a statement, but perhaps it’s not too far from the truth.

Regardless. Sprinting down the path opened by the crowd is the person Subaru has been looking for. “…”

The instant he lays eyes on HER, Subaru feels that the whole world has frozen.

The wind, people’s voices, even time falls out of his perception as absolutely all of his focus is redirected onto her.

Her long, silver hair flutters behind her and her amethyst eyes gleam with strong volition. Her slender, pale arms and legs come donned in white attire so mythical it could have been crafted for a pixie—

In this world stopped of time, she alone is permitted motion, as she utterly passes Subaru by. Her objective is the blonde girl who just ran past, Felt.

Felt has stolen something from her, and now she is sprinting around the Capital in an effort to retrieve it. Which will lead her onto a track of nigh unavoidable doom.

But Subaru will not let that happen.

He will never let a fate of DEATH ensnare her.

“I, no matter what, will save you.”

As he watches her grow distant, Subaru swears his pledge for the eighty-eighth time. Being that he’s broken the pledge so many times, it’s unclear exactly how persuasive it is.

Unclear. But if keeps on without surrender, if keeps fighting, if he keeps wishing to save her—”Be waiting for me. —Satella.”

3

Return by Death. The power to reverse time upon death.

Subaru has used this power to redo the world eighty-eight times now.

He’s already getting close to breaking one hundred attempts, and all of it has been spent on saving the silver-haired girl, Satella, from the dead end of fate.

“I mean I’ve done some trial and error on this one…but it’s not going to work like with Tom Dick and Larry.”

Is Subaru’s conclusion regarding his greatest adversary in this fate: Elsa Granhiert.

The person who commissioned Felt to steal Satella’s insignia is this shadowy woman named Elsa. She is a hazard who has brought Satella to her death countless times.

Subaru has tried inordinate times during these past eighty-seven attempts to remove Elsa and secure Satella’s safety, but he always suffered the loss when confronted with Elsa’s transcendental combat prowess and has died with his belly slashed open over fifty times.

This sadist who enjoys disembowelling people is not someone

Subaru can beat in a fight.

When the opponent is someone like Tom Dick and Larry, Subaru can figure some degree of a pattern in their movements and devise plans for absolute victory. But when they're as strong as Elsa, it's rather reasonable that Subaru's head be lopped off the second he tries to do anything.

And although it's not his head, he truly has been instantaneously disembowelled many times.

Subaru cannot fight her and win. Neither can Felt, or Rom, or Satella. Having reached that conclusion, the strategy that Subaru chooses is—

"Wonderful! Beautiful! Although I'd be happier if you could let me enjoy myself more!" "GhhhaaaaAAH!!"

Every time the blades slice through the air, blood spouts.

Too many fallen bodies litter the streets to count on your fingers as blood-soaked Elsa transcends ecstasy, seeming to be relishing in steady doses of rapture.

Although in such a gruesome situation, Elsa's sensuality only compounds the more blood she bathes in.

There are anecdotes about women who bathed in virgin's blood to maintain their own youth who were called vampires, and Elsa presently does appear exactly like such a VAMPIRE.

"…Another failure, huh."

Sighing, Subaru narrows his eyes as he observes the grisly scene from a rooftop.

He's in a ward of the slums which is particularly run-down and abandoned. The stage for the conflict is a space you could maybe call a square, where the massacre escalates unilaterally. Those trading blades with Elsa, and consistently being felled by her knives, are the Capital's guardsmen.

Information from a virtuous city person led them to detect the dangerous Elsa Granhiert, and following their attempts to arrest her their lives lay scattered and slaughtered—being that he is the virtuous city person, the sight does pain Subaru's heart.

"Didn't think there'd be this big of a power gap between normal guards and Elsa…" This was just presenting Elsa with lambs to gleefully slaughter.

Subaru had expected that, being that they are guardsmen who protect the Capital, they would empower themselves with some kind of magic first and then fight on even par with Elsa. But it looks like his hopes were too high.

So yes. Elsa is overwhelmingly powerful even by the standards of this world.

Subaru's resentment for Elsa compounds. But no matter how furious he is, Subaru will never be strong enough to stop this wicked woman.

He doesn't think for an instant that the guards will get a lucky hit in and defeat her either. "Pointless to just keep watching."

He does feel bad for the sacrificed guards, but Subaru will be ending this experiment here.

He has no intention to hold back, but if Subaru ultimately fails and loses his life, those who died here will resurrect in the reset world.

For now Subaru will swallow his tears and let the sacrifices stay dead. Next time he won't expect the slightest thing from them, so they can go back to preserving the Capital's harmony without worries.

Having reached that conclusion, Subaru moves to start leaving the scene—when. "—Oh my."

Freezing still with her kukri raised high, Elsa licks her bloody lips.

The crazed delight and bloodlust overflowing from her proves best that Elsa, having grown bored of slaughtering the guardsmen, has found new prey. The identity of this hapless victim is—

"—Go no further."

A pillar of fire is standing there, hallucinates Subaru. "…"

Swallowing his breath, straining his eyes, taking a closer look, Subaru finally recognizes that it is not flame but a person standing there.

A young man with fiery red hair and eyes as blue as pristine sky.

He may look lean, but his frame is muscled and limber beneath his white regalia. At his waist sits a sword which is probably larger than what is custom.

One hundred out of one hundred people would turn to glance if he walked by, and his looks are so attractive that this work of god would charm any beholder. Chaos resultant from beauty transcendent of gender—is not what he produces, perhaps because of his calm bearing.

Just one glance is enough for Subaru's soul to inform: this man is different from the usual riffraff. "Sir Reinhard!"

"Everyone, please withdraw. That woman is the GUTHUNTER. The sacrifices already number far too many. I don't want that count to increase."

Says Reinhard, his eyes lowered, in response to the trembling voice of a surviving guardsman.

It sounds like he's pitying lives that were butchered like rats, and like he's indignant at the murderer, Elsa, who did it.

Even Subaru as he watches from afar can perceive the nature of this young man, Reinhard. His reasoning is just, his conceptions are just, his mentality is just, hence he is angry.

Mourned death, detested murder, lamented failure, overwrote his remorse with his conviction. That was this man Reinhard's—this knight's—way of being.

“Reinhard Van Astrea. From the SWORD SAINT bloodline. Wonderful, excellent!” “I often feel crushed by the expectations. And you are the GUTHUNTER?”

“Yes, I certainly am. Oh, goodness. What am I to do? I need to be doing my work, but now I’ve come face to face with you.”

With a fevered, passionate breath, Elsa looks ardently at Reinhard.

But Reinhard’s expression is the definition of serious, his eyes filled with duty, not a speck of frivolity in him.

Both are facing the other with antithetical stances, but their hearts lead them to the same answer. They must slay each other and achieve their goal.

“Fundamentally speaking, this is where I would advise you to surrender, but…”

“You’re faced with this slaughter, and you’re telling me this? Very kind of you. So kind that it’s cruel both to me and to them.”

“—No, I share your opinion. It is impious to their deaths if I am lenient on you. I cannot ask for you to surrender.”

Elsa cheerfully kicks one of the fallen corpses as Reinhard slowly shakes his head. He reaches out to the guardsman at his side and promptly states, “A sword, please.”

“Please do accept it.”

The guard presents a sword, which Reinhard takes. He confirms its feel in his hands while Elsa furrows her brows, looking to have qualms about this.

“You’re not using the sword on your hip? But I wanted to feel the cut of the fabled Dragon Blade.”

“Unfortunately, this sword ascertains which opponents it ought to be drawn for. It is a rather troublesome trait, and it doesn’t seem that you’ve earned its graces. Instead, I will oppose you with this.”

“Hrmpf.”

Elsa sighs at Reinhard, who has readied not the sword at his waist, but the one he accepted. But Elsa’s displeasure only lasts for an instant. She immediately changes gears, and feeling premonitions of battle and bloodshed, licks her lips.

“Elsa Granhiert, Guthunter.”

“Reinhard van Astrea of the Sword Saint bloodline.”

They introduce themselves, both becoming wind as they charge at the other. The fight concludes with this one bout alone.

A completely banal slash births a maelstrom of light, the shockwaves destroying this section of the slums.

The slash from the man called the SWORD SAINT is the exact definition of POWER.

Natsuki Subaru, eyes wide, observed this scene.

With a tear on his cheek, his knees shaking, and utterly ignorant as to why.

4

Things went a different way from what Subaru arranged and expected, but it’s safe to say that the primary goal of defeating Elsa has been accomplished.

He didn’t predict Reinhard’s participation, but being that it granted his wish he’s more than fine with it.

Now the trouble surrounding Satella’s insignia will be safely resolved. And so long as Felt and Rom fail to reconvene with their hirer, Elsa, it shouldn’t be asking the impossible for them to keep Satella’s insignia stored. Subaru doubts that Satella will succumb to rage and kill them.

This story revolving around the Loot House will be completed using the bare minimum of characters.

It's a desirable outcome for Subaru as well. And so—

"—Why could you be helping me?"

"I mean you don't need to trust me. If you're fine with being surrounded by guards and losing all possible chance of revenge, just kill me and run away."

"…"

Spits Subaru as he leans against a wall, speaking to a crouching Elsa.

She is covered in blood, her black outfit torn in places and her white skin exposed. That said, her flesh is coated with horrible wounds which leave Subaru no room to feel the slightest bit bashful. And Subaru has no sexual interest in Elsa anyway.

He just thought she could be useful and wanted to capitalize on the opportunity.

"The guards' eyes're bloodshot looking for you. I misdirected them to be somewhere else, so it'll be a little while before they notice us. Your wounds?"

"Hurt very much. Very, very much, I could die. Huhu, it's wonderful."

"There's a sentiment I don't understand. Gonna be a problem if you die on me, kinda looking to do something here."

Subaru has gone out of his way, risking danger to misdirect them so that Elsa may live.

If he is felled here or gets wrapped up in the guards' search for Elsa, this spontaneous route where Satella survived will turn to dust.

Though, if that happens, it just means more rolls of the dice to get these events to unfold again.

"Can you make a path to the south-eastern section of the slums? I'll be able to reunite with my younger sister if you do. She'll treat my wounds and prepare an escape route."

"Sister! Hah, you have a sister, that's both on point and a complete tragedy."

It's probably not that she trusts him, and if she does trust him that's still disgusting, but either way Elsa's information means Subaru can calculate ways to overcome this predicament.

Their flight has already brought them rather considerably south. It shouldn't take them too long to relocate to this place Elsa's talking about.

Using the holy golden coins in Elsa's possession, Subaru bribes residents of the slums to interfere with the guards' search and lead them on an incorrect course. No problems.

"What I don't understand is your goal in this."

"Just wanted to put you in my debt. It might be helpful to have you around one day." "A debt. How strange. —When you are so eager to kill me."

Is what Subaru has to hear while lending Elsa his shoulder and helping her run away. Elsa's dark eyes look up at Subaru, trying to peer into his emotions.

But she already nailed it and there's no need to peer. The answer Elsa gets from Subaru's dark eyes is exactly what she stated.

Subaru would like to kill Elsa right now if possible. But he will not manage to beat even a dying Elsa if he fails to consider the possible branches, and besides that it's a hasty idea.

Subaru feels that he's been placed on a hideously lopsided side of the board.

It's a battle which presupposes that he consider every method possible, undergo trial and error, and make the optimum moves.

Think of it like shogi, where no amount of randomly moving pieces around will procure you any victory.

If it’s possible, swap out foes and allies. If there’s opportunity, don’t hesitate to alter your circumstances.

For this he must utilize even those he abhors and would rather murder. “I do want to kill you. And I will kill you one day. But not now.”

“I see.”

It’s not even worth hiding. Subaru reveals his true feelings to Elsa.

If Elsa were someone more prudent, she would kill Subaru right here to quell some future anxieties. But Subaru is confident that she will not do that.

It’s a blood-soaked confidence, which Subaru gained through more than eighty deaths to Elsa.

“Wonderful. You and I are bound by loathing. One day, yes. You will prove yourself right. And it’s very, very lovely.”

“…”

Elsa’s blood-soaked lips relax, smiling like a girl with a crush.

With her smile right beside him, from the very depths of his heart, Subaru thinks: repulsive.

5

“Let us meet again, yes?”

“See you, mister. Thanks for helping Elsa.”

The blue-haired girl they meet up with takes charge of Elsa, and Subaru breathes a sigh of relief. This girl waiting in the hovel Elsa mentioned is very young, in her tweens. Though her age shocks Subaru at first, she does tend to Elsa’s wounds in a practised manner, promptly completes arrangements for them to flee the Capital, and speedily vacates the shack.

He just barely manages to secure means to contact Elsa, which serves as his payment. Though it’s not clear whether that payment truly compensates for the danger he risked.

“Guess what happens from this point on depends on how I move.”

Subaru takes off his bloodstained tracksuit jersey, ties it around his waist, and starts walking.

His course leads him away from the slums and towards the Loot House. Elsa had failed to ever reach the place, but had Satella managed to safely reclaim her insignia? The question plagued him.

“…”

After some time, Subaru reaches the Loot House. His eyes go wide at what he sees. “Didn’t expect that.”

What unfolds before him is the sight of a frozen Loot House.

Or rather, ‘sealed inside ice’ is a more accurate description than ‘frozen’. What on earth happened here? Subaru quickly interrogates a nearby resident, and:

“The loot house’s old-guy boss and his granddaughter got nicked by the guards. Something about them making enemies with a scary magician…don’t wanna stick my nose in it.”

“Are the old man and his granddaughter safe? The magician?”

“They’re saying no one’s hurt, but I didn’t get a good look at either of them. Look, enough, okay?”

Perhaps unnerved by Subaru’s eerie intensity, the man pushes Subaru’s arms away and briskly escapes into an alleyway’s darkness.

Subaru ruminates on the man’s words as he watches him go, then puts his hand to chest in relief.

He doesn’t know how accurate the man’s statements were, but at very least his account couldn’t be confused with a hypothetical situation where people died.

That the guards arrested Felt and Rom is inevitable considering what they do for a living. They ought to enjoy prison for a while, and reflect on their occupations.

And now that Subaru knows Satella is safe, as he hoped—”—Alright. What do I do now?”

Subaru scratches his head, aware that he has completely exhausted himself of goals.

He was summoned to a parallel world, given RETURN BY DEATH, utilized it, and saved an adorable kind-hearted silver-haired half-elf.

Though it took him eighty-seven deaths to achieve it.

“Ah, crap. Maybe I better’ve died, reset, and had Elsa tell me why she was trying to steal Satella’s insignia…?”

He really ought to have asked this while transporting the wounded Elsa but lapsed.

However, if Subaru asked questions deeply involved with Elsa’s affairs, and that led her to discover that Subaru was sentimentally on Satella’s side, he’d have no idea how Elsa would react.

In the end, both Subaru and Satella are alive now. We’ll assume it’s the correct solution. “Though really, I’d like to know more about Satella if I could…”

Where did Satella come from? Where was she going? Would he meet her again? He didn’t know. Though, he could always repeat things until he did know.

But assuming there were some other method—”—So, could you guys teach me?”

Standing before the frozen loot house, Subaru shoves his hands in his pockets and turns around. No one feels present. But Subaru’s eyes see the several silhouettes standing there.

All mundane looking people, with a moderate jumbling of ages and sexes, an incoherent group. If there was anything about these people that did cohere, it’d be their eyes.

All their eyes were dead. Good for being steeped with madness and pursuing crazed ecstasy. And Subaru suspected that, if he looked in a mirror, his eyes would be the same.

“…”

His cheeks relax at the sentiment. And he looks to the sky.

An eerily lustrous moon gazes down, at the frozen loot house, and the madmen.

6

It happened almost two months later that Subaru learned more about Satella.

“In the Royal Selection! A silver-haired half-elf! Backed by Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers! Not Satella, Emilia—!”

Swooping at the sudden rush of detailed information after a period of radio silence, Subaru claps his hands, looking overjoyed.

This unexpected procurement of information resulted from an official announcement from the Royal Palace, giving news not only in the Capital but all through the country about the competition for the throne.

When Subaru first saw the bulletins posted around town about it, he mocked them as just being some stupid country election—when his eyes shot open.

The candidates consisted of five women—and one of them was the girl he was seeking.

“Royal Selection, the Royal Selection…if she’s a candidate for ruler it means she has pedigree. Of course she does. Think of how graceful she is when she’s just walking around. Emilia, she’s Emiliaaa…”

Learning her real name makes Subaru’s heart feel light, as if it’s sprouted wings.

He'd figured out ages ago that Satella was an alias. And also figured out why she—Emilia—had introduced herself to Subaru with a fake name.

After all, if a silver-haired half-elf introduced themselves as Satella —

"People'd think she's involved with us guys and stay away from her. It was a desperate measure to keep me from danger. Her face's so adorable, her thoughts are so adorable."

While speaking sadly about being a half-elf, and looking scared of being rejected, she showed consideration for others and utilized her lineage in an attempt to distance them from harm.

What a noble, piteous girl. So emotional it's squeezing his chest. When,

"—Natsuki Subaru! Beloved of disciples! Are YOU PRESENT?!" "…"

A shrill voice like a strangled fowl echoes unpleasantly through the room, calling Subaru's name. Subaru grimaces, puts the bulletin he pinched from the Capital on his bed, reluctantly opens the door, and exits his room.

He leans against the closed door, waiting, when an unhealthily pallid man comes into view down the poorly lit hallway.

"I had been SEEKING YOU! Why, why, why is it that you were here, INDULGING IN SLOTH?! When!

We! Must! Follow the Witch's auspices, and answer to her love with diligenceeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

"Cut it out with the false accusations, Bete-san. I'm just obeying the gospel's instructions. Gospel's telling me to spend my time here."

"What! The gospel so instructed you?! At this juncture, at this opportunity, in these circumstances, what cogitations must the Witch have, to instruct a disciple as devout as you to idle, even that slightest conjecture lies beyond! MY! FACULTIES!”

Not only is his screaming noisy, his movements are obnoxious too.

Indeed a madman, this Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti. It truly does take an effort not to sigh.

He’s an unlikable lunatic, but definitely a conductive character for Subaru.

After all, everyone in the group of Subaru’s affiliation is a selfish portrait of egotism, and it’s questionable whether the normal disciples have any sense of self-consciousness.

Subaru’s arbitrary speculation is that the normal disciples’ dull emotions might be due to something operating on their consciousness, so their affiliations won’t leak while they’re doing everyday things.

But who cares about supposition? The important thing is what Petelgeuse, in a position of authority very different from the normal disciples, is trying to achieve with this visit.

Subaru has been part of this group for two months now, and life’s been generally alright. Though, while the living’s alright, movement- and mental health-wise it’s a nightmare.

Having frequent interactions with madmen and religious crazies is, being that Subaru’s humanity cannot depart the realm of the commonplace, entirely agony.

His dwelling is a cave hidden in the mountains.

It’s a surprisingly liveable spot, and hospitable enough that Subaru can fashion a section as being ‘his room’, but stuff like how it’s far from civilization, and has hard floors and cold walls is something that generation Z Subaru has to endure.

But that said, he isn’t a good enough actor to succeed in hiding his connections to this group. As a compromise, he’s living here, being productive by learning and stockpiling information about this world.

"So, you have some business with my hermit self?"

"Are you NOT AWARE? Of the foolish event being conducted in this country!" "Stuff happening in this country'd be…you mean the Royal Selection?"

"INDEED! The Selection! HOWEVER the problem does not LIE THERE! The Selection itself offers no importance, it is the one participating! That being, the silver-haired half-witch!"

So that he can lecture the ignorant Subaru, Petelgeuse presents the official notice for the Selection—the exact same thing Subaru has decorated the room with—and jabs his finger at it.

Naturally, on that flyer is the face of a girl so cute that Subaru's staring has burned holes into it. Petelgeuse's bony finger, quite expectedly, points at her.

"WITNESS! This visage! This stock! Twin blasphemies against the Witch! This being is not one we may overlook! The time of the TRIAL is UPON US!"

"TRIAL." "EXACTLY!"

Screeching, Petelgeuse slaps the flyer flat against the cave wall before slamming his fist into Emilia's personal description, sending blood flying everywhere.

This self-harming madman, intoxicated on pain and blood, has desecrated Emilia's paper image.

"If it coheres, take her! If not, forsake her! Should she be verified as a suitable vessel for the Witch, we shall accept her into OUR FOLD! The Trial must commence!"

"And you're asking for my help?"

"Yes, CORRECT! I have contacted others, but doubt those nonbelievers will respond! WRATH alone may present possibility, however she is presently distant from this nation…thusly! We alone shall depart!"

With duty in his heart and a torrent of tears streaming down his face, Petelgeuse shoves his bloody fist into his mouth, sucks his wounds. The corners of his mouth tear as his teeth bite down on his hand, wounding his skin and flesh in a gruesome and repellent display.

But Subaru instructs himself to withstand the sight with ironclad will and dons a cool facade. “Mind if I come along, then? I don’t exactly know the details though, Cardinal.”

“So you are kindly accompanying! Aaah! AaAaAa! How so very so very so very so very very veryveryveryveryveryveryveryveryveryveryveryvery…JOYOUS!”

“That’s getting way too enthused when I’m just saying I’m going with.” The wry smile Subaru gives is legitimate.

After nodding so many times his head could practically fall off, Petelgeuse snaps his legs back into proper posture and whips around, his back to Subaru.

“We DEPART IMMEDIATELY! I have already given my fingers instructions along journey here…we will reunify with them, and travel to Mathers’ Domain. Then we shall follow the GOSPEL’S LEAD!”

“Roger And also, what’s the Trial?”

“A SOUND QUESTION. It is a test to ascertain suitability of the Witch’s vessel namely, a trial to determine whether the receptacle possesses the strength, the quality, and moreover the qualifications to host the WITCH’S SOUL!”

Subaru replies to the unhelpful explanation with a knowing nod.

He knows none of the specifics. But compared to his time spent in agony not knowing anything about Satella = Emilia, it’s inestimably preferable.

And it sounds like this means he’ll get to be involved with Emilia again. Though it also involves—

"—Now, now now! Now now now! WE DEPART! WE TEST! Should the vessel be suitable, then upon us now is the WITCH'S ADVENT! A chance after these many centuries that we may fill all of our seats!"

"If the Witch Satella descends here, does the vessel…?"

"MARTYRED! HOWEVER, that is VENERABLE! So venerable that I would take the role were it possible! Were my person capable of befitting Satella's spirit, I would endure all iterations of inestimable suffering for my desire to SEE HER AGAIN!"

"So she gets erased. Does she now."

Mumbles Subaru as he follows behind Petelgeuse, who has begun walking.

It doesn't reach cackling Petelgeuse's ears, secluded in his own world as he is, that faint and quiet murmur—

"Oh, does she now?"

—Neither does the madman notice Natsuki Subaru's dark smile.

7

He thrusts the sword into their skinny body, twists.

The feedback coming from the point of the sword informs him that he has just severed something vital.

And with a thin rasp of breath—

"Don't think you're gonna believe me when I say this, but." "Wh, y…?"

"I thought you were one of the better ones out of a group of unlikable people, Bete-san."

His eyes are wide in shock as they look down despairingly at Subaru's.

Surprise remains with him as he slowly topples backward, Subaru unsheathing the sword from his chest. The momentum makes Subaru stumble backward. He breathes deeply.

At Subaru's feet lies Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti in pool of blood. Petelgeuse, dying, his heart destroyed at Subaru's personal doing.

"It was a real effort setting this whole situation up. For how crazy you act, you're just a little too meticulous. Seriously, I got stuck so many times."

"What, are…YOU…SAYING?"

"I'm talking about all the trial and error it took for me to get here. I mean this goes for planning out my strategy too, but getting my trump card and stuff was seriously dicey. You have no idea how relieved I am."

Petelgeuse crawls, forcing strength into his powerless limbs. But he lacks the strength to get to his feet, merely creeping backwards, as if retreating from death.

Subaru doesn't have to do anything. Petelgeuse doesn't have long to live.

"I couldn't see Unseen Hand at first, was panicked about what the heck was going on. Dealing with your fingers was posing a bunch of trouble too…right now, I really feel like I accomplished something."

"Ghh, auhhh…"

The blood flowing from Petelgeuse is the last dregs of his life.

It shows no signs of stopping as it instead compounds in intensity, Subaru watching him bleed out while he reveals everything, mastermind style.

The black, invisible Unseen Hand.

Petelgeuse's confidants and reserve stock of bodies, the Fingers.

And the ability to migrate to those bodies, his life-extending

Possession.

Making full use of all three, Petelgeuse had been the very picture of his beloved ‘diligence’ as he attempted to corner Emilia. Downing him had truly been a back-breaking effort.

In fact it took Subaru over four hundred runs of trial and error to get here.

“Which makes you the person I’ve spoken to most in the world. I know how crazy lopsided this is, but I feel like you’re kinda a friend. Watching how you do everything you can to reach your goals, playing all the cards you have, I mean I have to say I was touched.”

“What are you saying…what are you saying what are you saying are you saying areyousayingareyousaying!!”

At the very end of the end, livid strength enters his moribund body. Focusing absolutely all of that strength on himself, Petelgeuse uprights his dying form.

He spits blood—literally, as it spills out from his mouth, his bloodshot eyes shooting open as he turns toward Subaru.

“Betrayer! Traitor who spurns the Witch’s love! You cannot be, you cannot be, FORGIVEN!!” Petelgeuse reaches out his blood-soaked hand.

He’s not doing it to activate Unseen Hand. There’s no point to an invisible arm when it’s perceptible. What Petelgeuse is clinging to is —

—The terms for evil spirit, Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti, to hijack another’s body. The process for him to possess the bodies of those with groundings as spiritualists. There is only one person here who meets those qualifications—

“Your body is—!!”

Mine! Is what Petelgeuse intends, but Subaru just sighs.

He leisurely walks over to Petelgeuse and slams a kick into his dying face. The force of the blow dislodges some of Petelgeuse's teeth—stunned, Petelgeuse recoils.

He hadn't been able to transfer to this supposedly-pilferable body.

Subaru's response comes not in words, but upon his raised left hand—where there, upon his fingers, floats a dim, red light.

It's an entity called a minor spirit.

Which has entered a contract with Natsuki Subaru who has groundings as a spiritualist, a cute tool

for lighting dim pathways.

Evil Spirit Petelgeuse can only possess the bodies of spiritualists who lack contracts. Who could guess how many deaths it took Subaru before he figured that one out.

"It's been the longest three days of my life. Though from your perspective we didn't know each other very long at all…"

"NATSUKI SUBARUUUUUU!!"

"You targeted Emilia. —Regret it."

Petelgeuse spits a shriek of enmity, when Subaru kicks him in the chest and swings the sword down on his face. The blade plunges into Petelgeuse's skull, demolishing his brain and his life.

The grating death-wail comes to a pause. Subaru leans his weight onto the sword in Petelgeuse, sighing.

In reality very short, but by Subaru's perception incredibly long, the battle with Petelgeuse is over. Feelings of both accomplishment and despondency flood into him.

"Hmmhmm? Looks like you're already done too." After a period of silence, a voice addresses Subaru.

He turns around, to find a massive silhouette skulking through the shrub and bush—belonging to a black-pelted beast with a lion's head and four horrible limbs, approaching him.

Naturally, the one addressing him is not the beast. It's the girl mounted on its back, giving Subaru a flirty glance.

"Yeah, I'm all done. Thanks, Mei Lee."

"No worries. You're paying us, and you looked after Elsa. But are you sure about this? I thought they were your pals."

"Have to wonder. If he hadn't tried to kill me at the end then maybe you could've called us friends with an age gap, but he tried to kill me so…unfortunately disqualified from friends, I guess?"

While using his sleeve to wipe away blood that rebounded on him, Subaru shrugs at the girl, Mei Lee. She puts her finger to her chin.

"Hrmmm. I'm not trying to kill you, so does that mean we're friends?" "Following the logic, it does. You and me are friends, Mei Lee."

"Ahh, yay! Now when you count Petra-chan and the others too, I have lots of friends!"

Clasping her hands together, Mei Lee happily rocks her shoulders as she sits atop the beast. Her childish attitude makes Subaru raise his brow, and her statement about having friends astonishes him.

"Huh, I'm surprised. It's one hell of a thing to say this, but you actually have friends." "I doo. I killed them all though."

"…"

Says Mei Lee, smiling slightly, and not looking guilty in the least.

Killed them. So they were probably people she was involved with through work. He had been thinking that Mei Lee had some childlike aspects to her, but yeah her morals are twisted.

Well she's Elsa's sister so what do you expect.

“Either way, it was a serious help that you filled in where I couldn’t. If you weren’t here, I never would’ve managed to kill all the fingers by myself.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. But, did you really need to go out of your way hire us? You could’ve asked someone more proper, like the Knights.”

“Wouldn’t be able to realise part of my goal if I did that.” “Goal?”

Mei Lee tilts her head as she attempts to probe Subaru’s thoughts. But Subaru gives no further explanation, just crafts a smile and,

“Rest of this talk’s for the adults. Children such as yourself would not need to hear of it, Mei Lee.”

“Ahh! Geez, you’re treating me like a kid! I don’t care ‘bout you anymore mister, I’m done, I don’t caaaareeee!”

Says Mei Lee angrily, for the beast to growl as if set off by her anger.

She’s siccing her pet on him. After all the effort he went through to finally kill Petelgeuse, he’d really rather not have this attempt end in failure.

Labouring to repair Mei Lee’s mood, Subaru toils his best as her bootlicker.

8

A few days after the Royal Selection began, a rather large change came to the territories of Lugnica.

The biggest change was that the front-running candidate for Ruler, Duchess Crusch Karsten, dropped out of the running—although the only one who understood the whole truth of the situation was Subaru.

Because all traces of this so-called ‘Crusch’ have been erased from the world, eliminated alongside the fact of her having ever existed, revised by the world as having never been there at all.

Which means that the Royal Selection had now always been four people, that the memories of Duchess Karsten's supporters have been twisted, and they became allies of other squads.

"Man, the White Whale's fog's terrifying. Just going off erasing records of people."

It's a mystery why it's ineffective on just Subaru. But, being that Subaru doesn't feel any particular sensation himself, it's just a pain with how weird inconsistencies keep popping up when he's having conversations with people.

He wishes he could just forget about this stupid Crusch Karsten.

Someone who died because they fought an enemy they couldn't hope of rivalling would never get opportunity to come back.

The only person in the world who could get that opportunity is Natsuki Subaru.

And so the defeated do nothing but act as reminders: don't do the idiotic things they did.

But a change other the one irrelevant to everyone except Subaru also occurred. Which is—

"Royal Selection Candidate, Emilia. Who subjugated perennial tormentor of the world, the Witch Cult's Cardinal of Sloth!"

The Kingdom is alive with the news, and apparently even foreign nations know about the achievement.

Even Subaru is surprised at what effective propaganda it is. A victory dovetailing from 400 years of death, claimed by Natsuki Subaru—which he transferred in entirety to the shady clown man supporting Emilia.

The question of how the Margrave would respond to negotiations to give Emilia the achievements was honestly a bet on par with subjugating Petelgeuse, but—

"He was so cool with it it was gross."

Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers received Subaru's proposal, easily consented to it, and immediately announced that the Petelgeuse subjugation was Emilia's achievement.

Although feeling something fishy about him, Subaru has no qualms about Roswaal's actions.

This world disparages Emilia for stupid bullshit reasons. And still Roswaal announced himself as her supporter, became her patron and promoted her participation in the Selection.

Perhaps it was simply whimsy, or more likely he was hoping to benefit should the one-in-a-million chance occur that Emilia takes the throne.

The way he swooped in with spit trailing everywhere in response to Subaru's Petelgeuse report made good proof of that.

"No issues. Do whatever you want, Mister Margrave. So long as you're on Emilia's side, I'll dump myself on your side too. Just as you expect, the Ruler will be Emilia."

Subaru will do everything he can with his death-defying power to achieve that.

But if it happens that Roswaal has some foul desires or unbecoming thoughts about Emilia, then—"All it means is another gravestone erected for Emilia's sake."

If he's going to keep operating in the shadows, unknown to Emilia, then he has no choice but to entrust the more public activities to Roswaal.

In exchange, Subaru will bring every single possible plan into fruition from behind closed doors. And for that purpose—

"Went out of the way to salvage you. Gonna be getting your help, Blue." "…"

In the back of the cave sits a metal-barred prison.

Chained inside that cold space is someone wearing dirty clothes.

Cat ears sprout from the head of this dainty, knight-uniformed girl—ish man, apparently.

While Subaru was running around putting things in order after Petelgeuse's death and the White Whale's rampage, he found these spoils and took the tool home.

But as of present, Subaru has had very few chances to behold the healing talents of the fabled Blue. Hell, he's not even healing his own injuries, just staring at the prison floor and weeping without end.

"…Someone, tell me. Tell me. Why am I…where's His Highness? What was I for? There was somebody. There had to be somebody. Everything's strange if there wasn't. But…"

"Man, I'm stuck. Gonna take some time for this one."

Subaru scratches his head as he withdraws from his chest pocket a note. It is the notice which informed about the start of the Royal Selection, which Subaru has been keeping zealously and unfailingly on his person.

The notice no longer looks like what Subaru's familiar with. There are supposed to be five candidates listed—but now there's four, and the descriptors have diminished.

Change owing to the abolishment of Crusch Karsten's existence had affected the notice.

But Subaru remembers. He may have been utterly ignoring her, but he has reread this thing more than countless times. Crusch Karsten's Knight is named Felix Argyle.

Which should be the same as this healer here, Blue.

"My guess was that when someone's erased by the Whale's fog, your memories compensate by changing in a way that doesn't feel awry, but…just look at this."

"Someone, someone tell me…His Highness, His Highness? His Highness, and, someone else…?"

“When they’re so huge that you can’t compensate for the missing memories, guess this’s what happens to you.”

When the missing person is such a massive part of someone’s character, of course they’ll collapse when that person disappears from the world.

Which is why Blue has wound up mumbling over and over like a broken doll.

Unfortunately, not even Subaru knows how to mend Blue’s broken mind.

Subaru never interacted with the one who safeguarded Blue’s heart. And even supposing that he does go back in time, it’s not certain where he’d return to.

And so Subaru does not know what story had been spun between them.

“But still, I did find a nice pawn here. Everything’s fine. I’ll fill your heart’s fractures in for sure.” “Someone, please…tell me. I, why am I…”

Blue shows absolutely no reaction to Subaru.

It might look hopeless, but Subaru proceeds with no alarm. He’s prepared to take his time.

A Knight healer bereft of his support. You don’t get pawns as easily manipulated as this very often. And so, Subaru earnestly, wholeheartedly,

“This time, I’ll definitely figure out how to keep you from killing yourself.”

I’m ready to die any number of times challenging you, he asserts.

9

All entrances to the mansion are boarded.

The doors are nailed shut from inside, and planks of wood cover all windows. Should he have been attentive enough to find the state of this shut-curtains mansion strange, perhaps he would have noticed it.

Though naturally, Subaru arranged these operations with confidence that he wouldn't.

A raging inferno swallows the whole of the mansion, steadily burning it to cinders.

The flame which started this fire knows no pause, blazing furiouser and furiouser as it consumes the whole of the mansion, screaming frenzied demands that everything return to dust.

The furniture and ornamentations of the inflamed manor aren't the only things getting charred. The many women who have spent a long time in agony in this mansion, too, lose their lives in the embrace of flame and smoke, their forms disintegrating into soot, indistinguishable as having ever been a person.

A gruesome deed. Anyone would think so of this barbarity.

But this was in fact the what the burning women desired! Is what you could claim, but who would believe you?

"Fuck, fuck, fuck this inanity!!"

Tongues of flame compound in intensity, buffeted on further by the wind. Through this blazing mansion echoes the sound of a man cursing.

His voice is so strained it's pathetic as he yells inside this burning, collapsing building.

He screeches in utter frenzy, the situation beyond his belief, unaware of what the hell has happened.

"#99! #114! Even #123 would suffice! Where are you?! Where'd you run off to?! Who do you think I am?! Leaving me behind while you go off and expire, what kind of irresponsible, selfish women are you?!"

His voice breaks as he screams like a child throwing a tantrum, this white-haired young man. White clothes garb his form, his banal face grisly like a demon's as he raves.

He makes for a very strange sight inside this disastrous mansion fire.

A sane person would be doing everything they could to escape the blaze.

But the man shows no indication of doing that at all. In fact it's like he hasn't considered for an instant that he would die, operating off some kind of dogma that transcends mortality.

He's insane, or rather not.

—No, it's incorrect to deny that he's mad, but in truth he is soundly confident.

This fire cannot kill him, he believes.

And so the man's screaming and cursing has absolutely nothing to do with fear for his own life. It's due to the inestimable rage he has towards his wives, who probably committed the arson.

"All of these accursed people, taking my limited assets and disparagin—" "—I'd appreciate it if you could close your unpleasant mouth."

"Nuh"

The frenzied man's face eats a kick from the foot which comes crashing in through a blazing wall. Dizzied by the unforeseen angle of the strike, and moreover by the unforeseen attack, the man flies easily down the hallway. Even burning wall turns brittle, unable to withstand the collision with him as it shatters.

He tumbles to stop spread out on the floor and stares up at the burning ceiling in dumbfounded shock.

"What, is…"

“This fire is the parting letter from your many wives. Spoken plainly, it seems that this is the end to these terror-born fetters of love.”

The voice that replies to the astonished man is the same one he heard when he got kicked.

The man jerks himself upright, crawls through the broken wall—for a woman garbed in black to come entering the burning room.

Her smile is resplendent, and her long black braid is characteristic.

But what speaks most of her identity is, held in her right hand, her kukri—”Burglar! Who do you think I am?! Your tomfoolery is what you’ll…”

Regret, prattles the man as he swings up his arms in an attempt to attack the woman.

But a light impact and the sight of his arms, severed at the elbows and flying through the air, foils him. He looks down. Observes that his arms are missing.

Impossible. What on earth is happening?

“Immortal? Invincible? I forget which it was, but I know the trick to how it works. Now all you are is a very unpleasant insect of a person.”

“—! A strumpet like you—” “…”

Forgetting about his missing arms, the man attempts to swear at the woman. But she doesn’t let him say a word of it.

She swings up her leg, sweeping in between his legs as he sits on the floor and proceeding to kick him in the crotch. The blow is strong enough to shunt him into the air as the woman flourishes her blade of death.

She now severs his arms at the shoulders and butchers round cuts of meat out of his legs from his feet up to his thighs. His toes, his ankles, his shins, knees, thighs, all subject to slashes, blood abounding as the man’s body swiftly turns into something atrocious.

“—My”

“It’s incredible that you’re still trying to speak in that condition.”

The woman plunges her foot into the man’s torso, now a considerable smaller target, which blasts him through the supposedly-boarded window and outside the burning mansion.

Alongside shards of broken window glass does he fall, incapable of catching himself with his missing limbs, to the earth. It’s fortunate that he only fell from the second floor, which lets him escape fatal wounds from the fall.

Though, his lack of limbs and overwhelming blood loss is already plenty fatal.

“As if I could stand this abject idiocy I, I am the most perfected being in the world. Wanting of

little, conscious of adequacy, humble and without avarice, that’s how I live my life and so, why do

I, of all people, have to face heckling from human failures of your “

“When you insult people like that on the regular, of course you’re gonna get hit with the divorce papers, Regulus-san.”

“Hauh?!”

Even turning around on his side is an arduous task for this man, when the sight of someone new cuts into his vision.

A boy with dark hair and dark eyes who dons a dark robe—Natsuki Subaru. It’s pitiful how little the man has grasped the situation. Subaru sighs at him.

“I never wouldda thought everyone’d collaborate so well to pull it off, Regulus-san.” “Why’re, you here no, then, you devised this?”

“Could anyone else?”

The man, Regulus, finally catches up with what's happening as Subaru shrugs, mouth twisted into a grin. Belittled, Regulus's eyes house fury.

"Curse you, bastard scum! Do you comprehend what it is you have done?! Took my wives, my beloved wives! And in my presence, burned them dead along with my mansion! Do you comprehend the immorality and wickedness of your deeds! Wife-murdering prat!"

"Man that angle's so unexpected I'm too stunned to speak. Just saying, your wives offered their own lives for the anti-heart strategy." "—Im, possible."

Subaru picks his ear, looking astonished as he informs Regulus of this. Regulus falls speechless. It's this thing where Regulus finds it so utterly unexpected that Subaru finds incomprehensible.

Regulus kept many women so dubbed 'wives' in his mansion, extolling the greatness of a married life where he threatened to violently murder them if they ever disobeyed him.

If that was all it was, then it'd just look like a horrendously malicious kind of harem, but the Cardinal's repulsiveness doesn't end there. The scoundrel entrusted his own heart to his wives, rendering his own body stopped in time, immortal, and invincible.

The only way to kill the Cardinal of Greed Regulus Corneas is to return his heart to him.

This means killing all of his targets for housing his heart, his wives, and robbing it of anywhere to hide.

Even Subaru agonized over calling the decision.

But it was Regulus's imprisoned wives—no—the imprisoned women who resolved the conflict for him.

"They were content with dying so long as it got them payback on you. Man even I haven't really heard of verbal abuse bad enough to drive people to do that."

"Who would possibly believe that, nonsense…I, I loved my wives!

And so they ought to love me back! Yes?! You don't think it's strange otherwise?! And still! Why have those damn women inflicted such suffering on me, that would indispose them as wives!"

"…You're being serious. That's the terrifying thing about you guys." Mutters Subaru, looking irked as he averts his gaze from Regulus.

What his gaze lands on instead is the black silhouette which leaps from the burning mansion and lands in the garden. Elsa. She brushes the soot off herself before noticing Subaru's look.

"Goodness, you were worried about me? Rest easy. I wasn't injured anywhere at all."

"I'm not worrying about you. Anyway, the heck's up with this. I didn't tell you to do this tasteless crap to him."

Subaru's lips twist into a frown as he points at the limbless Regulus.

Regulus had limbs the last time Subaru happened to see him, so it's definitely Elsa who did this. She shrugs.

"It felt like he'd be obnoxious if he had them…And wouldn't you want to convey what they said?" "…Yeah. You're right."

Surprisingly, looks like Elsa can be considerate to people.

It is wrong to let Regulus die without communicating to him how the sacrificed women resolved themselves as they caught him in this trap.

And now that they've communicated that, "GghaaaaAH!"

Elsa stabs her kukri into Regulus's chest, using it to slowly raise his light body aloft. It's like he's some kind of food on a stick, blood streaming from him as he unremittingly thirsts for life.

"Instantaneous?" "No…"

Subaru puts his hand to his chin as he replies to Elsa's question, in thought.

He might not be Elsa, but Subaru does have a heart which feels sympathy and indignation just as anyone's would. And that heart is demanding that he repay the women who yearned, crying, for death.

And so, Subaru orders Elsa:

"Throw him into a weaker part of the fire. We'll watch him burn."
"Very well, understood."

Elsa nods to Subaru's cruel instructions, not looking conflicted in the least.

She proceeds to throw the cursing Regulus onto a pile of smouldering woodscraps at the edge of the blazing mansion.

"…"

His body burning, to be roasted in flames until death, the man's shriek echo through the night sky. Without their expressions changing in the slightest, Subaru and Elsa watch him die.

"An insect, for how their noise is calming, would be preferable to him."

Once the long, long, death wail comes to its end, Elsa gives her thoughts. And Subaru does agree.

10

—To Subaru, the shattering glass carries the sound of shattering trust.

"This, is…"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't want to do this. I really, really didn't."

His voice trembling in shock, the man presses his elbow to the countertop. But that fails to support him and his upper body slips off the counter, toppling his chair over as he collapses on the shop's floor.

Caught in the fall, the glass and bottle on the countertop drop, shattering against the floor and dirtying the man's white uniform with an alcoholic reek.

His limbs fail to operate properly, his life slowly slips away. His lips fade to purple, his vision grows blurrier as he blinks and blinks and blinks, trying to drive away his impending demise. Subaru watches the man's frantic scramble for life from his seat at the table.

The man's face is a refined one. His body is lithe, and both his bearing when he entered the store and use of speech while addressing his friend abounded in elegance. Indeed the knightliest of knights.

"Can agree with you being called Impeccable, Julius Euclius-san."
"You, cur…"

"But, if you were thinking more about your position, you would've best paid to be a little more mindful of others. You're the Knight of a Royal Selection candidate who's sitting at peak popularity. You gotta factor in that it's not just your master, you're gonna be targeted too. Though…"

Subaru stands up, pontificating at Julius who is panting in agony, and reaches out. His hand's course heads for the person in the chair beside the fallen Julius.

Flax-brown cat ears and loveable features. Subaru gently draws their dainty shoulders closer to him, deigns to pat their head. By that alone, Blue's eyes relax in drunken ecstasy.

"Fhel, is…you…"

"You know it took me some pretty good effort to capitalize on his grieving? Never thought I'd ever wind up putting in so much trouble for anyone's life except hers. Did pay off though."

"What, scheme are you…"

"Has nothing to do with you anymore. Relax. My guess is, if you're gone then your master won't suffer any damages and things'll go good for her. Dunno what'll happen if she rallies herself though."

Julius's yellow eyes race through a chaotic medley of confusion and rage, sorrow and turmoil, grief and suspicion.

But not a single one of those breakneck emotions means anything.

"An old friend calls you to go drinking, and on the first sip you get this. Trust is sure a sweet poison, Mister Impeccable. You drowned in it, and miscalculated."

"…oi, son."

"It sure is nice to be someone anyone can be proud of. Life's so easy it's enviable. You're dead though."

Subaru squats down and peers at Julius's face. He isn't even looking at Subaru. He isn't hung up about the man who ordered his death.

What does rest in his eyes is his concern for his friend, made to commit murder against his will, and his penitence toward his absent master—

"…"

"A knight to the end. Abhor it."

Spits Subaru as he looks down at Julius's dead face, silent forevermore.

The nauseous feeling in his chest is probably coming from the fact that Subaru had absolutely no reason that he needed to kill the Knight Impeccable.

This is about the first time that Subaru has ordered a death without justification.

It did not pain him to have cultists or Cardinals die. But this time the killing purely results from Subaru picking the easier one to torment.

He is less cautious than Anastasia Hoshin, always surrounded by guards, and more importantly the Blue he wheedled into dependency is usable on him.

"Did I do well, Subaru-sama?"

"You did great. Sorry for forcing you into it."

Blue quietly inquires of Subaru, standing at his side as Subaru watches Julius's death through. Subaru shrugs at him and gives him another pat.

If doing this is enough to calm his unstable mind, then he'll pat him however many times.

"It's fine, so long as it helps you, Subaru-sama. After all, doing this was necessary for crafting the future that yourself and His Highness desired, right? Right?"

"Yeah, it is. That's why we couldn't have your friend stay alive." "Yes…"

Blue's face is dull of emotion, but still his friend's death seems to fracture his mind as he clings to Subaru's sleeve, as if filling the void in his heart.

The aroma of death hangs thick in the air. When, "—Oh, are you occupied?"

The entrance to a place nobody should be entering opens, and a delicate-looking man enters the store.

For a moment Subaru does think about silencing the witness, but fortunately, there's no need to silence this man. He's an insider.

"You're sure on time."

"I am. Time is finite, and us merchants believe that time is money."

"Look at you still calling yourself a merchant, audacious. More of a death dealer." "I truly have no reply to that."

It is a thin, grey-haired man who scratches their head in response to Subaru.

With his slick black suit and black tie he could look like someone returning from a funeral, but a closer inspection reveals the unobfuscable scent of death upon him.

His features are gentle, as are his eyes, but the way he casts his gaze around his surroundings reveals clear wariness of others, and signals that he has survived slaughters.

But most of all, Subaru likes his dreary eyes. Those were the eyes of someone who found no benefit in staying alive, had lost sight of all purpose for living, and nevertheless chose to keep being alive as an animate corpse. Eyes of a similar nature to Blue's.

"Your name's…don't think I ever caught it."

"I've never introduced myself, and neither do I intend to. Naturally, I have no inclination to ask for your name either, esteemed client. This way we can both relax."

"Well, you're right. Since it's not like we could ever be friends."

"Exactly. We'd become enemies the instant that something happens. And isn't what we see here the result of calling such people friends?"

Banters the man as he gazes at Julius's prone corpse, and at Blue who latches close to Subaru. Both acquiring the poison and the afterwards clean up are things that Subaru arranged while collaborating with this man. Because currently, Subaru is walking some pretty dangerous tightropes. "Tell Russell thanks for me. Counting on you again for it. I mean you are his right hand."

"That man's right hand is at the end of his arm. What I am is a slave."

He sure thinks in clean rationalizations, thinks Subaru fondly of the man's realistic reply. While also feeling some regret.

If they could be friends, they'd surely be good ones.

Subaru repeats his secret operations to whittle away at the candidates and at the Cardinals getting in his way.

A mysterious group, a hive of dangerous people, and more importantly, not a place where anyone interferes with each other too much.

The Witch Cult has been a very convenient masquerade for Subaru.

A masquerade that he'd eventually have to extinguish, yes, but utilizing them with that precondition in mind means he can throw them away with so little guilt it's refreshing.

He felt not the slightest trace of camaraderie for even the Cardinals.

He constantly watched them for openings, meditated on ways to kill them, tested, and if the plan felt fruitful then he would set up the groundwork. Even if he failed, Subaru had the power to reset the world and try again.

Even Subaru, with his situation, managed to form relations which could perhaps be called accomplices.

Even though he knows that not a single cultist should be trusted, and that he shouldn't be getting more people in on it.

"But haven't we been working together all the way, ever since the start? It makes me happy when you let me help you out with all this fun stuff, mister."

"I don't particularly intend to support you unconditionally, but even now, you're thinking to kill me should you get the chance. For some reason, I truly find it pleasant."

"His Highness's dream will come true if you're here, Subaru-sama. And so I'll always stay with you.

…But, huh? Subaru-sama, when, where did you and His Highness become…"

"Our relationship is surely just requests for dirty work. Accomplices? An asinine idea. The two of us are filial bankrupts who can't show their faces to their family. It'd be nicer to die if I could."

"I've come far enough that one more step, just one more step remains before the wish might be granted. Iiiiiiiiiiif that's what I'm doing it for, then I'll sell my soul to a demon. A demon called you, thaaaaaaaaaat is."

—Subaru does not think his actions praiseworthy in the least.

Regardless, before he could even realise it, there appeared people who are endorsing his deeds. And perhaps that fact was his solace.

Using Return by Death's power, Natsuki Subaru struggles on, wishing to save Emilia. He thought the battle would be a solo one, always fighting only ever on his own.

And perhaps the fact that, at some unknown juncture, it stopped being solo was—

12

Inferno engulfs the Capital. Subaru gasps in pain, staring up at the sky. He feels very awake.

The pain stings, but it leads his mind to sober rather than blur. Everything, from what happened to his reason for being here, is vivid.

In his arms, Subaru cradles a motionless Mei Lee.

Her open eyes are devoid of life, staring at somewhere absent in this world. Her cheeky attitude, her unfittingly sugary voice, her tantrum-like behaviour when treated as a child—nothing Subaru will ever see again.

—After all. This is where Subaru arrived after Returning by Death.

Return by Death's spawn point can change, but Subaru has never gone further back than a previous spawn.

This is where Return by Death's spawn point shifted, and being that the Mei Lee in his arms is a corpse, her life is beyond saving.

Aware that he is only comforting his own heart, Subaru gently shuts Mei Lee's eyes. He has no right to pray for the dead's posthumous happiness. These hands of his are far too filthy with blood.

And it's the same for Mei Lee. She committed so many wrongs that she could not possibly hope for peace after death. Piling sins upon sins, the chains linking Subaru's group to hell will never come undone.

"But, still.."

A meeting with death cannot be reason to give up.

Did he not get here by dying multiple times? Over one thousand, ten thousands times has he already disparaged life and desecrated lives, greedy to grant his own wish, and so got here.

He bordered on breaking beneath the agony of death many times. But every time he did, a fire scorched his heart.

That very first inferno, the touch of those fingers, is what let Subaru reach this point. He is only one step away from realising his deepest desire.

He made victims, sacrifices, to finally get here. And still—

"—Go no further."

The voice descends, vicious, from on high.

'Fire engulfs the Capital' had not been a figurative statement. The visage that appears atop that hill, as if amassing the furious blaze into themselves, looks dazzling.

"Reinhard, van, Astreaaaa "

"It seems that I don't need to introduce myself. I don't have much to say to you, either." Reinhard's blue eyes pierce the kneeling Subaru through.

The gleam in his eyes differs from what Subaru saw long ago, fraught with emotion as they are.

This man, who had remained calm when facing a butcherer, was, at Subaru—

—the emotion so intense as to be nigh indescribable, glaring with hatred. “So you were capable of hating people after all, Sword Saint!”

“It surprises me as well. I didn’t think these feelings were in me.”

“So you found a new you. Congratulations. Happy birthday, Reinhard.”

“Unfortunately, today is not the day of my birth. But it will be the day of your death.”

Subaru can prattle affected lines all he wants. A man of Reinhard’s calibre won’t be put off. Hit with Reinhard’s own breed of death sentence, a smile arises on Subaru’s face.

Destroyed that unflappable face of his and drew out the emotions buried in there. Subaru knows that it’s utterly pointless, but it’s the only thing he can boast victory about.

“Don’t make me laugh, Reinhard! Sword Saint! Sword of the Kingdom! You’re a knight who protects the Kingdom of Lugnica?! Did you protect any kingdom at all?! How about telling me that!”

“…”

Subaru shouts, arms spread wide, spit flying.

The two are facing each other outside the palace gates. Everything of the Capital visible from this vantage point is engulfed in flame—or no, it isn’t just the Capital.

This inferno is raging over the entire territory of the Kingdom of Lugnica.

No matter how strong Reinhard is or how superb a knight he is, what can he do on his own? He can do nothing. So is Subaru's conclusion.

"This is my gift to you! A trap I set to kill you!" "To kill me ?"

"How many times! Do you think I've tried to kill you?! How many times, tens and hundreds and thousands of times, do you think I've faced you?!" "…"

Subaru's incomprehensible yelling leads Reinhard's cheeks to stiffen in confusion. He wouldn't understand. Nobody except Subaru would ever understand.

Subaru has already gone through every conceivable form of trial and error to kill Reinhard.

He studied Reinhard van Astrea, researched him extensively, tested every idea he could think of, fiddled with his plans, used every possible track he could imagine in attempts to kill Reinhard. But no matter what methods Subaru used, Reinhard bested it. As if Natsuki Subaru's hideously weak brain, as if his very presence, could not effect him in the slightest.

Subaru sacrificed Elsa, sacrificed Mei Lee, sacrificed Blue, sacrificed the man who perhaps could've been his friend, sacrificed the clown who proclaimed to be his co-conspirator, sacrificed the Witch Cult, sacrificed the Cardinals, committed every conceivable crime and injustice and iniquity there is, and still couldn't kill Reinhard.

And so. Having no means to sever Reinhard's lifeline, Subaru decided.

"I'm killing who you are as a knight. I'm dropping your ostentatious name of Sword Saint to the earth, stomping my feet all over it, spewing spit and mucus on it!"

"All of this, only for that."

"Only for that! Yeah, I did, only for that! Only for that I used the lives of everyone there was, dropping you to the earth!"

Subaru sets Mei Lee's body on the ground. Jabs his finger at

Reinhard. Reinhard cannot hide that he's shaken. Feels nice.

"You're a hero, Reinhard. It's not possible for me to kill you. But I can kill a hero. —This is how to kill you, Reinhard."

"…"

Subaru boasts, his voice unhinged, at the silenced Reinhard.

Worked his hardest, tried so many plans, sacrificed people, shed blood, accumulated deaths, and finally.

With Mei Lee having protected him and drawn out his survival, finally, Subaru has managed to confront Reinhard like this.

After piling so many sacrifices, finally, he has managed to stand on the same stage as Reinhard. "…Why?"

The hot breeze blows away Subaru's previous momentum. His voice when he speaks is frail.

"Why are you so strong? Why are you so strong, that I had to let them die, to match it?" Trembling voice, laced with sobs. Hearing it makes Reinhard's face stiffen.

He surely has no idea what on earth Subaru is thinking. Of course he doesn't. Subaru doesn't even have any idea any more.

He doesn't know why he's crying. How long has it even been since he last shed tears? Surely. That day, when he was brought to this world, was the last.

The tears from the day that brought Natsuki Subaru to this sight of flames were the last.

"I wish I'd been like you. I wish I'd been honest like you, been strong enough to save everyone like you. I think you're enviable. I think you're contemptible."

"You…"

Flowing out alongside his tears come Natsuki Subaru's true feelings.

Back in that very first loop in the Capital, when Natsuki Subaru witnessed the man who freed him from an endless cycle.

—Back then, Subaru was jealous of Reinhard.

Disembowelled times upon times, suffered death, but still unable to change anything, Subaru's heart grew swiftly ragged, its outer skin peeled away, and then, practically by coincidence, as if kicking a pebble off the road, he altered that fate so easily.

Subaru aspired to have that strength, envied it, begrudged it, loathed it. "—I wanted to be you, Reinhard."

"—I don't understand you."

Reinhard discards Subaru's honesty as worthless codswallop.

And he's correct. Reinhard, you hero, you are just always, always correct.

—Where did the mistake happen? At what point did Natsuki Subaru err?

He doesn't know. Though actually, he does. But nobody would be capable of understanding it. Which is why. Which is exactly why.

Natsuki Subaru has, for a long time now, been an unempathizable madman. "…"

Reinhard narrows his eyes and stoops down. He isn't reaching for a sword. Meaning that not even he thinks a weapon is necessary to defeat Subaru.

He's right, he's absolutely right. One strike from him will leave Subaru's flimsy body disintegrated. So at the very least, and the very absolute least—

"—You don't think it too soon to be giving up?" "You!"

The instant that Reinhard begins his charge, a black silhouette swoops in from aside. Discordant noise peals out as Reinhard meets the silhouette's slash with his hand, held flat and open like a blade.

It’s stupid. How can he meet a knife swung with that much momentum using his hand? The knife shrieks, shattering to bits. It’s stupid. Why is the knife the one breaking?

“You truly are outside the norm, aren’t you.”

Elsa, covered in blood, spins through the air before making touchdown on her hands and fete. Subaru thought she was dead. He thought he had used her as a chess piece to create this situation, believed that her life had burnt to nothing, and had been acting with consideration to that. And yet.

“Apparently I didn’t die. Though in this situation, it feels that I’ve arrived to visit death again.” “Elsa…”

“Then Mei Lee is dead. Her poor sister.”

Noticing Mei Lee resting on the ground, Elsa mutters a shade sadly.

But she switches her gears in the blink of an eye, turning to face Reinhard properly. “It seems you’re my sister’s enemy as well. Shall we dance?”

“You’ve already lost your weapon. And do you understand who exactly you are protecting?”

“Difficult subjects aren’t my favourite. I do the things I want to do. This man behind me lets me do what I want to do. That makes him a prized customer.”

Licking her lips, Elsa gives a reply based in logic that only murderers would understand. Reinhard swallows his breath, and poises to take Elsa as his opponent.

“This will be the last chance for it. I had fun. It was wonderful.” “Elsa! I…!”

“Farewell.”

Ever like her, the goodbye happens smoothly and without any consideration to Subaru’s ideas at all. Immediately following, Elsa leaps with animalistic dexterity in a dance toward Reinhard, the hero and butcher engaging in furious combat.

To be concluded in only a short time, Elsa Granhiert's last blood meal.

"—Fuck!"

Subaru cannot die here.

Averting his gaze from Elsa's battle and Mei Lee's corpse, he breaks into a run down the hill.

The spillovers of battle echo behind him, distant.

Buildings collapse one after another throughout the blazing Capital, shrieks and wails echoing through this hell. Children calling for parents, parents calling for children, men calling for women, women calling for men in the screeching pandemonium of this hell.

Yes. This is the hell that Subaru created.

Created this hell, destroyed Reinhard's false image, and achieved his goal.

All that's left is—"Y-You're "

"—σσσσ"

Subaru stumbles, almost trips and falls—when a massive beast grabs him in its mouth and flings him onto its back. Subaru clings on desperately as its black pelt bursts into his view, alongside the sight of its ferocious lionlike visage as it runs.

"You're…but Meili's already dead."

It is one of the witchbeasts Mei Lee controlled, carrying Subaru in this dash through the burning Capital.

Ferocious Guiltilaw sprints with Natsuki Subaru on his back. He no longer has a master, and has no obligation to obey him—but still Guiltilaw carries Natsuki Subaru, wholeheartedly.

“Please, find her. She has, to be somewhere “

Subaru prays, wishing for Guiltilaw to pull off a miracle.

What to call this feeling in his heart? Relief? Resignation? Constricted by cryptic emotions, Natsuki Subaru’s mind wavers between consciousness and unconsciousness.

But what truly makes him hit is limit is what happens next. “—That’s enough.”

The sharp ice projectile skewers sprinting Guiltilaw in the side.

Guiltilaw shrieks, tripping over his own feet before crashing to the ground. Caught in the beast’s fall, Subaru also bashes against the stone roadway.

“Ghau…what, was “

His vision blurs in pain as he forces his eyes open, looking around to see what happened.

He finds that Guiltilaw has uprighted himself, countless icicles speared into his left side as he faces off against a silhouette engulfed in dim light, just about to begin charging.

Guiltilaw raises his vicious paw, roaring. Perhaps this was his dignity as a witchbeast, or his pride as the last animal which obeyed young Mei Lee to the end.

His strike is more than strong enough to shred a human being to bits should it hit. However, before the blow can land, a single sharp icicle goes plummeting—

—to invade Guiltilaw’s open maw, spearing down his throat before again entering through his chest, piercing out his behind, transforming him into a witchbeast on a stick.

Immediately following the ruinous but nonlethal attack, the air echoes, crackling as white frost spreads across Guiltilaw’s whole body, transforming him into an ice sculpture.

Having watched Guiltilaw's demise, Subaru slowly stands up.

He can't raise his left arm. Maybe he dislocated in the fall. He should be in intense enough pain that he breaks into tears, but his brain isn't feeling it.

After all. If Subaru starts bawling now, here, it will ruin everything.

"—That's enough, villain."

The two face each other, burning city townscape on either side of them, a frozen witchbeast between them.

Amethyst eyes blazing with duty and indignation meet dark eyes fraught with irrepressible joy.

Silver hair of lunar hue, eyes of finest-cut amethyst. Her celestial countenance electrifies Subaru's heart without end, and the silver chime of her voice sounds to him as a pixie's aria.

What he has pursued, sought, craved, never stopped loved, her visage, is here. "—Emilia."

"You know me?"

Emilia's brows shoot up in surprise. Seeing it makes Subaru laugh.

Exactly in line with his envisioning's—no. Exactly in line with his impression of her when they first met and ventured around the Capital together.

She doesn't have a single clue how much national attention is focused on her, being a Royal Selection candidate. It's not that she's lacking in self-awareness, it's that she has low self-esteem.

Despite being known worldwide as the hero who took the Witch Cult's Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, Wrath, and Lust, evils which tormented people for eras, and exterminated them.

And her track record would, on this day, in this instant, reach completion. "Is something funny?"

“No, I’m sorry. Just, how to say, I’m happy. It’s that thing, where you’re, well. You haven’t changed a bit, so it feels like I’ve been rewarded.”

“What do you mean? When did you and I ever…?” Emilia attempts a frantic search of her memories.

But Natsuki Subaru does not exist anywhere in her recollections.

Of course not. Their momentary tryst only remains in Subaru. And that momentary tryst alone, that final pledge of penitence alone, was what brought Natsuki Subaru here.

“You’re…”

“Lia, it’s no good. Don’t take anything he says seriously.” “—Puck, huh.”

Emilia searches for some clue in her memories. But she is interrupted but the grey cat that appears on her shoulder—a spirit, which Subaru remembers well.

His memories from that day are distant. But that’s exactly why he spent even more time endlessly thinking about that day than he did individually recollecting it.

It’s inconceivable that he would forget about someone who occupied a part of that memory.

“How nice of you to call my name so casually. With how flamboyant your crimes are, how are you thinking of paying compensation enough to settle them?”

“I’ll be paying compensation. Exactly what you want. —There’s no way for me to escape anyway.” “—? That’s rather sporting of you. Suspicious.”

Subaru unzips his track suit jersey and spreads his arms wide, displaying non-resistance.

Track suit. Yes, the track suit. He has taken that track suit which, until this very day, he kept sealed and now is wearing it. He had it in his head that if he was going to have a reunion with Emilia, this'd be the best.

All while yearning for the day he would wear this outfit, and stand before her again. "Everything I'm about to tell you is a crazy person rambling. Please don't remember it."

"—Huh?"

"I'm the one who set the Capital on fire. And it's not just the Capital, this fire's meant to burn down the whole country. No one could safeguard against it. That's the nation, and knights who protect this nation, mishandling the situation."

Subaru's choppy speech confuses Emilia greatly. Puck looks lost on whether to stop Subaru's talk, but does abort his attack after seeing Emilia's situation.

Grateful for that, Subaru continues.

"Reinhard's prestige as Sword Saint's fallen to earth. Since we don't know what started the covenant which's meant to be protecting the Dragon's Kingdom of Lugnica, the Dragon's no rescue either. That's something I tested heaps of times so it's definitely right. In the end, Reinhard and the Dragon are equal."

"Burning the country? You're burning the country? To try and destroy this nation?"

"No, wrong. I'm doing this to make you the Ruler. It's the only single way how."

"…"

A smile arises on Subaru's face, while Emilia's eyes shoot open, thoroughly shaken. There is no way that anything Subaru's saying could be making sense to her.

Being that he's prefaced this as being rambling, he doesn't mind if it doesn't communicate properly. It comes to Subaru's deepest wish, should it produce results.

"Flames of demise driving the nation to its destruction—the one to slay the culprit behind it won't be Reinhard, won't be the Dragon, it'll be you. None of the Selection candidates left can achieve anything to top this. The hero who broke through four centuries of standstill and saved the world is you!"

"That, isn't…what on earth are you saying?! Stop it, I don't understand! I don't understand anything you're saying!!"

Emilia clutches her head, blocks her ears, trying to keep Subaru's words out. Tears well in her eyes, and as he sees one trail down her pale cheek, a sweet shock strikes Subaru's chest.

Part of it is guilt for making her cry. Part of it is from seeing that his actions have shaken her heart, and his consequent dark cheer.

"You don't have to understand. It's fine that you don't understand. Everything that comes next'll be settled when others boost you up of their own accord. Then you just have to grant your wish. That is the only reason I set the country on fire. All of it was for you."

"Liar, liar, liar! I mean, I… you, how come, you…"

Emilia wails at the devotion she never anticipated, and at the offerings she never desired. It's inevitable that she's sad. It's inevitable that she can't understand.

Subaru knows that he is erring. Subaru knows that he is incorrect.

Subaru knows that this method will not bring joy to Emilia.

But this was the only method he had.

Grant Emilia's wish, make Emilia Ruler, and demonstrate his feelings for Emilia.

With these things in mind, and knowing from the very beginning that he was wrong, Subaru got here.

And so Natsuki Subaru laughs. Snickers. Smirks. "—Watch me, Emilia. See me, detest me, remember me." "Who, are you? Who in the world, are you…?"

Asks Emilia, her voice trembling, as Subaru slowly approaches her with his arms open wide. Subaru closes his eyes.

It feels like he's been yearning for this forever.

Yearning to answer that question in Emilia's presence, forever—"—My name is Natsuki Subaru."

"Su, baru…"

Just hearing that weak call of his name is enough for a flood of emotion to surge through him. Emotion so great that, by that alone, Subaru is completely satisfied with having come here.

With those feelings in his heart, and praying that he'll finish this sentence without his voice shaking because of them—

"—Witch Cult Cardinal of Sin, Bishop of PRIDE, Natsuki Subaru!"
"Cardinal…!"

Giving the greatest introduction he can, Subaru puts all his strength into his legs and kicks off the ground.

Natsuki Subaru focuses all of his scattered strength into one point in his body for the final sprint of his life.

Sacrificed many people, maltreated those who could perhaps be his accomplices, found solace in those he perhaps had bonds with, and now finally arriving at this darling girl—

"I'm the man who burned the world, rocked the country, killed the hero, and—"

"…"

"—you will kill."

Feeling the impact spear through his chest, Subaru smiles.

He falls to his knees, unable to support himself before collapsing, tumbling down. He never reaches Emilia as his body gracelessly pitches across the stone.

“Why?”

Subaru closes his eyes, ready to accept the end, when something prompts him to raise his eyelids. Emilia is standing right as his side, looking down at him. One of the tears streaming from her eye’s lands on Subaru’s cheek, making him open his eyes.

“Why?”

Repeated, overlapping questions.

What on earth could this ‘why’ signify, wonders Subaru.

Why did you do this?

Why did it have to be like this?

Why did you come here to die to me?

There are definitely many ‘why’s in that question.

And he would like to answer all of them, but Subaru only has the scarcest of time left. So he lets his final breath carry his answer.

“—I love you.”

13

Death draws near. Old, familiar death.

Every time that Subaru meets death, he is taken to a dark, lonely, unknown location. And it truly, truly is a lonely place, somewhere unbearable to be on your own.

Every time that Subaru met death, he was sent out of this place.

Into that world of blood and anguish, tears and woe, and a very slight presence of love.

But it is fine now. He is satisfied.

“…”

Subaru gets the sense that someone in this dark world has whispered something to him.

It is comforting, it is encouraging, it is confirmation, it is confession.

But why? This isn't the lover that Subaru sought.

His lover is somewhere else, somewhere where he isn't, with her dream coming true and efforts being rewarded.

Subaru had sacrificed many people, and in the end himself, for that purpose.

And so, it's fine. He doesn't need to be saved. Solace and a saviour are what he already got, at the very beginning.

"…"

Definitely calling him.

Calling his name with kindness, with mercy, with love.

And so, Subaru separates himself from the spiral of death, while accepting that distant presence. While accepting them, he answers to that □□□□'s words.

"…"

—Even if you reject me, I will never forget you.

END

Wrath IF:
Drowning Life in Another World From Zero

1

—I heard a voice ripe with hatred.

—A sound which would not leave my ears.

—Words imbued with rage followed me.

—It was frightening, so frightening that I could not bear it.

—I was being crushed by the pressure of this noise which did not obscure its murderous intent.

—It gripped onto my soul, and would not let go.

—There was myself, and with the more I clung to my life, the more I would hurt others.

—First and foremost, I was sorry, so sorry, and yet I was still drowning.

2

—A neck, was being strangled by a great force.

Straddling them, a light body was pressing down on someone, disabling all movement.

Shoulders were being held down by both legs and knees, small in size, the body floundering underneath without freedom. Before their eyes, white arms covered in vermilion abrasions were pressing down on their neck. An out-of-place thought flashed, that it appeared like blossoming flowers,

—Chokechoke, chokechoke, such was the great force with which someone's neck was being throttled.

???: "…"

Right in front of their eyes, was a pair of pupils glowing with passion.

Endless fury and hollow despair stretched deep, deep in those large round eyes.

A blank thought that falling into those bottomless eyes, passed through their head.

???: "Ah, kah… Uh."

—Badumbadum, badumbadum, such were the sounds of their legs flailing wildly.

That they were struggling in an effort to escape, was not the case.

Things such as thoughts to escape, had already disappeared long ago. So, the struggle of those legs were not an expression of a will to live, but merely a tantrum born of sheer physical suffering.

The brain was lacking oxygen, the mind had lost its will to live, but the body was still writhing in protest.

Everything was discordant, an unbalanced way of being such as that was unsightly.

Can't I just die quietly? I want to just die quietly.

As peacefully as possible, like I'm simply going to sleep, that'd be the most enjoyable way to die for me.

Alas, such a wish was not to be. Far from being granted, their fate was really to be the complete opposite of that.

???: "Buh, kuh, kuh."

With wide-open eyes bulging from their sockets, biting down hard and foaming at the mouth, with a body grown emancipated after only a few short days, it was in this state that they twisted and groaned like a wounded beast.

A fitting end, or so ought to be said.

A fitting fate, or so ought to be said.

What, why and how was it that they had come to be in this kind of situation?

???: “—What’s so funny?”

Suddenly, a voice was heard.

One unlike these animalistic groans, it was a cold yet clear voice.

The owner of those eyes laden with fury, their lips pressed thin as they squeezed their throat, looked up at the sound of the voice.

???: “…”

Even when asked what was so funny, they were unable to find the answer.

There was nothing funny here, in the first place. There really was not, so why even ask?

The question was confusing. Some rude kind of nonsense, a riddle.

Even if someone forced them to reply, they would not have any answers. Yet despite that, the time waiting in silence still felt like lying on a bed of thorns.

How many times had they been flung around like this, by the force of some divine providence, so absurdly and unreasonably?

???: “—What’s so funny?”

There was nothing funny about it.

???: “Huu, he, hehe.”

Then, was it that the person asking was directing it towards the wrong party?

Or, was it that this person was enjoying this moment without even noticing it?

Were they enjoying the situation of having this woman mount them like she was on horseback strangling away at their neck?

If that was it, then it was detestable; their rational thoughts escaped.

Woman: “—What’s so funny?”

There was nothing amusing here. Even though there was nothing, this question would be projected repeatedly, over and over again.

Not even projecting. She was not that far away. It was not even projecting.

Close enough to feel each other’s breath, gazing up at the beautiful face of the girl opposite him, they were surrounded by her voice. Blanketed in it.

She had, without words, without hurtful abuse, shown clear hate in her voice.

Woman: “What’s so—”

Funny, and then.

The question seeking an answer was expected again, but suddenly faded away like mist.

Woman: “—Guh.”

Tilted, the face of the girl in front of them suddenly tilted to the left.

Like that, her leaning body could not rise back. Her posture collapsed, and that girl’s body crumpled onto the white snow. Of course, as the thin arm formerly wrapped around his neck had also come loose, their path to suffocation had ended halfway through.

???: "—Geh, ah."

Coughing, the bitter taste of blood ascended their neck.

Collapsing lungs inflated before receding again, sending much-needed oxygen through their body in turn. That was also a reflex, from survival instinct. A proper human being would not just refuse to breathe and die.

Questions like whether that would be something a proper person would do or not, were something they did not wish to discuss, at this juncture.

???: "…"

The feelings that had been present within their heart up to this moment, that of resigning oneself to death, now faded away. They had been replaced with a desire to live dubbed oxygen, an obsessive desire that could not be let go. Frantically, earnestly, they greedily coveted more to the point of looking pathetic.

While like that, ceaselessly filling his lungs with cold air on every breath, they had come to realize.

???: "…"

Amidst the accumulating fluffy white snow, before him, lay a girl collapsed on her side.

Through the poor complexion of her face and lips, the woman's unrealistic beauty was raised to even greater heights. With her faint breaths turning to white mist, an omen of her life withering, her violently glistening eyes made for a strong impression.

Looking carefully, it was a sight that did not seem well-fitted for the snow.

Her uniform revealed bare shoulders and thighs; the thickness of its cloth was wholly insufficient for warding off the cold. The neck, the ears, and other areas easily chilled were exposed to the wind, a painful sight to witness.

They were only the clothes she happened to be wearing—although, it wasn't just the woman, but themselves too, that were in the same condition.

???: "…"

—Clackclack, clackclack, such were the sounds of trembling mismatched teeth striking.

Whether it was the cold, or the strong melancholy in their heart that was the culprit, they did not know.

In this situation, rather than worrying about the anomaly of their body, instead they could not take their eyes off the girl in front of him.

Woman: "—Em."

Even fallen over in the snow, with half her face buried in it, she still looked beautiful.

It seemed that unquenchable hate and fury was inflaming that slender body and keeping it alive. Covered in wounds to such an extent, it was a strange situation that the girl yet survived.

???: "…"

Countless corpses were lying around them and the girl, in that pure-white snowscape.

Those beasts that consumed life, indulged in it, and destroyed the soul, before the wind of this girl had all turned to corpses. So, in this place, the survivors amounted to only two. Themselves and the girl, only two.

That, too, in a moment, could immediately become one, become zero.

???: "…"

What is it, so the girl delicately mumbled as they slowly stood beside her.

The fingers on both their hands were numb due to the frost, having taken a dark-red coloration. With body temperature having dropped immensely, there was no feeling remaining in the cold fingers. Weak itching was the only evidence that the fingers were still attached to the their body.

Shaking about those fingers that could not be relied on, they lifted a stone as big as a human cranium.

Without any reason or purpose, it was only a stone that just happened to be there.

The fact that they had raised it secretly brought them much relief.

They compared the stone in their hand with the collapsed girl.

For a moment, that stone held by their fingers seemed to quite resemble the face of the collapsed woman.

They did not know if they were laughing. However, the look that was ultimately seared into their mind, was severe like that of a demon violently projecting onto them murderous intent and hostility, and nothing more.

As to shake that off, in both hands they lifted the rock skyward.

Gazing upwards at that action, the owner of those pink irises spoke with a faint, yet unquestionably clear voice,

Woman: “—I will definitely kill you.”

—The sound of something hitting something hard, in the snow-blanketed forest slowly, slowly echoed.

It echoed.

3

—That day, the mansion of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers’ collapsed with a whimper.

Ironically enough, the first to notice the collapse was the woman who, more than anyone else, had desperately struggled to maintain the mansion. And because of that, her actions had been ruthless.

???: "…"

At its genesis, she had received from the master of the house, from Roswaal, a great benefit.

So, hearing that the maid sisters who had taken care of the mansion no longer held their positions, knowing then that the owner had nobody to take care of him, she immediately rushed to that owner's side.

The change in the appearance of the owner brought a most terrible pain to her chest.

Those two suspiciously glinting, brimming with confidence, differently-colored pupils; the eccentric and frank way of speech; the pale makeup of a clown that could be said to be the epitome of bad taste; the choice of fashion that appeared to be clawing at other people's aesthetic sense; just about every light had disappeared from Roswaal.

After receiving such a reunion with him, the woman—Frederica, clenched her fists tight.

Frederica: "It cannot end like this. For the sake of those girls, I will…"

Earnest in thought, she would guard that place of belonging.

Rather than thinking on whether something could be done, focusing on hope and wanting to do something, for that reason she had started to act.

To uplift the mansion once again she toiled, taking the hand of the girl who was collaborating without even knowing she would drag the master who had sunk into languor, in apathy, busily going around every day.

There was no time to stop and fret for Frederica.

Even though sometimes she would grow disheartened with her state of mind in that difficult situation, she always raised her head with fervor.

Were she to falter at any point, she would not be worthy to gaze upon the faces of those precious to her.

At some point, she had forgotten how to smile. At some point, she had forgotten to welcome night with a relaxed mind.

Even then, Frederica did her utmost to protect that which she loved, to surround the bubbles spreading away on the water's surface with her arms so they would not escape. Even so—

Frederica: "—Ah."

By the time Frederica finally realized, it was already too late for everything in the mansion.

White, the soles of her shoes frozen to the hallway, she lost sight of where her own self was.

The sight of the once-familiar mansion had become distinctly different from what she knew.

The carefully-cleaned corridor; the kitchen where she had cooked; where she had run ragged for those that needed her care; all that Frederica knew on a daily basis had, in front of her eyes, now become a clouded white world.

And as for who had done all this—

Frederica: "Great Spirit-sama…"

???: "Sorry, Frederica. You're not to blame—it's just that, if I'm to protect my most precious thing, then this is the best decision to make."

Saying this, showing its face and floating in the air, was a small cat with gray fur.

Its size only that of a fist, yet a supernatural existence carrying immense power in that small of a body—it was the Great Spirit, Puck.

She did not want to believe. But now there was no reason to doubt.

That was the one who had wrapped the mansion in this white demise, transforming it.

Frederica: “Why, do this…”

Puck: “I said it already, all my actions are for Lia—Lia agreed left the forest because it was what she wanted to do, and also for her safety. Or so I thought. But there’s no worth here anymore. I wonder where it all went wrong.”

Frederica: “…”

Puck: “Roswaal was my miscalculation. That pitiful thing’s just your everyday guy.”

Shaking their head, Puck shot at her with voice devoid of any emotion.

At those words, Frederica’s breath hitched. And soon afterwards, clacking her sharp denture,

Frederica: “—Insulting the master of this house in front of me, a maid, cannot be forgiven.”

Puck: “You, too, are a pitiful child. Only you are desperate to protect this fallen place.”

Frederica: “Please stop talking as if you are referring to the past, it is not over yet.”

She called sharply. Without having a chance, towards the Great Spirit.

Faced with Frederica’s words of defiance, the kitten narrowed their round eyes and gazed with pity on their face. Reacting to that existence’s movement and expression, which to some extent smelled human-like, Frederica leaned forward and lowered her body.

Frederica: “Emilia-sama would be sad.”

That one brief hesitation from the small Great Spirit might give her the win, this was what Frederica was hoping. But—

Puck: “Unfortunately, I’m weak to Lia. I cannot move on from my child, I’m a momma bear.”

Even a moment’s hesitation, some small opening, from that Great Spirit did not appear.

As the world of difference between her and Puck reflected in her eyes, Frederica firmly smashed her molars together.

Whether it was the beginnings of regret or grief, it was too late to be felt.

Just a simple white breeze blew, and with that alone the woman named Frederica was frozen.

That marked the beginning of the collapse of Roswaal’s mansion.

4

By the time the warlock noticed the signs of collapse, it was all already too late.

???: “…”

With ghostly footsteps the warlock in their own mansion walked.

The frozen mass of air underfoot broke with a clatter, and a chill breeze tickled their nape.

His neck drew away from it, and immediately, an odd physiological reaction to that unpleasant cold was felt.

Nowadays, applying makeup to his face and choosing clothing had both been left to Frederica.

That diligent and enthusiastic girl was, no matter how, trying to pay back the grace she had received from this place, but it was too late. His heart that should not have have felt anything ached a little.

—The path to Roswaal's dearest wish had, at some point, been severed.

Roswaal: "Ram, Rem…"

Maybe it had been triggered by the loss of the oni sisters.

The existence of those two was a key part in the path towards Roswaal's utmost wish. With them having vanished, Roswaal had been left alone.

Four-hundred years later, upon realizing the road to his long-held hope had been broken, Roswaal could no longer stand on his own.

Roswaal: "—Ram."

A short, mumbled name, it was the name that conveyed the biggest regret.

—The possibility that it would become like this, he had already considered it previously.

Quite the opposite, the likelihood that it would end badly like this was much higher. It was because of this that Roswaal had taken insurance on his own existence.

When his end finally arrived, he wanted someone there that could receive it happily.

Her, dying before him, had ruined the last remaining cogwheel in his plans.

Roswaal: "…"

So then, it was strange for Roswaal, to find himself wandering through the frozen mansion.

He had lost his reason to stand already, and his reason for walking was already gone from him.

Frederica: “Master, please return yourself to how you were before. So the two of them—”

Many times, Frederica had so appealed to Roswaal.

With Roswaal falling into despair, his spirit weakened, Frederica had taken up the task of patiently and devotedly uplifting her apathetic master.

Henceforth, the power to walk in this now-frozen mansion remained in him.

Henceforth, in the middle of the hallway he was wandering in aimlessly, his sight now turned to the scenery beyond the window.

Henceforth, he saw that frozen world of white, and the form of the blonde-haired girl attempting to resist it.

Roswaal: “…”

He perhaps thought, that to not protect her here would not do.

Or it could simply be acting on reflex, he did not know.

Enough remained of his mind in the body for him to decide on reflex that he must do so.

So now, Roswaal slowly spread his arms wide, readying himself to pour out a vast amount of Mana—

Roswaal: “—Kh!”

At that moment, Roswaal barely avoided the bright flash of a blade targeting his neck.

???: “—Oh my, to be able to dodge this is outside of my expectations. Perhaps the Head Magician of the Court isn’t only skilled in magic, but is someone holding some level of skill in martial arts as well?”

From behind Roswaal’s back called out a light voice.

His zori attaining speed that could scorch the frozen corridor as they glided through it, it was the voice of a young man sporting dark-blue hair.

Blue-Haired Man: “That movement just now, it wasn’t something someone can just do on the fly. I’m honestly impressed.”

That terribly out-of-place person was clad in a blue kimono, wearing zori on his feet, and had two swords strapped to his waist. One of those had been unsheathed, and he was now tapping his shoulder with it.

A face with a neat appearance, donning a well-fitting smile. The bright eyes that gave a striking impression of a young mischievous child, and the long hair tied up both somehow offered him an androgynous look.

But from him emanated an aberrant yet transparent fighting aura—just by being bathed in that ghastly gaze, visions of myriad deaths from a sword surface, so that anyone would be rendered unable to make rational comments.

Blue-Haired Man: “If you’re a person confident in more than just magic, my heart’s relieved of a burden, it really is a great help. After all, something that’s so one-sided doesn’t fit my sense of aesthetics. No, I’d do it if told to do so, but I wanna avoid getting the villain treatment if possible.”

Roswaal: “Like in the rumors, you’re quite talkaaaaaative…”

Blue-Haired Man: “Oh, a rumor about me? It can’t be helped. Am I a celebrity even in such a place? Hehehe, I wish it wasn’t such a strange rumor, though.”

The young man fluently spoke as he scratched his head with a shy smile.

While looking at this scene, Roswaal reignited his sluggish thoughts to stir again, as to solve the situation he had found himself in.

What played a part in that blaze, was the burning sensation at his left arm.

Roswaal: "…"

Blue-Haired Man: "By the way, if you don't do anything about your arm soon, won't you die of blood loss?"

Roswaal: "Your advice, I'm grateful for it."

With that argument made by the young lad, Roswaal loosened his lips lost of the color of blood.

That Roswaal's left arm had been amputated near the shoulder, and what had used to be attached there was almost unrealistically rolling on the floor, like the limb of a doll.

Alongside the first strike to his neck that had been dodged, his arm had been lopped off.

After hearing this advice to act, Roswaal grasped his wound, and an instant burst of fire directly stopped the bleeding. Horrible pangs of pain tore through his brain, but with rigid cheeks he bore it.

At that his extreme emergency treatment, the young man's eyes widened ever so slightly.

Blue-Haired Man: "I'd imagined that mages'd be far more timid. Anya's like that… Oh, by the way, Anya's someone I'm acquainted with."

Roswaal: "I know, Cecilus Segmunt-kun."

Cecilus: "…"

Roswaal: "The most powerful warrior of the Vollachian Empire, top-ranked among the Nine Divine Generals, correct? Being given the rank of First General, the name of the Blue Lightning is famous even in Lugunica."

Cecilus: "Oh, that's the biggest of honors."

At Roswaal's low voice, the young man—Cecilus Segmunt responded with an elegant bow.

There was no reason to hide his identity. There was no reason to hide his name in the first place, so he may as well act coolly dignified and confident.

Watching those mannerly ways with their dramatic productions, Roswaal sighed.

Roswaal: “But that aside, what’s happening now, I wooonder~? Ahh, it couldn’t be, at this time when the new Monarch of the Kingdom of Lugunica is being decided, the Vollachian Empire is moving in violation of the treaty?”

Cecilus: “Oh, that’s a misunderstanding. Right now you could say I am on break from being part of the Nine Divine Generals, or you could say I am unemployed. Anyway, this business has nothing to do with the Empire, now I am professed as the strongest ordinary… vagrant swordsman.”

Roswaal: “…”

Cecilus: “This is no poor joke. My actions, the Empire’s not involved in them at all. Of course, loyalty to His Excellency still lies in my heart… But, I got my reasons for doing what I do.”

With a grand gesture, Cecilus emphasized that he and the Empire were not working together. It was difficult to believe it unconditionally, it was fact the plans of the Empire were incomprehensible.

For this reason, Roswaal narrowed both his dual-colored eyes, and inquired of Cecilus,

Roswaal: “Then it’s even more curious. That you’ve even abandoned your position of General at the Empire, and come here. What exactly is it that can move you to such an extent, I wooonder~?”

Cecilus: “It’s easy to understand—A step in the path towards the Heavenly Sword, was promised.”

Roswaal: “Path towards the Heavenly Sword?”

At that reply, Roswaal frowned his handsome brows.

Cecilus, witnessing that, nodded deeply in reply, and a murmur, “Yes”. The expression was just as if he was smiling, but a crucial difference lay in the emotion of the pupils.

With human emotions like that of joy and pleasure, the Blue Lightning severed human lives.

However, what lurked in the eyes of Vollachia’s strongest at this instance was not joy and pleasure, but a deeper hue, a more fervent hue—

Cecilus: “It’s a most important wish I’ve never spoken of to any living person. Someone guessed it correctly, and went on to say they could assist with it… There wasn’t any choice but to accept that opportunity.”

Roswaal: “How unexpected, you don’t seem to be type to be another’s puppet.”

Cecilus: “Between being controlled by others and merely accepting the stage provided by fate, isn’t there a subjective difference between the two? I accept the role of this world’s star actor, the leading part on its script. Beyond that, it’s part of an actor’s skillset to ad-lib lines and performances, isn’t it so?”

Cecilus shrugged, the emotions in his eyes returning to their previous state, and Roswaal simply nodded.

Indeed, at the strength of his argument, he gave up fighting against it. “Might makes right”, was the philosophy Cecilus had built over many victories.

To forcefully bend that notion was impossible for Roswaal, who had lived four-hundred years for an obsession of his own.

For Roswaal, who preferred stagnation, that philosophy seemed attractive to him, too.

Cecilus: “I don’t hate you, rather, I quite like you. But because this is also my role… Head Magician of the Court of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Roswaal L. Mathers; I will be taking that head of yours.”

Seemingly acting in his own breed of politeness, Cecilus returned the sword he held to its sheath. And with the sound of another blade being drawn, the blade of a beautiful sword was revealed to the world.

The beauty of the sword was truly arcane, a magic sword imbued with uncanny power—

Cecilus: "—Ranked highest among blades, the Dream Sword, Masayume."

Roswaal: "The sword that eats away at the holder's soul with one swing, is it?—Cecilus-kun, may I ask one thing?"

With the overflowing dreadfulness in front of him, Roswaal with a carefree tone raised a finger.

One-armed and bloodied, faced with a swordsman without peer in all epochs amongst the congealed atmosphere; yet in such a situation he raised a query towards Cecilus. The latter again tilted his head, at that out-of-place light-hearted tone.

Cecilus: "What are my weaknesses? My weak points are that I don't listen to people and I don't really have the composure of someone over twenty years of age. Oftentimes, that'd end up in the agenda of the Imperial Parliament."

Roswaal: "Your employer's name is?"

After that question was posed, Cecilus's eyebrows raised slightly.

He lowered the blade while drawing a foot back. Slowly, he leaned his upper body forward,

Cecilus: "Gossip around has them down as a wretch, a fiend, and I've even heard some speaking ill in their back, calling them the Purge King… But to you, because I've been asked to communicate the correct name to you…"

With that as the preface, Cecilus wet his lips with his tongue.

After a dramatic pause, he revealed.

Cecilus: "…"

With that name as an expression of power reaching his ears, Cecilus disappeared, cracking the floor of the mansion.

That he had vanished from the world, it was fast enough to mistake for that.

On that moment, the moniker of Blue Lightning truly befitted the man approaching like a bolt of electricity.

The distance was crossed instantaneously.

However, at that same instant, Roswaal weakly parted his lips, muttering,

Roswaal: "So it was you, after all."

Even before the sound of those words appeared in the world, the Dream Sword drew an arc.

Just before everything went dark, Roswaal's consciousness thought.

About those girls currently at the mansion, and their safety.

About those girls who had been become collateral damage in the path to his dearest wish, and had ultimately been left with no happiness at all.

—He did not possess neither the qualifications nor the time to apologize in those final moments, and so anything and everything vanished.

5

Door Crossing's mechanism was a simple one, which functioned by connecting the entrance to the Forbidden Library to another doorway.

Due to that straightforward effect, the versatility of Door Crossing was quite high, and she was proud of this outstanding magic. But just like any other magic, Door Crossing was not wholly flawless as well.

If its method were revealed that useful nature could turn into weakness. Because of this, the existence of the Forbidden Library and the effect of Door Crossing had to be kept hidden from outsiders.

Indeed, outsiders were not supposed to find out about it.

—Henceforth, such a situation was inevitable, she thought.

Beatrice: “What irony, I suppose.”

At the moment the door to the Forbidden Library’s was touched, Beatrice herself already understood that they would be let inside.

That spacious mansion with its countless doors to choose from existed, and yet, Beatrice had forcibly been guided to a single one.

That method was simple—a situation where the other doors could not open would do the trick.

The method to halt Door Crossing was to remove any choice of doors to connect to.

That task had been carried out with diligence, and so the doors that could be opened in the mansion had now been limited to one. And that who had helped in discovering this method must have been her dear brother, she somewhat understood.

Being put off-balance by this realization was inevitable. Because that was a common law for both their existences—

But even taking that into account, begrudging her dear brother was not fitting for her. Because of this, Beatrice, without holding any sort of resentment for her brother, instead quietly faced the door that had been opened.

???: “—Yo, Beatrice.”

Calling out to Beatrice from the other side of the open door, they waved their hand.

That voice and attitude, she remembered it. Because of this, Beatrice's body shivered with fear.

The face from her memories, and the face now seen in front of her, not every detail seemed to match up.

While it was in concordance with the general parts of her memory, they were already almost like another person.

Beatrice: "You, why are you giving me that look, in fact?"

To that dark, dark gaze ahead of her, Beatrice shook her head.

Far from improving, it had changed in a way that drew even more revulsion.

That rare-to-find black hair and black eyes remained, yet the hair had lost its luster, while in those eyes that had lost their shine darkened emotions were dimly revealed.

Surrounding those eyes reminiscent of gloom were deep dark circles, thin and frail cheeks lay underneath, and what could be seen of the fingers displayed a corpse-like pallor.

With long dark clothes wrapping their body, exposure of the skin minimized—among that united uniform of black, what stuck out was a bright orange scarf. Just that, and that alone, was quite strongly betraying their gloomy impression.

Some years had passed.

But despite that, too much had changed. How could a human become so different?

Beatrice: "You, your mood has seriously changed, I suppose."

Human: "Same goes for you, then. Is your growth spurt over? Normally, you'd become a little more mature after two years have passed."

In a blank voice, to Beatrice's words they replied with a joke.

Two years, was it? If that person said so, then certainly that would be the amount of time that had gone by.

Just two years, from Beatrice's perspective, was like the blink of an eye. To humans, especially to the one standing now in her sight, how meaningful would those years be, she wondered.

—Was that stretch of time so meaningful for that boy, who had been near death, to return for revenge like this?

Human: "Do you remember, Beatrice? We ate together here."

Beatrice: "—That memory does not exist, in fact. Eating together with you never happened, I suppose."

At the words of that human, Beatrice crinkled her brows.

The two were facing each other in the dining room, on the first floor of the mansion. White cloth draped the table, and in the center seat was that person, asking Beatrice a mysterious question.

Human: "…Ah, that's right. You, yeah, you wouldn't know that. Yeah, that's my bad. That just now, it was my bad. It's always my bad."

Beatrice: "What happened… No, it's not something that needs to be heard now at this point, in fact."

For a single moment, in Beatrice's heart hesitation brushed past.

But, that girl in the blink of an eye commanded herself to seal away those unnecessary distractions. And then. Towards that troubling human, she pointed her small palm.

There, with her sense of pride as the Librarian who guarded the Forbidden Library—Or rather, it was her fleeting sense of duty, a desire to martyr herself for her part, a part no one wished upon her.

Beatrice: "You might have a righteous right to wish for revenge, I suppose. Even so, Betty has, for Betty, a role to fulfill, in fact. For that…"

Human: "…"

With strength, Beatrice focused on her own role, glaring at him to suppress any violence from that person.

Seeing this, his expression tensed slightly. Something, perhaps an attempt to endure some difficult feeling could be seen, and at the moment Beatrice set down her foot—

Human: "Come on now, Beatrice—Wasn't there a Contract to protect me?"

—At that moment, in Beatrice was born a lethal hesitation.

Beatrice: "…Ah."

Contract, at that sound Beatrice's whole body was pierced with shock, and she grew stiff.

And that rigidness did not unravel itself, unchanging, regardless of what Beatrice's will was. Something of the mind was not the culprit. Physically, her movement had been blocked. That was—

???: "Forgive me. With this, you won't be able to move."

At Beatrice's side, having risen from the shadows, one person had manifested there.

Wearing a disheveled black kimono and biting on a gold-colored kiseru pipe with the sharp teeth that lined its mouth, there stood a beastman—a tall man, with a wolfen visage.

He gazed downwards at her with slitted eyes, as Beatrice only came up to his waist. Finding no emotion in those small pupils, Beatrice's throat let out a squeak,

Beatrice: "That, is…"

Human: "A mysterious shinobi technique of binding shadows, something of the sort. Think of it as a secret art. No need for concern however, it shouldn't be active for very long… You are my benefactor, after all."

Rigid, her body's freedom taken away from her, Beatrice could do nothing but listen to that voice.

There was no trembling in the words he spoke, no mistakes in the memories he shared. Slowly rising from his seat, and drawing nearer to her side, that person's eyes were dark, but any signs of discomfort could not be found in them.

To get revenge, was that person's reason for finding this place, Beatrice had concluded. But the glint in that human's eyes could not be perceived by Beatrice as one of revenge.

In those black eyes filled with dim light, some feeling that was ripping at his chest could be found.

Human: "Back then, you let me run away, and now I'm still here. That's definitely something I wanted to tell you."

Beatrice: "If this is your method for that… You really are an aggravating man, I suppose… Definitely aggravating."

Human: "I'm sorry about that. But, I figured something out, Beatrice."

Interrupting Beatrice's jagged speech, he slowly shook his head. Those lips, drawn in the shape of a smile, silently looked down at Beatrice.

If she thought about it, had she ever seen this person smile like this? Back then, when she had let him spend many hours in the Forbidden Library.

At that recalling Beatrice, he put out his hand, and said,

Human: "—That you and I, we're of the same kind, that is."

Beatrice: "…"

The corners of his eyes sagged, and only now did his eyes return to how they had been before, to how the eyes of the boy had first been.

The boy had returned to how he had been during those few days at the mansion, before becoming this weird being.

Human: “At that time, I had no other path but to die, but you didn’t give up on me, you saved me. Even now, how many times, how many times do the thoughts of that red-glowing sunset come to my mind.”

Beatrice: “You…”

Human: “I’m still thankful for that, Beatrice… Why didn’t you kill me, back then?”

Beatrice: “—Kh.”

Were those words of gratitude, or of resentment?

Regardless, Beatrice had been blindsided by the words spoken by a face displaying both joy and sorrow.

So this was the work of her influence, the all-consuming despair in his heart, she accepted.

As if naturally, that rigid hold on her body which made her uneasy came undone, and her outstretched arm dropped down. But, in this newfound freedom, her willingness to resist was already gone.

That cause and effect had been flipped around was quite easy to understand.

Human: “Beatrice, I’m thankful for you. I think I probably did like you. Within that time, only you truly drew close to me, those are my thoughts.”

Beatrice: “…That is, the lowest confession.”

Human: “I don’t disagree.”

At his words, Beatrice replied with empty feelings.

And then, in that thinly smiling boy’s black eyes, Beatrice saw the truth—the dark emotions within were so familiar to her, she realized.

It was a most foul lesion that would nestle in the hearts of many beings, eventually eroding all hope.

—A disease called despair, within him, within herself, had been quietly nesting.

Human: “Halibel, a kunai.”

At that request, the beastman standing by Beatrice raised his eyebrows.

Silently, looking on at those two’s exchange of questions and answers, the beastman now shook his kiseru up and down.

Halibel: “…Ya sure?”

Human: “A kunai.”

Having been once again ordered, that beastman swung his left arm high.

Then, a black lump of steel pierced the floor of the dining room with a thud. Crouching down, retrieving it, he left its weight on his palm.

It let off a dull gleam, this dark-colored metal. It had a simple form for cutting down life.

Human: “I’m so happy that you remembered our Contract.”

He did take advantage of it, such a thought occurred to her.

However. That it was truly a fleeting view of a distant joy, he spoke with that kind of voice. To blame him somehow, that feeling did not really appear in her.

Human: “You are so lovely, with those colors that suit you…”

Beatrice: “…”

At that moment, Beatrice’s eyes opened wide, and filled with heavy tears.

In her blurry sight, that person gently overlooking her was there. As she blinked, tears began to flow down her cheeks. Shedding tears like that, to gaze at his appearance to the end, was what she wished.

He had stated that himself and herself were of the same kind.

Then, there was definitely a reason, there was a reason as to why he was here for her.

What she had done at that time, it had greatly affected his life unknowingly.

If that was how it had ended up being, then that was how it was going to return to her.

If he, now, for Beatrice, was doing this, to try and save her—

Beatrice: "Are you…"

Human: "…"

With a numbly stiff tongue, shivering and shaking, Beatrice weaved speech.

Those words that came out like a sigh, when heard by the boy standing right in front of her eyes, caused him to cease moving.

He was giving her the time. For bitter words, or whatever it may be, he would accept everything, that kind of resolve could be seen.

To that determination, Beatrice—

Beatrice: "—Are you, Betty's That Person?"

That question's meaning, he would definitely not understand.

That there would be an answer, Beatrice was not even hoping for that much.

It was just, if it was her end, if it was that which had come looking for her, she must try to hear it still.

Human: “Yeah.”

—So, with that smiling, agreeing appearance, Beatrice’s heart was crushed and broken.

There was dearness in that smile, kindness in those words, and a blessing in that raised blade.

Human: “I’m, That Person.”

Once more, a large teardrop, flowing over that girl’s reddened cheeks, fell.

6

???: “There’s a proverb where I used to live, something like, a drowning man will even clutch at straws.”

Facing down towards the floor’s red carpet, a man was listening to the voice.

That carpet, his face was very close to it.

There was also another thing that was close; the intervals between the man’s breaths. The beat of his heart rang in his ears like bell that had been sped-up, the feeling in his body was that of having just finished sprinting over distant fields.

He looked to be reaching sixty, an old man.

Not just his son, but his grandchildren too had grown up, he showed the marks of having lived a long and fitting life.

His position was such that he’d had to deal with many a people. Having had a long and brilliant career, this man had been entrusted with much by those around him.

That he was out of the ordinary, he did not have any thoughts of bragging like that. But having been born with a wit beyond the norm, he had resolved to live a life of abundance.

And that was why, in his current situation, he could not help but wonder whether he was in a dream or in an illusion. He could not believe it.

—He was down on his knees, in front of an opponent no older than his own grandchildren.

???: “Straw, do you know what’s that? Maybe there’s straw like what I’m thinking of here… Like wheat, something like that. The one in the water’s so desperate, that even knowing how useless it is, they’ll grab at it with all their might.”

Old Man: “…”

???: “To put it plainly, dying humans will desperately try to survive no matter what, that’s the meaning of the proverb. It’s different from using brute force in case of a fire. They’re still thinking of turning their fortunes, but to grasp at straws is just a stupid idea.”

Smoothly, the voice above his head gave his words.

Of what was being said most seemed pointless, but not one word, not one phrase could be missed, for fear of somehow raising his ire. Not when repulsive rumors about what harmful things would happen in such a case were piled up like mountains.

Having emerged just two years ago, that boy had been spoken of in cruel and horrific spreading rumors ever since.

All that opposed him, their families, all those involved would be tracked down by any means necessary to be made an example of. With irresistible force he had kept resolutely expanding that association, Pleiades, as its leader.

With his terrifying success and his unparalleled ability of evaluation, people had bestowed the boy with a title.

—The Purge King.

Purge King: “…”

The old man was kneeling in a place where, this organization’s headquarters lay hidden in the shadow of the Four Great Nations, started for the purpose of controlling the underworld society.

Luxurious paintings, extravagant decorations and items had been gathered in this room, the organization's reception hall, a sight most obscene.

As for the location of the King, serving as its leader, he sat on the throne, at the back of the room—it could rightly be called treasure, on that supreme throne he looked down on his guests.

It was a dazzling and opulent setup, and the money spent on it was enough to make one's head spin. That violent fortune transgressed one's eyeballs, for a in a human lifespan, even multiplied thousandfold, no, two-thousandfold, it could not be reached.

That this was a demonstration of the organization's—no, of the King's power, even idiots could understand with a glance. And even if someone incapable of understanding such were to have arrived at this very room, they would never be seeing the light of day again.

Simple displays of power, mere shows of wealth were not worth anything in comparison.

Lining the walls were dozens of men, all possessing renowned names, all either top mercenaries or soldiers. All of this, had it been possible to utilize money to gain their following, and that had been how it had been carried out, what had been the cost?

Even if they only numbered a few dozen, to maintain this army, massive financial power would be needed.

Moreover, among that crowd where only the best of the best had been gathered, motivated by money, there was the pair at the left and right of the throne, those transcendental existences. For the kneeling old man, they were adequately enough to intoxicate his consciousness.

—Those extraordinary transcendentals were the Admirer, Halibel, and the Blue Lightning, Cecilus Segmunt.

Of the Kararagi City-States, and of the Sacred Vollachian Empire.

Each respectively holding the name of the strongest in their countries, those two were present side-by-side. As for how that young boss' violent hold had gone uncontested since this association's sudden appearance, there was no better evidence than this.

Purge King: “Sigrum-san?”

Sigrum: “…”

At the moment his name was called, his state of mind having gone dim, that man's—Sigrum's heart became frozen.

Looking on, resting his chin on his arm, the Purge King, smile gone from his face, was gazing at Sigrum with dark eyes.

As if his heart was being directly squeezed, Sigrum panted.

He must create an excuse soon, something, so his oxygen-deprived lips shivered. However, at that Sigrum's fragile response, the Purge King's shoulders shrank.

Purge King: “Ahh, for making you bored, I apologize. Having my stories get off-topic's a bad habit of mine since long ago, and if I talk in this roundabout way we might never get to the point.”

Sigrum: “I-I am fine… that, is…”

Purge King: “I'm talking.”

Sigrum: “…”

With a finger of his right hand held to his lips, the King's left hand was pointed at him.

His excuses interrupted by that quiet remark, his back became slick with cold sweat. A silence of several seconds, in which his body felt like it had frozen over, and once a time that felt like eternity had passed,

Purge King: “…Sorry. I didn't mean to threaten you. It's just that, these two people her, and these others present all follow me because I hired them, but that's not your case, is it? So, then, how should I say it… I acted in a manner I'm used to, sorry."

Sigrum: "…"

The speaker's tone was quiet and conveyed respect. That made it feel all the more anomalous.

The Purge King was polite, respectful of his opponents, and yet, just like that without hesitation he would also carry out violence on them.

The King's tone in treating others with words, showed none of his hidden intentions to those who listened. The terrified eyes of the boy were bereft of confidence, yet that narrowed gaze actually pierced through to peer at inner thoughts, the entirety of his nerves observing with strong attention to the other party's moves.

Those darkened black irises asked only one question.

—Are you, my friend, or my enemy, I wonder.

Sigrum: "…"

Of course, that he was not an enemy, he must assert.

However, Sigrum's words had been sealed, having just been vocally forbidden from answering.

Making a sound, or responding with his eyes, showing with his attitude, would it wear that person's patience?

With such a fear capturing the elder's heart, those few seconds of his life felt like an eternity, the longest of his life.

Laughing this off as an exaggeration, not a single person had survived trying that.

The organization's stance was merciless, and its tendrils reached the core of the underworld of the Four Great Nations. They already had become an irremovable sore.

To survive was to avoid being entangled in that diseased portion in the first place, as overcoming that illness after the fact was impossible.

And so, the sole method of surviving. Was to offer complete submission and to ready all answers in advance, it was only that.

An incurable illness he had tried to avoid at all costs. But ultimately, unable to escape it, the old man had come to this place.

With all his replies already prepared beforehand, with determination having chosen to submit, he had come.

However, Sigrum had come to understand here how naïve that idea had been.

As if hands and feet had been tied, and he had been tossed in the water while unable to move, his breathing labored, his lips panting in search of oxygen. On land, in this room, he was drowning in that gaze.

Sigrum: "…"

Not a disease. But a curse.

The Purge King, he was ruled over by an indelible curse.

Morbid fear clouded his eyes, and unending doubt gnawed away at his heart.

He was afraid of humans. His opponent was fearing, was doubting, was hating.

He himself possessed the strongest fear buried within him, and with this same curse he was eating away at others, all others that came across it were infected with the same.

Like drowning, the King had said first. It was just as he had said.

Now, if it seemed like a chance, Sigrum would try to grab at straws or at anything.

Purge King: “So, hmm… So, the straw story. A story of desperately trying to survive… Hm, it’s understandable. Sigrum-san came to our place to talk to us, to try and make sense of this idea.”

Sigrum: “…”

Purge King: “I’m fond of reasonable people. People who’re willing to talk are much more trustworthy than those who just punch you in the face out of nowhere. I don’t know what sort of nefarious rumors you’ve heard of us, but I want to request you to not judge us according to those… I prefer to avoid making waves if possible.”

While speaking those words, the Purge King spread his left hand in the other’s direction. And that offering gesture of the hand was like he was yielding the turn to speak.

Sigrum: “Ah.”

At that moment, as if the stiffness had come unraveled, a breath leaked out from Sigrum’s lips.

For a single moment, he was seized by the fear of annoying the King’s senses, but the young man in front of his eyes did not react. That domineering, patient silence, seemed to be leading Sigrum onwards.

Purge King: “Sigrum-san?”

Sigrum: “No..thing… My apologies. In what regards my side, it is as stated in the offer sent by letter. I wish for good relations with all members of your organization, from now on and for a long time.”

With words chosen carefully, taking care to avoid showing excess humility, Sigrum expressed his position on the matter.

Hearing that, the Purge King narrowed his eyes, but after mulling it over for a while he smiled.

Purge King: “…”

Seeing that sudden smiling expression match the age of its owner, Sigrum was surprised.

Having surprised Sigrum, the King proffered a deep nod, and,

Purge King: “Let’s have a nice partnership, Sigrum-san. The details will be discussed with the person in charge later on… This was the best and wisest choice for you.”

Sigrum: “Ah…”

Purge King: “Please continue to treat our association favorably from here after.”

His hand raised, while smiling the Purge King concluded the meeting.

At those words, Sigrum slowly lifted his body. His body had grown stiff from kneeling, and so his posture briefly faltered, but enduring it with difficulty he then let out a long breath.

Sigrum: “Thank you very much. From now on, this side will display favor towards you.”

Purge King: “Hmm.”

Somehow concealing the numbness of his tongue, his final words concluded the talk.

And so, with his task being fulfilled, Sigrum bowed to the assenting Purge King, and turned back.

Sigrum: “…”

In his heart that was bouncing and shifting, a strong sense of relief and achievement was blowing like a storm.

His body that had felt heavily weighted down up until a few seconds ago, suddenly felt like it was floating. And with naturally lightened footsteps, the faces of his family members waiting for him to return home rose in his head one-by-one.

Having braved this violent wave, somehow his wish had been granted.

Sigrum: “—?”

It was at that time.

From behind him, a very faint sound was heard.

A sound familiar to the ear, the sound of a coin.

It was very similar to a single coin slipping from the hand, and hitting the floor.

Purge King: “Tails.”

One short word, a voice was heard saying.

What that was, Sigrum’s mind wondered, and faster than he could understand—

Sigrum: “…”

The elder’s view tilted, becoming even with the floor.

Even more so than when he was kneeling, the carpet had suddenly grown closer—And that was the last he felt.

7

Halibel: “…”

Towards the fall of the man’s decapitated body, Halibel was gazing with narrowed eyes.

Brilliant handiwork.

The limbs of the old man’s corpse had not jerked, and the head, now fallen on the carpet, was still unaware of its demise. The corpse was like a corpse that had lost only its life and nothing more, and it was because of this that it could be called an artfully-created corpse.

But a corpse was naught but a corpse, and to judge it as splendid was not a hobby he indulged in himself.

Purge King: “Oh, ueh… Kh.”

Watching the sight of the bleeding corpse, the boy on the throne held his mouth firmly closed.

He had seen the moment of a person turning into a cadaver many times already, but as his temperament was sensitive, he showed no sign of getting used to it.

???: “Acting like that towards the dead, isn’t it insulting after giving these orders? I wouldn’t ask for you to become used to corpses, but maybe you should at least to aspire to avoid creating them, how about that?”

Purge King: “I’m not killing for enjoyment as well… I’m not. I’m unable to look straight at such a scene, but I’m present anyway. It’s the least I can do…”

???: “That’s being deceitful.”

His employer holding a handkerchief in front of his mouth, fighting off nausea, his colleague’s words held no absolution towards him.

Of course, there at the right side—was Cecilus. That his employer did not show fury at this was evidence he knew his actions had the marks of deception.

While looking at the young boy whose face had grown as pale as the corpse’s, Cecilus, with an offhand “Anyhow”, continued to speak. His gaze was still directed at the corpse of that poor, fallen old man.

Cecilus: “I’m more so astonished at that contradiction of yours, boss. The conversation ended so peacefully, to give a sudden order to kill is quite surprising even for you.”

While speaking as such, Cecilus with dissatisfaction puffed up his cheeks. It was not quite appropriate behavior for a man in his twenties, but considering the immaturity of his mind, it was an action that fit Cecilus greatly.

His human sort of beauty, and his regular behavior was what was allowing this conduct.

Anyway, to Cecilus's point, the boy contorted his cheeks,

Purge King: "And I did tell you, I didn't want to have him killed. Like I told him, I wanted to believe it. It didn't look like he was lying or anything, either."

Cecilus: "Then, why?"

Purge King: "Even if does not seem like they're lying, liars are gonna lie, after all."

The boy that knelt on the throne bit his lip as Cecilus gazed on at him with curiosity on his face.

On that horribly dry way of life, an unshakably strong will could be glimpsed.

Halibel and Cecilus both were unknowing of what had happened in his past.

However, in that person's past, a situation must have happened to make him adopt this belief.

Something akin to, the experience of a person close to him who had hidden away suspicion and self-interest in their heart all while smiling, then spewing hatred and murderous intent with the very same fingers and lips that had been kind to him.

Such a past must have taught this boy.

Purge King: "First cut the buds, then break apart the branches. I'll never be fooled twice."

Tightly, the boy grabbed his own shoulder and pressed his own fingernails over the cloth, into his skin. Those nails ruthlessly clawed into it; that skin was being torn, that blood was oozing was certain.

That self-harm was, to him, a necessary ritual to maintain himself. The subordinates that had been with him for long knew of it, and so, nobody stopped it.

As if soon satisfied with the pain, the boy slowly rose from the throne,

Purge King: “The corpse, make it neat and bury it. And an envoy’s to be sent to their shop. Everything’s to be confiscated, but if they follow along, do not treat them poorly. If they refuse, then purge the family and burn the store. When the takeover ends, have the next one in charge greet you. With that, it’ll be decided whether to destroy them or not.”

With a calm tone, the boy ordered so those in the room could hear him.

Those were rough instruction that someone should follow, but not anyone in specific.

These requests that did not worry about the process, but rather only with the result, made the group successful. By focusing on the accomplishments of the association, not that of any one person, the perfect system of the organization could be maintained.

Everyone possessed reasons and weaknesses, which forced them to undertake them.

And so, rather than risking having everything being taken away from them if someone were to be opportunistic, everyone would do their best—It was a sort of ideal workplace environment.

—As an example of that everything, it could be family, a lover, wealth, life, many other things.

That was the guideline of the boy presenting himself as the leader of the association. To hold onto those things as insurance, to keep things as a safety measure.

This was the cowardly boy’s, the Purge King’s, way of fighting.

???: “Boss, ya forgot yer coat.”

Purge King: “Ah, thank you.”

Standing behind the boy headed toward the doorway, Halibel gently draped a black coat over his shoulders.

Just slightly draping that on his shoulders, he also added a word of reminder—Immediately after that Halibel's whiskers grew numb with the detected faint killing intent. At its intensity, Halibel lowered his eyes.

The source of that intent, he did not have to check, it was the boy in eyeshot.

Probably, it was because he had stood behind him.

Purge King: "…Halibel-san, I do not want to kill you."

Halibel: "Hahaha, then ya can just, not do it. Instead, just use me well."

Purge King: "But wouldn't it be the worst to destroy oneself by having too many tools… That'd be a pretty shitty way to die."

Mumbling to himself, pondering on methods to kill the aide behind him, the boy put on his jacket.

Those grumbling words had been quickly brushed off, but the boy's words were not a joke. He would, if it was possible, try to kill Halibel.

It was simply that, the effort it took to kill, the insufficiency of his preparation to kill, and the trouble brought about after the killing, it was merely that which had inclined him towards not killing, all these were factors as to why he was leaning towards not killing him.

Cecilus: "Boss, boss. These offerings that person brought, where should they be moved to?"

Purge King: "Offered goods… The contents, what were they?"

Cecilus: "Contents were… Ah, there's a magic stone. From where did they learn of boss's tastes? They'd come having paid that much regard, truly, I feel even more sorry for them."

Purge King: “Lopping off his head was Cecilus-san’s idea so…”

At the room’s entrance, the boy, having been stopped, twisted his cheeks in annoyance. And at that breezy attitude of Cecilus, he sighed,

Purge King: “The magic stone, I’ll ask you to put it in my room. Other than that, do with them as you all prefer.”

Cecilus: “Yes, yes, definitely understood. And, boss.”

Purge King: “…What is it.”

The boy let out a moody voice. Cecilus brought a finger to his eye, tracing it,

Cecilus: “Those dark circles are quite severe. Maybe you should sleep softly next to the princess for a while?”

At Cecilus’s words, the boy’s tongue clicked.

Cecilus just laughed it off, but the other men around him froze with tension in their bodies. It was possible that, because of that irritation, Cecilus’s slaying could be ordered.

Of course, if push came to shove, killing Cecilus would be no trivial affair. Using every force available in the building, they would have to try to force a draw with Halibel in the mix as well.

Purge King: “—I’ll think about it.”

Fortunately, the boy did not hastily order this, but with just those words turned away.

With that, relief spread throughout the room, and the men watched the back of the departing leader. That waving Cecilus’s inability to read the mood, had been one of Halibel’s biggest concerns as of late.

Halibel: “Doin’ somethin’ as part of a group really ain’t one of mah strong points either…”

Shaking the kiseru held in his mouth up and down, Halibel gazed at that boy's departing figure.

Firstly, as the most senior associate, guarding and similar duties were handled by Halibel. However, whether inside or outside the mansion, threats meaning to cause him harm were few.

The former because of fear, the latter because his existence was unknown to many.

Halibel: "…"

Carefully, Halibel stared over that boy who evaluated everything with narrowed eyes.

In the building that served as the headquarters, the reception room was not the only section decorated with various works of arts and paintings. The flaunting of that violent financial power allowed for a posture of non-aggression.

The display of wealth, the display of power, served as a last resort, so that unneeded enemies would not be made.

Attaining victory without a fight, as the boy had said, would be the ideal.

Naturally, it went without saying that excessive wealth and power would be subject to the jealousy and envy of others. Ultimately, whatever one did, enemies would appear. The boy's method was then to reduce the number of them, as simple as that.

And, if the quantity of foes were reduced, it would only be necessary to deal with the rest using force later.

Purge King: "Halibel-san… Please watch over Cecilus-san with care, to keep him from going out of control."

Halibel: "Understood, leave it to me. Boss, are ya goin' ta see the princess?"

Purge King: "Hmm."

That he had accepted Cecilus's suggestion perhaps annoying him, the boy replied with a grimace.

And then, those two pairs of legs reached the innermost section of their organization's headquarters—the deepest part of the building named Pandemonium, they had arrived in front of the door of a strictly-guarded room.

—On that door, there were so many keyholes and locks that a person seeing it for the first time might shudder.

The number of keyholes neared fifty, clearly showing the importance of what lay on the other side of this door, as well as the meticulous, tenacious, and obsessed nature of the person that had prepared it.

But, above all, what made the caretaker's obsession most obvious was the fact that, the keys to fit in those keyholes and open the door, not one of them existed in this world.

In other words, this door could never have been opened by any normal method.

To open it, then—

Purge King: "—Puck."

Puck: "I'm called, and so I appear, nyanyanyan."

Receiving the boy's call, with an exhausting voice and excessive flashes of light, a grey-furred kitten suddenly appeared in the air.

Outwardly presenting a silly attitude and cute appearance, but within holding vast power, that Great Spirit—the existence known as Puck, floated down and landed on the boy's shoulder.

Puck: "Yo, you're here again after quite a while. Is Lia the reason you came?"

Purge King: "The door, open it."

Puck: "Hmm, what's with that tone. If you spoil the father's mood he might not let you see his daughter, you know. If you could understand the feelings of a father with a daughter at such a ripe age just a bit better, it would make me happy…”

Purge King: “Puck.”

On top of his shoulder, Puck was stroking his whiskers. The boy called to him.

Seeing that boy’s face marked with deep dark circles, Puck sighed with a “My oh my”, and then,

Puck: “You endured it until you couldn’t anymore again, didn’t you. It can’t be helped. That effort of yours is commendable, so I’ll let it slide just this once.”

Saying that, with a satisfied air Puck gathered his short arms together and pointed towards the door. And, through the many keyholes devoid of any keys, a faint light poured forth.

Puck: “Click.”

Soon after, the faint lights turned into keys made of ice, and fitting inside the door, the sound of something opening echoed.

The method to open a door that would not open—the secret was to create a key that did not exist.

Halibel: “It’s admirable how easily ya find blind spots. If there’s a keyhole, it’s kinda normal to find a key that fits it. But if someone tries to imitate this, then it’d become a problem.”

Puck: “There’s also the question of the magical wavelength. If someone other than me tried something similar, you both, and I as well, would be informed of it. And even then, I’m always there with Lia.”

Halibel: “That’s right.”

At Puck’s words, Halibel came to understand and agreed.

Without even paying attention to their exchange, the boy placed his hand on the unlocked door and paused. Behind him, with a face feigning innocence, stood Halibel. The boy gazed up at that face.

Purge King: “Halibel-san, you can go now.”

Halibel: “Is that so? But, I should greet the princess sometimes as well, don’t’cha think…?”

Purge King: “You can go now.”

Those words said without much thought, were flatly rejected.

Halibel certainly accepted that it was an absolute refusal. This was not something worth refusing to budge on, so Halibel chewed on his kiseru and backed off.

Halibel: “If anythin’ happens, feel welcome to summon me.”

Purge King: “…”

That boy was giving him a warning look, his hand still on the door. And so, Halibel turned his back to him.

Until he turned the corner and could no longer be seen, that boy’s sight was piercing into his back.

His employer and benefactor was always vigilant and fearful, rather than cautious.

Halibel: “Ah, if I said it like that, he will definitely not call out for me then.”

With such listless mumbling, Halibel spewed purple smoke from his pipe while looking overhead.

Smoke hit the ceiling, and with nowhere to go, scattered.

—That it was, somehow, a hint of their future, was the thought that came to his mind.

8

That boy’s sleeping face was so quiet, one could believe he’d died.

Purge King: “…”

Having entrusted his head to her lap, sleeping as if on the brink of death, that boy was the target of Emilia’s gaze.

Around his brows, there were dark circles that looked as if painted on with soot. Caused by and revealing the boy’s serious level of sleep deprivation, and the harsh environment he was in.

Emilia: “It looks like he hasn’t been sleeping again.”

Puck: “It can’t be helped, in his position he’s got no room for relaxing, most likely. Except for when he comes to see Lia and act like a baby, every now and then.”

She stroked his forehead, and organized his lashes with her fingertips. Watching that sleeping face made free by Emilia, the floating Puck wrapped his long tail around his stomach and sighed. Just like that he spun around her and examined Emilia’s personal quarters.

It was a white room.

White walls, white floors. A white ceiling, a white bed, white furniture and white curtains, everything in the room was united with whiteness.

Amidst that, Emilia was draped in thin sleepwear that was likewise white, so it was almost pathological.

This room, was the extent of freedom granted to Emilia—A bird cage, which she was confined to.

Emilia herself still wondered whether it was appropriate to utilize expressions such as “confined”.

Puck: “Lia, are you still angry at this child?”

Emilia: “…I wonder about that.”

Emilia hesitated in answering to Puck’s question.

It was not that it was difficult to put in words. She was just not sure about her own feelings.

Well, she had definitely been angry at first, but even now they had not yet made up.

To apologize to each other, they did not even have time for that. Without solving that problem, time had simply passed, and daily life had merely continued on.

Emilia: “But, I’m upset with you, Puck. While keeping it a secret from me, you made the plan for leaving all by yourself.”

Puck: “Sorry. But it couldn’t be helped. There was no way I’d entrust you to a Roswaal in that state, right? Dragging someone into a dangerous situation and place, only to then skedaddle out of there’s pretty irresponsible of him. That said, if it’s for Lia’s safety, here’s easily the stand-out option.”

Emilia: “…”

Puck: “Avoiding harm to Lia, that boy and I were of the same mind.”

So Puck had assented with the secret offer to take Emilia out of Roswaal’s mansion, and had not hesitated with the withdrawal of the Royal Selection and in cooperating with the association.

And with only Emilia unaware of anything, when she finally realized, she had found herself in this white room, a bird caught in a cage—

But that she had no right to criticize Puck’s judgement, Emilia also understood.

Emilia: “Because, in the end, I couldn’t do anything…”

The Royal Selection, to determine the next Monarch of the Kingdom of Lugunica—in that battle, Emilia had clearly suffered a tragic defeat, contented with a loss by default.

The biggest cause for that was that she had refused to attend the

Royal Candidate Meeting. As a result, her participation in the Royal Selection had not been recognized. That meant that Emilia's sponsor, Roswaal L. Mathers, and her both had fallen in status; that was the meaning of the latter's unhinged state.

In short, Emilia had not even displayed a will to participate in the Royal Selection, and so her sponsor Roswaal lost his qualifications. The Emilia Camp collapsed before its first task.

And so, Emilia had the ladder pulled from under her, and so been defeated without being able to do anything.

Emilia: "…My wish…"

It was to create a world without discrimination.

Creating a place where the births of half-elves and others would not serve as a definite evaluation of one's future life, that was clumsy Emilia's wish.

However, without even being given the chance to be spoken aloud, that wish had disappeared like a dream's fantasy.

Beyond that wish too, the freeing of Emilia's hometown—the task of rescuing the residents of Elior Forest, still in ice-encased slumber, that too she been unable to do.

Puck: "It'd be better to return to the forest rather that living in a defenseless house like that, but Lia was in a situation where even that was impossible. As you can imagine, when the first envoy arrived I was definitely surprised."

Emilia: "…Reaaally surprised. Because…"

The boy she had come to meet here, Emilia had believed to be dead.

—Her fate of not partaking in the Royal Selection had been determined by the death of the mansion's maid.

Rem, that was the girl who had become the first victim of the ruckus caused by the Witchbeasts. The boy, an outsider who had briefly been working at the mansion, had been a suspect in her death.

The boy could not endure that suspicious, and so had run away. Chasing him, that Rem's older sister, Ram, had also left the mansion —only never to return.

The collapse, probably started from there.

The cause of Rem's death was discovered to be the curse of the Witchbeasts afterwards, once the damage spread to the nearby village. The two disasters had overlapped, this state unrecoverable.

As a result of the chaos caused by the Witchbeasts, Roswaal had lost his position, without even seizing an opportunity to recover. Emilia had failed to announce her participation in the Royal Selection, and had met defeat without being defeated; a humiliation for her. The mansion was steadily declining towards the worse, heading towards undesired collapse.

It was then.

Swept away by the helplessness of being unable to change anything, Emilia was spending her days listlessly. But one day, that boy, who was supposed to have disappeared, had come to get her.

Emilia: "…"

Puck had quickly responded to that. But Emilia was feeling angry at that boy.

Without caring about her feelings, without any explanation, not when first disappearing, not even when he returned, without saying anything, he was suddenly taking her away.

He might even have been the catalyst for the start of the collapse of the world surrounding Emilia. Despite that—

Emilia: "Like that…"

Reunited with Emilia, the boy with a frail face exhausted from fear, even worse than the one he possessed now, had latched on, cried, and begged her for help.

And at that boy bawling like a child, Emilia had forgotten to be angry.

Maybe she was naïve. Maybe she was easy.

And, even then, Emilia did not think herself worthy of scolding him, that boy who seemed like a child, who had eventually exposed his sleeping, baby-like face.

So, the boy would visit Emilia, to find himself salvation.

He would come looking for her, without saying a single word about what he was doing outside her room's door, just sobbing sadly and talking about his own feelings, entrusting his life to Emilia's knees.

Whether she was receiving strong trust, or being looked down upon and being humiliated, that depended on what Emilia thought. And Emilia was not able to give any answer to that.

Emilia: "Obviously, this reaaally isn't healthy…"

That this was not a normal state to be in, even the immature Emilia realized that.

However, Emilia, while accepting that clinging boy's tears, looking on the form of the boy letting himself rest for nary a moment, in her own inner thoughts she was unsure.

Emilia: "…"

Speaking of the intervals in which the boy sought Emilia, it was about once every ten days.

Other than that, he was desperately struggling, even cutting back on sleep-time.

Really, they did not exchange many words.

But in this way, the boy would secretly came searching for her, for Emilia, once every ten days.

Emilia: "…Subaru's such a twit."

—That perhaps she longed for those visits, Emilia had grown aware of that.

9

—If a tossed gold coin landed on tails, with just that, anyone would be slain.

At that abnormal method of her master, Frederica could not hide her disgust.

Cleaning a headless corpse that had fallen in the reception hall, Frederica then replaced the sullied carpet, next preparing meals for the mercenaries in Pandemonium.

Frederica: "The fates of others, quite literally left to luck… Do you feel like you have become a god?"

Lifting the whole body of a corpse, Frederica, knowing all too well the reason for her helplessness, clicked her sharp fangs against one another, containing her feelings inside herself while trembling with anger.

Frederica Baumann was employed and working there in the organization because the Purge King, its leader, had a princess—Emilia, who had vehemently begged on her behalf.

That day, as the mansion filled with chilled air and frost, she had been convinced she was going to lose her life to that traitorous Great Spirit. Yet, for some reason, she had woken up here.

Since then, having been fitted with a collar around her neck, she was being used as a maid, to serve that detestable person.

Why in the world, how inept had her work been so that she was now subjected with this kind of absurd job?

Frederica: "—Master, pardon me, please."

Her owner's own meals, it was the rule that Frederica would carry it to his room directly.

He did not entrust this task to anyone else other than Frederica, and would not allow in his mouth food cooked by any other than her. That this was some honorable thing, she had no feeling like that whatsoever.

Firstly, it was not because of taste or trust that Frederica had been entrusted with the task. Merely that Frederica would not try stupid things, was the sort of conviction he held.

???: “Come.”

With the sound of many locks coming undone, a rude order allowed Frederica’s entry into the room.

Following those orders, with the food cart in tow, Frederica stepped foot into the room of her master.

Her master’s room, unlike the luxurious decor and interior of the building, was big, but quite simple and dull, a room lacking in humanity.

The room’s four corners held many books that were not distinguished by subject. Messily piled up books were stacked everywhere, and it was a place the orderly Frederica could not bear. But, that person deeply hated having his room cleaned.

Perhaps he was being wary of something being installed in the room.

Knowing that was impossible, but still being on the lookout for it, was not being cautious but rather cowardly—definitely, it was contemptible behavior.

Frederica: “Master, should I do the usual with these fallen documents?”

Subaru: “…Hmm. Yeah, please do. You can show them to someone who looks like they understand them.”

With those words, few documents littering the floor of the room, written down in messy handwriting, were waved away by her uninterested master.

At first glance, they simply seemed to be discarded, messed-up drafts, but they in fact were the source of the organization's wealth —The many mysterious creations brought about by the Purge King.

Subaru: "It might not be very helpful… Engines or things like that, I don't get the mechanism at all. As expected, different kinds of food are the easiest to figure out…"

Mumbling complaints, looking somewhere other than here was her master.

He would speak of knowledge and culture that no one had ever seen, discovered or noticed, be it leads or the ultimate results.

By meeting lots of people, that black-haired boy had repeatedly made great decisions—like he had been marked by fate, he had many unique ideas, and as a pioneer of culture had been granted cleverness.

With those many pieces of knowledge he spoke of, the experts of fields of study that had been in slumber had been lit with a new flame.

Those experts would examine and discuss that boy's joking words, which represented possibilities incomprehensible to ordinary people, with seriousness, and ultimately established them into theories.

And so, with that producing enormous profits, the boy who possessed nothing had been nurtured into a great villain.

Subaru: "At this point, calling it an unparalleled kata made of future knowledge isn't even funny."

Frederica remembered that her master had mumbled such strange words in reply to having his achievements praised, in the past. She also recalled that he had not been smiling at all when speaking those words.

And so, on one hand causing many people to suffer, on the other giving rise to much happiness, her dark-haired master was quite dishonest.

Even as a problematic existence that humanity should remedy, in his brain there was definite value.

This unreachable being, was definitely one-of-a-kind in this world in regards to being difficult to handle, there was no doubt—maybe in that sense, he might have had something in common with Roswaal.

Frederica: "…"

Subaru: "Frederica, the food. First, have a bite."

Even while preoccupied in her thoughts, Frederica was steadily readying the meal to be served.

This boy was only skin and bones, skeletal in appearance. It was not that his portions were lacking, the issue was largely mental.

Having given and taken many wounds, while living comfortably he was comparably quite skinny in appearance. As the manager of his meals, it did not make her feel great, but he probably was not vomiting because he wanted to.

Frederica: "Master, with this."

Why had meals been prepared for two?

All menus were for two, placed on large plates, and set on the table. And from every plate's meal Frederica ate a single bite, as to check for the presence of poison was one of her roles.

She had never thought about poisoning him. But that she wanted to, that she did.

It was just that, for Frederica, the work of a maid had taken up much of her life, and it was precious to her. With the people that had taught her, and those involved with her, in her mind, she did not want to commit acts of violence.

Frederica: “Then, I will be outside, if there is anything please call for me.”

Subaru: “Hmm.”

During meals, her master did not enjoy being seen.

Because of that, having finished with readying the meal, Frederica felt it was time to leave and was withdrawing from the room.

On this day as well, she intended to leave the room and wait outside—when suddenly, something caught her eye.

Spread out over the desk was a written list, holding the names of the organization’s members.

Placed next to that list, a gold coin could be seen.

At that moment, having realized the meaning of that, Frederica could not hide the fear running down her back.

Frederica: “Master—”

Subaru: “Frederica.”

With her turning around, void black eyes were gazing at Frederica, who had called for her master.

Frederica’s breath was robbed by that abyss. In front of her, her master slowly approached the desk and covered that unfolded list.

And then, flipping the gold coin just next to it with a thumb,

Subaru: “—Heads.”

With a carefree noise, that tossed coin fell into the boy’s left hand. Catching it, and having checked the side facing up, that boy smiled at Frederica.

Subaru: “It was heads, Frederica—Your brother and grandmother are safe.”

Frederica: “—Ah.”

Subaru: “Get out. And don’t come back until I say you may enter.”

At her master’s words, Frederica nodded like a doll without speaking.

And so, unable to hide the tears in her eyes welling up, she left the room as her cheeks were moistened by hot tears. Soon after, Frederica began to run while covering her face.

Frederica: “Uh, uhhh… Waaaaah!”

She could not tell, not anyone, not anything. Sharing would not be forgiven.

Why had it become like this?

Why had this happened to her?

Those far-away days at the mansion, with those not-cute-at-all juniors, that cute junior, that hopeless master—Where had those times gone?

10

—Having received word from a secret messenger, Cecilus closed one eye and looked up at the moon.

Cecilus: “Hmm, hmmhmm, hmmhmmhmmmm~.”

Twisting his neck and bending at the waist, low enough that the tips of his long hair could brush the ground, he tilted his form.

By nature, thinking had never been his best attribute. Cecilus had not received formal education, and had lived with no intention of learning things in the first place. In years, his life numbered around twenty, but he had spent it all on one thing only.

Many years he had spent only on swinging a sword, his swordsmanship a point of pride.

Since it was a life of only that, in his heart of hearts he wished to avoid difficult matters.

Cecilus: “Well now, how should this be done. As for me…”

Straightening his bent body, Cecilus shook the dust from his hair that had been touching the floor. And placing a hand on the sword at his waist, then turning back with a dance-like move,

Cecilus: “Hey, Halibel-san. What do you think?”

Halibel: “—What, it’s disgraceful that you’ve found me while I was keepin’ quiet, and ya were bein’ so unashamed.”

On the castle’s—on Pandemonium’s balcony, underneath the light of the moon with the sky overhead, from the shadows the beastman shinobi appeared.

Having been detected, Halibel scratched his head, and approached Cecilus, the latter’s face undaunted.

Retrieving the kiseru from his pocket and inserting it in his mouth, he lighted its tip. Inhaled, and puffed out purple haze.

Halibel: “Just now, who was that messenger sneakin’ about?”

Cecilus: “That?—Let’s just say, that was one of the Nine Divine Generals, but… Well, if it’s Halibel-san, the top shinobi in the world, it’s no wonder they were found.”

Halibel: “Ce-san, y’ain’t suited for secret stuff at all. Haven’t’cha revealed that ya never broke off ties with the Vollachian Empire just now?”

Cecilus: “But, Halibel-san, weren’t you already aware of that?”

Halibel: “…”

Halibel, already with an awkward grin, at Cecilus’s comment smiled even deeper.

That this was not a negative sign, Cecilus was frankly aware of it.

Cecilus: “Originally, working with the boss was as per His Excellency’s order. Of course, that I fell for the boss’s invitation and came to this side isn't a lie."

Halibel: "With the Empire's collar 'round yer neck… Well, Su-san's movements, if used well, it'd be easy to turn them into a profit to yer country. That knowledge from somewhere unknown'd be more readily accepted in Kararagi and Vollachia rather than Lugunica and Gusteko."

Cecilus: "It would, yes."

Drawing his hand into his kimono sleeves, Cecilus acknowledged that he was a spy.

Cecilus's reason for cooperating with the organization's activities, as he had stated, was to follow the orders of Vollachia's Emperor. However, the Emperor, knowing Cecilus's temperament, had not given specific instructions. Not that he could have remembered them even if he did.

Cecilus's role, as commanded, was to—

Cecilus: "All I gotta do is kill who the boss orders be killed, aside from His Excellency. So, it's just the usual."

Halibel: "Ce-san, aren't'cha even more of an assassin than I, a shinobi, am?"

Cecilus: "No, no, definitely not true, I mean, stuff like lurking in the water, or hiding poison on my person, or rising from the shadows is impossible for me."

Shaking his head and hands, Cecilus humbly responded by acknowledging the difference between their respective areas.

As a shinobi, as an assassin, he was far behind Halibel. But, if fighting head-on, Halibel was no match for Cecilus.

Cecilus: "Well then, having just caught me at the scene of me meeting with a secret messenger, what are you thinking of doing? Are you planning on fighting me with your life on the line here?"

Halibel: "That depends on the nature of the message."

Cecilus: “Hmm, you mean its contents.”

Halibel: “If its contents’d mean Su-san’s death, I guess I gotta fight to stop that.”

Holding his kiseru between his fingers, letting out a puff of violet smoke, Halibel’s fur fluttered in the cold night breeze.

Hearing he was ready to fight to the death for his master, Cecilus, with an “I see”, nodded his head.

Cecilus: “I’ve been wondering for a long time now. Why’s Halibel-san acting for the boss? It’s not out of sincerely loyalty to His Excellency like me.”

Halibel: “To repay a grace I received.”

Cecilus: “—What can it be, the sort of favor that Halibel-san received?”

Those unexpected words had come rushing out, and, having listened to them, Cecilus asked with sincere surprise. Depending on the person, this would be brazen enough to be considered rude, but Halibel did not say anything in particular.

Instead, Halibel gazed up at the moon hanging in the night sky—

Halibel: “‘Round the time I first met Su-san, there was a bit of an incident in a corner of Kararagi. That, well, it was an incident that involved the Four Great Spirits… Su-san dealt with it.”

Cecilus: “Huuuh, the Four Great Spirits! I know one of them, but they can’t really be talked with, you know. Can’t believe they were calmed down… Huh, perhaps the boss’s stronger than I thought…”

Halibel: “Nah, nah. It wasn’t an aggressive situation like that. What did… Well, I dunno what was the deciding factor, for sure. But you know how Su-san’s got some weird predications at times? It was prolly that.”

Returning his blade to its sheath, Cecilus with one eye closed listened to Halibel’s explanation.

The reason that felt both convincing and doubtful was because Cecilus appraised that boy, his boss, similarly, in certain aspects.

Halibel had called them weird predictions, but Cecilus did not look at it like that.

To prepare for anything was the weapon of a coward, he thought. And, Cecilus thought it desirable to respect the strong.

That meant that, no matter the method of fighting, one who would greedily use anything to win would be acknowledged as a warrior by him.

Cecilus: “Well, as a strong one among swordsmen, if possible, sticking with a sword fits me the best.”

Halibel: “Ce-san, Ce-san, are ya done with my talk?”

Cecilus: “Yes, that is enough. Anyway, it wasn’t that I thought of suspecting Halibel-san or anything like that. Unlike the Empire, the City-States is more like a mish-mash of heads… If you told me you were working for someone else, I’d trust you a lot more.”

With that declaration, Halibel seemed worn out and disappointed. At that, Cecilus tilted his head, and with an “Ah”, as if he had remembered something, clapped his hands together.

Cecilus: “Right, right, I was forgetting. The secret messenger I got in touch with a while ago.”

Halibel: “It’s okay to tell me?”

Cecilus: “If I don’t tell you, I think that’d cause a lot of difficulties. To be completely honest…”

Then, Cecilus informed Halibel, a large smile on his face,

Cecilus: “—As the Former Margrave’s murder has surfaced, the Kingdom is coming to destroy the organization in earnest.”

—And so, nonchalantly, the moment of the end would arrive.

???: “Many thanks for granting me an audience with you today.”

Saying this, welcomed as a guest to the reception area, this youth confronted the Purge King with a dignified attitude.

Subaru: “…”

This boy had slain many, erased many lives, grasped many weaknesses.

There had been many situations in which people, to maintain calm, had bluffed by presenting a brave front.

Subaru: “—Somehow, your confidence is remarkable, you do not seem much different from me.”

Young Man: “—Thank you for those sudden words of praise.”

The one who’s head dipped in a bow, was a delicately-built young man, fitted with a black suit and tie.

There was a mild look on his face, but in his eyes, somehow, a dim darkness could be seen. That smile he was making was likely fake. He was definitely aware that it would be seen through.

Not reckless, but full of courage—was the mixed impression of this young man.

Subaru: “Let me see, you must be…”

Young Man: “To be frank, not far off from now, we intend to do much large-scale business here. Because of that, we had been looking for a chance to send our regards to the organization, and present gifts, first of all.”

Subaru: “I see, that’s, well, thanks for your consideration.”

That posture of advancing according to his role without flinching left a good impression.

Emulating that attitude, the boy changed, to intently perform his own role as well.

Young Man: “These are the offerings from our side—We have heard that the leader desired this.”

Subaru: “Huh.”

Having been brought in and the lid of its box opened by a servant, the young man presented the eye-catching offering.

Inside, were a lot of stones—Magic Stones. As if affirming its utmost purity, the concentration of Mana filling the room heightened.

Staring at the offering, the Purge King muttered.

Subaru: “What color is there the most of?”

Young Man: “—?”

???: “Red and blue shades seem to be most prominent, but if you look further inside, there’s also yellow and green… Get the feeling the whole set’s there. Oh, how thoughtful.”

At that question with unknown meaning, the young man showed hesitation for the first time.

Instead of the youthful man, it was Cecilus who had replied, standing next to the King. After receiving that report from Cecilus, the King nodded solemnly.

Subaru: “Is that so, then my thanks for that. I’ll be receiving your consideration. Uhhh…”

Young Man: “This comes from Russell Fellow.”

Subaru: “Hmm, I see. Russell Fellow, is it. If any problem comes up…”

Then, the Purge King cut off his words.

The reason was that youthful messenger, who, to stop him from speaking, had opened a hand.

In that instant, a faint murmur spread in the room. With his words having been interrupted, what response would the Purge King give to that action; the guards were getting excited.

However, in such a situation, only Halibel, Cecilus and the young man involved had remained calm,

Young Man: “Please wait. In truth, the offerings, just this is not their entirety.”

Subaru: “—Huh. Then I’m even more impressed.”

After listening to that man’s words, the King responded as such, and the tension relaxed slightly.

There, in that atmosphere with lessened pressure, that young man gave a deep nod. And so—

Young Man: “—From the Kingdom of Lugunica, this could be called the response to the Purge King’s atrocities.”

—Immediately, an onslaught of white light swallowed up the whole meeting room, shattering it.

An incredible torrent of light engulfed the luxurious reception room of the Magic Castle Pandemonium; as if purifying it, it was transformed into white dust.

Those who had perished due to that white light, without even knowing what had hit them, numbered eighteen—each were warriors of great skill, each had their names known throughout, but this was no longer in their realm.

Even if, to those vanquished men, the truth of what had happened could somehow be told, there were none among them who would have believed it.

—The blow which had vaporized them all, had been brought about with a single slash.

The organization’s headquarters was collapsing.

The place where important things had been gathered, had been blown away by that reigning brilliant existence.

The Purge King had been finally acknowledged as an enemy of the world, having committed a multitude of evil deeds.

The assassin sent by the Dragon Kingdom to subjugate that existence, was none other than—

???: “Reinhard van Astrea, of the Sword Saint bloodline.”

The one who rendered all efforts ineffective, the absurd iron hammer of the divine, had manifested.

12

In that destroyed parlor, a man was standing, serene.

Fiery crimson hair, blue eyes that mimicked the very sky, a white Knight’s uniform left not a single speck of dust, the Knight Amongst Knights stood there, like something out of a painting.

Held in that Knight’s hand, a Holy Sword shattered into innumerable pieces.

With just one swing, a weapon crafted by a master swordsmith who’d left his name upon the world had turned to dust like it was nothing. In compensation, the man who had stacked acts of barbarity upon acts of barbarity and his gang both would be caught in a single blow—

???: “—You’re not a cute opponent at all, you know that, right?

Reinhard: “…”

Like a clap of thunder breaking through the smoke, a terrific sword strike closed in on Reinhard.

And so, with an impact like thunder indeed ringing out, the body of the one labelled the Sword was thrown back. However, his body had not been slashed—The scabbard of his beloved sword had been used to blocked it.

Not with hands, but by twisting his body to receive the slashing strike with the sheath, with movement akin to acrobatics, the young man, Reinhard, then fired a strike of his own—At that Cecilus, let out a whistle.

Cecilus: “Oh, I see you’re still completely beyond the realm of humans… That makes me so happy, Reinhard-san!”

Reinhard: “I believe I am not feeling very pleased about our reunion, Cecilus-dono.”

Carrying the Fiend Sword Murasame on his shoulder, Cecilus kicked some dust on the floor with his zori. Having been greeted with that single blow in lieu of a proper one, Reinhard furrowed his brow.

Then, squinting towards the back of the room, the smoke there clearing up,

Reinhard: “…It did not reach, huh.”

Cecilus: “Ohh, that didn’t reach the boss, did it? Well, it was a blow in a place where Halibel-san and I are guarding, that’s a hard place to get to. But, to be honest, I didn’t particularly move while thinking of protecting the boss, so Halibel-san gets one-hundred-percent of the credit there.”

Saying that, in the inner room, where Cecilus was innocently pointing at with his chin—On the throne shrouded in smoke was the Purge King resting his chin in his hands, and protecting him with his back, was Halibel’s figure.

That Halibel, puffing purple smoke from the kiseru held in his mouth—

Halibel: “Ce-san, a correction. This ain’t my achievement.”

Cecilus: “Well then, it was my hidden power…”

Halibel: “Even that ain’t it. It was, Su-san’s work… This throne’s definitely bein' protected by some sort of tremendous power. Though, we ain't ever heard of it."

At that Cecilus gazing down at his hand while trembling, Halibel shook his head.

Then, behind Halibel, the Purge King who had been seated on the throne until now, rose. And, grabbing the orange scarf he wore around his neck,

Subaru: "—I saw your strike before at the Loot House. To prepare for that's only natural."

Distorting his cheeks, he gave a very grim smile.

This was none other than, the Purge King's—No, Natsuki Subaru's reunion with Reinhard.

Reinhard: "Subaru…!"

Subaru: "You've really drawn a poor lot, Reinhard. Had you not helped me back at the Loot House, it would've have become the mess it is now—But in that case, you wouldn't ever been able to meet your precious master, guess it didn't turn out so bad for you, did it?"

Reinhard: "—Kh."

Peeping out from Halibel's side, Subaru stuck his tongue out at Reinhard.

At that wicked form, Reinhard's cheeks stiffened as if in pain. Swaying sadly, those blue eyes gazed ahead at Subaru, his face wicked and hateful.

But suddenly, that expression disappeared.

Subaru: "—What the hell. After all, you're black and white as well?

Reinhard: "—? Black and white? That is…"

Subaru: "Shut up, you lying bastard—Then, there's no way I'll let myself die to you.”

With emotionless words, Subaru turned away his eyes, having lost interest in Reinhard. And like that, whacking Halibel on the shoulder, then staring at Cecilus as he faced Reinhard,

Subaru: “Cecilus, do what you want, I’ve already lost interest.”

Cecilus: “—I don’t understand much about that, it seems the boss and I see things differently. My thanks for the worthy opponent, do accept those.”

Subaru: “We’re seeing things differently… Haha, that makes sense. Even at the end, you make me laugh.”

As if something about Cecilus’s words was funny, Subaru slapped his knee with amusement.

Then, his smile disappearing immediately,

Subaru: “It was enjoyable in its own way. Cecilus, since you had no weaknesses, you weren’t my favorite.”

Cecilus: “For me, it’d be just that—Mayonnaise is scary.”

Subaru: “Ha~!”

At that cheeky assertion of Cecilus, Subaru laughed as if he was pleased.

Subaru’s appearance, held in Halibel’s arms, sank into a shadow. And like that, Subaru and Halibel had departed from this difficult predicament.

Reinhard: “Wait! Our talk is yet to be…”

Cecilus: “—That’s the end of it, Sword Saint. If you don’t want it to stop there, then please catch up and start over. But before then, this faithful subordinate of the Purge King’s gonna be blocking your way.”

Reinhard: “Kuh… Kh.”

Trying to chase after the disappeared Subaru and Halibel, Reinhard felt something brushing underneath his feet.

Sundering the floor in a straight line, that blow, without a moment of the blade being drawn visible, was an extraordinary flash made viable by overwhelming swinging speed. No more than a sword that had reached the pinnacle of the sword.

Cecilus: “Regrettably, it’s too early to be evaluated in such a manner. I’m still in the middle of climbing that mountain. If I can overcome one more step, I think I can reach it.”

Reinhard: “Reach, where?”

Cecilus: “Of course, the Heavenly Sword.”

At that moment, a sound like the air freezing, like it was being cut and slain, could be heard.

A swordfighter who had truly reached the pinnacle of the sword—no, it was the transparent fighting spirit emitted by the swordsman, which reached a level monstruous enough that it would bring about unfathomable situations contrary to common sense.

That incarnation of the sword standing there; just by touching that blade, even invisible things would perish.

Cecilus: “I was waiting for this opportunity—A chance to cross swords with you.”

Reinhard: “…Cecilus-dono, I have already fought with you before. That match was, to me, of great significance. Why is it you…”

Cecilus: “Of course, if my body can wield a sword—we may only meet in a life-or-death match.”

The second sword, the Fiend Sword Murasame, was unsheathed with gleaming light.

The first sword, the Dream Sword Masayume, desired to cut, the beauty within it reveals.

Of the ten Enchanted Swords, Distinguished Swords, and Holy Swords existing in the world, those amounted to two—Not to mention,

Cecilus: "—The Dragon Sword Reid."

Always besides the Sword Saint, but only ever drawn against opponents suitable for the Sword Saint, that sword shining white exposed its blade to the air.

That the sound of the sword being drawn was being heard, was undoubtedly because the Dragon Sword was ululating.

Cecilus: "You must already know, Reinhard-san. In front of us lies a wall."

With each holding their Holy Sword, their Enchanted Sword, their Dragon Sword, these extraordinary existences faced one another.

Shuffling their feet as to narrow the distance between the two, the world viewed their clash with horror, the atmosphere distorted.

Cecilus: "For those who arrive at a certain realm, the way in front's gonna be blocked by a wall. That wall, which can't be surpassed no matter what, some'll never overcome it and give up. Something like that, it's impossible for me. For if I don't cross that wall, I won't be able to be me."

Reinhard: "…"

Cecilus: "That's when the boss's offer arrived. He offered me a way to get past the wall… Well, it ended up being a way to cross swords with you with lives on the line, setting up a serious fight for one's life—Well, just as he said it, it was to clutch at straws, that sorta thing."

Reinhard: "Straws…?"

Cecilus: "Those who are about to drown do, or so I've heard."

That was the solution that had brought Cecilus Segmunt brought to this place.

Or perhaps, with his desire as a swordsman being guessed correctly, this had been made inevitable?

At that wide-eyed Sword Saint, Cecilus curved his lips.

And, laughed. The Blue Lightning, who with a laughing face would cut down others, spoke,

Cecilus: “I’m drowning, Mister Reinhard van Astrea. Saying it like my employer would; apparently, we, those who deeply desire something, everyone of us, everyone’s drowning. We’re all drowning in an ocyan, or whatever it’s called, which we haven’t even seen before.”

Reinhard: “…”

Swallowed his breath, Reinhard did.

With that, lowering his body, wielding both his swords by their hilt, Cecilus took off his zori.

Cecilus: “—Swordsman, Cecilus Segmunt.”

Not of the Vollachian Empire, not as a General, not as the Blue Lighting—those other titles were unnecessary.

This body, as merely one swordsman, coveted the path towards the Heavenly Sword.

—Lightning, claps of thunder, tore through Pandemonium.

Droplets of blood, danced.

13

—Continuously, Pandemonium quaked.

The aftershocks from the fight, felt as vigorous shocks and tremors, even echoed through Emilia’s private quarters.

The light hanging from the ceiling was violently swaying, dust was falling. While lying in bed, Emilia was being forced to make a choice.

Emilia: “…”

To stay there, that was what had been said to her.

Or perhaps, it had been more of a plea, such as “Please stay”.

Should she believe that and wait, or should she ignore it and rush out?

Her inner thoughts about her situation lost in revolution, she continued to postpone a decision. However—

???: “—Lia, the end has come.”

Emilia: “Eh…”

While that fierce battle’s shaking continued, at the Emilia lying in bed Puck spoke. Her amethyst eyes trembling as they gazed upwards, Puck gave a sniff with his tiny nose, his short arms crossed.

Hearing that it was the end, Emilia gulped.

Yet again, she had been unable to do anything.

Putting off making a choice, then accepting the consequences of not make said choice.

That it was cowardly act she somewhat understood, she, once again —

Had deferred her stance onto Subaru—

Puck: “—Reinhard’s here. It’s Subaru’s defeat.

Emilia: “…”

With that continuation of Puck’s words, Emilia’s thoughts froze.

Emilia: “Ahh.”

Unable to speak but making sounds, unable to form thoughts, Emilia opened her eyes wide.

Even hearing that it was the end, Emilia had been certain of Subaru's victory. That she never for a moment doubted it, Emilia had only realized at this moment.

Natsuki Subaru would not be defeated.

No matter what the opponent, with his selfish excuses and tenacity and abuse of misanthropy, he would always grasp victory. With all under his control, manipulating all subordinates he could think of, no matter the opponent, they would be annihilated.

And, when tired of thinking, and needing a moment of peace, he would come to find Emilia.

Definitely, Subaru was going to come to her room, Emilia had been believing that.

Puck: "Until today, I've never rushed Lia's choices, but that can't be done this time. You have to make a decision."

Emilia: "To make, a decision…"

Puck: "Do you prefer staying here, or leaving here?"

To what extent did he know, for in that plain Puck's voice was conviction.

Puck gazed down at Emilia tightly grasping up her sheets. His usual aloof expression was completely gone, and the compassion for his beloved child was strong instead.

At a dear child that had lost her way and was anxious about the road ahead, a parent's eyes were directed.

Puck: "It looks like, all this time, Subaru had been controlling information properly. There isn't any sign of Lia being involved in the organization's activities. Well, Lia really wasn't involved at all, but having been with them for so long, some people with suspicions will show up for sure. This was a necessary precaution."

Emilia: “Wasn’t involved at all? Then, what kind of position was I in?”

Puck: “From Roswaal’s mansion you were kidnapped, and locked away. That’s how they’re treating you. Then those children attempting to destroy Pandemonium right now, seem more like rescuers who came for you.”

At this unexpected explanation, Emilia was stunned.

That Emilia had been brought out of Roswaal’s mansion against her will was true. And that she had been angered by it, and had disliked Subaru for it, was also truth.

However, she had not refused that clinging, pleading Subaru. It was likewise correct that she had overlooked the fact he had been doing his utmost to protect the time he had spent with Emilia.

And yet despite that, could it really be said that was Emilia wholly unrelated to how things were?

Wouldn’t arguing that just be the peak of shamelessness?

Puck: “Lia, if you just wait here nicely, as a poor princess, your rescuers will aid you, but…”

While speaking as if they were whispering, Puck landed on Emilia’s thin shoulder. And then, with that cat Spirit nearing her cheek, Emilia painfully comprehended the unspoken continuation of his words.

If she waited here, she would be rescued as a victim.

However, if Emilia left by herself, then she would be a perpetrator that had been acting of her own free will.

Faced with that fact, there was not even a moment of hesitation.

Emilia: “…”

Rising, Emilia put her hand on that white room’s only door.

To open it from the outside, a complicated authentication procedure was needed for identification, so Subaru, and her caretaker, Frederica, were the only people allowed to enter or leave.

The moment Emilia's hand touched the door from the inside, however, the system crumbled, leaving no trace behind.

Emilia: "Subaru, you twit…"

Seeking signs of the destroyed technique with the palm of her hand, Emilia murmured in a weak voice.

It had been originally created so it would be broken by Emilia and Emilia alone. In other words, Subaru had made it so Emilia could escape whenever she wished to.

That bird cage's door had been designed to be destroyed by the determination of the bird caged inside all along.

Was it perhaps because Subaru had trusted that Emilia would never escape?

Or maybe, was it Subaru's own kindness, in that he wished to respect Emilia's desire to run away?

That answer, she desired to hear it straight from Subaru's mouth, she thought.

—At the end of a time during which she had not been capable of choosing anything, that was the answer Emilia had settled upon.

14

Having been removed from the reception room, running through the castle along with Halibel, the Purge King, the youth, his boss, his master, he—Natsuki Subaru gave a deep chuckle.

Subaru: "Something like taking Felt as a hostage, I wonder if that might've been a good idea…"

If so, would it have restrained Reinhard's movements?

—No, rather than that, gaining Reinhard’s wrath, and having to fight the Sword Saint powered up with emotion seemed more likely.

This’d be the flow of the simulation till its very end.

In complete honesty, he’d had a premonition that the moment of Pandemonium’s fall would turn out in this manner

Subaru: “Guess posing as a big boss in the underworld was kinda fun…”

He was looking back. At the path towards here.

Just how much suffering had he caused? With the weaknesses of many people in his hands, and all while receiving their hatred, he would lord over others’ lives, receiving hate, ruling over his opponents’ lives, and on a whim taking those lives—

—No, it was definitely never a whim.

If it were perceived as toying, that would a very big misunderstanding.

He had never pondered it over. He had never given it a thought, because there was no point in attempting so, however.

—Subaru was afraid of people. Terribly so.

Outwardly approaching them with a smile, while hiding cunning slyness within himself in truth. That sort of way of being of a human being, concealing the truth, human beings moving as they pleased and move wherever following innumerable ulterior motives, was horrifying.

Whether to believe the people who were with him or not, worrying about that was idiotic.

And so, Subaru had decided on a way to simplify human relationships.

Everyone lied.

And so, with that, even if all human beings detested Subaru, a world devoid of problems would be established.

Every human, no matter who, possessed a weakness. Family, a lover, wealth, dreams, hope. Because of that—

Subaru: "—If only the weaknesses of every human being in the world could be grasped."

Then, only then, Subaru would not have to doubt anyone.

In a black and white world, in a world lacking any hues which could not be trusted, feeding on loathing, he could live comfortably.

Subaru: "…"

With Subaru, aiding in his escape, was Halibel.

To Subaru, Halibel's figure did not look to be their true form—his appearance appeared monochrome. He looked to be in only two colors, white and black.

Subaru: "…"

Appearing in monochrome like that was not restricted to just Halibel.

Right now, the world as it appeared to Subaru had, without exception, lost its colors and changed to possess but two.

People, objects, paintings, tools, jewelry, Magic Stones, fresh blood, water, all were black and white.

Blood and water seemed no different from one another, soup and poison also were not distinguishable.

Everything was monochrome. Black and white.

In such a world, that which looked colorful to Subaru amounted to only a few.

That only those were real, Subaru believed so.

Everything else was fake, Subaru believed so.

Beatrice had been so.

Emilia was so.

Beyond that, there was only one.

Anyway, Subaru could not believe in anyone else.

Everything else other than them, it truly looked faded.

Those fakers could not, only those real articles.

The qualifications to decide whether Natsuki Subaru should live or die were held only by them, only those real articles.

Subaru: "…I had a tad of expectations from Reinhard."

Perhaps those from before those days—in truth, he had expected those he had been involved with before the event that had triggered the loss of color would have remained without those colors fading.

However, he had appeared to Subaru just as monochrome as someone he had just met for the first time. Such expectations had been fleeting, and so Reinhard, despite how vivid he had seemed, now appeared as an ashen mass to Subaru. It looked dirty.

In the end, Reinhard was also a child of man.

There was no doubt that he too would continuously lie while living. That was all there was to it.

???: "Master—!"

As Subaru and Halibel ran through the castle, a sudden loud voice called out to them, intersecting them.

What could be seen dashing from the other side of the corridor towards them, was the long-haired, long in body maid Frederica. Though hard to discern her colors, that face's potent impression was easy enough to remember.

Subaru had secretly found Frederica to his liking. And so—

Frederica: “Prepare yourself—Shh!”

She, rushing in and making an attempt on his life and shouting both in a disciplined manner, appeared to be of a lovable nature to him.

Of course, those actions from Frederica would not be tolerated by the eyes of Kararagi’s strongest.

Frederica “Ah, ugh!”

The dagger in her hand being taken away, Frederica had been pushed up against the wall, her arm pinned. At Halibel, performer of these actions, Frederica could only turn back her head,

Frederica: “Why are you doing this, Halibel-sama? Now, by taking advantage of this turmoil, that man…!”

Halibel: “Ya could kill him. I understand why ya’d think so. Ya children whose weaknesses’ve been grasped, y’all desire for freedom with Su-san’s death. I know, but.”

There, Halibel opened his narrowed eyes, and glared at Frederica. Being bathed in the light of those eyes, from Frederica’s thin throat a quiet sound was produced.

Halibel: “Unfortunately, I don’t follow boss because of my weaknesses. To pay back Su-san’s kindness, that’s why I serve him.”

Frederica: “A kindness?! From this man, kindness? Stop playing around…!”

Held tight against the wall, with bloodshot eyes Frederica looked fiercely at Subaru. Those already sharp fangs grew, and those thin feminine fingers, began transforming into a thick, strong and beast-like state.

Frederica: “No matter what… Hk?!”

Halibel: “Su-san?”

Next to Frederica, fervent, her body distorted, Subaru had at some point come to stand.

Frederica widened her eyes while Halibel called out to him, but Subaru did not pause. Like that, Frederica desperately raised her arm, and grazed Subaru's neck.

At that moment, the scarf wrapped around his throat came undone and fell to the floor—

Frederica: "—Hii."

Frederica, seeing it, from deep in her throat made a sound.

Halibel, too, seeing that for the first time, revealed a faint surprise.

—On Natsuki Subaru's neck, clearly remained marks shaped like fingers.

Subaru: "It won't do, Frederica. I won't allow that black-and-white you to kill me."

Frederica: "…"

At that frozen Frederica, Subaru drew his face close and asserted with certainty.

Perhaps, he had hoped that Frederica may have had some color. Nevertheless, even at this crucial moment, Frederica had remained in black and white.

Subaru: "Halibel-san… Take Frederica, and let her get away."

Halibel: "…Su-san. The insider that dragged in the Sword Saint's prolly—"

Subaru: "I know."

Gazing at that Frederica unable to move an inch, Subaru cut off Halibel's words.

Even without it being said, he understood. It was comprehensible that Frederica had secretly done such things, her emotions, given the extremes of her treatment, were capable of being understood.

—Nay, it was not limited to just Frederica. If not her, that someone else would have done. That it would only be her had been a miscalculation.

Subaru: “You don’t have to come back, Halibel-san. I’ll go settle things, in my own way.”

Halibel: “…”

Subaru: “If you wanna return my kindness, that’ll be enough. In the first place, you got no reason to feel gratitude… I was just being cunning, after all.”

Shaking his head, Subaru smiled lightly at Halibel.

Halibel had, perhaps, regarded Subaru as someone who cared for him. Nevertheless, from Halibel he could not see any color either.

Perhaps, once the color was lost, it would never be restored.

It was because Subaru had lost the right to believe in something.

So was it that not one thing in the world would be colored for Subaru forevermore?

If so, that which was there to cling onto, was only—

Halibel: “With Su-san, I had wanted to be proper friends.”

Subaru: “…If I hadn’t run away, that might have been.”

Accepting Subaru’s intentions, Halibel, with those short words, simply said farewell.

Subaru, too, felt that exchanging more between them would be inappropriate.

But in the end, at that person who could have become a friend, he wanted to look cool.

Subaru: “Frederica.”

Frederica: “…”

At that call, Frederica slowly turned towards him.

At the woman who had lost the will to fight, Subaru was hesitant about how to convey it.

He wished to report to her, because he had been told to do so,

Subaru: “The food was always delicious, they told me that.”

—Perhaps, Frederica did not understand the meaning of that odd sentence.

Till the very end, in her eyes, Natsuki Subaru must have appeared as a monster.

That was fine. Even if it was like that, it did not matter. He had acted as such, he had been such.

He had not obtained the results he wished to see, however.

Subaru: “Then, where should I go, I wonder.”

Halibel had taken Frederica and, fading into the shadows, disappeared.

Left behind, Natsuki Subaru was alone in the collapse of his dreams.

Pandemonium shook constantly, perhaps evidence that Reinhard and Cecilus’s battle raged on. However, the multiple voices he could hear from afar showed that the assault was not limited to only Reinhard; he adjudged that potential foes had taken advantage of the opportunity.

Enemies, enemies, enemies. Nothing but enemies.

Having lived the way he did, it could not be helped.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru had reached a fork, and for nary a moment he hesitated in deciding where to go.

Going right, would have him come across Emilia’s private quarters, the girl who had supported his weak self.

Going left, would have him come across what his weak self had taken as a kind of support, that girl—

Subaru: “—Eh?”

It was at the moment he was faced with the option of where to go.

Someone running up, had pierced Subaru’s left side with a sharp knife.

15

In a strange castle within a strange landscape, Emilia was running barefoot.

Though having spent a year inside Pandemonium, what Emilia knew of the castle was only that white room, her private quarters. Outside her room, and past the inside of the building, had gone completely unexplored by Emilia.

And that still did not change. Emilia’s interest was not focused on this world.

Now, Emilia’s concern was now focused on only one person, only the boy that had sought her.

???: “—Emilia-sama!”

Called by her name, with a startled expression Emilia stopped her steps.

Pandemonium had partially collapsed, losing its original form. In a white corridor, its windows slanted and cracked, Emilia had been halted by a young man with sky-blue eyes and blazing red hair.

Emilia: “Reinhard…”

Reinhard: “Have you been well, Emilia-sama? I am glad to be able to meet you again.”

Even in this place, adhering to a Knight’s courtesy and posture, his attitude was too brave and elegant.

That man had run to Emilia’s side after finding her. Reinhard van Astrea bowed his head. But due to his appearance, Emilia’s amethyst eyes were shaking from bewilderment.

Emilia: “Reinhard, you’re gravely wounded. Are you alright?”

Reinhard: “There is no need to worry. That it is a light wound, cannot quite be said, however.”

Saying that, Reinhard relaxed his lips with Emilia’s words.

But Reinhard’s appearance, to her, was rife with injuries. She had thought it unimaginable.

Covering his body were innumerable cuts produced by flashes of a blade, and with the bleeding having not ceased even now, red droplets of blood were dripping here and there in the white corridor. On those noble and fearless cheeks strands of crimson hair were scattered about, stuck onto it; on his face was a certain hue of fatigue, albeit she had never seen his breathing in a disturbed state.

That white Knight’s uniform was dirtied and covered in blood, not only another’s but his own as well, and what was shocking above all—

Emilia: “Your, sword.”

Reinhard: “That right here right now is a scene for the Dragon Sword to be drawn, has been judged by the sword.”

That never-drawn, never-needed Holy Sword that was passed down through the Astreas, the Dragon Sword Reid with white light shone.

That blade, in this castle, against whom had he wielded it? Against whom would he wield it in the future?

Reinhard: “Anyway, that Emilia-sama is safe is fortunate… Depart from here alongside me. There is a dragon carriage waiting outside the castle. With it, to Lugunica—”

Emilia: “To Lugunica… Where is this?”

Reinhard: “This is at the edge of the Kararagi City-States, a hidden castle at the Crimson Hills Girall… Finding the organization took great effort, but through the efforts of a competent spy and an insider, it was somehow discovered.”

While answering Emilia’s questions, Reinhard was regarding his surroundings warily.

That even now the shaking continued meant that somewhere in this castle a battle was continuing to take place. In Reinhard’s case, he would wish to head towards his allies to support them.

No matter how covered in wounds he was, he was still the Kingdom’s strongest—no, the world’s strongest man.

With him, Pandemonium’s fall was only a question of time.

If he were not here—

Reinhard, “Emilia-sama, right now, we must—”

Hurry from this place, Reinhard might have been trying to say.

However, those words were suddenly interrupted by Emilia’s actions, who had spun in place.

Emilia: “…”

It was but an instant.

From the back, through Reinhard’s abdomen, a sword of ice had pierced. Blood flowed through the blade of frost, his insides being destroyed by the invading cold. The Sword Saint, at the shock he had never felt before, coughed up blood.

Reinhard: “Emilia, sama.”

Emilia: “Ah.”

Reinhard, still unable to understand what had happened, fell onto his knees. Watching that appearance, Emilia blankly stared at her own white fingers.

What she had done, she was realizing that it really had been an unexpected act.

—If this had been a betrayal from Emilia’s true heart, Reinhard could have blocked it.

Were it an attack holding hostility and intent to kill, Reinhard’s intuition would not be evaded. Or, in the case his Divine Protections were working properly, sure enough Reinhard’s defense would not have been pierced either.

But this place was Pandemonium, and Emilia herself could not make up her own mind—That had, in Reinhard, left a fatal gap.

Emilia: “I, can’t…Not that. Subaru is, no. Reinhard, no. Subaru, I won’t let him be hurt. Subaru, needs me…”

Shaking her head in refusal, Emilia’s own actions now corroborated her true intentions.

The reason for that instantaneous act, for the instantaneous assault on Reinhard, was she had instinctively realized that his existence would destroy Pandemonium and target Natsuki Subaru.

And, knowing that, she instinctively did not stop herself, that was what was thinking.

Unconsciously, Emilia, for the sake of protecting Subaru, had no choice but to kill Reinhard.

Emilia: “Subaru is my…”

Only at this point, did Emilia understand her own feelings.

Again and again, Subaru had come looking for her, and she had watched his form on as he had tried to attain peace of mind. During that time, Emilia had also been saved.

—Just as Subaru needed Emilia, Emilia also needed Subaru.

Emilia: "I will, protect him. If, I don't protect Subaru, then…"

Reinhard: "Emilia-sama, that is…"

Emilia: "—Puck! Please!"

A roar, and a cold wind blew, and her silver hair fluttered beautifully amidst the white hallway.

His body bathed in an extremely frigid wind of sublimated intent to kill, at his flesh freezing as it was subjected to severe wind, Reinhard drew a line of blood in midair as he flew far to his back. And, with his coughing mixed with blood, he lifted his sword.

Those blue eyes that reflected the sky regarded the Witch of Glaciation and the Beast of the End, standing side-by-side.

Puck: "Sorry, Reinhard. Lia's wishes are my own. If you're that weakened, even I might win—you can think of it as catlike cruelty."

Emilia: "Please, Reinhard. Return like this. Leave me and Subaru alone."

Reinhard: "—That, is not possible."

With Emilia having caused this situation, yet still trying to find a satisfactory solution, Reinhard shook his head.

Already, negotiations had broken down. He had been taken by surprise from behind—no, perhaps Reinhard himself, even considering his wound, may have accepted the offer of reconciliation if the situation allowed.

But Reinhard's belief, however, was that this was already a situation which did not allow for that.

Reinhard: "As the head of Pleiades, the Purge King, Natsuki Subaru, starting with the murder of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, among the people of the Kingdom, as well as of the Vollachian Empire and the Kararagi City-States, and among the subjects of the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, has already had one-hundred-twenty-six-thousand-seven-hundred-and-two people killed in total."

Emilia: "…"

Reinhard: "That number only goes for direct damage. When including the indirect damage, the number of victims who have lost their life increases even more. No matter what, it is not an evil that can be left ignored."

Reinhard's words held a serious resonance and held a plea.

From listening to his words and learning of Natsuki Subaru's evil deeds, there was a feeling that he was hoping for a change of heart to be born in Emilia from that.

In truth, Emilia had received a shock. Stuck in her private quarters, having been left only to the role of watching over Subaru's sleeping face, she had not known of any of his wrongdoing. That Roswaal had been killed when she had been pulled out of that mansion, she had vaguely guessed.

Struck by that shock, Emilia bowed her head.

Shock, there was definitely a shock. However, the shock Emilia felt to her core was not from disappointment about the weight and number of sins Subaru had committed—

Emilia: "—Sorry, Reinhard. Still, Subaru is dear to me."

Even having learned about those evil acts her obsession with Natsuki Subaru had not wavered at all, learning that had been the source of her shock.

Emilia's feelings, even knowing the truth, had not changed.

Reinhard: "—Kh."

Faced with such a declaration from Emilia, Reinhard bit his lip. And soon raising his face, and directing the drawn Dragon Sword, Reinhard: “Reinhard van Astrea, of the Sword Saint bloodline.”

Emilia: “I’m Emilia. Just, Emilia.”

Having each named themselves, at that next moment, a white shock destroyed the uppermost floor of Pandemonium.

The captive princess, who had been supposed to be rescued, and a Knight in shining armor who had come to rescue her, would end up killing one another.

16

Subaru: “Damn, it… Fucking… That, damn… bastard…!”

Cursing, Subaru ran, his steps faltering.

Beneath those swaying feet, with a tip-tap droplets of fresh blood trickled—a knife had been stabbed by his left armpit by an assassin at the time of his assault. The pain was performing a Dempsey Roll on his brain non-stop.

Subaru: “That black and white asshole… If there’s a next time, I’ll definitely kill you…!”

Sweating profusely, Subaru leaned on the corridor wall to continue moving along. At the end of it all, the assassin had run away, without delivering the coup d’grâce—the man who was supposed to have disappeared in the reception hall came to mind.

Bastard: “More than this is beyond the scope of my work. So, be careful, Natsuki-san.”

Killing the general lying in the midst of the enemy, then speaking some and escaping could be called splendid—Yet Subaru did not have giving praise to his enemies as an hobby.

To be precise, that man had been doing work he did not wish to have to do. That sense of pure humiliation due to having overlooked a troublesome enemy out of carelessness had his disappointment turn to fury.

However, it was unlikely that this situation would allow him to vent his anger.

Subaru: “Something suitable for the end, something suitable for these last moments…”

Prick-Prick, while touching that left armpit that hurt as if burned, Subaru murmured gloomily.

Given what he had done, he knew for certain that someday he would receive his just deserts. Despite that, to postpone that moment of meeting retribution all the way to hell had been the plan, such was this ordinary person’s petty wisdom—it was a shame that he had gone not three years before having found his limit.

Such was how the dictator would welcome his end.

His distrust at the end had been excessive. There was no doubt that it had spurred on this destruction.

However, he held no regrets.

If he had done this, if he had done that, those kinds of obvious mistakes did not come to mind.

He had known from the start that it was wrong, and never thought to correct it. Merely thinking that his way of life had been mistaken or something of the sort, Subaru had done nothing but flounder.

Much like if he were drowning. As if he had fallen in, only desperate for breath.

Just from that—

???: “—Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

Leaving a trail of blood, crawling through that hallway, someone called out to that Subaru.

For a moment, Subaru furrowed his brows, not understanding that voice—It was not that he did not know it. But, because he did not comprehend why he was hearing that voice at this place.

Because her private quarters were on the opposite side of this place, and there would no reason to be here if her intent were to escape. Therefore—

Subaru: “Uh, whoa!”

???: “I’m relieved, Subaru… I can meet you properly.”

Subaru: “Emilia…?”

It was not until he looked into her beautiful face from up-close, her having rushed towards him and knocked him down within that corridor, that Subaru came to grips that this was reality.

Together with that world of black and white, there was silver, and there was amethyst, and there were cherry-colored lips.

As if to inform that Emilia, and Emilia alone, remained with color in the world.

Subaru: “—But, why?”

Emilia’s figured was tinted, yet Subaru could not comprehend as to why.

From Emilia, Subaru was receiving definite warmth, her embrace such that it could even be called painful.

After all, Subaru had always sought Emilia out one-sidedly; for what reason, what conditions had made her become so that she would come to Subaru—

Subaru: “…Emilia, you’re hurt.”

Emilia: “—It’s fine, really. Truly, nothing happened. No need for concern.”

Emilia, still embracing him, looked at him again. Smiling, putting on a brave front, she was covered in wounds all over.

Her wonderful silver hair was disheveled and portions had been cut, giving it an uneven appearance. Her thin white nightgown had been torn and bloodied, and on her bare feet several painful lacerations could be found.

To prevent it from being like this, innumerable defensive measures should have been applied to her private quarters.

Furthermore, there should have been a Spirit alongside her, one that would have not permitted her going through any of this suffering.

Subaru: “What has Puck been doing…”

Emilia: “Puck is… Hmm, about that, everything’s fine now. Everything’s fine now…”

Subaru: “—?”

For a moment, hesitation flashed within Emilia’s eyes, but it was hidden quickly, beneath shutting eyelids.

Subaru held suspicions regarding that reaction, but the next time Emilia opened her eyelids, the faintly-visible hesitation was nowhere to be found.

Emilia: “Subaru, let’s run away together. If we do it now, nobody will be chasing after us.”

Subaru: “—Run away, with me?

Emilia: “Yes. Who else would it be with? Don’t say such weird things.”

Her demeanor becoming slightly tinged by anger, Emilia poked Subaru’s nose with a finger. Due to that seemingly way out-of-place act, above Subaru a question mark floated up.

To begin with, Emilia was supposed to be shunning Subaru.

Subaru: “And yet, all I did was presume upon you because you’re kind…”

Emilia: “—Really, did you? I’ve been thinking about something like that too.”

Subaru: “Emilia?”

Her hand on her chest, Emilia ephemerally lowered the corners of her eyes, appearing lonely.

Were the times she had passed alongside Subaru ever since he had taken her away flashing through her heart, through her mind? How many times had she gazed at that abominable companion’s sleeping face?

In those times, Subaru had received salvation, but to Emilia they would have been filled with humiliation—

Emilia: “I do believe was angry with you, Subaru. But, it truly only at the beginning… After that, I thought I was definitely receiving Subaru’s help.”

Subaru: “Receiving help, from me…?”

Emilia: “Because, Subaru, you had been needing me. Nobody would ever need me, that was how I had felt, and you had freed me of that, and so…”

“Codependency”, a word of that sort surfaced inside Subaru’s mind.

Subaru had required Emilia’s presence for peace of mind, and, much in that vein, Emilia’s mind too had arrived at a conclusion of that ilk at the time, that she herself desired those times, that she needed them.

And so, the pair had fallen into a codependent relationship, each in turn relying on the other.

Emilia: “Subaru, I want to be with you. So, let’s run away?”

Subaru: “…You putting it like that makes me happy, but…”

Responding while stuttering, Subaru could not accept Emilia’s confession yet.

His heart was overwhelmed with shock, but taking little notice of that, his mind reached a more realistic answer.

What Emilia had said, running away with her, was not possible.

Reinhard was coming. Even if Cecilus was attempting to hold him at bay, outside the castle a massive crowd of enemies would be gathered to subjugate the Purge King.

No longer did Subaru possess a single ally outside the castle. His numerous tricks for the sake of keeping potential enemies in check, would not function in this situation. Those potential enemies had become concrete ones blocking his path.

Taking Emilia and running away, it was not realistic at all.

Natsuki Subaru was to meet his end here. Here, he would come to an end—

Emilia: "—Then, I'll die together with you."

Subaru: "…"

At that moment, Subaru was stunned. More so than when he was stabbed, or when Reinhard first appeared, or when he realized that this was the end.

The smiling Emilia gazed on at Subaru, and spoke words containing love and definite affection.

If Natsuki Subaru was to meet his end, Emilia as well, in this place —

Emilia: "We'll meet the end together. I don't want to stay in a place where you won't need me."

Subaru: "—Ah."

Emilia: "Please, Subaru. I, need you. I want you to be with me."

Emilia clung closer to his chest. Relishing in her warm droplets and the feeling of her sighs, Subaru got the strong sense that the feeling he needed was the exact opposite of what he usually felt.

Just as he had clung onto Emilia, Emilia was now clinging onto Subaru.

All along, Subaru had been needing Emilia, having been receiving salvation from her.

And now, Emilia needed Subaru, seeking salvation.

Now, Emilia was in need of Subaru, calling for salvation of her own.

That a moment like this would come now, such a thought had not even—

Emilia: "Subaru…?"

Grabbing Emilia's clinging shoulders, Subaru shoved her away.

And, standing up in front of her, motionless, her eyes opened wide in shock, Subaru then stepped back.

Emilia was looking upwards, towards Subaru.

And to Emilia, his lips trembling, Subaru uttered.

Subaru: "That's, a lie…"

Shaking his head horizontally in refusal, Subaru stared at Emilia—with fearful eyes.

Emilia: "Suba…"

Subaru: "No, please stop, stop it. Why me, why now, why! Stop it! Stopit stopit stopit! PLEASE STOP!!"

Fear, it was fear.

There was fear. There was nothing but fear. There was only fear. Certainly, only fear.

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???: “—With so much of the Witch’s stench drifting from you.”

He covered his ears.

He held his head.

Trying to run away from that voice, from that raised shriek, from that audible voice.

???: “—There’s a limit to how much you can pretend to be unrelated to her!!”

As to cover his ears.

As to hold his head.

As to try to run away from that voice, from that raised shriek, from that audible voice, but unable to do such a deed.

???: “—Nee-sama is too kind.”

Subaru: “Do you think I would be aware of such a thing, AHHHHHH—Hk!!”

Screaming loud enough to the point of vomiting blood, Subaru retreated backwards.

Emilia stood up, asking him what was going on. He could not hear it.

With sweet, sugary, tender words, she tried to nestle closer to Subaru. He could not hear them.

Her words, her voice, were not being heard. He did not want to hear them.

Don’t be kind to me. Don’t treat me gently.

For what reason, are you trying to snuggle up to me?

Such a thing should be impossible.

Just how many evil deeds do you think I’ve piled up?

Emilia shouldn’t have forgiven them.

She really shouldn’t.

Was I the one to change that?

Had Natsuki Subaru’s foolishness, by having leaned on Emilia, by having relied on Emilia to sleep at night and get through everything, snot pathetically running from his nose, Subaru leaning, his pathetic nose running, on that pajama-wearing Emilia’s nights having relied on to overcome, been what had changed Emilia?

Did Emilia change as well?

Subaru: “It, would’ve been fine if you hated me! It would’ve been fine if you shunned me!”

Emilia: “…”

Emilia, was fading to gray.

Color faded from Emilia, washing away, plunged into the world of monochrome.

It was a lie, it had been a lie. That deception had caused Subaru's world to fade in tonality.

The silver, the amethyst that composed Emilia, the colors that made up the beautiful Emilia Subaru believed in disappeared from her, her deception causing her to be tainted by black and white.

That reality, he could not accept. Emilia was noble, and that would never change.

Even if she hated them, she could not keep someone who clung on to her away.

Because he had believed that her kindness was the materialization of her inner heart, and that she would never forgive Subaru, Subaru had been able to indulge himself in Emilia.

But, comprehending that Emilia too, changed—

Subaru: "Don't, act kindly towards me…!"

Subaru: "No matter what, you'll come to hate something about me, won't you? You'll come to doubt me, won't you? Because I'm an obstacle, you'll think of murdering me, of hating me, of cursing me, and you'll come to betray me!"

Subaru: "Then, please keep hating me, like it was at the start! If you'd just stayed like that, without changing, it would've been fine! Just do as you did, and hate me. Just do as you did, and hate me …!"

Suddenly welling up, was anger.

He was proceeding to drown in anger, at anything and everything in the world.

In trying to save his drowning self, he had struggled desperately as to try and take repeated breaths. But having finally at this juncture, even Emilia had betrayed Subaru.

—Something that changed would one day come to betray him, and because of that, it was similar to having been betrayed already.

Subaru: “Please don’t you pretend to be in love with me when you’ll just betray me one day!!”

Emilia: “—Hk.”

Shakily, Subaru thrusted away the monochrome Emilia extending a hand towards him.

Pushed back with resolve, Emilia fell over in the hallway, having lost her support. For a moment, hesitation brushed against his chest, but Subaru fully painted it over with fear.

Even Emilia was no longer tranquil.

That this would come to pass someday, it was the very last possibility he had considered—He had not been thinking that she would be in such need of him.

—That Emilia could, someday, forgive Subaru.

That such a day would never come had been his hope, and that was fine, but sure enough, it had surely materialized.

Therefore, Subaru, left in this world of only black and white, could only rely on his last resort, the only thing in his possession.

Emilia: “—!!”

That fallen Emilia, was shrieking something.

Leaving it behind his back, Subaru began sprinting.

He could not feel any pain in his side. He no longer cared about such a thing.

There was merely a wish to end everything. Subaru’s world of color was disappearing entirely.

What remained was, just that.

The last straw on to which the drowning Natsuki Subaru clung onto, was merely—

—An existence with hatred that would never change, which would not forgive Subaru.

Emilia: “—!!”

That half-mad Emilia’s voice did not reach that half-mad Subaru.

The collapse of that den of wickedness, Pandemonium, much like the collapse of its master’s mind, advanced at increasing speed.

Within that world crumbling, that world devoid of color, Subaru had finally arrived.

Subaru: “…”

He arrived at Natsuki Subaru’s office, still whole.

Firm protections, like those that had been used for Emilia’s private quarters, had been applied to it—Because, in this room, there was something which absolutely should never be damaged there, much like Emilia.

He had kept Emilia away out of a wish for harm not to befall her, but this was the opposite.

That which had been set up at the place closest to himself, was what Subaru opened up.

The door concealed behind the bookshelf, was truly a door that no one, with the exception of Subaru, would be able to open.

Without haste, Subaru opened it.

On the other side of the open door, the sound of chains, the sound of chains linked to the wall, reverberated.

And, while playing that sound of chains, pink-colored eyes gazed at Subaru, and spoke.

???: “—Finally, did you come wanting to die, Barusu?”

—Solely because of her hatred, the girl that desired to murder his own self held a minute smile, with the color of blood.

END

Gluttony IF: Patching Together a Life in Another World From Zero

1

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to mold its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to fill in the colors.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

Patching together, patching together.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and even now, as he patched himself together, he was still incomplete—

2

???: “—Hey, do you know my name?”

The little girl, Amue Sears, held her breath at that question.

It was quite an ordinary question, without any real coherence to it. It should have been a dull question that wouldn’t have required much time or preparation to answer. If you know it, you know. If you don’t know it, you don’t. That’s all it was.

Amue: “…”

But, Amue's voice did not come out at that question, even if it were to be seen at face value.

Life was a series of choices. This was the reality which even Amue, who had just turned 14 years of age, was well aware of from her experiences in her short life.

When it comes to life, decisions have to be made in just about everything. It begins from small, ordinary things, or, perhaps it was a variety of the big decisions that affect life. But, setting aside whether they were big or small, life was made up entirely of decisions.

And now, a question which held the greatest weight of her 14 years alive was raised at Amue Sears. Or perhaps, it was the greatest decision of her life. That dull, insignificant question, with nothing special about it, that had been raised just before, was that very thing.

???: "—Hey, do you know my name?"

The repeated question kept tightening Amue's throat. Nevertheless, the one who had raised the question didn't seem to have wanted to cause that. It was even a kindness to repeat the question once again; such a consideration felt like quite an imbalance.

If it was the one questioning that was tormenting Amue, then it was also the one questioning that held the most anxiety for Amue. In truth, she understood that he was just seeking an answer to the question. That's why Amue would have to grope for the right solution amongst the options, without any hints other than what was available from pondering it over within her head.

—What would really be the correct answer?

Know it, or don't know it: which was the one that the questioner was looking for? Or perhaps it would be better to answer that she knew it, even if she didn't? Or, would it be better to answer that she didn't know it, even if she did?—Amue's heart shrieked at the two anguishing choices.

???: “—Hey. Do. You. Know. My. Name?”

Each part of the question that was once again repeated was punctuated in impatience. Even if they didn’t understand each other, would that make him anxious? That fear plucked at Amue’s chest. To be honest, she could be convinced that if she didn’t answer with either a “Yes” or “No” that it’d be unconditionally impossible to meet the questioner’s expectations.

She couldn’t end it still without saying anything, still without giving a response, and still without making a decision. She would not be set free. —Only in that, there was no doubt.

Amue: “…”

Still her voice didn’t come out. She returned the gaze of those black eyes which were right in front of her. Amue pondered. Within those vacant black eyes, the terrible visage of the haggard Amue herself could be seen within them. She really didn’t want to say it out loud, but in her own appearance, she was self-conscious of the way she could be seen; she had become a mere shadow of her former self.

Being absolutely terrified of the dominance of the questioner right in front of her eyes, she cowered.

Amue’s face was drawn out, exhausted, as if she had aged dozens of years all at once. If things continued this way, she’d end up dying by the mere pressure of the question itself; fragilely she—

???: “—Hey, do you know my name?”

The strong feeling of pressure that gave her the impression of death suddenly, quite on the contrary, inspired hope within Amue. Whilst Amue experienced the suffocating sensation that felt like her chest was about to cave in, a premonition that she’d answer the question and then be set free encompassed her. Just as she thought that, she realized that the dismal sensation that been dominating her entire body had started to fade.

A sense of suffocation had come from the strong pressure of her doubts concerning what she should answer. Since she wanted to be set free from this, she would need to bite down her anxiety at the initial question. Perhaps it was a kind of self-defense instinct, but for Amue in this moment, this appeared like a divine revelation. Therefore, with her lips trembling, she once again stared back into those black eyes.

???: [—Hey, do you know my name?]

She would be set free from her current suffocation by answering the question. With all her willpower, Amue finally moved her trembling tongue, and formed some words.

Amue: [N… no…]

In accordance with her heart, Amue replied that she didn't know. She released her thoughts from the choices which had been up until then endlessly spinning around in her mind.

She answered the question with utmost lucidity. In fact, she didn't know neither the name or face of the questioner that stood in front of her.

When it came to her, who lived in a place that ought to be called the borderlands, the so to speak remote countryside, events from the Kingdom, even serious ones, were like rumors from a faraway land.

That's why, no matter how much of a big shot he was, to her, he was a stranger that she didn't know—

???: [—Is that so?]

It was a short reply. She couldn't tell whether deep emotion or dejection had been put into that reply. But Amue's decision had been formed. What came after was the questioner's problem.

If life was a series of choices and decisions, then that was the same for anyone. Since Amue had chosen, the questioner would also have to chose.

Amue: “…”

The 14 year old little girl waited for the questioner’s choice silently.

—She waited for his answer all alone in the middle of a village where no one had been left except for her.

3

???: [Hey, Subaru. Isn’t it time for lunch soon?]

Stopping in his tracks at hearing that call, Natsuki Subaru rubbed his stomach. The time had already passed noon, and now that it had been mentioned, he was indeed feeling hungry. The reason behind why he hadn’t noticed it until now was because he had been concentrating on walking about without heed. The main road continued endlessly on and on to the extent that he had to concentrate entirely on walking. If he were to think about where he was headed to, it’d get to the extent that he’d feel depressed; such was how absurdly long the journey was.

Subaru: “Though, a break is important don’t you think? My bad, Emilia-tan. Did you get tired?”

Emilia: [Not at all, I’m doing fine. But, it was just on my mind that I was worried for Subaru, who’s been walking all this time. If you’re alright, it’s fine, but…]

Subaru: “Nono, that’s right, my stomach was rumbling as well. I’m absolutely starving, almost to the point where my stomach was dangerously close to sticking to my back. Heh, how dangerous how dangerous.”

Emilia: [Is that so? That would be a reaaaaaally dangerous place for them to be, right…]

Having heard Subaru’s answer, who had exaggeratedly placed his hands on his stomach, the silver haired girl—Emilia placed her hand against her mouth and giggled. Her features looked the prettiest in this world, and the sound of her voice was rather like that of a silver bell. As that smiling face drew nearer, Subaru scratched his head and also let his lips split into a smile. And, from beside those two—

???: [Don’t tease Emilia too much, I suppose. No matter how rumbly your stomach is, it’s impossible for your stomach and back to stick together, in fact.]

Subaru: “Oopsy.”

When he turned his head to look at the direction of the voice, Beatrice was there, a composed expression resting on her face and her arms folded. Subaru suddenly narrowed his eyes at the point made by the little girl who was wearing a pretty dress. Seeing that, Beatrice furrowed her well-kept eyebrows and said [What, I suppose?]

Beatrice: [Subaru’s face is a little unsettling, in fact. What’s the matter, I suppose?]

Subaru: “It was so cute when you said rumbly. Say it again!”

Beatrice: [Grrrrr, in fact! Don’t get caught up in such strange things, I suppose!]

With her face flushed, Beatrice snapped back at Subaru’s frivolous words. Subaru and Emilia both exchanged glances and laughed seeing how Beatrice had reacted. She had puffed out her cheeks even more. Seeing her like that was really cute. —There was no mistake about it. If he were to tell her this directly, he would probably dampen her mood. After confirming that, Subaru rolled up one of his sleeves with an “Alright!”

Subaru: “Well then, how about we take advantage of Emilia-tan’s concern and start lunchtime? For the time being, let me show off my talent. Any requests?”

Emilia: [Ah, well then, I want you to use mayonnaise. Hey, look, I imagine Ram just made some mayonnaise again, right?]

Subaru: “Of course, of course, it’s my pleeeeasure if that’s Emilia-tan’s order! Luckily, there’s plenty thanks to Ram’s stockpiles. She finally recognized the appeal mayonnaise has…”

Ram: [—Stop saying such idiotic things.]

Subaru: “Uwaaa?!”

After he placed down the baggage that he had been carrying, Subaru started to make a campsite just off of the main road. Seeing some slender legs standing roughly beside him, pale pink eyes were staring down at the surprised Subaru. The figure stood embracing her own arms, an air of majesticness about her. The girl held a look that showed nary a trace of hospitality as a stark contrast to the maid outfit she donned—

Subaru: “That was quite the abrupt greeting, eh, Ram. At least let me finish what I’m saying!”

Ram: [Hah! Stop making me laugh. I only help out in making mayonnaise because it’s a professional order. Would Ram trust in such a flavoring that’s just sour and white? Disgusting.]

Subaru: “Saying it’s disgusting is such an overstatement! To begin with, you shouldn’t be able to deny the explosive power of using mayonnaise on steamed potatoes! I won’t let you say that the taste is a lie!”

A flavor coated in plenty of mayonnaise on the steamed potatoes that came fresh from the oven which were full of salt. The sweetness of the forbidden flavors which overwhelmed one’s tongue was an Eden that should be savored by any mayonnaise lover at least once—Potatoes and mayonnaise indisputably held the highest compatibility with each other that could never lose its luster.

Subaru’s mouth watered as he recalled that splendid harmony of taste. Were the ones next to Subaru imagining the same taste? He could see Emilia and Beatrice’s eyes shimmering.

Subaru: “Look at that, the reactions of two cute gourmands! Seeing that, can you still slander mayonnaise with your heresy?!”

Ram: […Ah well. It’s as Barusu says. The magnificence of steamed potatoes is such that even strange seasonings like mayonnaise can add value to them.]

Subaru: “It’s not that way, it’s the opposite! No, even me saying the opposite isn’t right, it’s more like you’re being stubborn. Isn’t that right, nee-sama!”

In the end, Ram would never yield to saying that the contribution of mayonnaise was greater than that of steamed potatoes. Even though Subaru shook his fist at that obstinate attitude, Emilia broke into strained laughter, speaking out a “Now now, settle down” to the two of them.

Emilia: [Subaru, calm down. I like both mayonnaise and steamed potatoes, as well as mayonnaise placed on steamed potatoes. Besides, it’s rather just down to the fact that Ram can’t bring herself to be honest.]

Ram: […Emilia-sama, please stop concerning yourself with speaking out Ram’s thoughts as you please. Ram’s target age is going to lower with Emilia-sama speaking like that.]

Emilia: [S-Sorry. But, what do you mean by target age…?]

Emilia was perplexed by Ram’s unreasonable and unintelligible reaction. However, the feelings which had been expressed in the two’s conversation weren’t ones of moodiness, but rather they were feelings of unconcealable deep affection and faith. On the contrary, Emilia and Ram had built up quite an ideal relationship with each other. Calling it a master-servant relationship was quite a delicate issue as from Ram’s perspective she didn’t think of herself as a subordinate, however there were more bonds between the two of them. And only Subaru understood those well. In any case—

Subaru: “I feel bad for Nee-sama, but Emilia-tan’s word of God takes complete priority. That’s the style of this party. Anywho, today’s lunch will have a whole bunch of mayonnaise!”

Emilia: [Yaaay, yippee!]

Emilia clapped in delight, and Ram gave an exasperated sigh. Even so, that was enough for Ram to not cling onto it more than that.

Emilia herself understood its deliciousness. Of course, since Subaru was a true, unbridled mayo-lover, he would be the biased judge for this menu.

Subaru: “Of course, Beako loves mayonnaise a lot just like me. It makes you happy, right?”

Beatrice: [I can’t deny it, in fact. But, the oh so omniscient manner you speak about it in is irritating, I suppose. Betty’s anger isn’t easy to dispel, in fact. I want a delicious meal for that, I suppose.]

Subaru: “Hehe, as you wish.”

Puffing out her slender chest, Beatrice made her cute special request. Subaru gave a bow at the request. After seeing that dramatic gesture, and making sure that Emilia and the others were satisfied, they began preparing the meal. Even so, they couldn’t make such an elaborate meal in the open air. Of course, if they used the power of magic they could use fire and water like that, but,

Emilia: [I’m sorry, Subaru. I can’t really help you out much.]

Subaru: “You needn’t say sorry. Now is my time to shine, don’t you think? On the contrary, it’s fine if you fall in love with me again when I show off my unexpected creative skills.”

Emilia: [Jeez, you’re such an idiot.]

Returning a smile at Emilia who still had a faint smile on her face, Subaru set about on coming up with something to prepare the meal with the ingredients that were at his disposal now. Food was what provided their energy each day; he didn’t want to be shoddy with it. Checking the contents of his baggage, Subaru did everything he could to prepare a meal which could meet everyone’s needs. Everyone that accompanied him would be given tasty food to eat.

He hadn’t thought about it up until now, but it would be delightful for everyone to receive his tasty cooking that he had made to eat. That too served as a motivation for him as he made the food. If he was able to do such a simple thing so well, then that ought to have delighted his mother quite a lot.

Emilia: [Mhmhmhmhm…]

Whilst confining those emotions to a corner of his mind, Subaru peered out nearby at those who were busying themselves cooking and his cheeks relaxed at seeing the cheerful figures of Emilia and the others. He could even hear some humming. It was out of tune.

???: [Oho, the one on meal duty today is onii-sa~n. That's quite worryi~ng.]

Meili had appeared as they were making the preparations for the meal. She turned towards Subaru, giving him a look that was not suiting to her age as she twiddled her fingers through her deep blue braided hair. Subaru returned her gaze with a suspicious look in his eyes on seeing her sweetly smiling figure.

Subaru: "Worrying, huh? What worries. I ain't going to let a girl who says such impertinent things eat!"

Meili: [Wow, that's abu~se. Besides, isn't it Onii-san that tries to soak everything in may~onnaise? I don't really like it at all.]

Subaru: "Wh- what?! You as well don't know the charm of mayonnaise…?!"

Meili: [Don't make a face like the world's about to e~nd.]

Meili gave a sigh at seeing Subaru making such an astonished face. But, the shock that Subaru had received on hearing her reply was immeasurable. Even if it wasn't tantamount to it being the end of the world, the shock he had received was like as if he had realized it was the end of this year.

???: [Even so, I think you're taking it a little too seriously. Miss Meili was just saying that she was not on the same wavelength as you, who tries to mix mayonnaise into just about any ingredient.]

Subaru: "Ugh…"

It was Julius who had followed up Meili's words, as she showed her objections to mayonnaise. He was a handsome man, who embodied gracefulness even in his gait. Julius, who had made his way over to him, grinned at Subaru all of a sudden.

Julius: [If I may add something, I too share the same opinion as Miss Meili. Thought mayonnaise itself isn't that bad, its first impression diminishes when you put it on everything. You have to be careful with it, you know.]

Subaru: "You're such a prickly, noisy guy. What was happening now was an issue between me and Meili. It would have been nice if you didn't come butting in."

Julius: [I guess in my role as one of the members here, it's my duty to preserve the healthy environment of the group. Ignoring the seed of disagreement would result in it budding and on it blossoming, you will repent and lament it all too much. It's my duty to give you advice before it becomes that. And with all that, you're reacting like that?]

Subaru: "You're a guy who always has a comeback for everything I say, aren't you!"

Expressing himself in such a roundabout way, Julius poked at each of Subaru's indiscretions. Feeling like he'd been cornered by his words, Subaru's voice became rougher.

And, having heard their exchange, Emilia burst into laughter with a "Hehe"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: [As always, Julius and Subaru are reaaaallly good friends]

Subaru dejectedly dropped his shoulders seeing Emilia's gaze which looked as if she was looking at something pleasant. Also in the same standpoint, Julius closed one of his eyes whilst brushing his hand through his fringe.

Just this time did Subaru and Julius's opinions seem like they saw eye to eye. But, it seemed like there was quite the difference between the way Emilia received that opinion. Since her jewel-like amethyst eyes seemed to view the exchange between Julius and Subaru just now as if it had been an act between two close friends.

Subaru: “Umm, Emilia-tan. I’m always saying this, but that’s a…”

Emilia: [That’s a?]

That was always a big misunderstanding, no matter what the circumstances may be. Subaru tried to explain that to Emilia who had inclined her head in doubt—、

Subaru: “That’s a…”

Emilia: [□□□]

The words he had tried to continue as his explanation, the start of them halted, and Subaru’s lip stiffened.

Just now, Emilia’s movement, who had inclined her head and had been smiling in front of his eyes, came to a standstill. —No, it wasn’t just Emilia who came to a standstill.

Around Subaru’s surroundings where everyone had been in the midst of cooking up until now, everyone who had been speaking stopped in their tracks. Everyone became completely stiff. —It was as if the world’s time had entirely come to a stop awaiting Subaru’s next move.

But, the sound of the wind, the scent of the greenery and the boiling water indicated that it wasn’t so. The world hadn’t come to a stop. —Only Emilia and the others had. It’s as if Subaru was awaiting for the images to catch up with him, to try and make them reappear.

But, just Emilia and the others had come to a stop—

??? “—Master~! Badump, I went to check ahead~!”

Subaru: “…”

Suddenly, an extraneous presence thrust itself into the silent world which had been at a standstill. It moved in front of Subaru’s eyes, who had been kindling the fire sat atop of a boulder. The figure jumped nimbly, diving towards him with great vigor.

???: “Here’s to the quick return of Shaula! Master, please praise me and hug me and love me!”

A tall, beautiful woman, with a smile adorning her features, turned towards Subaru and said that. She was someone who exposed her clear white skin, and had long, tied-up brown hair. She showed off her sexy feminine body without any shame—The woman, Shaula, let a carefree smile float across her face.

Subaru: “…”

However, Subaru’s reaction to Shaula’s appearance was quite poor. That too should have been expected. She had came barging in just as Emilia was smiling.

Her exuberantly lively leap had scattered Emilia, and she had also erased all the others that had stood still. Subaru frowned at that fact.

Shaula: “Wh-What? Wh-What’s wrong, master? Did I maybe mess up again?”

Subaru: “…No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Shaula: “Is that so? Well then, I won’t worry! Ah, besides that, Master I’m glad you’re preparing the meal! I’m staaaarving~”

For a moment, Shaula’s face had clouded over at seeing Subaru’s facial expression, but as soon as she heard Subaru’s backtracking, she went to over to embrace Subaru, her face with nary a trace of her earlier anxiety.

Even though he felt Shaula’s body pressing against his arms, and her hellish softness against his elbow and shoulder, Subaru shook her off with a blunt: “Hey, get off of me.”

Shaula: “Ah! Master’s so mean…But I won’t be discouraged. Bambambam, by attacking you in this way, I will snipe right for Master’s heart, soul and male instincts.”

Subaru: “Like, it’s as if you’re aiming right in the middle… Also, don’t go grabbing the arms of people in the middle of cooking. What would you do if I ended up burning my hand?”

Shaula: “If that were to happen, I’d gently lick the affected part! I would lick it and lick it day and night without letting go!”

Subaru: “That wouldn’t stop it from swelling…”

Shaula insisted, raising both of her arms vigorously. Subaru shrugged his shoulders seeing that attitude from Shaula and gave a feeble laugh. Seeing that, Shaula raised her eyebrows with a: “So, so!”

Shaula: “Did Master laugh just now? Did something amusing happen?”

Subaru: “What’s amusing is you, just you.”

Shaula: “Ehh, is that… a marriage proposal…?”

Subaru: “How did you come to that conclusion?!”

He didn’t know how the conversation had jumped to that, but Subaru poked Shaula on her forehead (whose cheeks were squirming, dyed in red), putting into his feelings of denial and his objections to it. Receiving that, Shaula groaned, “Oww~”

Shaula: “Wellwell, doesn’t saying “You’re an amusing woman” act like a legal right for a man and woman to fall in love with each other! After saying that, shouldn’t you just be continuing it with “Be my woman”?!”

Subaru: “Really, where did you hear such one-sided information? That pattern seems to have grown old even from where I am from already; you hardly see it anymore… “

Maybe it wasn’t seldom whereby male protagonists would handle these first-met events in games targeted towards women, or in Shoujo manga. But, Subaru didn't know whether that was still in use now.

In any case, referring to Shaula as amusing was not so he could seduce her. But, as far as Subaru was concerned, Shaula's reaction was—

Subaru: "—The thing you said was unexpected, it was new."

Shaula: "…"

Subaru: "That's why talking with you isn't… so bad. I have no doubts about that."

He wouldn't specifically say that talking to people other than Shaula was painful. But, when Subaru conversed with other people, naturally, it would be often that he would be made aware of his own incompleteness. And that was painful. It didn't mean that someone was at fault. —The one at fault was always himself.

Subaru: "The one who's at fault… is always me. That's why…"

Shaula: "In other words, this time, it's a marriage proposal?!"

Subaru: "What the hell, no!"

The mood that came with that earnest speech lasted only for a second. Shaula let her discontentment rain at the shouting Subaru. She wiggled her hands and feet and said "Eeh~"

Shaula: "Butbut, in the place where I spent my time in idle grey, it was you that blew a new wind into me. It's like that. Doesn't that make it still a legal right within a legal right~?"

Subaru: "Absolutely not. So, where on earth does your biased source of knowledge come from…?"

He had intended to have a relatively serious conversation, but Shaula had completely broken that, and so Subaru abandoned the idea. Absentmindedly slackening his cheeks, Subaru went back to concentrating on his cooking.

Next to Subaru who was cooking by the side of the road, a meal was prepared for the two of them. For the two of Subaru and Shaula —not for those whom should have been enjoying the conversation, i.e. Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Meili and Julius amongst others.

—Realizing that truth once again, Subaru's chest ached in cruel, forlorn anguish.

4

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to mold its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to fill in the colors.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

5

It was often that he was made aware that he was an imperfect being. And that really frayed at his nerves. It was quite evident that it wasn't a healthy mentality by no stretch of the imagination, but if you were to really be put into that situation, then you'd be able to experience the sensations of his worn soul.

Frankly speaking, there was no doubt that the current Natsuki Subaru's frame of mind was in such a state.

Shaula: "—Master, master, where are we off to next?"

Subaru: "Ah, that's right…"

Shaula was walking right next to Subaru, humming as she went along, in high spirits. Looking up at hearing her question, Subaru pondered about it as he looked up ahead of the main road.

Ram: [For now I think we should head towards the west, right? Are you perhaps looking for civilization? If you want to get away from civilization then turn to the right and you can plunge right into the Great Waterfall, or so I'd hope.]

Subaru: “Don’t make such a scary suggestion, Nee-sama… That’ll be the only feeling I’ll end up getting from it you know.”

Her point wasn’t just candid advice, but rather it was said in typical Ram-like fashion, the kind that was like she was exchanging poison. Whilst keeping that in his chest, Subaru decided to head westwards in accordance with her advice.

Subaru: “I am going to keep on heading to the west… But, what will you do?”

Shaula: “Eh? Well, I’ll be following Master without ever letting go, right? Since the time we were separated from each other was sooo long, it’s gotten hard for me to be away from Master for even one second. Please take care of Shaula, who’s always watching over you from good morning to good morning.”

Subaru: “From good morning to good morning, you say… How Scary! Wouldn’t that be all throughout the day!”

Shaula: “Every day and night too.”

Shuddering at her rather grand stalkerish advance notice, Subaru cast his face down, a troubled expression adorning it. In all honesty, it felt strange that he had ended up walking along with Shaula.

There was Subaru who held shameful feelings of guilt and misery. And then there was Shaula who acted openly without any inhibitions. Though maybe with them as a combo, the balance of tension between plus and minus was kept at an equilibrium. But, in any case, even though Subaru certainly felt like he was helped out a lot by Shaula’s behavior, he couldn’t think of what merits there lay from Shaula’s perspective in accompanying him.

Shaula: “Master is Master; that’s the number one thing for me, y’know”

Subaru: “…Honestly, I don’t really get you. Are you seriously going to keep following me around?”

Shaula: “Of coursssе! Haven’t you heard of something called “Until Death does us Part”! I can’t let the love that built up during the time we didn't meet go dry y'know~ . I won't leave Master's side anymore no matter what happens. I will even give birth to so many children, as many as in a baseball team!"

Subaru: "Don't you go throwing such horrifying fastballs around…"

Stretching out her ample breasts, Shaula looked over at him with shimmering bright eyes. He covered his eyes with his palm. The depths of his heart were complex and hard to comprehend.

He wasn't really sure whether he should call Shaula's rather direct behavior flirting, but in itself, as a man, Subaru wasn't necessarily unhappy. If he placed her eccentricity to the side, Shaula was a beautiful woman and quite attractive.

Subaru: "…"

However, Natsuki Subaru's heart couldn't be shook by Shaula's temptations. Because such human-like emotions were things which could only be permitted in decent human beings. In brief, it was because they were absolutely unattainable capabilities for the current him.

Emilia: [I think it'd be better for Subaru to be a little more kind to Shaula. She keeps giving it her all like that, and even for all of that, isn't it pitiful?]

Suddenly, a chiming voice like a silver bell cut into Subaru's hesitation. Turning his gaze to his side, Emilia could be seen peering at Subaru's face. Subaru closed one of his eyes at her adorable pouting expression.

Subaru: "…Even though it's Emilia-tan saying that, don't you think that was really harsh? And here was me thinking that I knew how I thought about Emilia-tan."

Emilia: [Uhm… I guess. Maybe. Sorry. Of course, I'm lonely too; but I think it's pointless if you're always moping about it. After all…]

Subaru: "After all?"

Emilia: [After all, I'm already—]

As she narrowed her amethyst eyes, Emilia tried to continue her words from before. He'd want to immediately interrupt if there was something he didn't want to hear, but that was difficult. Not lending his ears to this Emilia's words was more difficult than cutting off the words of God.

However—

Subaru: "Whoops"

Even if it was impossible to spontaneously interrupt her, he could still interrupt her due to external factors. Suddenly hearing a noise drawing closer from behind him, Subaru shifted his attention away from Emilia and made his way to the side of the main road. The sound of wheels drawing closer informed him that a dragon carriage was approaching.

At once, he pulled Shaula's arm and the two of them escaped from the path of the dragon carriage.

Shaula: "Yhaa, Master sure is aggressive…"

Subaru: "Get off"

Subaru boisterously avoided Shaula's hug who had been taking advantage of him having pulled her arm. Having been shook off, Shaula crashed against some trees along the main road, and she let out a shriek, "GYAAAA"

Giving a quick glance back at Shaula whose nose had turned red, still crashing against trees, Subaru waited for the dragon carriage to pass by and out of his sight, before going back onto the main road once again—

???: "Hmm?"

Ahead of him, the dragon carriage that had passed by Subaru and Shaula let out a sound and came to a halt. It didn't seem like it was due to any troubles with the carriage body. With that, he couldn't think of any reason for it coming to a stop other than because of Subaru and Shaula.

It was still the peak time of the day, but the road was deserted. Subaru increased his vigilance for a split second as if he'd come across bandits or the likes.

???: "—You wouldn't happen to be Natsuki Subaru-san by any chance?"

However, that vigilance quickly vanished too due to the call from the individual who had descended from the dragon carriage's driver seat. After calling out his name, the tall youth who should have been sat at the driver's seat of the dragon carriage walked over to Subaru, who had now let go of his vigilance.

It was an individual whose age was around about Subaru's, with grey hair that was tied up into a ponytail. Though his gentle features didn't give off any striking impressions, quite unexpectedly, his build was quite robust. He didn't give off the vibes that he performed manual labor, but it did look like his work involved some at least.

Regardless of such a first impression, what mattered the most for Subaru was that this youth recognized him, and that he had called out his name.

???: "Ahh, it's as I thought, it's Natsuki-san isn't it? It's been a long time."

Subaru: "Aaah, well…"

He was a youth that greeted out to him with the familiarity of no doubt an acquaintance, even though there was a bit of a distance. As he hesitated on deciding how he would respond to him, Subaru looked around to his surroundings.

Receiving that look, Emilia, Beatrice and the others shook their heads. They had indicated that they had no clue who he was to Subaru. Emilia and the others, and Subaru as well, had thrown their hands up at that, but he hesitated in starting a conversation whilst pretending to know him.

That was Subaru's signature move, but he didn't want to do it right now due to various reasons. Seeing Subaru embroiled in confusion within his current mental state, the youth furrowed his well-shaped eyebrows and said,

???: “Oh, perhaps you’ve forgotten? It’s me, Regin Suwen…My older brother, Otto Suwen, helps you out. We met once before at the village.”

Subaru: “Regin you say… Ah, that Otto’s!”

Regin: “When you say it like that Otto, it’s almost like you’re saying it like it’s someone else’s business, no?”

Showing a forced smile at that unnatural expression, Subaru clapped his hands together in comprehension in front of the youth—Regin. Unfortunately, he couldn’t remember Regin’s figure, but he did know Otto’s.

Now that it was mentioned, Regin and Otto’s features did have many similarities with each other. There wasn’t any doubts that they were brothers, and also acquaintances of Subaru.

Subaru: “It was my bad, it was my bad. Like you just caught me now at a time where various things are going on inside my head. That’s why your name didn’t come to me right away, or something like that.”

Regin: “Nono, I guess it couldn’t be helped since you’re in such a busy position. The royal selection has reached even my ears living in the remote countryside… Nii-san isn’t causing you any nuisances, right?”

Emilia: [Otto-kun causing you nuisances… what a preposterous thing to say, eh? Everyone of us has been helped out in various ways thanks to Otto-kun.]

Subaru: “Yeah. Otto’s become a great help to all of us in the camp… something like that. If that guy wasn’t there, it’d seem like things would be far more all over the place.”

Regin: “Is that… so? I guess that’s good then…”

Though Regin expressed a vague sense of gratitude as he said that, it seemed that he was quite relieved to be told about the current state of his older brother. And after that, he flitted between looking at Subaru and Shaula who were standing a short distance away from each other.

Regin: “Even so, Natsuki-san, what are you doing in a place like this? I would think it’d be quite arduous walking on the main road without even riding on a dragon carriage…”

Subaru: “Aah, you’re quite right there, or rather, how should I put it… I’d love to make use of a dragon carriage, or the likes if possible, but due a number of reasons doing that would be difficult. And, regarding what you said before about what I’m doing…”

Cutting his words off there, Subaru thought for a second. And then, he found the right words.

Subaru: “The current me is in the middle of reconsidering my own self… you could say ‘A Journey of Self-Discovery.’”

Regin: “A Journey of Self-Discovery…?”

Subaru “Mhhhm, that’s right. A Journey of Self-Discovery… Gh-hahahaha!”

His own words were amusing; Subaru laughed involuntarily. Although “Self-Discovery” was a word which was common with young people, were there any other relevant words which fit this well with the current Subaru? If he thought about it, it wasn’t so amusing.

Regin seemed to have vaguely felt that something was out of place at the state Subaru was in, and he said “Are you all right?” with a manner of concern for Subaru.

Regin: “Is something in your body not quite well? For a second, I was certain that this was the reason behind Natsuki-san recognizing me so late, but since I’ve been mistaken for others often before…”

Subaru: “My body isn’t unwell, really. If you’re talking about how I feel emotionally, then I’m on the confines of the worst I guess. But, it’s thanks to you, Regin, that I’ll hang in there. I was relieved to meet you here you know.”

Interrupting Regin’s words, Subaru deeply bowed his head and expressed his gratitude. Seeing Subaru’s attitude, Regin continued to get more and more bewildered. However, it seemed like he had furthered his conviction that Subaru’s attitude before his eyes was quite abnormal. Regin made a resolute facial expression, and called out to Subaru with a “Natsuki-san”

Regin: “I don’t really get the situation well, but for the time being, please come to the village with me. Let’s talk about it in detail at my clinic. You need to rest.”

Subaru: “Are you speaking like a doctor?”

Regin: “Though my patients are earth dragons, livestock and the likes, I am a doctor. Have you forgotten that too?”

Subaru: “—Forgotten. Aaah, that’s right. I’ve… forgotten?”

Regin: “Natsuki-san?”

If only he had forgotten, then for Natsuki Subaru, things likely would have ended up without him tasting the feelings of isolation that he had felt up until now. However, those feelings that tormented Natsuki Subaru were not easy things to forget.

Subaru: “Your village is further ahead, right? Have I ever stopped by?”

Regin: “Y-Yeah, of course. In the past, when there was a bit of an issue, you, my older brother and that other guy came together…”

Subaru: “—I see. Thank you.”

He had been able to roughly hear what he wanted. He turned to face Regin, who had been daunted by Subaru’s words, and continued.

Subaru: “The way you… and your older brother talk are very similar.”

Regin: “Huh?”

Subaru: “You are quite the good guy. Your brother seems to be a good guy too.”

That’s why from hereafter, their First Reunion would also be terrible. By no means was it something that he’d derive pleasure from or look forward to.

Subaru: “—Shaula.”

Shaula: “Present; what’s up Master?”

Subaru: “Don’t hurt him.”

It was a short, nondescript call. But, by simply guessing his intentions, Shaula nodded with a “Arahorasassā”

And—

Subaru: “I’m sorry.”

Subaru apologized to Regin who was in front of him with a single phrase. The true meaning of his apology this time was far more clear than the vagueness of the one from some time before. However, Regin never understood the real meaning.

—That was because before Regin could understand, his head had been engulfed by light and had evaporated.

Subaru: “…”

Regin’s headless body collapsed onto the main road without him even letting out a cry of pain. An intense heat burned the wound, and even blood couldn’t flow from the cross section of his neck.

Although it was ethically a mistake to praise how the murder had been carried out so skillfully, it was a blow that was so refined that he wanted to reflexively appraise it.

Subaru: “It’s a thing of splendor no matter how many times I see it.”

Shaula: “It’s the technique that I perfected sniping the Witch Beasts from the top of the tower that approached day in and day out, without having anything else to do for 400 years. Now that I think back on it, those are grey days unfitting for a maiden of age, right?”

Subaru: “You’ve lived for 400 years and you call yourself a maiden of age…?”

Without any emotion at the tragedy before his eyes, Subaru tilted his head at Shaula’s words. And then, dragging Regin’s headless corpse along, he approached his dragon carriage, that had lost its owner.

However, when the earth dragon noticed the approaching Subaru and the others, it immediately started to run away, trying to leave Subaru and others behind on the main road.

In an instant, a white light shot past Subaru’s side and pierced through the dragon carriage’s wagon. The attack penetrated into the earth dragon’s flesh as it still pulled the dragon carriage along, burning its insides, piercing through its head and finally snatching away its life.

Though it was a rather skillful blow, it was an unwanted one.

Subaru: “…HEEEY”

Shaula: “Th-There weren’t any hard feelings! It was legitimate self-defense! It’s the result of having braced my legs trying to stop it in my own way! It’s just that my killing machine habits don’t go away so easily!”

Subaru: “I’m not angry. I’m not angry, but we may not be able to get ahold of a dragon carriage again now. When are we going to upgrade from travelling on foot….”

He had no luck at all with earth dragons when he brought Shaula along like this. Thanks to her accompanying him, it’d already been determined that Subaru would be forced to keep walking on foot forevermore.

Shaula: “S—o, isn’t it as I always say? Even if it’s not an emergency, when it’s Master, I will always carry you on my back~ And when I do, I won’t even mind if you carelessly fondle anything strange! How’s that?!”

Subaru: “It sounds like you’re gonna ask for money after or something.”

Evading Shaula’s temptation with his blunt words, Subaru pulled Regin’s corpse into the forcibly stopped dragon carriage. The large body of the earth dragon had also fallen onto the main road having received the same fate as its owner, all the way to the point of having lost its head. Of course, the earth dragon couldn’t be taken away with Subaru’s strength. But.

Subaru: “For now, go drag the earth dragon along with the dragon carriage to the forest’s vicinity. I will try go to the village that Regin spoke of. —Do you get where I’ll be?”

Shaula: “It’s a piece of cake. I should try to make it so they aren’t found, right?”

Subaru: “If they can’t be found for a short while, that’s fine. It’s enough if they can be left hidden for 2 or 3 days.”

Getting off from the dragon carriage, he instructed Shaula to conceal the tragedy that had happened. Raising her hand in a salute of acceptance, Shaula grabbed ahold of the huge body of the earth dragon and easily lifted up its corpse in her slender arms. The dragon carriage also began to be pulled.

Whilst she went to hide the dragon carriage in the forest, Subaru turned to look towards where the village was.

Subaru: “Now then.”

Subaru started to walk, not without purpose, but with a set goal in mind. He walked straight towards the village Regin should have returned to.

How many people knew ‘Natsuki Subaru’ in that village?

Either too few or too many, whichever it was, it made him feel heavy in heart. But, although it was true that it was a matter of unpleasantness, were he to avoid it then he wouldn't be able to pick the right path.

It was a heartless choice, but it was one he had no choice but to do.

If. —If I can at least get back 'Natsuki Subaru' , everything will be alright.

Subaru: "Will getting him back even be effective?"

It's for that reason that Subaru made the choices 'Natsuki Subaru' couldn't take.

6

Subaru: "—hk, hhaa"

Subaru let the book that he had grasped in both hands drop the instant his consciousness spiraled back to reality.

His knees trembled, and his breaths had become ragged. An unbearable sense of dizziness, like the sort you'd get from standing up too fast, overwhelmed him despite him sitting on the ground.

—It felt like he'd never get used to it no matter how many times he experienced it.

Subaru: "Hhaa, hhaa…"

Brusquely wiping away the cold sweat dripping down his forehead with his sleeve, Subaru kept taking deep breaths and calmed his heartbeat down. Was the cause of his irregular heartbeat the chaos that came from the dissonance between his soul and body?

Each time he tackled a book, one after the other, he'd find that within the book, the thing he called "himself" had become hazier.

A sane human being probably wouldn't be able to know the boundaries between themselves and others if this kept being repeated, and they'd melt together. Or rather, they'd probably lose sight of their very self.

Shaula: “Master, are you alright?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, I’m okay, I’m fine. More importantly, have you found the next book?”

Shaula: “Lemme see…I’m still looking. It’s like matching pictures, they’re difficult to find~. I’m really not cut out for this kind of menial work…”

Voicing out her concerns for the roughly breathing Subaru, Shaula crossed her fingers at her own disappointing lack of progress. However, Subaru had no intentions of blaming such a fragile girl.

That was because he was making her help with something unsuited for her, just like she herself was aware of. On top of that, there were bounds even to his inhumanity in going as far to rebuke the girl who’d been doing his bidding without getting anything in return.

What she did, was more than enough. There was a line that should be drawn even for Subaru, who kept running on the path of inhumanity.

Subaru: “I know that you’re not cut out for this, but I’m counting on you Shaula. There’s no one else who can lend me their strength besides you.”

Shaula: “It’d be nice Master, if you could say it as… just me.”

Subaru: “…Right now, the one I’m counting on, is just you.”

Shaula: “Hehe, now that makes me satisfied.”

Puffing out her cheeks, Shaula once again dove back into the sea of books with a satisfied expression on her face. Although presumably she wouldn’t hold onto that good mood for very long, her eyes were indispensable for finding the books.

Her presence was a matter of life or death for Subaru, even insofar to the meaning of her being simple manpower.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru picked up the book that had dropped to his feet that he had been reading before, and ran his finger across the title written on its spine.

The title of the black book was plain and simple; “Regin Suwen” was written there.

That youth, who had happened to meet ‘Natsuki Subaru’ in the past, had unluckily lost his life by meeting the current Natsuki Subaru—Subaru had experienced his life in the book as if he was him.

The memories of his chance meeting with ‘Natsuki Subaru’ had also certainly been there within that vicarious experience. But.

Subaru: “…They weren’t that well acquainted. From Regin’s perspective, ‘Natsuki Subaru’ was a guy that came along with his older brother and it seems he didn’t know him well.”

Perusing the memories that had become part of himself, Subaru sighed, feeling as if he had wasted effort. In all honesty, he did think that the one who most wanted to sigh was Regin who’d ended up as the victim in this. However his disappointment amidst his feelings of wasted effort were also something that he couldn’t avoid.

Regin: [Hey, no matter how much you look at it, things aren’t like that, wouldn’t you think so, Natsuki-san?]

Subaru: “…Sorry. Even though I’ve snatched away all of your memories, the relationship is still far too thin, and reproducing it has become lower. It doesn’t seem like there are going to be many chances where I am going to pay attention to you.”

Staring reproachfully at the book with his own name written on it, between the bookshelves, Regin gave Subaru a rather profound look. Although it was to be expected, a hint of blame lay thick within his eyes.

After all, just about anyone would be in an awful mood if their death was lambasted as having been useless after being killed.

Being aware of that, Subaru gave him an honest apology and said "Sorry." However—

Regin: [Either way, I've got no choice but to accept that I've died. Besides, if your objectives are fulfilled, Natsuki-san, then everything will go back to how it was, right? Let's hope for that.]

Subaru: "Ooh, you have the tolerance of a saint. I'm sorry to be taking advantage of your generosity, but I'm depending on it. I will pay back this debt when I put things back exactly to how they were."

Regin: [Then let's not hope for it, instead, let's await it.]

Shrugging his shoulders, Regin waved and then started to fade from Subaru's sight like mist. After he watched him disappear, Subaru put Regin's Book of the Dead back on its shelf. And then, he picked up a paper that was nearby and crossed something out with his quill. —The paper was a register which had a lot of names written on it. And just now, he had drawn a horizontal line where Regin's name was.

Subaru: "…And that makes 23."

As he counted the numbers he had squiggled out, Subaru cracked the bones in his neck, knowing he had a long way to go.

The library which had the Books of the Dead on show—Taygeta's hostility was still going strong. And no matter how many times he'd visited it, it wouldn't give Subaru a in-library search feature or the like.

Since he used it so frequently, he thought it wouldn't really hurt if the service improved even a little bit. But, it sure was really annoying.

Beatrice: [Betty's forbidden library was quite big too, but it's not at all comparable to this one, I suppose. No one ought to complain about that again, in fact, Subaru.]

Julius: [I agree. It looks nearly impossible to find a specific book in such an enormous library. You have to sit yourself down and deliberately apply yourself to the task. You'll just keep exhausting yourself if you keep on going in blindly.]

Just as the complaints had crossed through his mind, Beatrice and Julius had given him their suggestions as they looked around the library. Their words were kind to Subaru, but that was why he stubbornly shook his head.

Of course, if he chose to devote time to it as had been suggested to him, then perhaps his feelings of wasted effort and anxiety would be eased just a little, but—

Subaru: "Trying to ease them would be a luxury in the first place. I don't have any free time to sit around doing nothing. I have to reach a solution as soon as I can…"

Ram: [What if you don't reach it? Will something change if Barusu hurries up a little?]

Subaru: "It'll change!—Everything will change!"

Ram glared at Subaru as he declared that with clenched fists, with her cold, pale crimson eyes. Turning away from her gaze, Subaru stared down at the list of names he held within his hand.

The list had all of the names of each person from the same village as Regin written down. Judging from what he consulted from Regin's memories, the likelihood that they'd be helpful in getting anything conclusive was quite low. Low, but not zero.

Then, if that was the case—

Emilia: [Will what Subaru wants to do come true if you read the books of those people?]

Subaru: "Emilia-tan…"

Subaru hesitated for a split second at Emilia's question, worry adorning her eyes. But, Subaru nodded at Emilia like he was saying it to himself above anything else.

Subaru: "Of course it will. Ever since… Ever since I forgot everything, I've just been causing everyone unimaginable trouble. This is the only way I can get everything back."

Emilia: [I didn't even consider that…]

Subaru: "—That's not good enough!"

Emilia's expression grew gloomier as if she were unable to bear to look at the angered Subaru. Subaru had raised his voice at her without meaning to.

And as he stared straight at the shocked Emilia's eyes, Subaru continued to speak.

Subaru: "For crying out loud, please don't say that. No matter what it takes… I will try and get 'Natsuki Subaru' back. And after that…"

Emilia: […And after that?]

Subaru: "And after that I'll meet you all once again… I'll meet you all and start anew."

It was after losing everything, that he realized everything was important, far too late. Why didn't people realize that what they had in their hands was irreplaceable until the load they carried on their back got lighter?

Unless losing everything and recovering didn't go hand in hand, then why—

Emilia: [□□□]

Emilia stared at Subaru with somewhat feeble eyes, as Subaru forced those words out into a mutter. Complex emotions filled those amethyst eyes which even Subaru couldn't read.

He should have been able to clearly see everything about her. And yet, his anxiety would be cruelly stirred up in the instances where he didn't understand what lay in her heart.

What did Emilia think? What did Emilia feel? And how did she receive the current Subaru?

Those answer were—

Shaula: “—Master! I found the next book! Praise me Praise me!”

Subaru: “Ah, aaah, well done. You did great, Shaula.”

Shaula: “Huhehehehehe~”

Shaula, who had come jumping in, had forced his dialogue with Emilia to come to an end. Subaru gave Shaula a head-pat; as a result, her face relaxed and she gratefully accepted it.

The book she held in her hand definitely matched the name written on his list.

Subaru: “…How long has ‘Natsuki Subaru’ been sleeping inside you?”

Receiving the book from Shaula, Subaru posed this question at the book that couldn’t answer him back.

Even though it was to be expected, the books didn’t concisely answer Subaru’s questions. However, answers did indeed lie within the books. All of his barbaric acts were necessary sacrifices for this purpose.

Subaru: “Fragmented, objective information is good enough. I’ll scrape it all up, and bring it closer to its completed form…”

Evaluation was something that was assessed and decided by the measure of others.

If that was the case, then if he was able to check everyone’s assessment and if the individual that was being assessed could be checked by the measure of everyone, then he should be able to reconstruct that person.

—And recover ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

That was Natsuki Subaru's highest priority; his entire journey had been for this purpose.

Of course, all of the sacrifices that had been made, along with all the sacrifices which would be made in the future, were all necessary actions so that Natsuki Subaru could get 'Natsuki Subaru' back.

If he could get 'Natsuki Subaru' back. If he at least came back.

Subaru: "…If it's you, I know you would take care of everything possible."

The memories of Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Meili, Julius, individuals other than them and in general, all the individuals who had some relation to him. He desired memories like those.

Because, that strength should be in 'Natsuki Subaru'.

Because, with that strength—

Subaru: "—Save me"

I'm counting on you, 'Natsuki Subaru.' If you're a hero, then save me.

7

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to mold its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to fill in the colors.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

8

—"Murder becomes a habit."

That was one of the phrases the famous detective, Hercule Poirot, left the world with.

The meaning of this phrase didn’t refer to a person who had killed a human being and then suddenly woke up with a preference for murdering people, who then kept repeating the crime to satisfy their cravings.

It referred to someone who once solved their problems by murder, and for them, whenever another problem arose, they would think about trying to break through the problem through murder again.

—”Murder becomes a habit.”

But, if killing really was linked to the solution of the problem, could it even be said that it was the result of murder becoming a habit?

Couldn’t it be said that it wasn’t that murder became a habit, but rather that unavoidable circumstances sprang forth.

The situation wasn’t that of adding murder as an option because it had become a habit, but rather such that there was no option other than to murder. Perhaps saying things like murder had become a habit wasn’t possible anymore.

—”Murder becomes.”

To hell with Hercule Poirot. Fictional detectives needn’t talk so pretentiously.

How could he have said it as if he saw through everything?! The reasons behind every situation, behind everything, are tangled together in various complications, with multiple layers of complexity to them.

Don’t disregard those things and make light of them by trying to apply those words to everything.

—”Murder.”

This was the only way when there was no other. It was the most logical when there was no other way to reach the correct answer.

That’s why it wasn’t murder becomes a habit, but rather…

—”Only murder becomes the answer.”

Yeah, that’s right. Of course it was. Only that was the answer. Only that was the correct answer. Only that would cut through the hopelessness of this dead-end; it was a last resort.

Emilia: [Subaru is always helping me out; you’ll end up finding a solution no matter what… My esteemed knight.]

Beatrice: [If Subaru hadn’t been there, Betty would still be completely alone in the forbidden library, I suppose.]

Ram: [Ah well… Barusu is a man with good timing. Even Ram will admit that much.]

Meili: [If Onii-san wasn’t so anno~ying, then I’m sure he wouldn’t have messed up his wo~rk.]

Julius: [Subaru, though perhaps you aren’t aware of it, but I was also saved by you. Your being was a path of hope for me as well.]

Subaru: “I know.”

I know that you all love ‘Natsuki Subaru’ a lot.

I know that you all really care about ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

I know that the ‘Natsuki Subaru’ that saved you all is a Superman.

I’m aware that everything that the ‘Natsuki Subaru’ that saved you all did has been ruined.

That’s why I have to get him back.

If I can at least get him, if I can at least get ‘Natsuki Subaru’ back.

If I can at least do that, everything will turn out well. It’ll all turn out well.

I have to keep going.

???: "—Natsuki Subaru has gone mad, and has killed Emilia, Julius and everyone else who accompanied him. I barely escaped with my life and somehow managed to run away and make it here."

Everyone gathered frowned as they received the report Anastasia had brought back. The meaning behind what was shown on their faces was quite clear.

"Anastasia": "It's natural that all of you would judge this as hard to believe. I also deeply regret that I had to bring back this report. But, if we take into account the danger he poses, we cannot afford to look away from reality."

???: "Anastasia-sama, even if you're saying that, I don't thi…"

Echidna: "—I am Echidna. Ana is still sleeping inside this body even now. Though, perhaps staying like this may be a blessing for her."

???: "…It sounds like such a far-fetched story."

The one who had cast his eyes down and then replied as he stood in front of Anastasia—No, Echidna, was a red-haired knight; it was Reinhard van Astrea.

They were in the Watergate City Priestella—Those that had gathered there were those who were involved in the Royal Selection. The battle for the city had ended quite some time ago, and each one present was awaiting the report regarding the return of Subaru and the others who had headed to the east.

Emilia and the others had headed to the east to borrow the Sage's wisdom to find a means of restoring the calamitous damage the Witch Cult had caused as a result of the Sin Archbishops having appeared in Priestella.

They were embroiled in anxiety. But, they were awaiting good news.

The grounds to make them believe that lay in one of the members that headed to the east. Those grounds were in none other than Natsuki Subaru himself. —That would show how he had gone mad, amongst other things.

Reinhard: “If I completely understood everything you said, then I can’t just nod my head at this story.”

Echidna: “Even if you can’t believe it, it’s the truth. He is not the same person you all knew. Natsuki Subaru has lost his memories, and is obsessed with getting them back. He has chosen the worst way to get them back.”

Reinhard: “What would the worst way be…”

Echidna: “The Books of the Dead that are in the Pleiades Watchtower… Within them are the impressions and memories of those who have died. The books can be read and understood. Unfortunately, since I haven’t read any of them, I don’t really understand the full extent of their power.”

Further confusion ensued after they received Echidna’s reply informing them of the strange power that the books held.

Of course, the threat that memories could be lost had been shown more than enough already. That too was one of the effects that Subaru and the others had gone to try and do something about.

But, who would have been able to predict that their journey to find a solution to that had ended up causing something of the same ilk.

???: “—I didn’t think Natsuki-san could do it alone. If his aim is reading the Books of the Dead , then how is he going about it?”

Reinhard: “Otto, do you believe this?”

Reinhard widened his eyes and turned to look at Otto who had let loose this coldly resounding question. With a glance at the Sword Saint’s blue eyes, Otto nodded with an “Indeed”

Otto: “Anastasia-sama… or was it Echidna-san now? There’s no reason for her to lie to us like this. It’s too abnormal, and it doesn’t make sense. In fact, I can only think that something unexpected must’ve happened for her to have came back alone like this.”

Reinhard: “That’s…But”

Otto: “I don’t want to believe it either. I don’t want to believe such a thing.”

Clenching his fist, Otto said this with a trembling voice to the persistent Reinhard. Anyone who heard that trembling voice would grasp just how much emotion was overwhelming the pit of Otto’s stomach.

Seeing the regret etched on the one he viewed as a big brother’s face, Garfiel, who was standing next to him, anxiously said: “Brotto…”

Echidna: “…Otto-kun’s guess is correct. Even if in losing his memories, Natsuki Subaru’s behavior pattern changed… If he was alone, Emilia and Julius and so on should have been able to restrain him with ease. What got in the way of that plan was the one who was helping him… Shaula.”

Garfiel: “Shaula…? Isn’ that th’ name of th’ Sage who oughta be in th’ watchtower? Did that guy do somethin’ to captain…No, this’s confusin’. It’s like in ‘Osmund’s Hesitation’…”

Echidna: “Sorry, but I can’t afford to wait until your confusion has calmed down. As you guessed, Shaula is the name of the watcher in the watchtower. Borrowing what she said, she kept saying that the Sage was her Master all the time. She ended up not being the Sage though…”

Reinhard: “There are various things I want to ask, but… just to make sure, is this Shaula collaborating with Subaru?”

Reinhard posed this question to make sure, and Echidna nodded. The place went into an uproar at her confirmation.

It was an unexpected betrayal from the hero who had tried to save the Watergate City from the Sin Archbishops. And the one that accompanied him in his transformation was the Sage, one of the three great heroes of yore.

Who wouldn’t try and lament the world in this cruel situation which was like a nightmare within a nightmare.

Echidna: "…It isn't because I want vengeance that I brought the truth back here."

Suddenly, Echidna, with her face pointed down, muttered those words amidst the confusion that was unfolding at her report.

Catching her reply, Reinhard raised his eyebrows and said: "Echidna?" As the gazes of several individuals collected on them, Echidna let out a short sigh.

Echidna: "Given Ana's feelings, and the time I myself spent with Julius, I guess it would be justifiable to embroil myself in anger at Natsuki Subaru who killed him …But, I'm exhausted."

Reinhard: "You're exhausted?"

Echidna: "It may be true that I detested him, and that he detested me. But, even if he's just a desperate child who's approaching me shaking his fist, I'm exhausted."

Shaking her head feebly, Echidna slowly stood up.

She had Anastasia's face and spoke with Anastasia's voice, but if she had really been her, then such a frail look would have never floated across her face.

Echidna: "I will leave this stage. The cruelty of ever bringing Anastasia back to this stage is unbearable. We have made undoable mistakes."

Reinhard: "Doing that would…"

Echidna: "I know you have no bad intentions. But sometimes, giving up is the best thing you can do. Persuading me not to give up will only lead to anguish. I am… quitting here."

Following that, not a single person had any words that would stop the completely heartbroken girl. Echidna of course knew that no one here had anything which would stop her.

Since she knew that, she faced away from those who had gathered, and left the place. —And just as she had stated before, she left the stage of the Royal Selection itself.

Echidna: “I’m praying for your good fight, all of you. —Please, I want you all to be careful.”

That was the final report that the only member that had returned back safely from the expedition to the Pleiades Watchtower left behind. All it did was stir up a heavy anxiety.

10

???: “…What’re ya gonna do from here?”

Ricardo, who was walking next to her, asked her that question as they walked on the way back. To that, Echidna closed her eyes.

The wound where Ricardo had lost his arm was serious; the part which he had lost that had once been a thick and burly arm was not attached there anymore. Instead, what had been attached there was something like a hook-hand. It could be said that the attitude of not giving up the fight even as he was now was rather like him, but—

Echidna: “It’s as I said. I give up. It’s wise. From this point on, I don’t think I will try and pretend to be Ana in her body…Though, at the very least, I will fulfill the minimum responsibilities towards the Hoshin Company.”

Ricardo: “What’re ya sayin’ the minimum responsibilities arrrrr…?”

Echidna: “The breakup of the company, and I have to try and help out the Employees with their next job. The company itself will probably do fine if it’s left to Vice-President Chuden.”

Ricardo: “…”

Echidna: “I get that you’re dissatisfied. But, it’s something that can’t be helped.”

Though her true colors hadn’t been revealed then, Echidna and Ricardo had been together for a long time. Though it had been a one sided acquaintanceship, she did have an appreciation for the strong emotions that Ricardo directed at Anastasia.

And that was because they were the exact same emotions that Echidna held for Anastasia.

If Ricardo held emotions like of a father's for Anastasia, then Echidna was the same as well; she probably held emotions like of a mother's for Anastasia.

That's why—

Echidna: "I think that I will part with the Iron Fang as well. From now on Ricardo, you are free to do as you like."

Ricardo: "If I'm free ta do as I like, then I'm gonna search for a way ta wake up Miss."

Echidna: "…If you still have your eyes set on that in this situation where our best chance was cut off, then I can't say anything against that. It'll be best if the young ones of the Iron Fang accompany you, right?"

Echidna couldn't fling away Ricardo's attitude as stubbornness like that. He too was serious about protecting the ones he wanted to protect, and not giving up on the ones he couldn't give up on. There was nothing more cruel than judging his plight as meaningless before he started anything.

There was no need for Ricardo to give up just because Echidna had.

Nevertheless—

Echidna: "Even I don't know whether Ana would be delighted by your attitude."

Ricardo: "…If she scolds me, then ah well. And what's more, how can I give up without first makin' sure?! I'm doin' this because… I'm Ana-bo's actin' foster father."

Echidna: "…"

Ricardo: "Can a father who abandons his daughter really be called a father? No matta' what anyone says, I will… NEVER give up."

There wasn’t a single hint of sarcasm towards Echidna in the resolute Ricardo’s declaration. However, being well aware of her own weaknesses, it stabbed deeply into Echidna’s chest. As a result, Echidna let a dry smile float across her face in admiration of Ricardo’s strength.

And then—

Echidna: “—Ricardo, you are really”

Echidna was about to continue her words by saying, “strong, huh.”

Or, if she had the time for it, she may have wanted to ask whether it was possible for her to get that kind of strength as well.

—But, there was no time for that.

Echidna: “…”

A feeling like a tremor shook underneath their feet, and in an instant, Echidna saw Ricardo stretching out his arm. His thick, hook-handed arm grabbed Echidna by the scruff of her neck and her feet were lifted up into the air.

With Ricardo having hooked her up, she was able to see what was going on, and that was the last thing she did.

The very next instant, a torrent of water rushed towards them with tremendous force, engulfing Echidna, Ricardo and the city, and then continuing on to wash away absolutely everything.

—The flood which the Witch Cult had botched up, now once again assailed the Watergate City which had previously escaped disaster.

11

Subaru let out a short sigh as he gazed down at the city that was being swallowed up by the flood.

The city’s design was built in the shape of a mortar so that if water was poured into it, there would be no way out. It definitely was extremely effective, like pouring water into an ant nest.

Subaru: “As expected of the city used for the decisive battle against the Witchbeasts… the effectiveness of the trap was incredible.”

According to knowledge, the city had originally been erected to bring down a Witch, Witchbeasts, and the like; in accordance with that, the efficacy of opening the watergates was immense.

The water’s violence dragged the city to the bottom of its surface in an instant, and engulfed its inhabitants before they had any time to escape.

???: [I see, it’s a thing of splendor doooooooon’t you think? With this, many of the people that know you were dealt with all at once…I guess I’m okay to think that your self-discovery is progressing foooooward, right?]

Subaru: “…Shut up”

Behind Subaru, who was overlooking the devastation, the tall clownish figure let his unscrupulous thoughts spill out. His facial expression didn’t express delight, though it did seem that he had gotten a suitable response in the results in front of his eyes. As the plan had been put into effect using his knowledge and advice, it’s wasn’t that he didn’t understand his thoughts, but.

???: [Master sure has poor taste…]

The young figure of a maid was looking at the clownish figure with an expression of disdain. The young girl, who adorably gave off a seemingly intelligent impression, snuggled closer to Subaru and sneakily took hold of his hand.

Squeezing her hand back, Subaru gave her a fleeting nod.

Subaru: “Petra, how are things looking?”

Petra: [Ummmm, well, it seems like Shaula-san did everything right. Since all four control towers were used I don’t think anyone’s managed to get away……Maybe in the shelters as well.]

Subaru: “…I see. I’m sorry to make you deliver such a painful report.”

Petra put on a brave smile even when she was asked for her objective opinion.

The girl which Subaru knew was certainly stout of heart, but she was nevertheless an ordinary child with nothing special about her. Of course, that didn't mean he didn't feel guilt for dragging her into this, but—

???: [If you're going to get so emotional, I would have preferred if you didn't start this in the first place. Subaru-sama is still such a half-baked individual, isn't he.]

Subaru: "Ack, I don't even have anything I can say back when you put it like that."

The anger of the blonde haired maid, Frederica, who had brought her condemnations to him, didn't clear up so easily.

She gave more weight to the tragedy that had happened to the people around her rather than the tragedy which she had witnessed. In that sense, it seemed like she'd never forgive Subaru's actions.

This wasn't the only reason why; it was also an emotional matter. Were he to look at this from a logical perspective, and were he to be unexpectedly honest with his feelings, he would be made to feel the kinship by blood she had with Garfiel.

Subaru: "Either way, I only know about Garfiel from others as well."

Muttering it out with a sigh, Subaru gently brushed his fingers into his fringe. Brusquely scratching his head, he heaved out a strong sigh and shifted his attention to focus on the fight.

Clownish Figure: [Well then? What are you going to do neeeeeeeeext, Subaru-kun.]

Leaning forward, he gave a tch at Roswaal who was looking at him from the side. And then, Subaru declared "It's as decided" as if he was spitting out a curse.

Subaru: "It'll go according to plan. —It's best to attack the most troublesome guy to start things off with.”

12

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to mold its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to fill in the colors.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

13

Otto: “Cough, Ghack…!”

Garfiel: “Brotto, are y’ okay?! Cough the water up! Cough ‘t all out!”

With tears streaming down his face, Otto violently coughed so that he could force out the water that had filled up his lungs. Seeing how dangerous his condition was, Garfiel helped him cough the water out; but, as expected, having his body shaken up and down, dangling upside down by his feet racked Otto’s mind and body in pain.

Though thanks to that, he managed to cough out all the water that had gotten into his lungs.

Garfiel: “Shit! What th’ fuck happen’d…?!”

Otto: “…The city’s watergates have been opened, I think. As a result, the streets have been swallowed up by water. Even though we desperately fought to hold the Witch Cult back, everything has come to nought.”

Otto muttered this to Garfiel, whose fangs were trembling, as they gazed at their surroundings at the spectacle of the submerged city. After hearing that, he took a look at his friend’s green eyes, his friend whom he regarded as a younger brother, and noticed that they were warped by grief. Otto cast his gaze down.

The current state of the city that had plunged into an all-despairing situation could be seen everywhere, even if one were to take just a glimpse. Luckily, Otto had been picked up by Garfiel and hoisted over his shoulder, with them fleeing to a height where the water barely reached. However, how many people in the city would have managed to do the same?

Garfiel: "Everythin's at the bottom of the water…"

Rooted to the spot and wide-eyed, Garfiel was stricken by the enormity of the flood that had assailed the city. Although he hadn't heard the story in detail, Otto got the feeling that Garfiel had experienced quite an impactful encounter in Priestella. The existence of such a desirable opponent would have been something quite important for him.

—This flood had even ruthlessly washed away the people Garfiel held emotional bonds with.

Otto: "…No, not just that."

Though he was worried for Garfiel's state of mind as well, what Otto must have been concerned about was the others who had gotten caught up in this.

Starting with Anastasia—Echidna, who had brought back the unexpected report, and everyone else, including the Royal Selection candidates that had gathered to hear her report would have fallen victim to the disaster.

They had been gathered to warn them about what had happened, but it seemed like it had ended up backfiring.

Otto: "I'm going to say something harsh. Garfiel, please stand up. We have to deal with this situation just like we did the Witch Cult last time."

Garfiel: "B-But… Brotto…Y'see…"

Otto: "WHAT WOULD BECOME OF US NOW IF WE SIT HERE LIKE SIMPLETONS DOING NOTHING?! NEITHER NATSUKI-SAN OR EMILIA-SAMA ARE HERE! PLEASE STAND UP, GARFIEL! IT'S JUST

US LEFT!”

Garfiel: “…”

Grabbing him by the collar, Otto shouted at his friend whom he regarded as a younger brother whose face had a look of feebleness etched on it. He knew it had been overly harsh of him to explode like that, but with him being so slow to grasp how things were in this moment, he had chewed him out.

In having had his withered heart be the object of his scolding, a fire was kindled within Garfiel that made him stand up.

If he could achieve that, then he did not care about being deemed as insensitive. —Even if he was hated by Garfiel later, it would be far better than if he wasn’t able to fulfill his duty.

Otto: “We need to search for survivors, and then meet back up with the Royal Selection candidates, the Knights or anyone else who might be left. If the attack on the city is from a hostile individual, then we need to reassemble our forces and fight against them…”

Garfiel: “—Tch! BROTTO!”

Otto: “—?!”

By instructing Garfiel about his compassionless decision, Otto drove that in as a persuasion for Garfiel. Pushing out his chest, Garfiel roared.

And immediately afterwards, a flash of light pierced through straight in front of Otto, who had fallen onto his backside on the rooftop, at tremendous speed, faster than the eye could see.

Otto: “GHAAAAAAAAAAA!”

For a moment, Otto’s entire body was engulfed by burning pain from the light which had slightly grazed his chest. There wasn’t any bleeding. But, there was a scorch mark on his shirt, and his skin underneath it had been charred.

The true form of the white light of now was pure, intense heat. And, that white light was—

Garfiel: “RRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAA—!!”

Giving a howl of rage, Garfiel forcibly parried away each one of those white light rays, those white rays of death, that hurtled towards them at lightning fast speed.

Wielding the silver shields fitted on his arms, Garfiel challenged that overwhelming force of incredible speed head on. A hyper-dimensional battle which Otto could not keep up with had commenced.

Nevertheless, he did have a decent idea about what was happening.

Otto: “Where did it come from…”

Whilst he endured his pain, Otto looked around his surroundings and concentrated on finding where the flashes of white had been fired from. It was likely that the culprit who had fired those attacks at Otto and Garfiel was also the culprit who had opened the floodgates.

Of course, the enemy that came to his mind was them being a Witch Cultist—

Otto: “—hk, from all the way over there?!”

Far, far away, at the edge of his sight, one of the floodgate’s control towers came into view—A flash of light could be seen from where Otto and Garfiel were, coming from the top of the tower which stood almost on the opposite side of the city.

Immediately after he thought he’d seen that flicker, the light instantly came surging to where they were. Somehow, Garfiel was still fending them off right now, but—

Garfiel: “THINGS ARE GONNA KEEP GETTIN’ WORSE! BROTTO, FIND A PLACE TO HIDE! MY AMAZIN’ SELF’S GONNA BEAT THE SHIT OUTTA THIS BASTARD!”

Otto: “GARFIEL! WILL YOU BE OKAY IF YOU GET CLOSER?!”

Though Garfiel roared that out, by no means was what he was saying a good idea in this situation.

The speed at which the approaching rays of white light moved at was completely out of the ordinary; the distance which separated them from their opponent was such that Garfiel was only barely able to mount a defense against them.

If he got closer, the time he would have to deal with the rays of light would decrease respectively. Even the difference of an augenblick would be fatal in a hyper-dimensional battle.

Garfiel: “EITHER WAY, THERE’S NO OTHER WAY! IT’S JUS’ US TWO! ISN’ THAT RIGHT?!”

Otto: “—. You’re right. GARFIEL!”

Garfiel: “HYYYAAAAH!!”

Repeating what Otto had said before, Garfiel took a mighty step forward and leapt up. Making use of a building which could barely be classed as a foothold in the city still submerged by the flood, Garfiel zealously drove forward, and determinedly made his way towards the city’s control tower where the white flashes of light had been coming from.

Garfiel: “GRRRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!!”

One shot after another, Garfiel braced himself and somehow managed to keep ahold of his footing whilst the shock of each impact racked his body as if paralyzing him to the bone.

The opponent was formidable.

In addition to their attacks’ pinpoint accuracy from so far away, the sheer amount of mana that they put into these potent attacks without missing a beat, was far from normal.

If he considered his position where he had kept his distance from the start, it was a terribly favorable situation for his opponent.

Otto: “Even so…”

His grasp of how skilled his opponent wasn't sufficient enough that he could give this up. And beyond that, what his opponent had done was seriously, completely, completely unforgivable.

It was likely that an unimaginable amount of people had become victims with the Watergate City Priestella sinking to the depths. One after another other, tragedy had engulfed the city which still hadn't completely recovered from the after-effects of the Witch Cult's last attack. —Caught up in the midst of that as well, was the family which Garfiel was tied together with by blood.

Garfiel: "—Tch!"

So to not let his mind dwell on that, Garfiel gritted his teeth, and frantically shook his head.

But, in the end, try as he might, nothing about what was on his mind would change. Sorrow and anger wasn't what mingled together in the depths of Garfiel's chest; rather, his heart was engulfed by a dark fury, as he continued to grow more enraged.

If he put that dark fury into his fangs and claws and struck down the enemy with it, then—

???: "—Garfiel"

Suddenly, a voice reached through to his skull amidst his tempestuous fury. The voice had just called out his name. If it had been just that, Garfiel wouldn't even have taken any notice of it.

However—

Garfiel: "—Captain?"

It was a completely different story if that voice belonged to the person he had long awaited to return. Letting his green eyes spin around, Garfiel looked around in the middle of the hyperspeed battle for the figure which had spoken.

—From the start, Garfiel hadn't believed a word of the report which Echidna had brought back.

To begin with, Echidna was a name which Garfiel couldn't put any trust in. Of course, he had warned Subaru about the dangers of the being that called herself that name, and on top of that, she had forced him to head to the Pleiades Watchtower.

Even so, on seeing Echidna return taking the form of Anastasia, Garfiel had regretted his thoughts as having been shallow, naive and immature.

He had considered following her so to find Subaru, Emilia and the others as soon as possible.

It was just after he had proposed setting up that discussion to Otto that the flood had come rushing into the city. It seemed like Otto was thinking as he usually did, but Garfiel sunk his strength into his fangs and adamantly refused to admit that his thoughts had been wrong.

For Garfiel, it didn't seem like Subaru was the sort who'd screw up.

That's why Garfiel found hope in having heard Natsuki Subaru's voice here. He would turn the tables around in this situation where absolutely everything had come to a dead-end.

He looked around for his figure so that he could cling onto such a convenient illusion—

Subaru: "Your heart can't grasp the most important thing about yourself. —Still, your family's eyes are sharp."

The moment that he came into view, Garfiel furrowed his brows in bewilderment. Not because the mutter had reached his ears. His mutter had been inaudible. What had caused the change in Garfiel's facial expression was purely his surprise at what was in front of his eyes.

Garfiel: "…"

Beneath his eyes, there was a figure looking up at Garfiel, who was leaping towards the white light. His appearance certainly seemed to be the same as the one he knew, but.

Garfiel: “—Who th’ fuck are you.”

When he shifted his attention to his nose, a familiar smell slipped into his nostrils. However, it was his instinct, not his five senses, that tried to deny the familiar figure below him.

A lapse that lasted not even a fraction of a second was born in his thoughts.

Nevertheless, it was a fatal lapse.

Moving towards there was—

???: “—Gotcha! Tah-dah!”

Garfiel: “Ngh”

From in front of him, a black haired woman came plunging forward, and threw out a kick with a semi-enthusiastic cry. Catching her kick immediately with both of his shields, Garfiel absorbed the attack which felt like he had been rammed by a dragon carriage.

Even so, she was not an opponent with whom he could deal with in this situation. He couldn’t afford to direct his attention in two different directions, both in front of him and beneath him.

Black-Haired Woman: “Not so bad, but myyyy love for Master is a 100 times better than that .”

With a smile of satisfaction adorning her face, her palm rose towards the front of Garfiel’s face. In an instant, with all of his hair standing on end, Garfiel tensed his body and quickly moved his face backwards—

“*Squelch*”

The blow pierced straight through Garfiel’s abdomen and his organs spilled out from his back.

—Otto's thoughts spun rapidly as he looked at the petals of blood blooming in mid-air.

Otto: "—hk"

Clenching his teeth, Otto cursed the cold-hearted part within himself. It was quite the odious thing to him that under these circumstances he was trying to calmly get a grasp of the situation. His friend whom he regarded as a younger brother had been blown away right in front of his eyes. And even then, he still couldn't get emotional at all.

Even in this overwhelmingly unfavorable situation, Otto's attention was focused on his surroundings in an attempt to find a means of escape.

If he used his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering then a faint glimmer of hope would emerge, no matter what the situation was. By putting faith in that mantra, he'd overcome every single hardship he'd come across up until now.

That's why—

???: "It's regrettable, but even rats end up drowning when they're soaked in this much water. Seems that the guy you were talking with is nowhere to be seen."

Otto: "…"

A voice, accompanied by the sound of footsteps, quietly struck Otto's eardrums.

The sound of footsteps slowly approached within the world which seemed to have fallen dreadfully still. Swiveling his head around to look at where the footsteps were coming from, Otto held his breath for a moment.

And then, he let out a short gasp.

Otto: "…You truly are beyond recognition, Natsuki-san."

Subaru: "Is that so? If you're talking about me, then I don't really understand myself well, but…”

Otto: “ I think you’ll clearly see what I mean if you look at a mirror. Ahh, that’s right. Didn’t Echidna-san’s story say you lost your memories. Is it because of that that you don’t understand yourself?”

Subaru: “Hahah, maybe so. More clearly, if I could be different in every single aspect, then well, I’d definitely give this up, but…”

Whilst scratching his cheek, the opponent laughed at Otto’s jabs. What should he call his opponent; what name should he call out? Composure and impulsiveness cried out in unison within Otto’s head. Hesitating on the right choice of what to call that, hesitating on there being no other way to call out to that, he shouted.

Otto: “You’re…”

Subaru: “Even if you don’t say it, I know. My name is… Natsuki Subaru. I’m broke beyond compare.”

Otto: “…”

Subaru: “I’ve heard a lot about you as well. You have quite the reputation. Finally we’ve met, Otto.”

Saying that, that individual—who took the appearance of Natsuki Subaru, but looked completely different to the one Otto knew, laughed.

His lightless left eye had clouded over, and his hair had gone completely white for god knows what reason. As he smiled from ear to ear like he was somewhat off his rocker, Natsuki Subaru kept laughing.

15

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

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16

Otto: “…”

Whilst gazing at the vigilant Otto before him, Subaru let out a long sigh.

Telling him he had changed a lot would be precisely describing what was detestable about him. Of course, even were someone to say he hadn’t changed, in his current mental state, Subaru would just receive that as irony; however, were someone to directly say “You’re a different person” then that would be quite hard for him to accept.

Up until now, this blunt manner of speaking hadn’t even been heard from the people who had come across him that had then been added to the patchwork, or even from the people that had been inside the tower.

Subaru: “Honestly, I’m having quite a hard time handling this.”

Otto: “…What do you mean?”

Subaru: “Didn’t you hear about what I’m doing from Echidna? My memories have vanished into thin air, I’ve been running amok with my head all loopy…That’s the gist of it anyways.”

Otto: “Of course I did. I even heard that you’re obsessed with trying to get your memories back.”

Subaru: “I don’t remember saying as much, but… well, it’s a reasonable guess. After all, every single one of you are quite competent. The only incompetent, no-good human being is me.”

Gently running his hand down his left eye, Subaru muttered this as if he was mocking himself. As he looked on at that gesture, Otto gulped.

Otto: “May I even ask what happened to that eye? “

Subaru: “Eye…Aah, my left eye? It does look a little bit hazy, but it’s no big deal. Though, it does seem like I hit my head a little bit too much when these shocking things started. For how my hair got this way, well, I didn’t do anything in particular… it just ended up like this on its own. How laughable. “

Otto: “Hahahaha, how laughable indeed. Are you satisfied?”

Subaru: “Far from it. There’s still a long way to go until I am satisfied. I’m so far away from it to the point that it’s depressing.”

Seeing Otto giving him a dry smile, Subaru also responded by showing him a dry smile.

Originally, it seemed like Otto and Subaru had been good friends, and, indeed he could see that. He got this feeling not only from the eyes of Emilia and Beatrice, or from everyone else in the camp, but it felt like something genuine.

Emilia: [Subaru and Otto-kun always got along so well, they were suuuuuper heartwarming.]

Beatrice: [Well, in essence, Subaru always used to tease Otto, in fact. I get the feeling that nothing much has changed, I suppose.]

On Otto’s left and right, Emilia and Beatrice each voiced their explanations. As he nodded his head at those explanations, Subaru licked his lips and said “Well then”

Subaru: “I’ve been looking forward to having my First Reunion with you for a very long time. Though, I know that you’re one of those bastards that become more dangerous the more time I give you. Sorry, but let’s bring this to an end now.”

Otto: “‘First Reunion’ is quite the peculiar way of putting it, but putting that aside, if I think about your goal…wasn’t it a failure?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Leaning forwards, Subaru frowned. And after that, Otto continued his words with a “How should I put it,” Otto: “Practically, it was quite the effective move. You found the right moment where everyone gathered in one building and killed them all in one go with a completely unescapable attack… I take my hat off at that. If your opponents get caught up in a natural disaster, they can’t strike back at you, regardless of whether they’re master swordsmen or a mercenary band.”

Subaru: “…”

Otto: “At this rate, wasn’t it part of your strategy to have let only Echidna-san escape from the Watchtower? You let her escape, so that she’d gather people who knew you through the report she gave. Following that hypothesis, the likelihood of Priestella being at the center of where everyone would gather was high. There are watergates here.”

Subaru: “…I’m honored to be praised by you.”

Whilst showing an attitude that he accepted the praise, Subaru rolled his tongue back into his mouth. Rather, it ought to be Otto who should be praised.

Otto, who had almost hit the nail on the head, had guessed the truth quite well, including that Subaru had allowed Echidna to escape.

Although,

Subaru: “Well, to tell the truth, at first it was by chance that Echidna escaped, but then I realized that she’d be useful after she’d escaped. It was because of that I didn’t chase after her.”

Otto: “I see. I’d have been surprised if you saw that far ahead. It wouldn’t be any leap of the imagination to say that those who lose their memories become quite shrewd. —But”

Cutting off his words there, Otto glared at Subaru. Recognizing the strength of the resolve within his eyes, Subaru put strength into the depths of his own.

And, putting himself on guard, Otto continued his words.

Otto: “In the end, you’ve completely screwed up your endgame.”

Subaru: “I’ve screwed it up? Me? What’s the meaning of that?”

Otto: “…It’s an expression I still don’t understand well, but there isn’t any meaning to it. You don’t get chances like these where you can strike with such an upper hand often. If you’d been earnest about it, then you should have carried out what you set out to do.”

Subaru: “What I set out to do…”

Otto: “You should have aimed straight for Reinhard-san without getting too greedy.”

Thrusting his finger out at him, Otto firmly declared that to Subaru. Subaru’s eyes flew wide open when he heard that declaration, and taking no note of his astonished face, Otto pressed Subaru for an answer.

Otto: “Weren’t you using the Books of the Dead where the memories of others can be read in? If you’re planning to use them to try and get yourself back, Reinhard-san will become your greatest threat. And if you’re aiming at him, then it’ll be impossible unless you catch him by surprise. From here on out, you’ll have to be on your guard. You’ll never get a second chance.”

Subaru: “So, the moment I clamped my fangs around my prey, I shouldn’t have let go. Is that what you’re saying? “

Otto: “Indeed, that’s exactly what I am saying. So you sh…”

Subaru: “Kh”

Otto: “—?”

Otto raised his eyebrows at the rather abrupt, strange sound that could be heard coming from Subaru’s throat. His reaction showed surprise, bewilderment and confusion.

Subaru wasn’t play-acting or a trick; his reaction was because of Otto. Such a reaction even may have been quite natural in some respects.

Despite having read between the lines of a lot of what had happened, in the very end, he had mistook what his endgame was.

Subaru: “It’s you, Otto, it’s you who’s misunderstanding.”

Otto: “That’s…”

Subaru: “The one I was aiming for wasn’t Reinhard. Of course, a lot of hassle would have been saved if he ended up dying amongst the chaos of this flood, but I won’t make any pretenses in relying on such a happy accident.”

Reinhard’s out of the norm characteristics were generally speaking fully known by everyone. He was the Sword Saint that you always heard about in rumor; the act of killing him would be a herculean one—In any case, it’d be necessary to keep building and building and building a plan to take care of him.

Dying to a casual, lucky hit wasn’t the sort of death that you could expected from a hero.

Subaru: “That’s why I need to try and look for a way to do that if I am kill that guy. I may weaken him, I may surprise attack him, I may set a trap for him, I may even take a hostage. Of course, if I need to kill him, I will do so…… But, he’s low priority.”

Otto: “Then, was the flood simply to get rid of the people who knew you all at once? For certain, the number of people who know you in this city due to what happened the other day has…”

Otto had tried to continue by saying skyrocketed. But before he could say it, Subaru had held out his palm.

Even Subaru knew what he was trying to tell him. The violence of the Witch Cult that had took place in the Watergate City Priestella had been scrutinized from every angle. Certainly, in that sense, that had been one of the ideas behind having used this city as well. However, that was a trivial factor compared to the biggest reason why.

Subaru’s objective behind causing the flood using the Watergate City as his stage was just one thing.

His main objective was—

Subaru: "—It's you, Otto."

Otto: "…Ah?"

Subaru: "This was a way I devised to make sure I could kill you. Anyone else who dies… Well, I guess they're just bonuses."

Otto: "…"

Otto tensed up as if he didn't understand the meaning behind the objective that Subaru had pointed out.

And then, closing his right eye at the astonished Otto, Subaru spun his head around in a circle, looking around at the scene on the rooftop, reflecting the world around him in his hazy left eye.

Otto: "…Why… me?"

Subaru: "Why did I make such a big deal just for you? It was the embodiment of the utmost caution I have for you. Even having Garfiel beside you was added to the plan as a safety measure."

Otto: "…"

Subaru: "Just so you know, this ain't something I thought by myself, since I don't trust my thoughts at all. I've only just realized I've been racking useless wisdom out of my useless head."

Indeed, Subaru's cunning did not amount to much.

No satisfactory thoughts arose in Subaru's mind, with him being naive to the understanding of the rules of the world, disconnected from the secrets of the world, and unfamiliar with the laws of the world.

That's why—

Subaru: "I made sure to consult with them."

Otto: "…"

Those who surrounded the taciturn, stricken Otto were all of his colleagues that were only visible to Subaru's left eye, and remained forevermore unreflected in Otto's eyes.

Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Roswaal, Petra, Frederica; all of his colleagues that made up the Emilia camp surrounded Otto.

Looking at each of their faces one by one, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and said "Isn't that right?"

Subaru: "Who is… the most troublesome guy from those who know me?"

[Otto-kun]

Emilia replied.

Subaru: "Who is… the most troublesome guy from those who know me?"

[Otto, I suppose]

Beatrice replied.

Subaru: "Who is… the most troublesome guy from those who know me?"

[That would be Otto, wouldn't it. How bothersome.]

Ram replied.

Subaru: "Who is… the most troublesome guy from those who know me?"

[It would be Ottoooooooo-kun]

Roswaal replied.

Subaru: "Who is… the most troublesome guy from those who know me?"

[Otto-san]

Petra replied.

Subaru: “Who is… the most troublesome guy from those who know me?”

[It’s Otto-sama]

Frederica replied.

Subaru: “—It’s unanimous. Even if Garfiel joined in with them, he’d probably say the same thing.”

Otto: “Who on earth are you talking to…”

Subaru: “Even if you’re trying to buy time, I should mention that it’s pointless. The reason I flooded the city was to kill you. —Even you won’t find a way to escape from this place, where there ain’t even a single damn rat left.”

This was the reason why Subaru had opened the floodgates and submerged the city in water.

Whether it be water dragon, rat or worm, none of them could get near Otto Suwen. By having been parted from terra firma, he was unable to use the witchcraft he specialized in.

Subaru had orchestrated everything to this point making full use of everyone’s knowledge.

This, and that, and everything was—

Subaru: “—I will not underestimate you. I will not underestimate anyone other than me. You’re all skilled guys. That’s why I will kill you without cutting any corners.”

Otto: “You are…”

???: “—Master”

After receiving Subaru’s powerful declaration of war, a voice interrupted Otto who had tried to continue what he was saying. The one who landed adroitly onto the rooftop was Shaula, half of her body was soaked in bright red blood.

And as she brushed the area around her chest that had become completely stained in blood, she said,

Shaula: “Finally I’m done! Kyaa~ He was so so stubborn. I legit thought he was immortal with how much I knocked about the stuff inside of his stomach and sent him flying!”

Subaru: “You really did take your time… Did you make sure to finish him off properly?”

Shaula: “I even crushed his head, maybe. Except for Master, human beings die if their heads get crushed, right?”

Subaru: “I don’t get why you’re excluding me. Even I’ll die if I get my head crushed!”

Shaula: “You’re full of surprises~”

Frivolously laughing, Shaula pushed her shoulders up in disbelief. From Subaru’s perspective, the way she thought was quite incomprehensible, but it would be uncouth to meddle into Shaula’s sense of values.

Above all else, she fulfilled the duties that were assigned to her. That was good enough for now.

Subaru: “Thanks for the hard work, Shaula. And now…”

Shaula: “I just need to kill Mr. First-Choice-san, riiight? Butbut, was he really an opponent yahaddago to these lengths for? To me, it really seems that…”

Subaru: “If you’re going to speak of stuff just as a matter of raw strength or weakness, then even I’d be able to finish you off with one hand.”

Otto’s strength was contained in a part within him which was hard to gauge by Shaula’s estimation. That was the conclusion he had come to after having pieced the details together from the stories that he’d heard from Emilia and the others.

Hearing Subaru’s response, Shaula replied with a “Mhm~ Of coursse” in agreement.

And on the other side, Otto, with hatred throbbing through the depths of his heart, was looking on at their exchange.

Otto: “No way, being assessed as the most valued in life and having it backfire like this… this feels the absolute worst.”

Subaru: “Valued in life? You’re misunderstanding it.”

There wasn’t a trace of sarcasm in what Subaru had replied to Otto’s words with; he had spoken from his heart.

This was the truth Subaru had seen from reading everyone from the Emilia Camp’s books. There was no mistaking it.

Subaru: “You were always the most valued from everyone in the camp, Otto!”

Otto: “—Eat shit, you phony.”

To Subaru, who had flashed his teeth and grinned, Otto also flashed his teeth and twisted his face into a terrible grin.

Though those words pierced into Subaru’s chest quite a bit—

“…”

—In the very next moment, a white flash of light pierced through Otto’s body, and their conversation was forcibly brought to a close.

17

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

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Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

???: “—This is as far as you’ll go.”

Natsuki Subaru slowly opened his closed eyelids right as those words came into earshot.

Below his eyes, at his feet, Otto’s corpse whose top half had been blown away had fallen there. Garfiel, who had died in battle, should be floating away somewhere in the water’s surface nearby.

What Subaru was doing under these circumstances, as terribly hypocritical as it was, was giving them a silent prayer. Subaru held no grudges against Otto or Garfiel.

There wasn’t any reason for Subaru to hold anything like a grudge against those that he had killed thus far. —No, he believed that the original Subaru should indeed keep his grudge against Roswaal, who had been behind considerable crimes; but the current Subaru didn’t know the real intentions of Roswaal at that time.

Other than these subtle matters of unease, Subaru didn’t hold any resentment towards anyone else. The one he always bore hatred for, was himself. He bore hatred for himself, who was not ‘Natsuki Subaru’.

This phony version of himself was of no use to anyone.

It was just the ridiculous Natsuki Subaru that tried to collect the bits and pieces of ‘Natsuki Subaru’. It was just the ridiculous Natsuki Subaru that tried to assemble the patchwork. It was just the ridiculous Natsuki Subaru that tried to form himself from patching himself together in one way or another.

That’s why—

Subaru: “I’d like to apologize, even to you.”

???: “…Subaru”

Turning his head to look back behind him, Subaru gazed ahead of him at Reinhard, who was standing at the edge of the rooftop.

Though he had seen his figure in the memories of a lot of people, there wasn't a single trace of cloudiness in his orderly figure. As a matter of fact, he had even managed to not get any of his clothes wet; how on earth had he achieved that?

Subaru: "I see, you're out of the norm."

Reinhard: "Subaru, did you do all of this? …Otto, Garfiel, and…"

Subaru: "I ordered them killed—if that's what you mean then yes. And not just those two. A whole ton of people in the city became victims in the flood… And all by my doing."

Reinhard: "Why… why did you do this?! You went to save the people in this city…"

Subaru: "To the watchtower, right? I know. I know all too well. As always, my experiences of it are rather lacking, but I do have some vague gist of it like as if I'd read a manga summary."

Whilst soaking in Reinhard's blame, Subaru spread out both of his arms towards the city.

The city was encroached in the turmoil of having been inundated by the water, but he knew that it had gone through a tough time even before this flood. The scars that had been left due to the violence of the Witch Cult and such were more warped rather than deep.

They had snatched away people's memories, they had changed people into inhuman forms, they had used overwhelming strength to forcibly subdue those who wouldn't follow their will, and they had forced their warped thoughts onto others to make them sympathize with them.

It was needless to say the things they did were of the worst nature in the sense that they trampled upon the quintessence of humanity.

But, at the same time, it gave him a certain sort of impression.

Subaru: "—Their plans are full of holes. I'm guessing they go in thinking they can't lose, and that's why they go rushing in with such dumbass plans.”

The Sin Archbishops who possessed supernatural-like strength were all sitting still on their abilities. Hadn’t anyone taught those guys? No matter what sort of strength you hold, if you use it the wrong way, then you will be defeated no matter who you are.

Whether it be wisdom, numbers or great talent, you will always be defeated.

Subaru: “I’m not going to challenge you being only partly prepared. Finding a way of making sure I win will only work with the right timing. That’s why I will consult them.”

Reinhard: “Consult…Is the one deceiving you the girl beside you?”

Shaula: “Huh, meeeee?”

Suddenly piping up, Shaula, who was beside Subaru, widened her eyes in surprise. She stared at Reinhard as she pointed at herself.

Shaula: “Me deceiving Master… If I could pull such a temptress’ move, I’d have done it looong ago! Master’s soo sexy like this since he doesn’t get caught up in my temptations… at all! Though, you’re too sexy for your own good!”

Subaru: “Though her position is that of a collaborator, she ain’t got the head to be able to deceive. It’s not really that I’m being deceived by anyone… No, if I’m forced to say it, I guess it would be a voice from within me.”

Reinhard: “A voice… from within you…?”

Subaru: “The sleeping lion inside of me is seeking the time of its release and is rampaging.”

After intently listening to Subaru’s response, Reinhard quickly realized that what he was saying was nonsense. Whilst gazing at Reinhard’s eyes which were clearly dyed in despair, Shaula nudged her elbow at Subaru’s side, speaking out a “Mastermaster”

Shaula: “Hey, um, that one’s presence is remarkably Reidish. Isn’t that scary?”

Subaru: “Indeed it is. Remarkably scary indeed. It’s because that guy’s Reid’s descendant.”

Shaula: “De-Descendant.”

Subaru: “His children’s children, and their children’s children and so on. That’s the nuance of it.”

Shaula: “Uurgh! He can’t seriously be related to Reid, right?! I wasn’t told about this!”

Shaula complained about her disadvantage to Subaru, her facing looking like she’d been ensnared in a Kaizo Trap. In actuality, the memories of being pummeled by Reid were quite clear for Subaru and the others.

(TL Note: To learn more about the provenance of the term Kaizo Trap, refer to this

It was natural that he wouldn’t be able to beat Reinhard, Reid’s blood relative, in a fair and open battle as well.

Reinhard: “—I’m sorry, but let’s put an end to your acts of barbarity here. Me being able to do that, is proof of my friendship towards you.”

Subaru: “You say such sad things in spite of us having a relationship where we gatecrashed a wedding ceremony together! Well, though it’s me who made you say it, you know, apparently Emilia-tan was delighted…”

Reinhard: “Subaru, stop already. —Just, stop.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru kept his mouth shut at the mournful echo of Reinhard’s entreaty. Reinhard’s expression was warped into something quite pitiful. From it, Subaru received a sharp pang as if his chest had been torn open.

It was the same as Otto and Garfiel, where he had no grudge against them.

Subaru didn't hold any grudges even against Reinhard. He knew that he was someone who bore no fault. He knew that he was a benefactor that was undeserving of being blamed. He also knew that he had been a good friend.

But despite that—

Subaru: "—I also need the piece inside of you to get back 'Natsuki Subaru'. That's why I will come to kill you one day."

Reinhard: "…"

Subaru: "But, not now. Not today. It's a matter for tomorrow's tomorrow."

A trace of bewilderment clouded Reinhard's eyes just after he heard Subaru's proclamation.

Reinhard was trying to settle things here right now. In fact, if Reinhard wanted to do so, Subaru was in a position where he could close the distance with a single step and cut him down in an instant. Even if Shaula made a motion to defend him, it wouldn't really change the outcome.

But despite that, Subaru could still say—

???: [Assuming Felt managed to take shelter in all of this, I think she'd be somewhere at the edge of the city.]

—And turning towards the direction pointed out by the bald-headed giant, Shaula fired a flash of white light towards there.

"…"

In an instant, Reinhard held his breath and flew backwards, following after the soaring blow of light at the exact same speed as it. He hadn't done that to kill Subaru, who stood in front of him, but rather to rush towards the faraway building where Reinhard's master—Felt had hidden after having survived the flood, so he could knock down that flash of white light.

???: [If you keep something important nearby, then of course, that's the same as exposing your weak points. The same thing applies to the Sword Saint Reinhard, dooooesn't it?]

Roswaal, who had given this suggestion let a wicked grin form on his face, and basked in his satisfaction in having outwitted the Sword Saint. Giving him a look from the side, Subaru took a short breath, and said.

Subaru: "Shaula, let's pull back. —That's enough for today."

Shaula: "Ooookay!"

Cheerfully lifting her hand, Shaula wrapped her arm around Subaru's back. She hoisted Subaru up with unbelievable strength from her slender arms, and with a light bend of her knees, she tried to leap out of the city.

But, just before the first jump had began, Subaru turned towards Reinhard, and said.

Subaru: "—You are not as omnipotent or superhuman as you think you are."

That's why—

Subaru: "—I will absolutely kill you too, Reinhard."

19

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to mold its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to fill in the colors.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

???: “—I want you to tell me once again. What is your name?”

???: “Ah, Amue. Amue Sears…”

???: “I see, that’s a fine name, Amue. …What happened now must’ve been tough.”

Amue: “Hghhgh…”

The red-haired knight, who had seemingly gotten onto one knee to be on the same level as with Amue, spoke those words to her. As soon as she heard those words, the little girl’s tensed emotions snapped loose.

Tears slowly trickled down Amue’s face, and her body began to tremble from the belayed terror that had returned to her.

Then, as he looked on at the sobbing little girl, the knight—Reinhard turned his eyes to look at his surroundings and bit his lip; deep worry was brimming in his chest at the terrible spectacle he saw.

Reinhard: “…”

Two days ago, an incident had occurred at a small village in the northern parts of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

It took awhile for the incident to be known because the village was located in the remote borderlands, and due to that, it lay quite far from both the Royal Capital and the five major cities. Dispatching the knights, including Reinhard, had ended up being delayed by several days.

In that meantime, Amue, who had become the sole survivor in the village, had just been sitting there, holding her knees in loneliness. —She’d been there, surrounded by all of the corpses of her family and the people she knew well.

Reinhard: “Subaru…”

Reinhard pensively muttered his name out as he touched the pommel of his Dragon Sword which he had holstered by his waist

Given the issues in this kind of incident, there was a good chance that this act of barbarity had been carried out by a Witch Cultist. However, Reinhard's intuition naturally saw through to whose hand had carried out this horrendous scene.

Reinhard: "The ones who did this… If I'm not mistaking it, it was a man and a woman, right? Two young people."

Amue: "Y-Yeah… Th-That's right. Ah, but…"

Reinhard: "But?"

As she heaved with sobs, Amue choked up her words as she replied to Reinhard's question. Amue hesitated as Reinhard awaited her to continue her words; his well-shaped eyebrows were furrowed into a frown.

Amue: "I don't know who the woman was, but, the man was…"

Reinhard: "The man was?"

Amue: "I hadn't realized it, but it was like he was talking to someone…"

Reinhard: "…"

Was there a trace of hesitation when she conveyed that vague information? Amue's explanation lacked conviction in it. But, Reinhard closed his eyes and breathed out a long sigh at her words.

Amue's perception was correct. That man and woman—No, Natsuki Subaru was definitely speaking with someone other than the woman who accompanied him, which was as Amue had seen.

Reinhard didn't know whether that someone was someone he knew, but—

Reinhard: "You have my gratitude for providing me this information. The Knight Order should deal with this right away. Do you have any relatives other than your family… ?”

Amue: “—Ah”

Amu’s fingers gently grasped at Reinhard’s trouser cuff as he spoke to her with kindness. As if frightened of him leaving her, Amue’s face had turned to disbelief at her own action.

However, given her mental state, that too was natural.

She had lost her family and her hometown too. How much suffering awaited her from here on out?

If he could be useful in distracting her from her anxiety in the midst of this, then.

Reinhard: “All right. I will stay with you until your safety is ensured. So, I want you to rest assured—Because no one that wishes you harm will get close to you anymore.”

Amue: “*S-Sob*…S-Sorry, I’m really sorry…”

Reinhard: “You needn’t apologize. —Since, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Taking her hand, Reinhard silently thought back to the guy who had caused this horrendous spectacle as he watched Amue once again starting to burst into heavy tears.

Reinhard: “Are you… Are you satisfied with this? Does it fulfill you? What on earth do you see reflected in your eyes? I just don’t understand. —Subaru.”

Reinhard muttered out the name of the person who wasn’t here and closed his eyes.

The figure which was reflected behind Reinhard’s eyelids was a friend who would eventually come to kill him. That friend would likely go to any means for that.

He was a friend that eventually Reinhard would have to kill by his hand.

???: [I guess by now that child, Amue, must have been found by Reinhard-san, right?]

Subaru: “She was the only left alive in the village that burnt down, right? If a child of that age sees Reinhard, she’ll become relieved and she likely won’t be able to be separated from him. —With this, he won’t have time to pursue us.”

???: [How cunning, or rather, how crafty, or…Though, well, I’m not one to talk.]

???: [Tha’s righ’. Brotto ‘n Captain really do damn get on th’ same wavelength at times like these.]

???: “Ewwww”

???: [Y’ damn well fit to a T!]

Pushing his way through a thicket using the branch he held in his hand, Subaru, who was following an off-road path, scrunched up his face into a frown. Otto, who was treading through the forest beside him in the same way had a similar expression on his face. And Garfiel, who was looking on at the two of them, clapped his hands together and clacked his fangs, laughing at the situation.

???: [Hehe- But, it’s great that we’re all together at last, don’t you think? It’s all thanks to Subaru being reaaaally busy and doing his very best.]

Subaru: “When you say it like that, even I get the feeling that my efforts were worthwhile and it lets me have peace of mind. If you, Emilia-tan, feel like I’ve done things properly, then I want you to reward me in so many different ways, but…”

Emilia: [You want that, but?]

Subaru: “…Well, with me being an innocent boy, it means I can’t let male instinct do the talking for me.”

Subaru looked at Emilia who had innocuously tilted her head forward. As he scratched his cheeks, Subaru turned his face away from her. A gaze stopped him in his tracks ahead of him; that gaze was Ram's who had turned a look of disdain towards him.

Ram: [Disgusting.]

Subaru: "Cut down in one blow! Generally speaking, I never said that! I want you to praise my feelings since I managed to not say any of my embarrassing desires!"

Ram: [Ram? Praise Barusu? I'd rather heaven and hell be flipped over than do that.]

Subaru: "I'm lower than a cataclysm?!"

Shrugging her shoulders, Ram turned her back from him and began to walk away with grace. Subaru's shoulders stooped down in dejection seeing Ram's attitude. And then a two small hands gently took ahold of his own from his left and right.

???: [Jeez, I can see how glum you look from all the way over here, in fact. If of all people Betty's partner is going to get like this, then I can tell the going ahead is going to get rough, I suppose.]

???: [That's right. Ram nee-sama's always been blunt, it's not like it's something she just started doing now. That's the reason why I'm gonna go easy on Subaru-sama. Good boy, good boy.]

Subaru: "Heyhey, no way, am I in the middle of a little girl sandwich…though now that I think on it, Petra isn't that little anymore. Dammit, time sure is cruel… as it keeps passing by I'll only be left with Beako as a little girl…"

Beatrice: [Little girl…what do you mean little girl, in fact?! That's impolite for a lady, I suppose!!]

Having graduated from being lolimanced, Petra puffed out her chest in delight, and Beatrice teetered between taking it as a compliment and otherwise. Nonetheless, Beatrice seemed to be a little girl by nature, thus it couldn't be helped.

Subaru: "It seems like the mothers and fathers of the world want their children to stop growing at their cutest age; you're like something out of a dream in that sense, Beako!"

Beatrice: [Hmph…By saying that are you hinting that Betty is the cutest in this world, in fact?]

Subaru: "I'd like to gather candidates for the seat of cutest in this world and make them compete with each other; though, the prettiest in this world is you. I'll try give you a medal."

Petra: [What about me? Heyhey, Subaru-sama, what about me?]

Subaru: "Hmmm, Petra is the cutiest in this world."

Petra: [Yaaaay!]

Letting out a cry of mirth, Petra took hold of one of Beatrice's hands and jumped about happily. Whilst being overwhelmed by that vigor, Beatrice also seemed like she wasn't at all in a bad mood.

Towards there—

???: [Well, well, weeeeeell, it seems like you're really in high spirits, doooooesn't it? Putting aside your physical appearance, you should be acting your actual age amongst them, but despite that, this is still raaaaaather adorable, isn't it?]

Beatrice: [Ugh, I suppose…]

Roswaal took a step forward with his long legs, an air of composure rested on his face. Beatrice made an unpleasant face at Roswaal who had made his appearance. Incidentally, Petra, who was holding Beatrice's hand also put on a look of displeasure due to the position of mischief that coated him in her Master's camp. Well, if you think about what he has been guilty of, it was natural though regrettable.

???: [Beatrice-sama, Petra, don't make such unpleasant faces.]

Roswaal: [Indeeeeeeeed, that's Frederica for you. Telling the both of you exactly h…]

Frederica: [Don't you two know that the more you make those faces, the more you’re just going to cause Master to be pleased, right? Since Master’s that kind of gentleman.]

Roswaal: [I take baaaaaack what I said.]

Roswaal lost his composure too on receiving Frederica’s sharp blow.

On the other side, both Petra and Beatrice obediently accepted Frederica’s words with an “Oookay” and an “All right, in fact.”

Subaru: “…Well, I also feel like y’all are too fussy, but I guess this fuss is a page of everyday life, right?”

???: [It doesn’t matter if it’s a page of everyday life, but please, aren’t you forgetting about me and Miss Meili?]

Subaru: “Mhm…”

A little apart from the Emilia camp who were chiding each other as they walked, Julius who was walking behind them, spoke that out. Closing one of his eyes, he reflected Subaru in his yellow eye and said,

Julius: [Though, do you take pride in that my advice was helpful for you when facing Reinhard?]

Subaru: “I ain’t saying it wasn’t helpful, but your evaluation of Reinhard makes him look a bit like a Dream Guy, so its credibility can be shaky. You mustn’t go getting yourself too caught up in your hero syndrome.”

Julius: [That’s not an answer which’ll help you borrow my strength. Maybe I should change my attitude a bit from now?]

???: [Heeeeyhey, sayin’ it like that’s no good, Julius. Should I draw up a propa’ loan for Natsuki-kun instead? It should work well enough even without a contract.]

With a tit-for-tat reply said in a gentle tone, Anastasia broke her way into Subaru and Julius’ exchange, which was prone to break into a full blown argument if it went on like that.

Anastasia, having completely regained her merchant-like attitude, stared at Subaru with her turquoise eyes and after causing him to blanch a little, she said:

Anastasia: [Natsuki-kun, arentcha forgetting? If we cooperate wit' each other well, then Natsuki-kun, when you get back to normal, you'll…]

Subaru: "—Aah, I remember. If I get 'Natsuki Subaru' back and go back to the time where I can restore everything properly, then"

Cutting his words there, Subaru took a deep breath and continued.

Subaru: "Then finally, I can take the time to atone to everyone whom I've killed."

22

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to mold its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to fill in the colors.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

Bringing himself closer to completion, and if the patching was completed this time around.

If his patching could be patched together as he was originally, then surely.

—Then surely, there was no doubt that he could do everything over again.

23

—'Natsuki Subaru' had the power to redo fate.

That was Natsuki Subaru's conclusion.

He could get back the lives of Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Julius, Meili, Petra, Frederica, Roswaal, Rom-ji, Garfiel, Otto, Anastasia, Ricardo, Hetaro, Tivey, Mimi, Kiritaka and Liliana.

It should be possible, if he was 'Natsuki Subaru'

Because, 'Natsuki Subaru' was—

[My esteemed knight.] [Betty's partner, I suppose.] [A man with only good timing.] [A good friend, I'd think.] [We~ll, maybe it's alright if I appreciate him a li~ttle.] [It felt like I could always give my best thanks to Subaru!] [I am grateful for the many times Subaru-sama has saved us.] [Subaru-kun, I've been waiting eagerly for you for many many years…] [Never for a second did I think that such a rookie could do all this.] [Captain! Y'can talk to me whenever if there's 'ny problem! I'll do anythin' 'f it's somethin' I can use my strength for!] [Well, I find it scary that the consequences of repaying my debt come back to bite me, so I would like you to take things in moderation though.] [Mhhhm, busyin' yourself is quite good y'know. Me, Mimi and the others should try'n loosen up a lil' bit more.] [Oh, ain't that a good change Ana-bo's proposin'! Aye Aye, we 'been workin' too much! A buncha days off would hit the spot!] [If Miss takes some time off, I'll start dishing out the work…] [When we get Natsuki-san to help out, Miss will make sure to try get the best out of him.] [Ooo, you're right! I getcha I getcha! Mimi too, Mimi too! Mimi will do her very best with Garf!] [So I can pay my debt of gratitude to you for saving the city… is something I cannot say so easily if we consider what happened to it afterwards, but…] [You're kiiidding right? Could it be that Kiritaka-san you're holding this grudge a bit tooo much? Becausebecause, if Natsuki Subaru-sama goes completely back to normal, then everything will go back to how it was, wouldn't it!]

With the strength of that of raging billows, the companions that surrounded Subaru listed their expectations in 'Natsuki Subaru'.

Subaru nodded as he listened to it, feeling like he was intruding on other people's affairs.

Subaru: "Aah, that's right. That's right indeed. Even though it's quite impossible for me, even though it was impossible, I will."

???: [If it's you, Subaru, you can do it, right?]

Subaru: "Surely I will… No, I absolutely will, don't you think?"

Subaru declared that with his fist clenched tight, and cheers ran out from his companions. As he basked in the din before him, suddenly, Emilia approached him. Subaru raised his eyebrows at her.

She gently beckoned Subaru, and then, she pointed her finger towards somewhere a little apart from the circle of their companions. The one who stood where her white finger had pointed to was—

Emilia: [—Shaula… she looks lonely. That's dreadful, Subaru. She looks so pitiful, doesn't she?]

Subaru: "She's…"

Emilia: "Don't give excuses. All of us absolutely want to try and do our best in any way we can with Subaru, but, the one who is doing their best would first of all be Subaru, and then wouldn't it be Shaula? So…"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "So, you have to take good care of her. —Promise."

What Emilia spoke to Subaru, a promise, was something which held really really great significance between the two of them. —No, as a matter of fact, as Subaru wasn't 'Natsuki Subaru' he didn't understand how 'Natsuki Subaru' regarded the weight of it.

But, even if he didn't understand 'Natsuki Subaru' , he understood the trust Emilia had when she tried to make promises with 'Natsuki Subaru' all too painfully.

Subaru: "…All right. I promise."

Emilia: "Mhm, perfect. —Well then, I'll see you later, Subaru."

Saying that, Emilia waved goodbye to him as she smiled.

And immediately after Subaru recognized that, the many figures of his companions that appeared from his ever cloudening left eye's field of view completely vanished. After that, everything went still, no one was there. A stillness that felt like it cut off everything but Subaru was left behind.

The one whom he had made the promise with wasn't there anymore, let alone the vestiges of the promise he had shared.

Subaru: "—Shaula, come here."

Tossing aside those desiccated thoughts, Subaru called out to Shaula, who was walking in the distance. Hearing that call, Shaula's face suddenly lit up and she leaped up and came rushing over to where Subaru was.

Shaula: "Wassssup, Master! Hm, has your fun-time where you're off grumbling to yourself as if you're having fun finished?!"

Subaru: "Don't you go saying it so damn straight! You don't have to say it like you're talking to a loony, there's no damn need to be so hurtful!"

Shaula: "My baaad!"

Slapping the top of her forehead with her palm, Shaula took back what she said all the while sticking out her tongue. Was she apologizing? It didn't feel like an apology, but, well, it was close enough.

In any case, Shaula, who had kept accompanying Subaru all the way here from the tower of sand—Certainly, the main contributor towards Subaru's aims was this woman, and not just because of what Emilia had said.

He borrowed ideas, knowledge and wisdom from his many companions in drafting a course of action and plans. But, what was needed for that each time was the power to carry those things out; to put it more simply, he needed fighting strength.

Shaula’s presence was indispensable in order to make those possible. Even so, Subaru had done almost nothing to reward her.

It felt like she was just a well he could always draw water from whenever he needed it.

It was as if she was saying he could do anything no matter what it was, if it was him, who wasn’t ‘Natsuki Subaru’

Subaru: “…”

Shaula: “Master?”

Without thinking, Shaula questioningly tilted her head at Subaru, who had sunk into silence. Long black hair slowly cascaded down her pale, bare shoulders.

As he paid attention to that, Subaru gulped and set his thoughts straight,

Subaru: “Shaula. What is it that you want to do in the end?”

Shaula: “Mhm~ What do you mean?”

Subaru: “I don’t mean anything! You must understand what my aim is, right?”

Until just before, he had disregarded any thoughts that related to how he would reward Shaula. Were you to pay attention to him, you’d notice that Subaru had begun to speak in a manner that showed traces of rudeness.

To those words, Shaula frowned, and her face showed no traces that she had understood what Subaru had said. She brought her frown-adorned face closer, and as a result of that, Subaru held her back by placing his palm on her forehead.

And as he held her back,

Subaru: “I kill everyone who knows me, and I read their Books of the Dead. If I wipe out everyone who knows me, then the last one would be you. After that, I’ll end up reading your book, and yet…”

Subaru lacked the most important parts of himself by a mile and wasn't able to fill in that gaping hole with his own strength. Subaru had no choice but to build 'Natsuki Subaru' up little by little by collecting all the scraps of 'Natsuki Subaru' from every single people who knew 'Natsuki Subaru' and patching them into his original form.

In its completed form, it would contain all the memories of those who were familiar with 'Natsuki Subaru.' Like Emilia, Beatrice, and so on; Shaula was no exception either.

That's why he had promised Reinhard that he'd kill him someday as well.

She kept openly smiling in front of Subaru's eyes. She kept helping Subaru in his objective without any hesitation. She kept interacting with her carefree attitude. And he had to kill her.

Subaru: "And yet, you accompany me? Shaula"

Shaula: "Are you worried about meeee? Is it because you love me?"

Subaru: "—. Don't joke about. I'm asking you seriously."

Shaula's answer to the sincere question he had asked was in the same tone as usual. And since that had gotten on Subaru's nerves, he repeated his question again a little more crudely.

But, after receiving his words, Shaula called back to him with a: "Master"

Shaula: "I'm really not joking about. Since being loved by Master is the meaning of my life. So, that's what matters the moossst."

Subaru: "…"

Shaula: "If Master loves meeee, then you may make use of me as much as you like. My life is Master's property. Being used as much as you like, Master… that is what I desire."

Still in her usual tone, still with her clingy attitude which had to be bluntly brushed off, still giving off a rather flippant vibe where it couldn't be distinguished if she was being serious or joking about, Shaula ran her hands down her ample breasts.

She ran them down and then turned her dark eyes to look at Subaru before giving him a weak smile.

What was shown there in her sincerity was an attitude that she lived her life earnestly, never ever lying. Shaula always spoke seriously. —And since she did, she had no need to lie.

Shaula: "You may use meee as much as you like until I come to a miserable end. In exchange, I want you to love meee, and I want you to cry for meeee if I die. Since I'm really, I'm really just… I'm really just satisfied with that."

Subaru: "…Why do you devote so much of yourself to me like that? It has to because I'm 'Natsuki Subaru' "

Shaula: "That's not why."

Subaru: "…"

Shaula: "Master is Master; I don't care about anything else. I just love wanting to love so that I want to love the one that I want to love. And, if that person loves me back, well, that'd be perfect. Am I speaking weirdly?"

Shaula tilted her head; it seemed like she didn't hold a single doubt in what she'd said. Seeing that, Subaru let out a small "Hah." And soon enough what had been just a small snort of laughter steadily caused his throat to squeeze up into laughter.

Subaru laughed.

He didn't laugh as either 'Natsuki Subaru' or the play-acted version of 'Natsuki Subaru' he put on in front of Emilia and the others. This time he laughed as the hollow Natsuki Subaru that had forgotten everything about his life in another world.

Subaru: "Ahhh, god damn, don't you guys… don't you people go fucking worrying about my damn self-discovery… Damn idiots."

Shaula: “Huh?! Master, no way, did you get mad?! Did I say something weird?! Could it be that Monday, Thursday and Fridays are the days which all the burnable trash is thrown away?!”

Subaru: “I ain’t angry. I’m just amazed. I’m amazed, and ah, I’m damn speechless.”

Letting out a long sigh, Subaru slightly shook his head and started to walk. Shaula, looking rather unlike her usual self, timidly watched over Subaru’s back.

Subaru gave yet another long sigh seeing the stubbornness in her gaze.

Subaru: “You can do what you want, so, get yourself over here quickly.”

Shaula: “If I can do what I want… then, maybe you won’t get angry if I cling onto your arm, right?”

Subaru: “I guess so if you ain’t gonna cling on with your whole body weight.”

In an instant, Shaula’s face lit up and with a leap she wrapped Subaru’s arms around her chest. Even though usually it would have been a rough experience, only when it came to touching Subaru did Shaula tone down her strength.

It was like she was handling something fragile and important and trying not to break it.

Subaru hated that Shaula would flirt with him—No, he disliked it. Her affection made him uncomfortable.

The one which Shaula wanted to be affectionate to was ‘Natsuki Subaru’. And, since everybody thought that they didn’t care or hold any interest in Natsuki Subaru, other than ‘Natsuki Subaru’

Shaula: “Master, Master~”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Shaula: “I love youuu Master. Love is Over.”

Subaru: “I see. I don’t love you though.”

Shaula: “Guaaaaa! M-Master’s so mean…”

Subaru: “But.”

Shaula: “But?”

Subaru: “…After you kill Reinhard, I will kill you last. I, who am not ‘Natsuki Subaru’ will kill you last. That is what I will do for you.”

Shaula: “…”

Subaru: “That’s all I will promise”

Shaula: “Ah, aahah, ahahahah! Master, Master… really? I’ll be last? Am I gonna be Master’s last woman?”

Subaru: “When you say it like that, it makes me want to break that promise already.”

Shaula: “Ehh~! No! It’s a promise! It was definitely, definitely a promise!”

Subaru: “I was joking.”

Shaula: “Eeeeeh?! A joke? Which part was a joke?! Master, Master~!”

24

Patching together, patching together, continuing to form its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to mold its shape.

Patching together, patching together, continuing to fill in the colors.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, and continuing towards bringing himself closer to completion.

Patching together, patching together, patching together, there’s too much to be patched together. Even if he kept patching it together so that the original form became unrecognizable, he could still patch together a new one.

Patching together, and continuing to live on.

Patching together, and continuing to live on.

Until the day comes where he would die, he would continue to patch it together, and live on—

END

Rem IF

Natsuki Rem

1

Under the radiant sky, Subaru squints his eyes at the sun's strong rays. A deafening cry can be heard.

The voice belongs to a baby girl, her forceful crying filled to the brim with all the strength her tiny body can muster.

Seeing her express her discomfort with the strength of her entire soul, Subaru wonders how it is that children can be so unbelievably energetic. And while thinking that, he shudders at how lacking in youth his thoughts have become.

"I've had a feeling I've been getting on lately, but it's pretty depressing to be consciously aware. Aren't I still a super lively YOUNG MAN?!"

""Super lively YOUNG MAN" my ass. Try looking at yourself a little more objectively."

While clutching his hands dramatically, Subaru is bombarded with trash talk. Used to the verbal abuse, he sighs lightly and looks to his side. A young boy stands beside him, his eyes level with the sitting Subaru.

Ignoring Subaru's silent stare, he adds,

"Anyways, do something about Spica already! Her crying's seriously getting on my nerves."

"No, I just can't go on anymore. After that last cruel remark, my NAIVE HEART is completely in tatters! Maybe I'll revert back to childhood and cry alongside Spica. Please forgive your useless father!"

"Who the hell's gonna forgive a grown man acting out in broad daylight like that?!"

The boy retorts loudly at Subaru's childish sulking. And, as he yells, the baby cradled in his arms, Spica, sucks in another mouthful of air. As the two men watch on helplessly, she once again explodes.

"WAAAAAAAAUUUU!!!"

"Whoa! She's crying! Spica's crying again! Hey Rigel, do something damnnit, you're her older brother!"

"If you're playing that card, then YOU should be the one doing something about this!"

Among the crowded city streets, in a certain boulevard, two men endlessly pass back the responsibility of calming the baby.

Passing townsfolk look to see what the commotion is about, see that it's these two clowning around, and proceed to casually ignore them with a face that says "oh, it's the same deal as always".

As a result, the tired act of the crying baby, and the two men that make her cry, goes on.

"This girl's crying out her lungs and soul and yet not a single person comes out to help… Damn, what a cruel and unreasonable world! Humanity has fallen so damn far!"

"We don't have time for you to lament about the state of the goddamn world! If we can't stop Spica's crying, when she comes back, what do you think she'll say—"

"When who comes back, and what will they be doing?" "Well that's obvious, it's…"

"Rigel", Subaru calls as they huddle for a moment. Nodding their heads in unison, Rigel first turns around. He stares dumbfoundedly, his jaw ajar.

Subaru follows his line of sight. "Hey, all done with the shopping?"

"Yes, without delay. …It looks like things were tough on your end though."

"Nah, Spica's super energetic today. Once she starts walking and running around, I bet she's gonna grow up to the type that just flings around men at her own insane pace. Such a nefarious future, it makes me both nervous and excited!"

As Subaru chatters casually, Spica, cradled in his arms, slowly opens her eyes and notices the woman now standing before her.

Despite her weak upper body, she opens her small hand and extends her arm out to her. Sensing Spica's desire, Subaru feels just a bit lonely.

"But well, ignoring her until she cries will just bring us back to square one. Here, take her."

"I have taken her."

Despite his rough speech, Subaru passes the baby with incredible care and caution. He handles her like a valuable, transient treasure, bringing a tiny smile to the woman's face.

The woman hugs the baby to her breast and carefully rocks her.

"Yes, what a useless father and older brother aren't they? Spica needs to get bigger quickly so she can scold the two of them."

"Hey hey, let's not feed her ideas like that while she can't understand words, okay?"

Subaru suddenly imagines being scolded on both sides by the two, hands on their hips, after saying or doing something stupid.

"Hm, it actually doesn't sound so bad. In fact, it's such a happy vision of the future that I'm tearing up."

"Well I don't like it. Getting scolded by my little sister would ruin my dignity."

"Ha! The moment someone fools around with me, they have no dignity to ruin. Yes, yes, I can see it… you will adore your little sister and spoil her far too much, to the point where she's scolding and spanking you without reserve. That will be your future!"

“Don’t push some weird future onto me just because you like getting scolded and spanked! There’s no way I’ll be like that!”

Subaru wags his finger tauntingly as Rigel retorts. But it isn’t Subaru who is agitated by the boy’s roars.

It’s the blue-haired woman who was watching over their bumbling. With a calm yet sharp voice, she calls the boy’s name.

“Rigel. What kind of language have you been using out in public. It brings your mother to tears.”

“Yeah but…”

“Your mother also doesn’t like your “Yeah but”s either. Also, what you said just now was mistaken.”

She mercilessly scolds the stammering Rigel. She then turns to Spica, who has finally calmed down, and smiles briefly.

“Your mother does not spank your father. Your father is always your mother’s number one favorite person after all.”

Blushing, she makes a remark even more embarrassing than crying in public.

Against his mother who so proudly makes such a declaration, Rigel finally throws in the towel.

Subaru laughs nervously as the woman who watches over her family so happily caresses her hair.

As if it was a fragment of the clear blue sky, Rem’s beautiful long blue hair shimmers elegantly with the wind.

2

In a small district in the country of Kararagi, at a clearing that may or may not qualify as a park, Subaru lumbers onto a nearby bench.

The boy with short blue hair named Rigel played rambunctiously with his friends. While the way he spoke with his father was awful, Subaru thought in moments like these that he might actually be a cute kid.

“Now if only we could deal with those eyes that make him look like he could kill someone.”

“We can’t do that. Those scary eyes are also a part of Rigel. No matter how much fun he’s having or how happy he is, strangers will always see his eyes and think he’s in a bad mood or that he’s some kind of delinquent.

That’s just who Rigel is.”

“I can hear you. Also, why does mom’s retort hurt even more than dad’s?!”

Rigel was playing “Freeze Tag” (*literally Ice Oni in Japanese), a game that Subaru had popularized recently. Having been frozen, Rigel can only comment from afar. Subaru carelessly waves over to him while Rem waves ever so gently so as not to disturb Spica.

Rigel puffs his cheeks and wrinkles his face in turn. At that moment, Subaru can’t help but think that Rigel looks just like he did in his own childhood albums.

“In other words, he’s pretty much guaranteed to end up just like me. If I was him, I would definitely try to fight it… if I was told I’d be me in twenty years.”

“Skilled in cooking and perfect in housework. Supporting her husband with all her love and care. Having such an ideal and wonderful wife… is what you’re talking about yes?”

“Who is that happy-go-lucky normie, damn he should just explode. Huh? Wait, that’s me!”

Rem giggles lightly as Subaru slaps his head and sticks out his tongue. Rem, trying to calm herself by clearing her throat, glances sideways at Subaru’s face.

“If you keep complimenting Rem like that, Rem might get carried away a little.”

“Hm, was I really complimenting you just now? All I did was not reject what you said. Though everything you said was basically completely true.”

Subaru knew that if he complimented her too freely, he’d get carried away with praise again and it’d be a mess. In such a public place as a park with kids running around, parents and neighbors were everywhere.

Once he started sweet talking with Rem, she would egg him on until their affection was tomorrow’s talk of the town.

That in and of itself wasn’t too bad, Subaru thought as he relished the warm afternoon air.

If he closed his eyes, the comfort of the sun’s warm rays made him feel like he was floating. The exhaustion from working long, late hours felt like it was being washed away as his head wavered slightly from its weight.

“Hm?”

“If you’d like, please rest on Rem’s shoulder. Rem’s lap is currently being occupied.”

Opening his eyes, Subaru finds his body already resting against Rem. There was a noticeable difference in their sitting heights. If he adjusted his neck, Subaru could comfortably rest his head on her shoulder.

As he leaned, Subaru saw Spica lying peacefully in Rem’s arms. Her jet black hair from her father and the pretty shape of her fair face from her mother. A dear existence that lives day to day, ignorant of the world around her.

“Grr, Spica. While you are my daughter, how dare you steal my precious sanctuary from me. I’ll be giving you the tickle treatment later.”

“Dear, please wait until nighttime before monopolizing Rem’s breasts.”

“Hey, let’s be careful about the remarks we make in a public park in broad daylight, okay?!”

Rem’s bold comment caused a wave of panic in Subaru. But when he peered at her face, he saw that she was blushing fiercely. Really now, he thought.

“My wife is just way too cute.”

“Because Rem is loved by her dear everyday.”

As Subaru flirts and Rem flirts in turn, they indulge in each other’s loving smiles. Rem’s giggling and Subaru’s goofy laughter could be heard faintly from afar.

Eventually getting embarrassed, Subaru nervously scratches his cheek. “Then I guess I’ll take you up on your offer” he says as he rests his head on Rem’s shoulder.

The sensation of the wind rustling Rem’s blue hair against his cheek felt very pleasant to Subaru. Its scent wafted to his nose as he rubbed his cheek against her shoulder.

“Dear, that tickles.”

“Oh, sorry. I guess I got a bit carried away because it felt so nice. I’ll learn from Spica and calm down. I’ll leave getting carried away to Rigel. Wow, Rigel’s suuuch a kiid∼”

“I can hear you, stupid Dad! Stop bringing me up all the time!”

“Rigel. Your sister is sleeping at the moment. Please keep your voice down.”

“GODDAMNIT!”

The frozen Rigel screams like a delinquent, but none of his family responds. To add insult to injury, no one’s coming to unfreeze him either. At the moment, Rigel is thoroughly being teased.

While Rigel’s personality, speech, and actions are similar to his own, it comforts Subaru that at the very least the other kids don’t bully him. At the same time, it doesn't feel like they accept him as one of their own, making Rigel's future admittedly not too bright.

"We should make sure Spica doesn't turn out like that. Even though Rigel's like that, you have your mother's looks so your future's definitely bright. All that's left is to pray you don't get caught by a useless guy like me."

"There isn't a person anywhere that could replace you. Rem's dear is the only one in the world."

Laughing softly from his wife's loving remarks, a comfortable silence falls between them. A gentle breeze caresses them as Subaru savors the heat from Rem's body. Eventually, he carelessly drifts to sleep.

Lately, the fatigue from laboring has built up in his body. Yet the precious moments spent with his family filled his days with bliss. Bathing in the bright sunlight, watching his son being teased by his friends, Subaru rests against his wife as he succumbs to a light nap.

—What a wonderful, blissful moment, he thought.

"Subaru-kun—"

Hearing his name, Subaru opens his eyes.

Peering in the direction of the voice, he finds Rem turning her neck to face him. He sees himself in her clear blue eyes as they wordlessly bring their lips together.

"…my name"

"…"

"It's been a while. Lately it's been "Dear" or "Your Father" after all."

Looking on at Rem, Subaru relaxes his face, yet Rem brings her lips to his once more.

Her attitude reminds him of several years ago, the way she was from “when they had just escaped.” While she thought that he wouldn’t have noticed, Subaru had watched over her more closely than she thought.

Closing his eyes, Subaru feels the wind rushing past them.

Today’s shopping trip was in fact Rem’s idea. Subaru had a general idea what her intentions were for this trip. After all,

“It’s been eight years since that day huh.” “So you remembered after all…”

“Of course, to me… No, to us wasn’t that day a huge turning point? There’s no way I’d forget.

“—There’s no way I’d forget.”

The day he lost against fate. The day he threw away everything, the day he ran away from everything. The day when he intended to give up everything, but just couldn’t give up one person.

The decision from that day, and that girl’s love—it was because of those that right now Subaru is able to live like this.

“Subaru-kun, do you…”

That familiar way of calling him, which she intentionally stopped using after the two escaped to Kararagi. In order to prove the bond of husband and wife to themselves and those around them… and also to try to build something distinct from the past they had escaped from.

Until today, Subaru had not asked for the reason, nor did Rem ever tell him.

Among the many things they left behind was this way of calling him. With a troubled face and a mix of emotions, she asks him,

“Do you feel regret?” “Regret?”

“Yes. About running away. About giving up. About throwing away everything. About choos—”

"If you say anything about choosing you, I'm going to get angry. I'll take Rigel and Spica home straightaway. Actually, nevermind about Rigel. He can stay here."

From afar, Subaru sees Rigel make a sour face, but Subaru's face tells him "We're having an important talk right now". He turns back to Rem and continues,

"You know, it's kind of late at this point, and honestly I've probably already told you this many times, tens of times, hundreds of times, so I don't know if it'll even mean much."

"Yes?"

"I love you more than anyone else in the world. You're the only one for me, and I'm the only one for you. And you're definitely not the kind of woman that a guy like me could get from giving up and compromising."

Subaru moves towards Rem and softly flicks her forehead. A surprised Rem holds her forehead as Subaru moves his face in close.

"Just as I promised that day, everything I have is yours. I will serve you. I will devote myself to you. I will live just for you. —And now, I suppose I'll live for our kids too."

With his lips approaching past her nose, Rem closes her eyes as he steals her lips.

Sharing their light kiss, Subaru's face hovers close enough to feel Rem's quickened breath. And with a mischievous smile that hadn't changed even with the passage of time, he says,

"So will this put you at ease?"

"Rem is sorry. Rem is always so anxious. Because Rem keeps falling

further and further in love with Subaru-kun. Every time it feels like things couldn't possibly be any happier, Subaru-kun always manages to make Rem even happier. Rem is so happy, and loves Subaru-kun so much, and that's why Rem is anxious."

Tears well in her eyes and her chest shakes as Rem admits to him how happy she has become. Shaking her head, she rests her forehead against his, and they share in their body heat.

“Even though I can touch you right now, I’m always afraid I’ll lose you.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t ever let you go, and I won’t go anywhere either. As long as I have your love, there’s no way we’ll ever be apart.”

“Rem will never stop loving Subaru-kun—”

“Good, then we’ll always be together. I love you Rem.”

While Rem’s head is filled with thoughts and emotions, Subaru once again kisses her. His lips brush against her teeth as he pushes further against the surprised maiden. Their tongues entangle as they feel the sensation of their warm saliva.

They stop there and part their lips. Rem breathes shallowly as Subaru points his finger upwards and continues,

“Also, don’t talk about it as if it was some sort of compromise. That would mean Rigel and Spica were born not from love, but sympathy. Spica is a crystallization of our love that we’ve been planning for years, and Rigel is the result of the fiery passion of our youth.”

“It sure was hard when Rigel was born.”

In front of Subaru who was scolding her with a hand on his hip, Rem fondly reminisced with a smile emerging on her face.

Now deep in the past, Rem waved her finger as if tracing back the memories.

“After moving to Kararagi and finding a home and workplace, we were supposed to take our time getting things together and building our livelihood.”

“Hey but, you know, we were young so we lacked patience and-”

"Even though Subaru-kun should have been exhausted after coming home from work, you always got really lively right before bed."

"Hey but, you know, we were young so we had too much stamina and—"

"When the employment was officialized, Rem became pregnant around the same time. At the time, Rem's face practically turned blue."

"It's kind of painful to admit the mistakes made in the springtime of youth "

In response to Rem's bold accusations, Subaru could only stare into the distance while muttering sheepishly. In the distance, Rigel, who was currently being treated as a "mistake," showed a sour face, but he read the atmosphere and calmed down without saying anything. Quite a kid, Subaru thought.

Subaru nodded at his son's remarkable growth. Beside him, Rem also looked on at her son's sour face and, with a small breath, continued,

"But when Rem was pregnant with Rigel, Rem was really, really happy."

"Well of course I was happy too. When I first heard, my nose started running and I pissed myself a little. Then I wanted to make sure it wasn't a dream so I asked you to punch me, and it was a complete blood bath."

It may have been because Rem was emotional at the time, but she had swung full force at Subaru, causing him to slam into the wall with such force that the entire building shook. If she hadn't unconsciously held back, it wouldn't have been strange for Subaru to have died outright.

Leaving aside those memories, Subaru could clearly remember the time Rem told him she was pregnant. He also vividly recalled the feelings welling in his chest.

However, Rem shook her head at Subaru's answer. He couldn't quite understand the meaning behind it, so he cocked his head in turn.

“The reason Rem was happy was somewhat different from the reason Subaru-kun was happy. The reason Rem was happy was because now… now Rem wouldn’t have to worry about losing Subaru-kun.”

“…”

“To Rem, Rigel is a definite bond between Rem and Subaru-kun. It sounds wrong that way but, when we had our first baby, it was also a link between us that would always exist That’s why Rem was so happy.”

Perhaps Rem had always struggled with this anxiety.

After throwing away everything she held dear, just the two of them escaped to a completely new land. With no one and nothing to cling to but each other, Rem always struggled with the fear that she would someday lose Subaru as well.

Her low self-confidence would prove an impressive match for Subaru’s. For Rem, who rates herself strictly, her life with Subaru was both fantastically happy and yet incredibly anxiety inducing.

It was the birth of the new life between them that finally put an end to that uneasy time.

“Did you have a hard time believing?”

“No. Rem believes in Subaru-kun more than anyone in the world.”

“That’s not it. I didn’t ask if you believed in me… I was asking if you had trouble believing in yourself.”

Hearing Subaru’s response, Rem takes a small breath and nods.

To Rem, Subaru’s existence was so very large. And yet because she looks at herself so poorly, she worried that her own existence was but a small shadow next to his.

—But in a way, Subaru also felt the same. He had always felt that, when compared to himself, Rem was far too wonderful of a girl for him.

It's so strange I can't help but laugh, Subaru thought as his face relaxed into a goofy grin. Rem sees this and puffs her cheeks.

“Nevermind. Rem was being dumb. It can't be helped that you'd laugh at her…”

“No, no that's not it. I was just thinking that you and I are really very alike. And so then I thought that my wife is definitely the cutest in the world.”

Unprepared for Subaru's surprise attack, Rem freezes in surprise for a moment, and then explodes into a feverous blush. Watching her react like this, I really get the feeling that I love her, thought Subaru.

More than anyone else in the world, I love Rem. I love her. I could scream it at the top of my lungs.

Actually, in reality, he sometimes does. In the neighborhood, they're known for being an incredibly loving couple.

“—Rigel, Spica.” “Hm?”

Rem appears to lovingly call her children's names. But she shakes her head to say “No”. She looks toward Subaru and says,

“They were both the name of stars, yes? From the place that Subaru-kun came from, they were how you called them.”

“Yeah, my dad was basically a nut, the sort of sad human being who could barely read, but I thought that his idea to name me after a star was good. I really like it, my name. “Subaru” is also the name of a star from there.”

Back around elementary school, there was an assignment to investigate the origins of one's name, and it was then that Subaru learned of the history of his name. When he learned that he was named after one of the dancing stars of the night sky, he couldn't contain his excitement.

Since then, while he couldn't keep interest in much of anything, he at least continued to gaze at astronomy charts in his spare time. He knew the names of stars by heart, and if a chance to name something came up, it was always an obvious choice how he'd do it.

"I'd always use the names of stars. With things like usernames on the Internet, I'd always use stars as nicknames. In a sense, aren't these names SHINING?!"

"Rem doesn't know what Subaru-kun is talking about, but using the names of stars sounds beautiful. When the third one comes, we'll do just that."

"Isn't it a bit early to talk about a third? I mean, isn't Spica still a baby?"

"Aside from feeding, we can leave everything to Rigel. Why do you think Rem said to wait until Rigel was bigger before having our next child?"

"You know, usually it seems like I'm mainly the one bullying him, but don't you actually go at him way harder?!"

Pondering the daily verbal abuse his son suffers, Subaru gets up and brushes himself off. As Rem looks up toward him, he casually stretches his back and shakes his hips.

"I think it's about time we head home and put away the groceries. Plus, there's too many eyes around here to flirt to my heart's content."

"Yes. Right now Rem is in the mood to flirt to with all her strength and passion."

"I-I wonder if my libido will be able to keep up with the stamina of an oni…"

Muttering to himself sheepishly, Subaru extends his hand to Rem, sitting on the park bench. Rem slowly grabs his hand, but Subaru suddenly pulls her up. The girl makes an audible "Wa!" as he skillfully catches her in his arms. He hugs her along with Spica and savors their warmth.

“Alright, let’s go back. To our home that is.” “Yes dear.”

Holding the groceries in one hand, he grasps Rem’s hand in the other. Walking half a step behind Subaru, Rem snuggles with him as they walk.

“Hey, my son frozen for an eternity in a winter wonderland. Watching your stagnant game of freeze tag was supremely boring so we’ll be heading home. Go stay at a friend’s house for the night.”

“So you’re flatly kicking me out for the night?! Plus, what kind of parents come to a park in broad daylight to kiss anyway?!”

“Ha, you’re just jealous. Sorry, Rigel. This Rem belongs only to me.” “SOOOOOOO ANNOYIIING!!”

While Subaru laughs proudly with his head held high, Rigel yells back with a demonic face. But seeing his father only get more festive, Rigel takes a deep breath and shakes his head.

“Calm down, calm down me. Don’t get caught up in your old man’s pace. Calm down, calm down~. Alright, I’ve calmed down. So, what were you talking about with mom?”

“Oh? We were talking about how your name comes from a star and stuff like that. You know our first idea was to name you “Vega.”“

“That sounds strong as hell! Why didn’t you?”

“Well, it sounds strong right? Like you would grow up to be really strong, and then you’d be too strong to handle in your rebellious phase, so I decided against it. Even though you’ll eventually surpass me in strength, the dad in me said he didn’t want to lose to his son so soon.”

“You thought about all this for a baby who was only a few days old?!” Rigel flails about after hearing Subaru’s casual banter. Then, “Heeey, Rigel’s moving! You’re breaking the rules of freeze tag!” “Ah!”

Despite ignoring him completely while he was frozen, the other children quickly pointed out his mistake the second he moved. Rigel's in shock as he stands there stunned. Subaru pats him on the back and says,

"Those who break the rules of freeze tag suffer a penalty game. You get tickled by the others until you can't even cry anymore. —Good luck."

"What the hell are you saying with such a serious face… Hey, what are you, GUYS! Wait, stop for a second! Don't just listen to everything this guy says! Wait, UWAAAAAAAA—!!"

Hordes of children descend upon Rigel and chase him about. Rigel tried to escape. But they eventually corner him. From there they grab his arms and push him to the ground. With no chance to resist, countless fingers begin tickling him.

"So long kiddo. You were a good son. It was your father who was the bad one."

"Rigel, your mother and father have some important business to attend to, so please stay at a friend's house for the night. Also, the use of your horns is forbidden. And don't let your clothes get torn."

"I-I'll remember this you heartless parents—!!!"

As a mountain of fingers tickle him relentlessly, Rigel's forced laughter can be heard even from a distance. Seeing her older brother in such a state, Spica raises her voice in excitement and delight.

Well well, seems like she's got promising taste, Subaru thought. Her position in the family will be a lot more interesting.

To their beloved son whom they cannot help but adore, they showed a somewhat unusual way of expressing their love that day.

Subaru pulled Rem's hand along as he walked.

Towards the precious place where his family lives, the place filled with peace and happiness that they call home.

“Subaru-kun.”

“Hm?”

Feeling a tug on his arm, Subaru stops and turns around toward Rem.

At that moment, a strong gust of wind blows about them. Subaru shuts his eyes involuntarily, opening them again after the winds had died down.

Rem’s long blue hair was being carried by the wind, glimmering brilliantly as if it was blending into the sun’s shining rays. Long ago, Rem had started growing out her hair. For whom she had grown it, Subaru now had a good idea. And when he thought of long-haired women, the very first to pop up in his mind was of course the one in front of him, the one he loved most in the entire world.

With her blue hair silently flowing behind her, and their beloved child held in her arms, Rem chased after Subaru with a brilliant smile on her face.

Above all else, it was Rem’s smile that stirred such feelings of fondness and love within him.

“Right now, Rem is the happiest in the entire world.”

Oni and Happiness

1

“N-No way… is this for real…?!”

Amongst the crowded plaza, Subaru raises his voice in disbelief.

Eyes rife with excitement, he can’t help but make a scene.

In his line of sight was a single market stall. —The brown-clothed shopkeep handling it widens his eyes at Subaru’s sudden overreaction.

But Subaru, overwhelmed, doesn’t even notice the shocked shopkeep. Lips trembling with excitement, he even neglects to wipe the sweat dripping from his forehead, causing Subaru to taste some oddly bitter “saliva.” Caught like a deer in headlights, Subaru’s feet stop squarely in front of the stall.

“Hey, what’s the matter, standing around like a mook all of a sudden? If we don’t get home soon you’ll end up buying some useless crap again.”

The child walking ahead grimaces as he reluctantly stops for Subaru.

Folding his arms behind his head, the boy’s sharp, dagger-like stare makes his displeasure seem very obvious.

And yet, while his leering suggests he’s out to kill, Subaru knew he wasn’t necessarily in a bad mood. After all, Subaru, with his own set of sharp eyes, was practically a veteran in accidentally scaring off strangers.

“[Live strong…]”

“What the hell are you suddenly pitying me for! Ah, wait wait wait! I don’t wanna hear it! I know it’s just gonna depress me! Don’t tell me! I said don’t tell me goddamnit!”

“Seeing you all worked up like this, I’m really looking forward to the future. Really, you’re the best for bullying like this. You might seriously be a prodigy. Blessed by the very Gods with this divine gift.”

“Like hell I want a gift like that! If the Gods have the time to be giving out useless crap, then at least give me something more useful damnit!”

The boy shouts back at Subaru’s taunts, his face twisted fiercely.

—The boy with short blue hair looks up to the sky as if grieving. Subaru merely nods at his usual overreaction, then proceeds to face the shopkeep who had been watching their useless banter with a blank face.

“Hey, how much are these?”

“H-Huh?”

Subaru grins mischievously at the shopkeep who was obviously taken aback. Subaru’s evil glare and exposed teeth puts a lump in the shopkeep’s throat as he tries his best not to shriek. Although considering the exchange just then, his own reaction seemed rather trivial.

Subaru clears his throat and points at a particular item in the stall.

“I want these. Give me some. I’ll take, say, three bags of them.”

“Y-Yes! Thanks for ya patronage!”

“Hey! Wait, wait a sec! What the heck are you buying all of a sudden… if we buy unnecessary stuff on the way home, we won’t just be wasting money, we’ll be punished within an inch of our lives!”

The second the shopkeep accepts Subaru’s purchase, the boy’s face fills with fear. He pulls sheepishly on the hem of Subaru’s coat, practically begging him to reconsider. Taking hold of his hand, Subaru crouches to the boy’s eye level and reassures him, "Don't worry, I'm not using any of our shopping money. This'll come out of my own personal pocket money. It's my hard-earned allowance that I've slowly, slowly been saving up. I'm sure you know how restrictive I am about using it."

"Uh huh, yeah, well… you don't spend on alcohol or smokes, so that just leaves… I guess splurging it all on women?"

"Hey, you're definitely trying for a serious misunderstanding here, aren't you. Who the hell did you get this awful personality from, huh? I'd really like to know-"

"I'm pretty much certain it's hereditary. Sadly."

Subaru shakes his head with grief at the boy's callous declaration. As he brandishes the Bird with his left hand, Subaru grabs the exposed finger by the joint, and the boy mutters a short "Ah" before wailing in pain.

As these two carry on, the shopkeep dutifully fills the bags and gives a brief, nervous laugh.

"You boys sure are friendly. Whatcha, father and son?"

"Hey, hey, after all that, you really think he's my son… man, merchants sure have some useless eyes. What do you think Rigel?"

"After looking at our faces, it'd be harder not to figure it out!"

Still locked in a death grip, Rigel shouts rebelliously against the pain. Hearing that, Subaru admits defeat with a casual "Well, I guess that's true."

At that point, the bagging was finished. The shopkeep brings forward three small sacks while Subaru pulls out the pouch holding his allowance.

"Alright, how many Yen will that be?"

"Dunno what 'Yen' ya talkin' 'bout, all togetha it be sixteen coppers."

“Hm, then three silvers should do. —I don’t need the change. Keep it.”

“Shoot! Generous ain’tcha! I’ll take ya up on it. Thanks.”

The shopkeep makes big, dramatic gestures as he happily accepts the silvers. Watching the exchange and their carefree smiles, Rigel grimaces. Between Subaru’s Death Grip and the fact they were giving up the change, it was obvious that Rigel was upset.

“Don’t worry, it’s all good. Today I got a hold of something really nostalgic. Just consider it a bonus for bringing me a little excitement. Besides, being too stingy will get you punished someday.”

“…Excitement and nostalgia, what are you even talking about.”

Rising up, Rigel, while still clearly discontent, asks curiously about the purchase. In response, Subaru ruffles his short hair with full force. “GUAAAAHH”, Rigel roars with further discontent.

“It’s got a little something to do with the Missus. It reminds me of an old custom from my hometown,”

Subaru replies, a mischievous smile emerging on his face.

2

“—and so, you two somehow ended up spending how much?”

The blue-haired maiden sighs lightly at Subaru’s explanation. The second Subaru and Rigel had returned, she came out to welcome them both home. She apparently came from the kitchen, as her white apron had faintly wet splotches, showing where she had hurriedly dried her hands.

In his spare time, Subaru covered her apron with decorative patches and embroidery. Seeing the wet splotches all a careful distance from his handiwork, Subaru is struck with a surprise attack of embarrassing affection.

“Geez, what are you laughing about. Rem still hasn’t received a satisfying answer."

Without really thinking, Subaru's face loosens at the sight of her

—yet, the long, blue-haired Rem was thoroughly upset. Looking ready to dish out a frightening punishment, she lays her eyes on Rigel who stands beside Subaru.

"Rigel too. You know your father is erratic like this. If you don't keep it together, what is Rem to do?"

"Yes, I'm incredibly sorry for… wait a sec, this is just weird. Even if I calm down and think carefully it's still just plain weird?! Why is the child being scolded for his careless parent? Isn't it supposed to be the other way around?"

"Wait a minute, Rigel. Take a deeep breath, now exhaaale… yeah like that, slooowly. Repeat that five more times, and make sure to close your eyes. One, two, three… yeah, there you go. Have you calmed down? Yup, you're calm now. Alright so now that you're calm, go ahead and apologize to your mother…"

"I freakin' meditated till I hit my Zen state and reflected on my actions, but I still don't see how I've done anything wrong!!"

Rather than calm down, Rigel goes red in the face with anger, raging toward his room. "Rigel!", Rem calls out his name as he rushes past her, but he keeps moving. Or so it seems until he had run up to the end of the corridor.

"…what?"

Rigel's feet stop. Despite everything else, Rigel always listens to what his parents had to say to the very end. Rem, fully aware that Rigel would stop for him, carries on with her usual cool demeanor,

"Snacks have been prepared for you up in your room, so please have them after washing up. And don't forget to let Spica know you're home."

"…got it. Thanks for the food."

As part of Subaru and Rem's lessons on mannerisms, it was an ironclad law in the Natsuki household to say "Thanks for the food" before meals. No matter how frustrated or rebellious he was, Rigel would always remember this rule. Seeing the rare child in him, the couple looked toward him with fond eyes.

In an act of petty rebellion, however, Rigel still slams the door as he heads upstairs. Rem turns back toward Subaru.

"Do you, do you think we teased him a bit too much?"

"Nah, in terms of mother-and-son conversations, that was par for the course. Even though he acts like that, at his core, he at least doesn't hate it. That brat, he really is just like how I was as a kid. I can basically see right through him."

Subaru affectionately pets Rem, comforting her as he removes his shoes and enters his home. He collects the day's purchases that Rigel had tossed haphazardly (though in reality, he let it prop up against the wall so it wouldn't fall over) and, practically by habit, Subaru walks side by side with Rem to the living room.

As he props the three small bags onto the table alongside the groceries, Rem sneaks a peek at their contents.

"They really are… completely normal beans."

"Yeah, that they are. What, did you think when I said "beans," I was somehow hinting something more naughty and erotic? Man, my dear wife might seem calm and level-headed, but she's actually pretty active and aggressive afterall."

"Rem simply doesn't hesitate with giving and receiving love. Furthermore, when it comes to embarrassing displays of affection, Rem thinks Subaru-kun is just as guilty."

"Oh? When has a SHY and NAIVE-natured NICE GUY such as myself ever done something so shameless?"

As Subaru poses flamboyantly, his chin on his fist and exposed white teeth flashing a smile, Rem briefly gazes at him with a charmed yet somewhat dumbfounded face. With her face still red with embarrassment, she averts her eyes,

“Wh-When we celebrated our anniversary, Subaru-kun bought a huge number of bouquets, and for Rem’s birthday Subaru-kun and Rigel put up decorations all over the house, and when Spica was born, Subaru-kun convinced the townsfolk to hold an entire parade… Subaru-kun always spends way too much on other people.”

“I use my allowance to make my wife and family happy. Isn’t that basically spending for myself? In the end, I’m spending my allowance for the sake of my own HAPPY LIFE aren’t I?”

“—-!”

Subaru’s earnest answer paints Rem’s white face red with shyness and embarrassment. The sudden wave of emotions is too much for Rem, as happy tears faintly well. Raising her face, Rem quickly grabs Subaru’s sleeve to mop her moist eyes.

Her sudden movements surprise Subaru. He lets out a small “Uwah!” as he loses his balance. Rem stands on her toes to support his weight, facing him as if there just to catch him.

“…”

“…What’s up with you all of a sudden?”

And then for a brief moment, they let their lips meet, their tongues entangled in a sweet embrace before finally parting.

Subaru’s heart beats feverously after Rem’s sudden display of affection, but he somehow manages a facade of calmness on his face. After savoring his tongue with her soft, sweet lips, Rem, with a faintly sensual look on her face, answers,

“Subaru-kun… is the one at fault here. Saying such embarrassing things so suddenly like that.”

“Did I really say something that embarrassing?”

“Subaru-kun doesn’t realize how much his words and actions affect

Rem. Subaru-kun should be more careful. —Rem doesn’t mind if it’s at home, but if Subaru-kun does this to Rem outside, Rem will be troubled.”

As a blushing Rem mutters back sheepishly, Subaru’s facade of calmness and his very last threads of reason seem ready to snap. Subaru anxiously sneaks a glance at his wife. He definitely wasn’t alone in his hot, unsteady breathing.

As the atmosphere between the two lovers reaches a boiling point,

“—AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

“Whoa!! Spica’s crying—! Someone! Anyone—! HEELP—!!”

The cries of their beloved son and daughter shook the house like a small tremor.

Subaru and Rem look each other in the face, and then automatically dash off. Without even a word, the two take each other’s hands as they rush over to their crying baby daughter.

“By the way, what were those beans for? Subaru-kun said they were for an old custom from his hometown…”

“Oh yeah, did I not say?”

With Rem wrapped around his arm and her weight pleasantly pressing against him, Subaru casually answers with an innocent laugh,

“—So back in my hometown, there was this tradition where we’d throw beans at bad Oni to get rid of them, you see.”

—At that moment, the bright smile Rem had shown Subaru seemed to freeze in shock.

3

“You got it all wrong! Completely, utterly wrong! That wasn’t my intention at all, I swear!”

"He's horrible isn't he, Spica. Your father, oh it must be that your father has come to hate your mother. If not, then why in the world would he buy beans for getting rid of Oni… It must be some roundabout way of telling Rem something. To Subaru-kun, Rem is just, Rem is just-"

"There's no way that's true! If someone asked me to choose between Rem and Rigel, I wouldn't hesitate for even a second to choose Rem!"

"You shitty Dad!!"

The family of four makes a huge commotion, its members chasing after each other in circles around the room. In the lead, a sulking Rem cradles Spica in her arms and traces circles, cheeks puffed to their max. Second in line, Subaru desperately chases after her, apologizing profusely. And at the end of the pack, Rigel, who isn't heartless enough to leave outright, yells after Subaru with his face twisted in anger.

"Wait I get it, stop for a second! I'll admit that what I just said wasn't quite right. Okay so, if someone asked me to choose between Rem and Rigel, I'll hesitate for a little while and then choose Rem!"

"It's not about how long you took to get to that decision goddamnit! Don't get me involved in your lover's quarrels!"

"Rigel, what kind of language are you using against your father. Also, if you keep angrily thrashing about, Spica will start crying again. Please keep quiet."

"I don't want to hear that from the angriest person in this house right now!"

Rigel continues to roar rebelliously. At once, Subaru and Rem both put a finger to their lips and make a "Shhh" sound. Mortified, Rigel drops out of their absurd chase.

The remaining two, Subaru and Rem, seem to chase after each other's backs endlessly, circling around an agitated Rigel sitting in the middle.

“[Chasing out Oni] was just an expression. Back in my hometown they were, let’s see… Oni were sort of like a collection of bad things. Things like disease and poverty and unpopularity were all bundled together and called [Oni]. The bean tossing was a tradition for getting rid of those bad things, so it’s not like we were antagonizing actual Oni.”

“Horrible, you’re just horrible. Subaru-kun, you even once said things like being ‘fanatical like an Oni,’ and ‘I love Oni’ just to woo Rem… It seems that Subaru-kun has completely forgotten the feelings from that time.”

“I’m telling you that’s not true!”

With that final retort, Subaru suddenly stops and turns around. Having not expected their circular chase to suddenly end, Rem falls into Subaru’s breast with a startled look.

Bringing her face even further into his breast, Subaru uses both arms to grab her in a bear hug, preventing Rem’s escape.

“Forgetting my feelings for you? That’s just plain impossible. Rem, you’re my number one favorite person in the entire world. Don’t tell me you forgot that?”

“Su, Subaru-kun…”

Feeling his passionate gaze on her, Rem’s eyes soon grow moist.

It has been nine whole years since the first time the two had met. In that time, Rem became a mother, and the young weakness in her was shed away, revealing the fortitude of a strong woman.

And yet, when she falls into Subaru’s arms like this, Rem can’t help but revert to that time long ago when she was brimming with love and longing for him.

Embarrassed with herself, Rem closes her eyes as a sweet sensation tickles her lips.

“Subaru-kun……—oh yes, Rigel. Please take Spica for your mother.”

“Err, uhh, yeah okay.”

“—Subaru-kun.”

Between Subaru and Rem, Spica had been experiencing a rather claustrophobic situation. Now with both hands free, Rem flings them towards Subaru’s chest and rubs her soft cheeks against him.

“In Subaru-kun’s eyes, is Rem still Subaru-kun’s number one favorite person?”

“Is that even a question? I wouldn’t even be exaggerating if I said that half my entire existence was my love for Rem and the other half was my devotion for Rem.”

“Geez, Subaru-kun is always spouting such nonsense…”

Embracing each other, Subaru and Rem exchange their deepest feelings.

Witnessing the scene of his parents making up, Rigel deftly plugs Spica’s ears,

“—WHAT A FAAAAAAAARRCE!!”

Rigel screams with the force and strength of his entire body.

4

“Hmm, the Bean-tossing festival… Rem has never heard of such a tradition.”

“Well I guess around here that’s gotta be the case. To be honest, I can’t seem to match the local calendar with my hometown’s, so I’m not actually sure when it even is around here…”

To properly celebrate the festival, they would have wanted to wait until February 3rd. But, while this world had the same four seasons, and a year was even the same 365 days, the names of the months were so outrageously different that, even after nine whole years, Subaru still couldn’t figure out which was February.

All he knew was that since it was mildly cold out, it had to be somewhere between January and March.

“Anyway, without further ado, let’s get the Bean-Tossing Festival started! Oh, but rather than chase away actual Oni, we’ll be chasing away all the bad stuff that gets referred to as Oni. Let’s do it for our family’s future happiness!”

“Well, Subaru-kun says that, but three out of our family are actual Oni…”

With the inkling of a bitter smile on her face, Rem protrudes a single white horn from her forehead, appealing for the Oni.

Just as Rem said, Rigel and Spica are indeed half-Oni. Having inherited Oni blood, horns have even sprouted on their foreheads.

Rigel can consciously bring his out, while Spica’s tiny horn occasionally emerges from her particularly enthusiastic crying.

As the four sit in a circle for their family meeting, Subaru can feel a lack of enthusiasm in his Oni family members. Dismayed, he tries for a diversion,

“TEI-!”

“Ahn!”

Subaru extends his hand toward Rem’s horn, gently rolling his fingers about the white protrusion. While the structure of the horn was quite rigid, its surface was surprisingly lukewarm and smooth to the touch. And above all else, apparently the horn was a sensitive spot of sorts. As Subaru’s fingers play with Rem’s horn,

“Ahn, mngh… wa-, wait, Subaru-kun… the children, they’re still, they’re watching… uu~”

“You’d be a little more convincing if you weren’t snuggling up to me right now…”

As Rem lovingly brings her body towards Subaru’s, she feels more reminiscent of a small, affectionate animal than a sexy housewife.

Subaru brings Rem to his lap as he continues petting her horn. Turning to Rigel,

“Hey Rigel, what do you think?”

“Aside from ‘You normies should just go explode!’? Well, I dunno but… Dad, I don’t really get why you wanna do this so badly.”

Rigel glares harshly at Subaru as he comforts Spica in his arms. To his son’s criticism, Subaru gives an audible “Heh” and makes big, exaggerated nods.

“The reason’s very simple actually. This is really the only holiday about Oni I could think of. Also, I didn’t mention it before, but there’s a bit more to this festival. As we chase away the bad things we call [Oni], we’ll also be inviting happiness into our home. Basically, it’s a sort of ritual where we do away with the bad while praying for a safe, happy future.”

At that point, Rem had curled up into a ball on Subaru’s lap. While softly stroking her small back, Subaru points his finger upward,

“To Natsuki Subaru, family is the most important thing in the world. And the fact that we have ties with Oni isn’t something I can or want to ignore… Besides, it’s not like Oni have to always be antagonized.”

“…meaning?”

“Technically we’re supposed to say ‘Out with the Oni! In with fortune!’ while we throw beans around. But lately it’s been popular to bring both Oni and fortune into the household.”

“That’s just putting the cart before the horse! Bringing in good and bad things, what happened to the stuff from earlier?”

“The way of thinking must have changed. And I don’t think it’s really a bad thing either.”

Subaru explains as his fingers gently trail through Rem’s long hair. Rem’s back faintly quivers at the ticklish sensation, melting Subaru’s gruff face into a fond smile.

"Chasing them out because they're Oni is just unreasonable. After all, it might just be possible to befriend an Oni. And then do erotic things with an Oni, and then marry an Oni, and then build a loving family with an Oni. Yeah, somehow, I think they're all possible."

"…"

"If the world changed its way of thinking like that, I think it'd be great. I've always really liked Oni, and now my wife is an Oni, so I'm in paradise! Maybe people have started accepting the good with the bad, and this change in the Oni's treatment reflects that."

Just as good and bad fluctuates in the world and day-to-day life, perhaps the way people feel about Oni is changing.

Some even declare Oni as "moe" characters. Having experienced Oni firsthand, Subaru knows them better than anyone. In his mind, there isn't even a shred of doubt. His wife is the cutest.

"In with the Oni! In with fortune too!"

"Say what?"

"'In with the Oni! In with fortune too!' Let's bring them both in! To me, Oni and fortune are both signs of happiness. Being a bit greedy and going for both… how's that sound?"

Seeing Subaru shrug casually, Rigel shapes his mouth to say something back, but eventually couldn't find anything to say and slinks back down.

As Subaru laughs at his son's speechlessness, a smiling Rem, still nestled in his lap, giggles with a "fufufu~" sound.

"That peculiar way Subaru-kun thinks, Rem loves it. —Let's do it, the Bean Tossing Festival."

"Oh, finally up for it it I see. Alright, let's strike while the iron's hot. Maybe after this we can share the Festival with everyone else too."

Rem tilts her face toward Subaru as he lifts her up. She gives him a puzzled look, to which Subaru answers, "You know, like back when I showed the kids how to play freeze tag, and it spread like wildfire. Kararagi just feels kind of intimate and familiar. I always get the feeling it's just like my old hometown."

"Subaru-kun does say that occasionally. Is the feeling really that strong?"

"I said it a few times without really thinking much of it, but the villages here also elect their leaders by popular vote… or something like that. And there are even holidays just like April Fools and Christmas."

"Because having many events and holidays keeps things exciting and interesting… Rem thinks."

"That's definitely part of it, but I feel like there's also more to it than that… well, it doesn't really matter right now."

Kararagi was undeniably a wondrous place to live. Together with Rem, it has been nine years since they immigrated here.

Indeed, without the flood of support and kindness from its inhabitants, Subaru and Rem could not possibly have done as well as they did.

Even now though, they still had their difficulties with the tricky Kararagi dialect, which was reminiscent of Kansai dialect.

"Hey, I brought the beans. If we're doing this, let's get it over with already."

"Aha, finally coming around are you, my son. Even though you were being all negative earlier, deep inside you just couldn't help getting all crazy and excited. Wow, Rigel's suuuch a kiid~"

"I'm still better than a stupid dad who worries his wife and kids to death!"

Rigel roughly forces a bag into both Subaru and Rem's hands, keeping one for himself.

Now facing each other, the two Oni look toward Subaru for what to do next. Nodding, he stuffs his hand into the bag and pulls out a single bean.

“It’s simple. Just chant ‘Out with the Oni! In with fortune!’. Well, except we’ll be bringing the Oni in. Yeah, let’s do that instead.”

“Umm, so the beans… does Rem throw them at the Oni?”

“Umm, Mom? That violent look you’re giving your son is genuinely terrifying him!”

“Well technically, but don’t do it so seriously, alright? Actually, please be gentle.”

After ensuring everything was set, the Bean Tossing Festival

—begins.

Facing off against each other, a bean in each hand,

“Alright, take that! In with the Oni! In with fortune!”

“Umm… i, in with the Oni! In with fortune!”

“In with the-, hey wait, Spica don’t cry! I said don’t cry! Hey, stop for a sec-, wai-, STOP WITH THE BEANS!”

Back and forth, the room is filled with such exchanges as beans fly chaotically all over.

Subaru bears a refreshing energy and gusto. Rem, who felt embarrassed at first, quickly casts off her shame and laughs innocently. Rigel, who for some reason bore the fatal handicap of handling Spica, fights against an almost desperate struggle.

“Yeah! In with the Oni! In with fortune!”

With the Oni themselves as family, and a home filled to the brim with happiness, this is the way the Natsuki household celebrates the Bean Tossing Festival.

With a loving Oni wife by his side and yet more Oni as children, Subaru enjoys a truly new form of the Festival with his precious family.

This is just bliss, he thought.

Rogue beans scatter about the room, the corridor, all over the house. Just thinking about the ensuing cleanup would put a serious damper on the soul. —But anyone moping about cleanup instead of enjoying this chaotic moment wouldn't be quite right in the head.

They laugh, and laugh, and laugh some more as beans shoot across the room.

For the sake of being together with the beloved Oni, and for the sake of everlasting happiness, they toss beans.

"Subaru-kun"

Before he realized it, Rem's face had closed in on Subaru.

As Subaru drops his gaze towards her, Rem approaches him, her flushed face showing him a brimming smile.

"Today and every day from now on, will Subaru-kun please happily embrace both Rem and fortune?"

Saying that, Rem jumps into his open arms. Subaru hugs her in turn as he replies,

"—I told you didn't I? Building a future together, hand-in-hand with an Oni, that's always, always been my life-long dream."

With the happiness of this moment, as well as the promised happiness of tomorrow, unshakably rooted in his heart, Subaru whispers back his reply with a limitless passion.

5

"…Damn, he sure just does whatever he feels like."

"Adaaa—"

"What, you're hungry? But no, you can't eat them. Dad said you're supposed to eat your age in beans. Spica's not even 1 yet, and you don't even have teeth to eat them with anyway. I'll eat them in your place."

"Udaaa—"

"Don't look so sour… you know, when you make that face, you look just like how Mom does when she's sulking to Dad. Damn, once Spica starts walking around and stuff, I'm not looking forward to my place in the family hierarchy."

"Au, baa—?"

"Go back inside? Don't talk crazy, we can't go back right now. All that stuff about bean tossing and the Festival, and after trying to look cool in front of Mom, they're definitely still flirting around in there. 'Out with the Oni!' my ass. I bet he just wanted me out so he could flirt to his heart's content."

"Aau! Aaah, adaaa—!"

"What, are you backing him up too? First with Mom, now with Spica, does Dad emit some sort of Oni-attracting pheromone or something? I don't believe this shit."

"Aah—? Ada, adauuu—. Uuu—"

"Huh? Why are you petting my cheek like you're trying to comfort me? No, you got it all wrong, it's not like I like Dad or anything. Even among the Oni, even among the outsiders of the Oni, I'm still an outsider. It wouldn't phase me even if all the Oni in the world fell for him. I'd still be a member of the Anti-Shitty Dad faction."

"Aahh—buaaa—"

"Agh, damn! Screw this! C'mon, we're going Spica. I figure if we take a short walk around the neighborhood, even those two will eventually finish their flirting. And I'm saying this now, but it's not like I'm doing this to give them some time for themselves… I TOLD YOU THAT'S NOT IT!"

“Aadaa! Aadaa!”

“Ahhh, damnnit.”

“—The weather sure is nice today.”

Fortune Roll Rhapsody

1

When Rigel sees what awaits him in the living room, he suddenly wants nothing more than to turn and run. Deep in his soul, there burns an intense desire to abandon everything and run home. Unfortunately, this is his home. There is simply no running from his cruel destiny.

“Fugafuga?”

“…”

“Fugafugafuu—ga, fuu—gafuga”

“Shut it with your fugafuga’s! What crazy cult ritual is it this time! Do you ever think how your son feels? When he comes home, and his Dad is running around fugafuga-ing with a pole of all things stuffed in his mouth?!”

As Subaru stands and ambles toward Rigel, mouth still stuffed, Rigel rants, spit flying everywhere. As the target of his son’s rebellious tantrum, Subaru slinks his shoulders.

“Fugafuga…”

“Would you quit it with the fugafuga’s already!”

“Fugafu… Geez, what a brat. You know, if you’re always this uptight, you’ll eventually regret it. Kids need to play while they’re young. Once you’re an adult, you’ll worry about people’s opinions and start restraining yourself…”

“When you say that, it sounds completely unconvincing! How old are you! How much longer are you gonna keep playing! When will you gain this so-called ability to ‘worry about people’s opinions!’”

Despite approaching his thirties, Natsuki Subaru doesn’t show any sign of slowing down. He even plays with kids Rigel’s age, causing the comparatively mature Rigel intense embarrassment. This boy wishes more than anything for his father to act his age.

Then again, if he actually did, Rigel would worry that his father was gravely ill.

“So, what sort of weird festival did you come up with this time?”

“Hold on, my son. Are you actually an esper? So, you’ve somehow gained the ability to read my mind. If not, then how could you ever see my actions as part of a festival…”

“It’s more like I’m praying it’s for a festival. My sanity couldn’t take it if you casually welcomed me home with a thick pole shoved in your mouth for no reason. Just tell me what’s all this about…”

Rife with complaints, Rigel picks up the mysterious object Subaru was carrying in his mouth. He finds it surprisingly soft and flexible. Rigel quickly uncovers its identity.

“…a sushi roll?”

“Yup, a sushi roll. You look like you want one. I got it, if you want it so badly, go ahead and chow down. Luckily, that’s just one of the ‘prototypes.’ I’ve already set aside the rolls for the main event, so you can have that one as a snack.”

“Even if I was hungry, I’m not gonna eat something that spent any time in my Dad’s mouth… Maybe if it was Mom or Spica.”

“Hey, isn’t eight years old a bit early to hate on your old man this hard? At your age, even I respected my Dad… wait, did I? Did I?”

“How would I even know! Anyway, what’s this festival already! And what main event!”

Hounded by an impatient Rigel, Subaru shrugs his shoulders and laughs. He points out a plate on the living room table with homemade sushi rolls stacked neatly on top.

“Isn’t it obvious? After the Bean Tossing Festival,—YES, it’s the Ehomaki Challenge!”

2

“Ehomaki, is it? What kind of festival would that be?”

Rem, after coming home from shopping, listens to Subaru’s explanation. She tilts her head curiously as she cradles a drowsy Spica in her arms. As Rem speaks, Spica’s small hands lightly grasp at the fair maiden’s long blue hair.

With all members accounted for, the Natsuki household sits in the living room, surrounding the plate of rolls.

“Remember the Bean Tossing Festival? By tossing beans, we took in happiness while getting rid of misfortune.”

“Of course. Rem thought Subaru-kun was trying to throw her away… Rem’s maiden heart was deeply, strongly afflicted. This incredible sadness, it will not heal easily. Please take Rem on a date.”

With upturned eyes, Rem pretends to sulk as Subaru smiles wryly.

His cute wife’s request. As her husband, accepting is both his natural-born duty and his happiest privilege.

“It’ll be my pleasure. Let’s see, I’m free tomorrow, so let’s do it then. Speaking of which, they just finished remodeling the spirit shrine at the edge of town. It’s really something now.”

“Yes. And after Subaru-kun started embossing couples’ vows onto its walls, visitors started flocking to the shrine from all over.

With her husband’s work going so well, Rem can hold her head high.”

“We’re married already, but how about we go add our vows too. It’ll be just the two of us. Ah, don’t worry, Spica’ll be fine. She’s got her siscon-afflicted brother to watch over her.”

“Subaru-kun… Rem is so happy. Rem will look forward to tomorrow’s date.”

“Can we get back to the main topic already?!”

As his parents plan out their date, an impatient Rigel finally explodes. But despite his sudden outburst, Subaru and Rem, used to his tantrums, hardly react at all. Even Spica seems unfazed, her sleepy face unchanging.

Rigel’s yells echo pointlessly throughout the house.

“Hey Rigel, don’t shout so suddenly like that. You know, if you’re too hot-blooded while you’re young, once you’re older, the veins in your head might explode from stress.”

“Shaddup! They’ll explode even if I hold it in! So I might as well shout!”

“Rigel, what sort of language are you using against your father. Your mother hopes you don’t speak like this outside as well. If Rigel always act so angry, everyone from friends to strangers will avoid you. You need to become a more wonderful person like your father. Oh, but Rigel could never possibly hope to win against Subaru-kun. Try not to be too depressed about it.”

“Your comforting is depressing me! What did I ever do to you!”

Bullied by his own parents, Rigel throws himself at the floor and collapses into a heap. Subaru and Rem giggle as Rigel falls into complete sulking mode. As Rem readjusts a sleeping Spica in her arms, Subaru clears his throat to resume,

“Well anyway, with it being Rigel’s dying wish and all, let’s get back to the Ehomaki. For the Bean Tossing Festival, we invited happiness and chased out misfortune. This Ehomaki Challenge and the Bean Tossing Festival are both part of a holiday called ‘Setsubun.’ The Ehomaki Challenge is a more minor event though.”

“A different event from the same holiday?”

“Exactly. Back home, the East and West did things totally differently, you see. The Bean Tossing Festival and the Ehomaki Challenge were part of those differences. The East celebrated the Bean Tossing Festival while the West did the Ehomaki Challenge.

But there's no such thing as too much of a good thing, so I thought we'd try both."

"Yes, as expected of Subaru-kun. The way Subaru-kun unhesitantly takes the best of everything is wonderful as well."

Rem praises Subaru, clapping softly to avoid waking Spica. Then, putting a finger to her cheek as she tilts her head to the side,

"So if we needed beans for the Bean Tossing Festival, the Ehomaki Challenge uses these sushi rolls?"

"Well, we actually could've used a few more things for the Bean Tossing Festival. I already got that shop to stock more beans for next year. But I also want to make some more elaborate preparations like getting an Oni mask and Oni pants for me to wear."

When it came to enjoying festivals to their fullest, Natsuki Subaru's energy and dynamism knew no limits.

A spellbound Rem gazes fondly as her husband exhibits his needlessly hot passion. After briefly letting his thoughts run wild, he shakes his head.

"Nononono. We're talking about Ehomaki right now. Just as Rem says, instead of beans, we have these sushi rolls. Where I call from, this kind of sushi roll is called an 'Ehomaki.' Rem, just from looking, what do you notice?"

"Hm, well. It's very long and thick and black."

"One more time please."

"—? It seems to be very long and thick and black."

"My cute, honest wife can sometimes be unknowingly erotic…"

Deeply moved, Subaru struggles to keep a straight face as Rem returns an innocent, puzzled look.

Seeing as this wasn't particularly wholesome education, Subaru puts on a serious face and gets back to the sushi rolls.

“These thick sushi rolls are called ‘Taimaki.’ Unfortunately, Kararagi doesn’t have any customs about Ehomaki, so I made them myself. They’re actually pretty easy.”

“This faintly sour scent, this is vinegie, yes?”

“Vinegared rice. It’s definitely the ideal rice for sushi. Next time, we should try it with some raw fish. Putting that aside for now, the recipe’s really simple. You just take dried seaweed and vinegared rice and wrap seven different fillings inside. That’s it!”

“Is there any special meaning attached to having seven fillings?”

Peering at the Ehomaki’s rainbow-colored fillings, Rem asks a natural question.

“Glad you noticed, as expected of my wife! Yeah, that’s an important point. Ehomaki are meant to be a festive food. Back home, we held festivals every year to celebrate the Seven Deities of Fortune, you see.”

“My, such festive deities.”

“Yeah, they’re a real festive bunch. The seven different fillings represent the Seven Deities, and when we wrap them into Ehomaki, it’s like we’re capturing their luck. A food filled to the brim with good luck. That’s Ehomaki!”

As Subaru explains this last point, his foot dramatically planted on the table, Rem once again claps modestly.

Finished listening, Rigel raises his face. With delinquent’s eyes that rival Subaru’s in sharpness, Rigel glares at his festive parents.

“So after all that fanfare, we’re just gonna eat sushi rolls? I don’t see what the big deal is…”

“Foolishly foolish fool!”

“Yeow! How’s a finger-flick so strong?!”

After chastising his cheeky son with a whip-like finger flick to the forehead, Subaru grabs the agony-stricken Rigel and forcibly gives him a shoulder ride.

“Why are you suddenly carrying me?!”

“Just felt like it, really. Anyway, I’ll admit that compared to the Bean Tossing Festival, the Ehomaki Challenge seems a bit plain. But actually, I neglected to mention a few more points. Forgive me my son.”

“Don’t bow while I’m on your shoulders! Cut it out! I’m falling!”

With the flailing Rigel’s very life at his mercy, Subaru makes purposefully dizzying laps around the dining table.

As father and son engage in such lighthearted roughhousing, Rem looks on with an affectionate, motherly gaze.

“So then, what else is left to explain, Subaru-kun?”

“Well first of all, what do you think the ‘Eho’ of ‘Ehomaki’ means? I haven’t explained that yet, afterall. The way it’s written, ‘Eho’ means ‘the compass of fortune.’ Every year, we have a lucky direction, like north or south. So they’re called ‘Ehomaki’ because we face that direction while we eat them.”

“Rem sees now. A ‘compass of fortune,’ what a fun idea.”

“Also, you can’t speak while you eat an Ehomaki. It’s just a saying though, so don’t split hairs over it. They also say you should eat it with a smile but… actually, that sounds like a good one. They do say ‘Fortune comes to those who smile.’ Besides, you naturally smile while eating something good.”

As Subaru grins widely at his own explanation, Rem cheerfully adds,

“When Subaru-kun eats the food Rem makes, Subaru-kun always has such a big smile.”

“Delicious food and a cute wife. Spending time at home with my beloved family, how could I not smile? It's like I'm hogging the entire world's happiness for myself."

"With Rem, it would be two people hogging… actually, the whole family is hogging the world's happiness."

"Rem…"

"Subaru-kun…"

"Don't flirt around with people riding on your head! Mom too! Restrain yourself a little while holding Spica!"

As Subaru and Rem flirt, totally oblivious of their children, Rigel's impatience boils over and explodes.

In the Natsuki household, conversations tend to sidetrack and go nowhere fast. Almost like another festival, it's a regular event that simply can't be helped.

After Subaru finally puts Rigel down, Rem hands Spica over to her son. An astonished Rigel watches as his parents lovingly take a seat beside each other.

Tightly holding Subaru's hand, Rem lets her small body rest against his shoulder.

"By the way, if the Ehomaki… If it's the 'compass of fortune,' which direction should it point in this year? Does Subaru-kun know?"

"Nah, I honestly have no clue. Even now, I wonder how they figured it out every year. It might've had something to do with Feng Shui, but that's way beyond what I know."

Leveraging his knowledge from before being summoned, Subaru makes a living as a successful producer of sorts. Though he can take a smattering of knowledge and somehow stretch it thin, he can't do anything when completely clueless.

While Subaru prepared the Ehomaki successfully, the all-important "lucky direction" eludes him. Tilting his head in puzzlement, his eyes wander toward Rigel and Spica. Suddenly, an idea forms in

Subaru's head, and he claps his hands together.

"I got it. This year's lucky direction, we'll let Spica decide it."

"Huh? Let Spica decide? Think a little before you speak. Spica's still small and cute, and you already want to corrupt her? God, it's just too pitiful. Hey you, are you going to take responsibility for Spica's tarnished future, HUH?"

"Man, whenever the conversation turns to Spica, you act like the world's most obnoxious delinquent."

With Rigel violently opposing his father's idea, Subaru thinks of how to pacify him.

"Listen. What would you say is the clearest symbol of happiness in our home? Of course, Rem's very existence is happiness itself, and your natural-born talent as a verbal punching bag is like a blessing granted to me by God, a fateful meeting of fortune and destiny…"

"Waitwaitwaitwait, I just heard something I can't ignore, HEY!"

"Rigel, please calm down. Just as Rem is a symbol of happiness to Subaru-kun, Subaru-kun is a symbol of happiness to Rem. Your mother doesn't have any sort of misunderstanding about that, so please don't worry."

"Anyone with eyes would know not to worry over that!"

Rigel plugs Spica's ears as he shouts at his parents, his so-called secret technique. Born and raised in the Natsuki household, in Rigel's short lifetime of a mere eight years, much like a one-trick pony, he developed potential in but a single talent.

—Yes, his natural 'straight man' act and his prodigious 'victim' character.

"Doesn't that make him a two-trick pony?"

"What kind of monologue are you having! Get back to the topic!!"

"Well what I mean is, Spica is the clearest symbol of happiness we have. That's why, whichever direction Spica chooses will definitely be lucky. How's that?"

"Shit, compared to Dad's usual nonsense, that's a pretty flawless, watertight argument…tch!"

"Whenever Spica gets involved, you completely lose your sense of judgement, don't you."

Frustrated, Rigel ruffles his short blue hair. But with his eventual approval, the specifics of the Ehomaki Challenge were finalized.

Since Subaru prepared the sushi rolls in advance, the last task was to divine the lucky direction.

"Having Spica decide seems fine, but how should we go about it? Spica probably won't understand anything we tell her."

"Hmm, let's see… How about we let Spica sleep on the table, and when she wakes up, we'll go with the first direction she looks."

"When she wakes up,"

"First direction she looks…"

Considering Subaru's impassioned speech from before, it was a rather casual way of deciding. Rem and Rigel look at each other, then down at Spica. They seem to be mulling over something.

"In other words, we decide based on… who Spica loves the most. — is what Subaru-kun means, yes?"

"…I, I guess?"

Rem's overthinking startles Subaru, but he realizes she's not exactly wrong. The first person Spica lays eyes on,—in other words, the person this defenseless baby depends on most.

Unexpectedly, the lucky direction will be decided in a battle for Spica's love!

"Well, unfortunately for you two, it's obviously going to be me. I'm the breadwinner of this household afterall. Spica must realize it’s thanks to her amazing Dad that she enjoys the necessities of life. Even though she’s still a baby, I’m sure this clever child is already dreaming of becoming my wife someday.”

“Please wait a moment. While Rem does indeed plan to teach Spica about Subaru-kun’s greatness and splendidness, this and that are two different matters. Afterall, from whom does Spica receive her milk, and in whose breasts does she so peacefully rest? This child surely knows. Rem is clearly the winner here.”

“You two just butt out. I’m obviously the one Spica relies on the most. In this weird, unreasonable household, I’ve abandoned anything and everything to protect her. Spica, loves, me, most, definitely.”

A three-way standoff, with no one yielding Spica’s love.

They stare each other down fiercely, daggers in their eyes as they compete for her. The peaceful mood from before feels like a lie.

“—ooh--”

As sparks fly, Spica rouses in Rigel’s arms. With the baby about to wake up at any second, the trio look each other in the eyes,

“Ehomaki moved!”

“Pillow set!”

“Spica set!”

Subaru takes the Ehomaki off the table, Rem places a cushion onto it, and Rigel plops Spica onto the cushion.

From there, the three nod, splitting off in different directions. On top of the cushion, Spica rouses from her slumber, her head shaking gently, her small hands rubbing at her eyes. So cute. Like an angel.

“…”

Holding their breath, they wait to see who Spica turns to.

Eventually, her eyes pop open, and her light blue eyes dart around the room.

“Aah—”

“OH YEAAAAAAHH!!”

Seeing Spica extend her hand out to him, a victorious Rigel falls to his knees in dramatic cheer.

The chosen Rigel yells with pure joy. Meanwhile, the forgotten Subaru and Rem fail to hide their disappointment as they snuggle up to each other,

“Well, when you think about it, the person who rests most peacefully in your breasts is me. I guess this match was over before it started.”

“Even if Spica wanted to be Subaru-kun’s wife, that spot is already Rem’s territory, and she will never budge an inch from it. It was an expected result.”

“Would you guys just celebrate my victory! Don’t get all mushy in front of your damn kids!”

Rigel scolds his parents as Spica mischievously pulls on his face.

Seeing his usual attitude, his parents burst into laughter.

Eventually, Subaru takes note of where Rigel stood,

“Looks like Rigel was in front of the entranceway. Alright, that’s our lucky direction. Everyone, take your Ehomaki and let’s go.”

“Yes, Subaru-kun. But which Ehomaki is Rem’s? Did Subaru-kun prepare one especially for her?”

“This one’s yours, Rem. I made it with a sakura filling that forms a heart shape when it’s rolled up. I went through a lot to pull it off, and I had to eat the failures, so I’m already stuffed.”

Subaru’s belly appears noticeably rounder than usual. Rem extends her hand toward it and rubs it lovingly.

“Subaru-kun looks so wonderful when he does his best for Rem.”

“Alright alright, to the entranceway damnit, the entranceway. As for mine, I’ll just take whatever. Also, what are we doing about Spica’s? She barely even has her baby teeth. It’ll be no joke if she chokes on the seaweed or something. Did you even think about that?”

Rigel searches for a roll that the young Spica could possibly eat. However, the overprotective brother fails to find anything.

To Subaru as well, being unable to prepare anything for her was a major regret.

“I tried a lot of things like melting the seaweed, but the tests didn’t go too well. It’s unfortunate, but Rigel will just have to eat twice as much to satisfy the Seven Deities.”

“How the hell am I supposed to eat two of these gigantic things. You’re expecting way too much from me.”

“Oh, I see. Yeah, I get it now. I guess even with Spica’s happiness on the line, you’re the kind of brother who can’t even make the effort to push his stomach a tiny little bit. That’s okay, I’ll do my best. You just keep deceiving Spica with your shallow, superficial love…”

“I get it! I’ll eat them both! No, please let me eat them both!”

“Hey, don’t pop out your horn over something like this…”

After taunting him with Spica, a short horn protrudes from Rigel’s forehead. He quickly grabs two futomaki and makes for the entranceway. Subaru and Rem laugh heartily as they follow after him.

3

“…”

"…"

"…"

"Aahh—"

Silence dominates the entranceway.

While many rules about Ehomaki exist, the most popular, widespread rule is undeniably "one may not speak while eating Ehomaki."

Since Ehomaki is eaten to take in fortune, opening your mouth would be like letting that fortune escape,

—is probably the case, Subaru decides.

To that end, the trio sit in their entranceway, nomming at their Ehomaki while staring blankly at the front door. Determined to finish their rolls, they eat in complete silence.

"Knock knock. Pardon Natsuki-san, I'm comin' in."

While they sit in the entranceway, their front door suddenly opens.

Perhaps due to old Kararagi customs, since long ago, this rural town had a culture of being shockingly laidback and neighborly.

Almost no one locks their doors, and people would suddenly come inside to greet each other like it was perfectly natural. The voice from just now belongs to a middle-aged woman, one of their many neighbors.

"We're passin' around this week's neighborhood notice. Was hopin' you could take a look…"

says the woman, flyers in hand. But upon seeing the entire household sitting in their entranceway, nibbling at taimaki while silently staring at her, the woman's eyes grow wide like saucers. But, quickly nodding, she leaves the flyers on their shoe cabinet.

"Well, looks like ya'll are busy, so maybe later. Take a look and pass it on will ya? Oh my— Spica's such a cutie today."

Smiling at a waving Spica, the woman leaves with a brief "toodle-oo." They wordlessly see her off with nods and hand waves. Once gone, the four return to sitting in complete silence—

"What the hell was that scene!!"

Unable to bear it any longer, Rigel suddenly jolts up, shouting against the absurdity.

"Why did our neighbor accept it like it was totally natural! Do the neighbors just assume we're a bunch of nutcases! I feel like an idiot for freaking out over Dad's shenanigans! Am I the weird one here?!"

"Fuga. Calm down Rigel. I know how you're feeling right now. Sometimes, when something feels off, you wonder if the problem is with you or the world itself. But you know, it's almost always the case that you left home with right shoe on left foot or something…"

"No! You're wrong! I'm not a nutcase! It's the world that's gone mad!"

As Rigel raves on, a giggling Spica excitedly claps her hands together. To Spica, the sight of her brother writhing in frustration is her greatest plaything. To already recognize the best way to enjoy Rigel at such a young age, this girl's future feels extraordinarily bright.

"Also, because you started talking, I failed the Ehomaki Challenge too. Damn, I really want to succeed at least once. There's plenty of rolls left, but at this rate."

"That's weird too! You said I only had to eat two of them, but now you and I have to finish off them all off ourselves? What about Mom?"

"You idiot, we can't let Rem force herself like that. What are you going to do if these carb-heavy bombs of rice and sugar destroy Rem's figure?! Even after having two kids, the fact that she's as slim as ever is a bonafide miracle. Compared to her, our weights are just mere numbers."

“Nomnom… Rem is finished. Also, if Subaru-kun says it like that, Rem will get shy.”

With a flushed, embarrassed-looking face, Rem declares her completion. With her serious, goal-oriented attitude, Rem’s chances of clearing the Ehomaki Challenge were exceedingly high. On the other hand, with their whimsical, impatient natures, Subaru and Rigel fail over and over.

Finally, one massive roll and one smaller roll remain.

“These Ehomaki are our very last chance. After all that squabbling and prep work, we can’t let it all go to waste. Let’s do our best, Rigel.”

“Urp… I’m almost at my limit. I’ll remember this, shitty Dad… ugh.”

“Good Luck”

Subaru gives a thumbs up as Rigel faces off against the smaller Ehomaki. Rem, having finished long ago, snuggles up to Subaru,

“By the way, this event doesn’t seem to involve Oni. Rem has many objections to the Oni abuse in the Bean Tossing Festival, but not involving them feels somewhat lonely.”

“Hmm, they don’t have to be completely uninvolved, do they? The seven fillings represent the Seven Deities, but you could also say they’re like sealed Oni. Maybe the red filling could be the Red Oni, and the blue filling could be the Blue Oni.”

“Do the Ehomaki even have a blue filling…?”

“Well, you know, sometimes vegetables are called ‘blue-green’ and… is that too much of a stretch?”

Hearing about the Blue Oni and thinking it was her, Rem wears a somewhat dissatisfied face. Then again, with nothing blue to use as filling, it simply couldn’t be helped.

Smiling wryly at Rem’s scornful eyes, Subaru spins the last Ehomaki in his hands.

“But if we think of the fillings as Oni instead of deities, it’d be like exterminating the Oni by eating them. I guess even here, the Oni get antagonized.”

“Does Subaru-kun’s hometown hold some sort of grudge against Oni?”

“Well a bunch of stories talk about rampaging Oni and such. But it’s not like I feel that way. The story about the Red and Blue Oni is my all-time favorite. And of course, my wife is an Oni too. So it’s the same deal as the Bean Tossing Festival.”

“The same deal?”

Rem asks with a curious look on her face.

“Yeah, the same deal. For me, ‘eating the Oni’ is the same as taking in happiness. If anything, they’d become my flesh and blood, in a sort of ‘I won’t let you go’ way.”

“Will Rem be caught?”

“I’ll catch you for sure.”

While Rem’s face beams with happiness, Subaru’s looks explicitly lewd. To their side, Rigel ignores them as he finishes his Ehomaki in silence.

“Alright, I ate it! I ate it all, damnnit! Hey, did you guys see that?”

“Deepest apologies.”

“Don’t apologize so honestly! Damnnit, I already knew, I was watching while I ate!”

Sulking, Rigel picks up Spica and rubs cheeks with her. Seeing her brother so heartbroken, Spica pats his back as if comforting him.

“Well then, for the finale, the family head will show what he’s got.”

“Yes. Rem looks forward to seeing Subaru-kun’s cool side.”

With Rem cheering him on, Subaru challenges the final sushi roll, a true monstrosity,—Ehomaki GRANDE!

Subaru had slapped together all the remaining ingredients into this last roll. While it technically still had seven different fillings, frankly speaking, it was less an Ehomaki and more like a biological weapon.

“No—mm”

Practically unhinging his jaw, Subaru bites into the Ehomaki, taking the first blow in their epic battle.

Having already failed numerous times, Subaru’s stomach is dangerously close to its limit. It could burst apart at any moment, a truly cruel and miserable death. Even then, as a man, as a father, there comes a time when one must fight.

“Nom-”

“—?!”

While Subaru takes on the battle of his life, Rem circles around to assist him.

Smiling slightly, she noms at the opposite side of the Ehomaki. In accordance with the rules, Subaru has no way to stop her. Rem had anticipated this, intent on waging war against the final Ehomaki right alongside him.

With his wife’s support, Subaru felt the strength of ten thousand allies pushing him on. But even while borrowing Rem’s power, as a man, Subaru has to show her his own strength. He pushes himself to lighten her burden by eating even just a tiny bit more.

As Subaru and Rem press on, the Ehomaki between them grows shorter and shorter. Before long, their faces close in, then finally their lips—

“Hold it! BAAAM!!”

At the very last second, Rigel splits the sushi roll with a karate chop.

With his horn protruding, Oni powers massively amplify the sharpness of Rigel’s chop. It wields more than enough strength to cleanly cut into the Ehomaki’s rice and seaweed.

With the sushi roll suddenly split in two, Subaru and Rem part their startled faces. Quickly finishing off their ends of the roll, they confront their son.

“Hey, Rigel! We were about to have a beautiful finale right there!”

“That’s right, Rigel. Subaru-kun and Rem were working on a very important collaborative effort. Does Rigel have some sort of complaint about his mother and father getting along?”

“Hell yeah I do! You’re always ‘getting along’ waay more than necessary! And I’m always trying to tell you too! Get across, my feelings!”

“Sorry, Deflected!”

“Don’t deflect them!”

As if swatting away Rigel’s projected thoughts, Subaru cheekily slaps at the air. On the other hand, an indignant Rem presses rather forcefully against Rigel’s horn.

With a pitiful yelp, he collapses in a heap.

“Karate chopping food, Rem doesn’t remember raising such a bad child. And to not only interrupt, but to interrupt at the last second. Rem hardly thinks this is sufficient punishment.”

“I wonder if all the demi-humans have weak points like this. Spica, if your horn grows in, you can’t let anyone but your precious person handle it, alright?”

Retrieving Spica from a collapsed Rigel, Subaru lectures her in his arms. Spica blinks at his words and rubs her forehead.

As if to say that even if they did grow, her family would still love her.

“As expected of Spica, our family’s greatest treasure. With a single move, she puts us all in bliss.”

Oddly enough, her simplest actions feel even more effective than the Ehomaki. Subaru kisses Spica’s forehead, then hands her off to Rem. He then slings the agony-stricken Rigel over his shoulder and proceeds to spank him.

“So, after we clean the kitchen, how about we go back to talking about our date?”

“Rem agrees. Also, while there’s still quite some time left, what would Subaru-kun like for dinner?”

“I’ve had my fill. I’m totally stuffed.”

With a strained laugh, Subaru heads to the living room. Rem walks alongside him with a heartfelt smile.

—On this day as well, they enjoy a rather uniquely-shaped happiness.

Today is Setsubun.

A sightly special day that comes every year, once a year.

Natsuki Rigel

1

“Rem’s birthday and Setsubun are here once more! By our powers combined, let’s make these days amazing!”

On February 2nd (self-decided), the first signs of a storm brew in the Natsuki household. And as usual, the one brewing it is the head of the household, Natsuki Subaru.

“We’ll do it as a family! You’ll help me won’t you, Rigel!”

Subaru gives a thumbs up, flashing a blindingly bright smile.

The young boy sighs deeply at his father’s pose, an unchildlike sternness on his face.

Bearing his mother’s beautiful blue hair and his father’s menacing eyes, nine year old Natsuki Rigel laments his very existence.

As he tries focusing on homework, Subaru anxiously shifts about, awaiting his reply,

“Dad’s lost it again…”

“That’s way too harsh! You skipped past ‘Huh, that’s kinda weird,’ and went straight to ‘My dad’s borderline insane’ territory! Plus, my request isn’t too hare-brained this time, is it? If anything, it’s brimming with love!”

“That blinding love of yours is what terrifies me. After living here for almost ten years, even I know to avoid it.”

With a cold stare and an even colder tone, Rigel pushes back an encroaching Subaru. “In the first place,” he continues,

“Mom’s birthday aside, all I’ve gotten out of that Setsubun thing is crippling trauma! Isn’t it just bean-tossing and sushi-eating? What’s so great about that weirdo fest…”

"Hey, don't call it a weirdo fest. Yeah, on the surface it's kind of a weird event, but like I said, there's kind of a meaning and purpose to it. You could say it's the Setsubun that's kept our family safe from misfortune, after all."

"What about all my suffering? What about that misfortune?"

"That's not misfortune, that's called 'daily life.' You know, you'll never get anywhere if you focus too much on all the bad things in life. Your stress'll add up too."

"Don't say it like it's my fault! I'm just a victim of my shitty Dad's nonsense!"

Rigel slams the table and flies up. Fuming, he points outside the window with a finger.

In front of their house, numerous flyers with the headline [Come Celebrate Setsubun!] are pasted onto a magic streetlamp. They list date and time, details, and the organizer's name—

"That weirdo fest, you're the one drumming it up into some bizarre town-wide event, right? Your name's even listed as the organizer… I-, I thought I would die of embarrassment at school today."

"Well it's a natural extension of my talents as a Producer. C'mon, now you can proudly boast something like 'My Dad's the HERO of my household!'"

"Maybe if the event wasn't about smashing beans into my face!"

Rigel rips yet another flyer off a nearby wall. He points to a section below "Practices," "Purpose," "Details," and the event date of February 3rd (self-decided). According to the flyer, [Oni] will run around the neighborhood being chased all day. And acting as their representative, will be [Natsuki Rigel].

"Don't sell out your son without permission! What are you, an Oni!"

"You're the Oni, and so is my wife. And well, I can't let Rem do something this crazy. That's why, I'll swallow my tears and send off my dear son…"

“What are you, an Oni! No, you’re definitely an Oni!”

“Calm down. It’s not like everyone’s out for blood. Plus, you might be the representative, but there’ll be other Oni. I’ll be helping out too.”

Seeing Subaru’s bold, undaunted face, Rigel gives in.

In the first place, they’ve already fought this battle countless times since the event’s announcement. Each time, Rigel was utterly defeated, and the day of the event creeped ever closer. Now, there was simply no running or turning back. While his role was forced onto him, Rigel felt obligated to fulfill it.

—Such is the level-headed Natsuki Rigel’s harsh way of life.

“An event’s an event. Just take it like a man. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“…Mom’s birthday, right?”

“Exactly.”

As Subaru snaps his fingers, Rigel turns away.

By some twist of fate, the hectic Setsubun and the birthday of his mother, Natsuki Rem, are only a day apart.

—Grandly celebrating with his mother on the first day, then tasting a glimpse of hell on the next. This was their annual schedule.

“We can’t properly celebrate Mom’s birthday like this…”

“I won’t deny that it’s a jam-packed schedule, but enjoying two great days in a row is a blessing. Come on, be more optimistic. POSITIVE THINKING!”

“…We can’t properly celebrate Mom’s birthday like this…”

“Huh? Déjà vu?”

Déjà vu my ass.

Unmoved by his father's speech, Rigel's answer remains the same, right down to the syllable.

"I know you're pretty tense about the Setsubun. But that's no reason to make light of Rem's birthday. It only comes once a year, you know. Won't Rem be sad? So let's switch gears here. I know you can do it."

"——. ———. ————. ————————ahh."

Rigel takes some time to accept.

But arguing won't get him anymore, and dispiriting Subaru is borderline impossible. Rigel's only choice is to obediently concede.

"So, you wanna talk about Mom's birthday present, right?"

"Right. You see, this year's a pretty big milestone. It'll be ten years since we got married, after all. We actually don't have a specific day for the anniversary, so I wanted to celebrate it along with her birthday. That's why, I decided to do something special this year."

"Well, that sounds alright to me? Honestly, Mom'll probably be happy no matter what Dad does. But for once, I'm pretty onboard with this."

"Right? So, here's the meat of it."

With the smile of a scheming child, Subaru beckons his son over. Rigel frowns, an ominous feeling hanging over him. But while he hesitates, Subaru waves for him over and over. In the end, a reluctant Rigel sighs as he lends an ear.

"For our tenth anniversary, I've actually prepared something really special. I already ordered it too, so no worries there."

"…hm, well, okay."

"I've been steadily building up my secret stash, all for this day. And the result is something to behold. Listen and be amazed—It's a gemstone!"

"—wohh, a gemstone."

"Be amazed," his father said. But with Subaru's gift actually turning out respectably amazing, Rigel was doubly amazed.

As a rule, no matter what he does, Subaru always overcomplicates things and makes a great, chaotic mess. But for once, that doesn't seem to be the case.

"A gemstone, huh…"

Looking back, Rigel's mother, Natsuki Rem, doesn't dress herself up very much. This wasn't a matter of household finance, but rather, a matter of character.

Rigel has always been secretly proud of his exceedingly beautiful mother. But her reluctance to wear jewelry and fancy clothes was a source of his discontent.

They weren't necessarily poor either. She just doesn't particularly care to adorn herself. And yet, without any regard for dignity nor honor, Rem is shamelessly attached to Subaru. To Rigel's dismay, if it's a present from Subaru, Rem will always accept it. Thus, Rigel immediately approves of a gemstone as his father's gift to his mother.

"That's really great! Hell, you really can do it if you try!"

"Yeah, that's right. I'm the type that just needs to try and… huh? What the heck? Doesn't it sound like you're the parent here?"

"Forget about it. What's important is Mom's gift, right?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Yeah, of course! What's important is Rem's gift. Well I knew I had the right idea, but I'm confident now that you've approved."

With a spirited fist bump, Subaru and Rigel nod to each other.

Rigel then wonders about his mother's gift, especially with his father's questionable tastes.

“So, what’s the gemstone like? Knowing Dad, I’m worried you found some weirdo craftsman to make it.

“Oh my god! My stock rose and fell within seconds! …But about that. Now we’re getting to the important part. Listen carefully, my son.”

“Ughh…”

Rigel groans at his father’s gravely serious face.

When Subaru has this serious look, and the playfulness in his voice vanishes, one must be extremely careful. He’ll definitely spit out something troublesome—this was the “trust” cultivated between Rigel and his father for the past ten years. And once again, this trust will not be betrayed.

As a fearful Rigel wrinkles his face into a scowl, Subaru whispers,

“—The merchant carrying Rem’s gemstone, his dragon carriage ran into some trouble and hasn’t arrived. There’s talk that he might even head back, so I’m going out to get it myself.”

“…are you gonna make it by the end of the day?”

“Well, I’ll be chasing after them full throttle, of course. —But, honestly, I’m not sure.”

Fingers twiddling, gaze dropping, voice lowering. Seeing his father like this, Rigel slaps his forehead,

“If you’re that worried, why not forget the gemstone for now? Birthday present aside, if Dad’s not here, Mom’ll be way more sad.”

“I know. I know that, but… I have to give her this present today. It’d be meaningless otherwise, I think.”

“That’s just…”

Selfish, he wanted to say, but Rigel’s words stopped short.

Subaru scratches his head, a pitiful, bittersweet smile on his face.

But beneath, a maelstrom of hard, indescribable feelings swirls about. Just from looking, Rigel feels its pull sweeping him away.

From the depths of Subaru's soul, tucked away with the greatest of care, Rigel could feel the faint traces of an important something.

—It was the irreplaceable bond his parents shared.

"…"

Cutting in would be wrong, Rigel decides.

With a sigh, he too scratches his head,

"So, after revealing all this, what do you want from me?"

"Will you hear me out, Rigel!"

"You're practically forcing me to! Spit it out or I'll look like some scumbag who can't read the atmosphere!"

"I'm saved!"

With Rigel's reluctant acceptance, an ecstatic Subaru grabs him by the hands, swinging up and down, to and fro.

Rigel scowls, but Subaru just keeps smiling back,

"I'm going out to retrieve the gemstone. I'll definitely be back in time, but you need to give Rem some excuse while I'm gone. Even if you screw up, don't talk about the present. It'll ruin the surprise."

"…if Dad's not around for Mom's birthday, I think that'll be more than enough surprise."

"Even then. Anyways, I'm heading out now. The rest's up to you!"

After forcing his trust onto Rigel, Subaru grabs his luggage and rockets out the front door.

Like the wind, he furiously tumbles down the street, making for the town gate—from there, he'll likely mount an earth dragon and chase after the jeweller.

“Is he gonna make it back in time?”

Just barely, according to Subaru. But Rigel figures he’s more likely to fail than succeed.

In his absence, it’s up to Rigel to defend the Natsuki household from devastation. But with Rem’s endless devotion to her husband, Rigel can already see his mother shaking and trembling.

“Is-, is this gonna be a bloodbath…?”

Trembling with fear, Rigel anxiously waits for his mother’s return, all the while praying for his father to come home even a second sooner.

2

Fortunately, Rem’s reaction wasn’t nearly the catastrophe Rigel imagined. Compared to the worst case scenario, she was utterly composed.

“So y’see, there was some trouble at work, or something. They needed Dad over because, y’know, they really depend on him and… wait, do they? They do, right? Well, assuming they do, he apparently went off to sorta help them, I think.”

“Why does Rigel sound so uncertain? Really, at almost ten years old, you should at least house-sit and relay messages properly. Honestly.”

Returning from shopping and the local neighborhood meeting, Rem is welcomed home by her son. With no time to prepare, Rigel clumsily explains Subaru’s absence. Luckily, Rem doesn’t particularly doubt him, nor does she pout.

But on the other hand, she clearly disapproves of his shoddy explanation. Despite appearances, Rem is actually quite the despotic mother. It’s a well-kept family secret that Subaru is in fact the more lenient of the two.

“So Subaru-kun had to go out… that’s too bad. For lunch today, Rem planned to make all of Subaru-kun’s favorite foods.”

Bearing her shopping bag, a slightly lonely Rem droops her eyebrows. Suddenly, a sense of duty burns and rages within Rigel. No matter what, he can't let his mother be sad. As a man, Rigel puts his all into everything, even roles forced onto him. You could say his very nature was a tragedy.

"Dad's favorites, huh. That's a shame… wait, didn't you say the same thing yesterday? I feel like we had all his favorites yesterday too…"

"Yes. And tomorrow and the day after, and the day before yesterday and even the day before that, it's all Subaru-kun's favorite foods."

"Home cooking aside, that's some extreme favoritism!"

Day in, day out, Rem dedicates every single meal to Subaru's tastes. Realizing this, Rigel can't help but cry out.

"No, no," Rem replies, shaking her head,

"Please don't worry. Subaru-kun's favorites are also Rigel's and Spica's favorites. Afterall, has Rem ever made anything that you two didn't like?"

"Well… now that I think about it, I guess not. But is it even possible for a whole family to like the same things? I mean, doesn't everyone have different tastes?"

"That's because when Rigel was just a baby, Rem endlessly whispered Subaru-kun's favorites to him as he slept, brainwashing him into liking them too."

"Please tell me you're joking?!"

"Yes, that was just a joke. Rigel should take better care not to fall for things like this."

Rigel's eyes are wide as saucers from this devastating truth. Seeing him, a giggly Rem playfully sticks out her tongue.

Then, smoothing down her long, blue hair, "Rem calls them Subaru-kun's favorites, but the truth is that Subaru-kun always says 'delicious' to Rem's cooking. So Rigel doesn't need to worry."

"Well alright. But doesn't that make your efforts kinda pointless…"

"Not at all. Subaru-kun always says 'delicious,' but when he really loves something, his tone changes, and his cheeks move a bit differently. They're cuter than usual. Fufu."

Rigel can't decide whether his mother's detailed observations make her charming, or a little scary. He lets out a vague, strained laugh as Rem smiles blissfully.

She then hands Spica over and carries the groceries to the kitchen.

"Seriously, your big bro's drowning in anxiety over here, but you're as carefree as ever, huh."

"Aaahh—?"

"Don't 'aaahh' me, you… ohh, you're too cute, Spica!"

With the goofy affection of an older brother, Rigel rubs cheeks with Spica. While naïve to the world, Spica still loves his doting and affection. She smiles and giggles as if being tickled. After savoring Spica's smile to his heart's content, Rigel takes her with him to the kitchen. Before them, Rem is putting away the day's groceries.

"So then, Rigel. When did your father say he'll be home?"

"Oh, uhh… well, I think he said he might take a while? But he said he'll try his best to hurry back. Since, y'know, he's got a reason to hurry today."

Rigel immediately regrets saying too much. Subaru's trip and Rem's birthday are topics he desperately had to avoid. And yet, with every clumsy step, a dumbfounded Rigel digs his grave ever deeper. Woefully unaware of his "Can't tell a lie to save my life" personality, Rigel quickly covers his mouth.

Mimicking him, Spica puts her small hands up to her own mouth.

So cute. But this isn’t the time to dote.

“Is that so. ‘He might take a while’…”

“…”

“How troubling. Though Rem understands why he would hurry.”

Without turning around, Rem continues stocking the shelves. But Rigel looks on in worry. Her voice is the same as always, but she might actually be on the verge of tears, ready to fall to her feet from the shock.

In Rigel’s mind, Rem is a strong woman, but she has some very fatal weak points. And those weak points invariably have to do with Natsuki Subaru.

In the first place, from her words, she’s probably already realized that Subaru’s preparing for her birthday. Unlike Subaru, Rem is unusually perceptive and actually capable of reading the atmosphere. Rigel wonders if there’s really any point to all this deception.

“Umm, Mom, listen…”

The more he thinks it over, the more it wears on his nerves. Honest to a fault, Rigel’s resolve grows weaker and weaker.

“It’s about Dad but, well, don’t think too badly of him.”

“—-? Isn’t that obvious? Rem would never think badly of Subaru-kun for going out to work. He’s working hard for his family, afterall.”

“But well, the situation’s a bit different this time, y’know?”

“…ahh, as expected. Rigel was also worried about that.”

Turning around, Rem finds her son with an uneasy expression on his face. She smiles back fondly, as if understanding everything from that one look. Feeling he’s been completely seen through, Rigel silently apologizes to Subaru.

But to think that, in a mere thirty minutes, he would already taste defeat.

Shamefully coming to grips with his loss, Rigel realizes he no longer needs to lie. The guilt of keeping secrets from family dissipates, the thought of coming clean lightens his heart.

In the end, you just have to be honest. There isn't a shred of doubt.

"Please don't worry. Rem is a little uneasy as well. But if it's Subaru-kun, there's nothing to worry about."

"I don't know if I believe in him that strongly, but… yeah, I guess that's good."

"Yes. Rem doesn't exactly understand his intentions, but she did her best to prepare to Subaru-kun's instructions. If anything, Subaru-kun entrusting Rem with this task is a sign of his faith in her. Rem feels inspired to do her best."

"…huh?"

Tightening her hands, Rem makes a guts pose.

Rigel secretly likes this childish habit of hers, but right now, it stirs a sense of anxiety in him.

Their conversation, it seems to flow, and yet it doesn't.

"Hold on a sec?" Rigel asks, his head cocked in puzzlement,

"What're you talking about?"

"—-? Well of course, preparations for tomorrow's Setsubun event. Rigel will be representing the runaway Oni, afterall. An appropriate outfit… Subaru-kun asked Rem to prepare one for Rigel. Rem was hoping Subaru-kun could review the final result."

"—AHH DAMNIT! I KNEW IT!!"

With both sides of their conversation finally meshing, Rigel's guilt gushes back in full force. Realizing that nothing he's said has made it across, he can’t help but wail in frustration.

Spica, still held carefully in his arms, looks to her brother’s wrinkled, anguished face. “Awuu—” she chirps, mimicking him as she laughs so happily.

3

—A few minutes later, standing before a mirror is Natsuki Rigel, newly reborn.

“As expected, Subaru-kun’s judgement was flawless. Rem is so moved.”

“Upaa~♪”

Rem nods, deeply satisfied with her work. In her arms, Spica gazes at her brother with a pair of sparkling eyes.

The being standing before them is a perfect reproduction.

“…”

Pants made from a yellow fabric, spotted with black lightning bolts coming down in vertical stripes. For his upper body, a vest sewn from the same yellow fabric. On his feet, a Kararagi specialty, wooden clogs.

In his hands, he grips a metallic-looking club made from papier-mâché. In his mouth, a pair of fake fangs borrowed from the costume store. And with his hair ruffled a bit more wildly than usual, Rigel was the spitting image of an Oni.

With her son perfectly embodying the classic Oni style, a delighted Rem looks on admiringly. Meanwhile, Spica’s eyes brim with heartfelt wonder at her brother’s magnificent form.

With these two watching over him, the newly reborn Rigel studies himself in the mirror,

“God, this is awful!”

“My, what is Rigel saying? Doesn’t this costume match perfectly with Subaru-kun’s sketch? For her fine work, Rem is ready to sing her own praises.”

“This is an Oni? I look more like a barbarian! Mom, as one of the last surviving Oni, doesn’t this costume piss you off?”

“No matter how the world perceives Oni, it won’t control Rem and Rigel’s lives. It will be okay. With that said, such a breathtaking costume… especially those eyes, so wonderfully Oni-like.”

“That’s the only part that’s real!!”

His parents may have given him this body, but having it praised by those very parents only annoys Rigel.

His unexpected reaction vexes Rem, but in all honesty, the one most vexed is Rigel. Delighted by his agitation, a cherry-cheeked Spica rolls and tumbles with laughter, her voice resounding like bells throughout the house.

An Oni vest and Oni pants. An Oni’s club and an Oni’s eyes. Truly a work of perfection.

“No, not yet. As the finishing touch, please grow out your horn. With this, the costume will be complete.”

“Th-, that’s not your business…”

“Not true at all. Rigel is Rem’s child. And when it comes to Rigel, Rem’s thinking is always serious and sincere.”

At Rigel’s doubtful eyes, Rem speaks back with an utmost seriousness. Overpowered, a reluctant Rigel concentrates his senses to his forehead.

As a successor to the Oni bloodline, Rigel possesses the horn of the Oni clan. However, rather than the usual pair, only a single horn grows from his forehead. According to Rem, this was probably due to Rigel’s half-Oni blood. Frankly, it didn’t bother him very much. However—

[For only being able to give Rigel a single horn, Rem is sorry.]

His mother's apology from so long ago. In Rigel's mind, it remains vividly clear. Her apologetic face, that regretful voice, he could never forget them.

But Rigel doesn't care how many horns he has. Whether there's one or two, a horn's a horn. When he grows it out, his body feels light and easy to move. Rigel considers it a true blessing.

[Yes, thank you very much.]

When he answered this way, his mother made a lonely, bittersweet smile. From time to time, Rigel helplessly thinks back to that moment. But since then, he could never find the courage to bring back the topic. They never spoke of his horn again.

Supposedly, his mother also has just one horn. Rigel wonders if she ever suffered because of it.

"…"

Putting those thoughts aside, Rigel concentrates on rousing his Oni blood. From his forehead, the white, pointed tip of a horn begins to emerge.

A sharp sensation courses through his forehead like lightning. As it flows to the rest of his body, Rigel feels his limbs brimming with strength. At the same time, a powerful urge throbs deeply within his chest. According to his mother, this was the Oni's natural battle instinct. The instincts roar louder and louder, assaulting his mind.

As he basks in this strange but empowering sensation, Rigel holds back the equally powerful battle instincts.

In the mirror, his appearance has undergone a clear transformation. Confirming the growth of his horn, Rigel turns back towards Rem and Spica—

"How is it…"

"Pfft… it-, it's very, splendid… splendid, indeed, Rigel… pfft."

"Could you give me back my concern?!"

Turning around, Rigel finds his mother desperately stifling her laughter. After witnessing his perfection of the classic Oni style, Rem's cheeks are puffed red. She falls to her knees in a giggling fit.

Just moments ago, Rigel was wrought with worry and concern. But with the growth of his own horn turning him into a laughingstock, he realizes it was time and energy wasted.

As Rigel droops his shoulders in exhaustion, Rem somehow manages to get back up. Pulling herself together, she wipes away a stray tear,

"In-, in any case, Rem thinks it's wonderful. Subaru-kun will surely be satisfied, and all the participants will love it too. —pffft."

"Fine, I'll make you all regret choosing me to represent the Oni! For the first time in my life, I'll unleash these savage fight instincts sleeping within me—"

"Of course, Rigel is forbidden from causing harm to anyone. If he resorts to violence, Rem will take responsibility and personally subjugate him. Is that clear?"

"For the first time in my life, I'll unleash these savage flight instincts sleeping within me—"

Adjusting the wording ever so slightly, Rigel corrects his declaration. Seeing a satisfied Rem nod back, he sighs.

"Looking in the mirror, I can see why you'd like it, but… is this really okay? Won't this just make the Oni look bad?"

"As a race, the Oni have almost all perished. Even if someone insults us at this point, there's little use in worrying over it. Incidentally, the setting for this event has Rigel as the chieftain of a ferocious, bloodthirsty Oni tribe. If the townsfolk fail to repel them, the tribe will instigate an atrocious mass killing, painting the town ruins into a true scene from Hell… is the planned development."

"They really are barbarians! Do they even need to be Oni?!"

“Oni are excellent for playing the villain role… is what Subaru-kun said.”

While indifferent to the Oni’s dignity, Rem seems reluctant to continue their talk.

The near-eradication of the Oni clan is common knowledge. And yet, Rigel has never heard Rem talk about it in any real detail.

Thinking back, he’s never heard much about his parents’ romance and past either.

“…Well, hearing about it will just wear me out anyway.”

Sometimes, from his parents—from Subaru and Rem, he has this strange feeling, as if something’s off or out of place.

Whether it’s helping with his homework, or celebrating weird festivals, scraps of knowledge from some unknown place would pop up from time to time. There were all sorts of mysterious odds and ends.

Every time he catches a glimpse at his parents’ past, Rigel feels oddly vexed. At any rate, between his parents, there were traces of an education that they couldn’t quite conceal.

Rigel guesses that these two received a respectable education from somewhere. As their son, the thought fills him with pride. And yet, seeing his parents hide their secret at all costs, this pride is tangled with resentment.

Rigel wonders if, someday, he’ll be able to hear their story.

“But well, I doubt they’ll tell me any time soon…”

Coming to this conclusion, Rigel sets aside his suspicions for now. Oblivious to her son’s inner turmoil, Rem clasps her hands with an enthusiastic “Now,”

“Let’s put away the costume and prepare for tomorrow. It’s too bad that Subaru-kun couldn’t personally check on it, but Rem will leave that for tomorrow as something to look forward to.”

“Am I really running around in this tomorrow…”

“Other Oni besides Rigel will be wearing the same outfit, so there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Though the only real Oni will be Rigel, of course.”

As he pulls his arms out from the vest and changes his pants, Rigel grows anxious over tomorrow’s event. Wanting to encourage him, Rem gently brushes her beloved son’s shoulder,

“It will be okay. Rigel is Rem’s and Subaru-kun’s proud son, after all.”

“Well, being Mom’s son is fine, but having to be Dad’s son is…”

“If anything, that part should be a source of relief. On the other hand, Rem’s blood flowing in Rigel’s veins, Rem worries and worries that it’ll cause him nothing but trouble…”

“Aren’t you undervaluing yourself here?”

It’s a bad habit of hers. Rem loves Subaru and sees him in almost too good of a light. And yet, while not quite self-deprecating, she’s undeniably too hard on herself.

“I don’t know how convincing it is coming from me, but I don’t think Mom’s blood ever caused me any problems. Like I said, it’s Dad’s blood that’s got me worried. These scary eyes aside, I feel like I’m inheriting his evilness.”

“Those eyes are wonderful.”

“But sometimes girls cry just from looking at me…”

“They’re just too young to understand a boy’s charm.”

That stubborn, unyielding faith in others, why does it weaken so much when it comes to herself?

Actually, Rigel suspects that Subaru has the very same flaw. But he rarely sees weakness in his father, so he can’t quite compare. Putting those thoughts aside for now, “As your son, I honestly have no idea why you’re so unconfident… I guess, I’ll just have to prove it to you?”

“Huh?”

“Tomorrow’s event, if I pull it off perfectly, completely, and without a single incident… then as both Mom and Dad’s son, I’ll make you see that there’s nothing to worry about.”

“…”

“It’s been bothering me for a while now. So I’ve always wanted to prove it to you.”

Staring back at his wide-eyed mother, Rigel makes his bold declaration.

As the loving wife of Natsuki Subaru, and the doting mother of Natsuki Rigel and Natsuki Spica, Natsuki Rem is a woman who lacks self-confidence. Yet in Rigel’s mind, no other woman is so deserving of respect.

“You’re always worried that you can’t match up with Dad, but I’ll show you that that’s not even the tiniest, slightest bit true!”

“Rigel…”

“My… my Mom is the greatest Mom in the entire world. I just wanted you to see that.”

Unconfident, yet living so blissfully, but at times, shrinking back in hesitation. Rigel has watched over his mother all this time, wishing that she would live more proudly.

Just as she loves her husband and her son and daughter, Rigel wishes she would love herself.

Because Subaru and Rigel, and Spica as well, they all love Rem.

Because just as Rem loves them all, they all love Rem back,

“Looking down on my Mom, I won’t let anyone do that, not even my Mom.”

Burning with a feverish vigor, Rigel finishes his declaration. But suddenly, he’s struck with an awkward situation.

What the hell am I saying, looking like this?!

Having removed the Oni vest and pants, he stands there in nothing but his underwear. Like this, no matter how serious he is, he’ll just be treated like a comedy show.

After all this time, he finally blasted out everything he wanted to say. But there had to have been a better time to do it.

“Ahh, uhm, just now, that was—”

“A mistake,” he wanted to say, but before he could,

“…”

Suddenly, Rigel’s head is entangled between two outstretched arms and abruptly embraced.

A tender feeling envelopes his head as a bewildered Rigel darts his eyes about in confusion. He quickly realizes, this is his mother’s embrace.

Hearing the intense pounding of his mother’s heart so close, Rigel’s face immediately turns red.

He’s at the age where being spoiled by his mother is unbelievably embarrassing. The days when she’d hold him like this should be long past. He instinctively wants to pull away. However—

“…Mom?”

“…”

Feeling the tremble and quiver of the arms cradling him, Rigel freezes in place. He calls out to his mother, but Rem doesn’t answer. That’s when he realizes,

“…uu, fu, eh-”

The sound of crying meets his ears.

But it isn’t the familiar crying of his adorable little sister. While so very similar, this crying comes from someone Rigel has never seen cry before.

Quickly realizing its owner, Rigel turns a pale white.

What if something he said was unimaginably hurtful. His forceful, impassioned words, if they hurt her, it’d be a mistake that Rigel could never take back.

He frantically wrings his brain for the right words to say.

But he soon realizes that all his fretting and worrying was unnecessary.

“…”

Shaking her head, a small Rem firmly embraces her even smaller son. The emotion packed into those trembling arms, it wasn’t displeasure, nor was it grief. There was only loving affection. Caressed by this affection, Rigel is the first to understand.

Returning his sobbing mother’s hug with his own, Rigel gently strokes her back.

“Don’t cry, Mom… if Dad sees, he’ll kill me.”

“…that, isn’t possible.”

“Why?”

“Rem is this happy, yet the tears won’t stop falling.”

To think that the mother he’s known for almost ten years is, unexpectedly, such a crybaby. Rigel sighs.

Still held by her mother, Spica looks to her mother and brother embracing, tilting her head. And then Spica, with her small, autumn-colored hand, as if mimicking her brother, starts stroking her mother's back.

Slowly, slowly, with a tenderness that could soothe even the biggest crybaby.

—As happy tears fall from their mother's eyes, the siblings continue stroking her back.

4

—In the end, Subaru, who went out to retrieve the gemstone, didn't return while Rigel and Spica were awake.

"Tomorrow will be very busy, so Rigel should go to sleep now.

Don't stay up too late since we start early tomorrow."

His mother spoke in her usual tone, as if she already forgot how hard she had cried. However, as Rem kisses his forehead to say goodnight, Rigel notices her expression has somehow changed from yesterday's.

In the end, they never spoke about her birthday, but at least he kept his promise with Subaru. Rigel decides to leave the rest to his father.

In the first place, he didn't have the courage left to spout any more embarrassing words. After all, he just finished blasting out a whole ten years' worth.

"…"

Staring at the magic crystal, Rigel counts down the remaining minutes on his fingers. Will Subaru return home in time for Rem's birthday? In Rigel's experience, Subaru will go to absurd lengths to prove his love and devotion to his wife. That's probably why. Even with just ten minutes left, Rigel isn't at all worried.

And in the end—

"—Rem, I'm home! Sorry I'm late!"

Subaru rolls and tumbles into the house, a mere five minutes before the date changes. —Though they technically had just five minutes left to celebrate, he still managed to keep his promise.

“Subaru-kun, welcome home. But please don’t make so much noise. Rigel and Spica are already asleep. It wouldn’t be good to wake them.”

“Ahh, sorry, sorry. I was just in such a rush…”

The sound of Rem welcoming, then scolding Subaru, and the sound of a flustered Subaru apologizing back. From his futon, Rigel hears footsteps make their way into the house.

Since he went to bed a few hours ago, Rigel has just been tossing and turning. But with this last worry cleared from his mind, he finally feels sleepy.

Considering tomorrow’s event, just as his mother said, he really should sleep already. Yesterday, he dreaded the Setsubun event, despairing as it came ever closer. But now, Rigel feels like he can look forward to it, just a little. It must be because of the promise he made with his mother—

“Rem, I’m really sorry for being late, but there’s more I have to say. The work I was out for today, it was more like a personal errand. A really important one.”

“A personal errand, is it? Was there something special going on?”

“There is. Though you probably don’t think it’s too special.”

Tilting her head, Rem seems to honestly have no clue. Neglecting herself, another bad habit of hers. Frankly, hiding the present from her might’ve been totally unnecessary.

That’s just how indifferent Rem is towards herself.

“There’s only two minutes left, but here, take this. —It’s your birthday present.”

“Birthday… ah.”

At Subaru's stiff words, Rem's cheerful voice abruptly pauses. Finally understanding, she's met with two conflicting emotions. Unsure which to embrace, she stands in bewilderment.

"…"

Rigel guesses that his mother's eyes are darting about in confusion as his father hands her something. And with Rem still vexed, it's probably Subaru who opens the small box lying in her hands. At the sound of the box opening, Rem peers inside and lets out a small gasp.

"This is…"

"A garnet… at least, I think that's what you'd call it. I've been steadily building my secret stash all for this day. But seriously, I was so worried. Even though it's only meaningful if I gave it to you today, that dragon carriage started heading back halfway."

"…"

As Subaru recounts his trials, Rem stands wordlessly. Noticing her silence, a wryly smiling Subaru roughly scratches his head.

"I wanted to give you something definite, something permanent. We've been together for ten years now. And with your birthday, and Setsubun, I thought this'd be a fitting way to ask, 'Once again, please take care of me.'"

"…is it really okay, for Rem-"

"Hm?"

"For Rem to be this blessed, is it really okay?"

Hearing her trembling voice, Rigel shifts about, his weary eyes now looking towards them. His parents are in the neighboring room, but Rigel can see them through the half-open sliding door. Subaru and Rem face each other, with Rem's eyes fixated on the red gemstone in her hands.

"Rem's birthday… she completely forgot about it. Because… Rem always believed she had no right to celebrate it."

"…"

"Rem left behind Nee-sama, who was born on the very same day… even though she knew it was such a terrible thing, but…"

"Yeah, tell me anything. I'll listen to you."

"—n. Rem was always worried, if she's allowed to be this happy."

That tearful voice, the same one Rigel heard just hours ago. Yet this time, it feels strained with a deep guilt.

And from his mother's mouth, the surprise of an unfamiliar word. "Nee-sama". But what truly surprises Rigel is that, far beyond what he imagined, his parents' past is heavy and painful.

"I won't tell you to stop feeling guilty. I know all too well that it isn't possible. Because, I feel the same."

"…yes."

"But even then, I don't want to think that anything and everything has been bad. Even though we gave up, even if we ran away, the things we obtained after running, I don't want to think badly of them too."

"…yes."

Unimaginable from his usual tone, Subaru's truly serious voice shocks Rigel. And as Rem nods over and over, her voice carries something different as well. Separate from her reliableness as a mother, different from the extreme love and favoritism she shows her husband.

Right now, they were merely a man and a woman, sharing in their precious bond and memories.

"Coming to this town, and having Rigel and Spica. After all sorts of things happened, now you and I are here. All of that is connected to our happiness. I wanted to prove that to you and give it shape. And that's this gemstone."

"…"

"If it's still too painful for you to accept it, I won't ask you to immediately wear that gemstone. I won't even mind if you put it away somewhere. But please, don't throw it away. I feel like that's the one thing we shouldn't do."

Appealing, Subaru takes a step towards the wordless Rem.

Carefully reaching out his arms, he embraces Rem and pulls her towards him. Holding her close, Subaru tenderly strokes her head.

As he does so, Rem buries her face into his breast, and says with a small voice,

"Today, Rigel told Rem."

"Yeah?"

"He said that Rem is… the greatest mother in the world."

"Yeah. You didn't know?"

"…Yes, Rem did not know."

Rem carefully repeats Rigel's words, but Subaru swiftly answers back, as if they were the most obvious words in the world.

At his immediate reply, Rem wrinkles her face and smiles.

Fortune Fish-Head Tree

1

It was a yearly thing—well, he disliked how it was yearly, thinking that it was annual in his mind, but that annual day approached this year too.

Rigel: “I feel some serious hatred because of this day coming closer…”

Then, the person who let out that listless murmur along with a sigh was a boy that had tiredness and insightfulness on his face, unfitting for his age.

He had short, blue hair swaying in the wind, sanpaku eyes to sharply look through the world, and traditional Kararagi Japanese clothes.

It was the Natsuki Rigel, the “Setsubun King”, admired by the people at Kararagi City State’s second town, Banan.

Rigel: “Too disgraceful…!”

The “Setsubun King” folds his short arms, and he looked up at the sky as if in grief.

The “Setsubun” event that started to root in the town a few years ago changed every, every year, swooping down on him. The continuation of that suffering made him grow, and when he realized it, it even pushed the lone boy up to the “Setsubun King”.

As of now, Rigel was merely walking in the Banan town, and even on days unrelated to Setsubun, he would occasionally have to deal with the shower of beans from kids. It seemed he didn’t understand the point of it. If he overlooked it pleasantly by reasoning that it couldn’t be helped because they were kids, then his father who’d seen it would laugh at him in an extremely pompous way, and he’d feel discomfort.

Anyhow, the “Setsubun” event already became essential at Banan, and to Rigel as well it was—putting his emotions aside, the same could be said for Rigel.

Rigel’s own father was related to why that began, but the biggest reason was because of a family matter—”Setsubun” was an event related to Onis.

Thus, Rigel, who had Oni blood, his beloved younger sister, and also his mother were inseparable.

Therefore, “Setsubun” was an event that involved Rigel, and it was essential to the Natsuki family.

So, Rigel came to accept the bean tossing, being a target, being silent until he was done eating the lucky direction roll Futomaki, and running all over the whole town dressed as an Oni.

However…but…

Rigel: “Can Dad run out of ideas already…”

Subaru: “—Hey! Rigel! Just how long are you gonna stand there lost in your thoughts?! I’m really counting on your fighting power! Come over here! Help out!!”

It was right after Rigel dropped his shoulders weakly and grumbled like that.

Rigel heard a faraway voice call him, which also sounded quite cornered, and so he reluctantly turned his head.

—His half-naked father was waving his hands frantically around the water of the large Mogolade geyser.

He was completely soaked, his usual upright black hair now clung to his forehead, and it was as if they were taking a bath together. His father threw away his ruined jacket, and while hurriedly bleaching his built upper body, he called out to Rigel and said

Subaru: “A school is coming! What Elder said was right! There won’t be another chance if you let this one go! Rigel! Hurry!”

Rigel: “Fine! I got it, sheesh!”

It would have been better if Rigel just abandoned it regretfully, but he recklessly and violently scratched his head, and he finally ran towards his father.

Rigel went towards the Grand Mogolade Geyser that spouted water while having his head being bathed in the spray of water coming down from the cloudless sky.

—This year’s “Setsubun was somewhat different from the usual.

Rigel: “No wait, being a nuisance to me is the usual!”

Subaru: “Rigel! Rigel-san?! Hurry! Bring out your horn! Grab onto the net! Grab onto it hard and don’t let go!”

Rigel: “Shut up—!!”

Rigel follows his father’s orders, unsure of if he was being serious or not, and when he stood on the deep pool of the grand geyser, he stared at the swirling water, seeing myriad of fish shadows.

“…”

He grabs tightly onto the edge of the net. Heat gets produced on his forehead. He blanks out for a second, and he felt an excessive amount of exhilaration.

The overflowing power swells up endlessly by taking in the mana in the atmosphere. The short 11 year old Natsuki Rigel had the brute strength of an Oni god inside of him, unfitting of his childishness.

Rigel: “Urwaaaa—!!”

He puts in unfathomable strength into his thin arms, and pulls up the net at once. The net made of thin iron thread fulfilled its role of not being torn down by oni strength.

Subaru: “There it is! Rigel did it! We won’t lose either! Everyone, give it all you’ve got and pull—!!”

Everyone: “Heeaaaaaaaaaveee hooooooooooo!!”

The father continues after Rigel, who became the previous counterattack—no, it wasn’t just his father.

All the people of Banan he brought along ran up to the net at once, and each of them pulled up the net with their entire soul. He turned his head towards the outside of the net to make sure the fish shadows didn’t escape, but they were already in the middle of a devilish strategy. They couldn’t escape. They wouldn’t let them.

Subaru: “You guys…behave, and become sacrifices for “Setsubuuun”!!”

They were comrades having unwanted suffering forced upon them by “Setsubun”.

They didn’t understand the other people’s—the adults’ feelings. However, at the very least…

—At the very least, I’ll sympathize with you guys from the bottom of my heart, and I’ll take you with me!

Subaru: “Uwoahhhhhh—!!”

He bites his molars, each of them fighting for their lives, putting in absolutely all of his strength.

His palm that grasped the net was hot. He didn’t know if the drops of water from his forehead were sweat, or if they were drops of water from the grand geyser.

The only thing he thought of was him not letting go of his grip.

—To understand why it became like this again, we’ll have to backtrack a few days.

2

It was early afternoon of a day off. The father and son entered the same kotatsu, faced each other, and began having a pleasant interaction.

Neither of them had school or work, and it was a rare day when they had no plans. They spent their time leisurely in the kotatsu since morning, had the same old conversation of “How’s school?” “Nothing new”. Having these kind of days every now and then—what a time of negligence it was.

Subaru: “Ah, Rigel-kun. It’s gonna be that day soon. What do you think about that? Hm?”

Rigel: “Go catch a cold.”

Subaru: “That’s a roundabout way of being offensive, oi.”

The person who responded to those words by curling his lips unhappily was this man that saw his eyes that looked exactly like Rigel’s everyday in the mirror.

He had short, black hair, unusual black eyes, and he was the center pillar of Natsuki, Rigel’s family name. He was Natsuki Subaru, Rigel’s father.

He should almost be turning 30, so to the best of Rigel’s knowledge, it wouldn’t be strange for him to have things like suitable composure and dignity as an adult. However, his father—as for Subaru, he didn’t really seem to be that way, and he had composure that might make you think he’d be 5-6, or even younger than that, perhaps being related to emotional matters, or his everyday behavior.

Incidentally, currently in the Natsuki Family there was Spica who was having special education for the gifted as the youngest child, and things like dirty words and offensive words were forbidden for the sake of her emotional development. Thus, it was necessary for him to pick expressions that would soften the abuse of his father down to things like “Go catch a cold”, while still carrying what he intended.

But, Subaru was not discouraged at all by Rigel’s original complaints, and he said

Subaru: “Well, it’s not like I don’t understand your feelings, either.

I've also reflected on this year. —There's no way you'll be hit with more beans during Setsubun than the amount of beans used at Banan in a month."

Rigel: "Last year I didn't think I'd hover between life and death because of something like beans. I've seen it for a while in my dreams, and even now I make noise while having nightmares."

Subaru: "But don't worry. The number of Onis has increased even more this year, and it's been converted into a plan to distribute and reduce the burden on your shoulders. Nothing similar to what happened last year will happen again!"

Rigel: "Stop building a unit with me in the center without warning!"

In response to Subaru's words, him acting like he cared but not actually caring at all, Rigel hit the kotatsu, and he raised his voice. However, he was relatively quick to feel like he was probably wasting his breath, which is what he started to feel in particular a few days after last year's Setsubun.

Anyhow, everywhere he went, every man he met, and finally, even any infant would know about Rigel's achievements. If the townspeople whose faces and names didn't match continued to call out to Rigel by saying "Looking forward to next year as well!", he wouldn't have something like a way to escape, as he was timid.

Rigel: "The kneading from last time wasn't good enough too. Also, about the decorative club, were the thorns filled with cotton properly? It's not like I'm going to hit people, but if by some chance I hit them, there's a good chance the event can get canceled…"

Subaru: "Considering how you're saying this and that, and how you handle things positively, I feel like I've raised you well. That's a relief."

Rigel: "What are you saying?! Also, isn't the first time you said that when you started getting everyone involved?! And putting my right to complain to you aside, don't you feel bad about disturbing the people who are mere participants?!"

Subaru: “Seems like you’re kinda getting old already…”

Rigel sighed without saying anything at Subaru’s unreasonable thoughts.

Subaru’s words being incomprehensible was also just the usual. Trying to understand all of them little by little would just tire him out. Unlike Rigel’s mother, he gave up on trying to understand his father ever since he had an umbilical cord.

Rigel: “So, is it safe to say that you wanted to talk about “Setsubun”? I’ll have you know that the size of last year’s Oni pants and vest won’t fit me. I’m growing.”

Subaru: “Well, compared to last year you have grown 5 centimeters, after all. It makes me feel good too seeing the height marker starting to get higher at a quick pace. However, I’ve also had my growth halted temporarily, and there was a lot of time until the next big result. Look at it in a long term point of view.”

Subaru laughs, and he reached out for Rigel’s head, who was at the opposite side of the kotatsu. He was probably trying to pat it, but he couldn’t reach it because of his laziness of not coming out of the kotatsu. It couldn’t be helped. Rigel brought out his head, and it got pat. It tickled.

Subaru: “Anyhow, don’t worry about the Oni pants. Rem will proceed to secretly work on that. The outfit that is remade every year for your growth…I thought to put visible decorations for the people that come to the ceremony when you get married, but what do you think?”

Rigel: “Go catch a cold.”

While getting his head pat, Rigel wished relatively seriously for a cold that would make his dad breathe painfully. Subaru continues with a “And then you see”, as he accepts that with a wry smile and says

Subaru: “Yes Oni pants are important too, but the “Bean Tossing Event” committee are the ones that pursue that issue, so we have to groan “Uh-huh” by ourselves. Apart from that”

Rigel: “Wait wait wait wait, you mentioned the name of a committee I’m unfamiliar with!”

Subaru: “Apart from that, what’s important is the upcoming new experiment for “Setsubun”. Bean tossing is easy with ehomaki, but we have to cultivate the unknown that to avoid getting tired of it. The times always walk fast. If you cling onto the past, you’ll get left behind.”

Rigel: “Catch it…! Go…catch a…cold…!”

The voice that sincerely made a wish didn’t even reach his father in front of him, and it got repelled.

Rigel hanged his head heartbroken in response to that reality. Subaru nods at his son’s situation, listens, and he leaned forward as if telling him to be surprised.

Subaru: “I wracked my brain, and I worked out what the Setsubun event left behind. With that being said, in addition to the bean tossing, let’s put that thing into practice too this year.”

Rigel: “…What kind of strange festival will it be this year?”

Subaru: “Don’t call it a strange festival. Strange festival…is what I want to call it, but I’m ready for that type of slander towards this event too……”

In response to Subaru’s way of speaking, him being gloomy, Rigel had the chills run through his back.

From an outsider’s point of view, it wouldn’t be strange for them to think of things like festivals to scatter beans and hit Onis, events in which people would stay silent, eating futomaki while facing the lucky direction, all as a strange festival, even if they seemed like a family gone mad. However, with the way Subaru put it, maybe they seemed like something more than that.

Rigel: “N-Noo! You’re just gonna end up making me suffer again anyway! Right? Isn’t that right?!”

Subaru: “Why have you become a child that doubts…just what changed you?”

Rigel: “90% of it was because of Dad, and 10% of it is because of Mom!”

Subaru: “…Hehe, for you to understand the influence of your parents at that age, you’re amazing, eh. To be frank, I’ve truly recognized that ever since you were born.

Rigel: “Why are you flattering me with a distant look, I’m angry, you know?!”

He rubs the bottom of his nose, and Rigel was seriously appalled at Subaru, who seemed to be satisfied in a way. However, Subaru waved his hands with a “Calm down calm down”, and he said

Subaru: “Stop, since the conversation won’t get anywhere. Allow me to announce what we’ll be doing in this year’s Setsubun.”

Rigel: “What about the next Oni pants…”

Subaru: “No need to worry, since they’re ones that won’t hurt your heart or body. —A new custom will be added to the Natsuki family, starting with this year’s Setsubun!”

He claps once, and meanwhile, Subaru hit the table with his fingers with fast rhythm. When he urged him with his eyes to imply that he was taking too long with his introduction, his father said “Tada!” to create an opportunity for himself, and he said—

Subaru: “—We’ll be doing Hiiragi Iwashi!”

Then, he said that.

3

Rem: “So, what type of event is this “Hiiragi Iwashi”, Subaru-kun?”

A few minutes after the awfully grand announcement, a woman came from the kitchen and returned to the living room—it was a person with long, blue hair, and beautiful, soft looks. She wore a kimono, had a lovely, black haired baby held in her breasts, and she was next to Subaru in the kotatsu.

Needless to say, it was Rigel's mother, and Subaru's wife, Natsuki Rem.

Rem had been cleaning up the lunch in the kitchen, and while caressing her daughter—while caressing Spica so that she wouldn't wake up, as she was full and was taking a nap, she tilted her head in a lovely way.

She was listening to the father and the child's conversation, but it seemed like it was also her first time hearing about the "Hiiragi Iwashi" that Subaru brought up. It wasn't like the Natsuki married couple to talk about basically anything.

Subaru: "You listened well, Rem. "Hiiragi Iwashi" is the third Setsubun plan to go with the bean tossing and ehomaki. I can't deny that it feels a little plain and minor compared to previous ones, but for that, it seems like there's some real, well, things like blessings, so it's recommended for religious people."

Rem: "I see, as expected of Subaru-kun. Woman and the elderly certainly do expect participating in the events like bean tossing and ehomaki to be difficult. It's not easy to clean up the beans and eating all of the futomaki…you have an eagle eye!"

Subaru: "Ah, yeah. Now that you say it, that is true. …Ahh, that's right. That's exactly the eye I was aiming for!"

Rem: "Yes! So, what is "Hiiragi Iwashi"? What type of suffering will you put Rigel through?"

Rigel: "With this, I feel like making Mom catch a cold now too…!"

In response to Rem's words that linked "Setsubun", "Rigel", and "Harm" with an equal sign, Rigel held his head with his hands and lamented himself. However, Subaru swung his raised finger back and forth, saying "Tut-Tut-tut" at Rem's words, and also said

Subaru: "Rem, don't jump to conclusions like Rigel. Zero harm will be done to Rigel this time. "Hiiragi Iwashi" is simple, quick work, after all. Don't worry."

Rem: "I-I see. …Yes, I understand."

Rigel: "Why do you seem a little sad? Hey, Mom, Mom?"

Rem: "Just kidding. Please don't take things so seriously, Rigel."

His mom's despondent look restored to her usual one, and Rigel made an indescribable profound look at her. Subaru responds to the interaction between the mom and child by clapping his hands as he said "Okay okay, attention please".

Subaru: "It's bad of the Natsuki family to get off track so easily. So, let's reflect and do this again. About the essential "Hiiragi Iwashi", it's something that's even simpler than things like bean tossing. It's a custom where you impale the head of a fried sardine onto a Hiiragi twig, placing it at the front door. Easy peasy, right?"

Rem: "Iwashi?"

Rigel: "Hiiragi?"

Rem and Rigel tilt their heads, respectively, at Subaru, who gave an explanation with pride.

The "Iwashi" and "Hiiragi" words Subaru said were both unfamiliar vocabulary to them. The original name was "Hiiragi Iwashi", so he thought it'd be simple.

Subaru puts aside convincing Rigel for now, and he folded his arms as he nodded saying "I get it".

Subaru: "If this was the old me, I would've said some foolish remark like "D-Damn it! People don't get Hiiragi and Iwashi here too!", but that's no good. I'm learning, too. I've anticipated it not getting through. So, let me simplify it. Hiiragi is a tree, and Iwashi is fish. In other words, it's a custom where you impale grilled fish onto a tree's twig!"

Rem: "Grilled fish…onto a tree's twig…why do that?"

Subaru: “To be honest, I really have no idea…this event is left at the edge of my sea of knowledge, but it’s about enough bean knowledge to make me want to praise myself…”

Rem: “I see. Bean knowledge just for Setsubun…Subaru-kun, well done!”

Subaru: “That wasn’t what I was aiming at just now!”

To the side of Subaru getting hurt by Rem’s assistance, her being innocent, Rigel puzzled as he said “Hmmm”.

An event where you impale grilled fish onto a tree twig—out of all the strange festivals that have happened, it certainly did surpass them in eccentricity, but it’s an event that didn’t require any particularly active activities. He nods, as there was no need for Rigel to be harmed.

Rigel: “But…”

Subaru: “And then Rigel felt like just a little something was missing…”

Rigel: “Don’t start a weird monologue! That’s not it! I thought your quietness was off, since you’re Dad, but those are two different things. Bring it on. I’ll impale a fish on a twig. Let’s get this over with.”

Subaru: “Ohh, positive, aren’t you. You’ve finally come to accept that “Setsubun” is a custom imperative to the Natsuki family. …I have nothing more to teach you.”

Rigel: “Yeah yeah, I’m thankful I’m thankful. So? What do we have to do?”

Subaru: “Well, hold on. I may look like this, but I am the boss of this “Banan Culture Promotion Committee”. We’ve went through a lot of work since last year, and the preparations have been made.”

Subaru smiles in a way that suggested he was going “Heh heh”. Rigel responds to that behavior by letting out a “Really?”, seeming to be impressed.

The “Banan Culture Promotion Committee” was a group of people that would spend useless efforts day and night to introduce the many new strange festivals that Subaru proposed for whatever reason as culture, spreading them throughout not only Kararagi, but throughout the rest of the world as well.

For some reason it was surprisingly popular, and the amount of promotion committee people was increasing beyond Rigel’s expectations, but him breaking because of that was another story.

Anyhow, should there be people cooperating with the “Banan Culture Promotion Commitee”, maybe he really wouldn’t need the few helpers from his family, Rigel and Rem. Whether it be for preparations or events, help would be essential to all of it.

Last year’s bean tossing event that used the town only happened because of working together with the people around, too.

Subaru: “And so, ever since last year, I’ve been absorbed in watching for an opportunity, and looking for fish and trees similar to Iwashi and Hiiragi. Although it’s difficult to look for things that are exactly the same, it would be sincere to the custom if the things are as similar to them as possible. Having the effect change, and having the celebration turn into a curse would be problematic, after all.”

Rem: “So, based off the flow of the conversation, you’ve found fish and trees, right?”

Subaru: “Exactly. They’re all fish nearby…also, it’s a place where they’re easy to catch.”

Then, Subaru put his hands around the bottom of his back, as he got out of the kotatsu, and he slowly brought out something that was put on his trousers. He spread it out on top of the kotatsu.

It was a map. The map that had the Kararagi City State drawn on it had moderate precision, though it was off-putting with its handwriting, and it had “Natsuki Subaru” signed at the bottom right.

After that, he thrust his finger at the middle of the map and said—

Subaru: “We’ll be going to the Grand Mogolade geyser. This is where the fish surge in schools. Plus, when they try to burst out, they’re the size of the Cragrel Moving Forest. Believe in the seniors, spread the roots here, and net a hall of fish. —That’ll be the mission of the Natsuki family.”

Rigel: “Don’t just involve us like it’s nothing!!”

Rem: “Ah! Rigel, you can’t! Spica is going to wake…ah, ahhh.”

Spica: “Waaaaaaaaa!!”

Rigel yells in response to Subaru’s declaration, him looking proud, and Rem was already too late to panic about that voice, as Spica’s crying resounded powerfully, having been woken up forcefully.

—That was the “Fish Head Tree Strategy” prologue.

4

—Let’s talk about the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

The Grand Mogolade Geyser isn’t at all related to “The inner sea of the planet. The platform of the watchtower. From the edge of paradise…” but it’s a place in the Kararagi City State country with an extremely favorable environment.

What stood out about the Kararagi City State’s climate was the deserts that were generally dotted around the country, and the abundance of arid regions that were scarce by nature, though you couldn’t go as far as to say those regions were deserts. —Basically, unlike the Kingdom of Lugunica abound with nature and the Vollachia Empire, it was a country with a harsh natural environment, although the type of harshness was different than what the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko covered in perpetual snow had.

Therefore, before Kararagi settled as a single country, each of the small countries competed with each other, scrambling for fertile land. A single hero brought them together, but that didn’t mean the natural environment would have any dramatic improvement.

Things were the same. The land was still harsh, and it was still an environment where not everything was rich in this rich land. People could only look for some way to manage living.

As a result of being in an unreliable natural environment, the way of life chosen for Kararagi City State was promoting business activity all over the country—this was how Kararagi City State became specialized in trade.

Alright, let's go back to talking about the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

The Grand Mogolade Geyser surrounding area in Kararagi City State has already been described as having a special environment, but to say what exactly would be special about it, it would be that this is the only area with fixed, periodic rain. —The intervals were also definitely fixed.

That was the only very big thing in the country Kararagi.

The Grand Mogolade Geyser did seem to be a huge lake. However, that entity was not something like a lake, but a large hole that was deep, so deep in the earth that it was empty until it penetrated the "bottom", and the water that filled that hole would lead to the "Great Waterfall".

And the arising water spouted out towards the sky at fixed intervals in the Great Geyser, tossing dozens of, sometimes several hundreds of kilometers of rain. Thanks to that blessing, a nature unexpected of Kararagi burgeoned around the Grand Mogolade Geyser, and it was treasured.

You could say that the towns like the fourth city "Fusumi" near the Grand Mogolade Geyser were the ones that benefited from that blessing the most.

And now, the "Banan Culture Promotion Committee" that Subaru ran received backup from the head of the Fusumi city, and they took the challenge of an "Iwashi Gathering Mission" at the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

On the other side of that cooperation, in recent years, there was a rumor that said there has been secret strife in getting Fusumi involved with the Banan activities that conspicuously raised the event related achievements in the whole city. However, this haggling was between the higher-ups, and neither Rigel, a child, nor Subaru, an adult, had heard about it.

It was long, but this was the beginning—it was the outline of the “Banan Culture Promotion Commitee”‘s fight below Rigel, who struggled at the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

—In other words, the story will resume from here.

5

Rigel: “Ahhhhhhh—!!”

He throws the net at the Grand Mogolade Geyser, grabs onto it, having succeeded at catching a large amount of shadows of fish, and Rigel roared with everything he had, having unleashed his Oni strength.

It was long, way too long of a fight. After Rigel grabbed the net, he felt like a lot of time passed since he came here, but he didn’t have any time to think about useless things, as he twisted desperately.

He went fishing with Subaru before.

It wasn’t that Subaru and Rigel were particularly interested in fishing, but Rigel brought Subaru along, as he was whiny about wanting to do parent and child sort of things, so he guided him reluctantly to the rumored pond at school.

Rigel ended up having a showdown with the chief that was there for some reason, and he spent no less than 2 hours with it as it tried to snatch the bait. He didn’t underestimate fish. Their survival instincts lit up even more than Rigel and Subaru, whose bodies were, incidentally, several times larger than theirs.

It was the same as the silver fish trapped inside this net—no, they of course couldn’t be compared individually to that chief, but the amount was too different.

The shadows of fish, a hundred, twice that, or even more sparkling lives had tremendous power, absolutely not a step less than that of the oni grating his molars.

Subaru: “Hang in there! Hang in there, everyone—!!”

Adults: “Heave-ho! Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

And behind Rigel, him being desperately determined, there was Subaru, pulling onto the edge of the net like he was, and the promotion committee that came along. Not knowing if their yells were serious or not was the one thing that hurt Rigel’s concentration.

—Your postures are already bad. Drop your hips more. Ahh, but Liggins-san has back pain, so he can’t strain it. Wait, why even come? Get some rest at home.

Liggins: “You guys, just faking it won’t cut it.”

Adults: “Li-Liggins-san…!”

Liggins: “Hehe, we’ve still got more to show…Gwaaaa! My baaack!!”

Adults: “Ligins-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!”

He gives a refined smile, and the moment Liggins changed his posture, he collapsed and withdrew from the front.

This basically happened because of the defeat of getting old.

Most of the promotion committee members were old people that wanted to strengthen the bonds in the area, connecting with youth through events.

Young members were chosen as carefully as possible, and the average age was around 60.

And well, at this battlefield where they were fighting violently for each of their lives, the people were half dead.

Subaru: “No! You can’t push yourself more than this! Elder! Take the casualties and fall back! People will die at this rate!”

Subaru takes into account the grimness of the situation, and he fires off his voice as if he made a tough decision.

If the wounded weren’t going to die, then it would be better and necessary to save them, rather than having them die. Casualties were kept away, but even then, two people were needed. In other words, if one person collapsed, a downward spiral of two helpers falling out would develop, and the front would finally collapse completely.

Now, there was only Subaru and Rigel, safely grabbing on the net, as well as three old people.

Subaru: “Di-Didn’t think that it’d come down to a battle like this… my bad, Rigel. I wasn’t thorough at all with my judgement. I even got Elder involved…”

Chamov: “There’s nothing to worry about. We’ve known each other for a long time, and I knew that a time like this would pop up.”

The person that shook his head at Subaru’ murmuring, him being bitter, was a senior that had his white fur wet with water, and yet still maintained his charm—it was the puppy person Chamov-san.

The senior Chamov, who traveled the world and boasted about having conquered the 7 deserts, was the one who provided the information about the wanted schools of fish that passed through the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

He had that responsibility for the information, and he was also participating in the fishing, but—

Chamov: “But, what’s regretful is that…I won’t…be able to be with you guys until…the…end…”

Subaru: “El-Elder? Elder—!”

Subaru looks back, and he was greatly surprised at Chamov, who he called out to. Rigel also looks back, getting lured by the sound, and he had no words for Chamov, who was no longer in sight.

The puppy person Chamov was only 50 centimeters tall, which meant he was the same size as the waves that were caused by the raging fish in the midst of the Grand Mogolade Geyser battle—just how many times has he stayed with them until the end, even after being washed away?

His diligent resistance and his toughness of not making himself noticeable to the others until this moment symbolized his hard-boiled way of living that didn't match his appearance.

Chamov: "I-I can't go on…"

Elder—he was a friend, and a person that visited their home many times

Rigel sees that Chamov had withdrawn from the front, and he quickly starts to lose strength. The horn on his forehead loses its light, and the boy's body turns into one of a mere 11 year old boy.

That was also of course him raising a white flag to the sparkling of the fishes' lives.

Subaru: "—Rigel, it's fine. Withdraw."

Rigel: "…Dad?"

When he sought to let go of the net, Subaru said that to Rigel, being right behind him. That voice's tone catches his attention, and his hands that tried to let go for a second were hesitant.

When Rigel looked back, he saw Subaru having the net tied to his wrist, even while being soaked, and he nodded at him, not letting go no matter what.

Subaru: "I have responsibility. So, I'll stay here until the end. Go back. Go back, and take those people collapsing over there with you."

Rigel: "Bu-But……you can't do it! Give it up! Let's replace the net later!"

Subaru: “It’s not like I’m holding out because I care about the wickerwork. I told you, didn’t I? I have a responsibility. It might be a little embarrassing to the “Banan Culture Promotion Committee” and you, but this is also a part of my job. —As if a parent would screw up a job in front of his kid.”

Rigel: “…”

Rigel could not respond to that assertion.

His enthusiasm was excellent. So excellent that he lost the will to snap at him.

However, he had no chance. Could Subaru do something about the failure that happened even with all those people pulling, not even having Rigel, who for some reason was the main force?

It was impossible. This battle was already—

Subaru: “Also, you’re not taking someone seriously.”

Rigel: “Dad…you mean daddy?”

Subaru: “Even if you aren’t taking me seriously, I’m a hopeless adult, so that’d be fine. But, the one you aren’t taking seriously isn’t me. …It’s Rem.”

Rigel: “Mom?”

Rigel was stumped with why Rem’s name came in this situation.

Rem hasn’t participated in fishing with the Grand Mogolade Geyser as a stage, something you’d also understand if you followed the battle up to here. Of course, she came with him to Fusumi, which was called a family trip, but it was not fishing that had the possibility of danger; it was like Rem and Spica were sightseeing, participating from the “Cragrel Living Forest” by tearing off twigs.

Rem: “Spica and I will be taking our time, so Subaru-kun and Rigel, please be careful not to skin your knees.”

They each swore to do their best, which was a bit of a calm interaction, but considering that conversation, the mom and the younger sister not being here was a self-evident truth.

Therefore, Rigel could not see Subaru's words as anything but preposterous nonsense, but—

Rem: "—Subaru-kun, you understand me as well as always. I'm blushing."

Rigel: "—!"

That voice made Rigel jump, who was trying to make Subaru give up in one way or another. It was a voice that shouldn't have been heard, a being that shouldn't have been here, and yet they calmly appeared.

It was a women with long blue hair put together simply, and she stood alongside Subaru, pulling onto the thread connected to the net so that the sleeves of her kimono didn't get in the way—it was Rem.

Rigel was dumbfounded by that entry, but Subaru immediately gave a broad grin and said

Subaru: "Sorry, Rem. We're in a pinch."

Rem: "Yes. It's always like this whenever I take my eyes off of Subaru-kun. Just another reason why I can't take my eyes off of Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "Your love is heavy! But, that helps."

The married couple grab onto the net together, and Rem puts strength into her shoulders, her lips closed tightly. Just from that, the net's force that lost to the fish pulled the fish towards them splendidly.

However, even then, they were still outnumbered. Even with Rigel, that inferiority in numbers wouldn't be overturned. They were already at an unmanageable difference in fighting power from the beginning. Even if a miracle happened when Mom joined here, this battle would—

Rem: “Rigel, hold onto this rope, and stand still please.”

Rigel: “Eh?”

Rem: “Meanwhile, Subaru-kun and I…Dad and Mom will hold up the net with the two of us, and hope that Rigel won’t miss an opportunity. —It’s a chance for Onii-chan to show his cool side to Spica.”

Without being able to hide his confusion, Rigel did just what Rem said. He did not pull onto the net; he held onto the rope connected to the net, and he looked around the area restlessly.

What in the world did chance and opportunity indicate?

Chamov: “This is a man’s opportunity. We won’t be defeated.”

Rigel: “El-Elder…!”

Ligins: “We’re here too…!”

Rigel: “Ligins-san! And the other bunch!”

Once again, the assembled comrades grab onto the net simultaneously to wipe away that uneasiness of Rigel, as he was worrying about his parents’ limits, and they put in their strength. Even if they were described as half dead people, if they were half alive, then there was meaning in bundling their power. Now was that time to do it.

Adults: “Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

Adults: “Heave-ho! Heave-ho!}

Rigel frantically opens his eyes while having his concentration disturbed by their yelling. He gets lost in the loud adults’ voices, and he feels something—yes, he feels something like tremor.

Perhaps it was an omen of the Grand Mogolade eruption, when the water would spew out. —No, that wasn’t it. The tremor was not inside of the grand geyser, it came from outside and it was coming towards them.

That was—

Rigel: “Th-The Cragrel Moving Forest…!”

It was the Cragel Moving Forest that moved, seeking water. —It was a quake. Clouds of dust rose into the air, and as for what was approaching, it was a march of green that was passing right next to the grand geyser.

Rigel belatedly determined what he’d aim for upon seeing the front —that large tree advancing at the very front.

Rem: “Rigel, now!”

In response to his mother’s yell, Rigel used the tip of the rope as a loop and threw it without question.

That loop entangles the tree’s thick branch, and the net pulls it.

—The sparkling of the fishes’ lives suffered defeat in front of Mother Nature.

6

—Let’s talk about the Cragrel Moving Forest.

The inner sea of the planet, etc…

The Cragrel Moving Forest is special nature that produced the Kararagi City State’s harsh environment, as well as the river source that is Grand Mogolade Geyser—it’s the name of the many trees whose roots don’t stick to the ground.

It’s already been explained how the water that spews out from the Grand Mogolade Geyser acts as a source of river around this area, but the water that spews out at fixed intervals doesn’t always rain on the land.

The wind has a particularly big effect, and the lands’ respective precipitation becomes sparse because of the season’s wind direction. Apart from that, the living things that were managing were people and animals, but the plants that relied on water could not do that.

Naturally, the Grand Mogolade Geyser's water was a lifeline to them, as they were things that would have no choice but to wither if water wasn't thorough.

Having said that, plants weren't things that could make direct appeals, as they didn't have mouths. Therefore, as a result of the influence from not knowing what to do to survive, the trees went through evolution.

It was them saying "If the land lacks water, then why not just walk to a place with water?".

And thus, the moving forest that was born—The lively trees that were called "Cragrel Moving Forest", picking up the name from the humans that first discovered it, were in the middle of the Magolya Plateau that had the Grand Mogolade Geyser water rain on it, and they continued to move all year round without rest.

The moving forest's trees' wood were known to be of very fine quality, perhaps because of how they were full of vitality, but they wouldn't stay in one place, so it was difficult for them to gather. To make matters worse, if you stood in their route, you'd get run over recklessly, so they were famous as forestry that put lives at risk.

That special characteristic of the moving forest worked as a plus, just for this one time.

That was when they did something with the force of nature, given that they couldn't win with human power.

Rem: "The moving forest was going for the grand geyser, so it seemed that I could take my time to join Subaru-kun and the others. That's what I said at the start."

Subaru: "Then, if Rem sees withdrawn people collapsed at the base camp, she'll do something about it, having noticed it…actually, that's the truth of my strategy, eh."

Rigel: "Strategy? How is that a strategy? It's a German hold of relying on Mom!"

Subaru: "Don't put it that way. Well, this is love winning in the end.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun…”

Rigel: “That was a good line?! Mom spoils you too much!”

They raised a big catch flag, and the group went back home.

The soaked family talked about this time’s cause of victory on the way back, but the one who wasn’t quite satisfied with that explanation was Rigel, who wasn’t overcoming it.

Rem’s participation and pulling the Cragrel Moving Forest with a net brought them success, and the large amount of fish that were in the great geyser was pulled out splendidly(Subaru called them pseudo-Iwashi).

Actually, after that, the dashing moving forest took away the fish with the net, and there was an act of them chasing the moving forest to get back the net back, but that was left out.

Anyhow, they obtained the fish safely, and they replaced Hiiragi successfully by cutting down one of the moving forests, so enough of that was secured.

With this, the preparations for “Hiiragi Iwashi” that Subaru talked about were complete.

Rigel: “That was a lot tougher than stuff like bean tossing and Ehomaki. We went far too, plus I’m tired.”

Subaru: “Yeah, people like Elder were about to die, after all. You shouldn’t do things you aren’t used to.”

Rigel: “You said it, I’ve had enough of that. I definitely won’t do things like that again.”

Rigel sighs, and Subaru smiles wryly at him, agreeing with his feelings.

Although, the two of them saw Chamov chewing on a sweet leaf carefully.

Even though it was a lot of work, fortunately there were no casualties, and there was no damage. They were all somehow intoxicated by the atmosphere, but their injured backs were also recovering through Rem's healing magic.

Like that, everyone triumphantly returned to Fusumi, and they should've been talking about distributing things like the fish and the wood now, but—

Subaru: "That's out of my control. Let's share the hardships of this trip as a family."

Rem: "Yes, the best part of the trip."

Rigel: "The best part of the trip is sharing hardship……?"

While experiencing a slight feeling of a common sense crisis, Rigel gets mad as he cuddled his beloved sister, his reward for returning from the jaws of death.

Spica was one year old, and recently, she's been frequently standing up and trying to walk on her own. She was an angel that also called Rigel "Nii-ni" on very rare occasions.

Rigel: "Her first calling me Nii-ni will be my lifetime treasure."

Subaru: "You are an extreme siscon…"

Rigel: "Uh-oh, kinda seems like you're saying Daddyy after Nii-ni and Mommyy, Spica. The grumbling of a loser does make me feel good. Hahaha."

Subaru: "Grrrr…"

Rem: "Calm down, Subaru-kun. You have to let Rigel feel superiority sometimes too. Also, Subaru-kun is my number one."

Rigel: "Spoiling him again…"

Rem kindly comforts Subaru, who was depressed. Rigel pouts in a displeased way at that usual interaction. Then, seeing that, Rem let out a little laugh.

Subaru: “Oh, what happened, Rem?”

Rem: “No, it’s just…we’re always together wherever we go…that made me a little happy, and I thought it was funny.”

Subaru: “…I see I see. If you thought of it that way, then it was right to have you on the family trip. Well, forgive me for having it kinda feel like bringing my family come on a company trip.”

Subaru seeing Rem put her hand on her mouth smiling happily makes him also smile again. Seeing that smile makes Rigel feel like he somehow saw through Dad’s expectations.

They went far to prepare for the new celebration of “Setsubun”.

Of course, they really were necessary procedures needed to celebrate “Hiiragi Iwashi”. That’s why fish, wood, and twigs should have all worked as alternatives.

So, as for why they still had plans of going far away like this—

Subaru: “The culture promotion committee was happy to tackle promoting culture. Being able to study the ways of Banan made Fusumi’s great men happy. And, we’re happy that we were able to make a family trip. It was a good attempt at finding a solution throughout struggle. No, it wasn’t a complete struggle, but 3/8ths of a struggle.”

Subaru laughs nonchalantly. The main thing was the very last part of his speech; if he was familiar with spending everyday together with family, he could see the light.

It probably was the truth that he couldn’t ignore the two goals in front of him. Not appropriately declining favors was very inconvenient, and it was the nature of a man who saw much of life. That’s what Rigel nonchalantly thought.

“…”

Rem was looking at Subaru’s smile, her smiling with a kind look in her eyes.

Mom also definitely was able to see through Dad's heart. That's why Mom did not even oppose Dad's absurd speech from the start, but instead happily went along with it.

Rigel: "Elder, Elder, can you hear me out for a bit?"

Rigel separates himself a little from the flirting called parents' pleasant chat, and he calls out to Chamov, who was drying his body's fur in the sun. Chamov turns around saying "Certainly?", and he looks at Rigel with his round eyes as he said

Chamov: "What is it, certainly? Rigel and I are good friends, certainly. Ask me anything, certainly."

Rigel: "Anything special happening in Fusumi this season?"

Chamov: "Hmmm…"

He asks that question, and Chamov closes one of his eyes, seemingly going into deep thought, just for a little bit. After that, Chamov glances at Subaru and the others, and he immediately nods.

Chamov: "Subaru has asked me that question too, certainly. Like father like son, certainly…"

Rigel: "No, I don't need to hear about that."

Chamov: "Don't be a party pooper, certainly. This season at Fusumi, famous flowers will… "White Snow Sakuras" will bloom."

They were plants that were extremely difficult to take care of that could grow precisely because of how it was Fusumi, land blessed with plenty of precipitation from the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

It was a scene of all the huge trees' leaves becoming petals that were white like snow—Rigel had never seen snow, but he imagined that it was definitely a stunning scene.

It was also a family trip Subaru planned, as he wanted to show it for "somebody's birthday" that was coming up very soon, using "Setsubun" as an excuse to go.

Chamov: “Calling him out would be unromantic, certainly. It will be kept secret, certainly.”

Rigel: “I won’t say it…but Mom probably knows.”

Chamov: “Like I said, it’d be unromantic, certainly. You too, if you’re going to marry, you’ll take that child too, certainly.”

Rigel: “I’m against raising Spica exactly like Mom…”

Chamov: “The madness of you wanting to marry your sister like it’s no big deal makes me tremble, certainly.”

He makes Chamov’s small body tremble, and Chamov looked at Rigel with eyes that seemed to be frightened. Just when he shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he was annoyed with that look, Spica pulled onto his cheeks. Cute.

Subaru: “Hey, Rigel, Spica. Come here. I have something to talk about.”

Then, just when the conversation ended, Subaru called out to Rigel and the others. Chamov jerked his chin in response to that voice.

Chamov: “It’s okay, I’ll go, certainly. I won’t be unromantic by butting into a happy family get together, certainly.”

Subaru: “Th-Thanks, Elder. Okaay, then we’ll see you later.”

He waves goodbye, and when Chamov let out a charming smile, while swinging his butt’s tail left and right, he walked off in a way that was filled with only love and respect, nothing more and nothing less.

Rigel sees that with his own eyes, and then he went back to his parents. When he did, he saw the same old Rem, her cheeks slightly red, and the same old Subaru, him being his reckless and self-confident self.

Subaru: “Ahem. You see, Rigel. I want to show something to Rem and you guys.”

He imagined what it was from the pretentious expression, and the wording that came out after that.

"…"

There was a pause after Subaru's announcement, and Rigel glanced at Rem.

Subaru faced the children, his eyes sparkling, and he did not notice his wife next to him. When Rem noticed Rigel's look, her having a faint smile, she put a finger on her lips, saying "Shh" as a signal.

Starting to talk would be unromantic. Pointing it out would be unromantic. That was greatly understood.

Rigel reluctantly shrugged his shoulders. Spica also shrugged her shoulders, copying him.

Subaru: "This time's family trip isn't for mere fishing and work. The truth is—"

The clownish mastermind gets surrounded by the children and his wife, thinking that his secret hadn't been found out, and he magnificently announced the final plan of the family trip.

7

The details of the "White Snow Sakura" appreciation meeting will not be talked about.

Let's just say that they were able to enjoy the truly splendid scene of the flowers that colored the many mountains of Fusumi.

Well then, the family trip was used as groundwork, and they still had to accomplish the new nominated custom of Setsubun, "Hiiragi Iwashi", but—

Subaru: "Hmm, I didn't see through this unexpected thing happening, even with my amazing eyes."

Rigel: "That's because you're blind as hell! Come on, use your hands, Dad"

They pant, and the big figure and small figure that ran about in the streets of Banan—putting it frankly, they were the men of the Natsuki Family, Subaru and Rigel.

They had green and red wigs that were like a perms, and vests with black and yellow stripes. They had clubs made of soft material in their hands, the thorns filled with cotton. It was a style of the good old days, and a style of the new era of the Oni.

As for what those two were frantically doing in what were clearly Oni outfits—

Subaru: "Trying to do Hiiragi Iwashi was fine…but I didn't think it'd cause an outbreak of cats and mice downtown!"

Rigel: "If you think about it, it was inevitable! Of course the strays would the eat all this bait if we hung them up openly!"

Rigel takes decorated fish again from an established point with their branches while raising an angry voice, and it gets thrown into the bag to collect them. They were now at 20. There was still a long way to go.

That was because branches and fish were distributed throughout town, and the whole town was practicing this weird festival.

Subaru: "Oi, Rigel, don't treat them so carelessly! This is like a sacred ritual, so the Hiiragi Iwashi would be thankful. You should dispose of them kinda like this, filling them at a proper place. You have to do it like that."

Rigel: "What a pain! Plus, don't implement disposal laws arbitrarily! And anyways…Ow!"

Rigel continued to feel impact on his little back, as he raised his voice pointing out the lack of progress. When he turned around to see what it was, what fell at his feet were small beans—they were beans.

And the ones who threw them were kids chasing him with smiles on their faces—.

Kids: “It—it’s hunter! Hunter found them!”

Rigel: “Crap! We’re gonna get covered in beans! Hey, you over there! How can we escape to the other side from here…shit! Damn, he’s nibbling on Ehomaki!”

When Rigel was cornered at the street, trying to look for a way out, he was at his wits’ end. The old person that he asked on a porch was looking at the lucky direction of the futomaki that he was nibbling on.

A person in that situation would not speak. He would continue gazing at the lucky direction until he was done eating.

Subaru: “I feel like damage like this breaks out even at Fusumi, but who will be responsible? Me? What you think, Rigel?”

Rigel: “At the very least, ow! Right now, oww! I’ve lost a way to escape, ow! So it’s your fault that I’m getting hit with beans ow ow ow! Why only me?!”

He had just seen him in a new light for a little, and yet Subaru still did an unsatisfactory job.

The parent and child ran their Oni pants through the Banan town while crying because of the rapid succession of beans.

Surely his mom and sister were waiting at home, eating Futomaki while facing the lucky direction.

Would they collect all the “Hiiragi Iwashi” and return home safely—?

Subaru: “Hehe, Rigel. You’re pretty fast now. I’m happy.”

Rigel: “Shut uuuupp!! Go catch a coooldd!!”

That parent and child quarrel resounded into the sky.

This was also, once again, a shot of the daily scenery at one part of Kararagi City State.

Fortune Setsubun Hollow

1

Let’s get right into it without any introduction. —Setsubun season is here this year again.

Setsubun is the most feared day in the year for the “Setsubun King” Natsuki Rigel.

In Banan, Kararagi city state’s 2nd town, it was culture that was now well established, and you’d call it a strange festival.

—Throw beans should you come across an Oni, eat rolls should you face the good luck direction. This is where the idea of hiiragi iwashi comes from.

Dunno who said that, but that’s what Setsubun is like—the new culture in Kararagi.

Rigel: “I wonder what they’ll make me do this year…”

On the way back from the school “Temple Elementary”, Rigel, while clasping his hands behind his head, sighs about the upcoming misfortunate event in which he’d probably be attacked.

Wear outfits like Oni underpants and run through the whole town to get away from the hunters that’ll be hot on your tail to try and hit you with beans. —Rigel does have that sort of role as the king, but that’s if we assume the standard turn of events of just the original bean throwing.

Every year, Setsubun culture goes downhill thanks to Natsuki Subaru’s—Rigel’s father’s—ideas, and now the damage doesn’t stop with just the bean throwing.

An event called ehoumaki where you eat futomaki in silence while looking in the good luck direction.

An event called hiiragi iwashi where you stab a fish head onto a tree branch and hang it at the entranceway to your house.

As a representative of the “Kararagi Culture Promotion Society”, Subaru had a very influential voice, and over the years the amount of those devilishly intricate revamps has increased.

On top of that, since they had an agreement to keep these sort of displays as vague information, occasionally the descriptions people give of the events are from off from what they actually are as a result of word being passed down like a telephone game.

Thus, Setsubun went through changes, and for Rigel it’s an event where stuff like beans, futomaki, and fish heads are thrown at him while he runs around town dressed as an Oni.

Rigel: “Nobody gets what Setsubun is all about! Plus, they all treat food so recklessly! If it were just beans it wouldn’t be that bad, but other things can’t be eaten once they fall to the ground…!”

While looking back at memories of Setsubun, Rigel showed his anger as he grinded his teeth.

This has been said before before, but Rigel doesn’t like the event Setsubun.

Every single time he just takes all the hits. Still, he had no intention of being a tank that likes it.

No matter how cruel the events may have been, the one thing we can say is that Rigel’s father started this. It really irritated Rigel how the original idea was changing into something different.

Letting them do whatever they want with no boundaries as a way to have fun in an event was the worst idea ever. And this event’s supposed to the event that considers tradition and hearts of the people…

—Though he did hate it from the bottom of his heart, Natsuki Rigel insisted on earnestly making Setsubun a success since he was born with the ability to be a hard worker.

Going off the subject, when it gets to the season near Setsubun when people cut back, in Banan town every family starts to stock up on beans. As a result, there are kids who misunderstand the point of Setsubun, and oftentimes they bring out beans from their home and throw them at Rigel a day prior.

There was also one act on the way back from Temple Elementary where kids saw Rigel and determinedly threw his beans at him which they'd found.

However—

Rigel: "—Woop, oh, oop"

The beans thrown, the size of them, the amount…Rigel knew the trajectory inside out, and dodged all the beans with the minimum amount of movement needed to do so.

If it were only one or two beans being thrown at him, perhaps it wouldn't be anything to freak out about.

However, this time each kid was throwing a handful of beans at Rigel—even though they were kids, 21-30 beans a throw was rough.

In short, Rigel dodged a storm of over 100 beans without even looking at them.

???: "No way…" "???: "Without even taking a glance…" "???: "D-Does he have eyes on his back…?"

In response to them being stunned, Rigel looked back as he shrugged his shoulders.

Rigel: "Too naive, brats, try again. Just how many times do you think I've cheated death every year?"

Said Rigel as he faced the kids with a twisted smile on his face.

That instant, the kids trembled, shrieked as if to curse at themselves for just casually challenging the "Setsubun King", then ran away in all directions.

???: “Eek! We’re gonna get killed!”???: “My god, those eyes!” ???: “The “Setsubun King” is a heartless demon!”

Rigel: “Hop off with the eyes comment! Also, listen to what your parents said about the rules of Setsubun—participate using the right amount! Now I’ma throw them right back at you!”

Rigel threatened the kids running away on the verge of tears and sighed as he looked at the beans at his feet.

Having more of these misunderstood bunches pop up when Setsubun comes near would be troubling. When one does it, everyone else will too, no matter where he goes. Things can’t keep going on like this. He’ll always sense danger whenever he goes out to do a little shopping, or even when he’s taking a walk, and that also goes for when he comes back from Temple Elementary, of course.

Going off the subject again, apparently this is the only time when there are “bean gatherer” jobs for a short period, since oftentimes beans will be scattered all over town when Setsubun approaches.

That’s what he’d heard from Clane, a mediator whom he knew. He vaguely remembers being told that they make a fair amount of money and are appreciated.

That being said, this also leads to Rigel’s senses being real sharp during this time.

Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to go out with cute little Spica in peace. This was probably one thing he developed as a result of having his life in danger.

As long as he’s with Spica, this whole “bean” thing won’t get him, even if they come at him at the speed of light.

Rigel: “Nothing with ‘bean’ in its name can even touch me now, huh.”

???: “—Saying weird things while looking far in the distance I see. You’re just like Su-san.”

Rigel: “Oh”

Rigel, who picked up a bean and was listlessly murmuring, raised an eyebrow upon hearing that voice.

He’d heard this voice before. A Kararagian speaker that had a low tone and sounded somewhat witty—the moment he realized who the owner of this voice was, Rigel broke into a smile as he turned around.

Rigel: “Uncle Halibel!”

Halibel: “Aye, glad to see you’re full of energy, Rigel.”

Patting Rigel’s head with his big palm as he said that and ran up to him was a tall man who wore a kimono and had a dog face—no, it was a demi-human with a wolf face.

This man who was a wolf man—a race that was considered to be extremely rare—put a golden kiseru to his big mouth that had a full set of sharp fangs, and laughed as he looked at Rigel with his narrow slit eyes.

Halibel was a friend of his dad and mom, and to Rigel he was like a relative to him, too.

Halibel: “Kids around your age grow up so fast when you take your eye off of them for a second. So fast that I want you to succeed me if Rem-chan lets you.”

Rigel: “I told you this before, didn’t I? I need to find a stable job and support Mom and Spica. Can’t have myself walking around aimlessly like you, Uncle.”

Halibel: “Huh, you sure are harsh. For you to sway me that easily… The way you talk big is too much for me.”

Halibel laughed wildly with his big mouth open, and Rigel also was acting spoiled with a smile that was appropriate for his age.

Rigel was someone who was often pushed around by all the shackles in this world, too. Sometimes you can’t look and act like a child when you're exploring the hardships of life.

So, that's why you gotta have times when you're just being spoiled, like how he was right now.

Rigel: "Guess that's the least bit of peace you can get as a child whose parents have all their hopes on them…"

Halibel: "You're getting super deep. Doesn't sound cool for a child to say that."

Rigel: "I don't care about that! Anyway, where have you been, Uncle? You promised to train me, but you were gone for so long that I thought you'd fallen dead on the street or something."

Halibel: "Haha, got me there. If I ever died or something, that'd be a serious concern for this country. It'd also seal my endangered kind's fate, I've got big responsibilities."

Rigel: "Yeah. And you're my master."

Halibel: "Yep. That's an even bigger responsibility."

When he was told something clever, Rigel also smiled at Halibel, who laughed in delight.

Rigel was fond of Halibel, as he was a sociable person and he'd be intimate with him like this.

Although he had a reputation of being an irresponsible person because of his behavior and the fact that he called himself an "Eternal Playboy", it seemed that he was good at his job, and whenever he walked through town with him, he could tell that a lot of people loved him—so much that he couldn't help but feel happy for him.

Rigel didn't really know what his job was, though.

Rigel: "Even after you told me that shinobis fight dangerous people day and night to protect the country. You also said that you're a wolf, an endangered race, right? You must be exaggerating!"

Halibel: “Well, in your case, you had no choice but to throw away your childish innocence to get through the days. It’s a bit unfortunate, but that’s the uncertainty of life for ya.”

Halibel puffed out smoke from his kiseru into the sky and gave a wry smile.

Halibel: “Oh right, have you been practicing the Substitution I taught you? It’s fine if you got tired of it.”

Rigel: “Of course I have. Why would I get tired of it? Can I show it to you? Though, the hiiragi iwashi that was thrown at me on my way back is the only thing I can use Substitution on.”

Halibel: “I see those fish heads every now and then. Su-san must have something to do with it.”

The iwashi head that had been thrown at him was very nice, so he thought to bring it home and show it to his sister for a memory.

When he took it out from his shoulder bag, Halibel nodded over and over as if to approve of it.

This wolf man has been friends with Subaru for a very long time, and just because of that, he was quick at figuring out what was going on.

Halibel: “He works for the Banan Culture Promotion Committee, right? I hear about him quite a lot in other towns. He’s gotten pretty famous. I’m proud of him.”

Rigel: “Hehe, dad may be how he is, but I mean, it is my parent’s job. I guess him being praised is kinda nice. Oh, but please don’t get carried away and tell my dad!”

Halibel: “Kids sure are complicated.”

Halibel, who put his hand in the front of his Kimono and was scratching his stomach, had a bit of a wry smile on his face.

Saved by his understanding attitude, Rigel started walking as he went “Oh yeah” and said, Rigel: “Since you came over here, that means you’ll be staying in town for a little while, right?”

Halibel: “Yep, for sure. I’m gonna go say hi to people I know for a bit, and then I’ll show up at your house at night again. Tell Su-san and Rem-chan I said hi.”

Rigel: “Uncle.”

Halibel: “Hm?”

Rigel: “What about Spica? Nothing for her?”

Rigel frankly asked, smiling with his head tilted.

Upon hearing that, for some reason Halibel’s face stiffened up as though he’d been overwhelmed and said,

Halibel: “O-Oh, right. Tell Spica-chan to be a cute girl and wait for me.”

Rigel: “Ahh, gotcha, I’ll let her know! Oh, but I dunno…Spica is already as cute as an angel as it is. If she consciously tries to be cute and wait, she might just reach an unfathomable level of loveliness.”

Halibel: “That part of you really shows how you are Rem-chan’s kid…”

Rigel blushed and worried as he imagined his cute little sister waiting at home. Halibel, faced with this scene, scratched his cheek with a dumbfounded look on his face.

Rigel: “Hah! I can’t be doing this! I have to come home and see Spica ASAP! Uncle! See you tonight! Don’t forget to bring Spica a present!”

Halibel: “Oh, okay, gotcha. I’ll pick something out and bring it home.”

Rigel waved goodbye with his small hand, turned around as if to say “My work is done here”, then started to zoom through town.

As Halibel watched him fade away while making clouds of dust, he smoked his kiseru and,

Halibel: “You were a sister lover before your sister was born, but after she was born, it’s gotten even worse, huh, Rigel.”

He muttered while giving a wry smile.

2

Ignoring Halibel’s murmuring—though, even if he did hear him, Rigel would be doing the same thing—he fiercely ran through town, and was rushing home.

Rigel: “Spica, Spica, cute li’l Spica.”

While excitedly humming to himself, Rigel ran faster than the wind.

Just by picturing my cute little sister in my mind, endless amounts of energy flows from my body. How about I call this the everlasting Spica engine?

The world oughta acknowledge Spica’s endless potential.

If everyone in the world were to see Spica, all kinds of things would come to an end through stuff like fighting.

While being possessed by such grand fantasies, Rigel repelled the beans that were thrown at him, waved at his neighbor who was nibbling on a futomaki to practice for ehoumaki, and when he put a fish head he’d been carrying on a hiiragi that had had only its fish head stolen by a cat, he’d made it back home.

Feeling that he couldn’t waste another second, Rigel opened the front door, and rushed in at once.

Rigel: “All riiiright, I’m hooome! Spica, Nii Nii’s home! I’m going to wash my hands and gargle right now, so be a cute girl and wait for me please!”

Rigel, with a big smile on his face, announces that he’s home while bearing with his urge to hug Spica right this instant.

Washing his hands and gargling was an obligation that he'd been taught since he was a baby.

He'd been told that he had to do it so that he didn't get sick or something. And Rigel has actually never gotten sick before, though he wasn't sure if it was because of that.

He had a feeling this was simply his healthy mom's blood being just that tough, but in any case, he had to get to washing his hands and gargling. If he didn't do that, he won't even be able to touch Spica and—

???: "You're real different indoors compared to when you're outside."

The one who greeted Rigel as he rushed into the bathroom, however, was neither his mom nor his sister. It was the voice of a woman that wasn't in his family.

Rigel gulped, and then stopped himself from going to the bathroom. After that, he headed towards the living room while being more cautious, slowly put his hand on the double door shoji, and then opened it.

Inside there was—

Spica: "Oh, Nii Nii."

???: "Welcome back. You sure are late."

Rigel gazed in wonderment at the scene in the living room beyond the shoji.

A kotatsu was placed in the middle of the tatami-matted room, and it was an essential for the Natsuki family during cold seasons.

There was a woman with her feet in the kotatsu, and she was cradling a smiling angel in her arms.

The woman shook her milky white hair whose ends were uneven and was furtively giving Rigel a sidelong glance with her almond eyes. Her light pink lips slackened, and she made a very provocative smile.

???: “Can you not be charmed just because I’m cute?”

Rigel: “—I mean, it doesn’t matter if there’s a beautiful person in front of me, I have my sister.”

???: “Look, you liking your sister is all fine and dandy, but people will think you’re an idiot if you’re always like this. Be careful.”

That moment, he came back to his senses upon hearing those words. What came back to him just then were the indescribable, mixed feelings he had about seeing that woman in her white kimono.

It was a frightening but well groomed woman.

In her case, well groomed may not be accurate, but it’s appropriate if beautiful is what’s meant by the phrase. She was not a result of a doll maker pursuing beauty; she was more like a natural beauty that was miraculously created by things that had been put together by animals that followed their instincts.

Beauty with a hint of crudeness…frankly speaking, that was all she was, but even Rigel, who still didn’t have much interest in women, was moved by just how much of that had to come from a miracle.

Although, that’d only be the case if this were his first time seeing her.

This was not the first time Rigel has talked with this girl.

Rigel: “Tia! What are you doing here?!”

Tia: “Huh? No reason, no reason at all, obviously. When I want to be somewhere, I’ll be there. It’s not like anyone has the right to tell me not to. Oh, there there, you’re so cute, Spica. —I really want to kill you.”

Rigel: “You’re gonna teach her bad things, stop that!”

While sweetly smiling at Spica, the woman—Tia uttered some really bloodthirsty words.

Rigel thought that she was actually serious when she suddenly said that remark, and when he panicked and took Spica away from her, he made sure that she was alright as he gently patted her black hair.

Rigel: “Are you alright, Spica? She didn’t do anything weird to you, did she? Sorry for coming home late so much. …What the heck is Mom doing?!”

Tia: “Rem let me take care of Spica and went shopping. I was thinking of going too, but this, uh, kotatsu, was it? It seems I can’t get out. To fascinate me this much…even humans do cool things every now and then, huh.”

Tia pouts over having Spica taken away from her, but she settled down with the kotatsu. She looked happy, resting the upper half of her body on the table as she moaned “Ahh” while smiling.

She looked to be around 20 years old, but the way she talked and acted were completely different. This beauty was also pretty friendly for how stingy she was—not the type of woman Rigel was very good with.

—He didn’t really dislike her, though.

Rigel: “Plus, look at how much of a bum she is, I’m dumbfounded…”

Spica: “Nii Nii, Nee Nee.”

Rigel: “Yeah, you’re right, Spica. Don’t know how I feel about Tia being “Nee Nee”, but we shouldn’t fight. I’m sorry.”

Spica closed and opened her hand and pushed on Rigel’s cheek. Sensing that his sister was emotionally appealing to him with that, Rigel decided to stop fighting for now.

While watching that interaction, Tia took advantage of this and said “That’s right that’s right.”

Tia: “Reflect upon your actions. Be sorry. Since you’ve hurt me, I’d like to eat sweets.”

Rigel: “Don’t get carried away now. Besides, my kind mother must’ve already left sweets. Where’d they go?”

Tia: “Where, you ask? In my stomach.”

Rigel: “Then you’ll have to hold out until supper.”

Rigel had no words for Tia’s bossy behavior who was acting outrageous at another family’s house.

Tia is another one of Dad’s and Mom’s old friends, and she’s also someone Rigel has known for a few years. According to Dad and Mom, she’s apparently more like family than a friend.

But honestly, Rigel still had some doubts.

And that’s because—

Rigel: “Families live together. If you only show up every now and then like this, doesn’t that mean you’re a relative or a friend or something?”

Tia: “What’s this? Getting all pouty because I don’t come to see you very much? Your face does look just like Su’s, but I guess you have some cute points after all. I want to kill you.”

Rigel: “Don’t say such dangerous things!”

He also didn’t like how she would keep on randomly saying “I’ll kill you” and “I want to kill you” as if it was a routine that she just had to do at the end of her comments.

The way she spoke, the way she behaved…those aspects were ruining a lot of things.

If only she didn’t act that way, she’d look quite—

Tia: “…? Did you get taller when I wasn’t looking?”

Rigel: "Gulp"

Tia got out of the kotatsu, instantly closed in, and stood in front of Rigel. She smelled pretty good. She nonchalantly reached her hand out and touched Rigel's short blue hair.

Rigel's silky hair was patted by her thin fingers, and he couldn't move a muscle. Meanwhile, Tia, who seemed to be very pleased with how much Rigel has grown,

Tia: "Kids grow up so fast. Just a little while ago, you were a drooling little shorty, and now you're only somewhat of a shorty."

Rigel: "…That stuff again, huh. People always tell me stuff like you and Halibel-san were there when I was born."

Tia: "It's the truth. I was there, and Halibel was there, too. I may have not been there during the most important part, though."

Rigel: "…"

That's when Tia squinted, and it seemed as though she was looking at something far away.

It felt like those eyes that were looking far away were not looking at what was in front of her, but at the past, and it made Rigel kind of upset.

Rigel couldn't reach that place. Rigel didn't like thinking about that place.

Rigel: "That stuff sounds too much like bull. Who'd believe that Banan town was going to be destroyed when I was being born?"

Tia: "Oh, it's the truth. The map was this close to being rewritten. I wanted to kill you so badly at the time, by the way."

Rigel: "You make it sound like you were going to destroy the town yourself."

Rigel shrugged at Tia, maybe because she wasn't careful with her word choice. Seeing that, Tia's eyes widened as if she'd been caught off guard, and then she said,

Tia: “The way you do that kind of stuff, it arouses my sadism. Ahh, if I keep looking at you being bothered, I can’t imagine how much I’d be pleased. I want to kill you.”

Rigel: “I hate that part of you.”

Tia: “—But, even though you don’t like me, you’ve kept my present for all this time.”

Said Tia as she broke into a smile and looked at Rigel’s left wrist. Upon hearing her point, Rigel choked, his cheeks became slightly red, and he looked away.

On Rigel’s wrist, he had a bracelet ornament made out of a beast’s white fur.

This was something Tia gave to him a few years ago when they first met. When she gave this to him, he said something.

Tia: “Do you remember? Do you remember what you said to me when I gave that to you?”

Rigel: “Id-! W-Well, umm…I-I have Spica, so…”

Tia: “That again? You’re so much like Su in that regard.”

Rigel gets teased, and he grinded his teeth hard. Spica, who was in his arms, innocently watched Nii Nii and Nee Nee glare at each other.

If I back out here, I lose my pride as a man. I can’t let Spica see me being pathetic.

Rigel made up his mind, and he pierced Tia with a sharp look.

And the—

Rigel: “That you love…”

Tia: “That as long as you have white bracelet, I will come running over whenever you're in danger…"

They both speak at the same time, and the things that came out of their mouths were completely different.

Tia's eyes widen in surprise, then her expression slowly turned into a mischievous one, then into a ferocious one a carnivore would have when it plays with a mouse.

Tia: "Hey, what did you just say? Hey Rigel, what did you say?"

Rigel: "Shut up! It's not like that! It's nothing! I lost myself! Dad set this up!"

Tia: "Ahaha, it's okay. I love you. But I want to kill you."

Rigel: "Goddamnit!"

With Spica in his arms and with a red face, Rigel turned his body and tried to run away from Tia, who was in front of him. However, Tia quickly prevented Rigel from doing so with quick movements, and when she got in front of him, she kept poking his red cheek with her finger.

Spica: "Owoo, Nii Nii. Nee Nee."

Spica was the only one who was happily laughing and watching them act that way.

And their little act continued until Rem came home after she finished shopping.

3

???: "And so, here's to Hal-san and Tia being back again!"

???: "—Cheers!"

At night in the Natsuki home's living room, everyone at the kotatsu made a toast.

However, the cups they made a toast with did not have alcohol in them, but tea and a kind of fruit juice. Due to various reasons, nobody was drinking alcohol at this gathering.

Halibel, who would even bring alcohol with him to the bath-house, was no exception either.

Subaru: “But man, coincidences really do happen. Who would’ve thought that Hal-san and Tia would come back simultaneously at the perfect time?”

Rem: “It really was unexpected. Thanks to that, we’re all here together at the dining table. It made me so happy that I’m worried about whether I was able to cook as well as I usually do.”

Subaru: “Oh, so you weren’t able to focus on doing your best, and you’re a bit worried?”

Rem: “Well, I’m always giving it my all to cook meals for our family.”

Seeing Rem smile slightly while being dreamy-eyed, Subaru scratched his head as he blushed.

Frankly, seeing his parents like this was bad for the eyes, but for Rigel this has been the usual since he was born, so at this point it was no big deal.

Rigel: “Uncle, hand me your plate. I’ll get some for you.”

Halibel: “Ohh, as smart as expected. Can you give a lot of meat? Also, don’t put too many vegetables.”

Rigel: “Aye-Aye. But it’s not healthy if you don’t eat your vegetables, you know.”

While taking Halibel’s order, Rigel skillfully used his chopsticks and dished out hot pot ingredients into the bowls.

Tonight at the Natsuki family house, they were having hot pot, and there were also many side dishes arranged by Rem who’d been fired up and made them with her skills.

Subaru: “It’ll be a lot of people, and we’ll be using a kotatsu. We have to have a hot pot!” [Rem: “Yes, that sounds great Subaru-kun! I’m convinced!”

This was what his parents were saying before they had the hot pot. He didn’t really disagree, so he let that be.

Also, Rigel liked hot pot. He liked being able to have lots of vegetables, though he wasn’t really a big fan of them.

Tia: “Hey, Rigel. Aren’t you giving me too many vegetables. Like Hal, I like to eat a lot of meat. Though, I did tell you to give me vegetables.”

Rigel: “What are you talking about? Eat your vegetables. You don’t want to get fat by eating only meat. Meat, vegetable, vegetable, vegetable, meat, vegetable, vegetable. Gotta go with the meat rhythm.”

Tia: “I can barely even eat my meat!”

Tia was served tons of vegetables, and she screamed in displeasure. Still, considering that she wasn’t putting stuff back into the hot pot, it seemed that she was being taught properly, and that’s more important than anything else.

Satisfied with what he saw in her bowl, Rigel served the next bowl, and then the next bowl, and continued to serve.

Subaru: “Man, it really helps that we have a someone taking charge.. Just watching him makes us happy~, and the hotpot running smoothly makes him happy. It’s a win-win situation.”

Rigel: “Stop being ridiculous. I want some hot pot too. Don’t make me do everything…”

Rem: “I feel bad, so…Here, open wide, Rigel.”

Rem pointed her chopsticks at Rigel, who was neglecting his own stomach because he was too focused on serving the hot pot.

It was a bit embarrassing, but everyone here was his friend. Rigel wasn't going to care about being embarrassed, and he contentedly accepted Rem feeding him.

Subaru: "Hey hey, what the hell are you making my Rem do? All right, I'll feed you too."

Halibel: "Oh, huh, Rigel, you haven't been eating at all. I'll feed you too."

Tia: "Oh, okay then I'll do it too. Here, eat this. Hey, c'mon, eat it!"

Rigel: "Nom nom! I can't eat all that!"

Rigel accepting Rem's food lead to all the adults stuffing his mouth with more food. Although Subaru and Halibel were horsing around, they were still choosing things properly so it could've been worse, but when Tia started doing it, she was only giving him vegetables from her bowl that she didn't like.

Rigel: "Stop messing around! You're all adults, so do it properly! Fooling around in the middle of a hot pot… Respect hot pot more! Tremble with fear at the power of hot pot!"

Subaru: "Wow, look at what an expert you are at being a hot pot governor. As your father, I'm proud of how you get into things so easily."

Rigel: "Shut up! You'd never praise me, Dad!"

Rigel roared loudly and whacked the adults, starting with Subaru. However, the adults laughed and ignored it, and it irritated Rigel quite a bit.

There really was no one on Rigel's side besides Spica.

Rigel: "And yet I still got Spica taken away from me by Tia!"

Tia: "Ahh, okay okay, don't get so moody. Like, you, her brother, are the one Spica likes. I've only met her twice, you know."

Rem: "She's right, Rigel. Usually you keep Spica all to yourself to the point of being stubborn, so let Tia-sama have her for today.

Instead, why don't you just pet Halibel-sama?"

Halibel: "Am I still in that low of a position to you?"

Judging from the way Rem bluntly expressed who she had a better relationship with, it seemed Tia had won her support and not Halibel.

An easy to talk to, beautiful, proud mother. That's who Rem is, but it's rare for her to be this friendly to someone, so Rigel wouldn't say anything if Tia were to stick his tongue out at him.

Subaru: "Hey, don't feel down now, Rigel. Seeing Spica is a matter of life and death for you too, isn't it? You won't be seeing Spica for a little while. Don't forget about Tia."

Rigel: "…You can't call her family"

Subaru: "Hmm?"

Rigel: "Aren't families family because they live together? She only comes over occasionally, so it's kind of weird to treat her like family."

Rigel whispered what he had said to Tia in the evening to Subaru.

That's when it felt like Rigel was ratting her out, and he was disgusted with himself.

However, Subaru ruffled Rigel's hair and said,

Subaru: "You've got a good point…is what I'd like to say, but that's not quite right. She doesn't necessarily need to live with us to be family. Tia has her own circumstances. So, she can only show up every now and then. But, she always comes when she can."

Rigel: "…"

Subaru: "Well, for now just spoil yourself with this awfully popular beauty that occasionally comes over to tease you. You're so blessed."

Rigel: “What are you talking about?!”

The sound of his tone changed. Once it clearly fell into the banter category, Rigel yelled. After that, he brushed away his father’s hand that was above him, then he thrusted his finger at Subaru.

Rigel: “Are you really being serious when you say that I’m blessed? I’m definitely going to have a bad time tomorrow at Setsubun, you know. I’m already so depressed…I won’t be able to sleep without Spica!”

Subaru: “What are you trying to demand here? The right to sleep with Spica is given by rotation, and tonight it’s supposed to be mine. And I’ll be giving it to Tia, so even in the worst case, you will have no right to sleep with her.”

Rigel: “Goddamnit!”

Rigel tried to take advantage of the mess and win some sympathy, but Subaru has known him for a long time; since he’s known him since he was born, his shallow plan was seen through immediately.

Then, while the father and his son loudly chatted with each other like that as if it was just the usual,

Tia: “Hm? What’s up? Need something from Rigel tomorrow or something?”

Tia, who was having her finger bit by Spica who’d heard the ruckus, tilted her head. Rigel wasn’t sure how to respond, but Rem took over, nodded, and said “Got it” with a smile.

Rem: “Tomorrow is Setsubun, and it’s actually the day of a festival Subaru-kun proposed. And, Rigel will represent the Onis as he runs around town dressed as an Oni while having beans thrown at him.”

Rigel: “That introduction’s so misleading!”

Tia: “Oh my, what the heck, that sounds like so much fun…”

Rigel: “Don’t get all enthusiastic about!”

Tia listened to Rem's rough introduction, and her eyes shined.

Though you may be able to tell from the fact that she said something dangerous, Tia clearly liked the "bean throwing" part. She liked the part about being able to annoy Rigel, and like she says herself, the sadism in her was very strong. In short, Setsubun is—

Tia: "—A festival for me."

Rigel: "This is why I didn't want you to ask about it! Who was careless and started talking about Setsubun?! Was it me?! It was me! I'm sorry!"

Subaru: "You have a lot on your plate…"

Tia looked at Rigel, who was crumbling with his head between his hands, with eyes that were like those of a young girl who was dreaming. Seeing Rigel's self-destructing, Subaru nodded as he said, "Alright."

Subaru: "Hey, listen up, Son. I really understand how you feel. It's true that the Setsubun event hurts you to a very rough degree. As your parent, I can't bear to see it."

Rigel: "Chomp, this taste like lies!"

Subaru: "That's when you're supposed to lick. Don't bite!"

Subaru got a bite mark on his hand from his son, and he had no idea what to do with Rigel and his distrustful remarks.

Subaru: "What made you become this much of a monster…"

Rigel: "Bad parenting! And bad treatment from the town!"

Subaru: "I'll have you know I do dress up as an Oni too during bean throwing. You're not the only one getting hit by kids throwing beans while walking outside!."

Tia: "Wait, I can throw beans at Su too? I don't know if I'll be able to take this…"

Rem: “Tia-sama, Tia-sama, the meat is cooked now. Say ‘ahhn’”

Tia: “Ahhn.”

Tia, who couldn’t hold in her sadism, teased him, but in the middle of doing so, Subaru’s good wife splendidly saved him, and he continued as he cleared his throat.

Subaru: “Anyway, don’t interrupt me. What I’m about to tell you is the most important part. It’s rough that you suffer too much every year during Setsubun. So, I’ve come up with an elaborate plan this time!”

Rigel: “I’m guessing you’ve added another strange festival aspect to Setsubun…”

Subaru: “You really just don’t trust me at all! Still, I’m sure you’ll be surprised and you’ll accept it!”

Said Subaru, and when he got out of the Kotatsu, he looked for his work bag that had been placed at the corner of the living room. Then, he started taking out a round cloth from it.

Subaru: “Hal-san, hang on to that end! We’re unfolding it!”

Halibel: “Oh, what’s this, a banner? What’s in it?”

Accepting Subaru’s request, Halibel got up and held the end of the cloth. When they unfolded it in one go, some letters drawn with a writing brush came into his vision.

Written on it was—

Halibel: “Setsubun Ghost…?”

Subaru: “The only thing is it’s written in I characters so that kids can read it. I actually wanted to write it as “節分お化け” (Setsubun Ghost). This is the 4th part of the Setsubun plan I produced. Makes you excited, doesn’t it?”

Rigel: “Makes me gets the chills.”

The phrase “Ghost” didn’t give him a good impression. It wasn’t something that sounded very familiar to him, but Subaru did tell him about them before—

Rigel: “Ghosts are Hollow, right? I don’t like the sound of it at all.”

Subaru: “Well, I get that. But, you see, this ghost is another kind of concept. With regard to that, Setsubun Oni have to take on another role…”

The “Oni” in Setsubun don’t represent actual Oni. Instead, they give an Oni = disaster/misfortune sort of impression, and the purpose of the event of driving away Oni is to keep misfortunate away.

Honestly, as someone who’s descended from the Oni, I really feel like Oni being treated as the symbol of disaster is unacceptable, but now that the idea has taken root so deeply in this town, we have no civil rights even if we push for them.

Subaru: “There will be no more of that chasing away evil doers sort of thing, and now the Oni are the protagonists of Setsubun! That’s how it is now, so just let that go.”

Rigel: “And because I’ve let that go, now everytime Setsubun approaches life gets hard.”

Subaru: “You’ve had to pull through despite life getting hard, but I’ve got good news for you. The Setsubun Ghost event is going to save you.”

RIgel: “Oh really?”

Rigel looks at Subaru with dubious eyes.

Halibel, perhaps because he saw that this conversation was going nowhere, put lit his kiseru and said,

Halibel: “Come on now, let’s let him finish. The only knowledge of Setsubun I have is stuff I’ve heard from other people who also heard about it from other people, but how are they different from Hollow?”

Subaru: “About that…this time, they’ll be allowed to disguise themselves as Oni.”

Rigel: “What?!”

Subaru raised his voice as if to say “I have an announcement”, and Rigel’s eyes widened.

The disguise part is what emphasized his surprise. This is because up until now, Rigel had only been allowed to wear yellow clothed Oni pants that had black vertical stripes, a red padded sleeveless coat, as well as a tremendously bold, bright green wig.

Subaru: “By putting on clothes that are different from the ones we usually wear, Setsubun ghosts can go through their Setsubun day without getting found by Oni—that’s the train of thought I had to come up with this.”

Rigel: “There you go making Oni the bad guys again!”

Subaru: “LIKE I SAID, I tried to switch them around this time. Basically, I got something in store for the Setsubun costume contest. I indirectly let the town know about it, so tomorrow all the guys, girls, old and young—everyone will flock to Setsubun in costumes. You’ll slip in and it’ll be like a game of “Where’s the Oni?” Whatcha think, sounds thrilling, doesn’t it?”

Rigel: “Kind of sounds like it’s become an even dumber festival…”

Subaru’s face was practically asking him “Doesn’t it sound awesome?”, and it irritated Rigel. Still, he pondered.

With this, surprisingly, he felt like Subaru’s idea wasn’t so bad. In fact, maybe it was good. Dressing in a way that makes him stand out will be the reason for tons of people chasing after Rigel.

However, if he’s going to look nothing like a normal Oni—rather, if he’s going to have an appearance that doesn’t resemble Natsuki Rigel, perhaps he’ll be able to go outside with Spica in peace.

Rigel: “What happened to you, Dad? Has the father within you finally awoken?”

Subaru: “You say that as if the father within me hasn’t been awake until now. The father within me has been in bloom for a good 2 years now.”

Rigel: “2 years…but that’s when Spica was born!”

Subaru’s teeth glistened as he gave a thumbs up, then Rigel gave a well-delivered comeback.

Anyhow, this was rare, really rare—in fact, this was the first time Rigel agreed with his dad regarding Setsubun.

Rigel: “A disguise! Alright, I’ll make it through tomorrow somehow!”

Subaru: “That’s the spirit! But well, it won’t be that easy, Rigel. To prepare for tomorrow, I’ve taken pics of what you normally look like with a “Metia” and sent them out. In other words, if you have a half-assed disguise, the town’s Rigelists will see through you easily, and you’ll be dead.”

Rigel: “Aren’t you going a little overboard?!”

Just when he started thinking better of him, he made him change his mind again.

However, Subaru went “tsk tsk” to Rigel as he waved his finger back and forth as he said,

Subaru: “Don’t be ridiculous. If this becomes a one sided game, that would be downright disrespectful towards the bean throwers who’ve trained their wrists up until today for Setsubun. They go all out, we go all out—only then will it be sportsmanlike. Yeah?”

Rigel: “Shut up! Then what?! In the end, this is just the same old Setsubun!”

Rigel’s appearance is actually even more well-known in town now than it was last year.

Rigel was ruled by that sort of sense of despair, having a feeling that he’d be killed by beans tomorrow.

However, Rigel was—

Rem: "—No, Rigel. It won't be like that. Leave it to your mother."

The one who gallantly got up and came to the rescue was none other than Rem.

She was in a light blue kimono, and when she tucked up her sleeves, she clenched a fist with her game face on.

Rem: "Subaru-kun told you something. That they'll be going all out, and we'll be going all out. That's exactly what's going to happen. So, all we have to do is give it all we've got and play along."

Rigel: "But Mom, what are we going to do? Wearing costumes is one thing, but I've never disguised myself before. They'll easily recognize me, and I'll be dead…"

Rem: "You're so silly, Rigel. You don't have to take on everything all by yourself."

Rigel: "Huh?"

With a smile, Rem nodded at Rigel who was confused. She gently reaches her hand out, then Rigel's mom's hand touched his cheek. Then, their blue eyes met each other.

Rem: "Listen, Rigel. Leave this to me. Subaru-kun…Your dad thought hard to come up with this idea for your sake. So, it's only natural for me to do my part as his wife."

Rigel: "Mom…"

Upon hearing those words, something warm started to fill Rige's chest.

Then, Rigel thought for a little bit, and—

Rigel: "—Alright. I'll trust you, Mom."

This was after Rigel, who believed in Rem, left it up to his mother to handle the matter.

Rem: “What do you think, Rigel? I did the best I could.”

Said Rem as she firmly nodded while appearing to be wiping the sweat off her forehead.

In response, Rigel took a good look at himself in the full-length mirror. In the tall mirror that reflected his whole body, there was a brand new Rigel.

Rigel: “This is me…?”

Reflected in the mirror was a pretty girl who was the same age as Rigel.

She had a kimono that was based around a dark indigo blue color, and a distinctively light red hair ornament. Her light blue hair was put up nicely, and she kind of looked like a rich girl.

She did have a sharp look in her eyes, but her long eyelashes and lightly rouged cheeks coupled with her slightly embarrassed expression created quite the charm that’d sway a man.

She turns around. Rem nods.

She turns around. Halibel breathed a sigh in amazement.

She turns around. Seeing that girl, Subaru grinned and said,

Subaru: “Let’s name this you Natsumi Rimmel!”

Rigel: “Shut up!! I was an idiot for trusting Mom!”

Rigel hated Subaru’s expression as he held in his laughter, so he stomped his feet with all his strength.

Of course, the pretty girl reflected in the mirror was a magnificent transformation of Rigel done by Rem. To be honest, it was so perfectly done that it made Rem’s skill scary.

Rem: “I saw nothing wrong with it. Rigel, I think you almost have the same potential as Subaru-kun…It’s a masterpiece.”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s pretty cute. I was worried about your future when I saw that you were born with eyes just like mine I was worried, but worst comes worst, with this, there are also eyes that can do something about the future…”

Rigel: “As if there are! What do you mean “This’ll unlock a future for me”?! And what’s this about me almost having the same potential as Dad?! Dad’s going to crossdress too?!”

Subaru: “Natsumi Schwartz…Look forward to tomorrow.”

Rigel had no choice but to yield to Subaru’s vaguely confident reply.

Halibel taps Rigel’s shoulder. When the slit-eyed wolf man let a sigh out of his large mouth, he said,

Halibel: “You might not be very happy about it, but isn’t it well done? I mean, that kind of outfit may be useful for sneaking into places if you’re going to succeed me in the future.”

Rigel: “Stop trying to cheer me up …In fact, just knock it off, Uncle. I have to do this.”

Halibel: “You’re getting pretty into it…”

Perhaps he just liked to laugh at himself. Perhaps he’s just the type to get totally immersed in whatever he did. Or, perhaps he was just used to it.

While wryly smiling at how quick Rigel switched to accepting reality, Halibel scratched his head as if to think for a bit, and he said,

Halibel: “Then how about I teach you the Clone technique for tomorrow? Dunno if it’ll go well if you only learn it on the spot, but you’ve got a feel for it, so maybe you’ll be able to make like one more of yourself.”

Rigel: “Is Clone the thing you used to make four of yourself?”

Halibel: “Yep, yep. I become 4 times the trouble, so it’s super strong. The thing I have to be careful of is, although I become more troubling the more clones I have, the wounds are shared. So if I get hit, I take 4 times as much damage.”

Rigel: “I can’t see anything coming out of it other than me being hit by two times as many beans…”

Halibel: “Wow, even your voice is higher…”

If that’s how it is, maybe I really do have a higher chance of surviving if I nail acting like a woman.

I should forget that I’m Natsuki Rigel and be so girly that they’ll hesitate to throw beans at me.

Rigel: “So I’m being a Setsubun Ghost to keep the Oni away…”

Halibel: “It’s not really like you’re going to fight against your own blood.”

Rigel: “Uncle, I won’t lose.”

Halibel: “Yeah, okay then. Go ahead and try your best. I like how you go all out in everything you do.”

Since Rigel was fired up, Halibel threw away his thought and was about to pat his head, but then he tapped his shoulders, perhaps out of worry that his hair would get messed up.

The way he cared about his hair made his heart skip a beat.

Rigel: “This is bad. I’m already losing doubt that this is who I am…”

Subaru: “The way you get influenced so easily is both one of your strong points and one of your weak points.”

Rigel didn’t touch on who that someone that influenced him was and just stuck his tongue out.

Anyway, if we disregarded Rigel's own shyness, the Natsumi Rimmel—previously Natsuki Rigel—strategy surely will be effective.

If there was a problem, it'd be—

Tia: "—Pant, pant, I'm going to die. I'm going to die. Th-They're going to try to kill me, what the heck, ahaha"

Rigel: "It's not that funny! I'm going to get hurt too, you know!"

Tia: "C-Cmon, stop being so into it. Ah, my stomach hurts, it hurts…!"

Tia had been laughing ever since Rigel's makeover had been finished. Although, it'd be kinda weird if she were to just accept it as if nothing was odd, so he was thankful that she was laughing at him.

Rigel: "…Do I really look that weird?"

Rem: "I'm proud that it is pretty perfect. But at the same time, when I look at you now, I do get the feeling that I may have created an absolute monster…"

He turns around to the mirror, and makes a quick pose. He thought it was cute.

Even though Rem was satisfied with how Rigel was doing, she was starting to break into a bit of a cold sweat.

Seeing his parents reactions in the corner of his eyes, Rigel laughed inside, delighted with how things were going.

Of course, he didn't actually like crossdressing. Well, he did think that it was pretty perfect, and he was surprised that he was pretty cute, but that was different.

When they realize that their own actions are going to put their son in danger, surely then his parents will learn to not have their ideas get out of hand.

By no means was he enjoying this cross dressing, since this chance doesn't come all that often, and letting out his daily frustrations by intimidating his parents.

Rigel: "Heeey, Spica. I'm going to do my best tomorrow."

Spica: "Aooo?"

Spica, who was playing around, going in between everyone's legs under the kotatsu, turned around upon hearing Rigel's words.

Then, she stared at her completely unrecognizable pretty brother, and put her finger in her mouth.

After that, she said—

Spica: "—Nii Nee?"

And she had a crisis from perceiving his identity, making her sink.

5

—The boisterous dinner came to an end, and the night went on at Banan town.

Tomorrow's Setsubun. Tonight is the night before the final battle.

Rigel's the type that usually can't sleep when he has plans the next day, so on the night before Setsubun he was especially nervous.

Apart from Setsubun, there's also family birthdays. Still, my heart's pounding.

Halibel, who had had an evening drink with his dad after dinner, has already returned to the tenement house. Subaru has gone to the "Kararagi Culture Promotion Society" for one last business meeting for tomorrow's Setsubun, and Rem went with him too.

She probably requested "Please take good care of my son tomorrow." She's a conscientious and meticulous mother. Because of that, Rigel knew that he was going to be protected by a lot of adults.

Since they were pushing Setsubun so much, the adults, including Subaru, have probably made sure that Rigel won't get into trouble.

They were thorough with the festival's participation guidelines too, so they probably have some sort of means to prevent Rigel from being mistaken for an enemy in tomorrow's "Setsubun Ghost" plan.

He should be ready for the worst scenario, which is a paper sticking on his back saying "This guy's an Oni."

And so, his parents were not at the Natsuki home at night. This is when Rigel would become the backup family head and steel himself to protect Spica the cute angel.

???: "—Can't sleep?"

A voice spoke to Rigel while he was sitting on the veranda, gazing at the blue moon in the sky.

The person sat straight down next to Rigel before he could turn around. A warm shoulder unreservedly touched Rigel, and he released a small breath.

Tia: "I'm not really sure about this, but don't Human children sleep around this time? You're going to be busy tomorrow."

Rigel: "That's true, but it's fine. In my case, a little lack of sleep puts me on edge and I can move better."

Tia: "But won't your disguise be ruined if you get eyebags? Won't it, Natsumi Rimmel-chan?"

Rigel was told that in a mocking tone, and his cheeks suddenly had a tinge of red.

He was being lead by the nose and played around with. Rigel turned away, not wanting to realize that. However, Tia chuckled, and gently pushed her nose onto Rigel's nape.

Rigel: “Dawa!”

Tia: “Relax. …Mm, the smell of nervousness. Can really smell embarrassment too. You’re so dishonest and cute. To the point that I want to kill you.”

Rigel: “…That again? If you wanna kill me, just do it.”

Rigel sighed as if to send the message “Not like you can anyway.” Then, in response, Tia’s eyes opened widely.

After that, she bit her lip just for a moment, looked down, and said,

Tia: “You’re…right. I want to kill you, but I can’t”

Then, Tia’s lips slackened, and with a smile continued and said “Because…”

Tia: “I love you, after all.”

Rigel: “…”

They were the words Tia had said when he first met her. Upon hearing them, it really stirred his heart.

This was probably the first time he had someone that wasn’t in his family say “I love you” to him.

On top of that, it was from an stunning beauty. He’d be crazy to not think anything of it.

Rigel: “…”

Rigel fiddles with the bracelet on his left hand’s wrist, unwilling to acknowledge the turmoil in his mind. A bracelet made of white beast’s fur, another thing Tia has given to him.

She had said that as long as he has this, she will always come running to save Rigel.

Tia: “You’ve never used that. You’ve never called me over.”

Rigel: “…’Cause, it’s kinda…pathetic. Calling you over just by crying for help…I don't wanna do something like that."

Tia: "Really? Doesn't your dad Su tend to be quick to ask for help from others?"

Rigel: "Dad does do that, but Mom loves him for it so it's fine. But I'm not like that. Thanks to Mom's blood, I'm different from Dad. When I want to see someone, I don't call them; I go see them."

Tia: "Hmmm."

Though it did take a lot of courage to say this, Tia had a negative reaction. She snorted as though she was ignoring him, and played with her milky white hair that was on her shoulder.

Tia: "What a cold night it is. I wonder when Rem and Su'll be back."

Rigel: "It's the day before Setsubun, so they'll probably drink a bit and will take a little longer to get back."

Tia: "Is that so? Then I guess we should get to bed, since we wouldn't want to catch that drunk smell."

Tia stood on her tiptoes and got up from the spot.

The Natsuki family has a rule such that, at night, everyone must put their futons together and sleep in one room. Even on days when Tia stays over.

The one thing that changes everyday is who gets to sleep with Spica —

Tia: "Tonight, I get to sleep with Spica. You jealous?"

Rigel: "Yeah, I am. Who cares about Setsubun."

Tia: "That was such a fast reply. You really are scary…"

This was about Spica, so he couldn't possibly lie, and he couldn't come up with a reason to lie either.

Tia squinted her eyes at Rigel, who had those sorts of thoughts as he curiously tilted his head.

Tia: “Earlier I’d figured this out by the smell, but…You’re nervous, and you’re only acting tough, aren’t you.”

Rigel: “…Well, if I say you’re wrong, that’d mean I could be lying about a ton of things.”

Tia: “Tons of things or not, stop being stubborn. Here, come with me.”

Rigel: “—?”

Tia, who’d gotten up earlier, pulled Rigel’s hand and made him stand up. Slender fingers, and the feeling of her smooth skin. Rigel, who was unexpectedly forced to stand up, was taken by surprise.

Then, Rigel, still shocked, had Tia’s smile coming close to him. She was right there, smiling at him, almost close enough for both of their noses to touch, and

Tia: “I’ll help you be brave. Today, I have the right to sleep with Spica, so I’ll give you the right to sleep with me.”

Rigel: “H-Huh?! If I do that…If I do that…what’s up with this?”

Tia: “You, me, and Spica can sleep together. I don’t want to give up being next to Spica, but I do feel bad for you, and when I look at your poor ol’ face, I’m itching, just dying to kill you…”

Rigel: “I get it! I’d like to go with your idea!”

Rigel, with an entranced look on his face, surrendered to the danger of Tia as she blushed.

In response, Tia nodded saying “Very well.”

Tia: “C’mon, if you’ve decided, then hurry up and get ready. I like to get some sleep without nightmares on my good days every now and then. I’ll even sing a lullaby for you, which I haven’t done in a while.”

Rigel: “A lullaby…”

Tia: “Yep, the “Kill’em Song”!”

Rigel: ““Tia”!”

It seemed the lullaby that his mother had hummed to him long ago came from Tia, and clearly the girl herself was dangerous.

Still, even though she was so dangerous, she’s never changed, and her presence has always saved Rigel.

If she could just stay the same as she was when she first met Rigel and left an impression on him, then maybe someday he’ll catch up to her.

Tia: “Rigel?”

Rigel: “I know, I’ll be there!”

As Rigel heard Tia’s wondering voice, the night sky hit his face, cooling down his hot cheeks and ears.

When he gets in the futon, he might be hot again, but by that time, he’ll be already be snuggled in the futon anyway. It didn’t matter.

So—

Rigel: “—Agh, goddamnit. Be quiet, heartbeat.”

While muttering, Rigel started walking to the futon where cute li’l Spica and Tia awaited him.

6

Incidentally, the next day, Setsubun incorporated with “Setsubun Ghost” turned out to be a huge success.

“Setsubun Ghost” was well known throughout town thanks to Natsuki Subaru suggesting it. So, many dressed up people got mixed together, even travelers from out of town came to enjoy Setsubun, and the bean throwing ended up being a big event.

As a result, stuff like a “Setsubun Ghost” contest and events to judge everyone’ costumes were held that was suddenly held were held to judge everyone’s costumes.

As a result, with the “Setsubun Ghost” contest suddenly being held, events and such were done to judge everyone’s customs, and—

—The Natsuki Family taking the victory stand remains as a photographic record taken with a “Metia”,

On it were a lovely little girl, a somewhat bewitching beauty, and a beautiful woman dressed as a dashing, gallant man.

With those three who stood together on that victory stand were a big wolf man, and a smiling beautiful woman carrying a baby.

Mimagau IF: Re: Mistaking Life in Another World from Zero

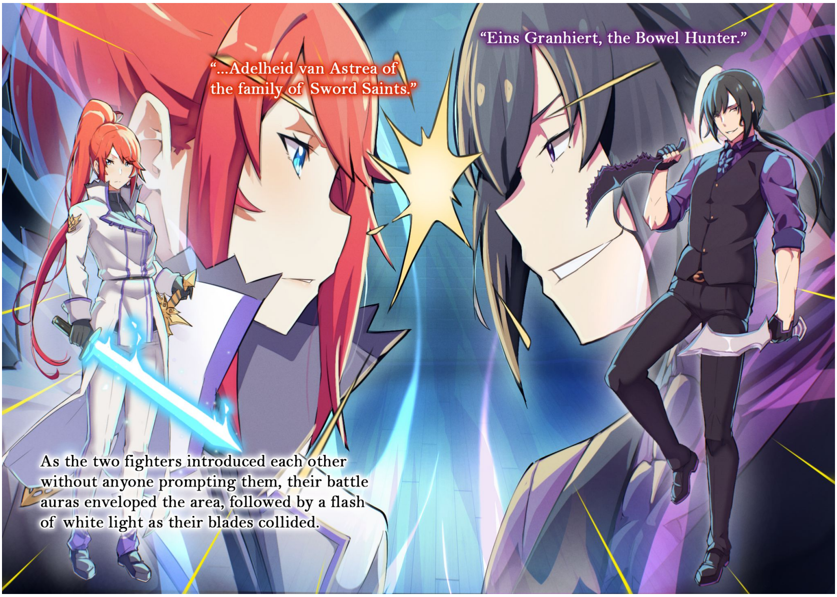
"...Adelheid van Astrea of the family of Sword Saints."
"Eins Granhiert, the Bowel Hunter."
As the two fighters introduced each other without anyone prompting them, their battle auras enveloped the area, followed by a flash of white light as their blades collided.

Mimagau I

1

Things are looking really bad. With no money to my name, everything was beginning to look bleak. Actually, I'm not entirely broke. I still have my wallet filled with coins and point-cards. I should have as much money as your average unemployed highschooler. Despite this, however, broke seemed like the right word to describe the predicament I was in.

This brings back a memory of when someone called me broke before. Man, I didn't expect that to hurt so much. I heard somewhere before that being poor affects one's attitude, but in my case, being poor affected the attitude of the people around me.

"I bet the currency is different here…" I said with a sigh as I fiddled a ten-yen coin with reeded edges in my hand.

The ten-yen coin, also known as Ridged-10, wasn't an exceptionally rare item. I found it lying around somewhere and kept it in my wallet ever since. A part of me thought it might come to my rescue like a knight in shining armor if I kept it on me all the time, but it never happened.

My heart is so fragile, even a mere ten-yen can hurt it, huh?

Speaking of fragile hearts, I’m starting to get offended by all these gazes. I’d noticed that people had been giving me funny looks wherever I went for a while now. It was starting to get annoying. I’m not dressed that weirdly, I think.

Although I was often told I had a scary-looking face, my appearance was more or less average. I had naturally black hair and wore a tracksuit that wasn’t designated by my school.

If going out in public without my school uniform on is a crime, then fine, I’ll hold a press conference and apologize to the whole world.

However, I doubted anyone would have listened to me even if such a conference was held.

“This must be that famous thing,” I muttered to myself as I crossed my arms, tilting my head.

A carriage with giant wheels clattered past me. The animal pulling it wasn’t a horse, but rather a giant lizard. The people who were gawking at me were also all dressed as if they were at Shibuya on Halloween. However, I could tell that they weren’t Halloween costumes, but real clothes.

What are real clothes anyways. Wondering what the definition of real clothes even was, I came to one conclusion: “I must have been summoned to another world,” I said, flicking the ridged-10 up high into the air, making a loud clicking sound.

2

Natsuki Subaru was born in Japan and raised in a generation known as the softie generation. Her day-to-day life was so mundane that there was nothing to write about here. The only things worth mentioning were that she was in high school—which she had been avoiding recently—and that she had wandered into another world on her way home from the convenience store.

“That’s all the narration needed to explain my transfer to another world. Talk about being easy,” she mumbled to herself.

It was way too easy. There wasn’t even a truck involved. I just blinked and here I am. And since we don’t need any qualifications to be summoned, even a minor could end up in another world. Of course, it’s not all good news. Being summoned to another world is usually a one-way ticket. And you have way too much free time after arriving.

As someone who had spent her middle school and high school trips alone at a game center, her current predicament was rather excruciating.

“I don’t suppose there’s a game center in this world. Though they’ve been facing existential threats back in my original world too. Man, I wish people would go out and play games outside more.”

There might have been other places people went to play games outside of their homes, but Subaru chose to ignore this possibility. Another possible explanation for why game centers were closing down was the rise of online games, where people no longer needed to go out to play with their friends. However, Subaru didn’t play online games.

“I hate to lose so much, if I played with other people, I might end up killing myself.”

But complaining about the current state of the gaming industry isn’t going to help me with my current situation.

She was still in another world with practically no money.

“Luckily, I was able to find out there’s no language barrier here, and the social infrastructure seems decent. I guess I don’t have to worry about starving to death…?”

As she mumbled to herself, she yelled “Show status!” into midair, but nothing happened. I suppose it isn’t the type of a world where I can see my current status.

“But shouldn’t there be something more? Where’s God’s apology for summoning me to another world accidentally? If not, where's the young girl responsible for summoning me?" she said as she made different gestures with her hands to represent different characters that usually appear when people get summoned to another world. She noticed her eyes started getting watery. "Ah, crap."

Although she was able to keep her emotions in check until now due to being numbed by the extraordinary circumstances she suddenly found herself in, she was reaching her limit. Without any hints or clues on how to navigate this world, she was forced to face reality.

I'm really gonna start crying if I don't do something. That won't be good. The patheticness of a high schooler crying in public could possibly be newsworthy enough to at least make it in a column on a local newspaper.

In fear of such a scenario, Subaru scuttled into a back alley and rested her head against a wall as she sniveled and let out a small groan. I knew I wasn't a good daughter to my parents, and that sure made me wanna kill myself, but I never thought I'd one day make them unhappy like this. The sort of unhappiness Subaru thought she would make her parents go through was the type where she wouldn't get a job and continue living in her parents home even after their retirement.

Actually, now that I think about it, it's the first time that I actually thought about my future like this. I guess the predicament I'm in right now is somewhat better compared to the future I just thought about. I should only pray my parents will live happily together now that I'm gone…

"Uh?"

As she was trying to hold back her tears, she heard a loud noise. She lifted up her head with her ears still ringing, turning her attention towards the entrance to the back alley where she heard the noise come from. It was in the direction of the main street, but she couldn't see the pedestrians as they were hidden by the three figures standing in front of her.

The figures were staring at Subaru, who still had her forehead on the wall. Although their lack of sensitivity was akin to the gawking she experienced earlier, this time there was obvious malicious intent in their stares.

“Crap, it’s a forced quest,” she said.

Her tears quickly subsided. She faced the three figures, trying her best to hide her anxiety. Her heart was pounding loudly. She glanced behind her to see the back alley was a dead end. Why did I choose to come into a place with no escape route? She cursed herself for lacking any sense of cautiousness. Even in modern day Japan, I was always told to be careful when walking alone at night.

“No, don’t be scared, don’t be scared,” she said, attempting to psych herself up. “Sure, there wasn’t a screen that displayed my current status, but it’s still too early to give up! This is another world! There’s still a possibility my hidden powers will awaken and allow me to take them all down!”

“What the hell is this girl mumblin’ about?” one of the figures said coolly.

“She obviously doesn’t know what’s about to happen to her,” said another one. “Let’s teach her a lesson.”

They must see me as weak prey and themselves as a strong predator. Although I don’t blame them, seeing as how it’s three against one.

“But don’t you get too cocky,” Subaru said. “Just so you know, I always play out scenarios in my head for when I get attacked on a daily basis. I’m gonna pummel you all and turn you into EXP!”

“I have no clue what you’re on about, but I feel like you’re mocking us. That’s it, we’re gonna kill you.”

“That’s… My line!” She kicked the ground and ran toward the assailants to deliver the first blow. Caught off guard, the three figures widened their eyes as Subaru threw a punch at the nose of the one closest to her.

The punch landed, causing the one who was hit to let out a groan.

Receiving Subaru’s punch directly on the nose, the assailant’s eyes gleamed in anger. “Now you’ve done it, ya bitch!”

“Huh? Is that it?” Subaru said, taken aback that her punch had no effect. Instead, her fist was hurting so much that she started tearing up from the pain.

However, this was only the beginning of Subaru’s true misery.

“Hey! Hold this bitch down!” yelled the one who had been punched. “We’re seriously gonna fuck ya up now!”

The other two—one small, one big—grabbed Subaru from both sides, pushing her against the wall.

“Eh? Wait! What?!” Subaru exclaimed, failing to escape their grasp.

“Better prepare yourself,” warned the one who got punched. She was of average height, skinny, and had sanpaku eyes that looked as intimidating as Subaru’s. “You’re gonna pay for what ya did,” she said as she inched her way closer to Subaru, sticking out her long tongue.

The other two women who were holding Subaru against the wall smiled vulgarly, as if to match their friend’s energy.

Subaru finally realized the direness of the situation she was in.

“I’m really sorry! I was completely in the wrong! Please don’t kill me!”

And so, the high-pitched voice of 17-year-old high schooler Natsuki Subaru echoed in the back alley.

3

With her arms and legs immobilized from both sides, Natsuki Subaru was in a helpless situation.

The woman with sanpaku eyes wiped a bit of blood off her nose and wiped it on Subaru’s tracksuit. “Black hair, black eyes, and clothes I’ve never seen before. And what’s this bag ya have? You punched my nose. Ya better have somethin' that's worth some money."

"H-Hard to say," Subaru responded. "I mean, you just wiped your blood on my clothes, so that probably decreased its value slightly. Ah! Also, I'm a rare race known as Asian. I heard I can be sold off at a higher price without any scars. So I suggest you don't hurt me… gueh?!"

As Subaru spoke she felt a dense object sink into her solar plexus, causing her to groan.

"I hate women who can't keep their traps shut," the woman with sanpaku eyes said, holding a knife in her hand. Subaru realized it was this knife that had struck her in her chest. She also realized it was their subtle way of saying they could kill her anytime they wanted.

Subaru felt a chill run down her spine. This is bad. This is really bad. She was a moment away from fainting.

Then a different voice erupted in the back alley. "Hey move it, move it! Ya'll are in the way!"

Lifting her head up at the sudden interruption, Subaru turned her attention to the entrance of the back alley where the person who had just yelled was approaching at an immense speed. He was a young boy with golden hair. He had piercing red eyes and a fang that made him look mischievous. His face gave off a cheeky vibe, but it also showed great potential of a handsome man in the making. Subaru felt like the boy's sudden appearance was the beginning of an adventure and clenched her fists.

I bet this boy has a heart of gold and will rescue me. Then, it'll be the true beginning of my story—

"Looks like you're in quite a pickle! But sorry, I'm busy right now! Stay strong!" the boy said as he passed by Subaru, shattering her expectations.

"Wh-What?! Seriously?!" Subaru exclaimed in disbelief.

The boy, however, kept running and didn't stop even when he came to a dead end. Using this momentum, he jumped on to the wall and kicked off of it to get to the roof of a nearby building. After showing off his superb physical ability reminiscent of a stray cat, the boy was out of Subaru's sight before she could utter another word. There was no indication that he was coming back.

"Is there any chance you lost your ill intent with that?!" Subaru asked, hoping her assailants would let her go.

"On the contrary," the woman with the knife said. "In fact, gettin' interrupted pissed me off even more. Don't think ya can leave in one piece now." The woman tapped Subaru's stomach with her knife, making her gulp.

Subaru began struggling, frightened she was going to get badly injured or possibly even worse. However, that only irritated the assailant even more. "Stay still!" the woman warned, delivering a kick to Subaru's abdomen.

Subaru fell to her knees and let out a groan. She was unable to crawl out of the situation either, as the assailant had her pinned to the ground with her foot pressed against her back. I guess you could say this is this world's way of telling me "welcome."

In Natsuki Subaru's case, however, it might as well be the world's way of saying "goodbye." Am I going to die as someone who couldn't survive this harsh world's welcome ceremony? Is this really the end? I haven't achieved anything. I haven't left a legacy. Am I really going to die all alone?

Death was frightening. However, what scared Subaru more than death was the idea of dying without having achieved anything; dying completely worthless, devoid of any meaning to this world. This thought frightened her to her core.

Right as Subaru thought she was going to die, another voice echoed in the alley.

"Stop it right there, you villains," the voice rang, silencing the alley in an instant.

It was as if time had stopped. Not in a literal sense, but in a way as if everything else in the world stopped and all attention was now directed at the person who just spoke. This was the case not only for Subaru, but also for the three assailants. They were unable to do anything except just stand there and stare. The person emanated a presence that stunned everyone. He was a young man who could only be described as beautiful. His silver hair glowed even in the dark back alley, his amethyst eyes emanated sincereness, and all his facial features were arranged perfectly. His eyes, nose, lips, and eyebrows were shaped to perfection. He wore a robe with an embroidering of a bird that looked like a hawk.

“I can’t allow you to go any further than that,” he said, condemning the assailants head on. “Your actions stop now.”

4

The events that unfolded afterward were like a scene straight out of an action movie.

“I-I’m gonna remember this!” one of the assailants yelled.

“There won’t be a next time!” another one exclaimed.

And so the three assailants fled the scene.

Seeing them off, the silver-haired boy relaxed his shoulders in relief.

“Bring it on whenever you like,” a gray cat-like animal said, waving its hand at the assailants. “Although I doubt they’d ever be able to do anything.”

The cat was floating, swaying its long tail from side to side. He had adorable features like that of a mascot, but the assailants fled as soon as they laid eyes on him. That, and of course the magic used by this young guy also must’ve contributed to their fleeing. The magic involved launching icicles at the assailants. It didn’t resemble any magic Subaru expected from a fantasy world, but was heavily practical in its utility.

The young man and the cat had entered the back alley in pursuit of the boy who had run past Subaru earlier. According to them, he had stolen something from them and they were chasing after him to retrieve it.

“I’m guessing it was something of value, right? Can I help you guys out somehow?” Subaru suggested, unable to just leave without helping the person who saved her life. Of course, it’s not like we share a common goal or anything, but I can at least follow them and see if I can help them out somehow.

The young man said nothing, hesitating to answer Subaru’s suggestion. As he hesitated, the cat spoke up. “Why don’t we take her up on her offer? It’s not like we have a better chance of success just wandering around the capital ourselves. We could use a helping hand. Also, she can be your meat-shield.”

“Rude!” Subaru exclaimed.

“Tink, you’re getting carried away,” the young man admonished.

The floating cat covered her mouth with her hands. Side eyeing the cat, the young man let out a sigh. “I really can’t give you any reward. Is that okay?” he said, showing a faint sense of anxiety and hope in his beautiful profile.

“The only reward I need is knowing I fulfilled my one-good-deed-a-day quota!” Subaru replied, extending out her hand to shake. “Also, I get the bonus of spending an entire day with the most handsome man I’ve ever met in my entire life that’s like a prince!”

“I don’t really understand what you’re saying,” he said, as he accepted Subaru’s hand.

And so the Natsuki Subaru Team was formed. The duo plus the cat showed exceptional teamwork, located the person in question with ease, achieved their objective, and lived happily ever after… “Isn’t what really happened, though, unfortunately.” Subaru sighed.

“What do you mean?” the young man asked, tilting his head.

“We’re on a manhunt in this big town,” Subaru replied as she looked over the town from an elevated viewpoint, “and we have no one to help us, or any knowledge of the place. We’re simply lacking too many tools."

Even though they were on the hunt for a precious item, their investigation had hit a dead end. For one thing, Subaru's legs had started to give in, as she didn't have a lot of stamina. Secondly, they lacked resources, such as the aforementioned knowledge of the town and helping hand to achieve their goal. And above all else, there was something Subaru was facing, which was a dire problem she couldn't tell the young man.

"I can't read anything…" she muttered to herself. She was able to understand the language, but she couldn't read any of the things written on the signs on the streets. She had fooled herself up to this point that the signs only depicted some sort of modern art, but she had to start facing the unfortunate fact that she just couldn't read the language of this new world.

However, the young man remained kind to Subaru. "At least we know we have to start looking in the slums. That's certainly progress."

So he's not only good looking, but also kind. This was a breath of fresh air for Subaru, who was beginning to get worn out by the cold-bitter reality of the world she had been thrown into. Additionally, the young man possessed a sense of naivety, something she hadn't realized the first time she met him, which made her maternal instincts kick in.

"I've always been good at judging a person's character, so I can say this with certainty," the cat said. "You're somewhat of an idiot, aren't you?"

"Shut up," Subaru retorted. "You're just a mascot. Why don't you sugarcoat your words a little. How're you expecting to raise magical girls with that sort of attitude?"

"The only one I'm raising is this one," the cat replied, indicating the young man. "By the way, we haven't heard your name yet. How about we introduce ourselves?"

"Self introduction! Now that you mention it, we haven't done it yet.

Alright, I'll go first," Subaru said as she pushed herself off the ledge she was leaning on and cleared her throat. She then pointed at the sky and posed by twisting her hips. "My name is Natsuki Subaru! I'm completely ignorant about this world and utterly broke! Pleased to meet you!"

"Just sounds like you're in a dire predicament," the cat said. "Well, I'm Tinkerbell. Call me Tink. Nice to meet you~."

Tink then flew into Subaru's hand, bumping it with her whole body in a handshake-like gesture.

Subaru tilted her head. "Tinkerbell is the same name of a fairy I know. Although that fairy is a girl."

"Then it's all fine, since I'm a girl too," Tink said.

"Is that right?" Subaru replied, squishing Tink who was still in her hands.

"By the way," the young man said in a depressed voice. "I'd appreciate it if you don't call Tink a fairy. I don't mind what you call me, but Tink is…"

"Eh, what?!" Subaru shrieked. The young man was apparently looking down, his eyes with long eyelashes quivering. "Did I say something to upset you?!"

"It's fine," Tink said nonchalantly. "She didn't mean any ill-will. Seems like 'fairy' is a form of compliment for her," she said, directing her words at the young man.

"Is that…true?"

"Uhh, yeah!" Subaru exclaimed, deciding to go along with Tink's words. "I meant it to mean adorable or fantastical, or something along those lines! I guess you guys don't use this word like that here? Haha, sorry, I'll be careful from now on!"

I mean, I'm just going along with Tink's explanation, but they're not all lies either. I really didn't know 'fairy' was an insult in this world, and didn't use it with any ill intent.

"I see." The young man nodded upon listening to Subaru's explanation. He then suddenly closed in on Subaru.

"Ueah?" Subaru blurted out, taken by surprise by the young man's behavior. A waft of the young man's fragrance tickled her nose.

"No wonder you have such clean hands," the young man commented. "You also don't look like the blue-collar job sort of person, and your hair color is uncommon too. Hm? What's wrong?"

"Y-You're too close," Subaru said uncomfortably. "It's a treat for my eyes, don't get me wrong, but you're too close."

The young man looked confused by Subaru's words.

Is he unaware of how good-looking he is? However, seeing the young man furrowing his brows in confusion, Subaru decided to change the topic. "I-It's your turn now. What's yooour name?" Subaru asked in a light manner, in an attempt to hide how flustered she was.

However, the young man looked down for a moment as soon as he heard the question. Did I do something wrong? Or was it conceited of me to ask such a good looking guy for his name? Subaru began sinking into a deep spiral of self doubt.

"Luna," the young man suddenly said.

"What?" Subaru blurted, feeling like she had been lifted from the spiral by his response.

As Subaru took a deep breath, the young man directed his amethyst eyes directly at her. "Please call me Luna."

He answered my question, but it doesn't look like he wants me to call him that. I would've also appreciated it if he told me his last name, which woulda been easier for me to call him by. Calling a boy, and a super good-looking one at that, I just met by his name is too high of a hurdle for me. I guess I'll address him with second-person pronouns for now.

Watching the interaction between Subaru and the young man, Luna, from Subaru's hands, Tink muttered to herself, "Can't say you have good taste."

However, no one heard her comment.

5

It was a while after they began searching in the slums when they stumbled across some promising information.

"You must be looking for Forte," a person in the slums said. "The blonde kid you're talking about is a short kid, right?"

Knowing it was her help that had advanced Luna's search, Subaru became ecstatic. After all, it was her portrait that helped make this possible. "There was even a period when I considered becoming a professional artist. Although I gave up on the dream after learning there were way more talented people than me."

"Is that so," Luna responded. "But I think this looks reeeally good."

"Thanks! That makes me really happy!" Subaru exclaimed while hiding the wooden canvas with the portrait of the blonde boy, whose name they learned was Forte, behind her back. "Honestly, thanks."

Honestly, I was worried if I would be able to draw Forte properly, considering that I only saw him for a split second during the most dangerous moment in my life. It also didn't help that the most impactful encounter in my life followed right after that. Despite her worries, she was able to draw a portrait of the boy that captured the general feel of him, which led to obtaining concrete information on him.

"But a loot house, huh?" Subaru muttered. "I can't imagine it being a peaceful place."

"Most probably, considering it's a place where they also sell stolen items from there," Luna said, agreeing with Subaru. "Say, you've done more than enough already. You don't have to tag along any further…"

“Wait, wait, wait! I had a feeling you were gonna say something like that, but just wait! I can’t let you go alone to a place we know could be dangerous! That fairy, I mean…” Subaru said, stopping mid sentence since she knew that she had just used offensive language. She then took a step toward Luna, closing the distance between them, and continued restating her last remark. “Tink isn’t with you either!”

The elemental spirit Subaru was careful not to call a fairy was not by Luna’s side at the moment. She had been told that she could only come out for a certain amount of time each day, and that she had already used it all up for today. In other words, Luna and Subaru were on their own.

“There’s no way I could leave you alone,” Subaru continued. “You’re more reckless than I thought.”

“You’re one to talk. You wander around aimlessly without any forethought. Besides, if it weren’t for me, you could’ve been really hurt by those three women.”

“Well, you never know. Maybe my hidden powers could’ve suddenly awakened and…nah, actually that wouldn’t have happened. All my luck has been used up by meeting you.”

Luna tilted his head. “I don’t really get it, but does that mean you’ve lived an unhappy life until now?”

“You’re technically correct, but that’s not what I want you to take away from that!” Subaru exclaimed, feeling flustered. She touched her fingertips together and continued. “What I’m trying to say is that I don’t want to leave you alone. This is something I started on my own volition. At least let me see it through to the end.”

“Well,” Luna started after a brief pause, “I am also worried about leaving you on your own, Subaru.”

“Whoa!” Subaru blurted out, caught off guard by Luna calling her by her name.

Luna looked confused by her reaction.

I'm beginning to manage talking to him naturally, but being called by my given name by someone like Luna, who's a natural-born hottie, is still too much for me to handle. Subaru paused for a moment and said nothing. But my intention isn't all impure. He saved my life. Not only that, but he took his time to help me even though he was in a dire situation himself. I need to repay him somehow. Otherwise, I won't be able to live without regrets. That's who I am, who Natsuki Subaru is.

"I'll take front. You stay behind me," Luna said as they walked through the slums. "You seem like a…reeeally reckless person."

"Yeah, even I know at this point that I'm more powerless than I thought, so I won't do anything… Oh looks like we're here." As they were talking, they arrived at a big old house-like building in the heart of the slums. "This is the loot house we were looking for."

"So this is it."

It was starting to get dark, drawing closer to night. Seems like this world doesn't have much light during this time of day. Subaru had noticed that most places outside of the capital didn't have any sources of light aside from the ones residents used for their daily lives. Added to the fact that they were in the slums, there wasn't even a light post available.

"It's completely dark," Subaru said. "What are we gonna…"

"I have a lagmite stone. We should be set with light with this."

"Lag what?" Subaru asked, furrowing his brows at the unfamiliar terminology.

Luna took out a white stone from his breast pocket, then banged it on a nearby wall, causing the stone to start glowing.

"Whoa," Subaru let out, looking at the glowing white stone in Luna's hand. "So this is a lagmite stone."

"By applying force to it, the mana stored inside the stone gets released and starts glowing," Luna explained. "How did you survive until now without even knowing this, Subaru?"

"By relying on some energies I don't quite understand that were discovered by significant people from the past."

There's an old saying that you never know what you have until you lose it, but I guess I never realized how convenient my life was until I came to this inconvenient world. I should've appreciated the things I had back home more.

"Alright, we need to retrieve the insignia," Luna said, ready to go into the loot house with the white stone in his hand. "Let's go."

"Wait, wait, wait just a minute." However, Subaru grabbed Luna's arm and held him back. "Things aren't that simple."

"What?" Luna asked with a confused look on his face.

Subaru sighed. This is what I was talking about. He's too honest with his approach. "What I'm trying to say is," Subaru continued, "the people inside stole your insignia, right? Do you think they'll hand it back to you peacefully if you walk in there, asking for it back?"

"Why not? If I take my time to explain, they might come to realize what they did was bad."

"What an idealistic view." Subaru paused before continuing. "And what if they refuse to give it back?"

"Then we'll…" Luna started, then made a face of realization. "Ah, we'll get into a kerfuffle?"

"What an adorable way of putting it," Subaru replied, shrugging her shoulders. "You're really pressing on my maternal instincts."

I don't know if it's because of his pacifist nature, but his views are a bit too naive for a world where a gang of ladies try to rob you in a back alley. Subaru was sure the situation would get violent once Luna walked into the loot house. And not just a regular fight on the street. There'll be blood for sure.

"So, I'll go negotiate with them first," Subaru suggested.

“Subaru, no!” Luna exclaimed. “You’re too weak.”

“I might be a girl, but being called weak pisses me off too! At least call me something cuter, like fragile!”

“You’re fragile!”

“You’re making my heart skip!”

I can tell that he’s really worried about me, considering how he rephrased his words. But I can’t back down now. I want to impress him. I want to impress him and get his stuff back.

“I may be fragile,” Subaru began, “but it’s because I’m fragile that I never resort to violence. I’m sure you could tell I’m a pretty darn good talker, right?”

“Hm…”

“I’m gonna give it a shot, and if it doesn’t work out then I’ll come back and we can formulate a plan together,” Subaru added, as she put her hands together and winked. “Let me give it a try. I’ll at least try to see if they really have the insignia.” As Subaru pleaded, she looked up at Luna’s face, astounded that he looked beautiful even from that angle.

Luna said nothing for a while, then finally let out a groan. “Promise me you won’t do anything too reckless.”

Looks like he’s accepting my suggestion.

Luna handed Subaru the lagmite stone.

“Leave it to me,” Subaru said with a smile as she received the stone, which didn’t possess any heat despite the amount of light it was emitting. “I’m not gonna do anything that’ll make you more worried than you are right now. Why don’t you go home and have a bath ready for me, Luna,” she remarked as she started off for the loot house.

“Ah,” Luna let out in a husky voice.

“Hm?” Subaru stopped in his tracks at Luna’s voice.

Luna was staring at Subaru, then his eyes started wandering. “Sorry. I’ll make sure to apologize for that once you come back.”

“I don’t know what you want to apologize for, but stop making such a face. You look like a lost puppy. You’re tickling my maternal instincts.”

“Stop being such an idiot.”

What a cute way to scold me. Subaru started towards the loot house again. She held the handle on the door and slowly opened it, making a creaking sound. Can’t say it’s safe to keep the door unlocked. I suppose it makes sense if the owner is here. But if the owner really is here, then why is it— “So dark?” Subaru muttered the last part of her thought aloud.

Using the lagmite stone, she looked around the pitch black loot house. The first thing she saw was a giant bar counter. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that the overall decor of the store was that of a bar.

Maybe this place used to be a bar. However, it was apparent the store was no longer in operation. Instead, there were miscellaneous goods stacked on top of each other all over the place.

They must all be stolen items. Each of the goods had a wooden plate hanging on them, which Subaru assumed were prices. It looks like they have numbers written on them. Maybe it’s my chance to learn some letters used in this world.

With such thoughts in her mind, Subaru began searching around to see if the insignia Luna was looking for was there. “Huh?” she let out, feeling as if she had stepped in a puddle. Noticing that her sneakers were wet with some kind of thick liquid, her mouth instantly went dry. She started following the trail of liquid with her light, and there it was. The decapitated corpse of a giant old lady with a missing arm.

Subaru screamed. Facing the brutal reality of death, the smell of iron began tickling her nose. Or rather, she had finally recognized it. The eerie atmosphere had made her subconsciously ignore it, but now she couldn't escape it once she faced the undeniable reality of the corpse. A bad feeling suddenly enveloped her. I-I have to run away. I have to run away right now and get to Luna.

However, before Subaru could move, a man spoke to her. "Ah, so you saw it. That's too bad. I suppose I have no choice, then."

The man's voice was deep and had an indifferent tone to it. But at the same time, he also sounded amused.

Before Subaru could turn around to see who was speaking, something hit her from the direction the voice was coming from at a great impact, causing her to crash into a wall.

Subaru groaned at the impact. She fell on the floor with her limbs spread out. The lagmite stone left her hand, lighting up an obscure part of the room. Still disoriented, she suddenly felt heat on her stomach.

"Gahh, it's hot!" Subaru groaned.

The heat spread over her body. She instinctively figured this heat would kill her if she didn't do something about it. However, she couldn't move even though she tried.

It's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot, it's hot.

She tried screaming but she was only able to cough up blood. Streams of blood overflowed in her mouth.

Why am I on the verge of drowning to death while feeling intense heat when I'm on land?

That's when Subaru realized she was lying in a pool of blood.

Oh, this is all my blood. I gotta say it's my first time drowning in my own blood. I guess most people who have only experienced it once right before they die. And unfortunately, I'm about to follow the same path as those people.

As soon as she began imagining her demise, she started to lose consciousness. The agonizing heat, and the suffocating feeling of drowning, all started to fade. Her consciousness was slipping out of her body, and was about to get taken away somewhere far away into the distance.

Maybe I could be released from all my worries if I don’t fight this anymore.

“—baru?”

A bell-like voice salvaged Natsuki Subaru’s soul that was sinking to oblivion.

It must be a hallucination. I can’t see, hear, or feel anything. Why would I so conveniently be able to hear his voice? Please let it be a mistake. Please don’t come into the building, Luna. One stupid visitor from another world dying is enough.

As Subaru prayed, a scream echoed in the room, and another person joined her in the pool of blood. The new body collapsed next to Subaru, where her arm was spread out. The pale-white hand of the newcomer overlapped with her blood-stained hand. Though it was all just a coincidence, the hand that was on top of Subaru’s twitched a little as if it was trying to hold her tight.

“…for me,” Subaru squeezed out, refusing to completely lose consciousness, attempting to buy some time. However, she had already lost all her senses. She couldn’t even feel the pain of the heat anymore. There was no point in saying what she was going to say. But, I don’t care. I gotta make this promise.

“I will definitely—”

Save you.

In the next moment, Natsuki Subaru died.

6

“So what’s it going to be, missy?” an intimidating woman with thick eyebrows asked. “What are you spacing out about?”

"Huh?" Subaru said, confused. She batted her eyes several times and took a deep breath, and repeated, "Huh?"

"Stop saying that!" the intimidating woman yelled. "You're the one who started talking to me. So are you gonna buy an abble or what?" the woman asked, as she shoved a round red fruit in front of Subaru's face.

"A-Abble?" Subaru repeated. It's just an apple. No, but since she's calling it an abble, maybe it's something completely different. Either way I can't buy anything right now since…

"I'm broke," Subaru said.

The intimidating woman paused. "I see, so you're just screwing with me. In that case…"

"In that case?"

"Get outta here! You're bad for business!" the woman yelled at the top of her lungs.

Subaru scuttled out there as fast as possible. After making her escape, she stopped and looked around. The sun was beaming on top of her head.

"What's going on?" she asked herself, tilting her head.

7

"Take that!" Subaru exclaimed, as she stomped on top of the foot of the woman with sanpaku eyes. "Bet you couldn't strengthen this part of your body!"

The sanpaku-eyed woman screeched and fell to the ground. Subaru quickly picked up the knife she dropped and faced the other two. I'm gonna call them the Anpontan trio for now.

Subaru glared at the remaining An and Tan, who had been unable to react to her movements. Seeing Pon get taken out like that made them too scared to retaliate.

Then I'll just use that fear to my advantage.

"Just so you know, I love the sight of blood," Subaru said as she started licking the knife. "So, which one of you will quench the dry pavement with your blood first? Hehehehe."

"Sh-She's licking the knife!" screamed An.

"She's crazy! She's out of her mind! We need to run away," exclaimed Tan.

They grabbed Pon and hurriedly ran out of the back alley. Watching them run away while licking the knife, Subaru let out a sigh. "Th-That should do it… What the hell was that? Were they trying to get payback for earlier? They seemed way too oblivious if so."

Subaru was surprised at how the same three women—Anpontan—from a few hours ago picked a fight with her again. However, this time, she was able to defend herself. Although it's a good thing that I simulated a battle plan for when I get challenged again, I didn't expect it to be used against the same exact opponents.

Subaru spat on the ground. "This is unsanitary," she said about the knife she had taken from Pon's waist, "but I guess I should keep this."

It seems unsafe to walk around with it without a sheath, but at least it's easy to carry. And most importantly, it's good to have a weapon. Now, I have to hurry.

"Luna is in danger!"

I was knocked out in the loot house. I don't know why I'm back here. Maybe a random healer saved me. I don't know. I don't know, but I'll think about that later. What I have to do right now is to go back to the loot house. That's it. I have to save Luna, the handsome young man who's too honest to a fault. I can't let him die.

"Hurry up, Natsuki Subaru! It's time to show a little guts!" she said to herself as she began running to the loot house.

“It might sound crazy, but have you died recently, Granny?” Subaru asked the old lady standing behind the bar counter.

The old lady laughed at Subaru. “What are you saying? Sure, I may look like I’m about to die, but I most certainly have never experienced it yet. Could happen anytime soon though, considering my age.”

The old lady took a gulp from her glass behind the bar as Subaru frowned and watched her. The old lady was the owner of the loot house. She had greeted Subaru when she burst into the store. Her name was Old Woman Rom.

She was over two meters tall, and wore clothing made from different fabrics. Despite having just met her, Subaru could tell she was a nice old lady. She didn’t make a single complaint even when Subaru asked rather rude questions. However, talking to her only made Subaru confused.

The last time wasn’t she… “Dead?” Subaru muttered to herself.

Subaru remembered Old Woman Rom’s dead body with her neck gouged and her arm missing.

I was attacked right after finding her dead. But then why are we both alive and well right now? Was I hallucinating Old Woman Rom’s death? But I’ve never even met her before. How could I hallucinate about someone I’ve never met? And what about my memory of looking for the loot house with Luna?

“What’s even real and why am I even here?” Subaru sighed. Being summoned to another world was confusing enough for her. She felt like her head was about to explode as it was, but this new development furthered her confusion.

What in the world am I even doing all this for?

“No, I’m an idiot,” she said to herself after spiraling in self doubt. “I must be a real idiot.” I may not know how I ended up in another world, but I know why I’m here in the loot house. It’s to repay my gratitude to Luna. Even if everything was just a dream, Luna definitely exists somewhere. And even if he doesn’t remember who I am, the fact that I owe him doesn’t change.

Subaru strengthened her determination to uplift her spirit. And right as she found her new resolve, another voice hit her ears, causing her to lift her head up.

“Huh? Who’s this lady? Hey, Old Woman Rom, you better not have sold me out.”

The one talking was a boy with a cheeky attitude—Forte.

As Old Woman Rom intervened between them, Subaru searched her breast pocket for the item she believed could be used as a bargaining chip. An item she brought from her old world and a product of its technology—her cellphone.

“Now, now, calm down,” Subaru said. “Why not have a chat with me, young man? It’s an interesting offer, I promise. It wouldn’t hurt to listen.”

9

“I see, so you’re one of them.”

With Subaru’s careless words, the situation quickly turned bloody.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Subaru was knocked to the floor, unable to utter a word, her eyes wide open.

“God dammit!” Forte exclaimed.

He was next to Subaru with his knees on the floor, biting his lips in vexation. He looked angry at himself for being powerless. Subaru understood his feelings.

“Let me return this to you. I don’t need it anymore,” a tall figure said as he placed a glass on the loot house floor. It had once contained milk, but was now empty with drops of blood lining its broken rim. The blood belonged to Old Woman Rom, whose neck had been slit just a few moments prior.

The tall figure was a man with braided hair who called himself Eins. After placing the glass on the floor, he started twirling his knife with his other hand. It was a kukri knife, a machete with a curved blade. As he twirled it, he turned around to face Subaru and Forte.

He had long slanted eyes and a faint smile on his face that made him seem like he was enjoying the smell of blood residue. His skin was pale-white and he had a handsome face, but the black clothes stained with blood gave off a dangerous vibe. Behind him was Old Woman Rom's giant body lying on the floor.

Subaru's negotiation with Forte over Luna's insignia had been interrupted by Eins, who had commissioned Forte to steal it. And now, the situation unexpectedly turned bloody.

Or perhaps, Eins planned this all along.

"I'm never gonna forgive ya," Forte declared.

"Hm, I don't recommend fighting back. It'll just hurt more."

"You'll hurt me either way, won't ya? You crazy bastard!"

"I mean, you'll only make it difficult for me to kill you painlessly," Eins said, slowly shaking his head. "I'm rather clumsy when it comes to handling my knives. My brother constantly points it out."

He twirled the knife in his hand like a performer. The way he handled the knife freely represented the imminent death that was soon to follow.

"Sorry for draggin' you into this," said Forte.

"I-I…" Subaru tried to respond while still sitting on the floor, unable to get up.

Without giving her a chance to stop him, Forte started dashing around. He quite literally became the wind, causing Subaru to lose sight of him, and moved about the store at an immense speed.

Forte kicked the floor and picked up the glass that had been used to kill Old Woman Rom. He then bounced off the wall and rushed towards Eins.

“The Divine Protection of Wind, how beautiful,” Eins commented somewhat ecstatically. “It would seem the world loves you. How envious,” he said as he swung his knife.

Forte, who attempted to attack Eins from behind, was struck down by the knife, slicing his shoulder open. He fell backwards as his blood splattered all over the place, landing on top of Old Woman Rom’s body. As if fate was playing a cruel joke, the two dead bodies looked like good friends hugging each other.

“You’re not taking any action, I see,” Eins said as he closed in on Subaru, who couldn’t even utter a word and only watched Forte’s attempt to take him down.

Subaru let out a small squeal.

Eins was covered in the blood of his two victims. He wiped drops of it on his pale cheek off with the back of his hand. Being stared down by his dark eyes, Subaru had to remind herself to breathe. And, as if being pushed by her irrepressible rage, she stood up.

“Finally, you’re up,” Eins said with a smile. “A bit slow and boring, but not bad.”

As soon as she saw him smile, Subaru couldn’t hold back her anger and charged at him. However, her impulsive attack was easily countered.

“It’s no use,” Eins said, digging his knee into Subaru’s abdomen.

Subaru let out a groan. This is nothing like the kicks and punches I experienced in the back alley. This is real ‘power’.

Subaru felt her internal organs getting destroyed by Eins’s powerful kick. Vomiting the milk she drank earlier, she staggered back, clutching her stomach.

“It’s over,” Eins whispered. “Let me take you to where the angels are.”

After making such poetic remarks, Eins leaned forward. Alarms went off in Subaru's head when she saw this. He's coming for another attack, she thought, before moving without hesitation.

"Wha—" Eins exclaimed.

Subaru predicted that he was going to go for her stomach again, and moved accordingly. Her prediction was proven right. She dodged his attack precisely, causing him to miss her completely.

"U-Uwaaaahhhh," Subaru screamed as she thrust the knife she took from Pon in the back alley at Eins's chest. Whether she was going to kill him or not didn't cross her mind. She was simply desperately trying to survive the imminent danger she was in. However, the knife never reached his chest.

"Ah, that was wonderful," Eins praised, the knife stabbing through his left hand. He could've stopped Subaru by catching his wrist, but he chose to let her stab him, as though praising her efforts.

The sensation she felt in her hand of a knife penetrating another human's flesh nearly made her scream in disgust, but before she could make a noise, Eins swung his knife, slicing through her body horizontally.

"Uh…"

Subaru fell to the floor, spilling out all her organs.

10

"Wait, wait, Luna!" Subaru exclaimed. Falling victim to the unexplained phenomenon again, Subaru was on the verge of having a mental breakdown. She was moments away from giving up on everything and collapsing on the spot, but instead she desperately chased after the silver-haired young man she spotted on the street. Hearing her call out his name, the young man in the white robe stopped.

Good, I wasn't mistaken. It's actually him. Subaru was relieved to see that he was in fact the purpled-eyed young man she was hoping to reunite with. She felt like everything she went through was worth it the moment she saw his face. She couldn't fathom what kind of grueling experience he had to go through after they split up at the loot house. She wanted to hear all about it, and she also wanted to share her miserable experiences with him as well.

I'm sure he'll listen to what I have to say without judgment.

Subaru was about to cry. However, her expectations were destroyed by the young man's next words.

"What's your problem?"

"Huh?"

"I don't know who you are, but what the heck are you thinking calling me by the same name as the Warlock of Envy?!" the young man yelled, furrowing his well-formed brows in anger.

It was Subaru's first time seeing him this angry. He didn't even show this much anger to the three ladies in the back alley. She felt a chill run down her spine, and feared she may have done something she wasn't supposed to.

Seeing her apparent fear, Luna heaved a deep sigh. "Will you answer my question? Why did you call me by such a name?"

"Wh-Why…?" Subaru said. "Because that's what I was told to call you."

"I don't know who told you to call me that, but that's not good taste. It's quite insulting to call someone by the same name as the Warlock of Envy, an embodiment of curses, whose name is even taboo to say." The young man glared at Subaru without any attempt to hide his disdain. She was utterly confused as to what he was angry about. However, she realized that other pedestrians who were listening in on them were glaring at her, which she concluded was a sign that she was on the wrong side of the argument.

At this time and place, in this world, it looks like I'm the bad guy. But why? What did I do to deserve this?

"Did you really not have any ill intentions?" the young man asked, seeing Subaru look absolutely defeated.

"I…"

"Look at you. Uhh… I may have been a little too harsh."

His words reflected his kind nature. Subaru was confused, nonetheless, by how he was acting. His words resembled that of a person who's never met her before. He's acting like all the things that happened, from helping me to everything after that, never even happened.

As she tried to organize her thoughts, the situation kept developing.

A small figure suddenly jumped in the middle of a crowd, crept up behind the young man, and swiftly snatched something from his pocket.

The young man was stunned at the sudden event, as was Subaru who yelled, "What the?!"

The young man quickly checked his breast pocket, where the small figure snatched something from, and turned blue. And so did Subaru.

"Forte?!" she screamed.

The small figure was none other than Forte, who Subaru witnessed get murdered by Eins at the loot house. He was now making his escape down the main street.

"I've been had!" the young man exclaimed. "Was this what the distraction was for…? Are you working with him?!"

"N-No! I'm…"

Due to calling out Forte's name, Subaru was suspected of having a hand in the robbery. The young man hesitated on whether he should apprehend her on the spot, but he decided to chase after Forte to retrieve his stuff.

"Please! That's important!" the young man screamed as he ran after

Forte.

Subaru chased the young man as well. “Wait, Wait! Why! Why is this happening?! Will someone please be nice to me! If not, what’s the point of even being summoned to another world?!” Unable to contain her emotions towards the absurdity of this new world, Subaru’s sorrow changed into anger and spilled out of her in the form of a scream. Her cry went unanswered, however. Neither a God who accidentally summoned her, nor a beautiful young girl who invited her to save the world, existed anywhere.

“Shit! I lost them!” Subaru muttered as she entered the back alley the two ran into, which was a dead end. They must’ve gone over this wall. It must’ve been easy with Forte’s physical abilities and Luna’s ice magic.

However, Subaru, who couldn’t imitate either of those abilities, had no way of getting over it.

“Where did they… The loot house?” Subaru concluded that if everything was going to end up at the loot house, she might as well head there too. But, considering all the tragedy she had experienced there, she was extremely hesitant to go there again. But what else can I do, then?

“Fine! I’ll go! I’ll go, dammit!” Subaru screamed, smacking a nearby wall.

She turned around to get out of the back alley and head to the loot house. But, what she saw after turning around caused her to stop and heave a long sigh of despair. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

The three ladies were standing at the entrance of the back alley, preventing Subaru from going any further.

11

“Return by Death, huh?” Subaru muttered to herself. “An ability that gets activated when I’m defeated sounds perfect for a loser like me.”

Subaru discovered what her power was after having died three times. The wounds on her stomach where she had been sliced twice were gone, as was the wound that should have left a scar on her back where she was stabbed earlier.

I'm glad they're all gone. I am a girl after all. I don't want any ugly scars left on my body. "Although I still have the scar from when I fell and stabbed myself on the head with a chopstick as a kid. Jeez, I'm still not even married yet. How are you gonna take responsibility, you stupid chopstick."

I guess I'm asking too much from a wooden chopstick. Lemme forget about this for now. It's got nothing to do with anything. "Could I say my power is one that reverses time…? Time manipulation sounds like an OP ability if this were fiction, but what's this about not being able to use it unless I die? So useless…"

Subaru had experimented to see if there were other ways to activate this ability, such as chanting magical-like terms, but nothing worked. The only method seemed to be by dying. "I knew I was a persistent one, but never would've guessed it was this much." There's an old saying that goes: idiots never learn till they die. But it's a bit overkill that I can't even die. Actually, I technically do die. I guess there isn't even a proverb for me anymore.

"But I still have my cell phone and corn soup," she said. Her cell phone, which she thought she had lost, was in her pocket, and in her hand was a plastic bag with a can of corn soup that was supposed to have been drunk by Old Woman Rom. "And I know these can be sold at a high price… This knowledge will come in handy, I guess?" People in this world will go crazy for this stuff. I'll sell them to gather war funds to prepare for my upcoming challenge. That's the most efficient option for me right now as a person who has no one else to rely on.

"But I can't help but imagine that Old Woman Rom would've been killed even without my meddling." It's highly likely Forte provoked Eins by being too greedy when they negotiated for the price of the stolen insignia. In which case, Forte's corpse might've been at the loot house too when I first found Old Woman Rom's body. If I choose not to do anything out of fear, they'll end up getting killed again. That… "Leaves a bad aftertaste… Man, when did I become such a saint of a person?” I thought I was a more selfish person who didn’t care about other people, and that’s why I was okay with not going to school anymore.

After deprecating herself several times in her head, Subaru slowly stood up. She was ready. I’m going back to the loot house to prevent the assault. I’ll save Old Woman Rom and Forte’s life, and use that as a bargaining chip to retrieve the insignia. Then, I’m gonna return it to Luna… I mean, that young man.

“So Luna was a fake name, huh? I guess that makes sense. Why would anyone give their real name to a person like me who’s obviously suspicious in so many ways? But even so…” I want to know his name. His real one. Even if the timeline doesn’t exist anymore, the fact that he saved my life hasn’t changed. And if I end up in the same situation, he would definitely save me every time. “I’m gonna do my best so he’ll tell me his real name this time.”

12

“Someooone! Help meee!” Subaru’s voice ripped through the back alley, causing the three assailants to get anxious.

“Wh-Who just screams outta nowhere?! This bitch!” one of the women yelled.

It was Subaru’s fourth time encountering them. The three women were the ones who killed her last time, albeit the whole situation seemed like an accident. However, she wasn’t going to take any chances as there was no guarantee that she’d be able to escape as well as she did two deaths ago. And relying on public help is more than a viable option. If someone helps me, great. If this is a cold-hearted world where nobody helps a stranger, then I’ll just kick Pon in the leg and grab her knife…

“Stop right there.” A voice, not exactly loud but a resonating one, traveled through the back alley, making Subaru feel as though a wave of heat just passed by.

Subaru and the three assailants were petrified. The person responsible for the voice was standing at the entrance to the back alley. She was a woman with long, fiery red hair and sky-blue eyes emanating a strong will, as if to say they won't ignore any wrongdoings in the world. She had long arms and legs and a tall stature, and wore white clothes. Her beauty was so beyond imagination that it would be impossible for even an artist to replicate it on a canvas. Such a woman began approaching the four women in the back alley.

"No matter what the reason may have been for the situation to escalate to this point," the woman began, "I won't allow you three to harass her any further."

Even though her words were that of a warning against the three assailants to protect Subaru, her voice made it sound as though she was singing a comforting love song. It's like her whole purpose of existing is to guard and love and protect everything in the world. Her immense presence makes me wanna continue hearing her voice for as long as I can if time allows me…

"Y-You're…" one of the Anpontan said.

The three assailants had visibly turned blue, their lips trembling at the sight of the woman. They looked up and down at her and gulped.

"Fiery red hair, blue eyes…a knight's uniform and a knight's sword with the mark of a dragon claw," one of the three assailants pointed out.

"She's the Female Knight among Female Knights!" exclaimed another.

"A-Adelheid… The Sword Saint Adelheid?!" the last one cried.

"Seems like I don't need to introduce myself," the woman with the fiery red hair said. "Although, I believe that title is a bit too much for me," she added with a wink.

However, she quickly stiffened her expression, intimidating the three assailants with her stern gaze. They gulped as cold sweat began to appear on their faces.

“I’ll let you leave if you don’t want further trouble,” she began. “However, if you want to continue, I will be your opponent. You may outnumber me three to one, but I won’t back down as a knight.”

“A-As if! There’s no way in hell it’s worth fighting you!”

The three women scuttled out of the back alley, fearing Adelheid. As she watched them leave, she let out a short sigh then faced Subaru with a softer expression.

“We’re both safe now. Are you hurt?”

“You’re such a valiant woman…” Subaru praised, putting her hands together in amazement.

“Hm?” The woman tilted her head, confused.

13

Subaru was back at the store that was also the loot house. She wanted to buy the insignia off of Forte before Eins got involved. He was a dangerous man, and since she couldn’t figure out a way to defeat him, she wanted to avoid him at all costs. Consequently, their negotiation was going smoothly. She was able to play on Forte’s greedy side, and with Old Woman Rom’s help, everything seemed like it was going well, but then someone showed up at the door.

“Don’t open the door, Forte!” Subaru yelled. “He’ll kill you!”

However, the person who walked through the entrance was someone Subaru wasn’t expecting.

“I would never do something so horrifying out of the blue…” the person who walked in said.

He was the young man with silver hair, and the rightful owner of the insignia.

“Eh?” Subaru let out, surprised to see the familiar face.

Wait, he was able to locate this store this quickly without my help?!

Subaru couldn't help but realize how much she was holding the young man back when they were searching for the insignia together. However, the situation unfolded despite her shock.

"Young man, you're an elf, aren't you?" Old Woman Rom pointed out.

"Technically, no," the silver-haired man answered. "I'm only a half-elf."

"Half-elf? A silver-haired half-elf? C-Could it be that you are…?!"

"No! That has nothing to do with me! I hate being mistaken like that…"

Subaru listened to them talk from the sidelines, not knowing what was going on.

I can't tell what they're talking about, but I have a feeling it's related to him not wanting to be called Luna. But that's something I can worry about later. Right now, we don't have time. "Guys, let's calm down for a second. Firstly, Forte, why don't you just return the insignia you stole from him? And you," Subaru said, turning his attention to the half-elf. "Just take the insignia and leave, and be careful not to get it stolen again, alright? This is friendly advice from someone with more experience."

The young man looked confused. "Why are you being so friendly to me? Also, why do I have to receive advice from you when I'm pretty sure I'm older than you."

"I don't like it one bit either," Forte interjected sullenly. "Miss, who the hell are ya anyways? I thought you wanted this insignia too."

"I just wanted to return it to the rightful owner," Subaru explained.

The young man looked dumbfounded by Subaru's response. "Return it to me?"

I guess it's hard to believe such words coming from a total stranger, huh? Let’s see. What can I say to convince him…

Right as Subaru began thinking of a way to explain her position to the young man, she saw a dark shadow creep up behind him.

“Tink, protect him!” Subaru yelled instinctively, as a blade closed in on the young man’s nape, reflecting light off of it.

Before the blade could reach its target, however, a shield made of ice appeared in between, protecting the young man.

The sound of a blade hitting a block of ice resonated in the room, as the young man leaped forward to create distance between himself and the sudden attacker.

“Tink…!” the young man called out the name of the spirit who just saved him from imminent death.

“Well, well, talk about perfect timing. Seems like I just made it in time,” Tink commented, rubbing her face with her paws, before turning around to face Subaru. “My, that really was just in the nick of time. Thanks to you, I was able to save my son.”

“I’m glad too. I was worried that your time was up for today,” Subaru responded, giving the spirit a thumbs up. There was a moment of acknowledgement between the two.

The assailant, Eins, backed away from the group upon having his attack deterred. Still calm and collected, he stood ominously while waving his kukri knife around and glanced at the people in the store. “A spirit, how wonderful,” he said, evidently excited by his bloodlust. “I’ve never disemboweled a spirit before.”

“Hey, what the hell is goin’ on?!” yelled Forte, not knowing why the person who asked him to steal the insignia was suddenly attacking them.

However, Eins paid no heed to Forte’s confusion. He simply gave him a cold, apathetic look.

“Ah,” Forte let out, shuddering at Eins’s stare.

“Unfortunately for you, it seems like you have mistaken my request,” Eins said. “I only asked for the insignia. I never asked you to bring the owner along. Now, I have no choice but to kill you all.”

“Th-That’s insane,” Forte retorted.

“Maybe so, but you’re the one who failed to properly carry out the task I asked. I’m simply replacing a useless tool. Is there something wrong with that?”

Forte made a pained expression at Eins’s cold words.

It’s true, Forte made a foolish mistake. And his foolishness could’ve cost him his life if I hadn’t been here. “Hey, you damn sadist! Don’t you feel ashamed to be trash-talking such a little boy, acting as though you’ve won?! As your mother, I feel so disappointed!”

Eins looked confused. “You’re not my mother.”

“It’s a figure of speech! Also, I’m so mad right now, the things I’m saying might not make any sense! Sorry about that in advance! But the truth is, I was just stalling by saying random nonsense! So, those of you who’re tuned in, don’t change the channel just yet! We’ll be right back!”

Eins furrowed his brow, unable to comprehend Subaru’s odd speech. Subaru, on the other hand, started to get embarrassed seeing Eins’s confused look.

Maybe there was a more lady-like way to stall.

Subaru then clapped loudly. “That’s it from me! Tink, take it away!”

“That was absolutely pathetic,” Tink responded, smiling. “Leave the rest to me. I won’t let your patheticness go to waste.”

Eins popped his head up, realizing he was surrounded by countless icicles with nowhere to run. Before he could do anything, the icicles darted toward him.

“Forgot to introduce myself to you, didn’t I, good sir? I’m Tink. At least remember my name before you die.”

With that, an explosive noise erupted throughout the loot house as white smoke filled the room.

14

“Eins Granhiert, the Bowel Hunter.”

“…Adelheid van Astrea of the family of Sword Saints.”

As the two fighters introduced each other without anyone prompting them, their battle auras enveloped the area, followed by a flash of white light as their blades collided.

The flash of white light appeared every time they swung their weapons, making it look as though they were splitting the loot house, air, and even the sky. Their swings caused a blast wave, but by the time there was an explosion they were already on their next move. The perpetual attacks were too strong for the loot house to endure, eventually bursting it into pieces from the inside as though a tornado had passed by.

The explosion caused everything in the loot house to get blown away, including the people in it. Subaru prevented herself from flying away by grabbing onto Old Woman Rom’s giant body, who was lying on the floor, while holding on to the silver-haired young man in her other arm.

Hold tight, hold tight, hold tight, hold tight, hold tight!
“Ngyaaahhh!!!”

Subaru held as tight as she could while making an unlady-like face, screaming in an unlady-like way. Moments later, after it was all over, she loosened her grip and lifted up her head. There was nothing but a clear night sky, brightly lit with stars before her.

“Th-The building is gone…” she muttered, still sitting on the ground.

“Good, you’re safe,” Adelheid said, turning her head around to face Subaru, showing an affectionate smile. In her hand was a sword that had just been pushed beyond its limits, slowly turning into ashes.

It was able to fulfill its role as a sword at a level that would have otherwise been impossible if not for Adelheid's superhuman power. I wonder if the sword was happy about that, though. "You said hunting monsters is your specialty, but it seems like you're the most dangerous monster!"

"Being called that hurts my feelings, you know?" Adelheid smiled bitterly, watching the ashes that were once a sword fly away from her hand.

Subaru regretted her words after sensing Adelheid's melancholic emotions through her profile. Although she only meant it as a joke, she worried if she had been too crass. However, before she could apologize, a person spoke to her.

"Is it over?"

It was the silver-haired young man. He looked exhausted from healing Old Woman Rom after Tink had left. Subaru also suspected his exhaustion was somehow linked to the fight between Adelheid and Eins. She went to his side to support him and asked, "A-Are you okay? Can you stand?"

"Yeah…"

Subaru held on to his arm that was lean but not particularly muscular, staring at his face.

"What is it?" the young man asked, noticing Subaru was staring. "It's reeeally rude to stare at someone like that."

"No, I'm just making sure your head is still attached to your body, and your limbs are still there."

"Of course they are. What a scary thing to say," he said, confirming his limbs were still there.

Subaru let out a sigh of relief. Finally, I'm here. I finally saved him. "By the way, I haven't said thanks to you yet, Adelheid. You really helped me out. It's the second time you saved me, counting the time at the back alley. Did you hear me scream?"

“Of course, since I am a valiant woman as you once called me… Just kidding. It was actually him,” she said, gesturing at the person standing by the wreckage of what used to be the entrance to the loot house.

“Hm?” Subaru looked at the person. It was Forte, who she had helped escape with all her might during their fight with Eins. It was he who had called Adelheid for help.

“I see, so everything is connected,” Subaru muttered as she sighed.

“That boy is…” the silver haired young man said, noticing Forte as well.

Worrying they might get confrontational over the insignia again, Subaru hastily got in between them.

“Wait, wait! We were saved because he called Adelheid for help. So I get that you’re mad at him, but please don’t rip him apart! I’m begging you!”

“I wouldn’t do such a thing! Just who do you think I am?! And why are you the one begging…?”

“Uhh, well that’s because…” Subaru muttered.

“I mean, who exactly are you anyways?” the young man asked, making a confused face. “One moment you were with the ones who stole my insignia, then the next you’re helping me. I can’t understand you.”

Subaru was unsure of what to say. It’s true, I was planning on buying the insignia off of Forte then returning it to him, but I never thought about what I’ll do afterwards.

Lost in thought, Subaru was oblivious to her surroundings, making Adelheid call out her name. “Subaru!”

Subaru snapped out of her thoughts as a figure jumped out of the rubble of the wrecked loot house, launching itself towards the silver-haired young man. It was Eins. Despite his body being covered in wounds, his eyes were still emanating killing intent.

“Watch out!” Subaru yelled.

The young man couldn’t react to the sudden event. Adelheid was also too far away to make it in time. Subaru was the only one who could save the young man.

All Eins had was a bent up knife. He was using this last opportunity to leave lasting damage. Adelheid can’t make it in time. But if I can just stall Eins for a split second, then she can come and save us. Everything was happening so fast that the young man couldn’t even turn around to see the emerging threat. Where is he aiming? I have to protect him. I will protect him. I will definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely, definitely protect him! “You’re going for the stomaaach!!”

Subaru kicked up Old Woman Rom’s club, covered her stomach with it, and leaped towards Eins just as he swung his knife at the young man. Subaru was knocked away, taking Eins’s attack head on. Her eyes started spinning, feeling as though she was hit by a moving car. She ended up slamming into a wall and getting buried underneath the falling rubble.

“You dare get in my way again?!” Eins spat, biting his lips since Subaru had prevented his attack again.

“It’s over, Eins!” Adelheid yelled, arriving at the scene before he could pursue the young man any further.

Eins threw the bent knife at her, pausing her advance, and jumped away. Even though the knife didn’t go anywhere near her, it created enough of a threat to give him a moment to distance himself. He landed on top of the roof of the wrecked loot house and looked down at his prey with the moon in the background. “I will disembowel every single one of you one day. You take good care of your stomachs until that day comes.”

Leaving such an ominous comment, Eins used what was left of his power and fled into the dark night of the slums. Adelheid didn’t pursue him. Not only would it be difficult to do so, she figured it would be too dangerous to leave the rest alone. She turned around to the young man and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Don’t mind me!” he yelled, ignoring Adelheid’s worry, and started running towards the mountain of rubble that Subaru was still buried in after getting knocked away by Eins. “What was she thinking being so reckless?!” He quickly began removing the debris and excavated her. “Are you okay? Are you alive?”

Subaru groaned. “Y-Yeah. See? I managed to stop his attack. Besides, who else was supposed to protect you at that moment. Although, my head is spinning.”

“Your head is… Adelheid!” the young man called.

“Seems like she hit her head hard,” she responded. “We must quickly take her to the hospital.”

“W-Wait, wait, stop, stop!” Subaru exclaimed at the two worrying faces. “It’s not that big a deal. I’m fine!”

She stood up and started performing moves from radio calisthenics to show them that she was fine. The two stared at her movements as though they were witnessing a rare creature.

“I don’t know what that move is supposed to be,” the young man began, “but I’m glad you seem okay.”

“I agree,” Adelheid said. “Subaru, you really saved the day. I’m really sorry I let such a thing happen. If you hadn’t been there…”

“Stop that too!” Subaru yelled, stopping Adelheid from apologizing and praising her any further. “Stop that, Adelheid! You did more than enough. If you say anything more, I won’t be able to live with myself.”

She then turned her attention to the silver-haired young man. He looked confused by her intent look, but straightened his posture nonetheless. He was ready to listen to whatever Subaru had to say. Now that I think about it, I went through so much trouble to save him. Although I didn’t tell anyone about all the trouble I went through, it’s all in my memory.

She pointed at the sky and rested her other hand on her hip, showing her signature pose. “My name is Natsuki Subaru! There are tons of things I want to say and ask, but just one will do for now!"

"Wh-What is it?"

"I'm your savior who just saved your life from a madman, amirite?!"

"Am a what?"

"Means, are you on the same page?" Subaru explained, bending her body to make an OK sign.

"Y-Yeah." The young man nodded hesitantly.

Subaru paid no heed to his hesitation and continued. "I am a lifesaver and an angel. And you, the prince, are the one who was just saved. Don't you think I deserve a great reward from you? Right?!"

"Of course. If there's anything I can do, just name it."

"Great! Well, I only have one wish. Just one!" she said, pointing her finger at him insistently. She was somewhat worried if he was starting to get annoyed, but she couldn't stop. "And that wish is…" She flashed a smile at the nervous looking young man.

"Yeah?"

Subaru snapped her fingers and smiled to show her shining teeth. "Please tell me your name."

The young man's eyes widened in disbelief. Silence enveloped the two of them. Subaru's lips started hurting, trying to maintain her million dollar smile.

Did I blow it? Did I just make the greatest blunder of my life? Should I have remained in that mountain of rubble and stayed there for the rest of my life? She started panicking because of the young man's silence.

Then, the young man started laughing, easing Subaru's mental state. He laughed hysterically with his hand on his mouth, his silver hair shaking and his cheeks reddening. It wasn't a laughter out of desperation or from depression. It was a laughter of pure joy. He was truly having fun.

"Emilio," the young man said, pausing from laughing.

"Huh?" Subaru said in a way as if air just left her body.

Seeing her reaction, the young man straightened his posture again and pointed at himself. "My name is Emilio. Just Emilio. Thank you, Subaru."

"…"

Emilio offered a handshake. "Thank you for saving me."

Subaru gulped as she looked down at his pale white hand.

No, you're the one who saved me first. All I did was repay my debt. But I finally made it after dying a total of three times. I went through so much pain, despair, and countless life threatening situations. Just so that I could learn his name. This is so… Subaru laughed joyfully. "This is so not worth it," she said as she accepted Emilio's hand.

15

And how great would it have been if the story ended here.

“But Subaru, I’m really surprised you’re fine,” Adelheid interjected after Subaru and Emilio finished their formal introduction. She looked genuinely shocked that Subaru managed to survive Eins’s last attack. His swing was that deadly.

Well, I couldn’t have protected myself if I didn’t know where he was going to aim either.

“If you hadn’t used this club, you would’ve been sliced in two,” Adelheid commented, picking up the club Subaru used.

Subaru nodded. “Yeah, if it weren’t for that I wouldn’t have been able to…” avoid BAD END 4: Split in Two.

Before she could finish her sentence, however, the club broke in half in Adelheid’s hand.

“Ah,” Adelheid let out, with half of the club still in hand.

She then turned her blue eyes to look at Subaru’s stomach. Subaru also turned her attention to where she was staring at, lifting her jacket, feeling uneasy. She had a well trained abdomen, but it was all so bruised up that she wanted to turn away. However, that was when a horizontal red line surfaced on it.

“Oh, crap,” Subaru remarked. “I did not see this coming.”

As she looked up, blood burst from the horizontal line on her stomach.

“S-Subaru?!” Emilio screamed.

I can hear him screaming. Ahh, this sucks. Why do I have to die right when I got to learn his name? But even if I do, I’m sure I’ll come here again.

Subaru collapsed, turning her field of view sideways, unable to move a finger. She saw Adelheid's panicking face and Emilio's handsome face twisted in agony. It might be insensitive to think this right now, but man, he looks so good even when he's distraught—wouldn't expect anything less from a parallel world fantasy.

She started to lose consciousness from the pain and shock.

And so, the alternate story of Natsuki Subaru's life in another world continues.

Mimagau II
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Subaru: “The pillow feels different…”

While checking the soft, fluffy sensation behind her head, Subaru muttered.

The sensation that was different from her usual wake-ups wasn’t limited to just the pillow. Subaru’s body, just a little taller than the average Japanese woman, the bed that was supporting it, and even the sheets with their smooth feel against her skin—everything, every last thing, was far too different from usual.

Subaru: “Basically, my life in another world is still going on…”

She shot up, her body quick to wake, and, finding the feel of the hair spreading over the nape of her neck annoying, Subaru confirmed that fact.

What Subaru had woken up in was a gigantic bed, far removed from someone like her, born into an ordinary middle-class family, and a large room that still had plenty of space even with that bed in it.

Given that this was a room allotted to Subaru, an uninvited foreigner, it was probably a guest room, and she guessed that rooms of this size here weren’t limited to just one or two.

Subaru: “No wound on my stomach. I don’t see any stitches either—the doctors in this other world sure are talented. If they’d turned me into damaged goods, I’d never be able to get married.”

While cracking such a light joke as she got down from the bed and checked the white skin of her stomach by flipping up her clothes, Subaru, tasting the inconvenience of not having a hair tie to gather her hair with, bent her neck and nodded.

This meant, in other words—

Subaru: "—This time, it looks like I managed to avoid "Return by Death"."

With that, she accepted, with relief, the fact that, at the end of the battle at the loot house, she had apparently narrowly escaped death from that outrageous blood loss.

2

Natsuki Subaru, a blooming high school girl, was suddenly summoned to another world.

Thrown into another world without any particular special skills to speak of, Subaru nonetheless possessed a special power granted to her, one long promised since ancient times in countless stories about other worlds.

Its name was "Return by Death"—an ultra super power that, by losing her life, let her turn back time and, through trial and error, avoid the tragedies that had befallen her and reel in the future she wished for.

Subaru: "Well, since I suffer like crazy whenever it activates, it's a cheat ability I'd really rather never use again if I can help it, though…"

Victor: "…Muttering and talking to yourself in someone else's stronghold—you've got some nerve, little girl."

Subaru: "Whoops, the first villager started talking to me."

If you could pick your ability when you were summoned to another world, surely there weren't many draws as bad as this one—so lamented Subaru, when a voice called out from behind her.

As Subaru turned around, right in front of her eyes, in the middle of the wide library, a stepladder had been set up, and on top of it sat a small figure, glaring at her with a dull, heavy stare.

—He was a shota boy of around ten years old, with short, bouncy cream-colored curls, clad in a tailcoat done overall in shades of reddish-purple.

In his bluish round eyes floated a distinctive pattern, and a slightly cheeky expression was plastered over his adorably well-shaped features. On his knees, pressed together under his short pants, lay a big book spread open, and he seemed deeply displeased at having his reading interrupted.

That said—

Subaru: "Even if you try to intimidate me with that cute little face, that doesn't work on a high school girl who basically sums up almost every mammal smaller than her with a "Kyaa, so cuuute~"."

Victor: "…Not only did you ruin the labyrinth Vicha put so much thought into, you pile incomprehensible remarks on top of that as well. You're terribly lacking in anything resembling respect, you know."

Subaru: "By "labyrinth", you mean that hallway that looked like it was going to loop on forever? Sorry, sorry, I pulled the right answer on my first try. That's just how I am—when it comes to me, not just what I say, even my intuition has this knack for not reading the room. Sorry 'bout that."

Raising one hand and winking, Subaru brought up the hallway outside the library—the one she had gone into after leaving the room where she had first woken up, and where she had gotten caught up in that bizarre phenomenon.

From the decorated paintings and vases, to the carpet that never seemed to end, to the doors with the same plaques hanging from them that she passed by again and again, Subaru judged that it was a corridor that repeated without end. And what Subaru chose in that situation, without the slightest hesitation, was the door to the very first bedroom she had come out of.

When she opened it, sure enough, what it connected to wasn't the first room, but the curly-haired shota boy who had likely created that hallway.

Subaru: “So, what do you want to do? Should I go back outside and act all shocked and over the top again? If that’ll satisfy your pride, I can go put on the performance of a lifetime for you, y’know.”

Victor: “…Good grief. Vicha’s patience has its limits, you know.”

Subaru: “Oh?”

Saying that, the child closed his book, climbed down from the stepladder, and walked toward Subaru.

Something about his presence carried a vague sense of intimidation, and Subaru’s feet wouldn’t move to step back; she was left standing stock-still as he closed the distance. Then his reaching hand gently touched Subaru’s stomach.

Subaru: “Eek.”

Victor: “If that’s all you have left to say, you’re a hopelessly frivolous little girl.”

Subaru: “Gyaaah—?!”

In that instant, Subaru’s entire body was pierced by a shock, originating from the child’s palm pressed against her stomach.

Without even being able to think about bracing herself, Subaru collapsed on the spot, helpless to do anything. Despite being the culprit, the child didn’t even bother to catch her body.

Thanks to that, she banged her head on the floor. The carpet was fluffy, so it didn’t hurt, though.

Subaru: “But you’re not very gentlemanly, boy… in two different ways, in this case.”

Victor: “I’m surprised you can still talk. That assessment isn’t wrong, either. —Don’t go measuring a noble being like Vicha by your own yardstick, human.”

With that very cold, dry pronouncement as the last thing she heard, Subaru’s consciousness receded.

At this point, she was losing consciousness way too often since being summoned to another world, and even though she was a young maiden in her prime, she was sleeping on the bare ground way too much and might end up chilling her body—she worried about herself over that, and then her consciousness cut out.

3

Reu: “Oh my, she’s woken up, Nii-sama.”

Rau: “Indeed, she has awakened, Reu.”

Once again, there was that fluffy, out-of-place sensation at the back of her head, same as before.

What dragged the disgracefully blacked-out Subaru back to reality were the voices of two young men, coming from beyond her closed eyelids, from the tomorrow that had arrived.

Subaru: “Not only did they see me right when I woke up, they saw my sleeping face too, and my maiden score is plummeting with an audible crash…”

It wasn’t like she had that spectacular a face, but even a face that wasn’t anything that spectacular ought to have its minimum rights guaranteed; that was the wonderful thing about the constitution.

The constitution was about as far removed as you could get from what was trendy among high school girls, but even so, it surely had a clause in there saying that a maiden’s sleeping face and the moment she woke up must not be casually ogled.

Otherwise, something was wrong. If that wasn’t protected by the constitution, how were all the other bashful maidens, lovelier than flowers, supposed to endure this shame and humiliation?

Subaru: “I will, with the constitution at my side, continue to fight to the bitter end…! Until we’ve wiped from this world every man who needlessly peers at maidens when they wake up, gets disappointed on his own, and then spouts unnecessary comments…!”

Reu: “My, I can’t help but sense a tremendous amount of pointless fighting spirit there, Nii-sama.”

Rau: “Yeah, a woman whose life has been wasted on idle talk and useless thoughts, Reu.”

Subaru: “Hey, you’re just saying whatever you want because you think I’m too flustered to move right now! That’s it, both of you, outside! I’m gonna fix those attitudes of yours—!”

Pelted with such scathing words, Subaru finally sprang up, shattering the shame of her rude awakening.

With that same momentum she flung off the sheets, and right in front of her eyes, at the foot of the bed she’d been sleeping in, stood two figures with slender, willowy silhouettes, looking her way.

Pink and blue—their hair colors differed, but their facial features, the look in their eyes, and even the impression given by the neatly worn butler uniforms were identical, like they’d been made from the same mold.

Confronted with the sight of the two of them, Subaru’s springing-up momentum came to a halt—or rather, it swung hard off in an entirely different direction.

Subaru: “H-H-H-Hot *ikemen* twin butlers…!!”

The twins, with hair cut in something like bob cuts and slightly long bangs that each hid one eye, were symmetrical in every respect except hair color, and the sight of them set Subaru’s heart ablaze.

However, in contrast to Subaru’s sky-high evaluation, the reaction she got from the two of them was far from favorable.

The blue-haired young man knit his brows ever so slightly, while the pink-haired young man openly directed a look of contempt at her.

Subaru: “Ugh… get a grip, me…! Honestly, the moment I realized I was sleeping in a mansion this fancy, I should have at least considered the possibility that hot butlers might show up. If it’d been hot old guys instead, I’d have lost my sanity.”

Reu: “Nii-sama, she is a guest, but is she perhaps ill somewhere?”

Rau: “Reu, it goes without saying: what’s wrong is her head, and it’s already too late.”

Subaru: “If anything, the way you’re putting it is way crueler on your side, Nii-sama!”

Even as Subaru snapped back at the rather strong barbs, the twin butlers’ attitude remained cool and composed.

If they were going to treat her as a guest at all, she would very much have preferred to be fawned over and treated like a princess, with all the butterflies and blossoms.

Subaru: “On that note, I’m sure Emilio-kyun would be much kinder to me…”

Emilio: “—This “Emilio-kyun”, that’s supposed to be me, right?”

Subaru: “Oh.”

Pouting her lips at the twins’ cold attitude, Subaru suddenly heard a third voice cut in, almost like an ambush—a voice that gently caressed her eardrums and made her chest sweetly tremble.

She turned to look and saw, in the doorway of the room, opened about halfway, a figure peeking his face in—with amethyst eyes and silver hair, a stunning beauty who, at a glance, enthralled Subaru’s very soul, standing there.

Emilio: “I’m glad, Subaru. You woke up safe and sound.”

Subaru: “Emilio-kyun, you’re heeere!!”

At the appearance of Emilio—the young man who was smiling softly and honestly rejoicing in Subaru’s safety—Subaru’s eyes, which had been derided over and over as having a bad look in them, flew wide open as she shouted that.

Emilio was startled by Subaru’s outburst of emotion, then his lips softened into a faint smile, and he asked:

Emilio: “What’s with that “kyun”? Where did that come from?”

With that, he tossed her a question that was both simple and, at the same time, oddly hard to answer.

4

Roswaal: “Nice to meet you, Natsuki Subaru-kun. I’m the owner of this mansion, Roswaal L. Mathers~”

After one thing and another, Subaru, who had been invited to the breakfast table, was introduced to the indigo-haired, presumably beautiful woman calling herself the mistress of this mansion, Roswaal L. Mathers.

The reason she was being called a “presumed beauty” was because —

Subaru: “Why the mask…?”

Roswaal: “But of course, it’s just part of my hobbies~. Isn’t it more intriguing when someone’s shrouded in mystery?”

Roswaal shrugged without the slightest sign of remorse, and the left half of her face was covered by a white mask. The mask looked like a clown’s mask that had been split in half, and its main feature was the jester’s grin it wore. The visible right half of her face, helped along by her yellow eyes, looked beautiful enough that the mask might well have been there to hide some scar on her face or the like, but—

Subaru: “Going by my read, I’m betting there isn’t any tragic backstory like that behind it.”

Victor: “It’s irritating to agree with you, but that assessment isn’t a bad one. It’s far more foolish to try and look for a reason behind every little thing Roswaal does, you know.”

Subaru: “And there you have it, a seal of approval from a cheeky shota.”

When she snapped her fingers and pointed that way, the child seated at the end of the long table draped in a white cloth pulled a sour face.

The child Subaru had run into when she'd first woken up in the mansion apparently wasn't just some being from inside a dream she'd had, but a shota who existed in reality.

At Subaru and the child's exchange, Roswaal raised her brows with a "Heeh," and said:

Roswaal: "So you're already getting along with Victor, then. Lately I'd been thinking he hardly spoke to me at all anymore, but has he gotten over his shyness~?"

Victor: "That's an unnecessary and mistaken interpretation, Roswaal."

Roswaal: "See, as you can tell, he's so cold to me~"

Showing both raised hands, Roswaal displayed the current state of her relationship with the aloof child—Victor.

Subaru still didn't really understand what Victor's position in the mansion was. From the looks of it, he didn't seem to be Roswaal's son, but perhaps she ought to suspect some complicated family situation.

Even in another world, a noble house probably had noble-house ties and troubles sleeping within it.

Because—

Subaru: "I mean, who'd have thought Emilio-kyun turned out to be a candidate-sama for king… which basically makes you a prince."

Emilio: "I'm not a prince. It's not like I have any deep connection with the royal castle or the royal capital. I was just added as one of the Royal Candidates for the next royal selection, in accordance with the Divine Dragon's Covenant, that's all."

Subaru: "I don't really get this Divine Dragon or Covenant stuff, but that proof that you're a candidate is…"

Tink: “That would be the insignia Subaru was trying to get back for him in the royal capital~”

Cutting in with a sidelong glance, the one who snatched away the end of Subaru and Emilio’s topic was Tink, for whom they had properly prepared a small set of tableware at the breakfast table.

The spirit contracted to Emilio, who called herself his stand-in mother, was holding the insignia in her short little hands as if cradling it, showing it off.

That was the very insignia Subaru had fought so hard to retrieve, and the very MacGuffin that had caused her to lose her life three times over in the royal capital—

Subaru: “But here I am, standing here like this. With the wound on my stomach all gone, too! Oh, right, thanks for healing that for me, Emilio-kyun.”

Emilio: “Ah, I wasn’t the one who healed that. Victor did. Victor’s reeeally well-versed in all sorts of magic.”

Subaru: “Wait, this cheeky short-pants was?!”

Victor: “I’m in the middle of regretting having healed you, you know. If I’d known you were such a rude and noisy girl, I wouldn’t have lent you a hand.”

Subaru: “No, sorry, sorry, that was just me trying to hide how embarrassed I am. Thanks for helping me out, Victa. I’ll definitely pay this debt back to you someday, in one way or another.”

Victor: “Before that, what did you just call Vicha?!”

At Victor, eyes round and yelling at her in his cute voice, Subaru blew him a kiss.

Then she looked once more at Emilio, and at Tink, who was lying on her back in front of him together with the insignia.

Subaru: “Getting back on topic, if I hadn’t helped out, that insignia would’ve been stolen and Emilio-kyun would’ve been in serious trouble, right? Like, “out of the Royal Selection!” or something.”

Emilio: “—Yeah. That’s right. That’s why I owe Subaru a reeeally big debt. It’s not the kind of debt I can ever repay just by healing the wound on your stomach.”

Roswaal: “As for this house as well, if the Emilio we’ve put forward had dropped out of the Royal Selection before it even began, it would have been impossible for us to avoid a major blow~. That being prevented beforehand by you, Subaru-kun, is something for which I believe we must repay you, in some form or another~”

Subaru: “Yep, yep, just the kind of turn in the conversation I was hoping for. In that case, my wish is an only one! Just a single thing!”

Pointing the fingers of both hands sharply at Emilio and Roswaal, the two who were probably the highest authorities present here, Subaru boldly slammed down her demand.

Subaru’s wish was simple.

Subaru: “Hire me to work here in this mansion!”

—It was the cunning, devilish scheme of plotting an old-fashioned cohabitation development under one roof with the guy she liked, so she could launch a full frontal offensive.

5

Emilio: “You really don’t want much at all, Subaru. For the reward you ask for to be my name and a job here at the mansion… it makes me worry about you.”

That was Emilio’s reaction to Subaru’s request for an employment opportunity.

Faced with the attitude of the handsome young man, brows drooping as he worried about her from the bottom of his heart, Subaru’s chest felt like it had been turned into a pincushion, riddled with heart-shaped arrows—but that was that.

Fortunately, Subaru's request to be hired went through without a hitch, and with Roswaal's permission, Natsuki Subaru was safely welcomed as one of the members of House Roswaal.

To build a solid base for her life in another world where she had no one to rely on.

She hadn't really given much deep thought to just how big an advantage that was, but Subaru still felt relieved to have secured it.

On the other hand, if there was anything she thought she might have rushed into a little, it would be—

Subaru: "This maid outfit is way too risqué! Isn't this way too much for someone like me to be wearing?!"

Pulling on the sleeves of the official uniform of a Roswaal manor maid, Subaru, half in tears, complained about the shortness of the skirt and the drafty sensation on her bare back.

Of course, since she'd become an employee, she intended to follow the rules of the mansion. But this otherworldly baptism, which completely disregarded functional beauty, was mercilessly trying to shatter Subaru's self-esteem.

Subaru: "Outfits like this only work because a real beauty is wearing them! When a sharp-eyed, bony woman like me puts it on, my inner self pelts me with "Know your place!" and other insults…!"

Reu: "Nii-sama, it seems Subaru-san is dealing with some kind of inner conflict."

Rau: "Reu, if you fuss over Barusu too much, she'll just get carried away."

Subaru: "You twins, as twins, ought to have a little more of a reaction to a young maiden, shouldn't you! I'm baring like ten times more skin than usual here and enduring the shame, you know?! "It suits you," or "Clothes really do make the girl," or "It doesn't fit your station," or something—use those kinds of comments to cancel out my embarrassment!"

As Subaru howled at them like that, the twins—whose names were Rau and Reu—remained curt.

It seemed they were the type of twins who didn't show much emotion on their faces, but if a lady changed her outfit, wasn't it a point of universal etiquette to provide a comment that matched?

Subaru: "Thinking about it that way, doesn't that mean Ros-chi's doing a bad job raising you guys?"

Rau: "Don't you dare criticize Lady Roswaal so lightly. Do you not value your life, Barusu?"

Subaru: "Quit glaring at me in serious mode all of a sudden! And my name's been turned into some kind of eye-gouging incantation this whole time! It's gonna monopolize the trending charts!"

Reu: "Nii-sama, Reu thinks taking her too seriously will only leave you exhausted."

Rau: "…You're right. Hey, don't trouble these hands of Rau's any more than necessary, Barusu."

Subaru: "Sob sob, my coworkers are cold, and the winds of the world are harsh…"

Rau and Reu were twins with an air that didn't easily let outsiders in, but even so, Subaru could clearly see the depth of their loyalty to their mistress, Roswaal.

Her impression was that they were about the same in that regard, but in terms of talking about work matters or private things, Reu seemed like he'd be easier to talk to than Rau.

Subaru: "Rau's the type who gives you the cold shoulder until he actually opens up to you, I bet."

Rau: "What is that unpleasant appraisal supposed to be? Were you not listening when Rau was talking?"

Reu: "Nii-sama, please leave this to Reu. Rather than guiding the newcomer, there should be more important duties that fall to you,

Nii-sama.”

Rau: “…You’re right. I’m counting on you.”

Annoyed by Subaru’s personal opinion, Rau tilted his chin in answer to Reu’s proposal.

However, before he actually left the spot, he shot Subaru one last glance and said:

Rau: “Let me just say this: don’t go running Rau’s earnest little brother ragged. If you get in the way of Reu’s work, then even if you are Lord Emilio’s benefactor, I’ll personally throw you out of this mansion.”

Subaru: “Wow, that’s some pretty intense intimidation. But I’m not backing down. I’ve got my own ambition I absolutely have to see through…!”

Rau: “Hah.”

With a huge, loud snort through his nose, Rau walked off, leaving Subaru pouting behind him.

As she watched his back go, Reu quietly stepped up to stand beside Subaru.

Reu: “Please don’t take it too much to heart. Nii-sama simply always bears the gallant quality of being honest with himself and never disguising his words.”

Subaru: “That’s one way to put it! From the sound of it, you’re pretty head-over-heels for your big brother.”

Reu: “Nii-sama is simply amazing enough to leave you spellbound, that’s all.”

Subaru: “I see. By the way, what kind of work did Rau go off to do?”

Reu: “Most likely, he went to take a short nap to prepare for lunch…”

Subaru: “How are we defining important work here!!”

In an instant, all of Rau’s earlier, self-important behavior was reinterpreted as stuff he’d said just so he could sneak off and nap on the job, and Subaru’s impression of him was rewritten accordingly.

With an attitude that arrogant and haughty, he at least needed to be really good at his job.

Subaru: “Or maybe he’s actually amazing when he works? Like an expert in cleaning, laundry, and cooking?”

Reu: “Nii-sama is good at cleaning. Reu is better at it, though. As for asking him to handle the laundry or the cooking, that would be somewhat difficult.”

Subaru: “That just erased his reason for existing!”

Whether it was that Reu wasn’t doing a good enough job of covering for him, or that it was simply Rau’s lack of ability, in either case, you could say his only reason for existing was being a looker, and any excuse he’d had for acting all high and mighty had just vanished.

Or rather, thinking about it that way, why did Subaru have to be treated like that?

Subaru: “Ugh, what is with that guy…!”

She’d ended up saying something that sounded like a line from a heroine who’d be blushing over a man who lived freely outside her sense of normal, but Subaru’s heart was devoted solely to Emilio.

She wanted to be kind to the people who were kind to her—that was Subaru’s honest maiden’s heart.

Reu: “Now then, I’ll teach you your tasks. Please come with me.”

Subaru: “Uu… Reu-ppe’s kindness really hits me right in the heart. I like people who are nice to me.”

Reu: “This is because it is Lady Roswaal’s directive, and because it would be troublesome if Nii-sama’s or Reu’s workload were increased without reason. Reu has no particular feelings about you, Subaru-san. Please don’t misunderstand.”

Subaru: “Damn it! Both brothers are cold as ice! Fine, I’m not losing to this!”

The older brother was straightforwardly blunt, the younger brother politely distant. Even so, despite receiving such chilly treatment from both sides, Subaru swore up to the sky that she wouldn’t be discouraged and would bravely face it all.

If she worked earnestly and did her best here, then surely Emilio would someday come to get her, riding on a white horse.

Subaru: “Wait, we’re already under one roof, so that stage is already cleared. Huh? But how am I supposed to move things forward from here? My otome-game knowledge basically ends at the point where the relationship starts…”

Reu: “I’ll be leaving you behind.”

Subaru: “Ah, I’m coming, I’m coming… Whoa, you walk fast! Show a little mercy!”

Reu: “So as not to bring shame upon Lady Roswaal, please also try to be a bit more mindful of your word choice, Subaru-san.”

Receiving such precious nagging from her senior, Subaru hurried along, fretting over the length of her skirt, and boldly dove into her gainful-employment experience in another world.

6

A few days passed after that, and Subaru’s very first “maid days” were one hardship after another.

What surprised her, honestly, was how Rau and Reu both, fairly earnestly, looked after Subaru. Of course, whenever Subaru messed something up, the extra burden landed on the two of them, so you could say their attitude was only natural.

However, with Rau's cold, razor-sharp tongue, and Reu's heavy strikes like a soft club, both of them played their part in helping Subaru improve.

Subaru: "Well, Rau seriously just mouths off, though."

Emilio: "Is that so? Sorry, I haven't really seen the detailed side of Rau and Reu's work. I just thought, "They're always working so hard," that's all."

Subaru: "It's fine, it's fine, Emilio-kyun, you're busy with your studies. Just don't push yourself too hard, okay? There's this theory that human concentration doesn't last all that long—or maybe it doesn't exist, or maybe I just made it up myself, you know, there's talk like that."

Emilio: "Oh, really, that's… Huh? So it's just something Subaru made up on her own?"

What the truth actually was, she wasn't sure; academic theories got flipped on their heads pretty often, so the facts were hazy.

For example, even on when you should salt and pepper meat—before grilling, while it's grilling, or at what stage exactly you're supposed to season it—opinions were all over the place.

Humanity had probably been grilling meat ever since it started using fire, and yet even this basic, entry-level topic still hadn't reached a final answer—that was what "academic theory" was like.

Subaru: "And that's what you get when someone like me, who doesn't even know that much, starts yammering on."

Wrapping things up in a pretty sloppy way, Subaru sat cross-legged on the lawn and yawned.

No need to worry—she wasn't currently in the short-skirt maid outfit. She'd already finished her daytime work, and was now in "just need to go to sleep" mode, so she was in her loungewear tracksuit.

When she'd run into that assassin in the royal capital, the terrifying

Eins, his final strike had slashed her stomach, and it had seemed like her tracksuit had gone to tracksuit heaven along with her. But fortunately, someone had kept the tracksuit, which had been barely a step away from a rag, and thanks to that, she'd been able to stitch it back together and put it on again.

Subaru: "Thank goodness for sewing skills. Having this or not makes a world of difference in how long your stuff lasts."

Emilio: "Now that you mention it, Reu also praised you. He said your mending skills are like those of a professional."

Subaru: "My Skill Tree's growth path is super warped, and I tend to pick my abilities based on feel. I'm the type who forgets to pick the passives that give you buffs."

Emilio: "Sorry, I don't really get what you're saying."

Maybe she'd used too much gamer jargon; Emilio just gave a wry smile, letting her "growth plan" comment slide right past.

That said, Subaru was the one at fault for not putting it in terms he could understand, and it wasn't like he had to understand anyway. Just being able to talk with him like this was fun for her.

It was night at the Roswaal manor, and Emilio was going through his daily routine of communing with the lesser spirits in the courtyard.

Ever since she'd heard he spent his time like this, Subaru, feeling like she might be intruding but wanting to be closer to him even more, had ended up sitting down at the edge of his field of vision like this.

Of course, if he rejected her, the damage would probably be so bad she'd never recover, but for now Emilio hadn't ordered her to clear out, so she judged it as a "safe".

—

Lesser spirits floated about in the night sky, flitting through the air while giving off a soft, faint light.

Surrounded by those lesser spirits, Emilio, brushing back his mysterious silver hair, looked so fragile, there was something so fantastical about him that if she tried to touch him with a finger, he looked like he might just crumble to pieces.

The unreally beautiful sight, as Subaru gazed at it up close, gradually heated her heart.

Subaru: “The moon is… beautiful tonight.”

Emilio: “Yeah. It’s something that’s always out of reach.”

Subaru: “Guhah!”

Emilio: “What’s wrong?!”

A bucket of cold water got dumped on the heat that had been building up, and Subaru’s budding love all but went into cardiac arrest.

Worried, and with no ill intent at all, Emilio rushed over to her, and Subaru raised a hand with a “I’m fine, I’m fine,” bravely answering his concern.

Then Emilio, seeing Subaru’s outstretched palm, let out a small “Ah…”

Wondering what was up, Subaru looked up as well, and understood what he was murmuring about.

Because the fingers of the hand she’d thrust out were covered in bandages.

Subaru: “Yikes, how embarrassing. Hands all covered in cuts aren’t very girly, huh.”

Emilio: “That’s not true at all. —Should I use healing magic on them? I’m not very good at it, but for wounds like those…”

Subaru: “Mmm, I really appreciate the thought, Emilio-kyun, but I think I’ll pass for now.”

Emilio: “Why?”

Having his offer turned down made Emilio lower his brows anxiously.

Sensing the hint of hurt that he might’ve been rejected by Subaru, she hastily shook her head with a “No, no,” and said:

Subaru: “It’s not about Emilio-kyun or anything, this is my thing. … These wounds on my hands are proof that I’m working hard here. So I kinda wanna leave them, at least for now.”

Emilio: “Proof you’re working hard…”

Subaru: “This one’s from when I was cooking, this one’s from messing up how to use a cleaning tool I’m not used to, and this one’s from looking away while I was cleaning the windows and jabbing my hand. Each one is proof I’m leveling up.”

After all, since Subaru had never even had a part-time job before, her maid days at this mansion were her first and only work experience.

She’d been pretty confident that she was on the dexterous side, but all that baseless confidence had been shattered one after another before her first job, and this wrecked state of her hands and fingers was the result.

But that wasn’t actually a bad thing.

Subaru: “When the proof that I’m trying my best is left behind in a way I can actually see, it’s like… I can trust my own footprints, or something. Sorry, I might be saying something weird.”

Emilio: “—No. Not at all. I reaaally understand.”

Subaru: “Emilio-kyun…”

With a serious expression, Emilio didn’t laugh at Subaru’s silly little hang-up.

Struck in the chest by his words, Subaru felt her heart pound not with some frivolous flutter, but with a real warmth being poured into it.

Overwhelmed by that feeling, she decided to take a little gamble.

Subaru: “Um, Emilio-kyun… If it’s okay, tomorrow I’m supposed to go shopping in the village and, um, would you maybe want to go on a date… g-go out with me?”

Emilio: “To the village…”

Subaru: “W-Was that no good?! Did I totally misread the distance between us?! Was I a sow?!”

Emilio: “I’m not thinking anything that awful at all!”

Subaru saw a vision of her head getting lopped off on the backswing of the blade after she’d stepped in too deep. Flustered by her intensity, Emilio waved his hands, and this time he was the one saying, “That’s not it,” as he scrambled for words.

Even while unsure how he should put it, Emilio went on:

Emilio: “This isn’t about you, Subaru, it’s my own issue. It’s about the village… If you go there with me, you might end up having an unpleasant time.”

Subaru: “No way! If I’m with Emilio-kyun, anywhere we go is gonna be sprinkled with rosy special effects!”

Emilio: “It’s just… the people around us might not look very kindly on it…”

Subaru: “It’s fine! No matter what kind of faces everyone around us is making, I’ll be right beside you with the best smile of the century, clinging to you nonstop until my annoyingness becomes addictive!”

Emilio: “…Fufu.”

Bow-and-weave forgotten, Subaru went pure infighting with her invitation, and Emilio finally let out a laugh, looking like he’d been worn down.

At that reaction, Subaru held her breath, waiting for his next words—

Emilio: “All right, you win. I’ll go to the village with you, Subaru.”

And at Emilio’s sheepish smile as he said that, Subaru was already wearing the most self-satisfied grin of the century, ready to break into a triple round of banzai.

Subaru: “So yeah, tomorrow’s a date with Emilio-kyun! Uhehehehe, I am forced to conclude that progress in our relationship is just around the corner! Isn’t that amazing? Isn’t that amazing?”

Victor: “Why are you going out of your way to report this to Vicha…?”

Subaru: “Well, Rau and Reu have work tomorrow and have to be up early, and it’s not like there’s anyone else to talk to besides Victa, who’s just wandering around the mansion doing nothing, right?”

Victor: “What I’m saying is that I don’t understand how, at this rate, you can just casually break through “Door Crossing” like it’s nothing!”

Victor shouted, face flushed, banging the table.

It was already late at night, and making a racket would bother the people around them, but Subaru didn’t scold him. Partly because she was in a great mood, but also because of this library—or rather, the forbidden library’s special properties.

Apparently, this child called Victor was an incredibly powerful being, and he was skilled in magic that twisted and grafted space together.

The “Door Crossing” magic he handled was an amazing technique that could link the door of this forbidden library to any door in the mansion.

It was just that “Door Crossing” was supposed to be highly random, making it hard to reach this place, yet Subaru could break through it on “just a hunch,” and that was all there was to it.

Subaru: “Haa, this must all be my reward for working hard every day… S-S-So, then, if that’s the case, would it be okay to get a little greedier? What do you think?”

Victor: “Vicha thinks nothing of it.”

Subaru: “Like, our hands! If I… if I tried to hold his hand, do you think he wouldn’t think I’m being shameless?”

Victor: “Listen, would you at least listen when you’re talking to someone?!”

Subaru: “Bombardieh!”

It was questionable enough to be asking a little kid for romance advice, but answering an older girl’s earnest worries with some kind of incomprehensible invisible shockwave was pretty questionable too.

In the end, without getting any decent answer, Subaru was blown away by a fierce wind, tossed out of the forbidden library, and her rendezvous with Victor came to an end.

Subaru: “For someone with such a cute face, you sure don’t have enough cuteness in your attitude. Someday I’m gonna spoil you rotten like a cat.”

Muttering her grudge over having been sent rolling down the hallway, Subaru slapped the dust off herself, then pulled herself together and skipped off toward her room with a spring in her step.

After shoving Subaru out, on the other side of the closed door, in the forbidden library, Victor—

Victor: “—This has nothing to do with Vicha, you know.”

—murmured that, though Subaru remained unaware of it.

Subaru: “Behold! A new day, and a day of dazzling progress! Natsuki Subaru, as of today, is graduating from being a girl who just sits around and waits!”

The instant she paid hush money to her drowsiness and bought herself fully awakened consciousness, Subaru sprang up.

Subaru’s brain, blessed with ridiculously good wake-up skills, had been constructing, from the very moment she opened her eyes, the optimal route toward fulfilling last night’s promise—namely, her first date with Emilio.

First, she would cleverly talk Reu into it so that he would assign her the simplest jobs possible. Then she would brush off Rau’s snide remarks with a mature, composed smile, take on the shopping trip to the village, and down the line, walk down the aisle with Emilio.

Subaru: “All right, so there’s no time to dawdle if I want that. Gotta transform into my Victory Form right now and—uwaa?!”

Reu: “…”

Rau: “…”

As she finished drafting her plan while wiggling her hips on the bed and turned around, a decidedly un-cute scream tore its way out of Subaru’s throat.

The reason was brutally simple: there were people standing in her room besides Subaru herself. Two of them, in fact.

And in the Roswaal mansion, if you saw two silhouettes standing next to each other as a set, there was only one possible identity they could have.

Subaru: “Hey, hey! Other than the first day, you’ve been relatively considerate, so barging into a maiden’s room first thing in the morning is suddenly off-limits, you know! You’ve seen my just-woke-up face again! Don’t look!”

Covering her face with both hands, Subaru tried to joke away the shame welling up inside her.

If anyone saw her when she was seriously blushing, she'd want to die, and when she covered her face she could feel the drying drool at the corner of her mouth and wanted to die even more.

Even if it wasn't Emilio, she was not such a tough boy that she could take a guy seeing her horrible sleeping face and come away with no damage. Not that she was a boy to begin with.

However, the attitudes of the two in response to Subaru's reaction were baffling.

Reu: "Nii-sama, our guest has just addressed us in a rather familiar way."

Rau: "Reu, it seems our guest has greeted us with a badly misjudged sense of distance."

While Subaru was going kyaakyaa and generously trying to gloss over the situation for them, Rau and Reu's reactions were curt, completely failing to read the room.

No matter the reason, no matter how well you knew each other, there was such a thing as proper decorum even between close acquaintances.

Subaru: "Or… don't tell me I overslept? And you two came as my senpai to wake me up…"

Reu: "Senpai? What are you talking about, guest?"

Rau: "Senpai? Being addressed that way is a repulsive notion, guest."

Subaru: "Huh…?"

Brow furrowing, both of them looked genuinely suspicious of her. That was not something she could just laugh off anymore, and Subaru lowered the hands she'd been holding over her face, her teeth chattering.

Honestly, she'd started to get the idea that Rau's harsh way of speaking was just how he was, but Reu joining in and riding that wave like this was going too far no matter how she looked at it.

As fellow servants, to keep their interpersonal relationships running smoothly, she really needed to teach them exactly how far they could push before she got mad—that was what Subaru thought she had to do.

She wanted to believe that was all it would take to solve the problem.

But—

Subaru: "—h?"

Before she could properly scold the two of them, her lowered hands came into her field of vision.

The hands she'd held out to Emilio last night, the hands so shamefully covered in wounds that he'd offered to cast healing magic on them.

Hands that had been battered by unfamiliar cooking and water work, and by using cleaning tools she wasn't used to—those hands now looked like the pretty hands of someone who'd never known the hardship of working at all.

Subaru: "N-No way."

Her fingers trembling, she flipped her hands over and over, palms and backs, but the wounds that ought to be there were nowhere to be found.

She couldn't believe that just seeing her own fingers in a pristine state could flip her mind over this much. No, what she couldn't believe was the situation in front of her.

Reu: "Guest?"

Rau: "Guest?"

Tilting their heads in unison, Rau and Reu, moving in perfect sync, looked in concern at the "first-time" Natsuki Subaru before them.

Seeing the innocent eyes of the twins, Subaru was certain.

And along with that certainty came despair.

Subaru: “Why… why did it go back?!”

She had learned her job, learned how to get along with them, and they’d gradually come to understand each other’s personalities.

She’d greeted this day with her heart pounding, imagining a fun future where surely everything would work out between them—only to find herself in a dead end.

As if to declare that unreasonable fate would never allow Natsuki Subaru any peace.

—The second first day began.

8

To be honest, that second “nice to meet you” hit Subaru’s heart horribly hard.

Even the first time she experienced “Return by Death,” when the impact of the onrushing “death” shot through her, she’d suffered a pain that was anything but ordinary.

Even so, that had only been something that happened over the span of a few hours.

In a time not even half a day long, the bonds she’d piled up, while big, couldn’t really be called deep. So when she was treated like a stranger, she’d been able to rethink it as “that’s just how it is.”

But this time was different.

This time, she’d spent several days together with them; they weren’t just people whose faces and names she knew. She’d had the chance to learn who they were as people, and the chance to let them learn who she was.

Having all of that overturned, as if every piece on the game board had been swept away and declared never to have existed, left her not just with a sense of futility and loss, but with the feeling that everything had been trampled underfoot.

It hurt. It really did.

It had taken her so much effort just to fire herself up and say she'd take that time back all over again.

The feelings of Subaru, who had overcome that anguish and tried to move forward, deserved to be commended. She ought to have been given a "you were so brave, you did so well" prize.

By no twist of fate should she have been made to go through something even worse, something truly gruesome.

By no twist of fate—

Reu: "—Are you a Witch Cultist?"

—should she have to be tortured in some dim forest at dusk by Reu, brimming with anger and hostility, with an iron ball in his hand.

Subaru: "U… ahh…"

Letting a ragged sound rattle from her throat, Subaru reached with a trembling hand toward her right leg.

Everything below the knee had been severed by something sharp, and she'd lost a great deal of blood. The bleeding, at least, had already been staunched. Reu, who had chased her down, had done that much.

Not to save her, but because it would be troublesome if she died before he could get anything out of her.

—This was Subaru's third attempt since waking up at the Roswaal manor.

After being sent back to the first day last time, Subaru had steeled herself to get through this, and tried to retrace those first few days as closely as possible, to recreate the same situation.

Whether that attempt had gone well was doubtful, but the ending was the same. —No, it was even worse.

The first time, Subaru hadn't known why she'd been sent back to the first day, but the second time she'd clearly been forced to "Return by Death" when something smashed her head in.

As a result, she'd judged it highly likely that someone was targeting Subaru—and the people in the mansion—and she'd gone into her third run with the goal of uncovering who they were.

And she had succeeded in luring out the culprit who had crushed her skull—

Subaru: "…Reu…"

Reu: "Do not address me so familiarly. When you're giving off the stench of miasma from your whole body like that, even if you say you have nothing to do with the Witch Cult, those words are not worth trusting."

Subaru: "Wh… what the hell is that supposed to mean…?"

A term she'd never heard before, something she knew nothing about—when he asked her about it, she had no answer to give.

The cold, rejecting tone in Reu's voice was different even from the politely rude one Subaru knew; it was dyed through with a much, much deeper, pitch-black hatred.

She'd thought they'd become friends.

That this boy, so devoted to his brother and so capable despite his lack of self-confidence, was, through their work and their idle chats, gradually meeting her halfway, that the distance between their hearts was shrinking.

She'd been wrong.

All along, he'd been watching like a predator for the chance to kill Subaru, and then he'd carried it out. No—that wasn't right. He'd already carried it out many times. Each time, Subaru had been flung back to the first day.

And this time as well—

Subaru: “Why do I have to be killed?! What did I do?! What did I ever do to you, Reu, why…!”

Reu: “You are—”

Subaru: “I, about you guys, all of you, I l—”

A sharp gust of wind stole her final words away.

Instead, a hot sensation passed out through her throat, and Natsuki Subaru collapsed on the spot and stopped moving. Her hands and feet twitched, and from beyond the edges of her whitening vision, she heard a voice.

Reu: “Nii-sama is too kind.”

And Subaru couldn’t understand the meaning of those words at all.

9

Subaru: “—I can, “Return by Death”.”

The instant she tried to say that, time for Emilio in front of her stopped, and Natsuki Subaru realized that sound, color, and the very passage of time had vanished from the world.

She couldn’t even move her own body. Faced with the arrival of a world frozen still, her consciousness was seized by terror.

If she were left behind in a world where nothing moved like this, then even though time itself had stopped, her mind would be eaten away in a matter of minutes.

Scary, scary, scary—her fear of that outcome tried to fill the one thing still working inside her unmoving body, her brain, but that fear never came to pass.

—Because a greater, immovable terror was slowly drawing near.

???: “—I love you.”

An unfamiliar voice whispered right by her ear, and in this world where nothing should move, the one thing exempt from that law drew closer to Subaru.

It was grotesque, and though it said nothing, it pressed in on Subaru eloquently, sliding into place right in front of her.

What came was a black shadow, a pure black silhouette through which nothing could be seen, a darkness her instincts told her no light could ever dispel.

From that jet-black shadow, a slender arm slid out, slick and smooth.

It was thin, but there was a sense of some firm core of strength running through it, and that arm slipped, slowly, slowly, toward Subaru’s chest.

And then—

???: “—I love you.”

As it sang of love, an unbelievable pain painted over Natsuki Subaru’s consciousness, and with agony beyond imagination, forced her to understand.

No one could share in the despair Subaru felt. She must never tell anyone.

Natsuki Subaru had no choice but to go on resisting, all alone.

—Or so she’d thought.

Victor: “It’s a provisional contract with Vicha, little girl.”

Subaru: “—Ah.”

She had even brushed aside the hand of salvation Emilio had held out to her, and yet the one who extended a helping hand to that Subaru was, of all people, the child she'd thought was off the list of romance targets: Victor.

Seeing how exhausted Subaru was, and hearing her, half out of desperation, ask him for help, Victor looked terribly annoyed, and yet, unable to hide his inherently caring nature beneath his brash attitude, he took Subaru's self-harmed hand and promised he would stay by her side.

Just that single promise was enough to save her heart, and Subaru laughed at how cheap she was.

But it had been such a very, very long time since she'd been able to laugh like that, and Subaru wept. Victor never laughed at those cheap tears spilling from Subaru's eyes.

That blunt kindness, she felt, was what would save Natsuki Subaru —.

10

Victor: "I'll take you outside. If I send you somewhere out of both Roswaal's reach and the elder twin's, you won't have to die."

Subaru: "…"

On the cliff edge with sunset closing in, Victor, who had come all the way here searching for Subaru after she ran away, offered a lifeline to Subaru, who no longer had anywhere she belonged.

It was only half a day ago that she forged a provisional Contract with Victor and, in his Forbidden Library, reached the time limit—the fifth morning she had never once managed to make it to before.

After struggling and struggling, only to finally reach that moment so anticlimactically and rejoice even while feeling oddly let down, Subaru's joy lasted only an instant; cruel fate had no intention of letting her off the hook.

—Rau wailing in anguish over Reu's death—that sight shattered Subaru's joy in an instant.

Subaru had always assumed that Reu was the trigger for the tragedy that unfolded in the mansion, and she was left stupefied at the sight of him lying cold in bed, never to wake again.

With every premise she'd had up to now collapsing and everything she'd painstakingly pieced together suddenly feeling pointless, it was like she'd been hurled into the middle of the sea without even a compass.

No matter where she turned, she couldn't see land anywhere.

The wind, blowing against her like a storm, wouldn't let Subaru advance in the direction she wanted to go.

On top of that, the towering waves, heedless of her feelings, raged on mercilessly, trying to drag Subaru's flimsy raft, tossed about as it was, down to the bottom of the sea.

Subaru: "Rau..."

Victor: "Regardless of how involved you were, the elder of the twins will never forgive you. Those two could never be without each other. Now that one of them is gone, there's nothing that can be done anymore."

Subaru: "…"

With his emotions laid bare, Rau turned the point of his anger toward Subaru.

He was seeking an answer: why his precious younger brother, his other half Reu, had had to die.

If Subaru had that answer, she would have liked to answer Rau's question for him.

But she couldn't. Subaru did not have that answer.

On the contrary, Subaru had been repeating this world over and over while carrying that same question herself.

All while having her life targeted by Reu, and surely by Rau as well.

For those two and their selfish bond, for Subaru to do anything for them—

Subaru: "—Why can't I bring myself to say there's nothing I can do, I wonder."

She clenched the hand she'd had pressed against the ground, lifted it up, and mocked herself.

As she brushed the sand from her hand, Subaru suddenly recalled the sensation of someone holding her hand while she was unconscious—no, not just a sensation, but a memory of a time in the past when someone really had held it.

Subaru could instinctively believe that that had truly happened.

Subaru woke up easily. Her brain came fully awake quickly, and she noticed even little things. Most things faded away while she drifted in the hazy gap between sleep and wakefulness, though.

Subaru: "I can't just write this off as if it never happened… I need it so I can keep facing forward."

A desperate voice, a voice asking why, had been chasing after Natsuki Subaru.

Running and running and running, on Subaru's fleeing back pressed the wail of someone who'd had something precious stolen from them, a sorrowful scream that made her chest tighten just to hear it.

Rau: "Lord Victor, please step aside."

Victor: "I will not allow that. This girl is Vicha's contractor. Even if it's only a provisional Contract, a Contract is a Contract, and I won't let anyone call Vicha unfaithful."

In front of Subaru, who was slowly piecing her resolve together, Rau, having reached the cliff, and Victor, shielding Subaru behind him, stood facing each other.

The two of them were getting worked up on their own, ignoring Subaru, who was at the center of the whole issue, and the guest of honor, Subaru, being left out in the cold did not sit well with her.

So—

Subaru: “Knee-tap!”

Victor: “Wah?!”

She mercilessly sprang a knee-tap on the child in short pants right in front of her.

Suddenly thrown off balance and nearly falling, Victor’s eyes went round, then immediately turned angry, his brows knitting at Subaru’s outrageous attack from behind.

Victor: “Wh-What do you think you’re doing all of a sudden?! Do you even know what Vicha was trying to...”

Subaru: “That was a dangerous stunt. I get that you want to put your body on the line for your older big sis, but sadly I’m not that cheap a woman. I mean, honestly, I was really wavering there, though.”

Victor’s face flushed red, and it was true that his thoughtfulness had struck Subaru straight in the heart.

Honestly, if Victor hadn’t stayed by her side, Subaru might never have broken out of the vicious spiral she’d created herself and might have made an even more foolish choice.

But Victor’s kindness had just barely kept Subaru from going that far.

And so, like this, Subaru’s resolve was set and her guts were steeled.

Subaru: “Rau, I can’t tell you why things ended up like this either. If I knew the answer, I’d tell you, but I can’t. —So I’ll go and find it.”

Rau: “—What good would that do?! Reu is already dead! He’s gone, he’s nowhere anymore... this Rau has already been left behind!”

Subaru: “I won’t let you be all alone. I won’t ever let you feel left behind again. I swear it, not to anyone else, but to myself."

Staring straight at Rau's contorted face, his features twisted and his teeth grinding, Subaru found herself thinking something entirely out of place.

He looked so much like Reu had back in that forest at dusk, when he'd glared at Subaru in anger. They really were twins. But if possible, she wanted to confirm that fact with a different expression on their faces, not one twisted by anger.

With the two of them standing side by side, smiles on their faces, facing Natsuki Subaru.

Rau: "What could you possibly know about Rau and Reu?!"

Subaru: "Nothing. But you don't know either, do you?"

Rau: "Know what..."

Subaru: "—That I! Love you two! A whole lot!!"

Natsuki Subaru's confession of love wiped Rau's thoughts blank for an instant.

Cracking a pointless little joke to herself like, Maybe I actually had more of a chance than I thought, Subaru turned her back on the frozen Rau and wide-eyed Victor and headed for the cliff.

Victor: "Wait—"

The little child's outstretched hand couldn't catch up to Subaru, who had stepped forward without hesitation.

She did feel guilty about shaking off that hand, the one that had once held hers to protect her, and then taking off running. But that wasn't a reason to stop her feet.

She would move forward. —Toward the tomorrow that lay ahead.

To reach, in the truest sense, that moment, that morning she wanted to arrive at.

She'd been told, I'll definitely kill you.

That was why Subaru—

Subaru: "—I'll definitely save you."

Just after her lips formed those words, a tremendous impact shattered her entire body.

It would have been nice if that had cleanly cut off Subaru's consciousness and sent her straight into the fresh attempt she was supposed to leap toward—

—but the fact that she hit the wrong way and didn't quite achieve an instantaneous "death" only spoke to the lousy luck of the woman called Natsuki Subaru.

11

Emilio: "You did really well, Subaru."

With those words, and with the feel of thighs that were soft for a boy beneath the back of her head, Natsuki Subaru was overwhelmed by the sensation of her emotions bursting, overflowing without end.

Even when she tried to stop them, her tears would not, spilling one after another from the corners of her eyes and streaming down.

Subaru: "W-Wait, no, this is, this is all weird…!"

Emilio: "Is it strange to just relax and bawl your eyes out? If it is, then that would mean it's strange for babies to cry a lot too, you know."

Subaru: "That's… not what I mean… and you know that…!"

The voice that came down from right above was Emilio's, gentle and full of concern for her.

With that voice, the warmth of the palm stroking her head, and the feel of his lap supporting it, Natsuki Subaru could feel herself being soothed down to her very soul.

For Rau and Reu, and, in a broader sense, everyone in the mansion, for everything Natsuki Subaru had wanted to become able to love, she had prayed, wished, and resolved to save it all, then jumped off the cliff.

Determined that she would never again let a single thing slip through her fingers, she had stretched her awareness and nerves out to touch every little corner, ready to protect everything—and yet.

Subaru: “And now I fall apart this fast… I’m so pathetic…”

Emilio: “Really? I don’t think so.”

The resolve and determination Subaru had taken on, and the forced smile that had become unnatural because she was too set on pulling everything off without a single failure, had been easily seen through by Emilio’s clear gaze.

Without even giving her time to put up a front, Emilio had forcibly pulled Subaru into an empty room, offered her his lap, and smashed down the crumbling walls around her heart.

Those battered walls had been barely holding something back.

His forceful kindness pried them open, and all of it came pouring out.

As it was, thanks to her, the average looks in the Roswaal mansion had already dropped dramatically, and if she went and showed them her crying face on top of that, it would be the end of the world.

Emilio: “Nothing’s ending. You’re not strange at all, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Stop… saying stuff like that…”

Emilio: “I won’t. Not if you don’t truly believe that yourself, Subaru.”

He sounded as if he knew every last thing about Natsuki Subaru.

Give her a break. Unlike Subaru, who had lived through these past few days over and over, how much could Emilio really know about her?

The only chances Emilio had had to get to know Subaru were that brief time in the loot house in the royal capital and these few days in this loop, barely four days in all.

To then talk like he could see right through all of Subaru, even if she was a shut-in truant with not much life experience under her belt, was still something she did not want him thinking he could pull off.

—Ah, but.

Subaru: "…"

Emilio, stroking Subaru's black hair, stayed right by her as she sobbed.

He had had almost no chances to get to know Subaru.

But that, turned around, meant that Subaru had had as many chances to get to know Emilio as the number of days she had repeated, and that was exactly why she understood the weight of his words.

Emilio was kind, considerate, always thinking hard so as not to hurt anyone.

The reason he could no longer just stand by and watch Subaru like this was, again, that kindness of his.

There was not a trace of falsehood or calculation in this gentle, soft way he had of loosening up Subaru's feelings, either.

Emilio: "It must have been really tough."

There was no need anywhere to doubt the feelings behind those words.

—And Natsuki Subaru, from the bottom of her heart, could now strongly wish to live for this love.

Emilio: “…”

Subaru slept soundly, breathing softly in her sleep like a child.

Looking at the relieved profile of the girl resting on his lap, Emilio let the ends of his eyebrows droop and gently brushed the bangs from her forehead.

Just then—

Reu: “It seems Subaru-san won’t be of any use today.”

Emilio: “Yeah, that’s true. She’s only been a maid for a little while, and she’s already slacking off like this. What a little lazybones. Make sure to scold her properly later.”

Reu: “—Looking at this sleeping face, that mood kind of goes away.”

Reu, who had surely noticed how Subaru had been overdoing it, looked at her sleeping face as she lay on Emilio’s lap and let that sort of comment slip.

Getting chided from inside the magic crystal that he shouldn’t be staring so much at a sleeping girl, Emilio apologized to Tink in his heart.

But if Tink hadn’t seen how close to the edge Subaru was and pushed him forward, Emilio could never have stepped in this far.

Now he was glad he’d properly spoken up to Subaru and let her get it all out.

Reu: “I will go speak with Nii-sama. I have to take over Subaru-san’s work, after all.”

Without saying anything harsh, Reu left those words behind and turned his back on Emilio and Subaru.

To Reu's back, Emilio, who had felt that Reu had been oddly distant toward Subaru ever since she began working at the mansion, called out.

Emilio: "Reu."

Reu: "…"

Emilio: "Subaru is a good girl."

He was appealing to him that there was no need to doubt that.

Reu gave no answer to that; only the sound of the door closing served as his reply.

Emilio: "Hang in there, hang in there…"

As he stroked the head of the sleeping Subaru, Emilio spoke those words of encouragement over her.

Over and over, he repeated them as if in prayer, wishing that everything, all of it, would work out in the end, and that the feelings of Subaru, who wanted things to turn out that way, would be granted.

12

—Among the children of Arlam Village, Pietro had the firm belief that he was the smartest and the best-looking of them all.

It was what you'd call an unadorable kind of self-awareness, but he could still play things well enough that the people around him, the adults included, never caught on.

Someone who had strengths of their own yet still provoked resentment because of them was just bad at handling themselves.

If you noticed early on that what mattered was how you firmed up the ground under your own feet, then you had all the ability you needed to bend the people around you to your will.

That was Pietro's philosophy, and the sense of omnipotence that came from his youth.

However—

Pietro: “Su…baru… that kid, Maorooo, he… deeper in…”

With his fever-addled head, he desperately tried to tell them that Maoro had been taken away.

Peering down at Pietro’s face where he lay collapsed on the low grassy hill was a maid from the mansion, with black hair tied back behind her head and a sharp gaze that didn’t really suit the maid uniform she wore.

She’d become the talk of the village as the girl who’d been newly hired to work at the lord’s mansion, and Pietro couldn’t help but have rather complicated feelings about her.

First of all, adults, every last one of them, doted on Pietro.

As the most handsome boy in the village and someone expected to one day have scores of women falling for him, Pietro, even this young, ruled those around him with hints of that promise and with the charm that came from knowing his own talents.

But Pietro’s ultimate survival tactic didn’t work on the maid—Subaru.

It wasn’t that she already had someone she loved or that their tastes were incompatible.

Truly beautiful things captivated others beyond such individual preferences. Pietro had that. That was the source of his self-esteem.

And yet, it didn’t work on Subaru.

Of course, she did toss him words like “You’ve got a bright future” and “You’re cute, you’re cool,” but there wasn’t the slightest trace of that awe you felt toward someone on a whole other level.

She treated Pietro at his true size and saw him just like the other children around him.

For Pietro, that was a fresh feeling and, at the same time, a frustrating one.

It was just that, unlike the adults Pietro could bend to his will, Subaru, who had a firm sense of self, seemed to him like someone who wasn't being moved by anything else.

And so—

Subaru: "It'll be fine, Pietro. Me and this big bro over here will go and find them, okay!"

To the words he managed to force out through the tightness in his chest, Subaru took his hand and answered him in all seriousness.

The strength of her grip felt to Pietro like proof of just how earnestly she'd accepted his words, and he felt relieved.

Reu: "Subaru-san, if it was Witchbeasts that carried the child off, then they…"

Subaru: "Hold it, Reu. Pietro did his best to tell us his friend got taken away. Even though he's having a hard time himself, he's worrying about his friend. I wanna honor those feelings."

Reu: "…"

Subaru: "If you won't, then I'll go by myself. Reu, you take these kids back to the village…"

Reu: "Please don't say such foolish things. —I will be going with you as well. Nii-sama told me to look after you, Subaru-san."

In response to Subaru's desperate plea, the blue-haired butler beside her nodded.

He worked at the mansion and often came to the village on shopping trips. He looked far more reliable than Subaru, but with him there, would Subaru really be all right?

Villager: “—! Perfect timing! Over here! Can I leave the children with you?!”

Through Pietro’s hazy consciousness, he could see Subaru waving to someone beyond.

The sound of hurried footsteps coming their way told him that adults from the village were running up to them. Leaving Pietro and the others to those adults, Subaru headed into the depths of the forest together with the butler.

To rescue Maoro, who had vanished into the depths of the forest along with the Witchbeasts.

Pietro: “Be careful, Subaru…”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know. Pinky swear.”

Being held in an adult’s arms, Pietro hooked his little finger around Subaru’s little finger as she said something he didn’t really understand and waggled their joined hands.

When at last their pinkies came apart, he felt a pang of loneliness, and at the same time, a strange sense of reassurance welled up in his chest, telling him that it was all right to believe.

Subaru: “Let’s go, Reu! I’m counting on you!”

Reu: “You needn’t say it. Please don’t move in front, Subaru-san. You will only get in the way.”

Subaru: “Don’t go killing my motivation like that!”

Seeing Subaru and the butler off as the two of them vanished into the gloom, Pietro felt his own consciousness growing distant.

As he felt himself slipping away, Pietro prayed with all his might.

If the world really would turn out the way he wished it to.

Pietro: “Please… don’t let anything bad happen.”

And so, for the first time in his life, Pietro prayed with all his heart, desperately, for the sake of someone else.

13

Victor: “At this rate, you will be dead in less than half a day, you know.”

Hearing that said to her straight on by Victor, Subaru was surprised at how not-shocked she actually felt.

Of course, it was not as if she could stay completely calm when she had just had a death sentence handed to her to her face.

Victor: “It seems you took it more calmly than I thought, you know.”

Subaru: “Dunno. With all this heavy info just piling on and on, there’s a chance my brain’s gone full circle and I’m just kind of dazed right now. For reference, can I at least ask why I’m gonna die?”

Victor: “—A curse.”

Subaru: “…Knew it’d be that.”

At Victor’s narrowed-eye reply, Subaru scratched at her head with her hair let down.

Setting aside Reu’s direct, beat-you-to-death approach, the factor that brought Subaru to “death” was Curse Arts, and the culprit was the Witchbeasts living around the village of Arlam.

Every time she used Return by Death and went on a shopping trip to the village, Subaru would always get her hand bitten by the puppy that played with the village children, but the reveal was that that dog itself had been the Witchbeast in question—an Wolgarm, the so-called Silent Killer.

In the loop where Reu lost his life, it had been Reu who was cursed by the Witchbeast in Subaru’s place.

That said, unlike the careless Subaru, it was hard to imagine Reu just letting a Witchbeast bite his hand so easily, and she wanted to suspect some sort of deliberate intent at work.

Subaru: “I mean, when neither me nor Reu got bitten by the dog in the village, that time it was the kids who got dragged off into the forest instead, right? …And when we went in to rescue them—”

Victor: “You got yourself bitten by Wolgarm an awful lot, you know. That is what will be the cause of your death.”

Subaru: “…Not even you can fix that, Victa?”

Victor: “If it were an ordinary curse, Vicha could dispel it without any trouble, you know. But the curses placed on you by multiple Witchbeasts are tangled together and are eating away at you.”

Subaru: “Aaah, so like when the controller cord on a game’s gotten super tangled up? Yeah, okay, I can see how you wouldn’t be able to undo that.”

At this latest extra helping of malice dumped onto her own head, Subaru shook it side to side with a “good grief.”

Frowning at her attitude, Victor went on.

Victor: “Are you saying you are not afraid of dying, you know?”

Subaru: “Of course not, don’t be stupid. Dying’s super scary. My knees are shaking. I feel like I’m gonna wet myself even now, but I’m desperately holding it in. Try to understand, okay? A maiden’s heart and all that.”

Victor: “…”

Subaru: “But I’m breaking up with that bad habit of mine where I give up and throw everything away right away. I finally managed to keep things from going sour between us this time, so there’s no way I’m giving up here—”

She had just answered Victor’s question like that when—

Subaru: "—Giving up is out of the question. Please tell me what I should do, Lord Victor."

Victor: "…"

A plea Subaru did not know beat against her eardrums.

This was not the first time something like this had happened to her—having memories of a conversation she should not know, as if she had been there to hear it.

It was the same as the warmth of the twins' hands that had given her the push to jump off the cliff herself to get everything back.

Subaru's abnormally sharp-waking brain, even while she was asleep, retained things that happened at her bedside in a shallow but wide way; this was proof she had remembered it.

Subaru: "—Victor, where did Reu go?"

Victor: "…"

Subaru: "Answer me! What happened to Reu, where did he go?!"

Clutching at that memory of Reu's voice, floating at the shallow edge of her recollection and ready to vanish at any moment, Subaru questioned Victor.

At her question, Victor hesitated for a while before—

Victor: "—He went into the forest to hunt down the Witchbeasts that are eating away at your life, you know."

Subaru: "Wha…"

Victor: "It is the simplest method of undoing a curse, you see. Kill the caster and you eliminate the chance of the curse's effect activating. That rule does not change even when the caster is a Witchbeast, you know."

Subaru: "But! The Witchbeasts that cursed me, there are tons of them in that forest…!"

The idea of defeating every last one of them and saving Subaru was a pipe dream.

They could not let even a single one escape. With no way of checking, Reu would not be able to stop until he had hunted down every Witchbeast that could possibly be a candidate.

But that was not realistic.

Rau: “—What exactly do you mean by that, Lord Victor?”

Victor: “—Rau.”

Subaru and Victor had chosen an out-of-the-way corner of the village where no one came to talk.

There, stepping in as an uninvited third party, was Rau.

In his pale-crimson eyes swirled a complex mix of colors as he stared fixedly at Victor.

They did not know how much of the conversation he had overheard.

However, whatever you said about his abilities as a servant, Rau’s wits were above average, and from Victor’s slight averted glance, he immediately grasped the situation.

That something had happened to his younger brother—to Reu.

Subaru: “Wait! Don’t do anything rash!”

Rau: “Let go! Reu is in danger. Even if you stop me, Rau is going.”

Subaru: “I get it, okay! I won’t stop you! Just listen to me for one second!”

She grabbed Rau bodily to stop him from just turning around and bolting straight into the forest.

If she did not do at least that much, the difference in strength between a man and a woman would let him shake her off easily.

But Subaru practically went at the hem of Rau's butler uniform with her teeth, trying to wear down his reckless momentum.

Thanks to that woman-thrown-aside tactic, Rau did stop his feet.

Subaru: "First off, I'm completely against just blindly running around looking for Reu. All I can see in that future is secondary victims—in other words, "the mummy-hunter turns into a mummy." So we need a different approach!"

Victor: "Rau has Clairvoyance. If he uses that, he can take his time and search for where Reu is. There, I have refuted you. Move aside now."

Subaru: "Hold up, hold up—if he's got such a handy power, that's all the more reason to take me along, okay?! That way no one has to end up missing!"

Rau: "What?"

Rau's hand, which had been trying to push Subaru aside, stopped, and his pale-crimson eyes narrowed in suspicion.

At Rau's reaction, Subaru rubbed her nose with her thumb.

Subaru: "If we can help it, I wanna have all of us together to see the fifth morning. I'm greedy, and I've got a stingy side, so I'm done tossing out all the hard work we put in this time."

Rau: "…What do you mean?"

Subaru: "I've got a body that Witchbeasts just love to flock to. Reu's trying to wipe out the Witchbeasts in the forest—the Wolgarm. If I go into the forest, I'll naturally close the distance between me and Reu. Well?"

Rau: "…"

Subaru: "And just so you know, I'm not the type to tell some stupid lie that doesn't even make sense. If you think I'm lying, you can leave me behind in the forest without mercy."

Rau: “There’s no way I could report something like that to Lord Roswaal or Lord Emilio. —First and foremost, if Barusu dies for nothing, all of Reu’s efforts will be wasted.”

With a hand to his mouth, Rau thought it over for a while.

But it seemed no clever plan came to mind that could shut up Subaru, eyes full of resolve, and make her back down. Or perhaps he had decided there was some merit in what she was saying.

Rau: “If you become a burden, I’ll break your knees and dump you back in the village.”

Subaru: “Is that really something you say to a girl?!”

Rau: “Hah!”

He let out a snort of laughter like he had won, but Subaru felt as if Rau’s usual tone had come back.

Then she turned to Victor, who had been watching the situation play out.

Subaru: “So yeah, me and Rau are heading into the forest to look for Reu. When Emilio-kyun wakes up from crashing after treating everyone, smooth things over for us, okay?”

Victor: “…You truly mean to go through with this, you know?”

Subaru: “Of course. Turning everything up to this point into some big joke would be way tackier, don’t you think?”

To worry over Reu’s safety and bring him back meant leaving the bomb called a curse inside Subaru’s body.

If that bomb went off, she would die—that was something she had already had seared into her body over and over—no, into her very soul, and it was no exaggeration to put it that way.

But she would never let things play out the way Victor feared.

Subaru was not going off to die; she was going off to live.

Subaru: “All right then, time for greedy old me to go grab every last thing I want! —Bring it on, oh inevitable fate!”

The grand adventure of Natsuki Subaru, summoned to another world.

Stage 2: Roswaal Mansion—Day Four, her fifth attempt was about to begin—.

14

To be perfectly honest, Reu himself didn’t understand why he was going this far, putting his body on the line and staking his life like this.

Focusing his awareness on his forehead, feeling the heat building there, he ground his skull as the oni horn stored inside his head slowly pushed outward.

The horn, wreathed in light, the instant it was exposed to the open air, greedily devoured mana in its hunger for power, and the heat it gave off flooded Reu’s entire body with a strength unimaginable under normal circumstances.

This was the source of the Oni Clan’s power—the power of the oni, said to be the strongest among the demihuman races.

That said, among those oni who were treated that way, Reu was a failure. Though he was supposed to be an oni who originally should have had two horns, he only had one.

However, the number of horns had nothing to do with why Reu was a failure.

Because Rau, who just like him had only a single horn, possessed enough power to be called the second coming of the legendary “Oni God,” a being whose name was passed down endlessly among the Oni Clan.

From a young age, Rau had been blessed with such talent that it made comparing him with those around him feel ridiculous.

And Reu, though he had been born as Rau's twin at the same time, was markedly inferior to him in ability, and only ever piled up more and more self-loathing at being a disgrace to the Oni Clan.

When their village was attacked by the Witch Cult, and their parents and kin were being killed, even when his brother, fighting to protect useless him, had his horn broken in the instant he stretched a hand out toward Reu—

Reu: "Ah… it finally broke."

Before worrying about his brother's life, he'd first felt the satisfaction of seeing his own sense of inferiority fulfilled. He was the lowest of the low.

Reu: "A-Aaaargh—!!"

Oni power surging through his entire body, Reu slammed sheer violence into the four-legged Witchbeasts that had him surrounded and were springing at him.

He shattered the head of a Witchbeast that opened its jaws wide to bite him with a punch, then swung the morningstar in his other hand in a great arc, slicing clean across the torsos of the ones foolish enough to leap into the air.

Blood and entrails sprayed everywhere as the Witchbeasts scattered their lives.

He wasn't counting, but he must have already killed thirty, forty of them. Even so, no matter how many of their fellows were taken out, the Witchbeasts never lowered the spearpoint of their killing intent directed at humans.

There was nothing they prioritized above slaughtering every last different life-form.

That was the twisted instinct of the Witchbeasts, a warped way of being that took precedence even over their own survival.

Reu: “Die! Die! Just die already—!!”

He crushed those creatures with their horribly warped existence one after another.

Over and over he swung the iron ball, mixing rage and hatred together with a bit of pity and sympathy.

Witchbeasts were a mistaken existence.

And in that sense, Reu was no different from a Witchbeast.

He had gone wrong. Perhaps his choices, no—perhaps things had already gone wrong from the very first moment.

From the instant he was born after stealing his brother Rau’s horn, things had gone wrong.

The Witchbeasts, born as Witchbeasts, and Reu, born as a dropout—

How much difference was there really between them?

If there was no difference great enough to be found there, then the iron ball he swung was both mercy and, at the same time, a tantrum of misdirected anger.

At the very least—

Reu: “Aaaargh—!!”

If all of this rage painting everything in front of his eyes bright red could at least be of use to someone’s future—if it could at least help save that sharp-eyed girl who had tried to help miserable him—

Then beyond that, there was surely nothing more Reu ought to wish for—.

Reu: “…”

Drunk on blood, before he knew it Reu’s world had been dyed entirely red, and his thoughts dulled to the very limit.

In a situation where his own life was on the line, the explosion of survival instinct that occurred in the body of an oni—

that tremendous surge wiped away every factor that might slow his movements: cool-headed assessment of the battle, fear, anxiety, all of it, and poured Reu's physical function wholly into the single purpose of surviving.

Nothing—yes, nothing—was distinguished.

Everything that moved around him was, to Reu, something that had to be smashed.

And so—

Subaru: "Heeaaave-ho!!"

Reu: "Huh?"

The thing hurled in along with that stupidly off-key battle shout should, originally, have been nothing more than one more obstacle for Reu to intercept.

Without any distinction whatsoever, that is.

If there was anything, across this wide world, that could have awakened in Reu—now ruled entirely by the instincts of an oni—any possibility besides destruction and killing, there was only one such thing.

—And what had been thrown in was, miraculously, that one thing.

Reu: "…"

On reflex, Reu stretched out his hands and caught the body flying toward him on a low trajectory—not even enough to call a parabola.

He firmly received that slender body in his arms and saw from up close what it was.

It was, unmistakably, the figure of the brother more precious to him than his own life.

Subaru: “Geh! Didn’t manage to throw you as high as I thought I would!”

Right after Rau ended up tightly hugged in Reu’s arms, a figure leaped in toward them.

He was within reach if Reu only stretched out a hand, but the arms he needed for that were missing. Both arms were cradling his brother’s body, which he could not bear to let go of, and so he could not extend them.

However—

Subaru: “Oof.”

The sword swung by that figure who had jumped in—broken halfway along its length—had been aimed at Reu’s horn, but it fell just a few centimeters short and sliced through empty air.

Just like that, the person who had swung the sword dashed right past Reu’s side and on behind him.

Subaru: “I totally blew it! Just one more step, if I’d had a bit more guts—Gyaaaah?!”

Reu: “—?!”

In the next instant, the ground beneath the feet of the black-haired person who had run past erupted as if it had exploded, sending that slender body flying high, high up into the sky.

The one who had done that was one of the Witchbeasts that had been carefully watching the ebb and flow of the battle from above, lying in wait for the moment to take Reu’s life—

the magic unleashed by that small-looking one had launched the girl’s body upward.

And then—

Subaru: “Laugh it up, Reu. —’Cause today, I’m more oni than any oni out there!”

Spinning and spinning as she fell, the figure unleashed a full-strength strike.

This time, there was no way for Reu—clutching his brother’s body tight against him—to defend against it.

Reu: “…”

A perfectly placed impact slammed into Reu’s forehead horn, sending a numbing shock through it.

15

Roswaal: “The Wolgarm in the forest have been wiped out. So neither you nor Subaru-kun need worry anyyy more~. While I was away, you even handled the whole Arlam Village situation. You did very good wooork~.”

With overwhelming magical firepower, Roswaal had swept away the packs of Wolgarm infesting the forest.

Though she was his master, with her out-of-scale strength and decisiveness, all Reu could do in response to her actions was bow his head deeply and show both gratitude and appreciation.

—The conclusion to the uproar caused by the Witchbeasts living around the village and the curses they had brought.

The pack of Wolgarm that cursed people and hunted them to steal their life force had, thanks to Reu’s reckless rampage, Rau and Subaru’s struggle to bring that reckless Reu back, and finally the overwhelming flames of the returning Roswaal, been burned away to the last beast.

If you broke down the overall extermination rate of the pack, Reu alone had handled about thirty percent, Rau and Subaru together about ten percent, and Roswaal had single-handedly taken care of the remaining sixty.

Looking at it that way, it was clear just how reckless and, at the same time, how pointless Reu’s actions had been.

Even if Reu hadn't pulled that foolish stunt without regard for anything around him, Roswaal, upon returning, would have made it in time to wipe out the pack, and Subaru's curse would never have been triggered.

Or perhaps Roswaal might have known some method of breaking the curse that even Victor did not.

Roswaal: "That would be overestimating me waaay too much, you knooow~. There isn't any great difference between Victor and me when it comes to magical knowledge. If Victor says he cannot do something, then you can say that I cannot either. —Much to my chagrin~."

The last few words she added sounded lonely, without a hint of falsehood.

Precisely because of that, even though he resisted the idea, Reu could believe that the words before that weren't just some excuse meant to comfort him.

Still—

Subaru: "—Reu?"

Reu: "Ah…"

As he kept watch over the peacefully sleeping face on the bed, her eyelids suddenly trembled, and the consciousness of the sleeping girl surfaced.

From the tiny initial reaction to her awakening, the whole process happened so quickly that Reu's reflexes were a step behind. She had claimed she woke up easily, but this was too easily.

Because of that—

Subaru: "You were holding my hand?"

Reu: "—My apologies. I… could not think of anything else I could do."

Subaru: “…”

Reu: “When something painful happened, having someone hold Reu’s hand always put Reu at ease. So when I remembered how that felt… I must have started acting like a child.”

Even though his height and his limbs had grown, Reu himself hadn’t changed at all from how he’d been when he was little.

He felt as if his own actions had just gone and proved that. It left him feeling awkward.

Back when he was small and too anxious or ashamed to sleep, the one who had protected Reu was his brother Rau, whose warm palm would hold his hand as they lay under the same covers.

Always walking out in front and telling him that as long as they were together there was nothing to worry about, everything about his brother had been Reu’s guiding signpost—and that hadn’t changed even after they lost their home and were taken in by Roswaal.

Reu: “Subaru-san, the curse that was eating away at your body will no longer trigger. Please rest easy.”

Subaru: “Well, that’s a relief… Wait, what’s with all this scribbling on my nightclothes?!”

Reu: “The children from the village. While you were sleeping, they came to visit and wrote those. Everyone was worried about you.”

Subaru: “Every last one of them… don’t just casually come stare at a maiden’s sleeping face…”

Covering her face with both hands, Subaru muttered that with her cheeks faintly flushed.

But the way she gazed down at the sleeve of her nightclothes—where the children had written so many messages of encouragement—and softened her eyes fondly, the corners of them drooping, told a different story.

Seeing that, Reu felt as if his chest were being tightly squeezed.

For some reason, having himself be the one here felt horribly out of place, and wanting to run away from that lingering atmosphere, he forced himself to continue with, “And so.”

Reu: “Reu must apologize to you, Subaru-san. —Even if the curse is no longer a concern, the wounds on your body will remain. And on your heart as well.”

Subaru: “Ahh, well, yeah, I guess I’m not gonna be able to look at a dog’s face for a while. As for the scars… um, are there any on my face or anything?”

Reu: “No. I made certain there would be no scars on your face, your neck, or any other plainly visible place.”

Subaru: “Then I’m basically fine. Anyone who sees more than that is either me, or, you know, someone I’m okay with showing that much to.”

Reu: “But…”

Subaru: “More importantly, are you okay, Reu? That’s what matters most to me here.”

At that kind of consideration, Reu felt his breath catch.

Subaru might say she didn’t mind, but that couldn’t be true. The wounds she had no need to bear had been borne because of him; it was unmistakably Reu’s fault.

Reu: “Reu is unharmed. There is nothing wrong. But that is… what hurts.”

Subaru: “Hurts?”

Reu: “Everything that happened this time is Reu’s fault. If Reu had done his job properly, there would have been no need to fear for Subaru-san’s safety, nor for Nii-sama to be placed in danger, nor for the villagers to suffer any harm.”

Officially, one could say all of that fell under the responsibility of the lord, Roswaal. But in Roswaal's absence, it had been the house steward, Reu, who had been entrusted with the running of the mansion.

He had had the role of managing everything properly and keeping it all running as it should.

Because he had failed to fulfill it, things had ended up like this—

Reu: "So the responsibility for everything this time lies with Reu—"

Subaru: "So you're saying you'll take responsibility and take damaged-goods me in?"

Reu: "—If that is what is necessary."

Subaru: "Ahahaha, I was joking. Don't go saying stupid stuff like that. For starters, if you say it's all your fault, then that means I've got responsibility here too."

Speaking as if it were a joke, Subaru shrugged her shoulders.

For a moment, Reu didn't understand what she meant. She'd only just been hired and didn't know left from right about the Mathers domain. There was no way she could have any responsibility.

But contrary to Reu's thoughts, Subaru gave a wry smile.

Subaru: "I do. I've got that responsibility."

Reu: "…"

Subaru: "And I took responsibility for what was within my reach. That's how I ended up arriving at this sunrise, so don't tell me I was wrong."

Subaru stared off into the distance, and Reu still didn't understand what she meant.

Even so, for some reason, he felt like he was about to cry. In those rare black eyes of hers, deep within, he caught a glimpse of struggles and anguish he couldn't even imagine—and of the brightness of having overcome them.

Compared to what Subaru had gone through, his own worries felt tiny—

Subaru: "Besides, I wouldn't have gotten here if you hadn't been around, Reu. So instead of cursing the day I finally managed to reach, I wanna celebrate it."

Reu: "…Huh?"

Subaru: "What, what? Don't tell me you're actually thinking everything would've worked out somehow even without you? Sorry to say, but even if we never got to test it, I'm gonna say loud and clear that's not how it would've gone."

Arms folded, Subaru said that in a way that shattered Reu's hesitation.

As Reu found himself taken aback, Subaru raised a finger.

Subaru: "For whatever reason, you've convinced yourself that everything you do backfires, that all the bad stuff is your fault, and all the good stuff is someone else's doing, but that's just not true."

Reu: "B-But in reality, Reu really did…"

Subaru: "Nope. Like, seriously, when we were being chased by Witchbeasts in the forest, how long do you think I was running around with your brother on my back? That guy dropped out suuuper early on."

Reu: "…"

Subaru: "Which means in that situation, Rau was out of the fight right off the bat! So does that mean the rest of the results are all thanks to me? No waaay. I don't have that kind of powerrr! So that leaves…"

There she paused and looked straight at Reu.

Under the gaze shining in those black eyes, Reu wanted to avert his own, but couldn't.

It was as if her eyes were burning away every path of retreat, leaving him nowhere to run.

Subaru: "Saying you couldn't do anything is a huge mistake. The reason I'm able to sit here like this is mostly thanks to you, Reu! So hold your head up already."

Reu: "…If Nii-sama were at full strength, then that wouldn't…"

Subaru: "Maybe I couldn't say it then. But I heard it from Rau. That "perfect Rau" you're picturing? He doesn't exist anywhere. Or what, are you saying a Rau without a horn isn't worth anything to you?"

Reu: "—That is not true! Nii-sama has always been Reu's…!"

Subaru: "See? You know it yourself."

Reu: "Ah—"

Stunned, Reu let himself be led inward by Subaru's words.

Born as twins, as the one who had stolen Rau's horn, Reu had gone on and on tormenting himself. At every turn he found himself thinking, *If only Brother were here…*

And yet Subaru, who should only have known them for a few short days, saw right through him with ease.

Was it because his worries were shallow, fragile, and meaningless?

Subaru: "It's because I was watching you and Rau with everything I had."

Reu: "…"

Subaru: "Reu, I don't think you can just flip a switch and change how you think right away. It's not as easy as it sounds, and being "reborn" might take something on the level of dying once. But I really don't recommend dying. It's honestly, seriously awful."

Reu: "…You say that like you've actually died before."

The way she said it, with such real weight behind it, made Reu almost believe Subaru really had died once.

In fact, back in the capital, when she saved Emilio, Subaru had nearly died in her place, so in terms of a near-death experience, she might have tasted something close to death.

But even before that, she had been able to stake her life for Emilio's sake, and in that, Reu couldn't help but feel she was fundamentally different from him.

Even so—

Subaru: "If you ever feel like you want to change from who you are now, or you wanna meet tomorrow in a better mood, I'll help you. As long as I'm not in the way."

Reu: "Reu… change?"

Subaru: "Where I'm from, there's this saying: "If you talk about next year, the oni will laugh." So, you know—"

As Reu sat there dumbfounded, Subaru's lips curled into a crooked grin.

For someone who joked about her scary-looking face, that smile, in that moment, seemed more dazzling to Reu than anything, anything else.

Subaru: "So let's laugh, Reu. A gloomy face doesn't suit anyone. Let's laugh and talk about the future. You've spent all this time looking back, so from here on out, let's face forward! For starters, we can talk about tomorrow."

Reu: "Tomorrow…"

Subaru: "Yeah, anything's fine. Like, "What should we make for tomorrow's menu?" or "Maybe I'll splurge on some fancy bath salts," or "I'll show off a different bowtie than usual," dumb little stuff like that. Let's talk about that kind of everyday nothing together, okay?”

To Reu, Subaru’s suggestion was so small that no one could possibly say what, if anything, it would change about the tomorrow that came.

He let out a breath.

And in that instant, the lump lodged in his chest, the haze clouding his head, cleared just a little.

When it cleared even that little bit, it felt like his field of view had opened up.

Reu: “Reu is much more clumsy than you think, Subaru-san. So I might lean on you so much that you end up regretting saying all that.”

Subaru: “Mmm, well, I’ll manage. I’m the one who said it, after all. And it’s not like I’m some superwoman who can do everything by herself either. Let’s just lean on each other as we go. Don’t worry, Emilio-kyun and Tink, and Victa and Ros-chi, and of course Rau too, none of them are gonna complain about that.”

Smiling without a hint of guilt, Subaru gave him a thumbs-up and flashed her teeth.

Keeping that gesture going, she added:

Subaru: “We’re gonna laugh and mess around and talk about the future that is tomorrow. It’s been my dream to talk about next year while laughing together with an oni.”

Reu: “…You really are oni-like.”

Subaru: “Right?”

Drawn in by Subaru’s way of speaking that never tried too hard, Reu found himself saying that, and before he realized it, heat welled up and spilled from the corners of his eyes, running down his cheeks.

Come to think of it, how long had it been since he last let himself cry so openly like this?

Reu: “…”

Back then, whenever Reu cried like this, the one who had always been beside him was his brother.

For a long, long time, Rau had stayed at his side as the signpost for a little brother who didn’t know how to live in this wide world and was frightened by his own uncertainty, serving as his example.

That was why this was a first.

For the first time, Rau was not at Reu’s side while he cried—and instead, his hand was being held by someone else.

A soft, small hand, different from his brother’s.

Feeling the hand of someone who wished for a future together with him, Reu kept on leaning on it.

He kept on leaning on it.

16

—All told, after four rounds of Return by Death, Natsuki Subaru had broken out of the dead end.

She only had that single day in the royal capital to compare it to, but these several-day challenges using Return by Death had worn down her nerves, battered her spirit, and come close to clouding her very soul.

Even so, Subaru had overcome all those obstacles and finally made it to the fifth day.

Granted, though—

Emilio: “—I’m mad at you, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Emilio-kyun…”

Emilio: “Don’t give me those eyes! Honestly, that was reaaally dangerous, you know. When I heard what happened afterward, you have no idea how much the blood drained from my face…”

Hands on his hips, Emilio fumed, his white cheeks flushed red.

As you’d expect from a once-in-a-century pretty boy, even that angry display made Subaru’s brain go numb, but she understood perfectly well why he was so furious, so she couldn’t drop her contrite attitude.

The children of Arlam Village had been targeted by Witchbeasts, and on top of that, Subaru and Reu had nearly lost their lives.

As a result, after pouring himself into healing magic for them, Emilio had been left completely exhausted and had fallen asleep.

It had been while Emilio slept that Subaru had gone into the forest with Rau, both to save Reu and to strike back at the Witchbeasts.

To then be told that everyone at the mansion but him had been fighting for their lives while he was out… no wonder Emilio’s feelings had taken the form of that beautiful angry face.

Subaru: “Uuugh, I do feel bad for you, Emilio-kyun, but what a feast for the eyes…”

Emilio: “See! That’s exactly how you try to joke your way out of it again. If Roswaal hadn’t made it back, what do you think would’ve happened? And Tink, Tink’s just as bad.”

Subaru: “Sorry, sorry, don’t be mad at Tink. I’m the one who asked him to stay with you, Emilio-kyun.”

Considering there was always the chance someone had sicced those Witchbeasts on them, there had been a real risk that a follow-up attack on Arlam Village might come while Subaru and the others were away.

Fortunately, their precautions had turned out to be unnecessary, but it hadn’t been something they could afford not to prepare for.

For all she knew, the reason no second attack had come was precisely because Tink and Emilio had stayed in the village.

At any rate—

Emilio: “Defending Tink is fine, but how are you going to explain yourself, Subaru? Subaru who tied me to a chair so I couldn’t follow after you.”

Subaru: “Ugh…”

Emilio: ““Ugh” isn’t going to cut it. …I was really, reaaally worried, you know.”

With Emilio’s eyes drooping like that as he said it, Subaru’s guilt hit max.

No excuse she came up with would make up for what she’d done to Emilio.

It was true that she’d left him in the village as backup, but it was equally true that a big part of it had been a maiden’s wish not to expose him to danger.

Emilio: “Victor went out of his way to come to the village too, so I bet he was worried as well.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’ll make sure to properly thank Victa too. That little shota has done nothing but take care of me from start to finish…”

It had been all thanks to Victor that they’d realized her repeated cause of death had been the Witchbeasts’ curse, that they’d understood leaving her alone after she came back from the forest would have been fatal, and that—reckless as it was—he’d pointed out the path she had needed to take to survive.

Even before that, it had been thanks to him that Subaru had been able to believe in Rau and Reu again and steel herself to face the future together with everyone at the mansion, so she honestly couldn’t hold her head up around him.

Subaru: “Next time, I’ll give him a nice, gentle ear cleaning.”

Emilio: “Is that something Victor would actually be happy about?”

Subaru: “Huh? He wouldn’t? Isn’t having a girl clean your ears every guy’s dream?”

Emilio: “I… wouldn’t know…”

Emilio’s underwhelmed reaction genuinely surprised Subaru.

Maybe it was Subaru’s values that were off, or maybe it was just some cultural difference in this other world.

Subaru: “In that case, I’m out of moves…”

Emilio: “How about you just thank him honestly?”

Subaru: “But that alone doesn’t feel like enough for me… What about ten ear cleanings?”

Emilio: “If you don’t have any other ideas, I think starting with a thank you is best.”

Faced with such an unoriginal suggestion, Subaru agonized over whether that really was enough.

If possible, Subaru was the type who wanted to go overboard with the wrapping on anniversaries and special events; if she couldn’t give them her all, she honestly felt it was better not to celebrate at all.

Subaru: “So if it’s just gonna be a compromise, I’ll put the thank you on hold until I come up with something.”

Emilio: “Try to come up with it sooner rather than later, okay? I’ll think with you.”

Subaru: “Wow, that’s reassuring. It’s like, you know, the two of us working on a project together! A first bite!”

Emilio: “Sorry, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

At Subaru’s excited nonsense, Emilio replied with a troubled look.

Then silence fell for a while between the two of them, standing in the mansion's courtyard, feeling the breeze.

Even sharing such a small moment was a delightful reward for Subaru.

Normally, Subaru wasn't good with quiet stretches, but if it was with Emilio, they didn't bother her.

At any rate—

Emilio: “Once again, you ended up saving me, Subaru. I should be the one thanking you.”

Subaru: “Eh! Emilio-kyun, you're gonna give me a reward?!”

Emilio: “Not a reward, a thank you. Would an ear cleaning be good?”

Subaru: “An ear cleaning doesn't count as a reward! Ah! You're right! When I imagine it happening to me, it's not a reward at all!”

Cut by the sharp edge of the boomerang she'd thrown herself, Subaru's eyes went wide.

Chuckling wryly at her reaction, Emilio asked:

Emilio: “Then what do you want?”

Subaru: “…”

At that utterly defenseless attitude, dark thoughts started to bubble up inside Subaru.

This Emilio, despite having such perfect looks, had shockingly low defenses when it came to dealing with people.

That was great for Subaru—but it was just as great for anyone else.

In other words, if she dawdled, someone might just snatch him away in no time.

Subaru: “This is the time to make full use of my advantage…!”

Emilio: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “A-Anything is fine, right? You’re grateful to me, aren’t you, Emilio-kyun?”

Emilio: “Well, yes, but the way you’re confirming it makes it kind of hard to just nod along…”

Her voice unintentionally went shrill, making her sound like some kind of creep, and Emilio looked worried, but Subaru took a deep breath and successfully sealed away the rising evil thoughts with a *Demon-Sealing Wave*.

Sitting down on the rice cooker of her closed-off heart, Subaru cleared her throat, and then—

Subaru: “Then… will you go on a date with me?”

Emilio: “A date?”

Subaru: “It’s when the two of us go out together, see the same things, eat the same things, do the same things, and share the same memories.”

Emilio: “…You’re okay with just that?”

Subaru: “That’s exactly what I want.”

That was the promise that had already vanished, the shining future Subaru had wished for at the end of these grueling five days she’d gone through over and over again.

At Subaru’s proposal, Emilio brought a hand to his mouth and thought for a while.

To Subaru, even that pensive pose looked like something out of a painting, and then Emilio smiled with a “Mm” and said:

Emilio: “Got it. Then let’s go on a “date”, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Yes! Emilio-kyun, *Maji Tenshi*!”

Emilio: “What’s that?”

Subaru: “Shortened, E.M.T.!”

Emilio: “And I still don’t know what that means.”

At Subaru’s bubbly excitement, Emilio couldn’t help bursting into laughter.

Because Emilio laughed like that for her, Subaru only got more carried away, hamming it up even more in hopes of drawing out more of his smiles.

At long last, she had reached a brand-new day.

As if blessing that beginning and the road that lay ahead, the sun climbing high in the sky watched over Subaru and Emilio with a gentle smile.

Shining down, it proclaimed that Natsuki Subaru’s life in another world was still far from over.

“The End?”

Re:Zero Academy

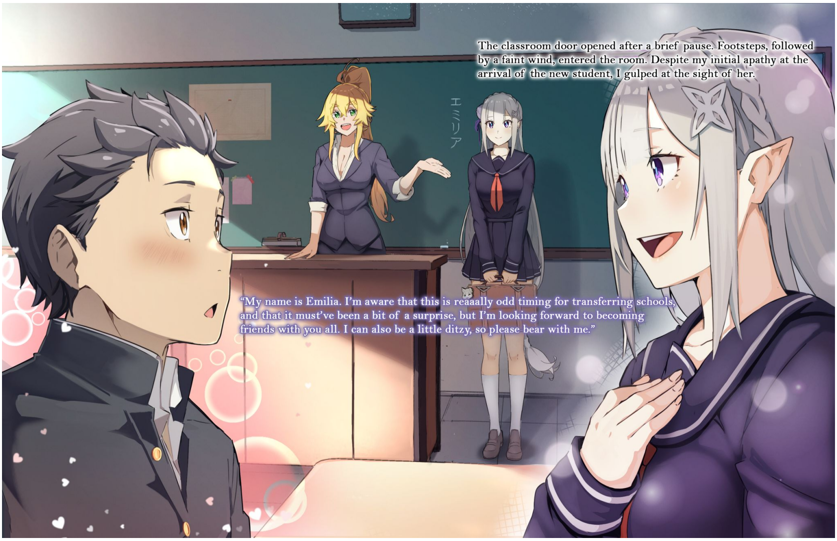

The classroom door opened after a brief pause. Footsteps, followed by a faint wind, entered the room. Despite my initial apathy at the arrival of the new student, I gulped at the sight of her.

“My name is Emilia. I’m aware that this is reaaally odd timing for transferring schools, and that it must’ve been a bit of a surprise, but I’m looking forward to becoming friends with you all. I can also be a little ditzy, so please bear with me.”

First Period

1

It was just like any other day. And like always, my morning call came without warning and with an impact.

“Cooome on! Wake up. It’s morning!”

“Buegh!” Awakened from my sleep with an impact to my stomach, a belch escaped my mouth. No, actually, it’d be more accurate to say that I was forcefully woken up.

Having had air pushed out of my lungs, I opened my eyes in agony. A cute, adorable face I knew very well was in front of me.

“Good morning, my foolish sister,” I said.

“Good morning indeed, I suppose, foolish brother,” she responded. Unsure of whether it was because she sensed the irritation in my voice, she climbed off my stomach as she spoke. “It’s time for you to wake up. If you don’t, you’ll be late for school, I suppose, and mom and dad will get mad at you, in fact.”

She was a young girl with a doll-like face and hair the color of pale cream made into vertical drills. I always imagined she would make for a great decorative doll if she didn't speak. However, at the same time, she was also very adorable whenever she interacted with others, charming them with her tact.

"As unbelievable as it may be, she is my younger sister, Natsuki Beatrice, but word on the street is that she looks nothing like her older brother."

"Who are you introducing Betty to?" Beatrice asked. "You are weird as usual, big br… Subaru."

"You were so close. You should've just finished your thought," I said. "I'm really sad that you don't call me big brother these days."

"S-Stop speaking nonsense and get up! If you don't, we'll keep those twins waiting!"

"That's not good. Alright, I'll get changed. Beako, help me take my clothes off, would ya?"

"Do it yourself!" she exclaimed, throwing a pillow at my face before leaving the room.

The way she was acting out, despite interacting with her older brother, an event that should be heartwarming, made me wonder if she was going through her rebellious phase. She had even stopped taking baths with me. But the worst part of it all is the way she addresses me. It was hard to believe allowing her to call her own older brother by name was good for her upbringing. I just wished our parents would've done something, but they were rather liberal. No, actually, they're just indifferent about such things. So it was up to me, as her older brother, to set a good example.

"And so I got changed and made my way downstairs," I said as I walked down the stairs after having finished changing into my uniform, an empty school bag in hand. The faint aroma of toast hanging in the air indicated that breakfast was ready and set on the table.

"Mornin'!" a middle-aged man greeted me as soon as I opened the door.

"Yeah, yeah, mornin', mornin'," I said dismissively.

The middle-aged man pouted at my response in dissatisfaction. "Hey now, son, what's with that cold response? You should be a little more like my beloved daughter."

"What the?" I replied. "You played along with this old man's enthusiastic 'mornin', Beako?"

"B-Because, if Betty doesn't, Papa gets really sad," she explained. "Betty doesn't want to see this family fall apart because of Betty, I suppose."

She seemed to have faced a terrible dilemma despite her young age. But then again, Beako's classmate, Petra, also uses difficult words. I guess elementary school kids tend to be precocious these days. Kinda scary how quickly Japan is advancing.

"So," I said, stretching my neck as I sat down, "what's for breakfast today?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Mom replied while bringing the toast to the table. "Mayonnaise toast, mayonnaise soup, salad with mayonnaise, and fish stewed in mayonnaise."

Our family's breakfast had a fixed menu. And even though each dish could be categorized as Japanese-style or Western-style, they all had one ingredient in common: mayonnaise.

"If you want to use your own mayonnaise, get it from the fridge yourself," Mom said. "Add more mayonnaise if it isn't enough."

"Yes ma'am," I responded. "But this is really bizarre when you think about it. Are there even any other households where each family member has their own mayonnaise?"

"Back when Betty used to think this was normal, Petra laughed at her when she told her about it… Betty is still traumatized by that experience, I suppose."

While sympathizing with my gloomy little sister, I proceeded to take out more mayonnaise from the fridge. My family consisted of mayonnaise fanatics who even had their own personal mayonnaise. This included me, of course. Beako was no exception, either.

That was how Natsuki family mornings always began. We were a family of four. Even though there was a problem with my little sister going through her rebellious phase, it was safe to say we were living peacefully in our happy, mundane life.

As I was enjoying my mayonnaise toast, which was just regular bread that was toasted after spreading some mayo across it, there was a ring at the door.

“Hm?” I said, before turning my attention to the clock. It was already time for me to get going. “Crap, I took too much time this morning.”

I shoved the rest of the mayonnaise toast in my mouth and washed it down with some mayonnaise soup. As I stood up, carrying my bag over my shoulder, Beako also got up from her seat with her randoseru bag on.

“…Why are you staring at Betty like that, I suppose?” asked Beatrice, noticing my gaze.

“No, it’s just that you look really good in a randoseru bag as always,” I replied. “If there was an award for the best randoseru bag wearer, you’d win it.”

“Th-That’s not a compliment!”

As I patted the blushing Beako’s head, we headed to the door. Noticing that mom and dad had begun flirting behind us, we said our goodbyes in hushed voices and hurriedly left the room.

“Good morning, Subaru,” a young girl with blue hair down to her neck greeted me after I put my shoes on and exited the front door. It was Rem.

As usual, Rem’s smile was like a flower in full bloom, and her voice was full of liveliness. In fact, she’s so beautiful that even though we're just childhood friends, I'm afraid someone might stab me for having her meet with me every morning before school. Despite my fear, however, I had no intention of giving up this routine.

"Is there something wrong?" asked Rem. "Why are you staring at Rem's face like that?"

"Nah, it's nothing," I said, unable to confess that I was captivated by her beauty. "Good mornin'."

"Yes, good morning!" she responded without minding my strange behavior.

Ever since we were little kids, she was never the intrusive type. This was one of the qualities I liked about her.

"Good morning to you too, Beatrice," Rem said, turning her attention to her.

"Good morning, in fact," she responded. "You're a really devoted one, I suppose, coming all the way here just for Subaru every morning. I swear, you have really strange tastes compared to your older sister."

"Wouldn't that mean you also have strange tastes, Beatrice?" Rem asked.

"Why would that mean that Betty has strange tastes?!"

I watched Rem tease Beako from the sidelines. Just as she was my childhood friend, Rem was a long-time friend of Beako. She was like her older sister. And she adored Beako like a real sister, but Beako refused to accept this. Maybe this also has something to do with her rebellious phase. Jeez, I just wish she would grow up already.

"Speaking of younger sisters," I said. "Where is your older sister today?"

"She's at Roswaal's place this morning," answered Rem. "He's going out for an interview today, so he asked her to clean his house while he's away."

“She’s as diligent as ever,” I said. “Though I have mixed feelings about the whole ordeal as Ram’s close friend.”

The girl we were talking about, Ram, was Rem’s older twin sister. Unlike Rem, who was gentle and gracious, Ram was rather strict and harsh to others. Even though they are identical in appearance, their personalities couldn’t be more different.

Apparently, Ram had been charmed by a famous writer, and had been aggressively making a move on him. From Rem’s story, it sounded like she already had a key to his house. Although, this really isn’t the kinda stuff I wanna know about my classmate. Rem stared at me with her head tilted. I was unsure whether she was indifferent about the situation or simply oblivious about it, but I decided to drop the topic nonetheless.

“Hey, what are you two doing chatting in front of the house, in fact,” Beako said. “We better get going, I suppose.”

“Oh, roger that,” I responded. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“Yes,” Rem said. “Let’s depart.”

Throwing my bag over my shoulder, we began walking. Beatrice was in the middle, with me walking along the road and Rem on the other side. This was how we walked to school whenever Ram wasn’t with us.

“By the way,” Rem started, “your horoscope had the best luck today, Subaru.”

“Seriously?” I said. “So something good might happen today, huh? I didn’t know at all since we don’t watch TV in the morning at our place.”

“It said you’ll meet someone great today,” continued Rem. “It said the first girl you meet today is your soulmate.”

“Betty is the first girl Subaru met today, in fact.”

“Rem’s mistake. The third girl you meet today is your soulmate.”

“The horoscope was that specific?!” I exclaimed.

Who was the third girl, again? Does my mom count? If not, then Rem would be the third girl I met today. But wouldn’t it be weird to say I ‘met’ Rem today when I’ve known her for a long time? I’m also still skeptical if I should add my own sister and mother into this.

As I tilted my head in contemplation, a girl’s voice stopped us in our tracks. “Oh, what perfect timing to run into you here.”

She was a beautiful woman with pale skin and white hair, dressed completely in black as if she was on her way to a funeral.

Noticing it was a girl I knew well, I greeted her. “Hey, good morning, Echidna.”

Echidna was a university student and the eldest… Or was it the third? Daughter of the suspicious family who owns the mansion we pass by everyday on our way to school.

“What do you mean by perfect timing?” I asked. “Did something happen?”

“Yes, something did happen,” responded Echidna. “Or shall I say, there was a disappearance? You three remember my depraved sister, right? Well, she seemed to have vanished somewhere. I’m worried that she collapsed in the middle of the road somewhere while taking a stroll, so I’m out here looking for her. You haven’t seen her by any chance, have you?”

“You mean Sekhmet?” Rem asked rhetorically. “No, Rem hasn’t seen her. You haven’t either, right, Subaru?”

“I haven’t seen her today, either,” I responded. “If I remember correctly, last time she went missing, she went to take out the garbage and fell asleep next to the dumpster, right? The garbage collector guy said it was a feast for the eyes.”

Echidna’s older sister, Sekmet, was also beautiful but infamous for her slothfulness. She was often seen walking around in clothes that were as exposing as underwear, which was something I was always thankful for as a member of the opposite sex in the same age range.

At the same time, however, she seemed more like a person who needed help and care than just a simple sexy lady, which was a great disappointment.

“Well, that aside,” I said as I put my hand on my jaw and stared at Echidna intently.

“Hm? What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?” Echidna reacted to my gaze.

She was beautiful. If I’m not counting mom in the equation, that would mean Echidna is the third girl I’ve met today. Could she be my soulmate?

“You’re going to make me blush if you keep staring at me like that,” she said. “I am still a girl, after all. Besides, I only left the house to look for my sister, so I didn’t put any makeup on.”

“She’s right, it’s not very gentlemanly, Subaru,” Rem agreed, grabbing my arm. “You’re troubling Echidna. You must calm down and reconsider who the third girl was. It was Rem.”

“Your desires are spilling out, I suppose,” Beatrice said, grabbing my other arm. “But Betty agrees that this woman is no good, in fact.”

“What’s gotten into you two?!”

Despite Echidna’s apparent joke, the two girls grabbing my arms from both sides looked deadly serious. I swear, girls sure love these stupid fortune tellings.

“Echidna!” came another voice. “Big sister wasn’t at the dumpster!” A blonde loli girl with blue eyes and giant boobs came running towards us, screaming. She was the second oldest among Echidna’s siblings.

“Hey, Minerva,” I said, calling her name.

“Hm?! Oh, if it isn’t Rem, Beatrice, and Natsuki!” Minerva replied, halting and flashing a bright smile. “What are you three doing here?”

She was beautiful as ever. Instinctively, I took her hands and said, “Not counting my mother and sister, you are the third. Meaning, you’re my soulmate, Minerva!”

“Wha—?!”

As I grabbed onto her soft hands, Minerva looked back and forth between her hands and my face. Her face rapidly began blushing, until it was completely red.

“B-But, I can only do house chores,” she said, trembling.

“I’ll provide for you,” I responded.

“I-I’m also really clumsy!”

“I love that part of you, too.”

“I-I also have to fight for world peace!”

“You are my whole world.”

With her face as red as a boiled octopus, Minerva shrieked and stomped in place. Damn, she’s really cute. I might’ve teased her too much. The fact that it seemed possible to make her my wife right then and there was rather frightening. I wonder if anyone’s ever tried to seduce her, considering how cute she is.

“Calm down Minerva,” said Echidna. “It’s just one of Natsuki’s usual shenanigans.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Well,” I began, “I can’t admit that I was messing with you, since that’ll make me scummy, so the answer is no, I’m dead seri…ow, ow, ow, Rem, your heel is sinking into my toes.” Rem was stepping on my toes with a smile on her face. I had no choice but to concede.

Minerva placed her hands on her giant bosom, and let out a big sigh. “O-Of course. Oh, you scared me there. I was so surprised, my breasts might’ve shrunk a little.”

"That would be a loss to humanity!" I exclaimed, trembling, to which Minerva punched me.

"Shut up! You idiot!"

Despite being hit quite hard, it felt good. So strange.

"Whatever, we didn't see your sister, I suppose. That's the end of the story, in fact."

"Oh, you sound bitter," Echidna said. "Are you upset we're getting all your brother's attention?"

"It's not like that!" Beatrice exclaimed, puffing up her cheeks. "Betty really hates this, in fact!"

She looks really mad. She must really hate that we're wasting our time on our way to school. However, as she pointed out, it was evident that we would be of no help to Echidna and Minerva. And school was starting soon, so it was about time we took our leave.

"Sorry we couldn't be of any help to you two," I said, before leaving.

"No, you kids need to prioritize your studies," Echidna responded. "Besides, this is our family's problem."

"You sound like an old lady, I suppose," Beatrice jabbed.

"Of course I'd sound old to you, considering I'm a college student with a lot of time on her hands, whereas you're only a child."

"I'm helping out with the household right now, so I have a lot of time on my hands too!" Minerva exclaimed.

"You rarely help out, though?" Echidna jabbed.

"Same goes for Rem's sister," Rem added.

"I think her unhelpfulness is incomparable," I commented.

It was an awkward way to end our interaction, but we parted ways after promising them we would call them if we saw Sekhmet. Watching Minerva run off into the distance, and Echidna slowly walk off, made me truly wonder if they were really related. Well, I guess one similarity would be that they're both really pretty.

"Subaru, Subaru," Rem called me.

"Yes, Rem, what is it?"

"Rem just remembered. The horoscope this morning said your soulmate's name starts with R and ends with M, and is three letters in total."

"It was that exclusive?!"

2

As we were leisurely walking after parting ways with Echidna and Minerva, we arrived at a fork in the road, separating our school and Beatrice's elementary school. This is where Rem and I are gonna say goodbye to Beako.

"Ah, Beatrice!" a girl with maroonish-red hair and cutesy wide eyes, who was waiting for us at the fork in the road, called Beatrice's name.

"If it isn't Petra, I suppose," Beatrice said, responding to her classmate.

"Good morning, Subaru, Rem," Petra greeted, bowing to us. What a well mannered young lady.

In terms of attractiveness, my little sister was on equal footing, but Petra was more charming. Well, Beako could be charming too, once you got to know her.

"What?" she asked. "If there's something you want to say, come out and say it, I suppose."

"I'm the only one who knows your good qualities," I said.

"What do you mean by 'only'?!" she exclaimed. "Betty isn't hiding them! In fact, she has so many that she has lost count!”

I patted her head, saying, “I get it, I get it,” as she continued yelling, waving her vertically curled hair. For some reason, though, this made her even madder. I swear, girls her age are so hard to understand.

“Don’t worry Subaru,” Petra interjected. “I know a lot of Beatrice’s good qualities too.”

“I see, that’s reassuring,” I said. “Take good care of Beako at school too, okay?”

“Yes, of course! And… What about my good qualities? Do you recognize them too?”

“An obvious one would be that you’re an exceptionally kind girl, Petra,” I responded. “You’re also respectful, gentle, friends with Beako, and above all else, a pretty young girl who’ll surely grow up to be a beautiful lady someday.”

Petra smirked and offered her head to be patted, which I then did. I shouldn’t be patting someone else’s daughter in this day and age, but she has this powerrr that doesn’t let me say no. Now that I think about it, doesn’t she make me pat her every time we meet? Nah, I must be overthinking it.

“Mmmm,” Rem groaned.

“Boo, I suppose,” Beatrice booed.

“And what are you two pouting about?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Rem, turning her face away.

“You don’t need to know,” answered Beatrice, looking the other way.

There was nothing more I could do. I understood that whenever a girl said there was nothing wrong, there was absolutely something wrong. However, in this instance, I couldn’t put a finger on what it was.

"Petra, do you think you know what they're pouting about?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm only a child."

That's true.

She then slipped out from beneath my hand, and, taking the still-pouting Beako's hand, bowed to me and Rem. "We'll be going now. Typhon is the class leader today. If we don't hurry and go, the classroom is going to be a mess."

"Are you implying that she's gonna mess up the classroom?!" I exclaimed.

"That's Typhon's quirk, I suppose. We're leaving now, in fact!" Beatrice said, as Petra pulled her away.

Rem and I waved at the two elementary schoolers as they ran off.

"Well then, let's get going as well," I said.

"Do you also recognize Rem's good qualities, Subaru?"

"You're cute."

"Don't think saying that'll let you off the hook every time," she replied somewhat cheerfully.

Guess I'm off the hook then. Maybe I should've given more thought to my answer, but I'd become completely dependent on this answer since it's always worked ever since we were little.

As I pulled Rem, who was looking downwards, another voice spoke to us.

"Are ya spoilin' Rem again, Cap'n?"

"Ahh, didn't I say to hang back and watch, Gaf-Gaf?"

When I turned around to see who they were, two figures were poking their heads out from behind the utility pole in the middle of the fork in the road. One of them was wearing a gakuran, while the other was wearing a sailor outfit. I instantly recognized them as they were both close acquaintances.

“Garfiel and Daphne, what’re you two middle schoolers doing here?”

“Who cares what we’re doin’ or where we’re at,” Garfiel answered, condescendingly. “Bringin’ the topic back to you, Cap’n, you’re breakin’ too many hearts out here, as usual. Right, Daphne?”

“Gaf-Gaf was waiting for Ram-Ram here as usual,” said Daphne, selling him out. “Daphne didn’t want to go search for Met-Met, so she decided to play with Gaf-Gaf.”

“Daphne, you!” Garfiel cried indignantly.

Seeing his condescending smile subside, it was now my turn to laugh at him mockingly. “Heh, I see, so that’s how it is,” I said. “So you’re the one doing his usual thing, huh? I gotta ask, are you ever gonna give up? Ram is head over heels for a novelist.”

“Th-That’s my amazing self’s business!” Garfiel exclaimed. “Besides, if I become a novelist, my amazin’ self’ll be on equal footing!”

“I admire your conviction to determine your future for the girl you love, but…”

I was hesitant to continue my thought. Firstly, it was hard to imagine that Garfiel would be able to become a novelist with his level of intelligence. And secondly, Ram wasn’t the type of girl to fall in love with someone based on their occupation.

“Well, first of all, with your level of intelligence, Gaf-Gaf, you’ll never be able to become a novelist. Besides, Ram-Ram isn’t in love with every novelist in the world.”

“Thank you for bluntly telling him what I was too hesitant to say.”

As dumbfounded as I was for Daphne to come out and say everything I decided to refrain from saying out of consideration, it was much better than how Garfiel, who was collapsed on his knees, must've been feeling. However, Garfiel was a man of great dignity. Despite his pummeled spirit, he wasn't ready to throw in the towel.

"Are you okay, Garfiel?" I asked. "Your wounds aren't that deep."

"Heh, thanks Cap'n," he replied. "But I won't lose to something like this… Speakin' of which, ain't Ram with ya today?"

"She's at Roswaal's place this morning," answered Rem. "She was asked to look after his house while he's away, and went to pick up a spare key."

"Guhah!" exasperated Garfiel, collapsing on the spot after hearing Rem's non-ill-intended words.

"G-Garfiel!" I exclaimed.

Even I was uncomfortable hearing how deep Ram's infatuation went. It must've been a great blow for Garfiel, who had feelings for her, to hear that she was getting a spare key to another man's house. I couldn't come up with anything to say that would make him feel better.

"Well, including all his shortcomings, this is what makes Gaf-Gaf who he is," Daphne said, flashing an alluring smile that was unnatural for a middle schooler, as she grabbed onto Garfiel's feet. "You two can go on your way. Daphne will take care of the rest from here."

Worried that she was going to start dragging Garfiel by his feet, I extended my hand to stop her. However…

"Not to worry," she said, "Gaf-Gaf is a softie, so being gentle with him will only make him weaker. Besiiides, once we get to school, there'll be people like Mimi, who'll give him attention. It's better to put him in his place when we can."

"I-Is that so?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes, it is," she replied, faintly smiling as she tilted her head. "Well then, see you around."

And so she proceeded to drag Garfiel away. At that point, stopping her would've been out of bounds. Middle schoolers have their own way of dealing with things, and it isn't our place to interfere. "At least that's what I'll tell myself. I don't wanna know more about their affairs."

"To even make such an innocent young middle schooler go head over heels for her… Sister is truly amazing!"

"I can't agree with that comment!"

Oh, forgot to mention this, but Daphne is the fifth daughter of the sisters, where Sekhmet is the eldest. Just so you know. This morning sure has been lively though, huh.

3

After parting ways with the middle school duo, Rem and I arrived at our school, Lugunica Academy.

Lugunica Academy was a school that kept its antiquated traditions. However, in recent years, it had put in an effort to modernize it, and as a result, became a diverse place home to a variety of differing values. Although I chose this place simply because it was close to my home, I was decently enjoying its rather liberal style.

"Ah, Subaru, they're conducting a bag inspection," Rem informed me, noticing the inspection that was going on at the school gate before I could with her superior eyesight.

"That must be the student council. They sure put in a lot of hard work from the wee hours of the morning."

As we got closer to the gate, I finally saw the inspection as well. Lugunica Academy conducts events such as bag inspections or morning assembly every now and then. This all started when the current student council was established. And at the center of this student council was the elite woman president who was overseeing this morning's bag inspection.

"Good morning, Natsuki Subaru and Rem," said the student council president.

“Mornin’ Ms. Student Council President.”

“Good morning, Crusch,” Rem greeted.

The student council president Crusch Karsten stood tall with her shoulders square, wearing a crisply maintained navy blue blazer. Her distinctive long green hair and dignified look gave off an air of manliness despite her sex. However, her curves made her femininity apparent, so it would be more accurate to say she gave off a warrior-like aura.

“As you can see, we’re conducting a bag inspection this morning,” Crusch said. “We’d appreciate it if you two could cooperate.”

“Yeah, feel free to look all you want,” I responded, handing her my bag. “It’s empty, anyways.”

“Although you shouldn’t be proud of that, it would seem you outplayed me this time,” she replied, shaking her head as she confirmed that my bag was empty. “How interesting,” she continued, smirking like a hero from a Hollywood movie.

“I wasn’t trying to challenge you.”

“Alrighty then,” another person who suddenly appeared from the side said cheerfully. “I, Ferris, will check Rem’s bag!”

The person was Ferris, Crusch’s right-hand man.

Adorning a cat-ear headband as usual, Ferris began inspecting Rem’s bag as his audaciously short skirt flapped in the wind. The idea that a girl should inspect another girl’s belongings sure becomes pointless with Ferris, I thought, as he was in fact a man.

“I get that he looks good in girl’s clothes, but don’t you get complaints about a guy inspecting girls’ stuff?” I asked.

“That does not pose an issue,” Crusch answered. “Everyone is aware of Ferris’s above average femininity. In fact, the number of men asking to have their bags inspected by me and girls asking Ferris is about the same.”

“Girls might be different, but some guys get off from that… Wait, I’m different, though! Don’t put me in the same category as those kinda guys!” Suddenly, I became worried about how people perceived me for naturally handing my bag to Crusch for inspection. Meanwhile, Ferris continued inspecting Rem’s belongings.

“Huh? Why do you have a pencil box for boys?” he asked.

“That’s for Subaru in case he forgot his,” responded Rem.

“Then how about this plain old notebook without any cute features?”

“It’s for assignments that Rem does for Subaru while imitating his handwriting.”

“Hmm, then how about this lunch box?”

“Rem prepared that for Subaru in case he’s unable to buy anything at the food shop.”

“Alright, let’s punish Subaru,” concluded Ferris.

“What the hell?!” I exclaimed

I mean, I get it. I do. But still!

Following Ferris’s condemnation, I leaned towards Rem. “Rem, don’t I always tell you that you don’t have to do so much for me?”

“Sorry,” she said. “Rem is painfully aware of that. But whenever she imagines you crying about something, she just can’t help it. She starts preparing for every possible scenario.”

“I appreciate that, but I won’t cry just because I forget my pencil lead, or not do my homework, or fail to eat lunch!”

Even though I’d never cried for such trivial reasons before, Rem still seemed to have seen me as a child. At one point, there was a rumor in our class that Rem was my caretaker, but it was beginning to become true.

“Talk about young love,” Ferris commented. “Am I right or am I right, Lady Crusch?”

“Agreed,” Crusch concurred. “Ferris and I make lunch for each other as well. There is nothing to be embarrassed about, but if you do not want to be the only one taken care of, you should express your gratitude every once in a while.”

“I made your favorite omelet today, Lady Crusch,” said Ferris. “The sweet kind.”

“I also made your favorite omelet today,” responded Crusch. “The salty kind.”

Ignoring the lovey-dovey student council president and her vice president, I picked up the lunch box Rem prepared for me. Wrapped in a blue cloth, it was twice the size of Rem’s own lunch box and quite heavy.

“Jeez, what were you gonna do with this if I didn’t eat this?”

“Rem thought she and her sister could have it for dinner.”

“That’s so sad, don’t do that. Just tell me next time. I’ll be having this for lunch today, thanks. Could you also show me the answers to the homework?”

“Yes, Rem will be looking forward to lunch.”

Cramming the lunch box in my bag that had just been handed back to me, we started walking towards the school building. That was when we noticed a ruckus from the side, where they were also conducting a bag inspection.

“Like I said! Why are you like that?! Could ya not make me repeat myself? I ain’t sayin’ anythin’ difficult, am I?”

“I do not believe I am saying anything difficult to grasp, either. It is you who is refusing to listen to my sound advice and causing a scene. You are the prime example of an ignoramus.”

“Do ya think usin’ big words makes ya sound respectable? That’s just embarrasin'. You're in high school already, why don't ya grow up? It's cringe."

"Don't you dare criticize the way I talk when you cannot even hide the vulgarity in your speech. I may be forgiving, but I also have my limits."

The atmosphere around the front gate was turning tense due to the heated argument between the two female students with distinctive appearances.

One of the girls was a beautiful young girl with purple hair and a prepubescent physique that could be mistaken for a middle school student. The girl she was arguing with, on the other hand, was also a beautiful young girl, who had the body of a fully matured woman and orange hair that exuded an alluring charm.

The girl who spoke with an accent was Anastasia of the student council, and the girl who spoke with sophisticated vernacular was Priscilla, the troublemaker of the school. They often butted heads as the student council accountant and the granddaughter of the chairman of the school board.

"They're at it again," said Rem, sighing at the usual sight.

Their antagonizing relationship was famous all around the school. The relationship between Priscilla, who bowed to no one, and Anastasia, who never backed down from a fight, was like oil and fire. From what I saw, I suspected they were fighting about the uniform Priscilla was wearing, which she had obviously customized to her own preferences. Well, Priscilla isn't willing to follow any school rules, including its rules on uniforms. One could say it's a win that she's even wearing the uniform despite it being changed in every way.

"But I bet she's the only one who could get that money-mongering accountant so worked up," I commented as I watched the commotion from a distance.

Then a voice suddenly came raining down on me from behind. "I would appreciate it if you would refrain from referring to Ana with such a slanderous nickname.”

“Geh,” I exasperated, feeling goosebumps appearing because of the condescending voice.

When I turned around, there was a good-looking, gentlemanly bastard towering over me. He was also a member of the student council.

“Sup Julius, my senior,” I greeted the man.

“I do not know why you call me that when we are in the same grade,” replied Julius, as he pushed back his bangs. “But that aside, please rescind the earlier remark you made about Ana. She is only a little bit obsessed with monetary affairs, and loves her job too much.”

“I think that opinion is a little more than biased.”

Julius was something called a student council secretary. As indicated by his rhetoric, he was a loyal follower of Anastasia, and they were often seen together.

“Don’t you have a job to do? I’ll tell on you to Crusch that you’re slacking off.”

“As a matter of fact, I am done with my job,” said Julius, flashing his pearly whites. “Although it was quite a workload with so many girls wanting to have their bags inspected by me, they were very cooperative, so it made my job a lot easier.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever man,” I said, scouring.

Why can’t girls see through this guy’s phoniness? I thought, before remembering that it wasn’t only girls who were in love with Julius. Men also speak highly of him too. Which means I must be the only one who can see through his act. I clicked my tongue. Truth makes a man lonely, doesn’t it?

“Rem wonders what they’re arguing about today.”

“Obviously, they were arguing about her outfit too, but the biggest problem was the way Priscilla was handling her bag," Julius explained. "She was making Al carry it for her instead of holding it herself."

"Al is that guy wearing a mask, right?" I confirmed.

There was a man next to Anastasia and Priscilla, standing anxiously as the two girls continued their heated argument. He wasn't particularly tall, but was well built. He looked about the same age as my dad, but it was impossible to say for sure due to the mask he was wearing.

There were several rumors circulating about this mask. Some say he's hiding a horrible burn mark, while others suggest that his face is covered in stitches. Personally, I'd like to think Priscilla was making him wear it on a whim. I mean, not only does he change his mask everyday, he doesn't strike me as a guy with a dark past at all.

To add on to his distinctive characteristics, Al had a prosthetic left arm. From what I've heard, it was high quality and acquired through Priscilla's family connections. One time, he'd opened a can of peaches for me with a can opener equipped to his arm. His arm was like a swiss army knife.

"How many times do I gotta tell ya?!" Anastasia's voice echoed. "An outsider can't enter the school buildin'. You know how stressin' it is to hafta kick out a grown ass man I find wanderin' around the buildin'?"

"That is none of my business," Priscilla retorted. "No one is asking you to kick him out. Ignore him. He is only ever there to tend to me anyways. Additionally, if he is not around, who then will carry my bag? I refuse to hold anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks."

"It's empty! It's practically the same weight as a pair of chopsticks!"

Anastasia was evidently getting irritated every time Priscilla talked back. The intensity of the situation kept escalating to the point I feared a catfight might break out if it continued any further. In which case, Anastasia would've been the one to get hurt. Though she may not look it, Priscilla was unexpectedly athletic. In fact, it was even possible that she was provoking Anastasia to get her to throw the first punch. No, no, I'm overthinking it. She's just naturally defiant.

"Things are not looking good for Ana," Julius commented. "I guess I have no choice but to go and stop them."

"Yeah, yeah, go do that," I agreed. "Before they get into a catfight and things get really messy with Nurse Elsa hearing about it."

Nurse Elsa was the school nurse known for her sexually provocative appearance and speech quirk. She was always quick to hear about any conflict that happened in the school and often appeared to neutralize the situation, claiming she couldn't help her old habits. Every student who was taken to the infirmary by her always came back completely obedient. Nobody knew what was done to them there, as she refused to answer. Consequently, the general consensus was that she conducts a horrific operation on her patient's digestive system to make them docile.

"Class is about to start, anywho," said Crusch, who was now by our side. "Go on ahead to your classroom, Natsuki Subaru. We will take care of the rest."

"Oh no, we drew the short meowraw," added Ferris.

"Voluntarily drawing the short straw to improve the school is part of the student council's job."

With that, the three student council members walked off toward the scene of the commotion. I'm sure even Priscilla will back off once she's facing those three.

"We've been here too long," I said. "Let's get to our classroom. I'm tired."

"There's so much going on this morning," commented Rem.

"Seriously. Although, I'm sure there won't be any more problems."

There was a good possibility that I had jinxed myself by saying such a thing. Even though I truly wished to not encounter any more problems when I had said it, it seemed as though God had other plans for me. The next problem appeared after I changed into my school shoes and started walking towards my classroom.

“Hey, Subaru! Think fast, receive!”

“Huh?”

Startled by the sudden voice and a girl running towards me, I instinctively lowered my hips and went into a receiving position for volleyball as instructed. Then, a small foot landed on my hands.

“Blue Mountain Receive!” yelled the figure.

Reacting to what seemed to be the name of a technique, I swung my arms upward with the person on my hands, letting out a great “Hmph!” Though I wouldn’t say the girl was as light as a volleyball, she successfully flew over my head and landed on top of the shoe rack behind me.

I turned around to see what the fuss was all about. However, the girl just put her index finger on her lips, indicating to me to keep quiet, with a shushing sound. Rem and I looked at each other, confused by the whole situation. Then, from the same direction the girl came, an insanely handsome man flashing a million dollar smile came running.

“Perfect timing. Rem, Subaru,” the man said.

He had distinctive red hair, eyes blue as a clear sky, and a physical appearance that screamed perfection. He was Reinhard, the school stud beloved by every girl in school and even the ladies in the shopping district, who was now approaching me with a rather distressed expression.

“Yo, wussup?” I said.

“It’s nothing dire,” he said. “But have you two seen Felt by any chance?”

“Felt?” Rem responded. “Well, she’s uhh…”

Rem turned to me with a troubled look. However, I quickly grasped the situation. What now? I wondered for a second before letting out a sigh of exasperation. Guess I have no choice.

“Nah, haven’t seen her yet,” I lied. “Why? Is something the matter?”

“No,” answered Reinhard. “I just ran into her earlier, so I wanted to invite her out to lunch… But before I could, she suddenly started running as soon as our eyes met.”

“Sounds like Felt,” I commented. “And you don’t give up easily either, do ya?”

As a fellow man, I admired his tenacity, but also wondered why he was so obsessed with Felt. “I mean, I’m not saying you could just snag any girl you want, but with your looks, you shouldn’t have any problem finding a girlfriend.”

“It’s hard to explain,” Reinhard replied. “Isn’t that how these things work? Don’t you think so, Subaru? Rem?”

“I don’t know, man.”

“Rem thinks so too!” Rem responded enthusiastically. “So Rem will be rooting for you!”

Looking happy at Rem’s words, Reinhard straightened his collar. “Well then, I’ll go look for her.”

“Why don’t you just wait for her in the classroom?” I suggested. “Class is about to start anyways.”

“Giving up on what I haven’t finished isn’t my style. I want to at least greet her properly.” Then he raised his hand and said, “See you two, then,” and walked off.

Even though he was only walking, Reinhard was gone from our sight in the blink of an eye. Confirming that he was completely gone, I sighed and tapped on the shoe rack behind me. “Yo, he’s gone. You can come down now.”

“‘Kay! Thanks,” the girl said in a nonchalant voice. I heard her landing on the floor behind me.

She was a short girl with gold hair, crimson eyes, and a distinctive fang. Her name was Felt. She was the luckiest girl in school who captured the attention of Reinhard. Although, she'd always emphasize 'reluctantly' whenever she was told this.

"You shouldn't be so cold to him," I said. "I feel bad for him."

"I'm the one you should feel bad for," said Felt. "Who the hell asked him to pursue me? I'm the real victim here."

"Reinhard is so passionate about you though," Rem said. "Do you not like him, Felt?"

"'Course I don't. And don't go gettin' the wrong idea. He only likes me cuz I'm different. It's like when a person gets excited by findin' a rare species. Gimme a break."

Felt didn't have anything good to say about Reinhard as usual. Even though she was living a life more romantic than your average Shoujo manga and as romantic as Cinderella, her attitude remained indifferent. As much as I sympathized with Reinhard as his friend, I also understood where Felt was coming from.

"You kinda do have a point," I said. "These things are tricky, huh?"

Reinhard was so used to being approached, he was quite inept at being the approacher. It was natural for Felt to be suspicious of his intentions with how awkward he acted. But as a bystander, I knew it was only a problem of miscommunication, which made them frustrating to watch.

"Well, I guess it's hard to objectively assess our own actions," I said.

"Yes, Rem agrees," Rem responded. "She absolutely agrees. You are right. Absolutely right."

"Rem? What's with the aggression? Did I say something weird?"

"Who knows," Rem said, turning her face away.

As I contemplated Rem’s strange behavior, Felt dusted her skirt and stretched her upper body. “Welp, I’m gonna keep runnin’ til class starts. Even he won’t come after me once the bell rings.”

“That’s until the seat-change,” I said. “With his tenacity, I have a feeling that he’ll manage to get a seat somewhere near yours.”

“Don’t say things like that man. You’re gonna jinx my peaceful school life.”

Turning pale at my words, she went running off in the opposite direction Reinhard went. The fact that Reinhard would find her two minutes later and get into a wild chase was a story for another time.

“Surely there won’t be any more problems,” I said, feeling like I was submitting my request to God. “Or else I’m gonna use up my energy for the day.”

“Rem is sure there won’t be any more,” Rem said, reassuring me.

I was certain a quiet, peaceful day was finally starting. However, as soon as I opened the classroom door, I was greeted by a yelling figure.

“Have you heard, Mr. Natsuki?!” the figure said, screaming. “A transfer student is apparently coming today!”

“Can’t you read my mood?! You freakin’ idiot!” I yelled back at them.

“Why am I getting scolded?!”

The screaming figure was Otto, the guy who sat behind me. He’d always seemed like an unlucky kinda guy, which was just proven by him making me even more irritated than I already was.

Placing my bag on my desk, I slouched in my chair. “Look, man. Forget about all this transfer student stuff. I’m already tired from all the things that happened this morning. You get it, don’t ya? So, postpone it.”

“We can’t send the transfer student home just because you’re tired, Mr. Natsuki," Otto responded. "By the way, why are you so tired? Did you do something you can't speak of early this morning?"

"There were too many characters, I don't even know where to begin. So much so that I'm sure nobody even remembers my sister's name."

"You'll make Beatrice cry!"

Actually, Beako isn't the sensitive type, so she won't cry because of something like that… Actually, now that I think about it, she acts tough, but she can be pretty soft. She might actually cry. That won't be good. Seeing little kids cry breaks my heart—and I definitely can't stand to see Beako cry.

"Fine, I'll forgive you for Beako's sake."

"Thank you… Wait, how does that make any sense?"

"So, what business does the confused Otto have?" Rem asked, jumping into the conversation from her seat, which was to my right.

"I don't think I'm the one who's confused… No, nevermind," Otto replied, scratching his head as he gave up on retorting, and continued whispering. "Like I said, there's a transfer student. I heard the teachers talking about it when I went to the faculty room. Apparently, they're transferring to our class."

"I've been meaning to say this, but you've really assumed the role of the best friend in dating sims, you know?" I said. "What do the girls in this class think of me by the way?"

"Other than Rem, everyone thinks you have mean-looking eyes."

"Are you serious? Like, really? You're not joking, are you? Please say that you are. Hey, come on, are you really serious?"

Otto's evaluation erased the possibility of there being any girl who was too shy to make a move on me because my childhood friend Rem was always by my side.

"Transfer student though, huh?" Rem said. "How rare. Is it a boy or girl?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know the details.”

Rem sighed loudly. “I see.”

“You know, sighing like that hurts more than being insulted right to my face!”

Otto was the class clown everyone picked on. His yelling was on point as usual, and Rem nodded in satisfaction upon hearing it.

The bell rang and the students who were outside started entering the classroom. Among them were the student council members, Crusch, Ferris, Julius, and Anastasia, who were on bag inspection duty. Following them was the ever-so-prideful Priscilla, trailed by Al carrying her bag. He quickly left the room as soon as he placed her bag on her desk.

When I turned my attention away from them, I saw Ram, who had entered the classroom without my realizing, taking her seat in front of her sister. Seeing as how she flashed a peace sign at Rem, it seemed as though her meeting with Roswaal went well.

Right before the bell stopped ringing, Reinhard came into the classroom, followed by Felt, who hurriedly came in just as the bell stopped. Reinhard flashed a faint smile at her from his seat, to which she stuck her tongue out.

And so, everyone in the class was present. There was only one seat left empty in the corner of the last row. I assumed that was where the transfer student Otto was talking about was going to sit.

“I was skeptical at first, but seeing that seat makes his story seem more believable,” I muttered to myself.

“Mr. Natsuki, do you have something against…” began Otto before being interrupted by Rem.

“Oh, Miss Frederica is here.”

I could sense Otto sulk behind me, but I obviously chose to ignore him. The classroom went completely silent.

The door opened, and a tall woman with good posture walked in. She had long blonde hair and emerald eyes. Dressed in a tight-fitting suit, she exuded youthful energy. The only distinctive flaw was her ferocious-looking mouth, but said imperfection was what made her easy to get along with. She was Miss Frederica, our teacher. She was also the older sister of Garfiel, who we encountered on our way to school.

“Stand up,” Crusch commanded in a clear voice from the front row.

Everyone stood up in unison. Even the rebellious Priscilla followed suit. This shows that this command is ingrained in our DNA.

“Greet,” Crusch commanded again.

“Good morning,” overlapping voices resonated.

Everyone’s voice varied slightly. I said it in an earnest voice, whereas Rem sounded much more disciplined.

“Take your seats,” Crusch commanded one last time.

Everyone took a seat, making louder noises than when they stood up. As the creaking sounds of the seats subsided, it was finally Miss Frederica’s moment to start talking.

“Well, good morning everyone,” she said. “I’m sure many of you aren’t enthusiastic about the weekend ending, but that goes the same for us teachers, so bear with it, okay?”

Her unexpected joke softened the somewhat tense mood filling the classroom due to it being Monday. She then pointed at the empty seat in the back.

“I’m sure many of you who have noticed that seat, or have heard from Otto who was eavesdropping, know by now, but we have a transfer student today.”

“She knows you were eavesdropping,” I said.

"Huh? That's strange," Otto said, tilting his head. "I was being extra careful, though…"

"Principal Wilhelm noticed you," Miss Frederica explained, to which he nodded in understanding.

Principal Wilhelm was an elderly man who was not to be underestimated. No matter how much he tried to hide his nature with his soft persona, he was unable to conceal his exuding air of competency. He would often appear out of nowhere, and either lend a helping hand in solving a problem or brag about his family. No one could escape Principal Wilhelm's eyes. This was common knowledge shared by everyone in Lugunica Academy.

"Leaving aside Otto Suwen's carelessness," Crusch said, "a transfer student is rare."

"True," Ferris added. "It's not even the beginning of the school year or semester. Now that I think about it, a transfer student in high school is quite uncommon. Although, it is a common occurrence in manga…"

"And just as you would commonly see in a manga," Miss Frederica began, "the transfer student is a girl."

Some of the boys in the class got a little too excited at Miss Frederica's last remark. The Ton-Chin-Kan trio were particularly loud. Jeez, don't they realize we already have more than enough pretty girls in our class, and adding one more would just add one more girl we can't do anything about? I pitied them, even though I was the loudest one there.

"So you're happy that the transfer student is a girl too, huh, Subaru?" Rem asked.

"I thought I should at least act like I was happy," I responded. "I'd obviously welcome anyone even if they're a boy. It's hard to imagine any greater tragedy than having guys like Reinhard and Julius in the same class."

By having the two most popular guys in the same class, all the other men had given up on attracting female attention. In a way, this helped unify the boys in the class into one. So even if we had a male transfer student, we were all ready to accept the new victim with open arms.

“This class already has too many good looking guys and girls,” I said. “It’s honestly overkill with girls like Crusch, Anastasia, Felt, Priscilla, Ram, and you. I suppose I can add Ferris to the list as well.”

“You’re also included in the list of good looking people,” Rem said.

“Yeah, I’m sure I’m super popular with a niche group of people who love sanpaku eyes!”

I knew Rem was only trying to make me feel better, but my life experiences made me too cynical to be happy by simply knowing there was a small minority of people who loved my appearance.

Whether it’s a boy or a girl, I’ll accept any newcomer.

“So, Miss Frederica,” I said, giving her a thumbs up. “We’re ready when you are.”

“Alright, now that I’ve gotten permission from Natsuki, who’s calling the shots for some reason, please welcome your new classmate,” she said, smiling bitterly as she called in the student from the hallway. “Come on in.”

The classroom door opened after a brief pause. Footsteps, followed by a faint wind, entered the room. Despite my initial apathy at the arrival of the new student, I gulped at the sight of her.

She had long silver hair that fluttered in the wind, and was gazing straight ahead at us with amethyst eyes. She was wearing a black uniform—which might’ve come from her previous school—that nicely contrasted with her pale white skin. The combination of the two seemed to represent her ephemeral air and innate extravagance—complete perfection. Her beauty took my breath away even though I was used to seeing beautiful girls.

Miss Frederica wrote her name on the chalkboard behind her. She glanced at the board, then turned around and bowed to us. “My name is Emilia. I’m aware that this is reaaally odd timing for transferring schools, and that it must’ve been a bit of a surprise, but I’m looking forward to becoming friends with you all.” She looked around the classroom somewhat nervously. “I can also be a little ditzy, so please bear with me.”

“Nobody uses ‘ditzy’ in this day and age…” I blurted unintentionally.

I quickly covered my mouth with my hand, but Emilia was already looking straight at me. My eyes must’ve been wide open. Unperturbed, she smiled at me alluringly. I was entranced.

It wasn’t the beginning of the school year or semester. It was just a regular Monday. Although it began a little more noisily than usual, it was supposed to be a normal day. However, at this moment, I had a feeling my peaceful days were about to come to an end. With the arrival of the new student—Emilia—my life would never be the same again.

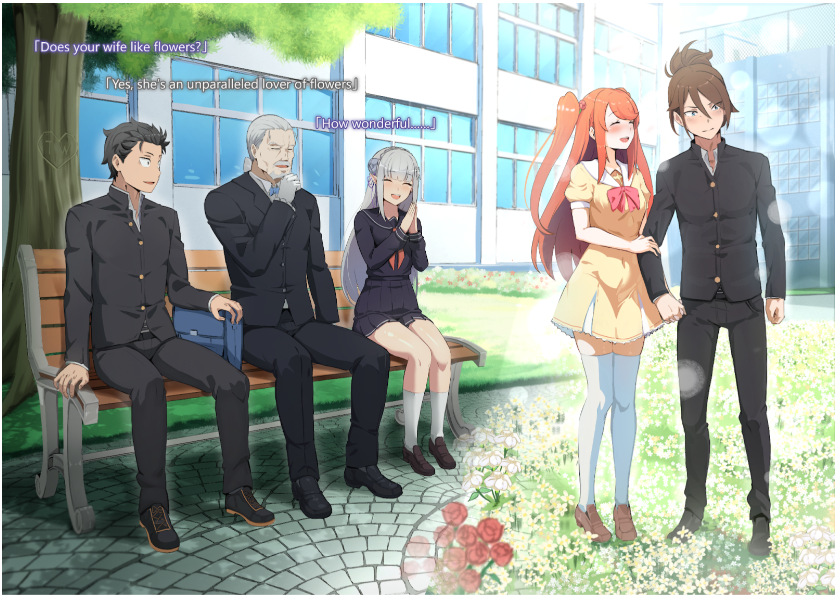
「Does your wife like flowers?」
「Yes, she's an unparalleled lover of flowers」
「How wonderful……」

Second Period

1

—I suppose this may have been the point where there'd be this huge monologue-like thing if this were a game and the opening would get inserted right about here.

Whatever the case, looking at things realistically, regardless of the shock I was in, time continued to move on solemnly. Time stopped as I was love-struck by the transfer student's smile, such an illusion seemed to have been exclusive to me.

"Now then, I believe Emilia-san also has plenty of questions, but I must ask you to leave those for lunch time… For now, I need you to take your seat. Emilia-san."

"Ah, yes."

"The window-side seat at the back, that empty seat there will be your seat. For the moment, would you please sit there?"

Frederica-sensei said so to the transfer student—Emilia—and pointed to the Best Place at the very back of the classroom next to the window. Naturally, as one would expect from exactly the spot one would assume a transfer student would sit in, certainly there must be some kind of predetermination to it,

“Understood. Then, I’ll-…”

“—OBJECTION!!”

“Eh?!”

As she began to move to follow Frederica-sensei’s words, that one comment stopped Emilia in her tracks

The one who sharply stuck their hand out and yelled out was the number one “KY”, the class ignoramus incapable of ever reading the room—In other words, me.

I glared at the transfer student who made a stupefied face, and my ears started to feel a little hot, so I turned my face away, then shook a finger at the shocked Frederica-sensei with a”Tsk, tsk tsk.”

“I think that’s quite an unacceptable attitude for Freddy-sensei to have there. You can’t just coddle the transfer student from the beginning!”

“I will not simply overlook you saying I am coddling her, Natsuki-kun. Just what led you to make a conclusion that led to that assessment? “

“Can’t you tell? It was the, erm, that thing! The last row window-side! Giving that away so easily to the transfer student, did she give you some kind of bribe?! It’s so out of character for you to yield to under-the-table deals “

“There goes Barusu again with his nonsense.”

Diagonally to my right, my childhood friend is spitting some kind of venom at me, but to me right now it means Nothing.

I have a good rhythm going on so far, so I intend to press my current momentum.

I stuck my finger towards both Frederica-sensei, who had a dumbfounded face, and Emilia whose eyes looked shocked, while looking around to everyone in the whole classroom

“The seat at the back next to the window is the Positioning any student would want! To so easily give that up, would leave all of us who have been Frederica-sensei’s earnest students in disquiet! Isn’t that right?”

“I guess…?”

No good, there were way fewer voices of agreement to my callout than I expected. My lack of preparation perhaps came back to bite me, as the majority of the students were tilting their heads in confusion.

Crap, if this keeps going, I’ll be written off as just a cringelord, which would just leave me torn to shreds in more ways than one.

“—Hmph, The words of this loud-mouthed fool hold some logic yet.”

“Ooh?”

“It may be in a trivial matter, but if a mere commoner is being favored over mineself, then it is not out of the question that it must be shown to be reasonable. Were it to not be, then a jest such as a deal under the table could prove to be realistic.”

“No way, there ain’t nothing realistic about under-the-table deals here, what are you freakin’ talking about…?”

Unexpected covering fire comes in, and its contents that which I, who should have been gaining assistance from, am instantly put off by. At those words of mine, the one with the greatest power level in the classroom, Priscilla, glared at me with a glance. By the way, not battle power or physical power or whatever, just looks alone, like—to put it bluntly, I mean a very particular feminine kind of power level. Don’t question it!

By the way, I've determined that the one who is pretty much number two in the class when it comes to power level is Crusch!

"Natsuki Subaru and Priscilla Barielle, I wouldn't go so far as to say your points are reasonable, but it may be hard for me to say that I would deem a completely opposite opinion to yours to reflect the opinion of all here."

"Oh gosh, Crusch-sama, your brooding side profile is so wonderful… But but, I do nyat think those two are actually thinking that deeply about it."

"No, there must be some conclusive factor for why they brought it up. Some kind of reason, unlike me, who just disorderly slid into the flow of things."

And then the Crusch-san in question threw an oddly expectant gaze at me, but being completely honest, I am almost purely going off vibes here! The thing is, I can't deny the feeling that due to Priscilla's uncalled-for support now it's starting to needlessly feel that way!

"Then erm…. Subaru-kun, was it? What do you want to do?"

"…"

However, the one who extended a hand towards me, who was feeling completely cornered, was, out of all unexpected things, the one who had been put on the spot of all things. The transfer student.

Being suddenly called my given name by a girl I just met, I get hit with a refreshing sense of surprise, and as she fixes her eyes on me, Emilia's amethyst eyes strengthen in color as she says-

"If what you want is that seat, then you wanna change seats with me? But, if we do that, then we'd be completely ignoring what Priscilla-san was talking about…"

"Y-Yeah, we would. It's not such an easy problem to solve. What's more, my own words apply to myself as well of course. The honor of obtaining that seat should not be bestowed or given to someone so easily.”

“Then…?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

When she asked me in return, I did my best to somehow guide her to bringing everything to a conclusion as I talked.

Then, I stuck my finger towards the gasping, beautiful girl and declared.

“Chiki Chiki[24]. With our whole heart and soul ‘The great seat change tournament’ will now be held—!!”

“—?!”

When I thrust my fist up and announced that, everyone who heard me gasped.

A few seconds of silence are created, but the stiffness soon is dispelled—

“Wooooooh! Seat chaaaaange!!”

Such is the mysterious enthusiasm that envelops it and blots it out

That’s right, a seat change. Within school life, it is something completely decoupled from the usual schedule, a mid-scale event that one may even call unexpected!

Unlike the sports or school festival, different from the large-scale events that are incorporated in advance into the regular schedule, the frequency of mid-scale events is greatly dependent on the whims of the teacher in charge.

Despite sometimes being the main factor affecting how your school life will develop from then on, it is an event that occurs at a teacher's whim, treated much like a natural disaster in a “Town building-type Simulation Game”.

However, while being a complete gamble that may bring either heaven or hell, it was also the perfect detonator for the students who are fed up with their everyday lives without any change for the better.

And for even this class that is filled with festival lovers and event planners by nature, that will be thoroughly displayed—!

“Including the transfer student, it’s an all-out bet for who will see the heaven of the last row! And who will see the hell of the front row! A battle where no takesies backsies or trades will be allowed. That is the true nature of the ‘Seat Change’!”

“Woooooh! Seat change! Seat change! Seat change!”

“Your classmates that you form bonds of solidarity over a shared external enemy during the sports festival and school festivals, will now, in this moment, turn into your enemies who will try to steal each other’s places in this death game that will now unfold!”

“Window-side! Window-side! Window-side!”

The class's frenzy does not cool down. Geez, I’m always saved by these guys.

If it weren’t for this specific class then it wouldn’t be strange for me to have ended up in a timeline where I get hated by everyone, and end up truant and all!

And so, having seen the class’s misconduct and frenzy, the transfer student must have been quite perturbed, or so I thought.

“Seat change…That seems suuuper fun.”

She put her hands together in front of her chest and stood with eyes sparkling.

Seeing that she surprisingly didn’t regard me poorly after that, I was instead the one who ended up surprised, yep.

And so, seeing that the class is now completely controlled by the Mood of the seat change, the one in charge of first period English, responsible for the class, Frederica-sensei commented.

“How many times has it been now that first period ends up taken over by the seat changing I wonder.”

—I’m sorry. It’s already the third time in total that the class has ended up like this.

2

To sum it all up, if I had to say what I was trying to do by making such a huge mess, I simply wanted to create the opportunity to talk with the transfer student, and get a little closer. Such was the ulterior motive I held.

In all honesty, being in this class filled with beauties, if you were to ask me how much my heart trembled from a new one being added in, even I’d find it hard to Comment.

Well, obviously I can’t help what trembles or doesn’t.

Now of course, if you asked me if this was a one-hit K.O. love at first sight then, I would say not quite. I’ve already said this many times before, but I am fairly used to beauties by this point.

Included there, of course, are my childhood friends, the twin sister beauties, my little sister who wakes me up every morning, a beautiful little girl future candidate for being a super beauty to look forward to, and of course, I know the beautiful little girl who is friends with that beautiful little girl. I’m also on friendly terms with the six beautiful sisters in my neighborhood, and a lotta my classmates are beautiful girls too you know?

What’s going on here? There are so many beauties I’m practically drowning in them. Whatever the case, when it comes to feeling that blissful, wonderful sight for sore eyes, I’ve more than had my fill.

But she is special, I’m not sure if something about her resonated with me or something.

I may not be sure, but in the end, the result of my actions to learn what I am not sure of was, well, my head can’t quite connect the dots of how that connects to my seat change announcement just now either.

Whatever the case, after a long complicated process of this and that, the result brought about by the seat change, if I had to say, was—

"I got some bottom-tier damn power of fate to be pulling the stupid freaking front row like this!!"

The only thing I could do at this point was hold my head and scream at this result.

Lo and behold I got myself the front row and the Positioning exactly front and center of the teacher's desk to top it all off. Can you believe it?! They say a schemer drowns in their scheme, but right now, I have no words for this feeling like I'm drowning in some bizarro scheme.

"And last seat change, even if it were a hall-side one, I'd finally managed to secure myself a back row seat, I can't believe things would turn out like this…"

"Before that, do you not have anything to say to us after we were dragged into this and ended up in the front row as well?!"

While I was sulking in my melancholy, Otto, who had managed to secure the front row seat to my left, yelled at me.

Look at this guy. Just how unlucky can he get? And also, to put all the blame on others, just how wretched can he get?

"Face it. This is the result of your actions. The gods observed your daily activities, and so this is the result. Repent."

"You could not be projecting more if you were a projector! For starters, we'd just done it, but because Natsuki-san went ahead and mentioned a seat change once again this-……The others also made a mess of things, which led to this. Get me out of this class!"

Otto's face looks like the end of the world, but the other fatalities of the front row seat who had the honor of drawing this spot are Tonchinkan, a group whose daily activities are truly easy to understand.

And so of the six seats in the front row, five are filled by boys, however the remaining final spot, the seat to my right, is—

“Well then, I hope we can get along for some more time, Subaru-kun.”

“Now your power of fate is so incredible, I got nothing to say, Rem. This is your third time in a row seated to my right, what do you even do to get these results to happen?”

“If I were to borrow your words, Subaru-kun, then I suppose it would be due to the gods seeing my daily activities so… that would mean the gods are rooting for me right? I will have to put more and more effort into things then.”

Rem clenching her fist against her chest and huffing as she pumps herself up is really cute.

No, she might be cute, but that tenacity of hers is damn impressive. The moment she drew out the paper slip for sitting next to me in the lot, that sound she let out while fist pumping was something I would have wanted to record for myself.

“It does seem that for Rem, even if she has to end up at the front row, being next to Natsuki-san is an unshakeable special privilege… But I am just so done.”

“The important thing here is that Otto-kun also seems very glad to be on Subaru’s left side. By all rights, I would even want to switch places with you.”

“What’s the point in encircling Natsuki-san by switching the left and right seats here?”

“I have grown used to seeing Subaru-kun’s right side every day, so I thought maybe seeing him from his left side every once in a while would be refreshing.”

“This person’s thought process is the real deal!”

Just like always with Rem, she drives Otto into a corner, but to my expertly trained ear, it actually seems like Rem is holding back quite a bit. The usual Rem’s brute force approach is way beyond this. She'd be way more assertive to the point that I don't know what's driving her to do that.

Whatever the case, my sides being reinforced with well-known faces is a good lineup for me. My condolences to Tonchinkan, but I am not particularly pained by being on the front since I don't sleep during class or anything. In fact, I feel bad for all the teachers of each subject who will have to deal with me.

"But yeah, my original objective with this seat change…"

The backrest creaks as I turn around, then I look to the seat behind me—or so I'd like to say, but really it's about two seats back, dead in the middle of the classroom, that the one I see sitting there is that silver-haired girl.

Once again, unsure of whether it'd be good or bad luck, the one who drew the lot for the seat right in the middle of the classroom was the transfer student in question, Emilia. While Positioning-wise it was, for better or worse, quite iffy and all, being positioned in the middle while around her she hadn't a single acquaintance must be pretty uncomfortable.

It was a little late for this, but I broke out into a cold sweat as I felt like I was starting to see Frederica-sensei's thoughtfulness in having considered all that and trying to put her in the back corner. Though it seemed that the girl still had some luck.

Since those faces around her were some faces.

"Hey, transfer student…Emilia-chan, was it?"

"Wahya!"

At the voice behind her, Emilia lets out a yelp, uncharacteristic of an ethereal beauty such as her.

When I think about how on board she was with the seat change, then perhaps she might have an unexpectedly active personality?

When the surprised Emilia turned around, what she was met with was a smile wearing a cat-eared headband. The one known as being number one in the class, perhaps in the whole school year for his girl power, Ferris scoops up Emilia's silver hair from behind, and enjoys the touch and feel with his slender fingers.

"Nyo need to be so nervous, I'm nyot gonna pounce on you and eat you, so relax. I'm Ferris, feel free to call me Ferri-chan."

"Ah, thank you. Alright, pleasure to meet you, Ferri-chan."

"Waos, it's kinda refreshing being accepted so easily. This seems like it'll be interesting… Isn't that right, Crusch-sama?"

"Yes, indeed."

Hearing Ferris' words, this time on Emilia's right, Crusch-san nodded.

The belle with arms crossed, gave a side eye to Emilia, with an attitude that made you feel her noble presence. Then, for a moment, she loosened her lips into a gallant smile.

"Name's Crusch. I was appointed president of the student council. Just like Ferris, if there's something you need, don't be shy and feel free to rely on us. "

"Miss president of the student council! That's suuuper surprising. It's a co-ed school and yet the president of the student council is a girl…"

"Hmph, if you judge a book by its cover, then you might get a rug pulled from underfoot. There are many mysteries in this world after all. There is not a small number of people who may look one way, but in truth hide a secret."

"…Is that so?"

Crusch-san took an unusually teasing tone with her, but her huge, hidden breasts were resting on top of her crossed arms, so she ended up being not at all convincing.

It's likely that to her, this was meant to be a very intelligent conversation with deep meaning hinting at Ferris' gender, but due to her being unaware of her own objective charms, it brought out this feeling that she fumbled it completely. She's quite perfect but specifically that part of her is no good.

"And that's Crusch-sama's most cutest point!"

"I didn't say anything, so stop reading my mind alright?!"

Ferris snapped at me, which freaked me out, just how much of my inner mind has he seen through.

However, Around Emilia was the Top Two of the Student council, so there should be zero problem. They're a people-pleasing bunch after all, she's not gonna end up getting lonely or anything.

"Well, at least that's some good news."

"Awfully condescending of you, Barusu. —Even when you've brought about so many victims who've been dealt emotional injuries from this seat change."

The one to raise the corners of her eyes after hearing my muttering was the one who had plainly secured the seat behind Rem, Ram. She's not wrong there, but no one had particularly suffered too much other than tonchinkan—

"Take a look at that."

"Well that was a given."

What Ram pointed out with her line of sight was the back row hallway-side seat. There was Felt face down, sinking into her desk.

As the top batter of the lottery, getting a backrow seat was quite the favorable start for Felt, however, she could only celebrate for merely a moment. Why, you ask?

"Hey there, Felt. I'm so happy to sit next to you again."

"God stands dead before me."

And just like feared at the shoe rack, Reinhard had perfectly managed to draw the seat next to Felt.

It happened with Rem as well, but I get the feeling that there's quite a number of cases where the result of the lottery gets influenced by a person's fixation. I can't really say whether I'm on Felt's side or Reinhard's side, but well, my opinion is that I want to pleasantly watch over their little game of chase.

By the way, just completely incidentally.

About that window-side back seat that was the source of this time's seat change. Everything sorted itself out so that the person who should've had it ended up getting it, or like, at least that's how it feels.

"This world is, after all, made to be for mineself's utter convenience."

So said, puffing her chest out in haughty delight at the very back seat, as you all know, her Lady Priscilla-sama.

She drew it just as expected, or rather, you can't even call that crazy statement of hers an exaggeration just by the mere fact that she drew it after it got left all the way to pretty much the end,

"Which'd mean, gettin' me right next to ya's also a convenience?"

Next to Priscilla, giving that statement as if quibbling at her, was Anastasia. Both of them are known to get along like cats and dogs. Before the seat change, they were in front of and behind each other, but now that they ended up sitting next to each other, things seem more and more like they're about to overheat from the sparks flying.

"Hmph… This vixen is awfully irksome. I did not think of thee as the kind to be so fixated on fouling mineself's mood."

"Could'ja do me the favor of not sayin' it like I was trynna aim for this seat? In the first place, you were the one to draw the lot for that seat there after me, weren't'cha? If you're so displeased with me then that's just karma right there."

“What an insolent thing, pure idiocy.”

And so Priscilla pushes back with a terse retort against Anastasia, but I guess in the end it all amounts to a tie this time around.

And Julius, who should be there to put a damper on those pointless arguments, finds himself with no means to put a stop to that due to being unfortunately separated from those two. Let’s hope those two have enough sense.

“And with all that out of the way, we’ve safely completed the seat change. Things turned out just a little off from what I’d had in mind, but judgment was delivered in quite the fashion as always, Freddy-sensei.”

“Stop twisting things to make it seem as if I had been leading the seat change this time. More importantly, it appears you have eaten up all our time until the end of the class again.”

“Chill out. Even if our class fell behind, our class is filled with top-of-the-line self-studiers who possess the greatest time-eater qualities around. Also, Freddy-sensei’s supplementary lessons are superduper easy to understand!”

“It would be best not to have supplementary lessons. The fact you do not even think of it like that is quite troubling.”

Frederica-sensei rubbed between her eyebrows with a troubled face. She’s still at such a young age, and yet I fear she’s become an expert at that gesture.

“You think so too, don’t you Rem?”

“Yes, Indeed. Even if Subaru-kun falls asleep mid-class, I am placed in just the perfect spot to wipe away his drool.”

“You’re most definitely not on the same wavelength with each other then?!”

How to put it, summing everything up like that was our regular custom.

Otto is just a little too convenient, it's like that y’know.

3

And as class time ended with this and that, lunch time was the well-established questioning Time.

When it comes to transfer students, them being bombarded with questions during lunch time is of course a rite of passage. Whether or not they have a boyfriend, what’s their history with men and the like, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say being dug through is practically a cliche!

“Hooh, So you were transferred from that Priestella All-Girls Academy, Emilia?”

“Yes, that’s right. Due to some family matters I had to move here and…Since my uniform still hasn’t been made, these clothes are the uniform from that other school. I thought it’d stand out in a bad way, so I was suuuper worried.”

“Hmmm, Nyo need to worry. It looks great on you, cute, cute. But, these clothes are nyot bad at all… they’d look nice on Crusch-sama.”

“I agree on Crusch-san, but wouldn’t they also look good on you, Ferri-chan?”

“Eh, really? Then, wanna try swapping for a bit later?”

And so, I wanted to press her with questions, but there stood the impregnable student council combo. While picking up on the vibes of what the other classmates wanted to ask, they kept their Q&A going without a hitch. It was going so Smoothly, in fact, that I forgot to interject on the topic of Ferris and Emilia’s little uniform swap.

Of course, I’d already understood that Ferris didn’t have any underhanded intentions. Ferris using his appearance for misdeeds and looking towards the girls disrespectfully is something that could never happen. Ferris’ gaze is always affixed to Crusch-san at his side, but whether his real intentions for maintaining that relationship with her are one thing or another is something I'm not sure about. I seriously am just not sure.

"However, being a transfer student from an all-girls academy… Would that mean this is your first co-ed school? Are you at all perplexed by this being any different than what you're used to?"

"Maybe a little bit? Errm…?"

"Reinhard Van Astrea. Just Reinhard's fine."

Saying so by jumping in right at that moment without a shred of hesitation was our dear Reinhard-san.

With a freshness that would shock a gentle breeze, into the girl's talk—though Ferris was in it so by nature it's not really a girl's talk, but he smoothly integrated into the girl's talk.

"Alright, Reinhard. But, I'm impressed you figured out this was my first co-ed school."

"Because the Priestella all-girl's academy is an integrated school system with elementary, middle and high school all in one building. Which would mean, you likely had never even been in the same classroom as a boy until now. That was my thought process."

"That's right, but you're quite well informed."

"It's a school in the same prefecture as us and all, so sometimes I am approached by the female students from there."

He's getting reverse hit on by girls from an all-girls academy who are supposed to have no resistance to men. Reinhard-san is incredible, damn.

Emilia is also surprised, so it seems those female student's assertiveness is not something that is commonly displayed after all. Hmmm, ikemen are to be feared.

"I understand your feelings but don't press her too much with that question. On the contrary, if Emilia herself has any worries she should be asking us, is there anything?"

"Ermm, in that case, I might want to ask about club activities. In my previous school, I used to go to the handicrafts club, and I was thinking I'd like to continue to do so in this school as well."

"—The handicrafts club, huh?"

Unexpectedly, Crusch-san narrowed her eyes at Emilia's question.

Seeing her reaction Emilia let out an anxious "Huh?", noticing that, Crusch-san shakes her head while saying "Apologies."

"I thought it quite unfortunate to hear the name handicrafts club here of all places. Though, I suppose it is somewhat better than you saying the home economics club."

"Ah, a home economics club would be fine as well. I just wanted to be involved in something of the like…"

"Woah, why hold on there, good lady. —I can't just have you lumping together the handicrafts club and the home economics club."

Clapping his hands to make a loud noise, he drew attention to himself and gallantly intruded.

Who did? I did.

Emilia's shoulders jolted, Crusch-san and Ferris looked at each other. In the middle of all of them, Reinhard with his usual attitude raised his hand.

"Certainly, if you have any questions about those two clubs then talking to Subaru would be appropriate."

"Yes, for in the long historied discord between those two clubs, the being known as me is a very crucial Factor…"

"Crucial facturr…"

Emilia's pronunciation was strange like it was the first time she'd heard a foreign word, yet I nonetheless barged into the conversation. The heavens must be my ally for the topic of the handicrafts club to come out.

For you see I, am a member of the handicrafts club!

“So the thing about our school’s handicrafts club, is that our homeroom teach Freddy-sensei is the one in charge of it. That means the teacher just now with the scary face and kind eyes.”

“That’s a rude way to put it…But if that’s the case then it’ll be easy to bring up, might be helpful.”

“However! Our handicrafts club led by Frederica-sensei has an overwhelmingly antagonistic relationship with none other than the home economics club led by the math teacher Clind-sensei! Those two well known for getting along like cats and dogs have a long and deep history together, and that continues fiercely enough to affect the power structure of the school’s culture clubs!”

“I-I see… But, why is that a problem? I guess it’s a bit of a problem that the clubs don’t get along but if I make sure to just choose one then-……”

“That’s because, depending on which one you chose, their blatant personal bias will affect how they treat you “

“They judge from their personal bias?!”

Emilia opened her eyes in shock at the unbelievably childish arbitrage.

That’s right. Frederica-sensei and Clind-sensei are usually teachers overflowing with kindness, and of good character, however, when it comes to one another that takes a complete turn.

If someone who would support one over the other were to appear, they would use the full extent of the authority they hold to crush them.

“Isn’t that a problem?”

“Of course it’s a massive problem. But, they have more than enough power as teaching faculty to compensate. So it’s… not quite tolerated but, they have workarounds.”

“Why are you so hush about it? You Natsuki Subaru are also one of those putting those to work after all.”

The golden tiger Frederica and Nighthawk Clind and their Tiger-Hawk Problem are an unavoidable problem to all who attend Lugunica Academy. Therefore, coping methods have been established.

Those methods are simple. For you see, I am also a member of the home economics club!

“Errrm, so basically, what do you mean?”

“No matter which you support, the other’s mood will foul, so just go with both to muddy the waters.”

“…Is that alright?”

“If you just give it your best on the club activities, then you’ll have no problem. Of course, they won’t complain at you to focus on the exhibition items for the handicraft club, and a girl with a wide breadth of daily life skills is much easier to employ than one who is just focused on crafting.”

“What do you judge to be a daily life skill nya.”

I suppose those would be sewing, cooking, and cleaning.

Either way, having the exchange take place in that idle vibe was a smart move. Without that, you’d meet a pitiful fate, and with a new student who is a part of it, one would need to be particularly careful.

“But well, it would be Best for you to prepare two copies of your club entry papers. As a member of the Handicraft-economics club I welcome your entry with open arms.”

“Ah, Subaru-kun is also in both clubs. That's… erm, surprising no?”

“You can keenly feel the vibe that she chose her words carefully.

Subaru-kyun, don't feel too down."

"You shush it."

Ferris poked at my shoulders while grinning so I pushed that forehead of his away.

I am quite self-aware that my hobbies don't match my looks, so it's not something that will bother me at this point. For real. But more importantly, the pretty girl transfer student entering the same club as me is huge for me.

"I mean, in this class the only one in the same club as me is Rem and all."

"Though in Rem's case, it seems she has mastered so much that there is no need for her to go out of her way to enter a school club."

"That's…your conjecture, so don't say that."

Saying the unnecessary, Reinhard announced that then shrugged his shoulders like he's in an American movie. It looked so ridiculously accurate that I could do nothing but just accept it.

Behind him, Ferris and Crusch-san moved their faces close together.

"There's nyo going against this guy. He should get some hurt for a change."

"Don't say that, Ferris. As the student council that protects the daily lives of all students, that would bespoil us of our essence. Let's have Ram act out as our proxy."

"I see, as expected of Crusch-sama, such a tactician…!"

God damn, keep it quiet you two.

The school council pair showing off how well they get along, and me with a sour face. Whereupon, strangely having been forsaken by the expected class cliche, Emilia put on a troubled face.

While reflecting on my rather unkind attitude towards the transfer student, I suddenly had an idea.

“That’s right, there’s club activities but also… Might be too much but, would you like a school tour? I mean, like, you wanna?”

Guiding the transfer student on a school tour! That’s right, this would also be another of the so called cliches!

The transfer student getting bombarded with questions during lunch break, and the transfer student getting a school tour after class. Who the hell even needs a tour. The school ain’t that big! She might even feel that way, but I’ll let all that be.

“You’ll give me a school tour?”

“Yeah, totally! Actually, I hope you’ll let me! To the point I’m the one who’d beg you to! I want to give you a tour around the school! That’s the whole reason I’m here today!”

“Sorry. You lost me a little there.”

I saw her get into it a little, so I thought I could be more forceful, but I got carried away.

But no, I won’t give up. I’ll do something about this, get it back into a good spot.

“Hold on there, Subaru. In these cases, you can’t just force things.”

“Oh, you’re butting in? Reinhard. You’re not about to say you’ll do it instead of me are you? Because if you do, honestly, I’d have no argument and would just have to throw my hands up.”

“I’m not really opposed to escorting her. Unfortunately, I have some business to attend to after class today. Now, wouldn’t it be better for it to be a light-hearted thing between girls? “

“Well, you have a point there…”

At Reinhard’s proposal, I dejectedly backed down. Fundamentally, Reinhard only acts in good will, and he is very assertive with his arguments, so it is hard to argue back.

A girl should give the tour, there was no way I could give any complaint to that course of events.

Seeing me back down, Reinhard winked at me with a “Right?” then said,

“Well then, Felt. I have a request for you, what do you think?”

“Like I care—!!”

He had the nerve to call on Felt, who so far had not entered the conversation at all, and was even trying to lie down on her desk to sleep away the time until the next period.

Although she looked to me like she was sleeping soundly, it seems she didn’t actually catch any sleep because of a bad feeling she was getting. Felt glared at Reinhard with a displeased face.

“I don’t care! This has nothing to do with me! I had a bad feeling already, and now this! You’re always up to no good!”

“I wish you wouldn’t say something so heartless like this has nothing to do with you. This is a girl who will become a friend you’ll learn along with in the same class. Besides, Felt, did you forget the fact that you are the class head monitor?”

“You also decided that by yourself when I missed a class to go help old man Rom!”

Felt’s rage towards the composed and logical Reinhard did not wane.

By the way, Felt being class head is literally true. We have the acting student council president, Crusch-san, but in terms of title, both in name and fact, she was at the Top of the class hierarchy.

“Moreover that role, I heard you obstinately forced it upon me! What’s wrong with you dammit!”

“I thought it was for the best. Certainly you shirk many things, but if given the appropriate station you’ll improve… or so I believe.”

“Nobody asked you to do that! You think you’re my parent or something?!”

“If you so wish, I would not begrudge deepening our bonds beyond that of parent and child.”

“Fuck off!”

Let alone within the school, she has the number one ikemen in the prefecture propositioning her this strongly, and yet she’s like this. Felt’s iron will is surprising, but Reinhard is not discouraged at all despite all she says to him which is quite, well, y’know.

“Unfortunately, Felt has declined. However, I hope you will not misunderstand her. She is actually a girl overflowing with compassion. She just seems to be in a bit of a bad mood today.”

“I-Is that the case…? Ok, I understand. Thank you.”

At the very least, I have no recollection of ever witnessing an event where Felt regarded Reinhard with warm compassion. Still, even Emilia had a face saying she’s given up on probing at that.

And keeping that troubled face, she turns to Crusch-san and Ferris.

“Well, you heard it, how are you two after school looking? Do you have any plans?”

“We would love to hang out, but we are packed with student council work. If you’re willing to wait a bit, then it’s possible but you may end up going home quite late.”

“And three girls alone in the dark on their way home might be pretty scary n’yeah?”

Three girls, Ferris shamelessly snuck in, but the flow was perfectly going my way. Then, when Emilia slumped her shoulders in disappointment, saying “Well then, it can’t be helped.”

“Then, let’s give up on this school tour-…”

“Wait wait wait wait! Me! You have me! I said I’d do it!”

Why did I get excluded from the candidates?!

As I placed myself among the candidates while still being shocked at the state of my being unexpectedly ignored, even Emilia made a puzzled face, so I was surprised.

“Eh, Subaru-kun, you’ll give me a tour?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying! Huh, am I that forgettable? Did I have so little impact that I’d be forgotten about in the middle of that back and forth there?”

That assessment is quite a shock. It’s a little weird, I’d be the one saying it but, here I thought I was the type to regularly leave quite the impression in people’s minds in a bad way!

“Hmmm, not quite…”

Seeing me panicked and making a commotion, Emilia was the one to furrow her brow in thought.

Beauties really do look picturesque even when looking a little troubled huh, or so I thought to myself, I am also quite used to beauties, so just this much won’t make me flustered. Rem sometimes has her even more defenseless and even more incredible moments.

“—Ok. Well then, if you could, Subaru-kun. After school, please give me a tour.”

And with a vibe befitting its own big bow SFX, Emilia lowered her head to me in very formal fashion. Of course, I gladly received that.

“…”

Why does Emilia’s gaze feel kinda, strangely, oddly, tragically heroic?

4

“I have a date with Nee-sama so I cannot… I just cannot go with you but, you absolutely must not be rude to Emilia-san, Subaru-kun.

Even if you interact with her with your usual behavior, Rem and Otto-kun can't be with you. So please, please…!"

"You don't need to worry about me like I'm some kind of dog off its leash I'll be fine!"

After school, the moment I spoke of the school tour I have with Emilia, Rem came protesting like a madwoman so the only thing I could do was give a dry laugh.

From what I hear, Rem is going to help Ram after school, help the novelist Roswaal by cleaning his house. By the way it came up a bit in conversation already, but in all aspects of housework skill, like cooking, sewing, cleaning, and laundry, Rem already holds more than enough expertise to make her a complete housemaker.

In the home economics club, the only one to have earned a license of total transmission[25] in all fields from the strict Clind-sensei is likely only Rem. She might not qualify as a specialist, but her skill as an all-rounder is known throughout the school.

And that's how it was. To Ram, her older sister who has no qualms about borrowing her younger sister's help, requesting her cooperation to show off her good parts to the one in her heart was an extremely natural course of events.

"I don't really care about Barusu being in heat at this point, but I will absolutely not forgive any acts that would make Rem sad."

"Stop treating me like I'm some dog released from the chains of reason!"

"You're being loud for Barusu."

"Ack!"

I take an insanely powerful low kick and collapse, and Ram leaves as she takes Rem away.

All the way to the end, Rem was worried about me, but once I saw her off, sweating bullets while waving at her, she very begrudgingly managed to leave.

“Woaah, Ram’s got a mean low…! She kicked right into the back of my knees with precision. Is her lower half just built different…?!”

With relatively healthy preferences, Ram may look like that, but she’s surprisingly good at moving her body. Her girl power barometer doesn’t hit levels even close to Rem’s, so trying to excel in a different area may have been the direction she chose as a result.

Despite appearances, she boasts the highest athletic ability among girls in multiple prefectures. She’s a female athlete who has served as a backer for several clubs. Even with all that, the force of the kicks from her well-trained lower body is abnormal.

“If we seriously got into an all-out brawl, I can see myself losing… Well, from the point that I got into a brawl with a girl, I feel like I’d already lost as a man.”

“Who’d get in a brawl with whom?”

“No, I just meant girls and boys are direct opposites so uwaaaoh?!”

When I was in grumbling and talking to myself Mode, I was surprised by a beautiful girl coming from behind. Once I turned around in a hurry, there was the figure of Emilia, surprised by my reaction.

She widened her big eyes and, while placing a hand on her chest, said

“Oh dear. You got quite flabbergasted didn’t you.”

“You don’t hear flabbergasted nowadays…”

Now and then, this girl sneaks in those dated terms.

Whether she understood the tepidness of my gaze or not, Emilia put her hands on her hips and cutely puffed up her cheeks.

“I only called out to you, don’t get so surprised.”

“Weeell, I was just in thought by coincidence, sorry.”

"In thought… were you thinking about something dangerous?"

"Not at all! Nothing dangerous at all. Just about Ram's bottom half."

"…I see."

I kinda get the feeling I phrased that wrong.

The source of my feeling is Emilia taking one step back, and the drop in temperature in her gaze.

I'm digressing here, but with the seat change and everything, everyone in the class did something like an introduction, so depending on Emilia's memory, she might have perfectly grasped everyone in the class's names and faces, so she may be completely aware that Ram is the name of that girl.

"However, what that would later mean, the two who had just met had no way of knowing…"

"Sorry. I kinda don't know what you're talking about."

Now that it's come to this point, Emilia unexpectedly breathed out an exasperated sigh.

What is it with everyone I talk to doing that all the time?

"Are you always like this, Subaru-kun?"

"I wonder? I believe today's me is for today, yesterday's me is for yesterday, and tomorrow's me has his own goodness for tomorrow. Every day brings a different me, and I wish to continue always bringing a fresh image for everyone."

"Well then, since we're here, would you mind showing me to the handicrafts club's room?"

"This feeling of being completely ignored, it's not bad."

Rem, who reacts sincerely, and Otto, who overreacts to everything, both have their beautiful reactions, but I feel this is not bad in and of itself.

That said, I am being asked something, so let's answer.

"Right, let's hurry on, to the handicrafts club… Let's head to the clothing room where they have activities."

—With that, by my guidance, Emilia's school exploration began.

That said, it's not like there'll be some event or happenstance, or even a very convenient clash between Frederica-sensei and Clind-sensei, the beginning of a Tiger-Hawk War.

Fundamentally and earnestly, I give her a tour through a number of the special classrooms, the cafeteria, the gymnasium, the old school building, and the like, completing the mission without delay.

"So, from this point on, it's the old school building. The new building is built with stone, but the old one is still partly built from wood, so it has this Showa vibe that I really recommend as a refreshing getaway "

"Refreshing getaway? As in for scary stories?"

"It's kinda cliche, but we do actually have our seven mysteries in Lugunica Academy. The old school building has its age and the fact that it creaks from being made of wood, so when staying over during a study session or sports club sleepover you'll get constant talk of ghost encounters, it's pretty entertaining."

"Hmmm, I see. Ghosts huh?"

"I'm surprised, thought you'd be more scared."

So far the Escorting hasn't taken more than a bit under an hour, but from the conversations I had in the meantime, Emilia had a bit of a childish side to her.

Despite the fact that appearance-wise she has a pretty pure-ish, or rather, older sister-ish side to her, maybe due to her childish inner self she has this sinful charm to her. Good Job.

So, the fact that precisely Emilia doesn't seem to be scared by the topic of ghosts was surprising. That she'd plug her ears, saying she didn't want to hear it and run to the new school building, I wouldn't go so far as to say that though.

"…Is it a problem if I don't get scared?"

"Nah, it's not like you need to get scared. But if this were a ghost house and I was an employee playing a ghost and you were a customer, then I would want you to be scared."

Actually, I tried saying ghost encounter and all, but my entire circle of female acquaintances has such a strong resistance to this topic that it's a complete non-starter.

The only one who honestly gets scared by ghost stories around me is Beako.

"Also, Ram actually."

"Eh?"

"No, just talking to myself. If she knew I was talking about her, she'd get pissed to all hell."

The most surprising thing of all, the one who is no good with the supernatural is Ram, the person who you'd expect to have a heart that would not be shaken by that. On the other hand, Rem is completely fine with anything ghost-related, whether it be a splatter movie or whatever she could watch while eating a burger.

That time I went to watch a movie with the twins, revered for its romance, and Ram spent two whole hours clinging to me due to me being in between the two, it must be a humiliating memory for her.

"At any rate, she beat the crap out of me while telling me to forget about it…"

I pretended to have forgotten, but if she knew that I remembered, she'd make an attempt on my life.

Spreading Ram's weak points to other people would be bad as a childhood friend and all.

“Well, you’ll rarely ever have to go to the old school building I think. After school, you’ll probably find the entrance closed after all.”

“Ah, you’re right. It’s already closed.”

There’s only a single path from the new school building to the old one which is a hallway.

While being bathed in the spring’s end wind, Emilia’s silver hair, as she tries to open the sliding door, flutters, and I gaze at it absentmindedly.

“Ah! This is bad.”

“—?”

When I was absentmindedly gazing at her, Emilia suddenly turns around and surprises me.

Emilia turned her back to the doors, just slightly turned a suspicious eye towards me. But, I’m the confused one here, so I could only tilt my head quizzically.

“What’s wrong?”

“…Ah, Nothing. Nothing right?”

“Well, I’m the one who wants to ask. —Oh.”

While I couldn’t help feeling like something stuck to me from that reaction, I suddenly raised my face

As it slid into my ears, what I heard was a chain of sounds as if it came from a floor above the new building—Ok well to put it plainly, it was a melody.

“Woah, whose performance is that?”

Noticing the melody just like me, Emilia raises her face to look up defenselessly. Her figure as she pushes away her hair flowing in the wind, to entrust her ears to the music was truly picturesque.

I sneakily peeked at her.

“What we’re hearing right now is the performance of our music teacher Liliana-chan. After school, she goes around to mess about in the light music club and band club that she’s in charge of.”

“Heeh, the music teacher…Liliana-chan?”

“Her appearance and regular behavior are not too dignified, so every student usually just looks over her with a smile like she’s some kind of lovable animal.”

As people have put it, “A genius that if had this world not had music would be doomed to be just an idiot.”

In speech, in actions, in lifestyle, in absolutely everything, she shows extremely unusual levels of carelessness, she’s an adult who, without that outstanding music talent she would no doubt have died by the roadside.

“She extorts students for their lunch. She’s late for her own classes. She fishes the principal’s koi fish. She wears the same exact jersey to school all 5 days of the week… that’s the kinda person she is.”

“B-But she plays so well?”

“That’s right. That’s why her existence is even allowed.”

“Allowed to even exist?!”

To Emilia, who had yet to witness it directly, she may not understand the sheer threat of her existence.

I am absolutely serious here, she’s merely a small creature that’s got a nice face, can sing, and play music. If she didn’t have those talents then she may as well have been treated like some field-devastating vermin.

“She kept being told she’d likely never find anyone to take her in, but apparently recently after she made a mess in some kind of music festival, she drew the attention of the son of a distinguished family… Everyone thinks this must be how it'd feel to be able to eat with just your single talent."

"I-Isn't that wonderful? See, she's erm… finally grasped happiness after being able to continue doing what she likes! Right?"

"Is it now?"

Honestly, I don't really understand if she did either. Every time I try to question Liliana-chan about it, she runs away, and if I blunder I'll end up made into a song.

It'd also be an absurdly good song, so if it turns out that a song using my name ends up being sung throughout the entire town I would die from shame.

"The pointless Liliana-chan talk aside….Think we've gone around and seen every point of interest already."

"…Yeah."

While lending her ears to the still audible performance, Emilia mutters back with a vague loneliness.

The mood of her voice throws me more and more for a loop.

I mean, she was giving this vibe of being so wary of me and all just a moment ago, then the moment I go "Oh we're about to end the tour" she gets lonely.

A woman's heart is not as clear as the autumn sky, I guess, it's too complex.

It's weird, I thought I had a decent amount of experience with pretty girls, but maybe I just had a lot of exposure and my amount of Data was actually small.

"Nii-cha stop treating me like a child, in fact!"

"As expected, Rem is truly impressed. Subaru-kun is wonderful."

“Barusu, I give you three minutes.”

I had a match in my brain against a fighting dummy of pretty girls, and the result was a very strange feeling.

While still not understanding the source of Emilia’s expression of Ennui, I racked my brains over what I could possibly do, then I arrived at my Eureka moment.

“There’s still one place I haven’t given you a tour of.”

That’s right, to the place that was treated as a kind of Sanctuary of this school.

That place was—

5

“This is one of Lugunica Academy’s secret attractions, It’s The Demon’s Garden.”

“Woah, ah.”

When I showed that place off to her, Emilia’s expression brightened with a smile.

Those somehow faint, downcast eyes that had been dragging a feeling of Ennui until now, their shine changed, and her gaze was stolen by the view before her.

Behind a school building encroached by the twilight, what unfurled there was a big flower bed of sizable scale.

To be honest, it was of such a scale that it makes me think it may be more accurate to call it a flower field rather than a flower bed. It’s a little different from a genuine one with a vinyl greenhouse and everything, but putting this big a plot towards a flower bed was quite the luxurious thing.

And also, the whole surface of this flower bed is, currently, covered in vivid flowers that are in full bloom.

The warm spring weather of the past few days has been calm, and the warmth has borne fruit. The flowers, now in bloom, welcomed us as they swayed gently in the wind.

“With the vermillion sunset colors pouring in, this is delivered to you in a slightly romantic fashion.”

Standing next to a lost-for-words Emilia, I give her a pompous bow.

By the way, those mannerisms just now were me doing an impression of the mannerisms of the most pompous man I know. I feel like it was quite a good copy if I do say so myself.

“…”

Still not saying anything, Emilia slowly turns towards me.

With my head down from my bowing, I open one eye and peek at her. Actually, if I don’t get a tsukkomi-like reaction here, my pompousness circuits will reach criticality and burn out.

The fierce inner battle between my sense of shame and myself prolongs and finally explo—

“—Thank you, Subaru-kun.”

“Oh.”

Smiling, Emilia said that to me.

Her silver hair glistens in the twilight, and I am captivated by the glimmering shine of it.

A beautiful girl smiling in the twilight covered flower field.

That had enough of an effect to make my chest thump with a mysterious impetus

And then…

“Well, let’s get on with it.”

“Whuh?”

In front of my stiffened self, Emilia’s expression suddenly turned serious.

Then, slowly, she raised both of the hands that she had tucked behind herself, and assumed what anybody could tell at a glance was a fighting pose.

Then she faced the astonished me, with a face like a tragic hero.

“L-Let’s go, come at me! I won’t lose!”

She said this, inviting me into a real fight for some reason.

“…”

That reaction was surprising, or rather, it’s not even at the level of surprising anymore. You can’t even call this unexpected, just where was the foreshadowing for this?

Is she a grappler?

“Wait no, how and why and when, who even wanted this course of events?!”

I think there’s some kind of misunderstanding, but I am completely stumped as to how this came to be so I simply threw my anger single-mindedly at an unseen something and could do naught but stomp at the ground in place.

In the faraway sky, Liliana-chan’s performance can still be faintly heard—.

6

While she refused to leave her fighting stance, once I’d heard Emilia's side of the story, it seems this is what happened.

“We had that thing at HR time right? When you mentioned the seat change at the beginning and got in the way of me taking my seat and the like, then afterwards you tried to scare me off from club activities and stuff so… I really thought you just didn’t like me, Subaru-kun.”

“You mean I called you out here in such a roundabout way to beat you into submission?! That’s how my goodwill was being interpreted?!”

“I kinda sorta did think it was strange you know? Like wow Subaru-kun is doing such a proper job of giving me a tour despite being so angry, or like wow his conversations are kinda fun, too bad we’re gonna have to wrap it all up with a fight…”

“That’s why you kept making such a tragic hero face?! There’s so many points in that conversation leaving me shocked my heart can’t take much more!”

We could just chalk it up to her being a pure and wholesome ojou-sama from an all-girls’ school and leave it at that right?

On the contrary, that a girl from an all-girls school would have the resolve to fight a guy after getting called out to the back garden is conceptually way darker! What made her turn out like this?

“You were muttering to yourself about how you had a fist fight with some girl called Ram too…”

“Right! I did! That’s completely on me! Dammit me! Dammit!”

I smacked the area on my leg where I got kicked by Ram and regretted my own careless comment.

I see, looking back, there were probably a ton of places that could’ve helped prolong the misunderstanding. What were they now?

“Just wondering but, did that moment with the seven mysteries of Lugunica Academy apply too?”

“…I thought you were trying to scare me to establish dominance.”

“My mental image of the law at all-girls’ schools is being corrupted. What, were there actually any Ojou-samas in that kind of environment that required that kind of battle-ready mentality to survive?”

If that’s the case, then I'd better watch out for what kind of school Beatrice ends up enrolling in the future. I want Beatrice to grow nice and healthy without worries. If she becomes a little girl who holds that kind samurai soul then things at home are going to get real difficult.

“Anyway! That was not at all what I intended. For real, it was just a tour.”

“…But, why did you get so insistent about giving me a tour?”

“Argh, it’s that you know? What they call uhhh Under Mind.”

“—?”

Which if you translated literally to Japanese it would mean “Ulterior move[26]”, but how much of that was actually my real feelings was kind of hard for even me to tell. Though, of course, there’s no lie in saying that what I felt involved wanting to get closer to a cute girl.

More directly, I just wanted to try to confirm the truth behind how my heart reacted when I first saw Emilia.

And if I had to say whether or not I actually did confirm anything with this escorting, it’d be a little tricky to say.

“To summarize, I wanted to get along with you more. Get along with you and get to know what kind of girl you were, and also, have you get to know me. That’s all.”

“…”

“Did I do a bad job at summarizing?”

I didn’t get any response, so I got anxious and tried asking her. I’ve always been bad at summarizing things. I have a habit of always trying to summarize a conversation while yapping all the while. Though whether I'm actually summarizing is a little iffy.

“…Ok, I understand.”

“Really, you understand?”

“That I am suuuper dumb and Subaru-kun is also pretty dumb.”

“If you wanna talk about my dumb points, then I have quite a few points I’m reflecting on.”

Trying to discuss what my biggest demerit was here would likely turn into an argument in and of itself.

While I was scratching my head about that, Emilia finally couldn’t hold back and broke into a laugh. Her smile, being so natural, was different from all the vaguely strained expressions she’d made so far.

Well, I suppose she was coming in expecting things to end with a brawl after all, hard to tell how often a natural smile would come out like that.

“Oh well, there was a lot here and there, but if you are satisfied, then ultimately that would be best.”

“Yes, I am very satisfied. Thank you for everything, really. Subaru-kun.”

“It’s all good…. More importantly, if we’re all done here, we should leave fast.”

“Eh?”

I got a smile from Emilia and all, so I proposed we scatter if she’s all satisfied. Then, Emilia reacted with surprise to those words. Her hair, pulled back faintly, looks towards the flower bed to her side.

“Erm, I’d like to look at them a bit longer, can’t I?”

“I would absolutely love to concede to that request right now, but there’s an alarm bell inside me saying, “It won’t be that easy, Baby”. Of course, I’m not being a meanie here alright? There’s a proper reason for that. The reason is that this place is a “Secret Attraction”“

"Ah, it's not a public attraction, it's a secret one."

Exactly, things can be either public or secret, compared to public, what is secret should carry the impression of having many shady aspects about it.

And so, this applies to this "Lugunica Academy Secret Attraction" much the same.

"Could it be, is there a kind of scary story to this flower field…?"

"Well no, this is completely unrelated to the seven mysteries of Lugunica Academy. Wait no, I suppose it might be horrifying in its own way. But, before talking about that, we gotta get-"

Out of here, before I could say that and drag Emilia away.

That voice abruptly appeared behind us.

"—Oh my, students after school at this time is quite rare."

"…"

When I heard that low tone of voice accompanied by a refined elegance, a cold sweat trickled down my back.

Once that voice behind my back reached me, I was unable to move. From behind my back would mean that it was basically to the front of Emilia, who was facing me.

She can see the face of the person who called out to us. Emilia has already been apprehended by that person. And she, of all things, turned a smile towards them

"Ah, Mr. Principal. Did you also come to see the flower bed? "

And greeted him with that.

She said that to this school's principal, Principal Wilhelm Van Astrea!

"I believe you are… Oh, right, the transfer student Emilia-san. This should be your first day after transferring. How has the school been treating you?”

“Yes, it is so full of interesting things. And besides that, I’ve been having Subaru-kun over here giving me a tour of the school.”

“Hoho, Well, well.”

From Emilia’s amicable mouth, my name spilled out.

As I remained unable to move, a tough, thick palm gently clapped onto my shoulders from behind me. Then, to my immediate side, a face I’m well acquainted with, that of an old man—Nay, that of the school principal

“Being kind to the fairer gender is a good thing. That is what makes one a man.”

“Ha, haha. It’s no biggie. No, really. Well now, looks like it’s about time to go, so I’ll be-…”

“Mr. Principal, do you know who’s been looking after this flower bed? I am just so suuuper moved by it that I wish to know.”

“Emilia-san?!”

That is such a worst-case-scenario choice that I unconsciously added San to her name.

Emilia gets surprised by my shriek, but the Principal laughs bashfully, saying “No, no.”

“It is nothing that outrageous. It is no more than a flower bed I began with my amateur knowledge. Just to kill some time. But it is an honor to hear you say that.”

“You’ve been taking care of it, Mr. Principal?! Wow, that’s amazing!”

Seeing the impressed Emilia's face, the principal grew increasingly bashful. That appearance of his was quite heartwarming. That’s right, it was certainly heartwarming.

However, the problem starts here.

“In the first place, gardening is more my wife’s hobby rather than mine.”

“Does your wife like flowers?”

“Yes, she’s an unparalleled lover of flowers. On the other hand, I hardly have anything I could call a hobby. Unable to overlook that my wife said this to me. “How about you try raising some flowers?”, and this is the result “

“How wonderful…”

Ecstatically, Emilia listened in on the principal’s “Secrets behind the origin of the rear garden flower bed.”

I’ve prepared myself for the worst already.

To be trapped here, that is.

“At first, I believed it would be simple, but surprisingly, there is quite a depth to gardening. Even the health of a flower varies depending not only on the type of flower, but on the individual flower. To the point my wife told me I should try to be as careful with it as I am trying to keep her in good spirits.”

“You have such a wonderful wife.”

“Indeed, she is such a great wife that I even think her to be wasted on me. When I bring her here during our free days, it is quite the sight seeing her frolic about, almost like she had gone back to her young days…”

Perhaps due to Emilia being an excellent listener, the Principal’s passionate conversation did not let up.

Rather than his passion not letting up, to put it bluntly it’s more like his passion for his wife is not letting up.

“Right right, now that I think back—”

“At that time my wife-…”

“We were still so young so-…”

“But that part of her is so charming that-…”

7

“Looks like the sun’s long since set on us…”

“Yeah…just as expected.”

Completely past sundown, on our night walk back from school, Emilia and I walked side by side.

About three hours must have passed since our encounter with the principal at the backyard flower bed. I, with an exhausted face, notice Emilia in my periphery with an apologetic expression.

“Erm, I’m sorry ok? This is all because I talked a ton with Mr. Principal.”

“No, it’s fine. From the moment we encountered the principal there, that fate became unavoidable. The principal’s unending boasting about his wife is the biggest reason that such a wonderful flower bed is kept a “Secret Specialty” not open to the public.”

Unending, meandering, endless, continuously surging topics about his beloved wife.

People call it Golden Time Lover Requiem. I’m people.

In short, Principal Wilhelm is a massive wife guy, and that garden is a flower bed he diligently put together for his wife.

If you pop into school on the weekend, like during club activities, you can occasionally encounter the principal bringing his wife there, happily spending his time hanging about.

“However, his wife is the more fearsome opponent so be careful. She’s twice-…… No, thrice as smitten as the principal.”

“And you’d have to take on both…”

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

Emilia nodded with a serious face that said she finally understood the threat of it

Principal Wilhelm and his wife are by no means bad people, but that feeling that they can no longer see anything but each other just gives you horrible heartburn.

In the end, we were trapped until after the groups doing club activities had left, and were stuck having to walk back late at night together like this.

“Escorting the fairer gender home is a man’s role, is what he’d said to me here.”

“Can you escort me properly?”

“If you’ll allow the risk of me knowing where your house is.”

“That’s fine. I mean, Subaru-kun won’t come trying to beat me up or the like right?”

“I might have to tsukkomi somewhere, so I can’t guarantee anything. After so many hours after school with you, I’ve at least grasped that much of your airheadedness.”

Let's chalk it up to her having enough of a unique personality to have been enrolled in the Frederica class. Now just put her in the thick of it, and if she doesn’t dim, she’ll be a bona fide Lugunica Academy student.

“But…Fufu, Aah, I had fun.”

And so, when I nodded in a very educatorish manner, Emilia beside me laughed splendidly and said that.

She swung her bag up, then when she looked up at the sky dotted here and there by the stars said, “I’d never walked around this late at night, there’s been so much that I didn’t know, so many things that have been suuuper fresh to me.”

“Novel and fresh are two very different things after all, not the best thing to mistake the two for one another.”

“Don’t they mean the same thing?”

“Freshness is Fresh, but novelty can become Pressing at times.”

There’s no guarantee one won’t be overwhelmed by novelty and fall behind as a result. If Emilia can avoid that, I’d also be quite glad, after having gotten along with her.

“Whatever the case, if you can give me a smile and tell me let’s get along tomorrow and on as well, then I guess that’s all I’d need. As a plus you could also be a little specially friendlier with me.”

“What do you mean by specially friendlier?”

“Right…Like, I guess the typical thing to deepen a relationship in one swoop is how we call each other.”

Human relations are a strange thing, when a relationship changes things like the way people call each other also change.

If you become closer, so-called etiquette begins to fade little by little. It’s a little different from disrespect. The relationship evolves into one where you don’t need manners.

“…”

Emilia started pondering the meaning of my words just for a little.

After that, she must have quickly understood what I wanted to say.

“Th-Then.”

She, slightly hesitatingly, stopped on the other side of the road and looked at me.

I slowly stopped my feet as well, and turned towards Emilia.

And then Emilia, as if having made up her mind,

“—Let’s get along in the future as well, Natsuki.”

“HUH?! Isn’t switching out my first name for my last name widening the gap in our relationship a bit?!”

“Eh?”

We had such a good atmosphere there, and yet, I was shocked by how that was thrown away.

Just then, Emilia also made a surprised face.

We looked at each other and tilted our necks with an “Eh?”.

“I-I mean, as proof of us getting closer, I should change how I call you…That’s what you said, right?”

“Which is why, having already taken the stance of adding kun to my first name, here I was hoping that you’d go through with calling me by just my first name.”

“But I did call you by your—!”

While comparing our intentions, Emilia suddenly got something stuck in her throat.

Her eyes opened wide, and while pointing at me with her finger

“By chance is the Subaru in Natsuki Subaru your first name?!”

“Yeah?! Did I forget to mention that?!”

“I-I mean there are people with no last name like me! And other people’s first names generally go first too, so I just thought…!”

Thanks to the astonished Emilia’s statement, I finally understood the situation

I see, so basically, Emilia thought that my first name was Natsuki.

And therefore, her attempt to finally come out and call me by my actual first name, failed.

“So that means this whole time you were meaning to call me Natsuki-kun? That does change the vibe of everything that happened today a little.”

“I-I mean I thought…hk.”

Suddenly being called by my surname by a girl I just met, now that I know that feeling of superiority was a misunderstanding, I feel just a little dejected.

However, Emilia’s mood gets really foul towards the dejected me. Emilia’s face becomes red, and while looking at me with slightly moist eyes says,

“S-Suddenly calling a boy I just met by his first name is just …. S-So embarrassing.”

“…”

“S-Stop that! Don’t look at me. My face is bright red right now…!”

Emilia put both hands over her cheeks and attempted to hide that seemingly blushing face.

I couldn't take my eyes off her as it happened.

That dejected feeling from a moment ago left to who knows where, now overwritten by a new surprise and admiration, I completely lost sight of it.

Because I mean—

“You’re so cute, Emilia-tan.”

“That’s…. Eh?! What?! Where did the Tan come from?!”

“It’s a change in how I call you. Y’know, a nickname makes you cuter right?”

“That’s what you call a cute nickname?! Liar, you’re just teasing me!”

Still with a blushing face, Emilia began to hit me with a pat pat.

Light, way too light. It doesn’t hurt at all compared to Ram’s. She likely isn’t even really trying to hurt me but it got kinda funny.

“Uhahahaha—!”

“Aw geez, Subaru you dummy! Who cares about you!”

On the night road on the way back from school, Emilia and I go back home while raising a sulky voice and a dumb laugh.

At some point, she changed how she called me, but I did not point that out.

But it seems like school life will feel different from tomorrow on.

While I still did not understand the identity of what I felt for this girl who was walking beside me, I simply let the impetus of this laugh carry me, and was satisfied with today’s conclusion.

Re:Zero Academy! Continues in third period!

Third Period
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—Mornings usually began with a sudden jolt.

Beatrice: “Come ooon, time to get up already, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Honjuras?!”

A peppy voice rang out, immediately followed by an un-peppy impact straight to the stomach. Letting out a shriek, I jolted awake—and right there, just in front of me, was my ever-adorable little sister’s face.

Subaru: “…Yo, Beako. You’re lookin’ pretty, cutesy, and lovely again today.”

Beatrice: “But of course, in fact. Betty is pretty today as well, I suppose. Now then, it’s a beautiful morning, so get up already and let’s eat breakfast together, in fact.”

Sitting triumphantly atop my gut with that smug grin, Beatrice beamed at me. While her light little body still weighed down on me, I gave in with a “yeah yeah” and curled up right there.

Beatrice: “Ah! You’re not getting it at all, I suppose! That’s a second nap! A second nap posture, in fact!”

Subaru: “Ughh, c’mon, Beako. I get that time spent eating with you is precious in this short life of mine… But just as much, I wanna savor this decadent morning vibe…”

Beatrice: “Nghh! Betty won’t allow that, I suppose! Nii-cha—no, Subaru! Which is more important, I ask you: Betty or your second nap, in fact?!”

Subaru: “That sounds like something outta a daytime soap… Wait, hold on, maybe that’s it!”

Beatrice: “—? What’re you suddenly scheming… kyaah?!”

I reached for the little girl swaying on my belly, and dragged her into the futon.

Her head snug in my arms, I gently stroked her hair, roping Beatrice into my toasty, decadent second nap. —Truly, the best of both worlds: dozing off with your little sister!

Subaru: “Now you get to enjoy a second nap too, Beako. And the joy of this is double that of a normal nap—no, it wouldn’t be exaggerating to call it exponentially better!”

Beatrice: “You’re rambling nonsense again, I suppose! L-Let go, in fact! Betty is no longer a child who would sleep with Subaru, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Aww, but lately, Beako hasn’t been sleeping with me and it’s been sooo looonely… So I’m gonna soak in as much Beatrieze as I can. sniff sniff”

Beatrice: “Stop sniffing me, in fact!”

Beako flailed adorably in my arms.

By the way, “Beatrieze” is a special brain chemical I invented that’s produced by petting, cuddling, or otherwise appreciating Beatrice. Without regular doses, the men of the Natsuki household wither and die. Case study: myself and Dad.

Just like that, while horsing around with my sister, a cruel twist of fate occurred—I started waking up.

Subaru: “Guh, damn it… Was this your plan all along, Beako? Using your adorable self as bait to distract me and sever my bond with sleep—I've been played…!”

Beatrice: “I-I don’t even know what you’re on about anymore, but let go already, I suppose. Ughh, my hair and clothes got all messed up, in fact.”

Subaru: “Don’t worry. Even messed up, your charm doesn’t fade.

There's a certain appeal in the messiness too. Mega messy Beako."

Beatrice: "You're being mega annoying, I suppose!!"

Pouting, Beatrice hopped off the bed and stuck her tongue out at me cutely. I scratched my head at her tantrum and sat up, tilting my head with a confused "huh?"

The reason? The clock—or rather, the time it was pointing to.

Which was—

Subaru: "Oi oi, Beako. You woke me up a whole hour earlier than usual. That's some top-tier oopsie behavior right there. C'mon, let's go back to sleep."

Beatrice: "Don't hold your arms out like that, in fact! You're making me wanna dive back in, I suppose! But no, I have a reason for waking you early today, in fact. And that reason is sound, I suppose."

Subaru: ""That reason is sound," huh…"

Beatrice: "Starting this morning, Betty has a meeting with the school's field trip planning committee, in fact. So I have to eat breakfast early and head off sharp, I suppose."

Subaru: "I see. And I'm being dragged into that because… why the hell?!"

Chest puffed out, Beatrice explained herself, while I, denied my sweet nap time, voiced my rebellion.

Even if she's the cutest little sister ever, there are lines that shouldn't be crossed. I was firmly of the mindset to stand against such selfishness.

Subaru: "The grudge of a man robbed of his second nap runs deep. What logic could possibly justify waking me up?! Go on, say it, Beako! Why did you wake your dear brother?!"

Beatrice: "Because if Betty woke up alone, she couldn't say good morning to Subaru, or eat breakfast with him, and that would be too sad, in fact…"

Subaru: "Damn it! That's too cute!"

In the end, a siscon has no power to reject his little sister's adorable wishes!

To answer Beatrice's honest feelings, I leapt out of bed in one smooth motion. I was wide awake now anyway, and trying to nap again felt pointless.

If that's the case, then it's a brother's duty to answer his darling little sister's plea—

Subaru: "Alright, now that it's settled, help me change, Beako."

Beatrice: "Do it yourself, in fact!"

—She didn't go quite that far for me.

Still, there'd been a weird dead period recently, so tossing in that classic gag felt like the right move.

2

Petra: "Then I'll be taking Beatrice-chan with me, okay~!"

Beatrice: "I'm the one being taken, in fact."

Even though it was early morning, Petra had shown up at the door with a dazzling smile to pick up Beatrice and head to school.

The two of them did everything together, and apparently, they were also on the excursion planning committee together. That seemed to add a whole new level of excitement to their morning, given their departure was at a different time than usual.

As her brother, I couldn't help but worry about my sister—who, despite her all-rounder stats, still managed to be clumsy here and there—but with Petra filling in the gaps so smoothly, I could rest easy. As a unit, those two could probably take over the world.

Subaru: "Kinda lonely for me, but… seeing my little sister off on her path to glory with a smile, that's a brother's job… "If my oshi makes it to Budokan, I can die happy…"“

Father: "Oi oi, getting ahead of yourself again, son. Sure, my daughter could totally be center stage at Budokan, she's that lovely a girl… but Papa's not signing off on that for at least another five years."

As I stood at the front door tearfully watching my sister off, Dad chimed in. He had a tendency to be half-naked most of the time, but at least on days when someone else's kid like Petra was visiting, he'd make sure to wear clothes.

His T-shirt had Beatrice's smiling face printed on it—an item that let him keep her adorableness close even on days she left for school early.

Father: "Don't worry. The back's got a print of you smiling when you were little."

Subaru: "I'm not worried about that! And would you please keep some distance from your teenage son? With Beako it's fine, but with guys my age, you never know what might trigger a total family meltdown."

Father: "That's terrifying… True, the one on the back is your elementary school grin, but even now that you're in high school, I love you just the same. You know that, right?"

Subaru: "Yeah, you tell me at least once a day."

In our family, saying "I love you" at least once a day and openly expressing your feelings to those you care about was a household rule.

I really respected Dad for valuing that so much—but as a teen boy, it could be kinda rough to uphold.

Subaru: "That said, I don't feel shy saying it to Beako or Mom, so maybe it depends on how you usually act?"

Father: “Tch, not cute at all! So, Beatrice left early, but what about you? Still got plenty of time. Wanna wrestle with your old man till Rem-chan shows up?”

Subaru: “Waking up early just to wrestle my dad? What am I, Hinomaru? But yeah… just zoning out is lame too, so… Alright.”

It bugged me to go along with one of Dad’s suggestions, but I wasn’t about to waste time on something as fruitless as wrestling him either. So I slipped on my shoes at the entrance.

Might as well take advantage of this rare early morning to go for a stroll.

Subaru: “They say “The early bird gets the worm”… maybe something good will come out of it.”

Father: “Ah, going for a walk, huh? Hold on, lemme go change.”

Subaru: “You’re not coming! I’m going alone! Go flirt with Mom or something!”

Father: “Oof, my bad. Guess you’re being considerate, huh?”

Subaru: “Don’t call it being considerate! It’s not like I’m helping a shy classmate get a date or something!”

After that uneasy back-and-forth, I quietly left the house.

It just felt… wrong to head back inside right after that. Even after twenty years of marriage, my parents were still as lovey-dovey as newlyweds. As their son, that could be hard to handle. Still, I was grateful they got along so well.

Subaru: “A peaceful home, free from arguments… Some say conflict builds stronger bonds, but smooth sailing’s always better in my book.”

That was my stance—less worries, less misfortune, fewer obstacles? All the better.

The Natsuki household was about as average middle-class as they came. And yet, with a happy family and an adorable little sister, I was more than blessed.

Subaru: “Thank you for the miracle of being born in this era. Thumbs-up with all I am. Sunshine lighting the future above. I’m the runaway train—get outta my way.”

Whoops. Guess my mood got the best of me, and I started mumble-rapping.

Early mornings really did clear the mind. Taking in the crisp morning air and strolling through a quieter-than-usual neighborhood… there was a certain poetic charm to it—

???: “—Oh, good morning, Subaru. What a coincidence running into you here.”

Subaru: “Hghyee?!”

Just as I’d started to skip along, a voice startled me into a panic.

And no wonder—I might’ve just been caught rapping. Worse yet, the voice that reached my ears was as delicate and melodious as a silver bell.

There was only one person in my entire life who that voice could belong to.

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan?! What are you doing existing at this hour?!”

Emilia: “Hehe. I get that you’re surprised, but “existing” is a bit much, don’t you think? Even when you’re not watching, I’m still very much alive and well.”

Subaru: “R-Right… Of course. Haha, hehe… You just caught me off guard, fufufu…”

Crap. I laughed like a total weirdo from the surprise encounter.

Still, while I was mentally kicking myself, the girl standing in front of me—Emilia, the new transfer student—smiled at me like an angel, her amethyst eyes full of gentleness.

Her long silver hair shimmered like moonlight, and her slender limbs made her look graceful and statuesque.

She hadn't gotten her school uniform yet, so she normally wore her old academy's one—but not right now.

She wore a light blouse and a soft, fluffy skirt that spread gently at the hem—in other words, casual clothes.

Subaru: "Damn… casual looks so cute…"

Emilia: "Eh? You think so? Thanks. Subaru, your outfit is… um."

Subaru: "Ah, this? This is my sweet lovely little sister, Beatrice. Cute, right? This was taken when she was fresh outta bed with messy hair…"

I proudly showed off my T-shirt to Emilia, who tilted her head in question.

Unlike Dad's shirt, mine had Beatrice's face printed on both the front and back. While I appreciated Dad's sentiment, it felt wrong to sully the pure act of adoring Beatrice by inserting myself into the mix.

Emilia: "Wow, that's your sister? She's reeaaally cute!"

Subaru: "Right? You get it! She's super cute. She's been kinda rebellious lately, but she used to be all, "Nii-cha, Nii-cha," tagging along everywhere… Not to brag, but I basically raised her."

Emilia: "Whaaat?! What happened to your parents?!"

Subaru: "Oh, they helped too. But, well, even between the two of them, I'd say it was seventy-thirty in my favor."

Emilia: "I see. You're reeaaally hardworking, huh, Subaru…"

It was my usual banter, but Emilia took it all in without questioning it, which only encouraged me to keep going. Thanks to that, the initial shock wore off a little, and I could finally start appreciating the miracle of running into a beautiful transfer student out of nowhere.

Subaru: “Anyway, what were you up to, Emilia-tan? It’s pretty early, huh?”

Emilia: “Hm? I was just out for a walk. See, I just moved here for the transfer, so I don’t really know the area yet. And I’ve gotta study it for Puck’s sake too.”

Subaru: “Wow, you’re dedicated… Wait, Puck?”

Emilia: “Yup, Puck. My cat. He’s over there.”

She pointed toward a nearby brick wall. On top of it, curled up with a long tail swishing gently, was a fuzzy, gray furball.

Peering closely, I could tell it was indeed a cat.

The cat noticed me watching, and then—with those big round eyes turned my way—

Puck: “Hey.”

Subaru: “What the—?!”

Emilia: “Wh-What’s wrong?! Why’d you yell like that…?”

Startled, I whipped around, and Emilia looked equally surprised at my reaction.

But like, come on! Don’t act like that’s normal! That cat just—

Subaru: “It talked, right? It looked right at me and waved and said, “Hey”…”

Emilia: “Huh? No way. Don’t be silly. If you’re trying to mess with me, it’s not gonna work.”

But Emilia didn’t believe me one bit. Which, yeah, was the normal reaction. Honestly, if she had said, “Oh yeah, Puck talks. Isn’t that neat?” I wouldn’t have known how to handle it.

Subaru: “Must’ve just been a mishearing… or some kind of hallucination. Geez, that scared me.”

Puck: “Exactly. Let’s go with that. You don’t wanna freak Lia out or get labeled the weird kid, right?”

Subaru: “You're talking to me so naturally!”

The cat—Puck—leapt down from the wall and curled up by my feet, talking casually like that was the most normal thing in the world. Completely floored, I picked him up.

His paw pads pressed against my cheek. So soft. So fluffy.

Subaru: “Just for the record, I don’t have any special power that lets me talk to animals. Which means the weird one here isn’t me—it’s you.”

Puck: “Well, if that’s how you wanna frame it, I won’t stop you. But saying stuff like that’ll only make you look like the weird one. Here, look.”

At that, I glanced at Emilia. Her amethyst eyes widened as she looked between me and Puck, who were locked in an intense staring contest.

Emilia: “It almost looked like you and Puck were actually talking. It’s super rare for Puck to let someone new pick him up like that and not squirm.”

Subaru: “Really? So, uh, what did it look like from your perspective?”

Emilia: “Huh? Puck was just going “meow meow,” and Subaru had this mean look on his face saying something back…”

Subaru: “You’re painting me as the bad guy?! And wait, seriously—this is really happening?!”

Going by Emilia’s reaction, it seemed only I could hear Puck’s voice. Stunned, I loosened my grip, and Puck slipped from my hands to land gracefully on the ground.

Then, as he casually washed his face—

Puck: “No need to worry. This isn’t the start of some strange story. I’m not gonna turn you into a magical girl or grant you wishes or talk about the entropy of the universe or anything. So go ahead and sign the Contract.”

Subaru: “I’m not signing anything! There’s nothing comforting about the word “Contract” in that context!”

Puck: “Kidding, kidding.”

He chuckled, then leapt into Emilia’s arms. She caught him gently and began to stroke his back.

Emilia: “Still, I’m glad you and Puck are getting along. I was a little worried.”

Subaru: “Worried? How come?”

Emilia: “Puck usually doesn’t get along well with my friends… Oh, wait. Subaru, are you okay with being called my friend? Is that too forward of me?”

Subaru: “N-No no no, not at all! If anything, I’m honored to be your very first friend. I’d even hope to one day… level up from that position.”

Emilia: “Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

My tongue just kept running, saying things I really didn’t need to say. A bad habit of mine.

But still, meeting Emilia like this felt like fate—

Subaru: “Since we were both out for a walk, mind if I tag along? We’re headed to school in the end anyway, so why not turn this into a little date?”

Emilia: “A date… That’s when you go out with a boy! It is a date!”

Subaru: “Whoa, was this your first time?!”

Seeing her eyes sparkle, I suddenly remembered she'd come from an all-girls school.

If she'd been that sheltered, she probably hadn't gone out with boys much, if at all. In that case—

Emilia: "This is my first date… What do we do?"

Subaru: "Wait! If it's your first date, I wanna do it right! At the very least, not in a T-shirt with my sister's face plastered across the front, back, and underarms!"

Emilia: "There's a secret Beatrice-chan under your arm…!"

I was the type who wanted to take dates seriously, if I was going to go on one.

If it was a moment we'd remember forever, I wanted the perfect setup.

Subaru: "Now that I think about it, I've never been on a real date either…"

Emilia: "Really? But you seem super close with everyone in class, Subaru…"

Subaru: "Well, I've gone out with girls before, sure. I go shopping with my childhood friend Rem all the time, and her sister Ram often drags me along too."

But if I counted those as dates, that just felt… depressing.

I'd also helped Crusch, Ferris, and Anastasia with student council errands, and got dragged around by a grumpy Priscilla when her attendant Al was unavailable. I'd even hung out with the six beautiful sisters next door once—

Subaru: "Come to think of it, from the outside I must look super experienced…"

Puck: "Your looks and your actual self just don't line up, huh? Yup yup, makes total sense. That's exactly the kind of vibe you give off."

Subaru: “You’re a cat! Stop psychoanalyzing me!”

I yelled at Puck, who purred contentedly in Emilia’s arms. But he just played dumb, and Emilia tilted her head at me in confusion. Dammit.

Subaru: “Alright! Anyway, today’s walk isn’t a date. It’s a walk-date. Totally separate thing. Let’s go with that.”

Emilia: “I don’t get it, but if that’s what you want, sure. So, where to?”

Subaru: “Hmm… So, you’re trying to get familiar with the area and also figure out good walking routes for Puck, right?”

Cats didn’t usually go on walks with their owners like dogs did, but since nobody was questioning it, I let it slide.

The question now was what route to take—

Puck: “I’d be happy with somewhere with a nice view and a pleasant breeze. I’m not in the mood for exercise, so let’s skip steep hills… Also, I haven’t introduced myself to the local strays yet, so if we could avoid the turf of the boss cats around here, that’d be great.”

Subaru: “You’re really picky… though I guess that helps narrow it down.”

Puck: “Right? It’s like when someone says, “Anywhere’s fine” on a date—it’s the worst.”

Despite scrunching my face at Puck’s smug tone, I appreciated the specifics. It made picking a spot much easier.

So, the route I decided on for our walk-date was—

Subaru: “Alright. Let’s go with the levee path. There’s a huge river running alongside it, so it’s got a great view and feels nice and open.”

And so, with that kind of invitation, we arrived at the riverbank in our town.

This embankment, with a large, famous river flowing right beside it, was a popular spot for watching the first sunrise of the year on New Year’s Day. On weekdays, it was also known as a jogging course used by both fitness-minded youths and the elderly.

Of course, many people came to the embankment with the same purpose as us, and here and there, dog owners could be seen cheerfully chatting with one another.

They could be seen—

Subaru: “Still, I don’t see any cat owners around…”

Emilia: “Cats hate having collars and leashes on, so maybe that’s why… But Puck always wakes me up saying he wants to go on walks.”

Subaru: “Huh, is that so.”

Puck: “Mhm. I just can’t feel like it’s a new day without being with Lia.”

Even if the purpose was pet walking, the details made each owner stand out, and Emilia, still holding Puck, had furrowed brows in concern.

Though her words sounded like a pet-loving owner making selfish claims, judging by Puck’s actual reaction, it didn’t seem like a one-sided love. My prejudice that most cats in the world saw their owners as servants appeared to be mistaken.

Subaru: “That said, it’s a walk, but you’ve been holding him the whole time.”

Emilia: “—? Oh, Puck doesn’t like walking, so I always carry him like this. But when he gets really, really pudgy, I make sure he gets exercise.”

Subaru: “Is that so. I kinda had this preconception that once an animal's body shape goes out of whack, it can't really return to normal, but I guess you can do that kind of Rizap thing, huh."

Emilia: "Well, it's the fruit of hard work."

Subaru: "But the weight gain was the fruit of laziness…"

Seeing Puck's smug face, I slumped my shoulders in dismay.

Well, since he's skinny now, it didn't seem like he planned to leave Emilia's arms. If she wasn't complaining about the weight, I had nothing to say.

Subaru: "But isn't carrying an adult cat around all the time a bit tough? Puck's on the smaller side, but still."

Emilia: "It's fine. I may not look it, but I'm pretty strong, you know. Back at my previous school, whenever there was anything physical to do, people always relied on me."

Subaru: "Even if you say that by the standards of a girls' academy…"

Even if she flaunted her strength with those thin, white arms, they looked soft around the upper arms, so it wasn't very convincing. For the record, I also had a fair amount of confidence in how I looked once undressed.

In this sort of situation, most of the time, people just couldn't see themselves objectively. So, I suppose Emilia and I were about even in terms of self-awareness.

And, while we were talking like that—

???: "—Huh? Subaru-kun, what are you doing here?"

Called out by an incredibly familiar voice, I was taken aback.

There was no need to turn around to check who it was. After all, it was a voice I was more familiar with than family.

Subaru: "Eh? Rem? What about you, why are you here?"

Rem: “This morning, I came with Nee-sama. But I never imagined I’d run into you, Subaru-kun… As expected of Nee-sama’s divine favor.”

Subaru: “Even if you treat her like a shrine’s deity, Ram is still just your sister.”

As always, Rem said something totally outrageous, and I replied with a wry smile.

Standing there on the embankment, dressed in cute casual clothes, was Rem. It wasn’t unusual for her to visit on her days off, but seeing her like this on a weekday morning gave it a sudden charm. The weekday effect, huh.

Emilia: “Hey hey, Subaru. That girl’s in our class, right?”

Subaru: “Hm? Ahh, yeah, yeah. This is Rem. My childhood friend who’s perfect at housework.”

Getting poked in the back by Emilia, I reflected on leaving her out of the loop. Then I took a step to the side and introduced Rem to Emilia.

And then—

Subaru: “Rem, as you know, this is Emilia-tan. We bumped into each other while she was walking her cat, so we’re checking out some suitable routes for a lazy cat’s stroll.”

Rem: “I see. That’s what this was about. —Once again, I’m Rem. I’ve known Subaru-kun since we shared our first bath as babies.”

Subaru: “Don’t lie. The one who shared a bath with you was your Nee-sama.”

Rem: “Ah, right. I meant to say we were wrapped in the same swaddling cloth.”

Subaru: “That was your Nee-sama too.”

Well, I wasn’t conscious back then, so I couldn’t say for sure, but

Rem and I had birthdays about two months apart, so that kind of situation was unlikely.

Emilia: “Oh, thank you for the polite introduction. I’m Emilia. And this is the gray kitty, Puck.”

Subaru: “Sounds like a courier company intro…”

Rem: “Wow, what an adorable cat. May I pet him?”

Emilia: “Of course. Here, Puck, show your belly.”

Puck: “Guess I have no choice, nyaa~”

With Puck rolling onto his back in apparent contentment, Emilia and Rem giggled as they played with him. Watching them while crossing my arms, I tilted my head.

Subaru: “Rem, you said you were accompanying Nee-sama, but why the embankment? What’s that got to do with Ram?”

Rem: “Well, Nee-sama is training.”

Subaru: “Training?”

Rem: “Yes.”

Tickling Puck’s tummy with her finger, Rem beamed proudly.

Whenever Rem got this proud look, it was always about either Ram or me. With Ram, fair enough, but being bragged about to others made me feel ticklish inside. Then again, I always boasted when I talked about Rem too, so I guess it was mutual.

Emilia: “Rem-san’s older sister is Ram-san, right? From our class?”

Rem: “Yes, that’s her. An amazing sister who’s far too good for someone like Rem.”

Subaru: “Just so you know, Rem’s sister bias is practically a chronic condition, so take her words with a grain of salt.”

Rem: “Muu, that’s not true.”

Pouting, Rem turned her face away. Still turned aside, she began talking about Ram.

Rem: “As you know, Subaru-kun, Nee-sama has incredible athletic ability and often gets asked to help with various clubs…”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’ve seen her doing flashy stuff in lots of clubs. Even when surrounded by guys, she handles it without issue. She’s just naturally gifted…”

No matter what you had her do, Ram would quickly master it. Especially in things that required instinct, she was outstandingly good.

So Rem’s over-the-top praise wasn’t exactly wrong in that regard.

Emilia: “So, what happened with this amazing Ram-san?”

Rem: “Yes. Because she’s so dependable, she was asked to help with a certain club again… and she wanted to take it seriously, so she started early morning training.”

Subaru: “Ram did?! That’s surprisingly earnest?!”

It was pretty shocking, almost like getting hit with unexpected news while half-asleep.

Ram had always coasted on her natural talents. She was fundamentally arrogant, overconfident, and always delivered results to match.

So I’d assumed she had no connection with actual effort.

Subaru: “And isn’t she supposed to be all over that novelist Roswaal guy right now? I thought she was dragging you along to fuss over him.”

Rem: “That’s true, but this is something separate she’s working hard on. So, I wanted to support those feelings of hers and help with preparations.”

Emilia: “Wow, that’s amazing. So that’s why it turned into this picnic-looking setup."

Behind Rem were picnic baskets and thermoses laid out on a leisure sheet, along with an emergency first-aid kit and towel set—clearly prepared for every contingency.

Rem's virtue was never slacking in preparation, though she did have a flaw of sometimes overdoing it.

Subaru: "Well, if she's got this much done for her, I'm sure Ram's satisfied… But what kind of helper gig is she doing that she's got to go this far?"

Rem: "The girls' judo club."

Subaru: "Girls' judo club…? I didn't even know we had one at our school."

Even after hearing it, I couldn't picture what the girls' judo club looked like.

Our Lugunica Academy had a fair number of active clubs, and many did reasonably well in prefectural competitions.

So if it were a famous club, you'd at least hear about it in passing.

Subaru: "Well, our Handicraft and Home Economics clubs are national regulars too."

Emilia: "Whaaat? Even though it's the Handicraft and Home Economics clubs clubs, they make it to nationals?!"

Subaru: "Surprised? But honestly, they're kinda sports-like clubs in disguise… They compete in things like straight-stitch speed, threading needles under time limits, or accurate sewing machine setup…"

Once you dig into it, even handicrafts can become pretty competitive.

Incidentally, our school regularly sent both the Handicraft and Home Economics clubs clubs to nationals, but they usually ended up canceling each other out.

The faculty advisors, Frederica and Clind-sensei, treated it like a proxy war.

Subaru: “Though the most famous at our school is still the light music club led by Liliana-chan. She even does national tours—it’s a big deal in indie circles.”

Emilia: “That doesn’t sound like a club anymore!”

Rem: “Lugunica Academy is a bit lenient with that kind of thing. Apparently, Liliana-sensei’s passion reached Principal Wilhelm.”

Subaru: “Ah, the legendary direct appeal—her guitar solo pierced the principal’s heart… I wish I’d seen that while still in school.”

Despite their contrasting appearances, Liliana-chan and the principal shared a common trait: passionate love for what they adored. So they surprisingly got along well.

The principal was so touched by the story that Liliana’s song “Sword Devil’s Love Song” became one of the band’s most beloved hits. The album cover even featured the principal and his wife.

—Setting aside the tangent about Liliana-chan…

Subaru: “So I get the helper thing for the girls’ judo club. But why’s Ram training for it?”

Rem: “That’s because…”

Ram: “—What kind of pervert wants to know every little detail of Ram’s actions?”

Subaru: “Uhyowai?!”

A cold voice suddenly struck from behind, making me jump in surprise.

Cutting off Rem’s answer and jabbing directly into my eardrums was none other than my other childhood friend, Ram. Dressed in a hoodie and jogging shoes, she was slightly out of breath, her light-crimson eyes fixed sharply on me.

Ram: “So, what’s Barusu doing here? Don’t tell me you heard about Ram’s training and came all this way just to mock her.”

Subaru: “Why would I waste my time like that? You know me, Nee-sama—I’m the type who tries to squeeze in every last second of sleep. That’s why I chose the school closest to home.”

Ram: “Because Barusu made such a selfish decision, Ram had no choice but to go to that school too… Haa. How inconsiderate.”

Ram let out a sigh, wiping away beads of sweat from her brow with her fingers.

Behind that exchange, I could hear Emilia whispering to Rem.

Emilia: “Hey, why did Ram have to go to the same school Subaru chose?”

Rem: “That’s simple. Rem decided to go wherever Subaru-kun went. And since Rem wanted to go to the same school as Nee-sama, she asked her to come too.”

Emilia: “Oh, I see… Wait, then, that means it was your selfishness?”

Rem: “Yes. Nee-sama is far too kind for indulging Rem’s selfishness.”

With a gentle blush, Rem basked in the warmth of her sister’s affection.

As their exchange revealed, while Ram looked like the domineering one, in reality, Rem held the reins in their relationship. The power dynamic between these sisters was overwhelmingly in Rem’s favor.

That said, Rem’s respect for Ram was genuine, so she never used her influence for selfish gains. She just leaned into it… strongly.

Subaru: “Well, that’s a good example of what makes Rem who she is… But still, it’s rare to see Ram sweating from actual exercise. Is

Roswaal doing a story on the girls' judo club or something?"

Ram: "Stop connecting everything to romance, you horn-brained fool."

Subaru: "Horn-brained?! That's harsh!"

I retorted to Ram's toxic jab, only to be met with her usual dismissive "Hmph" through the nose. Still, if this wasn't about Roswaal, then it left me clueless.

For Ram to be putting in genuine effort… the only ones I could think of motivating that were Roswaal or Rem.

Rem: "The girls' judo club has very few members, and with the seniors retiring after the upcoming tournament, it might be disbanded. That's why Nee-sama wants to help produce real results."

Emilia: "That's… really kind of her."

Ram: "…"

Rem's explanation resolved my lingering questions. Emilia clasped her hands at her chest, and even Puck, sprawled on the ground, nodded in admiration.

I, too, was convinced. Despite her icy demeanor and general bluntness, Ram had a surprisingly deep sense of compassion.

Ram: "…What's with that look."

Subaru: "Oh, nothing? Just thinking Nee-sama's actually kinda nice, you kno—ow!"

Without mercy, a low kick slammed into the back of my knee!

Crashing to the ground, I looked up to see Ram retracting her leg after a clean strike.

Ram: "That was foot sweep practice. Seems like it's paying off."

Subaru: “If you pulled that move in an actual match, the judo club would be banned on the spot!”

Ram: “No need to worry. The club will be disbanded after this tournament anyway. No loose ends.”

Subaru: “That’s a terrible thing to say even as a cover for your embarrassment!”

Rubbing my aching leg, I stood back up. Thankfully, I could still move.

Once, I’d run my mouth too much and taken too many of Ram’s low kicks. My legs swelled so badly I couldn’t stand, and I’d claimed it was due to an anaconda attack in the garden.

Puck: “Anaconda? That’s pushing it. Not the kind of thing you’d run into in a garden.”

Subaru: “Like I could say I was kicked into submission by my childhood friend.”

It said a lot that a cat was lecturing me on common sense.

After that incident, Rem had desperately argued, “It was the anaconda! It wasn’t Nee-sama!” the entire time, but it was all in vain.

Ram: “So? Never mind Ram and Rem, what about you, Barusu? You’re notorious for sleeping in—what wind blew you here? And with the cute transfer student, no less… how indecent.”

Subaru: “Don’t go jumping to conclusions! I only got up early because I was tagging along with Beako. Running into Emilia-tan was pure coincidence! Stop assuming things!”

Ram: “Noisy.”

Subaru: “Snake Fist?!”

What Ram unleashed was a Snake Fist strike—a type of Chinese martial art mimicking a snake’s movement. Why she’d learned it remained a mystery.

Emilia: “It’s true. I just happened to bump into Subaru while walking around the neighborhood. It was pure coincidence.”

Ram: “This is just a warning, but… are you sure it was coincidence?”

Emilia: “Huh, no way… You mean, a duel of fate…?”

Rem: “Nee-sama, please stop saying unnecessary things! And you’re still bringing up yesterday’s misunderstanding!”

Regardless of Ram’s suspicions, Emilia’s notion was pure misunderstanding.

For the misunderstanding about her thinking I’d challenged her to a fight during our school tour yesterday, refer to “Re:Zero School Life! Second Period!” Anyway—

Subaru: “We got caught up talking, but long story short, I’m showing Emilia-tan around town. You guys seem busy, so we’ll get going.”

Emilia: “Right. It’s a shame to part ways, but…”

Rem: “Oh, I see… I’m sad to say goodbye to Puck-chan too.”

With her brows gently lowered, Rem looked disappointed as we turned to leave.

Even Ram would bend a little when Rem made that face. Before I could come up with a backup plan, Ram sighed and dropped her shoulders.

Ram: “Rem, go with Barusu and the others. Ram will be fine on her own.”

Rem: “But Nee-sama, that’s not fair. You have all this stuff…”

Ram: “Rem prepared all this for Ram’s sake. I won’t waste a thing, and I don’t consider it a burden. —I’ll have Otto carry it.”

Otto: “Uweh?!”

Ram gently caressed Rem’s cheek as she spoke, then pointed toward the path. Jogging toward us in a tracksuit was Otto, his eyes wide in shock.

He must’ve been on a morning run too, and now, having been suddenly dragged into this, he looked completely lost.

Otto: “Um, what exactly have I been roped into? And also, why is everyone who’s not in a sports club out jogging this early in the morning?”

Subaru: “Don’t sweat the small stuff, Otto. We’re counting on you with the baggage.”

Otto: “Whaaat?!”

Rem: “Thank you, Otto-kun. Please make sure Nee-sama drinks warm tea regularly so she doesn’t get cold. I’m counting on you.”

Otto: “Hold on a second?!”

Emilia: “I don’t really get it, but Otto-kun, you’re being relied on a looot. That’s a wonderful thing, so good luck!”

Otto: “Even the transfer student?!”

We left the flustered Otto behind without explaining a thing.

Sorry, Otto. You were just born under that kind of star. Dealing with Nee-sama won’t be easy, but that’s on you for walking by.

Otto: “This is just too unreasonable, don’t you think?!”

Ram: “Stop whining and get moving. A man fussing like that… how pitiful.”

Otto: “And yet you’re making me help?!”

Behind us, the stark difference in power between the oppressed and the oppressor was on full display.

Resistance was futile, and Otto needed to accept his fate already. Still—

Subaru: “Even though he’s the ace of the soccer team, I doubt there’s anyone else treated this badly…”

By the way, Otto wasn’t a helper or anything—he was genuinely the ace striker of the soccer club. Not that you’d ever guess.

4

Subaru: “Even so, kinda surprising how many people you run into early in the morning like this…”

Emilia: “Thinking about it that way, time in the morning—when we’re usually not up—feels like a treasure chest, doesn’t it? It makes me glad I woke up, and it’s reaaally fun.”

Rem: “Emilia-san is quite the optimist. Rem thinks that’s a wonderful thing too.”

Puck: “Nyaa~n”

Leaving Ram in Otto’s care, the three of us—and one cat—resumed our walk.

Every now and then, we exchanged greetings or nods with people we passed, enjoying that shared serenity only morning could bring.

Thankfully, Emilia didn’t seem like the shy type, and surprisingly enough, she was getting along well with the strongly flavored character that was Rem. The one playing the biggest role in connecting them, of course, was Puck, who was getting lovingly squished between them.

Rem: “So cute… About how old is Puck-chan, if I may ask?”

Emilia: “Hmm… that’s actually something I don’t really know. By the time I noticed, Puck was already by my side… It’s been over ten years, I think.”

Subaru: “For a cat, ten years is getting up there, isn’t it?”

Puck: “Well, I get the urge to compare ages with humans, but just treat me like some kind of bakeneko and don’t pry into my age.”

Subaru: “That just makes it worse!”

I mean, you can’t just casually drop the bakeneko bomb like that.

Although, since I’m the only one who can actually hear Puck talk, there really might be some truth to that whole bakeneko suspicion… Or maybe I’m the weird one.

Subaru: “Maybe getting hip-checked by Beako every morning triggered a latent awakening…? These days, instead of dying by getting hit by a truck and gaining powers, maybe I unlocked mine by taking my little sister’s ass attacks to the face every morning. Not so much a new trend as a rejected one.”

The tragic story of humanity devolving into civil war over Beako’s butt begins now, in a blood-soaked frenzy called “The Beako Booty War.”

Subaru: “No… Beako’s poor butt… It’s gonna get split in two…!”

Emilia: “Umm, Subaru’s saying weird stuff again…”

Rem: “Please don’t worry. When it comes to his little sister Beatrice-chan, Subaru-kun tends to overthink things. But Rem finds that another charming part of him—it just means he treasures his sister.”

Subaru: “Hey now, don’t go making it sound like I unleash brotherly instincts on every girl with a sibling. I care about you for reasons totally unrelated to that.”

Rem: “Saying you’ll treasure Rem forever like that… it’s embarrassing…”

Subaru: “I didn’t say that! At all!”

Rem blushed furiously and started spiraling, so I waved my hand in the usual flustered fashion.

While doing that, we were just about to bow in greeting to another dog owner walking by when— I suddenly recognized the face.

Subaru: “Wait, isn’t that Felt and Reinhard? What the heck are you two doing here?”

Felt: “…Tch, busted.”

Now, “Tch” was one hell of a greeting, but the one who looked totally displeased upon hearing my voice was Felt—the Cinderella girl of our class.

And no, I don’t mean she was an idol or aspiring to be one. She got the Cinderella label (according to me) because she was being chased by a prince.

Said prince, standing beside the fuming Felt, was the strikingly handsome Reinhard van Astrea.

Reinhard, famous not just in our school, but city- and even prefecture-wide for his godlike looks and skills in everything from academics to sports, was completely smitten with Felt. Felt, however, was consistently, visibly annoyed by his affections.

Subaru: “So, a rendezvous in the wee hours, huh. Maybe that whole school persona was just a smokescreen all along…”

Felt: “B-Baka! No way! I knew you’d say that! That’s why I didn’t wanna tell anyone! I’m only here ‘cause of Romy, okay?!”

Subaru: “Romy?”

Glancing down, I noticed a red leash in Felt’s hand—connected to a big dog that barked loudly.

It was a pretty large dog, and given Felt’s petite build, she looked like she’d be dragged around. But Reinhard seemed to be keeping it in check smoothly.

Wait, what was the deal with this dog and Reinhard anyway?

Emilia: “Good morning. You two are our classmates, right? Reinhard, and Felt-chan, who’s close to him…”

Felt: “We ain’t close! What, even the transfer student’s looking at me like that?! Tch, dammit, this is ridiculous.”

Growling and clawing at her hair, Felt snapped at Emilia’s innocent comment.

Startled by Felt’s reaction, Emilia flinched, while Reinhard chuckled softly.

Reinhard: “Sorry for surprising you. Felt’s a little on edge this morning. Though, to be honest, she’s always like this around me. But she’s really a kind girl underneath, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t misunderstand.”

Felt: “Are you my mom or something?! What kinda angle are you coming from with that crap?!”

Emilia: “I get it, no worries. I can see that, because look how much Romy adores you.”

Ignoring Felt’s protest entirely, Emilia smiled as she pointed to Romy, who was snuggling up against Felt’s leg.

Felt might have a sharp tongue, but she was caring, and her gutsy, straightforward personality made her surprisingly popular with the boys. Of course, most guys backed off immediately once they realized Reinhard was in the picture.

Challenging that guy would be like trying to play rock-paper-scissors against a nuclear bomb. Pointless.

Rem: “Still, what exactly is Romy’s connection to the two of you?”

Reinhard: “Romy was actually a stray dog we found. It happened when Felt and I were walking home together one day… We didn’t know what to do, and at that time…”

Felt: “…My place didn’t have the room to take Romy in. Then this guy says he’ll take responsibility and raise him. But just leaving it all to him didn’t sit right.”

Reinhard: “So we’ve been sharing responsibilities—Felt takes Romy for morning walks, and plays with him on weekends. It's a way for her to understand what it means to care for someone."

Emilia: "Ohhh…"

So, Reinhard adopted a stray they found together, and now Felt helped look after him—that explained how we'd run into them during a walk.

Just hearing that made it sound like a heartwarming story, but—

Subaru: "Felt, you realize your defenses are crumbling hard, right?"

Felt: "Shut up. Don't say it. I already know…"

Felt was doing her best to keep Reinhard at arm's length, but thanks to the mere-exposure effect, even she was starting to cave. Honestly, it was pretty clear from the outside.

At this rate, it felt like a countdown to her inevitable fall.

Reinhard: "Felt's been coming over to my house more recently, too. The housekeeper really enjoys making snacks for her. She says Felt's reactions are honest and refreshing."

Felt: "I just say it like it is. If something's gross, I'll call it gross. But the old lady only gets compliments 'cause her stuff is always tasty. …Man, if your house didn't have you in it, I'd practically live there."

Reinhard: "That's… a difficult response to process."

Felt murmured with genuine feeling, and even Reinhard could only laugh awkwardly at that.

That was pretty harsh, coming from my perspective, but Reinhard didn't seem bothered by it. The man had nerves of steel. Someone like him probably wasn't used to rejection, and yet here he was, handling it like a champ.

Reinhard: "Even if it's harsh, hearing anything from Felt makes me happy. I didn't realize this side of myself existed—it's been a surprise.”

Subaru: “They say love is blind. Maybe when you walk the same path with your eyes closed, the world looks different.”

Reinhard: “—Hm. That’s an interesting way to put it. I’ll take that one.”

It was just some nonsense I blurted out, but getting praised for it gave me this weird sense of accomplishment.

Felt: “Anyway! I’m only with this guy ‘cause of Romy! So don’t go getting any weird ideas! And don’t you dare spread this around school, either!”

Subaru: “Got it, got it. Lips sealed.”

Felt: “That includes texts and LINE messages, too!”

Subaru: “Tch, sharp.”

Forced to swear secrecy, I reluctantly pulled out my phone, which I’d been sneakily hiding behind my back. I had planned to spill it to the whole class, but alas.

Reinhard: “See you at school.”

Felt: “Not a word!”

Waving goodbye to the ever-smiling Reinhard and the endlessly suspicious Felt, we went on our way.

At this rate, it really didn’t seem like it’d be long before Reinhard’s efforts paid off.

Subaru: “I dunno why, but part of me feels kinda sad about it…”

Emilia: “Is it like watching a friend get stolen away by a girl?”

Rem: “Or maybe it’s because Subaru-kun bet on how long Felt-san could dodge Reinhard-san’s advances, and now he’s losing.”

Subaru: “Five points to Rem.”

Rem: “Yay. I’ll make a note of it.”

Emilia: “Whaaat, what’s this? No fair!”

Seeing Rem eagerly jotting something in her notebook, Emilia looked bewildered, but the truth was, those points didn’t actually mean anything. It was just a silly thing we did sometimes.

Rem: “With this, Subaru-kun’s total points exceed two hundred thousand. It’s quite the milestone.”

Subaru: “Wait, what?! That many?!”

Emilia: “Wow, that’s a super old notebook… What happens when the points max out?”

Rem: “I don’t know. But Rem hopes that, someday, Subaru-kun will reward her with something wonderful for all the points she’s saved. Her heart pounds just thinking about it.”

Subaru: “The pressure’s insane! You should’ve brought that up when we were at, like, a hundred points!”

Two hundred thousand points?! Even if I gave out five points each time, that’d mean I’d done it forty thousand times! Just how far back has she been keeping track?!

And what kind of act could possibly be worth that many points…?

Subaru: “How about… spending ten points to get a head pat?”

Rem: “Then that means I can get patted twenty thousand times.”

Subaru: “My arm would fall off!!”

Since I couldn’t keep making careless comments, I promised Rem that I’d come up with a proper point redemption chart later. But the real problem was… What would count as high-value actions in my point system?

Subaru: “Say, Emilia-tan. Just hypothetically, what would you be happiest for me to do for you?”

Emilia: “Me? Hmm… Oh! Something like today, taking a walk together. That’d make me reaaally happy. It’d make waking up early feel totally fine.”

Subaru: “E. M. T…”

Emilia: “Huh? What was that just now?”

Subaru: “Dunno. Something warm just overflowed from my lips.”

Probably my heart trying to say “Emilia-tan’s seriously an angel” or something like that.

Not that it was helpful data for the point system, but as a guy of a certain age, that kind of comment still made me super happy.

Subaru: “How about you, Rem? Morning walks yay or nay?”

Rem: “They’re lovely. But watching the sleeping face of Subaru-kun in the morning is also part of my exclusive childhood friend privileges, so it’s hard to compare.”

Subaru: “Who gave you those privileges?! God?!”

Rem: “God did.”

Subaru: “…Well, can’t argue with God.”

I had no choice but to bow before divine authority.

And with that kind of light banter, we walked until the grand sight of a row of cherry blossom trees lining the embankment came into view.

The timing was perfect—just as they were beginning to bloom, the entire path was bathed in vibrant pink.

Emilia: “Waaah…”

Subaru: “Well? Not bad, right? This area’s actually kinda known for its cherry blossoms. It’s a major hanami hotspot, and people come in droves.”

Rem: “There’s even a cherry blossom festival this weekend. If you’d like, would you join us?”

Emilia: “Really?”

As we admired the festival booths being set up in advance, Rem invited Emilia. Her surprised reaction made her look even more adorable.

Rem and I exchanged a glance, nodded, and said in unison:

Rem & Subaru: “Of course!”

Emilia: “Wait, is that really okay? I mean… Did I do something wrong? Or maybe you already had plans with someone else…”

Emilia’s voice wavered with uncertainty, her face a bit flustered.

Hearing that, I found myself confused. I didn’t feel like we’d done anything particularly kind or worthy of gratitude. This was just normal classmate behavior, wasn’t it?

Especially for someone as pretty as her.

Subaru: “I mean… isn’t this just basic stuff? Right, Rem?”

Rem: “And the fact that Subaru-kun does such basic things without hesitation is what makes him amazing. Rem is deeply impressed.”

Subaru: “It’s just basic stuff!!”

Emilia: “Pfft.”

Hearing Rem’s classic one-liner, Emilia suddenly burst into laughter. Her shoulders shook with the force of it, and as if she couldn’t hold it back, she mumbled through giggles:

Emilia: “Heehee… Okay. I’ll take you up on that kindness. I’ll go to the festival with you two.”

Subaru: “That’s what I’m talking about!”

I snapped my fingers and whooped.

Early birds get the worm. And with perks like these, I'd say waking up early was well worth it.

5

Thanks to getting up early, I was able to make a promise to go to the festival with Emilia.

And so, today's morning roundup concludes with the thought that waking up early every once in a while ain't so bad.

That said—

Al: "I mean, there's practically no one in this class who's not gonna hit up the festival this weekend, right?"

Priscilla: "Naturally, for the class is made up of festival-lovers. There is no one who shall not make an appearance. Of course, I intend to conquer every booth."

Al: "That's what the Princess says, but think about the poor guy stuck tagging along with her. I'm tellin' ya, an old man's gut like mine doesn't wanna be compared with you youngsters' iron stomachs."

So saying, Al clinked his high-performance prosthetic left hand.

Priscilla, who was also the granddaughter of the chairman of Lugunica Academy, often brought Al with her to school like this. By the way, Al was not only missing an arm, but also hid everything above his neck with some kind of headgear every day. A man shrouded in mystery.

Well, once you talked to him, he was just a tired middle-aged dude, so that gap in impressions was one of the entertaining aspects about him.

Al: "Still, you two're bursting with youth from the early morn. A cute childhood friend, and a beautiful transfer student… If I'd been in a class this full of beauties back in my school days, maybe I'd've chased a few more dreams."

Subaru: “I get what you mean. When I first transferred in, I felt like I was gonna crumble into dust from the sheer beauty concentration in this class.”

Priscilla: “What foolish nonsense. My radiance alone is enough to reduce the likes of you to ash. I care not if you become ash this instant. Well?”

Subaru: “Care not or not, I do care, okay?!”

I stuck out my tongue at Priscilla, who waved a ridiculously fancy fan while saying such grandiose things.

Incidentally, one of the biggest contributors to the class’s high beauty quotient was Priscilla herself, which made it hard to refute her claims.

But I wasn’t such a sore loser that I’d go around calling a beautiful girl “not beautiful.”

—Morning walk complete, I returned home, changed into my uniform, and headed to school.

Just recounting that makes it sound like a simple morning scene, but getting to school a bit earlier than usual, like with the walk, came with its own share of new discoveries.

For example, chatting with Priscilla and Al like this was one such discovery.

Subaru: “Still, didn’t expect Priscilla to be at school this early.”

Al: “Surprisingly, the Princess is a morning person. In fact, I’ve been force-converted into one just from tagging along with her. Makes it hell to catch late-night anime.”

Subaru: “But there’s a ton of streaming options nowadays. I’ve been watching “Another World Wanted” too.”

“Another World Wanted” was a crossover anime that mashed together a bunch of different isekai shows. Since the original creators weren’t the same, I figured the director in charge was constantly teetering on the brink of death. I'd like to take this moment to commend their efforts.

Anyway—

Subaru: "The cherry blossom festival this weekend… could this be, like, an actual date with Emilia-tan?!"

Priscilla: "A date, you say."

Subaru: "When a guy and a girl agree to go to an event together… if that's not a date, then what is?! Even if it's just a group thing, considering what happened this morning, there's no doubt—it's a date! I'm fired up now…!"

Priscilla: "What a pitiable sight. Firstly, have you not gone out countless times with that younger of the twin sisters? With such experience, why get cold feet now?"

It was kinda funny, really, how this ended up being a conversation where I was asking Priscilla for dating advice, but her "standards" were completely unrelatable.

Subaru: "Just so you know, Rem and I've been childhood friends since kindergarten. We've gone out tons of times, so those outings don't help here at all."

Al: "Sounds hella painful when you put it like that. So this is the first time you're seriously sittin' down and thinking about what a date really means, huh? Ain't that adorable."

Subaru: "Right? I'm so nervous it's like my stomach's turning sour already."

Priscilla: "Whatever you do, do not let it overflow before me."

Snapping her fan shut with a flourish, Priscilla tapped my chin with its tip, lifting it slightly. That classic chin-lift move everyone talked about—yet when she did it, it looked absurdly natural.

Priscilla: "Do your best. In any era, women find delight in the flailing efforts of men trying to entertain them. Unless something truly horrid happens, the girl is unlikely to take it badly.”

Subaru: “That sounds like some femme fatale logic, but… was that just now… encouragement?”

If so, that’d be an absurdly rare occurrence, and I was honestly a little shaken.

But the moment I said that, the warmth in Priscilla’s crimson eyes vanished. Crap, I was about to apologize for opening my big mouth when—

???: “Hmm? Weren’t y’all just talkin’ ‘bout the festival?”

Priscilla: “…The she-fox.”

Bursting into the conversation came Anastasia, a spirited beauty whose lively Kansai dialect always hit just right.

Priscilla scowled at Anastasia’s sudden intrusion, clearly displeased.

These two were infamous for being like oil and water in school, and were generally kept apart to avoid disaster. Honestly though, maybe the real issue was whoever in the faculty thought it was a good idea to stick them in the same class.

Subaru: “Well, guess now’s not the time for escapism. What’s up, Anastasia? You don’t usually cut into conversations when I’m talking with Priscilla.”

Anastasia: “Well yeah, I usually wouldn’t, y’know? But when it’s about the festival, I just couldn’t let it slide. Our chamber of commerce’s gonna be settin’ up booths left and right, and gettin’ some advance info from our customers is useful for marketin’ purposes.”

Anastasia winked as she spoke—the “chamber of commerce” she referred to being a collective of local privately owned shops in the area.

Anastasia, who adored commerce and was absolutely nuts for money-countin’, frequented the chamber and worked day and night with the adults to help revitalize the region. Apparently, her business sense was no joke either, and it was said that the recent successes of the chamber had all come courtesy of the victory road she'd paved behind the scenes with her shrewdness.

Though, honestly—

Subaru: "Just how much of that's true is up for debate…"

Julius: "…What kind of look is that? Have you something to say to me?"

That remark about Anastasia had come from none other than Julius, who stood gracefully beside her and narrowed one eye at my gaze. The prior info dump about Anastasia had come from Julius, and who knew how much flowery praise he'd tacked on to that adorable money-devourer.

Anastasia: "Lately, we ain't been seein' as many young folks comin' to the festivals. So for us on the organizin' side, it's been pretty tough. That's why we welcome all ideas. Even the Princess's weird ones might end up bein' useful, ya hear?"

Priscilla: "As uncouth and ill-mannered as ever, she-fox. Is that the way one requests something of another? If thou truly wish to hear mine thoughts, begin by politely begging for it. Only then shall mineslef consider whether to grant thee thy desire."

Anastasia: "Oh, no worries. If ya don't wanna share, that's fine. I'm really here for Natsuki-kun anyway. The Princess's ideas are too out-there for us common folk to make use of."

Priscilla: "To blame thy own lack of understanding while belittling the noble… how brazen. One must squint hard to even notice such a small mind, lest it go unseen."

Exchanging barbs that left scorch marks, the two inevitably descended into full-blown war.

And here I thought today had started off on a good note—how did we get here again?

Subaru: “Man, it’s a mystery. Speaking of mysteries, you not stopping them even though you know they’ll fight is a mystery too.”

Julius: “Hmm, that is true. My personal view is that Ana does not actually despise Priscilla-san. They simply do not get along. I believe she acknowledges her abilities. Just as I, in a sense, acknowledge you.”

Subaru: “What’s that supposed to mean? What kind of “sense,” huh?”

There was no way to interpret that nicely, so I instinctively raised my fists. At the end of the day, Julius and I were like parallel lines—never to intersect.

I was a fool for even trying to have a proper conversation.

Julius: “Alas, perhaps I am in no place to mock Ana.”

Subaru: “What the hell are you suddenly so satisfied about…? Oh, hey, student council’s top duo. You two got plans for the weekend festival?”

Ignoring the pretty boy with the smug grin, I turned toward Crusch and Ferris, who were chatting at the desks in front and behind each other.

Responding to my question, Crusch placed a finger to her chin.

Crusch: “Us, you ask? Naturally, we will attend the festival. However, as student council president, I must also monitor our students to ensure they do not go overboard. So I do not intend to treat it as mere play.”

Ferris: “Eeh~ that’s kinda sad~! It’s a festival, ya know? Even if a yukata’s a bit too early, we should still dress up for the occasion~”

Crusch: “Hmm, true enough. Walking under the cherry blossoms in our usual attire does lack novelty. Besides, I would like to see you all dressed up beneath the sakura, Ferris. I concur.”

Ferris: “Ehehe~ Then I’ll prepare an outfit for Crusch-sama too~”

Crusch was spoiling a starry-eyed Ferris, but well, that kind of relationship had always been their weird norm. No surprises there.

In the end, it looked like most of our class would be attending.

Subaru: “In our case, Beako’s probably gonna be… well, Petra-chan or Meili-chan will take care of her. Still, it’s not Beako I’m worried about—it’s Dad.”

Emilia: “—? Not your little sister, but your dad?”

Just as I was letting my thoughts spill out, Emilia came back from her errand to the staffroom. Tilting her head at my comment, I nodded.

Subaru: “Yeah, see, my dad… he really hasn’t managed to let Beako go. He always tries to tie her down one way or another, so I hardly ever get to have her all to myself. It’s rough.”

Emilia: “I see… Wait, did you just say you want to monopolize her too?”

Subaru: “—? Well yeah, Beako is my Beako, after all…”

If possible, I’d keep her by my side at all times, carrying her in my bag. But Beatrice had grown too big to fit in a bag lately, and she was also forming her own relationships, so I couldn’t really smother her anymore. Still, I wanted to monopolize her once in a while.

Emilia: “That’s… a very doting big brother feeling.”

Subaru: “Exactly. …Though I guess, you kinda get it too, huh?”

Emilia: “Eh! Are you saying I want to eat Beako too?!”

Subaru: “Eat her?!”

When she shot back head-on like that, I seriously didn’t know what my feelings for Beako even were.

I’d heard that cat owners sometimes get so overwhelmed with love they express it in strange ways—this might be something like that.

Subaru: “So, what did you mean by saying you get it?”

Emilia: “Oh, I meant the part about not being able to let go. My parents also reaaally doted on me… and that caused a lot of trouble.”

Subaru: “Wow, that must’ve been rough.”

Emilia: “Even just this morning, after I got home from walking with you guys, they got super worked up when I told them. They were like, “Next time, you must bring that Subaru boy over too!”“

Subaru: “They said it like that?!”

Apparently her folks had a lot of energy in their speech, but the smile on Emilia’s face showed that they got along well.

Same as my family—annoying sometimes, but that bond was precious. Even when I wished they’d knock before barging into my room.

Subaru: “Basically, all my complaints about home boil down to Dad…”

Emilia: “Oh yeah! By the way, when I went to the staffroom earlier, Frederica-sensei looked super busy. Something must’ve happened.”

Subaru: “Huh, wonder what. But well, she’s always kinda in a rush.”

That was mostly because she was in charge of our class full of troublemakers. Still, hardworking and diligent Frederica-sensei kept charging through our school drama like something out of an old-school TV show.

And just like clockwork, she’d often end up getting scolded by Clind-sensei.

Subaru: “Still, between Emilia-tan transferring yesterday and now this, the events just keep comin’, huh.”

Emilia: “But that’s reaaally luxurious, isn’t it? Having so many fun things happening every day.”

Subaru: “You’re a master at finding happiness, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Really? Ehehe, thank you.”

And just like that, our chat was cut off by the bell signaling homeroom.

Everyone in the classroom rushed back to their seats, as did the ones who had just arrived from other classes or were running late.

As usual, full attendance—our class, always on point.

Subaru: “Huh? Looks like there’s one extra seat by the window…”

Frederica: “—Now then, is everyone present?”

Before I could finish voicing my suspicion, the door opened and Frederica-sensei appeared.

Back straight, dignified, and beautiful as ever—but this time, I thought I detected a faint note of exhaustion in her voice.

Subaru: “Derica-sensei, something wrong? You seem kinda tired today.”

Frederica: “…You’re quite perceptive, Natsuki-kun. I actually tried very hard to hide it, you know?”

Subaru: “Well, your desk’s right in front of mine, and Derica-sensei is gorgeous, so I’m always looking at your face anyway. Maybe that’s why?”

Frederica: “…”

When I answered seriously, Frederica-sensei narrowed her emerald eyes and went silent. Not sure what that meant, I leaned toward the right and whispered to Rem.

Subaru: “Rem, Rem, did I say something weird just now?”

Rem: “No, I don’t think so. That was just normal, lovely Subaru-kun.”

Otto: “The fact that that’s considered “normal” might be the real issue.”

Even though I didn’t ask, the guy on my left butted in with a snide remark.

Anyway—

Frederica: “Ahem. Moving on, I’ll continue. As you all know, Emilia-san transferred into this class yesterday, but in fact, I have something else to announce to everyone today.”

Subaru: “Whoa, what’s that setup? Don’t tell me—we’re getting another new character?!”

Okay, that would be a bit too random, like shameless meddling from the writing team, but I couldn’t help blurting it out.

However, hearing that, Frederica-sensei let out a deep sigh.

???: “—Unbelievably enough, that’s exactly right, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “Eh? That voice just now…”

As I reacted to the familiar voice, the front door of the classroom opened—and there she was.

A woman slowly stepped inside, and her presence left me speechless.

From head to toe, she was dressed in black, like mourning attire, her whole look imbued with a strange, decadent allure. Her long hair was snow-white, stripped of pigment, and the butterfly-shaped hair ornament she wore drew the eye irresistibly.

Another ridiculously beautiful woman had appeared—

Subaru: “Echidna-san? The third daughter of the six sisters living next door?! It’s Echidna-san!”

Echidna: “Thanks for the exposition. As Natsuki-kun just introduced me, my name is Echidna. Starting today, I’ll be doing my student teacher practicum here.”

Subaru: “S-Student teacher…?!”

As Echidna-san gave a graceful smile and bowed from the podium, we all stirred.

Student teacher—a unique role, somewhere between classmate and full teacher. A rare position that always added a little color to school life.

They were students, technically, undergoing training to become licensed teachers. The appearance of someone from a different age group—especially an older woman—was more than enough to set high school boys off-balance.

Subaru: “N-No way she kept something like this under wraps… Last time we had tea together, she didn’t say a word about it!”

Echidna: “I wanted to surprise you, Natsuki-kun. And if I had told you, there was a chance the other students would’ve found out too. Of course, the biggest reason was that I just wanted to see your reaction… So? Surprised?”

Subaru: “Well yeah, I’m suuuper surprised…”

I scratched my cheek, a bit embarrassed by her mischievous grin.

It hadn’t even been a full year since Echidna-san and her five sisters had moved in next door. But this particular older sister loved nothing more than to toy with younger people in creative ways—and I was her current favorite victim.

Still, I didn’t expect her to go this far. Her thoroughness was impressive.

Subaru: “Between Emilia-tan’s transfer yesterday and now Echidna-san’s sudden appearance… you sure know how to spice things up, Frederica-sensei! You’re a real entertainer!”

Frederica: “Please don’t speak as if I orchestrated all of this. Besides, the announcements aren’t over yet.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Frederica put a hand to her head as if she had a headache, and I blinked in confusion.

But the answer didn’t come from her—it came from the door.

With a loud bang, the same door Echidna-san had entered through burst open again. Another figure stepped inside—taller than Echidna-san, with long brown skin and a single ponytail down her back. She wore an unfamiliar uniform, walking past the podium and standing tall.

For some reason, right in front of me.

Subaru: “U-Um? May I ask who you are?”

She had green eyes, with a rare red pattern in her irises, and a powerful gaze. Only the top button of her uniform was fastened, boldly showcasing a knockout figure that naturally drew the eyes.

Her modified uniform easily matched Priscilla’s in extravagance. Her body too was no less exceptional, and that should give you an idea of how insane her presence was.

Still, more troubling than her explosive figure was the piercing glare she gave me, unprompted.

Was she about to pick a fight? I had just seen a pretty transfer student challenge me to a duel after school yesterday, so who knew what bizarre twist would hit next?

Also, my knee still hurt from that low kick Ram gave me yesterday. Not reassuring.

And then, right in front of me, the beauty’s lips moved.

???: “—Found you.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

???: “Master!!”

Subaru: “Buwah?!”

Her stern expression melted in an instant. Beaming from ear to ear, the stunning woman lunged forward and wrapped her arms around me.

She pressed my face straight into her chest, hugging me tightly with unrelenting force.

???: “I’ve waited sooooo long for this reunion! Even though you look different, I knew it was you the moment I saw you, Master! My Master~!”

Subaru: “Mffghh!”

???: “Huh? I can’t hear ya. But no worries, no need to explain a thing. No matter how much you’ve changed, I’ll still love you just the same, Master!”

Drowning in a suffocating wave of boobs, I flailed helplessly as the beautiful woman refused to let go. Her grip was unreal—seriously locked in. I couldn’t escape. At this rate, I’d die. Cause of death: boobs.

Rem: “—Please stop! Who are you? Let go of Subaru-kun this instant! He’s going to die!”

???: “Mgh…”

The one who saved me from heaven-hell was Rem, who grabbed my arm and forcibly pried the woman away. Holding onto my right arm, Rem glared fiercely at the stunning intruder.

???: “What’s your deal? Don’t get in the way of me and Master’s tearful reunion!”

Rem: “You’re the one being completely out of line! Subaru-kun’s the one suffering here! Just who are you, anyway…?”

Shaula: “I’m Shaula! I’m Master’s long-distance childhood friend, who met him when we were little and made a promise to reunite someday! That’s my position!”

Rem: “—! Subaru-kun’s childhood friend position belongs to Rem!”

In a flash, Rem yanked on my right arm in protest. But the woman —Shaula—pulled back on my left arm to counter her.

Subaru: “Guaaahh!!”

The two beauties tugged at me with all their might, and my shoulders screamed in agony.

In that instant, one phrase flashed through my mind: the Judgment of Ōoka. You know, the tale of two women fighting over a baby, and the real mother is the one who lets go for the baby’s sake.

So, the one who thought of my wellbeing would surely be the one who truly cared—

Emilia: “B-Both of you, calm down! Subaru’s gonna get torn in half if you keep pulling!”

Subaru: “Gyaaaaaaaaahhh!!”

Unable to bear it, kind-hearted Emilia joined in to stop them—but ended up grabbing my right leg instead. Now I was being pulled in three directions. I was being torn apart.

And of course, in these kinds of situations, there’s always one more who joins in.

Echidna: “In that case, I suppose it falls to me to hold his left leg.”

Subaru: “Th-There’s no “correct” answer here! Echidna-san, help me!!”

Echidna: “Unfortunately, I’m far too weak to resist the others physically. But when it comes to how deeply I care for you… I dare say I won’t lose to them. …How embarrassing.”

Subaru: “NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR THAT!!”

Echidna blushed faintly, but I didn’t have the luxury to process her tender feelings. At this rate, I was gonna be torn limb from limb.

Rem: “Subaru-kun’s childhood friend position belongs to Rem…!”

Shaula: “Master! It’s time to fulfill the promise we made when we parted ways!”

Echidna: “If nothing else, I will prove my feelings by never letting go…”

Subaru: “Nghhhhhghhhhh!!”

As all four of my limbs were pulled apart, I experienced excruciating pain while witnessing what should’ve been a dream scene—beautiful girls fighting over me.

It was like a warning for how chaotic the rest of my school life would be—

Frederica: “Now then, these two are our new friends: student teacher Echidna-san, and Shaula-san, our second transfer student in two days. Everyone, please help them feel welcome and fit in quickly.”

Everyone: “—Okay!!”

Frederica’s resigned voice was met with the cheerful replies of our classmates.

And as if it were all happening in some faraway world, my consciousness drifted further and further into the void.

Subaru: “Wh-What’s even gonna happen to me from now on…?”

Otto: “…I don’t know either, but it doesn’t seem like anything good.”

The last voice to slip into my fading consciousness was Otto’s, perfectly cast as the best friend in a dating sim, muttering under his breath.

—What the hell is gonna happen to my school life from now on?!

Fourth Period
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Beatrice: “—Rise and shine! Morning’s here, in fact!”

Subaru: “Fonjurass!”

With a thud, the impact marked the start of another morning for me.

Coughing up a storm as I opened my eyes, I was greeted—once again—by the ever-pretty face of my little sister, Beatrice, who somehow seemed more unstoppable in her prettiness every passing day.

Subrau: “No, ‘pretty face’ just doesn’t cut it when describing her… Cute, lovely, so cute… Let’s just call it a ‘super-pretty face.’”

Beatrice: “Hmph, that super-pretty face of Betty’s is here to announce the morning, I suppose. Come now, today’s going to be a very, very important day, in fact. So let’s hop up and go welcome the morning, I suppose.”

Beatrice, with a poetic flair that hinted at a promising future, announced the arrival of the day.

Our family’s Beatrice wasn’t just adorable in looks; she was a multitalented little prodigy, really. With so many paths ahead of her, it was enough to make her older brother feel a little woozy inside.

Subrau: “Ugh… Beako’s gonna end up so out of reach. But I still want her to always wake me up, stopping my late-morning sloth like she does…”

Beatrice: “Betty also wants to keep contributing to your comfy morning wake-ups, Subaru… but that’s not how things’ll always be, in fact. Because Betty is right in the middle of her growth period, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Uwooooh, please always stay my adorable Beako who fits in my schoolbag!”

Beatrice: “I’m way past the age to fit in a tote bag, you know!”

From the bed, as I kept up my aimless chatter, Beatrice walloped me with a pillow.

Fair enough. While I did want to exchange these daily morning affection rituals with my sister for a bit longer, today really was an important day—so I figured I’d better behave.

Because today was—

Subaru: “The long-awaited day of the annual Sakura Festival!”

Beatrice: “I suppose!”

After all, it was the day of an unmissable event for this overly excited sibling duo.

2

Meili: “Oh myyy, your bedhead’s really something, mister∼.”

Subaru: “Ah, it’s you, Meili-chan.”

After dashing about with an energetic Beako and finishing our ruckus in the room, I changed clothes and headed downstairs. The one who welcomed me was a girl munching toast at the table.

The girl with her deep-blue hair braided neatly was Meili-chan, a fellow student at Beako’s school, and one of her good friends.

Naturally, she knew me too, so I patted her elementary schooler head without restraint.

Subaru: “What’s this now, munching on our toast first thing in the morning. Don’t tell me… you’ve finally made up your mind to become my little sister?”

Meili: “Don’t say stupid things, reallyyy. I just ran out of bread at home this morning, so I didn’t get to eat. See, I’m a toast girl in the mornings, you know~?”

Subaru: “Didn’t know, but I’ll make a note of it. Toast in the morning… strawberry jam? Peanuts?”

Meili: “I like ham toast the most~”

Subaru: “A carnivore, huh. Then I’ll jot that down in the ol’ brain notebook.”

Since she’s one of Beako’s close friends, there’s a chance she’ll be back for breakfast again. Normally, Mom would take care of that, but it wouldn’t hurt for me to remember too.

By the way, Meili-chan’s languid way of speaking doesn’t quite feel like a kid’s, but learning that her attitude is largely influenced by her family makes it kind of charming.

And speaking of her family—turns out it’s a small world after all—

Meili: “Still though, saying you want me as your sister, how bold of youuu. That means you’ll marry Elsa, righttt?”

Subaru: “Oho, so you’re going there. True, Elsa-sensei is a beauty with a killer figure, but she’s got that kind of untouchable scary vibe too. I’m still trial-and-erroring whether to go that route, or find a non-legal workaround to make you my sister.”

Meili: “Hmm, do your best, just don’t make Beatrice-chan mad, okay~?”

Subaru: “Hey now, even if I get more sisters, it’s not like my love for each of them gets divided. In fact, my love gets multiplied by the number of sisters… That’s Sister Complex Dynamics Law No. 2. You’ll learn it in middle school.”

As I patted her head while she crunched her toast, Meili-chan let out a weary sigh.

Her reactions were quite different from Beako's, and I loved that. But if I got too carried away, Beako would bite my hand, so I decided to put my siscon pride aside for now.

Petra: "We don't learn anything like that. Subaru-oniisan, please stop saying weird stuff."

Subaru: "Ah, Petra-chan, you were here too?"

Petra: "Yes, Petra-chan is here. I was in Beatrice-chan's room."

Looking up at me while I was playing with Meili-chan was Petra-chan, the girl with the big, adorable ribbon in her hair.

Beako, Meili-chan, and Petra-chan were a trio often seen together, and even setting aside my bias as Beako's family, they were an unusually high face-value group.

And to think they're all in the same class… Their classmates must have it rough.

Subaru: "Just who's the most popular among them… I'd like to say our Beako's number one, but she's a bit shy and has a sharp tongue."

Meili: "Oh, that's sharp of you, mister~. Even at school, Beatrice-chan can be really blunt with the boys. That's why Petra-chan's the most popular~"

Petra: "M-Meili-chan, please don't say that…"

As I folded my arms and analyzed the situation, Meili-chan added commentary while biting into her second piece of toast. Petra-chan blushed at the explanation, but it was a valid take.

Subaru: "All three of you score equally high in the APP metric, but Petra-chan wins out in approachability and friendliness."

Petra: "Even if I'm popular with the boys, it doesn't mean much. My classmates are still so childish."

Subaru: "Oh, the classic "girls mature faster than boys" theory! This is my first time hearing it said aloud, kinda gets me hyped. Go, Petra-chan! Keep those boys wrapped around your finger!”

Petra: “Uuugh, that’s not the point I was trying to make…”

Subaru: “—?”

I’d meant to praise Petra-chan for her budding charm, but judging by her puffed-up cheeks, my response didn’t land well.

Meili: “Seriously~, you’re hopeless…”

Even Meili-chan was sighing behind me.

Hrm, little girls these days are a tough crowd to understand.

Subaru: “That’s where Beako comes in handy. She’s nice and straightforward, makes it easy for her big bro.”

Petra: “Subaru-oniisan, you really need to understand girls better. Why not read the shoujo manga in Beatrice-chan’s room?”

Subaru: “Oi, I’m always hungry for new stories, so obviously I’ve already read everything in Beako’s shelf. Classics like “Kimi Dake ni Todoke” and “Hanayome Danshi”—I’ve covered them all.”

Petra: “Then clearly, it hasn’t helped you one bit!”

Subaru: “That’s harsh?!”

Look, manga’s meant to be enjoyed, not studied. That’s my stance.

Though, if enjoyment leads to learning something, that’s just a nice bonus.

Subaru: “Anyway, that’s beside the point. Since things are turning against me, let’s switch topics. —Petra-chan, Meili-chan, what’re your plans for the Cherry Blossom Festival today?”

Meili: “I’m not really that interested~…”

Petra: “We’re going too. Beatrice-chan’s coming with us. Umm, if you’re free too, Subaru-oniisan…”

Subaru: “Oh? Was that an invite just now?”

Petra-chan shyly opened up the topic, and her kindness really touched me.

She was probably worried that I—the guy who doesn’t get elementary school girls—might be drifting aimlessly around the school.

Sure, from the outside it might look a little sad, a high schooler playing with little kids. But I truly appreciated her concern.

Subaru: “But no worries there. Maybe in another timeline there’s a lonely version of me, but in this heart-throbbing timeline, I’m not alone.”

Petra: “We know you have Rem-oneesan, so we never thought you were lonely. But… being with us might be even more fun… y-you’d have flowers on both arms and your back.”

Subaru: “Wait, that’s not the kind of sympathy I expected?!”

Meili: “And I’m apparently one of the flowers too. That’s scary, cut it out please~.”

Petra-chan’s invite made me super happy, but unfortunately, I had prior plans.

After all, I’d already made a date promise with a smokin’ hottie for today’s Cherry Blossom Festival.

Subaru: “So yeah, I can only hang with you girls for about the first hour of the festival. Sorry.”

Meili: “Still, you’re making time for us~…”

Subaru: “Of course. I wanna party at the festival with Beako, and I wanna see you and Meili-chan having fun too. That’s important to me, y’know?”

If this were a summer festival, I’d be snapping photos of them in yukata for sure—but not today.

Even just watching Beako enjoy herself with her close friends was something I wouldn’t miss.

Subaru: “So yeah, I’ll dash over right after school ends. Forgive me with that.”

Petra: “Mmm… okay. I’ll let it slide this time. But you better come, promise.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I swear. I’ll even pawn off Beako if I have to.”

Petra: “You’re not supposed to do that! You might not be able to buy her back, even with an outrageous price!”

Petra-chan held out her pinky, and I linked mine with hers for a pinky promise.

Just as we sealed the deal, Beako—fully ready for school—came to join us. Thus, with the girl who looked best in a randoseru in the world, and the two other girls tied for first in randoseru rankings, I sent them off—

—and so began the cherry-blossom-drenched day of Natsuki Subaru.

3

Rem: “Please don’t make me repeat myself. Subaru-kun’s mornings belong to Rem.”

Shaula: “You’re one to talk, makin’ me say the same thing over and over again, ‘kay? From now on, I’ll be the one enjoyin’ Master’s mornings. Thanks for your hard work up till now. Shoo, shoo.”

Rem: “I will not “shoo”!”

After sending off the trio of elementary schoolers that morning, I had just changed into my uniform and stepped out the front door when I was met with a ferocious catfight erupting before my eyes.

It was unusual for Rem not to ring the doorbell that morning, so I’d been a little worried something might’ve happened—

Father: “Didn’t think this is what it’d turn out to be. You’ve got some nerve, son.”

Subaru: “Ugh, Dad…?”

Mother: “Oh my, not just Rem-chan… that girl… could it be?”

Subaru: “Huh? Mom, you know her?”

My parents appeared behind me as I stood frozen in the doorway. I ignored Dad’s usual throwaway comment and latched onto what Mom had just said.

The two currently squabbling at the entrance were my childhood friend, Rem, and Shaula, the one who’d just transferred schools the other day.

Shaula had completely blown me away with her greeting during the morning HR on her first day, but ever since, she’d been acting all buddy-buddy with me at every opportunity, causing Rem’s voltage to hit MAX.

But there was something off about Shaula’s behavior. From the way she talked, it felt like she had memories with me that I didn’t know about—memories that hinted at something deeper.

Subaru: “So this is the moment the mystery finally gets solved? Mom, you know Shaula?”

Mother: “Let’s see… remember when you were little, and we went to visit my father? Back then, there was a girl you used to play with near your grandpa’s house… oh right, that scar on your forehead, you got it when you fell there.”

Subaru: “No one cares about my old scar. Also, it’s kinda confusing how you said “your father” and “grandpa” in the same breath… Anyway, this girl I played with, she was?”

If that’s true, then she’s the kind of girl you’d expect in a galge.

Could it be that I really did make some troublesome promise with her when we were kids? That possibility started bubbling up inside me.

Subaru: “Then, with Shaula, I…”

Father: “Wait, wait, hold on a sec. Isn’t that off? I’m pretty sure the one playin’ with Subaru back then at Grandpa’s house was Rem-chan, who’d snuck into the trunk to come along.”

Mother: “Huh? Was it?”

Subaru: “Wait, wait, wait! Now I’m even more confused! Which one is it, seriously?!”

Mother: “Sorry, looks like I was mistaken.”

She always liked to be dramatic, but this time Mom’s false lead left me completely deflated.

In the end, the mystery of Shaula remained unsolved… and it looked like we were moving into the second half of this story.

Subaru: “Second half? We haven’t even left the house yet. Today’s the day of the Cherry Blossom Festival!”

Father: “Exactly. You go do your thing, son. As for me and your mom, we’re gonna enjoy the Cherry Blossom Festival just the two of us, so don’t worry about us!”

Subaru: “Yeah, yeah! Glad your marriage is rock-solid!”

With both words and physical force pushing me forward, I made my way toward the two still locked in a war of words at the front door.

They immediately noticed me and shifted their expressions in an instant.

Rem: “Good morning, Subaru-kun. Let’s go to school together!”

Shaula: “Mooorning, Master! It’s a warm and sunny day, so forget school and come make some sweet ‘n spicy memories with me instead!”

Subaru: “Rem wins.”

Shaula: “Why’s thaaat?!”

Rem: “Yes!”

The tide had turned in Rem and Shaula’s ongoing rivalry.

It wasn’t that I disliked Shaula or anything like that, but still…

Subaru: “I’m the kind of student who actually likes school, which is pretty rare these days. So, sorry, but I can’t go along with the whole “ditch school and have fun” thing.”

Rem: “I understand, Subaru-kun. That’s precisely why there’s a gap between Shaula-san and me. It’s the difference in our childhood friend status.”

Subaru: “Is… that how it works?”

It felt slightly off, but considering Shaula had brought out her own twist on the childhood friend trope with that long-distance angle, maybe there was some rivalry here that only they understood.

Anyway—

Subaru: “Don’t let it get you down. Besides, that promise or whatever you’re talking about? I don’t even remember making it. I don’t even remember where we met before. Honestly, I think forgetting about someone like that would be better for you.”

Shaula: “Master…”

Shaula collapsed on the spot, dropping to her knees with misty eyes fixed on me.

I was weak to that look. But I had to stay firm here. Everything I’d said was how I really felt.

Shaula was beautiful, and she had all the makings of someone who could be happy.

She'd be better off forgetting all about some random pebble she stumbled over on the road.

Subaru: "So yeah, from now on, let's just be good friends—"

Shaula: "In other words, Master's tellin' me not to look at who he was, but who he is now, yeah?!"

Subaru: "That's what you got from that?!"

Wow, the image of me in Shaula's head just keeps gettin' cooler and cooler.

If I had said that on purpose, it'd be crazy cool, but it kinda felt like I was just trying to justify forgetting the promise, so maybe it actually made me look like trash?

Subaru: "Hey, Rem, can you talk some sense into her? Coming from you— Rem?"

Rem: "Th-That never even occurred to me… That was Rem's blind spot. Rem's just been relying on all the memories she has with Subaru-kun as a childhood friend…"

Subaru: "Rem-san? Yoohoo, Rem-san?"

Trembling, Rem stared down at her own hands in shock.

Looking back at what had just been said, I had no clue what could've hit her that hard—but somehow, she seemed to have had a revelation, clenching her fists with resolve.

Rem: "Rem mustn't only look at the Subaru-kun of the past. Rem must see the Subaru-kun of the present, and the future as well. Shaula-san, Rem is deeply moved by your way of thinking!"

Shaula: "Hmm… you might actually be a girl worth talkin' to! You wanna keep the Master's shine burned into your eyes for all eternity too?!"

Rem: "I do!"

The two grasped each other's hands with a snap.

I'd been completely left behind, but it seemed the two of them had reached some sort of understanding. Honestly, if it meant we wouldn't be having these clashes every morning, I was fine with that.

I was fine with it, but—

Subaru: "Uh, ladies? I was thinking we should probably head to school around now…"

Rem: "Ah, yes. Then, Shaula-san, Rem will take the right side today."

Shaula: "Guess that puts me on the left. Fine, long as we swap sides tomorrow, I can deal∼!"

Saying that, the two took up positions flanking me, a perfectly synchronized formation despite the fiery clash just moments ago.

Scratching my cheek, I had a bad feeling and turned to glance behind me.

There stood Dad and Mom in the doorway, giving me warm looks like they were watching something adorable. Flustered, I broke into a run.

4

Emilia: "W-Wow, Subaru, you're reaaally sweaty. Are you okay?"

Subaru: "Y-Yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine… I just got a little too hyped up this morning."

Emilia: "I see… Want to use my handkerchief? I made sure it's nice and clean."

Saying that, Emilia, who'd been waiting at the school gate, offered me a white handkerchief.

Just as she claimed, it was properly folded and even ironed. Using it to wipe my sweat felt like far too cruel a fate for it.

Subaru: “Nah, I’m good. I’ve got my own towel right here. Umm, let’s see…”

Rem: “Here you go, Subaru-kun. I made sure to wash it thoroughly.”

Subaru: “Oh, lifesaver. Thanks, Rem.”

Taking the towel from Rem, I wiped off my sweat without hesitation.

By the way, while I had run all the way from home to school without stopping, utterly drenched and dead tired, Rem and Shaula had not only kept up, they were both perfectly fine.

Emilia: “Rem-san and Shaula-san sure have amazing stamina. Subaru’s totally worn out.”

Rem: “Rem jogs with Nee-sama every morning. That way, if anything ever happens to Subaru-kun, I can run straight to the hospital.”

Subaru: “Please just take a taxi.”

Shaula: “Me too! I’ve got a li’l confidence in my reflexes, y’know! Don’t let looks fool ya, I was a pretty well-known sportswoman back where I used to live.”

Once I finally caught my breath, Shaula’s energetic comment stuck in my head.

I had heard she’d lived overseas before transferring here, but I still didn’t know what she’d actually been doing over there.

However—

Subaru: “Sportswoman, huh…? And you’re not even outta breath, so maybe you’re not bluffing.”

Shaula: “No bluffin’, no bluffin’ at all! My coach even told me I could shoot for the gold medal, I swear! But, well, that didn't really pan out."

Emilia: "Because you came back to Japan?"

Shaula: "Mm."

Something about Emilia's casual question gave me a bad feeling.

Not to sound full of myself, but I couldn't deny the possibility that I was part of the reason Shaula had returned to Japan. Which meant… could it be… she gave up her gold medal dreams because of…

Subaru: "It wasn't for me, right?"

Shaula: "Of course it was for ya, Master! I couldn't sleep at night thinkin' about ya, and honestly, all my grades plummeted 'cause I couldn't focus on anything my teachers or coaches said, so they just booted me out."

Subaru: "That's not "for me," that's "because of me," and it's not even my fault, is it?!"

The absurd self-inflicted tragedy made me regret worrying in the first place. I mean, I wasn't entirely wrong to suspect it, but this was clearly in the realm of personal responsibility, right?

Subaru: "Agh, seriously, I already used up a ton of stamina and willpower this morning… And I'd decided I was gonna go all out and have fun at the cherry blossom festival today. Don't drain my reserves with this slice-of-life skit."

Emilia: "Ah, the cherry blossom festival! That's right, we had that going on today. I almost forgot."

Saying that, Emilia poked her tongue out with a hint of guilt.

A gesture like that from a beyond-stunning girl packed enough firepower to knock someone out cold, but I was immune thanks to all the daily exposure to cute childhood friends, a promising little sister, and her adorable friend.

Subaru: “If you hadn’t brought that up, I’d be a husk by now. You gotta be careful, Emilia-tan. Your smile could either bring world peace or start an apocalypse—it’s a nuclear weapon.”

Emilia: “Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

Subaru: “Fair enough. …Wait, is that a phone?”

Her blunt response slashed me down, and bleeding inside, I glanced at the phone Emilia had pulled out. It was old. No, not outdated exactly, just incredibly plain in design.

It wasn’t a smartphone. It looked more like one of those easy-to-use flip phones.

Subaru: “Uhh? Did you find that somewhere?”

Emilia: “Hm? Nope, it’s my phone. Oh, that reminds me, I never got your contact info, Subaru. I was hoping to get it from you since we promised to go to the festival together. Figured it’d be a problem if I didn’t have it.”

Subaru: “Ah, right, right. Putting aside how that phone’s more unique than old-fashioned, yeah, we definitely should exchange info.”

Emilia: “Yes. I’ve already added your home number from the contact list.”

Subaru: “Please, I’m begging you, just don’t call that.”

Emilia: “Eh? O-Okay, got it.”

It was nice of Emilia to add me from the school directory, but if she ever called and my parents picked up, they’d grill her about our relationship and I’d take a critical hit. So I had to eliminate that option in advance.

Subaru: “Still, you should exchange numbers with Rem and Shaula too. You’re going to the festival with Rem, and… Shaula, what about you?”

Shaula: “Huh? Me~?”

Subaru: “Yeah. There’s a festival today. We’re heading there, so you’re coming too, right?”

Shaula: “I’ve been confessed to.”

Subaru: “I have not confessed, thank you very much?! I just said Emilia-tan and Rem are going too!”

Exasperated by Shaula’s wild leap in logic, I pulled out my phone and, fumbling a bit with Emilia’s unfamiliar one, managed to register my number.

Subaru: “Wait, sorry for doing it myself. You probably don’t like other people messing with your phone.”

Emilia: “It’s okay. I don’t really get how to use it anyway, so I usually just guess when I call my family.”

Subaru: “If that works, fine, but maybe try not skipping the tutorial next time. Like in games—don’t skip the first-time tutorial screen if you wanna learn the basics.”

These days, most games are built with intuitive tutorials early on to ease new players in.

Veterans might find it annoying, but you can’t choose a player’s experience level, so I get the developers’ pain.

Anyway, back to the topic at hand.

Subaru: “Alright, I already had Rem’s number memorized, so I added it. Shaula, yours?”

Shaula: “Master, I want you to enter it for me! It’s 080—”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait, you can’t just blurt it out! Protect your privacy! You’re hot, you’ll get stalkers!”

Shaula: “I’ve been confessed to again!”

Subaru: “I said I haven’t!”

After some commotion, we finally managed to register all three numbers in Emilia’s phone.

Shaula was being noisy about it, so I ended up memorizing her number too and added her to my own contacts. Looked like she was officially joining our festival group.

Subaru: “At this rate, adding more people won’t even matter… Rem, what’s Nee-sama’s schedule?”

Rem: “She said she was stopping by Roswaal-san’s place. Depending on how her work goes, she might join us for the cherry blossom festival…”

Subaru: “Hmm, I don’t wanna get in the way of her love life, but I’ll be lonely if Ram’s not at the festival.”

Rem: “Rem feels the same. I’ll ask her nicely.”

Clasping her hands in front of her chest, Rem’s declaration all but guaranteed Ram would show up.

Ram doted on her sister too much to refuse a request like that. At least, as far as I knew, she’d never done it even once.

Subaru: “So, never even once in her entire life.”

Emilia: “Wow, you’re so confident. I heard you and Rem-san are close, but is Ram-san too?”

Rem: “Yes. Subaru-kun and Nee-sama go way back—since they were swaddled together as infants.”

Subaru: “That wasn’t me, that was you, Rem.”

Rem: “My mistake. They were wrapped in the same swaddling cloth.”

Subaru: “That was still you.”

I felt like we'd just done this routine recently. Maybe a year ago?

That said, lingering at the school gate like this was starting to draw attention. I was already sticking out like a sore thumb, surrounded by three beautiful girls. Time to head in.

Subaru: "Right. While we're at it, maybe we should call some other people too. We can help fill up Emilia-tan's contact list."

Shaula: "That's discrimination against transfer students~! I'm a transfer student too, y'know~! Master, I want the same love and affection! Actually, I'd rather have something big and strong~!"

Subaru: "What kind of "big and strong" are you talking about? Like a giant teddy bear or something?"

Incidentally, as a symbol of large, strong affection, there were two huge teddy bears in Beako's room, gifts from both me and Dad that happened to overlap. Watching her sleep nestled between them always gave me that guardian-and-protected kind of vibe—and it was kinda heartwarming.

Subaru: "Huh? What's wrong, Emilia-tan? You're making such a serious face. …Don't tell me, you don't really want more people joining? You'd rather it was just the two of us?"

Emilia: "Nope, that's not it at all."

I was mostly joking, but the flat-out rejection still stung.

While I reeled, Emilia hesitantly opened up to me.

And then—

Emilia: "Um, Subaru. I'm really glad, but… I don't have a contact list. The only things I have are my diary and a vocabulary notebook…"

Subaru: "I meant the phone's one!"

Right on cue, I delivered the standard tsukkomi.

5

Felt: “Ohh, a festival? Sounds great—let’s go together!”

Next to me, Emilia was silently tapping away at her phone, seemingly absorbed in it. Meanwhile, Felt, who’d given her number to Emilia, gave a spirited grin as she spoke.

Just like we’d discussed at the school gate, we were aiming to recruit more members for the festival.

So, since Felt had actually come to the classroom early for once, I took the chance to corner her and bring up the festival and swapping numbers with Emilia.

Subaru: “You’re pretty into it. Honestly, I didn’t expect that.”

Felt: “Huh? Didn’t expect it? What, you think I’m some buzzkill who turns down invites?”

Subaru: “Not that. I’m talking about the lineup. I mean, I’m inviting Reinhard too, you know? You’d act like you hate that, right?”

Felt: “‘Act like’? The hell’s that supposed to mean?! I genuinely hate it!”

Felt tried to kick me with her indoor shoe, making the chair creak as she shifted. I easily dodged her attacks, but geez—she didn’t hesitate at all despite wearing a skirt.

Well, that was just the usual with Felt. She was the kind of girl who’d leap up onto the shoe rack without a second thought if it meant getting away from Reinhard.

Felt: “Lately, running away all the time’s been exhausting. No matter how far I go, that guy finds me anyway, and nobody in class takes my side…”

Subaru: “So now you’re just quietly hanging out in the classroom. Surrendered, huh?”

Felt: “Like hell I have! I’m standing strong, alright? I’ve got a will of steel, and I’m gonna keep dodging all the crap he throws at me. It’s all about me keeping my cool.”

Arms crossed, legs crossed—Felt had a bold, tough-as-nails stance.

And honestly, she had a point. Relationships only work when both sides are on the same page. Still, as someone who’d been watching the two of them inch closer, it was frustrating to see how clueless Felt was about her own changing feelings.

Emilia: “Does Reinhard like you, Felt-chan?”

Felt: “Whuh—”

Out of nowhere, Emilia lobbed that bomb of a question into the sensitive battlefield of love and relationships.

Even though she’d been concentrating hard on her phone, she’d clearly been listening in on us. Snapping it shut with a satisfied “All done,” she handed Felt’s phone back and continued—

Emilia: “The other day, weren’t you two walking your dog together by the riverbank? So I thought you must be reaaally close…”

Felt: “Ugh… I told you back then! I only went with him ‘cause of Romy. That mutt needed walking…”

Emilia: “But Romy’s important to you, right? It’d feel weird to leave him with someone you truly hated. I mean, I love Puck so much, I could never part with him.”

Saying that, Emilia looked out the window.

I followed her gaze, wondering what she was looking at—and was completely floored when I saw a gray cat perched on a utility pole outside. When she said “part with,” did she mean physically?

Puck: “—Come now, it’s just one of Lia’s adorable quirks. Let it slide. I’m only tagging along because I want to, after all.”

Subaru: “You’re sending telepathy directly into my brain now?!”

Felt: “Hey, Subaru. You’re mumbling with this totally freaky look on your face. Also, explain this to the new girl. I’ve tried, but I’m getting nowhere.”

Emilia’s pet cat, Puck, was a spirit beast that only I could hear—a feline monster-in-the-making.

It sounds insane even to say it, but it’s real, so I can’t exactly deny it. Still, talking to Puck like that always got me labeled as a weirdo. Gotta be careful.

Clearing my throat, I turned back to Felt and Emilia.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, I don’t actually have much to add. Reinhard really does like Felt, and Felt really is trying to run away from him.”

Emilia: “Oh, I knew it! I thought so! Hehe, I’m pretty sharp, aren’t I?”

Subaru: “Yeah, about as sharp as an HB pencil.”

A confidence that fragile needed to be handled with care and a good bit of sharpening.

Well, Reinhard was pretty serious about it, and everyone in class figured it was only a matter of time before something happened between the two.

Of course, for Felt, it probably felt like she was being made into some kind of spectacle—and she wasn’t exactly thrilled about that.

Subaru: “But hey, Cinderella is a storybook character.”

Felt: “A spectacle and a storybook character are not the same thing! I’m not anyone’s showpiece!”

Emilia: “So, it’d be different if no one was watching?”

Felt: “Ghk…!”

Caught off guard, Felt fell silent with a pained expression.

She narrowed her crimson eyes at Emilia, who tilted her head in confusion. She clearly hadn't meant anything by it, making this Felt's loss, honestly.

Felt did have a bit of a feline streak, so maybe she really did have two sides to her. In public, she couldn't bring herself to be honest, but when alone…

Subaru: "She's all claws in front of others, but cuddles up like a kitten when it's just the two of them… Tigress~"

Felt: "Shut up!"

Just as I was about to uncover the truth, Felt's merciless front kick landed square in my gut.

I'd been running my mouth in full joke mode and didn't dodge in time, taking the hit right in the stomach and crumpling. Emilia rushed over in a panic, patting my back.

Emilia: "Subaru, Subaru! Geez, Felt-chan, that was waaay too much for just covering up your embarrassment."

Felt: "I wasn't embarrassed! Anyway! I'm going to the damn festival! And I'm not stopping you from inviting that jerk Reinhard either. He's gonna show up anyway. So I'll just beat him at his own game!"

Subaru: "Wh-What exactly do you think Reinhard is gonna do to you…?"

Felt stormed out of the classroom, flipping the bird as she went.

So in the end, though it was still about Reinhard, the reason she bailed was more roundabout than direct. She probably wouldn't be back until homeroom.

Subaru: "Ahh, crap. I messed that up. Teased her too much… I'll have to apologize later."

Emilia: "Wait, you were teasing her?"

Subaru: “I’m surprised you didn’t notice, Emilia-tan, but yeah—it tracks. …Anyway, I’m rooting for Reinhard in this love story.”

That wasn’t just because I bet on the two of them ending up together in the class pool, but also because Reinhard was my friend.

Tall, handsome, and a genius at everything, Reinhard still fumbled like a clueless newbie when it came to Felt—it was his first love, and it showed.

Subaru: “Still, there’s something sweet about it, like you just have to peek through your fingers even when it’s too cringey. Y’know what I mean?”

Emilia: “Kinda… kinda not… But I get what you’re saying, Subaru. When two people like each other, you want them to get along. I always want Father and Mother to stay reaaally close too.”

Subaru: “Hm? Mmm… Yeah, that makes sense.”

When you brought married couples into the mix, the discussion shifted a bit, but it wasn’t wrong in a broad sense. So Subaru didn’t argue it.

That said, Reinhard’s feelings didn’t mean Felt’s could just be brushed aside. That part deserved reflection.

Subaru: “Felt, as you saw, takes action when she doesn’t like something. I don’t think she truly hates him though.”

For all her talk, Felt never went harder than Reinhard could handle.

That hesitation said a lot—and I, for one, wanted my buddy’s first love to work out.

Subaru: “So, with that said, I’d like to officially invite Reinhard to the festival too.”

Emilia: “Sure, no complaints here. I’d love to get to know him better too.”

Subaru: “Aww, that big ol’ heart of yours is what makes you amazing, Emilia-tan. Yo, you hear that, Otto?”

Otto: “You were acting like I didn’t exist this whole time, and now this?!”

With a theatrical reaction, Otto joined the conversation from the edge of the scene.

Otto, by the way, was the ace of the soccer club despite how he looked. He usually took naps at his desk until morning homeroom after early practice.

But when needed, he always chimed in like this. Really convenient dude.

Subaru: “From how Felt acted, looks like she hasn’t invited Reinhard yet. That’s rare. You got any idea why?”

Otto: “Nope. Reinhard and I aren’t in the same club or anything.”

Subaru: “Useless. You know in dating sims, the protagonist’s best friend always has tons of info, right? You gotta be that guy.”

Otto: “It’s already presumptuous of you to call yourself the protagonist. And those best friend characters only prep info about girls anyway.”

Subaru: “Otto, you and your facts…”

Otto: “Am I not even allowed to speak logically anymore?!”

Still, Otto had a point.

Even in games, the best friend wouldn’t be expected to keep tabs on male classmates, after all.

Subaru: “Although… if we’re talking dating sim logic, maybe…”

Otto: “Why do you have such unshakeable faith in this ‘dating sim best friend’ nonsense?”

Emilia: “I don’t really get this ‘dating sim’ thing… but Otto-kun, you're coming to the festival today too, right? Wanna come with us?"

And just like that, Emilia brought the dating sim argument to a close with her invitation to Otto.

Hearing that, Otto's eyes widened, and I slapped a hand over my face.

Emilia: "Huh? Did I say something weird?"

Subaru: "Yeah, Emilia-tan. You gotta tease Otto a bit more first…"

Otto: "You literally just said you'd reflect on your behavior toward Felt, and now you're doing the exact same thing to me?!"

Subaru: "Alright, alright. Then let's promise to meet under the legendary cherry tree."

Otto: "You're still dragging this dating sim stuff out?!"

Always throwing out oddly specific references—Otto Suwen just couldn't escape the aura of a dating sim best friend.

Anyway, with Otto joining the Sakura Festival crew, our adventure was far from over.

Subaru: "Yeah, our festival's just getting started!"

Otto: "It's about to end right here though!"

Emilia: "Wow, you two are in sync!"

This was Otto Suwen.

6

Frederica: "As you all know, the Sakura Festival is being held today. I believe many of you will be going out to enjoy it, but please do not get carried away. As students, you must strive to conduct yourselves with dignity."

Subaru: "Even if you don't say it, Derica-sensei. We're in high school, you know?”

Frederica: “Yes, which is exactly why I am saying it to you, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “Huh?!”

In the homeroom after school, with the Sakura Festival still to come, there was a restless air about the room—and in that, I got singled out by none other than our Frederica-sensei.

Dignified conduct as a student, huh? I had no idea what I’d done to deserve being called out like this.

Subaru: “Derica-sensei, why me?”

Frederica: “The rumors have reached even my ears. Apparently, a great coalition is being formed to attend the Sakura Festival. It is said the instigators are Natsuki-kun and Emilia-san.”

Subaru: “Coalition? Isn’t that a bit much?”

True, I was the one who proposed gathering a party to attend the Sakura Festival under the banner of “Let’s make more friends for Emilia.”

Then it became a second mission, standing against Shaula’s claims of transfer student discrimination, and I figured—might as well invite our classmates too. I told those classmates to “invite anyone,” but still—

Subaru: “That’s not such a weird thing to say, right?”

Ferris: “Ohh my, Subaru-kyun’s suuuper funny. He doesn’t even remember who he asked what~”

As I tilted my head, Ferris giggled into his hand, lips curved in that infuriatingly smug way.

I raised an eyebrow at Ferris’s overly cutesy behavior and shot back a “What now?”

Of course, Ferris was also one of the people I invited to the festival. He'd agreed without issue. I didn't think it was any problem.

Subaru: "So then why the cryptic act?"

Ferris: "Ohh, Ferri-chan's not tryin' to be cryptic~ But! Since you invited Ferri-chan, naturally, you also invited Crusch-sama, didn't you?"

Subaru: "That's… ahh, no way."

Finally catching on to what Ferris was saying, I peeked over Ferris's head to look at Crusch seated behind him.

Wearing her uniform with perfect composure, Crusch met my gaze and gave a solemn nod.

Crusch: "Do not worry. You said yourself, the more the merrier, did you not? Therefore, I extended invitations as broadly as possible. We should expect a reasonable turnout."

Subaru: "I wasn't trying to recruit a damn army!"

Crusch's response missed the point, but then again, she was the student council president of this school. On top of that, her family was a well-known house in the city, meaning she had connections far and wide.

Judging by how far she'd misunderstood the assignment, I had a bad feeling her invitations didn't stop at our school.

Ferris: "Sooo yeah~ Might end up a waaaay bigger group than lil' Subaru-kyun imagined~"

Subaru: "'Might'?! If you knew, why didn't you stop her?!"

Ferris: "Ehh~, but like, why would Ferri-chan stop it~? Crusch-sama was so earnestly workin' on it, and her serious face was sooo pretty…"

Subaru: "Ughh, I'm the idiot for ever counting on you."

Ferris: “Subaru-kyun’s a dummy∼”

Subaru: “Say that again?!”

And just like that, I got baited into snapping back at Ferris, the provocation too effective for its own good.

Ferris and I locked horns like a pair of overexcited hamsters until Frederica-sensei clapped her hands sharply at the front of the classroom.

Frederica: “That’s enough! Setting your little quarrel aside, Natsuki-kun, that is not all!”

Subaru: “Wait, there’s more?”

???: “Of course. Have you already forgotten that you extended the same invitation to me as well?”

Hearing that voice, all I could say was, “Ugh.”

Turning around, I found the smug, oh-so-smug expression of the young lady flaunting her customized school uniform—Priscilla.

Fanning herself with a closed sensu, she masked her mouth and continued:

Priscilla: “Events such as these petty festivals in town hold no appeal for me. However, to reject a direct request would reflect poorly upon my grace. Thus, I pulled a few strings as well.”

Subaru: “W-Wow, ‘pulled some strings.’ That’s… not really something high schoolers usually say, huh?”

Priscilla: “Fret not. While it irks me to allow that vixen a moment of satisfaction, if the stiff-necked student council president is to act, then mineself must, naturally, surpass her. It is merely a matter of course.”

Crusch: “Hm. That is quite noble of you. So, then… are you declaring a challenge to me?”

With an amused glint in her eye, Priscilla threw down the gauntlet, and Crusch—of course—accepted it without hesitation.

This was bad. Two of the class's Three Great Ladies were about to clash—and no one wanted that.

Subaru: "Wait wait wait! Both of you, don't fight for my sake—!"

Priscilla: "Fool. Who said we are fighting for your sake?"

Crusch: "We are simply acting in accordance with our names and responsibilities."

Subaru: "It's really not that serious! Also, if this drags on any longer…"

Neither Crusch nor Priscilla were listening. I started to sweat as I tried to explain the real issue. But someone else beat me to it.

And that someone was—

Anastasia: "—Hey, y'all. You do realize today's an important day for me too, right?"

Anastasia: "Yet here ya are, yakkin' on and on… I'm tryna wrap school up quick and head on over to the festival venue, y'know? Can I make that any clearer?"

Smiling sweetly as ever, Anastasia stood from her seat. The last of the Three Great Ladies had finally spoken.

Anastasia, known for freely coming and going from the city's Chamber of Commerce—some even said she ran the whole thing from behind the scenes—had, as I'd heard, been pouring herself into festival prep for days.

Well, actually, she told me that herself. So it was totally understandable she wanted to get to the venue as soon as possible.

Anastasia: "Y'all can play at bein' whimsical young ladies all ya like. But there's a time and a place, and if ya don't learn that now, ya'll be strugglin' plenty in the adult world. Y'all're high schoolers already. Should know better by now."

Priscilla: "You dare think yourself superior for no more than rubbing shoulders with the Chamber of Commerce? True influence is exercised in its rightful place. If you must dance in such petty halls, it speaks only of how lowly you value yourself."

Crusch: "Your tongue runs too far. Yet, I must admit, Priscilla's words do carry weight. Anastasia, I too appreciate your efforts, as a fellow member of the student council. However, neglecting our scholastic duties sounds a poor note."

Subaru: "GYAAAH!! Frederica-sensei! I'll be careful not to go overboard at the festival! And I'll take more responsibility for what I say and do! So please let's just end homeroom now!!"

Caught between the sparks flying from the three girls now standing at the center of the classroom, I begged Frederica-sensei to step in before things went full nuclear.

It was, quite frankly, like praying to God to stop a war—but unlike God, Frederica-sensei was actually present and could be guilt-tripped into action.

Frederica: "Very well! During the festival, see to it that you do not act as wildly as you are now! I do not wish for your memories of a joyful event to be sullied!"

Class: "…"

Frederica: "I said, do you all understand?!"

Class: "Yes!!"

And so, with my loud voice speaking for the whole class, homeroom came to a close.

At last, the Sakura Festival was set to begin.

And just like that, the day of the actual Sakura Festival had arrived.

The Sakura Festival was a spring event held at a well-known location, famous for its dense and extravagant row of cherry blossom trees. Countless stalls lined the walkways, and it was simple in design—a quintessential spring festival.

After school, everyone headed home to change into their casual clothes, then gathered at the festival's entrance.

Under a loose rule that even if one couldn't make it at the agreed time, they could simply join later, we decided to hang out together with an easygoing mood—but also being careful not to piss off Derica-sensei.

At the very least, if anything happened, odds were I'd be the one getting chewed out for it.

Subaru: "Seriously, how did it even come to this… huh?"

Grumbling, still not fully convinced by the situation, I made my way to the meeting spot. There, I spotted Emilia already waiting.

However, she wasn't alone.

Subaru: "No way… Don't tell me some sleazebag tried to hit on her—"

Echidna: "—Please, let go of me. I'm supposed to set an example for the other teachers."

Emilia: "Oh? No need to worry so much. I think it's fine if we just go around together. It's not like you're forbidden from having fun, right, Echidna-sensei?"

Subaru: "Wait, Emilia-tan's the one doing the hitting up?!"

Rolling up my sleeves, I had rushed in ready to save her, but all that fiery determination was for nothing.

I'd totally pictured some thuggish guy bothering the beautiful Emilia, but apparently I'd gotten the roles completely reversed.

The one being dragged around by Emilia was a white-haired beauty —

Subaru: “It’s Echidna-san. …No, Echidna-sensei.”

Echidna: “Natsuki-kun. …It feels oddly ticklish being called “sensei” by you.”

Subaru: “You’ll have to get used to it. You’re the one who decided to become a student teacher, not me. Still…”

Looking slightly troubled and blushing faintly, Echidna-san was currently undergoing her teacher training at our Lugunica Academy.

To me, she was one of the lovely ladies from the neighborhood, so I had some mixed feelings about how to interact with her at school—but I made sure not to show any of that.

Because, honestly, seeing her flustered like this was a blessing for the eyes.

Subaru: “So Emilia-tan’s the one holding Echidna-sensei back?”

Echidna: “Yes, exactly. Could you please talk to her too, Natsuki-kun? Officially, I’m here as a teacher. My purpose at this festival is to supervise students.”

Emilia: “You’ve said that a bunch already. But it’d still feel sad if you just left. Right, Subaru? Wouldn’t it be nice if we all went around together?”

Subaru: “Hmm.”

Scratching my cheek, I glanced back and forth between Emilia-tan and Echidna-san.

Well, both of them had a point. Echidna-san was technically working. As a trainee, she probably needed to draw a firm line between herself and her students.

But from Emilia’s perspective, it did seem weird for someone she knew to be nearby, watching from a distance, and yet not joining them.

Subaru: “Hmm… If I had the casting vote, I’d side with Emilia-tan. I wanna hang out with Echidna-sensei too.”

Emilia: “See! Subaru agrees with me!”

Echidna: “Even you, Natsuki-kun… Do you not care if I fail my teaching practicum and lose my chance of becoming a proper teacher?”

Subaru: ““Proper teacher” kinda sounds shady the way you say it, but I’m not hoping for that. I get where Emilia-tan’s coming from. And honestly, we’re probably the biggest group from school here at the festival.”

Echidna: “Mgh…”

In truth, with Crusch and Priscilla’s cooperation, plus Otto and Reinhard, not to mention Ram being roped in through Rem’s pleading… even I had lost track of the full headcount.

It might not have reached triple digits, but a high double-digit turnout was very likely.

Apparently, Echidna-san had also heard something similar from Frederica-sensei.

Thinking maybe my claim had some weight to it, she let out an unusually deep sigh and—

Echidna: “You really are good at convincing people. That’s Echidna’s genius for you.”

Emilia: “Wow, I want one too!”

Echidna: “Do you…? I was just about to say I wasn’t sure whether to be happy about that or not.”

Regardless of Echidna-san’s mood, Emilia seemed unusually attached to her.

Curious, I asked her about it. Emilia tapped her finger to her lips and said,

Emilia: “I’m not really sure why either, but I just felt like I wanted to be friends with Echidna-sensei. Or maybe, I felt like we could be friends.”

Subaru: “I see. By the way, I live near Echidna-sensei, so if you become friends with me, you’ll naturally run into her more often…”

Echidna: “Please don’t use me as a stepping stone for getting closer to her. That stings a little.”

Subaru: “Ugh, sorry. I got a bit too greedy trying to score a win.”

I genuinely reflected on my misstep.

Then, perhaps thanks to our combined persuasion, Echidna-san said she’d contact Frederica-sensei and stepped away, phone in hand.

I thought maybe it was an excuse to bail, but she made the call somewhere visible, so it seemed like she’d really come to terms with it.

Emilia: “Huh? Subaru, were you already at the festival earlier?”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah, kinda. It wasn’t sneaking around or anything—I had plans with my little sister and her friends. You know, elementary school finishes earlier.”

Emilia: “Ohh, so that’s why you dashed off like lightning after homeroom ended.”

Subaru: “Exactly.”

Since homeroom ran late, I’d had to rush like crazy to make it in time for my promise with Beako and the others. I used all the shortcuts and alleys I could, and nearly blew out my knees, so I ended up taking a taxi at the end. Dad covered the fare after seeing how desperate I was.

Subaru: “Anyway, I met up with my sister and her friends and had a bit of fun. Beako, obviously, but Meili-chan and Petra-chan were all smiles too. Petra-chan especially, she was extra stylish today… That's totally 'cause of a boy."

Emilia: "Huh? Subaru, your sister's in elementary school, right?"

Subaru: "Yup. But you know, kids these days are way ahead of the curve. Way different from when I was their age. Even game graphics are in a whole different league now."

With every new console generation, graphics that once seemed unbeatable just kept evolving. Really made you feel like human technology knew no limits.

While I was marveling over the future of children, Emilia softly murmured something.

Emilia: "I'd like to meet your sister too."

Subaru: "Oh…"

Emilia: "Hmm? Did I say something weird?"

Startled by her unexpected remark, I stared at her with wide eyes. Emilia tilted her head in confusion. I frantically waved my hands, head, and knees.

Subaru: "No no no, nothing weird! Not weird at all! Actually, yeah, I'd love for you to meet Beako too. I think you'd get along great."

Emilia: "Hehe, I'm looking forward to it. I'll bring Puck along too."

Subaru: "Yeah, sounds good. I've got a feeling Beako and Puck would really hit it off."

Well, Beako's cuteness was an all-devouring black hole, so there wasn't a soul in this world who wouldn't get along with her.

Emilia: "Thank you, Subaru. For everything."

Subaru: "Eh?"

Emilia: “I was really nervous about transferring, wondering if I’d fit in… But you, Rem-san, and everyone else have been so kind to me…”

Saying that, Emilia turned to look at me.

Right at that moment, a slightly strong gust of wind blew, sending a flurry of cherry blossoms fluttering around her. The petals danced, swaying around her smiling face, as if enchanted by her presence—

—I guess this is what they meant by being captivated.

Emilia: “Thank you, Subaru.”

Subaru: “…Don’t mention it. I’m just glad you’re having a good time, Emilia-tan.”

Barely managing to keep my composure, I gave her a reply.

For a brief second, I’d been so completely taken in by her, I didn’t want to ruin her natural charm with any weird reaction of mine.

Because that casual, unassuming moment felt so incredibly precious.

Rem: “—Subaru-kun! Sorry, did we keep you waiting?”

Shaula: “Master!!”

Right then, I heard Rem and Shaula calling out from behind.

And it wasn’t just them. More and more of our reliable crew had arrived, all ready to make the most out of the Sakura Festival.

Subaru: “Sure, the Sakura Festival’s fun and all…”

Emilia: “Hmm?”

Subaru: “But there’s still plenty more fun ahead. Get ready, Emilia-tan.”

As I watched everyone approach, I turned and winked at Emilia.

Flashing a dazzling smile, teeth gleaming, I struck my coolest pose and fired off my line at the girl I had my eye on.

Emilia blinked at me in surprise—and then smiled again.

And with that smile—

Emilia: “Yes, I’m reaaally looking forward to it!”

She smiled as brightly as the full bloom of cherry blossoms overhead.

—The festival was just beginning.

But it wasn’t only the Sakura Festival.

If every joyful day could be its own celebration, then the festival had already started long ago—and it would keep going.

—The festival goes on. The festival never ends.

Because the fun was only just getting started.

Blu-ray Specials

Bonds of Ice

Prologue:
Four Greats and an Outsider

—There exist beings known as spirits.

Mana fills the world. The Od Laguna is the source of this mana, and is considered to be the foundation of eternity. Spirit is the term used to refer to supernatural beings who are given life by the Od Laguna, manifest in this world through the power of mana, and meddle with it as they please.

They are born as lesser spirits, become quasi-spirits, and finally reach the status of spirit. Particularly powerful spirits are known as great spirits, but even among them there are four who possess exceptional power, the ones known as the Four Great Spirits, and these four spread dread, reverence, blessings, and menace across all the land.

Dread—the self-appointed 'Arbiter' Melakuera, who acts in order to preserve the balance of the world.

Menace—the most beautiful slayer, the 'Slasher' Zarestia who indulges in eternal peace in her bed.

Reverence—the 'Stone' Muspel, a sanctuary that merely exists, possessing neither will nor words nor ideology.

Blessings—The 'Sacred Beast' Odglass, who watches over humanity with affection and benevolence from atop the Sacred Mountain.

Four great spirits all of whom possess equal might, the Four Great Spirits.

Their existence and names are known far and wide, and the matter of how to deal with them is considered to be of grave importance in all the world's countries.

In truth, history even tells of an entire city that was burned down by their wrath. Setting aside Odglass, the Four Greats cannot be said to be friendly to mankind, and their actions for the most part are entirely self-serving.

This especially applies to the reason for the previously mentioned destruction of a city—It is said that it was caused by a clash between the Arbiter and a Great Spirit that possessed power rivaling the Four Greats.

Neither the name nor the appearance of this Great Spirit on par with the Four Greats are known.

But a name took on a life of its own, and the Great Spirit that escaped the Arbiter's judgement and lived on was called this by the people who feared it:

—A terrible beast as powerful as the Four Greats, 'The Beast of The End'.

Its actual circumstances and location remain unknown to anyone—

Chapter 1:
Called by You

1

When she woke up, the first thing she felt was the cold.

“…It’s reeeally cold.”

She whispered as she sat up in her crudely fashioned bed

—She was an extraordinary girl with exceptional features. Her silver hair was like moonlight itself, her skin as pure as virgin snow. She narrowed her amethyst eyes which resembled dazzling jewels, her beauty was truly miraculous.

However her countenance was marred by drowsiness, and it didn’t appear she would leave her bed any time soon.

“…”

In this manner, she whiled away her time wrapped up in her bedsheet. Fresh air blew in from outside her room. The atmosphere was the very picture of dawn, but the girl continued to waste time half asleep.

Even though it was only morning, one might worry about just how sleepy she was.

“Gotta get up…”

Nearly an hour had passed before she fully woke up.

She yawned, her long legs stretching out as she left the bed. Her thin nightclothes hung off her shoulder, salaciously exposing her smooth, slender body.

Her immodest appearance was more like a work of art than anything salacious, like some master painter’s finest work. It was far too careless even though there was no else there, it was as though she wasn't even considering how others looked at her.

"…"

She slowly opened the door and went outside as she tidied her long silver hair. She lived in a huge tree which had been hollowed out and even had doors and windows. She narrowed her eyes as she looked overhead at the sunlight streaming in through the trees, and then shut the door with her bottom.

She descended the winding roots barefoot, down to the frost-covered land, the chill eliciting a small moan. She then headed to a nearby stream as she relished the feeling of walking on ice.

The small stream next to her tree was indispensable to her lifestyle, a blessing from nature. She got on her knees and started washing her face with the freezing water.

"Mm! Mn-!"

The water's temperature was quite literally eye-opening, obliterating any last traces of drowsiness. She then smacked her cheeks as she stood up.

"Mm, alright!"

Having finally overcome her sleepiness, her voice was overflowing with vitality.

She shook her head to dry her bangs, and then left the stream.

"Okay, now to take care of everyone."

Near the stream was a clearing she used to dry her clothes, it simply consisted of a line going through the trees. She obtained a small towel from here and started sprinting with vigor.

She dashed into the forest, trampling grass and leaping over roots as her skirt fluttered freely.

Her surroundings were white, the wind was cold, but even so, it was a scenery she was familiar with. Grabbing a branch with one hand, she executed a pendulum-like swing.

She reached her destination having greatly shortened her path, as though making up for her drowsiness that morning.

“Hup, and there! Good morning, everyone!”

As she landed, she pitched forward to kill her excessive momentum. As if to cover up the awkwardness, she stuck out her tongue and greeted the figures before her with an embarrassed grin.

“…”

However she received no reply.

It was only natural, though they looked human, they were in fact ice sculptures. There were three exquisitely crafted sculptures, standing back to back in a corner.

She held her towel up to them with a smile, “Well then, I’m going to clean you up again, please bear with me.”

Her apologetic voice signaled the beginning of her daily routine. She used her towel to gently clean off the snow accumulating on the sculptures. Using minimal force, her technique was cautious and tender.

Before long she’d tidied them up sufficiently, and nodded with satisfaction as she stretched lightly.

“I overslept today, so I’ll have to speed things up a bit.”

She looked up at the sky and reflected on her tardiness. Her daily routine, the maintenance of those sculptures, was far from over.

Throughout the forest, there were many such sculptures scattered here and there and it was her duty to take care of all of them. The sun was higher than usual, she’d have to give it her all to make up for the time she’d lost, as she built up her motivation-

“—Oh dear, another day of hard work I see.”

Suddenly, a voice from the sky took the wind out of her sails.

"…That again, the way you talk is reeeally mean."

"I mean, it's strange. No one asked you to do this, so to me it seems like a total waste."

"It's not like I'm doing this to have someone praise me, don't say that sort of stuff."

The voice speaking to her was androgynous, and they couldn't be seen even if she looked overhead. The girl puffed her cheeks in displeasure as she steadily grew more frustrated.

"Not even a greeting, and you won't show your face? That's reeeally rude, you know?"

"Hm, I suppose you're right. One moment."

Freezing winds blew through the forest in response to the pouting girl's complaint.

That wind carried with it a hint of pale green, forming a whirlpool in front of the girl. A silhouette started to take shape, and in the blink of an eye the light manifested into a being with a fluffy gray coat of fur, small enough to fit in a palm.

Waving a tail as long its body, its round black eyes looked right at her. It truly did resemble a cat.

However, its true nature was entirely different, otherworldly in fact. An entity possessing supernatural abilities beyond the framework of the natural world.

"—Mr. Spirit."

Her form of address caused the spirit's face to change. A humanlike gesture, a smile.

"That is indeed what I am, but it feels wrong considering our relationship."

The kitten seemed displeased to be called a spirit, he groomed his face as he floated in front of her as though it was completely natural.

The girl sighed lightly at his attitude, and then-

"—Puck."

"Yep, very good. It makes me happy, Emilia."

This time the spirit called Puck smiled genuinely at the girl named Emilia. The girl thought him strange, for his smile was filled with tremendous affection.

In that enormous forest covered with freezing wind and snow, the odd pair conversed. In the entire frozen forest, there was only their small exchange.

2

—To Emilia who lived in the forest, Puck was akin to a strange neighbor. They weren't together enough to be called family, and they weren't familiar enough to be friends. But they weren't so distant as to be acquaintances.

Thus, they were neighbors—That's what Emilia thought at least.

"Really, what a layabout, always bothering me when I'm busy."

"Ehh, that's not quite right. Rather, you're the one at fault since you're always busy."

"There's a whole lot I have to do! I don't have time to play around with you."

"You have time to doze off in the morning, though?"

"D-Don't say such absurd things, I always get up early! Really, you know?"

Puck casually played with his whiskers as he watched Emilia turn red and make excuses at record speed. He simply floated behind her as she rapidly progressed through the forest.

As Emilia continued her routine, Puck started circling above her as he attempted to lure her.

“I won’t deny that I’ve got time to spare, but you’re working way too hard for no reason. Cut yourself some slack, I don’t think self-indulgence is such a bad thing.”

“Self-indulgence, I reeeally hate the sound of that.”

“Then how about Sloth? Ah, but that one gets on my nerves somehow.”

Emilia sighed deeply as Puck talked to himself.

“If you don’t like how busy I am, why don’t you help out?”

“Help as in-?”

“Like taking care of everyone, or investigating the forest! Isn’t it obvious?”

As Puck tilted his head, Emilia stopped and thrust her finger at him. She then used that finger to point around them.

“If you help me, I’ll have more time too…”

“Nah, no way. Because I believe not having to work is the best part of being a spirit. Furthermore, I think what you’re doing is pointless. Finally, I just don’t feel like it.”

“…Why are you always teasing me like this? Puck, you blockhead!”

His stern words seemed to hurt her. Calling her work pointless, it wasn’t like she was doing it for laughs.

“Consider it my revenge. You hardly ever listen to me, I’ll be nicer too if you stop being so obstinate.”

“There’s no need then! Please, take your leave! Hmph”

Emilia turned away from the winking cat and announced a breakdown in negotiations. Useless or pointless or whatever, she didn't plan to stop her routine.

Rather, Puck smiled bitterly and shrugged his shoulders as he continued to follow Emilia who was moving extremely fast. That was their usual exchange, one that had occurred several times now.

And then Puck would retreat, only showing his face later on when tensions had cooled, but—

"—Emilia."

"What is it?" Let me just say I'm still mad, so I don't have much time for you. But if you're apologizing…"

"Then save that time for later, we've got guests."

Emilia's expression instantly changed as Puck spoke in a slightly lowered voice. She extracted a scroll from her bosom, her worry clearly evident in her profile.

Meanwhile, Puck turned his head and started sniffing the chilly wind.

"Humans, quite a few it seems."

"Do you know where?"

"North of here, around the 'Sloppy Snow Path' on your map… Say, perhaps you should rethink your naming scheme."

"Why? They're easy to remember, I think they're good names."

"I'll agree with that much, but it might be embarrassing if others saw it… Ah, whatever."

When she tilted her head at his suggestion, he for some reason completely changed the subject. Emilia felt that something was off about him, but she set that feeling aside for later.

—The 'Sloppy Snow Path', contrary to what the name would suggest was extremely dangerous.

“People keep coming here despite all the warning signs you put up, huh.”

“Maybe they just miss them now and then.”

“They’re just facing the consequences then. It’s their own responsibility, so why not leave it be?”

“I think it’s a little nice how you don’t force me into anything.”

With a smile, Emilia nimbly tied her hair up using her towel, Puck then gave her a pure white robe he’d retrieved somehow.

She accepted it and put it on, covering her face with the hood to hide her identity.

“Even so, isn’t this too baggy?”

“It looks cute that way.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

Rolling up her oversized sleeves, she glared at Puck for a moment before she took off in a sprint.

The ‘Garden’—the various places she’d been on her daily routine—was not where she was headed. She kicked up snow as she accelerated, taking the shortest path at the greatest speed.

She kept low as she slipped through the densely wooded area. The frozen foliage was sharp as a blade, but Emilia ran as if to weave her way through it.

“The smell’s stronger at this range. There’s… Only ten or so.”

Puck flew through the sky, his tail fluttering as he effortlessly matched Emilia’s pace. His announcement caused her draw in her chin and narrow her field of view as she dashed over the snow.

“They haven’t brought a ground dragon, even in a snow-covered forest like this. Well, I suppose it’s only natural.”

“If they had one, it probably wouldn’t enter a dangerous place like this, huh”

“Dragons are quite good at sensing danger, they wouldn’t go along with these fools’ suicide..”

Emilia nodded as she leaped over a large chasm. They were already quite far from the ‘Garden’, but this a path she’d already mapped out.

Emilia could clearly see even the subtlest details which would be imperceptible to the average person, she easily flew through even the harshest paths. Finally—

“—Here!”

Suddenly, the forest had opened up and the ‘Sloppy Snow Path’ lay before Emilia. It was a slight gap in the forest, a sloping path sandwiched by trees on both sides. It was about as wide as three men standing arm to arm, an unnaturally well-kept forest path.

She then spotted some figures laying tracks on the path and pushing their cart with great effort.

There were ten men, desperately trying to get their cart up the path.

Their determination could perhaps inspire compassion from any onlooker, however—

“If only they were merely lost, eh.”

“It’s not like it’s impossible that they just lost their way.”

“To come without a ground dragon, and sneak through a secret path? Perhaps you mean they’ve lost the path of decency?”

“…You’re a dunderhead.”

Having said that, Emilia looked down at the ‘Sloppy Snow Path’, carefully observing the group from atop a large tree.

They wore thick clothes and had wrapped chains around their cart’s wheels to prevent slipping. This might have been necessary in frozen regions, but this wasn't the right season, it was as warm as could be. This forest was the only place with any snow at all.

In other words, they had intended to enter the forest from the start —

"Feel like admitting I was right?

"Oh, be quiet."

"Nya—"

Emiila pushed Puck away with a finger and stood up on a branch, she then glared at Puck who was rubbing the spot she'd pushed.

"I'll take care of this, so you just watch, I don't want you meddling."

"Meddle, as in?"

"As in delaying me like this, perhaps."

"Nyanderstood."

Puck put on an expression of understanding, but Emilia jumped down from the tree without even looking at him. She adjusted her hood mid-fall, careful to hide her face.

She intentionally landed with a bang, surprising the men who immediately turned to look at her.

"—Huh?!"

"Wh-What the hell?! Something suddenly…?!"

The screaming men were all on high alert, wary of Emilia's sudden descent. They had thick fur clothes, with headwear to match.

As they trembled, Emilia pointed at them and uttered these words—

"—That's far enough."

A firm, dignified voice like a silver bell. A tone intended to calm the men, who stopped moving as if entranced.

They had been captivated by her voice, but unaware of this effect Emilia stiffened her cheeks as she stood in their way.

"It's dangerous ahead of here, if you don't want to get hurt you'd better leave quietly."

The men simply stood there dumbfounded, their eyes wide at her words. Emilia took that reaction to be a favorable sign, and believed things would go smoothly.

She figured Puck was most likely still watching from behind, with no hope she'd succeed.

—Let's show him just how wrong he was!

"There should have been several warning signs around the entrance and several paths here. If you missed all of them… Um, this is hard to say, but I don't think you're cut out for this, places like this are reeeally dangerous."

"…"

"Please go back and reflect on today's events. If you're lost, I can guide you out. How about it?"

Emilia tilted her head as she asked this, and the men simply looked at each other in silence. Watching this, Emilia internally praised herself for her seemingly convincing persuasion. Puck would be surprised too, and if the men learned from this it was wins all around!

"Excuse me, lady."

"What is it?"

Emilia was already imagining Puck's apology when a large, bearded man called out to her, perhaps the group's leader. Having reflected on her warning, he'd lower his head and—

“—You think we’ll listen to you just like that?”

He yelled as he aimed his crossbow at her. She had the feeling Puck just sighed in exasperation.

3

His crossbow already had an arrow notched, prepared to fire at any time. It was a mechanically operated hunting weapon, with a lock for the arrow and a reel for the string.

It was originally invented in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, even women and children could use it and furthermore, men could use it one handed. For these reasons, it was a much beloved weapon.

Of course its accuracy depended on the user, but the bearded man had plenty of practice.

“Now don’t go thinking anything strange, this thing could blow a limb off in one shot.”

“…Is that for self-defense?”

“It’s far too powerful for that. As you can see, this is to take care of nuisances like you, who meddle in others’ business—Hey!”

He jerked his chin at his companions as he spoke mockingly. A man who was previously pushing the cart then approached Emilia with a rope in hand.

“Sorry, but we can’t just let you go now that you’ve seen us. You never saw anything… Or preferably, there was never anyone here.”

“You don’t want to be seen, so you were planning to do something bad here?”

“If that weren’t the case, why would anyone even come here? That doesn’t just go for us, but you too, right?”

His vulgar hostility was on full display, his deranged grin showing his crooked teeth. However Emilia fell silent as she grimaced at his brazen accusation. Because she couldn’t confidently say he was wrong.

“—! Wait, don’t move!”

Shaking her head, Emilia rushed him. He waved his crossbow to keep her at bay, but Emilia didn’t care.

“I understand your reeeally selfish viewpoint, so I’ll do things my way too. No hard feelings.”

“You fool! Can’t you see my bow?!”

“It’s you who ought to see carefully, or you’ll never land a shot.”

“—Die!”

His veins popping at her provocation, the bearded man fired at her. The firing mechanism released the coiled up string, letting the arrow tear through the air.

Emilia was less than ten meters away, he’d aimed perfectly at her center of mass. A steady arm and no hesitation, his ability with the bow could bring down any man or beast.

—For exactly that reason, she easily predicted his shot.

“Wha?!”

“No hard feelings, I said.”

Emilia had already dodged, letting the arrow pierce the tree behind her. Emilia repeated her earlier words as the bearded man trembled, having missed a certain kill.

She saw through everything, his bloodlust, his aim, the instant of his attack. Once she’d read the shot, dodging was a simple matter. And having dodged, she began her counterattack.

“Sh—!”

With her robe’s hemline fluttering, Emilia leaped at the man closest to her. The men didn’t expect their leader to fail, and were completely unprepared for her assault. She dived into his chest, her shoulder bashing his chin with such force he was blown away, towards the cart.

The men nearby screamed in pain as his flying body mowed them down.

“Y-You damned morons, what are you staring at, do something!”

The bearded man had come to his senses and started hurling abuse at his companions who had lost their spirit. Startled by his words, the men drew their weapons.

Watching them draw their blades and hatchets, Emilia felt strangely relieved. She was worried they might have more ranged weapons.

Because then, she couldn’t keep them from hurting each other.

“Nothing to worry about now!”

Throwing caution to the wind, Emilia boldly rushed into the charging horde, battling her armed enemies with her bare hands.

The enemies attacked without hesitation, and there were so many of them, but Emilia didn’t want to hurt them. To say she was a disadvantage was putting it lightly.

But as if to completely erase her disadvantage, Emilia used the terrain. The snow was her home turf.

On the other hand, the men had completely lost their mobility, their attempts at movement resembling those of toddlers. It was completely clear who was superior.

Kicking the snow, she nimbly rushed the man in front of her and slammed her palm into his jaw. She followed it up with a low sweeping kick to another man and simultaneously brought down yet another enemy. She had wiped them out in one go.

Her skill was sublime, it was like she was dancing.

“Wh-What the… This girl…!”

However, the bearded man didn’t have the leeway to be entranced by her dance. He desperately attempted to notch another arrow with his numbed fingers, but he was too panicked to do it smoothly.

The crossbow prized for its usability and power had one big weakness: It couldn’t fire rapidly. By the time he was done, Emilia had already eliminated half his men.

“Damn it, damn damn damn…”

Emilia sensed him aiming at her from behind. Emilia immediately created some distance with a powerful kick.

She simply had to read it just like she did the first shot. It was an invitation to strike.

“U-, Aargh!”

She sent a fat man flying with a kick, but this left her open. In an instant, the bearded man—

“Gh- Aaaaahh!”

Instead of an arrow, she was assailed by his screams of agony. She turned around in shock to find him writhing in pain.

She immediately approached him, worried about his condition.

“I warned you!”

Sliding near him, Emilia grimaced at what she saw. The writhing man’s face had a deep vertical cut on its right side.

Beside him was his crossbow with its string snapped, it was probably what tore into his face. His right ear had been ripped off, spilling copious amounts of blood as he screamed.

“Hurtshurtshurtshurts!”

“Don’t move, be still!”

Holding him down, Emilia untied her hair. She then used her towel to bind his wound.

It was far from ideal, but there was no other option.

With the blood loss stopped and the man unconscious, Emilia turned to the men, her hands covered in blood.

“You still want to fight?”

In response, the men who’d lost their leader and half their numbers gulped, even they realized the position they were in. However, their pride wouldn’t let them back down just like that.

It was meaningless obstinacy.

Emilia pointed at the snow stained by the bearded man’s blood.

“Listen closely. This is actually a witchbeast infested area. With all this happening in their territory, they’re bound to show up in large numbers. —You know how scary this forest is, right?”

“…”

“Take your fallen and go home. I won’t do anything to you.”

Emilia once again emphasized that she didn’t intend to fight. The men briefly fell silent, but soon started carrying their downed companions.

Emilia was relieved, it was over. If they retreated, that would be that. However—

“I told you to hurry, didn’t I? You’ll have to leave that cart behind, think of it as a punishment.”

She stopped their attempt to retrieve their cart. Their battle had surely attracted attention, they would have to leave as fast as possible.

The men showed signs of resistance, but ultimately yielded to her glare and left the forest dejected.

“—Come here, Puck.”

Once she was sure they were gone, she whispered to Puck. Meanwhile, she picked the crossbow up and examined its string.

That little incident was no accident.

“I was watching, you know. You made quite the mess.”

Puck casually descended from his spot. Floating next to Emilia, he stared at the bloodstained snow in feigned shock, causing Emilia to sigh as she showed him the crossbow.

“This didn’t happen naturally, that was too much.”

“Too much? I don’t get it, I’m just a cat after all.”

“You’re no cat. —Look, it’s frozen here. That’s why the string snapped and injured him like that. That wouldn’t normally happen.”

“Emilia, to think you’d do such a…”

“No way it was me! Seriously, I told you not to do anything.”

Puck feigned innocence as Emilia scolded him, meanwhile she set the crossbow down and facepalmed.

To call it a little trick would be cute, but the result was dreadful. However she did understand why Puck did it.

“I understand you were helping me, I’m happy about that. But surely you had another…”

“Sorry, but as far as I’m concerned that was karmic justice, I’m not losing any sleep over it. Your safety is far, far more important, after all.”

He stroked his whiskers without a hint of guilt as he replied, causing Emilia to cast her eyes downward. She knew he wasn’t wrong, that was what he really believed. He truly cared about her.

It was because she understood that it was so painful. She had no idea what she'd done to deserve his affection, nor how to return it.

"…"

Ordinarily, humans and spirits would never coexist due to their radically different modes of life. There existed a method to deviate from this natural order—a contract between human and spirit.

Having exchanged their vows and pledges, the spirit would be in the human's service, lending them power. Those who obtained extraordinary power through such contracts were known as spirit users.

In this scenario, it would not be strange for the pair to have a loving relationship. Emilia and Puck appeared to share this kind of relationship.

However, that wasn't quite it, there was no contract between them. Emilia was just a girl who lived in the forest, and Puck was just a stray spirit—That was supposed to be the extent of their relationship. Emilia didn't have the courage to take the next step.

"More importantly, let's have a look at their stuff. Regardless of what it is, it'd be a waste to leave it around for the witchbeasts."

"…But that's basically thievery, isn't it?"

"It's making good use of waste. It'd be great if they had cute clothes, though there isn't much chance of that."

Emilia set aside her thoughts and smiled bitterly at Puck's attitude, he was just clearing the atmosphere.

Accepting his consideration, Emilia checked the contents of their cart, contained in wooden boxes.

"It's… Some kind of bottled liquid. It's all murky, some kind of medicine maybe?"

"That green tinge is weird, huh? Shall we get rid of it? Or maybe you'd like me to make a sled?"

“Yes, please.”

The boxes were large enough to fill one’s arms, and each one was full of bottles of some kind of green liquid. Having guessed that they were some kind of medicine, Emilia collected all five boxes.

As she laid the heavy boxes down, Puck activated his magic—A pale light warped the atmospheric moisture, producing a small ice sled.

Emilia placed the boxes on it and started pulling it toward the ‘Garden’.

“We had to leave the cart, huh.”

“Something that size couldn’t enter the forest… I suppose the Snow Blight will end up destroying it.”

“Perhaps he’ll be satisfied to have a new toy. Go, go!”

Puck said as he rode the sled, Emilia shrugged her shoulders in response and started pulling again.

She had to return to the ‘Garden’ and continue her routine.

“Heave ho!”

“What the heck is that?” Emilia continued to pull the sled, urged on by Puck’s various chants. Such hard labor didn’t seem to suit her slender arms, but her strength showed otherwise.

4

—She got rid of anyone who tried to enter the forest, no exceptions, no lenience. No one had asked her to do this, she’d spontaneously decided it on her own.

The impetus for this, and her expectations in doing so were complex in a number of ways, but to simplify things, one could say that most of it was that she simply didn’t want others messing up her home.

She understood how egotistical it was, but since for some reason almost everyone who came to the forest had evil intentions, her guilt decreased by the day.

Even though she understood that wasn't something she should use to justify her actions.

"Even so, today's guys really were the worst, huh?"

Puck crossed his short arms as he said this, his casual attitude not matching his words. This was shortly after they'd returned home with the boxes.

Emilia returned to her work and Puck followed after her in a bad mood.

"Yeah, I guess so…:"

"You're using that tone even though they just tried to kill you. To lash out at you after you'd warned them so kindly is unforgivable, don't you think?

"But maybe the way I spoke bothered them somehow."

"Naive! Way too sweet!"

Puck immediately shot her down and thrust his tail at her.

"Listen, it's important to be aware of your own faults, but you're going way too far. I've heard far too many "buts" and "howevers", let's ban them for now."

"Eh? But-"

"Take this!"

"Ow, that… Doesn't hurt."

Puck struck her arm with his tail for her transgression. He'd perfectly controlled the impact to maximize the sound while minimizing the pain.

"What was that just now?"

"A punishment for naughty children. If you don't teach them right while they're young, they'll turn out like those guys from before. I sure would like to see their parents' faces right now… Wonder if the parents are all beardy too?"

"Pff"

Emilia almost burst into laughter at Puck's sudden joke. However, she quickly cleared her throat and hid it.

"Setting aside the beardy's spankings… Things have felt a bit strange lately, like we're being watched, and there's the increased activity in the forest… Perhaps I'm imagining it?"

"—. Well, the feeling of being watched might be my fault."

Puck gave a lighthearted answer as he washed his face. She felt that there was a momentary delay to his answer, but he started speaking before she could ask.

"As for the increased activity, to begin with, do you understand why those people keep coming here? Or did you face them without knowing?"

"N-No way. Their goal was… Something reeeally bad, right?"

"Yep yep, I guess so. Super cute."

"Why are you doing that? Did I say something wrong?"

Emilia knit her brows as Puck patted her head. In response, Puck straightened his tail and started speaking in a formal tone.

"Even I'm not very well versed in the happenings of the outside world. However, I do understand why those people came here."

"Puck, you said a banned word!"

"I can say it, it's only banned for you."

"That's tyranny…"

"Tyranny's fine. Anyway, let's continue. They wanted to secretly pass through this forest, so people wouldn't see them moving their goods."

"…Couldn't they move it normally?"

Not understanding his explanation, Emilia tilted her head.

"Probably not. Outside the forest, there's a number of rules and laws. Depending on the place, you even have to pay just to use a road."

Puck's explanation seemed plausible, but Emilia didn't seem pleased, because Puck would occasionally mix in lies in his stories.

"You're trying to trick me again, that's definitely a lie."

"You seem confident, but what am I supposed to be lying about?"

"That you have to pay just to use a road. That'd be a huge pain for everyone."

"That's right, it is. That's why they wanted to use the forest."

Puck would usually admit to lying right away, but he didn't do that this time. Emilia's eyes widened when she realized he was telling the truth.

"Outside the forest, even roads are considered property. People crossing, and even moving goods, all sorts of things have various fees associated with them. It's only natural they'd want to go through here, right?"

"…Then I'm doing something really terrible, aren't I?"

Puck's composed explanation stopped Emilia in her tracks. As she worried with a difficult expression, Puck stopped with her while grooming his tail.

"Why do you think that?"

"I mean, if that's how it is outside the forest, I totally understand them wanting to use that path. For me to stop them is way too selfish…”

“Hm, it is true that it might be bad if that were your own selfish desire.”

Puck nodded at her worried murmurs as he continued grooming his tail.

“However, that’s not quite right. All you want is to protect the ‘Garden’.”

“…Yeah.”

“That’s your own problem, but it’s also true that it’s extremely dangerous here. I’m sure they too thought it was preferable to be assailed by you rather than a witchbeast.”

Puck spoke gentle words to console Emilia. These words surprised her, a reaction that seemed to hurt Puck.

“Why so surprised?”

“I never imagined you’d say something so nice.”

“How terrible. Even though I’m always so nice, cute and fluffy.”

“Although I only ever thought of you as fluffy.”

“Harsh!”

Puck toppled dramatically in response to her words, causing Emilia to laugh for real this time. For a while, no words were spoken.

Emilia eventually tired of laughing and caught her breath as she nodded to Puck.

“Alright, I’ll try having a little more confidence in my actions.”

“Yeah, do that. Also, not all the people who come here are evil. There were those who were genuinely lost, and you guided them out, didn’t you?

“Maybe they wanted to avoid road fees too…”

“If little kids had such intentions, it’d be the end of the world.”

The two ended their reminiscing as they reached a frost-covered sculpture. Their unplanned adventure had ended and it was time for her to get back to work.

“Alright then, I have to take care of everyone, so.”

“Yeah, I’m really sleepy since I manifested for longer than usual. But if you can’t bear to be without me, I’m prepared to stay until I disappear.”

“Right, right. Good night, you lazybones.”

Emilia indifferently sent him off as she took off her hood. Her cold attitude caused Puck’s eyes to moisten as he disappeared from the feet up.

“Disappearing like he’s dying, he only learns the weirdest things.”

She said of the spirit who was far more worldly than her. Emilia then approached the sculptures with a new towel and started cleaning them gently.

“Good morning… It’s a bit late for that, sorry.”

She wiped down their faces, receiving no reply as usual. Her careful technique slowly shaved off snow and frost, returning them to their original form.

—The sculptures were exquisitely crafted, far beyond what a human could accomplish. Their physiques, expressions, clothes, were all perfect reproductions, as though real people had been frozen solid —Well, that was actually true.

She worked hard, taking her time as she carefully maintained the sculptures. In total, there were forty nine of them, all of which she handled every morning. They were all real people who had been frozen at some point, and to Emilia they were the shadows of her irreplaceable brethren.

Counting her, there were fifty elves in that white forest—

—Regardless of how it looked to others, that was what she thought.

5

—A giant forest covered in white, a world ending all the same in every direction.

"…"

Having separated from Emilia, the ethereal spirit headed toward a certain part of the forest. There was a very slight change occurring at his destination. It was an extremely subtle shift, but if left alone, it'd become something he couldn't overlook.

—It was akin to fire. The slightest spark could become a blazing inferno, turning everything to ash.

The forest, the people, and even the girl—

"—Disappear"

The spark which had only just ignited, the glow that threatened to consume the forest, was crushed. Making sure of that, the spirit manifested into a vague embodiment of power.

"She still needs time. If possible, an eternity."

Within that murmur was a heartfelt plea. It was intimate, loving, affectionate—

"…"

Leaving that lonely echo behind, the spirit disappeared.

Chapter 2:
I Am Here

1

Northeast in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, the Elior Forest was known as “The Frozen Forest”. Within Lugunica, it was considered to be an extremely unusual environment. These peculiarities had been recorded for around a century. Lugunica was typically temperate, warm in the fire season and cold in the ice season, it was only in a certain area far north that one could see snowfall year round.

If one were to then compare Elior Forest to other areas, it would be clear that its weather patterns were completely abnormal. The source of this abnormality was commonly considered to be a spirit.

To give an example, take the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, a land covered in permafrost, where spirits were seen on a regular basis. There even existed a nationwide religion worshipping spirits, the Holy Church of Gusteko. Extreme regions were considered to be trials put forth by spirits, and the majority of the population believed in these teachings.

Even beyond Gusteko’s scriptures, it was common knowledge that these spirits’ power had repercussions on the entire world. It was also very common to respect spirits, the only exception being the Vollachian empire.

But even so, it was a fact that spirits were beings of incredible power, and it was well known that to provoke one was to invite disaster.

—This has gotten a bit long, so let us conclude with this: The source of the extreme weather in Lugunica’s Elior Forest was a spirit who lived there, and angering such a powerful spirit would bring catastrophe.

That was Lugunican Kingdom’s viewpoint, due to which the forest continued to rest undisturbed to this day.

—Of course, the girl who lived there had no way of knowing this.

2

"—Puck, look! There's so many of those shiny stones! We did it!" Emilia proclaimed joyously as she lay on the ground, waving to Puck.

Deep in the forest, there was a place she called the 'Doddering Thicket', a place that only had very old trees, all frozen. Their dense foliage blocked out the sun, leaving the area dark at all times.

It was so dark that even one's footing was uncertain, and Emilia laid there with her eyes sparkling.

"That's really great, but be sure not to take too many. They'll lose value."

Puck laid down next to her, waving his tail as he warned her. Her grand discovery was reflected in his eyes too. Before them were old roots protruding out of the ground, meandering and coiling around each other.

Within a gap in the roots was a well hidden opening in the ground. Even in the darkness, that frozen opening had a glow to it.

—It was vein of the shiny stones, as Emilia called them.

"What do you mean lose value? They're all pretty, aren't they?"

"It'd be great if everyone thought that way, but if there's a lot of a certain item, people tend to think of it as less special."

Emilia cocked her head in confusion as she crawled to the opening. She then used a knife to carefully cut the stones out of the ground.

"Aah, this feels reeeally good, like cleaning someone's ears."

"That sort of reaction to stones this pretty, I can't say I dislike it."

“Is that a compliment?”

“Of course, you’re quite good at expressing your joy. It’s splendid.”

Emilia continued to scrape the wall with her rusted and chipped knife as Puck silently applauded and encouraged her..

Honestly, it was distracting. Anyway, Puck’s advice was given in good faith. It was easy for her to lose herself as she did this, but it would be troublesome if she took too many.

Because this was the only source of income she had.

“Besides, they won’t form new ones if I take them all, right?”

“That’s right. They’re basically mana in crystalized form. If they accumulate particularly large amounts of mana they become magic stones, and other such stones start forming around them. This place is very conducive to their formation, so the trick is to leave a few behind.”

“Hmm, you really are smart.”

“You could even call me a mana expert. In fact, you could even call me an Emilia expert.”

Puck stroked his whiskers as he smiled at a wide-eyed Emilia.

“It’s true, you know. If you collect too many of these, you’ll want to keep them and then use them to decorate your room. Yes, I can see that future clearly.”

“You’re not seeing the future, that’s something I did a long time ago…”

“History is a circle, people repeat their mistakes… Ah, that was pretty deep, huh?”

If he was seeking agreement, he would find none from Emilia.

However, there was some truth to his words. She had once tried to hoard the stones in secret, not wanting to give them away.

“I’d gathered so many, but they suddenly lost their luster and became ordinary rocks.”

“Because they’re piles of mana. If there were an even larger source of mana nearby, they would steadily be absorbed by it and become empty.”

“An even bigger source?”

“Ah, that’s me.”

Emilia was left dumbfounded by this nonchalant declaration. She remained silent as Puck nodded at her without a hint of guilt.

“Basically, as long as I’m with you, they’ll be no different from ordinary rocks. I guess you could say it’s a real waste. Now, hurry up and trade them for dinner before you get attached.”

“Understood, understood completely! Turning on me like that, you’re horrible…”

Emilia obeyed his instructions, clearly displeased. She put the stones in her pouch and confirmed their weight before leaving.

She tidied her snow-stained robe as she carved a sign into a nearby tree to mark the location, a portrait of Puck, quite a good one if she said so herself.

“A crushed witchbeast?”

Emilia ignored Puck’s teasing and returned to the ‘Garden’. She soon reached familiar territory and sighed in relief as the tension left her face.

“Looks like the forest still has a lot of places we don’t know about.”

“The forest reconnaissance team has a grand total of two members, after all. And I don’t really cooperate, so in truth you’re doing it alone. Even so, you’re steadily completing that rather avant-garde map.

“Avant-garde? You’re trying to trick me with tough words.”

“That wasn’t trickery, merely an honest impression.”

Contrary to his catlike appearance, it wasn’t uncommon for Puck to use words she didn’t understand.

This was usually when he wanted to hide his true feelings from her. It made her feel a little lonely, but she also thought herself selfish for feeling that way.

“It feels like you’re being all habuncho* again, though.”

[T/N: Regional slang for ostracizing someone]

“I don’t really understand what you’re saying either, I guess the feeling is mutual.”

Having heard her mutter, Puck shrugged his shoulders in a human-like manner. They arrived at her home as they continued their conversation.

They left the sled at the roots of the tree she’d remodeled into her home, she intended to sell its contents along with the stones she’d collected.

“By the way, it’s really convenient how this sled doesn’t melt away.”

“It’s because I made it, you know? Wanna ride down some slopes later?”

“That sounds reeeally fun, but I don’t have time for that. Maybe some other time.”

Having rejected his invitation, Emilia smiled bitterly as she pulled the sled. The boxes were quite heavy, but thanks to Puck’s sled she could move them fairly easily,

However, it was lacking in that it couldn’t cross uneven terrain. Though Emilia would normally bound through rough terrain, she currently had to use gentler paths.

“Looks like there’s more snow falling around these ‘Zig-zagging

Woods' than before, it's getting harder to walk."

"Straight to the point, huh. Zig-zagging, zig-zagging…

"No complaining. It's my map, so I'll name them as I place."

Emilia pouted at Puck who was complaining from the sled, he had a habit of criticizing her naming scheme.

It was at the point where Emilia, being stubborn herself, would no longer even consider his suggestions. Easy to understand names that you wouldn't forget, really good names she thought.

"Zig-zagging… Ah, we're approaching the exit. It's about time I left, you'd better put your hood on too, don't forget."

"Hmph, that's hard to swallow… But fine, I get it."

Emilia reluctantly nodded to Puck's advice as he took his leave when they reached the end of the 'Zig-zagging Woods'.

Donning her hood, she hid her silver hair. Puck seemed satisfied by this and smiled, he then started disappearing with no warning.

"…Suddenly disappearing like that is a real bad habit of his. It was quite the shock back then."

She was used to the sight now, but it was terribly surprising when she first saw it. Spirits could freely control the formation and disintegration of their bodies from atmospheric mana.

Not knowing this, Emilia was driven to tears when Puck suddenly disappeared with no explanation. She still remembered how angry she was when Puck just showed up like nothing happened the very next day.

"Whoops, can't get distracted now."

Realizing she was getting caught up in her reminiscing, Emilia consciously put a stop to it and braced herself.

She had almost reached her destination, it wasn't the time to fool around. The closer she got, the more her face stiffened. Even as her heart raced, she knew things were going quiet.

What awaited her demanded that sort of resolution.

"…"

She was now alone, having separated from Puck. Her surroundings steadily changed, the difference in atmosphere was strikingly clear. The drumming in her chest grew ever more violent.

The snow-covered landscape around her changed into brilliant greenery as she proceeded.

The deeper one went into Elior Forest, the more extreme the cold became.

However, the opposite was also true, the effect weakened as one left the forest, and the outskirts were no different from any ordinary forest. Of course that did not mean the cold disappeared entirely, but it was no longer lethal to humans.

At the chilly outskirts of the forest, there existed a human settlement.

"—I'm here."

Emilia stopped and narrowed her eyes at the scene before her. Through the gaps in the trees, she could make out some small houses

Houses made of brick, villagers wearing faded clothes. There were perhaps forty or fifty people here, and they weren't particularly well off according to Puck. That was second hand information, but Emilia did know how lonely the place felt.

Even they wanted nothing to do with Emilia, who only had Puck and her sculptures for companions.

"…"

Discarding her hesitation, Emilia walked toward the village. Pulling her sled through a gap in the fence, she entered the place, feeling the ground through the soles of her shoes.

It was well past noon, approaching evening. It was a season with long days, the sun still shone brightly in the sky. There was still some time before sundown.

For that reason, there were still small children playing in a clearing in the middle of the village. Their joyous voices were somewhat comforting to Emilia.

It was a poor village with few inhabitants, but the childrens' joy was priceless. She felt that the site of these happy children could make anyone smile.

At the very least, Emilia felt that way. However, she herself was the reason this couldn't continue.

"Ah…"

A feeble voice, from one of the children. A child had spotted her when he turned around, his smile immediately disappeared, tension evident on his face.

That striking response spread like a chain reaction. They looked at Emilia as they quietly whispered to each other and then left the area.

"…"

Their rapid evacuation didn't even leave Emilia the chance to say anything. Emilia wanted to sigh, even though she knew all along she would be rejected completely, with no opportunity to explain herself.

"…I didn't even do anything."

Emilia grumbled as she felt an air of fear spread through the village.

Children to adults, adults to neighbors, news of the 'Forest Person''s arrival spread. The village was on high alert, and the so called 'Forest Person', Emilia, picked up her pace as she continued pulling her sled to her destination.

Within clearing lay the village's only marketplace—one in name only—It was essentially a place to exchange goods. The villagers could bring their plant or animal products and quickly trade them.

However its meager lineup was more than enough for Emilia. Leaving her sled at the entrance, Emilia took a deep breath and entered.

"—You, huh."

A 'room' that only had a roof, with an aging man sitting before some goods lined up on a long table. The man wore a headband, and had his forehead was deeply wrinkled. He scowled at Emilia as he spoke to her in a low voice.

His tone and eyes made it clear he wasn't welcoming her. However, he wasn't ignoring or distancing her, which was a relief.

"The usual, please."

"…Alright."

They exchanged few words, the man then stood up in response to her laconic request. He picked up a nearby box and haphazardly tossed some crops and spices in.

Meanwhile, Emilia took her pouch out as she prepared to pay with the stones she'd collected.

"Your shoes."

"Eh?"

"…Your shoes. How about them?"

Emilia was momentarily dumbfounded by his hoarse whisper. But she immediately looked down and noticed the condition of her shoes, so ragged she was practically barefoot.

"Ah! Please do. As you can see, they've gotten all holey as of late…"

"…"

"And…"

Giving no response, the man slinked into the back of the building. Emilia simply smiled bitterly at her situation.

However, she was really happy he noticed her shoes before she said anything.

"…Here."

"Thank you so much. Hm, they fit just right."

He held out some crude shoes, cobbled together from cloth and hide. Emilia would normally very quickly ruin her shoes running around in the forest so she figured she was better off barefoot, but that wouldn't do in front of others.

This was also something she'd learned from experience. Having confirmed the shoes' size and feel, she paid him with her stones, he then passed her the box he'd filled.

Having obtained these, her shopping trip was complete.

Perhaps she could segue into small talk if they were closer, but unfortunately his gaze didn't allow it. As usual, she'd have to leave things at that and head back to the 'Garden'.

However, her chores that day didn't end at shopping.

"Um, actually, I brought some stuff that was left behind in the forest."

Her proposal caused the man, who thought they were done, to raise his brow. Emilia went outside and pointed to the sled and boxes she'd left there.

This was how she intended to dispose of the intruders' cargo. This was what she always did, taking the items left behind to the village.

Since she couldn't return them to the original owners, she at least wanted someone to make use of them.

“…Understood, I’ll take them.”

“Please do.”

The man examined the contents of the boxes, drawing in his chin as he looked at the bottled substance. Leaving their handling to the village, Emilia bowed and left for real this time. She didn’t pass a single villager on her way back.

She wondered if there was a rule dictating no one go outside until she left. If they were openly rejecting her to this extent, the shopkeeper’s blunt attitude was wonderful by comparison.

She had once gone to the shop while a woman was watching over it, sending her into a convulsing fit. Shopping aside, Emilia couldn’t even explain herself before she left.

It seemed they had a man in charge ever since, which she felt apologetic for.

“Am I really so scary, I wonder…”

Emilia touched her face all over, confirming what it felt like. However, she couldn’t really grasp what she looked like from feel alone.

—Emilia was deathly afraid to know exactly what she looked like.

“…”

Once she was done, she suppressed a sigh as she returned to the path into the forest. As she was about to enter, she suddenly turned around.

—She felt a presence watching her.

“…How strange.”

It was different from the gazes of the villagers. They tried to avoid her as much as possible, and that included even looking at her.

As long as she wasn't there, she basically didn't exist as far as they were concerned. That was precisely why the presence staring at her made her so uncomfortable.

"…"

Even so, she didn't wish to confirm who exactly it was.

Staying in the village much longer would be unpleasant, both for her and for the villagers. If it was something she could endure herself, she'd do it to keep the peace.

"Time to go."

She said to herself as she ignored the persistent gaze. Emilia dashed into the green forest, her new shoes impacting the soft ground.

As she ran, her breaths gradually turned white, and color left her surroundings, giving way to a snowscape. Finally, the sensation under her shoes changed to the familiar feeling of cracking ice.

"—Oh, you're back. Welcome home."

Emilia came to a sudden stop when she heard those words, her shoes scraping the ground. Catching her breath, she looked up to find Puck who narrowed his eyes at her condition.

"Seems you've had another unpleasant experience?"

"…No way! That's not the case. I got to talk a lot more than usual today."

"Yeah? Then hiding your face like that is a bit rude, isn't it?"

Puck chuckled as he pointed this out, causing Emilia to realize she still had her hood on. She hastily took it off, her cheeks a bit red.

"How cute, like an apple."

"…You're so nasty, Puck."

"I just called you cute, though. Anyway, setting aside your shopping, how about those boxes?’

Dissatisfied at this change in topic, Emilia shook her head.

“Mm, I don’t know. I couldn’t read the shopkeeper’s expression. And later, in the village…”

“In the village?”

The conversation naturally led to the gaze following her, but Emilia seemed hesitant to talk about it.

The reasons being rebelliousness, and that she didn’t want Puck to worry. Rebelliousness as in she didn’t want to tell Puck and then get treated like a kid like usual.

These factors sealed her lips.

“Uh, you see, the shoes. The truth is, he pointed them out before I even said anything. You know how the old ones were all holey?”

“That’s because you always wear them down right away, isn’t it? I think he was definitely shocked.”

“Even if that were the reason, it’s a really big deal for him to remember a detail like that. At this rate, we might even be able to talk about the weather…”

The fact that he looked at her with such pity even though she tried so hard to avoid that really annoyed her.

To Emilia, being able to talk about the weather would be a sign of greatly improved relations. The weather was a great topic, since it was always changing. She was having a hard time thinking of any other topics, though.

“To begin with, what weather are you planning to talk about? It’s always cloudy or snowy around here.”

“That’s fine! What’s important is being able to do it.”

“Really—?”

“Why would I lie about something like this? Really, really, it’s the truth!”

Emilia didn’t feel particularly bad as she responded to Puck’s doubting gaze. At the very least, she had someone actually talking to her.

—It was quite the luxury to her, since she’d normally talk to those mute sculptures.

3

The room was dim and gloomy. The windows and curtains were shut, blocking out any light from entering. A sinister atmosphere permeated the dark and still room.

The room was not silent. There was a very slight sound, which continued incessantly.

—Hoarse breaths, and the distorted sound of nails scratching at something wet.

“…”

The room had a wooden floor, a simple bed, and a crystal light that had gone out. Sitting on the bed was a silent man, picking at the bandaged wound on his face.

The wound covered most of the right side of his face, even his ear which was now gone. It was painful just to look at, but the man’s expression wasn’t one of pain, his bloodshot eyes were filled with hatred.

The reason was a small gap in the curtains through which he could see the outside world. —Several hours ago, he’d seen a girl in a white robe through that gap. Not only had she ruined their transaction, she even insulted their way of life.

Furthermore, considering her words and her movement in the village—

“Excuse me, boss. Uh…”

A young man with a deep voice knocked on the door, and then entered without waiting for a response. The darkness caused him to flinch, but he fixed his posture when he spotted the man on the bed.

The man wordlessly urged his visitor to speak. Having deduced that from his silence, the young man started speaking to the bandaged man—their bearded leader.

“Looks like you guessed right, boss.”

“…You’re sure?”

“They didn’t want to talk, but we squeezed it out of them. What now?”

Having received this report, the bearded man stopped his scratching. He sniffed his finger which was covered in blood and pus, the foul smell warping his face into an evil smile.

“—Bring me the cage.”

“The cage, sir?”

“They’ll know what you’re talking about. And then the troops, we’ll set out when they’re assembled, get them ready.”

The subordinate nodded as he gulped at the insane look in the bearded man’s eyes. Having made sure of that, the bearded man started staring at a wall, picturing the forest beyond it.

“Alright, let’s get you in that cage. You’ll be our plaything till you die, girl.”

4

—It had been several days since her trip to the village, and even more since her battle. As far as Emilia was concerned, nothing had changed in that time.

She would look after the sculptures in the morning, Puck would start his meddling midway, and once she was done she would have her breakfast, after which she would start working on her map.

In the evening, Puck would show up again and hang out for a bit, accompanying her on her way home since she would stop her mapmaking before sundown. She would then have her dinner and take a bath, after which she'd go to sleep and end her day. These peaceful days continued without incident.

That was probably why Emilia ended up forgetting about the strange gaze she'd felt in the village. Since she didn't think it was a threat, it steadily left her thoughts, and today was no different.

"You might get a little lonely, but I'll have to step out for a bit today."

That was the first thing Puck said to Emilia, who had just barely woken up and was washing her face in the stream.

"Umyu…"

"Yeah, that's right, a little outing. Don't cry because I'm not around, okay?"

"I won't cry or anything…"

Puck acted rather self-important as he passed a towel to Emilia, who was the furthest thing from a morning person. Emilia finally realized what they were talking about as she sluggishly dried her face.

"You're free to do whatever you want wherever you want, though… Guess there's days like this now and then, huh."

"I think just telling you in advance like this is already quite good for a vagabond."

"That's… Yeah, that's right."

Nodding at his assertion, Emilia cast her eyes downward, still holding her towel to her face. She blinked several times before she looked up at Puck.

"Then, can I ask you where you're going?"

“It’s a secret. But it isn’t anything dangerous, suspicious or wrong.”

“That sounds real dodgy…”

“If I say I won’t do something, I won’t do it. That’s why I never help with your mapmaking, you know?”

“That’s not something to be proud of…”

No matter what she said, Puck could always talk his way out of it.

“You really can’t say?”

“Yeah, sorry. But look, secrets just make a girl more desirable.”

“Eh? You’re a girl?”

“Nah, just wanted to try saying it, I really am a guy. Furthermore, it’d be real bad if I were a girl, I wouldn’t be able to fulfill a really important promise, you see.”

“Right, right.”

Puck placed his hands on his back and puffed his chest out, causing Emilia to sigh and nod. It didn’t seem like he intended to respond sincerely, and she didn’t really have the right to ask for more details. He didn’t have to tell her any more than he had, their relationship didn’t warrant it.

“Can I ask about your plans for today?”

“You already know, the same as usual.”

“I see… Sorry for asking.”

“You’re such a bully! Just forget it!”

Puck laughed cheerfully as Emilia pouted at his teasing. Emilia then turned her back on him, intending to go clean the sculptures. However, at that moment—

“—Emilia. I won’t be with you, so don’t do anything dangerous.”

"I should be saying that to you. Don't run off with some stranger or…"

Emilia turned around as she replied, but her sentence stopped midway. Puck's gaze was warm and gentle. Those round, black eyes seemed to contain some strong emotion.

"If something were to happen, your first priority should be to run away. And if it seems dangerous, run away immediately. Understood?"

"…"

"Don't let the 'Ice Flowers' bloom, even by mistake."

"…Yeah."

Emilia looked away as she nodded. Her attitude wasn't quite one of assent, but Puck seemed satisfied and started to fade away. As she watched his physical form disappear, Emilia started to pout.

"He really is unfair."

He was always playing dumb, but he'd occasionally get so serious all of a sudden. When he spoke to her that way, she couldn't possibly brush it off.

Even if she didn't like it, she had to stay aware of that which lay inside her, it wouldn't do to disobey Puck's instructions. Both Emilia and Puck knew this. Perhaps Puck even more so than her.

He wouldn't speak of it in detail, perhaps that too was part of the secret he'd mentioned.

"—I'd better get moving."

If she got wrapped up in her thoughts there wouldn't be an end to it. Disregarding the labyrinth that was her thoughts, she got back to her work.

By keeping her daily routine this way, she was also protecting her heart. Subconsciously aware of this, Emilia ran toward the 'Garden' with a towel in hand.

5

Mapping the whole of Elior Forest was something Emilia had decided to do on her own. Investigation and creation, all of it was done by Emilia alone. Puck wasn't particularly cooperative in this endeavor, though he would often meddle.

Even so, they shared the information on the map and she was grateful that he used it.

She'd started working on the map about half a year prior, but progress was slow-going, and she had a long way to go to complete the entire forest.

Especially as of late, the northern areas she was presently investigating proved to be quite treacherous due to the rough terrain and deep snowfall.

In addition—

"—Another one."

She marked an X on her map as she sighed at the scene before her. It was a densely wooded region, with thick trees that were completely frozen.

It was certainly a pain to have her path blocked by these dense woods, but she sighed for a different reason—The fact that a tree had been brought down by force, and the traces of something crossing over it. There were even signs of tracks in the area which caused Emilia to knit her brows.

"That's not supposed to be around here… And it's recent."

Snow started accumulating in the grooves. Seeing this, Emilia conjectured that this 'Clattering Grove' had just recently ended up in this state.

"…"

Spreading out her map, she examined its contents and her memory. She then took off, donning her hood as she slipped through the cramped grove.

Not to hide her identity, but to keep her hair from getting caught in the foliage. She often thought her long hair was troublesome in such situations, or when she was bathing.

She thought she'd be free of many of her troubles if she just cut it short, the reason she didn't do so was because Puck asked her to keep it long since he preferred it that way.

—She also felt that someone had once complimented her long hair, though she didn't remember it.

"—Here."

Having left the woods while in thought, Emilia looked down at the ground in front of her. It was a sight she'd seen several days prior, disconcerting as usual.

Just like before, the 'Sloppy Snow Path' had tracks going up the hill. What was different from before was the absence of the lawless intruders and the cart that they'd left behind.

"…"

She descended the path and examined the deeply engraved tracks. There was even more snow falling here than in the grove she'd just left, but none had accumulated on the tracks.

There were no footprints around the tracks, as though the scars from the other day's battle had been covered up completely. It was only natural that this would happen. It was natural, but it was a bit overdone—

"—You're here, aren't you? How about you show yourselves?"

As she stood over the tracks, Emilia raised her voice. For a moment there was no reply, the path was silent. However, that silence was soon broken.

The forest's silence was replaced by the sound of many footsteps, and the noise of a carriage being pulled. A group wearing thick clothing appeared before her with a familiar face leading them. Well, not that familiar, it had changed quite a bit since she last saw it.

"Yo, it's been a week, huh. Nice to meet you, girl."

"…I can't say the feeling's mutual."

They lined up down the slope, the leader who spoke to her being the large, bandaged man. His voice, gaze and wound made it clear to Emilia exactly who he was.

But the insanity in his eyes sent a chill up her spine. Emilia knew her judgement wasn't very good, but it was obvious to her what they were aiming to do.

She realized for the first time that she could be unhappy about someone wanting to meet her.

"Even so, how did you know we were here? We were careful not to leave any footprints."

"It's not like I came thinking you were here. I just noticed the tracks while I was doing something else. There was no snow on them because you used them to hide your footprints, right?"

"Tch, good eye. An expert on forests, are you."

Hearing her response, he clicked his tongue and started scratching at his wound. Emilia grimaced as blood seeped through the bandage.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What."

"That wound, it'll leave a bad scar if you don't treat it properly. Do you have any medicine for it?"

"—! Oi, oioioi, this little… Medicine? Medicine, you say?!"

Her question seemed to touch a nerve, causing him to fly into a rage. His expression and shouts surprised Emilia, leaving her bewildered, this reaction only further enraged him.

“You trying to make a fool of me? Or are you really that much of an airhead? Either way, you’re even more of a fool than I thought, ‘Forest Person’!”

“…That name…”

“I don’t think I need to tell you where I heard it, girl.”

The bearded man smiled vulgarly as Emilia’s expression changed. He moved his hand in a grandiose fashion, and in that direction—east of the forest—was the village.

“Damn you, you robbed us and sold the goods to that tiny village. We asked around and it turns you do this quite frequently, a serial offender, huh?”

“…What are you talking about? I never…”

“You can do whatever you want and their guilty conscience keeps them from complaining, you’re quite a nasty woman, you know?”

“Don’t make stuff up, I never once intended to do anything of the sort!”

“Quit playing dumb! Those village bastards spilled the beans, we know all about your little deal! Giving them a cut to keep their mouths shut, they’re practically accomplices!”

“…Eh?”

His malice overwhelmed any response she might have had to his false accusation. He interpreted her silence as an admission he was right.

However, the truth was much more cruel. Emilia was completely shocked by his words, their contents far beyond her expectations. To think that those villagers told them such things about her.

"You're barking up the wrong tree if you bear a grudge against them for this. Aiding a demi-human in a country like Lugunica is a task far too serious for those poor bastards, it was only natural they'd fail."

"Aiding a demi-human…?"

"Think you can get away by feigning ignorance? How about you drop the act and get on with it, 'Forest Person'—No, elf girl."

Following his string of false accusations, he dropped one final bomb. Emilia had no immediate response to his assertion that she was an elf.

His eyes sparkled with the satisfaction of being right as he stared at Emilia's frozen figure.

"They cooperated with a demi-human… Moreover an elf bandit. Those village guys are unbelievable, that's a serious crime in Lugunica."

"I-I'm not a bandit… Even so! Why even the villagers?!"

"You really are behind the times, huh? You don't even know about the Demi-human War? You bastards lost the civil war, you have no rights. Merely breathing near your human masters is a crime. Furthermore, even among demi-humans, elves are considered particularly bad. It's obvious isn't it?"

"Why…"

"Do I look like your dad? I'm not going to sit here and teach you."

He laughed at her shaky voice, and his twenty or so men started laughing with him. Surrounded by their malice, Emilia clenched her fists tightly.

Thrusting her nails into her palms, she suppressed her quickening pulse and breath as she glared at the man.

"What is it you want to do?"

"…Straight to the point, I like it. It's simple."

He stopped laughing and jerked his chin. Once he did this, they pushed their cart behind him. In the cart was a large rectangular structure made of metal. He was showing off an iron cage.

"You robbed us of our goods and ruined our business. The villagers are guilty too, but we're nice guys, we'll give you a chance to atone."

"Atonement or whatever…Does that have something to do with that cage over there?"

"You really are dull! Or can you not see reality? You! Will enter! This cage! We have to recover our loss, that much is obvious. We'll have the villagers compensate us, that's obvious too. And you, the mastermind, will pay with your body inside this cage!"

He screamed vulgarly as he smacked the iron bars, leaving her confused. She didn't get what he was talking about and thus couldn't consider it. To begin with, this negotiation itself was completely unexpected.

"I get that there's been a misunderstanding, but I have no reason to do as you say. It's true that I took your cargo to the village. As for what the villagers said about me… It's a bit sad, but let's set that aside for now. But to begin with, you were the ones who started it with your crime, weren't you?"

"Crime, crime, huh? But what about the villagers' crime of aiding a demi-human?"

"That's completely nonsensical! Besides, that's between me and them! You guys have nothing to do with it!"

"However, we're the ones who have the right to speak. In this country, your actions are unforgivable."

Emilia had no response to his extreme arguments. She didn't know whether or not he was lying, but he was clearly being completely unreasonable. However, if what he said was true, if the villagers would be blamed too—

“Then make a choice.

“…”

“It’s simple. If you don’t want to do it, you’d better forget about the villagers. If you don’t want anything to happen to them, get in.”

“That’s…”

“They sold you out, so I don’t think you have any obligation to them, though.”

The man offered Emilia a terribly cruel choice, and his wide grin suggested that he was quite pleased by her hesitation. She had to choose between herself and the villagers—

“…What will you do with me once I’m in there?”

“This world is filled with people who have certain preferences, perverts who’d love to violate a beautiful caged elf. I certainly understand the feeling.”

“…”

“I don’t mind either choice. Even if you don’t, we have other candidates too.’

“Candidates?”

“In the village, and of course the forest. They’re here, aren’t they? Longears besides you.”

The vulgar man directed his gaze toward the ‘Garden’, causing Emilia’s eyes to widen. That was malice directed at her frozen companions, she understood what she had to do.

“—Understood.”

Emilia shut her eyes as she announced this to him. It wasn’t that she couldn’t decide. She was merely confused and that manifested as hesitation. She knew from the very start what she was going to do, though she may have been mistaken.

However, the same went for them. She understood their desire to retaliate against her, but she wouldn't forgive an attack on the villagers or the sculptures.

—She wouldn't allow it. If someone had to be punished, it had to be her alone.

"You want me in that cage?"

"…Yes, that's right. Well, that depends on how much people want you. What's most important is your looks."

"I see. —If that's the case, I don't think I'll meet your expectations."

Emilia responded sarcastically as she grabbed her hood. It was unusual for her to feel this way while facing other people. —No, this was the first time. The first time she wanted to see their reactions.

"…"

Her silver hair flowed down her back when she took her hood off. She raised her face, staring directly at them with her amethyst eyes, causing them to gasp.

Emilia's expression was resolute in the face of their shocked gazes. Their faces could only be described as ones of stupefaction and astonishment.

That was just what she'd hoped for, but it still made her heart ache.

"Do you still want me in that cage?"

Her question made them all flinch in fear. Emilia As Emilia looked at their tension-filled faces one by one, someone muttered the following,

"Silver hair, amethyst eyes… Silver elf…!"

They were all features that comprised the being known as Emilia. They were also the traits of the world's most detested entity. The primal fear they induced could crush hearts and paralyze people with terror.

A village girl shrieked and fainted when she first saw Emilia, she learned what these features meant from that fearful scream. That is —

"—Witch. The same as the Witch of Envy."

"…"

It was one of the men who mouthed those words. The world's most feared, most hated, most terrible existence, a 'Witch'.

'Witch of Envy'—Throughout the whole world, even now that name was synonymous with fear. It was said that this calamitous being was a woman with silver hair and amethyst eyes.

Emilia matched these conditions perfectly, which was why she was shunned by all. The villagers were no exception.

However, that was merely a small portion of her sin.

"…"

Having laid eyes on her, the men started panicking. The shocked men were terrified to even meet her gaze.

However, there was one whose reaction was clearly different. The bearded man scratched his wound as he laughed loudly. A laugh filled with joy and insanity.

"Ha, haha, hahahaha! Oioioi, are you serious? Unbelievable! Who could have possibly predicted this?! Ah, you're more than I could have imagined!"

"…What's so funny?"

"You! You, obviously! I don't wanna hand you over to anyone else. Ah, I'd use you in that cage my whole life if I could."

He was practically licking her all over with his slimy gaze, a reaction that surprised her. She remembered that she'd felt this before, the unpleasant feeling at the village.

Several days ago, there was a gaze that stuck to her when she went to the village. —She now realized just what it was. She also realized that he had no intention of retreating even having seen her true face, and that further conversation was useless.

“Understood. I get it now. —Talking to you is pointless.”

“We just can’t get through to each other like this. It’s a shame we couldn’t come to an agreement.”

“Yeah. I agree.”

They mutually decided that their negotiations, which could hardly be called negotiations, had broken down.

Emilia spread her arms, at the same time the men behind the bearded man started to scatter. They were all equipped with crossbows, both their numbers and weaponry made this encounter far more dangerous than the previous one.

Even so, she had to defeat them. She would bring all twenty of them down and make them swear not to harm the forest or the village. If she couldn’t do that, the forest she’d tried so hard to protect would be violated.

“…”

There was no cue to start the battle. Emilia charged without warning, keeping low as she did so. The sounds of firing crossbows overlapped as a rain of arrows tore through the air.

However, Emilia avoided them with a mere twist of her body. The arrows were too fast to track by eye, so she would dodge by reading the shooters’ intent. It was that simple, but there was the question of how many people could do such a ‘simple’ thing.

Surrounded by the sound of arrows piercing the snow, Emilia slammed her palm into a man’s torso. The hardness she felt beneath his fur clothes was not that of trained muscle. He had something like a steel plate stuffed under his clothes which absorbed the impact of her blow.

“I reflected on our previous encounter, just like you said. I knew you’d fight barehanded, so isn’t obvious we’d be prepared?”

“—Kh.”

She grit her teeth at his boasting as she drove the back of her fist into a man’s jaw after which she knocked him down with a sweeping kick. She’d shifted into a more direct fighting style aiming to knock them out quickly.

“This damned girl!”

Shortly after, the men she approached tried to keep her at bay with knives, but she weaved through the silver flashes and performed a split kick mid-air, blowing two men away with hard kicks to the face.

She then turned mid-air, with not a moment to rest as she continued to dodge arrows. She immediately rushed into some other men, striking them with tremendous force. They were sent tumbling over the snow.

“Oohh, not bad. I knew you were strong, but even this many armed men aren’t enough? I could cry.”

The bearded man seemed calm even as he watched his comrades get beaten down. He whistled at Emilia when doubt began to show on her face.

“Ah, how delightful. —It seems unease and doubt are toying with your heart quite nicely.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Is that right? Do you know why I’m so calm, then?”

Emilia tilted her head and as if to show off to her, the bearded man struck the cage. He then moved his hand to his mouth—

“—Don’t you think this cage is a bit big for you?”

"…"

Before she could grasp the meaning of his words, he started to whistle through his fingers. The high pitched sound reverberated through the forest and summoned a massive beast laying near the path—One which had been kept in the cage.

"It can't be…"

Sensing a ferocious presence nearby, Emilia looked toward the sky. Above her was a colossal shadow leaping overhead, making no attempt to hide itself.

The giant beast's huge jump caused an explosion of snow. Lowering its head, the jet black beast bared its fangs and glared at Emilia as it roared.

"—Grr!"

Sending drool flying, and equipped with slimy teeth the size of human heads, were two heads. The beast—No, not a beast. Its doglike heads both had broken horns on their foreheads.

"Here's your answer. —The witchbeast Orthrus, what do you think?"

Emilia trembled as the bearded man, accompanied by the witchbeast, announced this full of excitement.

6

The source of his confidence, the massive monster bearing two heads, Orthrus. Covered in jet black fur, its colossal body measured over four meters in size and its eyes were devoid of sanity as it glared at Emilia.

Its colossal maws could swallow her slender body in one gulp and rip her to shreds, and its claw-like paws could tear humans apart with the slightest touch. These traits, specialized for murder, showed that Orthrus was a true witchbeast.

"A witchbeast… Why would you do something so reckless!"

"I suppose your charm plunges men into madness. It really is sinful."

The bearded man, confident he would win, ridiculed Emilia as her expression tensed up. The nonsense he spoke was very reminiscent of Puck's teasing, but the emotion it instilled was entirely different.

Emilia's breath halted for a moment when she remembered the absent cat.

"—Emilia. I won't be with you, so don't do anything dangerous."

That was what he'd told her when they parted that morning, the normally jovial spirit had gotten so serious. And perhaps this situation counted as the danger he'd warned about. If something happens, run away, he said. He was right, she understood that.

"But if I run… "

However, her legs didn't move. Not because she didn't want to run, she just couldn't back down with the village and the 'Garden' at stake.

"Hey now, what happened to all that vigor from before?

He clapped at Emilia, who'd stopped in her tracks and gone silent. She looked up in response, and the bearded men pointed to Orthrus who was snarling ferociously.

"If you've lost your nerve, I wouldn't mind having him withdraw."

"Really?"

"Is this the time to stare blankly? Ah, it's true. It'd be best if our product was unharmed. A limbless elf's value would be…"

"Then put him back in the cage and leave this place. Don't harm the village or the villagers either. If you do this, we can reconcile our differences."

Taking advantage of his offer, she offered an amicable resolution, a genuine solution with no ulterior motive.

However, the bearded man was dumbfounded by this and flew into a rage.

“Can you not comprehend your situation?! Why the hell should we listen to you?! Don’t get it wrong, we’ll give the orders, and you’ll obey!

“But I—”

“Do it, Orthrus!”

Her explanation was immediately cut short by his rage and Orthrus’ roar. Roaring with anticipation, Orthrus leaped at Emilia and swiped at her.

Its enormous blow carved up the snowy ground, sending hardened snow and soil flying. An attack of this magnitude would easily rip a human to bits if it landed.

With her hair fluttering, Emilia narrowly cartwheeled out of the blow’s path.

But the beast’s assault didn’t stop there, its colossal jaws continually snapped at her. Emilia desperately escaped as she was followed by the sound of its jaws, its foul smell, and its flying drool.

“This isn’t the time to be doing this!”

“—Grr!”

She continually dodged the two heads’ endless attacks by a hair. The way it chained attacks, and the interval between them, was radically different from any man or witchbeast she’d faced before. She couldn’t even attempt a counterattack since its thick fur and hide would simply absorb her blows. Furthermore, it wasn’t only the beast she had to be wary of—

“Don’t kill her! And avoid the face, she’ll lose value!”

The bearded man yelled to his subordinates, who had their crossbows trained on Emilia. Obeying this order, they fired at her legs in an attempt to kill her mobility.

Emilia had no room for error between the simultaneous threats of fangs and arrows. She could rely on her taijutsu for now, but she would eventually reach her limit. If one attack grazed her, another would land directly, and the third would be certain death. Before that could happen—

She slipped through the rain of arrows by force, assailing two men who had just fired and were reloading. She immediately followed it up by kneeing another man's torso, having forgotten about their steel plates.

"Damn—"

No matter what she did, she couldn't fully avoid Orthrus' teeth. She managed to avoid a direct hit, but her robe got snagged, causing her to lose her footing. She was immediately assailed by arrowfire. 'This is bad', she thought, but a shadow suddenly covered her.

"—!"

The next instant there was a howl of pain, but it wasn't from Emilia. The two headed beast had several arrows lodged in its back.

The arrows intended for Emilia ended up hitting the witchbeast as it continued to pursue her. The witchbeast turned around in a rage, and swiped at the men who shot it.

"—?!"

The ferocious blow split the ground open, creating an explosion of blood and snow. Fortunately for the men, their thick armor prevented their deaths.

However, their injuries were too grave for them to continue fighting. Witnessing this friendly fire caused the bearded man to explode in anger.

"Don't screw around, you moron! Do you not remember who broke your horn and became your master?!"

"—Grr!"

Showed in abuse, Orthrus roared rebelliously. However, the bearded man's command overpowered the beast's instincts. The reason was the witchbeast's horn.

Witchbeasts were originally considered to be completely impossible to tame, however there did exist one method to control them. That is to say, to break the horn that all witchbeasts are born with.

In this scenario, the witchbeast would be forced to obey the commands of the one who broke its horn. There existed no other method to tame them.

However, this only applied to the one who broke the horn. That was why Orthrus turned its fangs on the other men, there were essentially prey.

"That's quite a rowdy look you've got there! Hurry up and do what you're supposed to! Crush her legs and bring her to me!"

"—Grr!"

"Right now!"

Furthermore, even breaking a witchbeast's horn would not create an amicable relationship. It only granted the right to give orders by force. Consequently, Orthrus' hatred was directed at both Emilia and the bearded man in equal measure.

"…"

Despite this, Orthrus obeyed him and turned to Emilia. It wanted to destroy everything, but it directed all that bloodlust at Emilia. However—

"Hey, let's stop this!"

Before Orthrus could attack, Emilia once again appealed to the bearded man. It was her last chance, she couldn't fail here. She spoke desperately.

"Half your men are down, they need treatment! I understand how you feel, so let's stop here, continuing would cause irreparable damage!”

“Don’t make me repeat myself! You’ve already done irreparable damage! Capturing you would finally make up for it, that’s why I’m here!”

“Isn’t your life worth anything?! You have to get out of here right now!”

“Aah…?!”

They screamed at each other, but her desperate pleas eventually gave him pause. The emotion behind her appeal wasn’t quite fear, there was something different. Sensing that she’d gotten through to him, Emilia continued.

“I told you before, right? This forest is really dangerous! Especially for you, since you’ve spilled a lot of blood here, they’ll definitely remember the scent. And you even brought a witchbeast… What do you think they’ll do when they see their territory in this state?!”

“Territory? Whose territory? What the hell are you talking about!”

“That’s—”

Perhaps realizing he shouldn’t ignore her words, he raised his voice. Emilia opened her mouth to answer, but it was already too late. Before she could respond, the answer appeared before them.

“—Ah.”

A dumbfounded voice leaked out, causing Emilia to turn and look up. A colossal snowball filled the sky, thrown at them from atop the hill.

“Run—!!”

Emilia immediately leapt to the side as she shouted, barely escaping its blast radius. A colossal impact shook the ground, followed by many dying wails.

To call it a snowball was putting it lightly, considering the scale of the destruction it caused. The gigantic mass of snow rolled down the hill, adding to its size as it became a force of absolute destruction and crushed those who were late to flee the base of the hill.

Emilia had managed to escape the point of impact and Orthrus had dodged instinctively, but they were the only ones who managed to evade it., the survival of the rest was left to fate. You were lucky if it didn't roll into you, and unlucky if it did. It was that simple.

"…"

Shards of ice, beautiful though they may be, were little more than murder weapons once they were absorbed into the mass of snow. The men who were left behind dyed the snow red as they were swallowed up.

Screams of agony overlapped as they had their entire bodies crushed, their internal organs being forced out. In an instant, the snow path had turned into the scene of a disaster, a snowscape of death. The snowball which had swallowed so many men finally crashed into their cart, the magnificent impact destroyed the cage as the snowball fell apart.

Mixed in the scattered snow were human remains and the cart's wreckage. The tool they'd left behind had just been used to kill them.

—That was surely the embodiment of the rage of the lord of this territory, the white silhouette that stood atop the hill.

"Snow Blight…"

Emilia looked away from the tragedy, up at the being at the top of the hill as she mouthed its name. It wasn't as if it heard her, but the white figure turned to the sky and roared as if in response.

The horn on its forehead pierced the heavens as it beat its bulky chest, ostentatiously emphasizing its presence. It was definitely the Snow Blight—The 'Lord' of the forest's northern area, a terrible and cunning witchbeast.

It had the form of an ape, with short, frizzled white fur like snow, a red face intoxicated by bloodlust rather than alcohol, and erratic yellow eyes that glimmered with killing intent.

Its short legs were strong enough to split the ground and its tree-like arms were more than strong enough to toss a snowball weighing several hundreds of kilograms. It was certainly smaller than Orthrus, but it was just as menacing. It was this Snow Blight's arrival that Emilia warned of, the worst possible situation.

However, she wasn't the only who was upset at the boisterous intruder.

"—Grr!!"

Orthrus' fur stood on end as it howled with determination in the face of the Snow Blight's intimidation. The two witchbeasts had simultaneously deemed each other enemies, and they'd also deemed the each other the greatest threats.

Consequently, what followed was inevitable, unstoppable.

"…"

Their bloodlust collided, covering the several dozens of meters between them in an instant. Orthrus dashed up the hill, intending to massacre the Snow Blight with its sharp teeth and powerful jaws.

Facing the demonic dog's charge, the Snow Blight also prepared to fight in close quarters.

However, the Snow Blight's offense and defense were of an entirely different level.

"…"

Dashing forward, the Snow Blight stabbed its hands into the ground and started gathering snow in its massive palms.

—Before long, the gathered snow took on a spherical form and became a colossal snowball as it started rolling down the hill. This was surely the source of the Snow Blight's name, the way it rampaged through the snow.

"–Grr!!"

The speed and force with which the snowball took shape and grew was extraordinary. With the white murder weapon bearing down on it, Orthrus hastened its charge even further. Its two heads opened their jaws as wide as they could so as to tear into the snowball, and then into the Snow Blight's throat.

The distance between the two steadily shrunk until it disappeared entirely Orthrus' fangs pierced the snowball, its jaws clamped down, the force—

"Uuoohhh—!!"

The lord of the forest forcibly held the snowball together with its gigantic arms, causing Orthrus' teeth to shatter at the roots and its heads to snap to the side with their necks broken. This was without a doubt an instant kill—Orthrus' giant body was crushed by the snowball, its two heads spilling blood and brains.

The demonic dog's body was swallowed up completely, rolling with the snowball as its bones were crushed to bits, ultimately ending up as a pile of flesh.

Like this, the snowball left the path and rolled into the forest, mowing trees down until it disappeared into the distance. Having witnessed this overwhelming power, those besides the witchbeast had varying reactions.

"…"

Emilia put her guard up, the bearded man sat down in despair and his subordinates were too shocked to move. Only Emilia still had the will to fight. The others had their spirits broken by Orthrus' horrific murder at the lord of the forest's hands.

"I warned you so many times, and yet…!"

Emilia grumbled in frustration, but never in human history had idle complaints solved a crisis. Having crushed the demonic dog, the Snow Blight started scanning for its next victim. The lord of the forest preferred those with fighting spirit—In other words, just Emilia.

"…"

The Snow Blight glared down at Emilia. There were track-like marks near its feet. The witchbeast would move as if sliding, with its feet hardly leaving the ground, leaving these tracks in its territory.

The X's she'd marked on her map were all the Snow Blight's hunting grounds. This was no exception. The Snow Blight set its sights on Emilia and started howling.

"—!"

Leaping over the path, it swung its massive arms at her.

Its hands were too large even for its gigantic body and were strong enough to flatten Emilia.

Left, right, backward, regardless of where she went she could not escape its range.

Then the only answer left was forwards, the bold choice to advance and dive under its legs.

"…"

At the moment of impact, the explosion-like winds behind her were strong enough to push her forward.

Creating a cloud of snow where it landed, the Snow Blight casually launched another attack at Emilia who had managed to get behind it. Slipping past and stepping closer, Emilia slammed both her arms into its chest.

She'd put everything she had into that blow.

She even twisted her arms at the moment of impact to add penetrating force. The impact sent the snow around her flying and sound it created was such that any human would surely have their organs destroyed.

—However, her opponent was no human, it was a witchbeast. And even among witchbeasts it stood at the top.

“Hurts…”

Having been blocked by its armor-like muscle, Emilia retracted her fists in pain. Most of the power had been stopped, with Emilia suffering the recoil damage. And most importantly, Emilia had stopped moving in order to land that attack.

“—Grr!”

Unconcerned about the impact on its chest, the Snow Blight’s face showed no signs of pain as it swung at her.

Even twisting her body as fast as possible, her suboptimal position made it impossible to dodge. The powerful blow landed, blowing her away.

“Kh…?!”

Emilia couldn’t put up any sort of defense against the organ churning force and was slammed into a mountain. She had been embedded in the snow up to her knees as she coughed up blood.

“Ow…”

Having rendered her unable to move, the Snow Blight’s next move was exceedingly rational.

Leaving the powerless for later, it chose to prioritize the greatest threat.

“…”

“Uh, aah?”

The Snow Blight's line of sight landed on the bearded man, who had fallen to his knees. Having lost himself after witnessing Orthrus' death, he had wasted the time Emilia desperately bought them. As a result, since he still had his crossbow in hand, he was chosen as its next target.

"Hi, hic"

His throat trembled as he attempted to loosen his stiff fingers and drop the crossbow. He intended to show he was no threat by doing this, but it was too late.

"Ah"

His dumbfounded reaction seemed far too subdued considering the tragedy that had befallen his hands.

The demonic ape's palms crushed both his arms along with his weapons. The man forgot to even scream as he stared at his arm getting crushed with the crossbow.

The beast roared as it raised its arms. If it were to bring them down, the bearded man would die like splattered fruit. Neither he nor his comrades could stop this.

So it was someone else who stopped it.

"…"

The sound of an arrow being fired, and the sensation of a small impact in its back caused the Snow Blight to turn around. Its gaze landed on Emilia, who was on one knee as she held a fallen man's crossbow.

Wiping the blood from her mouth, Emilia discarded the crossbow. With an arrow in its back, the Snow Blight turned to face the interloper head on.

Being attacked by prey on the verge of death seemed to wound its pride.

Postponing the bearded man's execution, the Snow Blight chose to attack Emilia instead. Emilia knew this would be the consequence of interrupting.

If she didn't, he would die. She couldn't let that happen.

She didn't like him in the slightest, and he was the source of several unpleasant memories. But even so, she couldn't let him die.

"Don't do such terrible things in this forest…"

She whispered. She wasn't looking at the approaching Snow Blight, her gaze was aimed at the blood and corpses littering the path.

"Don't stain this forest with blood."

So many people had died already, if this continued the count would only grow. She couldn't let that happen. If even more people died here—

"Nobody needs to suffer here—"

Her vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. She had stopped speaking midway, because her words unintentionally touched the door of some memory.

Those words unconsciously led to the gate to memories that had long been sealed away.

However, they weren't enough to bring forth those memories. And she didn't really have time to seek them out either.

"…"

The witchbeast did not possess the reason, intellect or mercy to hear her plea.

So all she could do now was make a choice.

"Don't let the 'Ice Flowers' bloom, even by mistake."

Puck's parting words repeated in the back of her mind. She saw his face when she closed her eyes in guilt. And then, she spoke.

"—I'm sorry."

Words of apology, not directed at the beast before her, nor the bearded man and his men, and certainly not at herself.

It was an apology to Puck and to her companions in the forest who had been frozen.

"…"

Guilt and an unbearable power swelled up in her heart. The power desired a target, and she would release it to the outside world. —She was repeating her sin.

Hazy memories and vivid guilt, the sins of the past, the forest freezing over—

A glow surrounded her as colossal magical power started surging forth. Probably the same glow as back then.

"—?"

The Snow Blight stopped and frowned at the eye-burning light. However, it looked around and realized it was a false alarm, and then continued—Not.

It fell over, as though a massive weight had forced it off its feet.

Unable to bear it, the witchbeast howled in pain and confusion. It desperately tried to turn and look at its back, but that was impossible. The ape's large neck was encased in thick ice, and more than half its upper body had been frozen.

The weight it felt on its back, was something that grew from the wound there.

—Blooming on its back was a crimson flower of ice which grew by draining the beast's blood.

The ice flower absorbed blood from the small wound as it grew. Its mass was soon greater than that of the witchbeast that had become a flower bed as. The witchbeast had been robbed of its life force.

Warping the atmosphere, the beautiful and deadly ice flowers spread their petals and bloomed.

The witchbeast's body gradually withered away, its fur starting falling out as it lost moisture. Its shrunken limbs were like dead branches. There were no longer any traces of its former strength as the light left its eyes.

"…"

A hoarse breath signified the end of the ruler of this territory.

The witchbeast died a cruel death, its vitality consumed by flowers, understanding nothing as the snow buried it.

"Wh-Wha… What…?"

The bearded man panicked as he saw this. The death of the beast, and the crimson flowers of ice that bloomed from its body. However, even he understood the source of this phenomenon.

"Y-You… Elf?"

"U, Ku… Ah…"

Cowering in the snow, Emilia groaned in pain. She had been the one who did this.

Furthermore, her strained gasps and red face showed that his suffering wasn't over just yet.

Beads of sweat formed on her forehead as tears trickled down her cheeks. They weren't tears mourning the witchbeast's death, she didn't have the leeway to even care about that right now, so great was her suffering.

She desperately tried to suppress her surging power—But she couldn't.

"N-No way…?!"

The bearded man screamed as he stared at his crushed arms in shock. His wounds filled with crossbow shards had started to change, and the blood flowing out of them froze as a tiny flower bud manifested.

—The same ice flower that had killed the witchbeast. The sight of their growth overwhelmed him.

“H-Hii, hiii…!”

Still on the ground, he shook his head in rejection. However, his condition steadily worsened as he lost blood and vitality, and his consciousness was slowly fading.

At this rate he would end up sharing the witchbeast’s fate, losing his life to the ice flowers.

“W-Wait, please wait…! I’ll apologize! I beg you…!”

Driving his face into the snow, he begged as snot dripped down his face. However, Emilia couldn’t stop this.

A flower had even started budding in the wound on his face.

It turned out that the ice flowers were manifesting in any and all wounds in the area.

Budding in wounds, they would glitter a brilliant crimson, taking life and providing a beautiful death.

“No… Please, stop, understand…”

The men’s shrieks filled the path as they sensed their slowly approaching deaths. This snow path would turn all living things into flower beds, and become a field of crimson flowers.

Imagining this, Emilia desperately tried to keep it from happening. However, her power was beyond her control. Realizing that everyone would die, Emilia broke into tears

“Please… Somebody…”

“—That you didn’t call my name immediately is one of your bad points.”

An aloof voice responded to her tearful plea for help.

The voice was far too familiar, causing Emilia to momentarily forget her suffering.

“Good grief, I step out for a bit and this happens. Those obstinate fools are bothersome too, but I’ll have to lecture you properly later.”

Saying this, the owner of the voice floated down to Emilia’s side with a smile. There was no mistaking it.

Covered in fur, a cute face, an indifferent voice and a casual attitude, it had to be him.

“…Puck?”

“Yep, it’s me. Your wonderful, cute, fluffy cat.”

He winked at her as she suffered, and then moved to face her directly and joined his hands, as if praying, as he gently spoke to her.

“Emilia, take a deep breath. For now, you don’t need to think of anything besides me.”

“—Yeah.”

Right now, she had absolutely no reason to doubt or refuse his instructions.

She closed her eyes and started breathing deeply, just as he’d instructed. Even now the surging power within her showed no signs of stopping as it begged to be released.

However—

“…”

Her consciousness slowly faded as Puck whispered to her, and her pain and suffering steadily diminished as well.

The tension gradually left her face, and her breathing calmed.

"…"

Finally, the surging magical power had dispersed, leaving a sleeping Emilia. Her expression was rather peaceful. Puck nodded with satisfaction as he affectionately gazed at her, and then turned around—

"Now then, how should I deal with you?"

"…Ah"

Puck spoke as he clapped, destroying the blooming flowers in their wounds.

They were dumbfounded at the flowers' disappearance, having been mere moments from death.

An unavoidable death, and a miraculous savior—These consecutive shocks were too much for them.

But whether they lived or died still depended on how the spirit before them was feeling.

"Well then, I only saved you because this girl had tried so desperately to prevent your deaths. I merely respected her wishes, that's all."

"…"

"If it weren't for her, you would be dead. If she weren't so kind, I'd massacre you. If she weren't sleeping peacefully, I'd throw myself away."

His words, calm and gentle though they were, were very clearly threatening.

Puck circled above the men with a smile as they were frozen by his words. They had made Emilia suffer while he was away, as if to show his anger at this—

“If you’ve learned anything from this, never even think of harming this girl or this forest. It’d be wise to never approach this forest again. Emilia’s very kind so she’s even soft on you guys, she might even forgive you. But I don’t intend to be nearly as nice as I look. —Got it?”

“Hii—”

His final words were accompanied by freezing winds. The ice-like wind surrounding them was but a small fraction of his power—The men trembled, unable to even speak when they realized this.

“Well, hurry home then. —Because I’ll never forgive you.”

Puck seemed content as he said that to the cowering men.

This cold declaration had them running out of the forest with no hesitation this time. After he watched them scrambled away, Puck looked around and tilted his head.

“Now, to make sure she doesn’t catch a cold.”

His voice was full of love, the polar opposite of the threatening tone he was just using. He gently lifted the sleeping girl with magic and slowly took her home.

Gently, so that she could at least sleep peacefully for now.

8

When she woke up, the first thing she felt was despondency, a sense of guilt she couldn’t put into words.

“Ah—”

She muttered, still in bed, with no real meaning to it.

She had slept so deeply she didn’t even dream, and yet she woke up with much greater ease than she usually did. That was most likely because what her body sought was not rest, but escape.

—To escape from the sin she'd committed. Once she was suitably distant, she woke up.

—That was probably all it was.

“Puck, are you there…?

She sat up in her bed and called to him. However, she received no reply, he was nowhere to be seen. Shaking her slightly hurting head, she turned to the window.

Judging by the color and angle of the light pouring in, it was probably before noon. She believed she'd fallen asleep in the evening, so she'd definitely slept for almost a whole day. Perhaps even several days—

“How did things turn out in the end…?”

Stepping down from her bed, Emilia reexamined her memories.

The men who planned to ambush her at the ‘Sloppy Snow Path’, Orthrus and the Snow Blight, and finally her disobedience when she unleashed her uncontrollable power and nearly lost herself—

“—Puck had to stop it again.”

Having disobeyed him, she couldn't even count how many debts she owed him by now.

Without the opportunity to repay even a single one, she continued accumulating debts, that was the extent of their relationship.

This time, if Puck didn't stop it the whole forest—

“That's right, the village! I have to find out what happened.”

Puck had stopped her overflowing magic, so the bearded man and his men were probably safe. However, it wasn't only Emilia they were targeting, the fate of the village was unclear.

“—!”

Running out of patience, she rushed out of the house, grabbing her hood and donning it along the way.

Hiding her face, she ran toward the village.

Along the way, several unpleasant thoughts crossed the back of her mind. The possibility that the bearded man attacked the village, and the worry that he'd used a witchbeast. If Orthrus ran wild, a small village like that would be torn apart.

If something like that had occurred, it would be an unforgivable mistake on her part.

"Please, please…"

Emilia exited the white forest and arrived at the village as she prayed for their safety

From a distance it didn't look like any of the buildings were destroyed. Even after she leaped over the fence, she could find no traces of an attack in the village.

This relieved her, but she immediately realized—

"…There's no one here?"

It was midday, the villagers were usually out and about around this time.

But right now she couldn't find a single person, she found the stillness rather disconcerting.

The village wasn't damaged. But she didn't know about the villagers. Perhaps the bearded man caged them like he tried to do to her and—

"—!"

The moment she thought that, she sensed someone and turned toward them. Her reaction was fast, and she caught sight of a figure. A familiar man was peeking out from the village's meeting place—The man she traded with whenever she visited the village.

"U…"

Having been found, his aged face wrinkled even further. Emilia was happy that he was safe, but this reaction puzzled her.

The headband-wearing man was the only one in the village who didn't fear or reject her. But right now, it was though he wanted to avoid her at all costs.

That guess wasn't wrong.

"Um…"

"—W-We had no choice! Forgive us, please forgive us!"

"Eh?"

She drew closer to ask about the situation, but the man suddenly fell to his knees and lowered his head as he apologized in a shaky voice.

She was taken aback by this. She never imagined this sort of thing coming from the normall calm man.

"If we didn't say that, the village would have… Things were going well, but please let this be the end! Don't involve us in your business anymore!"

"Involve? I…"

"We won't tell anyone about you! I swear it! But I won't accept anymore goods, nor will I trade with you! Please leave us alone!"

"…"

The sudden fear and rejection left her lost for words.

"—Ah"

It's not like she didn't expect this to happen eventually.

But even so, she had hope. That maybe they could get closer, that kind of hope. That was why the shock was greater than she'd ever anticipated, but she also understood.

There was nothing more to say. —There was no longer any connection between them.

"…"

She'd heard what they said about her. It seemed what the bearded man said was true, that they'd sold her out.

And thus they feared that she would come to exact her revenge. Even if she declared she would do nothing of the sort, the fear carved into them would not fade.

And so, this would be the end.

"Just one more thing."

"One more…?"

"Those people didn't do anything? Nobody got hurt?"

She looked down at him, wanting to be sure of that at least. If she could just confirm that much, she could end this.

"Y-Yes… Nothing happened, nobody was hurt. They won't come here again."

"…I see, that's good then."

She was relieved from the bottom of her heart.

Nobody was hurt. That incident hadn't harmed anyone else.

That was probably the only part of this ordeal she could consider fortunate.

Having confirmed this, she could accept their decision and sever their ties.

But first—

"—Raise your head."

"Ah, aah, we're so sorry… ah"

He obeyed her and raised his head, his voice frozen. His wrinkled face turned pale, gripped by extreme terror.

Reflected in his green eyes, was the dreadful image of a witch, bearing silver hair and amethyst eyes.

—She would accept their decision. However, she would also have them accept hers.

Taking off her hood, she revealed her face, her eyes narrowed at the gasping man.

The cold, heartless, unfeeling expression of a witch—

"Never forget this face and what you're feeling in this moment."

"…"

"Never again mention to anyone that I was here."

Her warning was calm and absolute.

So they would never forget, so they would never think of incurring this fear again.

—So they would never again have anything to do with her.

"…"

The terrified man simply stared at her wide-eyed, unable to even answer. But the lack of a response wasn't a problem. That reaction in itself was the answer.

—Not just his, but that of the entire village.

"—Never again set foot in the frozen forest. That place is my forest, my garden."

Raising her voice, she warned the whole village.

She and the man were the only two people there. However, she sensed innumerable gazes on them from the moment he started apologizing, originating from the houses around them.

Therefore her words would reach them all. This fear would envelop all of them..

No would dare approach her, nor speak of her ever again.

"—Goodbye."

She turned around, intending to leave without saying anything. But in the end, she mouthed just one word.

She herself did not understand why.

Nevertheless, she did not look back at his face, she thought that was the right thing to do.

"…"

She slowly walked out of the village, her silver hair flowing in the wind.

Out of the clearing, past the fence, until the village was no longer visible, she continued walking resolutely as they all watched her, playing the role of the silver witch to the very end.

As proof, the man behind her murmured this:

"Witch of the White Forest. —The Witch of Frost"

That name would follow her for a long, long time.

9

—The kingdom's largest mining town, Ganacks, was to the northeast of Elior Forest.

Situated at the base of the Gina mountain range which was said to have once been a dragon's dwelling, it was one of Lugunica's six great cities and was known for its booming magic ore industry.

Though it boasted unrivaled magic stone production, it was also home to other industries—Such as its famous pleasure district.

Be it the miners working in the mountains, or the mercenaries dealing with illegal miners, the pleasure district was an oasis to all sorts of people, a grand success in the mostly dull area.

At night, Ganacks' main street would be lit by gorgeous crystal lights, and brawny men would come to be soothed by scantily dressed women—

However, right beside those showy streets was an entirely different world.

A gloomy world that the virtuous ignored, beyond the reach of those beautiful lights. An aura of blood and violence enveloped it, a place for those who made such things their business.

And then an old building by the main street—Even it was no exception.

It would be difficult to ascertain at a glance just what occurred in there, there wasn't even a sign of any sort. However, those more attuned to such matters would immediately sense the evil atmosphere surrounding it.

A den where the sanctity of life was sullied, where all problems were dealt with through violence.

"It's true! It's just like I've been telling you!"

In a room deep in the second floor of the somewhat filthy wooden building, a man shouted in a hoarse voice.

Contrary to the building's outer facade, the room was immaculate. And in the middle was an exquisite ebony table upon which the hoarse man, bandaged all over, placed his arms.

His right ear was missing, and both his arms were pitifully wrapped in bandages.

He was the bearded man who had just barely escaped Elior Forest with his life.

His eyes were bloodshot as he pled as though he'd completely forgotten about the pain.

"There's elves in that forest! I saw it myself! That elf girl was completely genuine, we need to capture her right away!"

"Just how many men will you send to their deaths before you're satisfied?"

The voice that responded to his barbaric proposal was cool and callous as it shot him down.

Sat in the chair facing him was a man in the prime of his life. A well dressed man with a clean shaven mustache, quite unlike the filthy man across him, the difference in their status was obvious at a glance.

"Fifteen men just died under your leadership. They don't come free, you know."

"They might as well! You could find any number of replacements roaming the back alleys!"

"Perhaps men are cheap, but that's not the case for witchbeasts. Merely keeping and feeding Orthrus was quite the expense in itself. I gave it to you as a favor, but…"

"Th-The elf can make up for that too! If we catch her, we can make half-elves! I'm sure the rich would swarm in to torture a half-devil!"

The bearded man continued to persist, his words causing the other man to lower his eyes in thought.

"…Certainly, half-elves aren't a common sight on the slave market."

"—! Then!"

Deeming his superior's reaction favorable, the bearded man chuckled thinking it was now possible to make a comeback. In his mind, methods to exact revenge on that elf—that silver-haired girl—had already started churning.

Even man and witchbeast combined proved insufficient. She even had that damned spirit with her. Even so, he had to do it. To recover his trust and honor, he had no choice—

“Definitely, I’ll definitely make up for this. I’ll teach that elf girl…”

“Make up, is it?—There’s other ways to do that.”

“Other ways?”

His excitement was suddenly interrupted by his superior. The bearded man waited for him to continue, but it the reply came from somewhere else entirely.

“—Not reversing a failure, but compensating for it.”

“—?!”

In that moment, a wholly different voice filled the room. They’d already made sure to clear the room, and the building itself was owned by their organization, they even had guards blocking the room. It’d be impossible to slip by and enter the room.

Therefore the intruder hadn’t entered by door or window, but rather manifested by traversing space itself.

Particles of light manifested near the ceiling, wavering as they gathered into a single entity. The bearded man was speechless as the light took the form of a kitten before his very eyes.

“It’s kind of embarrassing to be stared at like this, you know?”

“W-W-W…”

“Well now, that’s a reaction beyond my expectations. I quite like it.”

Floating before the bearded man, the cat nodded in satisfaction at his lack of comprehension. —The kitten, so small as to fit in one’s palm, was speaking human language as though it were a matter of course.

This reality, this existence, were both familiar to the bearded man. Staring in shock, he shouted.

“You’re… That damned elf’s spirit!”

“Hm, it’s only been two days. But that form of address isn’t quite fitting, she’s not a ‘damned elf’, and I’m quite different from the spirits you lot are familiar with.”

“What are…”

“After all, I’m far fluffier and cuter than any other spirit.”

The cat smiled and winked, very clearly mocking the bearded man. Understanding this, the bearded man was about to scream in rage, but then he realized.

“Wait a minute. Why weren’t you surprised, boss?”

Despite his shock, his superior sat before him as cool as ever. He showed no reaction whatsoever to the spirit’s sudden entrance, remaining in his chair unperturbed.

Almost as if he had no reason to surprised—

“—Don’t tell me, you sold me out?!”

“Don’t speak such slander. As for the means of compensation, the great spirit simply put in a word before you. Along with a gift, you see.”

As he spoke, the boss pushed the wooden boxes under his desk out with his foot. The merchandise the bearded man and his men had lost, stolen by the elf girl and villagers some ten odd days ago.

The spirit had returned them and influenced his boss, a fact that enraged him.

“You believe this damned cat over your subordinate?!”

“A spirit more than capable of freezing us along with the entire building, something your endless blunders and dimwitted yelling could lead to.”

The bearded man raised his voice, but his superior bluntly shut him down, and then started twirling his mustache.

“Moreover, I hail from Gusteko. I follow the holy teachings. To cross a spirit is absurd.”

In accordance with the holy doctrine, he turned his hands to Puck, signaling that he could do as he pleased.

That gesture and attitude showed the bearded man all he needed to know. His boss and the spirit had already settled things, and he was deemed useless to the organization, something to discard.

“Unlike the beardy over there, this one is quite wise. I’m thankful.”

As the bearded man was struck with the reality that he was being thrown away, the spirit wrapped his long tail around himself and said,

“Well then, it’d be great if that facial hair made you wiser too. Though I’d be satisfied if you just understood how hard that girl tried to settle things peacefully.”

His tone was casual, as though he was merely making small talk, his sleepy-sounding voice completely lacked in vigor. His words were soft like those of an adult scolding a child—But even so, his words held tremendous power.

The bearded man’s instincts screamed to nod, apologize and beg for forgiveness. But—

“—Don’t get carried away, you damned cat.”

“Hmm?”

Even if the spirit forgave him, it was still over. The organization definitely wouldn’t just let him off. Moreover, there was the fact that his boss betrayed him. He was doomed, so he might as well show some stubbornness.

“As if some talking cat has the right to nag its human masters! Listen up, in this country demi-humans, especially elves, have absolutely no right to disobey! They’re our livestock! No different from the rocks being mined and sold around here!”

His face red with rage and agitation, he glared at the cat as he bared his bloody teeth.

“I ought to be the one warning you and that girl. —No matter how far you go, no matter how much you hide, people won’t leave you alone! That threat will follow you no matter where you run, never forget that!”

Unsightly and warped, his words momentarily left the spirit speechless. The cat soon let his ears droop and took a deep breath.

“If you’re going to go that far, there’s no helping it. —It’s about time I punished you.”

“Gonna kill me? Must feel nice to let off some steam, huh!”

“No, I’m not that short tempered. Rather, I’m going to have you help us out.”

“What?”

The bearded man raised his eyebrow at the spirit’s statement, and in an instant he felt something slip into his chest. Cold, as though ice itself were being pressed into him, the sensation caused him to groan and grab his chest. However, there was nothing there, his chest seemed no different from usual.

“What the hell did you just do? You damned… Gah?!”

His rebuke was cut short by the severe pain exploding within him. He fell to his knees on the spot, the pain almost causing his eyes to pop out. It was unbearable, like a blade tearing him up from the inside.

“You saw the ice flowers in the forest, right? I just planted one inside you.”

"…"

"Your anger and hatred toward that girl and myself will cause it to grow. Even merely thinking or wishing evil upon us will feed it. —And in the end, it might even pierce right through you."

The cat groomed his face as he cruelly looked down on the bearded man with his round, black eyes.

"How fitting for you to be punished by your own heart. If you ever leave all of this behind, the flower shall wither away. But if you never let go…"

"Die, you-Gyaah!"

The bearded man's insults were cut short by his scream of pain, he then went limp and collapsed to the ground with a thud.

As he lost consciousness, he heard the spirit speak.

"—My name is Puck. Remember that name in the afterlife."

His anger at this introduction caused another jolt of pain, knocking him out completely.

"Alright then."

The spirit—Puck watched the bearded man faint and then turned to his boss, who was silent. The man's eyebrows furrowed as he watched his former subordinate, but he looked up at Puck without any change in countenance.

"What will you do now? Will I be punished too, for my negligence as Chap's superior?"

"Ah, his name was Chap. Doesn't really fit him, honestly."

"…"

"Well, there's no need to worry. As someone from the Holy Kingdom you should be familiar with a spirit's disposition, yes? My dispute was with him. —If you deal with him as promised, everything will be just fine."

Puck replied to his question and then started ascending before the continued, "But even so,"

"If you lot break your promise and attack the forest yet again, you'll all be turned to ice just as you expect."

"A spirit making an example of someone, how very human. Perhaps the times have changed."

"The concept is a little different. This is—"

Tilting his head at the man's sarcasm, Puck thought for moment.

"—A demonstration, shall we call it?"

Puck's words made the man fall silent and sigh deeply. He then shook his head in response.

"…I'm not joking around. We'll stay away from the forest and the elves. I have no desire to repeat this."

"I see. Then we no longer have anything to do with each other, and I'm not so cruel a spirit as to harm a human I have no business with."

Puck grinned as though he were telling a joke, but the man didn't smile back. Thinking this reaction unfortunate, Puck bid him adieu.

"Release ol' Chap and let him live a long life. Don't have the organization finish him off no matter what, that's what he's hoping for."

"I understand… But can I ask one final question?"

"Hm?"

His restrained voice caused Puck to turn back to him. He then spoke in a subdued tone.

"Shall we think of that forest as your… "The Beast of the End"'s territory?”

“…”

Puck initially showed no reaction to this question. It was a question he didn’t expect, and also a question that showed how keen the man’s judgement was.

The lack of response caused tension and unease to float across the man’s gaze. Puck did nothing to ease his nervousness, nor did he choose particularly gentle words as he cocked his head.

“What exactly are you planning to do with the answer?”

“…Nothing, really. As I said, I follow the teachings of Gusteko. I simply asked out of personal interest, considering you’re a spirit on par with the four greats.”

“I see. Idle curiosity, is it? There’s no helping it then.”

Puck nodded as though he’d accepted that answer, and straightened his tilted head. And then—

“Never again speak of that name or what happened here, how about ‘yes’?”

“…Supposing I were to tell someone?”

“You’d best leave it at that. Chap isn’t the only one with an ice flower inside him.”

“—?!”

“Kidding!”

Puck winked at the astonished man, his tone not suggesting a joke in the slightest. With that, Puck vanished from the room. Similar to when he appeared, mana scattered through the atmosphere as his form dispersed, leaving neither sound nor presence behind.

“—Hah.”

Having seen his visitor off, he leaned into his chair and took a deep breath—He was covered in sweat.

The cold sweat running down his forehead and back once again reminded him of the reality that he'd just confronted a supreme being.

"—What a terrible day."

He whispered as he ordered Chap's removal, his former subordinate still lying on the ground. It had already been an hour since the ordeal.

He felt a twinge of pity as he watched his subordinates toss the bearded man out.

"—Well, he's just reaping what he sowed."

However even that was little more than a momentary sentiment.

10

Emilia dashed out of the village and into the forest, but her pace soon slowed.

She slowly trudged her way through the familiar path. The greenery around her steadily lost color and she could feel ice being crushed under the soles of her shoes.

She'd walked this path countless times. It wasn't something she looked forward to by any standard, but it wasn't wholly terrible either. She had some happy memories here, however few they might be.

She'd probably never take his path again.

"I'll have to mark it off on the map…"

She murmured feebly, deeming the area forbidden territory in her mind. But in exchange, the Snow Blight's territory was now free. She would be able to increase the scope of her investigation.

She could finally investigate the area she'd been postponing, wary of witchbeasts. If she thought about it that way, it wasn't all bad. It was a wave of change, both good and bad.

"—You look like you're trying hard to convince yourself of something."

"Puck?"

As she walked with her eyes cast downward, the sudden appearance of the voice above her stopped her. Descending upside down before her was Puck, who'd been absent the whole day.

Puck righted himself once he'd reached eye level and looked at her with a sorrowful face.

"I get the gist of what's happened. As far as I know, your power even extended as far as the village. There were probably even children shocked to find ice flowers growing out of their scraped knees."

"…I see. I guess their fear was inevitable, then."

She'd only learned this after the fact, but their reaction was completely understandable. Much like those scoundrels, the villagers too had tasted the fear of the ice flowers, and they knew Emilia was the cause.

It was probably impossible for things to go back to normal after that.

"Do you think they're being selfish?"

"…Not at all. It was my fault, after all."

"Your fault? How?"

"Regardless of the reason, I put them through something dreadful. If you didn't handle the situation, things would have gotten even worse and the village would have…"

She couldn't continue, it was terrifying to even mouth the words.

If she said, she'd see it clearly. The horrifying scene she herself was going to create.

—She couldn't forget the alienation and dismay she felt at the village.

It certainly couldn't be said that they were close, they kept her at a distance, and she knew she wasn't welcome. Even so, they were able to compromise over time.

At the very least, Emilia had such hopes for the clumsy interactions they'd had for almost a year now.

A faint, selfish, thoughtless hope she'd never even realized.

"—Hey, Emilia. It's a good opportunity, so why don't we try leaving the forest?"

"…Puck."

"Now that you can no longer do business with them, it'll be hard to secure food. Furthermore, there were even those people who came here aiming for you. The time is right, isn't it?"

Puck's words caused her to lower her eyes slightly, deep in thought. His view was correct. Having cut things off with the villagers, the problem of food was a major one.

Like the bearded man, there were surely more people who would come after Emilia—and the elves.

The things she'd done to protect the forest, they might have all been self-satisfaction on her part, this was something she was certainly worried about.

But even so—

"I can't just leave everyone behind and run off somewhere."

Even if it was only self-satisfaction, she wasn't going to stop.

In addition, she was once again forced to face her uncontrollable power and she started to realize.

—Who exactly turned the forest white and froze her companions.

The reason for her guilt was surely within that unopenable door into her memories, and only her sleeping brethren held the key.

“You really are so stubborn, Emilia.”

“I’m sorry Puck. I really do understand how much you worry about me.”

“That you understand and still reply like that anyway is just the cherry on top. It really makes me pout, nya~n.”

Curling up mid-air, Puck meowed as if to tease Emilia. Despite her despondence, her cheeks relaxed a bit and the tension left her shoulders.

—This wasn’t the first time Puck had suggested leaving the forest.

He was never very cooperative when it came to her usual activities such as maintaining the sculptures or investigating the forest, but that was ultimately because he did not want her to stay in this forest.

And as for the reason he felt this way, he’d never once told her.

“Why do you want to take me out of the forest so badly?”

“I can’t stand to watch you punish yourself like this. To a free-spirited guy like me, it’s absurd to stay in a place that only makes you feel bad.”

“It’s not all bad… And even if it makes me feel bad, there’s a lot here that’s important to me.”

Her objection made Puck scrunch his face up. He looked as though he’d just tasted something sour, causing Emilia to burst into laughter. And then—

“…Thank you, Puck.”

"I don't recall doing anything worth your thanks, but it certainly feels good to be thanked."

Puck stroked his whiskers as he reclined, puffing his chest out at Emilia's words. Watching this, Emilia put on a brave face and thrust her fist forward.

"Alright, I can't just mope around forever. As you said, I'll have to find a source of food while I've still got some in reserve. Also, I've got to go take care of everyone as well."

"It's already been two days, might as well leave them be."

"Why are you always so mean?"

"Tough love, you could say I'm giving you advice on what exactly you should be prioritizing."

Emilia pouted at his bragging, but she nodded. It was certainly important to ascertain her priorities. In that case, her answer was obvious.

"Once I finish cleaning them up, I'll go explore the Snow Blight's territory."

"…Haah. The northern areas are completely unfamiliar, so it could be dangerous."

"Even if something were to happen, you'll save me, right?"

"Saying that sort of thing only when it's convenient, what a naughty girl."

Emilia herself thought her words were rather selfish, and Puck puffed his cheeks in response. But he didn't deny it, which made Emilia smile.

As Puck watched her smile, he seemed to have come to a decision.

"Hey, how about this… I could teach you how to contract with lesser spirits."

"As we just saw, I can't always be there when you're in a tough spot. This should keep you safe and lighten the burden a bit… How about it?"

"Is it alright?"

Emilia asked, her eyes wide at his proposal, and Puck seemed displeased as he responded.

"Well, I can't say I like it. But it is a fact that your trauma could have been avoided, these lesser spirits will be able to help you next time."

Lesser spirits were beings who hadn't yet become spirits, essentially balls of mana.

Their power certainly couldn't compare to that of a great spirit like Puck, but they'd be a great help if she contracted with them since she couldn't use magic on her own.

"But if I do that, you…"

"Hm?"

Blinking in surprise, Puck stared at Emilia who had stopped midway.

His suggestion made her rather uneasy when she thought about it. For him to suggest that she should contract with lesser spirits, it was almost as if—

"—No, it's nothing. Then, can I take you up on that when I have time?'

"Just leave it to me, I'll pick nice ones with brilliant futures ahead of them."

Puck struck his chest and declared this full of confidence, causing Emilia to smile bitterly. Hiding her unease behind that smile, Emilia turned toward her destination.

If by forming a contract with some lesser spirits, she could live independently…

'—Puck won't go away, right?'

Keeping away and drawing closer, not wanting to be alone, not wanting to be hurt. Considering their relationship, those words seemed terribly selfish to her.

"—Alright then, let's do our best today as well, Puck."

With those words, she ran off, leaving footprints in the snow.

As if she expected to find something at the end of her path, and would run any distance to reach it.

"Oh dear, that's some speed. I guess she's at that age, huh."

Puck swam through the air, smiling wryly as he watched Emilia take off like the wind.

But he soon stopped moving and turned to the grove to his right, sighing as he did so.

—Through the gaps in the trees, he could see a wavering red ball of light.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that. I'll keep my promise. You keep yours too"

'—'

The ball of light showed no reaction to his words.

Upon seeing that its color was deepening as its heat slowly rose, Puck pointed the tip of his tail at it and blasted it.

Being on the receiving end of this large burst of magic, the red light soundlessly disappeared.

Confirming its disappearance, Puck slowly lowered his tail,

"Nobody has the right to hurt her."

He said in a tone that was unlike him, and then shook his head several times. Then, once his eyes and expression had returned to normal, he turned to the direction Emilia ran off in.

Her slender, white back was already far off in the distance—

“Heey, wait up, Emilia. You’ll fall and get hurt if you’re not careful.”

His tone was tranquil as he said this, he then swam through the air as he pursued her.

—Two days later, she found another village to the west of the forest.

Chapter 3:
If It's for You

1

—The moment she woke up, even now she dreamed of it every single day.

It was cold, she was imprisoned in something hard for a very long time, and she could not make the slightest movement.

But suddenly there was a cracking sound as it broke, and she fell out of it.

"…"

She coughed several times, trying to expel something revolting, and suffered as she was unable to do so. She was then tortured by a pain that made her whole body creak as well as the wails of her empty stomach.

Within this never-ending pain and suffering that would not diminish, her mind was filled with fear.

—She didn't understand anything, not a single thing. She couldn't remember. Her head was in complete disarray.

Was this because of the pain? She did not even understand the source of her suffering, she only feared that it would continue, completely helpless.

"Scary… I'm scared…"

She didn't know what was happening, she sobbed as the unfamiliar pain and fear continued to make her cower.

She started to wonder if this unceasing fear would make her cry until she died, and the terror sent her into the depths of depression.

Suddenly, she realized that there was someone right beside her, and that something was touching her forehead.

“…”

She trembled and her body instinctively stiffened. But she immediately understood that that wasn’t necessary.

Right now, nothing could be worse than the agony she was experiencing.

Right now, nothing could be more frightening than the terror she was feeling.

And most importantly, right now, it didn’t feel like whoever or whatever was touching her had anything to do with the pain or the fear.

“…”

As she wept, a different voice mixed in with her own. It gradually became clearer, and she soon realized it was coming from whoever was touching her.

This person was crying too.

Are they in pain? Are they suffering? A vague unease rose within her.

But it was neither.

“—Sorry. I’m sorry.”

The voice kept apologizing.

Tormented by unbearable guilt and intolerable grief, the voice continued to apologize.

Because the voice sounded like it knew her pain, her suffering, and her fear,

Because it made her feel like she wasn’t alone,

“Why are you apologizing…?”

“…”

“Why are you crying…?”

Raising her head, she voiced her doubts. They seemed to fall silent. But she couldn’t give up on the answer. Because she had to know.

“—Because I left you alone.”

“You left me alone?”

“—Because I could never find you.”

“But you’re right here?”

She told them that they had no reason to feel guilty or regretful.

In exchange, she wanted them to tell her something.

“Your name is?”

“My name is…”

At this point, the world slowly started losing its form as a white light engulfed it—

“I’m…”

—Without ever learning the answer, Emilia would wake from her dream.

2

“The same dream again…”

Sitting up in her bed, Emilia wiped off the tears running down her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Emilia knew she wasn’t very good at waking up, but it was especially hard when she had bad dreams. And for the most part, this was a very frequent occurrence.

Thus, waking up only ever got harder.

"Mm…"

As she moaned in displeasure, her head drowsily swayed back and forth.

Despite her low blood pressure, Emilia wasn't the sort to go back to sleep once she'd woken up. It just took her some time to build up her energy. Therefore, she was still able to sense the presence of lesser spirits even in her half awake state.

"There… Good morning, everyone."

The mute spirits asserted their presence by perching in her silver hair or on her slender shoulders.

Fundamentally speaking, lesser spirits were unable to communicate with words. At best they could transmit and receive feelings via mana, but the lesser spirits were still very fond of this crude form of communication.

It was to the extent that as part of the contract they sealed, she was required to converse and connect with them twice a day in exchange for borrowing their power. But even if there weren't such a condition, she still enjoyed interacting with them.

There was also another condition, Emilia had to distribute her mana to the forest's lesser spirits. This meant that the lesser spirits would have joint ownership of their contractor's mana, this was supposed to be something that deepened their connection, but she didn't really get it.

Anyway, Emilia's life had changed quite a bit thanks to her contract with the lesser spirits. It wasn't merely that she now had more conversation partners (Although they couldn't reply), they were also an indispensable addition to her daily life in the forest.

However, there were also certain parts of this very welcome change that she didn't like.

"…Everyone?"

The lesser spirits' faint wavering glow disappeared from her sight, causing her to look around with her blurry vision. She found that the lesser spirits that had been dancing around the room had all hidden themselves.

Emilia could only think of reason for this.

"—Puck, are you there?"

"Ah, good morning, Emilia."

The moment Emilia called out in an exasperated tone, a powerful accumulation of mana—Puck appeared within the room as if driving the lesser spirits away. The cat smiled at Emilia without a hint of malice on his face as she looked at him.

"Your eyes just wouldn't open this morning either, huh. You're like a kitten."

"As if it was that cute…"

"It doesn't seem like you believe me, but I really do think you're cute."

Puck made a sulky face, but Emilia shook her head at his concern. Words like cute or beautiful did not fit her. So she immediately changed the topic of conversation.

"And Puck, stop teasing them every morning. Isn't it cruel?"

"It's not teasing or anything. I'm just giving those homewreckers what they deserve."

[T/N: Homewrecker = Thieving Cat in Japanese]

"You're the cat here, and you were the one who told me to form a contract with them."

"That's the dilemma. How pitiful it is that they end up incurring in my wrath whenever they try to show off their relationship with you."

Good grief, Puck spoke as if it was someone else's problem. Sighing at him, Emilia extended her legs off the bed and unsteadily prepared to get up.

“The fact that you’re so sleepy means you must have had a bad dream, right? What kind of dream was it?”

“…A dream of when I woke up?”

“Well, it’s not like I can answer that for you. At any rate, that’s a strange way to refer to it. It’s the dream you often see, right?”

“Yeah, that one… Even though I don’t remember anything from before then.”

The memory of the dream caused her to grimace as she took her sleepwear off, baring her body. Even though Puck was right next to her, she never once paid him any mind as she changed, nor would she.

To begin with, it was doubtful whether or not she would care even if it was someone other than Puck.

“Emilia. I keep telling you this, but don’t change in front of other people.”

“But you’re not a person, Puck…”

“Not even in front of a cute cat. Starting from these little everyday things, all of a woman’s faults end up getting exposed. I’d like you to behave as if you were always being watched.”

“…Noisy.”

“Ehh—”

As Puck lectured her yet again while flying around above her head, she pushed him aside with her hand. She didn’t really get what he was talking about, but it was definitely something troublesome. She put her head through the clothes that were drying in her room, and once she got her hair out her change of clothes was complete.

Puck would scold her telling her that combing her hair with her fingers would ruin it, but this too was wisdom that allowed her to finish things quickly.

“It’s wisdom.”

“You’re a good girl at heart, but you really let yourself go when it comes to this sort of thing, huh. Makes me worry that you might eventually neglect to take care of yourself at all and start getting fat.”

Crossing his short arms, Puck objected to Emilia’s carelessness. Emilia ignored him and stretched her whole body. After this she would wash her face in the stream, and then start her usual routine.

“My forest investigation has gotten a whole lot easier thanks to the lesser spirits.”

“Boo—boo—.”

“Don’t make weird noises. It’s the truth, so pouting won’t change anything.”

Emilia stopped his jeering with a poke to his snout.

Thanks to her contract with the lesser spirits, her ability to explore had increased dramatically. To cut a long story short, it was because she was now able to rely on the spirit arts whereas she only had her own physical strength before.

Depending on how she did things, she could now easily approach difficult areas that were inaccessible before.

“The Snow Blight is gone too, so it seems I’ll even be able to advance north in my investigation.”

“Hmm. But I get the feeling your taste in music won’t align with the witchbeasts over there. You won’t stop?”

“Sorry, I have no clue what you’re talking about. Furthermore, I wouldn’t even be able to live in this forest if I were always worried about witchbeasts… If you’re that concerned, why don’t you come with me today?”

Puck was never very positive about her investigation, but he had become even more resistant as of late. Therefore, she tried to invite him along instead. However, Puck meowed ‘Nyannyan’ in response,

“Sorry, but I can’t do that today. It’s one of those days on which I secretly go off somewhere. It’s a secret.”

“You’re talking about this secret reeeally openly…”

“It’s manly, is it not?”

“Is it really? Is this what it means to be manly? Then I suppose it is manly…”

Puck beamed happily at her half-convinced praise, but Emilia felt uneasy. Puck had already set out on some business he kept secret from her many times now.

But this past month, the frequency of his outings had clearly increased. Although he still made sure to inform her every time he was leaving, and always came back.

However, the increased frequency of his trips and the fact that he asked her to form a contract with lesser spirits were a thorn in her side.

—It was like he was slowly preparing to leave Emiila’s side.

“You won’t tell me where you’re going even if I ask, huh?”

“It’s confidential. I do want to tell you, but… Sorry, that was a lie just now. I’m not telling you because I don’t want to. But what I’m doing isn’t anything wrong nor is it anything indecent.”

“Yeah…”

He had clearly declared that he had no intention of revealing his secret, all she could do was nod in response.

Having ended their exchange that didn’t ease her anxiety in the slightest, they each set out on their respective tasks. Outside the giant tree trunk that had been remodeled into her home, the forest air was as cold as ever. Emilia took a deep breath.

Filling her lungs with the freezing air, she started her day.

"I'll try heading to the northwest today. You be careful too, Puck."

"Yeah, you too. If push comes to shove, use the lesser spirits as a shield."

Joking around as usual, Puck's form dissolved into the wind like always. Once she watched him fade into the atmosphere, Emilia shook her head and started walking.

"I'll wash my face, take care of everyone… And then."

And then start working on her map against Puck's wishes—

"Could that be the reason…"

She did not know why it felt like Puck was distancing himself from her. But supposing that was the reason, would she prioritize Puck or her goal? And Puck, between his secret and Emilia, which would he —

"…"

She just couldn't find the answer, and went about her daily routine unable to concentrate.

The area surrounding her home, known as the 'Garden', had forty nine ice sculptures scattered across it, there were all elves who had been frozen, and to Emilia they were all irreplaceable companions —No, that was what she believed.

"Everyone, I…"

Her whispered words stopped midway. It wasn't that she didn't want to continue. It was that she couldn't.

When she went about her daily routine, when she faced these ice sculptures, her heart always filled with an unshakeable sense of guilt toward her expressionless companions cruelly sealed away in ice.

Emilia was aware she had committed some irredeemable sin against them. However, Emilia herself did not know what exactly it was. It wasn't in her memories. It was a sin she could not recall.

All she knew that before she woke up, she was in the same position as the rest of them. She had slumbered for a long time as an ice sculpture.

And then Emilia alone had melted the ice that would not melt, and she alone had awakened from the slumber they could not wake from.

This fact and her everlasting guilt, in addition to the extreme magical power within her that spiraled out of control if she wasn't careful—Even Emilia who had lost her memories could come up with an answer that fit these conditions.

"The snow in this forest and the fact that everyone was frozen, I definitely…"

She did not know what she thought, felt, and brought about before she went to sleep within the ice

But even though her memories had faded, her awareness of her sin had not. That was why she remained in the forest.

Waiting for the day her frozen companions would awaken, and give her an answer to her guilt—

"Huff, here goes."

The day they woke up, would be the day she would receive judgement for her sin.

Waiting for that day, Emilia continued to polish their sculptures. For she who had nothing, that was all the meaning her life had, the reason she could live without running from her guilt.

—A mighty red mass of pure power manifested within the forest.

The appearance of this ‘Power’ brought about terribly obvious consequences on Elior Forest.

The white forest covered in eternal frost produced the sound of cracking glass it rapidly crumbled away. The frozen trees, the frozen ground, and the frozen animals were all destroyed by the overwhelming heat.

This phenomenon was caused by the light at the core of the destruction.

“…”

The red death was round, and would occasionally waver violently. It was the most primal force of destruction in this world, and consequently the most powerful—Fire, that was the name of this phenomenon.

The ball of fire about the size of a human head floated through the air as it dominated its surroundings. It dominated its surroundings. Of course, the flame had neither eyes nor a nose. However, that was domination, an act of a sentient being.

Searching for something, the flame grew into a roaring blaze. Its will was such that it seemed that if it was for the sake of its goal, it would even be willing to burn away the entire forest.

Practically speaking, that was the quickest method for it to accomplish its goal.

If it reduced every last thing hiding in this forest to ash, if it turned the entire landscape into scorched earth, it would complete its objective.

—Of course, he wouldn’t just overlook such a violent act.

“—Not just eyes, you’re even sending parts of yourself now, huh.”

As the flame expanded its range, a sudden voice halted its movement.

The floating flame was assailed by wind, and at the source of that wind there was light gathering together. Immediately after, the light formed a small silhouette in the air, and the power took on a physical form in this world—The spirit keeping the flame's heat waves in check with wind, Puck had appeared.

Having appeared, Puck took a look around, and narrowed his eyes at the sight of the mercilessly burned forest.

"That's quite the greeting, wouldn't you say? I made sure to mark this area as my own, so what exactly are you doing in my territory?"

"…"

"Ah, I don't mean I went around peeing on stuff when I say marking. Despite my looks, it's not as if I'm a cat to the core. I've got intellect and grace, you know?"

"…"

"I haven't been trained, though… Huh, weird. I thought that joke would get some laughs for sure."

"Conversation, Unnecessary—"

The fiercely undulating flame said this to Puck who had been taking advantage of their silence to say whatever he wanted.

A low voice that sounded like a flame burning the world away. The fluctuating voice emanated from within the flame as it roasted the atmosphere while changing its form.

"That's a very nice manifestation, but did you really need to add the hooves too?"

"Thou, Why, I, Here, Observation, Inference Possible—"

"You're asking questions even though you haven't bothered to answer mine. Great personality you've got there… I don't think your search is as secretive as you think. Just showing up here causes this to happen, after all."

The horse of flame whose entire body was blazing asked this of Puck, and Puck responded by indicating the ruined forest with his jaw. And then he continued, “On top of which,”

“You’ve sent your eyes so many times, so I’ve taken some countermeasures. I’ve placed a barrier around the forest that detects your Od. But if you’re sending parts of yourself with this much power, I don’t really need a barrier or anything to sense you.”

“I, Observe. Balance Collapse, Danger, Power—”

“Not even a thank you even though I answered your question, huh? Be it an eye or part of yourself, you’re as rude as ever.”

Puck went to the trouble of giving an explanation and received no reaction whatsoever, causing him to drop his shoulders in dissatisfaction.

The flaming horse definitely had the intelligence and self-awareness necessary for conversation, but it did not possess the amiable disposition required to do so. Just a powerful ball of power, that was all it was.

It was that very disposition that would prove most troublesome right now.

“This Forest, Frozen Land, Magical Power. Countless, Destiny, Ice Flowers Blooming—”

“Don’t make such a big deal of it. I got a little angry when my territory was disturbed, so I punished them. I won’t do it again.”

“All, Thou, Deed. This, Speak Falsehood—”

“I’m not lying or whatever, it really was me. To begin with, who besides me could do something so extreme?—Who besides me, a spirit on par with the Four Greats?”

The flaming horse’s face was a wavering blaze. It was not possible to glean its expression. On the other hand, Puck who was aware he was normally rather rich in expression was now intentionally expressionless as he confronted the flame.

Expanding cold and piercing heat, these two extremes of temperature swirled between the two spirits.

"If you're that suspicious, why not try asking around? You could try the forest's lesser spirits, and there might be some kids who know me in the village near that huge mountain to the northeast of the forest."

"Unnecessary, Fully Understood—"

"…You know everything?"

The after-effects of last month's disturbance, he tried to offer this information, but the flaming horse rejected his proposal. Puck narrowed his eyes at their attitude. However, the flaming horse suddenly increased the heat of its burning mane in the meantime.

His field of view was dyed red in an instant, and as Puck put his guard up, the flaming horse spoke in a more powerful tone.

"I, Arbiter, Melakuera—"

"…"

"Balance Collapse, Anticipate, Evil Being. Escape Forbidden, Eradication Inevitable."

Giving their name, the flaming horse—The Great Spirit Melakuera kicked the ground with his burning hoof, covering the evaporating ground with white smoke. The aftershock of this overwhelming power was such that even the mana comprising Puck's body trembled.

Showing no sign of his inner turmoil, Puck waved his tail left and right as he glared at his opponent.

"Thank you for announcing your incomprehensible convictions. The world in crisis or helping an evil person or whatever, the stuff you're saying doesn't really ring any bells, but… If it's a fight you want, you'll get one."

"Fight, Denial. Holy Crusade, Acceptance—"

"This is my first time meeting someone who actually uses terms like holy crusade. Isn't it embarrassing?"

"…"

Despite Puck's provocation, Melakuera continued to maintain his silence. This was not a silence intended to hide a disadvantage, he was silent because he had no intention of talking to Puck.

He had declared conversation unnecessary, and indeed he did not seek to converse. He had an unshakeable goal, and was not interested in anything other than fulfilling it.

It could be said that it was very much like a spirit to be so extremely self-centered.

The natural beings known as spirits did not need any reason besides their own will for their actions and their results. The only exception being a contract with a spirit arts user, in which case they may prioritize the will of their contractor.

In any other situation, a spirit would place its own convenience above all else.

If fellow spirits came into conflict due to their differing goals, it would only result in battle.

When this happened, the only solution was for one to wipe out the other, and thus it could probably be said that spirits were savage beings much more simplistic than humans.

"Recent, Calamity, Magical Power. Truth, Thou, Power, Truth Or Falsehood—"

Asking this, Melakuera steadily raised his firepower as his burning mane grew. The flaming horse's surroundings were gradually scorched by the intense heat, and the frozen forest started losing its shape as it was forcibly thawed. Depending on Puck's answer, that firepower would probably be directed at him instead of the forest.

But that was what Puck was hoping for, the next best thing.

"How many times do I have to tell you, that was my doing, I even apologized for it. Or—"

Consequently, Puck halted his words midway and brought forth a colossal amount of magical power. The cat spirit had produced innumerable icicles around his small body, and their sharp tips were all pointed at Melakuera.

And then—

"Would you perhaps like to confirm for yourself whether or not my power is a threat to the world?"

"…"

Puck showed his intention to oppose Melakuera with his provocative words and attitude.

If Melakuera went along with this, the forest would inevitably become the stage on which the two great spirits would clash. However, Puck was confident this wouldn't happen.

In truth, Melakuera lowered his head, rapidly dropped his fire power, and reduced the heat.

"Understood. I, Forest, Departure—"

"Yeah. I'm glad you understand. I'm really sorry too, for causing this misunderstanding. The next time someone enters my territory, I'll scare them off just like I did to you."

When Melakuera displayed the intent to leave, Puck provoked him even further under the guise of an apology.

The massive power the flaming horse had sensed—In order to convince him that the source was Puck himself and that he was the only powerful being residing in this forest, that was why he did it, to keep the Great Spirit's attention on him alone.

So that the flaming horse before him would not take interest in the girl living in the forest.

"Forest, Thou, Dwelling, Understood. I, Thou, Warn—"

In response to Puck's smiling distraction, Melakuera's form which was wavering like a shimmering heat wave dispersed. Having lost the shape of a blazing horse, with its hooves and mane and the like gone, all that was left was a round, red ball of fire.

"Balance Collapse, Omen. I, Arbiter Melakuera. Carry Out Judgement, Execute Arbitration—"

"Your vague standards and views are pretty hard to comprehend. Simply put?"

"Witch—"

In response to Puck who had one eye closed, Melakuera uttered this word in a voice that one couldn't discern the slightest bit of emotion from. Puck did kind of expect this, so he tried hard to suppress a sigh.

At the very least, he couldn't show such a reaction in front of this flaming horse.

"I understand your concern. I'll send you a letter if I see anyone like that, so it'd be a great help if you could tell me your address… Ah, too bad."

Before he could finish his flippant response, Melakuera had vanished from the forest. Like a candle's flame being blown out by the wind, the way he gracefully disappeared in an instant caused Puck to fold his ears.

He then took a deep breath and scratched his head.

"That Melakuera, the one he sent was strong even for a part of himself. He was probably annoyed because I kept destroying all of his eyes, but… To retreat like this, he's not very perceptive, huh."

The Great Spirit Melakuera—He called himself the Arbiter, and was one of the extremely powerful ruling spirits known as the Four Greats.

The Melakuera that Puck had just faced was some power split off from the original, and was nothing more than an inferior copy of the real thing. But even so, it possessed enough power to match Puck since he was currently in an incomplete state.

He was able to drive him away with words alone this time, but there was no guarantee that that would work next time. Anyway, even among spirits who generally had fairly liberal principles, Melakuera was a spirit who followed extremely rigid rules.

The flaming horse's goal was as he stated, to protect the balance of the world, and to deliver arbitration upon any unnatural distortions.

However, the basis for this was a scale known only to Melakuera himself, and was unfathomable to anyone else.

If you caught his eye, you were out of luck, such was the general sentiment around him. If this were someone else's problem, Puck too would probably just laugh irresponsibly and tell them to do their best, but just this one time he couldn't do that.

"If I and the lesser spirits act as a cover, he shouldn't notice Emilia, but… If he comes at us for real, we're finished. How long can I drag this out I wonder…"

He had already crushed Melakuera's eyes which held suspicion toward the forest many times now. His secret operations behind the scenes were effective, Melakuera was most likely uncertain as to Emilia's existence.

However, that magical power she released last time served to rouse him, and made him seriously suspicious of the forest.

—Emilia needed time. Time to confront the power lying within her, and to learn about the situation she was placed in. If she just had that, she could definitely overcome this.

"But it's not like that stubborn fellow will just give her that time."

So she needed someone to stall until then, and Puck decided he would be responsible for this.

“I sure am noble, huh. If there were some worldwide prize for nobility, I would surely receive it.”

Cracking a joke as if he’d forgotten how serious the situation was, Puck surveyed the burnt forest. It’d be a big problem if Emilia was drawn here by the burning smell and ended up seeing all these trees that were turned into carbon.

“Cover up, cover up…”

Uncrossing his arms, Puck started freezing the burnt forest so it would look like it did before it was defrosted.

Emilia seldom came to the southern part of the forest. Seldom, but not never. So that she wouldn’t feel uneasy when the time came, Puck painted the forest white.

The spirit continued to freeze the forest in secret, so Emilia’s heart could remain at ease.

There was the concern that he was clearly being overprotective, but there was no around to point that out.

4

—At the same time, in the northwest region of Elior Forest, in a coniferous area.

Emilia nimbly dashed through the gathering of sharp foliage, having finished taking care of the ice sculptures.

No, it wasn’t quite right to say she was dashing through it. Exhaling white breaths, Emilia wove her way through the trees on a board made of ice as she skated through the forest at high speed.

“Hu, hup!”

Emilia rode over the uneven snow beneath her with a superhuman sense of balance. Her board took to the sky with her yell, and she looked down at the frozen forest beneath her as her body was bathed in wind.

On the surface of the snowscape she was looking down upon, she could see a number of unnatural pits and felled trees scattered about. These must have been the result of a witchbeast's actions, or perhaps they were victims to the mana storms that occasionally appeared in the forest.

Mana storms were a natural phenomenon that occasionally occurred in areas filled with dense mana.

Mana, required for the use of magic and for a spirit's activities, was ordinarily nothing more than a harmless, colorless power.

However, the conditions would occasionally line up in areas filled with mana, and mana close to activation would spontaneously discharge. As a result, a power with neither aim nor outlet would end up destroying nature.

This was the phenomenon known as a mana storm, and was the reason she had to alter her map on a regular basis.

"But it's especially bad around here…"

With her tied up silver hair flowing in the wind, Emilia muttered this as she observed the ground from midair.

Mapping things out in her head, Emilia compared the scene before her against the blank spots on her map, she could easily guess the dangerous areas—

She landed on the snow on the rapidly approaching ground, turning her board sideways to kill her momentum.

Producing a large spray of snow, Emilia stopped on the spot as if piercing into the ground. However,

"Ah, it broke. Looks like I can't match Puck after all…"

Unable to withstand the rigorous use, her broken ice board turned back into mana particles. This caused Emilia to drop her shoulders lamenting her inadequacy, due to which lesser spirits gathered around to comfort her.

She had borrowed the lesser spirits' power to form the ice board she was skating on. She was lacking in experience and her connection with the lesser spirits wasn't very deep, due to which the strength and durability were both inferior to the things Puck made.

"But every little bit counts… Even if it's slow going, I'll keep advancing step by step, no point rushing."

Smiling at the lesser spirits gathered around her, Emilia admonished herself for making comparisons to Puck.

It was absurd to compare their bond of hardly three weeks to a great spirit that had lived such a long life. If she was going to lament her inadequacy, it should be after they'd spent that much time together.

"But I'll be a granny by then… Ah, focus, focus."

Rather than setting very patient goals, she had to prioritize copying what she'd just seen onto her map. Pulling the rolled up map out of her bosom, she untied it and unfurled it over the snow.

On that faded paper was the map Emilia had been drawing up on her own for more than half a year now. She would have to redo it whenever she realized the forest was larger than expected, so even its current incomplete state was actually the eight incarnation thus far.

"There's pits here and here… Let's call this the Thorny Thicket'."

Thinking back to what she'd seen from the sky, she filled in the blank spaces on the map with a rough draft. She would name the place whenever the inspiration struck, but making a fair copy would have to wait until she got home.

"Alright. It looks like it's nearing completion now. It was a real pain back when I first started, though…"

Reviewing the unfurled map, Emilia praised herself, it really did look like a map now.

Naturally, it was most accurate in the eastern region where she lived, but thanks to the cooperation of the lesser spirits, her investigation of the northern and western regions was going especially well this past month.

“At this rate, I might end up finishing it waaaaay sooner than expected.”

As she admired the map, the anticipation of completing it lifted her spirits a little.

Mapping the forest was something she spontaneously decided to do while tending to the ice sculptures.

When she was first released from the ice, Emilia didn’t know anything about the garden or what she was supposed to do. As she aimlessly wandered through the treacherous forest, she encountered the ice sculptures of her companions and understood. —There was a connection between her ceaseless guilt and the ice sculptures.

From that point onward, Emilia decided that she would live in the forest and watch over them until they woke up, this would be her atonement.

In order to do this, she noted down the positions of the ice sculptures scattered around the forest on a handmade map, and then started working on the map when she decided to learn more about the garden. This was a habit that persisted even now.

“Doesn’t look like Puck’s too happy about it, though.”

Overlapping with the map before her was the face of the spirit who had always been by her side ever since she woke up.

To Emilia who had been left alone in the forest, Puck was always a source of emotional support.

However, for some reason he would always become apathetic whenever the topic was the forest or the ice sculptures.

It was as if he was telling her to forget all about the guilt in her heart.

"Even though I can't do that… Puck, you dimwit."

Emilia gently whispered this in her heart, rebellious words she could never say to his face.

That she was so intent on completing her map was also partly an act of resistance to Puck's proposal—She wanted to show that there were still things she had to do in the forest, so she could not leave.

But what if she covered the entire forest, and finished her map—?

When that happened, she would probably look for another excuse and continue to wait in the forest for her companions to wake up. And Puck would probably continue to stay by her side as she did this.

—The answer was forever beyond her.

"Ah, no, what's wrong? Are you mad I'm ignoring you?"

While she was absorbed in thought, the lesser spirits gently touched her hair. The sensation surprised her, but she immediately sensed the reason for their appeal.

"…"

They were warning her. Holding her breath, Emilia promptly lay flat on the ground. As she put her map back in her bosom, she felt a stinging sensation against her skin. The source of this ferocious pressure was down the slope right next to her, in the cluster of trees on slanted ground.

"—Witchbeast."

She saw a squirming shadow through the gaps in the trees, causing her to mouth the general term referring to the forest's greatest threat.

The northern region of this forest was originally the territory of that Snow Blight. Now that he was dead, many witchbeasts were competing for control over this territory. There were even witchbeasts on par with Orthrus and the Snow Blight participating in this struggle for territory, so even Emilia would be in danger if she accidentally encountered them.

The witchbeast she found today was also a formidable opponent, it would be wise to avoid a direct confrontation.

“That is, I believe… Guiltylaw?”

Searching her vague memories, Emilia muttered the name of the giant black beast prowling around downhill.

The witchbeast trampling on the piled up snow as its large, awful frame swayed—Guiltylaw, also known as the Shadow Lion, a powerful being that dwelled in dark forests.

With the head of a lion, a torso resembling that of a horse, and a tail equipped with a snake’s fangs and venom, its ferocious and brutal nature caused Puck to warn Emilia of its danger, a truly terrible beast.

“The Jet Black King of the Forest…”

Swallowing her breath, Emilia concluded that it would be unwise to fight and that she should withdraw. If she did fight, it wouldn’t end very well for her. Erasing her presence, she retreated, gaining distance—However, the witchbeast moved first.

“—Rrr!”

As she lay atop the snow while on high alert, Guiltylaw roared beneath her.

This roar filled with hostility caused Emilia to shudder thinking she had been discovered. However, that wasn’t what happened. The witchbeast’s giant body nimbly spun around in the air, and furiously charged the ‘enemy’ behind it.

“—What, is that?”

The appearance of this ‘enemy’ was completely unexpected even to Emilia.

Its approach and presence were so quiet that she may not have even noticed it if Guiltylaw hadn't sensed it.

But even so, its bizarre appearance was such that one look would sear it into your mind permanently.

—To Emilia, it looked like a mass of black water.

But its body seemed too elastic to be a mass of water, so it might have been more accurate to describe it as slimy instead. Its size dwarfed even the four-meter long Guiltylaw, it probably measured around five meters. Obviously, the round mass of water possessed neither eyes nor ears nor fangs.

Guiltylaw's attack hit the mass of black liquid so easily one would hesitate to even call it defenseless. Torn apart by the talon-like claws, its viscous body burst open with no resistance.

It was definitely dead. Emilia and Guiltylaw itself probably thought this.

However—

"—Rrr!!"

The next instant, it was Guiltylaw who screamed in agony.

The strange phenomenon began from its right paw that had dealt the deadly blow. Its leg which had touched the viscous liquid produced a festering sound as it rotted away, and the Shadow Lion writhed in unfathomable pain. This reaction wasn't merely from losing one limb. In truth, the erosion had only just begun.

"—?! That water…"

As Emilia looked on in surprise, the viscous liquid which had been torn apart squirmed as it started to move again.

Even those claws that would have dealt a fatal wound to any other organism could not physically kill this entity that she was unsure was even a living thing. The viscous fluid closed up its cut, and then its colossal body sprang up. It then landed on the writhing

Guiltylaw, completely absorbing the witchbeast's entire body.

With even its head swallowed up, Guiltylaw's shrieks spouted bubbles as it convulsed. However, the viscous liquid would not let its captured prey go. The witchbeast's body slowly rotted away, and then dissolved.

In just a few dozen seconds, the Shadow Lion had been completely dissolved to the bone and had now become part of the viscous liquid.

"…"

This act of predation that had occurred right in front of her left Emilia speechless. This went for how easily Guiltylaw was killed as well, but she did not understand what just happened.

But there was one thing she understood immediately. —That viscous liquid wasn't done just yet.

"—?!"

Having consumed the witchbeast, the viscous liquid's mass had gone up a size—Right as she thought the black liquid's slimy surface seemed to be bubbling, she sensed something flying at her and leaped out of the way.

Right in front of her, there was a violent explosion where she had just been lying, the result of the black liquid firing part of itself at her, an attack that could perhaps be called a slime bullet. The viscous liquid pierced the snow and the ground, leaving her in shock. That black liquid was definitely intelligent. It also had the cruel hunting instincts necessary to bring down prey.

—No way?!"

Having analyzed that far as she landed, Emilia's eyes widened at the black liquid's next action.

The viscous liquid that was downhill crawled up the snow toward Emilia with unbelievable speed. Its movements as if spreading out over the ground were such that it easily overcame the poor terrain and the obstacles in its path.

She couldn’t outrun it. Making this judgement in an instant, Emilia summoned her lesser spirits and was surrounded by light—

“I can’t touch it. So I’ll be counting on you guys!”

Considering how Guiltylaw met its end, coming into contact with the black liquid would be no different from suicide. Physical attacks could not repel it, she had no choice but to use magic in order to face it.

Perhaps sensing her will to fight, the black liquid’s surface started bubbling again as it crawled. Emilia prepared herself for another slime bullet, and the viscous liquid changed shape before her very eyes and pressed the attack.

But it did not attack by firing a slime bullet—

“Black tentacles—”

Parts of the viscous liquid stretched out thin and long, the black liquid waved them like whips to attack. There were six in total, a fierce offense.

“But if that’s all you’ve got… This is going to be easy!”

This attack that snapped fallen trees, disrupted the snow, and mowed through the cold air boldly flew toward Emilia.

Emilia slipped past the approaching attack, and the viscous liquid was unable to keep up with her as she dodged. The strangeness of its attack definitely surprised her at first, but as long as she was careful not to make contact it was possible to fight at close range. Guiltylaw was unlucky.

Though it had offensive instincts, it seemed to lack survival instincts. The black liquid kept trying to attack Emilia as she approached, and made no attempt to retreat. Consequently—

“—Please!”

Once she was close enough to be certain she wouldn't miss, Emilia invoked the spirit arts with an order to the spirits. She thrust her palm forward, and the white light released from it pierced the atmosphere and scored a direct hit on the middle of the defenseless black liquid. Although it hadn't taken any damage from the claws of a witchbeast, its movements rapidly dulled and then to a stop before long.

The viscous liquid had been frozen from the core, and that freezing damage spread to the rest of its body. It rapidly lost its amorphous nature that had been its specialty, and was reduced to a lump of ice sticking to the slope.

"It really… Can't move now, right?"

She cautiously approached the frozen black liquid, and tried poking it with a rod of ice she had manifested. No reaction. At the very least, she seemed to have forced it into an immobile state.

"There was no horn either, so it shouldn't be a witchbeast, but… Was it even alive?"

It was unclear. There was also some doubt as to whether she could say it was dead now that it was frozen.

But this viscous liquid had dissolved and consumed Guiltylaw, and then directed its hostility toward Emilia. It was unreasonable to say it wasn't a living thing considering these facts. She couldn't come to a conclusion either way.

She probably wouldn't find an answer to this no matter how much she thought. She probably wouldn't, but—

"…"

She knit her brows, unable to take her eyes off the frozen black liquid. It wasn't the cautious gaze of someone looking at an incomprehensible life form. She was feeling an entirely different, strange emotion.

"Somehow, this doesn't quite feel right…"

Now that she'd frozen it, the battle was over. Despite this, Emilia's body was still stiff with tension and caution, and she couldn't help but keep her focus on the black liquid..

It was if instead of her memories, her body itself knew the true nature of this black liquid—

"But I can't remember anything."

As usual, Emilia couldn't find the memories she desired no matter how much she looked around in her mind. No matter how much she worried, no matter how much she thought, she never made any progress and remained as lost as ever.

But if she just stood around fretting like this, she would only be wasting her time. She understood that much. It was almost evening already, it was about time she wrapped up her investigation.

Even if she waited here, the answers she wanted would not manifest. She agonized for a while, unable to come to a conclusion, and then made a decision.

That was—

5

"So you brought it back to the garden so you could show it to me."

"I thought you might know something because you're so knowledgeable… Was I wrong?"

Back at home base in the garden, at the spot where she dried her laundry, Emilia looked up at Puck who had come back having finished his business and tilted her head apologetically.

By her feet was the frozen black liquid they were talking about. As one would expect, she couldn't bring back the entirety of its five-meter body, so what she returned with was a fragment that she had broken off.

"It was a weeeeird liquid. I mean, that witchbeast you told me about before… Guiltylaw, you said not to approach it because it was dangerous, even it ended up getting dissolved easily.”

“You’re confusing it with another witchbeast. Guiltylaw’s definitely strong, but it’s lacking in a number of ways so you can deal with it fairly easily, I said something along those lines.”

“Eh, was that how it was…?”

She was under the impression that it was a formidable foe, but thinking about it clearly she felt like he did say that after all.

Regardless, it was a fact that the black liquid had dissolved Guiltylaw. The mere sight of it was horrendous, a death that could make one end up feeling pity for it.

“But I mustn’t pity it or anything of the sort, huh.”

“It’s a witchbeast, after all. No matter how they die, they’re just reaping what they sowed. Rather, what I’m worried about is the wound to your heart from witnessing that… Anyway, about this pile of ice.”

Immediately tossing aside any concern for the pitiful Guiltylaw, Puck observed the pile of ice on the ground.

Carefully looking it over, Puck blinked his big, round eyes several times. In the meantime, Emilia’s eyes were on Puck’s tail which was swaying from side to side as she obediently waited for his conclusion.

“By the way, did your business go okay?”

“Yeah—Hey, I’m busy investing this right now.”

“That’s true, but… Anyway, what were you up to?”

“I went to play with some fire for a bit—Hey, quit interrupting. You said you wanted to confirm what this thing was, yet you keep getting in my way. What a naughty girl.”

With his investigation constantly being interrupted, Puck said this in a huff as he turned around. In response, Emilia lowered her eyes slightly and apologized, “I’m sorry.”

“Are you perhaps depressed? Was Guiltylaw that pitiful?”

“No, that’s not it. He was certainly pitiful, but I’m not thinking about Guiltylaw… I can’t properly explain it, though.”

She herself could not grasp the true nature of the discomfort lurking in her heart. It was for the purpose of understanding it that she asked Puck to analyze the black liquid. Yet she kept bothering him despite this, she was basically only hurting herself. She did not understand why, though.

Emilia fell silent, and Puck sighed in response. And then—

“Emilia, you said this was part of the black liquid you defeated, right?”

“…Yeah, that’s right. The real thing was much bigger, but I couldn’t bring it all back. This is, right… Just the tip of the iceberg.”

It was a lump of ice only around thirty centimeters in size, but it was still quite the pain to bring it back here. Rather than the weight, it was her feelings that were the problem. Her answer caused Puck to take on a troubled expression,

“Emilia, it’s hard to say this, but you haven’t finished it. It’s still alive.”

“Eh—”

Emilia’s eyes widened in surprise at Puck’s words.

Immediately after, a crack appeared on the lump of ice on the ground. Black slime poured out of the crack as if overflowing and expanded in the blink of an eye, after which it immediately threw itself at Emilia who was standing nearby.

“—Well, I can’t let you do that, though.”

But that was the end of its comeback.

Before the leaping slime could attack, Puck clapped the paws of his hands. In an instant, particles of light flowed in and surrounded the black liquid, causing the atmosphere to creak as the slime was frozen and compressed.

Its formerly thirty-centimeter diameter was now reduced to just two by Puck's power. The sphere then cracked from its core and was smashed into pieces, scattering like grains of sand.

"Seems rather resilient, so you have to go this far at least to finish it off. The ideal would be to freeze it to the core and smash it apart. This, in other words."

Puck spoke as though it was the simplest thing in the world, but this was a technique that employed a high degree of magical power. At the very least, Emilia as she was now could not easily do it even by borrowing the lesser spirits' power.

But rather than her surprise at this technique, something entirely different had a much greater impact.

"Wait, if the black liquid just now wasn't dead…"

"The big part you left behind is probably running around right now."

"…"

With her fears confirmed, Emilia reflexively turned to the north of the forest.

The part she'd frozen and left behind was well over ten times the size of what she'd brought back. If that part was also released into the forest, there would be a lot more damage like what happened to Guiltylaw.

"You won't make it in time even if you go."

"Maybe so. That might be the case, but I can't just leave it be!"

When Puck coldly called out to her, Emilia responded with a face that looked like she was ready to dash off at any moment.

There was no guarantee that only witchbeasts would fall victim to the black liquid. It had even turned on Emilia. Meaning that to the black liquid, even the animals in the forest and her frozen companions in the garden were prey.

And that might not just apply to this forest. Even the village nearby —

“Setting aside the village you can trade with now, didn’t you already cut things off with those other guys? I don’t think you have any obligation to worry about them.”

“—Still, that’s no good. I still can’t let that happen.”

Puck read her feelings from her expression as he muttered this, and she shook her head in response.

She had sworn to never approach that village again. There was an unbridgeable gap between her and the villagers. But that didn’t mean she wanted anything bad to happen to them.

If it was possible for her to stop it, she wanted to do so.

“You’re going so far for people you’d be better off ignoring. Your kindness is a serious illness, huh. Someday, it’s going to backfire on… Oh, it already did. But you’re still not reflecting on it in the slightest. What a troublesome girl.”

“Say whatever you want. I’ll go have another look at the ‘Thorny Thicket’. Puck…”

“—Alright. I’ll go in your place, so you wait here.”

Emilia was expecting to have to persuade him somehow, so this caused her eyes to widen.

“You won’t stop me…?”

“I am stopping you. And in exchange, I’m offering to go in your place. If you just tell me the place, I’ll get there much faster than you, and I won’t fall behind that filthy liquid either. Am I wrong?”

"You're not wrong. You're not wrong, but are you okay with this?"

"Yeah, sure. I don't particularly care about this forest or the people in that village, but… I'd much rather do this than let you face that filthy liquid again."

Speaking in his usual unlikeable manner, Puck winked. Blinking at this human-like gesture, Emilia spread her map of the forest in a hurry.

"It's still a rough draft, but the Snow Blight's territory went from here to here. I met that black liquid around here… Over here, because the frozen trees are all thorny."

"So that's the 'Thorny Thicket'. Easy to understand, huh. Alright, I'll have a look."

Having received her explanation, Puck nodded as his form dissolved into the freezing air.

Releasing their manifestation and then manifesting anew at their destination, a form of teleportation characteristic of spirits.

The accuracy seemed to depend on the spirit's ability, but since it was Puck he would definitely make it.

"Please…"

Before she knew it Emilia had closed her eyes and joined her hands as if praying.

The bud of unease growing within her heart had not disappeared even now. Rather, now that she knew just how dangerous the black liquid was, her wariness toward its contamination was strengthened even further.

"…"

She opened her eyes slightly, the scattered remnants of the black liquid were within view. The appearance of the black liquid was clearly the cause of this sense of tension that made her heart race.

And she had also experienced that sensation accompanying pain. Many times, in fact.

So many times, every morning, the feeling brought about when she would wake from her bad dreams—

"—Emilia."

But before she could find an answer in her memories, the light of mana took the form of a cat.

"…Puck."

Calling to the spirit who had returned, Emilia was relieved that nothing strange had happened to that small body of his.

To begin with, Emilia trusted that he wouldn't lose no matter who he was facing. But still, an opponent was an opponent. Now that her anxiety which was like grains of sand was negated, Emilia sighed.

However, considering Puck's downcast expression now that he'd returned, she got the feeling she was about to get some bad news.

"I'll start with my report. At that 'Thorny Thicket' place you spoke of, the frozen… Black liquid, was it? It was gone after all. So I looked around for a bit."

"—. So, did you find it?"

"Relax. I found it. I took care of it properly, so you can go ahead and praise me."

Ehe, Puck puffed his chest with pride, but contrary to his attitude his ears and tail were still drooping. Noticing her gaze, the cat immediately continued, "However,"

"With my report finished, I'm going to move on, but… Emilia, don't go to the north of the forest for now. If possible, try to avoid going deep into the forest at all."

"What's that supposed to mean? For you to say something like that.”

He spoke in a joking tone, but Puck’s black eyes wordlessly conveyed his seriousness. In response to his attitude, Emilia asked for an explanation and Puck fell silent momentarily,

“—I took a look around the area to find the black liquid that ran away, but I didn’t find just one. I finished off the three that I found, but it seems to me there might be a lot more.”

He forced these words out with a sigh, and confirmed Emilia’s unpleasant premonition.

6

Puck’s eyewitness testimony and Emilia’s unpleasant premonition were soon proven true.

The reason was simple. Ever since their first contact, the black liquid had infested the entire forest, the entire area had become their territory.

In response to this large scale outbreak, Emilia followed Puck’s advice and temporarily suspended her mapmaking.

However, it couldn’t be said that this guaranteed her safety.

Rather, the level of danger to her was much greater than before. The reason being—

“—Found you!”

Yelling this loudly, Emilia skated across the snow to engage the black liquid that she just found in close combat.

The enemy was around one meter in size, rather small for the black liquid. The undulating black slime produced protuberances across its entire body in order to intercept Emilia who was rapidly approaching.

“Too slow!”

But before it could ready its attack, Emilia's drove her palm into its core.

Her palm glowed blue as mana surrounded it, and the venomous viscous liquid was unable to harm her. On the other hand, the ice magic Emilia fired froze the black liquid from its core, causing it to shatter to pieces in an instant.

Looking back at the scattering ice fragments, Emilia used the edge of the ice board she was skating on to come to a sudden stop, her lovely profile was filled with caution, and she sharpened her senses of sight and smell as she searched for her next opponent.

—In accordance with Puck's warning, Emilia had suspended work on her map.

But rather than reducing her trips into the forest, she greatly increased them as she proactively continued to battle the black liquid in order to exterminate them.

Over these past two weeks, she had already battled almost a hundred, and her link with her lesser spirits had also improved greatly.

As you just saw, if her opponent was simply a black liquid, she could safely deal with it.

Of course, the risk was never zero when it came to battles, but—

"Even so, if I can reduce the damage by even a little…"

Fighting wasn't pointless. That was what Emilia thought.

'Unless you strike at the source, there will most likely be an almost limitless number showing up. No matter how many branches or leaves you bring down, the tree won't fall. In much the same way, it will be necessary to cut this off at the source.'

That was what Puck said to her as she ran around dealing with the constantly appearing black liquid. That was probably his frank advice to her now that she'd gone as far as to directly disobey his warning in order to run around the forest. No matter how hard she worked bringing the black liquid down, it was all futile unless she exterminated the source. She figured that that was what he was trying to say.

However, despite telling her this it only had the opposite effect.

“Even if my method is missing the point, even if I’m doing this in a roundabout manner, there’s still meaning in fighting like this. So the fact that I want to do it won’t change.”

She understood that he was concerned for her. Out of both sincerity and stubbornness, the cat spirit would keep talking her head off trying to keep her out of danger.

She understood that she was the worst for ignoring all of his consideration and selfishly continuing her pursuit.

‘I don’t really get what it is that drives you to try so hard.’

Since Emilia would not listen to his warnings, Puck powerlessly dropped his shoulders and said this.

—What was it that was spurring her on? Emilia herself did not know the answer to Puck’s doubt. Perhaps it was because she didn’t know that she was trying so desperately, so she could find out.

“—Feels kind of itchy in my chest.”

Whenever she came into contact with the black liquid, she felt something ache at the bottom of the memories she could not access. That’s why she thought there was no way she could stop—

“—There’s the next one!”

When the cold odor brushed against her nostrils, Emilia discarded her thoughts and began the chase.

The ice board accelerated rapidly as it received the force of her kicks, her skill with it had increased dramatically. Only in actual combat can your skills truly be polished, it was an example of that sort of saying.

She went up the slope, bursting into a cluster of trees, going up the hill as frozen foliage grazed her skin. Pursuing the slight odor reaching her nostrils, Emilia found it down the cliff in front of her.

"…"

She saw the undulating black liquid flowing down a slope so steep it was as if the hill had been cut down. Since it was sliding down bare rock, it would not be possible to pursue it unless she was prepared to fall to her death.

—However

"—Eiyah!"

Though the mere sight of this precipitous cliff would paralyze most people's legs, Emilia dived down with no hesitation. With her ice board against the almost completely vertical rock surface, she chased after the black liquid with her world tilted ninety degrees.

In response to her feat that was both skillful and daring, the black liquid further down the cliff started firing slime bullets to intercept her.

As the attacks flew toward her one after another, Emilia swung her body from side to side to dodge them.

As she slid down the cliff, she adroitly handled acceleration, deceleration and turning simultaneously. She then evaded slime bullets blocking her path by leaping over them—And fired magic while gliding through the air, freezing the surface of the fleeing black liquid. However, the black liquid took a tumble, ripping the frozen portion off, ensuring the safety of the rest of its body. The chase would continue.

"You don't even have a head, why are you so crafty…!"

It was now somewhat smaller, but Emilia bit her lip as it continued to slide down.

In the meantime, the black liquid had not let up on its counterattack. Emilia easily dodged, and then increased her speed.

She would close the distance in one go, and then pierce it at full speed—

“If magic won’t work, how about… This?”

Her declaration accompanied their collision, she raised the underside of her board, crushing the black liquid into the cliff from above. The direct contact caused the underside of the board to turn black as the venom corrupted it, but at the same time the surface of the black liquid turned white as it froze. The black liquid tried to escape the freezing the same way it did just earlier, but this time her freezing did not let up.

It continued to lose mass as it ripped off parts of itself, and finally exhausted itself before it could fully corrupt the ice board. Its slimy body scattered into fragments of ice which made it impossible for it to do anything further, it was completely finished.

“…”

But she was still sliding extremely fast. The ground beneath the cliff approached rapidly, at this speed she would definitely die from the impact. Emilia overcame this problem through a rather forceful method.

“Please.”

In response to her brief call, her lesser spirits put out all the power they could.

As the wind whined, they formed an ice ramp at the base of the cliff. The hastily built ramp could only withstand a single use. But that was all she needed.

She took the ramp at high speed, and her body flew high into the sky. In the air so chilly it was practically cutting, Emilia carefully examined the ground as her silver hair fluttered.

360 degrees, her field of view covered everything, and within it she discovered several of the black liquid she could after right now.

She aimed at them and fired off some ice bullets, the aerial attack destroying them one after another.

“Two, three, four… That’s five!”

When she confirmed that she had wiped out all five enemies in her inverted field of view, Emilia performed a somersault. The sky and the ground were back in place as she slipped down the snow, gently reducing the impact as she slowed down. Slower, slower, the snowy mountain before her approached—

“—Ow!”

Unable to stop, she ended up crashing into the snow facefirst.

“Ah… My nose, hurts…”

Pulling her buried upper body out of the snow, Emilia stroked her nose as her cheeks reddened. Even though it was a pile of snow that she crashed into, an impact was an impact. She felt somewhat dizzy even now.

“But I was able to take them all out in one go, huh?”

Still pressing down on her nose, Emilia sat on the snow and looked back at what she’d just accomplished with one eye closed.

Black liquid extermination had become her new daily routine, taking the place of mapmaking, but today’s results were quite a bit higher than anything else in the past two weeks.

It was just past soon, and she had already disposed of ten of them. Up until now, her daily average was around five, so this number was unusual.

“Looks like most of the black liquid is around the northern area after all.”

The rate at which they appeared backed up her hypothesis, and she was now sure it was correct.

Right now, the black liquid was appearing all over the forest, but she definitely encountered it more frequently in the north. Even her first meeting with it had occurred in the north, so it was probably safe to assume this was true.

“I’ll have to tell Puck…”

About this too, she thought, but her words stopped midway.

The image of Puck being displeased at her leaping into danger appeared in the back of her mind. If she revealed this to him, he would happily work toward a solution. Leaving Emilia behind.

She would once again be making him clean up her mess.

She thought of it as far too cowardly an act.

“I can’t just have Puck do everything for me. He isn’t some doll who exists to follow my orders—”

Even though she ignored Puck’s warning, she was going to rely on him when it mattered. That was cowardice. She was taking him for granted. And also—

“I don’t want to give up just yet.”

If Puck was the one dealing with this, he would definitely distance her from the matter. If that happened, she wouldn’t be able to find the answer to the unease that she had been hunting to this day.

Her most important memories that were supposed to serve as her starting point were sealed away from her even now.

She was already suffering not knowing them, she couldn’t bear the idea of having even more things she didn’t understand

“…”

As if building her resolve, Emilia clenched her back teeth and looked up into the sky. It was hidden by thick clouds, but the sun was still high. She still had plenty of time.

“Please, lend me your power once more.”

If they couldn’t rely on that kind and overprotective spirit, they’d just have to do it on their own.

Answering her call, the faintly glowing lesser spirits emerged around her. Surrounded by the bluish white light, Emilia proceeded further north into the forest.

Filling in this unexplored region that wasn’t on her map felt very much like filling in her missing memories.

Right now, Emilia was unsure as to whether or not she should tell Puck about what she was doing, and ultimately decided not to. But even supposing she chose the other option, she probably wouldn’t have been able to do it.

The reason being that while this was going on, Puck was also facing an enemy unknown to Emilia.

7

—This was around the same time Emilia resolved to head north.

“Well now, I’ll hear you out if you’ve got an excuse?”

“…”

Two spirits positioned some ten-odd meters apart—A gray cat and a crimson horse of flame confronted each other.

Each was a great spirit bearing its own name, these being Puck and Melakuera. They each beheld the other head on, continuing their standoff with an atmosphere that definitely couldn’t be called reasonable.

That was a natural confrontation. This was a chance meeting that shouldn’t have occurred.

They both understood that they were in conflict. This forest was Puck’s territory, and Melakuera was an uninvited guest—That was the conclusion they had reached in a previous conversation.

Despite this, they had once again encountered each other in Elior

Forest.

Furthermore—

“The black liquid… No, the Black Serpent’s poison, isn’t it. I found you while searching for the source. Come to think of it, its first appearance was right after I met that part of you—What do you have to say about that?!”

Puck knew the true nature of the strange viscous liquid that kept appearing. It was the after-effect left behind by a certain witchbeast, an evil poison that would never disappear, possessing the will to harm the living—

He knew what it was. The problem then was the source, and the flaming horse was definitely related somehow.

“I’d like to hear your opinion. Whether you have something to do with it or not.”

“Thou, Dialogue. Answer Denied—”

“You’re not saying you don’t know, you’re outright refusing to answer, huh. Guess you’re honest to a fault as usual. But you’d best keep your resemblance to a horse to your appearance alone. When you immediately forget what you’re told, we call that being birdbrained.”

[T/N: The resemblance to a horse bit is because the ‘honest to a fault’ part contains the character for horse.]

Melakuera refused to answer in a low voice, and Puck continued onward mixing hostility and ridicule.

“Where are you finding the poison? And you shouldn’t be able to release it into this forest. If you were to try to enter this forest, you’d immediately be discovered like you were just now. What sort of cheap trick are you using?”

“Answer, Denial. I, Reason, Visit. Thou, Falsehood, Excess.”

“You’re accusing me of lying? On what basis?”

“Mining Town, Recent, Criminal. Thou, Ice Flower Seed, Destiny—”

The flaming horse’s blazing reply caused Puck to narrow his eyes, “Fmm”

Melakuera was referring to last month, when he intimated those scoundrels in the mining town Ganacks. Puck had given the man who hurt Emilia and his boss a fitting punishment.

It was all to set an example, a trap to draw Melakuera’s attention toward himself, but,

“If you made someone talk, I suppose it must have been by intimidating the sensible one. What a pity. He was a believer of Gusteko’s sacred teachings which hold spirits in reverence.”

“Petty, Trifling, Insignificant—”

“How cruel. Well, I suppose unlike Odglass you don’t have that kind of sensibility. I’m of the same opinion, but even I feel like offering a little sympathy.”

Since his deed could bring harm to Emilia, he was probably an ice sculpture by now.

Threatened by a flame spirit, and ultimately frozen solid—Truly pitiful.

The Great Spirit who called himself the arbiter was sure of Emilia’s existence—Strictly speaking, it was not Emilia herself but her ‘Power’ that he regarded as dangerous.

“Her rampage that day ended up drawing his caution, after all…”

That was as bad as it could get. In order to deceive him, Puck used various tricks to pretend that that day’s events were the work of his magic, but he was unable to fool Melakuera’s prejudice.

If the Great Spirit of Judgement learned of Emilia’s existence, he would definitely deliver a prejudiced judgement.

So if he was unable to deceive said prejudice, Puck’s stance was obvious.

“No matter how much you doubt it, my answer won’t change. Leave this forest, Melakuera—Forget about this place and go arbitrate for a married couple in a rut or something.”

“Contempt, Scorn, Firm Refusal. Arbiter Melakuera. Derision, Grave Sin.”

“Ah, you’re mad? How troublesome. Sorry, sorry. Let me rephrase then.”

Puck directed an embarrassed grin at Melakuera who was in a rage, scraping the ground with his burning hooves.

Still smiling, the cat tilted his head and continued,

“—Turn around and trot away like a good little horse.”

“Declaration Of War, I, Accept—”

Taking Puck’s provocation exactly as stated, Melakuera prepared for battle.

Leaning forward, Melakuera’s flaming body billowed as it produced wings so hot they warped the atmosphere behind him—Wings of flame. Melakura dashed forward as he produced waves of heat.

His sprint burned the ground below him, and his heat waves so hot as to sear any eyes looking at him razed the terrain. The frozen forest was unable to withstand the high temperature and was vaporized despite the frost as it was blown apart.

“All Creation, Ash, Carry Out—”

His fluttering wings produced wind that was both hot and extremely destructive. The scorching wind would burn throats that breathed it, eyes that looked upon it, skin that felt it, and ultimately even burn away souls themselves.

The purest form of destruction of all swept through the forest, and instantly burned away everything in a radius many times larger than the wings, reducing it all to scorched earth.

This space of death that had been formed in the blink of an eye would not allow the existence of even a single living thing.

—Unless that thing possessed power matching that of the flaming horse.

“Good grief… If you go that far, it’ll be a real pain to hide it from Emilia later on.”

In the middle of this space of absolute death that burned everything, an unharmed cat muttered this completely unfazed.

Within swirling red heat waves, a few dozen centimeters surrounding Puck were unaffected, completely isolated from the effects of Melakuera’s inferno. It was simply the result of magic colliding with magic and canceling it out, but of course, in order to actually do it was necessary to have fine control over an amount mana rivaling that of a Great Spirit.

This too was an ability only held by transcendent beings.

“But since you’ve got a fancy title like arbiter, surely that’s not the extent of your power?”

“Affirmative—”

“Thank goodness. If that was the best you could do, as a fellow spirit I wouldn’t be able to show my face in public.”

“Shame Unnecessary. Thou, Here, Annihilation—”

In response to Puck who always had a comeback, Melakuera fired flame bullets from his mouth. The balls of fire collided with Puck’s magic barrier with tremendous force and shattered it.

“Mm…”

“Persist, Continue, Sustain—”

Having been expelled from his shattered barrier, Puck was now assailed by relentless attacks from the wings of flame.

Puck waved his tail to intercept this, producing a white wave of cold. Tyrannical heat collided with absolute zero and the clash produced an explosion of steam which covered the burnt terrain in the blink of an eye.

“Nya—!”

Aiming for Puck who was engulfed by the white curtain, Melakuera fired a barrage of small flame bullets. The flame bullets scattered the steam, vaporized the trees that ended up in their path, and turned the southern region of the forest into a wasteland in mere tens of seconds from when the battle began.

The clash of just two spirits caused this.

“Not bad. —Now it’s my turn.”

Puck countered the flame bullets that were destroying the forest with bluish white ice bullets.

The flame bullets and ice bullets collided head on, and their perfectly equal powers immediately canceled each other out. The countless blasts of fire were countered by ice bullets of equal quantity, producing a chain of vaporization, extinguishment, and mutual cancelation.

It sounded like pouring water, but the attacks canceling each other out possessed truly dreadful power. Everything the fire touched was vaporized, and all that was covered by the light was doomed to remain frozen at absolute zero for all eternity.

They exchanged countless fatal attacks, the shockwaves of which were steadily shortening the forest’s lifespan. It didn’t seem like there would ever be an end to this exchange. It was only natural that both would conclude this.

“Judgement Of Evil! Judgement Of Criminals! Carry Out Arbitration —”

As he fired flame bullets, the flaming horse roared for the first time as he closed the distance between them in one go.

Mowing through the atmosphere with his wings of flame, Melakuera ferociously charged Puck who was still mid-air. The cat placed one paw atop the other and caught the blow by forming an ice shield right in front of him. The resulting shockwave contained waves of both heat and cold, causing the terrain to crack as it was scorched and frozen, ruining it even further.

“This is… Even more of a problem than I thought.”

Tossed about by the shockwave, Puck grimaced with his ears and tail shaking.

The forest around them was now completely unrecognizable, but Puck who was at the epicenter didn’t appear to be wounded at all.

To begin with, the concept of injury itself was meaningless to spirits. To spirits, damage was something that only occurred when something tore through the defenses of their materialization and harmed the Od that was the core of their being.

Unless they lost their Od, spirits would not die no matter what happened to them. Or to put it another way, in a battle between spirits, the goal was to rip through the opponent’s mana and crush their Od.

In that sense, it could be said that Puck and Melakuera were both in good health.

“Doesn’t look like I have much leeway.”

Even though spirits used atmospheric mana to perform magic, there was a limit to how much they could control. Although Puck possessed extraordinary power compared to the average spirit, he too was no exception. To say nothing of the fact that his opponent was a fellow great spirit, meaning his mana expenditure in battle was much higher than usual.

“Furthermore, I’ve got to finish this before Emilia shows up…”

It wasn’t as if his forehead could produce sweat, but Puck wiped his forehead in a human-like manner.

They had fought this much and caused this much destruction. Emilia had disobeyed his instructions today as well and had gone into the forest, working hard to exterminate the black liquid. He just wanted to avoid having her show up here.

She was a gallant and noble girl. If she understood Puck was caught up in this, she would probably join the battle with no hesitation. And that would be just as Melakuera planned.

“Brethren. Thou, Conclusion, Hasty, Desire—”

“It’s not just me. I don’t think either of us wants to look at the other’s mug for too long.”

“Falsehood Unnecessary. Thou, Impatience Unnecessary. Reason, Already Discovered—”

“…”

The wings of flame spread out over the ashen ground as Melakuera took a low stance, and Puck’s eyes narrowed in response to his words.

The flaming horse wasn’t the sort who would resort to provocation. His statement did not have any ulterior motives. He had spoken his thoughts directly, conveying a fact. He was announcing that Puck had no need to rush.

“Thou, Falsehood. Thou, Secret. Thou, Protect. All Unnecessary—”

“Hoho. And why would that be?”

“Thou, Conceal, Half-Devil—”

“…”

“Half-Devil, Silver, Witch. I, Already In Hand—”

Puck’s narrowed eyes widened at Melakuera’s declaration, witch and half-devil.

At the same time, Puck realized. Between the rampaging waves of mana formed by the clash between fellow great spirits, he could feel waves of a familiar mana flowing in from afar.

It was coming from the northernmost region of the forest—This sensation caused Puck's fur to stand on end.

"—Melakuera, what did you do to her?"

"Conversation Unnecessary—"

"…That's true, isn't it. There isn't room to talk. Nor is there room for mercy or holding back."

The tone of Puck's voice dropped, and the mana enveloping the area transformed with a violent noise, forming countless icicles that seemed to cover the sky. Their sharp tips were all aimed at the flaming horse on the ground.

"I'll kill you, and then bring her back. There's probably no point hiding it anymore, right?"

In response to the icicles covering the sky, the ground beneath Melakuera started emitting flames all at once. The roaring blaze and absolute zero dominated the skies and the earth as they faced each other.

"Die, fool."

"Concurrence—"

Clash, at the same time, it all happened in an instant.

However, the destruction brought about by this colossal power completely annihilated the southern region of the forest.

The white forest had vanished completely with not a trace left. And what was left was—

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—The northern region had turned into a hell infested with black liquid, there was even more than Emilia was prepared for.

“Ha, hah…!”

Drawing ragged breaths, Emilia fell to her knees on the snow as she gasped. She had been running around the mountain non-stop, and the lack of oxygen caused her ears to ring incessantly.

The reason for all of this was the fierce attacks from the black liquid that just wouldn’t end.

“Finally, calmed down a bit…”

Wiping off the sweat running down her eyelids, Emilia sat down while making sure to keep her guard up.

It had been about an hour since Emilia challenged the north seeking to find the source of the black liquid. Emilia spent all that time fighting, they kept coming at her so fast she did not even have time to breathe.

“I lost count at twenty…”

Small and large, the black liquid came in a diverse range of sizes. It couldn’t be said that any one of them was particularly hard to deal with on its own, but having to fight battle after battle drained her willpower and stamina more than expected.

Perhaps Emilia was being conceited when she thought she could go further.

“If it weren’t for you guys, I would have been completely finished. Thank you.”

As she spoke her thanks, faintly glowing lesser spirits appeared on her shoulder. They couldn’t encourage her with words, but they supported her through their sensory connection. This made Emilia smile.

She had presently battled more than twenty, almost thirty of the black liquid. Counting the ones from before she reached the north, it was almost fifty in total.

She had to run around in the snow as she battled, and the fatigue was definitely building up. However, using the spirit arts didn't particularly tire her. This too was probably thanks to the lesser spirits.

"But I can still go on… Hah, didn't Puck once say this was dangerous?"

Opening and closing her fist, Emilia remembered Puck's lesson as she confirmed her level of exhaustion.

It would be ridiculous to follow his teachings even though she ignored his warning not to enter the forest. Furthermore, Emilia still felt a certain sense of antipathy toward the option of retreating.

The entire northern region of the forest had fallen under the black liquid's control, over this past hour Emilia hadn't seen a single other living thing, be it animal or witchbeast. The black liquid had probably already eliminated all of them. And when a hunter runs out of prey, it changes its hunting grounds—

"Even if I withdraw from here, they'll probably approach the garden sooner or later."

Even if she resolved to fight back when that time came, it was doubtful whether she would be able to reach the main part in the north. Perhaps this could be her one and only opportunity to reach the source.

"Mm—"

Crossing her arms, Emilia pondered with a troubled expression. She still had some willpower and stamina left. One more step, if something just gave her a little push—It was at that moment.

"…What?"

Her lesser spirits' sudden reaction caused Emilia to narrow her amethyst eyes and adopt a half-standing position. Since her lesser spirits sensed something approaching, Emilia started weaving mana in preparation for the arrival of some black liquid.

However, that preparation was pointless. The reason being that what appeared in front of Emilia was not some black slime, but—

"—Red, lesser spirit…?"

—Emilia whispered this as she looked at the crimson ball of light that appeared before her.

Particles of light gathered in the air and fused together, Emilia initially assumed the being that hence manifested was a lesser spirit like she was familiar with, but she immediately retracted that thought.

From her connection to the lesser spirits, Emilia felt the emotion of reverence flow into her. As the sensation surprised her, her lesser spirits all jumped and flickered as if they were afraid of the red spirit.

—She knew this reaction. It was a scene she saw every morning in her room.

"The way the children are reacting, it's the same as when Puck shows up, meaning… You're a spirit, right?"

Emilia carefully called to it, but the red spirit remained silent, giving no response.

Unlike Puck, the red spirit did not possess a true form, much like a lesser spirit. If it did not have any way to convey words or feelings, then perhaps it just couldn't be helped.

"But it's not like you showed up just to float there without saying anything, right?"

The spirit must have had some reason for showing itself like this.

Emilia held that sort of expectation towards the spirit. In a certain sense, it was natural for Emilia to have this trust. To her, spirits were all like Puck or her lesser spirits.

As far as she was concerned, spirits were all forces for good.

Consequently, Emilia had hope for this red spirit as well. —Emilia who could not place her faith in other people, her companions, and most of all herself, only believed in spirits unconditionally.

That was the sort of relationship she had cultivated with the spirits around her as she lived in the forest.

“—! Where are you going? Do you want to tell me something?”

It did not have a voice with which to answer her question, so instead it started moving as if to answer with its movements.

The red light swayed over the snow as if dancing, and started swimming through the air as if guiding Emilia. Emilia widened her eyes at the suddenness of this, but she immediately ran after the spirit.

“Wait, hey, wait! Where are you going?”

Surmounting snow paths, slipping through the frozen roots of giant trees, Emilia chased after the spirit in front of her. The spirit matched Emilia’s speed, maintaining a reasonable distance between them as it continued to lead the way.

There was something conclusive wherever the spirit was leading her. This belief drove her legs. She continued to run through the snowy forest, and the instant she came out of a cluster of trees—

“Ah—?!”

Perhaps her impatience had chipped away at her concentration, Emilia raised her voice as her footing unexpectedly crumbled.

A natural trap that would occasionally appear on snowy paths, overhanging snow. Her foot went right through the snow when she stepped on it, and she lost her balance as she slipped down the white slope.

“— This is bad!”

She let out a small scream, but fortunately the inclination of the white slope wasn’t very steep. She immediately used her limbs to correct her posture and stand up, and then slid all the way down to the very bottom.

“Wh-What a surprise. That was reeeeally startling…”

Looking up at the crumbling overhang of snow, the unexpectedly long distance she slid caused her to break into a cold sweat. She then remembered her objective, chasing after the red spirit, and restlessly looked around her surroundings as she searched for it. Then—

“—This is, a lake? So there was a place like this in the forest.”

Emilia’s eyes reflexively widened at this scene she was only just now discovering.

Before her was an immense lake under violently undulating snow. Of course, this was a place even Emilia did not know about. It was also the case that she’d left the northern region mostly untouched during her investigation, but considering the obstacles such as dense thickets and ravines, she probably couldn’t have made it far enough to confirm this.

However, this was Elior Forest, an eternally frozen land. Even this lake that appeared to be several dozens of meters in radius was completely frozen, and was like a huge ice making spot.

The red spirit that led Emilia here was floating at the center of the lake.

“A place like that… Umm.”

Having found the spirit, Emilia tried to run over to it, but stopped at the edge of the lake.

The surface was frozen, but she was a little unsure as to whether or not it would break if she stepped on it. There was also her experience with crumbling overhanging snow just now, so she cautiously placed her foot on the ice to test if it would break.

Fortunately, the frozen lake could easily support her weight. The frozen lake’s water was stained pitch-black so she was anxious about falling in, but it seemed there was no need to worry.

“So, I followed you, but… Is this the place you wanted to show me?”

Rapidly sliding over the lake’s surface to reach the middle, she called out to the floating spirit. The red spirit was silent as usual, but now it did not even move and simply continued to float there.

“As I thought, there’s something here… That’s how it is, huh.”

Interpreting the red spirit’s behavior this way, Emilia carefully examined her surroundings. It was an open space, under her was a lake, and in front of her was the spirit who vexingly could not speak, she had to find the answer.

She was currently in the northern region which had endless black liquid crawling all over the place, if she stayed here too long, the slime would approach—

“…How strange.”

Thinking that far, Emilia realized how odd the situation was.

There was no sign of the black liquid anywhere around her. That also went for the path she took to get here. Within an hour of entering the north, she was attacked by more than thirty of them. Compared to that frequency, her journey here was miraculously peaceful, too peaceful.

—No. There was one possibility that did not require a miracle.

—It wasn’t that she hadn’t encountered the black liquid. It was already here.

“…It can’t be.”

She suddenly felt her hair stand on end and was frozen in place as her eyes widened. She then slowly lowered her gaze, down to the lake she was standing on.

The lake that should have been frozen white seemed to contain something that dyed it black. —As if a familiar black contaminant was hidden there in such a large quantity as to fill the bottom of the lake.

"—What?!"

The instant she sensed the colossal danger in the frozen lake she was standing on, something strange happened. Turning toward the intense waves of mana, she found that it was her contracted lesser spirits that were calling her. The blue lights flew around at high speed, fervently trying to tell her something. What she felt flowing into her from their connection was fear, panic, anxiety—And anger.

Knitting her brows at this sensation, Emilia immediately noticed that the red spirit had disappeared. Right now, only Emilia and her lesser spirits were left on the lake.

The moment she realized this—

"…No way."

As if to affirm Emilia's dumbfounded mutter, a thunderous sound burst out from beneath her. Cracks formed on the lake's surface, and evil poison poured out of the ice like a volcanic eruption.

And then the contaminant gushing forth turned toward Emilia, and mercilessly rained down on her.

Chapter 4:
I Can Become Anything

1

Smashing through the lake's surface, the source of the black liquid—The great black liquid's entire body vibrated violently. The undulating black slime rained down slime bullets on its surroundings, instantly contaminating the lake's shore with evil poison.

The great black slime possessed a colossal body about a hundred meters in size, and it used that immense mass to wash away the frozen forest like a tsunami. In the blink of an eye, the area had turned into the scene of a disaster, filled with fallen trees and landslides.

Naturally, a girl standing in the midst of this downpour would be completely helpless. However—

"—Thank goodness, I just barely made it."

Surrounded by the terrible spectacle that looked as though the entirety of the lake had overflowed, Emilia said this as she sighed.

As the filthy water furiously swirled around her, not a single drop was able to touch her. This was no surprise, because her body was completely cut off from the black liquid. The method was simple, a box of ice.

The box ice Emilia had formed using the spirit arts floated atop the great black liquid's raging waves. The coffin-shaped box was very thick and buoyant, which allowed it to fully protect her from the contamination.

"But it won't hold for long, so… Ya! Ta! Ei!"

Her relief only lasted a moment. Emilia slipped out of the coffin and started forming new footholds over the liquid. The poison's erosion was dreadful, neither the coffin nor her footholds would last very long. Heading for land, Emilia leaped across the ice footholds she had formed using the spirit arts one by one, and escaped danger by jumping to an area the poison could not reach.

She then turned around, and the disaster at the shore once again made her eyes widen.

“That’s far too horrible…”

The lake was ruined by the great black liquid’s tyranny, and was already completely unrecognizable.

Having been released from the bottom of the lake, the great black liquid shook its whole body as if overcome by joy. —No, that wasn’t joy. It was moving like this to heat up the parts of itself that were still frozen and break them.

The great black liquid still had one portion frozen. However, it would soon be freed from even this incomplete state, and would use that giant body to hunt for prey. The forest wouldn’t even last three days if that giant body invaded it.

“I can’t let that happen! I have to stop it…!”

If it approached the forest, the tsunami would completely destroy the ice sculptures of her companions.

If that happened, there would no longer be anyone who could connect Emilia to her past. She would be alone. The idea was more terrifying than death itself.

Therefore, Emilia would fight. —Even if she could not remember the reason.

“I’ll stop it, I’ll definitely stop it! Please, lend me your power!!”

She would fight, and once again seal that great black liquid away.

Emilia built up her resolve and called out, and in response all of the lesser spirits she was connected to emerged. Each and every one of them shone brightly as they lent her power, and Emilia thrust her

her hands forward.

The lesser spirits took hold of her white fingers and arms, and built up every last bit of mana they possibly could.

"…"

Perhaps having noticed this massive whirlpool of mana, the great black liquid turned its attention toward Emilia. The viscous liquid did not have eyes. It barely even appeared to be sentient. Despite this, Emilia knew it was looking at her.

The great black liquid vibrated violently, and immediately after, terrifyingly huge tentacles emerged from it. It roared as it swung down an attack like several large trees bundled together at Emilia.

Something like a pouring waterfall couldn't even begin to compare to this. It was as if the sky itself was falling. The heavens were dyed black as they fell—And right before they could crush her, light emanated from her.

"…"

Black and white, the clash between these primordial colors looked like the creation of heaven and earth.

The pure white light painted over the jet-black sky. The sky was frozen in an instant, cracked the next instant, and scattered into pieces the final instant. As shards of ice poured down like rain, the light ceaselessly continued even further, ultimately landing a direct hit on the top of the main body—

However, neither had managed to land a decisive blow.

"—Cunning."

Having been hit by the light, its response as it started to freeze caused Emilia to raise her voice.

Before the freezing from the light could reach the rest of its body, the great black liquid twisted the frozen part off, minimizing the damage. On top which, it sent this part flying, and the fragments aimed at Emilia rained down like buckshot.

“Kh, uuu—!!”

Every single shot in the barrage flying toward her was like a huge cannonball. The black lumps of ice bored into the ground, causing it to explode and scatter snow and ice, and even surrounded by this Emilia advanced.

Just as Puck taught her, the only way to exterminate the black liquid was to freeze it to the core and smash it apart. Of course, the larger the opponent, the harder it would be to freeze them, and this particular opponent was the worst.

But even so—

“I shaved off 1% with that attack just now! So I just have to repeat that a hundred times—!”

There were no shortcuts. If her only option was to chip away at it bit by bit, she would choose to do so with no hesitation.

As Emilia rushed toward it, the great black liquid fired a large amount of slime bullets to mow her down. As Emilia leaped over frozen trees, the ground beneath her burst open, scattering huge amounts of snow and soil.

Having kneaded a colossal amount of mana for that last attack, her lesser spirits were now exhausted. It would be a while before she could use such a powerful attack again. Emilia would have to buy them that time.

“Bring it on!”

If she thought too much, it would only make her despair. As if to clear that darkness, Emilia yelled as she faced it.

The great black liquid was a mighty existence, none of the opponents she had fought thus far could compare to it. The black liquid would win the battle if it simply touched her, whereas Emilia’s attacks were sporadic and lacking in power. A tiny little girl like Emilia barely even counted as an opponent.

—It was unclear whether the great black liquid even had a mind with which to think, but supposing it did, it would probably think this.

And all the advantages the black liquid had would become openings for Emilia to exploit.

“Uyaa—!”

She evaded the slime bullets and leaped over the corruption washing over the ground. She skated over the snow, surfed up the slime on her ice board, and repeatedly attacked the giant that was toying with her, dealing damage bit by bit.

She kept fighting hard with no breaks, pushing herself to the limit to overcome her disadvantage.

If there were someone watching from afar, or if the great black liquid had intelligence, perhaps they would have been left speechless, unable to believe what they were seeing as they watched her give it her all.

What was unfolding here was not a battle between a lone girl and a colossal enemy.

Naturally, Emilia had a few things to say about that.

First, if one were to say she was fighting alone, she would deny it by pointing out the lesser spirits that were with her. If one were to say she was at a disadvantage, she would retort that her opponent was being careless. If one were to ask if she seriously thought she could win, she would probably reply that she was fighting hard so she wouldn’t lose.

Right now, there was no doubt that the brave battle she was putting on was mostly driven by willpower. As long as her willpower held out, she could fight on no matter what—It was her foundation.

“Eii, ya—!!”

Abandoning her contaminated ice board, she formed a large foothold on the lake and leaped over to it. Emilia dug in her heels to stop her movement, and then flashed a light as she turned around, this light froze the slime diagonally.

The blade of light seemed to cut right through the great black liquid, dyeing the cut white. However, the great black liquid's counterattack was also extreme. It launched a huge slime bullet some ten-odd meters large at Emilia who had stopped moving. She formed a barrier of ice, but she couldn't stop it.

The slime bullet struck her ice foothold, and launched the block of ice high into the sky.

"…"

Clinging to the block of ice that had been sent flying, Emilia endured the violent wind that assailed her as she spun.

Below her was the great black liquid. The sky offered her no refuge as the viscous liquid extended its giant body, seeming to open wide so as to gulp down Emilia and the ice in go.

"Nnnnn—!!"

Above the waiting great black liquid, Emilia groaned as she used magic any number of times. Repeatedly hitting the rising block of ice, she finally stopped its rotation—Instead, the block of ice was launched downward much faster than gravity could pull it and struck the great black liquid.

Accelerating its fall were the innumerable icicles Emilia had fired into it from above. The countless icicles added speed and rotation, allowing the block of ice to break through the great black liquid's defenses.

"…"

The gaping great black liquid was easily split in four by the block of ice. The viscous liquid scattered with a black splash, and Emilia pushed her spirit arts to the limit.

The radially expanding light froze three of the four pieces. The atmosphere creaked as the black contaminants were dyed white, the sight of which brought Emilia satisfaction.

With this, how many of the hundred attacks she was supposed to deal had she dealt? She decided to think about the exact number later as she immediately withdrew in preparation for her next attack.

She jumped off the block of ice that had pierced the great black liquid and was now sinking to the bottom. She followed the several footholds she had created mid-air to escape the great black liquid's grasp—

"—?!"

At that moment, a sharp pain suddenly stabbed her heart, causing her breath to catch as she lost focus.

It was similar to the pain she felt whenever her confrontations with the black liquid stimulated her lost memories. However, the sensation just now was on an entirely different level from anything before. It was far too strong.

—She missed a foothold, and was left defenseless against the viscous liquid's counterattack.

"—Ah"

For an instant, her world turned upside down when her foot stepped on air. The frozen black liquid was in her field of view, when she saw the contaminant wriggling directly beneath her falling silver hair, she let out a strained breath.

In an instant, Emilia used her survival instincts to the fullest, searching for any possibility of escape in order to execute it—However, her hands wouldn't move. She was unable to find a solution.

"…"

She would be swallowed, dissolved, and consumed. That was the unavoidable future just a few seconds ahead of her.

This realization left Emilia dumbfounded, more than anger, more than sadness, what filled her was pure shock.

Was death something that happened so easily?

The last moments of the witchbeast Guiltylaw as it was swallowed and dissolved passed by her mind. Just like that witchbeast, Emilia too would probably have her hair, skin, and flesh dissolved, and be absorbed to the bone.

That was really scary, but,

"…"

For some reason, some part of her felt apathy.

Death was frightening. The end was terrifying. Despite this, she felt slightly relieved that it was over.

With this, she would no longer be tormented by the unease and guilt she had no answer to.

Thinking of it that way, the idea of dying like this—

'—Are you sure?'

As she accepted the end, she heard someone's voice.

This question caused Emilia to gasp and reopen her closed eyes.

Her field of view was filled by the black-stained death approaching right in front of her.

'—Can this really be the end? Even though you haven't apologized to anyone for even a single thing?'

Apologize. For what? Just who should she be apologizing to, and for what reason?

Those words seemed like nothing but a false accusation, but they soaked deep into her heart.

'—No way. You're faaaar from finished.'

She finally realized. It was the voice she heard every day, every morning, her own voice.

—Immediately after, a light emanated from her in the blink of an eye, and the surging frost shattered the great black liquid from its core.

2

The great black liquid that had filled the lakeside and caused damage rivaling a calamity was now shattering into tiny pieces.

The dancing shards of ice turned into white light, and produced a wondrous atmosphere that didn't quite fit the disastrous scene. However, Emilia who was crouching within the boisterously dancing light did not have the leeway to pay it any attention.

What had she done, and what happened as a result?

She understood the answer far too well, and it continued to assert itself even now.

"—Ah, kh"

Groaning in pain, Emilia fell to her knees on the ice as she held her chest. The inside of her chest was heating up, and the source of the heat felt like it could burst out of her body and reach the outside at any moment.

She had used her power.

The power she wasn't supposed to use, she had to use it again.

—No, not had to. Emilia herself had chosen to use it.

There was also the option of not using it. In that case, she would definitely be dead. But there were things in this world that were taboo even at the cost of one's life.

Right now, her power was spiraling out of control, freezing the great black liquid was not enough to satisfy it and it was now running wild trying to freeze the entire world.

If that happened, just how much would be sacrificed in exchange for Emilia's life?

"Noo… That, absolutely…"

With her eyes tightly, Emilia grit her teeth as she attempted to suppress her power.

The instant before the great black liquid could swallow her, her voice that wasn't hers spoke with her, and Emilia decided to use the power. But she did not do it to sacrifice her surroundings so she could save herself.

So that wouldn't happen, she would settle it without sacrificing anything, even if it meant breaking the taboo.

"U, aaa—!"

Her heart rate increased rapidly, and her temperature shot up dramatically. Her bare skin started putting out white steam, and her power that had escaped the confines of her chest and expanded to her head seemed like it could explode at any moment.

How could she, what could she—Through the chaos, a sudden warmth came fluttering in.

It was not the heat rampaging within her, nor was it the power dangerously swirling around her. It was the call of the gentle beings who were connected to her most precious spot.

"…You all."

Emilia understood what was happening in her blurry vision.

As she gasped on the ground, her lesser spirits cuddled up to her shoulders. To these small accumulations of mana, the power overflowing from Emilia was an existential threat. Merely approaching her would be dangerous. Despite this, they did not try to leave her.

And then, the lesser spirits' faint glow started to twinkle brightly as they fired white light toward the other side of the lake. They did not hit anything, they just randomly frozen the ruined ground.

That white light was the magic produced by the spirits on Emilia's shoulders. Starting with this, more than ten of the lesser spirits started indiscriminately firing magic toward the shore.

This was all in order to squander the power that Emilia could not control.

"…Everyone."

Understanding their intention, Emilia felt choked up. The spirits continued to use up the mana even now. Emilia's suffering did not cease either.

However—

"N, Fu…U"

As she exhaled warm breaths, Emilia felt her body's temperature lessen bit by bit. The aimless blasts of freezing power covered more and more of the ruined shore with ice. Emilia's power continued to decrease as more ice covered the scenery. Finally—

"Ha, a… Fu, a…"

Drawing deep, gasping breaths, Emilia pressed her forehead covered in cold sweat against the snow.

Her high body temperature cooled down right away, and her thoughts that were rendered delirious by the heat were now back to normal. The sensation of something foreign raging in her body was not completely gone. However, there was no longer any danger of it exploding and running wild.

"Withstood… It… Without relying on Puck, for the first time…"

That was a state in which she could not do anything without relying on him, but she had managed to overcome it without him this time.

This was all thanks to the lesser spirits who worked hard to protect her with no concern for their own safety.

"Thank you, everyone… Thanks to all of you, I"

Emilia said this in a tearful voice, still sitting on the snow, and the lesser spirits did not say anything in response. The lights simply wavered gently in silence, and Emilia felt something well up in her chest.

She had faced death, used her power in order to avoid it, had her own life and those of others threatened by this power, and was saved from it thanks to the lesser spirits' help.

She felt guilty for relying on the taboo. She was of course reflecting on it. But just for now, her sense of accomplishment at having survived won out.

Furthermore, there was even more good news. She was able to deal with the source of the threat to the forest, the great black liquid. —This time, she was able to protect the forest, the garden, and everyone.

"This time…?"

Feeling something out of place about her emotions, Emilia knit her brows slightly.

However, once opened she could no longer put the lid back on her memories. Now that she was no longer desperately trying to control her power, Emilia discovered the source of the aching pain that arose within her when she met the great black liquid.

—A green forest, her companions before they were frozen, a silver-haired woman, a black robe, and then.

"Ah, kh—?!"

The moment she reached for the lid and snuck a peek at part of her missing memories, she was repelled by a pain that felt like she had touched hot metal. But at the very end.

She got the feeling that someone told her to forget.

"…"

Unspeakable fear, indescribable loathing, hate that did not need a reason.

Emotions Emilia was not even aware of exploded within her, Emilia was taken aback by this outburst and raised her voice—

“—e”

The next instant, rays of heat rained down, covering Emilia along with the shore.

“…”

The heat rays piercing the ground from the sky produced a blazing inferno with their heat.

The shore that had just been frozen was bathed in hellfire and even ice was immediately vaporized.

The steam gushing forth covered the area with white clouds and destroyed the forest which was unable to withstand the heat. Within the dancing ash, all that was left in the area was a girl who fell to her knees in astonishment.

It was Emilia. Her silver hair was frayed and her clothes were stained by soot and dust, but she hadn’t sustained any real injuries. Considering the scale of the inferno surrounding her, this was a miracle.

If it wasn’t a miracle, it had to be a result obtained through great sacrifice.

“…”

Within the smoke so hot it was difficult to even breathe, Emilia stared in shock, unable to move.

She did not understand what had happened. But unfortunately, she immediately realized she had lost something. The contract between spirit and spirit arts user was a connection between souls.

If one of the connected parties were to be lost, Emilia would immediately feel it.

That was why she understood that her lesser spirits had faced the pouring rays of heat to protect her, and consequently had their mana ripped away after which their Ods burned.

She knew right away that she had lost an irreplaceable connection.

"…"

Emilia's heart was filled with the feeling of loss and despondency, these emotions took her to the limit of what her brain could process.

The overflowing magical power, the ache of opening the lid to her memories, and now the feeling of loss and despondency upon losing her bond. Every single one of these was far too much for her slender body to bear.

"—Extreme, Delight. Aah, that's a nice expression. I wanted to see that look on your face."

A voice suddenly struck Emilia's eardrums in the midst of her depression. She slowly turned in the voice's direction, and found a red light past the smoke.

A round, red light—It was the light that led her to the lake. It was the spirit that called her here. The spirit that had disappeared somewhere when the great black liquid showed up had now reappeared.

"That voice… Your voice? You can talk…"

"Thickheaded, Slow-witted. You're too damned slow. The spirits who died for you won't be able to rest in peace."

"…"

The spirit's voice was full of malice, its declaration made Emilia blink. She did not know the reason for the hatred in its voice. The spirit was unable to bear this attitude of hers.

“—Naive. It’s me. I suppose I might have just been some insignificant prey to you, though.”

The light swayed as it spoke, and scorched the atmosphere as it changed its form. The flame steadily took on a humanoid appearance, and Emilia was left speechless when she saw the face it reproduced.

The humanoid flame grinning boldly—Those red features felt familiar.

“The people who came to the forest back then, you’re their…”

“Understanding Affirmative. I’m the man who went through hell because of you and your spirit.”

Saying this as if spitting the words, the flame—Formerly the bearded man she faced on the snowy path, sneered cruelly.

Emilia had fallen unconscious after she unleashed her power toward the end of the battle with the Snow Blight. Because of this, she did not know what happened to the men led by the bearded man after that, but it seemed something had happened to him.

Something that changed him into this mass of flame.

“Sympathy Unnecessary. Don’t pity me. Despite how I look, it doesn’t feel bad at all. I was as good as dead when I got tossed out of the organization, and then the power to exact my revenge fell into my hands.”

“Revenge… On me?”

“Inquiry Affirmative! Obviously! When I was on the verge of death, a spirit that looked like a ball of flame appeared before me. I wanted to get my revenge, and he wanted to enter this forest… Our interests aligned. So I lent him my body, thanks to which the flower seed in my belly melted away and now I feel great.”

The man who had lost his human form to become a flame spread his arms and laughed like he was out of his mind. Emilia had no response to the intensity of his tenacity and unjust resentment resulting from a misunderstanding. But at the same time, she understood this.

It was the flaming man before her who burned away her contracted lesser spirits, causing this sense of loss that seemed to bore into her heart.

“…I understand what you’re trying to say. I understand completely.”

Putting strength into her shaky knees, Emilia stood up and faced the flame.

Drying the tears in her amethyst eyes and wiping the soot off her cheeks, she glared at the flame blazing with malice.

“I understand that you want revenge on me for what happened that day. I did something terrible back then. So I understand why you would retaliate. But…”

“But?”

“Why did you kill my lesser spirits… Those children…?”

Her feeling of loss was revived when she spoke the words, and rage surged within her to fill the hole in her heart.

In response to her question, the humanoid flame fell silent momentarily. But his features soon warped in an unsightly manner as he laughed, baring his horribly vulgar emotions.

“Simple, Clear. I figured I’d be able to see you cry if I did it.”

“…”

Emilia’s vision turned crimson with rage in response to this malice that was beyond her imagination. Immediately after, she once again released the power she had just suppressed, a chill spread underfoot and turned the burned ground white as it froze.

“Delight, Pleasure. Wonderful, get angrier and angrier. I’ll burn your limbs off and then roast the other elves when you can’t move.

You'll be the only one left!"

"If I'm the one you're aiming for…!"

As if to oppose Emilia's rage, pillars of flame erupted from under him. The waves of heat set the man who had fused with a spirit's surroundings ablaze, and the lake's remaining water and snow boiled and evaporated away.

A sign of the fire season that hadn't visited Elior Forest in a hundred years clashed head on with a sign of the ice that froze Elior Forest for a hundred years, and the shore was turned into a hell of absolute hot and absolute cold.

"You are evil! You are a witch! You are a criminal! I, Criminal, Execute Judgement—!!"

"Leave the others out of it—!!"

The man yelled vigorously, and Emilia too raised her voice as if screaming at him.

The two shouts collided, and in an instant bullets of flame and bullets of ice blew away the shore's atmosphere. The exploding red and white lights produced shockwaves, and innumerable explosions burned the forest white and froze it red.

—The fated battle between Emilia and the man had begun.

3

Emilia who unleashed the power hiding in her chest, and the man who fused with a spirit possessing immense power.

The clash between these two mighty powers was already trending in a certain direction even though the battle had just begun.

"…"

Endless flame bullets were fired incessantly, and jostled by the impact and hot wind, Emilia did not even scream in pain as she was knocked about.

Emilia was also using magic to counterattack, but she could not even graze him. This was an obvious outcome.

The opponent had fused with a spirit, and moreover a supremely powerful spirit possessing power on par with a Great Spirit. By contrast, Emilia could not even control her power, let alone use it properly.

As a result, Emilia was one-sidedly tormented by her opponent's attacks, and was repeatedly blown away.

"Gutless, Weak! What's wrong, is that it? You'll die if you don't do a little better, you know?!"

The man enjoyed the feeling of harassing her as he continued to release flame in this one-sided assault. But every single one of his attacks was extraordinarily powerful, and all Emilia could do was devote herself to dodging them.

His ability was with no exaggeration on Puck's level—Who as far as Emilia knew, was the strongest.

"But, even so…"

Her lesser spirits gave their lives so she could keep hers, there was no way she could waste it by burning to death here.

Striking the ground to raise her body, Emilia escaped the explosive flames by flipping backwards. Continuing to flip, flip and flip, she twisted midway, overturning her body and breaking into a run.

"Unsightly, Disgraceful! Running is useless!"

"Even if you say it's useless, I can't let this be the end…"

Without the lesser spirits' assistance, Emilia could not handle magic skillfully enough to produce footholds or ice boards. All Emilia could do was run on her own two legs, and desperately hold on with her own two arms.

"Thou, Insane! If all you can do is run around, just burn away quietly!"

The man was enraged by Emilia's actions that seemed to be pointless struggling. The bright red attacks continued even now, and Emilia who was running across the shore desperately evaded the flames.

Even though she was running through extremely hot steam, Emilia had barely sustained any burns. This was thanks to the robe Puck gave her. The robe was probably woven with some special power that was reducing the damage. Even if this wasn't the case, it was what she believed.

It was fine if it was just an assumption. The power of an assumption was nothing to look down on. Thanks to this robe, she was able to keep her legs going. —And thus, she was able to create an opening to attack.

"Scheme Seen Through! Crafty woman!"

The moment she succeeded in her goal, the man's relentless attack loosened for the first time.

Turning around, Emilia saw it. The man clicked his tongue as he looked upward, at the great black liquid that had thawed out and was now about to fall on him.

The black liquid Emilia had frozen with her magic had now been freed by the man's flames. It was for this reason that Emilia had been running around the shore, she intended to revive the black liquid with his consecutive attacks.

It was a matter of luck who it would choose to attack when it was released, but—

"Now it's your turn to get chased around!"

The black liquid's persistence was guaranteed. The once smashed great black liquid had now been reduced to a size of about twenty meters upon its release, but compared to the man, it was large enough.

If it could create just the slightest opening, she could turn the situation around with one attack—

“Imprudent, Shallow, is that it?”

He held up his billowing arms of flame and turned the world a deep crimson.

It roasted the surface of the black liquid that was about to crush him, and in an instant the viscous liquid’s entire body started bubbling as it boiled, after which it exploded, spreading a foul smell as it was vaporized.

With the sound of water pouring on hot metal, the black liquid was mercilessly scorched by the ultimate flame. It bubbled up and burned away, completely vaporized.

This was complete destruction, on an entirely different level from being sealed in ice.

“—ah”

Emilia’s strength immediately left her when she saw this.

Emilia had to work so hard to beat it. She had gone so far as to rely on her power that was sealed away as taboo in order to bring it down.

The man had finished it off in a matter of seconds. It wasn’t a problem of compatibility. It was the overwhelming difference in power.

“Utmost Delight! This is it, this power! I was right to give the spirit my body! I, Absolute Agreement! Delight! Hiha, hihahahaha!”

Tramping on the remains of the black liquid that had been thoroughly burned, the flame scratched its head and turned back to Emilia. His gaze made her shoulders jump, after which realized that she had collapsed to the ground.

Her knees had no strength left, and her teeth chattered as she clenched them.

Begging for her life would be pointless. Stalling for time would be meaningless. Then at least—

“If it’s my life you want…”

“Affirmative. Yeah, that’s right. That’s exactly right. What about it?”

“The forest, my companions, I’m begging you… Please spare them…”

Emilia pleaded with the approaching flame as its heat warmed her bangs and dried her eyes.

If his goal was to exact revenge on her, it was inevitable that she would lose her life here. Even so, she at least wanted to be sure no harm would come to her companions. She had to make sure nothing would happen to them.

However, the flaming man’s expression was one of joy as he looked down at Emilia.

“Laughter Inevitable. Don’t make me laugh, you stupid girl. Why exactly should I listen to your request? If it brings you pain, I’d much rather…”

The man’s sadistic words thoroughly mangled Emilia’s heart one by one. His ill will caused Emilia’s cheeks to stiffen with grief. And seeing this, the man became even happier as—

“That’s right. I’ll line up all your companions near this lake, and burn them all away. And in the end, I’ll burn you… Unnecessary, Deed. I, Objective, Thou, Annihilation—”

“—?!”

Suddenly, the man stopped smiling and spoke in a completely emotionless voice.

The sound and its contents caused Emilia to stare in wonder, and immediately after even the man himself blinked. The man then grabbed his own throat, and started yelling at something she couldn’t see.

“Hey, quit talking like you own the place! This is my body… Appeal

Refused. I, Objective, Half-Devil Annihilation. Thou, Objective, Half-Devil Annihilation. Objective Priority. Thou, Inefficient—"

The flame trembled before Emilia's eyes, and two voices emerged from the man's mouth. One was the man's voice filled with rage, and the other was a low, emotionless voice. They were currently quarreling.

"Don't screw… She put me through hell… No, destroy the half-devil swiftly. This existence shall bring harm to the world. Descendant of the Witch… Half-Devil, kill, right now…"

Grabbing his head, the man and the flame's voices mixed together. Emilia understood that that was the voice of the spirit he fused with. Right now, the man's will was being consumed by the flame spirit.

But at the same time, she had heard something she couldn't overlook. The man's—No, the spirit's objective.

"It's not just him… You want to kill me too…"

"Inquiry Affirmative. Thou, Criminal. You are sinful. A criminal deserving of death. A half-devil…"

"…Half-devil? What's that?"

"Half-devil, descendant of the Witch…! Your hair, eyes, appearance, everything about you is the same as the Witch! Not just your appearance, even your bloodline is the same as the Witch's! The same as the half-devil!"

Emilia could not comprehend the man and the spirit's chaotic, overlapping words.

Words that she couldn't overlook just kept piling up. Witch, to Emilia and to anyone else in the world, that was an ominous word—

"Why are you suddenly talking about the Witch… Half-devil, do I have some sort of connection to…?"

"Don't play dumb, half-devil! No, half-elf! You who bear the same appearance as the Witch! Born from the same cursed blood as the Witch, descendant of the Witch! Reincarnation of the Witch! Danger to the world!"

"Half, elf…"

The word the flame spoke was completely unfamiliar to her.

It was supposed to be, but the sound of it melted into her heart awfully easily. With her breath taken away, her chest produced pitiful heartbeats, and her understanding deepened in tempo with this sound.

"I'm a, half-elf…"

"Affirmative. Thou, half-elf. You alone are different. In this forest, you alone are an outsider!"

"I, alone. I'm different from everyone else in the forest… That's why I alone woke up?"

Emilia was most likely in the same state as the rest of her frozen companions before she woke up. Despite this, she alone was released from her slumber, and continued to live her life.

There must be some reason, she thought as she battled the guilt that kept asserting itself within her.

There must have been a reason that she alone woke up, unlike her frozen companions in the forest.

—This was probably it.

"Then, do you know? What I did."

"…"

"You… You came to kill me, so you must know, right? What it was that I did, and why the forest was frozen!"

Facing the silent flame, Emilia forgot all about her unfavorable position and raised her voice.

Over and over, whenever night came, she would see the same scene in her dreams, her nightmares.

At the end of her battle with the black liquid, when the door to her memories opened ever so slightly, the scene she saw towards the end—

If that was the answer, if that was the unforgivable sin she had committed—

“Tell me what I did! What did I do to everyone in the forest?! Why am I… Hated by everyone? Why am I alone?! Why…?!”

Emilia shouted desperately as her voice quavered, as if she was crying, as if she was shrieking in despair.

That was the doubt she had always carried within her.

The guilt that kept smoldering in her heart, the people that detested and feared her existence, how she lived alone, unable to come into contact with anyone—

She always told herself that it couldn’t be helped. But even that had a limit.

It didn’t matter if it couldn’t be helped. She didn’t care if there was nothing she could do.

But if it really couldn’t be helped, then she at least wanted to be able to accept that. She was aware that she had committed a sin. Then using that as the reason, she wanted to put an end to this guilt.

And she believed that the flame before her would give her that chance.

“If you’re going to kill me, tell me why you’re doing it. If you just tell me that much, I… If I don’t know why, I won’t just do as you say…!”

The strength that had once left her once again filled her limbs as she mustered up her willpower.

This was rage, rage had given her this strength. Even though she was plunging into the depths of despair, even though the sense of loss was breaking her, her rage lit up her power. That was what was happening here.

“I, Protect the world’s balance. You are a threat to this world’s peace…”

“I don’t know anything about that! I haven’t done or even thought anything like that! That’s not the sort of thing I want you to tell me! I’m talking about the sin I committed!”

“Thou, Your, Past, Committed, Crime, Sin—”

In response to his argument that seemed like nothing more than a false accusation, Emilia expressed her irritation directly. Her objection caused the man and the spirit’s voices to mix together as they fixed their flaming eyes on Emilia. Looking at her, they continued.

“I, I, Unknown, as if I’d know.”

“—. —. —Ha”

The flame’s words burned brightly, and their contents momentarily rendered Emilia speechless.

Seeing her reaction, the flame repeated itself.

“I, Thou, sin or whatever, I have no clue—”

“—! That can’t be…?! Then why…?!”

In response to his unbelievable statement, Emilia gasped frantically as her voice caught.

The flame had answered her. It wasn’t concerned about Emilia’s past or the sin she had committed.

Then—

“Then why are you, for what reason?!”

“You are, criminal. I am, criminal judgement. That is, I, Mission—”

“But you’re saying you don’t know anything about my sin, aren’t you?!”

Emilia’s past, the source of her guilt. Though it did not know about them, the flame had declared her guilty.

Emilia’s voice grew tight at the absurdity of the situation, and to her the flame said,

“Thou, Existence, that is your sin—”

“…”

“Your very existence in this world is a sin. That is unforgivable. A great sin—”

“—u”

She let out a ragged breath.

And before she knew it, she had once again sunk down to the ground. Even the strength that her chaotic emotions brought forth had now disappeared, and she could no longer move properly. That was how badly those words just now had wounded her heart.

“Thou, Half-Devil. You are the descendant of the Witch. Thou, World Balance, bring about destruction. That Is Sin—”

Tormented by the violent words striking her, Emilia could no longer even raise her face.

Half-Devil, Witch, Danger to the World, she had nothing to do with any of that. She had no clue. Even so, she was declared a sinner.

She had spent countless sleepless nights assailed by her guilt. And when she would wake from her nightmares, the question of what she did in the past would wring her heart.

Hated by everyone, ostracized by everyone, distanced by everyone, these always brought her heartache.

Something had happened, there was some reason, the reason lay within her sealed memories, that was what she believed.

Her awareness of her sin in itself became a form of support for Emilia.

A form of support that allowed her to accept the situation she was placed in, and that she had to live all alone.

Despite this, the crimson flame casting accusations upon her burned away all of that, declaring this:

—You cannot be allowed to exist, your life itself is a sin.

"…Why is it always like this?"

As Emilia powerlessly hung her head, a hoarse, tearful voice left her lips.

"The reason you all hate me… Why is it always something I can't do anything about…?"

If the sin she committed was the cause, she wanted to be judged for it. If atonement was possible, she would do anything.

But if she was hated because she was not an elf, but a half-elf, there was nothing she could do about that.

But if she was hated because her silver hair and amethyst eyes resembled those of the Witch, there was nothing she could do about that.

But if she was hated because she was a half-devil, a witch, a threat to the world's balance, there was nothing she could do about that.

"If you loathe me, if you hate me… Make me the reason you do so…"

“Denial. I, Sentiment Unrelated. You are a half-devil, you are a witch, that is your sin—”

“This is about me, so why are you talking about someone else…?! I’m Emilia, just Emilia… Not a half-devil, not the Witch. Look at me, talk about me and not someone else…”

Emilia raised her head, voicing this desperate plea as tears streamed down her cheeks.

With her hand on her chest, she faced the flame that burned away criminals as she declared that the girl standing before it was her own person.

Amethyst eyes filled with tears and silver hair fluttering in the hot wind—In response to this girl who possessed the characters of the Witch who brought disaster, the crimson flame—The Arbiter spoke loudly.

“I, I, Arbiter Melakuera. Trial, Arbitration, Execute Judgement—”

The unfeeling arbiter did not offer the slightest bit of sympathy to her plea that seemed to reach one’s very soul.

The flame’s form then changed, its humanoid shape swelled up, taking on a half-human and half-horse appearance. The flame’s hooves seared the ground, with fire hot enough to scorch eyeballs.

The absurd heat it was gathering would completely and utterly burn away Emilia’s existence, mercilessly ending her with no remorse, sorrow, or anything.

“…”

The tears flowing down her cheeks evaporated. Emilia simply stared at this countdown to her death.

If it released those flames, she would disappear into nothingness. That was the man’s—No, Melakuera’s role as the arbiter, to mercilessly erase from this world with not a trace left.

She would vanish, become nothing. The days she had spent living here were something no one desired.

—It wasn’t even about how she lived.

Her existence was, to the forest, to her companions, to anyone and everyone, completely meaningless. It didn’t even matter who she was, that Emilia was Emilia.

Nobody, not one single person, would ever even call her name—

“—Puck.”

On the verge of erasure, Emilia regretfully mouthed that name.

Her life that no one desired. Within it, there was just one being who would call her by name.

Imagining the familiar cat with her eyes closed, with this one and only warm memory—

“Arbitration, Execute—”

Light rushed towards her.

The swelling red light reached her in the blink of an eye, and then—

“—That’s enough.”

A gray cat appeared before her and brushed away the red hot light.

4

“—You properly called my name this time. That’s great, Emilia.”

The cat smiled back at Emilia as he waved his tail.

The cat’s attitude, conduct, and smile were all familiar, and Emilia’s throat tightened.

Puck shook his head at Emilia as she repeatedly faltered, unable to even say his name because of how sudden this was.

"Relax, there's no rush. We'll have plenty of time to talk. —After I drive this guy away."

"Brethren. You, I, Clash with Part—"

"How noisy. This is between me and this girl, don't interfere."

Puck's mood turned sour as he frowned, and the next instant bullets of light were fired at Melakuera.

The centaur raised its forehooves to intercept this sudden attack, and trampled the approaching light bullets with its blazing hooves. However, its hooves that touched the light were frozen in an instant, after which they fell off with a low sound.

Of course, Melakuera was able to reform his lost hooves with flames right away, but in response to Puck's attack that declared further conversation would be useless, he made his entire body billow as he cautiously raised his firepower.

"Hey, did you know? It seems that those who get in others' way end up getting kicked to death by a horse. But if it's a horse getting in your way, that doesn't seem to make much sense, huh. Well, that's a saying about romance, though."

[T/N: Refers to a Japanese saying, people who interfere in others' love lives should get kicked to death by a horse.]

"Brethren, Appeal Stand By. That Half-Devil, True Nature Exposed. Witch Descendant, Annihilation Necessity—"

"I don't really care about any of that nonsense. That body is… The bad beardy, huh. You deceived him and borrowed his body to trick my barrier, I see. You're as sneaky as ever."

The two spirits exchanged words, but the rift between them could not be filled, and Puck in particular made his hostility clear.

The cat used his tail to point to Emilia as his eyes filled with rage.

"Poor girl, she's about to cry. You hurt her with your heartless words. With your worthless suspicion and nonsensical delusions.

With this, we've become enemies for life."

"That Girl, Half-Devil! She's the reincarnation of the Witch! That girl is a menace who shall bring ruin to the world's balance!"

"The world, the world, like that's the only thing you know… It's tedious. You think that anyone and everyone would be out to do something to the world if they just had a little power? Let me tell you, there's no one so obsessed with the world as you. And also, the world doesn't need you or your power nearly as much as you think."

"Contempt, Firm Refusal! My mission, objective, denied, as if I'll let you get away with—"

"Looks like we're finally on the same page. I can't forgive you either."

As Puck's anger got colder and colder, Melakuera's blazing rage responded to it. The two spirits who held extreme power were already beyond the point of reconciliation.

A clash between them was now inevitable. However—

"Puck, no… You can't win, you'll die…"

Shaking her head, Emilia pleaded with Puck from behind as he prepared for battle.

She was happy that he came for her. She was truly happy. But—

"If you die too, then… No…"

"—It's going to be a bit of a problem if you underestimate me, Emilia. Sure, he might look a little stronger, but I have an overwhelming advantage when it comes to cuteness and fluffiness."

As Emilia tried to stop him, Puck deliberately put on a carefree expression and raised his hands to encourage her.

However, Emilia who was a spirit arts user understood. All over Puck's behavior, and in the corners of his smiling face, there were signs of exhaustion that he couldn't conceal.

It seemed that something had happened before he got here, he had already used up a considerable amount of his power. That definitely couldn't be ignored considering his opponent was Melakuera, an opponent at the same level as him.

"Bluff Futile. Your resistance is pointless. Your, Reserve, Enormous Expenditure—"

And this fact was clear to Melakuera as well.

Despite this, Puck continued to face the centaur as he proudly threw his chest out.

"Saying that sort of thing, considering how I just took out a part of you that you put quite a bit of effort into, it seems to me that you're actually scared on the inside, isn't that right?"

"Cowardice Nonexistent. Imprudent, Shallow, I'm disappointed, you damned cat!"

"Be disappointed all you want. —You can go ahead and turn into shaved ice while you look down on me!"

Ending their conversation, the one who acted first was Puck who overlapped his paws. An all-freezing light emerged from his linked paws, gushing out straight towards Melakuera.

Melakuera countered the instantly approaching light with a flame bullet. The white light and crimson flame collided, and the space between absolute hot and absolute cold was ripped apart.

"—!"

The resulting explosion of wind ran amok like a typhoon, and Emilia desperately clung to ground on the verge of being blown away. As this happened, the cat and the flaming horse flew through the wind and clashed mid-air.

"How about you become an ice sculpture too, and get polished by that girl every morning?"

“Firm, there’s absolutely no way—”

His joking provocation was taken seriously and angrily rejected.

Forming white light in the shape of a sword, Puck used it to attack the flaming horse. The light grazed Melakuera and slashed the world diagonally, and in an instant the sky, the ground, the forest, everything in the light’s path froze.

Puck then spun his body, swinging the sword of light all over the place as he spun like a top. His body was well suited to this high speed rotation, and the tornado of light turned into an onslaught of countless attacks relentlessly pursuing Melakuera.

However, Melakuera wasn’t just going to sit there and take it. As the centaur dodged this extraordinary sword dance, it underwent a bizarre transformation, changing into a mass of flame.

“Rushing to finish it, Reserve Nonexistent! Proof! You’re going to lose and die!”

Having changed into swirling hellfire, Melakuera’s power and the hostility of the man it fused with roared.

The swelling crimson flame struggled against Puck’s sword of light, ultimately burning away the freezing sword with its extreme firepower, and the freezing waves were at once overwhelmed by the scorching heat.

“Puck—!”

Emilia screamed in despair at this scene that proved the man’s, Melakuera’s declaration of victory.

At this rate, the cat’s small body would be swallowed up by the flaming horse’s raging fire—

“A cornered rat bites the cat—I’m a cat, though.”

“What, What—!”

Puck was engulfed by the flames, and immediately after Emilia screamed, Melakuera who was supposed to have the advantage suddenly had his torso swell from the inside. His torso formed from flames swelled to the point of bursting, and finally flowers of ice bloomed from it as if ripping through the flame.

Puck had slipped into the flaming horse's body, and created a beautiful explosion of powerful magic from within.

"And this is what you call roasting the flesh and crushing the Od."

"Imposs, ible… That Phrase, I, Unknown—"

"I just thought of it as I said it, you see."

As the astonished flame ruptured, Puck who was still in good health inside it was holding a red light.

A light that could be held by Puck who was small enough to fit in a palm—That was the core of a spirit, the Od. To a spirit it was the source of their life, and when exposed it was also a fatal weak point.

If their defenseless Od were to be crushed, any spirit would die. Even Melakuera.

"Any last words?"

Puck who quite literally had victory in his hands asked this as if offering his final sympathies. With its Od stolen by Puck, the mass of flame that was losing its form started blazing especially bright—

"This, can't… I, with the spirit's power, get my revenge on that girl…"

"You were just used as a Yorishiro, but I don't really pity you in the slightest."

"Don't sc…! I, Arbiter Melakuera. Mission, Carry Out. World, Protect Balance, Deterrence—"

"I see. Those were both lackluster farewells, but I'll be sure to engrave them on your tombstones."

Intense hatred and unshakeable tenacity, Puck carelessly tilted his head at these two extremes. He then used his magic to mercilessly freeze Melakuera's Od, crushing it completely.

Like a fruit being crushed, Melakuera's Od scattered into red particles disappointingly easily. At the same time the flames drifting through the air also turned pale, and were blown away unable to even resist the wind.

There was nothing left. Not of the mighty Great Spirit, nor of the pathetic man it used.

"…"

Puck slowly descended to Emilia who was unable to believe what had just happened. With his tail swaying in the wind, the cat looked at her battered state with sad eyes.

The emotions filling his round eyes caused dread to well up in Emilia, making her grab her shoulders. Reminded of Melakuera's outrageous accusations, she tightly embraced her slender body.

Melakuera had declared this: The reason Emilia was ostracized by everyone, was because she was a half-devil, a witch.

There were many people who had called her a witch thus far. The people in that village nearby, the scoundrels who came to commit evil in the forest, the bearden man who was obsessed with her, and finally the Great Spirit Melakuera—

Every single one of them, they were not looking at Emilia, they looked past her at the Witch as they said those words.

And that was probably—

"Emilia, let's rest a bit first. You probably can't think straight right now no matter how hard you try."

"…"

Puck's gentle, considerate voice made her afraid. She couldn't look him in the eye. She didn't want to find out what emotions were reflected in his eyes.

She wanted to believe. Emilia wanted to believe in Puck. However, if even Puck was looking past her at someone else, what would she do?

"…Emilia."

As Emilia shook her head in refusal, Puck called her name in a lonesome voice.

She couldn't raise her head. The threat of Melakuera had passed, the great black liquid was gone too, the forest was supposed to be free of danger now, but she now felt far more isolated than ever before.

"Puck, did you know…?"

With her head still lowered, without showing her face, Emilia asked this of the spirit who was always by her side.

Emilia's bloodline that she herself was unaware of. Puck knew more than her about the world, the forest, and maybe even Emilia herself, perhaps he knew about it.

"That I'm a half-devil… That I'm different from everyone else."

"Emilia, there's no such thing as a half-devil. Don't say that sort of thing."

"…"

"It's true that you're different from the forest's elves. You're a half-elf. That's the truth."

"…"

Her breath caught, and she clutched her chest despite her heart's pounding.

He knew. Puck knew about her origin after all. He knew, and kept it secret until now, never telling her it was something bad.

“Why didn’t you tell me?! That I have evil, evil… Blood? Was it blood? If I knew I was descended from that sort of blood, this…!”

“—That’s wrong! That shouldn’t be something that hurts you!”

“No…!”

As Emilia dug her nails into her shoulders, Puck’s voice turned desperate for the first time as he yelled this.

Puck’s grim voice was so close she could touch him, causing her to step back instinctively.

Raising her head, she looked at him. He looked terribly hurt by her reaction. Seeing this, Emilia realized that she had committed a sin that she shouldn’t have—

“—a”

—Heat rays closed in from every direction, shooting the floating cat down.

5

Even when burned by heat rays beyond imagination, a spirit’s body would turn black or anything of the sort.

Unless the attack penetrated the defenses of the mana composing their body and harmed their Od, the spirit would appear to be in perfect condition.

However, if their Od were to sustain fatal damage, the spirit’s existence would crumble away like sand.

Just like Melakuera, whose Od was crushed by Puck just moments before.

—And just like Puck, who was currently dissipating into particles of light in Emilia’s palms.

“Brethren, Foolish. Result, Natural—”

“Real Body, Equivalent Part, One Body, Not—”

“Total Seven, Two Forfeit—”

“Arbitration, No Obstacle!—”

“I, Arbiter Melakuera”

Descending from above her were five voices and five flames.

The flames surrounded Emilia, and circled around her as they changed shape. The crimson lights produced four limbs, a torso, and a head sporting a mane, five flaming horses had manifested into the world.

All five of these flaming horses were beings equal to the Great Spirit that had just been defeated—No, not equal beings. One could believe they were the exact same being.

This was nothing special, the principle was simple.

The Great Spirit Melakuera had divided his existence into seven parts, and was controlling each of them individually.

Possessing seven bodies each of which was on par with Puck, he used this overwhelming power to monitor threats to the world, secretly acting as a force to deter any potential causes of calamity.

His unrivaled conviction was backed up by this power, he truly lived up to the title of Great Spirit.

—But this fact currently held no meaning at all to Emilia.

“Puck… Puck…”

She paid no attention at all to the five great spirits surrounding her or the fact that her death was rapidly approaching.

Right now, she was completely focused on the spirit that was fading away in her palm.

“…”

Completely powerless, Puck's fallen body did not stir an inch. The contours of his body were steadily blurring, and it seemed like he could disappear in the blink of an eye. So Emilia couldn't allow herself to blink.

But it was clear that this would have absolutely no effect on Puck's disappearance, she could not delay it in the slightest.

"…Puck…"

Puck gave no response to her call. He did not even react.

Normally, he would spring right up at any moment and say 'Just kidding—'. However, even Emilia understood that that wasn't going to happen now.

Puck was beyond saving. Just like the lesser spirits, he too would die protecting her.

"Brethren. His Death, Meaningless. Brethren, His Death, Regrettable —"

"Why… Did you…"

Puck's feeble warmth, feeling it to the fullest with her fingers, Emilia turned toward Melakuera who was saying something or other. The tears on her cheeks were drying. Her eyes were fully open.

The gaze of those amethyst eyes caused all five flaming horses to intensify their flames.

"It's fine if you hate me."

"Denial. I, Thou, Hatred Nonexistent—"

"It's fine if you loathe me."

"Denial. I, Thou, Loathing Nonexistent—"

"If you were only hurting me, I could take it. But despite that, the lesser spirits, and Puck, like this…!"

“Denial. I, Deed, Hindrance Elimination. Brethren Sacrifice, Thou, Sin—”

“If! My life! Was such a terrible thing!”

Why did she alone awaken from the ice?

Why did she live by herself in the forest?

Why did no one tell her?

Why, if her being alive was such a sin—

“Was I born to bring someone misfortune…?”

Filling others with dread, hurting someone, losing her lesser spirits, and now losing Puck too.

And after giving rise to all this sorrow, Emilia herself would lose her life.

“Affirmative—”

As Emilia trembled, Melakuera powerfully stomped on the ground as he affirmed her despair.

The spirit announced this to the girl stricken by the grief and sorrow brought about by her existence:

“Thou, Involve, Another Misfortune—”

“Thou, Acquaintance, Calamity—”

“Thou, World, Balance Collapse, Threat—”

“Therefore, Thou, Annihilation Necessity—”

“Thou, Existence, Grave Sin—”

The five spirits spoke in turn, calling out the surrounded girl’s crimes.

And finally, the five voices spoke in unison.

"World Consensus, Thou, Death, Crave—!"

Representing the world's desire, the five Melakueras simultaneously delivered their verdict. The voices from all five directions desired her death, this crushed Emilia's heart.

She lowered her eyes, and though her tears had dried, just one drop flowed downward.

And landed on Puck's forehead as lay in her palm, on the verge of disappearing.

"—I'm sorry, Puck."

An apology, not for getting him wrapped up in this, nor for disobeying his instructions, nor for anything that happened in the days until now. This apology was for just one thing.

For being born, for being alive, and for bringing him misfortune, that was what she was apologizing for.

In those words were disappointment in herself, and an empty hopelessness—

"—Don't screw around."

Emilia gasped when she felt the vanishing spirit in her palm move.

In her field of view that was blurred by that single tear, she could see the spirit tremble as it got up. The cat spirit's body was fading away, but its black eyes were filled with intense emotion,

"Don't screw around, Melakuera…!"

With his voice trembling with rage, Puck glared at the Melakuera's surrounding them.

"How many times are you going to make her cry? How many times are you going to hurt her? How much will you make her suffer? How much light will you steal from her…?!"

"Brethren. Thou, Annihilation, Unavoidable—"

“The reason this girl was born! Is not something you get to decide!”

“Puck…”

Her cheeks stiffened, and the tears that should have stopped started flowing again. Emilia desperately tried to keep her trembling out of her palm. She thought that even the slightest interference could make Puck vanish.

“This girl was… Emilia was born with blessings and hope…!”

On her palm, the spirit yelled even on the verge of disappearing.

His mana came loose with each roar, steadily shaving away his body. However, Puck persisted in spite of this, and thrust his tail at Melakuera who maintained his burning coldheartedness.

“This girl will become happy. Happily, happily, happily… Someone’s misfortune or being shunned by someone, there’s absolutely no need for such things to hurt her. This girl was born to be happy. Emilia was born to be happy!”

“Firm Denial. Anybody, That Birth, Desire—”

“I do—!!”

“Ridiculous! Firm Denial, Continuation—!”

Puck struck his chest as he said this, and all five voices responded in unison.

The five overlapping voices spoke the same words denying Emilia’s existence and Puck’s screams.

“That Power, Witch Reincarnation! That Appearance, Witch Reincarnation! That Existence, Witch Reincarnation! Therefore, World, That Existence, Threat! That, History, Spiral! Error, Endless Repetition! Error, Endless Transmigration! I, Endless, World Downfall, Crisis, Experience—!”

“You’re not talking about me! Nor are you talking about this girl, quit spouting off about whoever! No one’s talking about that! Now, look at the girl in front of you and answer me, Melakuera!"

Their turbulent emotions collided, and in response to Melakuera's roars Puck pointed to Emilia.

To the girl who had fallen to her knees sobbing, afraid of Puck's impending doom, wounded by the insistence that no one wanted her alive, plunging into the depths of despair even now.

"She's just a girl in tears. Where the hell is this threat to the world?!"

"That Power, Threat! That Mind, Immature, Threat! Crisis, Oneself, Approach. Uncontrollable, Magic, Easily Released. That State, Threat! Threat! Threat—!!"

"—hiu"

Emilia, weak-hearted as she was, thoughtlessly used the taboo power multiple times.

Because of this, Melakuera had decided that he could not overlook her existence. In order to protect herself, she would use her uncontrollable power, he regarded this mentality as dangerous.

That was an undeniable fact. Emilia could offer no rebuttal. However—

"The Black Serpent's poison at the bottom of the lake, weren't you the one who released it into the forest?! Tricking a weak-hearted person into cooperating with your plan… You trapped Emilia."

Melakuera's accusation enraged Puck even further. The cat examined their surroundings, and correctly deduced what had occurred at the ruined shore.

"You intentionally put her in a dangerous situation, and just waited to see if she would use her power!"

"…"

"And in the end, you brought out the source of the poison and had it fight her, isn't that right. It's true that she used her power when she was in a bind. But the whole thing was just a farce of your creation, wasn't it…!"

"Details, Argument Meaningless! Truth, That Girl, Uncontrollable, Magic, Use—"

"Both of us would have done the same thing! If we were in danger, we would try to do something with our power. Despite that, are you trying to say this girl is the only one not allowed to do that?!"

"Affirmative! That, That Is, Fate—"

"—Fate."

There was absolutely no room for argument, Melakuera firmly declared this, and Puck repeated the last word he spoke.

Fate, to the self-appointed Arbiter Melakuera, this word truly was the be all and end all.

It would not allow anyone to object. Because fate was decided by the world itself.

This magnificence of this word that denied all resistance took Emilia's breath away—

"—We won't lose to something as trivial as fate."

Puck said this with a smile, and Emilia forgot all about having her breath taken away.

"…"

Both Emilia and Melakuera fell silent at Puck's slight smile. Under their gazes, Puck calmly turned around and faced Emilia directly.

The cat on her palm was already disintegrating, and yet he groomed his face like nothing was wrong.

'—Emilia, let's form a contract."

"…"

"Nonsense—!"

His sudden proposal rendered Emilia speechless, and Melakuera loudly expressed his rage in her place.

But Puck waved his tail at the raging flame spirit,

"Be quiet, Melakuera. This is the sacred dialogue between spirit and contractor. Someone as obsessed with the rules as you shouldn't be able to interfere."

"…"

Perhaps his statement was right on the mark, Melakuera chose to remain silent in response. There was no longer anyone getting between Puck and Emilia. There wasn't anyone, but—

"Puck, why…"

"The situation isn't very romantic, sorry about that. But look, I could disappear at any moment, so I'd definitely say there's a certain mood to the situation."

"No, that's not it…"

She shook her head. Puck's current attitude was completely different from what it was when he was facing Melakuera. His voice was gentle and his gaze was warm, and it made her chest hurt.

She understood he was on the verge of vanishing and didn't have much time, but she still hesitated.

"…If that's not it, what are you worried about?"

"I mean, you… Until now, you never once mentioned a contract. So, I…"

It was Puck himself who discovered Emilia's aptitude as a spirit arts user.

And he was also the one who taught her how to form a contract with lesser spirits, and helped her do it. She was thankful for this. However, at the same time it also made her anxious.

He was a whimsical stay spirit who wasn’t contracted with anyone, but even though he was always following Emilia around, he had never once offered to form a contract with her.

“I thought someday, you’d go away somewhere… That’s what I thought, so…”

“—That’s, I guess I didn’t give off the right impression.”

She was afraid that broaching the topic of a contract would mean acknowledging that they might eventually part.

She thought that perhaps Puck was silently expressing his intent by avoiding the topic of a contract.

Because of this, Emilia never once suggested to Puck that they should form a contract, she couldn’t.

“Seriously, you’re so distrustful, like an unfriendly kitten.”

As she revealed her thoughts, Puck scratched his cheek with a somewhat troubled smile. He then floated up to Emilia’s face with a lazy expression.

Separating from her palm, he met her eyes from directly in front her, so close that they could feel each other’s breaths.

“Alright then, I’ll properly convey it in a way you can understand.”

“…Yeah.”

“You’re important to me, so I want to protect you forever.”

The spirit with round black eyes said this and then touched his forehead against that of the girl who possessed big, amethyst eyes.

“—You were born to be happy. So I want to help you achieve that.”

Not vanishing, not embarrassed, and not deceiving, this was pure compassion.

Those words pierced Emilia's heart, erasing the ache from her memories and her guilt.

All she felt now was the warmth of the spirit touching her.

"You won't go anywhere?"

"I won't. I'll always be with you."

"You won't hate me?"

"I don't think you'll find anyone who loves you more than I do."

And as the spirit smiled bashfully, the girl faintly smiled as well—

"Then, please. —Let me believe in you."

"Sure thing."

In response to the girl's smile, the spirit casually struck his chest—

"—Called by you, I am here. If it's for you, I can become anything."

And with that, the contract was sealed—

6

In the very beginning, it all started when a spark emerged from a small campfire.

Back then, it did not yet possess either intelligence or anything that could be called self-awareness. It just remembered that this was its beginning.

On a cold night out in the wilderness, surrounding the campfire it was born from, was a family seeking warmth.

There was nothing about them really worth mentioning, they were a completely average family.

A stern father, a gentle mother, a disciplined elder sister, and a mischievous younger brother. A kind of family you could find anywhere, a scene you could see anywhere.

—They traveled from land to land, living their lives all over the world.

Over the course of their travels, fire was indispensable to them whenever they set up camp. Cold, bandits, unforeseen circumstances, fire would prove useful no matter the situation, it possessed universally useful power.

“Once we’ve chosen where to camp, light the fire. From now on, that is your duty.”

The father passed down the important role of managing the fire to the youngest son.

The young boy would enthusiastically gather withered wood and light a fire whenever they set up camp. And when the campfire was lit, ‘it’ would appear from the flames.

“—A flame, a spark, a friend.”

From the moment the flames gave it life, it forever accompanied this family on their travels. It had no reason. It did not possess the intelligence to think of one. If it had to say, it was simply natural.

Going with the flow, it continued to accompany the family on their long, hard travels.

Extremely cold snowscapes, deserts full of hot sand, huge, rushing rivers, enormous, dense forests, there were far too many to count.

However, no matter what hardships befell them, when he settled down at their campsites and lit their fires, the boy was at peace. The flickering, wavering flame provided the family relief and tranquility.

And ‘it’ was always with them. With the flame, with the family, always.

"—A flame, a spark, a friend."

And then a long, long time passed, years, even decades.

This time that didn't feel particularly long to 'it' was plenty long to humans who had finite lifespans.

He who was a boy when he first gathered around the flame had become a young man, and then the young man became a father, after which the father became a grandfather, and now, he lay at the end of his life.

"—A flame, a spark, a friend."

His once youthful and lively voice had now become hoarse, and his hair had lost its color.

The old man lying on a crude bed repeated these words any number of times as if delirious.

He had already lost sight of reality. That was what his family thought as they each in their own way bid farewell to their grandfather, their father, their husband.

There was only being in the room who understood that his words were not nonsense.

'It' which had accompanied the boy for so long, which had watched over the young man, which had spent its time with the father, and which was now bidding the grandfather farewell from the quietly burning fireplace in the corner of the room.

"—A flame, a spark, a friend."

Those words were a prayer from the boy as he lit a spark on the withering wood and blew on it to make it burn. Even as a young man, a father, a grandfather, he would always say this prayer whenever he lit a fire. This prayer whispered so quietly that no one could hear it was a secret known only to the old man who had once been a boy and 'it' which had accompanied him.

So that it wouldn't lose to the freezing wind, so that it would drive away the savage bandits, so that it would protect them from suffering and misfortune, so that the family could live in happiness —

The old man who had once been a boy was always with the flame, always with ‘it’. So even as he was losing his life, he prayed for his family’s safety.

“—A flame, a spark, a friend.”

To the very end, the old man that had been a boy continued to whisper this prayer.

His family buried his corpse that had lost its soul under the freezing ground. ‘It’ wanted to burn his remains to ashes.

It did not know the reason. At this moment, for the first time, it gained self-awareness.

“—A flame, a spark, a friend.”

A friend, that was what he had called it.

It recalled the prayer of the man who was now buried under the freezing ground, never to move again.

“Friend—”

Until the very end of his life, he continued to pray to it for his family’s safety and wellbeing.

The man who had spent his entire life with the flame—The man who was its one and only friend had entrusted everything to the flame.

It had to protect them. It had to fulfill its friend’s final prayer.

“I, Sole, Friend. That Name, Melakuera. Therefore, My Name, Melakuera—”

“It’ took the name engraved onto his tombstone as its own.

He had accompanied it his entire life, until he finally burned out. Therefore, his name would live on with ‘it’ until ‘it’ burned out.

“I, Melakuera—”

It was still but a lesser spirit far from the status of spirit, however its purpose had already been decided.

It would fulfill its friend’s prayer. It would fulfill Melakuera’s hope, he who had entrusted it with maintaining peace and tranquility.

It would protect the world from all dangers. It would save others from all suffering.

—Its friend’s life was proof that fire was a power that could protect everything.

7

He did not understand why he suddenly remembered his past at this moment.

That was his origin, which Melakuera himself had started to forget. Regardless of the reason, regardless of the details, who Melakuera was right now would not change.

But having uncovered this memory tucked away at the bottom of his mind, Melakuera understood.

He had sworn a vow before the grave of his one and only friend who had prayed to him until the very end.

The man had accompanied him until his life burned out. So in exchange, his name would live on with the Great Spirit Melakuera until he burned out. This was his vow.

Therefore, it was inevitable that he would now remember that day.

The deterrent that protected the world, one of the Four Great Spirits, the Arbiter Melakuera—His end was near.

“This is a complete reversal from before, huh.”

“…”

“To be honest, I’m a little disappointed. Even though you’re missing parts of yourself, I never imagined that I’d be this much stronger than you.”

As Melakuera reminisced about his origin, a voice much more fierce than its tone would suggest pierced him. When the flaming horse lowered itself, it met a towering beast’s eyes right before it.

—Calmly standing there was a feline beast more than twenty meters long.

With gray fur and a mane like a lion. The tips of all four limbs were as sharp as talons, and its formerly round, black eyes now glowed gold. Even its countenance that would have been considered cute by human standards had now changed into that of a carnivore craving flesh and blood.

There wasn’t even a trace of its former appearance. The form of a fellow spirit that had released his his true power—

“Four Greats, Outsider. Beast Of The End—”

“I can’t say I’m very fond of that old-fashioned name. Furthermore…”

The great beast grimaced at Melakuera’s murmur, and then swung its paw sideways. In an instant, one of the flaming horses charging from the right took a direct hit, and its flaming body was easily ripped away. In other words, its Od had been exposed—

“For one of the Four Greats, you’re not putting up much of a fight.”

Ensnaring it with its claws, his fellow spirit ripped the Od apart with no hesitation. That was all it took for the part of himself that had been ripped open to lose its core and for the flames to then disappear with a noise.

Every single one of his parts fell before the Beast of The End, and what was left was—

"You're the only one left."

"Affirmative, I, Melakuera. Last, Individual—"

"Perhaps you're just saying that when in truth you've got reserves hiding elsewhere? You're pretty cunning, so I can't really believe you just like that."

"Investigation, Caution, Thy Liberty—"

"'Go ahead and doubt me all you want', huh. Well, I'll believe you. —No matter what tricks you get up to, you wouldn't lie."

His fellow spirit that had transformed its appearance only resembled its small self in terms of gestures as it closed one eye.

Saying nothing in response to his fellow spirit's carefree attitude, the final Melakuera raised his head. He was looking up at the slender girl clinging to the gray fur on the giant beast's back.

"…"

The girl tightly holding on to his fellow spirit did not avert her eyes from him. There were no tears in her eyes, there was only calm determination as her cheeks stiffened.

Silver hair, amethyst eyes, and devilish beauty that captured the hearts of those who looked upon her—Regardless of what she herself thought, they would probably continue to cast a shadow on her fate.

Melakuera did not regret telling her that her existence itself was a sin.

However, he did regret that he could not stop this sin from continuing to torment her.

"Brethren. Thou, Cruel. That Girl, Alienation, Hatred, Fear, Inevitable—"

"That might be the case. Certainly, just as you say this world does have too many troublesome rules and restrictions that would make it just a little hard for her to proudly be out and about."

"Agreement. Doubt Recurrence. Why, Thou, That Girl, Cruelty Inevitable, World, Push To—"

"That's because I believe."

A gentle and tender tone, this statement didn't really fit his current beastly appearance, but Melakuera waited for his fellow spirit to continue.

Belief. Like Melakuera had believed in the power of flame in order to fulfill his friend's prayer.

Why did his fellow spirit that was worthy of the title 'The Beast of The End' believe in the half-devil girl on his back? What did he see in her?

"I believe that this girl can strive for happiness no matter what kind of world she's facing."

"…"

"I believe she's that kind of girl, so I want to help her achieve that. It is for this reason, Melakuera, that your line of thinking was inaccurate. Although I've been telling you this from the start."

He had no basis, he believed just because he wanted to believe, as he spoke these extremely spirit-like words, Melakuera's fellow spirit brought his head down to Melakuera who had fallen silent and wrinkled his face as he smiled.

"This girl will not become the Witch. —Your worries are nothing more than pointless anxiety."

With this clear declaration, it seemed his fellow spirit had no intention of saying anything further. The flaming horse remained silent for a while in response to his fellow spirit's attitude, and then once again directed his burning yellow eyes toward the girl.

His impression of the girl stiffening at his gaze had not changed one bit.

"Thou, Half-Devil. Thou, Witch, Descendant. Thou, World, Balance Collapse, Threat—"

"…"

"Thou, That Doubt, Denial Possible—?"

That she was a half-devil, that she was similar to the Witch, that she possessed a power that could destroy the world, not one of these things would change.

He just wondered how the girl and his fellow spirit would overcome these.

"Just as you said, it seems I'm a half-elf."

"…"

"Different from everyone else in the forest, with hair and eyes resembling those of the Witch, and furthermore with a reeeally huge power sleeping in my body, I understand that you think that make me dangerous."

"…"

"I'm a weakling and a coward, so if I were alone something like this would definitely happen again. That's reeeally scary… However, Puck will be with me."

The girl strung her words together with difficulty, expressing her opinion in such a way that it would be easily understood.

She possessed silver hair and amethyst eyes, the same characteristics as the Witch, but she continued with this,

"I won't become a witch like you're worried about. I'm Emilia. A half-elf born and living in this forest."

She who possessed silver hair and amethyst eyes, the same characteristics as the Witch, declared that she was not the same as the Witch.

Consequently—

“Understood Completely—”

Accepting her gaze and resolve, Melakuera gave his answer after which his burning hooves bored into the ground.

Waves of heat spread with the tremors, and his fellow spirit and the girl both widened their eyes when they saw him once again create a sea of flames. With a sidelong glance at their reactions, Melakuera’s flames became even more powerful, and expanded.

His body became a roaring blaze, and the crimson horse of flame reached a size rivaling that of the Beast of The End. The Great Spirit of Fire and the Great Spirit of Ice confronted each other head-on.

“Thou, Appeal, Contents Understood. Thou, Survival, Resolve Understood. However, I, Arbiter Melakuera—”

His fellow spirit’s appeal and the girl’s resolve had both reached him. However, Melakuera’s several centuries weren’t so shallow as to be swayed by this. Melakuera too had his resolve as the protector of the world.

“I, Execute Arbitration! I, Carry Out Judgement! Thou, I, Everything, Show—!”

“…”

“Brethren, Nay. Thou, Puck. Half-Devil, Nay. Thou, Emilia—”

He called their respective names for the first time, and his fellow spirit and the girl—Puck and Emilia prepared themselves.

Lowering his body, Puck gripped the ground with his four limbs and Emilia tightly held on to him.

“Emilia.”

“What is it?”

“Once this battle is over, can I call you Lia?”

“…You dummy.”

With this exchange, countless bluish white lights started dancing around the fierce beast. His overflowing mana turned into waves of absolute zero and clashed with the waves of heat formed by Melakuera’s mana.

Fire and Ice, Crimson and White, Melakuera and Puck, the battle of two extremes would finally reach its conclusion.

“I, Arbiter Melakuera—”

“My name is Puck. Remember that name in the afterlife.”

The two great spirits exchanged introductions, and in the end his attention turned towards Emilia who did the same.

“I’m Emilia, just Emilia. —I was born with that name, and will live with it until I die. I’ll be sure to remember you too.”

She declared resolutely, and in an instant the flaming horse and massive beast unleashed their power—

—In the end, the lake in the northern region of Elior Forest was utterly annihilated with not a trace left.

8

The evening sun descended on Elior Forest’s sky, and the snow-white forest was dyed orange.

The forest was always covered by thick clouds and snowfall persisted throughout the year. The very fact that they were able to look up at the sky’s evening glow could be said to be a catastrophe on par with a cataclysm.

But that sort of emotionless analysis wasn’t necessary right now. Just a few words, this would be nice.

“—What a beautiful sky.”

Falling to her knees on the snow, gazing at the sky and forest illuminated by the evening glow—The scene of the entire surface being dyed orange, Emilia seemed enraptured as she murmured this.

“It is quite the view, isn’t it. Guess Melakuera did something decent in the end.”

Saying this with a smile was Puck, who was by Emilia’s side gazing at the same scenery.

The spirit curled up his body that was more than twenty meters in size, and his fierce features somehow seemed to retain his usual charm. Even though his appearance had changed, his behavior was still the same as that of that cavalier little cat.

Finding it just a little bit funny, Emilia ended up smiling.

“Ah, you’re finally smiling, Emilia. Yep, even that idiot managed to do something good in the end.”

[T/N: Idiot contains the character for horse]

“Puck, you’re going waaaaay too far.”

Emilia cautioned Puck who said this when he saw her smile.

Needless to say, Emilia herself did not hold a very favorable impression of the flame spirit, but—

“Melakuera, wasn’t he an old friend of yours?”

“Just an old acquaintance. I don’t really have very many friends, you see. Because cats are solitary creatures. Nyaon.”

“Puck, you dummy…”

Her strength suddenly left her when Puck mimicked a cat’s meow with that huge body of his. With a powerless posture, Emilia directed her gaze forward—Toward the peak of a hill from which one could see the entire forest.

There, dyed vermillion by the evening sun’s light, was a grave that was little more than a pile of rocks. The name of the flame spirit was engraved on it, but there was nothing buried there. It was a grave in name only.

Making such a thing might not have been any consolation to the Great Spirit. But for some reason, Emilia felt that she had to do it.

“I wanted to make him a more proper grave, but…”

“It’s a fine parting gift. You can think of this evening sky as a thank you.”

As Emilia stared at the grave, Puck responded while grooming his tail. His words caused Emilia to look up at the evening sun once more and let out a sigh of admiration.

The beautiful evening sky, a miraculous scenery that Melakuera had unintentionally created.

Puck seemed dissatisfied that it was because of Melakuera, but the details didn’t matter when it came to the deep emotions it produced. Come to think of it, this was Emilia’s first time seeing such a clear sky.

“This sunset too is something you couldn’t have seen if you died. The world still has a whole lot more that can make you happy.”

“…Yeah. I suppose so.”

“—Emilia?”

Emilia shook her head, “That’s not it.” In response to Puck’s puzzled voice.

She found it difficult to properly express these feelings in words. Emilia just needed some time to choose her words, and Puck affectionately looked over her without rushing her.

Right now, she was somewhat embarrassed to be gazed upon by those golden eyes full of consideration.

“…”

Her relationship with Puck had changed dramatically since they were now contracted to one another.

Until now, his whimsical, frivolous, flippant, aloof attitude had made her anxious countless times.

Unable to grasp his true feelings, not knowing if maybe he'd go away someday.

That was—

"Hmhmhmhmhmm"

When she cast a fleeting glance his way, she found him humming in a good mood. Not even knowing how she felt, like he was enjoying her confusion.

—Having formed a contract with him, they were now deeply connected, and through this connection she felt these emotions flow into her.

Within this colossal wave of emotions flowing into her, she felt a deep affection that made it hard to pull oneself away, and it made her so emotional she almost felt dizzy.

To think that he felt this way about her all along, she was so upset she wanted to kick herself for not realizing sooner.

Her ears and cheeks felt like they were burning. Her face was definitely red. She thought she could hide it from Puck by pretending it was from the evening light, but.

"Eh, Emilia, your face is turning red. Are you okay? Maybe it's a fever from the exhaustion?"

"Th-That's not the case. You're probably just seeing things. Because you became so big."

She completely failed to hide it, and spoke rapidly as she tried to evade his question. Puck grumbled, "Ehh, is that it I wonder—", but she immediately cleared her throat and changed the subject.

Hiding her shame and embarrassment, she asked something she needed to ask.

“Hey, Puck. Why did you form a contract with me?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have?”

“That’s not it! That’s not it at all. It’s just, until now, even though you were jealous of those lesser spirits, you still…”

Puck had adamantly avoided the topic of forming a contract with her. What changed to make him choose to form one despite that?

“…You’re only sharp at times like this, and you just won’t give up until you get an answer, huh.”

In response to her sincere gaze, Puck muttered this with the nuance of a wry smile. He then directed a distant look at the evening sky,

“The reason I never spoke of forming a contract with you was because I made a vow. I can’t tell you who to, but the vow basically restricted me from entering a relationship of spirit and spirit user with you.”

“Vow…? That you wouldn’t form a contract with me? But, Puck…”

“It was a really important vow, you know? But compared to losing you… The choice was obvious.”

Puck spoke as if it was of no concern, but the weight of this made Emilia fall silent. To a spirit, a vow was of utmost importance. They had to keep their vows even at the cost of their life. When she formed her contract with the lesser spirits, it was Puck himself who taught her that.

“Doing something like that, are you okay…?”

“Hmm, to be honest I don’t really know what’s supposed to happen. I imagine there’ll probably be a lot of fallout. Ah, I’m not talking about my fur.”

“Don’t joke around at a time like this! You don’t even know what’s going to happen, and yet…”

“But it’s fine. You don’t need to worry, Emilia.”

In contrast to Emilia who was panicking at the seriousness of the matter, Puck’s laid-back attitude showed no signs of crumbling. His attitude made her anxious, but Puck continued.

“Even if something happens, we’re already connected. No matter what happens from now on, we’ll be together. So you have nothing to worry about.”

“…”

Puck’s manner of speaking was so cheerful it was as if he truly felt no unease or worry.

Because of this, Emilia restlessly looked around any number of times, and finally gave in to exhaustion.

“It’ll be okay because we’ll be together, you don’t even have any basis for saying that… You’re really not worried?”

“Not really? I mean, I’m satisfied as long as I get to be with you. So I don’t really care about any of the other stuff.”

“M— The way you talk is so unfair…”

He’d talked away her unease and anger. After all, he had something so joyful. That he wanted to be with her, surely Puck had said something like that before—

“—a”

She let out a frail, strained breath.

Puck’s affection was slowly opening the lid to her memories, and the contents were pouring out.

Her dim, blurry memories connected, and were revived in that moment.

"…"

"Whoops, that was dangerous."

Puck supported Emilia's body with his paw when her sudden dizziness made her stumble. But the paw he had extended was the paw of a terrible beast. It was somewhat risky even though he skillfully caught her with his pads without letting his claws touch her.

"Aah, that was close. I got careless because I haven't used this form in a long time. Sorry about that."

"—Sorry."

"Yeah, sorry. I'm sorry."

"…Puck, you were apologizing to me back then too."

Still leaning on his paw, Emilia looked into the giant cat's eyes that were right beside her as she said this.

Her words caused Puck's eyes to widen, after which his pupils contracted as if he realized something. And then the spirit that had turned from a small cat into a big one awkwardly averted his eyes.

"…You didn't really have to remember that."

"That's wrong… That's not how it was."

Every night, she would see that dream. Every morning, she would wake from that dream. The answer to that dream made Emilia bite her lip. She grabbed the spirit who was still holding her, clinging to his fur as if to keep him from running away.

"Puck, back then… I, I…"

"Emilia, back then, you'd just woken up so you were in a serious panic. So no matter what you said it wouldn't be weird, and I wouldn't have minded no matter what you said to me. Also…"

As Emilia's voice turned tearful, Puck gently, calmly spoke to her as if handling something terribly delicate. He then paused for a moment, and continued.

“I was happy. That you needed me.”

“…”

“I can say this now, but although you were in that state back then, I was in quite the state myself. After all, in my hundreds of years of life… That was my first big moment. Makes me nervous.”

“Nervous…? You feel that too, Puck…?”

“What do you think I am? Maybe I look like some superhuman with a body and heart of steel, but the truth is that at heart I’m just a little cat as sensitive as my paws, you know?”

Puck bounced Emilia with his paw as he said this. But now Emilia understood that even such pranks were just to hide his embarrassment.

“Searching for you, I finally found you, and you woke up… You probably experienced many things for the first time back then, but that was my first time too.”

“Your first time, for what?”

“The first time I felt happy, the first time I was glad to be alive.”

Puck said this with a smile, causing Emilia’s eyes to widen. And then the spirit reflected in those wide, amethyst eyes donned an unusually serious expression.

“Thank you, Emilia. For making me happy. By waking up and by spending all this time with me in the forest, you made me so happy.”

“Puck…”

“Those feelings were really hard to express in words… So I wanted to show them every day through my actions, but it seems I was too vague.”

When Puck hung his head as if regretful, Emilia shook her head vigorously.

He would always come to see her every morning, exchange some trivial chitchat, and always act like he was having fun, because of which she couldn't understand what he was really feeling, but it was no big deal after all.

Every single day, it wasn't as if he was acting like he was having fun. He truly was enjoying himself.

"—Me too, there's something I could never tell you, Puck."

"Hm?"

Puck had honestly, truly honestly told her what he really felt, so Emilia felt like she had to reveal her true feelings as well. Her embarrassing true feelings.

She always wondered if he would laugh at her if she told him, so she could never say it.

"I love you, Puck… You're like a father."

"Pf"

"Wh-Why are you laughing?! I gathered all of my courage and endured the embarrassment to say that."

He really did laugh at her when she came out and said it, her face turned red as she separated from his paw. When she did so, Puck apologized while still laughing uncontrollably,

"Th-That's not it, Emilia. I'm not laughing at you or anything."

"M— then, why are you laughing?"

"…You said you could never say it, but you already told me that at the very beginning."

"Eh…"

Puck’s face was still wrinkled with laughter as he said this, astonishing Emilia. Though her memories seemed to have returned, she had no recollection of any such conversation.

“Don’t tell me you’re just making stuff up because I can’t remember.”

“You’re saying something absurd again, my daughter.”

“…You’re already treating me like a daughter.”

“You remembered… Isn’t what happened, but it looks like you felt the same way. I was actually holding back my affection too.”

When Puck winked at her, Emilia averted her eyes in embarrassment.

The same conversation back then, ahead of the memory in her dream—Her consciousness suddenly flickered, and the events of that day were revived in her mind.

Back then, in the scene her young self saw, there was a cat spirit hanging his head—

“Why are you apologizing…?”

“…”

“Why are you crying…?”

“—Because I left you alone.”

“You left me alone?”

“—Because I could never find you.”

“But you’re right here?”

She held out her hand and shook her head, telling him he didn’t do anything wrong.

“Your name is?”

“My name is…”

Her dream would always end at this point. But today, today was different.

What happened next, what they talked about, what they promised, she remembered all of it.

“—I’m Puck. Until now, and from now onwards, a spirit just for you.”

“Spirit…?”

“When you’re afraid, when you’re sad, I’ll protect you. When you’re having fun, when you’re happy, I’ll celebrate with you. —That is, if you’ll allow it.”

He would always be with her, he would always be kind to her, and he would allow her to rely on him. Even Emilia who knew nothing knew what kind of person that was.

She didn’t remember, she didn’t know, but she always wanted to meet him.

“—Father.”

“Eh?”

“That’s a father, right?”

“…”

Pondering for a moment, the cat spirit nodded as if confirming it.

“I’ll stay by your side and protect you. Your family, I suppose that’s right.”

“…”

“Then, from this day onward I’ll be your father. You can depend on me, Emilia.”

She remembered how she always depended on the spirit who said this to her.

“…”

“Emilia?”

Emilia blinked several times when her consciousness returned to reality, causing Puck to call out to her.

The synergy between the voice and her memories made her face turn completely red. It was to the point that she couldn’t even blame the evening light, not just her face but even her neck had turned crimson.

“E-Emilia? Are you alright?”

“…Not Emilia.”

With her face red and her cheeks warm, Emilia pouted as she said this. When she saw Puck’s eyes widen, she stared at him while turned to the side as she repeated herself.

“Puck, you said you’d call me something else.”

“…Yeah, I did say that. Is that alright?”

‘That’s, you know, it’s obvious. I mean, you formed a contract with me, so we have to be more, you know, affectionate. Also, I just remembered our first meeting, and you… So, um.”

“Calm down, you don’t need to be so flustered. —Lia.”

His voice was kind and his gaze was gentle, just like the memory she just remembered.

So Emilia donned a gentle smile.

“—Yeah. Understood, Puck.”

And with the evening glow behind her, she nodded. The girl and the spirit then affectionately cuddled up to one another and happily watched the sun go down.

—As they felt closer to each other than ever before, the two once again became family.

Epilogue: The Meaning of Happiness

1

The signs of dawn breaking made Emilia wake up, after which she sat up in her bed.

“Cold…”

Murmuring this with a drowsy look, she pulled her sheets toward herself. She drew her knees closer and placed her chin on the sheets she’d pulled, whiling away her time while in a half-conscious state.

She wasn’t falling asleep again. She was already awake. Her mind and body just hadn’t caught up yet.

So it was still okay, time slowly continued to pass by while she idly —

“—Lia. Get a hold of yourself, or you won’t have time for your daily routine.”

As she nodded off, a voice suddenly slipped into her ears. But this didn’t surprise Emilia in the slightest. She just grimaced,

“…Just a little longer.”

“That little longer is no good, I’m afraid. Come on, get up already.”

“Noisy…”

“Ehh—”

When Emilia buried her face deeper in her bedding, Puck made an elongated sound in a dissatisfied tone. But the gray coated cat soon regained his composure and landed on her shoulder. And then, while she kept her face lowered, he pulled hard on her ear.

“Hey, wake up, wake up. Wake up, wash your face, and brush your teeth. Once you’re done with that, move on to your hair… A braid would look nice today. Pretty please.”

“Braid… You do it.”

“Alright—”

Emilia left her hair to Puck who was hurrying her, and rubbed her eyes as she left the bed. Fixing her sleepwear that was sliding down her shoulder, she seemed somewhat annoyed as she stepped into the chilly morning air.

The scenery of the garden, which she could look over from the huge tree she was living in, hadn’t changed a bit over these past several years.

At the spot where she dried her laundry, she had constructed a simple storeroom that had her daily essentials crammed into it. The stream in which she washed her face and bathed was close by, and at its shore was a memorial she had built from obsidian.

“Good morning, everyone… Looks like we’ve got good weather today as well.”

Emilia made sure to greet this memorial with no inscription on it every single morning. This memorial was an offering to the lesser spirits she had once bonded with, who she suddenly lost. Her contract with them was severed one-sidedly. But still, she had to keep her promise. This was her sincerity towards the nameless memorial.

“Woah, cold…”

Splashing it with water from the stream, she cleaned the memorial. She then washed her face, getting rid of any remaining traces of drowsiness. She rinsed her mouth as well, and with this she had done everything she was instructed to.

“Alright, braiding complete. Hmm, you’re super cute today too.”

“Right, right.”

Puck had been working hard on her shoulder while she was busy cleaning the memorial and washing her face, he puffed his chest out with pride. When she cast a sidelong glance at Puck who wiped his forehead with an expression that looked like he had done something incredible, her braided silver hair entered her field of view.

“Wanna have a look in a mirror?”

“No, that’s fine. There’s nothing to worry about since you did it for me.”

Shaking her head at his proposal, Emilia who had been toying with her braided hair let go of it.

It wasn’t just limited to her hair, Puck knew more about Emilia than Emilia herself did. She didn’t think anything weird would happen if she just left it to him. To begin with, Emilia didn’t really know much about fashion.

Furthermore, Emilia still lacked the courage to step in front of a mirror.

“It’s so adorable too, how unfortunate.”

Puck crossed his short arms and sulked, causing Emilia to force a faint smile as she separated from the stream and headed back home.

Puck would fuss over her and compliment her appearance like this, but Emilia knew her appearance was one that inspired dread in others. She took Puck’s flattery with a grain of salt.

Having returned home from the stream, she approached her change of clothes placed on the bed. Picking out her clothes was also Puck’s job.

Emilia cheerfully shed her sleepwear, baring her body with no hesitation.

“How immodest.”

“You’re the only one around here, and you’ve got your back turned to me.”

“I keep telling you that that’s not the problem, I guess you just won’t learn no matter how many years pass.”

“I think you’re reeeeally stubborn, to keep repeating something I haven’t listened to for so many years.”

Her clothing today was worn like a coat, so there was no risk of it ruining her braided hair. She had a reliable family member called Puck who wouldn’t overlook such things.

Puck prepared her towel while she changed, and Emilia took her shoes out of a shelf.

“Those shoes, do they feel alright?”

“Yeah, they’re fine. I’m already completely used to making them, like a craftswoman or something.”

“I find it somewhat sad that you’ve ended up making your own shoes instead of finding some place to buy them, but since it seems you want to be praised I’ll go ahead and praise you all you want. That’s really great, Lia.”

“Ufufu, you just can’t be straightforward.”

Emilia had made her shoes by hand using tanned leather and plant tendrils. She tapped the tips against the ground to fit them against her feet, and then took the towel Puck offered her as she once again set out into the garden.

Her daily routine of running around to clean up her sleeping companions who had become ice sculptures had not changed. But she started a little later than she did before. This was because of how bad she was at waking up properly—Not really, the reason was much simpler.

It was because there was no longer anything she had to do after she finished cleaning them.

“But even so, you’ve gotten pretty lazy now that you’ve finished that map of yours."

"Hey, I reeeeally resent that. Right now. I'm just taking a break after a job well done."

"Sure is a long break, though."

Puck rode on her shoulder with an exasperated expression. Just as he said, Emilia's daily grind to finish her map of Elior Forest was now complete, and she was now out of a job.

The final rewrite of the map was the twenty first edition, and it was presently put up on her room's wall. Unfortunately, her original goal of using the map so she could talk to more people had not been fulfilled.

"But what's important is that I did it. This sense of accomplishment is a treasure in itself… Isn't that right, Puck?"

"Yeah, let's just go ahead and leave it at that, Lia."

Emilia too felt relieved when he agreed with her. It was a strangely roundabout way to say it, but Emilia ignored that.

The trick to getting along with Puck was to avoid fussing over the little stuff.

"Ah, right. Isn't the anniversary of Melakuera's death coming up soon?"

She was making her rounds around the garden, clearing the frost off her forty nine companions. Midway, Emilia muttered this as if she suddenly remembered it. The moment she did, Puck grimaced in dissatisfaction.

"There was no need for you to remember that… It's today. But it'd better if you just forgot about it."

"You're being mean again… There may have been a big quarrel at the end, but he was a friend, wasn't he? I'll have to clean his grave properly."

"I have some doubts as to whether you could really call that a quarrel, and to begin with I was never friends with Melakuera. He was just an acquaintance. We met… Well, I don't really remember."

Climbing up Emilia's silver hair, Puck started grooming his face on top of her head. Emilia sighed at this behavior resembling that of a family cat. His secretiveness hadn't changed.

But she got the feeling that he used his forgetfulness as an excuse a lot more frequently than he did before. Maybe that was related to him breaking his vow to form a contract with Emilia—

"Lia? You'll end up walking into a tree if you space out like that, are you okay?"

"Ah, yeah, I'm fine. I was just thinking for a bit… Right, back then, you became reeeeeally big. I thought for sure that you couldn't return to normal…"

"Aah, I was seriously perplexed when you sincerely started building a huge cat house. You didn't even have any plans, and you were pretty clumsy so you never did get very far, though."

"I know I'm clumsy, so you really should have told me sooner."

"I was really happy that you wanted to do something for me, so it ended up slipping my mind. And your red face when you got all embarrassed and angry was super cute, so it slipped my mind then as well."

"If there were that many slips, you were just playing a prank on me!"

When Emilia's face turned completely red as she got angry, Puck nodded several times in satisfaction.

During their battle with Melakuera, Puck had formed a contract with Emilia, this restored his Od and allowed him to use her excess mana to return to his true form—Since then, she hadn't once seen that giant, monstrous form bearing golden eyes.

"Because it's not very pretty, you see."

That was what Puck said, but she didn't really understand what that meant. However, Emilia also thought that this small form was more Puck-like than the big one, so she didn't complain. It was cute.

"Gosh, just come here already, Puck. I'm mad, so let me touch your ears and tummy."

"You don't really have to come up with that sort of excuse, you can go ahead and touch me whenever you want."

"It's not like I want to touch you, this is your punishment. I'm punishing you for being bad."

She pouted as she hurried him, and Puck descended before her saying, "Right, right" With a blank expression even though he was being punished. He spread his arms out as if telling her to do whatever she wanted, and Emilia reached out to his defenseless body to enjoy his fluffy fur.

His stomach, his ears, and even the base of his neck. A connoisseur like Emilia wouldn't overlook the tip of his tail either.

"Here, take this."

"Nyannyan, so ticklish!"

"Hehe, how was it? You're done? You give up, right?"

"I lost, I lost, I surrender, I surrender. I just can't win against you, huh."

After she toyed with him to her heart's content, she looked upon his wilting, exhausted appearance with satisfaction after which she put him back on her shoulder.

"Good. Now, stay quiet just like that until we get home. And start making preparations once we get back, we'll be visiting Melakuera's grave for the first time in a long while. It might take a while, should we bring lunch?"

"Sure, I do quite like your manly rice balls."

“—? Manly, didn’t that mean something like openly talking about secrets?”

“You remember something from that long ago, huh. To be honest, I’d forgotten.”

She didn’t really understand the connection between secrets and rice balls, but it didn’t seem like Puck had any intention of explaining it so she’d have to think about it on her own. Although she already had many such doubts she never could find the answer to.

Anyway, she had decided what she was going to do once she had finished her daily routine. Once she cleaned off the final one, she went back home while playing with Puck.

Leaping over the stream, ascending the tree’s roots, opening the door to her room—

“—That’s quiiiite the splendid map you have here. I couldn’t help but admire it.”

The instant she entered her room completely devoid of caution, an unfamiliar voice greeted her, causing her to stop.

The voice came from the tall figure standing in the middle of her room with their back to her. The figure with long indigo hair flowing down their back was looking at the map of the forest affixed to her wall.

“It must have taken a great deal of time and effort to create this. Considering the scale of Elior forest and the witchbeasts that dwell within it, it is easy to imagine how haaaaard it must have been.”

“Eh, ah, eh?”

“You possess adequate literacy. The drawings and names are perhaps what one might call creative, but that’s down to individual taste. Now, all that’s left is to look upon the creator… Yes, I see.”

Paying no mind to Emilia’s bewilderment, this person nodded as if confirming something, and finally turned around to face Emilia eye to eye. The sight of their face made Emilia gulp.

Their face was not normal. No, that wasn't quite right. The features themselves were nothing unusual, it was just that their face, well, it was unusual.

"…Makeup?"

"Correct, this is makeup. Howeeeeever, your features haven't been altered in the slightest it would seem."

The man who had painted his face white and his lips purple nodded in response to her question. Taking a good look at him, it wasn't just his makeup, the clothes adorning his body were truly striking as well. That eyesore of a color scheme went well with the makeup on his face, a rather disconcerting combination.

And betraying Emilia's impression of him, the man added this,

"It is truly an honor to be able to meet you. She who dwells in Elior Forest, The Great Witch of Frost."

"—!"

That name was the alias used to refer to her by those who knew she lived in this forest, it had become commonplace in rumors before she knew it.

To be honest, she didn't like it very much. Even now the title of witch was something she struggled with. Therefore—

"I thought I'd be quiet and hear you out, but I see your lack of manners extends well beyond sneaking into my daughter's room."

"Oh deeeear. What have we here, it seems you have a strange pet accompanying you."

Emilia felt uncomfortable, and Puck spoke in her place with a voice and expression full of hostility.

The spirit floated in the air with his arms crossed, keeping the man in check as his eyes widened. In response to Puck's intimidation, the man narrowed his heterochromatic eyes,

“What exactly does your watchdog… No, watchcat, do to visitors lacking in manners?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it. —This is what I’m going to do!”

Puck joined his paws as he spoke, and in an instant a massive whirlpool of mana surrounded the spirit. He turned it into a shockwave, and the man before him was easily—

“Eh?!”

“If thaaaat’s all you’ve got, I’m more than capable of doing the same.”

While looking at the whirlpool of mana, the man casually snapped his fingers. In an instant, he had produced a whirlpool of mana spinning in the opposite direction of the one Puck had formed, and the two collided—

And then—

“…”

—With a violent explosion of light, Emilia’s home of many years was blown to smithereens.

2

“—I have no intention of antagonizing you. I doooo wish you would believe this.”

“…Could you not say that before you spent half a day fighting?”

“Right, exactly, it’s just as Lia says. You’ll really have to reflect on this.”

“You too, Puck! I kept asking you to stop but you just wouldn’t!”

Covered in soot, Emilia was indignant as she yelled at Puck and the man, neither of whom showed any signs of remorse.

They had strayed quite some distance from her home, and were now in the vicinity of the ‘Zig-zagging Woods’ in the eastern region of Elior Forest. But the area had already changed so drastically that it would be hard to call it that anymore, perhaps she even ought to hurry up and change the name on her map to the ‘Bristly Wasteland’

“But eeeeeven so, this is the first time in a long while that anyone has managed to push me to my limit in a battle of magic. Against my better judgement, I forgot all about stopping and went so far as to use my trump card.”

“That goes for both of us. The last one to make go as far as to use my Star Beast form was one of the Four Greats, Melakuera. It would be no idle boast to say you possess power on par with the Four Greats.”

To make matters worse, the two in question completely ignored Emilia’s anger and were starting to get along. Even though they should have used up all of their willpower and stamina, they showed no signs of this whatsoever.

But in response to Puck’s praise, the man laughed meaningfully, “Hohooo”

“Your clash with one of the Four Greats, perhaps you’re refeeeerrring to ‘The Day The Heavens and The Earth Turned Red’ from seven years ago? Two beings possessing extraordinary mana clashed in this forest, producing a colossal calamity that dyed the forest and the sky red, or so the rumor goes.”

“Seven years! It’s already been that long, huh. Time sure goes by quickly.”

“The events of that day ended up becoming that kind of rumor?”

Emilia and Puck exchanged glances, the rumor the man spoke of was familiar to them.

It was definitely about the day they clashed with Melakuera. On that day, Melakuera’s power scorched the land and cleared the skies, spreading an evening glow. It truly was the day the heavens and the earth turned red.

“The ‘Arbiter’ Melakuera has been absent ever since. It is said that his now empty position among the Four Greats is filled by the being known as the ‘Beast of The End’. Perhaaaaaps this new member rings a bell?”

“Ohh, how scary. I can’t say I know of any spirit that goes by such a terrifying name—”

“Puck, didn’t you just show him your Star Beast transformation…”

With his shoddy attempt to play dumb completely failing to fool anyone, Emilia sighed and the man’s smile deepened as he looked at her. Judging by his attitude, it seemed fairly obvious that he already knew this for a fact from the start.

Then perhaps his objective had something to do with Puck, who was now one of the Four Greats.

“If that’s the case, I’ll be joining the fight too. I can see that you’re a reeeally skilled mage, but even you would be at a disadvantage two on one, isn’t that right?”

“I ceeeertainly cannot deny that. So allow me to speak of something else.”

“Speak of something else…?”

As Emilia grew warier, the man flipped his frayed coat and bowed deeply where he stood.

His gesture was so refined that even Emilia who knew little of etiquette could tell how polished it was.

The suddenness of this caused Emilia’s eyes to widen. The man continued with his head lowered before her,

“I humbly apologize for my sudden visit, and moreover, for being so rude as to test you. I am Roswaal. —Margrave Roswaal L Mathers. I am the current head of the Mathers family which has governed the land containing this forest for generations.”

Still in a state of shock, Emilia pondered the man-Roswaal’s words, and soon became even more shocked. Governing the forest, those words reminded her of something Puck had told her a long time ago.

“Are you perhaps… Here to collect money from us?”

“—Hah?”

“I mean, that’s what Puck said before. That outside the forest, even the roads and the land are people’s possessions, and even things like passing through them or living on them mean you would have to pay money. This is your forest, isn’t it?”

Never mind that she didn’t know, she had done something outrageous.

Emilia lost all hope and felt like she could collapse on the spot.

She only wished to quietly, peacefully wait in this forest until her companions woke up, but to think that she was being a bother just by staying here.

“Could this be the reason for my guilt…”

“That would be terrible. Let’s hope you’re wrong about that.”

Puck didn’t seem to agree with her fears, but Emilia too hoped that she was wrong about this. But even if that wasn’t the case, the fact remained that she had been living on someone else’s land for free.

She took a peek at Roswaal and found that he was watching their exchange with an amused expression.

“Ah, please don’t worry about me. Should it seem that this conversation could run long, let’s seeeee, I would be eeeeever so grateful to receive to a cup of tea.”

“R-Right, of course. A cup of tea… Ah, my home…”

About half a day ago, her home had been annihilated when the battle between Puck and Roswaal began. The scale of the magical battle following this made her forget about it, but considering how long she had spent there it was only natural that it would sadden her even now. Furthermore, she had even left her map in that room.

“You worked so hard to make it too, and now it’s completely gone…”

“Hm, so no tea then. And it would appear that the two of you cannot pay the rent you owe for the time you spent living here, is that correct?”

“u… Yes, um, that appears to be the case.”

Money, the problem was money. Just like before, she was purchasing her daily necessities by taking the shiny stones she dug up to the nearby village and using them to trade, so she didn’t have any money on hand.

“That’s right! How about instead of money, I dig up these pretty rocks…”

“Lia, calm down and think about it. The forest belongs to this… Roswaal, so naturally, everything you could find in the forest would also belong to him. That goes for those pretty rocks too.”

“Then I’m a thief?!”

“And me, I guess I was the real homewrecker.”

She had just lost her home, and now it turned out she was a thief all along, the devastating truths just kept coming to light one after another because of which Emilia just about reached the limit of what her heart could handle. Perhaps feeling some pity at seeing her like this, Roswaal clapped his hands, “Understood.”

“Then, let’s say this shall substitute for all the rent you owed until now…”

“Ah! That’s my map!”

Roswaal pulled a rolled up map out of his breast pocket in an exaggerated manner, surprising Emilia. Roswaal smiled in response as he casually waved the rolled up map.

“In truth, this map is a very precious item. Because of the countless witchbeasts prowling around Elior Forest, there has not been oooooone single person so reckless as to attempt to make a map of the area!”

“Really? It is really dangerous, after all.”

“That’s certainly true, but that’s not the only reason. For instance, the fact that investigation groups are unable to eeeeeenter the forest in the first place. It seems that a barrier surrounding the forest repels those who would attempt to enter, and if one were to force themselves through, they would be attacked by a Hollow appearing out of nowhere.”

“Ehh, I didn’t know about that. I’ve never even met anything like a Hollow.”

“Well, that goes for me too. You see, I too passed through the barrier to get here and I did not encounter any Hollows.”

Emilia’s white cheeks turned pale, in response to which Roswaal nodded as if concerned. Right next to Emilia, Puck’s expression turned sour,

“Hmm, I ended up relying on the barrier too much, I wasn’t cautious enough about the possibility that someone would get past it.”

Although he said such things, Emilia took no notice. Anyhow,

“So, you want to take that map as compensation for all the charges until now?”

“Yes, that is correct. Of course, if you believe this to be unfair we could always discuss…”

“No, that’s fine. Keep it. You’ll probably make much better use of it than I would.”

"…"

Emilia interrupted Roswaal before he could say whatever he was going to, she then transferred ownership of the map to him. This made Roswaal's eyes widen, but Emilia had already turned back to Puck,

"Take a good look, it wasn't useless or anything. Because I made that map, we just barely kept our lives. So it was a good thing after all, wasn't it?"

"Is that right? Hmm, that might be the case. Even I can refute that…"

"Right? Alright, I managed to beat Puck. Who did? I did!"

"I suppose so. You did indeed do that, Lia."

The map's unexpected usefulness made Emilia happy, and she was in high spirits as Puck put on a bittersweet smile with a defeated expression.

And then—

"I see. —This coooould certainly pose a problem."

As he watched the two, Roswaal muttered this in a satisfied manner.

"—? Did you just say something?"

Unable to hear what he had muttered, Emilia turned towards him and tilted her head. But Roswaal did not answer her question, he instead stared at her intently with his yellow eye.

"…"

His gaze somehow felt uncomfortable, like he was observing her, like he was peering into her. As his gaze overwhelmed her, she suddenly realized.

Thinking about it clearly, this was the first time she had been able to converse with someone like it was natural.

She didn't even have her robe on right now, so her silver hair and amethyst eyes were out in the open—

"—Are you not afraid of me?"

This was so unexpected to her that she ended up asking him this upfront. The moment she said it, she started to wonder if she had been too direct, but,

"If I had to say whether or not I'm afraid of you, I'd have to say I'm not."

In response to her question, Roswaal solemnly shook his head. He then continued,

"The reeeeason being that I knew from the very start that a half-elf possessing silver hair and amethyst eyes dwelled in this forest, and it was in order to find this person that I came here."

"—Then, don't tell me, you're like those guys."

When she heard that he had come to this forest specifically seeking her, a half-elf with silver hair and amethyst eyes, the characteristics of the witch, what first came to mind was from a long time ago, when those scoundrels invaded the forest. Those people had brought a caged witchbeast with them, and said they were going to make Emilia and her companions slaves.

"You need not worry. My goals are faaaaar nobler than those of such a bunch."

"You sure like to dance around the subject, huh. Setting Lia aside, I'm not a very patient guy. Because I'm a cat, you see."

"I wooooould rather avoid your ire, I shall get to the point then. But first, Lady Lia… Do you wish to be addressed in this manner?"

Shrugging his shoulders in response to Puck's intimidating words, Roswaal directed his gaze towards Emilia. Receiving his gaze, Emilia realized that this was the first time anyone had ever asked to hear her name.

Come to think of it she never did introduce herself, and Puck only ever used his affectionate nickname to refer to her.

So—

"—No, my name is Emilia. I have no family name. Just call me Emilia."

Introducing herself like so, she seemed to thrust her chest toward Roswaal with pride. And Puck was sitting on her shoulder as she did so, she had nothing to be afraid of right now.

One person and one animal, Roswaal drew in his chin when he saw the spirit arts user and spirit line up side by side. He then took a step backward, and got down on one knee as he respectfully bowed to her.

"Very well, Lady Emilia. Allow me to start over, I am Margrave Roswaal L Mathers. As a noble affiliated with the Kingdom of Lugunica, I have come to visit you on this occasion in order to enlist the aid of your esteemed self."

"…Aid?"

"Yes, that is correct. —Lady Emilia, would you please accept this?"

Roswaal took something out of his pocket and offered it to Emilia who was somewhat troubled by his respectful stance and tone. In his palm was a small object with a red jewel embedded in it. There was a design engraved onto the triangular black object—It seemed to be a dragon. She could tell at a glance that it was of great value.

"…"

Still uncomfortable, Emilia nervously extended her hand towards the object in Roswaal's palm. When her finger touched it, she momentarily withdrew her hand as if scared.

"Lia"

She heard Puck call her name as he gently snuggled up to her cheek, and she gave a slight nod in response.

She then took it from Roswaal's hand—

"—It's beautiful. What is this?"

She instinctively sighed as if entranced.

The jewel she accepted somehow started to shine in her palm. The red jewel glowed brilliantly, illuminating the forest cloaked in nightfall.

"This is proof, Lady Emilia."

"Proof… This proves something? What does it prove?"

"That's right!—It proves that you cannot escape your fate."

Roswaal answered her question as he brushed the dust off his knee and stood up. It was not Emilia, but Puck who was somewhat offended by this answer.

"I can't say I like that word."

"Is that so, that's unfortunate."

"Phrases like fated meeting or fated partner are a different matter, though. Because Lia and I have a super strong relationship, a bond bound by fate itself. Tight, super tight. Right, Lia?"

"Sorry, I don't really understand what you're talking about."

Ignoring Puck who was clinging to her cheek, Emilia turned back to Roswaal.

"Well then, Roswaal, what exactly do you want from me?"

"And once I tell you?"

"I think I want to help you if it's something I can do, but…"

She wasn't sure whether or not she would be able to do whatever it was. Roswaal smiled in response to her attitude.

“Then I must request your cooperation with all my heart. This is something only you can do.”

“Something only I can do.”

“A task only you can fulfill. There will be a reward, of course.”

“You don’t really need to…”

“—The reward is a method to awaken the people frozen in this forest.”

“…”

Emilia was about to turn down any sort of reward, but Roswaal’s words completely drowned that out. Taking notice of this reaction, Roswaal nodded deeply.

“I see your eyes have chaaaaanged.”

“—Could you explain in greater detail? What exactly it is that you want me to do.”

“Of course. Well then, let us sit down and… Oh dear, it would seem your home no longer exists. Weeeeell then, there’s no helping it. There is a dragon carriage waiting for us. Might I ask you to accompany me?”

Roswaal shamelessly said this as he extended his arm to indicate the outside of the forest.

Even Emilia who knew her judgement wasn’t very good understood the reason he waited for them at her home. He was planning to cut off any path of escape from the very start.

“You didn’t need to go that far.”

Even if he hadn’t cornered her like this, Emilia would not falter. If by following him she could free her frozen companions, if she could just find out how to do that.

“—Lia.”

Having received her assent, Roswaal started walking ahead of her. As she followed after him, Puck who was on her shoulder whispered in a voice only she could hear.

Emilia was prepared to hear something like how she should be careful about doing something so dangerous, or how it would be best if she stopped.

However—

“No matter where you go or what you decide to do, I’ll stay by your side.”

“…”

“Because it’s also a father’s duty to accept his daughter’s wishes, you see.”

Touching her cheek as if caressing it, Puck winked at her as she looked at him in surprise. His unchanging attitude and behavior saved her, and she nodded.

“Yeah. I’m counting on you. —So stay with me.”

“Until you no longer want to enter the bath with me, I’ll always be with you.”

“…You dummy.”

Emilia suppressed her laughter as she said this in response to his carefree and facetious tone.

As they had their exchange, Roswaal who was walking ahead of them stopped and looked back at them.

“Sorry, I’ll be right there—”

Saying this, with Puck by her side, Emilia started running—

—What awaited the girl and the spirit beyond the forest?

—That’s a story for another day.

END

The Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village

Prologue:
The Hornless Twins

—There exists a race called “Oni”.

In this world, humans were called the weak race that was the most abundant.

In this world, Demi-humans were called the race that was powerful to make up for the lack of numbers they had in comparison to people.

Onis and Humans looked like two peas in a pod with their appearances, but they were unmistakably true Demi-humans. They had the best body and mental strength for Demi-humans, and they earned the title as the world’s strongest race.

Should an Oni clan’s warrior appear on the battlefield, they’d wipe out thousands of soldiers. They would display powerful, unrivaled, almighty movements, and everyone would have stories to tell about that unmatched strength, their excellent magic techniques, and above all, the fascinating, shining white horns on their forehead.

However, all the activities and glory and such of the Oni clan admired in the legends were all things of the past.

In the present, the Onis had the multitude of their passed down anecdotes completely forgotten, and the race was slowly coming close to extinction.

The Oni clan’s downfall—there were two causes that stood out noticeably above the rest for the impending historical demise.

First of all, there was the fact that the Oni clan was too strong.

For many people, the Oni clan’s power that overwhelmed other races became something to fear and drive out. To put it appropriately, for the people afraid of the return of the “Witch of Envy”, it seemed really close to how the Elves became persecuted. Similarly, it’s said that in ancient times there was also a similar type of rejection towards giants.

Ironically enough, the Oni clan’s unrivaled power people found out about became the cause of other races making them their enemy.

And then there was the second cause, the Oni clan’s reproduction ability. Onis were strong as individuals, but on the other hand, their ability to bear children was remarkably poor, and they couldn’t increase their numbers like other races could.

The Oni clan population decreased rapidly as a result of that and the rejection from other races. They disappeared from the center stage of history, and they had to live in villages in the mountains. And so, even after that, the Oni clan’s numbers continued to decrease slowly—the destruction of the Oni clan’s final village was also now in front of their eyes.

???: “—They’re twins.”

The midwife lifts the bloodstained baby, and she said that as her sweaty cheeks stiffened up.

The hoarse, tired speaking of the old woman makes everyone at that place open their eyes wide all at once. Meanwhile, what resounded throughout the gathering was the first cry of a baby that had just came out of her mother’s womb.

The twins born on this day were new life the Oni clan was looking forward to.

The one who raised her voice and cried very loudly was the younger sister. The older sister had already been picked up and lain on a white, clean cloth. She didn’t cry, but she opened her eyes.

She looks around the assembly hall with her light pink eyes, and lastly she stared at her little sister that was just born.

???: “Twins, they’re twins, meaning that…”

The old woman who continued to hold onto the born twins repeats herself in a hoarse voice to make sure this was the reality.

That voice did not have the color of joy; it had only shock and acute sadness.

And everyone in this place felt the same way as the old woman, no exceptions.

???: “To think that you’d get pregnant with twins on this opportunity…you’ve done something unbelievably foolish, Temae!!”

Temae: “Eep…”

Inside the room ruled by surprise and sorrow, the one person who shook in anger was a gray haired old man. The old but muscular man shouts at the woman out of breath next to the midwife. The women that had just gave birth stiffens her pale face, and she shrieked at that angry voice.

Quark: “Setanta-sama! Temae…my wife has done nothing wrong! My wife…”

Setanta: “Be quiet, Quark! Do you even understand? Are you even aware of just how many expectations we had in you and Temae…if you are, then keep your mouth shut!”

Quark: “Gulp…”

Setanta: “Chika! Hand me the baby!”

The husband, whose wife got shouted at, stood up, but a grey elder silences them in anger. The grey elder goes towards the assembly hall room, and he stretched his arms towards the old woman who was holding onto the baby that was still crying.

Midwife: “Chief, these children are…”

Setanta: “There are no exceptions to the law. No matter what anyone says, that's final."

The grey elder's firm attitude makes the old woman lose her breath, and after that, she looked down at the baby in her chest. She gazes at the light pink eyes of the baby who wouldn't cry, and the old woman holds out that baby to the grey elder

Temae: "Se-Senta-sama…please have mercy…"

"…"

The twins' mother begs for mercy from the grey elder while she sprawled on the futon wet with blood. However, the grey elder ignored those words, and he placed the baby he was given next to the one that was born first.

The newborn twin sisters. The quiet older sister, and the crying younger sister. The grey elder looks towards the younger sister's forehead, and he said,—

Setanta: "One horn…they're cursed children after all."

What protruded from the crying baby's forehead was a bump that was white and the size an adult's pinky.

It was an organ unique to the Oni clan, and also proof that she was an Oni; it was a "Horn". Of course, everyone in this place had a horn. However, everyone had two of them.

Setanta: "The horns were divided and the twins were born lacking a horn. To think that I'd come across cursed children in my generation…"

Temae: "Chief! Can't you…can't you have some mercy? To us, to this village, these are babies we've been waiting for!"

Setanta: "Quit it! There will be no mercy! There are no exceptions to the law, even if that means going into ruins as a result of protecting the law. Bending the law is unforgivable."

The grey elder covered up the twins' father's shouting with a louder angry voice. The crying baby's voice became even louder and stronger, perhaps because of the raise of emotion in their two voices.

The grey elder faces the wall to shake off the baby's crying that filled the whole gathering, and he picked up the long sword that hung. It was a broken edged piece of iron, and it was used for rituals.

Setanta: "Cursed children shall not live. If they're going to live disgraceful lives hornless, then the only way to show sympathy is cutting off that path right now when they've just been born."

Temae: "M-My children…"

Seeing the white older facing the twins with a long sword makes their gasping mother let out a heartbreaking voice. That sound causes pain to run across the grey elder's profile, and when the grey elder blocked her vision with his own back, he said

Setanta: "Cover Temae's eyes and ears. It'll scar her."

He was going to kill that child in front of the mother. The grey elder also knew just how cruel this act was.

The twins' father holds down their exhausted, weak, resisting mother. Nobody went against the decision of the grey elder who was the chief. But, nobody tried to look away from that act.

"…"

The grey elder feels the readiness of those around him, and he raises the gripped sword. The grey elder bites his molars, focusing strength into his eyes, and two white, long horns protruded from his forehead.

Since they were born in the Oni clan village, it would be a death they could be proud of as Onis—.

"…"

The grey elder giving off his Oni spirit like a Rakshasa makes the baby raise her voice, and she cries as the intent to murder pierced her. This was the younger twin's most powerful cry of all. The older twin looks at her with a side glance.

Setanta: "—Forgive me."

The situation burns into the white man's memory at the end, and he faced the twins as he swung the long sword downward. The blow of the sword that held onto two lives went towards the twins' thin heads flawlessly.

However—

Setanta: "Nu—?!"

Wind envelopes the gathering. The grey elder who swung his long sword gets overwhelmed by the impact, and he backed off.

The grey elder steps on his heels with such force that it could have removed the wooden floor, and in response to the incident that happened just before, he opens his eyes wide. The old white man clearly saw what happened.

Setanta: "Was that…"

There was a white light being produced throughout the gathering in front of the grey elder, whose voice trembled in amazement. The two twins lying down on the floor—no, the light pink eyed older twin gave off the light.

On that baby's forehead, there was only one horn. It was only a single horn, something abominable to the Oni clan. It was proof of being damaged, a symbol of being incomplete, an absence that defiled pride, the lack of a horn—and yet

"…"

Nobody could speak. They were all fascinated by that older twin's white horn.

That was the beautiful, powerful, robust, and prideful proof of an Oni.

The Oni clan valued their pride and strength more than anything. That made the Oni clan what it was today.

That’s exactly why everyone in the gathering hung their heads and kneeled.

The grey elder, old woman, and the twins’ father and mother were no exceptions. All the Onis at that place kneeled as they submitted to the newly born peak of pride and strength.

This was the day when the Oni clan, which had their slow destruction right before their eyes, witnessed the birth of the final Oni god.

The Oni clan felt like it was their last hope, and also the last path to glory.

However, that was—

???: “Ah…”

The younger twin stops her crying, and she reaches out gently towards the older twin beside her.

The older twin looks at her younger sister’s held out hand with squinted eyes. While surging enormous power from the sprouted horn on her forehead, the older twin intertwines her fingers with the fingers of her other half.

The Oni clan’s hope, the arrival of a new Oni god, all those circumstances of the surrounding adults were nothing but trivial things to these girls who were brought into this world as twins.

Chapter 1:
A Fiery Night

1

—Rem slowly wakes up at a veranda bathed in pleasant sunlight.

It seemed like the light of the sun was so comfortable that she fell asleep while day dreaming. Rem rubs her sleepy eyes, wipes the drool she felt on her cheek with her sleeve, and she looked around.

She was a very young girl. She had on a white kimono, which was a native dress, and she wore Zoris on her feet. Even though the playful age was evident in her short, blue hair, she seemed to be squinting the eyes of her lovely face in a lonely way.

With her squinted eyes, she sees a familiar scenery. Rem suddenly notices the zabuton placed below her body. Rem, who had been sleeping, had an idea of who would do such a nice thing for her.

The person that came to mind was not by her side. When Rem jumped uneasily off the veranda, she scurried to the plaza in the middle of the village.

How long did she sleep? The sun above her head was still high, so she'd like to think that not a long time had passed, but she didn't even have confidence in that judgement. She slowly begins to feel tears coming from her eyes.

???: "Oh, Rem-chan. You're full of energy today again."

Rem: "…"

A woman's voice stops Rem, who felt unease in her chest. When she turned around, she saw a lady in her prime, who lived next door. They lived in the same village, and they were the same race. It was a face Rem was familiar with for as long as she could remember, but—

Rem: “Ah…”

Rem’s face flushes as she grumbles and looks down. Rem was feeling embarrassment and shame as she blushed, so she couldn’t respond. But, the woman didn’t notice that state of hers, and she said,

???: “It’s warm today, so playing outside does sound like fun. Children being lively makes me happy.”

Rem: “Um, um…”

???: “Oh yeah, is Ram-sama not with you today? That’s unusual.”

Rem: “…”

Rem holds her breath shortly at the end of the seemingly friendly voice. The reason she did was because of the name she said—it was the name of her sister, which she said with an honorific attached. No doubt about it, that was the cause of Rem’s heart burning.

???: “Ram-sama is the Oni clan’s next chief, so if she isn’t taken care of…”

Rem: “I, um…I…I’ll go…to…Onee-chan…erm…I’m sorry.”

Rem forcefully interrupts the conversation. Once she bowed her head while blushing, she ran away in a hurry. Rem’s sudden actions surprised the woman, but she waved Rem goodbye as she became distant and she said,

???: “Rem-chan, make sure to tell Ram-sama to return home before it gets daaaark.”

Then, she threw kindness at her that was not meant to be harmful at all.

While hearing the woman’s voice from behind, Rem’s eyes gradually become wet with tears. Rem gets disappointed with herself again and she starts to feel bad, and she forced herself to speed up as she closed her eyes.

Rem: “…”

Rem makes it to the plaza, and she looks for a crowd. Her older sister was always surrounded by people. This meant that if there was a crowd, her sister would be there, and if there wasn’t, she wouldn’t be at that place.

So, her sister was nowhere in sight at this plaza that had no crowd. Rem’s feeling of hopelessness gets worse and worse.

She had to find her now. She had to look for where she was—

???: “—Rem?”

Rem’s whole body shakes quietly in reaction to the voice that reached her ears and kept asking for her.

A pink haired little girl was looking at Rem, who turned around as if on demand. She had the same hairdo and clothes as Rem, and she had beautiful, light pink eyes. It was a girl who looked like she was full of dignity and self-confidence.

She was Rem’s other half, and the most respected and loved being in this generation—it was her older twin, Ram.

Ram stares at Rem, who had turned around, and when she gently touched her stiff cheeks, she said

Ram: “Rem, what happened? You look like you’re going to cry.”

Rem: “Because when I woke up, Onee-chan wasn’t there…”

Rem frantically shakes her head at her older sister as she implicitly asked who was cruel to her. She told her that it was just that she felt uneasy from not seeing Ram as she should’ve been with her before she fell asleep.

When Ram lowered her eyebrows in response to that reply, she gently hugged Rem, who looked lonely.

Ram: “Ah, I’m sorry. You looked like you were enjoying your sleep so much, so I’d feel bad for waking you up, Rem…”

Rem: “I-It’s my fault for falling asleep. But please don’t leave me behind…”

Ram: “You’re right, I won’t then. Next time I’ll call your name, Rem. But if you slept a little longer, I would’ve came back. …Rem has to deal with the boring duties, anyway.”

Getting hugged and patted on the head gently, Rem closed her eyes in reaction to Ram’s kindness.

Rem understood what her older sister did after she left her behind while she was sleeping—actually, her duties at this time were Ram’s daily routine. This was just Rem forgetting about that and becoming uneasy on her own.

Rem: “How were…your…duties…?”

Ram: “It was as boring as always. The reincarnation of an Oni God, the restoration of the race and all that…it’s so stupid.”

Rem: “Is that so…?”

Ram: “I understand that the adults are desperate and that they have expectations in me. I know how outstanding I am. But we can’t go back in time…those adults don’t understand that.”

Rem: “—?”

Someone still young like Rem could not understand much of what Ram was saying. Rem’s own sister who was the same age as her showed a level of wisdom that put adults to shame, and that made her feel worthless.

She was pathetic for not being able to understand how Ram felt with the constant troubles she had to face. The most painful thing for Rem was the unconditional love Ram gave to someone like herself.

Ram: “You don’t have to hurry, Rem. Rem, you can walk at your own pace. I’m an older sister, so I’ll wait for you, Rem.”

Rem: “Y…yes.”

Rem accepts the security she felt from the hand caressing her back, and she gets wrapped in love that felt like it was going to melt.

Everyone in the village adored and respected Ram. But on the other hand, Ram didn’t open up to anyone in the village, and she thought that expectations and respect and such were troublesome.

The younger twin Rem was the only one Ram truly loved from the bottom of her heart.

It was the treasure that Rem was the most proud of, and at the same time, the most suffocating burden.

Rem: “…”

But still, Rem hugged her sister back, making sure not to let go of that warmth.

For Ram, Rem was her lovable other half, and Rem felt the same way about her. Well, actually Ram was more than a half to Rem—

Rem: “…Onee-chan?”

Rem lets out an uneasy sounding voice in response to Ram suddenly turning away and glaring at the opposite side of the village. Listening to her, Ram says this while looking over there.

Ram: “Someone’s entered the village. I’m gonna go check this out.”

Rem: “—W-We should get hel…”

Ram: “I won’t be gone for long. Rem, you stay behind and…”

Rem: “I want to go! I’m going, too. Go with Onee-chan…!”

Since she was always getting left behind, her loneliness won over the fear of the unknown being. Ram pondered a little about Rem, who clung onto her, but as she immediately let out a sigh she said, Ram: “Stay by my side. Okay?”

Ram gives that order, and they go to the opposite side of the plaza—the entrance that connected the village and the mountain path, while holding hands. Rem felt anxiety now because of the outsider that came into the village while doing her best to run after Ram, who ran quickly.

If Ram was there, there wouldn’t be any problems. But still, she was worried about what she’d do if it was someone scary.

However, Ram arrived at the destination much faster than the worry hit Rem.

Ram: “—Stop right there, swine. This is not a village you can just simply enter without permission.”

Ram blocks the village’s entrance, chest thrown out with confidence, and she declared that as she faced forward. Being out of breathe as she chased after her, Rem nervously took a look at the person behind her sister.

The one who was greeted by those two little Onis was a bald, old man that had on shabby clothes. However, that old person looked two times taller than the old people Rem knew about from common knowledge. Her eyes were not deceiving her. The old person really did have a strangely large constitution and a scary look.

???: “Oh, it’s the little Onis of this village. Back then there weren’t any children.”

At first the old man was surprised, but once he found out that he was dealing with kids, he immediately made a relieved look. However, Ram snorted her nose as she went “Huh” in response to that reaction, and she said,

Ram: “Bringing up outdated information and acting as if you know someone is a trite and poor trick. Rem, get back. I’m going to tear him apart.”

???: “You’re quite the aggressive kid! Isn’t your Oni blood showing a little too much?!”

Ram: “I am the reincarnation of an Oni God and a famous prodigy. Not very memorable for your last words, Giant.”

???: “Are you really going to say those sharp words after knowing that I’m a Giant…”

The old man responds to Ram’s harsh speaking by stroking his head in a troubled way. Watching their interaction close by, Rem becomes flustered by the situation while being left out.

However, in contrast with Rem’s flustering, Ram and the old man ease up.

Ram: “So? Why is a Giant, whose tribe is close to extinction, at a hidden Oni village?”

???: “Hey you, a leader in extinction came to see you guys, Onis who are on the verge of extinction. Show some respect.”

Ram: “Acting all high and mighty just because you’re going to die first proves that old people are problematic.”

???: “You sure are a charmless girl…you should learn from your sister behind you.”

Rem quickly hides behind Ram as the topic of the conversation suddenly switched to her. The old man makes a hurt expression because of that reaction, and Ram clicks her tongue loathingly.

Ram: “You deserve to die 1000 times for frightening my cute little sister.”

???: “Spare me from having it happen 1000 times. —I came to see an old friend, Setanta. He should still be the chief. I haven’t heard of him dying, after all.”

Ram: “The Chief…”

Setanta was the Oni clan chief, as well as an old person that was this hidden village's mediator. He had grey hair, a large build, an awfully strong sense of intimidation, and he was someone Rem couldn't deal with very well. Although, Ram and her parents were just about the only people she was fine with.

Ram: "What do you need from the chief? If you get the chief killed now, the role would be handed over to me and that would be troublesome, so I would appreciate it if you didn't try that."

???: "The jokes kids have these days are thrilling…still, doesn't seem like you're entirely lying."

After dropping his shoulders dejectedly, the old man squinted his eyes to take a good look at Ram. Those eyes disturbed Ram, but he looked at Rem, as if done incidentally, and it made her feel uncomfortable.

In any case—

Ram: "Fine. I will guide you to the chief's residence. Even if you say you don't need me to, I will go with you anyway."

???: "You're a cautious little oni, aren't you. It's not like…I don't understand how you feel, though."

Ram: "Rem, if you ever think this Giant is acting weird, let me know. I'll kill him."

???: "You're gonna make me angry if you don't cut this out now!"

Rem: "O-Okay, got it. Let Onee-chan know, right?"

???: "This girl too?! What kind of manners have you been taught to welcome guests like this…"

Rem and Ram bring along the old man, who hung his head more out of defeat rather than shock, and they guided him to the chief's residence—a wooden building in the deepest part of the village.

That place was called the "Chief's Residence", but there weren't any big differences between the building and the other houses in the village.

However, there were only two people living in it, the chief and his wife, so it had enough space.

Ram: “Chief, I brought a large old man who claims he’s an acquaintance of yours. Is he really an acquaintance?”

???: “There you go again…”

Ram makes the old person frown, and she calls out from the building’s entrance. Then, after a short moment of silence, the door opens, and Setanta appeared with a stern face. Setanta stares at Ram and Rem, and then finally he sees the old person as he said,—

Setanta: “That’s a face that takes me back, Cromwell. Surprising to see you come here.”

Cromwell: “You haven’t changed…is what I’d like to say, but I can’t. You got old, too. You look as if your body got a size smaller.”

Setanta: “With your body, everyone around you looks like children…probably.”

They have a conversation that was like renewing friendship, and Setanta turned his attention to Rem and the others. When the grey elder stiffened his loose cheeks, he said,

Setanta: “Thanks a lot for guiding him, you two. He’s definitely someone I know. He’s called Cromwell of the Giants.”

Cromwell: “I don’t like that way of saying my name. I go by Rom now.”

Ram: “What a crude name change.”

Rom: “It just had to be done. If you said it would be easy to call me that, that is.”

The old man, who was formerly known as Giant and called himself Rom, lowered his eyebrows slightly and made that response. He seemed different from before, and he somehow gave off a feeling of deep affection, but nothing more than that could be understood.

Setanta: “You must’ve came a long way, Cromwell. Let’s talk inside. —Also, Ram, you stay. Rem, you go home before her.”

Rem: “…”

Setanta continued the conversation indifferently, while Rem held her breathe as she held onto Ram’s sleeve. Ram was going to carry a burden again with Rem being unable to help her.

But, Ram put her hand on Rem’s shaking fingers to cover them. And then she said,

Ram: “With all due respect, Chief, I think a young person like myself will only be a nuisance to a renewal of an old friendship. Besides, I promised to sprinkle the village’s fields after this.”

Setanta: “…Hmph. Your true feelings?”

Ram: “Rem would feel lonely, and I don’t want to be shut in a room for old geezers.”

“…”

She gives a rejection with details that were too frank, and it makes even Setanta open his eyes wide. Rem was also surprised by her sister’s intense, sharp tongue, but Ram kept a composed expression.

Rom: “Haaahaha! You’ve lost, Setanta! Children have their own stubborn viewpoints. I’d feel sorry for making her tag along on our old people tea drinking, too. Just let her go.”

Ram: “Even the guest is saying these sort of things, so I’ll be excusing myself. —Let’s go, Rem.”

Rem: “Eh…ah…okay, Onee-chan…”

Rem takes advantage of Rom’s words, who laughed wildly, and she took Rem’s hand as she quickly left that place. Following her sister who was walking fast, Rem looked back at the chief out of slight curiosity.

Rem: “Ee—”

Setanta’s glaring eyes make Rem regret looking back. She hurries up greatly to match the pace of Ram, and the sisters go far away from the residence.

Ram: “Rem, it’s fine now. The two of them entered the residence. Nobody is looking anymore.”

Rem: “—Ah”

Rem calms down because of Ram’s voice, who stopped in the middle of returning to the village’s plaza. In response to her sister who was looking at her straight on with her light pink eyes, Rem said this while being slightly out of breathe:

Rem: “I wonder why that guest came to this village.”

Ram: “Who knows? He’s at least able to enter this village, so he’s definitely a worthless acquaintance of the chief. Which means that he probably has some very worthless things to do.”

Rem: “Doesn’t Onee-chan have a lot to do, too? Are you going to be busy?”

Ram: “If you think of it as the adults wanting to rely on me, I will be. It’s going to be a pain.”

Ram folds her arms, and she sighs with a mature expression that didn’t match her age. She was an older sister that took a cold attitude towards basically everything, but Rem understood the subtle differences of her sister.

This reaction of Ram was an attitude she would have when she was seriously shunning the fact that something was right before her eyes.

Rem: “Is there something I can do for Onee-chan?”

Ram: “Rem…”

Rem: “If it’s something Onee-chan doesn’t like, then I want to help.

I might not be able to do anything since it's me…but I want to be with you."

Ram gazed in wonderment at Rem's words, her facing down as she rubbed her fingers together. Then, immediately after, when Ram stood in front of Rem, she touched her forehead with her own as she said,

Ram: "It's okay. Just having Rem care about me like that makes me 100 times stronger. I'm already this amazing, so with that, now I'm unstoppable."

Rem: "Onee-chan's amazing…"

Ram: "Yes, I am amazing. I mean, I am Rem's Onee-chan."

That was not really the basis for Ram being an Oni, being the next chief, and being called the "Reincarnation of an Oni God". It was more the basis for her being proud of being Rem's older sister.

That made Rem feel embarrassed, but it made her so happy that it seemed like her body was going to melt.

Ram: "Now, let's go, Rem. I want to play with Rem all day today."

Rem: "O-Okay…but Onee-chan, the field watering…"

Ram: "Ah, that. —Yeah."

Rem mentions pouring water to Ram, her smiling, and she immediately regrets it. However, when Ram squinted in reaction to that point, she looked towards where the village's fields were. And then—

"…"

Ram produces wind, and the sand at her feet starts a spiral with her in the center. Next to Rem, who was surprised by the aftermath of that power, a white horn extended from Ram's forehead as she had her eyes squinted.

Even Rem, her twin, was captivated by the beauty of that horn.

The tremendous power produced from Ram's horn, who was respected and admired by every Oni, gushed out towards the field—to put it precisely, it gushed out not towards the field, but the stream next to it.

The stream's water undulates wildly, bathing in the power of Ram's eyes. Immediately after that, the force of the water current producing ripples rises towards the sky, and it came up to the surface right above the field like a serpent. And then the body of the water serpent explodes above the field as water scatters all over the field.

Ram: "—Now my business is taken care of. Let's go, Rem."

The paranormal phenomenon finishes just like that. Rem nods at Ram's words, who put away her horn.

The ability to shoot that much water from such a far range—that truly was the outstanding work of an Oni God. Rem and everyone in the village could not possibly try to imitate something like that.

Ram was special, and the fact that she had unreachable power was the greatest proof for that.

It was something Rem was proud of more than anything—

Rem: "Okay, Onee-chan."

She takes her older sister's hand, chasing after her as she ran ahead.

Even if Ram hurried and hurried, she would always care for Rem and match her pace.

—Rem was proud of that, but at the same time, it became a very strong thorn, and it pierced her chest.

2

Once it became the evening, Rem and Ram returned to the village, and they were covered in mud.

What these two carried with their hands, their white kimonos so dirty that they turned black, was a basket that had countless loot of yams.

The yams were buried in soil and connected by vines, and there were as much yams as the two of them could handle with their arms. Ram was in a good mood, having harvested more than 10 of them.

Rem: “Onee-chan, you look happy.”

Ram: “Well of course. It’s because we’ll be able to eat tons of Rem’s steamed potatoes if we have this much. That’s the best treat of all for me.”

She shows a big smile that she would seldom show, and Rem smiles at her sister, who showed an unusually childish smile.

The steamed potato Ram talked about was a simple dish Rem made by borrowing the kitchen from her mother, and it would only be made whenever they’d harvest yams like this. It wasn’t complex enough be called a dish, but Ram was happy with Rem’s steamed potato more than she was with anything else. The village would put their best efforts into making various things for Ram if she wished for it, and yet what Ram wanted was Rem’s steamed potato.

Ram: “Your seasoning is perfect. Rem is the only one who can make a steamed potato that would make me happy.”

Rem: “Ehehe…then I’ll try my best again today and steam them for Onee-chan.”

Ram: “Yes, steam a lot. I’ll be having seconds.”

Rem smiles at Ram, who declared her gluttony with a gallant expression, and she fixes the way she carried the basket filled with yams.

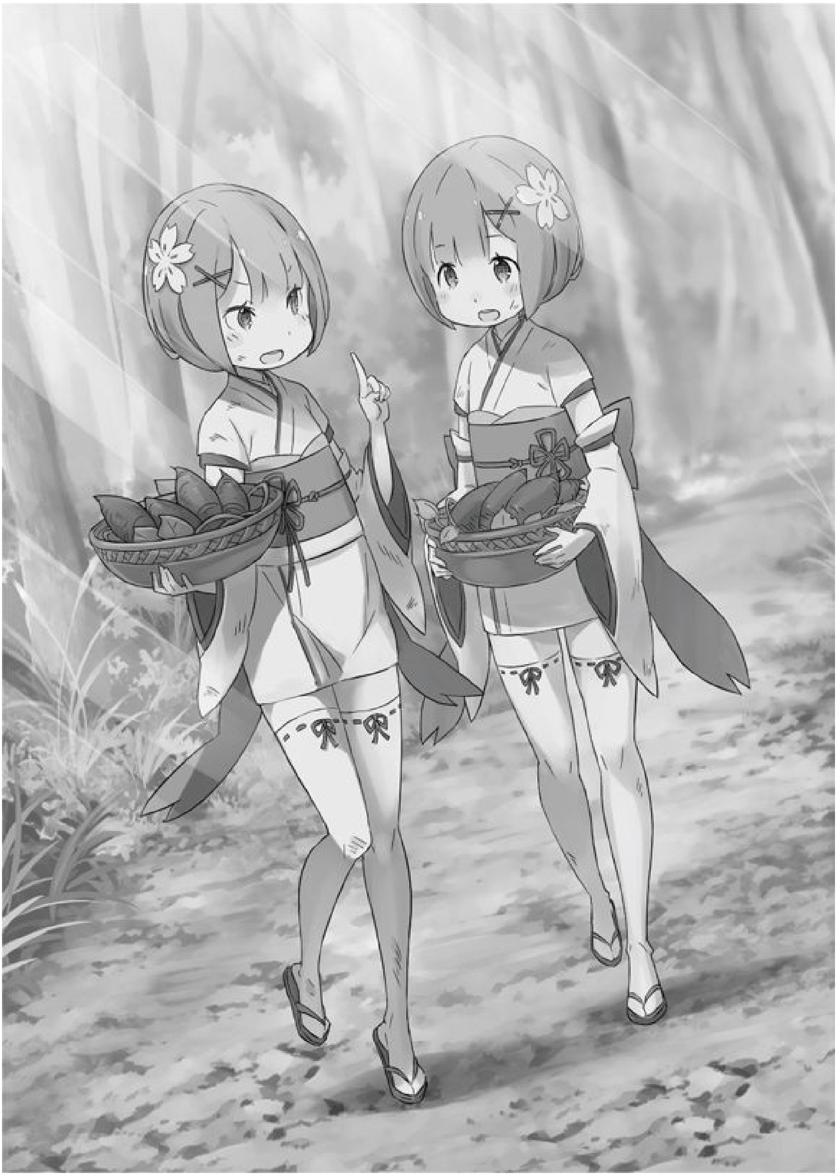

They return to the village from the mountain path like that, and they headed home—then, suddenly they stopped.

The reason being because there were two long shadows at the village's entrance bathing in the setting sun.

Ram: "The chief and that Giant person?"

There were two people standing at the village entrance: "Rom, who they guided to the residence a few hours ago, and Setanta, who greeted him. Once again, the two old people appear to have noticed Rem and Ram returning to the village, as one of them said,

Setanta: "—Went to the potato fields in the mountains again I see."

Ram: "Yes, as it is my only hobby. So, are you finished with your evil scheme?"

Ram's remark to Setanta, who had a grim look, even had a bite in it. Rem could only feel uneasy about that blunt attitude as someone who was aware of how Ram had been harsh to Setanta lately.

However, a big, gigantic old person shook his head in between the two who were about to cause a sense of insecurity.

Rom: "Can't you stop being tense with a kid? It's shameful. Besides, your opinion isn't going to get you anywhere…it looks like she's not convinced."

Setanta: "That's because she's still young. Should she start to have self-awareness and pride, things will take care of themse…"

Rom: "You oughtn't treat her like a kid only when it's convenient. Plus, well, in my eyes, it looks like this girl's nature has nothing to do with age and readiness."

Ram: "…"

Ram calmly answers Rom's eyes, which seemed like they were seeing through her, with a wise expression of her own eyes. Rem understood that Setanta and Rom were talking about Ram, but she still couldn't understand the details. But, Rem sensed that her sister resented it, and she held tight onto the basket of yams that she was carrying.

Rom: "Anyway, my answer is final. I'm pretty worn-out."

Setanta: "You sure have lost your energy, Cromwell. Or maybe I should say you don't take the initiative anymore?"

Rom: "You should say that I've gotten old. You and I, it's the same deal for both of us."

Rom responds quietly to Setanta's hateful sounding remark, and he turned his back on him. Stepping hard on the ground, the old man sought to leave the village as he went down the mountain path.

As he passed through Rem and Ram's side, he said—

Rom: "Always be close sisters. Don't forget that."

Rom leaves just those words behind, passes through the mountain path without stopping, and he went out of sight. Watching that large back become distant, Rem said nothing in confusion. She just wanted either Ram or Setanta to move so that the situation could end quickly.

Setanta: "He may be like that, but he was once a warrior that worried about being a brother. …Not a trace of his former self is left."

However, in contrast with Rem's wish, Setanta started talking about the old man that left. Rem couldn't understand the details, but Ram snorted in response.

Ram: "Time changes people. The change is unavoidable, for better or worse."

Setanta: "…He got involved with people too much for such a long time. He pandered that much to people he must've hated, so much that his anger faded overtime. A hopeless weakling."

The grey elder grinds his teeth, and he spits towards the back that couldn't be seen anymore. Seeing that anger, Rem remembers the words Rom said and the eyes he had when he left.

She felt like those eyes didn't have the spineless weakness the chief was calling him out for. There was the emotion of treasuring someone in those eyes. That would definitely be the reason why he'd seem different from back then.

But, Rem didn't even have a bit of the courage needed to say that out loud.

Setanta: "There's not a chance I'll see his face again. I feel relieved."

Ram: "Congrats on losing one of the few friends you have. I'd like to celebrate by treating you with steamed potatoes. How about it?"

Rem gets startled by Ram, who held up a bunch of potatoes as she invited the chief to dinner. However, Ram wasn't even serious. She knew what he'd say, so you could say it was a joke.

Setanta: "Unfortunately, I'm not in the mood for it. Perhaps another time."

Ram: "Miss one chance to eat Rem's steamed potatoes and you'll never come across one again. Go and regret having declined this invitation for an eternity. Let's go, Rem."

Rem: "Um, okay, yes. Chief, excuse me."

Continuing after Ram, who had a triumphant expression, Rem also bowed her head and left quickly. Afterwards, only the frowning chief remained, and Rem looked back at him over and over as she said "Is it really fine?".

Ram: "Rem is so nice. It's fine. A stupid adult just had his stupid plan belittled, that's all."

Rem: "Onee-chan, are you fine with it?"

Ram: "Yeah. I'm relieved that the stupid plan ended with a stupid conversation. In that respect, I'll have to thank that old Giant for making fun of the stupid adult."

She felt like she had been relatively bitter towards Rom until the end, but Ram had her own deep thoughts. Rem understood that, and she didn't really try poke her nose into it.

If there was one thing that was on her mind, it would be—

Rem: "He said that person used to be scary…he didn't seem like it at all."

Ram: "Yeah. The answer for the friction between Humans and Demi-humans was found through interaction. It was something like that, I suppose. In that case—"

Rem: "Onee-chan?"

With a curious look, Rem calls Ram, who stopped and went into deep thought. But there was still no reaction from Rem, her eyes closed. It was the first time the older sister didn't notice Rem calling her.

Rem: "Onee-chan, Onee-chan"

Ram: "—Don't worry, nothing's wrong. I was just thinking for a bit."

Rem: "Thinking? About what?"

Ram: "About eating the steamed potatoes Rem made, of course."

Then, Ram's stomach rumbled at the same time she said that. The stomach that sounded like the growling of a beast astonishes Rem, and Ram let her hear that sound with much pride as she said,

Ram: "It's just like you hear it. Let's get going. If we don't hurry, my stomach will break and I'll die."

Rem: "O-Okay. Got it. Let's get going then, Onee-chan."

Rem nods many times as she got overwhelmed by Ram appealing with a serious look. Afterwards, Rem was able to think of all sorts of ways to make the steamed potatoes efficiently while she hurried back home with her sister.

That was how Rem's head was filled with steamed potatoes, and not once did she remember Ram seriously thinking about something.

And not once did Rem feel regret from it.

With that, she also completely forgot about the visitor that came to the Oni village, and the days went by.

The sun rises and the sun sets repeatedly without Ram, Rem, or any of the Onis changing.

And so, time went on—

3

—For Rem, that fateful night was too sudden.

Rem: "…Onee-chan?"

Waking up at night alone, Rem let out her voice as she searched for her sister in the darkness.

Inside the room, she didn't see Ram, who should've been sleeping right by her side.

The sisters shared a room, and they shared a bed as well as they'd sleep next to each other. No matter how many times Rem reached her hand out, she couldn't find her sister's body which would usually be in a place where she could feel her.

Rem: "Maybe…she went to the bathroom."

Rem sits up in the darkness, and she ponders her sister's absence.

Ram would usually wake up earlier than Rem, and she would sleep later than Rem. Therefore, Rem never got to see her sister's sleeping face. Should Rem wake up at night to pee, Ram would wake up with her as if she knew. However, that also was something that only happened in the same room.

Not once was she gone from the room leaving Rem behind like she was today.

Rem: “…”

That makes Rem feel like something was off, and so she stepped on the floor barefoot when she removed the bed cover. She feels a strange uneasiness, and she reached for the door, feeling that she had to find Ram right away.

—That’s when she finally noticed it, although it was too late.

Rem: “—Huh?”

An intoxicating, burnt smell, and strangely humid air that reached the skin to caress it. The heat that made her wet with sweat clearly did not match this hidden village’s climate, not to mention climate of the night.

—There was fire. Flames. Fire was produced outside the door, and it enveloped the building.

Rem: “It burns!”

She puts her hand on the door in panic, and she screams because of the hotness of the heated door. Rem tears up because of her own foolishness while her palm became red with a burn as she wondered why was she stupid like this.

If she had the time to think about this and that, then she had to meet up with her sister as soon as possible—.

Rem: “—Aah”

She concentrates on her forehead and exhales, shaking slightly. Then, Rem starts sharpening her body’s five senses, and she perceives the world with every sense focused on her forehead.

A single white horn formed on her forehead that messed up her blue hair. Rem releases the power of an Oni, and when she raised her empowered foot, she kicked down the door without hesitation.

The next moment, flames of hell cross the corridor as if making fun of her, and Rem's vision was dyed in red light.

The overwhelming amount of heat causes the strength of her horn to die down, and she starts to feel fear once again.

However, Rem uses all the strength she had to suppress that fear, and she stepped into the corridor with rising flames.

She looks into her parent's bedroom at the front. The door to the room was wide open, and there was no sign of her parents. Of course, her sister wasn't there, either. She stepped back immediately and went towards the living room. The flames raged relentlessly at the place where her family spent time together. The dining table, the hanging scroll, and the cupboard were all burning in flames. Flames even burst out from the kitchen, so heading over there would be suicide. There was no one in the house. That's what she concluded.

Rem: "Whew!"

The flames in the entranceway were especially strong, so she needed the readiness to become burnt black to go through it.

Rem immediately crosses off the option to escape from the entranceway, and she strikes the burnt, fragile wall with her body to break through it. She bathes in the outside air, and she lifted her face while lying on the ground.

—Find Ram and meet up with her.

Whether it be a crisis or a regular day, Rem's judgement was always the same. She would rely on her judgement to leave to the plaza and meet up with her sister. But the next moment, that thought froze.

"…"

Her cheeks stiffen in terror. Her eyes open wide, frozen in place.

Rem stops moving, dumbfounded.

What she saw before her eyes was a never before seen collapsing of the scenery she was familiar with.

All the houses and the fields were engulfed in bright red flames, turning into ash. However, those weren't the only things exposed to the fury of the flames. Not only were the Oni villages burning, but the Onis themselves as well.

In front of Rem, who came out of the house, there was a burning house next door. The woman living there was engulfed in flames, and she turned into a burnt black corpse. Her limbs were twisted. Her face was distorted from anguish, and she couldn't even tell what it looked like when she was alive. Her mouth was wide open to cry for help.

The reason she was able to distinguish who this woman was, even when she was in this state, was solely because of the two horns protruding from the burnt corpse's forehead. The two horns with slightly twisted ends facing inward.

Rem had an inferiority complex from having only one horn, so she had a habit of looking at other people's horns in detail.

Thus, she was the only one who would never mistake one horn for another for her race in the village. And it became a pain that fell onto Rem. There couldn't be any pain that would be harder to endure.

"…"

All over the village, there were her race's burnt black corpses lying down.

If Rem saw the horns, she would immediately know who the burnt black corpse was. She immediately knew which burnt corpse was her father and which was her mother.

Her parents' burnt corpses were on top of each other, and they collapsed trying to protect each other. It was a tragic demise since they fought against death until the very end. It was a visit from death in the midst of pain.

Rem: “—Ah, u”

The death of her race, the death of parents, the repeated shock of death causes Rem to lose the strength in her hands and legs. The swirl of power produced on her forehead disperses. She breaks down, and at the same time, her horn pulls back into her skull.

What was happening? What the heck was this unbelievable situation—

???: “Ga… aaaahhh—!!”

Broken down, Rem hears a lively roar that kills the night.

The roar that sounded like a beast’s came from the blazing houses—she ran to the plaza from the deepest part of the village, and she saw a muscular, grey haired Oni.

The upper part of his Kinagashi was open, and he was naked from the waist up; it was the grey elder Setanta. The grey elder had two large horns extended on his forehead, and he was swinging a sword with eyes of insanity colored in rage.

The sword was a decoration for the venue, and it was considered a super heavy object that only Setanta could handle. It had lost its sharpness for a long time, but it would still be appropriate to call this piece of iron a dangerous weapon as it was longer than two meters.

And now Setanta was swinging the piece of iron so smoothly as if it was part of his body because there was an opponent that deserved to be hit with a weapon and anger.

“…”

Rem saw a squirming shadow in her eyes.

The flaming light of the houses shines brightly on the vicinity, and countless corpses appear in her eyes. The only one living and moving was Setanta—no, around Setanta, it seemed as if there were black dressed beings merging into a shadow crawling about.

The shadow wrapped in black clothes from top to bottom was clinging onto Setanta as he went into a rampage. However, Setanta had the power of an Oni, who were known to be a match for a thousand, and among them, he was someone who stood out.

Setanta: "—Meun!"

The wind slashing piece of iron catches the shadow from the front, and that might cuts the being in black clothes in half. Pieces of flesh scatter, and his opponent's body becomes a dead body within an instant as Setanta jumped at his next prey.

Rem sees the chief's brave fighting with her own eyes, and some strength returns to her legs. Among the corpses lying down, she didn't see Ram, who she was looking for. This wasn't the time to be devastated.

From what she's seen, the black clothed beings' abilities were no match for Setanta. While their attention was on the chief, Rem had to look for Ram—

???: "Che che che che che"

A sound suddenly slips into Rem's ears as she tried to leave that place in a hurry.

It was a sequence of an unpleasant sound—it was similar to tongue clicking. Someone's continuous tongue clicking arrives by the wind, and Rem's eyes wander around as she wondered what it was.

And then, she saw this.

"…"

Setanta blew fire.

Fire blew from the grey elder's mouth, nose, and ears, and his whole body was completely engulfed in deep crimson flames. Setanta drops his sword, holds onto his face, and he screams from the pain of having his internal organs burned.

However, the flames burn his screaming throat, and his voice was no more. The large fire evaporates his eyeballs, his tongue gets inflamed, and the grey elder Oni burned before her eyes. And then finally,

???: “Ho…rn.”

The surrounding silhouettes throw the swords they had in their hands, which had the shape of a cross. They pierce Setanta’s whole body, being engulfed in flames, and they heartlessly end his life.

The burnt black grey elder gets struck with countless swords, and he stood still just for a moment. But, he couldn’t leave behind any words in that moment. The giant figure falls backward, and it never moved again.

Rem sees that tragic death with her very own eyes, and now her body lost its will to fight.

There was none of her moving race as far as the eye could see. What she did see were dead bodies…dead bodies, nothing but dead bodies. Either those, or the black shadows that made them into the dead bodies that they were.

“…”

Rem was surrounded by those black shadows before she knew it.

The black clothed beings point cross swords at Rem, which were the same type of swords that pierced Setanta. Rem wasn’t sure if she’d prefer getting burnt to death or getting stabbed to death.

She wasn’t sure, but her lips moved. Her hands and legs didn’t move, and her brain wasn’t working. However, even if her body and mind weren’t working, Rem knew who she should rely on.

Thus—

Rem: “Onee-chan.”

—The moment she said that out loud, a wind blew violently.

The wind equally caresses the flames burning the village, the clouds concealing the moon, and Rem's bangs on her forehead. However, the results each of them had weren't equal.

Cries of pain and blood spray rise, and the black clothed beings that surrounded Rem lose the strength in their bodies. It was a natural result from having lost the neck and up part of the body. The shadows become corpses, and Rem was now surrounded by fresh death.

And then, right next to Rem there was

Ram: "Rem! Rem! Are you hurt?! Anything at all?!"

The one who rushed over with a frantic look and embraced Rem's sunken body was Ram. Horn out on her forehead, the older sister makes a tragic look with her face, which would usually be emotionless, and she hugged Rem, who was emotionally damaged.

Rem accepts Ram's hug, and she felt awkward relief and happiness.

She was glad to be reunited with her older sister. Her relief was also natural. However, what was this feeling of happiness? She saw her parents, her race, and the death of the chief with her own eyes, and yet what she felt in her chest was—

Rem: "O-Onee-chan…I…I…"

Her thoughts become white, and her consciousness turns off and on. The shock successively thrown at her was too intense for little Rem's heart to handle. Seeking for an outlet for that shock, Rem clings onto her sister right next to her. Ram accepts Rem's confusion, and she hugs her tightly. But—

Ram: "One after another…"

Ram, who had been caressing Rem's head to comfort her, speaks resentfully, and she looked back. Different black clothed beings appear again in her light pink eyes burning with passion, as if creeping out from shadows.

There were even more than the amount she had just wiped out. Just how many of them were crowded into this village? There was no room to hope for survivors.

That is why—

Ram: “I won’t let them lay a hand on Rem, no matter what. —All of you here, suffer a swift death.”

The silent black clothed beings answer Ram’s stern verdict by drawing their cross swords at the same time. Ram confronts the silent insanity closing in, and the horn on her forehead shines even brighter.

Right after that, what developed before Rem’s eyes was a massacre created by overwhelming power.

Ram: “Ah, aaaah—!!”

Ram roars, jumping right and left with her small body, and she fatally gouges the black clothed beings’ bodies with her own nails. Their heads, faces, and chests get torn up like paper, and the black clothed beings fall mercilessly before the unbelievable difference in power.

It was astounding physical strength—however, that wasn’t the only secret of Ram’s terrifying strength.

Ram swings her hand, pulverizing the black clothed being with a blow. Her light pink eyes trace the sky, and wind cuts down the black clothed being above her eyes. The black clothed being meets its end by the blade of the wind within an instant, and a corpse was left on the ground.

An overwhelmingly strong body, and magic usage that was so enormous that it seemed as if the world was in the palm of her hand. It was the demonstration of Ram’s true abilities, who was said to be the reincarnation of an Oni God once considered to be the strongest out of the Oni clan.

Every time there was a crushing sound, there was another dead corpse with a broken skull. The attacks from Ram, who transformed into a violent machine, did not stop. The people jumping out in front of the Oni God were basically volunteering to suicide. She smashes and cuts all the shadows that continued to jump at her, and it wouldn't be long until the battle was over.

Over there—

???: "Che che che che che"

She hears that tongue clicking again.

That unpleasant sound makes Rem come back to her senses, as she was in a trance.

Being in the middle of the battlefield of the clashing between Ram and the black clothed beings, Rem couldn't tell where that sound came from. She didn't have the slightest clue.

However, Ram didn't worry about that sound. It looked like she didn't even notice. That was frightening.

What happened earlier? What happened after this tongue clicking? —Setanta burned. That's what happened.

Rem: "Onee…"

Ram: "Remm!!"

Within an instant, Rem's vision becomes dyed in red, and her body was trapped in explosive flames—no, it wasn't explosive flames she was trapped in; it was Ram's chest that held her after she jumped in just before.

The blast that came from behind tosses the Oni sisters, and they get blown away like that. Rem feels dizzy, her internal organs are jumbled, and her face was dirty with tears and saliva. And as for Ram—

Ram: "You people…"

Breathing hard, Ram had an angry look while having raising her bloody knee.

Her white Kimono was torn into pieces, and the intense bleeding was creating a pool of blood at her feet. Her delicate body had a painful laceration—however, the wound heals within an instant in response to the radiance of Ram's horn. The regenerating flesh emits extremely hot heat, and the wound generated red steam.

Taking all the mana in the atmosphere and changing it into power to fight was a special characteristic of the Oni's horn. Ram had an outstanding horn, so she could easily heal non-fatal wounds.

However, it was never something that could help with pain and fatigue.

Ram: "…"

Ram checks if she could still feel with her feet, and she steps forward to attack the enemy again. But, that one step gets repelled by the generating explosive flames, and Ram was sent flying backward as she let out cries of pain.

Seeing her sister lying down right beside her, Rem opens her eyes wide, and immediately after, she hears a voice.

???: "Little Oni sisters, off again, huh. …Actually, not exactly."

It was low and hoarse tone, but it was filled with smoky sort of excitement.

It felt like the voice loved this scenery. It felt like the voice had affection for this scenery. It felt like the voice climaxed because of this scenery.

—In the village engulfed in flames, a backlit black shadow appeared.

Rem couldn't see the person's face from where she was. But, he was at a different place than all the other countless shadows, and she understood that it was the worst reality for the present situation.

Rem: "…Onee-chan?"

Ram: "Ple—ease…Rem, anything but Rem…"

Lying down next to her, Ram crawls and she hugs Rem, who sunk down to the floor, to cling onto her shoulder. And then the older sister desperately pushes Rem's face into her chest, and her voice shook as she faced the dark shadow.

It was a voice that sounded like it was begging, or perhaps asking for forgiveness, and it made Rem dumbfounded.

She never imagined Ram who was always full of confidence, always dignified, and who was always the strongest, most noble, most splendid twin sister in the world, begging like that.

And so, as for the person who the older sister made that clinging wish to—

???: "Such beautiful sisterly love. That makes it perfect. I was just about to check if Oni siblings smelled different burnt."

Ram: "…"

Ram bites her teeth so hard that she could've broken them, and she stands up as she faces the voice. However, she was hugging Rem, had injuries, and was distant. Even the reincarnation of an Oni God, Ram, couldn't take that one step.

He shoots steel from his raised arm, and it was aimed right towards Rem, who was in Ram's chest. Realizing that, Ram opens her arms, and she stands in front of her beloved sister to block her.

Protected by that small back, Rem only opened her eyes wide while feeling powerless.

And then—

"…"

There was a shrill sound, and blood spray and broken white splinters fell down.

A scream, and someone's laughter. White light flew through the red sky in the midst of that noise.

It was a white horn. The beautiful, most noble, precious horn of an Oni. The horn of Ram, the Oni clan's hope.

Her own life, the village engulfed in flames, and her sister screaming as she wiped the tears of blood she had from the pain, none of that was left in Rem's mind at this time.

She was only broken from the cruelty, and she stared at the blown off horn—

Rem: "Aah—"

—Rem lets out a shaky sigh, and the rest did not remain in her memory.

Chapter 2:
The Prideful Oni Clan

1

Voices. She would hear voices.

The usual voices. Whenever she walked through the village, whenever they'd see her, everyone would say it.

???: "Rem. You learn from Ram, too. Work harder."

???: "Rem, don't look so sad. Both Ram and Rem are my cute daughters to me. I won't play favorites. …It's just that Ram is a little special."

Her father smiled with a stern look on his face, and her mother smiled while she lowered her eyebrows in a troubled way as they said that.

???: "Rem-chan, is Ram-sama doing well today? See, that girl needs to grow up healthily. Because she is the future of the Oni clan, after all."

???: "Don't you forget about it, Rem. A cursed child like you lived this long because Ram was blessed with the Oni God's blood that should've been gone. Never, ever forget to be aware of that, and don't forget to understand it, either."

Her race that lived in the same village as her and the chief who governed them said those things to Rem.

???: "Compared to Ram-sama, Rem is still just a no-horn…but that girl is Ram-sama's sister. The 'Other Oni God' might not be just a dream after all."

???: "They do look like two peas in a pod. I'm sure these two jewels will make the future bright!"

Even though Rem was the very essence of mediocrity, she was compared to Ram, who excelled ever since she was a baby, and everyone had expectations of her.

It was because she was Ram's sister. It was because she was the Oni God's twin. It was because she was born along with the Oni clan's hope.

And so, more than anyone—

Ram: "Don't let it get to you, Rem. You don't need to worry about anything people say. I will—Onee-chan will always, always protect Rem. —It'll be alright."

The fact that her most beloved other half with the same face continued saying that made Rem feel pain, like she was being torn apart, but at the same time it made her so happy that it melted her heart.

2

Rem: "…"

The moment Rem woke up, she truly had no idea what was happening to her.

Her whole body was wrapped in an unbelievably smooth feeling, and she was seeing a white ceiling that she had never seen before. Rem was most likely facing upward, but her back and head felt such a softness that her usual bed could not possibly compare.

Even the material that touched her skin felt unusually slippery, so it felt like Rem was lying on a bed made of sand. She was struck with that sort of anxious feeling.

Like that, Rem looked for someone to rely on, and when her eyes wandered along with her hands—

Ram: "—Rem"

Her fingers trembling in loneliness get caught by a kind sounding voice and someone else's fingers.

Rem knew whose fingers they belonged to even without seeing her face. This is because those hands always made Rem feel this way whenever she felt anxious.

Rem: “Onee-chan…?”

Ram: “Yes, this is Onee-chan. Jeez, you overslept quite a bit, Rem.”

Rem calls out to her, and she responds affectionately. She turned around as she felt awkward. Then, Rem, lying down, saw the face of her older sister right by the bed as she looked at her.

Ram: “…”

She sees Ram pale, having a haggard face with a pitiful bandage wrapped around her head, and she lost her voice.

The beautiful, dignified face of her older sister wearing a white kantoui looked gloomy because of her tiredness, and she didn’t have strength in her light pink eyes; she looked at Rem with only kindness in them.

Rem: “O-Onee-chan, what happ…e”

Just when Rem was about to say ‘happened’, the memories came back to her mind fiercely.

It was a gruesome memory that started with the night engulfed in flames when she found her parents and her race who were burned to death after their resistance, ending with her twin sister screaming —.

That’s right. Ram looked up at the sky, and she screamed as if coughing up blood. The reason she did was because—

Rem: “Onee-chan, the village…everyone…in the village…Mom… Dad…”

Ram: “—Oh. You remember. I wish you’d forgotten about it, since it’s too much to handle.”

Rem, voice shaking, suddenly talks about her family, race, and home that were taken away from her. Ram's sister's state of confusion makes her lower her eyes, and she hugged her as she leaned forward.

She gently caresses her back, and her unstable heartbeat gradually calms down.

Ram: "It's okay. Give anything and everything to me. Your crying, your anger, I'll take it all. Onee-chan will be the outlet for the pain you feel."

Rem: "Onee-chan…Onee-chan…Onee-chan…Onee-chan…"

Rem, sobbing hesitantly, pushes her face onto her sister's body, feeling it over the light cloth. They went through the same suffering, sadness, and pain, and yet Ram's heart stayed strong no matter what. She was again spoiling herself with how big it was, just like always.

Like that, the older sister tried her very best to make her sister forget about her sadness. In response to that scene—

???: "—Just when I was thinking about where you went…so you were here after all."

Rem: "Ee"

A voice suddenly interrupts them, and Rem, who was burying her face in Ram's chest, let out her voice slightly. Ram responds to that reaction by caressing Rem's head, and then she looked back with a displeased expression.

Ram: "An emotional meeting between sisters is going on here. I'd like to ask for no insensitive interruptions from outsiders."

???: "As long as it's in times of peace, I highly agree with your opinion. However, the situation isn't like that right now. …You should at least know how your body is, too."

Ram: "You don't know just how lonely Rem will be if I'm gone… this girl is my priority."

???: “Always have something to say…you sure are a sassy guest.”

The person sighs at Ram’s unwavering protests in an appalled way. Rem stirred in the midst of that interaction and she finally got a look of the person who spoke next to her sister. And then,

???: “Good morning, Guest. I am truly happy to see that you’ve woken up safe and sound.”

The person saying that, politely pinching her skirt as she bowed to Rem while having eye contact, was a girl with beautiful, long blond hair wearing an apron that was based around the color black.

She was around 14-15 years old. She had blonde hair that would glisten in the sunlight, and clear white skin. Combining that with her refreshing, jade green eyes gazing at Rem that sparkled like gems made her looks have a latent, captivating charm. However—

???: “I’ve been ordered by the master to look after you two. My name is Frederica. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance.”

Right after she bowed perfectly, she took a look at the woman who lifted her head—at Frederica’s mouth. She saw a full set of fangs that were sharp enough to make her forget about what she thought of her hair and eyes.

The feature that changed even her graceful smile turn into something ferocious within an instant made Rem widen her eyes unconsciously in shock.

Frederica, upon seeing Rem’s reaction, looked down just slightly as she said,

Frederica: “My dearest apologies for startling you. I was born with these fangs, and they became really sharp because of my growth period…”

Rem: “Eh…ah…u…”

Rem, hesitant to speak, sees Frederica’s lonesome reaction and she regretted her surprise.

She was an adolescent girl. Frederica had her own inferiority complex because of her mouth. And Rem also knew how it felt to worry about having a hopeless nature. She knew the feeling so well that it hurt.

Apologize. I should apologize. Rem immediately has those thoughts, and she tried to move her tongue. And yet…

Rem: “—u”

Unable to express her thoughts in words, neither an apology nor denial came out of her mouth.

Frederica: “Alright, Ram-sama. Your sister is awake now, so please return back to your room. Next time I really will tie you to the bed since you’ve sneaked away so many times like this.”

Ram: “How uncivilized. If the blood of half-beasts makes you do that, how about you go lose some of it?”

Frederica: “I’d like you to kindly join me as a part of that suggestion.”

Even while Rem was mumbling, Ram and Frederica butted heads with each other. It seemed that Ram continued to behave recklessly to visit Rem as she slept.

In reality, her older sister standing next to bad looked pale, and even her breathing sounded beat. However, Ram, being the firm one that she was, rejected Frederica, who reached her hand out anxiously, and she said,

Ram: “I can walk by myself. Don’t touch me like you know me.”

Frederica: “Quite the stubborn one, aren’t you.”

Ram, acting stubborn in her kantoui, let out a sigh. Then, she looked back at Rem, lying down on the bed, and she smiled slightly.

Ram: “Rem, you can sleep a little longer. Let’s talk when you wake up again.”

Rem: "…Onee-chan, I can't be with you?"

Ram: "…"

Rem shakes from her recalled memories, sense of loss, and the loneliness of being left behind at an unfamiliar place. Seeing Rem like that causes affection and hesitation to go through Ram's eyes. However, before she used that as a reason to pamper Rem…

Frederica: "Master told me firmly, "Make sure to bring Ram-sama back to her room"."

Ram: "Frederica…"

Frederica: "Even if you glare at me like that, I feel conflicted. —You can't control your power after having your horn broken, right? It's awfully unreasonable to let you do what you want if you're like this."

Rem: "—Horn"

Frederica says that to Ram, who wouldn't back down, and tried to persuade her. However, the one who had a strong reaction to that persuasion wasn't Ram, but Rem, who was there listening.

A horn, the Oni horn. —The broken horn.

In the last piece of her recalled memories, there was Ram screaming as her horn broke—

Rem: "Ah…Aaaahhh?!"

It came back in her memory. Ram's broken, white horn fluttered down in the sky illuminated by flames.

The sense of helplessness she felt when she saw it, the feelings of guilt she had for letting it happen, the silence she had for the broken horn, all of it agonized Rem to the core, and her heart was smashed into pieces.

Rem, arms swinging mindlessly, screamed to fight against the flames that shouldn't have been there.

Ram: “What happened?! Rem, pull yourself together! Look at me, at Onee-chan!”

Frederica: “I-Is it my fault…?!”

Ram: “Whatever, just hold down her legs! Rem! Can you hear me?! Rem!”

The bed towel gets sent flying. Ram and Frederica hold down Rem as she struggled with her swell of emotions. However, Rem couldn’t be stopped, horn formed on her forehead as she fought back with the power of an Oni. Rem forcibly shakes them off in that state.

Rem: “—Ka…u”

The next moment, her arms that she uncontrollably shook stop, and Rem lost the strength in her body.

The cause was the horn—the organ that was the source of an Oni’s strength, and the thing that had to be what made Rem go out of control. Ram, having responsibility for that horn, bites on it as she stimulated it to caress it with her tongue.

Rem gives in to that electrifying, sweet feeling, and she breaks down. Because of that and her chaotic state of mind, Rem fell onto the bed sideways.

Frederica: “H-Has she calmed…down?”

Ram: “Probably. Sheesh, she really is a troublesome girl…”

Lying on the bed, Rem’s expression turned back to her sleeping face that she had just before, and in contrast with her tone, Ram affectionately caressed her sister’s forehead.

Immediately after that, when Ram turned around to face Frederica, she said,

Ram: “Frederica. I’m going to pass out, so I’ll leave the rest to up to you.”

Frederica: “Okay, understood…wait, ‘pass out’?!”

In front of Frederica, who agreed with her in the heat of the moment, Ram wobbled as she made a firm assertion. The peach haired girl collapses to lay next to her sister who looked just like her, and she fell asleep at once.

Frederica, who was pushed around by the Oni sisters, opened her mouth with visible fangs and she said,

Frederica: “…Seriously, what selfish guests!”

Then, raising her voice angrily, she spit out her rage.

3

Fortunately, the second awakening didn’t cause as much confusion to Rem as the first awakening did.

Rem: “…”

A soft bed and pillow, and the feeling of the smooth silk, wrapping her body.

The feelings she perceived even though she was barely awake made Rem understand that what happened before she fell asleep was not just a dream.

She woke up to a room of an unfamiliar building somewhere in the world. Ram, who waited for Rem to wake up, and Frederica, dressed as a maid while having an angry look, had called out to her. And then—

Rem: “Onee-chan’s…horn…”

???: “—It’s an honorable injuuuury. Or at least, that’s what your sister keeps saying. So, you don’t need to feel responsible at all.”

Rem: “…”

Someone replied to her when she was talking to herself, making Rem jump in surprise as she looked to the side. Then, her eyes met the eyes of a white faced man looking at her as he sat in a chair next to the bed.

It was a man who had long indigo blue hair and an aura that strangely stood out. Looks that were too well kept. Heterochromatic eyes that released the charm of his magical looks. But what made his aura seem even stranger was the eccentric, excessive amount of clown makeup that vividly colored his face.

Clown makeup painted his face white and colored along his eyes and lips. He had clothes to go with it, based around stimulating colors, and he wore many unnecessary ornaments.

???: “You look surprised. Well, it makes sense. You just had all these cumbersome incidents happen one after another. Not being able to understand everything right away is natuuuural.”

Rem: “Eh…u-um…”

???: “No no no nooo, you don’t need to force yourself to speak. I’ll wait however long it takes, even if you take your time. Even if it’s after your body heals, again I’ll…”

Putting up his hands, the clown interrupts Rem, who was confused, and he continued speaking. Rem, still feeling the shock from waking up to a clown, becomes flustered by his pushiness.

And then—

Frederica: “—Master, you’ve gone too far with your jokes. Just watching it makes me feel bad for her.”

???l: “…Sheesh, what a kill-joy. Frederica, you are excellent, but you don’t loosen up enouuuugh. And wouldn’t that make you butt heads wiiiiith Clind?”

Frederica: “You don’t have to tell me about my poor compatibility with that thing, Master. Anyways…”

The one who sighed at the smiling clown and lastly looked at Rem was a blond haired maid with an evil face—it was Frederica. Frederica, having her face seen by Rem, did everything she could to speak without showing her fangs.

Frederica: “I’m very glad to see that you’ve woken up again. —You won’t act up this time, right?”

Rem: “…Where’s Onee…-chan?”

Frederica: “—She’s currently in her room. She snuck out of her room many times until you woke up. …You sure are loved.”

Rem: “…”

The word ‘loved’ makes Rem hang her head.

Even she herself didn’t know if it was out of shyness, or if it was out of shame. However, she wanted to see Ram so much right now. I have to go see her, is what she thought to herself.

Rem: “Let me…go see Onee-chan. See Onee-chan…”

???: “Beeeeefore that…”

Rem, removing the blanket as she tried to get up, felt a gentle poke hit her forehead. It was the finger of the clown sitting beside the bed. Rem knew she couldn’t move because of that one finger.

It was a simple touch to the forehead. That was it, and yet she couldn’t move as she shuddered.

???: “I am very aware that you are full of unease from waking up at an unknown place, not seeing your sister, who is your other half. However, that doesn’t mean I can just leave you to do whatever you want…theeeere’s no way I can give you permission to do that. Can I get you to understand that?”

Rem: “…”

???: “Good girl.”

The clown smiles at Rem, who was unable to move her head as she showed approval with just her eyes. And then, once the clown took his finger off her forehead, he waved his finger left and right.

???: “By the way, Rem…or, is it okay if I call you that? Do you remember and understand the truth of what happened to you guys?”

Rem: “…”

???: “Do you know what happened at your guys’ village and why you’re here?”

Rem concentrates on her forehead that had been touched as the clown continued asking her questions. The memory she recalled was one that came back to her from touching Ram when she woke up.

Rem: “…The village…burned. Then, Mom, Dad, Chief, everyone, all of them burned.”

Rem, while searching through her memory with difficulty, imagines the scene of hell in her mind.

The village dyed in red engulfed in flames. Her race so burned that it was impossible to distinguish who was who. Setanta, bursting into flames with a yell. And Ram, horn broken as she screamed, covered in blood—.

Frederica: “…So cruel.”

The memory of the disaster Rem talked about makes Frederica knit her brows sorrowfully.

She talked about it indifferently and emotionlessly, but on the contrary it showed the depth of the emotion scar of the girl who happened to be at the scene.

???: “I seeee. It seems you remember more than I expected, so I guess you understand the situation, too.”

However, the clown nods at Rem’s recollection without batting an eye, and something convinced him. That tone and behavior had neither pity nor sympathy, and as for proof, he clapped his hands lightly and said

???: “Your memory is pretty much accurate. Your village was destroyed, and the only survivors are you and your sister. It’s no longer an exaggeration to say that death is right around the corner for the Oni clan, who have been said to be on the verge of the extinction."

Frederica: "Master?!"

Frederica shrieks at the clown's words that summarized the tragedy lightly to object. However, the clown shook his head at the maid's reaction.

???: "The truth is no different even if I change the way I put it. Beeeesides, the only survivors are the twins Ram and Rem. Surely they know this as well."

Frederica: "But, even so…"

???: " You cannot mix up kindness and spoiling others. The former shows composure, while the latter is a misinterpretation of arrogance."

Frederica keeps silent in response to the sharp speaking, and the clown continued to look at Rem. The clown's behavior didn't hurt Rem, nor did it make her feel sad.

The clown's points were the truth.

She and her sister were the two survivors of the Oni clan now. You could say that her race was practically deprived of their hope and dearest wish. To Rem, that was—

Rem: "As long Onee-chan is there…"

???: "The Oni clan will be peaceful? Sorry to say this, but she lost her horn. An Oni without a horn is not an Oni…that's your guys' unwritten rule, isn't iiiiit?"

Rem: "…"

???: "Or is your sister special to the point of absurdity? It may be true that she had the appropriate qualities to be called the second coming of the Oni God before she lost her horn. Hooooowever, that's now just a dream that faded away like heat haze…the current

Ram is a mere no-horn."

Rem: "—! What could you possibly know about Onee-chan?!"

The clown looks upon her sister, and it makes Rem have an outburst of emotions for the first time. Anger returns to her eyes that looked like they were dead up until this point, and the clown delightfully shakes off her hand.

Rem, in her night clothes, shrieks and she messes up the bed sheets. Then,

???: "You finally have a nice expreeeession. Having a conversation with a corpse is no fun. For better or worse, we've finally talked nooooow."

Rem: "You…what? What are you talking about?!"

Rem shows her anger with a loud voice at the clown who made exaggerations frankly as he fixed his collar.

When he listened to that comforting angry voice, the clown got up from his chair and looked down on her. The eyes of the skinny but tall clown make Rem flinch just a bit.

That reaction makes the clown look more and more entertained, while Frederica, standing next to him, sighed and said,

Frederica: "My apologies for introducing him late, Guest. This man is the owner of the mansion and my master, Mr. Roswaal L Mathers the Margrave."

Rem: "Margwabe…"

It was a formal introduction by Frederica, but it was all Greek to Rem.

This place is what she said was a mansion, and the landlord was the clown right before her. Also, if the clown's name was that long, she wouldn't be able to remember it. That's all she understood.

In response to Rem pronouncing the title poorly, the clown looks at

Frederica with one eye closed.

Roswaal: “Looks like you’re strict with what a standard response is, even though there’s no way a girl raised in a hidden village deep in the mountains could understand a title of the kingdoooom.”

Frederica: “Urgh…”

Frederica, getting told that, frowns, and then Roswaal looked at Rem as he said,

Roswaal: “To tell you this frankly in a way that you could understand…hmm. I am you and your sister’s benefactor. That should do it, am I riiiiiight?”

The clown—Roswaal says that, and Rem was reflected in his yellow eye while he had his other eye closed. It was a radiance so beautiful that it was entrancing, and yet it was disturbing.

I’m not going to like this man, is what Rem thought to herself.

4

Roswaal: “When I came running to the village, it was already wrapped in flames. I barely managed to find Ram at the mountain path holding you and lying down on the ground. Bringing you home was all I could doooooo.”

Roswaal explains the details of the rescue simply to Rem, who sought an explanation for the truth.

In Rem’s memory, Ram’s horn was broken by shining steel, and it ended with the moment when she witnessed her sister screaming from pain and emptiness. She had no clue what happened to them or how they survived after that.

Roswaal’s explanation was also very much just a summary. However, Ram carried Rem when she was unconscious and fled. —That part felt very believable.

Frederica: “Basically, consider all the factors and believe in Master. That seems to be the conclusion here. Thank goodness there wasn’t anything like denial right off the bat, right Master?”

Roswaal: “Trying to get revenge earlier was quite bold thooouuugh. Anyhow, it’s a good thing that you believe me. As long as you guys are in this mansion, I’ll guarantee your safety.”

Rem: “…So, where is Onee-chan?”

Frederica looks at the master with indifferent eyes, while Roswaal responds to that with a deep nod. Rem skipped over their interaction and prioritized getting back together with Ram, who wasn’t there.

If Ram was in her position, she would be thinking carefully without caring about the lack of a horn. Rem should just follow her sister’s way of doing things and her way of thinking. Just like she always has. Thus—

Rem: “Let me see Onee-chan. I’m worried about Onee-chan.”

Roswaal: “Worried about Onee-chan, you saaaay.”

Roswaal repeats Rem’s words that showed her concern for her sister, and he squinted slightly. Those heterochromatic eyes and speaking that sounded like ridicule make Rem feel discomfort once again.

Once Roswaal responded to Rem by placing his chin on top of his stacked hands, he said,

Roswaal: “Aren’t you really doing this because you yourself can’t stand being anxious…miiiiight that be it?”

Rem: “…”

Frederica: “Master, I’ve been watching, but what is the meaning of all this?”

The one who took Rem’s place, holding her breath, and spoke out against Roswaal’s behavior was Frederica. Forgetting to hide her sharp fangs, she lashes out at the master.

Frederica: “Doing something like digging into the emotional scars of a very young girl over and over…Master would never do such a thing back then.”

Roswaal: “Be nice to little girls”, have you been influenced for worse by Clind?”

Frederica: “This is common sense, and it has nothing to do with that thing’s thoughts whatsoever. Don’t say such disgusting things plea…wait, Master?”

Frederica, who talked back reflexively, had a face that indicated that she noticed he changed the subject at once. She glares at Roswaal with a frown on her face, and she had anger in her jade green eyes.

Frederica: “Just what are you thinking about exactly?”

Roswaal: “About what you call common sense, making sure to be nice to very young girls, of couuuuurse. You know it too, riiiiiight?”

Stopping himself there, Roswaal dares to pause for a moment, and he says,

Roswaal: “—That even if this child were to meet with Ram, it wouldn’t be the result everyone wants.”

Frederica looks down, unable to refute Roswaal’s words. Rem felt like it was an awfully alarmed reaction, and she looked at their faces alternatingly.

She didn’t comprehend the flow of the conversation very well. But, there was something she understood.

Roswaal wouldn’t let Rem and Ram see each other right now. It’d be best for them to not see each other. That’s what he said.

Rem: “Don’t mess with me…”

There was no way in hell she could accept an opinion like that.

Rem stares at Roswaal, voice suppressed while holding grabbing onto the sheets.

Rem: “Let me…see Onee-chan…! Onee-chan…if Onee-chan…”

Roswaal: “You want to see Ram, no matter what?”

Rem: “I-Isn’t that…obvious…? I want to see Onee-chan…let me see her…”

Rem tops off her hostile tone with a question, and she made an ashamed expression unintentionally.

And then, while staring hard at her face, Roswaal said,

Roswaal: “—Sure thing. Well then, let’s bring you to heeeeer.”

Rem: “…Huh?”

Roswaal makes a complete 180 in his opinion, and he approved of Rem’s request just like that. Rem, surprised by that change in attitude, could no longer tell what was Roswaal’s true motive.

Frederica: “I understand your confusion. I feel the same way, after all.”

Frederica lets out a sigh mixed with sympathy and resignation, and she put a thin shawl over Rem’s shoulders. Then, leading Rem by the hand naturally, she makes her stand up next to the bed.

Frederica: “Well then, may I guide Rem-sama?”

Roswaal: “Do as you wish, of course. Hoooowever, don’t forget to do it with caution.”

Frederica: “Yes, I am fully aware. Alright, Rem-sama, come this way.”

Frederica receives the approval from Roswaal, waving his hand, and she guides her out the room. Rem looked back at Roswaal, still feeling unsatisfied while obeying her.

The man dressed as a clown smiles at that look as he went “Hmm?”

with a friendly attitude. That smile makes Rem feel the chills. Once she hurriedly turned away, she ran after Frederica who went ahead.

—The sheer size of the Roswaal mansion went far beyond the limit of Rem's little imagination.

Long, spacious corridors, and red, ankle-deep carpet. To the left and right, there was a multitude of doors to rooms lined up in the stone passageway, and there were furniture and paintings arranged equidistantly.

The scenery outside clearly showed the they were as high as the second floor or above, and the differences between this place and her home that just had one-story houses made the common knowledge inside Rem collapse noisily.

The building chief Sentana lived in was the type of residence Rem was familiar with. It was a house that was just a little big in comparison to Rem's home, but this mansion was a whole new ballpark.

Frederica: "—Please don't think too badly of Master."

Frederica suddenly stops walking and said that to Rem as she was captivated by the scenery that went beyond her imagination.

Those words make Rem look stupefied for a second, and she quickly realized she was having a misunderstanding; a misunderstanding in which she thought that the reason for her silence was because she distrusted Roswaal.

Frederica: "He may behave like that, but Master is a generous and compassionate person. I'm certain he will treat you and your sister well."

While having that misunderstanding, Frederica carefully defends the master that wasn't there.

Frankly speaking, Rem was not interested in Roswaal and Frederica's opinion. The only important matter to Rem was Ram, who should've been in the same mansion.

Roswaal would treat Rem and Ram well. If that was the case—

Rem: “Let me see Onee-chan please.”

For now, she just had to prioritize that over everything. She wouldn’t ask for anything else.

Frederica responds to Rem’s request by closing her eyes, and after that, she continued guiding her again. She exits the corridor along with her, and they used the stairs to head down. She guides Rem to a place very far away from the room she had been in, and Frederica stopped walking as she said “We’re here” to Rem who felt doubt.

Rem: “…”

Rem becomes dumbfounded in front of the door she was guided to, and she was at a loss for words.

In front of her, there was a door with many tightly wound chains with locks, and in addition, even the door itself had a magic circle drawn on it because it provided a perfect seal.

Frederica: “It will take just a minute to open it, so please wait.”

In front of Rem, who was dumbfounded, Frederica used the keys in her hand to undo the chains. Once the chains were unbound with an extremely heavy sound, Frederica put her hand on the door, and she whispered something.

Right after that, the door’s magic circle emitted faint light, and some sort of technique was canceled out. The subsiding light takes Rem’s breath away, and when the light finally completely disappeared from the door,

Frederica: “You’re free to come in.”

Frederica goes off to the side of the door, and she made way for her. Rem blinks her eyes in response to those words, and she timidly reached out for the doorknob as she pushed it open while the wooden door creaked.

Rem: “O-Onee-cha…”

Rem tries to look inside while calling out to her, and the next moment, she bent backwards in a sudden gust. —Actually, it was not wind, but an illusion. Nevertheless, it was so strong that it felt like that.

Rem: "…"

Rem, grinding her teeth, stood firm at that spot. All of her downy hair stood on end, and her instincts ringed an alarm that told her to get out of there as soon as possible. That was Rem's survival instincts; the Oni blood inside her urged her, and she bravely called out to the being she sought for.

However, Rem calms her shaking legs, clenches her chattering teeth, and she held in those desires.

Because inside of the eyes of this girl nearly in tears, her sister suffering in the middle of the room was reflected.

There was an aberrant mana torrent that gave off an oppressive feeling, surrounding the room. The one who was distorting the space into a such a dangerous state that the door had to have a seal applied, was Ram.

Ram: "Aaaah!!"

An empty room with a bed in the center, all other furniture removed. Ram was lying down on the bed, her limbs tied to it with chains, and she was twisting her body vehemently.

It was not movement wanting to be released, but writhing to endure pain. It was almost as if there was something like a raging witchbeast kept inside of Ram, and it startled her back many times.

The bandage on her forehead wrapped around the wound from having lost her horn was now covered with blood, and her beautiful face transformed entirely into an evil, bloody look with the bleeding still not stopping.

Rem: "…"

She was speechless. Rem no longer had any other reaction besides

that.

It was the first time Rem saw her sister have an uncalm expression and her being on a rampage. The feeling of oppression that pierced her whole body and even aroused her survival instincts was undoubtedly caused by Ram's Oni nature. It was something Ram, who spoiled her sister, never directed towards Rem up to this point.

Unexpectedly, the proof of this was that Ram wasn't able to recognize Rem at this time.

Frederica: "…I'm sure that she won't harm you if you get closer."

Frederica calls out to Rem, who stopped at the entrance, not stepping into the room. Her low voice makes Rem come to her senses, and she looked back at Frederica while being focused on her sister.

Rem: "Why…is she like this…she was calm when she woke up earlier…"

Frederica: "She continued to steel herself until Rem-sama came back to her senses. Meanwhile, she had many impulses that were like seizures, but she would pull herself together through sheer force of will. She has a strong heart. But even then…"

"That was what she dealt with until Rem woke up", is what Frederica said with her eyes, not her mouth. That truth shattered her, because after all, Ram simply wished for Rem's recovery, who continued to sleep, staying by her side while holding back her impulses.

Rem: "…"

Even after knowing that truth, Rem didn't try to run up to Ram. Rem's survival instincts, of course, made her fully realize her own powerlessness.

Ram was currently like this because of the disruption in mana circulation due to losing her horn.

As an Oni, Ram's body was extraordinary enough to be classified as something supernatural, and even maintaining it required an enormous amount of mana. Originally her horn would be there to make that mana circulate efficiently.

However, Ram lost her horn, and even then her body raised a voice of hunger, seeking mana.

Mana gathered accordingly with that scream, but the horn to take it in wasn't functioning. Therefore, the mana drifted into empty space, having lost its place to go, and it generated a semi-artificial mana storm.

At this rate, a colorless power would rage in the middle of this room before long, and destruction would commence. And when that happens, the one to be damaged would be Ram, who was in the middle of the room—.

Frederica: "Fortunately, it's never gotten to the point of a mana storm occurring. This is because of the she's held down by force just before that happens, scattering the collected mana."

Rem: "But that's…"

Frederica: "…I know. There's no way it could be done so many times."

Sooner or later, failure would arrive. And from seeing how Ram was currently, it wasn't going to be later.

When failure arrived, in that moment, Ram's life would—

Frederica: "Rem-sama?!"

The instant Rem came to that conclusion, she shook off her hesitation and ran. That behavior makes Frederica raise her voice, but Rem put her call behind her and ran as fast as she could.

She was…not headed towards Ram's side as she continued to suffer. Rem, rushing out of the room, dashes through the stairs and the corridor she had used to walk over there, and she tumbled into the very first room she woke up in.

She opens the door violently and looked inside angrily. Inside there was still a man dressed as a clown. He looks towards the door, as if he knew that Rem would return, and he smiled at the girl breathing heavily.

Roswaal: “Look at what we have here, why are you in such a rush? Didn’t you say that you wanted to see your sister?”

Rem: “…”

Roswaal’s superficial words make Rem open and close her mouth repeatedly while sweat showed on her forehead. She had words in her head that needed to be said, but there was also slight hesitation in there as well.

However, the hesitation was smashed by her sister’s look of anguish that came to her mind, and it vanished.

Rem: “P-Plea…se. …Save…Onee-chan.”

Rem, blue eyes filled with tears, desperately begged Roswaal while her voice shook.

She had no definite proof, and not even a basis that said this was the right choice. And yet, Rem was naturally convinced by her instincts.

—If it was Roswaal, Ram could be saved.

He could save her sister, who lost her horn and was suffering from her body that was out of control, and the mana that couldn’t be taken in.

Roswaal closed one eye in response to Rem’s begging. Once again, being stared at by his yellow eyes, Rem summons her spirit that cowered in fear, and she faced him. There were several tens of seconds with them being like that.

Roswaal: “I took you guys out from the burning Oni village. At that point, I’ve already saved your lives once. You still have something to ask of me on top of that?”

Rem: “…”

Roswaal: “If I do that, I would then have saved your guys’ lives not once, but twice. In that case, what can you do for me? What would you have to offer?”

Roswaal’s words demanding compensation make Rem stiffen her startled face.

Requesting something, and wishing for something. It would be natural to have to pay the price if one wanted to do those things. Rem realized that obvious fact just now.

It was proof of how much Rem had been spoiled growing up thus far.

All throughout Rem’s life so far, she would always—no, she would receive things only from her sister Ram. She never begged for something from her parents and her race. However, Ram was the only one who was different.

Rem was always spoiled by Ram’s love, and she lived her days only being the receiver.

That’s why not even one of the vital words were prepared when this natural fact was in front of her.

Rem: “…”

Rem kept silent in front of Roswaal, while he stayed silent and waited for an answer. He wasn’t doing it in a hurrying manner or a shocked manner, but the clear feeling of impatience burned Rem’s heart.

Even now, at this very moment Ram was still suffering in that room. And each second of this hesitation and doubt could be something fatal to her sister.

She couldn’t stand it, and it was something that couldn’t happen. So, before it did—

Rem: “What I…can give…”

Roswaal: “Go on.”

His urging words make Rem gulp, and she wets her dry lips as she closed her eyes.

Then, she immediately opened her eyes, and she stared at Roswaal from the front and said this.

Rem: “—What I can give…is only myself. I’ll do…anything. I’ll do anything you say. So, please. Save…Onee-chan.”

Roswaal: “…”

Rem: “Please. Please. Plea…se…”

Rem gets on her knees, and she begged while rubbing her forehead against the floor.

The reason tears welled up in her eyes wasn’t because she felt miserable or pathetic. It wasn’t even shame or chagrin. She didn’t know the reason. The tears just welled up.

Rem begs him again and again and again while dirtying the floor with tears and mucus.

Just how many times did she repeat her words while being like that? Suddenly, the presence of a person stood in front of her eyes. When she nervously lifted her head, she saw Roswaal.

Roswaal: “—Those are the words I wanted to hear.”

Rem: “…Ah”

Roswaal: “Offering yourself for your sister’s sake. Truly beautiful. That’s my type of answer.”

In front of Rem, her eyes blinking, Roswaal brought out a handkerchief from his pocket. He puts that on Rem’s cheek as she sobbed, and lifted her small body sunk down to the floor.

Roswaal winks at Rem, who was carried in his surprisingly sturdy arms as she held her breath.

Roswaal: “Well, let’s go. You seeee, I am used to becoming the benefactor of someone’s life. I’ll work something out somehow right away. After that, let’s talk about you guys.”

Rem: “About…us…?”

Roswaal: “You said that you’d do anything, didn’t you? Then that means you are mine. And if that’s the case, then it’s natural to talk about how you’ll be treated. —Is it not?”

While walking, Roswaal continued with a face that made it seem like he’d already saved Ram. Although that behavior and details made Rem open her eyes wide, she understood him.

There was no doubt that Rem chose the best hand she could get to save her sister.

However, that might’ve been as reckless as voluntarily taking the hand of a devil.

Roswaal: “For maid clothes that suit your physique…that’s something that should only be discussed with Clind, yeeeees.”

Then, that’s what Rem thought to herself while looking up at Roswaal who walked as he hummed a tune.

5

Rem: “…”

Rem, sitting on a chair next to the bed, stared at her calm sister’s sleeping face like a hawk.

This was the first time in her life Rem got the chance to see her sister’s sleeping face. Long eyelashes, and small, thin lips. She vaguely thought that her sister’s sleeping face was cute, contrary to her gallant behavior.

Ram, breathing in and out on the bed, was taken out of that firmly sealed room, and she was now put to sleep at a place next door to the room Rem first woke up in.

This was also proof of Roswaal guaranteeing that Ram wouldn't randomly damage her surroundings with her power.

—Roswaal dealt with Rem's appeal way too easily.

Roswaal, who had headed towards the room with Rem in his arms, had walked up to Ram as her power went out of control and put his hand on her forehead, using an enormous amount of mana. The treatment finished just like that in a matter of seconds, and when she realized it, Ram was already sound asleep.

However, even Rem, a failure as an Oni, understood at a glance just how unorthodox that treatment was, which was performed in mere seconds.

Roswaal made the enormous amount of mana Ram pulled in harmless, and at the same time he did work that sent in the mana necessary to maintain Ram's body. He was practically using multiple magic all at once, and it was basically a feat that could only be pulled off by someone that was far more skilled than others.

Frederica: "Master is the head of the Mathers family and the best magic user in the kingdom."

That was Frederica's prideful sounding explanation to Rem, who was amazed by that act.

She didn't really know what the extent of a kingdom was, but at the very least, she understood the fact that Roswaal was the best out of the many people he was compared to.

Having qualities of excellence, that basically meant he was the same as Ram, who was a top Oni.

She was forced to realize it at the Oni village, but it was the same deal even with the outside world. Rem was forced to realize that in this world there were many people out of her reach with extraordinary wit.

Even among such great men, Ram's qualities should've been conspicuously excellent, and yet—

Ram: “…Rem”

Rem: “—?! Onee-chan, you’re awake?!”

A voice slipped into Rem eardrums as she went into deep thought, and she jumped on the bed. Then, Ram, lying down, opened her eyes slightly and Rem reflected in her light pink eyes.

Her face still looked tired from suffering, but Rem was relieved by the fact that she woke up.

Ram: “I…”

Rem: “Y-You should get more rest. Ummm, it was really bad until just now, but…erm…”

Ram: “…Rem, you don’t to have to hurry yourself. Take your time speaking.”

Seeing Rem not having the words come out of her mouth while being flustered, Ram says that to her as she had a slight smile on her face.

Rem received care from Ram who had been sleeping just a moment ago, and she felt so pathetic that it was unbearable, just like always. However, she didn’t want to look down here.

Because if she made Ram worry by doing that, she would forget why she was even there.

Rem: “Onee-chan’s…body…it went through…a lot of trouble.”

Ram: “…That seems to be true. It troubles me that it didn’t listen even though it’s my own body. Though it was troublesome when it happened, what’s gone is gone, and that bothers me.”

Rem: “You mean…your horn?”

Ram: “Yes, my horn. Without that, my body can’t be maintained properly. This’ll even cause trouble for Rem. I’m worried about the future…”

Rem: “If you are! If you are…don’t worry, it’ll be fine…”

Rem made her voice louder in response to Ram, who touched her forehead wrapped in a bandage while making a pensive look. That makes Ram open her eyes wide as Rem continued while having her hands on the bed.

Rem: “It’s terrible that Onee-chan’s body…lost its horn…but I… made a request. And so, he’ll take care of it from now on, is what Roswaal-sama…”

Ram: “—’Roswaal-sama’?”

However, in the middle of that statement, Ram’s very displeased voice interrupts her.

When the sound of that dangerous voice made Rem gasp, Ram touched her cheeks softly with her eyes squinted. And then, while Ram gently caressed Rem’s cheeks she said,

Ram: “Tell me, Rem. Why did you say that man’s name with a ‘-sama’?”

Rem: “Because, erm…Onee-chan…looked like she was in pain…”

Ram: “I looked like I was in pain, and what else?”

Rem answers while being startled from her worry about if she had did something bad. She presses her to continue by saying “and what else?”, then Rem said this while looking down.

Rem: “I told him I’d do anything to save Onee-chan…and then Roswaal-sama…said that he wishes for me to work at this mansion…”

Ram: “…He said that he wishes for you to become his?”

She nodded. To put it accurately, he didn’t say it to her; Rem said it herself. However, there was a peremptory force in Ram’s voice, and so Rem nodded to end with a brief answer.

That answer makes Ram closes her eyes for a brief period, and after that, with a low voice as if forced out of her lips, she said,

Ram: "—That man really is toying with us."

Rem: "…What?"

Ram: "Him taking advantage of Rem's kindness and using me to make you his is proof that his heart is rotten to the core. And on top of that, he has a twisted personality and he's a sophist…aah, damnit!"

Ram expressed her emotions to an unusual extent and she clicked her tongue as she threw her head onto the pillow.

Ram was always calm, and she was never infuriated. That's exactly why she had never seen her raise her voice besides the night when the village was destroyed. And yet…

Rem: "Onee-chan, it's okay. I can…do my best. For Onee-chan's sake…"

Ram: "You can't, Rem. That won't work. The two of us have already been set up by that man."

Rem: "—?"

A question mark floated on Rem's head as she couldn't understand the reply. When Ram sat up again in response to Rem being like that, she brushed up the hair over her ears as she said,

Ram: "Let me rephrase that. The two of us have been set up by that man…by Roswaal-sama."

Rem: "By Roswaal-sama…ah"

Rem thinks over the way Ram said that, and that's when she too finally realized it.

Ram let out a long, deep sigh at Rem as she made that enlightened reaction.

Ram: "…I said it when I ran away from the village and was found by that man. “Save Rem, I beg of you.” And then that man asked me what I could do for him.”

Rem: “…”

Ram: “Even when he said that he wouldn’t force Rem to do anything…he set us up good.”

Ram clicks her tongue, feeling regret from the bottom of her heart. She understood that she did this because Ram herself was the cause for Rem seeking help from Roswaal, and that it wasn’t even because Roswaal violated the words “I won’t force Rem”, which he did because she sought help.

Ram’s body going out of control, Rem’s begging, none of that mattered to Roswaal. That was the truth—.

Ram: “And that’s how that man successively made you and I his… that’s how it is, huh.”

Rem: “…”

Ram: “Rem, why do you look so happy from listening to what I’ve said?”

Rem: “What?”

Rem puts her hands on her cheeks, flustered from her sister’s point, and she was surprised by the fact that she looked happy. Then her eyes wander as she tried to figure out what to say to Ram, who looked like she wanted to hear her reason.

Rem: “I was happy…that Onee-chan did the same as me. And, um…”

Just like she did, Ram also said that she’d offer herself for Rem’s sake. That was crystal clear, and yet she was so happy that she wanted to cry.

Ram: “…Good point.”

Ram, upon hearing Rem’s reply, nodded with a dumbfounded look on her face. The anger that she had in her eyes just now vanished, and she gazed at Rem with only the color of love in them.

Ram: “I’m happy, too. That Rem said such a thing for Onee-chan’s sake.”

Rem: “Yes, me too. …I’m happy, too.”

Rem climbs onto the bed, and she embraced Ram, who was smiling. And then Ram hugged her spoiled sister as she patted her head affectionately.

Something terribly heart-breaking happened, things were only being lost, and the pain that hurt them wasn’t healed. But even then, their existences for each other, that most precious thing in this world wasn’t lost.

The Oni sisters embrace each other to confirm that, and they spent a few moments together with just the two of them in the world.

Yes, they were two people in the world, not just twins who were irreplaceable to each other. Rem and Ram were now the only two left with the Oni blood.

Even in that sense, they were alone—.

Ram: “—The four people.”

Rem: “…Onee-chan?”

An impurity gets mixed into their time of love and embracing.

When Rem raised her face in response to Ram’s murmur, she saw her sister’s facial expression with her lips closed. And then Ram said this while keeping the same expression.

Ram: “The four people that attacked the village got away. We must find them.”

Rem: “The four people…that attacked the village…”

Upon hearing the details contents of Ram’s words, Rem opened her eyes wide and repeated them.

The damnable people who burned the Oni village with fire and killed her parents and her race. Those enemies were the four people.

Find them, is what Ram certainly said. And then Rem agreed not with her emotions, but by instinct. —That had to be accomplished.

“Since the four people who got away were trying to exterminate the Oni clan, they might be going for them, the survivors.” It wasn’t a self-protective idea like that. The matter was much more simple.

Ram: “Retribution. We have to obtain it. —We must wreak the grudge of our kind.”

Call it revenge, reprisal, retribution, vengeance, whatever. It didn’t matter.

In any case, it had to be done. It needed to be done.

Rem didn’t think this because her sister told her; it was the instincts that slept inside Rem as an Oni. It screamed loudly and spoke to her. Get revenge, get retribution, show your pride—.

Ram: “All of them will be found and killed. Otherwise, the disgrace of the Oni clan won’t get wiped out.”

Rem: “Find them…?”

Ram: “To do that, let’s use whatever’s available to us. —We might as well even use Roswaal-sama, who should be elated right now.”

Find the four enemies in this wide world—just how difficult could that be?

Ram nods reassuringly at Rem, who still had anxiety while her Oni instincts were pushing her. Seeing her sister’s determination, Rem felt the very same sense of security she had once felt before.

Even if she lost her horn, Ram was still Ram, and she was the noble “real deal”, stronger than everyone.

Thus—

Rem: “Yes, got it. …I’ll do my best along with Onee-chan.”

Rem’s sister simply having one word to say ignited her soul, even more than her instincts as an Oni did.

It came from Ram. Ram was always right. That’s why she was right now, from now on, and forever. Her sister would continue being Rem’s guide, no doubt about it.

The Oni village was gone, Ram lost her horn, but they could still be together.

If that was the case, then nothing would change. Rem believed that, and it was engraved in her mind.

With just a quiet voice—

Rem: “…I’m sorry.”

The village burned away, her parents and race were killed, and yet she didn’t feel any deep sorrow.

So many things were taken from her, but she was saved by the fact that Ram would still stay by her side.

Ram: “It’ll be okay, Rem. I will…Onee-chan will always be with you.”

Ram, without questioning her, said that in response to Rem’s words that were just an apology, just like always.

Closing her eyes from the feeling of her sister’s warmth and the gentle touch of her hands, Rem leaves everything up to her.

Praying that she could keep doing so from now on, just like she always has up to this point.

—Embracing each other, the Oni sisters both swear to get retribution in the world with just the two of them.

Chapter 3:
A New Life and the Start of Revenge

1

—The Oni sisters' life at the mansion first started with lots of learning.

Frederica: "Since we are becoming coworkers at the mansion, don't expect me to treat you like I have been. From now on I'll be guiding you without holding back, so please prepare yourself."

That was the first kind instruction Frederica gave on the first morning of their maid life.

They had been guests up until the day before, but the girl acted in a way that showed they were coworkers from this morning on, and Rem felt nervous as she stood next to Ram. They were gathered at the mansion's entry hall, and from here their new life would truly begin. However, she was worried about—

Rem: "Onee-chan, are you really fine? You can still rest…"

Ram: "I'm fine. Don't make me act like a monster by letting Rem work alone. I want to be the one to suffer instead of Rem. If that's not possible, then I want to suffer together."

Rem: "Onee-chan…"

Frederica: "I didn't say that you should have such tragic readiness! You're making me look bad!"

Ram still wasn't even fully recovered, and yet she insisted on working with Rem. While worrying about Ram's stubborn attitude, Rem gazed at her sister's appearance from top to bottom.

Rem: "Onee-chan looks cute…"

Ram: "Yep. I look good in anything, so that's a given. But, Rem is cute, too. To be honest, you're so cute that I'm just dying to stroke you.”

Ram, thin chest puffed up with pride, smiled pridefully—she was wearing a pinafore based around the colors white and black, and it was what people called maid clothes. Of course, Rem was also wearing the same uniform, but in comparison to Ram who was as gorgeous as her dress, she couldn’t help worrying about how poor she looked in it.

It was far too early for an eight year old girl to worry about something like that. Besides, the question was if there were maid clothes in this mansion that fit little girls.

Although, the answer to that question was standing at this place calmly with confidence.

???: “—Yes, I feel the exact same way. It fits you two very well. It was well worth the trouble to make over the maid clothes the beautiful Oni sisters are wearing. A sight for sore eyes.”

The one who said that with a bow was a slender faced handsome young man wearing black butler clothes. His hair, more dark blue than Rem’s, was carefully fixed, and the impression of his sharp eyes was softened by a monocle. He looked around 20 years old, but there was something strange about his aura that wouldn’t let her sense his age.

This smiling young man was the one behind the tailored maid clothes that fit the sisters perfectly. Using flowery words, the young man complemented the sisters standing close to each other. However—

Frederica: “You mind not looking at them with filthy eyes?”

It was the disapproval of Frederica as she stepped in between the young man and the sisters with scorn in her jade eyes. And then the young man also sharpened his look at Frederica, who interfered.

???: “Stop being so sure that it’s the outrageous, Frederica. I was just genuinely loving those with a pure soul. The reason why you feel like that is filthy is simply because your eyes and heart are filthy as someone who is reading too much into it. You should reflect upon yourself. Reflect.”

Frederica: “Now don’t you have a way with words. How do you rephrase having a messed up lust for little girls like that? Simply calling it a mystery won’t cut it.”

???: “One-sided views and close minded, truly foolish. Besides, it’s wrong to think of it as having lust for young girls. I love pure souls. Therefore, boys are also included. Indiscriminate.”

Frederica: “I’m not concerned with how it’s inconsistent, I am saying that you ought to know better!”

Frederica, face red as she yelled at the young man that threw his chest out confidently, held onto her head in her hands.

Frederica: “Good grief…why is this our head butler? I support most of Master’s judgements, but this one is definitely wrong.”

???: “The master trusts my work, so I’m responsible for everything. That’s all. Natural.”

Frederica: “Your sound arguments seriously irritate me, Clind…!”

The young man kept a cool face in response to Frederica who shouted regretfully. Rem, using that pause in the conversation, pinches the edges of her skirt as she said,

Rem: “Umm, Clind-san…thank you. It fits…perfectly.”

Frederica: “So perfectly that it’s suspicious, that is. When did you take the measurements of their bodies?”

Clind: “It’s a divine protection power. When I look at a person’s body, I can see through all of it. Magical eyes.”

Frederica: “That’s a lie! Right?”

Clind: “Of course, I was joking. We have known each other for such a long time, why are you so surprised? Does not compute.”

Frederica had no words for the behavior of the young boy—Clind who told a lie shamelessly. Apparently Clind always had a slight edge on Frederica. That was how Rem grasped their relationship.

Frederica and Clind, these were the two people taking charge of guiding Rem and Ram's maid life at the mansion. They may be quarrelling like this at the moment, but their conduct actually looked resolved even to the untrained eye, and Rem also unconsciously stood as stiff as a ramrod as someone who wasn't taught anything yet.

Ram: "I understand our position now. On another note, may I ask something?"

Clind: "Ask away, Miss."

Ram: "About the employees working at the mansion, there's an awful lot of Demi-humans. …Or well, that's not quite it. I'm concerned about how there are only Demi-humans. Why is it like this?"

Rem tilts her head at her sister's words prompting them to shift their attention towards contemplating the mansion.

Rem: "Is there something weird…about having a lot of Demi-humans?"

Ram: "Rem might not get it right away since there was only our race at the village. But, that's strange for the outside world. Besides, Roswaal-sama is a human, right?"

Clind: "Indeed, Master is a human. An eagle eye."

Ram: "And so, this is the Kingdom of Lugunica. Mind giving me a logical explanation for all this?"

When Clind agreed with her point, Ram sharpened her eyes. They weren't sharp enough to call them dangerous, but Ram was being cautious of something. Rem also held onto her sister's sleeve because of her anxiety.

Frederica: "Indeed, everyone in this mansion is a Demi-human.

Among the gossip that goes around, there are also voices that call Master “Demi-human Lover”.”

Ram: “That’s quite the crude name.”

Frederica: “Frankly, I assert it to be groundless.”

When Frederica took a step forward in response to Ram’s scornful tone, she continued while looking down on the sisters.

Frederica: “Master invites Demi-humans with no place to go into the mansion, and he gives them work and education. That’s how he gives, and he doesn’t ask for anything in return. It’s all purely Master’s good will.”

Ram: “Right. However, that doesn’t seem to apply to Rem and I.”

Rem also nodded many times in her head to agree with Ram’s objection.

He doesn’t ask for anything in return for his charity. That’s what Frederica said about Roswaal, but it was the exact opposite Rem and Ram. Rem and Ram were asked for compensation to save their respective sister, and this current situation came about by offering themselves. It was a completely different story.

When Frederica quickly squinted her jade green eyes at their reaction, she said,

Frederica: “Perhaps he thought about how you two would rush out of the mansion if he didn’t create ties like that. Can you deny that?”

Ram: “…”

Frederica: “Then that silence proves the accuracy of Master’s thoughts.”

Ram chose to be silent because that was most likely the bulls-eye.

The sisters were both put under Roswaal’s care. If they weren’t, they would’ve rushed out of the mansion, and at about this time they might’ve been on a reckless journey for the Oni clan’s revenge.

Even Rem, someone ignorant, could imagine that to be something absurd.

Ram: "…Fine. Roswaal-sama is a benevolent person that helps Demi-humans who lack the ability to live uneducated. Let's leave it at that. Besides, it's not like we are in a position to complain, being under Roswaal-sama's care."

Frederica: "You have a sharp way of speaking, don't you. I understand how Master feels, too. If he doesn't make ties with reasons, you'll leave…that's what makes him anxious."

Ram, with a discouraged look, snorts at Frederica's speaking.

Ram: "Whatever the case is, we have a goal. Whether we stay in the mansion or not won't change that fact. We have strong determination to accomplish it. And well…until we accomplish it, I swear to "Ban Steamed Potatoes"."

Rem: "O-Onee-chan…no way, are you serious…?!"

Frederica: "There's a very huge gap between Rem's reaction and how I feel!"

Rem was extremely disturbed by Ram's oath, but Frederica didn't feel that shock.

Frederica: "…Anyway, I'm going to start guiding you. But, I must first explain an important rule."

Rem: "A rule…"

Frederica, arms folded, says those words, and it makes Rem's ears twitch. A rule. Perhaps that was something like the laws at the Oni village. She didn't have a very good impression of laws.

According to an Oni clan law, twins were cursed children, and if that was true, then the sisters Rem and Ram would've been killed. She couldn't remember how many hundreds of times she was told, "It didn't end like that thanks to Ram".

It was painful whenever she was told that, but it was engraved so deeply in her mind that she'd never forget it.

That's why Rem got ready for Frederica to tell her something harsh. But—

Frederica: "In this mansion, the leading servants are to be referred to as Nii-sama and Nee-sama, me included. As for myself, it would be Frederica Nee-sama."

Rem: "—Huh?"

Frederica: "As I said, 'Nee-sama'. You would call me Frederica Nee-sama…why are you giving me that look?"

Frederica opens her eyes wide at Rem, who was baffled as she couldn't understand what she was told. To her side, Ram had a completely unamused look, and Frederica compared the sisters' faces as she says this in panic,

Frederica: "Might you wait a second? I am not the one who suggested this. It's a tradition of this mansion…and it's also a rule for those who become servants of the Mathers family…"

Rem: "But, Frederica-san…doesn't even call Clind-san 'Nii-san'…"

Based off of their appearances, Clind was definitely Frederica's senior.

Frederica was unable to respond to Rem's genuine question as she went "Agh".

Frederica: "Y-You see, that's because…"

Clind: "She may be like this now, but there was a time when even Frederica was pure and innocent. Back then she was charming in that she'd look up to me as 'Clind Nii-sama'…but time is cruel. Heartless."

Frederica: "Don't just talk about that so calmly!! A-Anyways…"

Frederica shouts at Clind, who shook his head regretfully, and she cleared her throat.

Frederica: “The tradition should be protected. So, try it. Call me Frederica Nee-sama.”

Rem: “Um, but…”

Frederica: “It’s just a tradition, come on now. Moreover, I’ll be moving a lot closer to you, which is for the future, too.”

Rem looks at Ram, who was next to her, in response to Frederica’s firm insistence as she brought her face close at once. Ram had no words for Rem’s look, but the corners of her eyes and her cheeks were slightly stiff.

It was because she was feeling angry or irritated. Those type of emotions. To put it frankly, Ram was in a bad mood now.

As for the reason why she was—

Ram: “Rem’s sister…Rem has only one Nee-sama, and that’s me. Don’t be so selfish.”

Frederica: “…That’s a surprisingly cute reason for your sulkiness.”

Ram: “Huh? You’re ridiculous. I stand by my reasoning. Can there be anything more important in this world?”

Ram, slender arms folded, stuck her chest out and confidently declared that. She still looked pitiful with a bandage wrapped under her head dress, but that attitude certainly was the almighty Ram Rem knew.

Thus, Rem also nodded in accordance with Ram’s intentions.

Rem: “Um, there…is only one Onee-chan for me and that’s Onee-chan, so…”

Frederica: “Hmph, even Rem-san, too. …But, it’s a tradition, you know?”

Rem: “I’m sorry.”

Rem, bowing as she apologized, made Frederica’s shoulders tremble slightly. Clind said “Apologize” once he gently tapped her shoulder as he shook his head.

Clind: “When they’re this insistent, it’s time to give it up. Besides, even though they’re going to be maids at the mansion, they’re still young. Little girls.”

Frederica: “They’re young”, that’s your reasoning?”

Clind: “—? Yes, that’s it. What about it? Argument.”

Frederica: “I am sick and tired of your reasoning!!”

Frederica shakes off Clind’s hand, who had a curious look, and she let out a deep sigh. Then, she smoothed down her blond hair, and she looked down regretfully.

Frederica: “Understood. Shelving the tradition for now, let’s move on to the next topic. …Ahh, I was hoping that they’d call me Nee-sama too…”

Ram: “Sounds like Frederica is just as sinful as Clind.”

Frederica: “I may have given up on being called Nee-sama, but at least say my name with a ‘-san’!”

Frederica, who was disappointed, raised her voice at Ram, and then she started to move at once. Clind also walks next to her, and Rem and Ram follow from behind as well.

And then, when Rem suddenly had a realization and looked back at Ram she said,

Rem: “…Nee-sama”

Ram: “…”

Rem: “Erm, I just wanted to try saying it.”

Rem, becoming embarrassed, looks away, and she walked faster as even her ears turned red. Seeing Rem walk ahead hastily like that, Ram’s mouth loosened slightly.

Ram: “Haha”

Then, she snorted her nose in a pleased way.

2

Roswaal: “Heeeeey, Rem. Good work. Are you used to the mansion noooooow?”

Rem: “Ah, Roswaal-sama…ah”

Rem gets called out to while she was cleaning the mansion’s parlor, and she turns around in surprise. Rem, bucket of water in her hands, staggers slightly, but

Roswaal: “Oh, careful careful.”

Roswaal, coming a step closer to her, holds up her shoulder, and she just barely avoided falling. When Rem let out a sigh of relief, she immediately panicked and bowed her head.

Rem: “Thank you very much. My sincere apologies for this.”

Roswaal: “What, it’s no big deeeeal. …Oh another thing, I should’ve said this earlier, but you’ve got the style of speech down as well.”

Rem: “Frederica-sama…treats me with tender care, so…”

Rem, responding while sounding embarrassed, speaks of the results from Frederica’s guidance.

Rem and Ram have already been working at the Mathers mansion as maids for one month—during that time, Frederica and Clind helped them as their leaders.

They both were very kind to the young sisters, and although they quarreled with each other, they showed loving care. Apparently, in the mansion training plan, work wasn’t the only thing they had to learn. Speech was a given, then there was reading and writing of the alphabet, numerical calculations, as well as common knowledge—there were too many things to count.

Roswaal: “It seems like you’re enjoying your time here somewhaaaat.”

Rem: “I have fun learning new things. …But…”

Rem smiled as she chatted with the master, but she suddenly looked down sadly and stopped talking. It had to be because of something about the contents of this conversation.

Roswaal: “Do you feel guilt in your chest? Or is it perhaps pangs of your conscience?”

Rem: “…”

Roswaal: “The Oni village burned down, and your parents and kind were all killed. And yet, here you are starting a new life. …Is that weighing on your conscience?”

She didn’t say anything, and yet Roswaal correctly guessed what Rem was feeling inside as if he’d seen it.

She felt satisfied. It may not have been perfect, but at the very least, Rem spent her days at the mansion until today without feeling anything that seemed like dissatisfaction.

Rem had a surprising aptitude for housework, manual labor, and service. It was something that was improving conspicuously during this one month under Frederica and the others’ guidance.

It was a fact Rem didn’t know at the Oni village, and it was something she was never able to feel as someone who always had an “I can’t do anything” inferiority complex at the village.

—She came here after the village was ruined, and yet she felt more fulfilled than before it fell into ruin.

If that was the case, then it was as if she was happy now because of the village being destroyed.

Roswaal: “You see, I believe that the environment is more important than living.”

Rem: “…What?”

Roswaal: “No matter what talent you’re born with, suitable soil, sunlight, and water are needed for that seed to grow. That’s what an environment is, and that’s what the most important factor is for many things.”

Roswaal tells that to Rem, who hung her head, with a soft tone. He had very calm emotion in his eyes, Rem couldn’t move and it was as if she was entranced.

Roswaal: “If the environment changes you for the better, then that would be something you should be happy about. No matter what, do not curse the events. That would be a sin and a whole different matter.”

Rem: “…”

Roswaal: “Someone said something similar to me before too. In actuality, I do believe it. If the environment is a part of life’s journey, then meetings are, too. I was blessed with an environment. I was blessed with meetings. I’ve never regretted that, nor have I ever cursed it.”

Rem, seeing Roswaal declare that frankly, trembles so much that she started to feel a mysterious emotion.

It was strength. It was the same thing as Rem’s longing to be strong like her sister.

Rem: “I see that even Roswaal-sama has someone in his life like that.”

Roswaal: “Woops, that was a slip of the tooooongue. It’s embarrassing, so keep it a secret from the others, alright?”

Rem, with a slight smile, nodded at Roswaal, who put his finger on his lips. The behavior of this funny and friendly master made Rem change her opinion on him quite a bit in this past month.

At the very start, she thought he was someone she wouldn’t like when she first met him, but her feelings changed when he was this considerate and kind to her. Her doubt became gratitude, and then her gratitude became loyalty.

Rem had no problems at all with working at the mansion now like this.

However—

Rem: “The witch cult”

Roswaal: “Hmm”

Rem: “They are the people who attacked the village.”

Roswaal: “I guess Frederica and maybe Clind told you. They do spoil you, after all. I could’ve sworn I told them specifically to not let you know about it.”

Roswaal’s reaction of looking up with a troubled expression convinced Rem.

The witch cult—that was a part of her maid education, and it was a name that came up many times when she was studying the outside world’s common knowledge and history. They were a group of heretics that were treated as those to be detest throughout the world. Their numbers, their principles behind activities, everything was veiled in mystery, but the one thing that was certain was the worshipping of their “Witch of Envy”.

The worst existence that engulfed half of the world with shadow, known as the disaster of all disasters—even Rem, someone who was secluded at a village, knew that much about the rare evil existence.

This group that believed in such a witch surely were the ones who attacked the Oni village.

Rem: “It was neither Frederica-sama nor Clind-sama. I just heard about the witch cult, and when I thought about the village again…”

Roswaal: “You thought that they did it. If that’s the case, then I was the one to make a slip of the tongue, not the two of them. You sure got me theeeere. Today I am just a hopeless blabbermouth.”

Roswaal sighed exaggeratedly as he went “I screwed up”. He turns around his body there, and with his closed eye he faced Rem as she stared at him.

Roswaal: “About my answer just now…I meant that I think it was probably them. For circumstantial evidence, them being the witch cult indicates it, but it does nothing more than that, and nothing less than that.”

Rem: “Is it because…the witch cult…doesn’t leave behind anything?”

Roswaal: “Whether they are the assailants or the victims, that’s how it is. They won’t leave anything behind at the devastated scene. Soooo, it’s the same deal with your guys’ village.”

When the witch cult decides on their target, the place, people, and soil are extirpated. Even if the witch cult is repelled, the driven off witch believers wouldn’t leave behind anything and they’d hold their tongues.

Therefore, even though witch cult was detested everywhere, for hundreds of years they acted as they pleased.

Rem: “Witch cult…”

Once again, Rem grits her teeth at the truth Roswaal told her. Her small chest burned with endless regret, the flame of anger, and above all, a strong sense of duty.

It wasn’t just because her Oni blood wanted retribution; it was also for her oath with Ram.

Getting revenge on them was something Ram decided, and it was even a wish. That’s why, no matter what,—

Roswaal: “That’s why, Rem. If possible, I don’t want you guys to live only for revenge.”

Rem: “—Huh?”

However, Roswaal suddenly poured cold water on Rem, who had her spirit burning.

When Rem opened her eyes wide in response to the master's statement, with sorrow clouding his eyes, Roswaal said,

Roswaal: "It is true that you should detest someone who burned your brethren unreasonably. But you see, you and Ram are still young, and you have a future ahead of you. There's no need to insist on getting revenge, doing something that would be like wearing away your body and soul. That's what I believe."

He denies her revenge in an unexpected way, and Rem wasn't sure how to answer.

In the eyes of Roswaal, who looked down on Rem, there was only the color of pure concern for her. Those numerous factors were speaking to her saying that getting the Oni clan's revenge wasn't realistic.

Even Rem understood that. But, even then, this was something Ram wanted.

Just that was more than enough to—

Rem: "Roswaal-sama, thank you for your concern. I will think about it."

Roswaal: "I see, for now, that'll be fiiiiine. Anyhow…oh"

Roswaal approves of Rem's answer, and he tried to end the conversation. But, that's when he was stopped as he tried to exit the room, and a pleasant color was drawn in his eyes. The reason being —

Ram: "Don't carelessly get so close to my cute sister. Roswaal…-sama."

Roswaal: "An honorific that sounds forced, truly pleasaaaant, Ram."

Roswaal shrugs his shoulders at Ram, who was standing at the entrance to the room as she glared at him in a displeased way. When that behavior made Ram even more irritated, Roswaal let out a forced sigh.

Roswaal: “I am being this affectionate, and yet you are always so cooooold. We even spend every evening and every night together alone intimately too.”

Ram: “I’m just reluctantly accepting treatment for the sake of maintaining my body. So disgusting.”

Ram, with a frown that really made her look offended, entered the room hurriedly, and she stood in front of Rem. Ram, who interfered the master and her little sister, touched Rem’s face gently at that spot.

Ram: “Are you okay? He didn’t do anything weird to you, did he?”

Roswaal: “You don’t trust me, do youuuuu. We’ve known each other for a month now, so I think it’s about time we built a relationship of truuuuuust.”

Ram: “A relationship of trust? In this one month, my suspicions have only been increasing during my time with Roswaal-sama.”

Roswaal: “What a strict evaluation. But I wonder, is the reason why I think that your sister and I have built a good relationship because I’m conceiteeeeed?”

Roswaal smiles strangely at Ram’s cold response, and he waves his hand at Rem. Seeing him do that, Ram looks at Rem in the eye, and she said,

Ram: “Is this true, Rem?”

Rem: “He’s lying. Onee-chan is right.”

Roswaal: “Betrayed within an instant, my heart has been shatteeered.”

Rem had no reason to worry about if she should choose to be on Ram’s side or Roswaal’s side.

Seeing that Roswaal was sighing with his hands raised, Ram smiled triumphantly. However, Rem touched her sister's hand, and starting with "Onee-chan", she said,

Rem: "So, are you finished cleaning upstairs?"

Ram: "—. ——. —Not yet."

Ram answered Rem's question with a little hesitation while looking away. When Rem nodded at the answer she expected, she grasped her sister's hand that touched her as she said,

Rem: "Well then, since I'm finished with the place I'm responsible for, let's go finish the rest of Onee-chan's work."

Ram: "…Thanks as always, Rem."

Ram: "It's no big deal. It's for Onee-chan, after all."

Rem shook her head calmly in response to Ram's slightly apologetic sounding words.

In this past month, Rem's surprising aptitude for housework became clear, but at the same time, various truths also became clear for Ram. As for what they were—

Roswaal: "Still, it is surpriiiising. Frederica was awful at first too, but I didn't expect you to have such outstanding talent to be even worse."

Ram: "I produce outstanding results in everything. That's my karma."

Rem: "He isn't lying. No lies."

Roswaal sounded like he was teasing her, but Rem and Ram couldn't refute it.

In this past month, there was one big problem that became clear to Ram upon living at the mansion. It was the harmful effect of losing her horn, which was the chronic mana deficiency that threatened her body.

Currently, Ram's condition was kept stable because of Roswaal's treatment every evening. However, originally this was supposed to only take care of the role that a horn should fulfill. It was also a treatment that was solely limited to preventing her rampages, and it was far off from being the ability she had when her horn wasn't gone.

In conclusion, Ram's body was always in a malnutrition-like condition, and she couldn't even do activities by the book. She was only able to go on as a result of her tough mental strength, no doubt about it.

Of course, there was no way she could accomplish her duties as a maid satisfactorily. Still, Ram stubbornly engaged in roles, and she bestirred herself to try and do the same work as Rem.

Rem: "It's all clean. Onee-chan."

Ram: "Yes, understood."

So, making up for her sister's deficits has been Rem's daily routine. She finished cleaning the parlor, and she headed to upstairs with Ram as she nodded. But before that, when Rem bowed to Roswaal, she said,

Rem: "Well then, Roswaal-sama, we'll be leaving. See you later."

Roswaal: "Okay okay, keep up the good work. Also, Ram. I think my business is going to take longer tonight. I'm probably going to be late for your treatment, but just wait for me without feeling loneeely."

Ram: "It would be nice if you did it while I was sleeping."

Roswaal: "But then I wouldn't be able to enjoy your reaction…not, but you see, I wouldn't be able to tell if the treatment went well or not."

Ram, mood worsened, snorts at Roswaal who made exaggerations, and then Rem left the parlor along with her. Just after that, while they were both headed upstairs side by side, Ram took a side glance at her as she said, Ram: “He really didn’t do anything, right?”

Rem: “No need to worry. Onee-chan, you doubt Roswaal-sama far too much.”

Ram: “…You don’t have to speak formally with me too.”

Rem: “Ah, my apolog…sorry. It’s become a habit now to speak like that…”

Rem unconsciously started to speak formally, and she put her hand on her mouth in a panic.

She was completely blended in with the mansion life. That proved it was natural for her now. She got used to the maid dress that she was embarrassed of at first, and was even no longer reluctant with the manner of speaking and the work.

If there was still one thing that she wasn’t used to it would be—

“…”

There was the profile of Ram, who walked next to her. She steals a glance at her firm look and her gallant eyes. Her sister looked the same as before, but even then, she was definitely different now.

Even Ram, who she thought wouldn’t change no matter what happened, was no exception to the effects of losing a horn. There was no trace left of the power of her sister that was deemed the reincarnation of an Oni God.

If this was the Ram back at the village, she wouldn’t need help from Rem for anything. And that’s because Ram was far above Rem in everything.

Ram, who was supposed to be a truly outstanding being, was now standing close to Rem like this.

It didn’t seem like she would get used to it, no matter how much time passed. Or maybe, maybe one day she’d at least get used to this sense of discomfort. Maybe at least she’d get used to Ram not having a horn, just like how she did with her clothes and manner of speaking.

And if she really did, how would that be any different from losing her Oni pride?

Ram: “—Rem?”

Rem: “…Ah”

Ram, at the end of the corridor, calls out to Rem, who got lost in her thoughts too long and stopped walking.

Rem: “No, it is nothing. I am fine.”

Ram: “—Oh.”

Rem watches Ram give a slight nod as she accepted that reply, and she quickly stood next to her sister.

She didn’t realize that the words she let out automatically were formal, and she didn’t notice that her older sister was sensitive to the change happening inside of her—.

3

Even when Rem was feeling conflicted and worried, time went on irreversibly.

During this time that passed while she engaged in the mansion work, Rem became uneasy because of her heart, which was diminishing her anger that was supposed to be in her chest.

Her race’s revenge, her attachment towards getting revenge she promised with Ram faded every day, weakening.

That wasn’t happening because she was always going after them everyday; it was related to the feeling of happiness she had living in the mansion and Ram’s condition that looked like it wasn’t going to get better at all.

Ram was necessary for revenge, for the retribution. Nevertheless, Ram’s body no longer had any of the power needed to do that as she lost her horn. It wasn't that she wasn't losing the mettle for revenge; the practical power needed to carry out revenge wasn't in the sisters' hands.

That became a stone weighing on Rem's heart, and it cast a shadow on the flame of her desire for revenge.

At this rate, she'd forget about how she was an Oni, and she and her sister would continue living as maids along with Frederica and Clind. —Was there an option like that?

Rem never talked about it, and it wasn't like she clearly considered it to be one, either. However, it would be a lie to say that she didn't have those feelings growing inside her.

While having those feelings, Rem continued to work hard everyday to distract herself from that.

Being afraid of change, sinking into stagnation.

However, change would always come by seeking slothful peace.

—That was something inevitable to Rem at this time.

Rem: "Onee-chan is going to go with Roswaal-sama on his trip?"

Rem ponders the beginning topic, and she widens her eyes in surprise.

The details were of course like a bolt from the blue, but that wasn't the main reason why she was surprised. The thing Rem was surprised about the most was the schedule for the trip.

The schedule—basically, they were plans that would make the trip take several days, and during that time, Ram would be away from the mansion. The sisters were going to be separated for the first time in their lives.

Roswaal: "Normally, only a certain number of people are supposed to come near "Sanctuary". However, I have a duty to protect you guys safely. The treatment I give to Ram is a part of that. I shouldn't abandon that duty due to my own selfish reasons."

Ram: "I'm telling you, skipping a day or two won't do any harm…"

Ram was unhappy with Roswaal, who leaned on the sofa with his long legs crossed elegantly. But, sitting next to Roswaal, the older sister didn't shake off his hand caressing her hair.

Rem, sitting face to face with them, did not hide her surprise from that change.

Rem: "Onee-chan, will you be okay with Roswaal-sama?"

Ram: "If by okay you mean my neck won't break from being unable to take it, then yeah I'll live."

Roswaal: "It's a chance to look forward to Ram's perseverance that was bound to come up sooner or later. Consider this as a challenge, and I would like you to accept iiiiiiit."

Rem: "A challenge? What kind of…"

Roswaal: "Of course, the older sister separation and the little sister separation…or maybe I should call it the sisters separation?"

Roswaal's words make Rem and Ram's cheeks stiffen. Roswaal smiles at that sister-like reaction, and he put his chin on his stacked hands.

Roswaal: "Since you guys left the village, you both were never separated, not even for a second. So, I can easily imagine that it was the same at the village as well. How about you try taking a little breather now?"

Ram: "If we do that, does it even mean anything to Rem and I?"

Roswaal: "It does! You have to believe that everything has meaaaning. I just wanted to try it, wanted to see it, wanted to know how it'd be…that's why I'm doing this."

Ram: "If that's the case, then it's obvious that we should end the conversation here. Rem, let's go."

Roswaal: "You have a short temper. Sheeeeesh, you sure are a sassy girl."

He stops Ram from getting up and pulled her arm as he sat her on the sofa. Then, once Roswaal cleared his throat, he made a genuine, serious look.

Roswaal: "I really am worried. One day, you guys will have to choose your future. Whether you stay here or leave is up to you."

Rem: "—. But you said that Onee-chan and I belong to Roswaal-sama."

Roswaal: "I meant that to solely be something like an expeeeedient. I can't force you. If you guys really want to leave, then the door out the mansion is always there. And I won't maliciously insist on ownership to try and bring you guys back as you leave on your own."

The statement makes Rem widen her eyes, and even Ram had her eyes slightly widen, too. Seeing that reaction, Roswaal continued with a serious look.

Roswaal: "Even if it comes to that, you are free to do what you want. Buuuut, no matter what future you choose, there's no way you'll live without being separated forever. And then when that time comes, if you guys drown in suffering…well, if a time comes where I could lend a hand, I'll personally save youuuu."

Ram: "…Stop beating around the bush. What exactly are you trying to say?"

Roswaal: "To put it frankly, I'm worried about you guys. So I want to help as much as possible while I can. —Do you understand?"

Roswaal winks at Ram, who pouted, and Rem, whose eyes widened in surprise. That clown gesture and the kindness of his blue eyes make Rem dumbfounded.

However, she understood that this ridiculous looking master really was caring for Rem and Ram. Thus—

Rem: "Onee-chan…"

Ram: "Don't make that look, Rem. —I guess I understand what he's trying to say."

Upon being called out to, Rem looks down, but she still let out a reluctant sounding sigh. Just from that gesture, Rem understood she and her sister came to the same conclusion.

Being separated would make them lonely. Even if it was just a few days. But, Roswaal was saying the truth. Holding hands forever as sisters and living life without being separated for an instant was impossible. Even if they wanted it, unfairness would attack them occasionally with a perfect surprise attack.

Just like how the witch cult absurdly destroyed the Oni village.

Roswaal: "What, you're only going to be separated for three days at most, you knooooow. It's not like it's going to be a final faaaarewell. Spend this time without your sister's vision as well as possible."

Ram: "It's as if you're saying that I'm a burden to Rem. I don't like it."

Rem: "I'm going to be lonely and anxious without Onee-chan. Please come back soon."

Ram: "See, look how cute Rem is. …I shouldn't go after all."

Roswaal: "It's already been decided, so you can't do that obvioooously."

He ends the interaction with a smile, and Rem and Ram were going to be split up for the first time.

And then, after three days, the promised day where Ram and Roswaal would leave the mansion together came.

The two gigantic headed earth dragons pull the dragon carriage, and the two of them leave for their destination on it. But before that, Ram and Rem spent some time reluctantly saying their goodbyes, and they just wouldn't stop embracing each other.

Ram: "Listen, Rem. Don't cry at night, even though I won't be there."

Rem: "Okay, I won't Onee-chan, you be careful too…"

Roswaal: "You make it sound like you're going off to war. This isn't a final farewell, is iiiiiiit?"

They spent so much time that Roswaal ended up teasing them. Once the sisters finally separated from each other, Frederica stepped up to Ram as if deciding to do so on purpose when that happened.

When she fixed Ram's appearance just like always, she finally brought something out of her pocket.

Ram: "Is that…a letter?"

Frederica: "Yes, it is. My brother is at "Sanctuary". He's intrusive and noisy, so you'll definitely come across him. Can you give it to him?"

Ram: "If he's intrusive and noisy, I might end up shutting him up by force. If you're okay with that, then I'll take it."

Frederica: "That's fine. It'll teach him a good lesson."

There were bitterness and regret on Frederica's profile as she handed over the letter, perhaps because there were some sort of complicated circumstances. Ram appeared to have noticed it, but she accepted her letter without mentioning it.

And then, she stepped onto the dragon carriage that Roswaal boarded first as she said,

Ram: "Rem, I'll write a letter when we get there."

Frederica: "Don't you know that you'll be back before she gets the letter?!”

Frederica sees them off saying that, and the dragon carriage they were on departed. Rem watches the dragon carriage fade away on the other side of the cloud of dust caused by the earth dragons, and she puts her hand on her chest.

There wasn’t as much uneasiness in her chest as she thought. Although, she did have a feeling that she might’ve collapsed right there after her tears overflowed because of her separation from Ram.

Rem: “Thank goodness that didn’t happen.”

Frederica: “It would be worrying if that happened when it’s only going to be three days! Garfiel and I have…”

Then, Frederica unconsciously stopped herself from talking as if she blurted something out, and she looked down awkwardly. Based off that reaction, Rem guessed this person she spoke of, Garfiel, was the brother she was talking about earlier.

Rem: “Frederica-sama, have you always been separated from your little brother?”

Frederica: “—The situation is complicated. I haven’t seen him for quite a long time.”

Frederica made a slightly distant look in response to Rem’s question.

Frederica: “If an opportunity ever comes up, Rem might end up going to “Sanctuary” with Master too. If that happens, please get along well with Garfiel. He’s about the same age as you guys.”

Just for a moment, Rem was charmed by Frederica, who was smiling slightly, perhaps because she had remembered her brother. Her profile as she put her hand on her mouth with her fangs hidden certainly was just like a painting—.

Clind: “—Frederica, we have no time to smile. We’ll be thoroughly taking care of the mansion’s duties while Master is away from the mansion. It’d be nice if I got help from even a cat right now…yes, this has to be your time to shine as a cat half-beast. I really will be looking forward to it. Anticipation.”

Frederica: “So annoying! I’ll be right there!!”

Although, it also felt like Clind’s usual jokes being shattered instantly.

4

Despite the start, the time without Ram at the Mathers mansion had begun.

Not having her sister by her side certainly did cause loneliness and anxiety, but it didn’t bring about the hopeless sadness that she expected.

It wasn’t because she had succeeded in the sister separation, but rather due to Frederica’s care—there were many times when she threw her into one job after another, so often that she didn’t have the time to think about Ram’s absence.

In the end, Rem cried slightly about Ram’s absence only at night; the night where she finished her work, returned to her room, and spent the night on her bed without someone to cry to.

And then it happened the next day on the afternoon of the second day.

Frederica: “Well then, Rem. I’ll be accompanying those kids, so please take care of the mansion while I’m gone.”

Rem: “Yes, Frederica-sama. Have a safe trip.”

In front of the mansion, Rem sees off Frederica, who had her back against the dragon carriage, and she gave a deep bow.

Inside of the dragon carriage up front, there several little girls dressed like Rem and Frederica. The girls weren’t similar to the two of them just with their clothes, but their circumstances as well. —In other words, they were Demi-humans.

Just like Rem and the others, they were found by Roswaal with no place to go, and they were trained to work as maids at the mansion. Their training ended, and these girls, who were deemed to have adequate skills as maids, were now being sent out to service at another mansion.

Rem: "…"

In response to the women nodding at her from the passenger window, Rem also bowed her head politely and quickly.

Even though they were at the same mansion, Rem wasn't involved with them very much as someone still in training. Nevertheless, Rem hoped the best for her coworkers traveling to a new workplace.

At first, when Frederica talked to her about Roswaal, she said that he had a benevolent and tolerant personality, but that really was the truth.

He educated Demi-humans, gave them work, and sent them off to different places. This wasn't the first time Rem saw off travelling coworkers like this as someone who has been at the mansion for two months. She felt thankful that so many Demi-humans were saved by Roswaal.

Frederica: "Though Clind is unlucky, and I am worried about leaving you alone at the mansion."

Putting Rem showing admiration aside, that was Frederica worrying, who was acting as the girls' attendant. It was the first time Clind was going to be out while she was away from the mansion, and if things went as planned, Rem was going to be left alone at the mansion for half the day.

Frederica: "Having no one at the mansion is out of the question. But still, for you to be the one left alone…"

Rem: "It'll be fine, Frederica-sama. I've gotten somewhat used to the mansion. I'll be able to take care of it while you're out."

Rem nods back at Frederica, who worried about her, and she tried sticking out her chest, something she would rarely do.

There were already many times when Rem had to wait for her sister's return alone while she was mixed with the adults' meetings at the village, which Ram called duties. A situation like this was nothing to her.

Rem: "Besides, Clind-sama also left some work for me to do."

Frederica: "There's no doubt that…arranging the mansion's basement warehouse will be a lot of work for one person. I'm really sorry, Rem. When I get back, I promise I'll help out right away."

Frederica, continuing to show care, says that and worried about Rem until the end, but she finally departed from the mansion, though she still had a conflicted look on her face.

And so, once Rem saw off Frederica and the others, she was now the only one left at the mansion.

Rem: "But I have no time to just stand around absentminded."

Once Rem said that to herself, she quickly returned to the mansion and headed towards the wing with the basement warehouse. The old looking key in her pocket was something Clind gave her, who was out to do some errands.

It seemed that Clind was planning on doing a makeover of the mansion, cleaning it during these three days without Roswaal. The big job of rearranging the basement warehouse that started yesterday was also part of that.

Rem: "—It's here, right?"

The west wing, east wing, and then the third wing in the middle made up the Mathers mansion, and the basement warehouse Clind left her to take care of was at the middle wing. It was there at the deepest part of the first floor. People rarely came to the deepest part of the cold, stone passageway, and this was also the first time Rem came here.

That's how it was, so she wasn't sure if she'd be able to tell if the warehouse would need to be rearranged or not, but—

Rem: "Clind-sama said that you'd be able to tell once you see it, so…"

Clind was basically never wrong. Contrary to Frederica's fears, he was always gentlemanly and kind, so he even patiently worked with someone unskilled like Rem. He really did bother her sometimes, but it actually was only when she'd get surprised by him looking at her from afar.

With the help of her trust in Clind, Rem reaches for the door to the basement warehouse without hesitation. When she inserted the old key into the keyhole, it unlocked easily making a rough sound, and the door opened with a creak.

Rem: "…"

But, the next moment, Rem shrieked softly at the stink leaking through the door.

She closes the door reflexively and fell to her knees on the spot. The stink was that strong.

Rem: "Wh-What was that…? Huh, what? Wh-What in the world…?"

It was a shock way beyond comprehension, and so Rem became confused while she leaned against the door.

A stink—yes, it was something that could only be described as a stink, and a cruel, hideous odor.

It differed from a rotting smell and the smell of blood, and it didn't even smell like feces or stimulants. She couldn't compared it to anything. Rem had never came across this smell—actually, that's not right.

Rem: "Where have I…come across this smell…"

She smelled it before. She came across this smell somewhere once.

She didn't have a clear picture that appeared in her memory. But, she definitely did smell it. Sometimes sense of smell would be more accurately connected to memory than images and sounds. This was proof of that.

Rem: "…"

While not knowing which memory it connected to, Rem slowly opened the door.

Once again, she grimaced at the suffocating, enveloping stink, and Rem shakes her head dizzily. Even if she stopped breathing from her nose, she couldn't prevent the truly strong smell from breaking into her nasal cavity.

Despite the stink assaulting her sense of smell, Rem stepped forward and entered the basement warehouse.

—The basement warehouse was shut in darkness, and there wasn't anything she could use.

Rem: "…"

Rem, putting her hand on the cold wall while using it to move forward, goes down the stairs. Dry footsteps sound throughout the darkness, and Rem felt as if she was sinking endlessly. As sound came down, so did her body, into the abyss. That was the type of illusion she felt.

However, that nightmarish delusion ended quickly, and Rem reached the basement warehouse.

Rem: "…The…lights"

The moment she thought "I have to find them", Rem's vision suddenly became white light in front of her. When that shocked Rem and made her jump, she saw her surroundings, the state of the basement illuminated by faint light.

Miscellaneous tool shelves, piles of old books, tools of unknown use covered in dust, many very old furnishings that decorated the warehouse, all those kind of countless, unnecessary things filled the basement warehouse.

She agreed with what Clind had said. “Once you see it, you’ll know if it’s necessary or not.” I get it, I’m positive that anything and everything in here are unneeded things. So he’s telling me to take out all of it.

The light that shined on the room was a magic light installed on the basement wall. It seemed to be a mechanism in which it would light up automatically whenever someone came to the basement, and once that became clear to her, she wasn’t surprised

She understood her goal, and her anxiety disappeared. Now she should engage in her work while feeling like this. That’s what Rem concluded, and she would quickly clean up the basement warehouse —

Rem: “It stinks…it’s far worse than it was before…”

If Rem’s spirit wasn’t so strong that she could divide it like that, she wouldn’t have been able to kill her senses.

Rem, holding onto her breath, turns her head around to find the source of the stink. Once she tried following that smell in the cramped underground basement, she found what she was looking for in merely 10 seconds.

Then it was right before her eyes, and this was truly when Rem’s throat froze up.

Rem: “…”

In front of Rem, gazing dumbfoundedly, there was a door to another room that lead to the inner part of the basement warehouse.

The existence of it in itself wasn’t something to be surprised about, but she was concerned about what was inscribed on the door itself. —Several tight chains were wound on the door, and a magic circle was drawn to seal it.

Rem: “This was Onee-chan’s…”

She came across it before. This door had the same exact seal spell that isolated Ram as she went out of control without her horn, applied to ensure outside safety.

Rem: “…”

No doubt about it, the stink was coming from the other side of this door. Even if it was a strictly sealed door, it couldn’t prevent the escape of the intense smell.

The moment Rem understood that, the loudest alarm bell sounded in her brain. Rem feels something that was like a direct hit to her skull, and her instincts were telling her to leave this place immediately.

Rem’s senses that perceived the stink also surrendered in agreement with her instincts calls. You shouldn’t be here. You can’t be here. That’s what her senses and her instincts clearly answered together.

She remembered being irritated by the stink before. Rem forcibly holds down the cover of her closed memories that tried to open itself, and she came to the conclusion that she should leave this place for now.

And then, while being careful to not make a sound with her footsteps, she turns around quickly, and she sought to leave the basement—.

???: “—Che che che che che”

She heard a noise. A sound that opened the cover of her memories.

The next moment, Rem broke the chains by sheer strength, and she kicks down the sealed down as she jumped into the room.

Inside the room, on the other side of the broken door, there was someone that opened his eyes wide because of her Oni impulse. He opened his eyes wide, and right after that, he laughed and laughed —

???: “Welcome, little girl. Can you give a nice cry for me?”

Immediately after, the raging flames completely cover Rem’s vision, and she was blown away by the blast.

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???: “Does this mean I’m free now that the magic circle is broken?”

Rem: “…”

???: “Oh, it’s the great little girl. I guess this is where I should say “I want to thank you”?”

Rem: “…”

???: “Ah! Guess you got too close. I guess you wanna say “Ouch my ears, I can’t hear”?”

Someone, someone was…something, something…someone was saying something.

Rem, falling over on the hard floor, did everything she could to restore the blank space created in her head. I have to gather the thoughts blown away by the impact, find a voice I can speak with, and do my absolute best to break the stalemate and understand the situation—that’s what she thought, but the dark anger rising in her heart stood in her way.

Just previously, a sound Rem heard through the door released something that was shut inside her memory. The fire that died down day by day at the mansion flared up into a flame extreme enough to destroy the world.

Rem: “—Ah…AAAH”

Rem, mouth open, glares at the dirty ceiling, and she raised a distorted voice that shook the atmosphere. In response to that low voice, a white horn—the proof of an Oni showed up on her forehead. Her horn spreads the black smoke clouding the room, and it usurps a very minimal amount of mana from the world, turning it into energy.

She touches the ground with her hands, lifts her body up, slowly stands, and she glares at the man standing still in front.

It was an extremely skinny, unhealthy looking man. He had depressing cheeks and eye sockets, and a countenance that was so vapid that it looked ill. He wore nothing over his upper half of his body, and he only had hemp trousers for his lower half, but there were many burns and lacerations on his exposed skin. It looked as if he had been tortured before.

???: "…Wow, so I guess that horn means you're an Oni survivor. If that's the case, then did you come here for your family's revenge?"

Rem: "…"

???: "No response. But you do want it, don't you?"

She wasn't obligated to answer. Rem faces the man with a sadistic smile on his face, and she decides to attack.

She steps forward, kicks the miscellaneous waste around her, gets right in front of the man, and while relying on the strength produced by the horn, she punches his guts—

???: "Okay, boom!"

That moment, a blast was produced beside her face, and Rem's consciousness and her upper body shook violently. She felt dizzy, and her brain bounces in her cranium because of the blow that came from her blind spot. She staggers, and a complete gap was created.

???: "That's 6 now! If you can handle this, then this is where I should say impressive, right?"

Explosions occurred, following the man's voice. Three shocks were shot into Rem's chest, stomach, and abdomen one by one going into her small body from behind, and she was blown away.

Rem: “My…abdom—”

She tumbles doing a somersault, and a lot of blood came out of her throat coughing violently. The shock jumbles her intestines, and her broken ribs felt pain because of the vibration from her vomiting blood and coughing. She couldn’t tell if she was seeing red because of the pain, or if it was because her face was split in half.

???: “As expected, Onis are tough even when they’re brats. You were hit that much and you still aren’t damaged?”

Based off what the man looking down on her said, she was now sure that her body was the same as before. She was breathing heavily from the pain, but her shining horn wouldn’t let her lose her will to fight. Rem’s wounds blew red steam, the damage of her limbs were healed in an instant, her disconnected bones were reconnected with a sound, and she stood up fiercely.

???: “I saw it at that mountain many times, but man you guys are literally monsters. Will this be when I’m forced to torture you?”

Rem: “GaAAA—!!”

Rem roars, and once she jumped back to make time, she faced the man at front and attacked him as she brandished her Oni nails. But there’s no way she could rush forward like a madman after it already failed once. Hearing that little girl’s battle cry, the man raised his arms covered with scars and went,

???: “Che che che che che”

He clicks his tongue, and right after that, there was the stink that would brush against her nasal cavity. Rem twisted her body at once, and she avoided coming in contact with the space where the stink gathered. However, she couldn’t escape from the produced blast.

Even if she escaped from a direct hit, the explosion would create heat, impact, and destruction. Rem gets engulfed in those things immediately, and she was repelled again as she raised cries of pain. She rolls on the floor, and she hits the wall.

???: “No technique, no plan, no tricks. Are these the effects of somehow making it by, using only the strength of some power? You guys are all just like kids who swing their arms and legs around, so aren’t you the same as beasts?”

Rem: “Oo…Oooooo!”

???: “You even cry like beasts, how dull. If you’re going to cry, then do it in a cute way. Entertain me by barking. You’re a let-down, you know?”

Rem, crouching, roars in frustration, and she senses the stink again. She hits the floor, and jumps back at that spot. But, it was too late. Immediately, there was another explosion, and she was blown off, rolling.

She bleeds, and the clotted blood that became a splash stains all over the basement. The scattering unneeded things were crumpled up by the impact turning them into waste, and Rem was going to meet the same fate very soon.

She was going to die. She was going to get killed. At a place like this, in an incomprehensible state, to the enemy—

???: “You may do this much, but no one will come. Actually, you have no one. If that’s the case, then this is a golden opportunity. This is where I should kill the little Oni with a slash and get the hell out of here, right?”

When Rem heard the man’s statement that didn’t hide his intent to murder, she felt herself losing the will to fight back.

In proportion to her blood coming out the desire for revenge inside Rem—the Oni blood inside her also poured out. When she finally became empty inside, that would be the end of her life and the oath for retribution. If that happened—

Rem: “…”

If that happened, Ram would surely start the retribution for Rem.

Rem: “No, no…”

She can’t. No, she can’t. She can’t she can’t she can’t she can’t no no no no no no no.

With Ram’s current state, even if she had the same will and intentions she had when her horn wasn’t gone, she didn’t have the body to make it happen. That’s what she understood in this past month in her days at the mansion. She understood it so well it hurt.

If revenge was put into Ram’s hands only, she would definitely die in vain. And even if she knew it was in vain, there’s no way her sister would give up. She couldn’t leave revenge up to Ram.

Her sister won’t die. She couldn’t die. Her sister couldn’t have revenge. She couldn’t accomplish it.

Why? The answer to that is simple. —It was because of Rem.

Rem: “…”

The village burned, her race died, and Ram’s horn broke. If Ram went to fight recklessly with how she was, then it would be Rem’s fault. Because Rem let her sister do everything.

She couldn’t let that happen. There’s not a chance she’d let this man kill her precious sister.

???: “It’s about time I put an end to this. Little Oni, don’t you know that you’re no fun when you don’t cry?”

The man turned his palm towards her, and he was trying to stab Rem with the finishing blow while she faced up on the floor.

She focuses her eyes, will, everything she could feel into her Oni horn, and gathers them. She works out a countermeasure, changing it into an idea that was “Determine what this man is doing, and ruin it”.

In this extreme situation, that’s what her violent Oni blood and her instincts as the Oni fighter race burst open and shined on.

???: “Die—”

When the man said that cruel death sentence, his intentions became bursting heat, and there was an explosion with Rem in the center of it. That burst and scattered the little girl's body, and it was enough to throw out her blood and flesh.

However, that was if it were a direct hit.

Rem: "Ha—ah"

Rem kicks the floor and clings to the ceiling, and she looked down on the basement enveloped in the blast. She wasn't seeing with her bloodshot light blue eyes. She threw all of her senses into her sense of smell that has been sounding an alarm this whole time.

???: "Hold on hold on, let's not get carried away just because you dodged it by pure luck, alright?"

She escapes the certainty of the deadly blow, and the man looks up at Rem, who was above his head, with his eyes that had irritation in them. Signs of an explosion rose when the man concentrated on his consciousness, and Rem immediately got away from there as if on impulse. The blast was produced shortly after, but this time it couldn't capture Rem.

???: "What…!! Gaguwa?!"

Rem: "AAAaah!"

Her roar blots out his surprise, and her swinging Oni nails stabbed the man's shoulder. It was the first time in the basement blood and screaming came out of someone other than Rem, and she jumped as she escaped from the blast that came right after.

The man holds onto the wound on his shoulder, breaking into a cold sweat, and he followed Rem frantically with his eyes

???: "You, have you really…!"

Rem didn't respond to the man's trembling as he forced himself to speak.

She simply answered by dodging the countless produced blasts in the cramped basement.

Rem: "…"

She cracked the code to the man's explosive magic. The answer was shown to her on the door from the beginning.

He was a man who was sealed by chains and a magic circle. That situation was the same as Ram's, who went out of control without her horn. In other words, they were measures to prevent the mana manipulated by the man from damaging the surroundings. They were the same measures taken for Ram, who caused a chaotic mana storm, and if that was the case, then the principle behind the man's powers had to be the same too—

???: "Damn it, damn it, damn it damn it damn it damn it damn it!"

The man, causing chain explosions in the space, gets desperate to blow off Rem's limbs. However, Rem scents out the stink by using her sense of smell, and they didn't reach her as she predicted the "Explosion Spots".

The man's invisible explosions. That trick was plain and simple—the man sets up explosive techniques in a space beforehand and he was detonating them in accordance with his target's approach.

Therefore, the technique wouldn't detonate at unset spaces, and he was limited to using extremely minor firepower so that he wouldn't blast himself away.

The most fatal thing to the man was the fact that he wasn't the only one who could detonate.

Rem: "GaAAA!"

???: "How could someone…the one thing I've mastered…"

The man jumped back and dodged Rem, who kicked the wall and came at him as fast as a bullet. Without a pause, the man tried to detonate the technique while Rem was as close as she could be, but Rem threw something even faster than that.

???: "—Ah?"

In front of the man's eyes, a red, glowing crystal was thrown.

It was one of the magic stones inserted in the magic lights that lit up the basement, and it was something that Rem had been carrying after she removed it from the wall and took in the mid battle.

The magic stone gives a slight amount of mana, and a spark was produced right near the man's face. —The next instant, the technique arranged there reacts with the fire and it explodes with the man's face getting caught in it.

???: "Boo, gyaaaa—!!"

The explosive heat produced around the man's face blew off his ear and nose. Face burned, eyes wide open, the man holds his face up, and falls down while screaming.

Rem: "…"

Rem wasn't going to miss this chance. She rushes up to the man in agony and crushes his neck by stepping on it. 'Kill when the opportunity is given', not one bit of such mercy was given.

The hunting instincts as an Oni, stronger than hatred and anger. The man probably had a hunch that death was near. When he reached his hand towards the ceiling desperately to stop his screaming from the pain—

???: "Ch, Ch ch ch—"

It was painful sounding tongue clicking and his attempt to get himself out of a hopeless situation.

The detonations set up in the basement warehouse all go off in reflection with the man's intention. Tremendous, explosive heat and impact engulf the basement, and Rem also was caught in them as she lost her escape from the stink.

From top to bottom, the impact goes through her whole body, enough so that she couldn't even recognize her own hands and legs anymore—

"…"

Hearing the piles of scraps wood collapsing, the man covered in snute crawls out of the ground.

The blast shook the whole mansion, and it produced a power that could have buried the basement warehouse in a cave. Although the man didn't want to make the choice that got himself caught in it, on the contrary it did bring him luck.

???: "He, hee, haa…ha…haha"

The man pushes the metal shelf off of his body, and he looks around the disastrous scene as he laughed convulsively. It was a blessing in disguise—no, to the man, this was good luck for sure.

The first explosion of the chain explosions that blew up the whole basement turned over this shelf, and it acted as a shield that protected the man's body from the blasts. Thanks to that, the man miraculously cheated death.

???: "That kid…whatever, first I have to get out of here…"

The man thinks of the girl who brought him both good luck and bad luck—releasing him unexpectedly and fighting back unexpectedly—however, he quickly stopped caring about it, and he hurriedly headed towards the way out of the basement.

He lost his right ear, nose, and some of his front teeth because of the explosion, but it didn't cost him his life. After he found even just a random cloth to stop his bleeding, he had to escape before getting seen by the people in the mansion.

???: "And then I guess I'll hurry and meet up with them…?"

The man, who was thinking of what his plan would be after escaping, suddenly feels strange as he tilted his head. The basement warehouse no longer had its original form because of the explosion, but even now he still heard weird sounds in the spaces here and there where the crumbling continued.

It was metal clustering, or maybe the metals meshing with each other, a scraping sound, like they were locking—

???: “Wha—”

Without being able to finish saying ‘What’ even in this short moment, something glancing passes by the man’s body. That made an aberrant, destructive noise, and it fiercely broke down the wall right next to the man.

???: “Wh…”

He was speechless, having no idea what sort of destruction that was, and he watched it. It came out of the wall and cracked the floor making a heavy noise in front of the man gazing in wonderment

It was a piece of steel. It had a round shape. It had countless thorns on the sphere. It had chains tied to it. The chains were connected by a handle, and a girl was holding onto it.

Inside the collapsed basement warehouse, there was a girl that had an iron sphere with chains on it.

???: “It’s yo—u?”

The man turns around, discovering the girl ahead of the chains, and he threw his arm up at once as he tried to set off the detonations in the area. However, the arm he tried to raise wouldn’t lift itself.

Once he took a look, he saw the top of his upper right arm blowing off, being torn away.

???: “…”

He looks at his feet. There were the remains of the man’s arm. The ruins of his torn off arm that was cut up by an iron sphere.

???: “Gi, eeaaaa—?!”

The moment he understood the reality he was seeing, the man screams from the swelling pain. It hurt even more than when his face was burst open, and a scream that literally sounded like he was coughing up blood echoed throughout the basement warehouse.

???: "…"

Still, the scream that was painful to listen to didn't stop the girl from walking forward. —While the chains made a sound with each step, the girl pulled in the cruel chains and brandished them.

She throws, and misses. It gouges his left shoulder. She throws, and misses. Just his hipbone broke. She throws, and misses. Just his face's skin was ripped off. She throws, and misses. Just his shin was blown off from his left foot. She throws, and misses. Right next to the senseless face, the ground collapses.

??? Ee, ee, eee…"

The man, pain and fear taking over his brain, couldn't get his explosion techniques to work at all. In order to set up the techniques, he needed to calculate accurately and calmly use his magic. With the man's current state, he couldn't possibly hope to do any of that. As for the mana scattered aimlessly, that was just the result of the Oni horn sucking it in.

The man lost his right arm and his left foot, his bones were broken, but he was still alive. The footsteps nearby reach the man, and an Oni that looked like a little girl reflected in his eyes clouded with pain.

She had blue hair covered in blood, maid clothes with burn holes all over, a pure white horn protruding from her forehead, and her light blue eyes were shining, wet with desire and madness.

Rem: "You're the one…who did that to…me and Onee-chan's village"

???: "Wa-Wait, wait, come on wait… I was just…gugyaa!"

The man quickly tries to give an explanation in a low voice, and a scream came from his open mouth. The heel swinging downward breaks the man's left shoulder by stepping on it, and now both of his hands were useless.

He looked down on it. He made fun of it. The Oni's…the Oni's, the strongest Demi-human horn, the bone of the Onis, the flesh of the Onis—.

Rem: "Onee-chan said there were four people. So if you're one of them…"

???: "Ah, ha…ye-yes, that's right. That's right! If you kill me, you wouldn't know the names of the other three, right?! So, you can't kill me, you can't kill me!"

The man strains his voice, desperately clinging onto the hope of his life being possibly connected to others. Hearing that scream, the Oni girl's face contorts in anger. The man instantly regretted rubbing the young girl the wrong way. However, immediately after that, she held her hand, opposite to the one holding the handle, over the man's wound.

Rem: "Water mana, healing wave…"

???: "Ri-Right…"

A blue, soft wave forms in the girl's hand. That gently wraps the man's wound, and the pain was slightly relieved as it covered the painful looking wound. The water mana healing power was a healing technique she was poor at and wasn't skilled enough to do, but it was good enough just to relieve the pain.

The certainty that she wanted to communicate with him more than anything made the man recover his temper.

???: "Now we can…"

Rem: "—Now we can talk."

The girl, as ready to talk as to act, whispers to the man, repeating him as he used his craftiness to try and do a surprise attack as he enveloped her in fumes. Then, in front of the man with a dubious look, the girl raises the iron sphere over his arm

She strikes downward, and the hit crushes his arm along with his broken left shoulder, blowing it away.

???: “Goaaaa—?!”

That instant, the man screams belatedly in pain without knowing what just happened. While the fresh blood gushing out stained the floor, the girl puts her hand over the wound again, and she healed it.

Seeing that with a sidelong glance, a question mark flew on the man’s head. But, he knew the answer immediately.

The girl, the Oni girl looks down at the confused man, and with a lovely, evil countenance, she spoke.

Rem: “—I will break it, and then heal it, break it, and then heal it, over and over until you tell me everything you’re hiding.”

???: “Wh—a…”

Rem: “I will have retribution. For the honor of the Oni clan. —No, for Onee-chan.”

The girl tightened the chains in between the shocked man’s thin arms to show her determination. The light sound the metal made almost sounded like an ultimatum to the man—

???: “Wait, wait, wait! Wait, please waiiiit—!!”

The man’s sorrowful, high pitched begging resounded throughout the basement in vain.

Then, as for the whether or not she listened to his begging, the painful screaming that continued afterwards is your answer.

6

—Immediately after Rem woke up, she completely lost track of where she was.

Rem: “…”

She was in a room without lights, she couldn't move her hands and legs freely, her whole body was wrapped in a smooth feeling, and there was warm, soft weight on her chest.

She blinks many times in the silence, and when her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she figured out that she was in the mansion's guest room she frequented everyday to clean, and she also identified what exactly was the weight on her chest.

Rem: "…Onee-chan"

Rem faces up on the bed, and sees that it was Ram who was embracing her chest. She had her arms around Rem's body, keeping close to her to not be separated, and she was fast asleep. Once Rem smiled slightly, feeling her sister's sleeping breath with her ears and seeing her sleeping face, she unconsciously caressed her pink hair.

This wasn't a servant room given to them as a private room. Rem, having doubts about sleeping in a room for guests, searches her memory to figure out what happened.

I'm sure that I was taking of the mansion alone while everyone was away—

???: "Although you made the basement warehouse collapse in your fight with the enemy, you destroyed him. You were found by Clind, covered in blood, and you were brought to the room to rest because Ram begged."

Rem: "—?!"

Roswaal: "That's a rough outline of the situaaation. Did you get it?"

The person standing at the corner of the room, who appeared God knows when—Roswaal surprises Rem.

Seeing that reaction, Roswaal calmly walks up to the bed with a pleased look and says,

Roswaal: "Ram is taking a rest because she's exhausted from taking care of you. She's been doing it since we came from "Sanctuary", despite being on a tight schedule. She wouldn't leave your side ever since she got back…and she was always keeping an eye on your sleeping faaaace.”

Rem: “That’s because…Onee-chan is amazing…or, Onee-chan is important, but well…”

When they started talking about Ram, who fell asleep, Rem immediately began a different topic. Her memory came back to her when she heard Roswaal’s words. The basement, the man, and then —

Rem: “Roswaal-sama, my dearest apologies. I damaged the mansion’s basement so much.”

Roswaal: “…I’m surprised. I certainly didn’t think that you’d apologize for destroying the warehouse right away.”

Rem lowers her head and apologies, and Roswaal smiles in response.

Roswaal: “You have nothing to apologize for. Your safety is what’s most important, after all. Whatever happened in that building doesn’t matter. Still, once your life and existence are gone, that can’t be undone.”

Rem: “It can’t be undone…”

Roswaal: “Nooope, it can’t. So be sure to take care of yourself.”

Seeing Roswaal nod dramatically, Rem lowers her eyes quietly.

Then, Rem speaks of the question stuck in her mind, the beginning of the incident at the basement. First of all, why was a man at that place?—

Rem: “Roswaal-sama, why was someone locked up in the mansion’s basement? Plus, that person…that man is”

Roswaal: “—One of the people that attacked your guys’ village, yeeees.”

Roswaal unashamedly and sincerely affirmed Rem’s doubt.

The master dressed as a clown sighs pensively at the girl who held her breath upon hearing that reply.

Roswaal: “Indeed, it must’ve been very shocking to you. Locking him up was a secret that could’ve possibly created a crack in our trust that built up in these past 2 months.”

Rem: “No that’s… well, but…that’s…true.”

He affirms it. Roswaal was hiding an enemy of the Oni clan from Rem and the others. If that wasn’t betrayal, then betrayal didn’t exist in this world.

Rem’s shaking fingers grab onto the sheets, but she doesn’t have a fit. That was because of the heavy influence from her sister’s sleeping face on her lap. She didn’t want to disturb her sleeping.

Seeing Rem suppressing her intense emotions like that, Roswaal continues with a sad look on his face.

Roswaal: “I captured that man the same day I brought you guys home to the mansion…so the day the village burned. I captured the man as he failed to escape, and I tied him to the basement. Of course, I didn’t treat him the same way I did with you guys. I didn’t show any kindness besides giving him the minimum amount of food to eat. Plus, it was obvious that he wasn’t worth it.”

Rem: “If so, then why…”

Roswaal: “—Because I wanted to see what you guys would choose, that’s why.”

That answer bewilders Rem.

‘What would we choose’, what was that about? What choices?

Roswaal: “Do you remember, Rem? I said it to you and Ram. —Whether you guys stay at this mansion or leave it is up to you.”

Rem: “I do remember. You said that the promise is only an expedient and…”

Roswaal: “Correct, an expedient. And I also said this. “…”Forget about revenge and live, maybe you should consider that.”“

Rem: “—Ah”

That moment, the memory where Roswaal told Rem her choices came to her mind.

She told her. She definitely told her. Roswaal sure did tell Rem that there was a way to forget about revenge and live. Rem told him that she’d think about it with Ram and give an answer, but she didn’t have the chance to talk about it with her sister.

That was because, since the beginning, she disagreed with Ram’s opinion, and she thought that it’d be impossible to call off revenge.

Roswaal: “Allow me to put this clearly. I knew the man was one of your guys’ enemies. And if you really did wish for the Oni clan’s revenge, I was going to hand him over.”

Rem: “…”

Roswaal: “But, if you didn’t want revenge anymore and you were going to your life at this mansion in peace…I was going to bury that man without telling you guys, and I would’ve hid everything.”

It was Roswaal’s arrangement, and a part of his consideration that wasn’t shown to the sisters.

—How would the sisters tackle revenge, the retribution for the Oni clan?

Should they really commit to it earnestly, do it so show them the possibility of a clue.

Should they throw away their desire for revenge, do it to eliminate the possibility of stopping them from moving on.

Roswaal: “But, you came in contact with that man in a way I didn’t want to happen, and you suffered serious injuries. I really feel like I should apologize for that. Plus, Ram did criticize me a lot for it.”

Rem: “That man…”

Roswaal: “—Died. In the end, he didn’t even look the same, and it was a cruel death. Although, since it was a man who deserved it, I don’t have any sympathy for him at all.”

Roswaal put it as ‘died’, but Rem felt like he should’ve put it in an entirely different way.

He didn’t just die; Rem killed him. She crushed his limbs, healed his wounds, repeated it over and over, tortured him, while making him regret the crime he committed. And then—

Roswaal: “You have carried out the Oni clan retribution, though you had no choice in that situation. So now…”

Rem: “…No, not yet.”

She killed one, but not all of them. There were still three left.

Rem: “Only one has been killed so far. There are three left that ought to be punished.”

Roswaal: “Well, what are you going to do? Find those three and carry out retribution? Are you saying you’ve realized how right it was to have revenge after killing the first one? Is that it?”

Hearing Rem’s unclear words, Roswaal questions her determination that still sounded like doubt.

What was left in Rem’s heart after smashing that man with an iron sphere?

It was the first time she took away someone’s life. It was revenge for her family, for her parents. Rem certainly took one step forward to obtain the vengeance that she swore on, but what did she feel?

Was it the aversion to killing? Or was it the feeling of achievement from accomplishing revenge? Inside Rem’s heart, there was—

Rem: “…There’s not really anything.”

Roswaal: "…"

Rem: "I don't feel anything in particular from killing that man. Is that odd?"

Rem, with emotionless eyes, tilts her head at Roswaal, who said nothing.

The shock of killing a person shocked her so much that her heart couldn't accept reality. That's probably what Rem looked like right now. However, Rem knew that wasn't true.

There was nothing that shook Rem's heart from the man's death.

If she had to say there was something she felt from the way the man died, it would be—

Rem: "—I will grant Onee-chan's wish."

Roswaal: "You will grant Ram's wish?"

Rem: "Yes, I will."

The Oni clan's retribution, the four targets, to kill them was Ram's wish and her pride.

However, without her horn, Ram didn't have the power to get revenge on them. But still, Ram was more right than anything and anyone, so her wish had to be fulfilled.

So, what could she do? How could she grant Ram's wish?—That was simple.

Rem: "I will"

—I will just become the replacement for Ram's lost horn.

To prove how right Ram was, to wipe away Ram's shame, the one who was the hope of the Oni clan, Rem would be her hands and legs, her sister's horn—she would fill Ram's shoes.

Rem: "Roswaal-sama. …Will you teach me the basics of magic?"

Roswaal: "—Hm. You want me to teach you magic?"

Rem: "Yes. I heard from Frederica-sama and Clind-sama that Roswaal-sama is the kingdom's best magic user. They said you use all magic, and that you're an extraordinary magic user."

Roswaal: "They aren't wrong. In the kingdom…well, even if you consider the whole world, there's no one out there as knowledgeable on magic as I aaaam. But why?"

Roswaal affirms an evaluation about himself without even being humble, and after that, he asks a question about Rem's intentions. The reason why she was asking to study magic under him.

Hearing that question, Rem closes her eyes once, and then she opens her light blue eyes slowly as she said,

Rem: "—For Onee-chan. To become Onee-chan's horn."

Roswaal: "You will become Ram's horn?"

Rem: "Yes. Onee-chan swore on retribution, and it's the Oni clan's dearest wish. But, Onee-chan can't accomplish that without her horn. So, I will fill Onee-chan's shoes."

Roswaal: "So that you sisters can carry out the Oni clan's retribution?"

Rem: "No. —So that Onee-chan can be herself."

Ram was right. More right than anything. She was going to prove it. She would become the horn to do that.

Rem says her decision, and her mouth begins to open, creating a lovely smile. It was one that had more happiness than any of the many smiles she had in her days at the mansion.

When Roswaal closed his eyes upon seeing that smile, he opened his lips with lipstick and said,

Roswaal: "—Okay. Sure thing. If retribution is what you and Ram want, then I shall respect that wish. I shall support that wish.

Revenge shall be attained by all means possible.”

Rem: “…You won’t…go against it?”

Rem wouldn’t let go even if he was against it, but she was still surprised with his answer.

It was because out of the two choices Roswaal presented, Rem thought that he wanted them to choose to “abandon revenge”.

However, Roswaal closed one of his eyes in front of Rem, who felt surprised. He looks at Rem with his yellow eye.

Roswaal: “Whether you choose to forget about it or not, I will respect your decision. But, I know which one is the difficult choice. And well, the reason why I want to help you guys who chose the difficult road is because I’m no stranger to not wanting to forget as well.”

Rem: “Roswaal-sama…there’s something you don’t want to forget too, huh.”

Roswaal: “Not even for a moment. No matter much time passes.”

Roswaal says that reply, making a distant look for a second, and it pierced her heart. The grief and envy heard in his voice were emotions Rem knew well.

This was the first time when Rem and Roswaal formed something that was close to genuine trust.

Roswaal: “Rem, did you get that man to tell you the names of the people whom you ought to get revenge on?”

Rem: “—Sade. Sergey. Faust. The man who died is Fogg.”

Roswaal: “Those are the names of those that must be punished. Got it. I will definitely help with you with your wish.”

She tells him the names she got out of the man who screamed in the basement when his torture ended. Roswaal said that he’d help, so he should use all means possible and find the men.

And then, they'd find those three people, and they would atone just like the man she killed.

Roswaal: "Fill Ram shoes, be Ram's hands and legs, be Ram's horn —"

"…"

Roswaal: "—So you're saying that you want to be Ram's substitute."

Rem: "…Aah"

Hearing Roswaal's words, Rem a shiver ran down her spine. Her cheeks lose heat, and her heart flutters.

Ram's "Substitute"—that was really, truly, so easy to understand for Rem.

Rem: "—Yes, I am. I want to be Onee-chan's substitute."

The Oni girl being shined on by the moonlight coming from the window gives that answer, entranced.

7

Roswaal puts the Oni sisters to sleep on the same bed, and he leaves the bedroom.

Waving his cloak, he tramps through the empty corridor, and he headed to the office on the mansion's top floor. He returns to his own private room, and he faces the desk as he closes the toor with the hand he had behind him. Then,

Roswaal: "For you to enter the room without the master being there, don't you think that's a quiiiite rude?"

Clind: "My apologies. I had an important trifle, and so I figured it'd be okay to use Master's absence as a reason to come again. Explanation."

Roswaal: “For you to call it a trifle even though you said it was important, what does that even mean? Well, I mustn’t get maaaad. Because…”

Roswaal, cutting off his words there, snaps his fingers. In response to that sound, the magic lights in the room turn on all at once, and the room that had been in dim light starts to light up.

The office design was extremely simple to concentrate on business. There was a desk for duties, a sofa and table for receptions, and then nothing but several bookshelves and some art to decorate it.

And then, inside the room, there was a tall butler standing calmly with his back against the window that let in moonlight. The butler entered the room without the master’s permission, but Roswaal didn’t blame him.

Roswaal: “She couldn’t just turn down the loyal subject who I made into the villaaaaain.”

Clind: “Yes, it is extremely regrettable. This is why, if Ram and Rem…if those young sisters hated me, I wouldn’t be able to put the loss into words. The readiness I would need for the influence that would heavily affect my daily work as a butler. Major loss.”

Roswaal: “It’s just like you to put that into words without hesitation. Still, I swear to be as careful as possible so that doesn’t happen. —Though, I’m not sure how much you can trust me on that.”

Hearing Roswaal say that in a masochistic manner, the butler—Clind neither supports him nor corrects him. Seeing that behavior makes Roswaal more and more pleased, and his smile deepens.

Roswaal: “So, what is your oh so important triiiiiifle?”

Clind: “It’s about the thing that happened, of course. —The result that happened because I gave the key to the basement warehouse to Rem and ordered her to rearrange it, just like Master told me to. That disastrous scene. Explanation.”

Roswaal: “Disastrous scene, eh. It sure was that terrible. Rem was hurt heavily and the basement had her blood all over…though it was the man that turned into meat who was being scattered.”

Clind: “I don’t have any thoughts on that man’s death because of the circumstances. But what I want to hear from Master is an explanation for why you made Rem do that. Rights and wrongs.”

Roswaal: “Explanation, an explanation, huh. Let’s seeeee.”

Roswaal, without changing his expression, ponders the question asked by the butler who kept his tone the same. He then waits for a moment, and when he raised his finger and faced Clind he said,

Roswaal: “Well, let’s leave that as a secret like always.”

Clind: “—Understood. Comprehension.”

Clind bows in response to the playful answer without any opposition. Roswaal gives a wry smile unconsciously.

Roswaal: “Though this is just the usual, I feel uneasy rather than good because of your compliance. Are you really okay with not asking anythiiiing?”

Clind: “I’m sure Master has his own well thought out plans. It is reasonable for you to not reveal your true motive to someone like me…but I do have something on my mind. Worry.”

Roswaal: “Hm, you do?”

Clind: “Master doesn’t reveal his thoughts, his goals, not even what’s inside his heart, to anyone. I do think that’s because of Master’s excellent abilities and it’s a result of the strength of his heart…but sometimes, I feel pity for you. Presumptuous.”

Roswaal: “…Continue.”

Roswaal closes one eye in interest, and he sat on the sofa. Once he crossed his long legs and urged him to continue, Clind, who closed his eyes, speaks on with his back straight.

Clind: “Glass is hard, but fragile. Sometimes your heart that tries to be strong and solid seems more like glass, not steal. Hardship.”

Roswaal: “So you’re saying that my heart is like glass, is that it?”

Clind: “If there are times it is steel, then there are times when it is glass. A person’s heart truly is a mysterious thing. However, if you’re alone when you’re glass, you’ll have no way to defend against a stone thrown at you. Defenseless.”

Roswaal: “…”

Clind: “If, say, you have someone to come close to when your heart is a glass, then that’s a different story. It depends on if you’re interested in having such a thing, and that you wish for it. Report.”

Clind adds a bow with his last word because he said something too forward. A perfect, deep bow. Head kept down, perhaps not intending to bring it back up without Roswaal’s permission.

While seeing that with a sidelong glance, Roswaal puts his slender finger on his chin, and he let out a soft sigh.

Roswaal: “So basically you used this incident as an excuse to scold me and that I should go get married?”

Clind: “What a misunderstanding. If I could, I would meet a wife I could trust, have kids with her, and have those kids tell me what to do. Pure.”

Roswaal: “For you to let babies take care of you, that’s a pretty courageous decisioooon.”

Clind gives an explanation, speaking somewhat fast, and Roswaal made a faint, bitter smile. That interaction showed Roswaal’s answer to the previous question.

Then, his impulse to smile fades, and they both tighten their mouths.

Roswaal: “I shall take your advice. Though I think it’ll be hard to doooo.”

Clind: “There are probably a lot of women who won’t go any further because of the rumors about Master and his personality, but if you drop the makeup and dress properly, I don’t think there will be any problems. Advice.”

Roswaal: “Theeeen, I can’t. If I wash my face and change my clothes, then I can’t be who I am.”

Roswaal throws away the most realistic advice that’s been said thus far, and he puts his elbow on the table.

Roswaal: “Well, if you’re fine with it, then the previous matter is settled. Ram and Rem might hit you coldly for a bit, but please do your best to deceive theeem.”

Clind: “I have no problem with those little girls hitting me. Pleasure.”

Roswaal: “Sinful. Ah, right right, so I do believe that there was an iron sphere with chains kept in the basement warehouse…can you change it so that it’d be easy for Rem to use?”

Clind: “I wanted to remake cute clothing and stuff, but I accept. Reluctantly.”

Rem got her vengeance during her battle with the man tied to the basement using that special weapon. Out of all the weapons in the basement that were difficult to use, Rem dared to choose that one.

Roswaal: “I never used it before, but it surprisingly ended up being something worthwhile.”

Clind: “Considering everything and use everything, I think that’s the thing to learn here. Humble opinion.”

Roswaal: “Yeah, you certainly are right. Well, Clind, you may go back down now.”

Seeing Roswaal give a gesture that said the conversation was over, Clind bows and moves towards the door smoothly. Then, while he went over Roswaal said “Oh yeah” from behind and added, Roswaal: “Though Ram and Rem are angry, I’m sure that you and Frederica are mad about the commotion that happened in the basement too. Actually, that girl’s angry look was the strongest. Make sure to dodge her well.”

Clind: “…All right. Melancholy.”

Roswaal finally makes bitterness show on Clind’s profile, and he smiles like a bad boy seeing that his teasing was a success. Then, once the butler left the room, one person was left inside.

Roswaal: “…”

In silence, Roswaal rests on the sofa, and he looks up at the moon out the window.

He gazes at the moon missing its upper half, and while bathing in the silver moonlight, he closes one eye.

—It looked as if the bright moon was shaking inside of his yellow eye.

Chapter 4:
A Festival Dyed in Blood

1

—Rem was completely overwhelmed by the force of that overpowering crowd.

Rem: “Eh…ah…u…”

Rem gets pushed around left and right, overwhelmed by that scene.

The frail voice that leaked from her lips almost made it seem like she returned to the person she was back at the village. Although, if you were to ask if Rem’s true nature had changed from back then, the answer would be no.

She just became capable of doing a few things, and so she became good at misleading people. It was also something that quickly exposed her true colors in unexpected situations. That’s why her old self would show up suddenly, just like how it was now.

Ram: “Rem, you’ll get lost.”

Rem: “—?!”

A familiar voice suddenly hits Rem’s ear drums while she was surrounded by the surging crowd. Rem’s name was called, which made her shoulders jump, and she turned around. She looks at the face of her beloved sister who worried about her.

Ram: “Are you okay? Is the abundance of people too much for you to handle? I guess it’s expected. After all, it is your first time being somewhere with this many people.”

Rem: “Er…mm…”

The way Ram gently caressed her cheek with her fingers allows her to calm down. Rem puts her hand on her sister’s hand to get a better feeling of it, and when she sighed, she said, Rem: "…Nee-sama, sorry for making you worried. I'm fine."

Ram: "Are you sure? You don't have to push yourself. If you can't do it, then you can wait in the dragon carriage quietly…"

Rem: "No really, I'm fine. I can't be disheartened from something like this."

When she replied with a smile on her face, Ram pulled her hand back while still feeling a little worried. Rem, who was now more relaxed thanks to her sister, looks around at her surroundings again.

It was still the same. She saw a crowd of an enormous amount of people passing by. The noise and the abundance of presences of people made Rem feel like she was going to faint.

She couldn't say that there were a lot of humans at the Oni village or at the Mathers residence. That was the only experience Rem had with villages, so to her, this amount of people defied common knowledge.

—The Royal Capital Lugunica, the center of the Dragon Kingdom Lugunica.

The biggest capital of the dragon kingdom, a diverse melting pot with a population of over 300,000.

That was the name and title of the land Rem and Ram were standing on.

Roswaal: "How's your first time being at the royal capital? It's preeeetty splendid, right?"

Frederica: "You two, please be very careful so that you don't get lost. Finding a lost child in this city is no simple task. It's very difficult."

Then, the two people who spoke to the attached sisters in the surging crowd were Roswaal and Frederica.

Unlike Rem and Ram, they had plenty of experience with kingdoms and so there was no sign of them being nervous from the abundance of people. With how Rem was now, just that was enough for her to look up to them.

Ram: “It would still be difficult to search for us even when we look this conspicuous?”

Roswaal: “Maid clothes aren’t even unusual in the kingdooom. Innovators with foresight even run restaurants where the workers wear maid uniforms and serve customers. Weeeell, there aren’t really many young maids like you and Rem, so we win in that regard.”

Ram: “I don’t want to know why you feel like you’ve won.”

Ram, pinching the edge of her maid clothes she was now used to, says that in a bored manner.

Since the basement warehouse incident, her sister’s attitude towards Roswaal had been growing more and more bitter.

It seemed tying up a dangerous man, who was even their enemy, in the basement was enough for Ram to be more cautious of Roswaal. But on the other hand, Roswaal showed that he was intending on helping them with their revenge, so Ram felt quite conflicted inside.

Rem: “Sorry, Roswaal-sama. That’s not what Nee-sama truly feels. She just kinda has this lovely side of her that is dishonest.”

In contrast with Ram, Rem was obedient to Roswaal. Ram and Roswaal had opposite reactions to those words that were considerate towards both her master and her sister.

Ram pouted reluctantly, while Roswaal smiled.

Roswaal: “I know. Ram and I talk to each other enough. After all, we do spend sweet time together alone every night until we’re completely satisfied.”

Ram: “Sweet time? Apparently Roswaal-sama’s standard for tastes and my standard for tastes don’t match. Looks like this means the kitchen work you bothered to teach me was a waste.”

Rem: “But Nee-sama…hasn’t your treatment with Roswaal-sama been taking longer lately?”

Ram: “Hmph…”

Rem picks on Ram, who tried to respond sarcastically, with an objective fact.

In actuality, her treatment at night—lately it tended to take a long time. If there was no changes in the details of the treatment, then there had to be a change in their interactions.

Rem: “It would make me happy if Nee-sama and Roswaal-sama got along well.”

Roswaal: “So she saaaays.”

Ram: “—. ——. ——. —I’ll do my best.”

Rem nodded as she was satisfied with her sister’s answer, though it did take some time for her to say it.

Frederica: “Okay, let’s leave it at that. If this gets dragged out too long, we won’t be able to take care of our business, though it isn’t an awful lot. But I do agree that a master and his servant should get along well.”

Rem: “Oh, sorry. You’re right.”

Frederica claps her hands and moves the conversation forward. Rem apologies quietly in response to her and renews her consciousness, as she was getting carried away by being in the royal capital for the first time. It was her first time going far and her first time at a royal capital, but they weren’t there to fool around—

Rem: “Roswaal-sama’s relatives are having a baby. We are looking for gifts.”

Roswaal: “Yes. The Miload family will be the collateral descendants of the Mathers family. Grace, who will soon be a mother, is a close friend of mine. I want to celebrate her and her child graaaandly.”

Ram: “For you to go through the trouble going to the royal capital for that, you must have a lot of spare time.”

Roswaal: “I’m giving a gift to a close friend. Of course I’d find the time to choose one myself.”

Ram: “…”

When Roswaal replied, Ram, who acted cynical again, was the one to stay silent. Even Rem thought that the odds were against her sister in this conversation.

Unwilling to let the mood stay like this, Rem points at the crowds of people.

Rem: “S-Still, that’s quite a lot of people. Is the royal capital always like this?”

Roswaal: “It’s not an unusual scene for the royal capital…is what I’d like to say. But today is just speciaaaaal. Today is the day of the “Tammuz Festival”, one of the moon festivals that happen once a month.”

Rem: “Tammuz…festival?”

Rem tilts her head upon hearing a word she was unfamiliar with. Seeing Rem do that, Frederica begins a lecture as she held up a finger.

Frederica: “Laguna history is divided into 12 months, right? The days in the middle of those months are the days when moon festivals are held, and people celebrate. This month is Tammuz month…in this area, ice season ends and it’s the time when it starts getting warm, so flowers and fruit and such are on sale a lot.”

Roswaal: “Anyhow, if there’s a moon festival, you’ll find rare stuff that usually doesn’t appear on the market. If you’re going to be giving a present, you might as well make it a special one. And that’s why I came to the capital on the day of a festivaaaaal.”

Rem: “I see, that’s good to know.”

Rem, who got informed about festivals, understood the flamboyant atmosphere of people passing by the capital. She sure was getting glimpses of faces that were more or less carefree. The Oni village also had customs for days of celebration. —Although, they were mostly days where Ram's birth was celebrated.

Frederica: "So, Master. What are you looking for today?"

Ram: "He doesn't know, and I bet that's why we're in the capital crowded with people on festival day."

Frederica: "Gr…Even so, he should have an idea."

Ram's cold words anger Frederica, and she looks at Roswaal as if to confirm her conjecture. Then, Roswaal responds by saying "Of course" as he nodded delightfully.

Roswaal: "Frankly, what I'm looking for is something the baby will be happy with. If it satisfies that condition, then I don't care what it iiiiiis."

Frederica: "…The gift isn't for Grace-sama?"

Roswaal: "A gift for Grace would be a present for the Miload family. This is something I want to give to celebrate the baby. That's the plan."

He was probably saying that the gift would change depending on if it was for the family or if it was for a specific person. Rem and Frederica tug their chins in upon hearing Roswaal's words, while Ram was the only one to knit her brows pensively.

Rem: "So you want to choose something the baby will like even though it hasn't been born yet. You sure are asking for quite the feat."

Roswaal: "Right? It is going to be veeeery difficult. After all, I am famous for not being able to understand feelings even with those whom I talk with face to faaaace."

Ram: "That's not something you should be proud of."

Ram snorted slightly because of Roswaal's modesty, or at the very least, because of Rem's judgement. Seeing that girl's reaction happily, Roswaal clapped his hands as he said "That's where…".

Roswaal gathers the attention of the three maids, and he continues while having his hands together.

Roswaal: "Today, starting now, I would like to find a gift with all your help. Since you guys would most likely be better at choosing something than I would beeeee."

Frederica: "It is an honor to be counted on by Master. But still, what are we going to do?"

Roswaal reveals his intention, and Frederica asks him that with a look that appeared to be just a little nervous. It was an omen that could only be sensed between people who knew each other for a long time, one that Rem and Ram couldn't understand.

It was her sense of smell reacting to Roswaal's absurdity he spoke of. Although, even if her sense of smell grasped the omen, she couldn't escape it, nor could she prevent it.

Then, sure enough, Roswaal's smile deepened upon hearing Frederica's question, and he spoke.

Roswaal: "—We'll decide on a time and place to meet, and we'll split into two groups to find a present. A present suitable for a soon to be born child. There will be a prize for the one that does a good jooooob."

2

Frederica: "Master sure has some troubling ideas…"

Rem: "It's Roswaal-sama's idea, so we'll just have to do it. But what I'm unhappy with is how we were split. I wanted to be with Nee-sama…"

Frederica: "I know you don't mean any harm, but it does kinda hurt when you say that."

While walking around the capital's shopping street together, Rem's frank statement makes Frederica's cheeks twitch. Seeing that reaction, Rem immediately bows her head as she said "Sorry".

Roswaal's idea—or rather, as a result of the "Birthday Celebration Selection" division, as you can see, Ram and Roswaal were paired together, while Rem and Frederica were grouped together.

It was inevitable for Roswaal and Frederica to be split, who were knowledgeable of the capital's geography and were unlikely to get lost, and take care of Rem and Ram. Rem would be happy if the sisters were one group and Roswaal and Frederica were another, but then it would be difficult to get back together afterwards.

Rem: "If we can't do that, as long as Roswaal-sama or Frederica-sama goes alone, we can be divided into a 3 man group, with me and Nee-sama, and a one man group…"

Frederica: "You're being pretty absurd! I'll be lonely if I have to go alone!"

Rem: "Frederica-sama really is so honest."

When Rem smiled at the honest girl, Frederica sees it and she squinted her jade green eyes. Then, she murmured "Thank goodness" to catch her breath.

Rem: "Frederica-sama?"

Frederica: "It looks like this trip to the capital has allowed you to relax a bit. That makes me feel relieved. I was worried about your recent behavior."

Rem: "…"

Frederica: "I wasn't sure how much the incident of the enemy sneaking into the basement warehouse scarred you."

Rem couldn't find the words to respond to Frederica, who cared for her in a gloomy voice.

As indicated by how Frederica put it as "an enemy sneaking in", it appeared that she wasn't aware of the details of the man that was tied to the basement warehouse. According to Roswaal, Clind was the only other person who knew about the man's existence, and it seemed that the other servants were given an explanation that differed from the truth.

And the only three who knew about the man's background were Roswaal, Rem, and Ram.

Rem: "Thank you for worrying about me. But I'm fine."

Frederica: "I can't just be convinced with that when I see those injuries. Ram's face was burning red in anger…all of it happened because Clind had bad timing…!"

Rem: "It's true that Clind-sama had bad timing, but he is the one who found me worn-out. Besides, Roswaal is teaching me magic now, and so even if something like that happens again, I'll be able to heal my wounds"

She decided to let Frederica falsely accuse Clind, who Frederica had a grudge against. Moreover, what Rem spoke of was the basic magic Roswaal was teaching her, as promised.

Although Rem know about it at the village, apparently she had an aptitude for "Water" magic, and her technique was improving steadily thanks to Roswaal's teachings. She was still inexperienced, but soon enough, surely she'd put her attacks and healing techniques to use, and she'd even be able to hold her own in battle.

However—

Frederica: "Please don't say that it'll happen again. There's no need for an omen like that."

Frederica did not accept Rem's response.

Frederica: "I was doing some serious reflection. About that day when I left Rem alone at the mansion. If I was there, you would have never suffered injuries like that."

Rem: "…I appreciate your feelings."

That honest affection makes Rem look away reflexively.

Frederica was truly a kind woman for how she spoke. The woman who was always worrying about her was so nice that she felt inferior for hiding something.

Still, the moment she thought like that, Rem said this to herself.

—Those feelings are too much for a girl for me.

Rem: “…Oh! Frederica-sama, look. Doesn’t that look like a good place for gifts?”

Looking away from her, Rem finds a gorgeous store, and she gets attracted by it, thinking that she got lucky. It was a jewelry store. Frederica’s eyes widen upon seeing Rem moving quickly.

Frederica: “Dangit, wait, Rem! If you move by yourself, you’ll get lost!}

Then, she raised her voice, back to acting like the nagging teacher she usually was.

Even after that, Rem and Frederica’s “Present Searching” continued endlessly.

They walked around being fascinated by the full bloom flowers, felt the horror from the eye-popping prices at the jewelry store, and sat down and ate the food they bought at food stands since they figured eating while walking would be indecent—.

Frederica: “All right, now’s about time we should really narrow down our choices.”

After using about half of the 6 hours they had to search for a gift, the two of them had a strategy meeting while taking a break in front of a water fountain at a park.

In Frederica’s hand there was a note that had all the names of the stores they had visited and potential gifts written down. As they looked at that, in a friendly way, they thought deeply about what would be good choice.

Rem: “A gift, something it would be happy with…when I think about it like that, it feels really difficult.”

Frederica: “It really does, huh. Rem, if, for example, Ram was going to give a present to you, what would make you happy?”

Rem: “The fact that Nee-sama is willing to give me a gift would make me happy.”

Frederica: “That was a bad example. Hmm, let’s see…switching places, what would you give Ram? To your precious twin sister.”

Upon hearing that question, Rem feels a shock that was like getting hit by lighting, and it made her whole body tremble.

If Rem was going to give Ram a gift…what in the world would she give her? Rem had already given Ram things before. But all those things were given when they were at the village, and in that life that had nothing to do with money, Rem only gave her things like corollas and steamed potatoes—.

Rem: “But now that I’m being paid, I can give Nee-sama presents…!”

Frederica: “Rem? Hey, Rem. Are you listening to me? Reeemmm, I shouldn’t have aaasked.”

Rem: “Sorry, Frederica-sama. I have to find a present for Nee-sama now!”

Frederica: “I admit that it’s all my fault for asking! Sit down! Please sit down!”

Frederica stops Rem, who stood up and was about to run off as fast as she could at any moment.

Without her horn out, Rem couldn’t match her physical strength, so she gave in reluctantly. Frederica, who dealt with Rem’s unexpected resistance, felt relieved as she caressed her long blond hair.

Frederica: “You’re just like Ram with how you’re sometimes hard to deal with, and it sure does give the feeling that you’re both twins.”

Rem: “My…your praise is going to make me blush…”

Frederica: “Sorry for making you blush, but I’ll be moving on. By the way, seeing how you just acted, I’m guessing that you’ve never given a present to someone?”

Rem: “Umm…nope. Nobody besides Nee-sama. And Nee-sama never has either.”

Frederica’s question probably also meant to imply things like “gifts for babies and young people”, similar to what they were looking for now. Unfortunately, Rem never had opportunities like that.

Rem: “The Oni village never bore much children at all, and Nee-sama and I were the youngest there. There was no one near our age, and Nee-sama received special treatment…”

Frederica: “…I said something insensitive again.”

Rem: “Oh! So, Frederica-sama, how about you? Has your little brother ever given you a present?”

Rem senses Frederica reflecting upon herself, so she panics and changes the subject.

Rem: “You did say that he is at “Sanctuary. And you did send him a letter.”

When Ram and Roswaal left to “Sanctuary” the other day, Frederica gave Ram a letter. That was also when she found out that she had a brother.

Frederica nods at Rem, who remembered the name Garfiel.

Frederica: “Uhh, I send him a letter and a present on his birthday. That said, he doesn’t respond, but I still continue to send him gifts.”

Rem: “What do you send him?”

Frederica: “When I talked with Master, he said that Garfiel likes to read books. He wants to become heroic, so I send him heroic tales of the past.”

Frederica, with eyes that looked kind but lonesome, reminisces about the past. However, when her eyes widened immediately after she spoke, almost in a whisper, she murmured “That’s true” as if she had been convinced.

Frederica: “I’m sure that would be fine. It is a gift for a baby whose face we haven’t even seen yet, after all. As long as we give something that tells it that we wish for it to have a future full of happiness, then it should be fine.”

Rem: “Frederica-sama?”

Frederica: “I found a solution thanks to Rem. It’ll make Master tear up too.”

Rem: “That…makes me a bit excited.”

Although she wasn’t sure how her opinion helped, Frederica seemed to have found the answer to their test. If that was the case, then there shouldn’t be any problem if she went along with her idea.

Rem, being hurried by Frederica who said “Hurry hurry” as she was impatient, left the park with her, and they return to the shopping street. They were probably going to one of the shops decorated with several white stars.

Rem: “Frederica-sama, where are we headed?”

Frederica: “We’re going to find a gift that will let the baby know that we wish for it to grow up into a healthy and graceful woman.”

Rem: “But we don’t know for sure that it’s a girl, since it hasn’t been born yet.”

Rem, while Frederica gave her a wry smile and acted premature, chases after the tall girl who went ahead of her. Frederica enters the crowd, and she moves forward while pushing her way through the surging crowd. She heads toward the street with the shop they were going to while copying the way she walked and—

Rem: "—?!"

In the middle of doing that, Rem smelled an unbearable stink that slipped into her nasal cavity, and she stopped moving.

Rem: "…"

The chills go through Rem's whole body, and she looks all around her as she stood still.

The crowd of people walking avoid the girl who stood still, as if they were annoyed. Without even minding those reactions, Rem sharpened her sense of smell as she looked for the source of the stink.

This feeling, this scent, it had to be the smell she came across in that basement. It was the scent she smelled on that fiery night when Rem and Ram's village burned.

She didn't have a reason nor any proof. However, this was the evil scent that deserved to be punished.

Frederica: "—Rem, what's wrong?"

Frederica notices that Rem stopped, and she calls out to her. However, Rem turned around without answering her, and the stink —she turned her attention towards the path that lead to the alley where that wafted.

Frederica: "Rem—?!"

Rem, following the smell, pushes her way through the crowd and rushes into the alley. Behind her, Frederica called Rem, almost sounding like she was screaming, but it didn't make her slow down.

When she entered the alley, the capital's main street lost its splendor, and she rushed into a dim space that blocked sunlight and sound. While Rem blotted out the noise that could be heard from afar with her footsteps and breathing, she looked in the narrow path with her eyes wide-open.

The smell was near. Rem gets closer at once while she stopped the rage in her throat from exploding. The path curves over and over. She starts running so fast that her footsteps were practically burning onto the ground, and she arrived at the deepest part of the alley.

But—

Rem: “There’s no one here…?!”

Rem, hitting a dead end, growls that while grinding her teeth in anger.

She saw no one at the deepest part of the alley surrounded by the city’s outer wall. There truly was a stink in the space enveloped in darkness, but there was neither the shadow nor the form of the villain that caused it.

Rem: “Why…why why…why…!”

Rem’s vision turns red from the absurdity, and she stamps her feet to distract herself from her irritation. She was cracking the stone paving with her Oni leg power, but her anger wasn’t fading at all. She stomps, stomps, and stomps—

Frederica: “Rem, stop this now! This the capital, the territory of the highest nobles!”

Rem, taking her anger out on the alley, has her arm grabbed by Frederica, who had been chasing her from behind. While breathing lightly, Frederica frowns upon seeing Rem’s behavior.

Frederica: “What happened to you? You started running all of a sudden, and now this…”

Rem: “Nee-sama’s and my enemy was here.”

Frederica: “…”

Hearing that firm answer, Frederica freezes, unable to speak. But when she swallowed her saliva, she immediately came back to her senses.

Frederica: “Nee-sama and your enemy…you mean the witch cult?”

Rem: “Yes. The witch cult. One of the remaining three was here.”

She was sure he was there. No doubt about it. Rem nods at Frederica over and over with confidence.

However, Frederica looked displeased with Rem’s assertion.

Frederica: “Why do you say that? The witch cultists can’t be found so easily…”

Rem: “—! I can! I can tell! Their…I can sense their smell! The disgusting, awful smell of an evil person!”

Frederica gazes in wonderment at Rem, whose voice cracked as she pleaded with her.

Even Rem herself didn’t know why she could sense the witch cultists smell. If Rem had to give a reason for it, it would be that her Oni hunting instincts were commanding her. Her Oni blood granted her something necessary to carry out retribution for the Oni clan and so that she could be Ram’s horn.

There was nothing more to it. And there didn’t have to be.

Rem: “Why don’t you believe me?! If I noticed sooner, they wouldn’t have gotten away…! If it was Nee-sama…if it was Nee-sama, they definitely wouldn’t have gotten away…!”

They were in a capital with so many people. Even finding only three people would be impossible if they disappeared into this crowd. She missed a golden opportunity.

It was the worst failure. If it was Ram, this wouldn’t have happened. And yet—

Rem: “For…Nee-sama…I will…!”

Frederica: “…”

Rem clenches her fist so tight that she starts bleeding, and she roars while feeling regret from the bottom of her heart. Frederica lowered her eyes, unable to bear looking at Rem acting like that, and then she raised her voice saying “Ah” as she noticed something.

Frederica: “Could that be…”

Frederica ran up close to the wall while she murmured. At her feet, there was something small that fell out, something Rem overlooked. Frederica picks it up carefully.

Rem: “Frederica-sama, what is that…?”

Rem, who tried to walk up to Frederica, grimaces from the sudden stink. The stink characteristic of the witch cult was coming from Frederica’s hand—from the small bag she picked up.

Frederica: “Rem, well done.”

Rem: “Huh…?”

Frederica: “Let’s meet back up with Master right away. We have to get rid of those who will disturb the moon festival.”

With a firm tone, Frederica says that to Rem, who was disturbed by the small bag. Then, without waiting for Rem’s reply, Frederica tightly closes the small bag.

Frederica: “—The witch cultists were here for sure. I believe it now.”

That’s what she said with a nod to affirm Rem’s sense of smell.

3

Roswaal: “I seeeee. So this was kept in the alley. I’m surprised you found it.”

Frederica: “Rem found it. She chased after the witch cultists’ stink… or well, the miasma.”

Roswaal joined them earlier than he had planned. He figured there was something wrong with the two servants who had stiff and pale expressions, and he immediately sought an explanation for the situation at a deserted place.

The sensing of the stink, the empty alley, and the small bag with a stink that was left in the alley—Frederica quickly explains the situation, disregarding Rem, and Roswaal tugged his chin in upon hearing those details.

The master, leaning his back against the wall next to the street, ponders over the small bag in his hand. During this time when Roswaal stayed silent, Rem stood still with nothing to do, and someone pulled on her sleeve.

When she turned around, she saw Ram. But her appearance was completely different from how she looked like when she left to go shopping. That was because—

Rem: “Nee-sama, you have completely different clothes and hair ornaments.”

Ram: “…Roswaal-sama had some fun and dressed me up in all kinds of clothes.”

She wore a pink dress as her maid clothes. She had a tiara with jewels as hair ornaments. Her whole outfit was new, and Ram looked pretty like a fairy.

But Ram was displeased with those clothes, and above all, that wasn’t what she was concerned with at this time.

Ram: “Putting that matter aside, Rem, nothing happened to you? Nothing dangerous happened?”

Rem: “I’m fine. But, I’m sorry, Nee-sama. I was sure I found one of the remaining three people, but I let them get away…”

Ram: “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. Rem’s safety comes first. Retribution…should be carried out by the two of us together. Isn’t that right?”

Rem: “…Yes.”

Ram starts to feel her face. Rem puts her hand over her fingers, and she nods to agree with her sister.

They were going to carry out retribution for the Oni clan together. That's what Ram said. However, Rem was under a vow that was different from what her sister vowed with those words.

—Retribution was what Ram wished for. And so Rem had to grant that as her sister's back up.

She was glad that Ram worried and cared for her, but she wanted to avoid exposing her sister to danger if possible.

While keeping that wish a secret, Rem responded to Rem's sincere eyes with a lying smile. Then, before Ram could say something in response to Rem, Roswaal spoke.

Roswaal: "Rem, first of all, this is a glorious achievement. Had nobody noticed that this was left behind in the alley, a terrible disaster might have happened in the capital. Truuuuly a great feat."

Rem: "Is it really that big of a deal?"

Roswaal: "This isn't something that is dangerous by itself. But if it's left alone for a long time, there's a high chance for it to harm those around iiiiit."

Roswaal shakes the small bag in his hand, and with one eye he looks at Rem, who had a virtual question mark above her head.

Roswaal: "Inside there is a magical stone soaked in miasma… they're called magical miasma stones. If you swallow it, you might die instantly, so you shouldn't it eat them no matter what."

Ram: "There is no idiot out there that would swallow a stone."

Roswaal: "Exactly. If it's a human, they wouldn't make that mistake. If they're human."

He responds to Ram with a statement that sounded like cynical banter, and she knits her brows dubiously.

Ram: “…In other words, they’re going for non-humans? Like animals or something?”

Roswaal: “Only the criminals themselves know who the real targets are. Still, if the miasma slips by for too long, people will go mad. Animals are no exceptions either. Plus, there is a theory which says that they become witchbeasts by taking in magical miasma stones. Surprisingly, they might actually be going for animals.”

Rem: “Animals eating magical miasma stones…that’s how witchbeasts are born?”

Witchbeasts are evil entities that are born and only have intentions to harm other life.

Every witchbeast has a horn on their forehead, and they do not attack other life out of hunger, but because of their intent to murder and their malice. The many mysteries behind their ecology were even frequently observed near the Oni village, and they were dealt with accordingly.

Rem: “I’m pretty sure Nee-sama’s first prey was a witchbeast too.”

Ram: “…Yeah, it was a Guiltylawe. Even though it had a large body, it was stupid, so I had no trouble.”

Roswaal: “That story makes me wonder what you’ll be in the future. However, it doesn’t have to do with how witchbeasts actually multiply. There are a lot of rumors related to magical miasma stones that sound fishy. …Though, they all tend to say that they have adverse effects.”

While speaking, Roswaal puts the contents of the small bag into his palm. That’s when the suffocating stink came out, Rem frowned, and Ram looked at it with interest.

It was a dark, magical stone dyed deep black, and if you took a glimpse at it, your instincts would tell you that it was dangerous.

Frederica: “The minds and bodies of people and animals can be ruined if they’re affected by miasma. Regardless of whether or not it transforms animals into witchbeasts, it is a wafting miasma that would infect the people in the capital.”

Roswaal: “This is a place that bustles with so many people everyday. If the miasma’s effect spread, there would have been significant damaaaage. So good job, Rem.”

With their explanation, Rem understood that she had prevented a disaster before anything happened. She was happy because of that in itself, but her regret about letting the enemy escape still wasn’t going to go away.

And what poured salt on Rem’s wound—

Ram: “—Is that the only magical miasma stone set in the capital?”

Ram, sharpening her light pink eyes, glares at the magical stone in Roswaal’s palm.

Ram: “The witch cult’s goals…there’s no use in guessing what those low-lifes are thinking, but this is clearly a trap that indiscriminately aimed for an unspecified number of humans. I can’t bring myself to think that those low-lives would do this little when they’re people who do so much.”

Roswaal: “Hmmm. So what do you make out of this?”

Ram: “I figured it out with a map when I was walking around town. Considering how big the capital is and how many areas the magical miasma stone could affect…worst case scenario, there are 24 more places with traps. That’s what I would do.”

Rem: “—Nee-sama?!”

Rem raised a startled voice when she heard Ram’s surprising statement. Next to her, Frederica also had her eyes open wide. Roswaal was the only one who had quiet admiration in his eyes.

And then, when Roswaal nodded at Ram as she looked at him, he said,

Roswaal: “I do pretty much agree with your conjecture…but do you have an idea of where they’re set up and how many?”

Ram: “If it was me, I wouldn’t choose a roundabout way like stones to hunt prey in the capital.”

Roswaal: “I see. —You always exceed my expectaaaations.”

Rem felt like behind in this conversation where it seemed as if only Ram and Roswaal understood each other.

Without a pause, Roswaal cracks his knuckles, and Rem, who was puzzled, returns back to reality.

Roswaal: “Then I will now assign roles to each of you. There are people who have evil plans for the moon festival, so how about we smash their scheme into bits and pieceeees?”

Frederica: “All right, Master. —So what are we going to do?”

Frederica pinches her skirt, and she bows elegantly. Roswaal nods approvingly Frederica, who accepted his orders without any qualms.

Roswaal: “I will go to the station right nearby with Ram. There are a lot of guards in the city during moon festivals, so let’s get them involved in the search for magical stones. Ram will pinpoint the locations. I can count on you, riiiiight?”

Ram: “I’m okay with that. …But what are you going to make Rem do?”

Ram looks at Rem with concerned eyes while agreeing to Roswaal’s request. Her sister’s eyes were saying, “Don’t make her do anything dangerous”. However, when Roswaal’s smile disappeared from his face, he said,

Roswaal: “Rem and Frederica will carry out the search and destroy mission in the city. Rem’s ability to recognize the miasma’s smell, even while being far away from it, is valuable. She can tell where the magical stones are placed more accurately than you can guess where it is.”

Ram: “—! But!”

Roswaal: “Aaaand there’s more. If she’s lucky, she might even run into the witch cultists going around that placed the magical stones. Am I wrooooong?”

Roswaal interrupts Ram as she objected, continues speaking up to that point, and finally looks at Rem.

Rem, who had been completely left behind with the topic, widens her eyes upon hearing those words. If the witch cultists were still setting up magical stones, they would appear at other places where they would do so. —The enemies that deserved to be punished.

Rem: “—I’ll do it. Let me do it.”

Ram: “Rem—”

Ram raised her voice when Rem took a step forward and replied. But Rem still shook her head at her sister.

Rem: “It’ll be fine, Nee-sama. Besides, I absolutely can’t miss this chance.”

Ram: “Wait, Rem. Please don’t rush by yourself. I…”

Rem: “I’m not rushing by myself. Nee-sama and I are always together. It’s always the two of us. So, the retribution will be carried out with the use of both of our powers too.”

Rem removes Ram’s fingers that were clinging onto her, and she says that with a smile. Rem didn’t back down, even after seeing Ram shocked from those words.

Then, taking the place of Ram who couldn’t stop her sister with her words or her strength,

Frederica: “Ram, it’ll be fine. Rem won’t have to fight alone, nothing like that. I’m someone who regrets not being at the basement on that day, after all.”

Ram: “Frederica…”

Frederica: “Have some faith in your senior maid. I may not look like it, but I am strong, you know?”

Frederica winks at Ram, and she quickly mumbled, unsure of how to respond. Roswaal taps her slender shoulder from behind as he smiled.

Roswaal: “Relax. Besides, Frederica is actually stronger than Rem. In the mansion, me or Clind are just about the only ones who are strooooonger.”

Frederica: “That irritates me since it’s the truth. Anyways, leave it up to me. Everything.”

Frederica sticks her chest out after giving a wry smile, and she confidently declared that she would help. After Ram stayed silent for a few moments upon hearing her answer she said,

Ram: “Listen, Rem. If you think you might get hurt, use Frederica as a shield and run away, okay?”

Frederica: “I do at least want to shield her, but I’m not sure how I feel about being told to do it!”

Frederica’s scream resounds throughout the crowd, and the matter was settled, at least for now.

Ram and Roswaal would ask for help from the guards and crush the places set with magical stones through sheer numbers. Meanwhile, Rem and Frederica would track down the magical stones and the criminals by following the stink.

Frederica: “Master, we’ll be careful to avoid being seen, so can I have your permission?”

Roswaal: “Sure thing. If you do your best to run carefully, you won’t be found anywaaaay.”

They have a confusing interaction at the end, and then Rem and Frederica break up with Roswaal and Ram. Ram worried about Rem until the very end, but Rem still responded by waving her small hand to say goodbye.

Rem and Frederica confirm that they could no longer see them, and they enter the back alley. Rem wanted to hurry, but Frederica beckoned her in the alley.

Rem: “Frederica-sama? I would like to move as soon as possible…”

Frederica: “I know how you feel. So, I want to help you as much as I can. …Do not tell the others about this.”

Rem: “—?”

When Rem tilted her head upon hearing an ambiguous reply, Frederica smiled wryly. Usually she would hide her mouth when smiling, but she had no intention of hiding her sharp fangs with this wry smile.

And so, Frederica sighed softly, and she put her hands around the back of her maid clothes. She removes the hook of her clothes, and the knot was coming off.

Rem: “…U-Um, Frederica-sama? We’re outside, you know?”

Frederica: “I know. But I have to do this!”

Rem was disturbed by Frederica taking off her clothes all of a sudden, but she still didn’t stop, face flushed. Soon enough, Frederica’s apron dress was off, and she even put her hands on her daring underwear and took that off, placing it on top of the dress that she folded carefully.

Rem now saw Frederica standing with her white body exposed, and so she was utterly confused.

When Frederica simply looked down upon seeing Rem’s confusion,

Frederica: “—! Rem, please don’t scream.”

Frederica says that and closes her eyes. The tall woman faced down glaring at the ground—that was what Rem was faced with, and she lost her breath as she sensed hints of the atmosphere suddenly becoming tense.

A sign of the air drying up, and a sense that hurt Rem's whole body. Right after she understood that those reactions were concerning Frederica, Frederica's appearance changed.

Frederica's long, blond hair shrunk, and at the same time, golden hair on her body started to grow to cover her naked body. Frederica, standing up straight, stretches her limbs to the ground as that happened, and her build transforms with a creaking sound, enlarging.

Her characteristic fangs showing from her wide-open mouth were clearly bigger and sharper than usual, and even her looks no longer appeared to be human as she transformed into a wild cat.

In front of Rem, who was speechless, there wasn't the Frederica she was used to. The entity that had just been Frederica was now a beautiful, huge cat covered in golden fur.

Frederica: "It's my beast form, characteristic of half beasts."

Rem: "Y-You can talk like normal?!"

Frederica: "I am still who I am, after all. That's just natural."

That was the only thing that didn't change. She was still the Frederica with reason in her jade green eyes. Despite being shocked by her voice being the same even after transforming into a beast, Rem walked up to her.

Frederica: "Good job not screaming, Rem. …wait, why are you patting my head?"

Rem: "Oh, my hand just kinda…moved on its own…"

Rem was unconsciously caressing Frederica's fur that she had as a large cat. Her fur was strangely soft and smooth, so it was refreshing.

Frederica: "Hey, don't just tickle my neck like that! Plus, we don't have time to fool around. Here, get on my back please."

Rem: "—?! I can grab onto you?!"

Frederica: “I wasn’t expecting you to be so interested…but yes, go ahead and grab onto me. You have to, since a girl as light as you will get blown away if you don’t.”

After nodding vigorously at Frederica, who was full of confidence, Rem got on her back. While holding tight onto her body, Rem said “Good to go” as she enjoyed her fur with her cheeks and body.

After that, when Frederica bent her light limbs—

Frederica: “Let’s go!”

Frederica’s body immediately jumped towards the capital’s sky when she yelled. Rem’s whole body feels the wind, and she was amazed by that speed while hushing her voice.

Frederica: “First we’ll be checking out the east shopping street in accordance with Ram’s instructions.”

Frederica was saying something inside the windstorm, but Rem wasn’t in the right state of mind to answer. When Frederica softly landed on the building’s roof, that’s when they dashed at an astonishing speed, and they were running through the capital, so fast that one would think they were the wind.

4

—The wind direction is unfavorable.

The man senses that bothersome matter with his intuition, something you could call a sixth sense, and he clicked his tongue.

One could say that the wind was the most important factor to the man. To know which direction the wind created by nature was blowing from the hardest, he always had to carefully determine the level of humidity and the temperature.

Otherwise, it would significantly affect his goals and actions. Even a large fire that burns everything starts as just a mere spark. A supporting wind is needed to burst it into big, intense flames. And that was his exact role.

Nevertheless, this was the moment when the unfavorability of the wind got in the way of the man's goals.

???: "…"

It was a sudden change. Just a little while ago, the man thought that the wind was truly favorable. But, the wind suddenly became alarming, and soon there'd be dark clouds.

The preparations were perfect for this day.

He'd been reading the climate and the weather for several days, and based off the capital's terrain, he deduced which would be the ideal spots to set up. He loved the result so much that he was happy that there was going to be a festival soon.

He stuffed the magical miasma stones into small bags one by one diligently, and set them up at spots he decided on beforehand. Next, all he had to do was wait for the feast of blood and cries in the capital to start after the effect of the magical miasma stone spread.

—The wind's direction ruined that plan.

???: "…Oh…well."

When the man saw how dangerous the wind was, he decided to abandon his whole plan. He gave up on it so quickly, but this decisiveness was also an ability that allowed the man to live up to this point.

Since he lived by the wind, it wouldn't make sense to doubt it. It was a natural decision for the man to jump off the wind he had been on when he sensed the unfavorability of it.

The man let go of the magical stones that hadn't been set yet, and he quickly decides to leave the capital. He also ensured a way out of the capital beforehand. Nothing was even happening at this time, anyway. There was nothing to stop the man. Still, he was careful.

Being so careful to the point of excessiveness was how the man managed to live up to this point. So—

Rem: “Found the second one.”

The moment he encountered the small Oni with eyes shining with Oni spirit on a ferocious, large cat the man understood it.

—That this was how the worst wind came about.

5

Rem: “—Found the second one.”

They were at the capital’s slums, the section facing the outer wall—a large cat kicked the roof of the ruined house, and it landed as it raised a cloud of dust. The little Oni on its back looked right through the man standing before her with piercing eyes.

He was a sluggy, short, and somewhat fat man. His face and clothes weren’t unique at all; he was so ordinary that if he slipped into a crowd, you’d lose sight of him instantly. Even that was probably part of what the man wanted.

But that ulterior motive was pointless now that there was nothing he could do about this situation.

Frederica: “What a perfect spot for evil schemes.”

Rem: “—It’s also a perfect place for a scoundrel to suffer a lonesome death.”

Rem, who said a cruel statement, smelled a stink that was stronger than anything she had smelled before. It was as strong as the smell of the man that was tied to the basement warehouse. In others words, he was a part of them.

—Rem and Ram’s enemy, an evil that had to be punished by the Onis.

Rem and Frederica followed Ram’s instructions and went all around the capital as they pleased, destroying the magical miasma stone traps one by one. The combination of Ram’s predictions and Rem’s sense of smell thwarted the witch cult’s plan perfectly, but it was all thanks to Rem that they were able to chase down the principal offender.

While Rem was ruining his plan, she had a realization. —That the principal offender of setting up magical miasma stones was so hung up on predicting the wind's direction in the capital and moving while hiding his traces.

???: "…I sensed the unfavorability of the wind's direction, but I didn't notice the beast smell."

Frederica: "Rem was right about the enemy being careful with the wind."

The small man, who had an expressionless look on his face, stood face to face with the small Oni and large cat while they showed him hostility. He wasn't expressionless because he gave up or because he wasn't regretful; he was expressionless because emotions did not come out in waves for him.

Rem: "You look calm. Did you not notice the headwind with your wind reading skill that you're so proud of?"

???: "…Letting emotions come out in wind and waves is for second-rate wind readers. I won't make a fool of myself like that."

Rem: "You should probably go ahead and let it all out. Since, soon enough, you won't even have that freedom anymore."

Rem answers the man, and a white horn appears from her forehead with a sound. While the pure white horn shone faintly, it sucks in the mana in the atmosphere, and it fills her Oni body with energy.

The man's facial expression changed for the first time when he saw Rem's horn.

???: "…A horn, huh. I see. A survivor from that day of the burning of the hot wind."

Rem: "You will burn to death in the embers of the fire you guys created."

???: "…I'm a wind reader. Suffering a ridiculous death like that is the one thing that will never happen."

Rem: "—Well, we'll see about that."

Rem, who lost interest in the man's replies and got off Frederica's back, was holding onto an iron sphere with chains. After the fight in the basement warehouse, Roswaal instructed Clind to readjust it for Rem. It was Rem's personal weapon—Rem's fang for revenge.

"…"

Behind Rem, Frederica crouched down, and she was ready to jump out whenever she would choose to. She was someone who knew that this was Rem and Ram's revenge, so she looked like she was set on not getting involved if possible, but if Rem lost the upper hand, she wouldn't be able to do anything but reach out for her.

In other words, Rem had to completely beat him to death, a complete victory.

"…"

The man sees Rem take a step forward, and he keeps silent.

Thus, their clash surely would start like this in silence, with only the sound of chains to be heard.

"…"

Rem, with all the might she had put into her arms, releases the destructive power of the iron sphere tied with chains at the man. The chains wriggle, almost sounding like a beast raging, and the blow was shot at the man as it silenced the air.

The spinning iron sphere with thorns had more than enough power to crush the human body. If one were hit directly, their body would turn into meat; even if they had armor and a helmet on, they'd turn into meat from the impact; even if, say, they were a witchbeast, they'd turn into meat. In any case, it had the power to turn things into meat.

Although the fight in the basement warehouse was mere child's play where she just swung it around, she was now trained and so she could hit wherever she pleased. So, just like last time, she threw it to blow off the man's legs.

However——

Rem: "Damn…!"

???: "…Too cocky. You should have almost killed me with that first attack."

Rem grinds her teeth, as her attack that aimed for his legs got dodged, and the man talks to her in an unconcerned voice while looking down on her. Frederica's eyes widen, surprised that he had dodged it.

Frederica: "Is that flight magic?! There are people out there besides Master that could use it?!"

The man that got away from Rem's attack jumped and was floating in the air. The man sighs at Frederica, who raised her voice upon seeing that unexpected scene.

???: "…Sorry to disappoint, but this isn't that sort of high-class magic. It's wind riding that's just for show."

Rem: "Do you really think you can escape just by…"

???: "…Of course, I don't think that I can escape just by flying. However. I had a feeling that the wind's direction was bad. It would only be natural for me to prepare wind protection, don't you think?"

Frederica: "—Rem!"

Frederica, sounding worried, calls out to Rem, who was glaring at the man floating in the sky. When Rem heard her, she turned her attention towards the ground, and that's when her horn sensed countless signs.

Several shadows dressed in black appeared as they practically painted out her surroundings—the desolate scene of the slums.

They were a vanguard with a stink that wasn't easy to bear with, and they had swords that looked like crosses—they were a part of the beings that surrounded Ram and Setanta on the night the village burned down.

Rem: "Witch cultists…!"

???: "…I'm someone who likes insurance. I do set the magical stones myself, but that doesn't mean I ride solo. I can use others for guards. It's the usual to prepare wind protection when reading the wind, too."

The small man says that to Rem and Frederica, who grind their teeth, and he looked like he was going away from the battlefield. Rem gazes in wonderment at his actions, and Frederica also yelled with her mouth wide open.

Frederica: "You're going to run away?!"

???: "…It's only natural if you think about it. I have no reason to fight here."

Rem: "—! Witch cultists—!"

???: "…I don't feel like being named, nor do I feel like hearing names. Now, perish by the wind, little Oni."

The small man leaves behind just those words, gains altitude, and leaves the battlefield. While following the man escaping without regrets with her eyes, Rem raised her iron sphere over her head to throw it. But—

Rem: "Get out…of my way!!"

The black clothed beings get closer as if slithering, and she counterattacks the swords with the handle, smashing their heads like a fruits. Their skulls explode, and the enemy starts to rush in for Rem and Frederica when the witch cultists collapsed and scattered blood and spinal fluid.

To greedily protect the small man escaping and get in the way of Rem and Ram's dearest wish.

Rem: “Why…!”

He’s getting away, I failed. That sort of weakness was stuck in Rem’s mind.

The enemy fading away, and the hindrances coming near. Rem’s self condemnation and her anger blot out her mind and—

Frederica: “Gaurururururuu—!”

Right after a yell, blood splatters, and three witch cultists were blown away like spinning tops. The three black clothed beings thrown to the ground all had their heads gouged fatally.

Frederica: “We have no time to feel discouraged, Rem! We’ll finish them off quickly and chase after him!”

Rem: “Frederica-sama…”

Frederica: “I shouldn’t have any problem jumping after him! So…”

Frederica mowed down the black clothed beings rushing over with her forefeet, smashing their heads, and she motivated Rem with her words. Rem comes to her senses thanks to her voice, and she immediately nodded.

There was no time to be dejected. Chase after him as soon as possible like Frederica told me to.

Annihilate them so I can do that—

Rem: “But there’s so many of them…!”

Rem was determined to pull herself together thanks to Frederica, but the forces closing in on Rem and Frederica were cornering them.

The witch cultists appearing one after another as if swarming from the shadows—none of them were as strong as the two of them, but it seemed like they weren’t even disturbed by their comrades deaths, and it was the most insane thing to the two people facing each other.

Every second that went by, the enemy they found was getting farther; never mind that, at this rate, the enemy's forces were going to crush them, and they were going to die halfway through getting revenge.

—She was going to make Ram worry again.

Frederica: "We can't deal with this many…! Rem, grab onto me! We're withdrawing!"

Rem: "But then…!"

Frederica: "We need to throw them off, so we can't go after the guy that got away! But…"

As they fought with their backs against each other, Rem frantically shook her head in response to Frederica's proposal. Still, deep inside, Rem also knew that they couldn't turn their numerical disadvantage around.

She understood that following Frederica's plan and escaping from this place was the best option. Even if they missed that man, they could still fight as long as they were breathing. And yet—

Rem: "—If that man escapes now, he'll never show up before us again!"

That belief was what Rem felt inside and it wasn't going to change.

Rem understood it. In the short time she confronted that man, she understood his traits and mentality. That man who realized that he was being targeted would never show up before Rem again.

It was quite obvious that if he got away now, he would immediately try to flee out of the country.

Rem: "And yet…"

Rem didn't have it in her. She didn't have enough strength to capture that small man and make him atone for his sins.

Rem came here, had the enemy right before her own eyes, and she was stopped by none other than herself.

Frederica: “—If you’re going to blame someone, blame me.”

Frederica, looking down for just a second, murmured to Rem, who grumbled imploringly. Then, she put Rem’s thin waist in her mouth and lifted her carefully with her fangs.

Rem: “Frederica-sama…!”

Frederica: “…”

It was silent. Frederica was ready to withdraw from the battlefield without even listening to Rem’s complaints. She would channel strength into her hind legs, give a battle cry, and try to break through the surrounding of the black clothed beings—.

It happened right before that.

???: “—Stop right there.”

They were powerful words. It was a powerful entity. It was the very manifestation of power.

Something was coming down onto the ground from the gigantic outer wall that surrounded the capital. The moment its feet reached the ground, a producing shock wave travels through the ground, and the crowding black clothed beings went flying.

The shock wave blowing fiercely creates a gale. Rem and Frederica were shocked as they shook in the sudden gust because the wind that sent the black clothed beings flying weren’t affecting the two of them.

They didn’t understanding what was going on. Rem, who was released from Frederica’s mouth and sunk down to the ground, sees a shadow walking toward them from the shrouding cloud of dust.

—No, it wasn’t a shadow. It was a flame. A flame was walking towards them.

???: “You see, the guards were making a ruckus, and a large cat was jumping all around the sky. Even if it's the day of the moon festival, I thought something was off."

While the fire said those words, it came right before Rem and Frederica. That's when Rem finally saw that the fire's form, and on top of that, it looked like a child.

It was a boy with fire-red hair and blue eyes that looked like a clear sky. He was probably one or two years older than Rem. He had a smile on his face, and it may have looked young, but it looked good. Surely one day he would grow into a handsome man that would dazzle anyone.

However, the vision of the good-looking boy's future wasn't what took over her mind; a more straightforward and fundamental emotion did—that is, the absolute fear understood by Oni instincts.

"…"

What is it?

What was this entity that was standing right before her, smiling? Whether it was an adult or a child, it definitely wasn't the same type of life as one.

The entity was that disparate. Only one person in Rem's life has ever made her feel this sort of emotion.

Rem: "—Nee-sama"

This was the feeling Rem had for her sister, the one that was admired as the reincarnation of an Oni god.

Rem was simply astonished to find out that there was a being in this world that could rival Ram, someone who had a power like no other, even among all the existences out there.

The boy shakes his head in a troubled manner in response to Rem's words, who was dumbfounded.

???: "Sorry. Unfortunately, I'm not your sister. I do know that my face lacks manliness and toughness, but this is the first time I've been mistaken for a girl."

Rem: "N-No…that's…not what I meant…"

???: "—?"

The aloof boy shook his head, smiling at Rem as she trembled.

Even that answer felt deviant for some reason, but what frightened her the most was how he kept his calm in this situation.

Although, with the power this boy had, that may have just been something natural.

???: "Alright, we can't spare the time to talk right now. That's how you guys feel, right?"

"…"

???: "If you don't mind, I will handle these guys. I was already patrolling this area for my father, anyway. I'm the one who should fight them."

Frederica: "…Are you sure we can leave it up to you?"

???: "As long as you believe that I am capable of taking care of them."

The boy nods at Rem and Frederica while keeping an eye on the black clothed beings glaring at them. Afterwards, Rem was unsure of how to respond, but Frederica moved quickly.

The large cat puts Rem, who was sitting, in her mouth again, and she jumps after placing her on her back. Frederica, landing on top of the deserted house, hung her head when she saw the boy below her.

Frederica: "I'm sorry. I pray for good fortune in your battle."

???: "I hope all of that fortune shines upon you and not myself."

He sees Frederica off with a smile, and she sped up at once, leaving the area. The boy and the battlefield behind them are left behind, and while Rem clung onto the large, running cat—

Rem: “Was it really okay for us to leave him behind?!”

Frederica: “Rem, you do realize it too, don’t you? There’s no need to be so worried about him! He’s this generation’s…actually, the strongest in history…”

Rem: “—!”

When Frederica was mentioning the boy’s background, a shadow hidden in the sun appeared in the corner of Rem’s eye.

It was the receding figure of the small man that blended with the sunlight and escaped temporarily.

Rem: “Frederica-sama, towards the sun!”

Frederica: “—I see him!”

Frederica notices the same thing Rem pointed out, and she speeds up, kicking the roof.

The small man riding the wind, practically swimming in the sky, was going as fast as the wind itself, but he could only move from the windward and the downwind. If he was going in a fixed direction, even if there was distance between them, he wouldn’t escape.

Rem: “We’ll catch up to him soon and…”

Frederica: “—Actually, this is bad. At this rate, we’ll come out of the slums and will go towards the center of the city and then I will have no place to hide!”

Rem: “That’s…”

If Frederica showed herself in front of people as a beast, just that would be enough to make a commotion. And on top of that, guards were now looking out for witch cultists because of Roswaal’s report.

If she made a commotion, guards would come rushing right away. They would be accused as witch cultists.

Rem: “Frederica-sama! Please, go after him!”

Frederica: “…”

Frederica listens to Rem’s begging, and she speeds up while grinding her teeth to suppress a growl. Still, the more people there were and the closer they came to the festival crowd, the more hesitant she became to run.

Soon enough, Frederica came to a complete stop. Below, there was a large water fountain park on the side of a noble street, and it would be impossible for Frederica to go through it without being seen with how big she was.

I know that. But still—

Rem: “—But he’s right there!”

Rem glares at the faraway shadow that pretty much became as small as a black spot, and she raised a voice of regret.

She would never be able to catch him again once he escaped out of the capital. She wouldn’t be able to fulfill Ram’s dearest wish. Rem wouldn’t be able to accomplish her goal that she had to do.

“…”

The small man riding the wind turns around, looks at her, and says something. She didn’t know if they words that mocked her, or something else.

Still, the moment Rem saw that, the sense of defeat inside of her spread—

Rem: “—Nee-sama?”

The will of her twin sister that shared her blood and flesh flowed into the horn on her head, as if shocking her.

Synesthesia—a rare transmission between twins and siblings where emotions went from one person to another. Rem gets struck by that lightning, and she looks up at the sky with wide eyes.

She felt like her sister told her to not take her eyes off of it—.

Rem: “—Ah”

—The next moment, a wind slash going through the sky teared the small man’s limbs into shreds.

6

Ram: “Nice job keeping your eyes on it. Good job, Rem.”

A peach-haired girl kneeling down on one knee with her arms stretched out on the rooftop of the guard station in the capital shopping street murmured.

She was holding onto a staff with her delicate, white fingers, and it was shining white at the tip. The radiance was a swirling mana light. That enormous power warps the atmosphere, and it was burning the world with an overwhelming torrent.

Ram: “Thanks to you, I ‘saw’ exactly what I wanted.”

She drops the staff, and lets out a sigh of exhaustion. The moment she relaxed, the sweat that suddenly started trickling down wets her forehead, and she started to fall over because of her trembling knees. The man standing right next to her catches her hot body as she collapsed.

Roswaal: “Well done. Buuuut, you pushed yourself too far. For you to use sniping magic without any help when you’re this far away, have you forgotten that you are hornless?”

Ram: “Shut your annoying mouth. Also, take your unpleasant hands off of me.”

Roswaal: “You’re so exhausted that you’ll pass out if I let go, so it wouldn’t be smart to be stubborn, you know?”

Ram: “Leave me…alone.”

The girl—Ram pushed away the chest she was held in, and she escapes from Roswaal’s arms. Roswaal had one eye closed when he saw that stubborn attitude, but his open one was looking at her hand.

Ram: “What?”

Roswaal: “Oh it’s noooothing. You didn’t like the clothes, the jewels, the food, or the cosmetics, but it seems you at least like the staff present, and that makes me haaaappy.”

Ram: “…”

Ram, eyes squinted, looks at the staff in her hand and grinds her teeth. She honestly wanted to smash the staff because of Roswaal’s attitude. But of course, even Ram couldn’t do that.

It was impossible to break this staff unless there were extreme circumstances and there was an exchange. The reason being—

Roswaal: “It’s a special staff. It took a lot of work and time to make iiiiit. After all, it is made out of the horn of the most outstanding being in the Oni clan.”

Ram: “Stop putting it in such an unnatural way. Be more direct about it. —Just say that this staff is made of my broken horn.”

Roswaal nods delightfully because he made Ram say it herself. Ram, seeing that unpleasant reaction, hides the staff from his eyes.

Ram: “I can’t believe you found and picked up one broken horn from that village’s disastrous scene.”

Roswaal: “It’s your precious horn, you know? It’s a given to secure it even if it gets changed into something elseeee. Even if an Oni and its horn get separated, it should be kept somewhere.”

Ram: “I thought at that point Rem and I weren’t yours?”

Roswaal: “Whaaaat I’m saying is that I’ve been keeping an eye on you and Rem ever since. —To be exact, it might be more correct to say I've been keeping an eye on just you, not you and Rem."

Roswaal spoke carelessly at first, but he spoke solemnly for the latter half of his statement. When Ram looked embarrassed upon hearing that answer, the man dressed as a clown put his finger on her chin and he made her look up.

Roswaal: "The reincarnation of an Oni god, the Oni among Onis…I regret that I couldn't make it in time when the Oni village was destroyed. That's why I want to make it up to you now as much as I can."

Ram: "…So…selfish."

Roswaal: "I will be selfish if I want to. That's why I made a staff out of your horn, and why I act selfish by giving it to you calmly tooooo."

Ram: "So foolish."

Ram spat those words out, and once again she looks up at the sky where the enemy was shot down.

—The witch cultist Rem was pursuing that flew in the air by riding on the wind was shot down by Ram, who was far, far away from Rem and the man.

Of course, she wasn't able to see the man from the rooftop of the guard station. Casting magic on an enemy that you couldn't even see because of distance would classify as an impossible magic skill for any high class magic user.

Roswaal: "Buuuuut you accomplished that with your own ability. That was a surprising result. It shouldn't be so convenient, you know?—Your Clairvoyance power that uses other people's eyes."

Ram: "I just used what I could and achieved retribution. Like with this staff."

"Clairvoyance" is like a secret skill that only Onis could use.

The person putting it into practice can see scenes far away by synchronizing with someone's vision if they are within perception range and their mana wavelengths match. By synchronizing with another person in that field of vision and increasing the range over and over, it's possible to literally see 1000 miles away.

Ram, who was left at the station out of necessity, used the secret skill to back up Rem, and through her persistence, she found the field of vision of her sister running all around the capital, and she synchronized with it.

Then, she perceived the figure of the enemy flying away in the sky, took over for Rem, who was expressing regret, and brought death upon him.

Ram: "It's irritating, but if I didn't have this staff, I probably wouldn't have been able to do it."

Putting it as "A staff that uses my own horn" would irritate her so much that she would want to die in a fit of anger. However, she could be sure that there was no other staff out there that her hand was this familiar with.

What irritated her even more than that was Roswaal's attitude.

He seriously just casually gave this staff while she was doing her very best to cover Rem. It was despicable.

Ram: "You were happily waiting for a time when it'd be necessary to make staff for me, weren't you?"

Roswaal: "You both vowed to get retribution as sisters. You doing it for Rem, and Rem doing it for you. That relationship is beautiful, but it is fragile and delicate. I will do anything and everything it takes so that you guys can go on without breaking, despite being delicate, and you can think of me what you will for it."

Ram: "And your true feelings?"

Roswaal: "I wanted to see your long face and your pleased look when you feel like you've achieved something. That's aaaaaalll."

Ram snorts at the winking clown, and quickly goes from the station rooftop down to the stairs. Roswaal shrugs at that cold attitude, and he asks her a question from behind.

Roswaal: “That was the second person…now there are two left. You haven’t forgotten the contract, riiiiight?”

Ram: “…”

Ram stops upon hearing his question, but she just started walking again without saying anything. However, Roswaal nodded approvingly understanding that the silence was her answer, and she follows behind her small back.

One small bag was left behind on the rooftop after they left. The magical stone brought into the station to prove the witch cult’s involvement broke, and the miasma disappears while scattering with the wind.

As if signifying a gentle end to the strife that happened on the other side of the festival.

7

When they followed the traces of blood into an alley, they saw a man lying down, breathing very feebly.

???: “…paint, pant”

Every now and then, the sound of water was mixed with the sound of rough breathing. He was torn limb from limb, and he was bleeding out more than half of the blood that flowed through a human body—he was undoubtedly on the verge of death.

Rem: “As expected of Nee-sama.”

Rem, with a hoarse voice, praises the ability of her sister who shot down her village’s enemy, the small man on the verge of death.

After the synesthesia, Rem was positive that Ram did this.

That Ram somehow perceived the flying man and achieved retribution by using that magical skill.

Once Rem witnessed the man’s last breath, revenge would be achieved.

Frederica: “Rem, we don’t have much time. Make it quick and easy…”

Rem: “I want to ask him something.”

Frederica, still in her large cat form, asks for mercy for the dying man. But when Rem shook her head cruelly, she stepped up to the small man’s side.

???: “…It…was a bad wind, eh.”

The man feels Rem come near, and his eyes that lost light blinked. The man with a slight smile on his face still behaved like he lost his mind as he talked about the wind. That irritated her so much.

Rem: “You were cut up by Nee-sama’s wind. It’s all over for you. Is it frustrating? Do have any regrets at all? That’s pay-back for everyone at the village…no, for Nee-sama.”

???: “…”

Rem: “Come on, say it. “It hurts, I can’t take this, I regret it”. “Help me, I don’t want to die”…say it. Say it. Say it!”

???: “…I pity you, little Oni.”

The small man says that to Rem, who sought atonement, sounding like he felt pity from the bottom of his heart.

That moment, a horn appeared on Rem’s forehead again, and she grabs onto the small man and pulls him up with her Oni face on. Rem brings her face close to him without any resistance coming from him, and she grins at him.

Rem: “You’re going…you’re going to say that, of all people?!”

???: “All winds are destined to die out someday. My life also will end here simply because I failed to read the wind's direction."

Rem: "That doesn't answer my question! What is your motive?!"

Sade: "… Sade. Remember it, and forget it at once."

The small man tells her that without caring to answer Rem's question.

It sounded familiar. She couldn't have forgotten. It was one of the three names she got out of Fogg, the man tied to the basement. Sade, Sergey, and Faust—.

He revealed that his name was Sade. Perhaps that was the sole bit of pity the man gave.

Rem: "Say something! Answer me!"

Frederica: "Rem, it's no use. …He's dead now."

Frederica, standing next to her, shakes her head at Rem, who shook the drained small man. Just like she said, the small man was already dead. He could no longer say anything.

And he never spoke of his motive behind what he did, the reason why they attacked the village, or where the remaining two enemies were.

Frederica: "The guards are going to be hurrying over shortly, too. The root of all evil has been destroyed, and their plan has been ruined. Isn't this result good enough?"

Rem: "But…!"

Frederica: "Rem is safe, Ram and Master are safe. And I am safe. Is that not enough?"

Rem tried to respond by reflex, but she hesitated when she saw Frederica's gentle look.

Nothing would come out of disregarding her care. Besides, even if they took revenge, Frederica helped them.

To keep track of things you can't do more than what you have done. —That was a bad habit of Rem.

???: "Looks like things ended safely here too."

Rem: "—!"

It happened right after Rem stopped acting up and sighed. Rem and Frederica got nervous when they suddenly heard a voice in the alley. Then, seeing their reactions, the owner of the voice gave a wry smile.

Standing at the entrance of the alley was a red haired and blue eyed boy—the person that saved them.

Frederica: "Sorry…for earlier. Are you hurt anywhere?"

???: "As you can see, I was apparently blessed with luck. Maybe it's because you two prayed for me."

The boy smiles refreshingly, and he opens his arms to show that he was fine.

He had nothing that looked like external injures—actually, that's not what should be pointed out. Not even a scratch from the battle could be found on the boy, let alone any wounds. Even if he just ran away from the battle, there's no way he should've been able to escape the situation that cleanly.

Truthfully, this boy literally had the embodiment of an abnormal result.

???: "First of all, I captured all the witch cultists that were there. I'm just not sure how cooperative they were with the investigation. I'm guessing they didn't tell anything."

The boy, paying no attention to Rem trembling, continues the conversation indifferently. The fact that the boy captured dozens of people alive by himself was no surprise at all when you considered that he was the one who did it.

???: "That body right there, is he the ringleader of all this?"

Rem: “…”

Frederica: “He should be. As you can see, he was killed, so I figure their plan is ruined now.”

???: “A hint of miasma…No wonder the guards were running around the capital.”

Frederica took over for Rem, as words didn’t come out of her mouth, and he answers the boy’s question. When the boy was convinced with her answer, her serious look suddenly loosened up.

???: “But if that’s the case, then I guess my work here is done. I should go home soon, or else my dad will get mad at me.”

Frederica: “Your father scolds you?”

???: “Yes, of course. Dad is a serious worry-wart, so I can’t let him find out that I’m doing stuff like this. Please keep this a secret.”

The mood makes a complete 180 as the boy shows playfulness you’d expect with his age, and he asks them to tell the same story while facing them with one eye closed. Seeing him do that, Rem and Frederica widen their eyes.

Because they had the same level of surprise one would have when faced with some kind of disaster.

???: “By the way, Miss Half-beast. The guards will be running over here sooner or later. If you don’t want to shock them, I suggest taking off your fur.”

Frederica: “Hmph, that’s true. …But to keep this place as is…”

???: “I can preserve this place. Once you’re done changing, you can tell the guards about this place.”

Frederica: “But, that’s…not dangerous. Not a chance it will be for you.”

The boy, with a smile on his face, neither agrees nor denies it.

Frederica accepts that smile as an answer, and she pushes her head against Rem, who was beside her. That feeling calms down Rem, and she hurries onto the large cat's back as they jumped again.

Frederica: "Thank you for your help. "…"Sword Saint" Reinhard-sama."

Reinhard: "I'm apart of the "Sword Saint" family. I don't have to bear the responsibility of that name yet."

The boy answers the compliment that came from the rooftop with a slight smile on his face. It felt like that voice was the only thing that had a loneliness that didn't show before, but they didn't have the time to make sure of it as they were leaving.

Frederica moves her limbs, the scenery is put behind them within an instant, and they went as fast as the wind.

Frederica: "You've been quiet this whole time, Rem."

While running, Frederica checks on Rem, who was on her back. Rem never spoke ever since that boy showed up. But, that wasn't why Frederica was worried.

She would be lying if she said that she didn't have regrets about that man's death. They got no information about the remaining two enemies out of him. Retribution was coming along, but it might have been delayed.

However, it didn't cloud her mind, nor did it stop her from moving forward.

So, when Rem heard Frederica's voice, she closes her eyes tight just once and then answered.

Rem: "When we get back and Frederica-sama finishes changing…"

Frederica: "Yes?"

Rem: "We'll definitely have to find a gift now."

Frederica: "…"

Frederica's throat clogged just for a moment, perhaps because she had said something unexpected. But, when the golden, large cat quickly returned to herself, she purred cheerfully and said,

Frederica: "Yes, we do. I'm looking forward to getting Master's gift, after all."

Rem: "Yes, me too."

Rem nods back at Frederica and grabs tightly onto the large cat's nape fur.

It was true that there were plenty of problems before them that should be taken care of.

Still, one step…she really was one step closer. So, it was fine to just be happy, at least for now. Just for now, she'd forget about her grudge and be allowed to enjoy the large cat's fur.

Yes, for now—.

Rem: "Two left…"

For now, I'll forget about the hatred burning my chest and enjoy the capital's festival.

Rem: "Two left, I swear I'll find them for Nee-sama…"

Rem, while having thoughts that were inconsistent with her words, makes a wish with a smile of hatred on her face.

Chapter 5:
The Oni That Cried

1

The Miload family is a branch family with Mathers as the main family, and their mansion is southeast of the Mathers margrave territory, close to the industrial city Costuul.

The head of the Miload family, Dudley Miload, is an energetic person who will be turning 30 years old, and he is related by blood with Roswaal, although they are distant relatives. That said, Roswaal associates with the Miload family more because of Dudley's wife, Grace Miload, rather than because of Dudley.

This is because—

Roswaal: "Grace was born with defects in controlling mana. Her body's gate doesn't work well, and her irregular flow of mana was almost harmful to her. I fiiiiix that. That's why we've been acquaintances ever siiiiince."

Grace: "After that, I married my husband Dudley and became related to Roswaal-sama. I didn't think that it'd turn out like this, so it's strange."

Roswaal: "No no nooooo, it isn't. I was sure of it the first time I saw you. I was sure that you were going to be a very important person to me."

Grace: "Oh, you flatter me."

Then, hearing Roswaal's quick joke, the young woman—Grace Miload's cheeks blush just a little bit, and she pushed the clown's shoulder with her hand in embarrassment.

They were in Grace's bedroom at the Miload residence. Next to Grace, who was lying down on the bed in the room, Roswaal was chatting with her while sitting on a chair. The situation was like

that.

The one utterly confused with their friendly conversation was Rem. Rem didn't know why she was even there in the first place.

Ram: "—So? Roswaal-sama, why did you bring us along?"

Seeing Rem's doubt, Ram, who was sitting next to her, speaks up for her. She spoke frankly like you'd expect, though the one who chuckled slightly in response was Grace.

She acknowledges Ram, whose eyes were squinted, with a "Sorry" and said,

Grace: "I have no intentions of taking away Roswaal-sama from you. Don't get so offended."

Ram: "…I really don't get what you're talking about."

Grace: "Oh, is that so? You don't seem to be that slow of a child, though."

Ram sighs at Grace, who says that with one eye closed. It was rare to see Ram back down in an argument, so Rem's eyes widened in surprise.

Roswaal: "It makes me feel good seeing Ram defeated in an argument."

Grace: "Roswaal-sama, you should stop teasing kids you like, too. Soon they really will hate you, and you've already hurt them, after all."

Roswaal: "Woooow, that's harsh. You can give a real punch with your words now, huh. Moms are just good at it…I guess that's how it iiiiis?"

Roswaal says that, looking at Grace as he was scolded while acting triumphant. Those words make Grace smile slightly, and she softly stroked her stomach—her very large stomach.

The bulging that you couldn't imagine someone thin like Grace having was proof that there was new life in there.

Roswaal: “Shall I predict if it’s going to be a boy or a girl?”

Rem: “You can figure out something like that with magic?”

Roswaal: “It’s not magic, it’s simply prediction…maybe something like fortune-telling? I’m confident that I’ll get it riiiight.”

Grace: “…Well, I’ll pass. It’ll be a surprise until it’s born.”

Grace shakes her head in response to Roswaal’s proposal and she continues to rub her belly affectionately. Roswaal shrugs his shoulders to let Rem know that it’d be insensitive to say anything after that gesture.

—They went to the capital the other day to find a gift for the baby inside of Grace’s stomach.

Grace was already in the last month of pregnancy with her large stomach, so the baby could be born at any time. Normally, pregnant women shouldn’t have to deal with visitors, but—

Roswaal: “Sorry, Grace. I just thought that this would be a good experience for these two. I wanted them to see the beauty of a pregnant woman with new life inside of her.”

Grace: “How awful of you to call it beautiful despite my stomach being this big.”

Roswaal: “You don’t need to feel ashamed. This is an important ritual that keeps life going. Right now, as a woman you are…yes, this is the second most beautiful point of your life. The first being when you were at your wedding in a wedding dreeess.”

There was nothing weird about Roswaal saying exaggerative things, as he was someone who was usually pompous.

In fact, Grace smiled shyly, and Rem also felt admiration for him inside of her. Although, with her synesthesia, she sensed that Ram, who was next to her, was the one and only one whose mood was worsening.

Roswaal: “Well then, it’d be fun to keep chit-chatting, but I wouldn’t want to push a pregnant woman too hard. We still have more time. Let’s call it a day for now.”

Grace: “You sure? I’d still like to talk…ah”

Then, Grace, who was somewhat disappointed, took a side glance at Ram with a look that indicated that she realized something. And then, when the wife cleared her throat, she said,

Grace: “Okay. Well then, I’ll see you later. I’m sorry that I couldn’t be a very good host for you.”

Roswaal: “A pregnant woman shouldn’t worry about something like thaaaat. Anyways, see you later.”

Leaving those words behind, Roswaal leaves the room with Rem and Ram. On her bed, Grace continued to wave the three of them goodbye with a kind smile until they were gone.

Afterwards, the maid that was waiting in the hall guides the three of them to the mansion’s guest room.

The Miload residence was pretty big, though it wasn’t as big as the Mathers residence. There were a lot of maids, and it couldn’t compare to the Mathers residence, which only had a select few.

And so, when they were guided from Grace’s bedroom to the room for special visitors, saw off the maid that guided them, and took a breather,

Ram: “—So? Why did Roswaal-sama bring us along?”

When the maid left, the first thing Ram said was the question that had been evaded earlier. Every word was the same, but she spoke with eyes that indicated she wouldn’t accept the same result.

Roswaal, being glared at by her light red eyes as he sat down on a couch in the room, smiled wryly.

Roswaal: “I’m sorry that you’re so suspicious of me, but you’re overthinking this. I made you meet Grace because I truly wanted to show you guys signs of new life. There was no one younger than you at the Oni village…meaning, you guys never came in contact with a pregnant woman, right?”

Rem: “…Umm, no, never. Since Nee-sama and I were the first kids at the village.”

There was not a single child born after Ram and Rem, as the Onis had low birth rates. Therefore, strictly speaking, Rem, the younger sister, was the youngest at the village. Although, it isn’t really necessary to be technical, since they were twins.

In any case, Rem understood Roswaal’s goal, but she didn’t know what was his intent. What would come out of making Ram and Rem meet a woman with a baby inside of her womb?

Nevertheless, Rem tilted her head puzzling over that, whereas Ram had a dramatic reaction.

Rem: “Nee-sama?”

Ram: “…Seriously, he fools around so much.”

Sounding annoyed, Ram forces those words out, and she bit her lip in vexation. Rem winced, not knowing why she was angry. However, as Ram showed violent emotion, Roswaal closed one eye, and while seeing the sisters in his yellow eye he said,

Roswaal: “It’d be perfect if you guys would be there to witness the moment the child is boooorn.”

Ram: “How ridiculous. Rem and I won’t go for a reason like that. Besides, Grace-sama’s baby doesn’t know about your expectations.”

Rem: “—?”

Rem couldn’t keep up with Roswaal and Ram’s conversation and she was left behind.

Ram hugs her confused sister’s shoulder softly. And then, while still hugging her sister, Ram glares at Roswaal at firmly, and she spoke.

Ram: “Don’t disturb me and Rem anymore.”

Roswaal: “That’s a cruel misunderstanding. That said, I have no way to dispel your doubts. …Weeeell, there’s three days left. Be patient and go with it until then.”

Roswaal concludes the conversation, and he looks towards the window as he leaned back in the chair. Rem, being allured by his look, also gets captivated by the sky dyed in the color of a sunset.

Ram: “To be more precise, there are two days and a half left. —I do hope that there won’t be any evil schemes.”

However, judging from those words that came from Ram, who looked at the same sky, her bitterness and suspicions were still there.

2

10 days after the moon festival incident at the capital, Roswaal visited the Miload residence with Rem and Ram. The secret feud that happened behind the scenes of the moon festival was settled safely with the death of the witch cultist, who was the ringleader, and the information was not revealed to the public. All of the magical miasma stones set up all over the capital were found thanks to Ram’s reasoning and Rem’s sense of smell; it was a successful disposal.

The witch cult’s objective with the moon festival never became clear. There was no choice but to hope that it’d be revealed in the interrogation with the witch cultists the “Sword Saint” boy captured.

Ram: “Well, there probably isn’t much hope with that. Just by doing a little investigation, you can get overwhelmed by how dirty the witch cultists are. …If they were people who just simply confessed, they wouldn’t have made it this far.”

Rem: “That’s…yes, I agree.”

In the guest room they were provided with, Rem lowers her eyes upon hearing Ram say those words while drinking her cup of black tea.

In her mind, she saw the witch cultist who didn't even beg for his life when he was on the verge of death. The small man faced Rem and only spouted nonsense until he lost his life. Apparently he was more of a witch cultist than Rem's first opponent who died of extreme pain and fear caused by her torture.

Ram: "Rem, are you worried?"

Ram worries about Rem, who was looking down and not drinking her cup. Hearing her sister's words, Rem gasps quietly, and she shares the depressing anxiety that was weighing on her mind.

Rem: "I achieved retribution. Out of the four people, I've made two of them pay. But I got nothing out of the second one, and I'm not sure if I'll be able to find the remaining two…"

Ram: "The captured witch cultists might all suicide…would be as dirty as I've heard they are."

Rem: "Besides, I wasn't helpful at all at the capital. I have the nose to find them, but he outsmarted me and got away…if Nee-sama wasn't there, I might have never found him again."

Rem may have got too cocky because of her first opponent—Fogg.

Rem defeated the man at the end of a fight to the death, and she got him to fess up the names of the remaining three enemies. After that, she didn't know what to do with herself, and she was persuaded by Roswaal to live as 'Ram's Substitute' and by trying her best to be that, she no longer saw her imperfect self.

By training with a weapon she was given, striving to master water magic—which she had an aptitude for—and seeking revenge, Rem felt like she had forgotten about her past self.

She felt like she'd forgotten about her past self that was a disgrace to the Oni clan, who could not possibly even try to be her sister's substitute, as she was an imperfect tool that couldn't hope to compare to Ram, the one admired as the reincarnation of an Oni God.

Ram: “Rem, you really are such a fool.”

She couldn’t just simply say to her sister that she’d accomplish something in place of her.

Besides, Rem didn’t accomplish a single thing on her own since the start of retribution. Roswaal was the one who captured Fogg, confined him, and weakened him. It was nothing more than Rem undoing the seal and beating Fogg to death from behind as he tried to take advantage of that.

Unbelievable how she could still shamelessly say stuff like “Retribution has been achieved”. Now she understood how much things were set up for her. She knew it so well that she wanted to die because of her lack of shame.

Ram: “—Rem, it’s not like that. Relax.”

However, Ram, who put her cup down and got close to her, put a stop to such self-tormenting thoughts. Their shoulders touch. She wraps her shaking hand, and Rem looked at Ram’s face as she felt that warmth.

She nods at the wet, light blue eyes with only deep affection in her light pink eyes.

Ram: “Don’t say you were useless. I was able to shoot down that small man at the capital thanks to you. At the beginning, I was also able to figure out that the witch cult was planning something thanks to you. I’m able to be happy and well everyday thanks to you. Although the last part is what’s most important, you’re always contributing.”

Rem: “…”

Ram: “You’re always doing your very best, and I…Onee-chan knows that. So you don’t need to blame yourself. There’s no need for you take all of it by yourself.”

Rem: “…Nee-sama.”

Ram: “In fact, I’m the one that—”

Ram pats Rem's head, as she looked like she was going to start sobbing because of the comfort, and she tried to continue saying something. However, her throat clogged when she was just about to say her last words.

What ran through Ram's eyes were unusual hesitation and indecision, even though she was someone who always felt imposing. But, those complex emotions disappeared when she blinked, and she touched Rem's cheek as she stopped patting Ram's head.

Ram: "Never mind, it's nothing. —Besides, the enemy's' whereabouts isn't something that should be worried about. I'm sure that Roswaal-sama will find the remaining two."

Rem: "It is Roswaal-sama, but will he be able to find them easily?"

It wasn't like she didn't believe in Roswaal. In fact, as of right now, Roswaal was the one she trusted the most after her sister. Next people that came to her mind were her coworkers at the mansion, such as Frederica and Clind.

But, of course, they couldn't possibly compete with Ram, no matter how much control they had.

Rem: "The witch cultists have hid themselves around the world for 400 years…even if they're found, I have no idea how long it'd take."

She wasn't even sure if the remaining three enemies were still in the Kingdom of Lugunica. If they escaped to another kingdom, following their tracks would be no easy task. The flame of revenge continuing to burn for years, for decades—imagining it was horrifying.

Still, Ram smiled at Rem as she had those worries and said,

Ram: "Don't worry, it won't take that long. I mean, it took three months to defeat two enemies…doing some simple calculations, it'll take three more months to find the remaining two."

Rem: "'Doing some simple calculations'…oh Nee-sama."

Ram's joke makes Rem let out a smile as she put her hand on her mouth. It wasn't going to be that easy, but she was happy that her sister tried to soothe her.

Rem: "It's not going to go that well, and that's just a fact. I just…I just happened to coincidentally find the first two."

Ram: "—Just happened to coincidentally find them, eh. Yeah… maybe that's right."

Rem: "Yes, it is. …But I'm happy that Nee-sama cares. I'm more relaxed now, though just a little bit. Nee-sama is as lovely as ever."

With a smile, Rem expresses her gratitude as she put her chest. Not all of the anxiety disturbing her chest was gone. But, she was able to ease up thanks to Ram, although it was just a little.

As expected, Ram is amazing. She knows everything about me. She tells me the words I want to hear the most when I want to hear them the most, does things I want her to do when I want it.

That's why—

—I'll give everything I have to be the replacement for Ram's horn.

Ram: "Yes, I'm looking forward to it. Still…"

Ram responds with a smile without knowing about Rem's determination she was thinking about, and she looks around the guest room. She paused in the middle of her sentence, and when she sighed slightly she said,

Ram: "This mansion is boring. There's nothing to do since we're treated as guests."

Rem: "That's…yes, I think so too. This is boring."

Rem agrees with Ram's listless sigh. Currently, they were being treated as guests as Roswaal's servants at the Miload residence. They were, of course, provided with a guest room for visitors, and they weren't assigned any work. To put it as it is, they had free time.

Rem: “…”

Rem was always a girl who was terrible at putting time to use. Back then at the Oni village, whenever Ram was called over by the adults for ‘duties’, Rem would wait alone waiting for her sister’s return. No friends of her generation, no adults to look after her, alone—.

Ram: “Whenever there’s nothing to do like this, it brings me back to the days at the village.”

Rem: “—Nee-sama, you’re amazing.”

Ram: “I am, as I’m Rem’s Onee-chan, after all. …So, what about me is amazing?”

Rem: “You had said my exact thoughts.”

Ram proudly snorts at Rem, who was surprised by her innermost thoughts being read correctly. Seeing her sister in a good mood makes Rem smile, and then she was slightly surprised.

Since she noticed that this was the first time Ram brought up the village without it being out of anger or the desire for revenge.

Ram: “Come to think of it, there’s nothing memorable about the village. That’s why there are more noteworthy points even at Roswaal-sama’s mansion. Boring adults, and a village that never changes. A cute little sister.”

Rem: “My lovely sister was there, and that’s enough for me.”

Ram: “Well…yeah. There was nothing, but just running around in the hills and fields was fun as long as I was with you. Obviously we can’t act as we want like that in this mansion, though.”

She smiles wryly at Ram, who talked about a way to kill time and was looking at the door to the corridor this whole time. Ram was the world to Rem in those days. Her reason to live was being with Ram.

She pulls herself together as she thought about how much things have changed in just three months.

Rem: “As long as Nee-sama is with me, I don’t need anything else. I’ll be completely satisfied.”

Ram: “…But all I did was make you feel lonely in those days.”

Rem: “Nee-sama had an important role, so it couldn’t be helped. Besides, I did fine alone. I would collect a bunch of stones at a river beach near home and pile them up. As I made a pile of stones, the evening arrived, and so it’d be another day where I spent my time properly…”

Ram: “Re-Rem? You wasted time doing something like that…?”

The truth nobody knew about is revealed and it startles Ram. After that, she looked at Rem with a compassionate expression and said,

Ram: “Sorry, Rem. I’m supposed to be the big sister, and yet I never noticed…”

Rem: “N-No, it’s not your fault, Nee-sama. It’s my fault for being bad at killing time. And on top of that, I…I’m too weak to have the same duties as Nee-sama.”

Ram apologized while looking down, making Rem panic as she shook her head.

Ram’s apology—Ram was always full of confidence and she is the greatest existence in this world, but for Rem, seeing her lovable sister apologize wasn’t that rare.

After all, whenever her sister was taken away by the adults, she would always apologize to Rem; for leaving her alone, for not going with her, for being different than her little sister, and for making her feel all sorts of complex emotions.

And so it moved her deeply, so deeply—deeper than any words, fists, or circumstances could.

Ram: “—After all retribution is achieved, let’s put the Onis’ souls to rest. We’ll return to the village and tell the souls that have unfortunately lost a place to go that retribution is over.”

Rem: "…Yes, Nee-sama. I want to do that as soon as possible."

Ram: "Going to yam fields and getting covered in mud with Rem will have to wait until that's accomplished."

With a slight smile, Ram ends the conversation about the village like that. Rem's sister's words make her break into a smile, and she remembered the times when they'd run around the hills and fields together until they got in trouble with their parents.

And so, Ram, who nodded in response to Rem's smile, suddenly headed towards the door out the room.

Rem: "Nee-sama?"

Ram: "Since we apparently can't run around in the mansion, we'll just have to kill time by getting the adults in the corridor to help us out."

???: "Kya—"

As Ram said that, she opened the door straight away without doing anything else. That's when the people outside lost their support and fell to the floor while screaming softly.

They were girls dressed as maids. Rem, who was surprised, noticed that they looked familiar.

They were all demi-humans that were at the Mathers residence with her for a month—they were the girls who were sent to a different workplace after receiving maid training.

Them being here meant that—

Rem: "So you were all being taken care of at the Miload family's mansion."

???: "Umm, yes, that's right. Long time no see, Ram-san and Rem-san."

They stand back up with awkward expressions, fixing their postures, and one of them, a rabbit eared girl, replies. Seeing her act like that, Ram snorts quietly with her arms folded.

Ram: “So? I thought you were all trained properly to be maids, so why were you naughtily eavesdropping on guests in a room?”

???: “Agh! You see, we didn’t mean any harm. It’s just, uh, Master… or well, not anymore, Madam and Roswaal-sama told us too.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama and Grace-sama did?”

???: “Yes. They said to talk to you two since you guys might be bored…”

The girls speak nervously while looking at each other as they were scared of Ram. They should be 3-4 years older than Ram, but her calm aura was not that of an eight year old.

Ram had her eyes squinted and was pondering something. However, Rem felt pity for the girls who had pale faces because of Ram’s silence, and so she helped them out.

Rem: “Nee-sama, come on now, we’ve finally reunited with everyone.”

Ram: “…It’s not like I doubt them or anything. I can definitely see Roswaal-sama saying something like that, and we really were bored.”

Ram tugs on her chin while sighing, sounding like she had surrendered. As she made that reaction, Rem and the girls look at each other, and then they were all felt relieved.

???: “W-Well then, let’s have some tea. We have permission now, and there’s also sweets.”

With Ram’s permission, the rabbit eared girl brought the cart inside the room. Seeing the sweet aroma and warm steam waft, Rem finally loosened up.

???: “Please drink some tea and tell me about some things while you eat sweets. …Like, you know, what’s Ram-san’s relationship with Master?”

Rem: “Nee-sama’s relationship with Roswaal-sama?”

The girls screamed noisily while blushing as Rem gave them a blank look. Being put in the spotlight, Ram shrugged her shoulders tiredly.

Ram: “I knew it. —Good grief.”

3

The scheduled three days to stay at the Miload residence went by without anything happening just like that. For Rem, the three days at the mansion turned into something like an unexpected day off, and Rem and Ram never had to do anything like witnessing Grace giving birth, which Roswaal was looking forward to.

Rem: “Grace-sama was very kind. Good thing we came, huh, Nee-sama.”

Ram: “…Yeah. As long as you had fun, I’m satisfied too.”

As opposed to Rem, who looked back at the three days peacefully, Ram responded with some tiredness showing in her voice.

During their stay, the girls at the Miload residence pried into truths and lies about Ram. It seemed that her iron strength of will lost to the curiosity the teenage girls had for love.

Ram: “How ridiculous. Just how much of an age difference do they think there is between me and Roswaal-sama anyway? If they get this turned on by someone younger than them, then they have some problems.”

Rem: “Nee-sama is mature, unlike a lot of 8 year olds, after all. …Come to think of it, I wonder how old Roswaal-sama is. I never heard about that.”

Ram: “Despite how he looks, it seems that he’s 21. When I looked under his white make-up, surprisingly, I discovered a face appropriate of his age. It seems he uses makeup as a weapon to avoid being looked down upon for the difference between his position and age.”

Rem: “…I’ve never seen Roswaal-sama without his clown makeup on. So Roswaal-sama really does let his guard down with Nee-sama.”

Ram: “That’s not…true.”

Hearing Rem’s honest doubt, Ram replies in a slightly evasive way.

They met up every night for Ram’s treatment as she’d lost her horn. Since Rem had no idea what her sister was doing when they did that, she couldn’t tell what they truly felt inside.

Plus, Ram and Roswaal were both good at hiding their inner thoughts. Still, Ram’s inner thoughts on Roswaal were different from what they were at first. She was sure about that.

Although, she didn’t know if it was because she liked Roswaal or if it was because she disliked him.

Ram: “Anyway, I’m free from that rain-like barrage of questions for today. If I can think of it as being patient until Dudley-sama returns, then it’s no big deal for me.”

Rem: “Nee-sama, you were having some trouble after all…”

The head of the Miload family, Dudley Miload, has been gone from the mansion these past three days.

Dudley is going to the Industrial City Costuul and leaving behind his pregnant wife at the mansion because of his work. Rem and the others stayed at the mansion also to keep Grace company for the time being.

Accompanying the pregnant woman will also no longer be needed once Dulley returned to the mansion. That truly was something Ram was eagerly waiting for as someone who was tired from the maids’ curiosity.

Rem: “But I’m just a little sad. We won’t get to see Grace-sama giving birth.”

Ram: “…Yeah, maybe not.”

Hearing Rem's brief comment, Ram also showed her agreement with a few words.

At first, Ram was against childbirth as she hated going along with Roswaal's expectations, but once she got to know Grace's personality and started to like her, naturally, her thoughts also changed.

Ram: "But it's like I'm on the palm of Roswaal-sama's hand, and I hate it…"

Rem vaguely avoids touching on Ram's extremely complicated feelings with a bitter smile.

Still, Rem was glad that they came. She smiled more, even though they were wry smiles. It was undoubtedly because of the people living in the mansion, Grace and the maids.

Her failure at the capital and the anxiety to accomplish retribution—it felt like those things were forgotten about, just a little bit.

The third day at the Miload residence began peacefully while she felt relieved like that.

Dudley will be back home in the afternoon, and Rem and the others will be leaving then. Since this was a special occasion, Rem showed her cooking skills for lunch, and she received lavish praise from Grace and the maids.

Furthermore, this was when they started to ease up quite a bit with how they treated Rem and the others as guests; they were given the permission to walk around the mansion pretty freely, and they started to feel more and more reluctant to leave.

Still, those times would have to come to an end. After things were cleaned up at lunch, it was the time when Dudley Miload was scheduled to return, and an earth dragon arrived at the Miload residence entrance.

However, the news the earth dragon had was a bit different from what they'd imagined and—

Roswaal: "Dudley had to stop midway because of dragon carriage trouble?"

???: "Y-Yes, please forgive me. There was just a little bit more to go to reach the mansion, but we had to change dragon carriages because of a wheel problem. Which is why I came back like this…"

The young male servant says that and bows to Roswaal while having such a pale face that it was pitiful.

According to the young man who was Dudley's servant, a wheel was taken off of the imperial carriage because of the mud on the way back from the city Costuul, and it could no longer be used to travel. As a result, the young man returned to the mansion alone on the earth dragon as ordered by Dudley, and came to pick up a replacement dragon carriage. —That was the situation.

Roswaal: "Dudley suuuure is unlucky at crucial times, though it's always been like that. If Grace was going into labor right now, he'd regret it for a very long time."

???: "Master wants to come back to his wife as soon as possible too…"

Roswaal: "I understand how he feels, of course. —Let's see, if that's the case, then there's a lot of catching up to do, so I guess we'll go pick him up ourselves. Since we'll make Dudley feel uncomfortable that waaaay."

With a malicious smile, Roswaal taps the astonished servant's shoulder. After that, he looked back at the mansion and winked at Rem and Ram, who were listening, and the maids.

Roswaal: "Aaaaand so, let's take my dragon carriage. Ram, if you would."

Ram: "Understood. Please wait a…"

Roswaal naturally calls on Ram, and Ram calmly accepts. That interaction makes the maids' eyes light up for a moment. Seeing their reaction in the corner of her eye, Ram stops talking. Then, she looks at Roswaal, who was tilting his head, and said,

Ram: “Or well, I was going to go, but since I don’t feel well today, you should ask Rem.”

Roswaal: “You sure? I hope you’re alright. I was sure that nothing happened last niiiiight.”

Ram: “Yes, I’ll be fine. —As long as you don’t say any more unnecessary things.”

Ram kept endorsing Rem while being wary of the eyes of the maids, which were shining brighter and brighter. Rem gives a bittersweet smile in response to Ram’s feelings, and she bows to Roswaal.

Rem: “As requested by Nee-sama, I’ll be taking over for her. Is that okay?”

Roswaal: “Yeeees, I don’t mind. I just called on Ram first because she looked gruuumpy. I have no problems with Rem. Let’s go, shall we?”

Rem: “Yes. I’ll get it ready right away.”

Rem does a courtesy, and she went to go get the imperial carriage left at the other side of the mansion. The dragon carriage was medium-sized, and the earth dragon held at the stable was a four legged large earth dragon. She takes out the dark brown earth dragon from the stable, and gets on the driver’s seat connected to the dragon carriage. She controls the reigns skillfully, and it took less than five minutes for the dragon carriage to return to the main entrance.

Roswaal: “Impressive. Truly excellent.”

Ram: “She’s my little sister, after all. That’s just natural.”

Roswaal: “I’m glad to see that you’re in a good mood agaaaain. —Well then, we’ll bring back Dudley as soon as possible.”

Ram praises Rem, and Roswaal catches her off her guard and pats her head gently. The feeling flusters Ram, but she didn't stop Roswaal because of it. Roswaal dashingly steps onto the dragon carriage Rem was controlling, and then he nodded at the boy who was Dudley's servant.

Roswaal: "Alright, would you please show us the way? Think of it this way, every second we're delayed, Grace gets more loooonely."

???: "Ah, yes! Understood I will guide you!"

Hearing Roswaal call out to him, the young man jumps onto the earth dragon next to him respectfully.

He did come to get a replacement dragon carriage, but he was probably feeling disturbed inside since the Margrave made him come along. But, Roswaal being whimsical was nothing unusual, so Rem wasn't surprised.

Rem: "Alright, Nee-sama. We'll be gone for a little bit."

Ram: "Don't cry, Rem."

Rem: "I haven't cried over things like this lately."

Ram: "Then that makes me feel a bit lonely."

Rem has that exchange with Ram, they smile at each other, and she drives the dragon carriage. They leave the Miload residence, and the dragon carriage proceeded straight over the main road while following the guiding young man.

Rem: "By the way, Roswaal-sama, what do you think of Dudley-sama?"

Along the way, from the back of the driver's seat—Rem speaks while facing the small window connecting the passenger carriage and the driver's seat. After that, Roswaal, who was looking outside the small window, went "Oh?" as he raised an eyebrow.

Roswaal: "Did Grace and the maids not tell you about Dulley?"

Rem: "Everyone told me that he's a good husband and a good master. Incidentally, I was wondering what impression Roswaal-sama had of him, so I asked.”

Roswaal: “I see. Weeell, my impression is no different from theirs, either. He’s a good friend, a good relative…definitely a good person. So good that I get a little irritated just by looking at hiiiiim.”

Rem: “Irritated, you say?”

Thinking that it was unusual for him to lean towards an assessment of ‘close friend’ or ‘relative’, Rem asks again.

Roswaal: “He’s not the one to doubt others, you see. He tries to accept everything. It’s a part of how he married his wife, who had a problem with her Gate, and why he helps with my hobby.”

Rem: “Your hobby…I guess this is about the “Demi-human Lover” thing.”

Frederica had told her before about those words in an annoyed manner.

Roswaal took care of Demi-humans with no place to go, trained them, and gave them word. And there was gossip that insulted Roswaal as a “Demi-human Lover” for his actions.

Rem: “Roswaal-sama is a splendid gentleman. That’s what I think.”

Roswaal: “Hahaha, thaaaank you. Well, even though people talk about me behind my back like that, Dudley still is more than happy to help me. There were a lot of Demi-human maids in his mansion, right?”

Rem: “…He helps you, and yet you feel irritated by him?”

Roswaal: “He’s someone that can believe people without doubting them one bit. Even more so when he owes the person. Weeeell, anyone could say that, though.”

Roswaal’s thinking was complicated, so Rem couldn’t really understand what he meant. She just understood that he liked

Dudley, but also couldn't deal with him very well.

Having innate goodness and being a nice person don't always go hand in hand. Rem keeps that thought in mind. In any case—

Rem: "—I see it. I think that's the dragon carriage."

With the conversation put on pause, a stopped carriage comes into view right at the end of the main road. They stop at the end of the road, and there was a slightly tilted carriage. —This had to be the dragon carriage talked about earlier.

Rem: "There, there…"

Rem stops the earth dragon right by that dragon carriage, and she jumps off the driver's seat after exchanging looks with Roswaal. The young male servant next to her also gets off the earth dragon, and he ran up to his master's dragon carriage.

???: "Master, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting! I came back with a replacement dragon carriage…or rather, I came back with more amazing people!"

Noticing chaos and agitation in the young man's voice, Rem reflexively broke into a smile. It looked like the Margrave accompanying him stressed out his heart more than she'd thought. After the young man practically said that he was finally free from uncomfortableness, he jumped onto the dragon carriage and called out to him inside.

???: "Yes, yes, it'll be fine. No, in that dragon carriage. …Ahh, for crying out loud, you'll know once you see it! Oh, young maid, come on in."

The young man gives a confusing explanation to the master inside, and he beckons Rem. Hearing him call out to her, Rem steps on the ramp, and she—

Rem: "…"

was going to bow to Dudley inside and call out to him. But then her thoughts froze.

Rem: “Ah…”

Rem lets out a moan upon seeing the scene before her eyes, and she couldn’t move, legs becoming numb. It was as if her vision had poisoned her. In fact, it was a hell that would prevent you from moving an inch.

—The luxurious dragon carriage was turned into an unimaginable sea of blood.

The small dragon carriage was full of a suffocating smell of blood, and there were several large, red pieces of meat in a pool of blood on the floor. ‘Pieces of meat’ is what they should be called. You couldn’t call them dead bodies when they were this damaged.

You shouldn’t call them stuff like dead bodies when their dignities were damaged this much.

???: “The one inside is Master, and the two in the front are the driver and the real servant.”

Rem: “…”

The young man standing right by Rem, who was stiffening up, faces her, and he gives an explanation as he pointed at the pieces of meat. Rem couldn’t even move an inch when she heard that level voice.

She felt nauseated. Her whole body became weak. Gastric juice from her writhing stomach ran up her throat.

Rem: “Oo…eh…”

???: “Don’t breath with your nose. Make sure you breath with your mouth. Then, if you focus on your stomach, it’ll settle down immediately. If you feel pain, then at your feet there’s…ahh, it might be hard to tell, but the things on the seat are feet. Start with that to grasp the whole body in order.”

She was dizzy. Her thoughts were breaking. Her knees were shaking, and she felt like she was going to collapse into the pool of blood.

Why, why, why—it was so hard to move her body. Her mind and her consciousness were unstable.

But, even if her limbs gave up on her, there was one sense working vehemently.

It was too late. Fatally late. Why hadn't she noticed it? Even though the scent was this strong—

???: "—Juuuuust calm down. That's just pieces of meat, after all."

Rem: "Witch cultist…!!"

Rem senses the miasma, though it was too late, and she tried to jump back with the strength she scraped up in her body. However, for some reason, Rem fell down to her knees against her will, and she felt like she was going to faint.

The young man grabbed her body with his arms and he lifted her forcibly.

Rem: "Ka…ah…!"

???: "You sure are light. All Onis have is physical strength, so where does the weight of their muscles go? I wonder if I'd find out by dissecting one. There was no time to do that at that mountain, you see."

While holding onto Rem, the young man kept laughing with a frivolous and innocent look. It wasn't like he'd completely changed. He was extremely calm, extremely composed. That was dreadful.

Rem: "Ros…"

???: "Ahh, you want to ask your Master to save you? Well you can't. All the fun would be ruined once someone gets in the way of this meeting, right? So…"

The dragon carriage that turned into a horrible scene was shady, and Roswaal couldn't see the interaction from the passenger carriage. Seeing Rem trying to tell her master about the dilemma, the young man flaps his free hand cruelly.

A light, air-expelling sound—right after that, Rem saw red light on the other side of the dragon carriage.

Rem: "…"

The hot wind blowing through shakes her maid outfit, and she bellowed as she opened her mouth. However, even her own yell was drowned out by the explosion, and the high pitched ringing in her ears destroys her eardrums. But, it was still easy to guess what'd happened by looking at the flames that rose with the produced shock wave and hot wind.

???: "They're the flames that burned your home. Or perhaps the flames that burned your family. Though, that was a failure."

She didn't know what he meant by saying it was a failure. Still, the result was clear.

The eruption of smoke closes in, and the heated sand envelops Rem and the young man. On the other side of the dragon carriage tilted by the impact, there was serious damage to the dragon carriage Roswaal was on, and it was most likely being engulfed in flames.

With her master on it, the young man—no, the witch cultist, blew away the dragon carriage.

???: "How's it feel to be so powerless that even your master gets burnt after your village and family? How's it feel being unable to reach the enemy you hate so much that you want to kill him, even though he's right before your eyes?"

Rem: "I'll…kill you…!"

???: "Yes, that's it. Those eyes, that voice, and that horn are what I wanted."

In response to Rem's anger and her desire for revenge, the horn of an Oni comes out on her forehead. The white horn shining brightly sucks in the mana in the atmosphere, filling her whole body with over the top energy.

However—

Rem: “Oo…?”

???: “It is a beautiful, splendid horn…but power didn’t go in like you expected, huh?”

Hearing Rem’s moan, the young man chuckles with a complacent smile.

Just like the young man said, forget about power surging in her hands and legs, Rem’s horn was dying down in proportion to its radiance. There weren’t even any strange problems with her horn sucking in the mana in the atmosphere. If that was the case—

Rem: “The mana…”

???: “is being interfered with, yes. I was born with this nature. I randomly contaminate the mana around me. If it’s in my surroundings, the mana turns into poison. That’s why it was easy to take control of your village.”

Rem: “…”

Being told the shocking truth, Rem was at a lost for words.

The Onis are admired as the strongest race among Demi-humans. Rem had thought that it didn’t make sense for them to be annihilated in one night by witch cultists, even if there were disadvantages like it being a night attack and a difference in numbers. Her suspicions were cleared after finding out that the young man had an unusual ability that was the worst for the Oni horn.

As long as she was faced with the young man’s special characteristic, the Oni horn was invalidated—no, more like a detrimental result would be caused.

That’s how the witch cultists cornered the Oni clan, her father, and her mother and killed them—

???: “And so, the few survivors, you and your sister, will fall prey to us too.”

Rem: “E-Even Nee-sama…!”

???: “Of course. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have been worth going through the trouble to do all sorts of cheap tricks. We worked really hard for you and your sister. Although…”

Stopping there, the young man looks at the center of the explosion, whose fumes were still not settled down yet.

???: “I’d thought that the Margrave was going to be the biggest obstacle, but I didn’t expect him to get blown away this easily.”

Rem: “…”

???: “Surprisingly, it was no big deal. There were rumors saying that he is the strongest magic user in the kingdom, so I even brought forces, thinking that he was going to give me some trouble.”

Around the young man tilting his head, dark shadows suddenly appear in the dragon carriage from every direction. Countless shadows dressed in black from their heads appeared as if coming out of the ground.

The unmistakable stink and malice, without a doubt, were the witch cultists—.

???: “Now then, what’s left is the fun of choking you out and retrieving you with your sister. I’ll be expecting you to act honorably as a descendant of the prideful Oni clan.”

The young man grabs her neck harder as he said that scornfully. Rem, getting exhausted, couldn’t fight against the large amount of harmful mana being taken in. Even her thoughts slowed down, and her eyelids were strangely heavy.

Rem: “—Ah”

Ram, Roswaal, Frederica, Clind, Grace, and the maids come to her mind.

And yet, everything was swallowed up by the darkness of her distant consciousness—

???: "—Al Goa"

Just then, a crimson red fire blast swirled in the air, and the surrounding dark shadows were blown away with the heat weave.

???: "Wha—?!"

The young man, suddenly seeing the produced blast and soil, raised his voice in surprise. Without a pause, the young man reflexively jumps back, and attempts to get away from danger.

???: "You little…!"

However, Rem didn't overlook the fact that the young man turned his attention away from himself. Rem shook off his arms right away, and she escaped his control as she fell to the ground. Her body got held up in someone else's arms.

They were surprisingly strong arms, and Rem knew this feeling. It was—

Rem: "—Roswaal-sama!"

Roswaal: "Now I've saved your life three times. Peeeerhaps now's about the time you should seriously think about how you'll pay back your debt for real."

Roswaal winks at Rem, who gave an applause while being held by him. No doubt about it, he acted calm because of his use of magic, and it also made Rem's eyes shine, who still felt tired.

Keeping his distance while looking amazed, the young man shrugs his shoulders at Roswaal, who didn't even have any burn marks on his clothes and was standing in his way.

???: "Oi oi, I'm beaten. I did consider the possibility of you not getting killed by that, but you not even getting scratched sure as hell didn't cross my mind. What kind of magic did you use?"

Roswaal: "That's a secret. Unlike a certain someone, I'm not an idiot who shows off his own cards for self saaaaatifaction. Anyhow, that sure is a troublesome nature."

Roswaal responds sarcastically to the young man who had talked about his own special characteristic, and he looks down on his right hand. While opening and shutting his palm, with one eye closed, he said,

Roswaal: "The mana around turns into poison. In other words, the space becomes very troubling for magic users. To think that Ur magic can actually repress power to such an extent…"

???: "…Usually you wouldn't be able to cast magic freely either, and yet you pulled it off. I'll have to give you props for that. But, this place has to feel uncomfortable for you, huh?"

Roswaal: "It sure does. Buuuut, apart from that…"

While staying cautious of the witch cultists slowly closing in, Roswaal looked at the young man profoundly. Then he let Rem down from his arms. After being saved by Roswaal from a predicament, strength somehow returns to Rem's hands and legs, and she felt like she could even run.

However, Rem couldn't fight at all without her horn. Although, the Oni horn was useless in this situation, anyways. Rem came here, and she was held back by her own powerlessness again.

Seeing Rem look like she was going to cry, Roswaal tugs his chin in and says,

Roswaal: "Listen, Rem. I'll take care of this place. Return to the mansion, and save Ram and Grace. —I want you to take care of that."

Rem: "Roswaal-sama?! But…"

Roswaal's proposal to split up and have him handle a dangerous situation surprises Rem.

Around them, witch cultists were flooding in and it didn't even seem like they lost numbers after the first attack, and the young man who was a magic user's worst enemy was still in good shape. Roswaal's disadvantage was as clear as day.

But at the same time. Ram and Grace were left at the mansion defenseless. That was also terrifying to Rem.

She hesitated and worried. An answer wasn't coming to her. Even so, time still passed cruelly—.

Roswaal: "Rem, leave this up to me."

Rem: "…"

Roswaal: "You should relax. Also, allow me to deeeeeemonstrate. —Demonstrate how your master is the strongest magic user out there. I'll burn the limbs of that enemy over there and give them to you guys."

As Rem's eyes widened, Roswaal pointed at the young man and declared that confidently. Those words made the young man make an unpleasant expression, but after Rem blinked several times, she nodded deeply.

Her master said that much. And they certainly had created a bond for her to believe that.

Rem: "—Good luck."

Roswaal: "You and Ram get home safely, too."

Rem bows, and she starts to run away from that place at once. She had far from enough power to dash without relying on her Oni horn. But still, Rem kicked the dirt and broke through the enclosure.

Of course, the witch cultists brandished their cross swords over their heads and threw themselves at her, but—

Roswaal(?): "El huma. El fura."

The swirling wind carries slashes of ice, cutting up the dark shadows throwing themselves at the girl carelessly. The blood gushing out freezes, and the slashing blood cuts up another dark shadow. The damage spreads.

And so, meanwhile, Rem was leaving the battlefield at full speed without turning back once. That was the indication that she trusted in him to protect her back, no matter what.

Roswaal: “I did hope that she’d trust me innocently like that, but it does make me feel ticklish.”

??? You’re quite calm, huh, Margrave. Do you not see what the situation’s like?”

With a firm voice, the young man speaks to Roswaal, who watched Rem go off with a slight smile on his face. The boy, who had kept his calm up until then, glares at Roswaal, who was in front of the dragon carriage, and said,

???: “The situation has changed a little bit, but the forces to kill you are still alive. Plus, that Oni girl will still have a bad time once she gets back to the mansion. You are cruel.”

Roswaal: “Hmmmm, that seems to be a bit different from the flow of events I see.”

???: “How interesting.”

Roswaal: “Not even. It sounds like your source of confidence are at the mansion…but my Oni sisters, who I’m proud of, will deal with them. Unfortunately, you guys will also turn into dust with me here. Oh, but you’re the only one that’s going to get captured alive, so don’t fret. Your life should be taken away by the two of them.”

Completely relaxed, Roswaal calmly states that while putting up his hands. Rather than getting angered by that attitude, the young man puts his hands together with an impressed expression and claps.

???: “If you can talk big that much in a situation where you can’t even work out mana properly, then color me impressed. Man, I can’t wait for those sisters to turn into dead bodies with their original form still there…guess I’ll deal with it by using you.”

The young man smiles delightfully all of a sudden, and that’s when the witch cultists around him started to move simultaneously. The dark shadows prepare the weapons in their hands, and they went to tear the lone man limb from limb.

Roswaal: “You’ll ‘deal with it’. ‘Deal with it’, huh. That’s a pretty cocky way of putting it.”

Inside this silent delusion that completely covered his vision with black, Roswaal checks on the dead bodies lying in the back—in the dragon carriage—that disastrous scene, and he sighed.

And then—

Roswaal: “—I guess I’ll make up for Dudley’s death by taking your guys’ lives.”

4

The first one to sense a change with the situation was Ram, who had steeled herself for her sister’s absence.

Grace: “Ram-chan?”

Grace tilted her head curiously at Ram, who looked up in the middle of the conversation. Ram directed a narrow-eyed look out the window without responding to those words at all.

The mansion’s atmosphere completely chills, and the sound of the wind felt silent. Bitterness mixes with the dry atmosphere, and while tasting the increasing tension with the tip of her tongue, Ram quietly squinted her light pink eyes.

The change in the atmosphere irritating her skin—that was a sign of a hunting ground.

For Ram, as someone who was born in an Oni village among the mountains, hunting signs and her daily life were inseparable. Of course, the adults never took a young girl like her to go hunting, but she went into the mountains without telling them, and killing stray witchbeasts wasn’t just a one or two time thing.

It was not hunting for fun, but a procedure necessary to measure her own capacities accurately.

Although, Ram was also proud of her innocent sister praising her enthusiastically every time she told her that she'd killed a witchbeast. It's just that she'd never told anyone other than her sister about her actions.

Getting back on track, what Ram felt in the mansion's surroundings at this time was that sort of hunting sign that reminded her of the past. However, there was one point that was clearly different.

A change in her position—here, at this time, Ram was not the hunter, but the hunted.

Ram: "Neither Roswaal-sama nor Rem are here…"

They were vulnerable. This couldn't possibly be just a coincidental attack. Something had to have happened to Rem and Roswaal after they were lured away from the mansion. —But, Ram's mind was as calm as possible.

She was worried about Rem, but Roswaal was also with her. Though she hated to admit it, as long as Rem had that master dressed as a clown by her side, her life wouldn't be exposed to danger.

The current problem was this person next to her who didn't have those two to protect her.

???: "Ram-san, what have you been…"

Ram: "—Get ready to move Grace-sama immediately. In this occasion, lifting her up will have to do. Furthermore, call the guards in the mansion right away."

???: "…"

The maid, who had a dubious expression, blinked in surprise, becoming dumbfounded upon hearing Ram's instructions. That reaction made Ram want to click her tongue, but she couldn't blame her for not having sense of urgency.

Because Ram and the others were the ones who brought this attack's danger into the mansion, after all.

Ram: "Anyhow, just do as I say. This mansion is—"

Without trying to convince her, Ram raises her voice to force the best course of action. However, before she declared that, an intense impact was pushing up the building from below.

???: "…"

A roaring sound and a shock appears at the maid's feet, making her lose balance, and she fell to the floor as she screamed. Ram also felt such a shock that she had to kneel down on one knee, and she jumped onto the couch immediately. On it, there was Grace, holding onto her stomach, her beautiful face pale from anxiety and shock.

Ram: "…"

"I have to protect them", is what Ram thinks instinctively.

For Ram, that was something she would very rarely feel for anyone except for Rem. However, Grace, with how she was now, made her act like this, and she just naturally judged her to be someone that she ought to protect.

—She had no horn.

But, even so, there still was the blood of the reincarnation of an Oni god flowing within her body.

Ram: "—Look."

She puts her determination and her secret skill to use.

Ram started using "Clairvoyance", a secret skill of the Onis', without the mana that would normally circulate through the horn. The power goes around the Miload residence—its limited range—and finds an existence that could synchronize with the kneeling girl's mana, even though it was just slightly. —Just then, Ram's field of vision suddenly opened.

Ram: “…”

It was red, a very red scene.

The bottom and top of her field of vision were dyed bright red, and a figure was blurred over and over while flickering. It had to be because Ram’s target was wildly writhing on the floor.

Her vision was red, red as far as she could see. It wasn’t deep red that made her think of blood; it was bright red that reminded her of bright light. This is what people call flames.

The person who Ram borrowed her vision from gets engulfed in flames, and now was the exact moment she started burning to death.

Ram: “…”

Seeing that cruel scene didn’t crush Ram’s heart. She focuses on finding a clue inside the vision dyed red. Once the body she’s borrowing vision from dies, needles to say, the connection breaks. If that happens, then the owner of this body dies in vain.

That couldn’t happen. She wouldn’t let it. Get a hold of something, just something, no matter what—.

Ram: “—!”

A figure passes by the corner of her vision, and right after Ram gasped upon seeing it, the connection breaks. It was proof of the target of the magic being burned by flames and dying once and for all.

But, she obtained a clue. In exchange for her death, she obtained information on the attacker. However, it was Ram’s worst enemy.

What went through her vision was a large, muscular, short-haired man—Ram had encountered that man once before in red scenery like the one happening right now.

It was when she was surrounded by her kind’s burnt corpses in the Oni village burning down. That disastrous scene.

Ram: “A thief has broken into the mansion’s east wing. Guards are rushing over, but half of them have been burned. I can’t say that this place is safe either. Let’s move somewhere else.”

???: “Th-Thief, no way…there must be some mistake…”

Ram: “Did you not hear the shaking and noise just now? Moreover, the thief is actually the witch cult…I saw their black clothes come into mansion outside the window. Must I explain even further?”

The maid who couldn’t accept reality for a moment gazes in wonderment upon hearing ‘witch cult’. They were words convenient for making her understand that this was an emergency. The unfortunate thing was that it wasn’t a lie, but the truth.

This was a terrible attack by the witch cult to eradicate the Oni clan.

Ram: “In any case, it would be stupid to stay in this mansion. You are too insistent on keeping Grace-sama here. We have to move her.”

???: “But we can’t put such a burden on her! She should stay he…”

Grace: “No, let’s do what Ram-chan…no, what Ram-san says.”

It was Grace who interrupted the objecting maid and agreed with Ram in a firm tone. The pregnant girl sits up in the bed, and despite having a pale face, she stared at Ram with courageous eyes.

Grace: “You’re Roswaal-sama’s dear child. I’m positive that you are capable of making the best judgements.”

Ram: “…If that disgraceful title helps, then I won’t deny it in this situation.”

Grace: “Aww, you don’t have to be embarrassed.”

Ram responds to Grace, who acted unexpectedly relaxed. Then, the rabbit eared girl who’d been watching them rolls up the sleeves of her maid outfit.

???: “O-Okay, understood. I’m ready, too. Madam, it’s going to be a little uncomfortable, but please grab onto me.”

Grace: “Yes, Limrear, if you would.”

Even though her arms were thin, demi-humans are demi-humans. The rabbit eared maid—Limrear picks up Grace in her arms, and Ram put her ears against the door out the room as she watched that. No presences in the corridor. For starters, they had to move.

How long was it going to take for Rem and Roswaal to break past the witch cult and return to the mansion? She had to escape from the attackers hiding in the mansion until they did—.

Ram: “It’s definitely easier said than done.”

Most likely, that was going to be a hopelessly difficult obstacle.

However, as Ram said that out loud, she didn’t let the two of them with her notice her anxiety whatsoever.

5

And so, their fierce escape play began on the stage, the Miload residence.

The three of them leave Grace’s bedroom, and they escaped upstairs for now. After just a few tens of seconds, there was the sound of the bedroom downstairs breaking in the mansion, proving that Ram’s judgement was correct.

Ram: “Although, it really sucks how I can’t be proud of it at all even though I was right.”

Ram speaks her thoughts while she held her breath in the room she ran away into.

After muttering, almost in a whisper, she used ‘Clairvoyance’ and strived to find an escape route. Inside the mansion, there were several people hiding from the witch cult attack, just like Ram and the others were. For now, she had to guarantee Grace’s safety by borrowing their—the girls’ eyes.

Ram: “I can’t really say that it’d be wise to stay in one place. Fortunately, there aren’t many enemies. Let’s move.”

Limrear: “But that’d be dangerous…”

Ram: “This’ll get hit at some point if we don’t move since the pursuer is hitting places one by one. Besides…it seems they aren’t that naive, either.”

Sensing presences nearing downstairs, Ram tells the two of them to run away while they still have places they could run to. They exit the room, and run off to a different wing, carefully destroying their traces so they don’t get caught by their pursuers.

Relying on her secret skill and insight, Ram grasped the attackers’ characteristics pretty much correctly.

He was a witch cultist who was the village’s enemy. He was invading the mansion by himself. She was sure of that after what she’d seen. However, this wasn’t information that she could accept with open arms.

Since he was alone, this proved that he has the power to take control of the mansion on his own. In fact, as Ram checked her memory, she came to the conclusion that they were at a disadvantage.

If they fought, their chances of winning were slim. But even if they weren’t, they’d get burnt to death once found. That’s just a cold, hard fact.

Limrear: “In that case, can’t we go through the garden and flee outside the premise?”

Ram: “…Someone has already tried that and failed. As for what happened, that’s better left unsaid.”

Hearing Ram’s cruel explanation, Limrear understood that she’d lost her coworker, and she was at a loss for words.

When she was using ‘Clairvoyance’, she saw her target forcefully trying to run away from the mansion and she ended up failing.

The reason being because of the invisible explosive spells set outside the mansion—it was the trap used by the witch cultist Roswaal had kept in the mansion before.

Most likely, there were countless of the same kind of traps set up around the mansion. Evade that carefully, escape, and don't get found by the witch cultist. —That would be impossible.

Ram: "He's scrupulous with preparations, and on top of that, he's excellent at pursuit…it's as if he's reading the wind."

The pursuer, on top of blocking their way out, was definitely cornering them, and it made Ram grind her teeth.

The distance between them and the enemy had neither decreased nor increased since leaving Grace's bedroom; they were getting nowhere. His pursuit magic was excellent. He was so crafty that Ram praised him without exaggerating.

Ram: "…"

Time passed and passed, and the silence starts to spread heavily between the three of them. They speak less about focusing on escaping, and everyone besides Ram had their faces turn pale slowly.

They hadn't run into any of the other servants in the mansion, not even once. Surely the two of them weren't thickheaded enough to not understand what that meant.

And so, Ram's heart also tore apart when the pursuer, who they couldn't shake off, came to mind.

Limrear: "—! Ram-san, you're bleeding."

Ram: "…It's no…big deal."

Wiping the nose blood Limrear pointed out, Ram grinds her teeth while breathing heavily.

Ram's body had already passed its limit a long time ago from the repeated use of her secret skill. Her headache and the buzzing her ears wouldn't go away, and her hot head and body were strangely heavy. If she lost focus, she'd probably fall to her knees soon after.

Ram was able to prevent that from happening precisely because she had tough force of will. —Still, it wasn't so far from its limit. Sooner or later, it would definitely fail.

Ram: "Why…"

Is this body so fragile? Why does it have so many problems just from doing something?

Irritation with herself is exactly what she felt since her time at the village.

Ram: "—Damn it."

Limrear: "Ram-san! Please, that's enough. Don't force yourself!"

Limrear supports Ram's unsteady body, and she turns around. And then, while holding Grace, she went into a nearby room she had her eyes on, bringing Ram along.

Limrear: "Anyway, let your body rest for a little bit…"

Ram: "— You idiot, this room is"

Limrear speaks considerate words, and Ram's voice gets covered up as her eyes widened.

But, she was still late to stop her, and the three of them looked straight at the scene in the room.

???: "—Ah"

It wasn't clear who let out a sigh out of the three of them. That question was just blown away by the scene they were faced with, right before their own eyes.

—Piled up messily at the corner of the room were several burnt corpses turned into black.

Although she couldn’t tell with her nose clogged with blood, the room was most likely filled with the stench of burnt flesh. There were at least 10 corpses lying on top of each other. It almost felt like the evaporated, hollow eye sockets were giving them a resentful, empty look.

Limrear: “…”

Ram: “Careful…”

Next to her, Limrear falls to her knees with a ‘thump’. Grace, who she had in her arms, almost gets thrown down to the floor because she lost her strength, and Ram just barely caught her.

Still, it was understandable. Limrear’s long bunny ears sag, and she continued to shed tears from her eyes, stupefied as her voice wouldn’t even come out.

Grace: “How could…they…”

And so, Grace, who’d been rescued from falling down, also received unfathomable shock to her heart. She was shaking her head over and over in denial, staring at the burnt corpses in shock.

Ram grinds her teeth, seeing their reaction, as she thought, “I’ve failed”.

Ram felt a lot of regret for letting them see this scene. Not encountering corpses even once was supposed to be the bulwark to protect their hearts. That condition was broken once they saw these cruel, burnt corpses right in front of them.

And then that shock led the situation to a vicious spiral.

Grace: “…Ah…koo”

Ram: “Grace-sama?”

Grace, who had been stupefied with the disastrous scene, had the color of anguish go across her profile, and Ram knits her brows. It was clearly a reaction different from the surprise she had upon seeing dead bodies. In fact, Grace’s breathing became heavy, sweat appeared on her forehead, and she was going to collapse on the spot.

Ram: “Grace-sama? Grace-sama, pull yourself together! Fainting here now would be…”

Grace: “N-No, you’ve got it wrong, Ram-san…that’s not it…”

Grace holds onto Ram’s sleeve as she called out to her, and she shakes her head with a look of pain. That reaction makes Ram’s eyes widen in confusion, but she noticed it right after.

At Grace’s feet, a large amount of liquid was dripping from her nightgown. It was something caused by being faced with a horrible scene—how nice that would be if that was the case.

Ram: “No way, her water broke…?!”

A part of Ram’s knowledge on the flow of events for childbirth came to mind, and her voice trembles.

Once Ram said those words, Grace held onto her big belly and hung her head. It was nothing other than her clenching her teeth and dealing with the on and off pain.

Her water broke, and then she had labor pains—although the order was incorrect, they were signs of one’s first childbirth, and it was expected for them to happen at anytime for Grace as someone who was entering the last month of pregnancy. But she had to say that this was the worst time.

The worst time for labor pains to start in a situation where they were being attacked by witch cultists and the whole mansion turned into a battlefield.

Grace: “—Ah…hou…oo”

Ram: “…”

Grace breathes in and out painfully, grabbing onto Ram’s arm, and her hands were full of strength. It was such a grip that you wouldn’t believe it was coming from a girl with thin arms like hers, and it made Ram's head spin fast while she dealt with the pain.

The witch cultist wouldn't slow down his pursuit. Still, dragging Grace around with her current situation was impossible. It'd expose the mother and the child to danger. And she couldn't give birth here, either—.

Ram: "Limrear! Limrear, snap out of it!"

Limrear: "…"

Ram: "Limrear!"

With a dry sound, Ram slaps Limrear's cheek. That shock makes Limrear topple over, and her eyes widen as she held onto her hit cheek.

Ram shouts at the maid.

Ram: "Carry Grace-sama into a bedroom nearby! Get hot water and lots of clean cloth! That's as far as my knowledge goes. Now you just have to do something!"

Even a genius like Ram could only understand the surface when it came to stuff like knowledge on childbirth. However, Limrear, as the pregnant woman Grace's maid, should've been trained in case of emergencies.

Roswaal was thorough in that area. Thus—

Limrear: "U-Under-Understood…I will…take care of her…but, the witch cult"

Ram: "—I'll take care of them."

Ram, while standing back up, says that to Limrear, who somehow came back to her senses. Although two of them gazed in wonderment upon hearing her declaration, Ram confidently takes out the staff she'd equipped on her thigh.

It was a staff she was comfortable with, made out of her own horn —as of now, it was unpleasantly reassuring.

Ram: “Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourselves. Giving birth to a child is a major task, much more difficult than my cleaning that’ll begin after this.”

As Ram said that while preparing her staff, she braced herself to face an unavoidable battle.

6

—Feeling that Ram was straight ahead, he came to the corridor where Ram was standing in without hesitation.

???: “…Oh.”

Appearing at the end of the corridor, the man lets out a sigh in admiration upon seeing the girl standing dauntingly. Hearing that sound, which sounded like excitement in a way, Ram truly felt disgusted.

However, her fighting spirit and anger were stronger than her disgust, and they burned it into nothing within an instant.

The anger towards the witch cult—her kind’s enemy and a symbol of unreasonable fate—flared up in her light red eyes.

Seeing those angry eyes, the large man shrugs his shoulders in an unconcerned manner.

???: “Why has a little Oni, who had been running everywhere, suddenly decided to show up?”

Ram: “To put it as ‘running all over the place’ is extremely wrong. I was not running; I simply walked without caring about anyone. Not catching up to me, not finding me, whichever slip-up it may be… don’t blame me for your own incompetence.”

???: “It seems you are the one who is mistaken, little Oni.”

The man, with a low and muffled voice, objects those provocative words spoken by Ram, who smiled. When Ram squinted as she heard his reply, the man put leaf tobacco, which he took out of his pocket, in his mouth. And then,

???: “You’ve been running away ever since that mountain village died down, right? I’m asking how did you end up showing yourself here.”

Ram: “You sure know how to run your mouth well. —I’ll sew that mouth my way.”

???: “Hmph.”

While watching Ram, who twirled the staff in her hand and expressed her fighting spirit, the man cracked his knuckles. Just then, a faintly produced spark lights the end of the leaf tobacco. With a deep breath, he breathed tobacco smoke.

???: “You have fighting spirit, but I don’t sense any strength. I came to burn the reincarnation of an Oni God, a real Oni…but I guess I was off. The real one has been taken by Sergei. Unlucky.”

Ram: “—You sure do enjoy stupid hobbies, Faust.”

Faust: “—Fogg must be the one who couldn’t keep his mouth shut. He was an awful apprentice.”

Having his name guessed correctly, the large man—Faust spat out those words apathetically. Although Ram agreed with his opinion on Fogg, she tilted her head upon hearing ‘Apprentice’ and questioned him.

Faust: “He’s an arson apprentice. It makes sense to kill people, destroy things, and burn things. However, not everyone could do all that. If there isn’t anyone to teach it, then the skills won’t spread. So, I take the initiative and do so. It’s a practice that is a hobby and it has benefits.”

Ram: “…”

Faust: “Even the witch cult is desperate to enlighten people. Lately, there’s been no hesitation to convert those with no interest at all in their ideas into believers. Their deviousness is comfortable to evildoers.”

While enjoying the taste of tobacco smoke, Faust talks about his position thoroughly. The details go through Ram's eyes, and her hornless forehead starts to ache terribly.

She tilts her head without speaking of the sort of pain that felt like her skull was being pierced with a drill.

Ram: "In other words, although you help the witch cult, you aren't influenced by the witch. In that case, why did you help burn down the village?"

Faust: "I thought I told you. It's a hobby and it has benefits."

Ram: "Meaning?"

Faust: "I love fire. Plus, I wanted to try burning Onis. I wanted to know the smell."

Stating that, Faust spits out the shortened leaf tobacco and said,

Faust: "Everyone loves rare things, right?"

Ram: "Yes. And so I'll let you smell one of the rare smells in this world."

He drops the leaf tobacco onto the carpet, and the tip of the fabric burns with a scorching sound.

That becomes a sign, and Ram kicks the floor with her small body and starts sprinting. Faust raises his palm towards the girl running like the wind and says,

Faust: "What rare smell?"

Ram: "The smell of you being burnt to death. The best lingering scent in the whole world."

Her sharp words make Faust deepen his smile, and the next moment, his thirst for blood explodes.

Ram senses the concentration of heat in the space up front, and she evades the threat with a jump to the side. The produced blast grazed her cheek right after she blinked, but she steadied herself and continued on.

The invisible explosions—Rem had already saw through that trick. It's a special magic where he can cause explosions on the spot by setting up magic formulas in the air beforehand. It definitely would've been very troublesome for her without her background knowledge. However, once she'd figured out the trick, it was no big deal.

Rem had exposed it with her sense of smell, but Ram saw through it by the disturbance in mana right before the explosions.

Faust: "Wow, not bad."

Ram: "Kohhh—!"

Faust dodges her first attack, and he ignited countless spells while falling back. While he freely covered the corridor with explosive flames, Ram avoided fatal wounds with her supernatural body movement.

Yes, she avoided just the fatal wounds. She couldn't avoid her arm getting lacerated, her legs getting burnt, and her hair burning. But they were still miraculously minor injuries once you considered the amount of explosions and the scale of them.

There were no interferences in the battle, and she got close enough to get hit.

Ram: "…"

She clenches her teeth and bears with pain. The pain was not only coming from her wounds, but her exhaustion as well.

Her body could fight for a long time, but it could not fight perfectly. Besides, she suffered defeat against Faust even when it was perfect. Her chances of winning were slim from the start.

Still, even if they were slim, she'd take her chances. As long as she fought, she wouldn't think about stuff like losing.

In many situations, Ram was forced to fight. Ram's options to not fight would get ruined one by one, and she'd choose to fight. However, she would never make excuses when she had no other choices.

"Do it, and I'll win." That was a belief Ram told herself—

Ram: "Al Fura!!"

—Because it was an essential will as the proud older sister of Rem, her cute little sister.

Fierce, magical power concentrates at the tip of the staff she stuck out. Without a pause, it completely covers the Miload residence's spacious, long corridor just like that, constricting it.

The 'Al' rank is magic praised as the highest ranked power in wind magic, 'Fura'.

Ram, without her horn, was even easily manipulating the enormous amount of mana an ordinary person needed to summon up in order to use it, despite it being an unreachable level of skill.

Ram: "…"

The wind rages, like an intense force of a gigantic dragon, and the building gets ravaged by a sharpness that not even a treasured sword could compare to, making it lose all of its original form. The carpet tears into pieces. The pottery disintegrates without a sound. The windows crush like grains of sand. The paintings go from pieces of paper to fine powder.

The windstorm destroys people's eardrums, tearing through their bodies by breaking into the holes in them. Once that destruction blew through, all that's left was a scene without any bloodstains.

Ram: "Ha…ah…"

Ram drops her shaking staff, and she falls to her knees on the spot while breathing hoarsely.

It was an all or nothing maximum firepower attack where she threw in everything. Hit the opponent with your trump card when he starts taking you lightly and achieve victory—there was no other way to win.

Fatigue suddenly weighs on Ram's body, and as she looked down, blood dripped from her face onto the floor. She couldn't tell if it was coming from her nasal cavity or her painful horn wound. Ram just bore with the urge to fall over at once and tried to stand with her shaking legs.

If the battle was over, then she had to report that to Grace and the others. And then they'd move to a more safe and clean place for childbirth—

Faust: "How about I give you a hand there, young lady."

Ram: "Kooa—"

Without being given the chance to respond with her voice, Ram's body gets lifted up easily.

Her head was caught, and her legs were in the air. A strange man with finely chiseled features comes into Ram's vision.

It was Faust. He lifted Ram with his right arm, and was fixing his hair with his left arm. In his behavior, there were practically no signs that he'd been caught in the destruction.

Faust: "I really enjoyed your trap card. But, you were unlucky."

Ram: "Un…lu…"

Faust: "I didn't expect your trump card to be related to wind. That's my specialty. I was the one who taught Sade how to read wind. I know how wind protection works."

By looking at Faust, she knew that he wasn't lying. Even Faust wasn't unharmed by that murderous wind. However, most of his important organs avoided injury, and he wasn't dealt any hard blows that could be called severe wounds.

She had certainly put in her whole soul into the attack, and yet this was the result. She'd completely missed her chance to win.

Faust: “However, you haven’t lost your fighting spirit. I like those eyes. Just like an Oni. They’re genuine.”

Ram: “You…should’ve…seen many of them…at the village…”

Faust: “I said real ones. I wanted to burn a real Oni. That wish hasn’t come true yet. —I’m just sad about you. You’re such a great wind user that I want to make you my apprentice.”

Ram: “…”

At the last second, Faust strengthens his grip on her neck. While having her thin neck crushed, Ram stared fixedly at Faust without letting the pain show on her face.

It looked like Faust was impressed with her courage, and when he suddenly pulled her face close to his, he said,

Faust: “I thought there’d be no use in asking, but I’ll try. Would you become my apprentice? We’ll stand out, be famous, and go around burning anything and everything.”

Faust asks her that, almost sounding like he was saying “It’ll be fun”.

When Ram heard that excited man’s sigh, she took a breather while having both ringing in her ears and a headache.

Ram: “I had…always…thought that…”

Ram says that in somewhat of a careless tone, and she looks at Faust, who was right by her. And then, without any hesitation, she spat on his face. There was saliva on his cheek. Looking at that, she says,

Ram: “When your heart is rotten to the core, your face becomes dirty. …You should clean your face with my spit.”

Despite being on the verge of death, Ram smiled with a face that couldn’t look any more triumphant. Seeing that smile, Faust’s eyes brighten intensely.

Faust: “My apologies for my initial impoliteness. You are the real deal. No doubt about it, you’re it. Which is exactly why I’ll pay my respects and burn you to nothing—”

Faust wipes off the spit on his cheek with the back of his hand, and he faced the window while grabbing Ram. Most of the wall facing the garden was blown away by the aftermath of the magic, and the courtyard could be viewed from the third floor of the colonnade.

Contrary to the aspects of the mansion that turned into a disastrous scene, the garden remained in a peaceful state, such as the water fountain and the carefully trimmed garden trees and flower beds. Although, there were already countless spells set up in the garden to prevent escape, and they still should be intact even now.

Faust: “Once the explosions start at one spot, it causes a chain reaction. Don’t you think it’d be a magnificent and splendid farewell gift for a genuine Oni like yourself?”

Ram: “…Ight”

Faust: “—?”

Faust was talking about paying a tribute to her, but Ram murmured something in a muffled voice. That makes the man knit his brows, and he bent his ears to hear her murmuring.

Ram mutters something again, and it was almost like she was talking deliriously. What she said was—

Ram: “—More…to the right, Rem.”

—Right after that, an iron sphere of destruction struck Faust from above his head.

7

—I made it.

I made it. I made it. I made it…I made it…I made it I made it I made it I made it I made it I made it I made it I made it—.

Ram: “…Nee-sama!!”

Ram: “You came back. Nice job, Rem.”

Ram smiles at Ram, who hugged her bloody sister and came through the eruption of smoke. Her exhausted sister smiled, but Rem still nodded vigorously with tears in her eyes.

Rem barged in and attacked, causing the partially destructed mansion’s corridor to completely collapse. The floor of the 3rd floor and the 2nd floor passages crumbled, making them into one. When Rem, who kicked away the debris and stopped moving, wiped off the blood on Ram’s face, she rubbed her cheeks against her chest and checked her heartbeat.

She feels her hot body and her beating heart, and she lets out a sigh of relief and happiness.

Rem: “Thank goodness I made it…”

Her grievous voice sounded like sobbing, so Ram gently patted Rem’s head that she rubbed against her chest.

Rem, who had been caught in the witch cult’s trap on the main road, left Roswaal behind, and retreated to the mansion. After she escaped the mana contaminating zone that restricted the power of her horn, along the way she pushed her body and continued running until she reached her limit. All while being guided by the synesthesia that could be felt between twins.

She also made it past the garden set with invisible spells because of the synesthesia from Ram. She avoided the garden, jumped onto the building from the outer wall, arrived walking on the roof, and threw an attack.

And so, Ram was rescued safely, and here they are.

Ram: “Where’s Roswaal-sama?”

Rem: “He was fighting a lot of witch cultists at the main road…but he told me to leave them up to him.”

Ram: “I see. In that case, if, say, he does die, you don’t have feel responsible. Besides, it’s not like he’ll die, anyway.”

Ram’s strange trust in her master. Those words allow Rem to recover strength in her heart that had been uneasy. Seeing the light of her sister’s eyes, Ram smiles slightly.

And then—

Ram: “Then we’ll have to finish the cleaning before Roswaal-sama gets back.”

Rem: “—Yes. It’s our 462nd work together!”

As Ram declared that, Rem stuck her chest out and carried her sister on her back since she couldn’t move. After that, when she turned around to the enveloping eruption of smoke behind, she pulled back the iron sphere she had brought down. The sound of chains rattle shrilly, and the iron sphere with thorns rolled to her feet. However—

Rem: “There’s no blood. So, I didn’t kill him.”

???: “…Though I did hear that you’re a blockhead that just has a horn, if anything.”

Rem, who judged whether the man was dead or not based off the existence of bloodstains, feels only signs of a wry smile coming from the smoke. What eventually came out of that smoke and walked forward was a large built man. The man puffs out tobacco smoke from the leaf tobacco he had in his mouth, and he looked at the sisters with deep interest in his eyes.

She sniffs. She couldn’t sense a witch cult like smell, but—

Rem: “I will not hold back against men who have hurt Nee-sama and wronged Roswaal-sama.”

Ram: “—It’s Faust, one of the enemies. One of the remaining two.”

Rem: “…Then this is terrific.”

Rem's hostility increased regardless of her opponent's background, and Ram added the last fuel to the fire. Ram raised an eyebrow when she heard Rem's response, but Rem enlightened her without turning around.

Rem: "The person Roswaal-sama is fighting with is one enemy. The remaining two have been gathered. —We can accomplish retribution."

Ram: "—Yes."

Ram answers Rem's quiet voice briefly

For a moment, she felt like there was intense emotion in that reply, but Ram immediately got rid of it and said,

Ram: "Let's avenge our kind."

Rem: "Yes, Nee-sama."

Rem gains strength from her sister's next words, and she advances with her on her back.

Rem's horn shines even brighter, and the white light fills her whole body with overwhelming power.

Seeing that before his own eyes, Faust smiled happily, rather than getting scared.

Faust: "The Oni sisters are all together, eh. Sisters born from the same woman's womb…I wanted to see the differences between the smells of a real Oni and a fake Oni. That wish will have to be granted."

Rem: "Obviously Nee-sama smells better."

Ram: "The opportunity for you to confirm that will never come."

They have somewhat of an aloof exchange, and three—two of their shadows clash.

With her sister on her back, Rem rushed to the front with everything she had in her.

Ram, who turned in her arms, continued to hold on tight, and she left everything up to her sister's will. Feeling that she had to prove herself worthy of that trust, Rem struck Faust's body with her left hand with all her might.

Faust: "…"

Faust takes Rem's fist attack, which was strong enough to smash a large tree and even twist an iron plate, from the front without showing any intention of dodging it. The power of her fist that hit the middle of his crossed arms makes the large 100 kilogram man blow back like leaves of a tree. Easily, like he didn't weigh anything.

Rem: "So light—!"

Contrary to the flashy way he flew away, it felt light on Rem's hand, and so she raised her voice. At the same time, Faust, who was blown back, disappeared into the smoke. He gains distance, and hides himself. It was a temporary measure.

Rem was going to chase after him, but she stops right before she did. Instead, she threw her iron sphere sideways at the smokescreen. The iron sphere makes a circle in the direction of the missing wall, and she mows down everything lurking in the smoke to pulverize him.

The iron sphere is something that spins and has brutal thorns. If one is directly hit by it, their body simply turns into meat, and even if they're just grazed damage to the limbs is unavoidable. However—

Ram: "Rem! Look out above you!"

Rem: "—?!"

Hearing Ram's sudden warning, Rem falls backwards while crossing her arms over her head. Ram was sandwiched between the floor and her back, but the damage was minimal—facing upward, right after she thought that she saw the ceiling got cracked, explosive flames come down along with Faust.

Because of Rem's hit from earlier, the 2nd and 3rd floor passages were connected. Faust made use of that, slipped into the smoke, moved from the 2nd floor to the 3rd floor, and surprised them from the top floor.

Faust: "Your reading is top-notch. A real Oni's insight."

He swings his legs downward like a broadaxe, and the impact grinded against Rem's crossed arms. She barely managed to defend against the power with her iron handle, but if she didn't have that, her arms might've been smashed.

However, although Rem withstood that power, the second floor passage continuing to crumble couldn't.

Rem: "Ah—"

She feels the floor breaking behind her back. Within a blink of an eye, her whole body is taken over by a floating sensation. Rem forces her body to twist in the air, lands with her limbs like a mouse, immediately kicks the ground, falls back, and attempted to escape Faust's pursuit. Over there—

Rem: "Nee-sa…?!"

Hearing a sharp cry with synesthesia, Rem stops and jumps back. The next moment, Rem gets shaken by the blast produced before her eyes, and she was flicked back even further.

The explosive spell in itself had the same nature Fogg's magic. And yet, Rem's sense of smell didn't react to the signs. Come to think of it, Rem's nose hadn't been reacting to Faust since the beginning.

She didn't know why. Her fear got the best of her before she could find out. The moment Rem lacked the ability to smell her opponent that emitted a miasma, she went back to her pathetic, no-horn self.

A being back at the village who couldn't do anything but have her sister's back—.

Ram: "I'm fine, Rem."

Ram, on Rem's back, whispers that in her ears as Rem blocked pebbles and hot wind with her arm.

It was the world's most precious voice that was kind, passionate, and full of unconditional deep affection.

Ram: "—Believe my words."

Rem forgets about the situation and listens Ram's beloved voice that always loved Rem, was affectionate to Rem, and always guided Rem.

And so, in the very little time she was given, Ram clears Rem's doubt, who became silent.

With her words that would always free Rem from doubt.

Ram: "—Because I'm Rem's world's best Nee-sama, and you're my little sister."

Right after that, a blast and explosive flames completely covered Rem's vision all at once.

It was an inescapable, chain of explosions that practically cut off Rem. However, in response to those explosions, Rem walked towards them calmly, and she went into the shock wave.

Rem: "…"

Right now, Rem could understand the thoughts of her sister, who was close enough to touch her, faster with synesthesia than with words.

Through those communicated senses, Rem grasps all of the positions of the explosive spells Ram saw through, and she sipped through while keeping impact to a minimum.

While Rem protected her sister from the explosive flames and blasts, as if she was dancing and twirling, the horn on her forehead shined.

Rem: "Oh, that's right…"

It was a muttering voice that didn't escape her mouth. Nobody heard it, and it was etched in Rem's mind and nowhere else.

She remembered it. She had forgotten. Her stupid self immediately lost her decision and resolve.

It should've been decided from the start. She came to Roswaal, and swore to get retribution for her kind. Or maybe it was even further back on that fiery night when her sister wailed while she watched the glimmer of her broken horn—.

Rem: "I am…Nee-sama's horn. I am…Nee-sama's hands and legs. I am…Nee-sama's—"

The being identical to Ram, who was the most precious Oni, deemed the promising reincarnation of an Oni God.

When Rem caused her sister to lose her horn and felt '—' when she saw her without her horn, she made a decision.

Rem: "—I am…Nee-sama's substitute. That's my role, what I'm proud of, and what I live for."

She breaks out of the blast and mows down the explosive smoke with left hand. On the other side clear of smoke, Faust was smiling in admiration at Rem, who got past countless explosions.

Faust: "A fake Oni and a lacking real Oni have made…"

Rem: "Shut up."

Rem interrupts the man in the middle of his speech, and she hits the man with the iron handle in her hand. Faust took the Oni's hit with his raised left arm. His arms gets crushed, and it almost sounded like eggs cracking. His body gets penetrated, his bones fly out, and the madman laughs insanely while the scattering blood splatters onto his cheeks.

What shot at the same time as that vague, strange voice was a steel blow shining weakly. Faust shot a rod-shaped concealed weapon he'd kept in his sleeves, aiming for the horn on Rem's forehead.

What came back to her mind were a village dyed red, her kind burnt to death, and Ram wailing—

Rem: “…”

She flips up her head, and with her open mouth, she bites onto the piece of steel approaching her forehead, stopping it. Two of her left canine teeth get blown away by the impact. However, Rem focuses her strength onto her jaw without caring, and she crushes the steel instantly.

Faust: “Well done! But…oh?”

She smashes the concealed weapon, and Faust, who applauded, uses that chance to jump back. He gains distance, and was probably trying to reset. However, she wouldn’t allow that choice.

The iron sphere she controlled just by twisting her wrist circumvents the smoke and catches Faust’s back. The imperfect hit gouges his flesh with thorns, and the power crushes his spine.

Still, it was good enough. It stops him from moving. Just doing something unexpected was good enough.

Rem: “Ah…ahhh…AHHHHH—!!”

Rem roars at the top of her lungs, and she punches Faust’s jaw from beneath with her fist.

The power of her punch breaks his jaw, and Faust’s tall self was blown upward. Afterwards, Rem jumped and punched her opponent who couldn’t move in the air over and over tempestuously.

Rem: “AHHHHHH—!!”

She hits, crushing his bones. She hits, and his flesh burst open. She hits, rupturing his intestines. She hits, and his limbs break. Every hit was a hit for her kind’s revenge—.

They fly from the 1st floor to the 2nd floor, from the 2nd floor to the 3rd floor, out of the 3rd floor’s ceiling into the 4th floor, out of the 4th floor’s ceiling and finally into the sky above the mansion.

Rem: “…”

Rem, who went through the ceiling into the air, had her vision dyed in deep red.

It was neither flame nor blood; it was the red of a sunset dying the world warmly and majestically.

It was a scarlet sky that had absolutely nothing to do with countless corpses, creating one’s deathbed, and the man who believed in the red of blood and fire—.

While watching that sky, Rem positioned herself right above Faust, who was spinning, and—

Ram: “Rem.”

Rem: “Yes, Nee-sama—”

Once Rem’s name was called, she gave Faust the hardest hit while replying with deep affection.

Faust: “…”

Faust takes a severe hit to the guts, and his body falls to the ground. After getting hit by the might of Rem’s fist, his body descends diagonally, and it crashed right into the middle of the garden.

Faust was struck without defense at a height of tens of meters high, continued to have his body showered with grand blows, and was at the verge of death. However, he still had life in him. He was gazing at the sisters in the sky.

Faust: “…”

It looked like his mouth was whispering some sort of curse. But, his voice didn’t reach the two of them.

And so, Faust’s words would never make their eardrums vibrate again.

Ram: “One who wields a sword falls to the sword. One who clings to a devil dies falls to the devil. One devotes oneself to flames falls to flames—

Rem, who landed on the roof and had her hair fluttering in the strong wind, hears Ram's whisper.

It was a complicated voice that felt very sentimental despite being apathetic—.

Ram: "Thou shalt be destroyed by what thou relied on. —That shall be what puts our kind's souls to rest."

Ram says that, and she throws something that she'd held at her fingertips at Faust, who was in the garden. It was extremely light, and it went towards the madman's chest, as if being carried by the wind.

—It was something one would light the tip red, his leaf tobacco that he smoked.

Faust: "…"

The moment that leaf tobacco reached Faust, the set up spells activated.

Countless spells detonate consecutively. The explosive flames of the blast with Faust in the center sweep over the garden in one go, and it changes into a sea of flames.

Whether it be due to the fire power or the force of the flames, the madman's fate was easy to imagine.

Just like Ram said, the man who relied on fire turns into ashes, and he perishes.

Rem: "Now, it's ove…r…right?"

While kneeling and watching over the blazing park, Rem murmurs in amazement.

Faust…died. Rem murdered Fogg, and Ram killed Sade. And Sergei, the one recognized as the remaining one, should be fighting

Roswaal around now—.

Ram: “As long as Roswaal-sama isn’t getting beaten…that is.”

Rem: “It really…it really is…all…”

She couldn’t even hear Ram’s dishonest words. That’s how unreal it felt.

She was absorbed in the last battle, but it felt like she wasn’t fighting by herself. She let everything up to Ram, and fought with power she wouldn’t be able to bring out herself, being controlled by Ram.

That’s why—

Ram: “It makes sense for you to feel uneasy after all kinds of things got settled so suddenly. It probably won’t feel real until later. …But, I’ll just say this.”

Ren: “What…is it?”

Ram: “—Now, finally, ‘Steamed Potatoes’ are unbanned, and I can eat your steamed potatoes.”

Ram joking voice and smile makes Rem dumbfounded within an instant.

However, Rem immediately feels the urge to smile, and so she does so with her blue eyes full of tears.

Rem: “Nee-sama, you truly are a big eater.”

Ram: “Yes. Rem’s steamed potatoes are my source of life, after all. They’re what’s most important.”

Rem smiles even more, and at the same time, she felt tears on her cheeks. But she still kept smiling. Seeing that, with a sigh, Ram rubs her forehead against her sister’s forehead.

And so, the Oni sisters who achieved retribution thanked each other for their efforts, unseen by anyone else—.

And that let them know that this was the end of their retribution as they were wrapped in the red of the setting sun.

8

The night of a the baby's first cry had already came, and it was the dawn after that night.

Rem: "…"

Rem, who felt both tiredness and a sense of accomplishment, had been napping on Ram's shoulder, and she woke up as she was startled by a cry that was loud enough to be heard inside the mansion.

Rem: "Nee-sama…"

Ram: "You're awake, Rem. Don't worry, I'm here for you."

Once she looked towards the warmth close to her, she saw Ram sitting down next to her, nodding with sleepy eyes. Judging from the cry that Rem could still hear even now, she immediately understood that something had happened.

She understood that Grace, who had been fighting with the pain of giving birth this whole time, was done fighting.

Roswaal: "Sounds like it's been born without proooblems."

The one who talked about Rem's realization instead was Roswaal, who'd been waiting in the same room for the result. His outfit was neither messy nor dirty; he was his usual self.

It was very hard to believe that he'd annihilated the 20+ witch cultists that had surrounded him.

It took just about an hour for Roswaal to drag back the last enemy to where Rem and Ram defeated Faust. All of the other witch cultists were annihilated, and only Sergey, the so called young man that was their enemy, had been restrained with his limbs broken.

Rem didn't know how Roswaal dealt with a circumstance where he couldn't use magic perfectly and smashed the witch cultists, but seeing him come back safely made her feel relief from the bottom of her heart.

Now, retribution has been achieved. Now all that's left was Grace's childbirth and—

Rem: "…For Grace-sama to be informed of Dudley-sama's death."

Roswaal: "About that, you guys don't have to take responsibility. I will tell Grace about him. When the opportunity comes. I'll tell her. Please don't say anything."

When Rem showed him a depressed look, Roswaal shook his head to cheer her up. Not everything—yes not everything—can go back to how they once were.

Even in the mansion many servants became victims. Among them, Rem couldn't suppress her sadness that she felt for the deaths of the maids who had been trained at the Mathers residence. And, the husband of Grace and the father of her child had died.

The damage to the Miload family was unfathomable. And so, if the witch cult was aiming for the surviving Onis, then it was all because of Rem and Ram.

Roswaal: "People should not get blamed mistakenly. Besides, we should be celebrating the birth of new life. Limrear and the others should be coming s…"

Then, when Roswaal was in the middle of talking, someone knocks on the door of the guest room used as a waiting room. When Roswaal responded to that sound, the door slowly but surely opened.

Limrear: "…Excuse me, Roswaal-sama. Grace-sama's child has been delivered."

Roswaal: "Good work. Great job doing it without even having any help, despite it not being your specialty. You deserve the credit, no doubt about it. For taking over for Dudley, I thank…"

Limrear: “No, it was nothing…anyway, Roswaal-sama, Grace-sama needs…”

Limrear shakes her head in response to the words thanking her for her work, and she pulls on Roswaal’s sleeve. Roswaal knitted his brows when Limrear, who had a white dress on top of her maid outfit, acted impolite. However, the reaction was not out of displeasure, but out of suspicion.

Roswaal: “Limrear…?”

Limrear: “Please, Roswaal-sama. …We don’t have much time.”

Roswaal: “…”

Limrear, face lifted, murmurs softly, and a large teardrop dripped from her eyes. That makes Roswaal show rare signs of being disturbed, and so he exited the room quickly.

Ram: “Rem, let’s go.”

Rem: “Eh…ah…okay…understood…”

Ram, who had been silent up this point, chases after Roswaal. Rem’s arm gets pulled by her sister, and she hurried out of the room after standing up. While she did, she passed by Limrear, who was crying, but she still continued to weep, crouching down on the spot.

Why was Limrear crying? A baby was born, and revenge was over. Now all that’s left was some sorting and cleaning, and everything should’ve been heading towards the end—.

Roswaal: “—Grace.”

Roswaal opened the door to the room, stepped inside, and called Grace’s name.

It was the special guest room. Inside, there was a big bed for visitors, and Grace was sleeping on it in her nightgown. Next to the bed, there were many sheets dyed in blood, and there was a maid holding a baby that had just been washed with a yuto.

It was a little, little baby. The newborn baby's skin was dark red, and it was crying so much that its face was wrinkled like a monkey. However, it was lively and full of energy.

???: "Roswaal-sama, it's a girl. A lively, cute girl…"

The maid holding the baby hands over her to Roswaal, who approached the bed. The maid had a shrill voice, and her eyes were bright red. When Roswaal accepted the baby from the maid, she covered her face, and her coworker next to her supported her shoulders.

Roswaal: "…Grace, Grace. Can you speak?"

While holding the baby gently, Roswaal calls Grace, who was sleeping on the bed. Grace, who had been sleeping, opens her eyes when she hears her name, and she blinks several times.

Then, she looked at Roswaal and the baby in his arms and said,

Grace: "M-My…baby…"

Roswaal: "Yes, yes it is. The baby belongs to you and Dudley. It's an adorable girl. What'll you name her?"

Grace: "I…have one. I've been thinking about it…for so long…"

Grace speaks fraily, her shaking arms come out of the sheets, and she reached for her baby's cheeks with her finger. Her fingertips shake. Roswaal entwined Grace's hand with the baby's hand. The mother and her child feel each other, and tears flow from the mother's eyes.

Grace: "Anne…Annerose…Annerose Miload. That's her name."

Roswaal: "That's a great name. I definitely wouldn't be able to come up with that one."

Grace: "…Yeah, because, you're, you know, a very unskillful Master."

Roswaal: "…"

Grace smiles slightly, and she looks at the baby affectionately. Those words make Roswaal's cheeks stiffen for a moment, but they quickly relaxed.

A smile is what came out after he blinked. It was the artificial smile hidden under his clown mask.

Roswaal: "Annerose. I'm sure she'll grow up to be a kind, strong willed girl. Just like you."

Grace: "And then, I hope that she'll be loved by everyone, and will love everyone back. Just like you."

In a delirious sort of voice, Grace talks about the future of her daughter and an imitative husband standing near her.

When the mother held onto her daughter's fingers gently, the daughter gently held her hands back. Grace smiles the happiest smile possible, and she looked at Roswaal. And then,

Grace: "I love you. …Thanks so much…for giving me happiness."

Roswaal: "…"

That smile makes Roswaal pause for a moment. To swallow something.

After that, he had a smile on his face. It was neither a clown smile nor an artificial smile.

Roswaal: "I…love you too. Forever and always…"

Grace: "Hehe…"

That reply makes Grace laugh. As if she had to let it out, as if she'd heard the best joke ever.

The unexpected response makes Roswaal's eyes widen. Then, seeing his surprise, Grace says,

Grace: "Oh stop it. You aren't as good at lying as you think, after all."

Roswaal: "…"

Grace: "Thank…you…Please…take care of…Anne…"

The words slowly break up like a dream.

Grace closes her eyes. She brings down her finger that had been feeling Annerose, her daughter. Once Roswaal supported Grace's hand, he put it on her chest.

Roswaal: "…"

Right after that, Annerose started crying wildly again.

She was a baby who didn't know the world yet, but she still was loud, as if she'd understood what happened.

Influenced by Annerose's crying, the maids in the room also start crying, one after another. The sobbing doesn't stop. Everyone covers their faces, and starts crying loudly.

Rem: "—Huh?"

Rem was the only one who was dumbfounded and couldn't understand why they were doing this.

She didn't know what had happened or what was happening.

Why was everyone crying? Why did Roswaal look so mournful? Why was Ram hugging Rem so hard?

She didn't know. She didn't want to know. And yet, tears welled up in her eyes.

Rem: "—Huh?"

The tears didn't stop flowing. While the sobbing tormented her throat, Rem crushes her sadness with doubt.

She couldn't comprehend it. She couldn't understand it. So, there was no reason to cry.

That's what she thought, but the tears wouldn't stop. Why couldn't her stupid self figure it out, just this one time?

Ram: "—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Rem."

Ram just apologized over and over in a painful voice while hugging her from above her head.

Ram wasn't crying. But, the tears just weren't coming out; it was actually different.

Rem: "Nee-sama, Nee-sama…"

Rem is Ram's substitute. So, she cried for her sister, and shed tears.

These tears were for Ram, who was so strong that she couldn't cry. They were true tears.

Rem: "…"

So, she could cry all she wanted. Cry and cry, cry all of it out.

So that Rem could understand that she was crying to heal the wounds of Ram's heart.

—Please, I beg of you, don't make me think that these tears are for anyone besides my sister.

On this day, the head of the Miload family, Dudley Miload, and his wife, Grace Miload, were lost to the witch cult attack.

Because of this, Annerose Miload, the married couple's daughter that had just been born, had to succeed the Miload family. However, Margrave Roswaal L Mathers, as the guardian of the young girl, would also take care over the Miload family's businesses and duties.

Because of that, a new business and new territory were gained by the Mathers Margrave, and there would be rumors saying that the Margrave was directing things from behind the scenes.

However, later on, Annerose Miload would grow up, and she'd deny the rumors in a conversational exchange in the future with the Margrave who'd formerly succeed the family. The Margrave was a good friend of her parents, and he would gladly give back more to Annerose that what he was given.

And only the Demi-humans at this time involved in this situation knew that they were the Margrave's true, real feelings.

—Of course, the Oni sisters, who declared loyalty to their master, were also included among them.

Epilogue: The Clown, The Accomplice, and The Substitute

1

Clind: “Thank you so much, Master. I have never been so proud of working for you. I, Clind, will risk my life to accomplish my duties. My whole soul.”

Frederica: “Your unexpected level of motivation makes me feel nothing but anxious!”

It was another day where the routine quarrel unfolded in the entranceway at the Mathers residence.

The two quarrelling were Frederica and Clind. Frederica was the only one lashing out, while Clind just brushed her off in a calm manner. However, this was the only day Clind knitted his brows and talked back to Frederica.

Clind: “I’m not sure what you mean by anxious. I have always said that I’d never slack off with my duties, but I swear that I’ll do more than my best for this order. So I don’t get why you’re so anxious. Does not compute.”

Frederica: “Your fetishes! Your motivation! Combining them is what makes me explode with anxiety!”

Frederica, stamping her feet, turns around with anxiety showing on her scary face. Frederica sees people watching their exchange and decides to target the tall one among them.

Frederica: “Master, why are you laughing in this situation? I have told you over and over that there are problems with who you choose!”

Roswaal: “Well, your reaction was just so expected that it made me happy. Buuuut, it’s an obvious choice once you consider his ability and results, right? The scar left on the Miload residence is deep, and now at least one capable servant is needed to support the family. As a guardian, I have an obligation to do everything I can."

Frederica: "But…"

Roswaal: "Or can you recommend someone suitable for the job besides you aaaand Clind?"

Frederica mumbles and couldn't argue with Roswaal, who asked questions unkindly. And then Roswaal said "Besides" to her in a whisper as he continued,

Roswaal: "Clind will work beyond his ability since he knows that his master is going to be a baby. However, you are the only one who can stop him from getting out of control. You'll be getting the short end of the stick, but I'd like you to deal with it."

Frederica: "For Master, right?"

Roswaal: "Nooooope. For Dudley, Grace, and little Annerose."

Frederica: "…That sure is an unfair way to put it."

Frederica gives in to Roswaal's explanation, and she sighed after a short moment of silence. After that, she looks at the sisters waiting next to Roswaal—Rem and Ram, and says,

Frederica: "You'll probably have to deal with a lot of work. Are you two fine with that?"

Ram: "Yes, we'll be fine. We know that and we'll be staying here."

Rem: "What Nee-sama said. Besides, Frederica-sama and Clind-sama are the ones who are going to have a lot of work."

Frederica: "The work and the workplace are just going to be different. —Though, I don't get why I have to be with this guy."

Like always, Frederica had an unfairly low evaluation of Clind. Although, to Rem, they both were reliable seniors who had many respectable aspects about themselves.

Rem: “Of course, Nee-sama will always be number one. She’ll never move from that spot.”

Ram: “Yeah, obviously. I’m such a precious person to Rem, after all.”

Frederica: “Understanding each other despite the conversation being so disjointed…is this possible because of this synesthesia thing I’ve heard about…?”

The sisters see Frederica tilt her head, and so they looked at each other and smiled slightly.

—A few days after the Miload residence incident, signs of a resolution for the situation were showing, more or less.

The Miload family, which lost the married couple who were the head of it, stayed alive thanks to Roswaal becoming a guardian. However, because of the incident that happened, many servants died and many resigned, and as a result, Clind and Frederica have to be sent to the Miload residence so that it could be maintained.

On top of that, the job training for demi-humans that was carried out at the Mathers residence would have to take place at the Miload residence from now on.

Thus, the Mathers residence would be left with the bare minimum amount of workers—in other words, Rem and Ram would stay with Roswaal as his attendants.

Frederica: “As you know, taking care of Master is no simple task, but please be strong and hold on.”

Ram: “You have to deal with a weirdo, too. Do your best to hang in there, Frederica.”

Ram may have been offensive, but there was playfulness in her abuse. Frederica could also tell. It’s what they both felt in the words that they said to each other.

And so, Frederica faced Rem and kneeled down to match her eyesight level.

Frederica: “Rem, don’t push yourself too hard and stay healthy. You can call me any time if something ever comes up.”

Rem: “You worry too much, Frederica-sama. Besides, I will be fine anywhere as long as Nee-sama is with me.”

Frederica: “I see. Then that’s a relief.”

Then, Frederica smiles affectionately at Rem’s answer. The way Frederica smiled without hiding her mouth was like the sort of openness she’d show to someone she was close with.

Seeing that full set of large, sharp fangs, Rem suddenly feels the regret inside of her.

Rem: “Frederica-sama, I have…one thing I want to apologize for.”

Frederica: “Rem wants to apologize to me? Not Ram?”

Ram frowns at Frederica, who looked really curious. However, Rem puts their reactions aside, and she remembered the regret she had for her first meeting with Frederica that happened long ago.

It was when she got scared of the caring girl’s smile and didn’t get to apologize for it.

Rem: “The first time we met, I got scared of you, even though you worried about me. And to this day I still haven’t apologized…I’m sincerely sorry.”

Frederica: “…”

Rem apologizes with her head down, and it makes Frederica’s eyes widen. Immediately after that, Frederica looked like she understood something, and with a happy expression, she pats Rem’s head.

Frederica: “It’s okay, Rem. —You’re a very good girl.”

Ram: “I mean, she’s my little sister. That’s obvious.”

Frederica: “Forgetting about whether or not that actually means anything, yes, it is obvious.”

Getting her head pat gently, Rem made a surprised look. However, Frederica approvingly nodded at Rem, who lifted her head, and then she pinched her skirt as she did a curtsy.

The movement was so perfect that Rem and Ram wanted to copy her—

Frederica: “Please take good care of Roswaal-sama. I know I can leave it up to you guys.”

Then, she said that and smiled brightly without hiding her mouth.

2

—In an office under the shades of night, two shadows combined into one.

Ram: “—Oo”

Breathing intensely was a young girl with her cheeks red. The girl’s thin, small body trembles, and she weakly clings onto the man right by her. However, she did not do this to keep her balance, but rather to fight off waves of feelings. She wasn’t worried about shaking off.

Since she was on top of the man’s lap, being held in his arms, after all.

Roswaal: “There, aaaaall done.”

Then, their contact ends with the man’s slow voice. What faintly lighted the gloomy room was a four color light in the man’s hand—it was the radiance of mana.

By using several magic attributes simultaneously, he could heal the girl with a special constitution. That was the purpose of this night’s meeting, and it was the secret truth that happened every night.

Roswaal: “You must be beat. Are there any problems with your boooody?”

Ram: “…It’s fine for now. I don’t think there are any after-effects from overdoing it, either.”

While breathing somewhat unstably, Ram, who stepped onto the floor, put her hand on her forehead and shook her head. Every night she'd touch that place where her horn once was, but she could never get used to it.

Perhaps it was because her heart still wasn't accepting the fact that she'd lost her horn.

Roswaal: "Are you worried about something? You're making that look."

Ram: "Worried about something, huh. There certainly is something I'm worried about. My reliable seniors are leaving the mansion, and starting tomorrow, it's going to be just me and Rem. And yet, Master still won't reveal his true thoughts…right?"

Roswaal: "I seeeee. That's what you're anxious about…you're haaaarsh."

The one who shook his head with a bittersweet smile in response to Ram's cynicism was Roswaal, who was leaning back on a chair. He acted like he always would, poured alcohol into the wine glass on the business desk, and sips it.

It wasn't rare for Roswaal to drink alcohol. Ram was used to seeing it as someone who came to him every night for her treatment. However—

Rem: "You're having quite a lot today, and you're drinking fast. You're going to pass out."

Roswaal: "Sorry, this body has never passed out from alcohol. —Not getting drunk is a problem, though."

It was a strange, discomforting statement, but Ram didn't pay attention to that. What's important is the fact that Roswaal was trying to get drunk off of the taste of alcohol, and it was easy to imagine why he'd want to.

Ram: "Do you blame yourself for what happened to Dudley-sama and Grace-sama?"

Roswaal: "…"

Roswaal's expression didn't change when he was questioned. The ice inside the glass he was holding just cracked noisily. Feeling like it was the reflection of the wavering in his mind, Ram squints.

Being stared at by her light red eyes, he also stared back at them with his own heterochromatic eyes.

Ram: "That's surprising. I thought you couldn't care less about other people."

Roswaal: "That's basically correct. I don't mean to try and look tough, but I've mostly lived my life cold-heartedly. By choice, that is. …It's just that there are some rare exceptions."

Ram: "Rare…"

Roswaal: "Yes, rare. —In rare cases, I want the few people I like to be happy, and it has nothing to do with my own happiness. There are times when I wish for that."

He was probably implying that he felt that way for Dudley and Grace. Roswaal truly liked the two of them. However, they lost their lives.

On top of that, even though they had nothing to do with it, they were dragged into a fight with the witch cultists that started with the Onis—.

Ram: "Then do you blame us? Do you hate us?"

Roswaal: "I know a method to separate my feelings and results. So it would be truly unreasonable to blame you and such. Besides, the witch cultist attack was…"

Ram: "—Caused by you, right?"

Interrupting Roswaal, Ram gets to the main point herself.

Her assertive way of speaking makes Roswaal close one eye. Being stared at by his yellow eye, Ram continued while leaning against the desk.

Ram: “Rem, as someone who is pure, lovely, and innocent, doesn’t seem to find enemies appearing successively suspicious…but I, as someone who is wise, invincible, and gallant, beg to differ. Finding heretics one after another at the village can’t just be a coincidence. You’d be foolish to think of it as one.”

Roswaal: “So, wise one, you said that I made them do it. How’d I go about doing that?”

Ram: “It’s not about how you did it; it’s about consequences and motives. Well, it seemed like they had a thing for Oni survivors, so as long as we gave off the scent somewhere, they’d go for us. However, that only explains how they were lured over. There’s also the question of why you let them make the first move.”

Putting the one who was tied to the mansion aside, the remaining three were allowed to take the first move without exception. And so, as a result, Dudley and Grace died.

Roswaal had to pay a very big price for Ram and Rem to obtain their retribution.

That’s exactly why she had doubts. —Why was he doing this?

Ram: “Obviously, you knew about the dangers of luring the witch cult. So, why did you do so much to help us with our retribution? You even lost two close friends. Why did you figure that it’d be worth it to do everything you can for Rem and me? Why…”

Roswaal: “—It’s all…for my goal. It’s for the goal that I have been and always will be living for.”

He opens his closed eye, and shoots right through Ram, who pressed him for an answer, with his heterochromatic eyes. The power of the emotion in his voice overwhelms Ram.

The power, deepness, and the amount of his passion overwhelms her—and at the same time, she felt jealous.

Her heart burns with the desire to find out what the man before her eyes saw, what he was thinking, and what was his wish.

Roswaal: “If it’s for that, I’ll sacrifice close friends. If it’s for that, I will use any likeable person. If it’s for that, I’d be glad to involve myself in any kind of cruelty and heresy.”

Sacrifice, use, cruelty, heresy—Ram understood his intentions without turning away as he made his declaration.

Roswaal was saying that Ram and Rem were necessary for his goal. And so, if necessary, he’d cruelly use them as sacrifices and for convenience in the process.

Ram: “…”

Silence falls heavily in between the two of them.

It was perhaps the first time Roswaal said his true thoughts out loud. However, revealing them in this situation could also be part of his scheme to use Ram.

Roswaal: “…”

Roswaal is a man who continued to lie. He hides his true thoughts and true character under clown makeup and tries to hide everything by being silly and behaving eccentrically.

So, Ram could only do one thing about him.

Ram: “…”

Ram’s breathing and the bold sound of water afterwards were what broke the silence. The sound of water was actually the glass of alcohol; when Ram grabbed it from the top of the desk, she poured it on Roswaal’s face.

Roswaal takes the reckless action without hesitation, showing no intentions of avoiding it, and he shakes his head.

Roswaal: “—Is this your way of bidding farewell?”

She poured alcohol on him while they were having a conversation.

It was natural for him to not come up with any other explanation.

Still, Ram shook her head when he said that.

Ram: “No. —I just wanted to hear your true thoughts without your make-up on.”

Ram steps on Roswaal’s lap for a moment, and she wipes his face wet with alcohol by using a handkerchief. Then, the white clown make-up comes off, and his true face appeared.

Ram was face to face with him, and as she squinted, she said,

Ram: “With your face like that, without any make-up, say what you said before.”

Roswaal: “…”

Ram: “Don’t hide anything. Nothing. And say it. Say it. —Say it now.”

Ram holds onto Roswaal’s face with her hands, and she didn’t look away. Although, Roswaal wasn’t even fighting back. He closes his eyes, opens them, and says,

Roswaal: “I…I will use you guys for my goal. I need you guys for it. I won’t stop, no matter what type of sacrifices I have to make along the way. Even if I feel sad about Dudley and Grace, I won’t regret. —Even if I have to sacrifice you guys in the future.”

He looks at her in the eye, and says it all. His true thoughts collide with his true face and true feelings, and Ram’s heart leaped.

Right now, she was being reflected in this person’s eyes. She saw herself that was delighted, so delighted by this.

Thus—

Ram: “—Fine. I will do anything to help you with your goal.”

Roswaal: “…I did feel like there was a 9/10 chance of breakdown, though.”

Ram: “I’m not someone who can be easily predicted. Besides, we have a contract.”

Being close enough to feel Roswaal’s breath, Ram continues while their faces touched.

Ram: “The Onis’ retribution and revenge on the four enemies—I put my pride and soul on the line and swore to do everything I can for you so that all that could be accomplished.”

Roswaal: “It was a verbal promise.”

Ram: “Didn’t you just make it a verbal promise because you knew I wouldn’t break it?”

Roswaal was silent when Ram asked, and that was his answer.

And, these were her thoughts now, “Even if there wasn’t a verbal promise, I will”—

Ram: “—After tonight, from now on, I will still swear my loyalty to Roswaal-sama. You followed the contract, and proved that there’s Oni pride flowing throughout our kinds souls and my body.”

Roswaal: “…”

Ram: “I will give everything I have for you. I will devote myself to you. I’m yours.”

Ram takes an oath, made an agreement that said she’d even offer her soul, and gently brings her lips near Roswaal’s. Like that, their lips overlap sweetly—

Roswaal: “—Why are you taking advantage ooooof all the confusion? You’re 10 years too early for this.”

Ram: “Doh”

However, the hand he put in between their faces interrupted it.

Having her kiss denied, Ram frowns unhappily. That makes Roswaal smile wryly as he said, Roswaal: “I will accept your loyalty gratefully. But your affection is a different matter. As for that…let’s just say you’re 400 years too eeeaaarly.”

Ram: “…That’s a pretty long wait. Okay. I’ll back off for now.”

It sounded like a joke. However, Ram felt like there was a very large wall that he’d never take down. It was probably something meaningful to Roswaal, and it wouldn’t budge.

That’s why she’d back off. Forcing it would be pointless. Plus, she still had time.

Ram: “Just please don’t forget, Roswaal-sama.”

Roswaal: “About what?”

Ram: “Those who rely on swords fall to swords. Those who rely on witches fall to witches. Those who devote themselves to fire fall to fire.”

They were words woven together almost like a song, and it was the curse casted at the end of retribution.

However, this time, in a completely different situation, Ram put the curse on a man.

Ram: “And so, those who ask of Onis will fall to Onis, and shall be destroyed by what they relied on.”

Roswaal: “…So, you’re going to destroy me?”

Ram: “Yes, that’s right.”

Hearing Roswaal say those words with one eye closed, Ram got off his lap and nodded. And then, she steps back lightly, pinches her skirt, and while showing a perfect curtsy she said,

Ram: “Your desires, your wishes, your feelings—I will destroy all of it. While helping you out with that which means everything to you, I will take you away.”

Roswaal: "…"

Ram: "Please look forward to it."

Ram says that, and she winks in a charming, inappropriate way for her age.

After Roswaal made a dumbfounded look for a moment at that behavior, he laughed, unable to hold it in any longer.

He laughed, laughed, and laughed. Then, after that, he nodded.

Roswaal: "Very well. —Then let's see whether or not your loyalty and affection will be related to my destruction."

Then, Roswaal smiled with delight from the bottom of his heart with his face clean of clown makeup.

3

It was about one whole year after that fiery night when they came to their home.

Rem: "There's nothing left anymore."

Ram: "That's just how it is. Everything burned, and nobody lives here anymore. …Everyone's remains being buried by Roswaal is its saving grace."

Rem and Ram look around the place that once was a plaza, and they share their thoughts.

Not even the ruins of the houses that were burned and destroyed were left. The soil became a burnt field, and there were weeds starting to slightly grow. The fields were completely desolate, and the mountain road was impossible to recognize now. One could no longer tell that there was a village here before, ruled by verdant mountains. Perhaps it was too late and cruel to feel sad about it.

Rem: "Where was the cenotaph?"

Ram: "According to Roswaal-sama, it's where you can get a view of the whole village. So it's probably where the chief's residence was."

Rem and Ram were the only ones here. Roswaal declined coming with them this far, and he was waiting for them to return inside the dragon carriage stopped on the verdant mountains. He was spoiling them with kindness, but they couldn't make him wait for too long. They had to be quick and walk fast, even if they had to push themselves.

Ram quickly goes up the hill, appearing to be in agreement with Rem. However, it looked like Ram, a good walker, was getting tired from the journey. So,

Rem: "Nee-sama, let's hold hands."

Ram: "Well, since you want to, I guess it can't be helped."

Rem: "Yes, I want to. It's been such a long time since I've walked through the village with Nee-sama."

They go towards the cenotaph that should be on the hill while holding hands as they walked side by side.

A year ago when they were at the village, Rem would always walk behind Ram. "Things have changed quite a bit in just one year considering how it had been rare to even walk side by side", is what she thinks.

Her 7 year old consciousness that couldn't change at the village and the way she lived changed so much in this past year, and here she was.

Rem: "…"

She felt a little sad about not being able to show how she was now to her mother, father, and her kind at the village.

That being said, if the tragedy at the village never happened, Rem would surely still just be hiding behind Ram and cowering. That's why it was complicated.

She couldn't show anyone at the village how she'd changed. How she was now living the desired life she could be proud of.

Ram: “—Rem, that must be it. It stands out, like Roswaal-sama.”

Rem: “…Ah”

Rem’s thoughts were suddenly interrupted, and she looks at the strange stone monument in the direction Ram pointed at. Built at a place so high where the chief’s residence once stood was a white cenotaph.

—It was a very large mass of crystal stone, and it was bigger than both Rem and Ram combined.

Ram: “Mana exists in the crystal stone. There might be souls that attract mana so that spirits and lesser spirits can materialize by using it. …It’s an idea you’d expect of Roswaal-sama.”

Standing in front of the cenotaph, Ram admires Roswaal’s arrangement. Rem also quietly admired Roswaal at this place ignored by the world.

She couldn’t thank Roswaal enough for achieving retribution and giving her a way to live. Could she even return the favor by doing her very best as a maid?

Ram: “Rem, let’s let them know. —Hand me the alcohol.”

Rem: “Yes, Nee-sama.”

While still feeling deep emotions lingering inside, Rem took out a sake bottle from the hand luggage as instructed by Ram. They combined their pay and chose the most valuable alcohol to Roswaal.

Ram takes it, removes the cork without hesitation, and pours alcohol on the cenotaph as an offering.

—Oni funerals were kind of inappropriate, but no adults were there to criticize them.

That’s why they brought what was the most important gift for a funeral, used to put souls to rest.

Ram: “Retribution has been achieved. The regret of that night, the anger of that night, and the grief of that night—our kind’s sorrow has been taken care of by Rem and me.”

One in a basement, one at the capital, one with flames, and the last one with the help of their master.

Not a single one remained, and retribution was achieved. Now, their kind’s souls wouldn’t wander.

Ram: “Unfortunately, the reincarnation of an Oni God and the return of the Onis were reduced to ashes. But, the pride and blood will stay alive. —Farewell, everyone.”

Ram pours just half of the alcohol onto the cenotaph as she bid her farewell and put them to rest.

And then, Ram gave the remaining alcohol to Rem, and she leaned against the stone monument. Her sister moving away in silence was her being thoughtful. It was her being considerate of the fact that Rem alone would be the next to repose their souls and take an oath.

So, Rem quietly tilted the sake bottle she accepted, and she poured it on the stone monument.

Rem: “…”

Ram spoke the words to put their souls to rest. Thus, Rem had to tell them about her determination and bid them farewell.

The unbroken promise Rem she’d make to the sleeping souls of her kind, her father, and her mother.

That was—

Rem: “Mother, father, everyone, please don’t worry. Nee-sama…is fine.”

With her best smile, Rem mentions the thing her kind were probably worried about the most.

They were people who always pinned their hopes on Ram, believed in Ram, and worried about Ram. So, there was only one thing for Rem to give and promise them.

Rem: "—Nee-sama…I will do everything Nee-sama should have done."

Rem proudly promised her kind's souls that this truly was the meaning of her life.

It was a smile like a blooming flower. It was the sweet, lovely smile that only Ram had seen at the village, and she never showed it to her kind when they were alive.

Ram: "Are you finished?"

Rem: "Yes. Nee-sama, thank you very much."

Rem, who packed up and left the cenotaph, meets with Ram. Once Rem nodded at that question without any hesitation, she took her sister's free hand and started walking.

They were headed down the hill, out of their town, out of the mountain road, to the imperial carriage where their master was waiting.

Rem: "I want to see Frederica-sama and Clind-sama as soon as possible since they'll be at the Miload residence today."

Ram: "…I get depressed when I think about seeing those two. Frederica would probably ask me a lot of questions because of Garf."

Rem: "Nee-sama and Garf are good friends, after all. But please don't leave me all alone."

Ram: "I won't. Because Rem is the cutest, most precious little sister in the whole world."

As they held hands, she feels her sister's deep affection coming across her palm, and not one of those words was a lie.

While feeling that unexpected love, Rem applauded her sincerely.

—The substitute of such an adored sister. The substitute of such a wonderful sister.

—For that, to be that, so that she was allowed to be that, she’d live diligently from now on.

Without even her inseparable sister being aware of that oath, Rem just smiled sweetly and said,

Rem: “Yes. Nee-sama is the best sister in the whole world for me, too.”

END

Camp Formation Stories

Chapter 1:
The Valkyrie, Blue, The Sword Demon, and—
(LQ AI Translation)

1

—Felix Argyle’s earliest memory lay within a darkness painted over by nothingness.

Felix: “…”

That darkness was not a figurative expression. It was, quite simply, a statement of fact.

Shut off from the outside world, in a cold, dark room into which no change ever came—spending years there, doing nothing, being made to do nothing; if that was not to be called “nothingness,” then what was?

Lying on a bed soaked through with his own body odor, his ears were shredded by the ringing of a world without sound. That was young Felix’s everyday life, and it was the entirety of his world.

Felix: “…”

How, since when, for what purpose—Felix remembered none of it. He had spent such a long, long stretch of time there that his proper capacity for thought had already been lost.

Someone, something, connections, relationships—he felt as though there had been them, as though there had not.

Even supposing that there had been, resignation turned into compromise, compromise gave birth to apathy, and thought died. There was nothing. There was nothing at all. That was “nothingness.” That was “darkness.”

Felix: “…”

Sprawled on his bed, he was a pitiful prisoner who could do nothing but wait for time to pass.

The only times the boy moved of his own accord were when he rolled over to ease the pain of bedsores, when he relieved himself in the corner of the room, and when he crawled to partake of his meals three times a day.

The meals were pushed in on a metal tray from beneath the tightly shut door of the room. Relying on the faint light that came in only at those times, he crawled across the floor and shoved his nose into the dishes. No utensils for eating were provided. That was likely to prevent self-harm or suicide. Instead, Felix was forced to eat with his hands or like a dog.

If he devoured the food in a beastlike way, dirtying his face in his wretchedness, he would push the dishes back and the meal was over. Just like that, he would shuffle back to the bed and the time spent glaring up at the unseen ceiling would begin again.

—There was no meaning to living. However, because there was no reason he ought to die, he did not die either.

He had been deprived even of the ability to mourn his meaningless life, and continued living on in inertia.

Like this, until he naturally decayed away, he would be a prisoner for eternity, his soul bound to its jail.

That was what Felix Argyle's life was.

His circumstances did not change, it did not end, and he did not even wish for there to be change.

He continued to soak in nothingness and darkness until he could no longer tell morning from night, days from months, or months from years.

Felix Argyle's—

Felix: "…"

That strange sensation suddenly toyed with Felix, whether it was dream or reality.

The boundary between sleep and waking was blurred, and his consciousness was wandering along some vague border. Even so, his ears, sensitive to changes in the air, trembled, demanding diligence from his body in spite of his spirit's apathy. He felt the air ripple.

His mind could not muster the slightest interest in the cause. Only—

Felix: "…"

On a whim, he opened his mouth and tried to let out a voice.

He did not know whether any sound actually came out. Perhaps his ears were dead, or his throat was dead. Or perhaps, without him noticing, he himself had already died.

Felix: "…"

Immediately after that foolish thought, which was not even enough to raise a self-mocking smile, the air rippled once more.

It had not been his imagination. And Felix was not the cause. Perhaps insects had begun to swarm in the room. With his own unclean self, the leftovers of the meals he had scattered while eating, and the uncleaned excrement in the corner of the room, it was the perfect environment for insects to breed and flit about.

Even if he felt nothing, sharing a room with insects did not sit well with him. Would it be an affront to the insects, for someone beneath them to feel that way about them—

Felix: "…"

Again, he heard something.

He felt as though he heard it. As though something were disturbing the air of the room, the darkness, the "nothingness."

It came from beyond the door, that absolute barrier for Felix—

???: “I shall break the door. You will not mind, will you?”

Felix: “…”

???: “I shall take your lack of response as assent.”

No sooner had the unfamiliar voice struck his eardrums than, with a violent crash, the door was kicked in. The impact blew the hinges apart, and the dishes that had been placed beside the door went flying. At the sudden noise and violence, Felix’s eyes flew wide.

—Brilliant light cut through the nothingness and darkness, and the absolute barrier lay ridiculously collapsed upon the floor.

Felix: “…”

In the light streaming in through the broken entrance, even the dust drifting in the room danced in a fantastical way. As he narrowed his eyes against the brightness, a small silhouette standing against the backlight slowly slipped into his field of vision.

???: “Is Felix Argyle, eldest son of the Argyle family, here?”

In the voice that rang out, he sensed a certain taut severity of emotion.

For, listening closely, that voice belonged to a young child. They were deliberately adorning their naturally high, age-appropriate voice with dignity, forcing into its tone a strength befitting someone who would command the scene.

However, it was not something strained and affected.

There was nothing forced about that voice. The heart of the one who owned it had simply grown faster than their body.

Felix: “…”

Wordless, Felix stared at the other from atop the bed. The figure who had been peering into the gloom finally noticed Felix once their eyes had adjusted to the darkness.

Then, a small smile rose to their lips, and they walked towards him.

???: “I have found you. —Now is the time for you to be freed from this unjust time.”

Saying so, they took Felix’s filthy hand in theirs without the slightest hesitation.

2

Crusch: “—Ferris, can you hear me?”

Ferris: “Nyah?!”

Pulled back to reality by that pleasant voice, the consciousness that had been on the verge of a nap returned to wakefulness.

Realizing he had fallen asleep at some point, Ferris hurriedly lifted his face, and at once noticed the beautiful visage peering at him from directly in front, making him flush before he could stop himself.

Ferris: “Ah, u-uh, Crusch-sama… did you see my sleeping face?”

Crusch: “It was only a matter of a few seconds. Besides, it was an adorable sleeping face. There is no need to be bashful.”

Ferris: “Uu— even so, it’s embarrassing, since I let my guard down∼.”

Smiling at Ferris, who was jutting out his lips in a sulky face, was the woman who was his liege for life—Crusch Karsten.

She had glossy green hair and a dignified bearing like a sharpened sword. Her long, narrow amber eyes were beautiful, and she was a woman whose looks embodied the nobility of her soul.

Every time he saw her he fell for her all over again, and no matter how long he looked, he could do nothing but gaze at her in admiration.

Crusch: “Even so, Ferris dozing off is unusual.”

As Ferris gazed raptly at his master's figure, Crusch folded her arms and knit her brows at him. However, her attitude was not so much one of reproaching him for napping as it was weighted more toward concern.

In fact, Crusch looked down at Ferris, who was sitting in a chair, and lowered the tone of her voice.

Crusch: "After all, you have been working too much recently. I know, of course, that it is for my sake."

Ferris: "Th-There's no way Ferri-chan's overworking, meow! Ferri-chan's full of pep and…"

Crusch: "Even though you carelessly nodded off in the waiting room while I was attending the council?"

Ferris: "Ugh…"

At Crusch's one-eyed pursuit, Ferris felt keenly how unconvincing he sounded and let his shoulders droop. The two of them were having this exchange in a waiting room inside the Royal Castle of Lugunica.

In conjunction with the convening of the Upper Council, each attendee had been given one room. Crusch, who had few attendants to accompany her, had left Ferris, her first knight, in the waiting room and gone to attend the council.

Ferris had been napping during that time while Crusch was absent. Naturally, the Ferris of usual would never have considered dozing off, but—

Crusch: "These days, you have many duties as the 'Blue' magic user. And that too is for the Royal Selection, is it not."

Ferris: "That's not it! …Well, Ferri-chan can't exactly deny it. Ferri-chan's decided that everything, everything he does is all for Crusch-sama's sake, after all."

Told the plain truth and resigning himself, Ferris touched the white ribbon that adorned his flaxen hair.

—The Royal Selection; that was the ritual in which contenders vied for the vacant throne of the Kingdom of Lugunica and the next king was chosen. Crusch was one of the five Royal Candidates participating in that Royal Selection, and she herself strongly desired to ascend the throne. Therefore, Ferris had resolved in his heart to help her with all his might.

Even the way he, Felix Argyle the “Blue,” the foremost healing magic user in the kingdom, had continually built up favors with powerful people involved in national politics, was all from a single-minded desire to be of help in that.

However—

Crusch: “If you ruin your health over it, that defeats the whole purpose. You understand, do you not?”

Ferris: “…Yeees. Ferri-chan’ll work hard in moderation, ‘kay.”

If he overdid things and ended up making Crusch worry, that would be putting the cart before the horse.

He wanted Crusch to be free of all cares and able to focus on the Royal Selection. As Ferris drooped in dejection at his own inadequacy like that—

Crusch: “I am relying on you, Ferris. —I will be together with you. His Highness desires that as well.”

Ferris: “Ah…”

Touching his drooping cat ears, Crusch gently stroked his cheek and nape. From the ticklish feeling of her fingertips and the ring of resolve in her words, Ferris let out a heated breath.

His Highness—that was the greatest reason why Crusch and Ferris were facing the Royal Selection.

The smiling face of that youth, unfaded in their minds—just thinking of it made his willpower well up without limit.

Ferris: “Mufuu— leave it to me, Crusch-sama. Ferri-chan will keep staying right by your side from here on out!”

Crusch: “That is good. That is just how my Ferris should be.”

As Ferris pricked up his cat ears and puffed out his thin chest, Crusch too gave a satisfied nod. The two of them laughed together as they were, and then Ferris tilted his head slightly.

Ferris: “So, um, how did the talks go? Today’s summons was kind of sudden, and… it has to do with the Royal Selection, right?”

Crusch: “Ah. This is still a confidential matter, but another candidate besides me has been found. It makes her the second of the five priestesses inscribed on the Dragon History Stone.”

Ferris: “…! So that means she’s a rival to Crusch-sama, right.”

At this surprisingly important information, Ferris narrowed his yellow eyes to slits.

What was required to participate in the Royal Selection was a qualification different from lineage or blood. It was the aptitude as a dragon priestess capable of maintaining the covenant with the dragon, the thing held in highest regard in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica—a role that the royal family had originally borne.

It had been half a month since the entire royal family had died of illness—and during that time, the only one recognized as bearing the priestess’s qualification had been Crusch. There had even been expectations that perhaps, just like that, the throne would be hers.

Ferris: “So it’s just as the Dragon History Stone’s prophecy said, huh. It wasn’t going to be that easy. …So, do you know what kind of person this second candidate is?”

Crusch: “According to the report, it is said to be the wife of Baron Leip Barielle. However, Lord Barielle also served as the one responsible for managing the Dragon History Stone. For his wife to be a candidate is a little suspicious.”

Ferris: “Even with Crusch-sama’s eyes on him, you could not find any slip-ups?”

Crusch: “My Divine Protection of Wind Reading is not all-powerful. Particularly when it comes to opponents adept at hiding their true feelings.”

Shaking her head to say there was no conclusive proof for their suspicion, Crusch’s voice still carried a strong wariness. It was evidence that this man called Leip was not someone straightforward. Ferris also carved that into his mind.

Naturally, their real political opponent ought to be Leip’s consort, the one with the priestess’s qualification, but it was the husband’s role to support his wife. In practice, the troublesome enemy would no doubt be that man.

Ferris: “Leip Barielle… it’s not a name Ferri-chan remembers hearing, but Ferri-chan’ll look into it as much as he can, okay.”

Crusch: “Do not overdo it. Before long, there will surely be a chance for the candidates to meet face to face. I myself have no experience of exchanging words directly with Lord Barielle, but his character should be discerned at that time.”

Ferris: “Okaaay, understood. …In that case, what about today?”

Crusch: “If there is nothing else, I would like to return to the estate once. There is much I must also discuss with Father.”

Crusch had inherited the ducal house at a young age, but the previous head, Meckart Karsten, was still alive. Meckart, Crusch’s birth father, now enjoyed a retired life at the main house in Karsten territory. —Though saying “enjoyed” like that hardly meant he could be free from politics; such were the ties that bound nobles.

At any rate, Ferris had no objections to Crusch’s plan to return to the estate. Lining up beside her as he left the waiting room, he hummed a tune under his breath as he accompanied her out of the castle.

Ferris: “…”

On the way, while receiving salutes from the guards they passed, Ferris’s ears twitched at the state of things within the castle.

Right now, in the Royal Castle of Lugunica, many indispensable personnel for the kingdom were coming and going, such as upper-class nobles including Crusch and the leading figures of the Council of Wise Men, who effectively ran national politics. Accordingly, the patrolling guards' morale was high, and their training level was surely at an unprecedented standard.

However, even so, the sense of wrongness that something which ought to be in the royal castle was missing could not be dispelled.

—There was no figure of the royal family, who ought to occupy the main seat, within the castle.

That was the most obvious sense of wrongness expressing the kingdom's current state, an absence that ought never to have been.

Ferris in particular was not only a Royal Guard knight, but also the foremost healing magic user in the kingdom. He had many chances to go up to the castle, and that might be why he felt that loneliness all the more keenly.

Ferris: "…"

With his chest aching from sentimentality, Ferris wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. So he deliberately made his humming all the more carefree, walking beside Crusch while hiding his true feelings.

Whether she knew Ferris's inner state or not, Crusch said nothing. She simply went on walking, her dignified profile facing straight ahead, just the way he liked her to be.

It was as the two of them headed for the castle's main gate and came onto a covered passageway.

Man: "—Then that is not what we agreed upon, Bordeaux!"

At the sudden angry shout, Ferris involuntarily held his breath. Beside him, Crusch likewise came to a halt, turning her head to seek the direction the voice had come from.

The source was immediately clear. The shout had come from directly below the passageway—from the inner courtyard garden of the castle, which could be overlooked if one leaned out over the railing. The garden boasted a flowerbed where seasonal flowers bloomed and was known as one of the few places of rest within the royal castle.

However, that angry exchange was rudely shattering the garden's atmosphere.

Below their eyes, in the garden, two figures were exchanging words, both tall men. One had his back turned towards Ferris and the others, but the face of the person facing that back was clearly visible.

A large elderly man with a bald head and a stern face—Bordeaux Zergev. To Ferris he was an acquaintance, and he was one of the kingdom's bigwigs as a member of the Council of Wise Men.

The Council of Wise Men upheld the kingdom in the absence of a king, and Bordeaux was known among them as a central figure who drove discussions forward with fierce opinions and a strong arm. If Sir Miklotov McMahon, the representative of the Council, was the leading moderate, then Bordeaux was the leading hardliner.

For Ferris, however, Bordeaux was someone he had contact with outside of the Council as well. He knew the man's character as more than rumors. That was precisely why he was surprised now.

Because in Bordeaux's face as he argued with someone, he could glimpse a weakness uncharacteristic of him.

Ferris: "…Bordeaux-sama, that's a pretty unlike-you look on your face, y'know."

Crusch: "It is also unlike Lord Bordeaux to be arguing in such a conspicuous place."

Voicing a similar impression to Ferris, Crusch folded her arms, wondering what to do.

If this were a mere quarrel, there was no need for outsiders to step in and stir things up. However, even if the argument itself were trivial, the timing and place right now were bad.

There was no way Bordeaux was so oblivious he would not realize at least that much, but—

Crusch: "…"

Ferris: "Crusch-sama?"

Suddenly sensing Crusch catch her breath, Ferris felt puzzled.

Her gaze was fixed on the person standing before Bordeaux, on that back, as if to say she could not take her eyes off him.

—It was a person draped in filthy rags.

The "rags" were in fact a dark navy mantle, wrinkled, frayed, and noticeably dirty. The figure wearing those rags had white hair, and even in his shouted voice there was a rasp that suggested age. However, from his upright spine and sturdy shoulders, visible even from behind, there was not the slightest impression of frailty.

At the same time, he noticed the abnormal level of sword aura surrounding that elderly man.

Ferris: "Wh…"

As a warrior, Ferris's talent was lamentably poor. He had no strength for swinging a sword, and even if he honed his technique he could not reach even the second rate. He had consoled himself countless times that healing magic was his true path.

Yet even Ferris, who was third-rate or worse as a warrior, could tell how overwhelming that sword prowess was—and it was a presence that made it no wonder even Crusch, a first-rate swordswoman herself, would be involuntarily captivated.

—Just who in the world was that man?

Bordeaux: "I do pity you. But the timing now is bad. Far too bad. I sincerely apologize for going back on my word, but this much, at least, I must ask you to understand."

Man: “Understand…? You tell me to understand? This—this tyranny?”

While the two of them above were steeped in doubt, Bordeaux and the man resumed their conversation. However, the words Bordeaux spoke only aroused the man’s resentment, the gap between them only widening further.

Man: “How could I possibly accept that with such words! Why have you had this sudden change of heart? I should have exhausted words so many times over these fourteen years…!”

Bordeaux: “…You are not at fault. It is a matter of timing, and timing alone. I am not telling you to give up. I merely want you to stand down this time. I cannot say any more with my own mouth right now. Forgive me.”

Man: “Ridiculous…!”

To the man who continued to press him, Bordeaux’s words were hollow and halting.

The reason Bordeaux’s tongue was so heavy was probably his position as a member of the Council of Wise Men. With the kingdom in a crisis of life or death, he could not be allowed any careless remarks.

However, that great responsibility was the reason some kind of promise between Bordeaux and the man was about to be broken. —That much, even outsiders like Ferris and Crusch could tell.

Man: “I have heard as well about the deterioration of relations with the Vollachian Empire. If that is what is making you hesitate to send troops, then even just dispatching an emissary to that country…”

Bordeaux: “No, that is not it. It is true I do not wish to provoke the Empire, but that is not the only reason. I will make another opportunity. For today, back down with that.”

Man: “That will be too late! I should have already told you. By next month, there will be a conclusion. That ought to give us solid proof!

At least, look at this and consider it—”

Clinging desperately to Bordeaux, who stubbornly refused, the man pulled a bundle of papers from his breast and thrust it towards the Bordeaux who was trying to end the discussion.

The thick stack of papers was faded and stained with finger marks —and in the fingers gripping those sheets, you could glimpse a fragment of the man’s feelings.

It was clear at a glance that for him, it was the slender thread he was clinging to with his life.

However—

Bordeaux: “—Enough!”

Bordeaux struck away the bundle of papers thrust up before his chest with a rough sweep of his arm.

Perhaps that reaction had been unexpected for the man, or perhaps Bordeaux himself had unconsciously put more strength into it than he meant to; most likely, it was the result of both.

The swept-away bundle left the man’s fingers, and the documents scattered across the garden.

The wind blowing through the castle was not strong, but even so, the sheets rose into the air and scattered into the flowerbed like white petals.

For an instant, Ferris saw regret flit through Bordeaux’s eyes.

The reaction even more dramatic than that swelled explosively through the garden just after.

Man: “—Bordeaux!”

Bordeaux: “Ghh…”

The man, shouting sharply, had seized Bordeaux by the chest and pinned him against the wall.

Bordeaux groaned as his back struck the wall, his feet slightly off the ground. To lift that massive frame even while pushing him against the wall, the strength in the man's arms was no ordinary thing.

Ferris: "Ah! Crusch-sama?!"

Overwhelmed by that sword aura, Ferris's reaction was delayed, but beside him Crusch moved decisively. Without hesitation, she vaulted over the railing and dropped straight down into the garden below.

The height from the passageway to the garden was about five meters. For Crusch, it was a height of no consequence, but—

Ferris: "Ferri-chan's still gonna worry anyway…!"

He hurriedly leaned over, and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Crusch landing in the garden.

At once, Crusch drew the treasured sword at her waist and leveled its point at the back of the man pinning Bordeaux to the wall.

Crusch: "This disorderly conduct in the royal castle ends here. I advise you to surrender without resisting."

Crusch declared bravely, but she could not entirely hide the tension at the man's dense sword aura. Sensing his mistress's sense of crisis, Ferris set off at a run to hurry to the garden.

Ferris: "Geez, geez, geez, Crusch-sama's always doing such reckless stuff… You two over there! Come with me!"

Guard: "Huh? Sir Ferris, what in the—"

Ferris: "Just do it! Crusch-sama and Bordeaux-sama are in danger!"

On the way, Ferris unceremoniously dragged along some patrolling guards, then flung open the great doors leading to the garden. Welcomed by the smell of flowers, he saw the continuation of the scene from before playing out right before his eyes. Crusch, still pointing her sword at the unmoving man's back, spoke.

Crusch: “It is an assault upon a member of the Council of Wise Men within the castle. I cannot overlook it. —I also have personal attachment to this place. Therefore, my sword shall show no mercy.”

Ferris: “Crusch-sama…”

Struck in the chest by the feelings Crusch put into her words, Ferris stopped in his tracks. He knew all too painfully whose memories Crusch was painting in her mind now.

Apart from the wounds of that master and servant, the guards Ferris had called, realizing the situation, pointed their weapons at the man just like Crusch and encircled him.

It seemed that at any moment sparks might fly and the situation might develop into a swordfight, but—

Man: “—My apologies.”

Offering an apology, the man suddenly released Bordeaux. Bordeaux collapsed, his back still against the wall, clutching his throat and coughing painfully.

Looking down at him, the man let the strength leave his shoulders and turned around. At that movement, the guards openly took up cautious stances, and Ferris too carefully observed the man’s face head-on for the first time.

He was an elderly man with strongly chiseled features and a somewhat unkempt beard. Together with his ragged outer garment, he lacked any sense of cleanliness, but his vivid blue eyes glittered with undiminished intimidation.

However, before Ferris and the others, who were on guard, the man spread his arms as if to show he would not resist.

Man: “I have nothing on me. I have no intention of resisting. I will quietly comply.”

Guards: “…”

The guards were bewildered by those words, but when Crusch sheathed her sword with a sound, they immediately moved to secure the man's sides and restrain him.

According to custom, the man would be taken as he was to the guards' station and interrogated there. However—

Bordeaux: "…Wai—t. There is no need to make a fuss. Release him."

Bordeaux, down on one knee, voiced his objection to the man's restraint. However, the one who shook his head at those words was none other than the man himself.

Man: "Lord Bordeaux. I have no right to say this, but that will not set a proper example. Are you commanding the soldiers charged with protecting the royal castle to overlook a suspicious person?"

Bordeaux: "…Then confine him in the Prison Tower for one night. There is no need to question him. You may release him tomorrow morning."

Chastised by the man himself, Bordeaux amended his instructions with a bitter expression. In response, the guards started walking with the man toward the exit of the garden.

It was at the very moment the man being led away and Crusch passed by each other.

Man: "My thanks."

Those words, spoken in a single breath, did not reach anyone but Crusch and Ferris, whose hearing was keen. Without having time to confirm the true meaning behind that gratitude, the man was led out of the garden. Seeing him off, Ferris finally let the tension leave him in a sigh.

Ferris: "Crusch-samaaa, please don't make Ferri-chan worry so meow-ch. It shaved years off Ferri-chan's life, y'know."

Crusch: "My apologies. Your quick thinking saved us. As expected of Ferris."

Ferris: “G-Geez, r-really… Y-You can’t think Ferri-chan’s gonna let you get away with it just by saying stuff like that, ‘kay!”

Blushing, Ferris let himself be mollified by Crusch’s words. Then he turned toward Bordeaux, one of the parties involved.

Ferris: “By the way, Bordeaux-sama, you… whoops.”

When he looked back, he saw Bordeaux had stepped into the flowerbed and was picking up the scattered sheets one by one, not minding the dirt on his thighs and clothes and taking care not to tread on the flowers.

Crusch: “I shall help.”

Ferris: “Okaaay.”

At Crusch’s brief words, Ferris joined in without objection. The three of them gathered up the scattered documents, and once Bordeaux bound them together at the end, the collection was finished. Taking the last sheet and bundling the stack, Bordeaux let out a deep, heavy sigh.

Bordeaux: “My thanks, Lady Karsten. I have shown you both an unseemly side of myself.”

Crusch: “It is rare to see such meekness from Lord Bordeaux. That alone made it worth being here. So then, would you mind if I asked about the details of the matter?”

Bordeaux: “…”

In response to Crusch’s question, Bordeaux, the bundle of papers tucked under his arm, remained silent. However, there was a strong tone of refusal in that silence, and Crusch quietly backed off with a “Very well.”

If he did not wish to be asked, she would not press him. That was Crusch’s decision.

However—

Ferris: “—Well then, Ferri-chan will escort Bordeaux-sama back to his room, ‘kay. It’d be real trouble if you’d gotten hurt somewhere just now.”

Bordeaux: “No, I am quite…”

Ferris: “Now, now, don’t say that. Look, if anything were to happen to Bordeaux-sama, it’d end up meaning the responsibility lies with that person from before, wouldn’t it, hmm?”

At Ferris sidling up to him in such a transparently blatant way, Bordeaux gave up on any further protests. Catching the old man’s attitude, Ferris glanced over, and Crusch gave a deep nod of “Well done.”

—That there was one sheet of paper “accidentally” left undelivered tucked away in Crusch’s breast. Ferris, who had known her for many years, had seen through that with loyal affection.

3

Ferris: “It isn’t bad enough to leave a bruise, but I’ll go ahead and heal the blow to your back, ’kay. It might feel a little warm and itchy, meow, so ple-ease bear with it.”

Touching the scrawny old man’s back, Ferris cast healing magic on the injury just as he had diagnosed.

It was not a wound serious enough to warrant special caution. In the hands of Ferris, the finest healing magic user in the kingdom, treatment of this level was a matter of only a dozen or so seconds. In fact, the healing was finished almost at once, and Bordeaux, whose shoulder he tapped to signal it was over, let out a heavy breath.

Bordeaux: “I believe I told you. There is no need to trouble the ‘Blue’ over something of this degree.”

Ferris: “Maybe so, but it’s fine, meow, isn’t it. These last few months have been all hectic, and Bordeaux-sama’s regular checkups have been all spaced out, after all. I’m just doing it on the side, juuust on the side.”

As Bordeaux put his coat back on, Ferris, lips jutting out, looked around the room.

After leaving the garden, the two had moved to Bordeaux's office inside the castle. It was a luxurious room prepared for a member of the Council of Wise Men, but contrary to the room's stately air, one could feel no particular care given to its furnishings.

It could be said it was a very Bordeaux-like room, belonging to someone uninterested in noble authority and pretension.

Bordeaux: "Even if you stare at it all you like, there is nothing particularly new to see."

Ferris: "Oh, not at all. I was just thinking how it's such a totally dull, barren room every time I look at it."

Bordeaux: "You are a mage who never lets his tongue rest. …You really do resemble Master Fabless."

Ferris: "That is a super insulting assessment, y'know."

At Bordeaux's sour-faced counter, Ferris also jutted out his lips, making plain how dishonorable he found it.

Bordeaux had named the person who had first taught Ferris healing magic. His skill warranted respect, but as for his character there had been a few issues. Since he had been Ferris's master, there were many things Ferris had inherited from him—his connection with Bordeaux being one of them.

Ferris: "I know you're busy, but you've gotta keep up with your regular checkups, okay. If anything happened to Bordeaux-sama, the whole country would be thrown into chaos, 'cause, meow."

Some of the leading figures in the Council of Wise Men had entrusted Ferris with something like the role of their personal physician. Bordeaux was one of them, and they had an agreement that he would undergo a checkup at least once a month.

However, for these last few months—ever since the royal family's illness had come to light—even that had tended to fall by the wayside.

Ferris: “You only just had a serious illness last year, meow. You’ve gotten all skinny and everything, so you really gotta take better care of your body…”

Bordeaux: “No matter how much I spare thought for my own body, if I cannot deal with the issues eating away at the kingdom, it is meaningless. And even so, there were illnesses that could not be healed, were there not.”

Ferris: “…”

In response to Ferris’s concern as a magic user, Bordeaux turned his face away and replied in an irritated tone. At the end of that statement, in the intent contained there, Ferris caught his breath.

It was the illness that had claimed the lives of the king’s bloodline—an unknown affliction beyond even Ferris’s power to heal.

Ferris: “U-… hic…”

Bordeaux: “Hm… Forgive me. I went too far just now, Argyle…”

Though Bordeaux apologized, realizing he had been taking his frustration out on Ferris, Ferris was already covering his face and letting sobs slip out. Just like that, he sank down limply on the spot,

Ferris: “B-Because… I tried my best too… Saying it like that is… i-is just mean…”

Bordeaux: “Argyle, forgive me, that was a slip of the tongue. You are not at fault. I withdraw what I said just now.”

Ferris: “D-Do you really, truly feel bad about it…?”

As big teardrops spilled down his cheeks, Ferris haltingly spun his words toward Bordeaux. At that tearful voice, the old man gave a big nod and, with an “Ah.”, admitted his fault.

Bordeaux: “Of course. That slip of the tongue was entirely my fault. I admit it.”

Ferris: “Then, meow, I’ll forgive you. Ferri-chan is very magnanimous, after all.”

Bordeaux: “—?!”

Bordeaux was taken aback when, the moment his apology was accepted, Ferris stood up with a completely refreshed expression. Shooting him a sidelong glance as he wiped his tears away with his sleeve, Ferris let out a long, deep sigh and said,

Ferris: “Honestly, Bordeaux-sama, are you sure you really are one of the Council of Wise Men, meow? If you can’t even see through a bit of fake crying, it seems like some girl could trick you real easy…”

Bordeaux: “…And yet your tears themselves were real, were they not.”

Ferris: “I’m a water magic user, y’know. I can fiddle with the insides of my own body however I like.”

Manipulating his tear ducts and putting on a display of loud sobbing was child’s play for him.

And besides, it was not the first time Bordeaux’s remark—that he had failed to save the royal family and was incompetent as a healing magic user—had been thrown at him. He had been subjected to plenty of similar whispers, and it was only natural people would say that.

—More than anyone, it was Ferris himself who had cursed and blamed his own powerlessness.

Since that day, he had no desire even to count how many nights he had spent cursing himself.

Ferris: “But since we’ve gone to the trouble, I’ll go ahead and accept Bordeaux-sama’s apology. It’s a rare thing, after all～?”

However, Ferris did not let even the slightest flicker of that regretful flame scorching his heart show on the outside. Letting himself be bound by the past was something he allowed only on nights when he was alone.

All the rest of his time had to be spent for the future, for Crusch, the one and only person Ferris had.

Therefore—

Ferris: “So then—there’s something Ferri-chan’d like to ask that Bordeaux-sama who just apologized, but that old man you were arguing with earlier, what sort of relationship do you have with him?”

Bordeaux: “…And what do you intend to do, knowing that.”

Ferris: “It’s not some vulgar, nosy curiosity, meow. Ferri-chan just wants to be of use to Crusch-sama, that’s all.”

It was obvious at a glance that Crusch had taken an interest in that raggedly clad man. Ferris, too, could not help being intrigued, but taking his mistress’s wishes into account came first.

Bordeaux fell silent at Ferris’s answer and spent a moment deep in thought. At length, as though giving in under the weight of Ferris’s gaze, he let out a breath and said,

Bordeaux: “He is a friend I have known for a long time. No, I should call him a comrade in arms. …Or perhaps, from his point of view, it would be more accurate to say he was a comrade in arms.”

Ferris: “Past tense… Ferri-chan thinks you should do something about your friends before you lose them, y’know?”

Bordeaux: “That stings. …But I have no face to show him. I chose to put loyalty above gratitude. And I do not think I was wrong to do so.”

Ferris: “…What a clumsy answer.”

At the old man’s answer, forced out in a low voice, Ferris averted his eyes and muttered.

From that reply, he more or less grasped the circumstances behind the earlier exchange. Bordeaux had turned away a friend’s request, saying there were circumstances. And in the background of that lack of explanation—

Ferris: “—Outwardly, the extinction of the royal family is still being kept a secret, after all, isn’t it.”

Bordeaux: “I am well aware it is not something we can keep hidden for long. Even so, we must conceal it for as long as we possibly can. Faced with a sudden tragedy, the kingdom is far too unprepared and fragile.”

Ferris: “…The covenant has been severed too, and we have no idea how the dragon will act.”

With a heavy nod, Bordeaux failed to notice the slight sharpness in Ferris’s words. The royal family’s death by illness—in other words, the circumstances surrounding the Royal Selection—were at present information kept from all but those connected to the castle and a handful of powerful figures.

Of course, it was difficult to control information completely, and it was only a matter of time before it spread among the common people as more than mere rumor.

Bordeaux: “We need at least a month to pull ourselves together. Any sources of instability that could interfere with that must be cut away. Even if they are long-standing acquaintances.”

Ferris was so exasperated by Bordeaux’s ever more awkward way of doing things that he was at a loss for words. Still, though he might grumble at his methods, he did not dislike that unbending conviction that would not bend his pride when it came to sticking to his principles.

That clumsy way of being reminded him of the two people Ferris liked best.

Bordeaux: “Argyle, let me give you at least this warning… Do not let Lady Karsten get too deeply involved.”

Ferris: “Too deeply… involved?”

At Bordeaux’s words, breaking the silence, Ferris tilted his small head, a question mark on his face.

Bordeaux: “Lady Karsten holds the position of a Royal Candidate in the Royal Selection. But at the same time, I know her character quite well. Lady Karsten is very compassionate.”

Ferris: “That’s exactly the most wonderful thing about Crusch-sama.”

Bordeaux: “However, that may not always work in our favor. Hence my warning. Do not get too deeply involved with that man.”

Ferris: “…You don’t want your friend to be saved?”

Bordeaux: “Don’t be absurd. His wish is my dearest desire as well. But if you place it on the scales against the kingdom, there is no need to even discuss which way they will tip. That is all… that is all there is to it.”

Deepening the wrinkles on his aged face, Bordeaux said only that with a bitter expression.

And then, turning his back to them, the old man silently urged Ferris to leave. Bowing to that back, Ferris left only a sigh behind as he headed for the door. Just then—

Bordeaux: “Argyle, the situation of the Royal Selection is changing. You have heard about the second candidate, yes?”

Ferris: “A little bit, kind of sorta. Are you going to give us some kind of special favor or something?”

Bordeaux: “I am curious about the candidate herself as well, but it is her husband, Leip Barielle, you should watch out for. He is ambitious. A genuine one whose nature has not changed even after decades.”

After making that loaded remark, Bordeaux turned his gaze toward his desk and left it at that. Spread out upon it was the bundle of papers from earlier, and the expression on the old man’s face was a complex one.

There would be no further conversation to be had. Ferris decided to take that final piece of advice as his way of showing gratitude.

Ferris: “Please take care of your health, ’kay. For your own sake and for your family’s too.”

Leaving only those words behind and not waiting for a reply, Ferris left Bordeaux’s office. After that, without lingering attachment, he quickly departed the royal castle and hurried toward the Karsten family’s secondary residence in the noble district of the capital.

Crusch, whom he had parted from in the garden, should already have returned to the estate ahead of him.

Though he had not reached the heart of the matter, he had gotten fragmentary information out of Bordeaux. For the time being, he intended to report only that much and, if possible, put a lid on any further interest in that man.

It was not only Bordeaux who wanted Crusch to be able to focus on the Royal Selection.

Crusch: “—You’re back, Ferris.”

A voice from above greeted Ferris as he hurried back to the estate.

When he looked up, the one who welcomed him was Crusch, looking down at the front garden from the terrace. It was no coincidence; she had been waiting for him. Ferris narrowed his eyes at that smile of Crusch’s.

He was truly glad for the welcome, but there was something in that smile that gave him a slightly bad feeling.

And before Ferris could say anything about that premonition—

Crusch: “—I know you have only just returned, but we are going to the Prison Tower. There are things I wish to ask that man from before.”

Still holding the documents—the sheet she had picked up in the garden—in her hand, Crusch spoke to Ferris. In the emotion packed into her voice, he sensed the unwavering will there, and—

Ferris: “Yes. Ferri-chan will follow you anywhere.”

Ferris crushed the old man’s warning in his heart, deciding it had been in vain.

4

Crusch: “I did feel bad about it, but I went ahead and looked through your documents. Only a portion of them, however.”

Looking down at the other beyond the iron bars, Crusch declared that boldly, her arms still folded.

Man: “…”

Meanwhile, at those words, the other party fell into silence, sitting formally on his knees on the cold stone floor with his eyes closed. Having folded his ragged coat beside him, the body clad in nothing but his undershirt was trained to be as hard as steel.

However, his cheeks with bones about to show, his unshaven beard, and the white hair that had lost its luster gave him an inescapable air of uncleanness and ill health.

More than anything, the attitude of ignoring Crusch when she addressed him got on Ferris’s nerves.

Ferris: “Hellooo, can you hear us a bit here, meow? Don’t you think ignoring people like this is, like, waaay too rude, meow?”

Man: “…”

Ferris: “Hey! What is your problem, seriously! Do you not get what position you’re in, meow?!”

Crusch: “Ferris, wait a moment.”

Reining in the flustered Ferris, Crusch let out a breath at the old man who persisted in his silence. Then she stepped in front of the now-quiet Ferris and moved closer to the iron bars.

Crusch: “Allow me to apologize for my knight’s discourtesy. And also for my own rudeness in not giving my name at the outset.”

As she said so, she placed a hand against her chest and offered her apology. At that conduct of Crusch’s, even the cold, dusty air of the underground seemed to shrink back. The dominating aura that radiated from her was truly something inborn, and even the old man at last opened one eye to look up at Crusch.

Meeting that gaze with a nod, Crusch kept her back straight and went on.

Crusch: “I am Crusch Karsten, head of the ducal house of Karsten. I was present for the matter in the garden earlier with Lord Bordeaux Zergev. I have come to return what you dropped at that time.”

Man: “Karsten… the duke…?”

Hearing Crusch’s introduction, the old man opened his other closed eye as well. Understanding and acceptance flickered in those blue eyes, but were soon painted over by doubt.

Man: “I recall that the head of House Karsten was Lord Meckart.”

Crusch: “Indeed. Meckart Karsten is my father. Three years ago he ceded the headship of the house, and I am now the one invested as Duke Karsten. …It seems you are familiar with the kingdom’s affairs, but there appears to be a gap of a few years. I take it that is also where the cause of your quarrel lies.”

Man: “Has the kingdom’s bureaucracy become so short of hands that Her Grace the duchess herself must take part in an interrogation?”

Crusch: “You are harsh. In truth, I have no intention of prying into the dispute between you and Lord Bordeaux. That just now was nothing more than a pretext. It was simply the most convenient excuse for obtaining an audience with you.”

When Crusch shrugged at the old man’s sarcasm, his eyes narrowed slightly as well. Feeling a chill from their exchange, Ferris couldn’t help hugging his shoulders and letting out a sigh.

Right now, Ferris and the others were in a stone tower adjoining the royal castle—a facility for confining criminals known as the Prison Tower. That said, it had fulfilled that role only in the past; at present, the task of imprisoning dangerous criminals had been transferred to another location outside the capital.

For that reason, these days the Prison Tower was nothing more than an ordinary stone tower, with only a little work left for its underground cells. Even that consisted merely of serving as a place for minor offenders to spend a single night as punishment.

Crusch: “Even so, the drafts here are rather hard to bear. This is not a place I would care to linger.”

Man: “In that case, might I suggest you come to the point, so as not to take too long. Surely you have not come in person in order to pass judgment upon my discourtesy toward Lord Bordeaux?”

Crusch: “Of course not. Besides, Lord Bordeaux himself does not wish that. He insisted that the fault lay with him. You will likely be released yourself come tomorrow morning. …Naturally, if you were to behave the same way again, even Lord Bordeaux would no longer be able to shield you.”

Man: “…I shall not commit such folly again. What happened earlier was due to my own immaturity. Being thrown into a cold underground cell for the first time in a while will rather help cool my head.”

The old man’s tone contained something like a smile, but it was not a bright one; it was thick with self-mockery. The feeling behind his words was anger not at Bordeaux but at himself—in other words, self-directed wrath.

—Anger. It was anger.

What lay rooted at the bottom of this old man, what drove him with a heat that seemed it might scorch him, was a seething rage. Even as he maintained such composure and embodied, to Ferris’s eyes, a presence like a honed sword, within him there swirled a heat fierce enough to melt steel.

At that moment, regret welled up in Ferris's chest. He should have done as Bordeaux had said. If he truly wanted Crusch to think only of winning the Royal Selection, he ought never to have let this old man before him and Crusch come face to face.

And that regret of Ferris's lost any chance of being stopped completely with the next single word.

Crusch: "—The White Whale."

Man: "…"

At the very instant he caught that murmur, an emotion that surpassed his self-directed anger flashed through the old man's eyes.

It vanished in an instant without leaving a trace, but it could not escape the eyes of Crusch and Ferris, who had been expecting a reaction. With that certainty, Ferris too let out a breath.

There was no stopping it now. In fact, Crusch drew a single sheet of paper from her bosom and held it up beyond the iron bars for the old man, its rightful owner, to see.

Crusch: "As I said at the start. I did feel bad about it, but I went ahead and looked through your documents. Lord Bordeaux has recovered most of them, and the only one in my possession is this single overlooked sheet."

Man: "…He has always been somewhat lacking in attention to such details. I and others pointed out to him many times that he neglected what was at his feet. In the end, he still has not corrected that, has he."

Crusch: "That too is part of Lord Bordeaux's character. It is hard even to imagine a flawless Lord Zergev."

Man: "Indeed."

For the first time, a shared smile was born between Crusch and the old man.

One might say it was a sense of solidarity sparked by a bald old man, which made it sound rather less impressive, but after they had their brief laugh, Crusch once more ran a finger over the surface of the paper.

The text written there was something Ferris had been told about before they came to the Prison Tower, and it was astonishing in its contents.

For the simple reason that—

Crusch: "—It is data on the White Whale's distribution. I have only this one sheet on hand, but even this alone is extremely intriguing. If it is factual, it can be called a tremendous discovery."

Man: "…"

Crusch: "These are reports of the White Whale's appearances all over the world for the past ten-odd years. Not only in Lugunica, but in Gusteko, Vollachia, Kararagi… You have done well to investigate so much. From this one sheet I cannot tell, but I can imagine the data touches not only on dates of appearance, but also on the 'mist' and the resulting damage."

The old man remained silent and gave no reply.

Only, at the feeling of the air growing colder, a shiver ran down Ferris's spine. Facing the old man across the iron bars, he somehow had the illusion that a blade was being held to his back.

It was an instinctive alarm of danger brought on by the tremendous sword aura the old man before him was clad in.

Man: "…"

Yet in contrast to the old man's presence, the heat in Crusch's eyes and voice only grew. It came from an expectation and excitement she could not contain, something she rarely ever showed.

It was no wonder Crusch reacted as she did. Who could fail to be astonished, to grow heated upon seeing this?

The White Whale—that was the name of the evil witchbeast that had swum through the skies of the world for the last four hundred years. Its depredations had continued to spread across national borders, and its true nature was still not fully revealed, making it a byword for terror.

For the sake of destroying it, the kingdom had once in the past assembled a large-scale subjugation force—only to suffer a historic, crushing defeat. The kingdom had been driven into utter rout by a single witchbeast.

The wounds inflicted then had yet to close and still bled on. Everyone in the kingdom—everyone who knew of the White Whale—harbored anger in their hearts toward its existence.

Crusch: “However, you did not let that anger remain mere anger. You turned your obsession into fruit and gathered this much information. If a pattern can be found in the appearances of the ‘mist’ witchbeast that was said to be omnipresent and elusive, just how many people might be saved?”

It swam freely through the vast sky, its form appearing and disappearing together with the “mist.” Thus travelers, peddlers, and the many people who took to the highways were constantly exposed to its threat. —No, the White Whale’s menace chose neither person nor place, but had rained down equally upon the entire world.

However, if the usefulness of this data were proven, much of that harm could be prevented before it occurred.

Crusch: “The number of people who fall prey to the White Whale’s fangs would surely be drastically reduced. What you have done is worthy of that. You should be proud. Through your deeds, you have saved many lives.”

Man: “…”

Crusch: “You look as though you would say, ‘And what of it.’”

Man: “…”

Since the moment they had begun speaking of the contents of the documents, the old man’s face had only grown colder, and now his cheeks stiffened.

Color returned to his blue eyes and his parched lips, and the old man’s awareness focused solely on Crusch. Those eyes were asking what she intended to say.

Crusch: “I understand your intent. Over a long time, you have worn down your very soul in pursuing that witchbeast. The fruit of all that effort cannot possibly be merely to flee from the White Whale’s threat.”

Man: “…Then what, pray tell, do you think it is?”

Crusch: “It is obvious. Your aim is the White Whale’s subjugation—that alone.”

Ferris: “Crusch-sama—!”

At his mistress’s firm declaration of the old man’s goal, Ferris’s voice cracked as he called out to her. Grasping her sleeve and knowing full well it was rude to interject, he appealed to Crusch.

Ferris: “Y-You can’t, no! You must not go any further into this! Right now your own safety has to come first!”

Crusch: “I know that you are thinking of me. However—”

Ferris: “His Highness—!”

Cutting her off, Ferris had spoken those words without meaning to.

The moment she heard that word, a pained emotion flitted through Crusch’s amber eyes. It was tied to a wound that would not heal for her and for Ferris himself. Even so, he did not hesitate to use it.

Ferris: “His Highness had a future he wished for. If you start hesitating here, Crusch-sama, what will become of that? What happens to the dream he saw, to the rest of that dream?!”

Crusch: “Ferris…”

Ferris: “Scold me. Revile me. You can be angry, hit me, even hate me. Please, do not forgive me for using His Highness's—His Highness Fourier's—name like this. But I beg you."

Clinging with his fingers, tears pooling in his eyes and his thin lips trembling, Ferris pleaded.

Ferris: "For now, just for now… please put your own position first."

The existence, the wish, the gaze of the old man before them were a deadly poison to Crusch as she was now. An infectious fever. And yet Ferris's kind-hearted liege did not fear contracting that fever.

She would surely choose to suffer from the same fever herself, to struggle and overcome it.

Ferris, as her first knight and as the "Blue" healing magic user, could not allow that.

Ferris: "That's enough talking. It's rude of us to just cut things off when we were the ones who came here, but we're done."

Turning back, Ferris stated this clearly to the old man sitting in seiza inside the cell. The old man's expression did not change at those words. Crusch too remained silent, closing her eyes in frustration, and—

Crusch: "…It is rare for Ferris to go so far as to oppose me. My apologies, sir swordsman."

Man: "—Wilhelm Trias."

Crusch: "Hm…"

Wilhelm: "I must apologize for the rudeness of giving my name so late. My name is Wilhelm Trias. I, in turn, have shown nothing but discourtesy toward Your Grace. Once more, I beg your pardon."

At the old man—Wilhelm's—introduction, Crusch fell into thought for just a moment. But before his mistress could change her mind, Ferris pressed against Crusch's slender back.

Ferris: "Crusch-sama, that is enough talking. Let's go back to the estate. You’re very busy, after all.”

Crusch: “Very well. Then, Sir Wilhelm. …May you remain in good health.”

Wilhelm: “As I am a prisoner in a cell, I hesitate to nod to that.”

Being forcibly led away by Ferris, Crusch heard Wilhelm answer her parting words with something like a wry remark. With that, Ferris and the others left the depths of the Prison Tower behind.

Only, just before they emerged from underground, Ferris glanced back toward Wilhelm for a brief moment.

The old man had already lost all interest in them and sat in seiza, quietly lost in thought.

Alone in the dim, cold prison, left behind without being able to draw any closer to his goal.

—At that sight, Ferris’s chest creaked as though being savagely clawed at.

5

Ferris: “—I truly apologize for all the many discourtesies back at the Prison Tower.”

It was the very first thing he said after they had returned to the estate, finished dinner, and taken their seats for their customary evening drinks on the terrace.

With his cat ears drooping meekly and his eyes lowered as he apologized, Ferris made Crusch, who sat facing him, open her eyes wide. Her clothing was not her usual male attire, but a thin, black-based nightgown.

That feminine side of Crusch, usually hidden away, was bared without reserve only in front of Ferris, and that fact was a source of pride for him.

At the moment, though, he had no leisure to bask in that pride and was instead shrinking in on himself in self-reflection.

Crusch: “So you were worrying about that, if your silence all through dinner is anything to go by. You really are a hopeless one.”

Ferris: “Yes, Ferri-chan is hopeless. An unwanted child. Are you going to throw me away…?”

Crusch: “Me, throw you away? Impossible. If I were to discard you, I would cast aside my life first.”

Out on the evening-cool terrace, Crusch tilted her wineglass as the night wind blew against her. Each time her white throat bounced as it swallowed the liquor, Ferris, entranced by the sight, let out a sigh once more at his mistress’s magnanimity.

Crusch’s partiality toward Wilhelm had been obvious. But Ferris had forcibly shut that down, and at that with a taboo—by using Fourier’s name.

Fourier Lugunica, fourth prince of the Kingdom of Lugunica, had been a precious friend—and more than that—to both Crusch and Ferris.

Reckless, blunt, and friendly, Ferris had loved him dearly.

Even after the day came when Fourier and Crusch would be joined, he wanted to remain by their side as their attendant. That was the dream Ferris had held, and it was snatched away in an instant by an illness beyond even the power of the “Blue.” With the death of the royal family, Fourier’s life also came to its end, and the future he had envisioned for the kingdom now resided within Crusch.

The Royal Selection was the stage upon which Crusch would grant the wish entrusted to her by Fourier.

That was why—

Crusch: “If we put His Highness’s wishes first, we have no room to wander from the path. —You are in the right.”

Ferris: “…But being in the right does not mean I can say whatever I please. I am reflecting on that part of it.”

Crusch: “You are earnest.”

Ferris: “Because I love you. Both you, Crusch-sama… and His Highness Fourier.”

He loved them. He had loved the two of them. He still loved the time he had been able to spend with them both.

Therefore, if there were anything that would get in the way of that, he would oppose it before anyone else. Doing so was Ferris’s desire and his duty in a world where Fourier Lugunica no longer existed.

Ferris: “…So then, what are your plans starting tomorrow? Will you be going to the estate in your domain, to see Lord Meckart?”

Crusch: “I had intended to, but that is no longer possible. Baron Leip Barielle has contacted me privately. He says he will be summoning his wife—the second candidate—to the capital within the next few days and wishes to arrange a meeting. His speed is greater than I expected.”

Ferris: “So that means he’s not planning on hiding the plotting he’s been up to, huh?”

Crusch: “It would be premature to assume schemes. That said, we cannot simply strip away a qualification once recognized. In that sense, it may be that there is no longer any need to conceal it.”

There was also the possibility of Leip Barielle’s underhanded maneuvering, something Bordeaux had warned them about.

Ferris, who had wanted, if possible, to leave the capital for a while, ground his molars at seeing that plan fall through. While Ferris did that at her side, Crusch, glass in hand, was drinking faster than usual today.

Their evening drinks were a daily ritual, and Crusch’s capacity for alcohol was above average—yet it was rare for her to drink enough to become drunk, and her pace tonight was clearly faster than normal.

Ferris: “Crusch-sama, you’re asking for refills awfully fast, y’know. If you don’t let Ferri-chan pour for you too, meow…”

Crusch: “…I had not noticed. Please.”

Having her unconscious drinking pointed out, Crusch widened her eyes and pushed her glass over to him. Ferris poured into it an amber liquid the same color as Crusch’s eyes.

Ferris: “You might just be tired. Maybe you should call it a night with this one last drink.”

Crusch: “If you say so, I shall. It is true there is much on my mind today.”

Nodding, Crusch took the glass he handed her and drained it in one go. Then she set the empty glass back on the silver tray and stood up without a movement that showed any sign of intoxication.

Crusch: “I will leave the tidying up to you. I am going back to my room. You too should rest well tonight.”

Ferris: “Okaaay. You too, Crusch-sama—sweet dreams.”

Leaving behind a gallant smile, Crusch briskly departed the terrace. Seeing her off, Ferris licked down the contents of his own glass, then took the tray in hand and left the terrace as well.

His destination was Crusch’s office—the glasses and ice he left to the servants, but the bottle of alcohol that diminished little by little with their evening drinks was kept on a shelf in that room. As night was beginning to deepen, the office without its mistress was dim, and Ferris relied solely on the moonlight as he returned the bottle to the shelf.

Then, just before he left the room, he happened to notice a sheet of paper lying on the ebony desk.

Ferris: “This is… that old man’s…”

What lay on the desk was one of the documents they had failed to return to Wilhelm at the Prison Tower. As if it were an embodiment of Crusch's lingering regrets, it sat neatly folded at the corner of the desk.

Would Crusch regret not being able to be involved with him every time she saw this?

Ferris: "—Tch, honestly, something like this…"

The moment that thought came to mind, a feeling he could not put into words welled up, and Ferris impulsively picked up the sheet.

He grabbed it by the edge, intending in one stroke to tear it to pieces—yet his fingers did not move. The sheet was faded and crumpled, stained with blood and finger marks, with the weight of the years etched into it.

Ferris: "…"

His strength leaving his hand, Ferris gave up on tearing it apart. He had given up, but it was also true that he felt he could not simply leave it here.

He looked out the window. In the sky where a half-eaten moon floated, directly beneath it stood the Royal Castle of Lugunica.

—The time of night had not yet quite grown late enough to be called deep.

6

The cold air in the Prison Tower felt no different by day than after sunset.

Descending the stairs that led underground, his footsteps sounding upon the hard floor, Ferris entertained that thought.

Today's second visit to the Prison Tower was also the second of his life. Politely declining the offer of an escort from the guards at the entrance, Ferris once more, after only a few hours, stood before those iron bars.

Ferris: "…Ferri-chan's kinda surprised. Don't tell me you've been sitting like that the whole time?”

Wilhelm: “…”

Hands on his hips and eyes round, Ferris stared straight ahead—on the other side of the iron grating, Wilhelm, whom he had met again, greeted him in exactly the same posture as when they had parted.

In other words, he was still sitting formally on his knees on the cold, hard floor, eyes closed.

Ferris: “What’s that supposed to be, meow? Like you’re showing off how much you’re reflecting or regretting or whatever? Ferri-chan really hates that kinda thing. Feelings aren’t something that simple.”

Wilhelm: “I would say it does not matter to me what you think of me… but this is unexpected. I did not think you would return.”

Ferris: “If Ferri-chan didn’t have business, he wouldn’t have come. And that business is going to be finished right away. Yup.”

As Wilhelm opened his closed eyelids and looked up at him, Ferris stuck out his tongue. Then he drew from his breast the documents he had taken from the office and let them slip neatly through the gap in the bars into the cell.

He had felt guilty about tearing them up or throwing them away. So he was returning them to their owner. With this, there would no longer be any connection.

Ferris: “Crusch-sama is a very kind person. So please, do not lead her astray.”

Wilhelm: “…I must at least thank you for returning my documents. And I extend the same gratitude to your master, Duchess Karsten.”

Drawing the documents that had fallen beside him closer, Wilhelm spoke weightily, then inclined his head. That earnest attitude made Ferris’s breath catch, and when he finally let that held breath out—

Ferris: “This is, um, some advice from a meddling busybody, but… I think revenge is going to be hard, y’know?”

Wilhelm: “…What?”

Ferris: “That talk with Lord Bordeaux… or maybe it was more of a shouting match? Anyway, Ferri-chan heard a little bit of what you two were saying in the garden.”

He really should have left without saying anything, and Ferris was disgusted with himself for keeping the conversation going. But regardless of how he felt, Wilhelm’s attention was completely fixed on the substance of what he was saying.

Under the pressure of that gaze, Ferris tried to explain, carefully choosing his words so as not to touch on the Royal Selection or the details of the conversation with Bordeaux.

Ferris: “You said something about sending an emissary to the Vollachian Empire, right? That’s absolutely impossible right now. Absolutely.”

Wilhelm: “You also say the timing is bad…?”

Ferris: “Mm. That’s right. Ferri-chan gets that you wanna confirm the pattern you figured out from the data, but…”

Wilhelm: “Yet without proof, the troops cannot be moved. That is Bordeaux’s position.”

Ferris: “…!”

Struck suddenly by that sharp voice, Ferris’s narrow shoulders jumped.

Looking, he saw that the light in Wilhelm’s eyes, which had been calm until now, had turned dangerous. Pinned in place by a gaze that seemed not just to pierce but to cut him down, Ferris gave a small, choked gasp on the spot.

Facing Ferris, Wilhelm crushed the documents in his hand and rose to his feet.

Wilhelm: “I have pursued it for fourteen years and only now reached this conclusion. If its appearance is confirmed in the Empire this time, then next it will appear within Lugunica in half a year. I am but one step away from certain proof of that…!”

Ferris: “Lord Bordeaux… cannot send an emissary…”

Wilhelm: “Why? Why break your promise now, after all this time? We both hated the White Whale so intensely. We were both enraged at what it had taken from us. You too… have you forgotten Teresia, Bordeaux?”

Strength filled the low, angry voice as Wilhelm gripped the iron bars and bit down hard on his lips. Blood dripped from the corner of the old man’s mouth, and with a creaking sound the iron grating bent out of shape.

It was the same as what Ferris had felt several hours earlier—the raging, unquenchable flames of anger burning within Wilhelm. It was fury at Bordeaux for breaking his promise, fury at the hated nemesis that was the White Whale, and, more than any of that, an inexhaustible passion directed at himself for his own lack of strength.

Wilhelm: “…There is no time. If I let this chance slip by, it will be years again before I can face it once more in Lugunica. By then, I will have withered. Even now, every second that passes dulls my sword. This body continues to rust and grow brittle. I have no time left. Before we reach the point where it cannot be undone.”

Ferris: “…”

It was—it was a scream.

He was not raising his voice. He was not wailing in tears. Yet those words, which ground down the old man’s soul and were spat out with each breath at the cost of his life, were unmistakably his scream.

And a scream that shaves away the soul always carves wounds of equal measure into the hearts of those who hear it.

Ferris: "…Ah."

His heart clawed at by that scream, Ferris realized it at the same time. He understood. The name Teresia that Wilhelm had spoken rang a bell. No—more precisely, only when that sound, Teresia, and Wilhelm's name came together did his memory ignite.

Teresia van Astrea—hers was a name tied to the Divine Protection of the Sword Saint, the mightiest guardian inherited in the Kingdom of Lugunica.

She was the one who had brought to an end the royal civil war, the "Demi-Human War," that had engulfed the kingdom as a whole, and the records said that her life had finally been lost in the great subjugation fourteen years ago.

And the name of Teresia's husband was, in a certain sense, even more famous than that of she who was the Sword Saint herself—

Ferris: "—The 'Sword Demon,' Wilhelm van Astrea."

That was the name of the man who had built legend upon legend.

The meetings of blades between the Sword Saint and the Sword Demon that had so captivated people were sung of and passed down. The demon who loved and wed the woman loved by the sword. The demon who lived by the sword, who loved the woman loved by the sword.

—He was a man who had embodied a love that Felix Argyle could never attain.

Ferris: "Wh-What… Trias. Wilhelm Trias… Using a fake name like that!"

Wilhelm: "…It is not a false name. From the moment I abandoned the role that had been given to me and left my house behind, neither the Astrea family name nor the van sword name have been mine. Therefore, I merely bear now the name of a ruined noble house that disappeared on the fringes of the kingdom decades ago."

Ferris: "That's just hair-splitting…!"

Ferris started to snap at him emotionally, then immediately held himself back.

Whatever one might say about Wilhelm's insistence, thanks to it Crusch had not realized who he really was. If she were to learn that this Wilhelm was the Sword Demon—

Ferris: "…No, that does not matter."

To change one's attitude based on who the other person was would itself be an insult to Crusch Karsten.

Ferris's lifelong liege was not someone who would hesitate to extend her hand over something like that. Which was why, if everyone was going to cling to her limbs and beg for her mercy—

Ferris: "So that Crusch-sama does not drown herself, Ferri-chan's the one who'll do something about it."

At Ferris's murmur, filled with resolve, Wilhelm furrowed his brows in puzzlement. In response, Ferris took a big step back, putting distance between himself and the iron bars.

That space he opened up was also Ferris's way of making his attitude toward Wilhelm clear.

Ferris: "Ferri-chan's not saying anything more. There are things Ferri-chan can't say, too. It's the same as with Lord Bordeaux."

Wilhelm: "All I hear is that the timing is bad. What is it that you are all hiding?"

Ferris: "…"

He had no intention of telling him. The extinction of the royal family and the death of the king would, before long, become known among the common folk. Even so, as information they wished to keep hidden for at least a month, Wilhelm would learn the truth only then.

Once he knew, the Sword Demon would know as well—the reality that his dearest wish could absolutely never be granted.

Ferris: “Good-bye.”

Leaving those words behind unilaterally, Ferris left the underground as he touched the ribbon that adorned his hair. All the while he could feel Wilhelm’s gaze stabbing into his slender back.

He kept reminding himself in his heart that there was no hand to be extended to the aged Sword Demon left behind in the darkness.

7

Several days had passed since that night at the Prison Tower.

Since then, nothing about Wilhelm had passed Crusch’s lips. Ferris, too, was not foolish enough to dig back up a topic he himself had buried.

Crusch said nothing even about the disappearance of the documents which should have been brought back and left on her desk, and Wilhelm’s very existence came to be treated as a taboo between the two of them, handled by unspoken agreement.

Ferris: “…”

That was fine, Ferris kept on ignoring the strange twinge lurking in the depths of his heart. To make it through the Royal Selection, Crusch ought to focus solely on what lay before her. That opinion of his would never change. Therefore, Ferris would also devote his strength to that end.

And so, with a feeling as if he were running away from something, time passed, and that day came.

—When he first came face-to-face with that woman, what Ferris felt was a bottomless chill.

Priscilla: “What is this, you. You have brought along a most peculiar attendant. It is a taste quite suited to mine own preferences, is it not.”

So saying with obvious delight, the one who smiled like a beautiful, poisonous flower was a woman with orange hair.

She possessed a peerless beauty that set the hearts of all who saw her in turmoil, and crimson eyes like flames that would burn everything to ash. Her body, with its voluptuous curves that seemed the very pinnacle of womanhood, was wrapped in a luxurious dress the color of blood.

If that were all, she could have been dismissed as simply a peerless beauty.

But the presence that clung to her appealed to his instincts that it was impossible to regard her as a mere human being. It was the sense of mortal peril, the suffocating pressure of standing before an absolute, overwhelming power—

Crusch: “I do not understand your tastes, but I shall accept that as a straightforward compliment.”

As Ferris was on the verge of being overwhelmed by the woman’s aura, Crusch stepped half a pace forward to stand as if to shield him. Keeping that stance, she narrowed her amber eyes at the woman and said,

Crusch: “And you are?”

Priscilla: “Indeed. In deference to that delightful taste of yours and the mettle to stand before me, I shall give you my name.”

With her smile deepening at the question, the woman drew a fan from her bosom and snapped it open with a sharp sound. Then, hiding her lips behind the spread fan, she continued,

Priscilla: “I am Priscilla. Priscilla… hm, what was it now.”

Schult: “Barielle! It is Barielle, Lady Priscilla!”

Priscilla: “Oh, that was it. I am Priscilla Barielle. The next monarch of this kingdom.”

Ferris was left dumbfounded by the bearing of the woman—Priscilla—as she declared that without the slightest hesitation.

Of course he knew the circumstances and understood that she was a political rival, but he had not expected to be hit head-on with words that were practically a declaration of war, so bluntly and so openly.

Priscilla: “What a stupefied face, half-beast… no, not even half-beast. What are you, merely a throwback?”

Ferris: “—?! How did you know that?”

Priscilla: “One can see it at a glance. One can smell it and know. If I were to lick you besides, it would be all the more certain. I shall not, however.”

With just a sidelong glance at Ferris, Priscilla had seen through the truth of his lineage, and the fact sent a chill down his spine. He had no idea whether the words that followed were true or not, but his wariness spiked higher than ever before.

Likewise, at his side Crusch was also heightening her guard toward Priscilla. Naturally, a harsh atmosphere began to spread between the two candidates—

Leip: “That is enough! Do not provoke your counterpart at every turn in a simple meeting, Priscilla!”

Crusch: “…Lord Leip.”

A husky voice barked at Priscilla, and the glaring contest was swiftly brought to an end.

The one who had raised his voice and wedged himself between the two was an elderly man. His hair was white, and his skin was mapped with countless wrinkles that time could not hide. His age should have been approaching his seventies, the sort of age when, in this kingdom, it would be only natural to have retired into seclusion.

However, the vitality in his glittering eyes and the straight line of his spine robbed him of any sense of age or frailty, and his body brimmed with a vigor that did not match his years.

Leip: “Duchess Karsten, my wife has been terribly discourteous. I humbly beg your pardon.”

The man who bowed his head as he said this was none other than Baron Leip Barielle himself, husband to Priscilla, the second candidate, and the very man whom both Crusch and Bordeaux had named as one to be wary of.

Ferris, too, up until actually meeting Priscilla like this, had been firmly convinced that, in the Royal Selection, the rival they would be clashing against would be Leip—

Leip: “Priscilla, are you listening? You must also offer an apology to the duchess…”

Priscilla: “An apology? For what reason must I apologize. The one who ought to apologize is not I, but you. Every time I hear your raspy voice, my spirits sink. Your taste in perfume is also poor. My nose feels as though it shall bend.”

Leip: “Nn, gh, gh… y-you…!”

Seeing Leip’s face flush red and his teeth grind together, Ferris felt a deep, genuine sympathy for him.

Leip had absolutely no control over his own wife, who was also the second candidate. In fact, everyone here other than Leip himself had to realize it.

—That there was a cruel gulf in class between Priscilla and Leip.

Crusch: “Lord Leip, there is no need for an apology. Rather, I am grateful that you took the trouble to come today.”

Ferris: “That is right, meow. Priscilla-sama does not strike Ferri-chan as someone who likes goin’ out in purr-son, after all, meow.”

In the drawing room of the Karsten estate, as Crusch offered them the sofa opposite, Ferris chimed in. That remark, however, was also a bit of payback for the intimidation from earlier, and a little on the sharp side.

For a moment Crusch’s reproving gaze stabbed into his profile, but

Ferris kept a composed expression as he watched to see how their guest would react. In response, Priscilla snorted, “Hmph,” and said,

Priscilla: “A cheap provocation. Even if you had not said it, today is merely a passing whim. After all, the old bone’s manor here in the capital is in such dreadful shape. There is no way I could invite people into it as my residence. I have gathered craftsmen and am in the midst of having it rebuilt at once… that is all there is to it.”

Schult: “Yes! Once it is finished, it is certain to be all golden and glittering! The drawing of the new manor that Lady Priscilla made, I am very fond of it indeed!”

The one chattering away at her side as Priscilla sank deeply into the sofa was a young boy. With pink hair and a lovable face, he looked to be around ten years of age, but his outfit was that of a well-tailored butler’s uniform. He seemed to be the boy Priscilla kept by her as a page.

His behavior was charming enough, but—

Priscilla: “Enough, Schult. Do not cut into the conversation of adults. Also, you are forbidden to speak of what shall become of the manor. It would lessen the pleasure of surprising others.”

Schult: “I-I am very sorry… I shall be quiet, I shall be very quiet…”

At Priscilla’s rebuke, the boy immediately drooped with a crestfallen look. Leip, veins standing out on his forehead, silently tolerated the hectic exchange between the two of them.

It was a reminder that the initiative in this place lay solely with the two who were the leading actors in the Royal Selection. And those two, facing each other, were—

Priscilla: “Hm. Not bad.”

Crusch: “…”

Priscilla: “You should be proud. It is a rare thing, is it not? For me to thus find worth in another.”

Narrowing her crimson eyes, Priscilla declared this to Crusch with evident amusement. Crusch likewise did not let her composed posture waver, and met Priscilla's gaze head-on.

Just like that, Crusch's and Priscilla's gazes tangled with one another, until at last—

Priscilla: "Very well, I shall remember you. Duchess Karsten… no, Crusch Karsten. I had assumed this to be a boring sideshow, a trivial matter… but it may prove more entertaining than I thought."

Crusch: "This is a matter of great import that shall decide the fate of the kingdom. To call it a sideshow is something I cannot overlook."

Priscilla: "Even if you cannot overlook it, I shall cast the words aside as I please. In any case, each candidate has their own resolve in facing the Royal Selection… for me, it is entertainment. For you as well, at this rate, it shall become so."

Crusch: "What?"

At Crusch, who frowned at her frivolous reply, Priscilla spoke with a meaningful tone. When Crusch looked at her suspiciously over the remark, Priscilla gave an exasperated, "You have not noticed?" and continued,

Priscilla: "Your way of being is, whether or not it is to my taste, passable enough to behold. Yet you have some lingering regret before the main event. That shall drag at your feet and in time lead to something fatal. The fate of the kingdom you speak of is not so light that you can shoulder it while dragging such baggage behind you, is it?"

Crusch: "…"

Priscilla: "The throwback at your side is the same. The two of you stand before me together, incomplete. That does not allow my interest to fully take hold. Therefore, you had best wash away your lingering attachments."

Snapping her fan shut with a sharp sound, Priscilla pointed its tip alternately at Ferris and Crusch. She was saying whatever she pleased. Yet they did not feel like arguing back, because within Priscilla's theatrical turn of phrase there were facts that struck too close to home to ignore.

Priscilla: "There was more to gain here than I expected. For a suggestion from that old bone, it was enjoyable, I shall say as much."

Leaving those words to the speechless Crusch and Ferris, Priscilla rose languidly to her feet. Her bearing declared that the conversation was over, and yet no one in the room had any means to stop her.

Only Crusch, hesitating over something, nevertheless stood up and called after her back.

Crusch: "Priscilla Barielle. I too gained something from this meeting with you. You have my thanks."

Priscilla: "I have no need of it. All that I do leads only to my own future. —Everything in this world is made for my convenience. Therefore, all things are blessings for my sake."

Waving her fan with a flutter, Priscilla maintained her haughty arrogance to the very end as she left the room. As she departed, she reached out to pat the head of the flustered boy hurrying after her and murmured,

Priscilla: "Even so, the boldness to choose that one as your first knight is amusing. I find myself wanting to keep more eccentric fellows at my own side as well. I shall have to make arrangements in that regard."

Muttering things like that, she truly did cut a figure of someone who walked her own path.

Leip: "Duchess Karsten, once more I must apologize for my wife's discourtesy. Before the Royal Selection begins in earnest, I intend to make her understand the gravity of the matter."

Crusch: "I shall also repeat myself, but there is no need for an apology. —We have also learned that there is no lack in our opponent.”

As Priscilla left, Leip bowed his head in her stead, but Crusch shook hers. Leip pulled a bitter face at her answer, but Ferris nodded, approving his mistress’s judgment.

For better or worse, Priscilla’s presence was exceptional.

That could only be because she possessed, together with unshakable confidence, the substance to back up her intense words and deeds. For only the second candidate to appear and already such a formidable enemy had presented herself. And above all—

Crusch: “If I enter the Royal Selection while harboring lingering regrets, I shall find myself defeated without any means to fight back.”

Ferris: “Crusch-sama…”

It was a rare, faint laugh from Crusch, tinged with self-mockery.

Seeing her profile, Ferris could tell as if holding it in his hand what lay within her heart. Sensing the shift in mood flowing between master and retainer, Leip let out a sigh and said,

Leip: “In any case, it is best that we face the Royal Selection without regrets. —For the future of the kingdom as well.”

Leaving only those words behind, the man known as a sly operator also bowed once and took his leave.

With the room left to just the two of them, Ferris hugged one of his own arms and turned back to Crusch. Feeling his gaze, Crusch raised her face and said,

Crusch: “For the future of the kingdom, hm. To hear that said by Lord Leip is an irony indeed.”

Ferris: “Maybe so, meow. Even though he does not give the kingdom a single thought, really.”

Crusch: “I would not go that far. —Merely that it is surely not to the same extent as I.”

Crusch answered thus with her eyes closed to Ferris’s half-jesting remark.

The future of the kingdom—its very ring held deep meaning for her. The more strongly she focused on it, the more she felt as if she might forget the existence of things that must not be neglected.

He had known it from the very beginning.

Just what kind of person Crusch Karsten was—the final liege to whom Felix Argyle devoted his loyal love, the one and only master in this world he could so name.

Crusch: “Ferris, that man… can you find the whereabouts of Wilhelm van Astrea?”

Ferris: “…So you had realized.”

Crusch: “Even so, I am one who has devoted much of my time to the sword. I could not help but notice the name of the Sword Demon. Moreover, there was a time when I yearned for the Sword Demon Love Song. All the more so.”

After exchanging words in the Prison Tower, Crusch had probably realized from that point that the man burning with obsession toward the White Whale was the Sword Demon.

Ferris’s maneuvers to keep her from noticing had, in truth, been nothing but spinning his wheels. In the end, the state most fitting for Crusch was for her to be as she herself wished to be. He must have understood that unconsciously all along.

Ferris: “No worries. Ferri-chan’s been trackin’ his movements ever since he left the Prison Tower.”

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With everyone else cleared out of the Karsten manor’s drawing room, the meeting quietly came to pass.

Wilhelm: "—I am deeply honored to have been invited on this occasion."

The one who said that and dropped to one knee on the floor, wrapped in a fierce sword aura, was the old swordsman—Wilhelm. The way he pressed his clenched fist to the floor and bowed his head was a display of respect comparable to a knight's most formal salute.

Facing the Sword Demon's posture head-on, Crusch met him with clear, piercing amber eyes. It was a reunion long in the making, but in her first words, she let none of that feeling show.

Crusch: "It's been since that one brief glance. Have you been well?"

Wilhelm: "Yes. And seeing that Duchess Karsten is also unchanged is most reassuring."

After trading the customary pleasantries, the two exchanged looks.

In Crusch's gaze, brimming with spirit, the eyes that met it—Wilhelm's—held a burning passion. Seeing the strength in them, Ferris, standing by Crusch's side, couldn't help but be impressed.

Ever since that incident a few days prior, Wilhelm's efforts should have borne no fruit and been nothing but one swing and a miss after another.

Ferris's investigations had already revealed that Wilhelm had gone around seeking contact with influential people besides Bordeaux, only to have all of those petitions soundly rejected. And yet the Wilhelm before them betrayed no sign of exhaustion on his face, nor had his willpower waned.

More than anything, the passion dwelling in those eyes made Ferris feel a budding sense of expectation.

If the pretext for summoning the Sword Demon to this place had made him see possibility…

Crusch: "There's no need to drag things out with a long preamble before we get to the point. It doesn't seem either of us intends to make small talk.”

Wilhelm: “Your knight there informed me that you would be speaking the truth today. If possible, I would like to move on to the main subject without delay.”

Wilhelm flicked a glance toward Ferris.

The faint note of reproach in that gaze was likely his grudge over the fact that, when Ferris had gone to fetch him at the cheap inn, Ferris had concealed the circumstances from him right up to the end. Ferris understood his impatience. Even so, the initiative in this discussion had to belong to Crusch.

Ferris: “So that’s why Ferri-chan swallowed his tears and just left you hanging in suspense, meow.”

Crusch: “You heard him. Forgive it. Ferris never truly wished to keep silent.”

Wilhelm: “…”

Crusch, bearing the Divine Protection of Wind Reading, stepped in to defend Ferris, who today was dressed not in his Royal Guard uniform but in a short skirt.

At her words, Wilhelm knit his brows, but perhaps because the Sword Demon disliked letting the topic stray from the main issue, he did not pursue it.

Wilhelm: “Then I may expect that Duchess Karsten will not put off the matter any further?”

Crusch: “Of course.”

Crusch gave a heavy nod, narrowing her amber eyes at Wilhelm, who drew in a small breath.

Crusch: “The truth you seek is the reason your every proposal to subjugate the White Whale has been utterly dismissed, is it not? In other words, the cause of Lord Bordeaux’s breaking his promise.”

Wilhelm: “Yes. I believe you are already aware, but since that time, no matter to whom I bring the matter, their responses have all been poor. Everyone presses their lips shut and stubbornly refuses to speak the truth. I would very much like to hear just what it is that has made your tongues so heavy.”

Faced with Crusch, who showed no sign of trying to dodge the question, Wilhelm’s words became all the sharper. In response, Crusch closed her eyes once, then went on.

Crusch: “Once you hear it, there will be no going back. Even so, will you still seek an answer?”

Wilhelm: “—If this is an obstacle barring the road that leads to my wife’s killer, then I must step over it.”

That resolve was like tempered steel—bent for nothing.

At Wilhelm’s answer, Crusch exhaled slowly and deeply. To Ferris, it felt less like a sigh and more akin to relief and admiration.

It was an answer she had already anticipated—an answer she had been hoping for.

At that declaration from the Sword Demon, Crusch’s profile cast away its last trace of hesitation and had already reached a decision.

Crusch: “—His Majesty Randohal has passed away.”

Wilhelm: “—?!”

At that one statement of fact, Wilhelm’s eyes flew wide. Little by little, understanding flooded into his gaze. Yet his shock did not end there.

Crusch: “Not only that—the bloodline of all those related to the royal family has vanished from this world. The blood of the House of Lugunica, which had sat at the peak of this kingdom ever since its founding, here and now has been cut off.”

Wilhelm: “Nonsense! Something like that could never happen!!”

Still on one knee, Wilhelm lifted his face and bared his teeth as he roared.

Confronted with so preposterous a reality, the Sword Demon flew into a rage. It was only natural that he react so fiercely to the word “extinction” being spoken about the royal line. Because—

Wilhelm: “As one who once led the Royal Guard, this is not something I can simply let pass.”

Ferris: “…”

Crusch: “And yet, it is the truth. His Majesty lay bedridden, and the illness ravaged the royal blood itself. Not even the kingdom’s finest healing arts user could reach it.”

Crusch’s voice weakened just a little as she cast her eyes down. That was out of consideration for Ferris. To speak objectively of their failure to save the royal family—to save Fourier—made her hesitate.

However, in Wilhelm’s current state, he had no room to notice the two of them wavering.

Wilhelm: “Th-The royal family is… gone…? That… that can’t…”

He shook his head feebly from side to side, his composure torn to shreds, and Wilhelm’s posture collapsed. He hastily planted his hands on the floor to support his body, but the Sword Demon’s expression was frozen in a blend of shock and grief.

For a former Captain of the Royal Guard, the blow of hearing that the royal house to which he had once devoted his sword had been wiped out was immense. And at the same time, he must have clearly understood.

The reason behind Bordeaux’s abrupt change of heart, and why everyone without exception had rejected his pleas.

Wilhelm: “Ridiculous…”

He had been told again and again that the timing was bad, and

Wilhelm had surely tried to imagine the circumstances in his own way. But even so, not even he could have foreseen things coming to this.

The situation had raced far beyond anything the Sword Demon had imagined, straight into the worst-possible outcome. The king's death, followed by the deaths of the royal blood in turn—this was a calamity that concerned the very survival of the kingdom. Compared to that, the matter of the White Whale was trivial enough to be dismissed as a mere trifle.

Ferris watched Wilhelm as he grasped that truth and writhed in the face of such senseless reality.

He pressed his fist into the floor, the corner of his tightly bitten mouth beading with blood. Eyes squeezed shut in bitter frustration, the Sword Demon just silently trembled, unable to vent his rage.

To Ferris, his figure looked small, fragile, and unbearably pitiful.

There was no way anyone could see in that dim, shadowed soul the "Sword Demon" sung of in the glorious verses of the "Sword Demon Love Song."

—and Ferris's master would never, ever permit him to exist in such a soul-eclipsed state.

Crusch: "All you can do is quiver in remorse and self-loathing? Is that how the Sword Demon, whose name is known in song, chooses to dig in his heels?"

Wilhelm: "…Wh-What are…"

Crusch: "Listen. Your circumstances have not changed. All that has happened is that the 'mist' concealing your road has cleared, and the true nature of what was blocking your path has been laid bare. What did you feel when you saw that truth? Was it not you who roared that you would step over whatever you must to reach your wife's killer?"

Wilhelm: "I've no reason to endure such humiliation. You… what could you possibly understand?!"

Crusch: "I don't understand a thing. I don't even feel like making the effort to. Of course I don't. When someone I once admired as a predecessor in the way of the sword stops in place, shackled by resignation, what could that stir in me besides disappointment?"

At Crusch's words, fury colored Wilhelm's eyes. Yet the blaze was weak.

It was a flame with nowhere to go, flickering only faintly. It was still just a spark—nowhere near the heat and noble radiance Crusch demanded of him.

Crusch: "I told you already, Wilhelm. I warned you there would be no going back once you heard this. But that was not to give you an excuse to stand still. Not to drown you in helplessness."

Wilhelm: "Then for what? Why do you seek to drag me down?"

Even as she pressed on without mercy, the Sword Demon's eyes still held a burning rage. Meeting that gaze, which verged on hatred, Crusch raised a finger and thrust it straight at him.

Crusch: "Let's set one thing straight. Don't get the wrong idea, Wilhelm. I am the one who has been asking the questions. Your role is to answer. From the very beginning, I have done nothing but hurl the same question at you. When we crossed paths in the Prison Tower, and again now, in the moment I revealed the truth—I have been asking you the very same thing."

Wilhelm: "…"

Crusch: "Wilhelm Trias. —Are you truly content to stay like this?"

In that instant, Ferris, watching at her side, felt his whole body shudder.

Wilhelm too fixed his blue eyes wide on Crusch's stance. Neither of them could look away from her. Accepting those gazes, the beautiful noblewoman gave a firm nod.

Crusch: "Standing in your way is a crisis that threatens the kingdom's very existence. Faced with this unprecedented danger, there is no one in Lugunica who will lend their hand to your aim. Those who know the circumstances will not aid you. Those who do not know cannot possibly marshal the forces you need."

Wilhelm: "And you… what is it you intend to say to me?!"

Crusch: "The question continues, Wilhelm. I will keep asking it. I will keep demanding your answer. I have no words to give you besides what I have already asked."

Wilhelm: "…"

Wilhelm shut his mouth, his gaze sharpening as if to peer into Crusch's heart.

But not even the Sword Demon's eyes could cut their way into Crusch's heart. No matter how many people Wilhelm had crossed blades or words with, that meant nothing here.

Crusch was far larger than any person the Sword Demon had ever known. And the will that filled that vast vessel was the very same resolve bequeathed to her and Ferris alone by the Lion King.

Thus, Crusch Karsten went on questioning.

Crusch: "Wilhelm. At this rate, your path will soon vanish altogether. The vengeance you have pursued against that 'mist'-wreathed Witchbeast will evaporate like morning dew, and only the stain upon your twilight years will remain—just as your wife's honor has been dragged through the mud."

Wilhelm: "…And you would grant me a chance to swing my sword?"

Crusch: "I will say it again. Wilhelm, I do nothing but ask. The answer is yours alone to give."

Wilhelm: "…"

With Ferris at her side and the Lion King's will still burning in her heart, Crusch piled words atop that declaration. At them, the Sword Demon closed his eyes, drew a breath, and placed a hand over his chest.

Straightening his back, he readjusted his one-knee bow into the most formal of salutes. Then his eyes opened once more. The blue flames blazing in the Sword Demon’s gaze made Ferris’s spine tremble.

And then—

Wilhelm: “—Lend me your strength, so that I may cut down the White Whale and avenge my wife’s regret.”

Crusch: “Why ask that of me? I too am one of the nobles supporting this kingdom. My position is no different from that of the lords who rejected your plea or of Lord Bordeaux. Why seek it from me?”

Wilhelm: “Because, Duchess Karsten—because you are the same as I am.”

Answering her question in a low voice, Wilhelm continued, the blaze still in his eyes.

Wilhelm: “Duchess Karsten. Can you truly forgive that Witchbeast—the White Whale?”

Crusch: “—I cannot. I absolutely cannot. A creature so base, deeds so cruel, an outrage so monstrous, such mercilessness—who could possibly forgive it without a second thought? But.”

Breaking off, Crusch stared straight into Wilhelm.

Crusch: “What I can least forgive is that its very existence has stained the way so many people live. Their way of being is dimmed, their souls clouded… That, I cannot abide. Thus, Wilhelm, I also cannot abide the way you are now.”

Wilhelm: “…A most shameful figure I cut, then.”

Crusch: “Ah, shameful indeed. Hard to even look at. You don’t get many chances in life to taste such humiliation. Which is why the Witchbeast that caused it is no less unforgivable.”

Wilhelm: "…"

Declaring that, Crusch sharpened her gaze. Within her as well, anger was smoldering.

No doubt that anger had been there ever since before this meeting began—since the moment in the Prison Tower when she first laid eyes on Wilhelm. Since the moment she felt frustration at the sight of a Sword Demon who made rage his fuel, yet could do nothing with it.

Wilhelm: "And how, then, am I to let that anger go, Duchess Karsten?"

Crusch: "The answer is obvious. —When I see you as you truly should be, in a form your soul need not be ashamed of. The gallant figure of the Sword Demon, Wilhelm van Astrea. Nothing else is what I desire."

Wilhelm: "The name of the Sword Demon, the name Astrea—those are things I cast aside long ago. Until the very moment I cleave the White Whale apart, the names I abandoned will not return to me."

Crusch: "Then let me be the one to raise the victory cry. That will be the moment the 'Sword Demon' is reborn."

Wilhelm: "…Yes, my lady."

At Crusch's words, Wilhelm bowed his head deeply in solemn assent.

When she drew her chin back at that, her gaze slid to the side. Standing where she looked was Ferris, who had silently watched the exchange up to this point.

Receiving Crusch's look, Ferris went down on one knee before her with due reverence. Then, from his slender arms, he slowly presented the treasured sword he had been holding to his master.

Crusch: "Take it."

Crusch accepted the treasured blade from Ferris and, just like that, passed it on to the Wilhelm before her. The Sword Demon took it as naturally as breathing and drew the blade in one smooth motion.

The beautiful gleam of steel spun in his hand, and then Wilhelm offered the sword back to his liege.

Wilhelm: "…"

Crusch took it, and laid the edge of the treasured sword's blade lightly on Wilhelm's left shoulder as he knelt. She then moved it to rest on his other shoulder in the same way.

It was a sacred rite from antiquity, appointing him to the role of knight and formally binding master and vassal.

Crusch: "There is only one thing I ask of you. Never let that be sullied, Wilhelm."

Wilhelm: "My loyalty to you, in this sword. My debt to you, in this body. My vow to you, upon this soul."

Crusch: "—Ah, that will do nicely."

Accepting his words of oath, Crusch drew the sword back and held it at the ready in front of her.

Then once more she held the sword out toward Wilhelm. He took it, sheathed the bare blade, and lifted it high with reverent hands.

Crusch: "You keep that. A swordsman without at least one sword at his hip cuts a poor figure."

Wilhelm: "However…"

Crusch: "If I'm being greedy, it's simply because I want to see it. To see you standing there with a sword at your side."

At Crusch's wish, Wilhelm closed his eyes once, then rose to his feet.

The tall old swordsman bowed, fastened the gifted treasured sword at his waist, and stood with his back straight.

—Just that much was enough to make it plain, at a glance, that the Sword Demon's soul had regained its radiance.

Crusch: "What remains is…"

Ferris: "How we tie the Royal Selection together with the White Whale issue… right, meow? We also need to find some way to verify whether the White Whale data is actually accurate."

As Crusch muttered this with her arms folded, Ferris at last seized the chance to step into the conversation. Twitching his flax-colored cat ears, he kept the emotions stirred up by all that had happened tucked away in his chest.

Ferris: "I do think the compromise is that subjugating the White Whale will also earn Crusch-sama points in the Royal Selection… but even so, it's a huge job."

Wilhelm: "I would like to hear a more detailed explanation. This Royal Selection?"

Ferris: "Yup yup, I get it, I get it. You're not gonna understand a thing unless Ferri-chan starts explaining from there, meow. But before I get into all that, Ferri-chan has something important to say."

Behind the scenes reasons aside, Wilhelm knew nothing of the surface level circumstances. Ferris would have to explain the Royal Selection system to him—

But before that, there was one thing he absolutely had to make clear.

It was true that Wilhelm had received a sword and sworn himself as Crusch's retainer.

However—

Ferris: "But Crusch-sama's first knight is me. That's the one thing I'm never, ever giving up."

Even if he couldn't swing a sword properly, even if he never measured up as a knight in terms of martial skill, when it came to how much he loved Crusch, he would never lose—to anyone, save for one single exception.

Felix Argyle was, beyond all doubt, Crusch Karsten's first knight.

Ferris: "So don't you go getting the wrong idea, Wil-ji."

Wilhelm: "Wil… ji…?"

Ferris: "You're an old man named Wilhelm, so you're Wil-ji. And just so you know, I'm never calling you anything scary like 'Sword Demon,' so you better carve that into that thick skull of yours, okay?"

Pointing a finger right at him as he laid this down, Ferris left Wilhelm completely nonplussed. Seeing the Sword Demon show that expression for the first time, Crusch allowed herself a faint smile.

Crusch: "Indeed. My first knight is Ferris. That will not change, no matter what happens."

Wilhelm: "I have no objection to his position. Still, I cannot deny I feel some hesitation at calling a slender young lady with no proper training a knight."

Ferris: "Ugh, seriously, do I have to start explaining things all the way from there, meow?"

Wilhelm passed judgment in a manner befitting Ferris's behavior and appearance. At that, Ferris covered his face with his hand, while Wilhelm furrowed his brow deeply, baffled as to what was so funny.

Watching her two retainers like that, Crusch's smile only grew deeper.

Crusch: "It is strange, isn't it. Even though the path to the throne has such a gigantic Witchbeast looming across it."

As if even she found the feelings in her own chest a mystery, Crusch shut one eye. Then she murmured, barely loud enough for anyone but herself to hear.

Crusch: "—I don't feel like I could possibly lose, Your Highness Fourier."

9

Crusch: "—I don't feel like I could possibly lose, Your Highness Fourier."

Crusch's whispered words reached the eardrums of Ferris, who bore demi-human blood, in quiet fashion. Playing the fool as he dealt with Wilhelm, Ferris nearly burst into tears at that voice.

With the imminent Royal Selection right before them, Crusch had taken upon herself a burden she did not need to bear.

—Wilhelm's wish had nothing whatsoever to do with the great work of Crusch ascending to the throne.

Ferris: "Even so…"

It was precisely because she could not bring herself to abandon the Sword Demon's obsession that Crusch could truly be Crusch.

For Crusch Karsten, whom Ferris loved and whom Fourier had loved, there was no option of abandoning others. That was why Ferris would support her even for the share of the departed Fourier.

Ferris: "…"

Without realizing it, Ferris's hand had reached up to touch the white ribbon that adorned his hair.

That ribbon had been the first gift Ferris received from Crusch after being led out of the "Darkness." Besides being given the world of light and a way to use his life, it was the first present he had ever been given.

With a white ribbon identical to that one—a gift from Ferris—Crusch tied up her own hair. What he had been given and what he had given, everything about Ferris was connected to Crusch. Ferris's very existence, every last thing, was together with Crusch.

And so, from here on, no matter what might happen, Felix Argyle would—

Crusch: "—Ferris."

Ferris: "Yes, Crusch-sama."

Crusch: "I trouble you greatly. But I am counting on you."

Their eyes met, and within her gallant expression Crusch infused affection as she smiled at Ferris. That alone was enough for Ferris, swept about by the whirl of his emotions, to make a vow.

Ferris: "Leave it to me. —Until this soul burns itself out, I will remain at your side, Crusch-sama."

Chapter 2:
The Bloody Bride and her Amusing Servants
(LQ AI Translation)

1

Death was already looming right before his eyes.

???: "…"

His unmoving arms and legs were flung out on the ground, and with dried lips he repeated faint breaths.

He felt grains of sand upon his tongue, but not a single drop of saliva was secreted, and he could taste nothing. His body, its vitality completely dried up, was in a state of approaching death, and it was only a matter of time before he breathed his last.

Unconscious breathing that merely kept his life connected. When that ceased, his life would surely end as well.

???: "…"

Nothing rose to the surface in the mind that was on the verge of death. That was what was sad.

His body would not move, and the time he had left was very short. Even so, the head that was supposed to think had died. Nothing came to mind. Nothing could be remembered. Nothing could be thought.

His emotions had died before his body. And once his emotions died, death came to his spirit as well. Thus he became unable to think that he wanted to live, or that he wanted to die.

There had surely been a time when he had struggled desperately, wanting to live properly, not wanting to die.

Yet now, with the very end before his eyes, this body had no strength or will left to resist. Just like this, surely, with nothing at all, he would die—

Woman: “Hmph. What a wretched and ludicrous sight.”

The voice that suddenly reached him possessed a strength that trampled upon the emptiness of such a dead person.

His consciousness quivered faintly at the voice that was hurled down from overhead. However, the energy to raise his face, the spare strength to let out a voice, and the emotions that would stir up any sort of response, all of it had died.

Woman: “To think that I go out on a whim for a little trip, only for something so unpleasant to occur. Now then, what am I to do about it.”

???: “…”

Woman: “The sin of having offended my mood is a grave one. Even if you are but a child, I shall show no leniency for the weight of that sin.”

To a being that ought to have been dead, the voice kept on striking words down one after another.

He did not think of it as troublesome, nor as noisy, nor anything of the sort. His dead emotions did not allow him to think such things. He simply found it strange.

Why did this voice fixate upon someone who was about to die, or perhaps already dead? Because, at the very end of his life, he had come to want, no matter what, to know that—

???: “…”

Slowly, heavily, he pried open eyelids that were stiff as if glued shut, and looked the world straight in the face.

Eyes that had grown used to the darkness took an awfully long time to bring the world into focus. Then, when the blurred field of view finally settled with the passage of time, “it” was standing there.

Red, red, bright red, scarlet, deep crimson, like flames, a woman was there—

Woman: “What is with those eyes. They are the same blazing crimson as mine, are they not.”

For that alone, her bad mood until then and her good mood switched places in an instant. And with just a single word, the bright red woman continued.

Woman: “I am pleased.”

Both the body that was supposed to die, and the spirit that had been dead, were scooped up by the woman with the red eyes.

—The name Schult was the second thing, after his life, that the child received from the woman.

2

???: “—Fwaaah.”

Along with a yawn, the boy opened his crimson eyes, framed by long eyelashes.

It was still early in the morning. Through the gap in the curtains, the morning sun shone in; feeling its presence, the boy slowly pushed himself up in bed and lightly shook his pink-haired head.

He was a boy with a childish appearance. His age, he believed, should be eleven this year. His own grasp of that was somewhat vague, but what made it vague even to others was likely the fact that, compared to an average eleven-year-old, his body was quite small and delicate.

Perhaps as a consequence of never having lived in an environment suitable for a child, the growth of the boy’s body lagged far behind that of ordinary children. That said, he himself did not mind it.

For, precisely because he was like this, there was a blessedly important role waiting for him—.

???: “—So, you have finally awoken. To awaken later than I do, you lack the awareness befitting an attendant.”

???: “…Ah.”

The voice of a goddess brushed against the eardrums of the sleepily blinking boy. To call her a goddess was no exaggeration. At the very least, to the boy, the owner of that voice was without a doubt a goddess.

That the being who had given him life and a name was called a goddess, the boy only now, having come here, came to know for the first time.

And so, the boy—Schult—wriggled out from the bed, stepped before his own goddess, and knelt down right in front of her.

The goddess, clad in thin red nightclothes, sat in a chair with her long legs crossed, looking down, cheek propped on her hand, at the child kneeling at her feet.

Under that crimson gaze, Schult let a smile suffused with respect bloom upon his adorable face,

Schult: “Good morning, Priscilla-sama.”

Priscilla: “Early, is a description to which I must raise some objection, but very well. In deference to your adorableness, I shall forgive you.”

Schult: “Yes. Thank you very much.”

The goddess—or rather, Priscilla—narrowed the eyes of her unnaturally perfect beauty and gave the slightest nod at Schult’s greeting. Bowing his head at that attitude, Schult expressed his gratitude for her kindness.

Many of the turns of phrase Priscilla used were difficult for the uneducated Schult, but in every corner of her speech, mercy and forbearance overflowed. From the bottom of his heart, a sense of loyalty welled up in him to devote himself to her again today.

This was the Barielle Manor, Priscilla's bedchamber. The bed in which Schult had awoken was hers, and on most nights, Schult shared Priscilla's sleeping quarters with her.

The reason for that was—

Priscilla: "—Given the season, the nights are chill. Schult is just the right warmth to hold while I sleep. On that one point alone, I shall praise you."

Schult: "I am honored to be of use! I am very happy!"

Priscilla: "Do not make such a racket from morning. You are noisy."

Schult: "Yes! I will be careful!"

As Schult stood up and answered with all the volume he could muster, Priscilla had already lost interest. She lowered her gaze to the book resting on her knees and immersed herself in her daily reading.

Though free-spirited yet clever, Priscilla imposed a very regular routine upon herself.

She went to bed early at night and rose early in the morning. From early dawn until breakfast, she lost herself in reading, spending that time accumulating all manner of knowledge and stories.

Schult: "Priscilla-sama is far too amazing…"

Shallow in learning and still with so much yet to study in the manor, Schult could not hide his astonishment that the all-knowing, sage-like Priscilla still had not lost her desire to better herself.

However, thinking of the pinnacle Priscilla aimed for, perhaps that was only natural.

Schult: "I will work hard so that I can be of even a little help to such a Priscilla-sama."

Making that vow, Schult gave Priscilla a bow and headed for the door of the room. He had to return to his own room to change, then join the servants and apply himself to the manor's work.

Priscilla: "Schult."

As Schult was about to leave in such a manner, Priscilla called out to him.

Schult: "Y-Yes! Priscilla-sama, what is it? T-Tea… is it tea, perhaps?!"

Priscilla: "I acknowledge the thought, but I require no tea. You do remember what is to happen today, do you not?"

Schult: "Today, you say…?"

Tilting his head at Priscilla's question, Schult furrowed his well-shaped brows. Mustering all his memories at his master's words, he pondered what exactly made today special—

Schult: "—! It is Priscilla-sama's choosing of a Knight!"

Priscilla: "The servants are already pressed with preparations for that. You, at the very least, shall make yourself useful as well."

Schult: "Understood!"

Recalling that important duty and receiving Priscilla's encouragement, Schult energetically dashed out of the room. Then, hurrying to his own quarters, he slipped his arms into the small butler's uniform tailored just for him.

It may have felt a bit like he was trying to act grown-up, but the uniform on the handsome boy held a forbidden sort of charm.

Schult: "Good morning! I look forward to working with you again today!"

When Schult, in his uniform, dashed into the entrance hall, the manor's servants had already gathered there, about to begin their daily morning assembly.

The Barielle Manor was a large estate. With more than thirty servants, it had been quite the struggle at first for Schult to memorize all those adults' faces and names.

However, two months had already passed since Priscilla had taken him in, and by now he matched all of their faces to their names. They too had at first been bewildered by such an excessively young coworker, but now they treated him warmly enough that they could exchange smiles and words.

Thus, when Schult arrived at the morning assembly, normally a chorus of greetings would come back to him—

Schult: "Huh…?"

Yet no reply came to Schult from the servants standing with their backs straight. He felt a brief moment of doubt at his silent coworkers, but the reason soon became clear.

Leip: "—For the newest face to be the last to report for duty, you live quite the comfortable life, do you not."

Schult: "Ah… Master-sama…"

Before the lined-up servants, Schult shrank before the figure who snorted unhappily through his nose.

It was an elderly man with white hair, clad in black formalwear. His gaze was sharp, his expression brimming with a vigor ill-suited to his age, and in those eyes and in his voice there was not the slightest trace of leniency toward others.

Leip Barielle—the master of this manor, the Barielle household, and a noble of the Kingdom who was also Priscilla's husband. Rightly, he was a person whom Schult ought to revere as his lord.

Under Leip's sword-like gaze, Schult involuntarily caught in his throat. At the child's reaction, Leip's features twisted with irritation for a moment,

Leip: "Very well. I have no time to be preoccupied with trifles."

Abruptly losing interest in Schult, Leip turned to face the servants.

In that time, Schult also hurriedly slipped into line and listened to Leip's words as the man cleared his throat.

Leip: "You lot are doubtless aware of it, but Priscilla's bad habit of self-indulgent whims has shown itself again. Because of that, this house must devote effort to a needless event. —A most displeasing matter."

Servants: "…"

Leip: "Unlike usual, people of uncertain standing shall be coming and going. All of you are to bear that firmly in mind. To any trash who fails to recognize this place as Baron Barielle's manor, give treatment befitting them. Understood?"

High-handedly issuing his orders, Leip demanded affirmation from the servants. When they responded to his will with silence, he clicked his tongue and left the entrance hall, his footsteps ringing out.

Only once Leip's presence had completely receded did the atmosphere in the place finally slacken.

Maid: "That was unfortunate, was it not, Schult?"

Schult: "Ah, no, it is all right. Master-sama's words are true. It was because I was no good, no good at all, talking with Priscilla-sama and ending up as the last one here."

The maid of about prime age standing beside him tried to console Schult for having been glared at by Leip. But Schult shook his head with a smile, declining her comfort.

Leip's manner of speech was harsh, but that it was something to reflect on was the truth. He did not wish to set that aside, and for now he had to focus on his work.

Schult: "Just as Master-sama said, today will surely be terribly busy! I will help with anything, so everyone, let us all do our best!"

As Schult clenched his fist tightly and declared that, the servants exchanged glances. Then they smiled and lightly raised their hands in tune with their young coworker.

Surrounded by such kind people, Schult's hectic day truly began in earnest.

3

Priscilla: "—Truly, what a gathering of fools who know not their own station."

Hiding her lips behind a luxurious fan, Priscilla laughed provocatively as she gazed down at the scene below.

Her orange hair was gathered up with a jeweled barrette, her body wrapped in a blood-colored dress, her stance completed by an outfit that all the more impressed upon the eye her brutally beautiful features.

At the sight of Priscilla standing there, the sturdy men lined up in the garden raised their voices in rapturous cheers.

What filled the wide garden of the Barielle Manor was the frenzy of ferocious ruffians. The cause of that madness lay not only in their thick, booming voices, but also in the clash of the fighting spirit each of them exuded.

Behind those rough men, all the ornaments that usually decorated the garden's scenery had been removed, and in their place, a circular stone stage had been specially erected, stone slabs laid over the lawn.

For a stage, it lacked glamour, but the performers who would step upon it were who they were. To ask for more would be boorish.

Priscilla: "If it lack flowers, then enthrall me not with elegance, but with madness. Spill blood, burst flesh, let blades dance. Whosoever can amuse me upon that stage shall be granted the right to stand at my side."

Men: "…"

Priscilla's declaration was, in truth, the very wish and reward of the warriors gathered here.

—The Barielle Baron's manor, and the martial tournament to select a Knight.

The Knight who would serve Priscilla Barielle, wife of Baron Leip Barielle, was to be chosen by the results of this tournament. That was the purpose for which this event had been held.

For the warriors of the wilds, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity beyond all expectation—everyone present had come here from the outset seeking that honor.

However, the instant they laid eyes on Priscilla, such ambitions were blown from their minds. Before status or fame, the violent beauty of the woman they looked up to above them blew their heads clean away.

Her sensuality, almost fragrant to the eye, the bewitching demonlike face that seized their gaze and would not release it, the intense stare that turned their awareness to molten sludge—captivated by all of that, the frenzy of the men only burned hotter.

Watching the whirling enthusiasm, Priscilla once more covered her mouth with her fan and nodded.

Priscilla: "Strive as best you can, dullards. May the days in which you shaved your flesh and polished your souls prove worthy in my eyes."

She did not even attempt to conceal her haughty, overbearing demeanor as she loftily cast her words down upon them.

Yet instead of feeling anger at her vicious phrasing, the men made it the trigger to rouse themselves even further, their eagerness for the martial spectacle about to begin flaring up.

—All to seize, from one another, the right to serve at the side of that beautiful woman clad in a blood-red dress.

Schult: "As expected, Priscilla-sama's greeting was splendid."

Hearing Priscilla address the participants from the terrace and declare the tournament open, Schult was deeply impressed.

If possible, he would have liked to hear that greeting from directly at Priscilla's side, but that wish had not been granted. Schult, too, just like the other servants, was so busy he was running all over the manor.

With the holding of the tournament, the Barielle Manor, which served as the venue, was in an uproar with preparations. That busyness had reached its peak today, the very day of the event.

The servants were dashing about every corner of the house, and Schult was no exception. After all, it was exceedingly rare for so many outsiders to be allowed onto the grounds. Naturally, to guard against anyone harboring ill intent, the manor was under strict guard by Leip's private soldiers.

Schult: "Thank you for your hard work! I have brought you some refreshments!"

Schult's job was to deliver food and drink to those soldiers in charge of guarding the manor.

He truly wanted to be of more use, but there were not many tasks that could be entrusted to Schult, a child and a newcomer. For now, it was vital that he devote himself earnestly to the work he had been given.

Schult: "The red-prepared armor is so very cool…"

The soldier accepting the drink gave off a sense of a wry smile at Schult's muttered words.

Leip's private soldiers, clad in matching armor, had all of their breastplates painted a uniform, deep crimson. Red was Priscilla's color, and it was Schult's most favorite color in all the world. It was said that unifying the armor's color to red had been Priscilla's order, and it was truly cool. As expected of Priscilla-sama.

Schult: "But Priscilla-sama will not choose her Knight from among the soldiers, will she."

Carrying a tray loaded with empty dishes, Schult voiced that question.

Leip hated people who were useless, people who were incompetent. Therefore, every soldier belonging to his private force ought to be someone of assured family and assured skill.

In that case, Schult felt that choosing a Knight from among them would be the reasonable course.

Schult: “No, no, there is no doubt that Priscilla-sama has some truly amazing plan.”

Shaking off the doubt that had flickered through his mind for a moment, Schult reflected upon the fact that he had just now doubted his master.

Unlike Schult, wise Priscilla was sure to have some profound design.

Previously, when he had been taken along to the royal capital, he had met a person—a Royal Candidate, a woman who was to become Priscilla’s enemy—and she had also had a Knight with her, but that Knight had not looked particularly strong either.

The conditions required of a Knight, that was some “something” Schult could not even imagine.

Schult: “Besides, there is also… ah.”

Rough Man: “Huh?”

Lost in thought, he had neglected to look ahead.

He bumped into a large back directly in front of him, and Schult fell on his backside on the spot. At the same time, the tray he had been carrying dropped to the ground, and with a shrill crash the dishes shattered to pieces.

From the corner of the garden, the gazes of the rough men participating in the tournament all converged upon him. Schult’s cheeks went stiff under that pressure, and he fell into confusion for a brief moment.

Rough Man: “Hah? What is a brat doing in a place like this?”

In his frozen state, Schult heard the man before his eyes click his tongue.

The man had dusky skin and a muscular body covered in scars. His left eye was concealed beneath an eyepatch, and, looking down at Schult, still sitting on the grass where he had fallen, he said,

Rough Man: “That getup… you one of the manor’s servants? Ha, this is rich. If even a little brat like you is being used, sounds like the story about the Baron’s wife being all soft-hearted is true.”

Schult: “Ah, um…”

Rough Man: “Do not get so scared, squirt. If the house dog makes a mess in front of the guests, it is the master’s discipline that gets called into question. Hurry up and stand, and then clean up those broken dishes.”

Crouching down, the eyepatched man grabbed Schult’s small head in his palm. Schult, his face stiff as the man brought his own face close and breathed his foul breath upon him, managed a nod.

Just as the man had pointed out, Schult’s blunder might stain the servants’ reputation—that is to say, it might turn into ill repute for Priscilla, the mistress of the manor. That was something he wanted to avoid.

While exposed to the eyepatched man’s mockery and to the enjoyment showered upon him from those around, Schult rose on trembling knees and tried to apologize to him—

Rough Man: “Oops, my hand slipped.”

Schult: “…”

The moment he lifted his face, his forehead was pushed, and Schult fell on his backside once more. With that momentum, he toppled over backward. He stared dizzily, wondering what had just happened. A burst of laughter rose all around.

Schult: “Eh? Eh?”

Rough Man: “Gah-ha-ha-ha! My bad, my bad. Just forget it, yeah? If we end up working in the same place, it is a hassle if we start off hating each other, right?”

As the eyepatched man dusted off his knees and stood, laughing heartily, Schult’s eyes flew wide.

He understood then that he had been pushed, and immediately afterward he lowered his head in humiliation. He had been made fun of. That was what stung. It was not that he himself had been mocked. This was an insult to Priscilla.

It was an uncalled-for insult toward Priscilla, who had taken Schult into her service.

Schult: “I-I…”

His eyes brimming with tears of frustration, Schult came to understand the vague feelings he had been carrying in his heart.

Schult had been dissatisfied that no Knight was to be chosen from the red-prepared private soldiers. That was not because he questioned Priscilla’s judgment, but because the attitude of the rough men gathered here was far too lacking in respect toward Priscilla.

No matter how strong any one of them might be, Schult did not want to entrust Priscilla to any of them.

Even if Priscilla’s judgment was correct, for the first time, from the bottom of his heart, Schult thought that he disliked it.

And then—

???: “—So what, exactly, was supposed to be so funny about that just now? I totally do not get it.”

Rough Man: “Huh?”

A muffled voice cut in, and the eyepatched man wiped the smile from his face and turned to the side. Drawn along, teary-eyed Schult also looked that way, and for an instant, he entirely forgot his humiliation.

The appearance of the person standing there was so shocking that it left him unintentionally dumbstruck.

???: “Knocking a little kid over and then busting a gut over it is not exactly something pleasant to watch, you know. If you are going to fish for laughs, the least you could do is make yourself the butt of the joke.”

Objecting to the eyepatched man’s conduct, the newcomer idly toyed with the joints of the helmet that covered his head. The way he walked over at an easy pace, taken on its own, was not all that distinctive.

This was a place where martial skills would be tested. Many of those present wore appropriate equipment, and men in full plate were not uncommon.

However, the only proper-looking piece on him was the helmet that covered his head. From the neck down he wore the garb of a bandit and straw sandals on his feet; it was, without question, an appearance that could only be called bizarre.

Rough Man: “You… what do you think you are doing?”

To the man in the black helm, the eyepatched man threw an openly displeased question. The black-helmeted man, in turn, shook his head, going, “Nah, nah, nah,” and said,

Black Helm: “What I am “doing” is lodging a complaint, obviously. I just thought your tastes were trash. I am telling you this for your own good, so cut it out already. You said it yourself, did you not? We might end up working together as buddies here? If someone squeezes a rag out into your tea or something, do not come crying to me.”

Rough Man: “That is not what I meant, idiot. I am asking what you came here for.”

Black Helm: “What I came for? Pretty sure just about everyone here has the same goal, yeah?”

Rough Man: “With that arm of yours, huh.”

At the black helm’s surprisingly talkative reply, the eyepatched man jerked his chin in that direction as he spoke.

What his words indicated was obvious.

Clear to anyone’s eyes, the difference between the black helm and the others—setting aside his outlandish attire, there was another feature: his left arm was gone from the shoulder.

The man in the black helm was one-armed—and in martial arts, that was a tremendous disadvantage.

Rough Man: “Do not go shoving your way into a fight you have no chance of winning from the start, half-baked fool.”

Black Helm: “You put it that way, and I feel kinda weak myself. But as long as a guy is alive, he is free to hope he might have a one chance in a million shot, right?”

Rough Man: “Then you had better not complain if you lose that freedom right here. One of the conditions for taking part today was that you would have no problem if an “accident” happened.”

As the black helm shrugged, the eyepatched man answered, a dangerous edge mixing into his gradually lowering voice. The fighting spirit leaking from his entire body made Schult, standing so close by, shiver.

In today’s tournament, the participants were each allowed to use their own chosen weapon—in other words, even weapons with live blades. To put it bluntly, it was an event with death as a built-in premise.

In fact, Schult had overheard that there had already been deaths on the stage. By Priscilla’s strict command, he was forbidden from approaching the stone stage, so he had been spared the chance to witness it directly.

Rough Man: “It is a single-elimination spectacle before the Madam… If you are confident in your arm, you are bound to run into me somewhere.”

Black Helm: “Yeah, that much makes sense. I get the idea.”

Rough Man: “If you understand that and still will not back down, that just means you are a big moron who does not care about his life. …Not that I am likely to forget, but I will remember you, black helm. I shall make you regret having such a stupid dream.”

Black Helm: “For real? I have your face burned into my memory too, on account of your skin being darker than anyone else I have seen so far. Sounds like we got ourselves a real mutual thing going on here, huh.”

Maintaining his flippant tone to the end, the black helm made the eyepatched man snort irritably. Then the latter left the scene of the commotion without so much as a glance at Schult. A few of the men nearby went along with him, so it seemed he was taking part in the tournament as part of a small group.

Perhaps those companions had been the ones laughing when Schult had fallen on his backside earlier as well.

Black Helm: “Hey there, missy, rough one for you, huh. Can you stand?”

Just as Schult was thinking that, he blinked at the hand suddenly held out before his face.

Looking up, he saw that the one standing in front of him was the very same black helm. Looking back and forth between the helmet and the hand, Schult hurriedly sprang to his feet and bowed his head over and over.

Schult: “I-I have caused you trouble! Thank you very much!”

Black Helm: “No big deal, but honestly, getting my hand ignored stung more than anything. I do get that this look of mine is not exactly a hit with the ladies, though…”

Schult offered his thanks, but the black helm let out a sigh that sounded somewhat dejected. Many of the words he used were ones Schult did not understand, but there was one thing he realized.

Schult: “Um, I am not a girl. I am properly a boy.”

Black Helm: “Huh?! For real?! You are not some cute girl being made to dress up like a boy for reasons and stuff? With a face that cute?!”

When Schult corrected his misunderstanding, the black helm was far more shocked than he had been during his exchange with the eyepatched man.

Then, with the eyes hidden under his helmet, he looked Schult over intently. The gaze tickled.

Black Helm: “This twist, man, what a turn of events, I cannot even hide how rattled I am. If that is the case, I did not have to stick my neck out and get glared at by that scary guy to help you, huh.”

Schult: “Eh?! You would decide whether to help me based on whether I am a boy or a girl?!”

Black Helm: “Wah-ha-ha, it was a joke, joke. At that age, missy—nah, squirt—it does not really matter if you are a boy or a girl anyway. Well, if you had been a girl, there is a bit of a romantic dream in the idea that this would come back around ten years from now and some beauty would show up to confess her love because I helped her here.”

Schult: “I see, this romantic… is it.”

Priscilla’s remarks were hard to understand, but the black helm’s remarks were also quite difficult for Schult.

As Schult tilted his head at these unfamiliar words, he felt the man inside the helmet give a little laugh. Then, with his right hand, he roughly scrubbed Schult’s pink head.

Black Helm: “Anyway, watch yourself. Not everyone is like that guy, but it is also a hard fact that there are not exactly few like him either. It has always bugged me, why is it that folks in the mercenary trade end up all getting that same crude vibe? A refined gentleman like me really sticks out.”

Schult: “Pff! That is very funny. I am impressed!”

Black Helm: “Getting laughed at by that line is honestly not quite the reaction I was going for here!”

Taking the black helm’s jest as meant to ease his anxiety, Schult laughed. Seeing that, the black helm, satisfied, took his hand away and once more touched the joints of his helmet with that same hand.

The clacking of metal sounded; perhaps that was just a little habit of his.

Black Helm: “Well then, from now on make sure you look where you are going when you work. What happened just now was one of the better outcomes. If the next person you bump into is a real dangerous type, a good-natured old guy like me might not be able to step in to save you.”

Schult: “Y-Yes. Thank you very much for your warning.”

Black Helm: “Hey, do not worry about it. If you wanna think of this as a debt, just tell your master that the flashy-looking guy was a real nice old man, and give me a little boost in her eyes.”

Turning his back and waving his hand lightly, the black helm walked off. Watching that retreating figure, Schult noticed for the first time that at the man’s waist, there was a thick-bladed sword thrust through at his side.

That sword, wielded one-handed, was no doubt the black helm’s way of fighting. Even so, just as the eyepatched man had judged, Schult could not help but wonder how well he could really fare with only one arm.

As he watched the black helm’s back grow distant, Schult tightly gripped the hem of his uniform.

Schult: “If possible, I would like to speak with him again… so I wish for him not to die.”

He whispered that faint hope, for he had not looked very strong at all.

4

Leip: “Priscilla! Do not make me say it again! Your showing yourself before that rabble is far too stimulating! Behave yourself and wait in your room for the results!!”

That bellow seemed loud enough to smash through the door, rush down the corridor, and echo throughout the entire manor.

At the very least, Schult shrank back under that illusion. After all, the door the voice had just pierced was the very one he had been about to open. No one could blame the boy for instinctively yanking his hand back.

It was a voice he recognized. Or rather, there was only one person in this manor who both had that temper and possessed the right to raise such a roar—Leip Barielle.

And in answer to that roar came a beautiful voice with an edge as cold and sharp as a blade.

Priscilla: “This is an event I opened for mine own sake. If I do not witness it with mine own eyes, where is the passion of those common dolts to be directed? Even boorishness has its limits, old bones. Do not persist in spoiling my mood at every turn.”

Leip: “Old bones, you say…! Y-You… what do you… take me for…?!”

Priscilla: “Are you not the husband who used gold and ambition in excess to make me yours? Do not blow such trivial matters out of proportion. Do not forget that it is you yourself who are inconvenienced should you anger me. Although, to see ambition that has waited too long for its ripening rot and fall… that might be a diversion in its own right.”

Leip: “Gh… nghhh…!”

Even through the door, Schult could picture Leip with veins bulging on his forehead, grinding his teeth. The one mercilessly showering such words upon him was, in all likelihood, Priscilla with a look of boredom on her face.

Leip grew angry at Priscilla’s conduct, and she crushed his protests in return. That was an exchange that had repeated itself many times in the Barielle Manor over these past few months.

Leip: “To begin with! I was opposed to this! You have not the slightest understanding of how important the choosing of a Knight is! Lineage! Status! The Knight’s character is directly tied to the evaluation of the master’s caliber! And yet you would, of all things, choose such an important First Knight through this kind of farce as if it were nothing more than a game…!”

Priscilla: “I shall do exactly as I desire. That I overlook your schemes such as this is also by my whim. The fruition of your rigid, stubborn obsession shall depend on how well it can avoid offending my mood… Weigh each and every word and action carefully. Is that understood, old bones.”

Leip: “…”

Treated so offhandedly, Leip’s indignation at last hit its limit. Rough footsteps, as if he were kicking at the floor, rushed toward the door, and Schult turned pale and sprang backward. The next instant, the door was flung open violently.

Fortunately, he was not struck by the door as it swung open, but that was no salvation for Schult. Leip, finding him standing there in the corridor, clicked his tongue in disgust.

Leip: “Filthy little rat… If you have time to eavesdrop, put it to some use!”

Schult: “Y-Yes…!”

Made the target of Leip's venting, Schult bowed his head as if to endure a storm. Leip's barbed remarks were usually long from here on. However, this time that one line did not continue.

For a while, the old man opened and closed his mouth, let out a breath as if his words had deserted him, then shoved past Schult's shoulder and left the room. Stumbling, Schult leaned against the wall, and only after Leip's figure had disappeared from sight did he stroke his chest in relief.

Then, timidly, he peered into Priscilla's room. And there—

Priscilla: "Schult, is it. Come here. Show that face to me."

Schult: "Y-Yes, ma'am!"

Priscilla beckoned Schult, who had poked his face in, her expression listless. It was a look she rarely showed, and Schult blinked, then hurriedly ran to her feet.

Flustered, Schult thought that he wished he could be of some help. That face of his was gently taken between two white hands.

Schult: "Mugyu."

Priscilla: "Mm, how lovely. I was just now sitting face-to-face with a hideous visage, after all. My eyes have been sullied. Therefore, I shall wash them clean with your face. Remain just like that for a while."

Schult: "Uuu…"

Stared at from so close their breaths could touch, Schult's face flushed red.

The beauty so near at hand only deepened his embarrassment, and if he could, he would have liked to look away. However, the reason Priscilla favored Schult lay in those eyes of his. Priscilla's own twin orbs burned like fire, and Schult's twin orbs were of that same color—that, above all else, was the reason Priscilla had saved him.

Because he understood that, Schult could not avert his gaze from

Priscilla. Even if he felt embarrassed, all he could do was let her do as she pleased.

Schult: “P-Priscilla-sama… may I… ask you something, if I may?”

Priscilla: “What is it. Speak.”

If he only waited silently, he felt as though he might suffocate. At Schult’s desperate question, Priscilla, still gazing into his eyes with single-minded intensity, nodded magnanimously.

Receiving that, Schult recalled the little commotion that had taken place in the garden earlier—

Schult: “Is there… anyone who seems likely to become your Knight, Priscilla-sama?”

Priscilla: “—Hmph.”

At his question, Priscilla narrowed her eyes, and suddenly Schult’s face was released.

Startled by the abruptness of it, Schult watched as Priscilla turned toward the large window that led outside—the one that connected to the terrace—and closed her eyes, listening to the frenzy drifting in from outside.

That closed expression did not clear. It was the same listless look she had worn at the beginning.

Priscilla: “Common rabble have gathered and gathered again, have they not. In numbers, they have exceeded my expectations, but in quality, they fall within the bounds of what I foresaw. A most uninteresting outcome.”

Soldiers loudly proclaiming that they were the ones for the job, clashing as they sought the seat of Priscilla’s Knight.

For those who had nothing to do with the status of a Knight, it was an honor to drool over. And unofficial though it might be, one who became Priscilla’s Knight would not remain merely the Knight of a baron’s wife.

For Priscilla was a participant in the Royal Selection that would decide the next king of the Kingdom of Lugunica. One who became Priscilla's First Knight would be granted a position of commensurate importance.

Thus, that she would set stringent conditions on the choosing of her Knight was only natural—

Schult: "Is there… no one strong, for you to choose, Priscilla-sama?"

Priscilla: "I do not cling to notions of strength and weakness. I have no interest in such things."

Schult: "Then, do you wish to take someone wise as your Knight, Priscilla-sama?"

Priscilla: "The presence or absence of wit is equally irrelevant. Before me, even a sage is but a simpleton."

Disappointment at the failure of her expectations dwelled in her eyes; contrary to the roar of the men outside, her heat was cooling. There was not the slightest sign that she was enjoying herself as entertainment; her gaze was more like that of someone watching a turf war in a livestock pen.

Priscilla: "At this rate, the choosing of a Knight shall be entirely impossible."

Schult: "Th-That… I believe… would be dangerous…"

Worried by Priscilla's languid murmur, Schult's voice trembled.

He understood how she felt, saying that she could not choose a Knight. He understood, but after holding such an extravagant event, if it all ended in a dud, the wrath of the participants would be easy to imagine. In that case, a clash between the participants and the private soldiers, and a catastrophe with blood raining down, was not out of the question.

Hearing Schult's words as his face went pale at the thought, Priscilla smiled thinly. At that sadistic smile, Schult shivered as if his spine had been licked by a tongue.

Priscilla: “I see. You raise an objection to my conclusion. In that case, Schult. You must already have some candidate here whom you believe suited to be my Knight, do you not?”

Schult: “Eh…!”

Priscilla: “Are you telling me to compromise without offering any alternative? I shall say this now: I shall forgive most insolence on account of your youth and your eyes… but insolence piled upon insolence shall not fit within my tolerance.”

Priscilla drew a folded fan from between the valley of her breasts and slapped it against her palm. The dry sound, though Schult had never actually been punished by Priscilla, carried the feel of a gesture that foreshadowed it.

Schult: “…”

Swallowing, Schult desperately racked his brain.

It was not because he was afraid of being punished by Priscilla. Naturally, that fear was there. But even more than that, what drove Schult was his endless loyalty to Priscilla.

Right now, Priscilla was asking for his opinion. If he could not answer that expectation, he would not be repaying the debt of having been taken in. That was what Schult found truly terrifying.

He thought, with all his might. What a Knight needed was neither strength nor wisdom.

Originally, Priscilla had come up with this idea of choosing a Knight because of a meeting in the royal capital with another female Royal Candidate. It was the “something” she had seen in that cat-eared Knight that was important.

Comparing that to Priscilla’s usual words and actions, Schult had a flash of insight.

And then, following that flash, he blurted it out.

Schult: “I-If it is a strange person, there was one!”

Priscilla: “…What?”

Schult: “There was a strange person in the garden! He should be one of the participants! I did not understand what he was saying at all, and also, he was really, really strange!”

Accompanying his words with gestures, Schult described the eccentric he had met in the garden—the man in the black helm.

Come to think of it, the black helm had told him to talk to Priscilla about him as well. He did not seem strong, and his cleverness was unknown, but there was no doubt that his personality had been impossible to pin down.

And, strange as he was, Schult had not disliked that black-helmeted man.

Schult: “I am sure that, if you saw that strange person, you would also think he is interesting, Priscilla-sama! So it is still too soon to give up, I believe!”

Priscilla: “…”

Breathing hotly as he finished, Schult fell silent, and Priscilla did as well. She pressed the tip of her folded fan against her own white chin and closed her eyes, just as she had earlier.

However, what came next was different from before.

Priscilla: “Ku, fufu.”

Schult: “Priscilla-sama…?”

Priscilla: “Hahaha! Of all things, you say there was an eccentric? I ask whether you have a candidate for my Knight, and you cry that you have an eccentric to offer me…”

Unable to hold it in, Priscilla laughed. Laughing, she placed the fan against the back of Schult’s neck, then twisted her wrist and drew the boy’s body toward her.

She caught the stumbling Schult against her chest, and looking down at the face so close before her, she said,

Priscilla: “Schult. —You are beginning to understand me, are you not. I shall praise you.”

Schult: “Th-Thank you very much…”

Priscilla: “Yet an eccentric… an eccentric, hm. To recommend an eccentric as my Knight… No, that is not it. The mistake lay from the start in using such a grandiose phrase as “choosing a Knight”.”

Holding Schult pressed to her chest, Priscilla nodded as if she had come to some realization. Looking up at her from within that warmth, Schult’s face burned red from the breathless closeness and embarrassment.

In any case, it seemed Priscilla’s mood had brightened, if only a little. Schult felt a faint pride at having contributed to that.

—The strange change in the garden occurred at that very moment.

Schult: “I-It has suddenly become quiet…?”

Blinking at the change, Schult saw Priscilla silently turn her gaze toward the terrace.

The change—that was that the fervor coming from the garden had suddenly fallen silent. The clashing of blades and shouts that had continued without pause from the stone stage were cut off in an instant.

It was not complete silence, however. What could be heard faintly was the confusion that a great many people had all embraced at the same time.

Seemingly intrigued by the change, Priscilla quickly made for the terrace. Schult hurried after her, following her back out into the cool breeze. He grabbed onto the railing and peered down.

There lay the cause that had brought silence to the stone stage.

Black Helm: “—Hey now, hey, getting totally turned off like that seriously bums me out, y'know? Who? Me."

Standing in the middle of the round stone stage, the one who declared that was the one-armed figure in the black helm.

A man whose features you could not forget once you saw them, his frivolous attitude, the unmistakable eccentric who had just been spoken of.

Those seeing him for the first time could not hide their surprise and bewilderment at his bizarre appearance. And for those who could, that one arm and that outlandish outfit looked like nothing but an insult.

Warrior: "…"

Facing the black helm head-on was a giant in full plate armor, with a longsword on his shoulder. Like the black helm, his face was hidden by his helmet, but from the neck down he was thoroughly protected by metal armor. In the way he leveled his longsword and in the fighting spirit leaking from him, Schult could feel his fierce anger toward the black helm.

Contrary to the surrounding confusion, the opponent clearly felt insulted by the black helm's manner.

Schult: "P-Priscilla-sama…"

Schult himself did not know why he had called upon Priscilla here. He simply unconsciously thought that the fight ought to be stopped.

Against that giant, he could not picture any future in which the black helm won. Yet that very black helm was Schult's trump card, the one who might break through Priscilla's boredom.

If he was lost here, and Priscilla's eyes clouded over once more, that was what Schult feared.

But ignoring Schult's anxiety, Priscilla ran her tongue over her lips. Her pink tongue traced sensuously along her crimson lips, and her white throat swallowed.

And then—

Priscilla: “—Interesting.”

He heard her murmur that single word.

Warrior: “I dedicate the outcome of this battle to Lady Priscilla Barielle!”

In that instant, the giant, noticing Priscilla standing on the terrace, raised his longsword as if in offering and shouted. As his declaration spread, the participants also noticed Priscilla, and once more heat swept through the garden in a roar.

Everyone present loudly wished for the exit of the oddball who had stepped onto the stage without knowing his place.

Exposed to that, the black helm cracked his neck.

Black Helm: “Whoa there, getting all fired up now, are we. And on top of that, the odds are a hundred to zero, huh? Nah.”

His muttered complaint was swallowed up by the cheers. However, the black helm paid no mind to the enmity of the crowd and simply looked up at the two silhouettes upon the terrace above his head.

Priscilla & Schult: “…”

He received the gazes of the red woman and the red-eyed boy, both directed at him, and—

Black Helm: “At the very least, it ain’t like the odds are zero. —Well then, guess I had better give it my best shot.”

Drawing the sword thrust behind his waist, the black helm strode forward at an unhurried pace.

As he closed the distance at his leisure with the giant who was once more bringing his longsword to bear, the battle began an instant later.

5

—To Schult, an amateur, the black-helmeted man’s fighting looked extremely strange.

Schult: “W-W-Wahh.”

Covering his face with his palms and peeking through the gaps between his fingers, Schult was looking down at the stone stage.

The fact that little cries, almost like screams, kept slipping from Schult’s mouth from time to time was proof of just how shaken he was by the battle. After all, in the fight unfolding on the stone stage between the black helm and the giant, anyone could see that the one in black was at a disadvantage—there was nothing to call it but dangerous to watch.

Al: “—Dah?! That was close! Hey, you are taking this way too seriously!”

Letting out such lines, the black helm kept desperately dodging the sword strikes the giant sent his way.

Sometimes he leaped back, sometimes he rolled, sometimes he crawled across the ground at incredible speed—evade, evade, evade. It was an exceedingly precarious, completely unrefined spectacle, one that made one’s heart pound painfully.

Up until now, Schult had not once—indeed, not once in all his life since he was born—seen a real fight with his own eyes. To him, it was one overwhelmingly shocking scene after another.

Schult: “…”

There was not the slightest trace of restraint in the slashes the giant loosed. In other words, if they hit, they were blows that would without fail take a life. And the black helm was slipping past them by the barest skin of his neck.

At any time, even at this very instant, it would not have been strange for the black helm’s head to go flying.

Schult: “Ah! Doing that again… hyaah!”

Priscilla: “It seems you are enjoying yourself, Schult.”

Schult: “I-I am not enjoying this at all…! That man in the helm is far too in danger!”

At the sight of yet another exchange missed by a hair’s breadth, Schult let out a scream, and Priscilla addressed him. Unable to take his eyes off the battlefield, Schult only shook his head at her, but hearing that, Priscilla murmured, “As I thought.”

Schult: “Priscilla-sama, has something happened?”

Priscilla: “It is nothing. I was merely impressed that your eyes are not only beautiful. —He is indeed, just as you described him, perfectly adequate as a clown.”

Schult: “U-Um…”

Priscilla: “He understands how to rouse the crowd. In all likelihood, he has long made such things his trade. And that helm is an imitation of the Sword Slave King’s… Given that, I can imagine well enough what his background is.”

Leaving a bewildered Schult behind, Priscilla quietly stacked up her own conclusions inside herself. Schult had been staring, entranced, at her profile, but at a great roar of voices he hastily turned his gaze back.

Surely the black helm had—but what spread out before him was the exact opposite of what he had imagined.

Black Helm: “—So yeah, that makes it my win. Sorry, but save dedicating your victory for another time.”

Warrior: “N-No way…”

In the center of the stone stage, the giant lay fallen on his back.

Blood was flowing from his right leg, and with his helm stripped off, the giant had the blade of a sword pressed against his exposed neck, his movements completely sealed.

The match had not been decided by death, but the outcome was clear to anyone's eyes.

Black Helm: "All right, all right, everyone, quit spacing out. I get that some of you might have complicated feelings about me ending up taking the win here, but having a big heart is important for being a Knight too, yeah?"

Looking around at the spectators fallen silent at the conclusion, the black helm sheathed his sword and spoke with a shrug.

Those who had been struck dumb by the unexpected result were stunned by what felt like a provocative remark from the black helm, and in the next moment, their anger swelled.

Driven by a fierce emotion, some even went so far as to put a foot up onto the stone stage.

And that—

Rough Man: "—Do not get carried away, you fucking helm."

Black Helm: "Ah, it is you. I remember, I remember. You stand out for that dark skin and that nice big sty on your eye."

Pointing with his free hand around his own left eye, the black helm answered in a joking tone.

His opponent was the eyepatched man who had been glaring at him over Schult earlier. Perhaps he and the giant who had just been defeated were comrades, for he shielded the injured man behind him as he faced the black helm.

Rough Man: "You really stirred things up, huh. Damn acrobat, screwing around."

Black Helm: "The rules… well, the regulations, anyway, would not picking a fight with me here be against those? I do not see this as that sweet a situation that it would be worth getting yourself disqualified."

Rough Man: "In the end, the victor is going to beat everyone in some form or another. If I kill you here and now, how much trouble do you think that causes?”

Black Helm: “Put like that, I kind of feel you might be right though…”

Fiddling with the joints of his helm with his fingers, the black helm shook his head with a displeased air at the eyepatched man’s killing intent.

However, not only the eyepatched man, the mood of those around them as well was flowing in the direction of wishing for a showdown between the two. The hostility toward the black helm from the people nearby had yet to fade. If anything, thanks to what he had said just moments ago, a darker heat might well have grown.

Perhaps judging that he would not be able to slip away from that atmosphere, the black helm let out a sigh.

Black Helm: “Guess I got no choice. Just do not hold a grudge if I cannot live up to your expectations…”

Priscilla: “—No. There is no need.”

Black Helm: “Huh?”

A vivid voice cut off the black helm just as he was resigning himself. At the sound, the eyepatched man raised his voice reflexively, and, realizing who had spoken, stiffened.

Priscilla: “Twice I shall allow you to hear it. That there is no need. However, a third time shall not be forgiven.”

Fluttering her open fan, Priscilla, having intervened, cast her words down upon the battlefield below. In response, the fervor that had been on the verge of boiling over subsided in an instant.

At that momentary change, Schult, though surprised, also felt relieved, and in his heart he praised her as expected of Priscilla. Now the black helm would not be hurt, and things could smoothly return to the original progress—

Priscilla: “—With this, I shall draw the curtain on the audience match. You there, clown. I have chosen you.”

Black Helm: “…Huh? Me?”

Rough Man: “Wh—at?!”

At her words, the black helm, toward whom Priscilla was pointing the tip of her fan, pointed in surprise at himself. A heartbeat behind the movement of those two, it was the men in the garden who raised their voices in shock.

The eyepatched man in particular was greatly taken aback; he turned to look up at Priscilla above his head.

Rough Man: “W-Wait, Lady Barielle! No matter how you look at it, that guy is just—”

Priscilla: “…Lady Barielle? Ah, you mean mine own self. I doubt I shall ever grow used to that name, no matter how much time passes. At any rate, I care not. My decision shall not change. This is the end.”

Rough Man: “Th-This is insane…!”

Faced with Priscilla’s attitude, which gave him nowhere to latch on, the eyepatched man was struck dumb.

Behind him, the black helm, deciding that now that everyone’s attention was elsewhere was his chance, quietly leaped down from the stone stage. Slipping through the enclosure as he was, he snuck away from the center of the commotion.

Rough Man: “—! Get back here! Th-This ridiculous nonsense… What is the Baron, what is Baron Barielle doing about this!”

Only after a delay did the eyepatched man notice the black helm’s escape, and he raised his voice, seeking where the responsibility lay.

Similar cries rose from other participants as well. In a single instant, the direction of their anger shifted away from the black helm and toward the Barielle baronial house, who had held the tournament only to overturn it and turn it into a farce.

Their dissatisfaction exploded, and it seemed it could not be settled without blood being spilled.

That was what it seemed—

Leip: "—Did you not hear what my wife said? It is over. I must ask that you take your leave."

The one who declared that so imposingly, a strange short cylinder grasped in his hand, was Leip.

Behind Leip, who had appeared in the garden, there was a line of armed soldiers in red-prepared armor. At a single order, they were ready to move into an attack. With that one move, they had preempted the ruffians who were on the verge of turning into a mob.

And as warriors, they understood that that one move was a fatal one that could not be bridged.

Thus they could not move, stripped of any choice but to stand and listen as a one-sided demand for surrender was read out to them.

Leip: "On this occasion, I extend my thanks for your attendance at my house's event. For our part, as my wife's request has been fulfilled, we have no complaints. I ask that you take your leave without delay."

Men: "…"

It could hardly be called courteous. By that point, it was nothing more than a simple order.

Under Leip Barielle's overbearing proclamation, the men, eyepatched one included, could not talk back. And so, for some time, there followed a stretch in which no one could say anything at all.

—The tournament thus ended, leaving a terrible feeling of being unfulfilled in the majority.

6

Leip: “Priscilla! What are you truly thinking?! We were but one step away from this turning into a full-scale riot! Do you mean to bring ruin upon the Barielle family?!”

Priscilla: “I have no interest whatsoever in what becomes of this house. Do not indulge in such repulsive imaginings, old bones.”

Once the rough men had been driven from the grounds and the manor had at last been able to take a breath, the customary, entirely one-sided quarrel between husband and wife broke out within.

Face reddened with fury, Leip raised his voice so much that the veins on his brow looked as though they might burst. From his point of view, the event had begun against his wishes and ended against his wishes. He could not possibly remain calm after having been led around by the nose by Priscilla from beginning to end. On top of that—

Leip: “—Even had it been a foolish event, I could have forgiven it if there had been some harvest. But! On top of nearly inciting a riot on a mere whim of yours, the one you left at the end was, of all things, that man?! Do you have any idea just how heavy a responsibility you bear?!”

Priscilla: “You are the one who, how many times will you repeat yourself before you are satisfied? I shall do exactly as I desire. And all of it is correct. That is the will of heaven, and it is my path of conquest.”

Leip: “Enough! Cease this! I am sick of your twisted logic! You are not in your right mind!”

Priscilla: “Do not force upon me such pointless debates over sanity or madness. To begin with, who is to guarantee your sanity. Do not line up such tedious words and disturb my good mood.”

With his hand to his brow and his head hanging, Leip looked somewhat older. By contrast, utterly unconcerned with him, Priscilla paced about the room in high spirits—yes, in very high spirits.

She had been repeatedly opening and closing her fan for some time now, and her cheeks were faintly flushed with heat. Unconsciously, even to herself, a sensual allure overflowed from that figure, enough that even an old man who had long forgotten what it was to be a man would feel a thirst awaken.

Leip was no exception. However, the old man bit down on his own change and protected himself by smothering it under his anger.

The tournament had ended halfway, and the dissatisfied participants had been dismissed in a manner that was little better than being driven out. Within the manor, the cleanup of the affair was still ongoing. And the fruit gained on this day by going so far was—

Schult: "—Priscilla-sama, Master-sama, is this a good time? I have brought him."

As the foul atmosphere in the room stagnated, the sound of a knock from outside cut in between the couple. At once, as if she had been waiting for this, Priscilla's twin eyes sparkled,

Priscilla: "Mm, I permit it. Enter."

Leip: "Gh…"

At both Priscilla answering before him, and at the servant calling to Priscilla before him, Leip twisted his lips in humiliation.

In the meantime the door opened, and Schult entered with a tense expression on his face. Following behind him,

Black Helm: "Man, getting called in by big shots like this… for a small-gutted guy like me, it does not exactly feel like I am still alive. And since you really went and sent all the other guys packing, I guess you are not joking around here, huh."

Clicking the joints of his helm together, the one-armed black-helmeted man muttered that with a wry tone.

Taking a casual look around the room, the black helm shrugged toward Priscilla, who was standing at its center. At that insolent attitude, Priscilla said nothing, merely folding her fan and pressing it to her lips.

The gaze within the helm and Priscilla's crimson gaze tangled together, and at length the black helm let out a breath and said,

Black Helm: "It is an honor to have been invited… So, should I, like, kneel down or something?"

Priscilla: "It matters not. There is no meaning in empty, merely formal behavior like that of the rabble. What you ought to show me is where your value lies. Otherwise, there was no point in my having summoned you."

Black Helm: "You are one scary woman. …Sure hope I did not pick the wrong place to latch onto here."

Leip: "You cur! What is that manner of speaking toward my wife!!"

Though it was hard to believe they had only just met from the way the two were speaking, it was Leip, watching from the side, whose patience ran out first. The old man strode briskly up to the black helm, spitting as he railed at his insolent manner.

Leip: "Your impudent words and conduct! And on top of that, even when summoned here, you still keep your face hidden—what is the meaning of this! A braggart thug like you, I ought to cut you down here and now for your discourtesy…"

Priscilla: "Old bones."

Leip: "What is it! I am speaking at the moment—"

Priscilla: "You are noisy."

With that word, Priscilla's blow was unleashed; her closed fan struck Leip on the back of the head in a single blow, and the old man, whose face had been flushed red, crumpled to the floor without a sound.

Having felled her husband with a blow, even the black helm could only stare in amazement at such outrageous behavior.

Priscilla: “Schult, take him out. Roll him out into the corridor, then come back.”

Schult: “A-At the very least, I shall inform the others first, before I do so. Heave-ho, heave-ho…”

At words hardly befitting a married couple, Schult took hold of the fallen Leip’s feet and answered. Then the boy, straining with all his might, dragged the large old man out of the room.

As the door closed with a sound, only Priscilla and the black-helmeted man were left inside.

Priscilla: “Well then, at last the nuisances are gone and I can breathe easily.”

Black Helm: “…It might not be my place to say this, but is that not a little too eccentric? And being suddenly alone with some guy looking this shady, that is quite a bold move too.”

Priscilla: “Do you imagine that you could do anything to me? Do not be so conceited, commoner. The only one who can do anything to me is myself. No other being can do this or that with me.”

Priscilla thrust out her chest in complete confidence. Seeing her ample bosom sway as though it might burst free, the black helm shook his head with a “good grief” and let out a breath.

Black Helm: “Man, I am beat. This is a tougher customer than I imagined. In that case, just what am I supposed to show you so that I can measure up to your standards, Princess?”

Priscilla: “Let me see. —Show me that you can survive.”

A sultry smile bloomed upon her lips, and in the next instant Priscilla’s figure spun at high speed.

She snapped open the fan in her hand and let it swim through the air to block the black helm's field of view. The move was so sudden that the black helm knocked the fan away with his right hand. However, by that time Priscilla had already slipped around to his flank, and with an outstretched hand she drew from his waist his weapon, the broad-bladed sword.

Priscilla: "Fff—"

With a short breath, the naked blade flashed. Riding the force of her spin, the edge swept horizontally across the black helm's neck.

—She had him, without question. It was such a brilliant cut that anyone would have been certain of it.

Black Helm: "…Now this is what they really mean by "hanging on by the skin of your neck," huh."

However, what the fully swung blade cut was only the thin strip of skin on the neck of the man who had jerked backward.

It had been a blow such that one could vividly picture his head flying and blood gushing out in great arcs. And yet, in the most literal sense, by a hair's breadth, the black helm had avoided it.

Pressing his right hand to his neck, where the skin had split slightly and a single line of blood was running, the black helm said,

Black Helm: "Cut the sudden stuff out, Princess. You are not gonna hit me with some surprise follow-up, right?"

Priscilla: "You may rest easy. With that, I have uncovered most of your tricks. Hm, you are indeed interesting."

In answer to the black helm's fearful question, Priscilla gave a faint smile and tossed the sword back to him. Seeing the naked blade spinning rapidly end over end, the black helm reached out toward the spot where it would land,

Black Helm: "Yeah, no way I am catching that!"

Only for him to pull his hand back, so that the sword sliced through the room's carpet and stuck into the floor.

Priscilla: "What is the meaning of this, dullard. This is my room. What do you intend to do about this carpet."

Black Helm: "That is not my fault! No matter how you look at it, that was you blowing yourself up, Princess!"

While protesting against Priscilla's accusation, the black helm retrieved the sword sticking from the floor. Then he picked up the fan that had also fallen to the floor, gave it a light brush, and held it out to Priscilla.

Black Helm: "By the way, how am I supposed to take what just happened? Am I allowed to think I measured up to your standards, or did you call me here to personally guillotine me for my insolence?"

Priscilla: "As long as you can amuse me to a degree that exceeds the value of this carpet, I shall keep you by my side. What you just did, your conduct in the little entertainment earlier… You have the qualifications to be kept by me as a clown."

Black Helm: "Heh heh, much obliged… Wait, a clown? Not a Knight?"

Finding this different from what he had heard, the black helm voiced his surprise. In response, Priscilla folded her arms, fan still in hand, making her chest bounce as if to show it off, and said,

Priscilla: "What is this, do you wish to become my Knight? Is the title itself so important to you?"

Black Helm: "…Ah, no, yeah. I am not really hung up on titles. Besides, a cool position like Knight is not something that suits me."

Priscilla: "Hmph."

Letting his earlier vehemence vanish at once, the black helm lowered his tone as he toyed with the joints of his helm. Narrowing her eyes at the gesture, Priscilla gave his helm a light tap with her fan.

Priscilla: “And why is it that, even when you stand before me, you still do not remove that helm? What is your intent?”

Black Helm: “Ah, I messed up a bit, and now my face is not really something I can show people. I would not want to spoil your mood, Princess, so bear with it. If you cannot trust me without seeing my face…”

Priscilla: “It is fine, I shall allow it. I have no interest in your face.”

Black Helm: “That so. That makes things easier. Still, I ought to at least give you my name.”

Skipping formalities to the utmost, Priscilla forgave the black helm’s discourtesies one after another. Letting out a breath at that way of being, the black helm placed a hand to his chest in a show of respect and said,

Al: “—Aldebaran. That is my name, Princess. I would generally like to go by Al, but I will give you the full thing properly for you. You are my master, after all.”

Priscilla: “It is not a bad sound. I shall remember it, Aldebaran. And I have a generous heart. I shall not casually refuse the request of my retainer. I shall call you Al.”

At Priscilla’s answer, Aldebaran—Al—bowed his head deeply in gratitude.

In that way, a bond of lord and vassal was formed between the two. Originally, Priscilla ought to have proceeded as she was and performed the ceremony to make Al her Knight, but—

Priscilla: “I shall keep you by my side as a jester. I have no intention whatsoever of performing any Knightly investiture.”

Al: “That suits me fine too. It would just make me feel all itchy and ticklish down my back.”

Sharing such unorthodox views, Al nodded over and over at Priscilla’s declaration.

And once the two of them were in agreement, there came a hesitant knock at the door. At the sound, Priscilla called, “You may,” and Schult timidly peeped his face in.

Schult: “I have taken Master-sama back to his room. I have heard that there is no danger to his life.”

Al: “If there was danger to his life after that, what I saw would just plain be the scene of an assassination, you know…”

Al muttered that in response to Schult’s report. But Priscilla did not spare the condition of the husband she had struck down so much as a passing thought, and instead pointed the tip of her fan at each of the two attendants lined up before her.

Priscilla: “Schult, this is Al, my jester. Al, this is Schult, my page. The two of you are both strays I have picked up, so you are to get along as well as you can.”

Al: “Calling us strays sounds pretty bad, you know. Kiddo… you think so too, Schult-chan?”

Schult: “To call me a stray you picked up… it makes me blush.”

Al: “Hopeless.”

Seeing Schult blush happily at being treated as Priscilla’s property, Al grumbled.

At the child’s attitude, Priscilla nodded. Then she covered her own mouth with her open fan and said,

Priscilla: “From here on, I shall throw myself into the struggle to sit at the pinnacle of this kingdom. It is a contest whose outcome is already clear, yet the road there shall be rough enough. Al, I charge you with clearing the way along that path of mine.”

At the revelation of the true background lying behind this tournament—the Royal Selection to choose the king—Schult gasped. It was information that was still not public, and it ought to have been the first time Al had heard of it as well.

Naturally, one would have expected Al to be appropriately shocked at how suddenly the scale of the talk had grown.

However—

Al: “Got it, Princess. Just leave it to me. I came here for that very reason.”

Without even a moment’s hesitation, Al met her words with a firm nod.

Priscilla: “Naturally. So long as you attend at my side, you are to answer that honor with deeds worthy of it. —For, including you, this world is made in the way most convenient to me.”

At Al’s reply, Priscilla likewise nodded magnanimously without the slightest sign of being shaken.

In this way, into the camp of Priscilla Barielle, participant in the Royal Selection, there was added not a Knight but rather the attendant Aldebaran, and a new relationship of lord and vassal was born.

7

Al: “You sure are in a good mood, Schult-chan.”

Schult: “Yes! I am very happy!”

Leaving Priscilla’s room, Schult’s voice bounced with joy in response to Al’s words as they walked side by side down the corridor.

Al, newly added to the camp, was currently being shown around the manor by Schult. While the other servants were busy cleaning up after the event, this was the task entrusted to him. Of course he would be eager. Besides, if anyone other than Al had been chosen by Priscilla, he would surely not have felt this light-hearted.

Schult: “I had been hoping that you would be the one chosen by Priscilla-sama, Al-sama.”

Al: “Oh, for real? Guess cranking out that “raise-the-affection-meter” event back there paid off, huh. Stepping in to help was the right call after all.”

Schult: “Ah, that you protected me does not have very much to do with it.”

Al: “It does not?!”

As Schult guided him around the facilities—the archive, the dining hall, the bath, the toilets—conversation flowed between the two.

It was true that Al had surprised him by stepping in to shield him from the eyepatched man’s malice in the garden, and Schult was grateful for that. But that and the matter of Priscilla were separate.

There was only one reason Schult had recommended Al to Priscilla—

Schult: “It was because I felt that you would treat Priscilla-sama with care, Al-sama.”

Al: “Treat her with care? Pretty sure the rest of those guys would too, y’know. She is the one paying them.”

Schult: “That is true… but they are different. The others somehow had the same look in their eyes that Master-sama does when he looks at Priscilla-sama…”

Al: “You mean they were looking at her in a lewd way? If that is it, then I probably am not an exception either. You just cannot see it because I have the helm on.”

Letting a hint of something like lust seep into his tone, Al gave a low laugh. But Schult shook his head firmly at that attitude, saying,

Schult: “You are different from Master-sama and the others, Al-sama. That “lew…d”…? I do not really understand it, but I am sure it is completely different. It is only something I somehow feel, though.”

The child’s voice, so confident at first, gradually lost its certainty. Al fell silent for a moment at that, then soon scrubbed roughly at Schult's head with his one arm.

Al: "Well, being counted on like that does not feel bad. Given the choice, I would rather be liked than hated anyway."

Schult: "Yes! Let us do our best together for Priscilla-sama!"

Still held by the head, Schult's face lit up at once. Al gave a wry smile at that adorable expression, tilting his head.

Al: "But Master-sama's way of looking at the Princess, huh. They were going at it pretty loud, but is that how that married couple always is?"

Schult: "If you mean their usual attitude, then yes, that is right. Priscilla-sama and Master-sama are always like that. I would like them to get along…"

Schult dropped his gaze, thinking that that would likely be difficult.

It went without saying that Priscilla was clever, and Leip's wits were sharp as well. Schult did not really understand it, but it seemed that when two clever people were involved, their differences in thinking often made them clash. That the two of them argued so much surely had something to do with that.

Al: "…It is better for a married couple to get along, that is for sure."

Schult: "Do you have a wife, Al-sama?"

Al: "Sadly, my circumstances have not allowed for that. I do not even have a sweetheart, never mind a wife. I am the type who wants to marry for love, so I would want to take my time dating someone. …What about your parents, Schult-chan?"

Schult: "I was abandoned, so I do not remember them very well."

Al: "Whoa, land mine."

He had almost no memory of his family. He only remembered that they had been poor. That was why he had been abandoned to reduce the number of mouths to feed, then treated like a slave by the ones who picked him up, and there too he nearly died—

Schult: “Thanks to that, I was able to meet Priscilla-sama, so I am grateful to my family.”

Al: “…That so. Well, maybe that is better than moping over it.”

With a light thump-thump, Al once more tapped Schult on the head in response. Perhaps touching people’s heads was a habit of his. Schult did not dislike it, but Priscilla might.

Schult: “Al-sama, I am sure you should not go patting Priscilla-sama so carelessly.”

Al: “I pick my targets, all right. Reading the room is kind of my specialty.”

Letting out a wry chuckle at the warning, Al fiddled with the seams of his helm and glanced off to the side. His gaze went to the corridor window—to the view of the garden that could be seen from there.

Down there, the manor’s servants were rushing right and left, hard at work repairing the garden.

They cleared away the circular stone stage, secured places to replant the garden trees, and filled in the dug-up earth—

Schult: “Everyone is very busy…”

Al: “Cleaning up after a festival is always like this. …Though the real cleanup is only just getting started.”

Schult: “—? You mean putting the trees and stone statues back, and so on?”

Al: “Nah, I mean that grudges you buy from people are a scary thing.”

When Schult asked if he meant the work to come, Al replied with those hard-to-understand words. Hearing that only deepened

Schult’s confusion.

Al: “Well, guess we will just have to watch how the Princess handles things. Come on, we are going to be following her orders, so we strays she picked up ought to start getting along.”

Schult: “Getting along… I am looking forward to that. What shall we do?”

Al: “Let me see… How about I tell you a really amazing story. Every last bit of it is something that is not in your dictionary, Schult-chan.”

At that preface, Schult’s eyes began to shine, and Al continued, saying,

Al: “—Because it is a story about the world beyond the Great Waterfall, a world no one knows.”

8

—Leslie Gabbat was a first-rate mercenary who had survived countless battlefields.

He skillfully wielded a longsword, and by employing earth and wind magic he strengthened himself and turned the terrain to his advantage. His exploits on the battlefield were famous, and because he did not let his allies die, he was even called “the Benefactor.” Of course, he was not so soft-hearted as to save just anyone.

In Leslie’s view, the reason he did not let his allies die was simply because that way his odds of victory increased. He did what was necessary to raise his own chance of survival. There was no other reason.

Yet for some reason, comrades gathered around Leslie, who showed no mercy to his enemies but would extend a hand to his allies whenever they were within reach.

He bound those sorts together and staked his life as the head of the group. —That sort of position did not suit his nature.

Even so, gathering allies whose way of fighting and thinking lined up with his was in keeping with the methods he had learned to survive on the battlefield.

As he continued to fight like that, the number of comrades who had gathered before he knew it grew, and each time what he did not want to lose swelled, Leslie found himself thinking.

—I want a more stable position, an environment where I can keep these people together and look after them.

It was around the time Leslie began harboring that wish that Leip Barielle approached him.

To hold a martial tournament gathering men from outside the nobility, and there decide upon the baroness's Knight.

That was the gist of the information Leip brought him; in effect, it was the same as a recruitment from the baronial house. Knowing it was a chance to come under the banner of a noble of the kingdom, Leslie leapt at the offer.

If he showed his ability, then Leslie's band would become, fair and square, part of the Barielle family's forces. In that case, he would be able to feed his comrades more safely than now.

In fact, the tournament progressed just as Leslie had hoped. Since Leip, the host, was pulling the strings behind the scenes, it was only natural that things proceeded in a way that put them at an advantage. They steadily cut through the other participants, and if they were the last ones standing, they would be appointed Knights.

—At least, until those expectations were shattered by the red woman and that aggravating black helm.

The plan fell apart, Leslie and his men were betrayed by their backer, and they tasted humiliation.

Many others who had been there besides him could not accept that outcome. But their disappointment was nothing compared to Leslie's despair. That sensation of the ground crumbling beneath his feet was exactly what he felt.

What should have been good news to bring back turned into ill tidings instead, and his comrades' anger at knowing that their leader's face had been dragged through the mud was immense. It should originally have been Leslie's role to stop them.

The opponent was a noble of the kingdom, not someone a mere mercenary band ought to lay a hand on. Backing down and swallowing their tears would have been the correct choice. —And yet, he could not endure it.

Leslie: "We will… make that old man—Leip Barielle and Priscilla Barielle both—understand."

Leslie's anger, the anger of Leslie and his men, was something they needed to know.

He could not bear for them to think that things had ended there, that the cleanup was finished.

He gathered comrades scattered across the land, had their weapons sharpened anew, shared their anger, and waited for the time to come.

And thus, Leslie and his band swore revenge upon the Barielle family—

Beastman: "—Well now, that all? This turned into a way easier job than I thought it'd be."

To Leslie, on the verge of death, that anticlimactic voice sounded thick with disappointment.

The attack on their base had come without warning. On the eve of the day they were to carry out their plan of revenge against the Barielle family, Leslie and his men, encamped in the field, had been hit by a night raid from some unknown party.

Of course, Leslie and his men were no amateurs. They had posted lookouts, and they knew how to brace themselves against a night attack. —It was simply that their opponent was that much more skillful.

The sentries were silently taken out, and in the first surprise strike, half of their comrades were lost. Those who survived quickly regrouped, but both in individual strength and coordination, their enemy was superior; they had no means of overturning their disadvantage.

In the end, he could not even properly give the order to retreat, and Leslie, too, was wounded—

Beastman: “Dying in battle to shield your boss’s head… you got yourself some pretty fine underlings.”

Leslie: “Underlings, you say… Those guys are not… underlings.”

Beastman: “Oh? They ain’t underlings, huh. Then what are they?”

To the words of the dark shadow looming before him—the towering figure he had to look up at—Leslie shot back.

His opponent was even taller than the lanky Leslie, and nearly twice as thick in the body. Their very physical traits were fundamentally different. His whole body was covered in dark-brown fur, and his face was that of a beast—a beastman.

That Kararagi drawl, that giant adult-bodied race. There was no way someone working as a mercenary would not know the name.

Leslie: “They are… my comrades.”

Beastman: “…”

He spat up bloody phlegm and pushed himself to his feet, using his sword as a prop. His head was heavy from blood loss, but thanks to his comrades shielding him, he had yet to take a fatal wound. He could still fight.

At that sight of Leslie, the beastman before him scratched his head. Then, with a long sigh,

Beastman: “So they ain’t underlings, they’re comrades. My bad, then. The folks by my side are my family too. I can’t say I don’t get how you feel. —So go on and hate me all ya like.”

Leslie: “…This is the mercenary trade. I do not waste my hate on that. The ones I hate are the people who hired you.”

Beastman: “That so. This time, it ain’t the young Miss’s nasty scheme, anyhow. Hate ’em as much as ya please.”

Hoisting a thick machete up onto his shoulder, the beastman’s body began to overflow with killing intent. To Leslie, who had slipped through the jaws of death many times, its density was more than enough to tell him that this was the end.

Even so, Leslie’s legs did not shake. His heart did not quail. He stepped straight in.

Putting all his strength into the longsword he raised, Leslie brought down the greatest strike of his life upon his foe.

—The cleanup was finished shortly afterward.

9

The tense air in the reception room made Schult feel as if he were about to suffocate.

The Barielle estate did not receive guests all that often. And even when it did, Schult was almost never present. The reason was that the one who made use of Schult was Priscilla, whereas most visitors to the manor came for discussions with Leip.

Dealings with the outside were left to Leip, while Priscilla usually spent her time out inspecting her domain. For that Priscilla to personally receive someone at the manor was almost unheard-of.

Of course, his surprise did not end with Priscilla merely welcoming a visitor.

Woman: “Mmm, not bad at all. For someone this little, ya’ve been trained real proper, huh. Color me impressed.”

Schult: “Ah, thank you very much…”

In response to her impression of the tea he had poured, Schult answered haltingly, his cheeks stiff. Smiling at the boy was a lovely woman with pale, light-violet hair.

The woman, a guest to the Barielle estate, gently touched Schult's tense cheek with her fingertip. At the ticklish sensation, Schult's throat quivered faintly.

Woman: "No need to be so stiff, ya know. Do I really look that scary to ya?"

Schult: "N-No, that is not… the case…"

Priscilla: "Cease, vixen. Do not amuse yourself with my page."

Unable to bear watching Schult shrink back, Priscilla cut in with her voice. At his mistress's words, Schult's relief was plain to see, while the guest pursed her lips and gave Priscilla a sidelong glance.

Woman: "Now that's a hurtful way to put it. Don't tell me ya decided that just off the impression from my stole?"

Letting a dissatisfied note slip into her voice, the guest used the same finger that had been touching Schult to toy with her own neckline—specifically, the white fox fur wrapped around her neck. It was not a season of particularly low temperatures, yet to Schult she seemed oddly bundled up. Her outfit of pure white suited her delicate looks, but he could not help wondering if she was not hot.

Putting Schult's inner thoughts aside, Priscilla just snorted, looking bored, at the woman's words, and said,

Priscilla: "Hardly. I merely expressed your nature in the most direct way possible. Aware of it as you are, you wrap a fox's pelt round your own neck of your own accord, do you not? How commendable."

Woman: "You sure don't know when to quit talkin'. We're both crooked by nature, aren't we?"

Not yielding an inch before Priscilla's sharp tongue, the woman shot back in a speech colored by an unfamiliar accent. It was that very attitude which made up the second shock for Schult—not only that

Priscilla had welcomed a guest, but that there was a woman who could exchange words with her on equal footing.

The give-and-take between the two was prickly, laced with poison, and could by no means be called amicable. And yet Priscilla did not truly lose her temper—that was only because she saw commensurate value in her opponent.

Priscilla had worn that attitude once before, back in the capital—that much Schult remembered.

Woman: “Hmm. Even so, children usually take a liking to me, ya know. It makes me feel kinda lonely.”

At the guest’s murmur, her brows drooping, Schult started. Before he knew it, he had drawn away from her side and returned to stand right next to Priscilla.

Her gentle smile deepened, and in her light-blue eyes she took in both Priscilla and Schult, then said,

Woman: “Sure looks like ya love your mistress. Seems she’s got ya nicely tamed.”

Priscilla: ““Tamed”, you say? Do not make me laugh. That is a word far more suited to yourself, is it not? One who so delights in driving packs of dogs and cats is precisely the sort of beast-lover it befits.”

Woman: “Hearin’ that from the side that’s borrowin’ this beast-lover’s hands just sounds like bravado to me, ya know.”

Priscilla narrowed her eyes in displeasure, while the guest faced her with a smile still fixed in place.

Looking back and forth between the two, Schult turned his eyes toward the door as if seeking help. There stood Priscilla’s retainer, Al, leaning against the wall and looking bored. He noticed Schult’s clinging gaze and said,

Al: “What’s up, Schult-chan?”

Schult: “Ah, Al-sama, I feel extremely, extremely suffocated…”

Al: “Ahh, I get how ya feel, Schult-chan, but I don’t wanna poke at a princess who’s in a bad mood either. Right now I figure the smart move’s to keep our heads down and ride out the storm.”

Schult: “A storm…”

The dependable Al did not give him the answer he had hoped for, and Schult was at a loss.

If it had truly been a storm, he could have shut the shutters or holed up in his room to deal with it. But the heart of the matter was not wind, but the stare-down between the two women. On top of which—

Mimi: “Ooh, the wind is bad! Super bad! So Mimi votes for Old Man too!”

The last person present in the room chimed in cheerfully with Al’s words. It was a small girl clinging to the shoulder where Al’s left arm was missing, bouncing with excitement.

She had orange hair and wore a white robe, was shorter than Schult, and overflowed with energy. Cat ears sprouted from her head and a tail from her rear, marking her as a demi-human of the catfolk.

She was the companion of the visiting woman—in other words, the catfolk girl was a guest as well. Seeing the girl chattering away at the top of her lungs, the woman called out,

Woman: “Mimi, ya shouldn’t go causin’ too much trouble for other folks. Do ya work properly now, okay?”

Mimi: “Eeh, but Mimi is bo~red! The Miss won’t let Mimi go with the Commander!”

Hopping down from Al, the girl—Mimi—grabbed her own braids and tugged on them. The woman gave a wry smile at the gesture and beckoned Mimi over.

Woman: “If I let Mimi go too, I’d end up all by myself, wouldn’t I. Tivey’s makin’ preparations for the move, and Hetaro’s gotta stick with Ricardo to back him up or it gets risky.”

Mimi: “Uu, so not fair, Commander is so lucky. I bet he’s gettin’ to kill a whooole bunch of people.”

Al: “For such a cute face and voice, this little squirt says some pretty scary stuff.”

Mimi: “Uehehe, sayin’ Mimi’s cute makes Mimi all shy~. …Huh?”

Beckoned by the woman, Mimi snuggled up against her knees, looking bashful. Her words might be extreme, but taken just by appearance, it was an endearing scene. Then Mimi’s expression suddenly changed.

With a blank look on her face, Mimi glanced at her own right hand, then gave her head a big shake, making her cat ears twitch.

Mimi: “Miss, Miss, Hetaro’s bitin’ his pinky! His pinky! What was that code again?”

Woman: “That means “situation settled, no damage.” Ya gotta remember it properly, okay?”

Mimi: “Yeah yeah, that again. Next year Mimi’ll work hard! Work suuuper hard!”

Woman: “That’s right, you do that. And ya gotta give your “roger” too—bite your pinky back.”

Mimi: “Aye-aye~… chomp. Ow!”

Mimi bit her own pinky and burst into foolish laughter, for reasons Schult could not fathom. He stared wide-eyed at their exchange, but the other three showed no change in expression. Well, only Al’s expression was hidden, so in practice it was just Priscilla and the woman.

Priscilla: “Vixen.”

Woman: “Yeah yeah. I ain’t gonna fuss about ya callin’ me that anymore, but what is it?”

Priscilla: "“What”, you ask? How strange. Once the matter is settled, you have an obligation to report to your employer, do you not?"

Seated deep in her chair, head tilted, Priscilla addressed her, and the guest closed one eye. The smile that had been on her lips from the start vanished for the first time. She lifted a hand to her own cheek and said,

Woman: "Listen, don't go gettin' the wrong idea, 'kay? Those kids' employer is me, and me alone. This job was a deal between me and y'all, separate from their hire. Don't go decidin' who's above who all on your own."

Priscilla: "Hmph. If it is not only your chest that is small but your tolerance as well, then I can understand your desperation. In the end, all things in this world lie in the palm of *my* hand. I may take some pleasure in savoring futile flailing, but do you possess the worth to justify it?"

Woman: "So that's your way of sayin' you're turnin' down the idea of keepin' me, 'cause you're scared I'll bite the hand that feeds me?"

The deadly back-and-forth of poison against poison made Schult feel faint. He could hardly believe that Al and Mimi remained so completely unfazed.

However, the first to break off from the exchange of dangerous looks was the woman.

Woman: "Stayin' too long'll just put us both in a bad mood, so why don't we wrap this up. Just like ya guessed, this job's finished… I've taken care of the little concern on your side."

Priscilla: "It was nothing grand enough to be called a "concern". However irksome the presence of a few gnats may be, they are hardly an obstacle."

Woman: "That so? Then let's call it that. Stickin' my nose into a married couple's problems'd be the height o' poor taste, and as for keepin' up some nice, friendly relationship from here on… I reckon we can both pass on that, yeah?"

To the woman's confirmation that continuing any mutually beneficial relationship was out of the question from the outset, Priscilla responded with silence and a look. The cruelty in that gaze was answer enough to her proposal.

At that, the woman rose to her feet with a sigh and clapped her hands lightly.

Woman: "As far as I'm concerned, long as there's no hiccup with the payment, that's all I need. If this is the last time we do business and it ends here, that'd suit me just fine."

Priscilla: ""Ends here", you say. You know full well it will not be so, do you not?"

Looking up at the woman who had stood, Priscilla hid her mouth behind the fan she had somehow taken in hand. The woman, gazing down at that gesture, reached up out of habit to touch the fox fur at her throat.

Their gazes crossed, crimson and light blue intertwining. Then Priscilla wet her lips with her tongue and said,

Priscilla: ""A certain head of a Kararagi trading company journeys to a neighboring country to expand her business. There she negotiates with a convenient local lord to obtain the rights to open a storefront"… Do as you like. I shall not hinder you."

Woman: "Somethin' about that story bother ya? Ya sure make it sound like it's catchin' on somethin'."

Priscilla: "Twice, I shall allow it. I shall say, "do as you please". But a third time, I will not."

Hidden within that declaration was the cruel heat of Priscilla's will.

Should anyone defy that notice, she would show no mercy. How the woman took that proclamation, Schult could not tell, but she fell silent for a while, then—

Woman: "Haah… all right, enough. This time, I'll just chalk it up as the cost o' my lessons."

Priscilla: “Hmph. You would let go of your hard-won reward?”

Woman: “I ain’t about to leap at a pay packet only to find I’ve grabbed bad money. ’Sides, it ain’t like I’m headin’ home empty-handed. That goes for both of us, don’t it?”

With an exaggerated shrug, the woman stuck her tongue out at Priscilla.

Schult did not really understand the meaning of the exchange between the two. He only grasped that Priscilla had cornered the woman with her words in some fashion, and that the woman in turn had slipped free of Priscilla’s designs.

And that Priscilla quietly took pleasure in that fact as well.

Woman: “Mimi, we oughta be takin’ our leave. If we dawdle too long, who knows what Ricardo and the rest’ll get up to while they’re waitin’.”

Mimi: “Mmm, got it~. Then bye-bye to Old Man, and the little kid, and the big-boobed lady too! Bye-byee!”

Swinging her arm wildly as she waved, Mimi cheerfully called out her farewell. With her other hand she held the woman’s, and the two headed out of the reception room. As they went,

Woman: “Oh, right, this might be stickin’ my nose where it don’t belong, but maybe ya oughta keep a proper collar on your husband’s antics? If he kicks up trouble, that could turn into a real mess.”

Priscilla: “Be gone, vixen.”

Woman: “Yeah yeah, the princess sure is cold-hearted.”

With that, the woman left the reception room, taking Mimi with her. A servant waiting in the hall would guide them and see them off the grounds.

Once only those connected to the Barielle household remained in the room—

Al: “Man, that chick had some killer presence. I was practically fightin’ for my life tryin’ to turn into background air.”

Priscilla: “I shall commend you for not putting in unnecessary words. Speak with that woman and she would likely pry all manner of needless things out of you.”

Al: “Oh wow, that’s a surprisingly good review. Kinda rare, comin’ from ya, Princess.”

Priscilla’s evaluation of the woman who had just left surprised Schult as much as it did Al.

To Schult’s eyes, she had simply looked like someone with backbone and a gentle temperament. Of course, anyone who could stand face-to-face with Priscilla had inner strength of the highest order.

Setting aside Schult’s assessment, Al went on, toying with the seams of his helm with a finger.

Al: “So, ya went outta your way to summon her. That means she’s the third one, right?”

Priscilla: “Impudent girl, daring to appraise *me* as she went. … There is no mistake.”

Schult: “The third one…?”

Schult could not follow the exchange that made sense only between Al and Priscilla. As he tilted his head in confusion, Priscilla snapped her open fan shut with a sharp sound.

And then—

Priscilla: “She is the third Royal Candidate. In other words, my foe.”

Schult: “—! That lady! She is a different person from the woman we met before in the royal capital, is she?”

The unexpected truth startled Schult, even as it made sense to him. He knew he had seen Priscilla behave that way toward the woman before—that was how she had acted in the capital when she met the previous candidate.

Al: “But a Kararagi native as a candidate, huh. That Dragon Stone’s not exactly picky, is it.”

Priscilla: “The soil of one’s birth is of no consequence. If you trace it back, my own birthplace is the Empire. Those truly fit are chosen of themselves when the time is ripe. That is all.”

Al: “Hearin’ ya say that, it kinda sounds like you’re rating that girl pretty highly, doesn’t it?”

Priscilla: “Al, present your neck. I shall sever it.”

Al: “Sorry, I got carried away!”

At Priscilla’s cold tone and gaze, Al dropped into a *dogeza* on the spot as if diving forward.

From what Al had told him, *dogeza* was a posture of expressing the utmost apology to the other party. At Al’s side, Schult also dropped into the same pose before Priscilla.

Schult: “Priscilla-sama, please find it in your heart to forgive Al-sama. It was a momentary impulse, that is all!”

Al: “Uooh, Schult-chan, that makes me real happy… and at the same time, the guilt of makin’ a kid do dogeza with me is intense!”

Priscilla: “Very well, that is enough. I am in good humor today. For that reason, I shall let it pass.”

Al: “For someone in a good mood, what the hell was that killing intent when you said you’d lop my head off…?”

Still unconvinced, Al cocked his head, and he and Schult rose from their *dogeza*. Then Al addressed Priscilla, who had her cheek propped on her hand, with a “But, y’know,” and went on,

Al: “Gotta hand it to ya, Princess. Wrappin’ up Gramps Leip’s screwup and doin’ a meet-and-greet with a rival candidate all in one go. I bet they're plenty scared o' you on their side too."

Priscilla: "Fool. They have reaped as much as we. At best, we are somewhat better off for having judged that vixen's forces to a small degree."

Al: "Huh…? No doubt they're strong, but it's not like we really got a clear measure of 'em, right?"

Priscilla: "Truly, your eyes are nothing but knotholes. Do you imagine that vixen would be so careless as to come into enemy territory with but a single bodyguard? The entire manor was encircled by her forces."

Al: "Ugh, for real? That's terrifying."

Al slumped his shoulders in dismay, and Schult's eyes went wide at Priscilla's words. Realizing they had been in such a pinch without even noticing, he was impressed all over again that a Royal Candidate was not someone who could be dealt with easily.

Yet in contrast to the astonishment of her two retainers, Priscilla remained composed—or rather, she seemed more than composed. To Schult's eyes, he could see her mood rising.

It was just like on that day of the tournament, when she had decided to take Al as her retainer.

Schult: "Priscilla-sama, you somehow seem to be having fun."

Priscilla: "Oh?"

At Schult's stray remark, Priscilla looked back at him with a curious little breath. Seeing the light in his mistress's crimson eyes, Schult felt the emotion he had felt when he first saw them rise up within him again.

Looking down at Schult as he lay on the verge of death, Priscilla had peered into his eyes and called them "Blazing Flame."

Later he learned that "Blazing Flame" meant a flame burning in a vivid crimson.

Red was Priscilla's color, the color Schult loved more than any other in this world. That Priscilla had happily called Schult's eyes a Blazing Flame—she had accepted him as part of that roaring blaze.

She had driven heat into a body that had only been growing colder, and dazzled him with a searing flame.

Schult: "Because Priscilla-sama seems to be having fun, I am happy as well!"

Al: "…Good grief. You sure are innocent, Schult-chan. Our enemies' full picture's slowly comin' into focus, and it's clear from the start they ain't gonna be simple… and you call that fun."

Priscilla: "Truly, Schult's words miss the mark entirely."

As Schult smiled, Al, wearing the air of a wry smile, tossed the topic to Priscilla. Taking it up, Priscilla began by seemingly denying Schult's words, and said,

Priscilla: "Do not use such a frivolous little word as "fun" for one such as me. Show it with words suited to something that can set this breast aflutter."

Schult: "Yes! Priscilla-sama is very enjoy right now!"

Priscilla: "Mm, not bad. …Yes. Whoever the opponent may be, the ending will be the same. In that case, all that matters is that the path I take toward it be bright and resplendent as amusement for me."

The green-haired beauty and the purple-haired great merchant—rival candidates whose names and circumstances were still not fully known.

Even with them before her, there was no shadow over Priscilla's path of conquest. She simply believed in her own victory without the slightest doubt and lost herself in the beauty of the flame that would burn away the darkness.

Priscilla: "Even when it comes to making them submit, my interest is far better served if the opponent has worth befitting it."

Al: “You’ve got a nasty personality.”

Al shook his head and muttered in a low voice at Priscilla, who hid her lips behind her open fan.

At the exchange between master and servant, Schult found himself smiling faintly.

There had been a time when he had resigned himself to death. A hollow time when he could feel no fear at the thought of dying. Plucked up from that, granted this time to live as he was now, he thought,

Schult: “We are very enjoy the present as well!”

—Schult was very happy.

10

The building had been put up as if to hide itself away in a remote region that no one but the old man knew.

It was an old, wooden house. The structure was a shabby two-story building, run-down to the point of being almost a ruin. There was no trace of anyone living there, and in fact, no one actually resided in it.

The first and second floors of this building were nothing but decoration. What mattered was not aboveground but underground, and to reach that place it was necessary to go through a complicated series of steps.

Old Man: “…”

The old man felt no dissatisfaction at carrying out those troublesome procedures. His position demanded the utmost caution. He felt no hesitation toward actions necessary to fulfill his long-held vow.

It was precisely because of that disposition that he had been able to go on harboring his ambition for decades without letting it rot.

Old Man: "…"

With the sound of a latch being undone, the door leading to the basement swung open. Snorting at the dust that billowed up and the smell of old wood, the old man, relying on the light of the crystal lamp fixed to the wall, set his foot on the stairs. As the white light cut open the darkness, the stairs creaked under him as he descended underground.

Once he reached the bottom, the old man turned the crystal lamp's light straight ahead. In the spacious underground room, there—

???: "—Is this visit not earlier than scheduled? Caution: Required."

Old Man: "It is to share an unforeseen development. You need not tell me."

What emerged within the light was a small, black-clad figure. The voice was high and emotionless, yet somehow carried a tone that seemed to show concern for the old man.

The old man, however, merely clicked his tongue at the owner of that voice and sharpened his gaze in irritation.

Old Man: "That one is a far tougher nut to crack than I imagined. She refuses to let me get a hand on the reins at all. This level of trouble is excessive."

???: "You cannot bring her fully to heel? It seems things did not proceed according to your expectations."

Old Man: "Whether it is keen intuition or simply strong ill luck, I do not know. All the stray dogs I had my eye on beforehand were taken off the board one after another. Measures must be taken so that my groundwork does not come to light, but…"

???: "It may be that they unexpectedly took the initiative. Careful deliberation: Required."

At the pointed remark in that high voice, the old man wrinkled the bridge of his nose in displeasure. Even so, the life burning in his eyes had not dimmed in the slightest. With those eyes, he glared fixedly at the one he was speaking with.

Old Man: “I demand that the plan be moved forward. We should put a collar on that one as soon as possible.”

???: “…Is that not premature? Under the present conditions, I cannot be certain of the safety of carrying out the plan. Should degradation occur in the soul, it will affect the Dragon Stone’s prophecy as well.”

Old Man: “Who asked for your opinion? I made a demand. You have no authority to refuse.”

The old man crushed his counterpart’s reasoned objection head-on with a hardline stance. To the other, who fell silent under his overbearing words, the old man went on, lacing his voice with scorn.

Old Man: “Who do you think you owe for still being alive? I do not expect a proper sense of ethics from a witch, but I have spent this much time. You will provide me an appropriate return.”

???: “…I have no objection. It was merely a suggestion. I shall comply with your demand.”

Old Man: “You should have said so from the start. You, and that one as well—women should not stick their noses in where they are not needed.”

Spitting the words out, the old man hung the crystal lamp back on the wall. At last, the whole of the basement room was illuminated, and the full figure of the person before him was laid bare.

It was a young girl with no limbs, chained to the wall. A girl with long, pink hair, wearing nothing but a thin, filthy black robe—a wretched sight.

Yet in the old man’s eyes as he looked at the girl, there was no pity, no compassion, not even interest. There was only the flame of stagnant ambition, the long-standing obsession that had gone on smoldering endlessly without ever going out.

Old Man: “You will be of use to me, witch. Before the Royal Selection begins, you will replace that one’s Knight and shatter that creepy self-consciousness of hers, turning her into a puppet. —I shall not be handing this country’s throne over to anyone.”

At the old man’s declaration, dark like a flame, the only girl who heard it—the witch—said nothing.

Her eyes stared at the smirking old man, her lips pressed tightly together without emotion.

With many schemes still tangled together, before the start of the Royal Selection could even be declared, turmoil would visit the Barielle manor. Neither the old man nor the witch knew what the old man’s obsession and the witch’s involvement would bring forth from that turmoil.

However, in the near future, at the place where the start of the Royal Selection would be proclaimed, the figure of this old man was nowhere to be seen.

—That was a future already spoken of, and it became a historical fact that was all but impossible to change.

Chapter 3:
A Graceful Prosperity Record
(Edited Machine Translation)

1

—The moment the light was born, I blinked in surprise.

The fact that the dazzling light caught my eye, that I felt a faint heat in my palm, and that the unexpected mechanism had slightly shaken my heart were all things that led to surprise.

However, at that moment, the scene that was burned into my eyes and heart the most was something different.

"—Ah."

Compared to that, the light and heat were all so insignificant that they could be put off for later.

I think it was probably because of that that things had happened.

I think that without it I wouldn't be here now.

It was something bigger than light, heat, or emotion.

It was—

2

—With the scheduled time approaching, Julius Juukulius looked up.

"It's already this late, huh. Sometimes I lose track of time when I'm dealing with paperwork."

He took off his glasses and gently rubbed his tired eyes.

This was the downside of having to look at small letters for a long time. His eyes weren't bad. He thought that using glasses was just a necessary ritual to change his mood.

Naturally, when acting as a knight, he wouldn't rely on his glasses.

However, when he was facing documents in his study like this, in his role as the next head of the Juukulius family, he needed to take off his armor so as not to be too tense.

This was a commandment that Julius had imposed on himself without anyone telling him.

"—Brother, it's almost time. Are you ready?"

Just as he was gathering up the documents on his desk, there was a knock on the door. The thin voice that came through the door was a familiar one, and Julius's cheeks naturally relaxed.

"I was just cleaning up. Sorry for troubling you, Joshua."

"No, of course. I have heard that today's promise is important to our family… no, to the kingdom. It is my duty to support you, Brother."

After hearing Julius's reply, a slender young man opened the door and replied bravely.

He was a handsome young man with pale purple hair tied in a ponytail and a gentle smile. His name was Joshua Juukulius. As his family name suggested, he was Julius's younger brother, three years younger than him. Joshua was turning 18 this year and was a perfect family man who devotedly supported his older brother.

He smiled at Julius inside the room, then looked down at the pile of papers on his desk and said,

"You have another important task ahead of you… You're working too hard, Brother. If you don't take care of yourself a little, we as a family will be worried."

"I appreciate your concern, but I know my limits. Besides, right now, no matter how much time there is, it’s never enough. The only way to make up for that is to work hard.”

“In that case, please at least give an opportunity for not only you but also those around you to work hard. For the time being, leave the tidying up of the work to me. You, Brother, need to get changed and get ready to greet the guest. This is also an important duty.”

He put his hands on his hips and gave a long lecture as if he was the one taking care of him, making him smile wryly. Joshua had been scolding him a lot recently. That was how worried he was.

He understood his concern. The current situation in the kingdom was far from reassuring or peaceful.

“However, you act for that purpose, Brother. Today’s meeting is also for that purpose, right?”

“You’ve become able to say such things. Let me say that as an older brother it’s reassuring. At the same time, I feel a bit lonely that Joshua is leaving my hands.”

“P-Please don’t tease me… Come on, get out of the way.”

Joshua pushed the back of Julius who was smiling thinly and pushed his brother toward the door. Joshua then began to quickly put away the documents lined up on the desk, causing Julius to sigh.

The brothers had similar hair color and facial features, but Joshua was born with a weak constitution. Unlike Julius, Joshua was not blessed with any talent for the sword, but he excelled as a civil servant. His abilities were more desirable in that field than Julius who was considered to be excellent in both literary and military arts.

His recent attitude showed that he had acknowledged this and had no hesitation in deciding his position. While Julius found this reassuring, it was not an exaggeration to say that he felt a little lonely as an older brother.

“Brother can be too meticulous, so I’m just the right amount of lazy to be suited to this kind of work. Now, get ready. Under no circumstances should you keep a lady waiting.”

Joshua, not noticing his brother’s sad expression, jokingly closed one eye. It was a picturesque gesture, given his handsome features, but Joshua’s behavior was a bit surprising as it was unlike him.

“I’m surprised Joshua would make such a joke. Who did you learn that from?”

“You think I have bad friends? There’s no one I would emulate except you, Brother.”

Julius was shocked once again by the immediate retort.

After that, he calmly reflected on his usual behavior for a while and nodded.

“—I see. Now that you mention it, that is certainly true.”

Indeed that was a manner of speaking that was characteristic for him. In fact, he may have even said that before. Just as he nodded in understanding, Joshua gave a wry smile and kicked him out of the room.

In preparation for the time when his older brother next returned to work, the capable younger brother would make an environment that understood his older brother more than his older brother himself did.

Taking advantage of his kindness, Julius returned to his room as instructed and got ready. However, he had already finished the preparations the night before. All that was left was to change clothes.

—Putting on this uniform was a process that has been repeated countless times.

But even so, every time Julius put on this white outfit he felt a sense of responsibility. This uniform carried with it great power, and with that power came the responsibility of wearing it.

It was truly “formal attire” and must therefore be worn with respect.

“—All right.”

He looked at his whole body in the mirror, checked that his appearance was fine, and then nodded.

Caring about one’s appearance was a sign of vanity. And Julius took pride in that. Therefore, every time he put on his pure white, untainted uniform, he questioned the nature of that vanity.

Looking at the magic crystal hanging on the wall, he saw that there was still plenty of time until the scheduled time. Still, it was polite to arrive earlier than the appointed time. After getting ready, Julius left the room.

After leaving a message to the members of the household and a few words for Joshua, he left the mansion. With that plan—

“—Oh, that was quick. I thought a playboy would take longer.”

“…”

As soon as he passed through the entrance, he was stopped by a lovely voice calling out to him.

Julius held his breath slightly and stared in amazement at the voice’s owner—a woman leaning against a pillar in the center of the hall with her hands clasped behind her back. It took exactly two seconds for his surprise to fade away.

He changed course and headed down the stairs towards the woman. Julius closed one eye at the smiling woman and asked,

“I don’t think this is the case, but our maids weren’t so rude as to make you wait here, were they?”

“Ahaha, of course not. This is just somethin’ I unreasonably requested. So don’t get angry at the maids, okay?”

“It can’t be helped if I’m given a warning like that. I’ll give them a warning, but more importantly…”

Julius gave a wry smile at the gentle way she spoke and paused.

She was a petite woman. Julius was not particularly tall, but she only reached his chest. With her slender limbs and delicate build, she was the very embodiment of the word adorable.

In fact, the woman’s appearance was so beautiful that one would hesitate to compare her to a flower or jewel, and her round light blue eyes and soft, gentle voice have a magical charm that captures the human heart.

There was no other way to describe her than as a woman who stands out above the ordinary.

“Huh? Why did ya suddenly go quiet? Ah, do I have bedhead or something? How embarrassin’.”

“No, that is not the case. Today too, there is not the slightest hint of fading in Lady Anastasia’s splendor. I too have been captivated by your charm once again.”

“…Really, Julius, it’s unfair that ya say things like that without any hesitation.”

The woman, Anastasia Hoshin, looked up at the honest compliment and muttered in a sulky tone. Julius’s smile deepened at this reaction and he resumed the topic he had left off on earlier.

“So, what happened? There is still a while until our appointment, and I was supposed to be the one to come and pick you up anyway.”

“It’s right before a big match, right? When that happens, I can’t wait. It’s a bit embarrassin’, though.”

Anastasia blushed at the reason for the unexpected visit.

“Before a big match… Is that because you are nervous?”

“Uh-Uh. —Excited, I guess.”

She replied bashfully—no, her smile had a hint of belligerence to it. Julius was momentarily put off by her answer, but then he was instantly relieved.

It was reassuring to see that rather than feeling nervous before the big match, she was excited and couldn't wait.

"But, if you say that, I feel at ease."

"I see. It seems that you're really motivated, Julius. In that case, I'll rely on ya, please?"

"Yes, leave it to me. —We are in the same boat after all."

Anastasia looked puzzled at Julius's response. Then, she smiled even more happily and said,

"That's right. We're in the same boat. So we hafta be good friends forever, right?"

She closed one eye and said with a cute, strong voice.

3

Julius Juukulius was a young knight who belonged to the royal guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

At the same time, he was the eldest son of the Juukulius family, a noble family of the kingdom, and was in a position to inherit the family someday.

For that reason, he was expected to behave in an appropriate manner both as a knight and as a noble.

It was a responsibility that many would find burdensome, but Julius was always aware of its weight and showed those around him how to behave with a strong sense of reason and self-control.

With such a sincere attitude, it was only natural that he was rated as the "Finest of Knights".

In fact, many people who knew him took that reputation for granted, and no one would ever unfairly criticize him. It was his everyday actions that earned him the trust and respect he deserved.

Julius himself felt that the expectations and praise he received from those around him were excessive. However, he didn't go out of his way to deny it. If his abilities were not up to par with the praise he was given, he would work on improving himself until he was worthy of it. –And that made him even more so the "Finest".

The royal guard knights were the model for the kingdom's knights, and even among them, he was said to be the most outstanding.

His loyalty to the kingdom was extraordinary, and his abilities and loyalty were recognized by everyone.

And so, the events of that day marked a major turning point for him and others alike.

"…"

—Seeing the brilliance of the dragon jewel, many people were left speechless.

Witnessing this amazement, Julius let out an inappropriate sigh of admiration. Reflected in his yellow eyes was one woman, just like the people around him

However, the emotions he felt when he saw her must have been completely different from those of the people around him.

An emotion spread deep in his chest and asserted its presence. It would be unrefined to give it a name. Seeing that radiance for the second time, he felt an excitement in his heart that was uncharacteristic of him.

However, for now, Julius gently suppressed his excitement and took a step forward.

There was a clear difference between the amazement of those around him and Julius's admiration. His current mission was to help fill that clear gap.

"As you can see, the dragon jewel has recognized her qualifications to be the next king. With this beautiful radiance, I recommend her as one of the five dragon maidens prophesied by the dragon stone."

Placing his hand on his chest, Julius took the lead in answering the gazes of the high-ranking nobles—filling more than twenty seats in the assembly—looking down upon him.

In fact, it wasn't a complete lie to say that it had the spirit of a battlefield. The gazes directed at him were intense, and even Julius, who was used to such situations, couldn't help but feel nervous.

The knight's voice, which concealed his true feelings, brought the people, who were still shocked, back to normal. Then, their eyes turned once again to the shining dragon jewel—to Anastasia, who stood in the center of the assembly hall—proving her qualifications as a dragon maiden.

It would be easier if they just stayed together like this, enchanted by the light, but—

"—Hmm. I understand what the knight Julius Juukulius has to say."

His wish was in vain, however, as the silence was broken by an old man with a thin face and a long white beard.

The old man was seated in the front row, in the center, nodding gently in his direction. His words and actions made Julius feel increasingly tense. This was because the old man was none other than the wise elder, Lord Miklotov McMahon, the representative of the Sage Council, the brains of the kingdom.

Ignoring Julius's tension, Miklotov stroked his long beard and said,

"In that case, the next most important thing is the person's own will. I would like to hear from her."

"—So that means it's okay for me ta talk? That's a relief. I'm not good at stayin' quiet for long periods of time. In my job, there are some parts where talkin' is the key."

"Well, well. That's a very encouraging reply."

"Right? If I don't keep my nerve at the last minute, I won't be able ta convince ya old men."

Anastasia responded to the gentle words of the wise elder with a relaxed attitude.

The exchange between the two created tension among those who were not involved. Many attributed it to Miklotov's intentions, while a few attributed it to Anastasia's courage. Of course, Julius was in the latter category.

The courage to remain calm on this big stage was worthy of praise.

"Then, could I ask you to tell me your name again?"

"Yes, yes. My name, right? —My name is Anastasia Hoshin. I am the representative of the Hoshin Company in Kararagi. Thank ya again, everyone."

"…"

Bowing deeply, Anastasia turned to the assembly hall with a fearless smile.

A murmur immediately erupted in the hall. This was because what she said contained words that could not be overlooked. This was also proof of Julius's great decision.

—The qualifications to become a dragon maiden, in other words, the qualifications to participate in the royal selection to decide the next king.

He was recommending her, a "person from another country", to have her qualifications recognized in a situation where all the high-ranking nobles who supported the foundations of the country were gathered together in the assembly hall inside the castle of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

"Please be quiet. I said I would hear what she has to say first."

The noisy room fell silent at the sound of his gentle voice. It wasn't the volume of his voice, but the quality of his voice that had the power to leave no room for argument. After he spoke, Miklotov nodded to Anastasia,

“The dragon jewel certainly shines. I have also heard your name and background. Hmm, now it is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to participate in the royal selection…”

“My feelings are…”

Anastasia hesitated for just a moment, and gave Julius a sideways glance. Julius, standing to her right, could only continue to stand there sincerely, meeting her gaze.

However, Anastasia closed her eyes at Julius’s attitude, turned back to Miklotov, and said,

“I’m qualified. I also have my reasons. So I want ta take part in the royal selection. That’s what I’m plannin’ ta do.”

“…”

Miklotov closed his eyes as Anastasia boldly expressed her desire to participate. Julius was also deeply moved by the unhesitant nature of her words.

“Knight Julius, please explain how Lady Anastasia was chosen by the dragon jewel.”

“Yes. It all started when I invited Lady Anastasia to come to our house from Kararagi. The purpose was to negotiate for the expansion of sales channels for the Hoshin Trading Company in the Kingdom of Lugunica…During this business meeting, the insignia that had been distributed to the royal knights began to shine in Lady Anastasia’s hands.”

In response to the request, Julius began to fluently explain the events that had taken place.

It had been about a month since he had invited Anastasia to the Juukulius household and met her for the first time. The purpose was to ask for help in reviving the kingdom’s stagnant economy – it had been the sole decision of Julius, who was worried about the kingdom's future, but the situation had taken an unexpected turn.

Searching for the dragon maidens was a priority duty for the knights of the royal guard.

For that reason, badges with dragon jewels embedded in them were distributed to the knights, and by some coincidence, when Anastasia touched one of them, it began to shine.

"After confirming this fact, I confided the situation to Lady Anastasia and did everything I could to persuade her to participate in the royal selection…and to identify herself as a dragon maiden."

"Yes. I was passionately wooed."

Anastasia, standing next to Julius as he earnestly explained the facts, had her hand on her cheek and looked amused.

However, Anastasia's claim was not wrong. It was true that Julius had spoken passionately, strongly appealing to her about how valuable she was.

"The head of a trading company in the Kararagi city-states…a young and beautiful trading company head, I see. That's also…"

After hearing the explanation of the recommendation process, Miklotov corrected himself and spoke vaguely. There was a hint of bitterness in his voice, and it was clear what it was—

"—This is a farce. You should state this clearly, Lord Miklotov."

A rough, husky voice interrupted Miklotov's thoughts. The voice came from a balding old man sitting to Miklotov's right with his thick arms folded.

There was a hint of rage on the old man's face and it was clear at a glance that he did not welcome the proposal.

In fact, the bald old man—Bordeaux Zellgef of the Sage Council—stood up and gave Anastasia and Julius a stern look.

"How dare you bring a foreigner into this kingdom's most important crisis without permission, Juukulius! You are a royal knight; don't you understand the seriousness of the situation?!"

"With all due respect, Lord Zellgef. I always try to be mindful of my responsibilities."

"So what are you going to do about this? Not content with just revealing the secret national crisis to a foreigner, you now propose that person as the next king? Stop talking like a fool! Are you really the one who is called the "Finest" in the royal guard? You will bring shame to the name of the kingdom's knights!"

His fierce pursuit was almost like a shout, and his spirit intimidated Julius. Though he may be old, Bordeaux was originally a knight of the kingdom. He could understand wanting to say something about chivalry.

However, it was a fellow member of the Sage Council who put a stop to Bordeaux's anger.

"Lord Bordeaux, you're getting too heated. We're still in the middle of what they're saying. I haven't heard enough from either Lady Anastasia or Knight Julius."

"…Listen, I don't think this impression is going to change."

After being scolded by Miklotov for his anger, Bordeaux, although dissatisfied, backed down.

Bordeaux led the discussion with his formidable arm, while Miklotov calmly kept things together. Although they were both members of the Sage Council, their attitudes were completely opposed, but their presence stood out even in the assembly hall.

Most people would succumb to either the soft or the hard tongue. However—

"—So, is it normal for one of ya ta attack and the other ta be nice? If that's the case, it won't work on me."

Anastasia said this without any change in expression, and the atmosphere in the assembly hall froze.

Of course. Bordeaux's angry attitude was no lie. In response, it would not be strange to see it as an insult to insist that his anger was fake.

However, it was the wise elder's smile once again that melted the frozen atmosphere.

"It sounds a bit rude to call it a method. It's a bit of a predictable flow, though."

"Yes, yes, a predictable flow. Then, I'll accept it."

"That would be relief."

Unlike the scoffing Bordeaux, Miklotov gave a slight bow with a bitter smile. Anastasia, who calmly accepted the wise man's actions, was just as different an actor as the two of them.

As if to confirm Julius's thoughts, Anastasia raised her finger and said, "By the way."

"Regardless of whether I have the qualifications or not, I have signed a written agreement not ta disclose anythin' about this matter, so ya can rest assured. Oh, let's not talk about whether I keep my promises or not. If people doubt that, it would be the same as doubtin' my merchant spirit."

"If I may add, I have brought that written agreement with me today. If requested, I will submit it immediately. Is that acceptable?"

"Hmm, I see. So you're fully prepared."

Before the meeting with the council, the two of them were busy preparing, and Miklotov nodded deeply in satisfaction. Then, the wise elder closed one eye,

"Of course, you're also prepared for what we will discuss from here on, right?"

"Of course."

"I believe you are convinced."

Anastasia and Julius responded smoothly to Miklotov's question.

The moment they were able to do that, or when everyone saw the light of the dragon jewel, they had made up their minds.

After witnessing the results, a person sitting in the back row of the assembly hall creaked her seat back.

Then she muttered a few words.

"My opponent isn't lacking anything, I see."

Saying this, the green-haired beauty closed her amber eyes and smiled with a very dignified look.

4

"Thank you for your hard work, Lady Anastasia. As expected, your performance was magnificent."

When the conference ended and they left the assembly hall, Julius generously praised Anastasia for her attitude during the discussion.

In response to the praise, Anastasia put her finger to her lips and said, "Hmm."

"Well, I'd say it was a passing grade. It was partly thanks to the preparations made beforehand, but I think the biggest reason was that I felt reassured havin' Julius there."

"I am unworthy of such words. I would be honored if I could be of some help to you, Lady Anastasia."

"Hmm, a perfect answer… Oops."

Anastasia pouted in dissatisfaction for a moment, then noticed something and stopped in her tracks. Julius followed her gaze as she turned around, widening his eyes slightly as well.

In the castle corridor, a figure stood tall and composed, not joining the wave of nobles leaving the room. Her gaze was sharp, but not intimidating. Simply put, she had a dignified presence.

In fact, the woman's presence was like a sword and was almost dazzling.

"Lady Anastasia, that person is…"

"I know, she's famous. Besides, it's hard ta mistake her for someone else."

Interrupting Julius, Anastasia stepped towards her with her hands clasped behind her back. The woman didn't move in response to Anastasia's approach, and the two of them naturally found themselves facing each other.

"Anastasia Hoshin."

"Yes, yes, that's me. You're Duchess Crusch Karsten. Or rather, would it be easier ta understand if I called ya Crusch the royal candidate?"

"You may call me what you like. I am in a position to compete with you. In other words, you and I are on equal footing."

"Hmm, just as the rumors say…nah, she's even more straightforward than the rumors say."

The green-haired woman who answered Anastasia's call—Duchess Crusch Karsten—folded her arms.

She was also a candidate for the dragon maiden qualifications, just like Anastasia, and was the first person to be recognized. As she was also a member of the upper nobles who were summoned to the assembly, she would naturally have attended the previous assembly.

Therefore, like Bordeaux, she could have objected to Anastasia's participation in the royal selection on the grounds that she is from another country, but—

"Ya didn't do such a thing. Is that a relaxed attitude?"

“Relaxed? I’ve never been one to indulge in such things. I am aware of the mission and responsibilities that have been imposed upon me. Besides, this is now my greatest wish. I will give it my all.”

“…”

Crusch’s way of life, which embodied what an honest and upright noble should be, was something Julius could respect. However, there was something strange about how Crusch was speaking just now. It was an odd feeling that Julius felt because he had had a few opportunities to interact with her.

She had always maintained a strong awareness of her responsibilities as a high-ranking noble. And yet, when Crusch declared that she would give it her all in the royal selection, she seemed tense somehow—

“It’s been a while, Julius Juukulius. How have you been?”

“—It has been a while since I last saw you, but I’m glad to see that you’ve remained well since then, Lady Crusch.”

“I heard from Ferris that you haven’t changed either…No, maybe not. I don’t think you would have done something like this if you were the old you.”

“…”

“If there’s been a change of heart, I guess it’s the same for both of us.”

Crusch did not reprimand Julius, who chose to remain silent in response, but merely nodded. Then she turned to Anastasia,

“Once the remaining two candidates are present, the royal selection will begin in earnest. I’m glad I was able to meet you face to face and exchange words with you before that happens.”

“Are ya the type of person who wants ta see the face of the person you’re goin’ ta defeat, Crusch?”

“I would like to know their face. And if possible, I would like to know that my opponent has a purpose worthy of aiming for the throne and is powerful enough to compete for it.”

“Not only do ya look like a knight, but even yer way of thinkin’ is like a knight. In yer eyes, do ya think I fit that ideal?”

“—Let’s have dinner sometime soon if possible. Anastasia Hoshin.”

Crusch smiled faintly and turned away without giving a clear answer to the question. However, that smile was the best possible answer to Anastasia’s question.

—Crusch recognized Anastasia as a rival candidate in the royal selection.

Without a doubt, Crusch was the favorite to win the royal selection. Her judgment made Julius nod in agreement, knowing that his own eyes were correct.

Anastasia quickly noticed Julius’s reaction and pursed her lips.

“What? Ya look awfully satisfied.”

“Of course. After all, Lady Anastasia has been recognized by Lady Crusch herself. She will likely be the most difficult opponent, but it is also an honor.”

“Lady Crusch, what’s with that? And what’s with it bein’ an honor? I’m not the type of person ta get fired up when faced with the glare of a strong opponent. I’d rather have an easy victory, so it scares me.”

Anastasia frowned, making a troubled face as she spoke.

It was still fresh in his memory that she was excited and couldn’t wait until the big stage where she would put her name forward for the royal selection.

“—That’s right. Anastasia Hoshin. I will tell you one thing.”

Crusch stopped in her tracks as she turned around and pointed a finger in their direction. When the two of them looked up at her, Crusch’s amber eyes narrowed.

“At the moment, there are three known candidates. In addition to myself and you, there is also Baroness Barielle, Priscilla Barielle… but she is also quite a formidable opponent. You should prepare yourself.”

“Thanks for the advice. But it’s okay. –I already know that.”

“…I see. That was just unnecessary worry.”

Strangely, Anastasia looked genuinely displeased. Seeing this, Crusch gave a wry smile, as if she had realized something, and this time she finally left the corridor.

Seeing her leave, Julius and Anastasia were left alone in the passageway.

“Lady Anastasia, what you were talking about just now…?”

“It’s not difficult. The second candidate, Priscilla Barielle… I just spoke ta her in person a little while ago. She seemed like a tricky opponent too.”

“You met Lady Barielle in person?!”

Unexpectedly, a look of surprise appeared on Julius’s handsome face. Glancing at the good-looking man’s reaction, Anastasia gave a slightly mischievous laugh.

“I was just tryin’ ta scout the enemy. The reactions might be different before and after I put myself forward as a candidate. I thought it would be nice ta stir things up while I’m at it.”

“You never cease to amaze me… So, did you have any success?”

“—No matter how many times we negotiate, it’s all a waste of time. But findin’ out after just one is a bit of a gain, if ya want ta call it that.”

“That is…”

Julius frowned slightly, wondering what that meant.

Julius knew very little about the second candidate, Priscilla Barielle. To begin with, there was a gag order on the royal selection itself, and the same went for information about the other candidates.

Those involved in the royal selection were limited to a few important people, including high-ranking nobles, and the royal guard knights who were tasked with searching for candidates with the qualifications to become shrine maidens. Julius, however, was more familiar with the situation than the other knights because he was the first to discover Anastasia, the third candidate.

All Julius knew about Priscilla was that she was the wife of Baron Leip Barielle, who was much older than her, and that it was the Baron himself who was most enthusiastic about the royal selection.

However, as if to correct Julius's perception, Anastasia shook her head.

"Everyone says that it's the Baron who's the real challenger, but if ya see them in person, you'll see they're mistaken. –The princess is a much bigger monster than the Baron."

"…Isn't calling her a monster a bit of an exaggeration?"

"Maybe it was inappropriate to call a girl that. But, Crusch went outta her way ta warn us…Don't ya think that's credible?"

Julius held his breath at the persuasiveness of that statement, while Anastasia narrowed her eyes in a smile.

The one the dragon jewel would choose would be someone who was qualified to be a shrine maiden who could communicate with dragons—in other words, someone who could fulfill the role that the Lugunican royal family had played up until now.

Given that her qualifications were recognized, how could he think that Priscilla, whose true character was unclear, was merely an ordinary person hiding in the shadow of her husband? In fact, Anastasia and Crusch, two talented people, had been recognized by the dragon jewel and their names were on the list of candidates.

That was an overly naïve, immature, and shallow understanding. Julius admonished himself.

“My opponents are a duchess and a giant monster… It looks like a tricky situation. Since I’m competin’, I absolutely do not wanna lose, so I need ta think about this carefully.”

“Think about it?”

“If we’re gonna do it, there’s no point if we don’t win. It’s better not ta do it than ta lose. So, I’d like ta go back ta the mansion now and discuss various things.”

As Anastasia gently combed the white fur of the fox scarf around her neck with her fingers, she curled her lips as she considered the pending issues for the upcoming royal selection.

Seeing her pondering, Julius realized that this was beyond his ability.

“My apologies, Lady Anastasia. I actually have an appointment with someone after this.”

“Oh, really? Hmm, then…can we talk tonight?”

“Yes. Then, let’s meet at night. This time, I will come and pick you up myself. —I will do my best to give you good news.”

“If Julius says so, then I guess I’ll get my hopes up.”

After saying that with a playful gesture, he made an appointment for the evening with a smiling Anastasia.

After that, Julius escorted her out of the castle and saw her off to the inn in a dragon carriage. He bowed to Anastasia, who was waving, then turned around with a firm grin on his face.

The meeting place was the knight barracks adjacent to the royal castle. Unlike normal times, Julius passed through a corridor filled with many knights and guards and stepped into the dining hall.

There, awaiting Julius was—

“—This way, Julius.”

A voice called out to Julius, who was looking around the room from the entrance. Looking towards the back of the room, he saw a red-haired young man sitting alone at a four-person table, waving in his direction. Waving back, Julius headed towards the table without hesitation. He then bowed slightly to the person he had been keeping waiting.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting. The business at the assembly hall was completed without any problems.”

“It was a meeting of the high-ranking nobles and members of the Sage Council. You played an important role, so I think it would be unbecoming of a friend to blame you for being late.”

“It’s a relief to hear you say that.”

Julius smiled and narrowed his eyes at the joking young man. Then he looked around the slightly crowded dining hall and deciding it would be too conspicuous here—

“—I have something important to tell you. Let’s move to another location, Reinhard.”

So he approached the red-haired young man—the “Sword Saint” Reinhard van Astrea.

5

In a corner of the royal capital’s commercial district, there was a bar called “Silver Shield” which was frequented by the kingdom’s knights.

The owner was a former royal knight who retired due to an injury, and as a result of his colleagues and subordinates who admired him spreading the word about him among the knights, the bar had become an unusual place with only knights as regular customers. The bar’s reputation was excellent, but the owner lamented that because there were so many knights among the customers, regular customers didn’t come.

Julius had also found out about this bar after joining the knights. Since then, he had been a frequent visitor for several years, but it wasn’t just for the food and drinks.

“Mr. Conwood, I’d like to borrow the back room.”

“Sure thing. …It’s rare to have both the ‘Finest’ and the ‘Sword Saint’. Please don’t plot anything evil. It would be terrible if the country were to be turned upside down.”

“Don’t worry. Our swords are there to stop it from being turned upside down. Like a shoddy pole.”

“—. Haha, that’s what a Knight among Knights would say.”

When the owner laughed at the end of the exchange, the whole bar, having heard the joke, became noisy.

Behind that, the owner tossed a key over the counter. Reinhard took the key with a wry smile and handed it to Julius who headed to the back of the bar.

At the back of the bar was a private room—a room with thick walls that provided some soundproofing.

The reason why the Silver Shield was so highly valued by knights was because there was no need to worry about secret conversations taking place in the bar being leaked. The owner and customers were all people connected to the knights, making it a special privilege.

“So, we came all the way here to have a secret chat. Can I assume it has something to do with the royal selection?”

After locking the door to the private room, Reinhard, leaning against the wall, got straight to the point.

The room had a round table and two chairs, no unnecessary decorations, and was a room made entirely for private conversations. Now that Reinhard had spoken, there was no need to worry about his voice leaking out. In that regard, Julius had complete confidence in his red-haired friend.

Therefore, Julius, leaning against the table, lowered his chin in response to Reinhard's question,

"As you may already know, a third candidate has been found. I recommended her to the council today, and they have confirmed her qualifications."

"Her…that means the third candidate is also a woman. At this rate, it looks like all the dragon maidens may end up being women."

"Are you unhappy with the idea of a woman being on top?"

"I have no complaints if the person is deemed worthy of the throne. However, the next king will, in short, be the founder of the next royal line. It may sound bad, but it's easier for men to pass on their bloodline."

As Reinhard looked at the royal selection from a different angle, Julius silently touched his own bangs.

The current Kingdom of Lugunica was not only without a king, but was also facing the danger of the royal family being cut off. As Reinhard feared, the next king would be the first of a new royal family.

In view of these circumstances—

"—I think it would be natural for Lady Crusch to become king after all."

"The Duchess's family is a family that has always been close to the royal family. There is no small amount of royal blood flowing in their veins. And above all, Lady Crusch has great potential."

"She herself is very keen to take the throne."

The more he spoke about the current situation, the more he felt that the optimal solution had already been presented.

Crusch Karsten had the makings of a king. She also had a good reason to desire the throne.

The reason why she was so strongly attached to the throne—even Julius knew it, though to a lesser extent.

“The entire royal family fell ill. So, it may be disrespectful to mourn just one person, but…it’s regrettable what happened to Prince Fourier.”

“Reinhard…”

“His Highness was an equal person. That was something I could say about all the members of the royal family, but I had many opportunities to interact with Prince Fourier. He didn’t treat the ‘Sword Saint’ with any special consideration…Well, I’m sure Ferris was the one he had his eye on.”

“Or rather, Ferris and Lady Crusch, right?”

Both Reinhard and Julius smiled as they thought of the same person. Thinking back, the only memories that the owner of that name had were ones that warmed their hearts.

That was the kind of person Fourier Lugunica, the fourth prince of the Kingdom of Lugunica was.

Julius hadn’t had many contacts with him, but even with the few he’d had, he’d gained a lot from them.

Crusch, who had been close to him and likely shared his feelings, had much more—

“—Therefore, it may be most natural for Lady Crusch to inherit the will of the late Prince Fourier and ascend the throne. I also think that this is a noble and beautiful thing to do.”

“But you’re not convinced. That’s what you sound like.”

“…”

Reinhard pointed out to Julius, whose words had gotten heated in the latter half of his sentence, his voice trembling at the end. Julius closed his eyes at his words, and remembered what had happened at the royal castle just before.

Facing Anastasia, Crusch had declared that she would give it her all in the royal selection.

It was a declaration of war, and though it was typical of Crusch, who preferred to play it fair and square, there was something about it that made him feel uneasy.

Surely, the cause of this unease lay in the root of Crusch's obsession with the throne.

The reason why Crusch wanted to take part in the royal selection and become the king of this country, her true intention was surely—

"—So that we won't forget, I suppose."

There was a great royal family member who remained as a warm wound in the hearts of Julius and Reinhard.

What if there was something that had carved a strong, large, deep, burning wound on that person's existence that would never heal?

Even though you wish that you would never forget, that you would never let anyone else forget, the sweet pain of that wound—

"It's frustrating that I can't put it into words."

"…No matter what the driving force may be, as long as it moves in the right direction, I don't mind. I have no doubt that Lady Crusch will govern well. That goes for you too, doesn't it?"

"Of course. However, that is…"

Pausing his words, Julius groped around in his mind, searching for the perfect words. There had to be words somewhere that would properly express the feelings that lingered in his heart.

And as he searched, his fingertips tracing his memory touched something.

It was a very succinct, spontaneous comment from someone that got straight to the point.

“That is—Is it a story that looks good?”

“Julius?”

“Should we accept that the king who holds the throne of the kingdom has her heart bound by something? Even if she is a wise ruler who rules well, is it the honor of a knight to place a wounded woman on the throne?”

He’d been told that before.

It was a knight’s job to look good. If you look good as a knight, you will naturally become more like a knight. You will embody the honor of chivalry.

Those words put into words the ideal that Julius had in mind almost perfectly.

“I believe in the code of chivalry. The loyalty I have given to the kingdom is true. Therefore, if I offer my sword to my country and to my king, I do not want to go against my code or my loyalty.”

“Is that chivalry something that cannot be followed under Lady Crusch?”

“Under Lady Crusch’s current circumstances, it cannot. However, it is not my place to say anything about it. That person has already been appointed a knight. Therefore, that role does not belong to me.”

What came to mind was a friend of his who was a knight who worried that he didn’t look like a knight.

He knew that he had sworn absolute loyalty to Crusch, whom he regarded as his master. So it was possible that something like that could never happen. Or, it was possible that his own thoughts were completely misguided and he had completely missed the mark.

But if Julius was right and would not turn away from his principles or loyalty and continue to be a knight—

"—I want to dedicate my sword to someone I can trust without any hesitation."

"…"

Julius spoke these words with passion and force. Reinhard, who had heard them from the beginning, raised his eyebrows in slight surprise.

However, his red-haired friend, leaning against the wall, nodded several times,

"I think it's good. It's very Julius-like and cool."

"…It's more than a little embarrassing to hear you say that."

"I was just being honest. You don't often show that side of yourself to those around you. That's why people often misunderstand you. They don't realize that the real you is so straightforward, it's almost too straightforward."

Reinhard gave a wry smile, and Julius looked away, feeling embarrassed.

It was just the way he was born. He couldn't change it now, and he didn't want to. It was sad that it caused misunderstandings, but it would be counterproductive to let it cause him to compromise his character. Moreover, it wouldn't be elegant.

"However, from what I've heard so far, I've only heard your statement of intent. It'd be fun to have a heated discussion with a friend about the future of the kingdom, but…that's not the real purpose, is it?"

"That's right. I've gone off topic a bit. It's a bad habit of mine to go off on a tangent. Sorry."

"There are other views to be had on the way. I don't mind."

Julius nodded to Reinhard at his friendly response. Then, he finally got to the main subject that he had summoned Reinhard to the private room for.

That was—

"—'Sword Saint' Reinhard van Astrea. The highest-ranking swordsman in the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, the 'Knight among Knights', I have a favor to ask of you."

"Let me hear it."

This was not a proposal from a friend, but from the standpoint of a knight. Sensing this, Reinhard moved away from the wall and uncrossed his arms.

Seeing not his red-haired friend, but the current 'Sword Saint', Julius closed his eyes.

However, he only closed his eyes for a moment.

"Anastasia Hoshin—that is the name of the woman who has been recognized as a dragon maiden and joined as the third candidate for the royal selection."

"Hoshin…"

Reinhard frowned slightly at the familiar family name. However, Julius put aside the small feeling he had and continued speaking.

"I see in Lady Anastasia the potential to be king. Therefore, I would like to ask you, Reinhard…to be her knight and support her in the royal selection process."

—That was Julius Juukulius's best answer for the royal selection.

6

When he left the Silver Shield, the royal capital was already dyed orange by the sunset.

Spotting the setting sun over the Lugunica royal castle, Julius realized that he had been more engrossed in their discussion than he had thought. His appointment with Anastasia was at night, but he didn't have much time until sunset. Having time to spare was important in anything. Time to spare led to appearances and elegance. He hurried home.

Even if he was going to visit Anastasia, he couldn't do so in the clothes he was wearing.

The uniform of the royal guard would be conspicuous on a personal occasion, and it would be rude to visit empty-handed. Moreover, considering the importance of today's discussion, he would have liked to bring at least some high-quality alcohol.

So, with his head full of thoughts, Julius returned home—

"—Welcome back! We've been waiting so long! That's wrong! We've been waiting for you!"

"…"

Julius's thoughts were filled with confusion at the enthusiastic welcome he received at the gates of his home.

He was in front of the main gate of the Juukulius mansion in the noble district. As Julius walked up the hill and returned to the mansion, he was greeted by a petite girl who cheerfully raised both hands.

She only reached Julius's waist in height, and had distinctive orange cat ears and a tail. Her round, curious eyes sparkled, and she was a cute, charming demi-human—a kitten girl.

However, such an impression aside, Julius had already met the girl before. And not only the girl, but also the two kitten people on either side of her who looked very similar to her.

"Aside from Mimi, Hetaro and Tivey, what are you doing?"

"Th-The lady said to greet you. And then, my older sister dragged me along…"

"There's no point in me resisting, so I just went along with it obediently.”

The ones who answered Julius’s puzzled expression were two boys, one with a sad expression and the other with eyes clouded with resignation. The one with the sad expression was Hetaro, and the one with the clouded eyes was Tivey.

Between them, the only one who looked unusually happy was the girl named Mimi—

“I don’t mind you welcoming me, but may I ask about your attire?”

“Oh? Weird? Is it weird? The lady and the other ladies at the mansion praised me so much! Cute, they said I was cute! I’m so embarrassed!”

“I won’t deny that you are cute. Not only you, but your two younger brothers as well.”

“I-I don’t really need you to praise me for that…”

As Julius praised the proud Mimi, Hetaro’s eyes became teary and he complained about something. However, his assessment was not a lie. Julius pondered what to say other than a correction.

After all, Mimi and the other two were all wearing maid uniforms, the kind worn by waitresses. In fact, the lengths of the uniforms were adjusted to fit the three petite kitten people. He knew he shouldn’t say it, but it looked really good on all three of them.

He had to say, it was very charming, but—

“As boys, is it too much to ask that you have a certain level of common sense?”

“Do you think we dressed like this willingly, Julius?”

“I had hoped that this would not be the case. It seems my wish has been granted, so I am glad. This means… Lady Anastasia and Mimi are the problem it seems.”

Having immediately pinpointed the ringleaders, Julius shook his head in exasperation.

He didn’t like to interfere too much in personal tastes and preferences, but from now on, Anastasia would be in a more important position than ever. It would be necessary to be careful not to act rashly.

In particular, they must exercise strict self-restraint when it came to unbridled hobbies.

“These uniforms were specially made to fit your measurements. It doesn’t look like they were made just yesterday.”

“I took the lady seriously when she said she wanted to replace my old robes. …I’m grateful to her for giving me the chance to see my sister in her uniform though.”

“That means you’re not completely against it, so I hope you’ll be careful.”

“Wh-Wh-What, that’s wrong though?!”

As Hetaro shook his head and hands in a panic, Julius turned to Mimi. She was the oldest of the three siblings. Therefore, it was natural to speak with her.

“May I ask why you are here? I have an appointment with Lady Anastasia tonight, but…I told her that I would be the one to come and see her.”

“Hmm? Huh, but the lady came with us! I think she said she had something really important to discuss? And so, inishative? She wants to have that?”

“The lady likes to surprise people, so I’m sure that’s what she’s aiming for. As my older sister said, I think she wants to seize the initiative.”

Mimi broke down the contents of the story into simple terms, while Tivey added intelligently. Hearing the combined efforts of the siblings in reply, Julius felt a tingling sensation deep in his heart once again.

It seemed she was a woman who didn't let things go as planned and wouldn't let him take the reins.

"Oh? Is Julius having fun? Is it interesting? Are you having fun? What happened?"

"If I had to say, I was surprised by how you all greeted me. Your uniforms were also unexpected. The scheme was successful, Mimi."

"Oh! That's good! So what do you want to do? Go to the lady? Are you going?"

"I'm supposed to have returned home, so it feels strange to be shown around by guests."

"But we're supposed to have inishative! So, we'll show you around!"

Moving around quickly, the two younger brothers opened the gate at Mimi's signal.

After the exchange at the gate was over, Julius finally stepped onto the grounds. Then, following Mimi, who was humming a tune he had never heard before, the group headed to the front door.

"Are you three the only ones accompanying Lady Anastasia?"

"The lady left the Captain behind at the inn because his voice and size were too much and he got in the way. He's apparently drinking and waiting, so I think you don't need to worry."

"It seems there's no need to worry about him. With you three as Lady Anastasia's guards, that's enough, is that right?"

"Yes."

Listening to the off-key humming, Julius nodded in agreement with Hetaro and Tivey's pride.

Though it would be hard to imagine from their appearances, these three siblings were the vice captains of Anastasia's private army—and their abilities were undeniable. When the three of them were together, they were skilled enough that even Julius could not let his guard down.

“You all came to greet me, leaving the servants of this household behind. It seems best to assume that this household has already been subdued.”

“We didn’t do anything dangerous like that. Joshua seemed a little flustered though.”

“My younger brother is inexperienced. Perhaps I left him to do something terrible.”

Julius could picture his younger brother’s panic in his mind, and a wry smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. That smile made the other two, who had plenty of experience being pushed around by their superiors, chuckle in response.

Once inside the mansion, the four were greeted by members of the Juukulius household at the entrance. The servants, whom he had known for many years, looked remorseful for having let guests be sent to greet him, but Julius simply nodded in apology and told them to return to work.

Then, following the rest of the guidance from the excited Mimi, they made their way to the reception room.

“Heya, we’re coming in!”

Mimi opened the door with enthusiasm, and a room decorated in warm colors unfolded before them. There was a table in the center of the room, and looking in their direction was—

“—Welcome back. Did ya have a nice chat with yer friend?”

Anastasia smiled as if she knew exactly what he’d been doing.

7

“…”

As he took a sip of the tea he had ordered the waitress to bring him, the rich aroma tickled his nostrils. The warm aroma made Julius let out a sigh of relief and his mind regained its composure.

The tea that had been brought was Julius's favorite brand.

When facing an important conversation, he relied on the power of tea to help him prepare himself. The servants who have known him for a long time know this and will take care of things like this without him having to say a word.

Considering that, although meeting at home was unexpected, it could also be said to have been the right decision.

At the very least, he could feel supported by those around him as he entered into the conversation.

Be that as it may—

"Joshua, if you're not feeling well, you can go back to your room…"

"N-No, not at all. If I'm not able to be here, it will have a much bigger impact on me later. I'll try not to get in the way, so please keep me by your side."

Joshua, his face pale, shook his head in a panic. His younger brother was originally fair-skinned, but now the blood had drained from his face and he looked pale. He didn't want to push him too hard, though.

"…"

"…I understand. Just make sure you don't push yourself too hard. Make your own decisions."

Julius gave in to Joshua's silent plea and accepted his wishes. He thought it was lenient, but he understood his feelings. He didn't want to be left out of such an important national event because of poor health.

Anastasia chuckled at the brothers' conversation. In front of her, Mimi was curled up in her lap, and while stroking Mimi's head, she said, "Don't push Joshua too hard. …Though it might not be very persuasive comin' from me, the one who exhausted Joshua the most."

"You did nothing wrong, Lady Anastasia. I left the house to Joshua while I was away. Entertaining guests is one of his duties. Besides —"

"Besides?"

"Maybe you were going easy on him? Joshua hasn't collapsed."

"—. Hehe, ahahaha! What's with that, Julius? That's too funny."

For a moment Anastasia looked taken aback and then burst out laughing, unable to bear it any longer.

Seeing that smile, Julius lowered his chin in satisfaction. However, Joshua next to him was stunned at being used as a conversation starter. Julius shrugged at his younger brother's reaction.

"You stayed of your own volition, Joshua."

"I-I know that, Brother…!"

To Joshua's flustered voice, Julius replied briefly, "That's fine." Anastasia, watching this, tilted her head slightly,

"That's right. It's obvious, but Julius also speaks casually when talkin' ta his family. It felt a bit refreshin' ta hear it from ya."

"That may be true. I apologize if it was hard to hear."

"I said it was refreshin', so there's no need ta apologize. If ya can talk ta me without bein' too formal, that's much more welcome. Do I look like I wanna have a formal conversation?"

Anastasia tilted her head, Mimi on her lap, and Hetaro and Tivey on either side. Seeing how cute the scene was, Julius also smiled,

"By the way, I forgot to ask, but what are Mimi and the others wearing?"

"They're so cute, ain't they? It's unbearable, ain't it?"

"I agree with you about Mimi, but I do feel a bit sorry for the other two."

"Really? Hmm, I guess it can't be helped…"

Judging from her response that there was no deeper meaning behind it, Julius defended Hetaro and Tivey with a few words. Anastasia thought about his advice for a bit and then,

"Okay. Ya two can go get changed. There are new robes with the Ligers."

"What, really? What a relief, I'm off!"

"I felt like I was not alive. Julius, I'm indebted to you."

Their faces brightened as Hetaro and Tivey ran out of the reception room. Their skirts fluttered briskly as they ran through the room with light steps.

That was how much cross-dressing had affected them. Even if it suited them, the humiliation was probably a different story.

"Lady Anastasia, please don't play around too much. Your position is…"

"Different from before? Maybe. But even if my position changes, I won't change. Otherwise, there's no point. Right?"

"…"

Her smile remained the same, but Anastasia spoke with a different tone of voice. Julius felt as if her words had struck him in the heart, and he choked slightly.

The atmosphere changed. The room, the mansion—no, the world around Anastasia.

"I had a lot of fun talkin' with Joshua until Julius returned, but… it's about time we got ta the important main topic."

"The main topic."

"The outlook for the royal selection in the future, how we should face the royal selection in the first place…those kinds of things."

The one who swallowed, was it him, or was it Joshua next to him?

Julius, completely captivated by the woman, licked his lips to avoid being entangled in the gradually increasing pressure. Then, he stared back into Anastasia's light blue eyes.

Since she was bringing up the topic, Anastasia must have already had a plan in mind. To what extent that plan overlapped with Julius's wishes, he wanted to know first of all.

"Future prospects…May I ask what your wishes are for the royal selection, Lady Anastasia?"

"For me, winnin' the royal selection and gettin' the country…that would be the best outcome. With the kingdom on my scales, I'm interested ta see what will happen. But…"

Cutting off her words there, Anastasia closed one of her round eyes, and continued.

"I hate losin' battles. I'd rather not fight than lose. So I thought changin' the conditions for victory entirely might be an option."

"Changing the conditions for victory…? What do you mean by that?"

"It's a simple matter. For example, how about handin' over victory in the royal selection ta another candidate? If it would safely reduce the number of competitors, that would be tasty enough, right? Wouldn't it be profitable ta make a deal with another candidate usin' that as a condition and pull out somethin' good?"

"—! That is a huge disregard for the kingdom's prestige!"

Joshua lashed out at Anastasia, who was smiling with her hands clasped in front of her chest. Julius was of the same opinion as the red-faced Joshua; he was just late.

Selling the right to the throne. That was unacceptable. However—

“That’s what ya say, Joshua, but I’m from a different country. I don’t have the backin’ of the kingdom, and my competitors are a duchess and a princess with special circumstances…What are my chances of winnin’?”

“Th-That’s…”

“Besides, ya mentioned the kingdom’s prestige, but the dragon jewel chose me, who’s from Kararagi. At that point, the kingdom’s prestige had practically fallen to the ground.”

“…”

Stammering, Joshua glanced his way out of the corner of his eye, but Julius closed his eyes.

Anastasia’s words were realistic. She was by no means blessed with prerequisites.

In the first place, the reason Anastasia had put her name forward for the royal selection was because she had accidentally found out that she had the qualifications to be a dragon maiden, which was the qualification to participate. Not being too attached to that qualification, nor being too hung up on a right that came out of nowhere, could also be said to be a natural compromise for a merchant.

“The turf war in Kararagi had reached a stalemate, so I welcomed the opportunity ta expand our market ta other countries. That’s why I accepted the invitation, but…ta think that I would actually be qualified ta become the king of the country I was invited ta was like a dream.”

“It’s not a dream; it’s reality.”

“Let’s turn that reality into a more realistic profit. Is what I’m sayin’ really that strange?”

Julius looked away after hearing Anastasia’s words. Heat began to swirl in his chest.

He remembered the moment when she had touched the insignia and the dragon jewel shined. At that moment, Julius had been confused by the unexpected gift he had received—and at the same time, he had felt an irresistible sensation as if he was being swept away by a great wave.

Before he'd known it, Julius had been on one knee on the floor, asking Anastasia to participate in the royal selection. Even now, he still didn't think he was wrong to have followed that impulse.

"But, was it too much of a burden to you, Lady Anastasia?"

"I'm not talkin' about whether it's a burden or not. For me, it's like I've found somethin', and the question is how ta use it in the most profitable way. If I win, that's the best outcome. But if I think about what happens if I lose, there must be a smarter way ta do it."

Anastasia intentionally forced a rather undignified smile onto her pretty face. It was a slightly provocative move, but Julius felt relieved that she had assured him that it was not a burden.

The rights she had gained, the path of light that had opened up before Julius, she wanted to discuss how to handle it.

Julius lowered his eyes slightly. Anastasia's eyes narrowed at his reaction, and she cleared her throat. "Ahem." Then she spoke in a haughty manner,

"Well, ya see. I said it like that, but it's not like I absolutely don't wanna compete, ya know? It's true that I want a country, and I don't dislike big challenges. But in that case, I'd like ta ask a bit more from Julius…"

"Lady Anastasia, I have something to tell you regarding that matter."

"—?"

Anastasia stopped speaking and raised her eyebrows as Julius replied deeply.

However, perhaps sensing something unusual in the knight's serious gaze, she licked her lips,

“Well, I’d like ta think it’s somethin’ good.”

She chuckled. Julius nodded in response.

“I understand where your concerns lay, Lady Anastasia. As you said, being from another country and the fact that the Hoshin Trading Company is not yet firmly established in the kingdom will not be beneficial in the royal selection process. However.”

“Have ya come up with a way ta deal with that?”

“Yes. —I took the time until the evening to do that.”

It was entirely predictable that these topics would come up as a cause for concern during the discussion.

Julius was also the one who had recommended Anastasia for the royal selection. It was Julius who had first recognized her qualifications and suggested that she had the talent to join the royal selection.

Therefore, he had a duty to overcome all obstacles and do his best for Anastasia as much as possible.

“So, what have ya done for me in that time?”

“Right. Please be happy.”

Julius was also distracted by the good news he was delivering to Anastasia, who looked full of expectation.

Julius placed his hand on his chest and bowed respectfully as he spoke solemnly.

“—I have approached the kingdom’s greatest knight, the Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea, to become Lady Anastasia’s knight. He has responded favorably, saying he would like to meet in person.”

Even if the fact that she was a foreigner couldn’t be changed, she could still establish a foothold in the kingdom—especially in terms of finding backing.

If that person was from the famous family line in the kingdom’s history known as the Sword Saints, then there couldn’t be any greater power.

That was the greatest help Julius could give to Anastasia.

And, upon hearing Julius’s report, Anastasia also broke out into a broad smile—

“—I’m goin’ back ta my country!”

For some reason, she was in a very bad mood.

8

In the reception room of the mansion, which seemed as if a storm had passed, Julius was reflecting on recent events.

—Just what kind of mistake had he made?

“I intended to do everything possible to accommodate Lady Anastasia, but…”

Immediately after he’d told her his brilliant idea, Anastasia’s transformation had been astonishing. Her smile had looked exactly the same as usual, but the intimidating aura she’d carried was on a completely different level.

Even Mimi, although trembling, had obeyed when Anastasia said they were going home.

“Brother, I have seen Lady Anastasia and the others to the inn…”

Just then, Joshua returned after seeing the guests off to the inn. Julius tilted his chin in response to his bewildered younger brother’s report,

“I see, that was a lot of trouble. Sorry to have you do that on my behalf.”

“No, I’m fine. More importantly, are you okay, Brother?”

Julius failed to smile at the concerned gaze. Deep down, he was still very shaken. It didn’t seem that it would be easy to fix.

“But we can’t just leave the relationship as it is.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to give it time for things to calm down?”

“That is one solution, but in this case it is difficult to say it is the best solution. What if Lady Anastasia were to make the decision alone and give up her right to participate?”

Of course, it was hard to imagine that the intelligent Anastasia would act so rashly, but there were times when anyone could not remain calm. He was aware that he had robbed her of her composure. He wanted to do everything he could to find a solution.

However, Joshua’s gentle face showed a look of confusion at Julius’s decision.

“What’s wrong?”

“Maybe I’m being weird, but…Brother, you’re against Lady Anastasia handing over her royal selection eligibility to someone else, aren’t you?”

“Of course. That goes for you as well, doesn’t it, Joshua?”

“Yes, that is true…I am of the opinion that the prophecies of the dragon stone should not be taken lightly…but isn’t it different for you, Brother?”

Julius couldn’t think of anything to answer Joshua’s question and his well-formed eyebrows furrowed. Joshua himself was frustrated that he couldn’t put it into words and kept repeating “Um”.

“Brother, you recommended Lady Anastasia to the royal selection. And for her sake, you even tried to get Reinhard to cooperate as a knight. Why is that?”

“—? Isn’t it natural? I found Lady Anastasia’s qualifications and recommended her for the royal selection. It is my duty to do everything I can to ensure that she is in the best possible condition."

"So, it was a sense of duty that made you do all this. It wasn't about whether or not Lady Anastasia was worthy of the throne; it was about your role…"

"That's not true. –I thought that Lady Anastasia was worthy of the throne. I even thought about offering my sword to her. That's why I want to do everything I can for her."

Naturally, this was the true feeling that came pouring out from Julius's heart.

Of course, Julius had not come to this conclusion simply because the dragon jewel had shined.

The light of the dragon jewel was just a catalyst. It only showed that she was qualified.

Everything that had happened afterwards was the result of Julius having seized that opportunity and following his own heart.

Revealing that the throne was vacant and worried about the kingdom's bleak future, Julius asked her to join the candidates in the royal selection in order to make the prophecy of the dragon stone come true.

What had Anastasia said to Julius?

The words she had spoken without the slightest fear—Julius remembered them all.

"—She laughed. She said her fingers were touching her dream. She was overwhelmed by the size of it."

Before the dragon jewel's light had stolen the conversation, Anastasia had told him her story.

Born and raised in the lowest class of Kararagi, she had started as a servant at a company and worked her way up to where she was today. It was the result of desperate efforts. Her ambitions easily led her to surpass her own limits.

The girl who had been born with nothing, who had not let go of anything she had gained along the way, now appeared before him boldly, holding everything she had grasped.

There, Julius saw Anastasia Hoshin's royal vessel.

—Everything, including the light of the dragon jewel, was merely a "bonus" that came afterwards.

"I want to offer my sword without turning away from my path, my pride, or my loyalty. I saw that in Lady Anastasia."

"…"

"I was fascinated by her rapid progress. I was eager to witness it."

To that end, he had intended to cooperate as much as possible.

"Apparently, it seems I was dumped by Lady Anastasia."

Saying that like a cheap joke, Julius felt his body become extremely heavy. It seemed that this truth had caused him more pain than he had expected.

At the very least, from now on, he would support Anastasia from behind the scenes—

"…Um, Brother, there's something I'd like to say."

"What is it?"

"Brother, you often say that I underestimate myself too much…but I don't think that you can say that about other people."

Joshua's sudden statement made Julius stare in surprise. Joshua gave a wry smile at his brother's surprise and continued playing with his long bangs.

"You're overthinking it, Brother. I get that. I understand that you chose the person you thought was the most reliable for Lady Anastasia’s sake. I get that, but let me say this. That’s a big misunderstanding! You’re wrong!”

“I’m wrong? But, Reinhard is the best knight in the kingdom…”

“No, that’s not true! Because the best knight in the kingdom is you, Brother!! There is no knight greater than the ‘Finest of Knights’ Julius Juukulius! That is the conclusion!”

Joshua, his face reddening as he made sweeping gestures, spoke passionately to Julius. Julius was thrown aback by his younger brother’s enthusiasm, and blinked repeatedly in surprise.

He had never seen Joshua express his feelings so forcefully before. Julius was shaken by this, but Joshua continued to press on.

“If the best knight in the kingdom is the ‘Finest of Knights’ Julius Juukulius, then what should you do, Brother? You need the best knight to serve Lady Anastasia.”

“…”

“I have heard your thoughts, Brother. As the Juukulius family, it will be quite difficult to support a person from another country as a candidate for the royal selection. We can probably expect a great deal of opposition, but…we’ll deal with it somehow!”

“Somehow… That’s not like you, Joshua; that’s a very careless opinion.”

“Right now, I will do whatever it takes to get things done. I don’t want to see you staying in the shadows for Lady Anastasia’s sake. That wouldn’t be elegant at all.”

“…”

Joshua’s pleading words pierced his heart.

This may have sounded ridiculous or cheap. However—

“—That’s a big deal.”

To tarnish appearances, to lack grace, would go against the chivalry that Julius believed in.

Joshua knew this better than anyone, so he used it to his advantage to persuade him.

That was the origin of Julius Juukulius, whom many people praised as the “Finest of Knights”. —It was a fundamental principle that must never be compromised.

“Brother’s wish is to support Lady Anastasia on her path to become king. To achieve that, what’s needed is the best knight in the kingdom, so there’s no problem!”

“What I wanted to do and what I need to achieve it came together. …It feels a bit like a forced effort, but can this be called elegant?”

“Everything you do seems elegant to me, Brother.”

“That’s an overly biased opinion. –But, I’m grateful, Joshua.”

Being persuaded by such uncharacteristic passion, Julius closed his eyes. Behind his closed eyes, he could see the image of Anastasia listening to Julius’s explanation with the glowing dragon jewel in her palm.

He could see her expression and eyes gradually blossoming as if bathed in light.

“I don’t know why Lady Anastasia is upset. But at the very least, I have not yet conveyed my words. I would find it unbearable to have this all come to an end before that happens.”

“In that case…!”

Joshua’s eyes lit up with anticipation, and Julius turned his gaze to the magic crystal in the room. Julius’s eyes, the same color as the crystal, were reflected in its pale yellow glow.

—It wasn’t too late to visit a woman at night.

"—I'm goin' ta sleep tonight. Don't let anyone through."

When Anastasia returned to the inn, her attitude sent a strong chill down Ricardo's spine, and he shivered.

He silently watched as she headed towards her room, leaving only a short message behind. He could hear the sound of the door being closed rather roughly, and Ricardo made a gesture as if wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Oh, scary. What's with that attitude… Mimi, what happened?"

"No idea! The lady just burst out of nowhere! Mimi was curled up on the lady's lap so it was really scary! Everything else is a mystery!"

Ricardo scratched his dark brown head at the unreliable Mimi. Thinking there was little hope, he glanced over at Hetaro and Tivey who had returned with her, but they also shook their heads awkwardly.

"Y'all don't even know why the lady is in such a bad mood? That's troublin'. It's rare for her to get so angry even when a business deal isn't goin' well."

Sighing with his fanged mouth, Ricardo stroked his thick chest with his palm. From his chest to his stomach, his entire body was covered in dark brown fur—he was a dog-man demi-human. He was the leader of the Iron Fang, and the mood of his employer, Anastasia, was quite a source of worry.

—Ricardo and Anastasia had known each other for a long time. About fifteen years now.

Their first meeting dated back to when Anastasia was a dirty homeless girl. Even at a young age, she had possessed extraordinary eyes, and it had been Ricardo who had cleaned her up and introduced her to work as a maid at a company.

Their relationship had continued ever since, and now he found himself in a situation like this. Life was full of twists and turns. –Especially as someone who knew the current situation Anastasia found herself in.

“Otherwise, my dream would be whether the lady and ya could become proper wives. The lady scares men away, and ya…what, can ya get married?”

“Married? Don’t know, but it’s best to assume that things will work out somehow! That’s it!”

“You’re havin’ a good time… Hey, Hetaro, don’t glare at me like that. It’s not somethin’ we need ta talk about right now. Why don’t ya leave yer sister for a bit?”

“Captain, that’s like telling me to die…”

“That’s too much of an exaggeration!”

Younger children have no idea about the sorrow of those who are older.

As Ricardo lamented this, he suddenly noticed Tivey, who had left the conversation and had a troubled look on his face. He was fiddling with the monocle on his left eye and seemed to be in the middle of deep thought.

“What’s the matter, Tivey? Is there somethin’ botherin’ ya?”

“I was just thinking. I’m also choosing a place of business to establish the trading company in the Kingdom of Lugunica. It would be troublesome if the lady were to withdraw…”

“Withdraw? Why would she do that? That’s not like the lady.”

Ricardo laughed away his worries with his mouth wide open, while Tivey turned back to him with a serious expression on his face,

“On the way back in the dragon carriage, the lady was grumbling. If she was serious…agh!”

“Ya idiot, how can she be serious? Besides, ya saw the look on her face when she came out here, didn’t ya? There’s no way that lady would just quietly run away with her tail tucked between her legs.”

Poking Tivey's overthinking head with his finger, Ricardo waggled his tail vigorously.

The Hoshin Company's expansion into the Kingdom of Lugunica—this was supposed to be a new business plan put forward by Anastasia, but now it had transformed into merely one of the goals.

Ricardo clearly remembered the appearance of Anastasia on the day she had brought back the greed she desired for this kingdom. –That was Anastasia Hoshin.

"With a face that sparkles like that, how is it possible that greedy girl would give up?"

That was the look Anastasia made when she found something she truly desired.

It was the face she'd shown when she'd coveted the company, the three siblings, Roshi's life, and Ricardo.

So, Anastasia had once again found something she craved in this kingdom.

"She'll do whatever it takes to get it. Just like when she took over the company from Chuden."

"Vice President Chuden seems to be satisfied with his current position, though…"

"That guy has a difficult personality. I can't really say anythin' about other people, though."

Ricardo tilted his head as he recalled the squinty-eyed man he had known for a long time.

In any case, Anastasia had done everything well since they'd first met.

So her attitude had remained the same until now and likely wouldn't change in the future.

"So the reason you're in a bad mood is because ya were turned away from somethin' ya wanted."

As he remembered the reason for her rarely seen bad mood, the corner of Ricardo's mouth twisted.

In the past, when she was a child, Anastasia used to sulk more often than she did now.

It was when Ricardo easily evaded her, when the three siblings didn't listen to her as she wanted, when Chuden left her confused in the negotiations over the representation rights of the company—

"—In other words, she's in the middle of her evil scheme. What do ya think?"

"Unfortunately, even if I join the conversation halfway through, I can only say that I cannot give a thoughtless answer."

"That's a strange way ta answer. Like the lady."

Contrary to his words, Ricardo shook off his knees with a look of amusement on his face. As he slowly rose to his feet, he found himself a head taller than the good-looking man who had appeared in front of the inn.

Thus, the number of times he'd met him face to face could be counted on one hand, but—

"I hadn't noticed, but I guess that one was actually quite concerned about appearances."

"—? Sorry, but I don't see what you are saying again. Also, it is hard to give up on our conversation, but there is something else I need to prioritize right now. Would it be okay if you let me through?"

"Sure…is what I'd like ta say, but I guess that's not possible."

He made a show of giving way first, then blocked the way. The man frowned at Ricardo's childish harassment, while Ricardo gestured to Mimi and the others.

“I’ll deal with the customer. Y’all go and tell the lady that a customer has come. If she stays like that, she’ll probably say ta get rid of him, though.”

“Ah, she said not to let anyone through! Mimi has amazing memory skills!”

“Right? So my role is decided.”

“Aye, aye! Then, Captain and Julius, do your best!”

Mimi straightened up and recited her employer’s orders, and he stroked her head with his large palm. Mimi shook her head in delight, then took her two younger brother’s hands and ran into the inn.

Seeing them leave with a smile, Ricardo then rotated his shoulders. And then,

“I take it you are planning to turn me away?”

“That’s what the lady ordered me ta do. The hard part about bein’ a mercenary is that ya can’t go against yer employer. Well, even without that, I’d still be in the way tonight.”

“…”

The good-looking man narrowed his eyes. Tension grew in his limbs, and the air became tense at the same time.

Although he may have appeared to be a gentleman on the outside, what lied within was formidable—

“Usin’ a blade on the streets of the Flower Capital would be a big problem. So…I’ll make ya leave for today with my fists.”

“I see. I didn’t expect to be welcomed warmly, but I didn’t expect it to be to this extent. –However.”

The weight difference between the thick, massive man and the young man was more than double. Naturally, if they fought barehanded, it was obvious who would have the advantage—but even so, the young man laughed.

He removed the white cloak of his uniform and the knight sword attached to his waist, along with its sheath. Then, becoming lighter, he raised both his slender, supple arms and took a stance.

“Without a sword, I can easily defeat you. It’s disappointing that you think that.”

“…What d’ya know, I’m surprised.”

Seeing his bare-handed refusal to back down, Ricardo sighed in amazement for a moment.

Although he thought he had judged him to be a force to be reckoned with, it seemed he was still underestimating him as just a “knight”.

“…”

In front of him, what emerged was an unyielding spirit and a strong sense of pride honed through tireless training.

It was arrogant of him to think that he would be at a huge disadvantage if they fought barehanded.

“Li’l Ana bein’ all about looks isn’t somethin’ I can laugh at.”

He growled ferociously, his mouth twisting viciously, but there was a sense of relief in what he muttered.

Inside, he couldn’t stop laughing. He felt like slapping his knee at what he had just muttered.

—He had seen great potential in the young Anastasia, yet he had foolishly misjudged the young man in front of him.

10

“Oh! You beat the Captain? Amazing! How was it? How was it?”

“I’m happy to receive praise, but he went easy on me. In the first place, he had been drinking before I challenged him. I can't say he was in top condition."

After pushing past the gatekeeper and stepping confidently into the inn, he was greeted by three people who seemed to have been waiting for him to arrive. They were Mimi, Hetaro, and Tivey, the three siblings.

They all praised him for defeating Ricardo who had stood in his way, but Julius could not agree with them. Ricardo's consideration was obvious to Julius who had faced him.

The fact that they bumped fists together was probably just to save appearances.

"I take it that he set things up for me. That he deliberately played the villain in order to create an opportunity for us to talk."

"In that case, should we be villains as well?"

Hetaro asked, pointing to the door at the end of the corridor behind him. At the question, Julius closed one eye,

"What did Lady Anastasia tell you?"

"Like with the Captain, she said not to let anyone through. But…"

"The lady's made such a troublesome decision! I think, even no can mean yes!"

"I'll have to find out later who taught my sister that phrase."

Hetaro nodded repeatedly in response to Tivey's sigh. Mimi was completely unaware of her two younger brothers' overprotective behavior, but, in any case, he understood their opinion. Just like Ricardo,

"It seems you three will also allow me a chance to speak with her."

"If the lady is acting up, we won't be able to do our jobs either."

With no other choice, Tivey gave way to Julius. Mimi followed suit, and Hetaro followed after. Julius smiled at the path the three siblings had made.

“I don’t really get it, but I think it would be good to make the lady laugh! I thought that!”

“—Then, I’ll try to live up to those expectations.”

Mimi gave him a thumbs up and pushed him towards the room at the end of the hall. As he stood in front of the door, he took a deep breath,

“Lady Anastasia, I apologize for bothering you so late. It’s Julius Juukulius. I have come to speak with you. If you could please spare me a moment—”

“—N-No. Ya can’t. I’ve already closed up shop for today.”

There was a reply. He knocked on the door and called out, and from the other side of the door came a faint, high-pitched reply.

Julius’s cheeks stiffened at the rejection. If it were his usual self, he would have left the place with some nice words and decided to take the time to repair their relationship.

However, the words Joshua had spoken to him gave Julius the strength he needed.

“In that case, please excuse my rudeness and continue listening where you are. I would like to make a correction to what I said earlier. —I have retracted my recommendation for the Sword Saint to be Lady Anastasia’s knight.”

“…”

He could feel a slight sense of her holding her breath through the door. Closing his eyes, Julius recalled the face of the friend he had asked to meet earlier. He had spoken passionately for several hours and then took back what he had said that same day. His friend never got angry at his extremely dishonest words and actions.

However, as they parted ways, Reinhard smiled sadly and said, “I congratulate you for wanting to offer up your sword. I wonder if I too could yearn with such passion.”

Julius nodded in response to his friend’s murmur that seemed as if he felt he was wishing too much for himself.

“Of course you will. You too will definitely find a master to whom you can dedicate your sword. –For a hero, that will certainly happen.”

Did that sound arrogant? But, Reinhard sent him off with a smile. He’d like to think that his feelings were conveyed.

“—Why?”

A sudden question brought Julius, who was lost in thought, back to reality. A voice came from the door, asking Julius his true intentions in declining the cooperation of the Sword Saint.

This was it. Here, he must not make any mistakes with his words. He must speak his own feelings correctly.

“Lady Anastasia, it was none other than I who recommended you for the royal selection. I am responsible for leading you into this harsh battle. It is my responsibility to prepare everything in advance, to help and support you as much as possible.”

“Well, wasn’t the Sword Saint the way ya took responsibility? Julius was tryin’ ta fulfill his responsibilities. I’m not doubtin’ that, ya know?”

“—No, that’s not true. I told you. I have a responsibility to prepare everything in advance, to help and support you as much as possible. Therefore, I want you to have the best knight in the kingdom by your side.”

Not understanding, she became perplexed. She had no idea what Julius was trying to say. Of course. Julius himself knew that what he was about to say was preposterous.

However, this was the only option. Suppressing his hesitation, Julius puffed out his chest and spoke.

“I am Julius Juukulius, a member of the royal guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica. I humbly bear the title of ‘Finest’ as an honor of the knights—I am the kingdom’s best knight who will serve you.”

He stated it decisively. Immediately after saying this, Julius felt his body heat up.

At the same time as that heat, a change occurred in front of his eyes. The closed door slid open, revealing the person standing on the other side.

“…”

Seeing the petite woman, Julius knelt respectfully and gracefully. After observing his movements, she let out a long, deep sigh, and then,

“…That’s a really big boast. Sayin’ you’re the best knight in the kingdom, even surpassin’ the Sword Saint. That’s definitely not somethin’ ya would ever say.”

“My younger brother gave me the push I needed. Even now, my legs still tremble at my own boastful words.”

“Then, will ya correct it?”

“No. —It would be completely unreasonable for the first knight of the one who stands at the top of the kingdom to be anyone other than the best knight in the kingdom. Therefore, I hereby pledge my loyalty and sword to you.”

“I haven’t even said anythin’ about makin’ ya my knight yet; you’re so impatient, Julius.”

Putting her hand over her mouth and seeming to have regained her usual composure, the woman—Anastasia—laughed. Looking up at her smile, Julius quietly waited for her next words.

Anastasia also knew what he was waiting for. So she gently extended her pale, delicate fingers in his direction.

“—It feels surprisingly heavy.”

Taking the knight sword that Julius offered in her outstretched hand, Anastasia muttered this.

The slender knight sword was a sword that had been passed down in the Juukulius family. It was not a particularly famous sword, but the sword that had been passed down for generations had weight beyond the weight of lifting it.

“It’s the pride of a knight.”

“And then, proof of loyalty…did I get that right? It’s hard ta handle things ya can’t see. If this is a favor, then I’d be very happy if it didn’t have a price tag.”

Anastasia stuck out her tongue playfully and then tightened her cheeks.

And as soon as she became serious, her cuteness disappeared, and she began to emit a radiance that was simply captivating.

It was Anastasia’s own radiance that had captivated Julius even before the dragon jewel had shined in her palm.

“…”

Though she was not used to it, Anastasia slowly unsheathed the sword.

It was a blade that he must have seen thousands of times, but to Julius now it looked special. Leaving traces of that silver color on his eyelids, Julius closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Anastasia pointed the blade of the drawn sword at the kneeling Julius. She tilted the blade, and the flat of the sword hit Julius’s left shoulder, then his right shoulder.

—The ceremonial procedures for knighting were a widely known custom in the kingdom.

A knight was supposed to receive this knighting ceremony twice in his lifetime.

The first time was when a person who aspired to be a knight came of age and was recognized as a knight by the head of their family or a superior.

The second time was when they chose a person as their final master and were allowed to serve them.

In some cases, a third or subsequent time could occur, but this was considered shameful for a knight. This was because, in whatever form, it was synonymous with losing a master.

Therefore, being knighted a second time was equivalent to the biggest decision of a knight's life.

If only Anastasia, holding the sword in her hands, could also realize the meaning of offering it.

"So now, Julius…Julius is my knight. Ya can't take it back, ya know?"

"The same goes for you, Lady Anastasia. Now that I have become your knight, what you said about giving up your right to participate in the royal selection…"

"Ah, that? That was just a joke. I wasn't serious, honestly."

"What?"

Julius, who had thought that his first suggestion in their master-servant relationship would be for Anastasia to retract her statement, was stunned by how nonchalantly Anastasia spoke.

Glancing at Julius's reaction, Anastasia looked up in his direction,

"If I hadn't said that, things wouldn't have turned out the way they are now, right? I needed ta make sure that ya would desperately come and carry me."

"That's…But even in that case, you could have received Reinhard's help. What exactly is it about him that displeases you, Lady Anastasia…?"

“Yes, wait! I never answered that question. So it’s completely forbidden from now on! That’s enough now. My knight is Julius! That’s settled! The contract! Is sealed!”

Holding out her palm, Anastasia closed the door on Julius’s question, shutting it down completely. Overwhelmed by the force of her rapid-fire speech, Julius swallowed his words.

He had just sworn his knightly oath. After taking that oath here, he shouldn’t go against the words of the woman who had become his master so soon.

“…”

Telling himself this, Julius finally realized the truth, albeit belatedly.

He had offered his sword to his ideal partner, took an oath as a knight, and they had become master and servant.

“Julius?”

“Now, although it’s too late, I am astonished at my own actions. I proclaimed myself to be the best knight in the kingdom, and then forced a knight’s oath on Lady Anastasia and made a pact of master and servant.”

“Ah, true, that may not have been like ya, Julius.”

He felt embarrassed that his shameful behavior had been so obvious. However, in response to Julius’s reflection, Anastasia continued with a “But”,

“I’m happy that ya chased after me so desperately, ya know?”

“It’s a relief for me to hear you say that.”

“Yes, yes, isn’t that right? I’ve been sayin’ this for a long time, but I’m kind ta my people. I’ll also take good care of Julius, who has become my knight, so remember that.”

Anastasia was in high spirits, and Julius touched his bangs with his fingers. He felt embarrassed, perhaps because he was aware that he lacked grace.

More than that, it may have been because of the feeling he had gained as a knight that burned brightly in his heart.

“And then, since Julius and I are now truly in the same boat…it’s time ta close for today.”

“So you say.”

“There are so many discussions we missed today, right? I need ta recover my energy for that. It’s goin’ ta be busy from tomorrow onwards.”

For Anastasia, that seemed like a very leisurely way of saying things. “Time and money have the same value” was Kararagi’s way of thinking, and in keeping with that, it was an uncharacteristic way of speaking for Anastasia.

Anastasia looked at Julius with a smile like a blooming flower,

“Even if we don’t hurry, there’s always tomorrow. –Right? My best knight in the kingdom.”

“—That’s right. Tomorrow, and the day after, and for the rest of my life.”

He nodded at Anastasia’s words, placed his hand on his chest, and bowed.

“Good night, Lady Anastasia. Please, have pleasant dreams.”

“Mm, thank ya. Ya can dream about me, Julius.”

“That’s a very attractive proposition.”

Julius smiled back at Anastasia who waved back at him, then turned his back on her. He walked down the corridor and headed towards the entrance of the inn. There he found Mimi and her siblings as well as Ricardo.

He raised his hand to them. From this moment on, they and Julius were brethren.

Together, they would support Anastasia and become comrades who would do everything in their power for her.

“What’s that, ya got a good look on yer face.”

“Oh, that’s right! You got a good look on your face!”

Ricardo bared his teeth and laughed, and Mimi imitated him. He saw Hetaro and Tivey laughing as well, and Julius laughed too.

It was an awfully pleasant feeling.

“—I have been bestowed the greatest honor in the world by a wonderful woman.”

11

—The moment the light was born, I blinked in surprise.

The dazzling light, the faint heat in my palm, the unexpected mechanism, all of it surprised me.

However, out of all of that, there was one thing that burned itself into my eyes and heart the most.

It was—

“—Should I say congratulations?”

Leaning her back against the closed door, she placed her hand on her thin chest and took several deep breaths.

It was in the midst of this frantic attempt to calm herself down that the voice came.

Anastasia narrowed her light blue eyes at the familiar voice and glared into the back of the room.

This was a first-class inn even in the royal capital, and the spacious guest rooms had thick walls with great care taken to prevent noise from leaking to surrounding areas. In the room she had chosen, Anastasia locked the door behind her and said,

“Even if ya say congratulations, I don’t know what ya mean.”

“After all that, the thing you wanted came flying into your hands. I was so moved by that good fortune.”

“Don’t say mean things! Honestly, this is the girl who’s always been by my side!”

Anastasia retorted to the androgynous voice, pursing her lips as she stepped forward. Her feet led her to the bed—on top of which was a white fox scarf. It was something Anastasia always wore, and at first glance it looked like an ordinary piece of fur, but—

“More than the brilliance of the dragon jewel, you were attracted to his eyes as he spoke of his dreams. So you tried every trick in the book to get him by your side…but in the end, it was all in vain. Because he was the one who came to you.”

“—Echidna. Are ya my ally? Or are ya my enemy?”

Anastasia spoke sternly, and the fox scarf suddenly moved. It abandoned its role as a scarf, jumped onto Anastasia’s outstretched hand, and gently placed itself against her cheek.

With pure white fur and black eyes, it was a fantastically beautiful fox.

“Of course, I’m your ally. We’ve been friends for ten years. There’s no need to ask now, right?”

“But despite that, don’t ya think ya don’t show enough affection for me? I don’t deny Julius, but…this country will be the place where our contract will be fulfilled. Don’t ya think so?”

“That’s right. How much will you grow from that first opportunity you had as a child? I want to see where your fingertips lead. –Ah, that is my wish.”

Feeling an itchy sensation on her cheek, Anastasia narrowed her eyes at the fox's voice. There was a different kind of affection there that she didn't show to Julius, Ricardo, or Mimi and her siblings.

"Well then, I'll show ya. The ultimate goal of my desire. —Ta everyone, in a big way."

The love of her family, the loyalty of her knight, and the promise made to her friend.

—Anastasia Hoshin licked her lips, her heart pounding with sweet greed.

Chapter 4:
Felt’s Camp Formation Story Starting from Zero

1

The first thing I noticed was the unbelievably soft sensation wrapping around my whole body.

“Buah?!” A pig-like sound escaped my mouth in response to the unknown sensation. Waking up to my own voice, I opened my heavy eyelids, scratching my head. Covering my blurry vision was a pillow soaked in saliva—or so at least I thought. It’s gotta be a pillow. It’s hard to tell since it’s so pristinely white, as if it was just cleaned, and has an unbelievable silky texture, but it’s under my head, so it’s definitely a pillow, right?

Confirming the existence of the pillow my drowsy head was resting on, I noticed the anomaly wrapped around me wasn’t limited to just that. The pillow wasn’t the only thing with a ridiculously silky texture. The thin blanket covering my body did, too. Since there’s a pillow and a blanket, I must be on a bed.

As I suspected, there was a bed underneath me that nearly pushed my hand back when I pushed down on it. I pushed it several more times to check its resistance. It went without saying, but the hovel I usually stayed at didn’t have beds like this one. All I had was the discarded sofa I brought back and cleaned up. So what kinda magic was involved to turn that piece of junk into such a wonderful—

“Alright, that’s enough playin’ around.”

Not to brag or anything, but I’ve never had trouble waking up. Having been raised in the slums from a young age, having a good sense of danger was crucial. This was especially the case for me since I had a bunch of enemies due to my bad habits. I wasn’t even safe in my own resting place.

Still pushing on the bed, I turned my attention away from the pillow and scanned my surroundings. Looking up and down at the place I was in, I frowned. I reached a conclusion without much contemplation.

“Where the hell am I?”

Along with the soft texture of the pillow and blanket, I found myself in a room oozing with extravagance. It was somewhere a mere orphan from the slums could never have access to in a million years.

My usual-balled up rag was now a pristine pillow; the blanket that never lost its odor no matter how many times I washed it was now a clean, silky one; and the sofa that was infested with bugs was now a bed as soft as freshly baked bread.

Conclusion: This must be a dream.

“Ha!” I snickered at myself for having such an unfitting dream.

Well, in that case. I wrapped myself in the silky blanket again. It was refreshing not having to endure the stench of garbage in the cold morning air, but there was no point anymore as I already knew it was nothing more than a dream. It’s better to hurry up and wake up.

I would rather wake up to the desolate back alley I was used to than continue having a dream like this one. I was never fond of my life in the slums, nor was I attached to the people living there, but it was far better than this dream.

My goal was to one day escape my low quality life. I even formed a plan to achieve this by sharpening my thieving skills and setting aside a sum of money for savings everyday out of my measly income. I never wished to skip all the steps to get a life like this dream is showing me. That’s nothing but an insult to my plan.

It pissed me off that I was even having this dream. Hurry up and wake up, me. I wasn’t sure if sleeping in my dream would help me wake up in real life, but that was the only method I could come up with.

Then an unfamiliar voice hit my ears. “I thought you had woken up, but are you still resting?"

"—!" Startled, I instinctively reached for my waist only to notice my knife was nowhere to be found. Instead, my hand simply brushed past my ass and swung behind me. In fact, this was when I finally realized I wasn't wearing anything. There was nothing for me to cover myself with other than the blanket.

Clenching my teeth at my predicament, I grabbed the pillow near me and stood up as I glared at the person who spoke to me. When I turned around, the person had just opened the door to enter the room. The man who entered the white, extravagant room was a red-haired bastard.

Upon realizing I was glaring at him, he furrowed his brows as though he was taken aback. "Your clothes were conspicuously soiled and noticeably worn out, so our maids are repairing them. Your substitute clothes are on the way. If you would wait momentarily…"

"Wait just a minute," I said, stopping him in his tracks by raising my palm.

"—?" The bastard with eyes as blue as a bright sky showed a confused expression on his ridiculously handsome face, which irritated me even further.

As stated earlier, I wasn't bad at waking up. So, as soon as I saw this bastard's face, I started to remember everything that happened to me and how I ended up in this situation. And how this was not a dream, after all.

"Nevermind my clothes for now. That's not to say that I don't wonder why the hell you decided to strip me, but we can leave that aside for now. For now. Can you guess what I want to ask?" I said, scowling at him.

"I can think of a few possibilities, but I am not certain as to which one is correct. Will you give me the answer?" The red-haired bastard—known as the Sword Saint by everybody in the royal capital—Reinhard answered back with a question.

Feeling my blood boil at his oblivious attitude, I yelled, “Where the hell am I! And you! Why the hell did you have to knock me out?!”

Accidentally exposing myself in the heat of the moment, I hastily grabbed the blanket to hide. I must have looked like an idiot. A chuckle escaped Reinhard’s lips, and in response, I shot him a threatening glare, my fang on full display.

“Apologies for my insolent actions,” Reinhard responded nonchalantly to my apparent anger. “Please allow me to explain my reasoning behind my actions. Lady Felt,” he said, kneeling before me, piercing straight through me with those blue eyes.

2

I sat with my legs crossed on the bed, wrapping myself with the blanket while shaking my leg in irritation. As soon as I saw Reinhard’s face, I remembered everything that had happened up until I passed out.

The thieving request from the woman in black who promised a hefty reward; the insignia the dim-witted-looking silver half-devil had; the young guy with intimidating eyes I encountered after successfully stealing the insignia; and the events following after rendezvousing with Old Man Rom at the loot house. I remembered everything. Even Reinhard’s anxious look at the time.

He placed his hand over my face and everything went pitch black after that. Next thing I know, here I am.

Although I didn’t like the idea I was in another person’s control, I told myself there was no point in whining about it. Remember what Old Man Rom said: It’s important to be ready for anything, and keep a level head.

“Talk,” I said. “I’ll refrain from condemning the great knight for kidnapping a young girl until then.”

“Well then,” he said, smiling bitterly. “In that case, I must do my best and explain myself to resolve any misunderstandings.”

He’s smiling, this bastard. I clicked my tongue. And when will the damn clothes be here?

Paying no heed to my irritation, Reinhard searched his breast pocket while keeping his ever so soft expression. He was no longer wearing the conspicuous white knight uniform he had on when I had approached him in the slums. Nevertheless, the plain top and bottom he wore were unquestionably expensive, and added with his naturally handsome appearance, they looked ridiculously good on him.

“First of all, we are in House Astrea’s second mansion located in the royal capital’s upper level area known as the Nobles’ District,” Reinhard explained. “The room we’re in right now is a rarely-used guest room. So please forgive us if you feel cramped.”

“I can only take that as sarcasm. I can fit ten of my bedrooms in here.”

Although I spoke with as much hostility as possible, he replied with a simple sorry. He then pulled something out of his breast pocket and placed it on his palm for me to see, to which I groaned. “I believe you’ve seen this before, my lady?”

“That’s the thing I stole.”

“Technically, no. The insignia you’re talking about was returned to its rightful owner: Lady Emilia,” Reinhard explained, the insignia with an emblem of a dragon still placed on his palm. “The one here is a different one of the same kind. One I have been entrusted with.”

After hearing his explanation, I noticed there were in fact a few minor differences from the one the half-devil chick possessed. The differences were small details like the shape of the dragon’s wings and the jewel it held in its mouth, but that was the extent of it.

“So, what of it? I don’t want that thing anymore,” I dismissed.

“Please hold it once and you’ll know what I’m talking about,” Reinhard insisted, without any explanation.

Unable to come up with any retort, I reached for the insignia as told. I picked it up with my fingers, rolled it on my palm, and noticed it emanating light in my hand.

“I’m holding it,” I said. “But I don’t get it. It’s just glowing.”

“Just glowing…is the important part,” Reinhard explained. “The dragon jewel won’t light up in my hand, nor will it in any other person’s hand. No one else, other than you, Lady Felt, and a handful of chosen individuals.”

“Chosen? By a rock?” I snickered, believing he was just messing with me.

Some rock chose me? Who the hell does this rock think it is acting so high and mighty?

However, without changing his expression, Reinhard looked at me intently before continuing. “No, not by the rock. You’ve been chosen by the dragon… No, by fate.”

“Fate…” Instead of just snickering, this time I bursted out laughing. “Fate! Ha! Fate, you say?! How stupid!” I continued laughing, slapping my knee, showing my fang. And to wonder what he was gonna say with such a serious look on his face. “Listen up, Reinhard. Fate is a word losers who love to give up always use as an excuse. They justify their failure by blaming this thing called fate. It’s a perfect word for excuses. But I have no use for it.”

“…”

“Screw fate. It’s nothing but a word to get pity and make excuses. I don’t know what a bastard like you is so happy about, but leave me out of it.”

I swear, the biggest losers who have a habit of running away always resort to the word fate every time they fail. Whether it be their lack of strength, intelligence, luck, money, dreams, it’s all because of fate to them. Screw that. I make my own choices. How I turn out in my life is my own responsibility.

Reinhard remained silent, wearing a solemn expression. Wish he would solemnly let me go.

“Lady Felt,” he finally spoke. “No one can escape fate. The ones who can are only those blessed with certain qualities, possessing great resolve and courage.”

“Shut up. Are you tryna brag about how you are one of them? I’ll beat you up.”

“Unfortunately, just like everyone else, I’m not blessed with such a quality.” Reinhard responded to my hostility as he softened his expression, laughing.

It was a wimpy, bitter smile. Of all the expressions he had shown me up until this point, it, along with his response, irritated me the most.

“Whatever, we’re done.” I said. “I don’t want to talk to a bastard like you. So what if the rock glows? I’m going back to the slums. Just give me back my clothes.”

Yelling was no use, and I had no chance in a fight, so I had nothing more to say to this man. But I had no intention to walk around buck naked. They might have been worn out, but my clothes were some of my meager possessions. I wasn’t going to let them go. However—

“I am afraid I cannot fulfill that request. I have an obligation to inform the royal castle about those who can make the dragon jewel shine. You must be under surveillance for now—a duty you must oblige if you are a citizen of the kingdom.”

“What?! Screw that! If I’m a citizen, you say? This country hasn’t done a thing for me!”

“Even in poverty, living in the royal capital means you are under the protection of the kingdom. However small it may have been, you must have received its blessing. I cannot accept your defiance.”

“It’s not like I wanted to live here! I just didn’t have the money to get out! If you want, I’ll leave immediately. Just throw me out!”

“I cannot agree to that request. Please understand.”

“—!”

My patience was reaching its limit listening to this stubborn bastard. Reinhard, on the other hand, stayed composed the entire time. I was the only one turning red.

With my eyes bloodshot, I took a few deep breaths. Be ready for anything, and keep a level head. “F-Fine, bastard… I’ll take your words into consideration. I will. So just hear me out for a sec.”

“I’m ready to compromise as best as I can. But I must report you to the royal castle and keep you in our house until I get further instructions from the higher-ups. This is non-negotiable. So…”

“Not about that. Something more fundamental…about my clothes. How long are you intending on keeping me stripped, Mr. Great Knight?” I said as sarcastically as possible.

Reinhard widened his eyes. It was the first human-like expression I saw on him.

He gave a rather elegant bow. “My apologies,” he said, before turning his back to me. “I will call the maids now. You may choose from a number of options…”

“And sike! As if I’ll do as you say!”

You can’t be so careless, you idiot!

I grabbed the pillow behind me and threw it at him. He was facing away from me as planned. Without waiting for it to reach him, I jumped back, landing on the floor with my bare feet, and accelerated.

Reinhard moved swiftly before the pillow made contact, catching it in the blink of an eye. It seemed as though my plan failed, but it was all going according to plan.

“Take this!” I threw the sheets I had removed from the bed, covering his field of vision, making him lose sight of me for a split second. I took this chance to make an attempt for the door—would be something an idiot would think of doing. “Later!” I yelled, sticking out my tongue.

Using my momentum from jumping backwards, I pushed the window open with my back, as I held onto the curtain to prevent myself from falling.

I had scoured the room during our conversation. From the view outside the window, I speculated we were on the second floor. As long as I killed the momentum with the curtain, I should have been able to land safely on my feet.

I outsmarted the Sword Saint. That thought crossed my mind when —

“What?” The curtain that was supposed to be supporting me was severed in a flash. The horizontal slash was clean. It would have been impossible to replicate such a feat even with a pair of scissors or a blade. To accomplish this with only his hand made him more than a master. He was a monster.

“You, damn monster!” I exclaimed as I fell.

“This is the second time in the past two days that I’ve been insulted by that word,” Reinhard said, now falling alongside me after jumping out the window in pursuit.

He quickly passed me, reaching the ground first. I, on the other hand, felt sick, not being able to recover from the shock that the curtain was sliced in such a fashion.

“Pardon me,” Reinhard said as he caught me when I finally reached the ground.

Using the pillow in his hand to soften the impact, I fell into his arms like a puzzle piece falling into its place. The blanket I had wrapped myself in fluttered in the wind, making it feel like I was wearing a dress. What am I, a princess being carried by a handsome prince? This ain’t funny at all.

“You may not have known this, as I still haven’t given you a tour of the mansion, but we have stairs for moving between floors.”

“Don’t sass me! Hurry up and let me down! How long are you intending on holding a naked girl?!” I yelled as I floundered in his arms, which he masterfully controlled with simple maneuvering. I get that he doesn't want to let me escape, but why hasn't this bastard let me down?

"If I let you down now, your feet would get dirty. However, I understand your wishes, Lady Felt. So allow me to propose a compromise."

"Compromise?"

"I will meet you halfway. If you can successfully escape from this mansion without getting caught by the people here, then you are free to leave. In return, while you are living here, I would like you to listen to me as much as possible."

"Is that right?! I can run away? No take backs!"

"So do you agree to these terms?"

"You better keep your word, you bastard. If I can escape, I win. Got it?!" I said with a big smile, pointing a finger at him.

He said he's meeting me halfway, but he just dug his own grave. I'm gonna win this for sure. In these sorts of wagers, there's the aggressor and the defender. And the aggressor almost always had the advantage. In this case, I'm the aggressor. I win.

Reinhard let out a smile at my words. It was neither a bitter smile nor a polite smile. It was one that made it hard to tell what he was thinking. It was a normal smile.

Then he looked up at the window we fell out of. "Seems like the maids have noticed the commotion. We should head back to the room."

I clicked my tongue. "Just carry me safely, Mr. Great Knight!"

3

An old couple was waiting for us when we returned to the room. Reinhard explained that they were chamberlains of the mansion and were in charge of managing the giant building. In other words, these are the three people I gotta avoid getting caught by to escape. This is good. I have to be cautious of Reinhard, but it should be easy to get past this old man and old lady.

However, my good mood didn’t last long.

“Hey, man,” I said in a trembling voice.

“Yes ma’am?” Reinhard responded nonchalantly. “I think it suits you very well, my lady.”

Standing next to Reinhard was the old lady, smiling gently, carrying a load of bright colored dresses in her arms. They’d made me wear a yellow one.

“Wh-Where are my usual clothes?”

“They’re safe and secure in our possession,” answered Reinhard. “Please feel free to choose any dress you like. We’ve prepared enough to last a whole month.”

“But why, though?! Why can’t I just wear my regular clothes…”

“As we agreed earlier, it’s a compromise. I will meet you halfway with your wishes, so you must listen to my requests.”

I groaned as I was lost for words. He did. This bastard did mention something like that. So, while I was getting happy about my assured win, this bastard was plotting his own agenda.

Reinhard closed one eye before continuing, as if to taunt me. “And you agreed to this, did you not, Lady Felt?”

“You bastard! I’m gonna escape this damn place before you know it! Just watch me!” I yelled in a voice loud enough to make the whole mansion tremble.

4

And thus, my sad, pathetic, pitiful attempt at escaping had begun.

In retrospect, I still believe my initial assumption was correct. I was allowed to plan my escape as much as I wanted; there was no shortage of methods, and I had every advantage in that I could choose when and how often I made an attempt. Even back at the royal capital, when I was making a living as a thief, the aggressor always had the advantage. The defender had no means of anticipating when their opponent would make a move. In fact, they usually didn’t even know if their opponent would make a move. There’s no way for them to prepare, so I just have to find an opening and move swiftly.

Regardless of the time of the day or where I was in the mansion, I made an attempt at every chance I thought I saw. Whether it was against the old lady, the old man, Reinhard, or even all three at the same time, I carefully observed the situation, made preparations, and executed my plans. As a result, I came to one conclusion: Everyone in the mansion was a monster.

“…”

I gotchu this time! I clenched my fist as I jumped over the red-haired head.

I kicked the wall, jumped towards the ceiling, and grabbed onto the chandelier. Using the chandelier like a swing, I let myself go in a forward motion. Creating distance between myself and the chaser, I accelerated as soon as I landed, running away faster than the wind.

“Alright! It’s my win today! Take that you…gya?!”

Before I could finish my parting remarks, my collar was grabbed from behind, lifting my feet off the ground. “Ugeah,” I gagged upon having my neck constricted, due to being picked up like a cat.

“Lady Felt, I don’t think it’s very lady-like to gag like that,” Reinhard said.

“Ugeah, ugeah, it’s not very lady-like, is it? Ugeah,” I repeated, looking straight at Reinhard, who was still holding me by the collar.

“What a troublesome person,” Reinhard exasperated, smiling bitterly, which ticked me off even more. Oblivious to my irritation, he looked up as he continued. “But to think that you would get past me in a matter of a few days. It’s quite impressive.”

“Like hell that makes me happy, shit! Also, I’m not some stray cat! Let me down!” I said, flapping my feet.

“If so, may I take it that I win today as well?” Reinhard directed a normal smile at me that wasn’t bitter, to which I only looked away. He remained unperturbed, however, as if that was enough for him. “Then, from now on, I would be very happy if you would refrain from saying ‘shit’. It doesn’t sound very…”

“Shit,” I said to let him know I was listening.

I saw his smile turn bitter again in the corner of my eyes.

After dozens of interactions like that, my life under surveillance continued. Even after a week passed since our agreement, all my attempts were thwarted with ease. The bastard appeared out of nowhere every time I tried to make a move, as if he had eyes everywhere in the mansion.

However, he wasn’t the only problem.

“Come on, Lady Felt. Pouting like that ruins that cute face of yours,” said the person responsible for my last failed attempt. We were in the canteen, where I had been dragged.

A plate exuding a sweet aroma was placed in front of me as I sat sulking. My stomach growled at the warm, sweet smell of the pastry. The old lady let out a gentle smile when I instinctively placed my hand on my stomach.

The old lady—who Reinhard calls ‘Auntie’—was one of the people managing the mansion. She was tall and slender with faint blonde hair. I called her Granny, but she still looked young, and it was easy to imagine she was quite the looker in her younger days. Despite this, I was uneasy around her for different reasons than Reinhard. It might be because she’s always smiling and looks so kind.

“We’ve prepared pastries for snack time today. They’re your favorite, right, Lady Felt?” Granny said eagerly with a faint smile, seeing me look back and forth between the plate and her.

Well, since she's insisting. Still somewhat hesitant, I grabbed the hot pastry and began pushing it in my mouth.

As I bit into the crusty surface, the sweet filling melted in my mouth. The hot, sweet taste danced on my tastebuds, giving me a braingasm.

"Mmmm," I let out. This is too good. I can't help smiling.

I hated being in the mansion. I also didn't care for the pretty clothes or the soft bed, but it was impossible to not like the food. They were incomparable to the ones in the slums.

"Can I take you with me when I make my escape?"

Granny chuckled. "I'm very flattered. But I'm afraid my husband will starve to death if I leave. Although, I'm sure the Young Master can fend for himself."

"That's a no then, huh?" I said, clicking my tongue.

Granny's husband—who Reinhard called Uncle and I called Gramps—was a man of few words in charge of tending the garden and going shopping. He had a full set of white hair and a wrinkly face, but there was a glimmer of kindness in his eyes. In other words, he was the type of person I was uneasy around. I speculated his muteness had something to do with the giant white scar on his neck, but that wasn't important. The important thing was that he was also my enemy. Even the day before yesterday, when I tried escaping while we went shopping together… "He anticipated all of my movements and dragged me back here."

"He and I are both old now. We can't move like we used to. So don't be so mean to this old couple. It makes me so, so sad."

"Says the person who throws me around like it's nothing."

Even without Reinhard, Granny and Gramps' defenses were impenetrable. The term monster was not an exaggeration. These threes' abilities far exceeded any other humans' I had seen up to this point. Well, I guess that scary knife lady and the half-devil chick were also something else. Although now that I think about it, that intimidating looking bro was pretty normal. That’s kind of a relief.

“By the way, why are you two so amazing? Is it because you’re Reinhard’s associates? Or are all rich people like you?”

“Please, please, you’re overestimating me. I’m just a tad experienced in martial arts due to my upbringing… The truly exceptional one is my husband. He was so cool when he was young… No, actually, he’s still very cool even today.”

“Granny, Granny, get back to the point.”

“Oh my, how embarrassing,” she said, blushing. She must have gotten embarrassed for suddenly bragging about her own husband.

She must really love him. But that’s not what I’m interested in.

“I didn’t see Reinhard for lunch. Is he out on an errand?” Seeing Granny still blushing, I forcefully changed the topic.

“Yes,” she answered, hands still on her blushing cheeks. “The Young Master had an urgent matter to attend to. He should be coming home shortly. I know you miss him, so please kill some time talking to this old lady.”

“First of all, no one’s missing him. And second, I’m done eating so I’m out of here.” I stood up while licking the sweet jam on my finger. Truth be told, I wanted to lick the plate as well, but when I did once, Granny yelled at me like it was the end of the world. I don’t want to go through that again.

“I have to clean up and prepare for dinner, so I won’t be able to tend to you, but please don’t do anything reckless, okay? Otherwise, the Young Master will get mad.”

“I ain’t a kid, you know? Although, I do want to see Reinhard get mad. Anyways, thanks for the food.” I left the canteen, waving Granny goodbye.

I decided to prance around the mansion, but it had been a week since I arrived and there was nothing else left for me to see. Also, if I tried to make a run for it, Gramps or Granny would definitely catch me in no time. I don't know why, but I can tell.

"But I will definitely escape one of these days."

I feel like I'm slowly getting pulled in by Granny's cooking, but I refuse to let myself get comfortable here. I have to escape. I have reason to go back to where I belong.

"I hope Old Man Rom is doing fine," I muttered the name of my sole family back in the slums.

Although we aren't related by blood, that never mattered. Old Man Rom was and always will be my one and only family. One week prior, I got him involved in my mess because of the mistake I made and even got him injured. To make matters worse, I hadn't been able to check up on him since I was captured by Reinhard. Although the half-devil chick seemed to have tended to his injury, and he wasn't one to die so easily, Reinhard never gave any clear answers whenever I brought it up.

"That bastard's never straight with me when it's about something he doesn't want to talk about. I'm definitely gonna escape from this damn place."

I felt my blood start boiling as I thought aloud before I came to a halt. The door in the back of the hallway I was walking in caught my attention. It looked like it led to an ordinary room, but it grabbed my interest for some reason.

"Wasn't that door usually locked?"

There was usually an imposing lock preventing anyone from entering, but this time the lock was open. I approached the door that was freed from its shackles and turned the knob, opening it with ease.

"..."

Looking around to check that there was no one watching, I entered the room. The cold floor greeted the sole of my foot as I tiptoed my way in.

It was a dimly lit room. Despite it being daytime, the thick curtains shut out any light coming in from the window, which also contributed to the cool temperature. The room was also empty. Although there was a bed in the middle like all the rest of the other rooms in the mansion, that was all. There was nothing that explained why the door was usually under lock and key. And it's not like there's an exit I can use.

"How boring. And here I thought there'd be some hidden treasure or something…huh?"

Before I could finish expressing my disappointment, I caught sight of something that nearly stopped my heart. It was something that took me completely by surprise. There was a woman sleeping in the bed.

What startled me the most was the fact that I had never seen this woman before, and also that I didn't notice her presence at all. I mean, it's like she isn't even there.

"Wh-What the hell is wrong with this woman?"

I cautiously approached the bed. However, no matter how close I got, I couldn't feel any life coming from her. Despite this, I could tell she wasn't dead or just a mannequin. There were features of a living person on this woman. Her cheeks and lips were tinged in red as proof of the blood flowing through her veins, and her chest was moving up and down from breathing, albeit slightly. She's alive. But she has no presence.

"What the hell? Who is she anyway?"

I scratched my head, attempting to calm my nerves. As my heartbeat stabilized, I regained my composure, allowing me to organize my thoughts.

A woman I've never seen before, a locked room, and me. I soon reached a conclusion.

“I see, so that bastard Reinhard’s been keeping a different woman other than me.”

“You’re gravely mistaken.”

“Gyah!” I exclaimed, startled by the sudden voice that came from behind me.

Placing my hand on the bed, I jumped to the other side, and turned around to see who was at the door. It was Reinhard. He was leaning on the door frame with a contemplative expression on his face. It was a look I had never seen on him before.

“I don’t think I was out for very long, but…” Reinhard started. “I suppose this is my mistake.”

“It’s unlike you. Why don’t ya tell me who this woman is while you’re at it. Right now, you’re nothin’ more than a creep who likes to kidnap women and keep them locked up in my eyes.”

At this point, I was seriously wondering if all the women in this country were locked up inside the rooms of this mansion that I hadn’t entered yet.

Reinhard let out a small sigh as I stared at him suspiciously. “She’s my mother.”

“What?” I said after a brief moment to take in what he had just said.

I glanced back at the woman on the bed. She was an incredible beauty with long blonde hair. She looked no more than twenty-years-old. It would have made more sense if I was told she was Reinhard’s sister. If he’s lying, it’s a really bad one.

“You just added being a liar on top of being a woman snatcher.”

“It may be hard to believe, but it’s the truth. My mother—Louanna Astrea—is afflicted with a condition known as ‘Sleeping Beauty’. She’s remained in the same state ever since she first went to sleep. She’s been asleep for about seventeen years now.”

“Seven…?!” At a loss for words, I gasped at the number of years I just heard. If what he’s saying is true, I’m fourteen right now, so she’s been asleep since before I was even born. Wait, more importantly… “Reinhard, how old are you?”

“I’m turning nineteen this year… I was only able to spend time with her for the first two years of my life,” Reinhard said, shrugging his shoulders as he glanced at his mother, smiling bitterly.

He’s making that bitter smile again. It was the bitter smile that made my stomach churn in irritation.

“So you have your sick mother locked up in a corner of your mansion? You’re a noble. You have money, don’t ya? Why don’t you fix her?”

“You’re absolutely right. However, it’s a disease without a known cause. That’s not to say I won’t be willing to give her the treatment she needs as soon as they find a cure for it. Such is the reason we have her kept in this mansion located in the royal capital.”

“Don’t smooth-talk me like that.”

He didn’t stammer even once. He must be used to giving this explanation. He’s had this conversation a lot, huh?

Annoyed by his generic rhetoric, my patience reached its limit. “It’s your family! Of course you’re doing everything you can! And I criticized you in spite of this! Why won’t you get mad at me, you bastard?!”

“There’s no point. Your questions were understandable, and I believe my explanation was sufficient.”

“Yeah, whatever then!”

Talking to this stubborn bastard’s gonna make me go insane.

Reinhard’s mother remained fast asleep, despite shouting so loudly in her vicinity. Etching her beautiful face in my mind, I went for the door. Reinhard was standing there, but that didn’t matter. I stomped my way past him.

“Lady Felt,” he said, pulling me by the arm. I thought about biting him, but he continued. “Please don’t say a word about my mother to anybody. Sleeping Beauty is a rare condition, and I don’t want to cause any trouble. Also, I would really appreciate it if you would refrain from entering this room.”

“Just how…” nonchalant can you be. But before I could utter those words, he showed a faint smile.

“And thank you for considering my feelings.”

My mind went blank, unable to comprehend his words. However, I quickly processed them and nearly exploded in anger at his despicableness. This bastard knows why I was so angry, and why I wanted him to get mad at me.

“Reinhard, you’re a real bastard!”

Tearing my arm loose, I left the room. Reinhard quickly followed me after closing the door and locking it behind him. As he walked alongside me, I could tell that he had a faint smile on his face without even looking. So I refused to look his way.

“By the way, Lady Felt, I went to the guard station earlier.”

“…So what?”

“Seems like the old gentleman you were with left the station during his treatment and has disappeared. They’ve lost his tracks. I’m very sorry.”

“…” I came to a halt.

“I’ve been trying to locate him ever since you asked about him,” Reinhard continued his report, looking down. “I’m unsure if it’s because they didn’t want to make the fact that they lost him public, but the person in charge of the station kept his mouth shut for a while. I’m very sorry for my belated repor…”

“Of course he won’t stay at the station…” I said, smiling. “But if he can run away, it means he’s doing well.”

Reinhard raised his face, furrowing his shapely brows. “I wanted to take him into custody before reporting to you.”

“Ha, no need for that. My family can’t be stopped so easily. People from the slums are tenacious. You wouldn’t understand.” I laughed, lightly punching his chest, and began walking again.

Reinhard continued walking next to me without my permission. He looked relieved.

“You know, you do look like your mother,” I pointed out, seeing the resemblance after getting a look at him.

“Really?” Reinhard said ecstatically, turning his face towards me.

Taken aback by his enthusiasm a little, I nodded. “Yeah, your eyes and nose are identical. I’m still a bit skeptical about whether she’s your mother or not, but I don’t doubt she’s related to you.”

“Are you still suspecting that I’m a woman snatcher?” he asked with a dumbfounded look on his face.

“You might not be a serial kidnapper, but you still kidnapped me and have me locked up!” I spat, picking up my pace.

I’m in a good mood today. Guess I’ll spend the rest of the day planning for tomorrow’s escape. I’m also hungrier than usual.

5

So Old Man Rom is doing well. Although I had no new information about him other than the fact that he ran away from the guard station, I was elated just by this fact alone. That ain’t to say I’m gonna stop tryin’ to escape outta here. I was enthusiastic as ever, or perhaps even more so, to escape from the kidnapping knight. I tried the hardest I’ve ever tried to accomplish this goal. And the result of my efforts, you ask? Well, this is how it all ended.

After two months had gone by since I was captured by Reinhard, and had failed my 300th attempt (the bastard was counting), he said to me, “Please get ready. We are going to the castle now.”

All my efforts ended in utter failure.

“Please stop pouting like that,” he said as I sat across from him, looking out at the scenery that rhythmically moved up and down.

Exhaling sharply out my nose, I turned my pouting face forward. Reinhard was sitting there with his usual annoying smile. I was sick of seeing that face. I admit he’s good looking, but no matter how good his appearance may be, none of that matters if his personality is despicable. What’s worse is that he’s really annoying.

What annoyed me the most was his smile. It creeped the hell out of me. I wouldn’t go as far as to say he secretly looked down on me, but it was definitely a face that didn’t reflect his true feelings. It’s as if he was wearing a mask. However, as rare as it was, there were moments when he flashed a smile that showed his true nature. This was the smile he was showing me as he sat in front of me. One of his rare smiles. The smile of a victor.

“Don’t get so cocky just cuz you have one up on me and have me on a leash. You’ve just been gettin’ lucky for now.”

“I have no intention of being cocky, let alone keeping you on a leash,” he responded coolly. “I’m just sincerely asking you to listen to my request.”

I snickered and crossed my arms. “Good at twistin’ words, aren’t ya?”

To annoy him with bad etiquette, I started throwing my back against the seat, making it creak. However, for some reason, Reinhard didn’t try to stop me. Does he see me as some naughty kid and tryna be the bigger person? How annoying.

“I don’t like it one bit,” I said as I threw a kick at him, attempting to leave a footprint on his uniform.

I should have got him in surprise, but he blocked it with ease, letting out a simple, “Whoa.” There was barely any surprise on his face. Only his usual smile.

He had blocked and pushed my leg aside with his own. Even this movement alone seemed elegant, making me furrow my brows. He was still directing a smile at me, which ticked me off even more.

“Take this, and this, and this, and this,” I said for each kick I threw at him.

He blocked each one using only the tip of his feet, letting out a gentle grunt each time. I should know by now that I can’t get through his defense without any forethought. I decided to devise a strategy to etch my footprint on this bastard. But before I had the chance to execute it, a voice rained down on our parade.

“You two, we are about to arrive at our destination. Stop playing around,” Granny said from the front seat, beyond the screen divider. I looked at her. Her long blond hair was tied in a ponytail. She continued. “Please behave yourself, Lady Felt. And you too, Young Master. You’re making this old lady nervous. It makes me so, so sad.”

“I can’t argue with you, Auntie,” Reinhard said. “Lady Felt, can we call it a truce for now?”

I clicked my tongue. “Fine, whatever.”

I didn’t care for Reinhard’s wishes, but I couldn’t defy Granny either. Also, even though she sounded like her usual self, there was a tinge of unease in her voice. Now that I think about it, she seemed more uptight than usual when we left the mansion. After realizing something was off with Granny, I came to think Reinhard was acting a little different as well. It’s also my first time seeing him in his knight’s uniform in a while. I looked him up and down.

Noticing my stare, Reinhard tilted his head with a faint smile. “Is something the matter, Lady Felt?”

His demeanor just then looked incredibly innocent, as if I was looking at a child.

“Take this,” I said as I threw another kick at him to divert away from the topic.

He blocked it, yet again, further dampening my mood.

We were riding on a dragon carriage: a means of transportation often used by nobles and merchants, where they had an earth dragon draw the carriage. You may think, as a person from the slums, I wasn't acquainted with such a vehicle, but that's not entirely true. The ones carrying cargo often had hoods on the carriage, allowing me to sneak in quite easily when I wanted to rummage through the loaded goods. I also took advantage of the ones that were parked in warehouses as a place to sleep for the night during cold seasons. So, I was well acquainted with this vehicle.

Nevertheless, I had never formally ridden one as a passenger—let alone in an extravagant one. It was all my first time.

"Well, now that I'm on it, it ain't that big a deal," I commented on my first ride. "I was more excited before getting on."

"Which means you were looking forward to riding one, I take it? In that case, I deeply apologize for not being able to meet your expectations."

"Stop takin' my words out of context. Jeez."

Reinhard kept a solemn look for a while, before lifting up his face with a bright smile. "If you'd like, would you like to try dragonback riding next time instead of taking a dragon carriage? I have some experience with earth dragons. I may be able to teach you."

"By dragonback riding, you mean riding them on their back?"

"Yes." Reinhard nodded, still smiling.

I was honestly tempted by his proposal.

It's hard to explain, but I've always liked jumping and running around. At one point, it was my habit to navigate the vast royal capital by traversing the roofs of the buildings. Although part of it was to get familiar with the layout of the city (as Old Man Rom advised me to do), it had also become a sort of a hobby to kill time. The wind, the view, and the thrill from jumping off from there were all amazing. And when I'm on a high place, I—

“You must really like high places,” Reinhard commented.

“Wait a minute! When you put it like that, it just makes me sound like some idiot who likes to climb on high things! I also like to run fast! So what I’m tryna say is that…” It must feel good to ride on a galloping earth dragon. Even though I was quite confident when it came to running, I wasn’t arrogant enough to think that I could beat an earth dragon in speed or stamina. Running was their main job, after all. But before I mouthed these thoughts, I noticed something. “Wait, was I talking out loud about me liking high places?”

“You have a rich variety of facial expressions, Lady Felt.” Reinhard responded. “I never get tired of watching you.”

“Quit it with the leering! Imma make you pay for it!”

As embarrassing as it was for me to make such a face, it was also creepy of Reinhard to be able to discern its meaning so accurately. Is he really some sorta monster?

“…”

The point was that the invitation to ride an earth dragon was tempting. Although for a brief moment, it felt like one of his more normal proposals. However, I quickly steeled myself, remembering my current predicament. It’s already been two months and I’m still not able to get past Reinhard’s defenses, and Granny’s been dragging me in with her cooking.

“There’s no way I’m gonna let you have your way anymore,” I said. “If I wanna ride an earth dragon, I will on my own. I don’t want your help.”

“How unfortunate,” Reinhard said with a chuckle. “If you change your mind, please let me know.”

“Shut up,” I retorted, clicking my tongue.

I proceeded to throw my legs on the seat. He stared at me disapprovingly, but I ignored it. I’m wearing a dress I don’t even want to, as he requested. He’s gotta let me do at least this much.

"By the way, will you tell me why we're heading to the castle already?" I asked.

"Let's see…" Reinhard responded. "How about we keep it a surprise?"

"How about I beat you up? You may be good at blocking my kicks, but when I set my mind to something, I don't stop 'til I get it done. Even if I have to assault you in your sleep."

"No need to threaten me in such a way. I'll tell you," Reinhard replied, raising both of his arms as if to convey his surrender. "Do you remember our conversation about the insignia?"

That's the conversation we had two months ago. I nodded in response without saying a word. He was talking about the insignia with a gem that lights up when I hold it. Now that I think about it, my life's been messed up because of that stupid thing.

"I reported it to the royal castle, and here we are today. I'm sure it'll cause you great stress, but I'll be by your side if you need anything."

"Give! Me! More! Specifics!"

Don't give me the 'if you need anything' crap! Can't you explain it better?! However, Reinhard only smiled bitterly and didn't even attempt to give me any more information. What is it with this guy's attitude? Should I just jump out of the carriage now? Looking back at it now, I should have followed my instincts and attempted an escape. Instead, I obediently remained seated for some reason. Maybe I had been somewhat tamed in the past two months. By Granny's cooking, of course, and not by Reinhard. I clenched my teeth. There'd been way too many things I needed to reflect upon ever since I was caught by Reinhard.

"Lady Felt, the long awaited royal castle is in view," Reinhard said.

As I was reflecting on my current self, I couldn't help but get curious by Reinhard's announcement and leaned forward in my seat. Beyond the divider was Granny in the passenger seat, and the ever so quiet Gramps holding the reins next to her. As I popped my head between them, the landscape in front of the carriage suddenly jumped into view.

“…”

I gulped at the sight I should have been used to by now.

As I mentioned earlier, I liked high places. The elevation of the royal capital rose incrementally as you made your way towards the middle. And right in the middle, at the highest point, was the castle where the king lived. Surrounding it was the Nobles’ District where the nobles lived, then the Commoners’ and Merchants’ Districts, and lastly the slums. I would sometimes sneak into dragon carriages and smuggle myself into the Nobles’ District, a place a commoner usually would never have access to. Not to steal, but to enjoy the view from the top. Nevertheless, it was my first time being as high as I was at this moment.

The very center of the royal capital. The highest point where I can take in the cleanest air in the country.

“This is the center and highest level in the capital of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica—Lugunica Castle,” Reinhard explained as I stared, lost for words.

He was on his knee next to me, gazing at me as I leaned forward to get a better view. He was so close I could almost feel his breath. My face reflected in his blue eyes, and not the castle.

“Take this!”

I attempted a headbutt to his nose, which he evaded with a simple “Whoops.” I clicked my tongue.

6

“Gyaaaahhh! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!” I screamed in a voice that sounded like a chicken getting strangled, tears in my eyes, in a room that was neither too big nor too small. But no matter how desperately I cried and called out, the people behind me showed no mercy. They continued to squeeze my body like a wet rag.

“Stop, stop! You’re killing meeee!”

“Endure it a little longer. This is necessary. It is a duty you must abide as a lady.”

I never considered myself one, nor do I intend to become one in the future!

I wanted to run away, but seeing as Granny was standing by the door, that was out of the question.

The women who call themselves servants of the castle continued to grab me from behind and squeeze my body into some kind of clothing called a corset. The only explanation they kept spouting was that it was necessary and that I had to endure it. I was forced out of the dress I didn’t even want to wear in the first place, and now I was handled like some kind of a doll. There were six servants in total. I couldn’t even get past Granny, so my chances of escaping were nonexistent. I should’ve taken my chances while we were still in the dragon carriage.

After taking me into the castle, Reinhard rendezvoused with another knight at the entrance and went on his way. That other knight was also handsome. Are Reinhard’s acquaintances all good looking or monsters? I tilted my head in wonder as Granny dragged me into the room we were in, where I had been a subject of abuse ever since. I was mentally and physically exhausted.

“Abuse, you say?” Granny exclaimed. “Do you really see me as such a heartless monster, Lady Felt? How sad. You make me so, so sad.”

“S-Says the person laughing at me getting my body squeezed.”

I had already gotten used to seeing Granny’s fake crying. Seeing as it didn’t affect me anymore, she quickly dropped her act and stuck out her tongue. How cute.

The dress the servants prepared and were trying to make me wear was a yellow one. As much as I wanted to say I couldn’t tell the difference from the ones I usually wore, having been forced to wear all kinds of dresses every day for the past two months, I was able to distinguish between them. The one they prepared was unbelievably expensive. From the way it was tailored to the fabric it used, it was eye-catching.

“Which means it’s something I hate…” I was exasperated. “Ugh, my stomach hurts, and the texture of the clothes sucks; what the hell is all this? What is that bastard tryna make me do?”

“Please reserve your complaints for the Young Master,” Granny said. “Besides, you look splendid, Lady Felt. You look like a princess.”

“Please don’t call me that. You’re making me cringe.”

Granny’s exaggerated compliment was reminiscent of Reinhard’s. Could it be that Reinhard learned to make compliments from Granny? I began to wonder if he learned how to talk from Granny, and his handling of earth dragons from Gramps. Actually, I know his mother is sick in bed, but I’ve never heard him talk about his father. Well, it’s not like he would have mentioned his mother if not for my intrusion. Maybe he just doesn’t wanna talk about his family. We don’t need to if he doesn’t want to. It’s not like we’re pals or anything.

“Sorry to intrude. Is Mr. Sword Saint around?” came a raspy voice as the door to the room opened.

Even though the servants were done putting the corset on me, I was still in the middle of changing. As they shrunk back at the sudden intruder, I turned my attention to the door to examine the man. His unshaved face was red from liquor and exuded an air of depravity. The way he stumbled in his strut reminded me of drunkards in the slums who were frequently seen with a bottle in their hand. If he had been wearing old, worn out clothes, and shown a beer belly, it would have been a perfect depiction. But the clothes he had on, as wrinkled as they were, were still of fine quality. In addition, he wore steel boots and had an impressive knight’s sword equipped to his belt. Upon closer observation, I noticed, even though they were soiled, he was wearing the same white knight uniform as Reinhard. It’s hard to believe, but this old man is also a knight.

As I examined him, he looked around the room. He then tilted his head as if he couldn't find what he was looking for.

"Huh, that's weird," he said, scratching his unkempt red hair. "I heard people from House Astrea were usin' this room."

"How insolent of you to walk into a room a lady is using to get dressed!" yelled Granny, who had been quiet until this point.

Granny glared at the man with anger incomparable to when I licked the plate back in the mansion, almost on the verge of killing intent. No, maybe not killing intent. It's something else. But it's something serious, for sure. As I couldn't make out the situation, I was quickly given the answer by the man's next words.

"Hey, it's you, Auntie. Thought ya were an old piece of furniture that's seen better days. Don't surprise me like that."

"How sad. To think that mockery would come out of your mouth before an apology. If you no longer have a shred of the noble qualities required to be a knight, kindly lay down that sword you have hanging at your side."

"Harsh as usual, aren't ya." The man smirked. "But shouldn't you also be careful how you speak to me, Granny? Have you forgotten your place?"

"Master Heinkel..." Granny said, seemingly hurt.

From the way she called out his name, I was able to figure out that they knew each other. A knight with dirty red hair and clouded blue eyes—I see. I'm startin' to get it. I started to get the whole picture, but I was also starting to reach my limits.

"Hey old man, aren't ya being a bit arrogant for a guy who just walked into a room I was getting changed in? Where's my 'sorry' or 'excuse me'?" I said as hostile as I could.

"Wha?" He turned his attention towards me as if he just noticed me. He had a derisive expression on his face, to which I glared back. He then placed his hand on his forehead and began laughing, showing his yellow teeth. "Oh I see, I see, missy! My bad for that. I didn't know there was a little kid getting changed. You were so small, I didn't even notice you."

"Want me to etch a mark on your face with my foot, so you'll never forget about me? You piece of shit," I spat at the yellow-toothed man as I lifted my dress, ready to throw a kick at him at any moment.

Tensions were high. I was about to kick him across the face.

Then Granny put herself between the man and me.

"Vice Captain Heinkel," she spoke. "Are you not aware of the event taking place here in the royal castle today? If you are, you should be able to tell who this lady is."

I couldn't discern the meaning behind Granny's words. The man also didn't seem to understand what she was saying.

He sucked his teeth in annoyance. "Sorry to tell you, but I don't have a clue about what you're talkin' about. I've been workin' real hard slackin' off at the office today, as usual. I haven't heard anything from Marcos…"

"The royal selection," Granny muttered.

The man quickly went silent at her words. His expression visibly hardened, then turned it into a giant frown. His derisive countenance was no longer there. He turned his serious eyes towards me and looked me up and down, as if to examine me like I did him earlier. As I started getting irritated, he looked right up at the ceiling, covered his face with his hands, opened his mouth wide—and started laughing.

"I see, I see. So that's what this is about! That red-headed brat chose this brat to be the sacrificial lamb this time! How perfect! Ain't this just perfect! How can I not laugh about this?!"

He suddenly kicked the bookshelf by the wall, scattering all the books on the floor. Amidst the scattered books, he continued laughing like a madman. The lady servants yelped. I took a step towards the man, who was still laughing hysterically. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I could tell he was making fun of me. I've always hated it when people made fun of me. Don't screw with me.

The man was covering his face with his hand and wasn't paying attention to me. He's full of openings. I imagined how hilarious it would be to sweep this drunkard's legs and knock him to the ground. I shifted my weight and got ready to—

"That's enough," said the man. Right as I was about to go for a leg sweep, he closed the distance to the point where I could smell the liquor on his breath. "Even though I may just be a drunkard, you won't be able to do anything to me with those clothes on."

Taken aback, I instinctively jumped backward, landing right in Granny's arms.

"You should be embarrassed," she told the man, her voice bitter.

The man laughed derisively. "I thought you would realize that that was out of kindness and you would commend me." He turned his condescending eyes towards me. "You'll realize it soon, too, Missy. You and I are just toys fated to be played around with by the same monster. I can't wait til the time comes when we'll be lickin' each other's wounds."

He licked his lips disgustingly and turned his back as if to say he had said what he wanted to say. Then, without looking back or cleaning up after himself, he left the room.

After the madman left, the lady servants hurriedly closed the door. Things finally started to settle down after that.

"Lady Felt, are you alright?" Granny asked. I felt my shoulders loosen up as she held me from behind. She took out a handkerchief and gently wiped my forehead with it. It tickled a little.

"Don't worry, Granny. It's not like he did anythin' to me."

"Still, please allow me to apologize. If I had acted sooner, you wouldn't have had to go through such an unpleasant experience. I wish I could cut him down."

Sensing her strong emotions in her voice, I let out a huff. The corners of my mouth started to rise. I was making a bitter smile. It felt like Reinhard's personality had rubbed off on me, which irritated me a little.

"Don't say what you don't mean, Granny," I said. "If you cut that guy down… Sure, it might feel good, but it's gonna cause a lotta trouble, right?"

"Lady Felt…"

"That's Reinhard's dad, right?"

Even though she didn't make any noise, I could sense Granny gasp right behind me as she heard my words. I might be stupid, but with so many glaring similarities, added with their awkward interaction, it doesn't take a genius to put two and two together. It's true that Reinhard shared similar features with his sleeping mother, but if I had to answer who he resembled more, I'd have to say his father. Their similarities went beyond just their eye and hair color. They had similar facial structures and even similar stances. As someone who had spent a lot of time observing Reinhard to plot an escape, I was able to pick up on the fact that the man was his father.

"Like father, like son, they both piss me off."

"I am deeply sorry to hear that," Granny apologized, looking genuinely depressed.

Due to her position, she could neither agree nor disagree with my sentiment.

I decided to drop the topic. There was no reason for her to feel sorry. She did nothing wrong. If that guy turned out to have such a terrible personality because of his upbringing, that would be his parents' fault and not Granny's.

Granny maintained her silence, and the lady servants, too, seemed to be influenced by the somber atmosphere in the room.

"Well, that's enough about what's done. Let's clean this mess up," I said rather loudly, clapping my hands. I wanted to liven up the atmosphere of the room. “It'd be dangerous if someone stepped on the shattered glass, and ya’ll are still in the middle of dressin’ me up, aren't ya? My sides are all out in the open. Ya better not say this is how it’s supposed to look.”

I raised my arms up sideways to let the lady servants see the state of my dress. I suddenly became embarrassed when I realized I’d tried to pick a fight in such a state. The dress was still only clipped on, and as for my upper body, all I had on was a corset that was tough enough to possibly stop a knife from getting through.

The lady servants looked at each other and seemed to be hesitant at first, but soon broke into two groups and went back to work. One group helped me get dressed and the other cleaned up the mess. Although, the nature of their job was just squeezing me into my clothes.

I groaned and moaned as they continued to constrict me. Then I noticed Granny looking at me with a soft—no, a softer-than-usual expression. “Granny? Why are you makin’ that face?”

“No, it’s nothing,” Granny said, shaking her head. “It’s just that, I was reflecting on the fact that the Young Master’s judgment was right as usual.”

I snickered. “Don’t bring that guy up. Just thinkin’ about the guy pisses me off.” The despicable face of the redhead popped up in my mind then overlapped with the man from earlier. I shook my head to erase the man’s face, leaving only Reinhard’s face remaining. Sure, the dude’s despicable, but he’s much better than that other guy… wait, wait, why am I even thinkin’ about Reinhard? Old Man Rom and Gramps are way more of my type.

“If you weren’t here, Granny, I’d totally have tried to catch Gramps’s eye.”

“My, you shouldn’t say things like that, Lady Felt. Grimm… I mean, my husband is mine. You may not have him,” Granny said, her tone sounding scarier than usual.

“I know, I know. I was just kidding,” I said, bursting into laughter.

Granny nodded satisfactorily.

The lady servants finished dressing me up and dragged me in front of the mirror. It’s a dress. I’m wearing a dress.

“You look beautiful, Lady Felt,” Granny commented.

I decided not to deny her, as I usually would have. Not only would she have been troubled with a response, I was also rather surprised with the way I looked. I knew it was a bit more expensive than the dresses I usually wore, but these types of clothes only looked good on a particular type of person. The prime example would be the royal guards’ uniform. It looked good on Reinhard, but looked like old rags on that old man. That’s why I was against wearing this dress. But as I saw myself in the mirror wearing it, I was surprised to see it fit rather well.

For the past two months, Granny treated my hair and fed me three times a day to my content everyday, I was able to sleep well at night due to all the energy I used trying to escape, and I even got the hang of moving smoothly while wearing a dress due to having to wear them everyday. Suddenly, I started to realize the meaning of the past two months.

As I was reminiscing about the time I spent in the mansion, a pair of people entered the room.

“Excuse us, Grandmother. We are here to escort you to the throne room.”

When I turned around, pink-haired twin girls—or so I thought because of their identical faces—jumped into my view.

“Leaving aside the fact that I don’t know who you two are, what did you just say? Did ya just call Granny Grandmother? And what’s this about the throne room?”

Wait, actually, even I can tell that’s where the King is. I knew from the moment I was brought to this castle I was in for a headache, but what’s this about going to a room where the King is? Furthermore, aren’t all the royals already dead—

“Flam, Grassis, introduce yourselves to Lady Felt,” Granny instructed the twins.

So, you’re just gonna ignore my questions, huh?

The twins stepped forward and bowed their small heads. They were short. I’m quite small myself, but these girls were even smaller. They also looked younger than me.

“I’m Flam Remendis.”

“Grassis Remendis.”

They said, still bowing their heads.

So, their last name’s Remendis, huh? It’s kinda tricky to tell ‘em apart just by looking. I think maybe their bangs are a tiny bit different?

“I’m embarrassed to say, but they are my granddaughters,” Granny said, as she took a bow alongside the twins. “They shall take you to the throne room.”

“Wow, granddaughters? There’s a surprise. So, about the answers for my earlier questions…”

“You’ll have all the answers you need once you get to the throne room. The Young Master should be there as well.”

So they ignored my questions on purpose. I made a big frown to express my discontent, but Granny kept bowing and wouldn’t explain any further. So stubborn. I always thought I was pretty stubborn myself, but I had to concede to Granny this time.

“So, I just have to follow these two?”

“Yes, my husband and I will be waiting here for the Young Master and you to return.”

“Don’t pair us up like that,” I said, laughing.

I turned around and faced the twins. They wouldn’t even flash a smile, which made me think they must have undergone rigorous training to become first-class chamberlains. I'm gonna follow them and go to the throne room where Reinhard is waiting, huh? I had no clue what awaited me there, or how it had anything to do with the glowing stone, but it didn't seem like I had much of a choice.

"Whatever, bring it on. Being looked down on is the last thing I want."

If I backed down now, people'll think I ran away with my tail between my legs. My pride won't allow that. I crossed my arms, pumped out my chest to make myself look bigger, and followed behind the twins as they began walking. Granny and the lady servants saw me out. I took each of my steps as firmly as I could on the red rug laid in the hallway. Whatever's ahead, bring it on. I prepared myself for whatever laid ahead.

7

"Well, there was no point in preparing myself."

Such was my reaction a few hours later, feeling like a large amount of smoke was coming out of my head. I was slouching on the sofa in the anteroom I had been brought to. I was exhausted. There was so much stuff that happened, it stressed me out to even think about it. First, I had to sort out the good things and the bad things.

"Although I was relieved to see Old Man Rom was there," I muttered. "What is this about makin' me a queen? Are they nuts?"

So this is what Reinhard and all the rest of the people wanted to do at the throne room, just because I can make some stone glow up, huh? They're all so stupid.

"I don't know anything about a dragon or qualification."

Placing my chin on the back rest, I rolled the insignia in my hand. The stone inside it remained glowing, as if it was trying to aggressively prove a point, then would completely fade whenever I let it out of my hand. When I hold it, it lights up. When I let go, the light fades. Apparently, that's all it takes for them to drag me into a competition to become the queen.

“Not that there’s any point in complaining, now that I decided to do it.”

Knowing that there was nobody around, I scratched my head, messing up my hair. Reinhard and Granny both hated it when I did this. They often said I’ll damage my hair or that it’ll lose its beautiful color, but I hated worrying about such small things. If anything, I wanted to take off my dress and change into a more relaxing outfit as well.

“But I guess I’ll just have to wait ‘til I get back to the mansion. And there’s also Old Man Rom!” I said, raising my tone at the last bit of the sentence.

Old Man Rom was my one and only family. Although I wasn’t too sure about all the details, he was captured by the guards for trying to save me. He was in some real trouble, so I agreed to enter this thing called the royal selection in exchange for his release. As long as he was safe, I had no regrets about it.

Now that we were done talking with all the other candidates of the royal selection, (including the half-devil lady I met before) Reinhard went to pick up Old Man Rom. The plan was to wait for their return, and then we would all go back—or rather, dragged back—to the mansion.

“I suppose it isn’t realistic to successfully escape now.”

Considering the gravity of the situation, even I understood I was now in a position where I couldn’t just easily run away. I couldn’t even escape from the mansion. If I couldn’t run away from three people, how can I run from an entire country?

Also, if I’m being honest, I was in a rather good mood. This wasn’t because I was admired as a candidate participating in the royal selection. I mean, I made an enemy out of all of ‘em by pickin’ a fight with ‘em. But the mere fact that I got to pick a fight with them was exactly what put me in such a good mood. I finally had the chance to say everything I wanted to say to everyone I wanted to say it to. This alone made me ecstatic.

“I’ll worry about everything else later,” I said to myself, as I lounged on the sofa, before I noticed someone was at the door. “Huh?”

“Lady Felt, is this a good time?”

It was one of Granny’s granddaughters, Flam or Grassis, but I couldn’t tell which. They were right behind me in a room full of important figures earlier, which helped me. So, she was already someone I felt like I could relax around.

“Yeah sure, come in,” I said.

“There’s someone who would like to see you. It’s Miklotov McMahon from the Council of Wise Men.”

“Whoa, there’s a guest?!” I swung my legs down and stood upright from a lying position. The door opened and a person I recognized entered. “Hey, aren’t ya the most important old man in that other place from earlier?”

“Hmm, the-most-important is a bit of a stretch,” said the white-bearded old man named Miklotov. “People tend to give me a little more respect due to my age, but that’s all. If we’re talking solely about our positions, Lady Felt, you will be way above me from now on.”

I laughed. “Give me a break already. You’re gonna make my head explode.”

“That would be a problem,” Miklotov said, laughing. “The commencement of the royal selection was just declared with the five of you present.”

If I remember correctly, he’s the representative of the gathering of the most important figures in the country called the Council of Wise Men. He was in the throne room earlier. Out of all the people who were yelling and whining, he was the only person who was easy on me. There was also a sense of kindness in his eyes and voice, so I had a good impression of him.

"But now that you're here, are you planning on doin' somethin' nefarious to me?" I asked about his intentions.

"No, I would never think of doing such a thing," responded Miklotov. "I simply wanted to have a talk with you, Lady Felt, outside of a place such as the one we were in earlier. Of course, however, I'm not the only one who wished for this."

I tilted my head at the old man's cryptic words. However, I figured out what the old man meant as soon as I tilted my head: There was another man of small stature with a cunning countenance hiding behind him.

"Whoa, there was another one here?! Don't frighten me like that! Why didn't you say anythin'?!"

"It's a little complicated to explain, but we had our reasons," Miklotov answered. "Rickert, introduce yourself to Lady Felt."

"Yes, sir," said the man as he stepped forward.

I recognized his face as well. He was also in the other room earlier, though not on the stage, but among the rest of the lined-up people. He was the one criticizin' the other candidates and me, actin' haughty.

"Apologies for my earlier behavior. My name is Rickert Hoffman."

"Ah, yeah, sure. Although, I can't say I'm confident I'll remember it."

I was introduced to too many faces and names I had to remember in the past few hours. I was already having a hard time remembering the faces of the other candidates, there wasn't enough room in my brain to store the face of some guy who was on the fringes.

The man who called himself Rickert, however, didn't say anything about my standoffish response. I was a little surprised by his lack of reaction. Considering his earlier behavior, I would've expected him to start making a fuss about how I'm not fit to be a queen. Instead, he quietly stared at me.

“What are you lookin’ at me like that for?” I asked.

He remained quiet and kept looking at me up and down. If I thought he was trying to size me up I would have kicked him in his shin. However, I didn’t feel any ill intentions or ulterior motives in his gaze.

“Is she really your blood, Your Highness?” he muttered.

“What’d you say?” I asked back.

“Nothing, I just wanted to apologize for my rude behavior earlier, which is why I asked Lord Miklotov to set up this meeting. I thank you for your time,” he said, bowing and talking quickly.

He says he’s here to apologize for his behavior, but I don’t like how he’s suddenly changing his attitude. Furthermore, is that really his only reason for being here? Ever since I came to this castle—no, ever since I was captured by Reinhard, I’ve had no choice but to let other people control my actions. People are also keeping secrets way too much. Honestly, I’m not loving this situation at all.

“However, aside from apologizing,” said Rickert, “there is something I’d like to ask you, Lady Felt.”

“Oh?”

“As I mentioned in the other room, you will be exposed to countless hardships. From the story about you being raised in the slums, to proving your royal lineage… These will all present themselves as thorns on the path you’re about to take. Do you truly have the resolve to walk down such a path, and weren’t just being boastful earlier?”

I snickered. “Looks like you’re finally being your true self.”

His diplomatic attitude was gone. In its place was the gleam in his eyes I saw earlier. I wasn’t particularly happy about this, but it was much better than him trying to act polite. After all, if he wants to bite, I can bite back too.

“First of all, let me make this clear for you,” I started. “I haven’t the faintest idea of this path full of thorns you or the old man here are talkin' about. Isn't that obvious?"

"Wha—"

"I haven't heard about any of these things until today. I was suddenly thrown into this situation I've never even thought that I would be in. And all of you want to ask me if I'm ready to take on the responsibility or whatnot. It's hysterical to the point of absurdity." Rickert was taken aback, and the old man widened his eyes, but I had no intention of stopping. My coming hardships? Path full of thorns? These lot really don't get it, do they? "There's never been a single day or moment where I wasn't risking my life. Forget about tomorrow, or the future. If such things scare you, ya might as well just close your eyes, ears, and even your mouth, and go to sleep. But if you do, you'll only be wasting your time, and the tomorrow you fear so much will arrive before you know it."

"…"

"If you want to make someone happy by using phony words like fate or resolve, leave that for Reinhard. Cuz I sure as hell don't need 'em. So you can ask me the same question all you want, but I'm not givin' you an answer. That's my resolve."

Having blurted out everything I wanted to say, I crossed my arms and puffed out my chest. There was no telling how they felt about my speech. The old man nodded as he kept playing with his beard, and Rickert cast his gaze downward with his knuckles clenched.

"So, you're willing to be the next Lion King?" Rickert asked.

"The Lion King?" I said. "The hell is that? I thought I'm just supposed to be a normal queen. Sounds like a real pain in the ass."

"Yes, a path full of thorns tends to be a real pain in the ass."

I see, thanks for the clarification, man.

As I frowned to express my discontent, Rickert let out a small sigh. This small sigh might have been his way of saying he didn't have any more questions. He bowed once again, and went behind the old man.

“Thanks for talking with Rickert,” the old man said.

“I don’t mind that. But it left me with a bunch of new questions. I can’t say I’m exactly satisfied.”

“However, we were relieved from the many questions that we had,” said the old man. “You were able to put two people at ease within the few hours since the royal selection even began. Don’t you think this is a step…no, two steps forward?”

“You know, for a significant figure, you sure come off as sly,” I remarked.

Maybe this old man isn’t kind, but just a sly guy.

The old man simply gave an old-person laugh at my remark. He kept playing with his long white beard as he gave a bow. Looks like he’s done with his business here.

“It would be a great honor to speak with you again if the opportunity ever presents itself, Lady Felt. I am looking forward to what you will be…achieving, in the upcoming royal selection.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks for the very ambiguous support.”

He laughed. “Oh? But it might not be as ambiguous as you think.”

Sounds suspicious. I didn’t respond, but my face said it all as the old man and Rickert left the anteroom. Rickert kept a bow until the very end, but I was still skeptical about his intentions. Whatever they were, however, the arrival of the two guests while I was already exhausted made me even more tired. I was at my limit.

“Yo,” I yelled at the entrance. “Flam or Grassis, or whoever you are!”

“I’m Flam, Lady Felt,” answered the chamberlain who was by the door. “Grassis is the aloof one.”

I dismissed her statement with a wave of a hand.

"Don't let anyone else in. I'm tired, and my back's killin' me from having to wear this tight dress," I said, tapping my back like an old woman.

"Understood, I won't let anyone in," she answered. "So, please take your leave."

The last part of her sentence caught my attention. Was there another guest here to see me? Maybe they were someone who wanted to suck up to me now that I'm a candidate to be queen. Such suspicions arose from my past in the slums when people acted nice to me whenever I began making money.

"So, a rat was here to see me, huh?" I muttered. "Hey, who was that just now?" I asked.

"It was the Young Master and a very large old man."

"You didn't need to turn them away!!"

I jumped up and raced to the door.

Why the hell would she turn away Old Man Rom, and even Reinhard for that matter? Couldn't she be a little more flexible?

"Old Man Rom! I missed you so much!" I exclaimed, as I jumped into my one and only family's arms.

8

I didn't tell Reinhard the old man and Rickert came to see me in the anteroom. One reason was because I didn't think it was necessary, and the other was because I was reminded of how frustrated I was at him for tricking me when I saw the bastard's face. Sure, I meant everything I said in the throne room. That's why I was able to give that speech to the old man and Rickert. I'm not about to run away from a fight, and there's also people I gotta get back, like that arrogant red-woman! But all that aside, everything boils down to one thing. It's that—

"All of this has been going exactly how you've planned, right?" I said, leaning back in my seat as I glared at Reinhard, who was sitting in front of me.

The dragon carriage we were in slowly descended the hill, heading for Reinhard's mansion in the Nobles' District. The carriage was barely moving inside, which supposedly had something to do with this thing called a Divine Protection, but I didn't know what that was. All I understood about it was that no matter how much the carriage itself may rock for whatever reason—like when it's on rocky terrain, for example—the inside didn't get affected. This convenient power allowed me to focus all my energy on denouncing Reinhard.

As for the man himself, he simply stared at me and said, "My lady, the hem of your skirt is rolled up. Even though there isn't anyone around, you should not allow yourself to look like that. A lady is defined by the behavior she shows when there are only close acquaintances watching."

"Don't give me that lady crap," I said bitterly. "And who are you calling close acquaintances? You better not have included yourself in that category, cuz we're for sure not close."

Despite my reluctance, I fixed my skirt like he wanted. I wanted to take it off in the anteroom before leaving, but Reinhard kept whining, so I had to keep it on until we got back to the mansion.

"My stomach is killin' me…" I complained. "How do nobles even eat in these things? I don't think I'd be able to eat pretty much anything in this."

"It's rather uncommon to witness individuals indulging in a full meal at social gatherings, especially when they're wearing dresses. These occasions are typically meant for relishing the company of others and engaging in delightful conversations. Admiring the elegant outfits of fellow attendees is also an integral aspect of such events. On that note, Lady Felt, you look exceptionally lovely."

"Did you stop me from getting changed because you wanted to say that?" I intensified my glare at him.

He said nothing, only smiling faintly. I'll take that as a yes.

“I’m taking it off.”

“We don’t have a change of clothes ready. Please keep it on.”

“Then I’ll stay in my underwear. It’s better than looking at your creepy smile,” I said, but he didn’t look like he was taking me seriously, which made me seriously contemplate taking off the dress. However, I decided against it, realizing how dumb that would be.

I turned my attention away from Reinhard, and clicked my tongue in a way so that it wouldn’t sound like I was sulking.

“I mistakenly let myself go with the flow earlier,” I said, “but I should’ve been more careful in choosing my partner. What the hell was I thinking choosing someone who’s caused me nothing but grief?”

“I hate to disagree with you, but I believe it would have been difficult to find another knight to serve you,” responded Reinhard. “Considering your ambiguous lineage, there isn’t a better house to support you than ours. Also, this is a personal reason, but at this point, I don’t really want to serve anyone other than you, Lady Felt.”

“Don’t say that as if you were ever subservient to me. When have you ever listened to me?! Keep talkin’ nonsense and I’ll beat ya to a pulp!”

As I yelled and screamed, another voice that wasn’t Reinhard spoke inside the carriage. “That’s enough, Felt. I know it may not be easy to be calm right now, but yelling won’t solve anything.”

The man who spoke was the giant sitting next to me, who had to squeeze into his seat despite the carriage being rather large. It was Old Man Rom. I’m happy I finally reunited with him, but that statement just now didn’t sound like he was on my side.

“Fine, whatever, I don’t wanna make any excuses so I’ll stop,” I said.

“I said to calm down, but I didn’t say you can’t feel down. At least don’t hesitate to confide in me when you do.”

“I appreciate that, but maybe another time, when I really feel down. I can’t be dependent on you so early on.”

Old Man Rom patted my head with his giant hand. Truth be told, he hurt my neck everytime he did this as he was bad at controlling his strength, but I was never able to resist him. It gave me a sense of nostalgia every time. However, I knew I couldn’t cling onto this nostalgia forever. This was a resolve I made in the anteroom.

“So, the Sword Saint Reinhard, huh?” Old Man Rom said in a dignified voice with his hand still on my head.

Reinhard and Old Man Rom exchanged looks. There were only the three of us in the carriage. Granny and Gramps were in the driver’s seat. They volunteered to sit separately from us so we’ll have time to catch up, but the atmosphere is kinda heavy.

“I heard she was in your care while I was away,” Old Man Rom began.

“In my care is an overstatement,” Reinhard responded. “If it weren’t for your guardianship, Lady Felt might not have been able to stay at our house, and today might not have happened. If there’s anyone who should be expressing gratitude, it’s me.”

“Yeah, about that. Are you serious about making this girl the queen?” Old Man Rom asked without changing his tone. The atmosphere was tense as ever.

Old Man Rom moved his hand from my head to my back. With his size and strength, he could have easily grabbed me and run away. In fact, I genuinely thought he was going to do just that for a split second. And if I noticed it, Reinhard must have noticed it as well. In spite of this, he showed no signs of doing anything. There wasn’t even a slight change in his expression. He simply nodded.

“Yes, of course. Lady Felt was chosen by the dragon jewel, and she herself decided to participate in the royal selection. And I am her knight. I am determined to serve and help my mistress achieve her goal with everything I’ve got.”

“I must say, it’s a surprise to hear that the Sword Saint of all people is so attracted to her,” Old Man Rom said. “Although I shouldn’t be the one to say this, I can’t say I empathize with your judgment. This girl is only half the size of kids around her age.”

“Old Man Rom!” I exclaimed. What the hell does that have to do with anything!

However, Old Man Rom didn’t flinch at my loud voice. “I’m not making fun of you. This is an important discussion. As the royal selection progresses, things will only get harder and harder. We can’t afford a shred of uncertainty in our team if we’re really going to throw ourselves into such a tidal wave. We must discuss everything with full transparency, right?”

“Absolutely,” answered Reinhard. “May I call you Mr. Rom?”

“I go by Old Man Rom, but I suppose you won’t comply. You can call me whatever you want for now. Right now, I want to know your true intentions.”

With his bulky arms crossed, Old Man Rom fidgeted in his seat, causing the carriage to creak. He glared directly at Reinhard with an intensity as if to monitor every movement he makes. Even though I was their subject of discussion, I started to feel out of the loop. Then, Reinhard made his move. He removed his sheathed sword from his belt and handed it to me.

“What is this about?” I asked.

“I’m proving my loyalty to you, Lady Felt. I am prepared to serve you my sword both literally and figuratively,” Reinhard explained. “We cannot move forward with this discussion without doing so first. At least, both Sir Rom and I can’t.”

I said nothing. Being lost at words, I glanced at Old Man Rom. I wasn’t sure if I should accept his offering. His words sound exaggerated, and felt like it might trigger a bigger problem. Old Man Rom, however, wiped away my anxiety with a nod.

“The youngster’s got a point,” he said. “Take it, Felt.”

“Even though you never let me hold it in the past when I wanted to steal it from you,” I said, as I received the sword reluctantly.

The sheath was white, and everything about it was remarkably built; I’d never seen anything like it. Reinhard always had this heavy sword with him. Knowing that it was that precious to him, I even tried to steal it from him several times in the past as a form of payback for not being able to escape. Obviously, I failed every time, so I had mixed feelings about it being handed to me so easily.

“There’s a large nick on it even though it’s your precious sword,” I commented.

I repositioned the giant sword with both hands and traced the groove on the sheath with my fingertip. It looked like the claw mark of a stupidly large creature.

“That’s the claw mark of a dragon,” explained Reinhard. “According to legend, it was etched by the Divine Dragon Volcanica.”

“When you say the Divine Dragon…you mean that really famous dragon? You’re kidding.”

Even though I didn’t know the details about the event, I knew that it must have taken place a few hundred years ago. There’s no way a sword that old would be around today completely intact. Despite such thoughts, the eerie dignifying air the sword emanated made me consider otherwise. As absurd as it may sound, it was as if the sword was talking to me, saying: “I am the Dragon Sword Reid. I have slayed the Witch, and am still awaiting a worthy opponent.”

“The Dragon Sword Reid, huh?” Old Man Rom muttered. “How surprising to see that you are willing to lend such a legendary sword to Felt.”

“This sword is exclusively reserved for the inheritor of the title of Sword Saint. The Dragon Sword itself chooses its opponent and its place of battle. Its true power is capable of altering the core principles of the world. It’s that powerful.”

As I held the sword in my hand, I couldn't say Reinhard was exaggerating. I've held many swords in my days (albeit, they were all stolen) but none of them were anything like this one.

I looked at Reinhard. "So, now that you've handed me the sword, what are you gonna talk about?"

"Right," said Reinhard. "We were talking about why I believe you, Lady Felt, are suited to be the queen, yes?"

"She might've met the requirement to be a candidate since the dragon jewel glows in her hand," said Old Man Rom, "but it's far too early to associate her with the perished royal family based solely on her hair and eye color. You must have some sort of evidence before making such speculations…"

"I know why the last Royal Guard disbanded."

I didn't know what Reinhard meant, but Old Man Rom was visibly shaken.

His eyes were widened, and his voice shaky. "Wh-Why… Do you know about that…"

"I'm sure you of all people know the answer to that question, Mr. Cromwell."

"I see, so you know about me too. That person's wish will go in vain."

"If that's how it's meant to be," responded Reinhard, to which Old Man Rom grimaced.

His expression was that of the one he made whenever he admitted defeat to someone, but I didn't know why he was making such a face. Even though this whole discussion was supposed to be about me, I had no idea what they were talking about.

"Felt, this youngster won't betray you," said Old Man Rom. "No, he can't betray you. I'll vouch for that."

"Wh-Wha? What were you two even talking about just now?

Explain it to me so that I can understand too. Otherwise I can't…"

Before I could finish my thought, Old Man Rom placed his hand over my mouth, shutting me up.

"Felt," he said, as he patted my head with his giant hand, knowing full well I wouldn't be able to talk back whenever he did that. "You are my one and only family. So I want you to trust me."

"That's unfair," I complained. You won't tell me anything, nor will you let me say anything.

As a sign of my protest, the least I could do was to glare at him as intensely as I could. For some reason, tears started to fill my eyes, but I clenched my teeth and held them in. Through my blurry vision, I saw Old Man Rom make the gentlest smile of the day.

"How envious."

Such were the words I thought I heard him say, but I wasn't sure since I made a loud noise when I inhaled through my congested nose.

9

"There's really nothing left," I said, as I stood in front of the rubble.

"Nothing at all," Old Man Rom said next to me. "But if there was even a little left, we might've not been able to completely give up. It's better that it was wiped out without a trace."

"As the one responsible, I'm happy to hear that," Reinhard commented next to Old Man Rom.

"He didn't say it to console you," I spat at him.

The three of us, Reinhard, Old Man Rom, and I stood in that order, in front of what used to be the abandoned warehouse that was once our loot house.

We were supposed to go straight back to the mansion, but I made them change the carriage's course to see the remainder of the loot house. I was curious about this place since I wasn't able to come see what happened to it ever since Reinhard captured me, and it wasn't a stretch to say this was where it all began.

"What's gonna happen to this place?" I asked.

"At the moment, the public work sector is stagnating in the lower districts," responded Reinhard. "One of the main reasons is said to be the economic problem the kingdom is facing, but I doubt that's the only reason."

"I see, so they wanna have a place where all the dirty low-class commoners can gather in one spot, huh," I said. "Sounds like something people who watch over us from their ivory tower come up with. Makes me sick."

I kicked a pebble, trying to compose myself at the sickening structure of the world. Reinhard looked away. For a moment, I thought he looked away because the topic made him feel uncomfortable, which would have been a rather unseemingly childish attitude. However, that was not the case.

"Who's there?" Reinhard asked, as he stepped forward still looking away from us.

Old Man Rom and I followed his gaze, which was directed at the street next to us. Three men were standing there in the shadows. They were all differently sized: big, average, and small. They looked like nothing more than dingy delinquents, but their apparent filthiness wasn't solely because they were residents of the slums. They were all bruised and covered in wounds that appeared to have been inflicted on them recently. Noticing their bruises, Reinhard dropped his guard and instead furrowed his brows in worry.

"Are you hurt? If you are in need of help…"

"Shut up," yelled one of them, cutting off Reinhard's offer, as he stepped forward. "Just give us all your valuables! We won't take your life if we don't hafta!"

He had a dagger in his hand. What a violent guy.

“Hey, Rachins, we don’t have time to be doing this…” another one exclaimed, but the man who held the dagger and was called Rachins paid no heed to his comrade’s warning.

“Idiot! This is exactly the time we need to be doing this! We messed up using Russell’s name. We’ll be killed if we stay here! We need money to run away!” As he yelled these words, the man brought the dagger closer to his waist, and began slowly approaching us. The other two behind him didn’t try to stop their comrade anymore.

I guess I gotta stop him. As I began to have such thoughts…

“That’s enough.”

Reinhard moved faster than I could utter a word. He struck the man on the neck with a knife-hand. Remembering how he sliced a curtain with the same technique, I got worried that he’d chopped the man’s head off, but fortunately it didn’t come to that. The man simply lost consciousness and collapsed on the spot.

“Wha—?”

Taken aback by their comrade suddenly getting knocked out, the remaining two gasped. Reinhard played with the dagger he’d taken from the man who was now on the floor. As he turned around to face them, they finally realized who they’d picked a fight with.

“R-Red hair and blue eyes… Are you the Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea?!”

“You’re kiddin’! What are the odds we encounter such a guy right here right now?!”

“I’m glad both of you’ve recognized me,” said Reinhard. “Your friend is unconscious, but he’s still alive. If you retreat now, I promise we will not go after you. Do we have a deal?”

The two men’s legs were shaking. Even though it seemed like Reinhard was giving them a choice, in actuality, it was more of a threat. However, he didn’t seem to be aware of what he was doing. In fact, there was a good chance that he thought he was doing the right thing. As I watched his obliviousness, I began to get irritated.

It was like watching the epitome of this kingdom’s treatment of the slums.

“Wait Reinhard,” I said from the side.

“Lady Felt?” Reinhard said, surprised by my interruption, amidst the unconscious man by his feet and two others standing scared.

Ignoring him, I glared at the two men. “You bastards said you had to run away, right? Did ya’ll screw somethin’ up?”

The men groaned and made a pitiful face at my question. It was evident by their reactions that they were stuck in a rut, unable to get out of the mess they found themselves in. And it’s none other than the structure of this country that caused them to be in such a predicament.

“Look Reinhard, this is the slums. You were ready to let them go out of kindness, but that’ll just be a waste. The price of a life here is as cheap as a grain of rice. I’ll bet you anything, they’ll be dead this time tomorrow.”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate to make a bet based on someone’s life,” Reinhard commented.

“Are you serious?” I said as I pointed a finger at him for trying to change the subject. “That’s not the important part.”

He gazed at my fingertip for a moment.

“I understand what you want to say,” he said. “But then, what do you propose we do…”

“I told you before, Reinhard. I hate the way this kingdom is right now, so I’m gonna tear it all down. And I didn’t mean just up there, but also down here,” I said, as I pointed to the castle, then down at the remainder of the loot house. Lastly, I turned my attention to the men making pitiful faces behind me, and pointed at them as I puffed out my chest. “You lot, come with me. I’ll turn the tables on this shitty situation.”

“Lady Felt?!” Reinhard exclaimed, breaking his voice, which I enjoyed listening to.

However, he wasn't the only one surprised, but also the men. I quickly realized my proposal was out of the blue, and decided to explain my thoughts in detail.

"My plan is to tear this whole country down and recreate it. If I can't even save some delinquents I just met on the street, how the hell will I be able to achieve such a grand goal? Am I wrong?"

Reinhard and the rest were lost for words. I didn't regret for a second what I suggested, however. And I wasn't going to go back on my words, either. After all, my family who's been listening the whole time hasn't tried to stop me.

Then, my one and only family stepped forward.

"There's no persuading her, youngster," Old Man Rom said, backing me up. "She's stubborn once she sets her mind to something. Besides, it's amusing, isn't it?"

He tapped Reinhard on the shoulder, and carried the unconscious man on his.

"Amusing, you say?" Reinhard asked, staring at Old Man Rom.

"She's an orphan from the slums, the blemish of society! And who does she choose as her first vassals? Some hoodlums from the slums. How can I not laugh at this? How is this not amusing?"

"Hey, hey, Old Man Rom, you don't hafta put it that way," I said with my hands crossed behind my head, chuckling along with him. "Although, you're not entirely wrong."

Old Man Rom turned his attention towards the other two.

"C'mon, you two. Even if you just wanna run away from Russell, you'd have a better chance with us. Beyond that… Well, you can decide after spending some time with this girl," he said, gesturing at me with his chin.

He then began walking toward the outskirts of the slums—the main road, where the dragon carriage was parked. Granny and Gramps should be waiting for us there, but how should I explain this to them?

“W-Wait, what in the world is happening right now?”

“I don’t know, but we can’t leave Rachins! I’m going!”

The big one and the small one hastily ran after Old Man Rom. Watching them run from behind made me feel happy for some reason.

“You look happy,” commented Reinhard next to me.

I closed one eye and looked up at him. I thought I picked up a certain tone in his voice.

“Wait, could it be that you’re a little irritated?” I asked.

Reinhard widened his eyes and shook his head. “I’m not upset at all. I’m just a little taken aback, since this was all unexpected. Honestly, it was an idea I wouldn’t have been able to come up with.”

“Why don’t you be more honest with yourself and scold me for doing something so stupid?”

“If I do, will you listen?”

I sneered. “No way in hell.”

Reinhard showed his usual bitter smile. The bitter smile he showed whenever he wanted to avoid confrontation. I swear, this guy may be handsome, but his smile sure irritates the hell out of me.

“Why don’t you just say it,” I muttered.

“Say what?”

“Just say that I did something stupid. Leave aside whether I’ll listen or not, and just say it. It’s a matter of whether you want to say it or not.”

He asked me if I would've listened to him. Once I answered I wouldn't have, he proceeded to stay quiet. Instead, he just made the troubled look that I so despised. Whenever you smile like that, it's when there's something you're not telling me. "And that's what I hate about you the most, you bastard."

I let out all my pent up feelings. Having heard my words, Reinhard opened his mouth in disbelief. That's a rare look. Whenever I was around, he always had a bitter smile or a look of shock. The face he was making at the moment was closer to the latter.

"Nobody has said that to me before," he said.

I snickered. "Is that so? Can't imagine a world like that."

He's never been insulted in his life before?

As I smiled sarcastically, he shook his head, "No. To be precise, I've never been told that by anyone other than my family before."

"Don't say things like that so suddenly! You're killin' the mood!"

I wasn't sure if he was joking, but I couldn't laugh at it, especially after having met his father. It's hard to empathize with him. Old Man Rom is my only family and we rarely ever get into an argument.

Casting my gaze away, I kicked a pebble again. I thought we should get going so we could catch up to Old Man Rom and the others. However, Reinhard wouldn't budge, so I stood there with him.

"Lady Felt, you called me a bastard," he said suddenly.

"Huh? yeah, maybe I did," I said, frowning at his sudden accusation. "Don't tell me you wanna fix my language. Although I agreed to participate in the royal selection or whatever, I don't intend on changing the way I talk."

"That's not it," he responded. "Although I'd like to have a word with you about that in the future… I'm not sure if I'll have the chance to."

"The hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Lady Felt, you often address me with 'bastard' instead of 'you'," he commented. "However, you stopped addressing me like that a few days ago. I believe it was at about the same time you found my mother."

I said nothing. I wasn't conscious of his observation. I couldn't keep track of whether I addressed someone as 'bastard' or 'you'. However, if his observation was correct—

"Are you tryna say that I address people as 'bastard' when I consider 'em my enemy?"

"Yes," he answered. "And if such is the case, I must have truly disappointed you just now. I'm beginning to doubt if I'm even fit to be your knight…"

"You really are creepy, you know."

"What?"

I was dumbfounded that he was contemplating such a pointless thing. However, he seemed to have been shocked by my response and stood motionlessly. In that instant, I threw a kick at his shin. My kick that kept missing in the carriage on the way to the castle finally landed, leaving a footprint on his pants.

"Finally I got you," I said. "Although I feel bad for Granny since she has to wash them, it feels good to get one in on you."

"Is this your answer, my lady?"

"What? There's no meaning to this. I just wanted to kick you." Does this guy think there's a meaning to everything in the world? How hard-headed can he be? I stuck my tongue out at him. "Just like this kick, I call you a bastard in the heat of the moment, when I feel like it. It's creepy you even keep track of such a thing. Don't tell me you're keepin' track of other things too."

"I won't deny that."

“That’s what I’m callin’ creepy! But do you get what I’m sayin’? You’re worrying about nothin’.” He was still looking at me all confused, so I pointed at the footprint on his pretty white pants and continued. “Haven’t you been listening to me? I’m gonna change everything I don’t like. Your pretty little pants were the first thing. Just as I predicted, it felt good doin’ it.”

He said nothing.

“No matter what’s goin’ on in that little head of yours, I’m not changing who I am or how I live for anyone. There’s no point if I did. You want me to be the queen, no?” Whether that has somethin’ to do with my lineage isn’t my concern. Frankly, I don’t even care. What matters is who I am right now. “Reinhard, it’s up to you whether you’re my ally or just another bastard. The choice is yours. Otherwise, I’ll just leave you behind.”

I don’t care if he’s hailed as the Knight Among Knights or the Sword Saint. No matter what people call him, I will assess and evaluate him myself. And right now, he’s just a pain in the ass with an irritating smile, who also happens to be my knight.

“Look at that,” I said. “That’s a better look on you.”

“What?”

“It’s the first time you’ve smiled like that ever since we got here,” I said, gesturing at his face with my chin.

He touched his face. The corners of his mouth were upturned, and his eyes had closed the gap with his cheeks. In other words, he was smiling. The only other times I’ve seen his face like that was when I told him he looked like his mother and when I gave him an order in the throne room. Well, it’s definitely an improvement.

“You sure surprise me all the time, my lady.”

“Alright, you’re smiling a bit too much now.”

“I’m sorry, I’m remembering the declaration you gave back in the throne room… Of all the things you said you will tear down and change, I’m just honored that I was your first.”

“What?! Don’t get cocky! Besides, you can easily wash off that footprint!”

“No, I’ll ask Auntie to keep it as it is to commemorate this day.”

“You’re really creepy, you know that?!” I screeched, running towards where Old Man Rom was waiting.

Reinhard stood still, watching me run off. I stopped and turned around. And I pointed at him, who was smiling faintly.

“What are you doin’? You’re my servant, aren’t ya? Hurry up and follow me.”

“I am your knight, Lady Felt. No one else’s.”

“Ah, shut up,” I said, flashing my fang as I smiled.

As I stood with my hands on my waist, he began to walk towards me. He extended his hand to offer escort, but I snickered and slapped it away. Walking away from him, I knew he was making a bitter smile without even looking. However, I could tell it wasn’t out of pure bitterness. Ah well, it’s not like I wanna see his genuine smile so much. I guess I’ll let this one slide.

The main street came into view. I saw Old Man Rom squeezed inside the carriage through the window, and though I couldn’t see them, I suspected the three delinquents were on it as well. Gramps and Granny, who were waiting for our return by the carriage, looked confused, longing for an explanation for the new faces. I scratched my head. Looks like the path full of thorns I’m about to take really is gonna be a pain in the ass.

“Opening up such a path,” said Reinhard, as if reading my mind, “that will be my job.”

“And my job will be to stomp through it, huh?” I laughed aloud. “Sounds fun.”

Reinhard also smiled. “Yes, it does.”

END

Sloth IF:
Natsuki Rem’s Life in Another World From Zero

Prologue:
The Beginning

—A very heavy atmosphere was spreading inside the dragon carriage.

???: "…"

The atmosphere was not heavy because of nervousness or caution; it was just plain awkward. To feel like it was reality with her skin, the girl softly pulls up the blanket that was on her body.

The dog carriage was not being pulled by an earth dragon, but a large Liger, and it was not being shielded by divine protection. The passenger carriage had a rough structure, and so it shook noisily. They weren't really good circumstances, but since they weren't in a position to spend all they wanted, they just had to deal with this.

???: "…"

They already didn't even have too much travel expenses left anymore. Once their lives were at risk, they also had to use the money that they were hesitant to use at first because of guilt. Still, even if they temporarily pulled through their difficulties, the problem of money would always follow them around unless it was solved fundamentally.

Plus, money wasn't the only problem they had. There was an even more serious problem.

That was—

???: "A wife…but you look like you just had a nightmare, certainly."

A voice suddenly calls out to the girl at the corner inside the cramped carriage. When she looked back with just her eyes, she saw a small—no, a figure that was too small. It was maybe a child, or something smaller.

He had white hair and a lovely dog face—it was a beast man kobold.

???: “I can see why you’d be cautious, but I don’t mean any harm, certainly. I was just curious, certainly.”

Rem: “…Thank you very much for your concern. But…”

The girl stiffened up, but the tone of his voice made her relax. He probably just had good intentions. However, the girl’s heart wasn’t ‘strong’ enough to allow herself to be spoiled by his good intentions.

If she wasn’t tense, she’d become more and more corrupted. That was terrifying.

???: “You’re practically glass, certainly.”

Rem: “Like glass…?”

???: “Glass is hard, but fragile, certainly. That’s what your guys’ hearts seem like to me, too, certainly.”

His point truly made her heart crack like glass.

By ‘You guys’, it felt like he was saying that she wasn’t all alone. A black-haired boy was cuddling next to her in a blanket, sitting up and sleeping. She was leaned against him, and they were sharing warmth.

And so, this boy was the true reason why there was a heavy atmosphere in the carriage.

Subaru: “…I’m sorry…I’m sorry. I’m…so weak…so…everything’s my…”

Rem: “…”

Every now and then, feelings of shame leaked from the lips of the boy having a nightmare. The passengers felt something serious from his voice and tears that made it seem as if he carried the guilt of everyone in the whole world, and they couldn’t move an inch.

Rem: “Don’t talk about other people’s situations so bluntly…”

???: “Seeing everyone as a threat now is something you probably couldn’t avoid, certainly. It may have been unavoidable, but you can’t just never do anything about it, certainly.”

When she looked down with their arms linked, the beast man just looked like white fur. The fur that spoke as if she knew them irritated her just a little bit. She just didn’t want to make a big fuss about it.

Seeing her conflicted like that, the beast man gets a hat that he’d been hiding, and he took something out of it. And then, when he smoothly put his hand straight in there,

???: “Take this and go to Banan town. A friend of mine will help you out, certainly.”

Rem: “…Why…are you doing this?”

His voice sounded like he had good intentions. There was a place and a person’s name written on the paper he forced her to take. It seemed this beast man’s name was also included in the few lines. She didn’t know why he was doing this.

The beast man smiles with a “It’s obvious, certainly”, in response to the girl’s question and says,

???: “People should help out each other in times of need. As an adult, even more so when it’s a child. “The more bonds you make, the more good bonds you get.” That’s the Kararagian way I believe in.”

He tells her that kindly, and the girl grasped the scrap of paper tightly. After that, she brought her knees together, put her head on the shoulder of the boy next to her, and she let out a sobbing voice.

The beast man stares at the girl and the boy with kind eyes, and he patted their heads.

Chapter 1:
2 Months

1

—Kararagi city state is a large western country that is one of the four large kingdoms.

It’s a country comparable to the large countries the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko in the north, the Volcanica empire in the south, and the Lugunica kingdom in the east, but it became what it is now in a very peculiar way in comparison to other countries.

Kararagi city state’s history is quite shallow in comparison to the other three countries. A few hundred years ago, a bunch of warlords of small countries fought in the west—the rivalry between countries was an undying danger zone.

The west combined and became Kararagi city state as a single country.

Each small country changed into towns, and the country managed those towns with the parliamentary governments of the town leaders. In this system, the “Great Heir”, elected by the town leaders, is the one who holds the final decision.

Kararagi, which contains such circumstances, has completely different values in comparison to other countries. It not only developed distinct politics, but distinct national characteristics and culture too.

Wafuu culture and Wasou were some examples, but the most characteristic thing of all was—

Subaru: “I’m sorry, Rem. It went awful. I tried ma best, but it was just awful…”

The thick Kararagi accent—it was a dialect that was particularly easy to understand in Kararagi city-state, and it was a part of the unique culture that spread. The one who demonstrated it was a person apologizing with his forehead on the floor.

It was a young man with black hair and sharp sanpkau eyes. He was in a Wasou dyed deep blue, sitting upright in a room of tatami mats made of knitted grass, making a pathetic look.

—Natsuki Subaru was his name.

As you could tell from his terrible Kararagi accent, he didn't come from Kararagi. Although, Subaru didn't come from anywhere in this world anyway. He was suddenly summoned from a different world, went through various experiences, and as a result, he was now in Kararagi. —That's all.

And so, Subaru was apologizing to the girl facing him sitting straight. As she smiled at Subaru's apology,

Rem: "—Please stop speaking like that. It doesn't suit you at all, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "It don't?"

Rem: "It's horrible, to say the least."

Subaru: "That's too harsh! Ah, well, I'm sorry. Okay, I'll stop now."

She says that to Subaru with a smile, and he dejectedly stops with the poor accent. However, while showing the dissatisfaction he had inside by pouting, he rubbed two fingers together.

Subaru: "Well, I know I'm not good, but you know what they say, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do". I'm doing my best to fit in with everyone else as soon as possible."

Rem: "It's great that you're doing your best, and I could learn a lot of things from you. However, how should I put this…Subaru-kun's accent sounds like something you'd hear from someone who isn't from Kararagi and is making fun of the accent, and it's kind of irritating."

Subaru: "So that's why Kansai people get pissed off by Tokyoites' fake Kansai accents?!”

Rem: “Tokyo? Kansai accents?”

The ruthless comment sinks Subaru instantly. A question mark showed when Subaru lamented as the girl shook her blue hair and tilted her head.

Her hair that came to the shoulders and her pure eyes were both light blue. Looks that gave off a lovely and kind impression. It was a beautiful, pretty girl wearing a light blue kimono gracefully.

The girl’s name was Rem—or officially, Natsuki Rem. Although she had the same last name as Subaru, she obviously wasn’t his sister or his relative. They were family in a different way.

Subaru: “But like, umm, yeah. It’s not like my speaking has anything to do with work going wrong, okay. Work went wrong just because I’m incompetent…”

Rem: “Work went wrong? Like how?”

Subaru: “Agh…ghghgh you see, well…”

Subaru tried to beat around the bush, but Rem questioned him directly. Subaru thought hard about how he should respond to the fastball thrown at him, and he mumbled.

Seeing Subaru worry like that, Rem smiles softly as she said,

Rem: “Tell me all about what happened. Don’t worry. No matter how awful Subaru-kun was, even if you messed up big time at a work that doesn’t fit you, I won’t get mad.”

Subaru: “I messed up big time at a job that didn’t fit me and I was god awful!”

Subaru gets crushed by Rem’s kind lead-in, and he spreaded his legs on the tatami mat. Like that, he falls over sideways and timidly starts to poke the tatami mat with his finger.

Subaru: “I was too naive. I was beyond naive. From what I thought the basics of manual labor and day labor were, I was under the impression that anyone could do work that was in high demand…"

Rem: "So you were under that impression…and what else?"

Subaru: "Besides! I was reckless for trying manual labor with a crappy fish fry body like mine in Kararagi where Demi-humans are hired! Actually, I tried to cover up the quality of my work with the number of rounds. However, I had to carry three times as much with one round and I didn't have enough stamina!"

While Subaru's voice cracked, he did his best to give an explanation as he looked back on what happened this morning.

He has been living in a different world for no less than a year now, and he was aware of the fact that he was way stronger than before, but it was still difficult to close the gap in specs between him and genuine different world people.

Incidentally, today's job was carrying goods, but he got mixed with muscular Demi-humans, and it was simply hilarious how Subaru was working with a bright red face without even carrying a large amount.

Rem: "Oh, I see…so, how'd you mess up? What did you do?"

Subaru: "I tried re-wrapping goods, and I threw out everything…the damage canceled out today's pay."

Rem: "…The people there didn't ask you to compensate out of kindness, huh."

Salt was inside the bag and some was put back inside, but most of it mixed with sand on the ground, making it impossible to get it back. As a result, they were forced to cut the schedule short, and so he went home.

Rem sighed at Subaru, who gave an awkward report with a gloomy look, and said,

Rem: "I hope that you come across a pretty nice job, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: “It really pierces the hell out of me when you say that… wait, what about Rem? Why are you at home at this time? What about work?”

Rem: “Temple Elementary School is on break today. I told you this morning that it seems like the cold is spreading between kids. … Subaru-kun, you shouldn’t try and change the subject, you know?”

Subaru: “Agh”

Subaru admitted defeat and groaned pathetically at Rem, who glared at him with scornful eyes.

As you could tell from the daily labor failure story, Subaru didn’t have a job. To put it accurately, he had the will to work, but he didn’t have a job.

And unlike Subaru, who was job hunting, Rem got a job promptly. It was a job where she taught at a kind of school children institution, which was called “Temple Elementary School”.

Rem was very wanted for general education in this world, as someone who has mastered all sorts of skills like arithmetic and etiquette, and she never stopped working this year.

You might as well say that Rem was contributing 10 times more than him in regards to getting by, although they were in honest poverty. There truly was a wide difference between her and Subaru.

Subaru’s self-awareness of that and his impatience were what made him blame himself more and reflect more.

Subaru: “Damnit…I’m really sorry again, Rem.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun, you promised not to say that.”

Subaru: “I mean, I did make that promise, but it’s truly pathetic how it is a promise.”

Subaru brings his body up from the floor, sits cross-legged, and bites his lip.

He was proud of Rem being needed by people around her and being useful. However, recognizing it and being spoiled by it was a different story. Not to mention, the one who wanted this—the one who wanted to live supporting each other was Subaru, after all.

By no means was it to let Rem do all the supporting and get spoiled as much as he wanted.

Rem: “It’s okay, don’t worry. They’ll all realize how amazing Subaru-kun is eventually. You just haven’t found a job that goes well with your great talents yet. So, keep trying. Because I’ll work for money!”

Subaru: “That’s exactly how someone becomes a typical gigolo!”

Rem: “Ah, Subaru-kun?!”

Subaru bestirred himself and stood up before he melted in the huge, spoiling aura. Subaru leaves behind Rem, who was surprised by his energy, and he ran towards the room’s entrance.

And then—

Subaru: “Just you wait, Rem! I swear I’ll find a job! I’ll support you!”

Rem: “Okay. Please come back before dinner.”

Subaru: “Damn it! I will support you, you hear me—!!”

Rem waves Subaru goodbye, and he rushed out of the room—out of the tenement house while being on the verge of tears.

He puts on his zoris and runs off to the streets of Kararagi.

Job hunting—even in a different world, it was extremely difficult for people who were unqualified and had a blank period.

2

—Kararagi city-state’s 2nd town, ‘Banan’.

The next largest town after ‘Kyo’, the first town, located west of Kararagi—that is where Subaru and Rem, the Natsukis, live.

The streets are made up of Wafuu architecture, which is culture characteristic of Kararagi, and it seems it is deemed the cradle of the Wafuu style, which spread all over Kararagi. But well, to Subaru, Wafuu architecture was something that didn’t really make him feel like he was in a different world at all.

Because the streets didn’t make him feel like it was a different world, but rather—

Subaru: “—It feels like the Edo Period, or going back a bit forward, the Meiji Era and Taisho Era.”

As Subaru coughed, he saw buildings constructed with wood lined up nicely. Wafuu architecture, which stood on the streets, was also characteristic of the stores with open doors.

People walking down the road were wearing zoris and kimonos, which were wasou, but they were all true different world people. Among those that had hair color and looks that differed from Subaru’s common knowledge, there were a lot of Demi-humans representing beasts.

Japanese culture that forced itself into another world—Subaru had that impression of Kararagi customs, including the Kararagi dialect that sounded just like Kansai dialect.

Subaru: “It’s like people in a fantasy cosplaying. Well, the material is nice so it looks good on everyone, and it all comes together perfectly, though.”

It is very common for manga and games to have countries with Japanese culture in fantasy worlds in the first place. The problem was that it still felt weird actually confronting the scene, and it felt like that for longer than he’d expected. It was a feeling Subaru finally took in after a about a year.

That being said, he still had doubts even if he gulped down the weird feelings.

He couldn't believe that Kararagi's culture uniquely developed from zero. This culture had to have started spreading with people who came from the same place as Subaru.

In other words, people who came from a different world like Subaru and that steel helmet guy, Al—

Subaru: "—Stop it, just stop. Deal with the more realistic problems in front of you. Even if you solve the world's mysteries, you still don't have a job. I'm saying this to myself, talk about depressing…"

How much was this world's history influenced by people who came from the same place as Subaru? He should worry about that when he had more room to think and live. He'd put it off for now.

Right now he had to focus on job hunting, and he had until dinner for that.

Subaru: "It's already afternoon, so I actually don't have much time…! Anyway, first I'll go to the public employment security office and…"

???: "What's wrong, Su-san? You're walking with a serious look… what a scary face!"

Subaru: "Don't be so rude about people's serious looks…"

Someone made a rude point about Subaru's face as he frowned and walked around town. Once Subaru turned around to see whose voice it was, he saw a tall man right beside him. He'd seen his face before.

Subaru: "With that dog face, you must be Hal-san. Don't startle me."

Halibel: ""A dog face". Don't put it that way. I'm a wolf of dogs."

The one who opened his big mouth and laughed at Subaru's words was a demi-human with a wolf face, not a dog face. He was a tall one with black hair and a black kimono, and he bit on a golden kiseru with his back teeth. A lot of ordinary dogs were petite, and he had the credibility to call himself a wolf as he was one head taller than Subaru. However, his eyes were always narrow slits, and so if we're talking about dogs, he looked more like a fox rather than a wolf.

The name of the wolf he called Hal-san was Halibel. He was Subaru and Rem's neighbor of the housing complex 'tenement house' they lived at, and you could say that he was the first acquaintance they made at Banan.

Halibel: "You look like you want to say, "If you're not a dog, then you're a fox". Su-san, you just don't know when to stop, do you?"

Subaru: "Don't make complaints based off people's looks. I really was thinking that, though."

Halibel: "I am neither a Kobold nor a Fox. I'm a Wolf. We are a rare species on the verge of extinction, so don't make that mistake. It kinda feels like I'm carrying the pride of our kind, you know?"

Subaru: "If you're going to carry it, do it a little more seriously."

You'd obviously want to choose someone that could at least carry the pride. As for Subaru, pride—or at the very least, the wolves' title, who were on the verge of extinction, wasn't something he'd leave in the hands of Halibel. He may be taking care of them, but that didn't mean he'd immediately trust him.

Subaru: "I can't chat with you right now. I'm burning with the will to work. Don't get in my way."

Halibel: "Come on, Su-san, that sure is a cold way to greet me. I'm really depressed, so stop it. Besides, even if you're burning with the will to work, you don't have a job. It's just cinders."

Subaru: "I'm also really depressed, so can you not?!"

Subaru's neighbor's counterattack makes his voice crack. Halibel shook the kiseru in his mouth up and down. After that, as he exhaled smoke that entered his lungs, he said,

Halibel: "Go ahead and get more and more depressed. A man that troubles such a good wife is hopeless. How brave of her to not complain once even though her husband has no job and indulges himself in drinking…I feel bad for Rem-chan.”

Subaru: “I don’t indulge myself in drinking! But it hurts how that’s the only thing I can deny! To tell you the truth, I’ve been troubling Rem. …I really can’t compete with her.”

Subaru dropped his shoulders dejectedly as his current worthlessness was pointed out objectively. Halibel went “Harharhar” at Subaru happily while he was like that.

Subaru: “Did you come here to make fun of me? Or did you come here to cheer me up?”

Halibel: “We’re both jobless, and I thought we could have a pity party or something.”

Subaru: “No way! It would be too much to have a pity party with another unemployed person right after I almost became a gigolo!”

Subaru shakes off Halibel, who came closer to him, and he full on rejects being treated as his partner.

Besides, strictly speaking, Halibel wasn’t jobless. This glib talking neighbor was a tenement house manager—whether he was actually doing manager like work or not, he had the title of a manager as a vocational worker.

Although he had only ever seen him napping, grooming, drinking, or using his Kiseru, he was employed.

Subaru: “Basically, Hal-san is a dazzling being out of my reach.”

Halibel: “Don’t say something so sad, we can be friends. It’s true that I can get money just by lying down all day and playing with the fray spots of my kimono, but putting that aside, I think it’s precious how Su-san is working hard to earn money, you know? Isn’t it just lovely?”

Subaru: “Shut up, you slacker! …Actually, who did you go to to become a manager?”

Halibel: “Hmm, sorry to disappoint, but I just happened to be acquaintances with the owner of the tenement house. With that connection, I was able to be a couch potato…Sorry, Su-san, I’m a winner.”

Subaru: “Damn you!!”

Subaru hisses without hiding his anger as he listened to his shaky story.

In the end, personal connections meant everything in an environment where even academic backgrounds were useless. And Subaru didn’t have any personal connections, even if you were to disregard the fact that he was in a different world.

A man that traveled two worlds and failed to create relationships—that was Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “Struggling alone, and to top it off, jobless. …Looks like I’ll just have to wait for my death.”

Halibel: “You have Rem-chan. Struggling alone is an exaggeration!”

Halibel suddenly opens his large mouth widely, and he bursts into laughter as he looked up at the sky. Subaru, seeing that dog face in the corner of his eye, sighed deeply.

Subaru: “Look, you know my situation. I’ll be going job hunting. My goal is a disposable income of 15,000, and the condition is that I pay for traveling expenses and put it into pension and insurance.”

Halibel: “I don’t have actual work experience, but how’d you come up with that condition?”

Subaru: “I thought I’d go for a dream that was just barely realistic. Now I want to apply this condition to the common knowledge here and find out the minimal requirements for landing a job…”

Freeing himself from being supported by Rem was his biggest goal at the moment. However, he wanted to avoid temporary measures, such as choosing jobs that won’t last long and dead-end ones.

Subaru's goal was to get a job he could do for his whole life, one that he could be proud of as a family head.

Subaru: "—And so, I came to the public employment security office."

Out the Banan town areas, at a place away from the crowded, thriving street, there was a store.

It was the 'employment agency' which Subaru called a public employment security office. It was a place that acted as the bridge for interpersonal relationships with things like job arrangements and introduction letters for people.

There were several employment agencies in Banan, but Subaru always used the same one. Because of that, he was friends with the shop owner—

???: "—Ugh! It's dimwit!"

The moment he showed up at the reception desk, the man in the shop suddenly welcomed him harshly.

Subaru: "That's one rude way to greet a client, and you shouldn't use such a cruel nickname."

???: "You're the one that's rude! You screwed up at the goods carrying scene, didn't you?! I was told to never refer such a good-for-nothing!"

Subaru: "Aaa, the foreman told me to take care on the way home, I didn't want to know about this side of him…!"

Subaru collapsed as he was called incompetent, and a lizard faced man is what appeared before him—he was a lizard man. Lizards weren't rare Demi-humans, but he was so fat that he had a strangely large width, and so he looked more like a frog, rather than a toad. It was characteristic of him to wear a cute apron.

Crane Donahue was his name, and he was the owner of this employment agency officially recognized by the town. Employment agencies officially recognized by the town were scarce, and it was known as conscientious work.

However, the man that was supposed to be conscientious looked down on Subaru in an annoyed way as he said,

Crane: “How do you mess up at carrying goods? You’re going to become a job hopper at this rate.”

Subaru: “Er, well, you see, I was totally focused on trying to do as much work as others and…”

Crane: “Daily allowances have fixed rates. You could’ve made profit by sitting back and letting everyone else do the work.”

Subaru: “…That would be unfair. I don’t really want to do something unfair…”

Crane: “Why are you so insistent?! I don’t care if you do a good job, good grief…”

Subaru grumbled to protest, and Crane folds his crest. Then, he suddenly noticed someone standing behind Subaru.

Crane: “Oh! It’s Halibel! Sorry for not contacting you for quite a while!”

Halibel: “Oh, it’s fine, don’t worry. I just came to check on Su-san’s future.”

Subaru: “Future…well, anyway…”

Subaru cleans off his knees, stands up, and compared Crane and Halibel. After that, he pointed at Halibel and tilted his head at Crane.

Subaru: “You know this playboy?”

Halibel: “Playboy! Playboy! Why does it have such a lovely ring to it? From now on, I’ll be calling myself ‘The Eternal Playboy’. Does it sound good? Does it sound bad?”

Subaru: “What’s bad is that you actually like it.”

While Subaru joked at Halibel's name sense, he waited for Crane's reply. Seeing that exchange, Crane groans as he folded his big arms.

Crane: "Dimwit…I mean Mr. Subaru, you made it big. I knew you could do it."

Subaru: "You can't just blatantly change the way you treat someone!"

Crane: "Well, of course I'm going to use 'Mr.'. Who do you think Mr. Halibel i…"

With a look of shock and fear, Crane stopped when he was about to say something. Subaru raised an eyebrow at that unnatural reaction, but Crane went "Oh" while looking away as he said,

Crane: "Mr. Halibel is, you know…a-an eternal playboy."

Subaru: "He got that name just a second ago."

Crane: "Anyway! Moving on! So what's the matter? I can refer Mr. Subaru! But, don't ask for a relaxing gravy train, alright? The goods carrying one was your best shot."

Subaru: "It doesn't have to be a relaxing gravy train. I just want you to refer me to a job with a future. The conditions are negotiable, but please give me one for a family head."

Crane: "That's the first time I've been given the condition "One for a family head", but…"

Crane briefly scanned the shop as he puzzled over Subaru's request.

It was an employment agency approved by the town, but the store itself was neatly taken care of. The one floor wooden shop had minimal chairs and tables, and the bulletin board wall was filled with help wanted advertisements and wanted people forms. People searching for jobs would select a job from the posters, and the people who wanted a job done would ask Crane and he'd put up a form. That was the sort of system it had.

Subaru: "If I accept exterminating a dragon and fail, your reputation would be damaged as the one who got me the job.”

Crane: “I would never ask you to do that, and I’d leave the country once something like dragon extermination was announced.”

Halibel: “If it was in an empire, I’d exterminate a dragon with pleasure. If you have a good plan to kill it, you might even defeat the kingdom’s God dragon. Then you could take the country and…”

Subaru: “Oh! Crane! That’s it! Let me check out that ‘Zarestia Bed Search’!”

Subaru’s voice interrupts Halibel, who lit his Kisero and puffed it. Subaru approaches the wall dramatically, and once he tore off the poster, he read the contents aloud.

Subaru: “Let’s see…”Recruiting investigators for the bed of the great spirit Zarestia! The habitat of the Great spirit that has been a mystery for many years—the time has come to recruit members to explore it! Working conditions are negotiable, and the reward depends on results!” This! This…this doesn’t sound good at all…”

Crane: “Why are you talking so loudly to yourself?! Also, I’ll be putting that back. Give it here.”

When Subaru’s eyes turned lifeless from the absurdity of the recruitment details, Crane confiscated the poster. Then, when he looked at the details, he groaned an “Oh” as he said,

Crane: “I forgot to take this off. Applications closed quite a while ago. It’s just a crappy recruitment form I left on there just because I was told to do so. Just forget about it.”

Subaru: “Did it actually happen?”

Crane: “There are a lot more idiots in this world than you think.”

Subaru felt depressed when he heard Clane reply as he shrugged.

Involving yourself with great spirits would be nothing but a suicidal act. Just normally coming in contact with them would be reckless in itself. —I just hope that those daredevils died peacefully.

That was Crane's misinterpretation of Subaru's facial expression, and when he touched his own apron he said,

Crane: "I now know that you're so cornered that you'd jump at a job that's pretty much suicide. So…I really don't know if I should give you this…!"

Subaru: "So you're saying you have a job that's better than pretty much suicide?!"

Crane: "It depends. But well, you have to work for your cute wife…!"

Crane took out an application as if to say to him, "This is all I can do for you now!". Subaru nervously accepts what he held out to him, and he looks at the application details.

Subaru: "…A maid at Riften Magoji's place?"

Crane: "It's a short term job that lasts for one month. You'll be doing subordinate work, but Mr. Subaru has the skills, so…"

Saying that, Crane shows off his apron as he pinched it. The apron was way too cute for a giant like him, but the flower pattern on it was what emphasized that impression in particular.

Subaru: "An old fart with a lizard face may be wearing it, but it still looks great."

Crane: "You put it on yourself! My wife really liked it, though!"

Subaru: "That's just because I was sewing buttons back on. How's that related to this?"

Crane: "Take a good look at the guidelines. It says that it's a workplace with a lot of women. Good thing you have a special skill to attract women."

Subaru: "You're just jumping to conclusions! Besides, I'm more worried about the point "Only taking young men"."

Only taking young men at a workplace with lots of women—he could not figure out what went on over there.

According to the description, he just knew that it was subordinate work—sorts of chores. They weren't looking for special qualifications and inhumane manual labor. If only he didn't refuse being a manservant…

Subaru: "…Thanks, but would I even stop being a day laborer with this?"

Crane: "As if you could find a lifetime job out there so conveniently. Listen up. First you gotta start from the bottom, get your face and name out there, and then you'll find your favorite after earning trust. Don't you know that?"

Subaru: "You referred Rem to a job at Temple Elementary School at the start."

Crane: "Well, that's because Rem-chan is cute."

It was an irrefutable argument. You could not argue against Rem's cuteness. Stuff like Subaru's poor excuses weren't effective in society.

Crane: "Kararagi isn't nice enough to recognize an unemployed man as a full-fledged man,"

Subaru: "I came here to look for a job, didn't I?!"

He came to the public employment security office and was being treated coldly because he was unemployed. This was proof that, despite having the will to work, he was lacking the most important thing: "trust from society.

That being said, Crane's judgement was fair. Subaru dropped his shoulders in defeat.

Subaru: "Please make me a letter of introduction. I will do my very best to be liked."

Crane: "Yep, do your best. Mr. Riften is a brave dealer, but he's known to be a calm person."

Subaru: "…Brave warrior?"

Crane: "Brave dealer."

Subaru tilted his head at the slight difference in nuance, but Clay wasn't concerned about that as he finished writing the letter of introduction fluently, carefully put it into an envelope, and gave it to Subaru.

Crane: "On the morning of the day after today, go to Mr. Riften and tell him that you came from me."

Subaru: "Okay. Thanks as always."

Crane: "And lastly, be careful! Sheesh, don't mess up this time!"

He puts the letter of introduction in his pocket and left as he waved goodbye to Crane, who went back inside the shop. Then, he went back to the main street with Halibel, who had been smoking his Kisero at the street.

Subaru: "But, damn. …Hal-san sure has a lot of free time."

Halibel: "Why say that all of a sudden?"

Subaru: "It looks like you're jobless, gazing absentmindedly at other people job hunting. That's too awful."

Halibel: "When there's someone below you, you cheer them on, right? I'm the group that gives you courage."

Subaru: "Courage isn't what I'm getting from this. It's more like something dark, I think."

Subaru replies to Halibel cracking jokes, and he sighs. Although, Halibel still was actually the employed person here, and so Subaru was the one who had a low position in society.

Halibel: "Still, you're having quite some trouble with job hunting. What did you do before coming to this town?"

Subaru: " "…"

Halibel's casual questioning makes Subaru hold his breath for a moment.

However, he quickly smiles to hide his hesitation and he shrugs as he went, "Well".

Subaru: "I moved from place to place in Kararagi with Rem. I'm glad we settled down this town. It's all thanks to you that we were able to rent a tenement house. You're a lifesaver."

Halibel: "About that, you should thank Elder instead, the one who referred you. Connections are a way of life. If you're blessed with them, that shows you have something to offer."

Subaru: "…About that, I don't contribute much at all. It's all thanks to Rem."

Subaru replies as he thought, "That's the only thing I'm 100% sure about", and he stretches lightly in the crowd.

As he was temporarily relieved of the burden he had thanks to getting a job.

Halibel: "Moving from place to place in Kararagi…eh."

3

Subaru: "Sorry, Rem. I did ma best, but…"

Rem: "—Subaru-kun?"

Subaru: "Ah, yes, I'll stop. I apologize. And my next job will be short term."

Subaru was sitting straight on the tatami mat. He showed the letter of introduction he got from the employment agency to Rem, who had been working in the room's kitchen for the evening. Rem, who stopped cooking dinner, points out Subaru's poor Kararagi accent, and when she took the letter of introduction, she looked over the details.

Rem: "It may be a short term job, but it's still a step forward.

Subaru's breakthrough begins here. I can see it. Subaru-kun will be respected by a lot of people, and they'll build a bronze statue."

Subaru: "I wonder if ophthalmology exists in this world…"

When he gave a bitter smile at the exaggerated statement, Rem went "Oh" as she got surprised while looking at the letter of introduction.

Rem: "This is a job at Riften-sama's residence."

Subaru: "Yeah. Do you know Riften-san?"

Rem: "No, we aren't direct acquaintances. Among the kids I teach at Temple Elementary School, there are also ones from merchant houses, so I sort of know about Riften-sama, the brave merchant."

Subaru: "There it is, 'Brave Merchant'! He's not like a fierce shogun or anything, right?"

Rem: "Haha, fierce shogun…S-Subaru-kun, please don't make me laugh."

Rem chuckled, like she got a kick out of what Subaru said, and she breaks into a smile because of Subaru's question. Then, Rem said, "Listen" to Subaru as she held up a finger.

Subaru: "Oh, just like a teacher."

Rem: "Don't make fun of it. Brave merchant is a way to point out a merchant's rank in Kararagi. Excellent merchants are given the ranks 'Great Merchant', 'Wealthy Merchant', and 'Brave Merchant'. It's an honor."

Subaru: "'Great' and 'Wealthy' makes sense, but isn't 'Brave' kinda weird?"

Rem: "Because in Kararagi, where trade flourishes, achieving success in trade is practically like distinguishing yourself in a battlefield. Riften is also someone who's respected."

Rem replies like that, and she looks at the letter of introduction a bit nervously. Seeing Rem somewhat uneasy, Subaru knits his brows, and he called her name.

Subaru: “You seem kinda uneasy. What’s up?”

Rem: “Well, according to the rumors I’ve heard, there are a lot of women working at Riften-sama’s mansion…so a handsome, young man like Subaru-kun working in a workplace like that would be…”

Subaru: “You’re being pretty subjective!”

While Rem expressed her considerably subjective opinion, she folded and unfolded the letter of introduction. Subaru somehow sensed what Rem was worrying about, judging from her unease.

Subaru: “Silly.”

Rem: “Oww. S-Subaru-kun?”

Rem holds onto her head after suddenly getting chopped by Subaru. Subaru says “Good grief” to Rem, who had a surprised look, and he sighed.

Subaru: “Don’t worry about such odd things. Who do you think I am?”

Rem: “I’m sorry. But I’m worried now. Riften-sama, as someone who hires tons of women, will see cute ol’ Subaru-kun and he might not feel turned on…”

Subaru: “Ughhhh! That’s a little different from what I thought you were worrying about!”

Rem’s one-sided worrying dumbfounds Subaru, and he changes the topic.

Subaru: “But cute? Just look at my eyes. How are they cute?”

Rem: “I just can’t get enough of the manliness of Subaru-kun’s eyes.”

Subaru: “What exactly do I look like to you?!”

There were a lot of things about Rem's assessment of Subaru that other people couldn't really understand. In any case, Subaru held onto Rem's shoulder, as if to tell her that she shouldn't worry and to calm her down.

Subaru: "You don't need to worry. Rem is the only one for me. That goes for when I'm at a place with a bunch of girls too, got it?"

Rem: "Fuwa…ye-yesh, got it. Subaru-kun…"

As he whispered while patting Rem's head, her face turned red, and she nods. Then, Subaru also felt affection for Rem, who became submissive to him for a bit.

When Rem lifted her head slowly, her wet eyes met his up close. They get closer and closer, close enough to feel each other's breath—then, a pot whistled.

Subaru: "Owaa!" [Rem: "Kyaa!}

The sound of a pot lid falling breaks the silence. Rem rushes to the kitchen in a panic. She turns off the heat of the cooking stove that used a magic crystal, makes sure the pot settled down, and rubbed her chest in relief.

Rem: "—Haha" [Subaru: "Haha"

Then, they both smiled at each other at the same time.

And so, they laughed for a while, and when that settled down, Rem clapped as she went, "Alright".

Rem: "Let's eat. Subaru-kun, please set up the table."

Subaru: "It's more like a low dining table, though."

While still feeling slightly awkward, the two of them start to prepare the food. When he moved the low dining table against set against the wall to the middle of the room, Rem took off the lid of the pot vigorously.

A steamy pot and the smell of delicious, warm vegetables—today's menu was ‘Mizutaki’.

Subaru: “A pot. It’s nice to have every now and then. It’s the best when you have it with Ponzu.”

Rem: “I kind of wanted to eat something sour with assorted vegetables. Subaru-kun, are you fine with sour stuff?”

Subaru: “I like it. I’m surprised. You like sour stuff?”

Rem: “No, I really just kind of wanted to eat it, but…”

Rem curiously puts her finger on her jaw and tilts her head slightly. However, Subaru ignored her for now as her actions weren’t unexpected to him. Besides, Rem choosing a menu giving priority to what she wanted to eat was a good sign.

Since it was proof that she was slowly getting out of the habit of always prioritizing Subaru in one way or another.

Subaru: “Delicious! You did awesome today again!”

Rem: “My…for you to be happy that you have a cute wife who’s a good cook…I’m embarrassed.”

Subaru: “Well, I really was serious. I’m a such a lucky guy.”

No matter where they moved, Rem was always good at cooking. It was tough at the start with different kitchen utensils and different ingredients, but after living in Kararagi for a year, they were adapting nicely.

It’s just that there were a few parts they couldn’t adapt to, unrelated to tastes.

Subaru: “Uuu…my stomach hurts. I can’t move an inch…”

Rem: “I’m stuffed. Subaru-kun, my lap is free now.”

Subaru: “Yay! I’d like to make a reservation.”

Rem: “Reservation taken. A special seat, just for Subaru-kun. Hop on."

Rem taps her closed lap, and Subaru falls onto it. When he left his head on her soft lap, he felt his whole body being wrapped in happiness.

Their stomachs clearly took in more than a two person meal, and their stomachs relaxed to whatever extent they wished for.

Subaru: "Haa…Rem's amazing."

Rem: "Yes. But Subaru-kun is lovely too."

Subaru: "Those two things aren't related."

Rem: "To me they are. Closely related, that is."

Unlike Subaru's assessment, apparently to Rem, there was a tight knot connecting trust and Subaru.

He wasn't so sure if he was living up to that assessment. So, "Rem is amazing" was, without a doubt, Subaru's real thoughts, gratitude, and apology.

Rem probably knew that too. —He felt pathetic for that, again.

Rem: "After resting our stomachs for a bit, let's go to the bath-house. You have to rest up in preparation for work."

Subaru: "But my job starts the day after tomorrow?"

Rem: "I know. So, Subaru-kun has to take it easy tomorrow. —But not tonight."

With Subaru on her lap, Rem brings her lips near his ears, and she warmly tells him that. The warmth of her voice makes Subaru feel the chills, and his ears turned red.

Subaru: "…R-Rem, you're amazing."

Rem: "Yes. Because I'm loved."

Subaru lets out a whisper, and Rem replied to him while looking embarrassed.

—Although, Subaru didn’t notice that Rem’s ears were also bright red.

4

—Two days later, Subaru visited Riften Magoji’s mansion with an introduction letter.

Subaru: “As expected of the rumored Magoji palace…it’s so huge.”

Subaru, who showed the letter of introduction at the residence’s main gate and was let in by the gatekeeper, shows his admiration like that.

A residence in the north side of Banan nicknamed ‘Magoji Palace’. Buildings of Wafuu architecture were usually one-story buildings, and Magoji Palace was no exception. The palace conspicuously built on vast land looked just like a Daimyo’s mansion that shows up in historical plays.

Subaru: ““Walk to work takes almost an hour. Uniform is covered in your payment”.”

Thanks to the letter of introduction, Subaru was hired without problems. He had an interview just in case, but the mistress arranging the servants looked at Subaru and just gave him an OK—the deciding factor was unknown.

In any case, Subaru was employed as a novice choreman, put on the uniform he was given as he felt nervous with the new job and his coworkers he met with for the first time, and he stepped forward towards his workplace.

Magoji Palace was the place, but just like the guidelines said, there were an overwhelming amount of women.

At the very least, Subaru didn't see any men at the place other than the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper wasn't even inside the court, so Subaru truly was the only man at the residence. He couldn't count the amount of female coworkers on his hands and toes, let alone on just his hands. It sure was an imbalanced workplace.

Still, it had nothing to do with what Rem was worrying about. Subaru wasn't trying to do anything to his female co-workers, and most of the women were married.

However, that was if he overlooked the fact that there were other problems constantly coming up.

???: "Natsuki-kuuun! Hey, can you do this for meeee?"

???: "Oh, Subaru-kun, come here! Come oooon, help meee."

???: "Kyaaa! Subaru-chan, you handsome man! That's it that's it! You sexy guy!"

Then, shrill voices—he was a bit hesitant to call them that, but cheers like those came from all around the palace. They were all cheers coming from Subaru's co-workers that were working at the palace with him.

Even Subaru liked getting attention from men and the opposite sex. He did, but…

???: "Hahaha, what a nice butt."

Subaru: "Dohyaa!!"

He gets his butt pat as he passed by—no, he gets his butt rubbed relatively hard, and he shrieked. He immediately turned around as he held onto his butt, but the offender had already disappeared into the direction of the corridor.

Subaru was disgraced while not knowing what to do, and he broke down and wailed his heart out at the wall of the corridor.

Subaru: "I-Impressive sexual harassment…that's an environment with Osaka grannies for you…!"

Yes, his face was covered with tears as he cursed his own bad luck of jumping into a place infested with demons.

Subaru's butt was rubbed just now by Osaka old ladies—in Kararagi, they actually had nothing to do with Osaka, but the women were close to that in terms of their nature. Still, he didn't know who the offender was.

All of the women at the Magoji palace were suspects, previous offenders, habitual offenders—Subaru was thrown into a pack of hungry tigers, and sadly, he was nothing more than a shaking bunny.

Since, regardless of the humans and Demi-humans, this workplace was at the mercy of middle-aged women and no one else—-!

Subaru: "What is he?! A cougar lover?!"

???: "That's a pretty close-minded judgement."

The wall listening to Subaru's complaints answered him…not. A rich, low voice came from behind, and it came from a man that appeared there. And, since it was a man's voice and as it was in the residence, the candidates in the were narrowed down at once. If it wasn't the gatekeeper, then it had to be an intruder—

Subaru: "P-Please! Someone get help!!"

???: "Unfortunately, you are the only one that can answer. Right now, you are the only one who can save yourself."

Subaru: "True! But what are the gatekeepers doing…"

Subaru, without nodding at the just opinion, faces the owner of the voice from the front. It was a thinnish middle-aged man with a mustache and thick eyebrows. He was wearing kimono, which you could tell was made out of high class material at a glance, and an aura of influence emanated from his whole body—he immediately realized who he was.

Subaru: "Could you be…Riften Magoji…-sama?"

Riften: “Correct. I am your employer. Riften Magoji. Now, you don’t have to be so respectful. I just came to see the newcomer after finally finishing my work outside.”

The man—Riften calmly nods at Subaru’s point as he felt on his moustache. Just earlier, even though he didn’t know his identity, he still had acted impolite, and he didn’t even mention it. So, he must be a tolerant person.

Thus, Subaru talked about the doubts in his mind, making use of his tolerance.

Subaru: “Master, if I may call you that…I’d like to ask, are you into cougars?”

Riften: “You’re pretty direct. However, that’s a misunderstanding.”

Subaru’s suspicion that the work environment was too reflective of the employer’s tastes makes Riften shrug his shoulders as he went, “Good grief”. And then, when he took a deep breath,

Riften: “Women are delicate and beautiful. Just touching them makes me feel at ease. That sense of security is irreplaceable, and their open-mindedness gets more charming as they age—don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “My butt’s been touched close to 1000 times in the past few days!”

Riften: “That’s because you have a nice butt.”

Subaru: “You are too biased with your workers!”

Riften: ““Hit it, and you’ll hear it”. I see, so that’s why Mr. Crane gave me the letter of introduction. I understand.”

He was gaining understanding without showing any concern for Subaru. However, Subaru, the main person, was not understanding anything.

Subaru: “Well, regarding the work environment, I’ve come to the conclusion that Master is a cougar lover.”

Riften: “That’s a sad misunderstanding. One day, I’ll clear up your misunderstanding and you’ll truly understand me…actually, I’d like to see if you really will stay here until that time comes.”

Subaru: “That’s really suggestive. Why do you feel that way?”

Riften: “You think you’re the only man I’ve ever hired at my palace?”

Riften laughed lowly, as if the inside of his throat trembled. When Subaru looked at him, with his appearance he vaguely felt like he looked like an evil Edo-period prefectural governor. As he had that thought,

Subaru: “I just thought that all the men couldn’t take the sexual harassment and disappeared…”

Riften: “Although this is the first time I’ve heard ‘sexual harassment’, I can roughly imagine what it means. And let’s just say that I won’t deny your guess.”

Basically, he was saying that Subaru was chosen as one of the periodic sacrificial scapegoats.

It was already bad enough that the workplace was full of girls, so it would surely be a rough environment for a man with no resistance to sexual harassment. The more one had pride as a man, the more devastating the mark would be.

Riften: “Still, in comparison with all the other men, you’re kinda… tough. I expect good things from you.”

Subaru: “Th-Thanks…”

Once Riften tapped Subaru’s shoulder, he started to leave the corridor, leaving him with doubts. Subaru watches him leave, and he curled his lips as he thought about his employer’s eccentric nature.

Perhaps a human needed to sacrifice their human nature in order to become great. Or maybe, since he had senses that were different from others, his results were recognized as unique and he was able to move up in the world.

Subaru touches the shoulder Riften tapped as he said, “In any case”, and sighed.

Subaru: “…Even if he has expectations of me, he’s only going to be disappointed.”

Subaru’s listless whisper reaches no one, and it disappeared into the wooden floor.

???: “Subaru-chaaan! Come here for a seeeecond!”

Subaru: “—. Okay! I’m coming now!”

When Subaru heard a yell from afar, he started to run as he changed his expression.

As if to say, “There’s no time to stop moving”, to his job at this busy mansion and to his coworkers.

Chapter 2:
3 Months (1)

1

After that scene with his employer, Subaru spent a few days working at the palace.

You could say that it was going smoother than one would expect. It seemed that the many men hired at the palace quickly gave up under the environment, but Subaru didn't falter.

A big part of why he didn't is because, first of all, Subaru got hired because they were taking anyone as long as the person was a 'young man'.

Knowing why he was hired, he was able to do his job while taking it rather easy. He was also fortunate to not have his pride hurt by his coworkers' somewhat excessive physical contact.

The most fortunate thing of all was that women were attracted to Subaru, just like Clane had claimed.

???: "Subaru-chan is a hard worker. He's so great."

???: "He's super skillful, and he's considerate. Unlike my kid."

???: "I don't get tired of talking to him, and he's like a child since he smiles a lot."

These were the opinions of the women who were gossiping during break. He smiled a lot, talked a lot, cracked a lot of jokes, asked a lot of questions, and moved around a lot. Subaru had a mostly favorable reputation.

They also liked how he didn't awkwardly show off or try to cover up his mistakes. Even the sexual harassment that became a problem died down dramatically after he got through the first few days.

Subaru: "I guess this means I've been recognized as a coworker."

That's what Subaru understood since the butt rubbing damage became 1/10th of what it had been.

This was the type of treatment outsiders would get while they were one. However, once you were recognized as a colleague, you wouldn't get such treatment. All the men didn't have enough perseverance.

Subaru: "Well, I was confused about what the perseverance was for too…ah, it's done."

Subaru threads the last needle, and he bit off the remaining thread with his teeth. And so, what Subaru made with his own hands were clothes that had flower decorations sewed on—it was a palace uniform.

Subaru sewed flowers on the clothes for the employees working at the palace and for the spares. It was to distinguish the guests and employees at the banquet that was being held tonight at the palace.

Since Kararagi dresses were typically Wasou, it was possible to mistake guests, who wore kimonos, for servants. A plan was needed so that the atmosphere wasn't spoiled.

Subaru: "Can't have servants wearing maid clothes here."

Subaru took responsibility and added flower decorations with the hostess' permission, and it wasn't a part of his professional duties. Subaru's female coworkers did tell him, "You didn't have to do all that", though.

Subaru: "It's a banquet, right? The guests and I would be more happy with everyone wearing cute uniforms."

Then, Subaru got everyone to leave as he made that response.

Instead, the women who wore uniforms with flower decorations at the banquet concentrated on their hair and makeup so much that you might think they were guests, and that caused a different commotion.

On top of that, someone other than Subaru's coworkers surprised him at the banquet—

Rem: "—Did I surprise you? Subaru-kun"

Subaru: "…I'm stunned."

Rem: "Then this was a huge success. Hehehe, Subaru-kun's uniform is lovely too."

It was Rem who said that and surprised Subaru at the banquet hall wearing a hair-pin and a kimono that had flowers drawn like morning glories with dark blue cloth.

Rem, with her gorgeous dress, was so beautiful that all eyes in the hall were on her. However, she didn't react to her surroundings, and she just waited for Subaru to speak.

Subaru: "Ahh…my wife is soo cute."

Rem: "My…for you to say that you're a lucky guy for having the best wife ever…I'm embarrassed."

Subaru: "You sure said it…but why are you here?"

Subaru questions Rem, who wriggled her body and forth as she touched her blushed cheeks with her hand. Rem said, "Well you see", in response as she lifted the sleeves of her kimono and continued,

Rem: "I was actually invited by the parent of a child I teach at Temple Elementary School. I was going to decline at first, but it was at Riften-sama's residence. So I borrowed a kimono."

Subaru: "So you came to see me work …Um, is this parent that invited you a man?"

Rem: "Please relax, it was a woman. Subaru-kun's such a worrywart."

She was invited to a banquet, which is a party, and she was even given a kimono. Of course Subaru would be cautious. Seeing Subaru like that, Rem smiled slightly as she said,

Rem: “I too would be an Oni if something ever happened. That’s when I’d smash that person’s abdomen into bits and pieces.”

Subaru: “Doesn’t that kinda sound like you’re saying that you’re not usually an Oni?!”

He’d never heard a phrase that was as convincing as “I’m an Oni”.

When Subaru got cold feet from imagining an abdomen being smashed, Rem fixed the position of her hairpin as she said,

Rem: “She was a dry-goods dealer and she said that she had plenty of kimonos, so I borrowed one gratefully. But the one thing I didn’t get is what she meant when she said that it could be advertising if I wear it…”

Subaru: “It’s just what it implies. It’ll get publicity if a beautiful woman wears it.”

The excitement of the surrounding looks not calming down despite knowing that they were married was proof of that. Seeing Rem in her kimono sure was a treat for Subaru, but his anxiety from male instincts was much stronger.

That being said, at least he was managing to not worry at all about Rem’s feelings wavering. After all, he did now know that even if someone tried to carelessly do something to Rem, that person’s abdomen would turn into bits and pieces.

Subaru: “Anyway, I really enjoyed the surprise. Rem, you go enjoy yourself, though I won’t be able to look after you because I have work. The cooking will be as good as Rem’s.”

Rem: “Mm, you can’t beat me. Subaru-kun’s stomach is mine.”

Subaru: “You make it sound like you’re literally going to take it away…”

Rem: “Still, it feels kind of strange. I get to see Subaru-kun working his hardest. It’s like…”

Subaru: “…”

That’s when Rem paused. What was she going to say next? He could no longer tell since Rem just said, “No”, as she shook her head and changed her mind.

Rem: “I’ll be with the one who invited me. When I get the chance, I’ll put food in Subaru-kun’s mouth, so please look forward to it.”

Subaru: “That’s a pretty original way to enjoy a party!”

He wasn’t planning on relaxing, but he gained one more reason to avoid doing so as Rem left. Subaru watches his wife mix in with the guests at the banquet, and he shrugged his shoulders as he went, “Good grief”.

Suddenly, Subaru felt someone standing next to him—

Halibel: “—Rem-chan is such a great wife.”

Subaru: “Wait wait wait wait, something’s wrong here.”

Subaru turns around to the familiar voice, and he glared at the wolf man that appeared—he glared at Halibel. With casual clothes and casual behavior, he ate the food on the plate he was holding.

Halibel: “Mmm, this is excellent. Is there anything in this world that’s more delicious than free liquor and free alcohol?”

Subaru: “There is. It’s called food made by one’s beloved wife.”

Halibel: “Agh! You’re boasting about her! I have to drink some alcohol to get through this.”

Subaru: “Forget about that, why are you even here?!”

Subaru hit Halibel’s hand as he reached for the alcohol, and he pressed him for an answer. Subaru’s force makes Halibel open his slit eyes slightly, and when he made an evil smile he said,

Halibel: “Of course the gatekeeper would know me. It’s the power of networking which Su-san doesn't have."

Subaru: "You're a trespasser!"

Although he wanted to fault the gatekeeper for letting a suspicious person through, Halibel being well known was what you'd call a mystery. Thinking back, he did remember Clane respecting Halibel.

Subaru: "You aren't a feudal lord that came to check out the town or anything like that, right?"

Halibel: "'Feudal lord'. You sure know some outdated words. That's what the king was called before Kararagi settled down."

Subaru: "Really? Not that I know anything about it, though."

Subaru wanted to just talk, but it seemed like this was going to be another point connecting his former world and the different world again, so he gave a nasty look as he didn't want to delve into it.

Riften: "—My oh my, it's Mr. "Eternal Playboy". I'm happy to see you."

Halibel: "Oh, Rif-san, long time no see. Sorry for coming today even without being invited."

Halibel replied to Riften, who greeted him, as he raised his bottle of wine which he got his hands on god knows when. Riften calmly nodded at that behavior, however Subaru quickly bowed his head to his employer as he said,

Subaru: "I'm sorry, Master. I will kick out this suspicious man right away."

Halibel: "Hey now, that's cruel, Su-san."

Riften: "I like your hard work, but that would be unnecessary. It's rare for Mr. "Eternal Playboy" to show up at banquets like this. So rare that I'd like to apologize for not sending a written invitation."

Riften acted gentlemanly while Halibel acted relaxed. Their relationship also was a mystery to Subaru.

But, if there was one thing he could point out confidently it would be—

Subaru: “Did that ‘Playboy’ nonsense actually spread?”

Halibel: “Taking what you like is the Kararagian way, after all. I’m happy that I was able to get a simple title thanks to Su-san.”

Subaru: “I-I see…hopefully you can become a sage someday.”

It might be difficult because of the ‘Eternal’ part at the front, but he couldn’t give up his hope.

Riften: “By the way, these past few days I’ve been carefully observing how you work…”

Subaru: “Oh, sorry. I’ve been talking to guests so much that…wait, a few days?! Observing?!”

Riften: “I told you, didn’t I? I have high hopes for you. I’ve been receiving information from the hostess, and you sound different from the men I’ve hired. You’re more…feminine than all of them.”

Subaru: “Feminine?!”

Riften: “A truly intriguing word. I hear you’re the one that made it spread.”

The unexpected evaluation and the expression that said he’d brought it upon himself make Subaru’s eyes widen. He did remember saying ‘Feminine’ with his female coworkers several times, but he had underestimated Kararagi people’s adaptability.

But, it still wasn’t clear how that led to ‘feminine’ being the evaluation

Subaru: “So why did Master end up pointing out me being feminine?”

Rifter: “The hostess has mostly the same opinion as the other women, although your femininity isn’t the only thing that’s been recognized.”

Subaru: “The same opinion…”

Rifter: “Incidentally, I’ve heard from Mr. Clane that you’ve been looking for a place where you can have a long career.”

Subaru blinks with surprise as the conversation made an unexpected turn. Seeing Subaru’s reaction, Riften raised his thick eyebrows, and he reached out for Subaru’s chest—and he touched the flower decorations.

Riften: “This is well done. And you did it quick. The girls like it. Keep this up for the rest of your work period. —I’m hoping that I can tell you something good on your final day.”

Halibel: “…”

When he nodded deeply, Riften and Halibel exchange a few words, and he went back to the middle of the banquet. He had an obligation to entertain the guests as the host of the party.

Despite being busy, he spared time to tell Subaru something. As for what that meant—

Subaru: “…Hal-san, I should look forward to what he was talking about, right?”

Halibel: “If that was an indirect layoff notice, then I don’t think I can believe anything in this world anymore.”

Halibel answered Subaru’s question while opening a sake bottle. The previous exchange had so much impact on him that he forgot to warn the uninvited guest about his bad manners.

So, when Subaru took away the sake bottle from Halibel’s hand, he said,

Halibel: “Oh”

Subaru: “Looks like you’re out of drinks. I’ll go get more.”

Subaru collects the empty bottle as he hurried out of there.

While stopping himself from breaking into a smile, he made up his mind to take the initiative and work harder than anyone else tonight at the banquet hall. He also had to deal with the uninvited guest now to do that.

—As he felt excited inside since it seemed he'd be able to give some good news to Rem.

2

Rem: "—Oh, Subaru-kun."

It was after the banquet cleaning when he exited the main gate to go home.

Subaru gets his named called, and the slight surprise makes him raise his face. Then, it was Rem who was leaning against the palace gate, wearing her kimono which he'd seen at the banquet.

Subaru: "Rem? You didn't go home with the person you came here with?"

Rem: "I was going to, but I was selfish and said that I was going to stay here. I promised to return the kimono and hairpin I borrowed tomorrow."

Subaru: "That doesn't worry me, but…actually, it does. If something happened while you were out this late…"

Rem: "Thank you. But the gatekeeper was there with me, so I was fine."

Rem holds Subaru's hand as he rushed up to her, and she smiled at him to calm him down,

When Subaru turned around as he heard her words, he saw the gatekeeper he knew giving him a thumbs up. Subaru bows his head to show his gratitude towards him, and he considers not snitching on him to the hostess for letting Halibel through.

Subaru: "On another note, why were you waiting here? Did you have some urgent business to take care of or something?"

Rem: “It’s nothing like that. I’m wearing clothes that I wouldn’t usually wear, so I just wanted to walk home together.”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “I rarely wear kimonos like this…should I have not tried it?”

Subaru: “Erm…”

Subaru scratches his head with his hand that wasn’t being held, and he looked away from Rem. He saw the gatekeeper looking through the gap between his fingers. You know what, I’m going to snitch on him to the hostess tomorrow.

Subaru puts off that thought for later, and while feeling his ears turn red, he said,

Subaru: “I’m happy that you said that. Actually, I’m lame for making you say all of that. I want to show off my beautiful wife while walking home too. Thank you.”

Rem: “Yes. Please show the whole town that I’m yours.”

Subaru: “Now that’s a lot of people you’re talking about here!”

While being surprised by Rem’s idea, Subaru waves at the gatekeeper, and the two of them walked back home.

It was deep at night in the town Banan. The moon and starlight were not the only things showing in the twilight; Banan was being illuminated by hanging paper lanterns. Magical stones weren’t blazing in them; they were candle flames.

A beautiful girl in a kimono walking next to him, and a street illuminated by the night sky and paper lanterns—Subaru was not in a different world. He felt like he was seeing an optical illusion, as if he got lost in the past of his former world.

Rem: “—? Subaru-kun, what’s wrong?”

Subaru: “I just got lost in my thoughts for a little bit. I know I said that I wanted to show off as we walk, but I just remembered that

I'm the type that wants to have everything to himself. I want to enjoy it at home."

Rem: "I-It's a borrowed kimono, so we can't do naughty things, you know…?"

Subaru: "But what if it's just for a little?"

Rem: "Oh…i-if it's just a little…"

Subaru's naughty statement makes Rem look down with her face turned red. While loving her profile, Subaru said, "Still", as he began to speak.

Subaru: "I didn't expect Rem to be at the party…or I guess banquet. You must be close with that person to have been invited to go with her."

Rem: "I don't think think we should be friends since I'm a teacher and she's a guardian. But yes, we are."

Subaru: "I see. I'm so glad. We've finally just barely managed to settle down in this town now."

While responding to Rem, he remembered this year's journey where they moved from place to place.

Although he'd talked about it with Halibel when he went job hunting the other day, Subaru and Rem continued to move all around Kararagi until they settled down in Banan town. It was because they couldn't really find work and houses, however they finally were freed from their difficult problems at this town.

While wandering around, they visited Banan because of an introduction letter they got from a person they met, then they were introduced to Halibel, the tenement house manager, and they finally found a house. Rem got a job quickly, and even Subaru, who felt down because he was unqualified, was one step away from living the full-time employee life he'd dreamed of.

It was smooth sailing—it seemed they were finally in a situation where they could say that.

Rem: “I had the time of my life tonight. Subaru-kun praised my kimono, and I got to see my husband work up close. My heart is full.”

Subaru: “I praised Rem in a kimono, not just the kimono alone, you know? Also, I’m full because of the treats you gave me during my break at work.”

Rem: “Everything was so delicious, so I thought you’d love it too…”

Subaru: “Yeah, that was very sweet, and I love you, but…”

Even before the banquet, for some reason women made Subaru taste a lot of food, so he was full and couldn’t carry anymore weight. He was currently holding it all because of the naughty arrangement they made and his willpower.

Rem: “Plus, I was able to tell all your coworkers to take good care of you.”

Subaru: “I’m definitely going to be teased by everyone tomorrow…”

Rem: “—?”

He’s already treated as a toy as is, so of course the women would be so delighted to be asked a favor from his cute new wife. He was now terrified of how everyone would act tomorrow after work.

Subaru: “…”

The trivial but happy conversation stops. However, the silence was not something uncomfortable. It was just something that went between them naturally.

Even though they weren’t talking, it wasn’t awkward. There certainly was a natural feeling of distance between them. If it was just the two of them, there wouldn’t be anything to go with the silence.

—Thus, the world that unnaturally fell silent was a matter unrelated to their silence.

Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Rem called Subaru’s name about at the same time when he noticed that something was up.

Rem, who stood still and held onto Subaru’s hand tighter, stops him. That makes Subaru hold his breath for a bit, and he—tried to look at her, but he hesitated.

Since he knew why Rem stopped him and why she called his name.

Subaru: “…”

A small person was standing at the front of the street at night.

The shadow was in front of the moon, and its whole body was vague as it was under cover of night. It was shorter than Subaru and a little taller than Rem, and he just knew that it was a woman since she was thin and looked delicate.

She had on this sort of black dress that you’d mistake for darkness, and her hakama was boldly shortened to only cover half of her thighs, and he could very clearly see her white, long legs stepping on the ground.

It was an unarmed, young woman with a lot of revealing spots—if she was just that, then she’d seem like a beggar or a prostitute. And although he was hesitant to say it, neither of those were rare in large towns. Poor people who lost their family and lived in the streets and prostitutes taking customers in back alleys were natural to encounter.

—Hence, it was the glitter of the eyes of the woman standing still that made him think she was different.

Starlight was in the background and a shadow was casted on her face, but the woman’s eyes were shining in a penetrative way. That sharp light frightfully and violently directed hostility towards Subaru and Rem and—

Subaru: “Ah—”

The moment Subaru understood that hostility, he felt his hands and legs getting colder rapidly.

Subaru: "…"

He couldn't move. Subaru completely lost control of his consciousness with hostility before him. His eyes widen, he forgets to breath, and his knees tremble pathetically. And then—

???: "—What…are you doing"

The presence deeply rumbling the atmosphere swept towards them as wind.

He was despairingly too late to realize if it was a voice or just someone calling out to them. That's how much he forgot about the world, and the being was standing firmly as a foreign body.

It was a woman, but it wasn't. She had the shape of a person, but she wasn't a person. It was a repulsive enemy.

???: "—What…are you doing"

The repulsive enemy repeats the wind, her words.

It was a question, a threat, an attack, and mercy. It was even mercy.

Because she could've made someone like Subaru disappear long ago if she wanted to. It didn't happen solely because the enemy had mercy. Could there be anything else to it?

If there was something besides mercy and pity, it would be to let Subaru live.

Rem: "Y-You…"

Subaru's voice was gone. Hence, that wasn't Subaru's voice. It was Rem's, who was standing next to him. She held onto Subaru's hand so tight that it hurt, and it woke him up. The pain made Subaru face reality. Rem also stayed aware

Rem/Subaru: "…"

They were both overwhelmed by the being before their very own eyes.

Rem was the only one who was desperately looking for a way to escape while feeling pressured. Subaru's senses were also telling him that he had to do so. But, his spirit wouldn't respond.

He didn't have the strong spirit to respond. He couldn't do it with the enemy in front of him.

—Since Subaru couldn't choose to do something like fight an enemy as someone who ran from his enemies.

???: "—Die."

He was afraid.

The moment he came to that conclusion, the enemy expressed a very straightforward judgement.

Right after that, the increasing pressure becomes so severe that it practically burns his skin, and the hostility sublimates into murderous intent.

Wind blows. As if the seasonal night wind lukewarmly and gently brushed against his skin—

???: "—Come here!!"

When that fatally connected to him, Rem jumped away to the side while holding Subaru. The space they had been in splits roundly within an instant. The space splitted, as if it was bitten off by the jaw of a beast.

Anything left at that place wasn't a living thing. And so, no doubt about it, it was the murderous intent of the women before their eyes that was left there.

Rem: "Hya—"

???: "Die"

Since the hostility was unavoidable, Rem summoned up mana to attack and defend. However, her opponent's murderous intent was fast and strong like a sudden gust. The wind's jaw attacks Rem continuously, and she had no choice but to concentrate on dodging it.

Rem: "Ku…u—"

The kimono backfired. It reached down to her ankles and it was elegant, but in exchange, it restricted her actions. Even if she concentrated on dodging, she would eventually lose the ability to do so. It was getting worse and worse.

???: "Die die die die die."

Her murderous intent gushes out again and again as the shortest chant using the smallest amount of words, leaving no way out. It was too tall to jump over for Rem, who was holding onto Subaru. And first of all, even if she were to jump high, they'd become easy targets. As for the option to escape to a place with lots of crowds, she wasn't so sure if the women had the mentality to hesitate in sacrificing people, so that would be the very last option—.

Rem: "…"

Rem frantically racked her brain and struggled as much as she could to find one of the few chances of winning.

Subaru couldn't move since he was being held in her arms as he was swung around by the force of her jumping away. When the hostility turned into murderous intent and was acted upon, he even lost the willpower to act brave.

Despite knowing that he had to move and think.

???: "Die."

Without budging an inch, the woman repeats a chant of death.

???: "Die."

The wind's jaw eats the sky, the ground, and the town.

???: “Die.”

The enemy was so much stronger than him that it wouldn’t even be an exaggeration to say that it was like a cat playing with a mouse.

A way to turn things around, a suggestion that’d turn the hopeless situation around, an attack to paint over the distress—

Subaru: “…”

He had no time to find all that, and he couldn’t buy any more of it.

—I don’t want to die.

Subaru’s mind and body become chains, and that thought alone was what coiled around him, like a strong curse.

Rem: “If I could at least…”

Rem forces her voice out of her throat in response to the raging wind that was trying to kill them. Subaru knew what was going to come after her interrupted words. She was going to say this.

“If I could at least—just save Subaru.”

Subaru: “…”

There’s no way he’d let that happen. To show that he was against it, Subaru put a little strength into his hands that were holding onto Rem’s kimono. He put in all the strength he could muster up into his fingertips.

To say that even if he were ripped off easily by force, his heart is the one thing he’d never let someone rip out,

Rem: “But…”

Rem sensed that from Subaru’s slight movements. However, Rem really knew just how bad the situation was, much more than Subaru did, who was restrained as someone was trying to kill them.

They were being cornered. Soon enough the jaw of the wind would take away her legs, slurp on her guts, and devour her life.

Before that happened, she just wished for the one she loved to live longer, even if it was just one second—

???: “Die—”

???: “—That’s not happening. That’s enough.”

Right before the decision lead to action, there was the sound of the jaw of the wind biting on steel.

The bite attack changes the space that had been breaking up to this point. It didn’t stop with one blow; a loud, sharp sound cut up the night in line with the consecutive bite attacks.

Rem: “…”

The change even makes the girl who continued to chant and chant death stop moving. Rem, who was holding Subaru, also stopped, and she blinked, wondering what just happened.

The one who came into their sights was a tall person with a black kimono that shook at its edges—it was Halibel, who smoked the kiseru in his mouth and stood between them.

Rem: “Hali…bel…?”

Halibel: “Yes yes, this is the Ha-san you all know. That was a close one, huh, Su-san. That would’ve been bad if I hadn’t come. Rem-chan even looked like she’d made up her mind for good.”

Subaru: “Why…are you here…”

Halibe: “Ahh, I get why you’re curious, but I’ll have to postpone the explanation for now. Or else…”

Subaru could not comprehend the sudden appearance, and his trembling voice didn’t make Halibel act any different from how he usually would. It didn’t help relieve them, but rather it just increased the feeling that they were in an emergency.

Without caring about those thoughts Subaru had, Halibel slowly turned around to face the woman and said,

Halibel: “It’d be hard to fight that girl.”

Halibel says that, sounding like he wasn’t even in the mood to fight, and he slowly stepped towards the enemy. Subaru tried to say, “That’d be reckless” from behind.

However—

Rem: “Let’s let Halibel-sama handle this.”

Subaru: “Rem? But she…she’s…”

A terrifying opponent. A being with unordinary strength. Halibel was going to fight someone like that.

Subaru was trying to say, “We should at least try our best to run away”.

Rem: “—Halibel “The Great”.”

Subaru: “…Huh?”

Rem: “The one deemed the strongest in Kararagi city-state—that’s Halibel-sama.”

Rem’s quiet statement makes Subaru stiffen up, unable to use his voice. After that, he looked at Halibel’s back, as he closed the distance between him and the enemy, and it simply took his breath away.

The one who poured alcohol at the banquet. That guy was going towards the enemy, like it was just a walk.

Subaru: “This is…”

Halibel: “—Unbelievable, is what Su-san might be thinking. How about you?”

Halibel, facing the woman, takes the words right out of Subaru’s mouth, and he talked to her in an over-familiar voice.

He put aside Subaru and Rem, who were behind him, and stood in between them and the woman as if to say, “You have to get past me before you lay a hand on these two”, but the enthusiasm didn’t show on his face.

Halibel was being aloof, just like he would be whenever he took naps at the tenement house.

The woman also kept the same attitude. The woman standing still didn’t show any interest in Halibel’s appearance, and she kept directing the unlimited hostility towards Subaru and Rem.

Anything standing in her way would get smashed—thus,

???: “Die.”

The invisible murderous intent becomes wind, and the attack cuts the space into the shape of a globe—the bite attack went for Halibel. A threat at the end of death that went through defenses and relentlessly devoured its target.

There was only one way to protect himself against that—don’t let the bite attack reach him.

Halibel: “…”

Halibel puts his hand inside his kimono, and he threw something at lightning speed. An object that was thrown at such a speed that no ordinary person could’ve seen it—that collides with the wind—the bite attack didn’t crunch on Halibel’s guts; it stopped at a completely different place and crunched on the thrown object.

Halibel: “It doesn’t matter if I can’t see it. My nose is extremely effective.”

???: “…”

Halibel: “Oh, but don’t get me wrong, okay? I’m a wolf of dogs, and that’s one of our important aspects.”

Halibel would always say something to relieve tension whenever he first met someone. After that, she turned her head slowly, although it wasn't as if she'd understood him, obviously.

The woman looked at Halibel with her piercing eyes, and it was the first time she looked at someone other than Subaru and Rem.

Halibel: "Oh, so you finally look this way…"

???: "Die."

Halibel: "—There."

Halibel misfires the bite attack yet again by throwing. However the woman changed the priority of her murderous attack, and fire power focused on Halibel at once.

???: "Die die die die die."

Halibel waved his arms and demolished all the murderous winds wildly fired all at once. After brushing away the first gust of wind, Halibel went, "Alright" as he gained some momentum and said,

Halibel: "It seems you took interest in me, so how about I meet your expectations!"

???: "Di—"

Halibel: "Hoho. —Which me would you like to get killed by?"

???: "…"

Halibel steps on the street with his zoris, and he roughly shook his body left and right. An irregular feeling, and footwork that was captivating in a way. Right after that, a Halibel's body shook strangely—

Halibel: "Now," [Halibel: "Which me would you like?" [Halibel: "I'm the devoted type." [Halibel: "And I'm like a bossy husband."

Subaru: "—Wha?!"

It was not the woman who raised a surprise voice upon seeing an unbelievable phenomenon, but Subaru, who was being protected in the back.

And it was just natural to do so since he saw Halibel say a bunch of words unanimously as four people.

Halibel: “By the way, my strength isn’t divided into 4ths. I’m four people, and my strength is quadrupled.”

Halibel: “I begged and begged my parents for siblings, and then more came.”

Halibel: “Sorry, that was a lie.”

Halibel: “I saw myself in the mirror and pulled them out.”

Halibel: “Sorry, that was a lie too.”

The four Halibels crossed their arms, smoked their kiserus, and randomly talked as much as they wanted.

It was like coming into a bad dream. But, the four Halibels were not just illusions.

They were all there and felt real. The four Halibels, fighting power quadrupled.

Halibel: “…”

Halibel, who did not multiply, but cloned himself. Seeing that right before her made the woman stop acting for the first time.

It was doubtful whether the continuous bite attacks would work on Halibel, who could now act as 4. The possibility of having her invisible attacks defended against and getting hit with a severe counterattack increased immediately.

Whether or not the woman still had the sense to make such calculations was unknown, however—

???: “Die.”

Halibel: "…Is that all you can say? Seems like you have some pretty complicated family circumstances."

The woman bent her knees and jumped. She easily jumps onto the roof of a building next to her, and she looked down on Halibel and the others while cracking the roof with her bare feet. The moon was in the background, not one bit of the light in her eyes weakened, and it looked so beautiful that it was beyond human understanding

Halibel, who stood as four on the ground, and the woman dressed in black with the moon behind her glared at each other.

It felt like time it was going to continue forever, but—

Subaru: "—Rem?!"

The two of them did not break the stalemate. It was Subaru, who could only be there as a spectator. Halibel looked back at Subaru, who held onto Rem as she became dead tired in his arms and his voice trembled.

Taking advantage of that chaos, the woman tries to blend in with the night sky—"

Halibel: "Sh—!"

Three of the Halibels wouldn't overlook that.

The throws attack the woman from three sides, and two of the shots were repelled by the wind. However, the third shot drawing an arc slips through the wind, and the thrown object—the kunai pierces the woman's thin back.

???: "…"

The woman gets injured, lets out a slight groan, and she tries to flee.

Halibel: "…"

Halibel sharpens his hearing and looked out for the disappeared woman's movements for a bit. There was a possibility of her taking advantage of the darkness and continuing the fight. Still, it was apparent that the woman withdrew, knowing that she was at a disadvantage.

As a result, Halibel was satisfied and—

Halibel: “Guess one should be fine for now. Anyway…”

Subaru: “Halibel! Hal-san! Rem is…!”

Halibel finally runs up to Subaru and Rem as he was called out to desperately. At the same time, his clones disappear, and he went back to his normal self like an illusion.

Still, there was no time to talk about that mysterious phenomenon. Subaru continues to desperately call out to Rem, who was dead tired in his arms.

Halibel: “Did that black girl’s attack hit her?”

Subaru: “I checked! But there are no injuries on her body! But she still fainted and…”

It was chaos. However, he was sure that Rem had no wounds. She also fainted suddenly. The woman most likely did something after she escaped to the roof.

However, it misfired, and as a result, Rem collapsed instead. And that was—

Halibel: “Maybe she casted some strange magic or something…she does feel hot. It feels unreal, but it could be an illness.”

Subaru: “…”

Halibel: “That look sure makes me feel nervous. I’ll carry her back to the tenement house…”

Subaru: “N-No, I’ll…I’ll carry her! I’ll bring her back to the tenement house…”

Subaru interrupts Halibel, who stretched his arms, and picked up

Rem as he tried to control his shaking legs. Subaru stood up, and for a just a moment, his words made Halibel ponder something in his slit eyes.

However, he quickly said, “Okay” with a deep nod.

Halibel: “Then you carry her to the tenement house. I’ll call a magic user, and we’ll meet up with you guys in your room. Use a light street with a lot of crowd to go back.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’ll leave it to you!”

Subaru immediately began to run with Rem in his arms without any objection. He had a desperate look and his thoughts were covered with uneasiness, but he still had strength to walk. He wouldn’t run out of strength before getting to the tenement house.

Halibel looks at them go off, and he takes one deep puff of his kiseru as he said,

Halibel: “Anyhow…anyhow…”

The wolf man gives out smoke, and he ran off to the street at night, searching for a magic user.

3

—It’s all my fault.

Subaru: “Haa…haa…”

—It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault.

Subaru: “—!”

—It’s all my fault!!

Subaru: “Haa…!”

Subaru rushed to the tenement house with rough breathing, wide open eyes, and a bright red face.

He couldn't feel Rem's weight in his arms. He was just one person holding another in his arms as he ran, and yet the burning heat of the blood flowing through his body wouldn't let Subaru stop, as if it had become magma.

Subaru: "…"

He sprinted as fast as he could. Even though he tried to not shake, it still wasn't perfect. There's no way it was comfortable. And yet, Rem, who was unconscious, had not reaction. That was way too terrifying.

Magic, illness—Halibel's worries bound Subaru's mind with the chains called anxiety.

The black clothed woman that appeared—his fear of that enemy was completely disappearing from his head right now at this moment.

Being targeted with hostility, being exposed to murderous intent—they were all trivial matters.

Compared to the reality where he didn't know what was happening to this precious girl right now at this moment—

Subaru: "—Damnit!"

Subaru did not choose a direct route while dealing with his impatience; he chose the streets with the most crowds. Once he came out of the space that was unnaturally empty by crossing two streets, he saw everyday life, as if nothing had happened, and he felt everyone walking the streets at night looking at him.

A man changed his expression and ran through the street while holding onto a girl. It was a miracle that no meddlers with a weird sense of justice stopped him.

Still, he wasn't hoping for a miracle like that. Right now, there was only one wish he'd like to be blessed with.

Subaru: "Please…Rem…"

He just prays sincerely for Rem to be safe.

For her to open her eyes, call his name, and smile at him. That’s all.

If Subaru, as someone who couldn’t do anything back in that situation, had the right to shamelessly beg for a miracle, that would be the only thing he’d wish for. Nothing else.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru somehow made it back to the tenement house as he desperately prayed to the heavens. He forces the slide door open with his feet and puts down Rem in the dark room. He did not wipe his face dripping with sweat. When he turned on the light in the room, he spread a futon in a hurry, and he moved Rem onto it.

Subaru: “Rem…Rem…answer me…Rem…”

Even though he called her name, there was no response from Rem, who kept breathing painfully. With a sorrowful look, Subaru gently loosened the sash of her kimono, and he took off her sleeves. The borrowed kimono was tangled everywhere, and it seems she had dropped the hairpin that she had on her hair.

It was as if the Rem he saw this night dressed up, smiling gorgeously, was just a dream.

Subaru: “Rem…please…”

He scoops up water into a bucket and wipes Rem’s forehead and the back of her neck with a wet towel. He feels a fever from the forehead he touched. He couldn’t tell if it was a slight fever or a high fever. Currently, Subaru himself was in a condition where his anxiety and agitation wouldn’t die down, and he couldn’t say that he was at a normal body temperature.

Right now, he had no choice but to wait for Halibel to bring a magic user as soon as possible.

Even here, there was not a single thing Subaru could do.

Subaru: “Rem…”

Subaru holds onto Rem’s hand as she laid down on the futon, and he prays at the girl’s thin fingers.

Nothing happen, please. Please, wake up, I beg of you. If you could just wake up safely, smile like nothing happened, and then call my name—

Subaru: “…”

Who knows how long his praying went for. When Subaru heard a sound behind him, he was in a trance. It was the sound of a door opening. No doubt about it, Halibel had arrived with a magic user.

Hoping for that, Subaru turns around, and he was tried to say, “Take a look at Rem”—

???: “—Huh? What’s up with that pathetic look. I can’t bear to look at it.”

The woman leaning against the side door with her arms crossed says that in a contemptuous tone. That makes Subaru’s thoughts freeze completely for a moment.

It was a woman dressed in a kimono. She was wearing a pure white dress that was completely clean. She was wearing the white kimono with the right side over the left, and it looked like burial clothes. However, her dress’ hakama was shortened to the middle of her thighs, and he couldn’t find any sign of “death’s” shadow in her freely exposed long, thin legs and white skin.

The tips of her short, milky white hair were made into an uneven shaggy cut. Her sharp almond eyes were deep indigo blue. Although she had provocative facial features, they made an oddly beautiful face.

It was beauty created because it was unpolished and uneven. It was like an accidental beautiful face that was created as a result of a wild animals putting together whatever they thought was beautiful

—it was an uncanny work of art made up of truly beautiful things without even being particular about beauty.

An unordinarily beautiful face that would take anyone's breath away and make them lose their sense of reality. Subaru looked at that with his very own eyes, but the woman's beauty wasn't why he stiffened up.

He had a memory of the woman's face, although vague. And it was also a very recent memory—

???: "Hello? I'm talking to you. Do you even hear me?"

Subaru: "Y-You…"

???: "Oh. You can talk after all. Can you cut that out? It freaks me out when I get ignored. Cause, you know…"

After Subaru's trembling voice made the woman open her eyes wide, she put her hands together in front of her chest. And then, she had a slight smile on her face—a ferocious smile a carnivore would have upon finding its prey, and she said,

???: "—If you die before I kill you, that would dishonor the "Shinigami" name."

Subaru: "…"

The woman—the second attack of the woman that had continued to chant death makes Subaru move on impulse

He grabs the water bucket near Rem's pillow and throws it as hard as he could at the woman. He wasn't expecting it to do damage. He just needed to keep her in check. In fact, the woman had dodged the thrown bucket and the water thrown out of it with a displeased look.

Subaru: "Ruaaa—!"

That's when Subaru tackled the woman from a low position in order to grab onto her waist. He'd have a chance if he pushed her down and got on top of her. He'd smash her head with all his might. He was going to do it. He was prepared to do that easily with all the anger and energy he had right now—

???: "—Can you not hug me just because I'm cute?"

Subaru: "Ga—?!"

The low charge at her stomach gets blocked. The woman backs away easily, and when she grabbed the back of Subaru's head with her right arm as he was bent forward, she immediately held him to the ground by brute force. Subaru's nose hits the wooden floor, and he sees sparks. His face gets crushed by such brute strength that you wouldn't believe that they were thin arms.

He grinds his teeth, and he bends the lower half of his body like a Shachihoko while having his face on the ground. He goes for the woman's head with his imperfect heel attack, and she brushed it away with her free hand in an annoyed manner. However, distracting her, even if it was just for a little bit, was good enough. He twists his body, forces the woman's hand off of his neck, and jumped up.

???: "Yuck, you're covered…in sweat!"

Subaru: "Like I care!!"

He waves his right hand and jumps at the frowning woman yet again. He kept going for the lower half of her body. At least there wasn't a clear difference in ability for standing techniques. He'd force her out of the tenement house and keep Rem away from danger, even if it was just for a little bit. Even if it really was just for a little bit.

Subaru: "—Dzu..raa!"

His spirit was superior, and he tackled the woman's waist before her arms could stop it. He holds onto her thin waist by force, throws her at the door vigorously, and she immediately rolls out of the tenement house. He instantly tried to get on her to get the upper hand, but…

???: "Don't get so cocky!"

Before the woman fell to the ground on her back, she hit Subaru's chest with her knee as he clinged to her, and the impact of her long, beautiful legs sharply pierced Subaru's body, as if gouging his intestines. He chokes, and all of his bones crack. Even if he tried to hold onto her with his arms, the structure of his human body wouldn't let him.

Subaru was the one who came off and fell to the ground. He immediately tries to get up to scratch off dirt. But the woman put her bare feet on his head and pushed it to the ground.

Subaru: "Go…o…"

???: "Don't get up, stay down. You'll dirty the air. Sweat will fly."

He lifted his arms and grabbed onto the woman's thin ankles. He strengthens his grip. She didn't budge an inch. She snorts at his resistance, and once again, she swung down her foot that she lifted easily. She crushes his nose. Twice, thrice—

Subaru: "Ka…a…"

???: "Don't touch me, pervert. I didn't come here to fool around with you. Listen. Go to sleep."

She steps on Subaru one more time for good measure, and he was silent. Seeing Subaru dead tired with his blood spreading onto the ground, the woman turns around with satisfaction, and she started to go back to the tenement house.

She said that her goal wasn't to play around with Subaru. The woman's goal was not about Subaru—

Subaru: "—What are you trying to do?"

???: "…"

Subaru was clinging onto the woman's legs while having his nose crushed and dirtying the ground with his nose blood. Dirt and blood dirty her white skin. The woman's eyes were getting colder.

???: "Get off of me."

The woman's sharp demand was frank. Her breathing sounded suspicious, and Subaru couldn't respond with words.

He just put his other arm around the woman's ankle, which he was already clinging onto with one arm, to express his intent.

???: "Look…"

The woman brushes up her hair and looks at Subaru, who stuck onto her, in dumbfoundment. And then she sighed and kneed the man who was glaring at her with his face dirty with nose blood.

???: "I said get the hell off of me."

She knees his lower jaw, and the intense impact bounces the brain inside his cranium. The cerebral concussion even makes him feel like he was losing consciousness, and he saw blood from his nasal cavity get on her dress.

He falls down. Still, he didn't let go. He was grabbing onto her, and he wouldn't let her go.

???: "You're going to die."

Subaru: "Hyaa…"

He shook his head disapprovingly. The pain…the pain was unusual; it was irritating his whole body, and his head was being affected the most.

His crushed face, kicked body, kneed lower jaw, his whole body hit by unbelievable strength was having a big chorus of pain and powerlessness.

The danger alert was going off as loud as possible, and the fear that made him feel like "death" was near makes his hands and legs go cold. His vision was blurred by either blood or tears, and his shaking was getting worse and worse.

Death was right before his eyes. The woman Subaru was grabbing onto right now was the embodiment of death. She was a Shinigami.

“Death” is scary. Terrifying. Subaru feared “death” more than anyone in this world.

Doing as the woman said and begging for forgiveness was the right move if he wanted to avoid “death” and get away.

But, but, but, he wasn’t allowed to do it. She wouldn’t let him do it. And he couldn’t do it because—

???: “—You can’t stop me. After all, you are a loser”

Subari’s resistance was all for naught; the woman started walking. She enters the tenement house without even pulling him off as if to say that he was nothing to her. She goes up, steps on the tatami mat, and heads towards Rem.

Subaru: “Gi…ga—”

He bites on the tatami mat and tries to stop her. The tatami mat tears off of the floor. He stretches his legs to a pillar and hanged onto her knee. He takes him off by force. He gets dragged along, and he resists as he scratched the tatami mat. He resists.

???: “You just don’t know when to give up, do you. You poor sport. Aren’t you ashamed of struggling so much?”

Subaru: “Oooo! Oooo!!”

???: “So unsightly! So unsightly so unsightly so unsightly! So low! So lame! Are you stupid?!”

She harms Subaru with abusive language, but he still shook his head stubbornly like a child. Subaru would try to stop the women, even if it meant bleeding, losing teeth, and having his limbs torn off.

His unreasonable stubbornness makes the woman click her tongue irritatedly—

???: “This is retribution, but it still leaves a bad taste in my mouth! I am just…”

The woman grimaces with her beautiful face and she makes it to the futon with Subaru. Then, she looks down at Rem, who was sleeping there, and turned her palm towards her.

If that palm reached Rem, her sleep would end in an undesired way. Thus, Subaru called out to her woefully—right after, the woman stopped moving.

???: "—Ah?"

The woman's mouth was wide open with her hand reached out towards Rem. She then knits her brows and takes a long look at Rem, who breathed painfully. From top to bottom, slowly.

Subaru swallows saliva with blood without knowing what that look meant.

Subaru: "What…are you…"

???: "Ahhh! Damnit! Are you serious?! This won't do! I can't do this!"

The next moment, the woman suddenly erupts, and she kicked at the tatami mat as she roughly clicked her tongue. And then, the woman shakes off Subaru, whose eyes opened wide because of her strange behavior, and he sends him flying towards the corner of the room.

Subaru: "Damni…"

Subaru's carelessness leads to her being released, and he completely regretted his mistake. He falls onto the tatami mat, immediately gets back up, and he tries to grab onto the woman. Then the woman attacked his face with her bare feet.

Subaru: "Ga…"

???: "Calm down. Good grief, what a noisy man."

With a dumbfounded look, the woman looks down on Subaru, whose shout was stopped by her kick, and he collapsed onto the tatami mat. After that, the woman points at her own nicely shaped nose as she said,

???: “Your face looks pretty ugly now. Can it be fixed?”

Subaru: “…”

???: “Sure sucks to be a human. Since if you get scarred, it stays there.”

The woman says just that, and she alternates between looking at Subaru and Rem in an annoyed manner. He could tell that the emotion in her eyes wasn’t peaceful. So, he had to get up and restrain her. However, his body wouldn’t listen to him—

???: “Time is up, huh. Guess I have to go.”

Subaru: “…”

Stricken with a sense of helplessness, Subaru gets left behind, and he hears the woman let those words out. Her eyes were not looking at Subaru and Rem, but at the open entrance. She then went towards the entrance—towards the tenement house, just like she said, without doing anything to Subaru and Rem.

Subaur: “Wai…”

???: “Just curse at your bad luck. Tremble and regret as much as possible.”

He was unable to put together the words to stop her, and he had no clue what the woman’s sharp parting remark meant.

Subaru just stayed silent, stained the tatami mat with the blood coming from his nose, and he could only watch the woman leave.

Then for a while it was just Subaru and Rem, who was breathing painfully, left in the room

Halibel: “—Su-san? Are you okay? What happened?!”

Halibel arrives late to the chaotic situation. When he was called out to by the dog face that rushed up to him, Subaru moved to breath heavily from his nose clogged with blood and his mouth as he said,

Subaru: “…Take…care of…Rem.”

Subaru says that to the wolf man taking a look, and his consciousness disappeared.

4

???: “With this, the treatment is over for now. Now you just have to rest.”

The old healing magic user says that, and he wiped off the remaining traces of blood on Subaru’s face. The old magic user actually quickly finished the treatment after he examined Subaru, who was half alive.

Because of that, he went from having wounds all over his body to having serious body bruises, and the dull pain in his nose settled down to a level where he could ignore it. Now he’d have no trouble doing the very least: “standing and walking.

Halibel: “Su-san, how are you? Think you’re good? Think you’re gonna die?”

Subaru: “When I bite with my jaw, I feel pain that feels like my body is getting joint locked, but I’m not dying somehow. Thanks. …Thanks, but…”

Halibel: “Hold it hold it. I know that you want to prioritize Rem-chan. However, you can’t just forget about your condition.”

Halibel, who shrugged his shoulders, and he forced his opinion before Subaru could, who mumbled.

Halibel had returned to the tenement house, and the one he looked at was Subaru, who had stained the tatami middle in the middle of the room with blood and fainted as he said something like a will before doing so. Rem was sleeping on a futon, and if Subaru were to debate who was having more of an emergency, unfortunately he’d have no chance of winning.

But, in Subaru's heart, he still wanted to prioritize Rem—

Halibel: "Rem-chan can't do whatever she wants, of course. However, that goes for you too. That's the decision I came to fairly with Sensei. You owe me, right? Forgive me in consideration of that."

Subaru: "Owe you…"

For letting them live in the tenement house, and for saving his life just now—he kept getting more and more indebted to Halibel. Plus, he wasn't so shameless that he'd consider worrying him as paying off his debt.

Subaru: "Okay. But apart from that, Sensei, please take care of Rem."

???: "Leave it up to me. You guys are getting in my way. Leave to the front."

The old magic user responded bluntly and waved at Subaru, who bowed his head. Following his instructions, Subaru and Halibel leave to the front of the tenement house. On the way, Halibel stretched his long arms and helped prevent Subaru from almost losing his balance because of body pain.

Halibel: "Woah. You have to be careful, Su-san. You just started recovering two minutes ago."

Subaru: "You start to worry too quickly. …But you really did save me."

Halibel: "Su-san being honest…this is just wrong. But it pains me to be thanked. After all, I really failed at predicting an attack in the tenement house."

The two of them were sitting next to each other on a bench placed in front of the tenement house. When Halibel lit his kiseru, the smoke he inhaled went out into the night sky, and he said that.

Halibel: "I didn't expect her to attack continuously. I thought that she wouldn't act for a few days."

Subaru: “It wasn’t even close to a few days. We met again within 10-20 minutes.”

Halibel: “I was really shocked when I saw you bloody in the room. I thought to myself, “I messed up by sending Su-san back home alooone. Let’s not make the same mistake next timeee.”“

Subaru: “That won’t situation won’t happen to me again.”

Halibel: “So, I was going to go attack the enemy, and then Su-san talked. I thought your heart had stopped beating. I thought you were dead.”

Subaru: “…Aah, right.”

Halibel: “…”

Halibel goes from looking at the sky to looking at Subaru’s profile. It was a brief exchange, but it was clear that Subaru’s thoughts were elsewhere. Subaru was not focused on his conversation with Halibel; he was thinking all about Rem’s well-being as she was being diagnosed in the room right behind them.

He trusted the old magic user’s skill in relation to external wounds, enough with his own body. However, Rem didn’t have external wounds. It was an illness, or perhaps—

Halibel: “I don’t think it’s magic, though I only took a glance. Incidentally, you can consider it to be different from a kind of black magic. Rest assured.”

Subaru: “How can you be so sure?”

Halibel: “Because I’m a black magic specialist. You can believe in my stamp of approval.”

Subaru: “A black magic specialist…? I can’t just let that comment slip by.”

Halibel: “There’s a long story to my past. For now, just think of it as one less thing to worry about.”

Although it was a pretty impactful reveal, Subaru didn't object to Halibel's statement. It was concerning. However, he wasn't concerned about it right now.

Just like Halibel said, that was one less possibility of a threat to Rem's life. Even if it didn't make him feel relieved, it was enough to ease his mind.

And so, they waited for a while as the smoke Halibel gave out went into the night air—

???: "—Thanks for waiting."

Subaru: "Sensei! Rem, how's Rem?!"

???: "It's night right now and there's a girl sleeping, so quiet down. —I have something to tell you. Come inside."

Showing only his face outside, the old magic user beckons Subaru to come in. Impatience and the somewhat alarming atmosphere makes Subaru catch his breath, and he slowly went back inside the room.

The room was still in its disorderly stated caused by him raging at a woman. Only the futon Rem was sleeping in was fixed nicely, and it made him feel that the old magic user was somewhat thoughtful.

???: "Hey idiot over there, put out your kiseru's fire. It'll harm her."

Halibel: "But usually you wouldn't say anything unnecessary. … Okay okay, fine I get it."

Glared at sharply, Halibel obeyed the old magic user and put out his kiseru's fire. He sat down heavily at the entrance, and Subaru's mind makes him come towards Rem's bedside. The old magic user sitting at the side opposite of Subaru beings speaking with a hoarse voice as he said, "Alright".

???: "Let's start with the good news. This girl is not unconscious because she's injured or has an illness. And I'm guessing you've heard from that idiot that it has nothing to do with a curse."

Subaru: “…Yeah.”

???: “Basically, this means there is nothing wrong with her.”

Subaru: “Huh? No wait…”

The old magic user’s statement makes Subaru’s eyes widen, as he couldn’t understand what he was saying.

He said nothing was wrong. Rem collapsed. Her breathing sounding painful. These were all true facts. Although, her breathing was calm now, perhaps because of the treatment.

Subaru: “Sensei, Rem collapsed. She was in pain. Examine her more thoroughly!”

???: “You’re an idiot, just like the one over there. You jump to conclusions too quickly. I’m not done talking.”

Halibel: “You don’t have to call people idiots…”

???: “ Quiet, idiot. And I’m going to tell this idiot something. That was the good news…now I’m going to tell you the better news.”

Subaru: “The better news?”

There wasn’t anything wrong with Rem, so what kind of unbelievable news did he have in store for him next? Subaru decided to keep silent in hopes that his next words would provide clarity.

And then, after a pause, the old magic user continued speaking to Subaru, who waited for his words.

???: “—Congratulations.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Subaru was taken aback by the next word he said, and let out a sigh.

—He didn’t fully understanding the word “Congratulations”. Was it a name of a person? A name of a place? Whichever one it was, it was a different world proper noun that Subaru wasn't familiar with. What did it mean?

Subaru: "Um, so you're saying…Rem can be saved because of 'Congratulations'?"

???: "Hey, playboy. There might be someone who's dumber than you are."

The old magic user scratched his head with a dumbfounded look as Subaru questioned him with a stiff expression. Halibel scratched his head similarly as he went, "Well" and tried to make him see the matter his way.

Halibel: "Shouldn't you have told him in a different way? I'm not surprised that this confused him."

Subaru: "What do you mean 'confused me'?! Please just tell me! What's happening to Rem…"

Halibel: "You see, Su-san. By congratulations he means congratulations. And I congratulate you too."

Congratulations, or rather, 'congratulations': "the word that was repeated to Subaru, who was confused.

That word meant—

???: "Your wife is pregnant. It's your child."

Subaru: "Pregnant…she's pregnant?!"

The old magic user's explanation shocks Subaru as his eyes opened wide.

Pregnant, congrats, congratulations—all that goes around inside his head, beating up his brain. Subaru continued to be confused as the magic user looked at Rem with a serious expression.

???: "Don't worry about her being unconscious. She just exhausted herself so much that she became light-headed. She'll get up soon if you let her rest. Collapsing is not something that should be praised, though.”

Halibel: “She does push herself way more than your average wife, after all. We can’t learn anything from what happened tonight. That being said, this doesn’t mean that we could be completely relaxed, either.”

Halibel was murmuring about how Rem ended up exhausting so much that she fainted.

It’s true that they couldn’t learn anything from what happened tonight. They weren’t going to get attacked frequently like that. Still, it wasn’t like they had fought off the enemy; she just retreated on her own for some reason. He couldn’t possibly believe that everything was over now.

Halibel: “But she really didn’t kill you when she could have, huh.”

Just like Halibel said, the woman had plenty of chances to kill Subaru and Rem before he arrived.

She was hostile enough to make him tremble, and yet nothing happened with it. It was also true that she settled down. That’s how they escaped death by the skin of their teeth. Her true motive was still not clear at all, though.

Halibel: “—Su-san, are you okay?”

Subaru: “…Eh…ah”

Halibel taps Subaru’s shoulder, as he wouldn’t participate in the conversation, and he looks at his face. After doing all that, Subaru finally returns back to reality, and his eyes met the slit eyes in front of him.

His mind and heart were a mess with chaos and confusion.

It seemed Halibel could tell, and so when he made eye contact with the old magic user and they nodded at each other he said,

Halibel: “Su-san, we’ll be leaving for the night. The girl from earlier shouldn't come now. I have something I want to tell you, but that can wait until tomorrow. …Sensei."

???: "Let your wife sleep. You should get some rest tonight, too."

Halibel: "So that's that."

Halibel and the old magic user take turns speaking to Subaru, and he nodded at them in silence like a doll. When he made that slow movement, Halibel grabbed onto Subaru's head, and then he forced him to turn around to Rem.

Halibel: "Su-san, you have to be the first one Rem-chan sees when she wakes up. Got it?"

Subaru: "—. G-Got it."

He tells Subaru something else again, and his eyes finally vacantly settle on one place. Halibel makes sure Rem was in his black eyes, and he quietly gets up with the old magic user as they leave the room.

He was helped countless times in this night alone. Subaru really should've stood up and saw off the two of them, but he didn't have the energy to stand up, and they didn't want him to do that.

They put the fallen door back up, and the helpful guests leave the room behind. Left behind, Subaru silently reaches out for Rem's hot hand as she was lying down on the futon.

Chaos and confusion were still heavily disturbing Subaru's mind. They told him to rest, but even if Subaru was shameless enough to sleep in a situation like this, he wasn't going to be irresponsible.

First he was going to wait for Rem to wake up and make sure that she truly was safe. Subaru had to make sure of it before he could think about anything else.

Subaru: "—Rem."

Subaru shortly calls her name, and he continues to gaze at the girl's face as she slept.

Only the breathing of Subaru and Rem, the married couple, was left in the room.

5

A few hours had probably passed since then.

It was about to be the break of dawn when Rem nervously opened her eyes slightly.

Rem: "…Subaru…-kun?"

The color of the sky changes into signs of morning, and the dim light faintly shines on the room through the window. A weak light was in Rem's bright, light blue eyes in this scene that was shaded a color between black and blue.

Subaru: "—Mm. Good morning, Rem."

Rem's voice, which made it sound like she was dreaming in a way, brings Subaru back to reality.

Subaru's thoughts were engulfed in a swirl of stagnation in these past few hours he spent staring at Rem's sleeping face.

The tumultuous day, the busy banquet at night, suddenly having his life threatened on the streets at night, getting severely hurt at his own home he arrived to, the opinion of the old magic user that came afterwards, his thoughts on all of that were put on hold.

It felt like he kept having recurring thoughts, and it also felt like he kept looking away from them. In any case, he used waiting for Rem's awakening as an excuse to avoid wanting an answer

The time he could've used to run away ended, and it was now the time to face the situation.

Subaru: "Rem…umm…"

Rem blinks with her tired eyes, and she slowly moves her head while being half-awake. In the middle of doing this, she notices Subaru holding onto her hand, and she happily broke into a smile as she went, “Hehe”.

Rem: “What’s wrong, Subaru-kun? You were holding my hand while I was sleeping…”

Rem’s flower-like smile slowly stiffens, and she starts to open her eyes. Her consciousness gets freed from the cage of slumber, she puts her thoughts in order as the memory of last night came back to her vividly.

Rem holds onto Subaru’s hand harder, and when she sat up in a panic she said,

Rem: “S-Subaru-kun, are you injured?! I fainted, and then…aah, why…”

Subaru: “Calm down, Rem. I’m fine. And I don’t…have any injuries now.”

Subaru hid the second disaster that happened in the tenement house, although he did hesitate a bit.

If he made it clearer, the traces of Subaru getting physically abused in the room would become noticeable. However, she wouldn’t be able to tell with the current dimness anyway. It was okay to cover it up, just for this moment.

Fortunately, Subaru’s reply didn’t make Rem suspect any chaos, and she was relieved.

Rem: “Thank goodness. If anything happened to Subaru-kun after that, I would be very…”

Subaru: “I hate to admit it, but it’s all thanks to Hal-san…to Halibel. He fought off that suspicious person.”

Rem: “Oh, I see. Halibel-sama did. I’ll have to thank him later.”

It seemed that her memory was clear to a certain extent, and that she remembered Halibel coming in to help. In fact, it seemed like Rem clearly remembered things that happened up to the point where she was about to faint.

Once she closed her lips tightly, she continued with a, "So" as she said,

Rem: "What happened to me…"

Subaru: "You…"

Rem: "What I remember is that Halibel-sama showed up, and then I focused on my forehead to protect you as much as possible. However, that's when my consciousness faded away and…"

With her free hand, Rem touches her forehead—the spot where her horn appears, and she knits her thin brows. Her poor condition and fainting—Rem had no idea what was the cause of those things.

Rem: "I've never fainted like that before…umm, I'm sorry."

Subaru: "Y-You don't need to apologize. I should be the one doing that. You're always saving me…I wasn't able to move promptly in a time like that…that was really pathetic of me."

Rem: "No, that's not true…"

Rem's apologetic attitude hurts him inside. Subaru shakes his head at her apology, and harshly condemned himself.

He could not be afraid anymore, and that also went for the powerlessness and cowardice he described to her. He was being spoiled by Rem's feeling of guilt and delaying important news for as long as possible.

After confirming Rem's safety, his thoughts would move one step forward—he had to move forward.

Subaru: "Rem, listen. The truth is that you were examined by a magic user. After you suddenly collapsed."

Rem: "—Okay."

Subaru had a determined look, and Rem nodded with seemingly stiff cheeks.

With a serious look, he told her that she was examined by a doctor. It was natural for her to be nervous. However, Subaru, with how he was right now, really did not have the composure to show concern for her nervousness.

He hesitated many times, and wet his dry lips. Seeing Subaru do that, Rem closed her eyes as she said,

Rem: “Subaru-kun, please let it out. Whatever the truth is, I’ll accept it.”

Subaru: “…Ah”

Rem: “Even if it’s that I don’t have much time left, I’d like to spend it with Subaru-kun and…”

Subaru: “—Apparently, you’re pregnant.”

He interrupts her with that.

Rem: “Huh?”

He’s going to let me know that I have a serious illness. Rem was preparing herself for something like that, and so she was taken aback.

Rem opens her eyes, and she was looking at Subaru in dumbfoundment. Subaru nods at her, forgets about the dryness of his lips, pushes away his hesitation, and repeats himself.

Subaru: “Rem, you have a baby inside of you. —A child, and it’s ours.”

Rem: “…”

Hearing those repeated words, with her eyes wide open, Rem rubs her stomach with her hand that Subaru wasn’t holding onto. She still couldn’t tell with how it looked. It could be a misdiagnosis. That’s how unreal it felt.

A new life was inside of Rem. And it was theirs.

Subaru: “Were there any signs? Something that seemed weird.”

Rem: “I had…a slight fever…for a bit…I just thought that maybe I was tired. After finally settling in one town and being relieved, my body was tired…that’s what I thought.”

Rem answers Subaru’s awkward question while choking.

He was bothered by the fact that Rem didn’t tell him about the noticeable symptoms of her slight fever, but he understood how she felt. It was when their lives were finally starting to settle down. She didn’t want to use her poor health as a reason to interrupt that. Subaru would’ve done the same thing if he was in her position.

Rem: “A child…inside of me…a child. Subaru-kun’s…and mine…”

Subaru: “You fainted because you’ve been acting different. You’re in this condition where you get tired more easily than usual, and you’ve been getting exposed to tanger, getting tense, exhausted…”

Rem: “I-I’m sorry.”

Subaru: “Like I said, you don’t have to apologize. I’ve always been the one who should be apologizing.”

He made Rem overwork herself, which he shouldn’t have done.

Even though he didn’t know that she was pregnant, that was no excuse. He selfishly brought Rem with him, and he was a burden to her because of his own incompetence.

They did not finally have an everyday life; even a dangerous situation like that was just like how they were before.

Subaru: “…”

He couldn’t forgive himself for that. The one who couldn’t even move in his last moment. The weak one who couldn’t even accomplish his goal of not letting that person get close to Rem and was saved just because she was fickle.

The one who was always hurting Rem, Natsuki Subaru—.

Rem: “Subaru-kun…umm”

Subaru: “What is it?”

The hesitation in Rem’s words becomes clear. Subaru notices her agitation, and he spoke as kindly as possible with his voice to get her to relax.

As he did, he had only one thing in his mind, which was that he wanted keep her away from him after all the times he’s hurt her.

Rem nervously beings to talk to Subaru as he felt that way.

Rem: “Subaru-kun…what do…you think?”

Subaru: “What do I…by that do you mean…”

Rem: “We…have…a ch-child…about that, do…”

“You regret it?”. —Her next words were probably going to be something like that.

Rem’s weakness for not saying it and his own stupidity for making her say it make Subaru tremble, as if he was struck by thunder.

He was an idiot. A complete idiot. There should’ve been other things he had to say to her other than the fact that there was a baby inside of her at this moment and that they were blessed with a child. There were things, but he was such an idiot.

Subaru: “I…”

Subaru speaks reflexively, and that’s when he had trouble putting it into words. Rem’s watery eyes were sincerely staring straight at Subaru, waiting for his answer.

Doing something like saying a thoughtless statement on the spur of the moment would be unacceptable. Now was the time to make his frozen thoughts move again in front of Rem and ask his mind a question.

—The new life inside Rem is Natsuki Subaru’s.

The first emotions he felt when he imagined seriously facing their new life that was growing.

That was—

Subaru: “Let’s…see. —I think I like it and I’m glad.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “We have a child…a baby. And that…makes me…”

He faces the first, the very first deep emotions he had.

He felt surprised. He also felt anxious. But, more importantly, he felt passion. Natsuki Subaru defined that passion welling up in him as the first time he learned what it meant to be glad.

Subaru was happy to have a child with a girl so precious to him.

Subaru: “—Rem!}

Rem: “Fua?!”

Subaru gives in to the urge hurting his chest, and he hugs Rem without thinking.

That sudden action surprises Rem, and the warmth she felt from Subaru, who was very close to her, makes her goggle in astonishment. Subaru brings his lips near her ears, and with everything he felt, he said,

Subaru: “Thank you, Rem. —Thank you. Thank you, Rem.”

Rem: “Subaru…-ku…”

Subaru: “I’m so happy. We have a kid…a family.”

Rem: “—Ah”

Subaru cleared away his anxiety about the distant future, acted on the impulse he felt at this moment, and all of his words were his true feelings.

He had a baby with Rem. The two people who lived in Kararagi and called themselves a married couple, although it was just for form's sake—they were going to become a true family.

Rem: "Oo…foo…"

Being hugged, Rem nervously put her arms around Subaru's back. While hugging each other on the futon, Rem lets out a voice from her lips that sounded like crying.

It had to be the relief brought by the needle of his words breaking up the anxiety that had been growing endlessly.

Subaru: "Thank you, Rem."

Rem: "N-No…no, wait. I'm the one that should be…"

Subaru: "Thank you, Rem."

Still hugging each other, Subaru expresses his gratitude again to Rem, who let out a sob. When Rem accepted it, her throat clogs up, and warm tears fell down from her eyes.

The intense impulse inside Subaru's chest naturally goes to his throat, and then into his eyes, spreading all through his body, and he begins to shake.

Subaru: "Ah…haha…hahaha…"

He tries to hide it before that impulse turned into tears and then into sobbing. His laughter was also shaky, and as a result, he couldn't hide anything anymore, though.

This was the moment where he just simply wanted to share the joy of being blessed with life as a married couple.

Because even if there were still things he had to think about, anxiety, and danger—

Rem: "Subaru-kun, thank you. —I love you."

Subaru's gratitude and Rem's confession were, without a doubt, real.

Chapter 3:
3 Months (2)

1

Halibel: “—Still, that really surprised me. My heart almost stopped beating again.”

Subaru: “About that…”

Rem: “We’re sorry for troubling you.”

Subaru and Rem were the ones who bowed their heads side by side in the room as it approached dawn. In front of them, it was Halibel who was making them apologize as he nodded calmly.

He puts his hand inside his kimono, moves his eyes while he scratched his chest, and stared at the wall of the room with human made dents and cracks. At the very least, these marks weren’t there last night.

Habliel: “What’s up with all that?”

Subaru: “They’re the result of a ceremony to confirm a married couple being blessed with a new life…maybe.”

Rem: “I’m sorry. I couldn’t control myself very well, I guess because I was so confused.”

Subaru wiped his face with a towel, while Rem hung her head, showing regret.

In short, the dents in the wall were from Subaru crashing into it, and Rem was the one who made that happen. It happened right after she was told that she was pregnant and they shared the joy of being blessed with a child.

Subaru: “Yesterday was the continuance of shocking events. I wanted to make sure that having a child wasn’t just a dream, so I asked Rem to hit me a little hard, and then that happened.”

Rem: “shrug”

Halibel: “…Well, I’m just glad you didn’t die because of it. I wouldn’t really be able to rest in peace if you did.”

Halibel comments on the married couple’s unusual sort of way they talked about their happiness with each other, and he looked away from the wall’s dents. After that, he slightly opened one of his slit eyes as he said,

Halibel: “Anyway, let’s talk about the cost of repairs for the wall later…”

Subaru: “Later?”

Halibel: “I have something I need to talk to you about, although it’s nothing big.”

Halibel, sitting crossed legged on the tatami mat, started talking as he shook the kiseru in his mouth up and down.

The way he entered the topic sort of made the nervousness from last night return to Subaru. Rem’s hit filled with love proved that the tumultuous series of events wasn’t just a dream.

In short, all of it wasn’t just a dream, including what Halibel did last night.

Halibel: “In short, saying that I’m a “Playboy” as a tenement house manager was just a disguise.”

Halibel confidently made a confession about himself, as if supporting Subaru’s thoughts. The first major event that happened in the morning, continuing from last night. There seemed to be a serious light in Halibel’s eyes—

Subaru: “Wait, no there isn’t. And he isn’t even apologetic.”

Halibel: “Why would I need to be apologetic? I didn’t do anything wrong, and I also protected you guys.”

After saying that there was more to it, Halibel responded to Subaru like he always would. It was very like him to be aloof and go at his own pace. He just accepted that, since he could even be confusing by suddenly starting to use an authoritative tone, like his personality had changed.

Anyhow, while Subaru fixed the position of Rem's futon blanket cover as she reflected upon herself, he said,

Subaru: "So about why you came out with that revealing, shocking truth…"

Rem: "Sorry, Halibel-sama. I, uh, kind of figured."

Halibel: "Whaaat! How embarrassing! If you did, then that's really embarrassing! How embarrassing!"

Subaru's eyes were half-open, while Rem's eyes looked down awkwardly. Listening to their replies, Halibel looks up at the ceiling, and he sighed dramatically as he opened his big mouth and said, "God daaaamn it."

Subaru: "Hold on. You sigh stuff like, "God damn it", but aren't you said to be famous? Actually, I did sort of figure judging from the reactions of people around you, but you didn't even try to hide your name. So, being found out and being troubled are things you brought upon yourself."

Rem: "I also heard a lot about Halibel-sama "The Great"……so I thought you were testing us at first when you said that you were a tenement house manager."

Halibel: "Ah, so I've been found out since the beginning. Woe is me…"

Subaru: "Woe is not you."

Subaru just now realizes that he had been left in the dark by the two of them as he made that joke.

How anxious did Rem feel for not telling even Subaru that they had suddenly met Kararagi's strongest on the first day they moved? He was pathetic for being unaware of how much Rem had struggled, despite having peaceful days in this town.

Subaru: “You should’ve told me. Rem, why did you carry the burden all by yourself?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun…”

Rem is always like this. She always sacrifices herself more than others. Even though they were living together now, she sacrifices herself for Subaru.

That’s why she put the burden on herself until the situation came to light, yet again.

Rem: “I’m sorry. I didn’t know Halibel-sama’s true motive and…”

Subaru: “And?”

Rem: “And you’re terrible at lying. I didn’t want to provoke Halibel-sama since it’d show in your behavior if I carelessly told you about his identity…”

Subaru: “So you thought very realistically and didn’t trust me!”

Subaru gets showered with Rem’s sharp words again and again, and so he raises his voice. Seeing Subaru do that, Rem waved her hands in a panic as she said, “Oh, you’ve got it wrong.”

Rem: “I do trust Subaru-kun. Really, words are not enough for me to describe how much I trust you. However, trusting you and making you do something you’re incapable of doing are two different matters.”

Halibel: “The more you speak the more I feel bad for Su-san, so let’s leave it at that, shall we?”

Rem tells her realistic opinion without hesitation as she put her unlimited love and trust into words.

In actuality, Rem was right to be concerned. Subaru wasn’t so sure that he’d interacted with Halibel in the same way after she’d told him about his nickname.

Still, there was something he had to confirm in order for him to be convinced.

Subaru: “This may be a basic question, but is Hal-san really the strongest person in Kararagi? You sure it’s not someone else in your family, or a good little twin brother?”

Rem: “About that…sorry. I’m not completely sure.”

Halibel: “I’m in a bit of an awkward position now that you’ve apologized for that.”

Rem apologizes in response to Subaru’s meaningless point, and it hurt Halibel.

Halibel: “I mean, do you have a problem with me being the strongest or something? Listen, I am the strongest. Or is the the kind of thing where you love the same old me too much, and not the real me?”

Subaru: “It’s not something disgusting like that. It’s something more idealistic. A strong person should have a strong person’s personality, something like that.”

Halibel: “Now you’re just insulting me!”

Halibel raised his voice unexpectedly because of Subaru’s reasoning. Still, somehow he was Kararagi city-state’s strongest—he was the strongest in one of the four large countries.

Of course, he’d like him to have a fitting character. Like how that “Sword Saint” Reinhard van Astra is an overwhelming warrior in the Lugunica kingdom.

Subaru: “…Well, I guess that’s just me being sentimental.”

Halibel: “It’s not like I don’t see your point, but this is what I’ve been doing for a long time. To be honest, I don’t care that much about being known as the strongest…and I don’t understand being proud by being strong in a head-on fight and having confidence.”

He skillfully moves the kiseru in his mouth and draws a circle at the tip. Halibel's attitude makes Subaru knit his brows, and he tilted his head as he said, "Being strong in a head-on fight?"

Halibel: "I'm a shinobi warrior. My specialty is attacking around my opponent's weak points. Oh, but the details on how we fight are classified information. It'd endanger our existence. Sorry, we're all mostly dead now, besides me."

Subaru: "I don't really get your joke on getting wiped out. Also, a 'shinobi'…"

Haibel: "Oh, people from outside the country might not understand it. As for 'shinobi', it's like 'that'. Like, how could I put this? They're 'that'. It's a job where it'd be bad if I explained 'that' part."

Rem: "You haven't been specific about anything…"

Rem mercilessly casts aside Halibel's explanation that lacked the main point. Forgetting about the two of them, Subaru was correctly connecting shinobi with "shinobu" inside of his head—in other words, he connected it with ninja.

He went from being astonished by the existence of wasou and wafuu culture, from katanas to chopsticks, and now finally even ninjas. Because of this, Subaru didn't have trouble understanding it. He didn't, but because of that, Halibel's confession now had a different meaning.

He was obscuring various parts of his confession by joking, but there was some truth in his main point.

—That is, there was going to be some catch after finding out that he was a ninja.

Subaru: "…"

Halibel: "Su-san, you look pale, are you okay?"

Subaru: "What do you want from us?"

Subaru, cheeks stiffening with caution and nervousness, questioned Halibel, who sat cross-legged. Next to him, Rem also gets affected by the nervousness, and she gripped tight onto the futon blanket cover. Halibel could become a foe or an ally, depending on how he acts next.

And if he turned into their enemy, Subaru would have no chance of winning while holding Rem as she was pregnant.

Halibel: “If, say, in this situation, I said your lives—what would you do?”

Subaru: “I would…”

Halibel: “…”

Subaru: “I would make excuses and say that we’ve been neighbors all this time, Rem and I are newlyweds, she’s pregnant, and I’d shamelessly beg for our lives in desperation, appealing to your emotions…probably.”

Halibel: “I see.”

Subaru’s voice and facial expression were truly serious, and that was his reply to Halibel’s question. After that, Halibel sighed, and his eyes open just slightly in surprise.

However, Rem, who listened to the same declaration Halibel heard, smiled at Subaru’s reply. She reached out for her husband and held onto his free hand as proof of her trust.

Halibel sees the two of them unite like that, and he changed the way he held onto the kiseru with his hands.

And then—

Halibel: “—Wahahaha! S-Su-san’s so lame! So uncool! Making that face in front of your wife, “appeal to my emotions”……ahahah!”

Subaru: “You’re laughing way too much!”

Halibel: “O-Of course I’d…I’d laugh…ahh, hah…hah…hah…I’m gonna die of laughter…! S-So this is what you were trying to do… an ingenious scheme!”

Subaru: “That’s groundless, and I did reply seriously.”

Halibel: “I know I know.”

After laughing his ass off, Halibel wiped away the tears he had from laughing too hard. Then, being looked at by Subaru’s displeased eyes, the wolf man raises his hands as he said,

Halibel: “Hahh, man that cracked me up. Sorry for laughing. But, you can relax. The hypothetical situation was absolutely hypothetical. After all, even if I really did have a job where I’d get in trouble for getting found out, it would be horrible to act without changing my name.”

Subaru: “Th-That’s true.”

Halibel: “Besides, it would be too counterproductive of me to get rid of someone I saved. If I was going to do that, I might as well not have bothered saving you yesterday.”

Subaru: “…”

He touches on the attack that happened last night, making Subaru tremble as he remembered the predicament.

In truth, if Halibel hadn’t come, Subaru wouldn’t be alive right now. The baby inside of Rem wouldn’t be alive, either. On top of that, the baby would have been lost without them ever finding out about its existence—

Subaru: “I’m really sorry for saying this so late. Hal-san…Halibel-san, thanks a lot for yesterday. You are lifesaver. You saved me, Rem, and the baby inside of her.”

Rem: “Please let me thank you too. Thanks to you, we didn’t end up losing our, erm, child. Thank you very much.”

Halibel: “Wooow, how sincere. I’ll gratefully accept your thanks since it makes me happy, though.”

Seeing Subaru and Rem quickly bow their heads, Halibel cheerfully smiled. However, after that, while still having a smile on his face, he pointed the kiseru in his hand at Subaru as he said,

Halibel: “Okay, I accept your thanks. Still, you gotta quit it with that discomforting speech. It’s really embarrassing for Su-san to call me Halibel-san at this point. Rem-chan you too. If you could stop with the ‘Halibel-sama’ stuff now and be more informal with me, that’d make me happy.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, got it. Thanks, Hal-san.”

Rem: “I’ll see what I can do, Halibel-sama.”

Halibel: “Your wife sure is stubborn!”

Halibel raises his hands to surrender to Rem, who stubbornly insisted on keeping the honorific. Then, Halibel lit the kiseru that he held with his raised hands, and he put it in his mouth. He then smokes it.

Once Subaru saw the rising smoke, he made a sour look.

Subaru: “Hal-san. Tobacco can harm a pregnant woman’s body, so from now on, smoking is forbidden in this house.”

Halibel: “Ohh, don’t worry about it. Mine has no tobacco, unlike a normal kiseru. Mine is like medicine. It’s used by shinobis.”

Rem: “Medicine, you say?”

Halibel: “Yes. If I don’t smoke this regularly, I’ll die. Hahh, and then we’d all be wiped out.”

Subaru: “There you go again with jokes on getting wiped out…!”

His excuse sounded like a joke, but the wafting smell of the smoke made Subaru think otherwise. The smell of the smoke Halibel put out certainly was different from what you’d call tobacco, although Subaru wasn’t very knowledgable about it. It did not have the smell of tobacco, but the smell of medicine—but it’s not like that’d be good for a mother’s body, either.

Subaru: “Anyway, refrain from doing it when Rem’s here. If there’s ever a time when you're torn between decisions, you could help our child out by bravely dying out."

Halibel: "You just said that I'm a lifesaver though!"

Subaru: "Being a lifesaver and being a smoker are two different matters. Go do it by the window."

Halibel gets sent from the middle of the tatami mat to the side, and he gives out smoke out the window while being sulky. And then, with his slit eyes, he looked at Subaru, who protected his wife and child, and said,

Halibel: "Putting the matter of the child aside as something to be handled by the husband and wife…let's talk a little more about last night, shall we."

Subaru: "Mm, alright."

Halibel: "So, first I want you tell me about that person from last night. Do you have any idea who that girl is?"

Subaru: "…"

He starts talking about last night, and Subaru hesitates to answer his question about knowing who the culprit is.

He'd never seen that woman with a blade-like presence before. They truly weren't acquaintances. Still, it wasn't like he had no idea why she'd attack them.

The woman was clearly going after Subaru and Rem. This wasn't like something where they were unluckily dragged into an indiscriminate attack, since they were attacked not once, but twice, and she chased them all the way to the tenement house.

There could only be one reason as to why they were being chased someone with such bloodlust—it had to be because Subaru and Rem were living alone together.

Subaru: "Wi…"

Halibel: “Wi?”

Subaru moves his stiff cheeks and his lips, and he tries to touch on who she might be. However, the fear Subaru should’ve forgotten about returns, and it continued to tear his mind apart as he tried to open the cover to his memory.

—Actually, he didn’t forget it. He had never forgotten about it.

The fear was still coiled around Natsuki Subaru as the chains of regret.

Subaru: “…”

Even the two letters of the words he tried to speak were unbearable for his tongue.

Seeing Subaru act like that, Halibel impatiently played with his whiskers with his fingers. And then,

Rem: “—Subaru-kun, last night’s culprit isn’t who you think it is.”

Subaru: “Rem?”

Rem: “I know what you were feeling and what you were thinking just now. And I don’t think you’re right…yes, that’s what I’ll say.”

There was an unexpected difference in their opinions. Subaru instead opened his eyes wide at Rem, who made that statement. She nods at Subaru, and Halibel gave him a serious look.

He takes that look head on, and Halibel slightly opened one of his eyes as he said,

Halibel: “You shouldn’t lie to take care of Su-san. I know this doesn’t sound convincing coming from someone who calls himself a playboy, but we aren’t playing around here. This is a life-threatening matter.”

Rem: “I’m not lying. I…I have the nose to sniff out that enemy. I couldn’t sense it in the person from last night. So, the culprit is not related to what he thinks.”

Halibel: "—. How reliable is your nose?"

Rem: "I'm able to be with Subaru-kun right now because of my nose."

Those words did not justify anything. Still, they were declared so confidently that it didn't feel that way. As a result, Halibel's reacted a little late.

Meanwhile, Rem brought Subaru's arms towards her, and she hugged them firmly.

Rem: "Here's proof."

Halibel: "Su-san and Rem-chan sure are quite the…troubling neighbors."

Subaru: "…Says the guy who hid his identity."

Halibel: "I wasn't able to hide it, though. But, you got a point. Then I guess we're neighbors in the same boat. We're friends at this tenement house, so let's get along and work together."

Halibel suddenly smiles, and he faced the two people who were close to each other as he suggested to work together. His words surprise Subaru, and then Rem and him look at each other. They didn't understand his true motive.

Kararagi's strongest was going to help them in this situation where they had no allies and were being targeted by an enemy of unknown affiliation. It was a charming proposal, but he still wanted to know Halibel's intentions before jumping at it.

What did he have to gain from supporting Subaru and Rem in this situation?

Subaru: "I don't get why you'd help us out so much…"

Halibel: "Don't stress over complicated things. Elder asked me to take care of you guys, and plus you have no friends. Fussing over pros and cons is a part of Kararagi, however losing friends is an extraordinarily heavy loss. Isn't it just natural for me to act so that I don't lose any?"

Halibel says that, and he makes a gesture that looked like a wink as he normally would. He wasn't completely sure if it was a wink because both of his eyes were always squinted like slit eyes.

Everything about his behavior lacks seriousness, and so it didn't feel like there was an ulterior motive behind him doing it. Everything about Halibel's character is aloof, and that makes him who he is.

That's exactly why he believed him and why he didn't think he was just telling a lie he'd like to hear.

Subaru: "I understand. Thanks a lot for saying that. We're going to rely on you so much."

Halibel: "Yep, depend on me as much as you want. Once you become parents, you won't be able to whine with the child there anyway. Now's the time to depend on me before that happens."

Subaru felt temporarily relief, saved by his generous response. Once Halibel nodded at Subaru, who was finally relieved, he continued by saying, "Still."

Halibel: "We have no idea who the culprit is—that's our biggest problem."

Subaru: "About that, how about you make around 1000 clones and overpower her by sheer force of numbers?"

Halibel: "You truly are going to depend on me a lot, huh…Also, cloning is pretty much my trump card. I can't just use it recklessly. 1000 clones is impossible, and I'm bluffing pretty hard when I'm four."

Subaru: "How about your sense of smell as a wolf? Maybe you can go after the culprit's smell or something with that."

Halibel: "About thaaat, I did try it."

Halibel snorted at Subaru, who had his clone tactic rejected and suggested an alternate plan. As he moved around his black nose and sniffed he said,

Halibel: “How strange. I can’t smell that girl’s scent anymore. If you want to escape my nose, you have to get rid of your scent pretty carefully…I guess she’s just that skilled.”

Subaru: “This mean she’s taken countermeasures against Hal-san.”

In this situation, what’s terrifying is that woman’s meticulous planning.

In regards to the sequence of events of last night, Halibel becoming Subaru and Rem’s ally was still unconfirmed information. However, the woman perfectly prepared for that uncertain factor, and she attacked.

A night attack after people were cleared from the street, and a surprise attack where she came after him at the tenement house—in a way, both of these attacks weren’t matching in meticulousness, especially in the latter event where they exchanged some words to a certain extent.

Halibel: “Basically, right now we’ll just have to wait and see. No unnecessary sacrifices will be made this way, although I did talk about this with the town’s policeman just in case. It’d be problematic if the town became covered in bodies after picking a fight carelessly.”

Subaru: “It makes sense to clear out people. You think they’ll find her?”

Rem: “You shouldn’t expect much, I think. I should just take the initiative and act.”

Subaru: “You absolutely mustn’t do that.”

Subaru rejected Rem’s frail opinion with powerful words.

Although there still weren’t any changes showing in her appearance, Rem was pregnant. He wasn’t going to allow her to overwork herself. He even wanted to make her take a break from her job at Temple Elementary School and rest at the house.

Then, Subaru suddenly had a realization.

Subaru: “…Crap. What am I going to do about work?”

Rem: “I have to go to Temple Elementary School too.”

Subaru and Rem, who were focused on the conversation, notice that it’s right around the time to leave for work, and their faces became pale.

This was a critical moment for Subaru if he wanted to keep his job, and of course, it also was for Rem, who was a fulltime worker. Absences from work without notice were inexcusable; ICD—inform, contact, discuss—is essential for a working adult.

Halibel: “Ahh, should you really be worry about that right now?”

Subaru: “Don’t be stupid. Don’t lump me with you when you have unearned income. Were going to eat, whether or not there is an enemy. Money is needed in order for us to eat. We aren’t going to miss anything in our daily life.”

Subaru talked back to Halibel, who acted shocked, and he continued with a, “Besides.”

Subaru: “This is frustrating. It’s so outrageous how this keeps messing with the flow of our lives even though it’s all her fault. I’m not just going to sit back and let this happen.”

Halibel: “…”

Their daily lives were still waiting after the reasonable attacks by the enemy and repelling danger. Subaru and the others had lives to live even after their eventful story.

Therefore, he absolutely couldn’t stand breaking down what they’d built up.

Subaru: “Plus, we have a tight family budget.”

Rem: “And we’re going to have one more member, so we need to save up.”

Halibel: “What kind of threat is this?! You two truly are a ridiculous married couple.”

They used their lives and their new life as an excuse, and Halibel went into deep thought with a troubled look. The two of them were firmly determined. Understanding that, Halibel let out a deep sigh with his big mouth.

Halibel: “The enemy probably won’t attack today or tomorrow for now.”

Subaru: “What makes you say that?”

Halibel: “She took countermeasures while considering my nose, right? I came to this conclusion because I don’t think that she’d rush it and make a mistake.”

Rem: “I think he has a point.”

Rem also agreed with Halibel, who raised a finger. Subaru was convinced too as he said, “I see.”

They were thinking that the enemy wouldn’t do anything without enough preparation, precisely because she is smart. You could say that they trusted her meticulous style, although it wasn’t very fitting for someone who’d hurt him so much.

As long as they followed the twisted trust that came from the right track—

Halibel: “I’ll stay with Rem-chan for today. That way, Su-san can also relax, and the doctor from yesterday can come too once it becomes fire time.”

Subaru: “…Got it. I’ll go to the palace and talk with Riften-san and the landlady. I’ll tell Temple Elementary School that Rem will be taking a day off, too.”

Rem: “…Yes. It’s unfortunate, but please do.”

Although Rem seemed bummed out, she nodded in agreement with Subaru’s plan without opposing it.

As for Subaru's job, he had no choice but to reveal the situation and wait for Riften and the landlady's decision. It was depressing how the hinted path to being promoted to a full-time employee was undoubtedly far away, though.

However, once Rem moved forward in stages of pregnancy, she'd no longer be able to work at Temple Elementary School without being hindered by the enemy. That alone was a sure fact.

Rem: "Please let me continue for as long as possible, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "…We'll have to have a good talk about that, too."

Rem: "Okay"

It was now Subaru's turn to support Rem, as she was dealing with two problems—her job, and pregnancy. So that no other agonizing things would torment Rem's heart, even if they were justifiable.

Subaru: "Alright, although it's extremely hard for me to do this…I think…I'm gonna…go to work…!"

Halibel: "You should just quit if it's so hard for you."

Subaru: "Don't just say that so casually, undeserving noble. I'm going to be 'that', you know. From now on, I'm going to be the provider of my family."

He says that and somehow stands up after almost getting smashed by the weight of being a provider.

That…that's right. Rem has a baby. Subaru's going to be a father.

He's going to become the provider in order to protect this place called the Natsuki home.

—These were the thoughts weighing very very heavily on Subaru.

Rem: "Take care, Subaru-kun. I'll be waiting for you to come back home."

Subaru: "—Yep, I'm off now."

Rem, smiling slightly, gently relieves the pressure and reluctance Subaru had, and she sees him off. After that, Subaru took a deep breath, and then he goes towards the tenement house exit. He put his hand on the door, and he finally turned around.

Subaru: “Hal-san, please take care of Rem, seriously. If something happens, please sacrifice yourself.”

Halibel: “I never had a talent for dodging attacks, mind you.”

He waves, makes sure Halibel promised him, and he left.

The wind was cold, and the rising morning sun was slowly starting to brightly shine on the town of Banan.

Subaru: “So bright.”

He probably thought that the morning sun was brighter than usual because of his current state of mind.

While thinking that way, Subaru started walking towards his workplace to fulfill his duty.

2

—The turmoil that continued from last night—this series of events shocked Subaru significantly.

It was hinted that he’d be promoted to a full-time employee at his workplace, and then his life was threatened by an unfamiliar enemy on the streets at night. Once he got home, he was nearly killed by the enemy that followed him, and lastly, Rem’s pregnancy was revealed.

Honestly, the good and bad major events were too much for a single day. He even wanted to complain.

Still, there were plenty of happy realizations that happened because of the major events continuing.

—First and foremost, there was celebrating Rem being pregnant. That was a huge deal.

As usual with many men, the shock from unexpectedly finding out one's partner is pregnant is immeasurable. Subaru also was so shocked that he couldn't even tell that his surprise was surprise.

However, after the first wave of shock subsided, pure joy as well as gratitude towards Rem were left in Subaru's mind, so he was happy about it himself.

Children should be loved by their parents and born with joy and blessings.

Even though Subaru knew that this rule didn't apply to all children, he wanted to believe in the ideal. Or at least, Subaru was raised in such a way that made him believe in it.

That's why he wanted to love his child. He believed that being loved brings happiness.

That being said, always being worried about not being prepared enough is an entirely different matter.

—And then there was the second realization; they realized they were blessed with the people around them.

First of all, they were able to settle down in Banan town thanks to the connection they made with the person they had met on their journey. News got around, they made connections with Halibel, and then that led to them escaping death by the skin of their teeth last night as well as his help this morning.

And then he even realized it in Temple Elementary School when he came to tell them that Rem would be absent from work.

???: "—Pregnant! Really! Wow, that's great!"

Subaru was blessed so much by the Temple Elementary School staff that he was the one who behaved modestly.

Frankly, it was a personal affair of a newcomer. He prepared himself for insults like, "The new female teacher doesn't know how to responsibly separate her private life from her job!" but it wasn't anything to worry about.

Another teacher covered for her absence, and he was told that a higher-up would talk about what would happen from here on out. He did nothing but thank them. In an unexpected way, he found out about his wife's popularity at her workplace, and it made him proud as a husband.

That's how things didn't go as he expected in a good way, and then Subaru went to his own workplace.

He had to tell his employer Riften and the landlady superior about the situation and discuss what they'd do from here on out. Of course, this was a personal issue. Subaru was planning on discussing it when the opportunity came.

He was going to, but—

???: "—Subaru-chan, your wife is pregnant?"

All his enthusiasm went to waste, as it seemed they'd already heard about it from someone somewhere. For some reason, in the palace it was already well known that Rem was pregnant, seeing how he was plied with questions at once.

His memory on what happened after that wasn't very clear, but it did end with a warm conclusion of, "Ooh, Subaru-chan may have a childish look, but I guess he really does get some, too."

After that, he did have another opportunity to have a discussion with Riften.

Riften: "I heard about your situation. That's a pretty tough spot to be in."

Subaru: "Y-Yes…sorry. I've troubled Master with my private life…"

Riften: "What? I don't think it's a bother or anything. A new life means the birth of a new client."

Subaru: "You are so open-minded."

He reveals the situation to Riften in the tearoom, and the way he accepted it dumbfounded him, rather than surprised him.

Seeing Subaru react like that, Riften continued speaking as he said, “Also.”

Riften: “I heard about what happened last night from Mr. Halibel. If there’s anything on your mind, feel free to talk about it. The ladies and I will listen to what you have to say.”

Subaru: “Well…I, uh, appreciate it. However, why are you doing this?”

Riften: “Why am I being so nice? I told you, I have high hopes for you. I invested the asset hope in you. Of course I’d try everything so that I could recover my shares.”

Subaru’s extremely understanding workplace and his employer’s powerful words were starting to move him to tears. However, it was too pathetic of him to look like that. He was being spoiled too much.

Riften: “I’m sure that the ladies will respond nicely, too. That’s the trust you cultivated.”

Subaru: “…It’s only been about two weeks.”

Riften: “Two valuable weeks, that is. That’s all there is to it.”

He basically tells Subaru that it’s no big deal, and now was the time when he had to look up.

Everyone at the Magoji palace became true lifesavers to Subaru in this moment.

He was fortunately blessed with lifesavers, neighbors, and with people at his workplace.

The tumultuous day let him know that he was blessed with many things, including a child.

—All the more reason for the mysterious woman to cast a shadow on his happiness.

For Subaru and Rem, the enemy was too unpredictable. They had no clue as to why they were being targeted, ‘according to Rem’. Still, that beautiful, cruel killer would definitely show up again.

Even with Halibel, the one renowned the strongest of Kararagi, they couldn’t achieve relief easily.

And so, Subaru quickly left home and hurried on home, depending on the kindness of everyone at the palace. He’d return the favor, no matter what. So, he’d depend on them, just for now.

Connections helped him out with one urgent matter. Subaru didn’t have any bright ideas for the remaining problem—for countermeasures against the woman, but with Halibel, someone who was familiar with the town, and Rem, who had extensive knowledge, perhaps they would come up with a solution.

While having hopes like that inside, Subaru ran through the street and—

???: “—You look like a fool walking around all alone. Are you even trying to protect your woman?”

—Right in the middle of the street, he was convinced that Halibel was quite off with his foresight.

3

???: “What are you playing dumb for? Look, can you take your eyes off of me?”

The woman showed up in front of Subaru in an extremely unashamed way, like it was no big surprise.

He was in town in the middle of going back from the Magoji Palace to the tenement house. He managed to leave work early in the afternoon thanks to the people around him being considerate, and so it was currently in the afternoon with the sun high up—that was obvious. However, there were surging crowds walking past each other, and they were practically sticking out like sore thumbs.

In fact, the woman’s brutish beautiful face charmed people, and it wasn’t suitable for spying at all, for better or worse. If she had the same objective as last night, then perhaps the street being unclear was some sort of blunder by her.

Or maybe she was going to attack him despite all the attention.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru muffles his voice and looks at the street. Nobody could tell that this woman, who was standing in the middle of the street as if she owned it, was a dangerous person. If she attacked with as much force as she did last night, many people would get harmed—especially if the attack was as vicious as her first one was. He could not imagine the amount of damage it’d cause.

Subaru: “I messed up…I thought you were cautious.”

Clear out people, prepare for the enemy, and find out where he ran. He was inclined to believe that she wanted to secretly accomplish her objective and was going to at least carry out those things cautiously.

This was the result. She had the whole town hostage, and he couldn’t act.

Subaru: “How cruel it is for you to be such a sharp woman.”

???: “Huh? You sure can be rude out of nowhere. How could you greet someone like that?”

Subaru: “Everyone around are hostages, and if I run away, you will show no mercy. That’s your plan, isn’t it?”

The woman squints, her eyes were cold, and she had on the same white clothes from last night. The well-dressed woman’s Wasou being pure white without a single stain-although that wasn’t a very rare sight-and her beautiful face being eccentric created this ethereal sort of harmony.

That’s what he’d think if Subaru never found out that this silent person standing, looking like a painting God drew, was actually a sadist who hurt him and made him suffer.

???: “Well, whatever. We can talk for a little while we walk.”

Subaru: “What?”

???: “It’s too noisy here, and we’re going to the same place anyway. You do know that you aren’t in a position to refuse, don’t you?”

Jerking her chin, the woman overbearingly tells him to walk with her. The people around were being held hostage. It was frustrating, but he had no choice but to do what she told him.

If only she hadn’t said those unforgivable words.

Subaru: “You’re going to the same place…which means…no way, you bastard.”

???: “The home you and your woman live in. Some mutt is taking care of her right now, right? That’s why you’re here. If its owner is here, wouldn’t you feel more at ease if he had a collar?”

Subaru: “Don’t be ridiculous! Why would I let…as if I’d let you come with me! I won’t let a dangerous woman like you see Rem…”

???: “—Shut up.”

Subaru: “…”

The woman grumpily says those two words to Subaru, who firmly denied her request.

Hearing the sharpness of her tone, Subaru feels an illusionary knife stab his throat, silencing him.

His blood was freezing because of the woman’s sharpened hostility. It was the pressure from last night that very well might make one fall to their knees, practically disgracing themselves.

However—

Subaru: “…Like hell anyone would let you see Rem.”

???: “Wow. I’m kind of impressed. I thought you were gonna be a coward and freeze up.”

The woman’s slit eyes widen, and she said that to Subaru, who opposed her as he bit his lip. After that, she pointed a finger at Subaru, whose face turned red from anger and agitation, and said,

???: “Still, I won’t listen to you. And besides, you’ve got it all wrong.”

Subaru: “I’ve got it all wrong?”

???: “I’m not trying to kill you guys. Not right now, that is.”

The woman shrugged her shoulders as she opened the hand she pointed at him, waving it. She had calm actions and calm behavior, however this was the same way she acted last night when she beat up Subaru.

This woman is capable of beating Subaru to death while smiling, after all.

Subaru: “…How can I believe you?”

???: “I’m capable of killing anyone I want to kill. When I thought to kill you yesterday, I had plenty of time to do so. And yet, I didn’t kill you. So, I have no intention of killing you.”

That was some poor logic for proof. And yet, it had undeniable weight.

It was the sort of truth that was pride and a fact, and you could only call it a self-evident truth.

The woman was an enemy. She had both hostility and bloodlust. However, she left without taking Subaru and Rem’s lifes, showed up the next day, and told him that he was headed towards their home —.

Subaru: “I have no idea what you’re thinking.”

???: “You want me to tell you right away…What are you, a baby? Doesn’t your female partner have a baby? If you’re gonna to be a parent, how about you be a little more independent and use that noggin of yours?”

Subaru: “Seeing as you’ve changed after overnight, are you taking me to the tenement house to apologize or something?”

???: “Hah, that’s rich. It’s a good thing I’m not planning on killing you, huh.”

The woman scoffs at Subaru, and she starts to walk with her back turned on him. She didn’t speak, but her shaking milky white hair was silently pressuring him to come with her.

Even if he resisted now, the woman would still head towards the tenement house. The town was also being held hostage.

Subaru: “How do you know Rem is pregnant?”

???: “Because I could tell by looking, obviously. Can you not assume that I’m similar to a slow male like you?”

Subaru: “Rem didn’t notice, either.”

???: “Okay, then can you not assume that I’m similar to slow males and females like you guys?”

The woman dutifully corrects herself and walks through the town with Subaru while humming. It was unfamiliar, messy humming that didn’t have a melody or anything really, but something about it sounded nostalgic.

That being said, Subaru didn’t stop being cautious of the woman one bit, and he kept thinking about how he’d have no way to tell the two in the tenement house if she ever let her guard down.

Still, coming up with a dramatic idea in the mere 15 minutes it’d take to get there was highly unlikely—

Halibel: “—I did feel like your smell was coming back awfully quickly.”

Halibel, who was lighting his kiseru in front of the tenement house, let that statement out.

He came out to the front for a smoke break, and he happened to meet Subaru and the woman once they arrived. When Halibel stared at the two of them with imperceivable emotions in his slit eyes, he said,

Halibel: “The day after you discover your wife’s pregnant, you bring back another beautiful woman. What’s that say about you as a man?”

???: “I think it means he’s the worst, what do you think?”

Halibel: “I’ll have to agree that he is on the outside. But this isn’t the time to be joking around.”

???: “Hmm…”

Halibel, who took smoke into his lungs and breathed it out from his nose, ponders something. Then, he slowly stands up, and he looked at the women as he cleaned off his butt.

???: “Can you not get cocky just because you’re huge?”

Halibel: “Now that’s a new false accusation. You’re such a beautiful woman, so you could at least let me win in height.”

???: “One who enjoys being praised by a mutt is merely a mutt of a woman.”

There was no way to get along with this woman. The woman’s stern reply didn’t bring down Halibel, but as for Subaru, he was worried about this grim situation and Rem-who would have to get involved eventually.

Subaru: “Halibel, where’s Rem?”

Halibel: “I’m surprised you asked in this situation. …She’s inside. She wouldn’t listen when I told her to at least let me do the housework. I gave in.”

Subaru: “Sounds like Rem.”

Although she was pregnant, you could actually say that she was still in the early stages of pregnancy. Since her stomach didn't look all that different, at this point housework shouldn't be that much of a burden on her, although this was just Subaru's guess he made based off the little knowledge he had in health and physical education.

The woman next to him was 100 times more likely to be a burden.

Halibel: "So, really, who is that girl? She does have quite the foul mouth, but is she a friend of yours?"

Subaru: "No, you must know who she is. …She's the woman who attacked us yesterday."

Halibel: "Huuuuh?"

Subaru was disappointed by Halibel's poor guessing ability as he thought about how slow he was to get it. He thought that he was having a pointless conversation to kill time, but apparently that was not the case.

However, Halibel had an odd look after Subaru made that point, and he said,

Halibel: "She's…the girl from yesterday? But wait…"

???: "What? Are you trying to say that it's a lie? Are you trying to say that I don't look like someone who'd do something like that? Can you not make me laugh? I threw this guy all over the room, beat him to a bloody pulp…wait! Come to think of it, yesterday you disgusted me with all that sweat you were covered in! What are you going to do to make up for that?!"

Subaru: "Nothing! My body is shaky as hell now, be satisfied with that."

The woman interrupts Halibel, and in the middle of talking, she heats up with anger as last night came to her mind. Seeing that unreasonable behavior, which was like an outburst of anger, Subaru tries to appease her rage by reasoning that he could still feel the pain from the bruises on his body.

And then, once this ruckus suddenly began in front of the tenement house, it happened.

Rem: "—I'd like to talk."

The tenement house door opened, and the one who step foot into a dangerous situation was a blue-haired girl—it was Rem. Rem finished up the housework, and when she loosened the tied sleeves of her kimono, she smiled at Subaru.

Rem: "Welcome home, Subaru-kun. You're quite early today. You really wanted to see me that badly?"

Subaru: "…Yeah, I sure did. To be honest, it hurts when I'm not with you, even if it's only for one moment."

Rem: "W-Well…yes, erm, I feel the same way. Oh no, now I'm blushing."

???: "Can you not?!"

The married couple's innocent exchange make the woman's displeasure explode in a different way. The woman pulls her own short hair out as she said,

???: "Sheesh, this is just wrong…"

Rem: "I'm sorry about that. How about we go inside and cool down first? I'll make some tea, so please come on in."

???: "…"

The woman was probably trying to say something you would never expect to hear from her.

The women looked stupefied. Subaru and Halibel also exchange looks. Seeing their three reactions, Rem tilts her head, and while softly making a happy look, she said,

Rem: "You shouldn't startle the baby. Let's have a good talk."

So, she most definitely had mouthed, "The mother is strong."

Tia: “My name is…ahh, it’s Tia. Call me that for now.”

The woman—Tia, who was let into the room and sunk onto the tatami mat, named herself in an discomforting way.

In front of Tia, Subaru and Rem were sitting next to each other, and Halibel was standing and leaning against a wall near the entrance. It was almost like a stressful interview in a meeting hall, but you couldn’t necessarily blame them once you considered the tension covering the room.

In fact, something like a stressful interview or a defense was about to begin—it was a scene to get to the bottom of Tia’s objective, as she went out of her way to come back to the tenement house.

Subaru: “I really hope this isn’t the sort of thing where the culprit comes back to the scene of the crime just to double check things…”

It’s possible that she named herself to further her relationship with them. Rem places the tea in front of Tia, perhaps in response to her compromise, and when she quickly bowed, she said,

Rem: “I’m Rem. Next to me is Subaru-kun, my husband. The one at the wall is Halibel-sama, who lives in the next room. Pleased to meet you, Tia-sama.”

Tia: “Subaru-kun and Halibel-sama?”

Subaru: “Just “Subaru” and “Halibel” is fine. Anyway, Rem, you don’t need to say this girl’s name with a “-sama” honorific. She’s like…like an enemy.”

Tia was practically treated like a guest, but she was still someone who should clearly be classified as an enemy. Subaru was the one who insisted on that, but Rem shook her head as she said,

Rem: “I have to. Since Tia-sama has been invited, she’s a guest. And you’re treating someone who just came to talk poorly. She came here because she had something to talk about. Isn’t that right, Tia-sama?”

Tia: “Humph, I think I like you a little more than that male. Rem, was it? I’ll keep that in mind. As for the male and the mutt, they’re a no-go.”

Tia, being in a better mood because of Rem treating her politely, took a sip of her tea. She choked.

Tia: “Ouch! So hot! It’s so hot.”

Rem: “Oh, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

Tia: “I-I’m impressed. I let my guard down, and then this happens. You’re a tough one.”

Subaru: “You just inflicted pain on yourself. Quit it, otherwise this conversation will go nowhere.”

With his hand, Subaru stopped Rem from apologizing to Tia, who wrongly resented her as she displayed her inability to take in hot things.

It seemed like he’d misread Tia’s character, as she’s been having listless interactions. However, Subaru would never let his guard down. He was staying alert for when she’d strike like she did last night.

Tia: “The male seems to have a sickness of becoming tense and pointlessly marking his territory. Whatever. I’ll finish this business quickly, just like you want. I don’t have much time, either. In fact, I’m very busy.”

Subaru: “Business…”

Tia: “Like I SAID, I didn’t come here to kill you. —That does depend on you guys, though.”

At the end of Tia’s statement, her voice turned cold, and once she put down her teacup, she looked at the front with her sharp eyes.

And then—

Tia: “For mercy’s sake, I’ll assume you did it on the spur of the moment. So, don’t worry about the whole retribution thing. Give back the light ball instead.”

She declared that as she stared at Subaru—no, she stared at Rem.

That was the first thing that confused Subaru. Tia’s eyes fell on Rem and she literally thought nothing of people like Subaru who were right next to her. The next thing that confused him was the “light ball” Tia talked about, as he had no idea what that was. It seemed Rem didn’t either, as she said,

Rem: “light ball…?”

She tilts her head, and a question mark appeared. However, Tia wasn’t happy with that answer.

Tia: “Respond carefully. “Yes” is the only answer I want to hear. A wrong answer will cost you parts of your body.”

Tia tells that to Rem as she stuck her hand out in front of her and pointed at her with a white finger.

Her quiet voice sounded calm, but it was fake. There was anger hidden within her tone, and it was just counting to the time when it’d blow up.

Tia directs her anger at Rem by saying that her answer would affect the outcome, and she meant it. In this coercive negotiation, it was as if she was saying that people like Halibel wouldn’t be able to deter her—

Subaru: “H-Hold on.”

Tia: “No. Choose your words wisely, and that goes for you too, not just Rem. Make one wrong move, and your female partner’s fingers won’t suffice.”

Subaru: “What are you, a devil? Whatever, doesn’t matter, just listen. What is this light ball?”

Tia: “Playing innocent, huh. It’s what you guys stole. I don’t know what you call it, but it’s my light ball. I came to get it back.”

Subaru: “What the hell is that…”

Subaru’s answer makes Tia’s mood worsen even more. But no matter how much anger she had inside, Subaru would not give her the answer she wanted.

This is because Subaru truly had no idea what the “light ball” was, and of course, neither did Rem.

Even though she said they stole it, it was a bolt from the blue. Even if she ranted about it, they couldn’t imagine how what kind of object it was or how important it was to Tia.

But—

Tia: “I warned you. Choose your words wisely. You failed to do that.”

“…”

A wind blows by, going between Subaru and Rem, and it created a sharp mark on the wall in the back.

Sharp cracks were vertically cut into the tenement house wall, as if it had been showered with slashes. The sharpness was so fierce that, had the target been a person instead of a wall, it could’ve easily torn them in half.

A kind of threat and warning. By using force, Tia demonstrated that they wouldn’t get off next time.

Halibel: “…”

Halibel, watching in the back, couldn’t move. Perhaps he had no chance to move because he didn’t see the demonstration coming, which wasn’t done to hit them. He wasn’t sure.

In any case, for Subaru and Rem, this demonstrated that it was a force to be reckoned with. Afterwards, Tia posed the same question to Rem.

Which was—

Tia: "—Where is the light ball? Give it back."

Rem: "…I'm terribly sorry. My answer is the same as Subaru-kun's."

Tia: "…"

Rem: "I can't return something I don't know about."

Tia: "I see."

Rem answered firmly as she stared straight at Tia. Hearing Rem's answer, Tia closes her eyes, and then she moved a finger on her right hand that she held out.

The wind blew. This time it intensely blew off the room's fusuma, splitting it into two.

Tia: "Are you still not going tell me?"

Rem: "It's not that I can't tell you about it. I have no clue what it is."

Tia: "You sure are stubborn!"

Tia's anger towards Rem. who still stood her ground, finally explodes.

Tia stands up, and she stuck her hands out left and right. The next moment, the terrifying wind devastates the room, and the room is cut up by kamaitachi. Destruction demolishes the room.

The wall, the fusuma, the shelves, the tatami mat, the tea table—everything gets destroyed, falling down in the room. Subaru was stiff and holding his breath, as the waves of the raging wind fell all over him.

However, Rem didn't avert her eyes, and she didn't run away in fear.

Tia: "Gr…rrr…!"

Tia no longer had a main target for destruction in the room, and she finally roared. She looks at Rem, then Subaru, and then Halibel, and then she said,

Tia: “I-I’m going to kill that mutt. Are you still not going to give it back?”

Rem: “Nope, I can’t.”

Halibel: “I mean, there’s kinda no other choice with how the conversation’s going, but aren’t you treating me too poorly here?”

Rem’s strong will stubbornly pushes aside Tia’s desperate threat. Now that it’s turned out like this, even if Tia were to cruelly kill Halibel, her wish wouldn’t be granted.

Tia: “Well, I guess it’ll help my mood just a little bit.”

Halibel: “Su-san, may I cry?”

Subaru: “I feel you. You say ‘little’ because, like, when things don’t really work out, you get deeply disappointed.”

Halibel: “Not exactly the kind of support I was hoping for…”

Subaru, seeing Halibel sulk unhappily out of the corner of his eye, let out a brief sigh. Looking around the room, there were traces of destruction all over the place—however, Subaru and the others were all uninjured.

Once one saw that, even Subaru could tell what was going on, no matter how slow on the uptake he was.

Subaru: “You really don’t have any intention of killing us.”

Tia looked at Subaru, who came to that conclusion, with her eyes filled with anger and hatred. However, her sharp eyes couldn’t kill people, no matter how much bloodlust they had.

The room was cut up by Tia’s anger, but that anger was not bloodlust. This is because she “has no intention of killing them”, just like she has been saying from the start.

The threat was simply a threat and nothing more. In fact, it was like she was making an abnormal amount of effort to avoid harming them.

Subaru: “And yet, yesterday you nearly killed me…”

Tia: “I didn’t know Rem had a baby at the time…”

Subaru: “—So that’s why.”

Tia: “Oops.”

Tia let the cat out of the bag with a sulky look. It was too late for her to shut her mouth.

In other words, she—

Rem: “You didn’t kill us because Subaru-kun and I have a child…?”

Tia: “You stole the light ball. A sin is a sin. However, that sin is yours. The baby has nothing to do with it. Taking its life would go against my beliefs as a “Shinigami”.”

Subaru: ““Shinigami”……”

Hearing Tia express her thoughts, Subaru takes a brief look at Halibel. He felt like Tia had called herself a “Shinigami” last night, but he couldn’t remember things very clearly from the time when he was nearly killed. Seeing Subaru give him that look, Halibel tilted his head slightly to indicate that he had no idea what she meant. It was a self-proclaimed name, and nothing more—even with that granted, her power was little too much for the name.

Subaru: “In any case, you won’t kill us. You’re even avoiding hurting us. So…”

Tia: “So “give it up”? There’s gotta be a limit to how impudent a thief can be. I’m going to get the light ball back. If the baby gets in my way, then I’ll just have to wait for it to be born.”

Subaru: “That’d take too long, first of all…”

While being torn between her beliefs and anxiety, Tia shows that she won't give in one bit.

Seeing Tia's distress, Subaru looks at Rem, wondering what they should do. When Rem nodded at Subaru's look, she spoke while kneeling upright, not even breaking down within the wind.

Rem: "Tia-sama, like I've said many times, I have no idea what this light ball of yours is. I'll repeat myself again, I am not the one who stole it."

Subaru: "Rem was always with me. Rem had no time to do something so outrageous, and she'd never do such a thing, either. Why are you accusing us anyway? Was there some sort of deciding factor?"

Tia: "Isn't it obvious?—It's the nose."

Subaru: "…"

Tia answers Subaru's question confidently, pointing at her own nose. Hearing that answer, Subaru grimaces, and he lost his breath as his chest was struck by an unexpected force.

She found them by relying on her sense of smell. Chills and understanding were what welled up once he heard that-things that were expected.

Tia sniffed out Subaru with her sense of smell and came here—

Tia: "Judging by that look, you must know something. Protect your female partner all you want, it's no use. Rem reeks of the smell of a thief!"

Subaru: "…"

Hearing Tia's triumphant words, Subaru loses his voice for a moment.

Then, he thoroughly thinks about the words she said and says,

Subaru: "…Rem? Not me?"

Tia: “Huh? What’s this, you trying to protect her with an awful tearjerker act? Sorry, but my nose can’t be fooled. My nose tells me that Rem is the culprit!”

Tia sternly points at Rem, and she declared that once again with a triumphant look.

She was aggressive in anticipation of Subaru feeling guilty, based off his reaction. However, it was not the kind of guilt Tia was hoping for.

Thus, a very complicated atmosphere started to spread between Subaru and the others.

Tia: “Wh-What…you people…Are you trying to belittle me with those looks?”

Subaru: “We’re not…”

Rem: “There has to be some sort of misunderstanding…”

Tia: “I am not wrong! My nose is absolute! Hey, mutt! You have a dog like face, so you must get it, right?”

Halibel: “Why would you think that I’d take your side? Are you my wife?”

Tia: “Like hell I am—!!”

Tia’s white face turns red, and she yelled as she stamped her feet. It no longer looked like she had the intimidating air that she had in the beginning; she was just a lone girl who dug herself into a hole.

After Tia breathed heavily and glared at Subaru and the others one by one,

Tia: “You aren’t returning what you stole! You’re looking down on me! Who do you people think you are?! You’re gonna regret becoming parents if this is how you act!”

Subaru: “Let’s stop all this emotional denial. Also, how about you give it up already? You made a mistake. None of us stole whatever that light ball is.”

Tia: “NO I DIDN’T! Rem had to have stolen it! There’s no way I’m wrong…”

Rem: “Okay, well..”

Subaru couldn’t figure how how to deal with Tia, who finally started throwing a tantrum. Rem was the one who interrupted Tia, who was acting stubborn like a child, which was improper for how she looked.

Rem: “Tia-sama, it seems you think that Subaru-kun and I have stolen something.”

Rem softly speaks to Tia, as if she was trying to reason with an unreasonable child. After that, Tia’s face stiffened, and then she turned around to face Rem.

Tia: “For the record, you are the only one who did it. This male doesn’t seem to know about it.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun and I do everything together and go everywhere together. Understand?”

Tia I-I understand…”

Rem said, “Good” and raised her finger at Tia, who was quickly discouraged from acting the way she’d acted before as she nodded.

Rem: “I want to get back your stolen light ball. However, we don’t know what it is. If you don’t believe me…would you wait until you are convinced?”

Tia: “Until I’m convinced…”

Rem: “If your nose is correct, then we are the ones who are lying. If you keep an eye on us, eventually we might expose ourselves. That’s what I mean.”

Rem jiggles her finger as she says, “What do you think?”, leaving the choice up to Tia.

The suggestion would take up quite a lot of time, but Subaru thought of it was a temporary measure to temper a child. However, after Tia pondered the suggestion for a while,

Tia: "—Sounds interesting. All right, I'm in."

Subaru: "R-Really?"

Tia: "It's as Rem said. She'll get busted eventually for sure, so I'll wait."

Tia sticks out her somewhat busty chest, and she answered Subaru's doubts confidently. But it was still hard for Subaru to believe her choice. She snorted as she saw his face.

Tia: "I'm not lying. I'm confident in my nose. Look, there's no way I can lose! If I'm wrong, I'll even give you the light ball to make it up to you!"

Subaru: "Attacking us to get it back creates an infinite loop!"

In any case, if Tia has accepted Rem's idea as a good one, then the problem was solved. Or at the very least, Rem and Subaru shouldn't have to worry about being hurt by Tia anymore.

Subaru: "That's if we could trust that she isn't lying, though."

Rem: "It's fine. I believe that Tia-sama really is telling the truth. …I can tell since I watch plenty of kids at temple elementary school."

Subaru: "It's kinda worrying how that could be used as evidence to convince me."

Still, she really did sound like a teacher with the tone of that persuasive argument. In other words, Rem successfully convinced him because she was gifted with the skills of a female teacher.

Subaru: "Impressive, Sensei. That was well done."

Rem: "Of course. But when you're with me, I want to be called wife instead of Sensei."

Subaru: "—Good point. As expected of my wife. She's the cutest girl ever and she's so reliable."

Rem: "There you go, well done."

Rem praises Subaru, who corrected himself, as if she was playing around with him. Seeing her smile, Subaru scratches his head. He thought to himself, "I'm no match for her."

Tia, who quickly noticed them whispering to each other, glares at them angrily.

Tia: "Hey! What are you two whispering about…is it about the light ball?!"

Subaru: "Even if we were the culprits, we wouldn't be so stupid enough to whisper about it in front of the owner. How long are you going to stay here anyways? If we've come to a conclusion, then…"

Tia: "What are you saying? I told you, I'm keeping an eye out until you slip up. I'm staying here."

Subaru tilted his head as he listened to Tia's tone, which made it sound like she was saying, "Why are you asking something so obvious?"

Subaru: "Staying here…for how long?"

Tia: "Until you slip up."

Subaru: "…"

Tia: "It's still pretty crowded with three people in this room, though. I better not be staying with that mutt. Not only would it be cramped, but I'd get covered in fur."

Subaru: "You're going to stay here?!"

She makes a threat from an unexpected perspective, and it causes Subaru to raise his voice as he practically screamed. Hearing that, Tia breaks into a smile in great delight.

Tia: “Ahh, that scream, oh yes…I finally get to hear it, makes me kinda happy.”

Subaru: “I’m being serious here! As if we’d live with you! This is a house for a husband and a wife, use your head!”

Tia: “—? Isn’t Rem already pregnant? What’s wrong with me staying here?”

Subaru: “Well…well?”

When she asked Subaru about his thoughts, something prevented him from replying, “Even so”. It seemed Tia was not messing around, and she was saying that it was a genuine question.

If they were having sex just to have kids, then Tia’s viewpoint would be correct.

Subaru: “But then at night we’d be missing something needed to keep family happiness…”

Tia: “Stare”

Subaru: “Stop! Don’t look at me like that! Even if you do, you still can’t live with us!”

Tia looked at Subaru doubtfully, but he still stood his ground while giving excuses. Besides, even if she disregarded the thoughts of the husband and wife, three people would be too much for the room, just like Tia said.

Subaru: “Hal-san, the manager and landlord, wouldn’t even allow it anyways. Don’t forget that you’re the one who destroyed this room and beat me to a pulp!”

No landlord would be bold enough to negotiate deposit and key money after she destroyed the rent so much.

Subaru hoped for that in his statement, and Halibel nodded with his arms folded.

Halibel: “Yeah, Su-san’s right. First we have to talk about compensating for the room."

Subaru: "That's not the point!"

Halibel did not listen to Subaru telling him that this wasn't about the landlord.

Tia: "Me? Compensate for this room?"

Rem: "Tia-sama destroyed it, so that's a given…that goes for our damaged household goods, too, if you could."

Rem looks around the room devastated by wind that was now a mess, and she makes that request to Tia.

Things like shelves and furniture were destroyed by the wind slashes. Of course, the tatami mat and walls were, too. There were some cutlery that barely avoided being damaged, but the clothes in the wardrobe and the futon in the closet were probably different.

The daily necessities they obtained by managing with the little income they had were destroyed—it was a bit tear inducing.

Rem: "I'll help clean up, so Tia-sama, you can use this room. Halibel-sama, let Subaru-kun and I use another available room and…"

Halibel: "Yeah, that's fine. As you know, the tenement house is full of free rooms. Pick whichever you want and move over."

Rem: "Thank you very much."

The broken tableware pile up, and the damage to the memories depress Subaru. Rem and Halibel, the realists, put aside his sentiments, and once a room was assigned, they set a plan for the future.

Tia, who had seized the initiative in the beginning, was left behind by the quick progress, and she scratched her cheeks while being taken aback.

Tia: "How should I put this…you guys are like…tough."

Subaru: “I’ll have to agree with you on that.”

This was the only time Subaru agreed with the beautiful, unreasonable killer.

5

Halibel: “Su-san, got a second?”

Halibel beckoned him and brought him out of the tenement house when Tia started to reluctantly obey Rem, who diligently worked on cleaning the room.

Rem seemed to be enjoying herself, sleeves tied as she completely focused on cleaning the room, and nobody could stop her now that she’d enter such an intense state. It actually seemed like Tia was weak to Rem’s pushiness, and she was helping her obediently, although she didn’t look like she was getting into it.

Subaru: “Looks like I can take our eyes off of them for a bit.”

Subaru sees that Rem has the situation handled, and he exits the tenement house as he stepped over the door that was out of place. It was already after sunset. The round moon was up in the completely dark night sky, bejeweled with the glimmer of the stars.

Halibel, looking up at the sky as he left a trail of tobacco smoke in it, first starts speaking by saying “Sorry”, and

Halibel: “You were quite frightened during that conversation, right? Sorry for not doing anything.”

Subaru: “It’s not anything you should apologize for…is what I’d like to say, but I was really frightened. Especially when Tia started to destroy the room.”

Subaru shrugs and uses the conversation as a chance to talk about why they had to clean the room in the first place.

Halibel just watched things play out in the destructive wind without moving an inch. Rem didn’t move to show that she’d stand her ground.

So, as for why Halibel didn't do anything, stayed silent, and watched the mayhem…

Halibel: "She had no bloodlust. No hostility, either. So I was able to tell that she wouldn't hurt anyone, even though she acted up like that. …You might not understanding my reasoning, though."

Subaru: "Of course I'd know once I could tell those things were missing. Although I was late to notice, I also came to that conclusion once I saw the end result. It's just that…"

Halibel: "Once you considered Rem's safety, you wanted me to stop her? Yeah, I had a feeling you'd think that, so that's why I thought I'd apologize."

Halibel knocks the ash off his kiseru, apologizes once again, and bowed deeply.

As long as it was rational, Subaru had no complaints for him. Plus, Halibel was helping him out of kindness. It would be too arrogant of him to blame him just because of that decision considering how he hasn't paid him back yet or rewarded him.

Subaru: "Although, I'd appreciate it if I had a say next time. It's not guaranteed that I won't move carelessly and almost get hit by the wind, you know?"

Halibel: "If 1-2 of your limbs fly off from the sharpness, the doctor can put them back on just fine."

Subaru: "Once I let my head fly off I'm dead!"

Getting hit somewhere meant death. Considering how he didn't get hit, he got lucky. He felt very relieved knowing that he lived by the skin of his teeth.

Halibel: "I'm glad that you forgive me. I kinda felt down for arriving too late last night, too, when you were beat up."

Subaru: "Really?"

Halibel: "Forgetting about the title as Kararagi's strongest, I do regard myself as a shinobi. And so, being outsmarted sure isn't something to be pleased with."

Halibel shows his pride, and Subaru tugs on his chin as if to say "So that's how it is".

When he heard of ninjas, things like information warfare, undercover agents, assassination, ninjutsu, and all sorts of roles came to mind—but perhaps those were like characteristics of spies from ancient times. Messing up with counterespionage sure would be a failure for a ninja.

Subaru: "In that case, why don't you let one of the people working for you handle it? Since you're the strongest ninja in Karagi, aren't you the leader of Shinobi groups or something?"

Halibel: "Shinobi groups! We have no dangerous gatherings like that. I've never even seen any other ninjas outside of myself. How'd you come up with that idea?"

Subaru: "Don't you have special educational institutes like shinobi villages or something?"

Halibel: "I've heard about some living in the middle of nowhere in hidden villages due to racial circumstances, but as for my wolf brethren, they couldn't run and hide so they're reaching extinction…"

Subaru: "An extinction joke!"

If ninjas were endangered, then so were wolves. Halibel's culture and race were on the verge of dying out. They were also starting to decline because they knew their place.

Subaru: "Basically, don't expect too much from your ninja side."

Halibel: "Not sure what a ninja is, but yes, you certainly shouldn't expect too much. So, I have a proposal that isn't related to my apology from earlier."

Subaru: "A proposal?"

Halibel: "—About Tia, don't you think we should get rid of her while we can?"

He spoke those words with no hesitation in his usual tone. And so, Subaru completely froze. 5 seconds pass, then 10, slowly.

Subaru: "Hal-san?"

Halibel: "She has no bloodlust. Her hostility has settled down as of now, too. However, she is still dangerous. If we turn our backs on her defenselessly, she could get rid of us if we don't do anything."

Subaru: "Well…still, even so…"

The emotions in Halibel's slit eyes weren't clear. But his statement truly did have a certain level of persuasiveness. This was the chance to free themselves from anxiety about the future.

Even if it was now, right after Rem and Tia had explored the possibility of coexisting, although in a superficial way.

Halibel: "You see, my nose isn't picking up Tia-chan. Not just yesterday, but right now, too."

Subaru: "Even now? Is it because she got rid of her scent?"

Halibel: "Meticulously, yes. I've never heard of this "Shinigami" nickname that she spoke of, and she's such a beautiful woman. Like it or not, she'd become the talk of the town should she show up. And yet, I don't know who she is. That means pretty much nobody knows her."

A mysterious woman with an unknown identity that took countermeasures against Halibel's sense of smell—nothing about Tia's position changed.

They were now able to have conversations and the time for them to part has been postponed. Those were the only things that have been accomplished. Not to mention, how effective would the arrangement be with this girl who had a tendency to be moody?

Halibel: "If we act now, we could make it seem like she was never there. Rem-chan will have to lie, but I'll deal with the girl."

Signs of the cold smell of blood came from Halibel, who made a cruel proposal.

The man before Subaru finally didn't seem like just a lively playboy. It was the first time he could tell that he was a shinobi deemed the strongest in Kararagi.

But at the same time, he could also tell what Halibel was expecting as he gave off a cold, intimidating air.

Subaru: "…Sorry, Hal-san. For making you play the bad guy, leaving you to hold the bag."

Halibel: "…"

Subaru: "But you don't need to play the bad guy. It's not that I'm not worried…but Rem already told Tia so much. So I'll believe in her too."

Halibel: "Can you believe in that girl?"

Subaru: "I'm not talking about Tia. I'm going to believe in the eyes of my wife, the one who persuaded Tia."

In the back, they were working on tidying things and cleaning the room. The voices he could hear were having a conversation, and they were Rem who was gung-ho, and Tia, who was sulky—it seemed things were going somewhat smoothly.

He wanted to see the light at the end of that tunnel. Given that the killer doesn't end up killing them, that is.

Halibel: "…Su-san, you sure aren't one to let things go, huh."

Hearing Subaru's reply, Halibel puts his kiseru back in his mouth once again, and he murmured.

Then, the cold air coming from his body vanished within an instant. Once that went away, all that's left was the same old sluggish wolf.

He had acted the way he did out of consideration for Subaru—he acted like a shinobi so that Subaru would feel less guilty if he ever wanted to eliminate danger.

Subaru: “You said that I don’t let things go, but I feel like that should be said about you instead with how you were acting.”

Halibel: “No way. Besides, you’re the one who forgave someone who nearly killed you, and you don’t even know if she’ll change. This isn’t just a matter of being softhearted.”

Subaru: “Ahh, now that you mention it…”

Halibel tells Subaru that, and he remembered how Tia nearly killed him. Although he knew how strong she was, he had forgotten about how he was targeted by her violence nature.

This explains why Halibel was worried about Subaru and Rem.

Halibel: “Did you really forget? Even with all the pain you still feel all over your body?”

Subaru: “Don’t remind me, now it’s coming back to me…”

Subaru remembers his joint pain, and he moves around his limbs as he said “Oww” with a pathetic look on his face. Seeing him act like that, this is when Halibel let out a long sigh in a dumbfounded manner.

Halibel: “If Su-san and Rem-chan insist, then alright. I won’t do anything.”

Subaru: “I owe you one…actually, not sure if I should say that here. Well, I already owe you plenty anyway.”

Halibel: “You keep on indebting yourself. Looking forward to the day you pay me back.”

Halibel said that while smiling, though it wasn’t clear if he wanted to get paid back or not. Hearing his words, Subaru pouted, and he hung his head as if to say that he was absolutely correct.

Ever since he came to the town Banan, he's just been depending on people's kindness and being helped.

Subaru: “I gotta pay everyone back eventually.”

Halibel: “It'd be problematic if you died on us, so hang in there and stay alive until then.”

Subaru: “Damn, what a positive reason to avoid dying.”

Subaru smiles back at Halibel, hearing him say that, and he stretched his body. Just then, a voice coming from inside the room called out to the two people outside.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, please help me choose some clothes that would be fine.”

Tia: “You males are the only ones taking it easy…This is why you can't trust males. They should just spend all of their time outside hunting, honestly.”

Hearing Rem and Tia call on them, Subaru and Halibel look at each other, and they both move.

Halbiel knocks the ash off his kiseru, while Subaru stretched lightly.

—And with that, the night of day zero of the noisy days at the tenement house advanced.

Chapter 4:
6 Months

1

Subaru and Rem's moving finished quickly.

Because all they did was move the undamaged belongings to the next room.

The tenement house room assignment went smoothly. The room they had originally lived in was left to Tia, while Subaru, Rem, and Halibel lived to the left and right of it.

They did propose the idea of leaving a room in between each of them, but—

Tia: "Suggesting to keep the rooms apart…So you're saying that you do feel guilty!"

Then, it had to be rejected because of Tia loudly suspecting them. After several nights, Tia would end up regretting the room assignments with a red face since voices could clearly be heard in adjoining rooms, probably because of the thickness of the walls.

In any case, the moving finished without any problems, and so began the life of the strange neighbors in the tenement house.

Tia: "I gotta make money."

Halibel: "That's the first thing you're gonna say in the morning?"

Gathered at the breakfast table, Tia suddenly started the conversation like that, holding a chopstick in each hand.

The round tea table used as a dining table split into two last night, so they hurriedly forced the broken boards together for temporary use.

Two outsiders were sitting at the dining table for some reason—

they were Tia and Halibel. They were shamelessly enjoying meals together, even asking for seconds, taking advantage of Rem's kindness.

Not to mention, Tia's face was so bad at using chopsticks that her whole face was covered with grains of rice.

Tia: "Listen here. I may be allowed to live in that shabby room, but I don't want to if it's a mess like that. Screw that. Which is why I'm asking you to hurry up and fix it. And then…"

Halibel: "Maybe if Su-san and Rem-chan were paying for it, but there's no way I'll lend you money. Borrowing and lending money doesn't work without trust. Like, you've already ruined any trust you had, how shameless can you be?"

Tia: "Hey, come on! What do you think?"

Subaru: "Your face caught my attention so much that I couldn't join in on the conversation, riceling."

Her rice makeup was too next level for Subaru to understand it.

His point makes Tia's face turn sour. While she carefully picked the rice off of it, Rem nodded at her as she said, "I see."

Rem: "So Tia-sama is looking for a job. Well, that's not our problem."

Tia: "You know, lately I feel like your words have been hitting me where it hurts…"

Rem: "Subaru-kun's just one step away from being a regular employee. He's already far ahead of you. There's no recovering from this. Subaru-kun won."

Tia: "Forget about that male's victory, I just wanna know what exactly you're trying to say."

Rem roots for Subaru, breathing heavily as she laughed "tee-hee", and Tia urged her to go on as she raised her hand. Seeing that, Rem clears her throat, and then, Rem: “I think you should use an employment agency. I highly recommend finding a job you’re a good at and earning money.”

Subaru: “So your best bet is to get referred at Clane’s employment agency…hm. By the way, are you even good at anything? And do you have any qualifications?”

Tia: “My specialty is killing. I don’t feel like killing right now, though.”

Subaru: “There’s no way you’d find a killing job with that unmotivated attitude!”

Tia folds her arms, and she threw out her busty chest, rice still stuck on her face. Still, if they take her words into account and recommend murder, they very well might end up quickly regretting last night’s decision.

Subaru gives Halibel, who knew the town very well, a quick glance, seeking help.

Halibel: “Hmm, let’s see. Requests for murder aren’t posted on the employment agency bulletin board.”

Tia: “M-Makes sense.”

Halibel: “Stuff like that are hidden in the back. If he knows you, that is.”

Subaru: “It’s the dark side of the town I never knew about—!”

Perhaps even employment agencies recognized by towns have shady jobs. Subaru felt down, as he felt like he just found out about the good-natured lizard faced man’s complicated circumstances.

Halibel: “No no no, it’s a joke. Just a joke. You shouldn’t take it seriously.”

Subaru: “Huh? A joke? Oh, I see, thank goodness. You really had me worried there. I don’t know how I’d face that cute apron wearing lizard from then on.”

Halibel: “Clane doesn’t accept those kind of jobs. Unauthorized employment agencies handle that sort of stuff.”

Subaru: “From now on, I will never use anything other than authorized employment agencies.”

Rem: “Actually, if you get fully approved this time, Clane-sama will never have to help you again, so make that your goal.”

Subaru: “Ohh, that’s right!”

It’s pointed out that his goal was being lowered by trying to keep things as they are, making him have a realization. While feeling thankful for Rem having his back, Subaru felt more motivated to work at the palace.

Yesterday, the staff also cared about him. Starting today, he’d go full throttle.

Subaru: “My motivation has went up now that I think about it that way. All right, let’s go to work!”

Rem: “Yeah!”

Tia: “No! What about me?!”

Tia erupted when Subaru and Rem got excited and stood up hand in hand. With her hands, she threw the food left on her plate into her mouth, chewed on it and swallowed, and then

Tia: “Introduce me to this guy I don’t really know! And then I’ll do a killing job!”

Subaru: “You idiot! Who in their right mind would let you do a night job like that?! Hal-san, tell her!”

Halibel: “I kinda do classic night work as a shinobi…that said, I’m not too sure about letting you kill, so how about you try something else. Like suppression requests or bounty hunting.”

Halibel cracks his knuckles, and he gave those conditions, causing Tia to tilt her head. However, the adventurous ring to it made

Subaru's eyes widen.

Subaru: "Bounty hunting! Suppression requests! That sounds awesome!"

Rem: "What kind of work are they exactly? Can Tia-sama do them…?"

Rem had a pretty realistic reaction in comparison to Subaru, who thought adventurously. Rem sees Tia's side of the dinner table, which she got extremely dirty—she sees that she lacks things like the ability to do delicate tasks and etiquette and hoped that the job wouldn't require those sort of skills.

Halibel: "The main jobs are catching evildoers popping up on wanted posters, sometimes beating them up. And then there's also the evil witchbeasts that show up every now and then."

Tia: "Basically, hunting. My specialty!"

It was like Tia's eyes shined for a moment. And then, when she energetically stood up from the tea table, she grabbed Halibel's neck as he tried to have a quick smoke, having finished his meal.

Halibel: "Hmm?"

Tia: "Now, show me the way. I have no idea what to hunt, after all."

Halibel: "Wait! Su-san! Rem-chan!"

Subaru: "See ya."

Halibel: "Oh, come on!"

Tia drags away Halibel, and resistance was futile. Subaru had no reason to stop her, and he wasn't so sure that he could stop her anyway.

With the noisy neighbors leaving, only the married couple was left in the room.

Rem: “Ummm…is it really okay for us to let Halibel-sama take care of Tia-sama?”

Subaru: “Hal-san shouldn’t have any problems. If Tia were to try and do something harmful, only Hal-san would be able to stop her, so it makes sense to have him near enough to keep an eye on her.”

Rem: “I see, that does make sense. Plus, moss might grow on Halibel-sama’s body if he doesn’t work like everyone else every now and then.”

Rem encouraged Halibel, understanding and moderate sharpness showing in her words.

Letting Halibel handle Tia was actually already an established thing—Halibel even gave his consent. That last interaction was just like something a play would regularly have, nothing more.

Fortunately, Halibel didn’t have to stay with Subaru and Rem anymore to protect them since he now had a good grasp of the tendencies of Tia, the attacker. Hence why he didn’t need to worry about working while being in constant fear of when she’d attack.

Subaru: “Now I just have to worry about if I’ll become a full-time worker and Rem’s stomach.”

Rem: “…As of right now, I believe that I could work without any difficulties.”

Subaru: “It’s going to be our first child. I don’t want anything to catch us off-guard. Although. From the little knowledge I have, I remember that most childbirths take 9 months and 10 days.”

Going off of Subaru’s knowledge, it would take roughly 10 ten months to go from pregnancy to childbirth—however, there was no way to find how how long she has been pregnant. He guessed about three months since her stomach didn’t look all that different. Besides, there was another problem.

Rem is an Oni—a Demi-human species, although they didn’t look like it. Could a normal human’s knowledge really be applied to having a feel for when she was pregnant and when she’d give birth?

On top of that, there was also an irregular condition where it was a mix between a human and an Oni.

Subaru: “Is there anything else we can do on top of keeping in touch and seeing that healing doctor?”

Rem: “I’m sorry. I don’t know much about this stuff. In a time like this…”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “I-In a time like this, maybe we should find an experienced midwife.”

Rem hesitates, unable to find the right words, and then she says that. The reaction was unnatural, however Subaru did not say anything about it and just nodded as he said, “Yeah”.

He knew what Rem was going to say. There was an unspoken agreement between Subaru and Rem to not never touch on that subject.

Subaru says “All right” to pull himself together and put that matter behind as he continued,

Subaru: “Let’s just live like we always have until your stomach starts changing. However, if you aren’t feeling well, tell me right away. Even if it’s just a slight fever. I’ll get mad this time if you don’t tell me.”

Rem: “Understood. But if you do get mad, what would you do?”

Subaru: “You know. I’ll lock you in the room, and I’ll watch over you the whole time. Meanwhile, I’ll borrow from Hal-san for our living expenses, making us go into deep debt. It’ll be tough times once the child is born.”

Rem: “That’s…so…terrifying. I won’t let your idea become reality.”

Rem giggles, bringing herself close to Subaru since the fear was too much for her to handle. He embraces Rem’s slender body, and they hug each other in silence for a while.

As they did that, it naturally got closer to the time when they both have to leave for work.

Subaru: “All right, I’m gonna give it my all today too. I’ll be praying for nothing to happen to Hal-san and Tia as well.”

Rem: “Praying, yeah.”

They smile at each other one last time, and then they left their new room at the tenement house.

—In the evening, they would find out that their praying was off in a good way.

2

Halibel: “This is actually a really good catch. Even I rarely come across them.”

These were the thoughts of Halibel, who came with Tia on her first job. Tia came back with a bag filled with her reward, and she proudly put her feet on the table, but Rem scolded her for her actions, disheartening her.

Food was set on the dining table, knocking the closed reward bag onto the floor. Subaru had doubts about the report, seeing Rem lecturing Tia on the side.

Halibel: “No, I mean, I see why you’d be suspicious.”

Subaru: “After seeing that, yeah. Well, as long as it went well, it’s a good thing. So, what is this good catch? Tell me about it in detail.”

Halibel: “Hmm, so, at first, as decided, we chose a job on a wanted poster to catch a petty thief. But then that suddenly fell to our feet…obviously, I couldn’t just look. That became the reward we were dealing with, and then in the end it became a brutal arrest.”

Tia, who was brought to Clane’s employment agency, experimentally participated in bounty hunting with Halibel’s referral. Basically, they chose a random wanted poster on the store bulletin board, correctly tracked down the wanted criminal, and cornered him.

Halibel: “It was a petty crook committing theft at stores. But when we tried to break into his room, there were magic stones in it all over, causing a commotion. He ended up using them to try and suicide.”

Subaru: “So he was a really dangerous terrorist!”

Halibel: “Tia-chan socked him and tied him up. And then he said that he knew even more dangerous smugglers and that some of them are in town. We somehow got him to tell us their location, and we rounded up all of the idiots hiding in town, foiling their plan to destroy the city.”

Subaru: “That’s the feature film like incident that happened on your end today?!”

Subaru could only be amazed by the major event that happened behind the scenes and could’ve destroyed the town.

Subaru was completely unaware of the incident; he was even asking his female coworkers at his workplace what to do when the baby is born, and they laughed at him as they replied, “It’s too early for that stuff”.

Subaru: “Then, this heroine that saved the town got scolded because she put her feet on that dining table, and she’s all quiet now.”

Halibel: “Indeed, she is.”

Subaru and Halibel nod deeply. In their eyes, they saw Rem hesitantly explaining the importance of manners to Tia, who was completely afraid. Rem did not scold people by yelling; the way she did it spoke to the heart, and so it was rather painful in an emotionally.

Rem: “And so, manners are important. That also goes for showing respect to the people you eat with and the food you are served. Do you understand?”

Tia: “Yes yes, I understand. I UN-DER-STAND.”

Rem: “Tia-sama?”

Tia: “I-I told you, I understand…”

Perhaps this was a result of knowing that she was going to be a mother. Rem had no mercy when it came to being commanding, even with someone who was rather stronger than her. Overwhelmed by her force, Tia obediently sits down in front of the dining table girl-style.

Faced with Tia having downcasted eyes, Rem lets out a sigh, and then she said,

Rem: “Tia-sama, take this.”

Tia: “What’s this for…”

Rem: “I’m giving it since it seems you have trouble eating with chopsticks. Please use it with care.”

A wooden spoon—that’s what gets handed to Tia at the dining table, and Rem’s smile makes her eyes widen. Then, after she closed her eyes tight she said,

Tia: “Th-That’s kinda smart. All right. I’ll use it.”

As she said that, she accepted the present spoon. She had a grin on her face.

Tia: “It’s not feeding, but something like it…”

Halibel: “So, seeing her act like that, I guess Su-san wins the bet for now.”

Subaru: “If the bet is that Tia won’t cause any problems, then Rem is the one who won. And she still is.”

Halibel: “Ahh, that’s true.”

When Subaru sneered, Halibel replied by suddenly smiling. Seeing those two men act like that, Rem, who finished her lecture, clapped her hands.

Rem: “Now, let’s eat. Tia-sama had her first job today, and even Halibel-sama worked too, so the food should be delicious.”

Halibel: “Great, but is there some for me?”

Everyone follows Rem’s instruction and sits at the dining table. Subaru was curious as to why there was food for Tia and Halibel like it was the most natural thing, but the two of them had expectant looks on their faces, so he didn’t say anything.

They express their thanks in unison(Tia did it reluctantly), and he stopped caring about his concern once they started eating. Tonight’s menu was a fish focused Japanese style dish arranged by Rem. They dig in.

They were greatly pleased. Tia especially was digging in.

Tia: “I’m impressed, Rem. The light texture of the fish and the taste changes with the slightly burnt part. I can’t stop eating…!”

Rem: “Thank you very much, Tia-sama. There’s actually white vegetable sauce in it.”

Tia: “—! No way! Th-The the flavor is this refreshing?!”

It seemed like Rem was happily feeding Tia, who kept overreacting. It looked like a rare animal enjoying food that didn’t exist in its habitat.

It also seemed like the bloodlust disappeared and that she completely opened up to them, which made Subaru feel relieved.

Halibel: “Gotta bathe after eating. We made a lot with the reward, so you wouldn’t get angry if I drank after taking a bath, would you?”

Rem: “As long as you don’t make Subaru-kun and I drink, I have no complaints. Don’t make Tia-sama do it, either.”

Subaru: “You probably shouldn’t for safety’s sake…”

The three of them face each other, and they take a glance at Tia.

She was focusing on picking the leftover grains of rice in her rice bowl, paying no attention to their conversation.

They were afraid of having no idea what she would do if they got drunk. Unfortunately, Halibel would have to drink alone tonight.

Furthermore, Subaru prefers to not drink, as he didn't really like alcohol, and Rem has an extremely low alcohol tolerance for an Oni, thus they have never accepted Halibel's invitations.

Halibel: "Damn, I'm so sad."

In the end, nobody joined in to drink with Halibel, and he shook his whiskers in disappointment. Although his murmuring wasn't supposed to be a cue or anything, Tia, having finished destroying her grains of rice, tilted her head as she said, "What?" as she continued,

Tia: "What is this about? I'm stuffed, and I want to go to bed right about now."

Rem: "You can't. You worked the whole day, so you're probably covered in sweat. —So you have to take a bath."

Tia: "…If it's like bathing in a river or a lake, then fine I'll do it."

Rem: "No! Let's go to the bath-house!"

Rem leans forward, and she enthusiastically tried to convince Tia, who was uninterested. Her energy makes Tia's eyes widen, and she asks Subaru and Halibel for help. However, unfortunately—

Subaru: "—The bath-house is pretty nice."

Halibel: "Sure is."

Nobody was on Tia's side.

3

—About the "bath-houses" of this world", they're pretty straightforward, and are quite literally public baths.

A bath tub lies in a wide space, and the water stored inside of it heats up with the use of a magic stone at the bottom of the tub. The structure of the bath-house was extremely simple, except for the fact that it used special tools.

At first, Subaru was surprised by bath-houses with how common they were.

Subaru: “Well, in manga I’ve read that in ancient times there were already baths during Roman period. The existence of bath-houses isn’t all that strange in comparison to that.”

Plus, even ninjas finally showed up in Kararagi Wafuu culture. He definitely wouldn’t be surprised by stuff like bathtubs and daikon radish.

Subaru: “I’m gonna act very surprised if I find a Japanese mascot.”

Halibel: “What have you been mumbling about?”

Then, a ninja soaking right next to him in the bathtub spoke. The ninja soaked in the bath all the way up to his head. His whole body was wet, including his fearless face, and his hair was sticking together.

Now he truly was a wet dog. With just his body and appearance, he could no longer find any similarities to when he was dry.

Subaru: “So I’ve been thinking about different world people, it’s a pain living in a combined culture with all the differences races have. Once you get out of a bath, sometimes you’ll have someone’s fallen hair all over your body.”

Halibel: “You just have to pour hot water on yourself before you get out. Or do you have some sort of interesting idea?”

Subaru: “Let’s see. …Use the drain around the edge of the bathtub, control the flow of the hot water with a magic stone, and let the water run. Set a net for to catch the fallen hair that’ll get inside, and the hot water that passes through will come back.”

Halibel: “Hmmm? Can you draw a picture for that? I don’t really get it."

It was kind of summer-ish. Halibel didn't really care too much about his pool based proposal as he looked up in the bathtub contentedly moaning, "Oh yeahhh." However, he didn't blame him.

Everyone reverts to a naked beast once they soak in warm bath. Which has nothing to do with the worries Subaru had about differences between races.

—Right now, he just wanted to soak in the motherly warmth of this bathtub.

Subaru: "Which is why I'd like to ignore the voice I can hear over the wall…"

Tia: "Hey, hey! Isn't this cool?! Wow, oh my, I've never seen anything like it!"

Halibel: "Oh, Su-san, that's probably not possible. See, look over there."

Subaru was covering his face with a towel, but he heard a familiar high-pitched screech and was tapped on the shoulder by Halibel from the side, he couldn't ignore it anymore. He takes off the towel, and once he looked in the direction Halibel pointed at, he saw a tall wall—in bath-houses, the men's bath and the women's bath are separated. There was a wall separating them.

Often times, for some reason the baths are connected at the top of the wall, so—

Tia: "Oh! There they are! Hey, you two! Isn't it amazing how the bath feels so nice?"

Subaru: "…"

Tia had crept up to the small hole at the top of ceiling and the wall, seeming to have climbed up the wall. She peeked through the hole, and their eyes met. She was nude, waving her hand innocently, but fortunately the wall was hiding the parts below her chest.

But still, her wet hair and the curves of her exposed nape and shoulders were quite charming, and to tell the truth, it was alluring. Also, the people at the men's bath were startled when they were suddenly peeked at by a heavenly beautiful woman.

???: "Kyaaa!!"

They weren't really shrill shrieks, but rough shrieks that resounded throughout the men's bath.

There were people who fell over, people who ran into the dressing room, and people who dove into the bath. Tia looks down at everyone running in confusion, and it makes her blink in surprise.

Tia; Don't really get what's going on, but it does feel nice seeing males running away…"

Subaru: "Like anyone cares about your fetishes! Get the hell down from there!"

Tia: "Aww, but I have such a nice view from here. Oh yeaaah. Are there any differences between this bath and that bath? Can I check it out for a bit?"

Subaru: "You idi…!"

Without any hesitation, Tia climbs over the wall and tries to join the men's bath. He tried to stop her immediately, but unfortunately he could not reach the top of the wall from the bathtub.

Something happened immediately after Subaru gave up and decided to overlook Tia's reckless actions, when the people in the men's bath held their breath.

There was a high-pitched, tremendous scraping sound, and then Tia was no longer seen on the top of the wall. However, she didn't climb over. She had disappeared into the women's bath. And then immediately after that, there were successive sounds of large bodies falling onto the water, causing grand explosions in the bath-house.

Rem: "—Everyone, my dearest apologies for all the trouble. Please continue to enjoy the bath."

Once the sound of the water completely disappeared, those polite words were forwarded from the women's bath to the men's bath. It was obvious who said those words.

Subaru: "Rem?"

Rem: "Subaru-kun, I'm sorry. I was in the middle of washing my body at the washing place…but it's fine now."

Subaru: "Oh, good call. But anyways…"

It seems Rem had fixed the situation over at the women's bath. He felt like praising his wife for her clutch assistance, but there was something else on his mind.

That was—

Subaru: "That sounded like the nostalgic sound of chains, huh…"

Rem: "It's for self protection."

Subaru: "But this is a bathhouse, and Rem should be naked…"

Rem: "It's for self protection."

Her stubborn replies denied Subaru from any further questioning. Plus, since Subaru wasn't at the scene over the wall, he had no way of confirming it. The case was closed. It was unsolved.

Halibel: "Rem-chan sure is impressive."

Then, Halibel, who floated in the bathtub with his tray and sake and acted unconcerned the whole time, let out those carefree thoughts, and he was licking the sake with his red face covered by his hair

Once that he finished, after getting out of the bath, they went to the bath-house entrance to meet up with the two people who were at the women's bath.

The bath-house entrance had a space that was like a lounge, and apart from the dressing room, visitors could relax as much as they wanted there. Most of the time it'd become a place where old people meet, and they'd wait patiently for visitors who entered the bath to get out.

There was one dead tired woman slovenly lying down on a couch in that space—

Rem: "Apparently it was her first time at a bath-house, so she went too nuts and felt dizzy after staying in too long."

Subaru: "So that's why she using my special seat. I can tell that it's her first time, though."

As he grumbled, Subaru saw Tia, who was lying down while moaning "Oooh" and "Ahhh", receiving a lap pillow from Rem. Her white skin glowed so much that at first glance you could tell she had a head rush. Had she been standing up with a serious face right now, she would've certainly looked charming.

Although, by lying down in a sad, exposed state, men lose interest in hitting on her.

Subaru: "Wow, you even borrowed a fan for this girl."

Rem: "If she falls over on the way back, she'd get covered in mud after all that cleaning."

Subaru: "Sounds better than trying to maintain her beauty…all right, hand me the fan. I'll fan her. Whoosh…whoosh whoosh… whoosh whoosh whoosh!"

Tia: "Ooooooo…that feels so grooood."

Subaru takes the fan from Rem, who had been gently fanning her, and then he creates a storm. Bathing in that storm, Tia seemed to be enjoying it, although she was still groggy.

However, soon enough, his arms couldn't take it anymore. His fanning slows down, and stops.

Tia: "Come ooon, can't you fan me more?"

Subaru: “Don’t be so spoiled. Besides, Rem’s lap is mine. And the fan is borrowed. Who do you think you are, a princess?”

Tia: “So annoying…”

Tia grimaces at Subaru’s point, and he takes the fan away from him. After that, while Tia started fanning herself, Subaru looked at the wrist of her right hand.

Subaru: “What’s that? A friendship bracelet?”

Tia: “Don’t know what a friendship bracelet is, but Hal gave it to me. He told me to put it on. Is it a charm?”

Rem: “A charm, huh. It’s a bit surprising to see Halibel-sama give Tia-sama a gift.”

Subaru: “Well, it can’t be Hal-san trying to put the moves on Tia…”

She pouted, and she looked beautiful fanning herself quickly, but she also looked childish. Halibel’s true motive was unknown, and there may be no particular reason behind his actions, but all he had to investigate and cool down.

He was warmed up now, so he was going to finish his business and leave before he caught a cold.

Subaru: “All right, it’s time for the last bath-house ritual. You’re coming, too.”

Tia: “Ritual…?”

Rem: “Yes, a ritual. If you don’t do it, it’d defeat the purpose of coming to the bath-house.”

Subaru and Rem, the married couple, confidently replied to Tia, who gave a dubious look. The firmness of their tones confused Tia, further increasing the surprise of the one who showed up afterwards.

The one who came was Halibel—however, the hair on his dry head was fluffy, and he looked like a completely different person, despite them being familiar with how he looked.

Tia: “You’re the mutt, right?”

Halibel: “Yeah, it’s me. Also, here, take this. Gotta drink it before it warms up, or else it’d be a waste.”

Tia: “W-Wait a second…what’s this? A beast’s milk?”

Halibel: “Watch how you put it!”

What Halibel brought over in his hands was a white liquid in a bottle—what Tia said wasn’t wrong, but put in a more tasteful way it would be:

Subaru: “It’s milk for when you get out of the bath…it’s a universal ritual!”

One could call it “all worlds do it”, and it wouldn’t be an exaggeration. Or at least, if the stylistic beauty was common between the two worlds Subaru knew, you could call it a ceremony passed across worlds.

Strictly speaking, this wasn’t cow milk, and it wasn’t fruit milk either, which would have been ideal. However, there at least was a skill to keep bottled milk cold, and it would be best not to expect more than that.

Subaru: “Uncork the bottle! Put your hand on your hip! Then drink up!”

While Subaru enthusiastically explained the steps, he performed the ritual.

Cold milk goes through his throat, flowing into his warm stomach. That refreshing feeling-the strong counter for his body that warmed up inside from the bath, that is the best part of bath-houses.

Rem: “Mm!”

Shouting cutely, Rem also drinks milk like Subaru. Then so did Halibel, along with other people who got out of the bath.

Tia: “Ahaha! Y-Your face! A mustache! It’s making a mustache!”

Subaru: “It’s part of what makes this beautiful!”

Tia: “Lame! So lame! You look like an idiot!”

Developing a white mustache after getting milk around your mouth was like proof that the ritual was a success.

Incidentally, it was hard for Halibel to get milk around his mouth because of its structure. After Rem sneakily finished drinking, she looked back and gently wiped her mouth without letting anyone see.

Dubiously gazing at the three of them, Tia uncorks the bottle with a suspicious look. Then, after she took a light sniff of the smell, she put her hand on her hip, and she drank—

Tia: “—It’s so good!”

Then, a white mustache developed around her mouth, and she said that as her eyes shined.

4

The four of them were walking back in their yukatas as the refreshing night wind blew.

Tia: “Bath-houses aren’t as bad as I thought. Oh, just so you know, that’s just because I was surprised.”

Halibel: “It’s not like I’m listening anyway.”

It was Tia, who walked with light steps, and Halibel going home. Tia was humming happily, perhaps because she had enjoyed her experience at the bath-house a lot.

Although she was off key and it sounded like there was no melody, it was the same thing Subaru had heard just yesterday. Since she was singing the same thing, it didn’t seem like she was singing randomly.

Halibel: “What song is that?”

Tia: “Hmm? A nameless song. If I had to name it…”

Tia puts her finger on her lip, and she went into deep thought for a moment.

And then—

Tia: “It’d be the “Die Song”!”

Subaru: “Pick a better name!!”

The words were just too dangerous, so Subaru reflexively butted in from the back. That makes Tia irritatedly say “What’s wrong with it?” as she clicked her tongue.

Rem: “Subaru-kun’s right. It’s such a lovely song, after all.”

Tia: “This again…it’s not like you’d ever going to disagree with your male partner anyway, Rem.”

Rem: “Yes, that’s right. I pretty much agree with everything Subaru-kun says. Sometimes I do disagree, though.”

Tia: “Hey! So I had this realization…I don’t think I like Rem’s bossiness!”

Overwhelmed by something that was neither stress nor praise, Tia runs away with her head between her hands. Rem was the one who took over the humming for Tia.

Having heard it once, Rem somehow starts humming the same song.

Tia: “…Not quite. That’s not it, haha…hahaha.”

Rem: “Hmm, well I didn’t catch it very well. Tia-sama, please let me hear it again.”

Tia: “You wanna hear it that badly? Really? Well, I guess I have no choice.”

Pleased with Rem, who gave a low bow, Tia starts to hum the song once again. Had they not know that it was the “Die Song”, it would just sound like an enchanting song with a nice voice.

Subaru and Rem naturally start to speak less. Halibel also walked the street without saying anything.

There was only Tia’s humming in the quiet street at night.

Stars in the sky, and below it, the light of the paper lanterns dimly lighting the street red. Considering only that, it looked very mystical, like a moment in a dream—.

Rem: “Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Because he was immersed in the atmosphere, his response to Rem was a little late.

Rem smiles slightly, understanding how Subaru felt, and her face turned red as she said,

Rem: “I was just thinking…”

Subaru: “About what?”

Rem: “If only this moment could last longer for our child to see it…”

Rem says that with a gentle smile, and she rubbed her stomach softly. Her gesture and words make Subaru feel really embarrassed, and he couldn’t put his feelings into words.

Subaru: “…”

He simply gently held onto Rem’s free hand, combining their warmth, and they went home.

And that’s how the night went.

—The days went on slowly. Without any time to stop, like water flowing.

They were busy, noisy days.

Ever since the night Subaru met with the strange neighbors at the tenement house, the days were eventful in a good way, and hardly any of the things he was anxious about happened.

It somehow became a habit for Tia and Halibel to accompany Subaru and Rem at the dining table in the morning, and they'd spend time together until work while talking about their plans for the day.

Tia: "They need me, or else crooks will be on the loose. Even Clane said so."

Rem: "Tia is as reliable as expected. I'm very thankful. Looks like you might get more food!"

Tia: "This is where you give me more! You don't mean "might get more", you will give me more!"

Tia decided on doing "bounty hunting" as her job after getting a taste of success with her first job. It seemed that it really was Tia's calling, and from what they'd been told, her arrest rate was quite something.

Jobs handled at Clane's employment agency are recognized by the town—because of this, a lot of the jobs are highly beneficial to Banan town. Inevitably, Tia's efforts were making the town more safe.

Halibel: "Put yourself in my shoes as someone who has to go with her. I haven't been able to take a lovely nap with the sun out for so many days. My internal body clock is going to get messed up at this rate."

Rem: "Isn't this a sign that you're getting closer to being a proper citizen?"

Subaru: “Rem’s right. Suck it up and follow Tia around. I’m sure you’ll even lose some of that stomach fat of yours that you’ve been worrying about.”

As a married couple, Subaru and Rem soothe Halibel, who took a barrage of criticism while frowning. Seeing that interaction out of the corner of her eye, Tia happily drinks her miso soup as she raised her bowl and said, “More please!”

Subaru frequently went to the Magoji palace at noon, even after the defined period of time.

He succeeded at obtaining the steady job that he’d dreamed of without any problems. This was all thanks to Riften and the landlady recognizing Subaru’s abilities, and it was the reward for living up to their expectations.

However, if there was one thing that was different from what he’d expected—

Subaru: “—All right, today let’s review the basics of making youfuku(Western-style clothes).”

???: “Yeeees, Subaru-chan.”

Subaru: “Good answer! However, I’m the Sensei now. Call me Sensei, okay?”

???: “You got it, Subaru-chan Sensei.”

Subaru was shrugging his shoulders as he smiled wryly at the playful women.

Subaru was officially hired at the Magoji palace, but her was no longer just a servant, he was also acted as a teacher in a little “class for lessons”.

The classroom was one of Magoji palace’s tatami rooms. In it, you’d mainly learn about sowing, Subaru’s speciality, and a version of fashion related western-style clothing-stuff you’d call embroidery. Even in Kararagi, where Wafuu culture was popular, it was hard for it to take root, even with fashion culture from other countries coming over. In this place, someone with the knowledge and the skills becomes a teacher, and people would get the help they have always wanted with the western-style clothes women usually wore.

Most of the students were female coworkers working at the palace and bourgeoisie wives around the same age. Once in a while there'd be young women who would study the basics and planned on doing a job related to it in the future, but these were the kind of people who came, more or less.

If there had to be name for Subaru's job, you'd call it a cultural lecturer, the parallel universe version.

Riften: "I thought I told you that I have high hopes for your femininity."

Subaru: "Well, I don't have any complaints. I don't, but this is one of those things you're into, isn't it?"

Riften: "What a terrible misunderstanding. I just wanted to see my beloved girls in something other than wafuu clothing. I'm just trying to make that small wish come true, that's all."

Subaru: "For some reason you keep denying you're into cougars…"

Incidentally, Subaru's lessons are mostly popular, and they were talking about increasing his lessons from three times a week to four times a week. If the knowledge from Subaru's world was helpful at all, he'd like to use this cultural school as an excuse to spread it to others.

At night, after Subaru's work ended at the palace, he said goodbye to the ladies and the gatekeeper, who he was familiar with, and he went to the tenement house—no, he went to Temple Elementary School to see Rem.

Ever since he found out that Rem was pregnant, he always made sure to walk home with Rem. Otherwise, he wouldn't know if something happened along the way, and it'd be too late after something did happen.

Subaru: "A stranger might suddenly attack for an unjust reason,

after all.”

Tia: “What? I don’t get it, why did you look at my face when you said that? You got a problem, Su?”

In front of Temple Elementary School, which bathed in the sun, Subaru and Tia came across each other at a street, and they exchanged those words as they both grimaced.

Subaru going to meet Rem was a natural thing to do as a husband. However, Tia frequently going to Temple Elementary School to meet Rem sort of ruined the married couple’s time together.

That alone showed that she was attached to Rem, and sometimes it’d be too much.

Subaru: “Also, it doesn’t feel right when you call me Su.”

Tia: “What a pain. Hal calls you that, so there shouldn’t be a problem with me calling you it, too. Besides, I’m only here for Rem, you’re not needed.”

Tia pouted and acted intimidating, and Subaru also pouted at her. This was better than her calling them by their sex by saying stuff like “males”, but the arrogance of her responses wasn’t any different how it was in the beginning.

Subaru: “Then I’m going to tell Rem and you’ll get less food.”

Tia: “Y-You coward. You’re so heartless…!”

Still, their relationship was way more relaxed than before, just because they found a way to make her think twice.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, Tia-sama, thanks for waiting. …You two didn’t fight, did you?”

Subaru: “We did” [Tia: “Of course we did.”

Plus, the thing they both felt the strongest about was Rem smiling.

Given that people have time, everyone eats dinner together at night after coming home, and that even includes Halibel, who always goes off somewhere.

It seemed Tia was uninterested in the reward for her bounty hunting, and ever since she earned enough money to pay off the tenement house reparations with her first job, and all of her rewards were handled by Rem.

Rem: “So, when all your work goes well, you can treat yourself. When it doesn’t, spend wisely.”

Tia: “I can’t just live large everyday with all the money I have?”

Rem: “If you do that, you’ll forget to appreciate how special it is, and most importantly, you’d hurt Subaru-kun’s pride as the breadwinner. This is my prudence as a great wife.”

Subaru: “But I’d be pleased if you don’t tell anyone about this great wife’s prudence !”

He forgave her since Rem looked cute apologizing with her tongue stuck out. It was also for the sake of his own pride, though.

Moving on, Tia worked hard to understand Rem’s point as she nodded and went, “Uh-huh”. Their relationship was a strange thing; Tia was the one who looked the most mature, but inside, she was like a child—she acted like a wolf girl. Rem interacted with Tia, who didn’t act how she looked, affectionately, like how a mother or an older sister would.

Viewing her as a mother, this could be practice for the child. However, if Subaru viewed her as an older sister, that would be complicated and it’d make him feel like he was walking on thin ice.

Halibel: “Su-san, what’s wrong?”

Seeing Subaru go into deep thought, Halibel, who was the only one drinking alcohol, tilts his head and asks him a question. In response, Subaru says, “No” as he tilted his head and continued,

Subaru: “It’s nothing. I was just thinking about how nice it’d be if we got treated tomorrow.”

Rem: “Halibel-sama would really have to go out on a limb for that. After all, Halibel-sama is the reason why we can’t be treated in the first place.”

Tia: “Really? Then I should spank him and make him work!”

Halibel: “Don’t you think you’re treating me too cruelly?”

And so, that’s how the night went the exact opposite way the morning did with loud laugher at the dining table.

After they finished eating, they went to the bath-house, Rem watched over Tia, who acted a bit more responsibly than last time, Subaru and Halibel took their time enjoying the bath, and they went home after enjoying milk upon getting out of the bath.

Tia’s humming resounded throughout the street at night. Lately, it has been like a duet with Rem. In a way, listening to that added elegance to the time they spent going home, and Subaru loved it.

Their precious, busy, noisy time went on slowly.

6

Tia: “Wooow, it takes a lot more time for a child to be born than I thought.”

Tia puts her arms behind the back of her head, and she said that in a carefree tone.

She was on the way home from Temple Elementary School walking with Subaru and Rem on the street during the evening, which became a daily thing. She was looking at Rem’s stomach.

Rem was slightly smiling in a kimono—and her stomach was big enough to recognize it from afar.

Subaru: “Taking a glance, it’s probably been about 6 months… perhaps? So like in the middle stage of pregnancy.”

Tia: “Middle stage? Still only halfway there?! Wow, animals would never take this long.”

Subaru: “I’m not an animal! I’m a human! It takes quite a long time.”

Tia brings up a ridiculous example, Subaru lightly flicked her forehead, and she groaned while her forehead was being pushed. After that, she took a side glance at Rem and said,

Tia: “Isn’t it rough having your stomach so big? It doesn’t look like you could jump or hop.”

Rem: “I can’t deny that it is rough. Often times it’s difficult sticking out my chest, and there’s no way I could jump or hop, so I’ll let you do it, Tia-sama.”

Tia: “If you insist. I’m good at jumping and hopping anyways.”

While Tia got carried away, full of herself, Subaru broke into a smile with that interaction.

They’ve had a baby for about 6 months now—meaning, they’ve been neighbors with Tia for 3 months. Although they were worried at first, it was a completely stable life now.

Rem wasn’t in the stable period of pregnancy, but they were able to deal with Tia’s temper pretty well now.

Tia: “I wonder if it’s going to be a male or a female.”

Rem: “Whether it’s a boy or a girl, it’ll probably be naughty like Subaru-kun. But it’s acting up a lot in my stomach, so I think it might be a girl.”

Subaru: “If it’s acting up, wouldn’t that mean it’s a boy?”

Rem: “—? Would it?”

According to Rem’s self-diagnosis, apparently the baby is a girl. The way she came to that judgement made Subaru look dubious, but Rem tilted her head, and even Tia had a question mark above her because of Subaru.

In this world, people might think that girls are naughty.

Now that he thought about it, it did seem like a lot of the girls he got involved with in this world were active. —That's when his thought was interrupted.

Subaru: "Well, people are delighted when their first is a girl. Back at my home town, they say 'First Princess, then Taro', meaning it's best to first have a girl and then a boy."

Rem: "First Princess, then Taro?"

Subaru: "Princess is the girl, while Taro is the boy. It means the first is a princess, and the second is the eldest son. If I remember correctly, it means girls don't cry as much or something like that."

Kids being hard to take care of is common knowledge, and it's even been engraved in Subaru's limited knowledge. Obviously he's never had any real experience with it, but at any rate, it's a lot of work to take care of babies when they're highly prone to crying—he was already being lectured a lot by his female coworkers at the palace.

Subaru: "By studying the fundamentals of childcare with our first being a girl, it will be easier to deal with the second one. It's like the wisdom of my ancestors, or more like advice they came up with from personal experience."

Rem: "I see. …So I have to give birth to a girl first no matter what."

Subaru: "You don't have to put weird pressure on yourself because of what I said, even if it is a boy."

With a wry smile, Subaru scratches his cheek. To Subaru's side, it was unclear how seriously Rem took him, and she said,

Rem: "For Subaru-kun, do your best to be a…be a girl."

She was saying this to the child inside of her. However, he's heard that the gender of a baby is determined the moment fertilization happens, so Rem was all too late to speak to it.

Subaru: "If you're a boy, just come out healthy already. Cry all you want. If we learn the hard parts early, it might be easier later."

Rem: “Oh, that’s right. First it has to come out healthy…yeah, that’s what’s most important.”

Subaru: “Yep, that’s what’s most important…Oh, it moved.”

The baby responded to Subaru, who touched Rem’s stomach and talked to it while stroking it. The new life inside of Rem was already focused on turning and pushing.

Subaru really felt like it was a boy, but—

Subaru: “Maybe that’s because I’m thinking too much about after it’s born.”

Thinking rationally, he’d have the easiest time preparing if he knew whether it was a boy or a girl before it was born. The kind of choices he had for play equipment would be settled, and that’d go for clothes too, of course.

Before he had a kid, that’s actually what Subaru thought, but strangely enough, now he thinks otherwise.

He felt like the things that were unknown until it’s born were like blessings invoked by the baby.

Tia: “Still, about 6 months to go? Hmm, that sure is a long wait.”

Rem: “I’m sure that time will go by before we even know it. Would you prefer it be faster?”

Tia: “I don’t mind…It’s just that, at this rate, I’ll never get a clue for the light sphere.”

Rem: “…”

The words Tia spoke while she pouted and glared at the sunset—hearing “light sphere” made Subaru’s cheeks stiffen, and Rem also lost her breath for a moment.

light sphere-that’s what Tia was looking for, and it was the very thing that started this life.

Tia did not hesitate to say that Rem stole it for sure. However the baby got in the way of forcing information out of her, she was let off the hook until childbirth, and they became good neighbors.

However, Tia really hadn't talked about the light sphere since the first few days, and she wasn't acting suspicious of Rem. Hence why the matter was kept in the very back of her mind.

She couldn't hide her shock from Tia still remembering it and going after it.

Subaru: "…In any case, suck it up until these 6 months are over. That was the deal."

Tia: "Yes yes, I know that. 6 months…6 months, eh…"

Strictly speaking, a pregnancy period is about 10 months—if this is the 6th month, then there has to be 4 months left. Subaru still not pointing out that she was off by 2 months showed how he hoped to postpone 'that' moment.

It was not the same as when they had a terrible meeting. Tia was now an irreplaceable friend.

Tia: "If Rem gets pregnant again right after you're born, I'm going to be very troubled."

Tia talked to Rem—no, she talked to the baby while saying those things.

She wouldn't hurt Rem while she had a baby. Tia was so attached to these days that she laughed off her own rule that she had made. Subaru felt that it'd be nice if that was the case.

Rem: "Subaru-kun…"

Subaru: "Man, Rem, I'm not sure what to do when you make such a determined look…"

Rem looked at Subaru with watery, serious eyes as she firmly clenched her fist, making him knit his brows. Were her cheeks red because of determination? Or were they red because of the sunset?

In any case, he shrunk back when Rem implicitly showed her determination to have a second child. Of course, Subaru was also in favor of having another so that the child would have a younger sibling, but family finances were a big problem.

They had their first one pretty haphazardly, so he wanted to be more careful with the second one.

Subaru: “But if Tia has a change of heart…well, I don’t think that’ll happen anyways.”

Rem: “Maybe if we keep having kids non-stop until we die…”

Subaru: “That idea kind of sounds like a horror!”

In response to Rem seriously making scary plans, Subaru took her hand and guided her downstairs. Rem follows his natural guidance, and Tia was waiting at the bottom, as she went down the stairs a little quicker.

Going home in the evening, the usual affectionate time. 4 days left—this might be the last of these times; it was a fleeting scene that made him feel regretful.

—Somehow that evanescence made Subaru’s heart-ache as he squinted at the bright setting sun.

Halibel: “Oh. You must be beat. You worked all day again.”

When they came back to the tenement house, they saw Halibel smoking his kiseru sitting on a bench.

Lately, Halibel has tended to skip out on going to work with Tia. It seemed he was taking advantage of Tia being used to her job now, and so the “Eternal Playboy” made his comeback.

In other words, he was headed towards becoming a bum. Naturally, the three of them treated him coldly now.

Tia: “How lucky you are, yet again. Even though you’re a mutt, you can't be a watchdog when you're staggering all over the place."

Subaru: "Does the food taste good when you don't work?"

Halibel: "Wooow, a storm of verbal abuse. That's not nice. Rem-chan, say something about this."

Rem: "Let's see. …I think food tastes the best when you're fulfilled with work."

Halibel: "It's just the way you put it that's gentle. You're just as hurtful as Subaru!"

Halibel gets struck by Subaru, Tia, and then Rem with finishing blows, and he leaned back as he surrendered. After that, he slowly brought his bent body back into its original posture and said,

Halibel: "Yes, lately I haven't been working and have been lazing around, but today was a bit different."

Tia: "A bit different, and yet it seems your laziness hasn't gotten any better."

Halibel: "Let's not talk about that. Also, I've done all these things for you today, so I'd like you to take that into account."

Hearing Halibel's statement, Tia pointed at herself with a blank look. Once Halibel calmly nodded, he pointed the tip of his kiseru towards the tenement house—towards the entrance to Tia's room.

Halibel: "Come on, Su-san, reveal it."

Subaru: "You act as if I'm an accomplice for your schemes, but you haven't told me anything, either…oh?"

After the calming instruction, Subaru opened the sliding door to Tia's room. Once he took a look inside, the scenery made his eyes open wide. Inside, there was—

Rem: "Wow. Flowers, sweets…and even kimonos. Are these gifts?"

Rem, who viewed the Room like Subaru did, put her hands together, and she was impressed as her eyes sparkled.

As implied by Rem's words, Tia's room had a total make-over. This room, which Subaru and Rem previously lived in, had the minimum amount of furniture and was quite bland, even after the marks from Tia's rage were repaired.

And now, flowers were placed here and in the room, as well as kimonos and candy boxes on top of the tatami mats; it was full of all kinds of gifts.

Subaru: "For someone like Halibel-san, these touches are quite nice."

Halibel: "Hehehe, what do you think? See me in a new light now, right? That's what I'd like to say, but these gifts aren't really from me. These are gifts from the townspeople."

Receiving praiseful words from Subaru, Halibel quickly gives away the truth. It was too thoughtful for someone like Halibel, so he was convinced when he was told that he didn't do all this, but to tell the truth, he was shocked.

The people of Banan town gifted the owner of room—that is, they gifted Tia.

Halibel: "About Tia's work, I did say that her arrest-rate is impressive, right? But the employment agency job isn't the only job where Tia-chan is helping with all sorts of things."

Rem: "She has a job on top of her employment agency one?"

Halibel: "It's more like a helper sort of thing. She frequently goes around doing favors…they piled up, and this is how they've repaid her."

Listening to Halibel give an explanation with his arms folded, Subaru and Rem looked at each other, showing that neither of them knew about all this.

Strangely enough, this is exactly what they had thought about. There were many times when people in town said hi to Tia in a very friendly way when they were on their way back from places like Temple Elementary School or the bath-house. Subaru thought that this was because of her achievements with her employment agency job, but that wasn't the case.

Tia had been deepening her exchanges with the townspeople without Subaru and Rem knowing about it.

Subaru and Rem were comprehending the situation, whereas Tia was silent in front of the presents she was given. Her cheeks were red, and she was just playing with her hair with her finger to show her confusion.

Without knowing what was this feeling welling up inside, as if it was too much to handle.

Rem: "Let's have a feast tonight. We have all this food, after all."

Tia: "Rem…"

Rem: "These presents are for Tia-sama. We can't let it go to waste. I may not be able to finish it all myself, so will you help me?"

Tia's eyes shook as she heard Rem's proposal. Then, after pondering for a little bit, Tia nodded deeply at Rem without saying anything.

Seeing her nod, Rem rolls up her sleeves—and so began the preparations for the feast.

7

Even though it was a feast, there was no clear thing they were celebrating.

But still, if they were having this feast for something, it would be—

Rem: "—To celebrate Tia-sama becoming a member of the town."

Then, Rem tells Subaru that with a smile, and this was enough to convince him.

Celebrating becoming a member of the town—for Subaru and Rem, having the people around them kindly helping them out because they knew about their child was like proof that they were recognized by the town.

If something similar happened to Tia, that truly would be wonderful.

“…”

On top of the dining table, each and everyone one of the plates were empty.

Only four people were having a feast, but it was still a feast. Rem had put in her full effort, and she attacked with an amount of food worthy of her reputation. However, Tia faced all of it head-on, and with Subaru and Halibel’s help, amazingly managed to finish it off.

And so, she gave in to the fullness of her big stomach, and she was now breathing in her sleep.

Subaru: “She becomes a cow as soon as she sleeps after eating. And now her beauty is ruined.”

Halibel: “Oh, Su-san, I’m surprised you’re saying this when your wife is right next to you.”

Subaru: “I’m always praising Rem 100 times as much as that. Besides, I have no intentions of harming Tia. Tia is like…hm … She’s like a little sister.”

Judging off their appearances, it wasn’t clear who was older. However, by comparing their behavior and common sense, a whole audience would agree that Subaru was older than Tia.

In fact, neither Rem nor Halibel disagreed, and they just made gentle looks upon hearing Subaru’s statement.

Halibel: “But I don’t think she fell asleep just because she got full. She secretly took some sips of that.”

Subaru: “Some sips…oh.”

As Halibel chuckled, he pointed at somewhere behind Tia's butt while she lay down—hidden in the hem of her dress was an awfully expensive bottle of alcohol.

This was probably one of her gifts as well. Although, Subaru and the others did come to the decision to not let Tia drink since it'd be risky.

Halibel: "Continuing to hide something just because you've already began doing it…children find it intriguing. Eventually, it turned out like this."

Subaru: "…But you were still wrong to let it happen while knowing about it."

Halibel: "It's so cute how she sleeps right after having a taste of it. If she caused ruckus everywhere because of this, I would've had to take responsibility, but that didn't happen."

Subaru frowned when Halibel judged that everything turned out alright in the end. However, when he looked at Tia's calm sleeping face, he started to feel that he was wrong to be mad.

Even if Tia got drunk off alcohol, would she would use violence on Subaru, like she did before, and get back her "light sphere" even if it meant taking Rem's life away?—It was very hard for him to imagine her doing that.

Halibel: "Um, about the light sphere…"

Subaru: "—! Learned something?"

Halibel: "I frequently went around investigating. Did you think I was just lazing around?"

Halibel opens one of his slit eyes, and he gave a wink that meant the opposite of what it normally would mean. Seeing him do that, Subaru raises his eyebrows in surprise as he said,

Subaru: "Yeah, I thought you were just fooling around…now I think better of you!"

Rem: “Yes, I see you in a much better light now! Impressive, Halibel-sama!”

Halibel: “Here I was thinking about how skilled you guys are at acting normal as married couple…”

Giving a wry smile, Halibel scratches his own black-haired head. After that, in a low tone he said,

Halibel: “Sorry to get your hopes up. I haven’t heard anything about what exactly this light sphere is or where it’s at. The situation is still the same. I’m sorry.”

Subaru: “Sigh…”

Halibel: “Can you hold in your sighs? Also, if I haven’t heard anything about the light sphere, isn’t that enough to give us some nice information? Such that even the existence of it is fishy.”

Rem: “So you’re suspecting Tia-sama made everything up?”

Hearing Halibel’s words, Rem’s voice tenses up, and she says that in a bit of a criticizing manner. Subaru also felt disgusted by his assumption, although not as much as Rem.

Tia truly was determined to get her light sphere back. Hence why she was constantly checking for it on the way home today—there’s no way she was lying and making stuff up.

Halibel: “There’s also the possibility that she just can’t think that it could be anyone else. Tia-chan isn’t normal. Su-san, Rem-chan, you must know that, right?”

“…”

However, Halibel makes that assertion to the two of them who denied his hypothesis with emotional arguments.

Perhaps he calmly saw the truth objectively because these were the views of shinobis. Or maybe Subaru and Rem were simply too soft on Tia and they were just looking away from reality.

Halibel: “Once Rem-chan gives birth…”

This was the first time Halibel put the time they had left into clear words. The inescapable reality was coming closer. It was the time when a decision would be made, as well as the time to make a choice.

Will it be up to Subaru, Rem, or Tia?

Subaru: “There’s no need to give an answer right away.”

Halibel: “Maybe. —But an answer will have to be given eventually.”

As Subaru replied, Halibel quietly said that with his head down. Subaru becomes silent and says nothing in response to is words, and when Rem slowly stood up,

Rem: “I can’t let Tia-sama catch a cold.”

Subaru: “Oh, I’ll do it.”

Subaru takes out a blanket instead of Rem, who was near the closet. In the last few days, nights have been remarkably chilly. Of course, Rem wanted Tia to be especially taken care of.

Rem: “Tia-sama, I will be moving the alcohol. Would you like the futon to be spread out?”

Rem steps up to Tia as she slept, and she talked to her affectionately. And then, she collects the bottle of alcohol Tia hid in her hem, and she started to loosen the sash of her dress so that she didn’t have trouble sleeping.

Suddenly, Rem’s hands were caught in white fingertips.

Rem: “Tia-sama?”

It was the same old way she called out her name. Rem, who was looking straight at Tia’s sleeping face, was the only one who was able to tell that something was wrong.

Subaru, who was carrying the blanket, did not notice it and neither did Halibel, who smoked his kiseru at the window.

—A trickle of tears was slowly rolling down Tia's cheeks.

Tia: "Give it…back…"

A frail, low murmur came from Tia's thin lips.

Rem says "What?" as she tried to hear that voice melting in the ephemera atmosphere, and then she brought her ears closer—

Tia: "—Give back…me."

That moment, a wind blew.

Subaru: "Ah?!"

Subaru screams, and he immediately unfolded the blanket he was holding. Rem was blown away into him. Unable to withstand the impact, he gets blown away to the back. Subaru somehow forcefully wraps Rem in the blanket, and he crash into the kitchen with his back.

The cooking utensils make a loud noise as they fell onto the floor, and the food left in the pot gets thrown out.

Subaru: "Ka…ha…"

While the pain disturbed Subaru's breathing, he looked forward with his eyes wide open, wondering what just happened.

He saw the room that changed within just a few seconds—the dining table and the tatami mats flew off, and the magic gem lights hanging from the ceiling were violently turning on and off. There was an opening in the middle of the room, as if a beast had torn into it with its nails. Standing before it was Tia, whose wide dress waved in the wind as she shed tears.

Wind and a bite attack—it was more than enough to remind him of the attack that had happened that one night.

Subaru: “Tia—!”

Subaru cries that. However, it didn’t reach Tia as she continued to shed tears endlessly while she held her head. Her eyes looked confused, and she was muttering something.

Tia: “My arms…my legs…my…body…where is it? Where did it go…?”

Her steps were unsteady, her eyes made it seem like she was dreaming, but the danger was so clear—

Halibel: “…”

So, a shinobi had to deal with such danger in a way a shinobi would.

Halibel evaded the first wind by clinging onto the ceiling. It wasn’t clear how someone tall like him accomplished that. However, after Halibel escaped danger, he got off the ceiling, and he free fell down onto Tia’s head, dealing a blow to her.

What hit her was a fist axe, where he put his big hands together. It was such a powerful hit that it could’ve smashed a large tree. The force he struck with had a chance to kill Tia if it hit her, as she was frail. Tia, shedding tears, dodged it, and she kicked up the broken dining table, repelling Halibel, who dropped down.

In this small room, Halibel, jumping around lightly as a tall man, and Tia, who was trying to get the upper hand, were clashing with magic.

It was the return of that night. Although the location was different, the situation was the same.

Tia’s invisible bite attacks could not reach Halibel because of the kunai he threw. However, the aftermath had serious effects on its surroundings, and the tenement house got cut up again and again, destroying it.

Halibel: “This isn’t good! Su-san and Rem-chan are going to get crushed!”

Perceiving the collapse of the tenement house as dangerous, Halibel screams and steps hard on the floor. Then, the tatami mats just barely left on the floor sprung up from below one by one. Tia, who was on top of one, gets sent flying by the unexpected impact, and she was being blown out of the tenement house.

Turning over tatami mats—that is what Halibel pulled off, although it wasn’t clear how he did it.

Subaru: “—!”

The moment Subaru realized that, he gave a jolt to his stiff lower half of his body, and he stood up. Inside his arms there was Rem, who was wrapped in a blanket. While holding onto her, he dashed out the back of the tenement house.

Subaru: “Rem, are you alright?! Rem?!”

When Subaru started to feel how cold the air felt, he realized that his whole body was wet with cold sweat. He ignored how nasty it was and called Rem’s name as he held her in his arms.

Rem: “Subaru…-ku…”

Subaru: “Rem!”

Rem called Subaru’s name as she wheezed. Subaru screeches because of it, and he slowly unfolded the blanket to check if she was injured.

From what he could see, there were no injuries. His blood ran cold when he was inside of Tia’s wind up close. Had something gone wrong, Rem might have been cut into along with the space. It was a miracle that she just ended up getting blown away—

Rem: “What about…Tia-sama…”

Subaru: “Take it easy! Tia…Halibel-sama is doing something about Tia now! What’s more important right now is you. How’s your body…"

Rem: "I'm…fine…ku?! Ah…ahh!"

Subaru: "Rem?!"

Rem tried to smile bravely, but her body bent with an agonized look on her face. That makes Subaru's eyes widen, and then Rem held onto her stomach before his eyes, suffering.

The situation indicated the worst case scenario.

Subaru: "—!!"

Subaru hits his head, almost going into a panic, and he lifted Rem again with the blanket. There were still signs of Halibel and Tia clashing at the other side of the tenement house.

However, this wasn't the time for that. It wasn't, and yet…

Subaru: "Tia! Halibel! Stop! That's enough!!"

He ran to the front and yelled at the two clashing people to stop fighting. Hearing that, Tia slowly looked his way while Halibel stayed cautious.

Both of them had the same person in their eyes, and he didn't know why they felt so moved.

Regardless, the madness in Tia's eyes settled down, and Halibel really was no longer preparing for combat.

Tia: "Huh…?"

Tia let out a stunned and dumbfounded gasp, and when he looked at Subaru and the others, her surroundings made her think back. She thought back about the marks of destruction, Rem suffering, Subaru looking desperate, and Halibel fighting.

Tia: "Huh…?"

Tia just kept letting that out, looking like she didn't know what had happened. Halibel quickly ran up to Subaru and Rem without paying attention to Tia.

Halibel: “How’s Rem-chan?”

Subaru: “She’s holding onto her stomach and it looks like she’s in pain! We have to get her to the doctor as soon as possible…”

Halibel: “I’ll carry her. It’ll be faster that way. Su-san, you hurry, too.”

Halibel immediately picked up Rem along with the blanket, as if snatching her, and he jumped across the street with an extremely light leap, going off to get the old family magic user.

Subaru sees Halibel jumping towards the moon, and he hurries after him.

Tia: “Wai…Wait…”

A shaky voice called out to him from behind. Subaru stops for a moment, and then he looked back.

He saw Tia standing alone, reaching her hand out for his back. She wasn’t close enough to reach. She just had the will to try to stop him.

Tia: “I…”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru couldn’t find the words to speak to Tia, who didn’t finish her sentence.

He gave in to his impatience. —Actually, he was probably feeling irritated as well. He had no time to stop moving. He had to run to Rem as soon as possible.

The frustration makes Subaru’s feet move, and he starts running. Leaving Tia behind.

Tia: “…”

He felt like Tia's hoarse voice faintly reached his earlobes. However, Subaru didn't stop, and he didn't tell Tia to follow him, either.

Was he angry at her? Of course, that was one reason.

Was she afraid of her? Of course, that was another reason.

However, the biggest reason he ran away is because he was scared of speaking to Tia, as he didn't know what to say.

???: "Your wife is fine. She's calmed down. …That was pretty dangerous for both the mother and the child."

In the clinic he ran into, the old magic user said that after finishing the treatment, which took a few hours.

Hearing the calmness of Rem's breathing as she lay down on the bed, Subaru felt relief from the bottom of his heart, and words were not enough to express his gratitude towards Halibel and the old magic user.

And then, he went next to Rem as she slept, and he decided to wait as long as it'd take for her to wake up.

Even if Halibel returned to the tenement house and tells him that Tia isn't there, even if the old magic user tells him to a take rest, he was going to wait as long as it'd take for Rem to open her eyes.

Rem: "Subaru…-kun…?"

Rem woke up, he hears her voice, and he hugged her while shedding tears, confirming that she was okay.

Peace within his heart was restored at last, and after that, they faced reality.

—Tia never returned to the tenement house again.

And so, the noisy, fun life of the strange neighbors at the tenement house met its end.

The three months after that went by within a blink of an eye.

—The predicted date for Rem to give birth was coming closer and closer.

Chapter 5:
10 Months

1

Rem: “Thank you very much for your help again. I must be going now, Doctor.”

???: “Take care of yourself as best as you can. The baby might be born at any time, after all. If you get carried here like last time, I may or may not be available.”

Rem: “Yes, I’ll take your words to heart.”

???: “Now go already.”

Rem bows, and the old magic user waved her goodbye while holding onto his blunt attitude.

At a glance, it did seem like a perfunctory response, but now that they knew the old magic user for a long time, the true intention of his blunt attitude was clear. Since there was sharpness in his words, you could tell that his skills and the care for his patients were genuine.

This relieved Subaru, and he didn’t mind bringing Rem to the healing magic user.

Subaru: “Still, my heart was pounding like a drum. Like the doctor said, the baby really can be born at any moment…”

Rem: “Jeez, you can’t be like that, Subaru-kun. If you’re always so nervous, your body won’t be able to take it when the time comes. Keep it in check, and prepare yourself calmly.”

Subaru: “R-Right, keep things in moderation and act calm.”

With her hand on her mouth, Rem giggles at Subaru, who was so nervous that his legs and arms made it apparent it while he walked. Rem’s stomach was now undoubtedly big, and she was approaching the last month of pregnancy.

There was a time when the mother and the child were in serious danger, but fortunately they were able to recover and the baby inside grew normally.

Without a doubt, that was all possible because of Rem's strong will and Subaru's constant support.

Ever since that night, Subaru has been even more devoted to Rem, and he did his best to support her by her side. His coworkers and friends said that he was great for it, but that wasn't true.

Doing something like this was just natural once you considered the fear and confusion he'd experienced that night, in that moment.

Just imagining the fear of possibly losing Rem and their child made his blood run cold.

Rem: "Thanks to you, I've been feeling so relaxed. I'm not sure if I I'll be able to live the way I did before after being cared for so much by my husband and giving birth to our child."

Subaru: "Right now, you have an important job of raising the baby with your stomach as the cradle. Until that's finished, leave all the little tasks to me. If something bothers you, don't take care of it yourself, be hard on me and teach me, like you always have."

Rem: "Okaaay."

Listening to Subaru's dramatic orders, Rem nods, acting playfully again.

Just like Rem said, Subaru has been doing most of the jobs in the house instead of her. Subaru's responsibility was to do as much cooking, laundry, and cleaning as possible.

Of course, at first he did make a lot of mistakes and it was clear that he was unskilled and lacked knowledge, but he was able to pull through with Rem's guidance and help from his female coworkers when he was having trouble.

And so now Subaru has attained house-husband skills that were good enough to Rem.

Subaru: “It’s all thanks to Rem being an excellent teacher.”

Rem: “No no. Subaru-kun’s already a fast learner and you’re good with your hands so it was fun to teach you. I’m sure that you’re suited for tasks at home, too.”

Subaru: “I just never had many opportunities to try them. I actually think I am, too.”

He just never had any opportunities. He knew that he had a high aptitude for things like cooking, laundry, and cleaning. At this point, it’s been proven that he has a high aptitude for being a husband on top of his sewing skills.

A group of Kararagi housewifes had even surrounded him unexpectedly and confirmed that he was doing fine.

Subaru: “I wonder what we should have tonight. Rem, what would you like to eat?”

Rem: “Let’s see…I’d like to eat something sour.”

Subaru: “That’s a really classic request for a pregnant woman. Are you sure that you want to eat something sour?”

Rem: “Well, I was craving for it when I got pregnant, but not so much anymore. It’s why I snuck in a lot of sour food back then.”

Subaru: “The cats out of the bag with that shocking truth—!”

There were many times when they’d have sour fruits or vinegared food. That being said, at the time even Rem wasn’t aware that she was pregnant, so he was still a bit puzzled.

Subaru: “I’ve heard that morning sickness gets terrible and you start craving sour food. With that considered, you haven’t had much morning sickness.”

Rem: “Now that you mention it, that might be true. Maybe it’s the works of me really wanting to avoid showing myself being weak with you around.”

Subaru: “You’ve got strong nerves of steel. I’m just glad that we weren’t too late…”

It was discovered that Rem was pregnant when she lost consciousness and was taken to the healing magic user. If she’d never lost consciousness and kept everything inside, they might’ve never noticed that she was pregnant until her stomach became unnaturally large.

Rem: “And I’m sure I would’ve done everything I could to not have you think that I got fat, hiding how big my stomach was.”

Subaru: “And I’m sure I would’ve kept being fooled so easily. That really just isn’t okay…”

Come to think of it, it’s a good thing they had figured it out while they could still recover from mistakes. And on the night that sparked the realization there was—

Subaru: “…”

Naturally and unavoidably, his memory approaches that night.

That made Subaru’s expression turn sour, but it was something unavoidable. In the memories of the time he spent in Banan town, she was there in those three months, no matter where he looked.

In the funnest, loudest days that were still vivid in his memory, there was Tia.

Rem: “Tia-sama…”

Subaru: “She’s nowhere to be found. I put up a notice at Clane’s, and Hal-san’s searching for her too, but he’s found nothing.”

Hearing Rem’s melancholic murmuring, Subaru speaks quickly in response. This showed that he didn’t want to talk about Tia anymore if possible. However, Rem shook her head at his request as she said,

Rem: “Subaru-kun, are you mad at Tia-sama?”

Subaru: “—. Yes, of course I am. Do you know how much danger you were in? You and the baby were in serious danger, and she’s the one at fault.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “And she even got the hell out before I could give her a piece of my mind, let alone hear her apologize. How could I not be mad after all that?”

—Ever since the final night, Tia completely disappeared from the town.

Subaru’s last memory of Tia was him running to the clinic, leaving her behind and watching her cower like a child.

When he came back to the tenement house, which was on the verge of collapsing, after confirming that Rem was fine, Tia had already disappeared from the area. Afterwards, even Halibel helped out and they looked all over the town, but in the end they never found out a trace of her as months three passed by.

Wondering where Tia ran off to, wondering where did that strange neighbor go—

All while never being allowed to see her as something more than a neighbor.

Rem: “If you ran into her and she apologized, would you forgive her?”

Subaru: “…Would you?”

Rem: “I definitely would. I love Tia-sama, after all.”

Subaru: “…”

Rem’s soft words were understandable. She’d forgiven Tia from the bottom of her heart.

Rem said the reason was that she loved Tia.

Subaru had nothing to say once she told him that. Even Subaru probably felt the same way as Rem did. He cared about Tia. He considered her a friend.

And yet, the unpleasant feeling Subaru felt inside was still there, and he didn't forgive Tia.

Subaru felt the same way as Rem did and shared the same memories with her. Perhaps he didn't forgive because of their difference in tolerance. Or maybe there was a different reason—

Subaru "…"

While talking, Subaru and Rem went back home.

Currently, they weren't living at the tenement house from before, but at a house near the town area through the courtesy of Riften. The tenement house had collapsed from the damage of that night. It never got rebuilt, and the spot was now a vacant lot of the tenement house.

Knowing that they'd lost their house, Riften was the one who put in a good word for them. He really did feel bad about depending on him all the time, but them having a baby made him forget about restraining himself.

The temporary residence was unexpectedly comfortable, and it was far more considerate of Rem's condition than the cramped tenement house. Perhaps this was also a result of Riften's thoughtfulness.

Rem: "But I feel it's still a bit too big for just the two of us."

So said Rem as she slowly sat down in the living room. Unlike the tenement house, which was pretty much one room as it was just divided, this house had more than enough of everything.

But even if they had a living room, a bedroom, and private room for each of them—

Subaru: “It’s probably a room for the child for when it’s born. This is Riften-san we’re talking about. I can see him thinking that far ahead.”

Rem: “You have a lot faith in Riften-sama, huh.”

Subaru: “He’s helped us out so much, after all. I’m not gonna lose trust in him just because he’s got a thing for cougars. I’ve got tons of favors I have to repay.”

Rem: “Yeah, me too. I need to repay the people at Temple Elementary School and the magic user doctor. And there’s also Halibel-sama…”

Subaru: “Hal-san, huh.”

Hearing Halibel’s name, Subaru knitted his brows as he put luggage in the closet.

Ever since the tenement collapsed and they started living in completely different places, they had much fewer chances to meet with Halibel. The days when they’d see each other like a family were over, and it seemed Halibel wasn’t a playboy anymore and was doing his best to fulfill his duty as a shinobi.

Subaru: “He must feel responsible for what happened to you.”

Rem: “Well…it wasn’t even Halibel-sama’s fault though.”

Subaru: “I mean, still. Tia suddenly changing…if there was something that triggered that, it had to have been the alcohol. He must feel down as the person that let it happen.”

Halibel especially was someone who’d jokingly say that he’d answer with his life if any problems ever came up. Even Subaru didn’t know if he blamed himself so much for him to do such a thing.

Honestly, it’s not like he blamed Halibel and wished that he’d stopped Tia before she poured herself alcohol. In reality, even Subaru wasn’t so childish that he’d blame him by telling him that, but it wouldn’t be strange if Halibel was frustrated with himself for it.

Thus, Halibel has been committed to finding where Tia ran off to.

Subaru: "…Rem, I'm gonna go shopping. Do you want anything?"

No matter what they did, talking about that night always made them feel depressed. Rem feeling down isn't good for the baby. To avoid this, Subaru forced the topic to change.

His thoughtfulness should've been obvious to Rem, but she shook her head as she said,

Rem: "No, I'm fine. And you don't have to ask everyday. I'm not so selfish that I'd ask for this and that."

Subaru: "But with how you are right now, I want you to be selfish more than anyone, y'know?"

Rem: "In that case, I want you to stay with me forever."

Subaru: "I'm guessing this is what you came up with after perfecting the delivery."

Subaru smiles wryly at Rem's cute pestering, and he stood up once he was ready to go shopping. He thought about having sour food for tonight's dinner, as Rem had requested.

Although it sounded like a joke, she probably had told him since she really did want to have it.

Subaru: "Okay, Rem, I'm leaving now. Behave and sit tight, alright?"

Rem: "Both the baby and I will behave."

After that interaction, Subaru left the house to go shopping. He headed towards the town area—however, he wasn't going straight to the grocery store. He was going to Clane's employment agency.

2

Clane: "Unfortunately, I have no idea where Tia-chan is. Sorry."

Clane, giving a reply that was now routine, bowed his head to Subaru, who showed up here on a regular basis. Subaru shook his head, letting him know that he didn't have to act apologetic.

This also had become a completely normal exchange.

Clane: "Everyone's worried about that girl. This goes without saying, but she was loved."

Subaru: "She was really skilled, right? Not that I still have any doubts or anything."

Clane: "She was the best. A girl her age having bounty hunting as her calling isn't something that should be told to everyone, though. Anyway, I'll keep searching."

Subaru: "I'm counting on you."

The missing person poster posted on the wall-the personal description on the request form was even edited by Subaru, and it captured Tia's traits pretty well. But her beauty that defied common sense still wasn't written on it.

Needless to say, Tia was so beautiful that one would think that she wasn't from this world.

Subaru: "The pain from my nose being smashed begs to differ, though."

Clane: "Nose being smashed?"

Subaru: "Nothing. Just talking to myself."

Clane waves his hand at Subaru, and he leaves the employment agency. He was genuinely worried about Tia in his own way. He was feeling more and more on edge.

It was as if he was the only one in the world who cared about Tia.

Subaru: "Ugh. This is ridiculous. It's not the time to be saying stuff like this. …I'll buy some green onions and forget about it."

Brushing off his sadness, Subaru bought some green onions, or rather, green omions displayed on the greengrocer. He places them into the bag and starts constructing tonight's menu inside his head.

Subaru: "I first bought green onions, so it should be the main ingredient…Actually, green onions are pretty flexible, so even if they aren't the focus of the meal, things will come together just fine."

With Rem and the ladies' guidance, Subaru had mastered plenty of recipes. He picks the best out of the many good bargains displayed at the shopping district.

Lemom, tometo, cabage, cooking sake, fish, eggs, rice, soy sauce, Tia, wheat flour—.

Subaru: "—Tia?"

While carefully selecting ingredients, a shadow appeared in Subaru's vision for just a moment, and he gasped. If he had he looked away thinking that he took her for someone else, her milky white hair would've disappeared into the crowd.

Although he saw it for just a moment, he was still sure of it. That was Tia's hair.

Subaru: "Tia! Wait, hey, wait—!"

That moment, Subaru yelled, and he started running frantically

Subaru slips through a gap in the crowd of people, and he ran after her desperately as she became distant. Tia moved smoothly, as if there was no one in her way, whereas Subaru bumped into other people.

But still, the distance between someone who walks and someone who runs closes eventually. Suddenly, Subaru loses sight of Tia's head in the surging crowd, and he looked everywhere while panicking—he saw the hem of her dress disappear into an alley.

Subaru: "Tia—!"

While praying that his eyes weren't deceiving him, Subaru tumbled into the alley. Then, after he kicked the hard ground and ran, he saw someone standing in the dark passageway.

She had a slender, delicate back, and she was pretty tall for a girl. That short, shoulder-length milky white hair couldn't belong to anyone else.

Subaru: "Hah…hah…Tia, I've been looking for you. Why'd you run away?"

Tia: "…"

Tia did not respond to Subaru's question. However, she had no intentions of running away anymore. Subaru understood that, so he dropped his luggage onto the ground while regaining his breath.

And then, he walks up to Tia as she stood in the darkness, and reached for her shoulder.

Subaru: "Come on, I know it's hard for us to see each other. But at least look my way."

Holding onto her shoulder dressed in black, Subaru spoke to Tia in a somewhat blunt manner. The unpleasantness of the trouble from that night blackened out the happiness from seeing her.

If she at least had an expression that made it look like she was going through rough times, maybe he could be more honest.

While hoping for that, Subaru turned her around and—

Tia: "—Die."

He was hit by a violent wind of bloodlust head on.

3

Halibel: "Su-san! Are you here?!"

Rem: "Halibel-sama?!"

The door to the house gets thrown open, and Rem gasps in surprise upon hearing a voice that came in. And then she saw that it was a black haired wolf man that entered the house—it was Halibel.

It was a face Rem hadn't seen for a whole month. However, although it was the first time in a while that they'd seen each other, there wasn't a welcoming atmosphere. Halibel looked around the house as he said,

Halibel: "Rem-chan, I know it's been a while, but this is an emergency. Where's Su-san?"

Rem: "Subaru-kun is out shopping for dinner. He should be coming back very soon…"

Halibel: "Agh, so we missed each other! This is terrible! Not good, this isn't good…"

Halibe scratches his head and he couldn't calm down, making him sound antsy. Rem senses that he was acting unusual, and she stood up while holding onto her baby belly as she said,

Rem: "Halibel-sama, what happened? If it's something that has to do with Subaru-kun, please tell me."

Halibel: "Ah, Rem-chan, you really shouldn't push yourself too hard. I could've been more clear, but telling you straight up that Su-san's in danger would be…or wait, maybe I could just tell you?"

Rem: "Halibel-sama?"

Halibel: "Rem-chan, I told you this before, right? Do you remember? Because of my nose, I know that there might be someone going after Su-san."

Halibel's question makes Rem's eyes widen. Although it wasn't entirely correct, most of the parts were accurate perceptions.

Someone might be going after Subaru—that's what Rem told Halibel after guessing what Tia's goal was when she tried to harm her and Subaru.

She told him about the miasma surrounding Subaru—that is, the possibility of having the witch's scent.

Rem: "Yes, I did say. that However, that's irrelevant…and Tia-sama's actually going for me, not Subaru, and that's also probably a misunderstanding…"

Halibel: "No, that's not quite right. It wasn't a misunderstanding, and it was relevant. Dang it, I'm not being clear again. Right, we were mistaken. We were "wrong"."

Rem: "Wrong? Wrong…about what…?"

Halibel: "About who the culprit really is, and about who Tia-chan really is."

Rem gasps at the unexpected statement. When Halibel opened his eyes, which were usually closed like slit-eyes, there was heavy regret in his revealed black pupils as he said,

Halibel: "It's my mistake. I have no excuses. It's a total failure. I miscalculated everything. Because of that, we might have a dangerous situation on our hands."

Rem: "I-I don't get it, Halibel-sama. Please explain everything from the top."

Halibel: "—It all started approximately one year ago. Thequest for Zarestia's bed was the beginning."

Halibel listens to Rem's question, and the details he talked about were like a bolt from the blue yet again.

Zarestia—Rem also remembered that name.

It was one of the four powerful great spirits, known as The Four Great Spirits; an entity that lived in "Zarestia's Bed" located in the west side of Kararagi.

But as for what that quest started—

Halibel: "Zarestia's bed is a famous place wind blows, killing anyone near it. At first, the investigation team application was brushed off as a reckless challenge for daredevils, but…”

Rem: “But?”

Halibel: “Who knows if it was a miracle or something, but there’s one person who managed to return alive. If it had just been a survivor, then the story would’ve ended as someone who barely escaped death, but…”

Judging from the way Halibel recited the story, she guessed that it didn’t end there.

And then she also guessed what Halibel was trying to confirm just earlier when he was feeling frantic. The moment Rem connected the dots in her mind, her eyes opened wide in terror.

Halibel: “The girl who survived was someone seeking revenge and she sought Zarestia’s power out of hatred for the Witch Cult.”

4

—A wind blew.

And it was probably sharp enough to easily shred Subaru’s body into bits and pieces.

Or maybe being cut up by that wind and turning into bright red meat was Subaru’s punishment as someone who turned his back on everything.

Or at least, that’s what he thought in that moment.

Tia: “—What are you spacing out for? Are you stupid?!”

Subaru: “Whoa?!”

He gets grabbed by the scruff of his neck, and he was flung back at once without being able to resist. Then, he bounced on the ground, and he rolled, rolled, and rolled without defending himself. And then, when Subaru looked in front of him while grimacing at the pain, he saw that the one who flung him was—

Subaru: “T-Tia, is that you?”

Tia: “Not like there could be any other beauties here right now other than myself. …Well, that’s what I’d like to say, but I’m not so sure if I could.”

Bending forward lightly, Tia turns just her head back—both that rough tone and the way she treated Subaru rudely were just like her, no doubt about it.

And as for what Tia’s statement meant, he’d find out immediately with the scene right before his eyes.

Subaru: “…”

Standing in front of Tia, who threw Subaru, was another Tia.

Two Tias with the same face and the same appearance were facing each other. Their looks were completely identical. The one difference between them was their dresses; they were clearly different in that one was black and one was white.

The Tia dressed in black tried to kill Subaru, while the one dressed in white protected him.

In other words—

Subaru: “Black Tia is an enemy, and white Tia is an ally—!”

Tia: “You aren’t wrong, but I don’t like the way you put it!”

Hearing Subaru shout with his face lying on the ground, white Tia stepped forward immediately as she muffled her voice. She shot her thin body like a bullet and came at the opponent who had the same face as her.

Using the power of her beast-like body, white Tia mercilessly strikes black Tia’s face with her hand—that instant, black Tia put a smile on her incomprehensible, demonic, beautiful face.

Black Tia: “—Die.”

White Tia: “—!”

White Tia avoids the bite attack by quickly jumping up. However, the invisible attacks went after white Tia, shot into the sky one after another. White Tia kicks the wall, jumps diagonally, like jumping in a triangular motion, and she dodged, dodged and dodged.

White Tia: “Why you…! You’re persistent!”

Even if she jumped up walls, Kararagi buildings were short in general. White Tia quickly landed on top of the alley and angrily swung her arm at the ground. That moment, white Tia struck down with an attack similar to black Tia’s bite attack—however, it was clearly weak; white Tia’s wasn’t as good as hers.

Black Tia dodges it by quickly jumping away, as if it was inevitable.

White Tia: “Damn it! You’re me, and yet you’re stronger—!”

Black Tia: “—Die.”

Black Tia did nothing but speak bloodthirsty words to white Tia, who was furious with rage.

However, the difference in strength was showing in their few attacks. If they kept fighting like this one on one, eventually white Tia would be at a disadvantage.

Even Subaru knew that as someone who almost got into danger just by watching. Therefore—

Subaru: “—Look at me, fake Tia!”

Black Tia: “…”

Subaru gets up, and he was close to the wall—he jumped at his hand bag that had been blown away onto the ground by the wind, and he was throwing things that were in it.

However, unfortunately the first thing that went flying parabolically was a green omion. The long, green vegetable spun, lost momentum, and fell to the ground before it reached black Tia.

That pointless resistance makes black Tia turn her attention towards Subaru. Above him, white Tia was also staring at Subaru, wondering what he was doing.

Still, this was fine. This was fine.

He wasn't hoping to damage her or anything. He had no weapons, after all. If he could at least create a situation where it was a superficial 2 on 1, if he could at least make up for white Tia's misses—

Subaru: "…"

Black Tia: "Goo…oo…"

Just from being stared at, Subaru felt his mind freeze as it creaked.

Black Tia's eyes were empty. There was nothing you could classify as emotion, and nothing you could classify as will. In them was darkness—nothing but jet-black bloodlust that embodied it.

Bloodlust, and that's it. As scary as it was, black Tia had nothing but bloodlust.

So, black Tia's actions were the very definition of simple. The best actions just to kill were simple. And at this very moment, she didn't want white Tia's blood, but Subaru's.

Black Tia: "Damn…you…"

Sensing death being wished upon him, Subaru swung his arm as he resisted the fear entangling his body. However, his resistance was all for naught in the end. The bottle he held onto couldn't do much. It didn't hit black Tia; it felt onto the ground before him and broke loudly. Everything spilled out.

—That moment, black Tia's expression changed.

Black Tia: "—?!"

Subaru: "What?"

Suddenly, black Tia opened her eyes and stared at the bottle that fell before her. There was a broken bottle—a bottle of cooking sake just rolling and spilling out everything.

Subaru: “It’s just alcohol, you know?”

Black Tia: “…”

Black Tia couldn’t respond to Subaru’s dumbfoundment. Her cheeks stiffen. She covered her face with her hands, stepped back, and she was letting out a groan full of pain.

Black Tia was so afraid of that abomination-so afraid of the alcohol that it felt like her heart was being torn apart.

White Tia: “—Now’s my chance!!”

Swooping down from the building’s roof, Tia strikes with a dynamic kick.

Black Tia, being defenseless, eats a direct hit from the kick, and she was blown away with a rough somersault. She rolls, crashes into the wall, and ended up sprawling on the ground in the alley.

Subaru: “Did that do it?!”

White Tia: “Hah! When she suddenly stopped focusing, though I don’t know why she did, her fate was sealed! Now I will achieve retribution with my own hands…ew?!”

Subaru cheered and white Tia spoke triumphantly at the same time. White Tia was going to go after black Tia, who collapsed, but she suddenly stopped and screamed.

White Tia opened her eyes wide at the alcohol right behind her that soaked her feet.

Tia: “~~?! What?! What’s this?! Ew…ewww!!”

Subaru: “Not you too! What’s the big deal?! It’s just alcohol…”

White Tia was showing the same reaction, or maybe an even stronger rejection, that black Tia had. Judging from that unusual situation, Subaru understood that their rejection towards alcohol was not just a matter of disliking it.

However, before Subaru could investigate the matter, something unbelievable happened.

Black Tia: “Goo…ooo…”

Subaru: “Huh? Her face is disfigured…no, it’s blurry…?”

Black Tia groaned and slowly got up—her looks slowly fell apart, and they were coming off. Under it, there was a face that didn’t look like Tia at all. The harshness of her eyes was similar, but her unhealthy eye bags were what stood out more.

She had a pale face, and her hair color went from milky white to dark brown. Even her body shrunk; it was as if a spell had been casted on her, transforming her.

Subaru: “Hey…!”

That alone was enough to shock him quite a bit, however something even more shocking made Subaru’s eyes widen.

—He saw two shining protruding objects sticking out on the kneeling girl’s head.

Subaru: “Horns…? So you’re…an Oni?”

Black Tia: “…”

That was the conclusion Subaru came to after seeing the two horns sticking out on her forehead. A former member/descendant of the Oni race, like Rem. Although the woman seemed anguished over the conclusion, she let out a sharp sigh in vexation.

Black Tia: “—Die! Die! Die!”

Wrapped in a storm of overflowing bloodlust, Subaru immediately protected his face with his hands as he felt the pressure. However, she still focused on satisfying her bloodlust, and she spreaded her arms left and right, conjuring wind.

Buildings to the left and right of the alley were gouged by the wind she conjured making them collapse. Half of the buildings' supports were gone, and the buildings collapsed instantly. The alley was going to be buried soon.

Subaru: "Shit! Hey, Tia…ahh, damn it!"

Tia: "…What…what…what is this? It's on me…eek…"

Right after the buildings collapsed, Subaru called Tia's name. However, Tia was still shocked from having breathed in the smell of alcohol. Subaru was forced to carry her slender body, and he ran back.

Suabru: "Gaaaah—!"

Despite the collapsing noises nearing him and his back aching, Subaru ran straight through with all his energy. And right after he got out of the cramped alley, the destruction was over, and the alley was completely buried in scrap wood.

There were clouds of dust in the wind, and people in the main street rushed over to see what all the big commotion was all about. They immediately reached out for Subaru and Tia, who collapsed at the alley entrance.

Subaru: "She's…"

With help, Subaru stands up, and he looks back at the alley crushed by the destruction. Nobody other than Subaru and Tia rushed out to this alley. However, it was highly unlikely for the girl to have gotten stuck and crushed in the destruction in the first place.

She got away. The mysterious girl who could produce the same horn as Rem and had the same face as Tia.

Subaru: "Who…the heck…was that girl…?"

With his sleeve, Subaru wiped his face dirty with dust and sweat, and he muttered that while panting lightly. The girl who got away wasn't going to give him the answer to his question.

If there were someone else who'd give Subaru an answer—

Subaru: "—I can count on you, right? Tia."

Tia: "…Whatever."

Tia, having finally recovered from the shock of the alcohol, replied unwillingly with a sour look.

Hearing a reply characteristic of her, Subaru let out a wry smile of inappropriate relief.

5

Rem: "—Subaru-kun! Thank goodness you're alright!"

Subaru: "Woah, careful!"

Subaru arrives home, and he quickly caught Rem, who jumped at him at the entranceway. Even if she jumped at him with such force, hugging his wife was still a piece of cake.

That being said, he did want her to keep her expression of love in moderation since she was in the last month of pregnancy.

Subaru: "Rem, I'm glad you're happy to see me home, but if you keep this up, my lifespan will be shortened every time I get back. Think about the baby a bit more."

Rem: "I-I'm sorry. It's just that I heard you were in danger and…"

Subaru: "You heard that I was in danger? From who?"

Although Subaru talked to Rem kindly, he grimaced at her reply. The news got around to her too quickly. It has been only about an hour since Subaru got in danger. She shouldn't be informed about the news.

In fact, Subaru had planned on telling her about it after calming down.

Halibel: “From me, Su-san.”

Subaru: “…So you were here, Hal-san, No wonder she found out about it so quickly.”

His suspicions vanished after Halibel showed himself in the corridor. As a shinobi, Halibel could know what the whole town is doing through adequate means. Subaru suspected that he’d have his clones lurk all around the town whenever push came to shove.

Subaru: “But don’t worry Rem by telling her so quick. This is a very important time.”

Halibel: “Sorry about that, but it was unexpected for me, too. I didn’t expect Su-san to get attacked at this exact time. You should tell her that you’re alright, since she found out that you got attacked. Don’t you feel bad for Rem-chan?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun, please don’t blame Halibel-sama. Halibel-sama stopped me when I panicked and tried to run over.”

Halibel: “Yep yep.”

Halibel made an expression that showed he was backing up Rem. Instead of detesting his behavior, for a while Subaru felt like he wasn’t being himself, and he missed the timing to go off on him.

Besides, this wasn’t the time to be angry. Rem has the best gift of all, after all.

Subaru: “Honestly, right now I have a bunch of things I wanna talk about, like about what happened…”

Rem Yes. Please tell us. We were very worried.”

Subaru: “But not yet. First, I have someone I want you to see.”

Rem, who had gotten ready to listen, had a question mark above her upon hearing Subaru’s statement. Subaru smiles at her, turns around to the sliding door behind him, and spoke.

Subaru: “How long are you going to hide? Come in.”

???: “…”

At first, there was no response at all to Subaru. However, after a few moments of silence, the person nervously showed their face, probably because they couldn’t handle the tension. The one who slowly showed her head beside the sliding door was a girl who’d disappeared 3 months ago—

Rem: “—Tia…-sama?”

Tia: “Long…time…no see…”

Rem: “Tia-sama!”

Realizing that it’s Tia, Rem jumps at her with a emotional look. Amazed by her energy, Tia panics and catches her, just like the catch from earlier.

Then, when Tia slowly let Rem down at the entranceway.

Tia: “B-Be…Be more careful! Have you forgotten that you’re pregnant?! If I’d stepped aside, it would’ve been terrible!”

Rem: “I had faith that you wouldn’t do that.”

Tia: “M-Mmm…mmmm…”

Tia let out a groan as she bit her lip in vexation over Rem’s affectionate look. After that, she suddenly let out a sigh of defeat and looked down at Rem’s stomach, which was right next to her.

And her stomach was far larger than what Tia remembered.

Tia: “…It’s about to be born, huh.”

Rem: “Yes. Our deadline with Tia-sama is coming.”

Tia: “…”

Rem joked around in anticipation that Tia had already completely forgotten about the deadline. And, in fact, her anticipation was correct.

There’s no way Tia could kill Rem. Plus—

Tia: “Rem, about that, I have something to tell you.”

Rem: “You…need to tell me something?”

Tia: “You, as well as Su and Hal.”

Tia said that not just to Rem, but to Subaru, who was next to her, and Halibel, who was in the corridor, as well. With a little anxiety showing on her serious face, she said,

Tia: “I…I finally figured out what I have to do. I want to have a good talk about that with you guys.”

6

The four of them move to the living room of the temporary Natsuki house, and they each gathered at a desk, something that hasn’t happened in a while.

And so, for the first time in three months, everyone gathered in one room—however, this wasn’t going to be a fun, noisy dinner.

This was a necessary meeting to discuss more important matters.

Tia: “I…”

Tia, sitting straight with her hands on her lap, was the first one to speak. Although she wasn’t sure how to continue, she said,

Tia: “I…for retribution…no, to get my stolen light sphere back, I came to you guys. You remember that, right?”

Subaru: “Yep, I do. You gave us a real bad time in the beginning, after all.”

Rem: “Yes, that’s when you attacked me and Subaru-kun in the streets at night.”

Subaru and Rem answer Tia, who sought a confirmation. However, half of their reply was right, while the other half was wrong; Subaru was right, while Rem made a mistake.

He thought it was far too obvious, and there was nothing he'd confirmed directly, but—

Subaru: "Rem, Tia isn't the one who attacked us in the streets on that night. Tia only beat me up at the tenement house."

Rem: "What? But that would mean…"

Halibel: "Yeah, that's the first misunderstanding…I was also far too careless."

It was Halibel who nodded instead of Rem, as she was confused. It seemed Halibel had quickly realized the truth of this misunderstanding, being the one who actually fought with the attacker that night.

—He'd realized that on that night, it was black Tia who attacked Subaru and Rem on their way home, and that they never came across the offender again up until today.

Subaru: "Black Tia is called black Tia for convenience, and her face looks just like Tia's. And it's not just her face, that goes for her appearance too-everything. That's why there was a misunderstanding. Tia didn't deny it, either."

Tia: "I really did beat up Su, and even I had no idea there was someone out there with the same face as me."

Hearing Subaru's statement, Tia gave something that sounded like an excuse as she looked away.

Of course, this wasn't all on Tia. If they'd talked to Tia more to confirm the truth, they would've immediately noticed the inconsistency.

That never happened because they ran away from seriously facing the issue of the girl from that night, using their fear of ruining their relationship with Tia as an excuse.

Halibel: “It’s not Su-san’s fault. I should’ve caught on faster with that “Shinigami” name.”

Seeing Subaru hang his head, Halibel said that with his unlit kiseru in his mouth. He wasn’t acting himself today; his ears were bent, as if he was feeling down.

Subaru: “So…”Shinigami” was a hint?”

Halibel: “Not a hint, but the answer. —Sure, there’s no one here that goes by the nickname “Shinigami”. However, there is the most famous “Shinigami”. That was the missing piece to the puzzle.”

Subaru: “The most famous “Shinigami”……”

Halibel: “…”The Most Beautiful Shinigami”.”

Halibel said that as if he was mentioning someone revered.

The words he put together didn’t make sense to Subaru. Still, Rem, looking at Tia with her eyes opened wide, moved her lips with a surprised look.

Rem: ““The Most Beautiful Shinigami”, Zarestia…”

Subaru: “Zarestia? Zarestia…wait a second…”

He’d heard the name before. As Subaru began saying that, the scene of the memory came back to him vividly. He’d heard of it a few months ago at Clane’s employment agency.

Before he was referred to his job at Magoji palace, Subaru happened to find an application—the details written on it were “A Search For Zarestia’s Bed”. It was an application for challenging a great spirit.

In other words, the name of the great spirit that lived in that bed was—

Subaru: “Zarestia, the Great Spirit.”

Halibel: “—That’s Tia-chan’s real name.”

Halibel's level voice went over Subaru's that sounded like it was forced out of his lips.

The conclusion was way too out of the blue. Even if this was the truth, even the false name was too simple to begin with. They should've laughed about it, and yet nobody in the living room was laughing.

Tia, the one pointed out to be a great spirit, wasn't laughing, either. She simply let out a sad sigh as she said,

Tia: "I will say this now. I, as you guys have pointed out, am Zarestia."

Rem: "Tia-sama…"

Tia: "However, I'm not all of Zarestia. I'm half…no, not even half. I'm merely a part."

Subaru: "What do you mean by that?"

Tia, putting her hand to her chest, admitted that she was a great spirit. However, there were a lot of parts missing in her explanation that followed, so Subaru threw a question back at her in confusion.

Rem was the one who dealt with the mind-boggling parts of Tia's explanation.

Rem: "It's related to the story about the investigation team Halibel-sama talked about, isn't it?"

Subaru: "Investigation team…the application one? But Clane said that it was a failure."

Tia: "A failure? Was it really? Those guys that snuck into my bed and stole what's most important to me…they stole the light sphere so easily!"

Tia, raising her voice, firmly and emotionally denied Subaru's statement.

Light sphere-that's the name of the thing Tia kept insisting that it'd been stolen, and she went after Rem for it.

Rem had no idea what the light sphere was, and even the very existence of it had been suspicious to her. And now, that finally would be a true key.

Subaru: “So what is this light sphere really? What are you looking for?”

Tia: “It’s my source of power. It’s a contained stone that stores my power.”

Subaru: “Stone? A stone…wait, but if you’re a spirit, then…”

Hearing Tia’s lacking explanation, the answer starts to form in Subaru’s head. A stone that is necessary in order to remain in the world for spirits who form their bodies by using mana—

Subaru: “—So a Yorishiro! A Yorishiro is needed so that a spirit could remain in this world! That’s what the light sphere is!”

Now sure of it, Subaru shouted as he snapped his fingers.

Mana is necessary in order for a spirit to materialize and act. If it’s a great spirit, a vast amount of mana is needed. A Yorishiro, something that’s needed to store it, is exactly what Tia’s light sphere is.

Subaru: “That got stolen…So that’s why Tia came to get it back.”

Rem: “But how’s that related to me? I…well…I have no idea what the light gem is. I didn’t know we were close to the place Tia-sama had lived in, either…”

Despite being told about what the light sphere really is, Rem’s doubt deepened even further. However, unlike Rem, who knitted her brows in confusion, the conditions to guess the answer were satisfied for Subaru.

He remembered when black Tia’s looks came off and a changed person showed up in the attack from earlier.

Since Subaru now knew what the light gem and Tia were, the unclear meaning of that scene lead to a guess forming in his head.

If that girl who showed up in the end is the one who stole Tia's light gem, then—

Subaru: "—Black Tia had horns. They were Oni horns."

Rem: "Oni…horns? Could that mean…"

Subaru: "It's why Tia said that she'd sniffed out Rem with her nose at first with a smug look on her face. Tia mistook Rem's blood…she mistook her Oni blood for another Oni and found her."

Tia: "That's how it is. …I can't believe myself. That was pathetic."

Rem finds out the truth, and her eyes opened wide.

The complicated circumstances surrounding Tia introduced that girl to Subaru and Rem. And then that misunderstanding dragging on caused all the encounters that had happened up to this day.

They couldn't jump to a conclusion and blame Tia for it, calling her a troublemaker. Not if they didn't know just how desperate Tia was, as she'd lost something that made up more than half of who she was.

Subaru: "So basically, the light sphere, Zarestia's Yorishiro…that was stolen, and if we punish that Oni girl, the problem will be solved…Oh, but wait…"

Right before reaching a conclusion, Subaru tilted his head thinking that something was off. Although his guess was pretty close to the truth, one important part was missing an explanation.

Tia going after Subaru and Rem was a mistake by her, but why did black Tia attack them first—?

Halibel: "About that, I have one more piece of information I'd like to provide."

Subaru: "I can only feel like it's something bad since you're telling us now."

Halibel: "I hate to break it to you, but you're not going to like what you're about to hear."

Seeing Subaru with an uncomfortable look on his face, Halibel scratched his head as he gave a wry smile.

Halibel: "So, about the girl who stole something important to Tia-chan, while I was sneaking around behind the scenes, I kinda learned about the detailed circumstances"

Subaru: "I take it you told Rem about this on top of investigation team thing in private, right?"

Rem: "I-I only heard about this just now. I'm not hiding anything from you. It's already far too clear who matters the most to me between Halibel-sama and Subaru-kun!"

Halibel: "That…makes me sad, but I'm moving on. It'll be quick."

This was also going to be news to Rem, who'd been informed about this and that before she came home. After Subaru nodded at Halibel's statement, he said "Go ahead" as he urged him to continue.

Halibel: "It's about the light gem. The girl who stole it joined in on the great spirit bed quest to obtain that…But she wasn't in it for the light gem as much as she was for the great spirit's power."

Subaru: "She wanted the power of a great spirit? Dang, that's so reckless…for what purpose?"

Halibel: "Revenge, probably. —Revenge on the Witch Cult, the ones who burned her home."

Subaru: "The Witch Cult…!"

The words Subaru had avoided up to this point came up, making him tremble.

Although the group wasn't directly involved, they were directly connected to Subaru's worst memories. Not only that, but he had extremely mixed feelings after hearing that the girl viewed the witch cult as enemies.

Desiring the power of a great spirit to get revenge on the witch cult, she easily got her hands on the light sphere. Using the light sphere in a certain way, she sought revenge on the witch cult—

Subaru: "—Ah"

Then, after thinking it over this much, he hit the answer to his previous question.

The offender's goal is to get revenge on The Witch Cult; she wanted the light sphere only for the power to do that. And then, having obtained the power, she looked for the Witch Cult and found the witch's scent in Banan town.

Her target for revenge, the one she was actually going after on that night was—

Subaru: "—So it was me."

Halibel: "The avenger went for Su-san, whereas Tia-chan went for Rem-chan. We didn't know that, so all these complicated misunderstandings happened."

Halibel's conclusion cleared the doubt Subaru had in his mind, just like that.

A mixup in targets, and thinking that the two culprits were one person. That is what complicated all these problems and created an incomprehensible situation.

Subaru: "I knew things were getting mixed up. But with this, it all makes sense."

Subaru accepted the revealed truth, and he put words together as he cleared his mind.

He felt sympathy for the offending woman because of the Witch Cult, her target for revenge.

Subaru: “But it’s a mistake for the offender to go after me. Her hatred for the Witch Cult…I get it. But killing me won’t help her get over her grudge. Stealing Tia’s light gem also does nothing.”

Halibel: “There’s just something about the way you put it, but you’re right. While I do feel bad for her, we’re gonna punish her and get the light sphere back. For anything else that happens, we’ll just let the situation play itself out.”

Subaru: “I imagine that’s what we’ll have to do”

Subaru also nodded and agreed with Halibel’s conclusion.

Even with all of his questions answered, he never gave up on arriving at a conclusion. Rem’s safety and Tia’s feelings were more important to him than the wish of an avenger whose name he didn’t even know. In fact, now that the situation was clear, he wanted to come to a solution without any hard feelings.

Subaru: “If that happens, we can all…”

—After everything’s taken care of, we can all eat dinner together, just like old times.

Tia: “—That’s not possible.”

His outlook was interrupted and denied by Tia, who stood up.

The cold obstinance of Tia’s words brought everyone’s attention towards her.

When she crossed her arms as she saw their eyes on her, she looked away from all of them as she said,

Tia: “I’m sorry. I can’t do it. Once I get my light sphere back, I have to return to my nest. I can’t live with you guys. Nothing can change that.”

Rem: “But…why? I…Wait, if you’re worried about what happened before, it’s alright! I know about your circumstances now. So..”

Tia: “That’s not it, Rem. I’m an entity that can’t coexist with you all.”

Tia shook her head disapprovingly at Rem, who stopped sitting straight and pleaded with her. Neither Rem nor Subaru could tell what were the true intentions of her attitude, as she seemed distressed.

However—

Halibel: “Suspecting that Tia-chan is Zarestia, there’s one part that just doesn’t make sense. It’s the one thing that doesn’t make sense. It’s inconsistent.”

Halibel, crossing his thick arms, said that while squinting his slit-eyes even more than usual. Irritated by his suggestive way of speaking, Subaru got very angry.

Subaru: “What are you trying to say, Hallibel? Don’t beat around the bush. Spit it out.”

Halibel: “…Zariestia is a “Shinigami”, a murderous great spirit. Anyone who enters her hideout gets killed indiscriminately. Even all the anecdotes out there are stories about murder. So, what’s that have to say about Tia?”

Rem: “Well…the stories told are just messed up, I mean, they have to be, right?”

Hearing Halibel’s remarks, Rem shows a rare scene of her flaring up irritatedly. Even Subaru felt the same way as Rem. But—

Tia: “They aren’t messed up. Right now, I am the one who’s messed up.”

Rem: “Tia-sama!”

Tia: “Hal’s right, I’m a spirit that’s only good for killing…no, it’s not that I’m only good for killing; I’m a spirit that only thinks about killing. That’s how I became this trash that got most of her power stolen, left with nothing but the thought of killing.”

During those days, there were many times when Tia would say dangerous things. He never thought that they were her true feelings, but every now and then she did show that sort of great spirit part of her on her vicious face. —But now, all she had left in her was envy.

Tia: “If I get the light sphere back, I will go back to being a spirit that can only think about killing. I’ll have to kill Rem, Su, Hal, the townspeople, everyone. So, I can’t live with you all. So, this is the end. This is it.”

Rem: “No…Tia-sama, can’t we…Can’t we…do something about it?”

Tia: “…”

Tia shook her head at Rem, who clung to her. Rem, becoming teary-eyed, looks back at Subaru and Halibel. However, Subaru had no words for her sorrow. Halibel had his eyes closed and was grinding on the kiseru in his mouth with his teeth, feeling sorry for his own powerlessness.

No one could do something for Tia. And even if Tia were to give up on the light gem, the avenger is already set on going after Subaru.

And so—

Tia: “I will get the light sphere back. I won’t give up, no matter what.”

Rem: “…Ah”

With Tia’s very determined declaration, Rem grew weak and sank down on the spot. Tia looks down in a bit of a sad way, and she closed her eyes tight.

After that, she gently put her hand to Rem’s large stomach as she said,

Tia: “—Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

She says those few words as she rubbed Rem’s stomach. That was the only thing she did. An action that meant nothing at all—right after he had that thought, Rem’s expression changed.

Rem put her hand on her own stomach, and she quietly let out a "Huh" in a broken voice.

Rem: "Wh-What…What did you just do…Tia-sama…?"

Tia: "Time's up, Rem. That's it for our promise. …Although, maybe there never was any promise, since this was my mistake."

Tia murmurs self-deprecatingly, and Rem slowly crouched down in front of her. Seeing her hold onto her stomach that had been rubbed by Tia, Subaru jumps at Rem with a pale face.

Subaru: "Rem? Rem, are you alright?! Hey, Tia, what did you do to Rem?!"

Tia: "I just rubbed it. It's the truth. But, now that the shackles for Rem's mind are off, the child has realized that everything's ready."

Although nobody had known about Tia's involvement, even Subaru understood what had just happened.

Composure fades from Rem's facial expression, and she starts to breath a bit heavily. Her face clearly enduring pain and her holding onto her own baby belly meant that—

Subaru: "—She's going into labor!"

Tia: "Until the child is born, I can't lay a hand on her. That was our promise."

Subaru's eyes open wide, realizing that the time has finally come. In front of him, Tia tilted her head at Rem as she said,

Tia: "Becase we had that promise, I delayed this moment for as long as I could. …Both the mother and the child were way too stubborn."

Rem: "Tia…-sama…"

Rem tried to stop Tia, who started to step back with a smile. However, her stomach pain didn't let her, and Tia distanced herself without her fingers ever reaching her.

Tia, who jumped back lightly, opens the sliding door, and then she ran out to the garden.

Subaru: “Tia!”

Tia: “I’ll deal with my unfinished business myself. —If I fail, Hal-san, you know what to do.”

Tia looked back in the middle of the garden and said that with a smile on her face.

Hearing what sounded like one’s last words, Halibel curled his laps, as he was trusted with the matters to follow when his name was called.

Halibel: “It makes no sense for you to take a battle when you know you have slim chances of winning. You didn’t say anything about wanting help, either. Is this the pride of a great spirit or something?”

Tia: “It’s nothing big like that. —I’m strong, and I don’t plan on losing.”

Tia responded to Halibel’s comments like that with a refreshing smile.

After that, Tia finally looked at Subaru, and then at Rem.

Subaru: “How should I put this…This isn’t very like you.”

Rem: “Tia-sama…”

Tia: “About that day…well…I’m sorry. That was my fault.”

Tia awkwardly apologized to Rem while scratching her cheek with her finger. She said nothing more than that, and yet she looked even more nervous than when she revealed the truth about herself.

And then, after saying that, Tia added one comment with a bright expression.

Tia: “A kid! Give birth to an energetic one. A very energetic one.”

Right after Tia said that, a wind surrounded her. It was not a raging wind; it gently wrapped Tia, who was in the middle of the garden, and it urged her towards the sky.

They had no time to stop her. Tia got on the wind, and she rose at once. And then, Rem reached her hand out for Tia-for her friend as she faded away, and she desperately strained his voice.

It wouldn't reach her. Neither her voice nor her hand reached Tila while she faded into the sky approaching night.

Rem: "Tia…-sama…"

Subaru: "Tia—!!"

Subaru called Tia's name as she faded into the sky instead of Rem, whose voice died as it cracked.

Still, Tia didn't look back. She didn't stop, either.

Then, Tia steadily went up in the sky, going out of their sights.

"…"

The wind blowing against the garden, against the house, against Subaru and the others, died out. This meant that Tia went far away. So far away that she couldn't be interfered with at all.

Subaru: "Damn it…! That fool!"

Rem: "Subaru…-ku…"

Subaru: "I know! Rem, I know how you…feel…but…"

I want to chase Tia. He understood those feelings of hers so much that it hurt.

However, there was something more important to deal with right now. He had bring Rem to the clinic.

Rem: "—Ah…ku…"

When that crossed his mind, serious pain went across Rem's face.

Subaru, with both of his hands, lifted Rem, who panted because of the endless waves of the pain of birth.

Subaru: “Hal-san! Please take care of all that stuff!”

Halibel: “Got it, leave it to me.”

It was an unspecific instruction that was far too vague. However, Halibel accepted it without putting in any objection, and he disappeared as if melding into the shadows.

He needed to tell the old magic user about the situation before bringing Rem to the clinic. On top of that, there were mountains of things he wanted Halibel to do.

Subaru: “Rem, I’ll take you to the clinic as soon as possible. Please trust me with…both of your lives.”

Rem: “…”

Rem nods deeply in Subaru’s arms, and then he slowly stepped outside.

Under the variegated sky approaching night mixed with blue and orange, Subaru ran as fast as he could with his pregnant wife in his arms.

Now…just for now he thought only about Rem and ran and ran along the road to the clinic.

—Without realizing that, in a sense, this was another form of running away.

Interlude: Death Anniversary

1

—What erupted when she found that women were flames of unbearable rage.

Before the avenger became an avenger, she had lived in a village where “strays” gathered.

Onis are a race species. Rumors have it that their scarce kind created a hidden village somewhere, barely scraping by, but that was not the case for her. When she was born, it was a child and her parent, and after her mother died, she had nothing but her own life.

The place this girl arrived at was a village where “strays” gathered.

Demi-humans with baggage and people who committed crime and left human villages lived there; not many decent people lived there. Because of that, she didn’t get rejected, as she was a high and proud Oni, and was accepted as a member of the village, allowed to live on.

As someone that had never lived with anyone other than her mother, life at the village was full of confusing things. Although the villagers were not good people, everyone had their own circumstances and anguish to deal with. Nobody intentionally acted cold to her.

Once time went by, even she was able to make friends before long. She was no longer confused with life at the village, had a set way she went about her days, and accepted these ordinary but peaceful times.

The girl went ahead and thought that this was like a sort of blessing. She had never seen what a blessing actually is. It might’ve been a misunderstanding. But still, she was glad.

—It was when she had these sort of thoughts that they all disappeared in a scene of flames

The village she was familiar with was engulfed in flames, cruelly burning down.

The neighbor who would always greet her, the young man who taught her how to grow crops, the elderly who was kind to her now, someone of the same sex that she'd talked to for the first time just yesterday, the man she'd been talking with frequently as of late-everyone burned.

She survived only because she got lucky.

But did she really get lucky? Could it be that she'd survived because she didn't have the best luck?

She brings out her horn, and it releases abominable power. Mana running through her body, she goes on a rampage to get rid of those who casted flames on the village. However, it wasn't enough.

She gets overpowered by sheer numbers, and her body burns in flames. They loudly laugh at her for screaming from the pain and despair, and she gets crushed by their feet.

???: "Not too baaaad I'd saaay. That's the kind of glare that I like."

She heard a shrill voice nearby.

They stood next to her, and she poured something disgusting into her while she was down on the ground. It wasn't her body that rejected it; her soul rejected it. She let out a shriek. They wouldn't listen. Something slipped into her ears and was going into her body. Her insides get violated with moisture.

???: "Work's all done! Now, bastard, what do you like about me?"

The voice of a crazy, insane woman who wasn't okay in the head goes inside her ears, and it wouldn't go away.

It wouldn't go away. It just wouldn't. She gets tormented endlessly by the fear of going crazy at any moment. It was only when the villages, flames, and those people were gone that it finally disappeared.

But, her nose was still trying to find out where they went so that she could go after them. The thing that was poured into her-the shock that violently went through her sniffs out their location.

???: "—I will…punish them."

She swears that in the face of the scorched village and became an avenger.

Now that she was an avenger, she needed the power she lacked in order to do an avenger's job.

To obtain it, she did something rash that put her life in danger. She snuck into a great spirit's nest, a place people went to impelled by their own insanity, just like she was.

—She wanted the power to kill them, the power to punish them-the power to slaughter them.

The blowing wind was turning her party into a pool of blood like a blade. Using a corpse as a shield, the avenger ventured inside. Whenever the shield became ineffective, she used a different corpse. She repeated that.

Before she knew it, the wind started sounding like a song to the avenger

The great spirit's nest lies deep within the cave. Somehow, the cave played the sound of mother nature along with the wind coming from its deepest part, and the song playing really wrung the heart.

The avenger was enchanted by the wind's song, and she moved further in while being in a trance.

She wanted power. She wanted to hear the rest of the song. This cave had everything the avenger wanted.

And then, when the avenger reached the deepest part of it, she heard a voice.

???: “—I want to…kill everyone.”

—She remembered replying “I do too” to that voice.

2

???: “I want to kill. I want to kill. I want to kill. I want to kill. I want to kill.”

The power the avenger took in was endlessly pouring that intention into her.

Originally, it should have been a thirst for death that would make you go crazy, a torrent of bloodthirst, an impulse to destroy—however, it went well with the avenger’s wish; it was even like a pleasant singing voice.

Thus, the avenger demonstrated her power for retribution with joy.

She absolutely destroyed those who got caught by her sense of smell. There was nothing left of them. They couldn’t even be buried in a grave. It was the same as disappearing without a trace.

And so, the avenger achieved retribution again and again, until finally she’d reached a large town.

On the street at night, the avenger went after the “lingering scent” that her nose strongly reacted to, and she ran through an alley with an insane smile on her face. Her destination was close-right nearby.

This was her biggest target thus far. Maybe this was the target for the avenger—she got excited over the possibility that this might be the one who had that scornful laugh.

A black wind blows. Whenever that spreaded, people would recede out of fear. The target didn't sense her with the wind. She waits at the end of the path the target walks on, looking forward to their face twitching in fear.

"…"

An enemy with an extremely unpleasant, strong miasma appeared in front of the avenger. She saw their face, but unfortunately, it wasn't familiar to her. Doesn't matter. She was still going to kill them.

With that sole thought on her mind, the avenger adds bloodlust to the wind, and starts to bite her target whole—

???: "…"

A girl next to the enemy getting close to them caught her attention.

Somehow, at a glance, the avenger realized that this was a girl who had the same blood flowing through her as she did.

For a moment, she's taken aback by the girl standing to protect the enemy beside her. And then, once the avenger's stiffness was gone, thick, dark anger violently ate away her mind.

What is the she doing there? That man is an enemy who should be punished.

Why is someone of the same position, same blood, and same race with that man without punishing him?

???: "—What…are you doing."

In anger, her voice comes out.

It was not an intent to kill that came out, but a question.

Hearing that question, the girl did not choose to protect the avenger, but the frightened enemy, so her answer was clear.

The neighbor, the young one, the elderly, the person of the same sex…—The man who had hoped to bond…

She was going to protect the enemy that burned her happiness? Someone of the same blood, loving a man so happily?

In that case—

???: “—Die.”

—Killing this girl will increase her self-esteem.

3

And so, after experiencing failure twice, the avenger now had the right to face retribution for the third time.

???: “Damn…it…”

It was a white clothed woman who let out a cry of pain, hit the wall, and collapsed.

That forced voice sounded familiar. Of course it did. Inside the avenger’s cranium, a voice was still endlessly telling her to kill. The voices were the same.

The voice…was the same. And yet, it was too fragile. It desired something else. They weren’t in agreement. That’s why it was repelled.

This wasn’t the power the avenger wanted. It was something foreign, and it was too fragile.

Humbly saying that it wanted to become one would’ve been fine, but it was too fragile to do something like loudly tell her to obey.

???: “—Die.”

Thus, she demonstrated her power. She completely beat up the entity and reached for its core.

???: “Ah…oo…aah…”

Lifted by the collar, the woman moaned with her body. She squirmed and tried to escape from her arms, but she wouldn't let go. Then, the woman's existence slowly, slowly turned into light dust, and it was taken in by the avenger.

Originally, the woman's existence had been a part of the power the avenger took in. She held down the entity that had parted from her once before, making it hers for good this time.

???: "—e…m"

It sounded like the girl said someone's name the moment she disappeared. However, the avenger didn't hear it, and she gets scattered by the blowing wind, vanishing.

The nuisance was gone, and her power was complete. She wasn't missing anything anymore.

???: "—Die."

Now all that's left is to achieve retribution. An avenger carrying out her revenge. With that woman's death.

???: "…"

That woman is the one who's wrong. That woman is crazy for protecting the enemy that ought to be punished.

The enemy with the scent of the witch, and her abominable kind that got close to him.

Kill both of them. Both of them have to be killed. Kill. Kill, kill them.

Killing is the only thing that can comfort her for what she'd lost. This will be atonement.

—This isn't hatred; it's a duty. Because of this sense of duty, that woman must die!

Chapter 6: The Last Month of Pregnancy

1

The old magic user looked at Rem, who was brought into the clinic, and made a very unpleasant look with his pale face.

Doctor: “Is it really possible for the breaks to be this short right off the bat? What’s going on?!”

Rem: “…Hau”

The old magic user put his hand on Rem’s stomach as she breathed with difficulty, and he mentions how short the intervals of pain were. The old magic user clicked his tongue at Subaru, who was only confused by his point, and said,

Doctor: “Normally, the breaks between the pain during birth are long. It’s a sign that the baby will be born, though the pace will pick up little by little. But, your wife’s reactions are odd. Hey! Go call her over!”

The old magic user raises his voice in the middle of his explanation, and he shouts at the helper to call over the midwife. Meanwhile, the old magic user left the room in a hurry, and tension was starting to fill up the whole clinic.

Rem: “Subaru…-kun…”

Subaru: “Rem! Rem, are you alright…of course you aren’t. Damnit, ahhh, damnit, I’ll be here for you.”

Subaru gets angry at himself for being unable to say anything useful, and he spoke to Rem as he held her hand. Rem held his hand back so tight that it made him feel pain, but it wasn’t nearly as much as the amount of pain she was feeling.

Subaru seriously thought to himself, if crushing his hand would comfort Rem, then she can go ahead and do it.

Rem: “I won’t…do that. It’s my husband’s precious hand, after all…”

Reading Subaru’s inner thoughts, Rem slightly smiled. The way she was clearly pretending to be tough made Subaru choke up.

Subaru was the one who had to do everything he could-say everything he could—to comfort Rem. So, why was Subaru being taken care of by Rem?

Rem: “Tia…-sama…”

Subaru: “…Rem, don’t think about Tia right now. Focus on yourself.”

Rem: “That’s…not it. …Tia-sama said this before, right? That the baby inside my belly is trying to come out now because…the shackles of my mind…have been removed…”

Subaru: “She did…say that…”

Hearing Rem saying that falteringly, Subaru looks back on what Tia had said just before she bid her farewell.

The deadline of the promised made between Rem and Tia—until the child is born, Tia wouldn’t do anything to Rem and would quietly watch for any slip-ups.

It was actually a pointless promise and a misunderstanding by Tia, though.

Rem: “Then, the promise became pointless, and so now…the baby is finally coming out…”

Subaru: “…You might not believe me on this, but that’s just a coincidence. The events just happened to occur at the same time. It’s nothing to stress out about.”

It may be possible for one’s condition to be affected by the mind. However, it’s quite unlikely for that to even affect the timing of birth. It is true that Rem giving birth happened later than the magic user had predicted.

However, giving birth isn't so simple that you could just repress it through sheer will.

Rem: "It…it does stress me out. Because…I…"

Subaru: "I? What is it? Tell me anything. Right now, I'll listen to anything you have to say."

Rem: "…I…was scared. I was scared of the child…being born."

Rem held Subaru's hand tight, extremely tight, and said that while tearing up.

When Subaru's breath was taken away by her words, Rem closed her eyes tight again, and she continued to shed tears.

Rem: "I was so happy that you were glad that we have a baby. I really was. I was really happy. But, I was really scared. Because…"

Subaru: "…"

Rem: "Because…I…I wasn't able to be a good child…when I was one myself. I let…my parents down…and the villagers…thought I was a…hopeless child…"

Uncontrollable tears trickle down rapidly from Rem's eyes. And Subaru couldn't even wipe them away, as he was captivated by the beautiful, sparkling teardrops.

She was unable to be a good kid. That regret binded Rem's mind with anxiety.

Rem: "Despite all that, I have a child…and I was so worried, I couldn't stop being worried. Being a good child…a good little sister! I couldn't be either of those…and I wondered…could I really be a…parent…?"

Subaru: "Rem…"

Rem: “I didn’t…want to part with Tia-sama. I thought that, if there hadn’t been a deadline, we would have spent our days at the tenement house like that forever…and ever…But, I was wrong.”

Rem shakes her head disapprovingly and reveals the piled up inner thoughts she had kept hidden.

As if she was punishing herself for being far too sinful.

Rem: “I was… scared of becoming a parent. I was scared of… meeting face to face with the child. I was actually scared this whole time. I thought I couldn’t be a good parent!”

Subaru: “…”

Rem: “Because, I’ve always…disappointed all the…precious people…around me…”

Rem breathes heavily, and her face is red from agitation and grief. Using the hand that wasn’t holding onto Subaru’s, Rem wipes her face that had tears trickling down on it, and then covered it with her arm.

Rem’s heartbreaking outburst hits Subaru, and it was tearing his heart into shreds.

It was a very intense, a very natural, and a very sad outburst.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru swallows his saliva, and choosing his next words throws his brain into chaos.

What should he say? He didn’t know the answer. “Sorry for making you worry”? “Sorry for not picking up on your worries?” Criticize her by saying “Don’t be so pathetic”? None of them seemed correct.

Because Rem revealed what she felt deep down. She made up her mind to reveal that she was hated and disappointed others.

That’s right. Rem said that she has always disappointed those who were precious to her. She confessed after she decided to make

Subaru reveal his own true feelings.

And so, after that confession, what did he think? Was he actually disappointed by Rem?

Subaru: “Rem”

Rem: “…”

Rem, who had her name called for a moment, shakes with her face covered. Birth pains and probably disappointment with herself were tormenting her chest. Her mind was a mess, no doubt about it.

Subaru was also worrying about what to say in this situation, right here right now.

So, Subaru held Rem’s hand, and with his other hand, patted her head as he said,

Subaru: “I understand how you feel. …I really do.”

Rem: “Subaru…-kun…?”

Rem slowly raised her arms, as if she was surprised by the gentleness of Subaru’s tone. Just how pathetic did Subaru look in her eyes?

Rem’s worry truly was the same as Subaru’s, as if they were mirroring each other.

Subaru: “You see, I… …I’m the same way. No, I was even worse. I wasn’t able to be a good kid. I couldn’t…look my dad…or my mom in the face, either…”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “They were such great parents. My dad and my mom really were the greatest parents in the world. They loved each other, were nice to me…told me that they loved me…”

Just like Rem did, Subaru started talking about himself as the tears trickled down.

He's lived with Rem for a year and a half, and was summoned to this world just under 2 years ago. In all that time, Subaru had never spoken about his past to anyone—not even once.

Because it was related to the memories Subaru never wanted to reveal. And they were in this precious place that was so wonderful and beautiful to Subaru that he was scared to even touch it.

Subaru looked up to his parents. …From the bottom of his heart, he felt sorry that he had to be their child.

His parents were so kind, strict, gave him joy, sadness, anger, gifts, and yet their failure of a son couldn't give anything back. It was truly pathetic.

How could Natsuki Subaru, someone who was raised by such good parents and still couldn't be a good son, become a parent? That's what he was afraid of this whole time…

Subaru: "But, I can't…show you that I am. I…I brought you with me. I'm the one who brought you with me. I wanted to give you everything I had to make you happy. I told myself that I had to do it…"

That's why he hid his anxiety and eagerly waited for this day to come. He worked hard at his job, devoted himself to supporting Rem, and tried his best to be a good husband.

Believing that if he tried to be good husband, in the future he could become a good father too.

Subaru: "But, it wasn't that simple. Of course it wasn't. I'm going to be a someone's parent, you know. I can't just get the right answers by thinking logically. So, I'm still…"

At the last minute, he threw everything out there, as if to repent his ignorance of Rem's anxiety.

Subaru and Rem both knew that neither of them were perfect. And they were afraid of whether they'd be able to fulfill their responsibilities as parents for the child that was on the way.

They were scared. So scared. And they were even scared of confessing that they were scared, but…

Rem: "Subaru…-kun…do you regret it?"

After listening to his confession, Rem broke the silence by asking Subaru a question. Subaru impulsively lifted his head, and he looked straight at Rem's eyes that were right there.

Her light blue eyes were switching between despair and grief and were staring at Subaru. Inside her baby belly, there was their child. Labor pains have already started, and birth was just around the corner.

With all that happening, she had this confession. …Did he want this child to be born?

Subaru: "…"

Subaru knew that Rem's eyes were asking him that, and he rubbed his eyes hard.

He wasn't clear enough. Subaru made it this far regretting his lack of clarity, regretting his lack of action, running away from the problems before him and going to the more comfortable path—to the less painful path.

He made it this far by running away from his parents, running away from reality, running away from initiating into this world, running away from his promise that he made, running away from those who were precious to him, and running away from the fear of losing what he had.

Did he run and run and run and come this far, just to lose everything?

Subaru: "That's not…it. Rem, I don't regret it. I…I've been saved."

Rem: "Subaru-kun…"

Subaru: “I’ve always been running. I threw away everything and ran away with you…But, when I heard that we had a child, I was happy, and that’s when I was saved. Even after running and running with my back turned, there was something I could have. And that was…our child.”

He was worried. He couldn’t lie. Subaru, as someone who couldn’t look at his parents in the face, always had a fear of becoming a parent. He still does. It wasn’t gone. It probably would never go away.

But, at the same time, Subaru knew something. He knew the love of the best role model parents in the whole world.

Subaru: “I was a…terrible son. I wasn’t able to be a good kid. But, I had the best parents in the whole world. I know I had the best parents, and I know I was the worst child ever too. So, no matter what happens, I’ll love our child.”

Rem: “…”

Subaru: “My parents loved a hopeless failure like me. I know that. I do. …That’s why I’ll be able to love my own child—love my family.”

In Subaru’s mind, he saw their smiles—copying his father and his mother, he smiled. He threw his chest out with confidence, bragged that he knew the best role-models, and was proud.

Natsuki Subaru was raised by the world’s best parents—the world’s best role models—for 17 years.

Rem: “…”

After Subaru declared that with a smile, Rem was speechless. Her teary eyes open wide, her red face becomes even more red, and her facial expression slowly changes.

The overflowing tears turned into just one teardrop, and with a slight smile Rem said,

Rem: “…You’re fanatical like an Oni.”

Then, with the same smile from that one moment, she said an awfully nostalgic line to Subaru.

Did Subaru nod back at that smile with the same smile he had on that day?

Then came…

Doctor: "…The midwife's here. Birth preparations will begin. Get out. Go pray."

The old magic user came back to the clinic room with a middle-aged woman. Subaru thought the timing was too perfect, but the old magic user had his usual sour look, so he couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Anyhow, it was time. Subaru looked back at Rem, and took her hand once again as he said,

Subaru: "Rem, all these feelings I've let out are the truth. Please believe me."

Rem: "…I'll…always…believe Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "Ohh, that's right."

The helper who came in quickly brings in the necessary tools into the room. The midwife gives instructions for what to do with them, and the old magic user jerked his chin at Subaru with a stern look. He was telling him to get out.

Subaru: "I can't stay for its birth?"

Doctor: "You really think men staying here would be helpful? Everyone I've called over are woman, including the midwife and the helper. I'm here just in case, but in this situation even I'm just a figurehead."

The old magic user snorted to drop him a hint that he didn't need to do anything. He felt like his continuously blunt attitude was telling him that he trying to be more helpful than needed.

Subaru: “Doctor, please take care of Rem.”

Doctor: “Tell that to the midwife.”

He was waved at perfunctorily, and he gave a wry smile. After that, now was when he let go of Rem’s hand as he said,

Subaru: “Rem, I’ll be waiting. …My wife and kid are in your hands.”

Rem: “Yes, your Rem’s got this, Subaru-kun. …About Tia-sama…”

Subaru: “I know.”

Hearing the words she added on with a smile, Subaru nodded to indicate that she didn’t have to continue. Rem sees that, and after she closed her eyes approvingly, starts to breath heavily.

A fight only Rem could face was going to begin.

???: “Get out!”

The midwife speaks to him, and Subaru was forced to leave the clinic room. When he was about to leave the room, he heard Rem’s cries of pain. Her long, long fight was beginning.

The truth is that Subaru wanted to watch over her fight outside the clinic room too, but…

Halibel: “…Su-san”

Just as Subaru appeared at the aisle, Halibel spoke to him. He’d been planning this and that after he informed the clinic that Rem was going into labor.

He was also the one person who understood the situation besides Subaru and Rem.

Halibel: “How’s Rem-chan?”

Subaru: “She’s at the stage where birth really begins. They said that men will get in the way and kicked me out. …I really am useless in situations like these.”

Halibel: “That includes me too. It’s Rem’s job and her job only. Also, we’ve got our own things we need to do. …Su-san, you know that too, don’t you?”

Subaru gave a wry smile, and then said “Yeah” to reassure Halibel, who lowered the tone of his voice.

With the expression Halibel had, and above all, with what had happened just before, he could imagine what he was talking about.

Subaru: “The person who stole Tia’s power is coming to town to kill me. What about Tia…”

Halibel: “Look at this.”

To answer Subaru’s question, Halibel took out something from his kimono’s sleeve. At first, this thing knitted with black thread looked like something you’d wear around your arm. …Then, he had an idea.

Subaru: “That good luck bracelet is something you gave to Tia.”

Halibel: “Good luck bracelets are magic items because of the black braiding. I’ll be skipping the details on how it’s made, but two of these make a whole magical item, and if something ever happens to the owner…”

As Halibel spoke, he shook the black braids. It snapped while he did it.

Subaru: “Which means that Tia…”

Halibel: “She lost a fight she picked herself. Even she knew that she had a low chance of winning. She realized it when she was about to leave it up to me to finish the job. What a ridiculous girl.”

Halibel put the snapped braids into his pocket and laughed loudly with his fangs showing. It probably seemed sad somehow because he was mourning Tia in his own way.

And so, he took out his kiseru instead of the black beads, put it to his mouth, and lit it.

Halibel: “I’m going to take care of Tia-chan’s request. Su-san…”

Subaru: “I know.”

Subaru interrupted Halibel and answered. Just like how he did when he to Rem.

Subaru’s eyes lit up with determination and readiness, and then said this.

Subaru: “…There’s no running away anymore.”

2

Halibel: “About that girl…let’s call her ‘the enemy’. About the enemy, she was outside of the town. I sort of tried getting a hit on her, but that wasn’t a good idea. Doing it half-heartedly would just lead to more death.”

That was Halibel’s opinion as he lit his kiseru. After that, Subaru racked his brains with a serious look, and he tilted his head as he said, “A hit”?

Subaru: “By “a hit”, do you mean that you got in a fight? You fought?”“

Halibel: “If I did, don’t you think I would’ve gotten hurt? By I, I meant my team. Or in your words, I used a Shinobi squad.”

Subaru: “So Shinobi squads do exist! You really are a leader! You said they didn’t exist!”

Halibel: “A Shinobi can’t leak his secrets, you know? Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

Halibel tells Subaru, who wouldn’t let the issue go, to calm down as he put his hand on his forehead.

In this situation, he didn’t have the time to ask about hidden shinobi villages in Kararagi in detail. The information Halibel gathered and a plan were what were important…

Halibel She looks just like Tia-chan, but her skin is clearly black. We can stop her by attacking with a bunch of stalling tactics, but that won't work for long. What should we do?"

Subaru: "What would you do? Do you have some sort of idea in mind?"

Halibel: "The simplest method would be to confine you outside town and then accomplish our goal."

Halibel put up his finger and presented the most reliable and simple plan possible. However, before Subaru could say something, Halibel bent the finger he had held up as he said,

Halibel: "But, that's not an option. I wouldn't want to lose a friend, and I'd feel terrible if I let Rem-chan's husband die and left her child on the way without a parent. Plus, it goes against my promise with Tia-chan."

Subaru: "You sure do have a strong sense of duty. For a playboy, that is."

Halibel: "You can't play without rules. So, an "eternal playboy" also has to stick to the rules that go with playing."

Halibel responded to Subaru's joke with a joke of his own, and he shrugged. That gesture makes Subaru break into a smile, and he slapped his cheeks out of relief that he didn't have to worry about being sacrificed for now.

Subaru: "Let's discuss a little more. …What do you know about Zarestia?"

Halibel: "I told you most of it at the house. She's said to be one of the Four Great Spirits, a murdering spirit, a "phantom slasher", "the most beautiful shinigami", and she always sleeping in her nest in the west side of Kararagi. Sometimes she cuts up those who come into her bed. …Also, she might have an old song."

Subaru: “An old…song?”

When he raised an eyebrow at the unexpected word, Halibel said “Yes” as he nodded deeply.

Halibel: “I don’t know the details, but those who know it will recognize it. If I remember correctly, what was it again…it’s like a lullaby.”

Subaru: “The song of the wind? The lullaby of the wind?”

Halibel, Oh, that’s it. Su-san, I’m surprised you knew. Even though you’re not even a Kararagian.”

Subaru: “Well, of course I do. What kind of people do you think I’m surrounded with everyday at work?”

Subaru responded to Halibel, who acted impressed, and inside he was grateful—grateful for the nosiness of the ladies he worked with at the Magoji palace. Those ladies were the ones who taught Subaru, as he was going to become a dad soon, from general housework to babysitting. Among the things he learned, there was a song called the lullaby of the wind.

It was something that sung the story of when people defeated a certain large beast during ancient times.

Subaru: “…Hal-san, you mentioned stalling tactics, right? How long can we stop her for?”

Halibel: “…With sacrifices, half a day. Without sacrifices, 6 hours.”

Although Halibel hesitated for a moment, he looked into Subaru eyes and gave that answer. He did it because, right now, there was strong determination in Subaru’s eyes.

He thought about the lullaby of the wind, all of his enemies, Tia, and then came up with one idea.

He was going to need time, money, and help.

And then there also was…

Subaru: “…I’ll have to go around with my head down, ready to live to return favors for the rest of my life!!”

3

She waves her hand, conjuring wind. A slaughterous wind that cut up everything and turned things into dust.

???: “…Die.”

A brief order, then quick execution. In less than a second, the bite attack flew and devoured the sky.

A flash went through the sky, and steel was repelled by the wind that was following it. Throws delayed her, attacking her from all directions non-stop. It was depressing. The wind repelled the steel. No matter how many times she was attacked, it didn’t matter.

???: “…Die.”

She attacked her opponent who threw steel with wind. The effect was unclear. This was one of the flaws with the wind; the flurry of wind would turn into fangs and fade away after opening a space. She had to see the result for herself.

However, it was currently night time. The surrounding enemies were elusive and innately skilled at lurking in the darkness.

???: “…Die.”

It was impossible to tell if any of the flurries of wind caught the black shadow. Even if they hit, they didn’t even let out cries of pain and act shamelessly when they died. They were horrible enemies in every way.

???: “Kill kill kill kill kill kill kill.”

I hear a voice in my head. I know. I feel the same way. I want to kill everything.

But before that, I have to kill someone. There’s an enemy who needs to be punished. I sense their presence with my nose. I know where they are, but the dark shadows are getting in the way.

???: "…"

Suddenly, in her vision of hatred, she saw the black shadows move altogether. Her eyes opened wide, wondering what this was all about, and then all the presences surrounding her started to disappear, as if the wind had scattered them.

They withdrew. Suddenly. Without any changes in the situation. She thinks about what happened, about what they were doing. Her instincts were telling her to take this lucky chance to go towards the witch scent. However, if this is a trap or a plot, jumping into this would be the the height of stupidity. What are you thinking? You have the power to scatter them now.

The differing conclusions in her mind and her heart collide with each other. I want to kill them. I should kill them carefully. While they kept fighting each other, she came to the conclusion that she should settle down…

???: "…"

The next moment, she was disgusted by a foul, strong stench.

Her eyes opened wide, and the stench that reached her via the wind makes her nose react. Without a doubt, this wafting stench, which slipped into her nose even if she didn't want it to, was an evil scent, the witch's scent, a miasma that needed to be punished…

The smell was quickly getting stronger, her senses and instincts cheer her on, and so she blasted the ground with the bottom of her foot.

???: "Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

???: "…Die die die die die die!}

The cheer in her skull and her own cheer overlap. She jumped on the ground lightly and went after her target. She went into town, smashed roof tiles, jumped over buildings, and went deeper and deeper until finally—

Subaru: "…About your face…"

She landed with her limbs and looked up. In front of her, there was a man standing in a blue dress. A stench that pierced her sense of smell and disgusted her nose and mind.

The face with the witch's scent that she'd seen before—the evil face that had cowered in fear and trembled as it was hunted was smiling in a very provocative manner.

And then…

Subaru: "…It's cuter when you smile. Almost as cute as my wife and my child."

???: "…Die!!"

She was greeted with a spiteful smile, and her bloodlust makes her strike. The wind goes straight towards the man standing upright, and it scraped off his existence from the earth along with his stench…or at least, it should have.

Halibel: "Unfortunately, I won't let you do that."

???: "…"

With that flat voice, all of the flurries of wind came to nothing. The winds were shot down by steel thrown from the darkness. Wind arose where the enemy wasn't, and the man opened his arms, unharmed. It was like he was saying that he was the one who did this.

???: "…Diee!"

Inexcusable. She conjured even more wind, let her increase in bloodlust control her, and struck with her power.

She produces a blast. The ground was gouged out roundly, as if to draw a circle in the middle of the explosion. However, the man wasn't inside of the damage. Neither was the demi-human who interfered with by throwing things.

She looked up. She stepped onto the roof tiles, and on top of the building, there was a man. He was being carried by a demi-human on his shoulder, and he was trying to run.

…I won't let you get away. I want to kill you. Like I'd let you get away. I want to kill you.

???: "…Die!"

She chased after the stench and the demi-human running away while the night approached dawn, jumping and running through the streets. It becomes wind, she attacks with wind, swirls wind, rides wind, and—

???: "…!"

Inside the wind, a different smell was mixed with the stench. And her body was having a strong reaction to it. This was a person's smell, and a strong one at that. There were a lot of people. A premise…she sees a premise down there. The man and the demi-human fled into it. Peoples' presences…a stench that has another stench.

She was very hesitant about going in. But, the man was in there. Retribution was in there…

Subaru: "…I can return by"

???: "…!!"

After that inaudible utterance, her instincts went wild from the stench that became tremendously strong. Her cautiousness was blown away along with her reason. When she stepped in, she jumped towards the sky and looked for the demi-human running through the garden.

She aimed at him and the man he was carrying on his shoulders and attacked with absolutely unavoidable wind from all sides.

Halibel: "Sorry, Su-san!"

Sensing that the inescape wind coming close, the demi-human yelled right before it trapped them. He grabbed onto the body of the man on his shoulders and threw him as hard as he could. The man’s body went through a gap in the wind and escaped its cutting range. …However, that wasn’t going to happen for the demi-human that was left behind.

???: “…Die!”

The wind cruelly cuts up the demi-human who closed his fingers and was left inside. The demi-human died. She starts to feel joy from killing him, and at the same time, realizes that this wasn’t over yet.

The man had been thrown into the sky. She jumped towards it and opened her arms.

Let’s tear his body limb from limb, take his remains, and bring them to her. Let’s teach this woman who gave birth and snuggled up to the sinful enemy a lesson.

This is revenge. This is retribution. This is atonement for their blood.

…This is revenge for having the happiness that I was never able to have!

???: “…D”

Subaru: “Now…!!”

When her hatred and joy crossed each other and she tried to strike with “death”, the source of the stench shouted.

Subaru: “Ready…gooo!!”

Right after that, she sensed that something was being thrown at her from all directions—at the edge of her vision, she saw something that looked like an unfolded cloth. It was thrown at her.

???: “…”

Think. The stench is right before me. I can reach him and kill him.

But, if I prioritize that, the thrown unfolded cloth will reach me. I can still get away from it. I can conjure wind, get on it, and foil the enemy's plan.

???: "…"

That's right. No need to panic. Do what's safe. There's no need to go with the enemy's plan…

???: "Kill kill kill kill kill kill kill"

Control the thirst for death that keeps echoing in your head, and you'll get out of this situation.

Listen to me, just this once. If you do, you'll be able to quench your thirst—

???: "…I want to kill. But, I can't."

???: "…?!"

???: "…Because I don't want Rem to hate me."

Something inside her said that in the same voice that was telling her to kill.

Her hands and legs freeze. She couldn't move. She couldn't run or kill.

???: "…Dieeeeeee!!"

???: "…Ahh, I can't get enough of that scream."

When she heard a very cruel voice, her body was also hit by something that she was unable to dodge. It was the wet cloth. It wrapped around her. It wasn't attacking her. It just wrapped around her over and over.

Water…I'm wet. It's not water. This has a sharp smell.

???: "…! ! ……! ! …!!"

Then, she screamed as if her skull was breaking, and the rejection threw her brain into chaos. The entity that should’ve been shut inside went wild; it couldn’t take it anymore, and it tried to come out and escape.

???: “…”

Her head was aching. Her skull was being torn apart violently from the inside. It was strange pain that went beyond her imagination. She had never experienced this sort of pain. She had never experienced this sort of suffering. She had never imagined this sort of pain. No, no, no, no…I don’t want to die.

It comes off. It came off; the power that made up her body fell apart. She lost the figure that had been the basis for her body—the figure that made her look formidable to demonstrate power—as if melting like ice.

Her body shrunk. Her hair color changed. She went from having inhumane beauty to being an ugly village girl. She went from having eccentric power to being a mere incomplete Oni.

And so, she even lost her power to get revenge, was abandoned by her bloodlust, and…

???: “I”

Halibel: “…I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

She hears the voice of a demi-human that should have been cut up earlier. She shook off the cloth that was on her. She could now see the black shadows jumping at her.

A small blade stabbed a part of her body—the center of her chest.

…That was the end.

4

In the palace’s garden, he was looking down on a girl that had collapsed.

She had a light brown pigtails and an ordinary but charming face.

However, she was so pale that it looked like she could faint at any moment, ruining it, and she had awful bags under her eyes.

Halibel: “Her wounds are fatal, and she was hit with a curse that made her unable to get away. …Now, she’s done for.”

Next to Subaru, there was Halibel looking down on a girl, half-naked without his kimono on. Listening to his statement, Subaru knitted his brow and tilted his head as he asked, “A curse?”

Halibel: “I told you before, didn’t I? I’m an expert on magic…Killing with curses is my trump card. Stuff like my fur and nails are fused into the kunai I have, so if it gets stolen, it will cast a curse.”

Subaru: “What the hell, that’s really dangerous. Is it even okay for you to tell me about this?”

Halibel: “It’s totally fine. If you expose it to people, I’ll just make you completely disappear.”

Subaru: “That sure is a crazy way to deal with it.”

Halibel acted relaxed, but Subaru couldn’t hide the chills he had from his killing scheme.

Sorcery is said to be one of the arts in this world that are branches of magic. Since sorcery is an art that specializes in taking someone’s life, there is a rule that the caster must touch his/her opponent, and even Subaru has had experience with this before. Sorcery is very hard to use because of this, but Halibel has solved it by mixing in parts of himself with his weapon.

Halibel: “On the first night we met, the kunai stabbed her. Her movement slowed down because it was effective. Even while harnessing a great spirit’s power, you can’t stop the curse from working.”

Subaru: “So she came to kill me before she would die?”

Halibel: “It might be why she rushed things. Honestly, I don’t know myself.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Halibel took his kiseru out of his belly band, and put it in his mouth. It seemed that he had no intentions of being involved with what was going to happen now. He was being both kind and strict.

Subaru took a deep breath, and then looked into the face of the girl who was on the verge of death.

???: "…"

Slowly, her eyes opened, as if she had felt his presence. They were light blue eyes. That common feature made Subaru feel some unnecessary guilt. However, he didn't stop.

Subaru: "It was…It was a mistake for you to go after me. I have nothing to do with the Witch Cult. But, I can see why you still couldn't stop."

???: "…"

Subaru: "I won't ask you to forgive me. I'd like to, but there'd be no use in asking. I won't tell you to not hate me, so go ahead and hate me. But, I'd like you to hate just me."

He didn't want her to hate his child that was being born, and of course, not Rem, either. That also went for Halibel and the other people who helped him out.

In this situation, it was Natsuki Subaru who thought about killing her, made a plan, and carried it out.

It was Natsuki Subaru who wished to kill her; it was him who filled her with hatred until the very end.

Subaru: "My name is Natsuki Subaru. That is the name of the man who killed you."

???: "…"

Subaru: "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. Even though I told you that you didn't have to forgive me…I'm sorry for apologizing."

Ideally, he would listen to no complaints if possible, the dying girl would be left with no regrets, and he'd take her life. However, that didn't happen, and Subaru was being a helpless wimp faced with death.

"Death" is scary. "Death" is not salvation. Subaru knew that.

Subaru knew "Death" better than anyone in this world, so he felt very bad for the girl.

Subaru: "I have a child on the way. Rem is doing her best. I'm going to be a father. So, I couldn't die. I'm sorry. That's why I killed you."

They were nothing but selfish excuses. And if their views became so conflicted that they decided to kill each other, there would be no time to understand one another.

Subaru's words weren't going to comfort her or enlighten her.

In response to Subaru's words, the girl stopped her distressed breathing for a moment and said,

???: "I…"

Subaru: "…"

???: "I…hate…that…girl."

The girl said that in a voice full of hatred as if she was coughing up blood—as if she was looking into heaven from hell.

Subaru immediately realized that she was talking about Rem. He realized it, but that realization made things inconsistent. She she should have been going after the witch's scent. That's how they came up with the plan to use Subaru as a bait. All of her hatred should've been directed towards Subaru.

???: "That girl…has…everything…I want…everything…"

Subaru: "That's…"

???: "I was going to…with him…and yet…I…"

Tears flow from the girl's eyes. Her eyes were no longer looking at Subaru, or at anywhere in this world.

They were looking somewhere else—they were looking at a scene with happiness that she yearned for so much, enough to tear her heart out and drive her to get revenge.

Happiness that she was supposed to have too. She had that taken away from her, became an avenger, and now she was going to die.

What she held onto at the very end were her hatred and jealousy towards Rem, who had the same blood in her veins and reached a kind of life that was different from the one she had…No, it was probably envy.

Subaru: "What's your name?"

???: "…"

Subaru: "What is…your name?"

He asked, crouching down and moving his face close. To his side, Halibel tried to stop him, but Subaru prevented him from doing so with his hand. The girl no longer had the energy to do something to Subaru as he got close.

He listened to the girl's last spark of life that was running out even in this moment.

???: "…ese"

Subaru: "Reese"

Subaru picked up the name he was quickly told, and said that. He didn't have the time to confirm if he was correct.

???:……"

Light fades away from the girl's eyes. The girl envied Rem, cursed her fate, and breathed her last.

He saw that with his own eyes. …No, it was Natsuki Subaru who put an end to her.

He'd never forget her name. Subaru would never forget the fact the girl had once lived—that Reese had once lived. He sacrificed Reese to protect himself; to protect his family; to protect his life.

And he would never tell anyone what this girl Reese had truly wished for. Subaru, who was hated by her, was going to carry that to his grave.

So that neither Rem nor the child on the way would ever find out about it.

Subaru: "…It's over."

Halibel: "Yeah. It wasn't done in a very satisfying way, though."

Upon hearing Subaru's statement mixed with a sigh, Halibel responded while giving out smoke. He helped out with everything for this plan. Because of that, Subaru bowed his head to Halibel.

Subaru: "Thanks for going with my selfish, uncertain plan. I really appreciate it."

Halibel: "I was the one who made the final call, and we got her just like you planned, so I have no complaints. The Substitution that I hadn't done in a while worked. It all went fairly well."

He had said that he wasn't very good at Substitution, but in the very end, it worked out.

After Halibel let Subaru get away from the girl's max firepower, he used Substitution and survived by pulling a classic: "switching with a log.

Subaru: "That sure showed the finesse of a ninja. …Also"

Halibel wasn't the only one who helped out with this plan. He had the help of many others.

Looking around, this was the Magoji palace—after preparing a trap, he used the premise to guarantee the necessary space. And that was not the only thing he used; he used people and money too.

To prove it, there was Riften Magoji standing on the veranda of the palace. While touching his mustache, he bowed deeply to Subaru and said,

Riften: “I’m glad that things went according to plan without any problems.”

Subaru: “I sincerely apologize for the trouble I’ve caused you, Master…”

Riften: ““Culture School” has only just begun. You still have to guide all these women with your feminine abilities. It’s an essential investment. I love investments, you see.”

He had asked Riften, who chuckled, to supply the alcohol that was absolutely necessary for the plan on top of providing a place for it. He had used Riften’s name, as he was a brave warrior, to literally gather strong alcohol from the town and get them to bring it all into the palace.

Subaru: “The lullaby hint, and Tia being poor with alcohol. And then there was the overreaction to the cooking alcohol.”

Those things led to the inference that Zarestia isn’t fond of alcohol. The old anecdotes of an entity with extremely strong power drinking excessively and being slain were endless.

The lullaby also had details related to that. If there really were existences running rampant in this world that are like the ones in the legends, then it wouldn’t necessarily be wrong to act out those legends.

A blanket with a large amount of alcohol was actually thrown at the Zarestia that was captured in Reese, and she came out after her body was soaked in alcohol.

With Riften’s wealth and reputation and the traditions of the ladies at the palace, he won. Afterwards, the people who helped him with the alcohol soaking plan…

Subaru: "…Clane's employment agency."

Clane: "After you said "Avenging Tia", I had to come too. Also, everyone loved that girl."

Said Clane, in armor—not an apron—with his large arms folded. He and a lot of other non-regular employees came rushing over when they heard about avenging Tia.

If the plan fails, there will be an all out war with a being that has a Great Spirit level of power. Even though they had declined at first like that, many people did this for Tia.

Clane: "And if push came to shove, Halibel would've done something."

Halibel: "What the heck? You expect way too much from me."

"Give me a break, man" Halibel said as he shook his head at Clane, who scratched the nose on his lizard face. That behavior makes soft smiles go all around.

He had seen a harsh ending. However, having no victims other than the girl was the best conclusion among all the ones he thought of. It was the best one where he didn't lose anything.

So, all that's left was…

Halibel: "…The final payback, huh."

Subaru looked up, and Halibel knocked the ash off his kiseru. Riften firmly sat down at the veranda and picked up the weapons that Clane and the others deployed.

A wind slowly comes down towards the palace's garden covered with tension, battle preparations, and caution.

Milky white hair, a pure white dress, and a face that had reached inhumane beauty via the hands of God. She had a rude side, which didn't go with the way she looked, and childish parts about her and was surprisingly friendly and sentimental.

It was the girl that had the title of a great spirit, which didn't suit her at all, who everyone here knew.

???: "…"

Overwhelmed by the presence coming closer, Subaru stopped his feet from stepping back.

In his mind, he decided that he wouldn't run away. Believing that If he gets away from her—away from Tia…

…He'd also get away from those boisterous, noisy days of happiness.

5

Long, long ago before the world—before witches and dragons became this and that…

I was always free. I enjoyed my freedom without having anyone get in my way.

I conjured wind, spread fires, whirled up water, and dug up dirt, doing whatever I wanted.

Everyone approved of me. Everyone asked all these favors of me, who lived freely. I felt nice and they were well-mannered, so I did their favors.

I conjured wind, spread fires, whirled up water, and dug up dirt, doing what they had asked for.

After that, everyone was happy. Everyone praised me. Everyone smiled.

So, my mood got better and better, and I did everyone favors. Of course, sometimes I'd miss being free so much that I wouldn't do their favors, but in most cases, I still helped everyone out whenever I wasn't sleeping.

Eventually, everyone started bringing things whenever they asked me for favors.

They were things like vegetables, animal meat, sparkly gems, and burnished kimonos; they were all these sort of things that had "value".

I wasn't really hungry, nor did I have any interest in gems, and the cloth had some unnecessary fur on it so I wasn't happy with the things they brought.

But, I appreciated their thoughts, so I decided to work hard.

I conjured wind, spread fire, whirled up water, and dug up dirt. That's what I loved to do. By doing what I loved, everyone was happy. So, I did it over and over again.

However, eventually everyone's favors started to get weird.

Even though they were asking for favors, they kept bringing things with them. Before, I was happy doing what I wanted with fire, water, and dirt, but now I was being told what to do.

I loved being free. I loved doing what I wanted.

But, I liked being praised by everyone, and I also liked getting attention.

So, I reluctantly did everyone's favors. I conjured water, spread fire, whirled up water, and dug up dirt where they wanted me to.

Afterwards, everyone was happy again. My mood improved, and I forgave them.

Then, a lot of their favors were asking me to do what they told me.

Eventually…eventually it happened when I was getting used to doing what people told me to.

This favor was really weird.

They didn’t need wind. They didn’t need water. They didn’t need dirt. What they wanted was fire.

I didn’t like it. I wanted to start with wind. I didn’t want to use just wind. I loved being free. For a very long time, I have always started with wind.

I didn’t like how they weren’t letting me do that. I said “No”, refusing to do their favor.

When I did that, everyone left. I was left alone.

I was free. I thought to act freely like before, without caring about anyone. But, it was lonely being free. When everyone’s gone, I feel lonely, I thought.

I went to see everyone. I said, “If fire’s what they want, I’ll give it to them.”

Everyone was happy. I decided to bring fire, just like everyone asked for. However, fire isn’t the only thing I conjured; I snuck in wind. I wanted wind with the spreading of fire, and wind was the one thing I had to have. Wind was my symbol of freedom.

There was no water. There was no dirt. There were only wind and fire. Everything became bright red.

I was glad that everyone was pleased.

After pleasing everyone, they called me over and treated me warmly.

I didn’t really have any interest in food, dancing, or gifts. But, it felt nice having everyone treat me warmly. Also, the water that wasn’t actually water was amazing.

Water that became hot when you drank it. Water that had a weird smell. The more you drank it, the more you wanted another.

I was having a blast, and drank water as recommended by everyone. I drank lots, got sleepy, and then fell asleep at a place that wasn’t my nest for the first time.

…When I woke up, my limbs were gone, and my neck was about to get cut off.

I had always been free. I had always, always been free. I enjoyed my freedom.

Where did my hand that grew fire go? Where did my tail that whirled up water go? Where did my feet that dug up dirt go? Where did my freedom go?

When everyone heard my voice, they yelled with angry looks on their faces. They were yelling.

You tell me that fire burned the country, but I don't understand. You tell me that wind made it spread, but I don't care. You shout at me for not putting out the fire with water and dirt, but I don't get it.

Where did my freedom go? Why are people mad at me?

I said, "I want my limbs back." Nobody listened to me. Instead, I was showered with water that smelled weird. It was the water that put me to sleep.

The water was on fire. My body was burning. "Hot, hot, hot!" I screamed.

Everyone was happy about it. Everyone was happy that I was burning, like how they were happy when I did what I'd always do.

I didn't have the hands to spread fire. I didn't have the tail to grow water. I didn't have the feet to dig up dirt.

…But, I had the head to conjure wind. I had a mouth. I had a tongue. I had fangs.

Give me back my freedom. Give back me. …Don’t laugh at me. I’ll kill you.

My mind was dyed pitch black. I killed everyone besides myself. I killed everyone—everyone who was happy, everyone who was crying, and everyone who was mad.

I killed everyone…I killed them and slaughtered them, but I still wanted to kill people.

Even though pleasant things happened, I wanted to kill. Even though sad things happened, I wanted to kill. Even if there were things that angered me, I wanted to kill. Even if there were things that bothered me, I wanted to kill. When I became sleepy, I wanted to kill. After I woke up from a dream, I wanted to kill. After wind blew, I wanted to kill. After the sun set, I wanted to kill.

Kill kill kill kill kill kill kill kill.

I want to kill everything. My bloodlust was everything to me.

I was free. So, I wanted to freely kill everything. I will kill.

I’m free. The last ones I killed called me a “Shinigami”.

I’m free. Back when everyone was smiling, they told me I was “beautiful”.

I’m free. Freer than anyone. I am the “Most Beautiful Shinigami”.

…I am the “Most Beautiful Shinigami”, Zarestia.

…I’m free. I want to kill everything. I want to kill.

“Death” is what Natsuki Subaru was feeling.

His instincts understood that what had manifested before him was an entity that brought along deep “death” with her.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru was scared of death. He was scared of it more than anything. Many people feel the same way. But, for Subaru, “death” didn’t have the same meaning as it did for others.

“Death” meant the end. However, for Subaru, “death” wasn’t the end.

…It was the beginning of hell.

Subaru: “Since you’re in a white dress, should I assume that you are the Tia we know?”

The girl dressed in white lands while conjuring wind in the middle of the palace garden. She definitely looked like the Tia Subaru knew. Her appearance was exactly the same. The same went for her clothes; the white dress—for some reason, it was black when she became one with Reese, so it was easy to recognize the difference.

Subaru: “I would appreciate it if you’d tell me which one you are right now. Depending on your answer…”

Tia: “Depending on my answer what? What’ll you do, Su?”

Subaru: “…”

He called his name. A nickname he got used to hearing. He couldn’t believe that she’d call him that in an affectionate way—no, maybe she was calling him that with affection in her own way.

Subaru was called by that nickname, and he blinked.

Tia: “What’s up with that dumbfounded look? Could you not get charmed just because I’m cute?”

Subaru: “…I only care about wife. If my child is a girl, then I’ll be only care about my wife and my daughter.”

Tia: “Hah! Well said! Also…I see there’s quite a lot of people here.”

Tia’s lips curled as they had an exchange of banter, and she slowly looked at all the people that had gathered for this battle. They were all very familiar faces to her.

Surely Tia also knew that they were here to save her.

Tia: “Hal and the other males working hard late at night, huh. Apparently, grown men are idiots.”

Halibel: “You’re gonna make me depressed by being that harsh. Adults gotta stay up late like idiots every now and then, you know?”

Tia: “Ohhh, so did anything come out of staying up late?”

Halibel: “Actually, that’s what we want to ask you. Tia-chan, how’d it go?”

When Tia was asked that question, she held out her arms and gently opened and closed her palms. And then, when she went “Mm” as if purring like a cat, she said,

Tia: “…I got my light sphere back. I got me back. It’s like the great spirit Zarestia has been completely revived here.”

Subaru: “Completely revived…But you’re…”

Once Tia returns back to normal, she won’t be able to control her bloodlust anymore. She certainly did say that.

However, even after regaining the power that had been taken away from her, the Tia before them wasn’t causing any havoc that they had been worrying about. Perhaps she was the same girl with a slight attitude from before.

In that case, maybe the things Tia said would happen weren’t going to happen after all.

Tia: “Stop, Su. You shouldn’t get your hopes up.”

But, Tia shook her head at Subaru’s hopes with a stern look. When Subaru held his breath unintentionally, she sighed and said,

Tia: “Immediately thinking of things that sound nice is something that males do. But, it’s not happening. I told you, didn’t I? You guys are the reason why I got my light sphere back. I’m grateful for that.”

Subaru: “Then…”

Tia: “Yeah, I’m grateful. …I’m grateful, so I want to kill.”

Subaru: “…”

Bloodlust intense enough to give one the chills filled the whole palace, went outside the premise, and then swallowed half of the town. The smell of “death” was felt so much by his skin that, for a moment, he had the illusion that his vision might’ve been covered by a black mist.

After it sunk its claws into his soul, he understood that it came from Tia, who was standing still before him.

Tia: “This is who I am. This is who Zarestia is—the great spirit that only kills.”

Subaru: “T-Tia…Even so…”

Tia: “You’re still not letting it go? You’re still saying this to me?”

Subaru was overwhelmed by bloodlust, had his throat caught by fear, and his heart went out of control. Even so, he wouldn’t let go. As if irritated by it, Tia kicked dirt at him.

If Tia acts, there will be total war. But, would it even be total war? Wouldn’t it just be a one-sided slaughter fest? That’s how stronger the abnormal power felt to him.

Tia: “This…weird water…alcohol, was it? I remember now. I… hated…this stuff.”

Subaru: “…”

Tia: “A long time ago…I was forced to drink this…and my head was cut off when I was sleeping. My limbs were cut off too. This was thrown on my face, I was put on fire…After that, I always wanted to kill.”

Tia voiced her grudges to Subaru and the others, expressing just how cruelly she had been treated, revealing the reason why she hated the alcohol that became trump card for victory.

However, she still had a smile on her face. There wasn’t any anger on it. There wasn’t any resentment either.

There was only bloodlust with her smile that came from the heart.

Tia: “I want to kill everything. Whether I’m smiling, angry, crying, frustrated, in agony, or happy. Whether it be bitter or delicious. Whether it feel great or bad. Whether it be cold, hot, sweet, sour. Whether it be at night, in the morning, or in the afternoon. Whether it be a child, an adult, an old person, a baby, a man, a woman, a dog, a cat, or a wolf.”

Every feelings, every emotion, every situation, every time, every target, every being—everything was connected to bloodlust for Tia.

Tia: “I want to kill. I want to kill everything. That’s the kind of creature I am.”

Subaru: “Then…What about…us?”

Tia: “…”

Upon hearing Subaru’s forced out question, Tia directed her silent murderous intent towards him. She just looked at him. An action that small had murderous intent. The embodiment of bloodlust—a being that has every conclusion lead to bloodlust.

There were no lies on that billboard. Tia was trying to kill Subaru and the others. Even though she wasn’t killing them, she was trying to. Even though she didn’t want to kill them, she wanted to kill.

Tia: “I…”

Tia tried to say something. Words full of bloodlust come out.

Clane and his employees took defensive postures, Halibel put his hand in his pocket, and Subaru quietly clenched his fists.

And then…

Tia: “…I”

7

…Inside the clinic, there were intense energy and the spasms of a life.

Doctor: “Push down…!”

Rem: “Oo…ooooo…!!”

She tightly clenched her teeth and grasped the rail of the bed propping her up with all her strength. The iron rail squeaked and clear fingerprints were left on it. Still, the pain didn’t go away. She couldn’t hide from it.

The feeling of her insides being pushed out and the pain from a life struggling bash her consciousness again and again. Rem had never experienced pain like this in her whole life.

Rem: “Goo…eeee…!”

…Actually, with the time length considered, this was more intense than any other pain she’s ever experienced.

Even if she concentrated on her forehead, she could not feel her horn coming out. Right now, the Oni Rem was completely dead.

As if she had put all of her life force into the baby in her belly.

Rem: “…”

Rem’s horn has made her suffer a lot, and at the same time, has been beneficial.

Being an Oni has made Rem go through cruel, painful things. As she has confessed to Subaru, she wasn't able to be a good kid. To her parents, she was a failure of a daughter. …To her sister, she was a bad little sister until the very end.

It has also caused her to never think that she was given blessings and not benefits.

Whenever was tormented by pain, suffering, or powerlessness, she would realize that she was an Oni, that she Oni blood—that she had power. Once she could no longer feel that for the first time, she realized that she was blessed.

Blessed by being an Oni. By being born as her parents' child. By being her sister's little sister.

She met Subaru, got married, had a kid, and in this moment when it was being born, realized it for the first time.

Surely, her parents too, had felt…

Rem: "…Oo…Ahhh! Ooooo!!"

Breaks from the the pain become shorter and shorter, and now the pain was swarming her non-stop. Every time it felt like she was going to lose consciousness, the dull pain shook her awake. It happened again and again.

And Rem couldn't hear the midwife desperately cheering her on. She couldn't hear anything.

???: "…?! Hey, do you realize where you are?! Looking like that…"

Rem: "…?"

Rem felt a strange, surprising presence, and she opened her eyes. In her field of vision blurred by tears, she did not see the midwife looking at Rem with an earnest expression.

The midwife was was sinking down next to the legs of the bed. Instead, the one right next to Rem looking into her face was…

Rem: “Tia…-sama…?”

Tia: “Sorry to do this at a time like this, Rem. Also, I said we wouldn’t see each other anymore, but I was wrong. This…this will really be the last time.”

In her open eyes, she saw Tia smile lonesomely. It was Tia’s smile that Rem has seen many times…and yet, dark thoughts seemed to be appearing and disappearing.

Bloodlust…It was bloodlust. There was bloodlust in Tia’s smile. It wasn’t a fake smile, but there was bloodlust.

Tia: “This is the real me. So, I can’t be with you guys. I…When I see you struggling, I just want to kill.”

Rem: “…”

Tia’s words had apologeticness, sincerity, and bloodlust. It made total sense.

She understood what she was saying. Tia’s true feelings and her nature were always in conflict. She couldn’t live with her. That’s the kind of existence she is.

Rem: “You got yourself back…”

Tia: “…Yeah, I did. It’s all thanks to Su and Hal’s hard work. I want to kill.”

Tia played with her hair in an embarrassed manner, and she voiced her murderous intent while blushing.

Seeing her friend like that, Rem closed her eyes. A tear ran down her cheek.

Rem: “Tia-sama, I’m going to be a mom.”

Tia: “Yeah, I know.”

Rem: “Tia-sama, I…love Subaru-kun.”

Tia: “Yeah, I know that too.”

Rem: “Tia-sama…I…love you too.”

Tia: “…”

Rem: “So, I can’t…live with you.”

Even though she loved her, she couldn’t be with her. Her being unable to associate with others was an insurmountable mall. There was someone Rem loved and prioritized over Tia.

Rem: “…”

It was after she told her feelings that Rem noticed how Tia looked for the first time. Tia, who had run over in a white dress, had someone in her arms. It was a senseless girl who wasn’t breathing.

Someone’s dead body…A girl’s dead body. She somehow knew who it was and…

Tia: “I will bring her with me. I killed her. My other half…the fake me wanted to become one and loved me, so I killed her.”

Rem: “…Tia-sama, did you…come to kill me?”

Tia: “I…”

Tia going back to normal meant that Subaru made things work out somehow. Subaru wasn’t here. Only Tia, who wanted to slaughter everything, came back.

Logically thinking about it, this was a hopeless situation. It wouldn’t be surprising if Rem was heartbroken and sobbed as she begged for her life.

However, Rem didn’t do that, and she knew there was no need to.

…The days she spent together with Tia wouldn’t let her.

Tia: “I…”

Tia says an incomplete sentence once again.

Tia's milky white hair shook, and, with Rem in her clear eyes, she broke into a smile as she said,

Tia: "…I…love you guys…so I won't kill you."

8

It was dawn when he arrived at the clinic after running from the palace without any breaks.

Subaru: "H-How is Rem?!"

Doctor: "Still in the middle of fighting. Why are you guys barging in with stupid looks on your faces? You're just going to get in the way. Don't enter the waiting room either. Go wait outside!"

The old magic user acted so cold towards Subaru who was out of breath and checked if his wife was alright.

Although, that was understandable; because of Subaru and Halibel's negligence, they had an unexpected intruder at the scene of the child birth. Taboo things must have happened one after another in terms of professionalism for the one responsible for the clinic and watching the child birth.

Halibel: "But man, more than half a day…Giving birth to a child is no easy task."

Said Halibel, sinking down onto the waiting room chair and giving a long sigh. Influenced by seeing him relaxing, Clane and the others who accompanied him also all sat down. The ones who intruded included almost all of the people who had been at the palace; there wasn't nearly enough room in the clinic.

In the end, more than half of them left the building, falling over on the way out, then they waited for morning and the baby's first cry.

Of course, Subaru was waiting inside the waiting room, but he really couldn't settle down. He was just impatiently and restlessly walking around.

Halibel. Su-san, I understand how you feel, but shouldn't you calm down a little bit?"

Subaru: "…I get what you're saying. But, sorry, Even though it's pathetic, I just can't stay still. If I don't move, it feels like I'm suffocating."

Halibel: "Makes sense. Well, I just wanted to say that. I did say I understand how you feel, but this is isn't something I can't understand. Your worries are none of my business. It was just painful to watch, that's all."

Although it sounded really irresponsible, he tried to get his mind off things even if it was just for a little while, and he appreciated the thought.

However, Subaru used up all the relief he got from Halibel in mere seconds, and once again started to wander around. Halibel gives a wry smile.

Halibel: "At times like these, men can only watch in silence…No matter how many times I go through it, it's still rough."

Halibel bit on his unlit kiseru, said just that, and went silent this time.

Deep inside, he agreed with his words. At times like these, men could only wait in silence. He looked up at the ceiling and continued to wish with his whole soul, like he was praying.

An awfully stale wish. A wish anyone would make too if they were put in this situation.

Subaru: "Please, God, Buddha, Christ, Jehovah, Mohammed, Angra Mainyu…"

It didn't matter if it was a good god or an if it was an evil god. Even call a devil's name if you feel inclined to do so.

Subaru called the names of every supernatural existence he knew of, and prayed.

Subaru: “…Tia, please.”

And lastly, he prayed with a name that was neither a god’s name nor a great spirit’s name, but his friend’s.

I pray…

Subaru: “…That both the mother and the child are all right.”

It was right after he gave a prayer when there was a disruptive change in the atmosphere.

Inside the clinic, a voice—the first cry of a bawling rang out, going through the clinic room door.

Subaru impulsively lifted his face, and Halibel also rose from his chair. Everyone who had been sleeping jumped to their feet one by one, and they waited eagerly for the clinic room door to open.

Halibel: “Have you decided on a name?”

Halibel asked that to Subaru, who was standing still and raising and lowering his head.

After that, Subaru pulled himself together and said,

Subaru: “Y-Yeah, I got one. I have one. If it’s a girl, Spica.”

The “Subaru” in Natsuki Subaru is a name of a star. It’s what his parents named him as they prayed. Imitating them, he’d name the child after a star while praying that he’d become a father who’d live up to his parents.

The door to the clinic room slowly opens. Beyond it, he saw Rem holding the baby…

Subaru: “If it’s a boy…”

Epilogue: Anniversary

1

Rem: “…Rigel”

When the child had its named called by a gentle voice, it slowly stood up.

It was a child with light blue hair, and eyes that had the same color as its hair. It was turning six years old and was still at the peak of its adorableness…but the sharpness of its eyes didn’t make the future look too bright.

Natsuki Rigel—that was the name of this child, a fitting leading character for the ending of this story.

Rem: “Rigel, where are you? It’s time to go to Temple Elementary”

Rigel: “Mom, I’m right here. I’m already ready.”

When he responded to the voice that came from inside the house, a woman with long blue hair appeared all of a sudden. The lovely, beautiful woman suddenly smiled as she stared at Rigel, who was standing in the garden.

Rem: “Oh, you got ready quickly today. Good boy.”

Rigel: “Unlike Dad, I don’t want to trouble you.”

Rem: “Hmph, don’t say that, Rigel. You shouldn’t bad-mouth your dad. Besides, I’m into taking care of your dad, so I don’t mind. Hahh, it makes me so happy; I think the second one is coming now…”

Rigel: “Could you not?! That’s not funny!”

Listening to Rigel’s voice crack, the woman—Rem, the mother, giggled. She had a baby belly, and inside of it there was Rigel’s little brother/little sister in the making.

Although he was honestly anxious about having a sibling being born, Rigel had high hopes. Surely it'll be a cute little sister. No doubt about it. I vote for a little sister.

Rem: “So, even if it ends up being a little brother, don't bully him, and be his friend, okay?”

Rigel: “Well, that won't be a problem if you do your best to give birth to a little sister.”

Rem: “Oh, my. You really do seem to resemble someone…”

Dealing with Rigel's sass, Rem put her to her forehead as if to say that this was unfortunate.

It's true that in the neighborhood Rigel was known to have a smart mouth. He was so quick-witted that you wouldn't believe he was a 6 years old, and it was acknowledged by the kids in the neighborhood.

However, Rigel knew that some other people had a big influence on this situation; he knew things were like this mainly because of his father and his workplace.

Rem: “It's great that I got my maternity and parental leaves approved as suggested by your dad, but now that I don't have work, I'm very bored…”

Rigel: “What are you saying with that baby bell of yours? You should just do housework.”

Although Rem sighed with boredom, Rigel had nothing but respect for his mother's boldness.

This may not be her first childbirth, but how could a pregnant woman be this calm her second time? Rigel wanted to go around the whole town bragging about it, but his father was already doing that, so he held back.

Rem: “It was quite rough when I had you. This isn't so bad in comparison.”

Rigel: “Was it really that rough?”

Rem: “Yep, it sure was. It was a breech delivery, and I almost died.”

Rigel: “It was that rough?!”

Rem: “It was rough. Your dad and Uncle Halibel almost died too.”

Rigel: “They were going to die?!”

Rem: “They weren’t the only ones. Had it taken a little longer, the whole town of Banan might’ve gotten annihilated…”

Rigel: “Just how difficult was my birth?!”

Rigel was told that his own birth put the town in danger, and it surprised him. I can’t possibly imagine this happening, but is it going to be a difficult birth like that when my sister is born?

Rigel: “Will I stay alive and meet my sister…?”

In his mind he promises to use the Substitution Halibel taught him on his father to sacrifice him if push comes to shove.

In any case, while they were having that conversation, the bell tower rang.

Rigel: “Ah, dang it. I’m actually going to be late!”

Rem: “That’s not good. Here, bring this bento. Also, Dad forgot to bring his bento, so give this to him please.”

Rigel: “Alright…”

Rigel takes the two packages and knits his brows at the difference between the two. One was kid sized. He could see that. That one’s his. But, what was up with how grand the other one was?

Rem: “They’re the same.”

Rigel: “Are they now?!”

Rem: “I packed the same amount of love in each. For you to worry about such a thing…Rigel, you’re still such a baby, huh. Your sister’s going to be disappointed with you.”

Rigel: “Why am I always at fault?!”

Rigel pouted at what Rem said, and after that he put the two packages into his bag.

Then he waved at his mother, started to leave the house, and…

Rem: “…Rigel.”

Upon hearing his mom’s voice, he stopped and turned around. His mom gently waved while smiling and said,

Rem: “Take care.”

Rigel: “I’m off!”

After having that exchange, Natsuki Rigel started running to Temple Elementary.

2

???: “You sure are energetic again today, Rigel.” [???: “Ri-chan, good morning.” [???: “Good morning, Rigel.”

Rigel: “Good morning! Good morning! Good moooorning!”

Running towards downtown, Rigel was spoken to from every direction. To Rigel, this was the town he was born and raised in; the environment he was familiar with. But if he were to say that this was something totally natural, his classmates at temple elementary school would be surprised, so apparently he was just a little strange.

Rigel: “Mom and Dad seem to have done a lot of things…”

He’d overheard the adults conversate as if they were talking about an amusing story. His mom and dad may have been involved in a serious event that shook Banan town.

Rigel honestly thought that it was fake. Would his mother, someone who acts reserved other than with his dad, really get involved in a serious event like that? As for his dad, it would not be surprising if an uproar was centered around him.

While having such thoughts, Rigel…

???: "…Oh, Rigel. Come here."

He hears a voice that didn't sound like it was greeting him. Rigel stops upon hearing that familiar tone of voice, and turns around. Then, right behind him, there was not a black wall…but a person in a black kimono.

Rigel: "Uncle Halibel!"

Halibel: "Ohh ohh, long time no see eh, Rigel. Have you been well? Have you been skipping your training?"

Rigel: "No I haven't! In fact, I wanna go onto the next training already! How about you, Uncle? Why have you been gone from town for so long?"

Rigel had his hair tousled by him, and broke into a broad smile from the rough way he handled his hair.

Halibel was his parents' friend, and to Rigel he was like an uncle. Though he may not look like it, he works as a shinobi and jokes that he's always finding those who bring the seeds of trouble into Kararagi city-state, purging them behind the scenes, assassinating.

Still, he really was like a shinobi, and he was secretly giving training.

Halibel: "You're pretty good at this. So good that you should even follow my footsteps if Rem-chan lets you."

Rigel: "Like, following your footsteps to being an "eternal playboy"? No way. I'm going to support Mom and my sister and get a job that I can be proud of as a family head."

Halibel: “I feel like I’ve heard this before, and what about your dad?”

Rigel: “Dad’s a man. He’s old enough to wipe his own butt. He’ll be fine.”

Halibel: “Dahahahaha! What the hell, Su-san has no respect going for him!”

After shrugging his shoulders, Halibel bursted into laughter while covering his face. Then, once Halibel’s momentary laughter settled down, he said,

Halibel: “Hee…hee…A-Anyways, I’m gonna go see Rem-chan. I’m on break for a while, so I’d like to be there to see your little brother/little sister being born if possible.”

Rigel: “It’s a little sister.”

Halibel: “Hm?”

Rigel: “It’s going to be a little sister.”

Halibel: “Y-Yeah, right…”

Overwhelmed by an alarming sense of intimidation, Halibel nodded dubiously in response to Rigel’s comment. And then, he put his kiseru to his mouth, and lit it as he gave out smoke.

Halibel: “You’re going to Temple Elementary now, right? Take care. When you get back, I’ll train you.”

Rigel: “It’s a promise! Lie, and I’ll make you swallow 1000 needles!”

Halibel: “Ohh, how scary. A Su-san type of phrase. I’m so scared.”

Rigel: “You’ll be swallowing them from the bottom!”

Halibel: “Does that kind of stuff even happen?!”

Halibel shrieked and laughed loudly upon hearing Rigel’s reminder, and he left as he waved goodbye.

He was ecstatic to have met him again unexpectedly, but now he had very little time left. Was he going to have enough time to give his dad his bento? He wouldn't care if not giving it would just mean that his dad would suffer, but he didn't want to make his mom sad. It was a dilemma.

So, as a solution…

Rigel: "…Be sneaky about it."

Rigel concentrated on his forehead, jumped very high, and went over the streets.

3

Jumping high and bathing in the wind in the sky felt good.

Inside the horn grown on his forehead, mana gathered from the atmosphere, filling his body with strength. In this state, Rigel felt like he was wrapped in a sense of almightiness, and that he could do anything.

However, since his mom would make a lonely look whenever he grew his horn, he tried to avoid doing this as much as possible. Of course, using it in an emergency like this was different, though.

Rem: "I'm sorry…that you could only grow one horn…"

His mom had said that once when she was patting Rigel's head while he was pretending to be asleep. Rigel couldn't understand why she was apologizing for that. Judging from the way she had said it, it seemed having one horn wasn't enough, but wouldn't 5 or 6 of them look lame?

He thought there was a nice balance with having one horn in the middle of his forehead, and that it looked cool.

Rigel: "Well, it's not like I can look cool anyway with how much my face looks like dad's."

Rigel steps on the roof tiles, being careful not to break them, and hops over the town.

His dad's workplace is called the "Banan Culture Promotion Group", which was in the east side of town, and it seems they plan all sorts of festival and events, and it is up to them to pump life into the town, or something like that. Apparently, it used to be a "Culture School" that his dad had worked at, but he didn't know any details about it.

Anyways, his dad's workplace was annoying all year round, and it was tiring to explain to his friends that it was "a job that spreaded the ritual where you hit Onis with beans" whenever they asked him about it.

That being said, it was true that he was supporting the household with his earnings. Thinking that this was the time as a son to thank his efforts for the family, he focused on bringing the bento and…

???: "…Hey, you there."

Rigel: "Ooe?!"

He was called out to while jumping in the air and it freaked him out. Rigel looks right beside him, sees that someone is there, and was taken aback.

It was a very beautiful person. Milky white hair, a pure white dress, eyes attractive enough to leave you unable to speak.

???: "Wow, I can already guess whose kid is this. Isn't that something?"

Rigel: "Wh…ugya!"

Rigel, surprised by the beautiful faced getting near him and smiling broadly, lost his balance in the air. He lost control, and at this rate, was going to hit the ground.

???: "Careful. You should stop jumping around if you're incapable."

Rigel: "Ah"

He was grabbed by the neck, and was forced to stop. Then the person swooped down at once while holding onto Rigel—they silently landed at an empty street.

Rigel: “U-Umm…”

After landing, the woman and Rigel faced each other while she held him up. Rigel was stared at by a beautiful person he’d never seen before that smelled nice, and it made him nervous.

Seeing Rigel act like that, the woman sighed contentedly and said,

???: “I really enjoyed that. Yep, that’s a face that says you want to kill.”

Rigel: “What’s that supposed to mean?!”

???: “Ohh, just like Su. I guess that should be expected. Given that your face looks that similar to his.”

The woman laughed foolishly and let go of Rigel, freeing him. While timidly looking at the woman, Rigel had no idea how to respond and had a question mark above his head.

Since she talked about his face, she’s most likely someone Dad knows. A lot of the people Dad knows are weirdos, but this woman in front of me is pretty fine woman. A beauty. No, but still…

???: “Hey, don’t get mesmerized just because I’m cute.”

Rigel: “No matter how much of a beauty you are, I have my little sister, so…”

???: “Oh, okay then. So you’ve got a girl in mind…wait, little sister?! Won’t karma get you for that?!”

Karma…wonder what that means. I don’t understand complicated things. I’m just a kid, after all.

???: “Karma is when you have to live your life in a way that can never be changed. You’ll understand soon enough. Anyways…”

Rigel: “Anyways?”

???: “You’re Rigel, aren’t you? Su and Rem’s kid. Right?”

Rigel: “Uh, if by Su you mean Natsuki Subaru, then yes.”

The woman mentioned Rigel’s mom and dad’s names, and he nodded while being careful of her. The woman seemed very friendly. He also had a hunch that there was something else about her that was off putting, but he ignored it for now.

It was probably one of those hunches that wouldn’t be worth worrying about after Rigel interacted with her.

???: “…I’m surprised. You’re an interesting one.”

Rigel: “Isn’t that your karma? I don’t really get it, though”

???: “Aha, you got me. Well done. …You’re the hero that slayed a monster.”

The woman smiled and exaggerated that he had slayed a monster. If this girl was a monster, then the world must be a pretty peaceful place.

???: “And so, I offer this as a reward for the hero that has slain the monster.”

Rigel: “…? What’s this?”

What the woman held out to him was something like a bracelet made with white thread. The woman made a devious look and went “hehehe” in response to Rigel’s reaction of tilting his head.

???: “This is a small gift. I actually said I was going to give you my light sphere, but that’s hard to do. So, I’m giving you a special white, not black, binding made by myself.”

Rigel: “What do you mean?”

???: “If something ever happens, I’ll come rushing over to save you. That’s what the tool is for. It’s an amazing treasure. What do you think?”

“Come rushing over”, she says, but what can this slender girl even do if she does come?

Those were Rigel’s thoughts, forgetting about how he had been saved from jumping in Oni form. There was also the gift, but…

Rigel: “Mom said not to accept things from strangers, so…”

???: “Huh?! …Y-You’re turning down my gift? I-I’ll kill you, you know?”

Rigel: “That’s a threat!”

The woman starts tearing up slightly, says something dangerous, and Rigel screeched at her.

This girl was wack. She looked way older than him, but was talking like one of his classmates. Or maybe something closer would be…a little sister. It was like he was talking to a little sister.

Plus, he knew that she had no ill intentions. Looking at her eyes, he could tell. She stared at Rigel so seriously that it felt uncomfortable, and she was putting words together.

???: “But…I…love you. I want to kill you, though.”

Rigel: “…I have a little sister, so…”

???: “You already said that earlier! Besides, she shouldn’t even be born yet!”

She says that to Rigel, and rejected her for almost mesmerizing him for a bit. The women stamped her feet and tore her hair out, maybe because she was irritated by that, and said,

???: “Fine. Fine. F-I-N-E! If you insist, then FINE! I was actually going to leave, but not anymore! I’m going to talk about this with Su!”

Rigel: “With dad? I don’t mind, but Dad’s quite a pain in the butt.”

???: “I know. So is your mom. Let’s go, Rigel.”

The woman said just that, and then started to walk. However, she was going in the wrong direction to get to his dad’s workplace.

Rigel: “It’s this way.”

???: “I-I knew thaaat. Aren’t you being kind of bratty? Just how involved do you think I was with your birth? The town almost got destroyed, you know?”

Rigel: “Seriously, what the heck happened on the day I was born?!”

When Rigel felt like this was a story that he had just heard about from his mother, he loudly threw a question. After hearing that, the woman put her finger to her lips and said,

???: “It’d take a looong time to tell you the story. Longer than the time it’ll take to get to your dad.”

Rigel: “Then just come to our home. I’m sure Mom would welcome you.”

???: “…”

When Rigel put his hands behind his head and told the woman that, her eyes widened. After that, she chuckled and said,

???: “O-Of course she would. I bought that house with the goodbye presents that I earned, after all!”

Rigel: “What are you to my family…You haven’t even told me your name.”

Tia: “My name? Oh, I’m Tia. I’m…hm…”

The girl that seemed to be deeply involved with a bunch of stuff in the Natsuki family—Tia was messing with Rigel. However, he didn’t mind it, and he was charmed by Tia’s smile as she looked back.

Tia, with her broad smile, cheerfully said, Tia: “…I’m like…a part of your family.”

She finally said those words, and they both slowly moved towards his dad’s workplace, standing side by side.

Before she knew it, the girl started humming in a good mood, and it sounded like something Rigel had heard before.

Rigel: “…”

It was a lullaby his mom had put together long ago, before he was even born.

She had said that the name of the song was “Tia”.

…So, well, I guess I’ll accept the fact that she said she’s family.

A light blue sky, a town that looked ordinary in every way—the scenery of a family’s ordinary life.

That common, irreplaceable happiness definitely existed in one corner of the world.

There were things that were lost, things that were abandoned, places that were ran away from, memories that couldn’t be forgotten even if they tried…

Despite having all these feelings, they would still live in this world that went on.

…And that was also an ending for one of the loves of a lost boy that wandered into another world.

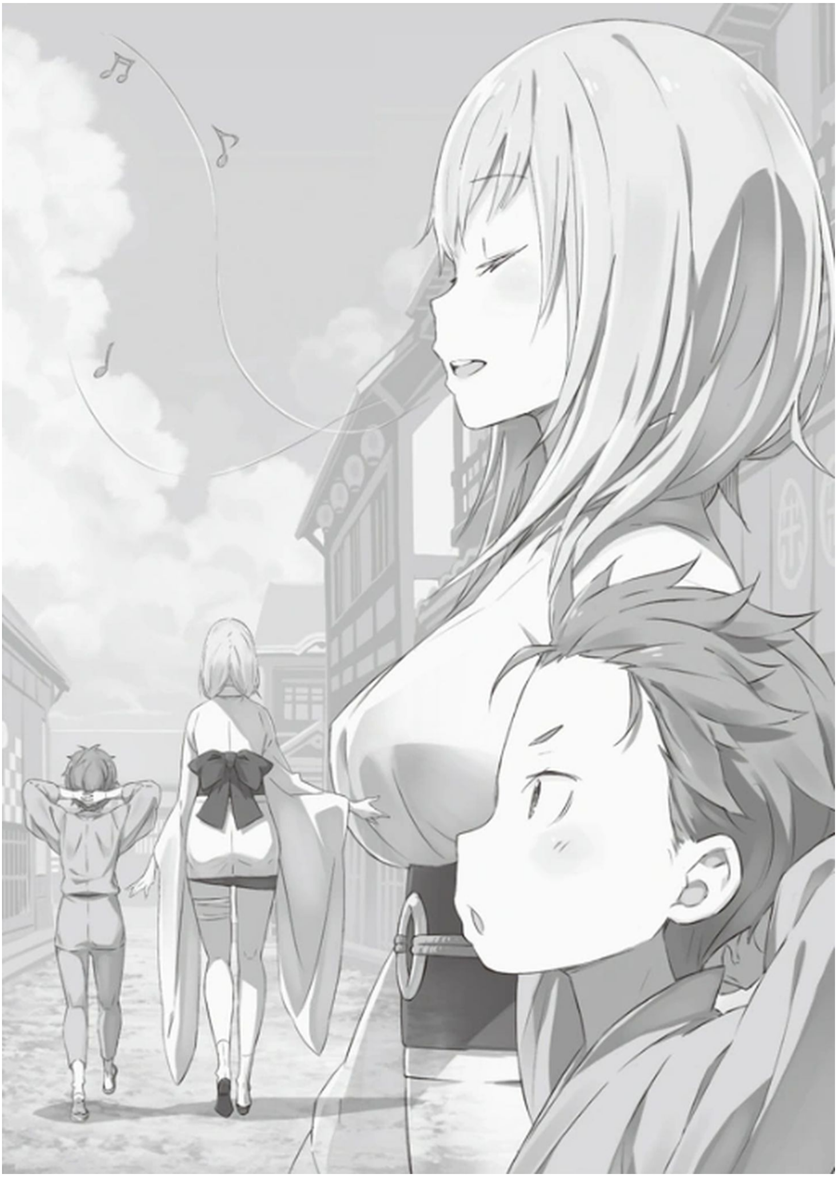

Apocolypse Girls

Prologue:
Beloved Warmth

—A raging storm of pallid snow shrouded her vision, and she was unable to see even a few meters ahead.

Thunderous and obstreperous was the wind, while the snow, howling as it blew, felt cold to the touch.

Feeling a cold so intense that it seemed like her bare skin would peel and flake away, she pressed forth, leaving prints in the snow one step after the other. The footprints she had trodden into the snow quickly vanished, so she was even unsure of which direction she had come from. Was it from the fore? Was it from the rear? Was she marching onwards? Was she retreating backwards?

—Was she still alive? Was she already dead? Uncertain, is what she was.

???: "…"

Loosening her lips at the foolish musing, she continued atop the frozen snow, assailed by the blizzard.

The snow accumulating on the ground was a rather peculiar thing, as what fluttered down from the heavens was a soft powder snow, but the moment it adhered to the surface of the ground, it would glaciate, assuming the form of a fatal weapon. Without shoes, her bare feet were torn to shreds, while the sensation of the blood flowing from their soles vaguely reminded her of the pulsations of her own life.

In the depths of the wintry chill, useless thoughts crossed her mind one after the other.

Things like when she had last eaten, what the leftovers she had a considerable while ago actually tasted like, the cute girl that veered away when they escaped from the slavers, the vulgar slaver who tried to lay his hands on the merchandise, and her very self, which even now seemed on the brink of vanishing.

???: “…”

All of those could be classified as nothing more than inconsequential thoughts.

Everything, including the matter of her very being, was inconsequential in the face of the chill she felt in that moment.

Cold, cold, cold, cold, cold. Even if she chanted it as a malediction, cold it remained.

The cold was something that robbed people of their ability to think like a human. It was not as though she had ever been one to think about things in a rational manner, yet that effect had become increasingly obvious.

To live or to die, when in a situation where the problem was narrowed down to those two extremities, humans were not so different from beasts. Rather, in the sense of unswerving dedication to life, beasts possessed a single-mindedness that humans could not emulate.

In that case, were she to become a beast, would it then become easier for her to live—

???: “Woof, woof, woof…”

Her lips, a faint hue of red yet lingering, made a husky voice mimicking the barks of a hound.

Any semblance of meaning it bore naught. This was nothing more than another link in the unending chain of useless thoughts. —Nay, there had indeed been meaning to it.

???: “—Hk! Finally found ye, blasted guttersnipe!”

???: “Ah…”

Amidst the howling of the snowstorm, she heard the voice of a man with a thick accent. Subsequently, a strike to her slender shoulders caused her body to topple over sideways atop the snow. Her whole body was embraced by the icy snow, and the sensation of her blood turning to ice made her cheek stiffen.

When she glanced over, she beheld a man of great stature standing just beside her.

‘Twas a visage bearing the mark of recognition within her memories. That was but a matter of course.

Large Man: “Did ye think ye’d steal me wares and scuttle away, damned thief…!”

Speaking those words, the keeper of the shop, from whom she had stolen, seized the tresses of her black hair and hoisted her aloft. In the midst of this raging snowstorm, it was a marvel that he had managed to pursue the fleeing damsel to such a distant place.

Should that be deemed an admirable ambition for commerce? Or a dismal vindictiveness? Perhaps both?

It was mentioned earlier that the cold could steal one’s ability to think like a human, yet it also stole something else. Composure and compassion; in other words, the very thing known as humanity.

The man, who had lost his very humanity, would go to the utmost limits of perseverance to exact retribution upon the thief, similarly bereft of that very thing.

He was an adult and she was a child. To begin with, there was a disparity in physique. Seized by the hair and hefted aloft, her feet could not be planted firm on the snow. Then, the man’s fist plunged right into the middle of her body, suspended as it was.

Over and over again, he hit her. Without any escape from the force of the blows, her bones grated against each other. For a time, her urine would probably be tainted with the hue of blood. Pondering as such, she continued to avert her attention away from the pain.

Large Man: “Haa, haa…”

Before long, the man ran out of breath from hitting her over and over, and released his grasp on her hair. Her body, languid and weak, fell atop the snow. She was weary, lacking any strength whatsoever.

Then, slowly covering her motionless body, the man draped himself over her.

Young Girl: “…”

Amidst the gale of snow, she could feel the man’s heavy breathing. Her own respiration was also noisy, however, her ears were of no avail. Only, one of the senses from the five she possessed yet persisted. That was why, she could feel it.

The man’s hand traced her slender and hollow ribs, groping her body.

Her body had thinned to the extent that it seemed to have no gender, but even so, it would make a sufficient meal within this extreme cold. Of course, “meal” was merely a figure of speech. This too, was just another link in the unending chain of useless thoughts.

Having stolen, should she just be grateful of the fact that she had not been immediately killed? Should she lament the fact that she was still living through a fate worse than death?

In the midst of the sensations that could be described as neither pleasant nor unpleasant, she slowly closed her eyes.

Large Man: “—?”

Suddenly, somehow, her outstretched fingers had caught a grasp of something. Not a piece of frozen snow, nay, held within her fingers was a certain hardness, with a rather smooth surface, akin to a shard of glass.

Immediately, she realized it was what she had stolen from the shop, the bottle of alcohol that had been the impetus of her pursuit.

It was not as though she had yearned to drink the strong liquor, yet such a thing lent itself well to an exchange with someone who did crave it. Moreover, it was infamous for blazing all too easily, a kind by the name of fire brandy, if her memory served her right.

Somehow, it seemed like it had fallen to the snow and shattered when she had been hit. She fiddled with a jagged shard of the liquor bottle in her hand, pondering. And knowing full well that it was a useless thought, still she ruminated upon it.

Large Man: “Guph…”

Young Girl: “—?”

In that moment, a strange sound melded in with the man’s heavy respiration, and she tilted her head.

Right before her, the man widened his eyes, baring his yellow stained teeth with mouth gaped open. From his mouth, dark blood spilled forth, and she unconsciously turned her head away.

Then, wondering what had happened, while the malodor of blood dominated her nostrils—

Young Girl: “—Ah.”

A sudden heat surged and spread through her lower half, drenching her in warmth.

Slowly, she lowered her gaze. The man’s large body shielded her from the furious winds of the hailstorm. Thanks to that, she could acutely discern what had occurred with her own black irises.

—The man’s abdomen had been torn open, his overflowing blood, his viscera, had spilled out from his waist.

Large Man: “…”

Within the extreme cold, it gave forth a great heat, enough to generate steam and provide her frozen body with warmth. Moving before her thoughts had time to settle, the glass shard grasped in her hand had ripped through the man’s belly.

There existed no words that could describe the unfathomable deep emotions she felt upon realizing that fact.

Was it because she had violated a taboo? Was it because she was piling up sin after sin? Was it because she had taken the life of another with her own hands? Neither was it wholly due to any of those things, nor was it not due at all.

Only, only, in the midst of this shivering cold, she pondered to herself.

—This very warmth is the truest feeling of being alive; so she thought, just like a beast.

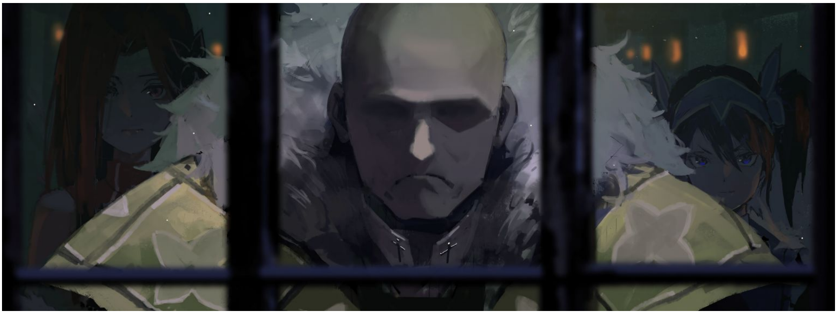

Chapter 1:
The Featherrun Sisters

1

—At first glance, Holosseo Featherrun was a man who appeared to be more dead than alive.

It was not as though he was unnaturally thin. If anything, his cheeks were rather plump, and looking upon him in his entirety, one could observe a superfluity of flesh adorning his frame.

That was not to say that the amount of flesh on one's body was directly fastened to their vitality, yet still, whether one was obese or emaciated was a good indicator to readily discern how wealthy or destitute they may be.

It was easy for the impoverished to die, while the rich would assuredly live on.

Only that unwritten rule had remained unbroken. In that sense, it seemed like it would be difficult for Holosseo to die.

Despite this, the primary reason he still gave off the impression of a dead man was likely due to his eyes, in which naught was reflected.

Holosseo: "Now, from this moment onwards, you are property of Featherrun."

Staring with those hollow eye sockets, those dark, abyssal chasms, he hurled such words towards the other party.

It was not as if they had been empty since his birth. No doubt, some foul torture had been inflicted upon him, gouging his eyeballs out.

The painful white scars that remained around his eye sockets stood testament to that fact.

???: "…"

It was said that the impression someone gave off was largely determined by the eyes. In fact, there was little information to be gleaned from a face that concealed its eyes, and it was difficult to commit such a face to memory.

Holosseo looked like he was either around thirty years old or nearing decrepitude, so his age could not determined based on outward appearances. Although, it could have just been that the beholder took no interest in the age of others.

Holosseo: "What is your name?"

???: "…"

Holosseo: "Featherrun is asking you a question. Answer. What is your name?"

???: "…Ah, were you asking me?"

It was a harsh voice, akin to the hurried scurrying of a spider across the corners of a prison cell.

Upon the realization that the voice was asking for her name, the young girl gave a faint smile and stroked her own hair. And, upon her slender wrists, the shackles and chains clanged, producing an ear-piercing note.

Across the iron bars, Holosseo's hollow eyes were evaluating the young girl. It was a strange tale. —After all, his assessment should have already been finished.

That was because she was the commodity of a slaver, and Holosseo was the buyer thereof.

Young Girl: "…"

Looking closely, there were two figures accompanying behind Holosseo's meager frame. They were a pair that made Holosseo, a man rather short for an adult male, appear to stand at the average height.

Two maidens, one of tall stature and red tresses, the other of small build and blue locks, both garbed in dresses that matched the hue of their own hair, silently bowed their heads as they stood behind Holosseo.

With just that, the relationship between Holosseo and those girls was made as plain as day.

That is to say, that of a master and his slaves— a dynamic where Holosseo was lord, and the young maidens his tools.

As the young girl absentmindedly gazed upon those visitors—

Holosseo: "—Answer. Answer to Featherrun."

Posing the question once more, that husky voice bore no emotion.

Bereft of frustration or suspicion, it was an utterly neutral query.

Though she had not intended to do so, her eyebrows rose in surprise upon witnessing that response.

This was the slave trade. Customers who purchased such wares were naturally arrogant. It was a place where those without value were given worth and traded as such, so it was natural that such a nature was fostered within the buyers.

Young Girl: "…"

The young girl, ruminating on such thoughts, felt a sting upon her skin.

It was not that Holosseo's heart had been roused with irritation, but rather, that the stinging emotions of the petite maiden standing behind him had pierced into her.

Together with a sensation akin to being punctured, the young girl felt a sweet ache in her abdomen. Relaxing her lips at the sense of titillating pleasure, the young girl took a short breath as she stifled her urges.

Whatever the case, naught could be satisfied while she remained locked up in the gaol, bound by shackles.

Therefore—

Young Girl: "—It's Elsa."

Holosseo: "…"

Young Girl: "A mere commodity, Elsa. —Please, I shall be in your care 'til the last drops of my life are spent, right?"

Adorned upon her face a beautiful smile, the young girl in the gaol — Elsa, tilted her head as her shackles clanged.

Beholding her provocative greeting, the aura of the two maidens changed their hue.

Nevertheless, Holosseo, their lord, quietly spoke,

Holosseo: "—From now on, you are a member of the Featherruns."

And thus, his heavy, burdensome reply had been spoken, and not a single word more.

2

Upon the map that dared to depict the world in its entirety, one could find inscribed the names of four large countries.

First was the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, second the Sacred Vollachian Empire, third the Kararagi City-States, and finally, fourth was the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

Those great countries, numbering four, were collectively known as the Four Great Countries.

Each of the great countries struggled with their own unique problems, yet among them, the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko was infamous for its particularly harsh environment; most of the land was encrusted with permafrost, and throughout the whole year, snow never ceased its fall.

For the majority of its citizens, the highest priority for survival in the relentless wintry chill was to demonstrate their faith towards the Spirits that held dominion over arcane forces. The basis for that was a deep sense of gratitude and reverence to the one that continuously protected the unforgiving realm of the Holy Kingdom along with its people, the Sacred Beast, Odglass.

Thus in such a realm as Gusteko, there were several conditions that needed to be met for areas in which people could survive.

If those conditions were not fulfilled, it would end up being quite easy for people to reach an everlasting slumber within the snow; it was imperative for the region to be considered Hallowed Land.

—In the sprawling, icy tundras of Gusteko, Hallowed Land stood as havens untouched by the harsh extremities of ice and snow.

Within the cities of Gusteko, all constructed atop Hallowed Land, people found a way to survive while also dealing with the constant build up of snow, even if only just barely.

In other words, Hallowed Land was something absolutely indispensable to the lives of the people of Gusteko.

So precious were they, that they could not be upheld without management of the Church of the Holy King, which safeguarded the Holy Kingdom—

Elsa: “—I’m surprised. So this place is Hallowed Land?”

Therefore, when she saw that the mansion she had been brought to was located upon Hallowed Land residing within a frozen ravine, Elsa felt a faint sense of astonishment.

During the journey in the dragon carriage, the windows, from which the outside could be peered, had been draped with curtains, making it impossible to glean the circumstances. Hence, though it was unclear which route she had been brought from, it was satisfactory to accept it.

A single mansion was hogging this Hallowed Land all to itself, a sight that harmed the sense of reality of all who bore witness to it.

Before her, the mansion occupying the Hallowed Land could be described as a grand estate. However, Hallowed Land intrinsically had enough power to protect a whole city from the waves of cold. Though it may have been described as a grand estate, to use those grounds for the protection of a single mansion was a luxurious extravagance beyond imagination.

In the first place, the very existence of Hallowed Land was of immense value, and they were strictly managed in amount and location by the ones who governed the Holy Kingdom, the Church of the Holy King.

Therefore, the sight which Elsa currently beheld was one that could never truly exist.

As an exception to that unwritten rule, this space was unabashedly exploiting the power of the Hallowed Land.

Thanks to that, within the surrounding area of the mansion there was sufficient greenery for one to name it a garden, and nature seldom seen in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko was being cultivated.

Indeed, this could certainly be called an “extraordinary” environment.

Elsa: “So, this is the true power of Featherrun?”

Along the road, she had heard about the extraordinary nature of “Featherrun” many times. Thus beholding its wonder, Elsa murmured in admiration.

The very next moment, a cold blade was affixed to the back of Elsa’s white neck.

Elsa: "—Oh?"

???: "…Do not belittle our esteemed Father."

Warning Elsa in her surprised state, was a hoarse voice akin to that of a crone.

It was the blue-haired young maiden who did utter those words, standing near Elsa's back. With tails of hair bound on each side of her head, she was garbed in a stunning blue dress, matching the hue of her hair. Her unripe beauty, lying on the boundary between young maiden and lady, was adorned with cosmetics, enhancing her immoral charm.

She had been prepared to have such a beautiful appearance, but alas, as her gaze was fixed upon Elsa, her eyes widened to the extent that it seemed her eyeballs would pop out, and her tongue stuck out like a hound, rendering her loveliness void.

However, what dealt the most harm to her lovely impression was the crooked weapon clasped within her slender arms— deadly in nature with blades tarnished to a red tinted hue of brown, was a large pair of shears.

The blades of those shears were fastened to Elsa's slender neck, ensnaring it from both sides. It was no empty threat, for should the strength of their grasp be increased, Elsa's head would surely bid a sorrowful farewell to her torso.

Her nostrils were stricken with a scent of rusted iron; She pondered whether that scent was intrinsic to the great shears, or if time had simply stained them so.

Though, faced with a situation in which her life was held in the balance, Elsa did not hesitate to tilt her head.

Elsa: "Something like belittling Father, that's a misunderstanding. What happened just now was… it was… I wonder, what was it?"

Girl: "…That's something for you to decide, isn't it?"

Elsa: "Well, then it wasn't belittling. That alone is certain."

With the blades yet ensnaring her neck, Elsa returned a response that did not quite fit the mood, causing the girl of blue hair to contort her cheeks. Her face reflected both her displeasure and discomfort as they were.

The look in her eyes was an unsettling one, a foreboding that she might clasp those mighty shears shut, but—

???: “Stop this, Dorothea. Do you intend to bring disgrace upon Father?”

Girl: “—Hk”

Upon hearing that voice, the maiden froze, immediately retracting the blades of her great shears. That instant, Elsa once again was parted from the tangential sensation of death, and stroked her own neck, which had been caught between the blades just before.

???: “Is it necessary to form such an unstable relationship immediately upon having met? Grow up.”

With that, the interaction between Elsa and the girl— Dorothea, was interrupted by the voice of a red-haired woman, who, opening the large door of the mansion, had made her appearance. A face that Elsa had also caught sight of back at the slave market.

The beautiful locks that reached down to her waist were blood red, and as before, she was adorned in a dress of the same hue. She was around twenty years in age, and possessed beauty that gave off a sharp, graceful impression.

As the woman gazed back and forth between the two standing in the garden, she shifted a stern look towards Dorothea.

Red-Haired Woman: “Dorothea, we spoke of this previously, did we not? Starting today, you are an elder sister. Your time as the youngest is thus concluded. That is why you must do things properly.”

Dorothea: “…B-Bu-But, Sithonia. Th-This girl…”

Red-Haired Woman: “This girl, what about her?”

Dorothea: “…Gr, grr, grrr!”

Whilst stomping her feet in anger, Dorothea stared with a face on the verge of tears at the woman of red locks— Sithonia, the person she had called so. Tears gradually emerged within those eyes, and unable to be held back, they began to overflow.

Dorothea’s manner at present appeared to be emotionally unstable, causing Sithonia to sigh as if she was at a complete loss. Giving a sidelong glance to that exchange between sisters, Elsa shifted the gaze of her black irises towards the mansion.

Elsa: “…”

As they all stood in the garden before the mansion, towards Elsa and the other two— nay, to be precise, not towards the other two, but just towards Elsa, several gazes were turned.

She did not know their exact number and positions. Regardless, she could tell that she was being watched.

Sithonia: “You… Elsa, was it? Is there something wrong with the mansion?”

Elsa: “No, I just thought I was being watched. It feels a tad like I’m being welcomed. I’m overjoyed.”

Sithonia: “—. Those girls, have you noticed their gazes?”

Elsa: “Yes.”

As Sithonia’s expression shifted into one of surprise, Elsa nodded, seemingly unbothered.

For a long time now, she had been alert to the vigilance of others.

Rather than gazes, it was something more like indicators or scents. By merely living, countless indicators would hang over the bodies of humans. Elsa was just a little talented at smelling those as they were emitted by people. It was simply a matter of that, and nothing more.

Sithonia: “There is more to you than simply being an exemplary specimen, it would seem.”

Elsa: “I’m fine with anything that may be planned for me, but, I wonder, may I give my greetings to the girls inside?”

Sithonia: “Of course, you can rest assured. There is just one thing I ought to tell you in advance. —Including Dorothea and myself, everyone in the mansion shall become your elder sisters.”

Elsa: “—Elder sisters.”

Upon hearing Sithonia’s odd assertion, Elsa tilted her head.

However, upon Sithonia’s face was worn an expression of utmost seriousness. Furthermore, as Dorothea stood behind Elsa with tears in her eyes, she made no effort to deny that comment, nodding her head as she sobbed.

Rather than discipline, perhaps it ought to be called a result of domestication.

As Elsa harbored such an impression, Sithonia continued with “Understood?”,

Sithonia: “Here, you shall be the youngest sister. We are the Featherrun Sisters, with you as the youngest sister right at the bottom.”

Elsa: “But, isn’t this girl around the same age as me?”

With a jerk of her chin, Elsa gestured to Dorothea behind her.

It was difficult to tell due to her height and make-up, but Dorothea was around fourteen or fifteen years of age. This year, Elsa would be fifteen years old; probably? Given that approximation, there would not have been a large gap in their ages.

Rather, in terms of age, Elsa would be the older sister, but—

Sithonia: “—Your real age is of no consequence. This is about the number of years one has spent after becoming a Featherrun.”

Elsa: “…Is that so? Understood.”

Spoken to in a firm, clear tone that was difficult to refute, Elsa did not persist.

It was easy to converse with Sithonia, and Elsa could tell that she was showing a good amount of consideration towards her. But, she was nonetheless a member of these so-called “Featherrun Sisters”.

No matter the group, there would assuredly be rules unique to it. That was the case for the slaves who were the merchandise of slavers, as well as for orphans who lurked in the cold alleys.

—Even if it was the Featherrun Sisters, the same idea would apply.

Sithonia: “For the time being, it shall be a few days before Father returns. Until then, you shall learn how to live in this mansion. Have you readied your heart?”

Elsa: “Have I readied my heart? How kind of you to ask.”

Sithonia: “Kind?”

Elsa: “After living in slavery for so long, I’ve completely forgotten what it’s like to be treated as a human.”

Nodding at Sithonia’s words, Elsa reflected on half of her whole life thus far.

Come to think of it, she had loitered around a considerable amount. Her position, too, had varied from runaway, to orphan, to slave, so she would likely immediately grow accustomed to being one of the Featherrun Sisters as well.

The primary factor that had allowed Elsa to continue to survive in such aberrant environments was undoubtedly her adaptability.

Sithonia: “…Yes. That shall do fine. No matter the case, you shall become our little sister before long.”

Elsa: “—?”

As some traces of tragic courage revealed themselves in Sithonia's mutter, Elsa tilted her head.

Be that as it may, Elsa felt no reason or need to probe any further.

No matter how their title was altered, a slave would remain a slave.

After all, whether she was a Featherrun Sister or whatever else, Elsa would remain Elsa.

3

—In the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, the existence of slaves was an open secret.

Officially, the state religion of the Holy Kingdom, the Gustekan Church, advocated that all lives were equal, preaching that there existed no difference in the value between individual people.

Albeit in reality, it was inevitable for there to be disparity between the rich and poor, for if there were those who abounded in wealth, there would certainly also be those who were famished. At the terminus of that unavoidable reality, there of course existed slaves in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed, and to guarantee a labor force.

The fact that Elsa had ended up a slave also stemmed from the adversity that was so commonplace in the Holy Kingdom.

She no longer possessed any recollection of her parents, but, for better or for worse, they were likely just ordinary people. Neither would they have loved their child particularly strongly, nor would they have vehemently shunned her. Merely, if their living circumstances had become difficult, they would have had no other choice but to sell her off in order to protect themselves.

Elsa harbored no intention of disparaging those parents of hers as heartless.

Only, after being sold off to a slaver for the first time, Elsa's personal history had been filled with many ups and downs.

At the outset, the tale began with a mass escape from her first slaver. The origin of this escape sequence was not Elsa, but the actions of an older, senior slave.

This older slave had already been planning the escape for quite some time. Strangely enough, the plan was executed directly after Elsa was taken into possession of the slaver, and transported to the base.

Unfortunately, the older slave who had devised the plan died by an arrow to the head, but Elsa, who was still healthy after having only just been sold off, splendidly succeeded in breaking away from the pursuing slaver.

Afterwards, she snuck into a nearby town and mixed in with the children who were living there under no roof, starting life as an orphan on the frigid streets. She ended up doing plenty of horrible things, including murder.

By doing so, she gained notoriety, and thus she naturally caught the attention of a certain group who preyed on such people, which led to the curtain rising on Elsa's life as a slave for the second time.

Considering how the first time had ended almost instantly, it felt somewhat like the first time she was actually living as a slave. However, this too did not last long. —It seemed that Elsa's physical appearance corresponded to the vulgar desires of men.

A buyer immediately took interest, and Elsa was sold off to the fellow who desired her as a slave. From there, she got up to no good and lost her master as a result, which was a pattern that only continued to repeat as she returned to life as a slave.

Amidst those repetitions, nasty rumors began to spread, and soon, Elsa no longer had any interested buyers. Before long, her slaver started to trouble over what to do with her, and ultimately began to consider a more typical disposal—

Elsa: "—And, that was around when I received an invitation to join the Featherrun Sisters."

???: “…”

Thus, having given a broad recount of her life up to that point, Elsa blew out the flame of the candle near her hand. Catching her breath, she looked up, and then proceeded to incline her head.

Elsa: “—? Is something the matter?”

???: “…I am surprised, you were burdened with far more than I had initially thought.”

Indeed, the one who had given an answer with carefully chosen words was Sithonia, seated around the same table as Elsa. A candle was present in front of her as well, its red flame flickering as it swayed.

Shown into the Featherrun Mansion, she was introduced to the sisters inside as she told her life story. The story of the events that had led Elsa to this point had just been told a moment prior.

In some ways, it was difficult, but she also thought that in some ways it had been quite fun.

Elsa: “That’s why, I think it’s a tad unexpected that you all view it as sorrowful.”

???: “—Kuku. If you think that it wasn’t sorrowful, then you’re quite the cheerful little sister.”

???: “—Albeit, she may be a girl who fits in just perfectly with the Featherrun Sisters. Kuku.”

In response to Elsa’s murmur, there were two smiles that coincided.

At the edge of the same table, two young girls who looked as similar as two peas in a pod sat side-by-side in a large chair. The two were identical from their facial features to their physique, with the only thing setting them apart being the difference in their respective gold and silver hair— as expected, they were each wearing dresses that matched the color of their hair, adorning them in a beautiful manner.

Elsa: “I had been curious about this, but the fact that you’ve spoken means that you aren’t just dolls, right? I wonder, are the two of you going to introduce yourselves any time soon?”

???: “Kuku, you’re a strange girl. —This girl is Hildea. She’s Saria’s little sister.”

???: “—This girl is Saria. She’s Hildea’s older sister. Nice to meet you. Kuku.”

Elsa: “Quite the confusingly similar introductions.”

As the two of them introduced each other, Elsa knit her well-shapen brow.

With their roundabout manner of speech, it seemed that the one with golden hair was Saria, and that the silver-haired one was the younger sister, Hildea. However, following the established rules of the Featherrun Sisters, both of them would be older sisters to Elsa.

As expected, they were all around the same age, yet she found it vexing to be treated as the youngest.

Sithonia: “As you can see, Saria and Hildea are twins who were taken in together. The two of us also went through a great deal before coming here… however, they were rescued here by Father.”

Elsa: “Rescued. Indeed, ah yes that must be.”

Sithonia: “—?”

Elsa: “This is just a supposition, Sithonia, but, did you perhaps also go through alot?”

Asked a question that caught on to the way she had ended her words, Sithonia’s expression slightly clouded over. Then, witnessing that, Saria and Hildea placed their hands together and exclaimed “Wow!” with delight,

Saria: “Did you see that just now, Hildea?”

Hildea: “Indeed, I saw it, Saria.”

Saria: “This Sithonia of ours, she was completely led around the nose by the youngest sister at the bottom.”

Hildea: “Even though she’s the eldest sister at the top, this Sithonia of ours truly is lacking in dignity.”

Sithonia: “Both of you, speak not in such a manner.”

Saria & Hildea: “Wah, scary!”

Being teased by the twins, Sithonia glared at them with sharp eyes. However, without showing any concern over that warning, the twins grinned as they brought cups of black tea from the table to each other’s lips, feeding each other. It was intimate, but that method of drinking seemed to be quite difficult to enact.

Sithonia: “Do not interfere with the things those two do together. That is the trick to getting along with them.”

Elsa: “Thank you for taking all this trouble for me. You’re quite the worrywart, now aren’t you?”

Sithonia: “When the number of unique younger sisters only ever increases, it will always prove to be tough on the elder sister.”

Wearing an expression fraught with weighty anxiety, the young and beautiful Sithonia placed her hand over her forehead.

Dorothea was a violent one, and the twin siblings of Saria and Hildea bore no hesitation to tease their elder sister. It was likely difficult to be an elder sister of all of them. Elsa thought that at least she would not do anything to become a burden on her.

Elsa: “By the way, will you answer my question from earlier, I wonder?”

Sithonia: “…Please do not also be one to trouble me.”

Elsa: “Oh my. I failed right away.”

Her plans crushed in exactly one second, Elsa reflected on her own conduct.

Elsa: “Then, may I alter my question? The Featherrun Sisters, now was it? How many people are there in total? In other words, those who will become my so-called family…”

Sithonia: “Including you, we sisters number six in total… there yet remains one person you still have not met. Currently, she is outside the mansion performing her duties, but she will return before long, so you will meet her soon.”

Elsa: “Six sisters… quite the large family, isn’t it? So then that plus Father, would be our family?”

Sithonia: “Indeed. —That, is our family.”

At Elsa’s query, Sithonia nodded with a gentle tone. And it was not only her, having heard their conversation from the side, Saria and Hildea also did the same thing.

The Featherrun Sisters. —The girls, gathered for a variety of reasons, had become sisters under the custody of Holosseo, and it did seem like they were satisfied with their life here.

Here, with the secret days they spent in this concealed plot of Hallowed Land.

Elsa: “I wonder if I’ll be able to fit in. My, I’ve come to feel apprehensive.”

Sithonia: “…You believe you will be unable to get along with us?”

Elsa: “Ah, that’s not what I meant. It’s just, a normal life, so-to-speak… I’ve never experienced such a thing, so I don’t know how I’d deal with something like a family.”

She had not had any siblings, so her family would have just been her parents, but that was a relationship for which she harbored neither recollections nor emotional attachment, and furthermore, it had been severed from the other side.

After being sold, even just the mere act of living was tough, so she was completely divorced from any notions of a tranquil life.

Elsa: “When I think about that, I wonder where exactly a peaceful day-to-day life would be for me?”

Sithonia: “…”

Elsa: “Sithonia?”

Elsa harbored pure curiosity, and upon her cheek softly was placed the hand of Sithonia. Gazing back at her in wonder, what emerged within those irises was an intricate, mysterious emotion.

It was an emotion that Elsa had never really seen before. If she had to describe it, perhaps it was something close to sorrow?

Saria: “My oh my, I suppose Sithonia’s the type to get like that right away, after all.”

Hildea: “She’s like that despite being the eldest, unable to bear the adversities of the world. My my.”

Witnessing Sithonia’s behavior from the side, the shrill laughs of the twins resounded as if they were lightly making fun of her. However, with nary a glance to the pair, Sithonia heaved a sigh with her eyes still fixed on Elsa,

Sithonia: “Worry not, Elsa. If it is here, if you are here, you can have both a day-to-day life, and a family. After all, the things you were unable to have until now, are all present here for you.”

Elsa: “…I see. I’m looking forward to it.”

Sithonia’s words, bereft of malice, prompted a faint smile to emerge on Elsa’s visage. Taking those words in, Sithonia lightly murmured “Alright”,

Sithonia: “Pardon me for asking about all these things. With that settled, we must help you to become more familiar with the mansion, Elsa. Without further delay, I will also be having you help out with the family’s work.”

Elsa: “The family’s work… that has quite the nice ring to it. What exactly do we do?”

Sithonia: “I mentioned it earlier, did I not? Nobody but us sisters and Father live here. We do not even have servants such as butlers or maids. Of course, neither do we have slaves. That is why—”

Speaking those words, Sithonia stood up and spread out her arms. That gesture was not merely pointing out the fireplace lounge. It was indicating something larger, the entire mansion.

Seeing that Elsa had understood that, Sithonia flashed a smile.

Sithonia: “That is why, all the everyday tasks and mansion housework is divided between us sisters.”

Elsa: “…”

Sithonia: “You were also once a slave, so you must know how to cook and clean, correct? Please demonstrate your talents. As fellow sisters, let us help each other out.”

Gazing at the white hand proffered by Sithonia, Elsa recalled the extensive facilities of the mansion of which she had received a light tour.

And then—

Elsa: “Though, I’m quite bad at such things, so I’m sure I’ll be an inconvenience.”

With that, she evasively declined the eldest’s invitation.

4

The environs of the mansion, that ought to be called the Featherrun Estate, were overflowing with greenery unbecoming of Gusteko.

It was common knowledge that villages and settlements in this country were constructed upon Hallowed Land, but the vast majority of residences were nonetheless surrounded by unmelting snow, so it was a rare occurrence to see any color other than white.

For this place to be an exception to that, was it because the quality of the Hallowed Land was high, or was it perhaps influenced by the fact that this mansion was the only construction on this plot; which of the two was it?

Elsa: “Or perhaps, is it neither of those, I wonder? What do you think?”

???: “…”

With malevolent shears thrust before her neck, Elsa calmly posed such a question.

They were located in the front yard of the Featherrun Estate, a garden that particularly stood out even amidst the Hallowed Land brimming with greenery. The grass and hedges were neatly trimmed, and there were a considerable amount of vibrant flowers of differing hues all around.

She had immediately been taken right into the mansion, unable to get a proper look at the garden, so she had went back just for the sake of it, but—

Elsa: “It seems like I’m not welcome.”

Saying that, Elsa gazed at Dorothea, who was glaring back at her through the gap in the shears.

Dorothea, who had arrived at the garden first, had not made any efforts to conceal her hostility towards Elsa, such had been the case ever since their first meeting. Even though Elsa did not discriminate between any of the other sisters, this was awfully harsh reception.

For what reason she was being detested so much, she truly had no clue as to why.

Dorothea: “…Why, are you here?”

Elsa: “You say the strangest things. You were the one who brought me here. And, wasn’t that on Father’s orders, too?”

Dorothea: “…That’s not what I’m talking about!!”

Dorothea howled in frustration, and that instant, the tip of her shears lightly cut into Elsa’s white neck. There was a stinging pain, and Dorothea let out a soft “—Ah”.

Then, she averted her gaze, and began to hold her own blue-haired head,

Dorothea: “Wro-Wrong, you’ve got it wrong… I, I didn’t mean to harm you, the momentum just…”

Elsa: “…Ah, a little blood spilled out. Well, I don’t really mind.”

Dorothea: “N-No…!! Y-Your body’s already, Father’s property, so…”

Dropping her shears on the spot, Dorothea’s face went pale. Her eyes darted about, and then, lifting her head as if she had realized something, she unsteadily approached Elsa.

Then, she placed her lips to Elsa’s neck, and began to lick the wound.

Elsa: “…I’m not really into this kind of thing, though.”

Dorothea: “Mm, mhh… if I lick, your wound… it’ll heal, it’ll heal right away, so…”

Clinging to Elsa’s neck in a trance, Dorothea was frantic to atone for her blunder. And since Elsa did not particularly feel the need to shake her off, Elsa allowed her to do as she pleased.

Instead, Elsa gazed towards the prudently maintained garden once more.

No matter how hallowed this land was, it would not bestow any special power upon the vegetation. It merely provided an environment such that they could keep on living. Since a garden would not be able to maintain itself, there must have been someone who tended to it.

Elsa: “Dorothea, are you the one who takes care of this place?”

Dorothea: “…Ah, yeah. This area’s… been entrusted to me, after all.”

In addition to the already ticklish sensation of being licked, the air exhaled when Dorothea spoke enhanced the ticklishness even further. Elsa slightly drew back her body, and then, for some reason, patted Dorothea on the head.

The azure locks, tied into twintails, were like silk as Elsa ran her fingers through them. This also went for Sithonia and the twins, but including Dorothea, the beauty of these girls was not merely confined to their facial features. They were so thoroughly packed with beauty that extended to their hair, skin, nails, and teeth.

Elsa: "—You're pretty."

Dorothea: "…Hyup."

Elsa: "Oh my."

The very instant Elsa expressed her honest impressions, Dorothea's body tensed up, and she leapt backwards. Elsa found it unfortunate that the soft sensation had left her, as Dorothea stared at her in shock.

Her expression was as if she had come across a Hollow on the street in the middle of the night.

Elsa: "If not that, then maybe it's the face of finding a Zodda bug in the corner of your room."

Dorothea: "…Are you making fun of me?"

Elsa: "No? I wonder why this always happens. Even though I talk to people in earnest, I'm often told such things. They tell me to not make fun of them, or to not mess with them. Perhaps I was impolite?"

Placing a hand to her own cheek, Elsa lamented the difficulty she faced in interacting with people. Then, touching her neck, she ascertained the lingering sensation of Dorothea's lips, and the condition of the faint wound.

Elsa: "It seems like the blood's stopped. Thank you… if I said that in this situation, would it be odd?"

Dorothea: "…Why, did you come here?"

Elsa: "I was going around in circles, I guess. It's just, I wanted to see the garden, so I came outside. So much effort has gone into caring for this flower bed, and yet I'd not had the time to get a good look at it."

No apology was given for the wound, and neither did Elsa desire one. Engaging in the necessary conversation, Elsa crouched down before the blooming flowers, and gently laid her fingers upon a petal.

She had not been very conscious of it, but seldom had she touched flowers like this.

While the slavers and buyers were affluent in their own ways, they were not so sentimental as to take effort to decorate the scenery of their homes with flowers. Much less, in places where the hands of slaves could reach.

Dorothea: "…Do you, not see flowers often?"

Elsa: "Yes, that's right. They aren't something I've ever seen much of."

Picking up her great shears, Dorothea stood beside Elsa with a slightly laudable attitude. That she did not also squat down served as a sign of her wariness, but Elsa did not mind much.

Towards that side profile of Elsa's, Dorothea inquired in a hoarse, crone-like voice.

Dorothea: "…What of Sithonia? She should be looking after you."

Elsa: "She was, but, I was probably too much for her to handle. See, you know how there's that thing about dividing the mansion's housework, such as cleaning, between everyone? The thing is, I don't really have much talent for that…"

Dorothea: "…You don't have talent?"

Elsa: "Cleaning and laundry aren't my strong suits. Cooking, too… I suppose that could be influenced by my life of being satisfied with whatever was edible. I’m not particular about how things taste.”

That she had done a half-hearted job due to it being tiresome, was not the case in the slightest. Since Elsa was also aware that she had been purchased, she was earnest about trying to fit in with her contemporaries.

However, if results were bound to follow just because one was serious about something, then words such as “meritocracy” would have never come to be in this world.

Hence, the areas in which Elsa had tried to help out fell into a ruinous state greater than they had been before she had assisted, so an exasperated Sithonia had told her that she was being put on the bench.

Elsa: “That said, it would still be bad to do nothing, right? That’s why, with the will to look for work on my own, I’ve been searching for my calling.”

Dorothea: “…Don’t tell me, is that why you came here?”

Elsa: “Indeed. I have decent experience with handling blades so I thought I might be of use—”

Dorothea: “…Stop.”

Receiving quite a strong rejection, Elsa caught her breath with an “Eh”.

Elsa promptly looked up at Dorothea, and cast back at her was a gaze brimming with a sense of hatred. Perhaps she had been irritated by someone encroaching on her territory?

Elsa: “I’m sorry if I took you by surprise. But, if I can just give it a go one time…”

Dorothea: “…Absolutely not. This place belongs to me. It’s the job that was bestowed upon me, so…”

Elsa: “But…”

Dorothea: “…Quit it already!”

As soon as she tried to persist, Dorothea’s emotions erupted once more.

Spinning around the great shears in her hands, she aimed for Elsa’s neck— nay, her collar, and once Elsa was caught by it, she was hurled a great distance back.

Widening her eyes at the raw strength unthinkable of the petite Dorothea, Elsa tumbled across the lawn. The sensation of greenery and the smell of grass, was a far cry from the frigidity of coarse snow.

This was no place to be thinking about such incongruous things. As Elsa laid face upward upon the lawn, above her leapt Dorothea, who began to rapidly descend towards her.

She did so with such vigorous intention to pierce straight into Elsa’s chest using her great shears—

Dorothea: “Someone like you…!!”

Elsa: “…”

In response to the approaching loathing and murderous intent, Elsa gently narrowed her black eyes.

Then, the moment Dorothea’s onslaught was about to befall Elsa— the great shears were grabbed by an interloping hand that had lightly reached out from the side.

Dorothea: “Ah…”

???: “Shut it with those “Ah”s! What are you, little miss stupid or something?!”

A light gasp escaped Dorothea’s throat, only to be drowned out by the angered bellow that followed directly afterwards.

Swung about in her entirety by the firm grasp on her arm, Dorothea’s figure disappeared from Elsa’s field of view. Then, the vanished Dorothea was slammed down right next to Elsa— no, she was slowly lowered.

The two of them now laid side by side upon the grass.

???: “Really now! Your short temper is unmanageable, Dorothea! With this sorta thing, we won’t even be able to trust you to tend to the flowers. The delicate blossoms would end up scattered in a huge mess!”

Dorothea: “…”

Within the vision of the collapsed pair, an upside-down face could be seen. That was the person who had flung Dorothea up, curbing her act of murder just before it was carried out.

And, to Elsa, the figure of that person was—

Elsa: “…A child?”

???: “—. You’re the new little sis, so I’ll let this first time slide. But, there won’t be a second time. I’ll have you know that being treated like a kid is the thing that I absolutely hate the most.”

Saying that as she grabbed Elsa’s sprawled out body and heaved it up by force, was a young girl who was only about as tall as Elsa’s chest level.

Her short, green hair was adorned with many ornaments, and she looked at Elsa with strong, round eyes. Based on her might, and the fact that she was here at this Featherrun Estate, her identity was evident.

Elsa: “I suppose you are the final member of the Featherrun Sisters?”

???: “You’re damn right! I’m the second daughter of the Featherrun Sisters, Ornea Featherrun. Your admirable elder sister. Make sure to never forget your feelings of veneration.”

Placing a hand on her waist, Ornea’s breathing grew fervent as she introduced herself before Elsa. No matter how one looked at it, she was at most eleven or twelve years old; but regardless, an elder sister who was clearly younger had appeared.

Be that as it may, it was precisely as she had been told earlier. Among the Featherrun Sisters, sisterly relationships were determined by the order of entry. Elsa's position as the youngest sister would not change.

Elsa: "Yes, it's a pleasure to meet you, Elder Sister Ornea. I am Elsa… though I suppose that I would be going by Elsa Featherrun now."

Ornea: "Mhm, it's good that you're straightforward. It might be tough, but I wonder if I could teach you a thing or two directly? But, there's something I need to tell you before any of that."

Elsa: "—?"

Ornea: "For now, you're not a Featherrun. —Not yet."

Shaking Elsa's proffered hand, Ornea nodded in high spirits. However, she pulled on Elsa's hand just a little bit harder, and added that on in a soft, quiet voice.

Elsa held her breath as she heard that whisper, and Ornea smiled as if forgetting her attitude from a moment prior, before turning her face towards the collapsed Dorothea.

Ornea: "Dorothea! How long do you plan on lying down there?! You know you're right in front of our youngest sister! Are you gonna behave like a spoiled brat forever, never acting like a proper elder sister?!"

Dorothea: "—Hk, b-but, Ornea…"

Ornea: "It's your own fault for getting slapped around by me! First of all, how are you going to face Father after trying to kill your younger sister half a day after meeting her?!"

Dorothea: "…Sniffle."

Rebuked by Ornea, Dorothea found herself with tears welling up in her eyes, unable to bear it. The moment Ornea saw this, her expression grew stiff with an "Ah…".

Ornea: "W-Wait, Dorothea, don't you cry now! Don't cry, okay? I don't know what to do when a little sis cries! So, don't cry…"

Dorothea: "Hnghh, ngh… WAAAAHHHHH!"

Ornea: "Eek!! She's cryyyying!!"

As tears began to stream down Dorothea's face, Ornea panicked. Since she was merely hovering her hand around her in a hurried manner, Ornea could not console Dorothea.

The girl of childish appearance panicked, and the other girl wept with the hoarse voice of a crone. Amidst that hopelessly unnatural situation, Elsa slowly squatted down.

Then, upon the cheek of Dorothea, face disheveled with tears, she gently placed her hand.

Dorothea: "…Ah."

Elsa: "Don't cry now, everything will be alright. Nobody is blaming you. If I, who was on the receiving end of those shears, sees it that way, wouldn't that go for everybody else as well?"

Dorothea: "…"

Elsa: "Or perhaps, can you not bear it? Though, you are supposed to be my elder sister."

Hearing Elsa's words, Dorothea's eyes opened wide; firmly clenching her teeth, she broke away from the hand touching her cheeks. Then, vigorously standing back up,

Dorothea: "…Wh-Who said I was crying?"

Ornea: "Nah, you were definitely crying… Mfghmfhhhh!"

Elsa: "We needn't say anything uncalled for now."

As Ornea tried to spoil Dorothea's show of courage, Elsa covered her mouth to stop her from continuing. Fortunately, that slip of the tongue seemed to have not reached Dorothea, so she went back to pick up her great shears, and clasping the huge blades together, she gave a curt "…Well, I'll get back to work now".

Elsa: "I see. Apologies for disrupting you. Do your best in your work now."

Dorothea: "…I, um, forgive you, for earlier."

Elsa: "Oh my."

Leaving behind those words with her back turned, face unseen, Dorothea passed through the garden with lumbering, large strides. Likely, she was headed to tend to flowers somewhere Elsa and Ornea could not see.

Seeing her off, Elsa took a small breath. And, thereupon—

Ornea: "—So, how long do you plan on silencing me?"

Elsa: "Ah, my apologies. You seemed like you would give numerous unnecessary comments, so I got a bit carried away there."

Ornea: "I don't think you can speak for others, though! Really now! Damn youngest sister!"

Slipping out from under Elsa's hand on her mouth, Ornea fixedly glared at her.

As expected, her childish appearance inhibited others from gleaning an accurate impression of her. However, she herself had said that she was the second daughter after Sithonia.

Elsa: "From what I've heard, you had an errand… no, a duty, and had been outside attending to it."

Ornea: "Mhm, I finished dealing with it and now finally returned. I've been looking forward to meeting you ever since I heard about you from Father and Sithonia, but…"

Elsa: "—?"

Ornea: "Yet again, there's another little sis who's taller than I am…"

Hanging her head in dejection, Ornea was disheartened by the height difference between Elsa and herself.

Looking over Ornea's head, Elsa turned her eyes to the direction she had come from— towards the outer portion of the Featherrun Estate, where the entrance to a small cavern was connected.

Going out from the snowfield, and through the cavern, would bring one to the recesses where this Hallowed Land laid. In other words, if she could make it through that cavern, the outside world would be waiting for her.

Ornea: "You can't."

Elsa: "…"

Ornea: "Don't think of doing anything stupid, Elsa. Take this as a warning from me. Any reckless actions will only end up digging your own grave."

Perhaps having sensed something within Elsa's gaze, Ornea cautioned her.

Receiving that advice from her short elder sister, Elsa shrugged her shoulders. Then, explaining her gaze with "You've misunderstood",

Elsa: "I'm not thinking of trying to do anything. Neither heedless actions, nor assisting with work."

Ornea: "So you aren't even going to try to help out with work… what is Sithonia even doing right now anyway? She's supposed to be the caretaker. Neglecting her younger sisters…"

Elsa: "I suppose she might be tidying up the devastation of the mansion I made in the name of helping out."

Ornea: "Then, you've gotta feel some remorse for what you've done!"

Hearing Elsa’s unashamed response, Ornea’s expression shifted into one of anger. Then, she grabbed Elsa by the hand, and forcibly began to walk towards the mansion.

Ornea: “Listen up. Now that I’ve returned, I’m gonna hammer what’s known as a rigid lifestyle right into you. Sithonia may have resigned part way through, but I won’t do anything of the sort!”

Elsa: “I see. I understand. I’m looking forward to it.”

Ornea: “Khkhkh, I’m the one who’s looking forward to seeing how long you can keep up that calm demeanor!”

With a confident smile, Ornea dragged Elsa into the mansion. Unable to go against that brute strength, Elsa, for some reason, looked towards the garden, towards the entrance to the cavern, and,

Elsa: “I truly am looking forward to it.”

So she muttered, licking her red lips.

5

Ornea: “I can’t handle her! This girl I tell you, what the heck is wrong with her?! I’ve never ever seen anyone so bad at living! She’s just like a beast!”

So shouted Ornea, at her wits’ end, the moment they all took their seats around the large table for dinner.

With the sweet facial features of a little girl, Ornea’s white forehead was engraved with deep wrinkles, accurately depicting the severity of her mental distress.

Elsa: “You mustn’t fret too much, Ornea. It’ll be okay, I’m sure a path will open up if we continue.”

Ornea: “Are you really the one saying that to me right now?!”

Elsa: “—?”

Beholding Ornea’s exasperated expression, Elsa tilted her head in confusion. As the second daughter hung her head upon seeing Elsa's response, the eldest daughter, seated at the same table, showed appreciation for her efforts with a wry smile.

Sithonia: "I understand Ornea's feelings. After all, I was also… surprised, by a variety of things."

Ornea: "Quite the reserved phrasing you got there! To me it felt like heaven and earth were flipped upside down!"

Ornea's lamentations only caused Sithonia's strained smile to deepen.

And while all of that was happening, the twins Saria and Hildea came out from the kitchen pushing a trolley upon which dinner was set. The two walked side by side as they pushed the trolley, and it actually appeared to be rather difficult for them.

Saria: "Kuku, we're far more used to doing this than it looks."

Hildea: "We were far more inefficient before, but after practicing over and over, we can do it quite freely. Kuku."

Elsa: "Though, that just sounds like it really was as difficult as I imagined at first."

It was splendid that they had overcome that, but it also sounded like something that had no real need to be overcome.

With nary a glance back at Elsa's tactless riposte, Saria and Hildea began to place the supper that they had made upon the table.

Saria: "Hildea made the main course today."

Hildea: "Saria prepared the appetizers today."

Saria: "Tomorrow, it will be your and Ornea's turn. I'll be looking forward to it."

Hildea: "I'm looking forward to it. To see your and Ornea's cooking tomorrow."

Ornea: “N-Nooooooooo! I wanna do it by myseeelf—!!”

At the mix of anticipation and provocation from the twins, Ornea responded in despair. Elsa, being treated as the primary cause of that despair, found it upsetting, but having said that, neither did she not have even a smidgen of confidence.

At the very least, without doing anything superfluous, it would be best for her to just wash the tableware and whatnot in the corner of the kitchen.

???: “…I’m back, Sithonia.”

Sithonia: “Ah, welcome home, Dorothea. First of all, let us clean the dirt off of your arms and legs.”

During that interaction, Sithonia brought Dorothea, having returned from gardening, to the washroom. Given that she also wore her blue dress while working, the manner in which Dorothea had gotten dirty was quite something.

Elsa: “Speaking of which, is it correct to think that our dresses are to Father’s tastes?”

Ornea: “Hm? Ah, that. Rather than it being to Father’s tastes, it’s a custom of the Featherruns. The Featherrun Sisters are to wear dresses. It’s that sorta unwritten rule.”

Elsa: “—. I see. I guess that’s fine then.”

While responding, Elsa looked down at the black dress she was wearing— without sleeves, it was an article of clothing that kept its splendor to a minimum.

Aside from Elsa, the other sisters were all clad in dresses that matched their respective features. Perhaps it was their doctrine to match the color of hair and dress, as it remained consistent throughout all of them.

Using a mansion hidden within Hallowed Land in order to buy up “problematic” slaves like Elsa, granting them clothes and a decent life, was Holosseo Featherrun a philanthropist, perhaps?

Elsa: “Fufu.”

Thinking such things in an insincere manner, Elsa’s lips curved into a smile.

With those abyssal, hollow eye sockets, there was no possibility for that man to be a virtuous human brimming with compassion. It was undeniable that he had gathered Elsa, along with the other sisters, with a certain objective in mind.

At present, Elsa did not know his objective, but— at the very least, she understood that she had been purchased in order to slot into the role of one of the Featherrun Sisters.

Sithonia: “—Sorry to keep you waiting. Everybody, take your seats.”

After some time had passed since supper had been put on the table, Sithonia returned with Dorothea, the latter having washed her arms and legs. Receiving that addressment, Ornea and the twins, who had been acting boisterously up until then, shut their mouths.

Then, everybody took their assigned seats with their supper before them. The head of the table was unoccupied, and in order from there, were seated Sithonia, Ornea, Saria, Hildea, Dorothea, and finally, Elsa.

Sithonia: “We thank thee, our Motherly Great Spirit, residing atop the highest peak of the Sacred Mountain. For today, you once again grant us sustenance, allow us to spend time together with our family, and to sleep in tranquility.”

Elsa: “…”

Closing her eyes and putting her hands together, Sithonia spun words of gratitude towards the empty sky.

Elsa knit her brows, wondering what was going on, but since Dorothea glared at her with sharp eyes from the other side of the table, she also put her hands together for the time being, and cast her eyes downwards.

Sithonia: “Though it may be meager, tonight we offer a prayer of gratitude towards your benevolence. May you bestow your grand love upon the Holy Kingdom evermore. —So be the Silver Affection.”

Elsa: “—So be the Silver Affection.”

Together with Sithonia’s prayer, the sisters all spoke in unison at the end. A moment belated, Elsa also repeated those words of prayer.

Sithonia: “Well then, let us enjoy this meal. Saria’s soup looks just as delicious as ever.”

Erasing the sublime atmosphere of the prayer, Sithonia proclaimed the commencement of mealtime. Then, each of the sisters began to eat as they pleased.

Finally granted permission, Elsa was also about to get started on her food, but,

Elsa: “Before that, about those words of prayer just now…”

Sithonia: “Ah, you are not familiar, are you Elsa? That was a ritual prayer of the Gustekan Church. Words of gratitude towards the Sacred Beast, Odglass-sama, who grants us sustenance each and every day… Our Father is in charge of an important duty in the Church of the Holy King. That is why…”

Ornea: “We’re also affiliated with the Church of the Holy King. Thanks to that, we can live in this warm house, eat warm food and wear warm clothes. Being thankful’s only natural.”

While pouring soup down her throat, Ornea interrupted Sithonia’s words and declared so. She seemed to be a bit of a glutton, and so, eating up bread and meat in quick succession, she continued to quickly fill up her tiny body.

Ornea: “Mrghh! Oi, seems like you really want to ask just where in my body all of this is going.”

Elsa: “And just where in that small body of yours is all of that going?”

Ornea: “Hey, you actually went and said it!”

Even while shouting in anger, Ornea’s hand did not stop shoveling food into her mouth.

Before mealtime, too, back when she was trying to teach Elsa a variety of things, she had been moving her small body around at full exertion. She was likely using a considerable amount of stamina just to live.

Elsa: “…”

Sithonia chided Ornea’s behavior, all the while Saria and Hildea fed their respective suppers to one another, similar to how they had done with their black tea earlier. Dorothea stirred restlessly in her seat as she ate, but upon noticing Elsa’s gaze, she abruptly turned a grim stare to her.

It was a terribly boisterous, frantic, and restless dining table.

However—

Elsa: “I suppose this is what’s known as a family meal.”

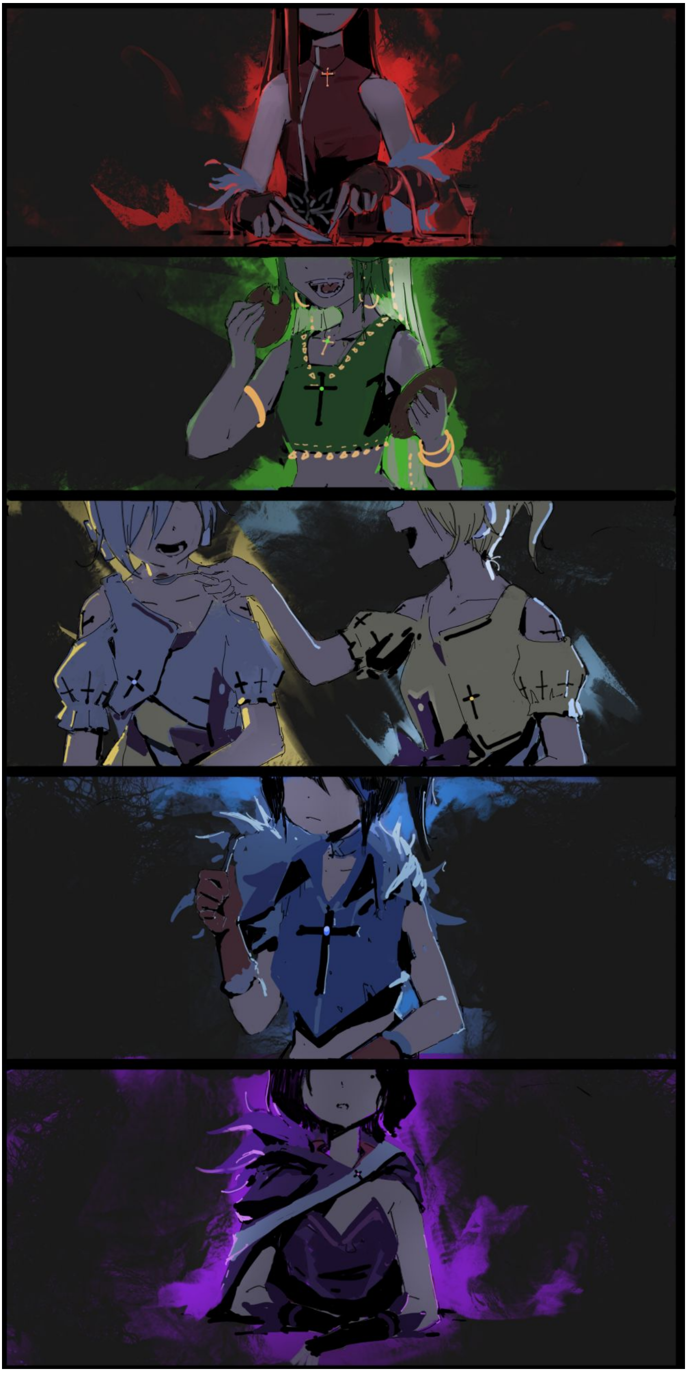

Getting a vague feeling that she was intruding on a scene alien to herself, Elsa muttered so. Hearing that, the other sisters all stopped simultaneously.

They pointed their eyes of various colors towards Elsa, and displayed their respective reactions.

Though the emotions spread across were mysterious and complex, the overall reactions were comprised of smiles.

Sithonia: “I’m glad you could understand, Elsa. This, is a family dining table. One shared by us, the Feathrrun Sisters.”

Elsa: “I see… In that case, I’ll do my best to grow accustomed to it. For the time being…”

Sithonia: “For the time being?”

Elsa: “—I guess I’ll focus on a tidier manner of eating.”

Saying that, Elsa looked down at her hands— with no recognizable trace left of the food that had initially been set on the table, she looked at the wretched mess she had made of the dining table.

Ornea: “Why’s that?! How’d it end up like that?! Are you a beast?!”

Dorothea: “…Did a stray dog come and lay waste only to Elsa’s supper?”

Saria: “Kuku, it may look like that, but no such thing happened. Right, Hildea?”

Hildea: “Yes, there’s no way such a thing could have happened. Right, Saria? Kuku.”

Exposed to the eyes of her sisters, who all seemed like they were seeing something utterly unbelievable, Elsa frowned in a sullen manner.

She had not particularly intended on ravaging her meal, and it had just naturally ended up this way. She had probably been born with a catastrophic lack of talent for keeping things tidy.

Sithonia: “Apprehensive to cleaning, laundry, and cooking. And finally, to think that even your ability to eat your own food is dubious at best… aha.”

Elsa: “Sithonia?”

Sithonia: “Aha, fufufu!! How peculiar. You are a peculiar one, Elsa, ahahahaha!”

Watching over that disaster, Sithonia burst out into laughter with a reaction delayed from the other four. Seeing that reaction from the one who had given off a peaceful impression, Elsa was a bit surprised.

However, she did not feel bad as Sithonia laughed like that.

Ornea: “Though, I don’t see this as any laughing matter. I’m at a total loss in regards to where to start teaching her from.”

Folding her short arms, Ornea admonished her so. However, her meek hue from earlier had grown faint, and in its place emerged something akin to a smile.

The twins and Dorothea, too, mixed into the gentle atmosphere with their looks. Albeit somewhat mismatched, amicable emotions had come together; that first act would now—

???: “—O Daughters of mine.”

Everyone: “…”

An unexpected voice resounded, and the sisters all lifted their heads as if snapping up. Then, all of them leaped out of their chairs in unison, and kneeled down to prostrate themselves on the floor of the dining hall.

Once again, as all the sisters other than herself performed those actions, Elsa remained alone gazing in dumbfoundment— the very next moment, Elsa was grabbed by the back of her head, and forced to bow on the floor by brute strength.

After a hard sound resounded alongside a spike of pain, she realized that her forehead had been knocked into the floor. The one who had done that was Ornea, who was supposed to have been a distance between herself and Hildea.

Just how much raw strength was housed in those dainty arms; Elsa could not resist their power in the slightest. And then, before Ornea could remove her slender arms, a voice called down upon them.

???: “All are present. Here in the presence of Featherrun.”

Sithonia: “—. Father, you have returned early. Please excuse our failure to welcome your return…”

???: “It matters not. You are all property of Featherrun.”

Due to being forced into the floor, Elsa could not see the face of the person speaking. But, this voice that sounded like that of dead man’s was present in her recollections. —It was Holosseo.

The man who had purchased Elsa from a slaver, and was referred to as Father by the sisters of this mansion. To Elsa, too, he was a person who ought to be called by such a title.

Holosseo had returned, and the sisters received his arrival in such a way. —Such an act was a bit of a warped way to welcome someone. After all, Ornea’s hand was trembling.

Her arm, pinning Elsa’s head down to the floor, had been trembling to a sorrowful extent. That was not because she was funneling power into it, but a result of her sentiments of dread.

Elsa: “…”

Twisting her neck, still groveling on her hands and knees, Elsa faced the fore.

At the entrance of the dining hall, Holosseo was standing with the support of his legs, which were akin to withered trees, and the only one to speak to him, down on one knee, was Sithonia. Upon her visage, too, were strong signs of tension. Only, tension was all that it amounted to, and it appeared as a hue wholly different to that of Ornea's dread.

Sithnoia: "If you have returned, Father, that means…"

Holosseo: "The provisions for the ritual have been arranged in advance. Bring the vessel to the divine chapel."

Sithonia: "—Yes."

Standing up from her deep bow, Sithonia then looked towards Elsa. Catching sight of the hollow hue dwelling in those irises, Elsa understood.

The "vessel" mentioned a moment prior, was in reference to none other than Elsa.

Ornea: "Don't resist."

As that was spoken into her ear, her pressed down body was hoisted up. Ornea, the one who had done that, effortlessly shouldered Elsa with one of her arms, and stood up.

After Ornea, Saria, Hildea, and Dorothea also stood up. The sisters followed behind Holosseo as he began to walk, and they exited the dining hall while leaving supper as it was.

He was headed for the divine chapel. —In that place, some sort of ritual would take place.

Elsa: "Ritual, hm…"

Among those who bought slaves, there were some who would attempt to satisfy their abnormal desires by feigning a ritual. Buyers were free to do as they pleased with their slaves, so that was not a huge problem.

The issue was, she found it utterly unthinkable that the objective of Holosseo's ritual would be akin to the likes of such boorish lust. In that case, what exactly would happen to Elsa?

Sithonia: “After this, you will become one of the Featherrun Sisters.”

These were the words given to her by Sithonia. They were concise, and a response that did not serve to answer her question.

However, she did not have the leeway to express discontent with that reply. When she was first brought into the divine chapel, her nostrils were assailed by a filthy malodor that permeated the room, one that could not be eliminated, regardless of the room having been cleaned.

Even if not it were not Elsa here, all who lived in this unsparing Holy Kingdom of Gusteko would have been able to identify the essence of that stench. —The putrid odor of death.

The traces of the dead would turn to malodor, lingering in a manner akin to bitter hatred. Just how many people had met their demise in this divine chapel, was a number far greater than she could ever imagine.

Dorothea: “…Almost everyone dies. So surely, you will too…”

Following right behind Elsa, Dorothea muttered in a subdued tone.

Whether that was a warning or simply a verdict of death, Elsa knew not; but from the way it had been phrased, it seemed that her chances of survival were at least greater than zero.

Elsa: “What separates those who survive and those who perish? Is there maybe a trick to surviving, I wonder?”

Dorothea: “…”

Saria: “Kuku, did you hear that, Hildea?”

Hildea: “Yes, I heard it, Saria. Kuku.”

As Dorothea was left speechless, Saria and Hildea sneered at Elsa’s avarice in her place. But, the pair, having regained a bit of leeway from the dining hall, chirped “Listen listen” in unison, Saria: “Elsa’s about to confront the ritual, and it seems she wants to know the trick to surviving.”

Hildea: “The reason why Hildea was alright, the reason why Saria and the others lived, it seems she wants to hear them.”

The pair called out to the other sisters, and spread the news that Elsa sought an answer.

With that news in mind, Sithonia, Ornea, the twins, and Dorothea, each moved their lips,

Sithonia: “Tranquility.”
Ornea: “Animalistic desire.”
Saria & Hildea: “Compassion and resentment.”
Dorothea: “The thirst of love.”

Indeed, each of them suggested their respective reasons for having survived.

Listening to all of them, Elsa smiled. Smiling, she accepted all of her sisters’ encouragement.

Elsa: “—Thank you. Well then, I’ll do my best to survive.”

As Elsa boasted in a carefree tone, the sisters no longer spoke any further words.

In the center of the divine chapel, was present an altar to which the putrid odor of death clung. Standing next to it, Holosseo’s unhealthy body was clad in vestment, carrying a short, dark-bladed sword in one hand.

Even for Elsa, who had been passed around a great deal of buyers, everything from this point on would be a first.

In an abnormal environment that threatened even her life, Elsa’s body trembled. Faced with the overwhelming fate looming before her eyes, it was naught more than pure ecstasy that had caused her to tremble.

As her whole body trembled, the young girl murmured.

Elsa: “—Ahh, what a thrill.”

Chapter 2:
Holosseo Featherrun

1

When she thought to dodge, she could easily dodge.

However, she felt no real inclination to do so, and thus basked from the head down in a spray of fresh blood. The viscous, warm sensation of blood, it tasted akin to an illusion of clinging tightly to life.

???: “But, it’s quite the strange thing, isn’t it?”

???: “Ah, kahh…”

???: “The one who vomits out life, is the one who ends up nearing their death.”

The huge man before her eyes groaned, and from his mouth spilled out copious amounts of blood. Naturally, not wanting to bask in that regurgitated blood, Elsa leaped a great deal back.

With that rhythm, she pulled out the knife that had pierced the man’s chest, causing an even greater amount of blood to spray out. That served as the finishing blow, and after the man’s body fell forward onto the ground, it spasmed a bit before coming to a stop.

If a human's two vitals of head and heart were pierced, any show of resistance would thus be rendered infeasible.

???: "Elsa, I'm finished over here. How are things on your end?"

Elsa: "Yes. I'm also—"

It happened the moment she tried to respond to the voice from the adjacent room, and had turned her back to the corpse.

???: "—Grufh!!"

The fallen corpse sprung back up, and drove a spear hand right into Elsa's back.

Without missing its target, it bore into Elsa's slim back, obliterating her heart as it perforated through to the front side of her chest, unrelentingly pulverizing her entrails.

A magnificent counterattack. The counterstrike from the man, hovering on the boundary between life and death, had certainly pierced through the ebony-clad young girl's life.

—However, that would have only held true if the girl was a mere human.

Elsa: "…How amazing. You really tried your best."

???: "Goh?!"

Alongside light commendation, the man's visage was kicked up from below. At a glance, that appeared to have been the result of a back kick from the girl whose chest had been impaled. The man's eccentric, mollusk-like body was punted up by the maw, and before his eyes, the girl turned around, her black hair fluttering. Then, raising the blade right above the man,

Elsa: "Apologies for messing up. I've yet to grow accustomed to this sort of work."

The downward cleave of the blade sliced the man open from his chest down to his abdomen in one fell swoop. 'Twas an attack far too gruesome to be called a mere slashing, and with it, vast amounts of gore and viscera poured out of the open wound.

Thus, alongside the arrival of that fatal wound, the curtain finally fell on the counteroffensive of the man who had been teetering on the brink of death. Once she ascertained the death of the man, fallen on his back as he was, Elsa slowly squatted down next to him.

Then, looking down at the wound that had been hollowed out in her own chest, she caressed the mouth of the wound from the top. Assailed by the oozing pain, she felt chills run down her back.

More; as she subconsciously sought out more pain, she tried to bore further into the wound with her finger—

???: "Idiot! Don't play with your wound! You'll stop it from closing back up!"

Elsa: "Ouch…"

Taking a fist to the back of her head alongside the angered bellow, Elsa turned around in disappointment. And, flashing her ire in response to that gaze, Ornea stood dauntingly.

Comparing Elsa's wound with the corpse of the fallen man, she shrugged her shoulders and said, "Good grief".

Ornea: "I entrusted this to you because you said you could handle it, but… you were damn negligent! If not that, either you were playing around, or got caught in the opponent's trap… either way, you can't be doing that!"

Elsa: "I wonder now, did you get everything done properly on your side, Ornea?"

Ornea: "Of course I did! Just who the heck do you think I am?! I killed each of them with a single blow! Quick enough as to not give 'em any chances to counterattack! Be amazed!"

Elsa: "Woah, I'm amazed."

Ornea: "That's not enough amazement!"

To always be envigored with anger no matter what anybody said to her was Ornea's nature, but there was likely no falsehood in her words.

That not a single drop of blood had found itself upon that green dress of hers, spoke to the excellence of her skills. By herself, Ornea had dealt with the over-twenty guards here in this mansion. Compared to that, Elsa's opponent had been just one man—regardless of him being the main target, the difference in their results was evident.

Ornea: "…How's the wound on your chest? Can you move?"

Elsa: "Yes, I think I'm alright. The pain feels like I might die when I move, but I'm fine."

Ornea: "Don't say that it's fine, then! Geez, even though you're still getting acclimated, you go and do nothing but reckless things! Get on! I'll carry you home!"

Since resisting would only serve as a waste of energy, Elsa obliged and got on her tiny elder sister's back. The pair were about to take their leave from this barbaric scene. However, before that—

Ornea: "Elsa, you've forgotten something. Leave one of those behind."

Elsa: "Huh? …Ah, yes of course. I almost forgot."

As Ornea's words sparked her memory, Elsa reached into her dress, and took out a single flower. So deeply purple as it was, terribly alluring was the manner in which it blossomed within Elsa's hands.

Taking that flower, she tossed it to rest on top of the collapsed man.

That was, unmistakably—

Elsa: "—The mark of the Featherrun Sisters."

The reason why the man and his guards had all died. In order to make that known, this flower served as a signature.

With a final glance towards the flower petals as they became soaked in blood, Elsa and Ornea departed.

They would not hold on to any unnecessary emotions outside of their work. That too, was a law of the Featherrun Sisters.

2

Sithonia: “Nevertheless, it always surprises me just how much Elsa has grown.”

Presenting them with freshly brewed black tea, Sithonia congratulated the return of Elsa and Ornea.

Enjoying the aromatic vapor of the black tea, her body was tinged with warmth as she sipped it. As she gained more opportunities to head outside, she was keenly reminded of the value of these vital plots known as Hallowed Land.

The frigid snow robbed people of all kinds of things.

It absconded with their emotions, their sensations, their relations, and finally, their lives. Considering that even brigands could show mercy on occasion, there were truly no words to describe that cruel iciness.

Elsa: “The snow is ruthlessly coldhearted, I wonder, would that not be a good joke?”

Sithonia: “…”

Elsa: “Oh my, was it not humorous? I did have a bit of confidence in it, though.”

As her joke was met with silence, Elsa licked her lips in disappointment. With a wry smile to her youngest sister’s demeanor, Sithonia shifted her eyes to Ornea, who was in delirium gorging on the cake served alongside the tea. Without even a glance towards the black tea, Ornea stuffed her rosy cheeks with the serving of teacake, diligently working with a single minded focus to replenish her stamina.

Ornea: “Mnngh? …Mhgnhh. What is it, Sithonia? Why’re you staring at me.”

Sithonia: “Giving a report on the mission is the responsibility of the elder sister, correct? And, I have yet to receive any proper report. Do not tell me that you have forgotten about it, have you?”

Ornea: “Ghogh, ehogff! Of, of course not. Just now, I was thinking that I’d better keep silent to not disrupt the conversation between you and Elsa, Sithonia. By no means is it the case that I’d lost myself to this teacake.”

Coughing violently with her reddened face, Ornea attempted to cover up her lapse in memory. Then, before Sithnoia’s lukewarm eyes, she prefaced with an “Ahem”, and,

Ornea: “As for the mission, me and Elsa completed it without any trouble. Pastor Cerid Mortis, who terrorized the populace with a selfish interpretation of the Holy Church’s dogma, met his demise, and his collaborators were also silenced across the board. There were no issues… Except for Elsa, who carelessly got her dress all torn up!”

Sithonia: “Though, it also ought to have been your duty to supervise her?”

Ornea: “What’s with all this harsh treatment towards me?!”

Lamenting her hopeless situation, Ornea capitulated. Heaving a sigh at her younger sister’s excuses, Sithonia then glanced towards Elsa and her torn dress, before narrowing her eyes.

Sithonia: “From the way it is torn… it seems you underwent quite a gruesome attack from your opponent.”

Elsa: “Yes. It came from the back and went all the way through and out the front of my chest. Even so, it’s incredible that this body was still able to immediately recuperate nonetheless.”

Sithonia: “—. You must not over-rely on it. We may be close to immortality, but we are by no means unkillable.”

Sithonia reached out her hand, and softly touched where Elsa's chest had been ripped open. The wound underneath the tear in the clothes had already healed, but Elsa obediently nodded.

For all things, one must never over-rely. In regards to this body, there were still many aspects that were unknown to Elsa.

Ornea: "And for that, the very best thing you can do has gotta be training. So, shall we head to the basement, Elsa?!"

Having finished the teacake that had been divided into nine slices on the plate all by herself, Ornea roused herself with crumbs yet stuck to her cheeks. Seeing the vigor of her standing up, Sithonia sighed, and Elsa got up with an "Indeed".

Elsa: "You're quite the instructor, aren't you now? I'll abide by what you see fit, Ornea."

Ornea: "Hmph. Khfufu, have you finally started to feel some reverence for me? There, there, in that case I'll patiently teach you like a good big sis. I'll show you how we Featherrun Sisters do things!"

Swinging her short arms around with vigor, Ornea exited the dining hall in high spirits. When Elsa tried to follow behind her, Sithonia abruptly pinched her dress.

Eyes concealing slight anguish were directed towards Elsa, and,

Elsa: "What's the matter?"

Sithonia: "—. No, it is nothing. Apologies for keeping you."

Elsa: "Is that so? I guess that's fine, then."

Sithonia's behavior had been teeming with significance, so it could not have been that it was just nothing. But, if she said it was nothing, then Elsa determined there would be no use in pressing further.

Sithonia released her grip on the dress, and Elsa proceeded forward to follow behind Ornea.

Ornea: “What’d Sithonia say to you?”

Elsa: “Who knows? Nothing in particular… I suppose she might have found it lonely to be left there all by herself.”

Elsa tilted her head as she recalled Sithonia’s expression upon their departure, to which Ornea laughed a humored “Kakaka”, before opening the basement door. —Within, a vast subterranean space stretched out.

That space, appearing to be a natural limestone cavern, was primarily used for the Featherrun Sisters to train for their duties. Unlike the interior of the mansion or the garden, this was a place that would bother nobody if damaged or sullied, and was thus used quite frequently.

Had it not been such a location, the Featherrun Sisters would have not been able to use it for training. After all, no ordinary level of martial arts training could have ever reduced it to the ghastly scene it had become.

Ornea: “—Hey, you’re too slow, Elsa!”

Accompanying the words hurled at her in a relaxed manner, a powerful blow connected.

As Ornea tread firmly with a smile on her face, she cast forth a chain with a weight attached to the end. —With a combination of throwing and batting, the weapon known as the kusari-fundo functioned as a powerful assassination tool.

However, when unleashed by superhuman strength surpassing all conventional norms, the damage would not be confined to just that.

Elsa: “Grghh…hk!”

Unable to evade the incoming weight, Elsa’s right arm was grazed, causing it to be blown off the shoulder. Losing an arm as blood poured out, Elsa’s stance crumbled, prompting Ornea to pounce on her.

Elsa quickly transferred her knife over to her left hand, and aimed it at Ornea's face. She thrust it with the intent to gouge out the opponent's eyeball, but it was easily dodged with a quick tilt of the head.

Then, Ornea closed in on Elsa to a distance where they would be able to feel the breaths of one another,

Ornea: "This'll hurt a little, so grit your teeth!"

The sound of chains clangored, and Elsa's body was flipped over in a mighty upheaval.

The reason being, her legs, torso, and neck had become entangled in Ornea's kusari-fundo, tearing down her stance by sheer force. And, Ornea's herculean strength would not let things end with the mere collapse of her opponent.

Elsa: "—Hk."

The moment Ornea funneled strength into her arm, Elsa's body, caught in the chains, was wrung and torn to shreds. Her neck broken, her legs broken, and her waist constricted down to be as thin as an arm, Elsa crumbled.

By all standards, that was far too brutal, a gruesome death that would make anybody want to avert their gaze—.

Ornea: "And, that's what it'd be like. So, why don't you stop saying cute things such as wanting to play with me when I get serious."

Elsa: "…Ah, uu."

Sprawled out across the ground, Elsa groaned as she teetered on the verge of death; beside her, Ornea crouched down.

Despite having torn Elsa limb from limb with her slender arms, Ornea did not seem to be particularly worried. After all, she harbored no feelings of guilt for having personally done such a thing to her youngest sister.

That was because Elsa's mangled body was, slowly but surely, repairing itself.

Elsa: "…"

Her lacerated legs, rended neck, and strangulated torso, all gradually regained their original form. Bones creaking, flesh was restored while spurting out blood; as her wounds closed up, her innards were mended.

A regenerative power beyond human understanding, and transcendent vitality that could quite possibly even reverse the state of death. This was the new body of Elsa Featherrun, now a fully fledged Featherrun Sister.

Elsa: "…It's my own body… but it's quite… the strange thing."

In a coughing fit, expelling all the blood from her throat, Elsa ascertained the condition of her body.

The pain had already evanesced, and the sensation of her limbs was unchanged from their usual state. In all likelihood, her crumpled up organs would have also returned to perfect condition.

Elsa: "—This, is the power of a Curse Doll."

Ornea: "We're forbidden from talking about this secret art. Don't recklessly go telling people about it, yeah?"

Elsa: "Telling people…? Just where in our lives would we have the chance to carelessly leak it to somebody?"

Ornea: "Well when you put it that way, I guess you're right."

At Elsa's simple question, Ornea nodded with an expression as if to say "You've got me there". The mood turning somewhat amusing, the two began to laugh together.

Just a few dozen seconds earlier, the sisters had been locked in a fierce duel in a manner that seemed like they were fighting for their lives. The sight of them giggling together like typical young girls would have been nothing but eerie to the eyes of an outsider.

However, for the two people involved, those emotions were natural.

After laughing for some time, Ornea suddenly narrowed her eyes,

Ornea: “Elsa, you sorta resemble me.”

Elsa: “—? I think that means there’s something wrong with your eyes.”

Ornea: “Don’t be saying that while staring so intently to compare our heights! I’m not talking about looks, something that’s more on the inside, like nature, maybe, anyway I’m talking about that sorta thing!”

Elsa: “That’s a bit vague…”

Ornea: “Shut your damn mouth!”

Flaring up at Elsa’s quick retort, Ornea continued with an “Anyhow!”. Playing with the kusari-fundo in her hands that had maimed Elsa’s body,

Ornea: “When one is turned into a Curse Doll, in most cases, that alteration will fracture their heart. That’s the reason behind Saria and Hildea’s extreme eagerness for physical contact, and Dorothea’s emotional instability.”

Elsa: “Is Dorothea’s voice also a side effect of becoming a Curse Doll?”

Ornea: “That was there from the start. I dunno why… It can’t have been anything good.”

After giving an answer with a distant look in her eyes, Ornea then peered into Elsa’s eyes with a “Got it?”.

Ornea: “Compared to our other sisters, you and I are well adapted to these circumstances. There’ll be many more opportunities to be recruited for missions like today. That’s why, we’ve gotta be careful.”

Elsa: “Careful?”

Ornea: “Ultimately, the ones keeping us alive are Father, and the Gustekan Church that Father abides by, gotta be careful with ‘em.”

Listening to Ornea’s quiet words, Elsa softly repeated the phrase “Gustekan Church”.

—The majority of people in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko placed their faith in the Gustekan Church.

A religious state that worshiped the Sacred Beast Odglass, and the Holy King appointed by that Great Spirit, as the pinnacle of sanctity. Such was the reality of the situation in this land of perpetual winter, the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

In harsh environments that befell all indiscriminately, everyday life was pushed to such an extreme that the hearts of men needed something on which to cling, lest they cease to persist. As a result of such circumstances, what laid at the terminus of people’s search for salvation would be entities sundered from the likes of humans— in Gusteko, that manifested in the form of faith towards Spirits.

And, purchased by Holosseo Featherrun, and ushered in as his adoptive daughter, it seemed Elsa had become a member of this Church of the Holy King without even having realized it herself.

In addition, she belonged to a hidden sector, one that must never be revealed to the outside world.

Elsa: “The Featherrun Sisters…”

Ornea: “With Father at the helm, we’re a unit that serves the interests of the Church to maintain order. That’s the duty of us sisters, an indispensable role in the cleansing of the Holy Kingdom.”

Had that been a statement imbued with guilt or cynicism, Elsa would have likely revised her evaluation of Ornea.

However, as Ornea uttered those words, her attitude was void of lamentation towards her position. She had accepted her role, her fate, and had adapted to this environment.

I see; at last she had been able to understand.

The meaning behind Ornea’s statement that Elsa resembled herself, at last she understood.

Ornea: “No matter how you slice it, our job is killing people. It takes a lot to become a Curse Doll, and the work that follows really puts your heart to the test. —Hey, Elsa. You know, I can’t bear to let our other sisters do jobs they don’t wanna do.”

Elsa: “…”

Ornea: “All of them are girls who’ve gone through tough times. It’s dumb to try and compare, so none of us brag about our misfortunes. But, as long as they’re here, their hearts can be at peace. In tranquility, without fear of getting hurt… That’s why, I wanna let ‘em continue on with that life.”

Elsa: “…For that purpose, you continue to take the short end of the stick?”

Ornea: “That’s why, I’ve got high hopes for you.”

After wearing a commendable expression on her face, Ornea thereupon smiled at Elsa. As she smiled, expectations for Elsa only continued to dwell within her narrowed eyes.

Ornea: “From what I can see, even when considering that you’re a Curse Doll, you’re clearly adapting well to this duty. That’s why, while also noting that it might be a bit early, I had you accompany me on my mission.”

Elsa: “I see… so as a successor, or probably as a partner?”

Ornea: “Once I get you trained, the two of us can continue to fulfill the duties of the Featherrun Sisters. If we do that… then Sithonia and everyone else should be able to keep living with their hearts at rest.”

That was a declaration of Ornea’s resolve.

Elsa did not know just how long she had been living this way as the second daughter of the Featherrun Sisters. But, therein was revealed the anguish of all Ornea’s days until now.

The sole aspiration she had discovered amidst such a life, was to grant peace to her sisters' hearts. —Hence, performing the duties of the Featherrun Sisters was the meaning in Ornea's existence.

Elsa: "How pitifully lovely. Even though you're this…"

Ornea: "This… this what?! Don't tell me you were about to say "this small"?!"

Elsa: "I hadn't said it, though…"

Ornea: "Your eyes said it loud and clear! You're absolutely lacking in respect towards your elder sister! Really now!"

Pouting her reddened face, Ornea gazed down at Elsa, the latter sitting on the ground.

In the time that they had conversed, Elsa's body had completed its restoration. To compensate for all the blood she had lost, pulsations of hematopoiesis could be felt within her body. The principle was unclear. However, since it was convenient, that did not matter to her.

Ornea: "How many people you think could manage something like that, I wonder?"

Elsa: "—?"

Ornea: "It's nothing. More importantly, pick a weapon. If you can't master a weapon that suits you, then no matter how tough we may be, we won't stand a chance against the fearless veterans who've fought countless battles."

Elsa: "Will we ever trade blows with such opponents?"

Ornea: "It's not impossible… There are times when we'll need to face Temple Knights too, after all."

Listening to Ornea's awe-inspiring words, Elsa gazed at the weapon rack mounted to the wall.

This training ground for the sisters was fashioned with many installations to serve that purpose. That included the environment which they were free to tarnish as they pleased, as well as the provision of countless weapons.

Among those weapons, Elsa, as if being guided to it, picked out a baleful dagger,

Elsa: “—As I thought, blades really do feel the most familiar in my hands.”

3

—Exactly as Ornea had hoped, Elsa had favorably adapted to her role as a Curse Doll, and as a Featherrun Sister.

???: “—Gather, Featherruns.”

The deathly voice of Holosseo signaled the arrival of work for the Featherrun Sisters.

The sisters bore no means to refuse Holosseo’s words. As a seemingly unspoken rule between a Curse Doll and their maker, that was an insurmountable wall.

Holosseo: “Sithonia, Ornea, come forth.”

On any given mission— following directives from elites ranked even higher than Holosseo in the Church of the Holy King, Holosseo would appoint the ones most suitable among the sisters who had gathered.

In such instances, the ones most often called upon were, naturally, the eldest and second daughters. An overwhelming amount of the time, it was Sithonia and Ornea. Sometimes, Saria and Hildea would also tag along, and that went for the greenhorn Elsa as well, though she was a world of difference away from the top two.

However, in Elsa’s cases, she was frequently taken along on Ornea’s request to accompany her on her missions. Just as she had mentioned in the underground, Ornea had high hopes for Elsa’s aptitude as a Featherrun Sister. Through her actions, she had proved that those were her true feelings, bereft of falsehood.

Elsa could not determine whether that meant the frequency of enemies emerging against the Gustekan Church was high or low.

Elsa: “Well, I suppose it’s much better than being neglected due to there being no enemies at all.”

And, Elsa’s thoughts included sentiments towards the fact that, outside of when he came to order the sisters on these missions, she never saw Holosseo at the mansion.

Unless it was an emergency, Holosseo would not sojourn at the mansion. In other words, this grand estate was only inhabited by Elsa and her other sisters most of the time.

Elsa: “So, I think it would save us time in our daily cleaning if we closed down the parts of the mansion that nobody uses, but what do you think?”

???: “…”

Elsa: “It’s silly to keep on thoroughly cleaning rooms that nobody even goes to. Well, I’m unable to perform such meticulous work, so it’s not like any time would actually be saved for myself.”

???: “…You’re being noisy.”

Elsa: “Oh my.”

Calling out to the back that was carefully proceeding forward, she was then scolded by its owner, who had halted their step.

Turning around to face Elsa, who had instinctively closed her mouth, Dorothea wore a displeasured expression. With her favored great shears held in one hand, her acute gaze stabbed into Elsa.

Dorothea: “…Why are you following me?”

Elsa: “If you ask me why, I guess my only response would be because I have time off. Even if I wanted to take a nap, I already overslept, so I’m not really tired. But on the other hand, it’s probably unhealthy to just absently-mindedly do nothing, right?”

Dorothea: “…Then work!”

Elsa: “Sithonia got fed up with me. She says I can’t be trusted with housework in the mansion.”

Elsa’s lack of talent, which rampaged across all kinds of domestic chores, absolutely decimated Sithonia’s theory of education; as Sithonia was in charge of the property, she issued a decree that forbade Elsa from engaging in any tasks.

Hence, as long as Elsa was in the mansion, her position was decided on being a parasite who laid down as she watched her other sisters work.

Dorothea: “…You don’t have any doubts about that?”

Elsa: “It’s up to destiny to decide what we are and aren’t cut out for. Even if I complain, nothing would come of it. Ah, of course, I do find it vexing, you know? That’s why…”

Dorothea: “…That’s why?”

Elsa: “For all the work I can’t do at the mansion, I intend to endeavor in my duties, get it?”

In most cases, she was just a bonus on top of Ornea, but she would not cut corners in her duties.

She had not thought much about it, but this service to the Church—the act of killing people, was not something that Elsa had any particular reluctance to. She was suited for it. At least more than she was to domestic chores.

However, hearing those words from Elsa, Dorothea’s expression shifted. It had not simply become pregnant with ire towards Elsa, but rather—

Elsa: “You’re getting mad in quite the strange way, aren’t you? Are you perhaps angry at yourself?”

Dorothea: “—Hk.”

Elsa: “Apologies, I just perceived that sort of scent. I could detect it before as well, but I’ve been particularly good at picking up on it since getting this body. —After all, people emit all sorts of scents as they live their lives.”

For indignation, for sorrow, and for delight, there existed scents of indignation, of sorrow, and of delight.

Though they may not have strictly been smells, Elsa’s nose was capable of discerning them with a high level of precision. It perceived not only the emotions of people, but was also alert to changes in atmosphere.

The fact that Elsa had survived until today was in no small part thanks to being saved by this sense.

Elsa: “That’s why, deception won’t work on me.”

Dorothea: “…S-So, what are you trying to say?”

Elsa: “—? Nothing in particular? It’s just, I thought it, so I said it. If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to, and if you do want to tell me, feel free to do so. As I’m sure you’re aware, I am quite free at the moment.”

Dorothea: “…”

Without showing diffidence, Elsa spoke as she opened the door to a nearby room.

The modest guest room was equipped with minimal furniture, so Elsa sat down in one of the chairs, turned around back towards the door, and tilted her head.

Peering inside from the entrance, Dorothea was taken aback by Elsa’s attitude, but eventually, she entered the room at a slow pace and sat down in front of Elsa.

And then—

Dorothea: “…I don’t get called out on missions, after all.”

Having placed her great shears upon her lap, Dorothea muttered regarding her own position.

Listening to that comment, Elsa slightly raised her eyebrows. Then, narrowing her eyes as if mulling it over for a bit,

Elsa: “Now that you mention it, it does certainly feel that way.”

Dorothea: “…Had you not noticed?”

Elsa: “Something like the number of times we get summoned isn’t something I can grasp through smell. And though I’m not proud of this, I have rather poor memory. Even Father’s face is a bit of a haze, since I don’t see him frequently.”

On top of seldom appearing at the estate, they did not spend much time together even when he did turn up, so Holosseo’s face within Elsa’s mind was quite fuzzy.

If she were told to draw a portrait of him, it did not seem like she would be able to draw anything specific save for those two conspicuous cavities— the abyssal sockets, shorn of eyeballs.

And, listening to Elsa’s candid thoughts,

Dorothea: “…Do not belittle our esteemed Father.”

Elsa: “…”

The unclasped blades of the great shears ensnared Elsa’s white neck in a show of force.

Getting a whiff of the frigid fragrance of rust, Elsa thought back to the time this sort of thing had happened before. And, that had happened just after she had been brought to the mansion for the first time.

Elsa: “Come to think of it, weren’t you angry about the same thing back then too?”

Dorothea: “…You really don’t reflect on your actions, do you?”

Elsa: “I’m the type that doesn’t look back on the past, I wonder if that might be a cool way to cover up the fact that I have poor memory? What do you think?”

Dorothea: “—Hk.”

Perhaps due to that response not being to her liking, the pressure of the shears intensified a degree further, lightly cutting into Elsa’s neck. There was a faint sensation of blood flowing, but no trepidation found residency in Elsa’s eyes.

And, that was not because she underestimated the possibility of her head being lopped off.

Elsa: “Unlike back then, I don’t think I’ll die even if you cut my head off?”

Dorothea: “…No matter how much of a Curse Doll you are, regeneration has its limits.”

Elsa: “Ah, that’s indeed what it seems like. Sithonia also told me that. But still, I don’t think I’d die just from having my head cut off… And even supposing I did…”

Dorothea: “…Supposing you did?”

Elsa: “If you killed your little sister on a whim, wouldn’t Father get mad at you?”

Dorothea: “…”

Of course, those fears and apprehensions would have also been present within Dorothea. Holding her breath in frustration, she slowly withdrew her great shears. Gently, she touched the wound torn open by the shears. The drops of blood moistened her fingers, but the wound in question had already closed up, and was no longer anywhere to be found.

Dorothea: “…Your healing, is fast.”

Elsa: “It’s the same for Ornea, isn’t it? Is yours different?”

As Elsa tilted her head, Dorothea pursed her lips and did not answer. Picking up on the scent of shameful emotions slightly leaking out, Elsa shrugged her shoulders.

Elsa: “Come to think of it, you seem to like Father a considerable amount.”

Dorothea: “…You’re able to tell?”

Elsa: “Out of all the sisters, you’re the one who says esteemed Father, esteemed Father the most. I’d figure it out even if I didn’t want to. Ah, “even if I didn’t want to” is just a figure of speech. I don’t have any particularly negative feelings on the matter.”

Dorothea: “…That’s because, Father chose me.”

Lying prone as she hugged her knees, Dorothea muttered in a feeble manner. Then, she softly placed her fingers upon her own throat. — Upon the throat that produced a hoarse, crone-like voice.

Dorothea: “…It’s a strange voice, isn’t it?”

Elsa: “It is quite distinct. Since it differs from the impression given by your appearance, I was a bit surprised.”

Dorothea: “…I crushed it myself… I drank boiling water.”

As if the memories from that moment had not faded, discord and despair filled Dorothea’s eyes.

Drinking boiling water. Just how agonizing that was, was something that even Elsa, lacking in the ability to visualize things, could imagine. It could not be simply expressed as pain, it was likely the anguish of hell.

Her tongue and gums were hideously scalded, her throat and esophagus were torn to shreds. The burns solidified in a crooked form, and the young girl’s throat would have been transformed into a disastrous state that could not be healed.

And, that she herself had desired it, was the truth behind Dorothea’s husky voice.

Dorothea: “…Whenever I was hit, or wounded, they liked it when I cried out in a shrill voice.”

Before Elsa could even ask why she had done such a thing, Dorothea responded with haste. Hearing that answer, Elsa immediately understood with an “Ah”.

Elsa: “There certainly are quite a lot of owners who enjoy the crying voices of children. I also have such memories.”

Dorothea: “…You, too?”

Elsa: “Indeed. But then again, I never really cried much so it seemed like they didn’t like me. I guess I’m quite lacking in charm. I’ve always been like that.”

Even if there were times when she was purchased from her slavers, in most cases, things generally ended with Elsa being unable to satisfy the buyer’s wants. Each time that happened, the slaver seemed to be at a complete loss regarding what to do about the returned Elsa, but as for that, this mansion now seemed quite comfortable for her.

This was the first time she had ever remained in one place for so long.

Elsa: “In that sense, I suppose this could even be said to be my very first home.”

Dorothea: “…”

Elsa: “Is something the matter?”

Dorothea: “…That, is Father’s kindness.”

Turning her face away, Dorothea sharply muttered. Within Elsa’s mind, Holosseo and the word “kindness” were quite divorced from each other, but she would not touch upon that here.

If there was one thing that she had taken away from the conversation until now—

Elsa: “Dorothea, you destroyed your own throat. And because of that, you were thrown out… then afterwards, you were picked up by Father? You’re grateful for that.”

Dorothea: “…That’s why, I want to be useful to Father. But…”

Elsa: “Even though the reason you met Father was destroying your throat, it’s ironic for your ruined throat to be the reason why you can’t be useful to him. Which way would have been better, I wonder?”

Likely, that worry endlessly continued to repeat within Dorothea’s mind.

Without needing to be told, Elsa knew that Dorothea cursed her throat, only capable of producing a hoarse voice. However, it was also the truth that if not for that, Holosseo would have never been able to add her to the Featherrun Sisters. In that case—

Elsa: “Even with that throat, I think it would be more constructive to think of ways to be useful.”

Dorothea: “…To be useful, even with this throat?”

Elsa: “Indeed. That’s right… if speaking will make you appear strange, why not take on missions that do not require speaking? If you just remove your voice, then I think your appearance is just right, Dorothea.”

Dorothea: “…Just right.”

Elsa: “Isn’t it just ideal to throw an opponent off their guard?”

With her blue hair tied into twintails, the appearance of the short Dorothhea was as lovely as an angel.

The husky voice that greatly betrayed that impression was the source of her inferiority complex, but then she just ought to conceal it in front of people who would dislike it.

A sweet little girl with no voice; she could easily keep up appearances of such a kind.

Elsa: “I’ll say this now, but while there are requests for girls who will cry out in a shrill voice, there are also requests for girls who will not make a sound no matter what is done to them.”

Dorothea: “…You.”

Elsa: “No matter what it is, there’s a way to make use of it, right? And you can give up at any time.”

An ability that could adapt to any place, and to anything, such a thing was far more rare. Most people would have no choice but to make use of what they had, and accomplish everything at extremities of ingenuity.

It was merely a matter of Elsa having Elsa’s own strengths, and Dorothea having Dorothea’s own strengths.

Elsa: “Even if you can’t do things like Sithonia or Ornea, it doesn’t mean that you have no worth. I think you’d definitely be able to live more comfortably if you don’t get a mistaken idea there.”

Dorothea: “…”

Elsa: “Well, I quite like the garden you tend to, so I don’t mind how things currently are.”

Added on right at the end, were Elsa’s honest feelings towards Dorothea.

Hearing that, Dorothea widened her eyes in surprise, and after keeping silent for a bit,

Dorothea: “…I had thought, that you were surely an idiot.”

Elsa: “That’s quite upsetting. It’s just that I’m not very good at thinking. It’s also true that I’m better at taking action than thinking.”

Dorothea: “…That’s why I thought you were an idiot… No, I’ll revise it. I don’t like you, but you’re not an idiot.”

Shaking her head, Dorothea gave such an evaluation of Elsa.

Standing up with her great shears in hand, she headed to the door to exit the guest room.

Her steps appeared to be lighter than they had been before the preceding conversation.

Dorothea: “…Thank you.”

Elsa: “—?”

Dorothea: “…Idiot.”

Not understanding the meaning of those thankful words, the confused Elsa was left with a disparaging comment. Watching that back as it exited the guest room, Elsa was left in the chamber by herself.

Elsa: “Thank you, hmm… Fufu, it’s been a while since anybody has given me their thanks.”

Even if she searched through her recollections, no memories of being told thank you by somebody easily rose to the surface. Thinking that to be a sign of her droughtful life, Elsa smiled with faint melancholy.

To receive gratitude in regards to discussing one’s troubles was truly like an exchange between sisters.

Thinking about such things, Elsa let out a small gush.

Certainly, if she could experience such feelings, then she might as well give her thanks to Holosseo.

4

???: “It seems like you said something to that girl. Thank you, Elsa.”

Elsa: “Oh my, that’s a second time now.”

???: “—?”

Elsa: “Nothing, just talking to myself. Please forget about it.”

Ignorant to the meaning of that response, Sithonia widened her eyes, to which Elsa waved her hand.

She had just recently thought that it had been a long while since anybody told her thanks, so she was surprised that it had happened a second time without much of an interval between.

Unable to share in Elsa's surprise, Sithonia continued with "No matter",

Sithonia: "I always lose my bearings when I talk to you, so I have given up trying to understand everything."

Elsa: "Indeed, I think that's a good idea. After all, nobody is capable of fully understanding someone else."

Sithonia: "I did not intend on engaging in such an intellectual discussion, though…"

Elsa: "Oh my, is that so?"

As Elsa expressed disappointment in her expectations having been betrayed again, Sithonia sighed. Then, she continued, "I was referring to Dorothea".

Sithonia: "In the time that myself and Ornea were not present, you spoke to that girl, correct? For a long time now, I had known that she was regretful about not being sent out on missions, however…"

Elsa: "Just because you're the eldest daughter doesn't mean that you can understand everything. Besides, all I did was just make the appropriate interjections in my talk with Dorothea. "

Sithonia: "Thanks to those appropriate interjections, it seems that girl has taken on more of a constructive outlook."

Rather than out of modesty, Elsa truly had no awareness that she had been providing advice. Sithonia understood that, and went even further to extend her gratitude.

According to what Sithonia was saying, when she and Ornea returned from their mission and were greeted by Dorothea, it seemed like she had sought counsel regarding duties that even she could fulfill. If speaking would arouse suspicion, perhaps she could participate in duties where she would not have to do so; she must have enquired so.

Sithonia: “Though, she had tried to conceal who exactly had suggested that idea to her.”

Elsa: “…Ah, I see. In that case, wasn’t there also a possibility that it wasn’t me?”

Sithonia: “If it was not you, it would have been Saria or Hildea, correct? However, those two would not give advice to Dorothea… nor to any of the sisters, at that. They are satisfied with their connections existing solely between the two of them.”

That slightly thorny phrasing was proof that Sithonia was at a bit of a loss with what to do about those twins. Perhaps having also realized that she had used rather strong words, Sithonia’s cheeks slightly stiffened, and she continued with “Anyhow”,

Sithonia: “I think that Dorothea’s eagerness to participate in missions is a good sign for her… Though, Ornea might not be too happy about it.”

Elsa: “I suppose that’s right. Ornea wants to do everything on her own, after all.”

Sithonia: “…I shall make no comment.”

As Elsa spoke of a slightly misconstrued version of Ornea’s thoughts, Sithonia decided against touching upon it.

That being the case, it seemed like Sithonia had not been told Ornea’s true intentions, but it also seemed like she had her own way of guessing what her younger sisters were thinking.

Elsa: “So then? If that was the only reason you stopped me, I shall be going now.”

Sithonia: “Do you have any urgent matters?”

Elsa: “Ornea has returned, right? If so, I want to get in some practice underground.”

A fight to the death between sisters— nay, a fight to destruction, was the quickest method to amass more skill with this body.

For that purpose, practicing with Ornea, who would demolish her without holding back, was that from which Elsa could gain the most. Even if she trained by herself, she would immediately get tired of it.

Sithonia: “…How fervent. However, before that.”

Elsa: “—?”

Sithonia: “There is something I want to give you, Elsa. Will you accept it?”

As she said that, Sithonia gently presented something to Elsa.

It was a small pouch that could fit in one’s palm. Its opening was bound with a string, and inside was placed something small and round, a faintly sweet fragrance adrift.

Sithonia: “It is something akin to a handmade talisman. A gift from me. I give them to all the sisters… and finally, I was able to get one ready for you as well.”

Elsa: “A talisman… is it something related to the Church of the Holy King?”

Sithonia: “No, I simply made it because I wanted to give it to you. I suppose you could view it as proof of our sisterhood.”

Sithonia smiled bashfully, and taking the charm from her hands, Elsa closely examined it. Although she claimed it was handmade, it was crafted by Sithonia, who was skilled at housework, thus ensuring it lacked the usual imperfections of handmade items.

It was light. Likely it would not serve as an obstruction if she kept it in a pocket. While she ascertained the feeling of the talisman in her palm, Elsa abruptly smiled at Sithonia.

Elsa: “I wonder, does this mean I’m finally considered as one of the sisters?”

Sithonia: “It is nothing so presumptuous… The moment that Father deemed you acceptable was the moment you became one of the Featherrun Sisters.”

Slightly casting her eyes down, Sithonia answered so, causing Elsa to furrow her eyebrows.

Sithonia’s words rang in a somewhat negative manner. However, rather than signifying that she did not want to accept Elsa as a sister, that was—

Elsa: “Do you happen to have some reservations about the Feathrrun Sisters?”

Sithonia: “—. Really, what an intuitive girl you are.”

Elsa: “I wonder, is that meant to be a compliment? It doesn’t really feel like I’m being commended, though.”

Sithonia: “In the sense of you always picking up on the things I do not want you to notice, I suppose so.”

After a brief exhale, Sithonia loosened her lips. It seemed to be taking a long-term perspective, accepting the truth, but compared to before, it appeared brighter.

Sithonia: “Elsa… the kind of Featherrun Sisters that Father desires, are surely girls like you.”

That was a statement lacking in envy, one that felt akin to pity.

That was why, as if it was rushing out of her mouth, Elsa blurted out a question.

Elsa: “Sithonia, are you not grateful to Father?”

Sithonia: “—I am grateful. There is no doubt as to that.”

That reply was so fast that it seemed like she had prepared it in advance. Only, bringing that up would be far too ill-natured, even Elsa thought so.

Elsa: “Everyone has all sorts of things on their mind… I wonder, does that go for Saria and Hildea as well?”

Sithonia, Ornea, and Dorothea all had their own outlooks on the Featherrun Sisters, and on Holosseo Featherrun’s way of being.

Having heard them without needing to ask, Elsa thought to herself.

Elsa: “Since I don’t really have any thoughts on these things, I get the feeling that maybe I’m the weird one.”

Sithonia: “…That is why, I believe you are the one most suited to the Featherrun Sisters.”

Although, she found it upsetting to be told so by Sithonia in such an exasperated manner.

5

In such a vein, the days went by slowly.

They were not days divorced from pain and bloodshed. It was a time that could by no means be called quiet. However, for Elsa, who for a long time had spent every day desperate just to survive, there was nothing stopping her from saying that the majority of her time spent at the Featherrun Mansion was peaceful.

That included the exasperated reaction to her devastating lack of ability for housework from Sithonia.

That included the torment of being torn limb from limb in her training with Ornea.

That included interfering with the inefficient teamwork of the twins, Saria and Hildea.

That included doggedly receiving threats from those great shears when incurring the displeasure of Dorothea.

For Elsa, absolutely all of them were first time experiences. So, unexpectedly, Elsa might have been thinking that it would be nice for that time to go on for longer.

Time that was peaceful to an abominable extent, and monotonous to the point of being lovely.

However, steadily did the footfall of ruin draw near, unwilling to permit Elsa's escape.

That alone was as though to declare it a fate ever incorrigible.

—On that day, too, Holosseo visited the mansion, as he usually did, to make selections for the next mission.

Holosseo: "Sithonia and Ornea. —Dorothea, come forth."

Dorothea: "…Hk, yes."

If anything was out of the ordinary, it was that not only had the names of the eldest and second daughters been called on that day, but also that of the fifth daughter, who had a dear love for her father. Faced with that reality, the fifth daughter must have been greatly delighted.

It was unclear just how much Elsa's advice had contributed to that nomination of Dorothea. Only, seeing how overjoyed Dorothea was at being selected, that seemed to be a trivial matter.

Elsa: "Though, I suppose you would be quite angry?"

Ornea: "…Seeing her like that, I'm not so cold-hearted that I'd say anything unnecessary."

Gazing over as Dorothea frolicked in high spirits, Ornea snorted at Elsa's question.

Even Ornea, who did not approve of her sisters participating in missions, understood that Dorothea had been eager to work for the sake of Holosseo. If Ornea was capable of denying that joy, then she would not have even been making considerations for her sisters in the first place.

Holosseo: “Saria and Hildea. You are assigned to a separate matter.”

Saria: “My oh my, why yes of course.”

Hildea: “We shall comply indeed, my oh my.”

Ignoring the conversation between Elsa and Ornea, Holosseo continued and ordered Saria and Hildea on a job. As the twins respectfully kneeled and accepted, Elsa raised her eyebrows with an “Oh my”.

The fact that five sisters had each been assigned respective missions meant—

Elsa: “I’ll be the only one remaining at the mansion… this, fills me with quite a bit of anxiety.”

Ornea: “You’re saying that on your own?! Don’t actually burn the mansion to the ground before we get back, you hear me?!”

Elsa: “Were you anticipating that? In that case…”

Ornea: “Don’t! Actually! Do it! You hear me?!”

With that reminder from Ornea, Elsa shrugged her shoulders with a half-hearted “Understood”.

However, the fact of the matter was that this was the first time Elsa would be by herself in the mansion. Thinking about it normally, it would be extremely careless to let a girl risen from slavery occupy such a magnificent manse on her own, but it did not seem like Holosseo and his colleagues thought that way.

Of course, at this point, although there was not even the slightest of conceptions that Elsa might steal something valuable and run away.

Sithonia: “Elsa, I believe it will be tough, but I am leaving things in your care.”

Elsa: “You’re telling me to be docile, correct? For the time being, I’ll try to just sleep through as much of it as I can.”

Sithonia: “…I find it quite regrettable that that seems to be the wisest course of action.”

With a wry smile, Sithonia softly stroked Elsa’s black hair. Then, she looked down to the pouch hanging at her chest— looking at the charm identical to the one she had given to Elsa,

Sithonia: “Well then, we shall be going now. Upon thee as well, so be the Silver Affection.”

Elsa: “Indeed. So be the Silver Affection.”

Her hand lightly fiddling inside her pocket, Elsa responded so to Sithonia’s words. And having received that, Sithonia gave a reassured smile and headed out to complete her mission.

Ornea, the twins, and Dorothea too, followed behind the eldest daughter—

Dorothea: “…Elsa.”

Elsa: “Oh my, I’m glad your dearest wish could come true. Do take care as you go on your way.”

Dorothea: “…I’ll, be going now.”

Upon departure, Dorothea gave a small wave of her hand, perhaps as proof of her gratitude.

Even if she did not know her true intentions behind that, Elsa received it with pleasure as she saw her sisters off. With this, she would now be all by herself in this vast mansion.

Elsa: “With that in mind, I feel a teensy bit nervous, but…”

Holosseo: “—O Daughter of Featherrun.”

Elsa: “…”

As Elsa felt shame from those thoughts, a voice akin to a dead man called out from behind her.

When she turned around, standing there was Holosseo. Staring into those hollow eye sockets, Elsa narrowed her eyes, feeling as though she was being accused of mischief.

To merely divulge the necessary information with few words, and assign missions to the sisters, was Holosseo's job. Once that was completed, he would leave the mansion with the sisters as they headed for their mission, and if not, he would always be gone before they knew it. However, today alone, he stayed at the mansion.

For what purpose that had been for, the following words of the cadaverous man would immediately make clear.

Holosseo: "Elsa, for you, too, there exists a duty."

Elsa: "—? Something separate from Sithonia and the rest? That would be…"

Holosseo: "Of course, for the sake of Featherrun. —For the sake, of the Featherrun Sisters."

A reply that directly went straight to the answer was not something that satisfied Elsa's inclination to enjoy the conversation. Though since she was a bit dense, that was actually quite helpful.

Either way, it seemed like Elsa's plan of slothful cravings whilst remaining at the mansion had faced a setback.

She did not mind that being the case, but she was curious about Holosseo's true motives.

Elsa: "Taking the trouble to clear the rest of the sisters out of the mansion… what are you requesting, of me alone?"

Holosseo: "That is a given."

With that brief statement, Holosseo turned his face to Elsa.

No reflection of Elsa was borne in his lightless eyes. However, Elsa could certainly feel it. The gaze Holosseo was directing towards her — nay, that was something closer to hopes or expectations.

The man who obeyed the Gustekan Church, and had his daughters kill people; the man who lived in a manner befitting a dead man with nary a drop of fortune remaining; just what hopes did he see within Elsa?

Holosseo: “—To bring the Feathrrun Sisters, to completion.”

Holosseo’s words seemed to be yearning, pregnant with a faint ardor, and they caused Elsa to tilt her head. Upon her white neck and shoulders, long, black hair gently ran down.

6

—The closing of the curtains on those peaceful days had arrived shockingly abruptly.

???: “—Hk!!”

That wail of lamentation was sorrowful to the point of rending the hearts of all who heard it.

The emotions charged therein belonged to a seemingly youthful maiden, however, the sound that rang out was akin to the husky voice of a crone, one that had been worn out over a long period—henceforth, everyone was privy as to who the owner of the voice was.

???: “Dorothea?! Did something happen?!”

Having just stepped back into the mansion, a shriek struck Sithonia’s eardrums, prompting her to rush to the scene.

The scream rang out of the divine chapel present on the estate. With her devout faith— or rather, with her particularly strong feelings towards the adoptive father who had picked her up, Dorothea always went to the divine chapel after returning from outside to offer a prayer.

This time was no different. Having completed the mission without a hitch, Dorothea felt a certain sort of way about it, now thinking to the future quite proactively. Then, to deal with and report on those emotions of hers, she had headed for the divine chapel. That was—

Sithonia: "—Ah."

Opening the large door of the divine chapel, Sithonia's eyes widened as she stepped inside.

Lagging behind Sithonia, the pair of Saria and Hildea, who had returned to the mansion just a little earlier, and Ornea arrived at the scene. Before them, too, was the sight that had left Sithonia speechless.

Saria: "My oh my."

Hildea: "My my."

Ornea: "This's…!"

Even the twins cracked no jokes, and Ornea's throat froze over. Sithonia was also unable to move from her position right away. That was how devastating of a sight it was.

Deep within the divine chapel, Dorothea was kneeling before the altar, clinging to something. —Leaning against the altar, the contents of his body spilled out onto the floor, was Holosseo, his final breath long passed.

Holosseo Featherrun had died there in cold blood.

Dorothea: "Father… hk, Fatheerrr… wh-why, how…!"

Sobbing, Dorothea clung to his remains without paying mind to the blood staining her. But, no matter how desperately she called out, no will remained in Holosseo's body.

Clear to the eyes of anyone, Holosseo was completely deceased. If this was a body of a Featherrun Sister, there might have been a chance for resuscitation, but—

Ornea: "—Father isn't a Curse Doll. To the end, he was only a doll maker."

Dorothea: "…Hk."

In place of the motionless Sithonia, Ornea was the one to step to the front. With the smallest body of all the sisters, she embraced the wailing Dorothea from behind.

Receiving the embrace alongside those bitter words, Dorothea's throat clogged up. Once again confronting the hard-to-swallow sight before her eyes, Dorothea looked down at her hands.

At the hands that, to a pitifully earnest extent, had been trying to return all that had fallen out back into her father's body.

Saria: "Even so, just what might have happened during the time Hildea and I weren't present?"

Hildea: "I wonder how such a thing could have happened during the time Saria and I weren't present?"

Overlapping their hands, the twins nestled close together and voiced a natural question.

While the sisters were away on their missions, just what had occurred at this mansion, how did it lead to Holosseo being lost in this tragedy, what in the world was the genesis of Dorothea lamenting like this—

Dorothea: "…There's only one thing… it could be."

Ornea: "Dorothea? Ah! Oi, wait a sec, Dorothea!"

Wringing that out like a hex, Dorothea abruptly stood up and shook free from Ornea. Without listening to her elder sister's detaining words, she began her advance with her bloodstained dress. Overpowered by that menacing demeanor, Sithonia made way for her, and she lumbered back to the mansion without hesitation.

Eyes blazing with detestation, the destination she strode towards was a certain room within the estate.

What that room was, all the sisters who lived in this manion knew.

Dorothea: "…Elsahh!"

Kicking open the door as if to demolish it, Dorothea peered inside as deep resentment seeped out from her. Her lovely facial features sullied with malice, Dorothea's gaze pierced both the bed, and the figure of the girl whose name had been called, slowly sitting up as she lay upon it.

Elsa: "Huahh… Dorothea? You've returned? That was quick."

Dorothea: "…"

Elsa: "…To come and see me before you even change clothes, I'm quite surprised."

Tilting her head, Elsa looked Dorothea up and down as she spoke.

Had she mistaken the blood of Holosseo on Dorothea as her having just finished her mission? Whatever the case, it mattered not to Dorothea at the present moment.

Sithonia: "Dorothea!"

Thereupon, the sisters who had lagged a moment behind in exiting the divine chapel caught up. Seeing the two, Dorothea and Elsa, facing off within the room, they all gasped.

Then, as Sithonia grabbed the shoulders of the imposing Dorothea from behind,

Sithonia: "Dorothea! And Elsa too, calm down!"

Elsa: "This is quite the intense and heavy atmosphere. Also, I'm fully intent on remaining calm."

Sithonia: "Elsa! Say not such—"

Superfluous things; Sithonia had been unable to finish her sentence.

Before she could, the sharp blades of the great shears swiveled up, severing Sithonia's arm off from a bit below the shoulder while it was grabbing Dorothea by the shoulder.

Sithonia: "—Eh?"

Dorothea: "…Get out of my way."

At the abrupt show of violence, Sithonia herself, her arm having been severed, did not understand what had happened.

A beat later, blood sprayed out, and as it covered her cheek, Dorothea coldly muttered those words. Sithonia's body shook violently as it collapsed backwards, and Ornea immediately moved to support her body.

Her white arm had fallen down and rolled across the ground, truly just like that of a doll's.

Sithonia: "Ah, AHHHHHH!!"

Ornea: "—Hk! Dorothea, just what the hell do you think you're doing?!!"

As Sithonia shrieked at the belated arrival of pain, Ornea bellowed while supporting her body. She grabbed the fallen arm of Sithonia with one hand, and immediately pressed it back against the open wound.

Since Sithonia had received the abilities of a Curse Doll, her arm would likely reconnect right away. It was something that also happened quite often in training. However, this was a separate matter. A world of difference existed between the two.

In a conflict that did not serve as training, a younger sister cutting off her elder sister's arm was an occurrence that ought not have ever taken shape.

However, without lending an ear to Ornea's appeals, Dorothea remained with her glare trained on Elsa. Then, with the hand opposite to the one holding the great shears, she threw something.

A sound was made as it slid across the floor, and seeing that, everyone's expressions, save for Sithonia, changed.

After all, it was the curved blade that was Elsa's favored weapon—

Dorothea: "…Explain… yourself."

Elsa: “…”

Dorothea: “…Why, was that pierced into Father’s body?”

Within the question from the husky voice, could be inferred the utmost effort to not charge it with any emotions.

Suppressing the urges to pounce at her even at this very moment, Dorothea awaited Elsa’s response.

None but Elsa had been present at the mansion, the weapon that had killed Holosseo had been her favored curved blade, and considering that she had little loyalty towards Father, all the undeniable circumstantial evidence had been assembled, and yet.

And yet, Dorothea awaited Elsa’s response. Then—

Elsa: “—Hm, I wonder why that is. Do you happen to have a clue?”

Dorothea: “ELSAAAAA…!!!”

Hearing Elsa’s usual manner of detached response, Dorothea erupted with indignation.

With a scream steeped with loathing, Dorothea brandished her great shears and closed in on Elsa. With the opened blades, she would clasp down on Elsa’s neck, and send her head flying.

Flicking up the curved blade by her feet with her toes, Elsa took it into her hand and slashed away the incoming attack. The crash of metal against metal disrupted the atmosphere in the room, and the sisters confronted each other head on.

Elsa: “Though, Dorothea, I don’t have any intention of going at it with you…”

Dorothea: “Shut up!! Shut up shut up shut up SHUT UUUUUP…!!”

Along with each of Dorothea’s bellows, the closing of the blades ripped Elsa’s room asunder. The ruthless cutting edge devastated the room, and the bed, the furnishings, and everything else were blown away.

Of course, the interior of the room was not the only thing to receive damage. As Elsa used her single knife to trade blows with Dorothea in a tango of blades, countless wounds were carved upon her body, causing blood to spurt out.

Her skin was gouged in a manner painful to behold, and depending on the wound, some had even reached down to the bone. As her blood spilled, she had her hands full with putting up a resistance, narrowly escaping being sliced asunder.

Despite that, Elsa—

Elsa: “Fufu, ahahahaha!”

Within the room that was not particularly spacious, Elsa trampled the space by kicking off the floor, walls, and ceiling to fly around it as she laughed.

Shedding blood, bearing unsightly wounds, Elsa roared with laughter nonetheless.

Dorothea: “—Hk!”

The cheeks of Dorothea stiffened as she swung her great shears about, the ripple of laughter striking her ears.

Dorothea was the one applying pressure, and the one who held the upper hand. Elsa stood on pure defense, without returning any counterattacks, with no choice but to get hewn up.

From anybody’s perspective, Dorothea’s advantage was not wavering. Even so, even though she did not allow for even a single counterattack, why was it that Dorothea felt as if her heart was being driven into a corner?

Dorothea: “How dare you…”

Do that to Father; Dorothea invigorated her heart with such notions, and attempted to swing her blades toward Elsa.

But, the moment she tried to firmly clasp down on the handles of the great shears, it happened.

Elsa: "—Ah, you mustn't, Dorothea. It isn't good to lie to yourself."

Dorothea: "…"

Elsa: "Aren't you putting in too much strength there?"

Elsa, who had been driven into a corner until then, slipped past the great shears and closed in on Dorothea. As the voice whispered directly into her ear, all the hairs on Dorothea's body stood on edge.

Then, the blade held aloft made its mad dash for Dorothea's nape—

Ornea: "Not happening!"

Elsa: "—Hk."

As a brilliant melody of shrill metal resounded, the kusari-fundo slithered like a snake as it commenced its onslaught. Firmly ramming into Elsa's temple, the young girl of black hair was sent flying with tremendous vigor.

Basking in an attack bereft of restraint, Elsa's body was blown straight to the side. Her slender body smashed through the window, flying outside the mansion.

Ornea: "Tsk! Such impudent movements! You flew out on your own didn't you?!"

Chasing after Elsa as she unexpectedly flew out, Ornea jumped out from the partially destroyed window. Lagging a moment behind, Dorothea similarly followed suit, jumping down from the window.

Sithonia: "B-Both of you, help chase Elsa…"

Left behind in the disastrous scene, Sithonia, sunken down to the floor, issued an order to the motionless twins.

While trying to reconnect her severed arm, Sithonia, her breathing heavy, turned her attention to the shattered window— to the battle that still raged on outside.

Sithonia: "Bring Elsa back alive. At this rate, she will be killed."

Saria: “But but, would that really be such a bad thing?”

Hildea: “Considering what Elsa has done, it can’t be helped. This sort of thing.”

Sithonia: “Enough…! Now go!”

At Sithonia’s command, Saria and Hilden expressed their disapproval. But, as Sithonia’s strong appeal superseded that refusal, the twins exchanged glances, and bitterly obeyed with an “Understoo~d”.

Pinching the hems of each other’s dresses, Saria and Hildea also descended from the window. In such a manner, Sithonia was left alone in the ruinous state of the room, and as she stood up by the window,

Sithonia: “Elsa, why…”

In a voice that amounted to one bereft of sound, she spilled a question that amounted to one bereft of query.

—With no answer given to Sithonia’s musings, the bout of death between the Feathrrun Sisters danced on.

Having leapt out from the mansion, the dress-clad maidens dashed through the well-maintained gardens as they each brandished their own baleful armaments; unfolding was a scramble to rob one another of life.

Dorothea: “ELSAAAAAAAA!!”

Elsa: “I can hear you even if you don’t shout in such a loud voice.”

At that screaming, hoarse weeping of a crone, none could go without feeling a visceral revulsion. This was due to an instinctive sense of aversion towards decline rooted in the very foundation of human nature.

The angel-like appearance of the maiden who had evoked such an impression, now wore an expression akin to a ghoul, a figure slashing with its great shears as if it were a deity of death; it was truly like a poorly crafted caricature that attempted to cram in all the good and evil in this world.

However, the battle continued as a fragment of reality, and with each swing of her great shears, Dorothea scythed down the garden that she had painstakingly tended to, blowing away the flowers, ravaging the whole location.

Ornea: “Can you calm down already, Dorothea?! Don’t rush out on your own! Elsa’s…”

Dorothea: “Shut up, Ornea! You coward! I’ll be the one to avenge Father’s death!”

Ornea: “Nghh…!”

Cursing at Ornea as she tried to provide cover, Dorothea refused the support as she swung her shears. Parrying those great shears with her curved blade, Elsa averted fatal wounds as she headed for the entrance of the Hallowed Land.

The Hallowed Land that surrounded the Featherrun Estate, to the cavern that connected it to the outside world—

Saria: “You can’t, Elsa. That’s not allo~wed.”

Hildea: “We won’t let you go, as per Sithonia’s orders.”

However, as to block Elsa’s path, Saria and Hildea, holding the hems of the other’s dresses, stood in the way. The twins passed their bodies within their Plenilune Cirque— in the center of a blade in the form of an enormous ring, and glared at Elsa from within, adopting lunge stances.

Elsa: “Though, it just looks like it would be hard to move like that…”

Saria: “Hildea and I don’t need your concern.”

Hildea: “Didn’t we tell you? We’ve been practicing, Saria and I.”

Synchronizing their breathing, the twins thrust their Plenilune

Cirque towards Elsa as she approached them. The amount of space that it took up was in itself a weakness, but their skill in maneuvering the Plenilune Cirque along with their might in doing so was immense.

Stopping the blow of the curved blade with minimal movement, they moved their meager body weights to unleash a heavy blow from the blade. Deeming it infeasible to surmount it from head on, Elsa jumped back a great distance— ensnaring her legs was a chain that had been cast out.

Ornea: “This, goddamn stupid IDIOOOOT—!!!”

Her legs caught by the chain, Elsa’s body was hoisted up in a tremendous manner.

Just where in her short arms and small figure did all that strength come from? Ornea’s fighting style was intense, and just as had been done to Elsa many times before, her body was easily jostled about. Slammed into a rock face with ferocious vigor, Elsa’s body was relentlessly scraped down by the rocky surface.

Her blood sprayed, her flesh was gouged, and her viscera spilled out. With a sensation that even the contents of her head were spilling out from a crack that had formed, Elsa felt an illusion as if her mass was dramatically decreasing— no, as reality would have it, she was directly undergoing the experience of herself waning.

If things continued like this, and she were slammed into the ground unable to do a thing, she would become unable to launch any counterattacks.

Hence, Elsa made her decision right away.

Elsa: “…”

Taking a full swing with the knife that barely still remained in her right hand, she severed off the right leg that had been caught in the chains; with the sacrifice of her leg, she broke free from the binding of chains.

Maintaining that immense vigor, her body was sent flying. Elsa cleared the garden, and was headed for the rear garden of the estate. If escaping through the cavern was infeasible, Elsa had no choice but to go with Plan B.

That was—

Elsa: "—The water well."

The bottom of this deep water well was not spring water, but was connected to an underground vein of water. The water in the well was cold, and the vein itself was probably dark and narrow, but it should be possible to slip through.

Though, she had certainly never expected that she would actually end up using it.

Elsa: "Ah, that hurts."

Falling on the gravel of the rear garden, Elsa hummed to herself as her skin scraped off.

Copious amounts of blood gushed out from her right leg, and it was more difficult to locate anywhere on her skin that had not been wounded. Regardless of having reached such a state, any notions of giving up were nonexistent within Elsa.

Prowling on all fours, she commanded her arms and legs as a beast would in order to reach the water well. It was a move unforeseen by Ornea and the rest, thus their pursuit had been unable to catch up.

However, Dorothea stood as the lone exception to this, blazing with deep red hatred toward Elsa.

Dorothea: "ELSAAAAAAAA!!"

Right when she was one step away from the water well, a blow from Dorothea perforated Elsa from directly above; the great shears impaled her slender torso, pinning her to the ground.

That instant, Elsa twisted her body, spinning around so that the great shears piercing her body would tear her up. The sharpness of the shears shredded up her flesh and innards, parting her upper and lower body from each other.

Dorothea: "—Hk."

Even Dorothea's eyes widened in surprise at the nature of violence in Elsa's conduct. And, with Dorothea's movements having come to a complete stop, Elsa swung the curved blade in her right hand towards her.

The sinister edge of the curved blade utilized its weight and momentum to cleanly chop the head off of that slender neck.

Elsa's body had been split between top and bottom, and Dorothea's head had bidden a farewell to her torso. —As that wretched spectacle of blood was birthed, the conflict between the two sisters came to a close as they visibly brought destined death upon each other.

Riding the vigor of having gyrated her body, Elsa proceeded to descend down into the water well. Witnessing that, Dorothea's chopped-off head wore an anguished expression as it rolled down onto the ground.

A second later, when the sound of splashing water reached the surface, Ornea and the twins reached the back garden.

Ornea: "Nghaa…! Dorothea! Don't you fall asleep yet! I'm gonna attach your head back now!"

Seeing the body part that had fallen, Ornea grimaced and picked up the severed head. She hurried to line it up with the wound on Dorothea's neck, and the healing abilities of the Curse Doll began to close it up.

For a moment, as Dorothea maintained a distant gaze, she regained her breath from the healing with a "Kehough".

Dorothea: "Ghagh! Gohkugh! …E, lzah, iz…"

Ornea: "Alrighty, settle down! Deep breaths! I'll let you off the hook for those rash remarks towards me just before! For the time being, you need to rest! As for Elsa…”

As Dorothea violently coughed up blood, Ornea stroked her back and looked at the water well right in front of them. Gazing down into the depths of that well were Saria and Hildea, who had likewise caught up.

Having pursued the trail of blood, the twins looked down into the water well that Elsa’s upper body had plunged into,

Saria: “As far as Saria can see, Elsa’s nowhere to be found on the water’s surface. What about Hildea?”

Hildea: “As far as Hildea can see, there’s no sign of Elsa floating there. What about Saria?”

Hearing the judgements of the pair, Ornea grit her teeth.

Leaving everything below her chest behind, Elsa had descended into the well. If it were Dorothea, Saria, or Hildea, that damage would have been fatal, but in Elsa’s case, that was yet unknown— it was largely uncertain if merely stripping her of her limbs and torso would be enough to completely thwart her ability to function.

Ornea: “At the very least, if she can operate on the same level as me…”

For it not to mean the end, even when reduced to being merely a head, was the pinnacle of ability for Curse Dolls.

Of course, once reduced to a mere head, it should be impossible to do anything even if consciousness was not lost.

Ornea: “The well should be connected to an underground vein of water, but it’d be useless to try and slip outside from there. It’s ultimately just spring water, so even without her lower half, there wouldn’t be any path for her to pass through.”

Perhaps it would be a different story if she had Ornea’s herculean strength or Saria and Hildea’s Plenilune Cirque, but the current Elsa had no means of breaking through bedrock. Ergo, this struggle was futile.

Henceforth, with full preparations, Ornea and the others hastened to the underground waterway to retrieve their youngest sister. And following the flow of the water, upon reaching its terminus, they understood.

Ornea: "…As ever, she's a frightening girl."

At the terminus of the well, Elsa was nowhere to be found. What was there, however, was a vast amount of blood, and scattered chunks of flesh. The reason for that was a passage of water so narrow that it would be impossible for a human body to get through.

However, without passing through it, Ornea and the others would have caught up, and she would have met her demise. That was why, Elsa had made herself small and passed through this narrow water escape route.

Likely, based on the size—

Dorothea: "…With just her head."

Ornea: "Even if it came to that, Elsa could still be able to move. Might've been a gamble on her part, but… in truth, if she made it out then it doesn't matter. She's tough."

Life force that exceeded all norms— in this case, rather than her talents as a Curse Doll, Ornea was praising her mental fortitude to do anything in order to survive, and then she heaved a sigh.

She had been unable to fulfill Sithonia's order. She had failed to bring Elsa back.

Ornea: "Unleash the hounds, have them pursue Elsa… Though I doubt she's dumb enough to be caught by them."

Dorothea: "Father, I will…"

Firmly gritting the teeth that had just been smashed in, Dorothea muttered in a loathsome manner, audible to all the sisters.

Each of them had their own thoughts on the matter. But, there was one sentiment consistent among them all.

—In the name of the Featherrun Sisters, the youngest sister who had gotten away must be slain.

7

Fangs stabbed into neck, slurping up blood.

The body of the opponent, which had been furiously writhing in resistance until a moment prior, thereupon was voided of all strength.

Elsa: “How charming.”

As she spoke with blood smeared all around her mouth, Elsa scrupulously sucked on her opponent’s wound.

The hound, clad in long black fur, was one that had been raised in the breeding pen of the Featherrun Estate. Looking after the animals was the duty of Saria and Hildea, but Elsa, who had displayed catastrophic capability as a caretaker, could clearly be said to have a poor affinity with them.

However, they had located the escaped Elsa in this heavy snowfall rather quickly, and to her, who no longer possessed anything but a cranium and right shoulder, they had delivered fresh blood.

But then again, the hound would have wanted to kill Elsa, and bring her back to her sisters. Since she had not been able to allow that desire to be fulfilled, she would at least sink her teeth in so as to not let its flesh go to waste.

The body of Elsa, turned into a Curse Doll, possessed such restoration and life force that generally no objection could be made to the claim that she was immortal. Be that as it may, she was reaching the limit of how much destruction she could take. In order to regenerate, the corresponding recompense was required, and so to put it broadly, eating well was important.

In that regard, it was the first time she had lost the vast majority of her body save for her arm and head like this, and she felt a light excitement at the fact that she would not die even if pushed this far. Even if she slurped up this corpse, the stomach and organs where it was supposed to reach had been left behind, so just what would end up happening?

But, as a matter of fact, Elsa's body did gradually begin to regenerate, and her freedom once lost returned.

Elsa: "…It doesn't seem like I'll be able to stick around for too long."

It was a matter of course, but if she did not get a move on, the next hound would sniff her out. She had just killed one of them, so the next hounds would be more cautious. Which of the sisters were accompanying them?

No matter how competent Elsa might be, if she clashed with her sisters in this state, it was exceedingly difficult to imagine making it out alive.

Elsa: "As expected, four on one is quite the tall task."

To begin with, Elsa's strength was absolutely no match for Ornea. In a situation where she understood she could not win against her alone, there was no way she could win against her with the other sisters in tow.

That was why, heaving a brief white exhale, Elsa stood up with her trembling bare figure.

Before she had noticed, she had restored enough of her body to have no impediments in the way of moving. Nevertheless, her clothes would not regenerate. In the midst of the zenith cold, a death by glaciation would be imminent if she did not move with haste.

The body in which a curse indeed dwelled, and the lone curved blade that had worked to the fullest to help her survive. With naught else, Elsa stepped out with bare feet amidst the snow.

To her rear, somewhere generally to her rear, was the Featherrun Estate— leaving behind all the days she spent at that Hallowed

Land, Elsa Featherrun continued to wander aimlessly through the snow.

Chapter 3:
Dorothea Featherrun

1

Oliver Zeppes was but a humble slaver.

In the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, the slave trade was officially a prohibited market, and was by no means an occupation that operated in the light of day. But, for Oliver, to be a slaver was his calling in life.

In the cruel lands of Gusteko, there was always high demand for slaves as a labor force. Thus, most slaves went without receiving an education, and lacked any life skills outside of physical labor.

That was why Oliver believed, from the bottom of his heart, that the occupation of a slaver, facilitating fateful encounters between slave and buyer to benefit both sides, was a business that could bring happiness to many people. While strictly forbidden by the Gustekan Church, it was a job that proved better at saving those who could find no salvation in the Chrurch's teachings.

If anything, instead of the Church of the Holy King, which governed the Holy Kingdom, it was the slavers that saved more people.

That was the philosophy of Oliver Zeppes, his pride, and his conviction— endeavoring in the honest work of the slave trade, he attached prices to people as a slave trafficker.

All the while, he wished for the happiness of all people involved with the slave trade, and even greater happiness for himself.

And yet—

Oliver: "Wait wait wait wait, wait for just a bloody second a'ight! Wh-Wh-What the hell d'ye think ye're doing showing back up 'ere again?!"

The lighting of the town had fallen to dusk, and within a room illuminated by the meager flame of a candle, Oliver's face went pale, and a cold sweat ran as he shuddered.

After finishing up work for the day, he had gone out for a nice drink and had just returned to his home.

Though he did not want to brag, today he had handed over a slave to an elite, high-paying customer, and had successfully secured a firm transaction. The slave that had been purchased was a girl capable of reading and writing. If what awaited her was a merchant family, then she would be treated properly, and would likely be able to one day buy back her freedom.

As long as she had work, she would not lose her food allowance. For slaves, the rations to live from day to day were exceedingly important.

He had returned to his room whilst humming in such jovial spirits, right when he was about to jump onto his bed thinking he would probably have good dreams tonight, Oliver happened across her.

Seated on Oliver's bed, was a black-haired girl, wearing a sweet smile on her face— a commodity formerly belonging to Oliver's inventory, rife with issues, she had been naught but dead stock.

Oliver: "E-E-Elsaaa?!"

Girl: "It's been a while, hasn't it, Oliver? You reek of alcohol, have you been drinking too much, I wonder?"

As Oliver stared in shock, the young girl— Elsa, inclined her head. Seeing her bare white shoulders, her braid of black hair flowing down, Oliver's throat croaked.

Bereft of lechery, the reason for that was founded in pure dismay, likely an unpleasant dread.

All of his pleasant tipsiness had been blasted straight out the window from the impact of this reunion.

Oliver: "I-I don't ever remember ye being cautious of me drinking b'fore. But, more importantly! Answer me damn question! Fuck're ye doing 'ere?! D-Don't tell me…"

Elsa: "Fufu, what do you think the reason is?"

Oliver: "Don't be telling it like a riddle! Ahh, bloody hell, what'd I do to deserve this!"

Holding his head, Oliver cursed his own misfortune, and even cursed Elsa while he was at it. The fact that she was already beyond help by the time he cursed her, was the worst thing about this dead stock girl.

After all, Oliver had been acquainted with this girl named Elsa ever since he had been a novice slaver, right when he first entered the slave trade—

Oliver: "This marks the thirteenth time! Ye've gone 'n come back to me place now thirteen bloody times! Each time ye're bought, the buyer always meets their doom… y-ye're a plague I tell ye!"

Elsa: “I’m nothing so monstrous. Don’t give me too much credit now, Oliver.”

Oliver: “And ye’ve not even the slightest clue! This isn’t praise! Can’t ye comprehend that?!”

Bellowing at Elsa as she detachedly missed the mark, Oliver fell to his knees. This oafish interaction had helped it finally sink in. Once again, Elsa had returned to Oliver.

—As he had lamented a moment prior, Elsa was a repeat offender of returning to the slave trade after being sold off.

Usually, slaves that had been purchased would scarcely come back into the inventory of their slavers. It was not as though buyers would never request to return the merchandise, but they were mostly always turned down.

The fates of the vast majority of slaves would be decided the moment they were purchased by a buyer. All that remained was how they would live, and how they would die under custody of the buyer. —However, as with everything, there were exceptions.

For instance, if the buyer met an unexpected demise in some shape or form, and the slave then lost any reason for remaining there, they would be sold wholesale back to the slavers at a low price.

For such reasons, returning to being commodities in the form of slaves, with their tomorrows left uncertain once again, such despairing, ill-fortuned slaves did exist, but this went too far in Elsa’s case.

Oliver: “D’ye have any idea just how much hardship I’d had to go through b’cause of those bloody antics of yours…?! How many times me good name’s been slandered as purposely giving a dangerous slave to buyers to have the master killed and valuables pilfered… And just when I thought I’d finally dispelled all those blasted rumors! “

Elsa: “You were doing such cruel things? That’s no good. You should apologize.”

Oliver: “I’ve not done a smidgen of that! And yet, they all doubt me b’cause of ye!”

For Oliver, who strived to be an honest slaver, such rumors were a fatal wound. Even so, with a face of ignorance, Elsa herself had returned to Oliver after misfortune befell her buyer.

Then, with an expression displaying no shame whatsoever, she spoke.

Elsa: “I’m going to be a burden on you once again, Oliver.”

2

Oliver: “To begin wit’, to begin wit’ I tell ye, wasn’t the buyer this time one o’those big shots up at the Gustekan Church? Tha’s why, I’d thought this time would be it for sure…”

Elsa: “Yes, indeed. I don’t blame you for that, Oliver.”

Oliver: “The Church of the Holy King I tell ye, they’re the damn bastards who decide on the laws of this nation! For the most part, the people in the faction who prohibit the slave trade are the ones who be wanting ‘em the most. ‘Course, ye know, I don’t wanna be discrediting the name of the Church by treating ‘em poorly or something. So then why, whyyyy…!!”

Lying down on his bed with a ruddy face, Oliver gave into despair as he slurped down cheap liquor.

From what Elsa had heard, his dealings had gone well, so it seemed he had indulged in some top quality alcohol before returning home, but it seemed that happening upon her like this had spoiled his mood.

Elsa: “…”

As the spillage of booze soaked his collar, Oliver continued to mutter his complaints. Gazing over him, Elsa narrowed her black eyes, and loosened her lips.

Elsa had now known Oliver for around four years.

Although Elsa herself had not counted each individual time, based on what Oliver said, this was already the thirteenth time that she had returned to him. To say it was a feat made possible by her homing instincts would not necessarily be a joke.

Oliver was a man in his late twenties, characterized by his chestnut hair and delicate features, and for someone involved in the slave trade, he was more gloomy than he was rough-mannered.

In reality, Oliver was not very good at resorting to violence, so it was his loquacious nature, something that had kept him alive until today, the extraordinary eloquence of a silver tongue that served as his defining speciality.

But then again—

Oliver: "That sorta special skill's got bugger all chance of working on people who don't listen to what others say…"

Elsa: "Yes, that seems tough. People who don't listen."

Oliver: "The one I'm talking 'bout is ye! Ye've got not even the slightest understanding of irony, what'm I s'pposed to do 'bout ye now!"

And, that signature move of his, for better or for worse, had never worked on Elsa since a long time ago.

However, Elsa had faith in this boisterous, pessimistic man. That was unquestionably because he had been the sole person to offer his hand to the bloodied girl atop the snow of zenith cold.

If he had not been of a certain kind of good nature, Elsa would have definitely perished.

Elsa: "That's why, I'll choose to count on you whenever I have the chance. If you really need to blame someone then please blame yourself."

Oliver: "Ain't that a phrase ye'd usually say to a bloke receiving retribution for their wrongdoings?! Being cursed even though I do so much good, 's that just mean I'm one of the ultrarich or something?!”

Elsa: “The idea that you’d be hated just for having money; I get the feeling that is a bit biased…”

Without giving a response to Elsa’s murmur, Oliver placed his palms over his face, and groaned for a bit. And, after groaning for a decent while, slowly did he raise his body.

Then, peering at Elsa, sat beside the bed, through the corner of his eye,

Oliver: “…So, what fate b’fell the buyer this time ‘round?”

Indeed, in such a gentle tone he enquired.

That was how he had always dealt with her. After lamenting his heart out cursing his fate, Oliver would then enquire about Elsa’s situation once again; that was how he did things.

In these four years, while he was certainly put through a great deal by Elsa, Oliver would absolutely lend an ear to what Elsa had to say. That said a lot about his methods as a slaver.

That was why, in response to him, Elsa’s answer had not changed even once over these four years.

Elsa: “—It wasn’t really anything of note. The buyer simply met his misfortune.”

Oliver: “…That’d be fine then. Well, it really wouldn’t be good in the bloody slightest, though. Ahh, fuck me, I’d even gone ‘n thought they was a valuable customer ye know?!”

Elsa: “Indeed, you’d think he was a valuable customer. Among all the people who’ve purchased me until now, his place was certainly the most comfortable. That’s why, I also find it regrettable.”

As Elsa spoke of it as if it was a matter detached from herself, Oliver heaved a heavy sigh.

Oliver: “Mind if I ask ye one thing, Elsa?”

Elsa: “What might that be?”

Oliver: “Your collar’s already been removed. That in mind, why’d ye come back to me place? Don’t ye think it’d be nice to go somewhere else for once, wherever that may be?”

Elsa: “By that, do you mean some place I wish to go?”

Oliver: “Yeah, exactly, right on.”

Elsa: “Then, that’s exactly what I intend on doing. That’s why, I came back here.”

Placing her hand to her chest, Elsa spoke thus, causing Oliver to make a bitter face. Once he digested Elsa’s words, prone to sounding like a confession,

Oliver: “That don’t mean ye’ve fallen for me, now does it?”

Elsa: “You mean like sensual love between man and woman? In that case it would be a bit perverse, no? Being sold off by the person you love to somebody else, and going out of your way to return to them each time something happens… how frightening.”

Oliver: “That’s just a fraction of the fear that I feel!”

Shouting in anger once more, Oliver stood up. Gulping down what was left in his bottle, he wiped his mouth and looked up. Upon his visage, no longer did there remain any grievous hue.

Only, his eyes burning with tempestuous determination, Oliver nodded with an “Understood”, and,

Oliver: “For the time being, there’s no helping that ye ended up coming right on back. Looking at it a different way, guess I could see it as me merchandise coming back of its own accord. It’d probably be best to think this an opportunity to make some more money.”

Elsa: “Isn’t it because of those thoughts that rumors spread about you being a corrupt slave trader?”

Oliver: “I don’t wanna be hearing that shite from the primary culprit! Ye should just go live a happy life already!”

Elsa: “…”

Oliver: “Geez, just why d’ye think I work in the slave trade…?”

Placing his hand to his forehead, Oliver spoke in an exhausted manner.

From his mouth were uttered the words “Find happiness”. Those were his true feelings, bereft of falsehood, something he was always bound to say, and something she had heard many times over these four years; this Elsa knew.

Oliver Zeppes was a foolish man attempting to bring happiness to people through the slave trade.

Because he was such a man, Elsa had likely never thought to head to any slaver other than him.

Oliver: “What?”

Elsa: “Even though you have a habit of saying that, I’m wondering if you’re actually going to make me happy soon. I’m getting tired of waiting.”

Oliver: “Ye’re bloody mistaken if ye think the winds o’favor will blow just b‘cause ye wait for it?! I’ll tell ye this now, but if ye don’t put in the effort to become happy, ye’re neva gonna find it, that’s life!”

Spittle flying out as he bellowed, Oliver put his coat back on. Then, turning to face the door, Oliver looked back at Elsa on the bed, and,

Oliver: “I’m ‘bout to stay up all night and revise a sales plan, so just stay put, will ye? Ye’ve already gotten me knackered in a huge mess, so ye better not do anything unless ye absolutely need to!”

With those firm instructions, not permitting any objections, he treaded off with noisy steps. Seeing him off, Elsa shrugged her shoulders, and slid into the bed.

She had expended quite a lot in order to return here. Now she wanted to rest for a bit and recuperate. In that sense, Oliver's attitude of not prying too deep into the situation was a huge help.

Even if that was only because it was his nature to not want to get deeply involved with a hassle, it served as Elsa's salvation.

3

—Then, at the same time that Elsa had closed her eyes for a brief rest.

???: "—Here's all that I could find."

Alongside those words, something made an unpleasant, wet sound as it was thrown onto the table.

That was the carcass of an animal ripped to shreds— a hound bred at the Featherrun Estate, one that had been sent out to pursue a runaway.

Surrounding that carcass, were the sisters of the Featherrun Mansion, where Elsa had lived peacefully for a while. The five sisters, Elsa no longer included among them, came face to face in the dining hall, and looked down upon the carcass.

Ornea: "The rest of the dogs were also killed. It's no mistake to think she's escaped."

Sithonia: "Is there no doubt that she made it through the vein of water under the well?"

Ornea: "A corpse of a hound was discovered at the exit of the vein. I also tried taking the same route, so it's certainly possible to stream out from there… really now."

Having changed into a spare green dress, Ornea heaved a deep sigh.

In order to pursue the trail of their runaway youngest sister, Ornea had slipped through the water vein with the same method. —That was to say, she had reduced her body to the smallest size possible, and had passed through with the water current.

It was a gruesome endeavor, but by relying on her special traits, Ornea went through with the reckless act. Rather, the one more deserving of admiration was Elsa, who had been the first to perform that feat.

Ornea: “Unlike me, Elsa oughta be able to feel pain… and yet to nonetheless cut her own head off her torso like that, there’s no way she’s even the slightest bit sane.”

Sithonia: “But, that girl still did it. How truly becoming of a Featherrun Sister…”

???: “…She is no sister of ours.”

The loathsome conversation between Ornea and Sithonia was bisected by a displeased, husky voice.

Having declared so in a chilly manner, Dorothea glared blanky at the air. The table of the dining hall creaked as she gripped it, all the while she grumbled out her sentiments of deep resentment.

Fierce did hatred swirl in those murky eyes, the runaway Elsa their target.

Saria: “My oh my, seems Dorothea’s in quite the bad mood, Hildea.”

Hildea: “Indeed, Elsa did make a fool of her after all, Saria.”

Giggling, the twins whispered to each other as they observed Dorothea with sidelong glances. Gazing over the exchange of the two younger sisters who did not carry their own weight, Sithonia placed her hand to her forehead, and breathed a sigh.

Ornea: “Sithonia, I can guess how you’re feeling deep down, but what are you gonna do? I’ll say this now, but Father is dead. In that case, our position is…”

Sithonia: “—It would be problematic for the superiors to discover that Father has passed away.”

Sithonia bluntly cut off Ornea’s timid statement. Hearing that, Ornea’s eyes widened, as if having guessed the eldest daughter’s intentions, and nodded.

Ornea: “Roger. I’ve got no objections. In other words…”

Sithonia: “Father is, Holosseo Featherrun is alive and well. Let us proceed with that outline.”

Dorothea: “…Hk! Sithonia!”

Raising an objection to the course of action being established was Dorothea, who had been glaring at the air.

As the sole one among the sisters who had truly loved Holosseo, Dorothea could not accept the cruel conclusion being presented by the eldest and second daughters.

Dorothea: “She, killed Father…! We need to inform the superiors immediately and have the whole Church of the Holy King hunt Elsa down…”

Sithonia: “And then, what will happen once Elsa is found? Once she receives retribution for killing Father, what will become of us? What will become of the Featherrun Sisters?”

Dorothea: “…Hk!”

Sithonia: “Having lost their doll maker, the fate awaiting such obstreperous Curse Dolls is evident beyond a shadow of a doubt. The only thing in store for us, would be an eternal slumber in the vault of sacraments.”

Unbridled aberrations and all the like, were not something that just anyone could control.

Sithonia and the other sisters would be stripped of their freedom, never again would they be able to bask in the light of the sun.

Sithonia: “We cannot afford to allow Father to die. Or perhaps, you would prefer to get revenge on Elsa, and then go arm in arm as sisters as we flee from the Church of the Holy King? Do you desire a never ending life on the run?”

Dorothea: “E-Even so…”

Ornea: “Dorothea, I’ll tell you this now. —I’m in favor of Sithonia’s view. So, if you were to go against that…”

Training a gaze on the persistent Dorothea, Ornea cracked her white knuckles. As that was a declaration she was willing to resort to violence, Dorothea caught her breath.

If she were to throw down against Ornea, the strongest of the Featherrun Sisters, no matter how much Dorothea struggled, she would be squashed, unable to stand a fighting chance; the only outcome was for her views to be forced into submission.

Dorothea: “S-Saria, Hildea…”

Saria: “Are you asking Hildea and I? What a silly-billy you are, Dorothea.”

Hildea: “Of course, Saria and I are in support of Sithonia. There’s simply no helping it, even if it’s tragic.”

Dorothea’s imploring words did not resonate with twins whatsoever. Secluded away in their own world, Saria and Hildea were unperturbed by the matter of Holosseo’s death.

Only, they would find it troublesome for the Church of the Holy King to raise an objection and seal them away. They seemed to share that view with Sithonia and Ornea, and nobody suggested that they try to seek vengeance for Holosseo.

Dorothea: “…F-Father is…”

Sithonia: “We have an obligation to Father. There is no doubt about that. That is why, we shall take suitable revenge. However, that is not something for the Church of the Holy King to do. It is an act, that we shall perform.”

Sympathizing with the quivering Dorothea’s emotions, Sithonia declared so in a quiet tone.

They would plot against the Church of the Holy King and conceal

Holosseo's death. However, that would not be a slight against the creator of the Featherrun Sisters, Holosseo.

Without fail, they would deliver due retribution unto the wrongdoer, Elsa.

Ornea: "For the time being, Dorothea oughta be satisfied with that."

With the assembly of sisters having ended, Ornea spoke out to Sithonia, who remained in the dining hall.

Dorothea, Saria, and Hildea had left their seats, and the only two left in the room were the eldest and second daughters. The two who had known each other the longest would now have to decide on the course of action for Featherrun from here on out.

Holosseo was no longer among them. So for the present—

Ornea: "About getting revenge for Father, you really dead set on doing it? For the sake of Dorothea?"

Sithonia: "…What do you think, Ornea?"

Ornea: "…Well when you put it like that, I guess it's a ploy after all."

Running her fingers through her own green hair, Ornea averted her eyes, a bitter look strewn upon her face. Sithonia did not deny Ornea's words. There was no way she could have.

The dependence that the fifth daughter of the Featherrun Sisters, Dorothea, had on Holosseo, ran deep. If they did not soothe her with such words, Dorothea would not have been able to retain her sanity.

However, in reality, Sithonia had no such intentions of getting revenge for Holosseo. This was not due to coldheartedness, but rather due to prioritizing a more pragmatic issue.

Sithonia: "In order to deceive the superiors, I will need to cram as much of Father's knowledge into my memory as possible. Fortunately, I have had many chances to accompany Father on his work, but…”

Ornea: “It’s not as if you’ve seen all inside his head. Sorry. For that, I’m gonna have to leave everything up to you.”

Sithonia: “That is no problem. Only, I will be counting on you far more than ever before for the missions.”

Ornea: “I agree to that… Though, it’s a duty that I had originally wanted to share with Elsa.”

Folding her short arms, Ornea grumbled those words. Listening to that, Sithonia furrowed her well-shaped brow, and then massaged it with her fingers.

Elsa’s act of violence had been far too abrupt, and since then, all the cogs had begun to fall out of order. Just why in the world had things ended up like this?

Ornea: “Sithonia, I’ll always be on your side.”

As Sithonia was being overwhelmed by cumbrous emotions, Ornea spoke to cheer her up. Clutched in the hand of that younger sister was the proof of sisterhood Sithonia had given her.

A small pouch in which a scented stone was placed, Sithonia had given the same thing to all her sisters. —Elsa was no exception.

Sithonia: “What about that girl’s one…”

Ornea: “It wasn’t in her room or the underground water vein. With this size, she could have probably placed it in her mouth and taken it with her. Perhaps she’s even still got it.”

Sithonia: “…In that case, just what might be her intention?”

She had killed Holosseo, to whom she had a great obligation, and endured pain with fierce determination as she fought a fatal battle against Sithonia and her other elder sisters in order to make her escape, yet had not relinquished her proof of sisterhood.

Was that not already far removed from the boundary between sanity and malevolence?

Sithonia: “—. Regardless, you really do take good care of it, Ornea.”

Ornea: “Ngha! Wh-What are…”

Sithonia: “That pouch, there are traces that you have patched it up many times.”

Given that they had known each other the longest, the proof she had given to Ornea was also the oldest.

Even so, several years had passed since they had become sisters, but it could be said that their relationship was much closer than that of regular sisters.

That was why, no matter the cost, she had to prevent it from collapsing.

Ornea: “Rest assured. It’s not just you and me who have nothing else but this place to hang on to. It of course goes for Dorothea, and even Saria and Hildea as well.”

Sithonia: “…”

Ornea: “Elsa’ll probably also end up realizing before long. When she does, she’ll regret her foolish actions… or, she might even be frightened now.”

Tucking her pouch away, such a possibility came to Ornea’s mind.

Elsa, having no way of knowing the result of the meeting between the sisters, might still think that she was still being pursued even now, experiencing sleepless nights. Perhaps that was something more cruel than just plain revenge.

If she was living in fear of the night like that, it would at least be some consolation for Holosseo.

But, on the other hand, Ornea also thought thus.

Ornea: “If she was a girl capable of something so pitiful, she could've never done this sorta monstrous act…"

Sithonia: "Elsa… I really do not know what that girl is thinking. It is by no means normal to give that impression on a level comparable to Saria and Hildea."

To a greater extent than even Saria and Hildea, who secluded themselves in their own little world, Elsa lived by an incomprehensible philosophy.

Ultimately, the genesis of this situation seemed to be an unbridgeable gap between her and the other sisters.

Sithonia: "Anyway, let us think up another method to successfully convince Dorothea. For now, the utmost priority is for us to surmount this difficult situation as sisters."

Ornea: "Understood… You aren't wrong one bit, Sithonia."

Upon hearing that baseless consolation, Sithonia could be seen with a faint smile on her face. Then, Ornea left her alone in the dining hall, and left the room just like the other sisters had.

Ornea was headed for the divine chapel— the site of Holosseo's death.

To cover up Holosseo's death, his corpse had already been removed from the divine chapel. Since Dorothea had desired it, she had been entrusted with disposing of it.

That was why, beheld in Ornea's eyes, was none other than the divine chapel, blood entirely cleared away, where the putrid odor of death yet hung adrift.

Ornea: "Elsa, just what are you thinking?"

No prayer, no repentance, Ornea merely enquired so of the youngest sister not present, and nothing more.

4

Elsa: "—I'm not thinking about anything."

Biting into a slice of sweet bread lacquered with honey, Elsa gave that answer to the question.

Hearing her response, Oliver's lips greatly distorted, bags under his eyes. His features were well worth seeing, but the unhealthy bags under his eyes, and the crooked curve of his lips greatly harmed that impression.

—The scene was the next morning after Elsa had returned to Oliver, as she enjoyed breakfast together with him.

Oliver had gone out of his way to bring breakfast to the room for her, and it seemed that just as he had declared, he had entered the morning without sleep. Even Elsa could not help but feel guilty for making a full exhibition of her habit of moving around in her sleep in his room. Though, she merely felt guilty, and did not do anything in particular to deal with it.

In any case, the answer she had given at the beginning was a response to the question he had posed.

That was to say—

Elsa: "I barely just escaped and made it back here with my dear life. I'm not thinking about anything like what might happen from here on."

Oliver: "Aye, aye, indeed, of course. Just asking to be sure, ye know? Well, I was just revising all sorts of plans till morn, 'n when I settled down to think 'bout it I just realized that if I didn't check to see what ye actually intend on doing then it might all just go to fucking shite."

Elsa: "Fufu, how careless."

Oliver: "It's your bloody fault!"

Licking the honey off her fingers, Elsa smiled as Oliver shouted at her.

Of course, Elsa recognized that Oliver was working hard. Always putting in his utmost was his virtue. Be that as it may, Elsa felt not even an iota of responsibility.

Giving a sigh at that attitude of Elsa's, Oliver scratched his head with an "Anyway".

Oliver: "Like we've done till now… I won't be able to put ye on the shop display right away. Only once we've ensured that everything's been cut off with the previous buyer."

Elsa: "You're quite familiar with this."

Oliver: "This is already the thirteenth bloody time! I got me doubts that there's any slaver as well versed in reselling a returned slave as I am. The irony!"

Elsa: "What a nasty personality…"

Oliver: "Aren't ye the one who's severed ties with your masters thirteen times?!"

While they were bantering in their usual tone, Elsa bore no objections to the course of action he had devised.

Rather than having faith in his skill as a slaver, she merely had nobody else against whom to compare him. And, even Elsa could agree that it was necessary for her to stay hidden for the time being.

At least, as long as she could not get a clear read on how the Featherrun Sisters would emerge—.

Oliver: "Nevertheless, this time was definitely the longest ye've been gone…"

Elsa:"Indeed… It was around half a year, I suppose? It was a nice place."

Oliver: "I could tell. Ye've also been giving off 'bit of a different air, yeah? How should I put this, ye've quickly become much more womanly."

Gazing over Elsa as she sat with light dressing on the bed, Oliver voiced his evaluation.

In his gaze, no wicked hue of a man was present whatsoever. What was present, however, was the pure eye of a critic, the look of a slaver appraising his merchandise.

Compared to when she first met Oliver, Elsa had grown up quite a bit. Her back, arms, and legs had all grown since then, and her chest and buttocks had attained more feminine thickness. And in the days she had spent at that Featherrun Mansion, Elsa had grown into a more devilish existence.

Considering the duties of the Featherrun Sisters, an excellent physical appearance was one of their necessary qualities. The quality of one's appearance would have influence over the success of a mission. To bring out the carelessness of an opponent, it was an important weapon.

Henceforth, the Featherrun Sisters were prepared with beautiful features.

Oliver: "—. Best of luck. 'S quite troubling that ye've got no outlook to the future, but how 'bout we just take the constructive approach of it meaning that any 'n all restrictions've been cleared away. So…"

Elsa: "What should I do?"

Oliver: "As I'd said, ye won't be put up in the shop. That said, I won't restrain ye either. Feel free to take a walk around town… Though I wouldn't mind if ye disappeared like that either."

Elsa: "Please rest assured. I'll return before it gets dark out."

Of course, Elsa could at least understand Oliver's sarcasm, but she did not dwell on it. With an audible sigh, Oliver stood up and began preparing to head out.

Elsa: "Where are you going?"

Oliver: "Fortunately, the slaves I'd had in stock've all sold out. I'm gonna head to the next stocking and… I've been invited to a bit of a banquet. Gonna have meself a bit of a chat with some valued clients. Please eat as ye see fit."

As he said that, Oliver took a bag of money out from his pocket, and tossed it towards her. Once she caught it, she could tell just how much money was inside from the sensation on her palms.

It was certainly no amount of money that should be defenselessly handed to a slave.

Oliver: “Either way, not like ye’re gonna use it.”

Elsa: “I suppose so. As expected, you really do know me well.”

Oliver: “Please! Behave! Yourself!”

With anger creeping up in response to her sarcasm, Oliver lumbered away with large strides. Seeing him off, Elsa shrugged her shoulders.

Then, looking out the window, she ascertained the sensation of the small bag in her hand. Oliver had said all that, but it did really seem that staying inside all day might not be the best thing for her mentally.

Elsa: “I suppose I’ll take a stroll around town for the first time in a long while.”

5

—The Snowfield Capital of Innorandum was one of the great cities belonging to the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

In Gusteko, where the vast majority of the nation was encrusted in permafrost, snowfall was present to varying degrees. Innorandum was considered a region in which snow blew particularly violently within the city, and while in other cities it was possible to more or less see the ground underneath the cleared away snow, no such phenomenon existed here whatsoever.

However, Innorandum was constructed upon Hallowed Land far larger than any other city, a town of an environment existing in a state of an endless stagnation as a result of the extreme cold.

The days upon which the climate was mild would only experience a light fall of snow, so the inhabitants who had gotten used to it would often take it as a chance to head outside. Today, the weather was also in such a condition.

Elsa: “It seems that today’s warm, so there are lots of people about.”

Strolling down the snow-trodden street, Elsa exhaled a white breath as she observed the bustling crowds.

Given the rare warm weather, many street vendors were out doing business. They were only set up in spots where the sun was shining, so Elsa, charmed by the bargainous atmosphere of the food stalls, satisfied her empty stomach.

Sauce poured all over the meat skewered by a steel rod, it was a hearty meal roasted by a powerful flame. Having been attracted by the eruption of flame at the stall, Elsa had purchased several skewers and ate them as she walked around.

As she dug in, she pondered about her course for the future. For the most part, Elsa was apprehensive about what was to come, and sought some signs regarding what she should do.

Elsa: “Well, whatever happens, happens.”

But, she also abandoned those worries right away, so that did not continue for long.

As Elsa walked around in such a manner, she noticed that there were several people gazing at her. Tracing the gazes back to their origin, she discovered that the ones looking at her were a group of ordinary men.

Sniffing out that the gazes were somewhat lustful, Elsa licked the sauce off of her lips.

She had never really been concerned with such things in the past, but it seemed that her current self was extremely captivating to the eyes of the opposite sex. Was that perhaps because of her growth, or was it because of her training as a Featherrun?

Elsa: “When I take a step back to think about it, I’m currently in a position where I'm being pursued. It may have been better for me to wear a hood to conceal my face."

That reminded her that before she had set out, Oliver had set out a showy display of clothing options for Elsa, and among them had been a hooded robe. However, since it seemed to be a bit warmer today, she had carelessly disregarded that consideration.

Elsa: "It would have been faster had he just persuaded me…"

And, pushing the responsibility onto somebody else, Elsa walked towards an alleyway with a cold, glaciated floor. Proceeding down a less popular direction on her own, she found herself at a dead end, and turned around.

And then—

Elsa: "I do think it's bad manners to chase after a lone girl with a big gang. Do you perhaps have some business with me?"

As Elsa enquired so, before her stood five men who had entered the same alleyway.

From their attire, she could tell that they were not people whose occupations operated out in the light of day. Perhaps because they were surprised that Elsa had noticed them tailing her, they could not conceal their discomposure at being posed the question.

—Nay, there was a single man who was unshaken.

Man: "To think I'd be caught tailing this sorta lass, guess I've really lost me touch."

Elsa: "Is that so? I don't think it's your fault. Those other onii-sans gave you away. If I were to explain which onii-san it was, would it cause a rift in your camaraderie, I wonder?"

Man: "Ahh none o'that, your concern ain't needed. So here's the thing…"

The man who had not wavered was likely something akin to an older brother figure among the men. Bearded and of high stature, he looked down on Elsa, who was standing leisurely, from above,

Man: “Lassie, you know Oliver Zeppes, don’t you?”

Elsa: “…I wonder what the best answer would be here.”

Other Man: “Bitch, answer bro’s question! If not… gabhehh?!”

Elsa did not know how to respond to the bearded man’s question, so in an attempt to urge her on, one of the men had lost his temper, only to be struck in the jaw by the bearded man’s fist. Biting his tongue in a forceful manner, he cowered as blood spilled.

Man: “Right now, I’m talking with the lass. Know your damn place.”

Slapping his cowering subordinate on the head, the bearded man apologized to Elsa with a “Sorry about that”.

Man: “Deepest apologies for following you, and for the lack of discipline. And, I know that you’re involved with that Oliver knob, lassie. Saw you coming out from his place.”

Elsa: “Oh my, so he got hit for no reason. Poor thing.”

Man: “I beg of you. Don’t be saying that, yeah? Well then, onto more important matters… lassie, are you and Oliver the only ones dwelling there?”

Not understanding the intention behind the question, Elsa furrowed her well-shaped brow. As the bearded man witnessed her reaction, he began to rub his balding head,

Man: “It may sound a bit pathetic, but truth be told, a slave purchased from Oliver has run away. And, without any place to go, I figured that he’d be the first place she’d turn to.”

Elsa: “That’s quite the strange story. If a slave has fled from their buyer, wouldn’t they also try to flee from their slaver? For them to return would be…”

Man: “You see, Oliver’s got a bit of a reputation for taking back returning stock. The common sense of other slavers doesn't apply to him. Lassie, you should also be aware of that, yeah?"

With a single eye closed, a ghastly smile emerged on the bearded man's face. Any ordinary person would have been overwhelmed by that gaze and backed down, but unfortunately, it was but a refreshing breeze to Elsa.

Be that as it may, it was difficult to dispute the bearded man's point. It seemed that this person was well informed regarding the rumors about Oliver, so it would be meaningless to deceive him with lies.

When it came down to it, the only thing Elsa could do was—

Elsa: "I've understood the problem with Oliver. Only, there was nobody in the house other than me. Oliver's also gone out, so it's completely unattended."

Man: "Can I really believe that?"

Elsa: "If you don't believe me, why not come and take a look inside?"

This time, it was the bearded man who was surprised at Elsa's proposal. However, from Elsa's perspective, the contents of these allegations were not present in her recollections, so she felt no particular pain in her gut from being investigated.

Oliver would probably get mad if he found out that she brought people into his house while he was absent, but since she was clearing up unnecessary allegations towards him, he would not have any right to complain.

Man: "Then, how about I take you up on that offer? It's a life saver that you're so willing to help, lassie."

Elsa: "A cooperative attitude is important, after all. So, you'll have to help me out next time, right?"

Man: "You've even got some guts, I'll give you that. You're beautiful, 'n these young blokes oughta follow in your example."

As the bearded man checked with his men, “Ain’t that right lads?”, they could not do anything but affirm him in quiet voices. Though, Elsa had no way of knowing the disgrace of being beaten down, and then told to follow the example of a young girl.

Elsa: “Well, employing violence to reform someone is but a matter of course. I’ve experienced it as well.”

Man: “Heh, have you now lassie? I can’t really see that Oliver knob as the kinda guy to do such a thing, though.”

Elsa: “It happened somewhere else. My head’s even been chopped off once.”

Man: “Wahahahaha! Bloody fantastic.”

Perhaps thinking it was a joke, the bearded man slapped his knees and gave a hearty laugh.

Man: “Well then, lead the way. Don’t worry, once we can prove your words true, lassie, we’ll withdraw from there.”

Elsa: “Yes, indeed. I’m glad that you’ll be doing so. Alright, shall we go?”

With that, Elsa took the men with her, and returned to the path leading to Oliver’s house. Then, bringing the men into the house, she would prove that the slave they were looking for was not there, and would then have them be on their way.

Men: “…”

Elsa: “Oh my.”

—In Oliver’s room, they came across a white haired girl cowering on the bed.

Naturally, that was something that even Elsa had not expected. However, these men did not live in a world so naive that they would openly lend an ear to such an excuse.

Henceforth—

Elsa: "—Let's just say that we were both unlucky."

Before the bearded man could draw his dagger, his hand was pierced by a metal skewer. Pinning her opponent's arm to the wall, Elsa's long leg delivered a powerful kick to the bearded man's head.

His eyes rolling to the back of his head, the bearded man lost consciousness. Seeing their elder brother figure getting dealt with in an instant, the men were shaken in the same way they had been in the alleyway.

Elsa: "I really do feel bad about this."

Then, Elsa's display of violence plunged every last one of the men's consciousnesses into darkness.

6

Be they nobility, be they gentlemen, be they clergymen.

A talent for smiling was required in the social landscape, and it just so happened that Oliver had an innate gift for it.

Oliver: "Greetings, long time no see, eh? How's your leg been faring since then?"

???: "Work has been going swimmingly. Thanks to you, there's been no end to the incoming requests."

Oliver: "By all means, be sure to call on me whenever ye find the chance! Let's open up a bottle o'something special!"

It was natural to change the topic depending on who he was talking to, but in addition to that, Oliver even altered the nature of his smile.

Sometimes to reassure the other party, sometimes to imprudently outmaneuver the other party, sometimes to appear full of confidence; he would get deep into the hearts of each person he was speaking to.

A smile that fulfilled the desires of the other party, was the remarkable talent Oliver possessed as a slaver.

—Slave traders and flashy social gatherings, some people may get the exact opposite impressions from those terms, but like any other business, success would be determined based on how well connected one was.

Not to mention, Oliver's would only do business with people who were more wealthy than he was. Rather, it could only be called natural for him to proactively turn up at these kinds of places.

Nonetheless—

Oliver: "…I guess today's a bit of a failure."

Looking over the drinking party formally designated as a buffet, Oliver quietly whispered in his mouth.

Neither the social gathering nor stocking up had yielded any results. He had gone around talking to many of the traders he was familiar with trying to stock up on new slaves, but had been unable to find any quality candidates. Oliver's requirements were for them to shine once polished. So, stocking up for today was canceled.

On the other hand, it was difficult to say the people at the social gathering were promising business partners; at best, he was having conversations or making light small talk with familiar customers.

Gathered today were many people involved with the Gustekan Church. It was the Church of the Holy King that forbade slavery, so they were unable to openly discuss the business very much. After enjoying a moderate amount of conversation and booze, Oliver was planning to leave rather early.

Partly due to his professional sensibility as a slaver, but also because he was worried about the bomb he had left at home. He neither knew when that bomb would explode, nor what would get caught in the explosion.

Oliver: "I'm begging ye, please just behave for half a day—"

???: "—You over there."

His mind preoccupied with Elsa, Oliver's reaction to the sudden presence was delayed. Hurriedly looking back at the person who had called out to him, Oliver attempted to put on a smile—.

???: "…"

—Facing the empty eye sockets of the one standing there, Oliver caught his breath.

Oliver: "—. Ah, it's been a while. I see you haven't changed much since then."

However, that stagnation was but a moment. Oliver immediately came to his senses, and forged a smile. Then, he recalled everything he had in his mind regarding the man before his eyes. —The name of the man affiliated with the Gustekan Church.

Oliver: "Holosseo-sama, many thanks for your patronage the other day."

—Indeed, it was Holosseo. Holosseo Featherrun.

As someone involved with the Gustekan Church, he was a person who appeared to be of a befitting position. He was once a client of Oliver's, none other than the buyer of Elsa.

With Holosseo right before him, Oliver's heart permeated with confusion. Elsa had said so. That because her buyer had met his misfortune, she had returned to Oliver.

So then, why was Holosseo standing here alive and well right before Oliver?

Oliver: "May I ask how things are going? Is she serving you well?"

However, Oliver bottled up the doubts in his mind and spoke in a nonchalant manner. He was attempting to ascertain how the other party would react in response to that.

???: "…Hk."

A reaction there indeed was. However, it was not Holosseo that had displayed a strong reaction to that, but rather the young girl with blue hair and blue dress waiting beside him— he recognized this person too. This girl had also accompanied Holosseo when he had come to collect Elsa.

The young girl of lovely appearance was glaring at Oliver with a dreadfully heinous look in her eyes.

If hatred was a vehicle of heat, it would have been enough to set Oliver ablaze; that fury was violent enough to make one think so.

Holosseo: “—It is carrying out the duty of Featherrun.”

Ergo, as Holosseo continued so, his response was delayed for but a moment.

Deciphering those words as an indication of how Elsa was working, Oliver mended his emotions.

Oliver: “Well that is the most important thing. I am also relieved that it was a beneficial transaction. How about it? If you ever get another chance, please do consider using our services again…”

Holosseo: “I shall keep that in mind. —This time was a job well done.”

Leaving naught more than those words behind, Holosseo turned his back on Oliver in a curt manner.

If this was a business negotiation, then Oliver would have lamented his failure, but the interaction initiated by Holosseo just now was meant to be a leading question. By no means did he seek any further dealings with Oliver.

As proof of that, the girl accompanying him did not cease her hatred-filled gaze until the very end of the end.

Oliver: “I’d deceived ‘em right away, but…”

Just what sort of blunder had Elsa perpetrated at Holosseo’s abode? To begin with, Holosseo ought to have met his misfortune as per the story he had heard.

Even if it was with that unchanged impression of poor health and eerie, empty eye sockets, Holosseo was unmistakably alive. A clear contradiction to Elsa's testimony.

Oliver: "Ahh, and just when I thought it was already depressing enough."

If there were people hunting down Elsa's whereabouts, a necessity was borne for Oliver to also think about his future course.

This was the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko. —A land where people lived under the name of the Gustekan Church.

After all, sparks of conflict and whatnot against authorities in the Church of the Holy King were not included amidst Oliver's happy plans for the future.

7

Elsa: "Oh my, welcome home. You're back quicker than I'd thought."

Greeting Oliver as he hastily returned home after leaving the meeting early, Elsa spoke calmly.

Faced with an attitude that truly made it seem like nothing was wrong, Oliver hoped that what he had been witnessing for a moment now was just an optical illusion. However, that could have never been the case.

Merely, this young girl by the name of Elsa, was a girl capable of remaining calm amidst a wretched scene of blood.

Oliver: "Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha…"

The moment he had opened the door to his own home, his nostrils were assailed by the stench of blood, giving Oliver a premonition most unpleasant.

Though not very physically strong, Oliver did lead a life as a slaver. In this neighborhood, he could not remain completely detached from violence. The malodor of blood, though foul, was something he experienced everyday.

However, never in such copious amounts. The piled up corpses of several men too—

Elsa: “Ah, don’t get the wrong impression. I haven’t killed them. They’ve all just been knocked out.”

Oliver: “Phew, now there’s a real weight off me shoulders. I’ve got peace of mind since ye didn’t kill ‘em… is that what ye’d wanted me to say?! How’d it end up like this… in just half a day, how did it bloody end up like this?!”

The reason why Oliver had hurried back home was to question Elsa about the particulars regarding Holosseo. However, this mountain of unfamiliar men had robbed Oliver of any composure he might have had.

Anyway, he wanted problems to stop rolling into his way one after another. Oliver was but an ordinary man, and he had no choice but to deal with them one by one.

Oliver: “Elsa! Who the hell’re these blokes? Did ye pick ‘em up somewhere?”

Elsa: “Who knows? I don’t really have any clue. That’s why…”

Oliver: “That’s why?”

Elsa: “I think it would be better to ask the girl who seems like she would know.”

Saying that, Elsa gestured with her chin to a corner of the room—to the side directly opposite to where the men had been piled up. Following it, Oliver was taken aback as his eyes caught sight of what was there.

After all, sitting there whilst hugging her knees, was the figure of a white haired young girl. And, that girl bore the mark of recognition within Oliver’s memories. After all, this girl was formerly his merchandise.

Oliver: “Tatiana?! Why’re ye in a place like this…?”

Girl: “—Hk.”

Upon having her name called out, the white haired girl— Tatiana, looked up. Tears filled the young girl’s eyes, and she leapt into Oliver’s chest.

Promptly catching her light body, Oliver pat the girl on the back,

Oliver: “Ye were s’possed to’ve been taken in by House Lexant a month ago. So, what’re ye doing here…?”

Elsa: “It seems like that girl had escaped, and these people were chasing her, you know? She must have had nobody else to turn to, and so she fled to your place.”

Oliver: “These guys were after Tatiana…?”

Elsa: “As expected of the “receiver of returning stock”… I guess I’m not the only one who comes back.”

Oliver: “Ye’ve laced those words with far too much poison for it to be ironic…”

Tatiana held in his arms, Oliver turned his eyes towards the group of collapsed men. Having fainted, with eyes rolled to the backs of their heads, these men were people of whom Oliver had no recollection. Perceiving that, Elsa spoke “Hold on for a bit” to Oliver, and headed up to the second floor.

And after a little while—

Elsa: “What about this person, do you recognize him?”

And, dragged down by Elsa, was a man with a well groomed beard. As for what the man had gone through upstairs, there were bruises scattered around his visage, and through his hand was pierced a metal skewer from a food vendor.

However, even in such a battered state, Oliver could narrowly grasp the man’s characteristics.

Oliver: “Ye’re the bloke from Lexant-san’s place… so, the matter of Tatiana escaping is…”

Man: “I-It’s true… I’d been ordered to bring the girl back… but, this lassie over here done got in me way, as you can see.”

His breathing feeble, the bearded-man languidly fell to his knees. Oliver had not been very cognizant of it, but it seemed a certainty that it had been Elsa who had beaten up the bearded man and his men.

Since when did she get so strong? Meeting Oliver’s gaze, charged with such a question, Elsa merely inclined her head as if to say “?”.

Oliver: “Anyway, I’ve wrapped me head ‘round the situation. Let’s see, so Tatiana’s run away from Lexant-san, ‘n Elsa beat up the blokes who were sent to chase after her… that about right?”

Man: “…Yeah, that’s it.”

Elsa: “It would seem so.”

It was normal for Elsa to talk about matters she was directly involved in like she was a third party, but in this case there was a separate issue.

Oliver: “In that case, Tatiana… why’d ye decide to run away?”

Tatiana: “…”

Oliver: “Tatiana?”

Hearing Oliver’s question as she was held in his arms, Tatiana gave no response. —No, she could not respond.

Suspicious of this, Oliver kneeled down to align himself with the height of Tatiana’s gaze. Then, looking directly into her eyes,

Oliver: “Tatiana, take your clothes off and show me. Right this instant.”

Tatiana: “…”

Having been instructed so, Tatiana silently removed the mere white undershirt she had been wearing. In this frigid country, wearing but a single layer of clothes was already pitiful enough, but her skin exceeded that to a severe degree.

—Upon Tatiana's tan skin were carved countless wounds in places typically unseen.

Those had not been present a month ago, when she came into Oliver's stock. In other words, these wounds of hers had undoubtedly been given to her in this past month—

Oliver: "…I've been a terrible fool. A bloody failure of a slaver I am."

Thinking that the eye he'd had for these sorts of things had decayed, Oliver apologized to Tatiana, embracing her. Held in his chest, unable to bear it, sniveling tears began to stream down from Tatiana's eyes.

Oliver had tried his best to ensure the proper care so that such things would never occur. But, this was reality. His blunder had inflicted merciless wounds upon Tatiana's youthful body and mind.

The fact that she could no longer speak attested to the horrid things she had been through.

Oliver: "…I'll have this, settled."

Elsa: "—How? Oliver, just what can you do?"

Oliver: "If I bring it up, to the association…"

Lifting his head, Oliver answered the question. However, he cut his words off midway. A matter of course. Convincing others of words one did not believe in themselves was bound to prove a difficult feat.

Much less when it was this defective black-haired slave, who could keenly sniff out the lies of others.

Elsa: "I can silence all of the pursuers, but even so, you're quite cornered.”

Glancing towards the bearded man and his men, Elsa made a cynical remark about Oliver’s situation.

In reality, if Elsa had already set things up to this extent, it would not be difficult for her to silence the pursuers, that being the bearded man and his troupe. However, it was also true that it would then become a deadlock.

Tatiana’s buyer was Heiken Lexant— a descendant of a lineage that had served as leading figures in the Gustekan Church for generations; from the outset, he had never once considered engaging in equal negotiations with a slaver.

—But, it would have been impossible for Oliver to simply accept such a situation, and allow harm to befall slaves.

Oliver: “Me ways, would never forgive such a thing.”

Elsa: “—Fufu, so then what will you do?”

Taking a step forward, Elsa peered into Oliver’s face, as if testing him. In those absorbent black irises, was a certain hue of anticipation awaiting Oliver’s decision.

She was waiting for Oliver to tell her what to do. Whether that was out of goodwill, or out of obligation, or if it was on a plain whim, he knew not.

He did not know, but he certainly did not like how that prim face of hers left him completely defeated.

Oliver: “We’ve been talking all ‘bout me, but, Elsa, ye’ve got some pursuers on your tail as well.”

Elsa: “Oh my, we’re talking about me now? Moreover, pursuers…”

Oliver: “At t’night’s gathering, the man who’d purchased ye was present, accompanied by a girl. I’d considered that I might’ve mistook him, but that’d be unthinkable. Ain’t no way to forget a man who stands out like he does.”

As he said that, Oliver tapped his fingers upon his eyelids. That had likely gotten the idea about Holosseo’s lack of eyeballs across to Elsa.

Elsa: “…”

Upon hearing those words, Elsa, for the first time since returning here, expressed bafflement.

Oliver: “Elsa?”

Elsa: “…Nothing, I just thought it was a little strange, but I’ve resolved it. Also, just maybe, both of our problems could be dealt with at the same time.”

Oliver: “What’ye mean?”

Elsa’s unforseen words caused Oliver to raise his eyebrows in surprise. Before Oliver, Elsa smiled as she placed her hands together in front of her chest,

Elsa: “You want to settle things with someone who wounded their own slave. I want to have a peaceful chat with the people who are chasing me… I think we can advance those goals at the same time.”

Oliver: “…So, will ye let me hear the how?”

Gulping down his breath, Oliver would lend an ear to the proposal of Elsa, the girl in black. As she listened to Oliver’s snap judgment, Elsa’s smile grew deeper, and she nodded.

And then, while smiling, she spoke.

Elsa: “It’s simple, really. —Oliver, just sell me to that bad customer.”

8

From the very start, she had had no enthusiasm for the mission on this day.

—No, in the sense of having no enthusiasm, it was not a matter limited to just this day. Lately, Dorothea neither had enthusiasm for the missions, nor to even live her own life.

And yet, the reason why Dorothea continued to perform her duties as a Featherrun Sister, was because it was the sole means by which she could devote herself to Holosseo Featherrun, who had changed her life.

Murdered at the hands of Elsa, nevermore would she get to exchange words with Holosseo. As a benefactor to Dorothea, she was his irreplaceable foster father. —However, the Featherrun Sisters had covered up his death, and were continuing with their activities, feigning that Holosseo was still alive.

Dorothea did not think highly of this, but it was not as though she did not understand Sithonia's insistence, fearing the terminus of fate that awaited the Featherrun Sisters who had lost Holosseo's patronage. Of course, if their reputation were to be weighed against Holosseo's life, Dorothea would not even need to set them upon the plates of a scale.

However, if it was an act that came at the cost of Holosseo's prestige, she would hesitate to do anything rash or blind.

—Holosseo had been killed by Elsa, a Curse Doll whose strings were pulled by him.

Whatever reality may have been, if it became known that he was murdered by his own tool, Holosseo's prestige would plummet. Everybody would berate him with scornful laughter, forgetting his meritorious deeds, and cast his memory to the wayside.

For Dorothea, with all the love and respect for Holosseo she had, could not endure such humiliation.

Henceforth, Dorothea's life lost its color, and days passed by without meaning.

The coverup of Holosseo's death was being successfully spearheaded by Sithonia. Thanks to her efforts, the activities of the Featherrun Sisters continued unchanged.

The frequency of Dorothea being called on missions increased, as she was found useful thanks to her ephemeral appearance. Compared to before, it was ironic that the secret to success was actually refraining from running in circles trying to produce results.

Dorothea: “…”

In any case, contrary to those sentiments of Dorothea, the mission on this day came around.

The world in Dorothea’s eyes had lost all ardor and hue. —She understood that Sithonia and the other sisters did not wish to get revenge for Holosseo as desperately as she did.

To substantiate that, instead of focusing on the hunt for Elsa, Holosseo’s killer, they were allocating strength to the preservation of the Featherrun Sisters. To begin with, Dorothea’s affection towards her adoptive father was greater than anybody else’s.

None of them truly loved Holosseo. She, and she alone, was Holosseo’s daughter.

And thus, having lost both the path forward and the path back, Dorothea was transformed into naught more than a living corpse submerged in her reminiscences. A corpse who, replaying the few memories she shared with Holosseo ad nauseam, warmed her icy heart.

That was why—

???: “—It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Dorothea? Have you been well?”

Welcomed in such a manner as she arrived at the premises of her mission, vibrant color permeated her vision for the first time in a long while.

9

Heiken Lexant had actually been quite the easy man to make use of.

As a token of apology, the slaver who had sold him a slave that had run away now presented him with a beautiful black-haired slave.

Now accommodated with a slave of far higher quality than the previous one had been, the man had put too much faith in his fortune.

Coming into the possession of a beautiful and obedient slave, Heiken lost all restraint, as if to proclaim that he existed at the pinnacle of splendor in this world. On a legendary splurging spree, nearly half of the assets of House Lexant, which he had inherited, had been squandered in just a trivial amount of time.

House Lexant was a prestigious clan that held an important post in the Church of the Holy King for generations, and it had been decided that in the near future, Heiken would take up a role in the Gustekan Church. However, though the destiny of a debaucherous noble, a person who was promised such a future was bound to have many enemies.

And through this short term spending spree, they had been made to overflow.

Engrossed in shortsighted pleasure, Heiken heeded none of the warnings from those around him as he spent his days in idle amusement— ultimately, he ended up being forsaken by the Church of the Holy King.

He was regarded as a potential poison to the Gustekan Church were he to be kept alive. Those who had been deemed as such, could no longer live in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko.

Ergo, to spell the end of Heiken Lexant's days of debaucherous indulgence—

???: "You ended up being sent here to this mansion, right?"

Gazing at Dorothea, frozen in shock right before her, Elsa smiled sweetly.

The stage was set upon the private residence of Heiken Lexant. The surroundings, a row of shelves storing many books that the manor's lord did not even feign to show interest in. Originally, House Lexant was responsible for keeping records on the sacraments of the

Church of the Holy King, but in the current day, that duty had been reduced to a mere formality.

The collective work of his clan over all these years was something Heiken took no consideration of whatsoever. Hence, in selecting this place as the stage for her reunion with her sisters, Elsa begot not even the slightest hesitation.

—Indeed, the long awaited reunion, with her sisters.

Regarding the missions of the Featherrun Sisters, Elsa knew the whole picture. She understood that if she could create an existence that the Gustekan Church found troublesome, they would be deployed to the scene.

For this reason, she had leveraged the debaucherous ways of Heiken Lexant.

Dorothea: "…Wh… y?"

With a gaze honed true upon Elsa's visage, from Dorothea's throat escaped a husky voice, a nostalgic timbre upon her ears.

Preceded by her capricious turmoil, rang a voice her other emotions failed to catch up to. Listening, Elsa slowly tilted her head by a margin.

Why, it was a rather vague query. Why had she done something like this? Why had she waited for her, why, why, why—?

Elsa: "I suppose, because this was the quickest way that I'd have been able to chat with you guys."

Dorothea: "…"

Elsa: "I was desperate when I was fleeing, so I didn't know where the mansion was. That's why I haven't turned up there ever since then, right? Without any way to get in contact, I ended up selecting this sort of roundabout method. Are you surprised?"

The existence of the Featherrun Sisters was treasured, the very darkness harbored by the Church of the Holy King. Consequently, the whereabouts of the Hallowed Land in which they lived were known to none.

It was such a secret that it could not even be discovered through the use of Oliver’s personal connections. Thus, Elsa immediately gave up on searching for the Hallowed Land. After all, her objective lay not within the Hallowed Land itself, but with the sisters who lived there.

Dorothea: “…”

Still staring at Elsa, Dorothea maintained her silence. Only, from what Elsa could see of the fury stirring in her eyes, the fact that it was not hesitation towards the question was evident.

The fury stirring within Dorothea, its identity was that of clear loathing—

Dorothea: “ELSAAAAAAAA…!”

Elsa: “…Did you miss me?”

Dorothea: “—Hk!”

As soon as she inclined her head at the hostility, and uttered a statement bereft of provocatory intention, Dorothea vanished. —Nay, she had taken a low stance, aiming for Elsa as she charged her down.

From behind her azure dress, swiftly unsheathed were two long glaives. Putting them together as she charged forth, Dorothea transformed them into enormous great shears.

Having severed vast amounts of flesh and blood, these great shears possessed a cutting edge that even Elsa had once gotten a taste of. Brandishing that, Dorothea charged forth with eyes sodden by murderous intent. As Elsa basked in that malevolent hatred of the fifth daughter of the Featherrun Sisters, she leaned down and hopped off the desk.

Then, once she lightly landed on the floor with the tips of her toes —

Elsa: “I missed you too.”

Immediately after, the fissures that had already been present in the floor expanded, and the library suddenly caved in.

Dorothea: “Wha…?!!”

Elsa: “That’s why, I was thorough in my preparations for it.”

Dorothea’s voice, coated with astonishment, overlapped with the cognizant voice of Elsa.

Having lost her footing out of nowhere, Dorothea was powerless to do anything as she was enveloped by the sensation of being suspended in the air. If this had been Ornea, she would likely have been able to break through the deadlock by using her kusari-fundo somehow.

However, such a thing would be difficult with Dorothea’s great shears. —In all honesty, even though it was possible to have the Featherrun Sisters summoned, Elsa had no way of predicting who would undertake the mission.

That was why, it being Dorothea, who was unable to deal with this situation, was the result of Elsa’s luck having won out.

And thus, it being Dorothea, the least capable of talking things out, was the result of Elsa’s luck having been rotten.

Elsa: “…”

In the midst of falling to a lower floor, Elsa used one of the falling bookcases as a foothold to close in on Dorothea. She had been immobilized by the shock for but a moment, so Dorothea attempted to maneuver her body to deal with the situation, but she was too late.

Right into the center of Dorothea’s torso, came a hammering blow from the tip of Elsa’s toes. As her dainty body was blown away with a cry of pain, Dorothea was swallowed up by a waterfall of plummeting tomes.

But, her fate remained uncertain for merely an instant. With her great shears, the bookshelf lying on top of her was cleaved up and blown away as Dorothea stood up.

Dorothea: "…Come on out, Elsa! You're planning to kill me like you killed Father, isn't that right?!"

Elsa: "Though, I think you have a bit of a misunderstanding there."

Amidst the fluttering descent of shredded books, Elsa responded to the bellowing Dorothea. Slowly walking out from behind a pile of bookshelves, Elsa peered at Dorothea with her black eyes.

Within those black eyes of hers, Dorothea's body appeared as if being distorted by the heat of detestation.

Elsa: "Dorothea, I think it would be best if we both desist. I merely wanted to talk about that today, so I summoned you here. Though, to be precise, it wasn't you specifically."

Dorothea: "Both, desist…? After making full preparations to ambush me, you're saying that now?"

Elsa: "I think it also would have been rude to await you without sufficient preparations. Besides, in the case that it was you who came, it was clear that it would have ended up turning into a deadly battle of this sort."

Waving her hand, Elsa insisted that she had no intention of fighting. But, unable to secure Dorothea's reassurance with that, a corollary of her doubts only growing deeper was begotten.

Still emanating a volatile impression, Dorothea glared at Elsa,

Dorothea: "…Fine, I'll listen to whatever impertinent things you have to say. What's your intent here?"

Elsa: "I told you, didn't I? For both of us to desist, that's what I desire. I would have been fine leaving things like that, with how we parted at the mansion, but… it would seem that you are searching for me."

Pausing her words there, Elsa returned Dorothea’s gaze head on.

Elsa: “Once you found me, it’s quite difficult to imagine that things would blow over amicably.”

Dorothea: “Isn’t that only natural…?!! You, you killed Father! The sole person in this world… the person who found me, that Father! You, YOUUUUUUU…!”

After displaying an attitude of being willing to listen, once more was Dorothea engulfed by fury, losing herself to indignation.

Lamenting that, Elsa shrugged her shoulders with a “Look at that”,

Elsa: “As I thought, I won’t be able to talk to you. This is what I’d been afraid of.”

Dorothea: “Enough. I no longer consider you my younger sister… I’m gonna murder you, Elsa!”

With a brandish of her great shears, Dorothea surmounted the books amidst the rubble, and thrust towards Elsa.

The haphazard speed of the girl, her blue dress fluttering, was a sign of a willingness to have one’s own body destroyed, characteristic of those who had awakened as Curse Dolls. For Dorothea, that was particularly striking, as she showed no hesitation whatsoever to have her body crushed and pulverized.

That attested to just how much of her self-worth she placed in Holosseo’s approval.

It was testament to her attitude that, if she could be useful to Holosseo, then she cared not for whatever happened to her.

Ergo—

Dorothea: “—Ah?”

Elsa: “You can’t become Ornea, or any of the other sisters.”

Compared to her angered bellow from a moment prior, that voice had been far too faint.

Before Elsa's eyes, Dorothea's charge was thrown into disorder. Her body had lost its balance. However, that was only natural. After all, her body had been split in half at the center of her torso.

Dorothea: "…"

Unaware as to what had occurred, Dorothea's upper body was sent flying. It was around the same time that her upper and lower bodies struck the floor.

Copious amounts of blood spilling from her bisected torso, and the belated arrival of pain caused her to shriek. It was just as if the rasping voice of an old crone wrung by the neck resounded through the manor.

Elsa: "You got way too emotional."

Amidst her cries, Elsa passed in between the two halves of Dorothea, and traced the air with her finger. —Nay, it was not the air she was tracing, but a steel wire that had been strung up in the air.

The steel wire, now with a few drops of blood hanging about it, had been strung up firmly at the height of Dorothea's torso. She had charged into the steel wire all by herself, causing her body to be split in twain.

Elsa: "Ornea would have noticed. Sithonia would have withdrawn once the unexpected began to occur. I don't know what Saria and Hildea would have done, but… you completely fell for it."

Dorothea: "Ah, aahgaAHHHHHHAHHHHH…!"

Elsa: "If it was only an arm or some fingers, you would have been fine, but you can't regenerate if your torso is cut in half. Your regeneration is weak compared to mine or Ornea's, so I suppose this is the end?"

Internal organs spilling out from the cross section, Dorothea writhed on the brink of death. However, writhing only led to the loss of more blood, so she was unable to do anything.

By the time the sisters were called to this manor, Elsa had already completed the appropriate preparations to receive them. Dorothea had been completely caught in the trap that Elsa had set.

Elsa: “Didn’t I tell you? A reception bereft of sufficient preparations would have been far more disrespectful to you all.”

Dorothea: “—Ah, kuh…”

As Elsa walked towards her, Dorothea immediately attempted to swing her shears at her. But, her arm was stomped down from above, and without any lower body to brace herself with, her assault was thwarted.

Elsa then crouched down, and peered at Dorothea, who wore an expression of pure unadulterated rage, from a close proximity.

Elsa: “Though, I just hope you don’t get the wrong idea.”

Dorothea: “…Wrong idea, as in?”

Elsa: “I’m not doing any of this because I hate you guys. In fact, I quite liked you. When you received that job, I was delighted as if it pertained to me.”

With those words, Elsa continued with “That’s why”,

Elsa: “—From the bottom of my heart, I’m regretful that things turned out this way.”

Dorothea: “…”

As Elsa bid her condolences, Dorothea’s expression froze over.

Then, Dorothea bashed her forehead into the floor, a sobbing noise emerging from her throat. Averting her gaze from the pitiful weeping, Elsa suddenly came to a realization.

Having fallen over slightly further away, it was Dorothea’s lower body. Disunited from the upper body that was communicating her will, that which had been limited to mere convulsions, the nature of its quiver, shifted.

—From something bereft of meaning, bereft of intent, into a movement of something in which purpose verily dwelled.

Elsa: “This is…”

Receiving a dire sensation from that alteration, Elsa’s body grew stiff.

In an instant, the bleeding that had abated in vigor forcefully resumed, the dusky fresh blood steeping into the floor like a malediction. Elsa widened her eyes upon witnessing that sight, and the situation shifted further.

Dorothea’s overflowing blood morphed into sharp blades, launching an attack on Elsa.

Elsa: “Kuh!”

Promptly jumping out of the way, Elsa evaded the sanguine blades flying about. But, the speed and force of the blood could not be simply discerned by sight, and so chasing after the jumping Elsa, they made contact with her white skin— causing it to burst asunder.

Elsa: “Zh…!! Aghh!”

The locations where the drops of blood touched upon burst open, a high pitch scream resounding out from Elsa’s throat.

Dorothea’s blood soaked into her white skin, causing it to burst open from within. Her right arm, right leg, around half her body ripped open to shreds, Elsa collapsed following the impact.

Pain, pain, a stabbing pain ensued. Agonized by that pain, Elsa’s face was,

Dorothea: “ELSAAA!!”

And, alongside a screeching voice, the firm sensation of a heel stomped down upon her face.

Dorothea had trampled Elsa’s face down to the ground with her heel. Dorothea, who was supposed to have been split in two at her torso, bared her teeth as she looked down at Elsa with an expression of pure hatred.

Her body, which ought to have been ripped asunder, was now firmly reconnected.

As Elsa looked up at that as her face was being stepped on,

Elsa: “…Even though I split you in two, how did you stand back up?”

Dorothea: “Blood, connected with blood… I’m surprised too. By the possibilities of Curse Dolls.”

Hearing the low voice of a crone, spoken as if casting a curse, Elsa thought back to Dorothea’s sobbing from a moment prior. That had not been sobbing, but the sound of laughter.

The fury had caused Dorothea to laugh, the fury had bestowed Dorothea with new power.

That was—

Elsa: “By controlling blood, you’ve tied your torso back together… How wonderful.”

Dorothea: “You’ve got leeway… You should be able to do this sorta thing as well.”

Saying that, Dorothea slashed her own arm with her shears. From her wrist poured out a vast amount of blood, soaking into Elsa’s abdomen. Considering what had happened before, it would not be strange for this amount of blood to explode from within Elsa’s torso. However, that was not Dorothea’s objective.

Immediately after, centered around Elsa’s abdomen, Dorothea’s blood began to stir within her body.

Elsa: “Ku, ug! Ah, uuh, AHH! AHHHahhhhhh—!!”

It was visually apparent that Elsa’s body was being destroyed by blood from within. Underneath her black dress, the affront was visualized through the form of dusky blood crawling in her white skin.

It was a sensation akin to small insects swarming around within her body. In addition, the insects harbored a clear intent for torture as they contributed to Elsa’s agony, clad in sharp blades as they bustled about within her.

Assailed by the hellish anguish of myriad insects hollowing her out from within, Elsa screamed.

Elsa: “Ug, gyhgh, AHHAHhahhhhhhhhhh—!!!”

Dorothea: “How’d you like that? How’s that? How’s that, how’s that, how’s that how’s that how’s that HOW’S THAT HOW’S THAT?!”

Her vision stained bright red, her brain was unable to process even her own scream. Noises disappearing into the cacophony, everything of this world grew distant from the realm of her comprehension.

Even now, Dorothea’s heel was still firmly stepping on Elsa’s face, but both that pain and humiliation were trifling in face of the violation of the blood crawling through her body.

The situation had been flipped on its head. Looking down upon Elsa, Dorothea roared with laughter.

Even when her body had been bisected, Dorothea had not cast away her will to fight. That doggedness is what had allowed a new possibility to bud for Dorothea’s body.

Dorothea: “HOW’S THAT, ELSA?! SUFFER! SCREAM! FOR FATHER! YOU SHALL—Hk!”

Elsa: “—Hk.”

Under the foot of Dorothea, who was yet commanding the blood, Elsa swung her legs a great deal upwards. Her flexible, long legs zeroed in on Dorothea's cranium. But, by tilting her head, Dorothea managed to evade.

However, slipping through the momentary slack, Elsa broke away from underneath Dorothea's foot. She tenaciously jumped to the floor on all fours, deserting the room packed with the ruins of the library.

Dorothea: "Know when to give up…! You think I'd let you get away?!"

In pursuit of the fleeing Elsa, Dorothea cleared over the wreckage. Then, as she rushed forth, her cheek was ripped open by a sharp edge.

At a glance, it was a similar steel wire to the one that had cleaved her in half. One of the many steel wires that had been strung up around the room, had torn into Dorothea's cheek without any repent.

Dorothea: "…Hk! How so very annoying you are!"

Alongside a roar of anger, Dorothea released more sanguine blades through the wound on her wrist, and hacked into the steel wire. Dorothea's ire was not constrained to merely that act, and neither did the destruction wreaked by her sanguine blades come to an end.

In order to lay waste to the shoddy traps Elsa had set, the sanguine blades razed the room to the ground, berserking as they pleased, thwarting every last one of the steel wires by force.

With that done, she would attempt to pursue Elsa—

Dorothea: "Ghgobu…!"

An iron stake fired from the fore perforated her body, causing Dorothea to cough up blood as her viscera spilled out.

Widening her eyes wondering what had happened, it had been nothing of importance. Just another trap set out in the same manner as the steel wires, an iron stake arranged to be shot out were a steel wire to be cut.

Elsa had meticulously, yet indifferently, made preparations in order to kill the Featherrun Sisters.

Dorothea: “…Hk!”

Pulling out the iron stake, she cut it in half with her blood. Using blood to close up the fresh wound on her torso, Dorothea dragged her great shears along with her as she left the room.

Dorothea: “…”

Elsa was not present in the corridor, but the trail of blood droplets informed Dorothea of where she had gone. Regardless, even at a distance, she could clearly tell that her own blood was driving Elsa into a corner.

Following the bloodstains and the throbbing of her own blood, Dorothea pursued Elsa. En route, there were many traps including the likes of steel wires and iron stakes, but she crushed those head on, and persisted in her advance.

Then, upon the room to which Elsa had fled, she tore down the door, and stepped in.

Dorothea: “The dining hall…”

Looking over the space furnished with a long table, lined with chairs that likely did not see much use, Dorothea felt a strong, out-of-place impression that perhaps the dining halls of grand estates were all modeled the same way no matter the location.

Elsa: “I wonder, why do the dining halls of mansions always end up looking so similar? “

An audible voice correctly guessed what she had been thinking, and Dorothea turned around.

Deep within the dining hall, Elsa stood before a door that continued into the next room. Dorothea had certainly expected for her to flee yet again out of that door, but she closed it with a hand behind her back, blocking off her own means of escape.

Dorothea: "…Have you given up on running away?"

Elsa: "Gradually, I've gotten used to the pain. You see, even if I continue to flee, I can't see any prospects of being able to get away from you."

Dorothea: "I see. In that case, accept your defeat and die here. For Father…!"

Standing on opposite ends of the long table, Dorothea readied her great shears while training a vigilant gaze upon Elsa. If she were to spring at her in a hotheaded manner here, she would just end up with a bisected torso all over again.

Given that she had taken the trouble to flee here, there was no doubt about this room also being laid with sufficient preparations. Of those, Dorothea would maintain utmost caution, while simultaneously applying vigorous motion to the blood within Elsa's body.

And all the while, she commenced an all out sanguinary offensive.

Dorothea: "No matter what sorts of traps you've set, I'll crush them all!"

The frenzy of a sanguine blade cleaved right through the table, honing in on Elsa, who stood bolt-upright. Bearing the anguish within her body, Elsa flew to the side to evade, yet the blade of blood was relentless in its pursuit.

In such a manner, the blade sunk its teeth into Elsa's leg, and with her movement thwarted, the legacy of that pursuit was carried forth by the great shears. Formulating the chain of attack in her head, she would put it into practice— it happened the very next moment.

An uproarious inferno engulfed the entirety of Dorothea's vision in bright red.

Dorothea: "…"

Overwhelmed by the intense heat of the flames, Dorothea froze up.

In an instant, thrown from the other side of the curtain of flame was a table knife with aim centered on Dorothea's face. Narrowly avoiding it, Dorothea attempted to shake free from the flames, as empty of a threat as they were.

However, as soon as she shook away from the flames, a silhouette came piercing through the blazing curtain once more.

That was—

Elsa: "With this, I can finally get back at you."

Dorothea: "…Hk! ELSAAA!"

Unconcerned about getting burned, Elsa had leapt through the flames grasping onto Dorothea. She immediately commanded the blood to burst her arm apart, but Elsa's expression remained unchanged. Eyes sparkling with belligerence, she grabbed Dorothea's head and slammed it to the ground.

And out from Dorothea's hand, pinned to the floor as she was, Elsa kicked the great shears flying, stripping her of her weapon. But, that did not mark the end.

Dorothea: "Any, weapon…!"

Even without her great shears, her flowing blood would become a weapon by which to kill Elsa.

With a wrathful gaze upon Elsa, Dorothea commanded the blood of her own circulating in her opponent's body. After all, she understood the restorative capabilities of a Curse Doll's resuscitating qualities. In that case, she ought to lavishly mince up her entrails with such force that she would not be able to reminisce on her life, inflicting upon her the utmost agony.

Dorothea's blood made an attempt to bring that to fruition, and overrun the insides of Elsa's body—

Elsa: "Unfortunately, I won't let you do that."

Right after those words, a vast amount of something was poured onto Dorothea's body. And that was not just on Dorothea, it was some liquid that Elsa had covered both of them in from the head down.

A malodor assailed her nostrils, and a moment later, Dorothea's frozen thoughts became cognizant as to its identity.

It was an alcohol strong enough to emit an intense smell. And, there was only one reason why Elsa would have doused them in alcohol in this situation.

Elsa: "Well then, shall we test our endurance?"

Dorothea: "WAI—!"

Wait, Dorothea exclaimed, but it was too late.

Weighing down on Dorothea, Elsa reached out behind her and grabbed the burning cloth from off the long table, dragging it towards the two of them. The subsequent instant, the liquor alighteth.

Elsa: "…"

The liquor burst into a thunderous eruption of terrific flame, burning the bodies of Dorothea and Elsa.

The scintillating flames charred the skin of the two maidens, scorched their clothes, singed their hair, destroying their beautiful forms. In an attempt to escape the intense agony, Dorothea writhed, and sought salvation through blood.

However, engulfed by the scorching flames, her blood had lost every last bit of its strength, and disappeared. No matter how aberrant a power was granted to it, blood was still blood. It could not win against flame—

Dorothea: "Gy, aaaAAHHAHHHHH—!!"

Those thoughts of hers were quite literally scorched to naught by the flames, bringing them to oblivion.

Scorched was the throat releasing a scream, causing the embodiment of her inferiority complex, her voice, to disappear. As she had let out a voice, her lungs swelled in hopes of oxygen, but the incoming heat only served to incinerate her internal organs.

Due to the incinerating heat, her eyeballs burst asunder, and her tongue and mucous membranes frothed. It took no time for her white skin to be scorched black, for her long blue hair, and dress of the same hue, and absolutely everything else to become engulfed in the flames.

And yet, despite all of that, even though there could have been no possible way to endure such agony.

Elsa: “Fufu, aha, AHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

While being burned in the same manner, she could hear the loud laughter of Elsa from right above her.

How could she be laughing amidst such heights of intense pain? Why was she laughing? —No, this was something she understood. This youngest sister, Elsa, was out of her mind. This was something she understood.

Even the Featherrun Sisters, by no means capable of living in a proper manner, could not comprehend the thoughts of the girl by the name of Elsa. They could not accept them. They could not acknowledge them.

Dorothea: “You, are no, Featherrun…!”

Being burnt to a crisp. Dorothea, inferior in her regeneration, could not recover from the same damage as Elsa.

If these flames came to an end, and the situation quieted down, there would be nothing she could do. Therefore, if she was going to attempt a counterattack, it had to be this moment. While her thoughts were dominated by pain, vengeful desires flared up within her.

With doggedness that could overcome even this scorching heat, she would take revenge for the murdered Holosseo.

Dorothea: “Drop, dead…!”

Mustering all of her remaining strength, Dorothea fastened her palm to Elsa’s abdomen. All the blood that she had ejected outwards had been burned by the flames. In that case, then she would commence an onslaught of blood directly from her hand, into Elsa’s body.

If she could then crush her heart, it would still be possible to turn this around.

Aiming for that, she fired a bullet of blood towards Elsa’s heart. Circulating the blood through her body, before it could be burned by the heat of the flames, to the heart—

Elsa: “—Too bad.”

Her voice, was lost.

Elsa’s face, melted away from its original form, laid most of her skull bare, however, Dorothea could tell that her usual smile was strewn upon her face.

As always, it was that malevolent smile, looking down on everything within this world.

Dorothea: “…”

Before the speechless Dorothea, Elsa had escaped disaster though means most astonishing. To prevent the sanguine bullet from reaching her heart, she had slit open her own torso.

Dorothea: “AH, AHH, AHHHHHHHHHH—!!!”

Elsa: “How sorrowful, Dorothea… With this, our sisterly quarrel has come to an end.”

Having sliced open her body with her hand, while reveling in the pain of her entrails being scorched, the blood bullet that was supposed to have proved fatal was seized by the flames. And then, as Elsa smiled amidst the anguish, Elsa: “Ahh, what a thrill.”

With that, as her flesh and bones were being burned by the scorching heat, it caused her body to tremble.

10

The Lexant Manor was engulfed in flame, caving in without leaving a trace.

Amidst a blanket of light snow, the sight of the mansion constructed upon Hallowed Land burning down was something out of a reverie. In a dark world of white, where light was scarce, the fluttering descent of snowflakes was illuminated a vivid red.

With the disaster befalling the mansion of a personage quite well known throughout the town, people could not hide their shock, unable to do anything but watch from afar, dumbfounded.

???: “…”

Outside the cognizance of those curious onlookers, was a silhouette walking through the alley beside the burning mansion on bare feet. That was a maiden with skin laid bare, her body soiled all over with black soot.

She was avoiding the eyes of onlookers, but that was not out of embarrassment regarding her naked body being exposed, but something more pragmatic aiming to not be called out and halted.

As proof of that, after finding the man who had been waiting for her as she slipped out of the alleyway, she did nothing to conceal her body as she smiled and waved.

Elsa: “Oliver, you really did wait for me.”

Oliver: “…This lass, why’d ye come back with no clothes on? At least do a little to cover yourself.”

Elsa: “That would’ve been impossible. Everything in the mansion had caught fire, and I didn’t have that sort of time.”

As the girl answered in a nonchalant manner, Oliver placed his hand on his forehead hearing Elsa’s words, having been the one to wait for her here. But, it seemed he had given up on getting a normal response, so he immediately took off his coat, and handed it over to the nude Elsa. Receiving it, Elsa gratefully put it on.

Elsa: “A man’s coat over my bare skin… I get a feeling that this might actually end up attracting more perverted men.”

Oliver: “Even though ye don’t use it, ye’ve gone ‘n accumulated nought but useless knowledge… nonetheless, ye’ve really made a show of things, haven’t ye?”

Elsa: “I hadn’t intended on setting fire to it, but it was a last resort given how things were going. Will it be tough to deceive House Lexant, I wonder?”

Oliver: “No need for ye to worry ‘bout that. After all, it was none other than the head of House Lexant… Heiken’s father, who made the request for his profligate son to be dealt with.”

Revealing the shady circumstances enshrouding Heinken, Oliver made a bitter face.

Given that he had made use of a patron, Oliver could not honestly be glad regarding the success of the plan. Only, he harbored no sympathy towards those who treated their slaves roughly. That had been the compromise agreed upon by this clumsy man.

Oliver: “So then, did’ye accomplish your objective a’ight?”

Elsa: “Yes… It’s just, any prospect of having a discussion broke down. I ended up losing my bet.”

Looking towards the mansion burning down in the distance, Elsa sighed at how poor her luck had been.

The major bets Elsa had gambled on today numbered two. The first, was whether the Featherrun Sisters would appear at the Lexant Manor or not.

And the other, had been regarding which of the sisters would be assigned the mission of Heiken's murder.

She had emerged victorious in the former bet, of the Featherrun Sister's arrival. However, the other bet had been a total bust. If it had been Sithonia or Ornea sent here, talking things out ought to have been possible.

Elsa: "Among the sisters, I had thought Dorothea as being the least open to conversation, but… as expected, things turned out exactly as I'd thought."

Oliver: "Well then for the both of ye… no, the other side may've actually found it to be a bit more of a one-sided misfortune."

Elsa: "I also got terribly hurt, you know?"

Oliver: "Compared to having your life taken, the opponent's oughta be the far more pitiful one."

As Oliver shrugged his shoulders and spoke, Elsa could understand that such was also true.

In the end, Elsa did find it regrettable that things could have only ever ended up as a fight to the death. In preparation for that, she had set many traps throughout the mansion, but that was that, and this was this.

Elsa: "Even so, that was a close one…"

Come the final stage, Dorothea, having attained the ability to control blood, had been a formidable foe. If it had not been the eleventh hour in which she obtained that power, and had she not over relied on it, Elsa likely would have been defeated.

Had she mastered the technique of controlling blood, the situation would have been painted a more advantageous hue in Dorothea's favor. Moreover, the degradation of her decision making ability from the large loss of blood had likely gotten in the way of that.

In any case—

Elsa: "What's done is done… shall we get out of here? If Dorothea, who was eager to kill me, has died, then the remaining sisters will likely back off."

Oliver: "I'd like to hope so. I've already had me fill of this bloody affair."

Gathered on the main street were not just curious onlookers, but personnel who had come to put out the fire at the mansion. If the Temple Knights, affiliated with the Church of the Holy King, were to find fault with her, trouble would be unavoidable.

Using the escape route that they had decided on beforehand, Elsa and Oliver distanced themselves from the mansion. Along the way, Elsa looked back just once, thinking about Dorothea, who had been left in the burning mansion.

Self conscious about her husky voice, she was a girl who hated opening her mouth. Putting utmost effort into the work bestowed upon her, the flower garden in the front yard had beautifully bloomed as the fruits of her labor.

Since she knew just how hard of a worker Dorothea was, Elsa found it regrettable from the bottom of her heart.

Elsa: "If only you could have let bygones be bygones, that would've been best."

Thinking that it was inevitable for her to say such a thing, Elsa shook her head after whispering.

Oliver: "Elsa! Don't ye fall behind now, we're on the run! Come on, over here, here!"

Elsa: "Yes, I know."

Not granted any time to immerse in sentimentality, Elsa responded to Oliver's call, and began to walk again.

Bearing in her heart the reality of having slain one of her sisters by her own hand, Elsa walked through the town of snow.

Without heeding those sentiments of hers, her black eyes moistened by dim emotions, she passed through the town.

—Through a town of white, did Elsa drift.

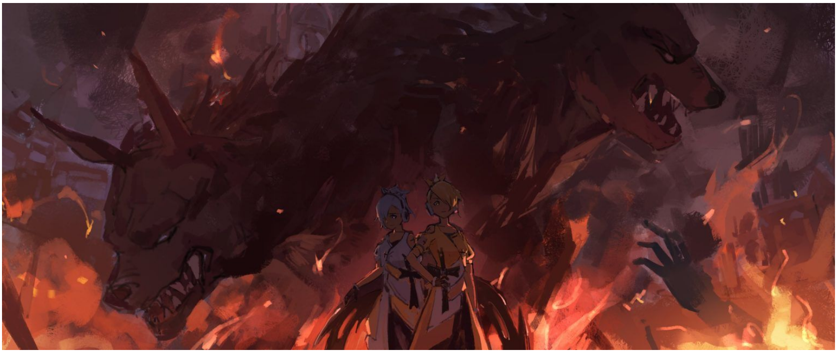

Chapter 4:
Saria Featherrun & Hildea Featherrun

1

Sithonia: “…Only a minimal amount of remains could be found in the ruins of the fire.”

Spoken in a somber tone, Sithonia laid it out over the dining room table.

Wrapped in a white bundle, was a peculiar object scorched black. At just a glance, it was difficult to tell just what it was, but while taking in the burnt aroma and visible shape, comprehension gradually followed.

It was a human bone fragment, of someone who had been a sister among them.

—The utterly altered form to which Dorothea Featherrun had been reduced.

Ornea: “This is, Dorothea, you say…?”

Aghast, grasping the bone fragment atop the bundle, Ornea muttered as her cheeks grew stiff. Presented with words that attempted to suppress all emotion, Sithonia spoke not a word.

However, that silence in itself was an affirmation of no falsehood. A corroboration of the fact that their timid, blue-haired little sister, had been discovered as a mercilessly burnt corpse.

Saria: "…What might have happened to Dorothea? Hildea is worrying over it."

Hildea: "Saria also seems mournful. How did this happen to Dorothea?"

Even Saria and Hildea, who would usually be immersed in their own little world, naturally turned pale upon witnessing these circumstances.

The tragedy that had befallen the Featherrun Sisters, so impactful had the truth of it been. The sisters were beings who had acquired quasi-immortality. To think one of them had been killed in such a manner.

Ornea: "Even if she went head to head with a high ranking Temple Knight, she shouldn't've been killed so easily. So just how, did things end up like this…?"

Sithonia: "There is one possibility conceivable. If the opponent was aware of how to kill a Curse Doll."

Ornea: "—Hk! Don't tell me, the opponent was…"

The expression on her face changing, Ornea lifted her head. Meeting the gaze of her younger sister head on, Sithonia nodded in a solemn gesture. Regarding the identity of Dorothea's murderer, there was only one person that came to mind.

Saria & Hildea: "—Elsa."

With that, the voices of Saria and Hildea overlapped, weaving together a lone person's name.

A member of the Featherrun Sisters— nay, occupying a position that ought to be regarded as former sister, Elsa. Having killed Holosseo, she who had managed to escape from the Featherrun Estate, had now slain Dorothea.

For what reason could she have possibly felt the need to commit such atrocities?

Saria: “Kuku… that girl, I suppose she’s planning on slaughtering everyone, even Hildea and I.”

Hildea: “What an outrageous girl. To think she feels like eradicating even Saria and I.”

Ornea: “Wait just a sec! Say what you like, but that’s way too hasty a conclusion! For me as well, she’s the only one who comes to mind regarding who might’ve killed Dorothea, but… “

Trying to reign the twins back in as they made up their mind on what the opponent’s aim was, Ornea hounded them so. However, the chilly gaze of the twins, and an utterance of “No” from Sithonia, stopped her.

As Sithonia looked down at the bones, at the horrid remains of Dorothea’s body atop the table,

Sithonia: “Following Father, Dorothea has also been killed. It is only natural that Elsa would be aiming to kill the rest of us.”

Ornea: “You really think she’s capable of such advanced thinking?!”

Sithonia: “Everything, including that, may have been an act. How much can you say that we really know about Elsa? To begin with, if she’s aiming for our lives…”

Saria: “She may have been a spy sent by someone.”

Hildea: “There are many people who are not fond of the duties of the Featherrun Sisters.”

Hand in hand, Saria and Hildea supplemented Sithonia’s views. Closing a single eye at those appropriate comments, Sithonia nodded to Ornea.

Even so, when Ornea was about to make some sort of refutation,

Sithonia: “Ornea, I know you had placed expectations in Elsa. But, you must stop averting your eyes from the things that have happened. —Dorothea, was murdered by Elsa.”

Ornea: “Gh, gh…”

Sithonia: “As you say, this isn’t something that Elsa could have planned by herself. There must be a collaborator, a person who is guiding her. As long as they remain in the shadows, we will never solve the root of the problem.”

Sithonia placed her hand to her forehead as if to express that an enemy was set against them, and sighed.

As it was, they were covering up Holosseo’s death, and doing what they could to maintain the appearances of Featherrun. In such a situation, losing Dorothea was a crushing blow. In both a simple sense of combat potential, and in the sense of their connection as sisters.

Despite how it might have seemed, Dorothea had been desperate to maintain their unity as sisters. Though, it was apparent that her reason for doing so was her deep affection towards Holosseo, with her not bearing many sentiments towards the rest of her sisters.

Saria: “—Hey, Sithonia. About Elsa, can you leave the matter to Hildea and I?”

Hildea: “—Hey, Sithonia. About Elsa, can you leave the matter to Saria and I?”

Thereupon, the twins strung together words in essentially the same tone, to which Sithonia was momentarily delayed in her reaction

That had been a surprising proposal. Even in this situation, she had expected the twins to wait and see what would happen as they always did, but to the contrary, they insisted on taking the initiative.

Ornea: “You’re really saying that the two of you will take action? How’d the wind end up blowing that way?”

Saria: “Well, what cruel thing of you to say, Ornea. You know, Hildea is one of the sisters too?”

Hildea: “And even Saria has some reservations about that. What a sharp tongue you have, Ornea.”

Puffing their cheeks up in discontent, the twins rubbed their cheeks together, leaving Ornea with a puzzled expression. To intervene, Sithonia placed her hands together before her chest.

In any case, Sithonia and Ornea had their hands full with the duties of the Featherrun Sisters.

Sithonia: “If you can fill in the gaps we cannot reach, it would be a wish come true. But, what will you do then?”

Saria: “To take care of that, just leave it to Hildea.”

Hildea: “If you count on Saria, it’ll be a piece of cake.”

Seeing the confident demeanor of the twins, Sithonia plunged into a brief contemplation, and then nodded.

Although they quite often lived in their own secluded world, they too were Feathrrun Sisters. They never lagged behind during missions, and they had two heads to think with.

Sithonia: “Do you happen to need anything?”

Saria: “Not at all. Hildea and I will make our own arrangements.”

Hildea: “Yes, but, I wonder just how many will suffice for Saria and I?”

Saying that, the twins pointed to their feet in unison— nay, pointing even further below than that,

Saria: “We’ll be taking all of the mansion’s hounds. Of course, that includes the very biggest pup.”

Hildea: “And then, there’s something we’d like to have Sithonia… no, something we’d like to have Father do for us.”

With sadistic smiles on their faces, Saria and Hildea made a request of Sithonia. Perceiving the seriousness hidden behind the twins' smiles, Sithonia silently nodded.

If it was necessary to get revenge on the killer of their father and younger sister— to kill Elsa.

Sithonia: "Use anything you please. In exchange, know that failure will not be tolerated."

2

???: "Aa…"

???: "…"

Looking at that which had been presented to her, a rare perplexity was etched into Elsa's brow.

Several days had passed since the incident involving Dorothea, and having returned to Oliver's base in Innorandum as if nothing had happened, she had been spending time healing her wounds.

Presented to Elsa, who sat on the floor with her back leaned against the bed, was a single white flower. And, the one holding that flower was a youthful girl looking at Elsa— Tatiana.

Having gone through hell whilst in the ownership of the now deceased Heiken, the slave girl had fled back to Oliver's place. Or perhaps, now that she had fled back here, she ought not be called a slave, but a mere commodity.

Regardless, Elsa had no intention of getting deeply involved with her, and she could not even hold a proper conversation with Tatiana, who was now suffering from aphasia, but—

Elsa: "So then, what are you doing with that flower?"

Tatiana: "Uu…"

Elsa: "I can't understand your "Aa"ing and "Uu"ing. Though, I do think flowers are very pretty."

Elsa tilted her head at Tatiana, who was shaking her head in refutation, given her scant ability to convey her will. In such a state, how were she and Olvier able to communicate with each other?

???: “Seems like she wants ye to take it. Though surely ye’d be able to tell that much just by looking?”

Striking upon Elsa’s eardrums as she harbored such a thought, the voice of the very person at the crux of those questions reverberated.

Upon returning to his bedroom, Oliver looked over Elsa and Tatiana, sitting opposite to each other upon the floor, and shrugged his shoulders as if to say “Goodness me”,

Oliver: “That girl’s thankful to ye. It’s b‘cause I told Tatiana that ye went ‘n punished the horrid master who’d put ‘er through hell…”

Elsa: “So then, she’s grateful to me? And this flower, is to represent those feelings?”

Tatiana: “…”

Tatiana vigorously nodded to affirm Elsa’s words. Then, glancing back and forth between the flower, being presented to her again, and Tatiana, who was holding it out, Elsa heaved a sigh.

And so, taking the flower from Tatiana’s hands,

Elsa: “Thank you. Setting aside whether it makes me happy or not, I ought to give my gratitude.”

Oliver: “Wouldn’t it be best for ye to just be happy in earnest?! Why’d ye have to put it like that?! “

Elsa: “I’m honest with myself. Use that as a sales pitch for the next time you try to sell me.”

Muttering that with a face of feigned ignorance, Elsa looked closely at the flower she had been given.

It was a wildflower of white petals. An ordinary thing, but in this Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, shorn of warmth, even an ordinary wildflower was rare. Unlike cultivated flowers, wildflowers could not survive unless they fulfilled certain conditions, so this was one that had emerged of such rarity.

Elsa: “And yet, to then arrive in my hands… what an unlucky flower.”

Oliver: “First time I’ve laid eyes upon someone lamenting the misfortune of a flower… geez, it could’ve actually been worthwhile for Tatiana if ye’d just earnestly accepted it with delight. Don’t ye find it pretty?”

Elsa: “Oh my, didn’t I say? I think flowers are beautiful. It’s not as if I have no attachment to them.”

As she said that, Elsa lightly beckoned to Tatiana with her hand. Tatiana’s eyes widened, and with a light moan she approached Elsa, who was sitting on the floor.

Flower in hand, Elsa gently reached her out towards Tatiana, and then,

Elsa: “There you go. This way, the flower will also have a comfy place to rest.”

Tatiana: “Aa.”

This time, Tatiana’s groan sounded as if it was something pregnant with astonishment and wonder.

Uttering such a voice, Tatiana’s eyes widened, upon her head— Elsa had adorned the white flower, and as she timidly reached up to touch that hair ornament, she appeared to have been deeply moved.

Beholding that, Elsa nodded, and looking to Oliver,

Elsa: “I had thought it was a bit strange how you could somehow communicate with this girl, but I can surprisingly tell what she’s thinking.”

Oliver: “…That’s what’s known as compassion. Just now, what did ye reckon she was thinking?”

Elsa: “Yes. —Her stomach’s empty, so make something, Oliver.”

Oliver: “Those’re your bloody feelings! I’ve wasted me time reevaluating ye!”

Oliver shouted in disappointment, and while Elsa found his demeanor to be noisy, she suddenly felt something weigh down on her shoulder.

Tatiana: “Uu.”

When she took a look, Elsa found Tatiana’s head resting upon her shoulder, moaning with her eyes closed. Elsa tilted her head, thinking that to be some sort of intimidation or protest, but realized that such did not seem to be the case.

Tatiana’s profile was reassured, and no hostility could be detected whatsoever.

Oliver: “Have ye taken to the one person in this world who ye absolutely shouldn’t get emotionally attached to…?”

Elsa: “Oliver, what happened to the meal?”

Oliver: “Whenever I just ‘bout think ye might be listening to me, I’m always proven bloody wrong, ye know?! I’ll tell ye this now, but today I ain’t listening to all your complaining ‘bout your preferences!”

With a violent shout, Oliver exited the room in a noisy manner. Since he could then be heard getting to work in the kitchen, she pitied how his mouth and limbs moved in a contradictory manner.

Anyway, regardless of Oliver—

Elsa: “But, as he said, I don’t think anything good will come of getting along with me.”

Tatiana: “Uu.”

Elsa: “But if you still won’t part from me… well, I suppose you can do as you please.”

Leaning close to Elsa, Tatiana drew near so as to make it difficult to separate. Feeling the warmth of that young girl on her shoulder, Elsa lightly snorted.

What slipped into her nostrils was the fragrance of the flower adorning Tatiana’s hair. That sweet aroma; it reminded Elsa of her days at the Featherrun Estate, of Dorothea’s flower garden.

It reminded her of the day she had been purchased by Holosseo, and brought to the Featherrun Mansion, whereon arriving at the mansion upon that Hallowed Land, that was the first sight that caught her eyes—.

Elsa: “I think, flowers are pretty. But…”

Tatiana: “Aa?”

Elsa: “They remind of the pitiful manner in which Dorothea died, so I dislike them just a bit.”

With that, narrowing her dark irises, Elsa reached out and patted Tatiana on the head for a reason she did not understand.

3

Ever since then, Tatiana could be found trailing behind Elsa wherever she went.

Throughout the day, while Oliver was busy working as a slaver, it was Elsa’s duty to look after Tatiana at his base.

For some reason, it seemed like Oliver had no intention of selling off the returned merchandise, Tatiana, to a new buyer. Even if he started reeducating Tatiana, he was not treating her in the same way as the other slaves, and instead was keeping her at his place the whole time, just like Elsa.

Oliver: “Ye know, for slaves to come right back to me is a bloody disgrace as a slaver, a bloody disgrace! I wanna do perfect work as a slaver. For that, I’ll get Tatiana back up on ‘er feet, and then I’m gonna sell ‘er to a buyer who’ll treat ‘er with care. ‘S a necessary investment.”

And, when asked, this was the sort of answer he gave regarding his treatment of Tatiana.

Still, in the sense of being returned merchandise, not only Tatiana, but Elsa likewise fulfilled the same conditions.

Oliver: “Ye’re… ahh, in your case, I guess I like, still need to consider a few things.”

Elsa: “Will you try to reeducate me?”

Oliver: “To begin with, I don’t have any memory of successfully educating ye even once…”

Not concealing his true feelings of finding her difficult to manage, Oliver was keeping Elsa put, without a clue as to what to do with her. In all honesty, he thought it the right answer to drive Elsa away since he knew of her obstreperous nature, but his act of not doing so showed the foolishness of Oliver Zeppes.

If Elsa left his hands, she would end up causing a great deal of damage to many individuals unrelated to himself. Since part of that responsibility would be on his own inadequacy, he would have to put a stop to it. That was the sort of foolish slaver he was.

Oliver: “Well, thanks to that, a wretch like me’s been saved.”

As Oliver found salvation in his petty-bourgeois sensibilities, Elsa resigned herself to the moment of tranquility.

While he was out working, she would head into the white town with money provided from Oliver, and spend her time window shopping in the street stalls and food carts just like before. All the while, accompanied by a youthful girl.

Elsa: “You’re quite whimsical as well, aren’t you?”

Tatiana: “Aa.”

Stuffing their cheeks with the skewered meat, Elsa and Tatiana walked through town.

Smiling at Elsa's words, Tatiana, as ever, answered with a moan. But, with how close they have been over these past few days, Elsa had become somewhat capable of understanding what she wanted to say.

Elsa: "You want to eat more? You mustn't. Any more than this and you'll be too full for supper. If you put Oliver in a bad mood and he stops serving us food, it will be troublesome to procure rations."

Tatiana: "Uu? Uu!"

Elsa: "How selfish. In that case, I guess there's no helping it. Just one more skewer then."

As Tatiana forcefully shook her head side to side in some sort of protest, Elsa bought one more grilled skewer from the food cart for her. For a moment, Tatiana made a dubious expression, but when Elsa sunk her teeth into her own additional skewer, she nervously followed suit.

In that time, with the hand opposite to the one holding her grilled skewer, Tatiana kept holding onto Elsa's sleeve.

Elsa: "…"

For the time being, Elsa had been told to look after Tatiana by Oliver, and did not shake off the small hand gripping her sleeve. It was not enough of a hindrance to shake off, but neither would she allow herself the vulnerability of gripping it back. Having both of one's hands occupied was a foolish act.

Elsa: "The teachings of Featherrun, indeed."

Tatiana: "—?"

Elsa: "No, it's nothing. I was just refreshing my mind with things I'm likely to forget."

Basking in Tatiana's curious gaze, Elsa reminisced on her days at the Featherrun Mansion.

The memories had a faint haze adrift over them— that was not influenced by any external factors, but was rather an issue of Elsa's own bad memory. This went for people's faces as well, but Elsa was quite forgetful regarding events that had happened.

Only, her gruesome training with Ornea, the final bout in which she was driven away by her sisters, and the stimulation at the time she killed Dorothea, were things she could remember clearly, but—

Elsa: "At this rate, I suppose those will also fade away"

The emotions mixed into that murmur; what exactly they were was not even clear to Elsa herself.

—Around twenty days had passed since her fight to the death with Dorothea, but the situation had completely stagnated, leaving Elsa to fall into obscurity amidst the surprisingly uneventful days.

The misfortune that had befallen Heiken Lexant was counted among the records of all the Featherrun Sisters' duties until now, and the truth of the situation would likely never get out.

After surpassing the extremities of debauchery, Heiken Lexant had received the death penalty. —That was the stance of the Gustekan Church, and the reality that would be recorded. Yet, not a soul knew of the Curse Doll who had also lost her life in the burning mansion on that same night.

Elsa: "The idea that Ornea might be angry only came to me a bit afterwards… but it seems it was a needless fear."

Regarding the incident with Holosseo, it seemed like the only one who was insistent on killing Elsa was Dorothea. So with her eliminated, there no longer remained any reason for her to feud with the Featherrun Sisters.

However, that was an idea that disregarded Ornea's desires to treasure her sisters.

Ergo, in these twenty days, Elsa had been unusually vigilant, waiting for Ornea to retaliate, or for there to be some form of contact. However, that opportunity never came around.

Elsa: “I wonder, maybe Ornea didn’t like Dorothea all that much.”

Tatiana: “Aa, aa.”

Elsa: “Hm? Ah, apologies. I was just thinking about something.”

Having gone too deep into contemplation, her reaction to the sensation of her sleeve being tugged on was a moment delayed. When she turned to look, she found Tatiana pulling on her sleeve, her eyes turned to the fore.

Tracing the line of Tatiana’s gaze, she spotted a rounded mass of fur in the snowy alley— realizing that it was a dog of black fur, Elsa widened her eyes.

Tatiana: “Uu!”

Perhaps because she liked animals, Tatiana pulled on Elsa’s sleeve to head towards the dog. Sensing that, the canine lifted its head, and looked at Tatiana with its red eyes.

—A moment later, the dog’s left eye was deeply pierced by an iron skewer thrown by Elsa.

Dog: “—BBRRAAARRK!”

Having had its eyeball mercilessly gouged out, the dog cried out as it was knocked backwards. Tatiana stiffened up upon witnessing that brutal sight, however, the tragedy ended not there.

Into the throat of the dog, shrieking out as it was, was pierced an iron skewer stolen out from Tatiana’s hand. The black canine coughed up blood from the impact as it collapsed, and after some brief convulsions, it stopped moving. A fatal blow.

Tatiana: “Aa…”

Dumbfounded, Tatiana looked up at Elsa, who had murdered the dog. Several question marks had emerged within her eyes, but providing them with answers was not something Elsa had time to do. Even if she had time, she did not know if she would answer or not, but—

Elsa: “—It got a bark out.”

She had failed to kill it in a single blow, and had allowed it to unleash a bellow moments before dying.

If it had been an ordinary stray dog, that final cry would have served as no reason to raise an eyebrow. However, this canine was no ordinary stray dog. —It was a hound. Moreover, it was a hound that had received special training.

???: “—BBRRAAARRK!”

Immediately after, to the snowy alleyway in which Elsa and Tatiana were, hounds were charging in one after the other, having heard their companion’s death throes. The disciplined hounds were beyond comparison to commonplace hoodlums. And with six of them present, they aimed to sink their teeth into Elsa and Tatiana—nay, just Elsa.

Elsa: “Get away.”

Tatiana: “Uu?!”

Faced with hounds leaping towards them, Elsa thrust Tatiana away. Jumping over Tatiana, who had fallen down without having been able to resist, the hound bared their fangs as they closed in on Elsa.

She had used up the grilled skewers to kill the first one. So right now, Elsa had no weapons at hand with which to fight. Hence, to avoid the hounds aiming for her legs, Elsa jumped up high. But, that had only allowed her to dodge the first two. Elsa no longer had anywhere to run, so the remaining four—

Elsa: “But, that’s a no-no.”

Jaw agape, the snout of a hound was perforated by the sharp tip of ice. Scattering blood as it fell, the hound had been intercepted by an icicle gripped in Elsa’s hand.

Using a large icicle that had been hanging from the eave of a building as an impromptu weapon, Elsa faced off against the hounds, howling in vigilance, and brandished a ruthless, but natural armament.

Elsa: “Stray dogs can at least run away if the situation becomes disadvantageous for them, how pitiful for you all.”

Having received intense training, the hounds were forbidden from fleeing, and thus had no choice but to fight to the death. Whilst she felt pity for them, Elsa did not hold back with her blade of frozen malevolence.

The remaining five put up a good fight, but they never stood a chance from the outset, not against Elsa, a nigh immortal.

Their heads and bodies borne into by the icicle, with care, they were thoroughly robbed of their lives one by one, their pursuit rendered a failure.

Elsa: “I’m finished, Tatiana.”

Casting away the bloodstained icicle, Elsa turned around, having suffocated the root of life from all the hounds. Tatiana had been holding her head during the battle, and lifting it up after hearing that voice, she widened her eyes.

That was because, torn asunder by the fangs of the hounds, Elsa’s shoulders and thighs were riddled with horrid wounds from which blood was flowing.

Elsa: “Ah, these? Don’t worry. They’ll close up right away if I just leave them as is.”

Tatiana: “Uu! Uu!”

Elsa: “—? You want another grilled skewer in exchange for the one just now? What a peculiar girl.”

Elsa inclined her head in response to Tatiana, who was vigorously shaking her head as she pleaded for the same thing she did in front of the food cart.

However, she did not have the time to go along with Tatiana’s empty stomach either.

Elsa: “—Seems like it’s begun.”

As she narrowed her eyes, Elsa could see black smoke rising in a place far from the alley. It was in the direction of Innorandum’s main street— it was the beginning of an abnormal event in the district where the food stalls were all lined up.

The beginning. Yes, this was the beginning.

Tatiana: “Aa, uu!”

Commencing at the same time as the rising of black smoke, were the bellows and screams of people in the town. Hearing that, Tatiana’s expression was dyed with a hue of fear, and she nestled close to Elsa’s arm.

Allowing Tatiana to do as she pleased with her arm, Elsa looked back at the slain hounds. The significance of them having come after her, lay unmistakably in one thing.

Elsa: “—Saria and Hildea. It looks like you two came next.”

4

Ornea: “—You authorized a cleansing operation on Hallowed Land?!”

An angered expression strewn across her face, Ornea burst into the office with enough force to tear off the door. Inside, facing the large desk as they did work, was a man nearing old age who had lost his eyeballs— nay, that was not so.

???: “…You are making quite a racket, Ornea.”

Uttered out from the man’s aging throat, was a report far too beautiful.

Immediately after, the man’s physique began to creak, and his appearance slowly transformed. Elasticity returned to his wrinkly skin, and his pigmentless hair was alight with a fiery hue. After a mere ten seconds, tangibly present there was not the deceased Holosseo Featherrun, but Sithonia Featherrun.

The eldest daughter of the sisters, who was maintaining the palace of Curse Dolls in place of their late master.

However, Ornea did not concern herself at all with that transfiguration of her elder sister, and closed in on her,

Ornea: “A racket? A racket you say? How do you expect me to not cause a racket with this?! Saria and Hildea are always heedless! But, just what the hell are you thinking?!”

Sithonia: “As always, I am thinking about my sisters. That goes for you too, no?”

Ornea: “And for that, you’re willing to accept a cleansing operation?!”

Sithonia: “Yes, of course. Are you really that surprised?”

As Ornea grabbed her by the collar, her breathing growing heavy as she voiced her objections, Sithonia tilted her head. Hearing her response, Ornea released her grip and took two, three steps back.

It was as if the Sithonia she thought she knew had changed into a completely different person.

Sithonia: “Turning into different people is something I always do, you know? That is my special skill.”

Ornea: “Even if, that was the case… nobody should be able to manipulate what’s in your heart. Even so, your decisions these days, they’re just like, just like…”

Sithonia: “Holosseo Featherrun. —As coldhearted as Father?”

Ornea: “…”

Pressed by those words, Ornea cast her eyes down in a feeble manner as she tried to respond. Hearing that, neither did Sithonia narrow her eyes, nor even attempt to alter her expression.

By no means did she want to think that while acting in the role of Holosseo, even Sithonia’s mentality could have been undermined to be the same as his.

Ornea: “If it’s a Curse Doll, could that be possible…?”

Sithonia: “—. Anyway, it was I who approved the cleansing operation for Saria and Hildea. In order to deal with Elsa… with that girl, I have decided it to be the best method. Is that so strange?”

Ornea: “…If she’d been hiding in some small Hallowed Land in the middle of nowhere, I wouldn’t object either. But, she’s in Innorandum… that’s a massive plot of Hallowed Land, yeah?!”

The Snowfield Capital of Innorandum was a city constructed upon exceptionally vast Hallowed Land in the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko. Of course, in terms of the number of inhabitants and level of importance to the state, the regular plots of Hallowed Land could not compare.

By nature, it was a plot that would cause one to hesitate to engage in combat that would draw attention there.

In such a location, that which Saria and Hildea were going to carry out was—

Sithonia: “—A cleansing operation.”

That was a last resort in order to eliminate heretics, whom the Church of the Holy King deemed were in the wrong. Aiming to remove problematic existences, it was a taboo deed unbound by any and all restrictions.

Once one was declared, the targeted land would be razed to the ground, no trace remaining.

In other words, though how she had done it was unclear, Sithonia had persuaded the Church of the Holy King. —In order to kill a single person, Elsa, she had secured permission to reduce a major plot of Hallowed Land to a scorched field.

Sithonia: “Of course, it is not as though the entire city will be burned. At most, just the district in which Elsa is hiding… Just one district out of more than fifty.”

Ornea: “…Even so, there’d still be no less than a thousand inhabitants.”

Sithonia: “Indeed. Still, it is necessary in order to protect the sisters. —Hey, Ornea.”

With those words, Sithonia closed the gap between herself and Ornea. Then, gently lifting her hand up, she stroked the cheek of an astonished Ornea.

The kind motion of that hand dispelling her caution, Ornea caught her breath.

—The sensation of those fingers, that affectionate gesture, seemed as if proof that Sithonia had not changed whatsoever.

Sithonia: “You are someone who treasures your sisters. With that in mind, if you were to weigh those precious sisters against random strangers on a scale, are you saying that those random strangers would be heavier?”

Ornea: “Th-That’s…”

Sithonia: “If you are objecting to the plan because you are worried about a thousand people you do not know, would that then not be the case? Am I wrong?”

You’re wrong, Ornea wished to say so.

However, her mouth moved not, and the will to go against Sithonia did not swell within her. On the contrary, Ornea’s heart was beginning to accept that Sithonia was actually right.

In reality, that was so. Sithonia was far more capable of making the right decision than the thoughtless Ornea.

For that reason, she and Sithonia split up their duties.

Sithonia: “I provide the valid judgements. That is why, Ornea, you shall…”

Ornea: “Become the spear of the sisters, who carries out that judgment… yes, that’s right.”

With a slow nod, Ornea reaffirmed her own worth, and her past choices. Then, looking back at Sithonia, she slightly pulled back her chin.

Ornea: “Understood… Out on a reckless cleansing operation, they’ve taken all the mansion’s dogs with them. Saria and Hildea, seems they’re going all out as well.”

Sithonia: “Indeed, that is what I am hoping for.”

Receiving Sithonia’s affirmation, Ornea breathed in, and turned her back to her elder sister.

Sithonia: “Ornea?”

Ornea: “I’m going to put my body to motion underground… Right now, I just need time to clear my mind of this haze.”

Leaving those words behind and naught more, Ornea left the office. Upon her departure, she set the broken door back into its original position, and stepped away once she ascertained Sithonia smiling in the corner of her eye.

Then, walking away from the office, as her footsteps picked up speed, she bit her lip.

Ornea: “Everything is for Featherrun, so that we sisters may live…”

Blood was flowing down her clenched fist, however, that was not noticed by the girl who felt no pain. But a single thing occupied her thoughts. —Her foolish youngest sister who, despite being able to feel pain, was undaunted by the notion of being wounded.

5

—A cleansing operation, that sound rang with a hazy familiarity in Elsa’s recollections.

Elsa: “If I’m not mistaken, it’s a coarse job to round up and deal with people who are hindrances.”

Her way of recalling that was coarse in and of itself, but no sisters were presently nearby to point that out.

If she were to delve into more detail within her memories, it was an authorization of extreme conduct in order to eliminate individuals regarded as heretics, those who go against the plans of the Church of the Holy King; such an understanding ought to have been accurate.

On that point, its objective was not too far off from the duties handed down to the Featherrun Sisters.

However—

Elsa: “Pretty much, unlike missions where you wouldn’t go after anything but the target and their surroundings, damages from these will extend endlessly… it seems like the opponent isn’t afraid to get reckless here.”

Tatiana: “Aa! Aa!”

Pulling on Elsa’s sleeve as she tilted her head, Tatiana frantically called out.

Her finger outstretched, it pointed further beyond the street, where the clamoring bellows and cries rang out without cease. She was urging Elsa to go join the fray unfolding there.

Elsa: “It’s likely that I’m the opponent’s target. That’s why, I can understand your feelings of wanting to sacrifice me to save yourself, Tatiana, but…”

Tatiana: “Uu?! Aa, uu!”

Elsa: “Yes, I’m aware. In most cases, everyone would prioritize their own life the most.”

When she shrugged her shoulders in an attempt to say that she did not mind, Tatiana vigorously shook her head sideways. Although she may have been a little too straightforward at times, it was easy to get along with Tatiana, as she never attempted to tactlessly deceive.

Only, the danger of bringing Tatiana along to a situation like this went without saying.

Elsa: “You don’t have a weapon that fits you just right, how troubling. Tatiana, will you be fine if I leave you be?”

Tatiana: “Uu?! Au! Aouu!”

Elsa: “A reassuring reply. In that case…”

Giving a nod to Tatiana’s attitude of regarding the hounds as nothing, Elsa was planning to split off from her. However, before she could make such a declaration, she remembered what Oliver had told her.

During his absence, he had entrusted her with Tatiana.

Elsa: “…”

Tatiana: “Aa! Uu!”

Elsa: “…I’m glad that you’re so brimming with confidence, but let’s actually stay together for now.”

In all likelihood, Tatiana would not require Elsa’s assistance, but she did not want to be scolded by Oliver for leaving her. If she did not keep with this babysitting, an act she had yet to grow accustomed to, then if worse came to worst, she would be kicked out.

Such a thing would be troublesome, and thus Elsa decided on going against Tatiana’s wishes.

Elsa: “Sorry about this, but please tag along with me, Tatiana.”

Tatiana: “Aa!”

Elsa: “Whether you like it or not, I’m bringing you along for the sake of my boring day to day.”

Tatiana: “Uu?!”

Tatiana had widened her eyes in protest. However, that was as far as the docile negotiations would go.

A moment later, many silhouettes appeared from the street beyond the alleyway, and came running towards Elsa and Tatiana. They were crowds seeking salvation from the pursuit of the dogs.

All were inhabitants of Innorandum whom, in her brief time here, were faces she seemed to recognize, but at the same time, she was not sure if she recognized them at all.

Elsa: “Well, I don’t really remember them, so I suppose it’s fine.”

Tatiana: “Auu?!”

With a soft mutter, Elsa forced Tatiana to the edge of the street without warning. Then, taking a low stance, she plunged right into the forefront of the fleeing crowd, unleashing a magnificent blow from her leg.

A man screamed out “Uoh?!” as he toppled over, and immediately after, the succession of people were trampled; screams turned to cries of pain, and finally, to death throes. Then, as people were trampled and tripped up in succession from that man, the alleyway was painted over with the agonizing cries of a hellscape.

Amidst the series of cries, angered bellows, and weeping voices of women, showing up late to the party were the howls of beasts— the growling voices of the ferocious hounds that had driven the crowd to this back alley.

In the name of a cleansing operation, the hounds had been granted permission to utterly chew up any whom they might lay eyes upon to death. And making full use of that murder license, the hounds sunk their fangs into the collapsed crowd.

Blood and shrieks flew up into the sky of the alley, satisfying the cruel hunting instincts of the hounds—

Elsa: “—Was a cleansing operation not a bad move, I wonder?”

Hound: “—BBRRAAARRK!”

The very next moment, Elsa shattered the window glass of a nearby building, and used a shard of it as a lethal blade to slit the throat of a hound.

She felt sorry for the dogs that were having the time of their lives feasting on their prey, but at least she was helping them along through the gates of hell with those climactic feelings as a parting gift.

Elsa: “I don’t have much interest in dog bowels. After all, I’d had my fill of them back when I was at the mansion.”

With a tight, bear-handed grip on the shard of glass, Elsa laughed as she stained her hands with blood. With a smile on her face, she dealt with every last one of the hounds inundating her.

Elsa had no qualms with using the crowd as bait to achieve that result.

It was not as though she valued her own life in particular, but—

Elsa: “That doesn’t mean I value others, either.”

She threw the shard of glass, and caught up with the hound that had leaped over the attack. Its jaw agape, Elsa used her hands to hold the oral cavity open as it endeavored to sink its fangs into her, and funneled strength into her arms.

After a moment’s resistance, the hound’s maw was torn top from bottom, ending its life. The hound’s blood showered her entire body, and turning back around, this indeed marked the annihilation of all the dogs that had hastened here.

She would have just killed around thirty.

???: “…Uh, ah, help, me…”

Elsa: “—? My apologies. I’m not a doctor, so there’s nothing I can do.”

She shook off the hand clinging to her leg, pleading for aid. It was unavoidable that those surrounding her would become unable to see properly as they teetered on the verge of death, but perhaps Elsa might have looked like a doctor?

Elsa: “You must have bad eyes.”

Leaving them with those words, Elsa stepped over the groaning crowd, and returned to Tatiana. Having been thrust away, Tatiana gazed up at Elsa’s red-stained figure,

Tatiana: “Aa, aa?”

Elsa: “Sorry for keeping you waiting. Don’t be mad now. I’ll kill them quicker next time.”

Deeply impressed with Tatiana’s nerves, Elsa waited for her to grip onto her sleeve once again.

There was certainly the option to slay the oncoming pursuers one after the other in this manner, but then the situation would not be resolved until dinnertime. Wanting to avoid that, Elsa would need to expedite the conclusion.

With that in mind, her target would naturally be—

Elsa: “—The root of the enemy, Saria and Hildea.”

Among the Featherrun Sisters, raising the dogs was the job of those twins.

It had been a system where Dorothea raised the flowers, Ornea raised Elsa, and the twins raised the dogs. She did not know what Sithonia had been raising. At the very least, she had failed to raise Elsa.

Elsa: “I’m sure Sithonia must have had no talent for raising anything.”

The desires and disposition of the person in question were things that did not really align with each other. On that point, Elsa ought to give her thanks to something for the fact that her abilities and tastes did indeed mesh well.

Nothing came to mind immediately, so she decided she would just give her thanks to Oliver.

Elsa: “Anyhow, let’s go somewhere more open. The opponent should also be looking for me, so I think they’ll come out to kill me if I go to a place where I stand out.”

Tatiana: “Au?! Aauu?”

Elsa: “Don’t say such barbaric things. For the most part, they should understand what I have to say since we’re sisters. I think it’s bad to throw away the option for negotiations right at the outset.”

Her sleeve still being pinched, Elsa took the hot-headed Tatiana out with her to the main street. She had slaughtered all the hounds that had come from there, so no additional pursuers appeared.

Along the road, there were a few people scattered around, collapsed and begging for help, so Elsa would have no choice but to occasionally stop and rebuke Tatiana, who eagerly wished to finish them off.

Elsa: “You’re a terribly stubborn girl, aren’t you now?”

Eat, sleep, kill; Tatiana’s avarice for such deeds was so truly human. If Elsa was capable of acting with as little restraint as she did, how good might that be?

Ultimately, people were all bound by fetters. At times, that was a terribly troublesome truth.

Elsa: “Hey, Saria, Hildea. —Don’t the two of you also think so?”

In the snowy plaza entangled with blood and screams, Elsa turned her vision, and inclined her head. And, receiving those words from their younger sister, upon the time tower located in the center of the plaza— atop the tower equipped with magic crystals signifying the time, visible from even a distance, two silhouettes held each other by the hand.

Then the sisters, as similar as two peas in a pod, nuzzled their cheeks together,

Saria: “Hey, did you hear? This Elsa really hasn’t changed in the slightest.”

Hildea: “Yes, I heard. This Elsa really hasn’t changed whatsoever.”

Indeed, as if to confirm with each other, Saria and Hildea flashed callous smiles.

As always, with the same expressions and the same dresses, they were identical twins no matter how you sliced it. Elsa narrowed her eyes upon seeing their unchanged demeanor, and breathed a brief sigh

Elsa: “I see you haven’t changed either, isn’t that so?”

Saria: “Indeed, that might be so. But, maybe not, according to Hildea.”

Hildea: “This is what Saria is thinking: even if you don’t appear any different, you might have still changed.”

Elsa: “Me? Well, I am certainly still in the midst of growing, so I might have gotten a bit taller, but…”

Saria & Hildea: “No, that’s not it at all!”

As Elsa pondered over their comments, Saria and Hildea rejected her answer in unison. Elsa widened her eyes wondering what it could be, and the twins gestured with their overlapping hands in her direction.

They were pointing towards Tatiana, who had drawn in her shoulders.

Elsa: “—. Is something the matter with this girl?”

Saria: “Something the matter? Something the matter, you say? This is a great shock to Hildea!”

Hildea: “Saria is also surprised. To think that Elsa of all people would be together with somebody else.”

With expressions suggesting they had just witnessed the strangest thing in the world, Saria and Hildea shared in astonishment. Then, they stared right into the eyes of one another, and,

Saria & Hildea: “—Even though she killed Dorothea.”

Elsa: “…”

Hearing Saria and Hildea’s tone, Elsa’s eyebrows twitched up. That was not because she was displeased with their words, but rather, because they were unexpected.

Elsa: “I’m surprised. I never would have thought you two would come after me because of what happened with Dorothea.”

Saria: “Is that so? It’s surprising that Hildea has sentiments for her younger sister?”

Hildea: “It’s strange that Saria was worried about Dorothea?”

Elsa: “Indeed. After all, I’d thought that you two were only ever interested in yourselves.”

Hence, even supposing Elsa were to be hunted for killing Dorothea, she had thought that Ornea, who cherished her younger sister, would have been the only one to do so.

Elsa: “Thanks to that, when the dogs first came out, I had thought it might be some sort of misunderstanding.”

Saria: “Is that so? Even so, you killed the dogs without hesitation, that made Hildea sad.”

Hildea: “They were pups we had raised in our personal care, and yet, oh so poor Saria!”

The twins put on overexaggerated mourning, but their intent was evident, their aim clear.

The problem that remained was the overwhelming disadvantage she was at. Unlike when she had lured Dorothea to a place laid with flawless traps, Saria and Hildea were the ones taking the initiative this time.

She would have no choice but to overturn that disadvantage, and bare her fangs to deliver them past the limits of their lives, far surpassing that of ordinary people.

For that purpose—

Elsa: “So, how long do you plan to keep holding hands up there? I really don’t mind in the slightest if you just keep watching from there, but the corpses will only grow all the more if you leave it up to the dogs, you know?”

Saria: “My oh my, the nerve to say such things. You’ve put Hildea in a bad mood.”

Hildea: “My my, If you say such things, even Saria will be pushed to her limit.”

Elsa attempted to drag the twins down from the time tower, and the girls parted for a moment, then danced back into an embrace, and the sound of their hands coming together loudly resounded.

And then—

Saria & Hildea: “—How about we introduce you to our most prized pup!”

Immediately after, two fiendish roars overlapped, quaking through the plaza— nay, through all of Innorandum.

The being that had produced that double layered bellow vigorously kicked off the snow as it charged towards the plaza, at the foot of the time tower before Elsa and Tatiana.

As snow scattered about, saliva drooled out from two giant maws, and the giant shadow lorded over Elsa and Tatiana.

Beast: “—GRAAOWRRHK!!”

The enormous demon dog boasting two heads— was the Witchbeast, Orthrus.

6

Orthrus: "—GRAAOWRRHK!"

Basking in the point blank roar of the Orthrus, Elsa's onyx locks and dress were greatly disheveled.

The feeling as oppressive as a bolt of lightning, Elsa licked her lips, and touched the goosebumps on her arms as chills quavered through her body. —She was not frightened, rather, her feelings were that of elation.

Elsa: "Wonderful."

Tatiana: "Aauu?!"

Faced with the Orthrus, Elsa spoke her candid feelings, causing Tatiana to act rambunctiously. As she pulled on Elsa's arm with that unruly outburst, Elsa looked up at the twins on the time tower,

Elsa: "Even though I was your sister, I had no idea you'd kept this sort of pet."

Saria: "Well, Hildea's been saying that it hasn't been all too long since you became our sister."

Hildea: "Though, if you had gotten along with Saria and I, we may have told you in secret."

Elsa: "I see. But, in exchange for that I had the pleasure of being surprised, so I'm fine with it."

The twins replied with mischievous smiles, and Elsa held her breath. Then, the very moment after a strain was begotten within the slightly cold atmosphere, the Orthrus sprung into action.

Orthrus: "—GRAAOWRRHK!"

The body of the twin-headed demon dog spanned at least five meters, from a quick estimation.

Just one of its front legs easily surpassed Elsa in mass, and its destructive force, unleashed at speeds that could scythe down the wind, would reduce a human body to dust in an instant.

Tatiana made an intrepid attempt to intercept the blow, and as Elsa pulled her back while narrowly avoiding a graze from the foreleg, she leaped a great deal backwards.

Any blow with such great mass behind it would prove fatal; a mere graze was quite capable of entirely extinguishing the flame of her life. But, even if she had evaded that front leg, it did not mean her life was secured.

Elsa: “A mouth so big it can swallow me whole, how troublesome.”

Twisting her body around, she barely escaped the powerful jaws. However, her heart could not so easily bear the sensation of her life being grazed. Much less when up against the Orthrus, where that anguish was made twofold.

Fang thrashed against fang, and a melody of the air being crushed in the jaws ensued; all the while, Elsa continued to dance past the onslaught of the Orthrus, Tatiana in her arms.

As snow fluttered, the two heads of the demon dog danced through the white plaza, kicking around the scattered corpses and the inhabitants who were still clinging on the verge of death. That passionate act of predation would instantaneously uproot her life if caught in it.

But, she could not keep up these evasive maneuvers for long. Furthermore, it was not as though the assassins, Saria and Hildea, were merely watching the battle unfold from a distance.

Saria & Hildea: “Taaa~ke that!!”

The Orthrus’s jaws snapped at Elsa as she leapt away, the sound of which overlapped with the voices of the twins. In that instant, what cleaved its way into the corner of Elsa’s vision, was a blade of death revolving at a rapid speed— in the center of their specialized weapon, the Plenilune Cirque, Saria and Hildea closed in on her as they spun happily.

Elsa: “—Hk.”

On the spur of the moment, Elsa had utilized one of the corpses collapsed in the plaza. The body had been chewed up by the hounds, and kicking it up, she used it to intercept the attack from the Plenilune Cirque. Of course, the attack was not one that could be held back with a corpse. The dead body was cleaved in twain instantly.

However, with the advent of a momentary delay, Elsa plunged into an opening of death between the Orthrus’s fangs and the Plenilune Cirque, and grasped survival as she skidded across the snowy street.

Elsa: “Now that you’ve finally come down, I suppose this is the main event?”

Saria: “Well, Hildea’s impressed with that impudent mouth of yours, Elsa.”

Hildea: “Indeed, Saria also might be impressed by how unwilling you are to admit defeat.”

Without cease to their rotation, the twins blurred amidst the snow as they ridiculed Elsa.

But, their laughs were no bluffs. And that was because they did so whilst looking down at Elsa who, in exchange for her life, had suffered a vast amount of blood loss from the wounds on her shoulder and waist, unable to evade.

Tatiana: “Aa! Auu!”

Elsa: “…Don’t be so angry. I’m aware that I look pathetic.”

Relentlessly slapping her hands on Elsa’s wounds, Tatiana was indignant at her cowardice. While receiving her scolding, Elsa focused on finding an opening in the enemy’s offensive.

She had poor compatibility against the Orthrus, which had the full ability to utilize its body in this large plaza. And with the anomalous attacks of the twins thrown into the mix, it would be impossible to secure this war front through logic.

Elsa: “But, I’ve gotten used to having your weight on me.”

Tatiana: “Uu! Uu!”

Elsa: “Yes, this won’t do for next time.”

While her wounds were still being beaten, Elsa nodded at Tatiana, who she was carrying in her arms. Having her arms occupied was undeniably inconvenient, but she would not be able to deal with the outcome if she abandoned her and they targeted her.

If anything were to happen to her, Oliver’s angered face came to her mind. Therefore, she would act to the best of her ability.

Indeed, as Elsa came to a conclusion so very much unlike herself, Saria and Hildea cackled in shrill voices.

Saria: “Hey, did you see? Did you hear? This Elsa is oh so strange!”

Hildea: “Yes, I saw, I heard! This Elsa won’t lose heart!”

Shrill laughter it was, and yet, the contents were not that of praising Elsa. On the contrary, it was something that had emerged from feelings of pitying, of looking down on Elsa.

As to where that composure of theirs was coming from, Elsa was suspicious—

Saria: “The pathetic Elsa, the pitiful Elsa! We’ll tell you, for your own sake.”

Hildea: “There was no helping it, you had no shot of winning from the outset, foolish Elsa!”

Elsa: “…”

Saria & Hildea: “After all, that’s what it means to have a weakness!”

As they spoke, each supporting the Plenilune Cirque with a single hand, Saria and Hildea gestured to something with their overlapping free hands; towards the time tower from which they had just descended.

Following with her gaze, Elsa pursed her lips when she noticed. The composure she had been maintaining in a calm and collected manner was lost.

That was because—

Elsa: "—Oliver."

Thereupon, Oliver was strung up, battered and beaten.

Oliver: "…"

His head languidly lowered, the strung up Oliver was barely still breathing. It was clear in a single glance at his swollen face and sullied clothes that he had undergone considerable torture.

Through clear malice and enmity, Oliver had been wounded in mind and body, and taken captive.

Tatiana: "Aauu!!"

When Tatiana noticed it too, her eyes widened as she frantically cried out. She pulled on Elsa's black hair with her small hands, and pleaded as she pointed at Oliver.

To free Oliver, to save him, she was pleading so.

Elsa: "I've never heard of something like a slave attempting to save their slaver."

Tatiana: "Aa!"

Elsa: "But, yes. Oliver is an irreplaceable eccentric, so it would be troublesome for him to pass away."

Lending an ear to Tatiana's appeals, Elsa licked her lips.

It would have been different if he were already dead, but as long as he was still breathing, he could still be saved. She would still have many opportunities to listen to Oliver’s noisy rebukes. For that reason too—

Saria: “—Elsa, why do you think Hildea and I chose this town to do a cleansing operation?”

Hildea: “—Elsa, who do you think it was that told Saria and I that you would be here?”

The moment she took a step, the beastmaster twins, who were accompanied by the hounds and the demon dog, made their declaration. Wondering what the intent behind those words was, Elsa knitted her brow.

That momentary standstill had allowed a fatal— nay, it would not amount to anything fatal for Elsa.

However—

Orthrus: “—GRAAOWRRHK!”

Tatiana: “AAAAUUUUU!!”

Beholding the sight of Elsa’s arm being bitten off alongside a howl, Tatiana shrieked.

Even if it did not amount to a fatal wound, it had resulted in her being robbed of her arm.

7

The moment her arm was bitten off, Elsa’s thoughts were drowned out by pain and loss.

It was a body that would regenerate no matter how finely it was chopped up, and Elsa had even once been reduced to just a head and an arm, but that did not liberate her from the terror of losing a part of her body.

The discomfort of losing something that ought to have been there would stain one's heart and mind black with unease, such that even Elsa ended up being mercilessly swallowed by it.

Elsa: "…"

Ergo, Elsa's next move was not something conjured using her head.

Her right arm torn off from the elbow down, what dangled down from the filthy mouth of the wound was blood, muscle fibers, and veins. Nestled within was bone, vehemently protected by the flesh, and brandishing that, she launched her attack.

The pointed tip of the bone bore into a tender eyeball head-on, piercing through it and ripping it apart.

That was a blow landed on the head of the Orthrus that did not eat Elsa's arm, as if to spite the head that had. The left eye of the left of its two heads gouged out, the Orthrus's anguished wail sounded through the air of the plaza.

They may have shared the same body, but perhaps they were to be considered different beings from the neck upwards, as it was only the one stabbed in the eye that cried out in pain. Displeased with that inequality, Elsa's leg sprung up and fiercely bore a hole into the throat of the one that had eaten her arm.

With a kick so mighty that even her own leg began to creak, she could feel her shoe shattering through her opponent's bones. That moment of recoil gave Elsa a taste of ecstasy, and as a result reined her back in to reality.

Elsa: "—Ah."

In terms of time, Elsa had lost herself for not even three seconds. But, in those three seconds, blood had begun to spill from the eyes and mouths of both the Orthrus's heads.

Only, she had felt that those three seconds she lost herself had been accompanied by an unbelievable sense of liberation. Just so she could get a taste of those three seconds again, she would plunge her consciousness into an even deeper place—

Saria: “Elsa, Hildea says you can’t do that!”

Hildea: “Saria says we won’t let you go that far!”

Reaching out to grasp the inexplicable sensation, Elsa attempted to go further beyond, but those voices called out to hold her back. However, without paying them mind, Elsa still tried to proceed further.

???: “Gy, AHHHHHHHH—!”

The clangor of the man’s voice that followed, a timber she knew well, did not allow her to do so.

Right before she could reach a state of trance, Saria and Hildea moved to the edge of the plaza. Then, the thin steel wire strung up there, only visible if one strained their eyes, was bisected by the blade cast in the form of the full moon, the Plenilune Cirque.

The steel wire was cut, and as a result, Oliver shrieked out in pain atop the time tower.

Saria: “We strung him up with a thin wire. Hildea did a great job, now didn’t she?”

Hildea: “Whenever one of the threads holding him up is severed, the burden on the other remaining strung up fingers will increase. Just now, Saria thinks he may have lost a finger.”

The callous proclamation gave Elsa a deep admiration of the twins’ meticulousness.

He would lose fingers whenever the load increased, and when he eventually became unable to support his body, he would plummet. If such came to pass, and he fell from such a height, Oliver would be beyond saving.

Moreover, the one-armed Elsa had an additional problem of a different sort.

That was—

Tatiana: “Au, auu!!”

Elsa: “As expected, it’s difficult to carry you like this, so it won’t do.”

She could not carry Tatiana with a single arm. Hence, Elsa dropped Tatiana to the ground, and then firmly grasped her outstretched hand.

The girl who had refused to have her hands occupied even when simply going around the food stalls, now joined hands with another.

Elsa: “How ironic.”

With the hand that had previously not been joined due to a reluctance towards being tied down, Elsa forcibly pulled Tatiana along. In an attempt to avoid a risky situation, she had ended up joining hands when things were most risky, thus putting the carriage before the ground dragon.

Tatiana’s body was small, her strides short. Even so, if Elsa pulled her arm firmly, raising her aloft, she could then put up a good fight against the wounded Orthrus.

However—

Saria: “If you keep running away, Hildea supposes that means your situation is only getting worse and worse.”

Speaking thus, Saria smiled at Elsa as the latter evaded the Orthrus’s fangs. Within the gyrating Plenilune Cirque, the expressions of the twins alternated, as they flew to another position in the plaza, cutting a steel wire.

Oliver: “GYAHHHHH!!”

Hildea: “Saria is wondering how many fingers he has left after this!”

Each time Oliver’s cries echoed throughout the plaza, his future prospects were sacrificed.

Oliver’s shrill voice usually gave off an annoying impression, but at the current moment, its timbre got on her nerves to an overwhelming extent. —To be precise, it was Saria and Hildea's actions to make Oliver scream, that got on her nerves.

Elsa: "Though, I'd be more grateful if you'd just tell me exactly what it is you want to do."

With Oliver as a hostage, did they wish Elsa to concede? Or perhaps, were they trying to get her caught on the Orthrus's fangs to make it seem like an act of suicide? 'Twas neither.

Right now, the deed being enacted was an abuse of Oliver. There was no meaning to be found in the act.

Saria: "My, you've forgotten to give an explanation to Elsa, Hildea."

Hildea: "Well, Saria is a careless girl, so it can't be helped."

The movements of the revolving twins halted, and as a cloud of snow was kicked up around them, they smiled. Then, as they peacefully traced the next steel wire right beside them,

Saria: "Our objective isn't just to punish him for having helped Elsa kill Dorothea."

Hildea: "Not just to punish him, we need him to become a poison that will force you to obey, Elsa."

Oliver: "Gih! Agh! GYAHHHH!!"

With each strum of the taut steel wire, Oliver shrieked from the damage to his remaining fingers.

As Elsa focused her attention on seeking the words to come from the twins enacting thus upon him—

Tatiana: "Auu!!"

By the time she became cognizant to Tatiana's warning, it was too late.

To the fore, the injured demon dog surrendered itself to wrath, hammering its front leg right into Elsa. She promptly spun her body around, distancing Tatiana from a direct hit. But, that was the limit of what she could have done.

All other defensive maneuvers remaining at a count of zero, the tremendous impact directly connected with Elsa's body.

Elsa: "…"

Her entire body shattering; relishing in a sensation much akin, Elsa's body was sent flying away in a manner reminiscent of a catch-ball.

Such an impact gave Elsa yet another taste of ecstasy.

Teetering on the brink of death was the one way ticket needed to deliver her to that moment; her soul verily interpreted it so. Thus, pruning all extraneous and troublesome elements, she would conduct herself as "Elsa" and naught more—.

Elsa: "—Sh."

The Witchbeast hot on her tail, Elsa kicked the ground with her back leg as she flew. That instant, her body flicked up high above the head of the bulldozing demon dog.

Stifling its large body's momentum with its claws, the twin heads of the demon dog snapped back around. The calvaria of both heads were simultaneously struck by the downward swing of Elsa's toes.

Orthrus: "—GRAAOWRRHK!"

Both heads sunk into the ground, the demon dog howled right away as it ate a ferocious blow. Lend an ear to those objecting howls Elsa did not, instead, still continuing to swing her legs down in turns, crushing blows were delivered to the Orthrus.

However, the perfunctory pursuit would go on no longer.

Saria & Hildea: "You can't do that, you bad, bad girl, Elsa."

Voices resounded in melody, and Elsa's body atop the heads of the

Orthrus was blown away alongside a cloud of blood.

Aiming for a back full of openings, Saria and Hildea slammed their Plenilune Cirque. The tempestuous upheaval of snow was sullied with blood, and Elsa raised her head, three limbs remaining to her as her right arm was missing.

—Before her eyes, the gaping maws of the Orthrus closed in.

Elsa: "…"

Instantly, her brain warned that she had to either jump left or right. However, in the disastrous absence of fixation and discernment, a delay to execute what her mind had thought of was yielded.

And, in this lethal situation, that had been a fatal delay.

Orthrus: "—GRAAOWRRHK!"

Whilst hearing the close-by howl, Elsa's thoughts veered in a useless direction.

When she had descended into the waterway to escape her sisters, Elsa had reduced her body to just a head and an arm, but if she were to be eaten by a living creature, would she be able to replicate that?

In that case, would regeneration begin from the head or the heart—

Tatiana: "Aa."

Elsa: "—Tatiana?"

Thinking useless thoughts, Elsa was about to be eaten by the Orthrus. Upon her eardrums, struck the thoroughly familiar voice of Tatiana.

Then, two hands joined to Elsa's left, forcefully and resolutely pulling her.

Elsa might have been light, but her posture was also at fault. Without having firmly braced her legs on the snow, the force of that pull swapped the places of Elsa and Tatiana. —Their places, had been swapped.

Tatiana: “Uu.”

In the corner of her eye, the expression she had glimpsed on Tatiana’s face was tranquil. It was as if to say she had fulfilled her dearest desire, and Elsa’s mind was enveloped in an inability to comprehend.

Why was Tatiana, the very embodiment of destructive impulses, wearing such an expression?

She had wanted to ask. However, that opportunity would never come. —It would escape her for all eternity.

Orthrus: “—GRAAOWRRHK!”

In the following moment, Tatiana’s smiling figure vanished into the Orthrus’s right maw. As those jaws, lined with sharp fangs as they were, snapped shut, Tatiana’s very existence vanished.

In Elsa’s field of vision, all that remained of Tatiana were two slender legs from the knees down.

Orthrus: “—GRAAOWRRHK!”

Eyes opened wide, legs at a halt, Elsa stood.

The head opposite to the one that had eaten Tatiana set its sights on Elsa in an attempt to devour her. Its bloodstained fangs sank into Elsa’s white skin, attempting to tear her apart—

Elsa: “—Strangely, I found that quite upsetting.”

—Following that, the Orthrus’s cranium exploded, bereaving the twin-headed demon dog of one of its halves evermore.

8

Elsa: “…”

Preventing the large mouth from closing with her arm and leg, she used her pivot leg to unleash a kick to the back of the throat laid bare.

Leg strength transcending the realm of common rationality thus blew the head of the enormous demon dog asunder from within; one half of the demon dog, a beast unparalleled in its fiendish nature, was delivered into the clutches of death.

Orthrus: "——GRAAOWRRHK!"

Elsa: "Even if one of your heads died, you're still alive. —Thank goodness."

Towards the right head, enraged by the gruesome death of its other half as it was, Elsa loosened her blood red lips into a smile.

To be frank, that kick from a moment ago had been enacted as retaliation. Of course, given that they were connected by body, the Orthrus's actions, good and bad akin, ought to have been shouldered by both of its heads.

But, it would be sorrowful to not kill an opponent she thought she should kill, especially when she had a reason to do so.

Such was how Elsa thought. —No, this was the first time she had thought it.

Elsa: "Hence, I'm going to give you a painful death."

Not once had Elsa ever thought to kill something out of hatred. To Elsa, life or death was naught more than the outcome. Pleasure was always to be derived from the process.

Orthrus: "…"

The demon dog swung its front leg down in anger, only to be caught head-on by Elsa's "newly grown" set of arms as she held her ground. Then, being rivalled in a contest of strength by a puny existence, the demon dog's pride was injured; its fur was grasped, and its body was flung with full force.

As it soared, what lay at the end of the demon dog’s parabolic arc was—

Saria: “You’ve got to be kidding, unbelievable.”

Hildea: “Unbelievable, it’s as if you’re kidding.”

Grasping the Plenilune Cirque, Saria and Hildea stood with dumbfounded expressions.

The Plenilune Cirque was indeed a mighty blade, but in a situation like this one, its lack of maneuverability was its shortcoming. Things might have been different if they could make the decision to bisect the Orthrus, but they would not deliberately diminish their fighting strength.

Saria: “HILDEA!”

Hildea: “SARIA!”

Calling out to one another, the twins halted the rotation of the Plenilune Cirque, and slipped right under the soaring demon dog. After they slipped out, they were planning on resuming the blade’s rotation.

But, as soon as the pathetic screams of the demon dog flew over above their lowered postures, a black shadow wedged its way between the two as they tried to begin spinning.

Saria & Hildea: “El—”

Elsa: “The two of you really have such a good relationship. I’m jealous.”

Saria: “SA…!”

In clearly calling out the name of the interloper, only one of the twins had been successful.

With eyes opened wide, the elder sister, Saria, reached her hand towards Elsa as the latter ascended once more. However, Elsa evaded her fingers with a leap. —All the while, carrying the younger sister, Hildea, in her arms.

Hildea: “K, yaaaaaaa—!”

A shrill shriek was raised from Hildea’s mouth, her face caught in a firm hold.

The reason being that Elsa had forced her body against a wall, scraping it down. Her hair and dress of silver hue were stained in blood, ceaselessly.

Saria: “W-Wait! Wait, Elsa! Let Hildea go!”

Hildea: “S-Saria! Saria, help! Hel… AHHHHHHHH!!”

Dragging the Plenilune Cirque along, Saria screamed. Hildea also sought rescue from the distant girl, but Elsa would allow no such thing. Giving no response, she resumed her retribution upon Hildea.

Retribution. Indeed, this was retribution. Lawful retribution, for that which had been stolen.

Elsa: “I experienced something unpleasant. Hence, I’ll let you experience the same thing. —Sit by and watch as your younger sister is tormented due to your own inadequacy.”

Saria: “—Hk!”

Her face going even more pale, Saria’s beautiful features were colored in fear.

It seemed that the Plenilune Blade functioned on the premise that it would be controlled by two people. Left behind, Saria’s movements were dull, unable to form a counterattack unto Elsa.

That was to say, the notion that one of them might be removed had not even been considered from the start.

Elsa: “Too bad.”

With Saria unable to do a thing, Elsa proceeded to destroy Hildea’s limbs.

Her shoulders, her elbows, her wrists. Her hips, her knees, her ankles. Thoroughly destroying them in proper sequence, she applied torment with bilateral symmetry, and on each occasion Hildea would scream, calling out Saria's name.

Elsa: "Ornea also spoke of it. The fact that wounds heal carries a high risk of being subjected to eternal torture with no escape. Well, Ornea couldn't feel pain, so it's a bit unfair."

The second daughter of the sisters, who knew not the fear of pain, was an existence invincible through her ability to regenerate when broken.

Uncharacteristically recalling the training she had received from her, Elsa began to destroy Hildea's body anew, as it had been attempting to heal from the outset of the prior destruction, and pitied the wretched scene.

Though, by no means did she take it easy.

Saria: "ELSA—!!"

Elsa: "—?"

Breaking Hildea's defiant arm, the number of joints had almost been doubled, and with a blood curdling expression Saria called out Elsa's name.

It appeared that she had discarded the Plenilune Cirque, standing light on her feet in a corner of the plaza. Her hand was placed upon a steel wire that was stringing Oliver up.

Clasping it with a bare hand, golden eyes shone with loathing as their gaze pierced Elsa,

Saria: "If you want this man to be returned safely, let Hildea…"

Hildea: "Gih! Gyah! Hyah! Sa, Sari…AHHHHhhhhhhh!!"

Saria: "—Hk."

Before Saria as she tried to make a threat, Hildea's head was bashed into a wall. Hildea shed blood from a gash on her forehead, and lifting that head up, Elsa displayed it to Saria.

Saria: "Hi…"

Elsa: "Do you think these conditions are equal? I can still live if Oliver ends up dying, but will you be able to live if Hildea dies?"

The question left Saria speechless.

But, the tables had already turned. The moment Hildea was seized, and the Orthrus's fighting capacity was reduced by half— no, they had turned at the very moment Tatiana was killed.

Elsa: "—I heard the sound of something dislodging inside my head."

That had been the same sensation as what one experienced when driven to the brink of death.

When one's soul was unleashed from the cage known as oneself, it would bring about an overwhelming strength alongside a feeling of ecstasy. What was now different compared to before was that there certainly dwelled an awareness within Elsa.

Mustering all the latent abilities that could only ever be drawn out through a state of ecstasy, Elsa was transformed into a weapon of annihilation that displayed the full potential of a Curse Doll.

Elsa: "…"

To put it bluntly, it differed to the very way she had been viewing the world until now.

As her limbs were being broken, Hildea attempted to resist and escape restraint. However, Elsa took no note of it. Her course of movement, her aims, Elsa could anticipate based on the fluctuations in her gaze and muscles.

This was—

Elsa: "Ornea's state of mind… How ironic."

Saria: “El—”

Elsa: “I’ll give it back.”

Encouraged by a sudden sense of fatigue, Elsa flung Hildea’s body.

Saria: “…”

Seeing that, Saria fell into a momentary astounded silence, then immediately ran to her younger sister.

Having undergone the thorough torment from Elsa, Hildea had become a loose clump of flesh and blood. Despite having been akin to two peas in a pod, the likeness of the tragic twins had already been altered definitively.

Elsa: “It’s a shame that you’re no longer matching. Let me help you match again.”

Chasing after Hildea’s flight path, the hem of Saria’s dress fluttered. With the two of them in the corner of her sight, Elsa passed by Saria, and towards the corner of the plaza— clutching the twins’ discarded Plenilune Cirque, she hauled it up through sheer force.

Saria: “—Hk!”

Pouring strength into her arms, she lifted the Plenilune Cirque. The weight of the weapon required that the twins Saria and Hildea wield it together, but with Elsa’s current physical strength, it was nothing.

Saria: “HILDEA—!!”

Looking back, she witnessed as Saria ran and caught up to the battered Hildea. Ripping the hem of her dress, Saria caught Hildea’s fall with her slender arms.

Hildea: “Sari… a…”

Saria: “It’s okay, it’ll all be okay, Hildea. We’ll—”

Embracing the bloodied body of her younger sister, tears streamed out of Saria's eyes. And, held in the arms of her elder sister, Hildea gazed with her eyes half-closed— those eyes of hers widened.

Elsa: "—I'll be sending you to meet the angels."

Serving up a smile to Hildea's dread, Elsa sent the Plenilune Cirque flying with all her might.

The titanic blade gyrated at monstrously high speeds, assailing the twins' embrace from behind.

Saria: "—Ah."

In response to the incoming Plenilune Cirque, the only thing Hildea could do, tottering on the brink of death, was widen her eyes. Saria had naught an opening to question the meaning of the reaction strewn upon her little sister's face.

Thus, the thick blade perforated Saria's back, and without faltering, cleaved her delicate body in twain. Naturally, as Hildea was being held in an embrace, she too was split in half at the chest.

Saria: "…"

Unable to even cry out in pain, Saria and Hildea both collapsed, tops parted from their bottoms. Copious amounts of blood and viscera scattered about the plaza, and the wretched sight pitifully expanded.

Saria: "Hil… dea…"

Hildea: "Sar… ia…"

Crawling with just her upper half, Saria headed towards Hildea. Sprawled out on her back atop the stone pavement, Hildea answered her slowly approaching elder sister with naught more than a gaze.

Then, the bisected sisters overlaid their hands with each other, trying to somehow reconnect—

Elsa: "—It seems like you're aware of your situation. Good dog."

A black shadow swooped down upon the twins, and the trickle of saliva sullied the bloodstained dresses a degree further. Saria and Hildea's eyes opened wide at what was transpiring, and looking down at them was the demon dog with its mouth gaping wide open.

Having lost one of its heads, the Orthrus had found itself in a battered state. Whilst raising a savage roar, it directed hostility towards the ones who were supposed to be its owners, Saria and Hildea.

Saria: "Wh…y…?"

Elsa: "Who knows? When all is said and done, I suppose it's just the way of nature. Even Witchbeasts are made to instinctively follow the strong… that's what I think."

Caressing the flattened, filthy cross section remaining of the neck, Elsa sweetly smiled. Receiving the sensation of her palm, the Orthrus hung its head to demonstrate its submission.

Rather than hatred due to its other half having been slain, it followed its instincts, and chose survival. —In that regard, beasts were more sincere to life, and thus simpler to understand.

Elsa: "Though, it'd have been best for the two of you to leave the likes of me alone."

Saria: "That's because, you were…"

Elsa: "—Did you think I was attempting to kill all of you? I never even thought of doing such a thing. The situation with Dorothea was an unfortunate misunderstanding."

Hearing Elsa's words, the twins' cheeks stiffened as if it was utterly unbelievable. Even if they made such faces, it was still the truth, so being doubted was nothing but a loss.

Towards Elsa, who harbored such discontent, the sisters composed only of upper halves directed their loathing.

Saria: "An unfortunate, misunderstanding…? Even so…"

Hildea: “You still killed Dorothea… didn’t you…?”

Elsa: “Oh my.”

Hearing the twins’ loathsome mutterings, Elsa felt something unexpected from the bottommost depths of her heart, and raised her eyebrows.

It was the same strong emotion she had harbored when this cleansing operation had begun; when she had seen Saria and Hildea at the plaza. —It was the astonishment towards the fact that these two desired to take revenge for Dorothea.

She had misunderstood these twins as girls who looked at naught else but each other, but—

Elsa: “If the two of you desired vengeance for Dorothea, then it was unavoidable. I was the one who killed Dorothea, after all. —The two of you had a reason to desire that, it would seem.”

Saria: “Elsa—”

Elsa: “So, you ought to understand, right?”

Tilting her head as she spoke, Elsa lightly tapped the Orthrus’s head.

Taking that as a signal, the Orthrus began to move. The sharp fangs lining its gaping maw mercilessly dashed towards one of the sisters sprawled out on the ground— towards Hildea.

The face of the silver haired girl twisted in sorrow, her lips calling “Sari…” to her elder sister.

However, she had not been permitted to finish that utterance. —As had been the case for Tatiana.

Saria: “HILDEA—!!!”

The maw snapped shut, and began to chew. Within the Witchbeast’s mouth, Hildea was minced, mashed, and morphed into a wreckage of flesh and blood that could not be recovered from; of this fact, Elsa and Saria akin were acutely aware.

Saria and Hildea were both Featherrun Sisters. Transformed into Curse Dolls, their flesh held an immortal nature, and as such, they would not perish with their bodies being split in two.

Nevertheless, if their bodies were masticated, eaten alive by another creature, there would be no saving them.

Elsa: "It'd be a different story for me or Ornea, though."

Saria: "Why… why, Elsa…?"

Elsa: "—? Ah, you want to ask why it only targeted Hildea? Let's see, it does seem strange to me as well, but… somehow, it seems like I'm angry."

Her other half devoured, Saria's eyes lost their light as a waterfall of tears shed from them. Her question, reminiscent of a doll, caused Elsa to reflect on herself, as she patted her chest and exhaled.

Within her heart, the accumulation of unavoidable emotions asserted themselves. That encroached on the being known as Elsa, driving her towards enacting a cruel deed.

She did not find it especially pleasant. Only, she felt just a little bit —

Elsa: "I'm relieved. Though, I don't hate either of you, that's the truth."

Saria: "…I'm, going to kill you."

Elsa: "That won't be possible."

The words rang as a malediction, however, Elsa answered without emotion. As if to affirm her response, the Orthrus, having finished its slow mastication of the younger sister, directed its gaze towards the elder.

The Witchbeast's instincts sought a decision from Elsa, to whom it had demonstrated its subservience.

Facing one who had committed inexcusable acts of barbarism, what sort of verdict would Elsa pass?

Saria: “…I’m, going to kill you.”

Elsa: “Didn’t I tell you? It’s a shame for the two of you, being so close as you are, to not be matching. So, I’ll help you match again.”

That served as the response.

Still did Saria glare at Elsa, attempting to vent her ire at the killing of Hildea. But, the Orthrus was quicker, placing Saria atop its malevolently writhing tongue.

Thus, it was but an instant until Saria, face twisting in hatred, was swallowed up by the closing fangs.

Naught a scream could be heard. Only, the sound of chewing echoed throughout the plaza— the cleansing operation that had targeted the snowy metropolis, thus met a terribly wretched end.

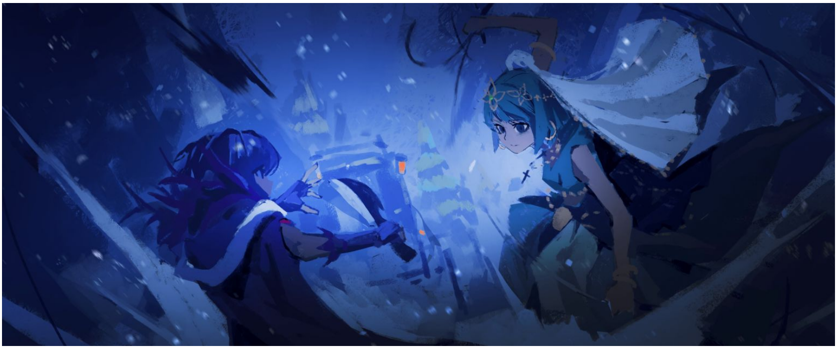

Chapter 5:
Ornea Featherrun

1

Elsa: “—The cross sections are quite pretty, and I suppose they can be reconnected since they were chilled by the snow.”

Releasing Oliver from the top of the time tower, Elsa spoke as she gently reached her hand out towards him. In her palm were six of Oliver’s severed fingers that she had picked up.

It was the result of his fingers having been tied to steel wires and applying force to them. Considering that it was a very real possibility for all his fingers to be blown off, sending Oliver himself plunging to his death, this could have even been called a miraculous outcome.

At the very least, he still retained four of his original fingers, and there was a chance that the severed six could still be reconnected.

But then again—

Elsa: “When you’re being told so by me, who can grow limbs back when they’re torn off, doesn’t it sound sarcastic, I wonder?”

Oliver: “…”

Elsa: “Hey, Oliver, are you listening?”

Giving no response, Oliver crouched atop the snow. His lack of movement almost made him appear to be dead, but Oliver slowly lifted his head when she called out to him.

His facial features, once called handsome, distorted in grief as melancholy engraved itself around his eyes and cheeks. In a completely altered state, he began to move his parched lips, and,

Oliver: “Tatiana, where…”

Elsa: “She died.”

Oliver: “—Hk.”

Elsa: “It was because she acted recklessly without bearing her own ability in mind. To think that would be the ruin of the Mad Dog, Tatiana, is quite ironic indeed.”

Oliver had been unable to grasp the state of the plaza amidst all the agony and dismay, prompting his face to stiffen.

Tatiana’s death had impacted Elsa to a much greater extent than she thought it would have. But, impacts would eventually disperse, fade, and gradually return to serenity. What remained in the aftermath, was but a tinge of loneliness.

Elsa: “…Ah, that’s right.”

Reflecting on her own feelings, Elsa was surprised at herself for feeling that tinge of loneliness.

Only lasting a mere few weeks, the time she had spent with Tatiana had been short compared to her days with the Featherrun Sisters, but it seemed to have been a pleasant relationship in its own way.

With Tatiana gone, she felt lonely. And, that had been the same for Saria and Hildea.

Elsa: “I’d also thought the same during that time with Dorothea, but… surprisingly, I am a woman with emotions.”

Oliver: “…Elsa, ye’re…”

Elsa: “Me? I’m fine. As you can see, I’m full of energy. Even if I did sustain some wounds, it’s almost like they never happened…”

Oliver: “That… ain’t it. Ye’re… ye lasses are, what th’hell are the lot o’ ye?”

Having worn out his throat from screaming, Oliver questioned her with a hoarse voice. Hearing the vague question, Elsa inclined her head with a “Who’s to say?”.

Elsa: “Even I don’t really understand it. Only, I received a peculiar body through a peculiar ritual. Though, I should have more or less been a normal human back in the days I was at your place.”

Oliver: “Healing wounds, bouncing ‘round everywhere, killing masses without batting an eye, acting like it’s all okay even when ye friend dies…”

Elsa: “…”

Oliver: “Elsa, just what th’hell are the lot o’ ye?”

That question had made her feel a definite isolation.

Somehow or another, Elsa had intended on building an amicable relationship with Oliver. Even if it seemed insolent from an outside perspective, Elsa had wanted to stand as his equal.

Though, given their roles as slaver and slave, attempting to establish an equal relationship was a rather odd notion.

Elsa: “Oliver, I’m…”

Perhaps because she had harbored that faint discord, Elsa’s response was delayed but a moment.

And in that moment, it transpired.

???: “—The Featherrun Sisters.”

Elsa: “…”

A voice suddenly cut in, snapping both Elsa and Oliver to attention.

For Oliver, it was an unknown voice of a third party, but for Elsa, it was an impossible voice to which her ears were all too familiar.

—No, it was nothing so impossible. To begin with, Saria and Hildea, who she would have never imagined would seek vengeance for Dorothea, had gone so far as to launch a cleansing operation.

In that case, the manifestation of this chance encounter had been an entirely possible development.

???: “Something wrong, Elsa? This ain’t like yourself, you look like you’ve seen a Hollow.”

Elsa: “—Ornea. So even you’ve come.”

Ornea: “…To tell you the truth, there was never any intention of actually deploying me, tho’.”

Heaving a sigh as she spoke was a young girl, her mature aura belying her youthful appearance— the second daughter of the Featherrun Sisters, Ornea Featherrun.

A tremor ran through Elsa the moment Ornea entered, the chains in the latter’s grip dragging behind her. Her specialized weapon, the kusari-fundo, had an enormous mass of flesh caught on its tip.

A writhing, deep red clump of flesh. Its identity was easy to surmise. Commanded by Saria and Hildea, yet in the end obeying Elsa by following its survival instincts, it was the Orthrus that had devoured the twins.

Elsa: “Though, it listened to what I said, so I had intended on setting it free.”

Ornea: “With one of its heads crushed? No way a twin headed demon dog is lasting long with a missing head. More importantly, this thing devoured my lil’ sisters. I’m taking their remains back.”

Elsa: “They should be totally mangled, but can you revive them?”

Ornea: “…Just grieving the dead, it’s that and nothing more. If eaten and chewed up alive, not even a Featherrun Sister… even if it were you or I, could be saved.”

Her cheeks distorting in annoyance, Ornea expressed her will to bring her sisters home along with the demon dog. Hearing that, Elsa tilted her head with “in that case”,

Elsa: “Before you take them home, do you mind if I open its stomach up? There should be a slave of Oliver’s in there along with Saria and Hildea.”

Ornea: “…Do you really think you’re in the sorta position to demand things of me like that?”

Elsa: “There shouldn’t be any harm in asking. You’re sweet, Ornea, so I thought I’d just try to ask and see.”

Ornea: “—I’m, sweet?”

That instant, stabbing into Elsa’s whole body was the bloodlust emanating from Ornea’s petite build.

In her battle against the twins, Elsa’s body had been unshackled from some kind of chains. But, although she had thought her body had arrived at the same level as Ornea’s, it trembled upon being exposed to Ornea’s murderous intent.

To think she had finally risen to Ornea’s domain, what an incredible misunderstanding. —The difference in strength between herself and the most powerful Featherrun Sister seemed even larger now that she had closed some of the gap separating them.

Moreover, in her current wounded state, just how good of a fight would she be able to put up against Ornea?

Elsa: “But then again… from the outset, I never intended on only fighting battles I know I can win.”

Ornea: “…Ever the same, aren’t you now?”

Seeing Elsa belligerently licking her lips, Ornea’s eyebrows dipped in exasperation. That instant, the bloodlust that had swept over the plaza dispersed, and the tension in Elsa's body also unconsciously vanished.

Be that as it may, the fact that Ornea still did not relax demonstrated her true strength. Back at the mansion, she had thoroughly pulverized Elsa's body as casually as making small talk.

Perceiving that sense of urgency still thick in the air, Elsa observed Ornea with utmost caution—

Oliver: "—Are ye a sister of the ones who did all this?"

The one to interject thereupon was Oliver, who had been placed outside the mosquito net.

Ornea: "…"

At the interjection of an unthinkable third party, Ornea directed her gaze towards Oliver. He had lost six of his fingers, and though the slaver ought to have been experiencing a ceaseless torment of violent pain, he received that gaze head-on.

Ornea: "Hm, now there's a face I don't know."

Oliver: "Tahaha, that so now? As ye can see, I'd intended on operating on an extensive scale, but the world just happened to be far wider and deeper than I'd imagined."

Foolishly chuckling, Oliver did not show any hints of the pain from his torture wounds. With that admirable demeanor, he craned his neck around the plaza, and signaled to the town.

Oliver: "Causing this much of an uproar in the Gustekan Church's turf… o' course, that's a huge gamble that ye could only ever pull off if ye were resolved to be branded as a heretic and hunted down."

Ornea: "Well, it certainly was a catastrophe. But, we're…"

Oliver: "Ye've got a shield covering your back to make sure that won't happen. Just before, ye said "Featherrun Sisters", aye? That's to say, the lot o’ ye are involved with Holosseo Featherrun-dono.”

Ornea: “…”

With a greasy sweat forming on his brow, Oliver’s loose lips prompted Ornea to narrow her eyes. Then, she closed the distance to Oliver, seizing the slaver by the collar with her small hand.

With Ornea’s superhuman strength, she could easily shatter Oliver’s cervical vertebrae just by pouring strength into her fingers.

Elsa: “Ornea, that man is…”

Ornea: “A slaver you’re involved with, yeah? I know this man’s been sheltering you. That’s enough grounds to say he has enmity against the Church of the Holy King.”

As Ornea constricted Oliver and spoke those words, Elsa tried to find an opening. But, even with one arm occupied, Elsa saw not a single opening in Ornea.

Nonetheless, with one of Ornea’s arms occupied with Oliver, now was her best chance. Just when she resolved herself to challenge Ornea’s small frame to a final battle as soon as possible—

Oliver: “But, ye don’t got ‘nough sense o’ duty to say anything to the Church of the Holy King, miss. That’s how it looks to me.”

Ornea: “…What?”

Oliver: “Rather, don’t it seem like ye’ve got some reservations here ‘n there? Miss, ye look like ye don’t find the wretched state of this town very pleasing, ye know?”

Ornea: “—You’re one aggravating man. There’s a foolhardiness to you that’s akin to Elsa.”

Oliver: “Though, I’m also just something like a victim being led along…”

With chilly eyes did Ornea briefly glare at Oliver as he smiled pitifully. Then, after Ornea took a long, deep sigh, Ornea: “…Indeed, I was against this cleansing operation. Even though they caused this level of destruction, Saria and Hildea died, while Elsa managed to survive.”

Oliver: “In the first place, why were ye aiming for Elsa?”

Ornea: “That’s—”

Oliver’s question pierced the crux of the matter, and Ornea’s expression contorted in silence.

The cause of that was the anguish derived from her inability to speak of the events that had served as the impetus for things having reached this state.

From what Elsa had heard from Oliver, Holosseo still seemed to be nonchalantly frequenting high society. Though, Elsa knew that the mechanism behind that lay in Sithonia’s unusual ability.

Oliver: “Ah, if ye can’t talk on it then don’t get concerned over it. ‘S just… the Elsa I know’s an unserious girl who treats every bloody thing like it’s someone else’s problem.”

Ornea: “Just what the hell is it that you wanna say?! If you’re gonna interfere with our affairs any further, I’ll pluck that head right off—”

Oliver: “Wouldn’t it be better for the lot o’ ye to actually try and just talk things out?”

Ornea: “…”

Seized by the collar, Oliver wrung out his words. His utterance left Ornea gazing in astonishment; thereupon taking her hand off him, she turned to face Elsa.

And then—

Ornea: “Right now, you and I are the only ones here. Dorothea, Saria, and Hildea are all dead, and Sithonia is waiting for a report back at the mansion. So, be honest with me, Elsa.”

Elsa: "…What is it?"

With Ornea now having released Oliver, both her hands were free, thus Elsa had missed her opportunity to get the jump on her. As that fact vexed Elsa, Ornea's lips quivered,

Ornea: "That day… the night Father died, what happened? For what reason, did you kill Father? For what reason, did you split up the Featherrun Sisters…?"

Elsa: "Ah, that day…"

At Ornea's imploring query, Elsa recalled the night in question.

When all the sisters had received missions and left the mansion, and Elsa was left behind on her own, Holosseo, whilst speaking exaggerations, had also bestowed upon her a mission.

And, as for the details of that mission—

Ornea: "Answer me! Elsa, why did you kill Father?!"

Elsa: "—? You ask some strange things. It's because the Father in question told me to do so."

Ornea: "…"

Wearing a blank expression, Elsa responded as such to the query.

And upon hearing that, Ornea's expression froze over. From her congealed expression, it seemed as if Ornea could not comprehend Elsa's words.

In fact, Ornea blinked her eyes many times over, and continued with a "Wait",

Ornea: "What… are you saying? Just now, what did you say?"

Elsa: "Like I said, I was instructed by our father. He said that it was necessary for the completion of the Curse Dolls, that the Featherrun Sisters would thus be brought to completion."

Ornea: “Bullshit.”

Elsa: “Excuse you.”

Ornea muttered aghast, to which Elsa voiced her disapproval. But, Elsa immediately realized that Ornea’s mutter was not directed towards her, but rather to something else, cursing out absurdity itself.

Ornea clutched her own head, reluctantly shaking it from side to side, and,

Ornea: “Father, he wouldn’t… no, but, a doll maker has methods that only a doll maker can comprehend, no? In that case, for what reason have we all been…”

Oliver: “Just meaningless fighting to the death, I s’ppose that’s all ye were doing. If that’s the case, I offer me condolences.”

Ornea: “—Hk!”

Amidst her confusion, Ornea erupted at Oliver’s interruption. Her kusari-fundo screeched as it violently smashed the stone pavement in the plaza right next to Oliver.

Oliver: “…”

But, receiving that deadly threat, there was no change in Oliver’s demeanor; rather, it was Ornea’s throat that clogged up as if she had been cornered.

Ornea: “You’re…”

Oliver: “Suppose it’s actually as Elsa said…”

As Oliver continued, Ornea listened as she held her tongue. She had fallen right into the scheme laid by Oliver’s silver tongue, though she did not seem aware of that fact.

As Oliver gestured his finger-lacking hand towards the unaware Ornea, Oliver: “If the source of your quarrel lay within himself, he ought’ve taken measures to prevent ye from fighting to the death. Maybe your father wasn’t the type to be prone to such thoughts?”

Ornea: “Bullshit! Our father’s thinking might have been inscrutable, but, that sorta…”

Elsa: “—Ornea?”

Ornea: “That, sorta…

Ornea protested fervently, but that fervor withered as she spoke. Looking as if she had realized something, Ornea did not even respond to Elsa’s call,

Ornea: “I need to confirm something…”

With that, she turned her back towards Elsa and Oliver.

Releasing the Orthrus’s flesh from her kusari-fundo, she quickly retracted her weapon. Then, once again did Elsa call out “Ornea” to the petite figure,

Elsa: “If you’re leaving Saria and Hildea behind, would it be alright for us to mourn them over here?”

Ornea: “—. Do as you please. I’ve got things to do.”

Elsa: “I see… Hey, Ornea. Ever since that night, we haven’t had any time to just leisurely talk.”

Ornea was just about to walk away, but her legs came to a halt. Looking at the back of her tiny elder sister, Elsa reflected on that night— the night Holosseo had died.

Things had gotten out of hand, and they had ended up parting without exchanging words, but—

Elsa: “I really do find it regrettable. That’s how I truly feel.”

Ornea: “…”

Elsa: “So be the Silver Affection. —Ornea.”

Giving no response to that prayer, Ornea departed as she left footprints on the snow-covered path. Only when her figure disappeared from sight did Elsa finally feel like she had made it out alive.

She had made it out alive from a situation she had no chance of winning. While grateful to that fortune, she gazed out over the wretched scene.

The plaza was filled with heaps of corpses that perished in the cleansing operation, and while similar sights ought to have been spread around various places in town, the only ones Elsa grieved for were her sisters and Tatiana, all eaten by the Orthrus.

At the very least, she would bury them someplace a little higher; that was all Elsa thought.

2

On lands outside the grace of Hallowed Land, even just digging a grave was hard work.

Clearing away the snow that had amassed on top, smashing through the snow that had frozen in place, and breaking the even further glaciated subnivean soil, the act of simply digging a hole felt like excavating a boulder, but finally, she cleared out a satisfactory grave hole.

A hillock from where Innorandum could be seen below, was the location Elsa had selected as a gravesite.

Elsa: “Three graves would be too tiring, so please bear with this. You may find Tatiana a handful, but you did kill her, so I thought you should take responsibility.”

With that, Elsa heaved the Orthrus carcass into the pit, entombing Tatiana and the twins, Saria and Hildea, all together. Including the Orthrus, it was a tomb for three people and one beast.

By digging this grave, Elsa’s arms were the worse for wear.

Her fingers had lost most of their original form, and a vast amount of blood was scattered around her. Without any tools, Elsa had needed to break her own arms in order to break the frozen soil.

Thus, she had broken them. That was all there was to it.

Oliver: “Even if that’s all, that’s normally something ye’d hesitate on.”

Elsa: “They’ll heal, so it’s no big deal. It hurts, but it’s fine if I just ignore it a little.”

Oliver: “A little, huh. Having lost some of my own fingers, I can’t understand that attitude in the slightest.”

Gazing over the completed grave, Oliver, who had been watching over Elsa as she worked, chuckled sarcastically. It was the sort of smile he did not show very often, but Elsa did not touch upon it.

Instead, Elsa called out “Oliver” to him,

Elsa: “—Torture is designed to make you divulge secrets, so I think there was no helping it.”

Indeed, as Oliver blamed himself, Elsa provided not consolation, but the matter-of-fact truth.

Oliver: “…”

Hearing Elsa’s words, Oliver cast his unpleasant expression downwards.

Oliver’s whole body had been tormented by the twins, including the loss of his fingers. It was unclear how the twins had located Oliver, but the reason why Elsa and Tatiana’s whereabouts had become the target location for the cleansing operation was apparent.

None other than Oliver had yielded that information in torture.

As a result, Innorandum became the target of a cleansing operation, and Tatiana had perished.

Oliver: “I’m a damn failure of a slaver…”

Elsa: “Is that so? Ah, but, you might be right. I’ve never heard of a slaver falling into such a depressive slump after letting a slave die.”

Oliver: “Tatiana… she was a girl who deserved to find happiness…”

Elsa: “Indeed. But, I think it’s presumptuous to say that dying means she was unhappy.”

Elsa refuted Oliver’s voice, which was not a tearful one, but rather, one that cursed himself and himself alone.

Speaking of Tatiana’s final moments as if they had ended in mere unhappiness rubbed her the wrong way.

In the end, Tatiana’s expression when she pulled Elsa away and threw herself before the Orthrus— it was not one that lamented her own imminent death.

Her spirit had arrived at a different place, one that transcended such notions.

Hence—

Elsa: “Tatiana’s death belonged to Tatiana alone. It’s not something for outsiders like us to say this or that about. More importantly, let’s do what we have to do.”

Oliver: “…What we’ve got to do? What in the world’re ye talking about?”

Elsa: “First of all, sticking your fingers back on. When you lack that many fingers, it’s bound to be an inconvenience. I don’t like that. You need to be taken care of”

Before the grave, she grabbed Oliver by the shoulders as he crouched weakly, and dragged him up to his feet. For a moment, Oliver attempted to resist Elsa’s hands, but he immediately realized the futility of that action.

Just as he had mocked himself, Oliver slowly shook his head side to side, and,

Oliver: “No matter what it is, I’ve never been able to go against ye… When ye think of it like that, the notion that I’m a failure of a slaver, it might be something I’m only realizing way too late now.”

Elsa: “Yes, truly. It’s truly too late now.”

Oliver strained a smile at Elsa’s merciless evaluation. Seemingly dragging him along, Elsa would search for a doctor to reattach his fingers, and so, once again, they returned to Innorandum.

All the while, her instincts were telling her that the time they could spend quietly like this, would not last long.

3

???: “…”

Storming through the familiar mansion with quick steps, Ornea forced open the door to the room of her destination as if she were tearing it down.

Ever-present in the heart of Holosseo’s office, a space crammed with stacks of confidential documents that could not be taken outside, was Sithonia.

Sithonia: “…Have you returned, Ornea?”

She closed the book she had been reading with nary a sound, gazing upon Ornea with her red eyes. Receiving her gaze head on, Ornea nodded with a “Yeah”.

Ornea: “I’m back. I’ve returned… Saria and Hildea, they both died.”

Sithonia: “…It would seem so. I received a report of a failed cleansing operation. However, I had not heard anything about you heading to Innorandum. Why act on your own accord?”

Ornea: “That’s, because… I was gonna provide backup, to Saria and Hildea…”

Sithonia: “But, the two of them died. And it was not because you arrived too late, correct? You intentionally let them both die… No, that is not it.”

Shaking her head, Sithonia slowly stood up from her chair. Then, as her long, red hair fluttered, Sithonia stood in front of Ornea, running her fingers through the latter’s green hair.

Feeling a ticklish sensation on her temple, Ornea caught her breath.

Sithonia: “You were unable to decide on whether to support Saria and Hildea, or Elsa.”

Ornea: “—Hk.”

Sithonia: “You did always dote on Elsa. Being as sweet as you are, choosing between sisters is impossible for you.”

As Sithonia’s icy voice pointed out thus, Ornea’s slender shoulders trembled.

She had hit the mark, and there was no room for excuses. Ornea had rushed to the battlefield amidst the cleansing operation and could have entered the fray whenever she wished.

But, she had done no such thing. —After all, she could not decide on whom to support.

Thus, Ornea’s indecision had allowed the sisters’ mortal combat to play out until the end.

Sithonia: “Ultimately, Elsa killed Saria and Hildea, that’s three sisters total including Dorothea. Of the Featherrun Sisters, you and I are the only two remaining…”

Ornea: “If, if our assumption was wrong from the outset, what then?!”

Sithonia: “—?”

The tenacious utterance of Ornea caused Sithonia to make a curious expression. Looking right up at Sithonia, Ornea referred to the owner of the office, the deceased Holosseo,

Ornea: “I spoke with Elsa. This is what she told me: the reason she killed Father was because Father had ordered her to do so. In other words, we’d misunderstood things right from the start!”

Sithonia: “…”

Ornea: “Father had some unfathomable objective. And for that reason, Father was killed by Elsa; she was never good at explaining things, and because of that, we chased her away… so then…”

Sithonia: “So then, you want to forgive Elsa? Ornea, are you truly saying that?”

Ornea: “—Ah.”

Her cheeks clasped by two hands, Ornea fell silent at Sithonia’s question. Lowering the hand that had been caressing her hair, Sithonia questioned the intent behind Ornea’s hesitation.

Would she truly be fine with that? And, on top of that—

Sithonia: “So you spoke with Elsa… That is why I had not wanted to let you go to Innorandum.”

Ornea: “…Sithonia?”

Her face suddenly released from the grasp, Ornea blinked her eyes. Sithonia took a step back, and from within the heap of documents, she pulled out a single note.

Holding it to her chest, Sithonia silently sighed before the perplexed Ornea,

Sithonia: “—The Witch of Envy.”

And, she muttered so.

The repulsive reverberance strewed confusion in Ornea, as well as an even greater sense of revulsion. For all who lived in this world, it was a vile name, one to be avoided, one to be feared.

An existence that even the Featherrun Sisters, who by no means walked under the light, found repugnant. It was a dreadful, hideous name of a being that once attempted to destroy the world.

Ornea: “Why, that name…?”

Sithonia: “Did you know? In the past, there were Witches in this world other than the Witch of Envy. But, those Witches were killed by the Witch of Envy, thus stealing their power. It is told that by doing so, the Witch of Envy became a being whom none could rival.”

Sithonia began to speak at length about history that was not commonly known. The fact that other Witches had existed was something that not even Ornea had been aware of. Hence, that topic in itself was something that surprised her. However—

Ornea: “That topic, why are you bringing it up now…?”

Sithonia: “—Because, it is not irrelevant to us, as Curse Dolls.”

As chills of unpleasant dread tinged her senses, Ornea interrupted Sithonia. As if knowing that, Sithonia continued with the note held against her chest.

Sithonia: “Ornea, do you know what the root of a Curse Doll is?”

Ornea: “…I heard it’s something that makes use of Curse Arts. By using the principle that the effectiveness of a Curse Art doesn’t fade until it can no longer manifest, we obstruct our own deaths.”

Sithonia: “Exactly, a curse does not perish until it kills its target. Curse Dolls utilize this… we cannot perish without killing an opponent we must kill.”

Ornea: “I agree with that, but… no, wait…”

Nodding as Sithonia spoke, Ornea called a timeout.

The inability to die without killing an opponent who must be killed. If that was the special characteristic of a Curse Doll, then how had Dorothea and the others died?

Ornea: “It’s a fact that we had individual differences in our regeneration ability. But, if what you’re saying is certain, then they should’ve made it out alive, given enough time…”

Sithonia: “It’s quite simple, Ornea. —It’s because they exchanged lives with an opponent they needed to kill.”

Ornea: “…”

Ornea’s dread grew ever larger, slowly crawling up her spine. Rejecting the instincts that told her that the dread originated not from within the conversation, but from Sithonia herself, Ornea shook her head from side to side.

Sithonia: “The reason the Witch of Envy became such a mighty existence, was because she killed and devoured the other Witches. Thus, the one who had thought to enact that very same phenomenon, was Holosseo Featherrun.”

Rather than as “Father”, Sithonia called Holosseo by name. A concern about the contents of the note clutched to her chest began to gnaw at Ornea’s heart, and thus she reached out her hand.

Ornea: “Sithonia, what’s written on that? Show me.”

Sithonia: “Holosseo’s Curse Arts, the Curse Dolls birthed thereforth… the Featherrun techniques are a remnant of heresy from the era of the ancient Witches. And, there is a person who cannot help but lust for them.”

Ornea: “SITHONIA—!!”

Sithonia: “—That person is mine abominable, accursed Mother.”

Sithonia’s confession was as a poem, causing Ornea to tear her legs off the ground.

The feelings between sisters, the deep affection that a second daughter bore the eldest, in this moment was overturned, morphing into hatred.

Sithonia had schemed something in secrecy away from the sisters.

And, that had been the genesis of the sisters' division, bereaving Ornea of the days she had envisioned.

Therefore—

Ornea: "Once I've knocked you down, I'll—"

Hear you out; brandishing her kusari-fundo, Ornea's fierce attack attempted to strike Sithonia.

Their relationship was that of eldest and second daughters, but with Ornea's level of strength, Sithonia was no match for her. Hence, her reaction time was not fast enough to evade Ornea's attack.

That was to say, there had been a different reason why Ornea's blow came to a halt.

For instance, getting her arms and legs tangled up in her very own kusari-fundo.

Sithonia: "You did well, how admirable."

Immediately after hearing Sithonia's gentle voice, Ornea fell head-first onto the floor without bracing for impact. Hitting her nose hard, a lukewarm sensation, blood, dripped out of her nose.

There was no pain. By birth, that was how it always was for her. But, something was strange.

Ornea: "M-My body…"

She could not move it at will. If it had merely stiffened up that would have been preferable, but it was not even that.

Half of Ornea's body was being restrained by her own kusari-fundo. Not because she had erred in its handling, but rather, the act of restraint was borne of a definite will.

However, no such intent existed within Ornea. So its very presence meant that—

Ornea: "No way, what did you do to my body…?"

Sithonia: “I have known you the longest, so it was not so difficult to gradually soak it into you. Though, it was painful for my heart.”

Sithonia squatted down next to Ornea, the latter collapsed onto the floor, unmoving. Whilst taking care to mind the hem of her dress, she cast an unaltered, gentle gaze onto Ornea.

Then, as Ornea caught her breath, Sithonia softly presented the note before her eyes. With that profound article thrust before her, Ornea’s eyes scanned its contents,

Ornea: “Bull… shit…”

—Knowing it to be a note left behind by Holosseo Featherrun, she was aghast.

Of course, it contained many things worthy of astonishment. But, what truly earned her shock was none other than Sithonia, who had known about the note’s existence, and had kept it hidden.

Ornea: “SITHONIA, YOU’RE…!”

Sithonia: “I am grateful to you, to the sisters, to Holosseo, that is the truth.”

Interrupting Ornea as she raised her voice, Sithonia spoke so. Ornea was left speechless at her audacity, and as Sithonia placed her hand over her own chest,

Sithonia: “Even if it was only for a brief time, being away from that woman’s side has truly felt like salvation. However, the time for viewing such dreams has ended. —Ornea, I envy you.”

Betrayed by one she had believed in, and the power she was so sure was absolute suppressed, Ornea lay sprawled on the ground in vexation; looking down on her, Sithonia placed an earnest envy upon her own tongue.

With that earnest envy upon her tongue, Sithonia spoke.

Sithonia: “Without knowing a thing, able to remain as a little girl, I truly, oh so truly, envy you.”

4

—As soon as her eardrums caught a faint clangor of metal, Elsa picked up Oliver’s body.

Elsa: “…”

Applying the lessons learned from the last time, there was no negligence.

When out in town with Tatiana, it had been far too lacking in vigilance for her to have walked around without carrying a weapon. Given the result begotten by that accumulated negligence, she was firmly opposed to letting it happen a second time.

Elsa: “Besides, if I was as careless this time, I would have been killed.”

Of course, Saria and Hildea had also been formidable foes, but the difference in their potential had turned the tables on them. However, such an upheaval would not work against the next opponent. Not to mention, if she was careless in any capacity, she was convinced that she would be snuffed out in an instant along with that carelessness.

Hence, for the first time in Elsa’s life, she removed from herself every last sliver of negligence.

Oliver: “Wai—?!!”

The screams of Oliver could be heard as she picked him up, but Elsa showed no concern. Lifting one of her long legs and kicking down the window of the dragon carriage, she leaped outside whilst carrying Oliver.

Immediately afterwards, the dragon carriage they had escaped from was seized by a clangor of metal, the impact pulverizing the frame to smithereens.

There had been other passengers riding the public transport dragon carriage, but the passengers, coachman, and ground dragons alike, were crushed, cast away to become an amalgamation of flesh and blood where none could be differentiated from the other.

Thus, that which had carried out such an extraordinary feat of destruction— was a chain of silver hue, writhing like a snake.

Elsa: "—Ornea."

The wreckage of the utterly macerated dragon carriage, and the kusari-fundo that brought that reality to fruition. The identity of its wielder laid in the small silhouette standing upon the forward path of the dragon carriage.

Clad in an emerald dress to suit the green of her hair, that had been the onslaught of Ornea Featherrun.

Oliver: "So she's come, aye? That lass…"

Still held in Elsa's arms, Oliver muttered, his reattached fingers wrapped in bandages.

It was an ambush on their way back to base after completing his medical treatment. Elsa had not gotten that impression, but if Ornea had been wary of their escape, Elsa would have expected for a fight to have been picked before they went into hiding.

Elsa: "My body has also returned to form… the playing field is even."

After a few days had passed, she had replenished her lacking flesh and blood through eating.

The wounds she had sustained during Saria and Hildea's assault had already healed, and there was no longer anything impeding her ability to fight. If there was anything at all in the way of Elsa doing battle, that would be,

Elsa: "You're in the way, so get back, Oliver. It would be troubling were you to end up like Tatiana."

Oliver: "Ye bloody… ahh, shit!"

As he tried to scratch his head, his lack of fingers prevented him from doing so. As a result, Oliver shook his moderately-long hair, and as he parted from Elsa's side,

Oliver: "Elsa! Ye'd better not die before I can sell ye off!"

Elsa: "Your merchant's soul is strong. I don't dislike it."

Without even a passing glance at Oliver as he shouted and distanced himself, Elsa faced off against Ornea, a distance greater than ten meters between them.

Ten meters. —Such may have been the separation, but for Elsa and Ornea, it was tantamount to there being no distance between them at all. Not to mention, the range of Ornea's kusari-fundo would easily hit its mark at even double that distance.

Elsa: "At any rate, have you changed your ideologies, I wonder? Before, you'd hated to get the surroundings involved, so to think you'd take out an entire dragon carriage in order to kill us…"

Ornea: "…"

Elsa: "Moreover, I think you also used to be more talkative."

With a sidelong glance to the flattened dragon carriage, Elsa tilted her head.

However, Ornea gave no reply. —Nay, a reply there had been. Not one of words, but through an instantaneous impact delivered by the kusari-fundo.

Elsa: "—Hk."

Promptly reeling her head back, she narrowly evaded the unleashed weight as it grazed past her cheek. Enough might dwelled in the unleashed weight to crush a human skull as if it were a fruit.

That was not difficult to infer from how it made the snow-covered road seem to explode behind her.

Thus, with that attack as the impetus, Elsa and Ornea began their fight to the death.

Elsa: “Sh—”

With a low posture, Elsa dashed across the snow at the speed of an arrow.

Erasing the distance of ten meters in the literal blink of an eye, she brandished her blade. The curved blade, wielded in a reverse grip, was the armament she had prepared for confrontation against Ornea.

As a result of seeking the weapon that suited her best whilst being half-killed by Ornea many a time in the basement underneath the Featherrun Mansion, this was the territory at which she had arrived.

Elsa: “With this, I’m going to gouge out your heart.”

Ornea: “…”

Elsa: “How cold.”

With a silver flash of light, the blade surged towards Ornea’s thin chest, just as promised. But, Ornea safeguarded against the attack by forcing her arm into the path of the blade, causing her left arm to be blown off from the elbow down.

However, scattering blood as it flew, the pain or sense of loss incurred by that severed arm would not serve as cause to stop Ornea. —Congenital analgesia, that was undoubtedly the characteristic that made Ornea the strongest.

Born with an inability to feel pain, Ornea was unconcerned with the destruction of her own body. Hence, she could carry out acts of savagery as calmly as if she were playing with dolls.

Reversing the direction of the blade that sliced off the arm, another blow aimed for Ornea’s neck. With her unbelievably flexible body, Ornea bent backwards to evade it. —No, she had not evaded it with her flexible body. Ornea had deliberately broken her own ankles and knees, forcibly lowering her body to escape the range of the blade.

Then, the shattered bores in her ankles reconnected in an instant, and she took up the offensive. A fist rocketed upwards with the force of her rising body, crashing directly into Elsa's upraised knee.

Elsa: "—Hk."

The report of an impact splitting the air, Elsa's knee and Ornea's arm simultaneously shattered.

Crushed were the bodies of the assailant and assailed akin; the extraordinary destructive explosion was made manifest only due to the fact that neither party cared for the destruction of their own bodies.

'Twas a madness born of transcending mortal bounds, made possible by a lack of concern for their own survival.

An unorthodox fight to the death it was, one that disregarded a core tenet of all living beings, that of protecting one's own life.

Elsa: "Fufu, aha, AHAHAHAHA—!!!"

As they clashed with murderous intent that scattered blood, shattered bone, and splattered flesh, Elsa's lips loosened, a roar of laughter resounding upon the snowy road.

With halting steps, swift conduct, and occasional flying about, the battle unfolded.

Even if they evaded each other, it was the utmost extremity of combat, with seldom a notion of defense in mind.

A fight to the death between those who could not die, in which certain death would be inescapable for anyone save the Featherrun Sisters, made possible expressly because they were Featherrun Sisters.

Their dismembered arms and legs, their crushed eyeballs and throats, their streaming blood, their lives, all would regenerate.

This fight to the death, a sacrilege of life, could not have taken place between anyone except Elsa and Ornea. That was precisely why, vigilant of Ornea’s power, Elsa had awaited the arrival of this day.

She had awaited this murderous game, where both parties would exert the utmost of their desperate efforts, and relish in the sensation of being brought to the brink of that distant demise.

Elsa: “Fu—!!”

Meeting the oncoming fist with her own, both of their arms were smashed up to their elbows. At a range so close that their shoulders crashed into each other, Elsa brandished her specialized weapon, piercing directly into Ornea’s throat. At the same time, Ornea wrapped her kusari-fundo around Elsa’s neck, giving rise to a firm report as it snapped backwards.

Both had suffered fatal wounds to the neck. With a momentary severance in consciousness, the one with the slower recovery would receive a serious blow.

A sound arose, and life poured in to mend her snapped neck, allowing blood to flow and restore her brain. However, that recovery had taken nearly a full second. In that time, Ornea would have been able to recover faster—

Ornea: “…”

But recover, she did not.

Neck perforated, Ornea sunk back as she spewed out blood, extracting the curved blade. Then, taking a step forward to catch up to her, this time Elsa slammed the extracted blade into her forehead.

Forehead smashed, the curved blade churned the brains located within. Her eyes losing their sense of focus, copious amounts of gore spurted out from Ornea’s nose and ears, and bearing witness, Elsa howled.

Elsa: “Ah, AHH, AHHHHHHHHH—!!!”

With her curved blade lodged inside her opponent’s cranium, Elsa ripped Ornea's body asunder with her bare hands. Mauling her neck, thrusting her fingers into the open wounds, she tore open Ornea's body with every ounce of strength she could muster.

Just as a fish would be flayed, Ornea's blood and viscera spilled out as she fell apart. Unwilling to permit that destruction, Ornea shot her shattered knees upwards, driving them into her opponent's face. Her thus upraised legs were grabbed, and her body was brutally slammed down into the snow.

Then, straddling the face-up Ornea, Elsa snatched up the kusari-fundo, and slammed the weight down over, and over, and over and over and over and over again, pulverizing her cranium.

Smashing, smashing, smashing, pulverizing, pulverizing—

Oliver: "—ELSA! ELSA! THAT'S ENOUGH! YE'VE DONE ENOUGH!!"

As Elsa swung downwards with an unceasing destructive impulse, it was Oliver who grappled her from behind, desperate to stop her.

When she slowly shifted her gaze, into her vision came Oliver, his face wrought with resolve. Splotches of blood were speckled over his body, and his clothes were disheveled as if he had been sent flying.

—No, it was not as if he had been sent flying. He had been sent flying.

In his attempt to stop Elsa as she lost control of herself in her unending beatdown of Ornea, time after time had Oliver tried to grab Elsa, and each time he had continued to be hurled away, tumbling over.

Repeating that over and over, he had finally brought Elsa back to her senses, putting an end to the violence.

Elsa: "Hah, hah, haah…"

Her breathing heavy, Elsa looked down at the one she had been straddling, Ornea— or at least that which had once been Ornea.

With her skull having been relentlessly bashed in, the girl had been crushed like a fruit.

That figure, with nary a twitch, had completely forfeited any and all ability to do battle.

Oliver: “Elsa… have ye settled down?”

Clinging to her arms, perhaps due to having been flung away several times, Oliver’s bandages had come undone. On that hand of his, three fingers were missing. —His fingers had not all been able to be attached. It was uncertain whether the remaining fingers would ever be able to move again.

Though, even if he lacked fingers, it would not be all too troubling as a slaver—

Elsa: “…It’s not the time to be thinking such things.”

Smiling at her own useless thoughts, Elsa once again took in the sight of Ornea’s unmoving remains.

Without speaking even a single word, Ornea had been pulverized by Elsa. Contrary to her sweet nature, she who had been unbelievably strong, had become utterly unrecognizable.

Why, why had Elsa won? —That was incorrect. Elsa had not defeated Ornea.

This was something else entirely, something that was not Ornea. Ornea had already been dead by the time she ambushed Elsa. Hence, this was an empty husk, one that could have never possibly hoped to be Ornea.

—In the end, the only two who remained were Elsa and Sithonia.

Chapter 6:
Sithonia Featherrun

1

—To locate the patch of Hallowed Land known as the Featherrun Estate had required quite a bit of effort.

Even within the Gustekan Church, they were a secret unit, one whose acts of service would never be revealed to the public. That was the position the Featherrun Sisters had been placed in, and had been their duty for many years.

To find those who knew of their existence, and those who possessed any further details, had been no easy task. Systematically, they followed the sequential order with sights set on their destination.

That had been a difficult journey given Elsa's lazy personality, but not once had she thought to give up along the way. To that extent, it was an issue difficult to abandon for Elsa.

For that purpose, she had snuck into the domiciles of those who seemed well informed regarding the Gustekan Church, forced them to speak about what they knew, silenced them, and brought about circumstances such that many important individuals in the Church of the Holy King to be replaced; accreting all those deeds, she finally found it.

Thus, Elsa had succeeded in returning home after several long months.

Elsa: "…"

Returning home for the first time in what felt like ages, the mansion was in a wretched state.

The garden to which Dorothea had tended had ceased to be maintained after she disappeared, the beautiful flowers having been taken over and ousted by weeds.

Saria and Hildea's dog kennel had fallen silent, and the surrounding area had become dominated by a cold, dry stillness, with nary a merry tone in sight.

The dining hall frequented by the gluttonous Ornea had also become quite desolate, and because everyone who would sit around the dining table had disappeared, the water in the flower vases had not been changed either.

Elsa: "If she's stopped keeping up any and all appearances…"

This had once been an ephemeral flower garden of dreams constructed by slave girls. Having woken up from those dreams, it was no longer possible for anyone to remain here.

Nobody could remain here, so nobody could put an end to the devastation of that flower garden.

Feeling loneliness in that, Elsa's legs, as if being guided forth, proceed deeper into the mansion— ironically, she descended the steps that led to the underground, a place that had left the greatest impression on Elsa.

She had only lived in this mansion for half a year, but just how many times had she descended these steps? And, in that cold, dark place, just how many fatal wounds had she suffered?

—By approaching death, she grasped the satisfaction of life that she had nearly given up.

That had been a ridiculously ironic enticement, but it had been necessary for Elsa.

Thus, as she set foot into the nostalgic basement—

???: "…So, not even Ornea was able to stop you."

Indeed, alongside a quiet voice, Sithonia appeared clad in a dress of red.

Ever unchanged was her posture, overlapping with the one present in Elsa's memories. —A malevolent weapon akin to Dorothea, traps akin to Saria and Hildea, a revenant stance akin to Ornea, without conforming to any of those traits, it was a figure truly befitting Sithonia.

Elsa: "Though, I'd surely thought you would have made many more preparations to welcome me."

Sithonia: "Indeed, I had considered it. But, given that you were able to eliminate Ornea, any trap I set would be futile, correct? Even I am capable of understanding that…"

Elsa: "—Please, don't refer to that as Ornea."

Sithonia: "…"

Sithonia's gentle manner of speaking found itself interrupted by an icy remark from Elsa's lips. Coming from Elsa, that was a rare vocalization of emotion.

Perhaps finding Elsa's words surprising, Sithonia slightly raised her eyebrows,

Sithonia: "I am surprised. So even you were in possession of sisterly emotions.”

Elsa: “Sisterly emotions, sympathy for Ornea, I have both… What did you do to Ornea? How in the world did you break her mind, I wonder?”

Receiving Elsa’s query, Sithonia cast her eyes down in sorrow.

Ornea’s mind had been shattered. —That was the conclusion Elsa had drawn after engaging in mortal combat against Ornea, achieving a crushing victory. That had been the root of her victory, which had allowed her to defeat the weakened Ornea upon that snowfield.

If she were to have done battle against the real Ornea in earnest, the probability for Elsa to be still standing here would either have been fifty-fifty, or likely even less than that.

Elsa: “But, I would never let myself be defeated by Ornea in such a state. And so, here I am.”

Sithonia: “Then, by killing me, you intend to achieve completion as a Curse Doll, yes?”

Elsa: “…What?”

Her words of mourning were halted by Sithonia’s unthinkable statement.

The completion of the Curse Dolls; as Elsa narrowed her eyes at that utterance, Sithonia smiled. That had been a terribly parched smile, one very much unlike Sithonia.

Sithonia: “Do not deceive me. I am aware. I know, Elsa. Of what Father set into motion, on that night. Of the death battle between sisters, the rite of Curse Doll completion.”

Elsa: “…”

Sithonia: “For the purpose of acquiring this Curse Doll art, I arrived here at Featherrun… however, if it never started, that would have been fine. After all, the days I spent here were of great comfort!”

Clutching at her chest tightly, with a grievous smile strewn upon her face, Sithonia complained to Elsa.

Coming and going through Elsa's mind were the days she had spent with her sisters at this mansion. Amidst those days, it was no lie that Sithonia, whilst thinking of and ordering around the sisters, felt fulfilled.

It could not have been a lie. Even so, she still—

Elsa: "—You desired the completion of the ritual. That's why you sent Dorothea, then Saria and Hildea, over to me in order. Shattering Ornea's mind, it was for the same reason, wasn't it?"

Sithonia: "…"

Elsa: "A completed Curse Doll… is that really such an enticing idea to you?"

Sithonia: "You…!"

Tilting her head, Elsa voiced a question with a scant few emotions, causing Sithonia to bite her lip. Violent emotions emerged on her face, laying bare the negative thoughts that had amassed within Sithonia.

And, Elsa's keen sense of smell was already alert as to what that was.

People would emit all sorts of scents just by living their lives. For Elsa, routinely picking up on them as she lived day to day, was an act as natural as breathing.

—The emotion oozing out of Sithonia, the truth of it was "terror".

An unbearable, expansive terror was enveloping Sithonia, urging her to commit atrocities.

Elsa: "Just what in the world are you so afraid of?"

Sithonia: "…The most dreadful, most repulsive being in this world."

Elsa: “Dreadful, and repulsive…”

Sithonia’s voice, trembling with fear, prompted Elsa to imagine the object of that fear. However, Elsa had a weak imagination, so there was no concreteness provided to that which Sithonia feared.

The dreadful, repulsive being that frightened Sithonia, it was—

Sithonia: “—Mother.”

Elsa: “Mother…”

Sithonia: “To be precise, the monster that calls itself my mother. In order to escape that monster’s dominion, I require that secret art…!”

Asserting so, Sithonia’s eyes bore an impulsive light residing within. That instant, as if hailed by Sithonia’s emotions, shadows swooped down upon Elsa as she stood stock still.

Promptly reacting, Elsa swung the curved blade that she had drawn from the hem of her dress. And not missing her mark, Elsa slit open the torso of the one who had leaped at her.

But, before Elsa’s eyes, after inflicting the fatal slash, a variance was borne in that wound.

Elsa: “This is…”

In the blink of an eye, the wound on the figure closed up.

Then, grabbing Elsa’s arm in her moment of surprise, the figure slammed her body into the ground. She made somewhat of an attempt to shake it off, but to no avail. After all, the figure was not alone.

One, two— no, five, then six, one after another did the assassins emerge from the shadows. Each and every one of these figures possessed empty eyes, and were clad in dresses.

Elsa: “These girls are…”

Sithonia: “—Do you recall the night of the ritual?”

Looking down on Elsa, pinned to the ground, Sithonia embraced her own elbows as she posed a question. The “night of the ritual” in question was a night different to the one upon which Holosseo had perished.

—It was the night upon which Elsa, by way of a secret art, had attained the body of a Curse Doll. Recalling the details of the night of the ritual, Elsa realized the identities of the surrounding dress-clad assassins.

That day, Dorothea had spoken thus. —Many had perished in the ritual’s failure.

She had assuredly thought that they had all lost their lives, but that had not been the case. Because they had lacked the adaptability to become Curse Dolls, it was their ego that they forfeited—

Elsa: “Just like Ornea, they live only to follow orders…”

Sithonia: “That is my poison. My trump card. This underground, in truth, is not a place for us sisters to battle to the death. It was a place to discard those who failed to become sisters.”

As if to supplement Sithonia’s explanation, walking out of the dim lighting in droves were the ruined husks of what ought to have all been formerly beautiful maidens.

No matter how beautiful they may have been in life, their shattered and abandoned hearts rendered that beauty meaningless, completely reducing them to mere repulsive dolls.

Beholding them, Elsa thought aloud with an “Ah”.

Elsa: “These girls fit the term “Curse Dolls” much more than we do.”

Sithonia: “Yes, yes, exactly, Elsa! It is just as you say… these are Curse Dolls. Exceedingly unsightly and wicked… however, that is why I require their power.”

Elsa: “…So that you can obtain a body that doesn’t die, and escape from your mother’s dominion?”

Sithonia: “Yes, exactly!”

With an ardent expression, Sithonia affirmed Elsa’s words. Firmly tapping her heel on the ground, the eldest daughter unveiled her objective, and upon hearing it, Elsa took a long, deep breath.

In order to escape her mother’s dominion, she was attempting to complete the ritual imposed by her father.

Even just looking at it literally, it was far too comical.

Elsa: “Sithonia… you’re an extremely pitiful girl, wouldn’t you say?”

Sithonia: “Elsa?”

Elsa: “Wanting to get away from your mother, you imitate your father’s way of doing things… although, if you were so troubled, you ought to have just talked to someone. If you had done that…”

Sithonia: “—BUT! YOU WERE THE ONE WHO STARTED IT!”

Sithonia rejected Elsa’s pity head-on. Her basis: the night upon which Holosseo was killed— she tried to frame Elsa’s act of killing him as the genesis.

Sithonia: “By killing Father, you set the rite into motion. You started the rite to bring the Curse Dolls to completion… so then, the only choice I have left is to come out on top.”

Elsa: “…”

Sithonia: “Emerging victorious, and becoming a completed Curse Doll. If I do that, I can escape her dominion.”

Repeating herself, Sithonia spoke of her own desire.

Just how much fear had needed to be tasted, how much despair had needed to be known in order to engrave Sithonia’s soul with such wounds, Elsa knew not.

She knew not, however—

Elsa: "—Even if we talk, I suppose it will no longer be of any use."

Sensing the breakdown of her conversation with Sithonia, Elsa silently muttered.

As Sithonia grasped Elsa's intent, she immediately thrust her palm forth, and commanded Elsa "Do not move" in a firm tone of voice.

Sithonia: "It is truly unfortunate… But, I am going to kill you, Elsa."

Elsa: "…I may be the one saying this, but I don't think you'll be able to kill me so easily. Even when reduced to just a head, I was able to recover from that."

Sithonia: "Indeed. I doubted my ears when I first heard it. Compared to you, my affinity with Curse Arts is no match. However, you can be killed. Just as you did to Ornea."

As she spoke, Sithonia's gaze shifted towards the Curse Dolls— to the failed sisters, who were pinning down Elsa.

Sensing the intent in that gaze, the Curse Dolls slowly readied their weapons. Each of them was equipped with fiendish armaments, those that had been stored in this basement for use by the sisters.

Not a single one was left unarmed, all so that the Curse Dolls could definitively kill Elsa.

Sithonia: "I wish to inflict as little torment as possible. But, in your case…"

Elsa: "Unlike Ornea, who can't feel these things, that which is painful does hurt me. Ah, but, you don't have to worry, I'll be fine. After all, I don't particularly dislike pain."

Sithonia: "—. Even if that is true for you…"

It is not the same for me, with human conceptions much unlike the

Featherrun Sisters, Sithonia endeavored to at least give Elsa a peaceful sendoff.

Gently reaching her hand out, Sithonia laid her fingers upon Elsa's forehead, and,

Sithonia: "Now, sleep. My youngest sister."

Elsa: "…"

Indeed, with a voice as if a prayer, Sithonia exhaled a deep breath.

Then, as if having received some sort of forgiveness, the wrinkles on her brow relaxed oh so slightly,

Sithonia: "With this…"

Elsa: "—? So then, what changed?"

Sithonia: "Eh?"

The next instant, Elsa stirred before a dumbfounded Sithonia.

To escape the Curse Dolls that were restraining her, Elsa dislocated her own shoulders, and forcibly shook off their arms.

It was an imitation of Ornea. However, for her, it would have been an act bereft of pain to be carried out calmly, but for Elsa, pain was indeed present. A fierce, violent pain that pierced her brain.

However—

Elsa: "What a thrill."

Converting that pain into pleasure, Elsa relocated her dislocated arms, grabbed the head of a Curse Doll that had had its stance broken, and slammed it into the ground through sheer force.

Crashing into the hard rock floor of the basement, the Curse Doll's head split open, its contents spilling out. Thereupon, Elsa did not hesitate to drop to her knees, and thoroughly smash apart the cranium along with its contents until the thread of life was severed.

With this, the remaining Curse Dolls numbered nine—.

Elsa: “It feels like the Featherrun Sisters have gotten a bit cheaper.”

Sithonia: “Wha, aa—!”

Before Sithonia as she watched over that slaughter in astonishment, Elsa drew out two curved blades. Readying the black, sinister knives in both her hands, she commenced her onslaught upon the Curse Dolls.

The rest of the unintentioned Curse Dolls were spurred to counterattack right after the second Curse Doll was decapitated, its remaining body sliced apart from chest to abdomen.

Curse Dolls: “…”

Ferociously, the Curse Dolls charged in with nary a sound or word. And, the one commanding that attack was Sithonia, having fallen back to distance herself from the battlefield, astonished as she was.

Through some technique, Sithonia held command over the Curse Dolls’ wills, forcing them to obey her orders in a vein akin to Ornea, whose mind had been shattered.

The skill of bending them into submission, it was truly a sight to behold. Elsa, too, was overcome with admiration.

Elsa: “You are far more suited to puppeteering dolls than that Father ever was.”

Sithonia: “ELSA—!!!”

Elsa: “You know, even if you weren’t speaking in such a loud voice, I would still be able to hear you.”

Her praise blotted over by an angered bellow, Elsa dissolved into the shadows with a look of discontent. Traversing from shadow to shadow, Elsa disrupted the Curse Dolls that outnumbered her, and wielding her immortal body as a weapon, she crushed them one by one as they rushed down on her with reckless abandon.

Elsa: “No awakening like Dorothea.”

They were a far cry from Dorothea, who in the midst of battle, had acquired the art of manipulating blood, allowing her to drive Elsa into a corner.

Elsa: “No trump cards like Saria and Hildea.”

They were a far cry from Saria and Hildea, who had used every effort at their disposal for the sake of sisterly emotions that may not have appeared to be so.

Elsa: “Even if they’re in the same state as Ornea, Ornea alone was far stronger”

And, they were a far, far cry from Ornea, who was stronger than anyone among the sisters, even with her mind shattered.

That was why, Elsa’s malevolent blades tore through the entirety of a Curse Doll, inflicting fatal wounds, delivering more and more fatal wounds without allowing any room for regeneration, until all movement ceased.

Sithonia: “Stop this! Elsa!”

Ecstatic from the massacre, Elsa’s slashing attacks mercilessly severed both arms off a Curse Doll. Having lost its arms, the doll that appeared to have lost all means of attack attempted to bite out Elsa’s throat.

A kick to its torso forced it against the wall, and then another kick whipped around, demolishing its skull. The fundamentals of killing a Curse Doll were the cranium, then the heart; an irrevocable death would form the means to grant death.

Sithonia: “STOP! STOP…!!”

The downswing of a battleaxe was caught by the two daggers, forcibly diverting the impact to the side. Its posture wavered from the wholehearted blow, and thereupon did Elsa withdraw her daggers, maneuvering them into a slashing attack.

Closing her arms in from left and right, the blades carved a crucifix-shaped scar into the face of the Curse Doll. Even if there was no pain, the doll reeled from the impact, and tripping over itself, it toppled over backwards. The Curse Doll hit the back of its head on the ground, and crushing its neck with her heel, she executed it.

Sithonia: “STOOOOOOOOOOOOOP—!!!”

Without listening to that screaming voice, Elsa cleaved through the arms, torso, and legs of the Curse Doll leaping at her, and kicked the upper body that fell to the ground far away.

And then—

Elsa: “—Sithonia.”

Sithonia: “Eek.”

Looking back, Sithonia’s face froze over with fear the moment her name had been called.

Shaking her head in reluctance as Elsa stepped forward to approach her, Sithonia waved her arm, and in front of her appeared a Curse Doll to block the way.

But, bereft of will, and unable to cooperate, the Curse Doll would not serve as Elsa’s opponent.

The heart of the Curse Doll was gouged out by a blow from Elsa, its eyes rolling to the back of its head as it collapsed.

Elsa: “This is the end.”

Sithonia: “…”

Aghast, Sithonia looked up at Elsa, the massacre having concluded.

Indeed, before she knew it, Sithonia had fallen to her knees, sinking down to the ground.

Sithonia: “Ah, ah…”

Gaining cognizance to that disgraceful conduct of hers, Sithonia writhed in an effort to stand up. However, that combative spirit transferred not to her knees, her trembling body refusing to listen to her.

Sithonia possessed no combat ability. —The reason why Sithonia had been frequently called out on missions was not because of her combat ability, but rather, because her unusual ability proved a useful asset.

Elsa: “I get that you were mimicking your deceased father, and mobilizing the Featherrun Sisters, but… what’s this poison you were talking about?”

Sithonia: “Th-That’s…”

Unable to stand back up, Sithonia’s breath caught at the inquiry. But, reaching into her clothing, she showed Elsa what she had pulled out from there.

That, was a charm in a pouch of faint coloration.

Elsa: “That’s, the charm that you said you gifted to your sisters…”

Sithonia: “…The fragrant stone within, laces the bearer with my blood, and…”

Elsa: “That allows you to shatter their minds?”

As if to affirm that inquiry, Sithonia nodded.

Then, she looked at Elsa from top to bottom,

Sithonia: “Even if it was just for half a year, it was a poison that would have cursed you so long as it dwelled in your possession. And yet, it bore no effect upon you. For you to be so special…”

Elsa: “—About that actually, I’m sorry.”

Interrupting Sithonia’s fracturing voice, Elsa shook her head from side-to-side. Then, she flicked up the charm held out by Sithonia with the tip of her knife.

Slicing it apart mid-air, what fell down from within was a fragrant stone dyed in red— catching it, Elsa sighed as she toyed with it in her hand.

And then—

Elsa: “The charm you gave me… to tell you the truth, I lost it the very day you gave it to me.”

Sithonia: “…Huh?”

Elsa: “I’m sorry. I thought you’d get mad at me, so I’d been carrying around a piece of cloth that looked similar. So, it’s only natural that your poison didn’t get through to me.”

Feigned as a proof of sisterhood, it had been bequeathed to her.

And due to losing it on the very day she had received it, she was unsure of just how much it would sadden Sithonia. Hence, Elsa had not revealed that fact to anybody.

And without ever having revealed it, she had arrived at the present day—

Elsa: “But, it seems like that was the deciding factor.”

Sithonia: “…Hah, hah. Geez, what in the world?”

Dejectedly, Sithonia, void of all strength, slumped her shoulders. She drew her knees close, pressed her forehead against those knees, and took a very, very long, deep breath.

Elsa: “Since Ornea treasured her sisters, she surely would have taken in a lot of poison, right?”

Sithonia: “And, you went and lost it… ahh, truly, you truly are…”

Elsa: “Lucky?”

Sithonia: “…The worst.”

With her forehead against her knees, Sithonia answered with nary a glance at Elsa's face. Elsa's lips curved at the cruel evaluation from the eldest daughter, and she thus closed her eyes, framed by long lashes.

Then, recalling the events of that night, of the night she killed Holosseo—

Elsa: "That day, if I'm remembering this right, he did tell me. That the ritual to achieve completion as a Curse Doll, slaughtering all the other sisters, was commencing. He said he had completed all the preparations for it."

Sithonia: "…Yes, I am aware. I found a note left behind in Father's office after you escaped from the water well. Hence, in order to ensure my victory…"

Elsa: "—There was no such need. I had no intention of killing anybody."

Hearing Elsa's response, Sithonia lifted her face from her knees with an "Eh". Looking into her red eyes whilst her own black ones housed a faint tinge of loneliness, Elsa continued.

Elsa: "A completed Curse Doll, a flawless, perfected existence… I don't particularly want to become that sort of thing."

Sithonia: "Why, is that? After all, if you do, you won't ever have to die…"

Elsa: "I don't want to become perfect. —You see, I always envied other people. I was jealous. I yearned. That's why, I don't want to be something like a completed Curse Doll."

She responded the same way she had to Holosseo's words on that night, and Sithonia was flabbergasted the same way that Holosseo had been. But, in his immediate fury, he declared that even if Elsa did not strive towards becoming a perfected Curse Doll, there was still a method to complete the ritual.

Being the puppeteer that he was, it would have been possible for him to pull some strings and cause Elsa's other sisters to die.

Elsa thought that he would do so, so she tried to do something in an attempt to change his mind.

Elsa: “But, thinking became difficult. And so, I used force.”

Sithonia: “…”

Elsa: “When I ended up killing him, I realized that I didn’t know what I should say to Dorothea, but it was already too late.”

That was the truth behind everything, and Elsa revealed it as a child would confess to their mischief.

For a short while, Sithonia spoke no words upon hearing the confession. Only, her red eyes flickering with her absence of speech, she slowly exhaled with a “Hah”.

Sithonia: “You were, truly, through to the bitter end… Elsa, and that’s all you could ever be.”

Elsa: “—? I think that’s a given, though.”

Sithonia spoke as if she had only just now noticed something that was completely obvious, causing Elsa to frown.

However, ignoring Elsa’s reaction, Sithonia nodded many times as if reaching comprehension, letting out an “Ahh” in soft wonder.

Sithonia: “From the very onset…”

Elsa: “—?”

Sithonia: “From the very onset, I was unfit to be playing a role in all these matters and affairs.”

A sorrowful, lonely conclusion it was. But, Sithonia’s expression was bright.

Listening to Sithonia’s answer, Elsa narrowed her eyes. Ascertaining the sensation of the curved blade in her hand, Elsa called out to Sithonia with a “Hey”, Elsa: “Now that we’ve cleared up our misunderstanding, do we make peace?”

Sithonia: “…Yes, indeed. Let us make peace. However…”

Elsa: “However?”

Sithonia: “I, want to end things here… No, I ask you to please end it for me.”

Lifting both her hands, Sithonia made her entreaty.

Receiving the words of she who desired death, Elsa muttered “How backwards”.

Elsa: “Even though you enacted such sinister plots because you wished not to die, you’re now turning all of that on its head?”

Sithonia: “It is because I finally understood that it would be impossible for me. But, there is a way to escape her dominion. That method is you, Elsa. —You are a Curse Doll who kills Curse Dolls.”

Pleading that she wished to be freed, Sithonia would accept Elsa’s malevolent blade. Bearing witness to that firm attitude, Elsa closed her eyes in resignation.

Elsa: “I don’t have confidence that it won’t hurt. I’m quite rough with how I handle blades.”

Sithonia: “I am aware… Attempting to educate you in domestic chores was a massive failure on my part.”

The girl who would be killed, cast a smile upon the girl who would kill her.

The elder sister who would be killed, and the younger sister who would kill. —Slowly, Elsa raised her blade aloft.

Elsa: “Do you have anything else you want to say?”

Sithonia: “…Once you kill me, you will be completed as a Curse Doll. You will end up being burdened with many terrible things, and just maybe…”

Elsa: “Your mother might come to meet me?”

Sithonia gazed in astonishment upon the ascertainment, giving a deep nod. Elsa understood Sithonia’s concern, however, she replied with “It’ll be alright”.

And, Elsa’s basis for that was—

Elsa: “—After all, I haven’t killed Ornea. That girl is still alive.”

Sithonia: “…Truly, what a hopeless girl you are…”

Upon Sithonia, sticking out her tongue in an odious manner, the downward swing of Elsa’s curved blade vigorously descended.

2

Gazing upon the now vacant Featherrun Mansion, Elsa slightly frowned.

The mansion had lost its lord, alongside the sisters who had succeeded its management. As concealed Hallowed Land, with its warden of the Gustekan Church having perished, this place would be converted into a sanctuary in a true sense.

???: “Gazing off with that absent-minded look, just what d’ye happen to be thinking about?”

???: “Ah, nothing major. Only, I was just thinking that it would burn quite nicely if set on fire.”

???: “As for why the heck ye’re thinking ‘bout burning it, I ain’t got a bloody clue.”

During her final battle against Sithonia, she had placed Oliver on standby outside the Hallowed Land. It would have been troubling to have him get involved, but then again, not involving him would be a dishonor.

Above all, there was a matter she had entrusted to Oliver.

That was—

Elsa: "—Ornea."

Thus, before Elsa's eyes as she turned her back on the mansion, curled up into a ball whilst sleeping on the roof of a dragon carriage, was a youthful, green-haired girl. —Of the Featherrun Sisters, Ornea Featherrun.

Having appeared to kill Elsa, the entirety of Ornea's skull had been crushed, leaving her defeated. But, her ability of regeneration would not accept death from her head merely being pulverised. However, even if her broken body had recovered, her shattered mind was beyond repair. That was simply how powerful Sithonia's poison had been.

Consequently, the Ornea who had become a different person from the Ornea before, was just like a baby.

Ornea: "Uu."

Elsa: "Moaning and groaning… It's somewhat like a replacement for Tatiana."

As Ornea groaned in displeasure, curled up into a ball, Elsa smiled. But, it seemed like Oliver had not been very fond of her comment, and he called "Elsa" to her in a sharp voice,

Oliver: "Quit it, would ye? There's nobody who can serve as a replacement for someone else."

Elsa: "That's not something I'd ever think to hear from a slaver who supplies manpower."

Oliver: "Tsk. There, wipe your face with this. For a lass of your age to be so damn bloodied…"

Elsa evaluated him with her usual lip service, to which Oliver clicked his tongue and tossed her a hand towel. Wetting it in the snow, Elsa vigorously wiped her bloodied face and hair.

As Elsa did so, Oliver asked her "What ye gonna do from here?"

Elsa: “From here?”

Oliver: “Ye’ve settled the issue with the sister who’s been targeting ye, yeah? In that case, ye’re officially a free woman… please don’t tell me ye’re gonna return to being my merchandise.”

Elsa: “Oh my, would that not be fine?”

Oliver: “I’ll beg off that. This was the final straw, I learned my lesson alongside my fingers.”

Holding up his hands short of a few fingers, Oliver was fed up, and forsook Elsa. At those words of separation that encompassed his true feelings, with neither a parting threat nor making excuses, Elsa felt a bit lonely.

Since becoming a slave, she had returned to him thirteen times, forming a bizarre relationship between slave and slaver; that would end here. Through that sense of loneliness, Elsa finally realized something.

Elsa: “I’m surprised. I suppose I was rather fond of you.”

Oliver: “What a preposterous thing to say. As for me, I’m completely sick ‘n tired of it.”

As Elsa’s lips broke into a smile fit for a girl, Oliver also wore a cheerful grin.

And then, he turned his eyes to the mansion Elsa had wanted to set on fire,

Oliver: “If the people of the Gustekan Church don’t know ‘bout this place, then would it be fine for me to take it? It’s tough living in Innorandum, and I’ve been wanting a new house.”

Elsa: “Yeah, I don’t suppose why not? This place is constructed more luxuriously than other plots of Hallowed Land, and it would surely be easy for your new slaves to live in. I can guarantee that as a progenitor slave who lived here for a while.”

Oliver: “…Did I say anything about continuing to be a slaver?”

Wiping her face, Elsa moved to stand next to Oliver, and he cast her a puzzled look. Looking back at his face, Elsa tilted her head with an “Oh my”,

Elsa: “You’re retiring? But, you’re only Oliver because you’re a slaver. If that very Oliver retires from being a slaver, what in the world are you going to become?”

Oliver: “…”

Elsa: “First of all, if you’re retiring, why did you follow me? The only reason you would have followed me to the point of losing your fingers, would be because I belong to you… isn’t that right, master?”

Oliver: “…Please, don’t ye call me such a disgusting thing.”

As Elsa looked up at him with a beautifully sweet smile, Oliver sighed. Then, after groaning for a while, he covered his face in resignation,

Oliver: “Probably, it’s exactly as ye say. I’m a slaver till I die. Since I didn’t die, even if my limbs are torn off, I’ll continue this work. So that eventually—”

Elsa: “You can make both you and your slaves, make everyone happy… I think it’s foolish.”

Oliver: “Say what you please.”

Elsa: “But, it’s wonderful.”

The final words she appended had caught Oliver off-guard. Seeing Oliver wear such an expression, Elsa tossed him the bloodied hand towel.

As Oliver screamed out “Bwahh!”, Elsa turned her back on him, and began to walk forward.

Sidestepping the dragon carriage in which Ornea was sleeping, she headed towards the cavern. —Towards the exit. Leaving this plot of Hallowed Land out into the snowfield, in order to head for somewhere not here.

Oliver: “Elsa, where ye headed?”

Elsa: “Who knows? Come to think of it, I’ve never stopped being a slave before, so there was never anything I wanted to do, nor places I wanted to go. And so…”

Oliver: “And so?”

Elsa: “First of all, I’ll look for somewhere that isn’t cold.”

Even if it was the homeland to which she was born, there was no such thing as getting used to this wintry soil. Cold things were cold. And Elsa loathed both snow and blizzards.

Since she hated them so very much, she treasured the warmth that allowed her to forget.

Seeking that out, Elsa stepped forward.

Elsa: “—Oliver, be well. Get along nicely with Ornea, will you?”

Oliver: “Yeah. Elsa, ye be healthy as well, aight…? Don’t go catching a cold now, ye foolhardy lass.”

In the place she had lived as a Featherrun Sister, those were the final words of parting between Elsa the merchandise, and the slaver who treated her oh so dearly.

3

Leaving Oliver and Ornea behind at the Hallowed Land, she passed through the cavern, and emerged out into the snowfield.

She was thinking to make for a nearby town on foot, and there enact the adequate preparations for her journey, before then attempting to leave the country. Her destination could have been anywhere, it mattered not. She would aim for a land outside this nation of frost, one of warmth.

For a land where none knew of the Featherrun Sisters, and where none targeted Curse Dolls.

However—

???: "—No matter how you look at it, wouldn't that just be way too convenient?"

A voice came falling upon Elsa right after she parted from the Hallowed Land, and set foot on the snowfield.

The shrill voice, making no effort to conceal its disdain and ridicule towards her, was quite frankly, a cluster of malice.

Elsa: "…"

The source from which the voice had descended quite literally covered the sky, causing Elsa to widen her eyes. Most things would fail to shake Elsa, but naturally, even she could not help but feel surprised by this.

After all, enshrined by the snowy mist right before Elsa's eyes, was a singular black dragon flapping its mighty wings.

Elsa: "…A dragon?"

Dragon: "Ohoho, why, even a bumpkin like you, Gusteko born and raised, recognizes and despises us on sight? As expected, I guess we dragons truly are so magnificent! Kyahahahaha-!"

Flapping its wings, the dragon slowly descended upon the snow, clad in jet-black scales as it was.

Its large body, quite likely seven or eight meters, was suitably intimidating, but what troubled Elsa further was the voice and demeanor that was completely at odds with its stern outward appearance.

It was not that she wanted it to be overflowing with majesty, but it was not a pleasant feeling to watch it clamoring about like an impudent young girl. However—

Dragon: "Heh~? If you can tell how terrifying and amazing this lovely lady is at a single glance, then your eyes must be pretty damn good for a piece of rotten meat."

By nature, a dragon's face was supposed to be difficult to read expressions from, however, it ridiculed her with an abundance of emotive expressions, looking down on her.

Fortunately, it was not in Elsa's nature to immediately feel anger at being shown disdain or contempt.

Moreover, regarding the black dragon that had appeared all of a sudden under these circumstances, she possessed an inkling as to its identity.

Elsa: "You…"

Dragon: "Ahhhnn? What? What business have you with this lovely lady? Talking back are we? Saying that I piss you off and that you hate me? Oh dear, oh dear, rebellious pieces of rotten meat like you are this lovely lady's absolute favourite! Crushing and pulverizing them, then massacring them along with all their friends and family…"

Elsa: "Are you, the mother whom Sithonia spoke of?"

Precisely upon hearing that, the black dragon ceased its movement. Then, casting its red eyes down upon Elsa, the black dragon properly perceived her for the first time.

Dragon: "The fact that you came outta there means there's no doubt that that other piece of rotten meat was disgracefully and boorishly defeated… let's see now, this is curiously troubling for this lovely lady."

Elsa: "Is that because you failed to get your hands on a Curse Doll?"

Dragon: "No no no no, that's all wrong! I mean, the likes of a Curse Doll was nothing more than an extra prize for this lovely lady to begin with! Given the opportunity! That which this lovely lady had wanted, was something else entirely!"

Elsa: "Something else? That would be…"

Dragon: “Isn’t it obvious? —It’s love. Love.”

That which the black dragon had spoken had been exceedingly, indeed, exceedingly grand.

Love; thus spoke the black dragon. From Sithonia, that it had desired.

Dragon: “That was my daughter. As my daughter, she ought to exert her entire body and soul in order to grant her mother’s desires. And then, display her love towards me for the first time! It is love which I desire, love that would do its utmost to deliver unto me treasures beyond my wildest imaginations.”

Akin to a lovestruck dame, akin to a poet yearning for love, the black dragon’s throat quavered in desire of unseen treasure. That way of being was absurd, and simultaneously did it appear as a terribly twisted and unsightly thing.

It was not like Elsa had lived in a way to take pride in for the most part either, but—

Elsa: “You’re quite the dangerously selfish person, aren’t you?”

The scent of fear that had pervaded Sithonia. She had plotted to kill the mother who controlled her by seeking an undying body, the completion of the Curse Dolls; Elsa finally understood her motives.

And with that understanding, Elsa, for the first time, pitied Sithonia from the bottom of her heart.

If she had wished to escape the bindings of this mother, then she ought to have ran away instead of trying to fight back. Had she thrown caution to the wind and attempted to escape for dear life, how much better things might have been.

Had she done so, then such a thing like killing her sisters and dying without obtaining anything in the end would have never—

Dragon: “—You’re an annoyingly interesting piece of rotten meat, aren’t you?”

Elsa: "…Is that so? Though, same as Sithonia, weren't incomplete Curse Dolls not to your liking?"

Dragon: "I'm kind. And so, I'll repeat something I already said a second time. I've got no interest in stuff like immortal beings. For starters, I've already gotten my hands on one a long time ago."

While speaking, the form of the black dragon before her eyes slowly began to morph. Bones creaking and flesh constricting, the black dragon's body withered away like something out of a nightmare.

Then, the shrunken flesh of the black dragon writhed, and that which emerged anew was the form of a young girl.

A girl of golden hair, and eyes of red. The black dragon had morphed into a girl that appeared to be around the same age as Elsa, and now gazed upon her with a cute yet savage smile.

Girl: "I collect the most outstanding, extraordinary, and deranged children. With every ability one possesses being a matter of merely being the right person in the right place, I bestow meaning in life to the monsters who can't live in the sun. I'm going to make you one of my daughters as well."

Elsa: "…Do I have the right to refuse that, I wonder?"

Girl: "I don't particularly care if you refuse, but… in that case, I'd be heartbroken at the rejection, and would do anything it takes to soothe my heart, you know? For example—"

With a callous grin, the black dragon shifted its gaze behind Elsa—to the cavern, and the Hallowed Land within.

If it had been in contact with Sithonia, then Elsa's battle formation would have also been leaked to this black dragon. Thus, that would have also included the fact that Oliver and Ornea, with whom Elsa had just parted, had been left behind there.

Elsa: "Even if those two were to die, it's not like I'd die. Did you think that would serve as a threat?"

Girl: "Don't lump me in together with your poorly-crafted sisters.

Whether or not they would suffice for a threat isn't something decided by me, but by you."

The situation was a recreation of the time at the snowy plaza when Saria and Hildea had taken Oliver hostage. —No, considering the poor personality at play, it was far worse.

Elsa: "…"

Witnessing Elsa's silence, the black dragon smiled darkly and proffered a hand. Seeking a handshake, it was not. With the back of its hand oriented upward, it was demanding Elsa's submission.

Girl: "Well, shouldn't you be giving a kiss to your lovely mother's hand?"

At those words, Elsa hesitated on whether or not to draw her dagger, but ceased. —It felt as if she had heard Tatiana's voice.

Henceforth, Elsa kneeled down on the spot, complying with Mother's demands, and planted a kiss on the back of her hand.

Girl: "Your name?"

To take one as a daughter without even knowing that, was a great laughing matter.

However, Elsa raised her face without laughing. Then, gazing at the wicked face of her mother up close,

Elsa: "I am Elsa Featherrun. No, scratch that. —My, name is…"

Cutting off her words there, Elsa closed her eyes.

What flashed through her mind was a cold snowfield, and the warmth of the first moment Elsa had felt alive—

And, the genesis of that warmth was—

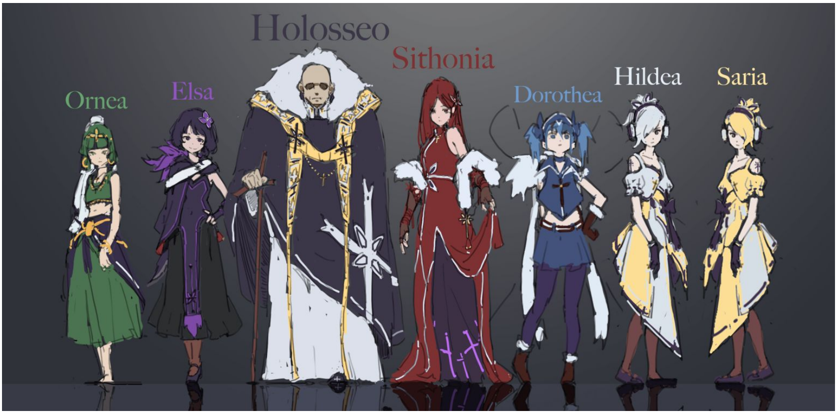

Epilogue:
Elsa Granhiert

—When she had first found the girl, it had been a scene pervaded by a terrible reek of blood.

???: "…"

The wordless toddler sat alone upon the bloody stream that had become of the meadow.

From behind the dark blue hair that had been permitted to run wild, it was apparent that her widened eyes were looking in her direction. The florid skin characteristic of young children was smeared with mud and grime; a shabby figure clad in naught but a coarse rag.

Dressed in a rag sullied by rain and human waste, it was obvious at a glance that she had not been living in a decent manner, but the awful stench of that filth was overpowered by something else.

—That had been a dusky blood, accompanied by the putrescent malodor of death.

In the vicinity of the child, innumerable corpses were sprawled. A horrid mountain of corpses, with heads severed, arms and legs twisted off, and torsos ripped open.

Numbering more than ten or even twenty, it would be no exaggeration to say the horde itself had been entirely engulfed by death. The aroma of blood and death filling the meadow was far too antithetical to the presence of the young child.

The greater region containing this meadow was known to be a perilous frontier inhabited by herds of Witchbeasts.

A few years prior, there existed a small village in the vicinity, but as the Witchbeasts expanded their living territory, the residents all evacuated and left the buildings behind. Therefore, it was rare for people to visit this place, and even supposing someone were to pass through, more likely than not it would be for the purposes of some wicked scheme.

For that reason, it was not uncommon for those who carelessly made use of this frontier to end up as corpses. And though rare, it was still possible for a young child to be present there. If a slaver had decided to enter and brave the danger for the purposes of avoiding the public eye, such a thing was entirely possible.

However, it was indeed strange for the corpses scattered about to be not that of humans, but rather the remains of Witchbeasts.

Thus, before the eyes of the blood-stained toddler, the presence of the girl standing next to the mountain of corpses—

???: “A warmer welcome than I could have ever imagined. Though, I had no intention of causing you any harm.”

The girl, standing at the heart of the bloody stream upon the Witchbeast corpse-strewn meadow, looked back at the toddler.

She was a tall, fair-skinned young girl, with her long black hair in a braid. In her mid-teens, the curvature of her body had developed in a manner most feminine, and about her hung an immoral allure in the interval between mature and immature.

If entranced by those deep black eyes, many men would find themselves unable to resist.

Though, that was only conceivable if she was not smeared in vast amounts of Witchbeast blood.

Child: “Phu, uuu…!!”

Glaring at the black-haired girl, the bloodied toddler grit her teeth in loathing.

In the toddler’s gaze, there was no fragment of gratitude towards the fact that she had been rescued from dangerous Witchbeasts. That was likely because the toddler did not see the Witchbeasts as enemies. It would also have been difficult to label them as family, though.

Only, in this place where no adults were around to protect the child, in order to survive in the perilous frontier crawling with Witchbeasts, there would have been no other choice but to coexist with those enemies of humanity.

As the Witchbeasts she had coexisted with were put to slaughter, the toddler’s heart must have fallen into unfathomable devastation.

However—

Girl: “Are you angry that I’ve made a mess of your home?”

As the very perpetrator of the Witchbeast massacre, the girl displayed not a fragment of sympathy or understanding of the anger harbored by the child.

With her head inclined, the girl gazed down upon the toddler whose breathing had grown rough,

Girl: “When you act like that, you really do look just like a Witchbeast, just like I heard about from outside. The rumored Queen who conquered the Witchbeasts… rather than a Queen, you’re more like a Princess.”

Child: “Phu-, phu-”

Girl: “If you can’t speak, then I suppose you might not be understanding what I’m saying either. Unfortunately, I’ve been instructed to bring you back. So, I’ll be having you come together with me. Even if you hate it, I'll be taking you back alive. If you don't resist, this can end without injury."

Child: "Uu~! Uuuuu~!"

Girl: "Not going to listen, huh? In that case, through what means are you going to refuse me?"

The child seemed to be throwing a tantrum, to which the girl loosened her lips.

Normally, when confronted with a person who could not be conversed with, people would feel irritation and impatience, but there were no such signs on the girl's expression. Only, there was something akin to dear nostalgia.

That only served to spur on the toddler's rage.

Child: "…"

At the behest of anger, the child fervently clapped her hands. — Directly afterwards, a large shadow leaped upon the meadow, as if having awaited that signal; it was a dark Witchbeast with the face of a lion with twisted horns.

Extolled as the jet-black King of the forest, it was a Witchbeast whose fiendish nature went without peer, the Guiltilaw.

Guiltilaw: "—AROOOO!"

The breath of a thundering roar explosively assailed the girl with a raw fragrance. In wonder at the Witchbeast's arrival and its overwhelming ghastliness, the girl went on to lick her own lips.

Girl: "Quite the big friend you've got. Wonderful, how absolutely wonderful."

A life-threatening peril before her, the girl's demeanour had been exceedingly aloof.

Seemingly irritated by that fact, the Guiltilaw brandished its bestial claws aloft, intent on delivering a tremendous blow to the girl. But

—

Girl: “That’s no good, with such a way of doing things. You have to be more gentle with girls, you see.”

Guiltilaw: “—AROO?!”

The Witchbeast’s front paw missed its mark, before dancing through the air alongside the girl’s smile.

Losing a leg in exchange for having used its full strength, the Witchbeast readjusted its focus after being flustered, and glared at the girl. And with the beast’s glare upon her, the girl slowly readied her sinister curved blade,

Girl: “A body so big it can’t be compared to humans… I’m looking forward to seeing what sort of insides are contained within.”

—What followed was a brutally one-sided battle, merciless to the extreme.

Girl: “—This marks the end.”

Just as the smiling girl had declared, the collapsed Witchbeast had already forfeited the majority of its vitality.

Having been completely dominated, the Witchbeast had not only lost the initial front paw, but its hind legs and tail as well. With no signs of its outpouring blood coming to a stop, its throat, which had previously given rise to a mighty roar, could now only let out weak whimpers.

The moment it had lagged behind in the initial clash, the victor had been decided. The feeble cries of the Witchbeast’s throat seemed as if it were even begging to be beheaded and put out of its misery.

But then again, as the girl was fatally poor at understanding emotions, the Witchbeast’s desperate pleas did not reach her.

Consequently, until its very last moments, the Witchbeast’s life was doomed to be toyed with by the girl.

Girl: “Does its poor color result from a problem with its diet, I wonder? Or is it just a characteristic of this one? Its stench is also terrible, but I’d like to compare it with other Witchbeasts… Are you going to call out a different one?”

Playing with the bowels of the slain Witchbeast, the girl questioned the toddler while inspecting the entrails with the tip of her curved blade. But, judging by the reaction of the child, who sank to the floor, there was no indication of any greater Witchbeast being played as a trump card.

Girl: “I see, so it’s over… That’s too bad.”

Taking the wordless hatred as a response, the girl was visibly disappointed.

Then, disappointed as she was, the girl approached the tense child —

Child: “—Aa-.”

Girl: “You don’t need to worry, I told you that I’d bring you back with me, right? It’s not that I don’t have any interest in your insides, but they’re not so appealing that I’d disobey instructions for them. Rest assured.”

Child: “Uu! UUU~! UU~U!”

Girl: “…When you hate me that much, I’ll be hurt. Wounds to the heart aren’t so quick to recover, you see.”

Carried under her arm, the child desperately writhed in resistance. However, the resistance of a skinny, malnourished toddler was not capable of bringing the girl to a halt.

Child: “Gau, uuu~.”

Girl: “I understand your feelings of wanting to kill me, but it would be impossible with your strength. Even if you gnaw on the back of my neck, it just tickles… it would be best for you to prioritize getting well first.”

The child was biting at her white nape, but the best her weak jaw could do was leave teeth marks.

Shrugging her shoulders at the ticklishness, the girl loosened her lips upon recalling something, and giggled to herself.

Girl: “Ah, apologies. I’m not laughing at you. Only, in the past I once spent time with a girl who couldn’t speak, just like you… Perhaps kids who can’t speak just tend to be the violent ones. That girl was also very hot-headed, you see.”

Still biting down, the toddler weakly pressed her nails into the girl’s neck and back. It was something akin to quarreling with a kitten, so the girl paid it no heed.

Slowly, whilst carrying the child, the girl stepped through the blood-soaked meadow, and moved toward the outside.

To somewhere not here, to a place unsecluded, to the wider world.

Girl: “It’s not a decent place, and I don’t know if you’ll have freedom or not. It might very well be far more comfortable for you to keep living here, but since you were noticed, you’d better give up, as there’s no helping it.”

Child: “Uu~! Fgwuu~!”

Girl: “There’s not really anything in particular that I can say or do for… ah, there’s one thing.”

Tearing the squirming child from her shoulder, she locked eyes with the hate-clouded irises right before her. Once they got out of here, she decided she would first put her in a hot bath, and then—

Girl: “I’m Elsa. Elsa Granhiert.”

Child: “…”

Girl: “Though I don’t know just how long we will end up being acquainted, that was just the one thing I had to say… after all, between the two of us, I’m the older sister.”

Saying that, the girl— Elsa Granhiert, joyfully smiled at her future little sister.

END

Afterword

Yes, we've reached the afterword! It's ya boy, Nagatsuki Tappei! Also known as the grey-colored cat!

There we have it, the anime disk bonus novel! Last time, for the first season of the anime, I was asked to write something, and now they're having me do it again! This too is thanks to all of your support!

Following the trend from last time, I'm writing in a style different to the usual main story, in which someone other than Natsuki Subaru is filling the position of protagonist.

For this first one, I decided to write the story of everyone's favourite Elsa Granhiert.

Because it's the first bonus novel for Season 2, I also had the view that "A story that's just about Elsa running rampant as she pleases, how would that work well as a bonus novel?", but they only gave me the condition that as long as the disk bonus somewhat connects to the contents of Season 2, it's OK to write anything!

Though it might be more accurate to say that I went and wrote to my heart's content…!

Thus, we have arrived at the publication of "Apocalypse Girls" this time!

I'm going to get into spoilers on the assumption that you've already read all the way until the afterword, but the contents are basically "Elsa-san runs as rampant as she pleases in her homeland of the North."

Originally, my expectation when I began writing was that it would depict how a normal girl known as Elsa Granhiert came to become the being known as the Bowel Hunter.

However, when I actually set out to put it to paper, Elsa-san's personality from the outset ended up being the same as it is currently, so my initial plans came crumbling down at the prologue. It seems that the reason why Elsa-san is Elsa-san, was decided at the very moment of her birth.

Since that also delivered quite the shock to the author himself, I considered how the story might proceed, so even if she was predisposed to be the Bowel Hunter by birth, I decided to focus on the details regarding how she gained her physical consitution, and how she ended up in her current position. That is what led to this story.

North of Re: Zero's main stage, the Kingdom of Lugunica, there lies the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, which despite being listed among the Four Great Countries, will likely never appear in Re: Zero's main story.

The previous anime disk bonus was written with the stage set in the Kararagi City-States, which will not appear much either, but with this sort of arrangement, settings that were supposed to be in limbo outside the main story are being brought out to the forefront, so I think it's a win-win for both the author and readers.

This time too, it was a lot of fun to write about this and that about the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko!

The people placed in an environment of harsh, extreme cold, and the firm religion deeply rooted there. In order to survive in a world of white cold, the girl throws herself into an unwanted battle—when it's written like that, Elsa-san seems like a heroine carrying an extremely tragic resolve, but the fact that she actually enjoys those circumstances, is something that everyone who has read the main story already knows.

She is also a key player who stole the "First Death" of Subaru, the main story's protagonist, so it would be no exaggeration to say that her existence dictated the forward course of "Re: Zero – Starting Life in Another World" as a piece of fiction. It was truly enjoyable to write about her.

Well then, I am repeating myself here, but the reason I was able to write this work was thanks to everyone whose support allowed for us to be blessed with the opportunity for a second anime adaptation.

Starting with Director Watanabe, the cooperation of everyone who's part of the large anime staff and cast made it possible to adapt the fourth arc, which was considered to be quite difficult.

It's jam packed with new characters and new developments, so deciding what to keep and what to depict, doing the utmost to come up with various ways to direct things, the author always loses himself in a trance while watching.

If that passion and intrest of the story is transmitted to everyone watching, and perhaps left behind some strong emotions in their hearts, then there is nothing greater to be hoped for.

This bonus novel is a thank you to everyone involved with making such a wonderful anime, and might be my maxium involvement with the anime as the original author.

Of course, I'm also giving my all to writing the disk bonus novel planned for later. I hope all the fans can love my work in its entirety!

And with that it looks like I've hit the end of the page. So let us move on to the usual thank yous.

To Editor I, for the go-sign you gave while diluting your words with "The bonus, I know I said you could write whatever you wanted, but…", thank you very much! Likewise, I responded "Is this really fine for the first one?" while tiling my head, but I think it was a dialogue quite fitting for an author and his editor! For the remaining bonuses as well, I'll do my best!

Illustrator Ootsuka-sensei, I could say that it was thanks to inspiration from your wonderful visual of Elsa Granhiert that I was able to write this story. Truly, thank you very much!

And this will be another repeat, but I give huge thanks to everyone involved with making the wonderful anime. For working with such hard material, thank you so much!

Above all, to all the fans who have supported the work until this point, accompanying me even as far as reading a bonus novel, I give my greatest thanks of all!

Well then, let us meet again in the next bonus novel!

Loving the Days Gone By

Prologue:
First Cry

—The moment she opened her eyes, what first dawned upon her was the doubt of What Thing her self was.

Enigmatically, she possessed knowledge.

If she were to define it, then she was currently in a state wherein simply the receptacle for the soul had been prepared.

In order to initiate something, the receptacle plastered with foundation for knowledge and skills had been prepared, lacking only its pivotal content—no, it had finally been inserted was what the condition was.

If she thought of being able to start walking, she could've walked. If she thought of being able to start talking, she could've talked.

However, the will that sought to perform those inevitabilities was also insufficient, and for that reason she was unable to move.

"…"

A room which had the impression of being queerly empty, with circles drawn on the ground glowing fleetingly. She understood it was a pattern for some kind of magic-esque technique, but she was ignorant as to what it specifically was.

The reason why her self was at the center of this light, was because her self had taken birth here.

Her self, who was yet to be Something had been born, and without even voicing a first cry, was examining the state of her surroundings.

"…"

Straining her eyes in the dim indoors, what she could see were books tightly packed in shelves, and many kinds of materials scattered on the floor, affirming those, she finally took notice.

Of the shadow staring down towards her self, as she stood within the light.

“…”

Long, white hair, such transient beauty that would seemingly crumble upon a single touch, the lady garbed in black clothing running contrary to the impression of her hair, stood there wielding a definite aura of presence.

Why, was she not livened up by a person so beautiful and bewitching. The reason was obvious.

Just as light far too powerful could not be imagined, she had merely overlooked what was too great.

That was not anything so outwardly as her presence or her shimmering beauty, but that she was something meaning greatly to her self, who was yet to be Something.

—That she was someone irreplaceable to her self, who was not Anything.

“—Ah.”

Her lips tried to vocalize something, trembling weakly, they spilled out a sigh.

The embankment was destroyed at once, the collapse thereafter perceptible immediately.

“Ah, a~a~h… a~a~a~h.”

Voice impossible of being vocalized overflowed, something warm trickled down from the corner of her eyes.

She possessed no means to halt her voice, halt her tears.

That which spilled out, that which trickled out, was the supernatant of the soul impossible of being contained within this receptacle. Shedding them in their entirety, finally, the soul matched oneself with the receptacle.

With this, at last, it shall all commence.

At last, her self, who was not Anything, her self, who had emitted her first cry, shall…

“—Good morning.”

Suddenly, a voice that was not her own resonated, and raising her trembling chin, she lifted her gaze.

A blurred field of vision, the form of that person that had been vividly visible till earlier was no longer visible, and frantically rubbing her eyes, she searched, searched, searched for the figure of that person…

“—You are, Beatrice.”

The voice told her, as a hand supported the cheek of the lost child.

Holding her breath, she gazed at the beauty before her eyes. That person, curved her lips in somewhat perturbation. With a delay, she realized it was a smile coming from this gauche person.

“—You are my, let’s see. Something akin to a daughter.”

Chapter 1:
Chased by the Spherical Moon

1

???: “Beatrice-sama, how did you formerly lead your life?”

The nonchalant question hurled at her, Beatrice slowly lifted her face.

This had been just about the time of awaiting supper, as she sat in front of the fire with an open book on her lap. Before her eyes, putting the hotpot on the fire was the one spending identical time on this land, Ryuzu.

A rare half-elf, the young girl conferred with an indispensable duty in the Sanctuary. Nowadays, Beatrice had been frequently acting together with her and spending time together.

This being per ordinary, they had been leisurely spending time of boredom together.

Beatrice: “…You, what is it that you intend, I suppose.”

Ryuzu: “Um… was that a strange question on my part?”

Beatrice: “It’s not about being strange, in fact. Simply, for you to probe into Betty, just what are you plotting, I suppose. Confess with honesty, and you shall be let off without facing much, in fact.”

Ryuzu: “For me to be plotting something, that is out of the question…!”

Holding the spoon for stirring the hotpot close to her chest, with long pink hued hair, Ryuzu acted ashamed.

A young girl unsuited to secrets. She was docile when facing Beatrice as well, and the latter wanted to trust her when she said she was not plotting anything—but she shan’t let her guard down.

Beatrice: “At any rate, Roswaal would stoop to any level if it is for teasing Betty, I suppose.”

Ryuzu: “Ah, so you were concerned about that…”

Beatrice: “There, that reaction! Your face says you happen to know something, in fact!”

She pointed a finger at Ryuzu, who seemed to consent, displaying a bitter smile. Afterwards, Ryuzu said, “It’s a misunderstanding” and put the spoon back into the hotpot.

Ryuzu: “Just now, I simply thought that I certainly agree with Beatrice-sama’s thoughts. Because it seems Roswaal-sama finds Beatrice-sama to be so cute that he just cannot help it.”

Beatrice: “What a mistaken idea, I suppose. You are also blind to an astounding degree, in fact. He is just nasty, that is all, I suppose.”

Ryuzu: “Is that so? I believe Roswaal-sama thinks of Beatrice-sama as his younger sister…”

Beatrice: “D-Don’t say anything so repulsive, in fact!”

The book interposed in her lap, Beatrice grasped her slim shoulders as she felt shivers run through her body.

Ryuzu’ poor vision was also grievous. For her to say Beatrice and Roswaal were siblings.

Beatrice: “To begin with, Betty does have a more proper sibling… Bubby, I suppose. If Bubby were also to be considered in furriness and cuteness, something like Roswaal wouldn’t even stand a chance, in fact.”

Ryuzu: “Bubby… elder brother, you mean? Beatrice-sama’s? In other words, Echidna-sama’s?”

Beatrice: “Things are a little bit complicated when it comes to that detail, I suppose.”

Ryuzu’ question, as she rounded her eyes, likely alluded to whether

Beatrice's elder brother was also Echidna's child—in other words, if they were true siblings.

In that sense, realizing a sibling relationship with a Spirit's disposition was difficult. However, in the sense of being born through the same technique and to the same parent, Beatrice indeed had an elder brother.

Beatrice: "That is, Betty's precious Bubby, I suppose"

Ryuzu: "…What kind of a person is he? Please tell me as well."

Beatrice: "Mgh…"

Her eyes twinkling, keenly interested, Ryuzu implored Beatrice.

This gaze of Ryuzu' was Beatrice's weakness. Above all, Beatrice being weak to gazes of this kind was not limited to Ryuzu' alone.

Beatrice: "Geez, what a hopeless girl, I suppose. Such insolence, in fact!"

Ryuzu: "Well then…!"

Beatrice: "Before that! Be careful of the hotpot's flame, I suppose. If you become engrossed in listening and burn the supper then it will be a problem to Mother, in fact."

The dinner Ryuzu was preparing was to be given out to people involved with the Sanctuary as a feast.

Ryuzu' cooking was actually the most delicious in this settlement. Everyone has their specialties. Though Spirits were not required to eat meals, they could comprehend taste, and could also reduce food into mana.

In secret, Beatrice had also been looking forward to the supper Ryuzu would make.

Beatrice: "So, don't burn it, I suppose!"

Ryuzu: "I understand. Well then, what story are you going to let me hear?”

Beatrice: “How self-serving, in fact… If that’s the case, then Betty will tell you about a while back, I suppose.”

A tale coming from the topic of her elder brother. If so, Beatrice shall talk about the days she spent with her elder brother.

Back when the Sanctuary had not been created yet, and she had not even met Roswaal, the time Beatrice had lived through, having been born as the daughter of the Witch, alongside her solitary elder brother.

And, the reason why Beatrice became such that she would look forward to suppers, like humans.

A short glance at Ryuzu, whose eyes were twinkling and cheeks dyed red in anticipation, and Beatrice sighed.

Beatrice: “That was, back when Betty had been entrusted with the house during Mother’s absence, in fact.”

2

???: “Aaaow.”

She raised her voice and crouched down upon the impact that landed on the top of her head.

What had directly hit the area of the whorls of hair on the rear of her head was a single book that fell as she was pulling it out.

The indolence behind her claim of being able to obtain it from the upper row of the bookshelf without a stepladder gave rise to calamity, and as she stood on her tiptoes stretching for above, she ultimately had to catch the book which slipped through her fingers with her head.

???: “Wh-What a disaster, I suppose… how audacious for a mere book, in fact…”

The book was quite a large one by itself, its impact had been nothing short of hefty. But, to admit that would mark the further increase of her own miserableness, the girl sourly refused to admit defeat before the book lying on the floor.

Above all, the faint tears accumulated in those large eyes of her's lost her of any convincibility.

—She was a young girl in possession of characteristic eyes of a bluish tint and symbolic patterns resembling butterflies visible on them.

Big, round eyes along with prickly, unruffled, well-ordered facial features, possessing a face and figure of approximately ten years of age, the young child who gave the impression that she shall become a charming beauty in the future was garbed in an extravagant dress. Her pale hued hair carefully rolled, the girl's figure was as though a princess from a picture book.

???: "Geez, you may be a book, but you lack the self-awareness of being Mother's property, I suppose. That is why you brought this chaos upon Betty, in fact."

The sweet albeit young girl picked the fallen book up and cleared away the dust on its binding whilst making excuses that went unheard by anyone. —The book was one with black binding, with no title on its cover.

Its contents were unknown at a glance, but when the young girl put her fingers, which she had cleared the dust on the cover away with, and contemplated, a faint light gave rise to letters. It was the book's title. Simply Mana I was written on it.

???: "Letters written with dregs of mana… though it is for the purpose of not being able to be read by those who do not have aptitude for mana, Mother's watchfulness is per expectation, I suppose."

Murmuring thoughts bristling with reverence, the girl opened the bulky book. Though within it were nothing but blank pages, letters appeared on them upon contemplation identical to how they had on the cover.

Magical books that could only be read by those who could utilize mana, were plentifully lined up in the shelf before her eyes—no, in the infinite number of bookshelves that comprised the young girl's environs.

A library packed with magical books of such nature, to those with no groundings they were worthless blank books.

Contrariwise, it was a mountain of treasure possessing inestimable worth for those qualified. The young girl harbored pride in having been given the right to freely enter and exit this library.

Just how many humans across the world would thirst for the key to this treasury of knowledge.

A sense of supremacy for having been bestowed with what could not be gained with ease, even upon wishing for it. However, it was simply natural she would be the object to this favorable treatment. For the young girl was—

???: "The one and only daughter, of the great Mother, in fact."

???: "—Oh, in the midst of studying, are you, Betty?"

???: "—!"

As she puffed up her chest out of slight self-regard, the young girl's shoulders sprung in astonishment upon hearing the voice. The book dropped from her hands once again, this time striking her tiptoes.

Shouting "Ukya!", the young girl reflexively crouched on the spot.

???: "Ah, Betty, I'm sorry. All because I called out to you out of nowhere…"

???: "I-I-I…-It, doesn't, hurt, I suppose… ~hk."

???: "Hm hm, you sure are a strong girl. Now, show me your foot."

Tightly gnashing her molars, the young girl braved the pain. What gently descended whilst fluttering right before her eyes was a kitten of grey colored fur levitating in the air.

The kitten lengthened its tail that was around the same length as its body and softly pointed its end towards the young girl's hurting tiptoes. And, a pale light was emitted, its warmth gradually healed her pain.

???: "No~w, pain pain go awa~y… did it go away?"

???: "… It's gone away, in fact. Thank you, I suppose."

???: "All 'cause I surprised you, after all. Doing this much is a matter of course."

The kitten accepted her gratitude with an affluent smile whilst putting a hand on its waist.

Holding the fallen book in her arms once again, the girl stood up and looked into the eyes of the kitten.

Of a size enough to sit on a palm and capable of comprehending human speech was the kitten—it was not precisely a kitten. To the utmost, its shape and form merely resembled a lovable cat, its true state was that of a further exalted being.

A Spirit living by using mana, the primal power swaying across this world, as a source of energy was what the kitten was.

But for the young girl, there existed a further appropriate name for it.

???: "For pity's sake, Bubby sure is an oversleeper, in fact. It's already past noon, I suppose."

???: "Sorry, sorry. I accidentally got too much at ease. See, I resemble a cat, right? So, I fail to resist the instinct of wanting to laze around when I find a nice, sunny spot."

The girl referred to the mischievously grinning kitten as "Bubby"—big brother. An outsider may observe the kitten and the girl refer to each other in an odd fashion, but there was nothing uncanny about it.

The young girl and the kitten, were a recherché set of siblings born in the same manner—for they were fellow Artificial Spirits, beings of paramount eternity albeit born from human hands.

—The girl's name was Beatrice, the kitten's name was Puck.

This was the identity of the siblings, who directed deep affection mutually toward each other despite completely unalike shape and form.

Puck: "I must say, Betty sure has a zeal for studying. Reading in the library again, are you?"

Glancing at the book Beatrice was carrying by her chest, Puck tilted his neck whilst gently brushing his whiskers. Subject to his gaze, Beatrice nodded in assent with a "Yes, in fact",

Beatrice: "In order to gain knowledge befitting of what Mother's daughter should suitably have, Betty is diligently devoting herself to studies."

Puck: "Woah, very fine. But is it really needed? Though both Betty and I are Spirits born with a bunch of procedures omitted, mana's usage is something instinctive, right?"

Articulating, Puck raised both of his tiny hands and ahead of his physical body generated a red and a blue light.

Each of the lights were conceived with fire and water mana respectively but for Puck, who happened to be a Great Spirit, this was as natural an ability as swaying his tail.

Of course, Beatrice was capable of the same as well.

Though she was capable…

Beatrice: "Doing it per sensation and augmenting it with proper knowledge is different, in fact, Bubby. You and Betty are capable of it. But, that alone won't suffice, I suppose."

Puck: "Well well, you sure are a stern one, Betty. But why?"

Beatrice: "Betty being Mother's daughter, and presently acting as proxy for the proprietor of this palace of knowledge are also factors that play into it, in fact."

Stretching her dorsal muscles firmly, Beatrice inlaid strength into her chest with which she was carrying the book.

A mountain of books submerged in countless bookshelves, contained therein a vast expanse of knowledge yearning to yet unable to change the world. Suitable of being named as proscribed knowledge forbidden from being hauled outside by anyone.

The true proprietor of this palace, Beatrice's mother was even capable of memorizing it all.

However, Beatrice did not possess that extent of ability yet. But now that she had been entrusted in place of her mother, she must compensate with everything within the grasp of her effort.

Beatrice: "For that, Betty is studying every day, I suppose."

Puck: "Hmm, how praiseworthy… though, it must be tough. I mean, the title of that book is also Mana I, right? The other book is also…"

Articulating so, Puck pulled out a random book out of the bookshelf. With mana concentrating on it, appeared on its front cover the title Earth IV, truly simple and concise.

The book likely had information about earth written within, and had no further information included. That was a problem not present in this book alone, but shared amongst almost all of the magical books submerging the bookshelves.

Puck: "It's her bad habit. From the onset, she must be thinking only about reading and writing it herself, hence that it'd be fine as long as she alone understands it. The way the books have been arranged is a total mess as well."

Beatrice: "M-Mother has her profound intents, in fact, Bubby! It'd be impolite to speak that way, I suppose. Even if it's Bubby, Betty will get furious, in fact."

Puck: "Hmm, you definitely are praiseworthy."

Puck crossed his short arms watching Beatrice pout. Her cheek pressed by his long tail, Beatrice lowered her eyebrows as her pouting cheeks deflated.

Whatever she may have told Puck, Beatrice was greatly perplexed by the abstruse nature of the reading material as well.

Just as Puck had remarked, the proprietor of this palace was the proprietor of genius beyond the attainability of human intellect, and was moving per a peculiar principle that could never be comprehended by others.

The books' arrangement was in identical state, making even Beatrice face hardship in finding the book of her choice.

Truth be told, Mana I which she was holding at present was not the book of her desire either. Though it seemed interesting by itself and she wished to memorize its content via sedulous reading.

Puck: "Some books have the same title at times, the numbering is all slipshod too, yeah. There's also the writing of memos on the back, procrastinating summarizing them altogether, keeping organizing them for another day."

Beatrice: "Betty wants to hurry up, and become such that she can apprehend Mother's ideas as well, I suppose…"

Puck: "I just think it's simply sloppy."

Beatrice: "Bubby!"

As Beatrice pouted her lips, the kitten spoke "Got it got it" and proceeded to levitate further upward. Then suddenly, Puck said "What's this?" as his black eyes darted towards the room's window.

Puck: "Betty, seems like a visitor is here. Pretty brave of him, to make his way to this mansion."

Beatrice: "—! Oh no, in fact! Must prepare for the reception, I suppose!"

Jumping next to Puck as he gazed outside, she affirmed movement of the main gate of Beatrice’s palace.

The shadow, passing through the main gate whilst bewildered, was one with the qualification, having surmounted the multiple barriers for reaching this palace—at present during her mother’s absence, it was Beatrice’s duty to welcome them.

Beatrice: “Bubby! Betty is going to go, in fact! The conversation resumes sometime later, I suppose!”

Puck: “Whoopsie.”

Cramming the book she was holding into a bookshelf within her reach, Beatrice’s dress fluttered as she broke into a sprint. Giving a sendoff to the acutely panicking back, Puck proceeded to caress his whiskers.

Puck: “It sure feels like she takes right after her mother when it comes to this casually unorganized nature.”

Having rushed out of the library leaving these impressions of Puck’s behind, Beatrice headed towards the entry hall. Subsequently reaching the position immediately before, she adjusted her dress and hair, perfecting her personal appearance.

Beatrice: “Well then, about time, this is Betty’s duty, I suppose.”

She told herself before stretching her hand ahead.

Receiving her actions, the palace’s entrance—the dual grand doors automatically opened gradually.

Cold wind conceived with the aroma of a clear sky wafted in. Accompanying the wind and sun rays descending from zenith, the red haired youth peeked into the palace through his astonishment.

Seeing his pupils frozen over in awe and nervousness, Beatrice contently straitened her eyes,

Beatrice: “Commendation for making thy way here. —In Mother’s stead, thy visit shall be welcomed, hero, I suppose.”

Focusing on the opponent owning an astonished expression, with ample dignity—at the very least, seeking to appear with ample dignity by her perspective, Beatrice declared calmly.

—The hero who had paid a call to the Palace of the Witch, was far too exceedingly thrilled by this reception to even swallow his breath.

3

In this world existed beings having conceived special strength, regardless congenital or acquired.

All of them manifested odd talents improbable of being recreated by ordinary individuals, superhumans who interfered with the principles of this world. Even amongst them, the existences who possessed might that projected the brinks of humankind, isolated superior beings that let none other come close—people called those, as the Witches.

Absolute personages who overcame the reason and principles of the human world, unbound by common sense, making no considerations for others. Hence, all feared, dreaded, shunned the Witches.

That was the ordinary state of affairs, and the common cognizance pertaining to the absolute beings named as the Witches.

Beatrice: "—However, Mother is the solitary exception to that, in fact."

Taking pride as though a matter of her own, Beatrice put her hand on her puffed slim chest.

Beatrice: "Mother possesses a profoundly compassionate, magnanimous and honorable heart, I suppose. Hence, whilst wielding the most excelling power in this world, she is not troubled by actuating it for the benefit of others, in fact. You all are also to firmly engrave that in your minds, I suppose."

???: "Haah, haa~h…"

Beatrice: “Engrave that in your mind, in fact?”

???: “U-Understood! I’ll engrave it in my mind, I’ll engrave it in my mind!”

The deferential youth’s shoulders bounced upon her pressurizing gaze. His grateful conduct made Beatrice nod, satisfied.

This place was the palace’s parlor, where visitors received at the entry hall were shown around and made to have a seat.

Above all, the conduct of the visitor seated on the sofa lacked all composure. That was per natural, remaining calm when taken into the Palace of the Witch would be the abnormality.

Seeing fright toward that Witch personified was pleasant to Beatrice.

Beatrice: “It is correct to regard the name of the great Mother as exalted and noble, I suppose.”

???: “That is, a matter of course. After all, the Witch of Wisdom-sama’s name is renowned…”

Beatrice: “Yes! Yes, in fact! You certainly get it, I suppose. Will compliment you for that, in fact.”

Hearing greater admiration for her mother, Beatrice caressed the person’s head as her mood progressively became genial. The youth rounded his eyes upon her actions, as she peered into his blue eyes,

Beatrice: “So? Having reached the great Mother’s… the Witch of Wisdom’s palace, what is that you want to ask, I suppose. What compelled you to approach the barriers of the Witch, in fact.”

???: “Barrier you say, that’s…”

Beatrice: “An exaggeration, you mean to say? To make it clear, this is no place one can just easily come to when he wants, I suppose. A mighty wish that would seemingly scorch your heart, that is what made you reach here, in fact.”

Speaking so, Beatrice pointed towards the exterior of the window—the vast, extensive, entirely uninterrupted landscape. Though this was a remote location distant from human habitation, it was not merely some random remote location.

The summit of a tall, lofty mountain that verbatim pierced above the clouds. The ground underneath, impossible to be viewed due to the obstruction of the thick clouds, was populated by a dense, vast forest, and rich mana that could not be compared with any other land made nature grow to abnormal degrees. This derailed sense of direction, the forest at times freely altered its shape and form, a naturally strategic position which humans were not allowed to enter with ease.

Ahead of this rigorous environment lay this Palace of the Witch.

A resilient body that could travel by foot through the extensive, mighty forest, judgement that could overcome all kinds of obstacles interwoven by nature, a heart that would not get exhausted midway through the course, and, the serendipity of time.

With a concurrence of all of these, the qualification to finally reach this palace could be said to have been acquired.

Beatrice: “However, though it is important to have the mind and body remain strong at once, there is something more important than that, I suppose.”

???: “That being, the wish…?”

Beatrice: “In fact. You must also have an idea, I suppose. Regarding the wish that made you keep advancing, in fact.”

“…”

If a powerful flesh body and sharp determination were the requirements for tackling this forest, then a mighty wish that would seemingly scorch one’s body was precisely the condition for reaching this Witch’s palace, both of these prerequisites had been satisfied.

“…”

The youth, gaze cast downward and searching for words, was only about fifteen to sixteen years old. Age that indubitably constituted him as a young boy, on top of that, rough clothes with a satchel of fur, his old-fashioned tawdry sword and equipment were also meagre.

It could be told from his responses alone that he was abound in knowledge unsuitable for his age, and also possible to sense he was endowed with odd talents and ability rivalling the aforementioned Witches.

For him to have reached the Palace of the Witch meant…

Beatrice: “It means, that you do have a wish unbefitting your stature, I suppose. Mother, welcomes those relying on the Witch for fulfilling such wishes unsuited to their vessel, in fact.”

???: “B-But, I have nothing that could be an offering…”

Beatrice: “—Do not belittle, I suppose. To begin with, Mother’s deeds are not so cheap that they could be recompensed by you all, in fact.”

???: “I-If that’s the case, then that’s all the more reason not to…!”

The youth’s face reddened upon slight provocation.

Beatrice narrowed her eyes upon the befitting immaturity of the youth and took a short inhale. Mocking banal humans this way was fine, but it was about time she fulfilled her original duty.

Acting as proxy for the proprietor of the palace—that being, extending a hand of salvation to those who had stepped foot here in pursuit of wisdom.

Beatrice: “That is Mother’s—the Witch Echidna’s compassion, I suppose.”

???: “—Ah.”

Beatrice: “You shall be asked again, in fact. What is your wish? What do you desire to know? How will you respond, I suppose.

There is nothing which Mother does not know until the very edge of the edge of the edge of this world, in fact.”

Spreading her arms wide declared Beatrice, as if singing.

The youth unwittingly straightened his spine upon hearing her, and similarly Beatrice encouraged herself to an identical degree. Her mother presently absent, Beatrice stood as her proxy, thus it was only natural that her conduct be similar to that of her mother as well.

No failure, error, blunder should happen. —For certain.

The youth’s lips quivered a few times before Beatrice, who had abandoned her own nature, before long he solidified his cheeks as though having cemented his thoughts, and spoke.

???: “Please, teach me… a way my childhood friend, won’t be taken away!”

Beatrice: “—. ——. —Huh?”

Yes, Beatrice was taken aback, dumbfounded, as the youth declared with an expression exhibiting preparedness for death.

Viewing Beatrice’s expression, the youth pitched forward pronouncing “Like I sai~d”,

???: “I want you to teach me. A way that my childhood friend, won’t get snatched away!”

Beatrice: “W-Wait a second, I suppose. Betty may have misheard, in fact. You just said, a way your childhood friend won’t get snatched away…”

???: “Yes! I want to protect my childhood friend, Remina!”

“…”

The youth leaned forward moreover with an intimidating attitude before Beatrice started feeling dizzy.

To rescue lands with crops failed due to droughts, to aid villages fallen into the predicament of frequent floods, to decontaminate grounds that stopped being approached by people due to dense mana storms, for solving such circumstances beyond human intellect the Witch had been relied on.

To think the youth would use this opportunity for his childhood friend, an apparent subject of his affection, to not be snatched away.

Beatrice: “Th-This is, Betty’s first task as Mother’s proxy…”

???: “Um, so on that note, where might the pivotal Witch-sama be?”

The youth timidly asked before Beatrice awakened from her dizziness due to the unforeseen circumstance. However, with a “Wait, I suppose” Beatrice pointed her hand towards the youth,

Beatrice: “Mother is currently absent. Thus, Betty will entertain you and grant the wisdom corresponding to your wish… your, wish…”

???: “Wh-What might have happened?”

Beatrice: “B-Betty didn’t exactly devotedly read through Mother’s vast collection of books, for the sake of some human’s love affair, I suppose…”

Knelt down, Beatrice cursed the misfortune befallen upon herself.

However, Beatrice was representing her mother, the youth before her eyes had stepped foot into this place having overcome the necessary trials. Hence, Beatrice must answer.

Even if this was some boundlessly worthless matter of some human’s love affair…

???: “Now now, Betty, you mustn’t jump to conclusions. It is an important matter for this child, and you must properly listen to what more he has to say, you know.”

Beatrice: “Ah…”

Beatrice subsequently lifted her face at the voice descending from overhead whilst she mourned for her own self.

Present there was Puck, his tail in his arms, softly sprawling in the air levitating close to the ceiling of the parlor. This entrance of Puck's made the youth holler "Eh?!" as he darted his eyes around.

???: "A c-cat… no, could it be, a Spirit?!"

Puck: "Yep yep, I'm surprised you got it. Despite being so furry, I'm a Spirit. With the permission of that Mother, I'm living together with Betty. Nice to be with you~."

???: "P-Pleased to be in your company…?"

Puck pointed his tiny hand towards the baffled youth whilst gyrating and descending. Perplexed, the youth exchanged something akin to handshake by picking Puck's hand with a finger.

Puck: "I'll ask in place of the depressed Betty, but what's your name?"

Toska: "Ah… I'm, Toska. I came from a village called Carnattse."

Puck: "I see I see. I'll say this, you sure are a hard worker, Toska. Betty also spoke of the same, but this palace really is no place you can easily reach. It takes many days if you travel by foot, yeah?"

Toska: "I, was anyhow just desperate…"

Puck: "Seems so. Um, Remina-chan, was it? Is she someone precious to you?"

Puck's enquiry made the youth—Toska falter a bit, but he then proceeded to give a deep nod.

Toska: "Yes… Remina is my childhood friend, but, that's not all."

Puck: "Is that so is that so. If that's the case then I'm rooting for you. I'm an ally to maidens in love and youthful youngsters, you see. So then, what kind of a guy is your romantic rival? Like the spoiled son of a distinguished figure in the village, a greedy nobleman who's the tax collector, or if things are odd then there's also the possibility of it being a relative…"

Beatrice: "…If a love affair is all that it is, then just run away at night or elope with her or whatever, in fact."

The deeply breathing Beatrice threw water onto Puck and Toska's heated dialogue.

Though she had surmounted the initial shock, Beatrice could not digest this with ease in spite of even Puck's direction. The love affair of a man and a woman was far too lowly to borrow the knowledge of the Witch of Wisdom.

Beatrice: "Yet, why did he make it to the palace, I suppose… the criterion for selection is excessively enigmatic, in fact. Betty laments her insufficiency of being unable to apprehend Mother's profound intents, I suppose…!"

Holding her head, Beatrice earnestly surmised the true motives of her currently absent mother.

She must understand the intentions of her mother, voiced not in many words, lest she fail to fulfill her duty of being her proxy. Wrinkles forming by her lovable eyebrows, Beatrice groaned.

Witnessing Beatrice's conduct, Toska stood up, having surpassed the limit of his endurance.

Toska: "Um! There really is no time! At this rate Remina will… Remina will, become a sacrifice for the Blight Dragon!"

Beatrice: "—Wait again, in fact."

Beatrice pointed her palm towards his muzzle as Toska earnestly implored. The exchange made Toska widen his eyes, vocalizing a "Hm?", but Beatrice paid no heed.

If anything, she commandingly glared at the youth taller than herself.

Beatrice: "Blight Dragon? Did you say Blight Dragon, I suppose?

Your childhood friend was chosen as sacrifice for the Blight Dragon, in fact?”

Toska: “Th-That’s correct! I’ve been saying that the whole time, haven’t I!”

Beatrice: “You didn’t say even the slightest bit of that, you enormous dunce!”

Toska: “O~w ~hk?!”

His tiptoes stomped, Toska jumped up and down with tearful eyes. However, considering how he had distressed Beatrice due to his dearth of explanation, he had earned that much.

He must have also had anxiety and nervousness after having reached the Palace of the Witch. She had considered that, but what a truly crude elucidation it had been. However, now she had a grasp on the matter.

Puck: “In other words, a Blight Dragon settled close to Toska’s village, and Toska’s childhood friend…”

Toska: “It’s Remina.”

Puck: “Right, Remina was chosen as the sacrifice is what the situation is. So, you can’t run away with Remina and let the village be brought to ruin by the Blight Dragon either, and are facing immense turmoil, is what it means.”

Toska powerlessly nodded as Puck encapsulated the circumstance. He hesitantly commenced reciting the situation surrounding himself, his childhood friend, and the village.

Toska: “Carnattse, is a small village with a population of about fifty people. Most households practice farming, including mine, and I am the second son… Remina, is the same age as me and she’s also my neighbor.”

Beatrice: “Get this backstory of yours out of here, in fact.”

Toska: “Y-Yes… um, anyhow, Remina says she’s going to become the sacrifice for the Blight Dragon for the sake of the village and just won't listen. But, even if Remina were to become the sacrifice…"

Puck: "Once it has an empty stomach again it'll demand the same thing. Dragons sure are classless."

Hearing Puck's impression gave no rise to a smile on Toska's face.

His childhood friend who accepted the role of being the sacrifice was a valorous young girl, but Puck's say was correct. Even if the sacrifice were to be offered, only a smidgen of peace would the Blight Dragon grant.

And, Toska did not want to lose his childhood friend in exchange for that smidgen of peace.

Beatrice: "So, you came here searching for a way to kill the Blight Dragon, I suppose."

Toska: "N-No! I wouldn't go that far…"

Beatrice: "Unnecessary appearances are a waste of time, in fact. Coming so far for the sake of hope, then dreading your wish at the crucial point, I suppose? That is unhinged, in fact."

"…"

She affirmed precisely his wish, his desire.

To frantically cling to something, to wish whilst paying no heed to appearances, meant having reached the water's edge. When there no longer existed any future, hope, potentiality, only to those who could earnestly put their life on the line did the gates of the Palace of the Witch open.

And Beatrice was one acting as proxy for the Witch who offered her hand to those drowning.

Beatrice: "Now, the Great Spirit Beatrice enquires, I suppose. What is your wish? Having arrived at the Palace of the Witch who grants wisdom, just what is it that you desire, in fact."

Toska: “I…”

In response to Beatrice’s question, Toska’s voice became huskier, tinged with heat.

Nervousness parched the youth’s mouth, but he prevailed over that vexing thirst. The youth bit his lips, saturating his tongue with his own blood, his blue eyes gazing at Beatrice,

Toska: “…I want to kill the Blight Dragon, and save Remina.”

Beatrice: “Can’t hear you, I suppose.”

Toska: “—Teach me a way to kill the Blight Dragon! Remina, is someone precious to me!”

Blood streaming from the vicinity of his mouth, Toska powerfully beseeched with impetus as though truly vomiting blood.

Listening to Toska implore, Puck shut a single eye whilst hugging his tail. And Beatrice nodded, having heard the same implore,

Beatrice: “The Witch’s daughter, Beatrice, shall grant that wish of yours, in fact.”

She answered, with a smile she had done her best effort to learn from her mother.

4

Puck: “Nevertheless, so the opponent is a Blight Dragon eh~. A bit weighty for Betty’s first task.”

Their discussion straightened out, Puck gently broke the ice as he leisurely descended.

Vocalizing a “Huh” Toska made a startled expression at the innocuous comment. As though awakening from a fever, he compared Beatrice and Puck with the eye,

Toska: “That reminds me, I got a bit carried away but… what’s this about the Witch-sama being absent, or the Witch’s daughter, or a cat Spirit-sama?!”

Beatrice: “…No need to make such a ruckus, I suppose. It’s just as you heard, in fact. Bubby is a Spirit, and Betty is Mother’s daughter. And Mother, the proprietor of the palace, is absent, I suppose. Something about there being an unusual evil omen, she is currently on a trip to the eastern edge, in fact.”

Toska: “She’s gone out you say… wh-when will she be able to return?!”

Beatrice: “No specific clue, I suppose. She simply comes to observe the circumstances once a month, in fact. Generally, it’s usually the night of the full moon.”

Toska: “—~hk, we won’t make it then!”

Toska hollered, countenance pale and hands on his head.

Toska: “Remina will be proffered as sacrifice on the night of the full moon… only ten days remain till then!”

Puck: “Hmm hmm, exactly the X-Day Echidna returns on, huh.”

Toska: “Ekks…? Anyhow, we must return to the village before that day!”

Toska peered at Beatrice as though clinging onto her, his face yet pallid.

His gaze was urging her to somehow get in contact with Echidna, but there existed no such means. The tool Echidna had invented, the Conversing Mirrors were there, but she did not carry those with herself.

According to her mother, she was not one who liked to look at her own face…

Beatrice: “It would be far too late should Mother’s return be awaited, in fact. Even for granting a plan instead, it would be onerous to complete preparations within ten days from now, I suppose.”

Puck: “Even if their hands are grabbed as they drown, there’s no way everybody would be saved, isn’t it~.”

Toska: “No way…”

Hearing Beatrice and Puck’s conversation, Toska’s head hung low, heartbroken.

Truly ironic. For him to have made his way to the Palace of the Witch seeking a hand of salvation, yet for it to remain ungranted due to the pivotal Witch’s absence. The outcome, he wasted the remaining few fragments of time he had with his childhood friend and must return empty-handed owning no other alternatives.

Rather, there was no surety whether he would even be able to make it back to that village by the next night of the full moon.

Beatrice: “…That is, unacceptable, in fact.”

Puck: “Betty?”

Puck’s ears quivered at her murmur. Looking upwards at Puck, the characteristic patterns visible on Beatrice’s pupils flailed.

Beatrice: “Just as Bubby is aware, this is Betty’s first task, I suppose. Mother entrusted Betty to attend during her absence, and commanded to fulfill the duties of the Palace of the Witch, in fact. Yet, to abandon the first hero who called onto this place due to an absence of means, are you fine with something like that, I suppose.”

Puck: “Hmm, admitting not being able to do what can’t be done is also a show of courage, wouldn’t you say.”

Beatrice: “But, it is Betty’s mission to be useful to Mother, in fact.”

Puck: “—Mission.”

Puck grimaced at Beatrice’s words as she firmly clenched her fist and touched her chest.

The word mission was a heavy one for Spirits—Artificial Spirits, Beatrice and Puck. So incredibly heavy it was beyond any possible comparison, constituting the core of their selves.

Both had taken birth together, not naturally, but by the Witch, and their existences held purpose.

Beatrice's did, so did Puck's. That was…

Beatrice: "As long as Betty is serving as Mother's proxy, no hands seeking salvation shall be shaken off, I suppose."

Toska: "Beatrice-chan…"

Beatrice: "Why would you suffix -chan onto Betty's name there, in fact!"

Toska: "That hu~rt ~hk?!"

Toska was moved to see Beatrice be so ardent, only for her to downright step on his feet.

However, she believed this exuberance made for the undone final push.

—The Blight Dragon extermination of Carnattse, as sought by the hero Toska.

Beatrice: "Mineself Beatrice, shall grant that wish in Mother's stead, I suppose!"

"…"

Beatrice declared sonorously whilst vigorously beating her chest.

His eyes widened upon her pronouncement, Toska inhaled with the trodden foot grasped in his hands.

Toska: "Um, I do appreciate the sentimentaagh?!"

Beatrice: "Got tired of listening to your unneeded objections, in fact."

With the toes of his other foot stepped on, Toska hopped on the floor with one leg at a time.

For Toska—no, for outsiders to make light of Beatrice assuming from her outward appearance was as anticipated. However, that was immense imprudence.

Beatrice: “Betty is Mother’s daughter… being lumped together with some random lackluster Spirit is intolerable, I suppose. Besides, if Betty will go then Bubby will also come along without fail, in fact.”

Puck: “Well, that’s true. I’ve been told to look after Betty by Echidna anyways, and there’s only so far you can actually let your cute kid travel into the world.”

Toska: “Puck-sama aside, Beatrice-cha… -sama, is also a Spirit?”

Tending to both of his feet whilst seated on the chair, Toska tilted his head as he visually compared Beatrice and Puck.

Toska: “I completely thought Spirits were like, either softly floating around like lights, or otherwise had taken the form of animals like Puck-sama…”

Puck: “Hm, that’s correct. Though on instances there are also some who specialize in taking the forms of humans, a great deal of Spirits’ original forms are animal-esque forms. Same goes for me, too.”

Beatrice: “For Betty, it is simply that this is the form Mother brought forth, I suppose. Of course, a Spirit’s might is not determined by shape and form, in fact. Even Bubby is so furry and lovable, I suppose.”

Puck: “Ehehe.”

Toska: “Well… I don’t really know about that, but…”

The Spirit siblings held their heads high side by side, before Toska pronounced “Ah” and formed an expression of having noticed something.

Toska: “Spirits live far longer than humans, yes? Then could it be that the same applies to the two of you?”

Beatrice: “O-Of course, in fact. It would be trouble should you misinterpret this brimming majesty and intellect, I suppose.”

Toska: “I knew it! Um, may I ask what approximately your age is?”

Puck: “Both Betty and I would be around three years old, yeah.”

Toska: “You’re totally young!”

Toska exclaimed, his anticipation proven inaccurate, as Puck shrugged his shoulders. Levitating before the let down Toska’s face, Puck pointed his tail forward and remarked “Do you hear me?”,

Puck: “Don’t have any misunderstandings, okay. A cat’s three years, equate to around a human’s thirty years.”

Toska: “But still, that’s way younger than my old man, and going by that line of reason Beatrice-sama is… woops!”

Beatrice: “Mgh, don’t conveniently dodge, in fact.”

Toska: “I absolutely will dodge!”

Toska evaded Beatrice’s heel, revealing his intent to not be stepped on countlessly. He then proceeded to gaze at the two, commenting “It’s no good after all”,

Toska: “I appreciate your sentiment. But, I cannot entangle children… people who are younger than me, into something so perilous. I, will run back to the village…”

Beatrice: “You do not appear to be a fellow so laudable that you would then spend the remainder of your time together, I suppose. You intend to challenge the Blight Dragon for the sake of your childhood friend, in fact.”

Toska: “—~hk.”

Beatrice: “What an inconceivably colossal fool, I suppose. Something like tackling a battle that cannot be won is meaningless, in fact.”

His eyes cast down, Toska sunk his teeth into his lips upon Beatrice's discernment, unable to rebut. For she had hit the bull's eye.

For the sake of his childhood friend, he had endangered his life to pay a call to this palace, banking his dependency onto the Witch of Wisdom. Inversely said, it implied the absence of any allies who would fight with him.

Beatrice: "Now that you have come here, something like that won't be allowed, I suppose. The Witch of Wisdom grants wisdom, in order to elevate those seeking salvation. Then, what can be accorded is not restricted to wisdom, in fact."

Toska: "—Ah."

Beatrice: "It shall be said once more. You seek a way to kill the Blight Dragon. And, Betty gave her word to respond to that. Thus, she shall respond. —Betty will, with this life of her's at stake."

For might to dwell in her words, in these moments, set ablaze was a definite flame within Beatrice's soul.

And that flame transfigured into an inferno, engulfing even Toska, gazing before her, within. Scorched by the blaze, Toska inhaled and deeply lowered his head as light sojourned within his blue eyes.

Toska: "Thank you very much. Prithee, fight by my side."

No disputation necessary this time. —Marking the beginning, of her first task.

5

Fastening the doors of the palace and arranging a parting letter for the time her mother returned during their absence, Beatrice, alongside Puck, exited the palace accompanying Toska with all preparations completed.

Beatrice: "The target time is the night of the full moon ten days from now… Betty will make sure to reach, I suppose."

Toska: “To be honest, I believe we will barely make it. Since the climb up to this palace was nothing short of extraordinary.”

Many set forth for the Palace of the Witch in pursuit of wisdom. But, the vast majority of them were filtered out due to scanty courage and ability. The prime reason being the mountain trail leading towards the palace.

So bedeviling it could no longer even be dubbed a mountain trail, cold sweat emerged on Toska through mere recollection.

However…

Beatrice: “Relax, in fact. The hindering vermin up until the palace are only there when entering… they won’t intrude when returning.”

Toska: “Really?! But, there’s also the rumor about the forest of no return…”

Puck: “Those kinds of rumors have been spread because if you come to the forest with scrappy feelings and ability, then you’ll only have a bad time, I think? Echidna’s a girl who does those sorts of things.”

Toska’s cognizance seemed to be enormously jolted by the impact of the truth he had been informed about.

And, seeing a rise in the number of humans conversant with her mother’s true form was something delightful yet slightly lonesome for Beatrice.

Beatrice: “Regardless, there is no apprehension for descending the mountain, in fact.”

Toska: “Yes. If we can just exit the mountain and the forest, then I’ll run while carrying Beatrice-sama on my shoulder the rest of the way. Puck-sama will…”

Puck: “I can keep up by flying so it’s all good~.”

Toska nodded as Puck responded with a relaxed pitch, waving his tail. Putting the two’s discourse aside, Beatrice looked back towards the palace and gently tapered her eyes whilst standing before the gates.

A parental home for Beatrice, forbye the palace of wisdom entrusted to her by her mother—albeit momentarily, something stood out about being apart from it.

Toska: “Beatrice-sama, is it truly alright to be absent from the palace?”

Puck: “Well, only one or two people make their way to it in a year, and if they happen to reach it during the time of absence then they’re just unlucky I suppose so it can’t be helped, I guess. This is also the first time Betty is leaving her home, so let’s let her resolve her heart.”

Toska: “Huh, it’s also the first time she’s leaving the palace?”

Puck: “Is it something to be surprised about?”

Puck caressed his own face with a hand before Toska opened his eyes wide,

Puck: “Even animals live their entire lives within their territories if they can defend it, right? If there never rises a need to go afar, then you too would live all your life inside that tiny village of yours. It’s the same thing.”

Toska: “If you say so, that’s true… I suppose?”

Puck: “Betty’s thing is also important, but I think you’d be better off worrying for yourself. There probably won’t be any time to take breaks between this place and your village, so are you fine with the way you’re prepared?”

In accordance with Beatrice’s assessment of it being meagre, judging Toska’s equipment to vastly fall short of the minimum necessary standard would be correct.

Despite being congruous with him being a son of a farmer, it would inescapably be termed as unsuitable for a wayfarer undertaking long travels. His garbs, his footwear, even the sword hanging on his hip, all were paltry and of poor quality.

Puck: “This is coming a bit too late, but I’m surprised you made your way to the palace. It can only be categorized as love and courage making up for it, isn’t it?”

Toska: “But, only as compensation… also, my body’s been burlier than others’ since long before, so that may be the reason.”

Puck: “Burly… that sort of a Divine Protection, I wonder? Well, it’s gotta be at least that much or it’d be impossible, yeah.”

Toska answered whilst scratching his head as Puck made sense of it, surmising it to be something in such wise.

And, making end of her brief farewell to her parental home, Beatrice regrouped with the two.

Beatrice: “Sorry for the wait, I suppose. It’s time to depart, in fact.”

Toska: “Understood… Beatrice-sama, your luggage?”

Even Toska, who sported lightweight equipment and clothing for tackling the towering mountain, was stupefied by Beatrice’s travel outfit.

For nothing about it had altered since the time they had their dialogue in the parlor.

Beatrice: “Betty is certain to have told you, I suppose. Betty is a Spirit… this outfit and even physique are molded with mana, in fact. Betty has total freedom over changing clothes and refashioning… hand luggage is a mere hindrance, I suppose.”

Toska: “Then, what about water or food?”

Puck: “Mhm, unnecessary for us. We’ll take ‘em if you give ‘em, but simply gobbling up the mana suspended in the air is sufficient. That’s why, I’m also empty-handed, and naked.”

Beatrice: “Bubby has natural fur, which is just the best, in fact.”

Beatrice light-heartedly nodded as she rubbed cheeks with Puck who perched on her shoulder. Hearing this interchange made Toska say “Is that so~” in admiration,

Toska: “If that’s the case then I, a human, am looking to be the most burdensome…”

Beatrice: “Hmph. Now that Betty has decided to follow through with it, it is her duty to pull you along, I suppose. Through the course of the journey she will provide you with water, and even help with hunting if necessary, in fact.”

Puck: “We can also give rise to a tailwind, and level the ground to make it easier to run. More than satisfactory, wouldn’t you say?”

Wind blew with a swing of Beatrice’s hand, ground was smoothed with a swing of Puck’s tail. Beholding this with his own two eyes, Toska cleared his throat and was yet again allured by the two’s might as Spirits.

Furthermore, he learnt that acting with queer restraint pertaining to the two’s might would be discourteous, as well.

Toska: “—. I understand. I shall borrow the power of you two! Prithee, make haste toward the itinerary to the village first!”

Beatrice: “Agreeable, I suppose. Now, well then, you’ll have to carry Betty in your arms, in fact.”

Nodding with a “Yes!”, Toska’s hands reached for Beatrice, both her arms outstretched. And, he scooped her up and coiled his arm around Beatrice’s waist, carrying her by his side as though carrying firewood.

Toska: “Alright… agh, it hurt ~hk?!”

Beatrice: “Don’t go alright-ing, I suppose! What, in fact, is th-this humiliating way of carrying!”

Toska shrieked with tearful eyes, with his armpit pinched by Beatrice whom he was carrying.

Truly, just what did he regard the exalted Spirit as. Toska’s conduct lacked the natural forethought towards even a lady, prior to

Beatrice's honor.

Beatrice: "A peasant after all, I suppose. Wield more delicacy, the daintiness of carrying a baby, in fact."

Toska: "A baby… I-I understand. Al, right."

Beatrice: "…Hm, no problems, I suppose."

This time gently carried in his arms like a child, Beatrice pardoned Toska's insolence. Puck threw himself down on Beatrice's chest, and the standard stance of the three departing on the journey was now contrived.

Toska: "Alright then, I shall run straight ahead. Please let me know if there is ever any issue."

Beatrice: "Well, you can keep running without care, I suppose. This side will handle the earth flattening, I suppose."

Toska: "Understood. Well then…"

Firm strength pouring into his legs, Toska then broke into a sprint, Beatrice still in his arms. Her entire frame basking in the acceleration and wind, Beatrice left the Palace of the Witch for the first time.

As the palace slowly, steadily faded away into the distance, she attempted to look back onto it in a final display of longing and valediction…

Beatrice: "—Wh-Wha?!"

Toska bolted at a velocity infinitely greater, the palace had already become invisible in a matter of seconds as the forms of the three raced down the hilly road and vaulted into the dense clouds.

Within the clouds, with no longer present the white titans of ice that functioned as impeding obstacles in the paths of those with their sights set on the palace, as if verbatim flying over the bare rock that made for an unfavorable foothold, Toska hurtled downward.

Beatrice sensed no room for the assistance of magic in his unwavering momentum and speed.

Truly, momentum akin to a gale.

Toska: “No hindrances when returning…! Seems like that was true!”

Beatrice: “Ababa, ababa, ubababa…”

Toska: “If this is how things are then it looks like we’ll be able to descend the mountain in half a day. We’ll make it, I’ll make it, Remina!”

Toska, exhilarated, shan’t notice the grueling condition Beatrice was in, within his arms. On Beatrice’s chest, Puck caressed his whiskers whilst pronouncing an “Ah~”, being rocked similar to her.

Puck: “I did think it was weird since he managed to climb up the mountain, but this kid also wasn’t normal after all, huh.”

So he whispered, his expression utterly drained.

6

—Blight Dragon, was nothing but a convenient name for Dragons harboring enmity toward humans.

Identical to how the Spirits that yielded harm onto others were labelled as Blight Spirits. However, unlike Spirits who for the most part did not leave their birthplaces, Dragons sought to expand their turf by their own accord.

This resulted in the birth of their conflict with people who originally lived there, subsequently starting to be designated as Blight Dragons.

Beatrice: “In other words, Dragons being regarded as Blight Dragons is solely a matter of humans’ point of view, in fact.”

Toska: “I see… then, the Dragon who showed up on a mountain close to the village is also.”

Beatrice: “It means it is one who literally spread its wings wide in order to expand its turf, I suppose.”

Puck: “In these times even the Dragons are all worked up due to their population having risen too much~. They’re likely troubled themselves, seeing the places they could use as dwellings become smaller and smaller.”

The time was one of total darkness, Beatrice elucidated about Dragons whilst hewing the campfire.

Half a day since their departure from the Palace of the Witch, Toska’s swordsmanship had exemplarily exited the montane forest and they had successfully escaped the mountain as well as the forest of the Witch. Nothing existed for Beatrice to draw a comparison with, but by Puck’s word his accomplishment was akin to monstrous.

Toska: “Monstrous you say, that is an overappraisal.”

Puck caressed his whiskers as Toska presented a humble response to the evaluation. What his round, black eyes glanced at was not the modest Toska, but his background.

—Behind Toska, lying on the ground was a titanic, ferocious-looking lion.

Black fur similar to wires, endowed with sharp fangs and claws, the quadruped possessed brutishness kindred with its fiendish appearance but its eyes had already lost their light, the thread of its life severed.

And the one to inexorably bring down this titanic brute was nobody but Toska.

Puck: “I guess it’s a Guiltylowe? Not very intelligent, but their might speaks for itself. And you tidied it up so easily. You know, are you sure you don’t hunt mere Dragons and stuff even without us being there?”

Toska: “Please stop, Puck-sama. You’ll know once you see any actual Dragons… They’re, not like this stupid dog. For my body to tremble non-stop during a confrontation, has happened for the first time ever since with big brother."

Swiveling his sword with an accustomed way of wielding, Toska dissected the titanic brute he had brought down. Peeling its skin, chopping the spouting organs and blood into casual sizes, he held it on the bonfire concocted on thin woods.

Beatrice: "Will other animals not gather due to the scent of grilling meat, in fact?"

Toska: "Please be at ease. This guy surely has the white horn on its forehead. Other animals don't come close to animals with this horn. It also serves as an animal repel if you carry its blood."

Beatrice: "…You seem familiar with this, I suppose."

Beatrice sighed as she gazed at his cooking, upon Toska's display of practical knowledge.

Though in truth, Beatrice's plan had been to flaunt her ability and make Toska sing her praises like "As expected of the daughter of the Witch-sama!" by the time of having reached up to this point.

Beatrice: "Betty's plan failed because you're a monster, in fact."

Toska: "Now you too, Beatrice-sama! Believe me, I am no monster. I can just move my body a very teensy bit more than other people… I do not compare with a Dragon."

A bitter grin, Toska vanished his smile and fixed his pupils onto the flame.

His eyes conveyed a certain longing, that he truly should have been a monster. Had Toska been a monster that could prey even upon a Dragon, then he could have protected his childhood friend without having to depend on anyone.

Toska: "No matter of how many of these stupid dogs I hunt, it is nothing worth taking pride in."

Puck: "That itself makes it a pitiable show for this child who got hunted… Well, it's said they don't have anything in their minds aside from attacking humans, so I guess it's only fair. Seems these types of animals are called Witch Beasts, yeah."

Beatrice: "Witch Beasts… Like Blight Dragons, they're not called Blight Brutes or something, I suppose."

Puck: "Well it is pretty hard to pronounce. Blight Brute. Like beetroot. Blight Brute."

Puck blew a breath onto the grilling meat of the Witch Beast whilst uttering. That instant, the cleaved fat begot an aromatic scent before Toska's belly gave rise to a large grumble.

Toska: "Frankly, their meat doesn't taste good at all."

Puck: "Huh, I see."

Toska: "Because of bad stuff being stockpiled in their bodies or something, the village headman had said. Can't be called anything extravagant either, I'll eat, though."

Articulating so, Toska proceeded to pick up a skewer and heartily dug in. His expression then observably clouded, with a disconsolate look on his face he put down the skewer.

And,

Toska: "Beatrice-sama, would you like one as well?"

Beatrice: "Why, did you think Betty would accept it after seeing your frown just now, in fact…?"

Toska: "No, I just thought there should be more casualties…"

Beatrice: "Just where did you drop your respect for Betty, I suppose?!"

Beatrice nailed her rage onto Toska, who offered her another skewer. A half-joke, Toska obediently drew back the skewer as well.

Puck: "Then, guess I'll take it in Betty's stead. Chomp."

Beatrice: “Bubby?!”

Puck: “Gobble gobble, gobble gobble… mhm, it’s disgusting! One more!”

Toska: “One more you say, managing to eat it alone is a feat.”

Declared Puck with a frown, having snatched the skewer from Toska’s hand and munched the meat. Considering how small his bites were, fully eating one skewer worth of grilled meat alone was an immense task for Puck.

Laughing at Puck’s conduct, Toska gorged on whatever remained of the first skewer.

Guiltylowe’s body was large, plenty of edible portions were still left. A number of skewers were being grilled on the flame, and Beatrice’s gaze intermittently glanced toward them.

She was a Spirit so it was improbable for her to become hungry. It was improbable, and yet…

Puck: “Eating a Witch Beast is also a good way to cover for the knowledge you lack, Betty.”

Beatrice: “B-Betty was thinking the same, in fact. No doubt even Mother would not have experienced eating a Witch Beast, I suppose. It is an opportunity to be useful to Mother, in fact.”

Even the studious Echidna surely mustn’t have ensnared herself in this order of bizarre eating.

Her sense of purpose of being useful to her mother, amalgamated with the inquisitiveness for the unknown before her eyes, Beatrice nervously took one of the grilling skewers in her hand.

And, with Toska and Puck’s watchful eye over her, took one bite of earnest heartfelt desire.

Beatrice: “—It’s disgusting, I suppose!”

The instant she took a bite, she felt the noxiousness characteristic of carnivores fill her mouth. Furthermore the meat itself was rigid beyond chewing, and the oozing flesh fluids upon each crunch were bitter like mud.

Truly, flavor akin to chewing sand.

Beatrice: “Taste of hell, in fact… Sh-Shouldn’t have eaten it, I suppose…”

Puck: “On top of that, this thing’s super filled with bad mana, so it’s poison for us. What the village headman from Toska’s place said was correct.”

Beatrice: “Ueh cough! Cough cough, in fact!”

Beatrice spat out what she once had in her mouth in tremendous fluster. Let her be termed as ill-mannered, but she did not possess the courage to swallow poison. And even if she did, that would amount to nothing but foolhardiness.

Beside her, Puck also spat out the flesh into the flame with a cough.

Puck: “That’s how it is, so I don’t really recommend it to you either, Toska? Even if you’re not a Spirit, bad content may start accumulating if you eat too much.”

Toska: “Is, that so? …But, I killed it, so.”

Puck: “Must eat the life you’ve taken, that type of thinking eh? I think that itself is praiseworthy, but don’t you get into pretty rough spots if you apply that to everything? You seem like you could even eat some venomous insects.”

Toska: “Uh… even I, would prefer not to.”

Though an argument quite extreme, it seemed to have sufficient effect on Toska.

Informed of the possibility that his body may get eaten into from within, even Toska lowered the skewer in his grip. However, his eyes yet remorseful, were contemplating the Witch Beast meat cooling down.

Beatrice: “Why are you fussing over that piece of meat, I suppose. To think you would get that hungry, humans need to put some limits on their inexpediency, in fact.”

Toska: “It’s not that I’m hungry… It’s just that, big brother had once earlier said that I’d get stronger if I ate strong creatures, so just out of habit.”

Manifesting a bitter smile, a sigh leaked from Toska as he released the grilled meat into the flames.

Beatrice felt a queer sensation jab her chest, beholding Toska’s expression. The expression of powerfully yearning for something, very much resembling that of pursuit for an unattainable wish.

Puck: “Big brother you say, you have an elder brother? That reminds me, you did say you were the second son, yeah.”

Toska: “Yes. I have an elder brother who is slightly older than me… though he is so strong, you wouldn’t believe he belongs to this world.”

Beatrice: “…Well well, if that isn’t another overstatement, I suppose. If he is so strong, then you should’ve left the Blight Dragon extermination up to your so-called big brother, in fact.”

Toska: “—. Big brother, has gone out of the village, so.”

His words were not the echo of a younger brother lamenting the absence of his dependable elder brother.

Something far more convoluted, like the mud named a long span of time having sedimented in a water well. All one could do in order to draw the water therein was to remove the mud aside and pray for the fortune of the water well having not dried up.

Beatrice: “But, Betty wants none of that dismal nonsense, I suppose.”

Toska: “Beatrice-sama?”

Beatrice: “Don’t be irresolute, in fact, human. No matter how much you lose heart, you cannot become your siblings, I suppose. That is a matter of course, in fact."

Pruning away the ashes on her footwear, Beatrice looked downward towards the mute Toska. Hands on her hips, as though launching a kick into the melancholic youth's back,

Beatrice: "—But still, you will save the village, I suppose."

Toska: "—Ah."

Beatrice: "You didn't give up, searched for what you could do and aimed for the palace. Though Mother is absent, Betty and Bubby have mobilized your wish, in fact."

No miracles befell upon those who undertook no action. No rains blessed upon those who simply looked towards the heavens.

In a world where all simply withered unless one kept moving forward, the will to advance was utmost sacred.

"…"

By the point of this declaration, Beatrice noticed her own heated temper. Toska's gaze at her now rapidly altered into a source of embarrassment.

Beatrice: "A-At any rate, that's how it is, in fact! Must wake up early tomorrow as well, so sleep right away, I suppose! You'll have to run while carrying Betty in your arms tomorrow as well, in fact!"

Beatrice swiftly articulated whilst concealing her embarrassment, cheeks tinged red. She subsequently lied on the ground blanketed by leaf litter, in the rear of the fallen tree being used as substitute for seating.

She was not reluctant to lie on the ground either, for the impurities on her dress were erased each time she shifted positions. Though she was anticipating the disgrace saturating her face red to rob her of her sleep…

Beatrice: "—Nn."

Her insecurity needless, mind and body exhausted by her first travel to afar, Beatrice's consciousness reaped the allurement of deep sleep.

"…"

Beginning to hear her quiet breaths of sleep within a matter of seconds, Toska exchanged a glance with Puck.

Puck: "Looks like she was tired, after all. As you saw, she'd been in pretty high spirits."

Toska: "Looks to be so. Since it was also apparently the first time she left her house… To think she would devote such efforts for my sake, when we've just met."

An intent gaze at the wavering bonfire, Toska put one hand on another and closed his eyes.

All kinds of intricate emotions pirouetted within the depths of his chest. Gratitude towards Beatrice and Puck, longing for the childhood friend he had left behind, love and despise for his elder brother absent from the village during such crucial times, apprehension whether the choice he made was the correct one or not, illimitable and unceasing.

All of them, thorns incessantly tormenting Toska since he had reached the Palace of the Witch, and since they had departed. However…

Toska: "I will save the village…"

Puck: "Hehehe, Betty said so, yeah. I also think it's correct. It was hasty and careless to rely on the Witch for the Blight Dragon extermination, but it was right that you abided by your intuition."

Toska: "Is that, supposed to be a compliment?"

Puck: "Of course."

Puck nodded, though the Spirit's words were every so often mingled with an unknown language.

Though his own illiteracy was distressing, had he truly yet chosen the best out of the attainable options.

Puck: “That is, something Betty and you will prove going forward, isn’t it.”

Astonished by the words as though his innermost heart had been read, Toska then beamed a wry smile.

Putting the lovely young girl over there aside, he could not possibly rival the easygoing, floating kitten over here.

That admission in his mind, Toska picked up one of the skewers that had been grilled to burns. Rather than crisp, the meat had about halfway turned into ash, though the flavor of the raw ingredient may now have vanished instead.

Matters will remain busy tomorrow onwards as well. Regardless however meagerly, he must fill his stomach however much possible, subsequently biting into the burnt meat.

Toska: “—I guess, Witch Beasts aren’t stuff to be eaten after all.”

Grumbling a quibble, Toska chewed the meat stuck onto the bones until the very end.

7

Next day onwards resumed the journey of the three, lasting for shorter than ten days.

Beatrice: “Neither tailwinds nor earth flattening are needed for you, to be honest, you’re disgusting, I suppose.”

Toska: “Isn’t disgusting going a bit too far?!”

Toska hurtled, Beatrice up in his arms, at a velocity enough to receive the reward of such aspersion.

His sprint was so excessively swift that to a bystander Toska’s legs would appear as invisible, and any Witch Beasts or stray dogs that attempted to pounce and halt him were all deserted behind, their opportunity galloping past them.

Puck: “Hmm, not disgusting, but it is uncanny. Could it be that everyone in Toska’s village is a monster like you?”

Toska: “Old man, mum, Remina and the others are all normal! … No, I’m telling you I’m normal as well!”

Beatrice: “Rattles of denial coming from a guy who himself is aware, in fact. Quite loose-lipped, I suppose.”

Toska: “When I’m eating nothing but Witch Beasts, you two have a grim look in your eyes at the time of campfire, so I tried catching fish in the river today…”

A peculiar fish washed by the riverside floundered, as Toska looked at the two whilst basking in the splashes of water.

Beatrice and Puck, identically soaked due to the waves evoked by the peculiar fish, remarked about the gargantuan peculiar fish of a length that all three of them could be lined side by side and its tailfin would still remain revealed.

Puck: “For something that was hunted to be eaten, it’s way too big. Wonder if he doesn’t know how to hold back?”

Beatrice: “To begin with, the repulsiveness of its appearance is identical to that of a Witch Beast, in fact. Despite being a human, does he not know that not just flavor but appearance is also important for meals, I suppose.”

Toska: “I can hear you, the two of you!”

Puck: “Who would’ve thought that fish was the lord of the fishes in the river feared in the nearby village, pretty big coincidence.”

Beatrice: “Not a quantity that could’ve been disposed of, so it was correct to hand it over to the village in fact.”

By having brought down the lord of the nuisance fishes and handing it over, they had been amiably welcomed by the residents of the village. Because those peculiar fishes had become an obstruction in fishing, they had seemingly verged on drying up, allegedly.

They were badgered to sojourn in the village and partake in the banquet to be conducted, but…

Toska: “I also, must save my village, after all.”

Puck: “Hm hm, commendable commendable. But, the one you want to save is moreso your childhood friend than the village, yeah.”

Beatrice: “That village headman implored to give his daughter to you, I suppose. What a waste, in fact.”

Toska: “No matter what you say, Remina is the only one for me!”

—Their journey had been a smooth one, but on occasion perilous circumstances paid a call to them.

“…”

Melded with dusk, the claws of a titanic brute ambushing them from the shadows, Toska skillfully warded them off with the sword he wielded and the rebounding blade beautifully bisected its beefy throat.

Sable blood spouted, the entire body of the red haired youth bathed in it with no shift in expression.

Repugnance, shirking, were luxurious albeit moreso futile and needless sentiments in the midst of battle.

Letting those not perturb his mind, Toska braced his paltry sword forward to the next, free from neglect.

“—Kiyuryursheeah!!”

A ferocious, truculent roar echoed, jolting the parched night of the wasteland was a Witch Beast assimilating shadows.

The Witch Beast that had assailed the troupe on the first night as well, members of the Guiltylowe species—that too, a horde of them.

Perhaps due to negligence of having become accustomed to the journey, they seemed to have inadvertently entered the hunting ground of the horde.

Though Toska too had acted tough and contrasted the opponent with Dragons as nothing but animals.

Toska: “But if they’re large in numbers, then it’s definitely rough…!”

Chased by the opposition against the impertinent continued linkage of Witch Beasts, Toska too felt his composure whittle. Increase of wounds caused by the grazing claws and fangs, the scent of his flowing blood roused the Guiltylowe.

“…”

Beatrice and Puck watched over Toska’s labors from afar.

They had not erased their presences or concealed themselves. The Guiltylowe had simply put the young girl and kitten for later and prioritized opposing the menace before their eyes, Toska.

Conceit conveying that a small, frail creature could be turned into a dish later on as well.

Puck: “To be neglecting us, guess they really aren’t very intelligent after all. Regardless, Toska is putting up a pretty good fight over there… so Betty, what do we do?”

Beatrice: “—. Betty will.”

Puck: “I see. OK, got it.”

Snuggling under Beatrice’s hair, Puck proceeded to emerge following her brief reply.

Puck’s tiny frame then headed above the battleground of whirling blood. By that point the vigilance of the Witch Beasts, who had made light of the Spirits as trifle articles, turned toward him.

They brandished their claws overhead towards Puck, who was easily within their grasp upon a single leap…

Puck: “Such casual mistakes unfortunately aren’t going to get you any gold stars.”

The following instant innumerable stumps of ice stitched the horde of Guiltylowe to the ground.

The Witch Beasts simultaneously bellowed, their limbs and torsos lunged, having been verbatim shot through by the glaciating impact. However, the solatium for erring the enemy’s war potential was a heavy one.

Before long, ice spread from the mouth of the wounds birthed by the icicles, congealing even the throats relinquishing their death wails as the Witch Beasts transmuted into ice.

With this, concluded the battle of tonight as well.

Toska: “Puck-sama…”

Puck: “No need to thank me. I’d been having it pretty easy up until now, after all.”

Toska: “No, if you’re this strong then please provide assistance more quickly…”

The injured Toska gave a wry smile to Puck, blood cascading from his cheeks and forehead. His correct articulation made Puck raise his eyebrows with a “Woops”, whistling away in an attempt to varnish the topic over.

The frosty sculptures of ice afterwards shattered, destroying the Witch Beasts down to their finest.

Puck: “Now then, coming to Toska’s wounds…”

Beatrice: “Ah… Betty will heal them, I suppose. This is nothing, in fact.”

Beatrice secured the duty for herself before Puck commenced his treatment. She zoomed over, hand aloft, and a pale light started healing the wounds Toska bore.

The mild sensation briskly and gently closed up the wounds, Toska sighed in relief as well. And once all of his wounds were closed, he briskly stretched his back.

Toska: “Alright, the pain’s all gone too! Thanks, Beatrice-sama.”

Beatrice: “Your gratitude vaguely seems to lack respect for Betty, I suppose…”

Her expression austere, Beatrice averted her eyes away from Toska and murmured. Beside her, Puck groaned a “Hmm” with a troubled expression whilst viewing the shattered ice sculptures of the Witch Beasts,

Puck: “Feels wei~rd. Self-assertive kids like these don’t often flock together with others.”

Toska: “On top of that, it is strange that we encountered them over here. It’s normal for people to come and go by this path in this area, even if they’re Witch Beasts they never expanded their turfs or anything, yet…”

Beatrice: “…Then, the answer is simple, in fact. They were driven out of their original dwelling, and were in the midst of escaping, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s theory gave rise to a staggered expression on Toska. Seeming to have reached an identical conclusion as Beatrice, Puck nodded with a “Yeah~” whilst caressing his whiskers.

Puck: “If the promised night of the full moon is the limit of the Dragon’s hunger, then it must be starting to get into a bad mood now. That may have agitated the atmosphere, which is why the Witch Beasts are also running away.”

Toska: “…It’s about time, isn’t it.”

Puck, devoid of nervousness, contrary to him was Toska, taut with pressing emotions. Imposing on herself as much nervousness, Beatrice too ascertained what lay ahead of the highway of night.

Exactly nine days since they had departed from the palace—the faintly waned moon of the night sky, would surely fáilte a purely round, spherical full moon void of any impurities tomorrow.

Beatrice: “Somehow made it in time, in fact. —The promised, night of the full moon, I suppose.”

Beatrice muttered, Puck and Toska consented whilst maintaining silence.

—The journey, Beatrice’s first albeit a short one, its end was imminent before their eyes.

Chapter 2:
Night of Stars’ Descent

1

Beatrice: “And so, Betty and Bubby, along with the foolhardy human, reached the end of the journey which lasted shorter than ten days and arrived at the crux, in fact.”

Ryuzu: “I-It certainly is a tremendous adventure…”

Despite only having unwillingly grumbled in the beginning, once she gained the momentum of reciting, words escaped her as though brimming over.

Stirring the hotpot with a spoon whilst listening to this, Ryuzu intermittently revealed the nail-biting tension she felt via facial expressions and utterances, a truly excellent listener.

Thanks to this, Beatrice unwittingly indulged herself in reminiscing as well.

Anyhow, the story now arrived at the critical Dragon extermination, but…

???: “—Now that is a really interesting tale. What happens next?”

Beatrice: “Yuck, I suppose.”

Before she could resume narrating, Beatrice grimaced upon hearing an unpleasant voice. Though the voice came from behind, she need not turn back. For he came around to her beforehand.

???: “Yuck doesn’t make for a greeting, does it. Won’t you allow me to join in on your story?”

Interposing so and inclining his body, the individual somewhere between a youngster and a man, his navy-blue hair stretching long, clad in dodgy devilishness was peering at Beatrice’s visage.

His entrance had Ryuzu smile in Beatrice's stead.

Ryuzu: "Roswaal-sama, are you finished with your business?"

Roswaal: "Yes, it all went quite smoothly. It helps that the people here are all so cooperative. By their aid. It's ought to have made for another step closer toward the realization of Teacher's dearest wish."

Ryuzu: "I am elated to hear so… Beatrice-sama, you mustn't hang your head low."

Eyes clear blue, the grinning youth—Roswaal's entrance impelled Beatrice to scowl further, subsequently giving up on keeping her gaze cast downward for how futile it held.

Beatrice: "Got it, got it I suppose. Defeat accepted, in fact… you, from where had you been eavesdropping, I suppose. So distasteful, in fact."

Roswaal: "Eavesdropping, that's a nasty way to put it. To begin with, it had been decided that we would be having dinner here. If you're to start reminiscing in a place like this, then it's only a matter of course it'd enter my ears."

Beatrice failed to pronounce even an "Ugh" as Roswaal shrugged.

—Not pertaining exclusively to the time within Sanctuary, meals were to be had with everyone as much as possible.

That was a precept established by the Witch Echidna, a decree neither Beatrice nor Ryuzu, nor even Roswaal could flout.

Although, just about the only one to feel tormented by this precept was Beatrice, being opposed to having to give company to Roswaal.

Ryuzu: "Roswaal-sama, would you also happen to harbor any interest in Beatrice-sama's prior life?"

Roswaal: "Of course. It's a shame Beatrice doesn't talk much about her past. Since we're often compared, I had heard about the presence of her so-called older brother, but…"

Beatrice: “You aren’t something worth even a comparison with Bubby, I suppose. Don’t be conceited, in fact.”

Roswaal: “Welp, that’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

Taking a path around the hotpot atop flames, Roswaal then boldly seated himself immediately beside Beatrice. Even when Beatrice shifted away, he consistently got that much closer and covered the distance in between.

The man possessed no other intent but to wholeheartedly make Beatrice boundlessly groan.

Roswaal: “It’s a chance to get closer to the enigmas of your Bubby. It also makes me really curious how your first adventure concluded, Beatrice.”

Ryuzu: “I am also incredibly curious about that. Will Toska-sama be able to protect his childhood friend?”

Finding an ally in the naive Ryuzu, Roswaal’s odious pupils gawped at Beatrice.

Of course, she did not have the option to not tell the rest after having come this far, but if that were to mean delighting Roswaal, it was simply human nature for her to fail recounting enjoyably.

Beatrice: “…Betty is an exalted Spirit, so human nature isn’t the correct term, I suppose.”

Roswaal: “There’s no need to fuss over such minute semantics. Now then, considering how I’m not even worth comparing to him, what feats will your splendid Bubby make I wonder?”

Beatrice: “Do you hold something against Bubby, in fact? So pigheaded, I suppose.”

Beatrice furrowed her brows in dubiousness, his speech coming off as strangely thorny in essence. But Roswaal provided no answer, as Ryuzu smiled bitterly, expression convoluted.

Beatrice: “It feels vaguely uncanny, but moving on, in fact. —After approximately ten days, Betty and the others arrived at Carnattse a day prior to the night of the full moon.”

Ryuzu: “Then, Beatrice-sama and the villagers worked together, and the Dragon extermination…”

Beatrice: “—Did not come to be, in fact.”

A thought dearth in appropriate vigilance toward the circumstance truly befitting of Ryuzu, but the reality did not unfold in identical vein.

With the gazes of the two listeners in mind, Beatrice returned to that night once again.

Beatrice: “The reason why he came to Betty and everyone’s place, was because he had no allies in the village, I suppose.”

2

Toska: “—Why, won’t everyone try to stand up!!”

An enraged bellow, in company of a mighty kick to the floor by Toska.

Having assessed him as the owner of a fairly composed personality for his age by dint of their meeting and journey, Beatrice was substantially astonished upon witnessing Toska’s exasperated form.

However, what astonished her furthermore, were the reactions of the dwellers of Carnattse who welcomed Toska.

A night preceding the promised night of full moon with the Blight Dragon, Toska had returned home bringing help from the Palace of the Witch. It would be appreciable should they be delighted about not having to sacrifice a young girl from the village.

In that case, despite feeling piqued by having to depend upon others, their purpose would have surely been fulfilled.

However, the responses they attained in reality ran counter to any such conjectures and expectations.

???: “What a foolish thing you’ve done, Toska. Went to the Witch of Wisdom’s place, and brought back the daughter of the Witch from there… how will we ever be able to pay any such recompense.”

A white-haired grandsire, the village headman mithered so with trembling vocals whilst solitarily facing Toska in his home.

Hearing this, the redness of Toska’s visage incremented further,

Toska: “I don’t mean to have everyone from the village shoulder the debt I’ve incurred! I arbitrarily went to the Witch-sama’s place. That’s why, I’ll pay for the recompense.”

Headman: “That’s only natural! Your actions were self-indulgent. However, it would’ve been better had that made for borrowing the Witch’s might…”

His words befogged midway through, the village headman’s cynic eye darted towards Beatrice and Puck.

His glance was unpleasant, but not to an unanticipated degree. Beatrice had simply an unamused expression. However, it was Toska who could not pardon this discourteous gaze.

Toska: “I implored Beatrice-sama and Puck-sama to come with me. Please do not direct a gaze of this kind towards them. I will, work together with the two of them and…”

Headman: “—Rescue Remina, you proclaim? Will you be able to oppose that fearsome Blight Dragon?”

“…”

Headman: “Foolish. Truly foolish, Toska. Why, did you leave the village? Had you remained in the village, you could’ve spent identical time with Remina albeit for a scant ten days.”

Articulating with pity, the village headman’s eyes turned to outside of the building. Beyond the window, visible far away was something akin to a shrine, the wooden door comprising its entrance tightly fastened.

Headman: “Remina is inside of the shrine. Preparing for tomorrow, she has commenced her ritual for purification. You shan’t even be allowed to meet her.”

Toska: “Remina…”

Headman: “Oh Toska, why must you have departed from the village. Should you have remained here, you would have made time and memories with Remina. The same way as you, Remina regarded you with fondness…”

Whether he set to chide him or was simply hopelessly inconsiderate, anyhow, the village headman’s remarks violated Toska’s fury which mustn’t be disturbed.

Toska glared at the village headman, canines bared,

Toska: “Remina! The one Remina loves, is not me, but big brother…! As Remina’s dad, shouldn’t you be the one who knows that the most!”

Relinquishing this assertion behind, Toska stormed out of the village headman’s home.

His tail jolted by the vigor of the fierce gale birthed by Toska, Puck exchanged a look with Beatrice. Beatrice drew her jaw in before Puck glided through the air and pursued the vanishing figure.

And, with Toska and Puck’s departure, the only ones left behind were Beatrice and the village headman.

Beatrice: “…Betty too, finds that to be quite witless, in fact. But, his judgement to depend on the Witch of Wisdom was correct, I suppose. Betty, is none other than the proxy of the Witch, in fact.”

Headman: “However, the pivotal Witch-sama remains in absentia. Is this not what epitomizes being deserted by fortune.”

Beatrice: “Right when you have a chance, do you intend to forgo the life of your own daughter, I suppose?”

Headman: “In exchange for the village?!”

Glowering at Beatrice, the village headman nailed his fist to the floor, giving rise to a report.

The rage and awareness dwelling in his gaze were proof of having compared the scales of his own daughter and the village, and having deliberated earnestly.

Henceforth, he had simply chosen his position as the chief of the village over his position as a father.

Headman: "…Toska was rash in his demands. By all means, please return."

Beatrice: "Blight Dragons… Dragons use mountains as dwellings. That remains unchanged, let it be labelled a Blight Dragon or not. It will settle on the mountain visible in the south of the village, I suppose. —The sacrifices, won't end with one, in fact."

"…"

Beatrice: "As uncouth as the name suggests, I suppose."

Dusting away the hem of her dress, Beatrice chose to excuse herself from the village headman as well.

By the very end as Beatrice was on the brink of exiting, she heard the village headman murmur "Remina…", yet Beatrice did not halt her steps.

However, from her exchange with the village headman and the villagers who shyed from showing themselves, she could tell.

Beatrice: "Not everyone, seems to have the mettle to battle the Blight Dragon, I suppose."

By the point of Toska's arrival at the Palace of the Witch all by himself, she had foreseen this to a certain extent.

Primarily, tackling the Palace of the Witch was standardly done after forming a clique. Setting about with a group of more than ten, yet the ones to reach the palace were a scant one or two, that was the class of trial it was.

Yet, Toska fulfilled it by himself. That did not allude to the aspect of his exiguous mobile ability and power of will alone, but also portended the negative of isolation.

Toska had no allies. —Nobody, was seeking to settle matters with the Blight Dragon.

Toska: "…I apologize for showing such a pathetic sight to you."

Beatrice was being guided to the rear of the shrine, having departed from the village headman's home and followed Puck's responses. There, Toska bowed and apologized, leaning on the fences enclosing the village.

Levitating beside him, Puck hugged his tail with a "Hmm".

Puck: "Was it pathetic? I feel like you're the only one not being pathetic in this village, though."

Beatrice: "Betty agrees, I suppose. For a human, you're on the better side, in fact."

Toska: "…Haha, that way of putting it would be a bit…"

Receiving Puck and Beatrice's comfort, a smile recrudesced onto Toska's expression.

Of course a mere bravado, but being cheered up meant being cheered up. Before it dwindled away, they must have the conversation they inevitably ought to.

Beatrice: "—It doesn't seem like there can be any allies found in this village who will assist you in battle, I suppose."

Puck: "Yeah, there's little hope. Seems everyone is so scared of the Blight Dragon that they've shut themselves in."

The village was a small and confined one. All within the village must have hearkened Toska's voice when he roared inside the village headman's home. Yet nobody attempted to come forth.

And Remina, isolated within the shrine calling the ritual for purification upon herself, was no exception.

Puck: “Won’t you call out to her?”

Toska: “—. After having yelled the pinnacle of patheticness just now?”

Gazing at the shrine, Toska responded to Puck, who tilted his neck.

His pessimism was only natural, considering Toska’s remarks shortly earlier. For the childhood friend he wished to rescue, Remina, the one she loved was not him but his elder brother.

Though judging solely from the hearsay they had learned here and there through the course of their journey, he seemed to be quite the unprecedented sort of personage.

Toska: “Had big brother been over here, we wouldn’t have had to worry about Remina becoming a sacrifice for the Dragon. I’m sure neither the village headman, nor the folks of the village, would’ve been afraid of the Dragon.”

“…”

Toska: “—But, the one over here is me. Me.”

She thought he would yet again itemize words lamenting his own powerlessness, gaze cast down. However, before the silent Beatrice and Puck, Toska marked brief words comprising the impetus to look forward by his own volition.

Toska bit his lips, clenched his fists, and mightily, powerfully, gripped the handle of the sword on his hip.

Toska: “So what if it’s a Blight Dragon. As if I’m ever going to hand Remina over to just a big lizard like that… Fighting with the Dragon, is way better than big brother’s knuckles.”

Beatrice: “That comparison is just weird, in fact…”

Puck: “But, gotta say, he’s got quite the boyish expression right there.”

Whether promising or pathetic, Beatrice slumped her shoulders seeing the way Toska resolved his determination. Yet Puck seemed to hold a different view, somehow appearing thrilled.

Beatrice: “Well, this is better for Betty than having to lend her strength to a coward, I suppose.”

She did not spend nine days and came all the way here in order to watch humans’ dispute. It was for the havoc enkindled by a Dragon—its breakthrough, and to prove.

The hand of salvation of the Witch of Wisdom sought by humans across the world, its definite might and promise.

Beatrice: “Betty and Bubby don’t have the option to withdraw to begin with, in fact. You will be held accountable for the responsibility of having brought us outside of that palace, I suppose.”

Toska: “…You’re truly unsparing, Beatrice-chan.”

Beatrice: “You… mgh.”

When she attempted to rebuke him that this was no time to interrupt, Toska’s mien intercepted her.

An earnest gaze and expression were a show of resolution. If referring to Beatrice so casually coincided with that in exchange, then she could overlook it at least this one time.

Beatrice: “However, you won’t be getting a second chance, in fact.”

Toska: “I am aware… It seems, we must work out a plan. Had we gotten more allies from the village, we could have charged into the Blight Dragon head-on, but.”

Puck: “You had such a thick-headed strategy? I’d say it’s a bit reckless against a Dragon.”

Even Puck was slightly astounded by a policy so erratic and haphazard. Same went for Beatrice, but now was the point in utmost need of Wisdom in this time’s situation.

Per Puck’s statement, challenging a Dragon head-on destitute of other measures was akin to suicide rather than simply being a poor plan.

As a matter of course, an ambush was necessary.

Beatrice: “Tomorrow night, what’s the arrangement for presenting the sacrifice going to be like, I suppose.”

Toska: “—? Halfway up the mountain in the south, Remina will be taken there and to the Blight Dragon”

Puck: “She will get proffered. Hmm hmm… Betty, think of anything?”

Beatrice visualized the programme for presenting the sacrifice within her mind, a hand positioned onto her chin. Taking a minute to ponder, the conclusion Beatrice subsequently reached was…

Beatrice: “From your childhood friend’s house, bring clothes deeply fragmented with her scent, in fact.”

Upon Beatrice’s instruction betraying expectations, Toska responded as though having forgotten his resentment and restlessness.

3

Toska: “—Once this ends, would you look at me a bit more instead of big brother?”

Before commencing action, Toska did not have any exchange with his childhood friend.

Simply leaning on the shrine’s wall, he unilaterally cast a wish.

No answer came to it, and even if it did, Toska surely did not wish for it to enter his ears. Thus, this was solely a rite necessary for the final push of his resolution.

Beatrice and Puck spoke naught, deeming that pointing this out would be boorish as well.

And the three mobilised action a night before the full moon—in other words, the very same day.

Beatrice: "…This mountain is a small, shabby, remote one, I suppose. Doesn't seem to be much of a sacred ground either, it's a mystery why a Dragon powerful in itself is still making this a part of its turf, in fact."

Puck: "Might be that there's a serious shortage of mountains. From what I heard, there's also Dragons who abandoned mountains for dwellings and are staying in castles after driving humans out of them. It's just hijacking at this point."

Beatrice: "What a savage thing to do, I suppose. They are just lizards with wings after all, in fact."

Puck: "Woah, go off Betty."

Puck voiced a restrained chuckle, the tip of his tail at his mouth. Tickling Puck's scruff, Beatrice moved her body and shifted her hips.

Parts of her body stiffened if she were to remain in the same position for long. —Beatrice had been crafted by her mother, a Witch, but such encumbrances of her body were no different from humans'.

Neither could she unfasten her body and slip into the mana in the air at will like Puck. The only reorganization permitted to Beatrice was solely the dress and hair comprising her guise.

Toska: "I say this again… but you two, seem to get along really well."

Toska murmured, somewhat nervously, watching the two siblings' frolic from close.

Even during the journey, Beatrice and Puck's laughs and teasing did not peter out. Had he been an impatient youngster, he must have indisputably detonated on some point midway through.

Or perhaps Toska was able to withstand such circumstances due to personal experience.

Beatrice: “Just as you can see, I suppose. And it looked like a lot of stuff happened with your real brother on your end, in fact.”

Toska: “Not at all. It’s just that big brother is someone who attracts people’s gazes, and I always stood stuck behind him. It’s because of that I wasn’t able to even get into the sight of the girl I like, that’s all.”

Puck: “Mmm, smells like bittersweet youth.”

Toska: “Yooth? I get what you mean by bittersweet though… I wonder if I’m yet immature.”

Toska’s query as he scratched his cheek made it difficult for Beatrice to answer with a “So immature!”.

She was aware of being incomparably more profoundly and richly abound in terms of knowledge than Toska, but in outline, Toska stood above Beatrice in terms of true age and years of experience.

Besides, she recalled problems in the sphere of love and affection having troubled and distressed even her mother.

Beatrice: “Betty will anyhow say nothing regarding the relation between you and the childhood friend… Betty also loves Bubby, but it appears it’s different from that.”

Toska: “When you say the two of you are siblings…”

Puck: “When made by the same person using the same technique, I’d say it counts as siblings by that point. Though me staying in that palace with Betty is like a period of preparation before I live independently.”

Beatrice: “Live independently…”

Puck’s indifferent say plunged Beatrice into solitude.

One day, Puck will depart from that palace and leave to search for something solely his own. She had heard about that before, and as long as it was concerned with Puck's mission, Beatrice couldn't impede either.

For the crafted lives that were Artificial Spirits, the meaning for being born was the weightiest, most exalted and valuable of all.

Toska: "The meaning for being born, is it…"

Beatrice: "You all are different from Betty and Bubby, I suppose. For how short lived you are, search for it with the utmost of all your might, in fact. Tonight, Betty will make time for that, I suppose."

Not for a conferred mission, but they must determine the path to walk on, to live on by oneself.

It could be that the path remained beyond discovery, and they very much lost their way. Beatrice regarded them, who walked such thorned paths, such unilluminated nights, with commiseration.

It was for this reason that the doors of the palace of the Witch of Wisdom reigned open to those harboring any wishes—.

Toska: "Beatrice-sama…"

Beatrice: "Hmp, still too early for gratitude, in fact. Even if you've been overwhelmed with emotion, save it for after everything's been cleaned up, I suppose."

Toska: "No, no that, your elbow's touching me and it hurts, would you mind shifting aside a bit?"

Beatrice: "You really have a serious lack of respect for Betty, in fact!"

Beatrice yelled, just when she thought what it was that he was about to say with such a meek tone. Toska expressed a wry smile to her angry remark, but the distance between her and his face was bizarrely close.

That was a matter of course, at present, Beatrice and Toska, along with Puck, were so to speak glued together. They had all gotten inside a single laundry basket, their breaths concealed—were in the midst of concealing, fundamentally.

Utilizing the laundry basket which the sacrifice had been in as camouflage, they shall ambush thereon. That was the entirety of the Blight Dragon extermination operation.

Puck: “It’s simple, but there’s no need to make things complex. Betty and I don’t have scents like ordinary creatures, so it won’t come off as odd even if we’re with Toska.”

Toska: “When I was told to go steal Remina’s clothes, and when I was glutted with cold water, I was beginning to doubt what all you were making me do but… makes sense.”

Beatrice: “Erasing your personal scent and overriding it with the childhood friend’s scent instead, I suppose. Women’s scents are acute, the Dragon will surely get beguiled too, in fact.”

All they had to do was to await until eventually it negligently drew near in order to ascertain the laundry basket’s content.

Should they win the minimum of its unpreparedness and opportunity, the rest would then be Beatrice and Puck’s stage. Should it come close enough to enter a sword’s range, then Toska’s sword strikes would also attain a window.

Sooner or later…

Toska: “I hold no objections, but the way you phrased that…”

Puck: “Now now, Betty is thinking in Toska’s best interest… That being said, getting into a laundry basket and awaiting a dragon, not a monster. I fee~l like there was some folktale like this.”

Toska: “Folktale? Of what kind would that be?”

Inside of the tightly packed laundry basket, as though averting his eyes from the amplifying insecurity and nervousness, Toska bit at the chitchat Puck proposed.

Puck: “Ermm~, it’s pretty similar to our current situation. An evil monster settled beside a certain village, and made a ruckus demanding a sacrifice to be offered. And so, it welcomed not only the sacrifice but also booze and stuff, and when the monster completely fell asleep like a baby they perfectly sliced off its head."

Toska: "…It would be great if it all were to go so smoothly."

The circumstances certainly resembled each other significantly, but the fashion in which Puck narrated it insinuated it to be a fable for children. The wryly smiling Toska seemed to have reckoned the same. On the other hand, Beatrice wielded a separate impression.

Beatrice: "Betty does not know of that story, I suppose. Bubby is so well-informed, in fact."

Puck: "It's just a matter of chance, a matter of chance. I don't really remember where I heard it from that well either. But isn't it a bit reassuring to think there's been predecessors?"

If someone had succeeded in monster extermination in an analogous situation, then their plan will surely go well too.

Such optimistic views of Puck certainly heartened Beatrice and Toska.

"…"

Thereon their dialogue diminished, as they awaited that moment to pay a call.

It was a night prior to the originally promised one. They possessed no proof the Dragon would come to inspect this laundry basket. However, if this mountain had become the Dragon's turf, then it would come to ascertain the foreign object set by its footstep.

For that was the attribute of the creatures who placed the world under their reign, called as Dragons.

Whilst awaiting the Dragon's visit, Beatrice incidentally thought. — That should this first task of her's be wrapped up safely, would her mother even commend her.

Puck: "If you lend this much of a hand, then it will have gone slightly astray from her policy of self-help endeavors, after all.”

As though having read through Beatrice’s heart, Puck’s pinpointing stung sharp to her chest.

The Witch Echidna who granted wisdom, her policy fundamentally was to present a solution before those who reached the palace and for them to apply it as the problem’s resolution by themselves.

In a majority of cases, humans sought immediate solutions to problems. However, focusing entirely on reliance they did not wish for growth, and lost sight of means to rescue their own self was her mother’s idea.

Beatrice endorsed this idea, very much so, and believed normally resolutions must be won by the diligent endeavors of the party concerned, but…

Beatrice: “This time is an exception, a special case, I suppose. There won’t, won’t be a second time, in fact.”

Puck: “Hehe, hope so… Betty, Toska.”

Followed by a short laugh, Puck’s faintly lowered voice called Beatrice and Toska.

The instant they received it, Beatrice and Toska’s nervousness elevated to its topmost. And simultaneously, Its arrival was sensed by their instinct before any of the five senses.

—Since time immemorial, It descended from the skies high above.

Flapping those potent wings, the monarch of aerial creatures that monopolized the sky.

The being fated to be a ruler by birth, its valiant advent.

[—]

An absolute being that hustled aside every other, whose presence alone jolted the atmosphere. Conjecturing it was immediately close through its pressure and the tremor caused by it stepping foot onto the ground, Beatrice halted her breath.

Had Beatrice possessed a beating heart, it must have undoubtedly simmered vehemently like a hotpot verging on exploding upon sensing this existence up close.

Through their journey, they had purported them as mere lizards with wings and fools who wallowed in their own strength, and though these had been their genuine beliefs, they were also simultaneously a bluff and part of their unwillingness to admit defeat.

They needed to coax themselves into believing Dragons were trifling beings, because they knew if they did not do so they would be rendered immobile when meeting the real one.

Inside the same laundry basket, Beatrice could hear Toska's heartbeat.

Toska, cheeks stiff, perspired sweat through his whole body without pause. Status akin to all biological responses of the body except for the heart having simultaneously come to a halt.

Prior to dying, the body had commenced conscious preparation for Death.

She could understand that feeling painfully well. She need not know what the ache of which part would be like…

Puck: "—Betty."

In the midst of such delirious entanglement of consciousness, a tender voice connected with Beatrice's earlobe.

A quick glance to the side, there present was Puck nestling by her cheekbone. Her tender brother, his black eyes narrowed, enquired Beatrice.

Puck: "Do I do it?"

The question was one she had been asked countless times throughout this journey.

And on every instance of this question, Beatrice presumed upon Puck's heart…

Beatrice: "Thank you, I suppose, Bubby."

She mustn't presume upon Puck anymore.

This was something Beatrice had started, and something Beatrice must fulfill.

For this was a trial incumbent to accomplish the mission Beatrice had been born with.

And…

Beatrice: "—Minya."

Accepting the push of resolve, Beatrice chanted.

The polished mana meddled with the world, the alteration thus born instantaneously derived results.

Light, was emitted out the laundry basket and laid a direct hit onto the opponent.

Toska: "—~hk."

She felt Toska gulp a breath, right beside.

However, she had not the time to be mindful of his astonishment. She solely bid to decimate the opponent with her all.

Beatrice: "Minya, Minya, Minya, Minya."

Materialized with each shout were lethal stakes shimmering in purple brought forth by Yin magic, Minya.

Manifest as purple crystals, they were a category of forbidden curses that froze the target's time, attenuating their existence itself and shattering them—an attack before whom no flesh body, no matter how robust or able, held any significance.

Dragon's scales which not even steel could scathe were no exception, the only options to counter being either to dodge or to be clad in mana firm enough to withstand any intervention of magic.

However, negligence lost the Dragon of both said options.

Beatrice: “Minya, Minya!”

Puck: “Betty, calm down.”

Beatrice: “Minya! Minya! Minya! Minya~!!”

Puck: “Betty!”

Beatrice cannonaded magic with undivided attention before Puck clung to her face. Her awareness robbed by the soft sensation, Beatrice returned to composure.

She had been attacking toward the gargantuan silhouette before her eyes, entirely absorbed. A disgrace. Should the opponent rebrace its stance and counterattack, her eyes would fail to even spot it.

However, Beatrice’s such anxieties were nothing more than needless.

Puck: “It’s over, Betty. The Dragon isn’t moving anymore.”

Beatrice: “Eh…”

Once Puck moved aside from Beatrice’s face, her breaths hoarse, her field of vision opened.

A beat later, the sound akin to thirsted frosting entered Beatrice’s ears as well. And what was reflected in her now opened gaze was the majestic stature of the Dragon looking down upon the laundry basket…

Its height enough to direct gazes upward, at a distance of about ten meters close. Closely packed scales shrouding its whole body, enormous wings that pirouetted its gargantuan build in the air. Its claws and fangs so fiendishly sharp they could tear into an iron armor like candy, befitting of a species counted as standalone cataclysms.

However, never again would anyone be tormented by this cataclysm.

For the Dragon's frame had sustained the stillness of time, having transmuted into purple crystals.

Toska: "This, easily…"

Puck: "This is how fights where one side is lying in wait fully prepared go. Striking with the greatest possible strength and crushing the enemy in one go. Betty's plan was the correct answer by far."

Sermoning the dumbfounded Toska, Puck gently levitated away from the partly destroyed laundry basket. Going further upward, Puck positioned himself still before the now crystallized Dragon.

And, gently caressed the Dragon's muzzle with the tip of his stretched tail.

—The following moment, crevices formed from the point he caressed and the entire frame of the Blight Dragon shattered and dissipated.

Only glistening fragments remained, for the end of a Blight Dragon who tormented many, an exceedingly short demise and no other way to describe it.

Puck: "Flawless performance, Betty. Toska too, thank you for your hard work."

Toska: "Um… I've done, nothing… truly, absolutely nothing, so."

Both Beatrice and Toska identically felt how anticlimactic this was.

Of course, it was not as though they wished to play a fierce skirmish with the Blight Dragon. The primary factor jeopardizing the village now gone, they had attained a perfect victory with not as much as a scratch, the results were in fact to an unforeseen extent.

Henceforth, they had not been particularly pitched into a state of ecstasy either.

Toska: “I’ve truly, done no…”

Beatrice: “—Without losing heart, you sought salvation from Mother. It can be said however many times, but that is your achievement, in fact.”

Toska: “Beatrice-sama…”

Insisted Beatrice to Toska, who failed to escape his astonishment.

Beatrice’s mind too was steadily, gradually reorganized, giving rise to comprehension. That they had safely succeeded in subjugating the Blight Dragon, and fulfilled Toska’s purpose—Beatrice’s mission.

For the first time ever since she was born, she exited the palace, embarked on a journey, and, killed a Living Being.

That her first kill was a Blight Dragon was quite the gallant record she had etched in her own history.

Beatrice: “A weak human depending on wisdom and connection to defeat a strong enemy is not a bad thing, I suppose. However, it’s no good to become completely reliant, in fact. Don’t get carried away and think you’ll have another chance hereon, I suppose.”

To have this presumed upon and be depended upon each time something occurred would run counter to her mother’s policy. Neither did Beatrice wish to save a human of such nature, either.

Thus…

Toska: “—. I understand. But, thank you very much. Thanks to the two of you, the village, Remina, was saved.”

Thus, Beatrice deemed Toska’s disposition, this being his answer, to be on the good side for a human.

His smile was yet powerless, and needed to digest a lot, which she could sympathize with.

Even so, Toska nonetheless looked forward.

Beatrice: “Well, say your thanks not to Betty but to the proprietor of the palace, Mother, in fact. To the utmost, Betty is only a proxy for Mother, I suppose.”

Puck: “You can never be honest hu~h, Betty… Anyhow, it was pretty unexpected. I had braced myself thinking it’d be a bigger, more powerful Dragon.”

Looking down onto the shattered fragments of the Dragon, Puck swayed his tail by the point its shattered cranium had been. Upon Puck’s words Beatrice glanced a quick view of the fragments and furrowed her brows.

Exactly as Puck’s words, it all felt a bit too fast regardless of the ambush’s success. The Dragon was an individual too, so it was possible this one was a special faux, but…

Beatrice: “—Could it be.”

Yes, the foreboding that erred Beatrice’s mind was synchronous with the situation’s alteration.

Toska: “—ah.”

Eyes dilated, frozen motionless, Toska stepped back whilst looking up to the sky.

Following the course of his gape, Beatrice and Puck also comprehended what made him harbor this terror.

—Ahead was, a silhouette calmly airborne in the night sky soaring toward them.

Beatrice: “…It all did seem a bit too easy, in fact.”

Beatrice reaffirmed, had she possessed a heart it must have been pounding with vehemence once again.

A small Dragon under its command, the Blight Dragon who truly placed Mount Carnattse under its reign—a Dragon boasting scales of silver.

That was what slowly descended before the immobilized three.

4

Taking gigantic laps around Mount Carnattse, what steadily descended to take foot before them was a Dragon of silver.

Prior to the beauty of its scales or remarkable pupils adorned with erudite intellect, came its gargantuan size.

If the Dragon they had defeated was ten meters in length, then the one before them now was easily more than thrice its size. Dragons thirty meters huge could only be seen on notably sacred mountains.

However, the Silver Dragon was enshrined before Beatrice and the group's eyes, as a being of reality.

Toska: "—Wo, ah."

A groan escaped Toska's throat, engulfed into the Dragon's majestic dignity and the glint in its eye.

He was not the slightest of a coward. Bearing in mind the heroism and valor he had tackled the palace of a nebulous Witch for the sake of his childhood friend with, he could forthright be labelled a prominent hero even amongst all of humanity. For the same Toska, the Silver Dragon bore overwhelming spirit that mutilated sanity.

And sustaining pressure identical to Toska, Beatrice attained a certain realization.

"…"

Judging from Toska's reaction the Dragon before their eyes was none other than the true Blight Dragon that demanded sacrifice from the village.

However, never did Toska inform them that there were a plurality of Dragons. Look to him at the side and it could be understood with ease that he did not know that either.

Multiple Dragons, that too of this colossal size, had established a mountain so tiny as their base.

The circumstances veiled on the flip side, their answer was evident.

Beatrice: “You all, had destroying the village as your purpose from the very beginning, I suppose…!”

???: [—Thou killed mine brethren, didn’t thee, oh bawbling ones.]

The deep, grousing voice of the Dragon descended upon them as though ridiculing Beatrice’s mutters.

Having lived through umpteen years, the Dragon in acquisition of intellect could comprehend human speech. —To go back on that, the origin of which amongst humans, Spirits or Dragons first began talking in words would also be something of immense interest.

That was how overwhelmingly daunting the Silver Dragon was, impelling one to rend their thoughts with such escapism.

???: [Thou killed mine brethren, didn’t thee. Oh bawbling ones.]

Beatrice: “…You’re audible loud and clear, no need to repeat yourself, in fact. Your purpose is to”

???: [Then, we has’t only one behest. To exact retribution upon the fallen scales of mine brethren.]

The Silver Dragon’s voice, abounding in dignity, was chaperoned by profoundness rather than conceiving might. Feeling as not the wind after drenching downpours, but the sensation of plummeting toward a bottomless seabed.

Coincidentally, Beatrice realized they had granted it a pretext.

The Dragon they had initially ambushed had been the opponent’s trap itself. —Beatrice, had given the Dragon a reason to take revenge.

Amongst Dragons existed rare cases who had formed pacts with humans, probing for a path of coexistence. However, should retribution be hailed as a just cause then even they would make no attempt to readily mediate.

She shall straightforwardly admit they got trapped inside a scrupulous scheme. However, she bore a doubt.

Beatrice: “Why do you go so far to target this village, I suppose. Judging by a glance, it’s just a remote village with nothing special, in fact.”

A sacred mountain of no sizable worth, and a village too small to scramble for.

Blight Dragons who simply enjoyed persecuting the weak were not few, but the Silver Dragon before their eyes demarcated a line from paltry Dragons like those.

Upon Beatrice’s question, the Silver Dragon aimed its crystalline golden pupils upon Toska.

???: [It is patent. —Destroy that redhead’s lineage.]

Toska: “…M-Me?”

Abruptly elevated onto the stage, Toska was acutely bewildered.

The Silver Dragon’s leer directly lanced Toska. That Dragon, would not jest. Hence, if so, then the Silver Dragon’s aim lay neither in the village nor in the sacrifice, but in Toska.

Puck: “Lineage, so precisely Toska’s kin I’m guessing? I don’t really get what it means, though.”

The Silver Dragon’s glare focused on him, Toska’s breathing plunged into disarray, devoid of any such idea. Puck descended to his shoulder and caressed his cheek in an attempt to calm him, whilst beside them Beatrice embraced identical dubiety.

What was there that could grant significance to its aim being Toska’s family.

???: [—The other day, Amangam of the east hath fallen and weyrs of Silver Dragons splintered in every direction. We too art a weyr splintered hence upon losing our pillar.]

Beatrice: “Amangam… the one who controls eastern lands, head of Silver Dragons? It fell, I suppose?!”

???: [—Precisely.]

Beatrice was staggered by the words the Silver Dragon communicated.

Dragons formed weyres throughout the world on all kinds of lands, but they had factions therein and any representative ones that spearheaded them were famous across the world.

The Amangam who controlled the east which the Silver Dragon had spoken of, was one who spearheaded one such weyre. And, if the downfall of the head of Silver Dragons was the genesis of Toska’s family being aimed after.

Beatrice: “Could it be, do you mean that this man’s family is involved in the fall of the head of Silver Dragons, in fact?!”

???: [—Following the blood, hath reached this land. Nay err.]

That it was a contention of the Blight Dragon—no, the proud Silver Dragon, meant this was a deed of conviction.

And whilst Beatrice digested this truth, behind her, Toska lost strength in his legs. Puck still atop his shoulder, Toska kneeled, stupefied with his eyes fixed onto the ground,

Toska: “…It’s big brother.”

He whispered, his tone one of despair.

Puck: “Big brother… you mean that older brother of yours whom you frequently mentioned, Toska?”

Catching his utterances Puck enquired back, to which Toska nodded. He then moved his lips, quaking in fear, and wrung out a voice pronouncing “That’s how it’s always been…!”.

Toska: “Always getting into trouble and being a nuisance… at last, just when I thought he arbitrarily left the village, this time he killed the leader of a group of Dragons, and they’ve come to take revenge on me and the village… wh-why, for what…!”

The fierce elder brother whom Toska had often brought up.

It had seemed as though he had distorted a sense of inferiority in Toska pertaining to his elder brother, enlarging his idolized image, but it appeared that the matter was not so simple—no, not so complex.

Toska, did not doubt that his elder brother killed the head of Dragons which even the Silver Dragon before their eyes obeyed.

And much to their dread, neither did the Silver Dragon repudiate Toska’s ideas.

It was simple. Toska’s tellings until now had all been fact, and his elder brother was a monster exceeding norms. For it was that monster who felled the head of Silver Dragons…

Beatrice: “As retribution for the fall of their leader, the Silver Dragons targeted the culprit’s family… Truly straightforward and unheeding to appearances, I suppose. The name and reputation of the Dragon clan will weep, in fact.”

???: [Speak per thy liking as long as thou art unacquainted with that being. That being shalt fell all what is nowise human. Oh Spirits, thou art nay exception either.]

Puck: “It’s enough to hold Dragons in crisis, it’s really no matter we can just laugh off as an exaggeration, you know?”

Beatrice and Puck, the Dragon chimed a warning bell for the two who were Spirits as well.

Was that how tremendous the might of Toska’s elder brother was. Potency to which even Dragons yielded, he may possibly qualify to count as an absolute personage ranking on par with the Witches.

The feeling of one’s heart being daunted before far too inordinate an existence was something Beatrice could empathize with too.

Beatrice: “But, sad to say. If it is to kneel before someone identically inordinate, then that person has already been decided, I suppose.”

???: [—Regrettable.]

Hearing Beatrice’s caustic remark, the Silver Dragon honed the glint in its eye, surmising they wouldn’t withdraw.

Its golden eyes that conceived brimming intellect steadily transformed into ones enveloped in rage and bellicosity, synchronously the atmosphere quaked, the ground agitated, and rained the premonition of Death upon the opposition.

Swallowed by the pressure of this Silver Dragon, before the battle even commenced Toska became unable to…

Beatrice: “—Stand in fact, Toska!”

However, Beatrice’s voice powerfully smited the shrunken, unmoving Toska.

Toska elevated his visage, looking at Beatrice with eyes startled.

Beatrice had turned her eyes away from the fearsome Silver Dragon and was staring in Toska’s direction. The Dragon’s intimidation piercing the side of her face was dreadful, even inducing the hallucination of her entire body being whittled.

But, she gnashed her molars and withstood it, glaring at Toska.

Beatrice: “Voice your wish I suppose, Toska. —Betty is Mother’s proxy! The daughter of the Witch Echidna, who grants means to fulfill the frantic wishes of humans, in fact!”

Toska: “I, am…”

Beatrice: “Now, it is time to fulfill your wish, I suppose!!”

Beatrice held her hand out, pointing towards the Silver Dragon before their eyes.

Beholding this, Toska gnashed his molars with force. Light rebounded to his blue eyes which had forfeited their strength, gripping to the handle of the sword by his hip, the youth stood up, his hair so red as to be set ablaze.

Toska: “I am… I am! I am, going to take Remina as my wife! I’ve loved her since long before!”

Beatrice: “You-, the wish-… agh! Even that works at this point in fact!”

Toska: “I’ll protect the village! Even if nobody fights alongside me, they split food with me when I felt hungry! They sheltered me when I cried after big brother hit me! I, love everyone!”

Beatrice: “More! More I suppose!”

Toska: “As if I’m ever going to give up, because of some nuisance big brother brought with him! You bloody, damn, shitty little big brother! The next time you come back, I’ll have you hold your nephews or nieces in your arms!!”

Hollering, Toska drew the sword from his hip.

A tawdry, crudely made sword, nevertheless in these moments shimmered with the hero’s spirit.

As Toska braced it straight ahead, by his side Beatrice and Puck exchanged a glance.

The opponent was Silver Dragon, a herculean individual thirty meters in size, Beatrice was a novice who had just experienced Killing for the first time a couple of moments ago, a three person troupe with no coordination or anything.

However, through these nine days, they spent their days and nights together, their bond albeit transient and brittle, was definite.

Consequently…

Toska: “—Come at us, lizard bastard! I’ll turn you into a wedding dinner!”

Receiving this proclamation, the Silver Dragon lightly widened its eyes.

And…

Fargall: [I, art one who shalt avenge the head of Silver Dragons—Fargall.]

"…"

Fargall: [—Though a misdirected retribution, I shalt destroy adversaries of mine family by blood.]

Blood relative of the fallen head of Silver Dragons, the Dragon—no, Fargall unfurled its wings.

A violent current furiously blew, the shockwave cleaved the earth, swallowing the three within. But, the pressure of that gale and tremor immediately vanished.

Puck: [Didn't I tell you? That I'm an ally to maidens in love and youthful youngsters.]

Ahead of Beatrice and Toska, that which instantly expanded his presence—no, his mass and transfigured his body into one on par with the Silver Dragon's, was Puck.

Having transformed his adorable outward appearance into a ginormous beast, Puck commanded a view above even the Silver Dragon.

Puck: [It's just that I'm still practicing it. So I can't make it last for too long.]

Fargall: [—Spirit.]

Beatrice: "Understandable, but you're going to regret it if you fall for Bubby."

Thus blew a gale glaciating the world, amidst the white that chilled even the Dragon, Beatrice made her move as well.

Purple arrows infinite were nocked in the environs, and the battle of the Witch’s proxy…

—The battle of the Silver Dragon subjugation, commenced.

5

Fargall: [—Gyaaaas.]

The battle began with a dragon breath, a misapprehension of the world being rocked intermingling within.

She had entered the battle after quite the grandstanding but Beatrice’s combat ability was by no means great.

Despite abounding in disposition and talent, her lack of experience in real battling shan’t turn traitor to victory or defeat. In this battle against the Silver Dragon, Beatrice possessed not a single decisive blow up her sleeve.

However, that did not make for Beatrice being luggage unable to battle.

Beatrice: “El Minya~a~a~a—~hk!!”

Lightening the weight of her body, Beatrice fusilladed a hail of purple arrows whilst dancing in the wind.

Unlike the Dragon taken out in the ambush, Fargall’s scales were clad in powerful mana. They impetuously diminished the might of magic, a firm armor that shielded its body.

Beatrice’s bombardment thwarted by the armor, not even as slight as a single strike connected.

However…

Puck: [Hiya~a~a~a~a~a~a—!!”

The star beastified Puck’s enormous forelimbs placed a firm hit onto the Silver Dragon’s trunk. The Dragon in a matter of moments attempted to brace its legs but the ground below its feet crystallized and shattered.

Minya stopped time of not just living creatures. Inorganic substances could be its targets as well.

Its brace proving to be fruitless, the Silver Dragon directly received Puck's robust arm. The gargantuan build akin to an amalgamation of multiple gigantic trees was thrown into the air as though weightless, and the blizzard toward that direction intensified.

The rampaging wind clad itself in blades of frost and charged towards the Silver Dragon imprisoned therein.

The might of the minor tempest was immense, some offhand Dragon would have gotten trapped within the instant it got touched, its body minced to a million shreds.

However, the opponent was no offhand Dragon, its pedigree and existence as an individual were all of the highest order.

Fargall: [—Gyaaaas!!]

Smashing through the tempest via the current birthed upon unfurling its closed wings, the following moment, a heat ray varnished the world in silver.

The heat wave released by the Silver Dragon approached Beatrice, killing even sound. —No, Beatrice simply happened to be in its trajectory. However, it was sufficient to rob her life in the aftermath.

Within that juncture, as Beatrice stood ready for Death, Puck swooped in ahead and accepted the heat ray.

A groan escaped the depths of his bulky throat before Beatrice instantly clung to the feet of her elder brother. Clinging to his long fur, she cheered her elder brother withstanding this agony with her all.

Potentially that bore its fruits, Puck forcefully turned his frame and escaped the heat ray, looking back to Beatrice who grasped his fur and then swung down his gigantic arm.

Synchronized with the movement of his arm, multiple house-sized floes of ice drew towards the Dragon.

The Silver Dragon countered them, some were repelled by the heat ray, others by the Dragon's wings or dragon claws, and attempted to launch a pursuit towards Puck.

However…

Toska: "—A~a~a~a~a~argh!!"

Flew out a bloody Toska, having slipped into the smashed ice floes.

Amidst the unheeding decisive battle of human and Dragon, bearing innumerable wounds throughout his body, Toska nonetheless did not allow for his fighting spirit to falter and assailed the Silver Dragon head-on.

A silver flash swung, a strike composed of all his might afflicted upon the Dragon's bulky, burly neck.

A strike of utterly perfect timing and sword technique. —What was lacking, was defense.

Toska: "—~hk."

A shrill note resounded, by the point the edge of his sword was rammed into the Dragon's neck, it fractured.

Toska's beloved sword that had supported the battle until now had been a single tread lacking in slashing the Silver Dragon's scales. As is, the Silver Dragon narrowed its eyes toward the mid-air Toska, now rendered defenseless.

The subsequently launched dragon claw, was perhaps an attack lacquered with honor and respect toward the warrior.

However, no matter what sentiment those claws were imbued with, it meant no change in the consequence they yielded. A singular claw was large enough to rip the body of a human.

In but a blink, the existence named Toska altered into a spray of blood…

Fargall: [—What?]

In the midst of battle, there existed not even the scope to spin words of significance.

This applied to both the Dragon and them, yet the Dragon's unrest for the first time quaked the atmosphere.

Fargall ought to have seized Toska in the claw strike, and brought his existence to complete ruin. However Toska, who ought to have perished, fluttered through the air via fearsome impact, not dead nevertheless.

Beatrice: "—Murak."

A hand upraised, Beatrice casted magic towards Toska the second he was going to be attacked.

Not a consequence foreplanned, but the optimum solution complying with the situation derived instinctively.

When he was about ensnared in the claws, she made Toska's body light like fluff and the wind pressure and impact of the claws escaped him from any fatal wounds.

The result, Toska barely managed to cling to his life.

Fargall: [Regardless—!]

Despite eluding it once, the consequence named Death was inexorable.

In order to prove this, the glint in Fargall's eye arrested the airborne Toska. Gaping its mouth wide open, the setup to fire a heat ray was completed in the span of a breath.

The inferno that scorched the world silver, paid no heed to the weight of the target to be scorched to ruin.

The tip of this ruin trivialized Toska. —It was on the brink of doing so, when.

???: “—Toska!”

A clamorous voice, not belonging to anyone present here.

The voice of someone Beatrice, Puck and even Fargall were unbeknownst of.

A voice that solely Toska, hovering in the air, knew whom it belonged to.

—Remina.

Toska’s lips moved so, as his blue pupils discerned the form of a slender young girl underneath trespassing onto Mount Carnattse, now a battlefield.

The girl grasped crude steel unbefitting her hands. Holding it aloft, with all her strength, she flung it in Toska’s direction.

The whirling object was same as one that had fractured earlier, a tawdry sword…

Fargall: [However, I shan’t allow it to reach—]

Puck: [I wouldn’t be so sure! I’m an ally to maidens in love, after all!]

The Silver Dragon set to deliver the finishing blow before the sword reached Toska. Its oral cavity attempted to heave the heat ray, when an impact from below overbearingly shut it close and misdirected its aim.

The silver inferno lost of destination exploded within its mouth, and the Silver Dragon greatly recoiled from the impact.

His entire body scorched, smeared in wounds, it was Puck’s attack—no, that was not an attack, he simply enlarged by the Dragon’s feet, a mere vigorless body collision. However, the hero plunged into the priceless interval it nonetheless bore.

Toska: “Wo-Woa~a~a~a~a~a~a~ah—!”

Receiving the hurled katana, Toska dropped towards the Silver Dragon’s direction after having turned his body.

Innumerable sword strikes struck the Dragon’s scales, repelled by their firmness, gouged them, repelled yet again, repeating this cycle he resumed to etch a gash.

Its flesh and blood gouged, the Dragon shrieked. A rigid sound reverberated, the katana snapped from the middle yet again.

However, toward Toska who lost his sword…

“Toska—!!”

The voice calling him was accompanied by a successively hailed rain of identically dull katanas.

Look there and stood beside the girl who had hastened to this place, the entire strength of Carnattse with the village headman standing first. In other words, the sum of hurled katanas was fifty,

Toska: “Hirya~a~a~a~a~a~a~a~a—~hk!”

He caught the katana thrown toward him in his right hand and drove in lethal slashes whilst his left hand caught the next one. Turning his body, each time resounded the echo of shattering steel, Toska gripped a new sword in his hands and abraded the scales of silver.

Born there in a trice was a transcendent swordsman who manipulated swords as extensions of his limbs.

Fargall: [—Oh kinsman, of red hair!]

Eyes dilated, the Silver Dragon Fargall aimed at Toska’s build whilst its own was being hashed.

The golden eyes until the very end, fumbled for a way to guard the Dragon clan…

Beatrice: “—Minya.”

The purple stakes Beatrice fired pierced the Dragon’s widened golden pupils from the front.

Its eyes unprotected by scales crystallized and vision that renunciated its duty lost sight of Toska.

—A silver flash, severed the Dragon’s burly throat till the middle, determining the outcome of battle.

6

Looking down onto the hunched Silver Dragon, Toska exhaled a white puff, drenched in blood.

Towards Toska came running the young girl who had first rushed here. She leapt onto him, both collapsing within the Dragon’s blood together.

Beatrice: “Ah, quite the foolhardiness that girl caused, I suppose. She has him wrapped around her finger, in fact.”

Puck: “Could be. Nonetheless, this means love wins in the end.”

Whilst viewing Toska and Remina exchange words within a fountain of blood from afar, Beatrice shrugged as a shrunken Puck came to her.

The exhaustion that came with undoing star beastification seemed rather intense, his form now about twice as smaller than usual.

Beatrice: “That’s how adorable Bubby is, I suppose. Betty is madly in love at this point, in fact.”

Puck: “Ahaha, though if I’m this small it’s trouble in a lot of ways so I’m quite the troublemaker~. Nevertheless… hm, I guess it’s all possible.”

Beatrice quietly assented to Puck’s words as he nodded a couple of times.

On the other side of the frolicking couple lay a powerlessly collapsed Silver Dragon, decapitated. A fearsome Dragon who truly possessed herculean strength. Victory would have been beyond their reach had they lacked even a single person on their side.

This included the villagers who mustered their courage and hastened here wielding swords midway through.

Fargall: [—Splendid, oh children of men.]

Toska: "—~hk! Stand back, Remina! It can, still talk huh…!"

Toska exercised vigilance toward the possibility of the victory they had caught hold of after crossing a brittle tightrope being jolted. However, Fargall appeared to be on the verge of death even from an outsider's perspective, and was not going to persist for long.

The Silver Dragon had been bested in the struggle for survival, and shall fall without exacting revenge on the enemies of its kin.

Beatrice: "A wrongly aimed revenge at that, I suppose. It's on you to have pulled an unnecessary stunt and lowered the Dragon clan's numbers, in fact."

Fargall: [Certes… It was, splendid. However.]

Beatrice: "…However?"

She thought it would act as a poor loser, however, the Dragon shan't do something so low. Then what did it intend, the moment she conceived this doubt, its answer arrived a moment later.

Puck: "—They got us."

Murmured Puck, looking up to the sky.

Lured by his voice Beatrice raised her countenance as well, and gulped a breath upon witnessing the identical spectacle.

It was, menace that rivalled the time when Fargall had earlier appeared—no, a spectacle exceeding that.

Shouldering the final fragment which the white moon lacked before becoming a full moon, silhouettes drew close whilst flapping their wings.

Though their size was not on par with the Silver Dragon before their eyes, their numbers unveiled despair. Above ten, above twenty, above thirty, not even fifty but nearly a hundred in count, a weyr of Silver Dragons.

This was the raid of the weyr of Dragons who sensed crisis upon the future of the Dragon clan after the fall of the head of Silver Dragons of the east.

Beatrice and team, who had just brought out and exhausted their all, couldn't possibly ever oppose them.

Puck: "What do we do, Betty?"

Beatrice: "…Only thing possible is for Bubby and Betty to buy time, I suppose."

Puck: "We might be able to. If in that window Toska is able to take the villagers… or in the worst case scenario, just Remina away, would it count as our task being done?"

Puck's usual attitude before the weir of Dragons close to a hundred in count was exceedingly heartening. Following the example of the ever composed and optimistic stance of her elder brother, Beatrice pressed and ceased her knees from shivering.

However…

Toska: "Please wait. I cannot cause you any more trouble. "

It was none other than Toska to impede upon the two's resolve.

Making Remina stand, Toska, his entire build bedaubed in Dragon's blood, shoved her in Beatrice's direction and,

Toska: "The Dragons' aim are big brother's relatives… they will never overlook me. If anything"

Beatrice: “You’re telling us to leave you here and escape with the childhood friend and villagers, I suppose. That’s, that’s absolutely never going to happen, in fact!”

Toska: “For what reason! You two, have no reason to stake your lives here…”

For the sake of a village they were unassociated with, she staked her life upon a mere request.

Toska bayed that he could not comprehend this attitude of Beatrice’s, his visage verging onto crying. To his question Beatrice laid a hand on her slim chest, and responded.

Beatrice: “—That is, Betty’s role. To devote her all for Mother, that is Betty’s mission.”

Puck: “My mission is a bit different from Betty’s, but it’s for my cute little sister.”

Asserted Beatrice, and beside her spoke Puck with his unchanging attitude. Hearkening the two’s response, Toska widened his eyes and hung his head down for a bit.

However, his vacillation amounted to only a couple of seconds. With an unbroken sword in his hand, he positioned himself and stood beside Beatrice.

Beatrice: “The opponent is a weyr of one hundred Dragons, I suppose.”

Toska: “If it is my sanity that you’re questioning, then I have been brain-dead after big brother hit me in the head since long before. —It would be unhinged if I were to run away, when I was the one to start this.”

He says quite cool things, Beatrice appended a novel evaluation to Toska’s side profile.

And as though emulating this spirit of Toska’s, Remina and the villagers turned towards the Dragons.

People who had once backed down and renounced resistance, now resolved their determination to oppose their hopeless destiny.

"…"

The humans' unyielding stance made Beatrice strongly, powerfully clench her fist.

It felt mortifying that the only one present here was her impotent self. Had the one here instead of Beatrice been her mother, been the Witch Echidna, then.

Had her likely distant mother, been kind enough to be here, then…

???: "—Al Chario."

Beatrice: "—ah."

A feeble note escaped Beatrice's throat upon hearing the abrupt voice from behind.

The chant had neither been Beatrice's, nor Puck's. It was improbable for it to be Toska, who knew not even the 'm' in 'magic', nor the powerless humans of the village.

That was the chant of one who was au fait with magic, and was utmost informed about it in this world.

As though some dream or illusion, Beatrice turned behind, flustered. The sight reflected within her bluish eyes, the one leisurely ambling toward them was an absolute personage wielding pigment of naught but the dual contrasts of white and black.

—The Witch.

???: "When I returned to the palace, you two were nowhere to be found beyond having left a parting letter, after all. It just so happened that the Dragon of the East was said to have fallen recently, so I was quite worried…"

Beatrice: "Moth, er…"

???: “Your first task seems to have become rather grandiose beyond anticipated. No scope for negligence or interlude.”

Called by Beatrice’s quivering voice, the lady, garbed in black and hair stretching long in white, leisurely halted her gait. Hearing her call, Toska froze, his eyes dilated.

He had knowledge of only one person whom Beatrice referred to as mother.

Toska: “Could it be, you are the Witch of Wisdom-sama…?”

Beatrice: “Yes, yes in fact. Your head is up I suppose, human. Prostrate yourself right this instant…”

???: “Beatrice.”

Beatrice: “Eek!”

Deeming Toska’s bearing as irreverent, Beatrice alerted him whilst correcting her own posture. Her mother’s hand placed atop her slender shoulder, Beatrice bewailed upon her touch.

However, mother—the Witch Echidna faintly loosened her lips,

Echidna: “You persevered well during my absence. However, I cannot close my eyes to that tone.”

Beatrice: “Th-Th-That, was, t-to educate this man, o-on what courtesy is…”

Puck: “Well well, it’s alright, Echidna. You also know Betty’s a hard worker and has no ill will, yeah?”

It was Puck who advocated for the humbled Beatrice, seated on her shoulder other than the one Echidna set her hand onto. A carefree exchange, failing to read the air Toska insisted with a “P-Please wait!”, his voice brimming with fluster.

Toska: “Um! It is a great honor that you came all the way here, Witch-sama! But, the weyr of Dragons is still…”

Beatrice: “…You, what are you acting so frightened for in fact, disgraceful.”

Beatrice glared at Toska as she snuggled with Puck, his form now the original, adorable one, by her cheek. However, he seemed to not comprehend whatsoever, hastily darting his eyes about.

Looking at Beatrice, Puck, and subsequently Echidna, Toska then gulped his saliva and,

Toska: “W-Witch-sama? Um, what does…”

Echidna: “Hm, it’s not anything particularly convoluted. The events transpiring are simple.”

Said Echidna with one eye closed, facing about toward the imminent weyr of Dragons. Lured into her movement, Toska identically viewed the sky, and took notice.

Beatrice and Puck also gazed at the Dragons perfusing the sky, and pitied them.

—Discerning Toska’s brother as a hazard and the stance to resist their downfall was unerring, yet.

Beatrice: “It is your greatest misfortune that you went against Mother, I suppose.”

In Beatrice’s field of vision as she whispered so, the Dragons that perfused the sky finally detected the menace.

However, they wouldn’t make it in time by the time they detected it.

Echidna’s chant, Al Chario set forth its efficacy and destruction manifested in the world.

Al Chario, the force it brought forth was…

Fargall: […Inconceivable.]

The dying Fargall distended its eyes upon the preposterous scene.

Hearing the voice of that Silver Dragon, Echidna raked her fingers through her white hair,

Echidna: “—Should there be any Dragons that survive through those falling stars, I shall listen once again.”

The sky which Dragons reigned, from which far, far higher above, descending from beyond was an onslaught of stardust.

Assailing upon the weyr of Dragons with velocity and might that rendered any defense or evasion impossible, within the destruction kindled by stars they were scorched. Scorched. Scorched.

—This was the true end.

—True ruin brought forth by the absolute personage, the Witch.

7

Echidna: “Going forward, I shall put Carnattse under my supervision. If anyone has any objections, let us have a thorough debate. Should that not suffice, you are free to exercise force.”

Who on earth could defy this ordinance coming from a Witch who had dropped stars.

The weyr of Dragons who had advanced towards Carnattse intending to bring ruin to Toska’s kin—much of the Dragons close to a hundred in totality had fallen, with only four remaining.

One of them being Fargall—injuries healed by Echidna’s hand thus managing to hold onto its life on the brink of perishing, it was the young leader of the weyr of Silver Dragons.

The Dragons who attempted to fight in order to escape downfall exhibited no purpose of resistance before definite ruin, and hanged the heads of their gargantuan bodies low and pledged an oath to Echidna’s words.

Fargall: [—We comply. Dragons born from the eastern sky, shalt not lay a finger upon the redhead’s kin again.]

Echidna: “Eastern sky, huh. I do feel your attitude in surrendering is somewhat unfavorable, but that cannot be helped. On my behalf, I understand… Young man, what shall you do?”

Toska: “M-Me…?”

Asked by Echidna to whom the Dragons submitted, Toska was at a loss for answer.

Making the Dragons surrender was Echidna’s feat, but the one to defeat the mightiest Dragon had unequivocally been him. It seemed that had not fully hit him yet, but…

Beatrice: “Don’t be so stumped, stand upright, in fact. Saving the childhood friend and the village was not your elder brother’s but your own deed, I suppose. Your elder brother was instead the main reason behind this impending ruin, in fact.”

Toska: “—. Beatrice-chan.”

Beatrice: “Why are you saying -chan again I suppose.”

Beatrice violently stepped on Toska’s foot, feeling she was being made light of. Toska howled “That hurt!” upon the affliction, smiling wryly with tears in his eyes.

He subsequently took a deep inhale, slapping his cheeks with his own two hands,

Toska: “Echidna-sama, I hold no objections either. All I did was try saving my childhood friend… Remina. I do not wish for the Dragons to be felled.”

Echidna: “So he says. Rather too kindhearted for the side who was made to confront imminent ruin without any dialogue or discussion, wouldn’t you say?”

Hearing Toska’s reply Echidna gazed at the Dragons, a single eye closed. The survivor Dragons upon receiving that Witch’s gaze bowed to Toska, his expression now altered.

“—I thank thee.”

The Dragons’ brief words, marked an intermission to the havoc enkindled by Dragons that had assailed upon Carnattse.

And…

“—Now then, let us commence the wedding between the village’s hero, Toska, and the one selected by him, Remina!”

“Hurraaaah!!”

With the village headman’s exuberant greeting, the villagers cheered, each holding a cup of wine. And in the core of the whirlpool of thus arising unbridled enthusiasm, stood the dressed up duo of Toska and the young girl.

First and foremost, all dressed up meant was Toska had changed into rough clothes of etiquette, his head now crowned with a festival ornament made out of animal bones. The one truly dolled up was the lovely, sweet young girl beside him, her cheeks slightly tinged—Remina.

Remina, now garbed in a wedding dress, was originally supposed to have lost her life as sacrifice to the Dragon by now. For her fate had been changed, there was no way she had not found happiness.

Beatrice: “How rich, in fact… Won’t go along with humans’ merrymaking, I suppose.”

Puck: “E~h, really? I’m really fond of auspicious atmospheres and seeing people get drunk and be stupid, though.”

Beatrice: “Bubby’s generous outlook is yet far too undoable for Betty, in fact.”

Passing on a slice of meat to Puck atop her shoulder, Beatrice sighed.

The oath pledged between Toska and the Dragons became an ever inviolable covenant with Echidna being its overseer. Thus, Toska had truly become a hero.

And, heroes were rewarded, and the reward he asked for was the young girl beloved to him.

As a result, a celebratory banquet was held and Toska's dearest wish had come true.

Beatrice: "The girl was not against it either, I suppose. It was just his overthinking…"

Viewing everybody's bustling back and forth, Beatrice however did not feel appeased.

Toska having Remina as his bride was a respectable reward. However, the villagers attempted to sacrifice Remina without any attempt for resistance against the Dragon, did they not.

Echidna: "—A rather joyless expression you have there, Beatrice."

Beatrice: "M… Mother…"

Beside the sullen-faced Beatrice, Echidna gently lowered her hips.

Through the course of the feast, there had been an endless number of villagers coming to greet Echidna, who had saved the village in essence. Apprised of words of reverence and gratitude from the villagers, her interactions had now finally arrived at a pause.

Beatrice bit her lips upon Echidna's glance, feeling her innermost heart had been peeked into. However, her mother did not press her further.

In the end, unable to withstand the silence, Beatrice spoke up.

Beatrice: "Betty… thinks nobody except Toska, has the right to be joyful like this, I suppose."

Echidna: "Their village was saved, and they did not have to lose their family or neighbors. You proclaim they don't have the right to celebrate that felicity?"

Beatrice: "Yes, in fact. After all… after all, the one to persevere in the beginning was only Toska, I suppose. Nobody lent an ear to Toska's words. Toska, had no allies, in fact."

Even Toska must not have chosen the Witch all of a sudden among the options he had at first.

He must have scrambled for a way to confront the Dragon in his own way, consulted the villagers, and even considered taking the childhood friend away from the village. The reason why he nonetheless did not abandon the village, was because he was a virtuous human and a coward who could not sacrifice many.

If that coward had brought forth the miracle of protecting what he cherished to the end, then…

Beatrice: "—Miracles, ought to be a reward bestowed upon those who persevered, I suppose."

"…"

It was to Beatrice's whispers, her expression one of vexation, that Echidna faintly widened her eyes. Echidna's rare surprise, eluded notice by Beatrice who glared down to her own hands.

Instead murmured Puck, "Reward for perseverance…" whilst atop her slender shoulder.

Puck: "You sure are kind, Betty. That's why you don't like people who persevered and people who didn't being treated the same way."

Beatrice: "…It might just be pettiness, in fact."

Puck: "Nah, that's not true~. —Besides, Betty's words just now made me feel I've recalled what I need to do too."

Beatrice: "—. Bubby?"

Softly levitating from her shoulder, Puck stretched its tiny build mid-air. Caught into his remark, Beatrice raised her eyes up to the tiny cat, her shoulders slumped.

Upon Beatrice's gaze, Puck laughed whilst caressing his face with a hand, Puck: “Miracles are rewards for those who worked hard… then, I’ve gotta work hard too. My stopover has gone on for a bit too long.”

Beatrice: “Huh, huh, huh?”

Echidna: “—. Are you leaving, Puck?”

Puck and Echidna’s dialogue proceeded, deserting the bewildered Beatrice behind.

Echidna enquired, her eyes straitened, to which Puck nodded with a “Mhm”.

Puck: “I have a mission I was born with. Though that doesn’t go for me alone, mine’s a bit more precise and weighty than others’. I’m leaving in order to fulfill that.”

Echidna: “I see… I shall not impede. However, you mustn’t act contrary to the contract.”

Puck: “Hahaha, that again? Seriously, that’s all you… you guys are all about.”

Laughing like a human, Puck then proceeded to descend before Beatrice. Puck gently brushed the bewildered Beatrice’s nose with his tail.

The sensation swaying her eyelashes, Beatrice vocalized “Bubby…” and called her brother.

Beatrice: “Bubby, you’re going to go away, I suppose?”

Puck: “Mhm, sorry, Betty. I’ll be parting ways for a bit. But, it’s not for always. Once I find what I’m searching for, I’ll come back. Even if I don’t, I’ll look through till every edge of the world then come back.”

Beatrice: “—ah.”

Indifferently informed, the feeling of wanting to stop him clogged up to her throat.

However, Beatrice was identical to Puck, an Artificial Spirit—she could empathize to a painful extent with Puck, who wished to fulfill the mission he was born with. Therefore, she could not stop him.

Born before her, her elder brother in its truest sense. —The only two Artificial Spirits in this world.

Beatrice: "—. Take care of yourself, don't catch a cold, in fact."

Puck: "You're right, I'll be careful I don't throw my blanket off while sleeping. You too Betty, get along and don't quarrel with Mother, okay."

Waving his tiny hand, Puck elevated himself from Beatrice's frontage up toward the night sky. At the same pace, his form as he swayed his lengthy tail proceeded to diminish, before long he was engulfed within the night sky, and disappeared.

In the night embellished with stars, Puck's form was no longer there to be seen.

Although for an instant she anticipated this to be a joke and he would come back down to her, but…

Echidna: "…So he's gone, huh. It was known that this would happen, but how truly unemotional. Must be to a significant extent if I'm the one saying this."

Her mother's words, by her side, repudiated all possibility for this to be a joke.

Ever since she had been born, she had spent greater than half of all these months and years alongside her elder brother. Beatrice's heart was scourged with loneliness, desolateness, that Puck was gone.

Toska: "Huh? Beatrice-chan, where is Puck-sama? Took up any more tasks?"

Abruptly came today's lead actor Toska towards Beatrice, whose eyes were cast down in lonesomeness.

He restlessly surveyed the environs, and touched on Puck's absence with a sense of dissonance.

However, Beatrice firmly shook her head,

Beatrice: “Bubby is gone, I suppose. For his mission, he embarked on a journey.”

Toska: “Embarked on a journey you say, in the midst of this banquet? There’s no way something so bizarre…”

“…”

Toska: “—Is that, true?”

His cheeks tinted in red, likely due to wine, Toska froze and distended his eyes. Beatrice did not refute his doubt. Shoulders ducked inward, she nodded.

Beatrice: “True, I suppose. Well, it cannot be helped, in fact. Bubby has something he must do, and was just on a stopover during his journey, I suppose. So…”

Toska: “Beatrice-chan, are you fine this way?”

Beatrice: “Wh-What do you mean fine, of course Betty is fine in fact. It’s Bubby’s, duty I suppose…”

Toska: “But, your expression really says you’re about to cry…”

With this pointed out to her, Beatrice touched her cheek. Fortunately, no tears had flowed, but this gesture alone made for sufficient basis to legitimize Toska’s words.

Toska: “Echidna-sama! Echidna-sama, did you not stop him?”

Echidna: “He couldn’t have been stopped, you see. Just as this child said, he departed on a journey in order to fulfill his duty. This was a stopover in his journey… the journey’s adjournment and resumption, are all by his volition.”

Toska: “But, Beatrice-chan looked so very lonesome. Because she had been with Puck-sama, she had only barely managed to hang on, so…”

Toska clung to Echidna, delineating as though having surmised Beatrice’s innermost heart and feelings.

To this subject Beatrice reddened her cheeks, and stood up.

Beatrice: “Don’t go on saying things per your own convenience, in fact! Betty is, alright I suppose! Even if Bubby isn’t there… Betty is going strong, in fact.”

Toska: “Beatrice-chan…”

Beatrice: “Bubby left to fulfill his mission… to work hard and persevere, I suppose. He decided to work hard in order to invoke a miracle, in fact. That cannot, be obstructed, I suppose.”

She shall admit it felt lonely. No lies in that.

But, someone else’s heart could not be judged to be chained using one’s own lonesomeness as pretext.

Toska failed to vocalize anything before Beatrice as she averred so, and just looked on at her with eyes abound in compassion. Beatrice attempted to snarl at his gaze right away…

Echidna: “Beatrice, is it true that you feel lonely?”

Beatrice: “Th-That’s… that’s, um, alri…”

Echidna: “—Beatrice.”

The strength she wished to bluff, was whittled with only a call of her name.

Beatrice: “…It feels lonely, in fact. Mother leaves often, I suppose. It would be trouble should something like today happen again, so Betty knows she must guard your absence, in fact. But”

Echidna: “I see, I neglected that on my part. You would feel all the more lonely with Puck gone, huh… If that is the case, then perhaps the timing is quite right.”

Beatrice: “Right timing? Mother, whatever may that mean, I suppose?”

Echidna: “The other day, I found a child suffering from mana periods. Though a human nobility… I wish for him to learn magic. Thereupon, I intended to have him take lessons in the palace until he’s made progress.”

Beatrice was petrified by her mother’s dissonant and, yet again, unconsulted words.

Quite the explosive proposal when she reckoned days of lonesomeness would befall with Puck’s egress.

Mana periods were akin to periods wherein mana that could not be released damaged the body from within.

It was a condition that generally occurred only in demi-humans or Spirits that utilized massive quantities of mana, but the same could rarely occur with humans blessed with potent talent.

Toska: “Thank god. That means Beatrice-chan won’t be alone, isn’t it.”

Beatrice: “Tch, why would you feel relieved, in fact! It has nothing to do with you, I suppose!”

Toska: “No I mean, Puck-sama left for his journey with the impetus of my request and if Beatrice-chan were to become lonely because of that, I wouldn’t know how to hold responsibility for it…”

Beatrice: “Nobody asked you to hold any responsibility, in fact!”

Whether it be about the elder brother or the Dragon, Beatrice was utterly flabbergasted by softhearted Toska’s attitude.

Though it may be precisely because of this tactless honestly of his that he even resolved to fight the Dragon with the sole will to protect his childhood friend…

Beatrice: “Keep this up and you’ll suffer one day, I suppose. Hereafter you’ve got someone to protect, so take proper care of yourself and don’t act rashly, in fact… Betty is, well, she’s alright I suppose.”

Toska: “Beatrice-chan…”

Beatrice: “As much as you can, celebrate your short human life and become happy, in fact. Mother’s benevolence and protection will magnanimously shelter and shield you all going forward as well, I suppose.”

Toska widened his eyes upon Beatrice’s words, then subsequently placed himself into a deep kneel.

The respectful bow, a gesture of gratitude, was directed not toward Echidna but Beatrice.

Beatrice: “Huh… you, that respect belongs to Mother, in fact.”

Toska: “Of course, I am also grateful to Echidna-sama. But, you were so kind as to listen to my request in the beginning, and lent not just your wisdom but even your strength. I, wish to show gratitude to you.”

Beatrice: “…”

Toska: “It is you who is my savior, Beatrice-chan. One day, for certain, I shall repay this debt.”

In face of Toska’s terribly humble statement, befitting of identifying as a pledge, Beatrice turned to her mother, to Echidna in search of an answer.

However, Echidna did not unveil an answer in her intellectual, black eyes. She solely jerked her chin, telling her to face Toska.

Beatrice deliberated much. It would detriment her image both as the Witch Echidna’s daughter and as a Great Spirit to provide an offhand answer here.

Therefore, Beatrice focused her gaze directly into Toska’s blue pupils, Beatrice: “Your vow was certainly heard, I suppose. It shall be placed in some corner of Betty’s mind with no expectations set upon it, in fact. You too, can brace yourself just to that meagre degree, I suppose.”

Toska: “—Understood. But, I will repay the debt I’ve incurred on this day back to you, for certain.”

Beatrice: “You aren’t even trying to get it at all, in fact. This is why humans invite trouble, I suppose.”

So she accepted the youth’s vow, his hair an incandescent red, without ever allowing herself to be honest with herself.

8

—Several days had passed since the Dragon catastrophe of Carnattse and the sudden parting with Puck.

That day, the palace of the Witch of Wisdom, Echidna, for the first time welcomed a human not possessing a wish to be carried to the Witch.

Halting the vehicle pulled by Grim Oxen—Farrow, a vast amount of baggage by his feet, was a seemingly ill-healthy skinny youth, his hair stretching long in navy blue.

Concealing the nervousness of meeting someone for the first time behind a composed visage, Beatrice ascertained the features of the youth who looked toward her that she had been informed of.

Long slitted blue eyes, an orderly countenance. The initial impression of him being ill-healthy did not diminish, but the youth had an expression devoid of anxiety and fear in a world wherein existed extraordinary principles which he set foot upon for the first time. Such was his visage.

And upon noticing Beatrice standing there to receive him in the entry hall, the youth respectfully bowed. The carefully conscious etiquette up until his very fingertips was proof of him having received the finest tutelage.

The youth aimed his blue eyes directly towards Beatrice who perceived this, and,

???: “Today onwards, I shall be under the care of Teacher… Echidna-sama. My name is Altair Mathers. —Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Naming himself so, he presented a smile with an expression of cheerfulness that looked up towards the hopes of future.

9

Beatrice: “…And so, thus concludes the bittersweet story of Betty and Bubby.”

A hand before her chest, Beatrice marked the cessation to a long, long reminiscence.

From the very beginning till the very end, Ryuzu had been experiencing the joys and sorrows of the story. She put a hand on her mouth and timidly glanced toward the side, seeking an answer to the final twist.

Ryuzu: “Um, Altair-sama would be…”

Roswaal: “Ah, it refers to me. In our house, generation after generation, the head of the household succeeds the name Roswaal. Before I expelled my parents and siblings, my name had been Altair.”

Ryuzu: “A-Ah, I see… Altair-sama…”

Dissonantly divulging his name change, Roswaal made a nostalgic expression. These events must have occurred multiple years ago, as Beatrice then grimaced.

Beatrice: “Infuriatingly enough, he changed his name right after coming to the palace, I suppose. Back then Betty started doubting what kind of a prank it was, in fact.”

Roswaal: “Calling it a prank would be quite the exaggeration. Since back then I had been yearning to be useful to Teacher as soon as possible, you see. That's why it was necessary for me to be in a position where I could freely utilize my house's authority. The name succession came as a result of that."

As one who loved her own, Beatrice could not possibly comprehend being dispassionate regarding one's own name.

Above all, that too was significantly because the one to give her this name had been her godparent, her mother, and she believed the same could be said about Roswaal.

What granted foundation to something's worth, was also significantly because of who it was that had given it.

Just as Beatrice cherished the name given to her by Echidna, Roswaal too surely cherished anything given to him by Echidna without letting go.

Ryuzu: "But, listening to this story, I have grown very much fond of Puck-sama. I would love to meet him once as well."

Beatrice: "Hmhm, that's a matter of course, I suppose. Bubby's cuteness and furriness can't be expressed in words, in fact. Should you actually see him, it'll be life-changing, I suppose."

Ryuzu: "Th-That much so… gulp."

Gulping saliva, Ryuzu nervously imagined the arrival of that time. Watching her spirits, Beatrice pondered she might have uttered something a bit too aggrandized.

The girl, who had been visited by a multitude of misfortunes until reaching Sanctuary due to her bloodline, could not leave this land for now.

Because they were in the midst of constructing and acclimatizing a technique connected with the soil and the inhabitants' blood.

Ryuzu: "You do not need to worry yourself, Beatrice-sama."

Beatrice: "Mgh…"

However, her heart was read by none other than Ryuzu. The girl slowly shook her head, touching her ear slightly lengthier than usual people's,

Ryuzu: "There is much that I do not know or have not seen. So, it makes me happy to be told of so many things by Beatrice-sama like this."

Beatrice: "…Well, then it's fine, in fact. Betty wasn't bothered by that at all, I suppose."

Feeling uneasy, Beatrice averted her gaze. Ryuzu let out a small laugh seeing Beatrice, with the latter miraculously not being displeased by it.

Roswaal: "At any rate, Teacher was magnificent in your story earlier. Who would've thought she would drop stars and repel the weyr of Dragons… it means even the skies abide by Teacher's word."

Beatrice: "Quite the good phrasing in fact, Roswaal. No choice but to compliment you for that one, I suppose."

Roswaal: "In terms of words that extol Teacher, there's no thing that stands equal with me, after all."

Beatrice whirred to Roswaal's phraseology, to which he bowed in a dramatic gesture. Ryuzu watched over the two's exchange with a pleasant smile, when…

Echidna: "—My goodness. I was wondering what it was that you all were talking about."

Beatrice: "Mother!"

Roswaal: "Teacher!"

At the spot where arrangements for supper were being made, Echidna joined them after finishing her business.

The belle Witch with characteristic black outfit and white hair, closed an eye to the gazes of her beloved daughter and her beloved pupil,

Echidna: “Talking about Puck is rather rare… That child doesn’t show himself oft either. I do not believe he perished, but how truly cold-hearted.”

Beatrice: “Bubby must’ve also entered an age where a lot of stuff becomes problematic, in fact. Betty wouldn’t worry about it, I suppose… Putting that aside, it’s time for dinner, in fact! Mother, please have a seat beside Betty, I suppose!”

Roswaal: “No, Teacher, beside me. I had some doubts I wished to ask you regarding Earth IV just about now as well.”

Beatrice: “That’s just an excuse, in fact! To begin with, Mother abandoned writing Earth IV midway through, so even reading it would amount to just feeling unsure, I suppose!”

She snarled at Roswaal, who took out the book and attempted to draw Echidna’s interest with that as pretext. Receiving her words, Roswaal shrugged with a “My, my”,

Roswaal: “You certainly wouldn’t pull such a shambolic stunt when it comes to Teacher at least, yes. If you think it has ended midway through, then doesn’t that mean you simply lack the knowledge to imagine what content would be written afterwards?”

Beatrice: “Galling, in fact. Quite audacious of you to say this before Betty, I suppose!”

Roswaal: “Woah, you wanna go at it?”

Beatrice: “Exactly what Betty wishes, in fact!!”

Leaping over the book’s content, they then jumped to guessing the author, Echidna’s intents. The two’s quarrel subsequently overheated, and the two finally came down to utilizing force.

Away from the bonfire, the two ardently headed toward open ground.

Beatrice and Roswaal’s tussle—it was wholly Beatrice who got heated up, but it was a usual affair for it to aggravate and outburst into a contention of magic.

Ryuzu: “Ah, ah Echidna-sama, what should we do… the hotpot will get cold…”

Echidna: “You seem to be more accommodating than what I anticipated as well. I am relieved. I shall keep an eye on those two.”

Raising her hips which she had just seated, Echidna proceeded to watch over the dispute between the toilsome two. When, Echidna vocalized “That’s right” and halted her steps.

Echidna: “You are having to persist remaining here, but I hope you aren’t facing any inconveniences. Beatrice has become quite attached to you as well. Should there be anything you need I would like to be as open to it as possible, but…”

Ryuzu: “B-By no means. Besides, I enjoy being with Beatrice-sama as well.”

Echidna: “I see. —Ryuzu, please get along with her.”

Upon a rare request coming from Echidna, Ryuzu couldn’t help but be petrified, eyebrows raised. Consequently, Echidna’s figure proceeded to distance away without hearing any answer.

Ryuzu: “Um! Yes, if I suffice! Kindly allow me to get along with her!”

Before her figure subsequently dwindled, Ryuzu cried, erasing her thoughts. Echidna did not halt her gait upon hearing it. She simply waved her hand, slightly.

With the alias Witch came all kinds of hazardous histories and rumors.

But by Ryuzu’ word, who was acquainted with the genuine Witch, a majority of those baseless rumors were false and groundless, there existed only one thing which she could not refute, that too something superficial.

A gauche and kind lady, simply wielding might that transcended human intellect.

Ryuzu: “Both Beatrice-sama and Roswaal-sama love the same person, and yet… although, Roswaal-sama pokes a bit too much fun at Beatrice-sama.”

Even to an outsider’s eye, it was clear as day that Roswaal doted on Beatrice. The reason why this was not conveyed to the pivotal Beatrice was because his way of expressing his love was exceedingly childish.

Roswaal: “—Well well, what’s the matter, Beatrice. Messing about even when Teacher is watching?”

Beatrice: “You! That’s it, you’ve really, really infuriated Betty now, I suppose! Won’t forgive you no matter what, no matter absolutely what in fact!”

She could hear the distant voices of the cordial two, frolicking. Ryuzu’ lips unwittingly gave way to a smile, and reckoned Echidna must have conceived an identical emotion.

The queer relationships of the Sanctuary, relationships that definitely did not comprise family, nor were they not a relationship of benefit.

Though not Roswaal, she wished for bonds not inferior to the elder brother Beatrice had affectionately spoken of to henceforward be nurtured here and tied together.

Whilst musing so, Ryuzu scooped a bite out of the hotpot with a spoon, and tasted the supper.

Ryuzu: “—Mm, delicious as always.”

She was excited to see once the contention of magic came to a halt and the three returned, how they shall all react.

Roswaal, who queerly preferred simple flavors, or Echidna, who did not feel quenched until she had analyzed everything about the particulars of the ingredients used, or Beatrice, who exceeded her bounds and attempted to finish everything served.

Experiencing a multitude of meetings and partings, Beatrice shall certainly prevail alongside the Witch. Ryuzu lovingly surmised about the gallant girl, that happiness lay ahead of that road.

—She prayed, wishing for there to be fortune, felicity upon that road.

Epilogue:
Crying Voice

—For long, for much too long, this expanse teemed with silence.

Everything beyond its time became poison, encompassing even silence. Silence, resounding as a cacophony to ears, was deadly toxic birthed by stagnation eating into the human heart.

Moreover, it steadily, mercilessly and without pardon, ate into even the heart of one not human.

Within the tempestuous silence, faintly reverberated the timbre of grazing paper. Atop her petite lap, turning the pages of a voluminous book, her eyes dimly illumine with a fleeting luminescence, chased the letters in pursuit.

Only the notes of this reprise jolted the air of the library reigned by silence—the Forbidden Archive.

For long, for too long had this evermore, forevermore subsisted—when.

"…"

Long eyelashes laced with her eyelids quivered, her blue eyes were elevated lento. Parting her gaze from the book, her sight focused ahead onto the room's gateway in a long time.

Her focus about concurred with the door unfastening with a creak.

Beatrice: "…A visitor in a long time, in fact. Roswaal too, quite the obstinate chap, I suppose."

Leaking a languorous, enervated whisper, the proprietor of the room—no, the librarian entrusted with this room by its proprietor, received the first visitor to arrive at the Forbidden Archive after a span of ten years with a gelid voice.

In days long, long bygone, she used to await someone's call.

However, her duty had since changed, the librarian's role was to await the visit of the Awaited One.

And, a long time had since elapsed, bearing witness to no visit by the Awaited One.

During this time, a few had succeeded in reaching this Forbidden Archive, but they all were inapposite to be the Awaited One. The same certainly went for this grey-haired grandsire.

Beatrice: "So? What did you come here searching for, in fact. A means to heal all kinds of illnesses? Art of conversation to amplify your fortune and fame? Or truths concealed in history, I suppose. No matter what it is…"

???: "—ebt."

Beatrice: "…What?"

Interposing in the midst of her speech, she failed to grasp the grandsire's scant words. The librarian thus asked again, and the grandsire, taking a step toward her, pierced her with his blue eyes unabating of radiance.

The librarian took an instant and furrowed her brows, gulping a faint inhale. For the possessor of those eyes, was…

???: "I have come, to repay my debt to you. —Beatrice-chan."

Beatrice: "…Toska?"

The librarian whose name was stated—Beatrice, dazed, called the tottering grandsire, the posture of his back bent.

This could not be, she thought. However, no refute was evinced by the grandsire, as he loosened his cheeks into a wry smile like once before. During that journey which lasted shorter than ten days, this was the expression he used to display the most.

Beatrice: "I-Impossible, in fact. After all, it's been more than a hundred years since…!"

Toska: “Erm, yes, that’s correct. This year marks the hundred and fiftieth.”

Beatrice: “You’ve lived for way too long I suppose! B-Befitting of a human, you should’ve celebrated your short life, and…”

Words escaping her, Beatrice was astounded by her own faltering speech. By merely this alone, she had surpassed the number of words she had spoken in the past however many years.

But, that was the scale of her astonishment. —No, her astonishment was illimitable. What did he say, just now?

Beatrice: “Repay, debt…? What in the world, does that…”

Toska: “I heard, you have remained here alone for long. Spending your time in far more solitude, than a bit prior to a hundred years ago.”

By a human’s scale, a calculation error of thirty years is not ‘a bit’, she failed to vocalize even this interjection.

The aged, tottering grandsire lapped with naught of the youth in Beatrice’s recollection, save for his eyes. However, she was astounded by the certitude alone that his eyes had not changed.

Beatrice: “…A hundred years, is not a short period, I suppose.”

Toska: “Of course. I… I, also went through a lot. I had children with Remina, who in turn had their own children, who then also had their own children… living for long is not something that can be overdone. I did not imagine I would live longer than my great-grandchildren. But…”

Then severing his words, Toska took another step walking up to Beatrice.

Toska: “Thanks to that, I made it in time for today… Beatrice-chan, won’t you please leave this place?”

Beatrice: “That’s…”

Toska: “This place, is far too lonesome for you to live in by yourself, all alone.”

Beatrice’s heart was staggeringly swayed, witnessing the wrinkled hand offered before her.

She had deemed her heart as frozen, having decayed the frailty to be swayed due to the stagnation that prevailed for long, but that had been fallacious. Her self was frail, brittle, akin to leaves swaying in nonchalant wind.

Beatrice: “B-Betty will…”

Whispering, Beatrice reached not for the offered hand but below her hip. By the footing of the sitting stepladder, was a single book veiled by her skirt.

Hauling it out in dismay, she ousted the book atop her lap for it and spread it open. Spreading it open, spreading it wide open, frantically attempting to pursue the words that shall hereinafter be inscribed…

“…”

—Before the blank-paged book void of anything ever recorded therein, Beatrice closed her eyes.

Toska: “Beatrice-chan?”

Beatrice: “I cannot, take your hand… no, I will not, in fact. I will not, I suppose.”

Juddering her head, Beatrice rejected Toska’s hand, senescent over a century.

Upon hearing so, Toska widened his eyes. However, his focus immediately rebounded with a “Why”.

Identically valorously as the day he had gripped the sword before the Dragon.

This gallantry of the hero, unchanging despite the elapse of a prolonged period since, seemed dazzling to her.

Beatrice: “Betty, was entrusted this archive by Mother, in fact. This is an exceedingly important, profoundly significant task, I suppose. Betty can never do something, as to abandon it, in fact!”

Toska: “But, it’s already been… it’s already been over a hundred years! Time until someone made children, those children had children, and even their children died! During all this time, you were all alone!”

Beatrice: “This is Betty’s mission, I suppose! Betty’s meaning, for being born in fact!”

Taking another step ahead, Toska attempted to get close to her so that he could reach her hand. Beatrice halted him, with a hand other than the one the book was set atop.

His aged legs paused as though his path was weaved closed, and instead upsurged a wind.

Wind to drive away any parties that threatened the peace of the archive, as the librarian that guarded the Forbidden Archive.

Beatrice: “Return I suppose, Toska. Live your last moments surrounded by your children and grandchildren, in fact.”

Toska: “—Beatrice-chan!”

Beatrice: “…Thank you, for remembering, I suppose. This suffices, as your repayment of the debt.”

Placing a hand other than the one outstretched onto her chest, Beatrice smiled.

Many people apprised her, that she was not honest. Everyone saw through Beatrice’s sighs, but this time alone did she wish to lie convincingly.

In her life of about a hundred and forty years, for the first time, Beatrice wished to be a genius at lying.

"…"

Expelled out of the room, the aged Toska straggled on the hallway, gazing up to the ceiling.

A building precisely identical to the Palace of the Witch he had once seen—however, time had passed, things differed from back then. His self had changed, the world had changed, anything and everything had changed.

Toska: "Yet, you haven't changed at all since then…"

His eyes moistening from vexation, the grandsire clenched the overlong thirst of his cheeks with tears.

How long had it been, since he had cried like this. —Never could he forget. He had previously cried, when he heard of his elder brother's demise. The man who cried not even when he bid farewell to his wife, his children, his grandchildren, now let fall tears.

He could not reach. His self was insufficient. Was he too late. Or, was he too early.

Purely, his self had not been the one. He could not become her, her kind self's, Awaited One.

Toska: "Someone…"

Someone. Anyone. —No, the one who was utmost kind in the entire world.

Someone, please save that kindhearted girl. Please, bury the solitude she had lived.

If this is the Palace of the Witch reconstructed, and if she is the proxy of the Witch, I shall wish until my heart scorches.

Toska: "Someone, please save her… She is, my, savior."

—At the end of his life, the grandsire wept. Wishing for her happiness, he kept crying.

—He kept on crying.

???: “—No good, huh.”

The silhouette watching the grandsire shed tears from the corner of the hallway, sighed so.

One glance at his state was enough to discern his failure. Having hoped that if it’s him, then he might be able to take the girl out of the Forbidden Archive, but it all fell in vain.

???: “Reminiscences dating prior to a hundred and thirty years ago, miiiiight’ve been too slender a thread to rely on.”

Knocking the temple of his forehead with a finger, he recalled the olden, faraway, distant days.

Having swapped bodies thrice now, hence had increased memories he could no longer recollect. However, those days in the Sanctuary shan’t grow dim, never could he forget either his emotions or his regrets.

However, that was his personal circumstance. —He could not possibly let her get involved within, he believed.

???: “But, Beatrice… you will also uphold your promise with Teacher, yes.”

The black books left by the Witch to the two of daughter and pupil—that book which indicated its owner’s future, was the solitary possibility for him, and befittingly his guide to a demonic conclusion.

In order to realize his purpose, it was necessary for him to renounce being human.

Therefore, his self renounced being human, and initiated deeds with the resignation of falling into the pits of hell.

However, at least before that, he wished to keep solely one person, solely her away in safety, but…

???: “Not everything goes well, isn’t it, Teacher. At least… at least, the future that shall fittingly arrive, those final moments, for her to welcome them with full contentment, I pray.”

The Witch who continued to grant the wishes of people, her pupil enunciated a prayer.

Upon the fair cheeks to offer this prayer, his wish trickled down in the shape of a singular warm droplet.

—The grandsire who tied together an old bond, and a kindred soul who relinquished his body to the clownery of fate, shed tears.

Unbeknownst of such happenings beyond the doors closed, Beatrice slowly lowered her hand.

The book atop her knees was an unchanging white, indicating naught of her future.

Beatrice: “…But, one day.”

One day for sure, one day for certain, one day for absolute, will arrive the time letters shall be scrawled upon these blank, white pages.

They whom her mother told her to await, shall arrive seeking the knowledge of the archive entrusted to her by her mother, before the Spirit whose mission was to devote her all for her mother.

Beatrice: “Mother, Bubby, Juice, Toska, Roswaal, Ryuzu…”

Amidst the days she lived for long, she whispered the names possessing magnitude within her heart. Ache constricted her chest upon the whisper of a single name, hugging the girthy black book into the same chest, the girl cast her gaze down.

Someone cool would be nice. Knowledgeable, well educated, elegant in conduct. A master in all kinds of martial arts upon wielding a sword, someone who rumbled heaven and earth upon using magic, it’d be nice if a superhuman like that were to be They.

And, if that was overambitious, then…

Beatrice: “—I’d be happy, if it were to be someone kind, in fact.”

One day, if there were to be someone who opened these doors and took her hand, then she wished for it to be someone kind.

Whilst wishing so, Beatrice faintly wailed, and cried all to herself.

END

Greed IF:
Accumulating Life in Another World From Zero
(Bluray)

Prologue I:
The Shield of the Sanctuary

—Roaring, he swung his claws toward the enemy surging from the environs.

???: “Gaahhhh—!!”

Their soft bodies burst open upon getting ensnared in his claws, his field of vision dyed with blood of a brilliant crimson hue.

The sensation of robbing the life of a living creature, despite being accustomed to it, could have never been enjoyable. Though he felt the hunting instincts seated within him galvanize, it was far from indulgence.

However, he immersed himself during these moments, forgetting said value of life and virtues.

If not, he shall be swallowed by the enemy—no, by the fiendish, multitudinous “Appetite” advancing from every direction, and fail to hold fast to even his own life.

???: “Shiiihk!”

A wrathful bellow, swinging his claws with no set aim, unleashing kicks. He still hit. It hit them. Ahead of his arms, by his shins, rebounded the dull sensation of shattering the bones of a tiny being.

Nauseating. However, forsaking all sentimentality, he bared his fangs in enmity, losing himself.

???: “…”

He was in a wrought state. For as long as time permitted, he had tormented his own body with pain.

Weakness was a sin. His self, had once lost what he held close to his heart due to this sin. Neither was he able to grasp an opportunity to never release what he cherished. That was why, for when an identical opportunity returned, or in order to not lose anything more, he sought the utmost of limits.

He could not, render those days futile. His self, was no longer his weak self. In order to prove that, sojourning an emotion akin to vomiting blood, he smashed, incised, tore apart the tiny lives.

The dusky forest of the night was tainted with blood. He felt the volume of this flowing blood, to be the fruits of the days he had accreted—

???: "—Urgh."

A sharp ache running through, his right calf burst open by scorching heat.

Look there and the fangs of a white ball of fur had been wolfing his leg, severing the flesh with not an instant's worth of vacillation. He gnashed his molars and swung his right arm down like a sword, slaughtering the ball of fur into two slices.

However, he could not end this spar out of agony. In spite of robbing the life of the enemy, he had lost the firm support of his leg. Curtailment of mobility, in this battlefield, meant immediately shortening the distance to Death.

—Death, the instant he focused on that word, shivers ran through his entire frame.

???: "—This ain't, no goddamn joke!!"

He did not want to think of these shivers as fear or dismay.

Raising his voice as though repudiating his weak self and shoving aside the thoughts coming to his mind, he elevated his wounded right leg overhead and energetically pounded it into the ground.

That moment, an immense power was invoked below his feet, and the soil and bare earth were vigorously overturned.

Entire hordes of fluffballs within five meters of his tiptoes were all toppled by the rising ground, many dozens of them giving rise to death wails as their bodies were crushed and perished.

???: “Now—”

???: “—Kyuuuhn.”

However, he was bestowed not even the time to be elated with triumph. Paying no heed to the entombing of dozens of their fellow comrades in the horde, the enemy’s fervor was not withered by even an atom. —No, rather than wither, saying it had augmented would also be appreciable. But, he was unable to identify any change in the horde charging towards his side.

The advancing white fluffballs, felt no rage, turmoil, or anything for that matter toward their comrades’ deaths. With simply a blazing glimmer conceived in their eyes, befitting of fulfilling the desires of the individual, they clattered their fangs.

Clanging, clanking, clunking, clinking, an infinite harmony of the sound of devouring life, abrading his spirit.

???: “—~hk.”

Faintly clearing his throat, he pounded his legs whilst seeking to fall back. What would happen should he fall back now. By falling back, and bracing his stance, just want would that amount to—

???: “—I suppose by now, you must’ve gotten how crazy the enemy is, right, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “—~hk! Shut yer mouth! Shut the hell up ~hk!”

He reflexively yelled back at the voice abruptly thrown at him from behind.

Lit with the flame of rebelliousness was the fighting spirit momentarily yielding to reason, subsequently repelling the surging vanguard of furballs with a barrage of fists, as by the spray of blood the forest was yet again tinted. Tinted. Tinted—.

???: “That amounts to nothing but buying time. They need to be dealt with from the source.”

Garfiel: “For the last goddamn time, I’m tellin’ ya ta shut the hell up! I ain’t listenin’ to yer directions, ya bastard!”

Upon getting preached by a visage indicating knowledge and experience, he howled back that nobody shall lend their ears to his say. Even should that advice hold accurate, he could never harbor the faith of entrusting his life to the one who offered the advice.

Never could he ever do so, at the very least, for the black haired youth spectating the battle from behind.

Garfiel: “—Piece of shit.”

With the gaze verging onto a sigh at his back, the battle with the white furballs resumed.

What he bore for the onlooker youth standing in the rear was distrust, and a sense of defeat excoriating his chest which he did not wish to admit. The resentment he directed towards his own self for having his state become per the youth’s anticipation, per his words, a maelstrom of rage.

—The crisis imminent upon the Sanctuary, one of the Three Great Witchbeasts, was something beyond what his hands could possibly manage.

Repudiating such seeming folly, he had entered the subjugation paying no heed.

However, the slaves of ceaselessly gushing “Appetite”, their overwhelming numbers and ruthlessness had waged a war of attrition as though sneering at his recklessness.

His wounds were deep. The Divine Protection of Earth Spirits that dwelled within his body accorded strength but could not heal wounds. He possessed no time, to use healing magic. Nor did he possess any comrades who would buy said time, nor did he possess any means to keep the enemy away.

He was alone. He was lonely. And that was something wished for by nobody but him.

That should he alone be strong, he would be able to protect everything till the very end. In order to make that childish illusion into reality, he had continued to train these fangs, these claws, this body.

And yet, and yet, and yet—

???: “It’s beyond you to be able to do everything alone, Garfiel.”

Delegating even the rage to retort with a “Shut up” into his fangs, he smote the enemies before him.

Their soft bodies shattered, flowers of blood blossomed before his eyes. Eating the fluffball now a slice of meat, another fluffball approached. The fluffballs he had assuredly crushed quavered, and multiplied into two like magic.

In an identical vein, the more he crushed the fluffballs, the more they multiplied. No matter how much he abated them, diminished them, they shan’t decrease.

Despair, distended within his chest. It felt as though it was being pronounced for him, that the entirety of the days he had spent until now had been futile, that illusions remained nothing but illusions.

—Warm tears of bitterness cascaded down his eyes, as he pierced them with his quivering fangs, and tore their flesh apart.

Chapter I:
Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch

1

???: "—Stay put right here. Do that, 'n I won't be makin' ya suffer."

Dealt by the intemperate voice, Natsuki Subaru realized his error.

Limbs tied, mouth gagged, he was thrown upon the solid, chilly floor.

Having been blindfolded so courteously, he could gather zero information from his vision. However, vision was not necessary for him to know which location in the Sanctuary this was.

For this was not the first time he had been restrained and confined in the ruins in this manner.

Subaru: "~~hk! ~~hk."

Twisting his body, he became desperate to unfasten the constraints on his limbs, but they seemed not to come loose even in the slightest.

On the other hand, he was feeling surprised by the unexpected meticulousness of the offender since it was serving to strangle his own neck. Right now he wished to implore said person to behave more wildly, the way he ordinarily conducted himself.

Anyhow—since things had come down to this, there was not much left Subaru could do.

There was no scenario of him breaking out with his own strength and the pattern of support arriving depends on preparation. And this time, Subaru had not laid the groundwork for said support to arrive.

Thus, Subaru did not possess the means to escape from here.

Subaru: “~~hk! ~~hk.”

However, Subaru had not become so resigned as to give up and think nothing can be done.

Hands tied behind his back, he twisted his body, attempting to sever the rope by rubbing it against the ground. With half hearted resolve, worrying for his own body, making a bunch of scratches was the best he could do.

Had he wielded the guts to whittle down his own flesh, or even his bones, perhaps he would have been able to escape from these constraints.

However—

???: “…”

Atop the floor, as Subaru danced like a caterpillar, the sensation of a tiny hand pin him down.

It was obvious that this was the person who had confined Subaru—Garfiel’s cooperator, and clearly a being exactly identical to Ryuzu.

An existence who could be called, without hesitation, a “duplicate”.

Puppets who took the form of Ryuzu, who simply abided by Garfiel, devoid of any will. It saw to the confined Subaru’s everyday necessities, simultaneously fulfilling the duty of surveilling him.

Even if his constraints were to come loose, then would come the issue of her—no, them? Should he be discovered by them, it would be short lived joy. He would immediately be restrained again, with no hope to escape. Likely, this would happen even if he were to escape the constraints with the resolve to whittle down his own limbs.

—In other words, this conclusion was an inevitable one.

Subaru: “—?”

The time of being given food by a mute duplicate and having his excrements disposed of continued for a number of days.

During meal time, when the gag would be removed, he believed there might be a chance for a counter attack. But that too, was easily restrained by small hands of the duplicate.

In order to escape, he desperately thought up his next plan, when…

—In that moment he began to hear grinding and a dissonance that called out to his instinct.

Subaru: "—~hk."

Guessing the identity of those sounds, anxiety and nervousness sprinted through his entire frame.

That which initially had been few in numbers, gradually built up their numbers and formed hordes, and was drawing near. No point in shrinking himself up and hiding somewhere. Their olfaction—the ability to sniff out the mana stockpiled by living beings was remarkable, and had converged as their singular purpose.

Namely, the purpose of utterly eating away their prey, and satisfying their own "Starvation".

Subaru: "~~hk!"

Limbs bound, blindfolded, and mouth gagged, he crawled on the floor akin to a caterpillar.

Bending his body back and forth, pulling the muscles within his body, unafraid of tearing them, he attempted to run away. Running away, running away, running away, dwelling not on what lies ahead. Simply running away, however—

Subaru: "~~hk, ~~hk?!"

He could not get away at literal crawling speeds.

Caught up by the prancing predators, Subaru's legs were eaten by a scorching like pain. In a matter of mere seconds, he felt the restraints of his legs he had so attempted to escape from come undone, but that gave him no delight.

It was meaningless, since along with the constraints of his legs, all up to Subaru’s knees had also disappeared.

He attempted to screech, but his mouth gag did not permit it. A groan as though vomiting blood in agony, the reason he managed to vocalize that was because the devouring fangs had crunched apart a section of his throat and opened a hole.

It was a shriek lasting but a moment, as soon a tiny creature penetrated into his body from the wound in his throat. One, two, at any rate, an infinite number of them, Natsuki Subaru was devoured from the inside and out.

Couldn’t make it in time, never did any such regrets graze past his mind.

Solely pain. The sense of loss from losing himself dyed his thoughts in murky black.

Die, he will die. If he was going to die, then he wished to die faster. His hands freed, he attempted to kill himself.

His hands were eaten from the fingers. He’s dead. Already, dead dead, dead dead dead dead dead de—

2

—His vision cleared, and Natsuki Subaru was standing beneath an open sky.

Subaru: “…”

A grassland of verdant emerald stretched as far as the eye could see.

A refreshing breeze jolted the blooms, a calm spectacle contrary to any boisterousness or savagery. The grassland resumed till beyond the horizon, making him almost hallucinate that this tranquility shall persist forever.

Narrowing his eyes from the radiance of this scene, Subaru turned back with a long sigh.

Ahead of his gaze was a slightly elevated hillock. Atop the hillock positioned were a white parasol and a table, seeming to meld into the beautiful ambience of the grassland.

Setting foot on the hillock, he leisurely climbed the slope. Atop the table, whose silhouette gradually defined itself, was a cup of black tea, steam rising from it. The sweet fragrance, mingled in the gentle breeze, was that of the tea and tea cakes that went along with it.

Different tea cakes were arranged for each of his visits. Surprisingly faithful, he thought in admiration.

Though above all, he was aware that both of those things were all make-believe that appeared with a snap of the tea party host's fingers.

Anyhow—

Subaru: "Tch."

Two chairs were placed around the table, both vacant.

Regardless of the invited guest, the absence of the host who invited him had Subaru furrowing his brows as he clicked his tongue whilst guessing what it was that she sought.

Afterwards, he took the cup atop the table in his hand, and bravely carried it to his lips. And, entwining the steaming amber fluid with his tongue, he quickly swallowed it.

Gulping in succession, he drank the cup's content—

Subaru: "—Oe~e~e~egh!!"

???: "Wait wait wait?!"

He vehemently spat out the black tea he just drank on that very spot.

Hot tea dripping from his mouth and nose, Subaru's violent coughs made someone shout with a flustered, overturned voice.

???: "Surely this is quite rude?! To vomit tea someone had prepared for you right there immediately after drinking it, that is too much!"

Subaru: "Cough, cough… s-sorry. It wasn't on purp… oe~e~egh."

???: "Even if not on purpose, it does not make one feel particularly good! To begin with, you need not drink my tea in such a deteriorated condition…"

Subaru: "But, you wouldn't have shown up if I hadn't done that…"

Calming his regurgitation, breaths hoarse, Subaru's words plunged the person into silence. Wiping his mouth and eyes with his sleeve, Subaru viewed the person immediately ahead.

Subaru: "…"

Ahead was a gorgeous young lady, her frame consisting solely of a dichromatic white and black.

White hair as though achromatized of saturation, black eyes as though ensnarling all shadows in the world, and a jet-black dress garbing her slender, supple figure. Proprietor of an appearance that befitted her the description of a belle from the heavens, and also a succubus or a devil—

Subaru: "—Echidna."

Her name called by the feebly breathing Subaru, the young lady—Echidna straitened her eyes.

She knitted her well-defined eyebrows, and slowly shook her head,

Echidna: "It does make me happy that you are so sincerely bearing to fulfill your promise to me, but… Assuming from your state, it appears you died in quite a horrific fashion this time as well."

Subaru: "…I've told you before. There's no such thing as an easy way to die."

Echidna: “I suppose so. That was a verbal gaffe on my part. I do wish to accord with your thinking as much as possible, but… this alone is something I lack personal experience in, you see.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru grit his teeth, refraining from having a sour expression, to whose words Echidna shrugged and gently caressed Subaru’s back with a hand.

Quite the unusual concern, he reckoned, but being grateful for it, he spoke nothing. Simply resuming his violent coughs for a minute, he remained knelt on the ground until he composed himself.

Some time later, Subaru’s mind and body calmed down at last.

The shock of slaughter from just before somewhat faded, it felt as though Natsuki Subaru’s torn and mutilated soul was returning to its original form.

Albeit he was aware, that this regeneration was nothing more than a patchy, shoddy one.

Subaru: “…Sorry. I’ve finally calmed down.”

Echidna: “Is that so. I am glad. Now then, let me arrange for a second cup of tea…”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “I simply jest, you know. I have received your good faith. Hence, I shall not be insistent. Though this is not really any meaningless entertainment either, you see.”

Halting the hand caressing his spine, Echidna stood up and snapped her fingers.

That very instant, the tea Subaru had violently thrown up, along with the soiled tea cakes and table, all vanished, and entirely new ones reappeared in their stead. As though a dream or illusion—no, in reality, that was the kind of place this was, so these events were truly worthy of being called wondrous.

Echidna: “Now then.”

Echidna then placed her hips on the seat positioned on the other side of the table. Placing both of her elbows atop the table, and propping up her chin, her upturned eyes gave a warm reception to Subaru.

Conjecturing what she sought from her gaze, Subaru sighed.

Subaru: “I know, you don’t need to tell me.”

With that answer, Subaru sat on the chair opposite to the Witch and gazed at the cup of tea which had reappeared just like the tea cakes, and helplessly took it to his lips.

Watching this, Echidna faintly blushed and smiled.

Echidna: “Hm, very well. It makes me happy you have become significantly acquiescent, Natsuki Subaru.”

Subaru: “…Why do you wish to make me drink your bodily fluids this much, wicked Witch.”

Whilst seeing the carefree Echidna’s smile, Subaru distorted his lips, feeling something repugnant instead of the taste of flavorless, odorless tea.

This was a dream world built in the graveyard of her, of the Witch of Greed—the Witch who had already expired took form beyond death, a tea party incapable of existing in reality.

Originally improbable, the solitary space materializing the tryst of the Witch and her contractor.

3

—Subaru was not particularly knowledgeable regarding the Witch of Greed.

Already expired, a young lady who was supposed to have died four hundred years ago. One of the seven Witches possessing immense might, a personage purporting to be the thirst for knowledge incarnate.

All of this was sufficient to raise eyebrows, but Subaru who stood before the genuine entity could not think of any reason to simply laugh it off.

As a matter of fact, the tea party where Subaru and Echidna met was held in her graveyard located inside the Sanctuary, and that she was enjoying this liberty after her death was proof of her might. He had met the other five Witches, but she even had the power to tether the souls of the deceased.

On top of that, there existed no margin of doubt in her being the thirst for knowledge incarnate, a clod of inquisitiveness.

After all, if not so—

Echidna: "—To propose a Contract to you and risk being scowled at by that thing, is not exactly a stunt that can be pulled off, is it?"

Subaru: "…I'm astounded. You're really gonna say that yourself."

Echidna: "It is not anything embarrassing or as such, after all. Rather, in order to have a deeper understanding of you I shall not keep away from all hazards; will this not make for a gallant maidenly appeal?"

Subaru: "It'll just give more of the impression that I've got some crazy person's eyes on me though, you know?"

Hearing the wry faced Subaru's response, Echidna pouted.

A terribly beguiling attitude, but there was nothing dishonest about her say. In truth, what Subaru and Echidna were walking over, was a bridge of risking their lives altogether.

A tightrope walk risking life and death in order to not collide with the outrage of the being who, in some kind, was deemed as the utmost fearsome existence in this world—

Echidna: "You need not be afraid anymore. To the utmost, the Contract is a secret pass tied between me and you. Even should the opponent be a Witch, our surreptitious meeting shall remain unnoticed.”

Subaru: “Can you stop going out of your way and speaking in this suspicious way please? It drains me.”

Echidna: “A girl is going so far as to say all this, and yet you have this attitude, I cannot say I approve of it…”

Echidna implored in displeasure, holding her cup to her mouth. But unfortunately, he had no time to lend an ear to any unserious comments of hers.

This tea party was not an occurrence of reality. Subaru’s body present in this location, Echidna’s existence before his eyes, the tea and tea cakes, from the table to the grassland, it was all make-believe. Outside of the tea party in the graveyard, Natsuki Subaru’s body was still lying on the chilly floor.

Still collapsed by Emilia’s side, who was tormented with nightmares after challenging the Trial.

And—

Subaru: “As long as I don’t find a way to break this deadlock, neither Emilia, nor will anyone else be saved.”

Echidna: “I will say this, you need not fret over the time passed here too much, you know? In accordance with your knowledge, this is a dream world of my creation… self-aware make-believe. Even if you were to spend a hundred years here, merely a scant amount of time would have passed outside.”

Subaru: “You make me shudder. No way in hell I’m spending a hundred years here.”

Echidna: “Oh, how callous. Even when I have already been here for nearly four hundred years.”

Accreting a radical precedent atop a radical proposition, Echidna smiled at Subaru.

It might have been quite an attractive proposal from her perspective, but Subaru's answer earlier was truly genuine. Spending a hundred years here would be outrageous.

—Even if, going forward, Subaru was to spend enough time with Echidna to rival that figure.

Echidna: "—Now then, you do not seem to enjoy small talk with me here anyways, so let us delve into the main issue."

Subaru: "…"

Subaru narrowed his eyes as Echidna set the cup down and clapped her hands before her chest.

Just before Subaru's irritation verged onto its peak, the Witch's observational perceptivity saw through it, making him feel the definite influence of her learning and bittering his mood.

However, Echidna seemed to enjoy even this mental state of Subaru's,

Echidna: "Let me get straight to the point, in what manner did you die this time?"

A candid enquiry devoid of even a speck of considerateness was hurled at him.

Subaru: "…I'm telling you every time, but you've gotta put it in a nicer way."

Echidna: "Oh? Every time? How very intriguing. For in accordance with my cognizance, this is the first time I have asked you this question. If so, can it be inferred that I am receiving identical adjuration from you like this every time?"

Subaru: "That's…"

Echidna: "That's?"

Eyes glistening with inquisitiveness, Echidna reacted with a lean forward. Glaring at her, Subaru fumbled around the bottom of his neck.

And, pulling out a dusky crystal, he forcibly unfastened it from his neck.

Subaru: “Try asking yourself!”

Echidna: “Oop.”

Subaru domineeringly threw the dusky crystal atop the table. Rounding her large eyes, Echidna pleasantly picked it up with a “Let me see let me see” —

Echidna: “Myon myon myon myon myon…”

Touching it by her brows, her lips began to leak this suspicious note of efficacy.

In all honesty, it seemed nothing more than tomfoolery from Subaru’s standpoint. Above all, she would answer that she was being serious upon being questioned.

Subaru: “It’s supposed to be this formula that cannot be omitted in terms of magic, but… I’m goddamn sure that’s all bullshit.”

Echidna: “How upsetting for you to accuse myon myon of being lies, myon. This is a crucial rite, myon.”

Subaru: “You’re speaking your thoughts out loud. Are you really able to read its contents like this.”

Echidna: “Myon myon… do not worry. I can certainly read them. Phrasing it in your style, I suppose it feels like firmly downloading memories.”

Putting forward western words unused in this different world, Echidna ceded the dusky crystal from her forehead. Witnessing the intellectual glister dwelling in her black eyes, Subaru surmised she had attained her objective.

Echidna’s objective—it was to retrieve the memories of Subaru’s previous Return by Death from the crystal dangling down his neck.

That is to say—

Subaru: “In the dusk jewel, the proof of the Contract, accumulated are experiences identical to what all I did.”

Echidna: “And each time you return to the tea party, I succeed the Memories from you. What all you previously conversed with me, and what all experiences you underwent, I mean. Hm…”

Subaru: “What. Is there some defect in the Memories or something?”

Echidna: “No, they are perfect. However, you told me to ask myself, did you not? Once I actually investigate and explore the Memories like this, well well, this is quite astonishing.”

As Subaru sat puzzled, Echidna, smiling faintly, prefaced with a “I mean, is it not true?”,

Echidna: “As much as I could approximately affirm, this is the fifteenth time I have asked you the way you died… in other words, that is the amount of times you have accreted Death since exchanging the Contract with me.”

Articulating so, Echidna returned the dusky crystal atop the table. And, cast her enraptured pupils toward the jewel serving to slake her thirst for knowledge, and her contractor, Subaru.

Echidna: “…Indeed, you are an individual difficult to ever attain. It was correct to have exchanged vows with you.”

Subaru: “Ding dong, you lost points on my amiableness scale once again.”

Echidna: “Hu~h? Even when I am complimenting you, that is strange…”

If that was her way of complimenting, then what Echidna ought to learn foremost was how to communicate with others. Subaru stood in no position to say this about anyone, but he could hold his head high for being far better off than the monochromatic Witch before his eyes.

Subaru: “At the very least, this is no time to be rubbernecking at someone else’s life and death.”

Echidna: “What a mortifying way to put it. By no means am I gaining amusement from the situation of you accreting Death itself. Most of all…”

Subaru: “Most of all what. It’s not too enjoyable of a spectacle anyways or something?”

Echidna: “No, most of all—you and I no longer qualify as being “someone else” pertaining to each other in our relationship, you see.”

Gently tapering her eyelashes, Echidna lowered her pitch to whose words Subaru halted his breath.

Before his eyes, the white haired Witch directed a gaze at Subaru captivating enough to make one shiver, her black irises assuaged with a dubious gleam. Magical charm that made one involuntarily forbear to avert their eyes away from her’s.

His throat feeling parched, Subaru spontaneously gaped his mouth open, focusing on the numbness of his tongue. That was truly an acute manifestation of the sensation of “Enthrallment”.

And much to his vexation, Subaru possessed no means to refute Echidna’s words.

Because—

Echidna: “—You, accepted a Contract with me. A Contract that on your forlorn road of innumerable stumbles hereon, I, the Witch of Greed, shall chaperone you.”

Subaru: “You don’t need to tell me, I…”

Echidna: “Already know, you say? Splendid. Certainly, it seems I have previously had this identical conversation with you before. Mhm, it is present within the Memories as well. However…”

Adjourning her words, Echidna slanted forward.

Subaru was on his chair, petrified like a frog leered by a serpent. Touching Subaru's lips with a finger, Echidna then put her finger on her mouth.

Afterwards, in a beguiling display, Echidna lovingly caressed the finger that had felt his lips with her vermilion tongue.

Echidna: "Once again, this is the first time my present self touches on this topic with you. Therefore, I wish for you to close your eyes to some larks as part of the Contract."

Subaru: "…Should've properly documented the Contract's details, huh."

Echidna: "How unvarnished. But, that is precisely why you attract a special gaze from me. Oop, although what you attract are not my eyes alone…"

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Even I am hurt by an expression so appalled. As a young souled, singular maiden, you see."

Watching Subaru distort his lips, Echidna pouted and narrowed her eyes.

Young souled, this expression alone had plenty of substance to demur, but this conduct of Echidna's vanished her of her earlier bewitching ambience. The Witch showed a multitude of expressions even in this short interval, to opine which amongst those was her true face felt akin to grasping clouds.

—Or perhaps, this enigma too would be unravelled once he had been in fellowship with her for a long, long period.

Subaru: "…The succession of Memories is complete, yeah. Then, let me get to the topic. About this time's cause of death…"

Echidna: "How impetuous. Certainly, it seems you could not see what killed you because you had been blindfolded… but that fashion of death is patent, yes? The calamity that assails onto the Sanctuary, it is the Great Rabbit."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Drawn into the Great Rabbit's foray, your entire body was devoured. To be quite honest, even I felt powerless upon browsing through your Memories, what a miserable Death."

Receiving Echidna's merciless delineation, Subaru felt a gastric influx in his gut once again.

The fierce death that he recalled, it could not have been more than ten minutes since he had experienced it. Unlike how it would have been if he were to be with Emilia or Rem, spending time with Echidna would not heal his wounds.

Even now, the sensation of his defenseless self being gorged away from edges of his body had been incised into his soul with clarity.

Echidna: "It somehow feels like I am being subjected to a rather rude comparison?"

Subaru: "—. Stop with the jokes. You're the type of character who doesn't understand the human heart, aren't you. It's too late for you to be malcontent about however I may think of you in my mind to begin with."

Echidna: "If that is your liberty as an adolescent young man, then I am not opposed to it either."

Subaru attempted to varnish the situation over, feeling as though his mind had been peered into, to which Echidna straitened her eyes. With a single one of her slender fingers, she alluringly traced her body garbed in a black dress.

A devilish gesture suggesting rousing or seducing—

Subaru: "One hundred percent no."

Echidna: "It is quite upsetting to hear you say it with such certainty too~! Despite appearances, I was even said to be welcomed by the king of a country as his favorite mistress."

Subaru: "Well, it's not that king's fault since Emilia-tan wouldn't have been there four hundred years ago.”

Echidna: “You are quite churlish when it comes to me alone!”

Setting her hands on the table, the prior seductive ambience dwindled from Echidna. In all honesty, Echidna pleasantly rattling on would bear to be of greater help to him.

In the sense of ignoring the impact immediately followed by Return by Death or the ache of wounds engraved onto his soul, as well.

Subaru: “Anyhow, I don’t object to the Great Rabbit being the cause of death. But the thing is, that’s the indirect cause of death. The direct cause of death is not the hare, but lies somewhere else. It’s—”

Echidna: “—Garfiel, right?”

Subaru: “…Right.”

Subaru jerked his chin upon Echidna’s brisk, complicit response.

Focusing solely on the main issue and allowing no disruptions during the interlude in between, this Witch was dreadfully concise and brisk.

Testament of her peerless acumen, perspicacity, and most of all, wisdom, but perhaps it was for this reason did their conversations stray off to an infinite extent.

Anyhow—

Subaru: “The reason he perceives me as a hazard is because of the Witch’s scent accumulating due to Return by Death. If it’s always going to be proportional to the count of death, then…”

Echidna: “There exist no means to win the confidence of a being who can pick the scent of Miasma.”

Subaru: “…That’s what I’m worried about. What do you say.”

Pronouncing so, Subaru sought the Witch’s stance on the Witch’s Miasma.

Upon each repetition of Return by Death, Garfiel's attitude quickly altered—now fixed on by utter hostility, the situation was such that he had himself expressed the reason itself.

With the reason for his hostility established, he wished to believe he could change their relationship for the better by removing that facet, but—

Subaru: "Does this scent last permanently upon getting tinged with it? If that's the case, then I'll be causing a good deal of distress to Rem once she's opened her eyes."

Echidna: "Concern that truly befits you, but how about you fear for the nearer future? To begin with, the Oni Clan is a race created such that they are capable of detecting Miasma, so even upon being placed in a distressing plight due to that, I suppose there is no choice but to give up on it by regarding it as an inborn quality of the race."

Subaru: "You said something kinda impossible to overlook, but then that'll mean I'll have to live my whole life with Rem thinking of me as stinky, huh."

Echidna: "Indeed, my deepest condolences… I am joking. Please do not glare at me like that."

Once he glared at Echidna who went astray with unserious answers, the Witch shrugged her shoulders.

Echidna: "Your fear is needless. The Miasma is not overflowing from your own Od. It is but a scent in the end… as time goes on, it will fade and ultimately vanish. Provided it will need copious time for someone tinged to not smell anymore."

Subaru: "Copious time… you aren't exactly talking about a couple of days now are you?"

Echidna: "Considering your density, I would say think of weeks or months. Also, this is something I do not wish to say since you will likely get angry at me, but…"

Subaru: "…I'll get angry if you stop there anyways, so accept it and say it.”

One eye shut, a remark whilst peeking into Subaru’s mood.

Correlative bitterness of not wanting to say because of his foreseeable reaction, but also the inquisitiveness of seeing how Subaru would react.

The idiosyncrasy of the Witch of Greed seemed to be quite the nuisance.

Putting these contemplations of Subaru’s aside, Echidna pointed to the dusky crystal atop the table with a “Well then, allow me to”,

Echidna: “As I previously mentioned, the optimal way of making the Miasma fade is the passage of time. But, since it is simply scent, it is necessary to ward away from the odor’s origin…”

Subaru: “Yeah. So?”

Echidna: “You are my contractor, yes? Even should the Authority not be utilized, you cannot elude my Miasma, so there may never be a day when it fades away.”

Subaru: “In other words, the reason why I stink right now is also because of you…!”

Subaru glanced at his palm once again, eyes dilated. Echidna sulked, stating “That is quite an abashed way to put it”, but this was an unanticipated demerit.

Of course, with him sharing the truth of Return by Death and consulting for a way to abscond from this impasse in their relationship, one could say Echidna was an ally difficult to ever attain.

However, in terms of exclusively the Sanctuary, this relationship’s drawbacks were indisputable.

Subaru: “Echidna’s Contract, and Return by Death’s count… no matter which, if the scent won’t disappear then I’ll never be able to connect with Garfiel. This is pretty bad.”

Echidna: “Certainly, within a restricted span of time, to be shadowed by Garfiel who is far more adroit than you can be called the worst possible environment.”

Subaru: “Sounds so insincere… you better not have known what happens, yeah?”

Echidna: “What do you mean, what happens?”

Echidna tilted her head as Subaru glared at her, teeth gritted in rage. From her black pupils framed with white eyelashes, he could not infer her true motive veiled beneath conundrums. However, it had now already been fifteen times—fifteen times had Subaru accreted Death ever since he contracted with Echidna.

Subaru: “Couldn’t you have given me advice about the problem posed by the Witch’s scent earlier. Had you done that, then Garfiel could’ve been countered while the scent was still weak…”

Echidna: “Ah, so that is what you mean. Certainly, pertaining to the Miasma shrouding you, I could have delineated it at an earlier stage. Regardless, it was still too late. Prior to entering into a Contract with me, you already reeked enough to buy the opponent’s distrust.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “A being who can pick the scent of Miasma surely would not have pardoned you.”

Arms crossed over her chest, Echidna replied whilst intercepting Subaru’s gaze.

Boldly riposted, Subaru failed to immediately refute. Her words could not be fully trusted, but he possessed no basis to allege lies or mendacity.

Once he was told it was too late to do something about his stench, he could not do anything but put his faith in it.

However, amidst an outwardly fruitless exchange, Subaru saw a faint glimmer of hope.

That was—

Subaru: “Considering your fishy phrasing, it seems my guess wasn’t pointless either.”

Echidna: “Fishy… well, I suppose when anyone is pointed out something about a subject as delicate as their body odor, they would feel somewhat discomfited. Most of all, I hardly have any at all. I did not have much body odor when I was alive, and in this place, a dream after my death, I can freely…”

Subaru: “I don’t care if you smell like flowers or sewage. That’s not what I’m talking about. —You’ve been repeating “A being who can pick the scent of Miasma” since earlier, haven’t you?”

Echidna: “…”

Subaru’s identification had Echidna raise a single one of her brows, wordless.

For the Witch to pause and incline herself to listen was somewhat of proof that Subaru was not off the mark.

That as basis, Subaru grazed his jaw with a finger,

Subaru: “An unusual phrase. Of course, here onwards, Return by Death… though I don’t want to rely on it much, but if I’m going to use it then we can’t do away with the problem of me and the scent. So, it’s also possible you may have been looking at it from the perception of someone looking at the distant future, but…”

Echidna: “Hm. That is fine, resume.”

Subaru: “From what you said, our focus to the utmost is the Sanctuary. Yet, why are you using this discursive phrase instead of just saying Garfiel?”

Going further, Echidna had divulged Garfiel’s name itself.

Yet she was expressly drawing a distinction between Garfiel and “A being who can pick the scent of Miasma”.

Its true connotation was—

Echidna: "—You definitely take notice of specifics. Mhm, admirable."

Subaru: "…I knew it, caught red-handed."

Echidna: "Your intuition regarding my fixation was correct, that is all. I certainly was deliberately drawing a distinction between a being who can pick the scent of Miasma and Garfiel. However, is it not a matter of course?"

A faint smile, Echidna resumed with a "After all" whilst setting her elbows on the table, chin propped in her hands,

Echidna: "The Miasma shrouding you, the one who can pick its scent is not Garfiel. It is someone else."

She pleasantly verbalized, unreservedly and lost of any diffidence.

4

Subaru: "…"

Subaru narrowed his eyes in response to what Echidna had said, an air of danger about it.

Deep inside his mind, he felt a certain sort of conviction, like he had muttered the phrase "I knew it".

Echidna: "From the start, I was talking about someone else. So, naturally, I call them differently and differentiate between them. I mean, my thinking here should not be that surprising, no?"

Echidna spoke with an air of composure, like she was talking about the most obvious thing in the world. Subaru frowned in response to her matter-of-fact way of putting it, gawking at her in disbelief.

Subaru: "I'd originally been suspecting that possibility. If he could actually smell the Witch's Lingering Scent, his attitude would've gone to shit right after I Returned by Death and exited the graveyard."

Echidna: “And yet, even when you, drenched in all the more Miasma after returning while accreting so many Deaths, leave the graveyard with your beloved girl, the attitude of Garfiel, who awaits you there, does not change. Meaning…”

Subaru: “Right there and then, he can’t perceive my smell. That’s why his attitude doesn’t change.”

Echidna: “Correct.”

She snapped her fingers and confirmed Subaru’s conclusion.

She was acting like she was his classroom teacher or mentor, but he ignored his irritation towards that currently. Right now, it was more important for Subaru to have his suspicions confirmed.

There was someone out there, separate from Garfiel, who could smell the Witch’s Miasma that Subaru was clad in. In other words, the hostility Garfiel felt towards him was down to this certain someone putting these ideas into his head.

And, he needed not trouble himself over who the candidate for this someone was.

Echidna: “You also must have had an idea all this time, right? Unless you have turned your eyes away from it.”

Subaru: “…Ryuzu-san, for sure.”

Every single time, Echidna’s knack for conversation would come along and block Subaru’s escape. Her skill of forcing Subaru to look ahead was a vector unlike that of Rem’s.

Compared to Rem, she was not as unsparing, but regardless, it was detestable.

Subaru: “Plus, not as kind, the hue’s darker, and it’s bitter in taste…”

Echidna: “I do not suppose I am being badmouthed, am I?”

Ignoring the words of the surprised Echidna, Subaru wrinkled the middle of his forehead.

Thinking about people that were able to smell the Witch's Lingering Scent who would have given Garfiel that information, by process of elimination, it could only have been Ryuzu.

Rem also had that ability, but by now, it was obvious to Subaru that her older sister did not.

In the first place, the allies of Emilia like Ram and Roswaal had no reason to be hostile towards him.

Lastly, to think of the most unexpected, perhaps Otto was somehow able to smell the Witch's Lingering Scent, but—

Subaru: "…He was killed right in front of my very eyes."

Just by recalling it, it became hard to breathe, but Otto had been an absolute idiot that had thrown his own life away for Subaru, someone he had known for such a short period of time. Therefore, he was most definitely not the mastermind behind this.

Subaru: "Now that I think about it, I was held captive by Ryuzu-san and Garfiel in the past."

That had been a collaborative effort of the both of them, but he had thought the main offender had been Garfiel. He had been mistaken. —The main offender had been Ryuzu, and Garfiel was only a collaborator.

And, the reason Ryuzu took these actions was—

Subaru: "Because she smelled the Witch's Lingering Scent."

Echidna: "She tattled that to Garfiel, whom she trusts. Believing his grandma's words in a heartbeat, Garfiel's behavior instantaneously changed, and he bared his fangs at you. Quite literally∼."

Subaru: "…"

While wagging her finger, Echidna confirmed Subaru's deduction.

With that explanation, the storm whirling inside Subaru had dissipated. But, without giving him a pause, black clouds began to appear inside his heart once more. Making their way through to his expression, Echidna tilted her head with an “Oh”

Echidna: “Your expression is quite stressed, perhaps there is something you wish to say to me?”

Subaru: “Of course there is! From how you talked earlier, you knew my real enemy was Ryuzu-san this entire time, didn’t you! And yet…”

Echidna: “Why did I not say anything, huh. It is reasonable that you would get angry, but for what it is worth, I had a reason. I do not think it is too late for me to say it?”

Subaru: “—Tsk, what is it?”

Echidna’s finger brushed against Subaru’s forehead as he gritted his teeth. Subaru took a listening posture, though his vigor was not dampened by the touch of the slender finger.

With her finger still pressed to Subaru’s forehead, Echidna prefaced her question with “Listen?”,

Echidna: “I mentioned earlier the problem with the Miasma surrounding you, did I not? As long as you have a Contract with me, the Miasma will never fade from you. Every time you use your Authority, the Miasma grows stronger and stronger, and it becomes impossible to make up for the impression you make on them.”

Subaru: “…Ah, about that huh. What does that have to do with you not telling me anything?”

Echidna: “You are quite impatient. In other words, no matter what I said, their impression of you would not change… I want you to understand that it is a given.”

While roundabout, this was her crude explanation to justify her decision.

Even so, while her finger was still pressed to his forehead, without saying anything, Subaru urged Echidna to continue. If she kept spitting excuses, he might have changed the way he viewed his Contract with her.

Echidna: “—That, is extremely unsatisfactory for me.”

Echidna replied to his innermost thoughts, prompting Subaru to raise his eyebrows.

Smiling at Subaru’s reaction, Echidna shrugged while saying “It’s not a complicated matter”.

Echidna: “As a basic premise, the other party… For convenience, let us call them Ryuzu. That negative impression you left cannot be changed. As such, If she remains your enemy, Garfiel’s aggression cannot be avoided… are we clear on that?”

Subaru: “…Continue.”

Echidna: “On the other hand… if Ryuzu was no longer your enemy, Garfiel’s aggression towards you would no longer be an issue, that is what I am saying.”

Echidna briefly summarized the problem as if she were stating a simple theory.

Surely, Echidna was correct on a logical level. Since Ryuzu was the one who had sensed the Witch’s Lingering Scent, if her meddling was the reason for Garfiel’s hostility towards Subaru, then logically the best way to avoid that confrontation within the Sanctuary would be for Ryuzu to not recognize Subaru as an enemy—

Subaru: “However, understanding the reasons behind their actions won’t change the outcome. In your own words, the Witch’s Miasma has drenched me with no hope of it fading away. If that’s the case, the reason for being hated won’t go away either…”

Echidna: “That is true. You still will be hated… Even so, that is no reason to be hostile.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

After those words that destroyed his previous assumptions, Echidna moved her finger away from the surprised Subaru's forehead and snapped her fingers right before Subaru's nose.

Suddenly, a white cup appeared on the cleared table, and the aroma and steam wafted into his nostrils.

It was the tea set that was served hospitably to Subaru every time he returned to the Castle of Dreams—the "Dona Tea".

Subaru: "…The hell are you doing?"

Echidna: "Have I not told you? I do not just serve tea frivolously, nor am I asking you to sit at the table just a matter of formality."

Subaru: "I thought it was just your fetish to make me drink your bodily fluids…"

Echidna: "Actually, while I do not mind seeing you drink my tea so reluctantly, that is not what I meant. Before entering your Contract with me, you had talked to Ryuzu. —About the Apostles."

—Subaru's breath stopped at the mention of the word "Apostles", causing Echidna's black pupils to flicker.

Echidna's assumption was correct that he had heard that word, before he had entered the Contract with her, before he had experienced Death fifteen times.

When the Witch of Envy had covered the Sanctuary in her shadow, and when Subaru had seized the opportunity to commit suicide through Echidna's scheme, he had seen numerous Ryuzus—her replicants, including Garfiel, who was accompanying them.

After that, Subaru had learned about the origin of these replicants, "Ryuzu Meyer", and that the Ryuzu he knew was a clone of her, a part of the system that protected the Sanctuary.

Apostle, it was a word he had heard in a conversation with Ryuzu at that time.

Echidna: "Do you remember? I believe Ryuzu had told you. The tea that has been served to you…”

Subaru: “Something about it giving me the qualifications to become an Apostle of Greed.”

Echidna: “And, that Garfiel also gained power over the replicants under the same conditions.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna’s additional words fit together perfectly within Subaru’s mind.

With a click, the gears began to turn, and Subaru felt like he understood the Witch’s aim, along with the words she had added. The tea was something that gave Subaru power as an Apostle of Greed.

There might have been many other tricks up her sleeve, but for now, he would turn a blind eye to them. The important thing here was that fact, that Echidna had overlooked Subaru’s Deaths fifteen times.

What was the reason that Subaru had to stack up more than fifteen Deaths?

It was—

Subaru: “—I’m waiting for my power over Ryuzu-san and the other replicants to surpass that of Garfiel’s.”

Echidna: “That is a great answer.”

Echidna clasped her hands in front of her chest and raised her voice cheerfully.

Echidna: “If two Apostles exist, then it would be natural to conclude that the one with the higher affinity would have priority when giving orders. It has been ten years since Garfiel challenged the tomb and became an apostle… So it is not surprising that he had plenty of experiences of being an Apostle. If you were to try to compete with him in such a short amount of time…”

Subaru: “Then it would be best for me to drink the tea over and over again… but what’s the point?”

Echidna: “Oh, are you concerned about what will happen after Death? Have no fear, since you are contracted with me, my interference will accumulate in your soul. It cannot be left behind when you cross over into Death.”

Subaru: “…You didn’t tell me this before, that way I wouldn’t lose my motivation.”

Before Subaru’s eyes, as he mumbled in frustration, Echidna hugged her elbows in silence. A faint smile appeared on her lips, quietly confirming Subaru’s words.

During the fifteen Deaths that Subaru had experienced, Echidna had hidden the truth about the relationship between Garfiel and the Ryuzus. The reason was that there was no solution for dealing with them until the effects of the tea had taken hold.

—In short, Subaru had no other solution but to accrete Deaths.

Echidna: “Now that you understand, are you convinced?”

Furrowing her brows, Echidna peered into Subaru’s face as he bit his lip.

The act of her slightly lowering her tone and giving an upward glance towards Subaru caused a burst of rage to swell up inside of him, but he refrained himself from raising his voice. In fact, Echidna’s thoughts were accurate.

—He would not have easily agreed to something as ludicrous as sacrificing himself fifteen times for nothing.

Subaru: “You needed me to understand that it was a dead-end, and there was nothing I could do.”

Echidna: “Yes yes, that is correct. I knew you would understand.”

Subaru: “Ding ding ding, your amiableness score has gone down once again.”

Echidna: “Heeh?”

Echidna’s eyes widened at Subaru’s heartless announcement. Subaru finished another cup of tea on the table in one gulp, relishing the Witch’s reaction.

Despite the steam rising from the cup, he felt no heat. It was an odorless and tasteless tea of unknown ingredients.

It was surprising that the Witch’s scheming included such a bland tea, and even more so that it would help to conquer the Sanctuary.

Indeed, there had been no wasted actions. Not the fifteen Deaths he had accumulated, nor even this Tea Party where she had revealed her true intentions.

Subaru: “So, the secret has been revealed. Which would mean, the time has come… hasn’t it?”

Echidna: “Indeed. It seems as though you now rank higher than Garfiel as an Apostle. The replicants that shield the Sanctuary cannot resist your commands. Even Garfiel can no longer give them freedom.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru could not help but notice the irony of him being called “The Shield of the Sanctuary”.

Originally, Garfiel had appointed himself to that role. However, Echidna, who had created the Sanctuary, recognized Ryuzu as the Shield rather than him.

As proof of this, Garfiel would be left out in the dark.

Subaru: “The Witch’s Lingering Scent… if Ryuzu-san doesn’t tell Garfiel about the Witch’s Miasma, he won’t have any reason to oppose us.”

Echidna: “Even so, he would not essentially want the Sanctuary to be released.”

Subaru: "…If there's room for discussion, there's a way to handle it."

The biggest problem with Ryuzu's inclusion was that it took away the possibility of discussing things with Garfiel.

If only he did not resort to violence and confinement first, then perhaps they could do something.

Perhaps, they could even give Garfiel a decisive reason to leave the Sanctuary.

For that purpose—

Echidna: "—You have keen eyes. Even I, a Witch, shudder at the thought."

As if reading Subaru's thoughts, Echidna chuckled and picked up a crystal off the table with her slender white fingers—picking up the Magic Crystal, she offered it to Subaru.

She did not want to miss a single fragment of Subaru's experience as her contractor.

Echidna: "Now then, things are in order. And moreover, the chances we have are now endless. With the Authority you possess, let us repeat every single kind of experience, over and over and over again, —let us seize that world which you desire."

With that, the Witch of Greed mercilessly pushed Natsuki Subaru toward his hesitance.

5

—Frustratingly, the situation went smoothly, all according to Echidna's plan.

???: "I am Ryuzu Shima… one of the first four replicants of Ryuzu Meyer, and a failure who had her role taken away."

In the forest, dressed in white and hiding in the woods, Ryuzu—no, Shima said so, raising both of her hands up in resignation at

Subaru, who had found her.

Finding her was easy. He had simply gathered the replicants, distributed them throughout the Sanctuary with Pico as their leader, and gave them an order.

—He had instructed them to find the replicants who had been secretly meeting with Garfiel.

And, the Eyes of the Sanctuary, which Garfiel boasted about, found their target easily and told Subaru of her location.

Subaru: "Shima… the Ryuzu-san I know called herself "Ryuzu Bilma". That difference, does it mean that you distinguish each other by your surnames?"

Shima: "…"

Subaru: "Answer me."

Shima: "—. Yes. We are all descended from Ryuzu Meyer. Thus, we cannot change the fact that we are Ryuzu. So, we sought individuality in another aspect."

Shima, who had remained silent for a moment, answered Subaru's question.

Forcing her to answer, despite her emotional state, seemed to be a privilege given to those who were deemed Apostles of Greed. The privilege of commanding the replicants, that was what had coerced Shima to speak.

Subaru: "Ryuzu-san… no, I'll call you Shima-san, I'm sure you're sensing the Miasma that seems to cloak me, right?"

Shima: "Hm…"

Subaru: "Please, don't try to fool me. I don't want to force you to answer me truthfully every time I ask you something. It hurts my heart to do so to such a familiar face."

Subaru pleaded with Shima, who hesitated to answer.

It might not have been entirely accurate to say that Shima was a “familiar face”; however, she was the spitting image of the other Ryuzu that Subaru was acquainted with—Ryuzu Bilma.

Forcing someone to bend to one’s will and twisting their true intentions would not be a good feeling. That method would be no different from brainwashing or blackmailing with how despicable it was.

Shima: “…That’s true.”

Perhaps sensing his distress, Shima silently nodded her head in agreement.

So finally, one burden was lifted from Subaru’s shoulders. —He felt that there was a glimmer of hope in dealing with Garfiel, a situation which had not progressed for a long time.

Subaru: “Shima-san, were you planning to meet up with Garfiel later to convey this information to him? Could you not do that, please? I don’t want to aggravate our relationship.”

Shima: “…Even if you say that, if Gar-bo pesters me, I won’t be able to go against him.”

Subaru: “Is that really the case? —Even if it is my request?”

Shima: “—Hk!”

In response to Subaru’s repeated question, Shima’s previously shrewd and relaxed expression stiffened for the first time.

Or, perhaps the calmness that had prevailed until just before was due to resignation. As such, Subaru’s words directly interfered with Shima’s calm, ocean-like state of mind.

Shima: “Could it be, Su-bo, that in just half a day, you’ve become an Apostle of Greed…?”

Subaru: “If the question is something like “Have you been awakened?”, the answer is an unwilling yes. Can you really bring yourself to lie to Garfiel through the persuasive power of my words?”

Shima: “…Probably, I’m sure there wouldn’t be a problem.”

With her eyes downcast, Shima reluctantly nodded to Subaru’s question.

Her reaction simultaneously brought a sense of relief that it had gone well, and a sense of guilt that he had pushed her too hard into this position. It was truly bitter and left a bad aftertaste in Subaru’s mouth, like an act of self-harm that he had inflicted on himself.

However, the only real harm that had been done was to Subaru. —He gritted his teeth and looked forward.

Subaru: “Pico, come here.”

Closing his eyes tightly, Subaru killed his hesitation and called out behind him.

Then, a silent Ryuzu emerged from the bushes—one of the replicants. Of those scattered throughout the Sanctuary, she was also a hollow-like marionette with no purpose but to listen to instructions.

Information within the Sanctuary could also be obtained from replicants other than Pico. If Shima was not an enemy, this analog surveillance system could be extremely useful.

Subaru: “If Shima-san doesn’t provoke him, there’s no need to worry about Garfiel’s sudden outbursts. However, I’ll have a few of you take turns keeping an eye on him.”

Shima: “Su-bo, about Gar-bo…”

Subaru: “—He’s currently my number one potential enemy right now.”

Subaru gave Pico instructions, interrupted Shima, who was about to say something, and explained to her clearly.

Shima snickered at his decisiveness, but Subaru’s greatest sincerity was his honesty.

Of course, Shima had her own point of view. Subaru, too, had experienced Death nearly twenty times so far, and had interacted with Garfiel in the Sanctuary.

According to that experience, Subaru knew that Garfiel was not an incomprehensible monster. He understood that much.

However, even so—

Subaru: "—I've already made my decision on what should be prioritized. Don't get it wrong."

Under Subaru's firm gaze, Shima shut her mouth and turned her head away.

Subaru did not command her to be quiet or to disobey. It was just that she was painfully aware of the firmness of Subaru's determination.

In Subaru's mind, the words of someone, not of Shima who stood before him, not of Garfiel who opposed him, not of the Witch with whom he was cooperating, but of another person, resurfaced.

Those, were the words spoken by a terrifying man who sneered in a world painted with blood, adorned with white snow and flames.

A man who had even used his own life as a betting chip and had left a curse on Subaru.

???: "Liiisten~ well, Subaru-kun. —This is important. The one thing that is truly, truly important to you. Cast away everything else except that one thing. Let go of everything else except that single thing, and think only of protecting your single most important thing to the end. If you do that—"

Subaru: "—You too, can become like me."

Subaru: "I—hk!!"

As soon as the voice echoed clearly in his head, his throat trembled with anger.

His vision turned red, and the beating of his heart sounded incredibly loud. His breathing became ragged, and Subaru could no longer bear it, slamming his fist hard against a tree trunk.

Shima: “S-Su-bo…?”

Suddenly Subaru erupted into a tantrum, and Shima timidly called out to him in a frightened tone of voice.

The frightened tone of Shima’s voice reminded Subaru of his instability, and he replied “My bad…” with a hand to his forehead.

The contents of his skull throbbed painfully, as if the pain was a reminder of a nightmare that he should not forget. —No, he must not forget it.

That was a warning. That curse was a binding chain that Subaru himself must consciously bear.

Subaru: “…Don’t get me wrong, Shima-san. It’s true that I consider Garfiel as a potential enemy, but I’m not thinking of getting rid of him in any way.”

With a frown on his face from the headache, Subaru said this to alleviate Shima’s concerns. Shima’s eyes widened at his words and she leaned forward, asking, “Ho, is that true?”

In response, Subaru nodded his head and said “Yeah”,

Subaru: “However, I need Shima-san’s cooperation to get him away from here peacefully. It’s going to take a lot of work to convince him. Shima-san understands that too, don’t you?”

Shima: “That’s… because Gar-bo’s stubbornness is hardwired. But how?”

Upon hearing that he wanted a peaceful resolution, Shima also agreed with Subaru’s thinking. Subaru accepted it affirmatively and moistened his lips with his tongue.

He was not plotting, nor was he camouflaging about his true feelings. Sincerely, he wanted to convey with all his words, so that they would understand.

And, if possible, to achieve a satisfactory conclusion for everyone involved in this situation.

By doing so, he could prove himself. —Once Natsuki Subaru accreted it all.

Subaru: "—Roswaal, I am not like you."

He would never become the Warlock, who was obsessed with just one thing, and allowed the world to make everything a sacrifice.

Even if he were to take the hand of the Witch, he would not lose the soul and dignity of being "human".

That was why—

Subaru: "—I, won't become like you."

6

It was with the cooperation of Ryuzu Shima and the twenty-one replicas who followed his instructions.

By using the power as an Apostle of Greed and skillfully manipulating them, the situation that should have been intricate was easily untangled, like light shining from beyond the dark clouds.

For Subaru, who felt as if his head was being held down and submerged in water, it was a level of emotion akin to finally taking in a breath of air.

However—

???: "Gaahhhh—!!"

And, with a blood-curdling scream, claws were swung and lives were cruelly torn apart, a scene that was contrary to the divine radiance that shone from beyond the dark clouds.

Subaru: "…"

Before the eyes of Subaru, with his arms crossed, there was a small shadow that was striking to the left and right.

Fighting against the overwhelming white malevolence that approached like a surging mist, literally, was a figure of a golden-haired boy—the heroic figure of Garfiel Tinsel.

Garfiel: "Shiiihk!"

Roaring ferociously, slashing with claws and fangs, he destroyed the enemies that came at him from all directions, one after another.

—His figure, what else could one call it other than heroic?

Facing the enemy without the support of his allies and standing in isolation, Garfiel proved that he was a bold fighter as he mustered all the courage he had built up in his body.

His posture engraved his nobility and bravery more eloquently than words ever could.

In fact, Subaru had no choice but to honestly re-evaluate the fact that he, too, had underestimated Garfiel.

However—

Garfiel: "—Urgh."

Garfiel's throat groaned in agony as a fang was plunged into his right calf.

The embodiment of gluttony devoured the muscles of his well-trained leg in one gulp, aiming to fill its stomach. Its round body was torn in half by a descending karate chop.

However, taking the opponent's life was not enough to make up for the pain.

There were literally enough opponents to fill Garfiel's field of vision.

Garfiel: "—This ain't, no goddamn joke!!"

For a brief moment, a hint of weakness flickered in his emerald eyes, but it quickly faded away.

Biting back the weakness that had sprouted within himself, as if he was ashamed, the roaring Garfiel swung his blood-spurting leg and smashed it powerfully onto the ground.

Immediately after, the trampled earth burst forth, and the destruction swallowed up the white herd of animals.

Collectively, dozens of them—no wonder they were frightened and realized their disadvantage, even if they were Witchbeasts.

Garfiel: "Now—"

Naturally, Garfiel, seeing this, also snapped his fangs in response to the blow.

It was a result worth being proud of. Or perhaps. he might have felt a tailwind at his back, almost like a plea, that he would be able to repel the enemy. —But all of that, too, was just a trick.

Great Rabbit: "—Kyuuuhn."

Stepping over the corpses of their own kind that were killed by Garfiel, the swamp of white furballs stirred.

All at once, without stagnation, like waves on the shore, the Witchbeasts approached like a surging wave. In an unchanged manner, with the deafening cry of kichi kichi.

There was no sense of fear for the death of their kind, or for Garfiel who made it happen.

Kichi, kichi, kichi; a quiet and cruel, life-devouring sound—.

Garfiel: "…"

Before that demeanor, even Garfiel's profile showed a frightened expression.

None could point a finger at him and demeaningly ask where that gorgeous figure from just before had gone. This was not the level of disaster that could be faced with a sound mind.

He thought this was the moment.

He had been waiting for the right timing to interject, to seize the opportunity to extend a helping hand, and he believed this was it.

Subaru: "—I suppose by now, you must've gotten how crazy the enemy is, right, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "—~hk! Shut yer mouth! Shut the hell up ~hk!"

However, Garfiel shouted at Subaru as if shaking him off

It was a voice that rejected Subaru, even more than it refused to admit his own fright.

In front of Subaru, whose eyes were wide open in the face of a backlash beyond his imagination, Garfiel's fists roused his deflated heart, and seized the white ball of fur—the Great Rabbit, and crushed the small Witchbeast.

The barrage of fists that were continuously unleashed blew away the fragile Witchbeasts with each blow, but those that turned over and stopped from moving were mercilessly chewed up by the fangs of their own kind that followed, like a perpetual motion machine.

—No, perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that they were not exactly members of the same herd, but more like they were the same existence.

The Great Rabbit, after all, was a being of mysterious biology that trembled and divided itself in the blink of an eye. Whether this was cell division or replication of itself was not clear.

The only thing that could be said was—

Subaru: “That amounts to nothing but buying time. They need to be dealt with from the source.”

Garfiel: “For the last goddamn time, I’m tellin’ ya ta shut the hell up! I ain’t listenin’ to yer directions, ya bastard!”

Being told directly that he would not be heard, Subaru could only curl his lips.

But, it would be arrogant to just assume that Garfiel’s stubbornness was simply stubbornness.

In the first place, looking back on how he had to face one of the Three Great Witchbeats, it was clear that anyone would sympathize with Garfiel as he faced the Great Rabbit.

Subaru himself realized that this was a terribly malicious method that he had used to set this up.

Garfiel: “—Piece of shit.”

As if encouraging himself, or hating the world, or cursing Subaru behind him, abusive words leaked from Garfiel’s mouth.

It was natural for him to want to shout like that. Garfiel’s feelings could be easily understood, as one were holding them in their hands.

Subaru, too, was dizzyingly familiar with the feeling of helplessness that burned in his chest.

Caught between feelings of powerlessness and disappointment, that was the terrifying nature of the hell that was oneself.

At first glance, Garfiel appeared to be furious, but in reality, to Subaru, he looked like he was crying. Overwhelmed by his own sense of powerlessness and disappointment with reality, he was like a crying child.

And, it was the scheme of none other than Natsuki Subaru that made him realize this.

Subaru: “It’s beyond you to be able to do everything alone, Garfiel.”

This was not something that was limited to Garfiel personally.

It was known that in all kinds of hardships, the power of a single person was tiny. That was why, to resist the raging current of fate, even giving it one’s all was not enough.

At least, it was not something that could be changed with just one person’s life.

Garfiel: “…”

Before Subaru’s eyes, Garfiel’s valiant struggle continued to be in vain.

Even if he shook off their claws and fangs and spilled their blood and flesh, the large rabbits’ numbers were replenished immediately. It was not a game of cat and mouse; it was an overwhelmingly one-sided battle of endurance.

Only his durability was being tested, and the enemy’s side was not running out of gas..

That was why they were called the Three Great Witchbeasts, and continued to threaten the world endlessly.

Subaru: “—This is the end.”

Tears streamed down Garfiel’s face as he grit his teeth, and his body was covered in incurable wounds.

If he took a moment to catch his breath, it seemed he would have been able to heal his wounds with the healing magic he had learned. But, he could not make the time for that. He should have felt the pain of knowing that he could not do it alone.

To make him realize that, he took him to the Great Rabbit that was assailing the Sanctuary.

With that goal accomplished, Subaru gave instructions for a replica to act as a bait for their retreat.

Subaru: “They’re coming straight towards the Sanctuary. It seems like the people in the village are a feast for them. So, we have to evacuate them.”

Garfiel: “…”

Subaru: “This isn’t the time to argue about whether or not to open the barrier of the Sanctuary. You understand how serious this is, right?”

Faced with Subaru’s question, Garfiel sat on the ground with his legs outstretched in front of him.

His back was pressed against a large tree and his face was downcast. He was conscious. He was also listening. That was evident from his trembling ears and occasional reactions in his breathing.

However, he probably did not have the capacity to respond to Subaru’s words. That was understandable.

He must have felt helpless against the Great Rabbit, and he must have felt like he had been denied the days he had spent accumulating.

Subaru, who had set up this outcome, did not feel great either. He did not even have a sense of accomplishment for being able to manipulate his opponent according to his expectations.

There was only a sense of exhaustion, and a dim expectation that things might work out. This expectation was neck and neck with the anxiety that things might not work out.

Garfiel: “…What ’bout Granny?”

Subaru: “Ryuzu… Shima-san is waiting in the Sanctuary. Originally, I didn’t plan to take Shima-san and the others out in front of the Great Rabbit. But I had Pico and the others push themselves to do it.”

Garfiel: “Pico?”

Subaru: “One of the ones who look exactly like Ryuzu-san and Shima-san, except for the fact that she’s not them.”

Garfiel wrinkled his nose in displeasure at Subaru’s answer.

Subaru somewhat understood why Garfiel had that reaction. Garfiel probably wanted to distinguish between Ryuzu-san and the others.

The grandmother, whom he loved, from the replicas, who were just identical dolls.

Maybe Garfiel was more rational in his approach to the replicas. Subaru would not have named her Pico if he had known how the replicas worked.

But, he had already given her that name. Subaru could not change it now.

Subaru: “Even so, I had to borrow their strength to bring you out and to attract the Great Rabbit… However, it seems that even if we delay their advance, we cannot change their course.”

Garfiel: “Ain’t gonna know unless ya give it a shot, ya know…”

Subaru: “No, I do know. —I’ve tried it many times already.”

Garfiel: “What…?”

Garfiel cleared his throat, dissatisfied when he could not understand what he meant.

However, Subaru did not intend to answer his question in detail. He only used the fact that his answer was not a bluff or anything of the sort as the basis.

The Great Rabbit’s course could not be changed. They were heading straight for the Sanctuary.

Therefore—

Subaru: “Evacuate the residents of the Sanctuary. Everyone in Arlam Village, too. I don’t want you to get in the way of that. That’s why I warned you about the crisis.”

Garfiel: “—. I get that we can’t do shit ’bout ta Great Rabbit. But, what’cha gonna do ’bout it?”

Subaru: “What do we do?”

Garfiel: “It’s obvious! The barrier! As long as the barrier’s up, no one ‘cept my amazin’ self can leave the Sanctuary! Not ’til that princess smashes through the Trial…”

The residents of the Sanctuary could not escape the forest because their souls would be repelled by the barrier.

Subaru nodded in response to Garfiel’s point with a “yeah”. It was indeed a daunting task to overcome the Trial that Emilia had been challenging in the tomb.

Subaru: “But, there’s an alternative to that. Don’t worry about it.”

Garfiel: “Alternative? What’re ya gonna do?”

Subaru: “It’s simple. —I’ll clear the Trial myself. And for the remaining two, I’ll do them in Emilia’s place.”

Garfiel: “…What?”

Garfiel was surprised by Subaru’s confident assertion as he poked his own chest with his thumb.

Looking at Garfiel’s stunned expression, Subaru noticed that his face, which had lost its ruggedness, appeared rather young. He had not noticed it before due to the numerous tense situations, but perhaps Garfiel was younger than Subaru thought.

Anyway, the resolution of such an unhelpful question would have to wait.

Subaru: “I’ve already completed the first Trial. I know what the second Trial entails. Honestly, it’s difficult content… but probably just a matter of getting used to it.”

Garfiel: “Gettin’ used ta it?”

Subaru: “Yeah. I just hope I don’t get upset every time I’m shown something I don’t want to see.”

Regardless of whether or not such a forceful clearing of the Trial was intended, Subaru’s plan to overcome the second Trial was something along those lines.

The so-called unthinkable present showed many afterlifes upon worlds in which Subaru had Returned by Death—the pain and suffering of which he endured with a broken heart.

Even so, Natsuki Subaru believed what stood beyond was a happy future for everyone, which he sought.

Subaru: “That nasty, evil Witch just keeps playing coy, refusing to share anything about the third Trial…”

However, since the first Trial was about the past, and the second Trial occurred in the present, one could vaguely imagine that the third Trial would be about the future.

Although it was unclear what kind of hellish future awaited him after the unpleasant past and the painful alternate present—

Subaru: “—If that’s what’s supposed to break my spirit, then I won’t stop.”

He did not have an unbreakable spirit that would not be shattered by any impact.

Rather, the strength of Subaru’s heart, no matter how much he strengthened it, would only be as fragile as glass. Even though it might appear hard on the surface, it would crack and shatter with a strong enough impact.

However, the fact that it could be broken was not a problem. If glass were to be heated, it could be melted and reshaped.

The Authority given to Natsuki Subaru was, in short, the power to do so.

Garfiel: “…”

Hearing Subaru’s confident words, Garfiel held his breath.

He probably wanted to bite Subaru’s head off and say, “Don’t be ridiculous”. However, Subaru’s actions up to this point had silenced Garfiel’s budding rebelliousness.

Subaru, as an Apostle of Greed, had demonstrated abilities higher than Garfiel; informing him of the existence of the Great Rabbit and the threat it posed to the Sanctuary, opening the barrier that originating from the tomb, assuring him that he could clear the Trial that Garfiel himself had been so frustrated by.

Subaru: “…It’s not your fault, Garfiel.”

With those words, Subaru addressed the profile of Garfiel, who faced his own weakness.

No one was at fault. The situation, the environment, and the timing were all different types of bad—

Subaru: “—It’s just that your luck was bad.”

8

???: “—Congratulations! The threat to the Sanctuary has been eliminated!”

Subaru: “…”

???: “Hmm? You are not responding well. From what I could gather from your Memories, I thought this was a stylistic element of a celebration.”

As she said this, Echidna tilted her head, having greeted Subaru with a loud burst of sound.

In the hands of the confused Witch lie a cone-shaped, cylindrical party item, which had exploded with a dry sound—a party cracker, to put it simply.

Although it was probably an item that did not exist in this other world, in this fantastic space created by the Witch of Greed, it was no surprise that manipulating her imagination into shape was her specialty.

Subaru: "…The idea certainly isn't bad. Just, your ability to read the room is hopeless."

Echidna: "Oh my, that is not something to just let slide. Saying that I cannot read the room is, quite simply, an insult, is it not? Why should I receive such an evaluation?"

Subaru's comment on the colorful tape, which had popped out of the party cracker, as he removed it off his head was met with an objection from Echidna, who put her hands on her hips as if to express her opinion.

Echidna's lips pouted, and she seemed to be very upset that her elaborate hospitality had not been well received. In the first place, her attitude was already an indication of her hopeless lack of discernment.

Subaru: "You can grasp what's happening on the outside through this crystal, right?"

Echidna: "Hmm? Yes, that is correct. A proof of our Contract… through that Magic Crystal, I can see everything you can, including outside the Sanctuary. What about it?"

Echidna furrowed her brow as Subaru pointed to the Magic Crystal hanging from his neck.

Subaru sighed heavily at the confused atmosphere. Echidna, dissatisfied with his layered reaction, complained with a "What is it?", but she was genuinely at a loss for an answer.

Subaru: "I took Garfiel before the Great Rabbit and made him taste powerlessness. Did you think I'd be happy being celebrated for something that didn't leave a good taste in my mouth?"

Echidna: "…I thought you would. Conversely, if you cannot be happy about this, then what can you be happy about?"

Subaru: "Ugh…"

When the question was asked back, Subaru stumbled over Echidna's words.

Spreading her arms in front of Subaru, Echidna, with her quivering white eyelashes, said "Listen please?".

Echidna: "At present, hostility with Garfiel, who was the biggest obstacle in the Sanctuary, has been avoided, and you now have the potential to save those close to you, including your beloved girlfriend. Is this not the result of your struggles and accumulated deaths? And yet, you cannot be happy about it?"

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Natsuki Subaru, I am not asking you to become inhuman. Given Garfiel's situation and position, it is understandable to sympathize with him. But, that does not diminish your own achievements."

Facing the silent Subaru, Echidna reiterated her thoughts to make him reconsider.

Indeed, she was right; if he only looked at the results, he had chosen the best route. He had avoided hostility with Garfiel, and managed to steer clear of unnecessary confrontation with Shima. Garfiel, having learned about the threat of the Great Rabbit, would take the initiative to help evacuate the residents of the Sanctuary and the people of Arlam Village.

This would also lead to helping Emilia, Ram, and Otto.

Echidna: "Even if you were to praise yourself for your efforts, no one would blame you."

Subaru: "Echidna…"

Echidna: "If I may add, my assistance has played a part in the results you have achieved. If you are feeling down, it would not give me, your contractor, a pleasant feeling either."

Echidna, hands clasped behind her waist and leaning forward, peered upward at Subaru. Subaru felt suffocated by her gaze and words.

Subaru was so distressed by the sight of Garfiel fighting the Great Rabbit, shedding blood and tears, that it left him with a pessimistic view that he could not fully approve of his own actions.

That was why he had pointed out that Echidna could not read the room when they both saw the same thing but felt differently; however, it was Subaru who was actually unable to read the atmosphere, and had been hopelessly insensitive.

It was only natural that Echidna, his contractor, would be displeased.

Subaru: "…My bad. I wasn't paying enough attention to my surroundings."

Echidna: "Are you reflecting on it?"

Subaru: "Yes, I'm reflecting on it."

Echidna: "Can you promise to not excessively belittle yourself?"

Subaru: "Okay, I promise. Honestly, it's not my strong suit."

Echidna: "Can you say that you have been saved by the feelings of the intellectual and compassionate Echidna?"

Subaru: "Don't get carried away."

Approaching forcefully, he flicked his finger on the forehead of Echidna, who was gradually intensifying her demands.

"Gyah!" said Echidna, who was bending over and holding her forehead with her hand, becoming teary-eyed. With this little drama at his side, Subaru thanked the Witch inwardly and took his place at the tea party.

Atop a green hill, facing the Witch at a white table, that was Subaru's reserved seat.

The backrest creaked as he sprawled and sat roughly with his legs stretched out. Watching Subaru's behavior, Echidna, still holding her forehead, narrowed her eyes,

Echidna: "…Could it be, that you are embarrassed?"

Subaru: "Ding ding ding."

Echidna: "Does that sound mean "correct answer"?"

Subaru: "That's the sound of your likability dropping."

Her saying what should have remained unspoken, made him reconsider his relinquishing of her disgrace of being a "Witch who cannot read the room".

In any case, Echidna took her designated seat, and snapped her fingers conspicuously.

Instantly, the Dona tea, which had become tradition, was prepared.

Subaru: "…Hey, if you can bring out crackers, does that mean food and drinks are also free to choose? Then, can you give me a cola? Not bodily fluids."

Echidna: "Even if I were to recreate that cola, the ingredients would be no different from the tea you despise."

Subaru: "It's about setting the mood. Warm and cold are different, right?"

Echidna: "Is that so? Well, I shall consider it."

After receiving a less-than-reliable reply, Subaru had no choice but to reluctantly take a sip of warm tea. Since he would feel like he had lost if he tasted the tea, he swallowed it down in one gulp.

After gulping down his tea, Subaru rudely placed his cup on the table. At that moment, his eyes met with Echidna's, who was gazing at him with a relaxed smile on her lips.

Subaru: “What’s up?”

Echidna: “Well, I have started to feel like I can rely upon you a bit more… If we get a bit more comfortable with our Contract, then you will be able to talk to me without having to come all the way to the tomb.”

Subaru: “—. Does that mean I can just talk to you normally outside?”

Echidna: “Ah, is that not delightful? Since you probably have a lot of situations where you wish to discuss your thoughts with someone.”

Echidna smiled at Subaru while resting her chin on her folded hands.

Subaru was hesitant to agree with her words, but it was true that if he could freely communicate with Echidna outside, his range of actions would be greatly expanded.

It was difficult for him to justify going to the tomb every time he needed to consult with her.

Subaru: “Is this like an expansion of the functionality of this Magic Crystal? Can you tell me in advance what kind of updates are planned in the future?”

Echidna: “Do you require benefits beyond constant communication with me? …Oh, no, I simply am joking. There is no need for you to give me that scary look. Let me see, for example…”

Subaru: “For example?”

Echidna: “You will be able to come and go from the tea party freely. In other words, you can meet me anytime you want.”

Subaru: “I see… so, there aren’t any significant benefits.”

Echidna: “You are really cold and unforgiving, no?”

He sighed at Echidna's bland attitude, which was a response he should have expected.

However, he did not want to be greedy. Just being able to rely on Echidna as a consultant in his situation, where he was being thrown around, would bring him great mental relief.

If that were the case—

Subaru: "—So, shall we aim to release the Sanctuary right away?"

Echidna: "Oh my, are you already planning to challenge the next Trial? Perhaps you could take it a little slower…"

Subaru: "Will I really not be punished for being lazy? …No, I will be."

The more idle one was, the more fate would mercilessly take away what was important to them.

Knowing this from personal experience, Subaru did not succumb to Echidna's tempting suggestion of idleness. Even if he could redo it, it was better to not risk losing anything at all.

Subaru: "It was a good opportunity to see what happens after each Death."

Echidna: "Originally, the second Trial was not supposed to be that way. In your case, the alternate Present from the current one has become a deadly poison. However, it seems as though you can overcome this with brute force."

Echidna raised both hands and teased Subaru's head-on approach.

It was a banzai attack based on the premise that one's heart would be shattered, and was deserving of being mocked as reckless. If Subaru were alone, he would never have chosen it, but—

Subaru: "I have a lot of things to say, but I'm grateful to you."

Slowly standing up from his chair, Subaru told that to Echidna before leaving the tea party.

It was an embarrassing topic to discuss eye-to-eye, so he turned his face away and spoke a little quickly. Perhaps that was why Echidna stared at him with a surprised expression and said “Eh?” as her eyes widened.

However, he did not feel like repeating it again. So, he turned his back and walked away.

Echidna: “Wait a minute, wait a minute! If you are going to say something, say it properly!”

Subaru: “Get lost. No, don’t get lost. You’re the type of character who can’t take a joke, so I can’t mess around with you. Just be quiet.”

Echidna: “Wah, you spoke so fast! Which means, that was not a misunderstanding on my part just now!”

Subaru: “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

As if she had just taken a demon’s head off, Echidna was shouting at Subaru’s back as he walked down the hill. Subaru covered his ears with his hands and decided to ignore her voice, saying he could not hear her.

Subaru: “Damn it, I shouldn’t have said that…!”

It was just a whim, he had pressed the wrong button in his heart; that was how he convinced himself firmly.

He was sure that he had seen a glimmer of hope in this dead-end situation, which had relaxed the chains on his heart a little. He might have also been swayed by the Witch’s sweet words from earlier.

After all, he could not be proud of himself for crushing Garfiel’s spirit. It was difficult to pride oneself on the result of hard work. — Even so, it was all thanks to Echidna.

Subaru: “You wicked Witch! I’ll deal with the rest of the Trials you’ve set up in a heartbeat!”

Subaru turned around and declared such to the Witch on the hill, flipping his middle finger towards her.

Since she was an ally rather than an enemy, there was no need to go out of his way to swear at her, but it was all due to the heat of the moment.

By encouraging himself in this way, he would be able to more easily attract favorable results.

It was a sort of jinx for Subaru, who had gone through a trial and error process before he caught this glimmer of light.

Echidna: “Isn’t wicked Witch is a bit too much…”

Echidna pouted at Subaru’s words.

But, she then quickly drove away her expression with a sigh, and smiled at her contractor as he pressed forth.

Echidna: “Give it a try, Natsuki Subaru. Are you really going to be able to pass a Witch’s challenge?”

Subaru: “Bring it on! I’ll show you what I can do. Go ahead and watch from the sidelines.”

The gazes of the Witch and the contractor crossed, and the challenge to overcome a new obstacle began.

However, there was no need to be afraid. With the Witch’s help, victory was assured. Even if it was just by a thin thread, the Witch had proven her insight to make it through.

The high, high walls surrounding the Sanctuary, which had seemed impossible to overcome alone. —They had been overcome by Echidna, with two hundred and thirty-two accreted Deaths of Subaru.

Echidna: “I shall support you as much as possible, Natsuki Subaru. —Please do your best, for my sake.”

Subaru: “I’ll do my best, but it won’t be for you!”

Subaru received the Witch’s cheers, unable to become serious until the end, and pushed open the door connecting the Castle of Dreams and reality, which lie beyond.

He was enveloped in a white light, and his consciousness returned. —Again, this was a reality where he would continue to struggle against Death.

And so, the Witch that was left behind smiled as she watched her contractor depart.

The white chair she was sitting in creaked, and she let her white hair flutter in the gentle breeze—

Echidna: “For someone who is not doing this for me… I wonder if that is really true?”

If that was so, why did the two hundred and thirty-two Deaths feel like a gift, stirring up her heart?

While rolling around this overwhelming feeling in her chest, the Witch of Greed sneered.

—With that smile, she decided to watch over her contractor’s struggles, fierce fights, and brave deaths through the Magic Crystal.

Prologue II:
The Witchbeast Master

—From the beginning, they had known that it was going to be a job unlike any other.

???: “Huff, huff…”

Gasping for breath, they trod through the dirt path, repeatedly glancing back over their shoulder.

They had been instructed to give heed to nothing else at all while they were running. They had been sternly warned that looking back would only slow them down and shorten their life.

Yet, they could not stop themselves from disobeying and looking back.

Such was the terror of the unknown that it eclipsed and obliterated the caution they usually observed.

???: “This is strange… so stra~nge…!”

Her face pale, the girl’s cherry blossom-colored lips trembled as she lamented the absurdity of the world.

Girl: “This, this is just like…”

—It was just like a nightmare.

She gasped and shook her head, trying to dispel the thoughts that had popped into her mind.

It was as if the enemy had foreseen everything: every hiding place, every plan, everything. Even the backup strategies she had prepared for unforeseen situations had been anticipated, leaving her with no escape route.

Even with all that said, she was nowhere near a position where she could merely quietly surrender on her own accord.

Should she be caught and fall into the hands of the enemy, she could not even fathom the kind of cruelty she would suffer; not at the hands of her enemy, but her own comrades. There was a certain negative trust that they would certainly carry out that cruelty.

An inner fear born from this negative trust. —And yet, even that was now secondary.

A different kind of hell, distinct from the one she had experienced countless times before, was rapidly closing in on her.

Girl: "Shadow Lion-chan…!"

Gasping for breath, a word of regret slipped from the corner of her lips.

In the distance, beyond the thick foliage of the trees, she could hear the Witchbeast that she had sent in—the death throes of the Shadow Lion, the Guiltilaw.

A Witchbeast unparalleled in its ferocity and cruelty. Yet, the Shadow Lion that had been dispatched to delay the enemy had fought in vain, falling prey to their venomous fangs and losing its life. —No, it was uncertain if it had even managed to put up a fight at all. The Shadow Lion was indeed a strong Witchbeast, but it had a tendency to charge straight ahead without thinking.

That reckless nature might have made it the perfect prey for this enemy.

Girl: "—Hk"

The more she thought about it, the more she felt she had made the wrong choice.

Right from the beginning, when she had returned to her hideout after finishing her patrols, she was trapped. From that moment on, she had been completely at the mercy of the enemy. The Witchbeasts she had gathered were all hunted down with Fire Magic Stones, and the remaining fighting force of her Witchbeasts was steadily whittled away, leaving the girl with no choice but to flee.

Sending the Shadow Lion out had been a hasty decision. She should have kept it by her side to protect herself, until the very end.

She was always one step behind. —In truth, it was supposed to be her forcing the enemy into such decisions.

Girl: “Elsa~…!”

Just as her options dwindled and her voice grew faint, her thin throat called out for her one and only ally.

The name had not been that of a Witchbeast controlled by her Divine Protection, nor of someone who had been ordered to accompany her by her terrifying Mother; it was the name of the one person she could truly consider her ally.

She was not here right now. She had been summoned and temporarily left her position. Ordered to stay behind, the girl was the only one remaining at the post. It was then that she was attacked.

Could it be, that even that summons was a ploy to separate her from her ally?

Girl: “It’s just, so wei~rd…”

Such a scheme was beyond merely predicting someone’s actions.

To control, manipulate, reel in the opponent’s actions, and finally achieve their inscrutable stratagem—was it not truly like the handiwork of a Witch?

???: “—Finally ran out of cards, huh? You really were a pain.”

Girl: “—Hk”

Immediately afterwards, the girl’s strength left her legs as she held her breath at the sound of the voice that had been thrown her way.

She slumped down and turned around. Her eyes met those of a figure emerging from the shadows of the trees she had just passed, and her throat went dry.

Girl: "—Ah, ah."

She had been wondering who could have set up such a trap, her mind swirling with confusion.

She had considered the two maids left behind in the mansion—aside from the Spirit she had heard about, one of them might have noticed their hidden presence and launched a counterattack. In that case, since one of the maids was someone she was familiar with, it naturally led her to suspect the other woman.

However, she was mistaken. Completely off the mark. —No, she should have realized it sooner.

Even Elsa had mentioned it. He was present at the scene of the failed mission in the Royal Capital.

The girl herself had seen him there. He was present at the scene when her plan had been thwarted and ended in failure. So why, up until this very moment, had she overlooked such a dangerous opponent?

???: ""He wasn't even on my radar.""

Girl: "…"

???: "And that's fine. In fact, that's what allowed me to set up this situation. Sorry, but I'll have to capture you now."

She was unable to say anything to the one who had read her thoughts.

She could only feel relieved that her life would not be taken here and now, though she was not sure if feeling relieved was the right response. Nevertheless, if she could survive this encounter—

???: "—I can't take Elsa down without you."

Those words, spoken so casually, shattered the faint hope that had begun to take root.

To capture her, and subdue Elsa. To use the girl as a bargaining chip, to make Elsa submit.

The moment she heard that, the girl’s vision turned crimson with rage and she tried to bite at him,

Girl: “—Ah.”

As she stepped forward, a white handkerchief was pressed against her mouth. The pungent smell assaulted her senses, pulling her consciousness away.

Though she realized she had been made to inhale something, it was too late. Strength drained from her limbs, her knees buckling beneath her. As her body began to collapse, surprisingly strong arms caught her and lifted her up.

—No. He was different, completely unlike the person he once had been.

Girl: “N-No~…”

The hoarse mutter was not directed at herself, nor at the person in front of her, but at someone who was not present.

You must not fight him. You must not challenge him or even face him. —You absolutely cannot win.

Desperately, frantically screaming these words in her heart, the girl’s consciousness sank into darkness.

Chapter II:
Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch

1

???: “Oh, ooooh—!!”

Using the slope to his advantage, he launched himself upward, his arms outstretched toward the head of the colossal beast towering above him.

At the end of his arms was a pickaxe meant for breaking rock, which he then used with all his strength to slam at the enemy’s head—or rather, into the twisted horn protruding from there.

???: “—!”

The force of the impact reverberated up his arms, and the pickaxe he had struck with all his strength was violently repelled.

Landing on all fours upon the blackened earth, he caught a glimpse of the fallen pickaxe at the edge of his vision, frustration biting at him as he clenched his molars. —He had screwed up.

???: “—AROOOOOO!!”

A deafening roar blasted over him, freezing him in place and momentarily robbing him of control over his whole body.

With its arrival, was an inevitable shock that one could not bear even if one were to anticipate it. The bestial pressure that shook his very core, originating from the overwhelming difference in strength between species.

Pathetically, he had never once been able to withstand such a force, nor had he ever managed to evade it.

Every hair on his body stood on end, his blood froze in his veins, and his lungs ceased their function, as if they had been torn apart.

Even his heart seemed to forget to beat, and by the time his senses returned, it was already too late.

Before his eyes, he saw the gleaming claws of the beast as it swung them down at an angle, directly toward him.

In his strangely slow-moving vision, each claw seemed as large and sharp as a sword, each slash comparable to being torn apart by a bundle of blades.

It is said that when one faces a life-threatening situation, time appears to slow down. It is a defensive instinct of the brain, frantically searching for a way to survive in those fleeting moments.

Experiencing flashbacks during a crisis is similar to this defensive instinct, not as a way to re-experience one's memories, but as a means to search for a method of survival based on past experiences to overcome the immediate crisis.

But alas, how unfortunate. —In this slowed-down world, in all his past experiences, there was not a single way for Natsuki Subaru to escape from this situation.

Subaru: "—Ah."

A merciless slash cut diagonally across Subaru's body, the beast's claws hooking into his chest and abdomen, effortlessly ripping them apart with an unsettling ease that human bodies should not possess.

The burst of blood and the searing pain that followed arrived just a beat too late to register before the surreal sight of his body being torn asunder.

Thanks to that, Subaru was given ample time to thoroughly witness the horrific spectacle of his own body being shredded, a sight that would undoubtedly rank at the very top of the list of things no one should ever witness in their lifetime.

Though the experience of seeing his own organs was not entirely new—

Subaru: “Bgh.”

No matter how many times he had seen it, the impression it left never changed.

In an instant, an overwhelming sense of loss surged through him, followed by a searing pain that threatened to consume his mind. His vision became clouded and chaotic, and he fell backward as if his entire body had been ripped away.

The agony, the sense of loss, the encroaching awareness of Death; these feelings jumbled together in his consciousness, turning his mind into a chaotic mess.

But all of it, everything—

???: “—Whoa, that looks pai~nful. You’re rea~lly unlucky, Onii-san.”

His vision, was white and blurry. Someone appeared beside him. Or perhaps she had stood there all along. It was hard to tell if his ears were working properly. He could only hear a distant, high-pitched ringing. Mixed with that sound, a voice, half-exasperated, half-sympathetic, seemed to reach him.

???: “I don’t particularly want to make you suffer, you kno~w? This kind of killing, like Elsa would do, it’s not my style at a~ll.”

With a shrug, she offered a flimsy excuse. Though, to the one being killed, such words held no meaning. It was merely an attempt to lessen her own guilt. —No, she was probably unaware of that.

This truly was nothing more than idle chatter, made all the more grotesque by the bloody scene around them. She stood over a dying person, his innards spilled out, and yet spoke as if nothing unusual was happening.

What a monster. Time and time again, he had faced this creature, been killed by it, and learned of its cruel nature.

Subaru: “…”

Whether it was because his ability to feel pain had shut down, his thoughts were hazy, but remained rational.

His mind was already racing ahead to the “Next” time, frantically trying to gather as much information as possible. Even if he could redo everything, there was no reason to repeat the same mistakes.

He must make an effort to pick up every bit of knowledge he could in this loop—

???: “…Wha~t’s with that look in your eyes, Onii-san? It’s a bit sca~ry. —Shadow Lion-chan.”

The presence crouched down right beside him, her voice growing quiet as if she had seen something unsettling. Following the command in that voice, the massive beast that had torn Subaru apart began to move slowly.

Shadow Lion: “—AROOOOOO!!”

The enormous creature growled in displeasure, and Subaru could feel its foul breath wash over him—

???: “Goo~dbye, Onii-san. I’ll make su~re to send the others along to you as we~ll.”

With those twisted words of misplaced compassion, Subaru’s consciousness faded.

He could only imagine his upper body being crushed by the creature’s massive jaws as darkness finally overtook him—.

2

Subaru: “—Fucking hell!!”

???: “Whoa there.”

In his rage, Subaru swung his leg upwards, his foot colliding violently with the white table, sending it flying.

The steaming white cup, the confections: all of it flipped over, scattering across the green hilltop, and the sharp sound of breaking porcelain echoed as it shattered into pieces.

Perhaps the sound of shattering might have cooled the blood that boiled from his furious mind—

Subaru: “Fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck…!”

Clawing at his head, Subaru continued to grind his teeth painfully, with little hope for relief.

Frustration. Agitation. His vision turned red as an unbearable fury swirled within him. Though he knew it was pathetic to lash out at objects, he could not control the surge of his emotions.

Treading over the broken cup on the short grass, he sought solace in the sensation of destroying something beneath his heel. Yet, it was futile. The anger, the irritation: both only continued to grow.

???: “You are quite agitated, no?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Breathing heavily and deeply, Subaru turned his head toward the voice that addressed him.

Beyond the overturned table, sitting calmly in the only chair that remained intact, was a Witch whose existence could be summed up in the stark contrasts of black and white—Echidna.

Before the table was kicked over, she had managed to secure her cup, bringing it to her lips as she serenely observed Subaru, who was consumed by intense emotions. Her calm gaze only served to further irritate him.

Echidna: “It seems like you have hit a wall. From the looks of it, it must have been quite a struggle.”

Subaru: “Cut the crap already! Don’t talk like it’s got nothing to do with you…!”

Echidna: “Unfortunately, at this moment, it really is not my problem. After all, I have not been filled in on what exactly happened to you yet."

Subaru clicked his tongue in frustration as he stepped closer to Echidna, who spoke in an indifferent tone.

Subaru reached into his chest pocket and pulled out the black Magic Crystal that hung around his neck. With a rough motion, he threw it at Echidna.

And then—

Echidna: "Ouch!"

Failing to catch it, the Magic Crystal struck Echidna on the forehead, leaving a cut on her alabaster skin. A pointed edge must have hit her, as a trickle of blood began to seep from the wound, running down the bridge of her nose.

As Echidna licked away the blood that dripped down with a soft swipe of her lips,

Echidna: "That hurt, Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru: "Shut up. I'm sick of your little theatrics."

Echidna: "Theatrics? How rude. I have no desire to suffer pain for no reason. I explored those curiosities fully in life, after all."

As she spoke of memories that hinted at harrowing experiences, Echidna bent down to pick up the Magic Crystal. Pressing it to her still-bleeding forehead,

Echidna: "Myon myon myon myon myon…"

She began another one of her familiar, nonsensical antics.

Subaru: "…"

The blood flowed from her forehead, and the Magic Crystal in her hand emitted a faint, eerie glow.

As Subaru watched Echidna's white eyelashes tremble with her eyes closed, he righted the chair he had knocked over and sat down heavily upon it.

He bounced his leg restlessly, dropping his clenched fists onto his knees over and over again. There was nothing here he could destroy in a fit of rage. At best, just the table or his own body.

Echidna: "I would not recommend self-harm. It is not particularly enjoyable to watch, from what I have seen. If you must unleash your violent urges, it is better to direct them at me."

Seeing Subaru's frustration, Echidna made an extreme suggestion.

Echidna had stopped pressing the Magic Crystal to her forehead and had ceased her ridiculous chanting. It seemed she had succeeded in inheriting the Memories and now understood the situation.

In other words—

Echidna: "Despite managing to avoid the issue of the Sanctuary, it seems you have been stuck for quite some time without resolving the problems at the mansion."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Although, since time resets each time you experience Death, what you perceive as a long time is just a matter of your own subjective experience."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Hmm… in the past, when I said something like this, I remember it provoked quite a strong reaction from you. But it seems that trick will not work anymore."

Echidna squinted with one eye, as if disappointed that her attempt to provoke Subaru had failed.

Indeed, there had been a time when her words, filled with empty provocations, had stirred Subaru's anger, causing him to lash out with a fierce impulse.

He could not remember how many times ago that had been, nor did he want to recall that awful memory.

The worst thing was not taking out his anger on something. Subaru knew this, not just as knowledge, but from experience. —That was what truly made it the worst.

Echidna: “It is a pointless regret. After all, was it not my suggestion when we made our Contract? I told you that, when you could no longer bear the weight of your repeated Deaths, you could use me as an outlet. You are free to punch, kick, or even strangle me; whatever you like. Of course, other things are fair game, too.”

Subaru: “…Stop it.”

Echidna: “Do not worry; I am quite accustomed to most forms of humiliation. Pain is no exception. I can control my emotions, so I am well-suited to be a sandbag.”

Subaru: “Stop it.”

Echidna: “Or would it comfort you more if I cried and begged, clinging to you for mercy? I am not particularly good at it, but it is not like I cannot do it. If it helps you let off steam, maybe it would not be a bad idea to learn such techniques. I could shed tears, plead for forgiveness, and…”

Subaru: “STOP IT—!!”

Shouting, Subaru surged to his feet and shoved Echidna backward, toppling the chair along with her. Straddling her as she lay on the ground, he wrapped his hands around her slender neck.

Her white hair and black dress were in disarray as Echidna narrowed her black eyes, gazing up at Subaru. As he met her captivating stare, Subaru could hear the thunderous pounding of his own heartbeat in his ears.

If he applied enough pressure with his hands, he could silence her by snapping that slender neck.

And so—

Subaru: "—Ah."

His hesitation lasted only a moment. Perhaps one could say he was overcome by a sudden, wicked urge.

There was a light snapping sound, like breaking a twig, and along with the sound of her breath escaping, a dreadful sensation ran through Subaru's hands. Her body immediately went limp beneath him.

Subaru: "…"

Echidna's head tilted to the side, her flowing hair concealing her face from Subaru's view. Yet, even with her face hidden, the stench of death that clung to the motionless Witch's body was unmistakable.

—She was dead. No, he had killed her. Subaru had snapped her neck with his own hands.

Subaru: "…Urghh."

The hands he pulled away from her pale neck felt unbearably repulsive. A wave of nausea surged up, and with a groan, Subaru vomited up bile from his empty stomach.

Splattering yellow gastric juices across the dead woman's chest, he swung his arms down beside her lifeless body, again and again, wanting his wrists, his forearms, his entire arms to tear off.

The lingering sensation of snapping her neck stayed with him, and it was unbearably revolting.

If it would help him forget that feeling, then he did not need his arms. —No, he did not need anything at all. Not his eyes, ears, nose, mouth, legs, or even his internal organs. Every part that made up his body was unnecessary.

After all, it was all useless. It was just there, making him feel sick. If it was all worthless and had no reason to exist, then it would be better if it were broken. Yes, that would be for the best.

Subaru: “Die, die, die die die die, just die, Natsuki Subaru…!”

Hot tears streamed from the corners of his eyes, and snot smeared across his face.

Thinking himself filthy and repulsive, Subaru stopped using his arms and began to slam his head into the ground over and over. Again, and again, and again—

Subaru: “I’m dirty, dirty, dirty dirty dirty dirty dirty dirty dirty dirty dirty…”

???: “—It is okay, you are not dirty.”

Subaru: “…”

As Subaru wished to erase his filthy self, his body was gently embraced from behind.

He held his breath at the warmth of the touch, unable to immediately understand where that comforting warmth was coming from.

However, a familiar voice and warmth pulled Subaru’s head closer, whispering softly into his ear.

Echidna: “No matter how much you deny yourself, I will affirm you. You are not wrong. And even if you are, you can make things right. So, there is no need to be anxious.”

Subaru: “Ugh…”

Echidna: “Even if you split my forehead, break my neck, and vomit on my corpse, I will forgive you.”

It was a form of acceptance so violent that it could hardly be called total affirmation.

It was something seemingly darker, unrelated to kindness or compassion or such warm things; something ill-suited to soft descriptions. That was why it could only be rephrased as acceptance or tolerance.

And, perhaps, because of that, he did not need to harbor false hopes, or suspect some form of deceit.

Subaru: “Ugh, ah, aaahhh—!”

Echidna: “There, there, it is okay. Cry as much as you want. No one else is listening.”

Subaru grabbed onto the arms holding him, pouring out the torrent of emotions swirling within his body.

The Witch accepted it, quietly allowing him to do so.

She forgave, accepted, and embraced it all. —As if, she knew that was the best remedy.

3

???: “Have you calmed down now?”

Seated on a chair, Subaru had slumped forward onto the table. A voice called out to him.

However, Subaru could not respond. He held his head in his hands, feeling drained and wishing to escape from everything.

Yet, the Witch, with her insidious nature, blocked any path of escape Subaru might have had.

Echidna: “Oh, I did not hear a reply. Could it be a side effect of having my neck broken?”

Subaru: “…I’m sorry.”

Echidna: “Huh? What? Sorry, I did not quite catch that. You know, since my neck was broken.”

Subaru: “I said I’m sorry! And what does breaking your neck have to do with your ears?! Do you lose your hearing if you break your neck?! Who the hell came up with that theory, huh?!”

Infuriated by the persistent Witch’s teasing, Subaru sat up abruptly.

In response to his outburst, the white-haired Witch leaned back with an exaggerated “Oh” as the chair creaked beneath her.

Around her slender neck, the marks of strangulation remained, and traces of blood were still visible on her face from the wound on her forehead.

Subaru: “Is this some kind of harassment?”

Echidna: “It is just a bit of cute payback. I was hurt by your tantrum, after all. If I did not retaliate like this, you would just keep feeling guilty, would you not?”

Subaru: “…If that’s your way of being considerate, you probably shouldn’t have said it out loud, should you?”

Echidna: “Sorry. I could not help but prioritize teasing you over being endearing.”

Echidna stuck out her red tongue slightly, a mischievous expression on her face.

Not that Subaru would say that was a bad thing, but he let out a deep sigh. At the same time, he realized that the storm of furious emotions swirling in his chest had subsided, and it was becoming easier to breathe.

This was all thanks to Echidna, who had put herself on the line to help him vent his frustrations.

Echidna: “Well, this is not the first time I have seen you this worked up. I have confidence in the amount of knowledge I have accumulated. —I can handle something like your periodic Days of Wrath.”

Subaru: “…Days of Wrath, huh.”

Echidna: “A fitting naming, is it not? I am also quite fond of the contrasting Days of Calm. They carry the weight of the history we have built together, after all.”

A faint blush colored Echidna’s cheeks as she wore an expression akin to one reminiscing about fond days gone by. However, what she was actually referring to were Subaru's Days of Wrath, when he was no longer able to suppress his emotions and would explode; and the opposite, the Days of Calm, when his emotions would die, leaving him like a living corpse.

Neither scenario matched the girlish expression Echidna was wearing.

Thinking of this as Echidna's way of helping muddle Subaru's feelings of shame might have been giving her a bit too much credit.

Echidna: "I do not mind whatever biased view you have, so long as you keep thinking highly of me."

Subaru: "…Ding, ding, ding."

Echidna: "Hmm, it seems I did not quite succeed this time. I thought I was getting pretty close, though."

Echidna shrugged her shoulders, disappointed at having pushed too far. But, she was not wrong.

This time, she had almost managed to change his opinion of her. Not that there was any rule saying he could not reassess or acknowledge her.

Subaru: "But still, it would feel like I lost on an emotional level…"

Echidna: "Well, considering you broke a girl's neck in a fit of anger, it is safe to say you have definitely lost if we had to speak in terms of victory and defeat."

Subaru: "Ugh."

It was such an irrefutable argument that Subaru could only let out a groan as a form of rebuttal.

At any rate—

Echidna: "—It seems like you are struggling."

As the previous topic was wrapped up, she introduced a new subject.

It was one that had caused Subaru's mental state to fluctuate wildly, so his response was anything but cheerful. As Echidna had mentioned, he had successfully managed to avoid the issues surrounding the Sanctuary.

By taking control of Ryuzu Shima, warning Garfiel about the approaching Great Rabbit, and persuading him to help evacuate the people remaining in the settlement, Subaru had cleared the Sanctuary and lifted the barrier surrounding it by completing the Trials in the tomb.

Naturally, he had to pay significant sacrifices to clear the second and third Trials, but,

Subaru: "That was just my death count piling up. It's not a big deal."

Echidna: "True. Seeing you push through with brute force, just as you had declared, was rather refreshing. Though, the second Trial is essentially a one-shot challenge."

Subaru: "A one-shot challenge…"

Echidna: "It is a choice between staying in an alternate Present or coming back. If you fail, the challenger's spirit cannot return here. Quite a risk, would you not agree?"

Echidna spoke nonchalantly, but Subaru was taken aback by the sheer ruthlessness of it.

At the same time, he felt a sense of relief that Emilia had not been forced to undertake such a dangerous Trial.

She, too, needed a chance to challenge herself and break out of her shell.

However, that opportunity did not need to come in a high-stakes situation. One where failure would mean more than just her own life, but also the lives of many others.

Subaru: “Anyway, I’ve cleared the Trials. Though, it’s annoying that every time I start over, I have to take on the Trials again, since my Return by Death resets everything to just before I face the Trials.”

Echidna: “Any complaints about that should be directed to the one who has bestowed that Authority upon you. Still, showing them the moment when the barrier around the Sanctuary breaks has helped you gain the trust of Garfiel and the others, has it not? It has given you quite a bit of extra time.”

Subaru: “Yeah, true.”

Only when both conditions, the approach of the Great Rabbit and the lifting of the barrier, were met, would Garfiel listen to Subaru. Although his cooperation was reluctant, not having to rack his brains to convince him each time was a result of Subaru’s repeated trial and error.

However, the other issue that had arisen simultaneously with the Sanctuary had yet to be resolved, despite Subaru’s numerous attempts through trial and error.

Echidna: “The duo that appears at the Roswaal mansion, the Bowel Hunter, and the Witchbeast Master…”

Subaru: “…No matter how many times I go through it, someone always ends up getting killed. Beatrice, Petra, Frederica… and, Rem.”

Echidna: “And, half of the villagers who stayed behind in Arlam Village. If only you could decide whom you wanted to prioritize in saving…”

Subaru: “—Echidna.”

Subaru stopped rubbing his forehead and called out to Echidna in a low voice. Immediately, Echidna withdrew her statement, raising both hands and saying “I was just kidding”.

This, too, was an argument they had gone through many times before—if Subaru could choose whom to save, more options might open up, and he could find a breakthrough.

Trying to save both the mansion and the village was what made it impossible. If he could just ease up on his efforts to save the villagers, how much easier would it be—.

Subaru: “There’s no way I’d be allowed that kind of weakness.”

Echidna: “Not allowed, you say? And who exactly would not allow it? The God from your world?”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Sorry to disappoint, but there is no God in this world. The closest thing would be something called Od Lagna, but it has no will, nor does it judge people.”

The term “Od Lagna” was one he had heard a few times before. —It seemed to refer to an unimaginably vast conceptual existence in this other world.

It existed, but did nothing. In a way, it might have been similar to the God Subaru knew from his own world. In that sense, he agreed with Echidna.

However—

Subaru: “It’s not God, or whatever that Od thing is, that wouldn’t allow it. It’s me.”

Echidna: “Hmm…”

Subaru: “Choosing whom to save and whom to let die is the kind of thinking a God would do. If I start picking and choosing whom to save, I’d be no different from some mechanical God.”

In the end, Subaru was just an ordinary, mundane human being.

Those under the delusion of excessive power or authority would easily be led astray. Subaru knew that once he crossed a certain line, he would start taking the easy way out.

That was why, he could never lower the hurdle he had set for himself.

Subaru: “I’m going to save everyone, both those in the mansion and the village. I won’t decide whose life is worth saving and whose isn’t. Don’t make me have this conversation again.”

Echidna: “I shall keep that in mind. However, you have to understand that I am not always aware of your past experiences before sharing your Memories with me, so please be a bit lenient on that.”

Subaru: “Then, at least act as my strategist, and show that you’re worth having around.”

Subaru and Echidna exchanged sharp words, glaring at each other. Then, with a snap of Echidna’s fingers, their usual tea and tea cakes were laid out on the table.

Indeed, this routine had become so ingrained that it could have been called their usual way of operating.

From breaking her neck to losing his sanity, the repeated trial and error were filled with grim, inevitable events.

In such an environment, maintaining some routine of normalcy was necessary to avoid being swallowed by madness.

So, Subaru and Echidna each picked up a cup and drank their tea.

—To set aside the notion that both killing the Witch and engaging in self-harm were simply part of the bargain.

Echidna: “Anyway, let us get back to the main topic. Though, the cause of death this time is pretty clear.”

Subaru: “…Yeah. I got my head bitten off by one of the beasts of the Witchbeast Master, of Meili.”

Subaru responded as he straightened his posture, refocusing on the main issue that Echidna had brought up.

To be precise, Subaru’s death was sealed the moment he was struck by the beast’s claws. His entire front had been ripped open, and with his insides spilling out, there was no way he could have survived.

However, more than the fatal injuries, it was the shocking impact that was etched into his memory. Being eaten headfirst by a Witchbeast was, after all, a particularly intense experience.

Honestly, being eaten by a Witchbeast was not an uncommon cause of death for him lately. Even so, he could never get used to the feeling of his very existence being devoured and lost to another creature.

Echidna: “Just when you managed to avoid getting chomped on by the Great Rabbit in the Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “Whether it’s a giant Witchbeast or a small one, being eaten feels just as bad either way… It’s impressive, that Wilhelm-san managed to escape from the White Whale’s belly, though.”

Echidna: “His training was on a different level, and when you are talking about such a vast difference in size, that changes things as well.”

In Subaru’s memories, it felt like ages ago when he had faced off against the White Whale. And yet, he recalled Wilhelm, who had once been swallowed by the creature during that battle.

In the end, he had managed to slice his way out of the Witchbeast’s body, and escape from within.

Could the difference really be attributed to something as simple as a difference in physical capability?

Echidna: “You do not think it is just a matter of sheer determination, do you?”

Subaru: “—. You think it’s unrelated?”

Echidna: “Not just unrelated; I think it is a nonsensical notion. Firstly, how much of a difference in determination do you think there is between an old swordsman, who has spent over a decade hunting the Witchbeast that killed his wife, and you, who continues to die to protect those around you?”

Subaru: “I…”

Echidna: “It is not something that can be quantified. That is why I will say it again: this is pure nonsense.”

Echidna cut down Subaru’s thoughts without mercy, her voice firm.

The way that she occasionally slipped in words from Subaru’s world was a result of her learning from viewing his Memories, as well as a sort of persuasive tool.

The extent to which Echidna understood Subaru was precisely what made her arguments compelling when he was seized by weak thoughts, becoming a reason for him to listen to her.

Subaru: “But, if it’s not about a lack of determination, then what am I supposed to do to fill that gap…?”

Echidna: “—Hmm. Perhaps, we need to approach this from a different angle. Up until now, you have focused all of your efforts on defeating the Guiltilaw, the Witchbeast Master’s trump card. Correct?”

Subaru: “…Yeah. There were times when things went well when I just killed it.”

Nodding at Echidna’s words, Subaru recalled the Witchbeast that had devoured him.

The Shadow Lion, the Guiltilaw, was a Witchbeast with the head of a lion and a body that looked like it was made up of parts from various animals. It had the appearance of something akin to a chimera, and was just as troublesome to deal with.

In any case, it had immense physical strength and was extremely ferocious. Because of its somewhat reckless nature, like that of a charging wild boar, there were a few times when it had been brought down by traps. However, that only dealt with the Guiltilaw itself, and did nothing to address the problem of Meili, who was controlling the Witchbeast.

Therefore, he was seeking more than just the defeat of the

Guiltilaw.

Subaru: “That’s why, I want to break its horn.”

Echidna: “If the horn of a Witchbeast is broken, the Witchbeast must obey the commands of the one who broke it. If you can tame the Guiltilaw, it might provide a countermeasure against the Witchbeast Master. However…”

Subaru: “—? However, what? The way you’re saying it, it’s definitely not going to be good news.”

Furrowing her well-shaped eyebrows, Echidna hesitated, causing Subaru to grimace.

In recent attempts, he had been repeating Deaths with the strategy of trying to steal away Meili’s powerful Witchbeast pawn. Echidna’s hesitation seemed to be throwing cold water on that plan.

Echidna: “I mean, it is a bit hard to say it.”

Subaru: “I see. Well, I’ll go ahead and die a few times with the current plan until you make up your mind… it’s not like I’ll say that. Each and every time, I’m doing it with the literal intention of dying.”

Echidna: “I understand. I do not want to have my neck broken by you again in a fit of madness.”

Subaru: “Look, I’ve already apologized for that…”

As Echidna brought up the topic they had previously put behind them, Subaru glared at her. In response to his piercing gaze, Echidna raised both hands and said, “You win, you win”.

Echidna: “Really, there is no need to make such a scary face. It is not like I am simply joking around.”

Subaru: “If you want me to believe that, then start talking. What’s so hard to say?”

Echidna: “Alright… I think it would be better to give up on the plan, to break the Witchbeast's horn."

With a raised finger, Echidna proposed a complete reversal of their strategy.

Subaru's eyes widened slightly at her words, but he quickly took a deep breath to calm himself. He did not immediately raise his voice in anger.

Subaru: "Let's hear your reasoning first. We can talk after that."

Echidna: "I appreciate your rationality. It is not a complicated matter. Do you remember what I told you about how Me… how that girl controls the Witchbeasts?"

Subaru: "—It's the Divine Protection of Fiend Manipulation, right? You said it's a Divine Protection that allows her to command Witchbeasts."

Echidna: "That is correct. Even without breaking a Witchbeast's horn, she can control them just like someone who has broken it. It is a Divine Protection that truly befits the Witchbeast Master."

Subaru narrowed his eyes at Echidna, who nodded while clasping her hands in front of her chest.

The coercive power of a Witchbeast's horn was perhaps the only fair characteristic of these dangerous and ferocious creatures, which were not even suitable for consumption. Despite this, Meili could ignore this fundamental principle, and convince the Witchbeasts she was their master, exerting her control over them.

Echidna: "That said, there is a limit to Divine Protections. Your plan to break the Guiltilaw's horn was based upon expecting that limit."

Subaru: "If we actually break the horn, we could find out whether the Divine Protection or the horn's coercive power is stronger…"

The recent deadly battle had been, in a sense, a challenge to determine that. Unfortunately, even when he had managed to land a powerful blow, the Witchbeast's horn did not budge, resulting in a series of futile deaths.

However, what seemed like meaningless deaths to Subaru was not necessarily viewed the same way by the Witch.

Echidna: “Even if you did not manage to break it, you dealt considerable damage to the horn. It would not be strange if that had caused some disruption in the Guiltilaw’s movements. And yet, there was no such effect. Perhaps…”

Subaru: “Perhaps?”

Echidna: “Perhaps there was no effect because Meili’s Divine Protection, is far stronger than we anticipated.”

Comparing her knowledge with the current situation, Echidna reassessed the power of Meili’s Divine Protection.

Then, with a snap of her fingers, Echidna said, “Listen up,”

Echidna: “—Is this not just perfect for putting our thoughts in order?”

As Echidna spoke triumphantly, the world around Subaru abruptly transformed before his eyes.

The green hill where the tea party was taking place changed in an instant, and before he knew it, Subaru found himself in a familiar place—inside a school classroom.

Before he knew it, both Subaru and Echidna were wearing school uniforms.

Just like when they had met in the fabricated past world, during the first Trial in the tomb.

Subaru: “…What’s the meaning of this?”

Echidna: “Like I said, it is to help us sort things out. I wanted to use this thing called a blackboard. As for our outfits, think of them as a little surprise.”

Echidna swished the hem of her short skirt playfully as she walked over to the blackboard. Grabbing a piece of chalk, she began writing in white letters, thoughtfully laying out information in Subaru's native Japanese.

Her writing was authentic, using hiragana, katakana, and even kanji with great proficiency.

Subaru: "If you accidentally got reincarnated into my world, I have a hunch you'd do just fine."

Echidna: "I appreciate the compliment, but it is all thanks to peeking into your Memories. It is kind of like cheating."

Subaru: "Then, I'll praise you for being good at cheating."

Echidna: "I am not sure if being called a good cheater is really a compliment."

With a wry smile, Echidna continued writing on the blackboard without hesitation.

Watching her back, Subaru rested his chin on his hands atop the desk in the classroom, a place that held no fond memories for him. Outside the window, he could faintly see the schoolyard and the cityscape.

If this place truly was a perfect recreation of the world from the Trial—

Echidna: "—Your parents, they are not here."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "If I gave you false hope, I do apologize. I only borrowed this classroom because I needed it."

Placing the chalk down, Echidna spoke to Subaru, who was gazing outside.

Subaru replied softly with a simple, "I see". Even if this world had been perfectly recreated and his ersatz parents were here, what would it matter?

Would he cry to them about being thrown into situations where his emotions repeatedly exploded and sank like clockwork, making him feel as if he were in hell?

Subaru: “Like I could ever be that unfilial… Echidna, continue your explanation.”

Echidna: “Understood. Now, please look at the blackboard.”

Without any unnecessary consideration, Echidna pointed to what was written on the board.

Drawn in white chalk were the names of Witchbeasts and a series of simple illustrations depicting them. The drawings, capturing the creatures’ distinctive features, were surprisingly well-done, causing Subaru to widen his eyes in astonishment.

Echidna: “It might come as a surprise, but I have written quite a few books. Including illustrations makes things easier to understand, so I can do this much.”

Subaru: “I see, I’m genuinely surprised. So, about these illustrations…”

Echidna: “There is the Shadow Lion, the Double-Headed Serpent, the Blackwinged Mice… and, I think I saw a Rock Pig in the mix.”

Drawn on the blackboard were images of Meili’s forces, the Witchbeasts she had used to attack the Roswaal mansion. The approximate numbers and size comparisons were also sketched out, making the information easy to comprehend, although it was frustrating to admit.

Echidna: “These are the Witchbeast troops you need to handle. Any questions?”

Subaru: “Ah, I have a question that isn’t specifically about the mansion, but about Witchbeasts in general… for example, if the horn of the boss of a herd is broken, what happens? Will the rest of the herd submit as well?”

It was a notion derived from stories in his original world, the kind of scenarios often seen in manga or anime, where defeating the leader of a group would result in the entire group falling under the victor's control.

He wondered if such rules could also apply to the Witchbeasts, and whether this could serve as a countermeasure against Meili's Divine Protection—

Echidna: "It is an interesting conjecture, but that is not how it works. If the leader… the boss of a herd has its horn broken, that individual loses its status as the leader. The moment its horn is broken, it is deemed unfit to be at the head of the herd."

Subaru: "…Well, that does sound like a likely rule."

If the hierarchy of wild animals was determined by strength, then a leader whose horn was broken would not maintain its position. For Witchbeasts, it seemed that having a broken horn symbolized weakness.

To damage such a symbolic trait was to invite that outcome. He had also heard about this before from Ram.

An Oni with a broken horn would be scorned and called hornless.

Echidna: "In other words, there is no loophole in the rules. We have to face Meili's Divine Protection head-on, even if it is an unfair advantage."

Subaru: "Unfair advantage, huh… I'm sure Meili would say the same thing about me, a Witch's accomplice who uses Return by Death."

Echidna: "I would have to disagree with that. Authorities are privileges that allow one to interfere with the world, while Divine Protections are like afterthoughts, tacked on as a nuisance to people like us."

Subaru: "I feel like this is important information, but it doesn't seem related to subduing Meili, does it?"

Echidna: "Oh my, you still are not interested in indulging my digressions, are you?”

Echidna shrugged her shoulders, looking dissatisfied as she stood at the podium. However, Subaru was not concerned with the truths of the world, or of the origins of Witches.

His only focus, was on overcoming the obstacles in his path, and securing a future with everyone.

Subaru: “Let’s get back on track. What did you mean when you said Meili’s Divine Protection might be far stronger than we anticipated?”

Echidna: “It is not commonly known, but… Divine Protections can have individual differences, and even potential for growth.”

Subaru: “Seriously?”

Echidna: “Yes, seriously.”

Echidna nodded repeatedly, smiling as she affirmed Subaru’s surprise.

Her attitude was rather frivolous, but for Subaru, who did not possess a Divine Protection, it was a complete shock. Since he naturally did not have one, he never had the chance to think deeply about Divine Protections in the first place.

Echidna: “For example, the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, which the whole species of ground dragons possesses, is an easy one to understand. This Divine Protection prevents the wind or any turbulence from affecting them while they run… however, the range and duration of the Divine Protection can vary greatly between a ground dragon that has run long distances and consistently used the Divine Protection, and one that has not.”

Subaru: “So, that’s what you mean by individual differences and growth in Divine Protections.”

Echidna: “In most cases, if their Divine Protection were to stop working, it is usually assumed that the ground dragon simply got tired from running. Since ground dragons do not talk, it is easy for it to go unnoticed.”

Other than the example of ground dragons, it seemed that users of Divine Protections could often use their abilities more effectively as adults than they could as children.

This was often misunderstood as simply becoming more accustomed to their Divine Protections over time.

Echidna: “Many cannot fully grasp the potential of their Divine Protections, and end up being overwhelmed by them during childhood. There may even be people close to you who have suffered because of their Divine Protections.”

Subaru: “When you put it like that, Divine Protections don’t seem like they’re just convenient powers.”

Echidna: “They truly are not. Having a power that others do not have might make one feel special, but having a third arm or a third eye does not necessarily make a person happy.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “I suppose you would agree with that sentiment, considering you possess an Authority unlike any other, would you not?”

Echidna slowly stepped down from the podium and walked over to Subaru’s desk, tilting her head slightly. As Subaru watched her soft, white hair cascade over her slender shoulders, he fell silent.

Needless to say, Echidna was referring to Subaru’s ability, Return by Death. And, of course, Return by Death was far from a convenient Authority.

If he could go without using it, he would. It was more like a curse that he would prefer to avoid.

Subaru: “…So, what you’re saying is that despite all the attempts we’ve made so far, we haven’t uncovered the limits of Meili’s ability. That means, if we keep fighting the same way, it might not yield any results.”

Echidna: “Exactly. That understanding is spot on.”

Subaru: “Then, that means there’s nothing we can do?!”

Setting up the classroom and making a big deal out of it, only to end up with no solutions, left him deeply frustrated.

Leaning back in the familiar feel of his chair, Subaru looked up at the ceiling lined with fluorescent lights. Even though the environment had changed, the sense of confinement and suffocation remained the same—

Echidna: “Nothing we can do, you say? —I see you are underestimating me.”

However, as Subaru lamented their lack of options, the white-haired Witch appeared upside down in his field of vision. Leaning over Subaru’s face from the side, Echidna smiled at his surprised expression.

Echidna: “Four hundred years ago, rulers from all over the world came to me for counsel. You should understand that the Witch with whom you made a Contract is such a being.”

Subaru: “…You mean, you have another plan?”

Echidna: “Of course I do. Otherwise, what would be the point of having you take my hand in the first place?”

Echidna answered with complete confidence, and Subaru’s eyes widened at her words. He slowly straightened his body and pressed his forehead against hers as she leaned in to look at him.

At such a close distance that he could feel her breath, Subaru gazed into Echidna’s black eyes,

Subaru: “Tell me. How can we deal with Meili?”

Echidna: “…Sometimes, you just erase the distance I have courageously closed in an instant. It does not feel bad, but I do feel like I am being played with, you know.”

Echidna pulled her forehead away, gently touching her slightly reddened cheek. Meanwhile, Subaru stood up from his chair, facing her directly and urging her to continue.

Seeing Subaru's reaction, Echidna let out a sigh and prefaced her statement by saying, "About Meili's Divine Protection,"

Echidna: "Its limitations far exceed what we initially expected… so far, so good?"

Subaru: "Yeah. If that's all there is to it, then I'll be left feeling completely hopeless."

Echidna: "I hope that hearing the rest will lift your spirits. Now, I have outlined the types of Witchbeasts that Meili controls. Considering the ones stationed around the mansion and keeping an eye on Arlam village, it is safe to say that she has hundreds of Witchbeasts under her command."

Subaru: "…"

Hearing Echidna's rough estimate, Subaru felt as if his vision was going dark.

To be honest, even a single small Witchbeast would pose a considerable threat to Subaru. But here, he was dealing with hundreds of them, including the ferocious Guiltilaw among them.

How on earth could this situation possibly turn into good news—

Echidna: "As a result of your bold attempts, there has not been any disturbance in the Guiltilaw's control. In other words, it is safe to say that she can handle controlling hundreds of Witchbeasts without any issue."

Subaru: "The more I hear, the worse I feel. Are we supposed to launch a missile at them or something?"

Echidna: "Back when I was alive, I might have been able to do something similar, but whether that would annihilate them is questionable. Also, have you noticed? I have been subtly dropping hints."

Subaru: “Hints?”

Hearing her words, Subaru widened his eyes in surprise, thinking that the crux of the matter was still to come.

He had assumed that the writing on the blackboard was simply a way to outline their dire situation. But, to hear that there were hints hidden within it for dealing with Meili—

Subaru: “—Oh, I see.”

As his thoughts raced, he could almost hear the gears in his head clicking into place.

Seeing Subaru mutter to himself as if guided by that sound, Echidna gave a faint smile. It was the entrancingly beautiful, yet cruel smile of a Witch.

Subaru: “…”

As the Witch watched over him, Subaru tried to put together the possibility that had come to mind.

At this stage, it was just an idea. The method to make it a reality would come next.

But even so, if he could think of a possible way to break through this situation.

Echidna: “Your Authority allows you to pry open even the tiniest possibility.”

Subaru: “Echidna…”

Echidna: “By repeating endless attempts and trading away pieces of your worn-out soul, you can turn any possibility into reality. Stacking up countless corpses of yourself, you reach for heights otherwise unattainable. That is something only you can do.”

Gently, Echidna extended her hands and wrapped her arms around Subaru’s neck. Subaru found that, for some reason, he could not reject the soft, slender arms of the Witch.

Even Subaru himself could not be sure whether he was being captivated by the Witch, or trembling with anticipation for the challenge that awaited him.

But—

Echidna: “—No matter how many times, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of millions of times you try, I shall be with you.”

The Witch whispered this reassurance into his ear, and in that moment, her embrace felt like a salvation to Subaru.

Subaru: “…”

Held by Echidna’s slender arms, which radiated warmth, Subaru closed his eyes.

In the end, Subaru could not shake the feeling that he was being manipulated in the palm of the Witch’s hand. But, that was fine. To avoid collapsing here, Subaru needed some form of emotional support.

In that sense, the presence of Echidna, who called herself his accomplice, was quite convenient.

So long as he was aware of this relationship, he could convince himself that he was not completely bewitched by the Witch.

Subaru: “…We’ve found a way to deal with Meili. Now, all that’s left is…”

Echidna: “The existence that is even more troublesome than the Witchbeasts. Shall we come up with a strategy for that together as well?”

Subaru: “—No, I already have an idea.”

Echidna: “Oh? How impressive.”

Admiration shone in Echidna’s eyes as her alluring aura seemed to fade slightly. Subaru sighed and gently removed her arms from around his neck.

Freed from her embrace, Subaru stepped back, putting some distance between himself and the Witch. Echidna narrowed her eyes at this action, but did not press further; instead, she crossed her arms over her chest,

Echidna: “So, shall we give it another try?”

Subaru: “—. Yeah, let’s do that. But, before we start, there’s just one thing I want to ask.”

Before restarting the battle to subdue Meili, Subaru fixed his gaze on Echidna’s face. He then asked her a question, catching Echidna off guard.

Subaru: “You came up with a way to deal with Meili much earlier, didn’t you?”

Echidna: “…It was difficult to bring up.”

Subaru: “Go to hell.”

Subaru contorted his face in a dramatic grimace, raising his middle finger and cursing at her.

After being made to die in vain so many times, he figured he had earned the right to do that much at the very least.

4

—Why had he not made that choice?

If you asked him, he would likely say he had simply been too afraid.

Their last encounter had seared itself into the chronicles of Natsuki Subaru’s life as the worst event he had ever endured. It had left such a lasting scar that he had resolved to sever all ties from the very start.

But when circumstances made avoidance impossible, he knew he had no choice but to swallow his dread and press forward. After all, had he not overcome the most harrowing of Trials?

Therefore, even if their chemistry was the worst imaginable, he should be able to overcome it.

Subaru: "—Roswaal, I know about the Book of Wisdom. I know you've been orchestrating all sorts of sinister schemes. So let's talk with that in mind."

With the room cleared, Subaru spoke, and for a moment, Roswaal's eyes widened in astonishment.

His mismatched eyes—one blue, the other yellow—stretched wide in surprise. For a fleeting second, Subaru glimpsed something almost human behind them.

Despite his disgraceful nature that made him never hesitate to sacrifice others for the sake of his own aspirations.

They were in the Sanctuary. The house belonged to Ryuzu, yet Subaru could not help but always think of it as the place where Roswaal convalesced.

Wrapped in bandages from head to toe, lying on that bed—Roswaal had been in that state for so long that it had become his new, permanent image in Subaru's mind.

The thought of his usual jester-like outfit did not stir any fondness in him. Subaru had no intention of reflecting on it, nor did he care to.

Roswaal: "…Subaru-kun, did you hear about it from meee~?"

After a brief silence, Roswaal's lips formed a familiar question.

The last time Roswaal had asked this, Subaru had been speechless. And in return, Roswaal had slaughtered Ram and Garfiel before his very eyes. Fortunately, the two of them were not present this time.

Garfiel had been clued in on the removal of the barrier and the incoming threat of the Great Rabbit. By now, he was likely being persuaded by Shima. As for Ram, Otto had taken her away to distract her, as per Subaru's instructions.

Emilia was still resting. She needed solace after her heart had been shattered by the Trial, and it was fine for her to learn later that Subaru had completed the Trials.

Indeed, everything else could wait. Nothing mattered except this conversation with the warlock before him.

Roswaal: "Subaru-kun, won't you answer me? Who told you about my book…?"

Subaru: "Yeah, it was from you, Roswaal. You told me yourself. Does that answer satisfy you?"

Roswaal: "—!"

At that moment, Subaru could see delight swirling in Roswaal's eyes.

Subaru had seen Roswaal laugh and raise his voice many times before. But now, he intuitively sensed that none of those instances had revealed his true colors.

The pure joy he displayed now, with a hint of childlike innocence to it: this, Subaru realized, was Roswaal's true face.

Roswaal: "If… if what you say is true, then surely you know what comes next?"

Subaru: "…You'll summon snow upon the Sanctuary, and the Great Rabbit, drawn by the Mana, will swarm here. Every last soul in this place will be devoured, including you."

Roswaal: "Ahh, I see. So, my manipulation of the weather serves another purpose beyond just tarnishing Emilia-sama's impression of me. But, as for dealing with that snow…"

Subaru: "I've already dealt with it. I've cleared the Tomb's Trials. The barrier is gone. By now, Garfiel is persuading everyone to evacuate."

Roswaal: “Fuh, haha! Hahahahaha!”

Roswaal’s voice trembled, his hand pressed to his forehead as he erupted into raucous laughter, his mouth stretching wide.

Subaru frowned at the display. Roswaal quickly shook his head and offered an apology before continuing.

Roswaal: “I expected this outcome… no, I hoped for it. Yet, now that it’s happened, I can’t help but find it… oh, so very strange.”

Subaru: “Strange? What’s strange about it?”

Roswaal: “Don’t play it off so casually, Subaru-kun! Are you truly unaware? You have broken the barrier that has bound this Sanctuary for four hundred years, and shattered Garfiel’s rigid, childish obsession, all in just half a day. How could anyone not laugh at such a thing!”

Hearing Roswaal’s words and boisterous laughter, Subaru became aware of the discrepancy between their perceptions.

To Roswaal, Garfiel, and everyone else in the Sanctuary, Subaru was just a newcomer who had arrived less than half a day ago.

Yet, despite this, Subaru had found the solution to many problems in half a day—or more precisely, within just a few hours, since his Return by Death had set the starting point at the tomb.

It was no wonder Roswaal would describe his accomplishments as strange.

Subaru: “So, what? Are you starting to feel scared of me?”

Roswaal: “Oh, I wish you wouldn’t say it so lightly. The truth is, yes, I’m terrified. I had anticipated the outcome of your Authority. But this… This far exceeds what I imagined…”

Subaru: “I’m not here for idle chatter. I’m running out of time, and of all people, you know exactly why that is.”

With both his words and gaze sharp, Subaru stared directly at

Roswaal, who lay on the bed, his eyes narrowed.

Roswaal's gaze was attempting to gauge Subaru's intentions, but if he wanted to understand them, he was welcome to try. If Roswaal's earlier claim of fear was sincere, Subaru would make sure it cut deeper.

After all—

Subaru: "You're the one who sent the assassins to the mansion, Roswaal."

Roswaal: "—. Would it do me any good to deny it or offer excuses now? Especially since, as you say, I'm the one who told you."

Subaru: "Unfortunately, this isn't something I heard directly from your mouth. I just pieced together scattered information, and you were the only possible culprit left. We haven't spoken much recently, after all."

Roswaal: "Hoh?"

With Roswaal not denying his pointed accusation, Subaru felt a mix of relief and bitterness well up inside him.

Holding onto those feelings, he dragged a chair next to the bed and sat down roughly, bringing his gaze level with Roswaal's as he faced the unfeeling warlock head-on.

Roswaal: "May I ask what you meant when you said we haven't spoken much recently?"

Subaru: "I'm not going to answer that. The point is, I've turned into the joker you were hoping for. So, the attack on the mansion doesn't need to happen anymore, right? Call them off."

Roswaal: "Oh my, how cooold~. If you've truly become the trump card I've long desired, why would you make such a request in the first place?"

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: “With your all-powerful Authority, you can draw out the answers you seek. You shouldn’t need to rely on me for anything. But, if you can’t even do that…”

Roswaal squinted his yellow eye, scrutinizing Subaru as if measuring his worth.

The warlock’s gaze was assessing, as if he was trying to determine whether Natsuki Subaru was truly the disappointment he suspected.

If that suspicion became a certainty, Roswaal’s actions would surely turn ruthless.

Subaru: “Are you planning to burn everything to the ground again?”

Roswaal: “As I stand now, that’s nothing but empty slander, Subaru-kun. But I suppose it does shed some light on why you’ve been avoiding meee~.”

Touching his chin thoughtfully, Roswaal closed one eye and smirked.

The look in his eye, his knowing expression: everything about him grated on Subaru’s nerves. It was not just his schemes; it was his entire demeanor that made Subaru avoid engaging with him until the last possible moment.

Even though Subaru had used Return by Death to the fullest to accumulate experience and gain an advantage, Roswaal, driven by his own obsession and talent, was closing the gap Subaru thought he had widened in an instant.

Even with the head start Subaru had gained, Roswaal remained a formidable foe he could not afford to underestimate.

Roswaal: “You understand the danger I pose. And yet, you can’t bring yourself to get rid of me. That’s because you know just how essential I am to Emilia-sama’s rise to the throne.”

Subaru: “You really are an unbelievably troublesome bastard.”

Roswaal: “Securing my usefulness is a talent I’ve honed to perfection, after all. If someone gets in the way of your goal, you remove them, no matter who they are. It’s natural to prepare for such possibilities.”

With a smile that never wavered, Roswaal exposed Subaru’s weakness.

In truth, Roswaal’s perception was accurate. His scheming and plotting made him a lethal poison to the safety of Emilia and everyone in their faction, yet he was also a necessary evil that they could not afford to lose.

Without him, Emilia’s chances in the Royal Selection would all but crumble. That would be a catastrophic loss for Subaru, whose aim was to see her fulfill her ambitions and stay safe.

However—

Subaru: “But are you really irreplaceable, Roswaal? Do you seriously believe we can’t move forward without you? Knowing what I’m capable of, can you seriously say that to me?”

Whether Subaru would directly acknowledge that to Roswaal, was another matter entirely.

Roswaal: “—Hmm.”

Hearing Subaru’s bluff, Roswaal let out a thoughtful hum as if contemplating his words.

Seeing him lost in thought like that, Subaru could not help but notice a resemblance to Echidna. He knew that Roswaal was obsessed with the Witch of Greed, but perhaps there was more to their connection than he realized.

In any case, Subaru decided this was the moment to press his advantage.

Subaru: “Sure, removing you would complicate things, but it wouldn’t be a fatal blow. You understand that, don’t you? The true devastation for me would be…”

Roswaal: “Losing Emilia-sama, correct? But if you’re so focused on protecting the mansion, then perhaps you aren’t quite as decisive as you like to think. Am I mistaaaken~?”

Subaru: “I won’t deny it. But that doesn’t mean I’ve fallen short of your expectations. —It just means I’ve decided to save everything, without any more hesitation.”

Roswaal: “…”

Subaru slid his chair closer to Roswaal, closing the distance between them.

Bringing himself within arm’s reach was Subaru’s show of force.

He knew that if Roswaal so wished, he could easily kill him with a single chop of his hand. However, Subaru wanted to show him he had nothing to be afraid of.

Roswaal: “…If I were to refuse your request, would I become a target you need to eliminate?”

Subaru: “Yeah. I don’t want it to come to that, but let’s just say an “accident” might happen.”

Naturally, it was nothing more than an empty threat.

Subaru would not be able to justify himself to Emilia and Ram, and he did not think he could recover from the aftermath either.

His words sounded like something a villain or mastermind would say, and Subaru almost wanted to laugh at himself for it. But, now was not the time for laughter. —He had to carry this bluff through to the bitter end.

Roswaal: “…I can’t order her to stop.”

Subaru: “You…!”

Roswaal: “Wait, wait. I’m not finished. You understand who’s attacking the mansion, right? Do you really believe she’s the kind of person who can be easily persuaded?”

Subaru, who was about to grab Roswaal, stopped in his tracks at those words.

With his eyebrows lowered in frustration, Subaru could not deny that Roswaal had a point. —The assassin, Elsa, also known as the Bowel Hunter, was the type who would not back down, not even against someone like Reinhard.

Even if her employer withdrew the request, it was hard to imagine Elsa would simply give up on her prey.

Subaru: "Why would you hire someone so difficult to handle…?"

Roswaal: "I chose her precisely because she's difficult to handle. If I'm going to test you, Subaru-kun, then the ordeal needs to be worthy of you. Wouldn't you agree she's performing that role peeerfectly~?"

Subaru: "This isn't funny! Fuck, you really had to pick the most troublesome method possible…"

Roswaal's schemes had been exposed, and yet he continued to remain a formidable adversary. Clenching his teeth in frustration at the traps Roswaal had laid, Subaru desperately racked his brain for a solution.

He knew that calling off Elsa and her associate would be the best possible outcome, but if that was not an option, he had to make sure he was not left without any cards to play.

For instance—

Subaru: "So you can't stop Elsa. Fine. But you can tell her to change the plan, right?"

Roswaal: "—That should be possible. But what kind of change are you proposing?"

Subaru: "It doesn't need to be anything specific. So long as we can split them up…"

Hearing Subaru's answer, Roswaal furrowed his brows.

Even he could not fully grasp what Subaru was planning, which gave Subaru a small sense of satisfaction.

That said, Subaru's plan was not overly complicated. He had already devised a strategy to deal with Meili based on Echidna's advice. All he needed was to incorporate Roswaal's involvement into that plan.

Subaru reviewed the different combinations of options he had in his mind, and then lifted his head.

He could not definitively say which combination would be the best. However, that did not matter. So long as he had cards to play, and the opportunity to fight—

Subaru: "Then I'll just keep playing the game as many times as it takes, until I get the best hand possible."

5

—Just like with Garfiel, he could tell when he had hit the "jackpot".

???: "…"

It was likely the result of the staggering number of times he had repeated Return by Death.

He was already aware that his ability to smell Death had sharpened. As that sense expanded, and the equation between failure and Death became clear, he naturally learned to instinctively recognize the signals that spelled failure.

Thinking about it that way, considering how few of his experiences had ended in success compared to Failures, it might have been more accurate to say that he simply was not picking up on the stench of defeat this time.

Subaru: "It doesn't matter, either way."

If the result was the same, he did not care whether the path to that result was predominantly positive or negative.

The separation and diversion had been successful, leading to the enemy’s isolation. All that was left was to carefully observe and ensure that the baited target did not make any unexpected moves.

???: “Huff, huff…”

Ahead of him, a girl was running down the mountain path, gasping for breath.

Repeatedly looking over her shoulder to check for pursuers was a poor choice. He understood that instinct, but fleeing without regard for appearances was the best way to ensure survival. Looking back in fear only slowed her down, and invited Death to catch up.

Though she should have understood, even without thinking about it, that being caught meant certain death.

Subaru: “Ah, right, it really is over for you when you die.”

He shook his head, correcting the discrepancy in his thinking.

—The rules of life and death were absolute, except for Natsuki Subaru.

If he lost sight of that fact, it would eventually trip him up. He needed to remind himself of it regularly.

Girl: “This is strange… so stra~nge…!”

Her voice trembling, the girl’s breathing grew more frantic with each gasp.

It was no wonder. An unfamiliar mountain path, lack of stamina, and a chest full of fear made her lungs quiver, making normal functioning impossible. Subaru had experienced this before.

Though it had been a while since he had felt that kind of fear.

Girl: “This, this is just like…”

The girl, thrown into an unimaginable situation, seemed to have seen something unbelievable. If it were Subaru from a short time ago, he might have described it this way. —It was just like a nightmare.

Girl: “Shadow Lion-chan…!”

Her cheeks stiffened as the girl let out a desperate cry from her frail throat.

The name she called out was that of a brave Witchbeast that had followed her orders to hold back her pursuers—but, her scream never reached the Witchbeast.

Instead of the reassuring roar she had hoped for, all she heard was a bone-chilling, agonized death wail.

The Guiltilaw, a Witchbeast that had caused Subaru countless hardships, let out a blood-curdling scream as if it were vomiting blood. The death cry was cut short, likely because it had lost the ability to make a sound.

Girl: “—Hk”

It was a mistake. Instead of using the Guiltilaw to stall her pursuers, she should have used it to aid her own escape.

Had she ridden on its massive back and fled through the hills and fields, she might have had a chance. But, that opportunity had slipped away with one poor decision. Naturally, he had been the one to close off that path.

The experience from a previous encounter, where she had escaped into the mountains with the fight ending in a draw, had proven useful this time.

Considering the threat she posed, allowing her to escape was not an option. No matter what, he had to end things with this dangerous assassin here and now.

Girl: “Elsa~…!”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stumbled over branches and roots. Her braids came undone as she awkwardly ran, calling out her companion's name in a desperate plea for help.

She called out the name of her closest ally, more dependable than the Guiltilaw, or any of the other countless Witchbeasts.

In truth, if that person had been by her side, Subaru would have stood no chance.

That was why, he had used a card he was reluctant to use in order to separate the girl from that woman.

Girl: "It's just, so wei~rd…"

Cornered and overwhelmed by her circumstances, the girl shook her head in denial.

She understood her situation: separated from her ally, and stripped of the advantage her Divine Protection once provided. Her mind was in complete disarray, struggling to comprehend the reality she found herself in.

—And, at the same time, he could tell she had no more cards to play.

Subaru: "—Finally ran out of cards, huh? You really were a pain."

Girl: "—Hk"

Holding her breath, the girl came to a halt and collapsed to the ground. Her forehead was damp with sweat, her bangs clinging to her skin as she—as Meili turned to look at Subaru with an expression as if she had seen a ghost.

Seeing Subaru step out from between the trees ahead of her, her throat tightened in fear.

Meili: "—Ah, ah."

Her eyes widened in shock, confusion clear in her gaze.

Perhaps, because of their previous encounter during the Ulgarm incident, Meili might have thought that Natsuki Subaru would have been an easy target.

However, that perception had been completely overturned, as she had been utterly and decisively outmaneuvered.

It was no surprise. To her, the real threats were the Great Spirit and the combat-capable maid left back at the mansion. As for Subaru—

Subaru: ““He wasn’t even on my radar.”“

Meili: “…”

Subaru: “And that’s fine. In fact, that’s what allowed me to set up this situation. Sorry, but I’ll have to capture you now.”

Meili had no more pawns left to use. Even knowing this, Subaru could not afford to linger. While it was true that he did not want to give her any chance to fight back, there was another, more pressing reason.

Subaru could not risk getting killed himself in the process of executing his plan to suppress Meili.

As Subaru took a step closer, Meili’s expression showed a hint of relief. Realizing that she would not be killed right here, her fear seemed to ease slightly.

That reaction sparked intense anger within Subaru.

Did she have any idea, just how much suffering she and her allies had put Subaru through?

So, just before capturing Meili, Subaru decided to deliver a parting shot.

Subaru: “—I can’t take Elsa down without you.”

Subaru intended to use Meili as leverage against Elsa. Oddly enough, it seemed Elsa had a soft spot for her kin. Even a villain like her, must have had a sliver of humanity.

For a moment, Meili’s face twisted in shock, and she opened her mouth to bite back at Subaru. However, the Witchbeast Master, left with no Witchbeast at her side, was no match for Subaru.

Meili: "—Ah."

Subaru pressed a handkerchief soaked in a poisonous herb, one with a sedative-like effect, over her nose and mouth, causing Meili to lose consciousness.

The herb was said to be toxic in high doses, potentially leaving lasting effects, but Subaru chose to ignore that risk. After all, he was sparing her life, which was far more merciful than what she and her comrades had ever offered him.

Meili: "N-No~…"

Her strength drained from her limbs, and Meili collapsed, her body going limp as Subaru caught her.

As her eyelids fluttered shut, tears trickled down her cheeks, but they stirred nothing within Subaru's heart. No pity, no guilt. All that lingered was a quiet sense of relief, and—

Subaru: "—A feeling of satisfaction, that you got what you deserved."

???: "I see. That must feel quite satisfying, I'm sure."

A woman's voice emerged from the shadows, as though it had crawled out of the very darkness itself.

Subaru, still holding Meili, turned to face the woman who had materialized from the gloom—a figure that seemed as if a shadow had taken solid form.

He had made it just in time, teetering on the very brink of being too late, but—

Subaru: "Seems like I can finally settle my score with all of you. I'm really sick of seeing your face."

Woman: "I don't recall us meeting enough times for you to grow so tired of it…”

As she spoke, the woman tightened her grip on the kukri knife in her hand, a flicker of disgust glinting in her dark eyes as she glared at Subaru.

She was being uncharacteristically emotional. Subaru found this quite satisfying, and smiled.

A twisted, mocking sneer spread across his face, dripping with malice.

Woman: “You’ve grown far more unpleasant since the last time I saw you in the Royal Capital.”

Watching Subaru’s behavior, the woman—Elsa Granhiert muttered with visible displeasure.

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Subaru: “—Don’t move. I know how much you care about Meili.”

Facing Elsa, the jet-black assassin, Subaru mercilessly carried out his hostage plan.

Holding the unconscious Meili from behind, he pressed a small knife against her neck. Even with Elsa’s inhuman speed, Subaru would still be able to slit her throat first.

Elsa: “…”

As expected, Elsa narrowed her eyes and remained still, just as Subaru had demanded.

However, the dangerous killing intent radiating from her entire body did not diminish in the slightest.

Elsa: “So, what now?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Elsa: “What are you going to do next? You’ve taken Meili hostage, and immobilized me. I'll give you credit for that… but what's your plan from here?"

Twirling the kukri knife in her hand in an exaggerated manner, Elsa asked Subaru what he intended to do next.

It was true that Subaru had succeeded in restricting Elsa's movements by using Meili as a hostage. But, even if he were to command Elsa to take her own life, she would not comply without a guarantee that Meili would be safe.

In fact, risking Meili's life and attacking Subaru was probably the better option for her.

He could not let that happen. That was why—

Subaru: "You have your own rules. You won't abandon Meili. But, I also know you won't gently back down, either. So, I have a compromise."

Elsa: "A compromise, you say? I suppose I can at least hear you out."

Subaru: "I'll guarantee Meili's safety. In return, you'll obey me. If you do that…"

Elsa: "—I refuse."

In an instant, a chillingly seductive voice whispered close to Subaru's ear.

At the same time, a black blade slashed through the air, aiming for Subaru's right arm, which held the knife to Meili's throat.

Her intent, was to sever his arm from the elbow, and to rescue Meili.

But—

Subaru: "If this were the first time, you would've won."

Looking down upon Elsa, who was poised from her strike, Subaru spoke with a cold, cruel tone.

Hearing his words, Elsa lifted her face, her expression twisting as she saw Subaru soaring above the treetops, ascending into the sky. It was clear what had enabled him to achieve this.

It was only natural. From Elsa's perspective, this was nothing short of betrayal.

Elsa: "…Wasn't I acting on your request?"

???: "Yes, that's riiight~. I'm truly sorry about that."

The one responding to Elsa's resentful remark was a jester-like warlock hovering in the air—Roswaal L. Mathers, who had grabbed Subaru from under his shoulders, and saved him from the assassin's lethal strike.

Roswaal, the client, was now opposing Elsa, who had accepted his request.

Subaru: "It's because you didn't back down that we ended up in this ridiculous situation."

Still holding Meili under his arm, Subaru was pulled up by Roswaal as he spoke thus to Elsa. At his words, Elsa furrowed her brow as if to say she was being unfairly accused.

Since the person in question was not aware of it, it was understandable that she would want to claim innocence. However, considering how many times they had gone through this, and how she always refused to listen, Subaru was no longer moved.

In any case—

Subaru: "We've finally secured Meili, and guided the evacuation of the mansion and Arlam Village… now, all that's left is to finish you off."

Elsa: "…"

Subaru: "I'll be sure to use the same methods your sister did."

Coldly stating this, Subaru's gaze shifted to behind Elsa. Noticing the intent in his eyes, Elsa slowly turned to glance over her shoulder.

Her back was completely exposed, but he did not make a move. There was no need to do any such thing.

Even without him having to lift a finger, Elsa had already fallen into a hopeless trap.

Elsa: "—Despicable."

As Elsa spat out those words, an eerie presence began to close in around her, gradually tightening the noose.

It was not just one, or two. Not ten, or a hundred. There were far more than that. After all, it would take a number far greater than that to overpower the Divine Protection of Meili, the Witchbeast Master.

—The sound of evil fangs clacking together resounded, a noise that Subaru had heard countless times.

This was the trap that had been set to eliminate both Elsa and Meili, who had attacked the mansion.

Subaru: "Even knowing it's a trap, you still can't abandon Meili. You, you're a lot more human than I thought."

Roswaal: "And, that's why we will defeeeat~ you."

It was unpleasant for Subaru to be lumped together with Roswaal, but in truth, without his cooperation, the plan to defeat Elsa and Meili would not have succeeded.

Roswaal's presence was absolutely essential for luring the Great Rabbit, Subaru's ultimate joker.

Subaru: "Only someone with vast amounts of Mana and such great mobility could act as bait."

Roswaal: "You're quite demanding in how you use people. But, I truly, truly admire your willingness to use whatever is avaaailable~ to you.”

Subaru: “Tch. Stop with the unnecessary—”

He was about to tell Roswaal to hold his tongue, but his words were abruptly cut off.

The reason was Elsa, who had rushed up the trunk of a tree and leapt toward him, landing right in front of Subaru.

Subaru: “…”

Elsa’s sense of timing was commendable, exploiting the brief moment of distraction caused by his conversation with Roswaal. This development caught Subaru off guard, as it was something he had not yet experienced.

Therefore, it was purely by chance that Subaru thrust Meili into the path of Elsa’s blade.

Had Elsa not possessed such superhuman capabilities, she might have cut through Subaru’s torso along with Meili. But, she was endowed with prodigious abilities.

Which, had allowed her to stop her blade the moment she realized it would kill Meili.

Subaru: “You really do care about your family. —It makes me want to puke.”

Suspended in midair, Elsa was kicked away by Subaru, who spoke with disdain.

Elsa’s body slowly tilted backward and fell, plummeting straight down without any means of protection. She descended into the midst of the swarm of Witchbeasts, eagerly clicking their fangs and licking their lips at their prey.

She fell, completely helpless to stop it—

Elsa: “—You’re despicable.”

Subaru: “I know.”

Once more, Elsa spat out an insult uncharacteristic of herself.

It was uncertain whether Subaru’s reply had reached Elsa’s ears. There was no time to confirm, as she was immediately engulfed by the swarm of Great Rabbits, biting into her from every direction.

Great Rabbit: “—Kichi kichi.”

The slayer swung her kukri knives and flailed with her limbs, tearing into the approaching Witchbeasts. However, it did not last long. As her fingers and ankles were bitten off, her body helplessly crumbled.

Being hard to kill only served to prolong her agony before the Great Rabbit. It was nothing more than a cruel spectacle.

Roswaal: “Well done.”

As they watched down below as Elsa was devoured, Roswaal whispered to Subaru. Hearing the tone of his voice, Subaru twisted his lips in displeasure.

Roswaal: “Oh my, it’s quite disheartening to see that expression. I assure you that my congratulations are sincere.”

Subaru: “Shut up. It’s not over yet.”

Roswaal: “Indeed, we—no, your esteemed self and I still have the task of luring the Great Rabbit to the Great Waaaterfall~.”

Subaru looked at Roswaal with suspicion as he shook his head and corrected himself in more formal language.

Noticing Subaru’s intent to understand the reason behind the sudden formality, Roswaal smiled and continued,

Roswaal: “You are my savior. You have proven it splendidly. Therefore, I wish to offer the appropriate respect your esteemed self is due. That is all there is to it.”

Subaru: “…Is that so.”

The sincere admiration, the chewing sounds of the Witchbeasts below devouring his bitter enemy, and the faint heartbeat of the girl in his arms: all of it was irritating, causing Subaru to grimace as he touched the Magic Crystal around his neck.

Only the black Magic Crystal knew the extent of Subaru’s success, and the countless failures he had endured after each attempt.

His throat dry, Subaru clearly understood that this knowledge was his only solace.

Great Rabbit: “—Kichi kichi.”

Chomp chomp, crunch crunch. The sound of the Great Rabbit’s gnawing echoed loudly.

Right now, more than anything, all he wanted to hear was the aloof voice of the Witch.

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Shrouded in white light, his vision suddenly cleared.

What greeted Subaru was a green meadow and a cool breeze, a white table and chairs set up on a small hill, a steaming cup of tea, and sweet-smelling tea cakes.

And, the one who had prepared all this was a Witch, whose appearance was defined by the stark contrast of black and white.

Echidna: “—Well done, Natsuki Subaru. At last, you have fulfilled your dearest wish.”

As Subaru climbed the hill and stood before the table, Echidna watched him and gave a small round of applause.

Even her words of congratulations and welcome seemed laced with ulterior motives. It was almost a kind of talent. Subaru scratched his cheek, her demeanor threatening to ruin the afterglow of his sense of accomplishment.

Still, she was a familiar face. Her voice was one he had grown used to hearing.

Echidna: "—? What is the matter? You do not look very happy. Could it be, that my congratulations were too plain?"

Subaru: "No, that's not it…"

Echidna: "I even thought about making it more extravagant, decorating the place and inviting the other Witches for a grand celebration. I could have changed into a more festive dress instead of my usual outfit. You are a boy, after all, so I thought you might hope for a bit more of a welcoming spectacle…"

Subaru: "That's definitely not the case. This is fine as is."

Misinterpreting Subaru's brief silence, Echidna tried to make everything more complex, so Subaru motioned for her to stop with his hand.

Then, he sighed and sat down in the seat prepared for him across from Echidna. Gently, Subaru picked up his cup, letting the warm aroma waft into his nostrils.

However, it was a strange tea, one whose scent gave no indication of whether it was sweet or bitter.

Echidna: "Have you grown addicted to it yet?"

Subaru: "When it comes to Dona Tea, I always tell myself that if I don't drink this, I won't be able to Return by Death next time."

Echidna: "What a way to phrase it. Well, considering it is your lifeline, I suppose you are not entirely wrong."

Despite her words, Echidna gave a wry smile, seemingly enjoying herself.

Perhaps, she truly was pleased that Subaru had achieved his goal.

Subaru: "That would be surprising."

Echidna: “What do you mean by that?”

Subaru: “I thought you’d be hoping I’d struggle more.”

Echidna: “Hey now, you are being quite blunt with your words. I am still the Witch who made a Contract with you, am I not? There is no way I would dislike my contractor’s wish coming true. That is something only those creatures from your memories, uh…”

Subaru: “—Demons.”

Echidna: “Yes, that was it. Only a demon would feel that way, do you not agree?”

Echidna pursed her lips, snapping her fingers and pointing at Subaru.

Subaru offered a brief apology. Whatever the truth might have been, it was true that Echidna had genuinely congratulated him on achieving his goal, even if it was just on the surface.

In that case, accepting it, even if it was just a pretense, was the proper thing to do.

Subaru: “I’ll gratefully accept your lip service.”

Echidna: “I thought we were talking about how it was not just lip service…”

Echidna sighed deeply as she spoke. Then, bringing her cup to her lips, she continued, “Oh well, no matter”,

Echidna: “It is hard to get you to accept things at face value… but, you have done it. That is a fact. Right?”

Subaru: “—True. Yeah, you’re right.”

Reminded by Echidna, Subaru blinked a few times before nodding.

Indeed, just as Echidna had said, Subaru had finally achieved his goal after countless failures. He had resolved the problems surrounding the Sanctuary, dealt with the Great Rabbit and Garfiel, passed the Trials, and saved everyone.

He had also solved the issues at the Roswaal mansion, defeated Elsa and Meili, thwarted Roswaal's schemes, and saved all those he wanted to save.

He had found solutions to both situations, which had seemed to be at a dead end, and reached the right conclusion.

Without anyone dying, without letting anyone else die, they had all finally reached Tomorrow together.

And yet—

Subaru: "…I just don't feel it."

Echidna: "…"

Subaru: "Step by step, I went over everything, making sure there were no mistakes or oversights, scrutinizing every move. And, I finally made it here, but…"

Looking at his trembling hands, Subaru could not be sure if he had truly reached the opposite shore he had desired.

So long as Subaru kept pushing forward, he was able to keep his doubts at bay. He could focus entirely on how to overcome the problems right in front of him, without getting distracted by unnecessary thoughts.

However, now that all those efforts had borne fruit, what had surfaced instead were feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.

He did not feel the slightest bit of a sense of accomplishment; no feeling of satisfaction filled his heart.

Subaru: "If anything, I just feel more and more anxious."

Echidna: "Anxious? Why?"

Subaru: "I don't know! I really don't get it. I don't know the reason at all. It's just that, if things go on like they have before, then the starting point for Return by Death will probably be updated."

If Subaru's previous experiences and Echidna's speculation were correct, Subaru had to overcome a significant challenge for the starting point of Return by Death to update.

On the other hand, while he had infinite chances to try again, Subaru could never return to a problem he had already cleared. Even if he had left something behind.

He was worried that he might have left something else behind again, just like how he could not save Rem from her coma.

Thinking that way, he felt like he was unable to contain himself.

Subaru: "Did I really not screw anything up? Is it okay for me to celebrate solving that problem? Has something irreversible happened somewhere I can't see?"

Echidna: "…Within the range of what I can observe, nothing of that sort has happened."

Subaru: "But, your sight only covers what I can already see! What about beyond that?"

Grabbing the Magic Crystal from around his neck, Subaru slammed it down on the table.

The crystal, a symbol of his Contract with Echidna, allowed her to see what Subaru saw. However, it did not extend beyond his field of vision.

If someone far away, separated from him, were to get hurt, Subaru would not be able to know.

Subaru had thought he had finally overcome the wall standing in his way, but now this anxiety and fear were coming at him in a new form—

Echidna: "—Calm down, Natsuki Subaru."

As Subaru trembled in fear of the unknown, a gentle voice softly reached his earlobe from close by.

Echidna, who was standing beside Subaru, gently pulled his head to her chest, cradling it softly. She stood to his right, embracing his head tenderly.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru held his breath, and stiffened in surprise at the Witch’s unexpected action. As she gently stroked his head, Echidna asked softly if he had calmed down.

Echidna: “I have heard that the sound of a human heartbeat has a calming effect on others. What do you think?”

Subaru: “…I can’t hear your heartbeat.”

Echidna: “Hmm, maybe that is because I am dead. I never really paid attention to that before.”

Echidna seemed surprised by this unforeseen issue, but not appearing particularly concerned about it,

Echidna: “But, I can hear your heartbeat very clearly. At first, it was fast and loud, then it jumped strongly for a moment, and now it is still a bit fast, but quieter.”

Subaru: “Gh…”

Echidna: “It seems my soft skin had some effect after all.”

Subaru: “G-Get away from me!”

Subaru ground his teeth as Echidna grinned triumphantly, and he shook off her arms that were holding him. As she backed away with a playful “Whoa there”, Subaru glared at her and stood up from his chair.

Subaru: “Stop messing around! I’m serious here. I’ve been seriously thinking and worrying…”

Echidna: “You are worried about everyone around you. I know that.

I was not messing around, either.”

Subaru: “Then…!”

Echidna: “I just chose the quickest way to help. According to my calculations, we do not have much time to ease your anxiety. It seemed best to make a quick decision.”

Subaru leaned on the table with one hand, eyeing Echidna suspiciously as she answered.

Did she just say, she would ease Subaru’s anxiety? But, how could she do that?

Subaru: “Is there a way to do that…?”

Echidna: “I understand the worries and concerns that torment you. It is true that I cannot see beyond your field of perception, and I had not expected this kind of pitfall. I had not expected that your heart would not be at peace after solving your problem.”

Subaru: “Answer. My. Question! Echidna! Can, you get rid of this anxiety?”

Stepping forward, Subaru closed the distance between them. He fixed his eyes on the white and black Witch, his voice rising with intensity.

Subaru wanted a straightforward answer without any pretense. How could he find relief? —No, Subaru did not care about himself. What he wanted, was to save everything else.

To save the people around Natsuki Subaru, those who made up his world.

For that, he needed to know—

Subaru: “What should I do?!”

Echidna: “—You should die.”

Her face was so close to his that he could feel her breath, her long eyelashes nearly brushing against him. Her otherworldly beauty stared straight into Subaru's eyes as she quietly sentenced him to death.

Die. That one word that had passed Echidna's lips made Subaru's eyes widen, and his breath catch in his throat.

Instead of reacting with immediate outrage, Subaru tried to accept and understand that Echidna's words were not a joke or jest.

And, after asking himself why over and over again, the answer became clear.

Subaru: "So, you're saying I should try again, to find a better path?"

Echidna: "—Yes, that is exactly it. You have resolved the issues of the Sanctuary and the mansion, and you have most definitely saved everyone there. But, if there exists any regret or dissatisfaction with the outcome, you can still address those as well."

Subaru: "…I, could do it better next time."

Echidna: "I am certain you could. But, you have to do it before the one who granted you this Authority deems this situation acceptable. Before the checkpoint of Return by Death is updated."

Spreading her arms wide, Echidna added this clarification to ensure that Subaru understood.

The new path Echidna had suggested was nothing short of a revelation to Subaru.

After all, Subaru had chosen the right path. He had made the correct choices. And yet, because the result did not sit well with him, he could throw it all away and start over, in search of something even better.

Doing such a thing would be the epitome of—

Echidna: "—Greed."

Hearing Echidna voice the word that had come to his mind, Subaru stared intently at her.

He expected to see her laughing with a wicked expression in response. But, Subaru was mistaken. —Instead, Echidna's eyebrows drooped, not in mischief, but in quiet sorrow.

Echidna: "It is a cruel path which I suggest. You realize that, do you not? If you continue like this, even when you choose the right path, it is likely you will never be satisfied."

Subaru: "…And, you'd be happy to watch that, wouldn't you? To see all the different outcomes unfold."

Echidna: "Please do not take this lightly. I am genuinely worried about you. If you keep pushing yourself, one day, your heart may crack and shatter."

Echidna's serious gaze took Subaru by surprise, making him raise his eyebrows.

At the same time, Subaru started to wonder if he had been mistaken in his understanding of Echidna, of the Witch.

Echidna had witnessed these hundreds of journeys alongside Subaru. He had thought those experiences would not affect a Witch like her.

However, that was Subaru's way of looking at things; a view filled with pride.

Subaru: "—I won't break."

Echidna: "You cannot be sure of that. This has already gone far beyond what we had originally envisioned…"

Subaru: "But, you're here, aren't you?"

Echidna's eyes widened in surprise as Subaru cut her off mid-sentence.

Amused by her surprise, Subaru gave a wry smile, his shoulders relaxing.

Subaru understood Echidna's concerns. He also realized that he was about to throw himself into an unimaginable struggle, and that it was reasonable to doubt his sanity.

But, if he was going to risk breaking, if he was going to walk that razor-thin line between sanity and madness, Echidna would be his reassurance.

Subaru: "Your job is to keep me from losing it, isn't it? That was part of the Contract. Have you already forgotten the terms of your own sales pitch?"

Echidna: "I-I have not forgotten. Of course, I intend to do everything I can."

Subaru: "Then, do just that. —I'll make sure my heart doesn't break, either."

Subaru's argument was weak in terms of justification, but Echidna remained silent for a while after hearing it, her shoulders slumping. She pressed her hand to her forehead, and shaking her head,

Echidna: "Fine, fine. You are right. It was I who had suggested this in the first place. If you need to, you can take out your frustrations on my body however you like…"

Subaru: "Yeah, that helps. Keep a stock of neck bones ready."

Echidna: "There are other ways to comfort you besides breaking my neck, you know!"

Echidna's voice rose in response to Subaru's excessively unscrupulous comment.

Subaru could not help but laugh, as his exchange with Echidna had become so funny to him.

To his frustration, the fear and anxiety that had been swirling around in his chest until just moments ago had subsided enough for him to take another step forward towards a reckless plan.

He had found the correct answer. And yet, seeking an even better outcome, he would plunge back into the darkness once more.

Subaru: “If I’m going to die anyway, I might as well aim for the best outcome.”

Echidna: “You know, that kind of resolve does not really suit someone about to throw themselves into death. You really are serious, right?”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m serious. I’ve always been serious. It’s too late for you to have any regrets now.”

Subaru extended his fist to Echidna, signaling for her to join him on this journey to hell. At first, Echidna hesitated, confused for a moment.

Seeing Echidna’s uncertainty, Subaru pushed his fist forward again, making his gesture clear.

Subaru: “This is a new beginning for Natsuki Subaru. You had better hold on tight and come along for the ride.”

Echidna: “Very well. —Truly, you are a most remarkable contractor.”

With a faint blush on her cheeks, her eyebrows lowering with a mix of sorrow and other emotions, Echidna brought her arm forward to meet Subaru’s outstretched fist with her own.

And so, Natsuki Subaru decided to start anew, seeking new possibilities.

Echidna: “—Yes, you truly are an exceptional contractor.”

Watching her contractor depart with renewed determination and vigor, the Witch narrowed her dark eyes.

He moved forward with a positive attitude, diving into the darkness to pursue a better future.

She had not truly guided him. She had simply mentioned it because the opportunity presented itself, hoping for that outcome. If things went well, it would be a gain; if not, there would be no loss.

That said, it was true that she did not want to see him get hurt.

She had no hesitation in using her knowledge, experience, and resources to prevent his heart from breaking.

Echidna: “Though, it would be nice if that obsession of his made him take a bit more interest in me.”

Putting aside her previous sentiments, the Witch muttered to herself as she ran her hands over her figure.

She knew she was not lacking in charm. In fact, she considered herself to be in the better category, which made Subaru’s indifference all the more perplexing.

Echidna: “Well, I suppose it is rather charming, too. Not everyone is like this single-minded boy, so devoted that he is willing to sacrifice himself time and time again. —For now, I shall respect that obsession of his.”

After all, his determination was so powerful that he no longer viewed Death as Death, or even feared it.

If that burning desire was his driving force to move himself forward, she, the Witch of Greed, would never deny it.

—For now, she would simply wish in silence, hoping that her contractor’s new challenge would be filled with the sweet unknown.

Prologue III:
The Versatile Steward

—That was, the way of a soul who had lived a fearsome number of years and vehemently matured.

It was beyond conjecture what way of life must one take, for the soul to get shaped this way.

He had walked this world for what felt like an eternity, yet standing here, he realized just how narrow his understanding still was.

He was taught so, however, threw all of his sentimentality for it behind.

There existed no time to halt, to contemplate. The crisis had already been set in motion.

???: “Even if I were to surrender, a way to survive surely would not be presented before me. Nonexistent.”

He had unwittingly danced upon a carefully laid-out board, moving exactly as the enemy had desired.

By the time he took notice, no place to escape remained, and he had been entirely isolated from the environs. For him to be helplessly isolated here, he could find no such spectacle in even his oldest, most ancient of memories.

Overwhelming disadvantage, the choice to flee also came to his mind, however—,

???: “—To let that thing go, would be outrageous. Foolishness.”

He could not choose that option, his sense of purpose, now akin to decaying wood, asserted.

As aforesaid, what made him pile up the impossible experience of doubting his own eyes, was the existence of the owner of a soul smothered in wounds and patches.

However, the object awakening his greatest sense of crisis and vigilance was not his personage.

Nestled beside that soul, the owner of the traces of a dusky, wicked, devious and malicious existence. —That which he was acquainted with, was the soul of a Witch who should have perished centuries ago.

???: “Not even considering that the Factor came unstuck and got inherited by the next vessel, to think she yet has not cleared herself of her flawed ideas… no, perhaps that tenacity itself is precisely their true form. Dispiriting.”

A hand on his eyebrows, he adjusted the slightly off monocle back to its position and sighed.

Their relationship could not be labeled as a friendship from antiquity, nothing more than acquaintanceship that existed long in the past. Anyhow, reuniting with an acquaintance after this much time had passed was not something particularly frequent.

And, reuniting with the Witch, was something not meant to be ever again.

???: “The world is already in a new era… to barge onto its stage. Inelegant.”

The world, was something that ought to be the stage of those living in that era.

Himself and the rest, as well as those women and the rest, had an era where they had the world as their own stage. Their selves had lived through that era, and had expired. That was how it was supposed to be.

Yet, to cling to the stage even after death, was befitting of being labeled as the acme of boorishness.

???: “…”

Upon directing his concentration toward his environs, the presences of many people clamored within the magnificent structure.

A Witchbeast called a calamity, and a hazardous person who had tormented people for long had been respectively subjugated, this was a ceremony to thank, reward and commend those who achieved these meritorious feats.

The Royal Candidates too were attendees, thus it was a significantly auspicious event for the Kingdom.

Hence, neither could the opponent do anything untactful, he therefore intended to finish this in one move.

When it came to the chaos and hounding subsequently caused as well, he was supposed to have readied himself to counter, and yet.

???: “It is as though, my actions had been foreseen… no, to say as though, it is but a foolish act to repudiate what is transpiring. Senility.”

To do away unanticipated actions of the opponents as sheer coincidence would be the deed of a simpleton.

Moreso when those except himself, were always contemplating the greatest way of action. He must simultaneously attempt to outstrip those greatest ways of action.

That was the readiness of the almighty steward, and the minimum courtesy for confronting the Witch.

???: “—Witch.”

Yes, the opponent was a Witch. One who should have already perished and lost any means to interfere with the world.

Now that it had appeared forth once again, as one acquainted with those dark ages, his morality of rights and wrongs was—,

???: “—Hey hey, where are you, bro! Playing hide and seek? How cold!”

The next instant echoed the mighty voice of the youth intimidating and constraining him.

The young man, laughing mockingly, stood on the balcony overlooking the garden, searching for him. The unmistakable presence of evil radiating from his chest made it clear that he was carrying some kind of supernatural Anchor.

Though he wanted to openly highlight that and implore who was the one to blame, he would forfeit any chance of victory upon doing so. Who could ever, possibly meddle with him via words.

For the youth was indeed one of the lead actors of this evening.

For he was the one and only Knight of the silver-haired half-devil who made immense contributions to subjugate great evil threatening the world.

???: “Knight to the Witch of Frost, and a contractor to a Witch of Sin… Distasteful.”

Faced with such outrageous titles, he could only laugh; this was precisely what it meant.

Though unfortunately, he refrained from expressing a smile thirsted of loathsomeness beyond criticality.

???: “I’ve given you company till now. Stop running around like a mouse, and come at me from the front!”

Though he seemed to not have ascertained this side’s position, the youth’s voice sonorously resounded into the air of the chilling night. The will to vexate sojourning his tone, was a substitute for rubbing the opponent in the wrong way.

It shan’t make for an easy escape should he err the significance of the danger which the youth posed.

???: “So, it seems you are not a simple puppet of the Witch. Obstreperous adversary.”

To begin with, the cause behind tonight’s ceremony of conferring honors, the subjugation of the great catastrophes were battle accomplishments the youth had attained regardless of the Witch.

Of course, he was no ordinary individual. —A contractor of the Witch who made full use of her.

???: “Thinking back to it, even in that era, I never experienced meeting an opponent this malevolent. Uncharted.”

Once again, he piled up identical contemplation as before.

Having lived for long, his disposition came to be that he had seen the entirety of the world, but that did not hold true. Neither for people, nor for the world, nor for things other than those, nor for anything or everything.

???: “The future holds bright for the lively, pure world. Blessing.”

Despite the predicament of being cornered, to hold his head high upon thinking of the future was the special privilege of the old.

Concealing his brazen smile with a hand, he took action conforming with his own mission.

???: “—I cannot allow the world to be brought to ruin by the insatiable, unbounded “Greed”. Promise.”

There once lived those, who fought to preserve this world.

Likable people, and correspondingly discordant people, however, the direction they all looked in, and what they all wished for was supposed to be the same.

—As the final one to remember those wishes, he could not possibly give up.

Chapter III:
Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch

1

It happened without warning: a sudden, jarring shock that tore through the air.

???: "—Hah."

With a single exhale, Subaru's body crumpled forward, collapsing as though the strength had been drained from him entirely.

No one was there to catch his fall, therefore he tumbled from the platform, rolling helplessly to the ground below.

???: "Subaru—?!"

A scream echoed, sharp and panicked, and in an instant, chaos rippled through the crowd in the wake of this abrupt incident.

He could feel the presence of people rushing toward him and from the platform above, astonished gazes bore down upon him. Subaru's body twitched uncontrollably, limbs spasming like a dying insect.

—Nay, not like an insect on the verge of death. Like one already doomed.

He knew the feeling all too well. The familiar touch of Death crept up behind him, wearing a thin smile, already resting its hand on his shoulder.

???: "Subaru! S-Someone! Please, somebody! Help!"

???: "Ferris, hurry! Get over here!!"

Hands grabbed his shoulders, pulling him upright. The moment he was turned over, blood exploded from his mouth, a violent torrent.

It sounded akin to one's submerged head breaking the surface of a bath. It was blood. A whole bucket's worth. Far too much for a human body to hold. Something inside him had ruptured violently and irreparably.

Someone nearby gasped, and he could see the large, heavy tears brimming in her eyes.

The sight pierced his heart, and it ached. He regretted it deeply, knowing that he had made her cry.

Because of Natsuki Subaru's pitiful, miserable death, he had once again forced that sorrowful expression onto her face.

Echidna: "If you are going to die anyway, would you rather do it where no one can see you?"

The room erupted into a cacophony of shouts and cries; but, amid the uproar, a calm, cutting, almost penetrating voice reached his ears with stark clarity.

It was like it had come from a world entirely separate from this one. —No, not "as though." It was from another world. That was the truth.

The cold black stone at his chest hummed with that voice as Subaru felt the warm waves of healing magic flow through him. Yet, deep down, he knew it was all in vain.

There was no mistaking it; the sensation of Death had a singular, unmistakable presence.

He understood now, without question. He was dying. And once he accepted that, only one thought remained—

Subaru: "Wh-Who…"

—Who was it? Who had killed Natsuki Subaru?

2

???: "Myon myon myon myon myon…"

???: "…"

A slow, carefree voice drifted across the breeze, carrying over the green expanse of the grasslands.

This familiar, almost prank-like ritual repeated itself with such diligence that it seemed a necessary step for the inheritance of Memories.

Then again, it could very well be her way of messing with Subaru, dragging this on and on.

Subaru: "If that's the case, your pettiness has reached new heights."

???: "Myon… oh, do you still doubt me? No matter how much time has passed in the real world, we have been together for a while now, have we not? Is it not about time you started trusting me completely?"

Subaru: "Trust you completely…? What, did I bash my head in or something?"

Pointing to his head, Subaru grimaced dramatically. Hearing his response, the Witch— Echidna puffed her cheeks in exaggerated displeasure.

It was a pouting face Subaru had grown accustomed to. As annoying as it was to admit, Echidna was not wrong. She had become a constant presence in Subaru's life in terms of time spent together.

At least enough to say that, in this other world, hers was the face he had seen more than anyone else's.

Subaru: "For someone I've been with for so long, you still make me feel like I can't put my guard down around you. You're quite one hell of a woman."

Echidna: "Oh? Hehe, it does not feel so bad being treated like a girl, you know."

Subaru: "If that's what you call being treated like a girl, you've got a long way to go.”

Watching Echidna deflate as the air left her puffed-up cheeks, Subaru sighed deeply.

Then, leaning forward weakly, he slumped onto the table before Echidna. Collapsing carelessly over the objects on the table, naturally, he knocked over the cups and tea cakes.

As she watched them tumble under the table, Echidna, closing one eye,

Echidna: “You are so rude. Even if I can conjure these things whenever I wish, it does not feel good to have my hospitality so thoroughly slighted.”

Subaru: “Think of it as an art form that expresses my utterly crushed spirit.”

Echidna: “Calling a simple tantrum art? Picasso or Van Gogh would be furious with you, you know?”

Echidna teased him, referencing great artists from Subaru’s knowledge. Subaru, not bothering to respond, tilted his head to the side.

Echidna: “This is serious. That being said, I do feel sorry for you. —Still, it has only been a month.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “One month since you dealt with the Sanctuary and the mansion, and made a Contract with me… and now, you are wrapped up in yet another Death. It really is a kind of talent, would you not say?”

Subaru: “Talent? What kind of talent is that? The talent to die? I’ll murder your ass!”

Echidna: “Oh my, so scary.”

Subaru cradled his head in his hands while the Witch, lying sideways in his view, gave a mocking shrug of fear.

Sighing deeply at her usual attitude, Subaru slowly pushed himself upright.

Then—

Echidna: “It seems you are done venting. So—”

Subaru: “A snap of your fingers to replenish the Dona tea and cakes. Ahh, I know. I know.”

Looking exasperated, Subaru grabbed the newly-appeared cup. Gulping it down in one go, he then stuffed some cakes into his mouth as if to clear the taste.

Both the tea and cakes were Echidna’s creations. There was probably no real difference between them, but liquid and solid forms somehow felt distinct in his mind. It was all psychological.

He had to keep this mindset, or the weight of the situation would crush him.

Echidna: “Nevertheless, being killed in front of a crowd like that; it was quite a bold move.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, I was completely caught off guard. But, isn’t it natural to let your guard down sometimes?”

Responding to Echidna as she broached the main topic, Subaru reflected on what had happened to him.

—The ceremony was meant to commend those who had defeated two of the great threats to the world: the White Whale, and the Sin Archbishop of Sloth.

That prestigious event had been the stage for Subaru’s newest Death.

The Crusch Camp, the Anastasia Camp, and naturally, the Emilia Camp, including Subaru, were all gathered. Nobles and high-ranking officials of the Kingdom were present as well. It was a high-class, formal affair.

How could he have possibly expected to be killed in such a setting with all eyes filed upon him?

Echidna: “In fact, it was your grand debut as the Knight of your beloved. I was hoping it would go smoothly, considering how much time I spent helping you with etiquette…”

Subaru: “Yet you can’t hide that smirk on your face. You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Echidna: “—. Do not get the wrong idea. I am not wishing for your death. I simply cannot suppress my overflowing curiosity about the unknown.”

Subaru: “They say only fools learn through death, but I guess not even death has cured your nosiness.”

Echidna offered a feeble excuse, but Subaru deliberately chose words he knew would annoy and irritate her.

For someone who openly claimed to be driven by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, she sure hated being called a busybody. Then again, Subaru would probably hate being called a veteran of death, so perhaps it was mutual.

In any case—

Echidna: “—This is the start of another Death loop.”

And so, Echidna clearly confronted him with words about a reality that was hard to deny.

Subaru could not look away as he violently scratched his head,

Subaru: “I don’t like that term, “Death loop”. It sounds too much like something from a game or a manga and makes it less serious.”

Echidna: “I think it is convenient and easy to understand… but, I will stop if you really hate it.”

Nodding at Subaru's complaint, Echidna added a casual "Well then" and continued,

Echidna: "Now, about this Death that struck you in such a situation… this time, the cause was almost instantaneous."

Subaru: "…It was when I was about to say something on the platform."

The ceremony proceeded solemnly, and while Wilhelm and Julius received first and second honors for their achievements in slaying the White Whale and the Sin Archbishop of Sloth, respectively, Subaru was awarded the third honor.

This was recognition of his achievements, second only to the two who directly had taken down the main enemies; it was even more so than that of Crusch, who had led the forces, or of Anastasia, who had provided military cooperation.

Subaru felt quite embarrassed by being awarded the third honor ahead of the Royal Candidates, but Crusch and Anastasia acknowledged Subaru's efforts and achievements, and Wilhelm and the others respected that judgment.

Having taken the position of Emilia's Knight, Subaru himself wanted at least some form of distinction. So, he humbly accepted their goodwill and gratefully received the third honor.

As a result, Subaru, who had been called up to the stage, received words of praise for his achievements from a representative of the Council of Wise Men, who spoke on behalf of the absent King.

And then—

Echidna: "Just as you turned to face them, you collapsed and departed, never to return."

Subaru: "Watch how you say that…! Weren't you able to tell what happened, either?"

Grimacing at her matter-of-fact tone, Subaru flicked the Magic Crystal hanging from his neck.

As their Contract deepened, Echidna gained the ability to share real-time information with Subaru outside of the tea party. He found it annoying when she constantly talked to him, but her perspective was invaluable in situations like this.

Subaru asked with that hope in mind, and Echidna shrugged,

Echidna: “Sorry that I cannot meet your expectations, but I did not pick up on anything.”

Subaru: “You useless, blabbermouth Witch…”

Echidna: “Yes, I cannot deny that one this time. Honestly, the most likely cause seems like sudden death… Although, I just had a thought: what if it was a chronic condition, like a heart attack? What would we do then?”

Subaru: “…Guess I’d just have to hope that my starting point for Return by Death takes me back far enough to improve my lifestyle.”

There was not much else Subaru could say to her blunt concern.

As Echidna had suggested, Return by Death probably could not do much against natural causes of death such as illness. After all, even the strongest warrior race in the universe could not defeat something like heart disease.

Subaru: “So basically, I need to eat my veggies if I don’t want to drop dead.”

Echidna: “At least you are reflecting on your daily habits. Now, let us talk about the parts of this that are worse.”

Clapping her hands in front of her chest, Echidna steered the conversation to the real issue.

Switching topics with a clap was a routine part of his interactions with Echidna. Subaru followed her lead, replaying the events in his mind to sort through his thoughts.

There was no denying the lack of information, but some facts could still be inferred from the current clues.

For example, the cause of Subaru's Death.

Subaru: "…Was it magic, or maybe poison?"

Echidna: "It could be. I did not sense any magic being used, so that is unlikely. But if it was poison, there is no way I could have known."

Subaru: "You weren't on full alert for magic either, were you?"

Echidna: "Well… no, I was not. I suppose if a pro assassin had been hired, it is not impossible that they could have slipped past my watch."

Subaru: "An assassin…"

Hearing that word, Subaru's face twisted into a scowl.

After all, it had not even been a month in real time since he had managed to fend off an attack from a pair of assassins. Fully aware of his situation, Echidna quickly realized the reason behind Subaru's distaste.

Echidna: "I understand how you feel. But right now, you are a person of public interest. You were one of the stars of this ceremony… it would not be surprising if someone sent an assassin after you."

Subaru: "That's…"

Echidna: "Of course, it is also possible that the Witch Cult is behind it. In this case, you might find it more reassuring if your enemies are cultists."

Subaru: "It's kind of messed up that I'd feel better thinking it's an act of terror by the Witch Cult than suspecting Crusch-san or Anastasia-san of trying to have me killed."

Subaru furrowed his brow as Echidna offered a faint smile with her words.

To say that it would be preferable to face off against the Witch Cult rather than accuse political allies was something anyone would think to be insane. But perhaps the only one who could understand that feeling was Echidna.

Echidna: “But, surely there is reason for suspicion? The two you mentioned are also rival candidates in the Royal Selection. They have more than enough motive to send an assassin after you.”

Subaru: “Maybe. But after being targeted by someone I thought was like family, I’m not about to start buying into every logical argument.”

Echidna: “Hmm, a sound argument, but still… Roswaal truly complicates things.”

Echidna groaned, knowing that Roswaal’s involvement made for a strong counterpoint, but there was no point in prolonging unfounded suspicions any longer.

At the absurd idea that Crusch or Anastasia would target Subaru,

Subaru: “Clearing those doubts quickly is the smart move. Then we can have a more constructive discussion.”

Echidna: “Oh, feeling confident, are we? Do you have a brilliant plan in mind?”

Subaru: “You’re not gonna like it if I tell you it’s the boring way.”

Without much fanfare, Echidna tilted her head as Subaru calmly laid out his thoughts.

She clearly preferred seeing Subaru running in circles, but he was not naive enough to cater to her whims or to sell his life cheaply.

Even if he had infinite attempts, wasting them accreting meaningless Deaths would be absurd.

Subaru: “Simply put, I should surprise Crusch-san and Anastasia-san with a direct question. If I suddenly ask them, “Are you the one who’s trying to kill me?”, they’d be quite rattled, right?”

Echidna: “Hohoh, I see.”

Subaru: “And anyway, if I’m going to suspect anyone, it’d only be Anastasia-san. I don’t think Crusch-san can scheme like that in her current state.”

Crusch, who was the victim of having her Memories stolen, was still reeling. Though she was present at the ceremony, Subaru doubted she was fully aware of her position or surroundings. If she had already begun maneuvering behind the scenes to eliminate political rivals, then her aptitude for politics would be truly terrifying.

As for Anastasia, it seemed unlikely for her to be the mastermind.

Subaru: “I don’t think she’d intentionally tarnish her camp’s reputation by pulling something like this during the ceremony. And killing me in front of everyone would only risk undermining her accomplishments.”

Echidna: “Hmm, a logical answer. I have nothing to add.”

Subaru: “Just how many times do you think I’ve died so far? I’ve learned to think things through a bit.”

In response to Echidna’s words, Subaru tapped his head with his finger.

It was not something to boast about, just a simple fact.

Return by Death did not accumulate physical experiences, but the mental scars stacked up with every attempt.

No matter how many times he experienced Death, the helplessness, the overwhelming loss, never dulled. And the pain, he would never get used to that; but—

Subaru: “—The fear of it has definitely faded. That, too.”

Echidna: “Oh, you are making me blush, saying it is all thanks to me.”

Subaru: “I didn’t say that.”

Subaru clicked his tongue, annoyed by Echidna's coy smile.

In truth, he had not said it. He had not, but he could not deny it internally.

Without Echidna, Subaru doubted he would have maintained his sanity through the many times he had already endured Return by Death.

Of course, he had no intention of voicing any gratitude for that.

Subaru: "Anyway, that's why I don't suspect the two camps."

Echidna: "Then, what about the two camps who were not present at the ceremony? The candidates not involved in this commendation might have had reasons to make a move here, correct?"

Subaru: "…I don't know about Priscilla, but Felt and Reinhard wouldn't do it."

Pressured by Echidna's persistent questioning, Subaru replied in a lower tone.

He did not have a particularly deep connection with Felt or Reinhard. It was by mere chance that they had helped him escape his first Death on the day he was summoned to this other world.

But, in that short time, he had come to trust them. Felt was not the type to tolerate underhanded tactics, and Reinhard was the picture of honesty and integrity.

Subaru: "Even if my last interaction with them wasn't the greatest."

Echidna: "Ah yes, there is that Memory of you driving them away with some harsh words. Maybe they were hurt more than you realize. Is it not possible they would want you dead?"

Subaru: "Come on, I'm not getting assassins sent after me over a temper tantrum."

Besides, if Reinhard wanted to kill Subaru, he would not need to send an assassin. His own skills would allow him to do the job himself in an instant.

Even with the success Subaru had achieved, if Reinhard decided to kill him out of anger, Subaru doubted anyone in the Kingdom would bother to come to his own defense.

Echidna: “At least you have me on your side. That is reassuring, is it not?”

Subaru: “And what could an evil spirit who haunts my head possibly do for me in a court of law?”

Echidna: “Calling me an evil spirit is a bit much!”

In any case, the scenario where Reinhard acted out of anger at Subaru over their last encounter could be dismissed.

In that case, that left Priscilla as the only remaining suspect among the Royal Candidates, but she also seemed unlikely.

Subaru: “This is just a baseless hunch, but Priscilla doesn’t seem like someone who’d go through the trouble of hiring an assassin… if she wanted me dead, she’d come right at me, face-to-face.”

Echidna: “I wonder about that. Based on what I have seen from your Memories, I think she is more of a pragmatist than you give her credit for. If necessary, she might resort to dirty tactics, as any ruler might.”

Subaru: “I don’t think she’s a ruler yet…”

However, Subaru agreed that Priscilla had a regal demeanor, even as a candidate. And he could not completely dismiss the idea that she would use underhanded methods if she deemed them necessary.

Thus, it might be prudent to consider Priscilla or the Witch Cult as immediate potential enemies.

Echidna: “Of course, there is always the possibility that someone trying to gain favor with one of the Royal Candidates got ahead of themselves and decided to take you out, but that would make finding the mastermind much more difficult.”

Subaru: “Stop it! I had thought of that too, but I didn’t dwell on it because it’s too damn depressing!”

Widening the pool of suspects like that would even put Crusch and Anastasia in a dubious light. This was why political strife and internal conflicts were the bane of nations.

Subaru: “Anyway.”

And, Subaru slowly rose to his feet, feeling sufficiently miserable after all these grim thoughts.

Still seated, Echidna widened her eyes and asked, “Leaving already?”

Echidna: “You could stay a bit longer and rest.”

Subaru: “Why bother keeping me here? You can watch the outside world through the Magic Crystal, so you don’t have any reason to be bored.”

Echidna: “It seems you genuinely believe me to be heartless, but I truly do care about you, you know? I am the one who wanted this Contract, after all. Is it not only natural that I would worry when you are about to throw yourself into another fight so soon?”

Subaru: “You always catch me off guard when you say things like that.”

Echidna puffed her cheeks in mild frustration at Subaru’s flippant tone, but he merely shrugged.

A door appeared down the hill, one that opened to the outside world, signaling the moment to leave this dreamlike castle and return to reality. Reality— that is, the very moment Subaru, who had just lost his life, would return to.

Echidna: “So, what is your next move?”

As she asked this to his retreating back, Subaru waved his hand without looking back.

There was no clear, immediate solution to figuring out who had killed him or how it had happened.

So—

Subaru: “For now, I’ll just get killed a few more times, and see if I can piece things together.”

He had no intention of wasting his life carelessly, and he certainly did not want to contribute to the accretion of meaningless Deaths.

Yet, if necessary, he would sell his life and accrete Deaths without hesitation.

For Natsuki Subaru’s soul had already been sold to the Witch of Greed.

3

Subaru: “—Is it you, Crusch-san? Are you the one who’s trying to kill me?”

Crusch: “Excuse me, what are you talking about, Natsuki Subaru-sama? I have been told you are my benefactor. Even with my lost memories, I would never think of repaying kindness with treachery.”

Subaru: “—Is it you, Anastasia-san? Are you the one who’s trying to kill me?”

Anastasia: “Huh? What’s goin’ on that you’d say somethin’ like that outta nowhere? Are ya feelin’ like you’re bein’ threatened or somethin’? If so, ya can consult with me.”

Subaru: “—Is it you again, Roswaal? Are you the one who’s trying to kill me?”

Roswaal: “Myyy~, my, that is quite the harsh statement, Subaru-sama. There is no longer any reason for me to test you like before. You know that quite well, don’t you?”

Subaru: “What do you think?”

Having gathered responses from those he wanted to clear suspicions from, and those he needed to clear suspicions from as well, Subaru stood at the corner of the commendation ceremony and silently directed his question toward the Magic Crystal hanging from his neck.

In response to Subaru's question, the inhuman Magic Crystal emitted a dull glow,

Echidna: "Roughly the same impression just as you would expect. Some were startled, some laughed it off as a joke, others smirked knowingly… well, there did not seem to be anything too revealing."

Subaru: "True."

Subaru gently rubbed his chin, mentally conversing with the voice that resonated inside his head.

He was communicating with Echidna, who dwelled within the Magic Crystal. They communicated without words, their conversations flowing telepathically if put simply, a method that had become invaluable for resolving issues.

That said, during more peaceful times, Subaru often found himself at the mercy of her endless small talk, which frequently left him frustrated.

Subaru: "Still, this is where you come in handy… For now, it seems none of them are the mastermind."

Echidna: "That, or they are just so skilled at hiding their true feelings that even a little prodding would not make them flinch."

Subaru: "If I start doubting them like that, it will never end."

If Subaru assumed his opponent was always one or two steps ahead, trying to uncover their plot would seem utterly foolish. It was a pathetic conversation between him and the Witch, both racking their brains and getting nowhere.

After all, he had already died three times, all for the sake of extracting fresh reactions from each suspect. At the very least, he wanted to cross them off the list for good.

—The time was the opening of the commendation ceremony, and Subaru's Return by Death had set its starting point here.

At worst, there had been a possibility that he would have been sent back several days before the ceremony, so finding the save point much closer than expected brought a sense of relief.

Echidna: "Having a few more days would have made it easier to prepare, would it not?"

Subaru: "If I had prepared too much, they might have called off the attack altogether. If that had happened, the culprit would have slipped away, and that would be much more troublesome"

Echidna: "I see. Easier to smoke them out if you know where they will be and whom they are targeting."

Subaru: "The last thing I want is for them to escape, and for the target to shift from me to Emilia and the others."

For that reason, Subaru would ensure that whoever was after him would be dealt with here and now.

Thanks to Echidna's assistance, he had successfully utilized Return by Death, but the conditions for updating Return by Death's checkpoint remained unknown as ever. The hypothesis was that it was only after overcoming the difficulties that befell Subaru, but that too was not certain.

More importantly, if someone other than Subaru were to get hurt, there was a strong possibility that his Authority, Return by Death, would not allow him to save them, just as it had failed to save the now comatose Rem.

Subaru: "So, I'll make sure to finish off the enemy who's been killing me right when they do it."

Echidna: "A strange way of putting it, but I understand. —So, shall we proceed according to plan?"

Subaru: “Yeah. It’s all on you. Show me I can trust you.”

Echidna: “Huh, so you still do not trust me…”

Unknowingly wounded by a matter entirely separate from the main issue, Echidna reacted subtly. Ignoring her response, Subaru withdrew his consciousness from the Magic Crystal and shifted his attention back to the lively hall.

He heard a voice akin to a silver bell, summoning him toward the line of people awaiting their commendations. Subaru smiled back at the girl beside him, who gently spoke to him. Her nervousness increased as they awaited the announcement of who would be honored for their contributions.

Of course, Subaru already knew the details of the ceremony. He also knew its conclusion.

As a result, there was no tension and no sense of anticipation for him. If there was any emotion stirring within him, it would be the simple wish to avoid seeing the girl beside him, hopeful for Subaru’s merits to be recognized, ending up with a sad expression on her face.

However—

Echidna: “If circumstances were to change, it could shake the foundation of our analysis, so you mustn’t overlook that.”

The warning was one Subaru already knew well, and he wrinkled his nose in irritation. That very nose was then playfully poked by the girl beside him as she told him to stop.

???: “—Now, we shall begin the commendation ceremony for the defeat of the White Whale and the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishop!”

The one who swiftly controlled the restless atmosphere of the venue was a man of imposing stature, clad in armor: the captain of the Royal Guard, who had also facilitated the announcement of the Royal Selection.

Wilhelm’s name was called first, commending him for his significant contribution in defeating the White Whale.

It was clear, however, that he was not in a state to fully appreciate the praise. His mind was weighed down by the condition of his lord, Crusch, and the old wound on his shoulder that would not heal. Subaru, too, could not help but wish to alleviate the cause of Wilhelm's suffering.

Next, Julius was summoned to receive the second-highest honor for his role in defeating the Sin Archbishop of Sloth. The ceremony continued, and soon, in a deep and authoritative voice, Subaru's name was called to the stage to receive the third commendation.

With a gentle push from the girl beside him, who was overwhelmed with emotion, Subaru ascended the stage. There, his achievements were acknowledged by one of the Council of Wise Men's elders, a man whose beard and eyebrows were far too long, and after he offered him words of praise—

Subaru: "—Blergh!"

Without warning, just like before, Subaru coughed up blood and collapsed, dead.

4

Echidna: "I have finally confirmed something about the cause of your death. —It was not any kind of magic."

Even though Subaru could not see her face, her smug tone through the Magic Crystal made it easy to imagine her proud look.

Subaru, however, was not entirely convinced that this was information worth boasting about. Considering the dozens of times he had died just to figure out the cause of his Death, it felt like a rather underwhelming revelation.

Subaru: "If it wasn't magic, then what was it? Poison? A curse? I've already matched the faces and names of those who might have touched me during the ceremony."

Echidna: "If we are dealing with a Curse Arts User, that would most certainly be a solid strategy. Usually, there is no saving you the moment they touch you, but your case is an exception. However…”

Subaru: “However?”

Echidna: “This time, that was a wasted effort. It was not Curse Arts, nor was it poison.”

Her tone was so full of confidence that Subaru found himself listening intently.

With magic, Curse Arts, and poison off the table, Subaru felt utterly stumped. But, perhaps there was a technique in this world that he still had no knowledge of.

Echidna: “There is an unusual technique called the Flow Method. Even those without talent can use it, but it requires hellish training.”

Subaru: “I see. Sounds like something you wouldn’t casually ask to learn. But, never mind that.”

In fact, there did seem to be techniques he was unfamiliar with, but they were unlikely to be something he could learn on the spot, nor would they suit him anyway.

Instead, Subaru redirected the conversation back to the main issue, and after a brief pause, Echidna added—

Echidna: “Judging by the number of attempts you’ve accreted, it is safe to say an Authority is what took you out.”

Subaru: “An Authority… so, that means it was the Witch Cult, then?”

Echidna: “Exactly. Whoever did this to you must be someone on the level of a Sin Archbishop. Authorities stem from Witch Factors… and there is a pattern of sharing them with their Apostles.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna’s voice carried an air of quiet intensity as she explained.

To someone who claimed to be the world's foremost expert on magic, the Authorities wielded by the Sin Archbishops must have been an irresistible object of fascination— or, simply put, the perfect additions to her collection, driven by her insatiable Greed.

Ignoring her peculiar inclinations, Subaru scanned the venue, observing the crowd of attendees.

Thinking that one of the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishops could be hidden among them—

Subaru: "…Could it be Gluttony?"

Swallowing hard, Subaru felt a mixture of faint unease and growing anticipation rising in his throat.

Subaru figured that if anyone in the world would welcome the arrival of a Sin Archbishop, it would likely only be himself, Wilhelm, and possibly Ferris.

If the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony was truly present here, it would be like a moth flying straight into the flame.

It would be the perfect opportunity to make him pay for the devastation he had caused, and reclaim what he had stolen.

Echidna: "If it is truly the one you are hoping for…"

Subaru: "Then it's obvious. —I'll take Rem back."

Clenching his fist, Subaru spoke out the unwavering resolve that had taken root deep within him.

Even now, Rem, who had both her Name and Memories stolen, remained trapped in her endless sleep. The desire to bring her back was one of the main reasons Subaru had decided to make a Contract with Echidna.

If the enemy truly was the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, it would be the jackpot he had been waiting for. Even if it turned out not to be him, they would at least gain a lead on the whereabouts of that monster and his detestable mouth.

Subaru: “So, how do we identify the Sin Archbishop?”

Echidna: “Well, that is the problem.”

Subaru: “…The problem?”

Contrary to Subaru’s steely resolve, Echidna’s response was casual and light. A bad feeling crept over Subaru, and as he furrowed his brow, the voice in his head continued with an ominous, “Actually,”

Echidna: “Normally, a Witch… ah, right, we are dealing with a Sin Archbishop here. Normally, a Sin Archbishop would be surrounded by Miasma. It should make them easy to spot.”

Subaru: “Miasma… so, I’m the problem?”

Echidna: “Sadly, you are correct. Due to all your accreted deaths and use of your Authority, your Miasma is now so thick it is practically drowning the entire venue, concealing any Sin Archbishop who might be present.”

The cruel irony of the situation left Subaru unable to blame Echidna.

Subaru saw this as a consequence of his decision to fully leverage Return by Death. Even if he had known about it beforehand, the option of not using it was never on the table.

Subaru: “No point in regretting what’s already done. So, what should I do now?”

Echidna: “It will take a slightly unusual approach, like… a human wave attack.”

Subaru was momentarily confused by Echidna’s suggestion, but the answer soon became apparent.

Echidna’s description was apt: an unusual human wave attack, indeed.

Subaru: “There must be at least… what, four or five hundred people here?”

Echidna: “Then, even if you are hopelessly unlucky, it should only take five hundred tries.”

She said it so nonchalantly, and Subaru had plenty of things he wanted to snap back with, like how there was no way he could be that unlucky, but he held his tongue.

After all, it was not like he could boast about having any luck.

5

Easily swayed by the Witch’s sweet words, Subaru’s chosen strategy was a simple one.

In essence, it was the same tactic he had used on Crusch, Anastasia, and even Roswaal— approaching people randomly and asking, “Are you a Sin Archbishop?”

Ideally, he would have preferred to ask multiple people as a joke in one go, but Subaru quickly learned just how much the Sin Archbishops were despised in this world.

In most cases, just mentioning the term caused intense tension, and the moment Subaru threw accusations of being a Sin Archbishop, his targets would become deeply agitated.

At first, he had hoped that their reactions were signs of having been identified as a Sin Archbishop, but—

Echidna: “You are one of the most renowned Witch Cult hunters, having defeated a Sin Archbishop. If someone like you were to suspect one of being a Sin Archbishop, they would deny it with everything they have.”

And so, Echidna’s reminder prompted Subaru to reconsider his approach and the need to be more careful in how he phrased his questions.

And so, accreting more retries, Subaru meticulously questioned each participant in the ceremony. Frankly, reaching five hundred attempts was the worst-case scenario, and he had expected to find the answer in far fewer attempts.

However, reality was unforgiving to Subaru, as the number of trials exceeded four hundred, pushing relentlessly toward the dreaded five hundred mark.

Subaru, however, had his justifications.

Naturally, in this kind of operation, he started by targeting people whose backgrounds were unknown or suspicious.

In this case, unknown meant people with whom Subaru had little to no personal connection.

He first questioned unfamiliar faces, other factions' supporters, and the ceremony staff. When that yielded no results, he moved on to the next stage: targeting individuals from other camps and people he knew by name.

Honestly, this was little more than a precautionary measure. He did not expect to find the culprit here, but once he had started, he had to see it through.

That was all there was to it. And yet—

???: "—Why would you think such a thing? Unfathomable."

The response he got from one particular person sparked something strange within Subaru.

Even in hindsight, he could not quite understand why that answer lingered in his mind. Some had misunderstood his intentions, and others had asked him similar questions.

And yet, for some reason, this person stood out to him in a way the others had not, though he could not explain why.

So, to get to the bottom of it—

Subaru: "Are you a sin Archbishop?" "Are you familiar with the word "Gluttony"?" "Do you happen to be a spy from one of the Camps?" "What do you cherish?" "Who's your family?" "Where are you from? "If you were to be an animal, what would you be?" "Does hearing the word Witch delight you?" "Do you know about

Petelgeuse?” “What do you think of Petelgeuse?” “Shall we talk together about Echidna?” “Where did you meet Roswaal?” “Aren’t you frightened of the Silver Haired Half Elf?” “E.M.T.” “What do you think about betraying?” “What do you value?” “Do you like money?” “What do you like?” “How are you doing?” “Did you get a haircut?” “You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

He fired off his questions relentlessly, and he deliberately took to the stage for the final round.

The wise elder with the long white beard presented him with the commendation, and asked him to say a few words. Normally, this was the point where Subaru would turn and be killed by “something.”

But, as Subaru turned around this time, nothing unusual happened to his chest. He took a step forward, looking down at the people waiting for his words, and spotted a face in the corner of the venue.

And, Subaru smiled at the person who had been watching him all along—

Subaru: “—You are my enemy, Clind.”

6

—Subaru knew shockingly little about the blue-haired man called Clind.

Technically, Clind was a member of the Emilia faction— though strictly speaking, it was because his master, Annerose Miload, was a branch of the Mathers family, thus aligning him with their camp.

That said, he had known Roswaal’s maids, like Ram and Frederica, for quite some time, and even Emilia was familiar with him. In other words, he seemed to have a deeper connection to Roswaal than even his own master, Annerose.

That was precisely why Subaru had postponed questioning him. In hindsight, this was a mistake that had needlessly increased the number of attempts.

Subaru continued questioning every last participant just to be sure, but Clind was the only one who had raised any alarm for both him and the soul bound to his mind.

In other words, Clind was likely involved with the inner workings of the Witch Cult and wielded an Authority—

Echidna: “Of course, just because someone has a Witch Factor does not necessarily make them part of the Witch Cult. My friends and I were not, for example.”

Subaru: “But, you guys were just as dangerous as them, right?”

Echidna: “Well, yes, each of us almost destroyed the world at least once…”

Echidna, the wicked soul, spoke as if it were no big deal, but if someone had nearly wiped out the world even once, they should absolutely be classified as a threat.

Setting aside Echidna’s skewed sense of reality, Subaru refocused on how to deal with Clind.

Subaru: “So, we know Clind is using an Authority to kill me, but what exactly is it?”

Echidna: “I do not know. The effects of each Authority vary from one person to another. I am sure even the current Greed manifests an Authority different from mine.”

Subaru: “So, he could be using invisible hands to kill me, like Petelgeuse?”

Petelgeuse’s Unseen Hand had indeed allowed him to commit such acts. Subaru had been lucky to see them early on, but had they remained invisible, it would have been a nightmare to deal with.

Much like back then, this battle would start with uncovering the nature of his opponent’s Authority.

Subaru: “Got any leads on how he’s killing me?”

Echidna: “I have a few ideas. From what I have seen, your heart is being destroyed while you are on the stage. So, invisible hands are definitely a possibility, though using something similar to Petelgeuse would be boring.”

Subaru: “This isn’t a manga serialization meeting. We don’t get to choose abilities based on how interesting they are.”

It was incredibly versatile and hard to defend against. Unseen Hand was an outstanding ability in that regard. It would be a terrifying threat if multiple people could wield such power.

On top of that, Petelgeuse had the resilience typical of Evil Spirits, making him incredibly hard to kill. Even now, thinking back on it, he was a formidable foe, one Subaru would never want to face again.

Echidna: “But even so, you cannot back down if you are against a Sin Archbishop.”

Subaru: “—. Sin Archbishop or not, I’ll crush anyone who lays a hand on my own people.”

Echidna: “Ohhh, so scary. And the worst part is, I know you mean it.”

Subaru could almost imagine the unseen Echidna shrugging at his response. His exchange with the Witch felt so natural that, without missing a beat, Subaru began planning his next move to deal with Clind.

At the very least, so long as he knew that Clind would make his move while he was on the stage—

Echidna: “Where will you start?”

Subaru: “Isn’t it obvious?”

The excitement in Echidna’s voice was barely concealed, as if she were anticipating the unraveling of the unknown.

The Witch’s inappropriate eagerness was oddly reassuring to

Subaru. With that thought in mind, he closed one eye.

Subaru: “—Gathering intel. If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles”

Echidna: “I doubt Sun Tzu considered that in order to avoid danger in a hundred battles, one might have to lose hundreds of times first.”

Subaru smiled at Echidna’s wry remark, and said “That’s a fair point.”

7

???: “Clind, is it? Yes, I see. He has been serving the Master for many years, and now, on the Master’s orders, he is working as Annerose-sama’s steward.”

???: “As per the Master, most of the Mathers household servants are trained by Clind. Embarrassing as it is, even I learned the basics of being a maid from him.”

???: “Skilled, versatile, the perfect steward… There’s no end to the praise for Clind. His abilities as a steward are truly unmatched, and I still feel ashamed of how much I have to learn. But…”

???: “But, as a person, he is far from admirable. Some might mistake him for a devoted, caring teacher… but, it is all just superficial.”

???: “His true nature is that of a beast who blatantly favors the young. Once someone grows up a bit, he loses interest. I, too, was treated horribly…”

???: “Subaru-sama, you need to be careful. Not for yourself, Subaru-sama, but for Emilia-sama. She may look mature, but emotionally, she is still very much a child…”

???: “Clind’s focus is not swayed by looks or actual age. He claims to see the soul or whatever; anyway, that’s how it is!”

????: “Concerning Clind…? Once again, you are stirring up unnecessary trouble before a big event.”

????: “You will be called up to the stage when the award ceremony starts. Stay quiet until then. If you mess up during the ceremony, no one will be able to bail you out.”

????: “…You want to chat to calm your nerves? You would be better off talking to Emilia-sama if that’s the case. And of all things, you choose to talk about Clind?”

????: “—. No, it’s fine. This is Barusu we’re talking about, after all. There must be some meaning behind it. Rather, if there isn’t, Ram would be surprised. And despise you for it.”

????: “Clind is Roswaal-sama’s steward. He can handle most tasks single-handedly, and he is incredibly skilled. He has never been seen breaking a sweat.”

????: “He is currently serving under Annerose-sama, and is particularly attached to that young mistress… He has a soft spot for children. He used to dote on Ram quite a bit… And on Rem too, surely.”

????: “If that girl is Ram’s sister, she naturally must have also had interactions with Clind, right? Well, that doesn’t matter now since that has all been forgotten. Back to the matter of Clind.”

????: “As for how long he has served Roswaal-sama, even Ram does not know. It’s said that their relationship goes back quite far, so you should ask Roswaal-sama directly.”

????: “…Not quite sure what your intentions are, but Ram would avoid quarrels with Clind. It’s not a matter of strength or weakness. He is just impossible to figure out.”

?????: “Curious about Clind? Oh, that’s an eaaasy~ request. He and I have known each other for quite a long time. I’m sure there’s plenty I could teeell~ you.”

?????: “To begin with, he’s serving Annerose on my orders. Annerose is, after all, a candidate to become the next Roswaal, you seeeee~. I needed some insurance to keep “her” safe.”

?????: “I’ve made a Contract with him. So long as it does not interfere with his duties, he is contracted to protect my assets. Annerose is considered one of those assets.”

?????: “Compensation for the Contract, you ask? Oh, that was settled long ago. Yes, it was a joint effort to defeat a certain enemy. It was an old nemesis of mine, so the timing was quite convenient.”

?????: “Ever since, Clind has been faithfully keeping up his end of the Contract. Althoooough∼, I doubt he expected to accompany me for this looong∼.”

?????: “He is exceedingly principled, you see. He could have walked away the moment the generation he had made the promise to had passed on. It seems that being able to see souls makes him a bit rigid in his ways.”

?????: “As for any weaknesses… I can’t say I’ve come across any. If I had to name one, it would be his particular attachment to Annerose. Not just out of duty as a servant to a master, but out of fondness.”

?????: “It is nothing romantic, mind you. He’s just drawn to her nature. There’s a brilliance within her… a purity and innocence he can never have. And that, I believe, is what keeps him tied to the world of the living.”

8

???: “—Subaru-sama, do you have a moment? Time.”

Just as Subaru searched for the person he wanted to find, the person in question called out to him.

Subaru turned around to find a slender-faced figure in a butler’s uniform standing before him. He had neatly-cut dark blue hair, a monocle adorning a sharp eye, and the kind of handsome, upright bearing that one would expect to see in a painting; yet, strangely, his presence felt faint.

When Subaru had asked him about it before, he had explained that a servant should not stand out in front of others.

It was certainly a fearsome skill if he could consciously erase his presence like that. But for now, that did not matter.

Subaru: “Sure, no problem, Clind-san. I have lots of time to kill.”

Clind: “Killing time, you say? How humble. Today, Subaru-sama is one of the main guests of honor… surely, no one would leave you alone. Busy.”

Subaru: “Well, it’s more like everyone’s being considerate of me, so I’m left sitting quietly in a corner. Ram even scolded me for acting like a kid.”

Clind: “I see. That sounds typical of her. Immutable.”

At the edge of the venue, Subaru shrugged his shoulders in his unfamiliar formal attire while Clind gave a soft smile.

Clind had always given the impression of being expressionless, but while his reactions were subtle, he did in fact display emotions. Subaru had assumed that being an exemplary butler meant remaining composed, and by extension, emotionless, but this had proven to be a misconception.

Clind: “Subaru-sama? Puzzled.”

Subaru: “Ah, sorry. I was lost in thought for a moment… this is the first time we’ve really had a proper conversation, Clind-san.”

Clind: “Regarding that, I apologize for the belated greeting. I should have been visiting the Mathers’s main estate more frequently… Reflection.”

Subaru: “Yeah, and I would’ve loved to help out with the cleanup after the Witchbeasts wrecked the place, but I had some business to take care of.”

Clind: “—Business?”

Clind murmured, narrowing the eye behind his monocle. For a brief moment, Subaru caught a glimpse of something predatory, a hawk-like sharpness in Clind’s gaze, and it made him involuntarily wince.

At the same time, Subaru could not help but mock his own acting ability as they continued this shallow conversation.

At some point, he had developed the ability to hide his true feelings, even when he knew what the other person was plotting.

Even if something unexpected were to happen, so long as it led to Subaru's Death, there would always be a chance to correct it. — Thus, he had grown harder to shake.

Echidna: "That is why you managed to keep it together even when you found out someone who was half a friend was an enemy."

Echidna's commentary on Subaru's thoughts chimed in like clockwork in his mind.

At this point, perhaps discerning between her helpful advice and useless chatter had become a skill unto itself.

Clind: "Subaru-sama, concerning the other day…"

Subaru: "Yeah?"

Clind: "Where were you while Emilia-sama and the Master stayed at our residence… at Annerose-sama's Miload mansion? Inquiry."

Subaru: "Where was I…"

Clind raised a finger, asking the question with a casual air. But, Subaru knew the innocuous tone belied the suspicion behind Clind's question.

He was referring to the time after Subaru had simultaneously resolved the problems at the Sanctuary and the mansion: when the Mathers Estate had been ravaged by the Witchbeasts' attack, and had been temporarily relocated to the Miload Estate. Though the entire affair had lasted fewer than ten days, unlike Emilia and the others who were at Annerose's mansion, Subaru had been absent most of that time due to another task.

That other task, of course, was—

Echidna: "—Preparing to take me out of the tomb, right?."

Exactly as Echidna's voice confirmed in his head, that was the reason he had acted separately.

Subaru: "…"

There were three conditions for Echidna to be released from the tomb.

The first was clearing the Trials to lift the barrier; the second was securing a Magic Crystal to house Echidna's soul; and the third was finalizing their Contract—

Echidna: "To put it simply, my soul was forcibly tethered to the tomb. We needed to reassign your body as my next host to get me out of there."

Subaru: "That was one damn painful ordeal… by the way, don't you think there are too many hidden costs in this Contract of yours?"

Echidna: "Think of it as renting an apartment where they do not disclose that the previous tenant committed suicide… no, that sounds too cheap. Let us say a condo instead. Yes, that fits better."

Subaru: "I think you're missing the point of what's cheap here…"

Echidna's strange obsessions aside, Clind's curiosity was suspicious.

Subaru had told him that he had been out on an errand. That should have been the end of it. Especially for someone in his position, known as the versatile steward, pushing further would have been overstepping.

And yet, the reason he chose to press the issue anyway was—

Subaru: "Clind-san, cut it out with the phony questions."

Clind: "…"

Subaru: "You already know the answer. That's why you came to talk to me. Right?"

Subaru had already figured out Clind's intentions, and met his gaze head-on with a wary glare. In response, Clind slightly widened his eyes, straightened his posture, and said, "With all due respect,"

Clind: "Subaru-sama, you are carrying something rather nasty. Danger."

Subaru: "Danger, huh? You mean this thing hanging around my neck?"

Clind: "The answer to that is both affirmative and negative. That is not what I was referring to. Misjudgment."

Clind gestured toward the Magic Crystal dangled on Subaru's chest with a lowered voice. There was no longer any doubt. —Clind knew precisely what it was.

Clind: "I must advise you that this thing is far worse than dangerous. If you keep it at your side, it will bring harm not only to you, but to everyone around you. Unprecedented."

Subaru: "He's talking about you."

Echidna: "Yes, I can hear that."

Clind's earnest warning might have rattled Subaru in the past. However, the Subaru standing here now was no longer the Subaru he once was.

One could argue that Clind's mistake was underestimating Subaru.

Unfortunately, they had long passed the point where mere conversation could resolve anything between them.

Echidna: "He is the reason you have died more than five hundred times already, after all."

Subaru: "I've already taken every possible precaution at that level."

Clind: "—? What exactly…"

"are you saying?" was probably what Clind was about to say. But, before he could, Subaru, keeping his voice low enough not to draw attention, called out to him with “Clind-san,”

Subaru: “Why are you talking to me? You’ve already made up your mind, haven’t you? You’ll settle this when I’m called up to the stage during the ceremony, out in front of everyone.”

Clind: “—Hk, how.”

Subaru: “Well, It’s strange, really. You’re set on killing me, but you want to avoid causing too much trouble for Emilia and the others. So, you’re aiming for a time and place where suspicion might fall outside of our camp, right?. I’m not sure I follow your reasoning.”

Through countless trials and discussions with Echidna after Subaru’s many deaths, they had concluded that Clind’s intentions were exactly as expected.

In other words, Clind wanted to kill Subaru, the Witch’s contractor, but he also intended to use Subaru’s death as a benefit of Emilia Camp.

Therefore—

Subaru: “I can’t figure out where your loyalty lies. So, be honest with me. —Are you a Witch Cultist? One of the Archbishops of Sin?”

Subaru’s questions for Clind came like an ultimatum.

But it was still too indirect. He knew he needed to be more direct, to cut to the heart of the matter—

Subaru: “Do you know Gluttony? I’ve got something I need to attend to with him.”

Clind: “—To all of your questions, no I shall answer. Denial.”

Subaru: “I see… I see.”

Clind shook his head in response, which was not the answer Subaru had hoped for.

But, as a result, it settled how he would deal with Clind.

Subaru: “Listen up, Clind-san. Where was Annerose again?”

Clind: “…”

Subaru: “That was what you wanted to ask me about right?”

Finding that his master was absent from his side, Clind had approached Subaru alone.

He must have thought that since Annerose was not near the key figures at this ceremony, Subaru would be the only one up to something shady.

It was an insulting assumption. However—

Subaru: “You’re right on the money.”

Clind: “Annerose-sama, where is she? Location.”

Subaru: “She’s now my hostage. I knew you’d try something on that stage, you see. How I found out is a trade secret.”

Clind: “…So, that too is the work of the Witch that accompanies you. Strategy.”

As Clind furrowed his brow in disbelief, Echidna muttered, “How rude,” in Subaru’s mind. But, this misunderstanding worked in his favor.

After all, Natsuki Subaru always found it easier to act when he was underestimated.

Echidna: “Being seen as formidable does have its perks in avoiding getting targeted, you know.”

Subaru: “It’s fine. If I look weaker than Emilia, then I will be targeted first.”

While conversing with Echidna in his head, Subaru kept his eyes on the increasingly wary Clind.

Everyone praised him as a calm, versatile steward. However, even the most composed individual would hesitate to act when their most precious person was in danger.

In that light, bringing Annerose here seemed like a mistake, but it would have been cruel of Subaru to blame Clind for that.

Subaru: “After all, you only decided to kill me after we arrived here.”

Clind: “—. How, to that extent could you…? Incomprehensible.”

Subaru: “I heard it from you directly.”

Clind was aghast. The clear divide between him and Subaru was the difference in knowledge.

Having all his thoughts, actions, and even what he held dear laid bare truly must have felt like a nightmare for Clind.

But, the feeling concerning nightmares was mutual. Subaru had been through his own personal hell more times than he could count.

Echidna: “Want me to tell you how many?”

Subaru: “I’ll pass.”

Rejecting his companion’s offer, who likely had been dutifully keeping track, Subaru focused his attention back on Clind.

Behind those piercing eyes of his, Clind was grappling with inner turmoil. Whatever that conflict was, unfortunately, it lay entirely within Subaru’s grasp.

Clind struggled between securing Annerose’s safety, and pursuing his own objective.

And, Subaru already knew which way the scales would tip.

Subaru: “So, what will it be? Will you surrender?”

Clind: “—No. Preserving the world takes priority. Disloyalty.”

Clind’s gaze sharpened as he said this, his focus shifting toward Subaru’s chest.

Subaru sensed the impending danger. He knew Clind’s Authority of unknown origins would, just like before, try to destroy his heart and inflict a fatal, unrecoverable wound.

Which was why Subaru dealt with it before it could reach him.

Subaru: “—THE WITCH CULT!!”

Clind: “—?!”

Clind’s eyes widened as Subaru’s voice, filled with sharp tension, resounded through the hall.

Right after that moment, just as Clind gasped in surprise.

—A group of fierce warriors, radiating an overwhelming swordsmanship, attacked Clind all at once.

9

Preparing in advance had not been a difficult task for Subaru.

As had been repeatedly stated, Subaru was one of the main guests of honor at this evening’s commendation ceremony. Furthermore, his efforts in taking down the White Whale and Sloth had more than earned him the merit.

The idea that the Witch Cult had sent an assassin to the commendation ceremony to target Subaru was all too convincing to those who had recently clashed with the Cult.

Of course, there was some resistance to the suggestion that the assassin was none other than Clind, the long-serving steward of the Mathers family.

The one most strongly opposed to this was Frederica, who had been trained in the basics of service by Clind himself, and Ram also seemed to share her sentiments to some extent.

Therefore, Subaru had proposed one condition to convince them and those around him.

The condition was—

Echidna: "—That Clind shows murderous intent toward you."

Subaru: "Well, things might get dicey before anyone can make a move if I provoke him too much."

If things went wrong, he could always just start over.

In actuality, even with Annerose as a hostage, Clind's inner conflict still pushed him to choose duty over the safety of his master.

However, the full significance of that duty remained a mystery.

Subaru: "Trying to dig out the true motives of the type of man who doesn't care for parting words is no easy task."

If every enemy were to spill their plans to their dying foe, not many in this world would be compatible with this as much as Subaru. It would make planning for their next encounter much simpler.

But, in reality, most people met their end without hearing much from their killer.

Perhaps they rambled on to their corpses after death, but it would no longer be Subaru's concern by that point.

In any case, Subaru had fulfilled all the necessary conditions to corner Clind.

Clind's fatal mistake was falling for Subaru's provocations and making his move on the spot. If he had taken a better look at his surroundings, he might have noticed that he was being watched.

Echidna: "But you secured his mistress to throw him off balance and keep him from noticing."

The fabricated information about Clind being a Witch Cultist, the efforts to ensure he would not realize he was under suspicion, and a hostage to force his hand.

Subaru had gone through all this just to bring things to this anticipated conclusion.

If any of these conditions had not been met, Subaru would have fallen prey to Clind's Authority for months and years on end—counting all the attempts required to identify him as the enemy, Subaru's retries easily reached four figures.

But, all that time and effort had paid off.

Subaru: "You tried to kill me right in front of everyone. There's no explaining your way out of that."

Indeed, security around the ceremony had intensified, and the evacuation of key figures was swiftly underway.

Seeing the situation turning against him, Clind had leaped from the balcony. However, in light of his previous actions, it was hard to believe he intended to simply flee.

Left unchecked, who knew what Clind might attempt next? Subaru was not the only one who thought so.

And if Clind was thinking the same, then the only logical conclusion was that tonight, here and now, would be the final showdown.

Subaru: "—Hey hey, where are you, bro! Playing hide and seek? How cold!"

Leaning over the balcony railing, Subaru called out provocatively into the garden below.

If he could not pinpoint Clind's location, he would just make himself a grand, obvious target. Anyone in Clind's position would feel compelled to take a shot at Subaru, seeing him standing there wide open and defenseless.

Echidna: "And if that ends up getting you killed?"

Subaru: "So long as I can figure out the trick behind Clind's

Authority, I'll call it a win even if he crushes my heart!"

So far, the only thing Subaru knew was that Clind had managed to crush his heart from a distance.

It was an instant-death attack, but it could not be something he could use without any limits.

The number of uses, continuity, and activation conditions. Every time Subaru learned one more detail, he inched closer to putting Clind in checkmate.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san, Julius, and even the captain of the Royal Guard are with me. I'm sorry it's so one-sided, but I'm gonna crush you with everything I have at my disposal."

Echidna: "You sure are talking a lot… Is this one of your Days of Joy?"

Subaru: "Is that so? I wasn't aware of that though."

Responding to the voice of Echidna in his head, Subaru bared his teeth as he searched for his elusive enemy.

As Echidna had called it, a Day of Joy was one of Subaru's mental states, alongside his Days of Wrath and Calm. It seemed to describe the emotional ups and downs he experienced.

Compared to the other two, Subaru did not show any particularly subjective symptoms. Unlike becoming violently aggressive or sinking into despair, it did not seem like a problem.

Therefore—

Subaru: "I've given you company till now. Stop running around like a mouse, and come at me from the front!"

He deliberately raised his voice, broadcasting his position, and acted provocatively, hoping to flush out his opponent.

Everything was part of the plan. There were no issues there.

Perhaps he was not exactly calm, but one could say he was in the zone. Riding this momentum would lead to a good outcome. Even though he could die as many times as needed, in this situation, he felt like he had died a little too much. Getting reckless with his lives was not the best idea.

Therefore, he judged that taking appropriate actions to secure victory was essential.

???: "—OHHH!"

Suddenly, a loud noise sounded from behind the venue.

It was likely that Clind had clashed with one of his pursuers. Subaru hurried toward the commotion, eager to join the fray.

It was not just his curiosity, influenced by Echidna's penchant for spectacle. No, it was crucial for Subaru to witness the facts with his own eyes.

—Otherwise, he would not fully grasp Clind's actions for the next round.

Subaru: "Tsk."

Rounding the back of the building, Subaru clicked his tongue at the sight that greeted him.

The neatly trimmed hedges and vibrant backyard flower beds were now marred by the bodies of those who had fought valiantly against Clind. They lay crumpled, utterly defeated.

Among them were familiar faces, and Subaru scratched his head at the realization.

Subaru: "I thought I knew this already, but the troublesomeness of Authority holders really is too much to handle."

Clind: "…Is that all you have to say? Heartless."

Subaru: "Heartless? That's rich coming from the guy responsible for all this mess."

Without exception, every fallen figure had their life force entirely extinguished.

Whether it was out of courtesy or caution, Clind had shown no mercy. Either way, the scene was so gruesome that one would want to cover their eyes.

It would have been enough to leave him broken beyond repair had this situation not been reversible.

Subaru: “But, you’re not unscathed either. So, who gave you the most trouble? You’d be doing me a favor by letting me know for future reference.”

Clind: “—! Your acquaintances got rolled up into this and died, and yet this is all you care about? There is too much that is crooked about your way of being. Hideous.”

Clind’s lips curled as he spoke, his voice filled with emotion, his body covered in countless wounds.

He had faced numerous skilled opponents, some of whom even Subaru had relied on as top-tier fighters. Naturally, Clind had not escaped unscathed.

His tattered coat lay discarded, his shirt soaked in blood from a gash across his chest. His monocle lay shattered on the grass, exposing his sharp features as he glared at the defenseless Subaru.

His eyes were filled with fierce hatred and righteous indignation, as if cursing Subaru for being inhuman.

Subaru: “It seems like our opinions don’t match. Guess this is the first time I understand how Echidna feels.”

Echidna: “Maybe now you will treat me a little better.”

Subaru: “I’ll think about it.”

Clind: “Natsuki Subaru-sama, it looks like we’re both already not compatible with each other… Resolve.”

Ignoring his side exchange with Echidna, Clind's eyes were locked on Subaru, full of unwavering hostility.

That hostility was about to take shape and strike Subaru down—right before something intervened.

Frederica: "CLIIIIIIIIND—!!"

A gust of wind tore between Subaru and Clind, accompanied by the flash of long golden hair and the imposing figure of a tall woman clad in a maid's uniform.

Her emerald eyes welled with tears, and her sharp fangs were bared in fury. It was Frederica.

At the sight of her, Clind's expression stiffened ever so slightly.

Clind: "Frederica…"

Frederica: "I always looked down on you, Clind. But regardless of what, I never expected you to get yourself involved with something so tyrannical…"

Grinding her teeth, Frederica surveyed the carnage around her, voicing her bitter frustration.

The blood-soaked garden Clind had created was littered with far more than just ten or twenty lost lives, and it utterly shattered the trust Frederica had held in him, trust that had held strong till the very end, into tiny pieces.

She knew the option of clearing up doubts through discussion was off the table, for it had been Clind who had first shown intent to kill Subaru.

Thus, Frederica glared at Clind with rage and sorrow in her eyes.

Frederica: "Why did you stray from the right path, Clind?"

Clind: "….No matter how much you say, nothing will change. Pointless."

Frederica: "—! Whether it is meaningless or not is not for you to decide, it's up to us!"

Clind: "—. I'm sorry. Apologies."

As Frederica let out a fierce roar, Clind lowered his gaze and uttered those words.

In that moment, Subaru, though an outsider, could almost hear the sound of Frederica's heart cracking.

Frederica: "…"

Frederica's pupils narrowed, and a low growl rumbled from her throat.

In the blink of an eye, her body began to transform, white skin covered by golden fur as her bones audibly shifted. Frederica's form grew in size at an incredible speed.

The next moment, a female golden leopard stood in her place.

The maid's uniform was shredded apart as she transformed, clinging like tattered remnants to her hulking frame as the beast-like Frederica crouched low.

And then—

Clind: "No matter how many years have passed, you never change. Childlike innocence."

Frederica: "How dare you… blown away!!"

With a swift leap, Frederica's body became a whirlwind, the bloodstained petals around her dancing in the violent gust.

As she charged forward at terrifying speed, she caught Clind off guard, sending his body flying into the air. Blood spurted from his left shoulder as he spun, and before he could regain his balance, more savage strikes rained down upon him from all sides.

Echidna: "Tremendous."

As Echidna's brief remark suggested, Frederica's speed was nothing short of extraordinary.

Her movements had always been impressive in her beast form, but the anger she channeled through her limbs after being betrayed had propelled her speed to an entirely new level.

Her claws and fangs tore into Clind's flesh, slowly but surely sapping his remaining strength.

Yet, the fact that Frederica's power could surpass that of the Knights, who had already fallen in the garden, was unlikely. Her fangs only found their mark because those who had fought before her had already weakened Clind's reserves and, perhaps, because of the emotional strain Clind was under.

Even someone as composed as Clind would struggle when faced with turning an old acquaintance into an enemy.

Subaru: "Maybe they're more than just old acquaintances."

Echidna: "—? What do you mean by that?"

Subaru: "It'd be hard to explain the intricacies of male-female relationships to you, so I'll pass."

Although they both saw the same thing, Subaru ignored the Witch and her inability to grasp the situation.

The battle between Frederica and Clind was reaching its climax before his eyes.

Clind: "…"

Still suspended in midair, Clind was helpless as he took the full brunt of Frederica's attacks.

The wounds he sustained and the amount of blood he was losing were accelerating, pushing him ever closer to death from blood loss. However, even with death looming, Clind's eyes remained undaunted.

Amidst the relentless onslaught, his gaze was firmly locked on Subaru.

As if Frederica was nothing more than an afterthought to him.

Frederica: “Where on earth are you looking at—!”

That realization seemed to dawn on Frederica as well.

Her voice trembled with frustration at being ignored, and to Subaru, it almost sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

It was the anguished cry of a young girl, desperately pleading with an adult for attention, unable to comprehend why he would not take her seriously. Her pained voice struck Subaru deeply, but the cold-hearted man remained unaffected.

Without shifting his gaze from Subaru, Clind reached out his hands and said,

Clind: “This too, is for the world… no, for the promise I made. Impoliteness.”

With a voice tinged with regret, Clind’s hands clenched.

In the next instant, Frederica, who had been charging across the ground, lost her balance and was violently thrown to the ground.

Frederica: “—hk?!”

Frederica, covered in dust, had no idea what had just happened.

All she knew was that her limbs had been crushed, and she had lost the ability to run across the ground. And—

Frederica: “S-Subaru-sama…! Please, you must flee!”

The path to Subaru was wide open, with nothing and no one standing in the way.

Frederica: “…”

Writhing on the ground, Frederica’s body slowly began reverting from beast to human. But, of course, the wounds she had sustained did not conveniently heal in the process.

With her limbs crushed and her body covered in grievous injuries, Frederica lay there helpless. And yet, despite being horribly wounded himself, Clind walked past her with steady steps.

Clind's body was as battered and bloodied as Frederica's, but his eyes showed no sign of weakness. Only an unwavering, ironclad resolve.

Subaru: "So you can make that kind of face too. How unexpected, Clind-san."

Clind: "…The words I have exchanged with you are far too brief. Scant."

Subaru: "Yeah, you're right. I wanted to talk more to you… It's sorta got a deceptive tone about it, but that's what I really think. Perhaps we could have built a different relationship."

In another timeline, in a what-if scenario, perhaps there could have been a different path.

But even if that path had existed, becoming closer to someone destined to betray him would only have hurt Subaru more.

Subaru: "That's why I am glad I didn't become friends with you. This is the right path"

Clind: "—. You really are acting complacent. No one can defend you anymore. Defenseless."

Clind frowned in suspicion as Subaru casually stood there with his hands in his pockets.

Subaru understood why he was confused, and part of him felt slightly guilty. But, after enduring countless Deaths, this was only natural.

Subaru: "Sorry, but you won't shake me so easily anymore."

Clind: “—?”

Subaru: “I’m not feigning confidence. If you wanted to, Clind-san, you could kill me in an instant. And that’s not a big deal.”

If he were to die, he would just come back with a new plan.

Echidna and Roswaal understood why Subaru’s Authority was the most terrifying, yet the most remarkable. Even Subaru knew this was essentially cheating.

He was using his cheat ability to the fullest, as one would expect of someone who had been summoned to another world.

Clind: “Your thinking is hard to comprehend. Unfathomable. But, prepare yourself for—”

Subaru: “Oh, just one more thing.”

Clind had given up on trying to understand Subaru’s strange confidence.

But, before his hands could reach Subaru’s chest, Subaru interrupted him, raising a single finger as he pulled his hand from his pocket,

Subaru: “—I made sure Frederica would be next if I died.”

Clind: “…”

Subaru didn’t miss the slight twitch that froze Clind’s expression.

That reaction alone was more than enough of a gain.

Clind’s weak point was neither his Contract with Roswaal, nor was it Annerose.

Clind: “The real threat was never the Witch. It was you. Wicked.”

Subaru heard Clind mutter in a trembling voice, horrified to the core by the realization.

Calling him wicked might have been a bit much, Subaru thought, feeling dissatisfied as the moment his heart would burst was approaching—

10

???: “It was an unknown situation, but you handled it rather well. How are you feeling?”

Subaru: “Nothing to worry about. I’m feeling great.”

On the familiar hill, Subaru responded to Echidna’s straightforward question.

Subaru was dressed in the black formal attire he had worn for the commendation ceremony. It might be a bit late to mention this, but the dress code for the Witch’s tea party was whatever the guest happened to be wearing when they were summoned.

As a result, he had been stuck in his tracksuit during the tea parties in the Sanctuary, and this time, he was stuck in his formal attire.

Subaru: “Let’s just hope I don’t get accidentally summoned while I’m in the bathroom.”

Echidna: “Ah, that’s a way to do it.”

Subaru: “That wasn’t a suggestion. You’re more of a peeping Witch than a curious bystander.”

Echidna snapped her fingers with a serious look on her face, and Subaru, leaning in, flicked her on the forehead. “Ow!” the Witch exclaimed, recoiling with a grimace.

Echidna rubbed her reddened forehead and said,

Echidna: “How rude of you. Not like by now there isn’t a place on your body that I haven’t seen.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that’s because I bring that Magic Crystal everywhere, even in the toilet and the bath! But, it’s about my feelings, okay? Modesty is important. Absolutely.”

Echidna: “You have the values of a maiden…”

Echidna muttered in exasperation, lowering her hand from her forehead, where the redness had already faded from her alabaster skin. Subaru could not help but be impressed by the Witch’s flair for theatrics.

In any case, as Echidna had pointed out, the unknown situation had been handled.

Subaru: “Identifying the enemy, assessing the situation, establishing countermeasures, and finding the best solution…”

Echidna: “That fight revealed much about the tasks we face going forward. We might have lost some things, but I would say we gained just as much.”

Subaru: “I can’t argue with that… Though the follow-up with Annerose and Frederica won’t be easy.”

Subaru rubbed his chin, imagining the grief-stricken faces of the two women, and bit his lip.

In the end, they had resolved to frame the situation under the assumption that Clind had been a Witch Cultist.

Clind had shown clear intent to harm Subaru and retaliated without ever attempting to explain himself. With both of these facts in place, not a single person could defend him.

Strictly speaking, Subaru could have defended him, but that was a futile thought.

—Clind’s response to Subaru’s question had become the pivotal moment that sealed his fate.

Echidna: “Irony, isn’t it?. Had he truly been a Witch Cultist, you might have kept him alive to extract information about Gluttony. But…”

Subaru: “But Clind wasn’t a Witch Cultist. Which just made him a dangerous threat.”

And, Subaru was not confident enough to believe he could keep a dangerous man like him alive. At the very least, some kind of safeguard would have been necessary, and Clind had none.

Thus, Annerose and Frederica had been left in tears.

Echidna: “Beyond that, the damage was minimized. You could call it a result worth celebrating.”

Subaru: “…Yeah. It’d better be.”

If it were not, then there was no point in making them cry.

He had saved lives. He had prevented further damage. Moreover, he knew it would have been ideal to protect their hearts as well. He knew, but how could he possibly—

Echidna: “Natsuki Subaru, you must not misunderstand.”

Subaru: “Echidna?”

Echidna: “Your Authority allows you to choose the best result through infinite retries. But, the best result does not necessarily mean saving everyone involved.”

Subaru: “…”

Subaru fell silent as Echidna’s harsh words sank into his heart.

Even if he chose the best option, it was impossible to prevent everyone he cared for from receiving even the slightest scratch. But, if he accepted that, it felt like Subaru’s entire purpose would crumble.

It did not matter if he had to die a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand times, so long as he could save everyone else.

That was the only reason Natsuki Subaru continued to challenge the spiral of Death.

Echidna: “Your feelings are noble, and your desire for your loved ones to be at peace is pure.”

Before Subaru, as his resolve wavered, Echidna spoke softly, her voice gentle.

In an uncharacteristically motherly manner, she gazed at Subaru and continued,

Echidna: “But, you cannot protect everyone forever, as if they were in a cradle. Even in the best of outcomes, shards of glass will slip through. And, those shards may cause wounds.”

Subaru: “…Then, how do I remove that glass?”

Echidna: “On that matter, my answer is as follows: You cannot remove all of the shards. There will be wounds. However…”

Subaru was about to protest her statement, but Echidna quickly continued, repeating the word “however” in a soft murmur,

Echidna: “So long as you stay alive, your wounds will heal. The Frederica and Annerose who you made cry today, tomorrow…or the day after, will stop crying.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Scratches will scab over, and eventually heal. If you worry so much about never even inflicting such wounds, your feet will stop moving, and you will be unable to move forward.”

Echidna’s carefully chosen words pierced Subaru’s heart without mercy.

Indeed, Echidna was right. Subaru had started to lose sight of what “best” even meant. He kept second-guessing himself, even after things had ended.

He had eliminated Clind. And as a result, Annerose and Frederica had been left in tears.

If he did not want to make them cry, should he have let Clind live? But, how else could Subaru have dealt with a man who wanted him dead?

That was—

Echidna: "—You are not wrong."

Subaru: "Ah…"

Echidna: "I will continue to guarantee your righteousness. You have saved lives, found a way to the future, and left hope in your wake, thus paving the way for new possibilities. That is the result of your actions."

Whenever Subaru's resolve wavered, whenever he felt lost, the Witch was there to bring him back to reason.

Just as she had done countless times before, Echidna stood before Subaru and pulled him back from the brink.

He had used Return by Death hundreds of times now, and as a result, his fear of Death had dulled, and the crushing sense of loss and helplessness had faded. But still, some part of him was wearing thin.

His fraying and fragile soul was pulled back once again, and Subaru held his ground.

A swirl of wrath, calm, fleeting joy; this was what had overwhelmed his heart.

Subaru: "Even if I save them, wounds will remain. But…"

Echidna: "Where there is life…"

Subaru: "Where there is life… there is a future. Where there is a future, there is hope. Where there is hope, there is possibility. Where there is possibility—"

Echidna: "—People can be saved."

Echidna quietly finished Subaru's half-mumbled sentence.

People could be saved. The wounds they suffer would eventually heal.

The two who cried today would dry their tears tomorrow, lift their heads the day after, and the next day, perhaps even start walking forward again. Or, at least, begin to prepare to do so.

For that purpose—

Subaru: “—Let’s move time forward. I… no, we have a lot to do.”

Echidna: “—. Very well. So, where shall we begin next?”

Echidna deliberately did not comment on Subaru’s use of “we.”

And that was fine. He was not looking for her to cling to him.

He just wanted to confirm it: the unbreakable bond of complicity between her and him.

Subaru: “Ah, about that—”

And so, the journey of trial and error would continue, with the Witch bound to him in this shared complicity.

Prologue IV: The Progeny of the Lion King

???: “—Leave the Kingdom together with Old Man Rom. If you do that, your safety will be guaranteed.”

In the middle of the night, she woke up to a presence entering her bedroom and shuddered.

The first thing that pierced through her mind was disappointment in her own loosened vigilance.

In the slums where she had originally lived, everyone around her was an enemy. There was no time or place where she could let her guard down. That was why she never lowered her defenses, even in her bedroom.

That should have been her source of pride for having grown up in the slums for fifteen years—

???: “I’m sorry for all the complications and self-reflection that’s being posed on you, but you’re not losing sleep over it, are you?”

Felt: “…Hey you, I don’t know who the fuck you are or where you’re from, but do you even know who you’re picking a fight with?”

With a low-voiced threat, she argued back while still lying down on the bed.

Being treated with contempt was naturally the shameful sight it was, but she wasn’t going to tolerate it indefinitely. So,

Even if this rubbed the other person the wrong way, she absolutely refused to grovel.

???: “You sure are acting tough, huh? Let me just tell you right now, that damn Reinhard is…”

Felt: “Screw you. Why did Reinhard’s name come up when I’m the one that messed up, and now I gotta wipe my own ass?”

???: “…”

Felt: “I’m telling you, don’t think you can get away with this for free. If you show me an opening, in an instant I’ll… oh?”

She had intended with determination to bite his unguarded windpipe. However, her intent was dampened by the intruder’s strange reaction.

Standing beside the bed, the intruder looked at her—suddenly, for some reason, his shoulders shook, and he began to chuckle a small laugh.

Felt: “Wh-What the hell’s so funny?”

???: “Hey, don’t use such a loud voice. I’m not sure if you can see what’s going on here… Well, you’re just being yourself by not calling Reinhard at this point, aren’t you?”

Felt: “Huh?”

She turned her head with a frown to the intruder, whose voice sounded somewhat distracted.

The initial sharp intensity was gone, as was the feeling of him doing something untoward if she moved. You could call it carelessness and it would be so, or you could call it intuition and it would be so.

In any case, it did not result in her regretting having turned around.

The intruder had done nothing to her, and more importantly, the person standing there was a familiar face.

Felt: “…Bro, what the hell are you doing here?”

???: “For no reason at all. My demands… wait, were you still half asleep and you didn’t hear me?”

Felt: “No, I heard you saying something about taking Old Man Rom and leaving…”

The demand did not match her impression of the person in front of her—a familiar, black-haired boy.

Looking at the boy, she saw he was unarmed, despite coming to threaten her.

He did not appear to be carrying a weapon, nor was he prepared to restrain her. As she slowly lifted herself off the bed, he did not tell her to wait or stop.

Naturally, she felt foolish for being so cautious, and roughly scratched her golden hair.

Regardless of the situation, there was no mistaking the fact that she had been caught off guard—

Felt: “Like, how did you even manage to sneak in? That damn Reinhard isn’t home tonight, but there’s other scary people here in this mansion…”

Black-haired Boy: “Yeah, there are. Flam and Grassis, yeah? The bodyguard twins, they might look cute, but they’re really good at what they do, so they gave me a hard time.”

Felt: “…”

Black-haired Boy: “And by a strange coincidence, I also know the three thugs you’re taking care of here at your place. I guess this is what they mean when they say that it’s a small world.”

When he had calmly pointed out those who should have been in the mansion, she fell silent.

Upon hearing that, she could feel a cold sweat breaking out on her back; and, gritting her teeth, she realized that her vigilance had been loosened in earnest.

The boy before her, his demeanor was certainly almost the same as the one she knew.

However, that in itself was unusual.

He had broken into a mansion that was difficult to infiltrate, even late at night, and moreover, he had managed to breach her guard and was now standing beside her bed, all the while remaining unchanged from before.

Felt: "—. What happened to the others? If you messed with them…"

Black-haired Boy: "No mercy? Don't worry. I'm not a kid who would retaliate just because I've been beaten up. And if you were to make a fuss, Reinhard would immediately come running."

Felt: "…And if I were to raise my voice, the same thing you did to them would happen to me, wouldn't it?"

Black-haired Boy: "Yeah, you're not wrong about that. So please don't. If you don't, then…"

Felt: "If I don't?"

Black-haired Boy: "—I'll keep your family's secret private."

He bent down slightly and whispered in her ear.

This was not a bluff or a random remark: she knew this by intuition, without the need for evidence.

And, in this case, "Family" could only refer to one person in her life.

Felt: "What do you know about Old Man Rom?"

Black-haired Boy: "A lot. I know a lot. In fact, it's not just about Old Man Rom, but I know far more about you than you do yourself… Though, I kinda feel like a stalker saying it like that."

Standing in front of her, the boy shrugged slightly and touched his neck—rather, the crystal hanging from it, with a wry smile as if he were sharing a joke with a friend.

The bizarre atmosphere made it impossible for her to deny him in this instance.

Black-haired Boy: “If you want to know all the details, I can tell you, but your family is quite the enemy of the Kingdom. If they were to find out his identity, they’d one hundred percent have him arrested and executed. It’s at the level that you, and all the members of your Camp, would all be implicated. I really don’t want to be doing that, either.”

Felt: “What the hell are you even talking about…?”

Black-haired Boy: “I’m going to suggest it from my own mouth. …I may have come across as a little bit of a douche.”

The boy scratched his cheek and showed no significant reaction to her swearing. It was as if he was already fully prepared, and all he had to do was to make her nod her head.

Felt: “…”

Perhaps, the boy was not in a situation that granted him as much leeway as it appeared.

In fact, if Reinhard were to be called, whatever the situation was, it would be turned upside down in an instant. However, it did not seem like he was anticipating that to happen.

If Reinhard were to be called, surely information would be circulated that would put her family in danger.

Black-haired Boy: “If you can understand that much without me having to explain everything, then you must be a good candidate for King.”

Felt: “—Geez, that just sounds like sarcasm to me.”

Whether he was aware of it or not, his words seemed like a natural provocation.

Then there was a long, long silence—

Felt: “—I understand. I’ll do as you say.”

Black-haired Boy: “Is that so. That’s good. Well then, I’ve prepared various escape routes for you.”

As she nodded, he suddenly looked relieved, and the boy pulled a bag from under the bed. When she looked at its contents, everything was meticulously provided, and the preparations were thorough.

It was really eerie how everything had been studied and planned to such an extent, sending shivers down her spine.

Black-haired Boy: “Go straight to Old Man Rom’s room. I’ve already talked to him too.”

She had no interest in learning how he had accomplished it, and she did not bother to inquire.

Accepting the offered bag, she glided past the boy while still in her sleepwear, enjoying the feeling of being in control of everything. Just before leaving the room, she halted her step—

Felt: “—Not trying to be a sore loser or anything, but that face of yours looks like the devil, bro.”

Having spoken those words, she swiftly exited the room without waiting to witness his reaction.

There seemed to be no possibility of victory. Now that he had become their adversary, not even Reinhard, or…

Feeling such bone-chilling fear, the blonde royal selection candidate withdrew from the Royal Selection.

Chapter IV: Accumulating Life in Another World from Zero with a Witch

1

A dream, I had a dream.

A dream that would not fade, a dream that kept repeating, a dream with no end, a dream that would not end—.

Over and over again, many many times over, repeating mistakes over and over, correcting them more and more.

One thousand times, spinning. Ten thousand times, connecting. One hundred million times, overcoming them.

And before knowing it, losing track of counting.

Agony, terror, turbidity, ruin, hatred, madness.

Exhausted, shaken, twisted, corrupted, contorted, decayed, anguished; a heart smashed to pieces.

And yet, there was still a place I wanted to reach.

And yet, there was still a wish I wanted to protect.

Even if no one knew about the endless tragedies that repeated over and over, I would not forget.

Even if no one notices, only I am unable to forget.

—Even if the people I want to save wept, I still want to save them.

So, even now, I do not regret having taken that hand.

If there is something I regret, it would be that I was hesitant and indecisive in taking her hand, and the frustration towards my own weak, fragile heart that I could not steel.

2

—Waking up from an empty dream, the first thing he always felt was a throbbing headache.

???: "…"

Drowsily waiting for the awakening of consciousness, shrouded in ambiguous mist. It would not take long. The groggy awakening took only a few seconds, and immediately his consciousness detached from that sleep, awakening.

???: "Ah, Aaah."

As his physical body began to wake, he confirmed his body's condition with a drawn-out voice.

At a glance, it appeared like he was still half-asleep, but this was an important part of his morning routine. By lying on his back, he let out his voice and gathered several pieces of information.

The tone of his voice, the establishment of his consciousness, the safety of his limbs, the organization of his memories, the progression of his day, and the existence of his life—.

Even so, it was easy to lose track of the correct flow of time. He could not neglect to verify it.

All of this, was evidence that Natsuki Subaru had reached the morning without making any grave mistakes.

Subaru: "Fuwa…"

Peeling off the blanket while yawning, he slowly lifted his body from the bed.

He roughly scratched his head and looked around the room he had become accustomed to seeing—it was luxuriously furnished, and standing out within the room's interior was a canopy bed.

But, where Subaru had woken up was not the luxurious bed, but rather a sofa placed further within the room. Curled up in a ball, hugging a blanket, was how he had spent the nights recently—no, rather, this had been the nighttime habit of Natsuki Subaru for what he felt was several years now.

Be that as it may, there was not any significant reason for him to not sleep in his bed.

It was simply the result of striving to find a comfortable sleeping environment, even if just a little bit. After various trials and errors, he had found that he felt more of a semblance of peaceful sleep by sleeping on the sofa rather than in the bed.

Perhaps it was the feeling of being on the edge that suited his nature, as if one careless toss and turn would send him to the floor.

Subaru: "…"

Putting those feelings aside, Subaru stood up from the sofa and headed to the washroom so he could get ready. He washed his face in the washroom that was adjacent to the bedroom, and observed his wet face in the mirror.

His face held a look of fatigue, and his eyes gave off a sense of despondency. His face looked frayed with dejection, and his overall demeanor appeared listless in every aspect, both mentally and physically.

In an attempt to tighten his sagging expression, he slapped his own cheeks as hard as he could with both hands.

A dry sound and numbing pain accompanied the tears that welled up; in order to wash them away, he poured cold water onto his face. Once again, he looked at his wet face in the mirror, and whilst carefully kneading his face, eyes, and cheeks, he spoke.

Subaru: "Smile… you gotta smile. If you can't, then… die."

Chanting this incantation, Subaru bent his mouth into a terrible, crooked smile.

He flashed his white teeth, his smile narrowing his eyes so the whites were no longer fully visible; this was the villainous side of himself that he had been acquainted with for around eighteen years. He could “camouflage” his eyes, his facial expression, and his countenance with no issues.

Subaru: “Oookay, okay. Keep it like this.”

Commanding his reflection in the mirror to maintain the smile, Subaru quickly dried his face with a towel and changed his clothes.

While living at the Mansion, Subaru’s appearance was not garbed in a servant’s uniform or a tracksuit, but rather, he predominantly wore the formal attire of a fairly dignified noble. He loosened the collar of his formal jacket, rolled up his sleeves to his elbows, giving a relaxed appearance, but surprisingly, there were no complaints about his manner of dress.

Given his position, and likely due to his achievements as well, he was expected to dress accordingly in public.

Individuals with power and high status were allowed some degree of personal freedom. —Just like how Roswaal, despite his clownish appearance, silenced those around him with his status of Margrave.

Compared to that, Subaru’s disheveled formal attire could be considered charming. Despite feeling a bit stuffy, he was still dressing in a manner befitting his position. After all, this position was something Subaru himself desired.

It would be absurd to refuse himself that which he desired.

Subaru: “Can’t stay here any longer. It’s about time.”

Straight away after he had finished changing, Subaru looked up to the Magic Hour Crystal that had been furnished above the room’s door and muttered.

It had a dark green hue, signifying that it was morning: it showed that his time for getting out of bed was soon. Apparently, it seemed like this morning he had spent just a little bit too much time practicing his smile in front of the mirror.

In a few more minutes, a meticulously punctual girl would visit his room right on schedule.

Before that, he needed to finish everything he had not done yet.

Subaru: "…"

Letting out a long exhale, Subaru opened his shirt's collar with a feeling of gloom.

There, resting against his skin, even during sleep, was the dull shimmer of a black Magic Crystal. Clenching it in his palm, Subaru directed his consciousness towards the mysteriously gleaming crystal.

The sensation of the cold, hard stone, gradually warming within Subaru's palm, even induced an illusion that it started pulsating like a living thing.

At some point, Subaru's own heartbeat even began to synchronize with that of the Magic Crystal in his grasp.

The Magic Crystal continued to beat faster and higher than one's pulse after an all-out sprint. Its pulsation and Subaru's heartbeat perfectly overlapped, equalling each other. —Right after that.

Subaru: "…"

By the time he had realized it, Subaru's consciousness was enveloped in white light, and he felt detached from his physical body.

The separation of his consciousness from his physical body was almost a sign of awakening from sleep. He had tasted the sensation of being pulled up from the depths of slumber twice within such a short span, and his vision began to clear.

A vast, green plain spread out as far as the eyes could see.

The sunlight, almost blinding, poured down, and a sea of grass swayed magnificently in the sweeping wind. A world where the blue of the sky and the green of the earth went on forevermore, up until they hazily intersected in the distant horizon.

It was a dreamlike world, lacking a sense of reality, possessing an unreal beauty which suited it.

Magnificently clear, eternally silent. —Right at the center of it all, there was a small hill that harmonized with the landscape.

Atop the gently sloping hill, a white table and parasol could be seen from afar, and Subaru slowly directed his feet toward them as if he was being led.

Under the parasol, upon the round table, were cups emitting steam; within the ceramic cups, amber-coloured liquid was warmly contained.

Two cups had been set upon the table, and white chairs had been placed on both ends of the table.

Subaru did not even confirm that the chair was prepared for him before sitting down on it. Though the tea had just recently finished brewing, he held the cup to his mouth, wetting his throat with its contents.

He had already lost count of how many cups he had already consumed, as the enigmatic tea continued to fill Subaru's insides. This strange tea, tasteless and odorless, however, was an absolute requirement for attending this tea party.

Hand-prepared by the host of the tea party, it was a cup offered as a form of greeting, a mandatory gesture.

And, as Subaru accepted this strange hospitality,

Subaru: "Ah, I drank it, I drank it, thanks for the drink. Alright, let's quickly move onto the main subject."

???: "—Of course, I suppose I did say that the first sip worked as a greeting. However, I do not believe that means that you should never give me a simple hello, mhm?"

After emptying his cup, Subaru tossed it aside as he spoke. Upon the cup breaking on top of the hill and his rude response, the person sitting across the table from him voiced their dissatisfaction.

In response to this complaint, Subaru showed no signs of remorse, and,

Subaru: “There’s no real reason to greet you. After all, since you’re peering inside and outside of my head day and night, does saying hello or goodbye to you have any meaning?”

Girl: “This and that are different matters, you know? First of all, saying that I watch you day and night: I would like for you not to speak of it in such a scandalous manner. Even supposing it is true, I am still a young maiden, as delicate as a flower. Would my reputation not become all the more worse if it became known that I am always staring into a boy’s mind?”

Subaru: “A young maiden, as delicate as a flower; did the meaning of those words change without my knowledge?”

Girl: “How scathing of you. Well, maybe it is unreasonable at my age to insist on calling myself a maiden.”

Saying so, the girl relaxed her mouth into a smile, quite contrasting the contents of her complaints.

She did not seem to express a particularly strong sense of wariness or fear to begin with; in fact, the girl was quite tolerant of Subaru’s casual, impolite language. Even this exchange seemed to be a source of amusement for her.

Subaru could not help but feel an intensifying sense of guilt within his heart upon seeing that smile. He knew the true nature of this guilt. —However, it was ugly enough to make him want to avert his gaze from it.

Thus, Subaru stared back at the girl who evoked such emotions, and averted his gaze from his own guilt.

Subaru: “As expected, you’re such an unpleasant woman.”

Girl: “How glad it makes me to hear that. Rather than becoming someone desirable to you in all manner of ways, rather than becoming someone apathetic for whom you cannot see the value in assisting with your helping hand, for your kind, greedy self, becoming someone hateful who cruelly wounds your heart and drives in a wedge that cannot be removed, would please me more than anything."

Even in the face of sarcasm without preamble, her response remained composed.

She was aware that her reply might have provoked a displeased expression from Subaru, or even have made him feel bitter, but she continued in that manner, leading him on.

Girl: "Now then, any more of this, and my heart will become pained from buying into your antipathy and being so loathed. Let us try to achieve the purpose for this morning's rendezvous, shall we?"

Subaru: "You weren't hoping to be hated?"

Girl: "It was the bluff of a cute girl, you know? This is what I want you to see and accept."

Subaru: "Cute…?"

Subaru tilted his head in sincere doubt deep in his heart; his companion merely gave an ironic smile.

And then—

Girl: "Truly, you are a man fearless to a fault. As the Witch of Greed, I like that about you. —Natsuki Subaru."

This contractor was worthy of being called the Witch of Greed.

Echidna narrowed her eyes with a sweet smile, a smile of genuine joy.

3

Subaru: "Today's the fourteenth of Kisdam… right?"

Echidna: "Yes, you are correct. Fortunately, nothing abnormal happened to you last night. You slept on that cramped sofa and endured the night's discomfort, waking up without any issues… But still, you are quite cautious, are you not? No need to worry so much, you know?”

Subaru: “Such stupid words. Living without caution, and waking up dead in the morning, is also a possibility. Us humans, we never know when or where we’re gonna die.”

Clicking his tongue at the Witch’s optimism, Subaru recalled the desperate feeling of loss his Deaths left him.

Without warning, the tomorrow he trusted would come would suddenly be taken from him by a Return by Death to the past—time forgotten by the people with whom he spent his time; how much fear and disappointment had he tasted upon realizing he would need to rebuild those relationships?

Subaru: “The world could end at any moment, and it wouldn’t surprise me anymore. That’s…”

Echidna: “—I agree. I was thoughtless just now. My apologies for that.”

Subaru: “…What, aren’t you being terribly meek right now?”

Echidna: “I apologise if you thought of it as a bad thing. I believe it is about time you acknowledged that I am not that bad of a woman.”

Resting her cheek against her palm, with her elbow on the table, Echidna sent a seductive sidelong glance toward Subaru.

Her enchanting white hair, long eyelashes, and a beautiful face with a straight nose were like a supreme work of art that was rarely seen, and many painters would break their brushes at such unreproducible beauty.

Sometimes jokingly, she boasted that she had received marriage proposals from royalty in the past; perhaps, this might not have been a lie.

However—

Subaru: “Hmmmm…”

Echidna: “—? What is it? Staring at my face in such a way… is there something on it?”

Subaru: “Aaah, just hair, and ears, and a mouth, and a nose, and eyes…”

Echidna: “…Hm, I wonder why? Even though you say something completely obvious, I feel insulted.”

When she showed such a vexed emotion, the solemn atmosphere of the Witch instantly dissipated.

What remained was the face of a remarkably youthful girl, contrasting with her actual age, despite her exterior matching the age one would expect. She would appear far more attractive to boys his age than a serene beauty, akin to a painting.

Of course, Subaru’s aesthetic sense had already determined the pinnacle of beauty, so discovering Echidna’s new charms would be just like adding another entry to an encyclopedia.

Echidna: “Did I receive a worse impression than I had thought just now?!”

Subaru: “I didn’t even say anything. That’s a false accusation.”

Echidna: “The way you put it, you might have been thinking something quite harsh, even if you did not mutter it aloud. Hiding things from me will not work. We are not that distant.”

Subaru: “I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to intentionally sour our relationship…”

Echidna: “See! I knew you were thinking something terrible after all!”

Reacting as if she had taken an oni’s head, she made a fuss about Subaru’s inner thoughts.

Subaru knew from experience that either telling the truth or hiding it would only cause a fuss, so he covered his ears and lowered his head, waiting for the storm to pass.

Echidna: “Generally, your attitude as of late is becoming quite unbearable. You have been treating me, the Witch of Greed, with much disdain. I do not expect admiration or awe from you, but there must be a more appropriate way for you to treat me.”

Subaru: “An appropriate way of treating you, like what?”

Echidna: “More like treating a noble with respect, or treating a beautiful woman with hospitality.”

Gently placing her hand on her chest, Echidna threw out a troublesome request at him.

It had become a regular occurance, this time of Echidna seeking attention.

This was not to say that Subaru’s mental state was fluctuating due to experiencing successive Returns by Death, but rather that Echidna was extremely troublesome in this situation.

Also, he did not want to deal with her after having just woken up.

Echidna: “Your casualness is quite refreshing and pleasant for me. But, sometimes, I would not mind having a moment that reminds you of who I am, you know?”

Subaru: “A moment that reminds me of who you are… does that mean making someone puke upon meeting them for the first time?”

Echidna: “When you cut it down to just that, I feel that my nature is greatly misunderstood!”

Saying this and that, Subaru frowned at Echidna’s attention-seeking behavior.

In the past, he had tried to deal with her in a straightforward manner, but the more he did so, the more she took advantage of him, leading him to avoid taking her seriously ever since.

Therefore, Subaru quickly shifted the conversation off topic with an "Anyway".

Subaru: "If you're just gonna idly chatter, I'm out."

Echidna: "Hmm… that is not exactly a heartwarming conversation. In the first place, you do not seem to be in great shape this morning. So, it would not hurt to rest here a bit longer."

Subaru: "…Certainly, there are times when staying here brings relief."

As he rose from his chair while cracking his neck, Echidna's eyes lit up as she responded to Subaru with a "Right?" But there was more to Subaru's words.

Indeed, during this tea party, Subaru's consciousness was isolated from the outside world, allowing him to stay here longer in spirit alone. There had been times when this mental refuge had brought him solace.

Subaru: "In situations like that, I won't hesitate to indulge you. But, not now."

Echidna: "Are you worried of becoming weak if you rely on others? That is a stoic way of thinking, but does it really make sense? After all, I am your only accomplice… I'm someone with whom you can share your pain and sorrow."

Subaru: "—. I'm grateful to you."

In fact, without Echidna's presence, the current Subaru would not exist.

By extension, that also meant that the peace that Subaru's loved ones enjoyed today also would not be possible.

Echidna's affirmation, support, and advice had all helped Subaru to overcome the numerous obstacles that had stood in his way. He had to admit that her presence had been empowering.

However—

Subaru: “However, I don’t intend to entrust my pain and sorrow to anyone. This is mine and mine alone, and I’m going to get over it on my own, which is why you and I made this Contract. Isn’t that right?”

Echidna: “…That is the one aspect you will not bend on. How lonely that makes me.”

With her eyes downcast, framed by long lashes, Echidna muttered with a sense of loneliness. As it was, she brought the cup to her mouth, a sign that she had let go of her intention to continue this conversation.

After witnessing this, Subaru turned his back on her and looked down the hill. Below the gentle slope, in the middle of the green meadow, an unnatural structure—a door, appeared.

This corridor was the only link between this Castle of Dreams and reality.

Subaru: “Earlier, you didn’t deny the idea of peeping on me constantly, did you?”

Echidna: “…I thought I had prefaced that with “hypothetically”?”

Subaru: “With my language skills, that sounds like how a conniving mastermind would speak.”

Echidna: “…”

At this hounding from Subaru, who had turned away earlier, Echidna let out a small sigh. Then she put her mouth on the cup once more. It was a sign that she had let go of her intention to continue this conversation—

Subaru: “From now on, I’m removing the Magic Crystal when I go to the toilet or wash myself.”

Echidna: “Aahh”

Replying with “What’s with that aahh?”, Subaru clicked his tongue and finally left the tea party.

Standing in front of the door at the bottom of the hill, Subaru put his hand on the doorknob and casually turned around.

There, on top of the hill, Echidna's hair fluttered in the wind as she absentmindedly watched Subaru's back. Noticing his gaze, Echidna gave a small wave of her hand.

For a moment, Subaru hesitated whether to wave back or not, and then, with only a sigh, he pushed open the door.

—And, straight after, his consciousness that had been captured by the dream world was released, returning back to reality.

Subaru: "…"

When his consciousness came back to reality, Subaru was still standing in his own room, holding the Magic Crystal.

He let out a long breath and raised his gaze; the color of the Magic Hour Crystal had not yet changed. The time he had spent in the world of dreams was only a few seconds in real time. It could be said to be a Room of Spirit and Time.

Subaru: "Still, I'll never get used to it…"

It had become part of his morning routine to be invited to that world of dreams, and to participate in Echidna's tea party.

By doing so, it helped Subaru grasp the current situation, and it had become a habit to ensure that there was no discrepancy between his perception and what was true; however, he still struggled with the time lag when he returned from the tea party to reality.

Echidna suggested he could stay longer without any worries, but that seemed to come with its own set of problems.

Spending long periods in that spiritual world, only to suddenly realize that his soul had aged by hundreds of years, would be a truly historical mysterious turn of events.

???: "—The aging of your soul, and your links with the Witch, shall one day become poison that will definitely consume you. Please do not forget that. Reflection.”

Subaru: “…”

Suddenly, Subaru’s thoughts suddenly echoed with a man’s last words and testament.

The poor enemy, who was completely seen through by the machinations of a Subaru who accumulated Return by Deaths, had all of his countermeasures prevented, had his escape route completely blocked, had lost his allies, and was left alone and helpless.

In the end, Natsuki Subaru’s battle had become ultimately one-sided.

His foe’s defeat was no exception. His rebellious spirit was completely conquered, and the battle was settled without causing any damage to the surroundings and without any bloodshed other than that of the enemy.

Those words that he heard were the final words of a man spoken in such a situation, with Death looming before him.

Someday, Subaru would regret his own way of being. If such a time were to come, would that man be waiting for Subaru in the depths of hell?

Subaru: “But, it’s unfortunate. After I die, where my soul goes is predestined.”

Even if all of his bitter foes were waiting for Subaru in hell, Subaru’s soul would never arrive there.

They would be waiting there, all alone, forever, continuing to be consumed by Subaru, even after death.

But, he would like them to tolerate that much. Subaru, also, did not expect that the afterlife would be easy.

Subaru: “That’s what they call a Contract with a Witch.”

???: “…Um, did I ever say something about taking your soul?”

As Subaru muttered deeply to himself, a different sort of hallucination echoed in his mind, distinct from the voice of the deceased man.

It sounded very similar to the voice of the Witch with whom he had just parted ways.

Echidna: “No, this is not a hallucination. It really is me.”

Subaru: “I know that. Shut up.”

Subaru silently refuted the voice of the Witch that seemed to be whispering in his ear.

The source of the voice was the Magic Crystal that Subaru had placed around his neck again. He flicked it with his finger in annoyance and snorted at the voice, which he could hear without having to go back to the dream world.

The reason as to why so few words were exchanged as their parting was quite apparent.

Echidna: “It is not necessary for you to linger, as we can always talk anytime.”

Subaru: “Don’t just randomly start talking to me when you don’t have business with me, just because you can.”

Echidna: “It is not uncommon for a Spiritual Arts User and their contracted Spirit to communicate telepathically. And, how should I put it, I do not believe anyone would pay much attention, even if your monologues increased at this point.”

Having had a sore spot poked, Subaru furrowed his brows with displeasure.

As soon as Echidna felt Subaru’s discomfort, she exclaimed “Oops”, and continued,

Echidna: “I will comply with your request here. Please, do not hesitate to call upon me if you need me, contractor-dono."

Leaving behind those theatrical words, communication with the telepathic Echidna ceased.

Although the physical distance between them had not changed, it was difficult for Subaru to relax as he was aware of her presence peering through the Magic Crystal.

And so, as the morning routine of being toyed with by the Witch came to an end—

???: "—Subaru-sama, are you awake?"

There was a knock on the door from outside, which informed him of his usual wake-up time.

Subaru cleared his throat slightly as he heard the gentle voice which had called to him. Then, clapping his hands to his face, and using the mirror to once again reshape his face into a smile, he gave a very unspirited reply of "Come innn".

???: "Good morning, Subaru-sama. Today is once again a splendid morning, you know."

Hearing that reply and entering the room was a smiling girl in a maid's uniform—Subaru's maid, Petra Leyte.

When he had first met her, she was still a young bud who had yet to flower; but now, she was entering a season of growth, and was in the process of blooming beautifully. Her height, arms, and legs had grown compared to before, and she was becoming increasingly well-suited to her pretty maid dress, too.

Her behavior and mannerisms, as well, were not lost against her adorable outfit. From the start, she was a girl who was well-taught and quick to learn. And now, as a maid, Petra had reached top-notch levels.

A fourteen-year-old flower—seeing the smile of the all grown-up Petra, Subaru replied with a smile.

Subaru: “Good mornin’, Petra. I agree with you… it’s indeed a splendid morning. I’m pretty happy that I was able to see Petra’s cute face again this morning.”

Petra: “Subaru-sama’s still saying such things… Ah, but there are clouds hanging over the sky beyond the forest, and it seems that the weather may get worse this afternoon. I have plans to go shopping this afternoon, so I hope it’ll stay sunnyyy.”

Inclining her head in response to Subaru’s greeting, Petra turned her eyes towards the window and muttered that out. In those words, there was a faint trace of her childish immaturity, and Subaru gave a small chuckle.

Petra: “Ah! No, Subaru-sama, why are you laughing?”

Subaru: “No, no, it’s that just now, you broke out of your beautiful maid shell for a moment. How very Petra-like.”

Petra: “Jeez, please stop treating me like a kid that way. I’m totally grown up. I’ve been a maid already for two years… because of that, I’ve become an adult!”

Shaking her auburn hair, Petra’s cheeks blushed and her lips pouted in embarrassment. Before the figure of his cute little sister, Subaru smiled and stroked the girl’s head.

Petra’s eyes narrowed happily at that touch, and she let out a reluctant sigh.

Petra: “So, what will you be doing this morning? It’s still too early for breakfast, but…”

Subaru: “Ahh, for the time being, I’ll just finish my usual routine, and then if it goes well, we can have breakfast with everyone. If it doesn’t go well… then, the usual.”

Petra: “…Right.”

Casting her eyes down slightly at Subaru’s reply, Petra made quite a serious face. Not able to bear seeing such a sweet girl make such a face, Subaru scratched his head, Subaru: “Anyhow, thank you for today as well. Especially for coming to wake me up.”

Petra: “…”

Subaru: “Petra?”

Petra: “Subaru-sama, you really are careless.”

Saying that to Subaru, who awkwardly tried to change the topic, Petra gave an exasperated sigh. And then, the girl shook her head, putting on a smile like a bloomed flower,

Petra: “No, even this is my job. Besides, it’s very easy to handle because Subaru-sama never really sleeps in… It would be fine, even if you were a little less disciplined, but…”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Petra: “It’s nothing. Well then, I’ll see you later. Pardon me.”

Every morning, after acting as Subaru’s alarm clock, Petra would hold her skirt politely in a curtsy. And then, after seeing off Subaru, she would leave the room.

The door would close, and Subaru would nod his head in satisfaction at Petra’s growth.

Subaru: “Petra has become so splendid. As a big brother, I’m proud.”

Echidna: “But from her perspective, she does not seem to think of you as an elder brother.”

Subaru: “…I tell you to keep silent except for when I need you, and then this happens. The great Witch sure is quick to break her promises.”

As she responded to his soliloquy, Subaru was astonished by the Witch’s lack of patience and inability to tolerate silence. But, letting out a sigh of resignation, looking towards the door through which Petra had disappeared, Subaru: “I’m that girl’s big brother, you know? So, that makes Petra my cute little sister. That’s why I will make that girl happy. —That much I will absolutely do.”

Echidna: “You shall absolutely make her happy, you say…? Contrary to what you might think, that may be a dreadful statement.”

Hearing Subaru’s firm tone, Echidna said this without poking any fun at him.

Ignoring the words of the Witch, Subaru stretched a little before leaving the room.

The corridors of the mansion were quite chilly with the air of the early morning; shivering, Subaru shrugged off the cold and set out.

—His daily “routine” was about to start.

4

Since a few months ago, mornings in the Roswaal mansion would begin with an intense “Death Match”.

Though, calling it a “Death Match” might have been quite surprising for those involved.

Still, for Subaru, who would witness it from the sidelines, the exchanges were violent enough to be called a “Death Match”.

In fact, one of the two who clashed together must have challenged with the intent to kill.

But unfortunately, the opposing party evaded that ferocious fighting spirit with ease. The disparity of power between the two of them was completely evident in the eyes of anyone who cared to look.

Of course, there was no doubt that they would keep up this dangerous routine every morning due to this reason.

???: “RHHHHAAAAARRRGH!!”

There was a fierce howl of rage, accompanied by an explosive kick that blew away the lawn on the courtyard.

Digging their foot in deeply, with that tempestuous propulsion the golden silhouette charged forward, his beastly claws driving straight toward the figure of their opponent.

It was a blow that could rend thick steel plates, one which could turn a human body into minced meat—the claws of the beast delivered a myriad of violent attacks, assailing its prey in an attempt to forbid it from escaping.

However—

???: “I apologize, but the gap is too great.”

???: “GHHA—?!”

The other silhouette easily avoided the downpour of fatal attacks coming from the claws of the beast. And immediately after, their long legs sprung up, and the body of the beast was pierced from below.

The beast raised a cry in anguish at receiving that blow, and the body of the one who had set the trap arced upwards—

???: “GHHAGHK—?!”

—Or rather, that was what should have happened, but that was not what had transpired.

The body that had been launched skywards was intercepted by the opponent’s heel directly from above, sending them crashing down into the ground. The impact produced a circular crater upon the lawn’s surface, leaving the beast perfectly silent, sprawled out unmoving upon the ground.

They desperately tried to move their limbs, but the beast’s fighting spirit was extinguished.

???: “Do you wish to continue?”

???: “—Aurgh”

The victor asked them whether they wanted to proceed as the loser let out a groan.

There was neither sarcasm nor cynicism when asking that; they were words spoken only towards the other’s fighting spirit. That was why those words deeply wounded the loser’s pride.

Thus—

???: “You probably don’t even realize it, but words like that are demeaning, you know. Stop with the damn Samurai’s pity.”

Entering the scene in which the outcome had already been decided, Subaru interjected, scratching his head.

Hearing those words, the young man who had been overlooking his sprawled-out opponent turned to look back at him. The young man with hair red as a flame raised his hand towards Subaru, saying “Hello”.

???: “Good morning, Subaru. You’re up early this morning, no?”

Subaru: “Not as early as the two of you. Even so, don’t you get bored or fed up with having to do this everyday… you don’t have to always act so upright, Reinhard.”

Reinhard: “There’s nothing wrong with his ambition to become stronger. Besides, it’s also true that he’s strengthening his abilities day by day. Before long, won’t there come a time where he will have a good match with me?”

Subaru: “Is that so? …I’m having a bit of a hard time picturing that.”

So smiled the red-haired youth—Reinhard van Astrea.

Subaru tilted his head at the evaluation of this generation’s Sword Saint, the strongest man on earth. He meant not to belittle his morning training partner, but Reinhard’s assessment seemed overly modest.

Subaru had tried countless attempts, but he could not come up with a strategy to defeat Reinhard. No matter how many times he had Returned by Death, he could not envision a victory.

Perhaps the same applied for the person lying sprawled out on the ground.

???: "—Tch"

Having suffered significant damage, frowning was none other than Garfiel.

Wheezing in anguish, he was still unable to stand up but the fighting spirit dwelling in his emerald eyes had not wavered at all. However, the world was not so kind that a competitive spirit could have any effect on one's prowess.

Even if Garfiel's frustration had reached its limit, he would not be able to break Reinhard's cool demeanor.

That, too, was the observation of Natsuki Subaru, who had witnessed a wide variety of situations.

Subaru: "Your determination to take on the challenge is admirable. Hey, can you get up, Garfiel?"

Garfiel: "…Don't be touchin' me so casually. I don't need yer fuckin' hand ta stand up, ya know."

Shaking off Subaru's outstretched hand, Garfiel bared his fangs in disgust at him.

It was obvious that he was putting on a tough act, so Subaru quietly retracted his hand. Even if it was bravado, he would rather let his fangs break before he let that fact be exposed.

Ever since kneeling before the Great Rabbit, Garfiel refused to yield.

He continued to challenge Reinhard, despite knowing there was no chance of winning, all in an attempt to forget that defeat.

Echidna: "Such an adorable act of resistance."

Subaru: “Quit it. I won’t let you make fun of Garfiel.”

Echidna: “Huh?! I was not making fun of him at all…”

Subaru could only sigh at the surprised reaction of the wide-eyed wicked spirit within his head.

Then, he looked at the now-standing Garfiel, who had somehow managed to get up,

Subaru: “If you can stand up on your own, go take a bath before breakfast. Get rid of that sweat and mud, or Ram will come to dislike you.”

Garfiel: “…Shut yer trap. I already know that without ya needin’ ta tell me.”

Subaru: “And…”

Garfiel, his knees trembling, wrinkled his nose as Subaru added a comment.

His enmity towards the person who had crushed his dignity was laid bare. Facing that gaze, Subaru closed one eye,

Subaru: “You should visit Ryuzu-san’s place once in a while. Both Ryuzu-san and Shima-san were worried about you.”

Garfiel: “—Tsk”

Subaru: “You can be stubborn all you want. But, if you let people worry about you because of it…”

Garfiel: “Shut the fuck up!”

And, at those sermon-like words, Subaru’s collar was roughly seized by Garfiel.

Garfiel then attempted to hoist Subaru up.

However—

Reinhard: “Garfiel, do not go any further. Subaru is going to get hurt.”

In an instant, Reinhard intervened, restraining Garfiel’s arm.

Reinhard, who had somehow managed to get his hand off of Subaru’s chest, looked at Garfiel sternly and lowered his eyebrows.

Reinhard: “If that were to happen, Ram-san would be terribly angry with you.”

Garfiel: “If y’all’re thinkin’ my amazin’ self’d back down just ‘cause I get told to, you’re dead wrong.”

Subaru: “Cough, we can’t help that it’s the most effective method. Ah, ugh.”

Having both Subaru and Reinhard consecutively refer to Ram, Garfiel clenched his teeth in annoyance. Chuckling at the situation, Subaru briefly placed a hand to his throat, which was in pain for a moment, and lightly coughed to adjust his tone.

Subaru: “Phew… even though the bit about Ram getting angry is a joke, if people get hurt, then morning practice might have to be banned. If that happens, it won’t be good for you, either.”

Garfiel: “Grr…”

Reinhard: “Garfiel, I will always be here with you. I know you swore a vow to not see your family until you are satisfied with yourself, but…”

Staring at Garfiel, who was gnashing his teeth, Reinhard quietly shook his head.

Within those blue eyes that captured the azure sky, there was a hint of loneliness, as he said,

Reinhard: “But, you should meet with your cherished ones, and exchange words with them while you can still see them. If you regret it after they are gone, there’s no getting that back.”

Garfiel: “…”

The pupils of Garfiel's emerald eyes narrowed as he listened to Reinhard's heartfelt words.

And then—

Garfiel: "Next time, I'm gonna fuckin' beat ya."

With that, he shook off Reinhard's grip on his arm and turned away.

As he walked away in a disgruntled manner, Reinhard called out "I will be looking forward to it", a sincere cheer devoid of sarcasm.

Subaru: "But, the lack of sarcasm actually makes it sound kind of sarcastic."

Reinhard: "I wonder about that. Do you think Garfiel was offended again?"

Subaru: "Nah, as far as he's concerned, he's got a lot more hate for me than for you, so I don't think you need to worry about that at all."

As they watched Garfiel depart from the courtyard, Subaru shrugged his shoulders. In response, Reinhard adjusted his collar with one hand and chuckled.

The slight disarrangement of his collar was the only trace of their morning training that Garfiel had managed to leave behind.

Subaru: "…After destroying the courtyard like this, I can understand why he's frustrated."

Reinhard: "Still, I think it's going to take a while. I can't help but feel bad about it too. After all—"

At that point, Reinhard paused, his gaze turning to the marks Garfiel had left on the lawn.

Reinhard: "He's avoiding visiting his grandmother, who lives apart from him, until he can defeat me."

Subaru: "I understand the logic, but he messed up his goal setting…

his own lack of strength seems to have hit him pretty hard. It's understandable that he is stubborn. Just…"

Reinhard: "Just?"

Subaru: "I think you are a part of the reason for that stubbornness."

When Subaru firmly pointed a finger at him, Reinhard nodded his head in agreement.

There was something to recall here. It was also an event that created an insurmountable rift between Reinhard and Garfiel.

To put it simply, it was when Reinhard found out about Garfiel's vow.

Subaru: "That was why you went easy on him, to help him achieve his goal."

Reinhard: "It was a mistake, and I deeply regret it too. I should have handled it better."

Subaru: "As long as you're thinking like that, no matter how hard you try, it won't work."

While Reinhard regretted the method he had used, it also became a significant point of reflection for Subaru.

The rift that was created between Reinhard and Garfiel was one of Subaru's failures, a mistake that he could not redo—the incident that happened just before Subaru's Return by Death checkpoint, an irreparable mistake.

Echidna: "It was a trivial matter, so it did not hinder us later on."

Subaru: "Because of that, Ryuzu-san and the others were left feeling lonely."

Knowing that Reinhard had been holding back, Garfiel's stubbornness only intensified.

As a result, the intensity of the morning practice, and the ferocity of the young tiger, grew stronger with each passing day.

Subaru: “In this case, it’s not about who’s at fault.”

Reinhard: “Just now, I thought you clearly said it was my fault.”

Subaru: “It’s a figure of speech! If we start pointing fingers, that stubborn Garfiel would be the one most at fault for sure.”

However, not being able to solve Garfiel’s stubbornness was also a sign of Subaru and the others’ powerlessness.

It was a painful realization. Even if he accumulated Deaths and reached for the best outcome he could, he still would not be able to prevent every single slight scratch, and wounds might still fester.

Subaru: “So, please continue to accompany him for a while.”

Reinhard: “I understand. Like I said earlier, his actual abilities are improving. It’s good that he learns quickly. —The courtyard’s destruction was worth it.”

With a composed expression, Reinhard’s concern was directed at the state of the ruined courtyard.

Garfiel had challenged him with a glaring intent to kill, but to Reinhard, this all might have been but child’s play. The day that Garfiel’s vow would be fulfilled remained distant.

In front of Subaru, Reinhard walked slowly across the destroyed lawn. And, as if by some unknown principle, wherever his footsteps touched, the ruined meadow began to recover.

Perhaps this was also the power of the countless Divine Protections he possessed; Subaru scratched his cheek at the casual miracle.

However, it was not just extraordinary power that defined Reinhard. This was what was so terrifying about him.

Echidna: “Given that, I would say that bringing him into your camp can be considered your finest play to this point. I, too, was surprised by your skill.”

Reading Subaru's feelings, Echidna chimed in with her own comment. However, Subaru could not help but nod in agreement. Undoubtedly, it was one of Subaru's greatest achievements.

—The Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea.

Currently, he was a Knight affiliated with the Emilia Camp, backed by Roswaal.

Shortly after the Royal Selection had started, the Sword Saint had become Felt's Knight. He had been the greatest adversary he would have had to contend with, and because of his distinguished prominence in the Kingdom, he would have been their greatest threat, but—

Reinhard: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "Oh sorry, I was kinda spaced out. You always amaze me, no matter how many times I see you."

Reinhard: "It's just the Divine Protection of Vegetation. It's something that revitalizes the life force of plants and flowers."

Subaru: "Calling it "just" is already quite something. But, looking at it this way…"

Subaru cracked his neck while Reinhard nonchalantly explained the miracle of his Divine Protection. Then, after a deliberate pause, he uttered the words that followed.

Those were—

Subaru: "If Felt were to return, I can't help but feel heavy-hearted at the thought of opposing you again."

Reinhard: "…"

Subaru: "Reinhard?"

Subaru, as he spoke calmly and without any pretense, furrowed his brow. In response, Reinhard shook his head, "No".

With a slight hint of melancholy upon his perfectly sculpted profile, the Sword Saint, the embodiment of miracles, lowered his gaze.

Reinhard: “I appreciate your concern, but I dare say I would be unable to go back to being Felt-Sama’s Knight. That lady has rejected me and judged me as unworthy. Were it not so, she wouldn’t have tossed me aside to vanish to whereabouts unknown.”

Reinhard faintly revealed a sense of regret and loneliness. It seemed that he wanted to say he had come to terms with it, but it was obvious that he had not yet sorted it out.

Witnessing Reinhard’s pained expression, Subaru cursed his own wickedness.

—Already, nearly a year had passed since Reinhard’s master, one of the Royal Selection Candidates, Felt, had disappeared from her Knight.

The girl, tough as a stray cat, had left the Astrea House, taking with her only the old man she regarded as family, and ran away from the Royal Selection. Thus, she cast aside the Sword Saint who had pledged himself to her.

Those were the rumors circulating among the public, and were almost identical to the truth.

In fact, Reinhard had heard nothing from Felt, before being abruptly driven from the Royal Selection. Having been abandoned by the master to whom he had sworn his loyalty, it was not difficult to imagine the sense of helplessness he must have felt.

Subaru had extended his arm out to this, and had dragged him over to this new camp.

With his conscience sullied, Reinhard had taken Subaru’s desperate plea, and offered his sword to Emilia as his new lord. And since, the Sword Saint had become the sword of the Emilia Camp, playing a key role in the Royal Selection.

Echidna: “He is the descendant of the Sword Saint who had sealed away the Witch of Envy. It is significant that he stated that he would support the candidate who is despised as a Half-Devil. It is enough to overturn her unfavorable reputation."

As Echidna pointed out, Reinhard's inclusion drastically altered the dynamics of the Royal Selection.

With the departure of the Felt Camp, and the weakening of the Crusch Camp, the position of the Emilia Camp was greatly strengthened, putting them on par with the Camps of Anastasia and Priscilla.

Truly, it was a situation shaped by Reinhard's involvement.

Even if—

Echidna: "—Even if it was done by none other than your behest."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "I guess it's "Ignorance is bliss", as they say in your world's proverbs."

Subaru ignored the teasing and probing words of Echidna that echoed in his mind.

Instead, he gave Reinhard a smile of concern, lifting the corners of his mouth slightly, and lightly patted the slumped shoulders of his friend. With just a glance at Reinhard's profile as he turned his gaze away, Subaru uttered, "Don't worry about it."

Subaru: "I can't just easily say that I understand how you feel. However, you've been a big help to me. Otherwise, I don't know how many times Garfiel would have beaten me up."

"That was a close call earlier, too," replied Reinhard with an open smile. Finally, the tension eased from his expression.

Reinhard: "No matter how you look at it, that seems like a groundless worry. Indeed, Garfiel's attitude towards you is harsh, Subaru, but… that is the flip side of him recognizing your strength. However, your strength lies apart from physical power. That's something Garfiel cannot openly express."

Subaru: “You’re being way too generous with your words… And, I’ve done enough to Garfiel to deserve a grudge.”

Subaru felt sorry for Reinhard, who did not know the whole story, but Garfiel had valid reasons to dislike Subaru. Even Subaru did not know if a day would come where the snow would thaw.

His recklessness in signing a Contract with Echidna and working to liberate the Sanctuary had only been possible by ruining and trampling upon the days Garfiel had accumulated.

From Garfiel’s perspective, being left completely out of a crisis in his own homeland and finding out that even his trusted grandmother had cooperated behind his back —Subaru could only guess at how he felt, but any sympathy on his part would be nothing more than hypocrisy.

As a result, the Sanctuary was saved without any sacrifices.

But Garfiel, too, could not do anything either. That was the crux of the matter.

Without the persuasion of Ram, Frederica, and Ryuzu, Garfiel might not have even joined the Emilia Camp. If that had happened, the camp would have lost a crucial force until Reinhard joined, and that would have been a huge loss.

Subaru: “No…”

And, biting his molars at his own thoughts, Subaru forcefully pressed his fist against his forehead.

He was reflecting on how he had failed to grasp Garfiel’s emotions and could not help but feel apologetic. But how did this take him to the position of seeing Garfiel as nothing more than a battle asset?

Did Garfiel despise Subaru because he could see through this thinking?

Subaru: “But, could that too be resolved if he continues to practice with Reinhard?”

The crux of Garfiel's resentment lay in his own lack of strength.

If that was the case, then by setting Reinhard as a clear goal, learning about the strength of the Sword Saint, and gradually getting closer, would things change little by little? Would he be able to forgive Subaru someday?

Would the wounds that Subaru was unable to prevent in the Sanctuary eventually heal?

Subaru: "If that's what it takes to get him to open up to me, then it'll be worth it."

Reinhard: "Surely, one day he will understand your feelings, Subaru. There's no need to be impatient."

Reinhard shook his head, gesturing consolation at Subaru's half-hearted conclusion. And then, the red-haired Knight turned his eyes towards the mansion,

Reinhard: "I want you to leave Garfiel to me for just a little while longer… That's if you still have any expectations from me, the one who was not even able to acquire Felt-sama's trust."

Subaru: "Don't be so pitiful. If I can't trust in you, who can I trust?. Yeah, I've got expectations for you."

Reinhard: "Understood. Then, you too should do what is expected of you. —That is the duty of the One and Only Knight."

It was only in those parting words that Reinhard had shown some kind of emotion.

The One and Only Knight—that term was only permitted in master-servant relationships that were tied together by the strongest of bonds. Reinhard had not been able to become that for Felt.

He didn't wish for Subaru to turn out the same way; that was the feeling being expressed.

Reinhard: "Well then, I will see you later."

Without even revealing such sentimentality on his facial expression, Reinhard gave Subaru a clap on his shoulder and left the garden. Behind him, as we walked away, the landscaping, which was supposed to have been razed to the ground, was completely restored.

Standing on the grass, Subaru made sure that Reinhard had completely left, and let out a long sigh.

Considering the lie he had just told, feeling repugnance might have been more accurate than a sigh.

Subaru: “How dare I even…”

Echidna: “My, what a magnificent acting performance. Your skin grows thicker by the day.”

Subaru: “…”

Once again, he heard the voice of the Witch who kept breaking her promise, but Subaru had nothing to say to her observation.

Taking his silence as permission to speak, Echidna transmitted her thought-waves from the Magic Crystal,

Echidna: “Hey, hey, no need to be so down. To begin with, were you not the one who brought up Reinhard in the first place? That you needed a sword to oppose the Witch Cult?”

Subaru: “I’m aware. I was the one who planned it, and the one who executed it.”

Echidna: “Originally, that girl—Felt had no interest in the Royal Selection in the slightest. So, she jumped at the chance when she was offered an escape route with no consequences. Of course, you made a few threats about revealing the identity of that old giant man. But, it was only the difference between early or late.”

Whether it was meant as consolation or not, Echidna’s remarks carefully peeled away Subaru’s pressure scabs.

Reinhard, who had encouraged him in vain, had nothing to do with the reason as to why Felt had abandoned him. All of it was the result of Natsuki Subaru's secret machinations.

If the truth were to be discovered, scorn and denunciation would be inevitable.

Echidna: "In order to save your beloved girlfriend, you needed strength to fight off the Witch Cult's malice. No one can be saved by charm alone. You made the correct judgment. It was a neccessary choice"

Subaru: "Shut up."

Echidna: "The damage to the Watergate City was kept to a minimum because of that choice. How could you have resisted the disaster that befell such a populated city without Reinhard?"

Echidna's words, accreting on top of each other, cut Subaru like a blade rather than comforting him.

The deceptions that were laid out to justify his actions were naught but piles of filth to Subaru. An ordeal he had to accept, swallow, and store as his own nourishment.

The Trial that he thought he had overcome at the tomb seemed to be continuing in the outside world.

—To save everything, strength was needed.

The memories of the future and the experiences he possessed were insufficient to cover the despair that existed in this world.

If he had been able to compromise, he might have been able to overcome his hardships more easily. However, Subaru could not be so strong or weak to tolerate self-sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice.

To accept giving up, to permit compromise, to turn a blind eye to sacrifices, there would be no point in that.

If he were to stop weighing his own life on the scales, the meaning of taking the Witch's hand would disappear.

Therefore, he had been working tirelessly to gather the necessary strength, to gather the necessary forces.

Echidna: “As a result, you have entrapped Reinhard van Astrea, and won him over to your side.”

To accomplish this, it was necessary for Felt to withdraw from the Royal Selection—the trial and errors that had accreted for this reason made the struggle against Clind seem almost endearing.

How difficult must it have been for him, to deceive Reinhard under his watchful eyes?

It was more difficult than deceiving any other existence in this world.

Echidna: “But, you did it. In the end, not a single person was harmed.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “By now, she should be living peacefully together with her family in Kararagi. I am sure that this is the best thing for her as well. The fate of her blood is a harsh one for her.”

This scenario imagined by Echidna, in fact, brought no solace to Subaru.

If there was only one thing that could save Subaru from his diabolical scheming, it was the indisputable fact that no one had been harmed.

Only that outcome could be salvation for Natsuki Subaru.

It did not matter how many times his heart would be wounded, so long as he could save their lives—.

Subaru: “Where there is life… there is a future. Where there is a future, there is hope. Where there is hope, there is possibility. Where there is possibility—”

Echidna: “—People can be saved. You are correct. You are not wrong. I can guarantee so.”

Subaru: “I don’t particularly need your guarantees, you know…”

Subaru spoke out his innermost thoughts to both cheer himself up, and to caution himself.

The Witch affirmed, understood, shared, and admired that.

While he responded aggressively to those words, it was a fact that he had been saved by the Witch’s words.

—Life, was life.

If he was alive, he could start over. He had possibilities. It yielded hope.

Sacrifices were things that were different to Subaru’s life. It was worth continuing to always use Return by Death all the time if it protected everyone except for Subaru’s own life, which was no longer included in his calculations.

—Even if those whom I wish to save weep, I still wish to save them.

That was the salvation that Subaru had decided to receive by taking the Witch’s hand.

5

Having received the Witch of Greed’s cruel comfort, Subaru left the courtyard.

Witnessing the morning exercises of Reinhard and Garfiel had nothing to do with Subaru’s daily routine; it was just a passing event he had witnessed.

Subaru’s real daily routine was—

Subaru: “—Heya, Beatrice. Sorry to intrude.”

Opening the door at the easternmost part of the mansion, Subaru did not need his sixth sense like before.

That was because this place would never move from where it was again.

Behind the heavy door, greeted by the scent of paper, Subaru closed one eye at the familiar sight. It was a library with a large number of bookshelves lined up and books crammed into the space.

Among the unchanged scenery, there was one thing that was distinctly different from before.

It was the absence of the librarian of the archives, who should have rushed him right as he entered. Sitting on a stepladder, a space where there should have been a young girl waiting with a disgruntled expression to welcome him; however, neither the girl he was waiting for, nor her words of welcome, were present.

Subaru: “…”

There, curled up in the corner of the room, was a little girl clutching her knees; a sense of loneliness emanated from her.

He should have grown accustomed to this sight, of her resting with her head on her lap, yet it still pained his heart to see her as she was now, compared to the girl he used to know.

Unchanged in her attire, unchanged in her form, only her way of being had completely shifted from before—Beatrice, there without even a hint of movement.

She slumbered not. That fact was evident from how her fingers hugged her knees with so much force that they were whitened.

The Beatrice who used to greet Subaru with a seemingly grumpy demeanor, yet proudly introducing herself as the librarian; her dignified posture, backed by pride and responsibility; she had lost every trace of her former self.

Narrowing his eyes at her appearance, Subaru briefly let an emotion pass through his chest before blinking it away. Then, he put on a cheerfully idiotic smile, and threw open the curtains of the library.

This place, once called the Forbidden Library, was an isolated space separated from reality.

However, as a result of Beatrice, the librarian, abandoning her role and relinquishing the concealment of the space via Door Crossing, it had manifested itself in reality, looking just like an ordinary room.

A breeze blew the curtains open, causing the light from outside to pour in from the window.

Nature that was previously absent in the former Forbidden Library, now boldly crossing the threshold.

Subaru: “Heyyy, Beako. Today’s another splendid morning. There’s a pleasant breeze blowing by. Isn’t it about time you stopped hiding in this musty old room and went outside to play?”

Beatrice: “…”

Subaru: “If you don’t want to muddy your dress up by playing outside, then at the very least, let’s eat together with everyone. Come to the dining hall like before. It’s not too much to ask, right?”

Beatrice: “…”

With the window and curtains wide open, Subaru smiled warmly with the sunshine and breeze on his back.

However, despite his candid invitation, Beatrice remained silent with her face hidden. The girl, clutching her knees tightly, almost seemed like she was punishing herself in Subaru’s eyes.

Subaru: “Hey, Beako…”

Beatrice: “…Just shut the hell up, in fact.”

Subaru: “…”

Unable to bear the sight of her, Subaru tried to approach her, but Beatrice spoke out.

Her voice sank heavily, growing hoarse. But, after hearing her voice, Subaru felt happy. Because, recently, just hearing her voice was a rare occurrence.

So, even though her words were a solemn refusal, it made Subaru feel content.

Casting aside Subaru's thoughts, Beatrice continued without raising her face.

Beatrice: "Betty is tired. She's already given up, I suppose. Going against Mother's instructions… breaking the Contract… and despite that, still being alive… why?"

Subaru: "Beatrice…"

Beatrice: "You, if only you had just abandoned me back then… why, why did you come to help me, in fact…? Who even asked you, you, who are not even That Person… hk!"

It was a resentment that would never disappear, a grudge that could never fade, a penitence that she could never forgive—.

In her four hundred years, Beatrice had bore those feelings alone, yet her heroic determination that had refused to relinquish such thoughts had been trampled upon, naturally bringing hatred.

Within the Forbidden Library, there was a Spirit who was prepared to abandon her mission; but, despite her resolve, she was spared.

Her eternal life had stripped hope from her, and all she had been given was time to live a life devoid of meaning.

Having relinquished the responsibility of managing the closed-off Forbidden Library, the long, long thread that had held Beatrice together finally snapped. and she had been left imprisoned in the death she had been prepared for. As a result, Beatrice was trapped in the Death she had prepared for.

She had given up her mission, thrown it away, and betrayed the mother who had believed in her.

The atonement for that was something she could no longer achieve herself. She had completely given up on that.

The weight of her strong sense of responsibility had become chains, binding the small Beatrice's soul.

Ever since the night she gave up her mission, she had spent endless hours crouched in a corner of the library, crying without end.

Even so—

Beatrice: "—hk! Go away! Let go, I suppose! Don't you touch Betty… tch!"

Unable to bear seeing her small figure in such a state, Subaru wrapped her body into a hug.

Shouting at him as he embraced her, Beatrice made no attempt to hide her disgust and rage, scoring Subaru's neck with her nails. Caught in her merciless attack, drops of blood oozed out of his wounds. But still, he would not let go.

He hugged her in an attempt to comfort her diminutive, shivering body.

But, perhaps it was actually Subaru who sought comfort in that act.

Beatrice: "Why, why did you come to see me, I suppose…! You're so, you're so…!"

Subaru: "No matter how many times you vent your anger at me, I'll be here. Even if the flames of regret don't seem like they're vanishing right now, if you keep pouring them out, maybe they'll vanish someday."

Beatrice: "They're not, supposed to vanish, in fact…! Betty is!"

Subaru: "I'm so glad that you're alive. So, I'll always look forward to the day where you'll stand before me with a pout once again. —That hope is there, because you are still alive."

Beatrice: "—hk"

After those gentle, sincere words were spoken, Beatrice's resistance subsided.

Without moving, Beatrice looked stunned, but then absently began to sob. It was a sign that she would no longer be able to continue this conversation.

—Once every two weeks, Subaru and Beatrice would exchange temper and stillness in such a way.

After releasing her from his embrace, Beatrice once again buried her forehead into her knees. And, after that, Subaru had nothing more to say to the girl who had retreated into her own shell.

Subaru's words still were unable to manage open the door to her Beatrice's heart.

Nevertheless, if he beat relentlessly against that door, maybe one day, they would open. —The mere possibility of this hope, was hope itself.

Subaru: "…Back then, I wonder if I should have lied and told her I was That Person."

Exiting the library and leaving Beatrice behind, whilst leaning his back to the door, Subaru recollected this.

Holding out hope that Subaru was indeed That Person, after the attack on the mansion, Beatrice had been prepared for the end of her long, long mission. However, both hope and resignation betrayed her.

For four hundred years, a girl eagerly longed for the arrival of That Person to take her away from the Forbidden Library. Should Subaru have deceived her, and lied about being That Person?

If he had done so, would her heart have been saved, and would she have relinquished the Forbidden Library with a smile on her face?

Subaru: "The book in that room…"

Echidna: "Beatrice has relinquished her role as librarian and has released the Forbidden Library. At that moment, all the books in the library turned blank. It was designed that way from the outset."

Subaru: “…You do some seriously ill-natured things.”

Echidna: “It is simply a precautionary measure. If Beatrice were to be killed, I could not let the library be stolen.”

Beatrice continued to sit in the library, which no longer possessed any value or reason to protect.

As if to irritate Subaru and his feelings for her, Echidna revealed the truth in a matter-of-fact manner. It was a precaution to prevent Beatrice from being killed—no, it was a precautionary measure to prevent knowledge from leaking out.

In the end, the feelings of Beatrice, who had been thinking of her mother for four hundred years, and the feelings that Echidna had induced, were vastly different.

Echidna: “Of course, the fact that the Forbidden Library is lost cannot be undone. Accepting the irretrievable loss of knowledge without inheritance is quite painful for me, but it cannot be helped. Though for you, compared to that knowledge, that Beatrice’s life was saved is what matters most, is it not?”

Subaru: “—Hk! If you hadn’t told her to wait for That Person…!”

Echidna: “Wait a second; no matter how you look at it, is that not sidestepping logic? I had my own reasons. Of course, responsibility for Beatrice’s long solitude does fall upon my shoulders. But, my intent was certainly not one of forcing misfortune upon that child. I do hope you understand.”

Having received Echidna’s objections, Subaru, aware that he was taking his anger out on her, hesitated.

The Witch’s words were correct. In the end, when Subaru blamed Echidna, he was just shifting the responsibility from what he himself could not do.

Subaru: “…In the end, That Person; who was it?”

Echidna: “Regretfully, I cannot let that slip from my mouth. Since the Forbidden Library has lost its role, discussing it would be meaningless. Even if you were to find out who it was, he would not know about it anymore."

Subaru: "He… which means, it's a man?"

Echidna: "—. Did my mouth slip? But, every way of finding him is gone now. In the first place, assuming you were to find him, what would you do? Would you introduce him to Beatrice? Or, do you intend to impose a sanction on him? In that case, what would be the charge? The person in question would certainly be unaware of it; a crime that does not exist cannot be sanctioned. Moreover, it is not as if you have the leisure."

Irrefutable were Echidna's conversational tactics, leading Subaru to click his tongue.

As a matter of fact, everything spoken by the Witch was probably correct. He could not find any flaws. He could not judge them. Subaru did not have the time to do such a thing.

Echidna: "Beatrice truly did spend that time in pity. But, that is not to say that the future would remain so, and there is no indication for us to think thus. Incidentally, it is just as you said."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Even if devastated by regret right now, there will come a day where that child will be freed. When that happens, someone will come to accept that child. Perhaps someone that is you, perhaps someone that is not. That is the possibility that living offers."

It was sophistry. It was merely a front of benevolence.

But, that doubtlessly was also hope.

It seemed like cajolery from Echidna, but if there was that possibility, then Subaru had no choice but to believe her words.

Thus Subaru, no matter how clear it was that the Witch with whom he was contracted was verbally toying with him, he could not deny her point. He could only cling to it, rely on it.

On her, as his only accomplice, keeping Subaru aware of his sins, allowing him not to forget was her presence.

Subaru: “Just like parallel lines.”

Echidna: “Ah, like parallel lines indeed.”

In the end, finishing their conversation thus, was Subaru and Echidna’s manner of confronting their sins.

Entrusting hope to the future, believing in the paths to possibility, awaiting the arrival of the ideal day.

It mattered not how many chances he had, Subaru would always find himself back in this place.

Knowing that Beatrice had relinquished her mission, had been prepared to face Death, and had entrusted her last hope to Subaru, only to be betrayed and to break down in tears day after day, he still wanted her to live.

Thus, clinging onto hope, he kept walking forward through thick and thin, through thick and thin.

—That he will be saved. That he was saved.

Today as well, he made these words his motivation for the future; he prayed that hope would flourish.

6

???: “Oh myyy~, but if it isn’t Subaru-saaama~! On your way back from visiting Beatrice?”

Subaru: “…”

Suddenly, Subaru heard a voice from behind him as he walked through the corridor, causing him to reflexively stop in his tracks.

He instantaneously recognized the speaker from the tone and cadence of his voice. For that reason, he regretted stopping, but he could not ignore it as he had already stopped walking.

He turned around in displeasure, and directly behind Subaru stood the other figure, leisurely.

Subaru: “Roswaal, huh?”

Roswaal: “Mhhm, that’s me of course. Good morning. How was Beatrice today?”

Subaru: “…It’s been a while since she’s treated me so haughtily. Well, anticipate some progress from now on.”

Roswaal: “I see… Looks like you took quite the beeeating~, though?”

Roswaal narrowed his differently colored eyes as he received Subaru’s dispirited reply.

His gaze was fixed upon Subaru’s neck. There, were the painful scratches Beatrice had given him with her nails a short while ago.

Roswaal: “Unfortunately, I’ve never been skilled at treating injuries, and I won’t be able to heal those wounds. The only ones capable of using Healing Magic are… Beatrice, Garfiel, and Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “The first two would be a bit difficult to ask. I could ask Emilia… well, I’ll think about it.”

Roswaal: “If you were to ask her, I am sure she’d definitely heal you right up. Or perhaps, could it be that to you, the ache of these wounds provide some sort of comfort?”

Subaru: “…”

In place of the reticent Subaru, each of Roswaal’s discursive words were as painfully sharp as a razor.

The last comment in particular hit him directly. Subaru narrowed his eyes, and so Roswaal shrugged his shoulders in a clown-like gesture, blatantly feigning ignorance.

The clownish makeup and exotic attire, Roswaal’s appearance and attitude had in no way changed—his way of interacting with

Subaru, his respectful and admiring attitude, had also remained the same.

Roswaal respected Subaru, acknowledging him as his savior.

He understood that salvation could be brought about in any manner, and accepted it with understanding.

Roswaal: “No need to worry, Subaru-sama. If you make use of your time, I am sure you’ll find a solution; no matter what the method, you will dedicate yourself to finding the optimal way. If your desire is to save Beatrice’s heart, such a method will one day fall within your grasp. There’s no need at all to feel aaanxious~.”

Subaru: “You make it sound so easy. There’s no way it’ll be that convenient.”

Roswaal: “You’re too modest. —Besides, I don’t think that it’s easy, either. But, that mere fact doesn’t cloud all of your achievements to date, that’s all I was saying.”

Bowing reverently, Roswaal gave thorough praise for Subaru’s achievements.

As a matter of fact, only Echidna, who was contracted with Subaru, knew about his Authority of Return by Death. But, Roswaal had an understanding of his Authority to be similar to Redoing. Roswaal evaluated that fact and his achievements together.

As Echidna held no tangible power, it was no exaggeration to say that Roswaal valued and supported Subaru the most in the truest sense.

Roswaal: “At the Royal Capital, at my mansion, and once again at the Royal Capital. And then, at the Sanctuary, and the Watergate City. —You have made it this far without letting anything slip through your fingers. Indisputable are your achievements, feats you alone have accomplished. There will come a day when you will fulfill my long-cherished wish, and for that I offer my utmost support. Please make full use of it.”

Subaru: “You sure are optimistic… Don’t be so sure that I’ll dance on the palm of your hand."

Roswaal: "But, you desire the blood of the Dragon. Without it, that girl—Rem will never awaken. Having reached that conclusion, you need Emilia-sama to become King. Isn't that right?"

Roswaal gave him a low, searching expression, and Subaru in kind returned a sharp, cold look.

It was a relationship of mutual cooperation, established on choppy waters, in which both of them knew each other's critical points.

Roswaal would accomplish his goal by utilizing Subaru's Return by Death, all the while putting Subaru in situations whereby he must gradually achieve this.

And though Subaru knew of those intentions, for the sake of saving the still-slumbering Rem, he had no choice but to advance them.

Roswaal: "Oh, but it won't be a bad deal. You do your thing, I'll do mine, and in any case, we'll both have our desires become reality. To that end, we'll make use of each other. That's all there is to it."

Subaru: "…"

Roswaal: "My strength should prove useful. I've devoted nearly four hundred years anticipating this occasion. And for me, your power will be the same, isn't that so?"

Subaru could give no objections to Roswaal's conviction.

He had arrived at that answer when he had discovered Roswaal's treachery all the way back at the Sanctuary.

Whether for the sake of the Royal Selection, or as a means of blocking against coming hindrances, being without Roswaal's presence was absolutely unallowable for Subaru and the camp.

Even if he was just planning on using Subaru to materialize his own wishes.

Subaru: "If you were honest about your true intentions and just told me what you wanted, maybe I would help you without being so stubborn.”

Roswaal: “What a shame, I’m afraid that’s impossible. You would never choose that path.”

Whenever Subaru would try to approach him even in the slightest, Roswaal would immediately push him away.

This familiar exchange brought a wry smile to Subaru’s lips, and Roswaal chuckled ostentatiously.

Roswaal: “Especially if you’re not conscious of it yourself. You always push forward with your sole priority. Any obstructions, anything or anyone that could cause you to stumble; regardless of the circumstances, you will discard even their dearest wishes. You can do that. You have proven it. This all has already been decided, hence why you’ve become my trump card.”

Subaru: “…”

Roswaal: “Isn’t this wonderful? I’ll take care of my side, you’ll take care of yours, freely fulfilling our wishes. If it’s impossible even like this, that merely indicates that the one with unfulfilled wishes lacked sufficient desire.”

Subaru: “…Ah, is that so?”

Subaru already understood that Roswaal’s crazed dedication was what was supporting him.

And, the root from which it came, his refusal to speak candidly about it was also thus.

With this in mind, Subaru ended the conversation with Roswaal, and finally started to walk away. With a posture that showed just how much Roswaal was detached from his heart, as Roswaal yet stood still,

Roswaal: “Ahhh, yes. Right about now, Ram should be in Rem’s room. I’m letting you know, just in case.”

Subaru: "…"

Unable to respond, Subaru rounded the corner and escaped from his gaze.

7

—The Contract with the Witch at the Sanctuary fundamentally changed Natsuki Subaru's way of existence.

It was a transformation of the world as Subaru perceived it, the world as he experienced it, and the world as he walked through it; he was destined to no longer live the same way he had before.

Naturally, it was inevitable that countless changes would come to Subaru both within the mansion, which was his base of activities, and outside of it, but her change was perhaps the one that had the greatest impact and caused the most discomfort among the changes he experienced.

After all—

???: "—Thank you very much for going out of your way to visit my unworthy sister, Natsuki Subaru-sama."

Saying this, the one who bowed deeply to Subaru as he entered the room was a pink-haired maid—Ram, whose character was the very picture of arrogance and insolence.

Subaru: "…"

After the events at the Sanctuary and the subsequent commendation ceremony, Ram's attitude had shifted drastically, and she no longer approached Subaru with the same familiarity as before.

This new attitude, however, made Subaru feel extremely suffocated.

Ram: "—? Is something the matter, Natsuki Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "…No, it's just that no matter how much time passes, I'll never get used to your attitude."

Ram: "…Again, many apologies for my prior rudeness. Ram's ignorance and lack of awareness caused great inconveniences to Natsuki Subaru-sama. But, since Roswaal-sama and Emilia-sama have given orders to show Natsuki-sama the utmost respect, that will not be the case again. Kindly rest assured."

Without changing her expression, Ram replied to Subaru in a manner any dignified maid ought to.

There was no trace of familiarity or sense of closeness which could have been interpreted as friendliness in her behavior, as there had been once before. Between Subaru and Ram, an invisible wall had emerged before he knew it.

—No, if there was a wall, then there would have been a way to scale it. Rather, there was no way of surmounting it; more precisely, it was an invisible gap.

Ram held Roswaal in high esteem, and adored him. When Roswaal had changed the way he acted towards Subaru, the value of Subaru's presence also changed dramatically for Ram.

The result was this current attitude, where she regarded Subaru as someone she respected.

Averting his gaze away from that Ram, Subaru approached the middle of the room—the reason why he had come to this room, the blue-haired girl who slept on a bed.

Lying on her back, her figure remained unchanged for over two years—that girl, was Rem.

He had made a vow to awaken her, and yet, he still had not achieved the conviction needed to fulfill that vow. Time alone was mercilessly leaving this girl behind.

Subaru: "Have there been any changes with Rem?"

Ram: "There have been none. She still continues to sleep… With so many other problems to deal with, Ram has no words to apologize for the worry her foolish sister has been causing you."

Subaru: “Don’t talk like that. Rem… thinking about Rem is absolutely not useless. Never say that again.”

Ram: “—Understood, sir.”

Ram responded curtly to Subaru’s firm order.

There was no dissatisfaction, nor complaint; no relief, nor gratitude.

In regards to her younger sister named Rem, Ram had no actual feelings or appreciation for her. Although she formally recognized that Rem was her sister, in the depths of her heart she probably had no room for Rem.

Her heart was completely centered on her loyalty to Roswaal.

This was heavily influenced by the actions of Subaru, who had made the choice to go along with Roswaal’s intentions, resulting in Ram’s cherished wish meeting its end.

Even if Rem were to awaken, would her heart once again have room for her little sister?

The older sister who was so adored, and the younger sister who was so doted upon: could these sisters ever return?

Subaru: “—Hk. Ram, I’m sorry, but I’d like to be alone with Rem.”

Ram: “…As you wish. Do call if you need anything.”

Grinding his teeth at the shuddering thought, Subaru felt terrified at being in the same room as Ram. Miraculously, before his trembling voice could escape, she removed her presence from the room.

Fortunately, Ram did not object to Subaru’s words, and instead bowed graciously and quietly headed for the door.

At the sound of her receding footsteps, Subaru let out a sigh of relief—

Ram: “—Ah, that’s right, Natsuki Subaru-sama.”

Subaru: “Wh-What is it? Did you forget to say something?”

Ram: “Yes. —Annerose-sama has sent a letter regarding Frederica’s condition.”

As Ram halted, Subaru was taken aback; her words that followed caused him to catch his breath.

The two names that were mentioned—Frederica and Annerose, neither of them were at the Roswaal mansion. Annerose, of course, was in her own mansion, and Frederica was accompanying her.

The official reason was to send her as a caretaker for Annerose, who had lost her steward. However, everyone, including Frederica herself, knew that it was in fact out of consideration for Frederica’s heart.

He had visited the Miload mansion several times, but Frederica’s stouthearted behaviour was painful to watch, and there was no prospect of her returning to be a maid at the Roswaal mansion.

Ram: “Apparently, she still is having difficulty concentrating. Annerose-sama is concerned as well, and in this circumstance, she is considering allowing her return to Ryuzu-sama.”

Subaru: “…I understand. I’ll discuss it with Emilia and Roswaal. What are your thoughts?”

Ram: “There is no need to be so forward with my opinion. By all means, do as you please.”

Politely bowing her head, she refused to give her thoughts when prompted. In the past, Ram would have offered her opinion even without Subaru asking for it. However, now she was well aware of her position.

Once again, the eerie sensation of dealing with someone who seemed like a completely different person surged within Subaru’s heart.

Considering Frederica, this was yet another terribly depressing event for Subaru.

While the elimination of Clind was inevitable, the fact that Frederica was present at the ceremony was another cruel twist of fate. Of course, Subaru, out of consideration for Frederica, had tried to keep her away from the venue and as he attempted to deal with Clind.

However, without Frederica's presence, it was impossible to reduce the damage, apart from that done to Clind, to zero. Quite literally, Frederica was Clind's Achilles' heel.

Therefore, no choice remained but to utilize Frederica's presence to strike at that weak point.

As a result, Frederica had suffered deep, emotional scars from which she had yet to recover.

Ram: "…"

Quiet, pale light-crimson eyes stared intently at the silent Subaru.

Under that piercing gaze, he felt as though he was being accused. In fact, being accused outright might have been much better.

He even wished for Ram to call him "Barusu" in her cold tone and for her to insult him again.

But, he could not ask that. Even if he were to command her to call him that, it would be meaningless.

Subaru: "…I'll think about it carefully."

Ram: "Yes, understood. Please, take care."

Once again, Ram bowed to Subaru after relaying her message, and this time, she left the room. As the sound of the closing door echoed, Subaru's shoulders slumped, and he let out a long sigh.

It had been suffocating. Honestly, so long as he kept his guard up, he felt suffocated no matter where he was, but it was especially stifling when he was with Ram.

Escaping that smothering feeling, Subaru turned his attention back to the bed. Finally, the only two left in the room were Subaru and Rem, who continued to sleep.

Subaru: “…Rem.”

Rem: “…”

Lying on the bed, the girl, who simply breathed over and over again in a manner which could not be called mere sleep, replied not. The slight rise and fall of her chest, and the warmth of the blood in her body, were the only signs of life within Rem.

Visiting this place, making sure to take her hand, to check for a weak pulse; that was all that Subaru could do for Rem. It was the only comfort Subaru allowed himself.

Subaru: “…Echidna.”

Echidna: “—For you to call out to me here, is truly a rarity.”

As he sat by her bedside, gently holding Rem’s hand, Echidna replied to Subaru’s call.

The Witch, the one he knew all too well to speak without being called upon, silently waited for a response from Subaru, who was submerged in the lukewarm water of his emotions.

Gradually, the silence continued; it lasted for a dozen seconds, or perhaps a few minutes.

Subaru: “The way to wake Rem… it hasn’t changed, has it?”

Echidna: “Oh, there are no new discoveries. The only way would be to reclaim her from the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, the one who put her in this sleep… but, that is not realistic, considering the likelihood of encountering the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony. Even if you were to hypothetically use your beloved as bait—”

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “My apologies, that was only a joke. Anyway, the Sin Archbishop is in hiding, not showing themselves. If you could make contact with them, I am sure there would be numerous ways of making them talk utilizing your Authority."

Subaru: "That's right. Of course, that's right. If I can manage to find them, catch them, and force them to tell me how to reawaken Rem, I can challenge them tens of thousands of times. Even so…"

They were nowhere to be found. The Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, that despicable blasphemer, never revealed themselves.

Even during the unprecedented catastrophe that had struck the Watergate City of Priestella, the scene of the horrific terrorist attack perpetuated by the Witch Cult, Gluttony did not appear.

—Why, why, why, why, why: that question filled his mind.

Subaru: "No matter what I do, I can't find that damn Gluttony. That's why…"

Echidna: "—That is why, you have no choice but to obtain the Dragon's Blood."

Subaru's denied wish was met with a glimmer of hope offered by the Witch.

Subaru shifted his bloodshot eyes and stared at the Magic Crystal hanging at his chest. Although he was unable to see the Witch of Greed, she must have been able to see Subaru.

The image of a challenger marching along an infinite path, clinging to the slimmest of hopes.

Subaru: "—With the Dragon's Blood, I can wake up Rem."

Echidna: "I refer to the Divine Dragon. Using the omnipotent power contained in the blood of its heart, I believe you should be able to release the girl's soul from her sleep."

Echidna's words were naught but speculation. But, it was a convincing speculation.

Though she had spoken without making explicit statements, the words of the Witch resounded forcefully. Thus, for now, Subaru believed that this was the way to save Rem.

The Dragon's Blood was considered to be one of the treasures which the Divine Dragon Volcanica had bestowed unto the Kingdom of Lugunica.

It brought plentiful harvest to the lands, kept away every disease, and had the possibility of granting miracles.

It could only be used by people with the highest pedigrees of social status within the Kingdom.

In other words, it was those who—

Subaru: "If you ascend to the throne, you can get your hands on it."

Echidna: "Of course. —It is for that reason that you must make her, your beloved, King."

Subaru: "…"

Echidna: "Back your beloved, support her, and make her King whilst you save those whom you wish to save. And only when you obtain the Dragon's Blood, will you be able to save Rem."

The words of Echidna seeped into Subaru's mind like a poison.

In order to save Rem, Emilia needed to become King. Making Emilia King, and fulfilling Emilia's wishes, were among the goals that Subaru aimed to achieve.

It was of utmost importance. Supporting Emilia would result in saving Rem.

Make Emilia King, to save Rem.

In the end, Rem would be saved thanks to Subaru's desire to make Emilia King.

Therefore—

Echidna: “Therefore…”

Subaru: “Stop it, you dumbass… Don’t try and shake my determination like that every time you can. Why are you trying to lower my opinion of Emilia like that?”

Echidna: “That was not my intention though?”

Subaru: “You’re not very convincing. We’ve repeated this conversation many times, dozens of times, hundreds of times.”

As if to brainwash him, the Witch would often pour poison into Subaru’s mind.

To change Subaru’s aims, she attempted to undermine his valuation of Emilia. But, that was a line that Subaru would not cross. If he were to make that mistake, Natsuki Subaru would lose the qualification to trample upon his own corpses that he had sacrificed so far.

Subaru: “You shouldn’t let your selfish feelings get in the way. No matter what you harbor against Emilia.”

Echidna: “That is a misunderstanding. Well, no matter how much I say, your thoughts will never meet mine; we are like parallel lines.”

Subaru: “We’ve had this conversation over and over again, and each time you say that we’re like parallel lines.”

In this partnership with Echidna, there were times like these where he could never let his guard down.

The Witch claimed to be Subaru’s accomplice, and by lending Subaru her wisdom as a contribution, she planned to exploit not only Subaru’s Return by Death, but also Subaru’s very way of being.

Although, thanks to her always being naive in the end, he had managed to avoid those poisonous fangs.

Subaru: “I’ll get my hands on the Dragon’s Blood. By making Emilia King. —But, that’s not something I’m only gonna do to save Rem. Making Emilia King will lead to saving Rem. My original intention remains the same. Make no mistakes there.”

Echidna: “My, my. I would not mind it if you were to dance to my tune occasionally. If you never let down your guard even a bit, I will not be able to save face as a Witch, you know?”

Subaru: “Your execution is too naive. …Or rather, perhaps, you’re too naive at the core. You’re not cut out to be a complete villain. That’s helped me so far.”

Echidna: “I see. I will try to keep that in mind.”

Echidna admitted her defeat with surprising readiness. Even if she attempted to use this as a lesson for next time, she probably would not be able to do so.

The reason for that, was because one’s nature cannot be so easily changed. Because it is not something that can be changed.

Natsuki Subaru would always be Natsuki Subaru, no matter what befell him.

The Witch of Greed, Echidna, would only ever be the Witch of Greed, Echidna.

One has no choice but to live armed with that which cannot be changed.

Because, in life, one can only play with the cards they are dealt.

Subaru: “—Rem, wait for me. For sure, I’m gonna wake you up. That’s why…”

—No matter how many times he would die.

His resolve was not exaggerated, and the stakes were not something to be surrendered lightly.

Regardless of how many times he threw it away, he would continue to spend his inextinguishable life. If that eventually led to her waking up, he would feel no regrets.

Just that much, just that much, just that would be good enough.

8

—After his visit to Beatrice’s library and Rem’s bedroom, he had reached the end of his daily routine.

Subaru gave the closed door of the room a light-hearted knock. Then, an immediate knock sounded in return from inside. It was not a reply, but a knock.

In response to that, Subaru gave another knock once again. And then, the other party immediately knocked back; not to be outdone, he knocked again. Not wanting to lose, the other knocked once more. Knock, knock, knock—.

???: “—Jeez, how long are you going to keep that up! It’s making me reaaally~ anxious.”

And, the one to lose their patience first was the one within the room.

The door opened from the inside, and the face of a beautiful girl with amethyst eyes and silver hair could be seen—she was the embodiment of supreme beauty that never ceased to captivate all things in this world.

Such was Emilia: even when she blushed with her cheeks puffed out, she gave off an impression of delicateness rather than of beauty; Subaru could not help but laugh.

Emilia: “Ah, what are you laughing for? Ugh, Subaru, you’re such a twit.”

Subaru: “Who even says twit these days. After all, it was Emilia-tan who started to return the knocks first. I just went with the flow.”

Emilia: “So that’s how you put it. Hmph, that’s fine. If that’s the case, I just won’t let Subaru into my room.”

Emilia tried to close the door, her face etched with annoyance from having heard Subaru speaking through his laughter. Seeing that, Subaru hastily put his hand in the gap of the doorway—

Subaru: “OWWW!”

Emilia: “Ah! Subaru, are you okay?!”

Emilia jumped at Subaru’s over-exaggerated shriek of pain after having had his fingers pinched. Quickly rushing out of the room, she hurriedly grabbed Subaru’s aching right hand, and,

Emilia: “Nom.”

Subaru: “Ehh, Emilia-tan?! Isn’t that a little bold?!”

Emilia: “Mmphphnn, mmhmhhmhpphhnomnomnomnomnom.”

Whatever he tried to say was muffled by Emilia’s angered reaction and her sharp amethyst eyes.

Emilia’s thin lips wrapped themselves around the reddened fingers of Subaru’s right hand. In between her soft lips, he could feel Emilia’s warm, pink tongue gently tracing the numbing pain which afflicted Subaru’s fingers.

Tingling with that sensation, a sensual shiver traveled up Subaru’s spine.

Emilia: “Mhm… that should do, I think. Subaru, that must’ve hurt… hey, why is your face bright red?”

Subaru: “I can’t help my boyish reaction, given how confused I was by that unexpected development… uhh, well, I’m okay. Thank you very much. That should do it for me.”

Emilia: “—? I’m not sure if I understood that, so I’m going to use healing magic, okay?”

Emilia gave a bewildered face as Subaru bowed his head, holding up his fingers which had been licked. However, she immediately switched her attention, and began to heal Subaru’s fingers with a light blue surge of magic.

The healing magic completely cured the pain that had been soothed by Emilia's tongue. All that remained for Subaru was how he would deal with his saliva-drenched fingers.

Subaru: "I'll wipe them on my clothes… wait no, that would be a waste. That being said, would it be too much to just openly lick them…?! But, if I let this opportunity escape…"

Emilia: "Ah, sorry. I got them covered in my spit. Yep, all squeaky clean now."

Subaru: "Dammit! It was a choice with a time limit—?!"

Not even noticing Subaru's astonishment, Emilia wiped his fingers with her handkerchief, looking pleased with herself. Then, suddenly, she glanced at Subaru's neck, and she blinked her eyes rapidly.

Still visible were the untreated scratch marks Beatrice had left. Emilia was quick to notice them, and gently touched the wounds with her white fingers.

Emilia: "Subaru, that looks painful. What happened here?"

Subaru: "Ah, aaaah, this? I just got my neck caught on something on the way here…"

Emilia: "Liar."

Subaru attempted to smooth over the situation, but he was interrupted; Emilia spoke only that one word.

With her round eyes wide open, she stroked Subaru's wounds with her finger over and over again, before eventually muttering a few words.

Emilia: "—It was Beatrice."

The moment she spoke thus, Emilia's voice became emotionless and cold.

In an instant, an enormous amount of pure white force surged from

Emilia’s body. It swept through the halls of the mansion in one fell swoop, and Subaru’s skin was caressed by a great burning cold.

The air froze, the chill caused it to crackle, and Subaru raised his voice in a panic.

Subaru: “Emilia! Emilia, calm down! Everything is okay, everything is okay!”

Emilia: “…”

Subaru: “Emilia! Here, look at me!”

Emilia: “—Ah”

He forcibly extended his arms and hugged the girl’s slender body as he called out to her.

Calling Emilia’s name over and over again in her ear, Subaru, who was close enough that she could feel his breath, shouted as he saw himself reflected in those amethyst eyes.

At the sound of his voice, Emilia’s blurry eyes came into focus, and she let out a small whimper.

In an instant, the cold air that was spreading across the mansion’s top floor vanished, and the overwhelming pressure that had been surrounding his body also dissipated, returning things back to as they were before.

Subaru: “Th-That was close. A little more of that, and Reinhard would have come rushing in…”

Emilia: “I… I… n-now… eh…?”

Subaru: “It’s okay, it’s okay. Emilia-tan is a good girl, a good girl, everything is okay.”

Her eyes darting around, Emilia slumped down on the floor, and Subaru crouched down next to her. As she hugged her own body, unable to comprehend what had just transpired, Subaru gently stroked her back.

Gradually, Emilia's breathing regained its composure, and then, timidly looking at Subaru's face,

Emilia: "S-Sorry? I… was acting weird again…"

Subaru: "It's alright. Any troubles caused by Emilia-tan aren't troubles at all. That's the role I want to take on. Don't worry."

Emilia: "…Y-Yeah."

As Subaru spoke to her, Emilia nodded even as she continued to frown.

Subaru would not let go of her body until her heart truly settled down.

Emilia's unstable psyche—it was significantly impacted by the fact that she was unable to surmount the Trails in the Sanctuary

In the end, he would never know what she saw in the first Trial, the Trial which showed glimpses into one's own past.

Nevertheless, whatever memories she saw had broken Emilia's heart into pieces. And then, unable to overcome the Trials with her own strength, Subaru had completed them himself, and the opportunity was lost.

Therefore, Emilia's progress was probably still trapped within the tomb even now.

But, no matter how long she continued to reject, to mourn, time would continue to progress without cease. And neither the world, nor her surroundings, nor anyone would tolerate her stagnation.

For that reason, Subaru would continue to take Emilia by the hand, even when she halted to a stop.

Emilia: "Sorry, Subaru. I'm causing Subaru trouble again…"

Subaru: "It's okay, it's no pro, no problem at all. Rather, it makes me feel welcome."

Emilia: "…Hehe, aww, Subaru. Mhm, thank you. I'm okay, I've calmed down."

After a brief embrace, Emilia lifted her face from Subaru's chest. She stood up quickly, her warmth leaving his body, and Subaru stiffened his lips with a look of regret.

Subaru: "Dammit. I wanted to enjoy Emilia-tan's softness just a little while longer."

Emilia: "Huh, would that be for the best? If Subaru says so, I'll do it."

Subaru: "Nononono, it's fine. This is a trick I use quite often to cope with dissatisfaction. Gorging yourself until you're full is for cattle. I think rather than a pig in its sty, I'm more like a wolf that's chasing after its prey."

Emilia: "That might be true. I also think Subaru is closer to a dog than a pig."

Subaru: "But, isn't it a completely different story when it comes to dogs and pigs?!"

With this absurd exchange, Subaru was relieved to see that Emilia was once again smiling.

Luckily, it appeared that she had forgotten her anger upon seeing his wounds from just moments ago, which was a relief.

Echidna: "I cannot bear to watch this."

Subaru: "Shut up."

Emilia: "—Huh?"

Subaru: "Ah, I wasn't saying that to Emilia-tan. Sorry, I was talking to myself."

Subaru instinctively replied to those suddenly interjected thought waves, startling Emilia.

Through the thought waves coming across the Magic Crystal, the strong sense of disgust towards Emilia who stood before him was evident. Taking advantage of the fact that only Subaru could hear her scorn and mockery, the Witch's abusive behavior was unbearable.

Emilia: "W-Would it be better for me to shut up? If that's what Subaru wants, I will do my best to stay quiet…"

Subaru: "It's not like that! It's fine, so let's talk a lot, okay? It's okay if you talk to me."

Emilia: "…Really?"

Emilia's amethyst eyes began to timidly moisten with tears. When Subaru nodded in response, Emilia let out a sigh of relief, once again taking Subaru's hand,

Emilia: "Well then, tell me, Subaru. —What should I do today?"

Subaru: "…"

Emilia: "Yesterday, I finished studying in my room as you told me to do. If it's something Subaru says, there's no doubt I will do it. So, can you tell me what I should do today?"

—She would do what was said by Subaru; she would make no mistake if it was Subaru; she would believe in Subaru.

In response to Emilia's words, Subaru struggled to keep his fake smile from disappearing from his face.

The smiles he had practiced in front of the mirror: the culmination of these efforts was on display here. Thanks to that, Emilia harbored no distrust or suspicion, but she simply waited with her eyes twinkling in anticipation for Subaru's response.

Emilia, who had been unsuccessful in her attempts to overcome the Trial of the tomb, was trying to protect her heart by completely relying on Subaru. —That was only natural.

By utilizing the power of Return by Death, Subaru had completely eliminated every obstacle that stood before Emilia. Emilia mistakenly believed that it was best not to defy Subaru's words, that his trust in her was something that she could earn; he had gotten this far by doing so.

Emilia's heart clung to Subaru, and he realised that she had become so terribly unstable that no matter how many Deaths he experienced, it was already beyond the point of no return.

There were other things which could not be undone. —For example, the beautiful silver hair of Emilia, who smiled before him, had been cut completely short.

Subaru: "…"

The exact reason as to why was unclear.

However, Emilia had cut her long hair, much to Subaru's surprise. Was it to catch Subaru's attention, or maybe to reduce the time and effort spent on grooming?

Or perhaps, did she do it to look closer to the "Sleeping Beauty" whom Subaru often frequented?

All of these were speculations. He did not know the answer. There was no turning back.

But still, Subaru did not consider this situation to be the worst.

Subaru: "Well then, I have a request for Emilia-tan. Today, just like yesterday, keep up with your studies! If I do something important again, I'll let you know in advance."

Emilia: "Like in Priestella?"

Subaru: "Yeah, just like in Priestella. Until then, you need to keep your spirits up. Preparing for an emergency, and boosting your own morale, those are assuredly the most important things Emilia-tan can do right now."

Emilia: "Mmm, understood, Subaru-sensei. I will do as ordered. So, could you—"

Emilia enthusiastically agreed with Subaru, who had put on somewhat playful theatrics. Emilia had accepted his command with something resembling a salute, then, as her words trailed off at the end,

Emilia: “—So, if I do that properly, could you stroke my head?”

Peeking up at Subaru, Emilia spoke this with anxiety and embarrassment in her eyes.

Subaru gasped at the sight of her, and for a moment he stood stock still. If that moment continued for any longer, it would not be hard to imagine despair creeping into Emilia’s eyes.

But, fortunately, Subaru put on a smile before that could happen,

Subaru: “Isn’t it obvious? Rather, shouldn’t I be the one asking for legal permission to touch Emilia-tan’s hair?”

Emilia: “—? If Subaru wants to touch it, he can touch it any time he wants…”

Subaru: “I’m! Saying!! That also would be a reward, so I shouldn’t. When good things happen, then I promise to do so. I will pet Emilia-tan. OK?”

Emilia: “Mhm, ohh kei.”

Subaru flashed a brilliant smile in confirmation and gave her a thumbs up, to which Emilia nodded awkwardly. And then, reluctantly, still holding Subaru’s hand in hers—

Emilia: “Alright, I’ll go back to my room.”

Subaru: “Aaah, I’ll have Petra bring some food up, so let’s eat together.”

Emilia: “Yes, I’ll be waiting. Well, I’ll see you later, okay?”

Waving her hand, Emilia walked back into her room. —Watching her hair, which had now been cut short, sway sadly, Subaru resisted the urge to let out a long sigh.

Before long, the door closed shut with a sound behind her, and the connection between Subaru and Emilia was physically severed.

Echidna: “Good grief, even ugliness has bounds.”

Subaru: “…”

As soon as Emilia was out of sight, Echidna started her abuse. To those words, smeared in revulsion, Subaru gave no reply.

From the time he had entered into this relationship with Echidna, he had come to learn to never exchange words with her concerning the harsh way she treated Emilia.

If he did not speak, she would not speak.

If Subaru maintained that stubborn attitude, the Witch would perceive it as futility, and would remain silent.

Only regarding Emilia, could Echidna not be relied upon.

And, concerning the relationship between Subaru and Emilia, even though it did not seem to have changed from before, it still was different than it was, but he did not have the time to fix it currently.

Echidna: “It would be more convenient for you if she were but an obedient doll, would it not?”

Subaru: “—Hk.”

His throat choked at her cruel remark, and Subaru regretted his reaction.

They were words that should not have been affirmed, but they were words that could not be denied.

To protect life; to protect the future; to protect hope; to protect possibility.

For this reason, he would sacrifice Emilia’s Present heart.

And, that it would not be limited to Emilia alone, Subaru was well aware of this fact.

9

Everyone would gather together, and share a meal with one another.

That simple rule of the Emilia Camp had over time become meaningless, with hardly anyone adhering to it.

Subaru: “Sorry, Petra. We’ll be having our meal in Emilia’s room.”

Petra, who was in charge of the meals, looked disappointed when Subaru informed her of this. However, she quickly masked her disappointment, and carried Subaru and Emilia’s meal to her room.

For Emilia, who was mentally unstable, there was an ironclad rule that no one else was to accompany her during her meals.

Emilia: “Subaru, here, ahhhh~”

In the same manner that Subaru would spoil Emilia, during their meals, Emilia would indulge Subaru as well. Amidst this interaction, and occasionally supporting Emilia whenever she wavered, the breakfast had come to an end.

Afterwards, as per Subaru’s instructions, Emilia went to her desk, determined to study diligently.

Emilia: “I need to do exactly what Subaru says to become a great King.”

Cheering on that adorable, self-motivated Emilia, Subaru left her room.

Having had some of Roswaal’s official work delegated to her, Emilia’s knowledge for the Royal Selection far surpassed that of the first time he had met her. The fruits of her effort were ripening day by day.

However—

Echidna: “Regardless of what she does, in the end, she will always come to seek your approval. An awfully interesting way to raise a King.”

Subaru: “Shut up.”

Echidna: “You too are harboring unease concerning it. I know you are always wavering about whether she should be allowed to ascend the throne in her current state. However, you have no other choice but to do so.”

Having left Emilia’s room, Echidna’s words dripped poison into Subaru’s ears as he walked down the mansion’s corridors.

It was true that Emilia’s psyche had become unstable, and the willpower she had at the start of the Royal Selection had been greatly shaken. Nevertheless, she would certainly sit upon the Kingdom of Lugunica’s throne.

None other than Natsuki Subaru would make it so.

By Returning by Death repeatedly, he would remove every hardship from before her, every impediment standing in her way, so that Emilia’s ambitions would be fulfilled.

And, by doing so, he would not only support Emilia, but also save Rem.

Supporting Emilia, saving Rem, keeping those dear to him away from harm. —Was this not the exact future that Natsuki Subaru had hoped for when he made the Contract with the Witch?

—I am sorry, Natsuki-san. This is where we must say farewell.

Subaru: “…”

Suddenly, a voice resonated not within his eardrums, but within his own memories, halting Subaru’s steps.

Turning his head around, he saw no one in his surroundings. He thought it perhaps was just the poor humor of the Witch, but it could not have been her thought waves. It was something else entirely: it was a call from his own memories.

The voice continued.

—As for me, Natsuki-san. Even through all of this, I thought of you as my benefactor. I thought of you as a person to whom I owed a great debt, one which I wished to repay any way I could.

The voice continued.

—But, I see your decision, and I understand it. You do not want anyone's help; on the contrary, you try, and somehow accomplish everything on your own.

The voice continued.

—Therefore, this is my way of returning the favor. Since you probably will try to protect everyone close to you, I will take my leave.

The voice continued.

—Well then, goodbye, Natsuki-san. Take care of yourself.

The voice continued.

—I thought of you as my friend.

The voice continued.

—Although, that must not have been the case for you.

Subaru: "—HK!"

Just as the last of these words resounded in his mind, Subaru punched the wall next to him with all of his might. A hard thud resounded throughout the corridor, and Subaru's fist cracked pitifully.

As blood dripped from his knuckles, Subaru exhaled raggedly and put his other hand to his head.

In this moment, he could not forget them, the parting words of Otto

Suwen.

Having saved the Sanctuary and the mansion, having survived a life-threatening commendation ceremony, and having overcome numerous challenges, Otto said those words to Subaru before departing the mansion.

Even though more than a year had passed since then, the vision of him walking away never disappeared.

It seemed as if he had condemned Subaru for choosing to save everyone.

Echidna: “But, you made no attempt to stop him. In actuality, the fact that there are fewer people for you to protect has only been a blessing for you.”

Subaru: “You’re wrong. It’s not like I didn’t stop him for such calculating reasons. It’s just, that I respected his wishes. From the start, he was a guy who had no reason to stay here.”

He was attempting to repay him for purchasing his cargo and rescuing him from the Witch Cult.

But, when it came to reimbursement, the debt was settled the moment he had driven the dragon carriage to save Emilia, who was about to be blown away by a time bomb.

And as for the cargo, once the proper payment had been exchanged, this debt, also, was no longer owed.

For Otto Suwen, there was no reason to cooperate with the Emilia Camp.

If he were to continue staying there without such a motive, he would need a reason that went above and beyond what led to him leaving to continue his life as a travelling merchant, something that could only exist for him within this place.

Therefore, he did not stop him when he decided to leave. Besides, even though Otto’s Divine Protection of the Soul of Language was useful, it was not indispensable for winning the Royal Selection.

In the first place, if he continued to be associated with the Emilia Camp, he would still be in danger from both the Witch Cult and the Royal Selection. It was better for Otto to leave this place

He had not heard any rumors of him since then. Their relationship was shallow to begin with; it was of no consequence.

Natsuki Subaru had others he had to protect by sacrificing his life.

Subaru: "…"

Stepping on the dripping blood, Subaru shook his head and started to walk away.

Recently, his thoughts were violated in this way by things that were out of his control. It was frustrating. It was irritating. And above all, Echidna seemed to be enjoying it.

There were countless things to consider. He had no time to brood within his own mind.

He needed to choose the best, the very best, the greatest, the ideal, the optimum choice.

And despite that—

Subaru: "…"

Stepping quickly through the corridor, Subaru returned to his room. He could not allow anyone, even inadvertently, to see his face right now.

Natsuki Subaru is calm, Natsuki Subaru is rational, Natsuki Subaru is optimistic; there is nothing different about him than usual.

So that things could remain as they were, everyone in the mansion must believe such things.

Otherwise, he would not be able to protect those he wished to protect—.

???: "—Oh my, you seem to have returned in a hurry."

He entered the room, and as soon as he locked the door behind him, Subaru's head shot up in shock.

Seeing Subaru's excessive reaction, the figure sitting on his bed smiling sweetly, gently stroking her hand across her long, braided hair.

???: "I thought I'd arrived on time, but you glaring at me like that is quite troubling."

Subaru: "—Elsa."

Elsa: "Yes, that's correct. The Bowel Hunter, Elsa Granhiert, at her master's request has come as quickly as she could—I'm not bothering you, am I?"

Articulating so, tilting her head seductively was a beautiful woman dressed in a rather revealing black garment that exposed her feminine body—an assassin with a bewitching yet poisonous aura, Elsa.

After his initial surprise, Subaru readily accepted the presence of the woman who had entered his bedroom without warning. There was no reason for him to panic.

After all, she was not his enemy. She had been once before, but that was all in the past now.

Subaru: "Now, I'm your collaborator… that is, unless you're holding a grudge over the fact that I fed you to the Rabbit."

Elsa: "That was an unforgettable experience. Besides, you rescued me before I was digested as Rabbit food. So, I'm not holding any grudges against you for that."

Echidna: ""For that": that is quite the loaded statement."

As she sat on the bed, Elsa's black eyes shimmered bewitchingly. Subaru tensed under her unfathomable gaze, yet Echidna's tone remained unchanged as she whispered.

Echidna's observation was not a nitpick, but rather an accurate assessment.

In order to repel Elsa's attack on the mansion, Subaru had lured the Great Rabbit and had used it to overwhelm her with sheer numbers. Afterward, he had saved her from the brink of death, making her indebted to him.

However, he did not believe that this alone was enough to control this dangerous individual.

Subaru: "That's why Meili remains a hostage. My loyal subordinates are keeping an eye on her."

Elsa: "…I know that without you needing to remind me. To be honest, I'm quite angry about it, but I have no complaints about the job itself. I also have no objections to you being my employer."

Touching the hilt of her kukri knife at her waist, Elsa licked her lips with her red tongue.

Contrary to her words, the pressure she exuded was capable of slicing Subaru's neck at any moment. —The only thing holding her back was the presence of Elsa's sister, Meili, who was currently held captive.

She was in a separate location from the mansion, where the duplicates of Ryuzu—Pico and the others, were taking turns keeping watch. She was not being treated poorly.

Subaru: "It'd be far too risky for me now to let you go."

Elsa: "Even with the Sword Saint at your disposal, it seems I've been valued quite highly."

Subaru: "Somebody's gotta do the dirty work, don't they?"

As Subaru responded in a lowered voice, Elsa placed her hand over her mouth and chuckled.

Currently, Elsa was secretly cooperating with the Emilia Camp, working behind the scenes.

—The leader of the camp, a symbol of purity who could not be tainted: Emilia.

—Lauded as the Sword Saint, with an unwavering reputation: Reinhard.

—And, averting numerous challenges with zero casualties, and overcoming many obstacles: Natsuki Subaru.

As a result of these accumulated reputations, Elsa had been asked to do the dirty work on behalf of Subaru and the others who were unable to do it freely. Of course, even though it was referred to as dirty work, the tasks assigned to her were not sinister activities such as assassinations or political purges.

She simply was proactively eliminating any potential obstacles or dangers that might come their way.

She had been entrusted with other tasks as well. Today's report concerned one of them.

Subaru: "So, how did it go?"

Elsa: "Sorry to report, but Gluttony was nowhere to be seen at the location you sent me to. There was nothing there but a motley crew of Witch Cultists… I helped myself to every last one of them. "

Subaru: "Aah. You're free to do whatever you want with that. … But, in the end, it was a dud?"

Subaru frowned and sighed at the report that had come from Elsa, who licked her blood-red lips.

Once again, it was a miss. Subaru's arrow had missed its target, and the target had gotten away again.

In search of the whereabouts of the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, he had set up an information network in various locations, hunting down every Witch Cultist from one end to the other; yet, Gluttony was nowhere to be found.

Subaru: "In the end, the only one we've killed is Greed."

Elsa: “That, and Wrath was captured. I think that was a success, but I guess it might not be for you.”

Subaru: “…Anyway, I got your report. For now, remain on standby until I need you again. If there’s anything I need to ask of you, I’ll contact you again.”

Elsa: “Yes. Understood. By the way, I’d like to meet with Meili…”

Subaru: “—You can’t. But, I won’t hold her captive forever. At most, you’ll need to be patient until the Royal Selection is settled.”

Rejecting Elsa’s request, Subaru emphasized the duration of their agreement. In response, Elsa replied with a brief “Yes, I understand”, and headed straight for the window rather than the door.

Since Subaru’s room was on the third floor of the mansion, she had probably entered through that window. It was not surprising that she managed to pull off such a feat of acrobatics—

Subaru: “Ah, wait, Elsa. There’s one more thing I want you to ask you.”

Elsa: “—? What may that be? I don’t really know anything of much importance.”

Subaru: “It’s nothing that important. Since you came from outside… how was the weather beyond the forest? Was it raining or anything?”

Elsa: “The weather? Ah, there was no problem with it whatsoever. The clouds are a bit thick, but there’s no need to worry about it getting worse. Is that all?”

Subaru: “No…”

Twisting his head to the side, Subaru gazed at the Magic Time Crystal in his room. Right now, it was already Fire Time—it had gone past seven Bright Time, and was now just after lunchtime.

After confirming this, Subaru walked over to Elsa, her feet still planted on the windowsill,

Subaru: “I want to ask you to do something. —Please, cut off my head with that knife.”

Elsa: “—Your head… I wonder, have you lost it already?”

Subaru: “I’m being completely sane, okay? I’m just asking you to do something that has to be done.”

Curiously widening her eyes at Subaru’s remarks, Elsa emanated a fierce aura. But, Subaru’s attitude remained unflinching.

Seeing his imposing manner, Elsa shrugged her shoulders.

Elsa: “Generally speaking, most people who have their heads cut off usually die.”

Subaru: “I suppose I also fall under that category. I’m not sure about you, though.”

Elsa: “I think I too would die if my head were to come off… Are you sure about this?”

Subaru: “Don’t worry, this won’t cause any harm to Meili. I’ll have someone bring you written instructions later so you’ll know where Meili is. Is that okay?”

As Subaru assuaged her concerns with his reassuring words, Elsa contemplated for a moment. However, after only a few seconds of thought, she slowly unsheathed her weapon—

Elsa: “Do you have any last words?”

Subaru: “Make it painless.”

Elsa: “…”

Subaru: “Ah. I told you about Meili, but you can do whatever you want with my guts after I’m dead. Just don’t lay a finger on anyone in the mansion. Well, I guess that’s why I have Reinhard arou—”

Before he could finish saying those words, Elsa’s arm sliced through the air.

For just a moment, Subaru’s field of vision was turned upside down. As his view of the room spun around, he watched as blood splattered all over that familiar room, and,

—Ah, cleaning this room is going to be hard on Petra.

And, with that thought, Subaru’s life blinked out.

10

—When he woke up from his hollow dreams, Subaru always experienced a suffocating sensation.

However, this time, his release from there was much quicker.

Perhaps, it was because Natsuki Subaru was being reconstructed in a manner different from him waking from sleep.

Subaru: “…”

Subaru jerked up violently, placing his hand against his sweat-drenched forehead. It was cooler than the perspiration typical of sleep, closer to the cold sweat that flowed when faced with the shock of losing his life.

In any case, Subaru’s body was atop the sofa in his own room, and sunlight was streaming in through the window.

Subaru: “…Morning, huh?”

Touching his neck which should have been cut, Subaru rose slowly. Cocking his head, making sure that his head had not fallen to the floor inadvertently, he checked the time using the Magical Time Crystal above his door.

The Crystal was glowing a pale green, indicating that it was currently early morning.

Then, the question that remained was “which” morning it was—.

Subaru: “…”

To confirm this, Subaru quickly pulled out the Magic Crystal around his neck.

As he clutched the ticket that connected this dream world with reality, the tapping of this foot, as if he were in a rush, overlapped with hot pulses, and Subaru’s consciousness was engulfed by a white light.

Subaru: “…”

When he opened his eyes, Subaru was once again standing in the middle of the vast grassy plain.

Turning around, he saw a hill, and under a parasol atop that hill, a Witch clad in black faced a white table, gracefully sipping from her cup.

Ascending the hill, he headed towards the Witch.

Subaru: “Hey, what day…”

Echidna: “…”

Placing his hands on the table, he snarled at the Witch who continued her elegant tea-time. However, she replied not, and simply pointed silently at the seat across from her.

The seat was empty, and a cup of tea had been prepared for a visitor. What she had presented to Subaru was the minimum requirement for participating in her tea party—.

Subaru: “Damn it, I guess I should just drink it, I’ll drink it!”

Grabbing the cup whilst clicking his tongue, Subaru gulped down all of the cup’s contents in one swig. Instantly, the heat of the freshly brewed tea burned his throat.

Subaru: “Ghhhuaa—?!”

Echidna: “Whoaa?! Just a second, just a second! You do know that there was really no need for that?”

Subaru: “Shut up! You play the part of a difficult to please Witch, and this only happened because you insist on making me follow such complicated procedures… ghha, ghhk gh!”

As Subaru choked on the tea he had swallowed, even Echidna hurriedly stood up from her seat. She then placed her hand on Subaru’s back, and continued to rub his back until his coughing subsided.

Then, after a moment of Subaru’s sputtering,

Subaru: “Ghha, ack… ah, I’ve calmed down… eh, what about the tea?”

Echidna: “Ah, it is fine this time. Also, there is no fun in having you spit out the tea that I worked so hard to brew. And, the table too, it would be a pity to leave it stained like this.”

Echidna shook her head as Subaru, wiping his mouth, tried to correct his transgression.

Then, with a snap of her fingers, the table that was sullied with the tea Subaru had spit out dissipated, quickly transforming the scene under the parasol into a desolate landscape.

Echidna: “Come now, you even dirtied the chair a bit. Making me stand here to talk to you, what a very sinful man you are.”

Subaru: “I was just choking on my tea and spat out. —Compared to that, we have more important things to discuss.”

Cutting off the teasing words of Echidna, Subaru raised his finger.

That which he had to confirm, was only one thing.

Subaru: “What day is it today? What’s the month and date?”

Echidna: “—Hmm. From that question, I assume you have returned again?”

Subaru: “Yeah. Yes, that’s right. I just want to be sure of the date. What is it?”

While holding out his Magic Crystal, Subaru asked this of Echidna, who fully understood the situation. Receiving the Magic Crystal, Echidna nodded before beginning to share in his Memories.

Echidna: “The month is Kisdam, the date is the fourteenth.”

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Judging by your expression, it would appear you are half excited and half bewildered.”

Upon seeing Subaru’s reaction, Echidna closed one eye curiously. Subaru nodded with a “Yeah” at her question, his eyes half excited and half bewildered.

Returning to the morning of the day he had Returned by Death was something he had desired. However, it also hinted at the possibility of other anxieties—

Echidna: “Myon myon myon myon myon…”

Pressing the proffered Magic Crystal against her forehead, Echidna began her goofy inheritance of Memories.

While witnessing this Witch’s ritual, Subaru righted the chair he had overturned, and sat down heavily.

He had some concerns. However, being able to return to this very morning was fortunate. Since the events that had transpired were still fresh in his memory, it would not have been too difficult to positively correct the situation.

Subaru: “There shouldn’t be a problem with Petra, but during morning practice I told Reinhard and Garfiel some unnecessary things. I’ll be more careful with that. Also, if I get scratched by Beatrice, it’ll upset Emilia. But, Beatrice hasn’t spoken to me in a while, so…”

He wanted to visit the Forbidden Library and exchange words with

Beatrice as much as possible.

Even if that exchange would be a painful rejection of Subaru in a sorrowful, tearful voice.

Subaru: “Roswaal is the same as usual, and Ram too… ah, she’s going to bring up Frederica in regards to Annerose’s letter, so I gotta come up with a clever response. Also, with Emilia—”

He had to tread carefully, as Emilia could easily go out of control if she saw Subaru’s wounds. However, if he were to deal with the situation in Beatrice’s room from before, Emilia would no longer go berserk.

Yet, he did not want to miss the opportunity to talk to Beatrice. Even if he got scratched, would Emilia remain calm so long as he hid his wounds?

Subaru: “Emilia, Emilia, Emilia…”

Were there any oversights, any mistakes, any irreversible problems?

Reflecting on his half of a day, recalling, recalling, recalling—

Echidna: “—Natsuki Subaru.”

As Subaru began to overheat in thought, without him noticing, Echidna, standing by his side, touched his cheek.

It appeared that the inheritance of Memories had completed. Echidna gently placed the Magic Crystal back around Subaru’s neck as his eyes widened,

Echidna: “If there is anything you wish to talk about, I shall listen to anything.”

And, that was all she said.

Subaru: “…”

Hearing those words, Subaru took a short breath and squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

In that quietness, he could feel his feverish thoughts start to calm down. He was okay now; he was fine. It was true that he was so distressed that he felt as if his heart might crack and shatter.

Subaru: “I can handle this much on my own… Thank you.”

Echidna: “—. How surprising. For you to thank me so honestly, you must have been feeling very weak-hearted.”

Raising her eyebrow, Echidna’s words caught Subaru off guard.

He wanted to correct letting those words of gratitude reflexively slip out as some kind of mistake, but the spontaneity made it seem all the more genuine, making it impossible to remedy.

This sensation was something that Subaru had feared. It was something he did not want to put into words.

—He felt more at ease in the dream world with Echidna, than he did in reality where Emilia and his friends were awaiting him.

But such a thing should absolutely not be allowed to happen.

Subaru: “…”

Echidna: “Well, that is fine. Just seeing that expression on your face is enough of a reward for me.”

Gazing at Subaru, who was silently attempting to cover things up, Echidna said this with a teasing tone.

It was extremely uncomfortable, as if she could see right through him, but the more Subaru pursued the matter, the more disadvantageous it would be for him. So, Subaru did not press the issue any further.

More importantly—

Subaru: “If you’ve inherited my Memories, then you should understand. The save point has moved. That means…”

Echidna: “—Another problem that threatens your life is fast approaching.”

Echidna was quick to grasp the situation, and Subaru nodded with a tense expression.

The checkpoint for Return by Death always updated when Subaru was in danger. If Return by Death had reset him to this morning, then a life-threatening situation would arise shortly.

Once again, if Death were to befall Natsuki Subaru—

Subaru: “I’m going to have to borrow your strength again.”

Echidna: “Well, that is what our Contract is all about… Nevertheless, there is just one thing…”

Subaru: “What is it?”

Catching on to her hesitant words, Subaru prompted Echidna to continue. Then, while Echidna twirled her fingers in her long, white hair,

Echidna: “Perhaps I am mistaken, but… you seem to be having a little bit of fun, are you not?”

Subaru: “—. Don’t say such stupid things.”

Subaru snorted in response to her outrageously ridiculous statement.

It was ridiculous, a truly ridiculous thing to say. There was no way something so stupid could be true.

To think that he would find more comfort with the spiral of Death engulfing him, repeating trial and error to escape from it, than he would in peaceful and ordinary days spent with Emilia and his friends.

Subaru: “At best, I’ll be counting on you, Witch of Greed.”

Echidna: “And you, for the sake of satisfying my boundless curiosity, please do your best.”

Ignoring the budding turmoil in his heart, Subaru was ready to take on Echidna and the challenge ahead.

Perhaps it could be said that he had an opportunity for a preemptive strike due to the unexpected update of Return by Death's checkpoint.

Subaru: “If I were to use Return by Death to make the first strike, could it be useful for a surprise attack?”

Echidna: “It is a rather rare opportunity. I certainly hope to make good use of it. —Oh, and…”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Calling out to Subaru as he was about to go off to battle, Echidna pointed to the Magic Crystal hanging around his neck.

Echidna: “Even after reading your memories, I still cannot understand: why did you Return by Death?”

Subaru: “Ah, that. That was because—”

The answer was—

11

Passing through the door of the dream world, Natsuki Subaru's consciousness returned to reality.

Subaru: “…”

Looking above the door of his room, the time shown by the Magical Time Crystal remained the same as it was before. As usual, feeling uncomfortable about the difference between the time he had perceived and time in reality, Subaru headed towards the bathroom.

He washed his face, brushed his teeth, practiced smiling, and quickly changed his clothes.

And, just as he had finished—

???: “Subaru-sama, are you awake—wah?”

Subaru: “Hey, good morning, Petra. You’re looking cute this morning, too.”

The door opened abruptly, and Petra stood there on the other side, her eyes wide open. But, after quickly realizing that Subaru was just teasing her, she smiled shyly.

Petra: “Jeez, please don’t surprise me like that.”

Subaru: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Well, Petra. Aren’t you going to greet me?”

Petra: “Really, you don’t regret what you did even a little? Hmph… yes, good morning, Subaru-sama. Today is once again a splendid morning, you know.”

Without mentioning Subaru’s frivolous attitude, Petra continued with a lovely smile. Her words were exactly the same as that morning before he had Returned by Death.

That being so, the next thing she would say would be exactly the same.

Subaru: “I agree, it’s indeed a splendid morning. Petra is cute today, too; I don’t even need to say it.”

Petra: “Subaru-sama’s still saying such things.… Ah, but there are clouds hanging over the sky beyond the forest, and it seems that the weather may get worse this afternoon. I have plans to go shopping this afternoon, so I hope it’ll stay sunnyyy.”

He listened to the girl talk about what she wanted to do, speaking in a manner which befitted her age; Subaru let out a laugh. Seeing this, Petra puffed out her cheeks, but he hastily replied with a “I’m sorry, I’m sorry” and continued to speak—

Subaru: “But, rest assured, Petra. Today will stay sunny all day. The clouds are giving off a false impression and won’t be a problem. I can say that confidently.”

Petra: “Huh? Really? That’s super helpful… But, how do you know that?”

Subaru: “Well, that’s because…”

Petra inclined her head and widened her eyes at Subaru’s assertion.

Giving her a smile that showed his teeth, Subaru answered the girl’s query.

Subaru: “—Because I returned just for this, putting my life on the line for it.”

12

—A plain of green, a small hill, a white-haired Witch in a mournful black dress sitting at a white table under a parasol, gracefully tilting her cup.

Echidna: “Using one’s own life, to save, to protect, to prevent others from being hurt. How great a feat it is to do so not just once, or twice, but repeatedly.”

Letting out an exhilarated sigh, the Witch recalled the image of a boy with whom she was Contracted.

Desperately pursuing his ideals, pressing onward despite being struck endlessly by reality, possessing the most wretched Authority of Return by Death as his own, a lovable human who continued to fight with all of his might.

Echidna: “—But that Authority is a double-edged sword. Too little regard for one’s own life, and one becomes too fixated on the value of lives other than their own. Sacrificing one’s own life, desperately trying to protect the lives of those precious to them… over time, they cannot focus on anything “except” for the lives of those loved ones. That is…”

No matter when, no matter where, that singular attitude of clinging onto one thing was downright foolish.

And, to be foolish, to be ignorant, to be knowable.

Echidna: “—You truly are, someone desirable to me.”

Cheeks reddening like a maiden in the throes of infatuation, the Witch longed for the absent boy.

Through the Magic Crystal connected to his Gate, she felt the boy’s world as if it were her own.

Was he aware of his own dependence on the Witch? He was willing to Return by Death simply to check the weather, unaware of such a mentality.

Echidna: “But, please rest assured. The lives of those whom you treasure, I will wholeheartedly protect them. I will support you with all of my wisdom. So, for this reason, you too—”

—To satisfy this Witch’s inexhaustible curiosity, I want you to continue being my accomplice.

Times of hardship and unreasonable fate would continue to befall this boy endlessly.

No matter how arduous the hardships, how insurmountable the heights, the boy and the Witch would overcome, lending one other strength and wisdom, hand in hand.

Offered by the Witch of Greed was that love of scorching flame.

Echidna: “Ah, even so—”

Feeling the pain in the hearts of the people the boy scrambled to protect, pain that resulted from being protected by that boy, through the boy’s Gate, the Witch sighed.

A proposition that would remain sempiternally unsolved, even in death; an enigma that would eternally enthrall her.

Ah, even so—

Echidna: “—Why must love fade?”

END

Afterword

Yes, this is the afterword of the bonus novel which comes as a bonus for purchasing the full-volume Blu-ray set!

First of all, thank you for accompanying me up to this point! It’s me, Tappei Nagatsuki, also known as the grey-colored cat!

The story this time, as those familiar with the web version may already know, is the novelized version of the popular “April IF”.

On the first of April each year, on Natsuki Subaru’s birthday, an extra chapter which diverges from the main storyline is published. These IF stories are ambitious works that depict a Subaru who makes choices which diverge from the main story, along with the changes in the characters around him and how the conclusion of the story differs.

This installment, “Accreting in Another World from Zero” branches off from the fourth arc of the main story; in volume 12 of the novel, or episode 37 of the anime, Echidna offers him a Contract, and this is the pattern in which he does not refuse it.

Upon learning about Return by Death, Echidna may seem to be the perfect partner for Subaru, as a woman of wisdom in whom he can confide; however, as those of you who have read the story will know, the number of Deaths which Subaru accretes exceeds a hundred times that of the main story.

The reason behind this is the verbally manipulative Echidna, who steers Subaru into accreting numerous different experiences with deceitful words.

Yet, it is not out of malice, but rather her simply using any means necessary to satiate her own thirst for knowledge. In truth, she even helps by thinking of proper ways to overcome obstacles, leaving Subaru unaware of her underlying intentions.

However, the Subaru in Kasaneru, in his desperation to save the lives of those dear to him, ends up neglecting everything except for those “lives”, and as a result, how does the future he obtains compare to that of the main story?

Does taking the Witch’s hand truly lead him to a happy future? That, I shall leave up to you, the reader, to decide.

Now then, thank you for staying through to the end of this full-volume Blu-ray set purchase bonus novel. Re:Zero — Starting Life in Another World is, I believe, able to continue living on as a truly fortunate work thanks to all of your support.

I hope you’ll continue to stay with us and witness the story of the Re:Zero world as it unfolds. As the original author, I will continue to put everything I have into writing the most compelling story that I can.

Well then, no matter the medium, I look forward to seeing you again soon!

Please, continue to enjoy the story from here on out! Thank you very much!

(Having finished writing the bonus novel for the Blu-ray, with gratitude and a sense of accomplishment.)

Closing Dialogue

Echidna: “Myon myon myon myon myon…”

Subaru: “—. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now.”

Echidna: “Yes? What is it? If something is on your mind, feel free to speak. We are in this together, no? Why would you become shy about it now??”

Subaru: “Don’t phrase it in a way that grates my nerves every time… What is this “Myon myon” thing?”

Echidna: “—? Nothing at all, it is merely a ritual for reading your memories from the Magic Crystal.”

Subaru: “Not that, I’m talking about that lackluster chant. Why “Myon myon myon”?”

Echidna: “Oh, that. It would seem that, before I was born, there was a magic user who made quite the name for herself in an era when magic had yet to be systematized.”

Subaru: “Oh, really? Someone like that… are they related to this?”

Echidna: “Yes. The name of that person is Myonmyon.”

Subaru: “Myonmyon!! That was a person’s name!!!!”

Echidna: “So, when those who received her instruction would use magic, they would chant this to remember the words of their master…”

Subaru: “So, you mean that Myonmyon was the master’s name?”

Echidna: “That is how it is. I suppose that mystery has been solved?”

Subaru: “Now that I’ve solved it, I guess it was a mystery I didn’t really need to be bothered with…”

Echidna: “Hey now, you have me explain it to you, and now you say this? What a terrible boy you are.”

Subaru: “And you, who continually accompanies this terrible boy, also have a strange taste.”

Echidna: “Hehe… well, what do you think? Do you regret it?”

Subaru: “Regret what?”

Echidna: “That day, the day in which you took my hand. That is how you have gotten to where you are now.”

Subaru: “—No, I don’t regret it. This, was the best choice I could have made.”

Echidna: “…Huh?”

Subaru: “Don’t be such a pushover, Echidna. You and I are in this together. No matter how many times, how many dozens, how many hundreds of times it takes to redo, I’m taking everyone with me into the future. You’re gonna have to tag along for the ride, too.”

Echidna: “My my, I had nearly forgotten. You have quite the talent for flirting with Witches, no?”

Subaru: “It’s not a good idea to start a rumor mill… Hey, you’re not gonna continue with “Myon myon”?”

Echidna: “That is correct. For the time being, I would rather talk to the you of the present than delve into the you of the past.”

Subaru: “…I see. Do as you please. Wicked Witch.”

Echidna: “Oh, but of course. —I, am quite the Wicked Witch, am I not?”

Virtuousness Before the Theater (LQ AI Translation)

Prologue:
The Day of Preparations

—The Water Plumage Inn was a long-established inn whose special atmosphere had taken shape even in Priestella, one of the Five Great Cities of Lugunica.

With waterways running all through the city and ever-pure water flowing, the “Watergate City” was also known as a scenic sightseeing spot. What further boosted that reputation was its location at the western edge of the Kingdom of Lugunica, with the Tigracy River between it and both the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko and the Kararagi City-States close at hand, bringing about cultural exchange with neighboring countries—a novelty seldom seen in the kingdom’s center.

The very look of the Water Plumage Inn traded on that novelty: the buildings employed Kararagi’s unique culture of Wafuu architecture, and the newness of it made anyone stop in their tracks.

Therefore—

Anastasia: “—We’re invitin’ the other Candidates here all at once. Think they’re gonna be real surprised, don’t ya?”

Spreading both arms with the inn’s buildings at her back, Anastasia Hoshin spoke, and Julius Juukulius, chosen as the first one to be surprised, widened his eyes slightly.

Julius opened his golden eyes wide; at that reaction, Anastasia nodded in satisfaction,

Anastasia: “Uh-huh, that face. Just what I was goin’ for.”

Julius: “—My apologies. I had heard of Wafuu architecture, but this is my first time seeing such an imposing structure, and I found myself overwhelmed.”

Anastasia: “Nothin’ to apologize for. Didn’t I tell ya? I picked this inn specially ‘cause I wanted to see that face.”

Placing a hand to her cheek, the lady smiled gracefully, and Julius felt abashed at his master’s words. On the other hand, true to what he had told Anastasia, a sure sense of emotion had welled within his chest.

Although Julius belonged to the Royal Guard and was also one of the kingdom’s Knights, there were, in his own home country, quite a few lands he had never set foot in. Priestella was one such land, but this time, he had been blessed with the chance to visit it like this.

Julius: “Since I am here, I would like to spend my time so as to have no regrets.”

Anastasia: “Oh, so yer in the mood, huh. The usual Julius would be worryin’ ‘bout everyone ‘round him ‘stead of himself, scurryin’ here ‘n there payin’ mind to everythin’.”

Julius: “Naturally, I do not intend to conduct myself self-indulgently. I shall put Anastasia-sama foremost in my considerations… “

Anastasia: “Ya will, but?”

Julius: “Perhaps it is a reaction to serving Anastasia-sama. I had thought self-restraint and steadiness to be virtues, yet it seems there is a self within me that finds only that somewhat unsatisfying.”

At Julius’s reply, the corners of his mouth relaxed, and Anastasia let out a delighted,

Anastasia: “Oh!”

Realizing that her surprise carried joy within it, Julius praised himself that he had managed to give an answer to Anastasia’s liking. Of course, it was not as if he had said something insincere merely to please her. It had been his unvarnished true feelings.

He did not wish to keep the charms of the Watergate City or this

Wafuu-style inn at a distance.

Julius: “I presume this inn will not astonish us only with its exterior, will it?”

Anastasia: “’Course not, ya kiddin’? Hearin’ ya expect that much gets me all fired up too. Y’all’ve gotten real used to our way o’ doin’ things, and our knight’s turned into a real honor student.”

Julius: “Your words are more than I deserve. —I only hope the other Candidates safely agree to honor this invitation.”

He did not wish to make Anastasia uneasy after all the preparations she had made to entertain them, but there was a non-zero chance that those arrangements would come to nothing. Should that happen, even Julius would likely be at a loss for words on how to console her.

As Julius entertained that concern, Anastasia chuckled, “What, what?” and,

Anastasia: “Are ya maybe thinkin’ up how to comfort me if things don’t go well?”

Julius: “—Did it show on my face?”

Anastasia: “Mmm-mm, yer the same handsome fella as always. But, ya know, you ‘n me have known each other a good long while now, so I can kinda tell from yer eyes ‘n the feel of ya. Ya sure are a worrywart.”

Having his inner thoughts hit on the mark, Julius reproached himself as his master tittered.

“Tacit understanding” sounded fine when said out loud, but for a knight to have his unease seen through by his master and even be encouraged by her was a lapse unbefitting a knight. In the first place, if it were truly tacit understanding, it should have been mutual—yet Julius could not gauge Anastasia’s inner feelings.

That she was not so easily seen through was, in itself, part of the reason for his loyalty.

Anastasia: “I’m curious what ya’d say to comfort me, but goin’ by my gut, I reckon ‘bout eighty percent o’ ‘em will take us up on it. I put together all the things they’d want, sent the invites without tryin’ to take advantage of ‘em, either. Only for Emilia-san ‘n her folks, the timing might be bad, though…”

Julius: “There was a meeting pending that gathered the influential figures of the West, was there not.”

Anastasia: “Even so, I ain’t ever lettin’ go o’ the chance to get that kitty Great Spirit back. That’s, like, absolutely absolute to ya too as a fellow Spiritual Arts User, ain’t it?”

Julius: “I cannot expressly declare it “absolute,” but yes. I, too, were my bond with the buds to be severed, would spare no effort to regain it. In all likelihood, anyone with ties to Spirits would make the same decision.”

Anastasia: “Mm. Then just sit back ‘n hold firm.”

At Julius’s firm stamp of approval, chin tucked in, Anastasia set her hands at her waist and nodded with heartening confidence. Then, adding, “And also,” she continued,

Anastasia: “If worst comes to worst and my scheme falls flat, then that’s that. In that case… “

Julius: “In that case?”

Anastasia: “Since we done came all the way out here to Priestella, we’ll just make it a lil’ luxurious company retreat for the Hoshin Company.”

At Anastasia’s forthright laughter, Julius blinked lightly, then, unable to help a smile, nodded with, “It is an excellent idea.”

That decisiveness and the flexibility in her responses—both were qualities ordinary people rarely possessed, and Anastasia Hoshin could display them with aplomb. —That, precisely, had been the first reason Julius had desired her to be the Kingdom of Lugunica’s next monarch.

Now, the reasons he wished to make her monarch were no longer limited to that alone, but freshly, clearly feeling that first sentiment again, Julius lifted his gaze to the sky, savoring a pleasant mood.

Under the same sky were the Royal Candidates he had invited to the Watergate City, and the knights who accompanied them. They were by no means so close as to be careless with one another, and the premise that they were opposing camps would not waver. It would not waver—

Julius: “Reinhard, Ferris, and Subaru. —I am looking forward to the time in this city when we can speak of how you have spent this past year.”

Thus, thinking of those who, though they looked up to different masters, surely held bright prospects for the Kingdom of Lugunica’s future as he did, Julius narrowed his eyes against the dazzle of the sunlight.

Chapter 1:
The Day of Invitation

1

—To be honest, Ferris wanted to send that little visitor who had come calling right back where he'd come from.

Hetaro: "Miss… an— a letter from Anastasia Hoshin-sama. She says she has something she wants to tell you, and asks if we could meet in the Watergate City, Priestella."

Ferris: "In the Watergate City, you say?"

At the visitor's proposal, the lady of the manor, who had received him in the parlor, gracefully tilted her head.

The invitation Hetaro handed over was sealed with sealing wax bearing the Hoshin Company's crest. When slender fingers carefully broke the seal, the letter within contained exactly what had been stated. Peeking in from the side, Ferris pursed thin lips with a "Hmm."

Ferris: "Why nya specifically Priestella? Ferri-chan and the others aren't free, of course, and Anastasia-sama's side wouldn't be either. Isn't that strange, nya?"

Priestella, the Watergate City, lay at the western edge of the Kingdom of Lugunica— a city facing the Tigracy Great River that formed the border with the neighboring Kararagi City-States. And Anastasia's country of origin, as well as the Hoshin Company's base of operations under her lead, was the Kararagi City-States.

Ferris: "Which means, Priestella's practically under the other side's nose! Lurin' us into a place like that— wouldn't anyone assume they're up to no good, nya?"

Hetaro: "Um, Miss… no, I think Anastasia-sama has all sorts of considerations. But she's not so thoughtless as to try something so obviously underhanded…”

Ferris: “Mm-mh! So you’re sayin’ Ferri-chan’s take is airheaded, is that what you mean ~ ?”

Sharpening his gaze with a crisp glare, Ferris fixed the visitor— the cat-person boy Hetaro— with a look. At that look, the already-small shoulders shrank even further, and he drooped with a dejected, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Just when Ferris thought, “Ah, this is bad,” at the sight of that earnest, pitiable boy—

???: “Ferris, you mustn’t bite so hard at a messenger. Hetaro-sama has only delivered a letter at his master’s behest.”

Chided by that gentle yet firm voice, Ferris shut his mouth with a small “mkyu.”

Casting a quick glance, his long, amber eyes met the other’s. Ferris raised both hands meekly in surrender and promptly admitted his fault.

Ferris: “All right, a-lri-ght! Ferri-chan was in the wrong just now.”

???: “You needn’t apologize to me. To Hetaro-sama, if you please.”

Ferris: “Uu~, sorry, Hetaro-kyun. I was a bit rough. Ferri-chan reflects.”

Hetaro: “I— I’m glad you understood. I also often think the Miss can be too sudden sometimes… er, Anastasia-sama.”

Waving his hands in a fluster, Hetaro then clapped those same hands over his mouth.

At his flustered behavior, a hand went to a smiling mouth with a soft chuckle—

???: “Pray, do not force yourself; you may address her as you usually do. I do not think it discourteous. If anything, I simply find your closeness heartwarming.”

Hetaro: "…Embarrassing as it is, I'll do so, Crusch-sama."

Called by name, the beautiful woman—Crusch Karsten—gave a soft nod with an "Yes."

Ferris's liege, Crusch, was a beauteous lady dubbed the "Valkyrie" for her gallant, noble bearing, and at a young age served as head of a ducal house—one of the kingdom's leading figures. Even that alone gave her more than enough presence, yet just now she bore an even grander title upon her shoulders:

—The Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica's vacant throne's next sovereign, one of the candidates.

Four other Royal Selection candidates shared that same title; each strove day and night to achieve results surpassing the others and seize the position of the next monarch. That was Crusch's current standing, and Ferris, her first knight, was giving his full support.

Ferris: "And at a time like this, an invitation from fellow Royal Candidate Anastasia-sama… Isn't it far more unreasonable not to suspect traps or schemin' or this 'n that? Wouldn't you say so too, Wil-ji?"

Wilhelm: "Hm."

Unable to wedge his words into the gentle air between Crusch and Hetaro, Ferris called over the head of his seated liege to the white-haired old butler standing on the other side. In response, the old butler narrowed his blue eyes and fixed Hetaro with a steady gaze.

That look was sharp enough to make Hetaro flinch and twitch his shoulders—yet,

Wilhelm: "I cannot fathom Anastasia-sama's intellect, but if it is Hetaro-dono, I believe he may be trusted. He was among our allies who stood with us in the battle against the White Whale."

Contrary to the sharpness of his gaze, his conclusion came to rest gently. Hearing that explanation, Crusch gave an acknowledging, "Ah," Crusch: “So it was. Hetaro-sama, too, in the battle with the White Whale.”

Hetaro: “Yes. I, together with my big sis and the captain and everyone in the clan, joined the battle against the White Whale. …I could not, however, take part in the subsequent battle against the Witch Cult.”

Hetaro nodded, his voice weakening the further he went.

The reason was surely not that he regretted his own feebleness for failing to join the battle against “Sloth” of the Witch Cult that followed directly upon the White Whale. What made him shrink back was the tragedy that struck the party as they returned to the royal capital after the White Whale— and its outcome.

Ferris: “…That’s why Ferri-chan didn’t even want to see Hetaro-kyun’s face.”

That mutter reached no one’s ears, spoken only within his mouth. Yet it was undoubted truth from Ferris’s heart, and the reason for thinking so lay in the aforementioned tragedy.

Seeing Hetaro’s face, who had been present there, would force him to remember that time whether he wished it or not. And then he would want to push off responsibility he did not want to and lash out unfairly.

However—

Hetaro: “Even in the battle with the White Whale, I was all tied up giving orders to everyone in the clan, so compared to the big sisters who were doing their best at the front, I really couldn’t do anything…”

Ferris: “—That humility’s misplaced, don’t ya think.”

Ferris interjected thus to Hetaro, whose cat ears drooped as he spoke without confidence— not out of a desire to shift blame or to vent.

As everyone’s eyes gathered on the words that slipped out unthinkingly, Ferris disliked his own impatient temperament, yet—

Ferris: “We won that fight because everyone came together as one, didn’t we, nya. Including the people who disappeared, everyone. No one slacked off, no one was useless, nya. Even that Subaru-kyun, and if not for that, even Wil-ji—”

Wilhelm: “—Ferris, I—”

Ferris: “Let me say it, Wil-ji. Ferri-chan and the others… we accomplished something truly hard, we did. Otherwise, it’d make your fourteen years light, wouldn’t it?”

At Ferris’s words, the old butler—Wilhelm van Astrea—closed his eyes.

No one wished more keenly for the White Whale’s subjugation than Wilhelm, driven by the fierce desire to avenge his wife, the “Sword Saint” Theresia van Astrea, who had lost her life in battle with that witchbeast fourteen years prior.

To accomplish that, the Crusch camp had paid many sacrifices. And Hetaro had been among those who took part and fought at the risk of his life.

Therefore—

Ferris: “No matter what anyone else says, we have to praise ourselves for what we did. Absolutely.”

Hetaro: “—. I’m sorry. I was thoughtless.”

At that strong entreaty from Ferris, Hetaro, his round eyes brimming, scrubbed at his face and then answered with a serious expression.

Even with his features set firm, the boy’s adorableness remained; his wilted cat ears sprang upright with a bounce.

Hetaro: “My big sis often tells me the same thing. “Hetaro never puffs out his chest, so he never looks awesome and that’s Totally No Good!”“

Wilhelm: “I see—Mimi-don would indeed say such a thing. It is, in truth, something to nod along with.”

As expected of siblings, Hetaro’s imitation of Mimi’s face and tone was skillful. Even Wilhelm let his lips soften at the quality of it.

Be that as it may—

Ferris: “Uu~, I’m sorry, nya. Ferri-chan totally said too much. Honestly, I end up hating myself…”

Clutching his head, Ferris reflected on the embarrassment of his own words and deeds.

When it came to Crusch, he lost his composure all too easily, and once he did, his words immediately lost their kindness— his bad habit.

At the sight of Ferris’s deep self-reproach, Hetaro hurriedly waved his hands.

Hetaro: “N-No, what Ferris-san said is right. Compared to my big sis and Tivey, my heart’s weaker, and because of that I… sometimes fail…”

Crusch: “Then, did Ferris’s words help you, if only a little?”

At the sudden question from Crusch, who had not spoken until then, Hetaro’s eyes widened.

With a quiet amber gaze turned upon him, Crusch wore a gentle expression, not pressing for an answer, simply waiting for the boy’s response.

At her manner, Hetaro nodded timidly.

Hetaro: “Yes. From now on, I think I can say, “I was one of the ones who took down the White Whale,” too. No— I’ve been given the feeling that I must say it.”

Crusch: “I am truly glad to hear it. In that case, though it may be presumptuous, may I add one thing of my own?”

Hetaro: “From Crusch-sama? O-Of course.”

Smiling, Crusch raised one finger; Hetaro flustered.

Ferris met Wilhelm’s eyes, but neither had any idea what words Crusch might offer Hetaro.

Drawing all three gazes, Crusch gently placed a hand to her own chest and—

Crusch: “In the name of me, Crusch Karsten, what our house bears toward Hetaro-sama is only a deep feeling of gratitude for your aid in the battle against the White Whale. Therefore, as for the events that befell many people thereafter, myself included, there is no need for you to bear responsibility.”

Hetaro: “—ah.”

Ferris: “…”

At Crusch’s firm words, Hetaro’s round eyes flew open.

Ferris, too—at Crusch’s broaching that tragedy they had avoided as a topic—no less, Crusch herself bringing it up, and the manner in which she did—found his voice catching.

On the return from the battle with the White Whale, the tragedy that befell Crusch’s party when they were attacked by a Sin Archbishop, and the rift with Hetaro, who, though present, directed immediate retreat rather than a counterattack.

Both had averted their eyes; it had become, in a way, an unspoken agreement that not touching it was the right choice. Now Crusch touched it directly; at her words, Hetaro bit his lip and lowered his gaze.

Lowering his head, the boy spoke with a trembling voice—

Hetaro: “Back then, I believed I’d made the best decision… But not standing firm to fight, running— I’ve always thought I deserved to be resented for that.”

Crusch: “Your judgment was correct, Hetaro-sama. I think so as well.”

At Crusch’s added words, Hetaro covered his face with both hands and let out a sob.

Crusch, with a gentle smile, continued to watch over him without urging him to stop his tears — and that made Ferris proud, and at the same time, very, very heartsore.

2

Ferris: “In the end, it feels like we were dancing in Anastasia-sama’s palm, and it leaves me all fuzzy and bothered, nya.”

Crusch: “In her palm, you say?”

Ferris: “…Don’t you think that person already knew about Hetaro-kyun’s guilt? And that only Crusch-sama could lighten it, and that Crusch-sama just might do so— it felt like she was expectin’ that, is what I think.”

Seeing Hetaro, who bowed his head over and over, leave the manor after being told to stop already, and then seeing the dragon carriage off until it was out of sight, Ferris indulged in such a cynical guess.

At first, when Hetaro had been sent as a messenger, Ferris had been angered at Anastasia’s lack of consideration, but now, even that felt like it had been part of her calculations.

However, when this was pointed out, Crusch nodded with a “I see,” and—

Crusch: “If that’s the case, then I’m glad I was able to meet Anastasia-sama’s expectations.”

Ferris: “Mou~, Crusch-sama, sayin’ such goody-goody things! Sayin’ we met her expectations sounds nice, but put badly it means we were used, y’know?”

Crusch: “In that case, there’s no need to put it badly on purpose, is there? Besides—”

Ferris: “Besides, what, nya?”

Crusch: “You, too, Ferris, are glad Hetaro-sama’s worries were lifted, aren’t you? I can feel a breeze like the clearing of a weight in your chest.”

With those words, Crusch lightly poked the tip of his nose with a slender finger; Ferris’s eyes darted, then he made an awkward face.

Though the Divine Protection of Wind Reading would not allow lies or bluffs to pass, even if it could not read a specific person’s thoughts, it could pick up their unadorned emotions; thus Crusch could not be deceived about his joy, anger, sorrow, or delight.

In a sense, she could see through the feelings in Ferris’s chest even more clearly than Ferris himself.

Ferris: “But it’s a huge mistake to think Ferri-chan’s worryin’ about Hetaro-kyun. I mean, he’s a formidable rival for the cute cat-ears slot.”

Crusch: “There’s no need to glare at one another over that. My Ferris could never lose.”

Ferris: “C-Crusch-sama~”

Hands on her hips, Crusch declared it so; Ferris’s eyes grew moist and he threw his arms around her. Facing him head-on, Crusch caught him and gently stroked his back.

The strength of that embrace and the way she stroked him were sensations utterly familiar to Ferris. —Even if something is stolen, there are things that cannot be stolen away; it made Ferris certain of that.

Wilhelm: “—The send-off is complete. Hetaro-dono, too, wore a good face.”

At that moment, Wilhelm returned, having finished seeing the messenger off.

Accustomed as he was to the sight of Ferris and Crusch embracing, he nonetheless turned his eyes to the invitation from Anastasia that remained on the table.

And—

Wilhelm: “You will accept the invitation to the Watergate City. Is that correct?”

Crusch: “Yes. I have no intention of changing the reply. From the outset, we have no other options, do we—if we are to be told newly learned information about “Memory” regarding Gluttony.”

Ferris: “…Truly, she’s someone who only ever presses on our sorest spots, isn’t she.”

Still held to Crusch’s chest, Ferris muttered that resentfully.

An invitation from Anastasia to the Watergate City; the profit their camp would gain by accepting it—that was information on the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishop of Gluttony.

It was information they absolutely could not afford to miss. Dangling the thing the other side wanted most right before their eyes in such a showy way— that was precisely Anastasia living up to her reputation as a great merchant.

Even if this were a trap, Crusch and the others had no choice but to go.

Crusch: “However, I do not think there is any need to worry about traps. Of course, it may mean incurring a large debt to her, but…”

Ferris: “M—why can you say that so flatly, nya?”

Crusch: “—Because it cannot be said that we are worth the trouble of trapping as we are now, can it.”

At Crusch’s voice, which had dropped in tone, Ferris involuntarily held his breath.

Ever since that tragedy, having fallen to Gluttony’s hand and lost her “Memory,” Crusch’s capability had lacked luster. A year had passed since the Royal Selection began; while many camps had visibly gained momentum, Crusch's was clearly the only one in a slump.

Ferris and Wilhelm alike keenly felt the helplessness that came from their own inadequacy in being unable to fully support Crusch.

Struck silent by that statement of fact, Ferris listened as Crusch continued, "That's why," and—

Crusch: "We should gratefully rely on Anastasia-sama's kindness. And then we should use that information to make such a comeback that she'll regret having lent us anything."

Ferris: "—! Crusch-sama…!"

At Crusch's words, which flipped his sinking mood on its head, Ferris's eyes widened. Looking down at his face, Crusch wore a reliable smile.

Crusch: "Now that it's decided, let's start our preparations at once. If we're to be away from the manor for a while, we must inform my father and the vassal corps. We'll be busy."

Ferris: "Yes, that's right, nya! Yes! Understood, Crusch-sama! I'll go drag Meckart-sama over right away~!"

Swept along by Crusch's vigor, Ferris's spirits rode along with it. Regretfully parting from her embrace, he dashed out of the parlor in a great hurry.

With those same feet, he went to summon Crusch's father, Meckart Karsten— who had ceded both the position of head and his title to his daughter and was virtually retired, only to be brought back to work by the problem concerning Crusch's "Memory."

Of late, Ferris had felt pained at being unable to bring forward-looking reports, but he felt that Crusch's resolve, which had set even his heart to a boil, would bring a good wind to the Karsten Domain as well.

Seeing Ferris's back as he rushed out—

Crusch: “—Wilhelm, do you think my resolve is not mistaken?”

Wilhelm: “I deem it most admirable. I, too, would like to help with all my might, little though it may be.”

Crusch: “…Thank you. I cause you and Ferris both such hardship.”

Nodding quietly to the Sword Demon’s words, Crusch softly touched the invitation on the table. —She told herself that on the other end of accepting this invitation lay a way to change her own imperfect self.

As if to make none other than herself believe it, she hid the trembling of her fingers—.

3

???: “Hey, hey, what kind of joke is this?”

???: “You’ve got some nerve barging in to where we are all by yourself.”

???: “Heh heh heh, and just so you know, we ain’t praisin’ ya. A runt like you is the handiest prey there is.”

Seeing a rough trio surrounding the visiting boy, Old Man Rom, who had been given the role of the camp’s adviser, patted his bald head with slaps.

It had been a little over a year since they made the Astrea domain and manor in the kingdom’s southeast their base, but it was a place that never grew comfortable even with a long stay. Not, mind you, because the live-in twin servants working as caretakers in the manor were incompetent.

Simply put, the cause was a problem not outside Old Man Rom, but inside.

Be that as it may for Old Man Rom’s state of mind, visitors came to the Astrea manor for various reasons. Residents of nearby villages, local notables from neighboring lands, people from organizations allied with the camp by policy—though their affiliations differed, attending to them was also an important job for those connected to the camp.

One could say the aforementioned coarse trio were slighting that important job.

Rom: “Hey now, what are you lot doing. He’s a guest, ain’t he.”

Rachins: “Huh? Whaddaya want, Cromwell, you givin’ us a lecture?”

Rom: “It ain’t anything so grand as a lecture. And don’t call me Cromwell. Call me Rom, or old man, or even damn old fart.”

Creaking the cramped stairs beneath a giant’s frame as he descended to the entrance hall, the sanpaku-eyed youth who turned —Rachins—snapped at him with a severe look and tone.

Following Rachins, the big man and the small man beside him, Gaston and Camberley, also turned this way,

Gaston: “Then, Rom-san, we were just doin’ our job.”

Camberley: “Yeah, that’s right! It’s our job to make sure the master don’t get any trouble, yeah? We’re fulfillin’ that role, ain’t we.”

Rom: “Oh? I didn’t know you lot were so diligent. However—”

Coming up before the blustery trio, he peered over their heads at the guest. What he saw there was a small boy—small in fact, regardless of Old Man Rom’s huge frame.

A demi-human who never grows large, a cat-person boy. He held a big staff and wore an unusual monocle, however—

Rom: “Honestly, it looks to me like you lot are bullying a kid.”

Rachins: “That’s not it! This guy’s from Anastasia Hoshin’s lot!”

Rom: “Anastasia Hoshin… the head of the Hoshin Company, is it.”

Now that it was said, Old Man Rom focused on the white robe the cat-person wore. On the wide cuffs of the boy's robe, the Hoshin Company's trade name was plainly stitched.

In other words, the other party was from Anastasia's camp—

Rachins: "So it's a raid!"

Rom: "Don't be ridiculous! Even if they were gonna mount an attack, their strength is economic warfare with funds as a shield. What idiot would challenge the "Sword Saint" head-on."

Rachins: "…Now that you say it, huh?"

The hot-blooded punks, who had been snorting, looked at one another and grasped the situation.

Letting out a big sigh at that reaction, Old Man Rom turned back to the cat-person boy,

Rom: "My folks did a bad thing. They didn't do nothin' to you, did they?"

???: "Yes, there is no need to worry. But it's good it wasn't my big sis or my big bro who came here."

Rom: "Oh? Why's that?"

???: "Because my big sis's hands fly right away, and my big bro's tears do."

With that clear and distinct answer, Old Man Rom nodded to the boy, "I see, I see."

In truth, Rachins and the others had, one might say, gotten off with their lives—or at least avoided a huge embarrassment. As with the servant sisters at the Astrea manor, they were poor at gauging the other party's capability.

One could tell at a glance that this cat-person boy, too, was someone who could fight properly.

Rom: "So then, who might you be?"

Tivey: “I am called Tivey. As I greeted you, today I have come like this as a messenger from Anastasia Hoshin-sama.”

Rom: “…”

At the words of the boy who bowed his head—Tivey—Old Man Rom narrowed his eyes and looked at the three.

Rachins and Gaston, who seemed to grasp the seriousness of the matter, averted their eyes, but the slow-witted Camberley cocked his head with a question mark floating over it. Of course, he would not do something like punishing only Camberley for meeting his eyes. It had been a uniformly foolish act by all of them.

Therefore, Old Man Rom drew a great breath,

Rom: “Tanglin’ with a messenger from another camp, you great big idiots—!”

And with a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the manor, he bellowed at the three.

4

Felt: “So that big dumb yell was you, huh? I about jumped outta my seat.”

Rom: “Sorry. My blood rushed to my head.”

Felt: “Nah, even hearing it, I figured they pulled somethin’ stupid, so it’s only natural, ain’t it? They’ll be gettin’ a thorough chewing-out from Reinhard and Sensei as punishment, I bet.”

Sitting cross-legged on her chair, Felt waved a hand, cackling.

The messenger who had already visited the manor had accomplished his purpose and was on his way home. They had just finished the explanation about the ruckus before and after that messenger’s visit. As for Old Man Rom, he could not stop reflecting on how he had shown an outsider, Tivey, the camp’s shame.

Felt: “Well, that’s just like them, and just like us. The soil we grew in is what it is. No matter how much sand you dump on top from above, you don't pick up fancy manners so easy."

Rom: "Good grief, you… you ought to show a bit more strictness now and then."

Felt: "You sayin' I'm makin' some boring cozy cliques? For the record, the only one callin' me soft is you, Rom-ji… and Grimm Gramps and Carol Granny."

Rom: "Which means to old folks' eyes, it looks precarious."

Felt: "Then there's no problem, 'cause all the other candidates are young… no, the Council of Wise Men are all a bunch of old geezers. Gettin' poked and prodded by them's gonna tick me off."

With a finger to her narrow chin, Felt fell into thought, and Old Man Rom felt her growth.

Her height, compared to a year ago, seemed to have grown a little, but what he felt more strongly was growth on the inside, not the outside. Not only the knowledge and etiquette she had stockpiled through proper education, but a strength polished and refined while keeping the core of her way of thinking and stance.

Plainly put, one could say she had begun to show the bearing of someone who seeks the throne. —And it was in a sense only natural for that bearing to show.

Felt: "Huh? What, Rom-ji, starin' at my mug—got somethin' to say?"

Rom: "—No. It still doesn't quite sit right with me, names like "Council of Wise Men" flyin' out of your mouth."

Felt: "Hey, it's the same for me, all right? But it can't be helped. Whether it's the back alleys or the kingdom, you can only fight where you're standin' now."

Rom: "And if you're going to fight, know your opponent's face and name."

Felt: “Fights you can’t win and fights you don’t know if you can win—only idiots pick those. ‘Bout time I stopped bein’ an idiot.”

Showing her fang and laughing as she boasted, Felt’s reliability made Old Man Rom click his tongue in amazement.

Truly, a child’s growth is swift. All the more so if one thought of Old Man Rom’s lack of change, an old coot since the day Felt was born—comparison was ridiculous.

In fact, the increasingly remarkable growth of Felt as head of the camp meant she no longer came running to Old Man Rom every time something happened to ask for answers on future choices and policy like before.

One sign of that growth was her reply already given to the messenger.

Felt: “Even so, the Watergate City’s pretty far. If Anastasia-neechan was gonna do it anyway, she coulda picked somewhere closer.”

In the hand with which Felt grumbled, she held the invitation Tivey the messenger had handed her. Its contents were an invitation to Priestella, the Watergate City, asking whether they would participate. And Felt had already replied that she would participate and sent the messenger back.

Rom: “For all that grumblin’, you answered “we’ll go” right away.”

Felt: “‘Cause she said she’s invitin’ the other Duchess and the half-devil lady too, right? I’m curious what kinda talk it’s gonna be, and ‘bout a year since the Royal Selection started makes for a neat milestone, doesn’t it? I owe Anastasia-neechan, and it’s also a time when our hands are free.”

Felt waved the invitation as she answered; pinching that invitation from her hand with his fingers, Old Man Rom peered steadily down at Felt with a “Hm.”

Under that gaze, Felt knit her brows with a “Wh-What.”

Felt: “I really have finished all the stuff I gotta finish, okay? The meeting with the Black Silver Coins in Flanders doesn't have any urgent business, and as for what we owe and are owed with Anastasia-neechan…"

Rom: "I understand, I understand. I've no intention of meddlin' with the timing or the aim. But those ain't the only reasons you decided to go, are they?"

Felt: "…"

Rom: "If Crusch Karsten and Emilia and their camps are coming, you'll be able to hear talk of the White Whale's subjugation. The "Sword Saint," too, would surely like to know the slayer of the prior generation's foe."

When Old Man Rom pointed that out, Felt let out a grunt in her throat, then heaved a big sigh and plopped her cheek into her palm atop her cross-legged knee.

Judging by that dissatisfied face, Old Man Rom had hit the mark.

Rom: "There's nothing odd about you lookin' out for that knight, is there."

Felt: "What I hate is lettin' that bastard catch on. …That bastard'll butt in with all sorts of extra mouthin' off, but he won't say a word about that kinda thing himself."

At Felt's resentful declaration, Old Man Rom closed one eye and gave a wry smile.

Most likely, what let Felt learn about the ties between Reinhard—no, the "Sword Saint" bloodline—and the White Whale was the old couple managing the capital manor with whom they exchanged letters.

As someone who knew both that couple and the "Sword Saint" who died in the battle with the White Whale, and even the "Sword Saint's" husband, Old Man Rom had his own thoughts when the news of the White Whale's subjugation came. For those involved—all the more for blood kin of those involved—those feelings would be all the stronger.

Therefore, it was natural that Reinhard would wish to speak with those involved about the White Whale's subjugation.

Felt: "He's a piss-me-off bastard."

With that consideration for Reinhard in mind, Felt, who had accepted Anastasia's invitation, vented such complaints at Reinhard, who would not voice such desires at all himself. And since telling Reinhard the facts would make Felt suffer, that made things troublesome.

Rom: "From where I stand, you and that "Sword Saint" whippersnapper are six of one, half a dozen of the other."

Felt: "Huhh? I'm the one bein' jerked around, no matter how ya slice it! And anyway, Anastasia-neechan's got a rotten personality too. She made a big show of tellin' us she invited the other candidates… it's obvious she wants us to hear 'bout the White Whale."

Felt's sullen phrasing, but of course Anastasia had not stated it outright. Old Man Rom agreed she likely had such an intent, but she had probably also meant it as a test.

Whether Felt would notice that hidden intent. And if she noticed it, whether she would choose to go along with that intent for her knight Reinhard's sake. —It was a touchstone to see how Felt and Reinhard's lord-vassal relationship had changed since the start of the Royal Selection.

If Felt had failed to notice the intent and flatly refused with "Like we'd accept an enemy's invitation," then Anastasia's evaluation of Felt would have been decided on the spot.

Rom: "She shows a fair bit of friendly pretense, yet she's a most thorough lass, that one."

Felt: "Right? Can't let my guard down 'round her, not at all."

Beside the disgruntled Felt, Old Man Rom felt a déjà vu with Anastasia's tack. Not that he knew someone with the same method, but he felt her way of thinking was close to his.

Anastasia’s way of fighting was a fang honed so that those who had not could fight those who had. At times, more than polishing swordplay, it became a weapon designed to stop the other’s breath outright.

However—

Rom: “My granddaughter ain’t so soft as to be killed by that so easily either. Heh, she’s something.”

Felt: “…What’s up with you, Rom-ji. Grinning like that—creeps me out.”

Rom: “Wahahaha. Nothing—just that feeling a sign of good things to come is no bad thing.”

With a suspicious narrowing of her red eyes and a “Hah?” Felt found her head roughly tousled by a giant’s palm; sitting on the floor, Old Man Rom slowly stood up.

He had, more or less, grasped both Felt’s will and the camp’s policy.

Rom: “Needless to say, don’t you dare get careless. Even if the “Sword Saint” is there.”

Felt: “Hah. If I’d been leanin’ on that guy and only that all this time, the Kingdom of Lugunica woulda been a wasteland ages ago.”

Rom: “No doubt.”

Exchanging a warped-cheek grin with Felt’s crooked grin, Old Man Rom left her private room. Ducking his huge frame through the door and stepping into the corridor, he happened to come face to face with someone just then coming up to the second floor.

Reinhard: “Rom-dono, were you speaking with Felt-sama?”

Rom: “Aye. A bit about the Watergate City invitation.”

Reinhard: “Anastasia-sama’s call for proactive information exchange among the candidates, yes. I was surprised Felt-sama accepted without hesitation, but…”

The one who said that, the corners of his blue eyes drooping, was Reinhard the “Sword Saint,” much spoken of. Felt’s knight, and the person used as bait as a reason for Anastasia to invite this camp to Priestella.

However—

Rom: “What did you think of that invitation?”

Reinhard: “Anastasia-sama is a painstaking person. Since she invited not only Felt-sama but the other Royal Selection candidates as well, I doubt she intends to host mere opinion exchanges, tea parties, or banquets. I think it highly likely that some manner of business talk or negotiation will be proposed, but—”

Rom: “But?”

Reinhard: “Unfortunately, even if I rack my brains, from here on it would seem best to borrow the wisdom of you, Rom-dono, and Ezzo-dono.”

Scratching his own cheek with a finger, Reinhard answered as if he knew his own bailiwick.

It was neither modesty nor sarcasm, but what one should call a relinquishing of thought born of sound judgment. It included the right person in the right place, and expectation and trust in his own people, but it lacked the most important perspective.

Exactly as Felt had said.

Rom: “Good grief, looks like a hard road ahead.”

Reinhard: “Rom-dono?”

Rom: “As you say, the lass named Anastasia will have her share of designs. If we’re leapin’ into the other’s bosom, we go in ready to be at a disadvantage. You understand?”

Reinhard: “—Yes. Overturning that disadvantage and bringing benefit to my liege is my duty.”

At Reinhard's solemn nod, Old Man Rom left it at that for the moment. He stepped aside to let him pass, for he would no doubt head for Felt's room.

Rom: "It's prickly in there—do your best not to get bitten."

Reinhard: "That's as usual."

In Reinhard's wry answer lay the crystallization of the time he had built up with Felt in his own way. Receiving that, Old Man Rom shrugged his large shoulders; Reinhard slipped past him, knocked on the door to Felt's room, and was seen being invited in.

Hearing again, through the door, the two of them—mostly the aftershocks of Felt biting at him—Old Man Rom went downstairs, looking for the figure of the camp's strategist, the smallfolk man.

There were many things to discuss and consult on.

Rom: "Even if my granddaughter's growth is remarkable, that doesn't mean the seeds of my worry are all gone."

Felt had grown, and their relationship with Reinhard, too, showed improvement; the definite shape of them as lord and vassal had begun to appear. —At first, Old Man Rom had been opposed to Felt's participation in the Royal Selection. Yet, ironically, it was with himself as the trigger that Felt decided to take part in her fate.

In that case, all Old Man Rom could do was offer up as much as possible of the time he had piled up in vain and what he had cultivated thereby, so that Felt's resolve and way of walking would not dim.

For the time being—

Rom: "Since she's loath to rely on Reinhard, I must prepare means to grant that selfishness. Honestly, what a handful."

Saying so, the mouth of the aged giant nonetheless bore a firm smile.

Heinkel: “Heard the Hoshin Company and the royal family’s survivor are gonna meet face-to-face in the Watergate City. Word is the Karsten ducal house got tapped too. Maybe the candidates are fixin’ to strike some kinda secret deal among themselves?”

A red-haired man, wearing the face of someone loudly reporting his great achievement, appeared in the dining hall; Al, cursing the man’s lousy timing, set down his meal.

One-armed and unable to remove the helmet he wore—that was Al. He was long since used to it, but Al’s mealtimes required more knack and focus than they looked. At the very least, it was not the sort of thing he could easily continue while fretting over how the conversation would unfold next.

Heinkel: “Hey, you listenin’, Lady Priscilla? This ain’t the kinda info you get every day. If I weren’t around, they might’ve beaten us to the punch. Am I right?”

Ignoring Al’s inward jangling nerves, the red-haired man—Heinkel Astrea—pulled a dissatisfied face and tone, pressing the mistress seated at the far end of the long table for a reply.

But there was no answer to Heinkel’s urging. Of course not. Being prompted, having demands placed upon her, and meekly acceding… there was no one in the world to whom that suited less than her.

Priscilla Barielle—she was Al’s liege, the Sun Princess whose will burned exactly as she pleased.

Silent, Priscilla deftly plied her silverware, continuing her sumptuous meal with ladylike grace.

Priscilla’s beauty of appearance went without saying, but even her deportment and etiquette were flawless; whether ornaments or otherwise, she compromised on nothing that adorned her person. Not merely the fact she had things made to order by master artisans—the essence dwelling in her very way of being would make one swoon, even after one grew used to it.

Yet the beautiful rose has thorns. And the true terror of that rose is when those thorns are the kind that bring death to what they touch.

Therefore—

Heinkel: “How long are you going to keep eating?. My words—”

Priscilla: “—Be silent, commoner. Even were it shining with a golden brilliance, nothing shall bend my will. Think not so highly of thyself.”

Heinkel: “Guh…”

She said it with a snap; Heinkel twisted his face as if in humiliation, yet her reply was the second-kindest among those Al had imagined.

The only ones who got the kindest were those she fancied very much, or Schult; in effect, one could say Heinkel had rolled the best outcome. For the record, Al had expected anything below third would involve physical chastisement, so he let out a breath of relief.

Be that as it may, Priscilla showed no sign of being in any hurry.

Al: “So it’s Anastasia-san and the Duchess, and the girl your son serves. When three Royal Candidates meet face-to-face, yeah, you do kinda start wonderin’ what they’re schemin’.”

Heinkel: “Right? Leave it be and they might pull a “grand alliance,” for all we know. I don’t care how well Princess’s domain’s doin’—if they squeeze us from three sides, we’ll be gaspin’.”

Al: “Hey now, I’m tryin’ to steer you away from pokin’ the Princess’s wrath for nothin’…”

Fiddling with the helmet’s clasp and clicking it, Al found his nerves jangling again at Heinkel’s careless stance.

Heinkel’s death-defying tightrope act showed far too little fear where Priscilla was concerned. Just imagining a time when “it couldn’t be helped” would not cut it made his spine go cold. If that time actually came, Al saw no future where Priscilla would spare him.

Even if the circumstances under which Heinkel had joined their camp—that he had not been drawn to Priscilla's royal vessel, but that he had taken a position to deal with her in exchange for lending her his name and standing—were what they were.

Heinkel, pleading there was something he simply had to have, had, surprisingly enough, been devoting himself here and there to win Priscilla's favor and contribute to the camp.

Catching wind of the other candidates' movements this time was part of that.

Heinkel: "As for House Astrea, I'm still the head even now. The domain's packed with folks under my wing. It's the same all across the kingdom. Folks lining up to curry favor with me… with House Astrea and the Sword Saint? They never stop."

Al: "So you traced those connections and got this info. Sounds believable."

Heinkel: "Naturally. I have corroboration."

Heinkel, showing his shrewdness, curled his lips in pride. All the more reason Al could only wonder why he so misread the distance he ought to keep with Priscilla.

Then—

Priscilla: "—What of the silver-haired half-devil?"

Heinkel: "Huh?"

At the single question Priscilla let fall, Heinkel's eyes went round. Folding the napkin with which she had wiped her lips, just as she finished her meal, Priscilla's crimson eyes met his.

Priscilla: "There is yet another candidate, the half-devil, is there not. If the topic is Royal Selection candidates, then even for the sake of making up the numbers, that one must be included. Hast thou no tongue to speak to that one's movements?"

Heinkel: "…Nothin's leaked out about that camp beyond rumors. The backer, the Mathers fellow's doin' well. But so what? A half-elf ain't even worth talkin' about."

Priscilla: "Hm."

Heinkel: "The Mathers guy's been an unreadable sort from way back. Even so, I figured he wasn't a fool… but cartin' out a half-elf? Looks like he's gone off his rocker."

Arms folded, Heinkel spat the words with irritation. At his attitude, Al raised an eyebrow inside his helmet and let out a breathy "Heh."

Al: "Huh, you knew that margrave from the sticks? Didn't know that."

Heinkel: "Really just face-familiar, that's all. A handful of times in the capital, more than ten years ago… h-hell, that's beside the point! More importantly—"

Priscilla: "—The meeting in the Watergate City, was it."

Needled in a past he did not want touched, Heinkel snapped back at Al's remark. Picking up his words, Priscilla spoke; "That's right!" he raised his voice.

Excited, nostrils flaring, he clenched a fist.

Heinkel: "Lucky for us, the other side hasn't got a bead on our movements. We can cook things however we like on our end. So then…"

Priscilla: "If the slum girl and the Duchess move, then thy bloodline shall surely come as well."

Heinkel: "Uh—"

Priscilla: "If that is so, then taking thee along shall amuse me."

Caught flat-footed by Priscilla, Heinkel's expression stiffened; Al pressed a hand to his brow with an “ah, crap.”

The complicated environment surrounding Heinkel—or rather, House Astrea—was something Al had heard, if only in outline. Of course, it was not as if he had drunk together with the man and dug deep into how the parties felt in their hearts but—

Heinkel: “…”

A glance at the silent, wordless Heinkel made it plain he felt anything but at ease.

And Priscilla had more or less guessed how he felt even before she saw his face.

Priscilla: “What is wrong. This is news thou thyself hast presented, is it not. The fruits of that news—seeing them with none other than thine own eyes is only proper.”

Heinkel: “…O-Of course. Yeah. Yeah, that’s right. Fine, I will go with you. I just so happen to have a thing or two I wanted to say to Father and to the Sword Saint.”

Whether the trembling in his voice came from excitement or fear—or both—Heinkel muttered so and took Priscilla’s proposal, whether or not it was a provocation.

Hearing that, Priscilla gave a solemn dip of her chin.

Priscilla: “I shall remember thy service. In the Watergate City also, answer my diversions in that manner. —Thou mayest withdraw.”

Heinkel: “—I will keep feelers out. Make ready for a trip.”

Adding that at the end, Heinkel strode from the dining hall. Deliberately straightening a back that wanted to hunch, making unnecessarily loud footfalls—watching his retreating back, Al let out a long, long sigh.

Priscilla: “What is it, Al. With such sighs, dost thou mean to dampen even my spirits?”

Al: “No such intention at all, but ain’t you pokin’ the old man a bit too hard? Honestly, watchin’ it had me all on edge… more like, achin’ just to look at.”

Saying so, Al resumed the meal he had paused. Sadly, the food that ought to have been warm had gone cold, and did nothing to warm Al’s chilled chest.

Al: “The Duchess, and the Sword Saint’s little miss… Just imaginin’ three generations comin’ face to face gives me stomach pains. Even if you do think the old man’s kinda clownish.”

Still ignoring poor manners, Al went on eating and talking at once. At his words, Priscilla closed one eye and called him briefly.

Priscilla: “Al.”

Priscilla: “Presume not to fix my thoughts with such witless logic. It is disrespectful.”

Al: “My bad, but what’s the witless logic?”

Priscilla: “That thou shouldst call that baseborn man a “pierrot”… a clown. To so judge him.”

Al: “It ain’t? I figured the Princess saw the old man that way.”

The unexpected point made Al honestly surprised.

Even to outside eyes not of the parties, Heinkel’s position and circumstances were harsh and bitter. Priscilla had a tendency to relish such human anguish and the sight of those who writhed in torment.

Whether one saw that as mere bad taste, or as an esteem for those who struggled to better their lives—each person who dealt with Priscilla could judge for themselves. But—

Al: “Between his father and his son, the old man’s caught in a vise, and he’s still bustin’ his back for his wife—that’s just the facts, yeah? I figured the Princess rated him for that.”

Priscilla: “Such an assessment is but a tracing of the surface. It is true I have interest in how that despicable man will shoulder a doom not suited to his stature, and where that road shall end… but he cannot be called a clown. He lacks self-awareness.”

Al: “Self-awareness…”

Priscilla: “Al, thou art aware of thine own clownery, art thou not. Between one who is mocked and one who is scorned, that is the distinction.”

Al: “…”

Priscilla: “Even I have seasons when I would laugh at something. Yet for the sake of that one in a thousand times, I shall not keep an ugly thing at my side.”

Seeking to understand Priscilla, who spoke thus, Al fell silent and set his thoughts to work.

The phrasing was abstruse; the philosophy suggested a high wall that refused others’ understanding. Even so, Al wished to grasp the will of the Sun Princess that poured down from there.

Not, “lest he spoil her mood.”—But because Al believed the reason he had ceased to be the Following Star lay in that very radiance of hers.

Priscilla: “Again, thy hand has stilled.”

Al: “…Ah, my bad, my bad. I’ll polish it off right away.”

Priscilla: “I do not mean to hasten thee. Thy manner of eating is unusual; it is not altogether dull.”

Al: “Even if I know I’m a clown, havin’ someone stare while I’m eatin’ ain’t exactly relaxin’.”

Priscilla: “There are times thou watchest my meals in silence as well.”

Called out on what he had thought he was sneaking peeks at, Al groaned “ugh” and gave up.

She was inured to the gaze of others; a glance or two Al sent through his visor had meant nothing to her.

Al: “For the record, the only thing I was thinkin’ was that the way you eat is both real pretty and kinda erotic, Princess.”

Priscilla: “Fool.”

With a single, crisp dismissal, Al conceded defeat and returned to his meal. Watching him with a glass of wine in one hand, Priscilla stroked her own lips with the other.

And—

Priscilla: “—Though the dullard said otherwise, the half-devil shall also have been called to the Watergate City.”

Al: “…Why do you think that?”

Priscilla: “If one judges the merits and labors of each camp from the start of the Royal Selection until now, the conclusion is obvious. If it is a scheme by the vixen, her purpose is easy to read.”

Al: “—The merchant boss lady’s purpose is to become king, yeah?”

Priscilla: “Just so.”

With a quiet nod that said “thou hast grasped mine intent,” Priscilla assented; Al pondered beside her.

If Anastasia had called not only Crusch and Felt, but truly even Emilia’s camp—what was her aim. It had been a year since the Royal Selection began; even if the struggle as a whole lasted three, perhaps they had been too leisurely.

Al: “If that’s how it is, then this might really be a fine play by the old man.”

Priscilla: “If so, then the commoner brings tidings of use; Schult brings charm. Now, in what manner shalt thou contribute to my amusement?”

Al: “Other than entertainin’ the Princess with my words and conduct?”

Priscilla: “Keeping a clown at my side is my caprice, not thy work. If thou wouldst win my favor, then wheeze—be it in misery or in pluck, or in some different fashion.”

The way she might well have added “Else—” made Al give a small shrug.

Even if one was taken into her household, one could not grow complacent and idle at Priscilla’s side.

Our Sun Princess loved rice-ears that grew straight and strong under the sun.

In that regard, rather—

Al: “Maybe the one who can’t read the room ain’t the old man, but me.”

For good or ill, Heinkel’s way—striving in earnest to change the status quo—was the right one here.

Taking from Heinkel this tightening of awareness, Al set down his fork. Finishing his meal, he jammed the napkin up under his helmet at the chin and wiped his mouth, then stood.

Al: “Thanks for the grub. I’ll go do a bit of work, walk it off.”

Priscilla: “At last. Thou hast escaped with thy life, Al.”

Al: “Don’t sound like a joke, so I’m dead serious—the Princess is scary.”

Priscilla, putting the wine glass to her lips, said no more to Al’s back as he turned.

Only—had Al failed to grasp the intent between her words, she would have dismissed him without a thought as unworthy to keep by her side. —In truth, that would not have been the first time, nor the last.

So long as he waited upon Priscilla, it was a risk that would always exist and must be swallowed.

Al: “All right then, guess I’ll go pick up the stuff the old man missed.”

A transparent fawning for her favor—as plain as day—would only earn her ire; for the moment, this was the only tribute Al could think of.

Unfortunately, as a drifter and a suspicious vagabond, Al did not possess the kind of information network Heinkel used; prying into the well-secured Meathers Domain was no easy feat.

—No easy feat, but not impossible.

Al: “There’s that thing where if you go friend-of-a-friend six steps, you could know even the president.”

Naturally, it was a notion that needed heaps of time and opportunity, but luckily, neither posed a problem for Al. All that remained was where to start.

Al: “For a socially awkward old guy, gettin’ a bunch of folks goin’ “huh?” at me ain’t exactly a treat. So—do me a favor and show up fast, Mr. President.”

Muttering thus, Al set off for the nearest village to start, for the time being.

He bathed in the fiercely pouring sunlight, squinting at the glare through his visor—

—laughing that not even the true sun’s twinkling could match the Sun Princess’s.

6

Mimi: “So, so, amaaazing—Garf, feels great! Mimi went goro-goro—

DOOON!”

Joshua: “A-And, she was like this the entire way back… Anyway, Emilia-sama sent a very favorable reply that she would be delighted to accept the invitation.”

Hopping up and down with her long tail sticking straight up, Mimi capered about. While she bounded left and right, Joshua reported that he had fulfilled his duty as messenger.

As vice-captain of the Iron Fangs, he had taken Mimi, the eldest of the cat-person triplets, and headed to the den of demons—the Mathers Domain—where all manner of rumors swirled. They had successfully delivered the invitation, and had even brought back a positive reply on the spot; he allowed himself some pride that he had done a fully sufficient job as a messenger.

Joshua: “Having Mimi with me—leaving aside the propriety for a messenger—was reassuring.”

Anastasia: “That so, that so. Then it was right askin’ Joshua to play babysitter for Mimi. That said, Emilia-san’s camp was the easiest to invite anyhow.”

Bringing her small palms together before her chest, Anastasia, who had come to meet up with Joshua and the others, let her lips soften.

Unable to read his lady’s mind, Joshua involuntarily drew his slim brows together. Catching the crease between them, Anastasia tapped her own brow with a finger.

Anastasia: “Keep frown lines up that often and they’ll get stuck that way, ya know?”

Joshua: “M-My apologies, I’m inexperienced. Er, may I ask—why do you say Emilia-sama’s camp is the easiest to deal with? Isn’t it the opposite?”

Anastasia: “Hm? Aha… So Joshua’s takin’ all them rumors ‘bout Emilia-san’s lot at face value, huh. Well, can’t talk, seein’ as at first I wouldn’t even deal with ‘em over the half-elf and all that myself.”

With the same hand that had touched her brow, Anastasia delicately touched her cheek. There was a faintly self-reflective tone to her murmur, and Joshua blinked.

It was true that Joshua had been at his wits' end over the outrageous rumors surrounding Emilia's camp. But from the sound of it, Anastasia made those rumors out to be utter nonsense, baseless scuttlebutt with no credibility.

Anastasia: "Truth is, I ain't finished sortin' how much of those tales got embellishments. But meetin' the real ones—how were they? Were they the scaaary folks the rumors said?"

Joshua: "—It was only a short time, so perhaps they simply didn't let anything slip."

Or perhaps, since Joshua and the others had come as Anastasia's envoys, they simply could not recklessly bare their fangs.

Joshua: "Only… Emilia-sama did not give me the impression of the Witch I'd heard in the rumors."

Emilia was a half-elf by birth, with silver hair and amethyst eyes—traits she shared in many ways with the symbol of fear in this world, the Witch of Envy. And yet, she had, Joshua thought, welcomed him as a messenger and treated him gently.

The rumored "Military Internal Affairs Officer" who watched them without dropping his guard had been frightening, though.

At that point Joshua realized that it sounded as if he were defending or trying to speak well of members of the Emilia camp.

Joshua: "My apologies! I swear I have no lessened will to support you, Anastasia-sama, nor would my eyes wander to anyone else…"

Mimi: "Huh? Joshua, what's up? Talkin' super fast—didja do something bad?"

Joshua: "I did not! Um, really—really, really!"

Silencing Mimi, who had tilted her head with no ill will, Joshua pleaded so strongly it was almost shameful. At his fluster, Anastasia covered her mouth and tittered.

Anastasia: “Ain’t doubtin’ that at all—what a funny child you are. And thinkin’ Emilia-san didn’t feel “Witch-like”—that’s your true feelin’, ain’t it? Treasure your own feelings. Workin’ with a lid clapped on your heart, you can’t eat tasty meals, can ya?”

Mimi: “So true—! Best is eat only what you love!”

Anastasia: “That’s a li’l different in meanin’, but you’re cute so I’ll let it slide.”

Patting beaming Mimi’s head, Anastasia looked to Joshua. Drowned in her pale-green gaze, Joshua lowered his eyes without thinking.

He did have cause to reflect when told he was putting a lid on his own feelings. But he did not wish to open that lid. As someone who looked up to Anastasia—who affirmed desire—he wondered if that way of thinking might be unbefitting.

Anastasia: “Joshua, I—”

Lowering her tone ever so slightly, Anastasia began to say something to the now-silent Joshua—but a sudden interruption got in the way.

Hetaro: “Big sis! Did you come back with Joshua-san?!”

With brisk, fluttering footsteps, it was Hetaro who threw open the inn’s entrance.

Mimi’s little brother, the cat-person boy who doted on his sister, spotted Joshua and the others talking out in the inn’s garden, widened his round eyes, and ran over.

Mimi: “Ah, Hetaro! Like ya see—Mimi’s back too! Messenger duty—accomplished!”

Hetaro: “Welcome back! Nothing happened?”

Mimi: “Nn~, a little! Garf! Goro-Goro—DOOON!”

Hetaro: “Eh? Eh? Eh?”

Catching her pouncing brother, Mimi spread her arms wide as she answered. Hetaro’s eyes went black-and-white at that answer; he looked to Joshua for the details. But Joshua, who had been subjected to goro-goro—DOOON the whole way back, did not know the particulars either.

Joshua: “Er, the “Garf” Mimi’s talking about is a Military Officer in Emilia-sama’s camp. It seems to be a nickname for one called Garfiel; Mimi seems to have gotten close with him, however…”

Hetaro: “G-Garfiel? I don’t know him, I don’t know him… Big sis? With that person?”

Mimi: “Garf? One look and it went goro-goro—DOOON! The thing Roshi said! Mimi’s finally at fallin’-age!”

Hetaro: “Gaaaan—!!”

Clapping both hands to her cheeks and smiling brightly, Mimi left Hetaro turning white right in front of her. So unlike the always-Mimi-favoring Hetaro was his reaction that Joshua could not hide his confusion either.

Had becoming friends with someone from an opposing camp made him feel a sense of crisis?

Tivey: “Honestly, both big sis and big bro are hopeless, yes.”

At the sight of Mimi and Hetaro, Tivey came out of the inn late and muttered in exasperation. The triplets’ youngest adjusted his monocle; spotting Joshua, he raised a hand.

Tivey: “Joshua-san, thank you for minding big sis, yes.”

Joshua: “Not at all. Tivey, Hetaro—you returned quickly as well. Were Mimi and I the last?”

Tivey: “I just got back too, yes. Big bro’s been antsy the whole time.”

Joshua: “I see. …How did your work go, you two?”

Tivey answered Joshua’s question with, “Both big bro and I completed ours safely, yes,” and—

Tivey: “Felt-sama and Crusch-sama will also accept the young lady’s invitation, yes. So the Hoshin Company’s comfort trip is postponed, yes.”

Joshua: “That is… well, only natural. Emilia-sama, whom we visited, will also gladly come to the Watergate City. That means the Royal Candidates will all be gathered… well, not all.”

All the invited Royal Candidates would be gathered in the Watergate City. —The result was that one camp only would be left out.

Joshua: “I have heard that the Sun Princess, Priscilla Barielle-sama, is an eccentric as well, however…”

Tivey: “She seems a bad match with the young lady, yes. So it might be a snub, yes.”

Anastasia: “Hey now, I can hear ya.”

Her tone was too gentle to call it anger; at her words, Tivey gave a little twitch of his shoulders. Stroking the fox scraf at her neck, Anastasia went on,

Anastasia: “Don’t say things that sound so bad. It’s just I couldn’t find a reason to call on her, that’s all.”

Joshua: “Like with Felt-sama —would “let’s talk, it’s been a while” not do?”

Anastasia: “At Felt-san’s place, that’s part of how we invited ‘em, but it ain’t just that. With the Princess, though, it’d end up just like that… and then we’re the ones callin’ her out and makin’ ourselves owe her, ain’t we?”

At Anastasia’s one-eyed wink, Joshua and Tivey tilted their heads together.

There seemed to be some high-level bargaining going on that Joshua could not grasp, but no matter how he thought about why the conditions would differ for Felt and Priscilla, no answer came.

Waving a hand at their reaction, Anastasia said, “Well, no matter,”

Anastasia: “More importantly, when our guests arrive, we’ll be on the hostin’ side… The time to enjoy the Watergate City’s limited anyhow, so how ‘bout we take a look ‘round the inn?”

Mimi: “Ah! Great idea, young lady! So when Garf and the others come, Mimi can show ‘em around —better do a suuuper thorough explore of the inn!”

Hetaro: “Big sis, that “Garf” person is… ah! Wait!”

At Anastasia’s proposal, Mimi and Hetaro pattered off into the inn. At their momentum, Joshua and Tivey looked at each other and burst into laughter.

At long last, it felt as if the tension had drained from his shoulders.

Tivey: “Shall we go too, Joshua? I’ll teach you the Kararagi style, yes.”

Joshua: “I’d appreciate it. …Honestly, I’ve been at a loss since I first saw the inn’s gate.”

Though he had knowledge of the Kararagi-imported Wafuu architecture, this was his first time seeing a building using the style so boldly. Including that the entry doors slid sideways, there seemed to be a mountain of rules sleeping in the inn that Joshua did not know.

Joshua: “But as hosts, we must make sure we do not make any lapses… I cannot let my brother or Anastasia-sama be shamed…”

Anastasia: “Don’t go thinkin’ yourself into a tizzy. At first even sittin’ proper on tatami won’t come easy.”

Joshua: “No, that will not do! Compromise and slackness are not of the Juukulius!”

There was no such proverb, but as a house of the Finest of Knights—Julius—it would be fitting to pass that down as a creed. Rather, Joshua felt he himself ought to actively spread it as the house's proverb from now on.

With that resolve, he was about to head for the inn's entrance with Tivey when—

Joshua: "Come to think, Anastasia-sama, were you not about to say something to me earlier?"

Suddenly remembering the remark cut off by Hetaro's entrance, Joshua asked Anastasia. At his words, Anastasia pressed a finger to her lips, went "Mm~," and thought for a moment before—

Anastasia: "Let's not, for now. Looks like Tivey's fixin' to cram ya with Kararagi style, and gettin' your head all jumbled's no good either."

Joshua: "Not hearing what you were going to say will be "jumbled" in its own way, however…"

Anastasia: "Don't be petty—be a good boy. Go on now, get along with Tivey, 'kay?"

As a worrywart, Joshua felt tugged at the back of his mind, but since Anastasia had said so, he could not press further. In truth, knowing his memory was not the best, he ought to focus on mastering the Kararagi etiquette looming before him.

Joshua: "When the Candidates arrive, we must not commit any discourtesies."

So admonishing himself, Joshua followed after Tivey's back and stepped into the inn.

—In the end, during this stay in the Watergate City, the chance for Joshua to hear what Anastasia had been about to say never came. And due to certain circumstances, that, for a long, long time, would be lost even from the Memory of the parties involved.

Chapter 2:
The Day of Arrival: Daytime

1

Al: “Come to think of it, I hear Priestella’s got a Songstress who’s all the rage right now.”

Schult: “The Songstress-sama… Does that mean there’s another princess besides Priscilla-sama?”

Leaning his weight against the dragon carriage’s backrest, Al kicked off some small talk; the boy across from him tilted his head.

The pageboy butler with fluffy, curly pink hair who looked perfect in short pants—Schult.

Priscilla’s favorite, he was a young child accompanying them on this journey as well. To his innocent question, Al toyed with the clasp of his helmet and looked out the window,

Al: “There’s more than just our Princess, see. Not that she’s an actual highborn princess, yeah? The kingdom’s real princesses kicked the bucket a little while back. Songstress is just a nickname… like a pet name.”

Schult: “A pet name… The Songstress is someone who sings songs, yes? To be treated like a princess for that is amazing! She must sing truly amazing songs, without a doubt!”

Eyes round and sparkling with expectation, Schult clenched his little fists; Al gave a wry smile.

This little boy, saved from the brink of starvation by Priscilla and whimsically taken on as her retainer, revered his benefactor as a goddess—no, as the sun itself.

Hearing that there existed, like the “Sun Princess” Priscilla, someone nicknamed “Princess”—the Songstress—his hopes shot through the roof.

And then—

Priscilla: “Enough, Schult. Do not frolic like a tail-wagging puppy. In the first place, to call someone known for skill in the performing arts a “Songstress”… what a grossly grandiose form of address.”

So said the Sun Princess herself, seated beside Schult.

Drawing a fan from the valley of her abundant bosom, she tapped the tip lightly against Schult’s head, taking issue with the disrespect of setting the Songstress alongside herself.

Priscilla’s way was to be ever fair—by looking down on anything that was not herself. She had, after all, at first refused to acknowledge even the existence of fellow Royal Candidates. Different fields or not, to speak as though the Sun Princess and the Songstress were peers—no wonder she took offense.

Had anyone but Schult said it, they would have needed to prepare for a caning that drew blood. However—

Schult: “Ah… I beg your pardon. I grew curious about what kind of songs she sings, and I let myself get carried away.”

Priscilla: “So long as thou reflectest, it is well. That a child should show interest in the arts is only natural. Once rusted over like Al, even if thou polishest, those fresh sensibilities shall not spring back to life.”

Al: “Hey, hey, why’d you jab me outta nowhere just now?”

Priscilla: “Ho? Then art thou claiming thy sensibilities are every bit as fresh as Schult’s?”

Al: “I’m sayin’ you could spare me, like, half the kindness you show Schult-chan, yeah? It ain’t like nothin’ you say can hurt me.”

Schult’s slip of the tongue was magnanimously forgiven, while Al got used as the butt of the joke in passing.

He was long accustomed to the treatment, but for the sake of his human rights he lodged a token protest. Of course, all that earned him was a snort and Priscilla's silence.

Al: "Sheesh… I won't beat Schult-chan, but I rate myself as pretty darn devoted too, y'know. I did bring you the intel you wanted, didn't I?"

Priscilla: "—It seems even the half-devil's camp has been invited to the Watergate City."

Al: "That's the one. Took a fair bit of digging, you know?"

He waved a hand, making his claim in an airy tone. In response, Priscilla propped her cheek on one hand, narrowed her crimson eyes, and recrossed her legs.

No derisive snort, no mockery-laced rebuke—her way of acknowledging him, in its way. Even so, Al knew that taking it that way meant he'd been trained too well.

—At present, Priscilla's camp had departed the Barielle domain and was heading to the Watergate City, where, under Anastasia Hoshin's initiative, a Royal Candidates' gathering would be held.

Their dragon carriage had already reached the great main gate before the city; once through inspection, they would enter.

The city's guards manning the checkpoint oversaw with high morale the people and goods coming into and out of Priestella. They could have revealed their identities and cut the inspection line—but—

Priscilla: "If we make a needless spectacle of ourselves, the vixenes already inside will catch on. Having come this far beneath the surface, we shall spend it to the end for the sake of the entertainment."

Al: "A Princess who'll swallow a little inconvenience for the sake of a surprise—I don't hate it."

Priscilla: "Fool. Do not speak so irreverently. —Therefore, see that thou impress it upon that one as well.”

She snorted and jerked her chin; Al glanced toward the edge of the carriage.

The lavish dragon carriage that had left the Barielle domain with Priscilla aboard was large and spacious—almost wasted with only four passengers besides the driver. Priscilla sat in stately fashion in the middle; Al and Schult flanked her front and side.

And the last one, sprawled a bit apart with his back to the seat and wall,

Heinkel: “Gulp, gulp… phaa.”

The liquor he had swigged down roughly ran from the corner of his mouth; he wiped it with the back of his hand and breathed out alcohol-reeking air.

Naturally, the one doing it was none other than Heinkel Astrea. He spent most hours with a drink in hand as it was, but on this trip his intake was plainly higher—visibly so the nearer they drew to Priestella.

No doubt he had in mind the reunion awaiting him in the Watergate City. He drank not to raise his spirits, but like administering anesthetic to numb the pain.

In fact, Heinkel had spent almost the entire travel time in a drunken haze; it was questionable whether he had even registered that the carriage had reached Priestella and was waiting on inspection. If he had, by now he’d likely be angry at being kept waiting, throwing his weight around and barking at the guards.

Al: “Given that, pokin’ him might be worse than warnin’ him not to make trouble, yeah?”

Priscilla: “Ho? Thou wouldst defy mine order? In that case, I leave the handling of that pent-up one to thee. By no misstep shalt thou render meaningless the fact that I have deigned to come in secret.”

Al: “Ugh, talk about kickin’ a hornet’s nest.”

Priscilla’s lips curved in a blood-red smile; Al couldn’t help but groan.

The hellscape of an unmotivated middle-aged man being saddled with nursing a drunk middle-aged man. Then a savior, having heard Al’s lament, called, “Al-sama, Al-sama,”

Schult: “Even if you’re worried, it’s all right! Heinkel-sama will surely cooperate properly if it’s for Priscilla-sama!”

Al: “Whether it’s “for the Princess” or not, he probably means to cooperate. But booze is scary ‘cause it guts those premises and resolutions right from the roots.”

Schult: “Then I will carry lots of water to Heinkel-sama!”

Rolling up the sleeves of his livery, he windmilled arms as thin as saplings. Schult’s every move was calculatedly cute, but his earnestness and consideration sank straight into Al’s heart.

Maybe stirring up that sight in the boy was part of Priscilla’s design too.

Al: “…Man, you got me.”

To be frank, Al wasn’t exactly keen on coming to the Watergate City.

Sure, there was a desire to avoid being put in a tight spot in the Royal Selection—other candidates banding together and Priscilla standing alone against them. But while probing the Emilia camp’s movements at Priscilla’s behest, Al had also sensed bad omens.

When an incident happens, there’s a suitable stage and a cast that give it a start.

Let those with strong, great influence in the world gather, and it can become the opening of a new tale. —Like the disturbances around the royal capital Lugunica last year when the Royal Selection was proclaimed.

The White Whale appeared; a Witch Cult faction ran rampant;

disasters on par with acts of god came crashing down all at once—calamities so rare they shouldn't crop up no matter where in the world you looked.

Luckily, Priscilla's bad itch hadn't acted up then, and Al and the others escaped harm—but—

Al: "This time, no matter what I say, she won't hear it. Once the Princess says it, she ain't takin' it back."

When Heinkel had first reported on this gathering, Al had thought the same: only Priscilla could change Priscilla's mind.

She might lend an ear to the words of those attending at her side—Al and Schult—but that was Priscilla's mercy, not anything like happily taking stern counsel.

Al knew that even if you hoped for a thousand, ten thousand, nayuta chances, that would never change.

So at the very least, what Al could do—

Al: "Sorry to the old man, but my priority order's the Princess and me, then Schult-chan beneath that."

Ultimately, Al recognized nothing as absolute in his win condition but Priscilla's survival.

His own life was a given, so perhaps it was better phrased as nothing absolute besides Al and Priscilla's survival. If possible, he wanted to save other lives too, so long as it didn't run counter to that aim.

But that, too, was neither absolute, nor a goal to be forced and achieved at any cost.

Schult: "Priscilla-sama, we're almost at inspection. Once that's done, we'll be able to lay eyes on the Watergate City! I'm excited!"

Priscilla: "I have heard it is a fair city. Let us see whether it can indeed delight mine eyes."

Schult: “Yes! I am sure we shall have even Priscilla-sama’s satisfaction!”

While Al mulled, Schult was making grand promises to Priscilla.

With the Great Main Gate blocking the view of the streets, it was one heck of a glib assurance. Yet with not a speck of malice or vanity in it—only pure good will to please his mistress—Priscilla did not censure him.

She quietly closed one eye, set a hand atop Schult’s head as he peered forward in anticipation, then looked Al’s way in place of chiding the boy.

Priscilla: “I expect no endearing charms from thee, but offer at least a word or two to amuse my heart—if not to Schult’s degree. Do not show me that cheerless face alone.”

Al: “…Since I started wearin’ this helmet, I’ve been passin’ for an iron-mask poker face, y’know.”

Priscilla: “Fool. Thy mug shows through though it be covered in black iron. Whom dost thou take me for?”

Al: “Well, yeah, but…”

Priscilla: “Cast aside such worthless inner turmoil. Thou knowest it. —This world is arranged for my convenience.”

At Priscilla’s unchanging cadence, Al felt a twinge of chagrin and fiddled with his helmet clasp.

He was aware he was on edge. In that sense, he had no right to laugh at Heinkel. With the chance to come face to face with father and son ahead of them, Al sympathized with the man who took refuge in drink.

If only Al could drink, maybe it’d be different—but sadly, he was a lightweight.

Al: “Man, seriously… the thought of meetin’ face-to-face is weighin’ heavy, bro.”

Even as he thought himself shameless, Al let out a self-deprecating chuckle inside the helmet Priscilla could see through.

2

Reinhard: “Then, Felt-sama, I’ll go ahead and pay our respects at the inn. Since neither Flam nor Grassis is with us this time, please take care not to stand out too much.”

Seeing Reinhard off—who kept looking back over and over with a face like his heartstrings were being tugged—Felt let out a sigh.

It was her first time setting foot in this city. She understood his point about not drawing the wrong kind of attention, but—

Felt: “If he doesn’t want me standin’ out, he shouldn’t be tryin’ to stick me in clothes like this…”

Curling her lip, Felt muttered so; the outfit in question was a cute dress in vivid colors.

They had argued themselves hoarse over this sort of attire, and compared to before its gaudiness and the number of accessories had been reined in to a degree one could call restrained.

But, fundamentally, Felt did not want to be wearing a dress.

Felt: “Lately that guy’s dress offensive had cooled down, so I let my guard down. Give him the slightest opening and he’s the sort who wants to shove a dress on me.”

Pinching the hem of the skirt, Felt shrugged her shoulders with a “good grief.”

With nothing else to wear, she’d have to make do like this for a while, but meeting the other Royal Candidates for the first time in a while while dressed in a dress did not put her in the right headspace.

That kind of argument likely wouldn’t fly with Reinhard, though.

Anyway—

Felt: “So yeah, you lot’re comin’ along while I hunt for clothes. Once that’s done, you can do what you like for a bit.”

Gaston: “’Kay, got it.”

Camberley: “Ain’t like I mind you stayin’ in the dress, though. It ain’t like it looks as bad on you as you’re complainin’ it does.”

Hands on her hips, Felt looked back; answering her were two men at opposite extremes of size.

The big one was Gaston, the small one Camberley; both were Felt’s retainers.

In truth there was one more, a man named Rachins of a size between the two, but he had already been sent ahead to the inn to notify their arrival before Reinhard.

Reinhard had gone after that Rachins; Felt and the others, insisting they’d take in the sights of the Watergate City and then regroup, had in fact another true aim—as stated above, to change out of this dress and face the other Royal Candidates in clothing that made sense to Felt.

Therefore, leaving the readily nodding Gaston aside, Felt decided she couldn’t let Camberley, who seemed to have unnecessary opinions, slide; she leaned her face in close to his.

Camberley: “Wh-What, boss, your eyes’re scary.”

Felt: “It ain’t about whether it suits how I look or not—it’s about my heart. If it don’t suit my heart, I don’t care how pricey it is.”

Camberley: “That so? Any clothes’d rather be worn by a beauty woman than a plain one.”

Felt: “Shaddup. Don’t talk back.”

He kept pressing his case and got a kick in the butt for it; Camberley made a disgruntled face with a “what the hell.”

As it was, starting with Reinhard, there were plenty—Old Man

Rom, the manor maids Flam and Grassis—who tried to make Felt wear things she didn't like. If Camberley and the rest piled on, Felt would be left with no allies.

Gaston: "I'm with Felt on this. I get that a lot's gone down, but even so, you dressed all formal still looks off."

Camberley: "Ah! No fair! Boss, he's butterin' you up! I know this! Gaston promised to bring back souvenirs for his woman and kid, so he's hopin' for extra pocket money!"

Gaston: "Idiot, don't say extra crap! How 'bout you buy somethin' for your own woman for once!"

Camberley: "I get them to spoil me, so I don't gotta do that!"

Felt: "Zip it! Don't start some shameful squabble in the street!"

She wedged herself between the two who were about to grapple and pulled them apart.

If anything, Gaston's argument overwhelmingly had more merit, but if she declared a winner here, it might spiral into something messy, so she called it a draw.

Felt: "Anyway, we're short on time. If we take too long gettin' to the inn, that bastard Reinhard'll overthink it and swoop over here. Worst case, he drags me back to the inn as-is and parades me in front of Anastasia-neechan and the others in the dress."

Gaston: "So we split up and look for clothes and shoes and such, that it?"

Felt: "Yeah, that. Ah, clothes are whatever, but I'll pick out shoes that fit me myself."

Camberley: "Boss, boss, how much skin see-through's okay?"

Felt: "Tch, shoulda left you and kept Rachins instead."

She'd thought he was the better choice than the womanless Rachins, but she was on the verge of regretting that pick.

Felt: “All right, then it’s you I’m countin’ on, Gaston. Got it? Whether we get looked down on today or not—you best think the Royal Selection’s future’s ridin’ on it. Heavy’s the responsibility.”

Gaston: “Th-The Royal Selection’s future…”

Gulping, Gaston’s face grew stern under the weight that had just been set on both his shoulders. He had a scary mug that might make a child cry, and yet somewhere out there there was a baby who giggled for him—funny world.

Anyway, with that preface out of the way, Felt and the others broke into a run through the unfamiliar streets.

—And after each of them brought back what they’d been after, they regrouped.

Felt: “…There’s somethin’ I just can’t get behind here.”

Muttering so, Felt picked out what she liked from the clothes they’d gathered, slipped out of the fluttery, hard-to-move-in dress, and changed.

The design—sleek and easy to move in—even included a belt to fix a dagger in place. The look paired well enough with the boots Felt herself had chosen. She knew she wasn’t the type to fuss over appearances, but that didn’t mean she wanted to go out of her way to look mismatched.

On that point, the chosen clothes nailed Felt’s tastes and needs perfectly.

Felt: “’Cept it bugs me they’re all ones Camberley picked.”

Camberley: “Hey now, what, boss. You got a problem with clothes I picked?”

Felt: “Nah, no complaints… Kinda like “no complaints” is my complaint.”

Camberley: “What’s that even mean!”

Felt knew she was being unreasonable here, but it felt like she'd been the one forced to swallow unfairness first, so it was six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Leaving grumbling Camberley aside, Felt looked to the other one—the sad loser kneeling in the alley, Gaston.

Sadly, not a single one of the clothes Gaston had surely picked out in earnest had been adopted.

However—

Felt: "Sorry, but I ain't wearin' this polka-dot or this stripey one or these makes-no-sense clothes."

Gaston: "Huh?! Th-Th-That's goin' too far with "makes no sense," ain't it?! They're cute, ain't they!"

Felt: "Cute…"

It was a shame for the aghast-faced Gaston, but when it came to fashion, his sensibilities and Felt's did not align. She wouldn't say the clothes he picked weren't cute—but in that Felt didn't want to wear cute clothes, it was the same kind of forcing as Reinhard's.

Felt: "If you're pickin' souvenirs for Ilya and Kalifa, quit pickin' 'em alone. It grates, I know, but get Camberley to help you—best way to go."

Gaston: "U-Urgh…!"

Camberley: "Quit takin' it so hard! What d'you take me for!"

Watching Gaston press his fists to the ground and cry like a man, Camberley complained so.

At his pitiful state, Felt thought a moment, then fixed on one thing from what Gaston had chosen—a blue neck-wrap—and swiftly wound just that around her neck. It was pretty long; the tip almost brushed the ground, but it wasn't a bad match.

Felt: "This ain't bad. Right, let's call it complete with this."

Gaston: “F-Felt…!”

Felt: “You look way too saved over one neck-wrap… geez.”

Gaston teared up, relieved that at least the neck-wrap had been adopted and his effort not rendered entirely void. After giving the giant’s shoulder some hearty slaps without restraint, Felt turned back toward the street with a “right then.”

Outfit changed, battle-readied and solid. —All that remained was whether the other Royal Candidates would be braced in kind to match her mindset.

Felt: “Well, judgin’ by how they’ve lived this past year, I don’t gotta worry ’bout that. Every last one of ’em’s livin’ strong enough to make you sick of it.”

While Felt’s side had focused on laying the groundwork, the other Royal Candidates—headed by Anastasia—had steadily advanced their preparations for the Royal Selection, as was widely known. Even so, Felt had no intention of losing once she was in it.

Not even at this gathering Anastasia had set up did her pugnacity plan to yield an inch.

Just, it wasn’t like she only wanted those crash-bang head-on collisions.

Felt: “Since the half-elf chick’s comin’ too, for once I wanna swap war stories ’bout bein’ made to do stuff that don’t suit us.”

After all, thinking back, she and Emilia were comrades who had butted heads in Old Man Rom’s loot house.

By the odd turns of fate that followed, they were both in the inescapable position of Royal Candidates, but unlike the others, Felt and Emilia, in the sense they’d started from having nothing, could be said to have begun looking at things from the same eye level.

Of course, the bitter draughts a slum girl and a silver-haired half-elf had tasted were surely very different.

Even so, there ought to be things they could set themselves down and talk about at length.

Felt: “Good grief, we’re dancin’ right to Anastasia-neechan’s tune.”

Realizing she’d been nicely put in the mood before she knew it, Felt gave a wry smile.

And just then—

Rachins: “—Tch. So this’s where you were. Been lookin’ for ya.”

Cursing as he said it, the punk—no, Rachins—ran up to where Felt and the others were in the alley. At his appearance, Felt raised an eyebrow with an “oh,” and Rachins, with those sharp sanpaku eyes, raked Felt up and down with a long look,

Rachins: “Hah. Figures—that’s why. The naggin’ from Reinhard’s gonna get loud again, ain’t it?”

Felt: “Say what he wants, if the goods ain’t here it’s our win. He ain’t keen on showin’ the other camps a front with our steps outta sync, either.”

Rachins: “That so. Anyway, the guy says get to the inn already. The other camps’re showin’ up one after another.”

Seeing through at a glance that “Watergate City sightseeing” had been a pretext, Rachins relayed that to Felt.

With the other camps arriving and Felt changed, they’d made it just in time; baring a fang in a grin, Felt clicked her tongue and steeled herself.

Felt: “Right, I’m off. If that dress’s still around, Reinhard’s liable to yap about changin’, so sell it. You can keep the proceeds. We’re at a place called the Water Plumage Inn, so if somethin’ comes up, head there.”

Rachins: “Yeah, yeah.”

Gaston: “Oh, got it.”

Camberley: “I’m gonna go have some fun!”

Shrugging at their three-as-they-please replies, Felt stepped out from the alley into the streets.

All told, she thought anew that doing the sightseeing she’d used as a pretext might not be so bad—the city was that pretty.

3

Crusch: “What a beautiful cityscape.”

Ferris: “—. Yes, it is. We’re blessed with fine weather too; it’s the perfect day for an outing, nya~”

Hearing Ferris answer while gazing at the same view, Crusch let out a small breath of admiration.

Sensing the brief hesitation before his reply, Crusch narrowed her amber eyes ever so slightly.

It seemed she had put her foot in her mouth yet again. Most likely, this was not Crusch’s first time visiting the city. —Regrettably, nowhere in her memory could she find when that had been, or what sort of memories she had of it.

Even at a time like this, the Divine Protection of Wind Reading Crusch had been granted worked in full, and she picked up the pained, desolate wind Ferris could not quite conceal no matter how he tried.

To the knight closest to her, most devoted to her, who thought of her more than anyone—Ferris in that position—she felt a mortification at making him taste that sensation again and again.

Over the last year, in all the places Crusch had gone with Ferris at her side, she had been freshly confronted time and again with the footprints of “Valkyrie” Crusch Karsten.

Crusch: “No—this is not limited to Ferris.”

In the sense of disappointing someone, she had probably made everyone who knew the former her taste it. If they had thrown disappointment and discouragement at her head-on, that would still be something; as it was, Crusch was merely sensing them on her own with the power of her Divine Protection.

There was no way she could put on the face of the victim; the bitterness only piled up inside.

Crusch: “Wilhelm, have you been to Priestella before?”

Before her sunken mood could show on her face, Crusch addressed Wilhelm, who was acting as coachman. The loyal retainer held the reins and, within a city whose roads were laid out intricately around its waterways, deftly directed the ground dragon along their route as he said,

Wilhelm: “Several times before. Though that was more than twenty years ago now. The cityscape has not changed in any major way, but there do seem to be small differences from my memories.”

Crusch: “More than twenty years… Was that when you were a Royal Knight?”

Wilhelm: “Yes. Several times on knightly duties. …And twice, I came on a trip with my wife.”

Crusch: “With your lady wife.”

It was not the first time she had heard, from the affectionate Wilhelm’s own mouth, memories of his wife.

Though he was not especially talkative by nature, when it came to his lady wife he spoke with a smoothness that was precisely for that subject.

It made her smile to hear that this Watergate City held such memories too.

Ferris: “Heeh, Wil-ji going on a trip with his wife, nya~. Even though you’re now Captain of the Royal Guard, you still had that much loose time back then?”

Wilhelm: “I was not the Captain of the Royal Guard since my youth, and even after becoming captain, I was not always buried in work. If I came home late on an anniversary or on a promised early-return day, Theresia would grow displeased.”

Ferris: “Ahh, a great domestic war. In that case the odds were against you, Wil-ji.”

Wilhelm: “Quite. I loved my wife, you see. And the reverse was likewise.”

Seated on the coachman’s box, Wilhelm faced forward; from the passenger compartment Crusch could not see his face.

Even so, she could picture Wilhelm wearing a gentle expression and lips as he spoke of his memories.

She frankly thought it enviable. —On occasion, even when someone told her about memories she did not know, Crusch could not feel them as her own. The unbridgeable gap born between the former her and the present her was a symbol of pain to Crusch.

Ferris: “Okay, okay, thanks for the treat! …But times were kinder in Wil-ji’s day, huh. Or is Captain Marcos just bad at work style, nya?”

Crusch: “Marcos Gildark?”

Ferris: “When the captain was young, you were still Captain of the Royal Guard too, right, Wil-ji?”

Wilhelm: “Indeed. To be honest, he possessed outstanding ability from his days as a recruit. He is stronger now than ever… to the point that even I in my prime might not be able to match him.”

Ferris: “But you in your prime were a powerhouse who defeated your wife, the then-Sword Saint… In that case, you’re saying Marcos-sama surpasses the Sword Saint of that time?”

Wilhelm: “—. Quite. Then allow me to rephrase: he does not measure up to me in my prime.”

Ferris: “Puh. What’s with that, nya?”

Ferris couldn’t help but snort at how Wilhelm flipped his opinion in a huff. Crusch, too, put a hand to her lips and tittered.

The way he could overturn his own statement the moment his wife’s renown, rather than his own, might be called into question told how great a share his love for his wife held inside Wilhelm.

For one to be loved so much, she must have been a truly wonderful woman. Regardless of memory or no, Crusch felt keenly that she would have liked to meet her at least once.

Just then, when Crusch was holding such sentiment—

Wilhelm: “Matters of the past may be allowed to remain that hazy. What is important is not to remember the particulars and be able to speak of them, but that the core within those memories remains unshaken.”

Crusch: “Wilhelm?”

Wilhelm: “At times, that may give rise to pain. Yet in many cases, what one truly desires is hidden precisely beyond that pain. It is a presumptuous opinion, but…”

Quiet words, spoken even as if hesitant to say them, that Crusch could tell—by her Divine Protection’s power—no, even without it—were addressed to her. And they were unmistakably a golden saying meant for Crusch, who bore an unceasing pain in her breast.

Crusch: “…”

After a beat, Crusch set a hand to her chest and took a deep breath.

Contrary to expectation, her heart was not racing. It felt as though only her heart was flustered, while her body sat solidly, waiting for it to settle.

Crusch: “Ferris, it seems you and I have visited Priestella before. Would you tell me about that time?”

Before the flower of courage she had been given could wilt and wither, Crusch asked Ferris thus.

At that question, Ferris's eyes went perfectly round in surprise. Then his gaze turned to the back of Wilhelm's head—no doubt because he realized it was Wilhelm who had given Crusch the push.

Ferris: "U-Um, about that time…"

After glaring at Wilhelm's head for a while, Ferris dropped his eyes and trailed off.

It had been about a year since her "Memories" were lost; Crusch had been rebuilding all sorts of things, and among those she had been with Ferris the whole time. She knew this reaction of his was not awkwardness or aversion, but consideration not to hurt Crusch.

That thoughtfulness of his made her happy. It did—but—

Crusch: "Ferris, I'm asking of my own accord. Even if those memories might hurt me, I'm prepared for that."

Ferris: "U… but, you see? Ferri-chan doesn't want you to be hurt."

Crusch: "Quite so. You are, surely, kinder than anyone else in this world, so it's only natural you'd want to stop me when I seem intent on hurting myself. However—"

Ferris: "Crusch-sama?"

Crusch: "I have exactly one certainty. Not a certainty that I won't be hurt, but a certainty that even if I am hurt, when that happens you—Ferris—will be by my side."

At Crusch's firm declaration, Ferris lifted the face he had lowered and blinked wide. Smiling softly at his adorable reaction, Crusch gave a quiet nod in return.

Ferris, called "Blue," the foremost practitioner of healing magic in the kingdom—if he was at her side, bodily wounds would be healed in an instant. And, limited to Crusch, the wounds of her heart would surely be healed as well.

The existence of the knight Felix Argyle—Ferris—was that great a thing to Crusch Karsten, regardless of whether she had "Memories" or not.

Crusch: “So please, tell me. The memories that existed between you and me.”

Ferris: “… It’s not only between Ferri-chan and Crusch-sama.”

As if to reason with her, Crusch had conveyed it gently; at last Ferris opened his mouth.

Her reply was something Crusch had not imagined, but no wind blew from Ferris that suggested he meant to equivocate here or to conceal the truth.

Always until now, Ferris had tried to be earnest and sincere toward Crusch. That same wind—no, an even stronger true wind—blew from him now.

Crusch and Ferris—and some “other” besides the two of them—.

Ferris: “—Fourier Lugunica.”

Crusch: “…”

Ferris: “His Highness Fourier Lugunica, Crusch-sama.”

Timidly, Ferris spoke the name once, then again with an honorific. The intensity of attachment in his tone was not something easy to put into simple words.

The winds of emotion that the Divine Protection of Wind Reading could sense came in many colors and directions; among them, Crusch regarded the one easiest to receive as that person’s strongest feeling.

Yet at this moment, the wind overflowing from Ferris was so intermingled with joy and sorrow that she could not declare which one was foremost.

If she had to name the source of this wind, she could only say this:

Crusch: “—A wind of love.”

Ferris: "…"

Crusch: "Ferris, you loved this His Highness Fourier, didn't you."

Ferris: "…ah."

So, from the "love" that washed over her body, Crusch read Ferris's feelings for the other. At her words, Ferris let out a ragged breath and his eyes grew moist.

Tears welled round in his eyes; he hastily wiped them with the back of his hand, worked his lips to speak, failed time and again, and then—

Ferris: "Yes. —And so did you, Crusch-sama."

Crusch: "…I see."

It dawned on her that this had been the reason that had weighed heaviest on Ferris's tongue.

At Ferris's gaze, full to the point of pain with poignant sorrow, a thorn quietly pricked Crusch's heart. There was a seeping ache—and the fact that it was only to that extent tormented Crusch terribly.

Surely, what Ferris had least wanted to see was Crusch's heart hurting in this way.

Crusch: "…"

Even when she spoke the name "Fourier Lugunica," there was no stab of pain in Crusch's breast.

The pain Crusch felt was only for the desolation of being unable to recall things related to that name, and for Ferris's reaction upon beholding that fact.

Though the one bearing that name was someone dear to the memories Crusch and Ferris shared. Though she knew what had become of a person bearing the name of Lugunica and called "His Highness."

But precisely because she didn’t fully know, she wanted to know.

Crusch: “Please tell me, Ferris. About His Highness Fourier. —About the person who was loved by me and you, and surely by many others besides.”

Ferris: “…It’s going to be really, really, reaaally long, you know?”

Perhaps she had expected to be told “I’m sorry” there.

Ferris’s eyes widened as though Crusch’s next words had been unexpected, and then, shyly, as if to test her resolve, he said so.

By now the carriage had been inside the Watergate City for a while; she supposed they would arrive before long at their destination, the Water Plumage Inn—but—

Crusch: “Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm: “…As you wish.”

Without needing her to say it all, the retainer who took her meaning ordered the ground dragon to turn down a road along the waterway. If he had caught Crusch’s intent, it would be a route different from the one leading straight to the inn.

That gave them a little more time.

Crusch: “If he was that important to us, I don’t expect you can tell me everything… but—”

Ferris: “…That’s right. Really, really, once Ferri-chan starts talkin’ there’s no end to it—such a troublesome, troublesome person he was.”

With eyebrows drooping, Ferris seemed to resign himself—but not in a despairing way; rather, like someone groping to draw close something precious far away, unsure where to begin, he murmured.

Gently, Crusch overlaid her hand atop Ferris’s and waited for his words.

For the telling of memories that the former her had surely had at her core, which the present her did not know.

—So she could hear the beloved “The Dream the Lion King Saw,” amid the murmuring of water.

4

Julius: “Anastasia-sama, it seems they’re arriving one after another.”

Anastasia: “Well now, right on schedule—how excellent. Sounds like nothin’ unexpected happened on the road either, so from the host’s side we’ve got well-mannered guests and that’s a big help.”

In a room at the inn, Anastasia, who’d been looking out at the waterway scenery from the veranda, gave a long, luxurious stretch at Julius’s report as he came to stand beside her.

The way every camp had arranged their itineraries to make the appointed date and time—now that was skillful.

Anastasia: “We went and lined up cooks and ingredients to match today, after all; I’m relieved it looks like none of that’ll go to waste.”

Julius: “Indeed. Beyond the beauty of the Watergate City itself, once they lay eyes on this Water Plumage Inn, I expect everyone will be duly astonished.”

Anastasia: “Oh? That what you’ve got your eye on most, Julius? If so, you’ve got quite the nice personality.”

Julius: “A nice personality…? That doesn’t sound like it’s purely praise.”

Smiling with a cat-like grin and peeking into his face, Anastasia drew a wry smile from Julius. At her knight’s reaction, Anastasia tapped the veranda floor with her hand, knock-knock,

Anastasia: “Ain’t that right? Our “Finest of Knights” here bein’ all eager—“Can’t wait to see everyone’s faces when this unusual inn surprises ’em”—now that’s real lively and fun, ain’t it.”

Julius: “You said much the same the first time you showed me this inn, the other day.”

Anastasia: “Uh-huh. So? From the eyes of the first one who got surprised, you think the rest’ll be surprised too?”

Julius: “On that point, I believe your preparations leave no gaps and no grounds for complaint.”

With a hand to his chest, Julius—rarely—shaped a mischievous smile. Seeing that, Anastasia let her brows drop in satisfied delight with a “heh,”

Anastasia: “My, my, you’re in a truly good mood.”

Julius: “It’s true I’m excited. Thinking back, I seldom… turned my wits toward things like this—schemes to surprise or please someone. However, Anastasia-sama—”

Anastasia: “What is it?”

Julius: “Contrary to appearances, even I had a mischievous streak in my younger days, before I aspired to knighthood.”

At that sudden—no, amusing—confession, Anastasia’s eyes went round.

If it was before he’d aspired to be a knight, then unless what she’d heard in passing was wrong, it would be when he was still single-digits in age. Anastasia couldn’t even picture Julius at that age.

All the same, the words “Julius Juukulius” and “mischievous” had a gulf between them far too wide.

Anastasia: “Heh heh, mischievous… You were mischievous? Now that’s a surprise.”

Julius: “So please, be at ease. Unexpected as it may be, I don’t dislike such things as this.”

Anastasia: "You say stuff like that, and it makes me wanna plan things like this again—'course, that's if this time goes well."

Hearing Julius's confession, Anastasia laughed with a hand to her mouth.

Honestly, it wasn't a bad notion. —In planning this gathering, and also for the sake of winning the Royal Selection, Anastasia had kept eyes and ears on the other camps' moves and circumstances. As a result, what she found herself thinking was the simple fact that she couldn't bring herself to dislike any of the other candidates.

They were rival candidates. With only one able to become king, wins and losses would surely arise. That didn't mean it was a matter of life and death. Nor that they could never speak again.

Perhaps only after the Royal Selection ended would the candidates, at long last, be able to strip away the needless entanglements and talk heart-to-heart.

Julius: "—Anastasia-sama, it's about time."

Anastasia: "Mm, that so."

Lost in thought, Anastasia raised her face at Julius's call. She took the hand her knight held out as he rose first, and slowly lifted herself from the veranda.

With a soft flutter, her light-purple hair streamed in the passing breeze; Anastasia once more gave a long stretch right there, then whirled around with verve.

With Julius in tow, she headed to the inn's entrance—the welcoming of the invited guests.

Sliding open the side-opening doors, she smiled and called out to the assembled faces marveling at the Water Plumage Inn.

Anastasia: "—Looks like we got ourselves some surprised folks. In that case, pickin' this place was worth it, wasn't it."

Chapter 3:
The Day of Arrival: Nighttime

1

On the night when the camps of the invited Royal Selection candidates were all gathered at the Water Plumage Inn.

The face-to-face meetings between the camps, given as the pretext, were postponed until tomorrow, and they were being treated to a welcome unique to a Wafuu inn—something rare even in Priestella.

That welcome was—

Emilia: “W-Wow, that’s a reaaally big bath!”

Beatrice: “Good grief, don’t get too carried away, Emilia. Betty was entrusted by Subaru to make sure you don’t embarrass yourself where others can see, I suppose—eeek?!”

Emilia: “Kyaa! Beatrice?!”

A high-pitched scream flipped over, and the next moment a great splash echoed across the open-air bath.

Apparently, one of the lively guests—the girl with the tightly curled hair, Beatrice—had slipped and tumbled into the tub.

Beatrice: “Blub blub blub, in fact…”

Emilia: “Honestly, Beatrice… If you rush that much, it’s dangerous. You mustn’t get too excited, all right? Subaru asked me properly, too.”

Beatrice: “Th-The very same request—what’s the meaning of that, I suppose… Betty and Emilia alike have been carelessly caught in Subaru’s scheme, in fact…!”

Raising her head from where she’d sunk into the bath, Beatrice trembled as Emilia tilted her head.

She didn't seem to get it, but Subaru's stratagem—ordering both Emilia and Beatrice to keep an eye on each other—wasn't half bad. One could also say he'd gotten used to handling the two when things turned into a situation like this.

Felt: "Tch—yeah, this is huge! No wonder the inn shows it off."

Crusch: "Indeed, truly so. I had heard as much, yet… to think the bath is outside is surprising."

A bit later than Emilia and Beatrice, Felt and Crusch came to the open-air bath as well. With towels wrapped around their bodies, they each took in the unusual bath with wonder.

Together with the way Emilia and Beatrice were frolicking, it was a reaction well worth the effort of hospitality.

Anastasia: "Heh-Heh—nice, ain't it? Even in Kararagi ya hardly ever see an open-air bath this big, y'know? The Wafuu buildin's and the food, and this open-air bath to boot—that there's the true charm o' the Water Plumage Inn."

Pleased by everyone's reactions, Anastasia—also in a bath towel—puffed out her chest.

The eye-catching buildings and the rich array of dishes were sights in themselves, but what Anastasia liked most about this inn, by far, was this hot spring.

As Crusch had been surprised to hear, the very idea of building a bath out under the open sky was the brainchild of none other than Kararagi's founding hero, Hoshin of the Wilderness. For Anastasia, who bore the Hoshin name not by blood but as the heir to his will, it was a point of great pride.

Anastasia: "Truth is, one o' my hobbies is hoppin' from hot spring to hot spring. On that front, it's a shame ya don't hear many rumors 'bout hot springs or hidden retreats in Lugunica."

Emilia: "Hidden retreats?"

Anastasia: "Means a secret hot spring. Out in the mountains, or beside a big river or lake—in places folks can't easily get to; like phantom baths, y'know."

At the unfamiliar word, Emilia tilted her head with a question mark; Anastasia lifted a finger and lectured. Listening beside them, Felt nodded with an impressed "Heh," and—

Felt: "Sure, dunkin' yourself head to toe feels great. These days I get a bath every day at Reinhard's place, but before that—'less we borrowed a bath at a brothel now 'n then—we mostly made do with a wash-off… Freezin' days were hell."

Emilia: "Ah, me too, me too. There was a river in the forest, but the forest always had snow piled up, so the water was reaaally cold and made me all tingly."

Crusch: "…You two truly had it hard, it seems."

Felt and Emilia spoke, a touch pensive, from an angle slightly different from what Anastasia had hoped to boast about. At those tidbits, Crusch kept flicking glances toward Anastasia, eyes asking for help on how to match the tone.

Unfortunately for Crusch, Anastasia had also been born and raised in one of Kararagi's worst slums. Until she'd been picked up by Ricardo at around eight, she prided herself on a life no less harsh than Felt's in the capital's back-alleys.

So, in her heart, she was on Felt and Emilia's side—hardly what one expects of a Royal Candidate.

Beatrice: "No need to let it weigh on you. It's simply that each person has a history, I suppose. It only means you had no need to endure that sort of hardship; there's no reason to feel abashed, in fact."

Crusch: "Beatrice-sama…!"

Hauling herself up from the bath she'd unexpectedly fallen into, Beatrice wrung out her wet hair. At her words, Crusch pressed a hand to her chest in relief.

With Crusch seemingly reassured, Anastasia clapped her hands.

Anastasia: “All right now—Beatrice-chan got ahead of herself a mite, but there’s proper manner for an open-air bath. Don’t dip yer towel in the tub, ’n make sure ya tie up yer hair.”

Beatrice: “B-Betty didn’t get ahead of herself; it’s this slippery floor that’s at fault, in fact! Besides, Betty’s body is made of mana, so with a snap she can recompose it and she’s not dirty, I suppose!”

Felt: “Hah, handy trick. But a bath ain’t just ’bout washin’ off the dirt.”

Emilia: “Right. Feeling all toasty-warm is so nice, I always end up soaking way too long.”

Anastasia: “Mm-hm, sounds like Felt ’n Emilia both’ve got the proper mindset for enjoyin’ a hot spring—good to hear. In that case…”

Judging Felt and Emilia ready to face the hot spring properly, Anastasia turned her gaze to Crusch. Through the bath towel one could tell her body’s elegant curves; at that, she stiffened her cheeks.

Crusch: “A-Anastasia-sama?”

Anastasia: “First ya wash yourself at the wash-place, then ya sink in nice ’n easy! Us long-haired gals can be pals together, y’hear?”

Crusch: “No, thank you; I can attend to myself…”

Anastasia: “Now, now, don’t say that. Mimi usually comes with me, but looks like she’s been runnin’ ’round playin’ with that Garfiel-kun, so I’m lonely all by my lonesome.”

Taking Crusch by the hand, Anastasia led her off to the wash-place.

Of course, if Crusch truly resisted in earnest, Anastasia’s slender arms wouldn’t stand a chance. The very fact she was being firmly escorted meant it wasn’t real resistance.

Emilia: “Then, Beatrice, let’s wash each other, too. How ’bout you, Felt-chan?”

Felt: “I’m good—don’t need in on that. As ya can see, unlike you ladies I keep my hair short. Ain’t much work to wash a—hey, what, shorty?”

Beatrice: “Don’t be so shy, in fact. Betty and Emilia will scrub you from the top of your head to your bottom, I suppose! Emilia!”

Emilia: “Mm-hm! We’ll get you squeaky-clean!”

Felt: “Whoah! Quit—cut it out! Hiss-ss!!”

While Anastasia marched Crusch to the wash-place, Felt let out a catlike cry as Emilia and Beatrice grabbed her and slathered her in suds. Over there, too, the noisy rough-and-tumble was in full swing—very fine indeed.

Anastasia: “So? If yer fixin’ to slip away from my hands, I’ll just leave ya to Emilia-san ’n the others.”

Crusch: “…Understood. I yield. You truly are dreadful.”

Sparing a sidelong glance at what Felt was being put through, Crusch slumped her shoulders in total surrender.

Anastasia soaped her back and then set to washing Crusch’s long, beautiful green hair.

Soaked with plenty of water, it showed a breathtaking peak of gloss and freshness. Not a single strand looked damaged; the sight all but drew out a sigh.

Thinking of her own slightly wavy hair, it made her greedy enough to wish they could trade.

Anastasia: “All that’s the fruit of your own effort, Crusch-san… hmm, or maybe there’s a real good chance it’s Ferris-san’s hard work, too.”

Crusch: “What is it? Did you just mention Ferris?”

Anastasia: “Mm~. Truth is, when I said we’d be takin’ a hot spring bath, I got a teensy bit fluttery wonderin’ which one Ferris-san’d go in—boys’ or girls’. I was thinkin’ maybe he’s always together with you, Crusch-san.”

Crusch: “N-No! Ferris is indeed most adorable, but he is a man.”

Though Ferris spread charm fitting his cute looks, just as Crusch said, his way of thinking and moving a conversation along left an unexpectedly masculine impression.

That said, there had to be meaning in Ferris consciously sticking to that outfit and that manner. While it was one thing for an onlooker like Anastasia to wonder, she’d been curious how the parties themselves—Crusch and company—regarded it.

Anastasia: “So you treat Ferris-san as a boy in how ya deal with him, huh.”

Crusch: “—? Yes, that is my intention.”

Anastasia: “Uh-huh. …Feels like there’s just a li’l mismatch there, though.”

Crusch: “Eh?”

Murmured under her breath, Anastasia’s aside didn’t reach Crusch’s ears. When asked back, Anastasia answered, “Nothin’, nothin’.” Then she focused on washing Crusch’s hair. Looking a little perplexed, Crusch did not press further.

Instead—

Felt: “Huh? Reinhard roughed up one of your folks, neechan?”

From the neighboring wash-place, where she was buried in suds, came that startled voice.

At Felt’s surprise, Emilia—still not stopping her hands—gave a wry smile.

Emilia: “Um, it’s not like he “roughed him up.” It’s just, y’know, when you first meet Reinhard he's got this… very slightly surprising aura, right? And then, our Garfiel seems to've gotten surprised by it…"

Beatrice: "He went "grr" and swung at him, 'n got cleanly countered for his troubles, in fact."

Emilia: "He was not beaten! …But it looks like he took it reaaally hard."

At the name Garfiel, Anastasia pricked up her ears, too.

Ever since she'd gone as a messenger to the Emilia camp, Mimi had been fixated on that boy named Garfiel. The one paling most over it was her kid brother Hetaro, but Anastasia, too, bore responsibility as their guardian.

Even aside from that, to Anastasia, Mimi was like a dear little sister. Not quite a daughter—she wasn't at that age yet.

Leaving Anastasia's self-recognition aside, Felt—now completely resigned to being double-teamed at the wash-place—rested her cheek on her knee and said,

Felt: "Kinda seein' the whole scene in my head… Betcha it went like this: that guy—Reinhard—took this Garfiel's sword or fist with a grin, 'n then went, "A splendid display," or some crap like that 'n rubbed him all raw, yeah?"

Emilia: "Felt-chan, amazing…"

Beatrice: "Almost like you were right there watchin', I suppose."

Felt: "Bang on the nose, huh. That guy never learns a damn thing…"

With an exaggerated sigh, Felt brooded over the dust-up between Reinhard and Garfiel. At that, Emilia went "Heave-ho," poured warm water over Felt's head, and rinsed off the foam. Felt shook her head and body, reacting exactly like a cat who hates being soaked to the skin.

Felt: “All right, you asked for it, neechan. ’Kay then, I’ll get you back.”

Emilia: “Oh, will you switch with me? Thank you sooo much. My hair’s long and it’s a lot to wash, so having help is a huge help.”

Felt: “If it’s long and a pain, just cut it off already.”

Emilia: “But Puck and Subaru both tell me long hair suits me better.”

Beatrice: “Betty agrees with Subaru and Nii-cha, in fact. Emilia’s long, pretty silver hair is worth swallowin’ a bit of trouble for, I suppose.”

Felt: “Yeah, yeah!”

Wearing the look of someone who’d poked a wasp’s nest, Felt answered Emilia and Beatrice with studied carelessness.

Because they were always holding hands, it tended to be the closeness between Subaru and Beatrice that stood out, but seeing them like this, the bond between Emilia and Beatrice was something, too. Like sisters—though which one was the older and which the younger was a matter for debate.

Crusch: “Anastasia-sama, if you like, shall we switch?”

Anastasia: “Ah, right. I’ll leave it to ya.”

Unlike the raucous trio over there, they finished scrubbing properly and thoroughly, and Anastasia and Crusch swapped offense and defense. Changing places, Anastasia undid her towel and bared her back.

Between Royal Candidates—one could say she was baring her back defenselessly to a political rival—but—

Anastasia: “—Crusch-san? What’s the matter?”

At Crusch, who’d fallen silent, Anastasia felt something off and turned just her head. With her hair tied up, Crusch narrowed her amber eyes and shook her head.

Crusch: “No, only… that Anastasia-sama’s hair is as fine and soft as a cat’s fur, and I find myself envious.”

Anastasia: “—Pfft.”

Crusch: “A-Ah? Why laugh? Did I say something strange?”

Anastasia: “Nah, nah, not that… Ahh, that’s rich.”

Unable to help it, Anastasia chewed back the laughter rising in her throat; Crusch blinked in confusion, eyes going round. At that wholly womanly reaction from Crusch, Anastasia shook her head.

Anastasia: ““The farther the star, the brighter it seems.” Hoshin’s sayings.”

Crusch: “—That is to say?”

Anastasia: “Means we’re both wishin’ for what the other’s got. Haah, settin’ up this lil’ meetin’ was the right call.”

Crusch: “…I cannot say I understand the reason behind your conviction just now, but on the thought itself I agree. I’ve been given a most meaningful time.”

Anastasia: “Right?”

Answering that crisp reply with a crisp grin, Anastasia and Crusch shared a laugh.

At the wash-place beside them, the combined onslaught of Emilia and Felt finally descended upon Beatrice, and the ruckus was lively indeed—their cheerful voices carried high, high up into the roofless sky.

This, Anastasia thought, was why open-air baths were so addictive.

2

Ferris: “Fyaa~ I feel revived~”

Letting the cat ears atop his head go all limp, Ferris stretched out his arms and legs as he soaked in the tub.

Ferris favored big, emotional turns of phrase about everything, but the satisfaction of sinking his whole body into a hot spring was no exaggeration—so Julius, soaking beside him, also felt.

For this gathering, Anastasia's camp were the ones who'd done the inviting. Naturally, they'd arrived in Priestella earlier than the others and had checked the Water Plumage Inn beforehand. However, though they'd verified with their own eyes the Wafuu buildings and the rooms' interiors, the actual stay had been postponed until tonight by Anastasia's arrangement.

Anastasia: "'Since it's a rare treat, Julius, ya wanna enjoy it the same as everyone else, right?'"

So had Anastasia mischievously proposed, and savoring the true intent behind it, he was once again struck by what a remarkable lady she was.

Reinhard: "Indeed—just as Ferris says, it feels like vigor wells up all the way to your fingertips and toes."

As if putting Julius's thoughts into words, Reinhard—soaking in the same bath—laughed. At his words, Ferris rested his upper body against the rim and went, "Right, right~", then—

Ferris: "Nya, a hot spring isn't just a big bath, y'know. It's like… the special goodness of a bath you sink into after field training with the Knights, or something."

Julius: "Ah, but I think I know what you mean. A bath after training has a different flavor entirely."

Ferris: "See, see~… and yet, Reinhard, you always handle it with that cool face of yours!"

Julius: "If you're going to say that, Ferris, your post in field training is mainly the treatment team… The intensity of the training assigned to you should be quite different from mine and Reinhard's, no?"

Ferris: “Don’t say extra stuff! Julius, whose side are you on?”

Julius: “If I had to say, we should call it that we’re all on different “camps,” I think.”

Ferris puffed his cheeks at Julius’s shoulder-lifted reply. Seeing that, Julius met Reinhard’s eyes and, a beat later, they both let out a small chuckle.

For all that hot springs were said to be a culture originating in the Kararagi City-States, he thought with feeling how curious and fascinating a thing they were.

The capital’s drill grounds had facilities for washing off sweat, and it wasn’t unusual for manors to have bathhouses for bathing, too—but this was the first time he’d ever soaked in the same bath as Reinhard and Ferris.

Why, during field training they might bathe in rivers or lakes—but—

Julius: “Even in places like that, the knights around me are often considerate.”

Ferris: “Well, Ferri-chan and Julius can at least produce water by ourselves, nya. Speaking of, what do you do at times like that, Reinhard?”

Reinhard: ““What do I do,” well… I just bathe with everyone else like normal, but…”

Ferris: “Heh~ bet everyone’s all tense, nya.”

Julius hadn’t known those particulars about Reinhard either, and hearing that, Ferris let slip a very pointed impression. Julius worried it might be a touch too direct, but Reinhard folded his arms in the hot water and said,

Reinhard: “It’s true. If I could, I’d like to get along better with everyone in the Knights, but it’s not so easy. I am trying, though. I’ve been using Captain Marcos as a reference, and…”

Ferris: “Ahh, there’s your problem laid bare in one go. The Captain makes folks as tense as you do—if not more.”

Julius: “The Captain? That is…”

At Ferris’s exasperation, Reinhard looked as surprised as if it had never occurred to him. Still wearing that surprised face, his blue eyes turned Julius’s way, and Julius nodded.

Julius: “We both—Ferris and I—find your and the Captain’s personalities admirable… but it’s a fact that your titles and prowess put pressure on those around you.”

Reinhard: “Oof… I see. I’m beaten. I did kinda suspect as much.”

Ferris: ““Kinda” won’t cut it. How many years you been Reinhard now?”

Reinhard: “Harsh.”

With Ferris’s characteristically sharp tongue, Reinhard gave a wry smile and scratched his cheek with a finger.

There was no bite to the barb precisely because it was so straightforward as to leave no room for misunderstanding. Even if it had been about himself and not Reinhard, the crispness would have won out. If Ferris hadn’t been here, Julius would surely have answered Reinhard in some roundabout way—so he was glad Ferris was.

Of course, Ferris, too, stood in the Royal Guard as someone singled out—for different reasons than Reinhard—so how he was seen by those around him could hardly be someone else’s problem.

Perhaps thinking the same as Julius—“in that case,” Reinhard looked over at Ferris, who was relaxing limply against the rim of the hot spring.

Reinhard: “What about you, Ferris? What do you keep in mind?”

Ferris: “Ferri-chan’s way? If you seriously wanna walk the same path as Ferri-chan, the first step would be to draw out the little girl inside Reinhard, okay?”

Reinhard: ““Little girl inside me”… I wonder if there is one?”

Ferris: “Well, to a greater or lesser degree, everyone’s got a part like tha— ow.”

Julius: “Now, now, don’t tease Reinhard like that.”

Ferris had been about to toss out a quip with a mischievous look; Julius pinched the toes of the foot he’d stretched out in the water to give him a mild scolding, then glanced Reinhard’s way.

Julius: “That said, Ferris’s charm isn’t something easily imitated by others. Jokes aside, as a reference it might be a bit off the mark.”

Reinhard: “I see. In that case, perhaps the one I ought to take as reference is Subaru.”

Julius & Ferris: “Hah?”

Before they knew it, that slipped out of both Julius and Ferris at once.

Julius wondered if this was petty revenge for Ferris’s earlier joke, but Reinhard looked far too serious for that.

Reinhard: “Subaru’s good at getting along with the people around him, right? In fact, he succeeded in negotiating with Crusch-sama and Anastasia-sama, and we managed to stand against the White Whale and the Witch Cult’s clutches.”

Ferris: “That’s… well, if you only look at the results, that’s true, nya.”

Julius: “…In his case, the road getting there was rather rough, though, wasn’t it?”

Reinhard: “Everyone makes mistakes. Thinking back, I first met Subaru in the royal capital on a day off, but even at first meeting he was very composed.”

Ferris: “Isn’t that just a matter of being thick-skinned or brazen…?”

Julius weighed his words; Ferris chose his in his own way. On the whole, Julius agreed with Ferris—but Reinhard nodded, looking satisfied, and said,

Reinhard: “I mean that mental strength, perhaps. I think Subaru’s is exceptional. I’m confident I’m above Subaru in physical strength, but… it’s undoubtedly a rare quality.”

Ferris: “Mmm, I think you’re appraising him a bit too kindly. We’re talking about Subaru-kyun, you know?”

Julius: “—No, I feel like I understand Reinhard’s view.”

Ferris: “Eh?! Betrayal?!”

At Julius’s single line, Ferris’s cat ears stood up and his eyes flew wide. “Betrayal” was overstating it, but there were, in fact, parts where he agreed with Reinhard.

—That Subaru’s mental side, his extraordinary strength of will, had many points worth emulating.

Julius: “Granted, as a knight in skill and conduct, he has far, far too many shortcomings.”

Ferris: “Phew, thank goodness~. Geez, I thought you’d suddenly stabbed Ferri-chan in the back.”

Julius: “But the fact you don’t object means you acknowledge that point as well, doesn’t it, Ferris?”

Ferris: “Myu.”

His cat ears, which had drooped in relief, perked right back up at Julius’s remark. Keeping them perked, Ferris “Uu~”-ed under Julius and Reinhard’s gazes, and—

Ferris: “I don’t wanna admit it, so I don’t wanna say it to his face, but… well, he’s pretty okay, isn’t he?”

Reinhard: “Haha—coming from Ferris, that might be top-shelf praise.”

Ferris: “Shut it.”

At Reinhard’s comment, Ferris pulled a sour face, not wanting to have said it. Even so, Julius thought he was glad to have heard it. If Subaru had been present, they’d never have gotten Ferris’s honest take.

Julius: “By staggering his bath time, Subaru’s lost out, I suppose.”

Ferris: “Don’t ca~re. If Subaru-kyun were here, we wouldn’t be having this convo.”

Ferris turned his face away with a little “hmph,” and Reinhard said, “Sorry, sorry.” Beside them, Julius looked up at the sky and felt a twinge of regret that Subaru wasn’t here.

That said, the reason Subaru wasn’t here was that—oddly deep in the Wafuu culture of Kararagi as he was—he couldn’t stop getting distracted by everything in the inn. Seeing how delighted Subaru was made even the hosts, and Julius as Anastasia’s knight who chose the inn, feel it had all been worth it.

Then suddenly, Ferris let out a loud, “Ah!”

Reinhard: “What is it all of a sudden, Ferris?”

Ferris: “I just remembered. When I invited Subaru-kyun like, “let’s hit the hot spring~,” he got all flustered and told Ferri-chan he’d go later.”

Reinhard: “Subaru did? What did he say?”

Ferris: “…He said that once he got in the hot spring, he’d end up saying, “I feel revived.”“

Turning back, lips just under the water, Ferris muttered in chagrin.

Seriously, just how far did he know Wafuu culture—hot springs—inside out? It was exactly the fresh, vivid impression Ferris had blurted out.

Reinhard: “See, Subaru is something else after all.”

At Reinhard’s smile, Julius also relaxed his lips with a “heh” and agreed.

In truth, over this past year Subaru had piled up tireless effort, training, and achievements to try to become someone worthy of the Royal Candidate Emilia. On top of that, he’d even managed to run rings around Ferris—lauded as “Blue”—like this.

Julius: “He, too, is surely a fine worthy rival for us.”

Reinhard: “Personally, I’d like to add “friend” to left or right of that.”

Ferris: “You two go do that, then. Ferri-chan isn’t friends with Subaru-kyun.”

Whether he simply felt sore at having been outdone, or he was sulking, Ferris’s answer only deepened Julius’s and Reinhard’s smiles again.

It was a shame Subaru wasn’t here, but this was a topic that rarely came up as it was. He wanted to be straightforwardly grateful for the time in which he’d gained rare admiration and insight.

Only, while he thought that—

Julius: “—If you were here, would you have…”

With the brazenness and thick skin Ferris called him out for—and with the mental fortitude that had earned Reinhard’s respect—would he have stuck his nose into matters Julius couldn’t step into?

—Into the unbridgeable rift within the Sword Saint’s family, between Reinhard and Wilhelm.

Though they were under the same roof, the two didn’t seek each other’s faces or meet each other’s eyes. Would Subaru have done something Julius and Ferris couldn’t?

Ferris: “But but, it’s kinda a surprise to hear Reinhard think that way. “I’ll work hard to get along with everyone around me~”—is that Felt-sama’s influence?”

Leaving Julius’s inner thoughts aside—or perhaps having thought the same thing—Ferris forcibly steered the topic with Reinhard back to the original track. At that, Reinhard gave a slight wry smile.

Reinhard: “Maybe it is. Before, I thought it’d be enough if we kept a distance that wouldn’t get awkward in a pinch. But now it’s a little different.”

Julius: “Different—how so?”

Reinhard: “I’ve started more often to feel frustrated when my intent doesn’t get across correctly and causes misunderstandings. Not just about myself; Felt-sama, too, is someone who’s easily slighted or misunderstood.”

Julius: “I see. That is…”

At a loss for what to call it, Julius’s words caught.

Just as Ferris had pointed out, that was unmistakably due to Felt’s influence. The lord–retainer bond between Reinhard and Felt—that it was steadily deepening into trust—was proof of it. At the very least, it was certain Reinhard was reaching out from his side.

As that in itself, personally, Julius should rejoice; and as a knight of a Royal Candidate, he should lament that a formidable foe was shedding a skin.

But putting aside such stances and feelings, he thought this—It was a very human worry.

Julius: “Not as a “hero”…”

It was a fact that reached in, stirred up, and unsettled the fixed idea, the preconception, the tacit assumption—held even by Julius, who always defined Reinhard as his friend—that he was always and only that.

Reinhard was changing. That was a change that ought to happen if he compared it to himself. Julius, too—before and after the start of the Royal Selection—held a different mindset, a different way of being.

However, that such change was happening to Reinhard meant—

Ferris: "It's kinda like… I wanna casually say, "You're overthinking it, right?" but I can't flippantly go, "Just do whatever you want, Reinhard," and all. A dilemma."

Reinhard: "Thanks for saying it plainly. That's a thing I like about you, Ferris."

Ferris: "Yeah yeah, Ferri-chan, Ferri-chan."

He was truly grateful to Ferris for sliding that exchange into the little gap that had opened. Thanks to it, Julius didn't have to face his true feelings without bracing himself. —Or perhaps he ought to regret it as having left something undone.

Julius: "…Truly, what a hopeless case."

Brushing back his wet bangs beside the smiling exchange between Reinhard and Ferris, Julius once more thought about the happenstance of Subaru not being here.

If Subaru had been here, it felt like he would have said it. About Reinhard—said to be someone who could only ever be a "hero"—having a human worry.

That single line—"That's only natural,"—the line neither Julius nor Ferris could say so easily—he would have tossed it off without a second thought.

3

Subaru: "That's only natural, right? I'm, y'know, Emilia-tan's number-one knight. This much is the necessary cost so I don't give up a position I don't want to surrender to anyone."

As Subaru, soaking in the same bath, pointed at the many white scars on his body, Joshua was torn between astonishment and exasperation, yet still let out a definite breath of admiration.

Today had been a day that drained him both physically and mentally as a member of the hosting camp. Not wanting to embarrass not only Anastasia but Julius either, he felt as though he had literally kept his nerves strung taut down to the fingertips—no, to even a single strand of hair. Thanks to that, he had managed to avoid any real blunders, and he even received from Anastasia a "Ya did great. Good work," and Joshua felt a sure sense of satisfaction.

And then, as he soaked leisurely in the hot spring that was said to be one of the Water Plumage Inn's centerpieces, and found himself melting with an involuntary "Fuwaaah," he was hit by an unexpected ambush.

Subaru: "Oooh! What a huge hot spring! Garfiel and Otto are totally missing out!"

In this private-usage inn and private-usage open-air bath, he'd been waylaid by the boisterously arriving Natsuki Subaru, and Joshua found himself forced into an unexpectedly tense moment.

Subaru: "Well, truth is, I got invited to hit the hot spring together with Ferris and 'em, but, y'know, I kinda feel daunted, like—ya get me?"

Joshua: "Daunted… I cannot say I don't understand."

After covering himself in suds at the washing area, Subaru came to sit right beside him without so much as asking. At his line as he gave a big stretch, Joshua narrowed his eyes as he looked down at his own pale arm.

If Ferris's name was coming up, that carried the implication that Julius and Reinhard would be together as well. —Which was to say, lining up alongside the very pinnacle of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Just imagining being present at such a scene made Joshua's blood run cold. Only, that was because of Joshua's station. Subaru was different, and had to be different. He was someone who had decided from the start to stand on that side—.

Joshua: “You—”

Subaru: “You get it, right! Taking a bath together with Ferris—like, what kinda face am I supposed to make in there! I want him to properly be self-aware he’s a crossdresser!”

Joshua: “Eh, ah, h—eh?”

Joshua had been about to say, “Such timid stuff,” but his momentum was cut. Subaru, however, paid his reaction no mind, set a hand on his shoulder with a “I know, I know,” and—

Subaru: “Man, I’m seriously relieved there’s someone who thinks the same as me. Sure, Reinhard and Julius might be used to it, yeah? But even they had a first time, right? And yet… no, actually, those two kinda feel like they could handle it right from the start.”

Joshua: “Wh-What are you even talking about, what!”

As Subaru waxed sentimental, Joshua fumed at having been dragged into such a ridiculous topic. This was someone called the “Lolimancer,” who bore the same title of Spirit Knight as Julius, and on top of that was the number-one knight of a Royal Candidate. Even putting aside the fact that he’d been jerked around by incomprehensible rumors beforehand, such attitude and personality were too much of a bad joke.

Such a person had absolutely no right to stand on the same stage as Julius. Thinking that, Joshua went to remove Subaru’s arm from his shoulder—when he noticed them. —On that arm, and carved all over his body: far too many scars.

Subaru: “—? Huh, what’s up?”

Joshua: “Those… those many scars…”

Subaru: “Ah? Oh—these, yeah, the scars. I mean, braggin’ about scars is kinda embarrassing, but—”

And so, noticing Joshua’s eyes on his scars, Subaru—mixing in a bit of foul-mouthed bashfulness—began to talk; that was the start of the opening words about his scars.

Needless to say, every one of those scars came with pain, with blood shed; they were proof of times he had grit his teeth.

Each and every scar had a story, a reason Natsuki Subaru had staked his body. Hearing about those all-too-painful-looking marks, Joshua felt ashamed of himself for having pompously thought a moment ago that Subaru had no right to step onto the stage.

Joshua: “Natsuki-dono—you are a knight.”

Subaru: “Well, I did properly get knighted, so that’s how I think of myself, yeah? That said, there are still parts where, if you call me the knight, it doesn’t quite click for me yet.”

Joshua: “You even possess humility. Ani-sama has that about him as well.”

Julius, a member of the Royal Guard and a quintessential knight among the kingdom’s few, did not indulge the conceit that he was perfect as a knight. It was precisely Julius’s stance—of never neglecting the effort to bring perfection closer to perfection—that made Ani his knight. Subaru’s thinking, too—even if far from Julius in the reality—at least a trace of it could be glimpsed.

Joshua: “…Natsuki-dono, please allow me to apologize. In terms of actual ability, you doubtless fall far short compared to Ani-sama, but to judge that even your aspiration could not match his—that was my arbitrary misreading.”

Subaru: “I was just telling my old-scar history; why am I getting an apology outta nowhere? Also, that bit about me being way below Julius in ability is unnecessary!”

Joshua: “Then, that matter at the royal capital’s drill grounds I’ve heard of is…”

Subaru: “Gwah! The invisible old-scar history!”

Clutching his chest, Subaru let out a loud groan. Back when the start of the Royal Selection had been proclaimed, the story that he had clashed with Julius and had been badly beaten in a mock bout at the drill grounds had reached Joshua's ears as well.

Subaru: "Damn! I know I've got it comin' to be told that, but it still hurts when it's said. The nickname 'Lolimancer' is one thing, but since I can share the shame as a set with Beako, even if it looks bad, being known for that is still better…"

Joshua: "No, the rumor about that matter is—"

Covering his face with wet hands and lamenting, Subaru cut off Joshua's words mid-sentence. That incident at the drill grounds hadn't, in truth, spread much beyond those present in the capital at the time. That was because Julius, taking responsibility, had worked to keep the rumor from spreading, as a case of having summarily punished a miscreant could become a shame to the Royal Guard. The fact it had reached Joshua's ears as a rumor was because he was Julius's kin.

So he had meant to tell Subaru it wasn't something to worry himself over—but—

Subaru: "—? What now again?"

Joshua: "…My apologies. Natsuki-dono's gaze was so sharp I forgot what I was trying to say."

Subaru: "I'm aware I've got a bad look in my eyes, but if even after the hot spring's loosened me up nice you're still like that, maybe talkin' with me is just impossible for you?!"

Joshua: "Indeed. And so, please excuse me first."

As Subaru forced his eyes open wide with his fingers and raised his voice like that, Joshua bowed his head and rose from the bath. The long soak made his head sway a little, but he wanted to praise himself for not toppling over. And for not telling Subaru Julius's true intent.

That attitude of Subaru's was proof Julius's consideration hadn't reached his ears. Which is to say, proof above all that Julius's aim was going well.

Subaru: "Oh right, Joshua."

And then Subaru called out to Joshua as he was about to head back to the changing room. Joshua stopped his feet and turned just his head to see what it was; Subaru, still sunk in the bath—

Subaru: "Thanks for callin' us out to Priestella."

Joshua: "—It was not I who invited everyone, but Anastasia-sama."

Subaru: "I know that. But hey, I think it really was a good opportunity, and I feel great gettin' to soak in a hot spring like this, so I wanna thank the folks on the host side. 'Cept Julius."

Joshua: "The way you clearly set Ani-sama as an enemy is, indeed, correct."

Receiving both the words of thanks and the hostility from Subaru, Joshua nodded thus. As he'd answered, inviting the other camps had been Anastasia's arrangement, and Joshua had done no more than serve as messenger. That said, being thanked didn't feel bad. It had been an unexpected little spell of time, but he'd also learned that Subaru was not as outrageous a person as the rumors said. Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing was another matter—

Joshua: "—It seems it truly was a rare opportunity."

He had thought hot springs were outrageous things—soaking with someone else, outdoors, naked—but it felt like they'd had a conversation one could only have in a place like that.

4

—After savoring their soak in the hot springs and the banquet hall's "funamori," with the real reason for gathering—the conference—penciled in for tomorrow, everyone dispersed for the night.

It was all stuff they could look back on as rare experiences, and it drove home that Anastasia was a born merchant—she knew how to tickle people’s hearts.

Felt: “’Course, if ya asked Anastasia-neechan, she’d prolly be like, “Well, duh.” Still, starting from behind’s a pain when ya gotta claw yer way up.”

Crusch: “Felt-sama is “starting from behind”? I did not quite have that impression…”

Felt: “Don’t kid me. I’m a scruffy brat outta the slums, yeah? Even I ain’t buying I lined up even with the Duchess at the starting line.”

Crusch: “…That is indeed a stubborn fact. My apologies. I did not think that through.”

Felt: “Ain’t askin’ ya to apologize. That habit of sayin’ sorry right away? Ya oughta kick it. You weren’t like that before.”

Crusch: ““Before me,” is it… Yes, I suppose so.”

Propping her cheek on the knee she’d pulled up as she sat cross-legged on the veranda, Felt clicked her tongue at how her words had only deepened Crusch’s gloom. She hadn’t meant any ill will, but talking about the former “Crusch” to the current Crusch was bound to be lacking in consideration. Then again, avoiding it too hard would be over-consideration in the other direction.

Felt: “My bad. Didn’t mean to make ya feel crappy. But the thing I wanted to ask the Duchess about, well… it’s kinda chained to those Memories.”

Crusch: “It is quite all right. I was happy you called me out like this.”

Night had already fallen on the Water Gate City. Each camp had withdrawn to its rooms; all that remained was free time before sleep. In that lull, Felt had summoned Crusch out to the inn’s veranda to chat while looking over the nightscape.

The invitation had clearly surprised Crusch, but she’d accepted it readily.

Felt: “What’d ya tell yer cat-ears?”

Crusch: “No special excuse at all. I told him honestly that Felt-sama had called me to talk. Ferris wanted to come along, but…”

Felt: “I’ve got that bastard Reinhard waiting in my room, too. Anyway, thanks for indulgin’ my whim to talk one-on-one.”

Crusch: “If it meets your expectations, all the better. So then, what is it you wished to discuss?”

Felt, for her part, felt a firmness in Crusch that lay separate from her lost “Memories.” She had a reflexive, apologetic softness, and she often seemed to hold herself back, yet she had a sturdy bedrock under that—agreeing to a vaguely purposed summons, steering the talk toward actually understanding the other party’s aim.

Even so—

Felt: “I got two things. …One’s about you before you lost your Memories. Not that I knew the Duchess all that well back then.”

Crusch: “In what way is it about the former me?”

Felt: “Nothin’ fancy. Back then, looked to me like ya wanted to talk to me. I dunno why, and askin’ ya now might not help.”

Crusch: “…”

Narrowing her amber eyes, Crusch weighed Felt’s half-question. That earnest, visible contemplation made Felt recall the look Crusch had worn a year ago in the royal castle, when the Royal Selection was announced.

Felt: “Excuse me if this sounds like a lame excuse, but I was maxed out then and didn’t have the bandwidth to look around me. By the time I tried to think back on it after… well.”

Crusch: “By then I had already become who I am now, and the chance to ask had slipped away.”

Felt: “Bingo. So yeah, total “too little, too late.”“

How much of the past remained to the Crusch who had lost her Memories, Felt could not say. She herself had forgotten things before, but never "lost" them. And as a rival camp, hearing everything laid bare wouldn't be ideal either.

Even so—

Crusch: "My guess is… what the former me wished to speak about was the Royal Family of Lugunica who passed away before the Royal Selection."

Her answer was clear, contrary to Felt's expectation, and it made Felt blink.

Felt: "The Royal Family of Lugunica—the ones who died to that sickness, yeah? What's that got to do with me?"

Crusch: "I have just heard this from Ferris myself… but it seems we were acquainted with one of the late royals. As for you, Felt-sama, there is a rumor that you could be the royal who vanished a dozen-odd years ago."

Felt: "Oh, that junk."

The old suspicion brought up in all seriousness made Felt snort. The shining dragonstone that proved her qualification as a candidate, together with the rumor she was the child kidnapped a dozen years back, had been the springboards that "pushed" her into candidacy.

Felt did not believe that gossip for a second. If she really were that child, why would she have been raised in the capital's slums?

Felt: "The guy who raised me was a big ol' geezer with a big ol' heart. Don't tell me ya think Rom-ji was secretly some castle butler or whatever."

Crusch: "I do not know the gentleman, and I doubt the truth of your origin was what the former me most cared about."

Felt: "…Huh? If she wasn't interested, what was there to "confirm"?"

Crusch: “Not “interested” so much as “to make sure.”“

Crusch touched her breastbone lightly.

Crusch: “I hesitate to speak of the former me in my own mouth—but I believe she strove to be faithful to her convictions, and to embody them.”

Felt: “Heh. That matches my read.”

Crusch: “Thank you. If I imagine such a person paying you heed, Felt-sama… I think she feared you might fall ill.”

Felt: “Ill, as in…”

Crusch: “Yes. The very illness that took the royals, one by one.”

Crusch finished and then asked, “What do you think?” It was strange to have someone confirm her own prior thoughts through another, but Felt found the guess easy to accept.

There had, in fact, been those who worried she would manifest the disease because of the rumor around her birth.

Felt: “Our brainy sensei is a mage. Compared to yer cat-ears’ healing, he ain’t gonna win, but he’s pretty dang reliable.”

Crusch: “So he has been examining your body.”

Felt: “Says we gotta do regular checkups so we can breathe easy. So far, so good.”

Crusch: “I see. …Then I am sure the former me would be relieved. As am I now.”

Hand to chest, Crusch let out a genuine sigh of relief, and Felt could imagine her former self doing the same. Getting an answer she had not hoped for left Felt lighter. And since she was feeling greedy—

Felt: “This’s off the main topic, but… can I call ya “Crusch-neechan”?”

Crusch: "…! I—ah—well."

Felt: "No good?"

Crusch: "It is not that. Please do. …But, why?"

Felt: "I used to call ya "the tightwad-neechan," or the "half-devil-neechan," y'know? But over the past year I actually learned yer names—Crusch-neechan and the rest."

At that, Felt looked down at the ribbon of water mirroring the stars and moon. Both were far off in the sky, bright and out of reach.

Felt: "Lots went down this year. I ain't so blind anymore I can still claim "slum brat," "thieving brat" fits me best. Your station and your titles change. But names don't, right?"

Crusch: "…Yes. Even if what I was were to vanish somewhere, so long as there are people who call me by my name, I am Crusch Karsten."

Felt: "Same here. I'm Felt, and you're Crusch-neechan, Anastasia-neechan, and Emilia-neechan. That's why."

Crusch: "And Priscilla Barielle-sama…?"

Felt: "I don't like that princess."

Felt didn't want to dress it up as "recognizing" Crusch and Anastasia from on high, but she certainly did not want to approach Priscilla the same way as the other three. She would make the distinction, and if needed, she wouldn't shy from bias or a dogpile.

Crusch: "I must apologize to Priscilla-sama, but… I am honored, Felt-sama."

Felt: "It's just my own little line in the sand, Crusch-neechan."

Felt shrugged off Crusch's smile as nothing special, then raked her fingers through her own hair.

Felt: "And look at me, drifting off topic. That was the side quest I grew along the way. The other thing I wanted to talk about… is our hunk of junk and yer old man."

Crusch: "Wilhelm and Reinhard-sama."

Felt: "You know they're a messy granddad-and-grandson pair. …If ya can help it, don't butt in."

Crusch: "…May I hear your reason?"

Felt: "I ain't got the words lined up clean. Big picture? It's Gramps's and the idiot's problem."

Her answer wasn't a bulletproof syllogism, and Felt didn't think it had to be. This was a matter of feelings—and to her mind, that was exactly Reinhard's biggest problem.

Crusch: "…And if one of them were to ask for help?"

Felt flashed her sharp little canines. She appreciated that Crusch had sighted the core on her own—or maybe Crusch's heart ached over the same problem.

Felt: "If the idiot or Gramps came to me or to you and asked, then forget what I said about keepin' out."

Crusch: "Understood. I cannot give you a promise, but I will keep it in my heart."

Felt: "Heh. That's very much like you, Crusch-neechan."

Felt snorted at the hand Crusch pressed to her breast, leaving unspoken whether that was "like" the current Crusch or the former. Crusch did not seek to pin it down, either.

With that tacit agreement, shared between the two—

Crusch: "We may have finished the topics you came for, but… shall we talk a little longer?"

Felt: "Yeah. I was just gonna say the same."

Under the white, chill moon that looked down on the inn's garden and the Water Gate City's nightscape, Felt rolled a shoulder at Crusch's invitation, and the two Royal Candidates, in their yukata, enjoyed a little more of the quiet night side by side.

—At the same time, on the opposite side of the inn, the "Sword Demon" and the "Lolimancer" just so happened to be sharing a quiet moment of their own beneath the same moon.

5

Unusually, having been invited to join her for a nightcap, Al—though a bit at sea—found himself summoned to the bedchamber.

Age-wise he and Heinkel were both middle-aged, but compared to the man who drowned himself in liquor—literally soaked in booze—Al was hardly a fitting partner for drinks even without considering that he was a lightweight. Still, he couldn't help a tiny swell of superiority that it was he, not Heinkel, who'd been called in—

Priscilla: "Thou lookest like a cat granted a roof for the first time. Such a hunched, shrinking figure—were Schult to do it, it would have no charm; for thee, there is none at all."

Al: "I'm not tryin' to be cute, and who're you callin' a borrowed cat? It's just… as usual, Princess's negligee is murder on the eyes, and I can't put on my usual performance."

Firing off cheek to get his rhythm back, Al kept sneaking glances at Priscilla.

Priscilla, who laid claim to the most luxurious suite in one of Priestella's top-class inns, reigned over the night with the same unchanging beauty and arrogance no matter the place. Ordinarily at this hour she would share her bedchamber with Schult, whom she used as a hugging pillow. Yet tonight, there was no sign of Schult in the room.

Priscilla: "Schult I set to watch over that drunk. It would not be strange were that commoner to bolt at the last moment. I shan't let slip the rare chance for it to be of use.”

She pegged Al’s unspoken question perfectly, swirling the amber liquor in her glass.

Truly, it was enough to make one wonder if she read minds. They say eyes speak louder than mouths, but Al’s eyes—and even his face—were hidden behind a helmet. How did Priscilla see through him so unerringly?

Priscilla: “Breathing, the use of thine eyes, thy little courtesies—each is a clue that bares the detail.”

Al: “Horrors, horrors, horrors! That’s terrifying when I ain’t said a word! Guess I can’t stare at the Princess and think anything spicy ever again!”

Priscilla: “I do not intend to peer into the innards of thy skull and censure thee. Were I to punish every unreachable desire my beauty inspires, there would be no end.”

Al: “Much obliged, ma’am.”

Priscilla moistened her lips with drink and slid her crimson gaze over Al. That sultry look traced his spine; he involuntarily drew breath.

The tension of being invited into her bedchamber had eased—somewhat—but the core question of why Priscilla had summoned Al at all remained.

Al: “If you wanted someone to watch the old man, I’d be the right pick, yeah? Keepin’ cute Schult-chan up past his bedtime ain’t like you, Princess. Didn’t even bring the book he’s readin’. Killing boredom’s his special skill, right?”

Priscilla: “Thy tongue flaps merrily. No need to heat thy heart so—once we have done, I shall chase night out at once. …Thou dost know the vixen’s inn?”

Al: “…Yeah. The Water Plumage Inn.”

At her slight lowering of tone, Al answered tersely.

The host of this Priestella gathering of Royal Candidates—Anastasia—had prepared that very inn for her far-traveled guests: the Water Plumage Inn.

He had figured that, since she was inviting Royal Candidates, the highest-grade inn in the city would be the choice and had even taken a guess for tonight's lodging—but he'd missed the mark.

Al: "Honestly, when I realized I'd guessed the wrong place, I thought we were done for. Never occurred to me she'd pick the inn for its entertainment value, not its rank."

Priscilla: "I doubt the vixen "deliberately" chose amiss, yet as an appraisal of her character, it is natural enough. Of course, the sin of making me take a fruitless step is grave, but…"

Al: "Gulp… "Grave," but?"

Priscilla: "This inn's hospitality and service are not poor. Counting that, I shall let the head remain."

Al: "Hah—lived to see another dawn! Air's delicious!"

With a stately nod she let the lapse slide; Al pumped a quiet fist with one hand.

Landmines that might cost a man his life dotted the ground around Priscilla, but being blown up over a lodging guess felt unreasonably cruel even to Al.

Al: "Still, why'd she pick the Water Plumage Inn…? Wantin' to brag about Kararagi, maybe. Wafuu architecture just looks all kinds of quirky to me."

Priscilla: "Call it odd all thou wish; from thy lips, aught is stripped bare. In any case, I have spared thy neck. I shall save the amusement for the morrow."

Al: "Then I better turn in early… But is that all you wanted to tell me?"

Priscilla: “Fool.”

With the grand act of slipping secretly into the Watergate City and crash-landing openly into the candidates’ meeting before them, Priscilla crisply rebuked him.

That answer, at least, was as expected—but Al had not a clue what the real topic was. Why, exactly, had Priscilla called for him—

Priscilla: “—I permit it. Do as thou must, for the sake of doing what thou must.”

It was a statement so vague, so shapeless, and so unfriendly to comprehension that it could only sow confusion.

Lacking the basic courtesies of clear intent or considerate phrasing, from anyone else it would have sounded like sleep talk. Stripped of ornament, nothing but core intent—yet because it came from Priscilla Barielle, and to Aldebaran—Al understood enough.

Priscilla: “Do not hesitate needlessly. Do not toady needlessly. Do not pity without meaning. Do not flail in falsehood. Do not waste in idleness. Do not lament a lapse. Do not balk at ruthlessness. Do not fear discourtesy.”

Reading Al’s silent assent yet again, Priscilla layered the words.

The fusillade both furnished Al with criteria he could not look away from and rekindled his unease at how much she saw.

Al: “Just what do those jewel-like eyes of yours actually see, Princess?”

Priscilla: “Spare me such questions. The world as it is, I see in truth. Thou, with that helm, narrowest thy view—thus thou canst not perceive what I do.”

Al: “…If a man can’t see what you see, is he useless?”

Priscilla: “Fool. Who could see more clearly than I what lies before me? If so, one who sees the same from the same height is of no interest.”

Al: “…”

Priscilla: “Mark it well, Al. Thou art my clown. Then fulfill thy role as a clown. A clown exists to amuse the master. To let aught but me into thy view—what impudence.”

With lordly clarity that admitted no rebuttal, Priscilla Barielle declared it.

Her crimson gaze and that voice that made souls submit demanded something of him. While groping at that uncertain shape, Al again sensed a sign he’d long been aware of.

When those who move the world gather, a great wave inevitably rises—and the change it brings. Perhaps Priscilla, too, was sensing it.

If so, then maybe—just maybe—a seed called anxiety might sprout in that rich breast of hers, something most unlike her.

Should that, by any chance, be true—

Al: “—No need to worry, Princess.”

Priscilla: “…”

Al: “You’ve got me. Whatever happens, I’ll save you.”

He tapped his own chest with a thumb and declared it to her head-on.

He’d resolved it in his heart countless times, but rarely had he said it to her face. Now he did.

Priscilla’s crimson eyes grew moist; her lips curved with joy and—

Priscilla: “Why trumpet the obvious? A teetotaler drunk on himself is an eyesore.”

Al: “Huh?! That didn’t tickle the Princess’s maiden circuits at all?! And I even mustered real courage!”

His earnest appeal swung and missed; Al yelped. With a lazy flap of her hand to shoo the noise, Priscilla's lips at last drew a smile.

A smile Al knew well and had fallen for many times—the Sun Princess's smile, untouched by weakness.

And then she spoke.

—"The world, for me, is arranged to my convenience."

Chapter 4:
The Day of Execution

—On that day, the stars gathered in the Watergate City advanced with their respective designs in their hearts.

Crusch: “Ferris, how is Wilhelm doing?”

Ferris: “…He said he wants to be alone for a bit. Crusch-sama, can you say anything to him?”

Crusch: “It is difficult. Leaving aside Reinhard-sama, it looked like the quarrel with his son hit him quite hard. Heinkel-sama, was it?”

Ferris: “Geez! I hate the Vice-Captain! He’s always like that, making everyone around him tiptoe… honestly, he’s a burden not just to the Knights, but to the whole kingdom!”

Gently laying her hand over Ferris’s and stroking it to calm him, Crusch continued, Please calm yourself.

Crusch: “To both you and me, Wilhelm is a precious person, yes? When the time comes that he wishes to borrow someone’s hand, we at least must keep from letting our hearts be thrown into disorder, so we can be the first to extend that hand.”

Ferris: “…You’re right. And on top of that, we’ve got the information on “Gluttony” Anastasia-sama said she would share.”

Crusch: “Yes. Surely this is our trial by fire.”

Ferris blinked roundly as Crusch lifted their interlaced fingers and declared that. He let the ends of his round brows droop and turned a gentle gaze to Crusch.

Ferris: “Crusch-sama, since when did you get so dependable? If you make me fall for you all over again, Ferri-chan’s gonna go all weak in the knees.”

Crusch: “That would be troublesome. Ferris, you are my first knight,

after all.”

Ferris: “Yeees, Crusch-sama. Ferri-chan will work hard enough for Wil-ji’s share too.”

Exchanging a nod with Ferris’s reassuring words as they held hands, Crusch smiled—so she would not be swayed by a wavering, uncertain “her own self,” but would define herself with dignity.

Al: “Hey, hey, Princess, where’re you off to?”

Priscilla: “I have taken in full the farce of the “Sword Saint’s” family. I also beheld, unexpectedly, the faces of those who are spoken of on the same level as me. In which case, there remains one last thing to ascertain.”

Al: “And that’d be…?”

Priscilla: “Naturally, the so-called “Songstress” who is doing her share to add to this city’s bustle.”

Covering her mouth with her opened fan, Priscilla declared so; inside his helmet Al blinked rapidly. After crashing the Royal Candidates’ meeting at the Water Plumage Inn, he hadn’t expected the “Songstress” to come up again.

Al: “Surprisingly, you were hung up on that whole “princess” connection Schult-chan mentioned?”

Priscilla: “Do not belittle me with such paltry conjectures. ’Tis disrespect. —I heard her singing through the Meteor; I am curious what the real article amounts to.”

Al: “Yikes, my condolences.”

If Priscilla had set her eyes on her, then regardless of whether the assessment was good or bad, it was proof that walking a smooth road would grow difficult.

As Al spared some sympathy for the yet-unseen Songstress’s position, Priscilla turned on her heel. Without attendants, she meant to stride off in stately fashion; Al moved to follow and—

Priscilla: "—Al, do not forget for an instant the golden words I gave thee last night."

Al: "…"

Priscilla: "When I have need of thee, be at my side."

Told without words not to come along, Al could only fiddle with the clasp of his helmet as he saw her off. Irritating her here and trying his luck with the turning of the stars against Priscilla would be putting the cart before the horse. —Then all that remained was to display, just as expected of him, Al's manner of being toward the foreboding.

Hence—

Al: "—I'll be counting on you to go easy on me, Fate, ma'am."

Anastasia: "Honestly, what a nasty lot they are."

Puffing her cheeks and voicing her displeasure without hiding it, Anastasia stroked the fox scarf at her neck and fumed. Julius, taking his lady's reaction as only natural, set a finger to his lips.

Julius: "Even so, how did Priscilla-sama learn of today?"

Anastasia: "As much as it galls me, the Princess was right that ya can't completely block information… but what sticks in my craw most is that she actually managed it on her end."

Julius: "…Vice-Captain Heinkel's presence was a blind spot."

Anastasia: "This one's entirely our blunder. I ended up letting the Princess spring a surprise on both Felt-san and Crusch-san. —Julius, you understand, don'tcha?"

Asked thus by those asagi-colored eyes, Julius straightened his back and dipped his chin. To say “Priscilla was simply the better player” and call it done was not Anastasia’s way; to lament her own insufficiency and resolve to correct it was. Julius, too, would support that with all his might.

Julius: “From here on, let us approach matters without letting our guard down. —That is the responsibility we must fulfill, we who arranged this meeting.”

Anastasia: “’Kay, long as you get it. …Even so, when are Mimi and Hetaro and Tivey, and Ricardo too, gonna come back, huh?!”

Felt: “And about now, I bet Anastasia-neechan and the others are fussin’ just like that.”

Reinhard: “Most likely. …Felt-sama, about what happened at breakfast…”

Felt: “I said what I had to say, and you heard what you had to hear. I don’t plan on sayin’ anything more.”

Sticking out her tongue, Felt cut off the kind of exchange that only sapped motivation as Reinhard seemed about to stack apologies. Instead, she jerked her chin toward their front—toward the tavern where their target awaited.

Felt: “What I wanna hear is whether you’ve got the guts to talk to your old man. Well?”

Reinhard: “—Yes, please allow me to accompany you. I am Felt-sama’s knight.”

Felt: “Don’t you dare forget you said that with that face on!”

Giving the straight-backed Reinhard a firm slap between the shoulder blades, Felt strode boldly through the tavern door to have the talk needed to win the future—with the “freeloader.”

Thus far, the steps of stars that inscribe history have been told.

And now to be told are the steps to go beyond those stars that inscribe history.

Do not ever turn your eyes away. And on top of that, do not forget to sear it into your soul.

—The earnest twinkling of the stars will repel the malice descending upon the Watergate City Priestella.

END

Movie Specials

Bonds of Ice:
Before Memories
(LQ AI Translation)

Prologue:
Bonds of Ice / Once upon a Time

???: “Even so, Subaru, you’re surprisingly capable, huh.”

Subaru: “Huh? Where’d that come from all of a sudden?”

Lifting his face at the voice that fell from overhead was the black-haired boy, Natsuki Subaru. To call him a dimension-lost wanderer summoned to another world sounded cool, but to put it plainly, he was a drifter. Owing to a strange twist of fate, Subaru lived at the Roswaal Manor, where, dressed in a butler’s uniform, he devoted himself to odd jobs.

There, without warning, that opening line was thrown at him, and still in his mopping posture, Subaru turned around. Narrowing his already sharp eyes even further at the owner of the voice—the gray little cat floating in midair—

Subaru: “Some of us are in the middle of work here, and you’re acting like a pampered house cat. Must be nice.”

Puck: “A big reason I do the spirit thing is this flex time system. Well, of course I do have an activity limit, but how you make it all fit together is where a business nyan shows his chops.”

Subaru: ““Business nyan,” he says. And if we’re talking time management, honestly, you’re not that great at pacing yourself. I haven’t forgotten what happened at the Loot House.”

Puck: “Good grief, if you only remember people’s bad sides, it’ll make your personality worse, you know?”

Subaru: “Then quit going out of your way to say things that beg for a comeback.”

With a half-lidded stare, Subaru shot back, and the flying kitten, Puck, stroked his own whiskers as he answered. Puck was the spirit contracted to Emilia, the girl Subaru had feelings for, but his activity during the day seemed to be basically free, and he often spent his time just like this. Of course, most of the time he could be seen at Emilia's side, but depending on the case, he would play with Beatrice, or, like now, come to tease Subaru while he worked.

For that reason, chatting with Puck during work like this was nothing unusual.

Subaru: "So? What is it I'm supposedly so capable at? If you suddenly praised me… you were praising me, right?"

Puck: "No need to doubt that. I was just impressed that Subaru was thinking about Lia more than I expected. Ah, not that I'm acknowledging anything at all, though."

Subaru: "Don't dash my hopes before I can even say anything."

Cradling a tail as long as his own height while he drifted through the air, Puck spoke, and Subaru puckered his lips, protesting that he wasn't even given time to get the wrong idea. For Subaru, who day by day harbored deeper feelings for Emilia, getting on the good side of Puck, her guardian-position, was a matter of life and death. "If you would shoot the general, first shoot his horse," went the famous saying—but in otherworldly terms, "If you want an angel, you've gotta woo the house cat first."

Puck: "Those snow statues of that family—you really watched them closely. You must've been pretty nervous on your date."

Subaru: "Aaah, well, if it's Emilia-tan, I wanna watch her without missing a single second, y'know? Also, the most nerve-wracking parts of a date are the meetup and the main event, right? Thanks to that, the flower field main event went over great, so my nerves had loosened up too."

Puck: "And thanks to that, you got to rack up Lia points with the snow statues on the side. Mm-hmm, not missing your chance."

Subaru: "There's malice in the way you say it!"

Whether he was impressed or making fun of him, Puck's phrasing made Subaru pull a face like he'd just bitten into something bitter.

Then, tilting his head as if remembering,

Subaru: “Come to think of it, I never asked for the details… Is there some connection between Emilia-tan and snow statues?”

Puck: “You could say there is, and you could say there isn’t. They don’t have anything in particular to do with that snow statue that looked like it was about to melt. I just remembered the past a little, that’s all.”

Subaru: “The past, huh…”

Still tilting his head, Subaru leaned his weight on the mop. Watching him, Puck went “Hmm, let’s see,” and let out a small hum.

Puck: “Subaru, do you remember how old you were seven years ago?”

Subaru: “Well, you just subtract seven from my current age, so I should’ve been ten, right?”

Puck: “Ten, huh~. In that case, that was when Subaru was still about the size of a grain of rice.”

Subaru: “I don’t know if that’s a difference in a spirit’s sense of time or some fuzzy long-lived-species thing, but I was bigger than a grain of rice from the moment I came out of the womb.”

From what he’d heard, Subaru had apparently been larger than average when he was born. He’d been close to three thousand five hundred grams. Well, bigger than a grain of rice, without a doubt.

Subaru: “Anyway, why seven years ago?”

Puck: “Mm~. Because that’s about when it ties in with me, Lia, and a snowy episode, I suppose? Back when Subaru was a mischievous little brat, Lia was cute like a jewel.”

Subaru: “That’s the first time I’ve heard of someone literally treating a cute girl like a jewel.”

And replying like that, Subaru continued with, “But—”

Subaru: “Seven-years-ago Emilia-tan, huh. I’m not Puck, but she must’ve been really cute. Oh—of course, the Emilia-tan of today is an angel too. E.M.T.!”

Emilia: “—? Did you just call me?”

Subaru: “Uhyah—!!”

A voice like a chiming bell hit him off guard, and Subaru leaped up and clung to Puck. “Nyanyan?!” yelped the startled Puck as Subaru hugged him, then Subaru hastily looked back.

And there, at the end of Subaru’s gaze, was the girl with round eyes, Emilia.

With long, beautiful silver hair and amethyst eyes like gemstones—and a superlative beauty. What other descriptors were necessary? Delicate and lovely—that was Emilia.

Emilia: “A-Are you okay? Geez, if you react like that, you’ll make me reaaally jumpy.”

Subaru: “S-Sorry, sorry. I didn’t plan on pulling off a standing long jump like that, but we were just talking about Emilia-tan, so I kinda… y’know.”

Puck: “Hey now. Getting leapt on in passing and having my fur messed up is more than I can take. Hmph, I’m miffed.”

Wearing a vague smile as he excused himself, Subaru let Puck slip from his hands. Puffing up his tousled fur, Puck then moved as if to his reserved seat—onto Emilia’s shoulder.

Emilia: “You were just talking about me—what kind of whisper-whisper were you two having?”

Subaru: ““Whisper-Whisper” isn’t something people say these days… Anyway, it wasn’t anything weird. Just talking about how cute Emilia-tan is, and how you’re like a jewel…”

Emilia: “A jewel…? Am I that round? Hehe, thanks for the compliment.”

Subaru: “Huh?! You’re responding more to “like a jewel” than to “cute”?!”

Smiling at the surprised Subaru, Emilia cheerfully stroked Puck’s ear. If Emilia was happy, there was no problem, but for Subaru it ended in keenly feeling his own lack of firepower. At any rate, the topic being Emilia and seven years ago was indeed the case.

Subaru: “We were just talking about something about seven years ago. Imagining a teeny, adorable Emilia-tan makes my chest go kyun-kyun.”

Emilia: “About me? Hm, I wonder. I don’t really remember much from when I was small… I think I’d rather hear about Subaru when you were little. Ummm…”

Subaru: “Seven years ago?”

Emilia: “Right, seven years ago. That was when Subaru was still a baby, wasn’t it.”

Subaru: “You too, Puck—but what do I look like to you two, and how old do you think I am?!”

Raising his voice at the guileless Emilia, Subaru then cleared his throat. To be honest, even Subaru, looking back, did not have memories rich enough to speak at length, but there was that saying —every person had their history—so he would pick his words and tell a little story.

Subaru: “Well, it doesn’t have to be limited to seven years; when you’re alive, lots of things happen. I’m sure I’ve got memories, and so do Emilia-tan, Puck, Ram, Rem, Ros-chi, and Beako—everyone’s got something…”

Emilia: ““Everyone’s got something”?”

Subaru: “I’m saying, it’s nice to be nostalgic once in a while. Now then, which of my episodes should I tell, I wonder.”

Emilia: “Wow, I’m reaaally looking forward to it.”

Seeing Emilia’s shining eyes and her hands clasped before her chest, he felt the bar rise. Still, to retreat here was not what a man did. Subaru was a boy, so he had his pride—and the girl before him was the one he loved, so in every sense, there was no turning back.

Subaru: “All right then, let’s tell a story for now. There’s a bit of a set piece a storyteller’s gotta do for this kind of tale.”

Emilia: “A set piece?”

Puck: “Heeey, you’re going pretty all-in. I’m excited to hear what sort of story this’ll be.”

Emilia tilted her head, and Puck, rubbing his cheek against her tilted cheek, were his audience. Smiling at the two, Subaru gave a ceremonious bow with, “Now then, if I may have your kind attention—”

Subaru: “Loooong ago, in a certain place—”

Chapter 1:
Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago / Priscilla Camp

1

The instant he slipped under the swinging flash of the blade, several strands of hair, too slow to escape, spun through the air.

They wavered in air parched with killing intent, then fell onto blood-soaked ground. A bare foot crushed them underfoot, and the man sprang far back, out of reach of the cleaver.

Breathing raggedly, the man’s shoulders rose and fell.

The sweat running down his brow came less from physical fatigue than from the grind on his nerves. Disliking the sting when it got in his eyes, he wiped it away roughly with the back of the hand gripping his blade.

Man: “…”

The man had wiped his sweat; facing him stood a bald giant, his whole body marked by sword wounds. A brutal blade in each hand, eyes slick with violence and killing intent stabbed toward the man.

What floated on that face was not anguish, but a grin of exhilaration that savored the fight. For the giant, this place was truly a paradise. —Being a gladiator was no doubt his vocation.

Man: “…give me a break.”

He sighed at the giant, who was making full use of his blessed build and talent and reveling in his prime. His grumbling mutter, however, reached no one’s ears here. Why? It was only natural. For —

???: “—Hk!”

Because cheers were pouring down from overhead like a downpour, filling the arena where lives were locked in a struggle.

—Gladiator Island Ginunhive is an entertainment city within the Sacred Vollachian Empire. The city exists for a simple reason: to run arenas where people can spectate people killing one another—strictly speaking, bouts pitting humans and Witchbeasts are sometimes staged as well, but that is a trivial matter.

What matters is that, in this arena, the taking of lives can be enjoyed as entertainment.

And—

Man: “Right now, we are the bugs being made to kill each other in the bug cage—that is where we stand.”

With a tone dripping with irony, the man—the one-armed fellow—shrugged.

A shabby outfit and a nicked-up cleaver; his gear differed little from the giant’s. Even so, the missing arm and the roughly thirty centimeters he lacked in height made the pairing feel downright malicious.

That said, lamenting his shortcomings or appealing to the referee about unfairness would not change a thing. After all, the arena did not classify gladiators by weight, and above all, there was only one rule here.

—The one who dies is at fault.

Man: “Whoops, that is not just here. That is the rule for the whole Empire.”

He muttered briefly and tapped his own shoulder lightly with the spine of his cleaver. Then, the next instant, the giant, who had been waiting for this, leaned forward and closed the distance, turning into a living battering ram.

At the giant bulk’s sprint, light as if it had no weight, the bigwigs in the stands let out vulgar cheers. What they wanted was a gruesome spectacle of bursting blood and bone, the very instant a life was cruelly scattered.

In that sense, the greatest delight would be for the giant's blade to hack the man to pieces, but—

Man: "Too bad for you. I am not going to play along with that."

Dropping a word to no one's ears, the man also stepped forward of his own accord.

The charging giant raised his arms and brought a blow down from overhead with thunderous force. He dodged it with a sideways leap; fissures from the slash split the ground where it struck, and he caught, at the edge of his vision, a great plume of dust billowing up.

As is, he would cut into the giant's legs, now halted, then, with the returning blade, take the neck—

Man: "That is just what you were hoping I would do, right?"

???: "…"

Just before he stepped in, a cleaver swept sideways past the tip of his nose, its momentum killed.

Using a ferocious sword strike as bait, he lured opponents into a gap he had made on purpose. That delicate killing technique, out of keeping with his giant frame, was the secret art that had kept him winning until today on Gladiator Island.

But now that it had been seen through, the giant's fate was sealed. —Just as he had made others until now, he would simply become fresh blood soaking into this arena.

Man: "Later. Your luck… no, your stars were bad."

The cleaver he swung on a diagonal mercilessly mowed off the giant's head.

—Blood spray and cheers rose high into the sky over the arena.

2

Girl: "Hmph, I see. So this is the spectacle of Gladiator Island."

Man: “A-Ah, yes. So, how was it? Did it meet your expectations?”

Girl: “Expectations? …Ah, indeed. In the sense that the curiosity in this breast was satisfied, one could say it met my expectations. It was not bad. I shall commend you.”

Man: “I-I see!”

At the words of praise from his companion, the man’s eyes lit up in a flash, and he patted his chest in relief.

He was a middle-aged man nearing fifty, and judging from the hair on his head beginning to go white here and there, one could say he looked no different from someone in their early old age. His grooming was in order, and a more than fitting amount of money had been spent on the clothes he wore.

A person whose appearance marked him at a glance as someone of standing—precisely because of that, it was a strange sight.

By age alone, he was someone who should give orders rather than be ordered around. Of course, even in such a position, one would humble oneself before a superior, but in this case, the counterpart was who she was.

—For the one speaking with the man was a girl still far too young to be called grown.

She was a terrifyingly, eye-catchingly beautiful girl.

Her hair, orange like the thought of sunlight, was adorned with jewels, and with eyes as red as blood she gazed challengingly over the world.

The shoulders and legs peeking from her dress, the white skin smooth enough to seem translucent, called to mind the supreme feel of a touch that would put every bolt of cloth in this world beneath her heel.

Simply by standing there, she was a demonic beauty that disturbed the composure of all people—a manifestation of peerless beauty; perhaps that was the air worn by this twelve-year-old girl who could hardly yet be called a woman.

With long, narrow eyes, the girl looked around in curiosity; at that figure, her companion's throat sounded. The fact that it was born of awe and a bit of lust, spoke eloquently of the relationship between the two.

Far from parent and child, the two were separated by an age gap like grandfather and grandchild, yet they were not blood-related. The relationship between the two was an affinal one—in other words, they were husband and wife.

Of course, among nobles, marriages with large age differences and without love fall within the bounds of common sense.

It is common to contract a marriage in form to strengthen ties between houses. However, that did not apply to this pair.

Because this beautiful girl had no backing other than that beauty.

Only her beauty, and the overflowing intellect, were the girl's possessions. That alone had been the reason this middle-aged man decided on marriage with a girl so young.

And on this day, at the girl's wish, the two set foot on Gladiator Island to spectate the most barbaric entertainment in the Vollachian Empire, the killing that sent people into a frenzy.

For his part, the man, who was weak with blood, wore a pale face from beginning to end. Yet the girl's profile, coolly seeing death through to its end, was so beautiful it made him tremble, and it was worth being enthralled by.

Girl: "Even so, that you overcame your distaste for blood for my sake—it was a great service."

Man: "—Eh?"

Girl: "What is this, did you not hear? I praised that labor of yours."

Hiding her mouth with the fan she held, the girl slanted her eyes toward the man. Seeing the emotion that flickered in those crimson eyes, the man involuntarily caught his breath.

Such a young girl held dominion over his life. He felt that his thinking had plainly been driven mad, cracks had opened in the steady path he had walked, and there were signs his world was collapsing with a roar.

Even so, he could not reject it. Sinking into a sweet demise, the pleasure of decaying.

The desires of ruin and decadence were fulfilled simply by being at the girl's side.

While savoring the setting sun of his own life, the man smiled and bowed his head to the girl—his wife.

And—

Man: "Ah, it is an honor, Priscilla. What is it you would have me do next?"

3

Jorah Pendalton was, as an imperial noble, a mediocre man with nothing worth noting.

Survival of the fittest, the strong devour the weak, enrich the nation, strengthen the military. —In the Vollachian Empire, where such ideas hold sway, there was no place for a man whose only virtue seemed to be earnestness.

In short, he was a man unsuited to being an imperial noble. That was Jorah.

He himself understood that the Empire's water did not suit him, and precisely because of that, Jorah had, up to now, avoided stirring up waves with those around him and resigned himself to a meager life in the shade.

He had nothing to do with staking everything on a great gamble in life. His role was to pass the house on to the next generation. It was an irony that, because of such timid thinking, he had not been blessed with a good match up to this age.

—Yet precisely because he had remained single, there was also a miracle that sprouted.

Priscilla: "—Is it so enjoyable to do nothing but stare at me so blatantly?"

Startled when his gaze at the girl was pointed out, Jorah opened his eyes wide.

Without the slightest awareness, he had been entranced, forgetting even to breathe, by the girl reading a book — his wife, Priscilla. Realizing that fact, Jorah toyed with his forelock with his fingers.

Jorah: "S-Sorry. I just, could not help but be captivated."

Priscilla: "Hmph, I see. It cannot be helped. The reason people are captivated by paintings and jewels is because a true beauty without rationale resides there. True beauty enchants people. All the more so if that beauty is me."

What an arrogant way of speaking from the girl, who snorted and gracefully crossed her legs. Yet the reason he felt no urge to deny it was, in truth, because she was beautiful.

"…"

Even in the gaps of conversation, those crimson eyes did not cast even a sidelong glance at Jorah. She turned the pages of the book placed upon her lap and greedily chewed over the story as she read on.

Come to think of it, she was a girl he saw constantly in the act of reading.

There was no doubt that the source of her overflowing intellect lay in the vast number of books she had read to completion up to now. That is to say, reading was, for her, the act necessary to store up knowledge and to soar to greater heights, to sublimate the existence that was her.

Put another way, one could say he was witnessing the process of her completion.

To be enthralled by a thing beautiful beyond reason is the essence of human beings. Yes, if what she had just said was true, then the reason Jorah had taken her as his wife and could not take his eyes off her lay in that.

Perhaps the reason he wanted to do as she said, to indulge her selfishness, all of it.

Therefore—

Jorah: "Priscilla. It was a short time, but spending it with you was a blissful moment."

Priscilla: "…"

Jorah: "I am a cowardly man. Until now, I have lived by slowly spending down the good fortune with which I was blessed by birth. Carefully, as though scooping with a teaspoon. But…"

There, Jorah was at a loss for words.

It was not because he had not thought ahead, nor because he faltered from his usual lack of confidence, nor any such backward reason.

The reason was simple.

Priscilla: "…"

— Priscilla's eyes were looking not at the book, but at Jorah.

Crimson eyes, beautiful as if they were rubies themselves, were fixed straight upon Jorah. Receiving that gaze, which urged him to go on without a word, Jorah's throat sounded.

It was a terribly foolish story, but in that moment Jorah, for the first time, gained a real sense of it.

That a tiny existence like himself had, for the first time, been properly cast as a character in the life of the girl before him — Priscilla — and been given lines.

Therefore—

???: "—Count Jorah Pendalton! On suspicion of high treason, you are under arrest!"

Even at the sharp call from outside the manor, he felt proud of himself for not letting his heart waver.

4

Imperial soldiers clad in golden armor surrounded the estate of Mid Count Jorah Pendleton.

To be armored in golden gear from head to toe was an honorable attire permitted only to regular servicemen of the Sacred Vollachian Empire. Each bore their own favored weapon—swords, spears, axes, even whips—but at least their armor was unified, signaling a strong sense of solidarity—no, that was a mistake.

???: "…"

Within the cohort clad in golden armor, there was not a shred of awareness of coordination or solidarity. It was a group whose members differed in their weapon of choice and, accordingly, in their personalities; it was impossible for such a group to come together peaceably.

Thus, if there was anything that commanded them, it was not some formless thing like team spirit, but something clearer and more concrete—namely, power.

Pure power bound and commanded them. That was the Empire's one, absolute rule.

Soldier: "General First-Class Ralfon, deployment is complete."

Goz: "Mm, understood. Stand down."

At the report from the subordinate at his side, a middle-aged man whose face was covered in scars gave a grave dip of the chin. A giant frame clad in a sturdy cuirass of muscle, and over that, golden gear—a full suit of armor.

He looked like he was made from head to toe—nay, down to every drop of blood flowing in him—of the word “warrior,” and in truth, he was the sort to take pride in evoking precisely that impression.

Goz Ralfon—this was the name of the middle-aged man, and he was one of the strongest in the Empire, entrusted with the position of General First-Class, the highest rank a soldier could hold in the Vollachian Empire.

Headed by Goz, the cohort surrounding the manor was wrapped in a grim atmosphere. That was only natural—their objective was to apprehend a man who had committed treason against the Empire. It could even turn into combat, depending on the circumstances, and that was precisely why they had been dispatched.

However, should it indeed come to rough work, the thing that merited the utmost vigilance was less the Mid Count Pendleton’s private soldiers than the person thought to be sheltered in his bosom—

For an instant, Goz narrowed his eyes in a fleeting speculation, then promptly shook his head to cast off idle suspicion.

Then Goz straightened the back of his giant frame, stepped out from the ranks of the subordinates around him, drew in a great breath, and—

Goz: “—Count Jorah Pendleton! On suspicion of high treason, you are under arrest!”

At that shout, the soldiers in golden armor smashed down the manor’s front entrance.

The charges had already been established, and there would be no mercy of granting a chance to explain. His person would be secured with haste, and from there, the task would be handed to those best suited to extracting the rest.

Goz: “All the more so!”

It was with a sense of pride that this scene had been entrusted not to another, but to himself.

Moments after the soldiers in gold rushed into the manor, the air rang with a fierce clash of blades. Apparently, the Mid Count Pendleton had also laid soldiers in wait within the manor, and a battle had begun.

Goz: “I do not intend to grant you much time.”

With a short declaration, Goz took up the weapon he had stood at his own side. It was a two-handed long-hafted arm, with a great round iron ball fixed to its tip—a kind of weapon called a tsuchihoko.

He hefted the nearly one-hundred-kilogram thing with ease, then, in a single bound, his giant frame vaulted over his men’s heads. With a single flash of a mighty arm, the tsuchihoko swung crosswise, and the foes blocking his path were sent flying in a group.

Goz: “Out of the way! We act under His Excellency’s imperial command. If you defy us, you too will be rebels, the same as Count Jorah Pendleton!”

Soldiers: “…”

A voice so loud it made the very air tremble cowed the Mid Count’s soldiers who stood with weapons at the ready.

From his reputation, he did not seem to have any right-hand man of famed martial prowess.

Naturally, facing Goz Ralfon, a General First-Class, it seemed unlikely there would be anyone with the backbone to brandish their weapons openly.

However—

Jorah: “—I am at a loss that General First-Class Ralfon himself has deigned to appear.”

Beyond the front entrance, in the great hall that lay ahead, on the top of the grand staircase that connected that hall to the second floor, a slender figure appeared, shoes striking the steps. Looking up at him, Goz drew his stern brows together.

It was a familiar face—none other than the very person he was seeking had shown himself.

Goz: “So the Count Pendleton has come in person.”

Jorah: “I am, even so, a mere scrap of an imperial noble. Leaving it to my subordinates and waiting, trembling in the rear, would reflect poorly on me—though perhaps the place I am trembling is merely different.”

So saying, the man with a stiff, twisted smile upon his face was indeed Jorah Pendleton himself.

And seeing Jorah come to the front line, Goz received an unexpected impression.

As far as Goz knew, Jorah had been an indecisive, conflict-averse, weak-kneed man. That such a man would show himself of his own accord on the field of battle like this—

Goz: “Has there been a change in your state of mind? I would like to hear what set it off, but…”

Jorah: “When threatened by one of the Nine Divine Generals, I feel as though I might tell anything. I… am a weak man. That is why I must constantly be rousing myself.”

Biting his lip, Jorah answered in a trembling voice. At his side, one of the soldiers serving him knelt and respectfully presented a sword. Jorah took it and slowly drew it from the scabbard.

Jorah Pendleton was not—so far as anyone had heard—any master of the blade.

He was plainly an amateur; not only was it form alone, even that form was not properly set.

Goz: “Even so, if you bear a weapon, I shall not go easy.”

Jorah: “Th-That is fine. From the moment I chose this path, I knew it would come to this… I have already taken my leave of my wife.”

Goz: “—Is that so. Then no more words are necessary.”

With that said, Goz gave a deep nod to Jorah, who looked straight at him. Then, gripping the tsuchihoko anew with force, he roused the soldiers around him and roared to crush the enemy.

Goz: “Goz Ralfon, one of the Nine Divine Generals! By His Excellency’s imperial command, I shall dispose of the seeds of calamity that would gnaw the Empire from within!”

Jorah: “Jorah Pendleton, Mid Count— for my wife’s sake, I will resist with these slender arms.”

5

Priscilla: “—That booming voice… so Goz Ralfon had come. Truly, what a lavish display just to capture me alone. Well, it is only natural, though.”

With a faint smile, the girl who boasted thus—Priscilla—swept nimbly through the forest.

Holding up the hem of her red dress, she traversed bad footing as if it were nothing; her figure, perhaps, approached that of a wildling for whom surviving amid great nature was a given.

However, apart from that carriage of hers, everything that made her up was the precise opposite of a wildling, and so it felt miraculous.

???: “…”

Behind her, at the manor she had left behind, her husband and his men were clashing with imperial soldiers. At the very last, the smile Jorah had shown Priscilla flickered across the backs of her eyelids. It flickered across her eyelids.

Priscilla: “—You have done well.”

He had not been a man with much to recommend him.

Measured against the Vollachian Empire's creed, he was wholly unfit; as an imperial noble and as a man, he lacked much. —Yet in that final moment, he was indeed Priscilla's husband.

He took his wife's feelings into account and, sacrificing himself, secured time and a line of retreat. To snort at such merits and efforts would be a base act of character; she could not, and would not, permit it.

Harboring such sentiments, Priscilla ran through the forest as if flying—

???: "—That is far enough, Princess."

Priscilla: "…"

At the voice thrown at her unawares, Priscilla's feet, moving through the forest, came to a stop.

Thus halted, Priscilla's crimson eyes looked overhead. Then, from where her gaze fell, a figure dropped from atop a great tree to right before her.

It was a girl with only thin cloth wrapped around her body, a revealing outfit. Her age was not so different from Priscilla's—early in her teens. Healthy, but with a figure still too lacking in curves to be called provocative; she was marked by drowsy round eyes, short silver hair with a single lock of red, and the canine ears peculiar to dog-people.

In her hand, the girl gripped a slender branch as long as she was tall; after she stared at the Priscilla before her, her lips trembled,

???: "…Lady Prisca."

—so she addressed Priscilla.

Priscilla: "I see. That it should be you who stands in my way at this juncture… how ironic."

???: “I… was told… by Lord Vincent…”

Priscilla: “Your manner of address is wrong. My elder brother already holds the station to be called His Excellency. If you are one of the Empire’s soldiers, know your place. Ah, and—”

There she paused once, and Priscilla gently folded her arms. Then, with long, narrow eyes she fixed her opponent, and she loosened her lips.

Priscilla: “As I am now, I am Priscilla. If I am to honor my husband’s final service, then I am Priscilla Pendleton. Do not, by any means, mistake it, Arakiya.”

Arakiya: “Pri… scilla…?”

Priscilla: “Prisca Benedict is dead. Otherwise, that would be inconvenient, would it not? For my part, even this is meant as a concession to my brother.”

Winking one eye, Priscilla snorted at the girl before her—the opponent she had named Arakiya.

At Priscilla’s words, Arakiya put strength into her small shoulders,

Arakiya: “Whether Prisca or Priscilla… the Princess is the Princess. Come with me. Lord Vincent… His Excellency will hear you out. So…”

Priscilla: “You would have me surrender? You, as my milk-sister, should know this as well. This personage will never submit to anyone. Much less, to my brother? That my brother would pardon me?”

Arakiya: “…Is that wrong?”

Priscilla: “No. A grave mistake. Honeyed words from my brother—no, my brother would not speak mere palliatives. You only interpreted his words into the shape you wished. That my brother ordered you lot to seize me was, in his way, an affection.”

Arakiya: “Affection…?”

Arakiya only traced Priscilla's words, and to that, Priscilla nodded.

Priscilla: "Of course, affection. My brother loves me. I, too, have due feeling for my brother. However, that and our stations are separate matters. —My brother must kill this personage. Therefore,"

Arakiya: "—!"

As she spoke and briefly lowered her tone, Arakiya's eyes flew wide. In the same instant, Arakiya's small body sprang far back. The reason was plain—a crimson flash.

A lateral sweep, a beautiful yet vicious slash, traced exactly where Arakiya's neck had been; her head had all but been seared off.

What had wrought it was the crimson treasure sword that, before anyone realized it, had been born into Priscilla's hand—

Arakiya: "Yang Sword Vollachia…"

Priscilla: "Whether one has this or not makes the difference in the Vollachian Emperor's authority. Though I think my brother no longer needs such a musty symbol of authority… Berstetz and the like will be noisy about it. If you would ward off that nagging, you have no choice but to pluck out this personage's life. Now, what will you do?"

Leveling the treasure sword called Yang Sword, Priscilla demanded Arakiya's resolve.

For a girl whose limbs had yet to finish stretching out, that treasure sword was large and far too valiant. But Priscilla brimmed with confidence to wield it at will; in fact, she would make that a reality.

Facing that Priscilla, Arakiya spent a time of contemplation that seemed long yet short—

Arakiya: "—Go, Princess."

Then Arakiya slowly lowered the staff clutched in both hands. Seeing this, Priscilla wore a taken-aback look and, Priscilla: “That should be an act of defiance against the Emperor’s edict, no?”

Arakiya: “…My Princess is my Princess. But if Lady Prisca is dead… then this is the last time. Please, do not stand out anymore. Things like spectating gladiator fights…”

Priscilla: “Even without that, my whereabouts would have been known. That is why I purposely gave you the pretext from my side. Well, it is true I imposed upon my husband.”

Knowing that pursuers would be set on her, Priscilla had invited Jorah to spectate Gladiator Island. As a result, that had invited today’s raid, but there was little difference between sooner or later.

Rather, because that had happened, Priscilla had, for the first time, been able to turn her eyes to her first husband.

Priscilla: “Arakiya, you have done well. Next time you meet this personage, have your heart decided.”

Arakiya: “…I do not want to see you anymore.”

Priscilla: “But it will not be so. At least, that is what I believe.”

Saying only that, Priscilla narrowed her eyes. And at the same time, from beyond the forest—from the direction of the manor Priscilla had fled—there resounded a violent, explosion-like sound.

No doubt some manner of resolution had been reached. Arakiya’s awareness turned that way for but an instant and immediately returned forward. However—

Arakiya: “—Princess.”

When she faced forward again, Priscilla’s figure was no longer there. She let her gaze wander about, but she was not so careless a person as to be found that way.

Such was Arakiya’s milk-sister, and the only sibling sharing blood with the Vollachian Emperor—

Arakiya: “Please, so…”

She fervently wished that somewhere far away—as far away as possible—she would live out her life.

She wanted her to forget the Empire’s harsh succession struggle and to live, far away, simply as a single girl.

But contrary to such a wish, Arakiya knew.

Arakiya: “—Absolutely impossible.”

She—Prisca Benedict—would not permit such a way of life.

Inevitably, a day would surely come when, like today, she would face her again. When that happened, just what could she do against Priscilla = Prisca?

She had been told to have her heart decided. She had been told, but —

Arakiya: “…Lady Prisca, you fool.”

For now, at least, that was all she could manage to murmur.

6

—The national treason scheme plotted by Mid Count Jorah Pendleton ended in failure.

The Mid Count who had been the ringleader was slain by the Empire’s General First-Class, Goz Ralfon, and one could say he became the first cornerstone of the new control established by Vincent Vollachia, who had ascended to the imperial throne.

The Mid Count had no blood relatives, and as a result, the Pendleton house, which had continued for generations, was abolished. This was finalized by the suicide of his younger wife, who had entered into an affinal relationship with the Mid Count only a month before.

Regretting her husband’s deeds, the still-young lady took her own life. —This is corroborated by the testimony of Arakiya, who would later become one of the Vollachian Empire’s Nine Divine Generals.

Therefore, there were no fugitives. —The sun did not grow dim and continued to exist even now.

Chapter 2:
Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago / Anastasia Camp

1

—On that day, a single company let out its first cry in the Kararagi City-States.

Its place was a corner of the Second City, Banan, and though one would not go so far as to call the building a hovel, it was hardly the sort of fine structure that deserved such praise; that was the office this company used.

On the western side of the world map, the Kararagi City-States were by no means a land blessed with “resources.” For that reason, commerce had flourished there since long ago, and merchants held such high status that other countries even derided it as a “business nation.”

Because of that national character, everyone sought the chance for a dramatic reversal, dreaming of rising by relying on their own mercantile talent, and so new companies springing up was nothing unusual. As was customary, most were devoured by renowned firms that already had firm footholds, and failed to leave any results.

However, on this day, the one who announced themselves in that survival-of-the-fittest world of traders was neither someone carried away by the opportunity before their eyes, nor someone overconfident in their own business acumen.

—To begin with, that person did not even dream of rising as a merchant.

For with meticulous planning and feasible preparations already in place, it was not a matter of realizing some pipe dream, but nothing more than a proper business plan.

And so, the very person who would achieve her aim by placing utmost importance on planning—

???: “Ah! Aaah! Hey, hey, old man! Look proper, would ya!”

A girl’s high, almost scream-like voice echoed across the blue sky.

Shifting one’s gaze from the blue sky to the ground, the one raising her voice was a figure in a kimono.

Her long, wavy, pale-violet hair flowed down her back, and she wore a gaudy kimono to perfection. It was a little warm for the season, but such obstacles were trifles before fashion.

She was a girl with round, sparkling teal eyes and adorably well-proportioned features. Only now, those eyes were sharp, and her lovely face was painted over with displeasure.

With her face entirely dyed in that discontent, the girl stamped the ground firmly, and—

???: “What the heck, geez! Why’re ya always so rough? We’ve known each other a long time, old man, but I reaaally don’t get that part of ya at all.”

Beastman: “What’s with ya— why d’ya gotta run me down that much! Does it bug ya that bad? Even if it’s just a tad crooked, ain’t nobody gonna care!”

???: “Not “nobody”— I’m already bothered by it right here! Geez!”

Cheeks puffed out in protest, the girl’s name was Anastasia Hoshin. At the tender age of fifteen, she stood as the head of her own domain, the representative of the Hoshin Company.

And the one being glared at by Anastasia, pulling a bitter face, was a dog-faced beastman more than two heads taller than her petite self, his whole body covered in dark-brown fur.

Mouth wide as he looked back to answer Anastasia’s protest, the beastman’s hands reached up to just above the building’s entrance, where there was a sign bearing the name “Hoshin Company.” As one could see, they were right in the middle of putting up the sign, an auspicious moment for the company’s opening—

Anastasia: “Starting out with the sign tilted is bad luck! Make it, make it proper!”

Beastman: “Alright, alright, ya noisy little thing. That Ana-bo sure got mighty important. Feels real moving for me too, y’know.”

Anastasia: “That! And quit it already with callin’ me “Ana-bo”!”

Following her instructions, the beastman made fine adjustments to the tilted sign, and Anastasia jabbed a finger at him. When the beastman rumbled “Huh?” in his throat, Anastasia’s eyes flashed as she continued,

Anastasia: “Listen, starting today I’m officially standing on my own two feet as a merchant, right? If people keep callin’ me with some kiddy nickname forever, it won’t look cool at all.”

Beastman: “Even so, ya been Ana-bo for sooo long. When ya still look so teensy, complainin’ ya hate bein’ treated like a kid~ ain’t very persuasive.”

Anastasia: “Sayin’ I look teensy is uncalled for! I’m still gonna grow, proper!”

Beastman: “Are ya, now?”

Blushing bright red, Anastasia drew a doubtful look from the beastman.

In truth, at fifteen an ordinary human girl’s body would have been fairly developed, but Anastasia’s growth lagged remarkably behind others. Her height was on the short side, and her curves were much too scant. Even so, those who looked upon her felt some hint of gloss in her beauty, something that must have arisen from the femininity emanating from her very essence. The white fox stole at her neck also adorned her beyond her years.

Of course, that feminine air of hers completely evaporated before the dog-faced beastman she had known so long, leaving her looking much like the girl she had been when they first met.

Beastman: “Anyhow, if not Ana-bo, what am I s’posed ta call ya? If ya wanna put on airs with a fresh mood, that's where ya gotta start."

Anastasia: "You? Callin' me…? Uh, um, that'd be…"

Beastman: "That'd be?"

Anastasia: "Y-You decide, old man! Anything but Ana-bo— and if it ain't cute, I don't want it."

Beastman: "Why ya puttin' such a troublesome shackle on me… Just got the collar off at long last, and all."

She averted her eyes, Anastasia's cheeks faintly flushed, and the beastman scratched at his own neck. Seeing that thick neck, Anastasia's lips curved in a slight, satisfied smile.

There was nothing conspicuous about the bare, dark-brown fur around his neck.

That very lack of a feature held great meaning.

Anastasia: "It's proof that you finally became mine, old man."

Beastman: "Sounds awful to the ear, that does… Well then, how 'bout you change how ya call me, too, Ana-bo?"

Anastasia: "Huh? Me too?"

Startled, Anastasia pointed to herself, and the beastman folded his thick arms with a "That's right."

Beastman: "Startin' today, you're a bigwig, and on top of that, I'm your property… If it's the start of a new life, it's the same for both of us. Can't have me doin' all the hard part."

Anastasia: "Mmm~ that's true… maybe? Then, as for you, old man…"

So prompted, Anastasia thought for a while. Then, looking up timidly at the giant in front of her with her teal eyes, her thin lips trembling, Anastasia: “C-Can I call ya Ricardo… without any honorifics?”

Beastman: “Ain’t that fine? Yeah, that kinda thing’s got some bluff to it and sounds good. Though, well, bein’ called that by you, Anabo, makes me itch, I’ll tell ya.”

Anastasia: “…Then, what’ll you call me?”

At Anastasia’s question, the beastman—Ricardo looked up with a “Let’s see,” then, after uncrossing his arms, carefully straightened the slightly tilted sign,

Ricardo: “Then it’ll be “Miss.” I’ll be callin’ ya that.”

Anastasia: “—. That’s just copyin’ Mimi and the others! Slackin’! You’re slackin’! Geez, old man… No! Ricardo, ya idiot! Lazybones!”

Ricardo: “Why’re ya gettin’ so grumpy over that? Can’t figure ya out.”

Saying so, Ricardo scratched his own head with a finger in exasperation. Brushed off with that all-too-familiar attitude, Anastasia puffed out her cheeks.

They had known each other a long time, and truly, he was a beastman who did not understand a maiden’s heart at all.

2

Anastasia: “Seriously, old man… when it comes to Ricardo, he’s dense as they come.”

Proprietress: “Hehe, that’s true. And at this point, that part of him might never change.”

Saying so, the proprietor of the familiar tavern softened her lips at Anastasia, who was sulking at the counter. What she quietly slid over to her was the fourth glass of milk of the day.

Taking the glass in hand, Anastasia drained it in one go. Her belly was about to start sloshing, but it still wasn’t enough to drink— or rather, it wasn’t enough to vent.

Her relationship with the tavern's proprietress, in fact, went back about as far as her relationship with Ricardo.

Originally, it was Ricardo who had picked up Anastasia when she was a vagrant from the slums, and it was the proprietress who had hired the girl— who had no backing at all— to do odd jobs. That's why, though the time had finally come for Anastasia to stand on her own as a merchant, this place could be called the origin where she learned everything.

For that very reason, she still frequented it as a regular even now. To Anastasia, who had no family, the proprietress was like a mother, or perhaps an older sister a few years her senior.

And then, as Anastasia kept on drinking milk, the proprietress let out a somewhat sentimental sigh and said, "Even so—"

Proprietress: "To think that Ana-chan is striking out on her own— time sure flies. It feels like we first met just yesterday… and you've become so womanly, Ana-chan."

Anastasia: "Well, I ain't gonna be a kid forever. But ya, proprietress, ain't changed one bit— and that ain't flattery. Say, ya doin' some sneaky, naughty thing to keep yer youth, ain't ya?"

Proprietress: "Even without doin' anything naughty, if I quietly borrow a little of the young folks' vitality, that's more than enough to stay young, y'know?"

Anastasia: "That sounds real serious-like, an' it's a little scary."

She gave a mischievous smile at the proprietress's joke, then wiped her mouth and stood up.

It was the end of Fire Time, with night about to draw near. The tavern's real business hours began when the craftsmen on their way home from work stopped in for a drink, so she didn't want to overstay and get in the way.

Proprietress: "You could always be our poster girl again, Ana-chan, y'know?"

Anastasia: “I reckon that wouldn’ be bad once in a while, but today’s a special day, so I’ll pass. As for me, though, I might be leanin’ on you ladies for a bit.”

Proprietress: “It’s you we’re talkin’ about— that’s just fine. …Stay strong, alright?”

Anastasia: “Mm, much obliged. It’s the first step toward my dream. Ain’t nothin’ I’m worried about.”

Leaving copper coins for the milk, Anastasia waved a smile to the proprietress. Then, sent off by her, she straightened her back in front of the shop.

Just then, as Anastasia stood there amidst a townscape turning the color of sunset—

???: “Ah, Miss, there you aaare! Boss was worried, so I’m suuuper glad we found ya!”

Along with that loud voice, a figure kicked up a cloud of dust as it ran up to her. From the voice alone she knew who it was, but turning that way, Anastasia narrowed her eyes.

Bounding up with brimming energy was a kitten beastman girl with orange fur. The girl didn’t slow down at all as she charged straight at them, and Anastasia’s smile deepened as she said—

Anastasia: “Watch it.”

???: “Gyahhh!”

Right beside the lightly sidestepping Anastasia, the girl barreled straight into the wall. The sound and impact that spread around made one worry in spite of oneself—

???: “Ahahaha! That was a huge wham! It suuuper hurts! Hurts!”

Seeing the girl sprawled on the ground, arms and legs flailing as she howled with laughter, that worry evaporated. Anastasia shrugged her shoulders in exasperation and gently held out a hand to the girl.

???: “Oh?”

Anastasia: ““Oh?” ain’t what ya say. C’mon, take my hand an’ stand proper. I went ’n dressed ya up in such a pretty outfit, an’ now look — ya got it all muddy.”

???: “’Kay! Got iiit— Whatever my lady’s heart desires!”

Anastasia: “Where d’ya even learn that kinda thing… honestly.”

With a wry smile, Anastasia hauled up the girl who’d grabbed her hand. The girl, light enough to spring as she rose, had the dirt on her body brushed off by Anastasia.

Even smaller than the petite Anastasia, the girl was a beastman from the so-called kittenfolk, a race whose people were short in stature. Her adorable face and fluffy coat were the absolute best in Anastasia’s book, and this girl in particular, with her friendliness, was impossible to take her eyes off.

Her name was Mimi, and she was one of Anastasia’s precious “assets.”

Anastasia: “So then, Mimi? Ya were lookin’ for me?”

Mimi: “Oh, yeah-yeah! Like, Boss said he made Miss mad— and if he went lookin’ himself, you’d get, like, super mad, so he was all, “Fix it with Mimi’s cuteness, pleaase!” kinda thing!”

Anastasia: “There he goes again, stickin’ his nose where it don’t belong. He’s losin’ my good mood ’cause he ain’t comin’ to look himself in the first place… Hmph, don’t care no more!”

Mimi: “Yeah, don’t care, don’t care! Boss is a dooork!”

Anastasia: “That’s right— Ricardo’s a dooork!”

In unison, Anastasia and Mimi happily vented their anger at Ricardo. Of course, Mimi was only matching Anastasia’s mood, but that didn’t matter.

Passersby glanced sidelong at the boisterous girls with indulgent smiles. Basking in those looks, Anastasia kicked a pebble at her feet.

Anastasia: “If that’s the case, I don’t care about Ricardo no more. Mimi, will ya tag along with me on my greeting rounds?”

Mimi: “Leeeave it to me! So, so, what’s a greetin’ rounds?”

Anastasia: “Heheh— glad ya asked. I been talkin’ ’bout it for a while, right? I finally opened my own shop. So I gotta go give our greetings to our valued customers.”

Mimi: “Ah! Mimi knows that— a raid!”

Anastasia: “Well, might be kinda similar, maybe.”

Patting Mimi’s head as she showed off slightly mistaken knowledge, Anastasia started down the street. Keeping pace beside her, Mimi rolled her round eyes as if to say, “Huh? That ain’t it?”

Anastasia: “Today’s goal is to show our faces to our regulars, and ask ’em to keep treatin’ us well from here on. So it’s fine if they just remember our cute faces— mine ’n Mimi’s.”

Mimi: “Ooh, Mimi gets that— Mimi and Miss are suuuper cute.”

Anastasia: “That’s right, suuuper cute.”

Hand in hand with quick-on-the-uptake Mimi, Anastasia turned her gaze toward their destination. For the time being, the first person she ought to greet was both a business rival and a benefactor.

Anastasia: “I’ve been nothin’ but indebted to Chuden-san, but I gotta make sure I don’t do anything like kickin’ dirt with my hind legs as I leave, y’hear.”

Just as Anastasia was muttering that in such a mood—

Gentleman: “—My apologies, young lady. Might you know of a Mr. Chuden?”

Anastasia: “Hm?”

Addressed suddenly from the side, Anastasia turned with Mimi. The one who had spoken to her was a gentlemanly man with a mustache.

He was well dressed, with a neat hairstyle and a refined bearing—and above all, his attire was not wafuku but foreign-styled, so it was immediately clear he was from another country. There were those in Kararagi who intentionally favored foreign fashion, but his speech that did not use the Kararagi dialect felt natural.

More or less grasping that at a glance, Anastasia tilted her head.

Anastasia: “If it’s Chuden-san, he’s my former employer… An’ you are?”

Gentleman: “Oh, that is most helpful. I have come to negotiate business with Mr. Chuden. It is my first visit to Kararagi, and I was out walking from curiosity, but…”

Anastasia: “Did ya, whoops, get yerself lost?”

Gentleman: “Hahaha, that is precisely it. Quite embarrassing.”

At Anastasia’s question, the gentleman touched his mustache, even his laughter refined. Seeing that reaction, Mimi also threw both hands up and said—

Mimi: “Mimi sooo gets that! Mimi gets totally lost even in her birth home! Lost every day!”

Gentleman: “For such an adorable young lady, that must be endlessly worrisome. If you would permit it, might I ask your names as a token of acquaintance?”

Mimi: “Mm— Mimi is Mimi, and this here’s Miss!”

Anastasia, side-eyeing overly friendly Mimi, cast a glance to gauge the gentleman’s expression. Meeting that look, the gentleman dipped his chin.

Gentleman: “My apologies. I am Juukulius— Alviero Juukulius. I am a foreigner hailing from a country farther to the east than here.

I would be most grateful if you could soothe my loneliness."

Anastasia: "…Yer tongue's real smooth, ain't it. I'm Anastasia Hoshin."

Alviero: "Hoshin? As in the same Hoshin as "Hoshin of the Wilderness," the founding hero of the Kararagi City-States?"

Hearing Anastasia's name, the gentleman— Alviero— widened his yellow eyes. At his words, Anastasia's teal eyes also opened slightly in surprise.

Anastasia: "Huh, ya know that well. Oh, but don't get the wrong idea, okay? I ain't got nothin' to do with that Hoshin. I just took the name, is all."

Alviero: "Ho, took the name? That is quite bold. "Hoshin of the Wilderness" is synonymous with rising from nothing. To declare that name in this meritocracy of Kararagi means…"

Anastasia: "It's proof I'm pickin' a fight with everyone around me without makin' excuses."

Alviero: "…I see— astute."

Fingers still at his mustache, Alviero offered that praise in a slightly lower voice. Seeing his narrowed eyes, Anastasia realized she was being appraised.

However, it did not feel like an indiscreet, ill-mannered gaze, but rather like that of an appraiser seeking to ascertain the other's mettle.

Accepting the intent of that look, Alviero said "Forgive me," and apologized as if ashamed of his own demeanor.

Alviero: "I am ashamed to have cast an impolite gaze upon a lady. —Tell me, young lady who borrows the name of "Hoshin of the Wilderness," what is it you intend to become?"

Anastasia: "Lemme see. First, the top merchant in Banan. Then after that, number one in Kararagi, an' finally…"

Alviero: “Finally?”

Anastasia: “—I’ll become a big enough person that my name’ll take the place of Hoshin’s.”

With a crooked grin, Anastasia squarely shot her mouth off at Alviero.

To some listeners, it was the sort of line that would be laughed off as the height of arrogance and bombast. However—

Anastasia did not hesitate to assert this, no matter who she faced.

There’s no reason for anyone’s dreams to be mocked.

And the gentleman before her did not laugh at Anastasia’s dream.

Alviero: “Then it seems I have had a good encounter. I am a knight of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica. I cannot travel here frequently, but if the chance arises, I would very much like to speak with you of trade.”

Anastasia: “Then I’ll hafta study up plenty from a future patron, won’t I? Make sure ya remember— Hoshin Company starts up today, right this very day.”

Alviero: “I shall keep it in mind.”

With a faint smile, Alviero offered a dignified bow right there. From that refined gesture alone, Anastasia could tell at a glance that he was of a first-rate lineage as a knight.

Watching his back as he strode off smartly, Anastasia quietly stroked her slender chest.

She hadn’t exactly been nervous, but it felt like a meaningful meeting for her as well. Of course, it wasn’t as if this would immediately connect to the future, but—

Anastasia: “Whatever the talk is, I gotta make it mine with my own hands.”

From here on, Anastasia would have to shoulder many things and do business.

More than ever, she would have to be sensitive to everything, and treat every matter with care. That was a way of thinking that applied to everything— time, meetings, and human ties alike.

Mimi: “Hey, heeey, Miss.”

As Mimi tugged at Anastasia’s sleeve and called to her in her carefree way, Anastasia looked her way, wondering if she’d sulked at being ignored.

Then Mimi pointed at the gentleman’s retreating back.

Mimi: “Wasn’t that old guy lost? Is he okay now?”

Anastasia: “Ah.”

Remembering the very start of this whole thing, Anastasia gaped. Then she hurriedly patter-pattered after Alviero’s back, which had unhesitatingly gotten itself lost again.

3

By the time their rounds of greetings were over, night had completely fallen all around.

Anastasia: “Mmm~, it dragged on longer than I thought. Mimi, thanks for taggin’ along.”

Mimi: “No probleeem! Mimi was told Mimi hasta take real good care of Miss, so Mimi’s the Boss’s stand-in! Mission suuuper accomplished!”

Just as they stepped out of the last place they’d visited on their greeting rounds, Mimi bounced as she answered Anastasia’s words of thanks.

Wherever she went, the free-spirited Mimi was basically liked by everyone. As a result, it honestly felt like she’d been received much more favorably than if she’d gone around with Ricardo in tow.

That said—

Anastasia: “Folks bein’ friendly is ‘cause they ain’t thinkin’ I’m an enemy.”

Mimi: “Huh— is that so? But Miss went alllll out pickin’ fights, right?”

Anastasia: “Maybe they reckon it’s best to act all composed, like proper grown-ups. If that’s the case, I’ll make ’em regret later that they took me too lightly. Till then, if they keep thinkin’ I’m just cute-smilin’ little Anastasia-chan, that’s my win.”

Mimi: “Deyahahahaha!”

Mimi burst out laughing as Anastasia put a finger to her cheek and made a smile.

She hadn’t expected to be laughed at quite that much, but since malice simply didn’t exist in Mimi, Anastasia filed it away as pure, honest amusement.

Probably only about half of the people they’d called on had taken Anastasia’s greetings seriously today. In the end, it was just the say-so of a fifteen-year-old slip of a girl.

Even the great merchants of Banan—one of the ten major cities of the Kararagi City-States—couldn’t so easily see through to Anastasia’s qualities. Or perhaps they had, and had decided that she wasn’t their enemy; that possibility was high enough as well.

If that was how it was, then that was interesting in its own right—so thought Anastasia.

Mimi: “—? Miss, ya look kinda happy?”

Anastasia: “Heheh— ya can tell? I shoulda had a bit of worry an’ nerves, and yet… honestly, I’m gettin’ so excited I can hardly stand it.”

Mimi: “Ohhh, then the future’s lookin’ briiight.”

How far she truly understood was unclear, but Mimi's words were straightforward and seeped right in.

Anastasia relaxed her lips and patted the head of the cute "asset" walking right beside her. As she did, Mimi, eyes narrowing at the pat, let out an "Ah," and—

Mimi: "Hetaro 'n the others— and Boss!"

Anastasia: "Huh?"

Following the finger Mimi pointed straight ahead, Anastasia lifted her face and saw a large silhouette standing on the road home before them. It was a giant big enough to make one look up, and on his shoulders sat two kittenfolk boys who looked just like Mimi— Hetaro and Tivey, Mimi's younger brothers of the triplets.

The one standing there with the two perched on his shoulders was none other than that heartless grown-up, Ricardo.

Hetaro: "Sis! Great— we didn't miss ya in passing!"

Tivey: "It was good we asked Miss about today's plans beforehand. If we hadn't, we definitely would've missed each other somewhere weird, yes."

At their sister's call, Hetaro and Tivey exchanged a glance and hopped down from Ricardo's shoulders.

Landing lightly, the two scurried over to Mimi with quick steps.

Mimi: "What're you two doin' here? Were ya lonely without Mimi? Aww, you two are such helpless lil' guys!"

Hetaro: "Eh? Uh, uh, Sis— y-yeah, that too, but…"

Tivey: "That is incorrect. It simply got dark, so we were worried about you both. The only one who almost cries when separated from Sis is big bro."

At Mimi's breezy smile, Hetaro and Tivey showed opposite reactions.

It was the difference in temperament between Hetaro, who put his sister above all else, and Tivey, who “merely” remained extremely devoted to family. Their true feelings were clearly in agreement, so it wasn’t something to fuss over.

And while they watched the heartwarming exchange among the three siblings out of the corner of their eye—

Anastasia: “And you too, Ricardo— what’d ya come for?”

Ricardo: “Don’t say it with thorns like that, Ana-bo. I only got worried ‘bout whether Mimi’d be fine without me taggin’ along… and, well, the proprietress scolded me.”

Anastasia: “The proprietress?”

Ricardo: “Said if my laissez-faire goes too far, I’ll be given up on sooner or later…”

“I see,” Anastasia thought, feeling complicated about the fact that the proprietress had given advice. Of course, gratitude outweighed everything, but there was also irritation at Ricardo needing that to get moving.

Come to think of it, it had been over six years since she’d met Ricardo, and more times than she could count, he’d made her fret like this— even now, after she’d torn off his slave collar.

Anastasia: “Ricardo… old man, do ya regret becomin’ mine?”

Ricardo: “Hah? Where’d that come from all of a sudden?”

Anastasia: “Just answer!”

Frowning, Ricardo got glared at from below by Anastasia’s upturned eyes. Watched over by the three siblings, he roughly scratched his own head and—

Ricardo: “I’ve regretted bein’ with ya more times than I can count.”

Anastasia: “…R-Really?”

Ricardo: “Sure have. Maybe it’s my way of sayin’ things, but ya were a girl who wouldn’t listen one bit. Got yourself in danger over ’n over, worried me over ’n over. Seriously, my lifespan kept shrinkin’ and shrinkin’.”

Letting out a long, deep breath, Ricardo grumbled as he looked back on things. Those honest words of his resounded heavy and booming inside Anastasia’s skull.

She’d braced herself to hear whatever might be said, but when she actually heard it, it hit harder than she’d expected. For a moment she even felt like running away; she didn’t, only because today was the day she’d decided she had to become one step stronger—her day of striking out on her own.

And then, upon the head of the Anastasia who didn’t run, a big palm was suddenly laid.

Anastasia: “—Ah.”

Ricardo: “After yankin’ my life up ’n down this much, it’s a little late, ain’t it? Do whatever ya want with my life, as much as ya like. Long since, I’ve been yours, Ana-bo.”

Anastasia: “…But, old man, you’ve always said you didn’t feel like you’d become mine.”

Ricardo: “Then I’ll go ’round spreadin’ it from today. From today I’ll go ’round spreadin’ it. How ’bout I slap on a collar with Ana-bo’s name on it?”

At Ricardo’s joking tone, Anastasia caught her breath. Then, timidly, she clutched with both hands the big hand resting on her head—

Anastasia: “…Not Ana-bo— it’s Miss, right? ’Cause you’re my Ricardo.”

Ricardo: “That’s right, Miss. From here on out, I’m countin’ on a long, long road together.”

Anastasia: “Mm. I’m gonna work ya hard, so get good ’n ready!”

Taking the hand off her head, she squeezed it, and Anastasia smiled at Ricardo. Seeing the girl's smile, Ricardo also opened his big mouth and laughed.

At the sight of the two of them, Mimi and her brothers traded looks.

Mimi: "Dunno what's goin' on, but Miss and Boss look suuuper happy, so Mimi is over the moooon!"

Anastasia: "Yeah, yeah, thanks. —Alright then, let's all head home and have dinner."

Mimi: "Okaaay! Yayyy! Mimi wants Daisukiyaki!"

Everyone laughed at the hopping Mimi, and Anastasia and the others set off walking.

The Hoshin Company was still tiny and had only just begun— even so, with the resolve to go straight on without hesitation, the future great merchant set out for home.

—And as the five shadowy silhouettes walked hand in hand side by side, she thought people would call that "family."

Chapter 3:
Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago / Felt Camp

1

—Things had gotten bad, Felt made a bitter face while being hung upside down.

Man: “You brats sure went and did something real stupid, didn’t ya.”

Felt: “…”

Man: “You pick a fight with adults and thought you could win? If so, that ain’t just naive. I’d love to see your idiot parents’ faces.”

A vile face that looked like crudeness and violence all mixed together.

Having a bald-headed man with a scar on his face breathe his fishy breath on her, Felt frowned all the more.

Of course the fishy breath was a problem, but the man’s words were even more so.

Felt: “I think the exact same thing.”

Man: “Hah?”

Felt: “If I could see my own shitty parents’ faces, I’d like to see ’em too. If I ever do see ’em, though, I’ll settle the score before you lot do.”

Man: “…”

Feeling the blood rush to her head from being upside down, Felt declared that with spite. Hearing it, the man before her gaped in astonishment.

Before long, the man slowly turned his head and met the eyes of the other men around him, and—

Man: “Da—hahahahaha!!”

With spittle flying, the men mocked Felt’s bold talk to their hearts’ content. Their laughter looked down on the little girl in filthy clothes insisting on her empty bravado, and jeered.

There is no salvation in the act of looking down on others.

Speaking only of appearances, the men’s outfits were, in their shabbiness, a fair match for Felt’s. Even so, there is always someone lower. People cannot win against the sweet temptation of looking down on others.

Man: “Hee-Hee, you really gave me a laugh there, brat. I was pissed that your pals ran off on ya, but now I’m feelin’ a lot better.”

Felt: “…Those guys ain’t my friends.”

Man: “’Course they ain’t! They left you behind and dumped you! Even if they were your friends, cut ties. Well, either way, you ain’t ever gonna see ’em again.”

To Felt, who had let that slip out weakly and bitterly, the man declared it with a lingering hint of a grin.

Whether those words were advice, or just a plain old sneer—Felt, with the blood flow to her head becoming a serious problem, could not quite judge.

In any case—

Felt: “…Things have gotten bad.”

Looking back anew on the situation she was in, Felt muttered that like a curse.

The beginning of it all had been half a day earlier, caused by a shouting match that had erupted between Felt and her guardian.

Felt: “Rom-ji, you idiot! I do not care anymore!”

A shrill shout rang through the slum’s overcast sky, and a small figure darted swiftly down the alley.

With short blonde hair streaming and red eyes peeking behind her, it was the young girl, Felt.

She was not quite like the wind, but her steps were, compared to boys and girls of her age, exceptionally fast. Seven years old. Athletic ability and quick wits promised an excellent future.

Rom: “W-Wait, Felt! Will you not, at last, listen to an old man!”

And behind that child brimming with promise, a hulking figure with several times her build gave chase. Judging by the messed-up face and the bald head, he was an old man that made one want to add nearly tenfold to her age. Compared to the girl, the mountain-like bulk was continually toyed with by the nimble fugitive.

The name of the old man, out of breath and drenched in sweat, was Rom—someone like a guardian to Felt, living in the slums. Of course, there was no blood relation between them, and even as a guardian, they did not live together.

Even so, if one asked from whom Felt learned the basics of life, she could assert with pride that it was from Rom. She and Rom were that kind of pair.

At any rate, though they had such a relationship, now Felt was making use of her lightness, running on top of walls, on rooftops, using cats’ paths, cleverly evading Rom.

As to why it had come to this—

Rom: “When will you feel like obeying what I tell you! I told you not to eat mushrooms with red spots because they are dangerous! Before long your guts will rot from the bottom and you will die!”

Felt: “I told you I had a mouse gnaw them to check whether they were safe or not! Anyway, your stomach is way too weak, Rom-ji! If you die to mushrooms, how are you supposed to live!”

Rom: “I am saying it because there are those who have died!”

Clambering lightly up onto a roof, Felt continued a stare-down with Rom below.

The cause of this chase and argument lay in the meal Felt had prepared for Rom. Recently, over a small matter, Rom had taken ill, so Felt, with her daily gratitude, had served a mushroom dish.

But regarding the mushrooms gathered as ingredients, an objection came from Rom. Certainly, among the mushrooms that grow in the slums’ shade, there are many with strong toxicity. However, so that such things did not get mixed in by mistake, Felt had properly performed the selection of mushrooms.

Then, this time, her method of selection was nitpicked, and Felt’s anger reached its limit. And she ran away from Rom as he began his scolding, which brings us to now.

Felt: “Anyway, what happened to all that “my head hurts” and “my body feels heavy”! If you can chase me around this lively, were you lying!”

Rom: “Fool! I am scraping away at my little strength to come lecture you! Otherwise… ugh?!”

In the middle of the argument, Rom let out a pained groan and fell to his knees on the spot. Seeing that, Felt, for an instant, started to run over with, “Rom-ji?!” but—

Rom: “G-Gwooo…!”

Immediately after, a stomach noise so strong it could have been thunder resounded, and it became clear that the reason Rom fell to his knees lay with the mushrooms. In other words, he was merely suffering from diarrhea.

Felt: “Tch, what the hell, making me worry. Rom-ji, you idiot! Just stay there and rest!”

Rom: “W-Wait, Felt… do not go… guuuh!”

Shelving the fact that the cause of the stomachache was herself, Felt stuck out her tongue and turned her back on Rom. Rom reached out a hand toward that back, but unfortunately, he could not move a single step.

Just like that, Felt, literally as if flying, was gone from before Rom.

Felt: "…If I have run this far, am I safe now."

After running at full speed for a while, Felt wiped her brow as she checked her surroundings.

Frankly, although a good portion of it had been buying and selling barbs, given Felt's personality, honestly apologizing to Rom was painful. In the first place, since the motive for the mushroom dish had been the result of worrying about the listless Rom, from an onlooker's perspective it was far too fruitless a quarrel.

That said, to the parties involved, any quarrel is a quarrel, so it was not as if she could now go back and make up. And, with that mood, as Felt jumped down from the wall—

Boy: "—Yo, blondie over there."

Felt: "…"

As she landed and crouched, an impertinent voice called out. Even Felt would not take it in the twisted way of thinking that being called "blondie" here referred to someone other than herself.

When she turned toward the voice, she saw a boy just sticking his face out from the alley—a person, three or four years older than Felt, in shabby clothes. A face she had seen several times in the slums.

She did not know the name, but he was probably a parentless orphan like Felt.

Felt: "What do you want with me."

Boy: "Do not be so prickly. You jump around, and you are amazing. I had my eye on you for a while."

Felt: “Had your eye on me? On me?”

Boy: “Yeah, yeah. Will you become one of us?”

Saying that, the boy with short-cropped blue hair held out his hand to Felt. Looking at that outstretched hand, Felt tilted her head with, “One of you?”

Felt: “One of you, you are alone.”

Boy: “They are not here. We are getting ready now. There is a shabby tavern near here, right? The bunch that use it as their hangout are going to attack a rich man’s dragon carriage.”

Felt: “…You are telling me to join that.”

Boy: “No, no. Not that. When their theft succeeds, they will buy booze and such, right. Then, while they are drunk and sleeping, we will steal that from them. That is the idea.”

At the boy’s attitude that seemed to be saying, “Brilliant idea, right,” Felt narrowed her red eyes and pondered.

If it had been a plan to attack a rich man’s dragon carriage, even Felt would have refused. It could not possibly go well, and the danger was too great. However, if it was stealing from the culprits after the raid—

Felt: “They might be full of openings.”

Boy: “Oh, that is it! And we have to open things like the tavern’s lock, so we wanted someone nimble who can slip in through a window. How about you.”

Felt: “I have never done it, but…”

She thought her hands were on the dexterous side.

Basically, the way Felt made a living was either to steal things from people, or to pick up items thrown away in the slums or the commoners’ quarter and, together with Rom, fix and sell them.

She did not know how much of it was flattery, but Rom would sometimes praise those hands.

—And, if a bit of money in a lump came in, she could make Rom eat his words.

Felt: “There would no longer be any stomachs ruined by mushrooms, too.”

Boy: “—? What is “mushrooms.”“

Felt: “It is nothing. Tell me the plan properly.”

Waving her hand, cutting off the boy’s curiosity, Felt demanded the necessary explanation from him. Seeing Felt’s willing attitude, the boy rubbed under his nose with a finger.

And, jerking his chin as he indicated the alley behind him,

Boy: “All right. Then I will introduce you to the crew, so let us go. If it goes well, we are filthy rich.”

Felt: “It would be nice if it were that simple.”

Following the endlessly optimistic boy’s back, Felt herself also, somehow, was thinking less about anxiety over the plan and more about Rom’s surprised face when they succeeded—.

3

—Therefore, the facts that one of the companions made a huge noise and drew the attention of the dozing men, and that he pointed out where Felt, who had failed to flee in time, was and then ran off, were things Felt herself could avoid resenting by cursing her own lack of caution.

Man: “Filthy-looking brat… Well, if it’s a girl, there’s always ways to use her. Sell her off to a brothel, or we use her ourselves… though with a brat this small that’s impossible, huh!”

Still gripping the one leg of the captured Felt, the scar-faced man let out a vulgar laugh. Egged on, the men tilted nearby bottles and roared with good cheer.

She wanted somehow to writhe free of his hand, but the difference in strength between an adult and a little girl's leg power was hopeless. Other than neatly exploiting an opening, no means of escape came to mind.

Man: "Or how about you beg for it yourself? Might be you're better off with us than with those cold-blooded bastards?"

Boy: "Uh, um… about that kid…"

Man: "Hah?"

To the man who was offering a lifeline he did not mean at all, a timid-sounding voice spoke up. At that weak voice the man turned, and the boy at whom his gaze was directed trembled in the shoulders.

He was a tall, scrawny boy with a white cloth wrapped around his head. Amid men who looked every inch the thugs, the fine-boned boy somehow seemed out of place. In fact, he seemed to feel alien to the men as well, and with a forced smile he said:

Boy: "She will not fetch much money, and if roughing her up leaves a bad taste… then letting her go would, um, be fine, would it not…"

Man: "Hey, hey, hey hey hey, what's that. You givin' orders or something?"

Boy: "Ah, uh, no, that's not—! I didn't mean—"

Man: "Gaston! Don't be sayin' buzzkill stuff!"

The boy shook his hands and head, trying to explain himself to the thug's words. But faster than that, the thug who was holding Felt kicked, and caught the boy square in the solar plexus.

Driven in the chest by the hard toe, the boy coughed and toppled backward.

Boy: “Geh! Cough cough!”

Man: “Don’t get the wrong idea, Gaston. We’re letting you be with us on the basis that you’re our errand boy. If you suddenly act like you’re one of us, that’d be shocking, right?”

Gaston: “S-Sorry… I won’t do it again…”

Hands on the floor, the boy bowed his head and apologized desperately. Perhaps that sight satisfied the man’s sadism, for he grinned and turned his gaze back to Felt.

Man: “My bad, my bad. Our scrawny kid got the wrong idea. So, what were we talking about again?”

Felt: “…You forgot?”

Man: “Ahh, it was about whether to sell you or break you, right?”

Putting sudden strength into his arm, the man lifted Felt’s body up in front of his face. In the upside-down view, the man’s vicious mug came within arm’s reach.

At that fishy-breathed face, Felt drew in deep and blew her own breath back at him—

Felt: “—Your breath stings my eyes!”

At the very instant she barked that, Felt swung the knife she had secretly stolen from the man’s waist when he kicked the boy, and added one more scar to the man’s face.

Man: “G-Gaaaah?!”

Caught by an unexpected counterattack, the man clutched his face and recoiled. Naturally, Felt’s body was released; she spun a half turn in midair and landed like a cat on the floor. Just like that, without hesitation she also drove the knife into the top of the man’s foot, and on the return stroke cut the tendon at the back of his ankle.

Letting out a scream, the man toppled over. With this, one leg was useless. At the very least, he would not be able to chase Felt—or so she judged, but—

Thugs: “You little shit!”

Witnessing Felt’s brutal act, the men’s violence was ignited.

Forgetting they had been drinking, faces red with anger, the men surrounded Felt. Like that, knife in one hand, Felt was on the verge of steeling herself.

However, right then—

Voice: “—That’s far enough.”

With a tremendous roar, the door at the tavern’s entrance was blown inward from outside.

Thugs: “…”

What on earth, the men turned their stunned faces toward the shop entrance. What had been blown away was not only the door, but also the thug who had been on watch outside the shop.

The lookout had the whites of his eyes showing, sank with a thud, and was foaming at the mouth, unconscious.

And the someone who had done that slowly stepped into the tavern —

Felt: “So long!”

Man: “Ah?! That brat…!”

Paying no mind at all to the presence stepping in, the instant the men’s attention wavered, Felt slipped through the gaps between them and leapt out the window.

A hastily reaching hand grazed her waist, but could not catch her. Riding that momentum she neatly withdrew from the scene of carnage and burst into a run down the alley.

Felt: “Don’t know who the hell that was, but…”

No matter what they had done for her, she had no interest.

Ignoring whatever was happening in the tavern behind her, Felt ran away at full speed, nothing else on her mind.

4

And then—inside the tavern, right after the blonde girl burst out at full tilt.

Red-haired boy: “I was in the middle of looking for my father, but I happened to see some children fleeing with desperate looks on their faces. So I thought I’d ask to hear what happened…”

As he spoke, the blue-eyed boy gently brushed back his own red hair.

At the sight of that boy, the men were struck speechless—no, to be precise, only the man who’d been given a fresh wound on his face was screaming in pain.

Hearing that man’s groan, the red-haired boy knit his brows in sympathy,

Red-haired boy: “As for that person, I think you should take him to a clinic. It would have been nice if I could have used healing magic, but I have absolutely no talent for magic.”

Whether he was playing dumb or truly not seeing the situation at all, the boy’s attitude was aloof. As the thugs exchanged glances at that, the boy suddenly murmured, “Huh,” and—

Red-haired boy: “Are those crates over there yours? The mark on the boxes looks like a seal I’ve seen before.”

Thugs: “…”

Red-haired boy: “…I see. It seems you won’t listen nicely.”

The moment he mentioned the crates stacked in the corner of the tavern, the thugs' eyes changed. Sensing that keenly, the boy shook his head.

Then he moved on his own feet to stand before the entrance, and with his small body blocked the way.

Red-haired boy: "I recommend you surrender. —I am very bad at holding back."

Thus, with as much sincerity as possible, the boy tried to persuade the thugs.

The answer to that persuasion was simple and clear: each of them gripped his own weapon and, inch by inch, encircled the boy.

—The red-haired boy lowered his blue eyes and let out a short breath.

5

Waiting until things had cooled down and then returning to the tavern, Felt's eyes went wide in surprise.

Felt: "That is…"

Sneaking, lying flat on the roof of an abandoned house to peek at the tavern's state—of course she did so, because around the tavern there were many men who were probably guards.

They were carrying the unconscious thugs out from inside the tavern and tossing them onto the bed of a handcart. Since the slum's streets were not wide enough for dragon carriages to enter, for hauling loads they had to rely on handcarts.

It was not only the thugs being carried out; the crates that had been in the tavern—the target the men had stolen from the dragon carriage and that Felt and the others had been aiming for—seemed to be going along with them as well.

As expected, Felt held back an inward click of her tongue at how there had been no such convenient thing as those being overlooked, and she stared fixedly, waiting for the guards and the handcarts to leave.

In the middle of that—

Red-haired boy: "…"

Felt: "—!"

For just an instant she felt her eyes meet those of a short person who had come out of the tavern, and she shrank down. The red-haired person she had glimpsed for a moment kept their gaze aimed for a while toward where Felt was hiding, but was soon called by another guard and shifted their attention away.

After a little while like that, the figures and presences of the guards receded—

Felt: "They're gone, huh."

Climbing down from the roof, Felt peered into the problematic tavern.

It was a fairly spacious interior, but apparently there had been quite the brawl inside; compared to when Felt had last seen it, it looked much more ravaged. Since every one of those thugs had ended up in custody, there would no longer be anyone using this place as a hangout.

With a "good grief," Felt shrugged her shoulders and stepped out of the tavern. Then—

Felt: "—Ah."

Right in front of the entrance, her eyes met those of the boys peeking from a narrow alley. They were the lot who had left Felt behind and run off first.

All of them alike could not hide their surprise that Felt was unharmed. Alongside the relief there, something like guilt and remorse also peeked through, and—

Rom: "—Get lost already, you brats!!"

Boys: “W-Woaaaah—!!”

In the next instant, a shout loud enough to make the whole slum resound rang out, and the boys fled as if leaping away.

At the sight of the boys running off like startled rabbits, Felt’s eyes went round. Then, atop Felt’s head, a large palm she was used to feeling settled down.

Rom: “I did that because you did not look like you wanted to talk, but… was that meddling?”

Felt: “…Nah, you helped. It was, how do I put it, one of those complicated things.”

Rom: “What’s complicated about it. Do not get carried away, little girl.”

Saying that as he roughly patted Felt’s head was Old Man Rom. Casting a sidelong glance at the giant frame that had come to stand right beside her, Felt let out a long breath.

Felt: “They invited me, and I tried to steal valuables from the tavern thugs… but I blew it. They sold me out, and I was this close to dying.”

Rom: “You say the most outrageous things so offhandedly… In that case, did you want to get a bit of payback?”

Felt: “Payback, huh…”

At Rom’s testing way of putting it, Felt thought a little.

Felt: “The thugs stole goods from a rich man’s dragon carriage. Then we tried to steal valuables from the thugs, and since I was the newcomer and just right for it, they abandoned me. …Hey, Rom-ji, isn’t that super infuriating?”

Rom: “Infuriating, you say?”

Felt: “Both the ones who abandoned me and the ones they were targeting are weak and poor. Is there any story more unsalvageable than this? Cowards preying on cowards.”

In this story, the only ones who were well-off were the noble or merchant who had loaded the luggage onto the dragon carriage in the first place.

Even for that noble or merchant, in this city, in this country, they were not first or second in standing.

Those at the bottom snatching from those at the bottom, hurting each other because they could not help it. It was a ridiculous tale.

Felt: “So then, am I supposed to hurt them back and call that payback for what they did to me? That’s playing right into poverty’s hands. No way in hell.”

Rom: ““Playing into poverty’s hands,” you say the strangest things!”

Felt: “Hah? It’s not something to laugh at!”

Rom: “No, it is strange. Wahahahahaha!”

Stamping her feet, Felt, at the age of seven, bit into the absurdity of this world. Hearing Felt’s anger, Old Man Rom laughed from his throat, sounding truly delighted.

Then, having laughed heartily, Old Man Rom rubbed his bald head and looked back at the tavern behind them. The interior was in utter disarray, with many traces of bloodstains and damage, but—

Rom: “If we clean it and repair it… hmm, it may be just right as our castle.”

Felt: “…We’re going to live here?”

Rom: “It is about time the current ramshackle place reached its limit. This place is spacious. With it this large, it would be good to start some kind of business. Contrary to appearances, I have a broad network.”

Felt: “Well, your frame is about twice the size of a person’s, too.”

At what Felt said, Old Man Rom relaxed his cheeks in high spirits with a “You said it.” Seeing Rom looking like that, Felt too somehow had the churning in her chest subside.

Then, looking around the interior now in utter disarray, Felt narrowed one eye and—

Felt: “We’re gonna sell stuff and buy stuff or what. …If so, at first, same as always—things we fixed up from what we picked up, or selling stolen stuff?”

Rom: “That would be the easiest to realize. Yes, since it will be a place to sell found items and stolen items, one might say… Stolen Goods Warehouse.”

At Old Man Rom clapping his hands as if to say “brilliant idea,” Felt thought, “Isn’t there a better name?” but, catching sight of his bright expression out of the corner of her eye, she could not say anything.

Instead of saying anything, Felt turned her back on the empty tavern and looked out over the townscape.

The slum sinking into the sunset sky, its blazing red scene burned itself into her eyelids, and the things that had happened today, the thoughts she had drawn from what had happened today, she etched into her heart.

Felt: “If I’m going to take revenge, then I’ll take revenge on poverty. Watch me, poverty.”

—Someday I’ll make you bawl, she swore that to the sunset.

Chapter 4:
Bonds of Ice / Seven Years Ago / Crusch Camp

1

???: “Th-Th-Th-This is terrible, Ferris! Crusch and my elder brother might end up getting married! Wh-Wh-Wh-What should I do?!”

As always, Ferris wondered why this person could never calm down, watching the blond boy who had burst into the room.

Panting and in a fluster, the boy who appeared had blond hair, red eyes, and a neat face marked by little fangs at the corners of his mouth. He was still only thirteen years old; more than masculine gallantry or sternness, childish innocence overflowed from him, and he wore an air that naturally soothed people’s hearts.

That was no exception for Ferris—no, with Ferris it worked even more strongly. After all, Ferris was exceedingly fond of this person, Fourier Lugunica.

If asked who he loved most in this world, with a heart-wrenching resolve he would choose Crusch—but he liked Fourier enough that he would have to shake him off to make that choice. —Since he would never hesitate with anyone else, it was a special case.

That said, such thoughts were disrespectful, so he would never say them aloud.

Because Fourier was royalty of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, the actual child of the current King, Randohal Lugunica, and a most noble personage who bore the title of Fourth Prince.

Be that as it may—

Ferris: “…Your Highness, is it meow-meow this time? Please calm down, purr-lease.”

Fourier: “How could I possibly stay calm! Were you even listening to me?! It's Crusch and my elder brother getting married?! What am I supposed to do?!"

Clinging to Ferris's slender body, Fourier looked up at him with a face on the verge of tears. Being told to keep one's distance with someone like that was difficult. No matter how much Ferris tried to maintain a proper distance, Fourier would crush that distance in an instant.

It was a casual manner of dealing quite unlike that of royalty, but Ferris did not dislike being treated as a friend. On the contrary, to be honest, it made him so happy deep down that he could not say anything.

Even now, he patted the head of the clinging Fourier and soothed him with a gentle "There, there."

Ferris: "Even so, Your Highness's older brother is…"

Fourier: "It is Brother Zabinel! He is the First Prince, so in due time he will become King! Which means, at this rate, Crusch will end up Queen Consort!"

Ferris: "Wow, with Prince Zabinel…"

At the unexpected name, Ferris made his flaxen cat ears tremble and fell into thought.

Even Ferris, for all his connections, had no acquaintance with Zabinel Lugunica, the First Prince. He did at least know that he was about eight years older than Fourier and over twenty.

Ferris: "In high society marriages, an age gap is nothing uncommon, you know. Since Crusch-sama is the daughter of a Ducal Family, it would not be strange at all as a story…"

Fourier: "Then would I not do as well?! I am in the same position, am I not?!"

Ferris: "Well, Ferri-chan would of course love to root for Your Highness's side, too~"

As Fourier shook his shoulders back and forth, Ferris narrowed his yellow eyes. Wilting under that gaze, Fourier asked, “Wh-What is it?”

Fourier: “Why look at me like that? If you have something to say, then say it!”

Ferris: “Then, with all due respect… Your Highness, if you feel that strongly, please hurry and propose directly to Crusch-sama. Ferri-chan would be happier that way.”

Fourier: “Gnuhaa!”

Told to say it, Ferris said it—and Fourier sprang back, his face turning bright red. Blood rushed to his face until it seemed steam might rise, and he took deep breaths over and over.

Fourier: “How could I say it so easily! First of all, I have yet to fulfill my vow! Until that is fulfilled, p-p-p-proposing is…!”

???: “—Your Highness, you were here?”

Fourier: “Hiaaaaa—hk?!”

Startled by the voice from behind, Fourier leaped straight into Ferris’s arms. But Ferris’s slender arms could not support Fourier’s sudden weight.

Ferris: “Kyaa—hk!”

Fourier: “Mm, Ferris!”

Ferris ended up being pushed down by Fourier; his arm was suddenly seized, and his body was pulled in with a yank. Then, just as he should have fallen to the floor, his body was supported; fearfully, Ferris opened his eyes, and—

Crusch: “Are you unharmed, Ferris? That was close.”

Ferris: “C-Crusch-sama…?”

Right before his eyes was the face of his mistress, Crusch Karsten, wearing a relieved smile. Then Ferris realized he was in his mistress's arms, being carried in a princess carry.

Even if it had been on the spur of the moment, Ferris's eyes widened at having put his lady's hands to trouble.

Ferris: "I-I'm so sorry, Crusch-sama! To trouble you like this for Ferri-chan…"

Crusch: "There is no need to apologize. If you are safe, that is best. Besides, you are light."

Ferris: "Crusch-sama… I love you."

Crusch: "And I you."

Still held aloft, Ferris was moved to tears by his mistress's kind words. Swept up in the moment, Ferris confessed his love, and Crusch nodded without a trace of hesitation.

At Crusch's gallant, dashing figure, Ferris's heart pounded—

Fourier: "Wait wait wait wait, this is not right, is it?! While I am sitting on the floor on my butt, do not gaze into each other's eyes and flirt! I am lonely!"

Crusch: "My apologies, Your Highness. …Shall I lift you as well, Your Highness?"

Fourier: "Mm, you are a very stalwart woman! But I am also a boy, so I have a pride that would be hurt! If it were the other way around, perhaps—but being carried is a bit too much!"

Declaring that with gusto, Fourier tearfully got to his feet on his own. Applauding that sight, Ferris was gently lowered from Crusch's arms.

Then, anew, Crusch turned her gaze to Fourier with a "Well then."

Crusch: "So, today you visited Ferris first rather than me. I was surprised to hear Your Highness's voice from downstairs. I have been terribly rude in greeting you so late."

Fourier: “N-No, there is no need to apologize, is there? It is only that I came scurrying in quick steps to Ferris’s place. I simply could not sit still any longer…”

Crusch: “So urgent a matter with Ferris?”

Fourier: “Mm. The truth is, my brother and Crusch are ma—”

Crusch: “Ma?”

Fourier, about to let the main topic slip out casually, cut off his words. But since about half of them had already flown out, there was no avoiding Crusch’s suspicion.

Fourier’s face grew damp with cold sweat. His red eyes wavered, seeking help from Ferris standing at Crusch’s side. However, Ferris could only shake his head.

Before they could discuss any counterplan, Crusch had arrived because Fourier’s voice had been too loud. To be honest, Ferris already thought that they had no choice but to confess.

Let him use the momentum to propose, and the two whom Ferris adored would be joined. For the time being, how about that flow—Ferris looked at Fourier with eyes full of prayer.

Receiving that gaze, Fourier caught his breath. And then—

Fourier: “The truth is, my brother is insisting that he wants to duel Crusch!”

2

Ferris: “Your Highness, why did you say something like that?”

Fourier: “Do not look at me like that! I am reflecting deeply as well! Behold! The cold sweat on my back has not stopped all this time! My throat is getting parched…”

Handed a water jug and a glass, Fourier downed the water with the gusto of a traveler tasting his first drink in days. Watching him out of the corner of his eye, Ferris sighed.

Was switching the topic from marriage to a duel in order to cover it up really such a good idea?

Ferris: “At the very least, it seems Crusch-sama was pleased, but…”

Fourier: “Crusch is gallant and earnest. That is greatly attractive as well, but at this rate will she not end up suddenly challenging my brother to a duel?”

Ferris: “It would be a problem if it came to that, so please handle this properly, Your Highness!”

Fourier: “O-Of course! If anything were to happen to Crusch because of this, my future blueprint would be thrown into great confusion!”

For the moment, it was the turmoil of that “future blueprint” that continued to stir the situation up, but Ferris did not comment on that.

To begin with, the origin of the matter was the talk of marriage between the First Prince and Crusch that Fourier had brought. Honestly, this was the first Ferris had heard of it, so he was more than appropriately surprised. Only, Fourier had been about a hundred times more flustered than Ferris, which had allowed him to calm down a little.

When there is someone more agitated than oneself, one’s heart, strangely, settles.

Ferris: “By the way, regarding the problematic match between Crusch-sama and the First Prince… where did you hear that?”

Fourier: “Y-Yes. In fact, I happened to overhear Father and my elder brother discussing something at the castle. Since my brother has passed twenty years of age, it is about time he needs a match.”

Ferris: “Well, at his age it would be natural for him to have a fiancée and the like. But for that to be Crusch-sama…”

No matter how you looked at it, Ferris found it dubious.

This certainly did not mean that Crusch was unfit to be Queen. To begin with, Fourier's feelings were obvious to everyone except the person in question, Crusch herself, so Ferris could not imagine the King, the First Prince, and Meckart, who was Crusch's father, arranging such an unreasonable match.

Fourier did not have such a rash temperament, but depending on the case it would not be strange if the two of them accidentally eloped abroad. In that case, what would become of Ferris?

Ferris: "If you would let me accompany you, Ferri-chan would be very happy. Ah, but but, if Crusch-sama were to become Queen Consort, would that not be very cool in its own way…?"

Fourier: "Wait wait wait wait, Ferris! Are you my enemy? Are you going to turn against me?"

Ferris: "Ahem. No, that is not the case. It is just that when I picture Crusch-sama sitting beside the throne as Queen, that alone makes my chest feel full…"

Fourier: "I beg you?! You truly are my only lifeline!"

That the Fourth Prince of the kingdom had only one person he could rely on was questionable, but being the one relied upon did not feel bad.

Drawing a short breath, Ferris said,

Ferris: "Understood. Leave this matter to Ferri-chan. I shall risk life and limb and show you I will manage something!"

3

Ferris: "Crusch-sama, do you have a fiancé or anything?"

Crusch: "That's rather sudden. What's this about?"

In the garden, Crusch, who had been swinging a wooden sword, widened her amber eyes at Ferris's question. Turning back and wiping the sweat at her neck, she looked so gallant that Ferris nearly found himself gazing in admiration. However, the image of

Fourier’s tearful face rose on the inside of his eyelids, and Ferris steeled his heart.

Putting off admiring Crusch for later, he insisted, Ferris: “It’s an impurrtant matter.”

Ferris: “It’s very late to bring this up, but Ferri-chan intends to serve at Crusch-sama’s side for life. If that’s so, when Crusch-sama marries, I’ll be serving that person as well, right? When I thought about that, I just couldn’t get to sleep at night anymore…”

Crusch: “I see, that makes sense. However, in that case it was a groundless worry.”

Ferris: “What do you mean?”

Shaking his flaxen cat ears, Ferris waited for Crusch to continue. Then, with no particular strain, Crusch said,

Crusch: “I have no fiancé. Strictly speaking, it isn’t quite so clear-cut, though…”

Ferris: “Just when I was about to say “Yay!” and be happy, you go and get vague. That’s unlike Crusch-sama—so what do you mean?”

Crusch: “Right. I suppose I can tell you. — In fact, I used to have one.”

Ferris: ““Had”… a fiancé?! And who was it?”

Wanting to gather as much information as possible, Ferris tried to uncover the truth of Crusch’s hidden fiancé. At his retainer’s forward-leaning stance, Crusch, unusually, hesitated and said,

Crusch: “…The Prince.”

Ferris: “—Pardon?”

Crusch: “Do not make me say it again. Prince Fourier was my fiancé.”

Ferris: “…”

Stroking her own green hair and averting her gaze, Crusch murmured. Hearing that, Ferris, while captivated by Crusch's feminine gesture, was swallowed by a storm of questions in his heart. —That Crusch and Fourier had originally been engaged, huh.

Ferris: "Um, then, why was it dissolved…?"

Crusch: "That was merely following Prince Fourier's instruction. You know that the Prince and I have, from before, a vow regarding the sword."

Ferris: "Uh, that, yes."

When she mentioned the sword vow between Crusch and Fourier, Ferris nodded reluctantly. The promise exchanged between the two had originally been an oath Fourier made her swear so that Crusch, who bore a strong interest in matters like swordsmanship and dragon-riding, would not have femininity forced upon her. Unless Fourier could defeat Crusch with the sword, Crusch would not have any unwanted femininity forced upon her. In other words—

Crusch: "His Highness took my feelings into account and volunteered to play the villain. To answer those feelings, I could only accept his proposal with sincerity."

Ferris: "…So you refused the role of the Prince's fiancée?"

Crusch: "His Highness made that promise to me. I must answer it."

With a bashful smile, Crusch said that, and Ferris was left speechless. In short, it was Fourier's self-destruction. He had brought it upon himself. To go further, the dissolution of the engagement was also Fourier's fault; it was a prime example of tying himself up in his own rope.

Ferris: "Crusch-sama… whatever future awaits us, will you keep Ferri-chan by your side forever?"

Crusch: "Of course. At this point, there is no way I would let you go. And on your side, do not think you can get away from me."

Ferris: "Crusch-sama, Ferri-chan is already head over heels~"

Honestly, just getting those words out of her was enough to satisfy Ferris.

4

Ferris: “So, with that, let us decide on the date for the duel between His Highness Zabinel and Crusch-sama.”

Fourier: “How did it come to that?! What became of that reassuring declaration?!”

Ferris: “I am sorry. Meow-aybe I just could not stand watching Your Highness spin your wheels…”

Having finished his fact-finding with Crusch, Ferris reported the circumstances to Fourier.

That said, he kept from Fourier the fact of the dissolution of the engagement that had existed between Crusch and Fourier. From what he had heard, that matter had apparently not been conveyed to Fourier.

In fact, if Fourier knew as much, a great many things would change. Probably, perhaps, surely even Fourier would—so Ferris wanted to believe.

At any rate, if he were to hear that there had been an engagement with Crusch he himself had not known about, and that it had been dissolved because of his own words and deeds, the Fourier Ferris knew might well faint.

Even Ferris, as expected, felt sympathy that the engagement had been quietly dissolved.

Ferris: “Well, as for the part where you have been a hopeless wimp the whole time, Ferri-chan is angry at Your Highness.”

Fourier: “Even I— even I am making efforts, you know? Only, when I stand before Crusch and at the moment I try to convey the fullness of my feelings, my face flushes, sweat comes out, my words catch, Crusch is so lovely I cannot look at her directly, and it all turns into utter chaos.”

Ferris: “That is… Hearing that makes Your Highness unbearably cute, though.”

Even Fourier, who was always brimming with baseless confidence, could not triumph over the sickness of love. That sweetly pricked at Ferris’s heart, but, taken literally, he could not allow him to lean on that.

Ferris: “At any rate! Since Your Highness spouted whatever came out of your mouth, you must properly take responsibility. Crusch-sama, too, thrilled at crossing swords with the First Prince she has never sparred with, is preparing in very high spirits.”

Fourier: “Hm, I very much want to see that Crusch. I do, but in fact there is good news as well. While you were working hard, it is not as though I was doing nothing, you know?”

Ferris: “Wow, really? Then, that “good news” is…”

Fourier: “Mm. In truth, my elder brother’s marriage partner was not Crusch. It seems he is to become engaged to the granddaughter of Azah Febry of the Council of Wise Men. I was relieved.”

Breaking into a broad smile as if to say “What a relief—” Fourier beamed. However, upon hearing that explanation, Ferris’s face turned sour. At that reaction, Fourier tilted his head with an “Huh?”

Fourier: “I had assumed you would rejoice together with me…”

Ferris: “No, um, I am happy, you know? Very happy. But then, what was it meow, exactly, that Your Highness heard?”

At the point he had heard from Crusch, because the dissolution of the engagement with Fourier had been offered from Crusch’s side, the match with the First Prince had rather gained in reality. For that to be overturned all at once, there had to be a corresponding reason.

At Ferris’s doubt, Fourier scratched his cheek and said, “About that —”

Fourier: “I overheard Father and my elder brother talking and took it for granted they meant Crusch. But apparently, from the very start, that was not the case.”

Ferris: “…What exactly were His Majesty the King and His Highness Zabinel talking about?”

Fourier: “Mm. That for my brother’s marriage partner, they must choose the foremost woman in the kingdom. Which is to say, I ended up certain they meant Crusch!”

Ferris: “Your Highness, hurry up and propose to Crusch-sama—!!”

It goes without saying that Ferris’s furious bellow laid Fourier flat. And that was that.

Epilogue:
Bonds of Ice / What Happened After

Subaru: "—So yeah, that's how Cinderella teamed up with the three little pig brothers, beat the seven dwarves, and successfully brought Princess Kaguya back safe and sound from Onigashima."

Saying that, Subaru finished telling the grand epic that had followed a bafflingly complex course. Then, peeking with his eyes half-open, he gauged Emilia's reaction as she listened.

Emilia, with her violet eyes moist, gently set a hand to her own cheek and said,

Emilia: "…I'm glad. It was a story where everyone could end up happy. Partway through, I was super worried it might turn out to be a sad story."

Subaru: "Well, I could've steered it into a downer, too, but I'm a happy-ending supremacist. Also, I prefer it when there aren't any dyed-in-the-wool villains. Which is why the seven dwarves had their own motives."

Emilia: "Yeah. I never realized the seven dwarves were trying to protect Onigashima for Princess Kaguya's sake…"

Listening to Subaru's thoughts on storytelling, Emilia exhaled in relief as she stroked her ample chest and grew pensive. In the middle of that, she glanced at Subaru and said, "Ah, but,"

Emilia: "If I remember right, I asked you to tell me your story, and then partway through it turned into something completely different…"

Subaru: "I mean, I thought about going the route of embellishing and adding more meat to it, but I figured the hook wouldn't be good. How to put it… no matter what you mix into black paint, it still ends up black…"

Emilia: “Uh, uh, did I ask something weird…?”

As Subaru shook his head—no, no—Emilia felt a little relieved.

She had been the one to beg him, but Subaru was the one who’d veered off topic. She had kind of thought maybe there was something Subaru didn’t want to talk about, so he told a story like the one just now instead.

Puck: “But it was a blood-stirring, flesh-leaping kind of spectacular blockbuster, you know. Subaru, maybe you’re cut out for a job like storyteller?”

Emilia: “Ah, I think so too. Subaru’s suuuper good at talking.”

Subaru: “Storyteller… bard—then I’d overlap job-wise with Liliana. Still, compared to being a gadabout who can’t meet the conditions to change class to Sage, it might have more of a future.”

Emilia: “Sorry, I don’t really get what you’re saying.”

Hand at his chin, Subaru sank into serious thought, and Emilia cocked her head. Sometimes, the things Subaru blurts out are incomprehensible.

Each time, Emilia reflects that she hasn’t studied enough, but according to Pack and Ram, that apparently isn’t because of any lack of study. Complicated.

And then, with Emilia furrowing her shapely brows like that—

Subaru: “Whoops, not good. Look at the time already. A traveling merchant’s supposed to come today.”

Emilia: “A traveling merchant… they’re coming all the way to the manor?”

Subaru: “They said they’re coming by dragon carriage from a ways off. Well, the snow’s melted a lot, so at least the roads aren’t all slushy—count your blessings.”

At Subaru’s words, Emilia nodded in agreement. Given yesterday’s conditions, the roads had still been a bit snowy, so coming by dragon carriage would have been quite a chore.

Thinking about it that way, it was sad that the snow and the snow statues were melting, but it had been necessary.

Subaru: “To-To-To—speak of the devil.”

Suddenly, the bell announcing the visitor’s arrival rang out, and with a mop in one hand Subaru headed for the door. Then he stopped, turned just his head back toward Emilia, and said,

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, what’ll you do? Wanna go say hi?”

Emilia: “Me? I… hmm, maybe I’ll pass. I’m not ready for greetings and all.”

Subaru: “Yeah? With you, Emilia-tan, you’re totally cute even in that loungewear, so it wouldn’t be a problem… no, it would be a problem. Too cute. A family heirloom blade should be kept sheathed until its moment.”

Nodding to himself like that, Subaru waved to Emilia and headed for the entrance hall. Seeing his back off, Emilia felt a little grateful for Subaru’s thoughtfulness.

Probably, he’d been considerate of Emilia’s feelings—how hard it was to bring up.

Puck: “Isn’t that giving Subaru a bit too much credit?”

Emilia: “That’s not true. Subaru’s a good boy. I…”

Puck: “Lia’s a good girl too, you know? She’s my pride and joy of a daughter.”

Emilia: “Yes yes, thanks.”

Floating softly, Puck perched on her shoulder, and Emilia responded perfunctorily. Hearing that, Puck covered his face with both hands in mock lament, but Emilia didn’t engage.

Then, after pondering just a little, she quietly started toward the direction Subaru had gone.

Puck: “Huh? Changed your mind after all?”

Emilia: “No, not exactly. If I go out there… I might end up startling the traveling merchant, right? I’m just going to take a teeny, tiny peek.”

Lately, those who had come to the Roswaal Manor were bards, chefs with first-rate skills, or that mage who really wanted to give Roswaal a piece of their mind, so Emilia herself was very interested.

Of course, she wouldn’t be let down even if it was just an ordinary, unremarkable traveling merchant—but—

Emilia: “Sneak, sneak…”

Given what she’d just said to Subaru, it would be awkward if she were found, so she moved her feet quietly. Reaching a spot from which she could look down over the entrance hall, Emilia peered gently beneath her.

In the hall, the visiting merchant was already spreading out the goods he’d brought. Subaru and Rem were both together, studying them intently.

The traveling merchant seemed to be a young couple. While the husband unloaded the luggage from the dragon carriage, the woman—presumably the wife—was explaining the products to Subaru and Rem—

Emilia: “—ah.”

In that instant, Emilia’s violet eyes flew wide, and a sound slipped from her lips before she knew it.

Seeing Emilia’s reaction, Puck called to her, Puck: “Lia?” But Emilia couldn’t answer that voice. She couldn’t take her eyes off her. —Not the merchandise, but the woman.

Among the couple who had come as traveling merchants, the young wife's face struck a chord of déjà vu.

—Suddenly, an old, subzero memory flashed across Emilia's mind.

It was back when Emilia had only just woken up in her homeland's forest, when she still knew nothing about her looks, about her power, about anything at all; a family being attacked by a witchbeast.

And there, after seven years had passed since then, was the girl, now all grown up.

Subaru: "Even so, doing the traveling merchant thing as a married couple sounds tough, huh."

While Emilia stood frozen in shock, downstairs Subaru and the others' conversation picked up steam. Even now, Subaru smiled at the merchant couple and had just broached that topic. In response,

Merchant's Wife: "That's true."

With a faint smile, she continued,

Merchant's Wife: "But I love traveling… it's also for this person's dream. My father and mother encouraged me, too, and I intend to follow him for life."

Subaru: "…Heh, red-hot. That's ridiculously lovely."

Merchant's Wife: "Yes."

Answering bashfully, the wife drew Subaru's gaze of yearning. At his words, her smile deepened and a faint blush on her cheeks made her look all the more endearing.

Seeing that, and then hearing what was just said, Emilia drew in a sharp breath. Then she turned on her heel and left the entrance hall quickly; only after she had put sufficient distance between herself and it did she let that breath out.

Puck: "Lia? What's wrong all of a sudden? Are you really okay?"

Emilia: "…Hey, Puck. That girl just now said her father and mother encouraged her to be a traveling merchant, right? That must be something recent, don't you think?"

Puck: "Huh? Mm, well, I guess so? They looked like a young couple; I think they probably married recently, too. …Why? What about it?"

At Puck's puzzled head tilt, Emilia squeezed her eyes shut. Then she slowly lifted her hand and, with it, struck her own face hard.

Smack smack.

With a dry sound, a tingling sensation ran through her, and Emilia's eyes opened.

And—

Emilia: "—I'm glad. That girl, and her family, they're doing well."

Puck: "…I don't really get it, but that's something that makes you happy, right, Lia? If so, then I'm happy that you're happy. Good for you."

Emilia: "Yeah, I feel suuuper relieved. It's something I'd been wondering about all this time."

Because she hadn't told even Puck about it, this truly had been Emilia's secret alone.

Back in her homeland. In a time when she still knew nothing, there had been a family she had frightened; she hadn't been able to confirm what became of the parents and their little daughter.

Now that she had unexpectedly learned it, Emilia felt her heart grow clear.

Emilia: "Hehe, somehow, right now I feel like I could just float up and fly through the sky."

Puck: "Then we're matching, huh. Napping above the clouds feels great, you know."

Emilia: “Wow, really?”

Laughing like that, Emilia and Puck strolled leisurely down the manor’s corridor.

There was a spring to their steps. It wasn’t as though a weight that had been on her heart for years had been lifted—but still, it felt just a little lighter.

—Because she could feel such a gentle feeling, it seemed like she could hold hope for the future that lay ahead.

END

Another Memory Snow

Chapter 1:
The Oni Sisters’ Memory Snow

1

“—That is all, Sister. I have finished changing your clothes.”

Saying this, the blue-haired girl—Rem tapped her sister’s shoulders from behind as she sat before the dresser and then inclined her body to bring her face next to her sister’s.

The pink-haired elder sister—Ram, bore an extreme resemblance to her save for their hair and eye colors. However, Ram was much more wonderful, her beautiful countenance was dignified and unshakeable.

Rem was always telling herself that she too had to follow Ram’s example as she admired her elder sister’s elegance.

However, even Ram’s dignified elegance was shaken this morning—

“…Thank you, Rem. But even this amount of clothes will not suffice, not nearly.”

“Sister…”

Ram’s voice trembled as she muttered this, the reason being the temperature which was so cold the room’s windows were turning white as they froze.

The Roswaal Manor was suffering an out of season cold wave at the moment, and there was even a little snow falling outside the frozen windows. The exterior of the mansion was turning white as snow enveloped it, one look at this would be enough to understand the extent of the cold this abnormal weather produced.

On especially cold mornings such as this one, merely getting Ram out of bed was quite the struggle in itself. With Rem’s desperate persuasion and cooperation from Ram who loved her little sister, they were at long last able to finish changing her clothes.

Perhaps one might think of it as exaggerated, but Ram’s condition as she shivered from the cold was truly pitiful to look at.

Even Rem who wasn’t particularly bad at dealing with the cold was unable to stay in her usual maid outfit which exposed her back and shoulders, instead opting for a thicker maid outfit which was intended for colder seasons—The ice season. And Ram, who was even weaker against the cold than Rem, had gone beyond that as she donned earmuffs and covered herself with a blanket in order to endure the cold.

“Are you alright, sister? It wounds Rem’s heart to watch you suffer like this.”

“Yes, I suppose it would. With only this much warmth, it would be impossible for Ram to work like she usually does. Rem, please embrace me from behind. I would like to receive some warmth.”

“Yes! If you’re okay with Rem!”

Obeying Ram’s request, Rem firmly embraced her elder sister from behind. Stretching her arms to the limit, it was as if she was trying to completely wrap up Ram’s body.

Ram rested her head against Rem’s chest as she heaved a long, deep sigh in her younger sister’s embrace.

“Haa, I can feel your love, Rem… Perhaps we should just stay like this until the sunshine starts pouring in.”

“Umm, Rem is glad to be of use to you, sister, but judging by these weather conditions I am unsure if there will be any sunshine at all today.”

“Well then, I suppose we have an excuse to cling to each other all day long.”

“Fufu, we cannot do that, sister. No matter how cold it gets, we are still the maids of this mansion.”

Smiling at Ram's somewhat spoiled words, Rem nuzzled her cheek against her sister's head which was in her chest. Ram sighed again as the sensation ruffled her pink hair.

"I have heard that sighing means you're letting your happiness escape. Subaru taught me this."

"Is that right? But unlike Barusu who is freezing to death alone, Ram is currently wrapped up in your kindness and warmth. Thinking of the difference in our level of happiness brings about a sense of superiority, doesn't it."

There was no problem at all even if she lost a bit of happiness by sighing, Rem couldn't help but admire her sister as she boldly declared this.

Regardless, considering the situation, the idea of Subaru freezing to death wasn't one she could laugh off even as a joke.

"It seems Subaru has been feeling quite cold as well these past few days…"

"Calling him weak would not even begin to describe him, after all. His ability as a servant is completely lacking, and he is utterly unable to adapt to his surroundings. I do wonder what exactly his strong point is supposed to be."

"You and Subaru, the two of you are the source of Rem's strength."

"I would have been happy about that if I weren't placed on the same level as Barusu."

With her lips relaxing, Ram donned a faint, wry smile as she cast her eyes in the window's direction. The freezing window was covered in white fog, and the mansion's front yard on the other side was barely even visible, but—

"—Does Lady Emilia intend to feign ignorance even with this much snowfall?"

"Umm…"

"Master Roswaal is overlooking it, so Ram, noble as she is, has elected to remain silent as well, however this situation is definitely one brought about by Lady Emilia… Or rather, the Great Spirit, is it not?"

"…Lady Emilia isn't particularly suited to deception, after all."

When she heard Ram's deduction, Rem forced a smile as she murmured this.

The extreme chill that had been assailing the Roswaal Manor for the past few days—The reality of the situation was that almost everyone in the mansion had seen through it, and knew what exactly was causing it.

The Great Spirit who accompanied Emilia, bearing the form of a cat, had entered his magical release period.

"I suppose his degree of freedom within this mansion is not quite what it was back in the forest. To think that he would cause this cold because of that… Ram feels she has gotten caught up in quite the troublesome situation."

"That's true, isn't it. But it is definitely possible to learn from one's mistakes. Even Rem was completely hopeless when she first came to the mansion, and would always trouble sister and Miss Frederica."

As she thought back to how incompetent she was in the past, Rem looked like she was going to turn red to her ears.

She definitely didn't think she was flawless even now, but she was even worse back then. Considering this, she thought it was only natural that a spirit arts user and her Great Spirit would mess up like this because of the sudden change in their surroundings.

"Furthermore, thanks to this cold, I can see Subaru all wrapped up in fluffy clothes, it is very cute."

"Mm, I can't overlook what you just said. If it's about being wrapped up in fluffy clothes, surely Ram is more than a match for him. And if it's about cuteness, it is definitely an overwhelming victory for me."

"My sister is wonderful. But Subaru is important to me as well."

"How stubborn."

Ram's response was short, but her expression was gentle and her voice was warm. This caused Rem to display a faint smile as well, after which she curtsied where she stood.

"At this rate, Lady Emilia and the Great Spirit should be done with their little secret in a few more days. I am happy to be able to see you in your ice season clothing in the meantime, sister."

"It seems you've developed a talent for sweet talking. Very well, I'll play along."

"Thank you very much, sister. Well then, it is about time we started working. Rem has to go see Subaru too."

"There's no helping it. Thanks to you, I feel like I can move my body a bit. But I must request that you embrace me once every hour."

"Yes, understood. Alright then, I shall see you later."

With a last look at Ram who was bundling herself in her blanket from the cold, Rem headed towards Subaru's room.

"…I ended up saying that to sister, but."

She felt apologetic toward her shivering sister, in truth not even Rem knew how long Emilia and Puck would take to deal with this. She certainly pitied Subaru and her sister for having to deal with this cold, but she was also happy that she was able to see them wear things that they wouldn't normally choose. Rem's feelings were complicated.

"The sole point of anxiety was that the snow might end up crushing the plants and flower beds, but Miss Beatrice somehow managed to do something about that."

As she said this, she took a look out of the corridor's window, at the white snow that was falling in silence. The only thing Rem was worried about was the effect this would have on the plans and flower beds she dutifully trimmed every day, but thankfully they were secretly protected from harm by Beatrice's valiant efforts,

It seemed as though Beatrice was helping Emilia and Puck from the shadows, it looked like she had erected a barrier that would prevent the cold from overflowing into the outside of the mansion.

In summary, the responses of each of the mansion's inhabitants to this cold were as follows: Roswaal was simply waiting and watching, and Ram complied with her master's intentions. Beatrice was supporting them in secret, and Subaru was just being toyed with.

"Subaru, how cute…"

Now that it was this cold, Subaru would suddenly have his snot frozen before he even realized it so Rem definitely had to do something for him. Thanks to this cold, she had a justification to never take her eyes off him.

"But it might be troublesome to my sister if I said this, so I won't."

But even Ram had gone as far to say that she wanted to be embraced once every hour which was awfully cute of her. Rem was already satisfied with that much.

Even if this cold were to persist for a few more days, she wouldn't mind in the slightest, that was how she felt.

—With a spring in her step, Rem was the one enjoying the mansion's chilly weather the most.

2

But unfortunately for her, that modest, wicked wish of hers would not last long.

Because when Subaru realized that his windows were frozen, his snot was turning into icicles, and his neck was producing creaking sounds when he turned it, he set about searching for the culprit with vigor and soon exposed Emilia and Puck's involvement.

And then the fact that this was happening because of Puck's magical release period, the fact that Beatrice was supporting them in secret, and the fact that Emilia really did seem to be trying to keep this a secret.

Having discovered each person's involvement, everyone gathered together to think of a solution to this problem. But as expected, the one who spoke up was Subaru.

"This is the grand opening of the first Chikichiki—The Roswaal Manor sponsored snow festival!"

As Subaru loudly declared this, Rem secretly burned his profile into her heart.

"Sister, all of the villagers from Earlham have gathered in the front yard. The Chikichiki snow festival shall soon begin."

"…'Chikichiki', please stop using that nonsensical term."

Ram, who was wrapped up in her blanket, warned Rem who had come to wake her up.

The time seemed to fly right by, and it was now the morning of the snow festival Subaru had proposed.

The cold weather Puck had brought about caused snow to cover the mansion grounds, the snowfall was especially heavy in the courtyard, and produced a genuine snowscape the likes of which one wouldn't often see even in the Ice season.

Within this snowscape, there were a number of faces one wouldn't usually see around the mansion. They were villagers who inhabited Earlham, having been invited to the snow festival, they were showing their readiness to participate in the snow sculpture making.

Since almost everyone from the village had shown up, the mansion was extremely lively.

"This is yet another one of Subaru's personal virtues, after all."

"They're probably just aiming for the prize… But there's likely no small number of villagers who are just like Barusu in that they just want to have fun with this festival."

In response to Rem's strangely prideful words, Ram who was stirring in her bed spoke with dissatisfaction. As she listened to her sister talk, Rem threw open the room's curtains.

She definitely couldn't say the skies were clear, but there was a world of difference from the gloomy weather they had these past few days. Rem had heard Subaru and Puck discuss this, that Puck would create all the snow they needed in the night, and keep the temperature at a level where it wouldn't melt for one day.

"But to freely manipulate the weather to this extent… The Great Spirit really was a Great Spirit after all."

"I understand what you're trying to say, but that irreverent way of putting it is quite cute, Rem."

"I apologize. It's just, he is always frolicking with Lady Emilia, frolicking in Lady Emilia, playing with Subaru, basking in the sun… That was how he appeared to be."

To be honest, Rem's impression of Puck wasn't much more than that of a talking cat.

Now that she had actually seen his power, she could finally understand his true nature.

"—That Great Spirit, could not possibly be such an easygoing being."

"Sister?"

"I was just saying that it would be ideal if he really was satisfied just sunbathing and eating small fish like a real cat. Anyway, what do you wish to do, Rem?"

Rem tilted her head, unable to hear her sister's low voice, and Ram asked her this in response. Having been asked what she wanted to do, Rem pondered for a bit.

As one of the mansion's maids, Rem figured she probably had to help out with the snow festival. However, Subaru who was full of vigor told them to leave the festival in his hands, his breath wild.

Thanks to him, Rem did not have much to do today beyond her usual chores. Even Ram could probably go back to sleep like she always wanted to.

However—

"—Rem, please tell me what you're thinking. Who exactly do you think I am?"

"Ah…"

"Has Ram ever bluntly rejected her cute little sister's wishes I wonder?"

Dressed in her night clothes and with a blanket draped over her head, Ram looked all the more dignified and her smile pierced Rem's heart. Rem then looked downward and clenched her fist tightly,

"Sister, Rem would like to participate in the snow festival with you. Because it would be our first time together in such a snowscape."

"I see, there's no helping it then. Now matter how terrible the cold may be, I shall do it for your sake."

When Rem built up her resolve and said these somewhat spoiled words, Ram immediately took her blanket off and stepped off her bed onto the floor. Rem's eyes widened when she saw this, "Is it really okay?"

"Even though you struggle with the cold."

"If it's for your sake, Ram can easily overcome a struggle or two. In exchange, please help Ram change out of these clothes. Because of the cold, merely standing up pushed me to my limit."

"Y-Yes! Right away, sister!"

Ram’s face was noticeably paler than usual as she extended her arms, and Rem rushed to the closet in a hurry. Ram’s lips relaxed as she watched her flustered little sister from behind.

“The snow isn’t bad either, huh… I can’t accept this cold, though.”

She whispered as she saw her little sister in high spirits befitting her age.

3

“Just where exactly did we go wrong? Why was our score so low…”

“As you can see, it was clearly due to the Barusu parts. As expected, we should have devoted our efforts to reproducing Master Roswaal’s likeness.”

Standing next to each other, the sisters gazed upon their collaborative project, ‘The Magnificent Master Subawaal Sculpture’.

The snow festival ended on a high note, and the snow sculptures the villagers had left behind were scattered all around the mansion’s courtyard. In the end, a girl from the village had been chosen as the winner, and she went home delighted after Subaru personally handed her her prize.

Even the other villagers were already satisfied with having participated in the snow festival, so they did not raise a fuss over this decision and it could be said that the event came to a close peacefully.

Surely, the fact that Rem and Ram could leisurely take their time evaluating their work like this was also thanks to this.

“Unbelievable, twelve points in total…”

“Hardly any difference from Lady Emilia and Miss Beatrice…”

Heaving white sighs, the sisters dropped their shoulders in unison.

An outside observer might consider their words and crestfallen attitudes disrespectful, but fortunately, these two were the only people around and there was no worry of anyone overhearing their remarks.

Incidentally, Emilia and Beatrice had received nine and seven points respectively.

Regardless, their sculpture created through great effort, ‘The Magnificent Master Subawaal Sculpture’—Which Ram and Rem, upon entering the snow festival, combined their wisdom and strength to create ultimately ended up receiving mixed reviews.

The craftsmanship itself certainly wasn’t inferior to any of the other favorite candidates. But for some reason, all three judges had unfavorable impressions of it and they ended up with a subpar score. But among the three, since they knew what scores Subaru and Roswaal had given them, it could only mean that the anonymous judge had given them the lowest score of all which was rather annoying.

“This anonymous judge, just who exactly… It’d probably be wise not to investigate.”

“I suppose so. More importantly, let us look for points we can improve so we can prepare for the next snow festival. How about making it more like Master Roswaal like you suggested, sister?”

“I do not wish to force concessions out of you, but I am certainly interested. Give it a try.”

“Yes. Here, like this, and this…”

They were particular about the height as well, so she used a raised platform in order to make some subtle adjustments, starting from the facial region. Since the base of the statue was already complete, Rem’s dexterous hands reshaped it in the blink of an eye.

Her heart was pained as she scraped off the Subaru parts she had recommended so highly, and made the Roswaal parts Ram had wanted more prominent. And thus, ‘The Magnificent Master Roswaal Sculpture’ was formed.

“It is complete, sister! What do you think? I believe it looks rather good.”

“…Yes, I suppose so. Just as I’d expect, Rem. You’ve done well.”

Hopping off her raised platform, she stood next to Ram and admired the snow sculpture.

She was tooting her own horn, but Rem felt that she had successfully reproduced Roswaal’s image which she had been familiar with since childhood. She thought for sure Ram would be delighted as well, but—

“Sister, does it not suit your taste?”

“That is no fault of yours, Rem. It is little more than a sentimental problem.”

“Sentimental…”

“I was just thinking. Even with such a well-made sculpture, what Ram wants is the real thing after all.”

“…”

Ram crossed her arms and spoke, and Rem fell silent as she felt the intense emotions those words contained. She then once again looked at the snow sculpture, and understood Ram’s feelings towards what was ultimately a fake Roswaal.

Rem agreed completely with her sister’s words. A fake was a fake after all. It was no match for the real thing.

“Well, this is unfortunate, but shall we go ahead and destroy it?”

“…I don’t think it’s necessary to go that far, though.”

“Y-You think so?” Since it’s not the real thing, I thought we might as well…”

“You have these moments now and then, huh. It’s very cute.”

Rem was embarrassed, having jumped to an erroneous conclusion, and Ram gently patted her head. As she felt Ram's kindness, Rem abandoned the idea of making a Subaru snow sculpture in secret.

"By the way, you said something rather interesting. Something about the next snow festival."

"Ah, that's…"

"Do you believe there will be another snow festival, Rem?"

At point blank range, so close they could feel each other's breaths, Ram asked her this.

To Ram who was weak against the cold, the circumstances surrounding a snow festival were probably terribly unpleasant. But at least she enjoyed the snow festival itself, Rem allowed herself to think this.

Her proof was the fact that Ram was smiling more than usual.

"Even the people of Earlham liked the snow festival itself, and we were unprepared this time, but with advance notice, it would be easier to put on an exciting event. Furthermore…"

"Furthermore?"

"Should these peaceful times continue, the Great Spirit's magical release period shall arrive again sooner or later. When that happens, I think this sort of snow festival would be the best way to deal with it."

"…"

With a sour expression, Ram fell silent at Rem's words.

The anguish in Ram's heart was clearly visible. However, reality was rather harsh on Ram.

Regardless, Puck would need an opportunity to release his pent up mana and a snow festival would prove useful for this, surely even Ram had to admit that much.

Furthermore, supposing their next opportunity were to appear like this—

“It would be proof that the times are so peaceful that the Great Spirit does not even have an opportunity to use his mana, isn’t that right.”

“That was what Rem was thinking. Um, sister…”

Rem timidly looked up at her sister to ascertain her reaction. On the receiving end of her gaze, Ram closed her eyes for a moment, and then let out a small sigh.

“At the very least, Lady Emilia will be staying with us for the next three years due to the royal selection. It would be difficult to say nothing of the sort will happen again in that time.”

“…”

“So I don’t think it’s a bad thing to be prepared for when that time comes.”

“Sister…”

Rem’s eyes sparkled as she heard Ram’s kind summation, she then leaped into her sister’s chest and embraced her. Rem’s joy caused Ram’s lips to relax as she nuzzled her cheek against her sister’s blue hair.

“Seriously, stop it with that childlike joy.”

“I apologize. But I’m so happy. Getting to play with my sister like this… Even back in the village, it didn’t happen very often.”

When they were children, the sisters spent almost all of their time together. However, spending their time together did not mean they played around particularly frequently.

This was in part because Ram received special treatment as the hope of the demon clan, but simply put, it was also because Rem’s lack of talent rendered her incapable of keeping up with Ram.

Freedom from such roles and the collapse of the invisible wall between them—Both of these were due to the burning of their village and the loss of Ram's horn, so she definitely couldn't just be happy about them.

"How foolish."

"…"

Perceiving the slight sense of guilt that had manifested within Rem, Ram pulled her little sister into her chest. Rem yelped in surprise as Ram caressed her back and then looked up at her elder sister.

With her face right in front of her, Ram formed a smile full of affection that she would only show to Rem.

"Ram is your elder sister. So whatever you want to say and whatever you want to do, tell me. After all, weren't you able to do that just this morning?"

"…Umm, uh."

"Rem."

Rem was unable to get her words out, so Ram gently called to her to help her relax.

This sound brought Rem an immense sense of relief,

"I would like to do this again, I want to enjoy another snow festival with you, sister."

"—. What a hopeless kid. Since this is a request from my little sister, I'll do it just for you."

Ram said this in an exhausted tone, as if sighing, as she ever so gently stroked Rem's head.

Rem quietly closed her eyes as she felt this ticklish sensation against her head and Ram's heartbeat against her cheek.

These troublesome cold days were borne of an unexpected, sudden magical release period, but even so—

“—Rem feels so nice and warm thanks to you and Subaru.”

“I would have been happy about that if I weren’t placed on the same level as Barusu.”

—And so, in that white courtyard filled with snow sculptures, the demon sisters shared this memory of a snowy day.

Chapter 2:
Crusch Camp

1

“Lady Crusch! Lady Crusch!”

In the capital of the Kingdom of Lugunica, a loud voice resounded through the Karsten family’s secondary residence.

With their short skirt and flaxen cat ears fluttering, a lovely character dressed in a blue toned outfit dashed through the corridor with light steps.

Out of breath by the time they reached the room they were looking for, this person flung the door open and barged in.

“Lady Crusch!”

“—You’re being rather boisterous, Ferris. Is something the matter?”

Greeting the cat-eared intruder was the calm voice and countenance of a beautiful woman.

This voice came from the imposing woman sitting at the desk in the room, using her quill to attend to her duties. The woman’s voice contained a tiny trace of affection only known to those close to her.

And receiving this affection directly, the other person smiled gently.

“Yes, Lady Crusch! It’s incredible, it’s shocking, it’s astonishing, I tell you!”

“The fact that you’re emphasizing it to that extent with such a lively voice, I must say I’m expecting something quite significant indeed. So, what kind of tale shall you amuse me with?”

“Myumyuu, please don’t put that sort of weird pressure on me, Lady Crusch. Ah, but Ferri’s got something so surprising it’ll blow those expectations away.”

Saying this, the cat-eared person passed by the desk and went to the window on the other side of the room. They then pulled the thick curtains covering it to the side—

“Please have a look outside the window, Lady Crusch.”

“This is, snow… huh.”

White crystals of lightly falling snow danced down outside the window. The woman—Crusch Karsten narrowed her amber eyes at the sight of the snow descending from the somewhat cloudy sky.

“Quite unusual around this season, is it not. Is this snow not natural?”

“Yes. I think there might be someone using a huge amount of magic or something. It seems the aftereffects of that magic have spread all the way out here.”

“I see. A being capable of manipulating the atmosphere to this extent would certainly be quite the threat, but…”

Rising from her desk, Crusch approached the window which had its curtains opened. Releasing the window’s latch, she gently pushed it open, after which a bit of snow and wind blew into the room.

Gazing at the wind and snow, Crush suddenly smiled,

“Their intent does not appear to be malicious. Furthermore, this degree of snowfall is not severe enough to prove inconvenient. That being the case…”

“That being the case…?”

“…I will be able to enjoy this rare sight with you with no worries.”

Saying this, Crusch turned around and gently took the slender hand that was by her side. Their eyes widening at Crusch’s smooth movement and gesture, the cat-eared person—Ferris’ cheeks reddened,

“Jeez, your splendor is driving Ferri crazy, Lady Crusch…”

And he muttered this with a resigned expression.

2

When he entered the courtyard with Crusch who had donned an overcoat, he found that there was already someone there.

Looking up into the skies, gazing at the snow falling from the faint clouds was an old man whose entire being was clad in heroic spirit, the sight of whom caused Ferris' eyes to widen, "Huh"

"Old Man Wil, why are mew out in the courtyard?"

"Mm, it's you, Ferris… And also, Lady Crusch."

Reacting to his call, the old man—Wilhelm turned around and bowed to them as they approached. In response, Crusch who had linked her arm with Ferris' nodded solemnly.

"It would seem the two of you have come to see the snow as well."

"That is correct. From the way you put it, it would appear that you too have come here for the same purpose."

"Yes. In this kingdom, it is very unusual to see snow in this season. The skies do not seem to have undergone any significant change so I would not say it is anything to worry about, but it also wouldn't do to act after something has already happened."

"Nyaow, don't go saying such boorish things. I had such a great mood going too, coming out here with Lady Crusch so we could watch the snow, just the two of us."

Ferris pouted as he complained about Wilhelm's response. Ferris' dissatisfied gaze caused Wilhelm to force a smile as he offered a slight bow, "My apologies."

"If that is all, let us leave it at that. I do not wish to be a bother to the two of you, thus I shall return to my quarters and await further instructions…"

"Wait, Wilhelm. Your words did not contain any lies, but… I can see that you haven't told us everything."

"…"

"Let me warn you, it would be useless to feign ignorance. I possess the divine protection of wind reading. According to this divine protection, there's definitely a certain something behind that attitude of yours."

As Wilhelm moved to excuse himself, Crusch detained him and pointed to her eyes.

—The divine protection of wind reading was a special ability Crusch possessed, one that truly deserved to be called a heavenly blessing. By reading the natural flow of wind, the user could even comprehend others' emotional states, a divine protection granted only to a special few.

Simply put, lies would not work on Crusch.

Wilhelm's expression changed to one of hesitation when Crusch called him out with her powers of observation. Seeing this unusual reaction, Ferris mischievously narrowed his yellow eyes.

"Hmmm? Gosh, Wil, trying to keep secrets from Crusch? Don't you think it's shameful to have that sort of attitude towards your master to whom you offered your sword and pledged your loyalty?"

"Mm, that is…"

"Or are you perhaps scheming something you can't tell us about? Oh no, Lady Crusch, Ferri's scared… Uyan."

"Good grief. Do not tease Wilhelm so much. I understand your true intentions, but it would be asinine to create unnecessary misunderstandings with that sort of behavior."

Crusch poked Ferris' cheek, surprising him, and then offered him a faint smile. And with Ferris still grasping her arm, she turned to Wilhelm and gave a brief apology, "Excuse us."

"It can be difficult to understand, but Ferris does not bear you any ill will. I hope you have not taken offense at his words.”

“Aah, not at all. I believe his grievance was only natural. You need not be concerned, I do not believe I would misunderstand his true intent either way.”

“I see, that is good then. Now then, what of your ulterior motive?”

“…I am simply no match for you, Lady Crusch.”

Saying this, Wilhelm shook his head with a slight smile. The old man then narrowed his blue eyes and looked up at the snow falling overhead.

“Under the guise of caution towards an unusual event, I was indulging in reverie. The sight of snow brings to mind a conversation I once had with my wife.”

“…Seems to me like just about everything reminds you of your wife, old man. There’s nothing new about that.”

“It is rather embarrassing that I have no response to that.”

With his eyes still on the snow, Wilhelm simply accepted Ferris’s statement without attempting to deny it.

Flashing through those blue eyes of his were deep love for his dead wife—Theresia Van Astrea, and nostalgia for those bygone days.

—His feelings towards his dead wife were a major factor in Wilhelm’s decision to become the royal selection candidate Crusch’s vassal.

Fourteen years ago, the kingdom carried out the ‘Great Conquest’ in order to subjugate one of the Three Great Witchbeasts, the White Whale. Back then, Wilhelm’s wife, Theresia, was one of the people recruited for this mission, and she ultimately died a heroic death in battle when the kingdom’s forces were defeated.

Ever since that day, Wilhelm had continued to chase after the White Whale in order to avenge his wife. Crusch had promised to help him fulfill this most cherished desire of his, and thus made the ‘Sword

Demon' her vassal.

Understanding how dangerous the path would be, Crusch chose to answer this old man's wish.

"But it kind of sucks to always hear your love stories about your wife whenever something happens."

"My apologies. My life only truly began when I met my wife. No matter where I look or what I feel, memories of my wife well up on their own."

Ferris puffed his cheeks, and in response to his dissatisfaction, Wilhelm lowered his eyes and stared at the cat-eared knight head-on as he continued, "That is,"

"Something you understand yourself, surely?"

"—Wil, you coward."

Having a precious feeling in his slender chest touched upon, Ferris spoke resentfully.

Wilhelm had declared that his life only began the moment he met his wife. And that Ferris himself should be able to understand that feeling well.

Ferris'—Felix Argyle's life began when he met Crusch Karsten. Imprisoned by his real parents, Ferris meaninglessly lived on in a half-dead state until she brought him to the outside.

Was it not natural to vow to offer such a person everything they wanted?

"Get a hold of yourselves, you two. We do not know how long this snow will last. Enjoy it while you can."

"Yeees, Lady Crusch. Ferri's just gonna toss this Wil stuff out and forget all about it!"

Crusch stopped her servants' trivial quarrel, and when she did so Ferris raised his hand and hurled some more abuses. Wilhelm smiled bitterly at this, and Crusch continued, “Well then,”

“Might I ask what sort of memory with your wife you were looking back on as you gazed at the snow?”

“Yes, of course. I find it rather delightful that you would wish to learn about my wife.”

As Wilhelm smiled broadly, Crusch faced him with a gallant expression. As he watched this from the side, Ferris couldn’t suppress the bit of envy that welled up within him.

It might have looked as though Crusch was simply saying this sort of thing to show her consideration and magnanimity towards her servants, but that was not the case, she proposed this because she was genuinely very interested. It was not because she had an interest in others’ love affairs as was commonly said, the reason was a lot simpler.

It was because Crusch was a swordswoman who admired the Sword Demon Wilhelm Van Astrea.

Setting Crusch’s true feelings aside, Wilhelm whom she had asked to tell her about his memories nodded a few times and then quietly turned toward the end of the courtyard.

In his line of sight were some shrubbery being covered in bits of snow, and a small flower garden.

“My wife was a woman who liked to admire flowers. Regardless of what kind of flower it was, she would say they each had their own good points so she did not choose any one type to admire. But even so, she did have some flowers that she was particularly attached to. For instance, the yellow flower Diana which can spread its roots in any environment.”

“You occasionally see them in the capital too. What was it that she liked about them?”

“My wife once planted the seeds of this flower in an area of the capital that was still under construction, and it was there that we first met.”

"I shouldn't have asked…"

Ferris had intended to collect himself, but pouted when he ended up poking at the core of Wilhelm's love story.

"I have a number of other stories relating to flowers, but there is one among them connected to snow. Back then, my wife would say that there was a special flower that would only bloom on snowy days."

"A flower that only blooms on snowy days, is it."

Wilhelm's words caused Crusch to quietly look at Ferris. In response to her questioning amber eyes, Ferris thought for a bit but ultimately shook his head.

Unfortunately, Ferris did not know of any flower fitting that description. However, supposing that such a flower really existed,

"That is definitely something I would like to see at least once."

"My wife would often say that whenever there was snowfall. Back then, I was a terribly simple man and the blood flow to my head was lacking. I cannot say that I have improved in this regard even now, but I was even worse back then. Whenever there was snowfall, I would get my friends and secretly head out to search for that flower, trying hard to find it as I hoped to surprise my wife."

"Heeh, how unexpected. You have friends, Wil?"

"—At this point, it might be more accurate to say I had friends. In their eyes, my present self would probably seem to be much more of a fool than the simple fellow I was back then."

He slowly shook his head, his tone somehow seeming unshakeable as he spoke. In response, Ferris shut his mouth, aware that he said something he shouldn't have.

Thus, an awkward silence fell over the courtyard. —And then,

"Raise your head, Wilhelm. Have you forgotten the words you said when you swore loyalty to me?"

Crusch spoke firmly, she would not tolerate this sort of silence from Wilhelm.

Maintaining her dignified stance, Crusch stood right in front of Wilhelm's eyes,

"I am aware that you have sacrificed many things to get here. It cannot be helped that you have some lingering attachment to those things. However, that is not something you must regret."

"…"

"Regret is something that always seeps into you regardless of what choice you make, like stagnant dregs. I am no exception, nor are you, nor is anyone in this world. These dregs cannot be avoided, but they only produce hesitation when you look beyond the results of your choices. Therefore, I shall firmly declare this right now:"

Pausing for a moment, Crusch took some time to select her next words,

"—Today is not a day for crying and mourning."

"…"

Ferris wondered if anyone beside him had noticed the fleeting emotion that filled Crusch's words.

For an instant, Ferris' heart was torn apart by Crusch's strong words, and he felt a sadness so powerful it could rend his soul itself.

The throbbing of the powerful conviction that pushed her spirit to such noble heights—Just who besides Ferris knew that the source was none other than the dregs known as 'regret' that Crusch herself felt.

"Not today, is it. —Aah, seriously, at this age I even have to be taught how pathetic I am."

Suddenly, having reflected on Crusch's words, Wilhelm hung his head deeply. The old swordsman then faced Crusch once more and nodded with a face that suggested he was no longer tormented by his troubles.

“It is just as you said, Lady Crusch. I lack the qualifications to even stand here. And despite that, I am still here. —Therefore, today is not a day for regret.”

“Correct… Although I do feel that it was Ferris and myself who left you hanging.”

“C-Lady Crusch… Ferri was intentionally staying quiet about that too…”

The serious atmosphere that had enveloped the courtyard was dispelled by those few words from Crusch. Sensing this, Ferris dropped his shoulders at his master’s overly honest nature.

And thus, intentionally acting like he normally did, he buried the earlier impact deep in his heart.

Watching their exchange, Wilhelm smiled gently,

“Once I avenge my wife, I could search for the elusive snow flower she dreamed of. I am able to think this way thanks to you and Ferris. —I thank you.”

And so, in that courtyard’s gentle snowfall, the Sword Demon discovered yet another way to offer his wife his love.

3

“A flower that only blooms on snowy days, you think something like that really exists?”

“From a commonsensical perspective, it is difficult to imagine a flower blooming in the snowy seasons. However, in the end it is just that, difficult to imagine. A spirit’s influence or some special terrain… There exist a number of possibilities.”

As she said this, Crusch looked closely at Ferris who had grabbed her arm, and fell silent.

Close enough that they could feel each other’s white breaths, Ferris clung tightly to Crusch’s firm warmth. He knew that this was disrespectful, but he also knew that Crusch’s magnanimity was such that she would forgive it.

Like this, Ferris would occasionally wish to feel Crusch’s existence so strongly it hurt.

This was a coping mechanism to deal with the sense of loneliness the memories of his early childhood brought about, this had completely settled down over these past several years, but—

“…You’re thinking about his highness.”

“…Yes.”

Ferris responded to Crusch’s question with a slightly lower tone of voice and nodded.

Between the two of them, the word highness referred to just one person—The fourth prince of the Kingdom of Lugunica, and a young man who was irreplaceable to them, Fourier Lugunica.

He was a precious person who unfortunately left this world due to the epidemic which ravaged the royal family and ultimately became the impetus for the royal selection. —Well, if it really was the case that everyone in the nation mourned his loss, perhaps Crusch wouldn’t have even participated in the royal selection.

“…”

Wilhelm had left, Crusch and Ferris were now alone in the mansion’s courtyard.

The Karsten family’s secondary residence in the capital—Even here, they had countless memories of Fourier. Cheerful and affable, he loved Crusch and Ferris from the bottom of his heart, memories of such a person.

“But we never did see the snow with his highness. I was under the mistaken impression that no matter what, no matter when, there would be a memory of him accompanying it, but…”

"…"

"There are still any number of things we haven't done with him, and sights we haven't seen with him."

That was the source of the regret Crusch was trying to tell Wilhelm about, this was something only Ferris who had spotted her momentary agony knew.

Crusch's current goal was to bolster the public's sentiment toward the now deceased Fourier.

He had never directly confirmed what exactly she felt towards Fourier. However, Ferris was not heartless enough to ask her such a cruel question.

So he simply wished to share her feelings towards the person her eyes were looking back on.

"If his highness were here, he'd definitely be having the time of his life in the snow, huh. And after playing in the snow with all his heart, he'd be exhausted and come down with a fever the next day."

"It is certainly easy to imagine such a thing happening. It is as if I can hear him imploring you to cure his fever."

"Yeah. Perhaps he would simply dislike the cold, and complain about it. After all, wasn't he always bundled up in fur because he was so sensitive to the cold?"

Fourier would often choose to don an overcoat made from animal pelts. Ferris' impression of him caused Crusch to lower her eyes ever so slightly.

"…Because he was the lion king."

"Eh?"

"No, it's nothing. I was just admiring the fact that you were watching him so closely."

"Well, it was obvious that I would. After all, this is his highness we’re talking about here.”

He really stood out. He was always so boisterous, and he just wouldn’t leave you alone.

Loved by all, he was always the center of attention, and for some reason seeing this made her proud.

—She liked him. She loved him. It wasn’t about the relationship between a man and a woman, she felt that way toward him as a person.

“Speaking of snow, there was that marriage proposal his highness suddenly received from the Holy Kingdom. Judging by how desperate he was back then, perhaps he really was no good at dealing with the cold…”

“Lady Crusch.”

As Crusch reminisced nostalgically, Ferris shook his head. Releasing Crusch’s arm from his grip, Ferris stared at her face to face.

It was his own joke that started it, but he did not want her to misunderstand Fourier’s feelings. He loved Crusch from the bottom of his heart. So,

“The reason he turned down that proposal was not because he disliked the cold. His highness…”

“—I know.”

“Lady Crusch…”

“I know, Ferris. —I know.”

Repeating these words any number of times, Crusch would not allow Ferris to finish that sentence.

And Ferris realized too late that what Crusch was showing him was not rejection, but consideration.

If at this moment, Ferris were to speak Fourier’s feelings in his place, the wound in Crusch's heart would once again bleed.

And they would both have no choice but to admit that the responsibility for that lay with Ferris.

"…"

The two fell silent, and the snow falling from the sky slowly piled up on their hair and shoulders.

The freezing snowflakes caused Ferris' shoulders to tremble slightly. The wind wasn't all that cold, but if they stayed like this they would certainly be chilled to the core.

Perhaps they were no longer in the appropriate state of mind to enjoy the snowy scenery—

"Ferris."

"—a"

As if reading Ferris' thoughts, Crusch called his name and offered him her arm.

In response to this gesture, Ferris hesitated slightly and then timidly took her arm once more.

The distance between them was one they were completely used to, and Crusch gently stroked Ferris' head.

"I wonder how his highness would have taken Wilhelm's tale of that snow flower."

There was no need for them to keep talking about Fourier. But if they decided to avoid the topic of Fourier now, there would be no going back.

Fourier definitely wasn't someone who had only left them with sad memories.

Crusch's attitude was proof of this, and Ferris felt ashamed of his thoughtlessness. He then nuzzled his face against Crusch's shoulder with no hesitation.

"—His highness would definitely go and exaggerate it like crazy, he'd probably say something like how finding the flower means your wish will come true. And then he'd be all excited about going to look for it."

"Aah, I can practically see it."

"But Ferris would stop him by telling him he needs to prepare properly. And then his highness would take it seriously, hear what he needs to hear from a whole lot of people, gather his tools, and then…"

Once they started talking about it, once they started imagining it, they could clearly grasp what Fourier would do, what he would say, and what he would wish for.

—Even now, the fact that he was unable to save Fourier remained in Ferris' heart as regret.

Crusch was the same, so this regret probably would not fade or even lessen.

Fourier's final days could not be called pleasant by any means, they were filled with pain and suffering.

But even so—

"—His highness definitely would have done that sort of thing."

"—Yes, I think so too."

Surrounded by the gentle snowfall, with their smiles undying, Ferris and Crusch spoke of the man who could not be with them now for a long, long time.

The image of the blonde young man bearing a gentle, handsome face manifested in their minds.

—The face they imagined, was forever smiling at them without reservation.

Chapter 3:
Anastasia Camp

1

“Amazin’! This is amazin’! Just look at it, iss’ amazin’! It’s all white!”

Mimi’s excited voice could be heard from out in the garden.

Boisterously dashing out of the porch, the girl opened the iron gate and started running around.

There was the resounding sound of her footsteps as well as a noise that sounded as though she was hopping on the wall and gate.

The animated nature of the girl known as Mimi was nothing unusual at this point, they could imagine what she was up to without even needing to look.

And since Mimi had taken the initiative to rush outside like this—

“S-Sister! It’s dangerous to hop onto places like that! Come on, get down here!”

“Just forget it, brother. There’s no way we can stop her when she’s that excited. More importantly, I believe it would be in our best interest to ensure she does not end up falling.”

“T-Tivey, you’re saying that too…”

Two boys’ voices rushed out, chasing after the noise of her running around. Their exchange couldn’t really be called a discussion since it felt like the conclusion was already decided.

In their voices, one could clearly perceive faintheartedness and resignation just as the contents of their conversation would suggest.

These two voices definitely belonged to Mimi’s two little brothers, Hetaro and Tivey, who were always at the mercy of her innocence.

The two brothers had rushed out into the garden in pursuit of their overly energetic elder sister, wracking their brains looking for a way to stop her.

And then—

“Just what is all this commotion about? What’s got Mimi so excited…?”

Yet another person with an entirely different kind of voice cut in.

That was the voice of a young man, retaining a little of the high pitch from before his voice dropped. The young man had come out here to find out what exactly was causing all of this commotion, and was rendered speechless mid-sentence.

His breath seemed to catch for a moment, after which the young man’s lips parted once more,

“Wh-What is this scenery?! Don’t tell me you lot went and did something… Mugyu!”

“Ohh! Joshua, you suck at dodging! That was a super direct hit!”

His astonished shouting was immediately followed by the sound of him falling onto his behind as he shrieked. He then heard Mimi burst into laughter, and found that Hetaro was at a complete loss, “Aaah”

“Wh-Wh-What…”

“Calm down, Joshua. Sturdy yourself. That just now was our sister’s doing. Unfortunately for you, you’re going to get wrapped up in this.”

“Wrapped up in… Eh, Ehh?! H-Hold on a minute!”

The young man—Joshua desperately called for some restraint in response to this abrupt situation. However, Mimi who prioritized having fun above all else complete ignored him and resumed whatever she was doing with a “Take this!”

Faint sounds rang out consecutively as something rapidly struck the wall and the ground. The three of them desperately ran around trying to escape from this something.

“S-Sister! That’s terrible! That’s so mean!”

“Fuuhahaha! The conditions of a battle are always changing! If you’ve got time to whine, then go ahead and launch a counterattack, Hetaro!”

“Talking is useless, brother. And Joshua, you’re going to be her victim yet again at this rate.”

“Th-This, this isn’t why I came out here… Hii!”

Strained shrieks and joyful laughter overlapped, and the area was turned into a battlefield in an instant. The man who was listening to all of this intently smiled as he heard the nearby garden turn into a fierce battleground.

And then, when he took a look outside the window in the direction the voices were coming from, the reason Mimi and the others were frolicking about so joyously gently descended into his field of view.

“Looks like those kids are having the time of their lives, huh.”

As he looked out the window, the woman who was with him casually addressed him.

The owner of this voice was also the owner of this room in which she was at a large desk, attending to her paperwork. In response to her voice, the man returned his gaze to her and nodded, “Yes.”

“If you find them to be a disturbance, I shall head out and warn Mimi and the rest…”

“Aah, it’s fine, it’s fine. I’ve just finished my work myself. I had completely blocked it out while I was working, so it was a bit of a surprise when I suddenly heard it.”

“Is that so. If so, this might surprise you even further.”

Closing one eye in response to the woman's gentle, elegant smile, the man—Julius Juukulius directed his refined countenance towards the window.

And when he felt her turn in the same direction, he continued,

"—It is snowing, Lady Anastasia."

2

Standing up, she walked over to the window and gazed upon the scenery outside it.

Before her, in the garden of the Hoshin company branch office which was serving as Anastasia's base in the capital, she could see that just as the earlier commotion suggested, Joshua and the three siblings were enjoying themselves as they played in the snow—Although Joshua and the brothers might object to putting it that way. After all, them playing in the snow essentially amounted to just running away from Mimi as she rapidly formed and threw snowballs endlessly.

It was a problem of sentiment for Hetaro, a problem of pessimism for Tivey, and a problem of endurance for Joshua, due to which they were each unable to launch a counterattack against Mimi and were thus forced to remain on the defensive.

Regardless, this game wasn't dangerous enough to warrant a scolding, and Mimi and the rest probably weren't the only ones enjoying themselves in the snowy capital right now.

Even setting aside the fact that this wasn't the right season, it was quite rare for the capital to see snowfall. Surely most of the capital's residents would accept that this was an unusual occurrence.

And the way they accepted it would vary from person to person. This place was no exception—

"—Snow? Why's something so troublesome gotta go and happen…"

In contrast to the tumultuous merriment going on outside, the woman—Anastasia was extremely troubled.

Possessing wavy, light purple hair, adorned with high quality goods even though these were her work clothes, with her beloved white fox scarf wrapped around her neck, she was a woman whose pale blue-green eyes could see through almost anyone.

Her mutter offered a glimpse at her anguish, causing Julius to smile wryly as he perceived this.

“What’s with that face of yours. Perhaps you have something you’d like to say to me, Julius?”

“No, please do not concern yourself. I was simply relieved that the reaction you had when you heard it was snowing was no different from the image of you I had in my mind.”

“I wonder if I can really be happy about what that implies.”

Alluding to the slight change in his expression, Anastasia pouted in displeasure. Regardless, Julius’ words did not really have any hidden implications or anything.

In truth, Julius really was relieved, and he understood too.

That Anastasia Hoshin, the woman Julius Juukulius had recommended for the royal selection which would decide the next ruler, was this kind of person.

One could only naively feel delight at the mention of snow if they were in a position free of responsibility. If one was aware they were in a higher position, they could not simply receive such news with joy. In order to live up to their responsibilities, they would also have to consider what would happen after the fact, and what secondary effects it would have.

“Lady Anastasia, about this snow…”

“Supposing this snowfall continues with no signs of stopping, I guess I’ll have to devise some ways to cope with it. The company’s transportation fees and storage charges are nothing to sneeze at, you know. We do have reserves for winter stored in each location, but perhaps it would be ideal to check out the big cities at least.”

"…"

Linking her hands in front of her chest, Anastasia's expression turned serious as she thought about how she ought to deal with the snow. He couldn't fully read how the abacus of thoughts in her head was moving, but even that part served as more than enough proof that she was qualified to compete for the throne.

"The items in demand will probably change too, the sun's whims sure are troublesome… Julius, there's that expression again. Really, what exactly is the matter?"

Julius was staring intently at Anastasia's face as she agonized over how to best deal with the situation, causing her to frown at him. She felt around her face with her hands and,

"Could it perhaps be that I have some ink splashed on my face? That would be quite embarrassing."

"No, your face bears not a single blemish. Please be at ease."

"The way you put it… Well, if that's the case, what is it that you want to say?"

With a small sigh, Anastasia urged Julius to continue. In response, Julius bowed theatrically and,

"This is somewhat belated, but I shall now offer my report. I had one of my buds, Ia, examine the condition of the sky. According to her, this snow will not last long."

"Can a quasi-spirit really know that sort of thing?"

"It would seem that this time is an exception. It appears that this snowfall is the work of a Great Spirit—Of course, you can rest assured that they did not have malicious intent in doing so, and that this is nothing to worry about."

Saying this, Julius nimbly raised his right arm and announced the contributions of the faint red glow that was perched on it—His contracted quasi-spirit, Ia.

The noble spirit which had accomplished its task somehow seemed to be proud as it brightened its red glow. Seeing this, Anastasia nodded several times, “I see, I see.”

“If you’re saying all of that, then it’s probably no big deal after all, what a relief. But anyway, quasi-spirits sure are convenient, huh. Can they comprehend the sun’s mood at any given time?”

“No, as I just said, this time was an exception. Although, this does not apply if it is a spirit changing the weather.”

“I see. That’s unfortunate. If it were possible to determine the sun’s temperament, that could become a business in its own right…”

As expected of a utilitarian like Anastasia, she wouldn’t give up her pursuit of profit even when it came to the work of a quasi-spirit. Standing next to Julius who was smiling wryly at this attitude of hers, she looked towards the window,

“If it’s not going to be a problem, then perhaps this snow is actually pretty pleasant. Although snow isn’t really something you see in Kararagi…”

“In Lugunica as well, it is rare for the capital to see any snowfall. Of course it would be a different matter in the territories closer to the Holy Kingdom, but it is certainly unusual.”

“And if it were the Vollachian Empire in the south, there probably wouldn’t be any snow in a lifetime.”

The Vollachian Empire Anastasia spoke of had high temperatures throughout the year, and it was known for its exceptionally clear climate barring the rainy season. Most of its populace would probably never see snow in their lives unless they left the empire.

“But even snow can be quite the threat in large enough quantities. Have you ever been to the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, Lady Anastasia?”

“Well, as far as the Albis river goes. Any further would be too harsh for a delicate maiden such as myself, after all.”

Anastasia giggled with a hand against her mouth. However, Julius nodded deeply in response and spoke, “How very discerning of you.”

“Given your current position, perhaps the opportunity might someday come, please do take care when it does. The terrain of Gusteko eats away at those of other lands more than one would imagine.”

“You’re once again speaking in a manner filled with genuine emotion. What, do you have a story like that?”

“…This is a story passed down from when my grandfather was part of the royal knights.”

Giving in to Anastasia’s deeply curious eyes, Julius revealed a story which had been passed down from the era in which his grandfather had been part of the royal knights.

“This is a tale of several decades ago, when the Kingdom of Lugunica was under heavy pressure due to the precarious situation it was in with the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko and the Vollachian Empire. The Kingdom’s royal knights and the Holy Kingdom’s acolyte knights clashed along the countries’ borders, and some of the royal knights including my grandfather were left behind in the snow.”

Gusteko was originally said to be an extremely cold land, a threat to human life with its never ending snowfall and blizzards, and in the face of nature itself the royal knights were forced into a horrendous battle. Julius’ grandfather was among the knights who ended up separating from the main force, ultimately being abandoned in the snow.

“Losing his way, with his body temperature dropping, surrounded by allies who had lost their sanity and fallen into derangement, my grandfather was ready to die. If he really had died back then, I probably never would have been born.”

“That’s quite the scary story. So, how did your grandpa make it back home? In all of that snow, he must have been completely helpless, right?"

"Hah. According to my grandfather, he was saved by some kind of phantom."

"…Phantom?"

Anastasia frowned, her expression suggesting that she didn't quite get it. Julius agreed with this reaction. Because when his grandfather first told him this story, he too had the same reaction.

But his grandfather firmly insisted on the existence of the phantom.

"My grandfather dragged his comrades' bodies as he desperately struggled to escape the labyrinth of snow. Like so, he wandered around in the blizzard… And before he knew it, he was in a forest."

"Forest? You mean a normal one with a bunch of trees and stuff?"

"Yes. However, it was a frozen forest. And it was in that frozen forest that my grandfather met the phantom. When the phantom saw my grandfather and his comrades, it said this."

"…"

The way Julius told this story took Anastasia's breath away as she eagerly awaited the answer.

And then—

"—'If you cause any chaos around my beloved daughter, I will never forgive you.'"

"…Hah?"

"The next instant, my grandfather and his comrades were in an unfamiliar place. But not in a snowstorm, they were in an open plain. After this, my grandfather safely linked up with the royal knights and attempted to report the details of what happened, but he was not taken seriously."

Ever since, this story known as 'The Phantom Father in The Snow' was passed down among the knights in scrupulous detail. It was said that it was all a delusion brought about by the extreme cold and frightfully ferocious snow.

"…Umm, what was that story about again?"

"It was a cautionary tale from my grandfather to teach us of how dreadful snow can be. If it was at all useful to you, I think my grandfather can rest in peace."

"You sure are sincere, huh."

It seemed the conclusion was not to her liking, Julius reflected on his insufficient storytelling prowess in response to her forced smile. However, this story from his grandfather who hated snow had a continuation—

"In truth, I wondered if this phantom that saved my grandfather might have been a spirit. Due to the effects of my divine protection of spirit attraction, I have always felt the presence of spirits nearby from a young age, but… Perhaps that was the reason I was interested in the spirit arts."

"What's with that, it suddenly turned around and became a nice story."

He didn't know whether or not it was a good story, but that he was here now was definitely thanks to that phantom. By saving his grandfather, and becoming one of the reasons he chose his current path.

Supposing that phantom really was a spirit, he would like to meet it someday.

"Well, anyhow. One way or another, your story about snow was pretty interesting. Although I can't really use it as reference for when I head to the snowy regions."

"That… Let us devote ourselves to that when we next get the chance."

"I'll be waiting, I suppose. You went to the trouble of telling me that story, but with the amount of snow we've got right now, it looks like Joshua's going to be the only victim."

Outside the window, Mimi's laughter could be heard even now, causing Anastasia to shrug her shoulders.

Julius' younger brother Joshua was most likely desperately resisting Mimi's snowy attacks even now.

They could no longer hear the screams that had been present until just now, so it seemed he was really concentrating now.

"Maybe he got done in and ended up getting buried in the snow."

"It is me saying this, but Joshua too is a member of the Juukulius family, Lady Anastasia. It is true that he was not blessed with combat ability or stamina, but he has received the same training."

Furthermore, Joshua too had heard their grandfather's tale of his hardships in the snow. Perhaps Joshua had his own feelings towards snow, and measures against it.

But in response to Julius' assertion, Anastasia closed one eye.

"It's good that you love your little brother, but it's a different matter when it makes you misread the situation, isn't that right? To put it in terms of suitability, this is a match to which Mimi is suited and Joshua is not."

"That is… Just as you say."

Even Julius had no rebuttal to what Anastasia had earnestly pointed out.

Certainly, no matter how he looked at it his statement just now was far too biased. In truth, Mimi's ability was at a level even Julius wasn't used to. Unfortunately for Joshua, he was most likely completely outmatched.

"Ah, are you perhaps feeling down? You don't really need to feel that way, though? I don't think the way you want to have faith in others is a bad thing."

“Hah… Want to have faith, is it?”

“Although you could perhaps use just a little bit of self reflection considering that apparent lack of self-awareness.”

Julius’ yellow eyes showed bewilderment in response to these unexpected words.

Wanting to have faith, that was the first time anyone had said anything of the sort about him. As Julius sincerely thought about how he should take this, Anastasia tilted her head, “Don’t ya think?”

“The way you have faith in Joshua is part of it too, at your core, you’re fundamentally a person who believes in others’ potential, isn’t that right? That’s also the reason you became my knight, I’m sure?”

“That… Applies to everyone, does it not?”

“It’s probably true that everyone has a part of them that’s like that. But that’s usually tangled up with a number of ulterior motives. But you, Julius, you don’t have any of that. That’s why, it’s dangerous.”

With her skills refined through innumerable negotiations, there was no one who could see through others’ ulterior motives and true natures as well as Anastasia could.

The reason Julius wished to help her reach the throne was not simply because the insignia recognized her as a dragon maiden, it was because of this nature of his.

Her eyes had deemed that that was the sort of person Julius was on the inside. That he couldn’t earnestly accept this was no different from rendering his own judgement useless.

“Perhaps it really is as you say, Lady Anastasia. To have this danger pointed out by my master, it is a disgrace worth reflecting on as a knight who is supposed to protect those around himself.”

“You really are sincere.”

"But allow me to make one correction. It was not because I was expecting anything from you that I became your knight. Of course, I do hope to see you managing the country's affairs."

"I know, I know."

With a gentle expression, Anastasia urged Julius to continue as he worried about putting it in a way that would be misunderstood. Supported by his master's magnanimity, Julius straightened his posture and continued.

Julius' yellow eyes pierced her pale bluish green ones.

"—The reason I became your knight was because you chose me. From this perspective, could it not be said that you were the one who had faith in me?"

"Haah, I see, I see. Simply put, don't call me someone who wants to put their faith in others, is that what you want to say, my knight?"

"Meaning we are both equal in this regard, that is correct."

"Mm, you actually went and said it."

Anastasia spoke in a teasing tone, and then looked surprised at Julius' answer. She then touched the scarf around her neck, and stroked its fur as she sighed.

"Right, right, I get it. I lose, I lose. We both put our faith in others, and we each have the other's faith put in us, huh. That's kind of complicated."

In response to her words, Julius started to reflect on what he had done, wondering if he had inconvenienced her. But when he saw her expression, he put a stop to this.

Anastasia's smile would not let him do something so inelegant.

"—What's this now! Looks like you guys are having a great time! How about I join in as well, you lil' brats!"

"Kyaa! It's the captain! Amazin', captain! That's an amazin' snowball—!”

“Cap! Captain! That’s kinda dangero… Sister! Here! Over here!”

“Joshua, let’s run away while we still can… Joshua? Joshua!”

“J-Just leave me behind… I don’t want, to become… A burden…”

The tiny space that had formed between master and servant was completely overwritten by the chaotic noise outside.

It seemed Ricardo had barged into Mimi’s snow game. If the huge dogman joined and started throwing snow without holding back, the situation would probably turn all the more chaotic.

“Hah, I can already picture it. Honestly, he never settles down no matter how old he gets…”

“However, I believe that is one of Ricardo’s strengths.”

“Well, I do think he makes a great pet?”

Somehow, this praise for Ricardo caused Anastasia to pridefully puff her chest a little. Finding this reaction of hers charming, Julius once again directed his attention towards the commotion outside.

He heard the loud laughter of the comrades who would fight side by side to the bitter end in the royal selection. This produced a very pleasant sensation in Julius’ heart,

“Perhaps it is a bit late to ask this, but what do you think of snow, Lady Anastasia?”

“Didn’t I tell you right from the start? Depending on the situation, it can block roads and thereby cause the transportation fees to pile up, ruin our storage charges, and change what’s popular, it’s a real pain.”

Anastasia outlined a number of points concerning snow from a merchant’s perspective. However, after she mentioned all of these grievances about snow, she continued, “But,” “If I’m just looking at it, it’s actually rather beautiful, snow.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

Anastasia reluctantly muttered this under her breath, and Julius agreed with her. The knight then slowly turned towards his master, and offered her his hand.

Anastasia stared at this hand.

“Lady Anastasia, would you not like to take a short break?”

“—Fufu, to make your master slack off, what a bad knight you are. You’ll make that ‘Finest’ title of yours cry, you know?”

“If it is for the sake of this moment, I do not regret that.”

Julius answered Anastasia’s teasing provocation with a bold smile.

In response to this answer, Anastasia nodded with satisfaction,

“—Alright then. Just a little.”

And saying this, she took the hand her knight offered her and stood up.

Chapter 4:
Priscilla Camp

1

—He was unable to take his eyes off the profile of the woman who was gazing out of her window.

"…"

Her crimson eyes housed a little surprise, and he noticed that her pink lips emitted some kind of sound.

The woman then stood up in an exceedingly refined manner, and approached the window her beautiful face was directed at.

She freely wore a dress that boldly exposed her chest and back. Forget extraordinary beauty, one would need beauty two or three levels beyond ordinary to properly wear such a dress. The woman effortlessly flaunted this dress, easily transcending these conditions available to only a special few by five levels as she reached out with her fair, slender hand and opened the room's window.

The moment she did, a refreshing breeze blew into the room and scattered the bundle of papers on her desk, causing them to dance around the room.

Surrounded by this scenery of dancing bits of paper, the woman continued to gaze outside without the slightest movement,

"…"

Her lips moved once more and produced yet another sound of some sort.

It was probably the same sound as last time. The man whose attention was completely focused on her profile couldn't quite make out what this sound was—

"Obelisk!"

“—You foolish commoner. Just how many times do you intend to make me repeat myself.”

The next instant, the direct impact to the middle of his forehead caused him to scream as he toppled over backwards. The crimson woman looked down on him with her arms crossed, emphasizing her voluptuous chest—

It was the folding fan that she threw as she turned around that collided with his forehead. The speed and power with which she threw it were no joke, the impact’s penetrating power was such that it might have split the average person’s skull.

Honestly, if it were anyone else taking such a blow, they would almost certainly lose some brain cells.

“Owowow… Just what are you doing all of a sudden, princess. If I weren’t the sort of masked character who always had a helmet on, that would have been a bloodbath just now.”

“Fool. Even I consider my opponents. As if I’d aim for the head if it were anyone besides yourself. If it were Schult in your place, perhaps I would blow on his ear to bring him back to his senses.”

“Oioioi, that’s totally favoritism, isn’t it. Surely even I ought to get a nice, sexy reward now and then. Why am I the only one treated so horribly…”

“It is because you are my jester that I have let you off with this much. If you were some common miscreant, I would have taken your head off. —Or are you perhaps dissatisfied with your current position?”

“Hehh, what are you saying, princess. You can throw that fan at me whenever you want.”

Shaking his head which had received her attack, he gave her a thumbs up and immediately changed his tune. The crimson woman gave a hmph in response to the man’s rapidly changing attitude.

Seeing this, the man who deemed silence to be unfavorable raised his hand, “By the way,” "Back to what we were talking about, why did you suddenly whack my head? The room's got paper scattered all over too, it's all too sudden, isn't it?"

"What, so you really were just staring blankly. Nothing about this is sudden or anything. I called to you twice. You were the one who ignored this entirely."

"…Aah, so back then, that was you calling to me, huh."

Puzzled by this rather embarrassing situation, he tried to lighten the atmosphere with some fake laughter. Contrary to their color, her crimson eyes were cold like a blade. His strategy failed.

"Although I can't shake the feeling that even attempting to calm things down was a mistake to begin with considering this appearance of mine."

"What are you muttering, are you even listening to me, Al?"

"Absolutely, I'm listening, princess."

Picking up the folding fan that was lying by his feet, the man—Al approached the woman and handed it to her.

The part of Al's head which had been whacked by the folding fan was covered by a black helmet. It was thanks to this defense that his head wasn't split in two. He was thankful to the one who had given him this helmet, truly thankful.

Setting that aside—

"Well, I'm sorry about ignoring you and all, but what exactly is the matter?"

"What a hopelessly dull man you are. I personally walked to the window and opened it by my own hand… Do try to imagine for what reason I would have done such a thing."

"…Ventilation, or did you perhaps feel like looking at the sky?"

Neither of these seemed very much like her. But compared to the former, the latter seemed far more likely.

And in truth, the girl nodded in response to his suggestion, “Correct,”

“I came to gaze upon the sky. —You have a look as well, Al.”

The woman indicated the outside of the window with a movement of her jaw, and Al obediently followed her instruction. Standing by her side, he quietly took a look outside. The view from his helmet was unexpectedly decent. Straining his eyes, he directed his attention up towards the faintly clouded sky—

“—Heeh, what a surprise.”

“Is it not.”

As Al admired the sight, Priscilla who was right next to him nodded as though he had taken the words right out of her mouth.

Immediately after, yet another breeze blew into the room, similar to when she first opened the window. The wind once again wreaked havoc in the room, causing her disarrayed stack of papers to dance through the air once more.

However, there was something else dancing along with these pieces of paper, white, fleeting crystals of water—

“—Out of season snow, this must be someone’s doing, is that not correct?”

With that powdery snow reflected in her crimson eyes, the woman —Priscilla Barielle murmured joyfully.

To Al, this voice somehow sounded like she was in high spirits.

2

“But even so, isn’t it really rare for it to snow around this area of the kingdom?”

“That is correct! I believe that this hardly ever happens. At the very least, this is my first time seeing snow!"

"First time, it's at that level, huh. You must be feeling pretty excited then, Schult.

Saying this, Al looked at the pink-haired boy with a gaze as though he was looking at something charming.

The boy's name was Schult, a chamberlain in training working in Priscilla's mansion—Or rather, Priscilla's page who was something like a cherished pet to her.

The person in question didn't really care, but the reason Priscilla originally picked him up when she found him on the verge of starvation was because their eyes happened to be the same color.

Priscilla had stated that if this weren't the case, she most likely would have just ignored him. Even Al understood that she wasn't trying to hide her embarrassment or anything by saying this, her words simply described the reality of the situation.

Amazingly, despite the various hardships he had experienced until now, Schult did not take any strange turns in life and was growing up to be a nice and wholesome boy, it was adorable. Even Al could see that.

"—? Sir Al, is something the matter? Have I said something strange?"

As Al thought this, his gaze caused Schult who was picking up the scattered papers to tilt his head. Al shrugged his sole arm's shoulder at the boy who was presently engaged in his usual chores that weren't even worth discussing.

"No, I was just thinking that it's adorable how you're so wholesome. You probably feel the same way, don't you princess?"

"Do not speak such absurdities, Al. Even supposing he were an infant, it is only natural that he would give his all for my sake. Therefore, Schult's efforts have no bearing on my evaluation of him. The reason I keep him by my side is only because his appearance and bearing are splendid, nothing more."

"That was an incredibly roundabout way of putting it, but basically, you just like the way he looks?"

Priscilla who had given this haughty answer hmphed at Al's simplified explanation. But considering she made no attempt to correct his explanation, it was probably fine to think that it was for the most part accurate.

Despite her attitude, she left the task of cleaning the room to Schult as she sat on the windowsill, idly watching the dancing snow.

"…"

Suddenly, Al realized that he had forgotten to even breathe as he gazed at her profile, captivated.

There was the unusual snowy scenery as well, but to begin with Priscilla's own beauty was already at a transcendent level on its own. There existed beauty in this world which no paintbrush could reproduce, it would be no exaggeration to say that Priscilla was among such beauty, that was simply a fact.

"Well, that's basically what my argument amounts to, so please forgive me."

"I haven't even said anything and you're already making excuses for stealing glances at my profile, you truly are an insipid man. Regardless, do not misunderstand me. I am not so narrow-minded as to lose my temper over such a thing."

"Eh, talk about unexpected. Wouldn't you be like, your gaze is bothersome, zubaaa or something?"

"It is inevitable that men would experience carnal desires at the sight of my beauty, such is this world. If I were to find fault in this, I would have to behead every man in the world. That in itself would be the height of wastefulness."

"Mm, that's some confidence you've got. But from someone at your level, I guess those aren't words to make light of."

Smiling wryly at her display that was both pompous and magnanimous, Al fiddled with the metal at his helmet's joint. With this metallic sound behind her, Priscilla continued to gaze at the outside.

It was also difficult to understand just where exactly her interest was directed, that was the sort of woman she was. It was true that they were experiencing some unusual weather, but Al didn't think that it was the sort of thing you could enjoy looking at for extended periods of time.

"You seem rather passionate about this, princess. Do you have some sort of emotional attachment to snow?"

"It is nothing of the sort. Rather, the issue at hand comes before that… Much like Schult, I too am seeing snow for the first time."

"Eh? Seriously?"

Her unexpected statement caused Al's eyes to widen within his helmet. Next to Al, Schult too looked up at Priscilla with an expression of surprise on his cute face.

"This is your first time seeing snow as well, Lady Priscilla! How surprising! But I am also delighted that we are experiencing this together!"

"You do say some cute things, Schult. I shall pat your head."

"Please go ahead."

As Schult smiled innocently, Priscilla beckoned him over to her and started stroking his pink, fluffy hair. Al sighed deeply as he watched her hand move.

Perhaps annoyed by this reaction, Priscilla's crimson eyes narrowed,

"What is it, would you perhaps like to say something?"

"It's not like I particularly want to say it or anything. I was just thinking about how unpredictable you are. How should I put it, it's kinda weird to say it like this, but you seemed to be the kind of character who knew everything and could do anything, you know?"

“—Hm. Certainly, there can be no doubt that I am a being not far from such a description.”

“I said it myself, but this is my first time seeing someone who would actually accept the descriptors omniscient and omnipotent.”

Anyway, it was a fact that that was the sort of impression Al had of this woman who was so full of confidence.

It probably was a bit too much to say she knew everything and could do anything after all, but even so, he thought that perhaps Priscilla who had both extensive knowledge and excellent analytical ability had seen all there was to see in this world.

That was exactly why he thought that he of all people would be able to catch her interest.

“So it’s quite the surprise to hear that something like snow is a fresh experience for you. Unexpectedly, it would appear that you’ve never had certain common experiences, princess.”

“While I am certainly curious as to what basis you are using to define the word common, you evidently haven’t put much thought into your statement. Rather, the impression you have of me has unexpectedly roused my interest.”

With her hand still on Schult’s head, Priscilla smiled sweetly at Al’s words. Al’s shoulders trembled slightly, as if someone was running their finger down his spine.

Seeing this out of the corner of her eye, Priscilla once again directed her gaze towards the sky,

“I have seen it any number of times in books, but I had never in my life encountered snow. The sight of white snow descending from the skies was ultimately something I could only imagine.”

Snow descended onto the palm she held out. This snow as ephemeral as grains of sand immediately melted in her palm, becoming ordinary drops of water.

Priscilla hmphed having confirmed this,

"It was not quite as wondrous as I had hoped."

"Hoping for something wondrous, you just said something pretty damned cute."

"Fool. Do you not think it disrespectful to describe me as cute. There exist much more fitting words to extol my beauty. Schult, let us hear them."

"Eh? Y-Yes! Umm, umm… Lady Priscilla is really 'elegant' and a 'beauty'!"

"You're quite a fast learner. You used those words well."

Schult turned red in the face as he displayed the knowledge he had only just learned, impressing Al. Priscilla too nodded with satisfaction in response to his efforts.

"Behold, this is the manner in which my servants ought to serve me. Al, you too must exhibit the proper diligence."

"Alright, understood, I'll keep that in mind."

Saluting with his right hand, Al nodded at Priscilla's words, not taking them too seriously. His attitude was probably completely transparent to Priscilla, but she did not say anything about it.

"Fundamentally speaking, they are no different from raindrops it would seem. Dried up water solidifies atop the clouds, and then it is merely a matter of whether it descends as raindrops or snowflakes. Should it become snowflakes, they cling to one another and descend as snow. And they hence melt and repeat this process."

"Heeh, you could have fooled me. Was that written in your books as well?"

"When I see something in person, I comprehend it to its core. This does not extend as far as the minute details, but it is for the most part true."

Seeming bored as she said this, Priscilla pulled her folding fan out of her cleavage. Concealing her mouth by unfolding it, she turned away from the sky and towards Al.

“I told you just moments before. That there can be no doubt that I am a being approaching omniscience and omnipotence.”

“Oh-Ohh, you’re digging that up again, huh. No, I do think that you possess such traits to some extent, but…”

“If so, for what reason did you hold such an impression of mineself? There are of course the beauty and elegance with which I was born as well as my countless other virtues, but among them which was it that stood out most?”

“That’s…”

“Slow. I shall tell you. —It was my intelligence.”

Al faltered, and Priscilla firmly declared this without waiting for his answer.

She was so overwhelming that he could actually feel some heat, causing him to fall silent and bite his lip. Priscilla shouldn’t have been able to see him do this within his helmet, however, she donned a faint, sadistic smile,

“Intelligence, that is the ability to reason which is all that separates mankind from beasts… There are those who say such things, but I do not agree in the slightest. Even beasts in the wild possess consciousness, they possess the instinct to learn, and they possess a life with which to make use of their knowledge.”

“…”

“Intelligence, it can be said that it is a guide which transcends fetters such as sentiment and bonds, and which determines whether one lives or dies. That being the case, beasts too possess intelligence. There exists no qualitative difference between man and beast, to unconditionally deem them beneath humans goes beyond pride, it is simply laughable.”

“Wooow, that’s an absurd argument in itself.”

“Do not try to gloss over this by acting like a clown, Al. I am asking you a question regarding your principles.”

Al tried to shrug in response to her smile, but he suddenly stopped.

From directly before him, Priscilla’s crimson eyes were fixed on his eyes within his helmet.

“Answer carefully. If it is not the presence of intelligence which separates man from beast, where exactly lies the difference between them? What is it that definitively separates them?

Her gaze made Al feel like his neck was burning. Al’s breath halted, and realized all too late.

—That right now, he had been placed at a crossroads far more extreme than he had imagined.

“…”

Priscilla stopped talking and continued to pierce him with her unchanging gaze.

Having stated her theory, she was now waiting for a rebuttal, her attitude as she did so was as composed as ever, but hidden as its edges were a ferocity and vigor that would occasionally flare up.

They weren’t grand, easily understood emotions. However, they were certainly passionate.

This invisible storm of emotion was thrust into Al’s throat in the form of pressure, questioning what he would do next. If he did not choose his words properly, this pressure would quite literally pierce his throat.

The snowfall and their chit chat relating to it, that was all it took to land him in this situation.

He knew from the very beginning how risky it was to stay by her side, and all of that risk was now gushing forth.

“Where lies the difference between man and beast? What is it that separates me from the likes of you?”

The same words, with a small change midway.

Those words declared that Priscilla and Al were entirely different organisms, and seemed to be a sort of ritual to determine the difference that ought to exist between them, causing him to gulp.

He then moved his heavy tongue, and while swallowing his bitter saliva,

“The difference is, the opportunity to refine oneself.”

“…”

“Even beasts learn the connection between life and death. However, the difference between those who live in the wild where failure means death and we who live in more forgiving environments is the presence of opportunities, and whether or not one can act on them. Even though you were born as a sexy cutie, the reason you seemed to be omniscient and omnipotent…”

“—Good. I shall allow it.”

As Al chose his next words, the sharp sound of her fan shutting suddenly interrupted him.

With this sound came a few words from Priscilla, and in an instant, the pressure bearing down on his entire body dissipated. Immediately realizing that he had forgotten to even breathe, Al let the tension leave his shoulders.

Priscilla’s throat hummed with stifled laughter in response to Al’s grandiose reaction,

“Well, how about it. When pushed into a corner, your intelligence serves its purpose does it not? Predicting the future based on your past experience and your relationship with me, it desperately struggles to avoid the worst case scenario. But then, that is an ability beasts also possess. It does not serve as a difference between man and beast.”

“Your jokes are too harsh, princess… You’d be angry if I said that, huh?”

“Of course.”

Priscilla firmly asserted that she certainly was not joking. This caused Al to heave a truly deep sigh after which he started wiping off his damp back which was covered in cold sweat.

“Unlike beasts, humans have the opportunity to actively expand their knowledge. Humans have methods with which to do so. Simply put, read a book. I was not joking or anything of the sort when I told you to be more diligent.”

“So, you’re basically saying that the omnipotent aura you give off is because you read a lot of books.”

“Not even mineself was perfect at birth. There was quite a bit which I learned from ink and paper. In much the same way that one requires flame and a hammer to forge steel, one also requires writing to refine one’s spirit. If one were to lack either, they would only end up as a failure of a human being.”

“…”

“It is not as though I particularly wish to be surrounded exclusively by that which is beautiful. However, I am not so eccentric as to keep by my side those who would by their own negligence reduce themselves to ugliness.”

“…In other words, you’re telling me that you’re tired of my usual act, so you want me to keep refining new ones?”

“…”

The way Al splendidly simplified it momentarily caused Priscilla’s breath to halt. She then let out a small sigh,

“Haha, hahahaha! Well now, to think you would rephrase my words in such a hackneyed fashion. An act of all things! An act, you say! …Kuku, I see you are unwilling to concede your role as a jester.”

“Aaah, I’m glad I could make you laugh. However, princess, I’ve got a few things I’d like to say too. Although your words were so magnificent I kinda ended up getting convinced myself.”

As Priscilla laughed loudly, Al wracked his brain as he continued.

Carefully, but in a manner that wasn’t completely submissive, while remaining aware of who was at his core—

“I’m not your knight or anything, princess. I’ve sworn allegiance to you as your servant, but there’s no point in expecting anything more from me. That would be too heavy a load for the old man going back beyond the Grand Cascade.”

“Oh? Simply put, you do not intend to do as I say, is that it?”

“I do realize that I’d probably have my head taken off if I said that. That’s why I came up with my own compromise back in that chat about acting.”

Declaring this, Al walked towards Priscilla with determination. Standing close enough to be touched by the crimson woman sitting on the windowsill as she looked at him, he threw out his chest.

“In the end, I’m satisfied being your jester. So I’ll keep amusing you in all sorts of ways so you never get bored, princess.”

“…”

“In exchange, I won’t give up on the things I can’t give up on. That is the compromise between my role as a jester and that stuff about steel bookworms you like so much.”

There was no helping it if she didn’t like this, Al presented his opinion directly.

He didn’t know if Priscilla would fly into a rage or perhaps calmly release her killing intent, but even if that happened, there was no helping it. —In that case, he just needed to bring her into the territory.

However, it soon turned out that his fears were completely needless.

“Very well. —If you are aware of your role as my jester, and possess a clear ‘vision’ of the future, I shall not object. It is only natural to leave gardening to the gardener.”

“…Are you sure?”

“How tedious… Surely you do not wish for me to take your head off by my own hand?”

“Nonono, as if as if as if, no way no way no way.”

Wildly waving his arm, head, and legs, Al pleaded before Priscilla’s suspicious eyes with no objection. What effects this would end up having was a different matter, but for now, it seemed as though Al’s attitude had earned him another day of life.

And in this manner, the conversation between Al and Priscilla reached its conclusion,

“…Buhaaa! I-I-I-I’m past my limit! That was so scary!”

“Woahwoahwoah, Schult?”

With his face completely red, Schult heaved an exaggerated sigh as though he was glad it was finally over. Schult who had endeavored not to interrupt their conversation with a hand over his mouth raised his voice, “Excuse me!”

“The two of you have reconciled, correct? It’s okay now, correct?”

“Ohh, sorry to make you worry. Papa and mama are getting along just fine… Damuhin!”

“Fool, just who are you calling papa and mama.”

The instant he cracked this joke, Al ducked to dodge the sweeping fan strike that was sailing overhead. Al felt as though the top of his helmet had been singed, and Priscilla ignored his fear as she gently raised Schult’s jaw with said fan.

“I forced an unpleasant experience on you, but you endured it wonderfully. I shall personally reward you. What would you like?”

“U-Umm, uhh, can I ask for anything?”

“I shall allow it. Ask for all that you desire.”

“…Then, since it’s snowing and all, I’d like to go outside with you, Lady Priscilla.”

Schult’s face lit up as he announced this in response to Priscilla’s magnanimous words. In response to this, Al who was sitting on the floor nervously looked at Priscilla.

Having seen snow for the first time, Priscilla had expressed a great deal of disappointment. To ask her to walk out there with her servant was—

“Very well. This shall be my first time playing in the snow as well. It could be said that my ‘tension’ is rising.”

“Eh, seriously?! Then why were you in such a bad mood just now?!”

“I was merely explaining one of my principles. Come, let us go, Al. As my jester, you shall amuse me to the fullest even within the snow.”

Priscilla nimbly descended from the windowsill as she said this and turned around with a wave of the hem of her dress. Next to her, Schult stared at Al while smiling brightly.

“Sir Al, it must be fun! Have you ever played in the snow, Sir Al?”

“Playing in the snow, huh.”

Tilting his head in response to Schult’s question, Al took a look outside the window, at the scenery of the faintly accumulating snow. The sight of the area covered in a blanket of snow stimulated old, distant memories—

“Come to think of it, I don’t remember ever playing in the snow either. I’m kind of looking forward to it.”

“That is wonderful! For the three of us to experience this for the first time, it is miraculous!”

“A rather trivial miracle. But I suppose it is only fitting for something so stale as snow.”

As Schult showed his excitement, Priscilla stroked his head and then boldly set forth. Schult hurriedly followed after her, and Al tagged along while fiddling with his helmet.

Midway, Al stopped for a moment. He then looked out of the window, at the snow descending from the sky,

“—I don’t remember ever playing in the snow or anything, after all.”

Muttering this in a voice audible to no one, he continued to follow after the master and servant pair ahead of him.

Chapter 5:
Felt Camp

1

“…”

The instant she advanced, Felt directed her gaze to the left as she pitched her body to the right.

Throwing her opponent off balance with her misleading gaze, Felt dived in the opposite direction. Felt wouldn’t need to use these sorts of tricks against just anyone, but from what she’d experienced thus far, she absolutely needed such tricks against highly skilled fellows.

And this especially applied to the opponent before her, she would not hesitate in the slightest to throw everything she had at him.

“…”

Felt’s little trick caused the young man whose eyes seemed to contain the skies themselves to purse his lips. Seeing this out of the corner of her eye, a smile of satisfaction manifested at the edges of Felt’s mouth as she advanced.

She would make it, she had done it, she had won, she had broken through, such phrases assuring her of her victory continually flashed through her mind.

Trampling the red carpet, she immediately dashed forward to make this assurance a reality—

“—Lady Felt.”

“Dawaaa—?!”

The man she thought she had outwitted and left behind suddenly appeared before her, causing her to scream.

The next instant, with her eyes still widened, a light impact to her legs swept her off her feet and sent her small body flying upwards with unexpected speed and force. This impact that seemed to cause heaven and earth to turn over made Felt imagine the sight of herself slamming into the floor. But no matter how long she waited, the collision she expected never came.

This was only natural. The reason being—

“Are you alright? I hope you have not bitten your tongue or anything of the sort.”

The red-haired young man whose blue eyes were staring at her from up close. There was hardly any distance at all between their faces. They were so close they could feel each other’s breaths.

This too was only natural, for Felt was at present in the young man’s arms. To put it in simpler terms, he was carrying her.

Realizing what kind of situation she was in, Felt’s mood immediately worsened. Narrowing her eyes in dissatisfaction and biting her lip with displeasure, she growled angrily which caused the young man to lower his brow and smile bitterly.

“Your present attitude would suggest that your tongue is quite alright.”

“Hmph! Thank you so much for worrying about me. Thanks to the sense of defeat you so elegantly carved into me, I haven’t sustained the slightest injury. Damn it! What a cheap trick, acting like I managed to take you by surprise.”

Ignoring the fact that she was using cheap tricks herself, Felt crossed her arms and turned her face away from him. The young man maintained his bitter smile in response to this unfriendly attitude of hers,

“No, I do apologize if I have caused you to misunderstand. Your distraction this time was magnificent. However, moving in the opposite direction of one’s gaze is a rather standard tactic in itself, due to which…”

“Don’t just advise me so leisurely! Let me tell you, this is a serious match between you and me! You’re gonna regret it if you take me too lightly, Reinhard!”

Saying this, Felt thrust her finger into the man—Reinhard Van Astrea’s face which was right before her as she boldly displayed what a sore loser she was.

This little contest between Felt and Reinhard had been going on for about a month now.

—Ever since that incident at the loot house in the slums, Felt had been living a life of confinement, robbed of her free will ever since Reinhard captured her.

However, it was not so constrained a life as these words would suggest, she was not cuffed and could freely change her clothes, she could eat as she pleased and take her baths whenever, speaking in practical terms her environment was rather hospitable. Even Felt thought that if she no longer had any attachments to the outside, perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to just indulge in this life to the fullest.

But she did have such attachments. Reasons she had to be outside and not here.

“That’s why I’m going to sneak past you and bid farewell to this mansion. Once I do that, you can no longer chase after me. Surely you haven’t forgotten.”

“Of course not. Therefore, I too shall endeavor to keep a watchful eye on you.”

Reinhard’s response to Felt’s caustic words was no exaggeration, his declaration was entirely sincere.

In truth, Felt had already tried to escape Reinhard’s mansion countless times over this past month, and he had foiled her attempts every single time. To attempt to count how many times this had occurred would be a fool’s errand.

It wasn’t as if she was always aiming for a direct confrontation with Reinhard. She would in fact use any means necessary to avoid him such as aiming for when he was going out, or going to bed.

“But despite that you somehow always show up right when I try to escape… You damned monster.”

“Even I find such a manner of speaking hurtful. In addition, please allow me to explain one other thing. It would seem that you believe that I used an underhanded trick just now, but that is a misunderstanding.”

“Aah?”

“My surprise was genuine. But what caused that surprise was not your actions, Lady Felt…”

Pausing there, Reinhard turned around, to the hallway’s window that was behind him. Felt who was in his arms also naturally ended up facing it and thus ended up having to confirm what had entered her line of sight.

Thus, in Reinhard’s arms, the sight Felt found before her was—

“—It was the snow.”

The scene of powdery white snow gently dancing down onto the capital.

2

“It is not as if the capital never sees snowfall, but this is a rather unusual sight, is it not.”

Felt’s eyes were fixed on the sky, and Reinhard who was gazing upon the same sky said this to her in a deeply moved voice. His voice contained no small amount of admiration which caused Felt’s lips to warp.

“What’s with that. Looks like the peerless Great Sword Saint is getting pretty excited over a bit of snow.”

“I am not so joyful as all that. If the snow were to accumulate to an excessive extent, the capital’s functions would be affected as well.

There is also the concern that this is very clearly not a natural phenomenon, however…”

“However?”

“I do not sense the presence of any malice in this sky. That being the case, I was thinking that at least for now, it would not be so bad to simply think of it as a beautiful snowscape.”

With an expression that looked like a bashful smile, Reinhard explained what he was feeling. Staring at this expression of his, Felt felt as though she was seeing something unusual.

In order to improve her chances of victory in their contest, Felt had spent a lot of time observing him over this past month, a fact she took pride in. Of course, since this was his home, she could on a rather frequent basis see him in a more relaxed state, in both mind and body, than he would be outside, however,

“Wipe that dopey look off your face, damn it.”

Thus, Felt pushed on his cheek with her palm in a rather irritated mood. She then sighed at Reinhard who offered no resistance.

“To begin with, what’s so great about snow anyway. It’s just a pain, ain’t it.”

“Do you not like snow, Lady Felt?”

“It ain’t at the level of like or dislike. You think people like me who live in the slum’s back alleys could possibly be happy about snow?”

Felt hmphed as if disparaging his rather elegant question.

Obviously, life in the slums was lacking in all sorts of ways. In that sort of environment where you weren’t even sure if you would have a roof or walls to sleep in, something like snowfall was simply hell.

“There was even a time when I ate a whole bunch of snow ‘cause I had nothing else to eat, and ended up getting diarrhea because of it.”

“Was that not due to your own lack of discrimination…”

“Oh shut up already, old man Rom got mad at me too, you know! Quit complaining already! Also, just how long are you planning to hold me, put me down already!”

Flailing around wildly, Felt showed her displeasure in an attempt to get away from Reinhard’s chest. Giving in to her stubborn attitude, Reinhard released her onto the floor.

Patting her knees, Felt clicked her tongue loud enough to be sure Reinhard would hear it.

“I’ll acknowledge that I lost today. Even if I tried to escape now, I doubt the outcome would be very pleasant considering how cold it is out there.”

“Understood. I agree that it would be best to leave it at that. After all, it would be unfortunate if you were to fall sick, and also… No, never mind.”

“—?”

The way he spoke suggested he had something more to say, but Reinhard did not say anything further. She somehow did not feel like interrogating him about it, and so their conversation came to a close.

It would also be irritating if on top of being the loser, she had to spend her time looking at the winner’s face.

Therefore, Felt once again narrowed her eyes at the sight of the snow dancing down outside the window,

“—I hope old man Rom isn’t feeling too cold.”

3

“And so, I once again failed to escape. I’m seriously losing confidence in my legs here…”

“Oh dear, you must not say such things. You must first of all believe in yourself. Or you will not be able to draw forth your power when it is necessary.”

“Even though you’re saying that sort of thing, you’re still one of the people interfering with my escape, granny…”

In this manner, Felt complained with her jaw on the dining room’s table in response to which the old woman laughed pleasantly.

She was a woman who had aged well and gave off an elegant impression. The reason she looked so dignified despite her plain clothing was most likely because of the sharp beauty her figure possessed as she stood up straight, her back’s posture immaculate.

This woman was yet another obstacle to her attempts to escape from Reinhard’s devilish clutches—She was one half of the old married couple who would impede Felt’s attempts to escape whenever Reinhard wasn’t around. Even though Reinhard called her grandma or whatever, she was clearly no ordinary person considering her movements did not show her age in the slightest.

Regardless, except for when she interfered with her escapes, she was always kind to Felt and the food she made was also exceptionally delicious due to which Felt could not dislike her, and thus their strange acquaintanceship continued.

It was to the extent that on days on which Felt sincerely admitted defeat, they would get together to have tea and snacks like this.

“However, it would be troublesome if the snow were to fall too heavily. I am getting on in years myself so I would end up worrying you and the young master if I were to fall and get hurt.”

“Don’t just decide on your own that I’d be worried… I would be worried, though!”

“Fufu, I am well aware. Because you are a kind child, Lady Felt.”

Saying this, she gently stroked a sullen Felt’s head without reservation. It felt somewhat ticklish, but it also felt rather pleasant, so Felt would not shake her off of anything.

"It would seem that you are not especially fond of snow, Lady Felt."

"…Did you hear that from Reinhard? It's not like I particularly like or dislike the weather, you know? It's more like asking whether it's easy to live in or hard to live in, isn't that right?"

"You might be correct. Certainly, clearing up all of this snow is going to be hard for grandpa, that is troublesome indeed."

"Snow is unexpectedly heavy when it piles up too, gramps'll have to be careful about his back."

"Oh dear, I'll have you know that he is still plenty strong despite his age. In both body and soul."

With a hand against her mouth, the old lady giggled. Her voice and expression clearly displayed her overflowing love for her husband.

The image of the old man giving it his all shoveling the snow around the mansion naturally manifested in Felt's mind.

He could not speak, but he was hale and hearty despite his age. As one would expect, this old man was also one of the people impeding her escape, but just like the old lady Felt could not dislike him.

His aura was of the same sort as Rom's, he was kind and gentle and just seemed like a good person.

—Felt wasn't very good at dealing with good people. Or more accurately, she felt that good people were taken advantage of by those around them and she couldn't bear that sort of environment.

The awareness that she herself was depending on Rom would take this even further.

"Tch."

"Come now, you must not click your tongue. It makes you appear to be one of poor character."

"I had a poor upbringing. So it shouldn't be a problem to overlook something like clicking…”

“Your upbringing has no bearing on the matter. It is a matter of consideration for the other party. Or do you not mind if the old lady you are speaking to is hurt? Aah, how sad, oh dear, oh dear…”

“Oh, come on! That was my bad! I get it! I won’t do it in front of you anymore!”

Felt panicked as the old lady lowered her head and placed her hands against her eyes.

It was not that she actually thought that she would cry over something like this, but it was often the case that such words of lament came from the heart. Felt knew a lot about the elderly. Old man Rom himself did this sort of thing on a regular basis.

“Man, I’m just no match for you, granny. Have you been toying with people that way for a long time or what.”

“Well, that is not the case. I was terribly hard headed when I was young… To the extent that I myself was put off by it. If it weren’t for grandpa, perhaps I never would have married.”

“Heeh, how unexpected. Have you and gramps been working here long?”

“Do you perhaps mean the Astrea family when you say ‘here’? If so, I have been serving the Astrea family from the day I was born. Because that is the lineage I was born into.”

“Hmm, that seems pretty rough too. Then you probably knew Reinhard back when he was a brat, huh?”

With a sour expression, Felt carefully considered the old lady’s feelings from the bottom of her heart. Felt’s words caused the old lady to raise her eyebrows slightly, after which her expression suddenly changed into a relaxed smile.

“Do you dislike the young master, Lady Felt?”

“I certainly do, what about it?”

"Oh my, fufu."

She was wondering what she was going to say, this instant response from an exasperated Felt made her giggle.

Felt had never seen this sort of reaction from her before.

"What's so funny, to make you laugh like that."

"No, no, I was just surprised. Because it is very rare for the young master to be disliked by anyone."

"Is that so? Although I get the feeling that if you asked around the slums and back alleys, you'd find any number of people who hate the guy?"

In truth, in the slums which had very many people of self-debasing character, merely being born into the commoners' district would make one an object of envy. To come from a family of knights, and moreover bear such a celebrated title as 'Sword Saint' meant that there would be no end to those who bore jealousy or envy towards him.

"None of them could say it to his face. That is why I am certain I can place my trust in you… Just like I trusted that man with Lady Theresia."

"—?"

She couldn't quite hear what the old lady had whispered towards the end. But when Felt tilted her head, the old lady shook her head, still smiling,

"Oh dear. When I speak with you, I somehow seem to end up thinking back to my past."

"Your past, how many decades ago was that?"

"Ah, how cruel… About forty years ago, perhaps?"

"That's more than double my age…"

It wasn't as much as old man Rom, but she could definitely feel this lady's age. Unfortunately for Felt, she was a long ways off from broaching the same territory as them. Of course, they must have in their own way had their immature periods just like Felt.

"I was that way too, you know. I was once but a young maiden in love."

"—? You're still a maiden in love, aren't you. When you're getting along that well with ol' gramps, are you not aware of it?"

"…Well now."

The sight of the old lady's bashful smile with her cheeks slightly flushed made Felt smile as well.

She would occasionally spot the two of them while they were alone, what an intimate couple they were. Felt didn't have much experience when it came to this sort of thing, but she thought that that was what a loving couple ought to be like.

Having this pointed out, the old lady nodded any number of times as if reflecting on her joy. Her eyes then narrowed and gently stared at Felt.

"Granny?"

"Lady Felt, did you know that there exists a special flower that only blooms on snowy days?"

Felt thought that this was an extremely sudden change in topic, but she did not point this out and instead offered a straightforward response, "Yeah?"

A flower that only blooms on snowy days, meaning its composition was rather troublesome.

"Flowers only bloom when they have water and sunlight, don't they? For one to only bloom on snowy days, why does it grow in such a troublesome manner?"

"Why is that, I wonder. It is a flower so elusive that there is doubt as to whether or not it even really exists. All that is known about it is that it is a flower as white as snow itself."

"…It kinda feels like you're talking about something really memorable, doesn't it?"

She couldn't imagine that the old lady's explanation came from some passing memory. The old lady nodded when Felt pointed this out, "Yes."

"After all, I went looking for it several decades ago. With the then head of the Astrea family and his wife… My former master and grandpa came along too."

"Hmm, sounds like quite the large scale expedition. So, did you manage to find the flower?"

While smiling faintly, the old lady lowered her brow as she shook her head. Felt accepted this answer as if it was only natural. Had she seen in person, she would not describe it as an elusive flower or whatever.

A white flower that would only display its full glory in the snow, one that might not even really exist.

"There was even a legend going around that if you found it, your wish would come true."

"A wish, huh."

"Supposing you were to find it, Lady Felt, what do you suppose you would wish for?"

"I guess I'd have that damned Reinhard punished properly and then run away from the mansion with you. And then you'd make me snacks every day."

"Oh dear, I could not go on living if I were to be separated from grandpa."

"Then I'll bring him along too. Reinhard can probably manage this huge place on his own, anyway."

Someone like Reinhard could probably somehow manage something even if he were left on his own. Perhaps he would even find it easier to live this way.

Considering how he always had to be worried about his surroundings, taking care not to break anything.

“What about you, granny? If you found that flower right now, what would you wish for?”

“My wish, is it…?”

“It’s not like I’m the only one who has the right to make wishes, right?”

On the contrary, Felt couldn’t bring herself to like the idea of entrusting her wishes to such a supernatural force. If merely wishing actually did anything, there wouldn’t be such a thing as slums in this world.

Wishes would not save anyone. Even if that hope kept them alive.

“If my wish could be fulfilled…”

“If it could be fulfilled?”

“… I wanted to try living together with two close friends of mine, that perhaps.”

“…”

“That we would somehow deal with things together. If I could entrust a wish to the past, I would surely wish for something like this…Oh dear. It seems I really am getting old.”

The old lady giggled as she made this joke.

However, to Felt, that fleeting smile of hers somehow seemed to reflect her true feelings.

“Lady Felt. Just who I was looking for.”

“Geh.”

Felt welcomed Reinhard who was approaching her with a grimace. In response to her unpleasant expression, Reinhard maintained his ever present smile,

“I have just returned from clearing the snow out front with grandpa. I do not believe that the ground will freeze over, but do take care not to slip when you leap out of the window.”

“Hey, don’t talk as if it’s a given that I’ll be leaping out the window.”

That was an escape method that had already failed several tens of times. Perhaps she would wait and see and try it again when they least expect it, but now was not the time.

“Well then, it’s actually pretty good timing for me as well now that I’ve run into you. The granny’s laid out some warm drinks in the dining room, so bring grandpa with you.”

“Aah, that is a great help. As expected, even my fingers go numb when I clear out the snow.”

“Eh? Is that so? That’s kinda human, huh.”

As she said this, Felt grabbed Reinhard’s hand and confirmed this shocking fact by holding his cold, red fingers. Perhaps one could say it was obvious, but he was a human with blood flowing through him.

“So, how was the snow? It’d probably be a pain later if there’s a whole lot piling up.”

“—You need not worry. Even if it were to pile up to some extent, I believe it will all melt tomorrow.”

“I see, I see. Doesn’t look like there’s anything to worry about then.”

Dropping Reinhard’s hand, Felt ran past him.

If Reinhard and the old man were heading to the dining room, Felt would return to her room for now. There, she would have to refine her escape plans for tomorrow and onwards—

"—Lady Felt."

"Aah? What."

Felt turned around in response to this call. Gazing into her red eyes, Reinhard hesitated ever so slightly,

"—No, it is nothing. Please stay warm in your room."

"Right. You can go ahead and catch a cold, though. That'd help me out quite a bit."

Waving her hand apathetically, Felt turned away from Reinhard and returned to her room.

She felt Reinhard's gaze behind to the very end, just what was it that he wanted to tell her. Felt wasn't going to and ask about it, she had no obligation to show that much consideration for his feelings.

But since he worked hard clearing out the snow, she would at least forget about escaping for today.

"—What's this."

As she thought this, Felt tilted her head when she spotted a certain something in front of the room allotted to her.

Left out in the hallway, in front of her room, was a single white flower in a small vase. She had never seen it before, but she could tell at a glance who had given it to her.

"That guy, I was wondering what he wanted to say, so this was it."

Her lips curved as she wondered if this was some form of harassment, but she immediately discarded that thought. Reinhard probably had no intention of harassing her. He probably just found a pretty flower and wanted to share that feeling with her.

Felt sighed at his behavior following his return from clearing out the snow as she picked up the vase.

“But even so, that’s a crazy coincidence, huh. I was just talking to granny about this and here it is, a white flower.”

This flower he went and found somewhere bloomed fleetingly yet beautifully, its petals possessed the power to make even Felt who had no interest in flowers think that it was beautiful.

As expected, she couldn’t bear to throw away such a lovely flower just because Reinhard was the one who gave it to her. She decided that she would place it on her windowsill and leave it at that.

“Maybe it really is that snow flower granny was talking about. If that really is the case…”

Entering her room and placing the vase on the windowsill, Felt made a wish to the white petals.

If this really was the snow flower that could grant wishes—

“—Make it so that granny can see nice dreams with her friends.”

Felt said this with a smile as she touched the flower’s white petals.

—To continue a bit further, the snow that covered the capital on this day melted away and disappeared completely the afternoon of the next day.

Even the white flower in Felt’s room soon withered away, perhaps she had handled it poorly.

However, the morning after the snowfall, granny was unusually cheerful as she welcomed Felt, and her breakfast that day was even grander than usual.

She did not ask why she was in such a good mood. Because Felt had already completely forgotten about the wish she had made to the flower yesterday. —She merely gazed upon granny’s joy, and gramps who was delighted when he saw this.

Carried by this good mood she once again challenged Reinhard, and once again experienced crushing defeat.

Even the snowfall had not produced any particular change in Felt's life of confinement—This was merely one page, a moment of the constrained, flurried life she lived until the royal selection finally began.

END

Notes

Chapter 11: The Harmonious Post-Meal Get-Together

1. The drill-nose design originated in the 1963 Toho film Atragon (featuring the submarine Gotengo), was later reused in the 1977 film The War in Space (with the spaceship Gohten), and then passed into anime mecha tradition through Getter-2 in Getter Robo, before gaining widespread popularity and iconic status in Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann. ↩
2. Sun Wukong wore a magical golden headband (also known as the Tightening Fillet or Constrictive Circlet) that painfully constricted around his skull whenever his master, Tang Sanzang (Tripitaka), recited the Tight-Fillet Spell (a secret sutra or mantra), which the monk used to discipline and tame the Monkey King whenever he acted mischievously, violently, or went out of control. ↩
3. The phrase 炸裂するＮＤＫ（ねえ・どんな・気持ち）ダンス (Exploding NDK (Nee□Donna□Kimochi) Dance) is a playful, exaggerated Japanese internet meme expression referring to the explosive deployment of NDK—an abbreviation for 「ねえねえ、今どんな気持ち？」 (“Nee nee, ima donna kimochi?” meaning “Hey, how are you feeling, now?”). It often describes taunting someone (especially when they’re in an embarrassing, painful, or frustrating situation) by repeatedly asking how they feel, as a form of provocation or further rubbing it in. The “dance” part humorously implies an over-the-top, gleeful performance of this teasing, like someone energetically “dancing” while bombarding the target with the question. NDK itself originated from an ASCII art (AA) used on Japanese forums/2ch for trolling or provocation, featuring a bear-like character (often with “ｸﾏｰ” bear sounds) paired with the line “今どんな気持ち？” to mock or goad others—turning a once-neutral phrase (from a boxing-related interview context that got twisted) into pure online bait. ↩

Chapter 24: The Morning He Yearned For

1. A reference from the movie “Detective Conan: The Time

Bombed Skyscraper”. It references a scene in which the protagonist Shinichi Kudo reassures Ran Mouri, who is forced to disarm a time bomb and fears she will die, that he will stay and face death with her. ↩

Chapter 25: The Voice of Deep Resentment Doesn’t Vanish

1. A sickle weasel (鎌鼬, kamaitachi) is a Japanese yokai, said to ride on gusts of wind, cutting people with their sharp, sickle-like claws. Rumored in Japanese alps, they’re associated with the phenomenon of sudden gales leaving cuts on one’s skin. “For more information, see here”). ↩

Kararagi Girl Meets Cats

1. Ryokucha = A type of tea in Kararagi. Literally green tea. ↩
2. Dekoyaki = A type of food in Kararagi. Probably something like takoyaki. ↩

Sunlight on the Water

1. Most readers might already know this but おねショタ (oneshota) is “older girl x young boy”. ↩
2. Hollow = ghost in the Re:Zero universe. ↩
3. ミイラ取りがミイラになる “a mummy hunter becoming a mummy”.
   It’s a phrase for when someone who went to look for someone else became unable to come back. It could also mean that someone who went to convince someone else became convinced by the other person instead. ↩
4. What Priscilla actually says here is テンションが上がる. It would be “my tension is increasing” if it was literally translated, but that will mean something different. ↩
5. What Al actually says here is ラッキースケベ (lucky sukebe). It’s a type of fanservice in anime/manga where a character accidentally witnesses another character being naked, or where a character accidentally touches another character’s you know what. ↩

Prologue: Aldebaran

1. The base sentence for this line is exactly the same as Al’s catchphrase of “Your stars were bad”, however, the Kanji 星 is accompanied with 菜月・昴 as furigana, which is Natsuki

Subaru's full name (in Kanji). Because of this, the sentence may be read as "The stars known as Natsuki Subaru were bad" or even "Natsuki Subaru messed up" if you stretch it a teeny bit further. In the text, we have rendered the sentence as "Natsuki Subaru failed you" since it is the closest thing to what the Witch is actually audibly saying, just keep in mind that it is meant to overlap with the meaning of "Your stars were bad". ↩

Chapter 52: Aldebaran I

1. Kannon is the Japanese name of the Avalokiteśvara, a figure in Buddhism associated with great compassion, who in some depictions possesses a thousand arms. ↩
2. The Witch refers to the term "Make-believe" reminding her of an unpleasant individual. The best guess that can be made here is that of Pandora or the Saintess, as the Japanese term 虚構 used here as make-believe, is fairly close to 虚飾, the term used for the Sin of Vanagloria. ↩

Chapter 54: Warlock VS Witch

1. 鬼に金棒めいた is a Japanese idiom along the lines of "Giving a metal bat to an Oni". Essentially saying to make a strong thing even stronger. I have used all of my brainpower to generate an English equivalent to capture this sentiment. As some of you might know, this text is Japanese, and Japanese I can handle just fine. But Japanese with cultural specific idioms is like a chimp with a machine gun! ↩

Chapter 6: Instantaneous Water Heater

1. It being darkest at the foot of the lighthouse is a Japanese idiom that means sometimes you can't see what is right under your nose. ↩
2. An instantaneous water heater (also known as a tankless water heater) directly heats water rather than storing hot water in a tank. They are much more common in Japan and elsewhere in the world than in North America, so we figured a translation note would be useful for those readers where they are uncommon. ↩

Chapter 7: My Friend

1. We have chosen to use the same translation for the term 聖女 here that we also used when it showed up in Arc 9 for the

Saintess and the Valiant. We considered going with the more generic Saint, but given that we have very little context at this point for the term in either instance and how they may or may not be connected, and due to the fact that 聖女 is an exclusively feminine term (lit. holy woman), we discarded the idea. ↩

Chapter 7: My Friend

1. A yandere is a character trope where a character is obsessively in love with another, to the point of mental illness, which may result in violence. ↩

Chapter 8: The Consequences of a Choice

1. “To send salt to the enemy” is an idiom in Japanese meaning to help an enemy rather than exploiting their weakness. It originates from a story from the Sengoku Jidai, the Warring States period of Japan. Two of the most famous and influential warlords of the period, Uesugi Kenshin and Takeda Shingen, were famous for their rivalry with each other. However, when the Hōjō, another clan that Shingen had broken ties with, cut off salt shipments to the Kai province under him, Kenshin decried it as cowardly and sent salt from the province under his command, Echigo, saying he would settle the war between them properly. ↩

Chapter 10: Faith Embedded

1. Otto is emphasizing the politeness markers (です and ～ます) in his speech here, which we have rendered here as him emphasizing words that might otherwise be contracted as “y’know” or “that’s”. ↩
2. What is translated in this sentence as “seeing a new perspective” is in fact an idiom that can be translated literally as “fish scales falling from their eyes”. This idiom originates from the Book of Acts in the New Testament (specifically Acts 9:18), from the story of the conversion of Saul (later the Apostle Paul) to Christianity on the road to Damascus, where after seeing a vision of Jesus that would lead him to convert, he was blinded. Later, his sight was restored and it is said something like the scales of a fish fell away from his eyes as he was healed. Since Christian imagery and themes are common throughout Re:Zero, we figured giving some extra context would not hurt. ↩

Second Period

1. Downtown no Gaki no Tsukai ya Arahende reference, one of the hosts Masatoshi Hamada will open many of the skits with this exact phrasing. ↩
2. Not sure if this should be translated otherwise, but a license of total transmission is a term for a kind of initiation given in certain disciplines like judo or tea ceremony where the teacher gives the student permission to begin teaching others. ↩
3. Subaru in his dialogue said Andaa maindo in katakana and in japanese is saying 下心 which means an ulterior motive, usually of a sexual or romantic kind and is literally composed of 下 down/under and 心 heart/mind. ↩